



Zoho
Campaigns

A ZOHO CAMPAIGNS EBOOK

The Smart Sender's Guide to **Topic Management**



Table of contents

I	The inbox problem nobody talks about	04
II	What is a topic?	06
III	What is topic management?	08
IV	Why topic management is a game-changer	10
V	Building your topic	13
VI	The contact journey through topics	15
VII	Topics across email platforms	18
VIII	Five common mistakes to avoid	20
IX	Your topic management checklist	22

Preface

Most marketers believe the secret to email success is sending more—more campaigns, more newsletters, and more promotions. But it isn't.

The secret is relevance: sending the right message to the right person at the right time. That idea isn't new, but the tool that makes it happen consistently is often overlooked. That tool is called **topic management**.

This book is for anyone who's interested in email marketing, both beginners and veterans. If you've just set up your first mailing list, this will give you a head start others won't have. If you've been running campaigns for years, this will sharpen your approach and quietly fix habits that may be hurting your results without you realizing it.

By the end, you'll know how to build an email program that your subscribers actually look forward to.

Let's get started.

Chapter I

The inbox problem nobody talks about

Picture this: You sign up for a newsletter from your favorite outdoor gear brand because you love hiking. You want trail tips, gear reviews, the occasional discount on boots.

Instead, you get promotions for yoga mats, kids' camping kits, and corporate gifting programs. Naturally, you unsubscribe.

This happens millions of times every day—not because brands send bad emails, but because they send the wrong emails to the wrong people.

46%

of people open every email from a brand because that brand consistently sends relevant content¹

72%

of consumers say they only engage with personalized messaging.²

The picture is clear: Relevance is the currency of email marketing, and the brands that figure this out early build lists that are healthy, engaged, and profitable.

The solution isn't sending fewer emails; it's sending smarter ones. That's what topic management is about.

TRIVIA

The first marketing email ever sent was in 1978 by Gary Thuerk of Digital Equipment Corporation. He blasted it to 400 recipients on ARPANET. It generated \$13 million in sales and a wave of complaints. The tension between relevance and reach has existed since day one.³

Chapter II

What is a topic?

In email marketing, a topic is a named category of content that your subscribers can choose to receive.

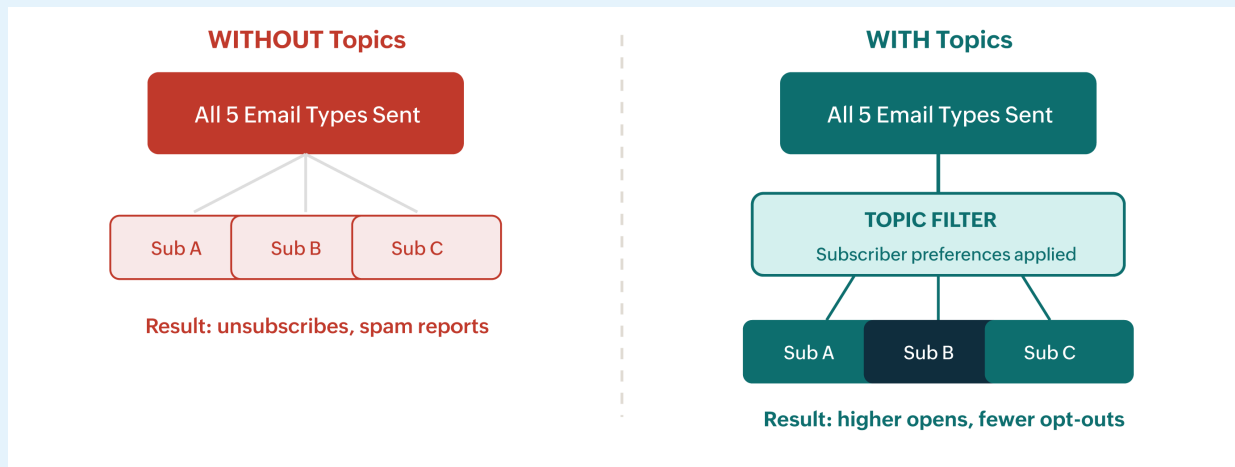
Think of it like a streaming service. Netflix doesn't force you to watch every genre; you choose what you're into (thrillers, documentaries, romances) and the platform adjusts. Topics work the same way; you define the content categories, your subscribers pick what interests them, and you send accordingly.

A simple example

Let's say you run a fitness and wellness brand and produce five types of content: nutrition tips, fitness routines, product launches, mental health content, and promotions.

Not every subscriber wants all five; someone passionate about nutrition may find fitness emails irrelevant, and a subscriber sensitive to promotional emails will disengage or leave entirely.

With topics, you let them choose; you only send what they've asked for.



Side note — Topics go by different names across platforms. Mailchimp calls them “Groups.” MailerLite calls them “Interest Groups.” ConvertKit calls them “Topics of Interest.” SendGrid uses “Unsubscribe Groups.” Brevo uses “Multi-list Subscriptions.” Same concept, different labels, and we cover them all in Chapter VII.

Chapter III

What is topic management?

Whereas topics are categories, topic management is the system you build around those categories; it's the practice of organizing, assigning, and maintaining content categories so that every email reaches only the people who want it. It has three moving parts:

Setting up topics — Define the content categories relevant to your brand.

Mapping contacts to topics — Assign topics to contacts based on their preferences, whether at signup, through preference centers, or automatically through behavior.

Sending by topic — Every campaign is tied to a topic, and only subscribers associated with that topic receive those campaigns.

Example:

Let's say you run a mid-sized clothing retail business that sends four types of emails: new arrivals, styling tips, seasonal sales, and VIP member offers.

Before embracing the topic management approach, every subscriber gets every email—the result of which is predictable: some 35% never open styling tips, 20% complain about receiving too many sales emails, and unsubscribes climb steadily.

After implementing topic management practices and letting subscribers choose what they want, open rates rise 28% and unsubscribes drop 40% in three months.

The goal of email marketing isn't reach. It's resonance.

Resonance happens when the right message meets the right person. Topic management makes that possible—consistently and at scale.

Zoho Campaigns note — In Zoho Campaigns, topic management is baked into the platform's core. You can't send an email campaign without associating it with a topic first, which reinforces intentional, preference-based sending by design, not by discipline.⁴

Chapter IV

Why topic management is a game-changer

When marketers first hear about topic management, a common fear surfaces: “If I let subscribers opt out of some topics, I’ll lose reach.” But the truth is the exact opposite.

Topic management reduces unsubscribes

The moment before your contacts unsubscribe, they’re mostly frustrated. Topic management gives them an alternative. Instead of a full exit, they remove themselves only from the topics they don’t want. You keep them on your list and they stay satisfied.

It improves email deliverability

Gmail, Outlook, and Yahoo score your sender reputation based on engagement. High open and click rates signal a healthy sender. Topic management filters out disinterested subscribers from specific sends, which naturally boosts engagement and protects your sender score.

FACT

Sending to a 10,000-person list where 4,000 people never open your emails actively hurts your reputation. Inbox providers treat low engagement as a spam signal. A clean, topic-segmented list of 5,000 engaged subscribers outperforms the bloated list every time.

It builds trust

When you let people control what they receive, you're telling them you respect their time and attention. That builds the kind of loyalty no discount or giveaway can manufacture.

It drives revenue

Relevant emails always convert better compared to irrelevant ones—thereby increasing your revenue.

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

REI: The master of inbox relevance

REI, the iconic U.S. outdoor retailer, lets subscribers self-select topics like hiking, camping, cycling, snow sports, and fitness. Subscribers receive only what they chose. Their email engagement rates consistently rank among the highest in the retail industry, and they attribute much of it to preference-driven email strategy.

It makes your data smarter

Topic management generates priceless behavioral data such as:

Which topics are most popular

Which get the highest open rates

Which topics correlate with purchases

These analytics provide a pathway for better content strategies, better campaigns, and better business decisions.

Chapter V

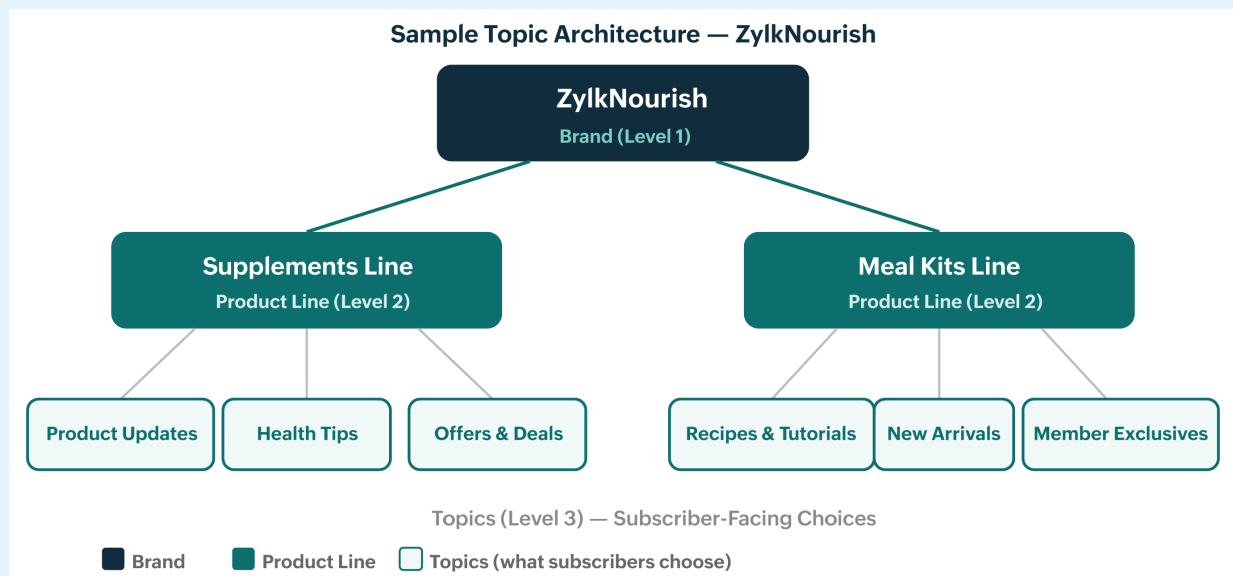
Building your topic

Let's get practical and look at how you actually build a topic structure that works. Think in three levels:

Level 1 — Brand — Your organization; the umbrella over everything.

Level 2 — Products/business lines — Major divisions or product categories; single-product brands can skip this level entirely.

Level 3 — Topics — The specific content categories that subscribers actually choose from.



Tips for defining your topics

Start small. — Launch with three to five topics and add more as you learn what resonates with your audience.

Name them from the subscriber's perspective. — “Weekly Recipes for You” beats “Content Category 3”.

Make the value obvious. — Each topic name should instantly tell subscribers what they'll get.

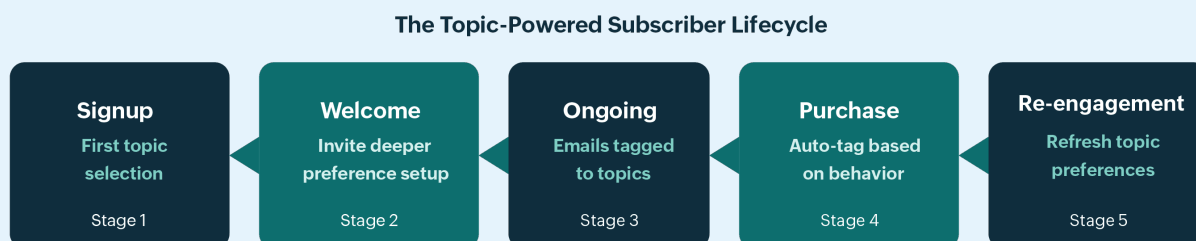
Single-product brands should skip Level 2. — Go straight from brand to topics. Simpler is better.

Pro tip — Don't create a topic for every content type you produce. Think from your subscriber's perspective: “I want nutrition advice” is a topic; “Tuesday infographic about magnesium” is not. The distinction matters.

Chapter VI

The contact journey through topics

Topics aren't just a signup form feature; they're active throughout the entire subscriber relationship. Here's how to deploy them at each stage:



Topics follow the subscriber throughout every stage of the relationship

At signup

The most natural moment to have your contacts choose their preferences is during signup. Add topic checkboxes to your signup form, but keep it to three to five options. Too many choices and subscribers will abandon the form without selecting anything.

EXAMPLE

A cooking blog's signup form

“What would you like to hear about?” Quick weeknight recipes / Baking & pastries / Healthy eating / Chef interviews.

Subscribers tick their boxes. The relationship starts right, from the very first interaction.

In the email footer

Every email you send should contain a “Manage Preferences” link that enables existing subscribers to update their topic choices at any time without needing to unsubscribe fully.

During a welcome series

Welcome emails have the highest open rates of any email type—often 50 to 60%. It's in your best interest to use this moment wisely. Invite subscribers to personalize their experience while they're most engaged.

Try something like this: “Now that you're in, tell us what matters most to you. Choose your topics and we'll tailor everything we send.”

After a purchase

Let's say someone just bought running shoes. You can automatically tag them with the "Running" topic so that you can send running tips, accessories, and training plans. This isn't creepy personalization; it's thoughtful service.

For re-engagement

If a subscriber hasn't opened in 90 days, send a preference refresh email. Either they re-engage or they opt out cleanly. Both outcomes improve your list hygiene.

Side note — Gmail's spam filters pay close attention to engagement signals. Sending emails to subscribers who consistently ignore them actively hurts your deliverability. Topic management isn't just a personalization strategy; it's also a deliverability strategy in disguise.

Chapter VII

Topics across email platforms

You don't need any specific platform to practice topic management. The concept is universal. Most modern email tools support it, just under different names.

Platform	Feature name	How it works
Zoho Campaigns	Topics	Mandatory per campaign; org-level; fully subscriber-facing
Mailchimp	Groups/Interest Categories	Subscriber-selectable via signup and preference forms
MailerLite	Interest Groups	Self-select at signup or via preference center
ConvertKit/Kit	Topics of Interest	Mapped to tags; subscribers manage via footer link
Brevo	Multi-list Subscriptions	Each topic = a contact list; subscriber-selectable on forms
Campaign Monitor	Preference Center + Custom Fields	Interest categories via custom fields; managed in preference center

Platform	Feature name	How it works
SendGrid	Unsubscribe Groups	API-based; recipients select/deselect on email preferences page
ActiveCampaign	Tags and Lists	Assigned via behavior, forms, or automation rules
AWeber	Tags and Segments	Applied through forms, click/open automations, or workflows
Klaviyo	Profile Properties and Lists	Preferences managed via a preference page; drives segmentation

FACT

Zoho Campaigns is one of the few platforms where associating a topic with a campaign is mandatory. You literally can't press Send without it. This design choice forces intentional sending and systematically prevents the batch-and-blast habit from taking hold.

Chapter VIII

Five common mistakes to avoid

Topic management done poorly creates confusion, not clarity. Here are five of the most common sending traps businesses fall into—and how to avoid them.

1. Too many topics at launch

If you have 15 topic options, that feels like a questionnaire—not a preference center. Subscribers abandon the form and you get no data. Start with three to five topics and then add more as your audience signals what they want.

2. Vague or internal-sounding topic names

“Newsletter Type A” and “Comms List 3” mean nothing to subscribers. Use clear, benefit-driven names. For instance, “Weekly Recipe Ideas” and “Flash Deals” are instantly understood. Always name them from the subscriber’s point of view.

3. Never asking subscribers to update preferences

Interests evolve. A subscriber who signed up for “Beginner Fitness Tips” may be ready for “Advanced Training” a year later. Reach out once or twice a year with a preference refresh email. This re-engages dormant subscribers and keeps your data fresh.

4. Slipping content across topic boundaries

If someone has opted into “Educational Content” and you quietly sneak promotions in, subscribers notice. They can get annoyed and ultimately lose trust. Honor your topic boundaries with discipline; trust in your brand is built slowly but broken quickly.

5. Not connecting topics to automation

Topics should trigger workflows. If someone selects “Product Updates,” they should automatically enter your product drip sequence. Manual management doesn’t scale; automate the connection from the start.

Chapter IX

Your topic management checklist

Use this to launch your first topic setup or audit what you already have in place:

- ☐ Define three to five topic categories based on your content types and what your subscribers actually care about.
- ☐ Name each topic clearly from your subscriber's perspective.
- ☐ Add topic selection checkboxes to your signup forms.
- ☐ Include a visible "Manage Preferences" link in every single email footer.
- ☐ Build a welcome series email that invites subscribers to deepen their topic preferences.
- ☐ Connect each topic to relevant automation workflows so that topic selection triggers a sequence.
- ☐ Set up post-purchase behavior tagging to auto-assign relevant topics.
- ☐ Schedule a preference refresh campaign every six months.

- ❑ Monitor open and click rates by topic; retire or merge any that consistently underperform.
- ❑ Ensure every campaign is assigned to a topic before it goes out—no exceptions.

A smaller list of people who care beats a massive list of people who don't.

Topic management is one of the most underused strategies in email marketing. The brands that do it well don't just see better metrics; they build real, lasting relationships with their audiences.

**Start small → Pick three topics → Let your subscribers
choose → See what happens**

The inbox isn't a broadcast channel; it's a conversation. Topic management is how you make sure both sides are finally speaking the same language.

References & Footnotes

- 1.** ZeroBounce, “Into the Inbox: Email Marketing Statistics for 2026,” January 2026. <https://www.zerobounce.net/email-statistics-report>
- 2.** SmarterHQ, “Privacy & Personalization Report,” cited by Verizon Business News. <https://www.verizon.com/about/news/why-personalized-consumer-brand-relationships-are-future>
- 3.** The first bulk commercial email was sent by Gary Thuerk, DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation), on May 3, 1978, to approximately 400 ARPANET recipients. It reportedly generated \$13 million in sales and is widely considered the first unsolicited mass email. <https://porchgroupmedia.com/blog/100-compelling-email-statistics-to-inform-your-strategy-in-2023/>
- 4.** Zoho Campaigns Documentation, help.zoho.com — Topic Management is mandatory for all email campaigns by platform design. <https://help.zoho.com/portal/en/kb/campaigns/user-guide/contact-management/topics/articles/updated-topics>



support@zohocampaigns.com

[Talk to our team](#)

[Learn with our help docs](#)

[Explore Zoho Campaigns](#)

[Join Zoho Campaigns Community](#)