Celebrating Gmail's 10th Anniversary
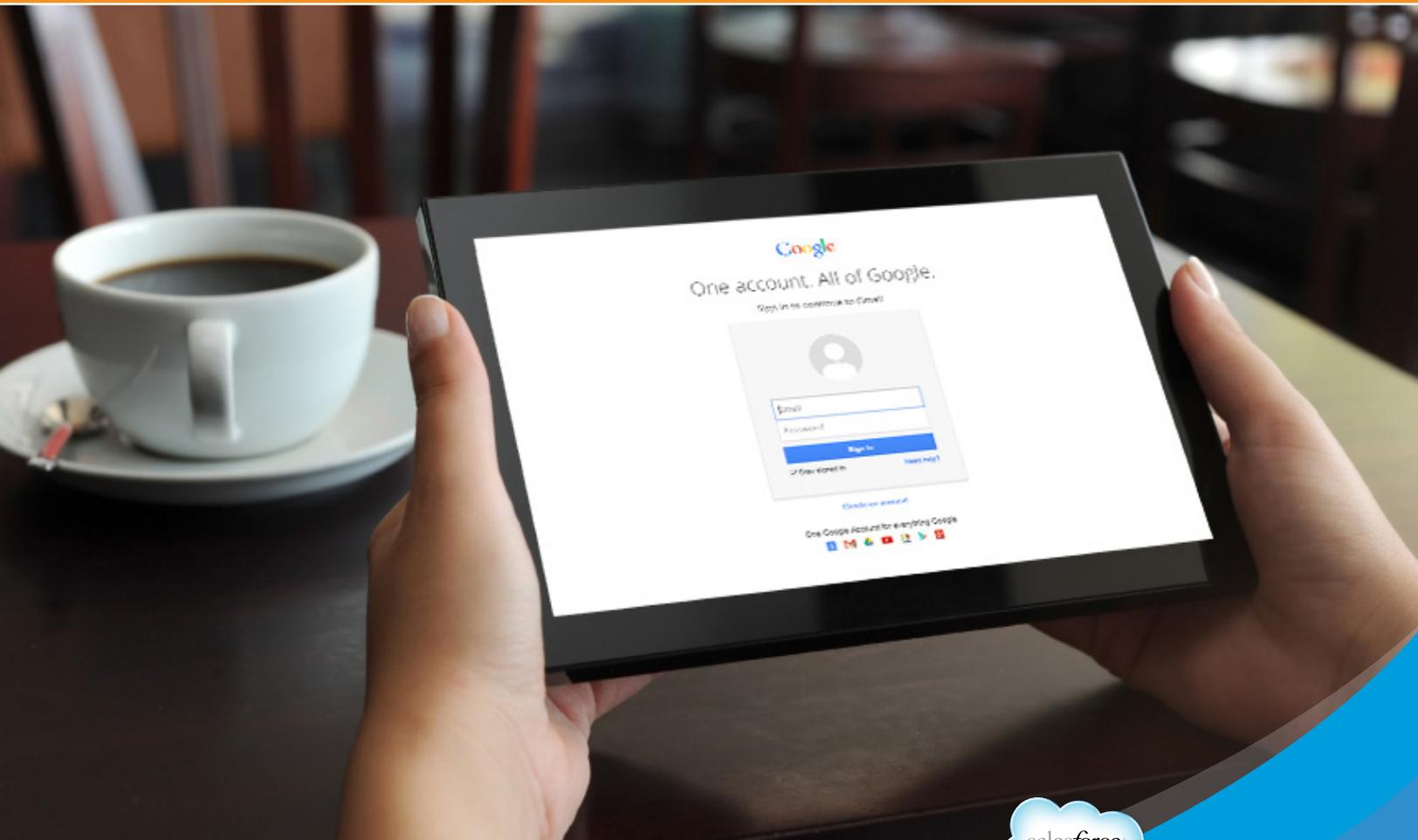
Email experts share insights on Gmail's past, present, and future

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2014 has been a year of fascinating milestones for digital marketers, as well as tech professionals in every industry. In March, we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the World Wide Web—the foundation that makes our connected world possible. Facebook and Twitter both celebrated birthdays this spring, reminding us how the explosive growth of social media has forever changed the world in just a few short years. And now, we reflect on the 10th anniversary of Google's mail service, Gmail.

Unlike the web, Facebook, and Twitter, Gmail was not the first of its kind. In fact, it was a relative latecomer to the webmail party. Gmail's objective was not to create a totally new way of communicating, but to make radical improvements to the existing webmail model. And by all accounts, they've succeeded.

To recognize the innovation and influence of Gmail, we've compiled this collection of insights from five email professionals. In it, they share their memories from the early days of Gmail, their perspective on how it has changed the email industry, and even a few thoughts on what happens next.

Here's to the next 10 years. Happy birthday, Gmail!

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Top 10 Innovations, Courtesy of Gmail

Carlo is a loyal Gmail user since April 26, 2004.

It's hard to believe that Gmail turns 10 this year. From its initial release in 2004 to the various iterations it has undergone over the years, Gmail has consistently disrupted the status quo in the email world. And they are doing a fine job of it:

Gmail, despite being late to the webmail scene, now boasts more unique users than its older counterparts, Yahoo Mail and Hotmail (now Outlook.com). Not bad for the young kid on the block.

I distinctly remember when the service was first announced on April Fools' Day ten years ago—not because I have a stellar memory, but because I was working for Yahoo Mail at that time. You can imagine what a big deal the announcement was for my co-workers and me.

The biggest shocker back then? It was the massive—by 2004 standards, at least—storage space of 1 GB that was offered with each Gmail account. (For those too young to remember, before Gmail, webmail accounts only offered several megabytes of space—about 2 to 4 MB for every account! If you wanted more than that, you could purchase more megabytes.)

With its 10th anniversary, I thought it would be fun to look at the interesting and innovative features that Gmail has introduced so far. These are my top ten:

Carlo Catajan
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1. Virtually unlimited storage
As I said, this was a very big deal back in 2004. Not only did consumers not have to worry about maxing out and cleaning up their mailbox anymore, Gmail actually encouraged users not to delete any emails. Archiving all emails was the way to go. Needless to say, Hotmail and Yahoo Mail both scrambled to increase the capacity of their users' mailboxes as a result.

2. Simple user interface
Whereas other webmail providers showed graphical (often distracting) ads to their users within the email interface, Gmail went the less intrusive route by initially showing text-based ads instead.

3. Contextually based ads
Gmail introduced contextual advertising to email, an approach no webmail provider had previously taken. This means that the contents in a user's emails are used to automatically display relevant ads via their AdSense program.

4. Advanced search
As search is Google's forte, it was only logical that they incorporated powerful and advanced search options within Gmail. This also aligned with their philosophy of "searching instead of filing." The search functionality in Gmail is so robust that you can use myriad options to refine your search.

5. By-invite-only launch

While this isn't technically a feature, it was a great approach to introducing a webmail service for a number of reasons. The exclusivity of being a part of the initial batch of users for Gmail enhanced the demand for and buzz around the service. It also paved the way for Gmail to scale the service in a controlled manner, along with leveraging the feedback generated by early adopters and engaged, new users. Additionally, it built a foundation of trusted users and social graphs from which they could glean valuable information.

6. Labels

Instead of folders, Gmail let users label messages. This allowed messages to be categorized multiple times, whereas you can only move a message to one folder (without making a duplicate) once.

7. Free POP access

Gmail provided POP3 access from the get-go. In contrast, back in 2004, Yahoo Mail (for its US users) and Hotmail only offered POP3 access through paid versions.
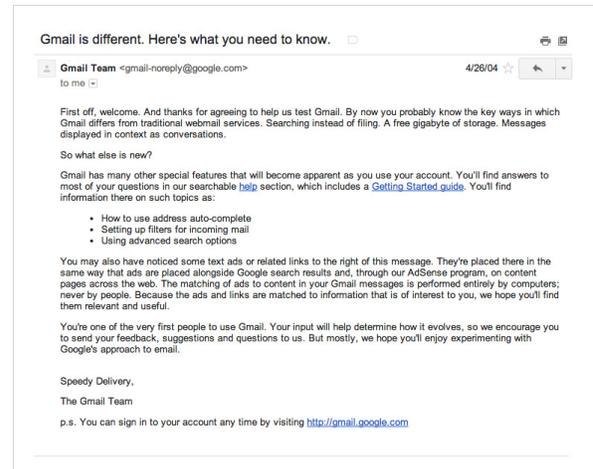
8. Email add-ons

Gmail offers optional enhancements to your webmail experience via Gmail Labs. Whereas other services come in one-size-fits-all packages, Gmail Labs gives you the option to try experimental features that aren't quite ready for or useful to the general audience.

9. Priority Inbox

In 2010, Gmail launched this feature to help users cope with inbox overload. Simply put, the feature highlights messages in the inbox with a yellow marker that signifies importance to the user. Importance is based on an algorithm that looks at who the user emails frequently, what types of messages a user opens, the user's own feedback, etc. It basically attempts to boost the signal-to-noise ratio within the inbox.

10. Inbox Tabs

In May 2013, as a further step to tame the modern but often still messy inbox, Gmail introduced the concept of Inbox Tabs. As the name suggests, the feature automatically groups messages under five user-selectable tabs: Primary, Social, Promotions, Updates, and Forum. Such an inbox layout lets the user focus on important and personal messages in the Primary tab, and then go to the other tabs if they want to check out social-media notifications, commercial newsletters, account updates, and mailing-list discussions.

Original welcome email from Gmail

And that's my top ten for Gmail's first 10 years. Did I miss any on your favorite features? In any case, I'm certainly looking forward to more innovations from Gmail in the years to come, as they seem to have a knack of perpetually pushing the email envelope.

Leader in Inbox User Experience

Andrea is a loyal Gmail user since May 2, 2005.

As one of the early millennials, I was embarking upon my professional life as Gmail took the scene by storm. Debuting in 2004, it was one of several markers that email was now officially a key player in business. Having a personal but professional email address was critical for resumes, interviews, and inbox storage space.

Little did I know I would end up making the world of email my career— and Gmail's set of tools actually helped prepare me for that world.

Gmail offered several perks over the competition—the ability to select a new username that didn't include a lot of numbers if you were an early adopter, a very easy user interface that had search features, grouped messages, and best of all— no more "inbox full" notifications due to the large amount of free storage. The new email client was constantly adding features in beta, so you could continually improve your inbox's look and functionality.

Performance-driven design and testing considerations

On a normal morning, Gmail is usually the first thing I check online, proving its practicality daily for reading, sorting, storing, and archiving the 50+ messages I receive on a daily basis. Even more specifically, it taught me the importance of testing, keeping all email designers and coders on our toes, throwing some serious curveballs due to the way it renders HTML email. No universal code standards for email exist, so while other emails clients also have rendering challenges that we must diagnose and work around, Gmail taught us the importance of pixel perfect code syntax and even how user-chosen themes can override style choices we make for an email's design. With these challenges, my email code skills and design choices were sharpened out of necessity. I became a better consultant because of the need to implement solutions that both performed and looked good—that degraded gracefully when certain standard web elements weren't supported in email and were still captivating and highly functional despite those limitations.

Staying power via multiple platforms, devices, and apps

Since Gmail currently makes up about 10% of email client marketshare—not even counting the potential Gmail addresses that are ported through third-party desktop email software instead of the web-based interface—it looks like Gmail is around to stay. It's always been accessible via different browsers, but has proven its staying power as consumers use it on multiple devices like tablets and smartphones. More than that, you also chose how to use your account, either porting your address to your mobile device's native mail app, or downloading the respective Gmail app.

With on-the-go accessibility now a staple in our daily lives, Gmail will continue to evolve alongside our daily communication habits.

Andrea Smith
Design Lead,
Content Marketing & Research
ExactTarget Marketing Cloud

Gmail's 3 Greatest Contributions

Chad is a loyal Gmail user since November 2, 2005.

From Day 1, Gmail has had a palpable distain for the status quo. Experimentation and user-centricity are the central pillars of the service, which has consistently been home to marketers' most desirable subscribers and has regularly given marketers fits and sleepless nights.

Beginning as an invitation-only service on April 1, 2004, Gmail's dedication to experimentation has been truly epic. The service was officially in beta until the summer of 2009. And Gmail Labs, which it launched in 2008, has led to plenty of new functionality. But there are three areas of contribution I think are particularly noteworthy:

Inbox bifurcation

Since its creation, the email inbox has followed the rule of "last in on top," which meant that the most recently received email had the most prominent placement at the top of the inbox. This simplistic hierarchy has never sat well with Gmail, which knew that delivery time was a secondary value indicator.

Priority Inbox, launched in 2010, as their first stab at disrupting this paradigm. It essentially created a must-read portion of the inbox for critical messages, separating it from your other emails. In 2011 they followed up with Smart Labels, which automatically labeled and foldered emails in various categories, including promotional. That optional feature was clearly the precursor of Gmail Tabs, which was introduced last summer and immediately caused panic among marketers who were afraid their messages would be exiled to tab limbo.

However, both Priority Inbox and Tabs have since proven to be boons for marketers with good permission practices and strategies in place to ensure that the emails they send are relevant. For others, these have been wakeup calls to improve their practices.
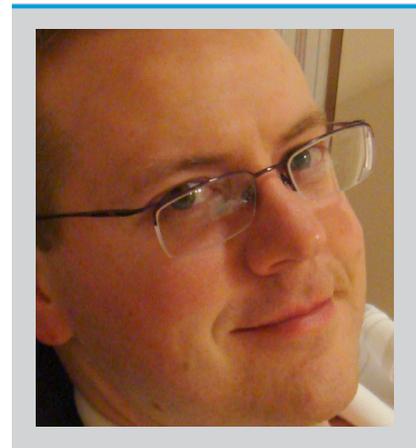
Social integration

While social has taken a backseat to mobile lately, it's still having a significant effect on inboxes, with much more to come.

YouTube was integrated with Gmail in 2010 so that YouTube videos included in emails could be watched without leaving Gmail. Google Chat is integrated into Gmail. And Google+ has just begun to be integrated with Gmail. Already you can filter your email so you can find messages from people you have in circles; you can see G+ notifications without leaving Gmail; and earlier this year Gmail started allowing you to email your G+ connections even if you don't know their email address.

Google's move to a single sign-on is strong indication that we will see more cross-platform integration in the future.

For marketers, these changes reflect the increasingly fluid cross-channel interactions that consumers have with brands and the need to have a strategy to address these behaviors.

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Interaction flow disruption

The classic email interaction model says that a recipient first engages with the envelope content (from name, subject line, and snippet text), then the body content of the email, and then the landing page. Gmail has taken aim at this paradigm as well.

The aforementioned integration with YouTube is part of this, allowing Gmail users to view videos without clicking through to YouTube. Around the same time, Gmail was experimenting with what they called "Enhanced Email," which allowed a form of browsing to occur within an email viewed within Gmail.
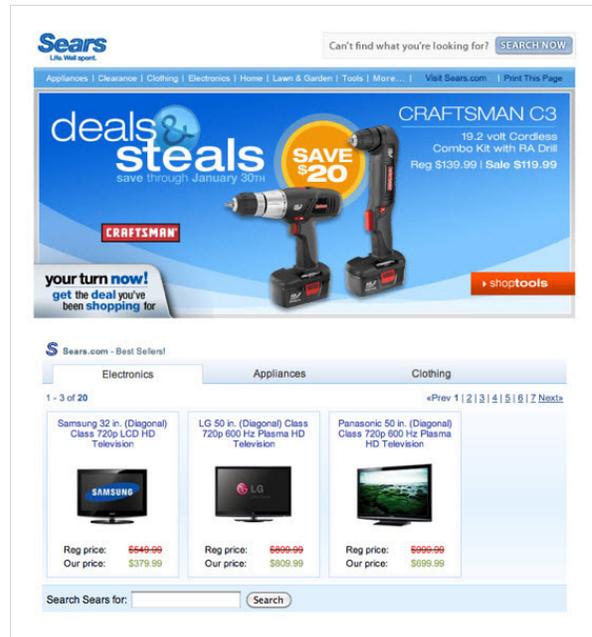
In a limited test of the functionality, Sears sent an email that enabled Gmail users to browse multiple "pages" of products within a module of the email. When a subscriber hit the "next" link in the module's navigation, the current set of products slid out of the box to the left and the next set of products slid in from the right in one smooth motion. While this functionality hasn't been rolled out, adding JavaScript-like functionality to the inbox is definitely on Gmail's radar.

More recently, Gmail introduced Quick Action buttons, which allow email recipients to act on an email without opening it. Quick Action buttons basically allow recipients to skip the body of the email and go right to the landing page.

These are all signs that the inboxes of the future will require new ways of measuring email success and of thinking about email interaction.

Change agent

Change is scary, and Gmail has given marketers plenty of scares over the years. But ultimately Gmail is all about an efficient user-driven experience, and what's good for email users is ultimately good for email marketers—at least those who are as responsive to their customers as Gmail is.

Gmail's JavaScript-like "Enhanced Email" functionality never went beyond testing with brands like Sears, but it is another example of Gmail short-circuiting the established email interaction flow.

10 Ways Gmail has Changed Email

Tom is a loyal Gmail user since August 2, 2004.

As Gmail marks its tenth anniversary, it's amazing to see how much has changed over the years. For Gmail's tenth anniversary, I've put together 10 ways Google changed email and the email industry.

1. Buzz

No, not Google Buzz, but marketing buzz. Sure, there were viral marketing campaigns before this, but Gmail's launch set the standard for tech launches: invite-only, limited supply, and lots of buzz. Their formula created extremely high demand with invitations being auctioned on eBay for over $100. In the past ten years, many have successfully mimicked the same formula. Mailbox, the email management app that had a waiting list of almost a million users, was only a month old when Dropbox purchased it for a purported $100 million.

2. A billion bytes

Before Gmail, web services were stingy with storage, especially webmail. Yahoo Mail and Hotmail offered a paltry 6 MB and 2 MB of storage respectively. Realizing people saved more than emails in their inbox, Gmail initially offered a gigabyte of storage. Dismissed as a gimmick, CNN even wondered "if 1,000 megabytes is really necessary." Today, Outlook.com and Yahoo offer almost unlimited storage thanks to Gmail.

3. Email with "cat-titude"

Google transformed Gmail from an email service run by Garfield (the orange, overweight, tabby cat) and targeting kids to a webmail service whose main demographic was thin, young, educated, career-minded males.
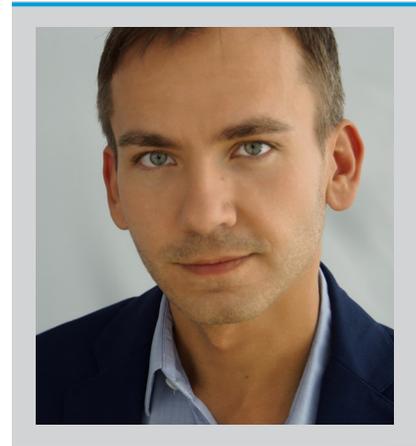
4. Big brother spam recipes

When Google announced Gmail's arrival, privacy experts raised an eyebrow or two. Google promised contextual ads in Gmail from scanning incoming messages for keywords, and even amusingly serving spam recipes while in the spam folder.

In 2013, Gmail started placing paid inbox ads that looked like an email message, and could even be forwarded to other users. Privacy concerns haven't died down over the past 10 years, and likely won't anytime soon. Gmail may be reading our emails, but at least they're trying to prevent the NSA from doing the same.

5. Spam filters

By the time Gmail hit the scene, most webmail services had a hard time with spam in the inbox. Google's engineers set out to build a better mousetrap with most reviews and studies showing Gmail and Hotmail leading the pack. On the other hand, marketers haven't been as happy since Gmail's filters catch a lot of opt-in promotional email, as well.

Tom Sather
Sr. Director, Research
Return Path

6. Innovation in the inbox

Outside the use of HTML emails, email in general hasn't seen much change as the rest of the web has in the past five years. Unsubscribing or tracking a package required going to a webpage, taking people out of the inbox. As Gmail strives to monetize the inbox and create a better user experience, marketers get a gift in the form of Quick Actions, actions that allow Gmail users to check into a flight or make a purchase without ever leaving the inbox. Gmail even made it easier for users to opt out of promotional email by placing an Unsubscribe link next to most promotional emails. This is just the beginning of the interactive inbox.

7. One inbox to rule them all

Google's competitive advantage against Microsoft was the one-stop shopping of Gmail, which includes Google office apps—Docs, Spreadsheets, Drive, Chat, and Talk—making it an easy sell for the enterprise to move to Google. As more businesses move to the cloud in the next few years, Google will likely be the winner, making Gmail not only the number one commercial domain, but also the number one solution for hosted business email in the near future.

8. Mobile

Most existing email and webmail services never got mobile right, but Gmail nailed it, making it as easy to send, receive, and search for email on smartphones. In five years, hopefully Gmail can read me my emails within my glasses or earpiece, or even auto-compose my emails based on what Google knows about me and everyone else in the universe.
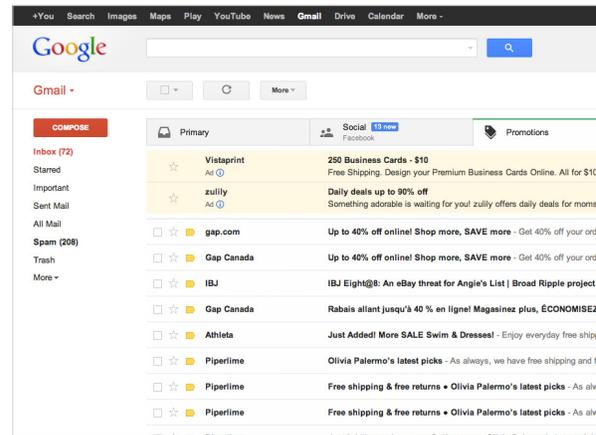
9. Labels & search

By allowing users to tag emails as much as they want and using the powerful search that Google is known for, Gmail eliminated the need for folders. No time for tagging? Gmail created Smart Labels, the precursor to Gmail Tabs (see below) that do it for you.

10. The tabbed inbox

Gmail's biggest change in the last 10 years was no doubt the categorization of email into Promotions, Updates, Social, and Forums. Gmail users loved the change. Marketers, on the other hand, weren't so thrilled, calling the tabs an email marketing ghetto. Return Path research shows tabs are great for everyone. Not only have read rates changed very little, highly engaged Gmail users are reading more. In fact, Gmail has been quietly testing new labels that could find its way into separate tabs, like Purchases, Travel, and Finance.

Happy Birthday, Gmail!

Gmail gives users a tabbed inbox experience with three initial tabs: Primary, Social, and Promotions.

Reflections on Gmail, Then and Now

Julie is a loyal Gmail user since 2007.

The year 2004 was a momentous and transitional year for many, especially for Gmail and myself! 2004 marked the birth of Gmail as well as my departure from high school. So I guess you can say I will always remember Gmail's momentous anniversaries.

Where it all began

I joined Gmail in 2007, and witnessing the evolution of Gmail and Google as a whole has been remarkable. Ten years have passed by and much has changed. I now have two Gmail accounts—one with my maiden name and one with my married name—and still use both to this day. I love being able to check both email accounts easily on my mobile device.

Who knew what could be packed into a free email service from the massive storage space, conversation tracking, search functionality, chat capability including video—not to mention the rest of the Google "suite"—Google+, Hangouts, Drive, and Sites. I have just recently been taking more advantage of Drive and Sites and love the idea of keeping all you ever wanted in one place—contact information, messages, documents, etc.—and being able to share what you want with others. It is incredibly useful in both professional and personal settings.

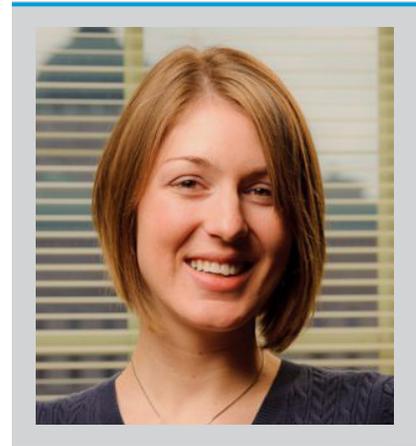### Gmail's impact on the marketing world

From the standpoint of someone who has been crafting email marketing messages since 2008 and now focuses on all ExactTarget Email offerings as a product marketer, I truly believe Gmail has shaped what email can be and do for the world. The innovation they have put forth has driven what other email clients provide now. And to add, Gmail has shaped how email marketers do their jobs. What emails will make it to the inbox? Will the new tabs within Gmail affect how subscribers will see my campaigns? Gmail has definitely been a game changer in the email world.

Gmail has shaped how email marketers do their jobs.

If you look at all the email clients out there, Gmail was the first to introduce the idea of conversation tracking. All your emails—the replies, sends, and forwards—are grouped together in order to keep track of the entire conversation. Just recently, other email clients have begun to follow suit. And with the introduction of the tabs within Gmail, email marketers are taking a step back and paying even more attention to see whether the new tabs have any effect on metrics (open and click-through rates).

What's next

And what does the future hold for Gmail? It is hard to predict. Who would have thought we could do what we can today on the internet? Various television shows have predicted it whether it be Star Trek's prediction of mobile devices or the Simpsons predicting the use of video chatting. I feel there are no limits.

Julie Brown
Product Marketing Manager, Email
ExactTarget Marketing Cloud

Power Your Customer Journeys

Make the most of your customer data with email, social, mobile, and the personalized web. Our cloud-based marketing software powers relationships between brands and customers.

Check out exacttarget.com to learn more!