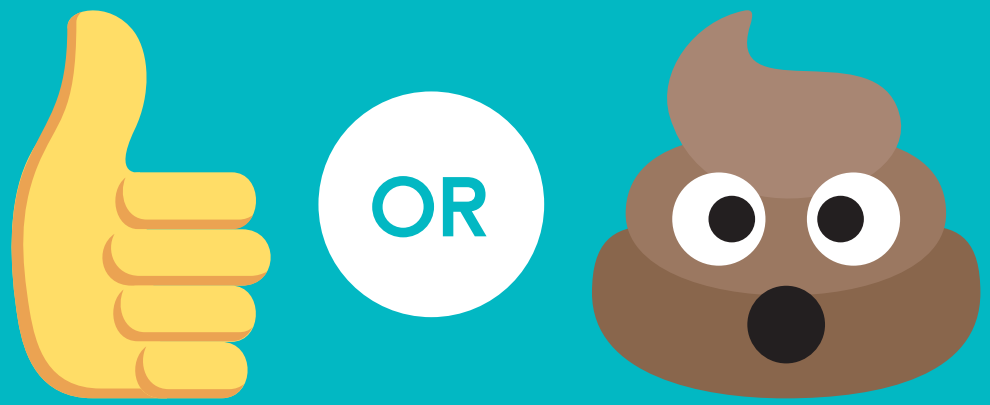
Emoji… or eNOji? What science says about subject lines.



phrasee

Artificial intelligence.
Human language.
Awesome.

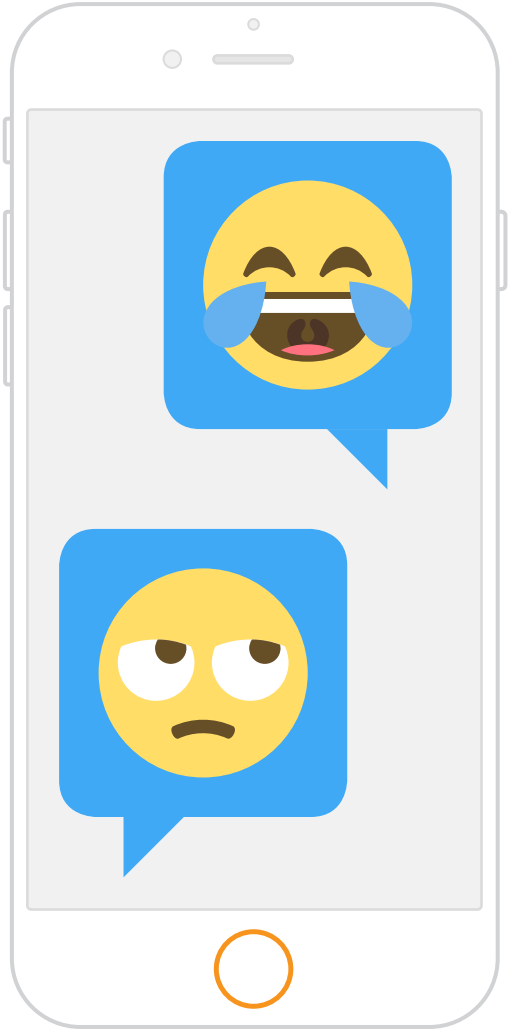
The history of the emoji.

Way back in 2015, The Oxford English Dictionary named *"Laughing Face with Tears of Joy"* as its "word of the year". While many academics and linguists objected, citing the limitations of digital communication as the downfall of the once mighty English language, their complaints fell on deaf ears.

Why? Because the good folks at The Oxford English Dictionary recognised **two simple truths** that the academics did not:

Truth #1: The widespread adoption of digital technology has altered the way people communicate forever.

Truth #2: Truth #1 is neither a good thing nor a bad thing. It just is.



The emoji and marketing.

While the emoji is by no means the only way the digital age has changed the way people write; it is certainly a powerful symbol to illustrate how modern linguistics have changed.

Here in the marketing realm, where the language brands use can have a huge effect on revenue, such linguistic changes can have far-reaching and important ramifications. Understanding what these ramifications are, and how they impact the way consumers interact with brands, is essential. It is (or at least should be) a key driver for any brand's marketing strategy.

For all those reasons and more, Phrasee decided to conduct some research to take a deeper look at how the inclusion of emojis in marketing language impact its performance at scale.

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An 1862 New York Times transcript of an Abraham Lincoln speech contains the phrase: "(applause and laughter ;)". This may or may not have been a typo, but marks the first ever appearance of the "winky face" emoticon.

The emoji test.

To determine how extensive emoji use is in the email marketing field, and more specifically in marketing email subject lines, Phrasee analysed **1.7 million unique** English language email subject lines sent worldwide in the past 12 months.

These were our findings:

- **1,700,000 unique subject lines**
- **5% incorporated at least one emoji**
- **1,500 different emojis used**
- **100 most common made up 66%**

The top 20 emojis:

1	⭐	11	ⓝ
2	✈️	12	ⓔ
3	❤️	13	☆
4	☺	14	ⓦ
5	❤	15	🔥
6	☀️	16	🎉
7	✓	17	✨
8	✉️	18	⏰
9	→	19	⚡
10	🎁	20	☀

The emoji test.

In conducting our research, we looked to answer two simple questions:

1. **What is usage like for emojis in subject lines?**
2. **Do subject lines with emojis in them perform better than those without?**

Phrasee specialises in one very specific area of marketing language: email subject lines. Luckily for us (and you), the humble email subject line offers a fertile ground for experimenting on how emojis affect marketing language performance.

So that's exactly where we started.

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The word "emoji" is just as Japanese as it sounds. It's taken from the Japanese words "e" ("picture"), and "moji" ("character").

The methodology.

To answer these questions, Phrasee conducted a test (because testing is awesome) in conjunction with a large ecommerce site. The site (which also happens to be a Phrasee client) had a large mailing list (5,000,000+ subscribers), and had agreed to allow us to test out emoji effectiveness on **470,000** of their subscribers.

It was agreed that the email marketing performance metric most closely associated with subject lines was a campaign's open rate.

Over the next several weeks, we conducted daily tests on our sample group and closely monitored the results.

5 different subject lines were tested each day on a group of 94,000 subscribers. The group of 94,000 subscribers was split into 5 groups - each being sent an email with exactly the same subject line, 50% received a subject line incorporating an emoji (our sample) with the remaining 50% not including an emoji (our control).

It was all very scientific, and with sample groups and control groups this large, the data collected was reliable and largely free of random variance.

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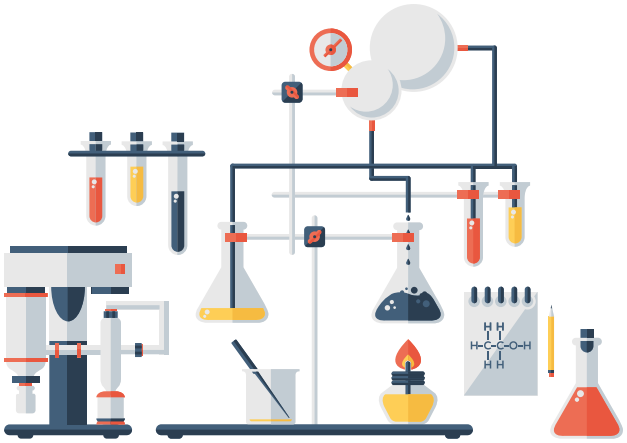
"Emoticons", graphic illustrations formed using keyboard characters, first appeared on the typewriter scene as far back as the 1800's.

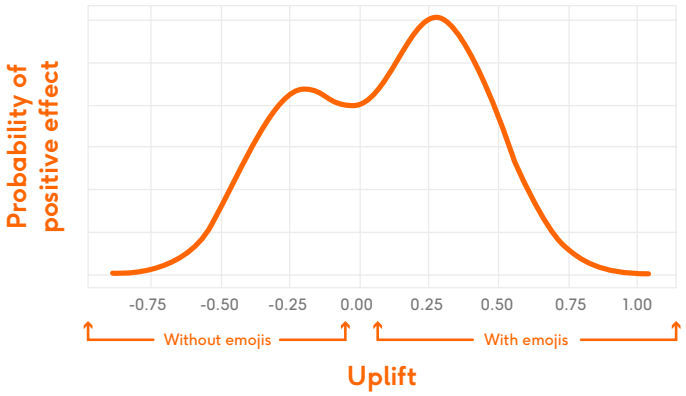


The results.

Our extensive scientific experiment into the effectiveness of emojis in email subject lines was... inconclusive.

We were unable to statistically verify that adding an emoji to a subject line will always increase or decrease the open rates that subject line generates. However, that's not to say that we didn't learn anything, or that any brand or email marketer wouldn't benefit greatly from looking at the data we collected.

In 60% of the tests we ran, during the course of this experiment, the subject line which included an emoji outperformed the same subject line minus the emoji. This data suggests that **emojis do indeed help** with subject line performance more often than they hurt it.



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In 2014, there were a total of 722 emojis in the standard Unicode 6.0 set. In 2015, this number increased by 250, as an increasingly enlightened world demanded the addition of more culturally diverse emojis.

The key takeaway no. 1.

For any brand's audience, testing and retesting the language elements used in email subject lines is essential to increasing engagement in the form of email opens.

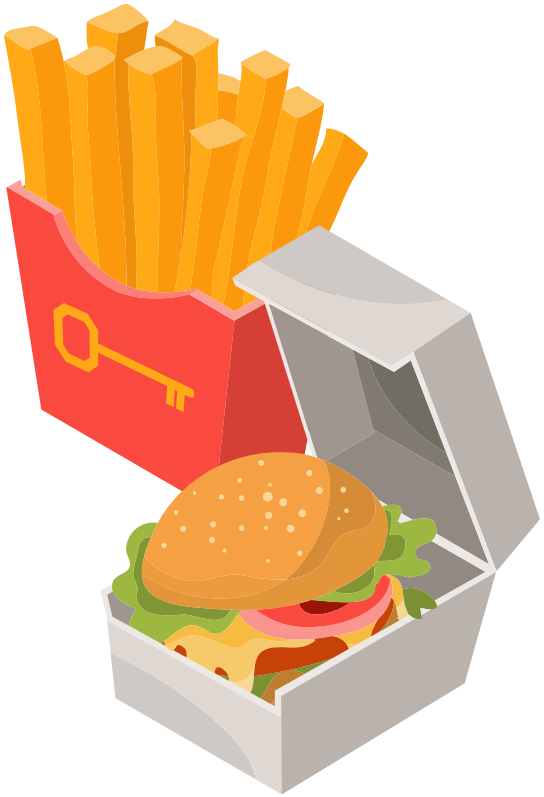
It is important to note that what emojis really do is **amplify a subject line's message**. Incorporating an emoji will make a bad subject line worse, and a good subject line better.

FREE Beer!

This is a bad subject line. It's bad because it's **MISLEADING AND DISHONEST**. Let's see what happens when we add in an emoji:

FREE Beer! 🍻

Now it's **MISLEADING AND DISHONEST... WITH A BEER EMOJI**. The emoji has done absolutely nothing to make the subject line better.



The key takeaway no. 2.

Emoji or no emoji, it is still essential to start off with a good subject line.

Anticipating which subject lines are "good" subject lines is entirely subjective. Different audiences will respond in different ways to different subject lines, and the linguistic variables involved in any subject line are legion.

This is why a subject line which performs well this week will often fall flat the next. Testing and retesting email subject lines on an ongoing basis is the only true path to success.

An example of how the performance of a similar subject line changes over time:

Date	Subject line	Open rate
15/05/2017	Flash Sale! 20% off everything this weekend...	21.3
03/06/2017	⇨ Flash Sale! 20% off everything this weekend	19.59
08/06/2017	Flash Sale! 20% off everything this weekend.	19.02

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1982 marked the first appearance of the "smiley face" :-) and "frowny face" :-(emoticons. These remained in common use throughout the 80's and 90's, and, indeed, still appear in digital communications to this day.

Including emojis in your email subject lines *could* drive more opens and clicks for your email marketing programme.

There's only one way to be sure: **test them out**.

Just remember: how emojis affect the performance of your email subject lines is only one of the many things every brand should be testing on an ongoing basis.

Every audience will respond differently to language. Figuring out how to construct the subject line language that your brand's audience responds to is the surest way to increase your email open rates, but keep in mind that **staying on brand should be a top priority** as well. Not every language element will be a fit for every brand.

Once you've determined which new language elements you'd like to try out, it's time to split test!

Here are some things to try:

Words in all caps:

Your name is all over our sale! Last CHANCE to get an extra 20% off

Hashtags:

#Trending—there's no ignoring our #1 trending item!

Emojis and their placement:

🙌 Picture-perfect properties from £157!

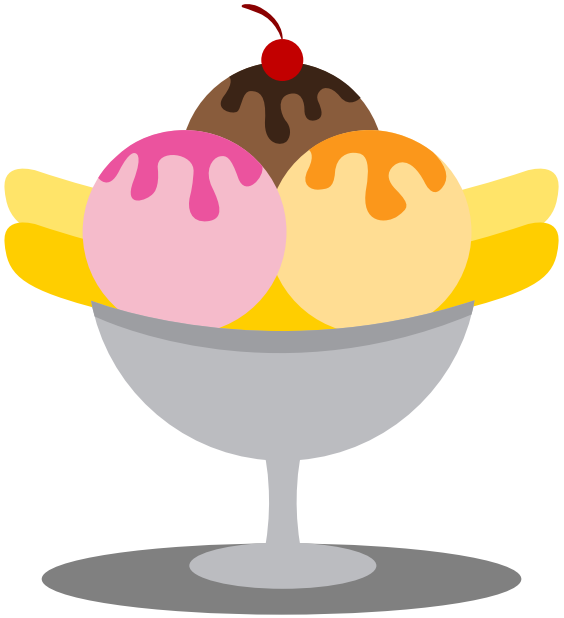
Plus, loads more stuff – because there are millions of ways to write the same subject line

How to setup a split test.

1. Look at your list size and determine a number of splits that will be statistically relevant
2. Ensure that each split has at least 10k subscribers in it
3. On smaller lists consider doing a straight A/B split and learning from week-to-week

How to run a split test.

1. Always work backwards from your optimum send time - 4 hours prior to your send is an industry standard
2. Wait at least 4 hours before sending the winner - this ensures that you will enough data to accurately determine the winner



Phun phact

Shigetaka Kurita created the first 180 emoji collection in 1998 for a Japanese mobile web platform.

The action plan.

Just remember: what your audience responds to today might not be what your audience responds to tomorrow.

Does our action plan sound like an awful lot of work?

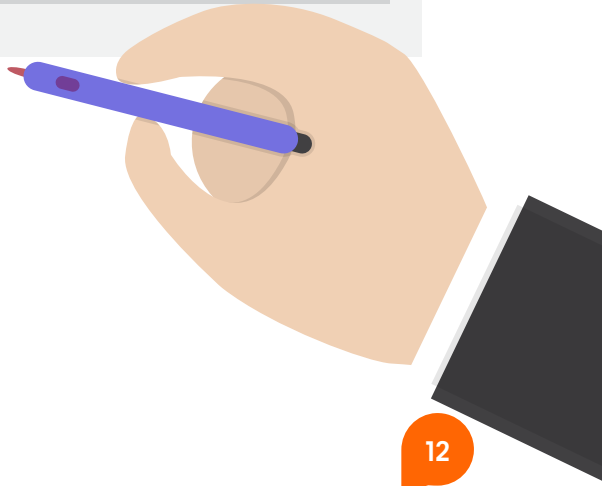
That's because it is. But also - it will get you better results... and isn't that the aim?

For brands with large mailing lists, we are talking about a lot of email subject line performance data here. Sifting through it all can be a tall order for any email marketing team.

It's well worth it, though.

Action plan

- [x] Test out as many different and varied subject lines as possible
- [x] Don't look for short term uplifts off the back of specific elements
- [x] Ensure you have statistically significant split sizes
- [ ] Make sure you wait at least 4 hours before sending the winner
- [ ] Re-test language that didn't perform well previously because your audience will change



Testing and optimising your email subject line language will increase conversions and ROI. Trying out new things like emojis is almost always worthwhile.

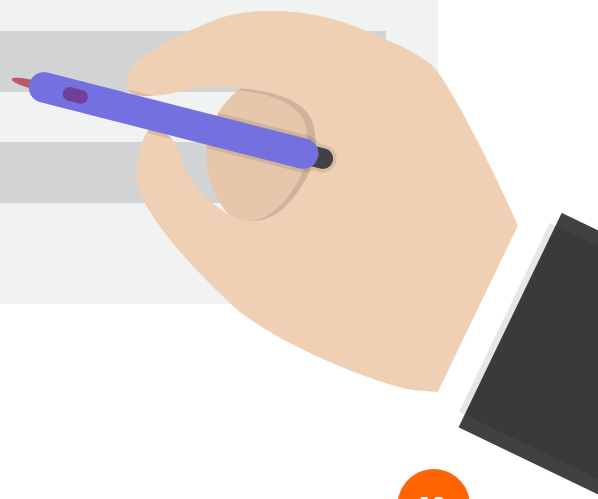
When online classified ad site Gumtree joined forces with Phrasee for some subject line language experimentation this year, their team weren't quite sure how their audience would respond.

A **23%** jump in opens and a **44%** uplift in clicks later, the phabulous team at Gumtree was far more willing to be bold with their subject line language choices.

A subject line is probably worth testing if it is:

Subject line checklist

- [x] Brand compliant
- [x] Inoffensive
- [x] Suitable for the content
- [ ]
- [ ]

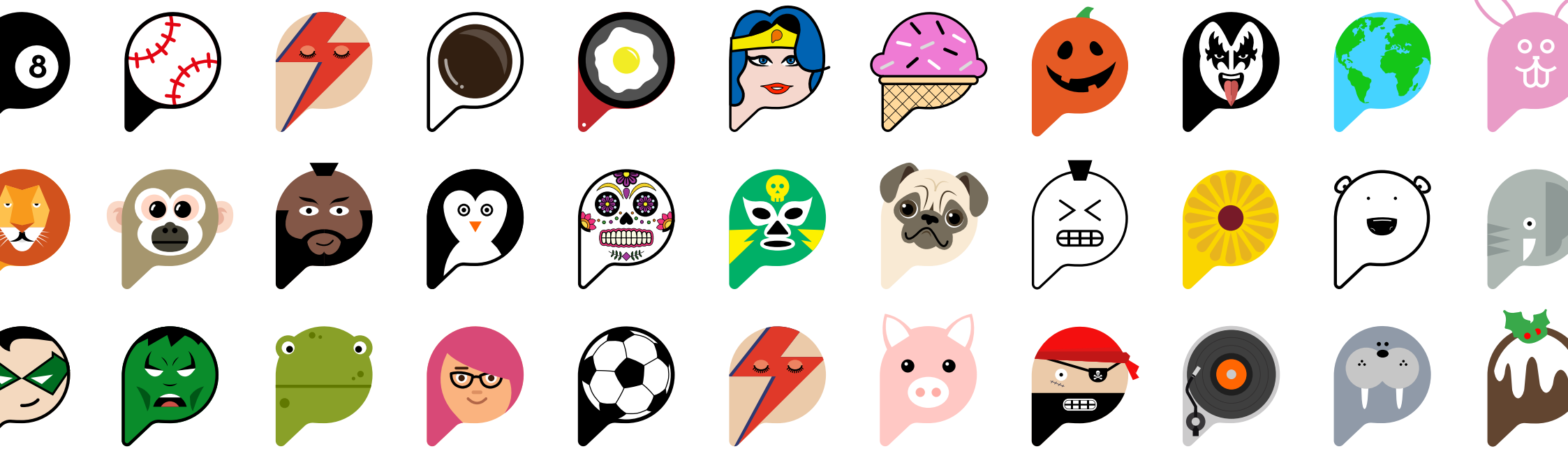


Next steps.

If your team has the time and manpower to generate, test, retest, analyse and optimise your brand's email subject lines on an ongoing and consistent basis, great! Follow the tips and processes outlined above and watch the opens, clicks and revenue roll in!

If, on the other hand, you'd prefer to keep things a little simpler, drop us a line, because that's exactly what Phrasee does!

Our powerful AI tech can test millions of linguistic variables (including emojis) and analyse millions of data points simultaneously. It can predict with a high degree of certainty exactly what language will perform the best for your brand's subject lines. It's awesome.



Get in touch!

Drop us a line on +44 (0)20 8870 6968 or awesome@phrasee.co for any more information.

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Artificial intelligence.
Human language.
Awesome.

020 8870 6968
awesome@phrasee.co
www.twitter.com/phrasee
www.linkedin.com/company/phrasee
www.phrasee.co

Phrasee Ltd
5 & 6 Crescent Stables
139 Upper Richmond Road
London
SW15 2TN