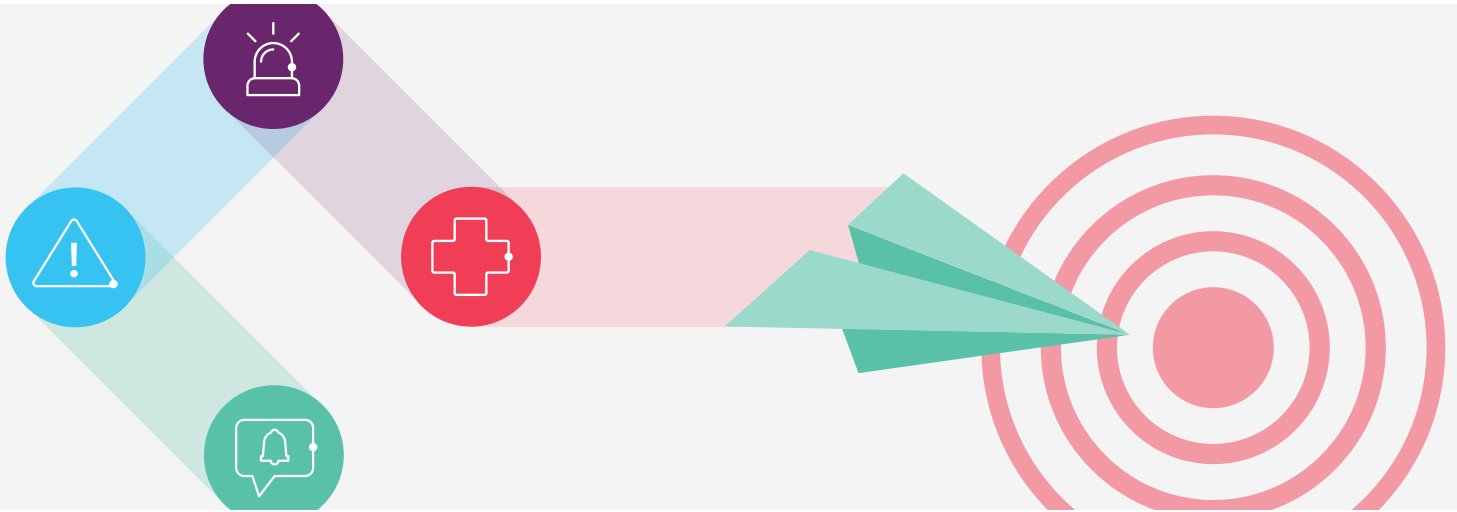


# Unboxing Must-Have Marketing Campaigns: Emergencies and Crises



It's on every marketer's mind in 2020: How do you communicate with customers during an emergency or crisis?

While it'd be nice to have [Olivia Pope on speed dial](#) for a brand crisis or a [designated business continuity team](#) during a global pandemic, companies don't always have that option.

Yet?

Growth marketers like you would love to have the confidence and skills to communicate during an emergency, so customers are happy, satisfied, and stay loyal to your brand when everything goes back to normal.

This is why we're going to focus on emergency and crisis campaigns for this next edition of Unboxing Must-Have Marketing Campaigns.

Once you read this guide, you'll get the details on:

- **How an emergency or a crisis creates opportunities for your brand**
- **The power of a Single Overriding Communications Objective (SOCO)**
- **How five e-commerce companies are using SOCO (but don't even know it)**
- **What governments and nonprofits can teach brands about cross-channel messaging**

Sound good? Let's get started.

## How an Emergency or a Crisis Creates Opportunities for Your Brand

Before we dive into the how-tos of crafting an effective emergency or crisis campaign for your brand, let's establish some basics.

[According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#), an emergency is:

*“Any incident, whether natural, technological, or human-caused, that requires responsive action to protect life or property.”*

Examples of emergencies include incidents like earthquakes, plane crashes, and oil spills.

Whereas a [crisis is](#):

*“Anything that could negatively influence your business’s reputation or bottom line.”*

Examples of crises include any incidents that only affect the brand or business themselves. This includes—but isn't limited to—events like a product recall, a public relations snafu, or a government investigation.

In other words, an emergency or crisis is generally not a good thing to happen to your brand.

However, [author and crisis communications expert Stephen Fink](#) has a different perspective, defining a crisis as:

*“A fluid and dynamic state of affairs containing equal parts danger and opportunity.”*

Meaning?

An emergency or crisis could catastrophically put your brand out of business.

Hence, the “danger” part.

But an emergency or crisis also allows businesses **the opportunity** to offer new products and services; rethink operational procedures; and remind past, present, and future customers why they should **trust** your brand with their business.

Now that we understand that a crisis creates an opportunity for your brand to do something different let's talk about the one principle you should keep in mind when communicating during an emergency.

## The Power of a Single Overriding Communications Objective (SOCO)

Of course, each emergency or crisis situation presents its own set of unique challenges, but customers will generally:

- **Ask questions**
- **Prod for status updates**
- **Voice their disapproval at your actions**
- **Take out their emotions on your brand (even when you're not necessarily at fault)**

So here's a framework the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) uses to communicate with the public during a health emergency.

It's called a **Single Overriding Communications Objective (SOCO)**.

The CDC specifically uses this framework to help brief their media spokespeople for press conferences, but we at Iterable have taken the liberty of modifying the five questions for sending cross-channel marketing campaigns.

The questions are:

1. What is your primary message?
2. What do you want your recipients to do?
3. What lists or segments need to know about this?
4. What facts or data points support the message?
5. Who should "send" or be the spokesperson for this message?

Let's break them down, one by one.

### 1. What is your primary message?

Determining your campaign's primary message can be hard to do in general. But it gets especially more difficult during an emergency or crisis that is rapidly changing by the minute.

Maybe it's notifying your customers that your stores are open for curbside pickup during a global pandemic.

Or you need to tell them that shipping times are delayed because your warehouse location is experiencing a hurricane.

Whatever it is, it's important to remember that recipients are skimming, so you need to prioritize what information is most important for them to know.

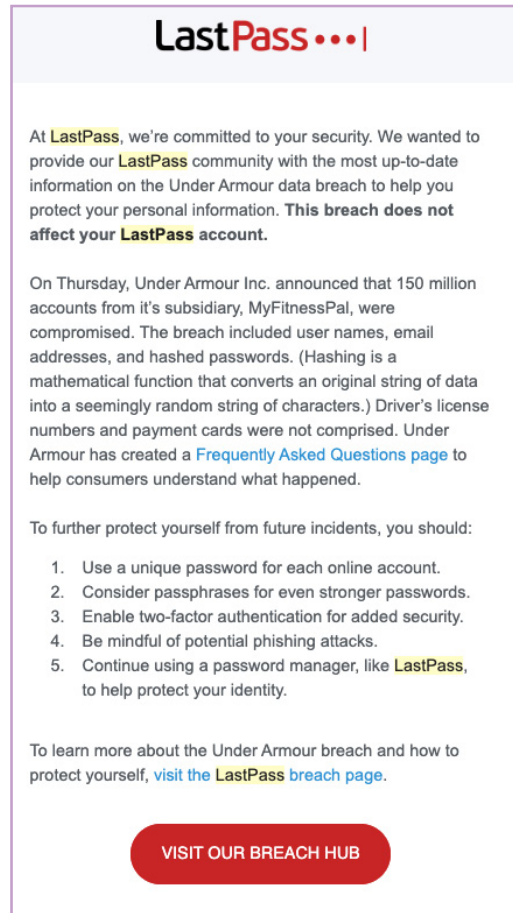
For example, let's take a look at the email campaign LastPass sent to users during the [2018 Under Armour data breach](#).

While LastPass does an excellent job of stating upfront that user accounts are not affected by this data breach, the primary message gets lost as the email goes into detail about:

- **How to protect yourself from a data breach incident**
- **What the meaning of a hashed password is**
- **Detailing information about the incident**

If LastPass had eliminated some of the extraneous information by linking directly to Under Armour's website or added a few line breaks, the primary message would be easier to read and understand.

However, this email still serves as a good example of why it's essential to communicate with your customers directly about an emergency or a crisis—especially if customers are at risk.



*Password manager LastPass notifies customers about the Under Armour data breach.*



## 2. What do you want recipients to do?

Figuring out what you want your recipients to do is otherwise known as deciding what your campaign's primary call-to-action (CTA) should be.

B2C emails typically use CTAs like "Buy Now" or "Start Shopping."

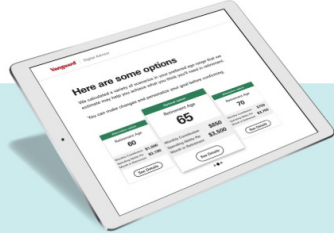
Except those CTAs can come off as insensitive during an emergency or a crisis, especially if they don't mention the situation at hand and how it affects the customer.

For instance, take a look at the sales email Vanguard sent to its users amidst a volatile stock market during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Even though Vanguard is asking for users to try its Digital Advisor program, take notice of how the email addresses the volatile stock market trends in their second paragraph:

*"Navigating change is a fact of life. We reach milestones, breathe through market ups and downs, and watch seasons come and go. Through it all, our dreams for financial independence in retirement remain."*

Vanguard has been around since 1975, so there's no question that the company has "watched the seasons come and go." This email serves as a great example of how brands can still sell products and services with empathy during an emergency.



**Vanguard** | Digital Advisor

### Here are some options

With Vanguard Digital Advisor, you can explore different investment options and see how they might affect your retirement goals. You can also see how your investments are performing over time.

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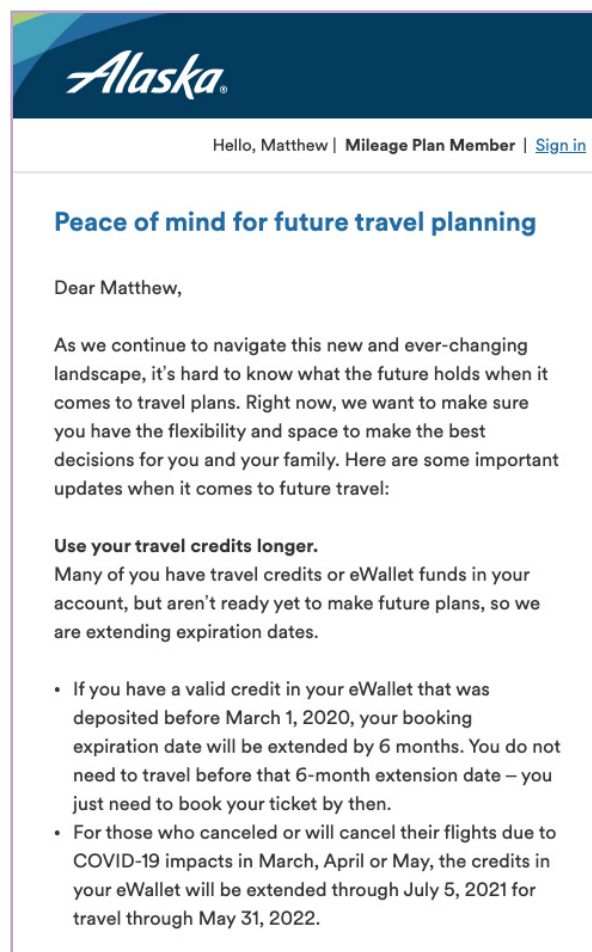
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### 3. What lists or segments need to know about this?

We at Iterable have noticed that since the COVID-19 outbreak, our inboxes are filled to the brim with [re-engagement emails](#).

This strategy often makes sense from a brand's perspective. After all, it's [five to 25 times more](#) expensive to acquire a new customer than retain an existing one.

But it can also come off as annoying to the customer, especially if it's been years since they've heard from your brand. For contrast, let's look at the following Alaska Airlines email sent during the COVID-19 outbreak.



*Alaska Airlines allows a 6-month extension for using travel credits.*

There was a ban on non-essential travel due to government-issued stay-at-home orders, so Alaska Airlines alerted any customer who had existing travel credits in their account that there was a 6-month extension on using them.

Also, note the empathetic language in the first paragraph:

*“Right now, we want to make sure you have the flexibility and space to make the best decisions for you and your family.”*

Compare that to other airlines, who sent a general thank you message about the [comprehensive relief fund](#) to anyone who’s ever booked a flight with them.

In general, it’s always a good idea to [personalize your campaigns](#). But it’s even more important during an emergency or a crisis so your [brand comes across as empathetic](#).

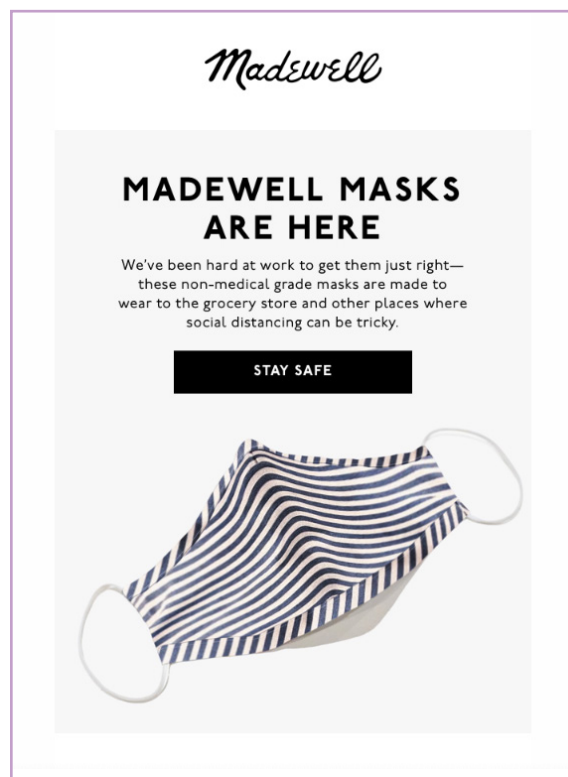
#### 4. What facts or data points support this message?

According to [crisis communications expert Doug Levy](#), you need three convincing details to make your primary message believable.

Using facts or data points adds legitimacy to your message without emotions attached to the emergency or crisis.

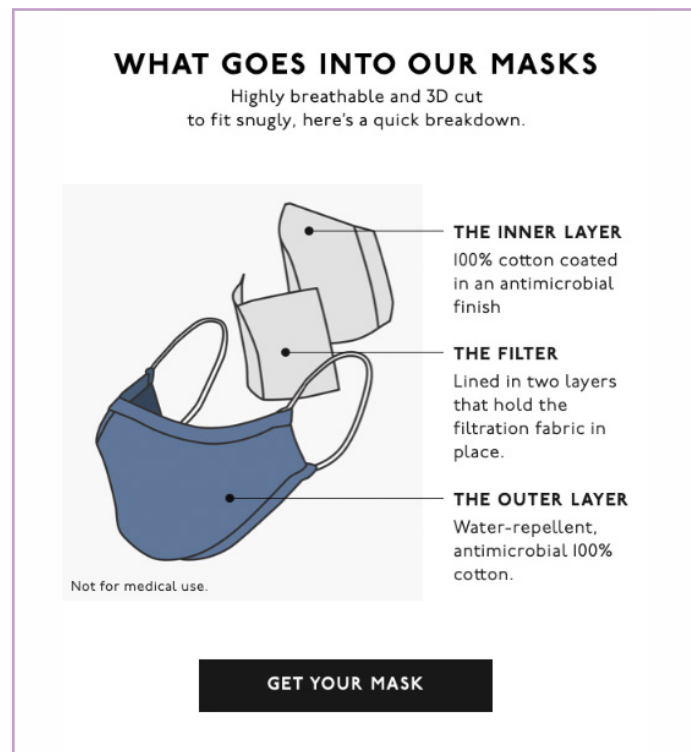
It also allows the recipient to validate whether the message is trustworthy or not.

For example, clothing retailer Madewell sent a promotional email stating that its non-medical grade face masks were ready for customers.



*Clothing retailer Madewell promotes its new non-medical grade face masks.*

However, Madewell is known for its cute and stylish clothing— not necessarily face masks. So in the next part of the email, Madewell describes the materials used to make each mask layer.



*Madewell describes the materials used in their new non-medical grade face masks.*

During the time this email was sent, the CDC had recently made recommendations to wear a mask to limit the potential spread of COVID-19. Using facts in this email not only helps the recipient feel safe and secure that the product is reliable but also encourages the customer to browse the Madewell website for other clothing items.

## 5. Who should “send” or be the spokesperson for this message?

When your brand is deciding who should “send” or be the spokesperson for your campaign, it ultimately comes down to who your recipients trust the most.

According to crisis communications expert Doug Levy:

*“People are much more likely to trust a person they know or have seen before. If there is no personal relationship, trust can be earned by a person who demonstrates that they give accurate information and have empathy for the audience.”*



Either one of those elements will help with trust and credibility. But what if you found someone who was both familiar and empathetic?

Recently, Farmgirl Flowers CEO Christina Stembel went to her Instagram to [ask for orders during the COVID-19 outbreak](#) so she could continue to pay her employees amidst a county-wide shelter-in-place mandate.

The response was so overwhelming that afterward, she sent a thank you email to her customers.

Brands don't get a response like that from customers without trust. So it's clear that using Stembel as a spokesperson for the brand's response to the emergency or crisis was the right thing to do.

Now that you understand the **Single Overriding Communications Objective (SOCO)** and how it applies to email campaigns let's examine how the same framework is used in cross-channel mediums.

**Farmgirl**  
FLOWERS™

Thank you



Wow.

It's not often I find myself speechless (brevity isn't something I'm typically known for) but I don't think I have the adequate words to *thank you* for your overwhelming support after we posted a video about our response to the COVID-19 crisis and the closure of our San Francisco headquarters. Your kind words, offers of support and orders this week have been the silver lining in a time when it feels like every day only brings more bad news. I've said it before a million times over—we couldn't do any of this without you and I'm so grateful that you've stuck with us for nearly a decade, and *especially* in these past few weeks.

Just like so many other businesses right now, we're doing our best to stay afloat so we can continue to be a small part of all of your moments—big or small—for years to come. And while I know flowers aren't near the top of the list in times like these, I hope you'll consider sending a bouquet when you want to be "there" but you can't physically be there. It would mean the world to me and the rest of Team Farmgirl, too.

Thank you again,

*Christina*

SHOP NOW

*Farmgirl Flowers' CEO and Founder thanks customers for their support during COVID-19.*

## What Governments and Nonprofits Can Teach Brands About Cross-Channel Messaging

While B2C brands are still primarily using email to communicate with their customers during an emergency or a crisis, governmental and nonprofit agencies are more likely to utilize cross-channel platforms.

Why? Because the messages require immediate action, and not every recipient checks their email inbox 24/7.

So whether your brand utilizes text messaging (SMS), mobile push notifications, or social media, keep three of the following principles in mind:

1. Know your character limit
2. You can always send an update
3. Have a strong call-to-action

Let's walk through each of them, one by one.

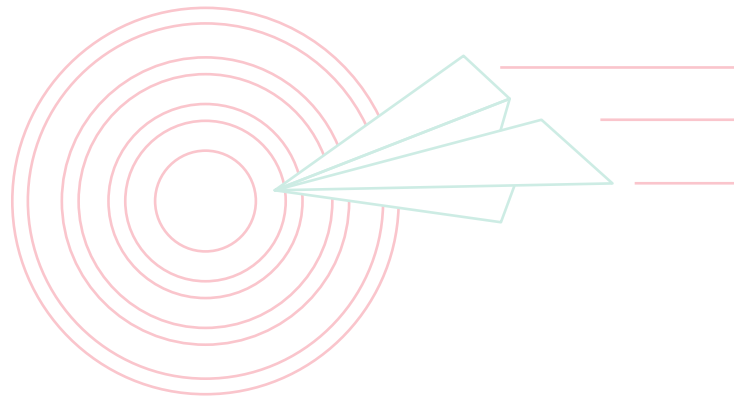
### 1. Know your character limit

When using a cross-channel medium like text messaging (SMS), be aware of the recipients' character limits.

For example, most phone carriers limit SMS messages to 160 characters. But for emergency communications programs like Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA), the maximum number is 90 characters.

This is for three reasons:

1. Different cell phone carriers have different character limits
2. The SMS message can be read in its entirety on the phone's lock screen
3. It prevents the possibility that the SMS message will wrap and send multiple notifications to the recipient.



This limitation may seem daunting but see below for how the National Weather Service condenses their text message while still following the **Single Overriding Communications Objective** (SOCO) framework.



*The National Weather Service alerts nearby residents about a flash flood. Image credit: [National Weather Service](#)*

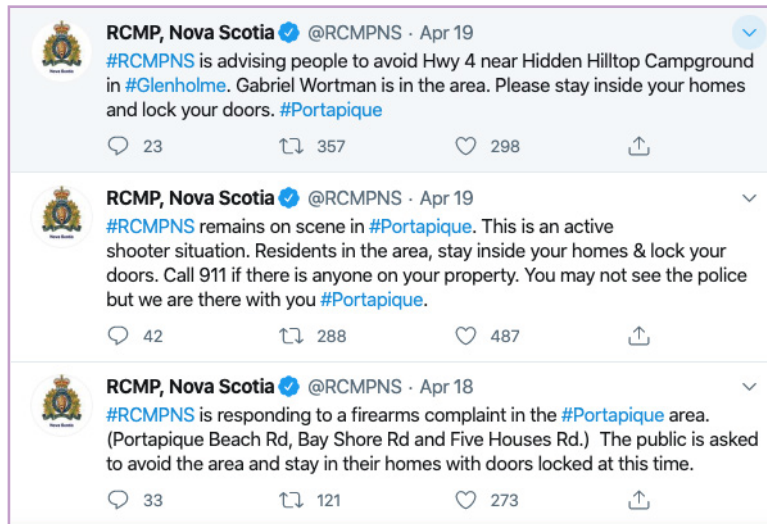
Note that the primary message is “Flash Flood Warning this area til 6:00 PM EDT,” and the primary call-to-action is to avoid flood areas and check local media.

But let’s say your brand needs more than 90 characters to communicate your message via SMS. In that case, you could share a hyperlink that recipients can click on for more information.

## 2. You can always send an update

For rapidly evolving situations like the [Nova Scotia mass shooting in 2020](#), it can be cost-prohibitive—and ineffective—to alert recipients via text message.

So it's now considered a best practice for law enforcement agencies like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), to utilize social media platforms like Twitter to update the public on emergencies.



*Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) alerts Nova Scotia residents during an active shooter emergency.*

Notice how each tweet still follows the Single Overriding Communications Objective (SOCO). The primary message starts the tweet, followed by a primary call-to-action.

Of course, there are pros and cons of using social media to communicate with your customers, especially if the emergency or crisis is a life-threatening situation. RCMP is [facing some criticism about whether they should have used an emergency alert](#).

But don't let that deter your brand from using social media during an emergency or a crisis. Other emergencies like the [2010 Haiti earthquake have used social media platforms like Twitter](#) to great benefit.



### 3. Have a strong call-to-action

Let's say your brand isn't directly affected by an emergency or a crisis but wants to do something to help. While growth marketers could use an email campaign, brands with mobile-first apps may see more success with in-app messaging to get the word out.

For example, look at the in-app message Spotify sent below for its [COVID-19 music relief fund](#).



*Music streaming service Spotify asks users to donate to the COVID-19 Music Relief Fund.*

Take note of the eye-catching background, the succinct copy, and the large call-to-action button that takes the user to the donation page if they so desire.

## Now, a Recap

We at Iterable believe that while an emergency or a crisis can negatively impact your brand's operations or bottom line, it can also:

- **Allow companies the opportunity to offer new products and services**
- **Rethink operational procedures**
- **Remind past, present, and future customers why they should trust your brand with their business**

However, it can be difficult to see that opportunity during the event itself. So that's why we recommend relying on the **Single Overriding Communications Objective (SOCO)**, which involves answering five questions before brands send out any marketing campaign or messaging:

1. What is your primary message?
2. What do you want your recipients to do?
3. What lists or segments need to know about this?
4. What facts or data points support the message?
5. Who should "send" or be the spokesperson for this message?

And if your brand is mobile-first or experimenting with other cross-channel platforms like SMS, in-app messaging or social media, keep in mind these three principles:

- **Know your character limit**
- **You can always send an update**
- **Have a strong call-to-action**

Now that you have the confidence and skills to send the right campaigns and messaging during an emergency or a crisis, what are you going to do to build trust with your customers?



## About Iterable

Iterable is the growth marketing platform that enables brands to create, execute and optimize cross-channel campaigns with unparalleled data flexibility.

Leading brands, like Zillow, SeatGeek and Box, choose Iterable to power world-class customer engagement throughout the entire lifecycle.



### Data Flexibility at Your Fingertips

Access real-time user, behavioral and event data to trigger personalized messaging at virtually unlimited scale. Support an audience of millions while appealing to each subscriber's unique preferences.



### Unified Brand Experience

Orchestrate seamless customer engagement across email, mobile push, SMS, in-app, web push, direct mail and more throughout every lifecycle stage, from activation to re-engagement.



### Agile Iteration & Optimization

Launch, measure and fine-tune campaigns with ease to deliver more relevant messaging faster than the competition. Experiment and iterate on-demand to determine the right content, channel and cadence for each user.



### Customer Journey Mapping

Visualize the entire customer journey and build sophisticated, cross-channel segments and campaigns with Iterable's intuitive, drag-and-drop Workflow Studio.

If you want to learn more about Iterable, please request a demo:

[Request Demo](#)

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