The Inbox Trust Ladder

SAMPLE DATA, NOT REAL RESULTS **Sample brand:** Sample Co., a small-batch home goods shop

A four-rung model for how much mailbox providers and customers trust your emails. Work through every rung, find your rung, and turn the gaps into a plan.

1. Authenticated	2. Recognized	3. Welcomed	4. Relied on
Verified	Known	Wanted	Looked for

How to use this workbook

1. **Run the free scan** at signifystudio.com for rung 1 (about ten seconds, no login).
2. **Work through each rung page.** Use the Where to look column to find the evidence. Mark Yes, Partly or No.
3. **Find your rung.** It is the last rung where every check is a Yes.
4. **Build your action plan.** Fix the lowest rung first. Page 6 turns the gaps into a 30, 60 and 90 day plan.
5. **Run it again** every quarter, and after any platform or domain change.

WHY A LADDER

Each rung supports the next. A beautiful welcome flow on a domain that fails authentication is a beautiful message nobody sees.

DELIVERABILITY VS THIS MODEL

Deliverability is rungs 1 and 2. Rungs 3 and 4 cover what happens once people receive your email: whether they want it and rely on it.

Start with a symptom (optional)

YOU ARE SEEING	START AT	WHY
Revenue from email down, send volume flat	**Rung 1, then 2**	Mail may be reaching the inbox less often.
Sudden drop in clicks across all campaigns	**Rung 1**	Check authentication and spam placement first.
Spike in unsubscribes or complaints after a send	**Rung 2**	Targeting or frequency problem.
Big list, weak clicks, few replies	**Rung 3**	Relevance and engagement.
Healthy sends, but customers do not come back	**Rung 4**	Missing moments. See the Second Purchase Map.

The Promotions tab in Gmail is normal for marketing email. The spam folder is not.

Rung 1. Authenticated

SAMPLE DATA

Can mailbox providers verify you are who you say you are? Nothing above this rung works well until this one is solid.

CHECK	WHERE TO LOOK	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	IF IT IS NOT, DO THIS	PRI	STATUS
1.1 SPF passes	DNS TXT record on your sending domain. Run the free scan at signifystudio.com or any SPF lookup.	One SPF record only, includes your email platform, stays under 10 DNS lookups.	Merge duplicate SPF records into one. Add your platform's include. Remove services you no longer use.	**H**	Y P N
1.2 DKIM signs with your own domain	Your email platform's sending domain settings and DNS records. Then send a test and view the message headers.	Headers show dkim=pass and the signing domain is yours.	Set up a branded sending domain in your platform and publish the records it gives you.	**H**	Y P N
1.3 DMARC is published and aligned **Sample: monitoring policy only. Reports are not being reviewed.**	TXT record at _dmarc.yourdomain.com. Test send headers should show dmarc=pass.	A DMARC record with a reporting address. A plan to move from monitoring toward quarantine or reject once reports are clean.	Publish a monitoring policy with a reporting address. Read the reports. Fix senders that fail. Tighten step by step.	**H**	Y P N
1.4 One-click unsubscribe works	Send a test to a Gmail account. Look for the unsubscribe link at the top of the message.	Unsubscribe shows in the inbox header and in the footer, and is honored promptly.	Turn it on in your platform and confirm with a test send.	**H**	Y P N
1.5 Sending from your own domain	From address on your last 20 sends.	A brand-domain address, not a free-mail address, matching the domain you authenticated.	Send from an address on your own domain and authenticate that domain.	**H**	Y P N

IS THIS RUNG COMPLETE? (EVERY CHECK IS YES)

Almost there. One Partly on DMARC keeps rung 1 open.

NOTES AND EVIDENCE

Pri: H = high, M = medium, L = low priority if the check fails. Y = yes, P = partly, N = no.

Rung 2. Recognized

SAMPLE DATA

Do mailbox providers and customers know your sender? Reputation is built by being steady, clean and wanted.

CHECK	WHERE TO LOOK	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	IF IT IS NOT, DO THIS	PRI	STATUS
2.1 Consistent sender identity	From name and address on recent sends, across flows and campaigns.	One recognizable name, one address per stream (marketing and transactional).	Choose one name and address per stream. Update every flow and campaign.	**M**	■□□ Y P N
2.2 Steady cadence **Sample: six-week gap before a large send.**	Send calendar for the last 90 days.	No long silence followed by a big send to the whole list. A rhythm you can keep.	Set a minimum rhythm. Ramp up gradually after quiet periods.	**M**	□□■ Y P N
2.3 List hygiene **Sample: no sunset flow yet.**	Bounce and suppression reports in your platform.	Hard bounces suppressed automatically. Long-inactive contacts handled by a sunset flow.	Build an inactive segment and a sunset flow. Suppress contacts who never respond. Common starting point is 90 to 180 days, adjusted to your buying cycle.	**H**	□■□ Y P N
2.4 Complaints stay low	Platform reports and Google Postmaster Tools.	Spam complaint rate well under 0.1%, never close to 0.3% (Google's published thresholds for bulk senders).	Find the sends with the most complaints. Tighten targeting. Make unsubscribe easy to find.	**H**	■□□ Y P N
2.5 Sign-up quality	Forms, pop-ups and any list imports.	No bought or rented lists. Fake sign-ups filtered. Clear consent.	Add bot protection. Remove poor sources. Consider confirmation for risky sources.	**M**	■□□ Y P N

IS THIS RUNG COMPLETE? (EVERY CHECK IS YES)

Open. Cadence and list hygiene need work.

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Rung 3. Welcomed

SAMPLE DATA

Do people want your emails? This is where engagement, relevance and replies show up.

CHECK	WHERE TO LOOK	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	IF IT IS NOT, DO THIS	PRI	STATUS
3.1 Welcome sets expectations	First email of your welcome flow.	Says what they will get and how often, thanks them, invites a reply or adding you to contacts.	Rewrite email one. Add a one-line reply invitation.	**M**	☐ ■ ☐ Y P N
3.2 Success measured by clicks and replies	Your reporting. Privacy features inflate open rates, so opens alone mislead.	You track clicks, replies, site visits and orders, not just opens.	Move reporting to clicks, conversions and replies. Treat opens as a rough signal.	**M**	■ ☐ ☐ Y P N
3.3 Non-engagers are handled **Sample: campaigns go to the whole list.**	Your segments and campaign targeting.	Most campaigns go to engaged contacts. Inactive contacts get a gentler, less frequent path.	Create an engaged segment (for example, clicked or purchased in the last 90 to 120 days). Send most campaigns there.	**H**	☐ ☐ ■ Y P N
3.4 Replies are answered	Your reply-to inbox.	Reply-to is a monitored address. A person answers within a day.	Set a real reply-to. Assign an owner. Create a simple triage routine.	**M**	■ ☐ ☐ Y P N
3.5 Basic relevance	Your segments and flows.	At least new vs repeat customers and one product-interest split.	Start with three segments. Add more only when each has a different message.	**M**	☐ ■ ☐ Y P N

IS THIS RUNG COMPLETE? (EVERY CHECK IS YES)

Open. Campaigns go to the whole list.

NOTES AND EVIDENCE

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Rung 4. Relied on

SAMPLE DATA

Do people look for your emails? This is the rung that turns a list into an asset.

CHECK	WHERE TO LOOK	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	IF IT IS NOT, DO THIS	PRI	STATUS
4.1 Customers reply, forward and save	Reply inbox, forwards, support messages.	Regular unprompted replies and shares.	Invite replies in key emails. Answer them. Feed what you hear back into the system.	**L**	☐ ☐ ■ Y P N
4.2 Emails tied to moments they care about	A list of every moment from order to reorder.	Messages around orders, restocks, gifting and occasions, not only promotions.	Map the moments. Build the ones that are missing.	**M**	☐ ■ ☐ Y P N
4.3 Customers mention your emails	Reviews, support tickets, social comments.	People mention your emails in a positive way, unprompted.	Make one email worth mentioning. Ask for feedback in post-purchase.	**L**	☐ ☐ ■ Y P N
4.4 Email is a habit, not a blast	Share of site visits and revenue from email over time.	A steady, growing share, not spikes only around promotions.	Add useful non-promotional touchpoints. Reduce discount reliance.	**L**	☐ ■ ☐ Y P N
4.5 Customers add you to contacts	Welcome and post-purchase emails.	You ask, and some customers do it.	Ask in the welcome and post-purchase emails.	**L**	☐ ☐ ■ Y P N

IS THIS RUNG COMPLETE? (EVERY CHECK IS YES)

Not started. Build after rungs 1 to 3.

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Your readout and 90 day plan

SAMPLE DATA

List the five fixes that matter most. Start with the lowest rung and the highest priority. Fix the foundation before the flows.

YOUR RUNG TODAY	RE-CHECK DATE
Base of the ladder. Rung 1 is almost complete.	Sample: 90 days from today

Top five fixes

#	FIX (CHECK NUMBER AND ACTION)	EFFORT	IMPACT	OWNER	DUE
1	1.3 Move DMARC from monitoring toward enforcement	Low	High	Marketing lead	30 days
2	2.3 Build a sunset flow and suppress long-inactive contacts	Medium	High	Marketing lead	45 days
3	3.3 Send most campaigns to an engaged segment	Medium	High	Email manager	45 days
4	2.2 Set a minimum send rhythm and a ramp-up plan	Low	Medium	Email manager	30 days
5	3.1 Rewrite welcome email one with a reply invitation	Low	Medium	Copywriter	60 days

90 day plan

FIRST 30 DAYS	DAYS 31 TO 60	DAYS 61 TO 90
DMARC path. Send rhythm. Read the first reports.	Sunset flow live. Engaged segment in use. Welcome email rewritten.	Re-run this workbook. Begin rung 4 moments with the Second Purchase Map.

Glossary and what comes next

SAMPLE DATA

TERM	PLAIN MEANING
SPF	A DNS record listing the servers allowed to send email for your domain.
DKIM	A digital signature added to each email that proves it was not changed and came from your domain.
DMARC	A policy that tells mailbox providers what to do when SPF and DKIM do not align, plus reports on who sends as you.
Alignment	The domain in the From address matches the domain that passed SPF or DKIM.
Sending domain	The domain your email platform signs and sends from on your behalf.
Complaint rate	The share of recipients who mark your email as spam. Keep it very low.
Sunset policy	A rule for gradually stopping email to contacts who have not engaged in a long time.
Engaged segment	Contacts who have recently clicked, purchased or replied.
Warm-up	Gradually increasing send volume on a new domain or after a long pause.
Postmaster Tools	Google's free dashboard showing domain reputation and complaint rates for mail sent to Gmail.
One-click unsubscribe	A header that lets mail apps show a single-tap unsubscribe link.
Mailbox provider	Gmail, Yahoo, Outlook and similar services that deliver mail to inboxes.

Next in the Inbox Journey

Once the ladder is solid, use the **Second Purchase Map** to design what happens after people receive and read your emails: how they feel, and what earns the second purchase.

NEED HELP?

Run the free scan at signifystudio.com, or book a call at signifystudio.com/schedule/. Thresholds and platform screens change. Check your provider's current guidance before acting.