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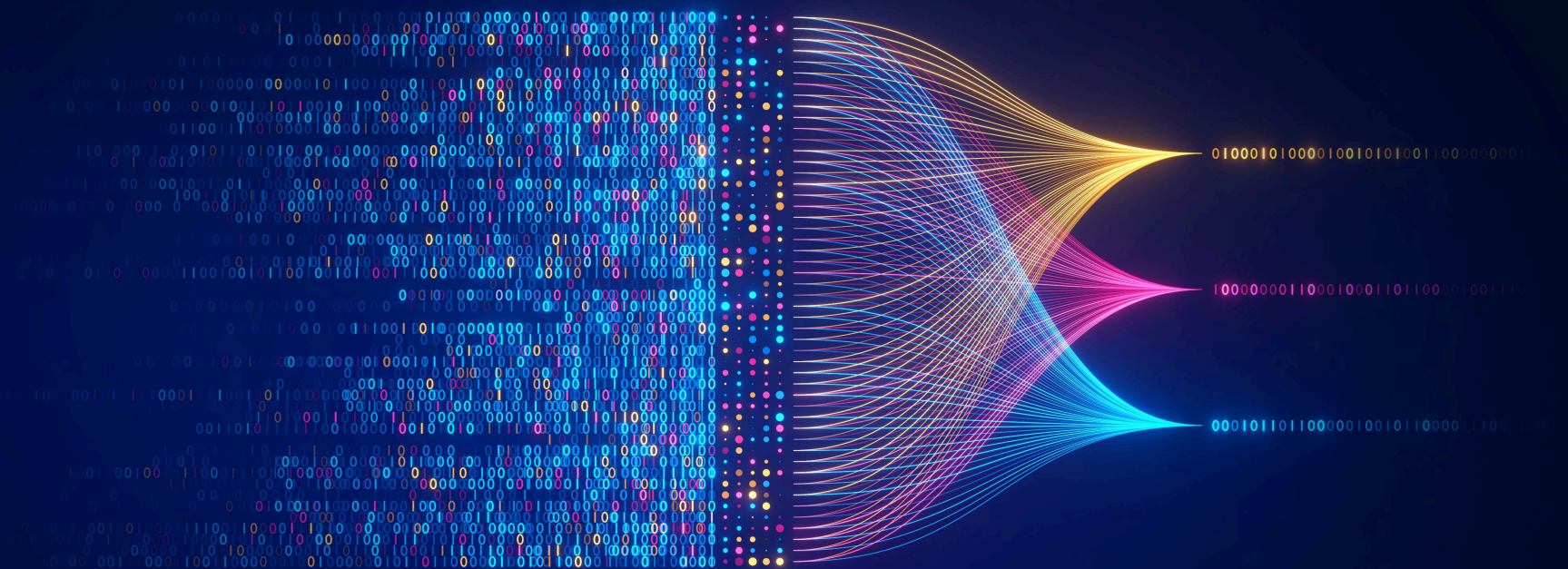
The Rise of the Customer Journey

Reflecting on 20 years of email in customer relationship management

20 YEARS

RPE ORIGIN

As we celebrate 20 years of RPE Origin, our team reflects on the evolution of email's role in customer relationship management and the shift from generic mass emails to high-touch personalized customer experiences.

Building Relationships Through Email
Reflections from John Caldwell, Founder

This year marks 20 years since I started what would become RPE Origin. At the time, I'd already been working in email for nearly a decade. Back then, email was still the underdog. It was clunky, overlooked, and too often treated as an afterthought in broader marketing plans. But even then, I saw its potential. I knew email could do more than blast out promotions. I knew it could build real, measurable relationships.

I didn't set out with a long-term vision or roadmap, but rather a belief that there was a better way to approach email. A way rooted in relevance, strategy, and respect for the customer. Over the years, the tools got better, the data got deeper, and expectations changed. But our approach stayed the same: help brands use email to create thoughtful, timely, meaningful experiences that serve the customer.

As we celebrate our 20th anniversary, Patrick reflects on where we've been, where we are, and where we're heading next for email in customer relationship management. He's been deep in the work and has seen the same shifts I have, from batch-and-blast to AI and beyond.

Whether you're new to CRM or have been around for decades, I hope you find something in here that makes you pause, nod, or rethink how you approach the inbox.

Thanks for reading—and for being part of the journey.

The Evolution of Email in CRM: Relevance, Technology, and Relationships

Reflections from Patrick Green, VP of CRM & Email Strategy

I still remember the thrill of getting my first email account I could type a few words, hit send, and someone on the other side of the room, or the world, would instantly receive my message. Even then, when email felt like a useful tool for communication, its future capability to empower customer relationships was a twinkling in my eye.

Decades of working in marketing and customer engagement has provided a wild and sometimes short-lived variety of tools and channels for how to reach and message customers. But I can say confidently that email hasn't just survived the gamut—it's evolved into one of the most powerful and personal tools in CRM (customer relationship management). The journey from clunky code, annoying mass mailers, and long-form sales pitches to intelligent, real-time customer conversations is one I've enjoyed taking. Thinking back through it probably says a lot about where customer relationships are headed.

The early days: spray, pray, and learn

Through the early 2000s, email campaigns were essentially glorified direct mailers. Get a list, load a template, hit send, and hope someone opens them. Metrics were pretty much limited to open rates, click-throughs, and unsubscribes. It was more about broadcasting than building a relationship.

But even then, email had an edge—it was direct, it was affordable, and it was measurable. Compared to print or broadcast ads, email gave marketers **data**. We had feedback loops, even if they were crude, and a technical backbone that provided a consistent and expandable foundation.

What was lacking were tools to personalize or segment effectively at scale. Creating segments and versioning messages were painstaking processes at best (if they were even used). Customers were often pushed into broad buckets under the assumption everyone in a specific segment wanted the same message. Spoiler alert: they didn't.

Segmentation and personalization: a big leap

Before the early 2010s or so, my coworkers and I went through complicated and resource-intensive processes to make the best, most relevant messages possible. But then something shifted. Data-driven marketing platforms matured. Salesforce, HubSpot, Marketo, and others made it practical to connect email addresses to purchase histories, web behavior, lifecycle stages, and more. Richer data meant audiences could more thoughtfully be sliced, diced, and slotted into more meaningful messaging groups.

Personalization went beyond just "Hi [First Name]." Emails grew to reflect preferences and behaviors, such as follow-up emails based on what someone clicked, reminders of items left in a cart, or tailored content based on past purchases. Email became smarter—and customers responded. Open rates ticked up. Conversions improved. And trust, slowly, began to build.

For me, this was when email marketing started to feel like a microcosm of a larger CRM craft. It wasn't about volume anymore. It was about relevance. It was about using data to understand the customer journey and being present at the right moment.

Automation and the rise of the customer journey

As automation tools matured, the idea of one-off blasts or manually scheduled emails became passé. Email evolved into journeys—automated, adaptive paths that followed the customer through their lifecycle. Welcome series, re-engagement campaigns, or onboarding sequences could all be triggered by behavior and timing and be enriched with customer data from a variety of sources.

This was a game changer for the influence of email. Instead of reacting, email began anticipating. Instead of treating everyone the same, the craft was about personalization at scale and 1:1 communication. Along with my history of translating data into insights into messages by hand, my team and I could use machinery to make magic with massive impact.

These tools also helped us better reflect consent and preferences. GDPR and other privacy regulations led to more transparent data practices and, in turn, made messages more welcome. People asked for and expected the messages they were getting.
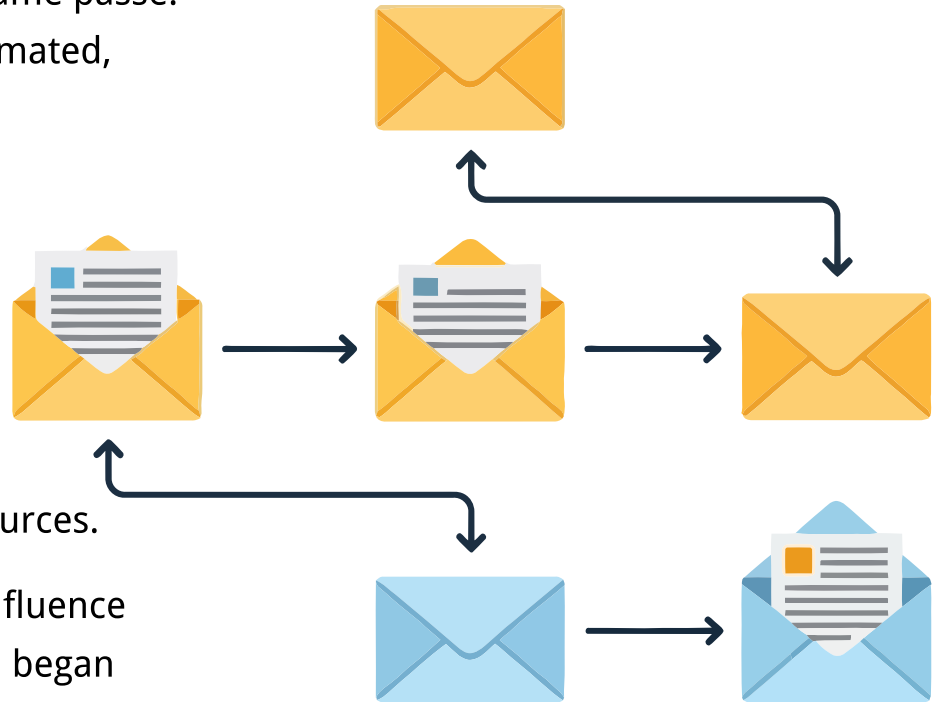
AI, predictive analytics, and the hyper-personal future

Fast forward to today, and we're seeing a new renaissance in email as part of CRM—one powered by artificial intelligence and real-time data. It's a revolution of computational power, pushing seemingly into all aspects of life. AI models can predict which customers are likely to churn, what products they might buy next, and when they're most likely to open an email.

Highly useful and intensively engineered, these models are there to enable. I've learned that the secret to being a smart user, though, is to be a user rather than be used. As I tell my team, keep your eye on what the machines are doing and don't be afraid to customize the power of AI to refine. It's your campaign, after all.

Likewise, don't skimp on what's available. Dynamic content blocks that change based on user behavior, predictive send times, subject line optimization, and even AI-generated quick-turn follow-up messages can increase engagement. Think of email as not just a channel, but a conversation—adaptive, contextual, and increasingly personalized at scale.

Be sure to keep the customer in the center of all that capability. In a world flooded with content, relevance is the ultimate differentiator. And thanks to technology, we can now deliver that relevance at incredible scale and variety.

Where email fits now and what comes next

Despite the rise of social media, SMS, push notifications, and chatbots, email remains the backbone of CRM. Why? Because it's universal. It's direct. And it's owned. You're not renting space on someone else's platform. You're speaking directly to your customer in a channel they check every day.

But what excites me more is how email is now part of a broader orchestration layer. It's not just about sending an offer—it's about being part of a larger narrative that includes the website, app, social media, and even physical touchpoints. Email can be the glue that holds that journey together.

And with continued advances in machine learning, real-time personalization, and zero/first-party data strategies, I believe we're entering an era where emails will be less like campaigns and more like ongoing, tailored conversations.

Some final advice for what's ahead

Looking back, I feel fortunate to have grown up with the industry. My eternal philosophy is customer first—to learn about and listen to customers using all available data and use that knowledge to forge relationships. The tools today make that easier, more accessible, and more actionable than ever.

For anyone working in CRM today, I'd offer this advice: Don't underestimate the power of a well-crafted, well-timed, well-targeted email. And don't underestimate your role in shaping the outcome. You have tools at your fingertips to create genuine and intimate customers relationships. Just remember, tools are tools, but relationships are human.

About RPE Origin

We are the industry's only vendor-agnostic, email-centric agency serving enterprise companies throughout their digital journey. We aim to be an indispensable partner for enterprise and agency clients who rely on email for success. Whether you need help choosing a new ESP, enhancing automated B2C or B2B customer journeys, or connecting data points across your tech stack, we help you move from simple to sophisticated to drive more revenue through email marketing.

Our team lives email every day, and that includes both email marketing and maximizing the connective tissue across all digital channels. With our customized approach and flexible services, we can do everything from one piece of the puzzle to the entire picture.