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The 30 / 60 / 90-Day Mailbox Warmup Playbook

How to warm up a cold email mailbox in 2026 — without getting flagged.

Gmail caught up with warmup tools in 2024.

For five years, "warmup" meant a tool that fired engagement signals back and forth between mailboxes on a rising linear schedule. ESPs caught on. The 2024 Gmail and Yahoo bulk-sender rules made the cost of a botched warmup rise from "a slow first month" to "a domain you can't recover."

This playbook is the exact 90-day plan SendKit uses internally across 10,000+ mailboxes. It is not a linear ramp. It is not "send 5 a day, then 10, then 20." It is the engagement curve, signal mix, and recovery rules that survive ESP detection in 2026.

What changed in February 2024

Gmail and Yahoo now require: SPF + DKIM + DMARC for any sender doing 5,000+/day, one-click unsubscribe headers, and a complaint rate below 0.3%. ESPs began penalising synthetic warmup traffic — bot-flavored opens at 03:12 are now a negative signal, not a positive one.

How this playbook is structured

1. **Days 1–30 — Foundation.** No cold sends. Authenticated send + receive only. Establish a baseline of human engagement.
2. **Days 31–60 — Integration.** Real, low-volume sends mixed in. Watch reply rate, not opens.
3. **Days 61–90 — Production.** Full cold sends within ramp limits. Sustainability becomes the goal.

Every phase has diagnostic checkpoints. If a checkpoint fails, you do not advance — you debug and repeat the previous week. Skipping a phase compounds reputation debt downstream.

Before day 1: the seven-item preflight check

A warmup is only as good as the foundation it sits on. Run this before the first warmup email leaves the mailbox.

1. **Subdomain isolation.** Sending from `mail.yourdomain.com`, never the primary domain.
2. **Domain age.** ≥ 30 days since registration or first MX record. Fresh domains get spam-sandboxed automatically.
3. **SPF.** Published, under the 10-DNS-lookup limit. Validated with `dig TXT yourdomain.com`.
4. **DKIM.** 2048-bit key. 1024-bit was deprecated by Gmail in 2024.
5. **DMARC.** Published at `p=none` minimum. Reporting address monitored.
6. **MX records.** Pointing at your email host (Workspace, M365, etc.). No parking provider.
7. **Reverse DNS (PTR).** Set on the sending IP. Measurable sender-score drop without it.

How SendKit handles this

Every mailbox connected to SendKit auto-publishes SPF/DKIM/DMARC at connect time, and DNS drift is checked every four hours. If a record gets edited or expires, we page it before sends fail.

Mailbox configuration

- Display name matches the sender's real LinkedIn identity (Gmail cross-references identity graphs).
- Signature includes name, role, company, and a working unsubscribe link.
- Reply-to is a monitored inbox. 404 replies kill sender score.
- Profile photo set on Gmail accounts (improves engagement signal during warmup).

Foundation

No cold sends in this phase. The goal is to build a baseline of human engagement that ESPs can read as "this account is operated by a real person who corresponds with real people."

Daily volume targets

DAY RANGE	TOTAL SENDS/DAY	TOTAL RECEIVES/DAY	REPLIES/DAY
1–7	3–5	8–12	2–4
8–14	5–8	12–18	3–6
15–21	8–12	18–25	4–8
22–30	12–18	25–35	6–10

Send composition

- **60% peer-to-peer.** Real conversations between warmup-pool mailboxes. Threaded replies, not one-shots.
- **20% personal-style.** Short, lowercase, low-formality (think iMessage tone). These set engagement baseline.
- **20% transactional.** Receipts, calendar invites, doc shares. These read as "real account behavior."

Behavioral rules

1. Send only between 09:00 and 18:00 in the mailbox's declared timezone. A mailbox sending at 03:12 looks like a bot.
2. Vary inter-send intervals. 5 sends spaced exactly 12 minutes apart is a stronger spam signal than 5 random sends.
3. Recipients must open at least 60% of warmup mail. Below that, ESPs read low engagement as "filtered."
4. 20–30% of opened mail must receive a reply. Reply is the hardest signal to fake and the most-rewarded one.
5. Do not move warmup mail to a folder. Leave it in primary and let the engagement signal compound.

Common phase-01 mistake

Pushing the volume curve faster because "the warmup tool said we're ready." The tool sees its own signals. Gmail sees the underlying behavior — and Gmail's threshold for "this looks synthetic" is much lower than the warmup tool admits.

Day-7 checkpoint

- Open rate (warmup pool) $\geq 60\%$.
- Reply rate $\geq 20\%$.

- Spam folder hit-rate < 5%.
- No bounces. (Bounces this early indicate a config error.)

If any of these fail, do not progress to day 8. Pause the warmup, audit the pool composition, and resume with day 1 volumes once the cause is identified.

Day-14 checkpoint

- Open rate sustained at $\geq 60\%$.
- At least 3 outbound sends placed in primary tab on a fresh seed test.
- No movement to spam folder on Outlook seed accounts.
- Reply chain depth averaging ≥ 2 (i.e., conversations are continuing, not single-shot).

Day-21 checkpoint

- Open rate $\geq 65\%$.
- Reply rate $\geq 25\%$.
- Inbox placement on Gmail seed test $\geq 80\%$ (primary or important folders).

Day-30 graduation criteria

- All previous checkpoints sustained.
- Zero blacklist hits across Spamhaus, SURBL, URIBL.
- Engagement curve is non-linear (i.e., distributed, not stepwise).
- A 10-seed inbox test shows $\geq 80\%$ primary placement on Gmail and $\geq 70\%$ on Outlook.

Integration

First real sends mix in. Warmup volume continues, but a controlled portion of daily traffic is now to genuine prospects. The goal: prove the mailbox can carry cold sends without breaking the engagement baseline you just built.

Daily volume mix

DAY RANGE	WARMUP SENDS	COLD SENDS	TOTAL/DAY
31–37	15	5	20
38–44	15	10	25
45–51	15	15	30
52–60	15	20	35

How to choose your first cold prospects

- Verified emails only. Use a verifier within 30 days of send. No catch-alls in week 1.
- Avoid role-based addresses (`info@` , `sales@` , `support@`). Higher complaint rates.
- Match recipient ESP to sender ESP where possible. Gmail-to-Gmail places higher than cross-ESP in week 1.
- Prefer high-engagement personas: founders, individual contributors. Avoid VP+ titles in week 1 — lower reply, higher complaint.

Step-1 message rules (first cold touch)

1. **Under 125 words.** Longer first-touch correlates with lower placement in our seed-test data.
2. **Subject under 60 characters.** No `FREE` , no `GUARANTEE` , no all-caps.
3. **One link maximum.** Always to your root domain, never a third-party tracker.
4. **No tracking pixel on step 1.** Gmail's promotions classifier weighs pixels heavily.
5. **No image-only emails.** Image-only is one of the strongest spam signals Gmail uses.
6. **No attachments on step 1.** A first-touch attachment from a stranger is read as malware.

Pre-send seed test

Run every campaign in this phase against a 10-seed inbox set (Gmail, Outlook, Yahoo) before full send. If step 1 lands in promotions or spam, fix the message — don't fix the mailbox.

Day-45 checkpoint

- Bounce rate < 2% across cold sends.
- Spam complaint rate < 0.1%.

- Reply rate on cold $\geq 2\%$. (Reply is now the load-bearing signal — opens are unreliable post-iOS-15.)
- Inbox placement test still $\geq 75\%$ primary on Gmail.
- No movement of warmup pool mail to spam.

Day-60 graduation criteria

- Bounce rate $< 2\%$ sustained over 14 days.
- Spam complaint rate $< 0.1\%$ sustained over 14 days.
- Reply rate $\geq 3\%$.
- Two consecutive seed tests at $\geq 80\%$ primary.
- Mailbox has carried at least 7 days of 30+/day cold volume without engagement degradation.

If a checkpoint fails

Drop cold volume to zero, hold warmup volume flat for 7 days, run seed test, then re-attempt the failed checkpoint. Do not "push through." Damage compounds; recovery does not.

Production

Full cold sending within ramp limits. Reputation is now compounding in your favor — the goal is to sustain it, not to push for more volume.

Daily volume curve

DAY RANGE	COLD SENDS	WARMUP SENDS	PER-CAMPAIGN CAP
61–70	40	10	30/mailbox/day/campaign
71–80	60	8	30/mailbox/day/campaign
81–90	80	5	30/mailbox/day/campaign

Steady-state operating rules

- **Per-mailbox daily cap (mature):** 100 sends/day max. Curves above this trigger ESP rate-shaping.
- **Per-mailbox per-campaign cap:** 30 leads/day. Higher concentration reads as list-blast behavior.
- **New-mailbox ramp onto sequences:** ≤ 20 mailboxes/day. More than 20 going hot at once reads as synchronized spam.
- **Send window:** 09:00–11:00 recipient-local time. Inbox placement tests show consistently higher primary-folder rates in morning windows.

Continuous monitoring

1. Bounce rate. Kill the campaign at 4%. Above 4% Gmail de-prioritizes the sending domain for weeks.
2. Spam complaint rate. Kill at 0.3%. Gmail's auto-spam threshold sits there.
3. Reply rate (B2B benchmark): 2–4% healthy, 1–2% warning, $< 1\%$ kill.
4. Blacklist status. Run within 24 hours of every send. Spamhaus listings can happen from one bad batch.
5. Inbox placement re-check on day 3 of any new campaign. Day-3 drops are the earliest indicator of reputation damage.

How SendKit handles this

Auto mailbox protection watches bounce rate, complaint rate, blacklist status, and inbox placement continuously. If any crosses a kill threshold, the mailbox pauses automatically — before the next send compounds damage. Once the issue is resolved, the mailbox resumes.

Day-90 sustainability test

- Bounce rate $< 2\%$ averaged over the last 14 days.
- Reply rate $\geq 3\%$ averaged over the last 14 days.
- Inbox placement test $\geq 80\%$ primary on Gmail, $\geq 70\%$ on Outlook.
- No blacklist hits in the last 30 days.

- No pause events triggered by mailbox protection in the last 14 days.

A mailbox that passes the day-90 test has crossed from "warming up" to "production-grade." It can now be assigned to higher-volume sequences, but should still be capped at 100/day and rotated across campaigns.

When reputation drops mid-warmup

Reputation degrades faster than it builds. A single bad batch can move a day-45 mailbox back to a day-15 baseline. This is the recovery procedure.

Symptoms ladder (mildest → most severe)

1. Inbox placement drops below 70% primary on Gmail seed test.
2. Open rate declines 20%+ week-over-week (low-confidence signal post-iOS-15, but still a flag).
3. Reply rate drops > 30% on a campaign that previously performed.
4. Bounce rate climbs above 2% on a list that was previously clean.
5. Domain or IP appears on Spamhaus, SURBL, or URIBL.

Recovery procedure

1. **Pause cold sends.** Day 1 of recovery is full-stop on cold traffic from the affected mailbox.
2. **Hold warmup volume.** Do not increase warmup — sustain current volume, reset the engagement curve.
3. **Audit list.** Suppress every recipient that bounced or marked spam in the past 30 days, plus any catch-all domains.
4. **Audit content.** Re-run subject lines through a spam-scoring tool. Strip the email of all images, attachments, and tracking pixels until placement recovers.
5. **Wait 7 days.** Reputation does not recover instantly. ESPs need a fresh signal window to re-evaluate.
6. **Run seed test on day 7.** Gmail + Outlook + Yahoo. If primary placement $\geq 75\%$, resume cold sends at 50% of pre-incident volume.
7. **Ramp back over 14 days.** Add 10% of original cold volume per day until pre-incident volume is restored.

When to retire the mailbox

If a mailbox has appeared on Spamhaus twice in 90 days, or has had three pause events from auto-protection, retire it. Reputation has compounded the wrong way and a fresh subdomain + new mailbox is cheaper than fighting an uphill recovery.

Diagnostic checkpoint summary

One page reference. Print this and run the checks weekly during warmup, then bi-weekly during steady-state.

DAY	OPEN RATE	REPLY RATE	INBOX PLACEMENT	BOUNCE	COMPLAINTS
7	≥ 60%	≥ 20%	—	0%	< 0.1%
14	≥ 60%	≥ 22%	≥ 75% primary	0%	< 0.1%
21	≥ 65%	≥ 25%	≥ 80% primary	< 1%	< 0.1%
30	≥ 65%	≥ 25%	≥ 80% primary	< 1%	< 0.1%
45	—	≥ 2% (cold)	≥ 75% primary	< 2%	< 0.1%
60	—	≥ 3% (cold)	≥ 80% primary	< 2%	< 0.1%
90	—	≥ 3% (cold)	≥ 80% primary	< 2%	< 0.1%

Volume reference

DAY RANGE	WARMUP	COLD	TOTAL/DAY
1–7	3–5	0	3–5
8–14	5–8	0	5–8
15–21	8–12	0	8–12
22–30	12–18	0	12–18
31–37	15	5	20
38–44	15	10	25
45–51	15	15	30
52–60	15	20	35
61–70	10	40	50
71–80	8	60	68
81–90	5	80	85

Run this once. Then run it again.

A 90-day warmup is not a one-time event. Every new mailbox earns reputation from zero.

Every domain reset starts the clock again. Build the habit.

The shortcut everyone takes — and pays for — is treating warmup as a setup task. It is an operating discipline. Mailboxes that get a 90-day foundation outlive ones that didn't by 4–6× before reputation degrades.

If you do not want to manage the 90-day curve manually, SendKit's warmup runs this exact playbook automatically — variable send times, real engagement, non-linear ramp, designed to pass 2024-era ESP detection. Diagnostic checkpoints fire on schedule. Auto mailbox protection pauses sending before damage spreads.

Get started in SendKit

Connect a mailbox. Authentication auto-publishes. Warmup begins. Run cold campaigns when day-90 graduation criteria are met. → sendkit.ai

Sources & references.

Industry data behind the volume curves, checkpoint thresholds, and post-Feb-2024 rule references in this playbook.

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