stensul
5 steps to recession-proof
your email creation process

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Introduction

The U.S. Federal Reserve's raising of interest rates and its related guidance on expectations for the economy suggest we're headed toward a recession, if not already in one. The good news is if it does occur, recession 2022 won't be as severe as recent downturns.

In the face of economic uncertainty, it's wise for any organization **to be prepared and take necessary action** to ride out the storm and maybe come out better on the other side.

Given all that, **it makes sense** to take steps **to have your email operation be able to handle whatever is thrown at it** - and keep delivering results.

This eBook offers five steps to help ensure your operation is recession-proof. It presents a set of suggestions you can adapt to best fit your circumstance.

- **Step 1:** Plan, revise, repeat
- **Step 2:** Estimate the workload
- **Step 3:** Evaluate your people
- **Step 4:** Examine your process
- **Step 5:** Optimize everything

Much of what you'll read here has as much applicability in the best of times as in moments like now, when the clouds of concern gather over our heads.

What is a recession?

A recession is a “significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP (gross domestic product), real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales.

That definition is from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), a private research organization that’s the acknowledged authority on determining the onset and end of a recession.

Step 1: Plan, revise, repeat

Remarkably, there are people in roles like yours who will take one of two postures in the face of an economic downturn. The first is to make like an ostrich. They stick their heads in the sand figuratively, and do nothing. The other is to panic and act irrationally, often overreacting, possibly putting their operation in a worse position had they stayed the course.

Neither is recommended. What does make sense is to **prepare a plan to manage through challenging times. Ideally, it should be developed in advance of economic difficulties.**

Management consultants often point to the best-worst-most likely scenarios approach when planning for the unforeseen. By looking at a potential situation in that manner, you give your organization the needed flexibility to adapt to what might be the actual situation.

Once completed, it is useful to **treat your plan like a fire extinguisher.** You know, the bright red cylinder that sits on a hook in a hallway, ready to be used to put out a burst of flames. Even though not so much as a flickering spark has been seen in quite some time and the fire extinguisher's top is a little dusty, you check it. **You look to see that all is right and ready.**

Treat your plan the same way. As brilliantly as you feel you conceived and constructed it, things change, especially when there's even a little bit of economic turmoil. **Look to see what's still right and what needs to be revised.** Do this periodically or, if circumstances are such, when you must. You undoubtedly have heard the expression, "it's a living document." **Make it your duty to keep the plan vital and relevant** to where your organization is at that particular moment.

Planning resources

If you don’t have a plan, work on it now. Improvisational management is not advisable when the pressure is on.

In addition, look to your own company’s strategic planning team. There’s an excellent chance they have a template - for a plan, not an email - that you can use.

While these resources offer a view from the top of the organization, you can look to them for advice and planning ideas for your email operation:

27 Top Ways to Recession-Proof Your Business

7 Tips to Recession-Proof Your Business, From Leaders Who Have Been There

Marketing at Low Tide: How to Recession-Proof Your Marketing Department

Step 2: Estimate the workload

Companies that thrived during the most recent economic downturns were the ones that turned up their marketing spend. You've likely seen more marketing efforts driven by email even before the storm clouds gathered. The reason is readily apparent. **No marketing channel is as effective as email** when it comes to engagement, loyalty development, and revenue generation than email. **Its $42 ROI for every dollar spent holds even more appeal if a recession is top of mind.**

The message is simple: **don't assume things will slow down when the overall economy does.** You and your team might find yourselves busier than ever. That's all the more reason to evaluate the workload. The one you're dealing with today and what it could be tomorrow.

The best-worst-mostly-like scenario approach will be helpful here.

Find out what the marketing groups you serve have planned - as far as they can see. At the same time, explore any potential to allow for flexibility in SLAs.

Understanding the number of email requests you'll be fielding - and at what rate - lets you determine your personnel requirements and whether the creation process is aligned with throughput demand.

Questions you must answer:

- Is your email creation capability at or near capacity? Now? Next month? Next quarter?
- Is it currently below that? How expandable is it?
- How easily/quickly can it adapt?

Workload estimation resources

Your organization - or yourself - may have a method to estimate how long an email creation effort might take as well as how many team members will be required. If it's a method you're comfortable with and has a track record of being reasonably accurate, stick with it.

If not, or if you're looking to enhance your estimating method to deal with the uncertainty created by the condition of the economy, these resources may be useful.

Agile estimation techniques help marketers manage workload

How to effectively manage your team's workload

Why Mr. Spock would NEVER make a good planner

Steps To Create A Workload Management Template in Excel

Step 3: Evaluate your people

While headcount reduction is a possible recession-proofing move, made without careful analysis can bring an operation to its metaphorical knees. **Before you cut heads, you must have the right ones in the right jobs** and sufficient numbers so high productivity can be achieved and maintained without anyone getting burned out.

If you want to devise a plan for your people, consider bringing them into the process. But don't play favorites. Have every team member be a part of this for two reasons.

First, by having them be a part of the plan's creation, **they will buy into it** more so than if it's presented to them as a set of actions to follow.

Second, they'll **have a greater responsibility to see it through** since they were part of shaping the plan.

This is also a time for self-evaluation - as a manager of people engaged in email creation. **Are you confident of your abilities to lead** a team, regardless of the work model, in office, hybrid, or fully remote under a time of high stress? The pandemic taught us that even star performers are affected. Are you ready to handle that? If not, seek advice from your head of Marketing, People Operations, or a mentor.

Questions you must answer:

- Are assignments aligned with skill sets?
- Who needs to be reassigned?
  To what roles?
- Are those skill sets at the needed levels?
- What sort of training is needed?
- Are you over/under-staffed? If so, why?
- Do you have a clear read on
  team morale?
- Do you know who you can't lose?

People evaluation resources

Looking at the individual performance of the people on your email creation team should be done on an ongoing basis. The days of the literal annual review are long gone - or should be. In a time of challenge, which is what a recession can be, having a crystal clear view of the performance and personality of each team member is truly important. If you feel the employee evaluation system at your company serves your needs, then look to that as there's little purpose to creating another system. However, what makes conducting a personnel assessment in the face of economic changes different is the need to look at the team concept of performance over that of individual performance.
As coaches of sports teams like to say, "you want to put the best players on the field." Those who perform well individually and as collaborative team members, who follow the plays you call properly, will likely be the best mix when times get tough.

Here are some relevant sources to refresh your thinking on this important step.

Why Performance Management Still Matters in a Recession

How to improve employee morale during a recession

How to Prepare Employees for a Recession

Step 4: Examine your process

The overwhelming majority of companies take two weeks or more to get just one email out the door. During the best of times, that inefficiency might be tolerated. But **when times are** appreciably **less than best** - or headed that way - **it's wise to take a close look at how your organization creates emails.**

In all likelihood, it's a process characterized by specialists operating in silos using disparate applications that do not "talk" to each other. It's a method chock-full of chances for bottlenecks that delay the deployment of entire email campaigns. Perhaps the aspect that contributes most to headache-inducing time delays is the review & approval process.

If a minor error is found in an email proof during the review, it has to go back almost to the beginning of the creation process. A coder must make the fix and put the new proof back on the review path. Exacerbating that is the all-too-common experience of people reviewing the wrong version of an email proof, providing comments in a haphazard way, slowing an already time-sucking process even further.

Questions you must answer:

- Does it take days or weeks, instead of hours, to create a single email?
- Is it difficult to scale to handle more email requests and more email volume?
- Is it a challenge to meet SLAs consistently?
- How much time does your team spend on email production/strategy activities?

Stensul analyzed the creation of tens of thousands of email creations and found **the traditional approach forces teams to spend 90% of available time on production-related activities. This left just 10% of available time for actions that can improve the performance** of an email, like segmentation, personalization, or the utilization of dynamic content. So, on top of their creation process being truly inefficient, most organizations, possibly yours included, handicap their abilities to sharpen strategy to achieve the best possible performance from their emails.

Process examination resources

If you're creating emails like you've always created emails, you might not see you have a problem. That's all the more reason to take a close look at your current process as a recession forms. If you recognize a problem, you might not be aware there is an alternative to inefficient email creation.

These resources can help you see the problem, understand it, and take steps to solve it.

5 Signs Your Email Creation Process is Broken (& Tips for Fixing It)

How marketing operations pros can make email creation more efficient

Five signs your email review & approval process needs to be improved

Step 5: Optimize everything

Analyses of the Great Recession of 2007-2009 point to leverage as the cause for that problematic economic period. In that context, leverage meant debt. The recession taking form now is looking far different because the debt levels of the banks, brokers, bondholders, and borrowers are far lower now.

More importantly, today, the term leverage has taken on a different meaning, relatable to all businesses. It isn't about financial machinations. It's a strategic approach to operating a business and, frankly, an email creation operation.

Leverage means enhancing available resources and capabilities to increase competitive advantage. Strategic capabilities are a company's core competency that let it outperform others in the industry, provide superior value to the customer, and achieve extraordinary profit.

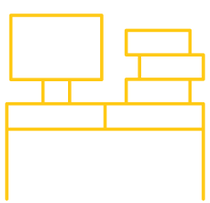
So let's acknowledge that email creation and the email marketing it enables are strategic capabilities. **Can you say with total confidence that you've leveraged all aspects of your email creation to optimize the competitive advantage it can provide? The answer needs to be "yes!" If not,** here's what you should **consider** doing.

Optimize your planning

Assuming there's a planning process in place, look to **see how you can compress the time it takes to construct a plan.** Remember that it needs to be comprehensive and consider all factors and contingencies.

Orient the plan to allow your operation to **deal effectively with the bobs and weaves of economic change - from budget to personnel to production, and performance.** This simultaneous assessment/planning approach is not only about cost analysis. It's about optimally applying available funds for better investment and performance returns.

See where there's inefficiency in spending, utilization of personnel, and, in particular, technology. Identify it and **then plan to reduce if not eliminate it.**



Optimize your workload

As seen during the pandemic - and as anticipated **with the expected recession - the need for personalized, frequent communications with customers of consumer companies is high.** Nothing does that better than email. **On the B2B side,** email is asked to do even more in finding prospects and nurturing those opportunities into deals. Here too, **email is the go-to marketing channel.**

That means your workload will grow. In contrast, email requesters' patience for delayed campaign launches will shrink dramatically. **You must look for ways to streamline and simplify your workflow** to allow you to **do more with the same or fewer resources.**

Optimize your people

Some will look at a recession as an opportunity to right-size an organization, to remove the poor performers. Under certain circumstances, that isn't wrong thinking. If you opt to go that way, take care. The well-documented "survivor's guilt" felt by those who remain after a headcount reduction can impact productivity and morale.

Perhaps a more important thing to do is **check to see if you have the right people in the right jobs. To optimize your people's performance and positive attitude, see that they're optimally leveraging their strongest skills.** In addition, make sure they're doing things that they enjoy. **With heavier workloads, the need to have people like what they're doing cannot be understated.**

If you need to have skills refreshed, refined, or have new ones added, **get the necessary training and provide it in a way that works** to keep the operation efficient and encourage team members to learn and retain whatever's needed.

Since many organizations operate with a hybrid or fully-remote model, as a team leader, **you need to step up the frequency and quality of communications with each team member and the team as a whole.** In potentially stressful times, having someone ask about their work, discuss recent efforts (think mini-performance review), and their physical or mental health is enormously important. As a manager, acting on what you hear is even more important.

Optimize your process

You can have exceptional people capable of doing exceptional things. Still, if **the process they're using is not optimized, the benefit they represent will not be realized**. By extension, executing a well-thought-through plan that considers a rising (or highly changeable) workload will will likely be impossible if your email creation process is less than optimal.

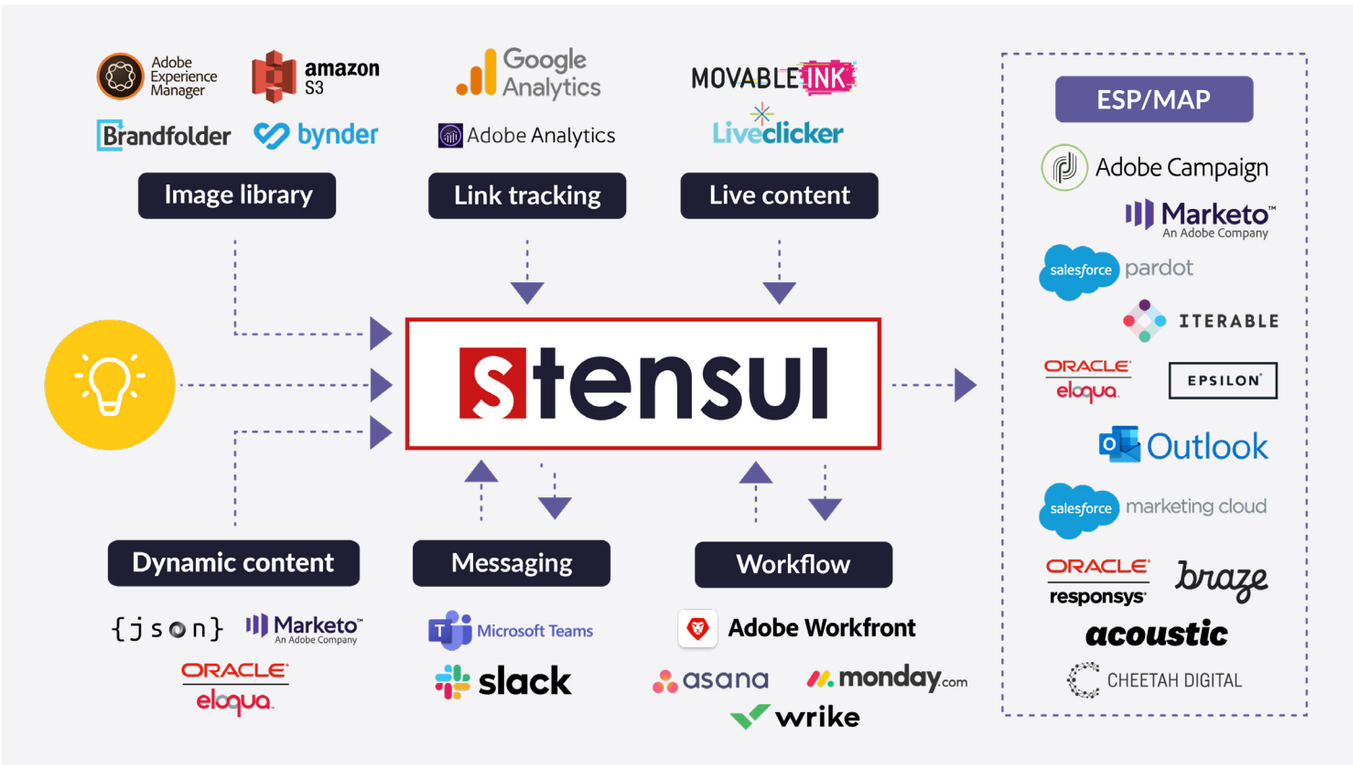
Optimizing your process is very much about leveraging the right technology in the right way. If your organization's creation process looks anything like this, it's far from optimized efficiency.

- An email brief is prepared
- The brief is reviewed by a copywriter and designer
- The email's messaging is developed by the copywriter
- The designer designs the email's look and feel
- A marketer reviews and approves the copy layout
- If changes are needed, it goes back to the copywriter and/or designer
- A developer then turns it into HTML code for it to be reviewed by the prior participants
- Any fixes identified in the review sends the email back to the developer
- Once all is right, the email is reviewed for brand and regulatory compliance and, maybe, senior management
- If changes are needed, it goes back to the developer for fixing
- Once fixed, the email goes through QA
- If any issues crop up, it needs to go back for corrections to the code or template
- When everything is as it should be, the email is sent to the MAP/ESP for deployment, assuming deliverability, accessibility, and similar matters have been addressed

What's more, you have technology in **your martech stack** that **can be optimized if the effort is made to integrate** as much as possible of it **for** even **better performance** and delivery of **greater value**.

To optimize your process, change it

To optimize your process - even staring at a possible recession - change it. **Put an Email Creation Platform at the center** of your email creation process.



An Email Creation Platform **accelerates launch times,** and **increases send volumes without sacrificing the quality or adding more resources. It creates a single, collaborative environment to streamline the overall process for more efficient workflows and faster production cycles.** An Email Creation Platform can **reduce creation time by as much as 90%.**

It has features that add speed to the production, review, and approval processes. It does not deploy emails; instead, it sits in front of your ESP or MAP. This is the critical difference between Email Creation Platforms and ESPs or MAPs.

It is important to note that many MAPs and ESPs include an email builder as part of their solution, but it is not core to their offering. It fails to deliver the same capabilities that an Email Creation Platform provides. **ESPs and MAPs center on automating various aspects of your email marketing efforts. An Email Creation Platform focuses on the creation process.** It complements your existing ESP and MAPs, integrating with the rest of your marketing technology stack to streamline your email production.

“Before Stensul creating an email was a much more difficult process that few could handle easily. Now we have lots more people creating, editing, and executing emails.”

– Kat Seiple,
Senior Manager,
Demand & Marketing Operations

Accolade, a healthcare benefits management company, was creating marketing emails with an inefficient process that took hours to yield a single email. More than being time- and resource-intensive, this approach wasn’t scalable. That was key as email creation needed to keep up with the company’s aggressive growth plans.

To overcome the limitations and risks of their existing approach, Accolade opted for the Stensul Email Creation Platform™. It allowed them to extend email creation beyond the devops team and easily handle increased email volumes with the emails created in Stensul.

Accolade

Learn more

“We needed Stensul to create the needed changes.”

– Senior Creative Manager
Implementation

One of America’s leading drugstore chains sent 8.8 billion emails in 2021 to promote pharmacy services, consumer goods, and a loyalty program. With many tedious steps, it took three days to get an email created - even for rush projects. The lack of time limited designers’ ability to think strategically and creatively. How emails were built forced them to be “brand police,” impacting their morale.

To turn its process from slow and labor-intensive to efficient, with better collaboration and performance, the company chose to make fundamental changes to the way they created emails. The key was to put the Stensul Email Creation Platform at the center of the revamped process to manage the necessary change.

Learn more

Stensul

Stensul. The collaborative email and landing page creation platform.

The Stensul Email and Landing Page Creation Platform™ dramatically reduces creation time - up to 90% - so teams can better focus on improving email and landing page performance. Stensul makes this possible by streamlining collaboration and simplifying the creation process for all marketers, so they can create high-performing emails and landing pages that drive stronger results. For more information, visit **stensul.com**.

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