BuildUp
BOOKINGS

08

BONUS 08 OF 11 · MASTERING VACATION RENTAL MARKETING

# The Off-Season Email Funnel

## A companion resource to the 2nd edition

### WHAT YOU'LL HAVE WHEN YOU FINISH

A seven-email re-engagement sequence with the copy already written, correctly segmented, scheduled against your booking window rather than the calendar.

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PART 1

# Do this now

Start here. Each one works on its own.

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**1** **Test your capture path before you write a single email.**

Go to your own website on your phone, like a guest would. Enter a real email address into the live form. Submit it. Then open your email platform and confirm the contact actually landed, and that any welcome email actually arrived.

Do this first because the most expensive email failure in this industry is silent. A tracking tag configured against a field that stopped existing after a site update will let the form submit, show the guest a thank-you, and never deliver the address anywhere. Nothing errors. No alert. The only symptom is a list growing slower than it should — which is indistinguishable from "our offer isn't good enough." That has cost a client of mine hundreds of leads over several months. Treat this as absolute: **a capture path is not built until a real human has submitted a real entry and watched it land.**

**2** **Segment before you send.**

Past guests and people who have never booked need different emails. Sending one blast to both is a reliable way to make these sequences underperform.

**3** **Clean the list, carefully.**

Remove hard bounces, complaints and unsubscribes. Subscribers who never stayed and have not clicked anything in 16 to 24 months go to a quiet tier that gets this campaign's best email, not all seven. Never drop a past guest for being quiet: a guest who stayed years ago and books again off your list is the reason the list exists.

**4** **Schedule against your booking window, not the calendar.**

"Off-season" is when *you* are empty. This sequence has to land when guests are *deciding* about that period, which is weeks earlier.

**5** **Write subject lines as plain text.**

If you want to test an emoji, add it deliberately in your email platform. Do not paste one in from a design tool or a document; pasted emoji often arrive as stray symbols or empty boxes.

**6** **Decide the offer before you write.**

If the sequence has a discount in it, know the number, the dates and the code now. Three emails referencing an offer nobody has defined is how these stall at email four.

**7** **Set the stop rule.**

Anyone who books exits the sequence immediately. If your platform cannot do that, you are going to email a discount to someone who just paid full price.

PART 2

# The depth

The full method.

## What this sequence is, and what it is not

This is a **re-engagement sequence for an existing list during a soft period.** It is not a welcome sequence, and confusing the two is why so many of these fall flat.

| | WELCOME SEQUENCE | THIS SEQUENCE |
|---|---|---|
| **Trigger** | Someone just subscribed | A calendar date you chose |
| **Audience** | One person, brand new | Your whole list, at once |
| **They know you** | Not at all | Some of them have stayed with you |
| **Job** | Introduce and set expectations | Fill specific empty dates |
| **Runs** | Continuously, forever | A defined window, then stops |

The book covers the welcome sequence separately, and you should have one. This is the campaign you run when you are looking at a soft February.

## Segment first, or the copy cannot work

One message to everyone means writing for nobody. Three segments, minimum:

| SEGMENT | WHAT THEY KNOW | WHAT MOVES THEM |
|---|---|---|
| **Past direct guests** | Your properties, your area, you | "Come back" — memory, familiarity, the thing they said they would do next time |
| **Subscribers who never booked** | Your emails. Possibly nothing else. | "Here is why this place is worth it" — they need the destination sold, not the discount |
| **Recent website or phone enquirers who did not book** | They almost booked | Directness. Something changed, or the timing was wrong. Ask. |

Past guests should get a genuinely different sequence than never-booked subscribers. At minimum, change the first line and the offer framing. The seven emails below are written for the general list with notes on how each shifts per segment.

Owners should never receive this sequence at all. If your owner contacts sit in the same list as your guest contacts, fix that before you send anything.

**Who belongs on this list.** Only people who gave you their email address themselves: guests who booked on your own site or by phone, and people who signed up through your own forms. Airbnb guests do not qualify because they stayed with you. Airbnb's terms bar hosts from using guests' personal information to send commercial messages without consent, and for reservations booked on or after November 20, 2026, from asking Airbnb guests for an email or phone number at any point during the booking or stay, WiFi login pages included (hotels and resorts excepted). Airbnb also bars offering discounts to book off Airbnb. Never import an address or stay detail from an Airbnb reservation into your email platform, and check every other channel's terms before adding its guests. In this document, "past guests" means past direct guests.

## Timing: against the window, not the month

The mistake is running an off-season campaign *during* the off-season. If February is soft and your shoulder-season booking window is three weeks, an email arriving February 1st is arriving after a meaningful share of February was already decided.

> **Start date = first soft date – your booking window for that season – 1 week**

Check your PMS: in many markets the off-season booking window is shorter and more impulsive than peak. If yours is, that is good news: the whole sequence can run in about five weeks and still be in time.

**Suggested spacing across roughly five weeks:** day 1, 5, 10, 16, 23, 30, 35. Front-loaded, because attention decays. Never more than two emails in a week.

## The seven emails

Copy is written to be sent. Adjust the voice to yours, keep the structure.

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**Email 1 — The invitation to imagine**

*Day 1 · Job: get re-noticed, ask nothing*

**Subject:** The valley in February

Hi [First name],

February here is the quiet one. The trails are empty, the roads are clear, and the hot tubs are honestly better in the cold.

No pitch in this email. I just took a few photos on the ridge this week and thought this list should see them.

If it puts an idea in your head, our February calendar is open.

[3–4 photographs]

[See what's available →]

[Name]

*Past guests:* open with "It's been a while since [property name]." *Never-booked:* keep as written.

The first email asks for nothing, which is exactly why it works. It also sets up everything after it.

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**Email 2 — The thing they do not know**

*Day 5 · Job: be useful, establish local authority*

**Subject:** Five things about February here that surprise people

Hi [First name],

Some genuinely useful things about visiting in the off-season, whether you come to us or not:

1. [A specific closure or seasonal change most visitors get wrong]
2. [Something that is actually better this time of year]
3. [A local event or window most people miss]
4. [A practical logistics tip — road, parking, ferry, weather]
5. [The thing you would tell a friend]

Number three is the one I'd plan a trip around.

[Read the full guide →]

[Name]

This email does the heaviest lifting in the sequence. It is the reason someone opens email three. It must be specific — five generic tips is worse than not sending it.

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**Email 3 — The offer**

*Day 10 · Job: give a reason to act now*

**Subject:** [X]% off February stays, through [date]

Hi [First name],

Straightforward one. We would rather have our cabins full in February than sitting empty, so:

**[X]% off any February stay of two nights or more.** Code **[CODE]**, valid through [date].

No blackout dates, no minimum-week nonsense. It applies to every cabin we have open.
[Book with the code →]

[Name]

*P.S. It works on the hot tub cabins too, which is the only part anyone ever asks about.*

Say the number in the subject line. A vague “special offer” gives the reader nothing to decide on. If you cannot discount, offer something real instead — late checkout, a mid-stay clean, an extra night at half price — but offer something concrete.

*Never-booked segment:* lead with the destination, put the offer second. They are not yet convinced they want to come at all.

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**Email 4 — What you would actually do here**

*Day 16 · Job: make the trip concrete*

**Subject:** A February weekend here, hour by hour

Hi [First name],

The hardest part of booking an off-season trip is not knowing what you would do. So here is an actual weekend:

**Friday** — arrive late, [specific local thing that is open late], hot tub.
**Saturday** — [specific morning activity], lunch at [real place], [afternoon option], dinner in.
**Sunday** — [the slow-morning thing], home by mid-afternoon.
That is a real itinerary, not a brochure. [Name of place] is the one people write to us about afterwards.

[Cabins available that weekend →]

[Name]

Specificity is the whole email. Real place names, real timing. This removes the actual objection, which is not price — it is "what would we even do."

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**Email 5 — Other people's words, not yours**

*Day 23 · Job: social proof*

**Subject:** What people say about the off-season

Hi [First name],

I could keep telling you February is good. Better if they do:

> "[Real review quote about the off-season specifically]"
> — [First name], stayed [month]

> "[Second real quote, ideally mentioning quiet, value, or the hot tub]" — [First name], stayed [month]

Both of those were February stays.

[Code [CODE] is still good through [date] →]

[Name]

Use real reviews mentioning the off-season specifically. Two is better than six. Never write a testimonial — guests can tell, and a fabricated quote is the fastest way to lose a list's trust.

**Email 6 — The honest nudge**

*Day 30 · Job: urgency, without theatre*

**Subject:** [CODE] expires Friday

Hi [First name],

The February code comes off on Friday. Not a fake deadline — we start pricing for spring after that.

Here is what is actually still open:

- [Cabin name] — [dates] — sleeps [n]
- [Cabin name] — [dates] — sleeps [n]
- [Cabin name] — [dates] — sleeps [n]

[Book before Friday →]

[Name]

Real scarcity only. Listing what is genuinely still available outperforms "limited availability" because it is checkable. If the deadline is not real, do not claim one — this is the email that costs you credibility if you fake it.

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**Email 7 — Closing the loop**

*Day 35 · Job: catch the last few, exit gracefully*

**Subject:** Last one about February

Hi [First name],

Code's expired and I will stop emailing about February.

If the timing was just wrong, our spring calendar is open and I would rather help you find the right weekend than the discounted one. Reply and tell me roughly when, and I will send you what fits.

Thanks for reading these.

[Name]

Removing the pressure and offering to help with a *different* date catches the people for whom the objection was never price. Replies to this one are your warmest leads in the whole campaign.

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## Non-openers, and what to do about them

Do not simply resend. Two things work:

**Resend to non-openers with a new subject line only**, 48 hours later, on emails 3 and 6 only. Same body, different subject. It is cheap, and most operators never use it.

**Then leave them alone for this campaign.** Someone who engaged with nothing across seven emails is not a person you convert with an eighth. Move quiet non-guests to your quiet tier. Past guests stay on the list for your next send.

## Deliverability and hygiene

- **Quiet-tier long-unengaged non-guests** before you start: never booked, no clicks in 16 to 24 months. Judge on clicks, not opens, because Apple Mail registers opens automatically. Past guests are never cut for being quiet. Delete only hard bounces, complaints and unsubscribes.
- **Authenticate your sending domain** — SPF, DKIM and DMARC. Inbox providers enforce this for bulk senders now, and without it your carefully written sequence lands in spam.
- **Never buy a list.** One purchased list can damage a sending reputation you spent years building.
- **A working unsubscribe link in every email.** CAN-SPAM requires it. Gmail and Yahoo also require one-click unsubscribe headers from bulk senders, which most email platforms add for you. Someone unsubscribing is far less damaging than someone marking you as spam.
- **Include your physical postal address.** Required for commercial email in the US.
- **Watch your complaint rate.** It matters more than your open rate, and a spike means you sent to a segment that did not want it. Gmail asks senders to stay under 0.1% (one complaint per thousand) and never reach 0.3%.

## What to measure

| METRIC | WHAT IT TELLS YOU | READ IT AS |
|---|---|---|
| **Revenue per email sent** | The only number that matters | The scoreboard |
| **Bookings with the code** | Direct attribution | Floor, not ceiling — many book without it |
| **Click rate** | Whether the copy worked | More reliable than open rate |
| **Reply rate on email 7** | Warm leads created | Follow every one personally |
| **Unsubscribes per email** | Whether you mis-segmented | A spike on one email means that email was wrong for that list |
| **Complaint rate** | Deliverability risk | Any rise is a stop-and-look |

Open rates have become unreliable — privacy features in mail clients pre-load images and inflate them. Judge on clicks and revenue.

PART 3

# Worked example

One example, all the way through.

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*Ridgeline Cabin Co. — fictional company, 40 mountain cabins, the running example across these bonuses.*

## The setup

**Problem:** February is their softest month. Cabins sitting empty at a fixed cost.
**Off-season booking window:** 3 weeks.
**So the sequence starts:** 3 weeks + 1 week before February 1 = **the first week of January.** Not February 1, which was their instinct and which would have missed most of the month's decisions.

## Segments

| SEGMENT | SIZE | TREATMENT |
|---|---|---|
| **Past direct guests** | 2,140 | Full sequence, opening lines reference their cabin and stay date |
| **Never booked** | 3,600 | Full sequence, emails 3 and 4 swapped so the destination sells before the discount |
| **Recent website or phone enquirers, no booking** | 180 | Emails 1, 3, 7 only. Short and direct. |
| **Quiet tier — never booked, no clicks in 18 months** | 1,410 | Email 3 only. Not deleted. |
| **Homeowners** | 52 | Excluded entirely — different list, different relationship |
| **Airbnb and other OTA guests** | — | Never on the list. Their contact details are not Ridgeline's to market to. |

Holding 1,410 contacts back from the full sequence felt like shrinking the audience by twenty percent. None of them were deleted, and none of them were past guests.

## Their email 2, filled in

**Subject:** Five things about February here that surprise people

Hi Dana,

Some genuinely useful things about visiting in the off-season, whether you come to us or not:

1. The ridge road stays open all winter — it's the switchback route to the south that closes, and every map app still routes you down it.
2. The hot springs are half the summer crowd and the same temperature.
3. The county's winter market runs the first Saturday of each month in the old mill, November through March. Most visitors have no idea it exists.
4. Cell service drops in the last two miles. Download your directions at the gas station.
5. Bring boots you don't mind ruining. It's mud season, not snow season, and nobody tells you that.

Number three is the one I'd plan a trip around.

[Read the full February guide →]

Sam

**Why it works:** five things, none of which a search engine would surface and none of which a machine could invent. Item one and item four are genuinely useful even to someone who books elsewhere, which is what earns the open on email three.

## What they did not do

No fake deadline. No fabricated testimonials. No emoji pasted from a document. No full sequence to the quiet tier. No address that came from an Airbnb booking. No discount email to the 52 homeowners.

## Results framing

They judged the campaign on revenue per email sent, compared against the same period the prior year. Code redemptions accounted for only part of the February lift — the rest booked without the code after receiving the sequence, which is why code attribution alone would have understated it substantially. Email 7 produced nineteen replies, and those replies produced spring bookings that never touched the discount at all.

PART 4

# Your turn

Your worksheet. Print it and fill it in.

## Timing

**My softest period:** _____

**Booking window for that period:** _____ weeks

**Therefore sequence starts:** _____

## Segments

| SEGMENT | SIZE | INCLUDED? | WHAT CHANGES FOR THEM |
|---|---|---|---|
| Past direct guests | | | |
| Never booked | | | |
| Recent website or phone enquirers | | | |
| Never booked, no clicks in 16–24 months | | ☐ Quiet tier | Best email only |
| Homeowners | | ☐ Excluded | — |

## The offer

**What it is:** _____

**Code:** _____ **Valid through:** _____

**Restrictions (be honest in the copy):** _____

## Your five things — email 2

The most important asset in this sequence. Nothing generic.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

## Your real itinerary — email 4

**Friday:** _____

**Saturday:** _____

**Sunday:** _____

## Your two reviews — email 5

Real quotes from off-season stays only.

1. “ _____ ” — _____ , stayed _____
2. “ _____ ” — _____ , stayed _____

## Schedule

| # | EMAIL | SEND DATE | SUBJECT LINE | RESEND TO NON-OPENERS? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Invitation | | | No |
| 2 | Five things | | | No |
| 3 | The offer | | | ☐ +48h |
| 4 | Itinerary | | | No |
| 5 | Social proof | | | No |
| 6 | Honest nudge | | | ☐ +48h |
| 7 | Closing | | | No |

## Pre-flight checklist

- ☐ Capture path tested with a real submission on a real phone
- ☐ Booking exit rule configured — bookers stop receiving the sequence
- ☐ Every contact gave you their address directly; no OTA guest data imported
- ☐ Long-quiet non-guests moved to the quiet tier; no past guests removed
- ☐ Homeowners excluded
- ☐ SPF, DKIM, DMARC configured
- ☐ Physical postal address in the footer
- ☐ Unsubscribe link and one-click unsubscribe tested
- ☐ Offer code created and tested in the booking engine
- ☐ Every subject line typed as plain text, emoji added deliberately in the platform if at all
- ☐ Every review quote is real
- ☐ The deadline in email 6 is real

PART 5

# How you'll know it worked

What to check, and when.

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**Before you send** — the capture-path test either passed or it did not. If a real submission from a real phone did not land in your platform, stop and fix that. Everything downstream is worthless until it does, and it fails silently.

**During the sequence** — watch click rate and complaint rate, not open rate. A click-rate collapse between email 2 and email 3 usually means the offer is unattractive, not that the copy is bad. A complaint-rate rise means a segment received something it should not have.

**Within a week of the last email** — revenue per email sent, against the same period last year. And follow up on every single reply to email 7 personally. Those are the warmest contacts the campaign produced and they are routinely ignored because they arrive after everyone has moved on.

**Do not judge this by code redemptions alone.** A meaningful share of the bookings this generates will come in without the code, from people the sequence reminded and who then booked normally. Code attribution is a floor, never a ceiling, and treating it as the full result will lead you to conclude the campaign underperformed when it did not.

**What failure actually looks like:** flat bookings for the target period *and* flat clicks. If clicks were healthy and bookings were not, your emails worked and your offer, rates, or availability did not — a different problem, in a different department.

**The structural failure I see most:** running it during the soft month instead of ahead of it, then concluding email does not work for off-season. Check your start date against your booking window before you conclude anything.

PART 6

# Where this lives in the book

Where to read more in the book.

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**Sections:** *Reign supreme in email marketing* and *Offline & Online Email Collection Tools* (Featherweight) — building the list in the first place, from direct-booking guests only (see Who belongs on this list). *Champion of the Inbox: Achieve winning results with email sequences and a newsletter* and *A Capture Path Isn't Built Until Someone Tests It* (Lightweight) — the welcome sequence, the pop-up, and the capture-path failure that opens this document. *I got the email address. Now what?* — the welcome sequence this campaign is deliberately distinct from. *Pinning Down Success with Advanced Email Marketing* (Middleweight) and *Push the envelope with advanced email tactics* plus the *10/10/80 testing framework* (Super Heavyweight) — where sequences become a tested program rather than a campaign. *Heavyweight email marketing* (Heavyweight) — segmentation by group and trip type, and the page in the book that sends you here.

Read *Where's your CRM?* (Lightweight) and *How Often To Send: Aggressive, Then Taper* (Featherweight) alongside this if your guest and owner contacts currently live in the same place. The segmentation this sequence depends on is not possible until that boundary exists.

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## Want help putting this to work?

We've worked with more than 300 vacation rental companies on direct bookings, homeowner acquisition, SEO, paid media and AI search. If you'd rather not do this alone, book a free call at **buildupbookings.com**.

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