L-Soft

Stop Guessing and Start Knowing

Using A/B-Split Testing to Increase Your Email Campaign Effectiveness

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered how your recipients respond to your newsletters or campaigns? Do you wonder how they react to a specific image or whether a particular subject line is more effective in enticing them to open the email message? Do you want to improve your campaign performance? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then consider that one of the simplest ways to assess and improve the performance of your newsletters or email campaigns is to use LISTSERV Maestro's A/B-split testing. A/B-split testing allows you to send two or more different versions (*e.g.* variant A, variant B, *etc.*) of a newsletter or campaign to distinct but random splits of your recipients. Results can show how your newsletters or campaigns are performing, why they are performing as they are, and what factors are affecting their performance. A/B-split testing gives you the information you need to improve future campaigns, and it helps you come up with new ideas as you refine and discover the best approach for your marketing endeavors. With just a little effort, you can increase the effectiveness of your messages and get the responses that you are looking for.

Top 5 Reasons to Use A/B-Split Testing

1st A/B-split testing gives you knowledge about your target audience, your campaign performance, and, most importantly, the reasons behind your campaign performance.

    For example, a jewelry store can test whether images of items with prices included will generate more clicks and, ultimately, more sales than images without prices.

2nd A/B-split testing allows you to learn what works and what doesn't work for your campaign.

    For example, a university can assess the difference in open-ups for a reminder message to students regarding upcoming registration deadlines with the sender as the university or as the university's president.

3rd A/B-split testing gives you the opportunity to make adjustments so that you can improve your campaign performance.

    For example, a local theater can reduce no-shows by using data from its split test of sending reminders to patrons regarding their upcoming reservations three days versus one day prior to the performance.

4th A/B-split testing lets you know whether or not differences in response may be related to target audience characteristics, such as demographics, profiles, and segments.

    For example, a disaster relief organization can determine whether customizing a fundraising appeal to mention disasters in local states or region of the recipients is more effective than a general appeal.

5th A/B-split testing gives you the opportunity to not only test minor changes but also partial or complete redesigns of your campaign strategy.

    For example, a toy retailer can determine whether including the customer ratings along with the product details and price in the email is more effective than supplying the subscriber with a direct link to the product's customer ratings on the retailer's website.

Testing Tips and Guidelines

The best way to know what your subscribers want and what gets their attention is to experiment. For the most accurate and illustrative results, you should:

- Establish a clear sense of what you want to evaluate.

- Make sure that your sample size is sufficient and that the variation between the tests will produce meaningful results.

- Allow for seasonal, time-of-day, and other factors that can confound results by testing simultaneously and repeatedly over a period of weeks.

- Only test for factors that you are willing to change.

- Make sure to only test one critical aspect at a time. A few simple but valuable details you should consider testing are:

- Subject Line	- Sender Name	- Call-to-Action	- Layout
- Lead Article	- Special Offers	- HTML vs. Text	- Title
- Length	- Frequency	- Timing	- Images

- Don't forget to examine bounce rates as well as open-up and click-through rates to assess the success of your campaign.

Once you have collected your A/B-split testing data, save these results and continue to compare them from time to time. This will give you a richer perspective and a point-of-reference for your internal best practices and benchmarks. In addition, consistent testing will increase your information about your subscribers' wants and needs, and you will soon acquire a valuable knowledge base for your particular newsletter or campaign.

Interpreting the Results

Let's consider this example:

A fitness club wants to measure the effectiveness of subject lines that mention a special offer or promotion for the club versus subject lines that include statistics or information on recent fitness trends. Using LISTSERV Maestro, the fitness club can create an A/B-split job with two variants, where the subject line in variant A is promotional and states "One Week Only, 20% Off Classes", while the subject line for variant B refers to statistics from a recent study and states "Study Finds Regular Exercise Classes are Key to Fitness". To get an adequate amount of data, 336 recipients are used for each variant job, randomly sorted by LISTSERV Maestro. When the definition of the A/B-split job is completed and when each variant is successfully delivered, LISTSERV Maestro will gather and store the data needed for a thorough analysis.

There are several ways to view and analyze the results of each variant job. You can view each variant individually and generate a report for that single variant; or, you can generate a comparison report that allows you to simultaneously view the data for each variant on the same screen.

For the purpose of this example, you are going to generate a Sum of Events Comparison report that will track all open-up events, the number of sent messages, and the number of unbounced messages.

For variant A, 314 of the 336 messages were successfully delivered, and 265 of these messages reported open-up events.

For variant B, all 336 messages were successfully delivered, and only 81 of these messages reported open-up events.
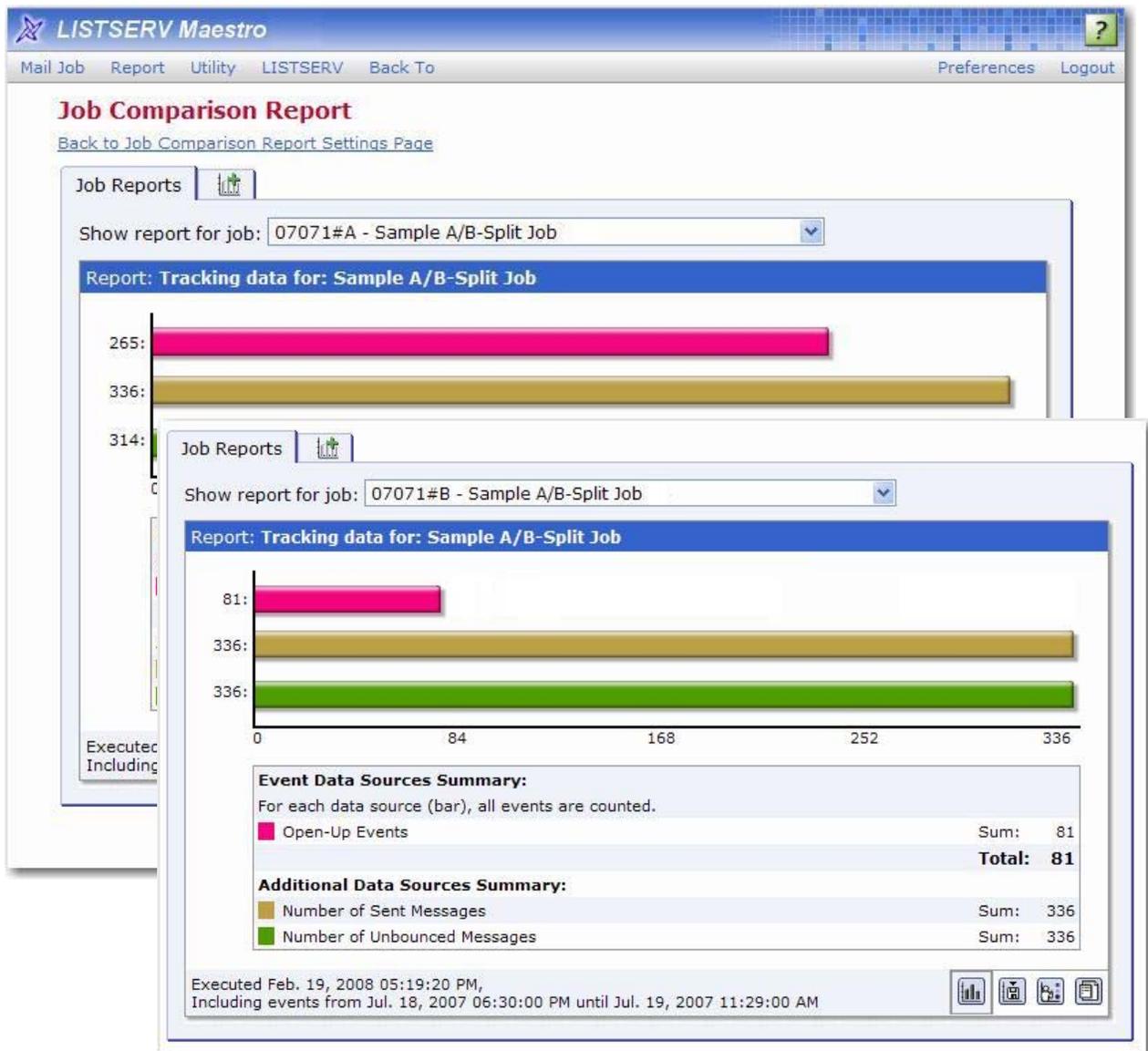
A quick analysis of these results gives the fitness club a clear answer: More recipients responded to the promotional subject line than the subject line referring to a fitness trend. With these results, the fitness club is able to make a strategic decision based on data rather than speculation.

Continuous Improvement

A/B-split testing is not a one-time activity. By planning it carefully and using it methodically, you can continuously refine your email campaigns, one step at a time, making each new campaign more successful than the last.

Step one is to get your recipients to open your email message. If they don't open it, any improvements you make to the content will be wasted. With the challenges of spam and Trojan horses, many messages remain unopened because the recipient does not recognize the sender or the subject line. Because of this, the first two sets of tests should address these two variables. These need to remind the recipients of who you are and why they signed up to receive your email messages.

For your first test, think of how your audience identifies you. For example, say you are an L-Soft staff member who works with one of its main products, LISTSERV®. This week, your main goal is to create and manage the release of the upcoming "LISTSERV at Work" newsletter. You have a hunch that more subscribers have heard of LISTSERV® than of L-Soft; therefore, you're thinking about using "LISTSERV" in the sender name to generate more open-ups. In this case, you can test this assumption by sending the newsletter in two different ways, naming the sender alternately as "L-Soft Editor" or "LISTSERV at Work Editor". Then, you can look at the open-up rates. Is there a difference? Is the difference significant enough that you can move on to a new test, or should you repeat the test with the next mailing?

For the next test, take a look at the subject line. Does it clearly identify the message as being on topic for what your subscribers signed up for? Does it need to, or is the sender name already conveying that message? In the latter scenario, you might consider an additional incentive to get the recipient to open the message. For our newsletter example, you might send out one set of messages with the subject "LISTSERV at Work - Issue 1, 2008", another with the top story's headline, and maybe a third set of messages with "LISTSERV at Work:" followed by the headline of the top story. Look at the open-up rates again – which approach led to the highest rate?

Even when analyzing the open-up rates, also look at click-through rates. If the subject was somehow misleading, it might have generated more open-ups, but that's only helpful if those who are drawn to open the message are also the ones who are most interested in its content, as evidenced by the click-through rates.

Once you have optimized your open-up rates, it's time to tackle the content and work on improving those click-through rates. If you had to pick just one link that you want your readers to follow, which one would it be? Experiment with different ways of drawing attention to that most important link. If the same URL is linked from multiple places within your message, use link aliases to distinguish the tested link from the other instances of the link, so your results aren't diluted or confounded by multiple appearances of the same link.

With each new mailing, think of an assumption that you have been making about your email communication strategy, and then come up with a way to test that assumption. With regular use of A/B-split testing, you can stop guessing and start knowing what captures your subscribers' interest.

Where to Go From Here

Now that you have read about the many benefits of A/B-split testing with LISTSERV Maestro, it is time to take action and start maximizing the effectiveness of your newsletters or campaigns. For more information, refer to the following sections on how to use A/B-split testing in LISTSERV Maestro. To talk directly to an L-Soft sales representative, call 1-800-399-5449 (in North America) or see http://www.lsoft.com/contact.html for worldwide contact information. The sooner you get started, the less guesswork you will need and the more successful your next email strategy will be.

Understanding A/B-Split Testing Jobs in LISTSERV Maestro

LISTSERV Maestro offers two types of A/B-split testing jobs – a normal A/B-split job and A/B-split job with sampling – that will help you achieve a higher success rate with your messages.

An **A/B-Split Job** lets you define a list of recipients with several different message content and tracking definitions in the form of variant jobs, which are sub-jobs of the A/B-split job. During delivery, the list of recipients will be evenly split between all of the variant jobs, and each variant job will then be delivered to its recipient share.

If tracking is defined for the variant jobs, then the tracking results can later be used to assess the "success" of each variant job in comparison to the other variants. These results give you valuable insight into which kind of content has the most impact and which should be used to optimize future jobs. For additional details, see the *Defining A/B-Split Jobs* section.

An **A/B-Split Job with Sampling** is a special version of a normal A/B-split job. It contains two types of job categories – Sampling Variants and a Main Variant – and, combined together, they create the sub-jobs of the A/B-split job. The bulk of the recipients are reserved for the main variant, while only a smaller part of the recipients are evenly divided among the sampling variants. The sampling variants are authorized and delivered first, while the main variant is held back. The tracking results of the sampling variants are then used to assess the "success" of each variant (just like a normal A/B-split job). With these results, you can copy the content of the most successful sampling variant into the main variant (maybe with some additional changes based on feedback received about the sampling mailings). After this is done, you can finally authorize the delivery of the main variant (which contains the bulk of the recipients). By holding off the delivery of the main variant, you can use the insight gained from the sampling variants so that the bulk of the recipients receive the message that has proven most successful (in contrast to normal A/B-splitting, where the insight can only be utilized for the next job). The drawback of A/B-split sampling is that some recipients will get the message earlier (the recipients that are used in the sampling variants), while the bulk of the recipients will receive the message later (when the main variant is authorized and delivered). A/B-split sampling should only be used if there are enough total recipients for each of the sampling variants to provide meaningful results. For additional details, see the *Defining A/B-Split Jobs with Sampling* section.

Defining A/B-Split Jobs

To define an A/B-split job, click on the **Mail Job** menu and select **New**. The Start New Job screen opens. In the **Initial Job Settings** section, select the **All new job** option, and then click the **Job Type** drop-down arrow and select **A/B-Split Job**.
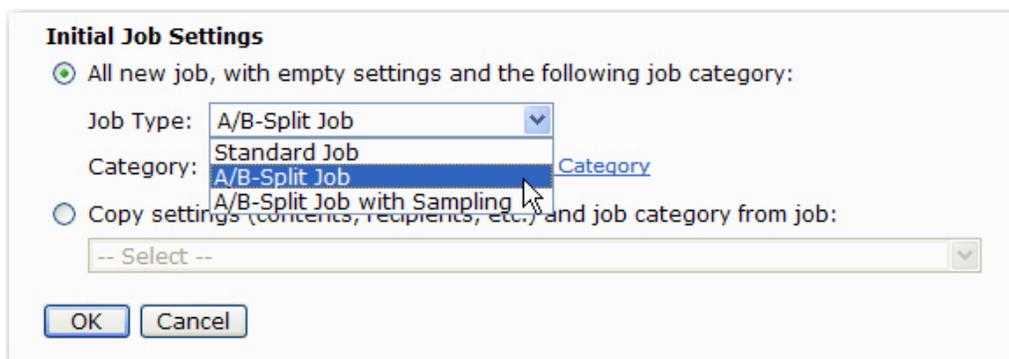
Once you've finished entering the rest of the job's information, click **[OK]**. The A/B-Split Job Details screen opens. This screen lets you access the details of an A/B-split job so that you can view and edit the various job parts and variant jobs, if applicable.

Each section of this screen contains information pertinent to the job along with its status. If each section is successfully completed, then a green shield is shown. To enter or change job information, simply click the **Edit** link associated with that section.

The following sections need to be completed before delivery can be authorized:

- **A/B-Split Job** – This section lets you edit the job title, job category, job-ID prefix, delivery notification, "authorization due by" date, and auto-archive settings. Not all settings may be editable at all times, depending on the A/B-split job's state.

- **Recipients** – This section lets you define the recipients of the A/B-split job. This section may not always be available, depending on the A/B-split job's state.

    When defining an A/B-split job, the following recipient definitions are acceptable:

    - Send to a Recipient Target Group

    - Upload a Recipient Text File

    - Select Recipients from a Database

    - Define from a previous job, if the recipient definition of the previous job matches one of the above.

- **Job List** – This section lets you define the variant jobs that are part of the A/B-split job. Each variant job is displayed in a separate row, with job ID, job title, and with four icons for each aspect that is unique to each variant job: **Content**, **Tracking**, **Sender**, and **Test**. These icons reflect the states of the corresponding workflow steps.

    To edit a variant job, click on its ID. The Job Details screen opens. From here, simply define the message content, the sender, and tracking, and then test the delivery. Once you're done, click on the job ID at the top of the screen to return to the A/B-Split Job Details screen.

    > **Tip:** From the Job Details screen, you can also copy the details from a different variant job. To do so, click the **Mail Job** menu and select **Copy Settings from Other Variant**.

Click the **Add Variant Job** link at the bottom of the list to add another variant job to the A/B-split job. In addition, a **Delete** link may appear next to each variant job, allowing you to delete the corresponding variant job (the link does not appear if only the minimum number of variant jobs is present in the A/B-split job). Adding, editing, or deleting variants is only possible if the A/B-split job's state still allows it.

- **Delivery** – This section lets you schedule the delivery of the A/B-split variant jobs to take place immediately after authorization or at a future date and time relative to a selected time zone. The delivery settings apply to all variant jobs equally, as does the authorization. This means that the A/B-split job can only be authorized when all variants have been completed (all four states of all variant jobs are complete and marked with the green checkmark), and once the A/B-split job is authorized, all variants are authorized (and will be delivered according to the delivery settings defined here).

Once the above information is completed (green icons and checkmarks will let you know when everything is completed), and you are ready to authorize delivery, then click the **Mail Job** menu and select **Authorize Delivery**.
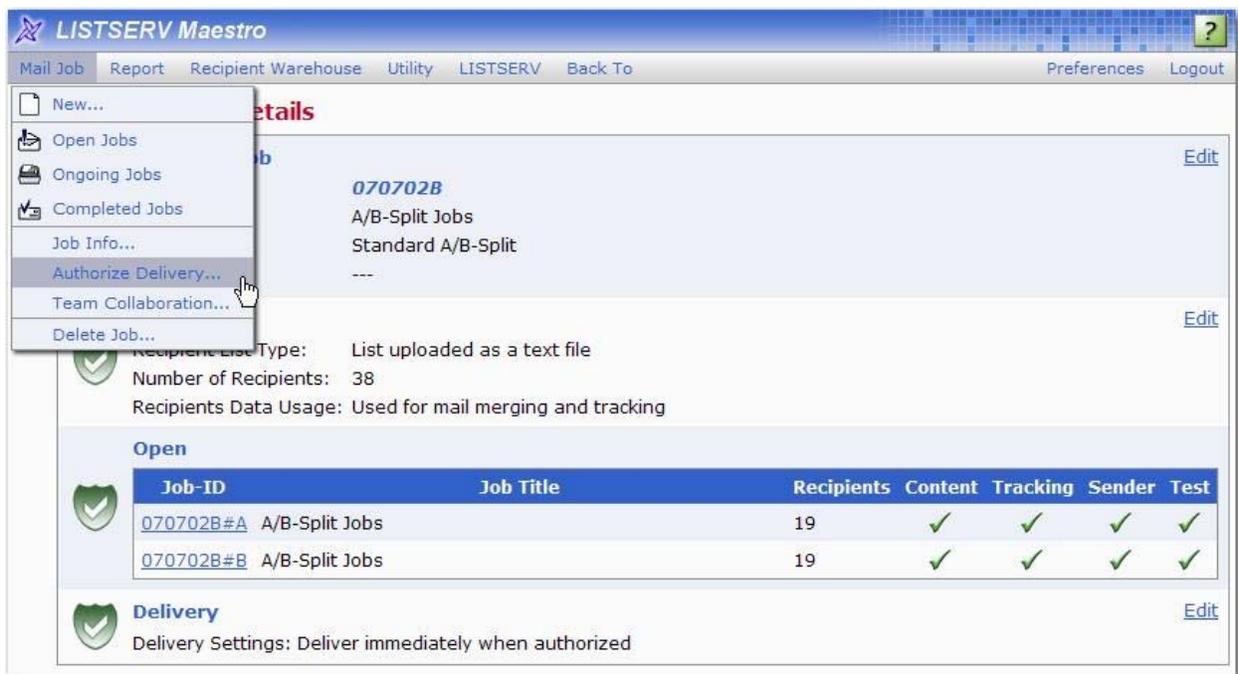

The Authorize Delivery screen opens, presenting you with a final overview of the job. Verify that everything is correct, and then click the **[Authorize Delivery Now]** button.

Note: Working with and defining the A/B-split job details is very similar to working with a standard mail job. For more information, see the *LISTSERV Maestro User's Manual*.

Defining A/B-Split Jobs with Sampling

To define an A/B-Split Job with Sampling, click on the **Mail Job** menu and select **New**. The Start New Job screen opens. In the **Initial Job Settings** section, select the **All new job** option, and then click the **Job Type** drop-down arrow and select **A/B-Split Job with Sampling**.
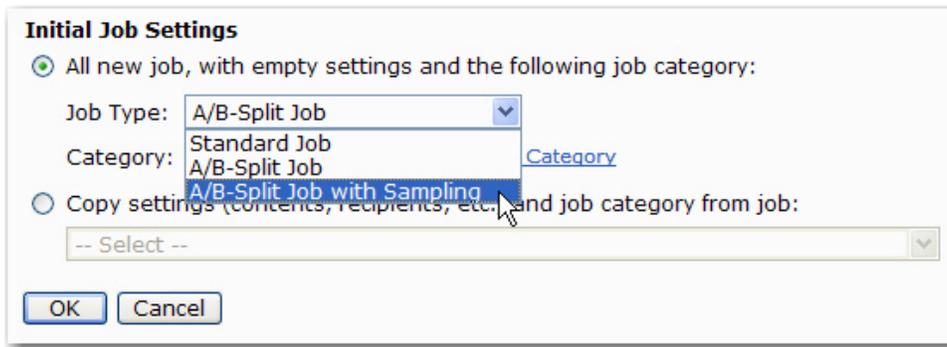
Once you've finished entering the rest of the job's information, click **[OK]**. The A/B-Split Job Details screen opens. This screen lets you access the details of an A/B-split job so that you can view and edit the various job parts and variant jobs.

Each section of this screen contains information pertinent to the job along with its status. If each section is successfully fulfilled, then a green shield is shown. To enter or change job information, simply click the **Edit** link associated with that section.

The following sections need to be completed before delivery can be authorized:

- **A/B-Split Job** – This section lets you edit the job title, job category, job-ID prefix, delivery notification, "authorization due by" date, and auto-archive settings. Not all settings may be editable at all times, depending on the A/B-split job's state. Editing this information also lets you define how many recipients will be used for the sampling jobs and how many will be used for the main job.

- **Recipients** – This section lets you define the recipients of the A/B-split job. This section may not always be available, depending on the A/B-split job's state.

  When defining an A/B-Split Job with Sampling, the following recipient definitions are acceptable:

  - Send to a Recipient Target Group
  - Upload a Recipient Text File
  - Select Recipients from a Database
  - Define from a previous job, only when the recipient definition matches one of the above.

- **Job List** – This section lets you define the variant jobs that are part of the A/B-split job. Each variant job is displayed in a separate row, with job ID, job title, and with four icons for the four aspects that are unique to each variant job: **Content**, **Tracking**, **Sender**, and **Test**. These icons reflect the states of the corresponding workflow steps.

  To edit a variant job, click on its ID. The Job Details screen opens. From here, simply define the message content, the sender, and tracking, and then test the delivery. Once you're done, click on the job ID at the top of the screen to return to the A/B-Split Job Details screen.

  > **Tip:** From the Job Details screen, you can also copy the details from a different variant job. To do so, click the **Mail Job** menu and select **Copy Settings from Other Variant**.

Click the **Add Variant Job** link at the bottom of the list to add another variant job to the A/B-split job. The variant jobs list is additionally separated into two tabs labeled Sampling Variant Jobs and Main Variant Job. The first tab contains all sampling variants while the second tab contains only the main variant in the A/B-split job.

In addition, a **Delete** link may appear next to each variant job, allowing you to delete the corresponding variant job (the link does not appear if only the minimum number of variant jobs is present in the A/B-split job). Adding, editing, or deleting variants is only possible if the A/B-split job's state still allows it.

> **Note:** The main variant can never be deleted, and the Main Variant Job tab does not contain a link to add more variants because only one main variant is permitted.

- **Delivery** – There are two separate delivery settings that need to be defined – **Sampling Delivery**, which applies to all sampling variants, and **Main Delivery**, which applies only to the main variant. Because of this, the delivery settings are located on both tabs – the Sampling Variant Jobs tab and the Main Variant Job tab. Similarly, the authorization of the sampling variants and the main variant happen one after the other. The sampling variants have to be authorized first, and, similar to a normal A/B-split job, it is only possible if all sampling variants are complete (with green checkmarks). Once the variant delivery is authorized, all sampling variant jobs will be delivered according to the **Sampling Delivery** settings. Authorization of the main variant is in turn only possible after the delivery of all sampling variants has been completed (either successfully or with failure). Also, the main variant job must of course be completed first (with green checkmarks). Once authorized, it will then be delivered according to the **Main Delivery** settings.

Once the above information is completed (green icons and checkmarks will let you know when everything is completed), and you are ready to authorize delivery, then click the **Mail Job** menu and select **Authorize Sampling Variant Delivery**.

The Authorize Delivery screen opens, presenting you with a final overview of the job. Verify that everything is correct, and then click the **[Authorize Delivery Now]** button. The sampling variant

jobs are authorized and delivered first, while the main variant job is held back. You can then use the tracking results of the sampling variants to evaluate the "success" of each variant (just like a normal A/B-split job). With these results, you can copy the content of the most successful sampling variant job into the main variant. After this is done, you can authorize the delivery of the main variant.

> **Note:** Working with and defining the A/B-split job details is very similar to working with a standard mail job. For more information, see the *LISTSERV Maestro User's Manual*.

Comparing the Results

After an A/B-split job is successfully completed and delivered, LISTSERV Maestro will gather and store the data needed for a detailed comparison of the job's variants. Comparing the job's variants will allow you to thoroughly analyze the job's data and will give you clear answers to your email strategy. Because of this, your email strategy will be based on true data, not just speculation.

Using the Job Comparisons Report

The Job Comparison report lets you dynamically compare the tracking events for two or more jobs (up to 12 jobs can be included). Job Comparison reports can be run to compare separate standard jobs or to compare the variants of an A/B-split job, which can help you figure out the best variant for the job.

To compare the variants of an A/B-split job, go to the Completed Jobs screen and select the A/B-split Job (not one of its variants) that you want to work with. The A/B-Split Job Details screen opens. From here, select Mail Job > Comparison Report for Completed Variant Jobs. The Job Comparison Report Settings Screen opens.

The Job Comparison Report Settings screen is where you define the settings for the report.

1. Select a report type:
    - **Event distribution over time** – A simple line graph showing how event occurrence evolves over time.
    - **Sum of events** – A bar graph that summarizes the number of recipients that clicked on each URL or opened up the email (the number and size of displayed bars depends on how the statistics are bundled, see choices below).

    > **Note:** The rest of the options available on this screen will vary depending on the report type you selected.

2. Define how the result shown on the Y-/X-axis of the graph is calculated:
    - **Total number of events** – The Y-/X-axis will show the total number of events.
    - **Percentage of total number of messages sent** – The Y-/X-axis will show percentages in relation to the total number of messages sent.
    - **Percentage of total number of unbounced messages sent** – The Y-/X-axis will show percentages in relation to the total number of messages sent that have not bounced.

3. If applicable, define if unique events or all events are counted:
    - **Count only events that are unique for each recipient** – If the same recipient generates the same event several times, then it will only be counted once.
    - **Count all events** – All events are counted, whether they are generated by the same recipient or by different recipients.

4. If applicable, define the time interval used for grouping events:

- **Events per hour** – Each interval will count the events collected during a given hour.
- **Events per day** – Each interval will count the events collected during a given day.
- **Events per week** – Each interval will count the events collected during a given week.

> **Note:** With small intervals, the curve will be smoother because there are more intervals to display. However, using more intervals will mean that the calculation of the report will take longer.

5. Define whether or not values should accumulate from one interval to the next:

- **No accumulation** – Each interval will only show the events counted from the beginning of the interval to its end. This means that the curve will rise and fall, depending on the event occurrence during each interval.
- **Accumulate interval values** – Each interval will show the accumulated number of events counted from the very beginning of the report period until the end of the interval. This means that the curve may only rise, but never fall. However, as events get more and more sparse with each proceeding report period, the curve will become less and less steep, until it tapers out into an (almost) horizontal line.

6. Select the type and the bundling of events to appear in the report:

- **Open-Up Events** – This option bundles all open-up events together into one variable charted on the report.
- **Click Through Events (all links bundled)** – This option bundles all click-through events together into one variable charted on the report.
- **Click Through Events (all links are separate)** – This option creates separate variables for each click-through event that is tracked.
- **Open-Up Events and Click Through Events (all links bundled)** – This option bundles all the open-up events into one variable and all the click-through events into a second variable charted on the report.
- **Open-Up Events and Click Through Events (all links separate)** – This option creates separate variables for each of the open-up and click-through events.

7. Check any of the following options to have additional statistics appear in the report:

- **Number of Sent Messages** – This option adds the number of messages that were sent with the job as a constant reference value to the report.
- **Number of Bounced Messages** – Another constant reference value is added to the report. This value shows the number of messages that were sent with the job but were detected as bounces. (See "About Bounces" below.)
- **Number of Unbounced Messages** – This constant reference value shows the number of messages that were sent with the job and were not detected as bounces.
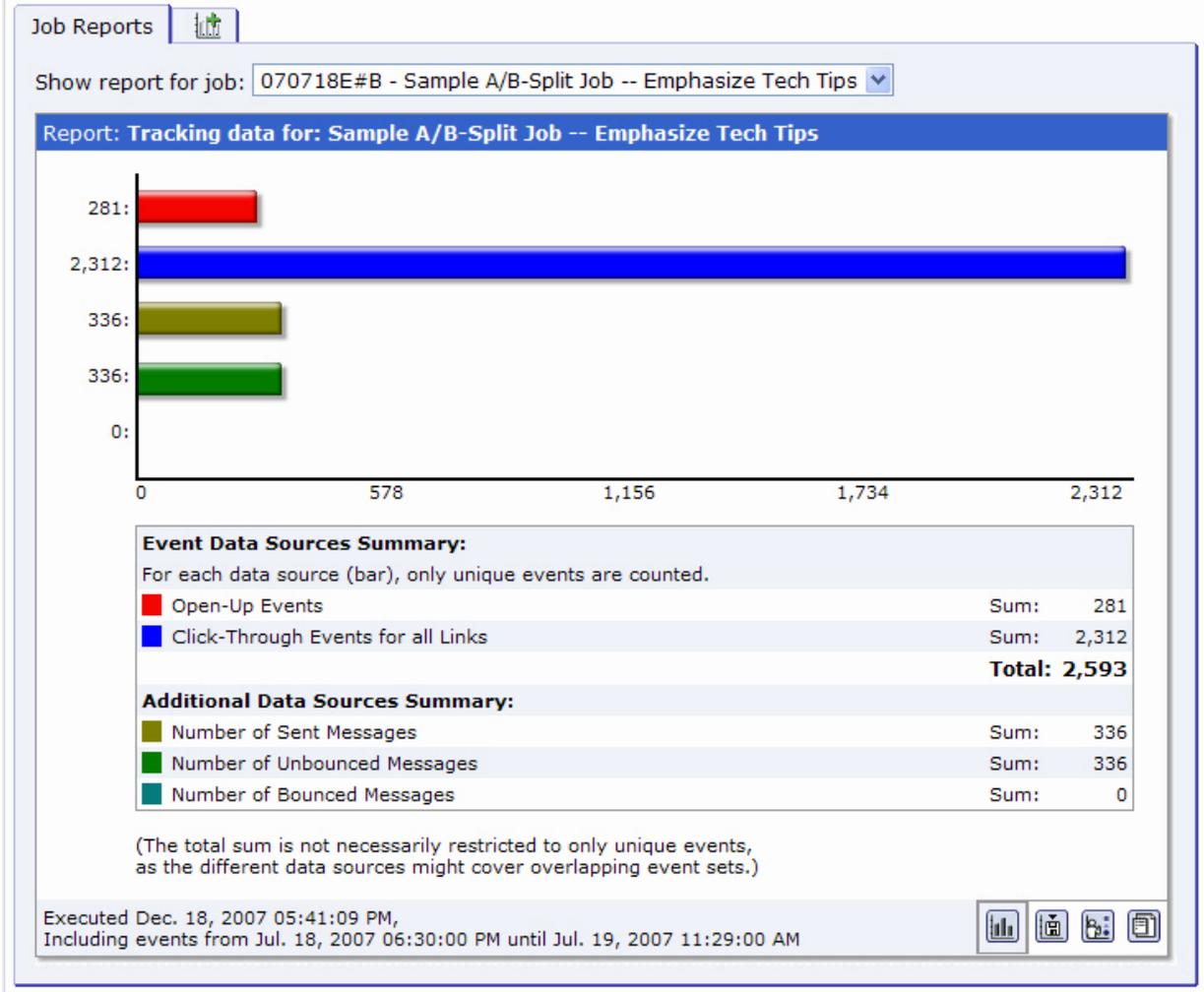
8. Once you have finished defining the report's settings, click **[OK]** to run the report.

The Job Comparison Report is displayed and, initially, it contains only the Job Reports tab, which contains the individual reports for all included jobs.

The Job Reports Tab displays the individual reports of all included jobs in the comparison report. Only one individual report is displayed at a time. Select the job for which you want to display the individual report from the **Show report for job** drop-down menu at the top of the tab. The displayed report is similar to the normal report that can be displayed for a completed job via the Reports tab on the job's Completed Job Details screen. (For more information on viewing reports, see the *LISTSERV Maestro User's Manual*.)

Generating Additional Comparisons

The comparison tabs are the heart of the job comparison report: There can be any number of these tabs and each tab can be used to create an individual comparison of the data sources from several of the included jobs in the report.

Additional comparison tabs can be added by clicking the **Add New Comparison Tab** icon that appears on a separate little tab at the top. When you click this icon, a new comparison tab will be created. This tab can be used for individually configured comparisons of the tracking events of several of the included jobs. There can be any number of such additional comparison tabs, for various comparisons (see below for details).

Click the **Back to Job Comparison Report Settings Page** link at the top of the page to go back to the settings screen, which is where you can change the general settings for the report (for example the report type and the type of the included data sources).

To close a specific comparison tab, click the **Close Tab** link at the top right of the tab.

Each freshly created comparison tab is initially empty and waits for you to select the jobs and report data sources to compare. For this selection, use the **Job Selection for Comparison** panel that appears at the right side of the window whenever a comparison tab is the active tab.

On this panel, select the jobs that you want to compare by selecting their corresponding checkboxes. For each selected job, you may then also select one of its data sources to be included in the comparison chart. So for each selected job, there will always be exactly one data source that is included. Each job has an associated color which is displayed as a colored margin at the left on the selection panel. This color will be used to represent the selected data source of this job in the comparison chart. Depending on the type of the report, the data source will appear either as a colored line (in a "distribution over time" chart) or as a colored bar (in a "sum of events" chart).

Use the **Select All** and **Unselect All** links at the top of the panel to quickly select or unselect all jobs in the list.

By choosing the right combination of selected jobs, and for each job the selected data source, you can build your own individual comparison chart, which allows you to directly compare the data that interests you. And, by adding more comparison tabs, you can create several of these comparison charts. You can then quickly switch between these different charts by switching between the different comparison tabs.

For example, on one comparison tab you could compare the open-up data sources of several jobs, while on another comparison tab you could compare the click events for a certain link that appears in several jobs, or any other useful combination.

If you find a certain comparison chart especially useful, then you can use the **Create Report** icon at the bottom right of the comparison tab to create and save a standard tracking report that contains the selected jobs and data sources. You can then execute and view this report via the normal Tracking Reports list at any time, without having to go through the job comparison report interface again. (This option is only available if you have the necessary user rights and if at least one job is currently selected.)

Note: If you are working with a small window size, then the job selection panel may overlap the actual reporting tab. In this case, to be able to view the full reporting tab without having to scroll horizontally, simply hide the job selection panel by clicking the **Hide Selection Panel** link at the top right of the panel. Of course, while the panel is hidden you can no longer change the selection of jobs and data sources, so to show the panel again, click the **Show Selection Panel** link that appears below the report on the reporting tab whenever the selection panel is hidden.

References

LISTSERV Maestro User's Manual

http://www.lsoft.com/resources/manuals.asp