

MARKETING

# UNPACKING A RISING BRAND'S MARKETING



With all the noise and smoke in the startup world, a strong brand is critical to capturing your audience's attention. And for a brand to be effective, its messaging has to express the brand's unique position in a clear, emotionally appealing way.

Pulling that off is much easier said than done.

A recent example of a company whose brand and messaging have caught a lot of attention is Superhuman. If you're not familiar with them yet, their product is an email client. In other words, it's an interface to help you get more out of your existing email account.

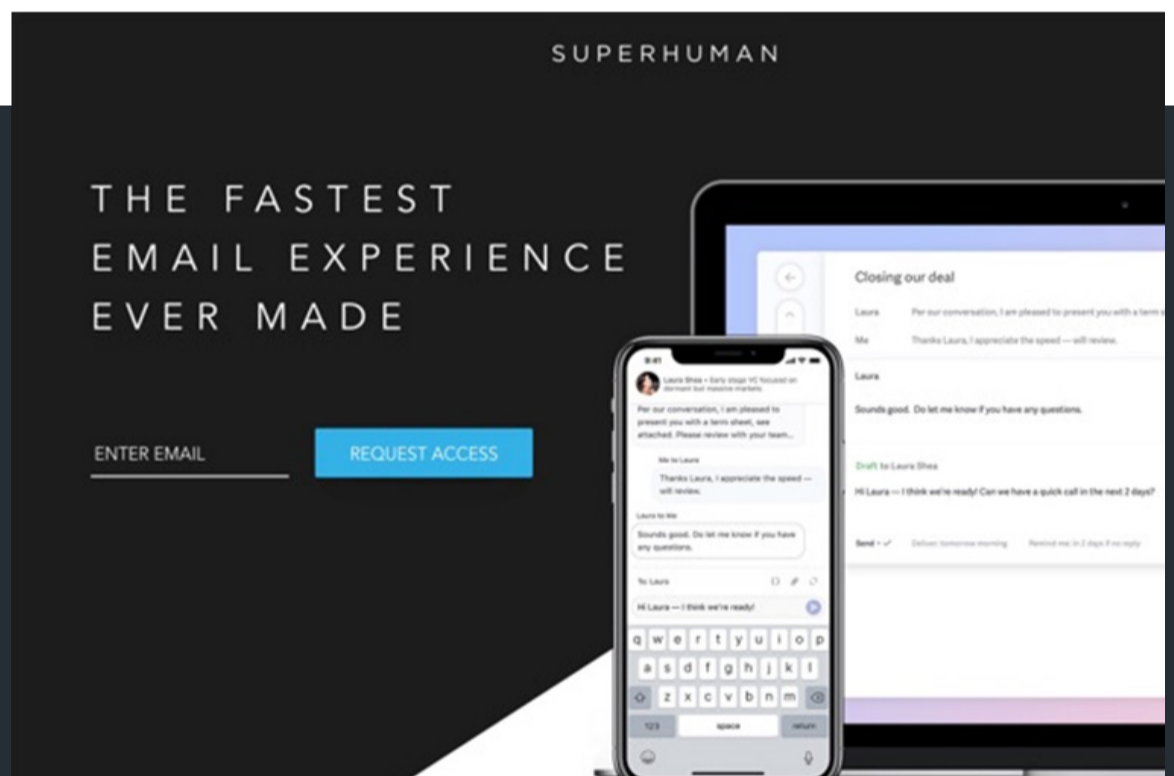
There are several notable elements of the business that feed into the buzz they've gotten:

- To get access, you either need a current user to refer you, or join their waitlist (which they say is 100,000-200,000 people long).
- The onboarding process happens through a 30-minute, one-on-one video session with someone from their team.
- It has a premium price of \$30/month.
- They most recently raised an investment round of \$33 million, valuing them at \$260 million.

All of these things contribute to the story of an elite business on the rise. So, what's the brand's key marketing message that's driving this excitement?

## 'The Fastest Email Experience Ever Made'

At first glance, that seems like an interesting value proposition. After giving it a little thought, though, we wanted to unpack their messaging and see if there were any opportunities to improve on it.



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## Is Speed Really the Most Important Feature in Email?

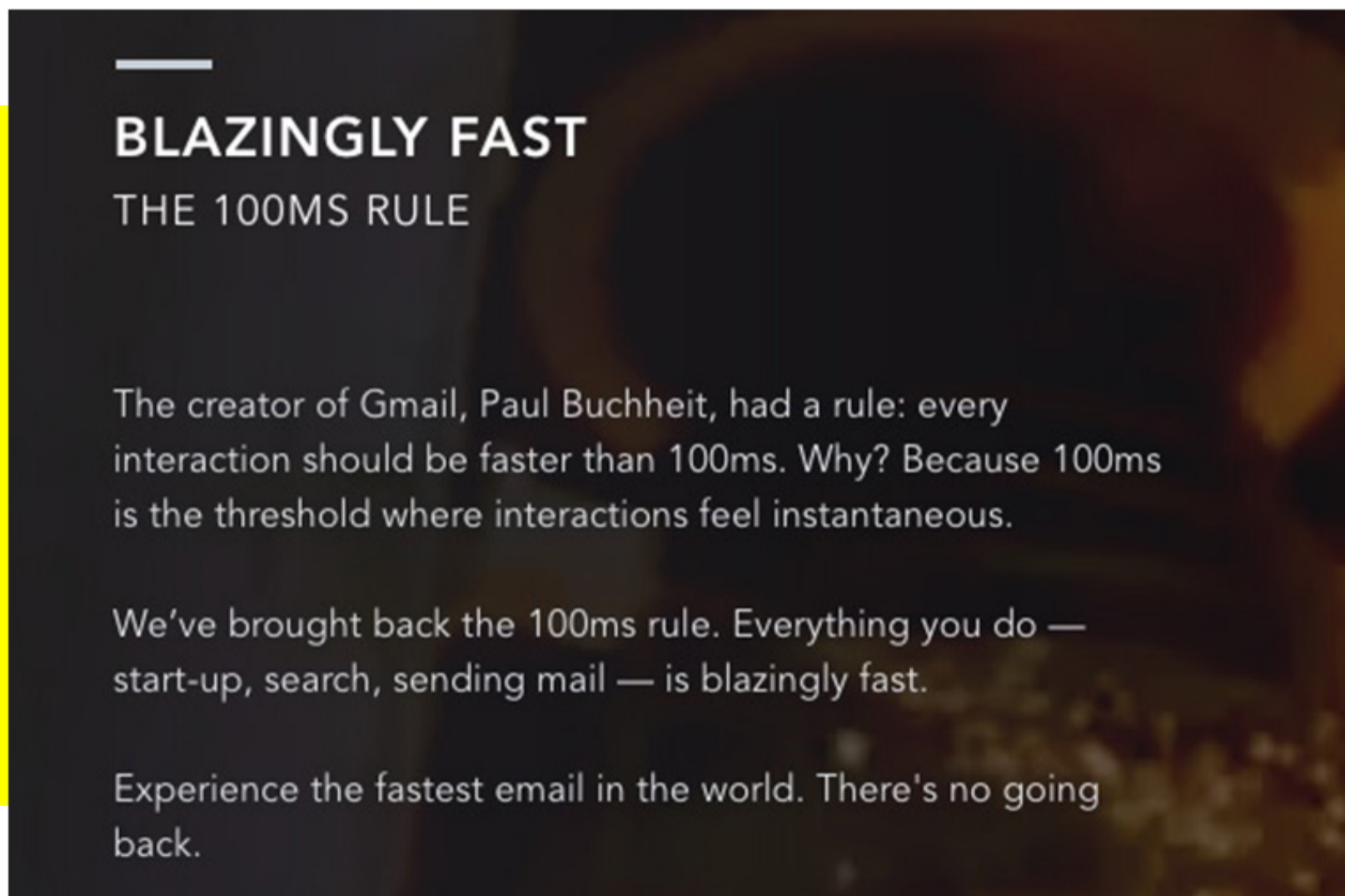
For Superhuman, the concept of being “The Fastest Email Experience” isn’t just a messaging statement on their website. Their entire brand centers around this theme.

So the biggest point to question here is whether fast email is the most valuable benefit for users.

To start, there are two sides to speed in the context of an email client:

- 1.** The speed of the actual app itself, i.e., how fast it processes interactions
- 2.** How the app speeds up the way users engage with email

Superhuman plays to both ideas, but their messaging puts a lot of focus on the first point—the speed of the app itself.



The marketing priorities for Superhuman, based on the messaging order of their site, focus on these three areas:

- 1.** Speed
- 2.** Beauty
- 3.** Intelligence/Functionality

Our initial hypothesis however, based on personal email use and preferences, is that this ordering should flip to:

- 1.** Intelligence/Functionality
- 2.** Beauty
- 3.** Speed

**A** big reason for that flip is that most email is already pretty darn close to feeling instant. We use G Suite email for work and I personally don't remember ever feeling like the speed of the app was a pain point for me.

If the messaging clarified that the gains in speed are focused more on the way we engage with email, that might make it feel more important. We'll expand on that more below.

The other reason for bumping up intelligence is that there's a lot of untapped potential when it comes to making email smarter. Gmail/G Suite has slowly been rolling out things like scheduled sending, followup reminders, and expiration dates on messages.

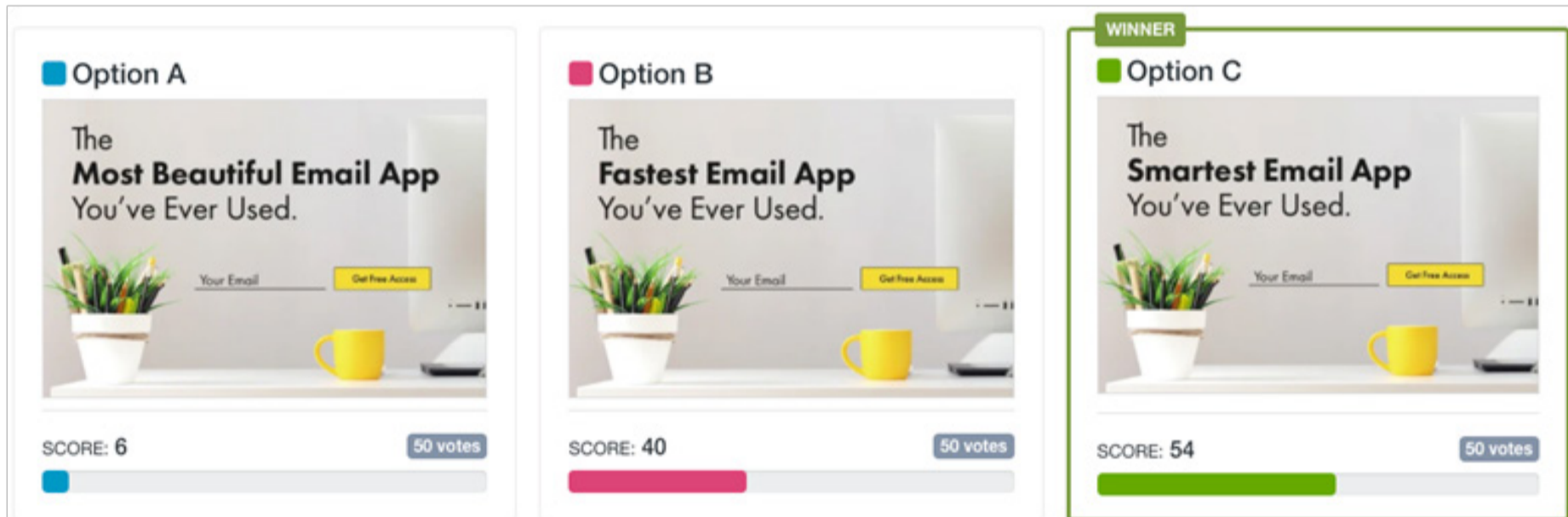
Superhuman has its own list of features like this, along with cool extras like automatically pulling info from people's public social accounts (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) to give you context on who they are.

Collectively, these features can have a big impact on the day-to-day value you get out of email.

## Our Email App Messaging Survey Results

To test out email benefit preferences, we ran our own paid survey on the service PickFu. We created three mockups for a hypothetical email product. Each focused on one of the three key value propositions.

The question posed to participants was: "Which of these headlines for a new Email App would most compel you to try it?"



Here are the results:

**Smartest (54%)**  
**Fastest (40%)**  
**Most Beautiful (6%)**

There are a couple interesting things to note here.

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# 1. Words are always open to interpretation.

“Smart” probably opens itself up to the most variation in meaning for folks. The great thing about PickFu is that participants have to include a quick explanation for their choice. Most folks felt “smart” represented advanced, useful functionality.

## Here are some unedited responses:

“I’m not very tech savvy, so my first option would be to choose the smartest one. Maybe it would be the most helpful and intuitive one for me.”

“I am interested in what is so smart about the e-mail app. I am also interested in an aesthetically pleasing e-mail app. and fast is fine, but gmail is fast, so what’s so good about that?”

“Having an email that is “fast” doesn’t concern me at all. I have never had issues with speed while using emails. Having a smart email app would be most appealing as function is more important than anything else to me.”

## But a couple people also pointed out that “smart” is a loaded term in this age of privacy concerns:

“Smartest could go either way. It might be well featured or it might be something using AI and scraping my content. Yuck.”

“I don’t need my email app to be smart. This implies to me that it’s parsing data from my email communications.”

## Those that chose “fastest” also highlighted different interpretations:

[Speaking to app speed] – “I want my email to be reliable but fast. I am a bit impatient.”

[Speaking to operational speed] – “I’m always looking for ways to become more efficient and do things quicker so that’s hugely appealing.”

Overall “smartest” and “fastest” were by far the favorites. In both cases, the reasoning behind the selections often came back to efficiency gains.

# 2. This was a survey of a general audience, not necessarily Superhuman’s target audience.

Email is a universally used tool and our informal survey was to a general audience. But Superhuman isn’t trying to appeal to everyone. They’ve refined their approach to target a specific type of email user.

The founder of Superhuman, Rahul Vohra, wrote a fantastic, in-depth article around their efforts to find product/market fit. Their research shows how their most passionate users really do come back to this idea of speed quite a bit.

These are power users looking to get the most out of email and who are willing to pay a premium price for it.

However, even in Vohra’s own reporting, it’s clear that the idea of “fast” centers more around how Superhuman creates speed through efficient interaction styles (e.g., keyboard shortcuts over mouse) rather than strictly the app’s processing speed.

Below is a word cloud they created through reviews from their most passionate users. Note the emphasis on words like “Keyboard” and “Shortcuts.”



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Those words indicate a focus on behavior speed, as opposed to strictly app speed.

## How Could Superhuman's Messaging Get Even Better?

Overall, Superhuman's brand and messaging are very compelling. Again, the buzz about the product somewhat speaks for itself. That said, here are a few areas that could warrant experimentation:

### 1. Switch to benefits over functional descriptions.

Right now, the main headline and top few sub-section headlines are all about the product, not the user.

"The Fastest Email Experience Ever Made"

"Visually Gorgeous"

"Blazingly Fast"

Those are all feature-centric descriptions.

As a user, what does that mean? What benefit do I get as a result of those things? That's ultimately what people care about. When you focus on features over benefits, you make the user do the mental heavy-lifting around the impact of the features

A simple shift of focus from product to user would be interesting to A/B Test:

- "The Fastest Email Experience Ever Made" >> "Soar through your inbox every day"
- "Visually Gorgeous" >> "Experience total inbox calm"
- "Blazingly Fast" >> "Receive the gift of more time"

### 2. Clarify the focus on speed for people over app performance.

As discussed, there's a lot of focus in the messaging around the speed of the app itself. However, based on how the app works and user responses, the biggest speed gains are really about shifts in behaviors.

**T**he messaging around the “100ms rule” feels a bit wasted for that reason. If standard email is reasonably close to that threshold, most people probably won’t perceive a sharp pain point here.

A test in messaging could be to put the emphasis on how Superhuman makes users more efficient through improvements of interaction. Superhuman could position themselves as the experts in maximizing human efficiency in email.

That’s more compelling in some ways than being the company that built an app with slightly faster processing time.

### **3. Emphasize smarts over beauty.**

Based on our informal survey results, “beauty” was by far the least important consideration for folks when it comes to email.

Some people made the connection that beauty equates to good design, which in turn equates to ease of use. But again, that reasoning requires some mental leaps on the part of the user.

Overall, the combination of intelligence/ functionality and speed were the most potent combo for people.

Superhuman might be better off making those two areas the primary focus and bump design down slightly.

### **4. BONUS POINT: Focus on human imagery.**

This isn’t about messaging, but it’s still a point of opportunity. Right now, you have to scroll through four sections of content on their site before you get to an image that shows people.

There’s almost nothing emotionally engaging about a screenshot of an email interface—even a brilliantly designed one.

It would be interesting to test options that show people engaging with, enjoying, or benefiting from the product in some way. Possibly even enjoying their life away from email.

## **With Messaging, Every Word Counts**

Messaging is both an art and a science. There’s always a creative element to finding the right combination of words to capture your positioning and tell a compelling story. But your efforts should always be informed by research and a deep understanding of your target customers.

When you find the right combination though, it can have a massive impact on the success of your business. And it can certainly help your brand rise above the smoke and noise in the competitive landscape.

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