

EMAIL MARKETING DESIGN & RENDERING: OPTIMIZING YOUR EMAIL DESIGN



Print designers have it easy, don't they? Before designing a print piece, they know the size of their canvas. It might be 8 1/2 x 11, legal size, or a custom width and height. Once that size is determined, print designers can see their creation exactly as they intended.

It's not the same story with email designers.

For email designers, we'd like to take it a step further with specific design guidelines. We're including all levels of designer tips here—from basic to advanced—because even the most experienced designer can make an amateur mistake.



KEEP IMPROVING.

Consider your design an ever-evolving, iterative process (Figure 1). Just when you think you've figured it all out, "best practices" will change.



THINK EFFECTIVE.

A common misconception about design is that it's simply aesthetic—only concerned with look and feel. The truth is that an aesthetically pleasing email design isn't always an effective, performance-driven design due to image blocking and other constraints. However, an effective design can—and should—also be a beautiful design.



STICK TO THE BASICS.

CSS-based layouts are only successful in the most compliant of email clients. Your design will render more consistently when HTML tables are used for layout. Limit the use of CSS to inline styles, as external and embedded styles are stripped out in Hotmail and Gmail.



REMEMBER THE TEXT VERSION, SEND IN MULTI-PART MIME.

Though most of your subscribers will view the HTML version of your email, some subscribers prefer to receive the plain text version of your message. Use simplified copy points, different capitalization techniques, and characters such as asterisks and dashes to create headlines and visually separate areas of interest.



Figure 1
Good email design is a constantly evolving process, and what works today won't necessarily work tomorrow.

Understanding Multi-part MIME.

A common method for transmitting non-text files via email, MIME encodes the files using one of two encoding methods and decodes it back to its original format at the receiving end. An email sent in multi-part MIME format will be interpreted by each individual mail client to display either HTML or text, whichever it can render from the coding it received.



DESIGN WITH IMAGE BLOCKING IN MIND.

Plan how to best use graphics in your design. Images should act as a supplement rather than the main focus of your design. Even with images blocked or disabled, your design should be readable and the call to action clear. In cases where an image must be used, don't forget to include "alt" tags in the tag. Additionally, it's best to use HTML



600 IS THE MAGIC NUMBER.

Although monitor resolutions vary, we recommend keeping your design at approximately 600 pixels wide to avoid horizontal scrolling and to ensure that your primary message appears in the preview pane.



PROPER SYNTAX COUNTS.

Although email design and web design are different, syntax still counts when coding HTML for email. Including all necessary opening and closing tags, proper syntax, and specifying width and height for all your images can help ensure that your email displays as you intended.



BE SMART ABOUT FORMS.

Forms can create a design challenge. Microsoft email clients, such as Hotmail and Outlook 2007, don't support forms. If your subscriber list is heavily-weighted with these email clients, consider using your email real estate in alternate ways, or driving subscribers to a web-based survey program.



AVOID RICH MEDIA.

Embedding Flash or video in an email will cause major deliverability issues. If delivered, these design elements will be stripped or disabled. If you want to use rich media, use a screenshot of the media linking to the "live" version on your website. Animated .gifs are also alternatives that work across many—but not all—email clients.



TEST AND TEST AGAIN!

We recommend adopting the policy of "Constant and Never-Ending Improvement" as a way to improve ongoing design and rendering efforts. Simple A/B tests can be incorporated into your regular send schedule to learn about one element of your email design with each send. A multi-variate test requires some extra work, but the analysis can net huge gains in effective email design as you can test multiple elements at once. For the most experienced tester, we recommend an experimental design—or Taguchi—testing plan to test hundreds of combinations of design elements at once. No matter your approach, testing will always be worth your time to confirm your current design or set it off in the correct direction.

Validation At Your Fingertips.

Validators – like the one available at <http://validator.w3.org/> – can be a valuable tool to check for syntax errors. Keep in mind that some email clients may require non-compliant or deprecated tags in order for your design to display properly.

Contact Us

Phone: 508.935.2275
Fax: 508.935.2276
Email: info@listengage.com
Web: <http://www.listengage.com>