CREATIVE GUIDELINES FOR EMAILS

9/16/2015

Creative Guidelines for Emails

SECTION 1

BASIC HTML EMAILS

An effective design should do more than look nice. It should support the message and render correctly. Tight and compelling copy will engage users and lead them to the proper call to action. Simple and clean HTML will ensure the message is delivered effectively. Text copy will be used as a backup for recipients who cannot receive HTML creative.

Assets Needed:

- From Line (less than 32 characters is recommended)
- Subject Line (less than 49 characters is recommended)
- HTML Creative
    - Final creative copy needed
    - Images hosted; if images cannot be hosted, an additional flat fee will be added
    - Links embedded
    - Postal Address of the advertiser in the footer
- Text Creative
- SEED List for Test (email addresses of anyone who would like to see the tests for approvals/revisions)
- SEED List for Final deployment (email addresses of anyone who would like to see the final mailing)
- Suppression/Opt-Out File for CAN SPAM compliance (applies to third party advertiser orders only)

> "Simple and clean HTML will ensure the message is delivered effectively."

Key Reference Points

Ensure your HTML is clean and coded correctly. Spam filtering is more likely to occur because of HTML coding than the words you use in your email.

- Use simple tables with a fixed width between 500px and 600px.
- Use fixed widths for table cells instead of percentages. UPDATE: Percentages need to be used for responsive design to make the HTML fluid.
- Email readers use the preview pane to initially view the email. An email preview pane is commonly a width of 600px and height of 300px – aim to include one call to action in this area. Do not define the overall height of the HTML but do define the width.
- Use frame table which contains all internal layout tables (header, content and footer).
- Use <bg color> in <td> cell or <table> tag and CSS.
- Use 'padding style' to control margins in <td> cells. Set padding style to 10px so that the text does not interfere with the left and right edges (margin style does not work).
- Do not use <div> or <span> tags.
- Add the height and width to <img src> tags to ensure that the blank placeholder image doesn't throw your design out.
- Build your HTML email in HTML 4.0 syntax not XHTML.
- Do not place a Doctype Declaration at the top of your HTML Code.
- Do not link to external CSS sheets as this reference is ignored or deleted.
- 3 extra line breaks after final </html> tag.
- The total email size (HTML plus all images therein) should be under 100kb.
- Treat the use of images carefully. An image heavy creative increases both its weight and chances of being picked up by spam filters.
- Ensure image names are simple and are generically named. Do not relate them to the offer or promotion within the creative. e.g. "win_a_car.gif" as browsers will filter these by default.
- Do NOT use a single image as a creative.
- Do not include more than 20 images per creative.
- Do not use background images. (for instance, Outlook does not recognize background images)
- Do not embed large block of text within images - use standard HTML text.
- JavaScript, ActiveX, Flash, or any other plugins (streaming media) should be avoided, as most web-based email browsers will filter these out. Most corporate email systems (Outlook, Lotus Notes, etc) will also apply a filter on the content.
- Please ensure the use of ALT tags. Many email clients prevent images from loading within html email by default, thus user intervention is required to display images. If this is not done the creative will appear as broken images. By adding ALT tags you can display relevant text in the absence of these potentially broken images.

- Do not use absolute positioning of elements with CSS. CSS positioning does not work in emails, mainly because the zero point will not always be in the top left corner of the message, especially in on-line inboxes which are inside a web-page. Use tables.
- All special characters such as £, € symbols should be defined using the HTML escape codes, e.g. £ &euro. Avoid using symbols in the subject line as they increase the chances of the creative being treated as Spam. Do not include telephone numbers and extensive numerical information in the creative; instead provide a link to a landing page with this information.
- Do not use forms as they will be stripped out by the popular email clients.

HTML Page Design

Focus design efforts on areas that can maximize responses and deliverability:

- Use fonts that are universal on the Internet such as Arial, Verdana, Tahoma, or Times New Roman. Other fonts can revert to a default font if the recipient doesn't have it installed on their computer.
- Minimize the number of fonts, sizes, and colors used in the design for easy flow and professional look.
- When possible, avoid using white (#FFFFFF) text. Spammers sometimes use white text on white backgrounds to prevent visibility of some text, so spam filters may flag this.
- Use ALT tags in the HTML code for each image used in the HTML design.
- Keep the length of the email short, concise, and about one page maximum in length. Newsletters may be longer, but the further details of a message should be left on a hyperlinked web page.
- Use bullet points to identify key points in the message.
- Clearly identify what the call to action is and restate it multiple times throughout the copy.

TEXT Design Requirements

- Text copy should be done in Simple Text or Notepad; not in Word.
- Text should be in plain font; no bold, no underline, no bullets.
- Links need to be written out on their own separate line so that they can be hyperlinked (they cannot be hidden under "click here")
- Postal address of marketer should be included in the footer of the creative.

Structure – Tables

Due to positioning and float not working in email, you have to use tables to structure the entire message, including the body. All online inboxes will only render the contents of the body tag and all other code is not rendered. Subsequently any styling you would normally add to the body tag will not work in an email.

Try and keep things clean and simple. You want everything to look good, but try to make it look good in the simplest ways. For example, instead of using margins use more tables. Seriously, tables work in emails very well, so if you put a centered 680 pixel wide table inside of a 700 pixel wide table to create a 10 pixel left and right margin, you should have no problem with that showing up.

Div tags are a standard these days for website building, but, unfortunately they don't work in emails too well. Tables are the best alternative to use here, but try not to use colspans and rowspans. Instead, just put more tables inside of the current table if you need to split up cells.

If you are not coding the HTML from scratch by using a text editor, it is best to use a standard HTML editor such as Adobe Dreamweaver or Microsoft Expression Web. These will generally create very clean code that is very compatible, even when using the graphical editing tools that they offer. If you are not making the creatives using an HTML program, be very careful of what you use. Adobe Photoshop, InDesign and Microsoft Word are three programs that are used a lot for making creatives, but all three are not meant for creating HTML at all. Oftentimes these will create problems. If your designers do not know HTML and feel that they need to use a program like one of these, it is best to use Adobe Fireworks. Fireworks is intended to be an HTML creation tool that uses the same slicing features found in Photoshop and InDesign. It is very easy to use and creates the most compatible code, HOWEVER; do not rely on it 100%. When slicing, try to avoid making uneven rows and columns. When rowspans and colspans are placed into an email, there is a high chance of the emails showing up incorrectly, as not all mail clients accept rowspans and colspans.

Styling for each table inside a table needs to be in its own table. The style tags will not carry through.

Background Color

If you want a background color, you need to use a 100% width one cell table and apply the background color to that table and cell. Then put your main content table in that cell with a white background.

There is also the view in a browser link which will render the entire html in its own browser window/tab.

This entire page will not have the background color because the body is not colored, only the main wrapping table.

Images

Display

Image tags are reacted to differently in different inboxes, especially when it comes to line breaks. It is good practice to add the attribute style="display:block;".

Background images are not a good idea, because Outlook 2007-2016 does not show them. Colors are fine, and I would suggest using them in place of images when possible. Also if you can set up the HTML to have the images as foreground images instead, do that. Keep in mind that you want to have as much text as possible in the creative though, as having a lot of images relative to text can trigger spam filters.

Alternative Text

When images are blocked (as they are by default on all inboxes unless you specify otherwise) some inboxes will show the contents of the alt attribute and some, like Outlook, will display its own text.

You can style the alternative text for inboxes, which will show it, by using a style attribute in the image tag itself.

Dimensions

Image dimensions are conventionally measured in pixels but some inboxes react differently to this when 'px' is specified at the end of the value, subsequently you should only add the number and not the 'px' on image dimensions and table and table cell dimensions. The hosted images themselves should already be the correct dimensions for the spot they will appear in the creative. This will avoid any distortion in the inbox. Also, if you do not actually give the image tag any height or width attributes and the hosted images are the correct size, some inboxes will shrink the area around where the image will be when they are blocked and then when the images are loaded they will stretch the table cells accordingly.. Widths always need to be in the img tag, heights not necessarily.

Content and Deliverability Tips

In order to increase the likelihood of avoiding the junk folder, here are a few basics to keep in mind:

Text to Image Ratio

There should be more text on the page than images, about 60:40 text. Spam filters will assume that all text is 'medium' /12px, count the characters and add them up. They will then compare that number to the total area of the page covered by images.

Pre-Headers

Include a Pre-header above the banner in order to earn the trust from recipients and to help them see the full email if the images are blocked. This will include at least a link to view the email in a new browser window/tab. You might also include a call to action within this pre-header.

SECTION 2

RESPONSIVE DESIGN - Mobile best practice

With more than 50% of users opening email on Apple devices and more than 65% on mobile, mobile first strategy is important. Consider the mobile user as a priority: single column, large buttons & text, white space, concise copy.

Responsive design for HTML email is achieved by creating a fixed-width container for the desktop version and nesting a fluid layout inside the fixed container. The container and images are then made fluid via media queries for smaller devices.

Responsive email design is a compromise because of different devices, email clients and rendering engines available. Some code will work in one email client and not another. You may need to code a particular setting in multiple ways to work across email clients.

Single-column emails work best everywhere, particularly on a small mobile device. Keep it simple. Layouts no wider than 640px will degrade gracefully. A single-column ensures no content will be completely lost outside the viewport when zoomed in. As a best practice while coding emails, review the slices, start a new html doc, break into clear sections for fault findings, separate tables make updates easier later, do not use colspan or rowspan as they can create rendering issues in Outlook.

Width of email - 500 to 700 pixels

Use tables instead of Divs for your layout

Recommended font size - At least 16 pixels for mobile email. In regards to the typography, using HTML typography has many benefits including faster load times, dynamic content, and easier updating.

Large call to action (CTA) - Apple recommends that all tappable (clickable) controls have a hit target of about 44 x 44 pixels. Diminished screen real estate places more credence than ever on the idea of 'the fold'. Important CTAs should be placed as near to the top as possible.

Using high-res images for HiDPI/Retina devices - Heavier images might not be ideal if they take too long to load. If you use choose to go retina, make the image twice as large as you plan to use it in your layout.

Use media queries – Use media queries for progressive enhancement. And combine with modern CSS and an advanced toolset. While using media queries use media query conditions to target specific email clients and devices. iPhone resizes fonts less than 13px to 13px—this can break navigation bars. Inside your media queries, remember to target HTML elements with CSS attribute selectors to overcome a rendering quirk of Yahoo! Mail.

Support for media queries is not driven by the mobile device. The mail application that is used on the device determines support. If you were to view an email on the same phone in two direct apps, you will see how support for media queries varies.

Adapt to outlook and gmail – your existing emails should adapt to these email clients for better open and click rates.

Text to image ratios – Keep images/text ratio in mind while designing and slicing the design. Also, always set images with links to have a border of 0 (border=0) to prevent blue boxes.

Handle CSS with care – Just like with HTML tables, CSS nesting can get you into trouble. However, even though email clients typically have dismal support for CSS (especially new CSS), things seem to be improving. Most reliable styling is the CSS style attribute. (style="")

For buttons — Go bulletproof. You can take three approaches to bulletproof buttons: VML-based, padding-based, or border-based.

Stick with older/simpler coding to ensure better compatibility. - When given a choice between an HTML attribute or a CSS rule, usually opt for the HTML way when it is just as easy. (i.e. background images)

Links - Make sure all links are absolute

Background Images — Some email clients do not see background images.

Images - Code the width/height of all images that you want to hold space. Images without a width/height do not appear until images are loaded. To style alt text on images add styling to the image tag. ALT text + styled ALT text are a great way to combat image blocking too. Set all images to style="display:block" to fix weird spacing issues. If you need to float them, use the HTML align left or right attributes. An email that only contains nothing but one image is never recommended for deliverability.

Skip These - Do not use frames or plugins such as Flash or QuickTime. Animated GIFS may only show the first frame instead. Do not use javascript.

Body Tag – Do not style the body tag as it may get stripped in certain email clients. If you want a background color, make a 100% width table and set the background color on that and put the content in.

Pre-header - another key area when it comes to visibility in the inbox. Try to avoid simply displaying 'view in browser' text. To insert invisible preheaders: In between the <style> tags, paste this code in: .preheader { display:none !important; visibility:hidden; opacity:0; color:transparent; height:0; width:0; }

Just under where the <body> tag starts, paste this code in: Preheader text goes here

Replace the placeholder text with what you want your pre-header text to read.

Left-aligned text - Certain operating systems, notably android, will not scale content to fit the screen, therefore displaying only the left half of an email you may want to for align important elements to the left-hand side of the content area.

Break designs down into smaller pieces - Keeps focus on components rather than grand designs.

Most Common Issues with Email HTML Rendering in Outlook

Outlook 2007, 2010 and 2013 use Microsoft Word (versions 2007, 2010 and 2013, respectively) to render emails. There are work-arounds that pop up for some of these issues but they do not always work so as of this publication here are issues specific to Outlook according to Litmus.

No support for background images in divs and table cells

No support for CSS float or position

No support for text shadow

Poor support for padding and margin

Poor support for CSS width and height

Problems with nested elements background colors

1. Outlook 2010 will often ignore CSS line-height. Try adding mso-line–height-rule:exactly; just before your line-height declaration. This will only work on block elements, however. This should not cause interference with other email clients.
2. Cellpadding is ignored in Outlook.com so use CSS padding on individual table cells instead.
3. Outlook.com does not support the CSS margin property. Use padding instead.
4. Most versions of Outlook will not allow you to use the CSS margin property when you left or right align images with text. It is best to create in your design program the appropriate spacing in the original image.

5. In Outlook 2007/2010 it is recommended to add the following CSS property to all tables; table {border-collapse; collapse;} to maintain spacing between tables.
6. Try to avoid colspan and rowspan as they can create rendering issues.
7. Most desktop versions of Outlook ignore borders placed on images.
8. Outlook spacing issues become more evident when tables are placed side-by-side using an align attribute. Add the following additional Microsoft Office proprietary CSS properties table {border-collapse:collapse; mso-table-lspace:0pt; mso-table-rspace:0pt;}

Gmail and CSS from Litmus (www.litmus.com)

As a webmail client, Gmail has to take some precautions when displaying an email. Like most webmail clients, Gmail uses a preprocessor to strip any code from an email that could be a security threat or interfere with the rendering of the client interface itself. Gmail strips out both the head and body tags, as well as any style tags in an email.

Once an email is run through the preprocessor, it is passed to the app and rendered by the browser. While different browsers can have their own rendering quirks, most issues that designers run into stem from styles that were stripped by Google's preprocessing.

The quickest way to insure your email campaign renders properly in Gmail is to place your most important styles inline.

A lot of designers, especially those coming from a web-heavy background, prefer to develop emails with CSS in the head of the email. The development process can definitely be quicker using this method, but care should be taken to move styles inline before deploying an email.

"Inlining" styles moves the CSS and associated formatting instructions from the style block in the <head> of your email into the body of the HTML.

What about responsive styles?

Inlining CSS is great for the general look and feel of an email. But what about handling responsive emails that rely on CSS media queries?

The answer is to keep those styles within the head of your email. Yes, Gmail will strip them out when it runs your email through a preprocessor, but that's OK. Ideally, all of the structure and styling in an email is inline. Anything in a media query is an enhancement on top of that styling. Even if it is stripped in webmail clients—it doesn't matter. The styles in the media query aren't intended to be viewed in a webmail interface—they're intended for a smartphone or tablet.

In most cases, mobile clients that rely on those media queries and responsive styles will still see and render them properly, but if they are missing in webmail clients, your email will hold up and look great since you took the time to inline your most important styles.