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## **Email Design Specifications & Guidelines**

**Updated January 2010**

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# 1 Introduction

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## Introduction

As the art of modern web development improves at a speed comparable to a bullet train, the world of email design seems to be taking a slow bus ride back in time. Instead of having your nails as breakfast and your teeth for supper, we've taken the liberty to put together this pocket-friendly guide to the best practices of email design.

We hope that by keeping close to these guidelines will result in a successful email campaign, and most importantly, get your marketing message undeniably across to your audience.

## A Note On Email Design

When designing an email, always remember that the most important goal is to get your message across to your target audience as clearly as possible. This is when we say aesthetics should support your email campaign, and not run it. Here's a quick checklist of best practices:

- Keep your most important message in HTML text. Some email clients block images by default, so let's not risk the chance of losing the main campaign message when it's hidden within these blocked images.
- Specifying alt text for these images ensures your email is still readable if images do get blocked.
- Do not use custom fonts. Stick to Arial or Times Roman and you'll always be safe.
- Maximum width for your design should not be more than 600 pixels. There is no height restriction, but keep your most important messages above the "fold".
- Total file size (HTML and images) should not exceed 200KB. Nobody will bother to wait for your email if it takes too long to load in their inbox.

Many emails clients such as Outlook and webmail such as Gmail block images by default, so you have to click on a button to display them. This is quite common, so you must ensure that your most important messages should be rendered in plain text and HTML. Rest assured your audience will not be lost in translation.

Finally, whenever possible, try to keep the number of hyperlinks in an EDM to a maximum of 8. In our experience we find less is more and recipients tend to click on the most obvious link. Having too many links listed can confuse your target audience and that's something you don't want to do. Fewer links also makes it easier to track your campaign performance more effectively.

## 2 Standard HTML Emails

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### Tables Are Your Best Friend

A rule of thumb is to use proven techniques such as tables. Despite their ugly HTML appearance, tables will do the job where modern CSS floats and DIVs fail. CSS Floats, Layers and DIVs have very little support in major clients.

When planning your tables, do not overuse the <rowspan> or <colspan> tags. Nested tables are much preferred. For example if you need to split a column into 2, nest another table with 2 columns instead.

Of course, all this nesting and cells-splitting can sometimes have conflicting attributes and alignments, this why we will always recommend to wrap your entire HTML Email in a master table. A master table will hold your design together as intended.

Be careful when applying CSS styles to tables. Even a simple border declaration can cause havoc to your layout. When an element receives a CSS style, it automatically needs all other dependent styles to be declared. For example, if you were to state a *border: 1px solid black* style to a table, you have to also state a *border-collapse: collapse* declaration to it. Take heed!

### Handle Your Images Gently

Try not to use empty table cells to control spacing and alignment. The safest method is to make the effort and create transparent gifs or jpgs of the same color as the required background. These should be exported at the exact dimension required.

On that bombshell, never "stretch" an image to fill up an area. For example, specifying a 500 pixel width value to a 1 pixel image file, we have known this to cause unimaginable results!

Use as few background images as you can get away with. This rules applies to both the HTML declaration and the CSS one. Refer to our list for a better understanding of client support.

Take the time to optimize all image files and you will be pleasantly surprised how many KB's you save! Adobe Photoshop's Save For Web feature is a great place to start.

Animated GIFs are generally accepted except in Outlook 2007. Do ensure that you optimize your animated gifs as they tend to chalk up in file size on longer animations. Some mail clients will only show the first frame of an animated GIF so make sure the first frame is topical.

### CSS and Styles

CSS support on mail clients is improving at a pace equivalent to a sitting rock, but luckily for the sanity of all email designers, inline CSS styles are allowed and encouraged. We would bet that the CSS inline font styles are the most copied-and-pasted commodities on your email. And that's not a bad thing, remember: Once you don't explicitly specify, the mail client WILL ruin your intended layout or design.

Never use style tags in the <head> or external stylesheets, mail clients such as Gmail simply strip them away.

If you're obsessed with styles, our advice would be to test your email design WITHOUT the styles intact to see if any message is lost. Which brings us to our next "best practices" recommendation; include backup HTML attributes to ensure that your design will come out looking somewhat acceptable. Examples of good backup coding would be:

```
<font style="font-size:12px;font-family:Arial;" size="2" family="Arial">
```

## Last Checks

- Ensure that all HTML tags are closed and all values are enclosed in double-quotes
- Do not take the shortcut and wrap entire tables (or any HTML elements besides text) in a <font> tag. Have your <font> tag immediately before any text or better still, use inline CSS styles.
- Javascript, Java Applets, Active X elements are not allowed and are not supported by major email clients.
- Test, test and test again. Test your email design extensively against all email clients; it's the only right thing to do having invested in your e-marketing campaign.

Do not use web browsers as a benchmark for your HTML Email!

All Email Clients in the market today are nowhere as advanced as their web browser siblings. Web browsers such as Mozilla Firefox, Internet Explorer and Google Chrome have a far superior engine to handle HTML or any web media, hence making it an unfair comparison.

## 3 Flash TVC Emails

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### Flash in Emails?

Dispel the myth! Flash does exist in email marketing with the help of our Flash TVC Email product. When designing your Flash TVC Email, leave and indicate the space you want to stream your TVC ad into. Though there is no size restraint to your TVC, both in dimensions and file size, we recommend not having it too large as users on older computers may suffer a lag, or not to have it too large a file size, these users tend to lose interest.

A recommended Flash TVC should be around 15 seconds duration of 320 x 240 dimensions. Send us your separate video file in any of the following formats - .mov, .avi, .mpg, .fla or .flv and we will stream it into the space left for the TVC within the EDM.

### Break Apart Text Fonts

When sending a .FLA file, please break apart all the fonts in the flash, converting them to shapes. This ensures that your desired look for your text layout will always stay intact. Follow these steps below:

1. Using the Selection tool, click a text field.
2. Select Modify > Break Apart. Each character in the selected text is placed in a separate text field. The text remains in the same position on the Stage.
3. Select Modify > Break Apart again to convert the characters to shapes on the Stage.

*Note: The Break Apart command applies only to outline fonts such as TrueType fonts. Bitmap fonts disappear from the screen when you break them apart. PostScript fonts can be broken apart only on Macintosh systems.*

### Adding Flash To Your HTML

When developing your HTML, do not use SWFOBJECT or AC\_RunActiveContent.js (published from Flash) when embedding your Flash movie. Always use the proven embed/object method:

```
<object classid="clsid:d27cdb6e-ae6d-11cf-96b8-444553540000"
codebase="http://download.macromedia.com/pub/shockwave/cabs/flash/swflash.cab#version=
9.0.0.0" width="320" height="240" id="yourmovie" align="middle">
<param name="allowScriptAccess" value="sameDomain" />
<param name="movie" value="yourmovie.swf" />
<param name="quality" value="high" />
<param name="bgcolor" value="#ffffff" />
<embed src="yourmovie.swf" quality="high" bgcolor="#ffffff" width="320" height="240"
name="yourmovie" align="middle" allowScriptAccess="sameDomain" type="application/x-
shockwave-flash" pluginspage="http://www.macromedia.com/go/getflashplayer" />
</object>
```

Flash attributes and parameters such as Scale, Salign and WMODE should always be kept at the default values. There should not be any Actionscript calling within the Flash itself as well, such as allow full screen playback.

## **Requesting A Test Mail**

When requesting for a test mail, please remember that Flash is still NOT 100% supported on many mail clients, especially Outlook. Please contact our sales team for more information on receiving your test mails.

## 4 Lotus Notes

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### Take Control

Lotus Notes can be a tough Email client to test your HTML Email and newsletters against. There is a general lack of information on how the Lotus Notes client renders and displays HTML for the end-user. Many designers and firms tend to skip over the whole Lotus Notes compatibility issue due to the fact that they believe that the majority of recipients using Notes are considered small. The problem is that there can be a substantial amount of corporate Lotus Notes users on any given mailing list.

The following is a guide that you may find helpful in diagnosing and trouble shooting common Lotus Email Marketing issues.

### Little Red Boxes Around Images

This is usually caused by the absence of an absolute url (i.e <http://www.yourdomain.com/img/spacer.gif>.) for that particular image resource. The best thing to do in this case is look at your HTML reference to that image character-by-character.

Alternatively, you can load your code into a Text Editor such as TextPad, and turn on the "visible spaces" feature. This will allow you to see every space, carriage return (<CR>) or other character representation which could be fouling the interpretation of your HTML in the Lotus Notes Environment. Even a single space or carriage return can trigger this conversion.

Now, if you're getting strange boxes, lines and distortions, 99% of the time, you are using a GIF file that has a matte or background that is showing through as an extra border. We advise switching to Jpeg format.

### Alignment & Styles – The HTML Jigsaw

Lotus Notes provides developers and designers with pretty much the same headaches as any other email client when it comes to piecing your HTML Email design together. Without proper experience and careful coding, what may look fine in normal web browsers will quickly fall apart in the world of emails.

We've documented numerous accounts where Lotus Notes has completely ignored some HTML coding during rendering, while displaying other HTML coding just fine. This is especially true when it comes to width parameters for TABLE tags, nested TABLE tags and finally, TABLE tags that are not constrained within another table.

The techniques for HTML Email mentioned above apply to Lotus Notes as well. One of the "Best Practices" we've established in consulting for clients is using one master table to constrain your entire email. By "wrapping" your HTML Email in one master table, you help reign in all of those various width=% and other "ambiguous" attributes and parameters which can wreck havoc on how your HTML Email is rendered by the viewer's browser.

Test your HTML Email message without your style sheet to see if it could service suddenly not having the style sheet render for you. A prime example to watch for is whether suddenly having your 10pt text suddenly expanding to the users 12 pt Arial default. In many cases you have a lot more text start wrapping and pushing all of those carefully arranged elements around your Email Message.



When using stylesheets, code some backup HTML attributes to help the above problem in case of style sheet failure. Relying on the User's default settings can be disastrous. Examples of good backup coding would be:

```
<font style="font-size:12px;font-family:Arial;" size="2" family="Arial">
```

## Last Notes

Here are some of most popular things that do not work in Lotus Notes (or most email clients):

1. Named Anchor: Specifying a "#anchormame" in the href will trigger a new browser window to a non-existent page URL: "#anchormame"
2. Stylesheets and Link element in <head>: Save yourself the trouble, just go inline.
3. Transparency Gifs, PNGs, and opacities: Please do not base your entire design on these fancy effects, they live and breathe as we know it and will act up as they please.
4. Lastly, the mother of all headaches: Background images. To be safe, stick to specifying background colors, and even that won't work well on some email clients.