EMAIL JITSU

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< MONKEY STYLE >
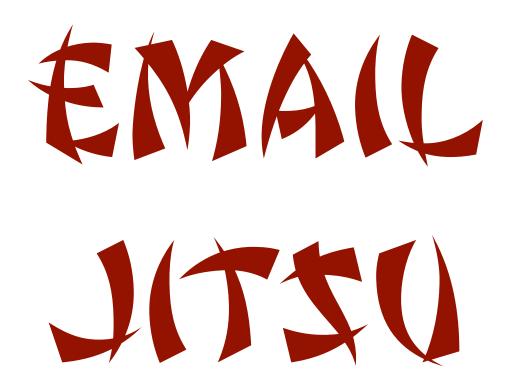
EMAIL JITSU

Email Design and Coding Tactics from the Ancient Web
Masters of the 1990s

SO, YOUNG GRASSHOPPER. YOU THINK YOU CAN COMPETE IN MAILCHIMP'S BLOODSPORT OF HTML EMAIL DESIGN?

YOU MAKE ME LAUGH, SILLY NERD.

CODING HTML EMAILS IS A MYSTERIOUS, COMPLICATED ART FORM. THE MODERN WEB DESIGN WARRIOR IS SPOILT WITH CSS-3, AND CSS POSITIONING AND SILLY, FANCY-PANTSY "GRIDS" AND SUCH. WE HAVE BECOME FAT AND LAZY WITH TECHNOLOGY AND THE SAFETY OF "STANDARDS."

CONQUERING HTML EMAIL CODING AND DESIGN REQUIRES A FUNDAMENTAL MASTERY OF THE ANCIENT ART OF WEB DESIGN CODING, CIRCA 1999.

SUCH TECHNIQUES ARE NOT TAUGHT IN TODAY'S WEB DESIGN SCHOOLS.

SCHOOL. HA. YOU MAKE ME LAUGH.

LUCKY FOR YOU, THOSE ANCIENT, SECRET TECHNIQUES HAVE BEEN DOCUMENTED BY THE HISTORIANS AT MAILCHIMP...

COMBAT TIP #1
Think Like Monkey. Code Like Monkey.

Take off that beanie and put that Zeldman book down, you hippie. There *are* no standards in HTML email. Email programs are all over the place in terms of how they render HTML. You will need to think different. Fight different. Yes, you will need to resort to dirty "street" style tactics to make your email designs look consistent. Medieval stuff like:

✱ Table layout. No CSS Positioning. Not only that, but…

✱ Embedded Tables (gasp!) Shim-GIFs (double gasp!)

✱ Videos, Flash, ActionScript, DHTML, JavaScript, and all that other fancy-schmancy stuff is not going to work. Most anti-virus software block them from working inside email apps.

Oh yeah. You'll want to hand-code *everything.* No WYSIWYGs. Luckily, once you get into the swing of things, you'll enjoy how fun this raw, bare-knuckle way of HTML email coding can be.

COMBAT TIP #2
Never Underestimate Your Opponent

Unlike the world of web design, where you deal with 3 or 4 major browsers, there are *dozens* of different email readers out there. To design great looking HTML emails, one must know how to deal with email readers.

* Webmail apps render differently from Desktop apps. Mainly, webmail apps restrict CSS more, to keep *your* code from interfering w/*their* operation. Inline-CSS is the only reliable way to stylize HTML emails.

* Most email apps use some form of preview pane. In general, you have either [250-px in width (and lots of height), or 250-px in height](#) (and lots of width) to include your most important elements, like logo, top story, etc.

* In general, Microsoft Outlook is the worst to design for. They chose to use Microsoft Word as their HTML email rendering engine, instead of IE. Don't ask.

COMBAT TIP #3
Learn To Fall. Gracefully.

Once you have achieved black belt status, your journey has not ended. In fact, it has only just begun. You've mastered the basics, but the rules are always changing. So your design and code must fail gracefully.

* Take your HTML email template, and fill it with lots of real content. Turn off CSS. Turn off images, because so many email apps display emails with images off by default. Does the message still get across? If not, you have failed. Go back to page 1.

* Email applications always change their rendering techniques. You can kill yourself learning all their tactics, or learn to keep things simple and failsafe.

* Use MailChimp's Inbox Inspector to test your designs.

FINAL RULE
Forget The Rules

Style does not happen until you have learned to break all the rules that you know to be true, but in your own creative way. And you cannot break the rules until you first learn them. After you've achieved enlightenment through strict and relentless practice of "the rules," it is time to develop your own style.

But none of that "Cobra Kai, sweep the leg" crap.

Good luck, grasshopper.

WEAPONS

✳ Just cheat [by downloading a few basic templates](), then build on to them from there.

✳ [MailChimp Inbox Inspector]() – preview your email design renderability across 20+ major email programs and spam filters.

✳ [Automated A/B testing]() – In case you want to test your work in real-world scenarios. Here's how to use dynamic content merge tags to [test the design.]()

✳ [Automagic CSS inliner tool]()

✳ [All the different ways]() you can import your HTML emails into MailChimp without using our built-in WYSIWYG

TACTICS

✳ Email Marketing 101 [video series in MailChimp Academy]() (covers design and coding basics, other technical issues)

✳ Email Design presentation on [Slideshare]() (a much more boring form of the above video)

✳ [MailChimp's Email Marketing Guide]() (65 pages) – this is an older guide, but since HTML email hasn't changed in ages, it still applies. Pretty much everything you need to know.

✳ Most common [HTML email design mistakes]()

6-1. ShimGif-su Strike Pose. *The right hand represents width (earth); the left hand represents height (sky). Legs are positioned with negative space, representing transparency, invisibility (wind).*