Email Marketing Best Practice Guide

In this guide, we'll cover email design best practices for all the different elements of your email campaigns.

HTML Email

Email Promotion Specifications

Best Practices: Design & Development

Tips & Recommendations for Designing HTML Email

HTML & CSS in Email Design

Universally Supported CSS & HTML for Email Designs

HTML Tags & Attributes Ignored By Outlook

A Few Important Reminders for Coding HTML Email

Email Promotion Specs

GENERAL SPECIFICATIONS

Dimensions:
- Width: 600 px. (recommended)
- Height: Flexible

File Size:
- Preferred Total: 100KB Max
- Absolute Total: 1MB Max

HTML & CSS
- HTML must be successfully validated for email. (We recommend using an email testing service such as Litmus, http://www.litmus.com)
- CSS must be "inline" with no embedded style sheets, external linked style sheets, CSS for positioning, or CSS layers

IMAGES
- File Formats: JPG, PNG or GIF
- Self-hosted Images: If you are hosting the images in your HTML email, please verify that they are linked correctly.

NOT ALLOWED
- ► No background images or transparent images
- ► No sound
- ► No Flash
- ► No JavaScript
- ► No animation

SUBJECT LINE
- Maximum 50 characters including spaces.
- Subject to editing by IR to clarify source of the mailing.
- May not contain all capital letters, only one word, SPAM trigger words or characters requiring encoding.

PREHEADER TEXT
Preheaders add valuable context to your subject line and can help your open rate. Keep it short (between 40-70 characters) and to the point. Use this space to help your customer know why the email is useful to them. Your subject line and preheader text should work together.

SUBMISSION PROCEDURES

Materials must be submitted at least 7 business days prior to scheduled send date.

For questions, please contact Winnie Lee at 312-572-6275 or winnie@verticalwebmedia.com.

Materials:
Send to your contact in the following format:
1. Zipped folder containing validated HTML file
2. Click-through URL
3. Email subject line
4. List of test contacts including email addresses
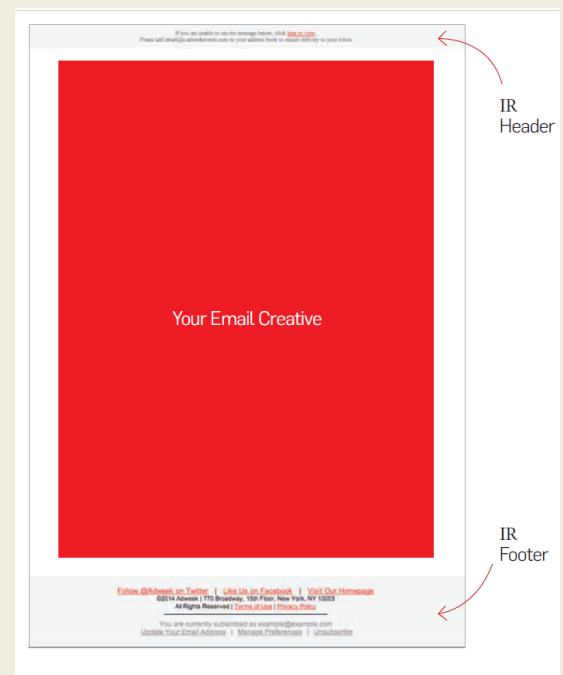
NOTE: Branding email header and footer will be added.

HTML tags ignored by Outlook

applet	onkeypress	counter-reset
bdo	onkeyup	cue-before, cue-after, cue
button	onloadonmousedown	cursorelevation
form	onmousemove	empty-cells
iframe	onmouseout	float
input	onmouseover	font-size-adjust
isindex	onmouseup	font-stretch
menu	onreset	left
noframes	onselect	line-break
noscript	onsubmit	list-style-image
object	onunload	list-style-position
optgroup	readonly	marker-offset
option	scrolling	orphans
param	selected	outline
script	standby	outline-color
select	tabindex	outline-style
accept-charset	valuetype	outline-width
accept	textarea	overflow
accesskey	td colspan=0	overflow-x
archive	th colspan=0	overflow-y
checked	frame frameborder=0	pause-before, pause-after, pause
classid	td rowspan=0	pitch
code	th rowspan=0	pitch-range
codecore	background-attachment	play-during
codetype	background-image	position
compact	background-position	quotes
data	background-repeat	richness
declare	clear	right
defer	float	speak
disabled	list-style-image	speak-header
enctype	list-style-position	speak-numeral
longdesc	text-transform	speak-punctuation
marginheight	word-spacing	speech-rate
marginwidth	azimuth	stress
media (screen | print | all)	background-attachment	table-layout
method	background-image	text-shadow
multiple	background-position	text-transform
noresize	background-repeat	top
object	border-spacing	unicode-bidi
onblur	bottom	visibility
onchange	caption-side	voice-family
onclick	clear	volume
ondblclick	clip	windows
onfocus	content	word-spacing
onkeydown	counter-increment	z-index

HTML and CSS in Email Design

Below – with help from www.emailonacid.com – we've summarized the universally supported html and CSS tags. These can be used and will render properly in any email client (excluding Lotus Notes 6.5/7.0. Notes supports the following HTML but only supports the CSS properties with an *).

background	background-color	border
border-bottom	border-bottom-color	border-bottom-style
border-bottom-width	border-color	border-left
border-left-color	border-left-style	border-left-width
border-right	border-right-color	border-right-style
border-right-width	border-style	border-top
border-top-color	border-width	* color
* display	* font	* font-family
* font-size	* font-style	font-variant
font-weight	height	letter-spacing
line-height	* list-style-type	padding
padding-bottom	padding-left	padding-right
padding-top	table-layout	* text-align
* text-decoration	text-indent	text-transform
vertical-align		

Universally Supported CSS Properties (Inline Only)

background	background-color	border
border-bottom	border-bottom-color	border-bottom-style
border-bottom-width	border-color	border-left
border-left-color	border-left-style	border-left-width
border-right	border-right-color	border-right-style
border-right-width	border-style	border-top
border-top-color	border-width	* color
* display	* font	* font-family
* font-size	* font-style	font-variant
font-weight	height	letter-spacing
line-height	* list-style-type	padding
padding-bottom	padding-left	padding-right
padding-top	table-layout	* text-align
* text-decoration	text-indent	text-transform
vertical-align		

HTML and CSS in Email Design / Safe Tags

a	class, href, id, style, target
b	class, id, style
br	class, id, style
div	align, class, dir, id, style
font	class, color, face, id, size, style
h1	align, class, dir, id, style
h2	align, class, dir, id, style
h3	align, class, dir, id, style
h4	align, class, dir, id, style
h5	align, class, dir, id, style
h6	align, class, dir, id, style
head	dir, lang
hr	align, size, width
img	align, border, class, height, hspace, id, src, style, usemap, vspace, width
label	class, id, style
li	class, dir, id, style, type
ol	class, dir, id, style, type
p	align, class, dir, id, style
span	class, id, style
strong	class, id, style
table	align, bgcolor, border, cellpadding, cellspacing, class, dir, frame, id, rules, style, width
td	abbr, align, bgcolor, class, colspan, dir, height, id, lang, rowspan, scope, style, valign, width
th	abbr, align, background, bgcolor, class, colspan, dir, height, id, lang, scope, style, valign, width
tr	align, bgcolor, class, dir, id, style, valign
u	class, id, style
ul	class, dir, id, style

Best Practices

The email design best practices you need to know:

This reference assumes you're a front-end web designer with an intermediate working knowledge of HTML and CSS. You're comfortable coding in and using HTML tables for structure, and working in coding standards.

Best Practices: Design

There are a few things to keep in mind when designing HTML email campaigns.

- Emails should be 600-800 pixels maximum width. This will make them behave better within the preview-pane size provided by many clients.
- Design for simplicity. Use grid-based layers and avoid complicated elements that require HTML floats or positioning.
- Assume images will be initially blocked by email clients, or that certain images—background images, for example—will completely fail to load.
- Don't design an email that's essentially one large, sliced-up image. While these kinds of emails look pretty, they perform poorly.
- Use basic, cross-platform fonts such as Arial, Verdana, Georgia, and Times New Roman.
- Avoid elements that require Flash or JavaScript. If you need motion in an email, a .gif is your best bet.
- Animated Gifs. Be aware that animated gifs are not fully supported across email platforms, and most will display only the first frame of the animation.
- Don't forget about the mobile experience! Is your email readable at arm's length on a small screen? Will the images slow its load time on a mobile device? Are your links easy to press with a thumb?

Best Practices: Development

Much like with design, there are best practices to follow when coding HTML email.

- Code all structure using the table element. For more complicated layouts, you should nest tables to build complex structures.
- Use element attributes (such as cellpadding, valign, and width) to set table dimensions. This forces a box-model structure.
- Keep your CSS simple. Avoid compound style declarations (IE: "font:#000 12px Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif;"), shorthand code (IE: #000 instead of #000000), CSS layout properties (IE: slot, position, clear, visibility, etc.), complex selectors (IE: descendant, child or sibling selectors, and pseudo-elements)
- Inline all CSS before sending.
- Use only absolute links for images, and host those images on a reliable server.
- Don't bother with JavaScript or Flash—those technologies are largely unsupported by email clients.
- Account for mobile-friendliness, if possible. Use media queries to increase text sizes on small screens, provide thumb-sized (~46x46px) hit areas for links. Make an email responsive if the design allows for it.

Tips and recommendations for designing emails using your own HTML:

- Always build your HTML with tables.
- Keep your code clean.
- Don't use image maps.
- Avoid colspans and rowspans.
- Inline styles are the most solid way to style your emails.
- Images should be jpes or gifs, RGB color values, 72 dpi and double width of template
- Don't send one large image in an email.

Other things to know
A few important reminders for coding your own HTML

Email is not a webpage or a print mailing
It's important to remember that designing HTML for email is different from designing HTML for a webpage or print. While there are a number of key similarities, there are many more key differences.

Communicate with customers on all devices / Responsive Designed Emails
Making your emails responsive can be a great solution. Responsive design means that the email contracts and expands based on the size of the screen on the device used, but is still readable and includes all of the essential design elements.

Coding
Use In-line CSS styles. Always use inline CSS styles rather than classes.
Use Basic HTML Tables. In order to have your email blast work across the many different email browsers and clients, use basic **HTML tables.** Most of the complicated code that works on websites does NOT work in an HTML blast. For example, divs and shortcodes do NOT work at all in certain email browsers.
Don't Use Coding Shortcuts. For example, when styling CSS, set each property rather than grouped together in one shortcut code (i.e. use "border-width:5px; border-style:solid; border-color:#000000;" rather than "border: 5px solid red;"). For both **HTML and CSS,** use all 6 hexadecimal numbers instead of just three for a shortcut (#ffffff and #000000 would be correct, rather than #fff and #000).
Avoid Colspans. When building your blast with tables, avoid using colspans (column spans that show up as colspan="") as it usually renders differently for each email client and could "break" your blast.

Layout and Design
Maximum Dimensions. Recommended maximum dimensions: 600 x 600–800 pixels. Maximum width is 600px but can be greater in length. This ensures the email looks overall acceptable across multiple email platforms.
Responsive/Mobile-Optimized Designs. We accept mobile optimized/responsive blasts. With the increase of mobile audience, we recommend designing your blast with that in mind. Be sure to test your HTML email before submitting final artwork.
Easily Clickable. Increase your click-through rate and customer satisfaction with "call to action" buttons and links that are large and easy for the user to find.
Keep it Simple. Simpler designs, such as a single column, work well across more platforms. The more complicated the design, the more you need to test and debug.

Images and Backgrounds
Maximum Collective File Size. Recommended collective size of all image files: 40kb. Keeping the image size low keeps our emails loading quickly. Maximum collective size of all image files: 300kb (required).
Avoid Background Images. Background images are not fully supported across email clients and will not display for all users.
Avoid Image Maps. Image maps rely on technology that is not supported email browsers. This means that some subscribers may not even be able to click on your email at all. Instead of using an image map, slice up the image and place it in a table.
Animated Gifs. Be aware that animated gifs are not fully supported across email platforms, and most will display only the first frame of the animation.
Be Careful With Spliced Images. If you have a larger image that is spliced and placed into your HTML using table cells or img tags right next to each other you will need to test thoroughly. Some email clients may add extra space between your images. Using "display: block" in your style code can usually remedy this.