

21 Tips to Improve HTML Email Delivery

A Pinpointe Tips 'n Tricks Paper
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INTRODUCTION

Are you wondering if you should be sending HTML or text-only newsletters and correspondence? Often there is more energy and passion applied to the graphic design, (which, if incorrectly designed, has about a 70% chance of never making it to your recipient), than there is to the content, personalization headline and call-to-action elements combined.

If not done correctly, HTML email delivery rates can be sub optimal, so we've pulled together this short paper to help email marketers avoid some of the pitfalls and potholes and get their masterpiece delivered to the recipients' inboxes.

HEADS UP: IT'S NOT AS EASY AS IT LOOKS

4 of 5 HTML emails are not W3C compliant. In many browsers, this causes an email to not render properly and makes the message undeliverable, especially with MSN, Hotmail and Yahoo. Why? One security hack that spammer rely on is to use invalid or broken HTML in order to hide their actual email payload message. So, if you do use HTML code in your messages, you should plan to take the extra time (or pay a designer) to get it right.

Developers should also note that designing HTML for the Web and designing for emails is totally different. Many web designers want to do cool stuff like, use flash, graphics, java scripting, etc. But these are not always the best for use with emails.

POOR RENDERING KILLS DIALOGUE

One goal for email correspondence is to develop a dialog with your prospects and customers, but poor email rendering (as a result of incorrectly structured HTML) can stop a 'conversation' in its tracks. In 2007, the Email Experience Council studied a sampling of 1,000 emails from both B2B and B2C customers and found that 21% of the emails appeared completely blank while 28% showed relevant content but did not have any working links.

<http://www.emailexperience.org/resources/executive-summary/>

DOING HTML EMAIL RIGHT

If you're going to send HTML emails, here are some Tips to help improve the likelihood that your email will be read.

DEFINING HTML EMAIL

First, we should clarify what may seem like an obvious point, but isn't. By HTML email, we mean an email message that is rendered in HTML and incorporates a mix of text and images.

By 'text' we mean either a) plain text, or b) an email rendered in HTML that contains only text content and no images. Why would a marketer want to generate a text message and use HTML? This approach has some advantages, namely -

- Enable tracking email open rates and links that are contained within the email. HTML is used to insert a unique tag at the end of a URL (which can make the link look ugly), and/or to insert a small transparent image or dot with the email, which is often used to track open rates.

- Enable simple URLs. If you want to include a link to a specific paper in your 'Resources' section of your website, an HTML rendered email can display 'click here' without having to display the actual URL. This is easier for the recipient to read.

THINK KISS - KEEP IT SIMPLE ...

Unlike the same-named 70's excess rock band, HTML-formatted correspondence is best when it is simple and uncomplicated. Extraneous images, overly complex graphics and complex table layouts all increase the chance of making mistakes in your HTML code, and as far as many SPAM checkers are concerned, poor HTML code can be a flag. Embedding too many graphics and rich media also bloats the size of your email, which isn't nice either.

Specific Advise: Rather than embedding rich content directly into your HTML layout, store your rich media content on your site (or on custom, targeted landing pages).

SIZE MATTERS

Keep any graphic images to a maximum of about 600 pixels wide. The message display window of most email clients is about 600 pixels wide, so using anything wider means that your recipient needs to scroll back and forth in order to display it. Larger screens mean the appropriate width is expanding slightly but if you want your content to be seen, the best bet is to keep it within 600 pixels wide.

On a separate note regarding image size, it is also best to properly size images before sending. We've probably all and received emails that have embedded images that are 800x600 but are displayed in the email at a resolution of say, 200x150. Which means that, when the email is opened, the user has to download an image file that is 10x bigger than it needs to be.

LENGTH MATTERS TOO

This tip applies to all emails, not just HTML emails. Short headlines work better than long ones. How short? Roughly speaking, your subject should be under 50 characters and under 40 is even better, though it's safe to say that trimming your subject line to 5 characters is probably counter-productive. While on the subject of subject lines, make sure your subject is honest, truthful and doesn't overpromise, or you'll not only lower your open rates, you'll potentially start to do harm to your brand.

IMAGE BLOCKING = X-RATED CONTENT

Image files aren't actually sent as part of an HTML email. The actual images are hosted on your server (or ours, for free, if you are a Pinpointe customer). When your recipient decides to view the images, the images are downloaded. So a quick basic tip – be sure to use absolute, fully qualified paths for any images. For example:

This works:

```

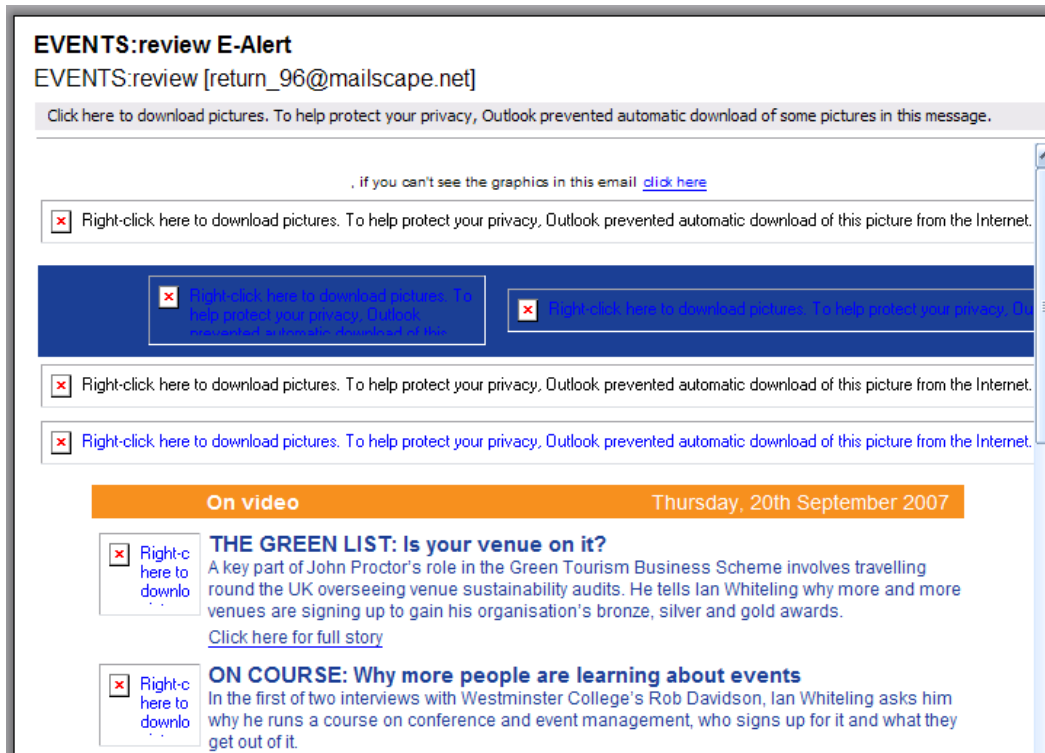
```

This doesn't work:

```
.
```

By default, Outlook as well as Yahoo Gmail and others, DISABLE image display, so there's a 70% chance that a nice, hand-crafted, HTML graphical email will look like a random juxtaposition of red 'Xs' when it's received.

Here's how one hand crafted HTML looked when I received it. I found it in the delete bin when I was looking for an example:



Working with Images

First, start by assuming that your recipient will have image display turned OFF and they'll have to right click or explicitly make a selection to display images. Next, assume that 105% of your target recipients will be too lazy to turn them on. Now, create your HTML email with the assumption that your email graphic images will be blocked. How will it look and how can you still make it useful?

BALANCE COPY AND IMAGES

Create a layout that ensures your text flows around the images in such a way that your text flows around images and your readers can focus on the message, and not the big red 'X's and blank spaces. Along the same lines, avoid a format layout that starts off with a banner image, which will create a big dead spot at the top of the message when image display is disabled.

It is also important to balance the amount of text vs. graphics in your email. Many email filters produce a SPAM score based on the 'graphic to text' ratio.

This SPAM-blocking technique was developed because earlier versions of SPAM firewalls filtered on text content, but then crafty spammers started creating messages that were one really big image. Most SPAM filters now rank the text to graphics ratio as another spam rating mechanism.

DO USE ALT-TEXT TAGS

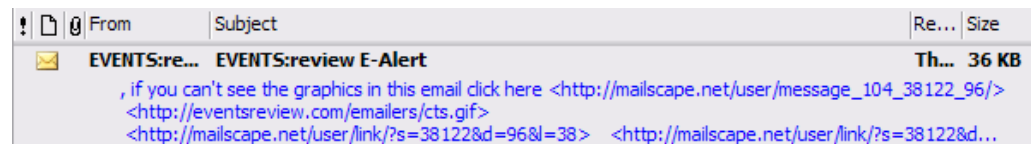
HTML allows you to attach descriptive text tags to graphics images. The text is displayed when a) the graphic is not or cannot be displayed, as described here, and b) if the image IS displayed, the ALT text will be displayed when the cursor is hovered over the image. Either way, you win. Here's how to add ALT tags:

- Open the Image tag (IMG)
- Add the ALT-text attribute. The HTML code will look like this:

```
<img src=http://www.site.com/image.gif alt="ALT text">
```

UNDERSTAND AND USE PREVIEW PANES

More than 70% of Enterprise customers use Outlook, which displays a 4 line preview, assuming that your recipient is using the 'Auto-Preview' pane, which most people seem to do. If the first thing in your email is a graphic or set of links to graphics images, then the resulting display will look like this one below:



Read carefully and you will note that it is the preview for the same poorly designed email I showed previously, which I found by scouring my deleted folder when I was looking for an example of a poorly designed email.

AVOID CASCADING STYLE SHEETS

You know all that cool CSS stuff you (or your marketing team) uses when developing websites? It doesn't work so well in emails. CSS support for example, is limited and CSS style sheets can be problematic for email clients as some will not render emails correctly and many simply strip out style sheets altogether. If you are going to use styles, then follow these guidelines:

- Use inline (embedded) styles. Linking to external CSS sheets is unreliable.
- Stick to basics – font size, color, other simple stuff. Don't go overboard.
- Embed the style within the two BODY tags. Email systems like Gmail, Hotmail and Yahoo will truncate or even strip out everything between the header tags, so if you must use styles for your HTML email, add style definitions between the body tags.

BACKGROUND COLORS

Since many email systems strip your HEADERS and BODY tags, assigning a background color in the body is pretty fruitless. If you want a background color, the trick is to wrap your entire email into a 100% wide, single cell table and give the table cell a "bgcolor".

DON'T BE SLOPPY

Spammers are sloppy (sometimes intentionally) and SPAM filters know it. So, don't be sloppy. Close table cells and font tags. Some spam filters will punish you for using FrontPage (or other WYSIWYG tools) to code your HTML email. So strip out useless META tag info.

BLACKBERRY'S IPHONES AND EYEBALLS

64% of key decision makers are reviewing their email on a Blackberry. (source: Marketing Sherpa) and a rapidly increasing number are using smart phones like the iPhone. Have you ever seen a graphic-laden email on a

Blackberry? I have. It's ugly, annoying, and thumb-numbing – often forcing you to scroll through the long spaghetti string list of URL pointers to images you can't see, just to get to the meat of a message. Most Executives won't have the time or patience. Your carefully hand crafted content will hit the virtual trash bin.

The bit of good news is that desktop email isn't going away for these users. Most are using their Blackberry to compliment their desktop email reading. This is just one more reason to have your key value proposition right at the top of your message, so it can be seen on the blackberry screen. Another trick is to use MIME – see the next tip.

USE MIME

MIME (Multipart alternative format) embeds both text and HTML within the same message, along with a header indicating that the content is multipart. Intelligent browsers, including Blackberry, will select the appropriate version of your email based on either their abilities (or lack thereof), or based on the recipient's preference (e.g. – preference to only receive text emails). So...text-only readers will see a text rendering and HTML capable clients will see the HTML version (subject to all the limitations described in the preceding pages).

ONE-TWO PUNCH

One strategy to consider is to combine the use of pure text messages and pure HTML messages as part of each campaign. For example, say you have an upcoming event you want to invite regional subscribers to attend. Consider first sending a short, text-only note with key points, and a note that full details will follow. A few days later, drop the HTML, fully formatted version. If done properly, you're likely to see a pickup in the total response.

A FEW MORE MINI-TIPS

Here are a collection of bonus tips to keep in mind while crafting your HTML emails:

- When sending a message, keep your value statement in text, not in graphics. By value statement, I mean the description of the call to action, the purpose of the correspondence, table of contents or reason for writing. It's the 'meaning of life' for each message. And if your message doesn't have one, it will probably 'expire' quickly.
- Locate the value statement above all other content *and make sure it is left justified* – i.e., don't put a masthead or other images *above* the value statement, or it's likely to get passed over.
- If you are using an image for your call-to-action (eg, a 'Click Here' button'), make sure your call-to-action has text associated with it (see 'using ALT tags, earlier).
- If your email is important enough to layout with pretty pictures in HTML, then it's probably important enough to post a copy on your website, and include a link to it within your email. That way, if someone receives the text version and does want to see the rendered version, it's always a click away. Note – you won't directly get to track link status and probably can't track the open status for the people who just open link from a text message but hey, they would otherwise have not opened the email anyway.

In summary, there is a time and place for HTML email correspondence, but the smart marketer will take into consideration design tips to maximize delivery rates, and include a balanced mix of Text and HTML correspondence.

We hope you find this paper useful. If so, please distribute it freely to all your friends and enemies.

ABOUT PINPOINTE

Pinpointe is a leading provider of on-demand email marketing automation software based in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. As former High Tech B2B marketers, we've been in your shoes. Our team has a passion for helping B2B marketing professionals communicate with existing customers, and target new prospects through behavioural targeting, improved segmentation and message personalization.

OTHER RESOURCES

If you're a Business to Business marketer and are want to stay on top of the latest marketing trends, tips and best practices, then please sign up for our twice-a-month Tips 'n Tricks notes. Once or twice a month we'll send you a briefing with tips and tricks. We'll also include a link so you can op-out or update your preferences, any time.

Pinpointe Site: www.pinpointe.com

Pinpointe support Blog: www.pinpointe.com/blog

CONTACTING PINPOINTE

At present, we provide sales and support from 8am to 8pm PST, M-F. We can be reached 24x7 at:

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