



BRONTO
FOR BETTER EMAIL MARKETING

Email Marketing Best Practices

Design Tactics for Improving Deliverability

A Bronto Whitepaper - June 2007

Email marketers already know that effective email design plays an essential role in branding and has a direct correlation with high clickthrough and conversion rates. However, many marketers overlook the effect that design can have on the deliverability of the actual email message. In light of the increasing use of preview panes, filters and the default blocking of images in popular email clients such as Outlook, Gmail, AOL, Bronto has outlined design best practices that will help you successfully reach your audience.

Code Carefully

An estimated 9 out of 10 HTML emails are not W3C HTML compliant, which can cause rendering and delivery issues. If you use HTML in your messages, make sure your code is error-free and follows W3C HTML guidelines.

Avoid scripting if possible, as well. Security risks due to script vulnerabilities in email browsers have increased over the years. Most messages containing JavaScript and VBScript result in stripped messages. There are a few email systems that reject the message immediately if scripting is detected. To ensure that your email is delivered, avoid using scripts in messages. Instead, you may consider driving your readers to your web site, where dynamic components may be implemented.

- Properly closed HTML tags. Poorly formed HTML often results in email messages being rendered in surprising and undesirable ways. Most mail clients are smart enough to know that if you don't close a paragraph tag then you probably made a mistake and it will add one in for you. However, other things like table tags are pretty tricky, so the mail client might guess correctly and might not — or it might not even try to fix it. Your message could look fine or it could be changed completely. It's a lot like leaving the punctuation out of an entire paragraph — people can guess what you meant, but they might guess wrong.
- Be mindful of CSS (Cascading Style Sheets). Don't link to external style sheets. Use inline styles tied to individual HTML tags since they display more reliably. Also, don't embed CSS in the head tags since many email clients strip those tags from email. If you do use CSS, be sure to test extensively. Some web-based mail clients combine your CSS with their own, breaking down the look of their application as well as the look of your email message.
- Use an HTML validator. HTML validators make sure your message uses properly formed HTML. Professional web design packages and browser add-ons, such as HTML Tidy, often include this feature.
- Keep a balance between text and images. Filters are on the lookout for email messages with only images. If you embed your text and graphics into a single image you risk your message going straight to the intended reader's spam filter.
- Include an alternative text version of your message. Use an email marketing product that allows you to send a text version of your message along with the HTML version. In addition to being another criteria for some filters, the text version of the message ensures readability by email clients that are not receptive to HTML messages.

Design Simply

Unlike web browsers, there are many different types of email clients and the way in which they display messages can vary wildly. Hence, it is best to keep your message and HTML code as clean and simple as possible for the most reliable results. Here are some more specific guidelines:

- Design your emails with formatting in mind. Using multiple columns or nested tables can be very unstable — in fact two columns can turn into a straight vertical line in some email clients. In most cases, it isn't worth risking deliverability due to excessive table tags. Tables also typically add a significant amount of extra bulk and extraneous HTML to your message.
- Avoid Flash. Embedded Flash does not work consistently in most email clients other than Mac Mail. Relevant, concise copy, a compelling call to action, and clean simple design will create more reliable and consistent impact than a risky "flash in the pan" mailing. If you do want to include Flash or other audio/video elements, it is most effective to include them on the adjoining landing page rather than embedding in the email message for best results.
- Use absolute links versus relative ones. Relative links open up the risk of all links and images being broken in the email because the mail client won't know where to go to get them. It's like giving the mailman your house number and street but no city or state. If you code a link to go to <http://bronto.com/stats/>, it has all the info that it needs to get to where you want it to go. However, if you just code the link as [/stats/](#), then it's not complete.
- Don't link to images used elsewhere on your website. Your web designer may replace, re name, or delete these images and inadvertently cause your images not to be displayed your email. By hosting your images with your ESP (or at the very least, separate from your other website images), you will avoid problems with broken links showing up in your email and probably speed up the display of these images in your email.

Grab Your Audience While You Can

Your email has a great deal of competition in the crowded inbox. Put your company name in the "from" line for quick recognition. Add an engaging subject line. Use the most valuable real estate, the top of your email preview pane, to be "disabled images" friendly. Incorporate teaser text instead of images to enable your customers to get an immediate preview of the email offerings, even if they are unable to see any associated images. Last, but certainly not least, display the important content – the offer, call to action – at the top for immediate viewing. You have a very short period of time between open and delete, use it well.

- Write Effective Subject Lines. Subject lines are one of the most important components of an email. The content of a subject line is the key variable for a recipient to proceed with opening an email, deleting it immediately, ignoring it, or reporting it as spam. The subject line content is also a major component in the algorithm of many ISP and recipient-level spam filters. A poorly written subject lead may lead to a customer not opening your message, or it may never reach the recipient's inbox.

Keep in mind the following when creating a subject line: inform, intrigue, invoke action, and uplift brand.

- Utilize your real estate well. Are you wasting the most valuable real estate in your message? Give an incentive to the recipient to scroll further within the newsletter or email, or possibly even click the web version. A good example is “Scroll down to read why our content is the best”.

Test, Re-Test and Test Again

If you don't have a distribution list for testing, stop what you are doing and immediately set up one for your email marketing. Never rely solely on your internal email client and standard browsers for testing. You should conduct tests for the major ISPs (Outlook, AOL, Gmail, Yahoo, Hotmail, etc.) as well as other email providers that make up a large portion of your email lists. Also test the readability of messages in different browsers (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari) to verify that your text and images translate successfully in each. Make a checklist for yourself of critical items such as the following that you will test across multiple ISPs and browsers:

- Cascading Style Sheets are not altered or mangled
- HTML images are not blocked or there is a proper placeholder for the image if it doesn't appear
- Images are hosted with your ESP and not linked from elsewhere on your website
- An alternative 'text version of this email' label is displayed
- If the email client strips out your text and changes the background color, you can still read your message
- If used, columns and tables are unaltered
- URL links function properly

Hopefully this brief introduction to email design will get you well on your way to higher deliverability. For further information, check us out at www.bronto.com.

About Bronto

Bronto Software is a leading email marketing software company, providing successful email solutions to more than 700 online retailers, interactive agencies, and marketing departments across the world. Bronto is a mature and powerful email marketing platform with advanced segmentation tools, extensive reporting designed by marketers for marketers, the latest in deliverability technologies, and a robust API that lays the groundwork for seamless integrations. Most importantly, we have a responsive and insightful client services team dedicated to helping our customers become better marketers.

