Best Practice: Web Development

Perfecting Readability for Email Campaigns

Designing an email campaign that it is universally readable is, to say the least, a challenge. With so many different providers (Yahoo, Hotmail, Gmail, et. al.) and different ways of viewing (Outlook, Web browser, Mac Mail), designing the perfect template requires careful planning.

Here are some tips that, if applied correctly, will make your email campaign readable for most of your subscribers.

1. When it comes to coding, do it yourself
WYSYWYG (What You See is What You Get - pronounced "whizzy wig") editors like Dreamweaver and word processors are less than stellar for developing HTML based emails. They add extra code that can jumble certain elements of your email when displayed. It's best to code the HTML by hand using a text editor like Notepad - just be sure to close all of your tags. Avoid nested tables, if possible.

2. Think about what your readers will see
Here's a worst-case scenario - a viewer who is using the Outlook preview pane to view all of their emails, with a screen resolution of 800 x 600. For such a user to be able to read everything in your email, your template should not exceed 400 pixels in width. If your template has a lot of graphics and text, working within such confines is almost impossible. Try to include something at the top of your design that will compel pixel-challenged readers to view the email in its entirety.

3. If they can't see it all, make them want to see it all
Most email readers now have a preview pane where readers review most of their emails. So, you need to plan your design for the vertical preview pane. When designing your header, make sure that your company logo is on the left-hand side. Also, you may want to move administrative text like unsubscribe links to the footer. This will help ensure that the stunning header you designed will stand out and prompt your readers to open your email.

4. Make your email easy to read
Now that you've drawn your readers in with captivating design, make sure they can read the content easily. Try to always use a universal font that can be found on the majority of operating systems.

We prefer Verdana, but Arial and Times New Roman are the old stand-bys. As for size, 10 or 12 point is best for body text. Using the <h1> tag as the main header at the top (if you have one), with <h2> or <h3> tags for sub-headings throughout the rest of the body will provide visual cues for readers scanning for relevant information. Smart use of color - a light shade for the background, darker shades for headings - is always a good idea too.

5. Time for a test run
Once you've completed your design, view your email in as many different email programs and from as many different providers as possible. Start with Outlook and view it in the horizontal and vertical preview panes. Set up accounts on the most common Internet-based email tools like Gmail, Hotmail and Yahoo. Review your newsletter in those environments as well. Recruit your friends or co-workers and ask them to review. If you do not have an Apple computer in your office, find a friend with iMail and have them check out the email in a Mac environment.Tweak your code as needed. If everything looks perfect, congratulations - your induction into the Email Hall of Fame is pending.

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