Creative Guidelines for Email

SUMMARY

Following these guidelines will help create better looking emails that have a much better chance of appearing correctly. While there may be other things, these are the most common problems.

- Creative Size
- Creating HTML
- CTA
- CSS
- Background and Images
- Divs

- Margins, Borders and Floating objects
- Font Styles
- Linking in Dreamweaver
- Special Characters and Acceptable Code
- Videos
- Helpful Strings of Code to fix common issues

CREATIVE SIZE

- **Sticking to a maximum of 600 pixels wide** ensure your design should still be readable when scaled down for each mobile device. This width also gives good results in desktop and web-based preview panes. Even though monitors are getting wider, most email clients have panes surrounding the email, reducing the viewable area, and you never want anyone to have to horizontally scroll to view an email.

- A single image should **never be larger than 1728 pixels tall**, as distortion will occur in Outlook.

- **Be aware of automatic text resizing:** In what is almost always a good feature, email clients using webkit (such as the iPhone, Pre and Android) can automatically adjust font sizes to increase readability. If testing shows this feature is doing more harm than good to your design, you can always disable it with the following CSS rule: -webkit-text-size-adjust: none;

- **Always include the dimensions of your image:** If you forget to set the dimensions for each image, a number of clients will invent their own sizes when images are blocked and break your layout. Also, ensure that any images are correctly sized before adding them to your email. Some email clients will ignore the dimensions specified in code and rely on the true dimensions of your image.

CREATING HTML

• **USE HTML editing software:** If you are not coding the HTML from scratch by using a text editor, it is best to use a standard HTML editor such as Adobe Dreamweaver or Microsoft Expression Web. These will generally create relatively clean code that is mostly compatible, even when using the graphical editing tools that they offer.

• **Avoid using Adobe Photoshop, InDesign and Microsoft Word:** these programs are not meant for creating HTML at all, and oftentimes create problems.

• **CAN use Adobe Fireworks:** If your designers do not know HTML and feel that they need to use a program like these. Fireworks IS intended to be an HTML creation tool that uses the same slicing features found in Photoshop and InDesign to create the most compatible code, as long as under "HTML Setup", the table output is set to "Nested Table". When slicing try to avoid at all costs making uneven rows and columns.

• **Avoid Rowspans and colspans:** Many mail clients DO NOT accept rowspans and colspans. So they often will make creatives show up incorrectly.

DESIGN AND CALL TO ACTION

• **Make the call to action short and clear.** A call to action should be short and sweet. Now isn`t the time to break out your mad poetry skills; just include the basics. An effective call to action is between two to five words.

• **Use urgent language.** After reading the email, what do you want the recipient to do? Make a purchase? Test a product? Download an e-book? Whatever the desired action, create a sense of urgency around it. For example, if you want your recipient to make a purchase, "Shop Now" is an effective call to action. If you want your customer to download something, "Download Your E-book Today" works. Both options are short and have a sense of urgency.

• **Go "above the fold".** In an email, the content that appears without needing to scroll down is onsidered "above the fold." the placement of your call to action is important. Your recipient may not read the entire email, so you want to include a call to action "above the fold" to capture as many clicks as possible.

• **Make it standout.** Design the email so the call to action is not hidden in the body, make it stand out.

CSS

• **CSS does not work well for coding Emails- its is better for Web Design**. Some major email clients (like Gmail) will actually strip CSS from the email when it hits the inbox, so any hard work you put into the styles for that email will have been for vein.

• **Inline Stylesheet**s are much more compatible and offer better results across email clients. Example: <td style="font-size; 17px; color:#000001">

• When using colors in a style, the full 6 digit hex code must be used, as three digit short codes do not always show the correct color across platforms, and are even ignored on some platforms. (Example: use #ff0099 instead of #f09)

• To keep text styles, the style definition needs to be placed in each cell containing text, otherwise clients like Outlook will not register the styles (see slide 9: Font Styles).

• **A handy tool to use to quickly convert CSS** to inline style sheets can be found at http://premailer.dialect.ca/, but be sure to check over your code afterwards as the tool can create odd HTML errors.

BACKGROUND IMAGES

• Background images are not a good idea, because **Outlook 2007-2013 will not show them**. Colors are fine, and I would suggest using them in place of images when possible.

• Also, if you can set up the HTML to have the images as foreground images instead, do that. Keep in mind that you want to have as much text as possible in the creative though, as **having a lot of images relative to text can trigger spam filters.**

• **Never use very large images** / graphics AND keep the amount of links proportional to the amount of text to avoid spam filters. Too many images and little content is usually filtered as spam when sending bulk email.

DIVS

• **Div tags are a standard for website coding, but do not work well in emails**. Just using them simply as dividers of content with no positioning information is fine, but adding any type of margins, positions or other such attributes to change the location, size and appearance of a Div is not a good idea.

• Clients like Outlook will ignore these, **causing a well-designed creative to come up as a single column of information.** Tables are the best alternative to use here, but do not to use colspans and rowspans.

• Instead use nested Tables- just put more tables inside of the current table if you need to split up cells. The code looks ugly, but it works.

MARGINS, BORDERS AND FLOATING OBJECTS

• Avoid floating objects, as several mail clients ignore the float style altogether. Instead, use align="" to create the same effect.

• Margins and borders are not very consistent across email platforms.

• Where possible, use container tables to create borders by setting the background color of the container to be the desired border color, and giving this container a cellpadding of the desired border width. Margins can be replicated using the same method, or by adding columns or rows where there should be a margin.

**Note: this does not work for everything, but will work fine with images.

SPECIAL CHARACTERS AND ACCEPTABLE CODE

• **Use:** The only types of languages that will work universally in all email clients are HTML and Inline Style Sheets.

• **Don't Use:** All other types of markup or programming languages will not necessarily work and should never be used. This includes Javascript, PHP, XML, ASP and other common web languages. Some standard HTML tags will not work either, such as iFrames, Embeds and Forms. Tags introduced in HTML5 should be avoided as well.

• All special characters must be hardcoded in the email. For example, © needs to be input as ©. Note that many HTML programs will leave special characters as they are if copied from another program, so things like apostrophes copied from Word will also need to be coded.

FONT AND COLOR

• Setting the font and everything in the body tag certainly saves time, but in emails the body font will not always carry over to the rest of the email. Some email clients will ignore the body font when going into a table.

• To be sure your font appears correctly throughout the email, set each TD tag to the style you would like it to be. Even setting a table to a certain font will not carry over into the individual cells, so make sure that each cell is defined properly.

• In addition, try to use generic web-safe fonts, so that your email will appear correctly for everyone who sees it. Also make sure to use backup fonts to account for users on different operating systems.

• Keep your color scheme for graphics and text to 2-4 colors. This color scheme tool will help you get the idea. We recommend a heavy contrast of dark text to light background to be sure your text is clearly readable.

• Colored Text over a very dark background is not recommended. If you do choose a dark background, white text is best.

LINKING IN DREAMWEAVER

• Adobe Dreamweaver is definitely the standard for HTML editing, and is a very good tool, but even it makes mistakes.

• One common issue is when a link is inserted using any of the graphical tools in Dreamweaver, **it may convert the & symbol to its html equivalent of &amp**; If this occurs, your link may not work properly anymore, so if you ever insert a link using the & symbol, you should do so in code view, or using a plain text editor.

• We would **highly recommend opening the HTML file in any browser and viewing the source of the page** to ensure the links are inserted correctly. If you are using an HTML editor that makes these changes when saving the file, you will need to go back into the HTML using a plain text editor to ensure that the link is correct.

VIDEO IN EMAIL

With no support for JavaScript or the object tag, video in email has long been limited to animated gifs. Turns out HTML5 video does work in many email clients right now, including Apple Mail, Entourage 2008, MobileMe and the iPhone. The real benefit of this approach is that if the video isn't supported, you can provide reliable fallback content such as an animated GIF or a clickable image linking to the video in the browser.

• Of course, the question of whether you should add video to email is another issue altogether. If you lean toward the "yes" side check out the technique with code samples.

• Avoid video. Video only works in Apple Mail. A very small percentage of email clients allow videos to be used, no matter how they are coded into the creative.

•   If you absolutely must have moving images, the only reliable solution is to use an animated GIF, but even those do not work in some clients (like Outlook).

•   The best option is to just link to a video using an image of a still from the video, as this will work 100% of the time.

HELPFUL STRINGS OF CODE

 In addition, below are some common strings of code we often place into emails to fix common problems.

•   If line height of text appears too large in Hotmail:This one actually should be done as CSS, within a style tag in the header of the HTML.

.   **ExternalClass * {line-height: 100% !important;}**

• If text is appearing too large when viewed on an iOS device, this body tag should replace the existing one

   <body style="-webkit-text-size-adjust: 100%;">

• If the layout of your creative is handled largely by images in a table, this attribute should be applied to each image tag to prevent breaking. Fireworks inserts this code as CSS automatically when exporting, but clients like Gmail will not accept the CSS, so it needs to be applied to individual image.

   style="display:block"

SPAM TRIGGERS

• The subject lines with the highest open rates are descriptive yet simple, no more than 50 characters.

• Avoid words like "free", "last chance" and "offer." Chances are your message is going straight to junk folder.

• Repetition is instrumental to any successful marketing campaign. Engaging users over time builds brand awareness and loyalty. You'll never see a TV commercial run just once, the same rules apply to email.

• Check out this list of Spam Triggers: http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/30684/The-Ultimate-List-of-Email-SPAM-Trigger-Words.aspx

Use a spam score checker tool to see if the content of your email blast is considered 'spammy'.

http://www.contactology.com/

https://spamscorechecker.com/

http://www.lyris.com

TIMING

• **Know your audience.** Your creative should be relevant and be timed just right. If you're targeting moms, mailing during busy morning hours, is not ideal.

• **Repetition** is instrumental to any successful marketing campaign. Engaging users over time builds brand awareness and loyalty. You'll never see a TV commercial run just once, the same rules apply to email.

• **A/B Test:** It's important to keep testing your emails, and learning what is and is not working.

TELL DON'T SELL BEST PRACTICES MATTER

It may seem like the art of crafting a subject line is complex and intimidating, but it's actually pretty straightforward. Subject lines should, simply put, describe the subject of your email. Yes, really—that's it!

The best Subject lines are short, descriptive and provide the reader with a reason to explore an email message further.

How to Tell Not Sell
Splashy or cheesy phrases in subject lines more often then not cause the email to be ignored rather than make it stand out. It should always be straightforward - but that does not mean you cannot be a little creative - the key is balance.

Tip: Turn your subject line into a question if possible/relevant. This can often lead to higher open rates.

Examples:

Lose Weight While You Sleep

Want to Trade in Your Car for Something New?

Why Arnold Palmer Uses Quaker State Motor Oil

Uh-Oh, Your Prescription is Expiring

Tiger Woods Can Afford Any Car; He Drives a Buick

More Alaskan's Drive on Michelins...

Federal Home Loan Program Announced

To the Road Warrior Who Hates to Travel

Confidential to Corvette Owners

Banking Secrets That Banks Don't Want You to Know

Invitation to Miami Fourth of July Sale Event

Wanted: People to Write Greeting Cards

Living Well for Less is the Best Revenge

Unique Gifts for Dads and Grads

Huge Savings on Holiday Overstock

Stop Needless Hair Loss

Personalization

DO use location information (Eg. City name).

Do NOT use First Name unless it is a highly targeted list as this can negatively affect Open Rates.

Punctuation & Words

Do NOT use ALL CAPS.
Do NOT use exclamation marks!!!!

Do NOT use words: Free, Help, Percent Off, and Reminder. These affect Delivery.

TOP TIPS

Love Your Recipients

DO reflect what is in the actual email.

DO include a Call to Action when relevant to give your recipients an idea of what your expectations are.

To the Point

DO limit Subject Lines to 50 characters or less (including space).

Do NOT repeat the same Subject Line format .... repeatedly.

HOW CONTENT FILTERING ACTUALLY WORKS

It's an old wives' tale that certain practices will get you immediately marked as spam. Spam filters can be triggered for a variety of reasons, but specific words alone rarely are the culprit.

- Using all caps
- The ultimate four-letter word: free
- Exclamation points

How content filtering actually works

Spam filters assign points to "spam" words in the subject line and body of an email. If the points exceed a certain threshold, then the email is considered spam. However, using any one (or two or three) of these words won't automatically mean a trip to the junk folder. While content filtering plays a part in spam scores, your sender reputation and engagement metrics are much more important.

SO WHAT WORKS?

When it comes to Email Marketing, the best subject lines TELL what's inside, and the worst SELL what's inside.
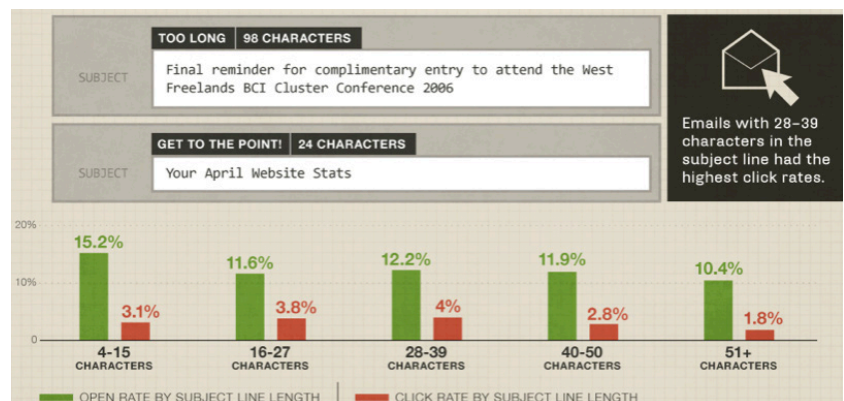
1. **Leverage Localization:**
Collecting geolocation can improve open rates by being personal and relevant.

2. **Ask Questions:** Subject lines framed as questions perform better. Consider your audience's needs, interests, or the types of questions your content might answer.

3. **Keep it short and Sweet:** Try to say it all in 50 characters or less. Emails with 28-38 Characters in the subject line tend to have the highest Click Rates.