
E-mail Blasts

production standards

& guidelines

**a brief guide on how to create
a successful e-mail blast**

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v. 1.3

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1. Introduction

This document addresses html coding standards and content specifications for e-mail blasts (also called optins, or e-shots) for both html and .txt formats. Particularly for html, it's a moving target – changing as browsers/e-mail clients/markup standards evolve.

Some customers will design and markup the content not using key best practices.

- Help your vendor be successful online
- A lot of times vendors are new to advertising and marketing online—and they your expertise to understand why something is more effective.
- Give specific feedback re why the blast will be more effective if you apply specific changes.

Questions/Suggestions?

Please ask your Media Coordinator.

2. Summary recommendations

a. TECHNICAL:

- Inboxes will accept e-mail up to 100k (our standard is 50k)
- E-mail creative should be no wider than 700 pixels (our standard is 600px)

Do:

- Use inline styles.
→ Tip/Exception: a style sheet which would usually appear in the <head> tag will usually deploy correctly if you paste it just below the <body> tag.
- Use lower case html 4.0 markup
 - For special characters such as ® ™ & etc., use html entities or ASCII markup
- Try to mark up the page so that a user increase or decrease the font size, design, branding, content still appear coherent
 - The most effective blasts always do this
 - It's not always possible as our customers want to use their own designs and/or markup

Do not use:

- JavaScript -- most e-mail clients will not interpret it
- Forms -- most e-mail clients will not interpret
- Rowspans – most e-mail clients will not interpret as expected
- <style> tags – inline styles only
- Image maps
- Moving images
 - Animated gifs work in some browsers but not all. If you do use them, design so information is delivered with or without the animation.
- Flash – outlook interprets correctly; other e-mail clients do not.
- Anchor links (e.g., “top” “bottom” etc.)
 - These do not render in all e-mail clients; e.g. Lotus Notes never renders them; gMail & Yahoo! have problems as well

Avoid:

- Colspans –
Lotus notes, AOL will not interpret correctly.
→ Recommend using nested/stacked tables instead.
Most e-mail clients will interpret as expected.
- Animated gifs
 - Do not deploy as expected in some e-mail clients.
 - May be too distracting from your main message

b. Design/Usability:

Keep the message readable, usable, so targeted audience will click.

- a. Featured creative should appear in MS Outlook's preview pane area, i.e., approx. the top 300 pixels of the blast.
- b. Featured content should appear 'above the fold' when using a web-based e-mail client like Gmail and Yahoo!, i.e., approx. 420 pixels in height.
- c. When designing, note that gmail populates automatically generated competitor ads to the right of the e-mail interface. Design so this will not overwhelm your primary message.
- d. If there are ads in your blast, run them down the left side of the email, with textual content to the right. Tests have shown that in left-to-right languages, this layout results in maximal number of clicks.
- e. **Put important content in html text—not images.**
 - o Images are by default turned off by some e-mail clients, some users.
 - o Ideally, the e-mail will convey your message elegantly and effectively with images on or off.
- f. **Call to Action should have visual importance and be in a prominent location** – follow the natural flow of the eye as it reads a page
- g. **The e-mail should be designed so a user with a mid-size computer screen does not need to scroll down to view all key information.** Users will often not scroll down the screen, so containing all the information in a smaller space is preferable. Clearly define at least one link towards the top of the e-mail for users who don't scroll.
- h. **Our standard width is 600px wide, and length would be 400-500px before user has to scroll.**
- i. **Design for Images to be turned off.**

Images will not show up right away in most readers as a security issue, so the content should be readable without viewing any images. Here's what an all image e-mail might look like with the images turned off



What I saw by default



What I saw when I enabled images

Some tips to minimize this problem:

- Never use only images for important content like headlines, links and any calls to action.
- Add a text-based link to a web version of your design at the top of your email.
- Get added to your recipient's address book (see guideline 3 below).
- Use the alt attribute for all images for a better experience in G-mail
- Always add the height and width values to the image to ensure that the blank placeholder image doesn't throw your design out.
- Do not use image maps.
- Test your design with images turned off before you send it.

j. Define your layout as strictly as possible

- Lock in the height and width of <td> tags.
- Never rely on default alignment.
- Define text styles for **every** link and <td>. Do not assume that styles will cascade.
- <p> tags will render differently in every client, use
 or <div> tags when possible.
- Try to stay away from layouts that use a lot of spacer gifs

k. Validate your code against html transitional standards

- This is a best practice for any html project

l. Use entity names for special characters

- Copyright (©), registered trademark, exclamation, asterisk, etc. Most e-mail readers will block images until the user chooses to view them. Keep this in mind and use text rather than images wherever possible. Never send out an e-mail that is only images.

m. Make sure that there are well defined links in text format in addition to any image links.

When in doubt, underline the links in the e-mail, especially in blocks of text. Users expect things to be more defined in e-mail than on the web.

n. Link images whenever possible as users will often click images. Always use alt attribute for images to encourage users to view the images as well.

- o. **Use tables to lay out the document.** XHTML does not render well in many readers. Clearly define image and cell sizes to ensure that the e-mail will look how you intended it to for the largest amount of users.
- p. **The maximum width of the e-mail should be either set as a percentage or as 600 pixels or less.** If the e-mail is too wide, viewers will have to scroll horizontally which is not user-friendly. In addition, important information may be hidden if not all of the e-mail is clearly visible.
- q. **The HTML file should be 50k or less in size.** No image contained in the HTML should be greater than 25k in file size. This ensures that the e-mail will load quickly for users on a slower connection as well as on a fast one.
- r. **Colors used in the HTML should complement—not compete with—color in images.** Glaring colors can detract from the overall look of the e-mail and be distracting to the viewer.
- s. **The HTML file should be carefully checked to ensure that it renders without a problem.**
 - o Very simple, clean html will help the opt-in to render well in as many different e-mail servers as possible. With web-based e-mail readers, this is increasingly important.
 - o G-mail and Live Mail support inline styles only, any <style> tags will be removed.
 - o Test the file in as many e-mail readers as possible before sending the test to the customer.
- t. **CONTENT:**
 - o Keep it simple.
 - o Make every word count.
 - o Avoid spam.
 - o Subject line is your first interface with the recipient of this targeted email.
 - Special characters: avoid as most will not be interpreted correctly
 - o Include an Opt-Out in every e-mail.

3. Markup

a. HTML e-mails

Most emails will be html format.

- Do not use doctype, <head>, <title>, <style>
- Always use inline styles
- Define attributes for each element specifically; cascade and inheritance rules may or may not be interpreted as expected. Do not rely on it for your communication.
 - include height and width for each <td>
- Background tags
 - aol, netscape, Outlook 2007 strip background tags
 - if you design an optin with background images, be sure it works with or without background images
- background colors
 - define the body to have background color of white; most e-mail clients have default background color of white, but some, such as webtv, use grey or black.

→ Not defining the body color may result in black text on black ground.

○ Filenaming Conventions

- In final produced optin, references are absolute, not relative for all assets and hyperlinks
- e.g.,

DO: <http://www.website.com/folder/images/filename.gif>

DO NOT: ../.. /images/filename.gif

- If possible, use functional naming scheme
 - E.g., bul1.gif, more_info.gif, etc.
 - Do not use spam triggers for filenames

b. TEXT e-mails

Some vendors prefer to send email blasts in text format in addition to html. Reasons for doing this include:

- UNIX operating systems e.g., pine, elm email software
- Vision impaired users prefer text based email
- Virtually any email client may be configured to reject html—not many people do this but special sets of users, e.g., vision impaired, may prefer this.

Rules for producing a successful text format email blast:

- Content
 - Same as HTML e-mails
 - Include opt out
 - Include redirect

- Design and Usability
 - Graphical elements are not possible
 - Use space, lines, dashes, asterisks, capital letters to differentiate between information sets
 - Use line break to break up an area within a section
 - Put important content at the top of message

- Hyperlinks
 - Enter as absolute paths, e.g.: <http://www.google.com>
 - No <a href is required; hyperlinks will be translated by the email program

- URLs
 - Long URLs often break in text emails. Try to keep URL length moderate. This is not an issue if they are redirects using CompareNetworks tools.

- Width & Length
 - Do not exceed 72 characters in width
 - As with HTML, keep the length to either no scrolling—or just a little scrolling.

- Hard Returns
 - Always put hard returns after each line text copy. Not doing so will cause some systems to interpret a line to be longer than you intended.

- Software
 - Use Editpad pro or similar text editor (notepad, wordpad)
 - additional characters will not be inserted – just the type you enter.
 - When pasting ms word content—paste into editpad pro tool; with default setup, MS Word will replace apostrophes and double quotes with special characters not supported by many e-mail clients.

- Special Characters
 - Do not use escaped ASCII characters—they will translate as text
 - When you need to refer to a special character:
 - copyright © symbol, use a lower case letter ‘c’ enclosed in parentheses (c)
 - registered trademark ®, use (r)
 - trademark ™, use (tm)

4. Target Browsers & E-mail Clients

CompareNetworks projects are required to work in the following e-mail clients and browsers. This will change:

- E-mail Clients:
 1. Outlook 2007 on the PC – this is commonly used. You may well find that projects that deploy well in every other browser do not do so in Outlook 2007; it is problematic as it is using an MS Word engine.
 2. Hotmail, Yahoo!, gMail under i.e. 6.x on the PC
 3. Entourage on the Macintosh
(this is microsoft's e-mail client for the macintosh)
 4. We are not testing for Lotus Notes
→ blasts set up with colspans or rowspans will not deploy as expected in Lotus notes.

- Target Browsers:
 - PC:
 - Opera (latest)
 - Firefox (latest)
 - Internet explorer (v. 6.x is a must)
 - Internet explorer (v.7.x)
 - Internet explorer (v. 8 – soon-- when it launches)
 - Safari (latest)

 - Macintosh
 - Safari (latest)
 - Firefox

5. Spam

E-mails can be blocked as spam for various reasons, the most common being spam triggers.

In addition to spam triggers, a large percentage of html/image bytes to text bytes can be a factor. HTML that is not well formed can cause an e-mail to be blocked as well. Avoid using too many images to ensure the e-mail is not blocked.

Choice and order of words in the subject line can affect spam factor of a given email. A high spam factor word modified by a less or non-spam factor word gains a lower spam factor.

e.g.: *Implants Orthodontists Favor* is more spammy than *Orthodontist Preferred Implants*

While this is not a complete list, the following words and punctuation should be avoided whenever possible as they trigger spam blockers:

!	Contest	Open Now!
!!	Drastically reduced	Order
!!!	Drawing	Promotion
%, \$, money	Free	Save
100%	FREE	Sign up today
1-800	Grand prize	Special offer
1-866	Great offer	Special promotion
1-877	Guarantee	Survey
1-888	Guaranteed	Sweepstakes
Alert	Increase your	Top # (e.g. top 5 reasons)
Apply online, Apply now	Limited time offer	Trial offer
Afford	Limited time only	Unlimited
Click below	New	Win
Click here	Offer	While supplies last
Click this link	Offer expires	Open Now!

More about e-mail spam:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-mail_spam

6. E-mail QA Checklist

Test the e-mail blast against the following list before giving the media coordinator an ok to deploy:

1. MARKUP
 - a. Well formed html
 - b. Colspans/rowspans – avoid colspans; do not use rowspans
 - c. Alt attributes – correct?
 - d. Used ascii for special characters

2. BROWSERS
 - PC: i.e. 6.x, i.e.7, Opera 9.23, Safari (latest)
 - Mac: Safari (latest)

→ on the horizon: Internet Explorer 8.x

3. E-MAIL CLIENTS
 - PC:
 - Outlook 2007
 - Yahoo!, hotmail, gMail under i.e.6.x

→ on the horizon: Internet Explorer 8.x
 - Mac: Entourage

4. LINKS
 - a. Work
 - b. Target correct pages
 - c. Open new browser window
 - d. Title attributes? If employed are they correct? Or too much language?

5. USABILITY

With images turned off

 - a. Are message, design, content/call to action still effective?
 - b. Colorblind users can see also? (wide guideline—not specifically tested)
 - c. Useful alt attributes?

6. SPELLING/LANGUAGE
 - a. Doublecheck any proper nouns and scientific terminologies
 - b. Grammar – correct and pithy

7. LAYOUT/BRANDING

7. Media Coordinators and Sales

What to tell your vendors...

when they ask what you would like for the artwork and content of the blast:

- If the customer is doing the design themselves, ask for
 - A layered PSD
 - this is a Photoshop file with all the art and text in layers
 - text is editable
 - graphics are on separate layers so they are easily modified/resized

- If the customer does not have a layered PSD, ask for
 - Original art
 - Common formats include Adobe Illustrator, or a raster format such as .tif, .jpg, .bmp, .gif .psd, .pdf – or something

- Let your customer know that the end product will be in html, with some graphics
 - CompareNetworks graphic designer will use the materials your customer sends to create an html e-mail per all the format rules above.

 - Non-layered PSD art sources require extra work:
 - Slicing and optimizing images

8. Resources & Tools:

- ASCII
 - <http://www.hypergurl.com/asciisymbols.html>
 - http://www.w3schools.com/tags/ref_entities.asp
 - <http://www.utexas.edu/learn/html/spchar.html>

- Browser preview tools:
 - <http://ipinfo.info/netrenderer/>
(i.e. 5.5, 6.x, 7. 8 beta and combinations)
 - <http://browsershots.org/>
(lots of options and configurations)

- Browser Usage Statistics

This is imprecise but gives you some idea; interpret according to your target user group:

 - http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_stats.asp
 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usage_share_of_web_browsers#TheCounter.com
<http://news.zdnet.co.uk/software/0,1000000121,39247539,00.htm>

- Coding
 - <http://www.zeldman.com/2007/06/08/e-mail-is-not-a-platform-for-design/>

- Color blind testing:
 - Check against 3 major types
<http://colorfilter.wickline.org/>
 - all colorblind resources
<http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/accessibility/color.html#clink>

- HTML Editors
 - HTML editors that do not insert proprietary tags are good; these include Dreamweaver, Homesite, Editpad Pro
 - MS Word should be avoided as multitudes of proprietary tags are inserted in to the resulting html

- HTML Validators
 - Dreamweaver has a great built-in validator
 - If you use one of the following, add doctype declaration (html 4.01 transitional) body and head tags:
 - <http://htmlhelp.com/tools/validator/>
 - <http://validator.w3.org/> -- but requires a doctype declaration, so not useful for e-mail blasts

- Special Characters – HTML Entities
cross-platform © ® &
<http://www.utexas.edu/learn/html/spchar.html>

- Subject Line
http://www.emailabs.com/email_marketing_articles/writing_email_subject_lines.html

- Text Editor
<http://www.editpadpro.com/>
clean way to edit .txt files—avoids any formatting or hidden characters

- Online E-Mail Marketing & Advertising
 - <http://www.cheetahmail.com/corp/>
cheetahmail tracks latest best practices and techniques

 - <http://www.clickz.com/>
ClickZ for latest online marketing and advertising news, with latest metrics strategies, branding

 - <http://www.emailabs.com>
All sorts of information about e-mail; good to check from time to time for standards/protocol updates, trends.

- Power up your Snippet Text:
http://www.emailabs.com/email_marketing_articles/email-snippet-text.html

- Sample E-Mail Blasts
 - <http://www.dentalcompare.com/optin/147.html>
 - <http://www.dentalcompare.com/optin/160.html>
 - <http://www.medcompare.com/optin/87.html>
 - <http://www.medcompare.com/optin/63.html>
 - <http://www.medcompare.com/optin/86.html>
 - http://www.biocompare.com/optin/20080221_2116.html

 - Most recent blasts for Biocompare:
<http://www.biocompare.com/ArticleArchives.aspx?aa=18>