

# Email Labs

High Performance Email Marketing





# The Complete Guide for Creating HTML Emails: Technical and Design Best Practices

Email marketing is one of the most powerful and effective forms of marketing today. It is quick to deploy, offers immediate highly-measurable results, enables advanced segmentation and personalization and delivers a high return on investment.

However, achieving maximum results from your HTML emails requires experience and expertise. Simple mistakes in the implementation of HTML emails can seriously affect delivery or usability and cripple your ROI. To help marketers optimize results from their email marketing efforts, EmailLabs has created a complete guide to HTML email. These technical and design best practices have been compiled from articles we've written over the years, and we hope that providing them in a consolidated guide will give marketers the ability to improve their own marketing campaigns.

Additional resource articles and tips can be found online at the EmailLabs Email Marketing Resource Center at <http://www.emaillabs.com/resources/> and in our award-winning newsletter, the Intevation Report, at [http://www.emaillabs.com/resources\\_enewsletter\\_subscribe.html](http://www.emaillabs.com/resources_enewsletter_subscribe.html).

## HTML Coding

HTML coding for emails is much trickier than for Web sites. With Web sites, most designers/programmers code for the most popular and most used versions of browsers, such as Internet Explorer 6 and 5, Firefox and Mozilla. Email, on the other hand, uses dozen of clients. In the office/work environment, Outlook (all versions) commands about 75% market share, with Lotus Notes roughly between 5% and 10%. With consumers, AOL, Yahoo and Hotmail/MSN comprise about two-thirds of most email lists.

Good HTML creates branded, usable and attractive email messages that have better conversion rates than plain text emails. But when HTML goes bad, your messages will be unreadable, not function correctly and can trigger email blocks or filters.

With this in mind, following are a few general HTML coding tips for emails:

- Code HTML emails as a single Web page with the basic <HTML>, <HEAD>, <TITLE>, and <BODY> tags
- Make sure all tags have supporting closing tags. The most common HTML errors come from not having a closing </FONT> tag or having open <TD> or <TR> tags in the HTML. While your HTML might render properly in a browser, these errors can cause problems with many email clients
- Test your HTML code. Make sure your code conforms to [W3C standards](#)
- Code emails by hand where possible, as WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editors typically add extra code that causes havoc with certain email clients. If you must use an editor, use Dreamweaver or Homesite, which do not add extra code to the design process
- Use only the ASCII character set. More advanced word-processing software often inserts odd characters, such as the trailing dot character or smart quotes (curly instead of straight), which can hamper display or create delivery problems in some email software
- HTML email code should be self-contained

- If you use CSS, include the <STYLE> element in your HTML file between the <BODY> tags. Do not link to an external style sheet, as this code is often stripped out by email clients, creating display problems
- Avoid using CSS for positioning. The support is very limited and will, more than likely, result in a broken layout for most of your recipients
- Use HTML tables for the design layout
- Keep emails a fixed width of between 500-650 pixels wide
- Avoid nested tables if possible. Some email clients, especially Lotus Notes and Netscape Messenger, might not render them correctly
- Do not use JavaScript. Some email clients do not support JavaScript, and others view it as a security risk
- Do not use canvas background images. Most email clients do not display canvas background images. Background images for individual table cells are generally acceptable but might not appear in some clients such as Lotus Notes
- Do not apply attributes to the <BODY> tag. Attributes placed in the <BODY> tag are often flagged by spam filters and increase the likelihood of your message getting bulked or blocked
- Do not embed images in an email. Some ISPs will filter emails with embedded images. Also, the file size can get quite large with multiple embedded images, which also might cause the email to be blocked
- Do not use EMBED tags
- Avoid embedding forms, such as surveys, into emails. Some email clients such as Hotmail might not pass the data through to the collection point. Instead, link to a Web form that can complete the action
- Animated GIF files are acceptable, but use them sparingly
- Use of images maps is acceptable
- When sending a multipart mime message, remember to create the text version. Most email clients send HTML as a multi-part alternative by default. Not including the text part of the message can cause some filters to treat your email as spam

## Validate HTML Content and Avoid Using Scripts

An estimated nine out of 10 HTML emails do not comply with W3C HTML standards. This can cause rendering and delivery issues, particularly at AOL, MSN and Hotmail. AOL, for example, has a filter that is an HTML validator, which scans incoming messages for HTML syntax and formatting errors. If it detects invalid HTML, it will reject the message. One of the dirtiest tricks in a spammer's arsenal is invalid, broken, and malicious HTML code used to obfuscate his payload. If you use HTML in your messages, make sure your code is error-free and follows W3C HTML guidelines.

We always recommend that you establish procedures for proofing email campaigns, and that the proofing checklist should include HTML validation. Popular HTML-editing software such as Homesite or Macromedia Dreamweaver already offer effective validation tools and will highlight any errors as you create your message. For a complete reference spec of HTML formatting, visit the [World Wide Web consortium](#) documentation pages. Also, you can use the HTML validator in your email application or third-party validator such as The [W3C Markup Validation Service](#).

Also, avoid scripting. Security risks due to script vulnerabilities in email browsers have increased over the years. The result is most scripts, such as JavaScript and VBScript, get stripped out of messages. Some email systems reject messages outright if they detect scripting. For greatest compatibility, avoid using scripts in messages. Instead, drive your readers to your Web site, where dynamic components are easily rendered.

## Using Forms in HTML Emails

EmailLabs generally discourages the use of forms in email to prevent delivery or usability problems. However, at times you might still need to use one instead of directing readers to your Web site. Consider these factors before you use a form in your next email message:

Hotmail will not allow you to include a working form in an email. Hotmail displays the form but strips all values from your <FORM> tag and removes the name values of all form elements, rendering the form useless. Hotmail recipients can complete the form, but nothing will happen when they hit the submit button.

Some email clients do not support forms that use "POST" method. Instead you will need to replace it with the "GET" method. The "GET" method will write all form content to the query string of the page to which the form is posted.

*For example:* <form method="get" action="http://.....">

Most email clients that provide a preview pane don't allow you to tab between form elements. This means that when a recipient completes the first field in your form and clicks the TAB key, the focus is automatically shifted to another part of the software. This hinders usability and can confuse your recipient.

## Font and Font Size

In general, use only universally-supported fonts such as Arial and Times New Roman for your message. If you include fonts that are not also loaded on your recipients' machines, their email clients will substitute different fonts, which can affect your design. If you must use a special font (such as within a company logo), use it within an image. Arial is a font that was specifically designed for onscreen readability. Studies indicate that Web users prefer Arial, Verdana and Tahoma to others when viewing Web pages and email.

Fonts can be specified in pixels, points or HTML font size value. Use a point size no smaller than 10 point, size "2" or 10 pixels.

## Color

From images to fonts, colors play an important role in the design process but can also create problems. For example, don't choose a font color such as a muted gray on a gray background that makes your headlines and calls to action hard to read. Don't hide valuable information in your emails by blending the content into the background.

Men and women react differently to colors, but several [polls on color preferences](#) by gender and age yield interesting results:

- Female Top 3 Favorite Colors: Blue, Purple, Green (all cool colors)
- Female Top 3 Least Favorite Colors: Orange, Brown, Gray (warm and neutral colors)
- Male Top 3 Favorite Colors: Blue, Green, Black (2 cool and one neutral color)
- Male Top 3 Least Favorite Colors: Brown, Orange, Purple (neutral, warm, mixed colors)
- Among favorite colors, preferences for green decrease with age (all genders)
- Among favorite colors, preferences for purple increase with age (all genders)
- Among least favorite colors (all genders), dislike of orange increases with age

For more information on color, check out these resources:

<http://desktoppub.about.com/cs/color/a/symbolism.htm>

[http://desktoppub.about.com/od/howcolorworks//aa\\_colorsee.htm](http://desktoppub.about.com/od/howcolorworks//aa_colorsee.htm)

## Background Colors

Use a white or very light-colored background with a dark to medium font color to provide easy readability for your recipients. If you use background colors in sidebar boxes, for example, contain them within tables and avoid using a body background color, because Web-based clients remove the body tag and typically place its attributes within a table. This might hurt your design. Also, email clients such as Microsoft Outlook might retain the background color when replying to or forwarding the email but use their default font color (usually black), making message text difficult to read.

## Font Colors

Beware of using white as a font color. While it is tempting to use a dark background and white text to make it stand out, many spam filters key on the use of white (#FFFFFF) in a font tag as a possible spam trigger. Spammers often use a white font on a white backgrounds to hide information from recipients. Use your color wheel to find contrasting colors that can accentuate your message.

## Buttons, Charts, etc.

Buttons, charts, and other supporting images should use the colors of your design elements to pull the reader's eye to the images. Make sure the text color used on your images stands out and is readable. Most importantly, make sure the recipient understands the action. See the examples below:



## Style Sheets

Many Web designers use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to simplify the coding process and ensure a consistent style throughout a Web site. Use of CSS in HTML emails can be problematic, however, as many email clients will not render style sheets correctly.

CSS and Email Clients					
	Hotmail	Yahoo	Gmail	Outlook	AOL
<b>Linked style sheet</b>	No Stripped	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Embedded style (inline) between head tags</b>	No Stripped	No	No Stripped	Yes	Yes
<b>Embedded style (inline) between body tags</b>	No Stripped	No	No Stripped	Yes	Yes
Testing environment: Windows XP, Internet Explorer 6.0					

*When designing your email, keep in mind that popular email clients render CSS differently*

Avoid using CSS if possible, but if you must use them, choose the embedded styles also known as inline. Embed the style within the two body tags and not within the header. Some email clients will truncate or strip out the header. So, add the style within the body tags.

*For example:*

```
<body>
<style type="text/css"> <!-- td.maintext {} --> </style>
</body>
```

## Keep HTML Emails to 500-650 Pixels in Width

Most HTML emails are 500 to 650 pixels wide. Early email clients were developed before HTML and were not designed to render wide Web page-like emails. More recently, the message windows of popular Web-based email services such as Yahoo Mail, Hotmail and Gmail will typically present 500-650 pixels, although this will vary according to users' screen resolution settings.

This means that HTML messages wider than this range require the recipient to scroll horizontally to view the whole email. Forcing a user to scroll horizontally might be OK on your Web site, but you should avoid it in email. At the very least, it's irritating, and you risk losing transactions or readers if you force them to scroll to see the whole message.

## Windows Service Pack 2: Impact on Email

Microsoft's Service Pack 2 for Windows XP includes several changes in the way Outlook Express processes email. First, it enables users to display email messages as either plain text or HTML. Selecting plain text mode forces Outlook Express to display the text part of a multi-part message, rather than the HTML part that has so far been the default.

Additionally the service pack alters the way messages display external HTML content. With SP2 installed, external HTML content, such as images or links to external CSS style sheets, does not automatically download. Outlook Express now includes a modification to the user interface allowing the user to authorize the downloading of all external HTML content for a message.

These steps should help minimize the negative impact of these changes:

- Create a suitable text version of your message to accommodate users who prefer it to HTML
- Minimize or eliminate reliance on external CSS to specify message formatting. This will prevent severe disruption of message formatting and reduce the chance that your message will be mistaken for spam
- Specify the height and width of images used in HTML content. Without image dimensions manually set, a Web or email browser will "stretch" the rest of the HTML content around the image after it has completed loading. Now that image loading will not happen by default, the browser will not immediately have a reference point for correctly placing the content unless specified. Image sizes are specified in pixels and are set in the tag

*For example:* `<IMG height="20" src="http://website.com/yourimage.gif" width="50">`

The changes to email will apply only to Microsoft's Outlook Express, not Outlook, which means that the greatest impact from these changes will be to consumer rather than business communications. For more detail on Microsoft's SP2, [click here](#).

## Images

Images for emails should be hosted on a Web site and not embedded within the email to ensure proper rendering and minimize file size. You can use as many images as you wish – the right number depends on the purpose, type and focus of the email. Ecommerce emails often have more images than promotional emails.

Consider using graphic images and buttons to draw readers' attention. These images can convey concepts such as Free Shipping, Email-Only Special, Buy Now and Limited Supply in combination with your copy. Make sure your call to action is not only supported by an image but also by text. This way, if the images are turned off, the recipient can still find your call to action.

*Important:* Define the size and parameters (horizontal and vertical height in pixels) of each graphic in the <IMG SRC> tags.

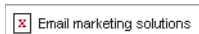
*For example:* ``

## Use Image Alt Tags

HTML "alt" tags display a text description of an image when either the image does not display or when a cursor rolls over a displayed image. Using alt tags in your HTML emails is important for three reasons:

1. Recipients using dial-up or other slow connections might not see images for several seconds. Displaying alt tag text can convey what is to come
2. Many email clients (Outlook 2003 and Outlook Express) and email services (AOL, Yahoo and Gmail) disable images by default or display a warning message or command to download the images
3. Gmail email service uses what it calls "snippets," which display the first few text words it sees in an email, following the subject line. Gmail will also display the text from alt tags, so it is important to use this to your advantage - as an addendum to your subject line

A sample alt tag that would display looks like this:



```
<IMG SRC="http://www.emaillabs.com/image/01.gif" alt="Email marketing solutions" BORDER=0>
```

Tips on using alt tags:

- **Newsletters:** For logos, headers, section titles and other uses of images, describe the logo and image, but consider adding a brief teaser that explains that section of the newsletter. For example: "Optimization – Strategies for improving email marketing performance"
- **Ecommerce Emails:** Include short but complete descriptions of product photos, including banners such as "50% off"
- **Charts and Graphs:** Include enough text to explain the value and contents of the chart or graph, such as "Chart: Open Rates from A/B Split Test"
- **Gmail Snippets/Preview Text:** Use an appropriate image in your header to display key teaser info. For ecommerce emails, the information might expand on special offers mentioned in the subject line, reinforce Free Shipping or promote additional products. For newsletters, consider mentioning additional articles beyond what is in the subject line, or expand on the existing topic

While this sounds like a lot of work, at most, it probably adds 5 to 10 minutes to your email production. Most importantly, though, marketers who don't use alt tags accordingly risk lower open and click-through rates because recipients might decide not to display images or act further.

## Create a Web Version of Your Email Newsletter

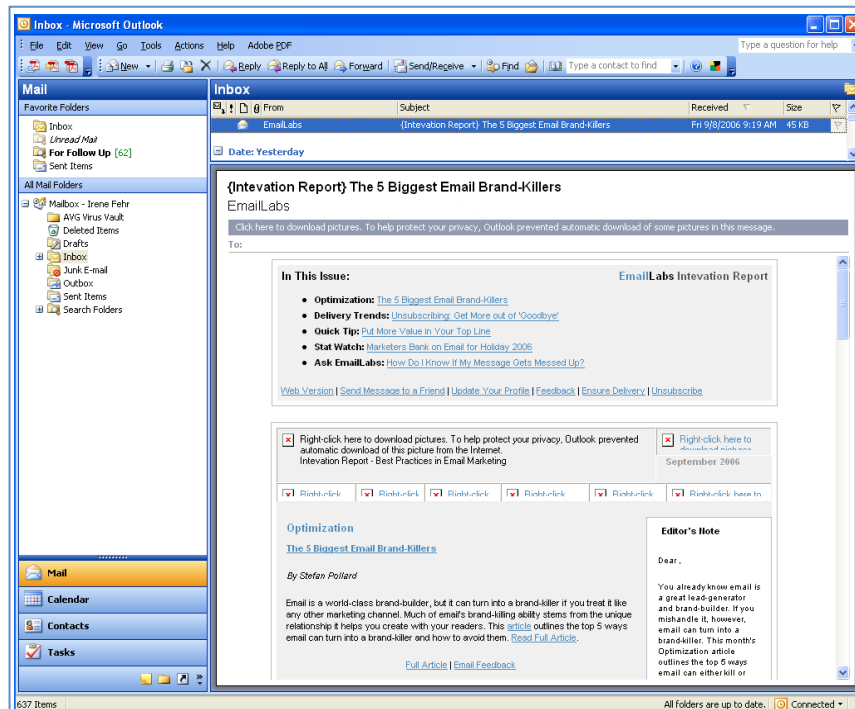
Although the vast majority of email clients and email Web interfaces (e.g., Yahoo, Hotmail) render HTML correctly, your recipients could be using an older version of Lotus Notes or AOL, which might not render your images properly. Giving readers a link to a Web version or offering a text option ensures recipients see the email as you intended.

Three tips:

1. Include a "View Web version of this message" link at the top of your email. The link can be automatically generated to a Web-hosted version by your email service provider or to a link to your Web site where you've posted it (perhaps along with back issues for newsletters). One EmailLabs client reports about 4% of recipients click on the Web version link. This is a significant number if you have a large list. Also, include a link to the Web version in the footer or admin area of your email message
2. Include "Format Preference (HTML or Text)" on your opt-in form. Also, include a note worded like this: "Choose text if you use Eudora Light, Eudora Pro 3 and below, Lotus Notes versions below R5 or AOL 5.0 and under"
3. Include a link to a Profile Update page allowing recipients to change their preferred format from HTML to text

## Preview Panes and Disabled Images

Two advances in email clients are combining to deliver a double whammy to email marketers: the [horizontal / vertical](#) preview panes, which allow a reader to view just a narrow strip or square of an email message without actually opening it, and a [blocked-images feature](#) that prevents images from downloading unless the reader requests them. Around 75% of people who use preview panes go for the horizontal version, while the remaining 25% prefer the vertical version. You can cover both pane configurations by placing the most important information in the top left corner.



*EmailLabs' Intevation Report in the Outlook preview pane: although the images are blocked, recipients can preview the email's contents from the teaser text and a concise subject line*

Individually, each development is probably throwing off your open rate and preventing users from seeing your most critical information. In tandem, it means your email performance will be reduced significantly if you don't redesign your emails to deliver key information as quickly as possible.

In fact, you might have only 2 to 4 inches of space to tell your story and persuade viewers to open your email instead of just previewing it.

Although this has implications for both business and consumer email marketers and publishers, the problem is especially acute for B2B emailers, because a significant portion of their readers are likely using Outlook and Lotus Notes – the two email clients that combine preview panes and blocked images.

Some email industry observers have even attributed a recent drop in open rates to widespread use of blocked images, because open rates are generally counted when a small, clear image within an email message is called from a Web server.

While most Web-based email clients don't use preview panes, Yahoo Mail is now beta-testing a Web client that behaves more like a desktop client, with a preview pane and default image-blocking. Yahoo Mail and other Web email clients also use image blocking as a default setting.

*Note:* If you are not testing your emails in multiple clients already, EmailLabs has integrated EmailAdvisor into our product suite. The EmailAdvisor inbox snapshot shows you exactly how your message will render in various email clients, before you send it to your full audience. EmailAdvisor is a premium service from EmailLabs.

Take these steps to make your email more preview-pane/disabled-image friendly:

1. Redesign the top of your email template so that key content shows in the preview pane even if images are disabled. Content-oriented newsletters should include headlines or "In This Issue" teasers. Newsletters with banner/images-based ads should switch to text ads and content teasers. Ecommerce and other promotional-type emails should summarize or highlight the key value proposition, offer or products right up top. See how we've approached this with the design of the [Intevation Report](#)
2. Study your click-tracking reports, or use other software that maps out where readers are clicking most often – these links need to be at the top of your newsletter
3. Ask to be added to your subscribers' address book. Images are displayed by default if you're in the address book for all AOL and Hotmail recipients as well as anyone using Outlook or Outlook Express. Always send from the same address, since that is the address the recipient added to the address book
4. Move less critical administrative information to an admin center at the end of the newsletter, especially if it draws few clicks per issue. But consider keeping or including text links to key actions below your "In This Issue" or [teaser text](#). At EmailLabs, we saw a fairly high number of Intevation Report subscribers clicking the "View Web Version" link. So, we kept that and added "Update Profile" and a few other key actions. However, we moved the "Add this address ..." copy to the Admin Center. We recommend that this "Add this address ..." information should be included in the opt-in messaging on your Web site, in the confirmation emails and perhaps in the first email they receive. Thereafter, however, this copy is simply taking up prime preview pane real estate
5. Your from and subject lines become much more important in this new reality. Sixty percent of readers told us they consult those to decide whether they'll scan the message in the preview pane or just delete it without a glance
6. In this new preview-pane format, the From and Subject lines become the top two points of a triangle, with the third point being the top of your newsletter. All three have to work together to snag a reader's eye
7. Remember that email clients vary in how they show from and subject lines in the inbox. You can test your lines using our free [From and Subject Line Tool](#) in our online Resource Center
8. Use both text and HTML in advertisements, logos and branding messages rather than live images linked to your Web site, such as JPEGs or GIFs. You'll still be able to deliver key information even to readers whose email clients block images

9. Yes, blocked images affect your open rate, and based on our survey, it could be significant. Most email marketing software tracks opens using a clear 1x1 pixel GIF that counts the email as being opened when the image loads from the server. So it is conceivable that image blocking might have contributed to a drop in your B2B open rates of 5 to 10 percentage points during the last few years. And yes, an email that is viewed in a preview pane DOES count as an open, if images are enabled
10. Along the same line, use alt tags that describe an image's content or action. However, most ISPs and email clients that block images also don't render alt tags. (See our ClickZ column on [blocked e-mail images](#).) You can get more information about how to do this with this Quick Tip in our Resource Center: [Don't Forget to Use Image Alt Tags](#)
11. Review your HTML coding to make sure it complies with W3C standards. More information in our Resource Center: [Validate HTML Content and Avoid Using Scripts](#)
12. Review how well your format complies with the quirks and nonstandard rendering of Lotus Notes. Our statistics show that 8% of Intevation Report readers use Lotus Notes. Depending on your B2B readership, your Lotus Notes subscriber base might range from a low of 5% to as high as 15%, if you reach many of Global 2000 and professional services firms
13. Learn more about working with Lotus Notes in this article in our Resource Center: [How to Address Lotus Notes Compatibility](#)
14. Eliminate skyscraper or vertically rectangular ads that go deeper than the pixel equivalent of 3 or 4 inches.

Whether your email subscribers are B2B or B2C, use of the preview pane will only increase. You should act now to redesign your emails for a world of blocked images and small preview panes

These articles and tips will help when you explore email design and coding issues:

- [Blocked E-Mail Images](#)
- [25 Quick Tips to Boost Email Marketing Usability](#)
- [Text Version for Multipart Emails - Text Version of HTML Emails](#)
- [Minimizing HTML Rendering Issues - Provide Recipients a Web Version](#)
- [20 Tips for Better B2B Newsletter Content](#)
- [How Message Size, # of Links and Subject Length Affect Email Results](#)
- [Determining Which Content is King](#)
- [Using Alt Tags in HTML Emails](#)

## Number of Hyperlinks

The main job of your email is to motivate recipients to click through to your Web site. Hyperlinks in an ecommerce email, for example, should not be like in-store retail salespeople – there when you want to be left alone, but nowhere to be found when you need help and are ready to buy. Place text, image and navigation links throughout your email so that a customer can't go anywhere without tripping over a link. Make sure that all images, especially your logo, are clickable links. Consumers are trained to click on images and expect them to be links.

In fact, according to analysis by EmailLabs in 2004, increasing the number of hyperlinks in a message leads to increased open and click-through rates. Even if you are promoting a single product, you should still have multiple links throughout the email, including your logo, navigation links at the top and bottom of your message and the call to action.

Emails with 25 links or more had an open rate 12% higher than those containing fewer than 25 links, and a click-through rate that was 29% higher than that for emails with fewer than 25 links. However, you should not merely list a bunch of links at the bottom of the email. Doing this could hurt delivery, as it is a common spam tactic.

These results support some long-held beliefs among email marketers: In general, email marketers should include as many hyperlinks as possible. The more links there are, the greater the chance that one or more will resonate with recipients and motivate them to click through. And while 25 links might sound like a lot, navigation and administrative links in best-practices newsletters can easily reach 15-20 links by themselves.

Though these findings are compelling, it is essential that you conduct split tests across key variables to determine what works best for your customers and subscribers. The EmailLabs analysis was based on the results of 23,475 email campaigns sent by more than 650 clients between January 1 and March 31, 2004.

## Phishing and HTML Links

Many email clients are being updated to detect phishing attempts. "Phishing" is the industry nickname for the effort to collect sensitive personal and financial information by sending forged emails that look as if they come from an authorized agency, such as a bank, online auction or financial service, ecommerce provider or government agency.

Both Mozilla Thunderbird and AOL 9.0 feature phishing scam detection that will affect how your email is treated. To determine whether an email could be a phishing scam, the client looks for a link in your HTML campaign where the display text is a URL. If the displayed link is different from the actual URL, the client alerts the user.

Most email service providers encode your URLs for tracking, and change the URL within the <HREF> tag.

```
<a href="http://www.yoursite.com">http://www.yoursite.com</a>
```

The change might look like this:

```
<a href="http://ESP.com/c.html?rtr=on&s=3d2,18xr,pt,37e5,6bav">http://www.yoursite.com</a>
```

To avoid having your emails wrongly tagged as phishing attempts, don't use a URL as the display text for a link in any HTML emails. Instead, use a word or phrase which describes the link itself.

```
<a href="http://www.yoursite.com">Visit us here</a>
```

## Length

The optimal length for emails can vary dramatically based on your objectives, audience demographics, the type of content, frequency, the competitive environment and other factors. For example, subscribers receiving a monthly newsletter would expect it to be much longer than a daily or weekly one. A grand opening or seminar invite is typically going to be very short, whereas a B2B newsletter discussing strategic and thought-provoking topics can easily run the print equivalent of 4-6 pages.

## Message File Size

Don't be too concerned with message size. EmailLabs analysis does not reveal any negative effect on performance from messages above 50 KB, for example. Having said that, you should still try to keep message size to 40 to 50 KB, because some recipients might have size limits.

## Copy/Tone/Personality

What works here boils down to personality. Email marketing efforts often lack personality. That's probably the biggest oversight marketers commit today. Our own anecdotal evidence suggests that newsletters with a strong personality (and great content) consistently produce significantly higher open rates than those without.

Every retailer has a personality – whether you are Wal-Mart, Amazon.com or Bob's Sporting Goods – and your email copy and creative design should reflect and leverage that. Don't underestimate the power of your copy. Many people will say that they don't read the copy – and they might be right – but you are writing the copy for the 10% that will read it and click through to your site. Your copy should not only reflect your company's personality, but should also create a sense of urgency that motivates customers to act immediately.

Personality is a combination of style, tone, humor, emotion and attitude – and it's also what human beings connect with. Remember that a human being is on the receiving end of your emails. When choosing the appropriate voice to speak with, you need to consider two things:

1. **What do you want to project to your audience?** Whether it's a company image or a one-on-one connection, you want a reader to close your email with a clear understanding of the person who sent it.
2. **What is your audience looking for?** Connecting with someone means finding something that you are looking for. It's also what can make email marketing so successful – offering something to your readers that they desire. The idea is to find the right voice in which to present those desires.

Another key element: Design your emails to be read by two distinct audiences, the skimmers and the readers. Skimmers will look at the top of your message, headlines and subheads, and key bold phrases throughout your message. Proper use of boldface can pull the reader's eye down throughout the message and still deliver relevant content quickly. Skimmers will make a decision to act in the first 5 seconds. Readers will take the time to savor your entire message, reading every word and derive more pleasure from the finely crafted personality you worked so hard to weave into your message.

Tip for both types of readers: Use plenty of white space.

White space is nothing. It's the absence of text; the absence of images. White space is negative space. But it's not wasted space. White space provides visual breathing room for the eye by breaking up text and graphics. Add white space to make a page less cramped, confusing or overwhelming. Cell padding between text and images is especially important. It is hard to read text when it is smashed up against an image or border of a table cell.

There is no proper percentage of white space. If a page looks or feels crowded, it probably needs more white space. In general, more white space lends an upscale feel to a piece. More utilitarian documents use less white space.

## More Products and Categories (Not Just for Ecommerce)

Customers like options. If you are sending the same email to everyone, you need to give people a variety of choices to whet their appetite. If you sell products in various categories – running, cycling, camping, and fishing, for example – you need to offer a few product options in each category. Otherwise, you probably won't get their attention. Your avid cycling customer is not likely to click through on the fly-fishing rod, no matter how great the deal it is. You might also want to include regular features, such as "Email Specials," "Product of the Month" and "Brand Specials."

This same concept can be applied to email newsletters. Provide a table of contents and links to back issues or the most-read issues on your site. While the content you presented might be the most prominent on your site, it might not be the most interesting to all readers. Others might have deleted a previous edition by mistake or to save time and might want to read it later. Don't miss the opportunity to provide value to the recipient at every opportunity.

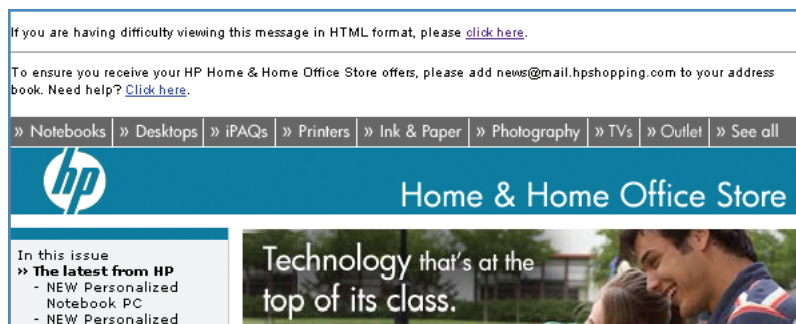
## Personalization

Some studies suggest that the more elements of personalization in an email, the higher the response rate. At minimum, address your customers/subscribers by first name if you have it for all your customers. If you have more information – such as their interests and/or past purchase history – consider personalizing the copy or product selection.

For example, using the earlier sporting goods example, you might want to personalize emails based upon each of the four sports. Each recipient would receive the same basic email, but with a few sentences of copy tailored to each sport and a special product offer. To add this to your emails effectively, either create separate versions for each customer segment or use dynamic message assembly and build these different versions on the fly. You could also make sure the relevant product is featured at the top with a larger image, and the supporting products have smaller images and appear below the featured product.

## Navigation

Leverage your Web site's navigation. Remember, your email is basically an extension of your Web site. Make the navigation consistent with your Web site – but also highlight key areas of your Web site that are likely to get customers to take action. If you have Bargain Basement, Closeouts, Featured Products and other areas on your site – use them in your email.



*An example of good use of navigation in the email message header that mirrors the navigation on the Web site*

## Search

If you have a search capability on your Web site, add it to your email. Your customers can type in their search phrase, hit submit, and it will take them to your Web site's search-results page. You now have those people on your Web site, where you have the potential to convert them to customers.

## Ad Banners/Text Ads

A major source of revenue in email newsletters comes from ad banners or text ads. Placement of these ads can make a huge difference in the effectiveness of your email. Ads are generally placed at the bottom of large blocks of copy, as separators between two paragraphs, or on the right-side bar of an email.

Don't place ads in the message header, where your logo and navigation should be. This can confuse the reader and muddle your branding efforts.

## Offers

A key goal of your ecommerce program is to generate maximum revenue at the highest margins. Large discounts and free shipping drive transactions and revenue, but finding the optimum combination is the key to profitability. One approach is to entice your customers using special email-only offers. Second, test different approaches in your subject line, whether free shipping, discounts, or something similar, to determine which approach drives the most revenue and has the best impact on your bottom line. Third, personalize your offers to your customer segments. Loyal customers might receive free shipping on their next purchase above \$100, whereas new or low-value customers might receive 10% off their first or next purchase.

## Email Format/Versions

While the core of your email program should use the HTML format, you must also produce separate versions of your email in plain text and potentially Rich Text Format (RTF) formats for subscribers whose email client cannot read HTML. Most email applications send HTML as a multipart MIME version (HTML and text pieces), where the default shown is the version the recipient's email client is set to receive. Even if only 5% of your subscribers either cannot read HTML or prefer text, producing well-crafted text versions of your email can pay big dividends.

When producing the text version of your message, watch out for line length and justification. Insert a hard break after 65 characters on every line or as close to it as you can get without breaking up words. This will prevent email clients from breaking up your copy in inconvenient places. We also recommend left justifying all headlines to avoid spacing issues that can arise when attempting to center text. See the example below:

\*\*\*\*\*

Headline Goes Here

\*\*\*\*\*

As with HTML, you should use only the ASCII character set. More advanced word processing software often inserts "odd" characters, such as the trailing dot character or smart quotes, which can cause display problems in some email software. The following characters are safe to use in your plain-text emails:

- a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z
- A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
- 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- " % & ' ( ) \* + , - . / : ; < = > ? \_

Recently, many email applications have begun to provide an RSS-feed function as an alternative format for delivery. Recipients who opt to change the format from email to RSS will receive new email as an updated RSS feed. RSS users have immediate access to the new content and can view the same information and click through on the same links as the email audience. One key advantage to RSS is that entries are not subject to spam filters and have 100% delivery. Recipients who want to unsubscribe simply remove the feed from their reader.

## "Push to Talk" Functionality

Consider adding a "Push to Talk" feature to your email if you sell hard-to-fit clothing items or other products and services that benefit from personal contact. A "Push to Talk" feature enables a recipient to schedule a callback from your call center.

## Forward-to-a-Friend

The forward-to-a-friend functionality is a great way to increase your subscribers. EmailLabs recommends providing a link in the email to a form hosted on your site, rather than including the form elements directly in the email itself, as discussed earlier in the section on form elements. Another approach is to provide a link to your subscription practices with language like this:

“Received this email from a friend? If you would like to subscribe, click here.”

This allows recipients to forward messages directly, rather than by using a form hosted on your site. Many consumers fear that by using the form hosted method, their friends' addresses will be automatically subscribed. By including this option, you can increase the chance that a recipient who received the message from a friend can join your list.

## Rich Media/Flash

The consensus is in on using rich media in emails: Just don't do it. Most email clients do not support Flash or other types of rich media. If you need to use Javascript to launch the rich media, it is often stripped out due to security concerns. If you must use animation, use an animated GIF, but watch the file size. If you've developed a really cool rich media application you want to showcase, include a link to a Web-hosted version, which gives you more control and browser acceptance.

## Essential Content

After you have gotten your design right, you must still verify that your message includes these items:

1. A working unsubscribe mechanism. You want to make it as easy as possible for your recipient to stop hearing from you. Not only is it a CAN-SPAM requirement, but a properly designed and promoted unsubscribe process builds trust with recipients and reduces the likelihood they will report your message as spam
2. Your company name and street address (no PO box allowed) – a requirement of the CAN-SPAM law

EmailLabs recommends marketers combine this information with some other best practices into a custom footer we call the “Email Admin Center.” By combining the above information with a few other useful pieces of information, you can keep all of the housekeeping items bundled together into one neat package. While not all marketers put this information in a footer, most email recipients now expect to find this information located at the end of the email. This location obviously makes people scroll to the end of their emails, but having a standard location across all emails is ultimately better for the entire industry.

The Email Admin Center should include these items:

1. A quick explanation of how you got the recipient's email address (e.g., opted in on your site or a partner's Web site, purchased a product from you, etc.)
2. Your recipient's email address
3. Link to your privacy policy or email policy. You can also put your terms of service link here if appropriate
4. A request to be added to the recipient's address book to ensure delivery, which also helps to ensure images will be turned on
5. Update-profile link where the recipient can change the format, frequency or email address
6. Your feedback and contact information: phone number and email address
7. Forward-to-a-friend link
8. Subscription link to help people who received your email from a friend and wish to subscribe

### Email Admin Center

This newsletter is a service of EmailLabs. Should you no longer wish to receive these messages please [click here](#) to unsubscribe or send an email to: [unsubscribe-929@emallabs.com](mailto:unsubscribe-929@emallabs.com)

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To view our Privacy Policy [click here](#).  
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*An example of the Email Admin Center from our newsletter, the Intevation Report*

## Test, Test, Test and Improve

Testing is the single most important piece of advice we can provide. Things change quickly in email marketing: What works for a competitor, or what worked for you six months ago, might not work today. You need to continuously test variables, including format, design, copy style and calls to action, subject line approach and offers, personalization, content types or product categories and more. Start with simple A/B split tests, and repeat the test at least a few times to verify results.

Email split tests let you conduct meaningful research on your own email marketing campaigns. To run an email split test, create two or more messages and send them to randomized, equal portions of the larger list. You can then deliver the message with the best results to the remainder of the list or apply them to your next campaign.

## What to Test?

Anything in your campaign can be tested. If you test more than one element, you might not know which one made the difference. The key to a good test is to pick one element and change it, then check the results, and test again. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- **Subject line:** It's easy and low-risk to create several subjects and compare open rates between them
- **Layout, colors or format:** You might need big changes to see a difference in the response rate. If your campaigns are usually a single image, a text message might compel those who normally suppress images to open or click them. Or, if your messages are text-heavy, more images could improve readability, click-throughs, and, ultimately, conversion rates
- **Offer placement:** If you send multiple products in an email, try switching them around. Moving an item from bottom to top could change the email's overall performance
- **Offer:** You might get a great response when you offer 25% off. But what if you got the same great results if you offered 10% off? Or no discount at all?
- **Call to action:** See if you get more transactions with a to-the-point "Buy Now" link or with a lower-obligation "Learn More" link
- **Landing page:** Often neglected, it can make or break your campaign. Keep the messages identical except for the URL of the destination page. Refining your landing page is the key to strong conversions
- **Frequency:** Should I send once per month or per week? Hold a control group of recipients from the test audience and watch your metrics for activity change

## About EmailLabs

EmailLabs is a leading provider of high-performance email marketing solutions to agencies, publishers and marketing departments of middle-market and Global 2000 companies. The EmailLabs email marketing platform is provided as an ASP (Web-based) service, and is easily integrated with a company's Web site, sales force automation and CRM technologies through EmailLabs' application programming interface (API). For the fourth consecutive year, EmailLabs has been recognized by ASPnews.com as one of the Top 50 ASPs worldwide and as a Top 25 Service Provider for the Software-as-a Service (SaaS) and Business Service Provider category. The company provides email marketing solutions to more than 550 companies, including Nokia, Agilent, PalmSource and Jupitermedia. Headquartered in Menlo Park, Calif., EmailLabs was founded in 1999 and is a subsidiary of J.L. Halsey Corporation (OTCBB:JLHY).

For more information, visit [www.emaillabs.com](http://www.emaillabs.com).



[Register](#) for a demonstration, [email](#) us with your requirements or questions, or call us toll-free at 866.362.4522

## Marketing Resources

For more email marketing tips, articles and tools, visit the industry's most comprehensive resource center at <http://www.emaillabs.com/resources> and subscribe to EmailLabs' award-winning newsletter, the Intevation Report, at [http://www.emaillabs.com/resources\\_enewsletter\\_subscribe.html](http://www.emaillabs.com/resources_enewsletter_subscribe.html).

For expert advice and knowledge to address your marketing and delivery challenges, EmailLabs offers On-Demand Consulting Services. Visit <http://www.emaillabs.com/solutions/services.html> for a full list of service offerings.