

Copywriting and designing for email 101

Writing and designing effectively for the email medium is something that even seasoned creative professionals botch. Why? Because most people take email for granted and don't consider the unique challenges and opportunities presented by this piece of the marketing mix. Often, we are concerned with simply translating a website, direct mail piece, catalog page, or print advertisement into email form. We do it as quickly as possible and without really thinking that what works for one medium, may not work for another.

However, deliverability—that is, ensuring that the email creative can make it past spam filters, email clients, industry-maintained blacklists, and actually be delivered to your audience—should be the end goal. For instance, many promotional HTML messages are sent as a single large image (much like a print ad or web page may be designed), instead of a combination of text and images. The problem with this approach is that the majority of email clients, including Microsoft Outlook, Microsoft Entourage, and Gmail, for instance, automatically remove images. So, if the entirety of a marketing message lay in an image, it may not be delivered at all.

Here are some simple guidelines to keep in mind for both the copywriting and designing/coding of your emails that will improve your deliverability, and ultimately, your response rates. Let's start with the copy.

Email copywriting

In general, email communications require short, concise copy that offers a clear call to action and intuitive linking strategy. Don't burden your readers with long paragraphs of advertising language. If you do have a lot of copy to provide to the audience, consider using teaser blurbs and linking to a website, where the content will be much more readable. This is especially important for email newsletters, which often feature several stories within the same message.

Email offers the opportunity to include personalization. But that shouldn't end with the coding of a personalized salutation, such as *Dear <reader>*. Instead, ensure that your content is relevant to *each* reader. Email is not the medium to reinforce a branding message; your audience members are expecting new and fresh information with each email communication.

Best practices

Your copy should:

- Use active words; avoid passive voice
- Utilize bullet points to make it "scannable"
- Include many and a variety of links to maximize click-through activity, including multiple system text links that may be worded differently but link to the same splash page, images, buttons (animated or static), banners, bursts and more
- Link only into your own site—there's no victory in linking to other sites
- Be short, concise, clear and actionable

- Avoid spam triggers (most notably, use of the word “free” or special characters)—especially in subject lines and headlines
- Use familiar phrases; write to a common reading level (6-8th grade)

As a result, your readers should:

- Understand immediately what you are trying to communicate
- Be engaged enough to click to purchase or find out more

Subject lines

Writing subject lines can be tricky. They’re difficult because they offer your message two hurdles. First, if a message is marked as spam, more often than not, it is because of the content of the subject line, not the actual message. And secondly, you have to write a subject line that not only gets past the spam filters, but is also intriguing enough to bring your reader to open the message. That’s why the first metric in nearly any email campaign report is *open rate*, not the click-through rate.

Here’s how to write subject lines that address both challenges.

Always keep your character counts (including spaces) below 60. Avoid excessive use of numerals, punctuation or capitalization, special characters, use of the word “free,” or nearly any term related to finance, loans, or mortgages. If you can code your subject lines to include the recipient’s name (but still not exceed the 60-character limit), do it.

Your subject lines should be benefit-oriented—give the reader a reason to open the email—but still be straightforward. A vague or promissory subject line may increase your open rates, but it very well could increase your opt outs, too.

Also, remember that subject lines are easily tested. Consider splitting your audience in half; send them the same message, but with two different subject lines to identify the better performer.

Linking strategy (copy and design)

Avoid "[click here](#)" as link language. Use an active approach— phrases like "[purchase now](#)" or "[learn more](#)." Attempt to include at least one system text link in nearly every paragraph or section of your message, including multiple links to the same landing page.

In addition to being actionable, your links should be measurable and varied. Use multiple calls to action and assorted types of links. For instance, include buttons, or make your images hot. Doing so creates a redundancy, which in this case is a good thing. It provides your readers multiple paths to the same end point: your website.

However, don’t rely on a single image or button to do all of your linking. Again, if the images are stripped from your message, then your readers see a message without a call to action. Plus, placing a single call to action at the end of a message, which is customary for other types of media, means that you may not have a single link in first view, and are relying on the reader to scroll.

Email design

Email design needs to be clean and sharp. But there are many more limitations to email design than web design—and as such, many of today's best web trends, like transparencies, CSS and other style sheets, or use of Flash or Silverlight should be avoided. Indeed, even your overall canvas to work with is small—width should not exceed 600 pixels.

So, aim for simple and easy to navigate, striking a balance between style and substance. Focus on readability and reinforce your visual brand. While nothing needs to mirror your website exactly, newsletters and other email creative should have a look and feel that is consistent with your website's design and should look particularly similar when linking to a specific landing page.

Make your calls to action stand out in some way; use color changes, increase font size, or use boldface. Try to repeat the calls to action and offer your readers multiple paths to the same website. Perhaps you can include it in a sidebar, banner, burst, or button.

Best practices

Your design should:

- Be designed to the content; not written to the design
- Avoid text-heavy layouts and include white space
- Offer easy navigation—for newsletters, specifically, include a table of contents and quick links (*Back to Top*) to allow the reader to jump around the creative
- Keep things "scannable"—copy should appear clean; use of bullets is encouraged, as is liberal use of boldface—make the most important points stand out to the reader
- Be no wider than 600 pixels
- Keep important content, including logos, to the left where the reader is apt to view first
- Limit HTML file size to 65K
- Avoid Flash; if you do use it, keep it below 100K and remember to use a static background image
- Really avoid using style sheets (CSS, JavaScript)
- Always include a .txt version to ensure more universal delivery
- Know your audience's capabilities—Which email clients are they using? Can they view HTML and images? What is their file size limit? Etc.
- Always include ALT tags in case the images are stripped out of a message
- Keep the above point in mind when designing headlines and subheads; if you use images for these, add ALT tags
- Only include the word "free" or other known spam copy triggers in the design, NOT in system text or ALT tags

Avoid design spam triggers, which include:

- Red text
- White text on dark backgrounds
- Large file size (see file size limits above)
- Creating an entire email as one large image
- Text in all CAPS

Summary

As you can see, there's a lot to keep in mind when crafting email creative. It's also worth noting that solid performing email creative may not be as aesthetically pleasing as beautiful web design. Don't get hung up on this; remember, with email, it's all about deliverability. It's important to write and design for this medium and not hurry to translate a website or print piece to email.

Good email creative can be invaluable to an organization. As a medium, it remains relatively cheap compared to other marketing and advertising channels. And yet, email response rates are typically higher than those of other direct response media. Plus, for the metrics geeks, email offers incredible behavioral tracking and information.

About David Morrissey

David Morrissey is a professional copywriter with extensive digital and email experience. He works fulltime for one of the largest advertising agency networks in the world, and offers freelance services on the side. He earned a B.S. in journalism from Emerson College and is completing a M.A. in communication from Gonzaga University. David resides in Salt Lake City, Utah, but has worked with clients throughout North America. For rates, copywriting portfolio samples and more, please visit <http://www.dmorrissey.com>.