

E-mail Marketing: to HTML or Not to HTML?

(From GotMarketing)

Believe it or not, that's still a serious question. Even though HTML is the format most often preferred by email users, it's not the unanimous winner. In fact, there are many people (senders and recipients) who think that HTML is just not "worth the effort." If you're doing email marketing, it's important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of HTML — not only for you, but for your audience, too. Read on to learn the pros, the cons and how you can get the best of both worlds.

Pros: Reasons to HTML

1. You can present the visual component of your brand, which sometimes makes a more powerful statement than words alone. (Think of Nike and the "swoosh.")
2. You can differentiate yourself. Plain Text emails are all formatted similarly: black text, in a Courier font, on a white background. In HTML, your own colors and images work with your text to make your message stronger and more distinctive.
3. You can make lengthy messages more readable, by adding an interactive table of contents and big, bold headlines.
4. You can take your website to your readers, instead of making your readers come to your website. Once they're clicking on your email, they're immediately on your website.
5. You can use compelling calls to action (words) as clickable links. Instead of seeing: "<http://www.abcdefg.com/hijk.lmno>," your readers could see "Click here to learn more."
6. You can know who opens your HTML emails (if your email software has the right tracking features). You'll never know with Text.
7. You may get higher response rates. Industry experts like Forrester and Jupiter contend that overall, HTML gets 2 to 3 times as many responses as

Text. Cons: Reasons Not to HTML

1. It can take a long time to download. Text emails are not as "big" (file-size-wise) because they don't have colors or graphics. Plus, connection speeds can vary. An email might take 3 seconds to download over a high-speed DSL connection, but it might take 3 minutes over a slower dial-up connection.
2. It's not easy, or even possible sometimes, to read HTML emails offline. Images will appear as big X's and disrupt the flow or meaning of your message.
3. Some people just don't like it. They find the colors and images distracting and would prefer to see only the "meat" of your message, not the "gravy."
4. Some people use email client software that doesn't display HTML properly. Your email may turn out ugly, or your clickable links may not work.

5. You simply don't have the skills to create a professional-looking HTML email campaign. How to Get the Best of Both Worlds

To maximize the benefits and minimize the negatives, here are some pointers to creating and sending HTML email campaigns painlessly and without fear of problems on the receiving end.

How to create HTML without knowing how to write HTML?

You could hire someone else to do it for you. Better (and cheaper) idea: Use email marketing software that comes with customizable HTML templates. You won't need graphic design or programming skills. Just fill in the blanks (with colors, text and images from the web) and let the software do the rest.

How to minimize download times?

Don't put images directly in your HTML emails. Instead, link to them from within the HTML source code. Keep your email file size under 20K. Avoid using HTML editors (like Microsoft FrontPage) that add code "overhead" that makes the file bigger than it needs to be. Best bet: Create and send your campaigns with email marketing software that's optimized to keep file size to a minimum. (Check out this handy download calculator)

How to deal with HTML-averse email readers (both software and people)?

If you're building an opt-in list from your website, offer readers a choice of Text or HTML and record their preferences. Then, you could maintain two separate — one for HTML and one for Text — and then send two different campaigns. Better (and easier) idea: Maintain one list and use email marketing software that can send users what they want. If you don't know which format they want, or which format they're even able to read, use email marketing software that automatically detects whether or not someone's email client can display HTML.

So, considering the pros and cons, many people agree that HTML can be "worth the effort," especially if you use the right email marketing software. But what happens when you go beyond big fonts, bright colors and bold images? Next month's Splash explores the interactive, relationship-building side of email marketing.

— Lynda Partner is CEO of GotMarketing, provider of self-serve email marketing software.

2001 Email Marketing Wrap-Up:

- 68.3% of all commercial emails sent were in HTML format (up 34% from 2000).
- 27% were sent in plain Text format (down 39% from 2000).
- 55% of marketers used 2 hyperlinks, 24% used 1, 6% used 3, and 13% used more than 3. *Source: Opt-in News*