

## WHITEPAPER

# Email Marketing Design & Rendering: The New Essentials

## Overview

Design is vital to the success of your email marketing program. But what does “good” email design really entail? How do you ensure your message is seen correctly by your subscribers? And who is ultimately responsible for the look and performance of your emails?

Is it marketers? Designers? The answer is yes to both.

Marketers and designers play an integral role in the success of email marketing design. Good email design is multi-faceted, and we’re here to help you navigate the ins and outs with best practice recommendations. If you’re a marketer interested in improved ROI, click-throughs, and conversions, the first two sections of this whitepaper are for you.

If you’re a designer who likes to talk in terms of pixels, CSS, and HTML, you’ll want to begin with the designer section on page 9. If you’re a true whitepaper aficionado, however, make sure to read the whole thing—after all, it’s always beneficial to understand the full picture. **The figure below will help you identify the most relevant information for you: simply identify your color, then read the indicated sections.**

Marketers.  
Pages: 01 - 08

Designers.  
Pages: 09 - 15

Both.  
Pages: 01 - 16

## Marketer Part #1: Effective Email Marketing Design

According to w3schools.com, the most common screen resolution is 1024 x 768 pixels—but this statistic doesn’t account for the varied groups of email recipients out there. Some recipients have multiple windows active in the same screen, while others operate two (or more) computer screens at once. **Beyond various hardware scenarios, the myriad of different possible Internet Service Provider (ISP), email client, and browser combinations increases the potential for message rendering issues to arise.**

ISPs and email client vendors continue to strive for differentiation in their product offerings. To date, many of these points of differentiation among email clients have had direct impacts on rendering. While common standards would be nice, the reality is that marketers need to work in a complex environment and optimize rendering across the most pervasive email clients. This whitepaper will help you find design tips to improve your rendering across the most commonly-used email clients and ISPs. Let’s begin with five tips for marketers looking to create a powerful email design plan.

## What’s Inside?

**Pages 1 - 4: Marketer Part #1**  
Effective Email Design

**Pages 5 - 8: Marketer Part #2**  
Designing for the Five Stages  
of Email Viewing

**Pages 9 - 10: Designer Part #1**  
Optimizing Your Email Design

**Pages 11 - 15: Designer Part #2**  
Design Tips by Email Client

**Page 16: Additional Email  
Marketing Design Resources**

“Ten years ago, a plain text email was acceptable. But today, our subscribers have higher expectations—now, our email design influences how subscribers view our brand.”

— Todd Callaway  
Interactive Marketing Manager,  
Shaw Floors

**Marketer Tip #1: Start with a Design Plan.**

The key to any element of your email marketing program is in the planning. Before you provide a creative brief to your design agency or internal design team, ensure that your email campaign supports the overall direction of your email program and the value proposition being offered to your subscriber.

**As you begin planning your email design program, start by asking these questions:**

- What is the business purpose of this email communication?
- How does this communication support the value we offer to our subscribers?
- Is email the best medium to communicate this message?

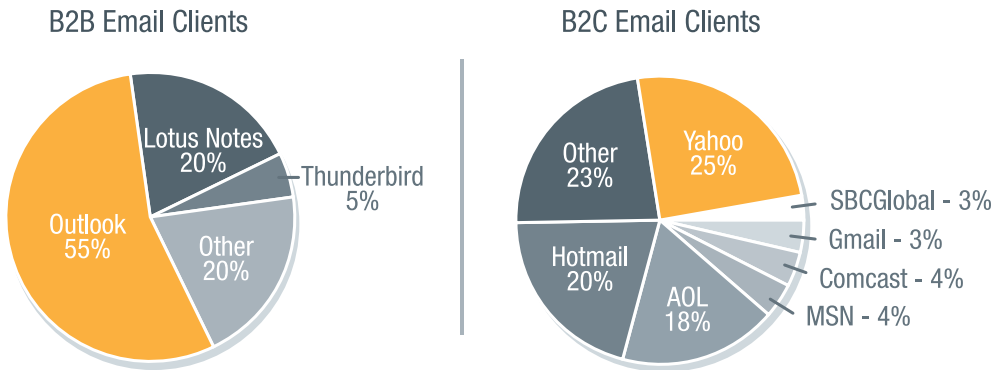
Once you have answers to these questions, we recommend building a wireframe, or a “blueprint,” to ensure your content has strategic and hierarchical message placement.

**Marketer Tip #2: Know Your Audience.**

Different design approaches need to be considered for different audiences. If your email list is comprised of common B2B (Business-to-Business) or B2C (Business-to-Consumer) domains, consider designing for the “lowest common denominator” of the average list.

**However, if you know that a majority of your subscribers are using a specific email client, or they all come from a region with a specific ISP, then it’s best to customize for them.** Further still, if your email campaigns are sent primarily to an internal list, then you should optimize your email design for your internal clients.

Figure 1 illustrates the common B2B and B2C list composites by email client:



**Figure 1**  
Common B2B and B2C list composites by email client.

Source: B2B (Pivotal Veracity, 2005) | B2C (Domains represented across ExactTarget clients as of March 2008)

“Good email design must balance beauty and effectiveness. Typically at odds with each other, it’s our job to strike the right balance between these goals.”

— Jan Ball  
Graphic Specialist, Shaw Floors

“We optimize for specific email clients based on our different audiences. For example, our B2C subscribers are less likely to use Lotus Notes to view our messages than our internal team.”

— Jan Ball  
Graphic Specialist, Shaw Floors

**Marketer Tip #3: Design for Your Audience.**

Unfortunately, your email list is likely not a “typical” list. Instead, you might have a large amount of regional ISPs, or a younger segment skewing the domain composition of your list. Before you begin designing, make sure you know the top domains on your list. Several Email Service Providers (ESPs) provide reporting tools that can help you analyze the precise compositions of your subscriber lists (like ExactTarget’s List Demographics Report). Once you understand your audience, you’ll be ready to optimize your email accordingly, maximizing design effectiveness for the majority of your subscribers.

Take Shaw Floors, for example. As an ExactTarget customer using Lotus Notes as their internal email client, Shaw Floors is faced with some common Lotus Notes rendering issues when sending internal email (see page 12 for additional tips about designing for Lotus Notes). **“The biggest design challenge with internal stakeholders,” says Todd Callaway, Interactive Marketing Manager, “is that they can’t recognize the difference between what they see and what we’ve designed for our external clients. They don’t get the benefit of the design we’ve spent a lot of time perfecting.”**

**Marketer Tip #4: Test and Test Again.**

It’s important to test your design across multiple email clients and ISPs to ensure your subscribers see what you expect them to see in both the HTML and text versions. Testing design for rendering purposes is important, but it’s also critical to ensure that your design is effective—leading subscribers to convert and support the email’s business purpose.

Callaway and Ball of Shaw Floors describe their testing strategy prior to launching a send: “Once we have the email set to go, we send it to a couple of test accounts and check the results on different machines. We regularly check the email on both Mac and IBM, and test for various email clients such as AOL, Yahoo, Gmail, Outlook, Thunderbird, Apple Mail, and Lotus Notes.”

**Complete and thorough testing, like that done by Shaw Floors, will help ensure your subscribers are seeing your emails as you intended.** An easy way to test the rendering of your email across several email clients at one time is through ExactTarget partner Pivotal Veracity’s eDesign Optimizer. By sending one email to a seed address, Pivotal Veracity’s report provides up to 25 views of your email in the top email clients. “Views” can include screenshots of your email with images on and off, in preview panes, and on mobile devices.

**Think Big Picture.**

Remember that the internal audience who approves your email messages may be viewing them on entirely different email clients than the majority of your external subscribers.

**Your Time Is Valuable.**

Pivotal Veracity’s eDesign Optimizer cuts down on the manual work of checking multiple accounts to see exactly what your subscribers see. Contact ExactTarget for more information about this tool.

**Marketer Tip #5: Measure and Optimize.**

After sending your emails, use key performance metrics to identify the level of success for each campaign. Every marketer's key performance metrics will differ. **Marketers might use a variety of data points to determine the success of their email design, including open rates, click-through rates, or unsubscribe rates.** Conversion rates can also be combined with web analytics to measure an email campaign's success, in addition to other statistics including subscriber retention, sales cycle, or downloads.

While there are a seemingly infinite number of metrics to monitor on each campaign, it's important to measure those that support *your* overall business purpose. **By measuring the success of your email design over time, you'll be quick to spot which elements drive the most results.** As the market, email clients, and your subscribers evolve, metrics will assist in pointing your design in the appropriate direction.

"Email content and messaging is driven by our audience. We include very specific banners and copy for the various industries we touch, and then we track the impact of each email to measure our success."

— Jeff Chandler  
Senior Manager, Marketing Tools  
and Technologies, Convergys

## Marketer Part #2: Designing for the Five Stages of Email Viewing

The Email Experience Council noted that fewer than 50% of marketers create emails that render appropriately (January 2007). **Proper email rendering can make a big difference, however, as subscribers tend to view your email in five separate stages—judging each one individually before deciding whether to move on.** At each stage, subscribers will consider these factors: brand, urgency, value, and interest. The clincher? This decision-making process will happen in a matter of seconds, so it's vital to ensure the following elements are designed effectively.

### Active Viewership Stage #1: From Name.

#### Key Design Tips

Ensure your from name is instantly recognizable by using the company name, product name, or sales associate your subscribers are most familiar with.

Your email fights for attention in a crowded inbox. Do your subscribers immediately recognize the communication is from you? **According to the Email Sender and Provider Coalition (ESPC), 73% of subscribers click “Report Spam” or “Report Junk” based on the content of the from field.** Make sure your subscribers recognize your from name.

Keep in mind, too, that some email clients still use your from email address in the inbox (i.e., company@domain.com instead of your “from name.”) Make sure it's also branded and recognizable.

### Active Viewership Stage #2: Subject Line.

#### Key Design Tip

Keep your subject line under 49 characters. And remember, mobile users may see even fewer characters!

After weighing the appropriateness of your from address, subscribers then move their attention to your subject line. **The ESPC notes that 69% of subscribers base the decision to send your message to the spam folder on the subject line (December 2006).** Quite simply, the subject line can make or break your campaign. A simple A/B test can identify whether your subscribers prefer a consistently-branded subject line, consistent syntax, or varied wording.

### Active Viewership Stage #3: Preview Pane.

#### Key Design Tips

Place your primary call-to-action in the top left 4-5 inch square of your email so it's visible in the most preview panes.

Your email doesn't necessarily have to be open for your subscribers to see the content. **When present, many subscribers use preview panes to get a quick look at your message before they open it.**

As such, it's important to make sure your call-to-action is visible in the preview pane. Preview pane sizes vary widely across email clients and ISPs, but ExactTarget's Design team recommends placing branding and the main call-to-action in the top left 4-5 inch square (between 288-360 pixels) of the email.

This square roughly represents the most-viewed area of an email, based on vertical and horizontal preview panes, in addition to usability research that's been conducted the typical reading patterns a subscriber follows when viewing email.

## 5 Stages of Email Viewing

From Name

Subject Line

Preview Pane

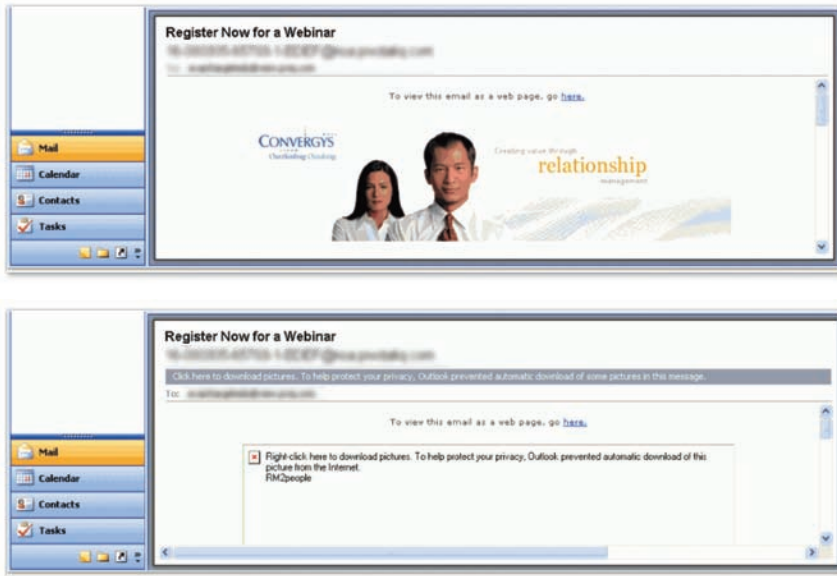
Opened Email  
(pre-scroll)

Full Email

As a security measure, many email clients block images by default (Figures 2 and 3). For example, of the top B2B email clients, only Outlook XP and Lotus Notes do not block images by default. All B2C email clients and ISPs that include preview panes (Hotmail/Livemail, Apple Mail, Yahoo Beta and AT&T) block images by default. According to MarketingSherpa, 59% of online customers routinely block images (2007).

“Without proper planning, rendering and display issues can severely distract subscribers from the key marketing message in your email.”

— Jeff Chandler  
Senior Manager, Marketing Tools and Technologies, Convergys



**Figure 2**  
**Horizontal Preview Pane:** Many subscribers use a horizontal preview pane similar to the one offered by Outlook 2003 (top). However, when images are off by default, the main call-to-action is not displayed (bottom).



**Figure 3**  
**Vertical Preview Pane:** Note the difference between the area rendered in a horizontal preview pane in Outlook 2003 (top image on page) versus the vertical preview pane, such as the one shown above from Outlook 2007.

**Active Viewership Stage #4: Opened Email (Pre-Scroll).****Key Design Tip**

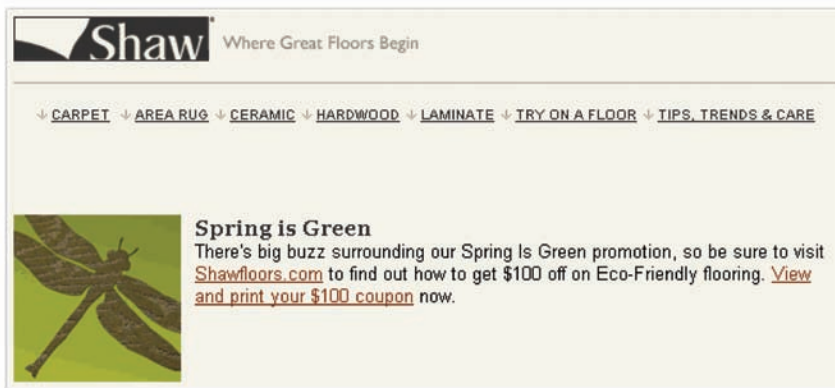
Present an organized and appealing message "above the fold," like your primary call-to-action or a table of contents.

So, your subscriber clicks on your email and it opens in a new window. But how many of those subscribers view the *entire* email including the content "below the fold?" The answer is surprisingly few. The Nielsen Norman Group published a July 2006 study that noted only 11% of subscribers read the full email message.

What does that mean for marketers? Include plenty of high-powered content "above the fold," such as a table of contents or other cues for the reader to scroll down to view the full content (Figure 4). Consider using bullets, borders, or background colors to engage subscribers to scroll down. The content above the fold should create enough interest to encourage a subscriber to scroll down and ultimately convert.

**Keeping it Above the Fold.**

"Above the fold" refers to the area of an email the subscriber sees before scrolling. This area can vary depending on screen resolution and the size of the window in which the email is being viewed.

**Figure 4**

The Shaw Floors email shown above includes text navigation links and content "above the fold" that entice readers to either scroll down or follow the links to areas of the Shaw Floors website.

**Active Viewership Stage #5: View Full Email.****Key Design Tips**

Organize design elements to keep your design logical and branded. Use spacing, bullets, borders, text colors (HEX colors ideally) and background colors effectively.

You've enticed your subscriber to view your entire email. Well done. But what will they see when reading your entire message?

Nielsen Norman Group's usability study (*Email Newsletter Usability—Third Edition*, June 2006) determined that users, once engaged, spend an average of 51 seconds on each newsletter in their inbox. With such a short time frame, how do you want your subscribers spending their time? Ensure your email is designed to guide a subscriber's attention through the email to the conversion opportunity. If the conversion is to a website, it's critical to create a consistently-branded experience for your subscribers through the email and landing page.

## Marketer Conclusion

Marketers, we advise you to know your subscribers, to understand what they want from you, and to deliver your messages when and where your audience wants to receive them. We can't emphasize enough the importance of creating emails that render well across various email clients and ISPs.

The first two marketer sections of this whitepaper took you through the need for effective email design. If you're looking for additional detail about how your team can put specific design tips into action, continue reading. **While the following sections are geared towards designers, we're pretty sure marketers will learn a thing or two as well!**

### Whitepaper Aficionados, Read On.

If you're looking to get a more complete picture of email marketing design, dig into the following designer sections for specific recommendations that can help improve the appearance of your messages.

## Designer Part #1: Optimizing Your Email Design

Print designers have it easy, don't they? Before designing a print piece, they know the size of their canvas. It might be 8 1/2 x 11, legal size, or a custom width and height. Once that size is determined, print designers can see their creation exactly as they intended.

It's not the same story with email designers.

For email designers, we'd like to take it a step further with specific design guidelines. We're including all levels of designer tips here—from basic to advanced—because even the most experienced designer can make an amateur mistake.

### Designer Tip #1: Keep Improving.

Consider your design an ever-evolving, iterative process (Figure 5). Just when you think you've figured it all out, "best practices" will change.

### Designer Tip #2: Think Effective.

A common misconception about design is that it's simply aesthetic—only concerned with look and feel. The truth is that an aesthetically pleasing email design isn't always an effective, performance-driven design due to image blocking and other constraints. However, an effective design can—and should—also be a beautiful design.

### Designer Tip #3: Stick to the Basics.

CSS-based layouts are only successful in the most compliant of email clients. Your design will render more consistently when HTML tables are used for layout. Limit the use of CSS to inline styles, as external and embedded styles are stripped out in Hotmail and Gmail.

### Designer Tip #4: Remember the Text Version, Send in Multi-part MIME.

Though most of your subscribers will view the HTML version of your email, some subscribers prefer to receive the plain text version of your message. Use simplified copy points, different capitalization techniques, and characters such as asterisks and dashes to create headlines and visually separate areas of interest.

### Designer Tip #5: Design with Image Blocking in Mind.

Plan how to best use graphics in your design. Images should act as a supplement rather than the main focus of your design. Even with images blocked or disabled, your design should be readable and the call to action clear. In cases where an image must be used, don't forget to include "alt" tags in the <img> tag. Additionally, it's best to use HTML text and web-safe fonts wherever possible.



Figure 5

Good email design is a constantly evolving process, and what works today won't necessarily work tomorrow.

### Understanding Multi-part MIME.

A common method for transmitting non-text files via email, MIME encodes the files using one of two encoding methods and decodes it back to its original format at the receiving end. An email sent in multi-part MIME format will be interpreted by each individual mail client to display either HTML or text, whichever it can render from the coding it received.

**Designer Tip #6: 600 is the Magic Number.**

Although monitor resolutions vary, we recommend keeping your design at approximately 600 pixels wide to avoid horizontal scrolling and to ensure that your primary message appears in the preview pane.

**Designer Tip #7: Proper Syntax Counts.**

Although email design and web design are different, syntax still counts when coding HTML for email. Including all necessary opening and closing tags, proper syntax, and specifying width and height for all your images can help ensure that your email displays as you intended.

**Designer Tip #8: Be Smart About Forms.**

Forms can create a design challenge. Microsoft email clients, such as Hotmail and Outlook 2007, don't support forms. If your subscriber list is heavily-weighted with these email clients, consider using your email real estate in alternate ways, or driving subscribers to a web-based survey program.

**Designer Tip #9: Avoid Rich Media.**

Embedding Flash or video in an email will cause major deliverability issues. If delivered, these design elements will be stripped or disabled. If you want to use rich media, use a screenshot of the media linking to the "live" version on your website. Animated .gifs are also alternatives that work across many—but not all—email clients.

**Designer Tip #10: Test and Test Again!**

We recommend adopting the policy of "Constant and Never-Ending Improvement" as a way to improve ongoing design and rendering efforts. Simple A/B tests can be incorporated into your regular send schedule to learn about one element of your email design with each send. A multi-variate test requires some extra work, but the analysis can net huge gains in effective email design as you can test multiple elements at once. For the most experienced tester, we recommend an experimental design—or Taguchi—testing plan to test hundreds of combinations of design elements at once. No matter your approach, testing will always be worth your time to confirm your current design or set it off in the correct direction.

**W3C Validation At Your Fingertips.**

Validators – like the one available at <http://validator.w3.org/> – can be a valuable tool to check for syntax errors. Keep in mind that some email clients may require non-compliant or deprecated tags in order for your design to display properly.

**Hungry For More?**

Download ExactTarget's recorded webinar: *Using Rich Media to Maximize Your E-Marketing Effectiveness* from [www.exacttarget.com](http://www.exacttarget.com). For additional information, also check out *Animation in Retail Emails* released by the Email Experience Council (EEC) in June 2007.

## Designer Part #2: Design Tips by Email Client

Now that we've covered the general guidelines for optimized email design, let's look at some specific email client recommendations for making sure your subscribers see exactly what you want them to see.

### Email Client #1: Outlook 2003 and 2007.

Optimizing an email for Outlook is imperative for diligent email marketers, regardless of a B2B or B2C focus. Both Outlook 2003 and Outlook 2007 use preview panes and block images by default. Though Outlook 2003 is one the most "forgiving" email clients to design for, the tips below will help you optimize your emails for the most commonly-used versions of Outlook.

#### Outlook 2003

If you're optimizing for Outlook 2003, it's imperative to specify the height and width of the images included in the code. Without these specifications, the blocked image—including an automatic security warning—expands to the width of a single line.

#### Outlook 2007

Outlook 2007 presents a host of unique challenges, and full recommendations are detailed in ExactTarget's *Seven Tips for Outlook 2007* whitepaper. Listed below are some additional tips for optimizing your design for Outlook 2007 users.

- **Avoid Background Images.** We recommend that designers use background images as secondary elements, because they will not render in Outlook 2007. A solid border around the email using spacer .gifs or a matching background color coupled with a background image are two alternative options.
- **Avoid CSS Positioning.** Revert to standard HTML tables to control layout. This will ensure your email renders as designed because Outlook does not support the "float" or "position" CSS properties.
- **Avoid Forms.** Outlook 2007 does not support forms (i.e. embedded surveys, search boxes) (Figure 6). Because forms are disabled, we recommend using the email real estate in other ways and encouraging subscribers to "view as a webpage" or click on a link where a survey or form can be hosted on a webpage.
- **Avoid Animated .gifs.** Neither Outlook 2003 nor Outlook 2007 supports rich media content. Outlook 2003 will display animated .gifs correctly, but Outlook 2007 will only display the first frame of an animated .gif.

1. What flooring product(s) would you like to learn more about?  
 Carpet  
 Hardwood  
 Laminiate  
 Ceramic  
 Area Rugs

[Submit]  
 If you do not receive a confirmation page after clicking submit, please click [here](#).

Figure 6

By default, Outlook 2007 disables forms, such as embedded subscriber surveys.

#### Keep In Mind...

Email clients are always evolving. These are specific email design recommendations current as of March 2008.

#### Hungry For More?

Check out ExactTarget's *Seven Tips for Outlook 2007 Whitepaper* (available at [www.exacttarget.com](http://www.exacttarget.com)) to learn more about the ins and outs of designing your emails for optimized Outlook rendering.

**Email Client #2: Lotus Notes.**

Lotus Notes market penetration is estimated to be 6-20% for business users. Most B2B designers are keenly aware of the client's unique rendering challenges because the email client does not support many common HTML and CSS properties (Figure 7). If you know that a high percentage of your subscribers use Lotus Notes, here are tips to help your design.

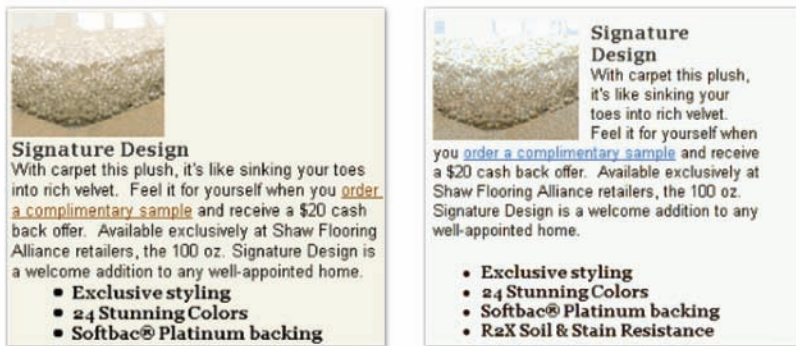


Figure 7

Lotus Notes 7 (left) renders many formatting elements differently than other commonly-used B2B email clients, such as Outlook 2007 (right).

- **Use Tables for Layout.** Later versions of Lotus Notes support some CSS properties, but designers don't necessarily know which version a subscriber is using. Therefore, the safest bet is to use tables for effective layout and rendering.
- **Avoid COLSPANs and ROWSPANs.** When multi-column layouts are necessary, use nested tables and isolate each row as an individual table.
- **Specify Accurate <td> and <table> Widths.** Lotus Notes displays the exact width you've specified, even if that means displaying a 2000 pixel-wide column within a 600 pixel-wide table. Ensure you've specified accurate widths to avoid this issue.
- **Avoid Background Images.** Neither the CSS property nor its deprecated cousin (the "background" HTML attribute) are supported in Lotus Notes. Instead, use the "bgcolor" property to create contrast or highlight areas of interest.
- **Use Table Attributes or Spacer .gifs for Padding.** Since CSS "padding" properties are ignored by Lotus Notes, using built-in attributes for "cellpadding" and "cellspacing" in your table structure can be useful. In cases where "cellpadding" or "cellspacing" may not be appropriate, spacer .gifs can also be used. Keep in mind that these .gifs are images and may be blocked in other email clients that suppress images.
- **Remember the 12 x 12 Rule.** Lotus Notes will not render any images smaller than a 12 pixel by 12 pixel square, so any ruled lines or other design elements created by using spacer .gifs smaller than 12 x 12 pixels will be enlarged.
- **Avoid Bookmarks and Anchor Links.** It is important to note that bookmark and anchor links are not supported in Lotus Notes, and it may be best to drive your subscribers to a "view as a webpage link" to see an HTML version of your communication.

"After conducting internal testing, we found Lotus Notes was by far the most demanding environment for which to design emails. The end result looks very different in Lotus Notes versus HTML. For example, tables are particularly troublesome. We have to specify the width of each element of the table or it will go haywire in Lotus Notes."

– Jeff Chandler

Senior Manager, Marketing Tools and Technologies, Convergys

**Hungry For More?**

Request ExactTarget's *Lotus Notes* Use Case to learn how these practical tips can make a big impact on the performance of your email in this challenging client.

**Email Client #3: Hotmail.**

Average email marketers may see 20% or more of their lists use Hotmail. If you are a B2C designer with a high number of Hotmail users, consider the following tips for optimized email rendering.

- **Links.** Hotmail automatically displays all links without an underline, and the underline only appears when the mouse hovers over a link. If underlined links are desired, you need to set the “text-decoration” property to underline with inline CSS in the <a> tag of every individual link.
- **Image Blocking.** Hotmail defaults to using gray rectangles when blocking images and does not display “alt” tags (Figure 8). While there is no way to force Hotmail to display “alt” tags, we recommend including them for other email clients that do render them when images are blocked by default.

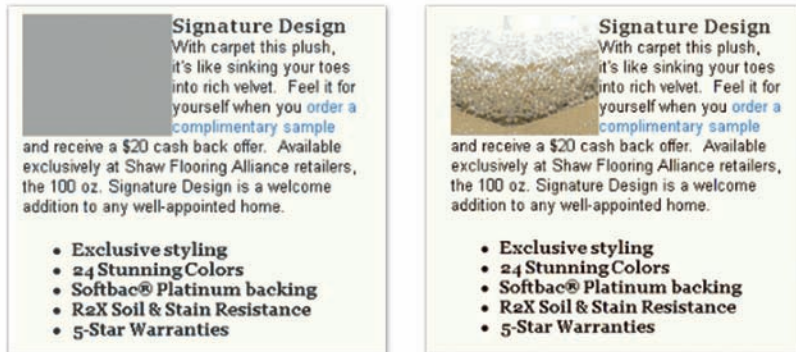


Figure 8

By default, Windows Livemail and Hotmail display emails with images off in the inbox, replacing images with gray boxes without “alt” tags or security warnings (left).

- **Non-Black Default Font Color.** Hotmail will set any text without a specific font color to dark gray. To ensure colors maintain brand standards and display as intended, assign a specific color (even if it’s black) to all text in your message.
- **Avoid Forms.** Hotmail will render forms properly, but disables the submit button—so forms will not function as intended. Encourage subscribers to view the email as a webpage or drive them to a website where the forms can be rendered properly.
- **Firefox + Hotmail = Image Difficulty.** When a subscriber uses a Firefox browser to view email in Hotmail, the subscriber may see extra white spaces under images. This can severely impact email rendering. Avoid this problem by using a workaround that places a “display: block” style in image tags: <img src=“image.jpg” style=“display: block;”>. This workaround could potentially cause rendering issues with other email clients, so be certain to test.

“We use the color palette from our art department to match our email HEX colors with our brand. It’s always a better idea to use HEX codes than trying to eyeball it.”

– Jeff Chandler

Senior Manager, Marketing Tools and Technologies, Convergys

**Email Client #4: Gmail.**

Gmail, like other web-based email clients, is constantly evolving. These updates continually change the way HTML emails are rendered. Not only do email designers need to pay special attention to Gmail, they need to be aware that their Gmail subscribers may be seeing one of two different versions of Gmail.

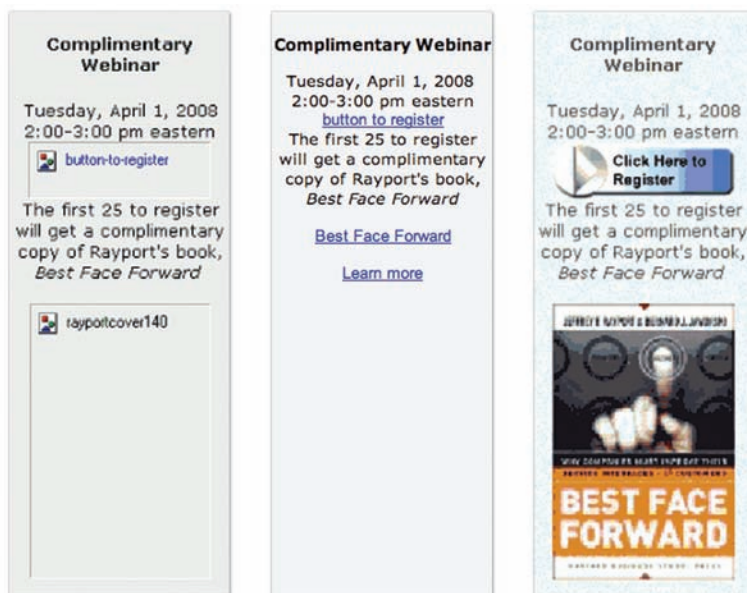
- **CSS Borders.** The newer version of Gmail has difficulty rendering CSS borders. Occasionally, 1-2 pixels of white space will be added to the left or right side of the content enclosed within the border. This issue affects some designs more than others, so if you have a particular element that depends on symmetry, test both old and new Gmail versions to ensure your design renders properly.
- **“Cellpadding” and “Cellspacing”.** Remember “cellpadding” and “cellspacing” applied to an HTML table are not supported in the newer version of Gmail. If you want to apply padding to an element in Gmail you have to use the CSS “padding” property.
- **Use Inline CSS.** In both versions of Gmail, CSS must be applied inline. External or embedded CSS in the head of the HTML will be stripped out.
- **Background Images.** Background images are supported in both versions of Gmail. However, the “background-image” CSS property is not supported, so the HTML “background” attribute must be used to assign a background image. Background image will always repeat (tile) in both the horizontal and vertical directions.
- **Image Blocking.** Both versions of Gmail block images by default. However depending on the browser, blocked images are handled in different ways. The older version consistently displays an icon in the upper left corner as well as a 1 pixel black border around the image. When viewed in Firefox, the newer version removes the icon and border (Figure 9). The space occupied by images is often times compressed, shrinking your email vertically. Once the images are unblocked they are displayed in the proper width and height.

**Understanding Gmail Versions.**

Google released the newer version of Gmail in late 2007 to a select number of users as part of a gradual rollout to their user base. You can tell if you have the newer version by looking at the links in the upper right. If you see a link that says “Older Version” it means that you have the newer version. Note that the newer version is not currently available to users of Internet Explorer 6 or Opera..

“Designing for Gmail requires us to pay special attention to the email client’s tendency to strip a lot of our formatting.”

– Jan Ball  
Graphic Specialist, Shaw Floors



**Figure 9**

The older version of Gmail (left) blocks the image and replaces it with an icon in the upper left corner of the space, as well as a 1 pixel black border around the missing image. In Firefox, the newer version of Gmail blocks images by default without the icon and border (middle). Images appear normal when unblocked by the recipient (right).

**Email Client #5: Yahoo.**

Because it's one of the largest ISPs in the world, B2C and B2B marketers want to ensure that their emails render appropriately in Yahoo. While Yahoo displays most CSS properties and does not present large design-specific challenges, marketers mailing to Yahoo will want to test both the Classic and Beta versions, as they sometimes render emails differently.

For example, Yahoo Classic does not offer a preview pane, while Yahoo Beta features a preview pane with images blocked by default. Since there is no accurate way to determine what subscribers on your list are seeing your email in each of the two versions of Yahoo, we recommend testing to both versions of Yahoo for optimization.

**Email Client #6: Thunderbird.**

According to Pivotal Veracity, Mozilla's free email client represents approximately 5% of the at-work email market. Designers love Thunderbird because it supports almost every CSS property. It's important to remember that Thunderbird has a small market share for B2B subscribers. So unless you're sending emails to internal subscribers using Thunderbird, you'll want to follow the guidelines in this whitepaper to create emails that render for the maximum number of subscribers possible.

**Email Client #7: Apple Mail.**

Apple Mail constitutes less than 5% of the market for email clients, but remains a favorite among design shops and agencies. If you can confirm that your subscriber list is using mostly Apple Mail, consider using advanced CSS properties to spice up your emails. If not, we recommend optimizing for other email clients and ISPs.

**Email Client #8: AOL.**

If you're a B2C marketer, you likely have a large amount of AOL subscribers on your list, though some B2B marketers find AOL as a large portion of their lists as well. While there are image blocking considerations for subscribers at AOL (as the email client blocks images by default), it is also important to note AOL does not offer a preview pane view. Therefore, creating effective from names, from addresses, and subject lines becomes even more important. Other than appearance in the inbox, there are not large design considerations to manage specifically for AOL, as the email client renders most CSS properties.

**Designer Conclusion**

As an email designer, the most important point to remember is that the email landscape is ever changing. Each email client is unique and has varying support for HTML and CSS. Until there are industry-wide standards in place, it will remain a challenge to create emails that will render effectively across the board. The best way to tackle this challenge is through frequent and thorough testing.

"Subscribers are busy with very little bandwidth. Our emails must grab their attention immediately and be persuasive. We're focused on content and messaging. But we're just as focused on packaging that information within an attractive, properly-rendered email."

— Jeff Chandler  
Senior Manager, Marketing Tools  
and Technologies, Convergys

## Additional Email Marketing Design Resources

Whether you've read this whitepaper with the heart of a marketer or the eye of a designer, we hope you're walking away with actionable tips you can implement today. And if you're looking for additional resources, you're in luck.

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