White Paper
Email creative

Contents

About this document

Best practices are based on the collective experience of the industry and this is not meant as a definitive guide on how to create email campaigns that will produce superb results. It has been shown in the past that campaigns that break all the rules can sometimes work and produce great results. There are many variables that can affect how your campaign is received. The aim of this document is to give you a few guidelines and tips whether you are new to email marketing or just looking to re-evaluate what you are currently doing. Only through testing and refining of your own procedures will you be able to put together your own best practices that best suit your needs and your audience.

This white paper on Email Creative is one of a series of white papers published by the Legal, Data and Best Practice Hub of the DMA Email Marketing Council. They are designed to help make Best Practice more readily understandable, so that you can implement them within your organisation.

Whether you follow these guidelines or not, it is important that all the necessary legal requirements detailed in the Data Protection Act 1998, the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003 as amended by the Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) (Amendment) Regulations 2011 and Companies Act 2006 are included in your campaigns. This includes such things as a working unsubscribe and company details. These should be included at the start of the planning and design phase so they become part of the overall design and not just an afterthought.

About the authors

Executive summary

The inbox is a very congested place. According to the Email Statistics Report produced by The Radicati Group in 2010 (http://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Email-Statistics-Report-2010-2014-Executive-Summary2.pdf) a typical corporate user sends and receives about 110 messages every day with this rising to over 200 before the end of 2010. The VP of Jupiter Research said in 2008 that an average reader took 2 - 5 seconds to decide whether to read or delete an email. With the increasing volume of emails received today, this gives you very little time to grab the user's attention as their eyes scan over the visible content of your campaign.

Unlike many other forms of marketing, building a successful email campaign is not all about the look and aesthetics of the collateral. Obviously this is a major component but just as important is understanding how the user will view the final piece. In traditional marketing such as print you see exactly what the recipient will see. In email this might not necessarily be the case.

The creative is still hugely important in a successful campaign since it is sometimes the only connection a client has with your brand, and one of the many reasons for email marketing is building your brand. The last thing you want to do is undo all your good work building a successful brand with a succession of badly designed campaigns. Designers like things to look nice. A good email designer also takes into account the message and the aim of the campaign. Don't compromise deliverability, the message or a call to action just because something looks better in the print version.

Obviously good copywriting is a must. No matter how good your campaign looks, if the content doesn't make sense or is too long you run the risk of losing the recipient's attention before any call to action. However, if the content is too short it won't convey the correct message and the user will lose interest and leave.

This document is not intended to be a technical manual, and the 10 steps do not contain detailed instructions on how to implement each of the recommendations. The idea is to show that email creative is not a dark art requiring witchcraft and technical know how but that by following a few simple steps your campaign can achieve better results. And, after all, results are what gauge a successful campaign.

Ten factors to consider in email creative

1. Test! Test! Test!

If you mention testing an email campaign to people they normally associate it with checking the campaign for mistakes and sending test messages to check links work, images load etc. However, it is important to remember that an email campaign can be updated and altered in real-time and that every component listed in this whitepaper is a variable. The key is to use the data available, assess the ongoing success of the campaign and tweak as necessary.

To do this you need to decide on your criteria for a successful campaign. Do you want to drive more people to your website, have more people read your message or simply increase the number of articles that are clicked on? Once you have a target you can then start to think about what components of the campaign will affect this. If you're interested in opens then maybe the subject line needs varying to get people's attention. If it is clicks you are interested in then maybe the position of the articles or the calls to action can be changed.

The key to testing a campaign is planning. Don't just randomly change variables and then try to judge which variant gave you the best results. Have a goal or aim, analyse your data, make a change to achieve the goal and test again.

A simple way to start is with split tests on the subject line. Something easily set up, with minimal cost or time which can start to give an insight not only into the benefits of testing but also what types of subject line your audience responds to. Split testing is a very effective way of testing your campaign to achieve better results. For details on split testing there is a DMA white paper giving ten steps to better split testing.

2. Design

a. Image frequency and size

Images should never be embedded or sent as an attachment to an email. This not only massively increases the size of the email that the user has to download but also isn't supported by most email clients. Recipients will receive a very large email with missing images. With a linked image the image is only downloaded when the email is previewed or opened.

If your message is made up entirely of a couple of images then you are going to increase the chances that it ends up in the junk folder. Many spam filters work out a ratio of text to images in an email and score it accordingly. So even if your message is made up of multiple images it will still be a problem if there is very little actual text. Also many email clients by default have images turned off. The recipient will want to know the context of the email message before they download the images. One way to help with this is to use Alt tags for your images. This tag will help describe what the image is supposed to be when it isn't being displayed and give the user an idea of what they are downloading.

There are however a number of ways you can ensure that your images will be seen by the recipient. The first is to make sure you are on the recipient's Safe Sender list in Outlook. Safe Senders are the email addresses of senders from which the Outlook user consents to receive full graphic messages. Add text at the top of your campaigns asking your subscribers to add your "From Address" to their address book as a "Safe Sender."

Another way to have your images displayed by default with some of the major ISPs is to join a certification program such as the one from Return Path (www.returnpath.net).

You also need to consider the physical size of your images as well. There is no need to have all your images as high resolution jpegs when a gif would be fine and a tenth of the size. Remember, the user has to download all these images. As a rule of thumb use jpeg images for photos or any true colour image. For everything else use the gif format.

b. JavaScript, Flash and video

As a general rule of thumb, JavaScript, Flash and embedded video should never be included in an email as very few email clients will support them and it will increase the likelihood of your message never reaching the recipient.

The solution is to include an image and link the image to a landing page which contains the flash movie. The same is true of video. Instead of trying to embed the video in your email as an mpeg or animated gif, it is better to include an image that looks like a video and when the image is clicked it takes the user to the video on a hosting site such as YouTube. Sites like this are specifically designed to stream video and support large numbers of users viewing videos all at the same time.

c. Background images

The use of background images is a standard technique when designing web pages. It's a simple way to overlay text on an image and makes a dull piece of text more interesting to the eye.

However, the way email clients display background images is not consistent. For example, Outlook 2007 and Gmail require a bit of CSS trickery to get them to display background images.

There are ways to use background images and provide support for most of the popular email clients but it is not 100% reliable. Try to avoid background images wherever possible and don't make your entire design rely on a background image. If you do have to use a background image then include a background colour that the email client can fall back to if it doesn't display the image.

d. Value of the content

We have already said that images might not be downloaded and displayed by default. With this in mind, it makes sense not to put important and valuable information in an image as the user might never see it. This includes any calls to action that you might have. If the call to action (CTA) is an image saying "click here to purchase" then there is a chance the user will never see it unless they download the images which they might not be able to do. By all means include a call to action on images but, if you do, ensure the CTA is repeated in HTML that does not require images to be shown. One technique for doing this is using a simple HTML based button with CSS styling.

For this reason it is always important to test your campaigns with images turned on and off and change the design appropriately so the message is still conveyed to the user even without images.

e. Width

When creating an email it is possible to have its width automatically change depending on the width of the email client. This sounds good but it means you have no control over how the user is going to see your message. From mobile clients to wide screen monitors you are going to get vastly different results. The general rule is to define the width to a specific pixel size and keep your emails fairly narrow. General rule of thumb is 700 pixels wide. Many email clients don't give you the full screen to preview or view emails so it is unlikely you will get a full 1024 pixels width or more without scrolling.

3. Coding

a. Inline styles

The head element of any HTML document usually contains information about the content of the document such as style definitions and whether you are using an external or internal style sheet. It should never contain any content you want displayed. Most email clients will ignore everything between the HTML <head> tags in an email and this includes style definitions. The solution is to use what is called inline styles. Inline styles must be applied to every element you want them on and is done by adding the style parameter to the HTML tag i.e.

<p style="margin-top: 0; margin-bottom: 1em;">

The above style can be used to render paragraph tags correctly in Yahoo. Designing HTML for emails is about the only time you will ever use inline styles since it is restrictive and difficult to make changes to.

b. Clean code

It goes without saying that if your HTML code is not written correctly then you are going to have rendering problems. Some problems might not be immediately apparent because some rendering engines try to fix broken or badly written HTML and have a best guess at what you are trying to achieve. So from your point of view everything looks good. However if someone else's email client doesn't fix these problems then they will see something completely different. Once you are happy with your design it's a good idea to run it through an HTML validator to check all the syntax is correct and all tags are correctly closed.

c. Old is good

When it comes to starting to convert your design into HTML code for your email, the first thing to do is forget everything you have learned about using CSS and DIV areas for layout. If you have never heard of CSS and DIV areas then it is not a problem as you won't be using them. If you have, then you need to go back to basics and use simple tables to layout your content and CSS for formatting only. It is simple and safer as tables are supported by all email clients. Also, try and use nested tables to create your layout rather than setting margins and padding. Again it is more reliable across email clients. It's old fashioned but effective.

d. Links

There are a number of standard links that you should consider including in every email that you send. These are normally standard links provided with every Email Service Provider solution.

It is essential that you include a clear unsubscribe in your message and the unsubscribe page should be branded with your logo etc. to give the recipient confidence in what they are unsubscribing from. It is also good practice to make sure the unsubscribe process requires no more than 2 clicks to be successful.

At the top of your email and clearly visible should be a link to an online version of the email. If people are having problems viewing your email then they can click this link to view the message online in their normal web browser. The people at Litmus have discovered that by adding a piece of CSS code to your email you can have Outlook 2010 automatically added to the online link at the top of your message http://litmus.com/blog/outlook-2010.

So you can track how your message is forwarded, it is a good idea to include a forward to a friend link. Please see Section 3.3. viral email marketing in the DMA Email Marketing Council's Best Practice Guidelines for details on the legality of this. The idea is to encourage people to use this link to forward the email to other people rather than using the forward button in their email client. The advantage is that you can see how many people the message has been forwarded to and judge the viral properties of your campaign.

When a recipient receives a forwarded copy of your message they may decide that the content of the message is very relevant to them and that they want to receive future campaigns. To facilitate this, it is a good idea to have a subscribe link in the message.

Social media links are also an important element that shouldn't be overlooked. Links to your Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites are a good way to increase traffic to these sites and subsequently your own website.

4. Rendering

There are lots of different desktop and web-based email clients in use today and each one has many different versions. Many render HTML in slightly different ways. For example, an Internet Explorer based rendering engine will attempt to fix any issues with the HTML as it sees fit. The same code in a Mozilla based email client may look different as it doesn't do this.

A good analogy is to think of HTML as a language, which it is, and the email clients are the interpreters. As with any language each interpreter can interpret things in slightly different ways that can completely change the original meaning. The same issue exists with HTML. Each email client can interpret the HTML slightly differently and produce very different results.

The answer is to preview your email in as many email clients as possible. In the past this meant installing a variety of email clients on your desktop and continually keeping up to date with new releases. This was both time consuming and costly. Now there are a number of tools on the market that can help with this. Most Email Service Provider solutions include a preview tool and there are third party external solutions such as Litmus (litmus.app) and Return Path (www.returnpath.net).

5. Content

a. Think like a spam filter

For many years now spam filters have been a standard part of any email system. As spammers have discovered new techniques, the spam filters protecting us have become more intelligent. Although content filtering plays a smaller part in email deliverability these days, it is still a contributing factor and something to be aware of when designing and building your campaigns.

In its simplest form the filter uses a set of rules. These rules look for certain phrases in the content and if these phrases are found then a score is applied. All the scores are then added together and if the total exceeds a threshold then the message will be regarded as spam. To make things even more fun this threshold is configurable so the same message may be categorised as spam by one filter and not another.

It is pretty obvious that words like "Viagra" or "V14GR4" will get your message a high score but so will using a capital letters when they aren't required or phrases such as "special offer" or "limited time". You also need to be aware of spelling mistakes, hidden text and small fonts. All these can increase your spam score. It is possible to use words such as "free", such words don't mean you will be considered spam, they only increase the risk. As long as not too many other factors add to your overall score you can still get your email delivered.

If you would like more detail about what phrases may cause you problems then have a look at the SpamAssassin website http://spamassassin.apache.org. This has a full set of rules listed showing scores for thousands of phrases. But beware there are hundreds of customised rulesets available for free that can be added to the default ruleset and it is very easy for users to create their own for specific problems they have.

Note that content isn't the only factor on which emails are scored for spam. Your domain, IP address reputation and increasingly the level of engagement are all factors that can affect delivery. However, even with a good reputation, if the content looks like spam you may still not make the inbox.

Further information on spam filters and reputation can be found in the DMA Deliverability White Paper.

b. Language

If you want your email to be read by the recipient then the key is to know your target audience and if necessary segment and tailor the message accordingly. Consider an IT product launch. If the recipients are technical then they will more likely want to know a bit about how it works and what it is capable of. If they are non-technical then it will be more about what it can do and how much it costs. If they are the CEO they will want to know how it improves the bottom line. There is some commonality across all the groups as everyone will be interested in the release date.

c. Brand

Good email branding will inspire trust in the recipient and reassure the reader that the email is from you. Conversely, bad branding can have the opposite effect and the reader might begin to doubt the origin of the email. As well as having your company logo above the fold and adhering to your brand guidelines, you can also re-iterate your brand in other places. Try including your brand in the subject line or as text in the alt tags of any images. This way if images

are turned off it's still obvious who the email is from. It's sometimes also a good idea to use your company name as the addressee as it will hopefully be a name the recipient will recognise.

6. From the web to email

In general, the first people to whom a company will turn to design their email campaigns are the people they know who are familiar with HTML design and their brand guidelines. That's usually the people that developed their website, whether that is in-house staff or an external agency. Unfortunately building an email is not like building a page for the web. It has its own set of challenges and needs a different approach. A good example is design width. For a web page the norm is that 1024 pixels width is a good size. However, if you design an email using this width it will be almost double the width the average email client has to display the message.

When you design a web page you never design to account for the fact that the images might not be displayed. After all, if the HTML is correct and the images exist then they are always going to be displayed in the browser. This is not always the case with email.

As we have already said, there are numerous desktop and web-based email clients. As web browsers have moved towards standardisation and commonality, email clients have not. Perhaps much of the reason for this is simple. If you are writing a web browser then it needs to allow you to do what it says on the tin. Browse the web and display HTML pages correctly. Email clients often come as part of a business package and, as such, the whole package is the focal point and not just HTML rendering of the email client.

7. Personalisation and relevance

Personalisation is a well known factor in improving response rates and maximising the effectiveness of a marketing communication. We all have good intentions when wanting to create a good personalised message but it is worth remembering that unless done properly it can be a lot worse than not personalising at all. Nothing annoys a recipient more and gets them reaching for the spam button faster than a misspelt name, incorrect information or wrong assumptions. Done well it can be the thing that makes your campaign stand out in a crowded space.

Personalisation mistakes are unfortunately common place in email marketing and the problem is compounded because the very nature of email makes it likely they will be drawn to our attention. Whilst mistakes in direct marketing generally result in the offending piece being dispatched to the bin, these people are unlikely to bother writing a complaint and spending money on a stamp to post it. However, a disgruntled recipient of an email has a number of simple avenues through which they can make their thoughts clear. They can unsubscribe and hope to receive nothing further. They can mark the message as spam and hope that teaches you a lesson. Or they can hit reply and let you know exactly what they think of your message.

The aim of personalising a message is to demonstrate you know and understand enough about the recipient and their interests to have deduced that your email is relevant to them. The email has not been indiscriminately blasted to your entire database, but that you have selected them as individuals (or part of a small targeted group) to communicate something of relevance. Personalisation is not only about putting customer details in the email or subject line but also about tailoring the content of the email to an individual or group of individuals.

Batch and blast emailing is out. Ensure you understand that your email isn't about you and what you want them to read, it's about what they want to hear from you. With this they not only welcome your mailings but they anticipate them, open and respond!

8. Subject lines

Never underestimate the importance of a compelling, well constructed and effective subject line. It really could make or break your campaign. It is the first (and sometimes the only) thing that your customer will see. Who the email is from and what the subject infers about the content of the email are the main factors upon which your email will initially be judged. If you can improve your open rate from 25% to 30% by spending some time thinking about the subject line then it is definitely something worth exploring. Think of a subject line as being like the front page headline on a newspaper. Its purpose is to grab your attention and make you want to read more.

Opinion is divided as to whether short or long subject lines are better. Often short and direct is better with a limit of about 50-60 characters. This isn't to say that longer subject lines won't work either. You can include more descriptive detail in a long subject line which may act as a stronger driver for someone to open the email. Think of the subject line as your campaign, compacted into one single sentence. It is primarily in the subject line that you have the opportunity to really shine and visibly stand out from the crowd. Both short and long subject lines have their merits and only through testing can you determine which works best for your audience. The basic principle is always the same. Make sure the subject line grabs attention and stimulates interest.

Personalising subject lines can often draw people to look further, however this requires good A/B testing as it can sometimes have the adverse affect. For details on split testing there is a DMA whitepaper giving ten steps to better split testing.

9. The fold

The fold is a term borrowed from the newspaper industry and refers to the top half of the paper before it is folded in half. Editors place the most important articles above the fold so they are always visible and catch the eye when papers are folded and stacked on a shelf.

The same is true of email. You will only get a percentage of your email to display in the preview window without the recipient having to scroll. It is estimated that you have between 2 and 5 seconds to get the reader's attention and engage them before they delete the message (Jupiter Research). It is unlikely they are going to scroll through your message in this time to read content they cannot immediately see. You need to make sure that what the reader sees first is compelling, relevant and informative and that it offers a reason to open the message or scroll down. Key components to consider putting above the fold are your logo for branding, a call to action, navigation and the core subject matter.

10. Mobile clients

In a report produced by Forrester Research in 2008, it is estimated that by the end of 2013, 35% of European mobile users will use mobile internet services at least once per month. Analysts at Gartner also predicted that 70% of all mobile devices in Europe will be smartphones by 2012. Another report by The Radicati Group entitled "Wireless Email Marketing, 2009-2013" (www.radicati.com/?p=4133) says that mobile email users are set to increase at an annual rate of 68%, totalling over 1bn mailboxes by the end of 2013.

Understanding and thinking about mobile clients can significantly improve the performance of a campaign. Smartphones make it quick and simple for a mobile user to read their emails while on the move. They can click on links, reply to the message and even delete the message from their mailbox so it is never seen again. For these reasons it is important to make the mobile experience as user friendly as possible. Issues such as font resizing and screen size etc. all have an impact on the effectiveness of your campaign on a mobile device.

a. Font resizing

The iPhone or iPad automatically scales fonts that are less than 12px up to 12px. Depending on the design of your campaign, this can cause a number of issues as many people use much smaller fonts for sections such as disclaimers, copyrights etc. The auto resizing can be disabled by setting the inline style:

style="-webkit-text-size-adjust:none"

This applies to Webkit email clients only and will be ignored by all other email clients. Apple Mail will be affected and to avoid this you can use a CSS @media query which will change the formatting depending on the device it is being read on.

Conversely, if you design to allow the email to be resized and scaled by a smartphone then you should avoid putting text in images.

b. Screen size

The available space on a mobile device is considerably less than that of a desktop email client. If you know you have lots of users then maybe reduce the width of your campaign.
At time of writing, examples of smartphone / tablet screen resolutions are:

Apple iPhone 4	960 x 640
Apple iPhone 3	480 x 320
HTC Desire Z	800 x 480
RIM PlayBook	1024 x 600
Sony Experia X10	854 x 480
Apple iPad	1024 x 768

Summary

In summary, there are ten points that you should consider when you are building your email creative. Again, these are best practice guidelines based on collective industry experience and not a definitive guide.

1. **Test! Test! Test!** – Think of a testing strategy and what you want to achieve from the campaign.
2. **Design** – Don't rely on images alone to make your creative work.
3. **Coding** – Keep it simple and clean.
4. **Rendering** – Preview your email in as many different email clients as possible.
5. **Content** – Use your brand and be aware of spam filters.
6. **Web to email** – Be aware of the differences between a web page and email.
7. **Personalisaton and relevance** – Avoid mistakes and keep it relevant.
8. **Subject lines** – Grab the recipient's attention and make them interested.
9. **The fold** – Remember all your email isn't visible.
10. **Mobile clients** – Don't forget about them.

Further reading and useful links

The following section provides a list of useful documentation and website links that readers can follow for further information on the points that have been dealt with above.

Spam Assassin
http://spamassassin.apache.org

Litmus
http://litmus.com

Return Path
http://www.returnpath.net

Radicati group
http://www.radicati.com

DMA Deliverability white paper
http://www.dma.org.uk/toolkit/deliverability-white-paper-review