

Getting your email creative right

There's more to email template design than meets the eye.

Good email design relies on a number of key factors, all playing their part. A good email creative often relies on achieving the right balance between imagery and text. An email which is image heavy and text poor (a common mistake for the novice email marketer) may have great visual appeal but it will be penalised by many SPAM filters and will result in lower successful open rates.

On the other hand an email which is text heavy may be hard on the eye and might not hold the reader's attention long enough to get the desired message across.

By following some simple best practice email design principles and adjusting the layout of your email, it is possible to achieve significant, measurable results in no time. The first thing you need to do is to clearly define your goals. What do you hope to achieve from your email marketing? Do you want to achieve maximum open rates, greater click-throughs to your website, lower unsubscribe rates or greater deliverability so you are less likely to be flagged as potential SPAM?

Some considerations

- Do not change your email design frequently. It will make it harder for your reader to familiarise themselves with your emails.
- Consider how your email will look when the images are disabled. Will the recipient recognise it's from you when the images are not there? Can they still see the important information?
- Try not to use images where you can use a solid background colour instead. This can help reduce the likelihood of getting stuck in spam filters.
- Simplify navigation, and make it easier for the reader to locate what they are interested in. If possible try and incorporate a text navigation menu (not images as these will not appear by default) near the top of your email with links back to your website to maximise click-throughs.
- Does the email design fit with your brand?
- Make sure you steer clear of:
 - CSS
 - Java script
 - Animated GIF
 - Flash
 - Web page templates
- Finally, test your designs. See which layout works best. Is it helping you meet your desired outcomes?

Creating effective subject lines

Often it's the last thing you do. You've spent a lot of time crafting your email newsletter or campaign and now you just want to get it out. So you come up with a quick subject line or use a standard, "February newsletter" and away it goes. You're proud of this one and expecting great results.

A few days later you eagerly check your campaign report only to find a disappointingly low open rate. What happened?

A number of factors can influence your open rate, not least of which is just getting your message to the inbox. But that's a subject for another time. Once you've made it to the inbox, one of the first things your recipients see is the subject line.

The subject line can be the dividing line between an open and a delete. Grab my attention with a compelling offer or topic of interest and I'm likely to open your email. Fail at capturing my attention in the second or two that you have my eyeballs, and I'm likely to either ignore your email or send it to my trash folder.

Here are some do's and don'ts when it comes to creating an effective subject line:

- Give your subject line the same passion and attention you give to your content. Think about your recipient and what's going to entice them to read your email.
- Be honest. Don't try to trick your recipient into opening your email by promising something you're not delivering. Lose their trust and you lose their interest.
- Keep it short. Many email applications only display 40-50 characters of the subject line, so if you need to go beyond that, make sure you have the most important information up front.
- Include personalisation. Addressing the recipient by their first name, for example, can add a more personal feel to your communication and increase your response rate.
- Avoid using spammy words and symbols, such as dollar signs and exclamation marks. Check your own junk folder to see what key phrases and words are popular and make sure you avoid them as much as possible.
- Test. Test. Test. Not all of these tips will work for your particular audience. If you have a large database, test different subject lines with different segments of your database to see which one generates the best results. Campaign Master's A/B Testing feature is a great tool for testing different options.

Following these simple guidelines can help to improve your open rates. But don't stop there. A better open rate doesn't necessarily mean better results. If more people open your email but don't engage with you any further, are you any better off than before?

The effort you put into crafting the perfect subject line should increase your response rates – click throughs, downloads, orders, etc – not just your open rates. In fact, your open rates could decrease while your overall response rates increase.

Deconstructing the email template

Feeling overwhelmed when it comes to newsletters?

We are not all webmasters or designers, so when it comes to designing your newsletter it can be a bit daunting. If you are new to email marketing, or just looking for some design tips, here is a brief introduction to newsletter templates and a few handy hints to keep in mind when creating your own.

Why create a template in the first place?

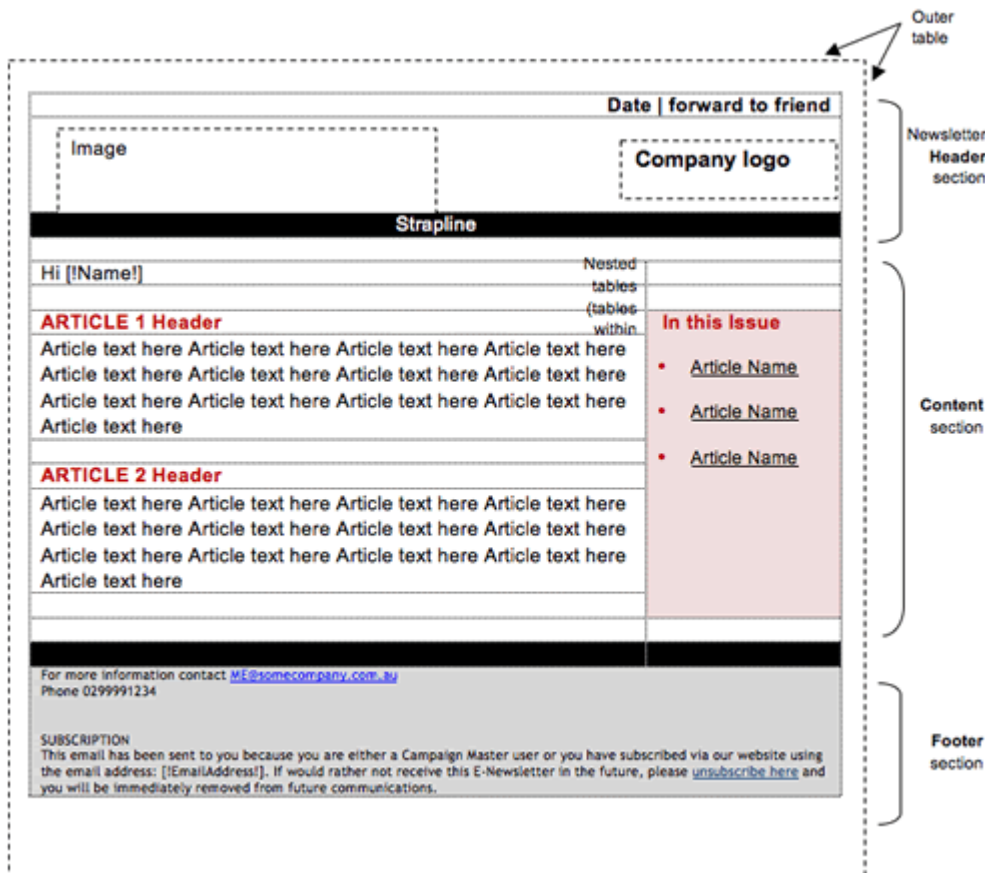
With newsletters there are always parts that are the same. By creating a template, you only have to create those parts once. Even if your newsletter only contains the most basic information it is still worth creating a template. What's more, by adding in all the obvious parts now, you won't forget them next time!

A simple newsletter structure is made up of three basic building "blocks": the header, the content, and the footer.

Header	This contains all the information that needs to be at the top. It includes the visible header of your newsletter. The header of your email generally remains unchanged.
Content	This is where the "meaty" bit sits. The content changes each time and contains article titles and text, links and images.
Footer	The footer contains information that goes at the bottom of your email, such as copyright, contact information and links to other pages. It also commonly includes the unsubscribe link, view online version link, forward to friend link etc. Typically this content remains the same for each newsletter.

What does the template look like "behind the scenes"?

All web browsers and email viewers are different, so in order to ensure the layout of your email remains stable and as you designed it originally, create it using tables. Here is a very simple example of a newsletter created with tables.



In this example, there is one outer table and within that, another nested table. Tables are made up of rows and columns. You can change each row and column as required by merging cells together and you can alter each cell's content, colour and font individually just as you would within a Word table.

Things to consider when designing your template

- To accommodate preview panes, keep your email width to no greater than 550 pixels, designing your outer table to be that width. Use absolute pixel width rather than percentages.
- If you are not concerned with preview panes use an absolute pixel width of 900 pixels.
- Keep all text left-aligned. It is difficult to read centred text on screen.
- Logos should be prominent and of good quality.
- Don't use fonts larger than 20 pt.
- Keep the ratio of text to images high. Spam filters look for images accompanied by little or no text, so when it comes to graphics, smaller images are better. If you want to use a large image, then it should be sliced into smaller jigsaw like portions. Images should be jpg or gif files between 5-15kb in size. Use absolute width. Include alt tags for images for best practice.
- Tables should be simple. When creating nested tables (table within tables) they should be kept to a minimum, as it can be difficult for users to adjust or update. Avoid creating tables with thick borders.
- When using columns, two is the optimum number to have. Any more and your newsletter becomes difficult to read.

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HTML email design

HTML email design can sometimes be a headache for marketers. Getting the design right is never an easy task, especially as there are many different email browsers, all which display emails differently. Even if you have a design you're happy with, it could end up faltering later on. No HTML email template is future-proofed.

HTML email design is an ongoing process involving frequent review of design methods. This document can be used as a current guide to assist in HTML email design.

Tables

- All email communications should have their content housed within a fixed width (pixels, not percentage) table. This provides greater control over the display of the email, regardless of what email browser or screen resolution the end recipient is using.
- Avoid nesting too many tables within each other. Certain email clients produce inconsistent results when there is more than one level of nested tables (i.e. a table within a table).
- Always define table, row, column and cell widths (and height where applicable).
- When defining table, row, column or cell heights, remove non-breaking space tags () for low height settings.
- Use tables as much as possible to define placement, rather than using line or paragraph breaks. Avoid using the spacebar to position your content.
- Avoid using cell padding and spacing as not all email clients support this feature.

Images

- Background images should be avoided, as some email clients such as Outlook 2007 do not display them. However, they can still be used if they are not critical to your message and do not affect the look and feel of your email if the image is not present.
- Include alternative text for all images in an HTML email.
- Animated GIFs are not recommended, as they do not fully render in some email clients. If they are used, keep in mind that the first frame of the GIF animation may be the only frame to display, so your main message should be displayed there.
- Most recipients will not be able to view Flash in HTML emails. Link to Flash content on a landing page instead.
- Always include the width and height in the image tag.
- Stretched images may not render correctly in some email clients. All images should have their correct dimensions in the file properties.
- Images should be set to border=0 by default, unless you specifically intend to design it with a border. However, image borders are not fully supported.
- Avoid relying on vertical and horizontal spacing for an image, as it is not fully supported.
- Use style="display:block" to avoid spacing issues with email clients such as Hotmail viewed through Firefox.

Text

- Define font size in pixels, not points. Pixels are the web standard measurement. Points are absolute lengths and different browsers and platforms may display these values differently.
- Use one or two different types of fonts at maximum and provide a sufficient list of alternate fonts in the style class. Fonts should be listed in terms of: desired, acceptable, generic (e.g. Arial, Helvetica, Sans-serif).
- Avoid ASCII characters, such as curly quotes, copyright symbols and special characters. Always use HTML equivalents instead.
- The following codes are allowed for font styling (refer later to CSS). These can be used as needed, or as one inline set: Font-family, Font-size, Font-style, Font-Weight.
- Some email clients create automatic links for any text that it reads as a web domain (e.g. .com, .co.uk, etc.), even if you haven't specified it as a link.
- Avoid vertically aligned content regions where height is determined by text, since some email clients display blocks of text with slightly different leading and kerning.

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)

- Cascading Style Sheets are not recommended. Instead, styles should be coded as inline styles to prevent certain email clients from removing CSS headers.
- If CSS is used, avoid embedding above the <body> tag.

Tags

- Avoid using <p> tags as they may create display problems in some email clients. If required, use two tags between paragraphs.
- Frames, iFrames and framesets are not allowed.
- Define style attributes in the nearest <td> or <a> tag.
- Forms, such as surveys, questionnaires or subscription forms, are not recommended due to inconsistent user experiences and results captured. It is better to use forms on landing pages rather than within the email.
- Avoid empty lines of code and spaces between an and </td> tag. Some browsers may read this space as an actual space in the overall layout, which can lead to misaligned graphics.
- Ensure all tags are properly closed; many email clients produce significant rendering errors if tags are not closed properly.

For more detailed information on creating HTML emails contact us.

If this all looks to complex please contact us, we are more than happy to design and manage the entire campaign process for you.