



HTML BEST PRACTICES

Email marketing is one of the most powerful and effective forms of marketing today. Email campaigns can be quickly deployed, offers measurable results, allows one-to-one communication and personalization and delivers a very high return on investment relative to other marketing options.

That notwithstanding, achieving maximum results from HTML emails, at least from the standpoint of message construction, does require adherence to sound HTML design techniques. Simple mistakes in your HTML code can adversely effect delivery and usability --- and ultimately hamstring your ROI. For this reason Makesbridge Technology has compiled this guide to HTML design. We hope you find it useful.

HTML Coding

Good HTML creates brand awareness, fosters utility for recipients, and typically yield higher response rates than Plain Text emails for BridgeMail System users. However, when the HTML is poorly designed your messages can be unreadable, not function as planned, and possibly be hung up in Spam Filters.

Given the above, here are a few general tips for coding HTML:

- ◆ Code HTML emails as a single Web page with basic <HTML>, <HEAD>, <TITLE>, and <BODY> tags.
- ◆ Make sure all tags have supported closing tags. The most common HTML errors come from not having a closing tag or having open <TD> or ,<TR> tags in the HTML. While your HTML might render properly in a browser, these errors can cause problems with many email clients.
- ◆ Test your HTML code. Make sure it complies with W3C standards. <http://validator.w3.org/>
- ◆ Code emails by hand if possible since WYSIWYG (What You See Is What

You Get) editors typically add extra code that can cause problems with certain email clients. If you must use an editor, our customers have had success with Dreamweaver and Homesite, which do not add extra code during design.

- ◆ Use only the ASCII character set. More advanced word processing software often inserts odd characters, such as a trailing dot character or a smart quote (slanted or curled instead of straight), which can effect display and perhaps create delivery problems in some email software. For example: Have you ever seen an odd “box” or ? where an apostrophe or quote mark should be in your email? This is caused by Microsoft Word’s “Auto-Correct” function.

- ◆ HTML Code should be self contained

- ◆ If you use CSS, include <STYLE> element in your HTML file between the <BODY> tags. Do not link to an external style sheet. This code is often stripped out by email clients, creating display problems.

- ◆ Avoid using CSS for positioning. The support is very limited and will, more than likely, result in a broken layout for most of our recipients.

- ◆ Use HTML tables for the design layout

- ◆ Keep emails a fixed width between 500-650 pixels wide.

- ◆ Avoid nested tables if possible. Some email clients, especially Lotus Notes and Netscape Messenger, might not render them correctly.

- ◆ Do not use JavaScript. Some emails do not support JavaScript, and others view it as a security risk.

- ◆ Do not use canvas background images. Most email clients do not display background canvas images. Background images for individual table cells are generally ok but might not appear in some clients like Lotus Notes.

- ◆ Do not apply attributes to the <BODY> tag. Attributes placed in the <BODY> tag are often flagged by spam filters and increase the likelihood of your message getting bulked or blocked.

- ◆ Do not embed images in the email. Some ISPs will filter emails with embedded images. Also, the file size can get quite large with multiple embedded images, which can also cause the email to be blocked. BridgeMail System does not allow for embedded images in email campaigns.

- ◆ Do not use EMBED tags

- ◆ Avoid embedding forms, such as surveys, into emails. Some email clients such as Hotmail might not pass the data through the collection point. Instead, link to a Web form that can complete the action.

- ◆ Animated GIF files are acceptable, but use them sparingly

- ◆ Use of image maps is acceptable

Validate HTML Content and Avoid Using Scripts

Approximately 90% of HTML emails do not comply with W3C HTML standards. This can cause rendering and delivery issues, particularly at AOL, MSN, and Hotmail. AOL, for example, has a filter that is an HTML validator, which scans messages for HTML syntax and formatting errors. If it detects invalid HTML, it will reject the message. This is because spammers use broken, invalid HTML to obfuscate their nefarious code.

We recommend establishing proofing procedures, and your procedure should include HTML validation. Popular HTML editing software such as Homesite or Macromedia Dreamweaver already offer effective validation tools and will highlight any errors as you create you message. For a thorough reference specification of HTML formatting, visit the W3C documentation pages <http://validator.w3.org/> . Also, you can use the HTML validator in your HTML editor application or a W3C validator service. <http://validator.w3.org/>

Also, avoid scripting. Security risks due to script vulnerabilities in email browsers have increased over the years. The result is most scripts, such as JavaScript and VBScript, get stripped out of messages. Some email systems outright reject messages if that contain scripting. For greatest compatibility avoid using scripts. Instead, drive recipients to your website, where dynamic components are easily rendered.

Using Forms in HTML Emails

We discourage embedding forms into email because of delivery and usability problems. However, when you do need to use a form, consider the following: Hotmail will not allow a working form in an email. Hotmail displays the form but strips all values from your <FORM> tag and removes the name values of all form elements, rendering the form useless. Hotmail recipients can complete the form, but nothing will happen when they hit the submit button.

Some email clients do not support forms that use “POST” method. Instead you will need to replace it with the “GET” method. The “GET” method will write all form content to the query string of the page to which the form is posted.

For example: `<form method=”get” action=”http://....>`

Most email clients that provide a preview pane do not allow you to tab between form elements. This means that when a recipient completes the first field in your form

and clicks the TAB key, the focus is automatically shifted to another part of the software or message. This hinders usability and can confuse your recipient.

Font and Font Size

In general, use only universally-supported fonts such as Arial and Times New Roman for your message. If you include fonts that are not also loaded on your recipients' computers, their email clients will substitute different fonts, which can effect your design. If you must use a special font (such as within a company logo), use it with an image. Arial is a font that was specifically designed for onscreen readability. Studies indicate that Web users prefer Arial, Verdana, and Tahoma to others when viewing Web pages and email.

Fonts can be specified in pixels, points or HTML font size value. Use a point size no smaller than 10 point, size "2" or 10 pixels.

Color

From images to fonts, colors play an important role in the design process but can also create problems. For example, don't choose a font color such as a muted gray on a gray background that makes your headlines and calls to action hard to read. Don't hide valuable information in your emails by blending the content into the background.

Men and women react differently to colors, but here's some data we've read on how gender and age effect color preferences:

Female Top 3 Favorite Colors: Blue, Purple, Green (all cool colors)

Female 3 Least Favorite Colors: Orange, Brown, Gray (warm and neutral colors)

Male Top 3 Favorite Colors: Blue, Green, Black (2 cool and one neutral color)

Male 3 Least Favorite Colors: Brown, Orange, Purple (neutral, warm, mixed colors)

Among all favorite colors, preferences for green decrease with age. (all genders)

Among all favorite colors, preferences for purple increase with age. (all genders)

Among least favorite colors (all genders), dislike of orange increases with age.

For more information, check out these resources:

<http://desktoppub.about.com/cs/color/a/symbolism.html>

http://desktoppub.about.com/od/howcolorworks/l/aa_colorsee.htm

Background Colors

Use a white or very light background with dark to medium font color to provide easy readability for your recipients. If you use background colors in sidebar boxes, for example, contain them within tables and avoid using a body background color, because Web-based clients typically place its attributes within a table. This might hurt your design. Also, email clients such as Microsoft Outlook might retain the background color when replying to or forwarding the email but use their default font color (usually black), making the text difficult to read.

Font Colors

Beware of using white as a font color. While it is tempting to use a dark background and white text to make it stand out, many spam filters key on the use of white (#FFFFFF) in a font tag as a possible spam trigger. Spammers often use white font on a white background to hide information from recipients. Use your color wheel to find contrasting colors that can accentuate your message.

Buttons Charts, etc...

Buttons, charts, and other supporting images should use colors of your design elements to pull the reader's eye to the images. Make sure the text color used on your images stands out and is readable. Most importantly, make sure the recipient understands the action.

Style Sheets

Many web designers use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to simplify the coding process and ensure a consistent style throughout their website. Use of CSS in HTML messages can be problematic since many email clients will not render style sheets correctly.

CSS and Email Clients					
	Hotmail	Yahoo	Gmail	Outlook	AOL
Linked Style Sheet	No Stripped	No	No	Yes	Yes
Embedded style (inline) between head tags	No Stripped	No	No Stripped	Yes	Yes

Emedded style (inline) between body tags	No Stripped	No	No Stripped	Yes	Yes
Testing environment: Windows XP, Internet Explorer 6.0					

When designing your email, keep in mind that popular email clients render CSS differently. Avoid using CSS if possible, but if you must use them, choose the embedded styles known as inline. Embed the style within the two body tags and not within the header. Some email clients will truncate or strip out the header. So, add the style within the body tags.

For example:

```
<body>
<style type="text/css"> <!-- td.maintext [] --> </style>
</body>
```

Keep HTML Emails 500-660 Pixels in Width

Most HTML emails are 500 – 650 pixels wide. Early email clients were developed before HTML and were not designed to render wide web page-like emails. More recently, the message windows of popular web-based email services like Yahoo Mail, Hotmail and Gmail will typically present 500-650 pixels, although this will vary according to users' screen resolutions.

This means that HTML messages wider than this range require the recipient to scroll horizontally to view the whole email. Forcing a user to scroll horizontally might be OK on your website, but you should avoid it in email.

Windows Service Pack 2: Impact on Email

Microsoft's Service Pack 2 for Windows XP includes several changes in the way Outlook Express processes email. First, it enables users to display email messages as either plain text or HTML. Selecting plain text mode forces Outlook Express to display the text part of the multi-part message, rather than the HTML part that has been so far the default.

Additionally the service pack alters the way messages display external HTML content. With SP2 installed, external HTML content, such as images or links to external CSS style sheets, does not automatically download. Outlook Express now includes a modification to the user interface allowing the user to authorize the

downloading of all external HTML content for a message.

These steps should help minimize the negative impact of these changes:

- ◆ Create a suitable text version of your message to accommodate users who prefer it to HTML.
- ◆ Minimize or eliminate reliance on external CSS to specify message formatting. This will prevent severe disruption of message formatting and reduce the chance that your message will be mistaken for spam.
- ◆ Specify the height and width of images used in HTML content. Without image dimensions manually set, a Web or email browser will “stretch” the rest of the HTML content around the image after it has completed loading. Now that the image loading will not happen by default, the browser will not immediately have a reference point for correctly placing the content unless specified. Image sizes are specified in pixels and are set in the tag.

For example: ``

Images

Images for emails should be hosted on a web site and not embedded within the email to ensure proper rendering and minimize file size. As a BridgeMail System customer, you are aware we ‘enforce’ this best practice by not allowing file attachments in emails. You can use as many images as you wish (*but be sure to keep each image size at or below 50kb to avoid filtering*) – the right number depends on purpose, type and focus of the email. Ecommerce emails often have more images than promotional emails.

Consider using graphic images and buttons to draw readers’ attention. These images can convey concepts such as Free Shipping, Email-Only Special, Buy now and Limited Supply in combination with your copy. Make sure your call to action is not only supported by an image but also by text. This way, if the images are turned off, the recipient can still find your call to action.

Important: Define size and parameters (horizontal and vertical height in pixels) of each graphic in the `` tags.

For example: ``

Use Image Alt Tags

HTML “alt” tags display a text description of an image when either the image does not display or when a cursor rolls over a displayed image. Using alt tags in your HTML emails is important for three reasons:

1. Recipients using dial-up or other slow connections might not see images for several seconds. Displaying alt tag text can convey what is to come.
2. Many email clients (Outlook 2003 and Outlook Express) and email services (AOL, Yahoo, and Gmail) disable images by default or display a warning message or command to download the images
3. Gmail email services uses what it calls “snippets”, which display the first few text words it sees in an email, following the subject line. Gmail will also display the text from alt tags, so it is important to use this to your advantage – like an addition to your subject line.

A sample alt tag would look like this:

```
<img src=http://www.bridgemailsystem.com/buynow.gif alt="Buy Now" border=0>
```

Tips on using alt tags:

- ◆ Newsletters: for logos, headers, section titles and other uses of images, describe the logo and image, but consider adding a brief teaser that explains the that section of the newsletter. For example: “Optimization – Strategies for improving email marketing performance”
- ◆ Ecommerce Emails: Include short but complete descriptions of product photos, including banners such as “50% off”
- ◆ Charts and Graphs: Include enough text to explain the value and contest of the chart or graph, such as “Chart: Analytics Report for Last 10 Campaigns”
- ◆ Gmail Snippets/Preview Text: use an appropriate image in our header to display key teaser info. For ecommerce emails, the information might expand on special offers mentioned in the subject line, reinforce Free Shipping or promote additional products. For newsletters, consider mentioning additional articles beyond what is in the subject line, or expand on the existing topic.

While this sounds like a lot of work, at most, it probably adds 5-10 minutes to your email production. Most importantly, marketers who don’t use alt tags accordingly risk lower open rates and click-through rates because recipients may decide not

display graphics or act further.

Create a Web Version of Your Email Newsletter

Although the majority of email clients and email web interfaces render HTML correctly, your recipients could be using an older version of Lotus Notes or AOL, which might not render your images properly. Giving readers a link to a Web version or offering a text option ensures recipients see the email as you intended.

Include a “view web version of this message” link at the top of our email. On the Introduction page of the Wizard (where Subject, From, and Reply To Address reside), BridgeMail System offers its users the option to post a web version of the email, provides the URL, and offers the option to place that URL at the top of your email.

Preview Panes and Disabled Images

Two advances in email clients are combining to make messaging more difficult for marketers. The horizontal / vertical preview panes, which allow a reader to view just a narrow strip or square of an email message without actually opening it, and a blocked images feature that prevents images from downloading unless the reader requests. About 75% of people who use preview panes go for the horizontal version, while the remaining 25% prefer the vertical version. You can cover both pane and configurations by placing the most important information in the top of the left corner of your email!

Individually, each development is likely to be skewing your true open rate downwards and preventing users from seeing your most critical information. In tandem, it means your email performance will be reduced significantly if you don't design your emails to deliver key information as quickly as possible.

In fact, you have only 2 to 4 inches of space to tell your story and persuade viewers to open your email instead of just previewing.

Although this has implications for both business and consumer email marketers and publishers, the problem is especially acute for b2b emailers, because a significant portion of their readers are likely using Outlook and Lotus Notes – the two email clients that combine preview panes and blocked images.

Some email industry observers have attributed a recent drop in reported open rates

due to widespread use of blocked images, because open rate are generally counted when a small, clear image within an email message is called from a web server.

While most web based email clients don't use preview panes, Yahoo Mail is now beta-testing a web client that behaves more like a desktop client, with a preview pane and default image blocking. Yahoo Mail and other web mail clients also use image blocking as a default setting.

Take these steps to make your email more preview-pane/disabled-image friendly:

1. Redesign the top of your email template so that key content shows in the preview pane even if images are disabled. Content-oriented newsletters should include headlines or "In This Issue" teasers. Ecommerce and other promotional-type emails should summarize or highlight the key value proposition, offer, or products right up top in a Table of Contents
2. Study your click-tracking reports to see what links people click on most in your emails – these links need to be at the top of your email
3. Ask to be added to your subscribers' address book. Images are displayed by default if you're in the address book for all AOL, Hotmail, and Yahoo Mail recipients as well as anyone using Outlook or Outlook Express. Always send from the same address, since that is the address the recipient added to the address book.
4. Move less critical administrative information to an admin center at the end of the newsletter. Information and requests for adding you to their address book should also be done with the sign-up confirmation messages.
5. Your from and subject lines become much more important with this new reality. Sixty percent of readers say they consider these to decide whether or not to open an email. Our favorite bit of advice to BridgeMail Systems users – Use the your subject to answer a critical recipient question: 'What's in it for me?'
6. In this new preview pane format From, Subject lines are the top two points of a triangle, with the third point being the top of your newsletter. All three have to work together to snag a reader's eye.
7. Use both text and HTML in advertisements, logos and branding messages

rather than live images linked to your website, such as JPEGs and GIFs. You'll still be able to deliver key information even to readers whose email clients block images.

8. Yes, blocked images effect your open rate, and it could be significant. So it is conceivable that image blocking might have shaved 5 – 10% off your open rates in the last 2 years. And, yes, a message viewed in a preview pane does count as an open if images are enabled.
9. Along the same lines use alt tags that describe an image's content or action.
10. Review your HTML coding to make sure it complies with W3C standards.
11. Eliminate skyscraper or vertically rectangular ads that go deeper than the pixel equivalent of 3 or 4 inches.

Number of Hyperlinks

The main job of your email is to motivate recipients to click through to your web site. Make sure that all images, especially your logo, are clickable links. Consumers are trained to click on images and expect them to be links.

Increasing the number of links in a message leads to increased open and click-through rates. Even if our are promoting a single product, you should still have multiple links throughout the email, including your logo, navigation links at the top and bottom of your email and a call to action.

Emails with 25 links or more had an open rate 12% higher than those containing few than 25 links, and a click-through rate that was 29% higher than that for emails with fewer than 25 links. However, you should not merely list a group of links at the bottom of the email. Doing this could hurt delivery, as it is a common spam tactic.

These results support long held beliefs among email marketers: In general, email marketers should include as many hyperlinks as possible. The more links there are, the more likely the chance of resonating with the recipient. And while 25 might seem like a lot of links, navigation and administrative links in newsletters can easily reach 15 – 20 links.

Phishing and HTML Links

Many email clients are being updated to detect phishing attempts. “Phishing” is the industry nickname for the effort to collect sensitive personal and financial information by sending forged emails that look as if they come from an authorized agency, such as bank, online auction or financial service, ecommerce provider or government agency.

Both Mozilla Thunderbird and AOL 9.0 feature phishing scam detection that will effect how your email is treated. To determine whether an email could be a phishing scam, the client looks for a link in your HTML campaign where the display text is a URL. If the displayed link is different from the actual URL, the client alerts the user.

Email service providers encode URLs for tracking, and change the URL within the <href> tag.

```
<a href=http://www.yoursite.com> http://www.yoursite.com</a>
```

The change might look like this:

```
<a href=http://www.bridgemailsystem.com/  
art=vsd78fasdfs8797S&sub=fifasr8797> http://www.yoursite.com</a>
```

To avoid having your emails wrongly tagged as phishing attempts, don’t use a URL as the display link in any HTML emails. Instead, use a word or phrase which describes the link itself.

```
<a href=http://www.yoursite.com> Visit Us Here </a>
```

Length

The optimal length for emails can vary dramatically based on your objectives, audience demographics, the type of content, frequency, the competitive environment and other factors. For example, subscribers receiving a monthly newsletter would expect it to be much longer than a daily or weekly one. A grand opening or seminar invite is typically going to be very short, whereas b2b newsletter discussing strategic and thought-provoking topics can easily run the print equivalent of 4-6 pages.

Message File Size

Don't be too concerned with message size. Having said that, still try to keep file size below 50 kb, because some recipients may have size limits.

Copy/Tone/Personality

What work here boils down to personality. Email marketing efforts often lack personality. That's probably the biggest oversight marketers commit. We find that customers who use personality and strong content consistently produce significantly higher open rates than those without.

Every company has a personality. Your email copy should reflect and leverage it. Don't underestimate the power of your copy. We say, "copy is King". Although many say they don't read copy, you are writing it for the 10% who do read it and will click through to your site. Your copy should not only reflect your company's personality, but should also create a sense of urgency that motivates customers to act immediately.

Personality is a combination of style, tone, humor, emotion and attitude – and it's also what human beings connect with. Remember that a human being is on the receiving end of your emails. When choosing the appropriate voice to speak with, you need to consider two things:

1. **What do you want to project to your audience?** Whether it's a company image or a one-on-one connection, you want a reader to close your email with a clear understanding of the person who sent it.
2. **What is your audience looking for?** Connecting with someone means giving something they are looking for. It's also what can make your email so successful. Remember...answer their question – "What's in it for me?"

Another key element: Design your emails to be read by two distinct audiences, the skimmers and the readers. Skimmers will look at the top of your message, headlines and subheads, and key bold phrases throughout your email. Proper use of boldface can pull the reader's eye down throughout the message and still deliver relevant content quickly. Skimmers will make a decision to act in about 5 seconds. Reader will take time to savor your entire message, reading every word.

Tip for both types of readers: Use plenty of white space.

White space is nothing. It's the absence of text and images. White space provides visual "breathing room" for the eye by breaking up text and graphics. Add white space to make pages less cramped confusing, and overwhelming. Cell padding between text and images is important. It's hard to read text when it's smashed up against an image or border.

More Products and Categories (Not Just for Ecommerce)

Customers like options. If you are sending the same email to everyone, you need to give people a variety of choices to whet their appetite. If you sell products in various categories – running, cycling, camping, and fishing, for example – you need to offer a few options in each category. Otherwise, you probably won't get their attention. An avid cyclist isn't likely to respond to a fly fishing reel offer. You might also want to include regular features, such as "Email Specials", "Product of the Month", and "Brand Specials."

This same concept can be applied to email newsletters. Provide a table of contents and links to back issues or the most-read issues on your site. While the content you presented might be the most prominent on your site, it might not be the most interesting to all readers. Other might have deleted a previous edition by mistake or may want to read it later. Don't miss the opportunity to provide value to the recipient at every opportunity.

Personalization

Some studies show that the more elements of personalization in an email, the higher the response rate. At minimum, address your customers/subscribers by first name if you have it for everyone. If you have more information – such as their interests or purchase history – consider personalizing the copy or product selection.

For example, using the earlier sporting goods example, you might want to personalize emails based upon each of the four sports. Each recipient would receive the same basic email, but with a few sentences of copy tailored to each sport and a special product offer. To add this to your emails effectively, either create separate versions for each customer segment or use BridgeMail System's Dynamic Content Items feature to assemble and build these different versions on the fly. You could also make sure the relevant product is featured at the top with a larger image, and the supporting products have smaller images and appear below the featured product.

Navigation

Leverage your web site's navigation. Remember, your email is basically an extension of your web site. Make the navigation consistent with your web site – but also highlight key areas of your web site that are likely to get recipients to take action. If you have Bargain White Paper archives, Blogs, Basement Closeouts, Featured Products and other areas on your site, use them!

Ad Banners/Text Ads

A major source of revenue in email newsletters comes from ad banners or text ads. Placement of these ads can make a huge difference in the effectiveness of your email. Ads are generally placed at the bottom of large blocks of copy, as separators between two paragraphs, or on the right-side bar of an email.

Don't place ads in the message header, where your logo and navigation should be. This can confuse the reader and your branding efforts.

Offers

A key goal of your ecommerce program is to maximize revenue at the highest profit. Large discounts and free shipping drive transactions and revenue, but finding the optimum combination is the key to profitability. One approach is to entice customers using special email offers. Second, test different approaches in your subject line, whether free shipping, discounts, or something similar, to determine which approach drives the most revenue and has the best impact on your bottom line. Third, personalize your offers to your customer segments. Loyal customers might receive free shipping on their next purchase above \$100.00, whereas new or low value customer might receive 10% off their first or next purchase.

Plain Text Versions

While the core of your email program should use the HTML format, you must also produce separate Plain Text version. The BridgeMail System uses multipart MIME (i.e. we deliver HTML and Text), where the default shown is the version the recipient's email client is set to receive. Even if only 5% of subscribers are limited to receiving plain text, you have to consider the large number who preview plain text

versions in Outlook.

When producing the Plain Text version of your message, watch out for length justification. Insert a hard break after 65 characters on every line or as close to it as you can without breaking up words. This will prevent email clients from breaking up your copy in the wrong places. We also recommend left justifying all headlines to avoid potential spacing issues when attempting to center text. See example below:

```
*****
Headline Goes Here
*****
```

As with HTML, you should use only the ASCII character set. More advanced word processing software often insert “odd” characters, such as the trailing dot character or “smart” quotes (seen here with curved tails). Microsoft Word’s Auto-Correct function, for example, converts “straight” quotes into “smart” quotes. These “odd” characters can cause display problems – you have probably seen random boxes or ? marks in emails before. These are displayed because your email client or web service cannot correctly display these odd characters. The following characters are safe to use in your plain-text emails:

- ◆ Abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
- ◆ ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
- ◆ 0123456789
- ◆ %&+() *.-/;<=>?_ ' "

Forward to a Friend

The forward to a friend functionality is a great way to increase your subscribers. When it comes to getting these “friends” to subscribe, we recommend providing a subscribe link to a form hosting on your site instead of placing the form on your email – you might recall the potential rendering and functional maladies we pointed earlier in this document.

Here are a few concepts to handling and taking advantage of Forward to a Friend functionality:

Capture New Subscribers

Insert copy: “Received this email from a friend? [Subscribe Here](#)”

The link will go to the sign up page on your website.

Incentives to “pass the word”

Insert copy: “Reward yourself and friends with free shipping when you pass this email along”

The email will be forwarded to “Friends” with a link to a sign up form on your website. When the friend signs up, send them their free shipping (or whatever you’re offering) email with confirmation number or promo code.

The BridgeMail System tracks who “Forwards to Friends”, so you’ll know who to reward for forwarding to friends.

Rich Media/Flash

The jury is in on using rich media...Don’t Do It! Most email clients do not support Flash or other types of rich media. If you need to use Javascript to launch rich media, it is often stripped out due to security concerns. That aside, recipients don’t particularly appreciate having Flash movies foisted on them --- particularly those with low bandwidth connections. If you must animate...use animated GIF files; but watch out for the file size. If you have developed a gorgeous Flash presentation or video, simply place a link to it in your email along with a graphic screen capture.

Essential Content

After you have gotten you design right, you must still verify that your message includes these items:

- ◆ An unsubscribe mechanism. You want to make is easy for recipients that do not want to hear from you to opt-out. Not only is the provision of a clear opt-out offer the law under CAN-SPAM, but a properly designed and promoted unsubscribe feature reduces the likelihood of being reported as a spammer. BridgeMail System Wizards automatically append Unsubscribe links to the footer of all emails and automate the Unsubscribe process.

- ◆ Your company name and street address – a requirement of CAN-SPAM law.

Test, Test, Test and Improve

Testing is the single most important piece of advice we can provide. Things change quickly in email marketing: What works for a competitor and you six months ago may not work today. You need to continuously test variables including format, design, copy style, calls to action, subject lines, offers, personalization, and product categories. Start with A/B split tests, and repeat the test a few times to verify results.

Email split tests let you conduct meaningful research on your own email marketing campaigns. To run a split test, create two or more messages and send them to randomized, equal portions of the larger list. You can then deliver the message with the best results to the remainder of the list or apply them to your next campaign.

Anything in your campaign can be tested. If you test more than one element, you might not know which one made the difference. The key to a good test is to pick one element and change it, then check the results, and test again. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- ◆ **Subject Line:** It's easy and low risk to create several subjects and compare open rates between them.
- ◆ **Layout, colors, or format:** You might need big changes to see a difference in response rate. If your campaigns are usually a single image, a text message might compel those who normally suppress images to open or click them. Or, if your messages are text heavy, more images could improve readability, click-throughs, and ultimately, conversion rates.
- ◆ **Offer Placement:** If you send multiple products in an email, try switching them around. Moving an item from bottom to top could change the email's overall performance.
- ◆ **Offer:** You might get a great response when you offer 25% off. But what if you got the same result for 10% off? Or no discount at all?
- ◆ **Call to action:** See if you get more transactions with a to-the-point "Buy Now" link or with a lower obligation "Learn More" link.
- ◆ **Landing Page:** Often neglected, it can make or break your campaign. Keep the email messages identical but try two different landing page URLs. Refining your landing page is the key to strong conversions.
- ◆ **Frequency:** Should I send once per month or per week? Hold a control group of recipients from the test audience and watch your metrics for activity change.

