The A-Z of Email Marketing

For several years now email has been a pivotal tool in many organisations' marketing and communications strategies.

However, with an increasing number of organisations using email communication, it is essential that you design and construct your emails effectively to maximize your success.

The following A-Z of Email Design has been written to help you navigate your way through the maze of email design.

This has been broken down into 3 key elements:
1. Planning the Email/eNewsletter
2. Design and Structure
3. Completion, Testing and Sending

1) Planning the Email/eNewsletter

The Content: It is crucial that you provide content that is relevant to your audience or target markets. Do not simply send an email for the sake of it – more than likely, it will simply be deleted rather than being read.

According to data firm Return Path the following reasons are the most common when it comes to why emails are opened:

Why Consumers Open Emails - Return Path Third Annual Consumer Survey

55.9% = Know and trust the sender
51.2% = Previously opened and thought valuable
41.4% = Subject line
32.2% = I only opened the e-mails I normally read
21.8% = Preview window caught my attention
20.0% = Discount
20.0% = Free shipping offer
17.5% = Company doesn't send me many emails
9.4% = Looked like the catalogue I received at home Return Path Third Annual

Email Length: Once your topic has been decided, consider how long the email will be. If you have a lot of content to convey, consider using landing pages. Not only do landing pages reduce the overall length of the email, but they will also allow you to monitor click through rates and understand which topics are of particular interest to your readers. This will help you and your marketing team when planning future campaigns.

Audience: Consider segmentation to ensure you reach the readers for whom the email is most relevant. For example, an email about a weekend sale in your retail store is unlikely to be relevant to readers outside easy driving time. In many cases, your entire database is not appropriate for the email.

Scheduling: Consider the following when planning your email:
- Do I have enough time to thoroughly prepare, construct and test the email?

- What is the most appropriate time to send the content of the email?
- Does this message compliment other email or marketing campaigns?

2) Design and Structure

After you have defined the purpose of your email, put yourself in the shoes of the recipient and ask:
- Is the message and call to action clear?
- Is there a continuity of design from the email itself through to any landing pages/shopping cart/other links (e.g. PDF documents)?

The points below highlight the different elements you should consider whilst designing and structuring your email/eNewsletter:

From Name: Choose a regular from address and from name to use for your emails; this will usually be your name and/or your organisation's name. This will ensure that these details become familiar to readers so they immediately identify the email relevance and ideally will add you to their address book.

Subject Line: The only purpose of a subject line is to achieve an open. You have about 50 characters to capture a reader's attention. Be careful not to use words that will cause your email to be caught in Spam filters e.g. free.

"Above The Fold": Most readers will use a preview pane when skimming their inbox; therefore the top 400 pixels of your email are the most crucial for capturing the audience's attention.

Header: It is tempting to make the header large and grand, however, avoid making them higher than 120 pixels (approximately 2-3cm). If a recipient has images switched off in their email client they won't see any text because there is a large white space where the image should be.

View Online: Use a "View Online" link so that if someone is having trouble reading your email they can view a correctly laid out version online.

Branding: Ideally, you should place your Company Logo/Branding in the top left hand corner of the email header. This will allow for easier company/brand recognition.

Top Links: Provide easy links for readers to follow including key calls to action. In particular, these links should sit "above the fold" and serve as shortcuts for people who are skimming or returning to your email.

Personalisation: The email should be personalised and sent to a named addressee (e.g. Hi Billy, Hi Mr Jones) and where relevant be written in engaging one to one dialogue.

Navigation: If your email is long (more than 5-6 paragraphs), use an "In this Issue" Navigation Menu at the top of the email so that readers can skip to the parts that interest them most. Remember, you have 3 seconds to grab someone's attention.

Images: Tabloid newspapers are popular because they use graphics to complement a story – transfer this approach to your email for a similar effect. However, remember to use images that are relevant to your content.

More Links: Use "More" links to place snippets of info in the email and link through to more detailed landing pages. This will reduce the overall length of the email and allow you to track the reader's interests.

Links: Within the message, links should be shared between text & graphic. Where possible avoid using 'click here' but rather link the actual text you want to link, such as "visit our website".

Calls to Action: Ensure you have a call to action that includes a link very close to the top of the email. This will enable readers to easily locate it even when viewing your email in the preview pane. Where appropriate, place different 'calls to action' throughout the email. This way you can identify what is really grabbing your readers' attention.

Bottom Links: These should mimic the top links so that when the reader reaches the end of the email they can easily follow your 'calls to action', without having to scroll all the way back to the top.

Email Footer: Ensure the footer of the email contains all the required information for Spam compliance and best practice. The reader should clearly understand who sent the email, why they are subscribed to the list and how they can unsubscribe or change their subscription.

3) Completion, Testing and Sending

Styles - CSS and In Line: Although these are popular when designing web sites, it is preferable to avoid all styles when designing emails to ensure display and consistency across all email clients. Remember that email clients read your HTML differently and CSS can result in your email not displaying as you intended.

Plain Text Version: Not all recipients will receive your email as a HTML email. It is important to fine tune the plain text version, bearing in mind the message needs to work without graphics, columns and tables. **Ensure that you test both HTML and Text versions of your email**.

Define your Quality Assurance Procedures: Although it is extremely tempting to sacrifice quality to quickly finish and send your email, don't. It is highly recommended that you define an internal Quality Assurance process that you follow each time you send an email to ensure any mistakes are identified and rectified **before** your broadcast send.

Relevance Testing: Does the final email meet the objectives initially set out in the planning phase? If not, are the changes for the better, or does the content of the email need to be changed to ensure the email is still the right message for the audience? Following up with these simple steps can make all the difference.

Overall Message: If possible, ask someone else to read the email checking for grammar and link errors. It is easy to skim over these mistakes as the author, so a fresh set of eyes is advisable. Also if possible run your email through our spam

checking tool 'Spam Assassin' to identify any issues that may resolve in your email being blocked by a recipients Spam filters.

Email Client Testing: Set up a test database that includes Yahoo, Hotmail, Gmail, Outlook 07, Outlook Express and any other programs you have access to testing on. Your email may display differently in various email clients and this testing could identify issues that can be rectified before sending. **Test sending to the different email addresses in your test list and make sure you click on every link to ensure it is working as planned. This final step is very important do not skip it!**

Send: Congratulations! You are finally ready to send a high quality piece of email marketing, deserved of representing your organisation and brand. When using our emarketing system to send your messages you will have access to a range of reporting information which will let you know how successful your email was as well as providing crucial information to help shape your next campaign. Then it is simply a matter of using this information to improve your future email messages.