Date Updated: 1st February 2012

HTML Email Guidebook

HTML stands for *H*yper*t*ext *M*arkup *L*anguage. It is a method for syntactically indicating where, in a body of text, formatting should occur. HTML can be used to control layout; current W3C standards state a well formed and standards derived HTML page should only do this via CSS (*C*ascading *S*tyle *S*heets).

W3C standards should be adhered to in every case *except* for any HTML content that is delivered via email. This is because all email clients modify HTML based newsletters and emails, including rendering it using a non-standards compliant engine and/or stripping or ignoring syntax.

HTML emails and W3C standards

In most cases, a W3C standards compliant HTML email:

- ***will not*** display identically across multiple email clients.
- will be ***completely unreadable*** in some email clients.

Guidelines

To alleviate cross client compatibility issues, development of HTML emails and newsletters should adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Do not use JavaScript, Flash, Quicktime, animated GIFs or depend on any code held within the <head></head> tags
2. Use basic HTML formatting (for example: <font>, <i>,<b>) as a functional backup where email clients strip out CSS.
3. Link to image using direct paths.
4. Use well-formed HTML (i.e. all images should have width, height, alt and title tags defined).
5. Do not use CSS if at all possible.
    a. Where unavoidable, CSS should be restricted to in-line syntax and text or link formatting.
6. Layout must be controlled via HTML tables, not CSS – relatedly, float and alignment should be avoided except where controllable with HTML tables.
    a. Do not use table row span
    b. Do not use table height
    c. Spacing should be controlled first by table width specifications and then by spacer gifs (1x1 transparent gif)
7. Maximum visual width should be 600 pixels.

8. Keep total file size to a minimum – excessively large HTML emails and newsletters can trigger spam or junk filters.

Testing

The only way HTML newsletters and emails can be tested is by being sent *to* an email address utilizing either an email client (i.e. Lotus Notes or Microsoft Outlook) or a web based email provider (i.e. Gmail, Yahoo, Hotmail). This cannot be done by copying and pasting the content into an email, it must be done either programmatically (i.e. with PHP) or through an email sender such as MailChimp, Litmus or Campaign Monitor.

Tools

Line break remover

Link: http://textmechanic.com/Add-Remove-Line-Breaks.html

Whitespace and Tab remover

Link: http://www.textfixer.com/tools/remove-white-spaces.php

Purpose: some email clients convert line breaks to HTML break tags or use it to determine where page breaks (rendered visually as unexpected gaps) will occur. To alleviate these problems, it's advised that lengthy HTML emails remove un-needed line breaks, tabs and whitespace.

Note, please take care with these tools as they might also remove space from the *text* portion of the email.

HTML Primer

Link: http://www.w3.org/MarkUp/Guide/

Purpose: a brief introduction to basic HTML, its syntax and capabilities.