

Is Your E-mail Recipient Seeing What You Are Sending?

by Joe Dysart

It used to be that sending an “HTML-E-mail”—i.e., sending an e-mail with all the color, graphics, movement, and other special effects of a Web page—was a dice game. People would either open your “rich media” e-mail and be impressed with the gorgeous imagery and design work, or they’d be confronted with a PC screen filled with unreadable symbols.

No more. Thanks to some recent advances in software programming, there are dozens of e-mail packages and services available now that will automatically know whether or not your recipient’s e-mail reader can handle an HTML e-mail—and then render your message accordingly.

“It’s fairly simple,” says Karen Fegarty, founder of MailWorkz (www.mailworkz.com), a software maker that specializes in HTML-e-mail delivery software. “If their software can read HTML, it will show them the HTML message. Otherwise, it will default to a text message, and they’ll never know the difference.”

Understandably, the implications of the recent advance in HTML e-mail reliability for the office and industrial real estate industry are substantial. Firms such as Southfield, Michigan-based Signature Associates (www.signatureassociates.com) will be able to send the color, e-brochures they have posted on their site directly to the e-mail boxes of current and potential clients. Companies will be able to use the medium to e-mail full-color press releases—which include color photography—to appropriate parties.

Indeed, given that 66 percent of nearly 700 companies using e-mail marketing in 2001 reported an overall increase in sales as the result of e-mail marketing promotions (according to the Direct Marketing Association (www.the-dma.org), this breakthrough in HTML e-mail could not have come at a better time. “E-mail marketing, facilitated by new technologies and driven by the challenging economy, is now reaching a stage of maturation,” says H. Robert Wientzen, DMA’s president and CEO. He adds that nearly two-thirds of companies reporting success in e-mail marketing had used HTML e-mail in at least some campaigns.

Where to Get the Tools

www.mailchimp.com

If you’re a little nervous about committing to an HTML e-mail campaign, you can try out the concept for free at MailChimp.com. In just a few minutes, MailChimp.com enables an upload that tests an HTML message, and then sends the test message to up to 100 e-mail addresses from your own database. They also have a great “do’s and don’ts” guide online, which was written by seasoned, HTML-e-mail veterans who know what works best. Afterwards, if you decide to continue using the service, MailChimp.com will charge you as little as a penny per e-mail to send HTML messages from its site.

www.mailworkz.com

Of course, even sending messages at a penny-a-pop can get a little pricey if you’re putting together a high volume campaign. Should you decide to bring your campaign in-house, you may want to check out Broadcast HTML by MailWorkz (www.mailworkz.com) (\$750). I test-drove this program, and was able to successfully design and send an HTML e-mail in under an hour. Besides being

easy to use, Broadcast HTML also offers some advanced features, including the ability to personalize each e-mail you send with a person’s name, company name, address, and similar details.

Other Online Services

Not surprisingly, there are a number of packages and online services chomping at the bit for your HTML e-mail business. For a look at additional online services, check out: Cooler E-mail (www.coolere-mail.com); EarthOnline (www.earthonline.com); MessageReach (www.messagereach.com); Mindshare Design (www.mindsharedesign.com) and @Once (www.once.com).

For in-house software packages, you can test-drive: Campaign, by Arial Software (www.arialsoftware.com); WorldMerge, by Colorado Software (www.worldmerge.com); Mailloop by Mailloop (www.mailloop.com); and PostCast by Gate Comm (www.gatecomm.com).

One Caution

One caveat: despite the fact that top-shelf HTML e-mail programs now automatically default to sending a text e-mail message to e-mail readers when necessary, the programs still cannot guarantee perfect results. The reason: most HTML e-mail programs are written to work with the latest version or two of popular e-mail readers like Outlook Express and Netscape. So you may run into a situation where an older version of Outlook Express will accept your HTML e-mail, but it will not render it exactly as you'd hoped.

Of course, as the general population continues to upgrade to the most recent (and free) versions of popular e-mail readers, this minor problem will become less and less significant. In the meantime, you may want to stick with text e-mail in situations where every person on your e-mail absolutely, positively, must be able to read the e-mail—now matter what.

Test Drive Your HTML Campaign

You can also “test-drive” your HTML e-mail campaign for free at services like Yahoo! Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>). Yahoo! Groups enables users of its service to receive e-mail in either text or HTML format. Essentially, in a few moments, you can create a few different Yahoo! identities at this site, send a test e-mail with a program like Mailworkz, and verify for yourself that the software works.

In fact, you'll find a number of office and industrial real estate professionals are already offering HTML e-mail mailings at Yahoo! Groups site, including The Christopher Group (www.christopergroup.net), under Yahoo! group name “TheChristopherGroup;” Realty Marketing North-west (www.vmnw-auctions.com), under the group name “RealtyMarketing;” and Kalmondolgin (www.kalmondolgin.com), under the group name “Kalmondolgin.”

Where to Get Design Smarts

If you're able to design a simple Web page in authoring programs like MS Frontpage (www.microsoft.com/frontpage) and Dreamweaver by Macromedia (www.macromedia.com), you already know how to design HTML e-mail. Even if you don't, you'll find tools and instructions by using any online service or in-house package.

Either way, you'll want to check out the wonderful been-there-done-that guide, “HTML E-mail Design Tips” on the MailChimp.com web site before you launch a major campaign. Specifically, the guide authors, Ben Chestnut and Mark Armstrong, serve up some recommended design formats they believe will work best—as well as some pitfalls to avoid.

Keep It Simple

As you might suspect, the two insist simplicity is king—as are pages that don't take forever to download. “Don't design HTML e-mails more than 500 pixels wide,” says Chestnut, who is also a partner at MailChimp. “You might be used to designing Web pages for 800 x 600 screens, but keep in mind that the preview pane in most e-mail applications—such as Outlook—is much smaller.”

“Also, keep it less than 100K,” he adds, referring to the overall size of the e-mail file you plan to send. “Respect the fact that the majority of the population is still accessing the Internet via modem, so keep your e-mails nice and light. HTML e-mail is great for including useful graphics and pictures of your products. But don't go crazy with animation, sounds, Flash movies, and heavy downloads.”

What to Avoid when Designing

It's also a good idea to avoid MS Outlook when designing an HTML e-mail, since not all Outlook HTML features will work in other e-mail readers, Chestnut says. Generally, e-mail readers that tend to be most temperamental when it comes to HTML e-mail are Eudora, Lotus Notes, and AOL 5.0, Chestnut says. Indeed, given that approximately 30 million people now use AOL, you may want to create a specially designed HTML e-mail you know performs well in most versions of the service's browser, he says.

Where to Get the Moving Parts

While Chestnut's caution against loading up your e-mail with unnecessary, bandwidth-hogging graphics is sound, there's still nothing wrong with posting such supporting effects on your Web site, and providing a simple link that readers can click on to experience the sizzle. Also, if you know that all the recipients of your HTML e-mail have high bandwidth connections, you won't need to be quite as concerned about file size.

Fortunately, there are a number of places on the Web where you sample these special effects for yourself—and often sample some of the goods for your own use for free. For JAVA-script animations, for example, you'll want to stop by Freecode.com (www.freecode.com); Java Script Kit (www.wsabstract.com); and Dynamic Drive (www.dynamicdrive.com).

Other animations can be sampled at Free Animations (<http://bestanimations.com>); 2coolanimations (www.gifanimations.com); and Animation Factory (www.animationfactory.com). And for simple pictures and graphics, click to Clipartconnection (www.clipartconnection.com); ClipArt.com (www.clipart.com); and Search Art Today (www.freegraphics.com).

For streaming audio and video, you'll have to part with some green. The most popular formats in this area include Real Networks (www.realnetworks.com); MS Windows Media (www.microsoft.com/windows/windows-media); and Apple QuickTime (www.apple.com/quicktime). ❖

Joe Dysart is an Internet speaker and business consultant based in Thousand Oaks, California.

