

# Think Small Screen

Challenges and solutions for e-mail design

**I**n the recesses of Web time—like the early '90s, when Mosaic was “the” browser—there were few choices for designing on the Web. Now with CSS 3.0 looming on the horizon, the possibilities for designing on the small screen are increasing exponentially. But for those needing to create the digital counterpart of the printed flier, the technical possibilities are not much progressed from the digital Wild West equivalent of the mid-'90s.

Designers polishing their skills on e-mail campaigns are working from a smaller toolbox. With technical options primarily limited to carefully composed images set in HTML tables, the e-mail campaign of today will not work using either the newest JavaScript nor the cutting-edge CSS tags. But even with these technological limitations, there are choices you should make carefully which will result in significant payback in customer response.

First, and most importantly, who is your target audience, and what is the visual image of your company or product? This focus should be at the basis of every design decision made. Run down your mental checklist with each design revision: Are you keeping on target of your goals? Can you verbalize exactly why each item is in your design? If your answer to any of them is your version of, “Well, it looks cool,” then take out that element.

## Don't Forget the Basics

There's a good reason you learn basics first. If your background is in print

design, think of the e-mail as a poster. And like a poster, it's all about immediate impact! If you don't get your message across quickly, your e-mail is destined for the trash folder. Hierarchy, space, composition, alignment—all those things are found in the beginning pages of a design textbook, and they should govern your creative execution. One trick to try: Look at the design on the screen, and then squint your eyes so everything is out of focus. What do you see? Do some elements stand out? Or are you just seeing a mass of medium gray? If you're in the 50 percent gray category, it's time to seriously re-evaluate your design.

## Think Small

One of the real challenges most people face when designing anything for the computer screen is the lack of a constant size. When you're designing for a printed page, you know the exact dimensions of the final page, and your bleeds work without a hitch. But a digital “page” could be anything from 640 pixels by 480 pixels to the 30-inch behemoth monitor that has a resolution of 2,560 pixels by 1,600 pixels. Again, e-mail design has its own set of quirks and, often times, an even smaller effective display area. After making more accommodations for the e-mail packages themselves, e-mail designs need to be very compact—many times around 500 pixels in width.

Beyond the issue with screen dimension, designers must be keenly aware of the file size of the images making up



their designs. E-mail campaigns work by keeping all the images on a central server rather than as an attachment to customers' e-mails. They must be small so download times are very quick. The tide has turned, and more people are on some version of a high-speed Internet connection than not. But your target audience might not be in the demographic typically having a high-speed connection. Even if it does, the tolerance for even a moment's pause in downloading is low. As content providers, for better or worse, you must work diligently to minimize the wait time. The easiest solution is to use the tools you already have to optimize your images. For example, the “Save for Web and Devices” feature in Photoshop does a good job of reducing image size to a palatable level.

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## E-MAIL

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### **Watch Your Colors, and Work Your Colors**

Color is one of the key elements to any design, and of course the palette is larger with any kind of design displayed electronically, since you will work with an RGB palette instead of CMYK. But colors don't translate to every screen exactly the same. Yes, the days of needing to worry about Web-safe colors are largely behind us, but most monitors are not going to be calibrated and adjusted. They are going to range from high-end LCDs to hand-me-down CRT screens.

Another little quirk in the mix: The colors on a Mac screen are lighter than on a PC. What does this mean for your design? You should avoid subtle color differences if they are critical to your message. If you want something to be read, keep the contrast high. But do the work to check your colors, too. Those programs that will let you preview how the colors will look on both Macs and PCs are your friends. Find other monitors, laptops and dif-

ferent operating systems to view your designs. Some colors, particularly warm browns, have a tendency to appear very unappealing on certain screens.

### **Keep It Simple and Clean**

Good design has breathing space. If every pixel of space is filled with content, the overall design has a cheap look and feel. Open up the spacing, and allow some emptiness. Without all the visual competition, it becomes easy to make the important things prominent. I know sometimes this is easier said than done when your client or project director is focused on maximum material on a page. But good designers are good communicators, so explain in dollars and sense how the cleaner design will help the bottom line and the company image.

When other people see your design, do you hear, "Yeah, I like that! It looks just like ..."? If you do, then it's time to start over. The best design should be innovative and memorable. One tool that usually works well is thumbnails. Not refined little vignettes, but rough

ideas sketched out quickly. Seldom is your first idea your best; usually it's the cliché. More often than not, it's idea No. 20 or 30 that has the possibilities for really good presentation of the product.

### **Make It Easy for the Customer**

Certainly, this list is not exhaustive. Redundant navigation; inclusion of an "unsubscribe" to avoid possible legal repercussions; being aware of the "page fold" on a Web site—these are among a few of the additional topics you will be juggling as you design your e-mail. The best result will be a combination of all these suggestions plus more, with a particular focus on the intent of the e-mail. It is the careful and thoughtful culmination of all these points that will make your design memorable and effective. ■

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