

WHITE PAPER

Email Branding

*A best-practices approach to **email branding***

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▶ Introduction

In pre-Internet days, official company letterhead was used for all communications, external and internal. Whether it was a quick handwritten memo or an invoice or official correspondence, it was typed on branded bond paper, likely placed in a branded envelope, and often included a business card with the company's logo on it. Projecting brand integrity and impression was a no-brainer and written communications on non-branded stock was simply *verboten*.

Fast forward to today when 87% of a company's communications takes place through email. Companies are still spending thousands upon thousands of dollars to develop a brand strategy and supporting components like wordmarks, logos, proprietary fonts, style-sheets and so on. Yet companies are not routinely enforcing the branding of emails, even though the vast majority of communications take place via this channel.

This is the equivalent of doing the unthinkable -- sending out all communications on plain white paper, negating the investment in branding elements and missing the opportunity to strengthen the brand in the eyes of customers, partners and prospects.

This article will discuss the goals of email branding, the reasoning behind it, the desired impact and perceived barriers to implementation. It will also look at best practices for enacting an email-branding protocol across the organization and provide some technical tips on how to create impressive email signatures and disclaimers that incorporate photos and other dynamic elements without stressing bandwidth and email-storage requirements.

▶ Understanding email branding

Why is email branding important? Companies and individuals alike want their emails to make an impression. People are busy, and having a memorable branding element in an email enables its message to stand out in the recipient's crowded inbox. The look and feel of correspondence, electronic or otherwise, should be consistent and be deployed seamlessly across the enterprise. Each sent email presents an opportunity to expand a company's image and awareness while demonstrating its professionalism and that its brand is carefully and consistently cultivated.

Implementing an email-branding policy enables senders to include their contact information in correspondence in a consistent, attractive format. Custom signatures and rules-

based administration of brand elements based on the recipient or recipients can be applied by IT departments, ensuring that the right messaging is directed at the right audience, every time an email is sent.

While these elements all sound positive and easy to implement, several perceived barriers to adoption have kept companies from deploying email-branding policies, fearing that it will be too expensive or require too much bandwidth and intensive writing of code in order to be implemented. Below, I'll hopefully dispel some of these myths and map out a best practices approach to email branding.

There are a number of technical considerations to keep in mind when developing brand elements for email, the majority of which pertain to manageability. For example, ensuring that the recipients will see a pleasing message regardless of the email client they're using, or that their inboxes or mail stores are not going to be clogged by branded email.

▶ **Deploying email branding at the server level**

Modern tools are deployed at the server level and adhere to a rules-based infrastructure that takes the individual sender out of the picture.

Adding the signature at the server level provides administrator control over how all messages are branded, preventing anyone from tampering with the corporate message. If users are left to create their own signatures, the result will be inconsistent branding, the possibility of typos, and a high chance of an amateurish presentation to customers.

Adding such information at the server also ensures that all mail gets the correct disclaimer or signature added, even if originating from a mobile device such as a Blackberry or a Web client such as Outlook Web Access. Finally, control at the server means that there is only ever one place to make a change, rather than having to roll out a modified signature to numerous Outlook clients.

▶ **Advantages to using Inline CSS**

Cascading style sheets (CSS) were designed to separate the style elements from the HTML code in Web pages. This can be done with either embedded CSS, where the styles are defined at the top of the page, or with external CSS, where the styles are defined in an external file and referred to from the <head> element of the HTML document.

The advantage is that it makes it very easy to completely change the style of a Web page by modifying the style sheet. However, these methods can be very unreliable when used with email, particularly when the message is being viewed by a Web client, resulting in the message appearing nothing like the sender intended. Many email clients, in fact, purposely strip out any CSS that's either externally referenced or contained in the <head> element.

Inline CSS is a method for defining CSS properties directly in an HTML element. Designing an email style using this method creates the greatest chance of preserving the fidelity of the design, and virtually every HTML-capable email client supports this format.

Inline CSS may be the least flexible way of using CSS, as it requires the style to be individually set in each element, requiring more code and requiring styles to be changed in several places rather than just one. However, it's the most reliable. If you're going to style your HTML messages, you're going to need to embrace inline CSS.

▶ **Concerns to keep in mind when using images**

Certain special considerations need to be taken into account when including images in a signature. The best option is to keep any image small, both in terms of file size and physical dimensions. Nobody wants to have to download and store a large company logo, especially if on a smartphone or other lower-bandwidth connection.

If communicating with potential new customers, bear in mind that many people don't open the message, instead they read it in the preview or reading window. If the first thing they see is nothing more than a large logo, there is a strong chance the message will be deleted without the content ever being seen.

Only the first few lines are visible in the message preview, so use those first few lines carefully, particularly if it's a sales message, and don't waste them with a large image at the top of the page.

Additionally, make sure that the message doesn't look awful if the images are not there; the modern versions of Outlook default to not showing images without the reader's consent.

Lastly, be aware that some of the less intelligent spam and anti-virus filters may be configured to reject messages with particular attachment types.

Animated GIFs are subject to the same issues discussed above, with the additional consideration that some email clients may not display an animated GIF and instead will

show only the first frame. This is particularly true of Outlook 2007.

Also, the fact that animated GIFs contain multiple frames means that they will be much larger than a static GIF. It is important to also be aware of the distracting nature of an animation and ask whether it really is appropriate for a business email. In most cases, you should avoid animations.

▶ **Maintaining branding across email clients**

Although it can never be guaranteed that signatures will be readable and maintain brand identity across a variety of email clients, communications between most HTML-capable email clients such as Outlook (at least, before Outlook 2007) and Outlook Express will generally reproduce the branding and signature exactly as the sender intended.

However, as replies are sent back and forth, and depending on how the respondent's reply separation is configured, pretty email stationery may well gradually become distorted as the images move down the page and get indented with each response. Additionally, some clients may be able to see only the plain-text version of a message, so keep this in mind when designing the signature.

Outlook 2007 provides its own unique challenges. It uses a different HTML rendering engine than all the Outlook versions before it.

▶ **General guidelines/Conclusion**

Here are some best practices approaches to email branding and general guidelines for making implementation and deployment successful.

- Keep it simple. By keeping it simple, there is a much greater chance of the recipient seeing what was intended, and much less chance of the message being falsely identified as spam. If a complicated design must be used and it is a sales message, ensure there's an embedded link allowing the recipient to open the message in a browser in case the email client renders it incorrectly.
- Make sure it looks good in plain text as well as HTML. Send yourself test mailings and view the message in as wide a variety of email clients (applications and Web-based alike) as you can.

- If possible, code the signature by hand. Tools like Dreamweaver and Word can make the code more complicated and bloated than necessary.
- Use inline CSS rather than embedded or linked CSS.
- Avoid scripts as they are almost certain to get blocked by an antivirus program.
- Avoid Flash animations since not everyone installs the Flash player. And, again, Outlook 2007 won't support them.

Email branding can be important for your company. If you follow these guidelines, your email can reinforce your brand.

▶ Brand your email with Exclaimer Mail Utilities



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