

WHITEPAPER

Seven Email Marketing Design Tips for Outlook 2007

Overview

January 30, 2007 marked the retail launch of Microsoft's new operating system, Vista, along with an updated version of Microsoft's email client, Outlook 2007. If your marketing team uses HTML or CSS in designing your email campaigns, the launch of Outlook 2007 will change the way you message to your subscribers, though in varying degrees depending on your email design. If you are using ExactTarget standard templates, you may not notice a change with rendering in Outlook 2007, other than with surveys. Changes specific to surveys and forms will be discussed in "Next Steps #5" later in this whitepaper.

The fundamental changes to Outlook 2007 have email marketers concerned—and rightly so. Instead of using Internet Explorer to render HTML emails as in previous versions of Outlook, Outlook 2007 uses Microsoft Word to render. This change creates what Microsoft calls, "a single editing and rendering engine" for email. This single, Microsoft Word-based engine does not support a number of commonly-used HTML properties.

In the meantime, expect an extensive number of subscribers (both businesses and consumers use Outlook, and market share estimates start at 50% of a typical subscriber list) to upgrade to Outlook 2007. Therefore, Microsoft's changes will cause HTML emails designed under today's standards to break or render incorrectly. Over the course of the next few months, review the recommended changes laid out in this whitepaper. Our recommendation is to use these suggestions to restructure HTML emails and templates so that your designs evolve as Outlook 2007 gains critical mass.

Deep Impact: Rendering

The greatest impact of Outlook 2007 will be the way an email is rendered—based on the information available, deliverability should not be affected. While the most immediate impact will be on B2B marketers, due to the high penetration of Outlook 2007 among business users, these changes need to be seriously considered by all email marketers, as many consumers also use Outlook as their email client—even with a consumer email address (e.g. yahoo.com or gmail.com). In effect, Outlook 2007 fundamentally will guide all email design, no matter the audience.

Preparing for the Change: Your Next Steps

The following topics and suggestions represent the recommended changes by ExactTarget's HTML programmers. (A full listing of non-supported HTML tags and properties in Outlook 2007 are available at the following website: <http://msdn2.microsoft.com/en-us/library/aa338201.aspx>.)

There is a silver lining.

One of the driving factors likely prompting the Outlook 2007 changes is fixing known security holes and weaknesses. These types of weaknesses lead to the proliferation of computer viruses, internet worms, and spam—specifically, PCs unknowingly converted into zombie spam machines. The heightened security and reduction in spam messages will lead to email becoming a safer marketing medium benefiting all involved in the space.

Next Step #1: Design with Image Blocking in Mind

Description:

As with Outlook 2003, Outlook 2007 also blocks images by default.

What to do:

Ensure that your primary call to action displays, even with the images blocked, by using HTML text and other non-graphical elements that will entice a subscriber to enable images or click-through without the support of attractive image-based design (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Outlook 2007: Blocked Images
Security warning displayed



Figure 1: Outlook 2007: Images Displayed
Viewer has "allowed" images

Next Step #2: Don't Rely on Background Images

Description:

Outlook 2007 will not support background images of any kind, regardless of whether you apply them using standard HTML or CSS (Figures 2 and 3). Many designers use background images to drive the visual impact of their emails. Common uses include background gradients around a border, creating a drop shadow effect, or with a text overlay as an image-blocking workaround.

What to do:

Use background images as secondary design elements, knowing that they will not display in Outlook 2007. A solid border around the email using spacer .gifs—with a background color or the CSS border property in addition to the background image—will maintain the integrity of the design in Outlook 2007 and other email clients that do support background images. Since background colors are supported in Outlook 2007, specifying a matching background color to the element along with a background image may offer another option.

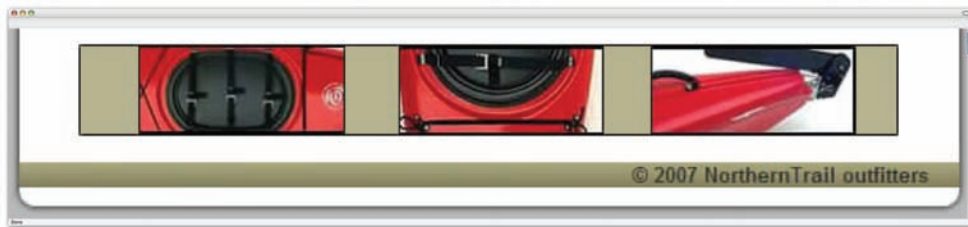


Figure 2: Outlook 2003
Background images display

Outlook 2003

Background image behind “Northern Trail Outfitters” displays properly (once viewer ‘allows’ images).

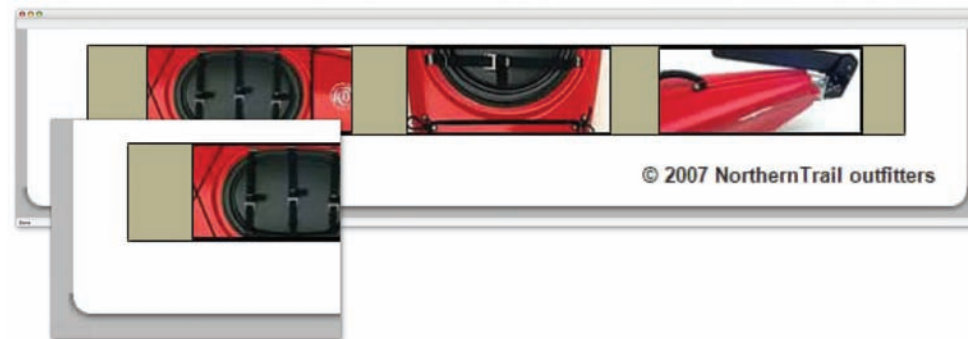


Figure 3: Outlook 2007
Footer background and side shadow images missing

Outlook 2007

Footer Background Image Missing. Background image behind “Northern Trail Outfitters” does not display (only text overlay displays), even when images are ‘allowed.’

Next Step #3: Design Without CSS Positioning

Description:

Outlook 2007 does not support the float or position CSS properties. Many designers use these elements to control the layout and positioning of elements in their emails.

What to do:

Revert to standard HTML tables to control the layout and ensure the email will display as intended.

Next Step #4: Continue Using ALT Tags

In their release notes, Microsoft lists the alt attribute as no longer supported in the tag in Outlook 2007. But our testing shows that alt-tags still have value, especially when images are not displayed. As images are not displayed by default in Outlook 2003 and Outlook 2007, the alt-tag description continues to provide a text alternative to replace the missing image. While the ALT-tag mouse-over functionality is missing in Outlook 2007, ALT-tag descriptions still provide value when images are not displayed (Figure 4).

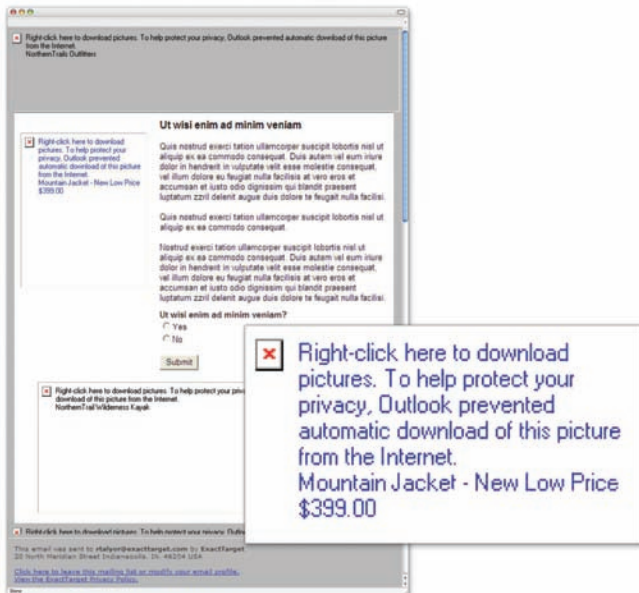


Figure 4: Outlook 2003 and 2007
ALT tag information displays in both Outlook versions

Next Step #5: Design Without Forms

Description:

Likely due to security risks, Outlook 2007 does not support forms. Emails commonly use forms, such as embedded surveys or a search box, to mimic a website design. Outlook 2007 disables the form or does not render it correctly (Figures 5 and 6).

What to do:

If you can't avoid using a form in your email, use "view as a webpage" or other links to drive subscribers to your website where surveys, search boxes or other form-based elements can be hosted.



Figure 5: Outlook 2003 Forms
Embedded survey displays correctly



Figure 6: Outlook 2007 Forms
Embedded survey does not display correctly

Next Step #6: Avoid Rich Media and Animated GIFs

Description:

Flash has always created deliverability and rendering issues due to the way that the code is interpreted by spam filters. Microsoft 2003 shows an Active X warning before allowing any Flash to play within the email client. However, Outlook 2007 will not support flash, or a commonly-used substitute, animated gifs.

What to do:

Avoid rich media and animated gifs. If video or animation is required, feature prominent links to your website, where rich media can be housed and played without issue.

Next Step #7: Test, Test, Test

Description:

Testing your email design using emulators, design optimizers or an Outlook 2007 test account.

What to do:

1. If possible, set up a test account on a computer that is using Outlook 2007 to test your current design. Identify elements of your emails that are not displaying correctly, and redesign as necessary.
2. Microsoft offers the following tool to test your design: <http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?familyid=0b764c08-0f86-431e-8bd5-ef0e9ce26a3a&displaylang=en>
3. Deliverability auditing firms, such as Pivotal Veracity (www.pivotalveracity.com), will offer a preview of your email design in Outlook 2007 in their eDesign Optimizer product, which also shows previews of your email across other email clients. The Outlook 2007 preview functionality launched in February/March 2007.