

E-mail: A Story of Evolution By Design

By Cheryl Rickman

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E-mail has come of age with rich media. C. Rickman looks at e-mail's history, benefits and rich media applications to conclude how to get the most from this killer app

The Killer App

Known as 'the killer app of the '90s, e-mail has come a long way, from the dawn of e-mail packet-switching theory in the 1960s and the first e-mail programme in 1971, to the present day, 2001, where rich media and java technology have created e-mail that can battle with television advertising and improve return on investment.

Throughout the 90s the key benefits of e-mail were in its cost-efficiency, its quickness and click through rates. The fact that e-mail allows for good customer retention and prospect list building are further benefits, along with its viral marketing capabilities and its capacity to be responsive and customary, based on user action. Thanks to the ability to tailor content, style and frequency of e-mails, depending on customer buying patterns, actions and demographic statistics, e-mail is one of the best customer-focused marketing tool at a business's disposal today.

E-mails nurture those important customer relationships and allow marketers to gather market intelligence.

Says Jonathan Jackson of emarketer (<http://www.emarketer.com>) "There's also a sense of urgency about using e-mail. What's the first thing you do when you go online in the morning? Head for your e-mail?"

Additional benefits have been added to the resume of e-mail, with the rise of rich media and improved CRM and measurement tools. And the sheer amount of usage

and growth creates an even wider audience for marketers and businesses.

According to Jackson there is "plenty of evidence to suggest that e-mail is indeed the killer app." Says Jonathan, "In the US there are 97 million active e-mail users aged 14+ who send or receive five or more e-mail messages every week. They account for 44% of the total 14+ population. And while there are 97 million e-mail users today, there are only 88 million active web users."

Naturally, with an increased usage comes a proliferation of e-mails jostling for position in inboxes across the globe, so the target audience is growing but the task of ensuring that messages are read is made increasingly difficult. Thankfully more and more options are springing up ranging from simple HTML programmes to streaming media, video and audio e-mail options. But more on that later.

A History

The beginnings of remote message transmission came with smoke signals and jungle drums. This evolved towards telegraph wire messaging and morse code via airwaves. The telex system was also widely used from the 1920s-1980s and the telephone network has evolved substantially towards mobile networks and WAP technology. Just as communications have seen massive growth in recent years, so has e-mail.

Back in 1957 the USSR launched Sputnik, the first artificial earth satellite. This is when experiments in 'packet-switching' began. By the early 1970s, the first host-to-host protocol was being used and the first cross-country link was installed by AT&T between UCLA and BBN at 56kbps.

In 1971 Ray Tomlinson of BBN invented an email program to send messages across a distributed network. Soon after that, Larry Roberts wrote the first email management program (RD) to list, selectively read, file, forward, and respond to messages. E-mail was born.

Two years later, in 1973, the first computer-to-computer chat took place at UCLA and the University of London communicated by e-mail with people in Norway. In 1975 John Vittal developed MSG, the first all-inclusive email program providing replying, forwarding, and filing capabilities and Satellite links crossed two oceans (to Hawaii and UK) as the first TCP tests were run.

The 1970s was the decade when e-mail really started to take hold. The Queen of the UK, Elizabeth II sent her first email in 1976 and shortly afterwards emoticons became widely used.

The 1980s saw the introduction of DNS, the Domain Name System and Internet Relay Chat (IRC). With shopping malls arriving on the Internet in 1994. E-mail and the net have come a long way. Today, thirty years on, email has become the killer app.

Growth of the killer app

E-mail marketing response rates outdo banner advertising response rates and other forms of advertising with a CTR of 5.4%. Evidently, E-mail is not called the "killer app." for nothing.

The amount spent on e-mail marketing has risen from \$97 million in 1999 to almost \$1.1 billion in 2000, according to emarketer, with future spending set to increase. This will rise to over \$4.5 billion by 2003, emarketer predicts.

With the proliferation of e-mail messages in today's society and the cluttered condition of inboxes, it's a greater challenge to get e-mails opened and actioned. To meet this challenge make e-mails:

- Precise, clear and simple
- Customer-focused
- Timely
- Personal
- Contain information of value
- Well targeted
- Urgent
- Innovative

Other solutions that enhance an e-mail's chance of getting read have recently sprung up, including rich media applications. For example, video e-mail is perfect for those who aren't great copywriters but communicate well when they talk or present something.

Rich Media E-mail Solutions

Text can cause misunderstanding and can be ambiguous, and at the same time 'everybody sends text e-mails, they're boring'. Using audio or video e-mails is a surefire way to rid e-mails of ambiguity. There are several programs available, here are just a few:

elive2u™ is easy to use live real time video email
<http://www.elive2u.co.uk> .

This programme allows you to communicate in real time

with anyone, anywhere who is connected on the Internet. You just need the elive2u software, a PC camera microphone and speakers and, providing the user owns a web camera, you can send your video email with the simplicity of a text based HTML document. Access to the live streaming audio/video email is just as simple. Recipients do not need to book or utilize a central server, need no expensive plug-ins and require no software other than their regular email client, as long as it supports HTML and JavaScript.

The elive2u software enables the user to transmit live streaming audio/video to private email accounts, which provides the user with totally confidential and private Internet transmission and it's inexpensive too.

Another company, Emblaze, have licensed Microsoft's Windows Media Audio and Video Format using their Emblaze based solution for video over wireless 2.5G and 3G networks, mobile phones and other low-resource handheld devices. <http://www.imagemind.com/> . Video Express sends both personal streaming video and audio, therefore not requiring attachments. Your recipient does not have to wait to play your multimedia e-mail because there is no file attachment and they will only need the Windows Media Player. All you need is your sound card for voice messages and any Windows compliant video capture board to record video.

Mailround is an innovative email branding service which sends out all outgoing email with the company brand www.mailround.com . While <http://www.cyberavsolutions.com/products.htm> have another video e-mail solution:

VideoLink Mail 2.0 can send both audio and video. It works with any email software that lets you attach a file and also works well with most cameras and video capture cards. The recipient needs no special software to play the video, because the player is embedded in the video.

Videoshare at www.videoshare.com offer a free downloadable software application that enables users to send streaming video via email, greeting cards and embed video on web pages.

There's plenty to choose from, so why opt for Rich Media?

1. It Gets Attention! If executed properly, the return on a rich media email campaign can be much higher than a regular plain text or html campaign.

2. Not only is this a novel way to receive e-mail. It provides its readers with a lot more stimuli and information about the product or service, enhancing their chances of buying.

3. Less effort is required to view a video e-mail than to open a text e-mail, click on a link and browse a site.

Whatever you decide, before embarking on a rich media email campaign do your homework. Think about the capabilities of your list, your message, your target audience, the costs involved and plan your campaign very thoroughly. And always keep abreast of new technologies. So where will e-mail be in another 30 years? I wonder...

Cheryl Rickman is author of, 111 winning ways to promote your website successfully. and the founder of <http://www.webcritique.co.uk> where she offers website appraisals, personalised web promotion plans and press releases, plus web page writing, editing and proofreading services.

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