

# Don't Let Your HTML Email Newsletter Break!

By Jessica Albon

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Offering your email newsletter in HTML frequently results in higher subscribe rates, greater reader recognition and impressive ROI. That is, if they're done right. Done wrong, your reader may suffer broken links, missing images, or worse.

To take advantage of the best HTML has to offer, your HTML will need to be error-free. Fortunately, that's not as complicated as it sounds. While constructing and testing HTML newsletters, we've found six steps that eliminate about 99% of all HTML errors. You can do them yourself or look for a company that offers HTML email testing.

1. Perhaps the easiest way to avoid HTML problems is to offer a plain text version separately (depending on your distribution system this may mean setting up two separate lists). Though many email distribution systems do allow you to send both your plain text and html versions in one message, the technology behind multi-part MIME can create problems with older email programs.

Because email programs vary, sending both versions of your newsletter in one message may actually create more problems than it solves (readers may see both versions, the HTML may become garbled, etc). Though maintaining separate lists is a little more work, you'll wind up with a newsletter that's consistently delivered correctly, because your readers choose the version that's best suited to them.

2. Write your HTML code by hand. Though WYSIWYG editors (like FrontPage and DreamWeaver) make quick work of HTML design, they're also notorious for adding unnecessary codes.

Excess code presents two potential problems. First, it bloats the file size which results in longer download times for your readers. Second, these excess codes can confuse email programs which tend to be less forgiving of HTML errors than are typical web browsers.

3. Preview your HTML newsletter in a web browser often. Watching the results of your coding in a browser is the easiest way to catch HTML errors as they occur. You can use whatever browser you're most comfortable in, but remember each has its own idiosyncrasies and isn't identical to an email program.

By checking on your progress regularly, you'll also ensure the newsletter looks the way you want it to look. This saves you from going through all the steps only to discover your newsletter looks nothing like you'd planned.

3. Avoid missing images and broken links by making all URLs and image locations absolute, not relative. A relative URL for the index page of a website would be "index.html" while an absolute URL for the same page would be "http://www.domain.com/index.html". Get in the habit of typing the complete location for both links and images.

When your email newsletter arrives in my inbox saying my computer can't find the images folder (it doesn't know to look on your domain) and displays a broken image. Microsoft Outlook does allow you to insert images directly into messages (which it then sends with the message), but this method is unreliable for readers who don't use Outlook.

You can also use the base href tag if all of your links and images will come from one domain. To set a base URL, you'll want to add a to the very top line of your HTML code (before the ). Make sure to include the trailing slash. This will tell your reader's computer where to look for all images and links and means you can use relative URLs throughout the newsletter.

4. Run your HTML through an HTML validator. Because you've typed your HTML code by hand, it's possible you've left off tags or made typos in your HTML. There are a number of HTML validators available, some that you can use on your desktop like HTML Tidy (<http://tidy.sourceforge.net/>), and others, like NetMechanic (<http://www.netmechanic.com>) that you use over the Internet. They all help you to uncover and fix errors that may cause problems in your newsletter.

Though these programs are designed to check HTML designed for web browsers, they can alert you to many common HTML errors. You'll still need to check things like image links (for absolute locations) and URLs yourself (they can't tell you if you've linked to the wrong page, for example).

5. Test the newsletter. Though it wouldn't make sense to test your newsletter in every email program ever made, you can test your newsletter in the most popular clients. AOL, MSN, and Earthlink each offer limited-access or "Bring Your Own Access" programs for reasonable sign-up fees. Check your subscriber list to see which accounts are most popular so you'll know which services to emphasize.

You may also want to set up accounts at Yahoo!, Hotmail and Excite, if you allow these addresses on your list. Also check platforms and programs most likely to be used by your clients (i.e. test it with a Mac if your newsletter goes out to graphic designers, etc.).

Bottom line: An HTML newsletter does require more time than its plain text counterpart, but, when carefully executed, the results more than make up for any initial inconveniences.

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