

No Time for "Pretty" Ezines

By Rosalind Gardner

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If you have a newsletter, or plan to start one up, you may be wondering if you can send out those 'pretty' HTML ezines. Well, of course you can. But SHOULD you?

If how you spend your time is important, then I think not.

When crafting a text-only newsletter, you take time to outline, draft, and edit your work. When it's correct, you format a 65-character line length to prevent email ugliness, and voila! your email newsletter is ready to send.

However, if it's going out as HTML, you're not done yet. Not by a long shot.

First, you have to create a web page to hold your text. Even if you have a pre-made template with your logo and other graphics ready to go, you still need to format headings with the correct fonts, and that's only if you're using cascading style sheets. If you don't use CSS, you'll probably have to add more than just the header tags.

Next, you'll need a weekend - a week if you're a newbie - to sort out how individual email clients and Internet service providers handle various HTML codes and objects.

Some email clients can't read HTML email at all, while others accept only a limited number of codes and tags. AOL is particularly finicky.

If you want to reach your subscribers who use AOL, you need to know that the following HTML objects are not supported by the AOL client mail.

- ActiveX
- Audio
- External Style Sheets
- Frames and IFrames
- Java
- Meta Refresh
- Scripts: JavaScript, VBScript, Perl, etc.
- Tooltips
- Video

Seems simple enough, doesn't it? Just use pure HTML and avoid the bells and whistles.

Not so fast! To get the body portion of the page to render correctly, you'll have to include a MIME-type header, which is used to send non-ASCII information, and allows email programs to display images instead of a garbled mess that looks like this:

```
#&½A÷Á\dÚLiõAÓm0`g'À'"LI'Àµ:¿Ei£ñãsÉ
¶|=r`fx!!gi9a-ã-éâÖHäR©ÖJ+Ífpè
`QÀeçx} & »t-Íªá&/gE3'J$SE; &UDçWyk,!
eÉÑI@~õ"ñ}Ö;ÛB,%sØS!E-à~|NÜxv½³à6¹-!m*%s
"ÁL2ÎpÙ0-
```

Oh, yes. You'll also to include a Content-type header too! ... and those are just AOL's requirements.

Even if you learn how to make HTML email work, some folks specifically choose to receive only ASCII email. They know that HTML email can expose them to viruses and intrusive programs. These folks might be annoyed to receive the garbled mess that is your newsletter. Annoyed enough to click that unsubscribe link, which was the only thing in your ezine that was legible.

Let's assume your ezine survives the trip through cyberspace and arrives in all its HTML glory. Will your subscriber be able to read the text? Are the fonts large enough and dark enough to see without a problem? Maybe you can see the page, but sight-impaired readers have no way to apply user-accessibility options in an HTML document. They too will unsubscribe, even if it means digging out the magnifying glass to find the link.

Here's yet another way that HTML email wastes time. It takes as long to download as any other web page, and some of your subscribers are still on 33 - 56K dial-up connections. Your over-sized email is costing them money; and that fact is costing you subscribers.

Honestly, is 'pretty' email worth the time and challenges? That's up to you.

If the appearance of your newsletter is that important, upload it as a page to your server and email the URL to your ezine subscribers. That way, you may prevent a few unsubscriptions. Better yet, you'll have more time to play with your kids, or whatever you like to do.

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