Email usability, design & best practices

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Best day & time
Wednesday or Thursday at 11am - best day changes during seasons - but studies show that as long as you have good content then it tends to matter less when you send it - as long as you send it on a regular predictable schedule.

Subject line
First part should stay the same for recognition, second part should change - is the hook. For example: [Newsletter Title]: [Catchy Phrase] (50-60 characters total, with important content in 1st 25-30 characters)

From line
Important not to change due to name recognition, white listing by users.
Include company name.

Welcome letter
Welcome letter has positive effect: users like and even look for an immediate response when they sign up. If they don't get it they are less likely to open the newsletter email when it does arrive later that month. The welcome letter also helps develop the relationship as well as set future expectancies. May want to offer the last edition of newsletter along with or instead of welcome letter. Then important to send newsletter each month on regular expected schedule to satisfy user expectancy & anticipation.

Format
Most important that it's consistent & has good content. Typical to have branding & tag line across top, although MarketingSherpa articles published earlier this year indicate that we can have higher success rate by using new design methods that take the preview pane into consideration (see "Preview Panes" section under "Design Considerations" below). Many users have images turned off by default and never turn them on. Important to format for preview pane - especially for B2B users, who tend to use the preview pane more. Stats for open measurements do not reveal who views in preview and who opens all the way. (MarketingSherpa Study Data: One Out of Four Consumers Uses Preview Panes; 59% Block Email Images [Feb. 16, 2007]: http://www.marketingsherpa.com/article.html?ident=29872)

Important to keep it brief and must be designed to facilitate scanning (e.g., by using headlines and whitespace). Today, only 19% of newsletters are read thoroughly. Dominant mode of dealing with emails is skimming them (69%). (From Jakob Nielsen study: http://www.nngroup.com/reports/newsletters/summary.html)

People glance at the headlines and especially at whatever is at the top. The longer the newsletter, the less likely it is that the content at the bottom will be glanced at. (JN Study)

Content must be current & timely (Jakob Nielsen). Users highly rate the following as useful:
- work-related news or company actions
- prices/sales
- personal interests/hobbies
- events/deadlines

When people get tired of newsletters/emails from a company, they tend to mark it as spam rather than unsubscribe. (JN)

Design considerations

Recommended to design for and test for all of these (MarketingSherpa study 2/16/07):

      1. Preview pane version - at least small horizontal (*see below for innovative solutions*).

      2. Images blocked version.

      3. Regular full-screen image-enabled version.

PREVIEW PANES:

* Sample of a preview-pane friendly HTML design
(from Email Preview Pane Samples & Charts:
http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/epreview2/study.html)
- images disabled: http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/epreview2/5a.html
- images visible: http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/epreview2/5b.html

* Sierra Club Tests Radical Email Newsletter Redesign to Improve Preview Pane Viewing
https://www.marketingsherpa.com/article.html?ident=29668

Why (and How) You Should Redesign Your Email Templates for Outlook, Hotmail & Yahoo Immediately (nice checklist of email template requirements - fits with my experience)
http://www.marketingsherpa.com/article.php?ident=29662
- Nearly all email users everywhere see about 350 pixels across.

MarketingSherpa: How Consumers See Email in Preview Panes
http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/previewpanes/study.html

MOBILE EMAIL:

Special Report: Email Marketing to BlackBerrys - Usage, Formatting & Rendering Tips
http://www.marketingsherpa.com/article.html?ident=30057

The Horrible Truth About Mobile Email (July 15, 2007)
http://www.marketingsherpa.com/sample.cfm?ident=30037

- "If you use HTML for nearly anything -- especially for graphics, such as your logo and other headers that appear near the top of the email -- then your email message looks AWFUL on a BlackBerry. Why? Because most mobile devices currently read only the text of the HTML. This isn't the text-only version, but rather a text-rendered HTML version. That means ugly codes and meaningless hotlinks probably show up all over the place."

Blackberry Simulators
http://na.blackberry.com/eng/developers/downloads/simul
tors.jsp
http://support.vzw.com/swf/blackberry8703/blackberry_87
3e_simulator.htm

MICROSOFT OUTLOOK 2007

Microsoft takes email design back 5 years (Campaign Monitor Blog January 12, 2007)
http://www.campaignmonitor.com/blog/archives/2007/01/microsoft_takes_email_design_b.html

Notable findings from Jakob Nielsen's study

Below quoted from JN study (http://www.nngroup.com/reports/newsletters/summary.html):

The most significant finding from our usability research on email newsletters is that users have highly emotional reactions to them. *This is in strong contrast to research on website usability, where users are usually much more oriented toward functionality. Even a website that users visit daily seems to feel like a tool: users want to get in and get out as quickly as possible rather than "connect" with the site.*

Users tend to glance at websites when they need to accomplish something or to find the answer to a specific question. In contrast, newsletters feel personal because they arrive in users' inboxes, and users have an ongoing relationship with them. Newsletters also have a social aspect, as users often forward them to colleagues and friends.

*The positive aspect of this emotional relationship is that **newsletters can create much more of a bond between users and a company than a website can**. The negative aspect is that newsletter usability problems have a much stronger impact on the customer relationship than website usability problems.*

For example, in one of our studies, a user received an error message that read "Email address is not valid." This would be a poorly worded error message in any user interface, but the emotional aspect to newsletters increased the user's anger: "Mine's as valid as the next person's! ... It's questioning my validity as an entity in cyberspace."

Sixty-nine percent of users said that they look forward to receiving at least one newsletter, and most users said a newsletter had become part of their routine. Very few other promotional efforts can claim this degree of customer buy-in.

UNSUBSCRIBING (also quoted from JN study):

*Even though users successfully unsubscribed 91% of the time during the test sessions, they **often refrained from even trying to get off mailing lists that they no longer wanted to receive**.*

The four main reasons people didn't attempt to unsubscribe were:

*   * **Emotional attachment** to the newsletter: Users said that it didn't feel good to sever the relationship, even when they no longer read the mailings.*

*   * Low expectations for the website's usability: People assumed that it would be difficult and **time-consuming to unsubscribe**, so they postponed the job for another day and simply deleted the newsletter's current issue.*

*   * **Fear that unsubscribing would fail and would subject the user to even more mail**: Many people have heard that asking to get off spam lists only confirms the validity of their email address to the spammers; this notion has become an urban legend that contaminates users' mental model of legitimate newsletter publishers as well.*

*   * Easier options: It's **often easier to simply use a spam-blocking feature to stop future issues** than it is to unsubscribe.*

Whatever the reason, it's clear that mailing list owners shouldn't assume that all subscribers actually want to receive their newsletters. Many users might have simply neglected to unsubscribe. . . . If users keep getting unwanted newsletters, the messages will start to backfire and become regular reminders that they're annoyed with your company.