



EMAIL MARKETING



A MAILCHIMP FIELD GUIDE





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HELLO.

You don't have to be a professional web designer to use this guide, but a little HTML knowledge will help. First, we'll cover all the basics, like how HTML email works (and why it always seems to break when you try to send it yourself). Then we'll get into the technical stuff, like how to design and code your HTML email. Finally, we'll run through email-marketing best practices for list management, deliverability and measuring performance.

If any of your questions aren't addressed here, feel free to contact our support staff at mailchimp.com/support. We'll be happy to assist you.

About the Fourth Edition

According to our server logs, this guide has been downloaded a few hundred thousand times since we first wrote it in 2001. We hope it's helped a few people out there get their email marketing off to a good start.

We wrote the first edition because back then, you had to know a lot of technical stuff before you could get into email marketing. Email marketers were jacks-of-all-trades—designing their emails, coding them into HTML, setting tracking links and images, managing bounces and setting up databases on their websites.

Nowadays, email-marketing services like MailChimp have built-in tools that do all that tedious stuff for you. We manage your lists, give you signup forms, send welcome emails, handle double-opt-ins, set one-click unsubscribe links—and we even give you built-in HTML email templates (so you don't have to know how to code HTML email anymore). Our new features include Design Genius, a tool that helps you create emails that match your company's brand, and geo-location, so you can reach your subscribers anywhere in the world, right on time. All you have to do now is create excellent content and click "send." In other words, a lot of the technical "how-to" stuff in this guide has been replaced with "push this button in MailChimp."

But there are new challenges, which we'll cover in this fourth edition:

- Most email programs now block all images in your HTML email by default. You've probably noticed how you have to right-click on an email or push some button to make images show up in the emails you receive. We'll help you design around that.
- Over the years, desktop email programs (like Outlook, Lotus, Eudora and Apple Mail) made great progress in standardizing

the way they display HTML email. But then webmail services (like Yahoo, Gmail, and Hotmail) started getting more popular, and they have their own unique challenges. Two steps forward, one step back. We'll share what works and what doesn't in webmail clients. Then, Microsoft decided to change the rendering engine in Outlook 2007 from Internet Explorer to Microsoft Word. Again, two steps forward, one step back.

- Spam filters are very sensitive to the content in your email. We've got tips on how to write your content.
- There's so much spam out there, that spam filters need their own spam filters now. They're called firewalls or gateways, and they block email before they even get to your recipients' spam filters, based on reputation. We'll teach you how to protect your reputation.
- Spam laws require every email marketer to follow some very important rules. If you break any of the rules, you can get your pants sued off. We'll let you know what information you must include in each email you send to your customers.
- Blacklists used to simply block email based on the server you sent from. Now, they scan the content of your messages and look for domain names that have been found in reported spam. Even if you've never sent an email campaign before, you can find yourself on a blacklist if one of your reseller partners has been sending spam with your domain name in it. We've got tips for staying away from blacklists.

But first, what the heck is MailChimp?

MailChimp makes it easy to design and send beautiful emails, manage your subscribers and track your campaign's performance. We take fancy-schmancy tools like segmentation, a/b testing and ROI tracking, and we turn them into something anyone can use.

Looking for stats on who's opening and clicking your emails? You got it. Wanna integrate your campaigns with Facebook, Twitter or Flickr? No problem. Need help choosing colors that match your website? We automated that. Why? Because email marketing shouldn't be a hassle.

The information in this guide comes from years of research and experience in the email-marketing world (and it doesn't hurt that we send a gazillion emails a day).

HOW HTML EMAIL WORKS

Before you can start designing, coding and sending HTML email, you need to know how it works and what tools you'll need. Here's some background information that every email designer and marketer should know.

The Multipart/Alternative MIME format

The most important thing to know about HTML email is that you can't just attach an HTML file and a bunch of images to a message and click "send." Most of the time, your recipients' email applications will break all the paths to your image files by moving your images into temporary folders on your hard drive. And you can't just paste all your code into your email application, either. Most email apps send messages in **plain-text** format by default, so the HTML won't render. Your recipients would just see all that raw source code, instead of the pretty email that's supposed to show up.

You need to send HTML email from your server in **Multipart-Alternative MIME format**. Basically, that means your mail transfer agent bundles your HTML code, plus a plain-text version of the message, together into one email. That way, if a recipient can't view your beautiful HTML email, the good-old-fashioned plain-text version of your message is automatically displayed. It's kind of a nerdy gobbledy-geek thing, which is why a lot of people mess it up when they try to send HTML email themselves. You either need to program a script to send email in multipart-alternative MIME format, or just use an outside vendor (ahem, like MailChimp) to deliver email for you.

Image files in HTML email

Embedding images and photos into messages is the #1 reason people want to send HTML email. The proper way to handle images in HTML email is to host them on a web server, then pull them into your HTML email, using **absolute paths** in your code. Basically, you can't send the graphics along with your message. You host the graphics on a web server, and then the code in your HTML email downloads them whenever the message is opened. Incidentally, that's how **open tracking** works. You place a tiny, invisible graphic into the email, and then track when it's downloaded. This is why open tracking only works in HTML email—not plain-text—and why the new email applications that block images by default (to protect your privacy) can screw up open-rate stats.

TIP: CODING IMAGE TAGS IN HTML EMAIL

Do this:

```

```

Instead of this:

```

```

If you just use MailChimp's built-in email designer, we host your graphics on our server for you—for free. No need to FTP files anywhere, or code anything.

Free hosting services

You really need your own server to host images for your HTML email. Don't try hosting images on a free "image hosting service," because those websites often put scripts in place to prevent you from linking to them in emails (they can't handle all the traffic). And since you get what you pay for in that regard, free image hosting services tend to be pretty unreliable under heavy traffic conditions. Also, spammers use free image hosting services all the time to cover their tracks. Email-marketing services like MailChimp have built-in image hosting capabilities.

Delivering HTML email

Lots of newbies make the mistake of setting up forwarding lists, or CC'ing copies of a message to all their customers. This causes all kinds of problems—especially when a customer clicks "Reply to all." First of all, there's no way to do any kind of individual tracking or personalization when they CC a big group like that. Plus it just looks unprofessional and impersonal when recipients can see your entire list of other recipients.

That's why when an email-marketing system like MailChimp sends your campaign, we take your message and send it one at a time to each recipient on your list (really, really fast). Unlike your work computer linked to your local ISP—which probably has a standard monthly bandwidth limit—email-marketing vendors use dedicated mail servers that are capable of sending hundreds of thousands of emails (even millions, for larger vendors) per hour.

Other factors you should consider when delivering HTML email campaigns:

- If you send from your own server: Your ISP may throttle your outgoing emails or shut down your account if you send too much too fast (like more than 500 per hour) or if you exceed your monthly bandwidth limit. If you've ever sent an email campaign to a big list of recipients, and you attached a giant PDF, this has probably happened to you before.
- Email firewalls and ISPs that receive your emails don't like receiving tons of emails from one single IP address at once (unless they normally receive tons of emails from that IP). So if you only send occasional email campaigns from your IP, you may want to throttle your delivery or spread them across multiple IPs, to avoid accidental blocking. Email-marketing services usually split your campaign into pieces and send it out over lots of different IP addresses.
- If you send emails from your desktop email program, chances are you're connecting through your local ISP. If you don't have a dedicated IP address set up with your ISP, you're probably sending emails from a dynamic IP address. ISPs and spam filters don't like receiving lots of emails from a dynamic IP address, because it looks like a hijacked home computer. If you're not using an email-marketing vendor like MailChimp, you should always send from a dedicated IP address.

DESIGNING AND CODING

Now that you have a basic understanding of how HTML email campaigns work and how you should deliver them, let's start talking about designing and coding them (the fun part!).

Tools of the trade

Here are the tools you'll need to succeed at coding HTML emails:

1. **A design application**, like Adobe Photoshop, Fireworks, Dreamweaver or Illustrator. Use these tools to lay out your template and slice out your graphics, like your company logo and product photos. We're partial to Fireworks, but to each his own.
2. **A good, pure HTML/Text editor**, like BBEdit and TextWrangler for the Mac, or HomeSite and NoteTab Pro for the PC. You *could* use WYSIWYG style tools to generate HTML, like Microsoft FrontPage, or maybe Adobe GoLive or Macromedia Dreamweaver. But they have their disadvantages. WYSIWYGs very often throw in gobs of junk into your code (FYI, Microsoft says the extra code is to help with "round tripping," which means you can export from Word to Powerpoint to HTML, then back again, without losing anything). All this extra code usually ends up just breaking things or setting off spam filters. There are some WYSIWYGs out there that generate clean code, but we've found those are a bit *too* perfect, because they're designed for web pages and not HTML email (so they don't know all the things you have to rig in your code). If you want to do HTML email correctly, you should learn to code HTML from scratch with a good text editor.

TIP: FREE HTML EMAIL TEMPLATES

If all this talk of designing and coding HTML is too nerdy for you, consider using MailChimp's built-in HTML email templates. They're super flexible and can be customized to match any brand. Plus, they've already been tested in all the major email programs. See some nice examples of what our customers have done:

mailchimp.com/resources/templates

3. **Your own web server**, to host all your images and archives. You should create a folder on your website for email newsletters. This is where you'll store images, then point to them with absolute paths in your HTML code. You might also want a folder on your website to store archived newsletters. When we started out, we created a folder on our

website called, /monkeywrench/ and then kept campaigns under subfolders named by /date/ to store each campaign. Use your own organization style—just be sure to come up with a system and process for archiving, so that each newsletter isn't a chore to publish.

Nowadays we don't even bother, because we use MailChimp's built-in archive functionality. It'll save a copy of every campaign you send from our system. You can build a page on your website called "Newsletter Archives" and paste a little code snippet from MailChimp. We'll keep your page updated with your most recent campaigns. Saves so much time.

4. **An FTP program**, like Fetch for the Mac, or CuteFTP for PCs. When you design your email and slice out all your graphics, you'll use FTP to move those files from your computer to the server.

5. **A test machine (or two)**, loaded with as many different email applications and accounts as possible. You'll want to check your HTML email designs under lots of different scenarios. Unlike web design, where you only have to check your work in a small handful of browsers, there are *tons* of email applications out there, and they all handle HTML email differently. If you use MailChimp, you can add on our Inbox Inspector tool (mailchimp.com/inboxinspector) to do all the testing for you.

Design guidelines

Here are some pointers for designing your email. Early warning: If you're a seasoned web designer, you won't be happy with all the compromises and hacks you'll have to make when designing for email applications.

Set your width to about 500–600 pixels.

If you've ever worked on a website, you're probably used to designing pages to fit 1024x768 screens. But that won't work when you design HTML email. Most recipients will be looking at your email through their **preview pane**, which is usually a small portion of their available screen. A width less than 600 pixels is safe for most programs.

TIP: THE 250 PIXEL BOX

Most preview panes are so crowded, you really only have about 250 pixels in height or width to make your first impression. Check out this [blog post](#) for details:

mailchimp.com/blog/email-design-tip-the-250-pixel-box

Simple layouts and tables work best.

You wouldn't believe all the different ways email applications garble up HTML email. Keep your email designs nice and simple. Avoid complicated layouts, too many embedded tables, and tables with too many rows and columns. A simple two-column table with a row across the top is about as complex as you can get. Lots of email applications don't cooperate when you code tables with **colspans**, which are table cells that span across multiple columns. One application that's particularly finicky when it comes to tables (and just about everything else) is Lotus Notes.

If you're working on an email layout and find the tables are getting complex, and you're having to code too many colspans, you might think about chopping it up into separate tables. For instance, we almost always use separate tables for the header, body and footer of our emails. Better to go with more simple tables than one big complex table.

If you're a [CSS ninja](#), you're probably rolling your eyes in disdain with all this "tables" talk. But trust us—you're not going to be able to use all that cool, timesaving CSS stuff in your HTML emails. DIVs and CSS positioning don't work (we'll cover that later in this guide).

Special considerations for webmail services

A lot of your recipients will check their email in their web browser, such as with Yahoo!Mail, Hotmail or Gmail. Since they're viewing email in browsers, there are certain things you need to know when you code your HTML emails:

- They'll strip out your `<HTML>`, `<HEAD>`, and `<BODY>` tags, in order to keep *your* code from interfering with *their* web pages. That means...
- Any background colors you specify in your `<BODY>` tag will be lost. So wrap your entire email **inside** a larger, 100% wide table, and set a background color to that table.
- Any CSS that you place inside the `<HEAD>` tags will be lost. So don't try to link to CSS files hosted on your server. Use embedded CSS instead, and make sure it's below the `<BODY>` tag. If you're a web designer, that'll make you feel kinda dirty because that's not exactly the *proper* place to put embedded CSS. But no worries—it'll work. If you just can't stomach that, use inline CSS.
- Some webmail clients are starting to strip even the most basic

CSS, even if it's embedded below the BODY tag (like we described above). We think it's because they don't want any of *your* CSS interfering with *their* CSS, or maybe because they're using so much JavaScript and AJAX technology.

TIP: EMAIL PROVIDER TRENDS

We analyzed outgoing email traffic from the MailChimp servers to see who the major email providers are and to identify trends. Check out our findings:

mailchimp.com/blog/major-email-provider-trends-yahoo-and-hotmail-tops-gmail-catching

CSS in HTML email

CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) is a godsend for websites, but don't put too much faith in it with HTML email. For instance, you shouldn't expect DIVs to work. And definitely stay away from **CSS positioning**. Won't work. If you're a CSS-standards freak, you're going to hate yourself after coding HTML email. You'll have to rely on old-fashioned `<TABLES>` for your layouts in HTML email, and only use CSS for simple font formatting and colors. Always design your CSS to "fail gracefully." That means if someone took away your CSS, your design and content would still display decently. Before you send your HTML email, delete the CSS and see what it looks like. Did you have tiny text that is now gigantic, and blowing out your tables?

CSS is especially touchy if you're using a WYSIWYG to design your HTML email, because WYSIWYGs insert all kinds of crazy CSS and DIVs by default. It's one of the drawbacks of WYSIWYGs for HTML email. It may help you get things coded, but you still have to understand HTML enough to go back and *remove* some of the code, so things won't break in email applications. You might as well code by hand.

Using Microsoft Word to generate HTML is even worse than using WYSIWYGs. Word adds so much code behind the scenes, it's unbelievable. Don't do it. Learn to code HTML, or use our built-in HTML email designer.

If your email design uses lots of CSS, be sure to check it in Gmail. At the time of this writing, they don't fully support CSS, so you'll see your fonts defaulting to Arial and black in color. Here's what our MonkeyWrench Newsletter looked like in Outlook (which supports CSS just fine) vs. Gmail:



Gmail stripped out virtually all of our CSS. Where did our font sizes and line height go?

Flash, (and JavaScript, ActiveX, movies, and other stuff that won't work) in HTML email

You can deliver HTML emails with Flash in them, but most recipients won't be able to *view* them. Not unless they're using an email program that uses a browser to render their HTML email. Most anti-virus applications block the code used to embed Flash movies, and they block JavaScript, ActiveX, and even background music files. All that stuff has been used in the past to spread viruses, so it's commonly blocked now.

There are services out there that claim to make videos work inside of emails, but most of them seem to just be elaborate ways of pointing people to landing pages that recipients would view in their browser. We haven't found any that reliably work inside an email reader.

Goodmail provides a certification process where you can pay to have your videos work inside certain email programs. Visit goodmail.com to get the most updated list:

If you must include rich media inside your emails, the safest solution is to use a **landing page**. For example, if you've got a great animation or movie to show to your recipients, just send a simple, intriguing GIF or JPEG graphic in your HTML email, then link it to a landing page on your website with the animation in it. Same goes for JavaScript, ActiveX and movie files. Anti-virus applications block them from running. So fancy rollover or pop-up navigation and streaming videos aren't going to work either. MailChimp's video merge tags handle all that for you.

TIP: VIDEO MERGE TAGS

MailChimp's video merge tags can save you a lot of time if you want to include videos in your email campaigns. Check them out here:

mailchimp.com/blog/linking-to-youtube-blip-tv-and-vimeo-in-mailchimp

Background colors

Remember when we told you about how browser-based email services (like Yahoo!Mail and Hotmail) strip out your <HTML>, <HEAD>, and <BODY> tags? That's what you need to remember when coding your background colors and images. You normally specify that stuff in your <BODY> tag, but you can't rely on that with HTML email. You'll need to create a big, 100% wide **table wrap** around your email. Set your background color in that table, and use some CELLPADDING as needed. If you're into CSS, you might be tempted to use a <DIV> instead. But we've seen DIVs break quite frequently in email applications, so we don't recommend them.

ANATOMY OF A GOOD HTML EMAIL NEWSLETTER

Here's what a well-built HTML email newsletter looks like:



1. Your company name in the “From” field. Recipients should recognize who the email is from instantly. It can’t be deceptive in any way (duh). If a recipient has to strain his brain to remember who you are, he’ll click “This is spam” instead of opening.
2. A relevant subject line (don’t be “spammy”), with your company or newsletter name in it. So they instantly know who the email is from, and what it’s about (hence, *subject* line).
3. The “To:” field of your email should be personalized to the recipient’s name, not their email address. MailChimp lets you merge recipient names into this field, if you have it in your database. You would insert `*|FNAME|* *|LNAME|*`, for example. Check out our merge tag cheatsheet for more info: mailchimp.com/resources/merge
4. A one-click opt-out link that removes people from your list immediately. There are times when you might consider placing it at the **top** of your email as well as in the footer, so that people who want off your list can easily find it (instead of clicking their “Junk” button). If you use MailChimp’s Managed List functionality, you would use our `*|UNSUB|*` tag to generate your unsubscribe link (it’s required in every email you send from our system). Any recipient who clicks it will be instantly removed from your list. If you use our built-in HTML email templates, we insert that link into the footer for you—no coding required.
5. In addition to your opt-out link, you might also include a link in your header for recipients to “View this email in your browser.” Point it to an archived version of your email on your server. This helps if the email was forwarded to friends, and got mangled along the way. MailChimp automatically keeps an archived version of all your campaigns on our server. You can just use our `*|ARCHIVE|*` tag in your emails to link to yours. If you use our built-in HTML email templates, we automatically place this link at the top of all your emails.
6. Your valid, physical mailing address, and as much contact information as possible. The more contact information you provide, the more reputable your email will look.
7. Bonus: It’s a really good idea to also include some kind of reminder text, like “You are receiving this email because you signed up at our website.” People forget opting in to lists, and they get a little trigger-happy with the “This is spam” button. That can get you reported to the major ISPs, so you want to prevent it. Also, in the rare case that a recipient reports you to an anti-spam organization, having this reminder text can make the difference between a server admin blacklisting you forever, or contacting you for further explanation. If you use our built-in email templates, MailChimp automatically inserts that reminder text into your email footer with the merge tag:
`*|LIST:DESCRIPTION|*`

Plain-text email

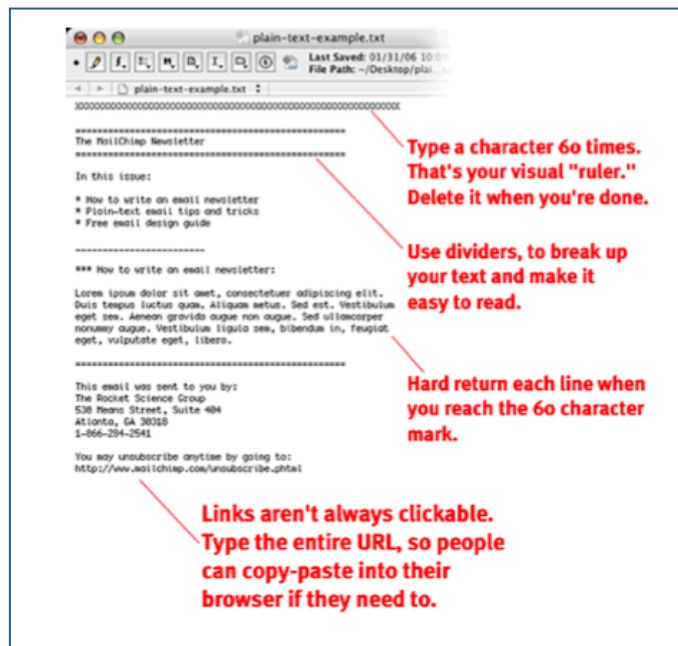
Don't forget your plain-text email. You need it for people who can't (or won't) view HTML. Sometimes the plain-text version of your email is the one that gets displayed if your recipient checks email on a mobile device. If you don't take the time to create the plain-text version of your HTML email, you'll just look like a lazy spammer (spam filters will penalize you for only sending HTML). When you send a campaign in MailChimp, you'll need to create both versions of your message (HTML & Plain-text). Then we bundle them together in **multipart format** and send them off. Your recipients' email applications decide which version to display.

The art of plain-text email

There's definitely an art to constructing your plain-text email. You can't just use the same text from your HTML email. It has to be formatted *juuuust* right, so the best way to do it is to build it from scratch, or copy-paste the content from your HTML email, then reformat it heavily. Here are some tips for your plain-text emails:

1. Use a plain text editor, like TextWrangler for the Mac, or Windows NotePad. Don't use something like Microsoft Word, because it won't give you the kind of raw text files you need. You need an application that gives no formatting whatsoever.
2. If you're using MailChimp, just click the button that says **Copy text from HTML version** and we'll take care of it for you. This will save you some time, but you'll almost always want to hand-tweak it to make it just right.
3. By default, some email applications start to wrap your plain-text messages at about 60 characters or so. That's not really a big deal to most people. Just let your text wrap wherever their email programs want it to. But if you have content that you absolutely do not want to wrap unexpectedly (like in the middle of a hyperlink), one nice little trick is to type a letter 60 times across the top of your message, and use that as your "ruler." As your content approaches the end of that ruler, hit your return key and **hard wrap** the line. Again, this is only if you want very strict formatting. While you're hard wrapping, make sure none of your lines begin with a period. A couple of periods used to indicate the end of a message in older email programs. You'd be surprised how many ISPs still honor that, and will cut your email off prematurely.
4. People don't read email. They *scan* email. Especially plain-text email. So make it really easy to find important information with bullet points and visual markers (see screenshot below)

5. You can't code a clickable link with plain-text email. You just have to type out the entire URL. Some email applications will make it clickable automatically. Others won't.



One thing we've noticed is that a lot of people spend so much of their time on the HTML version of their message that they're too drained to work on the plain-text email (we're guilty of that ourselves). So they either ignore it, or they slap in some junk, or they cheat a little and type in something like, "Evidently, you can't view HTML email, so visit this URL in your browser to see our newsletter in all its glory." We think this is a big mistake. So don't put *all* your energy into the HTML version of your email. Save some love for your plain-text message too. If you find yourself spending so much time coding HTML that you're too pooped to make a plain-text email, you should consider setting up one re-usable template that you can just select, and fill with content every campaign. No need to reinvent the wheel for every campaign.

6. There are some people who really, really don't want HTML emails. They actually *want* plain-text. They're a special breed of people, and you might be able to use that to your advantage. Why not insert special messages in the plain-text version of your newsletter, just for these people? Don't just look at plain-text as a hassle. Think of it as an extra-special segmenting tactic to talk to the uber-nerds on your list.

TIP: PLAIN-TEXT ONLY OPTION

When you set up a managed list in MailChimp, you have the option to "let my users choose plain-text only" when they fill in your opt-in form. MailChimp will automatically deliver *only* the plain-text formatted email to them when you send your campaigns.

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

Here are some of the most common mistakes people make when coding HTML emails:

1. Not coding **absolute paths** to their images. Remember, attaching graphics and using **relative paths** won't work. You need to host the images on your server, then link to them in your code.
2. Using JavaScript, or ActiveX, or embedding movies. That stuff just doesn't work in HTML email.
3. Getting overly ambitious with designs. Designing HTML email isn't just like designing web pages. You can't have all the CSS-positioning, DIVs, DHTML and complex, embedded tables like you can in web pages.
4. Forgetting—or refusing—to include an opt-out link. It's stupid and unprofessional not to allow recipients to unsubscribe from your list. Oh yeah, it's illegal, too. Be sure to read and understand The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003: ftc.gov/spam
5. Linking to an external CSS file. You usually put CSS code in between the <HEAD></HEAD> tags of web pages, right? But browser based email applications (like Yahoo, Hotmail and Gmail) strip <HEAD> and <BODY> tags from HTML email. Embed your CSS below the <BODY> tag.
6. Letting your permission “grow cold.” If you've been collecting opt-ins at your website like a good email marketer, but you haven't sent an email in several months, your subscribers have forgotten all about you. So when they receive a full-blown email newsletter from you out of the blue, they're going to click their “This is spam button” in their email application. Don't let your permission grow cold. Send occasional emails. If you've been collecting emails for years, and you're only *just now* sending your first email to everyone, you should send a little re-invitation to your list. Something like, “A long time ago, you subscribed to my email list. Well, I've finally got some time to start sending my cool newsletter, and I want to make sure you still want to receive it. Click here to sign up.” At the very least, send an email and place some kind of text at the top that reminds them of where and when they opted in. People usually forget about opting in to something after six months or so.
7. Sending to a list without permission. This is the worst offense. Lots of innocent marketers who mean well commit this heinous crime. Here are some common ways legitimate marketers can inadvertently become known as evil spammers:

- Getting an email list from a tradeshow. “But I’m exhibiting there, and the tradeshow host said it would be okay, and when people purchased tickets, the fine print said that we could email them, and...” Nope. You’re spamming. Don’t do it. If they didn’t give you permission to email them, they didn’t opt-in to your list. If they didn’t opt-in, you’re spamming. Even if you can legally send them email marketing, those recipients are more likely to report you for spamming them. Then you’ll get blacklisted. Plus, your company will look really slimy. If a tradeshow host is collecting email addresses, then they should be doing the emailing. It’s all about permission and setting expectations.

- Getting a list of fellow members from some trade organization. Just because they joined a club, and the club posted contact information so everyone could keep in touch with each other, doesn’t mean each member gives you permission to send them newsletters and offers. If you sent them a personal greeting from your own email account, they probably wouldn’t mind. That’s what the organization’s member list is for. But add them to a list and send them a huge email newsletter, and you’ll be reported for spamming.

- Say you go to events and swap business cards. The business cards just get thrown into a “prospects” pile. Years later, you get an intern to finally type all the contact info from those cards into a database. Then, one day out of the blue, you send a big, fat email newsletter to everyone. As if they actually want to hear from you. Trust us, they don’t.

- Fish bowl of business cards. Similar to the example above, but you hold an event, and collect business cards in a fishbowl to win a door prize. The people who dropped their business cards into the bowl wanted the t-shirt you’re giving away (plus all the fame & glory)—they didn’t opt-in to your list.

8. Using a WYSIWYG to code your HTML. WYSIWYGs are notorious for generating absolutely horrible HTML. They insert so much junk code, it’s unbelievable. Even the ones that generate “clean” code don’t know how to rig things to work in email applications (like sticking your embedded CSS *below* the <BODY> tag). To code HTML email properly, you need to learn a little HTML. It’s really not that hard. Plus, you can download free HTML email templates at our website: mailchimp.com/resources/templates

9. Forgetting to test thoroughly. When you send HTML email, you’ve really got to test it in as many email applications you can. Then you have to test on different operating systems. Then different ISPs (we’ll explain shortly). If you keep things simple, and build a rock solid, thoroughly tested template for each newsletter, you won’t have to test so much. But you should *always* send at least a few campaigns to yourself before sending it out to your entire list.

10. Sending nothing but a big, gigantic graphic as the HTML email. Sigh, that's what spammers do. And since most email programs block images by default, what do you think your recipients see when (if) they open your email? Many spam filters will block your email if you don't have a healthy balance of images and text.

DESIGNING AROUND SPAM FILTERS

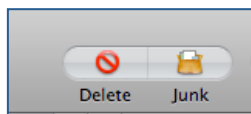
A guide to email-newsletter design wouldn't be complete without a section on spam filters. You have to design your emails a certain way if you want your messages to make it past them. But you can't go overboard, either. Spam filters can smell fear. If you try too hard, they know it, and they attack. So just be cool, act normal, and don't make any obvious mistakes.

How anti-spam systems work

Before getting into the nitty-gritty design tips, you need to know how all the various anti-spam mechanisms out there work. Understanding them will make designing around them much easier.

Bayesian filtering

This is one of the most important ones to learn about, since it's installed in so many email applications these days (like Outlook, Mozilla Thunderbird and Apple Mail). Bayesian filters work by watching users classify email as **junk** (such as when they click a "This is spam" button).



It reads the junk mail, compares it to other emails you called junk, and looks for common traits in the subject line, content, hyperlinks, sender, etc. Over time, Bayesian filters learn to scan for those traits in every email message you receive. Every time they find something that looks spammy, they assign a score to it. For instance, using "Click here!" might get you 0.7 points. Using **bright red fonts** might get you 2 points. Including the word "mortgage" might get you 1 point, but using the word "Viagra" will get you 5 points. Once an email exceeds some threshold (set by the user), the email is classified as spam and thrown into the junk folder. It's amazing how many different things Bayesian filters look for. To read some, check out our blog about funny Spam Assassin criteria: mailchimp.com/blog/funny-spamassassin-scoring-criteria

Remember, MailChimp comes with a spam filter checker (look for the **Inbox Inspector** under your Account tab) that'll tell you exactly what your email's spam score is, and what you need to change if you want to improve your chances with spam filters.

Blacklists

A while back, some server admins got angry at all the junk mail they received. So they started to track the IP addresses of the servers that sent them spam, and put them on **blacklists**. Anytime they received email from a server on their blacklist, it was deleted immediately. It worked pretty well. So they started to share their lists with other server admins. And other admins started to add on to those blacklists. Pretty soon, the blacklists got very, very big. Large ISPs started to sync up with them. If you send spammy emails, you could end up on one of these blacklists (whether the recipients are opt-in or not). Once you make it on to a blacklist, good luck getting off. Geeks are notoriously difficult to negotiate with (we know because we're geeks). This is why you need to make sure you only send to recipients who gave you verifiable permission to email them, and you need to have *proof* that each one of them opted in to your list, such as through a double opt-in system. Want to know the easiest way to get blacklisted? Let your company's sales team blast out an email newsletter to a list of prospects that they collected from conferences, and that they scraped off of websites.

Email firewalls

Managing email servers (and incoming spam, viruses, and phishing attacks) can be a lot of work. So large corporations usually install **email firewalls** (Google the terms "Barracuda Firewall" or "Postini" or "Cloudmark" for some examples) to handle their incoming email. Think of them as spam filters on top of spam filters. They're big, heavy-duty gatekeepers, and they're not friendly at all. They often use a combination of Bayesian-style/adaptive filters, community reporting, blackhole lists, and a little bit of proprietary magic pixie dust to keep spam out of the company. Most of the time, when your email's not getting through to a larger company, it's their firewall. You can think of these firewalls as kind of Xenophobic and paranoid. They're all twitchy and tend to ask questions like,

"Okay, is this sender new to me? Why is he sending copies of the same, exact email, to a bunch of people in our company? Spammers do that kind of stuff. Hmm, how long has their server been around? Can I really trust this sender?"

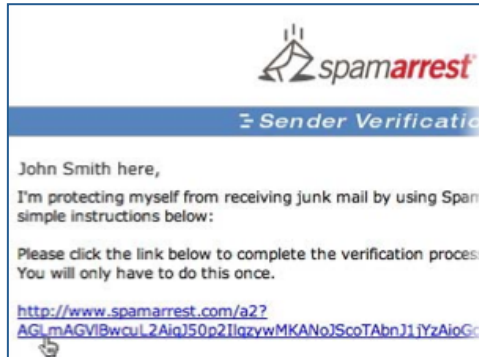
Spam firewalls are usually only a problem when you first start sending campaigns to a big client or something. You'll experience some deliverability issues in the beginning, because you're new. They'll eventually learn to let you through. To expedite things, you may have to ask the IT people in charge of the firewall to **whitelist** your IP Addresses (or the IP address of your email service provider).

TIP: OMNIVORE

Did you know that MailChimp comes with a powerful abuse-detection technology called **Omnivore**? It's a fancy algorithm that's constantly studying patterns in bad campaigns, so it can predict a campaign's behavior before it even gets out the door. The good news for you? You'll achieve better deliverability by default. Read more here: mailchimp.com/omnivore

Challenge/Response Filters

These are more common among at-home recipients (because they're too intrusive to use at work). When you send email to someone with a challenge/response filter, here's what happens: If you're not already in that person's buddy list or address book, then you're considered a stranger to him. And if you're a stranger, you *could* be a spammer. So their challenge/response filter sends you an automatic reply with a question that you have to answer, or some link you have to click (this is to prove you're a human, and not a spambot). This screenshot is an example of a typical challenge/response reply, from Spamarrest, a very popular vendor:



The thing to remember here is that you have to be **whitelisted** if you want your emails to get through. So when people fill out your opt-in forms on your website, ask them to "please add our email address to your address book." Use your opt-in process as a way to set expectations and get whitelisted up front. Whenever you send a newsletter, make sure the reply-to address is valid, and that a human checks it after each campaign. You can expect to receive a couple auto-replies like this after every campaign you send. Whenever we send our MailChimp Monkeywrench newsletter, we get a ton of these autoreplies. We have to manually click each one of them if we want the email to get delivered (one good reason to always use a real email account for your reply-to address, and always check it after you send your campaigns).

Tactics for Avoiding Spam Filters

So now you know how a lot of anti-spam systems work. You really have to think like a spam filter when you design your emails. Just like you think like a search engine when you design web pages. Spam filters read your emails and look for similarities with known spam. You don't want to do things that'll get you accidentally thrown into the junk folder. And the best way to learn what *not* to do is:

1. Open up your junk email folder.
2. Look through all that spam you got. *Really* read it. Look at how they design things, and look at how they write their copy. Notice all the similarities?
3. Now, don't do what they do.

Okay, okay, to be more specific, here's some stuff to avoid:

- Don't use **bright red fonts**, or going crazy with colors, styles, and formatting.
- Don't yell with lots of exclamation points!!!!!!
- DON'T YELL WITH ALL CAPS.
- Avoid spammy words, like "mortgage" and "Viagra."
- Don't say "free" or "click here!" or "click here now!" or "act now!" or "limited time!"(be especially careful of your unsubscribe link, where you might say something like, "click here to unsubscribe.")
- If you use a WYSIWYG to code your HTML email, make sure the HTML code is clean. WYSIWYGs often throw in lots of useless code that's invisible to the user, but spam filters look at it and think you're a sloppy spammer who doesn't know HTML.
- Bad HTML in general can get you spam filtered. Missing table tags, content below the closing `</HTML>` tag, or empty `<TITLE></TITLE>` tags will get your message thrown into the junk folder. Don't get sloppy with that code! Note: the empty `<TITLE>` information is very common if you use WYSIWYGs. They throw that in by default, and expect that you go back and fill it in. Don't forget to go back and give the document a title!
- Don't use dummy text in your message, even if you're sending a test campaign. Spam filters get suspicious of all that "lorem ipsum" stuff. When sending test campaigns, use content that's as real as possible. Don't type in one paragraph, then copy-paste it ten times. Spam filters notice all the duplicate content.

- Don't use the word "test" in your subject line.
- Don't get too creative with your spelling, because the spammers do that all the time (how many m0rtg4g3 ref1nanc3 spam messages are in your inbox right now?)
- Don't make an HTML email that's just a bunch of pretty graphics. You need some text in your message, too. Otherwise, the spam filters will have nothing to read, and will think your message is junk.
- Don't send the HTML email by itself. Always include that plain-text alternative message.

TIP: READ MORE ABOUT SPAM FILTERS

Read this article to learn more about how spam filters think:

mailchimp.com/resources/how_spam_filters_think

TESTING AND TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR EMAIL DESIGNS

After you've finally figured out how to design and code your first HTML email template (and, of course, your plain-text alternative version), don't just plop in your content and start sending campaigns. Test your template first to make sure it'll work in all the different email applications out there. Once you've found all the little bugs, and your template is rock solid, you can start sending.

Hey web designers: Emails aren't the same as web pages!

If you're a web designer, you're probably used to testing web pages in a few different browsers, like Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox and Mac's Safari. And you're probably familiar with a few annoying inconsistencies between all the browsers, and you might even have a couple hacks to make things look right. For email design, multiply all that by ten. There are tons of email applications out there that you need to test on, and they all render HTML email in their own annoying ways. Do you need to test every single newsletter across every single application every single time you send? Of course not. Just set up a good, simple, solid template, and test it as much as possible. Then all you have to do is swap out content. Here are some tips for testing your email designs.

Testing in different email applications

In the past, the only way to test your campaign was to set up a bunch of accounts at all the major ISPs, set up some test computers with different operating systems and email programs, and send test campaigns. It would take hours to do all this, and it really took all the fun out of email marketing.

That's another reason why we created our **Inbox Inspector** tool. You build your campaign, click one button, and we'll generate screenshots of how your campaign is going to look in every major email program. We'll even tell you if any of the major spam filters and email firewalls will block your message, and why. We'll point out what content you need to fix in order to not get blocked. We'll check for typos and HTML coding errors.

If you prefer to test your campaigns yourself, here are some email applications you should install, and what to look for:

AOL

AOL takes spam very seriously. So check to make sure your emails don't get filtered. Also, notice their "Report spam" button. Make sure your emails look relevant, or people will click that button (even if they opted in to your list).



At the time of this writing, AOL 9 has an extremely tiny preview pane. It's about 194 pixels wide, so make sure your branding shows up okay under those circumstances. If your email is too wide, and your logo is right-aligned, your recipients will never see it, and they may never realize who sent it.

Note: Okay, AOL9 is ancient history now, but we chose to keep this section in our guide to demonstrate how email programs often seem to take two steps forward, one step back. Case in point: mailchimp.com/blog/email-design-tip-the-250-pixel-box

Apple Mail

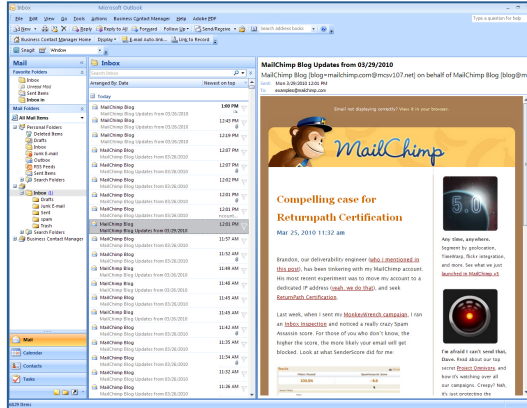
This is Apple's free email application. You get a nice big preview pane here, and they don't do much image blocking at all (yet). Images seem to be blocked only if an email ends up in its junk folder. Apple Mail comes with its own spam filtering system that "learns," so you should test your emails for any deliverability issues.

Microsoft Entourage for Mac

Kind of like Microsoft Outlook, but for the Mac (it comes with Mac Office). Their HTML email support is fine, but we noticed in earlier versions of Entourage, if you send an email in HTML format, but it consists of nothing but text and hyperlinks (no graphics or tables), then the links actually display their URL next to them. Kind of odd. But if the email actually contains a graphic or table, then the links work as coded. The issue seems to be fixed in the latest version of Entourage. Microsoft announced they were going to be replacing Entourage in late 2009 with Outlook for Mac (wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft_Entourage).

Microsoft Outlook 2003

Outlook 2003 has better spam protection, so watch whether or not your emails get filtered. Also, this one's got three vertical panes, so your emails have less room in the preview area.



Three vertical panes in Outlook leave little room: Make sure you fit!

Microsoft Outlook 2000

There are lots of business users who haven't upgraded to Outlook 2003 yet. This version of Outlook predates all the vicious worms, spam and viruses that we're used to now, so more of your emails with flash and videos will actually work here. Don't let it build your confidence—that fancy stuff won't work in other programs.

Microsoft Outlook Express

This is the free version of Microsoft Outlook, installed on all Windows machines and used mostly by at-home recipients. Not really many HTML email issues, besides the usual "Block images by default" feature that's on just about every email application these days.

Microsoft Outlook 2007

For Outlook 2007, Microsoft switched from using Internet Explorer (a web browser) to render HTML email to using Microsoft Word (a text editor). Obviously, HTML email would render a lot better in a browser than Microsoft Word, so this is kind of a bummer. Microsoft said this was because they wanted their customers to have more control over editing HTML email. Whatever. Here's what you need to know about Outlook 2007:

- Background images won't work
- Most CSS won't work
- Flash *definitely* won't work
- No forms
- No animated GIFs

Lotus Notes 6.5.3 and 6.5.4

If lots of your recipients work at very large companies, you'll need to check your emails in Lotus Notes. This is probably the most frustrating email application out there. It does the strangest things. You'll need to keep your layouts very simple. Even still, Lotus will find a way to mess things up. There are even big differences between Lotus Notes 6.5.3, vs. 6.5.4.

Eudora 6.2

Eudora has good, predictable HTML email support.

Mozilla Thunderbird

A free email application that's gaining in popularity. Does some odd things with alt-text and image blocking, but for the most part supports HTML email well. Thunderbird 1.5 has a feature that tries to detect "scams," where they look for hyperlinks that claim to point to a website, but the code actually links you somewhere else. If it detects a potential scam, you get a warning across the top of the message, saying "Thunderbird thinks this message is a scam." You can click the "Not a scam" button if it was a false alarm. It's a nice idea, but it seems to give lots of false positives, especially when you use click tracking in your emails (all your links will point to a redirect script, in order to track clicks). We don't think it's much of a problem, as long as your emails look nice and professional.

Testing in browser-based email services

You might want to set up accounts with all the browser-based email services. They're usually free, so it's easy to set up lots of test accounts. You *especially* want to look at how browser-based services alter your HTML and CSS. Also, since these services are used by bazillions of people, their anti-spam filters are set really high.

We listed them below in order of most-to-least popularity (according to a recent survey across all MailChimp managed lists). When you set up your test accounts with these services, leave their junk mail filter settings to "default." It really pays to test on these accounts before sending your campaign.

Yahoo!Mail

Pretty aggressive anti-spam filters (understandably). Other than that, they do the typical browser-based email stuff, like stripping your BODY and HEAD tags.

Yahoo!Mail Beta

A much richer browser interface, with a preview pane. So far, support for HTML email looks great.

Hotmail

Similar issues as Yahoo!Mail, where BODY and HEAD tags are stripped, so background colors and embedded CSS are lost. At one time, Hotmail was “expiring” hyperlinks in emails that were open for 5 minutes or longer.

Gmail

Extremely aggressive spam filters. And very, very little CSS support. It strips embedded CSS, (even if you keep the CSS out of the <HEAD> tag). It also strips every “class” code that it finds (such as in). To get CSS to work in Gmail, you’ll need to use inline styles. Otherwise, your fonts will default to Arial, colored black, and about 13 pixels in size. If your fonts don’t adhere to their CSS rules, check to see if they end up blowing out your tables cells, or wrapping in weird ways.

Check Different ISPs

If possible, check your emails when they’re sent through different ISPs. Different email servers will alter your messages before they even get to the recipient’s email application. For instance, some ISPs use email servers that will strip any content below a line in your email that starts with a period (we know, weird). We’ve been surprised at how differently email looks when checked in Outlook 2003, but received through Comcast, Bellsouth and Earthlink.

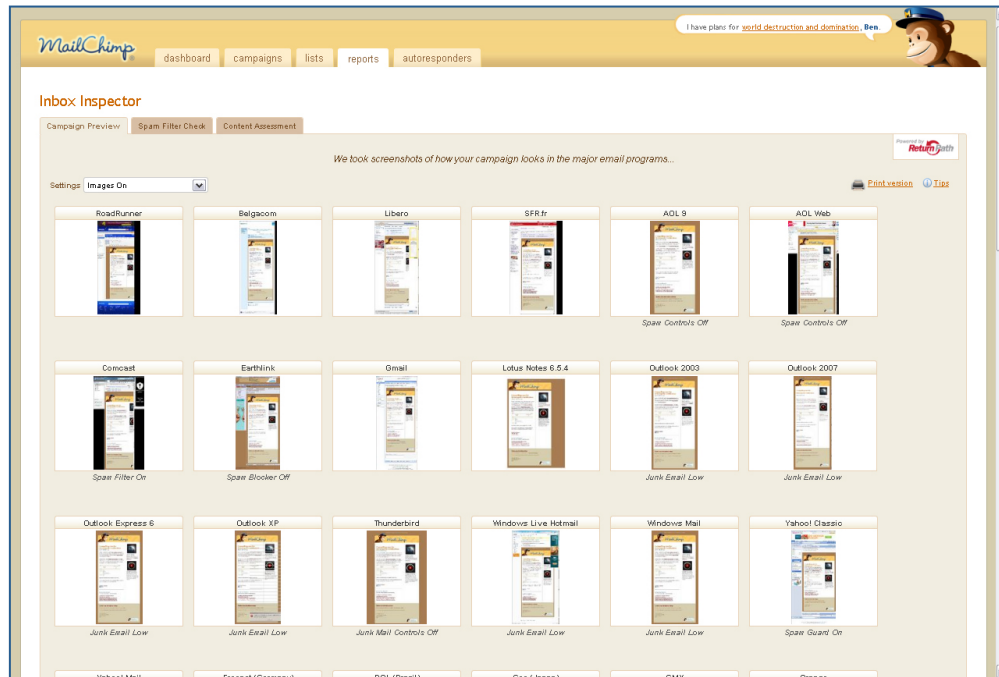
Send tests to friends and co-workers

If you can’t set up a few test computers, keep your designs really simple, and send each campaign to a few friends or colleagues. Just ask them to let you know if anything looks funny or broken.

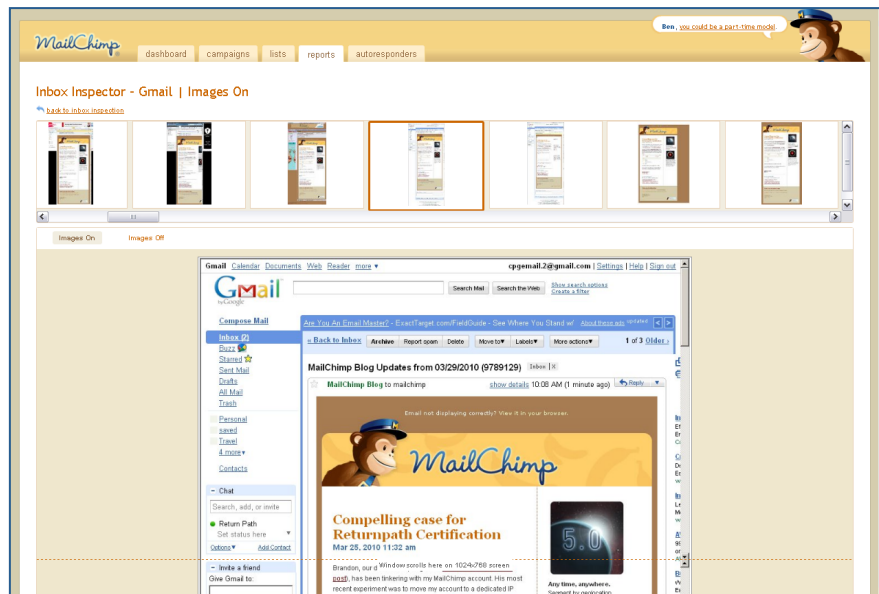
Or just use MailChimp’s Inbox Inspector

If you choose to set up your own test machine, and all those test accounts with the different ISPs, you could easily spend a couple grand. If you also want to check your campaigns against the big server firewalls (like IronPort, MessageLabs, and Postini), it’ll cost you several thousand dollars just to get started. If you’ve got the money, go for it. But who has the time to *maintain* all that stuff?

You can save yourself a ton of time and money by using our **Inbox Inspector**. Here are some screenshots of what you'll get (it costs less than what you'd charge for one hour of your time).



We'll generate screenshots of your campaign in all the major email programs.



Zoom in to see where your email scrolls in each program, on a 1024x768 screen.

The screenshot shows the MailChimp 'Inbox Inspector' interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'Campaign Preview', 'Spam Filter Check', and 'Content Assessment'. Below these, a message states: 'We passed your campaign through some of the most common spam filters...'. A summary bar shows 'Filters Passed' at 100.0% and a 'SpamAssassin Score' of -8.4. The main area is divided into 'Server Filters' and 'Gateway Filters'. Under 'Server Filters', there are three categories: 'Cloudmark' (4 reasons), 'Brightmail', and 'MessageLabs'. Under 'Gateway Filters', there is one category: 'Barracuda' (4 reasons). Each filter category has a green checkmark icon.

We'll tell you if spam filters are likely to block your campaign, and what you need to change if you want to get through.

EMAIL MARKETING BASICS AND BEST PRACTICES

If you're new to email marketing, you should learn some basic principles before you start sending campaigns. In this section we'll talk about best practices, legal issues, and how to measure your overall performance.

The Definition of Spam

If you get an unsolicited email from someone you don't know, is that spam? Not necessarily. If you get an email that was obviously sent to a whole list of people, is that spam? Not necessarily. So what's spam?

Spam is when you send an unsolicited email to a whole list of people. Let's say you just bought a list of email addresses from some local business organization. These are great prospects for your business, right? You want to send them an email with a relevant offer they can't refuse. It's spam if you upload that list into MailChimp (or any other email service provider) and send that list an unsolicited email. It's *not* spam if you take that list and write personal, one-to-one emails to each recipient, and the content is unique for each recipient. If your immediate reaction is, "but what if..." stop now, because you'll probably get yourself reported for spamming. You simply cannot send unsolicited email to a list of people you don't know.

The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003

The United States federal CAN-SPAM Act became law on January 1, 2004. According to their website, the FTC says that if you violate the law, you could be fined \$11,000 for *each* offense (multiply \$11,000 times the number of people on your recipient list). ISPs around the country have already successfully sued spammers for millions and millions of dollars under this law.

We can't give you much legal advice, but if you send commercial email, you should read through the CAN- SPAM Act of 2003 and understand the rules. If you have a lawyer, consult with her. There are a couple of points we'd like to highlight.

If you're sending **commercial** email (where you're selling or promoting stuff), here are just a few rules you should know about:

- Never use deceptive headers, from-names, reply-tos, or subject lines.
- You must always provide an unsubscribe link.

- Remove recipients from your list within 10 business days.
- The unsubscribe link must work for at least 30 days after sending.
- You must include your physical mailing address in the email.

TIP: Get to know the CAN-SPAM Act

To learn more, go to:

ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/business/ecommerce/bus61.shtm

Royal Screw-ups To Avoid

If you've downloaded this guide and have actually read this far, you're obviously interested in doing the right thing. You're probably not an evil spammer. But even the most well intentioned, legitimate email marketers get reported for spamming. Do you know how you get reported? All it takes is for one recipient to click a little button in his email program.

When he clicks his "This is junk" or "Report spam" button, a little alert gets sent to his ISP. Then that ISP sends a warning to the sender (as long as the sender has responsibly signed up for that ISP's feedback loop). If an ISP sends you 1-5 warnings, you're in trouble. 5-10, and you can expect your emails to get throttled. More than that (some of them say less than 1% of your list), and your email server gets blocked. None of your emails will get through to that ISP anymore, unless you can provide proof of opt-in for those complainers.

And ISPs aren't just blocking email servers anymore. They're scanning reported spam for URLs and domain names. If they find your company's domain name in reported spam, they'll block any future emails they receive with that domain name in it (no matter where it was sent from, or who sent it).

So it's easy to get blacklisted. When that happens, it can take months to get your name cleared—if ever. Usually, companies get blacklisted because they made one little mistake.

We've been in this business for years, and we've seen thousands of marketers send millions of emails. Needless to say, we've seen lots of screwups. Here are some of our most memorable examples. Learn from them. *Note: Some of the details have been changed to protect identities.*

“But these are co-members of a local organization.”

Our first “abuse-desk situation” was from an alpaca farmer. He was a really nice guy. He was sending a beautiful email newsletter with alpaca breeding tips to members of an alpaca farming organization (yes, those exist). Problem was, those members never asked for his email newsletter. He got their email addresses from the head of the organization. Surely other Alpaca farmers would love hearing about this stuff, right? Not if one of his competitors is on the list. One of his recipients didn’t appreciate getting emails from a competitor, so he repeatedly reported the newsletter as spam to his ISP, and to us. Since our customer was sending emails to a third-party list, which is strictly forbidden here at MailChimp, we had to shut down his account.

“But they dropped their business card in my fish bowl.”

We had a real-estate agency sending emails to a list of recipients about a brand new condo property that was opening up. As soon as they sent their campaign, we started to receive complaints. When we asked them where they got their list, turns out they set up a fish bowl at local eateries, so people could drop in their business cards for a chance to win a free lunch. No mention of any email newsletters or opting-in to any lists was placed on those fishbowls. We had to shut them down. This one’s notable because their web developers threatened us, cursed at us, and called *us* the spammers. They actually defended themselves by saying, “C’mon, they dropped their cards into a fishbowl. They knew what they were getting into.” Not okay.

“But we swapped business cards five years ago,” or “But these are in my CRM.”

This is a recurring one. Sales guy sets up a booth at a tradeshow and swaps cards with someone. That someone is now a “prospect.” That prospect gets entered into their CRM. It sits and waits. And waits. A year later, the company decides to send an email newsletter. The prospect is added to the list and gets a huge, five-page HTML email newsletter with all kinds of promotional junk he never requested. The prospect clicks his “Report spam” button. This is probably the second most popular reason we shut down accounts (next to real estate agents with fishbowls). If you’re a marketing director, and you’ve decided to add email marketing to your strategy, that’s smart. But don’t go to your sales team and say, “alright, gimme every prospect you’ve ever talked to, so I can blast our newsletter to them.”

“But this list was really, really expensive.”

A creative agency purchased a list of email addresses from a leading resource for advertising professionals. The people in that list were members who voluntarily submitted their contact information, just for networking purposes. Not for receiving emails from third parties. By

the way, this is almost always the case when you buy email lists—those people never gave their permission to have their info resold to you. Buyer beware. Anyway, this creative agency used MailChimp to send a portfolio email to that list. But one of the email addresses on that list was a “sales@” address, which means it got forwarded to every single sales employee at a pretty big, well-known company. A pretty big, well-known anti-spam company, to be exact. That customer was shut down immediately, and they got a very good lecture. Fortunately, the leader of the anti-spam group forgave that company, and we were able to reinstate their account. They learned their lesson: Never send mass, unsolicited emails to a whole list. If you’re going to buy a list, you should send an individual email to each recipient to ask them if they want to opt-in to your email newsletter.

“But I’m sending for the government.”

We had an organization that basically published scientific research papers online, into a searchable database. Where’d they get the research papers? From the U.S. government, apparently. So where’d they get their email addresses? It seemed they were taking author names and guessing at what their email addresses would be. They’d send emails like, “Congratulations, Professor John Smith! We’ve published your research paper at XYZ website!” Problem was, they sent to the wrong Professor John Smith. Professors from universities all over America were reporting them to us for spamming. Not sure how they did it, but we had to shut them down. Their reply? “This is not spam. This was sent for the U.S. Government.” Sigh.

“They ordered something 10 years ago.”

One of our users sent a software update email to his list of about 20,000 customers. These were people who had downloaded and purchased his software. 10 years ago. (Man, was the Internet even around back then?) Anyway, to his credit, he had a very good, “Hey, remember me, from 10 years ago?” introduction paragraph, and he even merged in each recipient’s order information: Full name, how much they paid, order ID#, etc. He really went all out with the details. Unfortunately, 10 years is a long time to wait to send email updates. Almost none of those emails were even valid anymore. And some had no doubt been converted into spam traps (Microsoft does that with old, expired email addresses sometimes). As soon as he sent his campaign, one of MailChimp’s IPs got blacklisted by Hotmail and MSN. We had to reroute outgoing emails from those IPs and work with Microsoft to explain the situation. Luckily, the sender had overwhelming evidence in his campaign that they were his customers, and we got delisted. Whew.

“It came from my Outlook Address Book.”

A nice woman from a small town in North Carolina sent out an email campaign for her local beauty salon. It invited women to “come in and get a manicure.” After she sent her campaign, I got an email from a very, very angry *man* about how “this woman is using MailChimp to spam me.” I investigated the man’s email domain, and noticed it was from an ISP located in the same small town as the sender. That’s too much of a coincidence for me. I asked him, “any chance your wife signed up for this newsletter?” Nope. No wife. No kids. And nobody who would ever have access to his computer. “She obviously purchased an email list from somewhere,” he tells me. Now, if some local business owner sends an email to 3,000,000 recipients, that idiot bought a list. But this woman sent to a couple dozen people, with no other complaints. Hmm. He also tells me that his email address has been dormant for years, and he was shocked to even be receiving any messages to it. After many hours of back-and-forth conversations with the sender and the complainer, we figured it out. She dumped her entire Outlook Address book into her email list. She figured the only people in her address book were her clients, since that was her business computer. So how did he end up in her address book? He used to be the tech-support admin for her ISP, before they were bought out by a bigger ISP. You really shouldn’t dump contacts from your address book into a newsletter list. Those people might be your friends or clients, but they haven’t necessarily opted-in to receive email newsletters from you.

“But my sponsor asked me to.”

One customer implemented a double opt-in list, and had a very nice, respectable looking email newsletter design. He even had a nice, well-branded welcome email. He sent a campaign one day and got reported as a spammer by over 60 of his subscribers (usually, five reports is enough to get blacklisted). What would compel so many people, who specifically requested emails from this man, to then report him for spamming? Turns out for this particular campaign, he removed his logo, and changed the design dramatically. Instead of a white background with his orange and blue logo at the top, he sent an all-black design, with white and red text. Why? A company was sponsoring his email campaign, and that company wanted him to follow *their* branding guidelines, not *his*. Sigh. If you’re sending to *your* list, make it look like you sent it (and tell your advertisers it’s for their own good too).

Double Opt-in

We *highly* recommend the double opt-in method when managing your email lists. In fact, it's the only way MailChimp's built-in list management system will work. Here's a quick overview of the process:

1. A customer signs up for your email newsletter through a form at your website.
2. He receives an email with a confirmation link.
3. If he clicks the link, he's added to your list, and you store the IP address, date, and time of registration. Now you've got proof of opt-in, should you ever need it in the future (like if you receive a false or malicious abuse report).
4. If he doesn't click the link, he's not added to the list.

Double opt-in is fast replacing the single opt-in method, where someone submits a form, and bam—they're added to a list. There are too many chances for someone to get signed up to a list without his permission, either erroneously or maliciously. And there's no need to even discuss the old opt-out method anymore. That's getting phased out, due to all the spam complaints marketers get from people who never saw the opt-out check. Don't be so desperate to grow your list that you put your company's reputation on the line.

Pros & Cons

There was once a big concern about double opt-in, where marketers complained, "But nobody's going to click the confirmation link! I'll lose all my prospects!" This isn't a huge issue anymore. People are used to the double opt-in method these days. Plus, it just looks more professional.

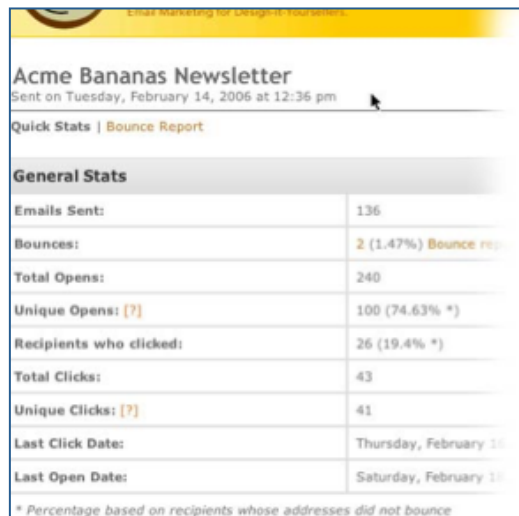
Sure, if you compare a double opt-in list to a single opt-in list, the single opt-in list will be larger. It's just too easy to subscribe (anyone) to a single opt-in list. But it will also have more accidental members, a higher bounce and unsubscribe rate, higher abuse complaint rate, and lower response rate. Double opt-in ensures that every single recipient truly wants to hear from you.

MEASURING PERFORMANCE

Once you've become a pro at HTML email design and coding, and you're sending campaigns on a regular basis, how do you measure performance? How do you know if your email-marketing efforts are working or not? How can you experiment and improve your performance? Here's a basic rundown of what you should be measuring and how you can test your campaigns.

Open Rates

How many people opened your email? An open rate of about 20% to 30% is considered average. Watch your open rate over time. Your first email might get a great open rate (like 50% to 70% or more), but over time will level off some.



The screenshot shows an email marketing dashboard for 'Acme Bananas Newsletter'. The dashboard includes a header with the newsletter name and send date, followed by navigation links for 'Quick Stats' and 'Bounce Report'. Below this is a 'General Stats' table with the following data:

General Stats	
Emails Sent:	136
Bounces:	2 (1.47%) Bounce report
Total Opens:	240
Unique Opens: [?]	100 (74.63% *)
Recipients who clicked:	26 (19.4% *)
Total Clicks:	43
Unique Clicks: [?]	41
Last Click Date:	Thursday, February 16, 2006 11:00 AM
Last Open Date:	Saturday, February 18, 2006 11:00 AM

* Percentage based on recipients whose addresses did not bounce

Try experimenting with different things, like:

- Your subject line: Make it longer (or shorter). Merge their first name into the subject. Use your company's name.
- Date of send. Do weekdays work best? Or is the email geared towards an at-home audience, who checks emails on weekends? Or do they typically only order while at work, on fast connections?
- Time of send. Mornings, just before the first wave of spam? Just before lunch? Just after lunch? Just before quitting time? If you were a restaurant owner, would you send a campaign for a Friday event on Monday or Thursday?

TIP: MAILCHIMP'S SUBJECT LINE SUGGESTER

Our subject line suggester is a free feature for all MailChimp users. You just enter some words or phrases that you were planning to use in your subject line, and MailChimp will compare it to *all subject lines ever used in our system*, their resulting open rates, and then tell you how they performed. Check it out here:

mailchimp.com/blog/subject-line-suggester-from-mailchimp

Also try our A/B testing tool for subject lines here:

mailchimp.com/features/power_features/ab

Click Rates

How many people clicked links in your email? Which links did they click the most? Did they click on product links or research links? Did you see a rise in purchases? How long after you sent the campaign do links keep getting clicked?

Try experimenting with:

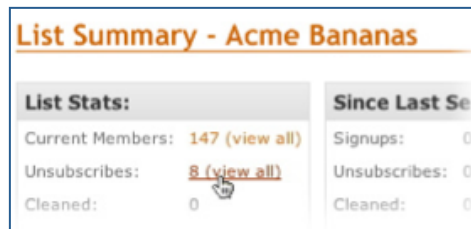
- The number of links in your message. One big, giant link, or lots and lots of different links?
- Product photos for each link
- The wording of each link
- Segmenting your list, and sending more focused emails (and links that are more relevant)

Example of a typical MailChimp report. You can see which links people are clicking:

Clicks by URL		
URL	Total Clicks	Uniques
http://www.acme-ind.com/index.html	67	55
http://www.acme-ind.com/landing/preview.html	28	25
http://www.acme-ind.com/updates/refer.phtml	19	17
http://www.acme-ind.com/updates/unsubscribe.html	15	13
http://www.acme-ind.com/privacy.html	2	1

Unsubscribe Rate

What's your unsubscribe rate after each campaign? Less than one percent is average for lists that are contacted regularly and well maintained. If you send very infrequently, or if it's your very first send, your unsubscribe rate may be much higher. Check your unsub rate after each campaign. If it spikes after a particular campaign, see if it had anything to do with your content. Maybe you're sending too frequently. Maybe not frequently enough. Keeping a good, fresh, quality list will result in a very low unsub rate.



List Summary - Acme Bananas	
List Stats:	Since Last Se
Current Members: 147 (view all)	Signups: 0
Unsubscribes: 8 (view all)	Unsubscribes: 0
Cleaned: 0	Cleaned: 0

Bouncebacks

Watch your bounceback rate after each campaign. A good list-management system will break down your bouncebacks into “hard” vs. “soft” bounces, and clean your list for you. Soft bounces are emails that exist, but for some reason, they couldn't be delivered. For instance, their server might have been too busy at the time of your delivery. Hard bounces are undeliverable—perhaps the email account doesn't exist anymore, or there was a typo in the address. Hard bounces should be removed immediately. Your email-marketing service should let you read the header information from each bounced message, so you can see exactly why they bounced.

Try experimenting with:

- Re-sending your campaign a little later to the people who “soft-bounced.”
- Look through your hard bounces for any obvious typos. For instance, “hotmial.com” could probably be corrected to “hotmail.com.”

MailChimp helps manage your bounces

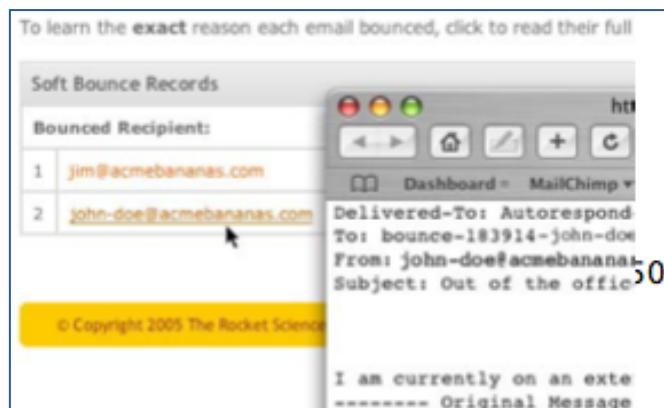
Not all bouncebacks are bad. Soft bounces are mostly temporary, and you can probably keep them on your list and try again. If MailChimp sends your campaign and an email address soft bounces back to our system, we'll watch that email address over the next five campaigns. If it keeps soft bouncing, we'll automatically clean it from your list. But if an email address hard bounces (like when it's an undeliverable

address), we *immediately* remove it from your list. You shouldn't send campaigns to a bad email address over and over—ISPs block you for doing stuff like that.

Viewing SMTP replies for bounced email

When a recipient's email address bounces back to MailChimp, the server that bounced it usually sticks a little message in the email's header, which is called the **SMTP Reply**. These SMTP replies tell us why the email was bounced (such as temporarily busy, overquota, on vacation, bad email address, account no longer exists, etc). This helps MailChimp classify the bounce as soft or hard. But sometimes, email servers don't use standard codes and messages in their SMTP replies. It's all up to how the server admin set things up. Worse yet, some anti-spam firewalls outright lie, by inserting "This email address no longer exists" into their SMTP replies. This is meant to trick list-management systems into removing an email address from their list.

Classifying bouncebacks as soft or hard isn't a perfect system. That's why MailChimp gives you the **View Full Headers** option in your bounce reports, so you can read the headers of each and every bounceback, and determine exactly why each email bounced.



Traffic to your website

Check your website traffic logs after each email campaign. Does traffic pick up? Do orders increase? Do the cash registers go, "cha-ching?" Check and see if you get a spike in traffic immediately, or if it's more like a gradual wave. How long does the new traffic last (and how long should you keep the graphics and pages that your email points to hosted live)?

Signups since last campaign

After each campaign, do you get lots of new subscribers? That could mean your wonderful recipients are forwarding your emails to friends. How nice! Your content is actually useful! Don't see any list growth at all? Make that content more interesting.

Since Last Send:	
Signups:	28
Unsubscribes:	10
Cleaned:	16

Try experimenting with:

- Place some text near the top of your email, that says, “feel free to forward this to a friend”
- Place a “View this email in your browser” link at the top of your email. It should point to an archived version of the campaign on your website. Some people like to forward *that* link on to their friends.

WRAPPING UP

So there you have it. Everything a beginner needs to know about designing, coding, sending and managing email campaigns. We hope this guide gets you on your way to sending many successful campaigns. Following is a quick list of the overall email newsletter creation process that you can use to send your very first email campaign (whether you use MailChimp or not).

Checklist: Your First Email Campaign

- ❑ **Decide how many lists you want.** For example, you might want a “Newsletters” list, but also a separate “Press & Media Relations” list. Some people set up “Weekly Specials” lists and “Internal Employee Newsletter” lists. Basically, you don’t want to send your weekly specials to someone on your list who might have just been expecting an occasional newsletter.
- ❑ **Decide on your content and frequency.** Will you send email newsletters every single month? Do you truly have the time to do that? What will the newsletter be about? Why would anybody want to subscribe to it? What will recipients gain from it?
- ❑ **Decide on the personality or brand of your email campaigns.** Are you sending lots of e-commerce specials? Letters from the president? Personal? Corporate?
- ❑ **Get permission.** Ask the customers in your database for permission to send them email newsletters, offers and promotions. Don’t ever start blasting newsletters and email offers without permission.
- ❑ **Get your privacy policy in order.** In particular, issues like “tracking personally identifiable information” or “marketing to children under 13.” If you’re tracking opens and clicks, and if it’s possible for children to subscribe to your emails, you need to cover those topics in your privacy policy.
- ❑ **Know the laws.** Become familiar with the CAN-SPAM rules. Consult with your attorney.
- ❑ **Set up email addresses that you can use as the “Reply-to:” for your campaigns.** For our MailChimp company newsletter, we use newsletter@. For our MonkeyWrench newsletter, we use monkeywrench@. You might use sales@ or email@. Whatever. Just be sure it works, and be sure a human checks that account. If you use jenny@yourcompany.com, what happens when Jenny leaves the company? You’ll need to change names to the new guy, but spam filters will have already been trained to receive emails from Jenny.

□ **Set up an abuse@ email account.** No matter how clean you keep your list, you'll get complaints. It's *inevitable*. People forget they opted in. People get tired of hearing from you. People get mad from some lost shipment or bad customer service. When that happens, they sometimes report your email as spam. If they subscribe to anti-spam services or report to their ISP, those reps will want to contact you via email. And the first place they'll try is `abuse@your-company-domain.com`. So make sure that works. And while you're at it, you should register that abuse@ address online (go to <http://www.abuse.net>), because when they receive complaints about your emails, anti-spam organizations often use this to gauge how responsible your company is.

□ **Set up feedback loops with major ISPs.** If you're going to send lots of email marketing from your own company server, register your IP addresses with AOL and MSN, so they can send you a report if and when their users report your emails as spam. Google the term "AOL feedback loop" for more info. MSN and other ISPs are said to be implementing similar reporting mechanisms. Also go ahead and register for reports at <http://www.spamcop.net>. If users on their system report your emails as spam, they'll send you automatic email alerts. If you use MailChimp to send your campaigns. Don't worry—we've already got this covered. All our IP addresses for all our servers are registered, so we can handle any deliverability problems as they arise. If you use another service, make sure they monitor this information too. Most reputable vendors do this.

□ **Set up test email accounts with Yahoo, Gmail, Hotmail and AOL.** Set up a test computer (or two) in the office, and download as many different email applications you can find, like Outlook, Mozilla Thunderbird, Lotus, Apple Mail, Entourage and Eudora. You'll be doing tons of testing. Or, like we've said, try our built-in Inbox Inspector.

□ **Set up a double opt-in form on your website.** Tip: create questions you might be able to use for future segmenting, like "industry" or "title" or "referral." Be sure to customize your confirmation screens and confirmation emails appropriately. Use them to set expectations about the emails they'll be receiving. After you get it set up, you can start inviting your customers to opt-in. Post links all over your website, your invoices, and in your email signature.

□ **Design your HTML Email template.** If you're sending different kinds of communications (sales promotions vs. monthly newsletters vs. how-to's and tips), you might set up multiple templates for each occasion. If you're not the design-it-yourself type, try our built-in template designer and our Design Genius. You can use it (free) to set up as many different email templates as you want.

□ **Insert real content into your test campaigns.** Don't just use

“lorem ipsum dummy text” when you test campaigns. It’s not accurate, plus spam filters often throw away emails with garbled, nonsensical words in them.

- **Build your plain-text alternative email.** Plain-text email has its own peculiarities, so you’ll want to get a template for it refined from the beginning. Don’t let plain-text be an afterthought.
- **Test your templates.** And we mean *really* test them like you’ve never tested before. Send them to friends, family and colleagues. Try the templates in as many different email applications you can. Open your own emails, and click them like crazy. Now go check your reports. Make sure all the tracking works like it should. Hit the “reply” button and see if you get replies to your account. You want to uncover any embarrassing mistakes before sending to your real customers.
- **Set up a test list.** If you’re like most people, you probably have about three or four email addresses. Why not set up a test list in MailChimp, and send your full campaign to that list? That’s the best way to simulate what your email will actually look like when you send to your real list.
- **Make sure you’re subscribed to your own list.** Seems obvious, but people often forget. Even though systems like MailChimp allow you to send tests, it’s best to be on the actual list, just like your customers.
- **Prepare your website and landing pages for delivery.** Before you send, get everything in order. Did you create a copy/archive of the email for your website? Make sure that’s all in place. Are all the landing or e-commerce pages that your email links to live and working?
- **Prepare the office.** What time will you be sending your email? Here’s a funny and embarrassing story: Once, we spent hours and hours prepping an email campaign for MailChimp. We sent it out at 9am EST, and got tons of calls and orders immediately after. It was great! So our entire office went to lunch together that day to celebrate. But “lunchtime” on the East Coast is “just getting into work time” on the West Coast! We all came back to tons of angry voicemails and emails from our West Coast customers waiting for us. D’oh! Now, we’ve got these cool clocks across our wall, representing every major time zone around the globe. Learn from our mistake, and be sure you’ll be near the phone/email after you send. Let your staff know about the campaign too, especially if they take orders via phone, email, or live chat.
- **Deliver the campaign.** Finally!
- **Log in to MailChimp after sending.** We provide stats in real time, so you can virtually watch the opens and clicks as they happen. It’s always shocking to see how many people open and click in the first

few minutes after you send. Then it trails off. You'll still get opens and clicks weeks after. That's why MailChimp keeps your links and tracking alive for three months before archiving them. And in our reports, we provide "Date of most recent open/click."

□ **Review performance.** After a few days, go back and analyze your reports. How many opens? How many clicks? Compare it to your web traffic logs, and most importantly, to sales. Did the email generate leads or sales? What was the ROI on that campaign?

□ **Plan the next campaign.** Use your campaign reports to understand what people clicked and what they didn't. That should serve as the foundation for your next campaign. Maybe you'll split up your list and segment next time around, or test different subject lines or delivery schedules. Get scientific!

RESOURCES

Email marketing sites

marketingsherpa.com Great email marketing case studies and research. Sign up for their email newsletters.

clickz.com Lots of online marketing and email marketing news.

marketingprofs.com Nice case studies and articles. Premium membership is worth it. They issue a Buyers Guide to email vendors.

btobonline.com Email and direct mail news. Check their “email marketer insight” section.

futurenowinc.com/ Look for their little alien mascot, and sign up for their Grokdotcom newsletter. These guys specialize in conversion, and they know their stuff.

marketingexperiments.com Great experiments and case studies.

Email and marketing related blogs

mailchimp.com/blog Gotta plug our own blog, We feature email design tips and tricks, hacks, troubleshooting tips, news and more.

ducttapemarketing.com/weblog.php John Jantsch’s Duct Tape Marketing Blog is full of quick, simple and affordable marketing ideas for business. His book’s a great read for businesses that are just getting started.

sethgodin.typepad.com/ That familiar bald head is chock full of handy marketing ideas.

www.tompeters.com As Tom would say, “Wow! Nice blog.”

emailmarketing.typepad.com Tamara Gielen’s blog on email marketing. She posts links to news all over the email-marketing world.

email-marketing-reports.com/ Mark Brownlow has posted hundreds of useful email-marketing articles and links here.

Products and tools

Text editors for coding:

bbedit.com BBEdit is a great text editor for the Mac. Use it to code

HTML and plain-text emails. Or check out their free TextWrangler product, a lite version of BBedit.

notetab.com NoteTab Pro is a great text editor for PC.

adobe.com/products/dreamweaver/ Web design pros use Dreamweaver to build websites. You can use it to build HTML emails, too. Use the coding interface for HTML, but be careful of the WYSIWYG tool. It adds CSS and other things to your file (which you'll need to take out for HTML email).

FTP clients, for sending files to your server:

fetchsoftworks.com/ FTP software for the Mac. (\$25)

cuteftp.com FTP software for PC (\$90, and worth every penny)

Graphic design programs

adobe.com/products/fireworks/ Fireworks is great for designing anything for the web.

adobe.com/products/photoshop/ A must-have for serious graphic designers. A bit overkill for HTML Email design, but you can't list "graphic design programs" and not include Photoshop. Also check out Illustrator (adobe.com/products/illustrator/).

Miscellaneous

apple.com/downloads/dashboard/reference/picker.html A great Apple Dashboard widget for quickly picking websafe colors to use in your emails.

vmware.com/ We use vmware to setup testing computers, with multiple operating systems and email applications.

templatekit.com/tstore/index.php They sell tons and tons of templates for websites and emails

mailchimp.com/resources/html_email_templates/ We posted some free HTML email templates, which are easily tweaked to match your brand, and pre-tested on all the major email applications.

mailchimp.com/support Our support center, with live chat and a searchable knowledge base.

istockphoto.com Really, really, really cheap stock photography. We get a lot of our photos from here.