TECHNOLOGY IN MARKETING

The Top 10 E-mail Newsletter Design Best Practices

By Joshua Fruchter

If your law firm is distributing e-mail newsletters to clients, it's not enough to just click "send." To ensure that you are maximizing the experience of your subscribers, and thereby promoting loyal readership, you need to consider "best practices" in e-mail design.

Probably one of the most important "environmental" factors driving e-mail design nowadays is the reality that a sizeable percentage of subscribers may be using e-mail applications with image blocking "on." When image blocking in an e-mail application is "on," subscribers see red "X's" where your graphics would have otherwise displayed. In order for graphics in your e-mail to display, readers need to turn image blocking "off."

Additionally, it's important to stress that e-mail is a "scanning" environment. That is, subscribers don't necessarily "read" e-mails; they scan them. For example, Nielsen Norman Group's e-mail newsletter usability study (Third Edition, June 2006) determined that users, once engaged, spend an average of 51 seconds on each newsletter in their inbox. If the content seems interesting, they may devote more time. But you've got to grab them at the "scanning" phase.

With those factors in mind, here are 10 quick law firm e-mail design tips (after the jump) to maximize readability.

1. Don't Send an E-mail Consisting of a Single Large Graphic

While graphics tend to be more visually appealing than HTML text (even when formatted with bolding, colors, etc.), do not send e-mails consisting of a single, large graphic (no matter how snazzy). The reason is simple: Any clients using e-mail applications with image blocking "on" will only see one big red "X," as mentioned above. While you can alleviate this issue somewhat by populating the image's ALT tag with text that describes the image (see tip #5 below), the overall presentation is not very enticing or visually appealing.

Additionally, there is another issue with e-mails consisting of a single graphic that not many people are aware of. And that is that a low text-to-image ratio on SpamAssassin (a leading content filter) increases your risk of getting filtered. In other words, if your e-mail consists of a single large image, and no text, your Spam Assassin score will be higher (because your text-to-image ratio is virtually zero), and your risk of being filtered much greater.

2. Render Key Messages As Text

Instead of sending e-mails consisting of a single large graphic, the better practice is to limit use of graphics to important visuals related to the announcement, such as banners, attorney photos, and firm logos. Then render the key messages in your e-mail as text. Key "messages" include text such as article headlines and calls-to-action (*e.g.*, Register, Read More, Full Article). This way if image blocking is "on," the key point of your message can still be viewed in the preview pane since HTML text will always display.

3. Position Key Text in the Upper Lefthand Corner

"Eye-tracking" research shows that the human eye scans e-mail in an "F" pattern (*i.e.*, from top left to right or down). Consequently, position your key "text" message as close to the top left corner of your e-mail as possible so it is visible within the preview pane without scrolling. At the same time, while it is a great idea to include a banner with your e-mail for visual impact, keep the banner short. In general, we recommend displaying your key message in the top left 290-360 pixels of your e-mail. This means that a banner taller than, say, 200 pixels in height will start to encroach on that valuable real estate.

Positioning your key text messages close to the top lefthand corner of your e-mail also ensures that folks with image blocking "on" who scan e-mails in their preview panes before opening, can immediately read your key messages. This makes it more likely that they'll open the e-mail to full view, and display the images included with the message.

4. Keep Your E-mails Under 650 Pixels Wide

To reduce the likelihood of horizontal scrolling, design e-mail templates to be no wider than 650 pixels. Indeed, for two-column templates, we usually aim for 600-625 pixels wide.

5. Populate ALT Tags for Images

The ALT tag is an attribute of images that holds text that describes the images. When you populate "ALT" tags for images with descriptive text, readers who have image blocking on can at least read a short description of the image. This increases the likelihood that they will activate it.

6. Include Height and Width Attributes with Images

Every image has a height and width attribute. Populating the height and width attributes for each image will help keep your e-mail intact even if image blocking is on.

7. Use Tables for Formatting

CSS-based layouts are not supported by most major e-mail applications so don't use them. Your design will render more consistently when HTML tables are used for layout. But you can use inline CSS to format content (*e.g.*, font sizing and color), as well as effects like link behavior on mouseover.

8. Avoid Deliverability Issues

Rich Media, Embedding Flash or video in an e-mail can cause deliverability issues. It is also likely these elements will be stripped or disabled. If you want to use rich media, use a screenshot of the media linking to the "live" version on your Web site.

9. Make Sure Forms Include Links

If you're including an embedded form such as an RSVP or survey, make sure to also provide a link to a Web-based landing page alternative for readers using applications like Outlook that don't support forms. Also,

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mentor, resources abound via organizations like the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession (on which I served for five years as the Commission's marketing liaison), the National Association of Women Lawyers (NAWL) and the New York-based Women in Law Empowerment Forum, where I serve as Co-Chair.

WOMEN-FRIENDLY FIRMS AND LEADERSHIP

In thinking about firms that define themselves as "women-friendly" and those that claim to have women's initiatives in place, I look to those firms to see how many of them have created leadership programs, including leadership workshops that include legacy themes and implementation. Women-in-law programs within law firms may include social events and networking which nurture existing clients and give tips on how to get new clients, but are they really empowering women to become leaders if that is a career goal? Do women-in-law programs aspire to be enclaves of women who only think about being part of the environment without going outside the environment to create success stories? Here is where being outside the law firm environment can lead to success inside your firm. Let's pick an extracurricular activity. Pick something you are passionate about — children's issues, a grassroots political issue, the environment or a philanthropic organization. Join it, work hard, and let your opinion and voice be heard. All of this will lead to valuable connections within the organization and in time will definitely lead to developing business. Be sure the firm knows of your accomplishments and gives you the support to take those outside activities to the next level.

LEADERSHIP ROLES OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF YOUR PRACTICE

Now what I am about to say may be a bit controversial, but I counsel women to not take on leadership roles within their firm that have "no red meat." There are only two roles within a law firm that count: the governing body of the firm and the compensation committee. The truth be told — traditionally, these spots are filled by those within the firm who have books of business. So if that's the case, then there must be a process to develop business. I believe that without question it is a jungle out there and you need to bring to bear all of your resources to prospect for gold. The route to business development is to market yourself utilizing your talents beyond what they teach you in law school. Everyone assumes you are a good lawyer. You should have that "vocal pocket resume" or five-minute elevator speech on your legal background, but remember too that, like those college applications, you need to balance your legal expertise with outside activities about which you are passionate. Prospective clients want to know who you are outside the firm because very often, as I have witnessed, the outside activities can align with those of prospective and existing clients. Nothing resonates better in developing business than demonstrating leadership capabilities that have been developed while working with cultural, political, philanthropic or community service organizations. Yes, there are internal programs like pro bono within every firm, but they are tied to the firm. Pro bono is essential but it is more about the firm's goals than what your passion might be. Follow that passion. Find the activity that is fun and worthwhile. Providing a leadership role within the organization of your choice not only can help you attain a sense of fulfillment in your life, but can in time become your signature. A leadership role becomes part of who you are and will garner respect from your colleagues. Non-traditional leadership roles can also maximize your potential as someone who will be recognized within the legal community. Each year, the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession honors outstanding women with its Margaret Brent Awards. Most of the honorees have not only demonstrated their legal capability but have given back in ways that make them stand out from the crowd. This is the heart and soul of what leadership is really about.

OTHER AVENUES

Other avenues of non-traditional roles that can lead to business development include fund-raising, either at the college or law school alumni level or through your children's schools. Asking for money is difficult and may not be suited for everyone. That being said, all fundraising is really about is making connections and connections are key to leadership. I personally have been involved in all types of fundraising and most of the people I have worked with on various charities are still my friends. I have also never said no to a colleague or friend who has asked me to contribute to a charity that I believe in. My list is limited, but it is important to realize the personal and professional value that comes with being charitable.

CONCLUSION

In closing, let me borrow a line from the movie "Working Girl" that says: "Who makes it happen … *you* make it happen!" So why are you still sitting there. Get busy!

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prepopulate your forms with subscriber data to maximize conversion rates.

10. ALWAYS TEST YOUR E-MAILS BEFORE SENDING

Always send a "test" e-mail to yourself before distributing to clients. Check *all* links to make sure they are working properly. If there are any forms associated with the e-mail (such as an RSVP form in an e-mail invitation), complete and submit the form to make sure it is working properly.

Also consider sending "test" e-mails to addresses outside your firm's mail server. We had one client who only tested the links at its e-mail address within the firm. Unfortunately, the links had consisted of URLs on the firm's internal, admin version of its Web site, which were not accessible to folks viewing the e-mail outside the firm. Including a test send to their account executive at our company would have caught this error.

In closing, e-mail is a great marketing tool, especially for proactively reinforcing expertise with clients and other contacts such as referral sources. Just make sure to follow the design "best practices" in this article to ensure your e-mail marketing is having maximum impact.

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