MDR's Guide to Mobile Email Marketing

Over the past few years, marketing strategies have shifted from direct mail, printed catalogs, and other print media to a variety of digital marketing channels. The transition to online marketing brought its own set of best practices for email, web ads, and social engagement. Now we're faced with yet another transition as we see consumers moving to mobile.

In the education market, we know that educators at all levels are checking email, browsing the web, and making purchasing decisions on multiple devices, including mobile ones. Users flip between smartphones, desktops, and tablets, often checking the same email on each device.

As a result, email design in particular needs to shift with this trend. Marketers can no longer assume that customers and prospects have a full computer screen to read email marketing messages; in any particular email campaign you will have readers accessing your email across a variety of devices. This is why it's become critical to craft your email campaigns with mobile users in mind.

Here are some key tips to help you design mobile-optimized email campaigns.

Mobile Email Design Guidelines

Simplify as Much as Possible

- Complex HTML, tables, and multiple links in close proximity are all challenges on a mobile device. Remember that the reader is "clicking" with a thumb or finger and doesn't have the precision of a mouse. Make sure it's easy for recipients to read your copy and click on links, buttons, etc.

- Many email marketers are including full site navigation in their email design, and mobile device readers will have a hard time with this. Instead, remove the navigation and focus on the core content of your message. Be concise! It's more important than ever to deliver the value proposition quickly and include a strong call to action.

Sizing and Placement

- Say goodbye to huge headers with positioning graphics, as they only push the real content of your message down. Try to keep headers for mobile between 110-120px.

- Design in a vertical manner with full width images. Single columns work well, but avoid complex tables.

- Slim down the width of your emails. Design for no more than 550px wide; 320-550px is a good width range. Android does not auto-scale like iOS (iPhone and iPad) does, so the slimmer width increases the odds that all readers, no matter what they are reading your email on, can view your email content.

- The goal of most emails is to encourage a click. Try to place this call to action above the fold, at least 44 x 44px in dimension. Anything smaller can be a challenge for a reader to easily click with a finger or thumb.

- Use larger fonts: 12-14px or larger for body text. iOS automatically scales text to 12px, but this can break up the layout of the design. Turn auto-scaling off by adding the following code: style="-webkit-text-size-adjust:none." Be sure to preview your copy before sending the final email.

Other Mobile Best Practices

- Always include ALT text for images, since so many systems default to images turned off.

- Choose contrasting colors. On a smaller screen, low color contrast fonts, backgrounds, and images are much harder to discern and read. You don't need to go so far as using black and white, but just bear in mind that subtle changes in colors are harder for the reader's eyes. More color contrast allows for easier mobile viewing, and it makes your design "pop."

- At the top of your emails, include a Preview Header: a "View Mobile Version" link, along with "View as a Web Page" if possible. This should be the first visible portion of your email after the subject line. Left align the Preview Header as some devices may cut it off if centered. Even if readers have images turned off, they'll see these links and can use them to experience a well-formatted version of the message. Consider adding a short and punchy headline or call to action in this section of the email as well.

- Send Multipart MIME messages. This format sends the email content in both HTML and plain text. Using Multipart MIME will ensure your email content is available, even if the mobile device only allows text.

Test!

- With so many devices and different formats across all of these devices, there is no magic format or design spec. iOS behaves quite differently than Android devices, so testing is critical. Send test emails to co-workers who can open the email on several types of devices.

- Make sure to test with images on and off to see how each displays.

- Test what drives results. Shorter subject lines and more succinct copy may perform better for the mobile audience.

Don't Forget Your Website

Since the goal of most emails is to get a click-through to the website, you want to make sure your site is also optimized for mobile users. While the focus of this guide is optimization for email messages, there are many resources to help you get your site in shape for mobile users. As you work on optimizing your site, you can make one quick adjustment that will help iPhone users immediately: define the viewport.

Safari on the iPhone uses a 980px wide viewport. This means any template hosted on the web that's less than 980px wide will appear zoomed out. To correct this, you need to define the viewport for your mobile version and mobile landing pages. You can do so using this code: <meta name="viewport" content="width=width of your layout, initial-scale=1.0; minimum-scale=1.0, user-scalable=yes" />.

Analyze and Adjust

These best practices will help get your email campaigns in good shape for mobile users. Use email reporting and web traffic analytics to get a handle on what devices your email recipients are using to open and click. You may find trends in devices that will help you further optimize your email marketing.

And as you work to make your email campaigns accessible and appealing to mobile users, don't forget that the best practices of email marketing still apply: targeting, relevancy, personalization, a strong call to action, and testing.