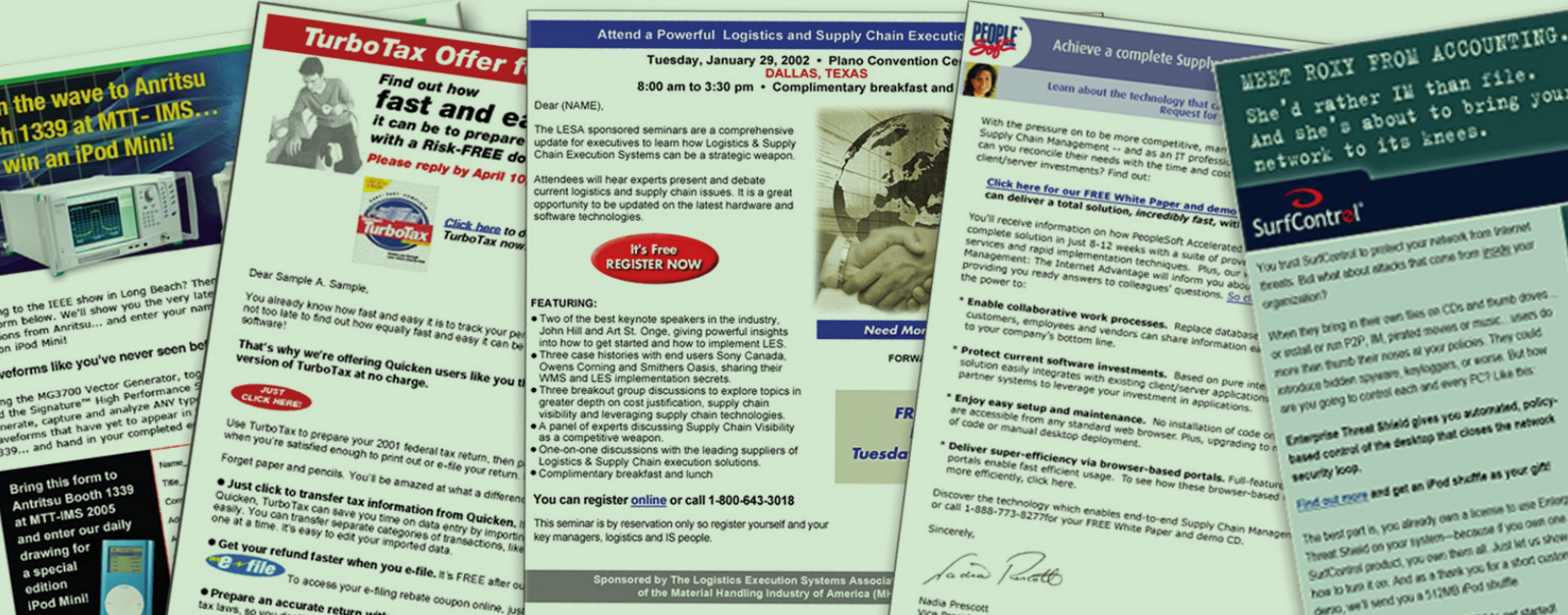


How to do Your Own Email Audit



A Hands-On Guide



Are your email open rates and click-throughs steadily declining, even though you haven't changed the way you send your email? Would you like a 10-20% improvement in response to your emails with no increase in cost? If you answered "yes" to either of these questions, it may be time for an email audit.

You've put a lot of effort into planning the most effective and compelling communications to your customers and prospects, and the last thing you need is a technical glitch that can keep people from receiving your message in the way you intended for them to receive it—or possibly keep them from receiving it, period.

An email audit can help—by analyzing the steps for composing and sending email to your house files and rented opt-in lists, and comparing these procedures to best practices in direct marketing. Specifically, we're going to look at three areas that have been identified as trouble spots in hundreds of email programs reviewed by Beasley Direct Marketing:

- Problematic or "dirty" HTML coding.
- Disconnects between the way you design your communication and the way your recipients see it.
- Getting trapped by spam filters, in spite of your best efforts to comply with the ever-changing definitions of what is and isn't junk email.

We've included a total of 8 action items, which you'll find at the end of each section. By applying even a few of these—many of which you really can "do yourself", especially if you or a staffer have good HTML coding skills—you can reap a fast reward in terms of an immediate uptick in results from your next promotion.

This isn't an exhaustive list—we've focused on the big problems that yield big improvements when they are resolved. If you'd like to dig deeper, or if you're interested in professional email audit services, please contact our email guru, David at dbeasley@beasleydirect.com.

PART 1

The importance of clean HTML

The easiest way to design an email communication is also the riskiest: composing it in Word, choosing “save as a Web Page” then opening and sending from Outlook. In the interests of cross-application compatibility, Microsoft adds all kinds of formatting that can change the way a document will look in different browsers or even make it unreadable.

Using an HTML editor like Dreamweaver is somewhat better—but only if you work mostly in the “code” window and stay away from templates which add their own formatting. And the very best option is to work in a text editor, like Notepad, and hand-code your HTML (which you can then open in an HTML tool to check for open tags and other typos.)

This is important because any extraneous information causes an accumulation of formatting tags that can cause problems in visual rendering or set off spam filters. According to Marketing Sherpa, even experienced web designers often don't realize that “email requires super-clean code”.

Here are 12 best practices for HTML email (based on our own experience):

- 1 Ideal page width: 550-700 pixels.** This allows full-width viewing on a variety of browsers.
- 2 Limit the file size to 30KB** (20KB for mobile phones) or less for quick loading.
- 3 Avoid using background images.** They're not recognized by many email browsers—including Outlook 2007.
- 4 Make sure all tags are properly tested and closed** `<html></html>`, `<tr></td><td></tr>` etc.
- 5 No javascript, please.** Many email browsers can't read it.
- 6 Avoid flash or streaming video** in HTML emails. Animated .GIFs are usually OK.
- 7 Never use CSS layers to position elements;** use HTML tables instead. Many email clients do not support CSS layers, and will destroy the format of your message.
- 8 All dimensions** for tables, rows, cells should be in pixels, not in percentages.
- 9 It's usually OK to use the COLSPAN attribute** (“how many across”?) but ROWSPAN (“how many down”?) is not recognized by many browsers.
- 10 Special ASCII characters like ®, ©, or ™** should be converted to HTML (`®` `©` `™`).
- 11 Foreign characters should also be coded** to remove accents, tildes and other characters that do not always reproduce correctly.
- 12 All images should have their height and width spelled out.** Otherwise, if images are blocked they may display as white boxes with infinite height and width, pushing all the HTML text off the screen.


Why you shouldn't use ROWSPAN.

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MINOR'S® SIGNATURE™ FLAVOR
Handcrafted by chefs, for chefs.



Thank you for your recent interest in MINOR'S® Signature™ Flavor. We hope you enjoyed your free bottle. Now's the perfect time to order more of the flavor you sampled, or try other bold MINOR'S® Signature™ Flavor sauces for \$10 off per case.



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These bold, versatile flavors will give your menu a unique personality—yours!

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1) Go to www.bestflavors.com and receive an immediate \$10 off per case* (limit 10 cases) on any MINOR'S® Signature™ Flavor sauce. Download and complete the Redemption Form.

OR

Order through your distributor and receive a \$10 rebate off per case* (limit 10 cases) on any MINOR'S® Signature™ Flavor. Download and complete the Redemption Form.

*NOTE: Each case contains four bottles.

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- Product Information
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Tell us how you're using MINOR'S® Signature™ Flavor and get a chance to be drawn for 1 of 10 MINOR'S® branded kitchen tools. Go to www.bestflavors.com and fill out the 6-question survey.

The email at left used ROWSPAN to set up the images and colored fields. The email at right was re-coded without using ROWSPAN elements.

The problem with embedded style elements in headers.

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- Send and Receive Email** Get a fully hosted email application with POP/IMAP support, Live Search, virus protection, and even your own domain name.
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- Share Documents** Securely access documents, files, and applications from one common web console.
- Create Powerful Database Applications** Develop your own web databases or use our templates as a starting point. It's fast and easy.
- Send and Receive Email** Get a fully hosted email application with POP/IMAP support, Live Search, virus protection, and even your own domain name.
- Conduct Meetings** Meet online—real time—collaborate with your team, give presentations, demonstrate products, or conduct training.
- Share Productivity Tools** Access everyday office functionality online, including tasks, contacts, expense reports, and more.

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Notice the unformatted headline and body type in the example at left. This happened because the message was sent to Gmail, a web client that strips out header style information. The example at right used in-line style elements for more consistent effect.

And here are our three top tips for composing HTML that works in email:

- 1 Provide an absolute path to graphics on your server**, rather than including the graphics as an attachment or a relative path to a local server that won't be available when the email is opened.
- 2 Insert the style sheet elements in the body of the email.** Not in an external stylesheet (which will not work if the link is not working) and not in the header either (because many web email readers will strip out those headers).
- 3 Prepare your email in multipart mime** which means there is both a text version and an HTML version, along with the code that allows the email program to deliver the right version for each recipient. This translation procedure will generally be done by your mail transmission service. If they don't offer it, demand it.

HTML and cross-browser compatibility

As if it isn't enough to have basic coding challenges, different readers and browsers handle emails slightly differently.

- Gmail and other web mail programs strip out the headers. In fact, to avoid potential problems, many third party email services will remove the headers before the email is transmitted.
- Outlook 2007 completely changed its code base, and is now based on Word compatibility instead of Internet Explorer. As a result, HTML forms no longer work in email, and background images are no longer displayed.

BONUS TIP

Sloppy HTML isn't just unattractive to your readers. It can also earn you points, the bad kind, with spam filters that assume that sloppy coders are likely to be spammers.

Many email transmission services offer a tool that allows you to check your code for cross-browser compatibility. Ask. (Even so, there is no guarantee that an email that displays well in their tool will look good in everyone else's tool. So you should test by sending and receiving emails in a variety of configurations, or have your vendor do this for you.)

The importance of clean HTML code.

```
<!DOCTYPE HTML PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD HTML 4.01 Transitional//EN"
"http://www.w3.org/TR/html4/loose.dtd">
<html>
<head>
<META http-equiv="Content-Style-Type" content="text/css">
<title>HTML Email</title>
</head>
<body bgcolor="#FFFFFF">
<table border="0" width="600" cellspacing="0" cellpadding="0">
```

This is an excellent header for cross-browser compatibility. Notice how the TITLE field has been filled in. If you don't do this, the email editor will default to "Untitled" which gets bad points with spam filters.

```
<!DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD XHTML 1.0 Transitional//EN"
"http://www.w3.org/TR/xhtml1/DTD/xhtml1-transitional.dtd">
<html>
<head>
<title>Anritsu_frame </title>
<meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=utf-8" />
</head>
<body bgcolor="#ffffff" leftmargin="0" topmargin="0">
<table border="0" cellpadding="0" cellspacing="0" width="600">
  <tr>
```

Here's another cleanly coded header, this one for a message in XHTML. You'll get readability benefits by specifying the type and version of code in the header, but be sure that ALL code in the message follows this specification or spam filters will add points against you. Don't mix HTML versions, or alternate between HTML and XHTML, in the same email.

Action steps for this section:

- 1** Clean up your code. Take a look at the code in your most recent email. Ask your HTML designer to sit with you while you do this. If you see something that doesn't make sense, try taking it out. If the rendering of the HTML doesn't change, it's probably an artifact from an external template that can mess up in web browsers.
- 2** Move all your style elements into the body of the email—no external style sheets, no header-embedded elements either.
- 3** Make sure all graphics are indicated with absolute, rather than relative paths.

The special problem of mobile delivery

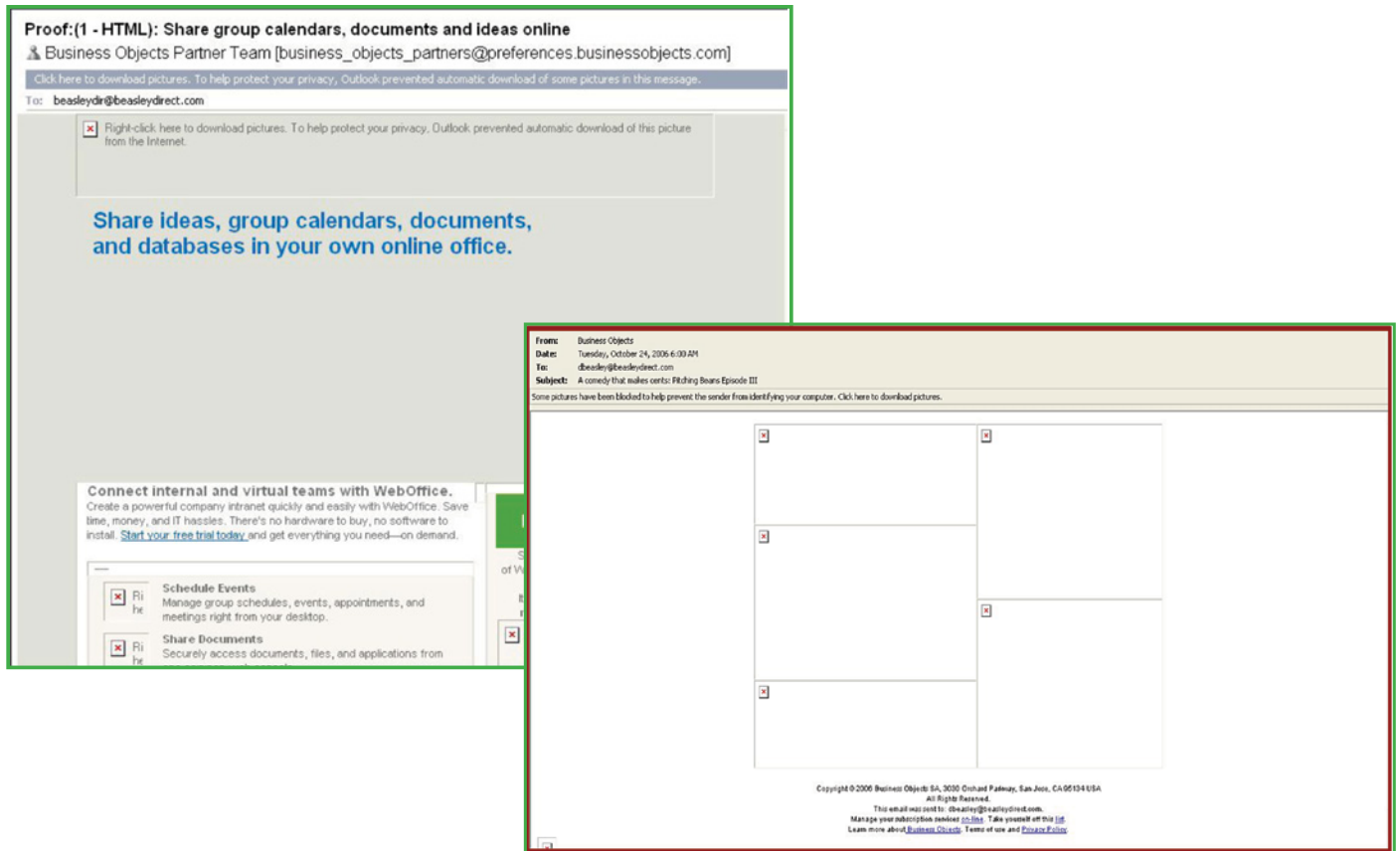
Depending on your audience, a few to most of your users are seeing emails not on their computers, but on their mobile screens. Mobile devices display differently but all have the problem of narrow screen width. Here are some best practices when delivering to mobile:

- **DON'T use long URLs** that fill the entire mobile screen.
- **Design narrower pages** if you know you are going to mobile users: 300-400 pixels vs. 550-700 for a desktop monitor; 40 text characters maximum vs. 72 for standard email.
- Mobile readers display HTML in a variety of ways, so **always include a text version in multi-part mime** so the client will deliver your message in a readable format. (Blackberry, for example, displays actual HTML code rather than interpreting it—a result that's useless for readability.)
- Some day, mobile companies may agree on a common graphic standard, but today there are significant display variations from one mobile screen to the next.

PART 2

Making them see the message you want them to see

Your HTML can be perfect, yet you can still transmit a message that says absolutely nothing, like this:



What's wrong? The recipients of these all-images emails have accepted the default settings of Outlook, which means images are not downloaded without permission. And without the images, all they can see is a bunch of red X's that do nothing to get your message across.

Here are some solutions:

- 1 Design your emails so graphics are less critical to your message.** Code your headlines in HTML, not graphics. Use HTML color specs as part of your design rather than loading graphic banners and backgrounds. Put your graphics to the right of your head so they aren't the first element a user sees.
- 2 Use ALT tags to reinforce information that is behind the graphics...** this is the text that is loaded when the image doesn't load. The ALT tag allows the recipient to see a text message relevant to your offer—such as “use this link to request your white paper”—rather than a red X or, just as meaningless, a random image title.
- 3 Encourage subscribers to add you to their Safe Senders List** which, in Outlook, means graphics are displayed by default.
- 4 TIP: A “contrarian” use of graphics** is to put words there that would never pass a spam filter, such as “click here for free offer”. Just be sure that the spammy text isn't repeated in the alt tag; it should say something like “use this link to request a white paper”. Also, don't overuse this trick because too high a ratio of graphics to text counts against you with the filters.



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Even with images blocked, the HTML head and body copy formatting get the message across. For the “images on” version, notice how the value proposition is clear and complete in the information “above the fold” in this small window. The cut-off pictures at the lower right tease the reader to scroll down and find out more.

The Next Step:

Make your message look good in the Preview Pane. According to Email Labs, 52% of business users “always” use the Preview Pane to scan a message. If they don’t see something to attract them there, why should they take the next step and open it? For those who do download graphics, make sure that enough of your value proposition shows in the preview pane that they will either click through directly or open it.

TIP: About subject lines. Don’t count on more than 39 characters showing before the subject line is truncated in the preview window. Those 39 characters must contain enough information to deliver a compelling value proposition or create curiosity.

Action steps for this section:

- 1 Replace all headlines in graphics with HTML heads. And be sure your email starts with an HTML head so the red x isn’t the first thing they see.
- 2 Write ALT tags for your graphics so they’ll see an explanatory or marketing message instead of red X’s.
- 3 Encourage subscribers to add you to their Safe Senders List; in Outlook, this means your images will appear automatically

PART 3

Take a fresh look at spam filters

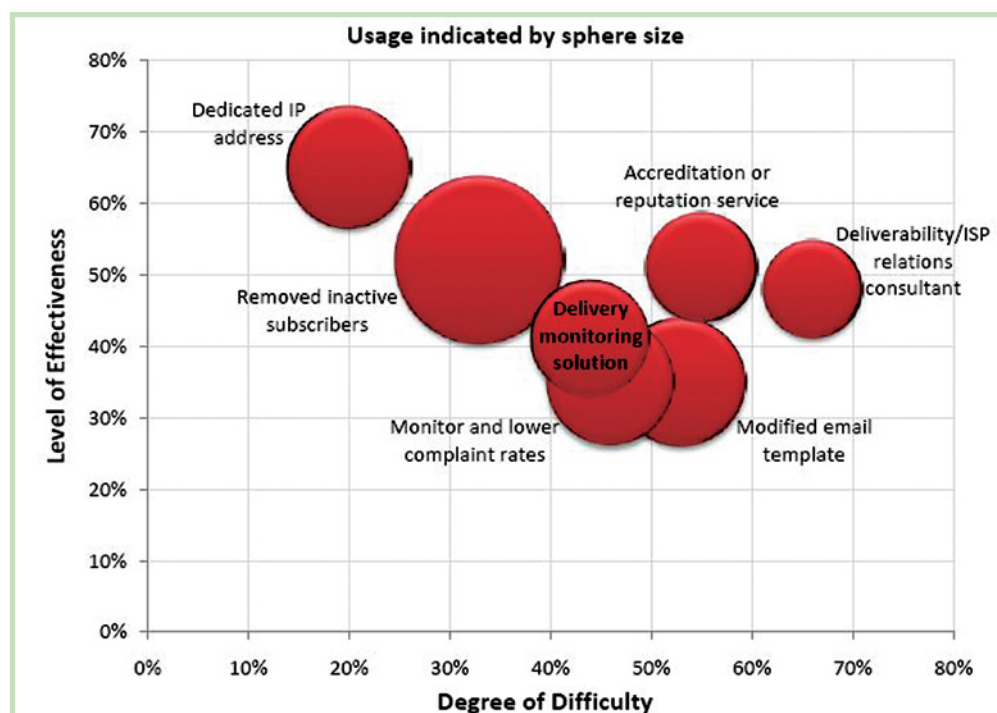
At Beasley Direct we work with marketers who are intimately familiar with spam filters. Yet, almost every email we transmit needs some tweaking to reduce its spam score and improve its deliverability. This isn't surprising because spammers are constantly changing their tactics to stay ahead of the filters, while the filters are working just as hard to keep up with the spammers.

If your email is tagged as spam it may be shunted straight to the junk mail folder... it may be delivered with a tag like "(SPAM)" to prejudice the reader... it may be blocked at a firewall or a corporate filter so the recipient never even sees it. Yet the filtered or blocked email may be registered as "delivered" by the sending utility, making the delivery rates appear high while open and click-through rates steadily decline. These are good reasons why eternal vigilance against being labeled a spammer is well worth the effort.

Email deliverability through spam filters is a top challenge for many email marketers. Getting your emails through the filters takes a multi-level approach. First, we recommend that you have a dedicated IP address that will be used to identify you as a legitimate marketer by the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and spam filters. Secondly, spam filters look for messy lists, so keep your list clean by removing inactive subscribers. Third, modify your email creative or template using the tactics we're describing in this guide. Doing these three things will make the most difference in improving your email delivery rate.

Top tactics for improving email deliverability.

Three dimensions of deliverability tactics - effectiveness, difficulty and use.



There are several categories of spam filters, but the two that are of greatest concern to legitimate marketers are content filters and volume filters. Let's look at each one.

Content Filters analyze the guts of a message and then assign it a point score based on an ever-changing set of criteria. "Spammy" words count against you, as does sloppy coding considered characteristic of professional spammers who are moving too fast to keep their code clean. Many spam filters add further points against you if recipients actively tag your message as spam.

ISPs can set their own thresholds as to what is considered spam; it's generally a score of 5 on the widely-used SpamAssassin open source tool. It's rare to have a perfect score of 0, yet with some diligent cleanup you can usually bring a spammy email well below the 5 point trigger.

The frustrating thing about content filtering is that you can get dinged for using words that are perfectly legitimate. For example, the score for "Viagra" is so high we can't imagine how the company making this product can communicate with customers via email.

Below is a snapshot of scoring criteria in the SpamAssassin database. Some spam triggers are obvious, others not so obvious. Further, many of the banned words are

AREA TESTED	LOCALE	DESCRIPTION OF TEST	TEST NAME	DEFAULT SCORES (local, net, with bayes, with bayes+net)	MORE INFO (additional wiki docs)
body		Generic Test for Unsolicited Bulk Email	GTUBE	1000.000	Wiki
body		Incorporates a tracking ID number	TRACKER_ID	2.699 2.696 2.000 2.003	Wiki
body		Weird repeated double-quotation marks	WEIRD_QUOTING	2.799 2.796 1.428 1.396	Wiki
body		Body contains a ROT13-encoded email address	EMAIL_ROT13	1.600 1.680 1.850 2.000	Wiki
body		HTML and text parts are different	MPART_ALT_DIFF	2.498 1.143 1.456 0.739	Wiki
body		HTML and text parts are different	MPART_ALT_DIFF_COUNT	2.899 1.882 1.500 1.110	Wiki
body		Message body has 80-90% blank lines	BLANK_LINES_80_90	1	Wiki
body		eval:tvd_vertical_words('0','10')	TVD_SPACE_RATIO	2.899 2.899 2.307 2.219	Wiki

those beloved by direct marketers like free, promise, no fee, no obligation, money-back guarantee... as well as less obvious words and phrases like "click here" or even "unsubscribe".

The solution is to study the spam filters as you compose your email message—and then actually run a sample message against the filters before you send it, to see what you've missed.

Your email provider should have spam testing tools or you can simply email yourself to a variety of accounts on various ISPs, then read the explanations for your own spam score.

A final note on content filtering: treat the scores as guidelines, never as a pass/fail tool. You may get a good “score” on your test, and still get filtered for other factors determined by the ISP or many of your recipients’ PC spam filters.





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AS REPORTED IN:

- The Wall Street Journal
- National Geographic
- O: The Oprah Magazine
- CNBC

and other major media.

RISK FREE
90-day money
back guarantee

The Brain Fitness Program is:

- computer-based exercises you do at home
- easy to use, you just point and click

It works — scientifically validated

Horace B. Deets, former Executive Director of AARP:

"The science behind Posit Science is solid, and studies show, the program works. We can do something to enhance our powers of concentration, understanding and memory. I keep thinking of all the people who can benefit from this breakthrough."

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This email was trapped by the spam filters

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AS REPORTED IN:

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This email got through. What’s the difference?

In the first email, a .gif was titled “guarantee. gif” and its ALT tag was “Risk Free 90 Day Money-Back Guarantee”. Once these spammy words were changed, the email looked the same but the score dropped below the threshold.

HTML code no-nos that can get you filtered

- Text in different colors or font sizes (without using embedded style elements)
- Using “dotted decimal” IP Addresses to reference graphics and links
- Unbalanced body, table and other tags
- Leaving the html editor information in the header
- Having “spammy” words in alt tags or as file names
- Missing or “untitled” between <title></title> tags
- <TBODY> tags

Volume-Based Filters are triggered not by content, but by characteristics of your transmission procedures as monitored by the receiving ISP. The most common triggers are resource-based and unknown user-based.

Resource-based filters are triggered when a mailer demands too much of the receiving mail server at the ISP. The ISP terminates the connection at that threshold point. This is what happens when you try to send too many emails in a bulk transmission, instead of using a service that sends them one at a time. In addition, some ISPs such as Earthlink and AT&T have filtering protocols based on too many email cc’s to their users, thus thwarting a common bulk mailing tactic where all the recipients are blind cc’d so their addresses remain confidential.

You can avoid getting filtered by these resource-based tests if you:

- Reduce unnecessary volume demands by removing those who don’t open your emails, or by breaking up large lists.
- Modify the send rate to prevent large “pulses” of emails through the ISPs.

Unknown user-based filters are triggered by a high number of attempted deliveries at the ISP that are not valid addresses. If the marketer passes a threshold, their mail will stop being delivered. Here’s another reason to keep your list clean.

Steps to avoid unknown user-based filters:

- Regularly clean your lists to remove “bounced” addresses that require extra processing by the ISP and count against you for volume.

Other steps to avoid ISP filters:

- Make sure your host name and your IP address match.
- Only send your emails from the mail server, never from a 3rd party “open” relay server.
- Follow the procedures for identifying yourself with Sender ID (Hotmail) and signing with DomainKeys (Yahoo), so your email is recognized as legitimate by these services.

Most good Email Transmission Utilities take care of these last three steps. Make sure the one you or your vendor is using does!

A few “trigger” words guaranteed to raise your spam score

Click	Sale	Complimentary
No-cost	Save	Ensure
Spam	Saving	Money-Back
Profit(s)	Value	Refund
Guarantee(d)	Special Offer	Risk-Free
Free	Download	Toll-Free
Limited time (offer)	Win	Removal
Income	Instant(ly)	10% Off
Subscribe (or unsubscribe)	Amaz(ed)(ing)	Bonus
\$\$\$ / Money / Dollar(s)	4U	Prizes

Action steps for this section:

1 Run your latest email through a spam filter, then remove as many “spammy” components as you can without gutting your email. This is a balancing act. If you take out every provocative word the filters will love you, but your readers will be lulled to sleep. However, you can almost certainly lower your spam score without affecting the impact of your message.

2 Strategically move some of those spammy words to graphics, such as putting a “YOURS FREE” burst on top of a premium offer. Just remember to say something innocuous in the ALT tag for that graphic. It’s still ok to say “free offer” within your graphics just as long as the ATL tag doesn’t also say “free offer”.

BONUS TIP After you’ve done all the things in this guide, ask us to cross-check your results. For just a very small fee, Beasley Direct will conduct a complete audit covering all the points described in this report... and a few more besides. To get started, contact David Beasley at dbeasley@beasleydirect.com or call Dave at (408) 782-0046, ext. 22.

About...

Beasley Direct Marketing

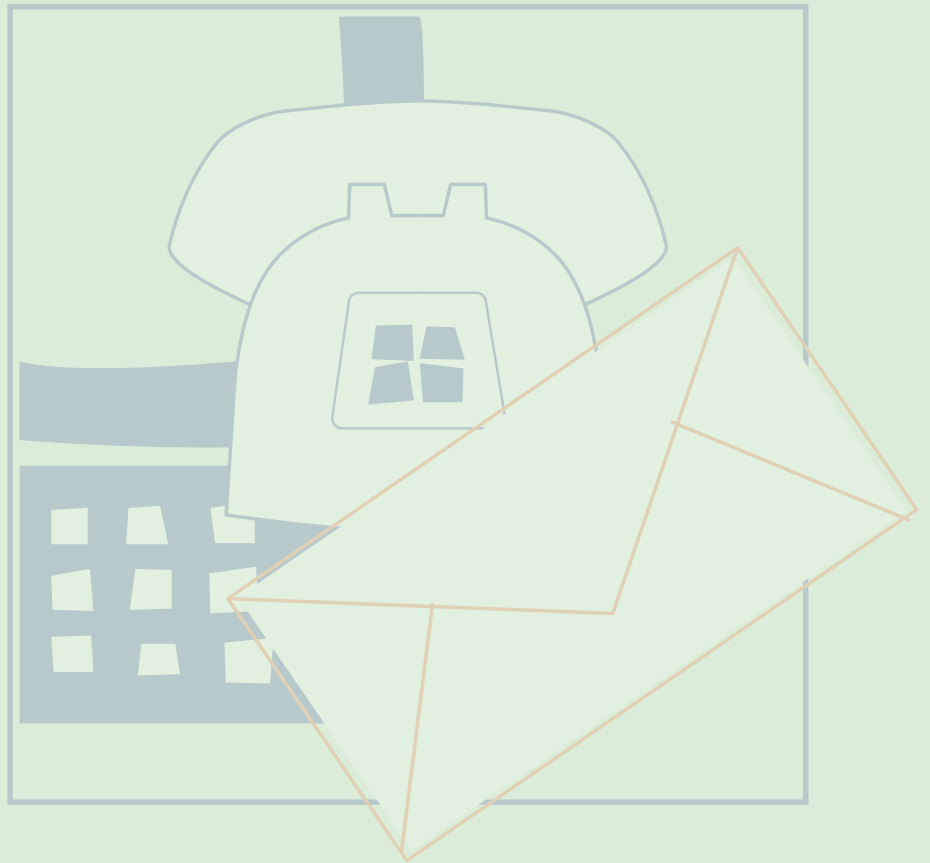
We are a full-service direct and online marketing agency. Our client experience ranges from consumer products to complex technical services, and from household names to mid-market companies. In each case we strive to deliver value by optimizing the marketing communication at every step of the sales process.

The insights in this report are based on hundreds of engagements with clients in a range of industries. They represent best practices from our own experience and the examples of others. We hope they will save you the time and expense required for trial-and-error marketing that few companies can afford in these economic times.

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