

As the dust settles on the big bust up over Outlook 2007 and how it displays emails, I thought I'd sum up the arguments, issues and implications. Here goes...

The story so far

Microsoft's new version of Outlook, the email client included within their forthcoming Office 2007 software, features an important change in how it displays emails.

Previously, Outlook relied on the technology behind its sibling web browser (Internet Explorer) to interpret the underlying code and instructions that HTML emails use to tell Outlook where and how to display all those images, colors etc.

The new Outlook 2007 now uses Word to do that job instead.

The big deal is that Word is not nearly as good as Internet Explorer at understanding HTML elements and style properties (CSS). Microsoft themselves published an [article](#) describing the various things that Outlook 2007 will not be able to cope with. These include:

- Forms
- Background images
- Animated GIFs
- Flash
- Float or position commands
- Alt tags in images

In a nutshell, this places a lot of restrictions on email design. Needless to say, email designers are not happy.

The fires of protest first sparked into flame via an [article](#) in Sitepoint's newsletter. This led to a now-famous blog post by David Greiner, with the memorable title "[Microsoft takes email design back 5 years.](#)"

David's post in turn led to a slew of similar posts from outraged designers, who like him were upset at the limitations imposed on their work by Outlook. The story even made it to the front page of [ClickZ](#) and [Digg](#).

Is this bad for email marketing?

The general consensus is that the implications for email marketing are not huge. This is because Outlook is predominately used by the business community.

Other email clients typically used by business folk aren't particular good with HTML and CSS either. So most B2B email marketers are already sending out Outlook 2007-friendly HTML emails.

For example, the folk at [MailChimp](#) point out that much of the "lost" functionality was never standard in HTML email design anyway. In other words, we're losing a lot of functionality that wasn't particularly valuable in the first place.

That opinion is echoed by Bill Nussey of Silverpop, who [notes](#), "Bottom line, Outlook 2007's rendering engine is not a game-changing event for email marketers."

The counterargument is that these other email clients never had enough market share to make it compulsory to send out "watered down" HTML emails.

So some people will inevitably have to go back to their email template and redesign them again, on the assumption that Outlook 2007 will likely become the most popular email software among business people.

Even then, say experts, there's no reason why simpler HTML has to mean poorer response rates.

Some suggest that the negative reaction is more to do with the creative restrictions it imposes on designers rather than any likely marketing problems.

In other words, yes, design needs to take account of Outlook 2007's relatively poor rendering capabilities, but you can still send decent looking, effective email to people using it.

That argument is exemplified by Greg Cangialosi, who writes on the [Blue Sky Factory blog](#), "This is a small blow to email marketers, but certainly not the biggest deal. What this really does is make all of that great creative talent we have out there revert back to nascent HTML email design"

So why the fuss?

To some extent the uproar comes from a reopening of two traditional divisions in email marketing.

The first is between the creative folk and the marketing folk.

Some marketers have made relatively offhand comments along the lines, of "tough, get over it," which is a touch disrespectful to the trade and art of email design.

If you took away the color green from an artist's palette, she could still paint great works of art. But you wouldn't expect her to be happy about it.

The second division is between the email marketing community and a section of the anti-spam community...those who believe marketing email in general and HTML marketing email in particular is an abomination. See, for example, this [article](#) by Jack Schofield.

The anti-HTML-in-email brigade have welcomed the move, though it's a pyrrhic victory: it won't change the number of HTML emails around, it will just make them less creative.

So are there any practical implications?

Yes. If you are tackling a business audience with your list and never bothered to consider problems with how your emails display, then this is a necessary wake-up call. Various versions of Outlook have a market share among business users of over 50%. So expect Outlook 2007 to be widely used.

The change should be seen as a further reminder that how your emails display is a critical part of email marketing.

The more complex the email and the more fancy the coding within it, the less likely it is to be seen as you intended. It doesn't mean the end of email design creativity, but it certainly means you need to take a more circumspect approach to the whole topic.

People view your emails using different software. Some use a desktop email client, others use webmail. There are different webmail services. Some people read emails on their mobile device. This diversity needs accommodating in your email design.

Equally, the less creative flexibility you have in terms of layout, images and colors, the more thought needs to go into other aspects of the email, such as the words you use and the offer you present.

So while Outlook 2007 may not prove to be the disaster some have called it, it's certainly another good reason to take a longer deeper look at the email we send.
