



If you work in the email marketing space, you are probably more than well aware of Microsoft's unpopular decision to rebuild Outlook's HTML rendering engine with the release of Outlook 2007. This latest version of Outlook, which began shipping in tandem with Office 2007, uses the new (and not so improved) Office HTML rendering engine instead of Internet Explorer's.

Why all the fuss, you ask? The new Office HTML rendering engine has significantly weaker support for HTML and CSS in comparison to the rendering engine used in previous versions of Outlook. In a nutshell, while many other email programs and web-based platforms have been steadily improving their support for standard HTML features and CSS functionality, Microsoft has taken a huge step back in time with their latest release of Outlook. Outlook enjoys a 70-80% market share of desktop email programs, which means that as more users upgrade to the latest version of Microsoft Office, the impact of the change will have stronger repercussions. Email marketers, focusing in the B2B space where the majority of recipients use Outlook, will feel particular impact.

The table below lists the primary hot button issues introduced with Outlook 2007:

No Support for Background Images
No Support for CSS Positioning (float and position properties are not supported)
Poor Box Model Support (CSS padding and margin properties may not behave as expected)
Background Color Behaves Unexpectedly When Nesting Tables
No Support for Animated GIFs
No Support for HTML Forms
Uneven Support of COLSPAN/ROWSPAN Attributes (works for any value greater than "0", but COLSPAN="0" causes unexpected behavior)

While following current HTML email design and coding best practices will help mitigate many potential rendering pitfalls introduced with the new version of Outlook, there are several issues that designers and coders must consider going forward. In the following pages, we list each of these issues and discuss workarounds from both a design perspective and a coding perspective.



### 1. No Support for Background Images.

This is a real shame. We've seen a lot of great designs that overlay HTML text on top of background images. Placing HTML text over images is one of several successful tactics used to encourage readers to engage with messages when images are disabled.

There are three recommended approaches to this problem:

- a) Place the text over an area of the image that doesn't detract from the design when it doesn't appear for Outlook 2007 users. Coders should specify a background color for the cells containing the image. Also, when coding the email, break the main image up into smaller slices so that the section with the text overlay can use a background image while other parts can still use regular images. While not aesthetically ideal, this solution will make your message look good on the majority of other email platforms and will degrade relatively gracefully for Outlook 2007 users. If you are a B2C email marketer, this is probably the best approach to take.
- b) Don't design with background images in mind; keep imagery and body text separate in your design. This is the simplest approach and guarantees that you'll sidestep any problems, but you'll lose the performance improvement that usually comes from overlaying HTML text on background images.
- c) Include text directly in images instead of using HTML text. From a results perspective, this is probably the least effective solution. Users will not see the text if they have images turned off in their email reader, and with the prevalence of preview panes and blocked images in most email programs today, it's becoming increasingly important to provide text to capture readers' attention and generate click-throughs.

### 2. No Support for CSS Positioning

If you are already following best coding practices in your emails, this shouldn't have any effect on your messages. We hate to say it, but you shouldn't be using CSS positioning in your code; always use tables for the layout. Yes, we know they are so 1996, but HTML tables are still the only tried and true method for laying out your email designs and ensuring they render well across all the major platforms. Tables may not allow you to create simple, elegant HTML files, but they do work!

### 3. Poor Box Model Support

What this issue really means is that CSS padding and margin styles do not behave as expected. Use caution when using either padding or margin styles and be sure to test your files across a wide range of platforms to ensure proper rendering.



4. *Background Color Behaves Strangely when Nesting Tables.*

For some strange reason, the developers of Office's clunky HTML rendering engine decided nesting tables shouldn't inherit the background color of the parent cell. When using nested tables, you'll have to remember to specify background color within each nested table as well as the parent table.

5. *No Support for Animated GIFs*

This is just plain cruel. Rumor has it that support for animated GIFs was left out of Outlook 2007 because they pose a security risk. Aside from those annoying, flickering low-res banner ads, what harm have animated GIFs ever done to anyone? Instead of seeing an animation, readers in Outlook 2007 are only able to view the first frame of the GIF. To deal with this limitation, consider avoiding animated GIFs whenever possible, and, when you do use them, make sure that the first frame is compelling enough to stand on its own.

6. *No Support for HTML Forms*

It was bad enough when Hotmail wasn't supporting HTML Forms. With Outlook and some of the other web-based email clients now joining in the act, it's time think about retirement for those existing, form-based email templates.

Weighing whether to use forms in email deserves your case-by-case consideration, taking your specific industry into account. For example, many retail email marketers in the travel industry use embedded trip schedulers to generate sales directly from within email messages and might be hard-hit by abandoning forms altogether.

7. *Uneven Support of COLSPAN/ROWSPAN Attributes*

This last issue is a bit odd. In Outlook 2007, specifying a value of "0" for either COLSPAN or ROWSPAN attributes will cause the table layout to break. The standard usage of COLSPAN and ROWSPAN still works properly (i.e. ROWSPAN = "2") but using values of "0" should be avoided. It's something we'd classify as wasted code, and shouldn't be done anyway, but still worth noting.