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Guide to email marketing mobile optimisation



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Introduction

Mobile optimisation? There is an imperative for email marketers to understand what this means for them and how best they can adjust to what is essentially a new dimension to their world. The word optimised is one with both stretchable and shrinkable definitions, especially in the digital sphere. For the purposes of this guide I shall consider the simplest definition, that is; 'making the best of.' We can all appreciate that in our non work lives, don't we all have to 'optimise' much of the time?

What I want to achieve in this guide is to provide marketers with some appreciation of why they should be paying attention to the massive increase in the use of mobile platforms for viewing emails, also to give you some guidelines as to how, as the definition would have it, to make the best of it for your email broadcasts.



The rise and rise of mobiles

Ralph Waldo Emerson is famously misquoted as saying “Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door” well perhaps smartphones and tablets are that better mousetrap? Apple didn’t invent the smartphone but it is clearly since the introduction of the iPhone that the world has been beating that path. It was the ability of this product to more easily read emails, even in HTML format, that drove much of the excitement and the subsequent rapid adoption. Gartner’s, the research and analysis organisation, estimates that in 2008 some 30 million smartphones were sold, their reckoning for 2011 is in excess of 300 million.

A major attraction to buyers around the world has been the facility to receive, read and reply to emails, again research suggests that 40% of those polled cite email as their main reason for buying a smartphone. Likewise tablet sales have also soared, and though there are other important factors that encourage sales of these products, an email facility is still up there.

Sales of devices using the Apple iOS, Android and RIM systems will rocket over the next few years, they will truly become a computer in your pocket. As of May 2011 the Nielsen Company reported that 38% of US mobile phone owners use a smartphone, up from 29.7% in October 2010. On its own, this fact isn’t reason enough to focus on a mobile email experience, yet these other findings may convince you otherwise. Most smartphone users take advantage of its email capabilities:

- 53% check email several times per day
- 29% check email throughout the day
- 66% check at least once per day

For the 1,427 US smartphone users surveyed, email was the most effective purchase trigger as the majority take action based on emails. The survey found other communications weren’t nearly as compelling.

What is the impact of this for email marketers?

- As we have seen research suggests mobile devices are fast becoming the gadget of choice by which people view emails. Return Path's latest study on mobiles shows that email readership on mobile devices grew a staggering 81% between October 2010 and March 2011.This means that optimising for mobile isn't something marketers can afford to ignore any longer

- Increased mobile use is not confined to consumers, surveys in the US and Europe record that company directors, managers and workers increasingly use these devices to view work emails. And if you are sending out B2B mailings at weekends you must optimise

- If upwards of 25% of your email opens are showing up as having been on mobiles can you be sure that there isn't an additional large number not bothering because your email construction doesn't interest the recipient? (More of this later)

- If your ESP can provide stats for opens by device and also have a feature to allow you to download lists of recipients that do use mobiles, how cool to be able to design optimised emails to address them specifically?



- Reacting to your subscribers viewing habits can only be a positive move, one which can only assist in increasing the impact of your email broadcast

- Integrating the use of mobile systems with email and other marketing tools, posters, in store promotions etc. Is on the rise and proving effective

Back-up statistics

The spreadsheet below indicates the results of a series of email broadcasts chosen at random within the last few weeks, all of which had an opens by device reporting facility enabled in the metrics report. The clients used to compile these stats were a mixture of those sending to B2B and B2C. This reporting feature can also indicate which operating system was used when opening the email but I shall leave you marketers to decide how to use that information.

Client sector	Desktop users %	Smartphone opens %	Tablet opens %
Retail	78%	20%	2%
Retail	70%	25%	7%
Recruitment	31%	25%	6%
Financial Services	60%	36%	4%
Charity client	75%	21%	4%
Publishing	67%	28%	5%
Promotional	74%	21%	5%
Ticketing	60%	35%	5%
Retail	82%	15%	3%
Publishing	67%	30%	3%
Leisure	44%	46%	10%
B2B	69%	30%	4%

**Stats above based on one off sends for companies within each sector named above*

I think it is clear from the chart that the impact of the mobile is significant and attention must be paid to it. So how should marketers react and respond?

Pay attention to the basics

The From Address

Whatever the actual from address being used, ensure that the 'descriptor,' the word or phrase used at the far left of the address is clear and distinctive. Read on a mobile email list this descriptor will be prominent. e.g. The Linen Shop...enews@enews.linenshop.co.uk never, never Mike...*enews@enews.linenshop.co.uk.*

The subject line

Strong relevant subject lines are a key to gaining opens when sending to mobiles, ensure the important words are at the beginning, and the line as a whole intrigues and excites enough to trigger further interest.

The pre-header

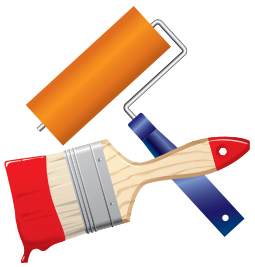
Use fewer functional pre-headers, that is, get rid of the 'click here to unsubscribe' or 'click to view in a browser'. Use engaging, mini marketing messages or short calls to action, connect them in substance with the subject line using them as a continuation of the punchy, strong message contained therein.

Email width



For a traditional email client width generally should not exceed 650 pixels. Most mobiles have a viewing area of half that. If you are going to stick to 300-350 pixels then your design will need to be radically changed, especially rethinking the number of images to be used. Even if you choose to exceed this width you will still need to bear many of the following points in mind...

Design and structure



- As well as width considerations you should also be conscious of length, keep it short, people don't like scrolling down on a mobile; and to be honest not really on any other platform
- Certainly put a header image in the email but keep images to a minimum, they take up space; increasing length
- CTA' s are vital to emails so to give them more impact in a mobile screen by presenting them it bold text surrounding by white space and/or short bullet points, double spacing is also useful
- Keep the salient information in the email to the top, CTA's especially
- Keep the lines in a plain text version short certainly less than 70 characters
- Also bear in mind that an email designed with flair for mobiles can still look good when forwarded to a desk or laptop, like a digital business card

One size fits all

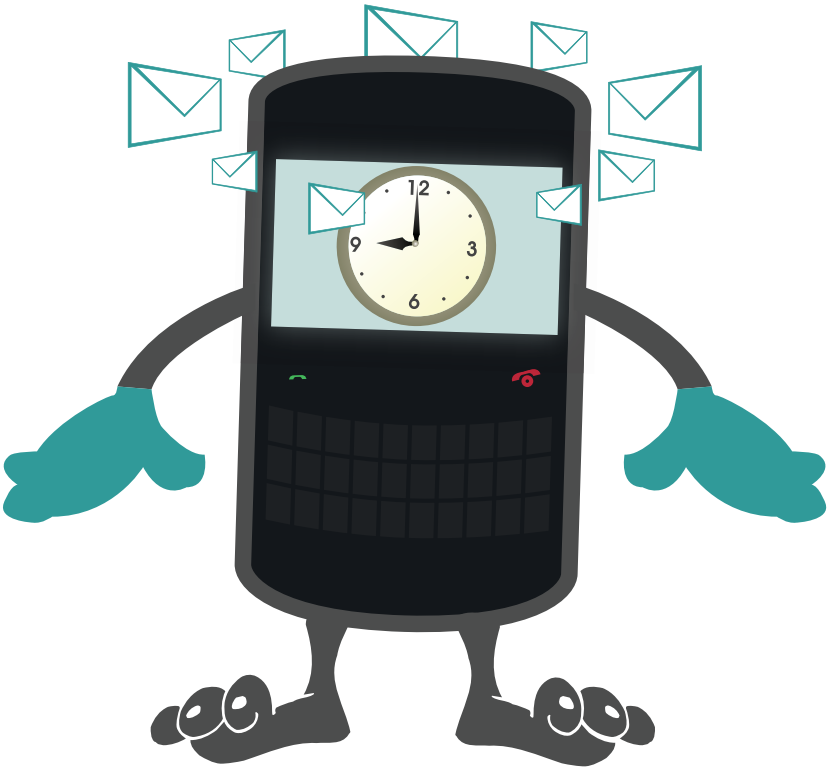
If you don't have the design or staff resources consider a "one size fits all" alternative to a specific mobile design. Many of the disciplines of designing for mobile, brevity, great subject lines, tempting pre-headers apply just as much to other platforms. As I have already said most of the new breed of mobile devices are very good at rendering HTML so without making the viewing experience unpleasant for those reading on a desktop or laptop you can make accommodations.

- Slim down the width, perhaps to 550-600 pixels or even less, some commentators advocate 350-400 pixels but of course you must consider the desktop users
- Think about reducing the length of the email, it is anyway extremely good practise to keep emails short, use the features provided by your ESP to provide additional information via links, to websites, landing pages or documents
- Remember that when using a mobile, probably with a touchscreen, the reader will be using their finger...use big buttons to help them navigate, and remember they will be using finger gestures to do this, make it easy for them...

Mobile broadcasting timing

Desktop open rate tend to build up to a high point on Wednesdays and taper off from there. Mobile opens remain steady throughout the week, be mindful though that research is indicating that mobile email viewing is overtaking that of other platforms. Many regularly triage the inbox via their mobile to help keep it clutter free. Perhaps also, if your audience is B2B and you're sending on the weekend, make sure your email is optimised for mobile.

A common tactic of B2B marketers is to send emails in the early morning to be towards the top of the inbox of the subscriber when they come into work, but this paradigm has changed due to people checking email constantly throughout the day. Using your ESP's reporting by device features you should now be able to assess what times your emails are being viewed and which are the most popular days and adjust broadcasts to suit.



Mobile FAQs and some do's and don'ts



What about tablet devices?

Yes, you absolutely need to think about your email strategy around tablet devices, specifically around the iPad. The iPad has the largest market share of any tablet device and our study revealed a 15% growth in open rates from iPads during a recent Return Path mobile emailing study. If you have a large number of subscribers reading your email on an iPad, make sure that your website is also compatible. If your website is primarily Flash-based, iPad readers won't be able to follow through on your call to actions, causing frustration with subscribers. Check your conversion rates for these subscribers as this may hint towards problems with your website on HTML5-enabled devices.

Can video be embedded into mobile email?

The iPhone and iPad use HTML5, which means that video can be viewed in the default mail viewer of these devices. According to recent surveys by Forrester and the Direct Marketing Association, marketers can realise double and even triple open rates by using video within their emails. It's also possible to code email to display a still image or an animated GIF for email readers that don't support HTML5 video, which includes most other mobile and tablet devices. Be cautious though of embedding video within the email, ensure you test using some type of Inbox Preview, it may be that it may not always be supported. An alternative would be, as an example, a YouTube opening image linked to the YouTube URL.

Do understand your current audience

Providing a rich, compelling mobile experience to your audience requires investment. To determine how much, or how quickly to invest, you need to know what portion of your audience will appreciate and respond to the changes you make. You might even discover they're not ready for mobile at all. Use your ESP's tools to fully assess the extent of your mobile audience and react accordingly.

Don't overlook the value of your audience

This is where in depth analysis of your metrics becomes vital. Again using the tools provided by your ESP not only do you need to assess the size of your mobile audience but it's actual value in terms of ROI. Are they contributing sufficient revenue for you to justify additional expenditure on design, new functions, new lists etc?

Consider your reactions to mobile strategically

Experience teaches us that marketers often rush to adopt a 'new' idea or marketing tool and concentrate too many resources on that at the expense of other tried and tested methodology. The 'Gaderene Swine' rush into Social Media is a case in point. Even though a large percentage of your audience are using smartphone it doesn't mean that they have abandoned their desktops or laptops. Some users I know triage their emails on their phones getting rid of the junk and saving others to view on their other devices later. Chart a middle course and ensure, at least to begin with, that your emails can be read and fully understand on all platforms. Later once the analysis if completed you can move in more specialised deliveries for specific campaigns by identifying where mobile is a clear differentiator.

You should have already identified the aims and goals of any email campaign. Some will be clearly associated and relevant for subscribers likely to be 'on the go'. Daily deals and last minute travel information are good examples. These types of emails are naturals for mobile emails, consider the ongoing implications and plan separate campaigns.

Apply mobile design principles

In a lot of cases, there's no reason to generate both desktop and mobile versions of your emails, as previously described. And, generally, there's no reason to create distinct versions for the various types of smartphones. As you would never create separate emails for different email applications (e.g., Outlook, Gmail, etc.), the main groups of mobile device are very similar in that they render HTML in similar ways.



Review existing practices and test extensively

There is no question that mobile users have differing habits to those of desktop users. Therefore you should look at sending times and establish test routines to determine the best times to maximise open rates. Your ESP should have a tool to enable you to establish 'opens by time'. Use this and list segmentation to test mobile and non mobile users, the more you learn about customer behaviour the more susscesful your broadcast will be.

Use smartphone features to build mobile email lists

Persuading the target audiences to opt in to your emails is a challenge but you can use some of the clever features of smartphones to aid this process. For example you can insert QR codes into printed advertising which can be scanned by smartphone apps then used to generate an email response. Likewise SMS short-codes being responded to also generate an email. Such a request will add the audience member to a mobile list and the email can be sent pre-optimised in mobile format.

In-store signage prompts people who are interested to text their email address. They then receive an email explaining the program benefits. Customers get the information they need without waiting for a salesperson to free up, and the company's marketers convey their message clearly, succinctly and accurately.

Restaurants and other similar types of entertainment outlets can use this successfully by offering a clear CTA to their customer with a suitable inducement, free starter or ticket concessions for example, to opt in by text.

An example

Paper Hat Press, a small US based company that sells personalised children's books cleverly uses ads based in free iPhone and Android apps aimed at mothers. One campaign in just four weeks, generated more than 13,000 emails addresses, quadrupling the size of Paper Hat's existing list.

Adjust layout for a smartphone's smaller screen



I have already touched upon this but here I am thinking specifically if you have established a mobile email list generated from similar tactics as described above. You don't want to make your smartphone subscribers zoom in or scroll to read, or even find, your text. Nor do you want them struggling to get to your landing page because their finger can't hit the right link. The following makes it easier for mobile subscribers and the image on the right illustrates this clearly.

- Use a single column of text -- 350 pixels is often recommended, but some commentators suggest this is too small and go for 400-450
- Both Microsoft and Apple publish recommendations suggesting 16-18 pixels for body text, and 21 or 22 for headlines. You should experiment with this and ensure you are happy with the larger sizes
- Leave enough space around buttons and links for a finger to tap them without hitting the wrong object

If you are sending to an exclusive mobile email list ensure that both landing pages, if you have them, and your mobile optimised website adhere to the same meticulous techniques you should use for the email. There is nothing worse than clicking on a link in an impressive mobile optimised email then being taken to a non optimised landing page.

Mobile does mean Mobile



The probability is that if people open your email on their mobile they will be engaged in other activities, even if it merely travelling or shopping. Your emails should then be simple, clear, easy to read and pack an immediate impact.

- Keep your copy focussed and to the point
- For a mobile audience, pick one idea, one concept, or one offer. This not only limits the amount you have to explain, but also prevents you from obscuring or confusing the message. This is especially important when trying to attract a mobile audience. Only convey what's essential
- Keeping emails short and succinct doesn't just make sense in terms of the context, it's also appropriate for the small screen size
- Work hard to get the right subject lines and 'from' field
- To paraphrase Marshall Macluan let the medium inspire the message. The very nature of our move towards the use of a mobile device as a potential computer in our pockets, and our behaviour once we use such devices, should encourage brevity, speed and quick responses. Your messages must be tailored to suit the times

Conclusions

In this guide i have providided a series of thoughts and ideas about dealing with the need to respond to the increasing use of mobile devices with special emphasis towards email marketers. I have tried to research online and discover what the commentators, experts, other, relevant, email marketing providers and survey companies have to say about the issue.

One of my findings was certainly that as the number of mobile email users rises, so do the number of articles advising email marketers as to how to respond to this, and I am conscious that I should provide sound, common sense advice to readers. In my experience many email marketers rarely have the time to undergo deep and meaningful analysis, they have to react quickly to business imperatives and prefer to have clear guidelines.

However, having said that in the end the marketer in each company will need to make some choices. The 'experts' are split as to which of these choices should be made, whichever view you choose to follow will depend on your company model, your customer base and your rolling campaign programme. Here is the first of those choices.

- Do you treat your actual or potential mobile audience separately or as part of the general audience?

  OR

- Do you believe that viewers will see your email but not delete it to read later on a PC?

Your decision on this will dictate both your design techniques and your overall broadcasting strategy. Emails for mobile look awful on a PC, likewise long complex email designed for the PC are a turn-off seen on mobiles. Your choice, at least to begin with, is whether to follow a hybrid approach. Thus far I can see that very few 'best practises' have yet emerged, making some concessions to mobile email users, but still expect them to view most of your emails on a big screen, being one. Experts are still feeling their way toward the best solutions to recommend for both mobile design and content.

One thing I can be absolutely certain of is that the mobile device revolution is still at an early stage, there's still a lot of change ahead and no-one can be certain where we will be in a few years time. For example will we abandon our laptops and desktops for mobile tablets? Will the new systems on smartphones, could Apple' new voice controlled features be used to demand company information be automatically ported to your device?

How radically will consumer habits change as the use of smartphones increases, as it surely will? Is it possible that email will be superseded by information pulled directly from company websites by the consumer rather than pushed by the email marketer?

Final Suggestions

Now is the time to begin to incorporate a mobile element into your email marketing strategy. Even if at present your numbers of opens via mobile are low start to plan for future direction.

Consider the creation of an online "preference centre" allowing users indicate whether they read emails on a mobile device or a traditional computer, this way you can allow users select different types of email for specific devices. This has the additional advantage of allowing your users to also pull the information they need from you rather than receiving every single email, many of which may be irrelevant.

Alert messages are great for mobile, but newsletters are better for computers, for example so plan individualised, time-sensitive alerts when your customers want to be contacted. For example, a billing reminder one week in advance, relevant and convenient messages could turn your customers into mobile email converts.



Author of this guide, Professor Bairstow is one of the many talented and experienced people who make up the team at Pure360.

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We'll work with you to improve your email marketing and SMS results.

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You can find the team working to improve our customers' email campaigns, down in Brighton, pop in or give us a call on 0844 586 0001 to discuss how we can help you get excellent results from your email & SMS campaigns. Or email us at contact@pure360.co.uk

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