

Why I don't read html e-mails – and why you shouldn't have to either



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It shot out from the page that I was reading like a bolt of lightning. It certainly arrested my thoughts, but possibly for all the wrong reasons. I was reading an article in a recent professional magazine about, of all things, marketing and business development tips for the internet. In this article, the author referred to a poll that she had conducted recently, and gloated over her success in receiving replies from 50 per cent of those she surveyed. The author deduced from the results of her survey 'eight important lessons to take from this survey'. It was the very first 'lesson' that had me seething. Here is the first lesson:

'Depending on your market, at least ninety per cent of your audience has the ability to receive html e-mails (html is the use of colour, formatting and graphics), and the survey show [sic] eight-one per cent prefer it. Our subscription base has only a six per cent plain text distribution. So why e-mail to the lowest common denominator?'

I nearly choked on my breakfast cereal, especially since this purportedly came from a 'marketing and business development speaker'. Let me translate: here is someone in marketing who actually advocates that we should ignore the lowest common denominator in a quest to simply reach the majority. But she goes on, and ties herself in knots justifying her position.

'However, if you are sending your communications to large corporations, or government departments, many do not accept the html e-mails, only plain text. My advice is to call the webmaster and find out their policy before putting a number of their employees on your mailing list.'

'Only people on '95 programs such as Outlook 95 cannot receive html. People on Outlook 97 will have to open the colourful e-mails through Internet Explorer, and everything from 98 on will open straight in the inbox.'

I'll ignore the fact that a 'webmaster' (someone who runs a website) in a large corporation or government department is highly unlikely to have much to say in the way of policy governing incoming e-mail, or have any concern over what passes through the mail server, but I do take issue with her advocacy of this method of communication. It is especially intriguing since she also appears to have a one-eyed view of e-mail software and the user's choice of operating system (her ignorance of how more sophisticated people actually use the internet is breathtaking in

itself), but to suggest that dismissing any percentage of a subscription base is worthwhile is absolutely incredible from someone in marketing.

ALIANet has been built from the ground up to be workable in all of its forms via the lowest uncommon denominator. It isn't that hard, either: many of the earlier browsers and much of the older, dated technology makes the deployment of new and whizzbang tools all too complex or difficult, and mostly irrelevant. We try to accommodate ALL comers, and make the options as attractive for those with 640x480 pixel screens and old rumbling 386's as we do for those with Macintosh Powerbooks and 21" screens. Either way, we build for ALL of our online constituents, and when we hear of those who cannot access a new service, we do what we can to make it work for those with less-than contemporary equipment. Our new website is an example of this: the technology required to view the site is actually less demanding than ever before, and faster and simpler to view. When we send e-mails from ALIA National Office, either through our mail server or our e-list server, we ensure that mail is sent as plain text, so that the lowest common denominator can also read the message — without effort, without fuss.

Where did it all begin?

A journey into the world of the internet standards might be helpful at this point.

In the beginning (it was 13 August 1982, to be exact) there was RFC 822. The 40-something page document was named 'Standard for the format of ARPA Internet text messages'. ARPAnet was the forerunner to what we know as the internet today. Back then (and even today), attempts at codifying the practices of the internet were rolled into 'RFC's', or Request For Comments. RFCs are collaborative works, and are usually built over a period of time, tweaked, adjusted, and otherwise improved upon to become the building blocks of the internet. E-mail messages were defined by RFC 822, and like all other good standards, will continue to do so for a long time to come. This particular RFC has stood the test of time, but from the early days, it became apparent that software developers (and users) could see some opportunities to extend the possibilities of sending mail — sending plain text was simply not enough. So along came MIME, and a further 200 or more RFCs, covering all aspects of mail (including spam). By the way, 'MIME' is Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions, and governs how a mail message can transport other data, such as sounds, video, images,

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documents and even executable programs (which might just carry viruses or trojan horses).

But rather than disappear down an alley and describe the ins and outs of RFCs and MIME and HTML-encoded messages, let's briefly return to earth and try to work out what we are attempting to do in all of this.

'When something can be read without effort, great effort has gone into its writing.' Enrique Jardiel Poncela

Firstly, we wish to communicate, and we wish for people to communicate with us. Secondly, we would like those we communicate with to be able to hear or read what we have to say — without effort. In other words, we have an interest in the state of the recipient, and we want them to hear/read. And what state might they be in?

The author that I have referred to earlier had a good notion of what her readers were up to in her survey: she went on to divulge that fifty-six per cent had a 'fast' connection (I assume broadband, but could be wrong), thirty-seven per cent had a 58K [sic] modem, and that most logged off some time after downloading e-mails. She also made reference to people being afraid of hacking as a reason for going offline. This doesn't surprise me, if so many of her constituents use Outlook of one kind or another — though minimising time spent online will not reduce their exposure to such events. The author also refers to the difficulties of embedded graphics in e-mails, and quotes a study in America that claims that whilst ninety-two per cent of people read the text on news sites (you surely have to wonder about the other eight per cent!), only twenty-two per cent looked at the graphics. In other words, one of the advantages of using html in e-mail is apparently negated, since she questions if we really need to include images.

Why is plain text better?

I can demonstrate a few good reasons for *not* viewing messages with encoded extras, such as HTML.

Plain text is safe, and secure. If the only payload that is delivered is plain text, you are safe from infection, viruses, trojan horses and most other nasties — especially if your mail is set to simply read mail, and nothing more. I have a mail client on my desktop that I use for work which is capable, easy to use, and is no effort. Granted, I am unable to read the many html-encoded messages that come my way, nor am I able to deal with any of the attachments that are often found in spam, but I can read all that I need to read, and I can communicate more than adequately with anyone I need to communicate with. I can send attachments, but invariably find ways of avoiding the hassle of doing so by making the message plain.

Not only do I thus avoid spam, but I avoid the pixel-bot problem: a typical scenario for spammers is to send a message in html format, but with a single pixel image (so tiny you would miss it) that is only found on a certain spammer's website. When you open the message, in all its glory, often the first thing that is loaded is that single pixel image, whilst the rest of the message is drawn. That single pixel image is fast to load, and practically invisible, but it is only found on the spammer's site. So when you open the message, the spammer receives confirmation that your address is active, and thus you remain on their list. Simple, and so easily avoided by not opening html-encoded messages, or allowing them to be read as html.

I also avoid attachments like the plague, unless I have requested them. Previously, I have written about the financial impact that incoming mail has, but I have not directly referred to the impact that the extra payload can have on your computer. Most viruses are generally sent via e-mail, as attachments — and they can be hidden in a number of ways. More-recent Windows software can be set to automatically hide file types (the last few characters of a file name, preceded by a 'dot', such as '.jpg', or '.doc'). By default, the file type information

is hidden. Imagine this scenario: you receive a file via e-mail that claims to be a jpeg-formatted image, purely because its name, 'summer_holidays.jpg', suggest that it is a jpeg-formatted image file. But what if the file was really named 'summer_holidays.jpg.exe'? How do you know that it is not named this way? In other words, the file can be disguised without too much difficulty to show different attributes, and any file terminating with a '.exe' opened on a Windows system runs the risk of contaminating the computer with a virus, or some other malware. In short, attachments can cause grief: even Word or Excel documents with macros recorded within them can cause a virus to spread. There are simply too many ways of creating problems on a computer by sending the wrong type of message.

Of course, Microsoft mail software (and others, too) assumes that by default you would want to dress up your outgoing e-mails, and leaves such settings wide open so that you end up sending html-encoded messages every time. For the sake of your intended audience (including a potential six per cent), I would advise turning this so-called 'feature' off. The world will be a better place for it, I can assure you.

You will win more friends and influence people by straight-talking plain text every time. If you really must send dressed-up mail, check to see if your audience can receive it. I now routinely ditch all html-encoded mail and attachments from anyone that I do not have listed in my address book, as a security precaution. It is also a time-saver: opening other software to view a message is too tedious. Have you ever looked at html-encoded e-mail with images turned off — or have you ever viewed html-encoded messages on a mail client that does not convert the code into anything displayable?

If you have, you would know why I sometimes choke on my breakfast cereal. ■

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