

Best Practices for E-Newsletter Design

The following recommendations will help you work with a designer to create an e-newsletter that is attractive, easy to read, and able to display properly in the widest variety of e-mail programs. In addition to discussing general design guidelines and principles, this document includes recommendations that are specific to e-newsletters from the University of Washington. Most of these guidelines are written with the assumption that you are designing an e-newsletter that includes photos and graphics and, thus, is built with HTML or a similar coding language. **For a step-by-step guide to creating an e-newsletter, [consult the e-newsletter how-to manual](#).**

Note: Since Outlook 2007—the latest version of the most widely used e-mail program—heavily restricts the design options you can use in an e-newsletter, we have included a [special section below](#) about how to optimize your e-newsletter design for Outlook 2007 users.

Establishing a Look and Feel

Here are recommendations for how to make your e-newsletter both visually distinct from and complementary to other communications from your department and from UW in general.

Brand/Graphic Identity

- **Reinforce your unit's unique brand.** If your department/school/college has its own brand elements, such as logo, color scheme, or fonts, use them in your e-newsletter. Even if money was no object, there's no reason to design an entirely different brand for just your e-newsletter if it is meant to represent your department/school/college.
- **Reinforce the University of Washington's brand.** Don't assume readers will know that your e-newsletter also represents the University of Washington. Incorporate some UW branding, such as the logo, into your design. It is important that all of our e-newsletters look like they're coming from the same university. Also, be sure that you spell out "University of Washington" on first mention, rather than using only "UW" or "the UW." After all, we are not the only UW in the U.S. To obtain UW branding elements and guidelines for using them, [visit the University Signature Logo System site](#).
- **Make it visually compatible with its primary "sister" Web site.** E-newsletters by their nature include a lot of links to the Web. Generally, most of those links will go to a specific site. For example, an e-newsletter from the College of Engineering will include a lot of links to the Engineering Web site, so that e-newsletter should have some visual resemblance to its sister Web site.

Making It Easy to Read and Understand

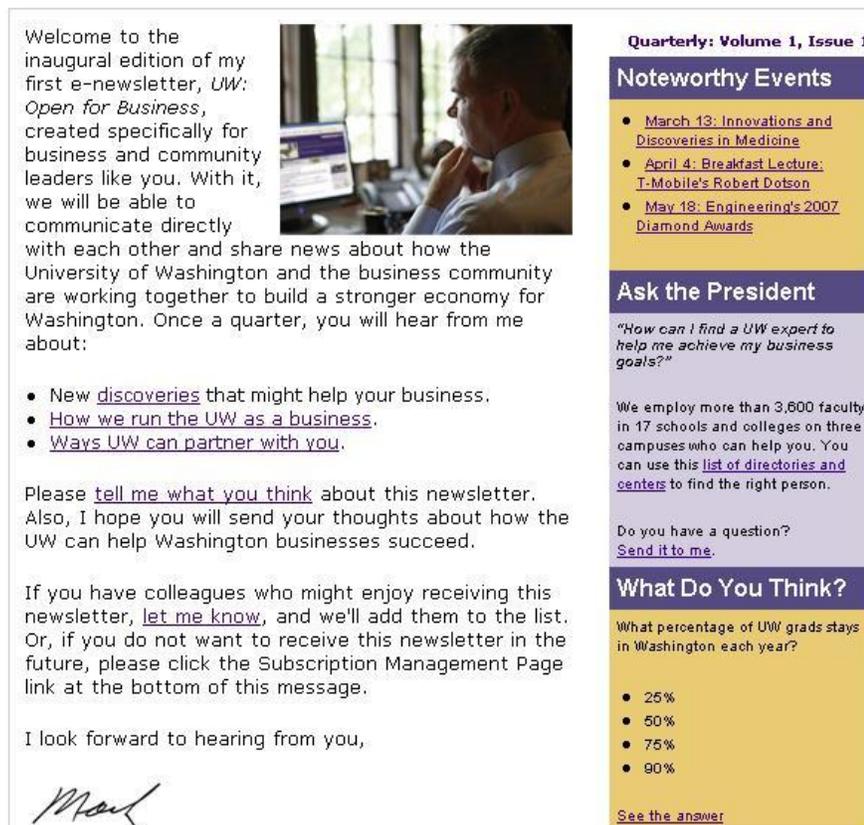
Here are recommendations to ensure that your readers' experience with your e-newsletter is as successful as possible.

Layout

- **Make it visually engaging, but not overwhelming.** Any graphic included in an e-newsletter should serve a purpose and not strictly be eye candy. And

try to limit the number of fonts to two. Some e-mail programs will not display your fonts the same way you intended anyway, so it's best to keep it simple when choosing fonts.

- **Have a consistent layout.** The basic structure should remain the same from issue to issue. Incremental changes should occur only if you've gotten very clear feedback from readers that some aspect of the layout isn't working. Otherwise, changes should be restricted to major redesigns of the newsletter itself or of its sister Web site.
- **Allow for some flexibility in the length of the content.** After all, this is not a print publication that has to fit on a certain paper size.
- **Make it visually balanced.** If a column is narrow, content in that section should be brief, so that the reader doesn't have to contend with reading a long, skinny paragraph. Columns and content sections should be attractively aligned, but still flexible. For instance, it is not critical that columns be the exact same length. Here's an example from Pres. Emmert's e-newsletter.



Welcome to the inaugural edition of my first e-newsletter, *UW: Open for Business*, created specifically for business and community leaders like you. With it, we will be able to communicate directly with each other and share news about how the University of Washington and the business community are working together to build a stronger economy for Washington. Once a quarter, you will hear from me about:

- New [discoveries](#) that might help your business.
- [How we run the UW as a business](#).
- [Ways UW can partner with you](#).

Please [tell me what you think](#) about this newsletter. Also, I hope you will send your thoughts about how the UW can help Washington businesses succeed.

If you have colleagues who might enjoy receiving this newsletter, [let me know](#), and we'll add them to the list. Or, if you do not want to receive this newsletter in the future, please click the Subscription Management Page link at the bottom of this message.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Mark

Quarterly: Volume 1, Issue 1

Noteworthy Events

- [March 13: Innovations and Discoveries in Medicine](#)
- [April 4: Breakfast Lecture: T-Mobile's Robert Dotson](#)
- [May 18: Engineering's 2007 Diamond Awards](#)

Ask the President

"How can I find a UW expert to help me achieve my business goals?"

We employ more than 3,600 faculty in 17 schools and colleges on three campuses who can help you. You can use this [list of directories and centers](#) to find the right person.

Do you have a question?
[Send it to me.](#)

What Do You Think?

What percentage of UW grads stays in Washington each year?

- 25%
- 50%
- 75%
- 90%

[See the answer](#)

- **Make sure it prints out nicely and, ideally, in Portrait orientation.** Even though e-newsletters are meant to be read on a computer screen, many subscribers still like to print them out before they read them. Unfortunately, the e-newsletter will sometimes print out in an unreadable way. Often that's because the layout is too wide and forces the subscriber to reset the printing orientation to Landscape instead of Portrait, which is typically the default print setting. You can help readers avoid this extra step by limiting the width specifications to no more than 600 pixels. This will also help ensure that your e-newsletter appears entirely within the e-mail window and doesn't cause a horizontal scrollbar to appear.

- **Include a footer in your design.** This will enable you to visually define the bottom or end of the e-newsletter. Unlike Web pages, e-newsletters should have a scrolling endpoint. Ideally, the e-newsletter should be no longer than two 8.5"x11" pages when printed. Here's an example of a footer:

(c) 2007 [University of Washington](#) | [Resources for Business & Industry](#) | [Contact Me](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

- **Optimize your design for an 800x600-pixel monitor resolution.** That will help you avoid building an e-newsletter that is too wide and causes readers with low screen resolutions to scroll horizontally to see the right side of your e-newsletter.

Content Support

- **Make each section easy to distinguish and understand.** This can be done through designing standard section labels, including dividing lines/rules or borders, and defining column widths. Here's an example from UVa:

FEATURE



Can Wikipedia be Trusted?

As more students use this popular online encyclopedia for research, the hue and cry in academia gets louder. Find out what the fuss is all about.

Where Am I?



Identify the photo for a chance to win a U.Va. Bookstore gift card! Click for larger view and submission instructions.

ALUMNI PROFILE

Being a Rockette

Learn how Ericka Whitaker (Educ '06) began getting her kicks with this renowned troupe while she was still a student at U.Va.



UNIVERSITY NEWS

U.Va. reaches out to Virginia Tech

Largest gift in University history will create new school

Single sanction on shaky ground?

LIFESTYLE

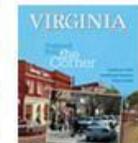
Pour Yourself a Cold One

John Giannopoulos (Col '82) and his family-run Sly Fox brewery are giving Guinness a run for its money.



ETC.

Letter to the Editor: Corner Memory



"The College Inn had a large glass bowl by the cash register that one could deposit a

hoosonline.virginia.edu/TR.asp?ID=M7259418415878966943585465

- **Be clear about what form of communication it is.** Let the reader know that it is an e-newsletter that comes out at predictable intervals (e.g., monthly, weekly) and its overall purpose. Here's an example from Microsoft.

- **Visually reflect the tone or personality of the content** (e.g., personal, strictly business). Here's an example from the University of Virginia:



[Good work](#)

Student researchers celebrate their work and present it to peers and faculty alike.

[Good chemistry](#)

Ian Harrison wants to move a sustainable energy future closer to reality.

[Looking good](#)

Enceladus decorates its fellow moons of Saturn with 'cosmic graffiti.'

[Good catch](#)

Environmental scientist Todd Scanlon nabs prestigious NSF grant.

- **Ensure text is easy to scan** by restricting width of each content section and the number words each section contains.
- **Design a "Forward to a Friend" area that can double as a place to invite new subscribers.**
- **Clearly show readers how they can unsubscribe**, revise their profile (e.g., changing their e-mail address) and subscription preferences, and learn how the sender is protecting their personally identifiable information. Most e-newsletter distribution software automatically inserts information about how to unsubscribe.

For further details on this topic, [read the Best Practices for Developing Effective E-Newsletter Content document](#).

Making It Function Properly

Here are recommendations to ensure that your e-newsletter works properly and renders correctly no matter what e-mail program the reader is using.

Technical Specifications

- **Keep the "weight" of the newsletter under 40K.** That size should allow for a graphically pleasing design that loads easily and doesn't overload the recipient's inbox. The next tip gives you the best way to do this.
- **Images used in your e-newsletter should be published to a live Web site** rather than sending them as attachments. This will help keep the overall size of your e-newsletter low because, technically speaking, the images are never actually in your e-mail inbox. It also allows the e-newsletter to download the images faster and helps prevent them from being blocked by spam filters. In the HTML code, it's best to use a full URL in the image or tag (e.g.,).
- **Minimize the use of special characters** (such as em- and en-dashes, copyright symbols, registered trademark symbols, curly quotes) because those characters do not translate successfully in certain e-mail programs and

- will show up as something other than you intended. For example a curly quote or apostrophe often ends up looking like this Greek character: **æ**.
- **Ensure elegant design degradation.** Though your e-newsletter might look perfectly fine in the e-mail client or Web browser you use, it may fall apart in other browsers or e-mail software. Use your e-mail distribution program to send test copies of your e-newsletter to multiple different e-mail clients so you can help you find and troubleshoot any design conflicts. Oftentimes you can override them by inserting more-restrictive code.
 - **Allow the e-newsletter to be accessible to all readers**, including color-blind or visually impaired readers who use a screen reader that simply reads aloud all the text in the e-newsletter. That's why it's important, for example, to include [alt text](#) in the code that describes graphics and photos (e.g. alt="Photo of President Emmert"). The Web Accessibility Initiative offers some helpful [basic tips](#) as well as more-detailed [guidelines and techniques](#) for accessible design. UW Technology has a site called [Making UW Web sites Accessible to Everyone](#) that offers some tips that apply to e-newsletters as well.
 - **Have links open Web pages in a separate browser window.** That prevents readers who read their e-mail on the Web from being sent out of their e-mail inbox to another Web page and having to use the Back button to return to the e-newsletter. Adding the HTML tag **target="_blank"** to an **<a href>** tag is one way you can ensure that clicked links will open up a separate browser window.

Testing Your Design

Inevitably, there will be an e-mail program that so stubbornly resists your code specifications that you find yourself spending a disproportionate amount of design and testing time troubleshooting that one scenario. In the event that this troubleshooting threatens to cause deadline delays, you should consider how many of your subscribers are likely to be using that particular program. Oftentimes the most troublesome programs are the newest or most obscure and are likely to be used by only a tiny fraction of your readers.

If time is of the essence, make sure your HTML e-newsletter performs successfully in the following, listed in order of popularity among business users*:

- Outlook (versions 2003, 2000, and 2002 total 52.4%; no data on 2007 yet)
- Lotus Notes (8%)
- Outlook Express (5.9%)
- Mac: Entourage (more frequently used in higher education institution than other businesses)
- Handheld devices (such as Blackberries)

Also consider testing in:

- Mozilla Thunderbird (2.7%)
- Yahoo (1.5%)
- Eudora (1.5%)
- Hotmail (.4%)

* *Data Source: E-mail Marketing Benchmark Guide 2007, MarketingSherpa*

Designing a Text-only Version

It is important to create a non-HTML version of your e-newsletter because some e-mail programs don't translate HTML very well (e.g. Web Pine or e-mail programs on

handheld devices). Also, some subscribers prefer text-only files, often because they take less time to download and use less inbox space. Most e-newsletter distribution software can automatically detect whether a recipient's e-mail program accepts HTML or not, so it is not necessary to determine that ahead of time. However, it is good business practice to offer subscribers the option to receive text or HTML on your e-newsletter subscription page.

Even though the text-only format severely limits your design capability, it is important to make it readable and usable. Here are some tips and an example of content from a text-only e-newsletter:

- **You cannot use embedded links** in a text-only e-newsletter. So remember to include the full URL in parentheses or on a separate line. For example, [this is an embedded link](#) and this isn't: www.washington.edu/.
- **Strip out all special characters**, such as curly quotes and em-dashes.
- **Font formatting, such as bold or italics, will not translate.** For example, even though style rules require that book titles be set off by italics, italics won't translate in plain text. So, you should consider using quote marks or title case to set off the text.
- Similarly, **you cannot choose the font that will be displayed** in a text-only e-newsletter. It is most likely to display in something like *Courier*.
- **Use simple characters**, such as *, --, or # to help distinguish special text, like headlines or bulleted lists. It is also acceptable, though not preferred, to use ALL CAPS in text-only e-newsletters as another way to set off text, like section headings.
- While it's a good idea to compose your e-newsletter in Word to ensure that there are no spelling errors, you should **place the final text in a program like Notepad, which gives you the closest approximation of what your text-only e-newsletter will look like in e-mail.** That way you can find and fix any formatting problems ahead of time.

Example:

Here is an example of a section header, headline, and blurb from a text-only e-newsletter:

```
THE INSIDE STORY
*****
+++ Why Did the UW Buy the Safeco Tower? +++
http://www.uwtv.org/programs/displayevent.aspx?rID=10794&fID=2425
```

Last September, we purchased more than half-a-million square feet of office space in the University District for \$130 million. Though this may seem like an enormous outlay, frankly, it would have been fiscally irresponsible not to pursue this purchase -- and the return on our investment and the benefits to local businesses will be swift. We currently lease 1.2 million square feet of space throughout Seattle for staff we simply cannot fit on campus. Owning our own space allows us to move staff closer to the main campus, use the money we save on rent to help pay for the debt service on the property, and open up more campus space for research and teaching. For U District business owners, our presence will be a boon, with UW foot traffic in the area increasing as our people turn even more to "the Ave." for lunch and other purchases.

-- Watch my Office Hours video, filmed in the tower:
<http://www.uwtv.org/programs/displayevent.aspx?rID=10794&fID=2425>

Optimizing Your Design for Outlook 2007

The following are issues specific to Outlook 2007 (and, in some cases, other e-mail programs) that you should consider when designing your e-newsletter:

Issue: Image blocking. For security reasons, Outlook 2007 will automatically block images in HTML newsletters unless the user tells it not to.

Solution: Outlook 2007 provides instructions for how to make images visible. However, for those readers who elect not to download the images, you should make your content compelling enough to attract their interest even without eye candy alongside it.

Issue: No support for background images, such as gradients or drop shadows.

Solution: You can still use background images. Just make sure the e-newsletter still looks good even if those images aren't showing. Also since Outlook 2007 **does** support background colors, you could use those as alternative design option.

Issue: [Cascading style sheets](#) cannot be used to control layout or positioning of design elements.

Solution: Use standard HTML tables instead.

Issue: No support for forms. If you use forms to embed a survey, interactive poll, or search box in your e-newsletter, it will not work or render correctly in Outlook 2007

Solution: If you want to provide readers with an interactive experience, like voting in a poll, provide a link to a Web site, where you can use forms and be assured that they will work.

Issue: Rich media, such as Flash, and animated .gifs won't work.

Solution: Don't use them in your e-newsletter. Send readers to a Web site instead, where you can include whatever format of video or animation you want.

Important Note: Even if you follow these guidelines, you should also test your e-newsletter in Outlook 2007. You can do this by locating a computer that has Outlook 2007 installed (most IT departments will have one) or [download Microsoft's free HTML/CSS Validator testing tool](#) for Outlook 2007.