The Savvy Marketer's Guide to

# Modern
# email design

QU
AR
RY

# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Last year, Responsive Web Design (RWD) started hitting the radars of modern marketers. This game-changing technique enables websites to dynamically adapt layout, content and even functionality as screen sizes get smaller or bigger, all from one code base and one URL.

To help marketers better understand this technique, we released *The Savvy Marketer's Guide to Responsive Web Design* in June 2012. This 26-page Guide dives deep into the why, what and how of RWD. Since then, Responsive Web Design has become a white-hot topic. (Just search for #RWD or #ResponsiveDesign on Twitter and see the conversation yourself.) And for good reason. Executed well, RWD can create truly brand-building experiences.

**Here's more good news: responsive design does not need to be limited to just your websites or landing pages. The same responsive design techniques can help make your emails look great and deliver a consistent brand experience on any sized screen too.**

That's why we've created a new BrandErgonomics® publication: *The Savvy Marketer's Guide to Modern Email Design*.

In this Guide, you'll learn:

- The 5 reasons why mobile email really matters
- Your new choices: scalable, flexible or responsive
- How 3 savvy marketers have risen to the mobile email challenge
- The 5 principles for modern email engagement
- The key terms and techniques you'll need to understand to get the conversation started

This Guide was written by Richard Hill and Frances Ranger, with important contributions and expertise from visual design, digital development and marketing automation teams at Quarry.

We would love to hear your feedback about this Guide, and we'd welcome the opportunity to discuss your email marketing needs or the broader challenges of building your brand using the philosophy of BrandErgonomics® in today's buyer-centric universe.

**Please contact us at responsive@quarry.com and follow us on Twitter @Quarry.**

Thank you!

PS: We hope you agree there are lots of great tweetable ideas in this Guide. Click the Twitter icon to share any of them with your network. Go ahead, try it now if you'd like.

---

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**

# CONTENTS

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**

Today, buyers consider their mobile devices and their email accounts as inseparable. So why aren't marketers responding with a better mobile email experience? 🐦

It's not that they aren't aware. In fact, marketers recently ranked the proliferation of mobile devices as the top issue affecting email campaign success in 2013.[1]

Modern marketers understand the need to send emails that consistently look great on any size screen. That's not the challenge. The real challenge is working out *how* to get it done.

Quarry Integrated Communications
www.quarry.com
responsive@quarry.com

QU
AR
RY

# WIIFMB? (WHAT'S IN IT FOR MY BUSINESS?)

We'll get into the *what* and *how* of modern email design shortly but, first, let's consider the *why*. We believe it's critical that brands start to invest in ways to deliver better email experiences for mobile viewers for 5 key reasons:

### 1. Attain significant return on investment.

Some say email is doomed. We know that's not true. And so do your buyers. Consider this. A new study[2] from ExactTarget set out to identify the ways in which customers and marketers disconnect in terms of channel preference and behavior. The number one area where buyers felt their favorite companies should invest more of their time and resources? You guessed it: email.
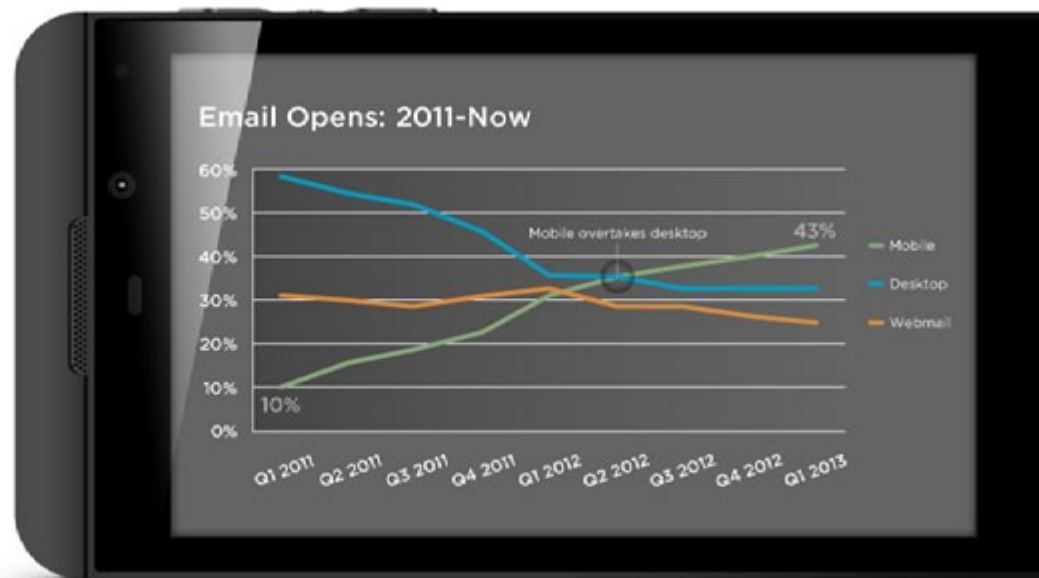
Email remains one of the most reliable, robust and cost-effective ways to connect with customers and prospects. In fact the Direct Marketing Association says that every dollar marketers spend on email marketing returns $40.56 to them in revenue.[3] That's not bad ROI in anyone's books!

### 2. Be where your buyers are.

Mobile devices and email go, well, hand in hand. Buyers increasingly prefer using their mobile devices to read and respond to emails. Here are some insights from Litmus into changing buyer behavior that you need to know:

- Mobile devices now account for 43% of all email opens (as of March 2013). That's up 330% since March 2011 and 38% in the last 12 months alone.[4]
- A watershed moment occurred in 2012, when for the first time on record, more emails were opened on mobile devices than desktop or webmail clients.[4]

> **" The data is clear: mobile opens have increased 330% in the last two years, and almost half of all emails are now opened on a mobile device. Marketers must adapt their planning and design process to account for the challenges and opportunities of smaller screens. "**
> (Justine Jordan, Litmus)



Desktop, Webmail & Mobile
Email Opens, Q1 2011–Q1 2013[4]
(Source: Litmus)

### 3. Make the most of your one shot.

We don't need to tell you about the importance of making a great first impression. But it's even more important than you may realize when it comes to email. Here's why. You may think people use their mobile devices to skim and bookmark emails for later reading on their desktop. You'd be wrong. Instead, 97% of all email interactions (opens, clicks etc.) happen on the first viewing device.[5] 🐦

So if email is a one-shot deal and more emails are being opened on an enormous range of devices – from desktops to laptops, tablets to smartphones – it's now critical that your emails are smart enough to render consistently great experiences on all sizes of screens and different types of devices.

> **❝ If you're not optimizing your email for mobile delivery, there's a good chance that prospects will associate your brand with lousy looking, badly formatted content.[9] ❞**
> (Matthew McKenzie, DemandGen Report)

### 4. Stand out from your competition.

Consuming email content on mobile devices is a trend that's not going away, but marketers have been slow to respond. According to Lyris, only 14% of marketers even track what mobile devices are being used to open their emails[6] 🐦 – let alone render versions that have been optimized for mobile. On the other hand, Experian reports that 22% of marketers are planning to optimize their emails for mobile viewers in the next year.[7]

Hang on, did you read that? That stat suggests that fewer than one in four marketers plan on doing anything differently to deliver better mobile email experiences over the next 12 months. Wow. If you're a savvy marketer – and we know you are – now's a great time to take the lead and leave your competitors in the dust.

### 5. Build your brand rather than damage it.

Many marketers today are delivering an experience in mobile environments that do not match buyers' increasingly high expectations. The consequences can be disastrous. According to e-Dialog, after receiving an email on a mobile device not optimized for mobile viewing, 63% of Americans delete the email immediately.[8] 🐦

Instead, delight your buyers, build greater equity into your brand and drive higher email engagement rates by delivering the right user experience for the right device and screen size at the right time. There's a strong chance your competitors aren't doing this yet, so use the techniques in *The Savvy Marketer's Guide to Modern Email Design* to your strategic advantage.

**To get there, let's take a deeper look into the what and how of Modern Email Design.**

QU
AR
RY

# THREE DESIGN APPROACHES: SCALABLE, FLEXIBLE OR RESPONSIVE

**Did you know there are over 6,500+ internet-capable mobile device models, each with varying screen sizes, hardware capabilities and email clients that buyers could be using to view your emails?**

It's impractical (all right, it's impossible) to design unique versions of your email for each device and its specific screen size. The challenge is finding ways to create and deliver consistent email experiences across the full range of screen sizes your buyers may use today, and into the future, without breaking the budget.

There are three new options – each with their own pros and cons – that can ensure your emails either 'scale,' 'flex' or 'respond' to deliver the right experience for the right screen size. 🐦
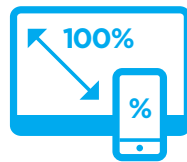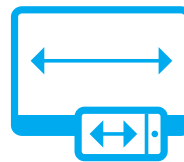
### SCALABLE

**One layout that scales up and down: proportionate fit**

Exactly the same layout for every screen size – email just shrinks (or grows) in proportion to the original design to fill the screen it's being viewed on.

Good impact ★

### FLEXIBLE

**One layout with flexible content: optimized fit**

Same basic layout for every screen size – however, key elements (namely images and fonts) resize and wrap to optimize the experience for defined screen size ranges.

Better impact ★★

### RESPONSIVE

**Unique layouts for defined situations: custom fit**

Different layouts for different screen size ranges. Uses fluid images, copy wrapping, column stacking and dynamic content rules to deliver a highly custom-fitted experience.

Best impact ★★★

Selecting the best approach for you will involve careful consideration of your audience (What are their expectations? What range of devices are they typically using?), your email content (How adaptable is it to smaller screens?) and your resources (Do you have access to skilled email coders or can you resource in those skills from elsewhere?).

Let's explore each of the three options in more detail.

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**
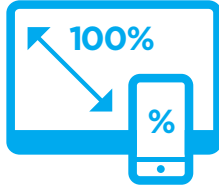
# SCALABLE EMAIL LAYOUT

**Scalable emails feature one layout that proportionately scales to fill any screen size**

**What is a "scalable email"?**
A scalable email renders exactly the same layout for every screen size – it simply grows or shrinks to exactly fill the screen it's being viewed on, all in proportion to the original full-size design.

**How do they work?**
To create a scalable email, use "EM" values as font size and line height for type to achieve copy scaling (as opposed to "PX" or pixel values). This approach will even compensate for font size settings in device system preferences (e.g., large, medium etc.).

**When do they work?**
When you don't have a lot of time, skills or budget but you want to make an effort, the scalable approach may be the way to go.

**When don't they work?**
This approach can yield mixed results when dealing with large amounts of content because emails can become unreadable when scaled down for smaller screen sizes. Ensure that your email designs stay usable even on smaller screen sizes.

**Bottom line:** Scalable emails are a good approach to get you in the game.

Quarry Integrated Communications
www.quarry.com
responsive@quarry.com

QUARRY
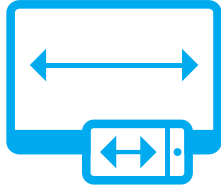
# FLEXIBLE EMAIL LAYOUT

**Flexible emails feature one layout containing fluid content that adjusts to deliver an optimized experience across screen size ranges**

### What is a "flexible email"?
A flexible email retains the same basic layout for every screen size, with key elements (namely images and fonts) resizing and wrapping to optimize the experience for defined screen size ranges.

### How do they work?
This approach uses relatively simple techniques, including *fluid images* (images that scale up or down proportionately) and *copy wrapping* (text automatically wraps and reflows onto next line so users never need to scroll horizontally. Instead, the email just gets longer). It relies on using a simple CSS rule (max-width: desktop px – 1px) to enable alternate styling to kick in below or above defined breakpoints in screen size ranges.

### When do they work?
When you have a simple layout (more copy, fewer images) that fits well in one column; when you have access to the skills to make it happen; or when you want to make a noticeable impact on buyer experience but don't have the resources to go all the way, consider flexible layout.

### When don't they work?
This approach can break at the extremes. For example, content can become very crunched up on tiny screens or, on the flipside, it can be too stretched out to be readable on very large screens, such as internet-enabled TVs or large monitors. To overcome these challenges, don't use an entirely fluid-width approach. Instead, you can use a blended approach by setting minimum and maximum layout widths. That way you won't get emails that are ridiculously narrow (and long) or wide (and short).

**Bottom line:** It will take you a little more effort to get to this point, but the incremental experience delivered for mobile viewers will be worth it.

# RESPONSIVE EMAIL LAYOUT

Responsive emails are smart enough to custom fit the experience they deliver for different screen conditions

### What is a "responsive email"?

A responsive email is the "smartest" of the three design approaches. That's because it's actually capable of providing unique layouts for defined screen size ranges and other conditions. The result is an entirely custom-fit email experience, just right for the device (and person!) viewing it.

### How do they work?

Media queries, a relatively new enhancement of CSS3, are the real secret sauce behind making emails responsive. They are the magic bits of code – conditional "if this, then that" statements – that allow your email to learn useful information about each visitor's device so that on load, it can choose to render different experiences (including different layouts, fonts, images, columns) to custom fit the user experience appropriately. Media queries are not just about widths and heights. They also allow you to design for screen orientation, pixel densities and more. Basically, media queries allow you to match the right email experience with the right screen situation, all from a single code base. You'll know you're looking at a media query in your email code if it starts with *@media* followed by an expression.

### When do they work?

When your buyers or your brand demand that you deliver an exceptional mobile email experience or when you're dealing with greater content complexity (e.g., a newsletter) that needs more customization for smaller or larger screens, you should commit to a responsive email.

### When don't they work?

Because they are more complex and conditional in nature, responsive emails can take significantly more effort to build and Quality Assurance (QA) test. If you don't currently have access to the right skills and resources to pull it off, be ready for a steep learning curve. Also know that, while well supported, *media queries are not universally supported* by all email clients at this time.

**Bottom line:** You may need some experienced email designers and developers to pull this off, but the results will be mind-blowing for your buyers.

### Support for @media

While support for CSS media queries (@media) is increasing, it's important to note that it still vastly varies across email clients. Most of your CSS rendering troubles will come from Outlook 2007–2010, Lotus Notes and Webmail (e.g., Yahoo!, Gmail and Hotmail) because they do not recognize embedded CSS rules. Email clients that do broadly support media queries include: iOS (for Apple devices), OS7+ (for BlackBerry devices) and Android 2.2+.

---

Quarry Integrated Communications
www.quarry.com
responsive@quarry.com

QUARRY

# RESPONSIVE EMAIL TECHNIQUES

Like their flexible cousin, responsive emails use *fluid images* and *copy wrapping* techniques to help optimize the experience for different screen sizes.

However, responsive emails go further by layering on more advanced techniques, including *column stacking* (the ability to consolidate multiple columns into one at certain breakpoints), and *content hiding or substitution* (the ability to display, hide or swap images and copy as desired).

A

E

B

F

CTA

C

D

A

B

D

CTA 1

C

CTA 2

E
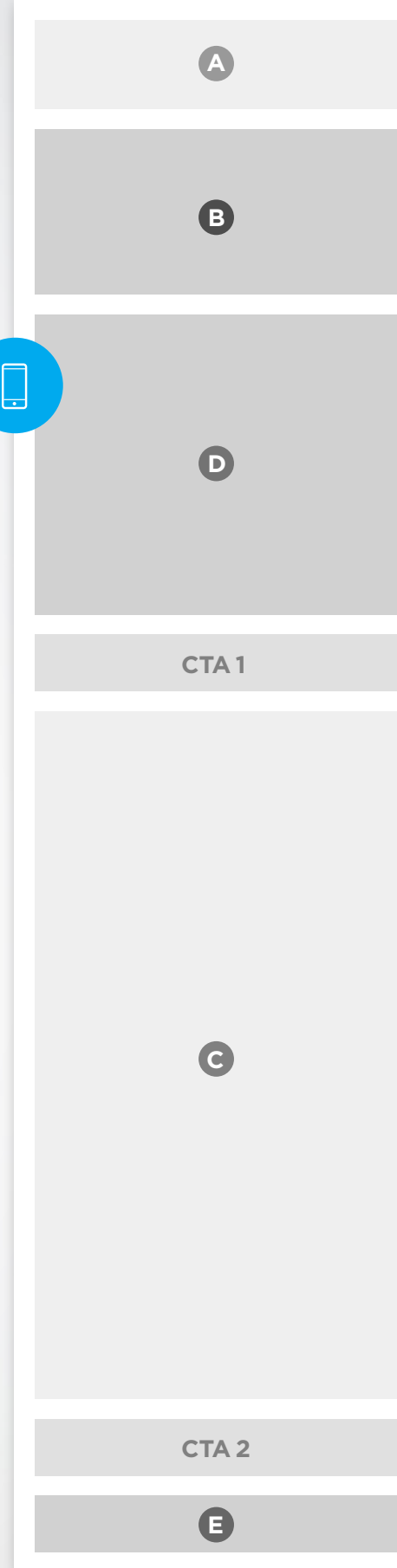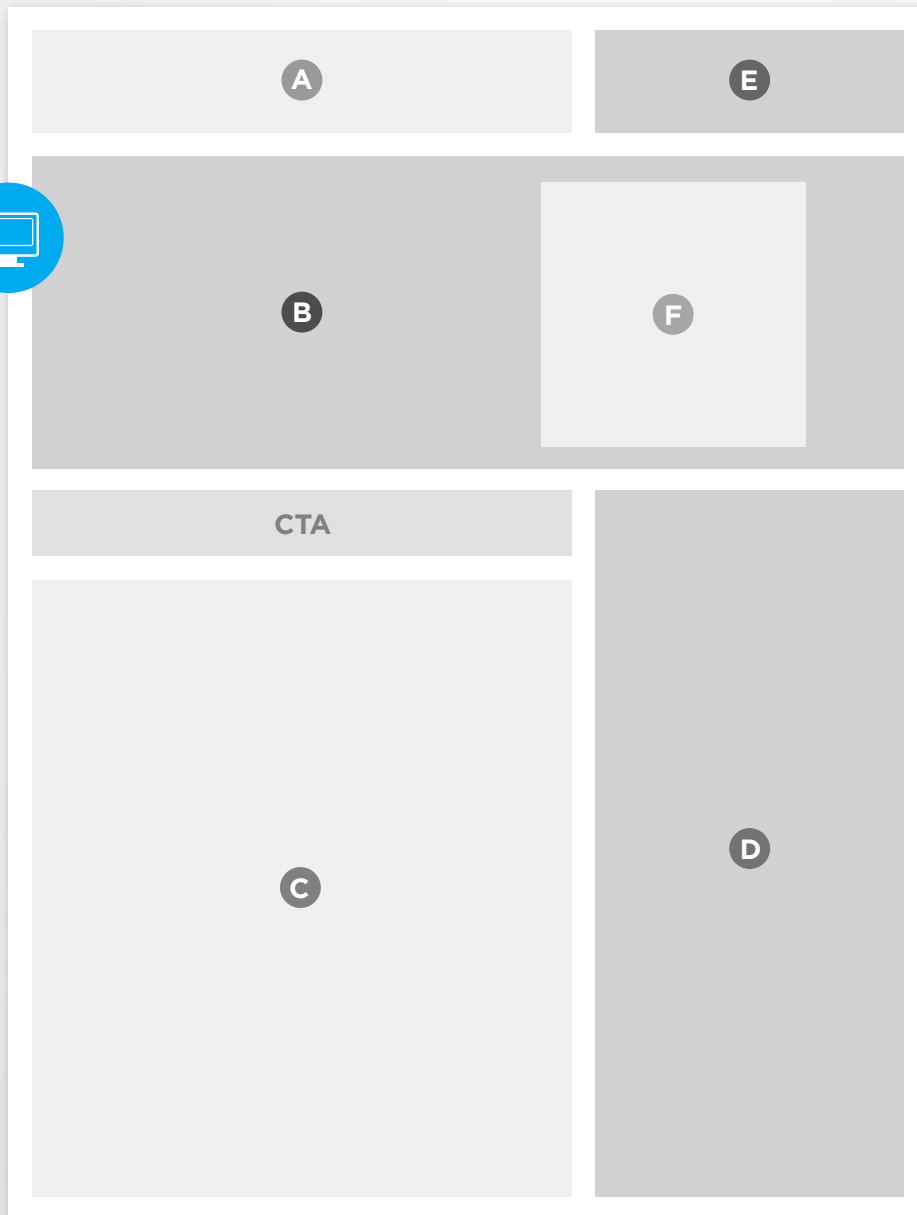
**This responsive email from NASDAQ OMX is smart enough to be able to deliver different experiences for different sized screens.** Notice how it switches layout from two columns to one for smaller screens.

This email is also capable of hiding or relocating certain content elements (like the social icons and hero graphic), helping focus mobile viewers on what's most important when screen real estate gets tight. Content hiding can also be used in reverse to reveal content when appropriate – like the extra call to action button at the bottom of the smartphone version.

Quarry Integrated Communications
www.quarry.com
responsive@quarry.com

QU
AR
RY

**Syngenta Canada, a world-leading agribusiness, knows that to engage with today's increasingly mobile farmer, their emails need to look great on all sized screens. That's why they have been an early adopter of responsive emails design techniques.**

Using media queries, this email is smart enough to be able to shift from a two column for desktops to a one column for smaller screens. Talk about responsive!





Syngenta Canada also uses a simple technique to wrap copy, which avoids the need for viewers to scroll horizontally to read the email content.

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**

**This simple, clean one-column email from eBay was the perfect candidate for a flexible layout. Notice how the images are fluid, scaling up or down proportionately to perfectly fit the screen size of the device viewing it. The text also wraps and reflows onto the next line, so users never need to scroll horizontally.**

Pre-headers can help you make great first impressions. Notice how someone can take action within the first few seconds of engaging with this email.
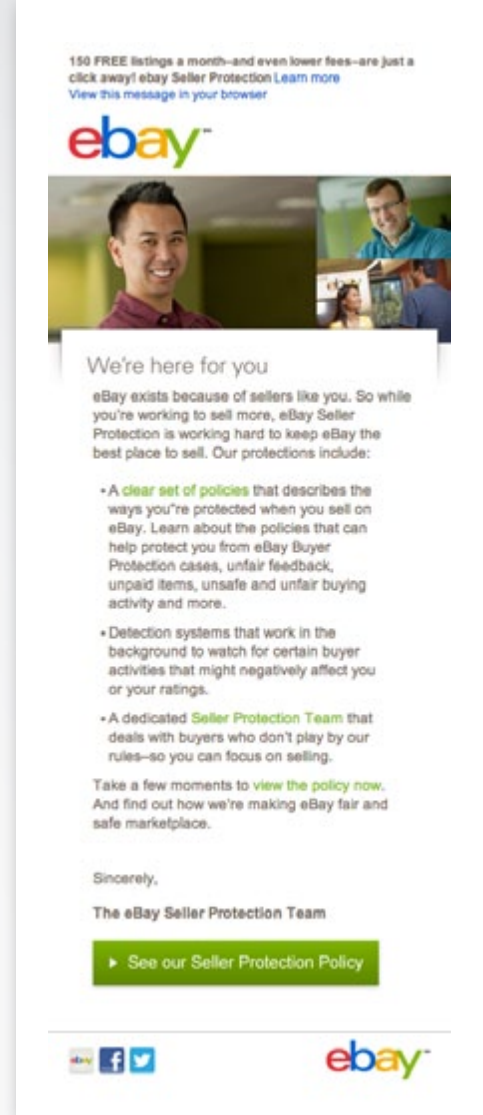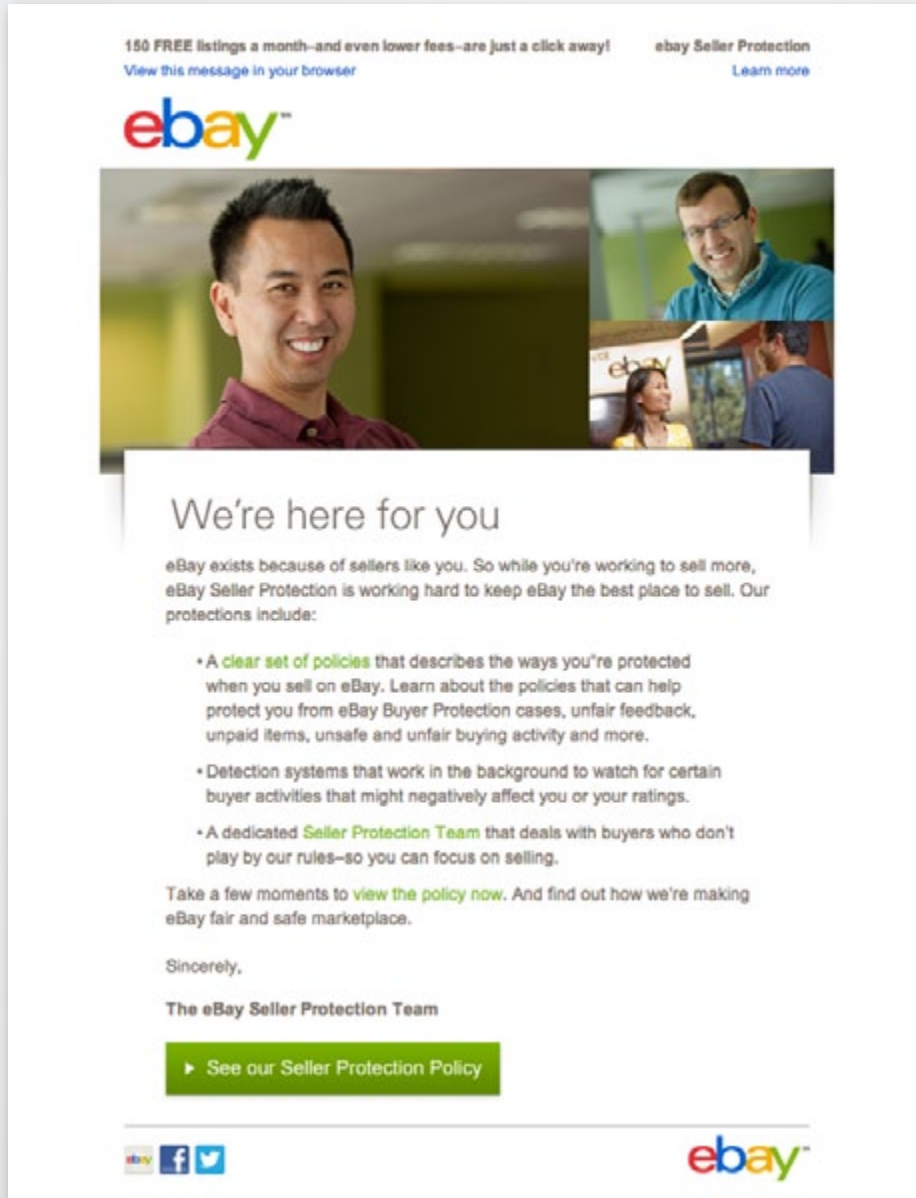


This email's large, tap-friendly call to action button makes sure viewers know exactly what they need to do next.

# FIVE EXPERIENCE DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR MODERN EMAIL

**The widespread adoption of mobile devices brings with it new challenges for email designers. To create modern email experiences that work across all sized screens, consider these five design principles:**

## 1. Design for first impressions. ✈

As we mentioned earlier, with email, you won't get a second chance at making a first impression. Here are some tips to maximize your initial impact:

- To start with, convince people to open the email with a well-crafted subject line that keeps important content within the first 35–45 characters (which are the subject line character count limits for the iPhone and BlackBerry Z10 respectively).
- Consider including pre-headers (either visible or hidden) with limits of around 85–90 characters to take control over the preview message that appears in the inbox.
- Consider setting a minimum font size of 13 or 14 for improved readability.

Next, as many email clients block images by default, design your emails in a way that ensures they deliver a great experience even when images are turned off.

- Consider designing with an appropriate balance between images and text, use live text for headlines (that is, avoid embedding headline copy in an image) and use ALT text in images (or even stylized ALT text if you want to get fancy).
- Build your buttons from pure HTML, not images (an approach called the "bullet-proof button") to ensure your calls to action render even when images are turned off.
- Build design elements – such as highlights, shadows, gradients and rounded corners – with pure HTML to enable them to be progressively enhanced across various email clients.

## 2. Design for the finger. ✈

A mouse allows viewers to navigate desktop emails with precision, but touch-screen mobile devices don't have a mouse (duh). The finger is the new mouse, and it's not as accurate. To account for this change, designers should:

- Ensure calls to actions are large – a minimum of 44 by 44 pixels.
- Add padding around buttons and links that are close together so that viewers don't hit the wrong item.
- Eliminate the need for horizontal scrolling and pinching by building emails that either 'scale,' 'flex' or 'respond' to deliver the right experience for the right screen size.

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**

### 3. Design to focus attention. 🐦

Your goal, no matter what size screen readers are using, should be to waste no time in letting viewers know why they're getting your email and what they're meant to do next. Arguably, this goal becomes even more important on smaller screen sizes, where real estate is rare and viewers are more than likely on the go. To get there:

- Try to limit yourself (we know, this is hard!) to asking readers to do just one thing as a result of receiving your email, and include that singular call to action near the top and to the left so viewers don't have to scroll down or over to see it. (Hint: it's great to repeat a singular call to action in the same email – just don't have several different competing calls to action throughout your email.)
- Don't overwhelm readers with too much information, and be mindful of the order of content. Draw attention to the important things first, scale secondary content appropriately and consider new techniques that can hide less important content elements in smaller screen environments.

### 4. Design for the whole mobile journey. 🐦

The goal of most emails is to drive traffic somewhere. If you take the time to build a responsive email that looks great in both mobile and desktop environments, but your "somewhere" destination, be it your website, landing page or form, is not optimized for mobile viewers, then your investment will have been for naught. (Thankfully, there's Responsive Web Design for that!) When you widen your perspective to include the whole journey, you may reconsider the balance of your content between email and landing pages. By designing for the whole journey – something few marketers are doing right now – you open up new opportunities to truly delight and meaningfully engage with your buyers.

### 5. Design for progress, not perfection. 🐦

It will be impossible to create an email that looks 100% great across every email client and every device out there – yeah, that's a bit of a bummer. Trust us, we're always trying. But with some smart planning and smart coding, you can get very close. Learn to live with a small margin of error. Strive for progress, not perfection.

**If you haven't already, check out _The Savvy Marketer's Guide to Responsive Web Design_ to see how you can ensure your websites and landing pages are also optimized for mobile devices.**

responsivewebdesign.quarry.com

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**

# CONCLUSION

Modern email design does more than simply help you to avoid damaging your brand. It allows you to deliver experiences that are aligned with how your buyers and prospects want to engage – the core principle behind the practice of BrandErgonomics®.

With three new modern email options, each with differing levels of complexity and resources required, there really is no excuse left for modern marketers who are lagging behind in delivering on their buyers' mobile preferences.

Starting now, you can ensure your emails either 'scale,' 'flex' or 'respond' to deliver the right experience for the right screen size. 🐦

Your buyers – and your brand – will thank you.

**"** The message is clear: Marketers need to begin preparing (and designing) email and other content with mobile devices – and mobile users' needs and preferences – in mind.[10] **"**
(Matthew Papertsian, SiriusDecisions)

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**

QU
AR
RY

# APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF MYSTERIOUS TERMS

**Breakpoints:** In responsive design, the term "breakpoints" describes the exact moments along a spectrum of pixel width ranges whereby one style (layout) should give way to another.

**Cascading Stylesheets:** Cascading Stylesheets (or CSS) are what developers everywhere use to create, organize and encode sets of rules that define basic email and website layouts. The recent release of CSS3 has brought with it some enhancements to certain modules, including media queries (see below). It's worth noting that support for even simple CSS (and media queries) varies considerably between different email clients, and even different versions of the same client.

**Column stacking:** A technique that allows for emails to consolidate multiple columns (typically two) into fewer columns (typically one) at defined breakpoints.

**Content hiding or substitution:** A responsive technique that allows for emails to display, hide or swap images/copy as desired to improve the viewing experience in defined situations. This technique is achieved using a media query.

**Copy wrapping:** Text that's been coded to automatically wrap and reflow onto the next line so users never have to scroll horizontally.

**Fluid images:** Images that have been coded to scale up or down proportionately.

**Flexible email layout:** An email that retains the same basic layout for every screen size, with key elements (namely images and fonts) resizing and wrapping to optimize the experience for defined screen size ranges.

**Media queries:** Conditional "if this, then that" code statements that allow an email to learn useful information about each visitor's device so that on load, it can choose to render different experiences (including different layouts, fonts, images, columns) to custom fit the user experience appropriately. They are the key mechanism that enables an email to be "responsive." You'll know you're looking at a media query in your email code if it starts with @media followed by an expression.

**Responsive email layout:** An email that is capable of providing unique layouts for defined screen size ranges and other conditions.

**Scalable email layout:** An email that features one layout that proportionately scales to fill any screen size.

# REFERENCES

[1] eMarketer: http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Marketers-Push-Take-Email-Mobile/1009709

[2] ExactTarget: http://www.marketingcharts.com/wp/direct/compared-to-marketers-online-consumers-want-more-email-less-content-26356/

[3] Direct Marketing Association (as reported by Direct Marketing News): http://www.dmnews.com/marketers-lag-customers-mobile-email-adoption/article/273880/

[4] Litmus: http://www.slideshare.net/LitmusApp/mobile-email-why-what-how

[5] Litmus: http://litmus.com/blog/saving-email-for-later-opens-across-devices-environments

[6] Lyris: http://www.lyrislabs.com/media/pdf/lyris-guide/2012_Lyris_Digital_Optimizer_Report_Actionable_Insights_for_Delivering_Customer_Value_US.pdf

[7] Experian: http://www.experian.com/assets/cheetahmail/white-papers/acquisition-and-engagement-tactics.pdf

[8] eDialog: http://visual.ly/globe-trotting-e-dialog

[9] DemandGen Report: http://demandgenreport.tumblr.com/post/40857851253/email-and-mobile-the-glass-is-still-half-empty

[10] SiriusDecisions: http://www.siriusdecisions.com/blog/mobile-friendly-content-no-longer-just-a-nice-to-have/

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**

# ABOUT QUARRY

Quarry is a buyer experience agency with a 40-year history of converting branding into buying for B2B marketers. Our focus on the buyer's perspective enables us to design and deliver experiences that are aligned with how customers want to engage. This philosophy – which we call BrandErgonomics® – spans the traditional disciplines of effective marketing and communications as well as all newer forms of engagement, such as mobile and social media.

Quarry offers extensive experience in buyer insight, brand strategy, demand generation, marketing automation (Eloqua® Level 1 certified partner), user experience design, buyer and stakeholder communications and sales enablement.

Having helped our clients deliver resonant buyer experiences for four decades, we've seen a lot of trends come and go. Mobile is decidedly not a trend; it's a new way of life. And it's a new reality that marketers have to embrace. Modern Email Design is just one of the pathways that can help you build your brand through a thoughtfully designed *mobile* buyer experience.

Quarry Integrated Communications
www.quarry.com
responsive@quarry.com

**QU AR RY**

**THE SAVVY MARKETER'S GUIDE TO MODERN EMAIL DESIGN**