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How to Create Effective HTML E-mail Signatures
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When done right, law firm e-mail signatures can be time savers and excellent branding tools. What differentiates poor signatures from great ones is a split-second, mental judgment that the e-mail recipient makes categorizing your message as professional or unprofessional.

It is common practice in law firms to use detailed email signatures. These signatures can be both time-savers and excellent branding tools when done right. Having worked as a developer of email signatures for the past eleven years, I've seen the best and the worst, and everything in between. In this article I will share my professional experience as a means of helping you to position your firm on the good end of that spectrum.

What differentiates poor signatures from great ones? Above all, it's the split-second judgment that the message recipient makes mentally between the terms “professional” and “unprofessional”. Signatures that elicit a response of “unprofessional” may have the following characteristics:

- a seemingly random mixture of font styles and colors
- hyperlinks that look as if they should work but don't
- graphics that are disproportionately large, blurry or pixilated
- inclusion of smiley faces or other emoticons
- misalignment of text
- stacked, and overly tall, vertical orientation

Additionally, lack of signature standardization within a firm – even if the signatures are well done – sends the message that consistent branding is either not important or not controllable.

Clearly the message created by unprofessional email signatures is detrimental. No signature at all is preferable to a bad one.

Conversely, great email signatures will brand the firm, the sender, and the message itself as professional at first glance. Characteristics of a great email signature include:

- visual simplicity
- key contact information presented in an easy to assimilate fashion
- logo displayed as a sharp graphic and sized proportionately to the overall signature
- functional hyperlinks
- font styles, sizes, and colors that integrate well with each other and the overall signature layout
- an effective, but understated, marketing slant – maybe a tagline and two or three social networking links

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Finally, a great signature will reflect a technical understanding of the tradeoffs and programming techniques necessary to achieve a best case scenario as outgoing email is sent to a multitude of email programs and devices.

> Note: It is important to be clear – a signature that includes graphical branding (logo) will not always be displayed graphically as you would like it to be. This is primarily due to "image blocking" and the receipt of email on smartphones. I suggest that you don't get hung up over this obstacle. There is no way around it. Skipping the graphical branding is an option, though I think a poor one. By skipping the graphical branding you forgo a huge number of opportunities to fully brand your emails in a rich and effective way. You do this to cater to email recipients who do not have their email configured to properly display HTML email. It is critical to recognize that the blocked image in your email signature will not appear to these people as if something is broken – it will appear to them as normal – they receive a constant stream of emails every day containing one or more blocked images.

There are numerous approaches to creating email signatures – I will explain the one that I've used with great success with thousands of users and millions of email messages. Essentially there are four steps in the process:

1. Create a graphic that encompasses the entire signature – the logo, all of the text, the visual prompts for any hyperlinks, separator lines, etc.
2. Post this graphic to a server.
3. Create the HTML programming code that displays this graphic properly and activates the various hyperlinks.
4. Install the HTML code correctly into the sender's email program so that this signature is correctly applied to outgoing email messages.

I will address each of these individually.

Graphics

Typically a horizontal orientation is preferable to a vertical orientation – a horizontal orientation increases the likelihood of the entire signature being seen (vs. having the bottom cut off by the bottom of the screen), especially when email messages are read in the preview pane. Keeping the overall width less that 675 pixels is generally a good idea as well – an overly wide graphic can cause horizontal scroll bars to appear, and no one wants to have to scroll left and right to read an email message. A typical size might be 500 pixels wide by 130 pixels high. That's a sleek size that generally provides space for a logo and all of the other key contact information and hyperlink prompts. Since the overall layout needs to key off of the logo, beginning with a logo of the correct size is always a good way to commence your design.

Font choice can be difficult at times as you will generally find yourself working with some very small sizes. Favorites for me are Arial, Calibri, Tahoma, Trajan Pro, and Verdana. Microsoft San Serif, at a size of 7 pixels, works well for disclosures & confidentiality statements.

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In terms of file type, .GIF is best when its 256 color limitation does not limit the graphic's appearance. I stay away from .JPEG format as it often becomes pixilated when saved. This can be especially problematic with the small text that is usually used in a signature graphic. Instead, when the colors in the graphic are not conducive to using the .GIF format, I use the .PNG format. This image type has proven extremely successful for me over the years.

The size in bytes is not overly important. Programmed properly, the graphic will not be saved with each email message, so filling up storage space with repetitive occurrences of this graphic is not really an issue.

Posting to a Server

Having the graphic hosted and referencing its location on a server in your HTML code is very important. The alternative – embedding the graphic in the signature – will increase storage needs, increase the likelihood that your messages will appear with unexpected attachments, increase the likelihood that your messages will bei flagged as SPAM, and in many cases, decrease the visual quality of the graphic itself.

Creating the HTML code

The complexity of this step will be determined by a variety of factors – most importantly whether your signature will contain more than one active hyperlink and whether your signature will be installed into Outlook 2010.

Your HTML code essentially contains twoelements– an image reference <IMG SRC> to display the image and hyperlinks <A HREF> to activate the hyperlink prompts you've used in your graphics.

Unless you are going to be deploying your signature into Outlook 2010, I suggest that the entire signature be contained in a single graphic. This means that you need just one image reference. Multiple hyperlinks can be programmed through the use of “image mapping” via the <MAP> tag and the proper coordinates. This is not hard, though the coordinates themselves may seem confusing at first. Here's how they work - left, top, right, bottom – so 0,10,190,110 would describe a hot-spot that started at the leftmost side of the graphic (coordinate “0”), and 10 pixels down from the top, and extended right for 190 pixels and extend down for 100 more pixels. These coordinates would create a horizontal rectangle that began at the left of your overall graphic. You’d define additional hotspots around the various link prompts that appear in the upper right corner of the signature graphic.

The proper use of “ALT TAGS” within your HTML code is essential. The alt tag is used to display text as an alternative to your graphical image. That is, when your graphic is blocked or not displayed for some reason, the text that you’ve placed within your alt tag will be displayed instead. This ensures that the key contact information in your email signature always gets through. Certainty by the sender that their contact information is being transmitted is vital in gaining acceptance for your signature program.

Installing the HTML code as a Signature

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Installation of the completed signature HTML code is generally quite easy. While there are numerous approaches to installing email signatures, I will share the one that I've found to be the most universal and easy for end-users to follow.

First, the signature HTML should be provided in any fashion such that it can be clicked open to display the signature in a browser window. With the signature displayed in the browser window, press Ctrl-A to SELECT ALL and then Ctrl-C to COPY. This will copy the underlying signature HTML to the clipboard.

> Note: It is important not to somply right click on the graphic itself and choose COPY. This will copy the graphic, which will lead to the signature appearing to be installed correctly, but none of the underlying HTML code will be copied and this the signature will not function correctly.

After the HTML has been copied to the clipboard, go into the signature creation dialog box for the email program. Here you can type in any text that you may wish to add to the graphical component of the signature; for example, a valediction such as "Sincerely," or "Kind regards." This text can be formatted as needed. When the text portion has been created, position the cursor where you want the graphical portion to appear and press Ctrl-V to paste.

> Note: Pasting the HTML code in as the final step can avoid some potential problems. If the signature HTML is pasted in before editing the the typed text is completed, there is a possibility that the underlying HTML code may be damaged. Again, the signature will look fine visually, but it will not function correctly. Usually the hyperlinks get "broken."

That's it for the installation. You can set this signature as the default signature for new messages and/or replies.

This approach to installing an HTML signature is easy enough that virtually every user can successfully do it themselves in minimal time. This is especially true if you prepare a good set of instructions that is specific to the email program in use within your firm. For instance, the signature dialog box changed significantly between Outlook 2003 and Outlook 2007. And while the signature dialog box in Outlook 2010 looks the same as the signature dialog box in Outlook 2007, navigating to it is entirely different. Clear instructions that match what the end user is actually seeing will help make a firm-wide deployment go smoothly.

Once deployed within your firm, users may have some questions. Here are two of the most frequent:

Q: Why don't the links in my signature work?
A: No links ever work in email while you are COMPOSING a message. They will work when the recipient is READING your message. To verify, send a test message to yourself and try clicking the links after you've received it and are reading it.

Q: Why does my signature fail to appear sometimes when people reply to my email?

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A: Not all email is configured to send HTML. Although the recipient may see your graphical signature when they read your email, their email program may strip the signature out of their reply.

I hope that this brief article has provided you with the basic understanding needed to create and deploy truly effective email signatures within your firm. Although the process may not be quite as easy as it seems it should be, the results are *definitely* worth the effort. If outsourcing this work makes more sense than doing it in-house, your web development company may be able to do it for you, or you can turn to a specialty firm working in this area.

About the Author

Rex Weston (http://zuplo.com/bio.html) is a career entrepreneur who has founded and operated software companies since 1987. He founded www.stationerycentral.com in 1999 and has focused on email branding technologies for the last eleven years. He may be reached at rex@stationerycentral.com.

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