Modern email marketing, demystified

Email is back. And it's big.

Email is not new. It's not the latest technology. It isn't a buzzword or a revolution or a bold, fresh idea.

But it might just be the most important tool at the modern marketer's disposal.

Customers are gravitating towards a one-on-one relationship with brands, and email provides a unique opportunity to deliver on that expectation with relative ease. Email marketing isn't about sending "blasts" anymore. It's closer to writing a letter, where the content is chosen based on what the customer wants, not what you want.

Using web fonts allows brands to unlock the potential of email with responsive, customized messages delivered directly to opted-in consumers. Using web fonts also opens up possibilities for greater automation and efficiency around the email process. Sounds great, right? But how do you make it all happen?

79% of marketers queried in Salesforce's 2016 State of Marketing report said email "directly generated ROI," up from 54% the previous year[1].

Wait…what's a web font?

A web font is exactly what it sounds like – a typeface that has been optimized for the web. But the importance and usefulness of web fonts goes well beyond that simple explanation.

Web fonts are live text, which is actual, editable text rather than text embedded into an image. This means the text is dynamic—it can be adjusted programmatically from one user to the next—and responsive, meaning it can size up or down automatically based on the device.

In many cases, web fonts are also optimized for on-screen readability compared to their desktop versions.

Web fonts are designed to look crisp and clear in all use cases.

How can web fonts make my emails better?

On-brand personalization

Personalization is perhaps the most important aspect of modern email marketing. Brands can use data and customer behavior to send targeted content to opted-in customers. Unfortunately, personalized copy is dynamic, which means it can't be part of an image and forces brands to rely on "web safe" fonts for the copy.

But modern consumers expect every touchpoint to be on brand —a closed loop of unified visual and typographic elements. They also increasingly want this targeted content because it doesn't waste their time.

Web fonts enable you to do both. You can deliver targeted messages in live text in the font of your choosing, resulting in the targeted, on-brand messaging your customers want.

Personalized emails deliver six times higher transaction rates, but 70% of brands fail to use them[2].

Monotype

Responsive design

Using live text allows you to use responsive design in your emails. Instead of embedding your text into different images to accommodate a range of different screen sizes, live text can wrap to fit virtually any display dimension.

More and more people are accessing their email via mobile devices and the trend shows no signs of slowing down. Providing a good mobile experience for your customers is essential, and using live text is key to achieving that.

Automated workflow

As email marketing evolves, automation is crucial to keeping your workflow manageable as your operations scale larger and larger. Personalization, in particular, can be very work-intensive.

Using live text is essential to gaining these efficiencies. The code can be easily reused and modified, meaning you can create templates rather than build emails from scratch[2]. It allows you to think of your email marketing ops as a system rather than approaching it on a campaign by campaign basis.

Mobile email finished 2016 with a 54% of market share based on opens, according to Litmus[3].
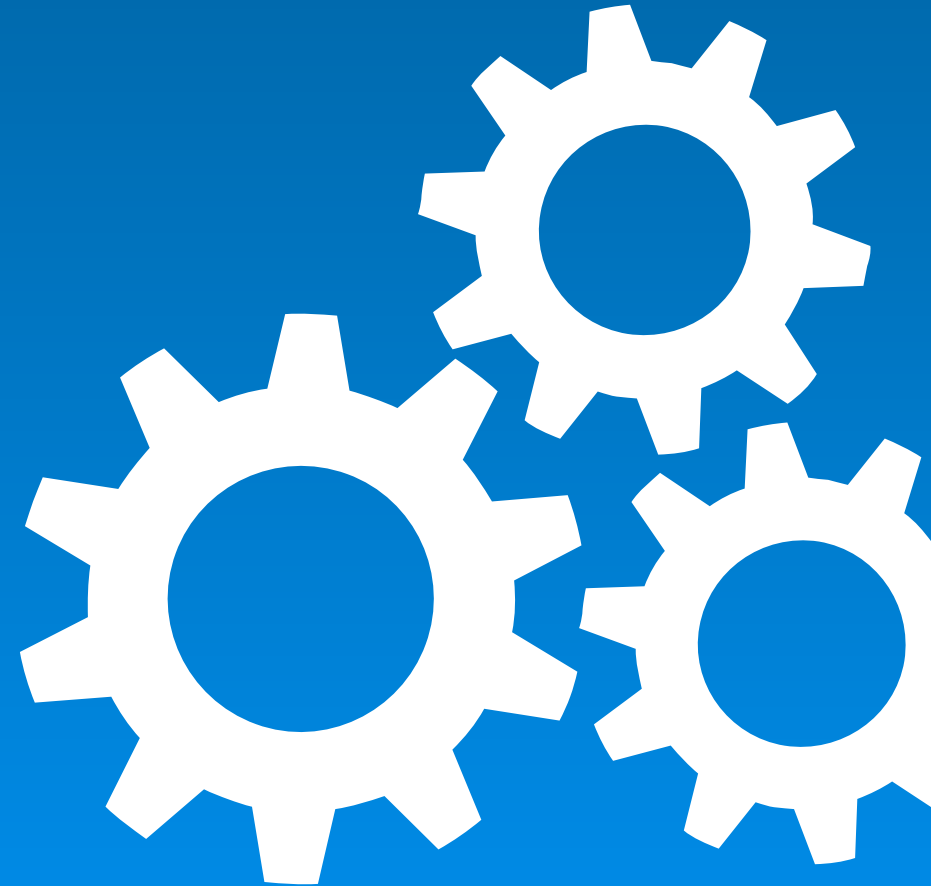
Faster Loading Times

Live text generally loads faster and more efficiently than text as images, thanks to the decreased file size. This is particularly helpful on mobile, where users may not always have a strong connection to either Wi-Fi or their data network.

And don't forget, many users have automatic images turned off in their email by default. Text may not appear right away (or at all) if it's embedded on images, but with live text you know the copy will always load.

Increased ROI

Email is already a high-ROI marketing channel (the highest, for many brands) and brands are doing everything they can to increase engagement. Optimization, however, often comes at the expense of your visual identity.

Personalized content is typically not branded--the text can't be embedded in an image because the copy is dynamic and will change depending on the recipient. Web fonts allow you to use on-brand fonts with dynamic content, meaning your customers get a targeted, personalized, on-brand email—the perfect combination.

For every $1 spent, email marketing generates $38 in ROI[4].

Challenges & how to overcome them

Not universally supported

Most of the world's biggest email clients support web fonts: all of Apple's proprietary mail clients, plus Outlook 2016, support web fonts. Apple represents roughly 50% of market share alone[5]. That's the good news. The bad news is that Gmail, the second biggest email client in the world, does not (as of October 2017). Same goes for older versions of Outlook[6].

Fortunately, the trend is towards web font support, not away from it. Mobile usage is growing and new devices are being added seemingly everyday[7]. Email clients that don't currently support web fonts will have to at least consider it to keep their user experience from deteriorating[8].

As of October 2017, Apple email clients, which support web fonts, accounted for 48% of email client market share[9].

Have a backup plan

If you are going to use web fonts, you'll want to include fallback fonts in your code[10]. Fallback fonts are exactly what they sound like: a list of alternatives to your preferred web font. You code in what's called a font stack, starting with your first choice alternative (usually something very similar to your preferred font) followed by several options that end with a guaranteed web-safe font. This at least gives you control over the email's appearance in the event your web font isn't supported.

Tricky testing

Inconsistent support means you can end up with a range of outcomes for a single email. Some clients will display the web font, but some won't. Some users will see your preferred fallback font, while others may get a font from lower in the font stack.

Fortunately, there is software available that allows you to preview your emails in a wide range of apps and environments. You can also send copies to test accounts in as many email clients as you want. This is where understanding your audience comes into play: if a large majority of your opens are in three major clients, that helps narrow your focus.

What's Next?

The most intriguing thing about email is not what you can do now, but where things are going. The big push at the moment is towards real-time personalization and greater interactivity within the email, essentially bringing the website experience into the inbox[11]. If a brand can send emails with relevant products or information, why not start the buying process there?

Customers increasingly expect brands to be available wherever, whenever. Web fonts enable this level of interactivity by allowing you to keep this dynamic experience on brand.

When it comes to interactivity, the sky's the limit: live shopping carts and in-email purchases, product photo galleries, in-email product reviews, quizzes, and more.
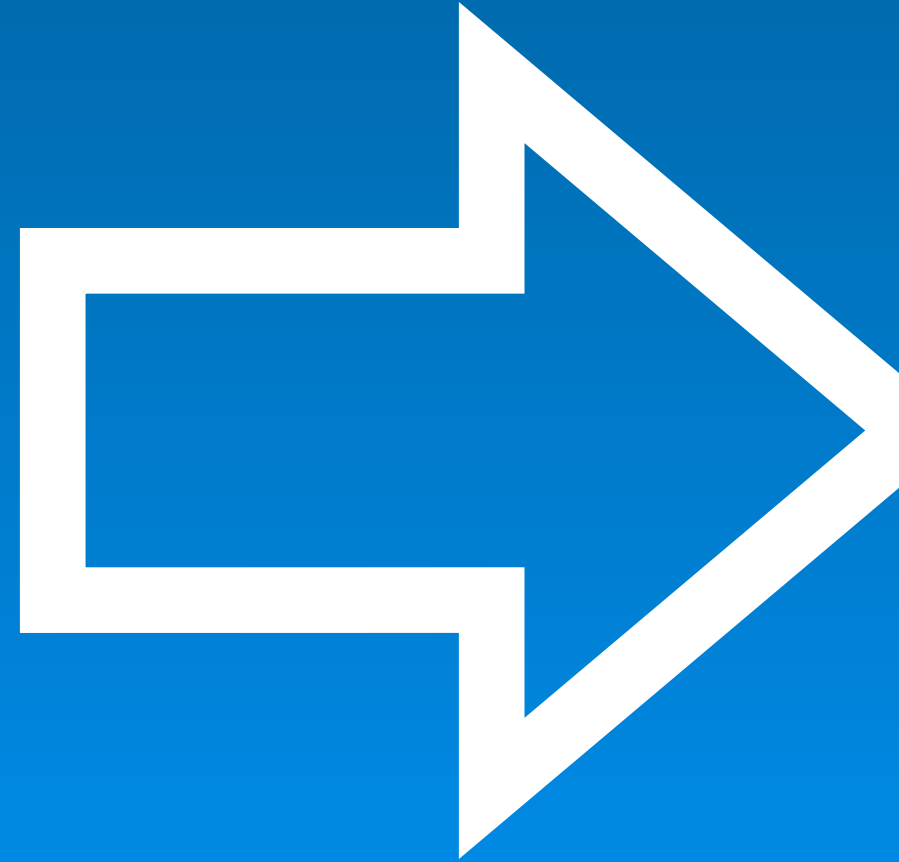
Full circle

It's a bit ironic that email, which is ancient in Internet terms, remains not only relevant but is actually on the cutting edge of digital marketing strategies. But, here we are.

As marketers push forward with new ideas in email marketing, web fonts are emerging as a crucial tool in bringing those ideas to life. Brands that make the switch to web fonts will not only see improvements to their workflow and ROI now, but set themselves up for the future, too.

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