



Quality Email Design Always Wins

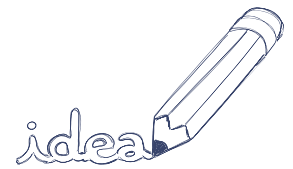
Reflections on 20 years of email design

As we celebrate 20 years of RPE Origin, our team reflects on the evolution of email design, how some things change and some things stay the same, and why quality email design will always win.



Fighting the good fight

Reflections from John Caldwell, Founder



When we started out, email design felt like the Wild West—no rules, no real standards, and definitely no playbook. Over the years, digital design evolved quickly. Websites got slicker, apps became more interactive, and expectations soared. But email? Email kind of got left behind.

Even after 20 years, email design is still wrestling with the same old problems—image blocking, file size clipping, rendering chaos across different clients, and coding like it's 1999. Instead of pushing through and finding better solutions, too many agencies have chosen the easy way out. All-image emails, ignoring accessibility, and skipping testing has become far too common, and it shows. Bad design doesn't just look sloppy—it tanks performance and hurts brands.

We've watched this space shift, and in some ways slide backward. But we've also seen what happens when you take the harder road and do it right. Quality email design still wins. It performs better, connects better, and reflects better on the companies that invest in it.

So here we are, two decades later, still in the trenches. Still working through the same frustrating constraints, yet still pushing boundaries, solving problems, and delivering work that makes us proud.

Because for us, good email design isn't about shortcuts—it's about showing up, doing the work, and helping brands stand out in an inbox full of noise.

And after all this time, we're just getting started.





Some things change, some things stay the same

Reflections from Evan Diaz, Chief Creative Officer

If there's one theme that sums up the past 20 years of email design, it's this: Some things change, and some things stay the same. While the broader scope of digital design has advanced in the past 20 years—think fancy websites and interactive apps—email design has struggled to keep pace.

The core issue is that email creation is riddled with technical constraints. It relies on outdated HTML and CSS, plus additional issues of image blocking, Gmail's file size clipping, and inconsistent rendering across clients. These hurdles have pushed many agencies to cut corners rather than find innovative solutions. Tactics like designing all-image emails, neglecting ADA compliance, and leveraging other shortcuts have become more common, which all leads to lower quality emails. This not only results in lower response rates, but also damages brand reputation and, ironically, costs more in lost opportunities than it saves in effort.

A brief history of email design



Email began as a simple, text-only medium—a utilitarian tool for communication. As the internet matured, so did expectations. By the early 2000s, marketers wanted emails to mirror the visual appeal of websites by incorporating images, layouts, and branding.

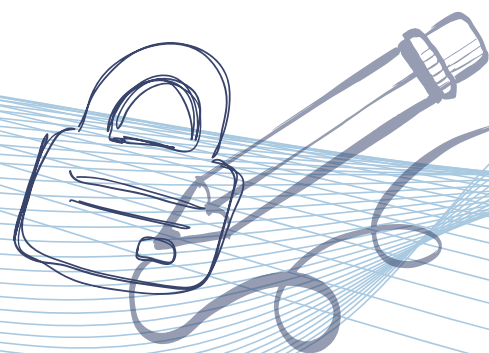
Today, the bar is even higher: emails are expected to be responsive, engaging, and seamless across devices. Yet, unlike web design, which benefits from standardized browsers, email design contends with a fragmented landscape of email clients—Gmail, Outlook, Apple Mail, and countless others—that each interpret code differently. This lack of uniformity (as well as legitimate security concerns) has kept email design from evolving as swiftly as other digital fields.

The big challenges in email design

The technical limitations of email design haven't changed much in recent years. Some things change, but some things stay the same. The key obstacles we face today look similar to the key obstacles email designers faced a decade ago.

- **Image blocking:** Many email clients block images by default for security and bandwidth reasons, which leaves recipients with blank spaces unless they manually allow images. This disrupts designs that rely heavily on visuals, which means it disrupts most emails.
- **Gmail file size clipping:** Gmail imposes a size limit and clips emails that exceed it with a “view entire message” link. Most users don't click, so critical content can vanish, including unsubscribe links (which leads to higher abuse complaints), legal disclaimers (which opens you up to legal concerns), and even entire sections of an email (which creates confusion for the subscriber).
- **Rendering Inconsistencies:** Modern HTML and CSS power web design, but email clients vary widely in support. An email that is flawless in Gmail might break in Outlook, which requires time-consuming testing and even more time-consuming resolution, as solutions to rendering issues are often not easy to find.
- **Outdated tools:** To ensure compatibility, email designers are stuck with basic HTML and CSS—think tables and inline styles—while web designers enjoy less obtuse, more modern frameworks.

These constraints force email designers into a balancing act: meeting modern expectations with tools from the early internet.

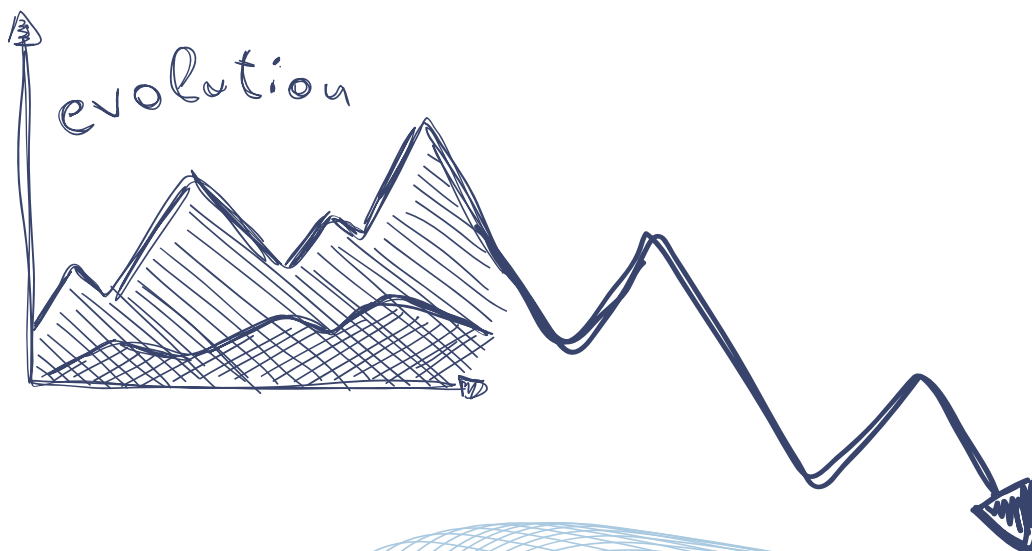


The corner-cutting trend

Faced with these challenges, many agencies and brands have opted to cut corners rather than invest in quality email design. Instead of adapting, they're regressing. Common shortcuts include:

- **All-image emails:** Rather than coding robust layouts, some designers export emails as single images. It's a quick way to build an email, but if images are blocked (which they are nearly 50% of the time), the email is blank when the subscriber opens it. An all-image email also fails accessibility standards and isn't responsive for desktop/mobile view.
- **Ignoring ADA compliance:** The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates accessibility—like alt text for screen readers—but some email designers skip it to save time, which risks legal and ethical fallout.
- **Minimal testing:** Testing and troubleshooting email rendering takes time, so some designers forego testing across various email clients, or they rely on generic templates to save time.

This isn't progress—it's regression—and it shows. Agencies are dodging the hard stuff because it takes time and know-how, and not everyone's willing to invest.

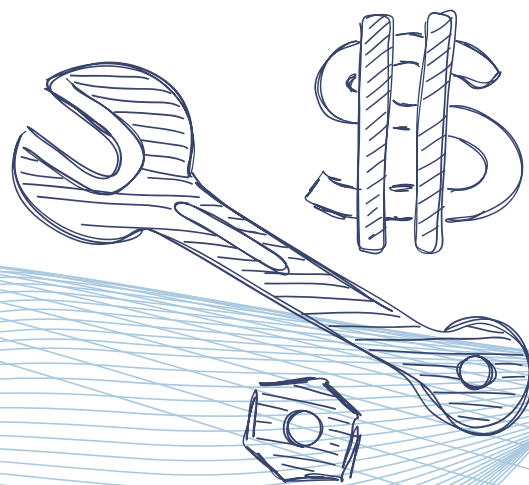


Why cutting corners backfires

When agencies and brands decide to cut corners, they're often looking to reduce the production time required to send an email or they don't want to invest in hiring experienced email designers. These shortcuts might seem efficient, but they carry steep downsides:

- **Lower response rates:** Poorly designed emails—blank, clipped, or inaccessible—don't engage. A nonprofit's donation plea, for instance, might be invisible to screen reader users, which immediately lowers the return.
- **Damage to brand reputation:** A broken email reflects poorly on the sender. Imagine a retailer's sale email clipped before the discount code—customers see incompetence, not value.
- **Higher long-term costs:** Skimping on design saves upfront effort, but lost engagement and time spent fixing broken emails outweigh those savings. A campaign that flops due to laziness costs more than proper execution.

This isn't just a matter of opinion—it's all backed up by data. Studies show well-designed, accessible emails consistently outperform sloppy ones in click-through and conversion rates. In other words, it's worth the time and effort to do it right! It's like buying cheap shoes that fall apart in a week—you end up spending more to replace them than if you'd gotten decent ones to start with.

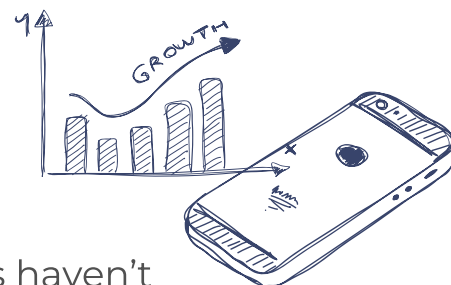


The flip side of doing It right

Not everyone's slacking, though. Some agencies and brands have embraced the challenge of leveraging responsive design, prioritizing accessibility, and mastering email-specific coding. They test rigorously and customize their emails to deliver results that justify the effort. Over the past few years, this divide has widened—those who invest in quality are pulling ahead, while those who cut corners are lagging.

Wrapping it up

Email design has changed over the past decade or two, but not always for the better. The technical limits haven't budged much, and as expectations climb, agencies are feeling the squeeze. Too many are regressing—leaning on lazy fixes like all-image emails or ditching ADA rules—because mastering it takes effort. But that's a mistake. Bad email design impacts response rates, the company's reputation, and the bottom line.



The smart move? Invest in doing it right. It's tougher to navigate image blocking, clipping, and rendering quirks with old tools, but the payoff's huge—better engagement, a polished brand, and real results. The next time you're picking an agency, make sure they're not just phoning it in. Your inbox—and your bottom line—will thank you!



about RPE origin

We are the agency the big guys use. We aim to be an indispensable partner for enterprise and agency clients who rely on email for success. Whether you need help choosing a new ESP, enhancing automated B2C or B2B customer journeys, or connecting data points across your tech stack, we help you move from simple to sophisticated to drive more revenue through email marketing.

Need help making well designed emails?

Contact our team to get the conversation started.



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