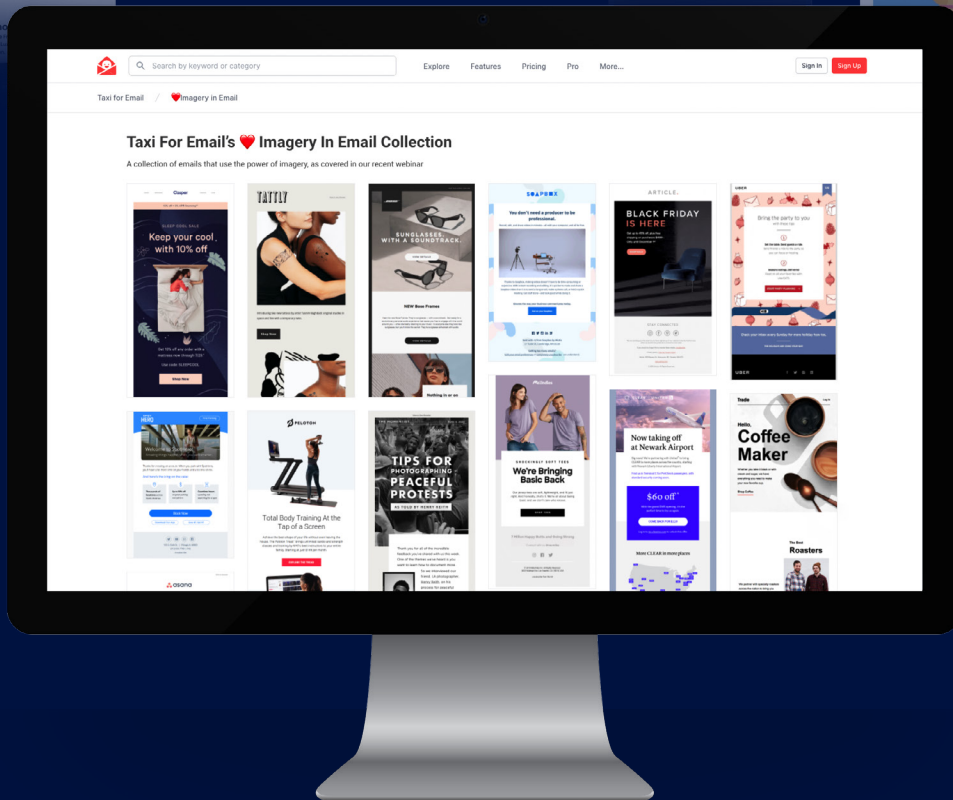
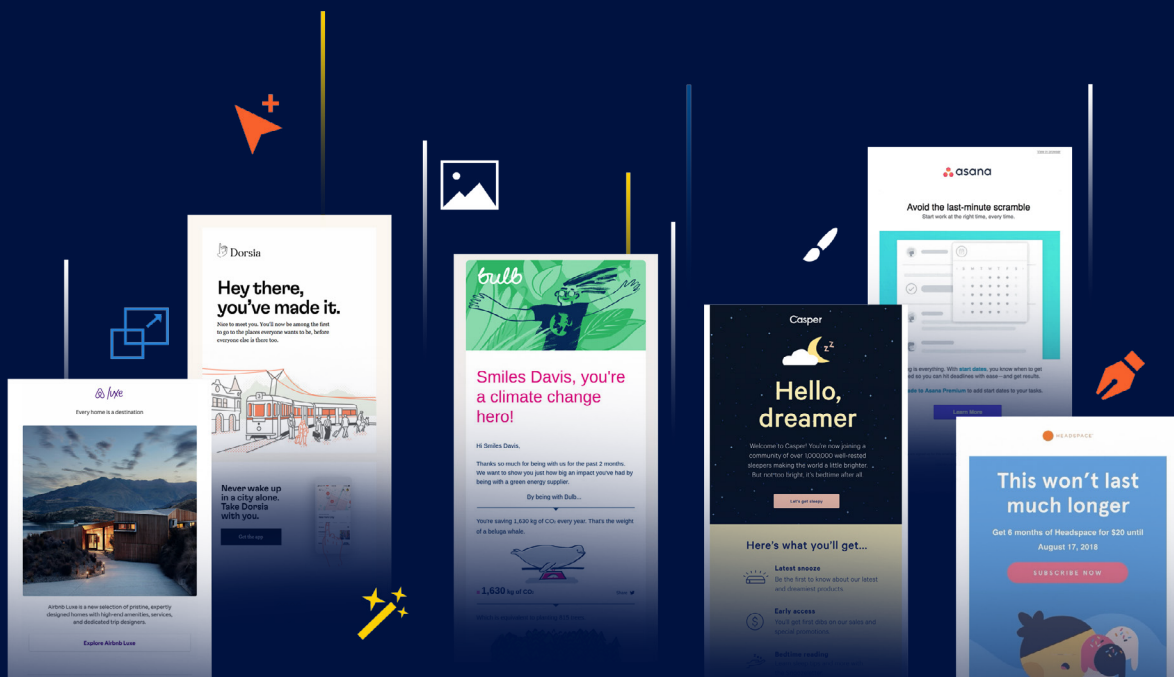


The Power of Imagery in Email



THE ULTIMATE GUIDE
TO EMAIL DESIGN

The Power of Imagery in Email

This design guide will equip you with everything you need to know to fill your emails with powerful, creative, and impactful imagery – which will better engage and inspire your audience. We've filled this guide with practical advice and inspiration from real examples you can implement into your emails.

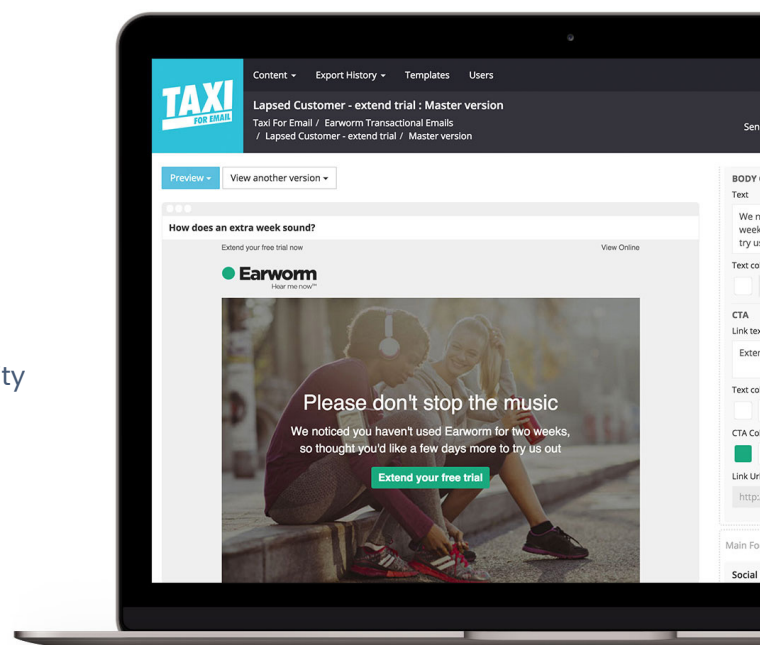
Using images in email helps connect you with your audience on a deeper level, provoking emotion and adding excitement to your otherwise text-heavy content.

If done well, imagery helps encourage customers to buy your product or offering, and/or keep them coming back for more. While there are many ways you can add imagery to email, images should be thought out carefully. You need to create a strategy behind your content, and fit imagery around it to tell a story and take your reader on a journey.

This guide will take you through the many ways you can use images in your emails, but ultimately it is up to you which route you go down.

Use this guide to learn how to:

- 02. Keep your emails simple
- 04. Use images that represent your brand's personality
- 05. Include personalized images and iconography
- 07. Explore image workarounds for dark mode
- 08. Create accessible images
- 09. Find the right balance between file size and image quality
- 11. Explore background image support
- 13. Plus, key takeaways!



All examples of emails in this guide have been sourced by our friends at Really Good Emails or [Taxi for Email](#) 🍷

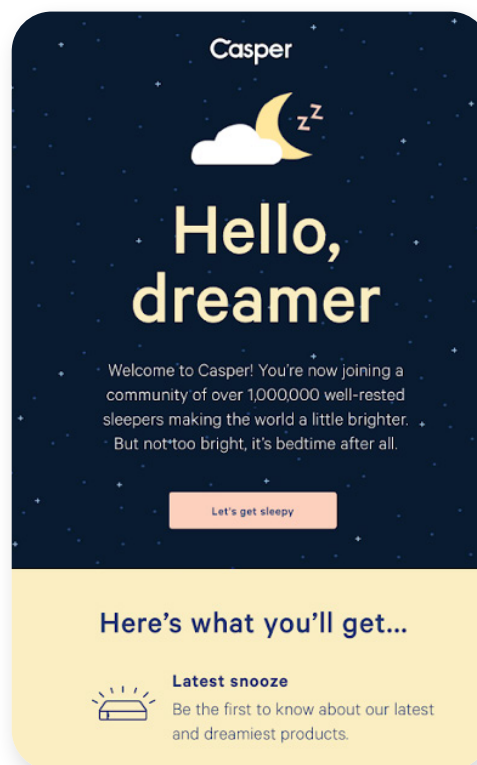
↓ A static navigation bar allows you to skip through pages of the PDF



1. Keep your emails simple

Imagery doesn't have to be advanced or complicated to make an impact on your audience – sometimes the simplest image or layout can resonate with your readers the most. For example, a well thought out and high quality body image in your email will be more impactful than an email full of stock imagery.

Try to bear in mind your designer/developer too! Certain types of images or animations will be a massive headache for them. A simple set of illustrations that can be used across different emails and help set your email tone will work better for you than a one-time use background.

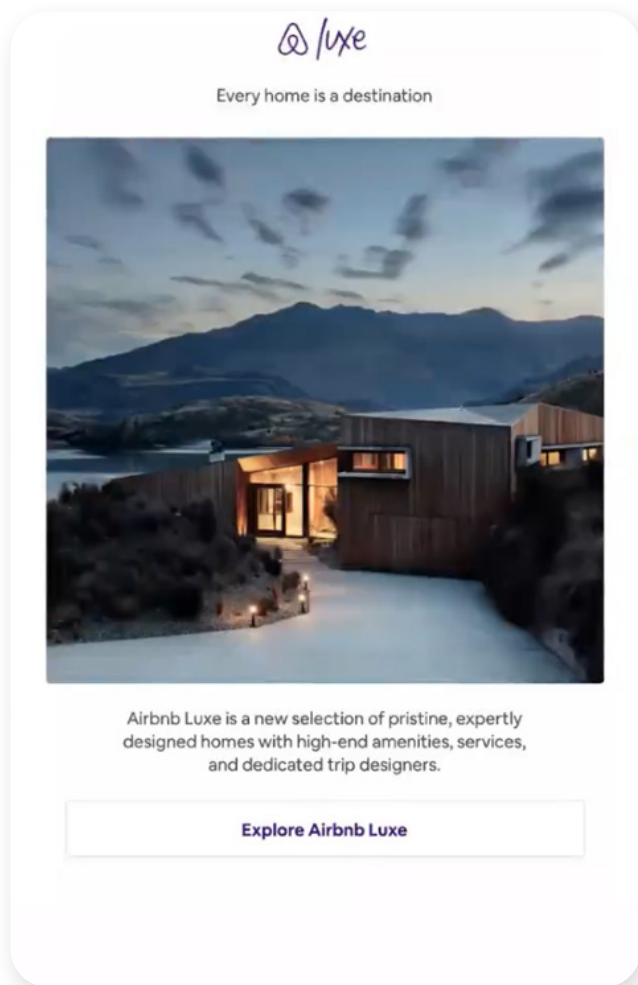


Before doing this  try starting your emails like this

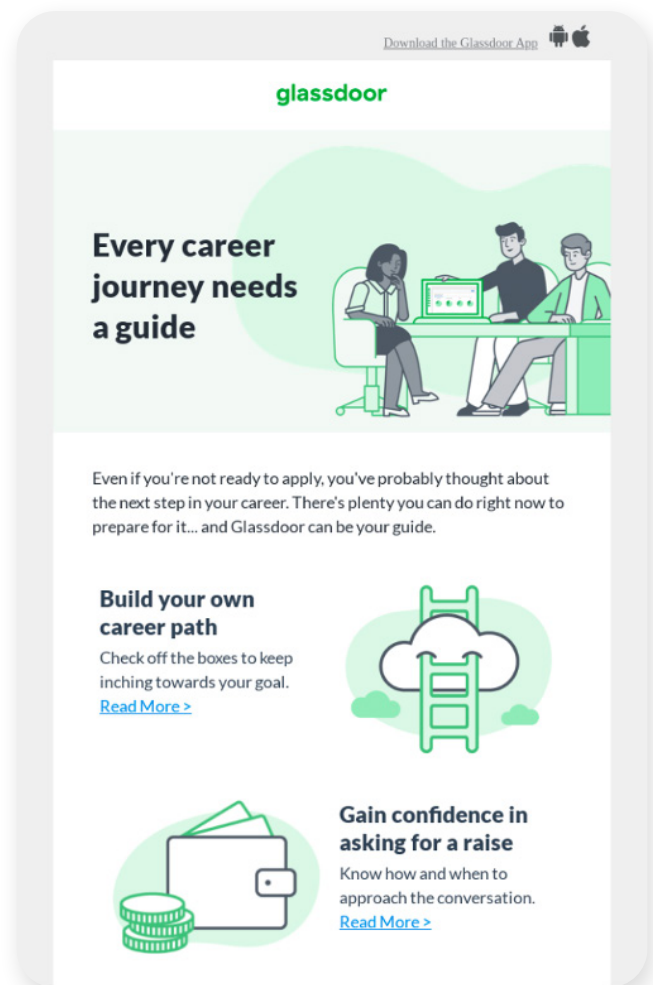
It's important to get the foundations right:

1. **Consistency is key:** Every email you send should have the same image style to maintain brand consistency.
2. **Find out what your audience likes:** What resonates with them? Look into your email analytics to see how they are navigating through your email and what images they are engaging with.
3. **Don't let imagery be a final thought:** Take time to sit down with a designer and mock up icons, simple illustrations or images for your emails. If you don't have a designer, look online for free resources to use images that aren't too "stocky" (more on this below!).

Once these basics have been achieved, you can move onto more advanced image techniques like animated images, background images, and different image layouts.



! Airbnb does an amazing job here of showcasing a property without over complicating the imagery. Who wouldn't want to stay here? A beautiful property, which stands out more with less copy and more white space.



! Using photography, it can be hard to explain a process, so using illustrations are a good way to help get the message across without adding too much text.

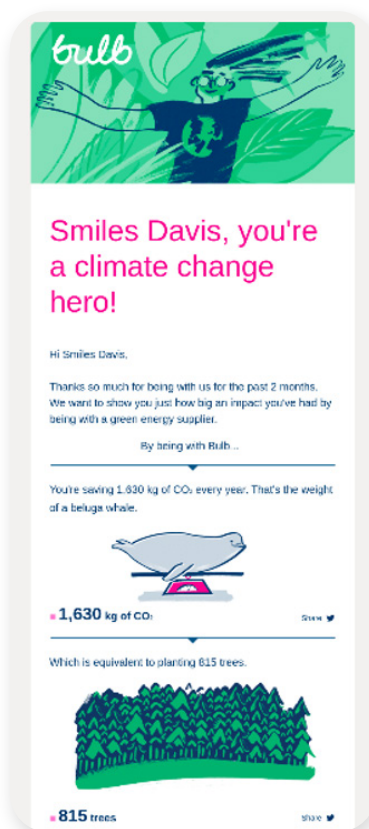
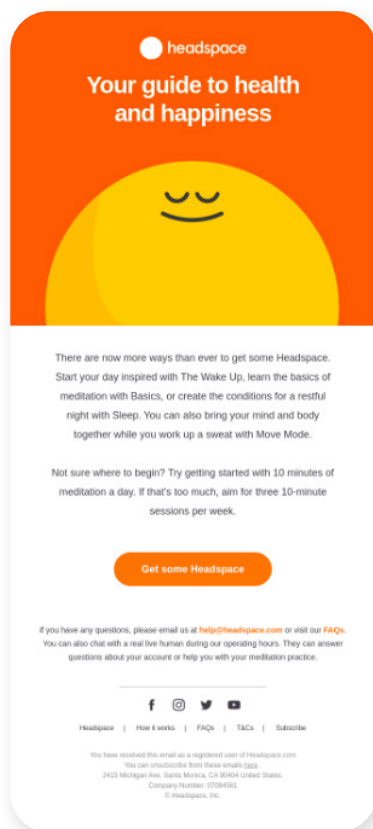
2. Use images that represent your brand personality

Images communicate much faster – and often more effectively – than written text ever could. And while creating a powerful script is important, the same love and time should go into finding or designing the right images to support the message.

Images are the focal point of an email, so make sure you use images that represent your brand. Stock imagery won't do your emails justice, so when you can, try to source bespoke images or illustrations.

Not all brands have the luxury of sourcing a designer to create bespoke imagery, so don't worry if this is you! You're not alone – here are a few things you can try to level up your imagery game on a low (or no) budget:

- **Go beyond the classic stock image providers.** [Stocksy.com](https://www.istock.com) or [Unsplash](https://unsplash.com) have a selection of more unconventional photography that might be a fit, depending on your brand.
- **Explore premium lines for stock imagery.** Many stock image platforms offer a premium line where, for a bit of extra money, you might find images that you haven't seen before.
- **Combine photography and illustration.** There are a lot of great examples of brands that use custom illustrations to spice up their photos – so why not use that technique to give your stock imagery a unique touch?



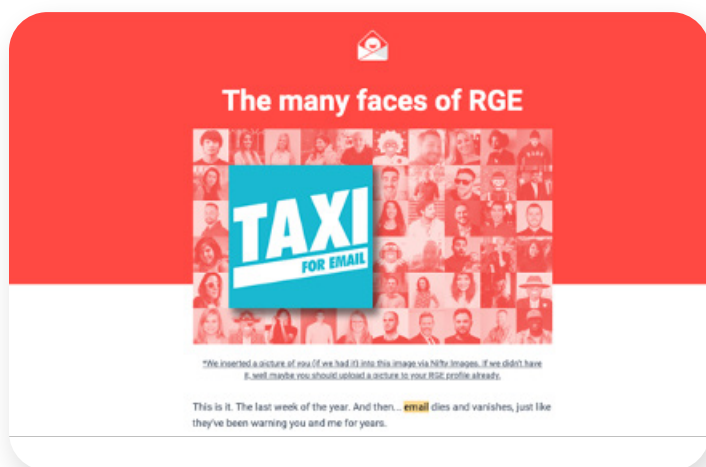
! A trend at the moment is for brands to use illustrations that aren't particularly gendered, which helps because anyone can find themselves in the illustration. It's a nice way to be inclusive to everyone and gets a big thumbs up from us!

3. Personalized images and iconography

Not all teams have the resources to create illustrations, but those who do should certainly take advantage! Illustrations help provide consistency across different mediums: web, email, app, etc. and help resonate with your audience.

Personalized images

You can add personalization to images too - to help connect your brand with a customer. For example, Really Good Emails (RGE) added Taxi's logo into the email below, which is a nice personal touch. It also catches the reader's eye - they know it's about them, so they will be more inclined to read on. Plus, they have a fallback option (as mentioned in the copy "we inserted a picture of you if we have it") so that those who didn't add a logo in their RGE account still feel included.



Icons

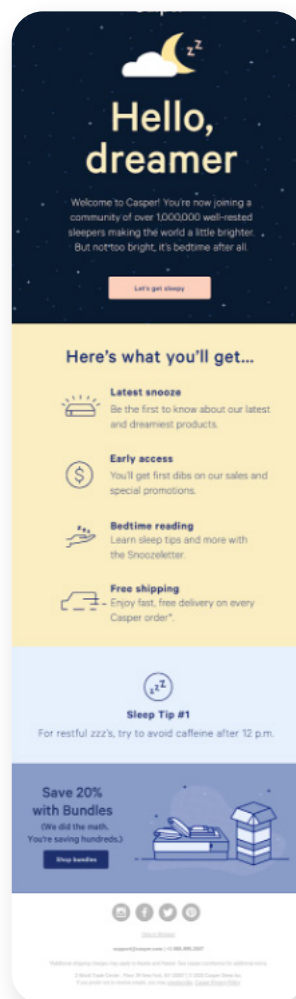
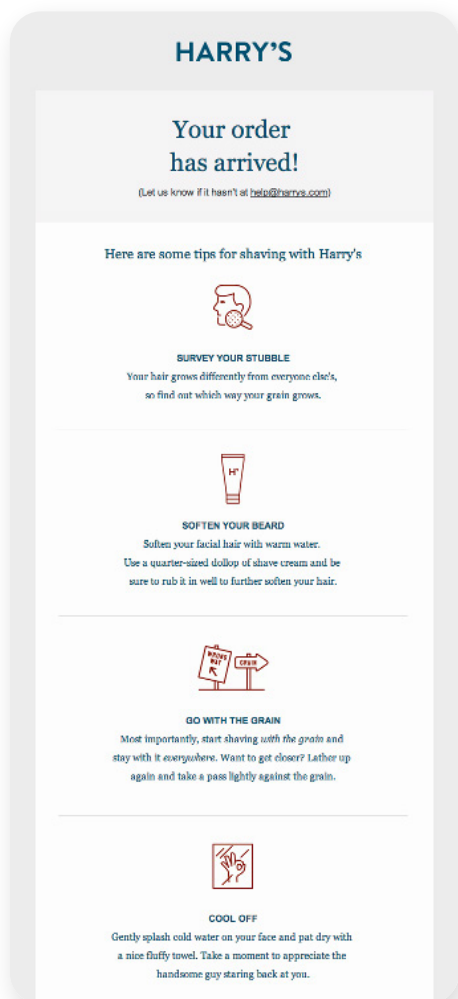
Another fun idea is to create a set of icons to use in email (and repurpose them on your website and vice versa).

Icons can help:

- Highlight the benefits of a product/offering
- Breakdown a journey or process a customer needs to take
- Show off a specific feature in your product
- Structure and organize your email nicely
- Maintain brand consistency across different mediums



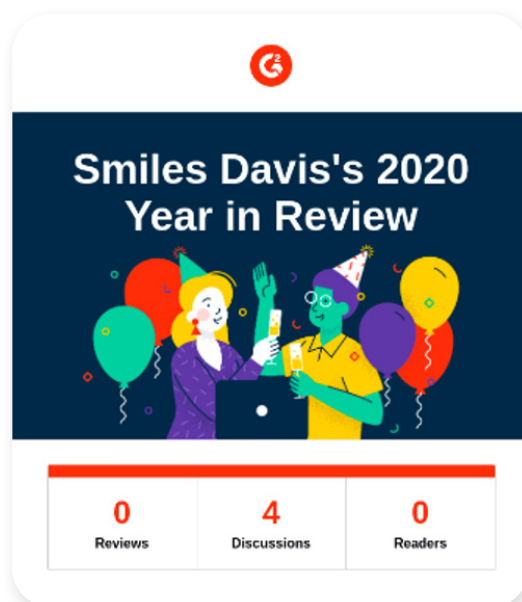
If you don't have a designer to create these for you, you can find free resources (or cheap ones) to take icons from and add your brand colors.



No budget?

You can still make images look personalized even if you don't have the budget. You can:

- Create a background image module (block/element).
- Add your image, but make sure you have about one-third of clear space at the top of the image.
- Add your copy in the space with personalized language. (For example: Happy Birthday %%first_name%%! 🥳)



4. Image workarounds for dark mode

It's really important that all images are dark mode compatible so they render across different web clients correctly. Not all web clients support images in dark mode, so there are a few workarounds you should consider implementing.

Dark mode uses a reversed color scheme - it essentially switches the light aspects with the dark ones and vice versa in your email for dark mode users. These colors can be inverted in different ways. Locked assets might not change at all, but text over image style elements can disappear into a colored background.

Email client	Dark mode changes	Media query support
Apple Mail (MacOS)	No change*	✓ Yes
iPhone / iPad (iOS 13)	No change*	✓ Yes
Hey.com	No change*	✓ Yes
Outlook.com	Partial invert	? Partial*
Outlook 2019 (MacOS)	Partial invert	? Partial*
Outlook 2019 (WinOS)	Full invert*	✗ No
Outlook 2019 (Android)	Partial invert	? Partial*
Outlook (iOS)	Partial invert	✗ No
Gmail app (iOS)	Full invert*	✗ No
Gmail app (Android)	Partial invert	✗ No

What can you start doing now?

- Use PNGs with transparent backgrounds to avoid white background 'blocks' around your images.
- If you choose to put text over an image, avoid using pure white (#ffffff) or pure black (#000000). These are likely to be swapped to other colors when dark mode is activated.
- Use a filter over images to dull them when dark mode is active. This stops the contrast between a dark background and bright image being too harsh.
- If you use dark text for headers or dark icons (e.g. social media icons), put a 2px white text-stroke so that it shows up clearly against a dark background.

Go to the dark mode section of our other [design guide](#) for more tips!



5. Creating accessible images

It's our duty as email marketers to give all subscribers a great email experience. It's important to ensure your images are accessible because not everyone reads email in the same way.

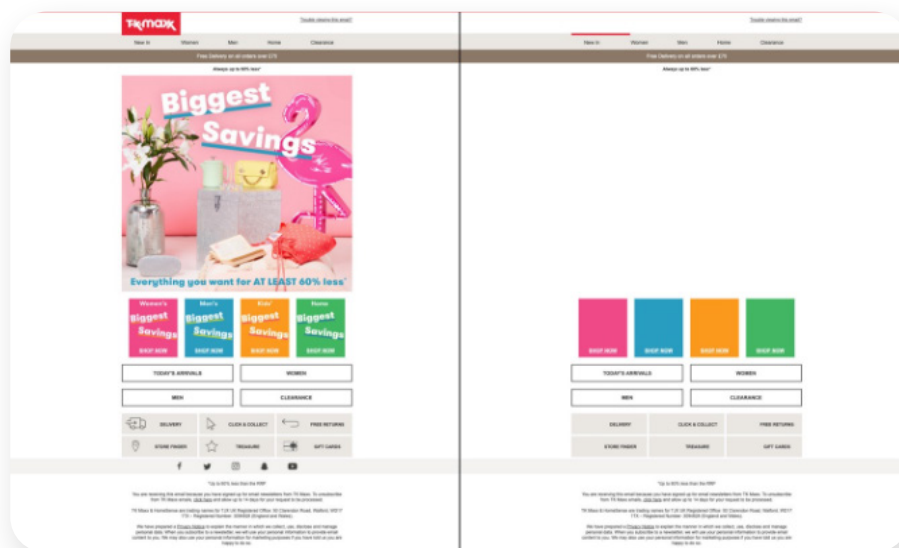
Creating accessible email is important because:

- 1 Readers with permanent, temporary, or situational visual disabilities won't get the full message if the images aren't properly explained using alt text.
- 2 Image-only emails won't scale for different screen sizes, and your emails will be mostly blank for recipients who choose not to load images.
- 3 An animated image with fast-moving frames will not only annoy some of your readers, but it can actually trigger seizures in people who have photosensitivity, especially when frames have varying light and dark colors.

With this in mind, there are a few things you can start doing (if you haven't already) to make your emails as inclusive as possible:

- ✓ If your image is important to your message, include meaningful alt text. If it's purely decorative and it shouldn't be read out loud by screen readers, make the alt text "null" or empty (alt="") so screen readers ignore it.
- ✓ Stay away from creating emails that are image-only. This limits the risk of emails being blank or ending up in the spam folder.
- ✓ Make your GIFs as accessible as possible by enabling smooth transitions between each frame, and make sure that your frames are animated at a slower rate.

Read our [email accessibility cheat sheet](#) for more tips on creating accessible email.



! If images are turned off/not displaying correctly, the reader won't be able to experience the email the way you need them to, and all your marketing efforts will be for nothing. Test your emails before sending, and check web client support for things like background images to avoid mistakes when sending.

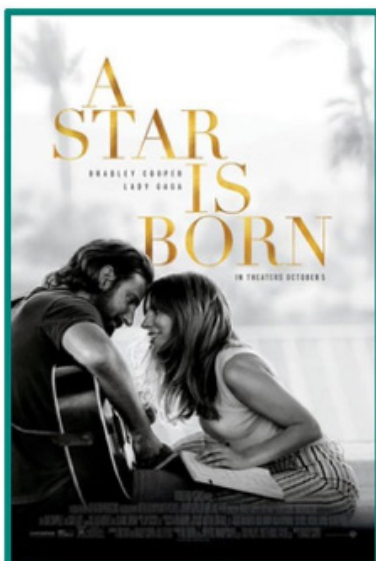
Alt Text: A Lesson in Context

Incomplete Example

Alt Text:
A Star is Born

Better Example

Alt Text:
Movie Poster: A
Star is Born



Incomplete Example

Alt Text:
A star is born

Better Example (as a decorative image)






Alt Text:
“”



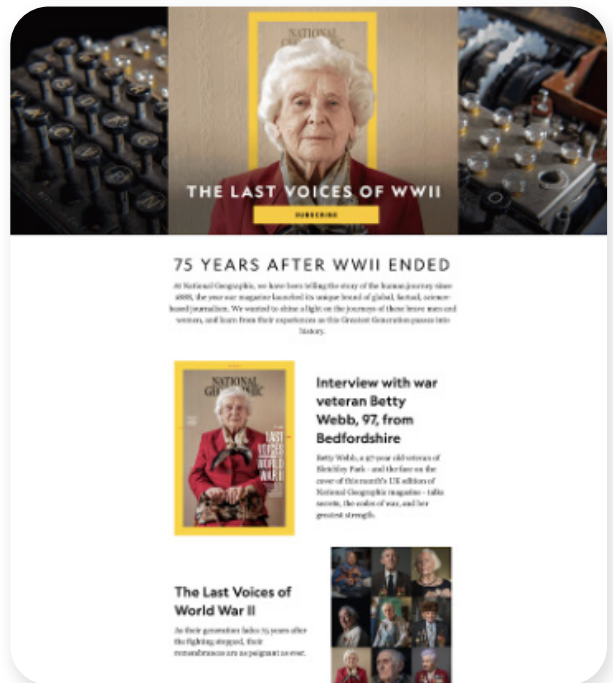
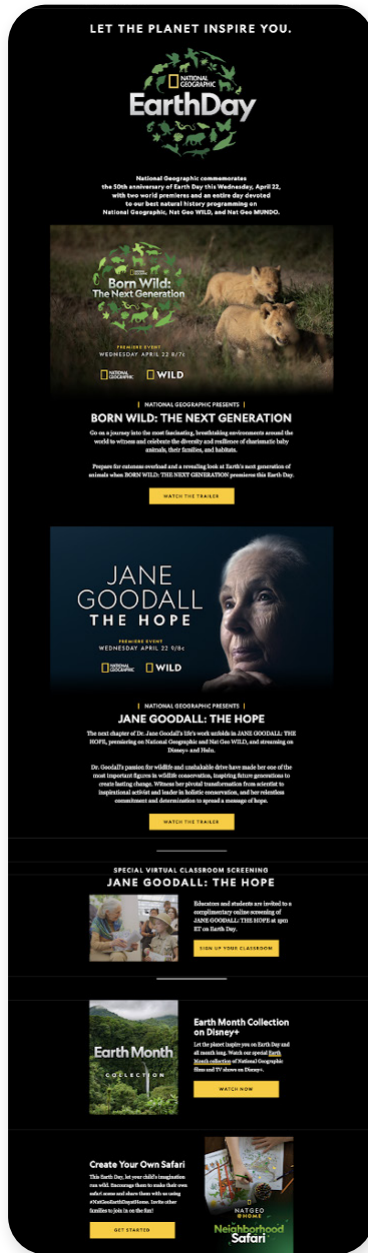
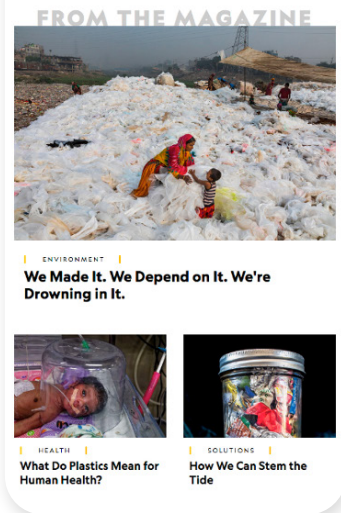
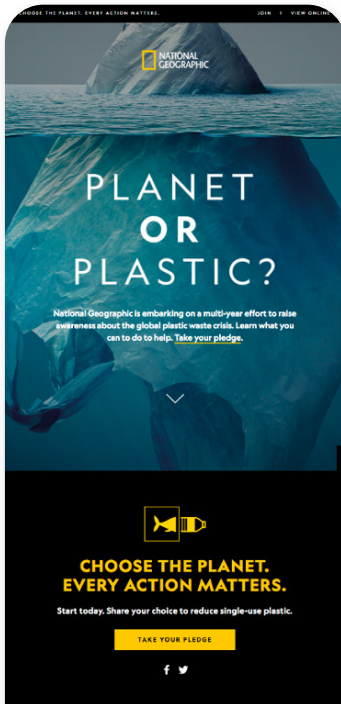
! Context is everything! Simply writing “A star is born” without context of what is actually going on in the image is no use to the reader. Make sure you fully explain the context/message of the image.

6. Finding the right balance between image size and quality

If a user can't see your email because it takes too long for the images to load, all your efforts are for nothing. Images need to load quickly - and this relies on having compressed images. Generally, images should be around 500kb, and in one-off cases 1mb, but that size will still impact load times. So by rule of thumb, always aim for 500kb or below.

-  **Images should be below 500kb**, and the whole email (including images) should never go over 2mb. Anything above 2mb will mean a sloooow open - and no one wants that.
-  **Use tools like Photoshop to compress images** before uploading them to your emails.
-  **Add size limits on your images** in your Email Design System so marketers can check image size quickly. This is actually a massive help and saves a lot of time.
-  **Reduce the number of frames in your GIFs** to help reduce the overall file size.
-  **Use PNGs for illustrations** if you want to keep them high quality but reduce size, and use JPGs for photography.

National Geographic are a great example of a brand who balance their text and imagery in their emails perfectly. See a few examples below for more inspiration ❤️



7. Background image support

Background images aren't supported everywhere (see the table of email client support below). This means it's important to know which email clients your audience use, then decide if it's worth the effort. If a high percentage of readers open email on Outlook 365 for example, it's better to stick to images separated from your copy instead of behind it.

Background images can be subtle yet powerful, but you need to understand the code behind them. This article covers the basics of background images.

If you do choose to include background images, make sure you:

- Provide a good fallback image
- Set a mobile version of your image.
- Add meaningful alt text so if the image is lost, the context/message isn't.

Email client support for background images:

Email Client	Using inline CSS	Using VML
Apple Mail 14	✓	✗
Office 365 (Mac)	✓	✗
Office 365 (Windows)	✗	✓
Outlook 2016 (macOS 10.12.6)	✓	✗
Outlook 2013, 2016, 2019 (Windows 10)	✗	✓
Windows 10 Mail	✗	✗
Gmail App (Android 10)	✓	✗
Gmail App (iOS 13.4.1)	✓	✗
Outlook (Android 7.0)	✓	✗
Outlook (iOS 12.0)	✓	✗
Samsung Mail (Android 7.0)	✓	✗
iPad 11 Air (Gen4 iOS 14.2)	✓	✗
iPhone 12 (iOS 14.2)	✓	✗
AOL Mail (Edge)	✓	✗
Gmail (Chrome)	✓	✗
Office 365	✓	✗
Outlook.com	✓	✗
Yahoo! Mail	✓	✗

To set up a background image, you need to create a containing table – and set the image attributes and inline styling on the first <td>. Anything that’s put inside this cell will sit on top of the background image. Your code will look like this:

```
1 | <td bgcolor="#000000" background="YourImageURL" width="640" height="400" style="background:
    url('YourImageURL') center / cover no-repeat #000000; background-position: center; background-size:
    cover; background-repeat: no-repeat;">
```

Source: Taxi for Email

To cover email clients that don’t support CSS styling, you will need to add HTML attributes for background color (bgcolor), background, width and height. Width and height attributes will tell the browser or email client to leave a gap in your content.

Next you can look at the inline CSS. You can wrap this all up in a background tag to add support for webkit email clients and webmail, as well as the Gmail app.

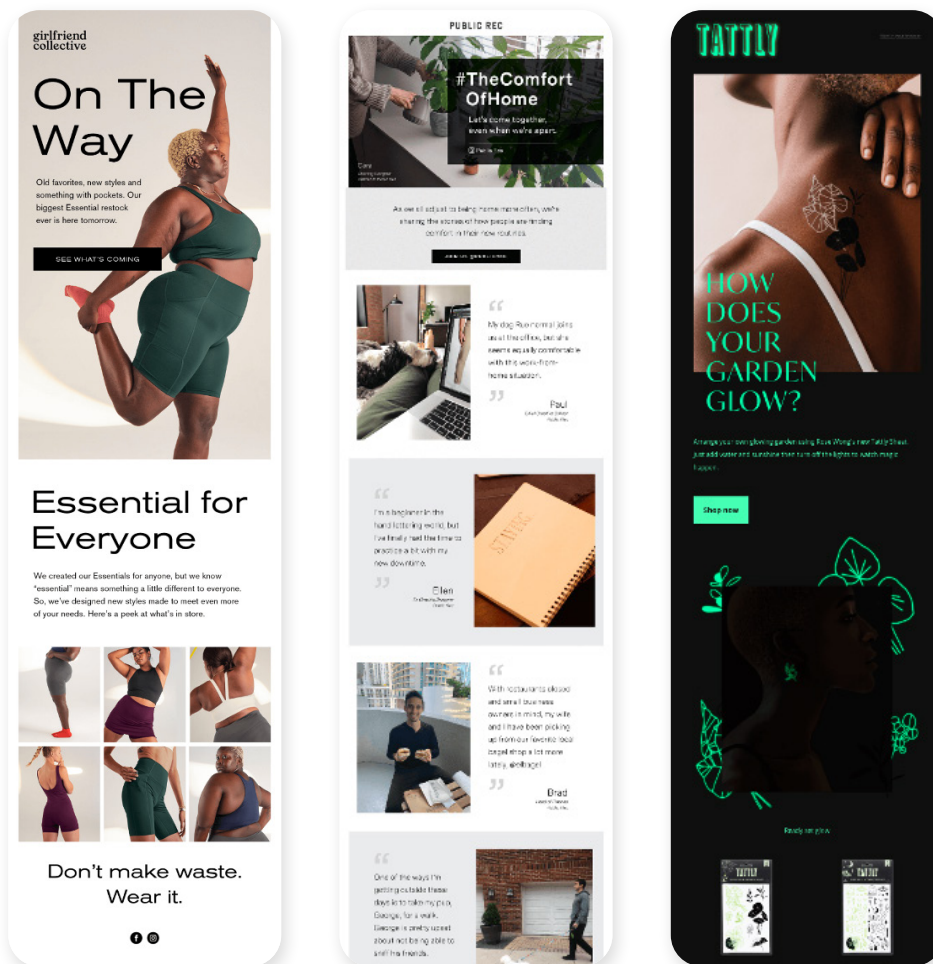
```
1 | background: url('https://via.placeholder.com/640x400') center / cover no-repeat #000000;
```

You can then add the same information again, but in long form to add more control over Yahoo and AOL app backgrounds.

```
1 | background-position: center; background-size: cover; background-repeat: no-repeat;
```

To make the background image work in Outlook, always ensure you are using the same image link in the src="" field. And convert the pixel size to points. Outlook uses Vector Markup Language (VML), which is a language that controls shapes, colors, and image layers. So it’s important you do the two things listed above. You can convert your image pixels to points by multiplying your pixel value by 0.75.

Here's some emails we love which use background images really nicely. Notice how your eyes naturally go towards the images? And certain copy, which is deliberate – the highlighted copy adds the information you need and the rest tells a story if you really want to read a bit more.



Key takeaways

- **Don't overcomplicate what you need to do!** Start simple, and build your knowledge and confidence before doing the “big” things.
- **Avoid stock imagery** where you can – look at other free resources or create your own.
- **Compress your images!** Aim for a total email size of 2mb or below.
- **Use PNGs for illustrations** and JPGs for photography.
- **Avoid image-only emails!** For accessibility purposes and design best practices, let's steer away from these please!
- **Test your emails.** Web client support is ever-changing, so be mindful of this and run your emails through a render-testing tool.

Stuck on the rat wheel of painful email production?

Cut your email production time from two weeks to two days with Messagebird. You can level up your team, your emails, and your results – all while using your existing ESP.

How Messagebird helps emails teams like yours resolve recurring production pain points:

- Simplify collaboration and workflows within your team (and with other teams!)
- Make fewer mistakes by simplifying your QA process
- Scale your emails by handling dynamic content and personalization with a few clicks
- Lock down elements and editing controls to maintain brand standards
- Export send-ready HTML code with seamless integrations with most major ESPs

Ready for a lifeline to get out of your stressful production woes?

We're here to help show you how Messagebird can help.

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