



Going Above and Beyond: Four Factors that Define “Above the Fold” in the Digital Realm

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In the print world, “above the fold” refers to articles displayed at the top of a newspaper before the crease. Editors place the most important articles in this section to entice buyers and increase sales. In e-mail marketing, the act of placing important content in the most prominent section of an e-mail serves the same purpose, but becomes complex due to the many variables that affect the exact placement of the digital “fold”.

Why should you care whether or not your e-mail design maximizes the real estate above the fold? Your e-mail is competing for consumer engagement. The average consumer spends 3-5 seconds looking at an e-mail. Unless something immediately catches her eye, your customer is likely to hit “delete” and the opportunity is lost. Placing enticing benefits and calls-to-action (CTAs) front and center reduces the chance she’ll miss them, and your conversions will increase.

In a 2007 survey of e-mail marketers conducted by the Email Experience Council, 59% of respondents said that a call-to-action placed above the fold was more important to conversion than branding. But where is this elusive digital fold? Again, tough question, and the answer is based on many factors.

It’s (almost) all about rendering

Gmail, Microsoft Outlook, Hotmail – every popular application consumers use to read e-mail renders HTML in a different way. Each of these e-mail clients displays more or less of the e-mail depending on the amount of screen space dedicated to menus, advertisements, and other elements. So how do you determine where the fold is located when every program has a mind of its own?

Marketers can test their e-mail templates and see where the fold falls using tools like Return Path’s e-mail rendering report, which shows how a message looks in popular e-mail clients. Typically Gmail shows 329 pixels above the fold on a monitor with 1024x768 pixel resolution. On the same monitor,

you'll only see the first 208 pixels in the Windows Live e-mail client¹. However, these pixel values are not perfect guides for defining where the fold appears as there are other factors at play.

Sometimes it's personal

Just as each e-mail client dedicates different amounts of space to advertisements and menus, each user's personal computer settings have an effect on where the fold falls. Specifically, people have different default font sizes, toolbars, browser window sizes, preview panes (horizontal vs. vertical), and image preview settings (on or off). The digital fold moves depending on how users tweak their systems.

What's on display

According to Jakob Nielsen and Hoa Loranger in *Prioritizing Web Usability*, 60% of computer monitors are set to 1024x768 resolution; 17% are set at 800x600; and the rest are set to 1600x1200 or higher². The higher the resolution, the more of your e-mail appears above the fold. Although the trend for computer monitors is moving towards bigger displays with higher resolutions and more pixels shown above the fold, more consumers are also buying cell phones and reading their e-mails on the go. In other words, your e-mails are being read less often at home on a computer monitor.

Consider the device

Desktops usually have the largest monitors and show the most pixels above the fold. Laptops have average monitor sizes and show an average number of pixels above the fold. Mobile devices have the smallest displays, the lowest resolutions, and usually only support text e-mail. Some smart phones have HTML e-mail, but Blackberry users must download a third-party application to display HTML – and the messages don't always render well. The iPhone does support HTML e-mail, but displays 100% of the width of the message. This means that a large percentage of the e-mail shows up above the fold, but the small display requires zooming to make text legible.

Overcoming the challenges introduced by the constant increase in the number of devices used for reading e-mail doesn't require as much extra work as it sounds. Marketers should simply create text and HTML versions of their e-mail campaigns and mail their customers in multi-part format. What this will do is send both text and HTML e-mails to each recipient. If the customer's device or personal settings dictate they can handle rendering the HTML e-mail, it will render. If not, they will view the text version.

¹ http://www.useit.com/alertbox/screen_resolution.html.

² *Prioritizing Web Usability*, Jakob Nielsen and Hoa Loranger. New Riders Press, Berkeley, CA



So, where is the fold again?

As you can plainly see, many variables affect where the fold falls in the digital world. There's no above-the-fold pixel range that holds true in all circumstances, and no clear home for the fold line. But there are a few guidelines you can follow to capture attention early.

Emphasize the call to action. The higher the call to action appears in your e-mail, the better.

Know your target audience. If you are selling to senior executives glued to their Blackberries, know that your e-mails will probably need to be text-based. If you are targeting graphic design professionals, concentrate your resources on the HTML version to make it as visually appealing as possible.

Create text and HTML versions of your e-mail campaigns. In the text version, be sure the benefits and calls to action appear within the first few lines. In the HTML version, place the most important information in the top-left corner. Usually companies place branding here; feel free to break this convention.

Send your campaigns in multi-part format. Ensure that every e-mail is received in the format that works best for your recipient.

Finally, keep on testing. It's important to understand that these guidelines count for very little unless you test them to see how each change affects your campaign's performance.