

THE GRANICUS GUIDE TO

# PUBLIC SECTOR EMAIL DESIGN

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TURNING EMAILS INTO

**ACTION**

# INTRODUCTION

Your organization's communications have a profound impact on people's lives. From healthy eating tips, to road construction updates, to severe weather warnings, public sector communications undoubtedly make a big difference – as long as they get read.

So, how can you ensure that the largest percentage of your audience will notice, read, and take action because of the messages you send? Our comprehensive email design guide explores the best practices and customer-centric approach your organization's emails should follow to deliver a relevant and meaningful experience that keeps your audience opening, reading, and clicking.

## THE CHALLENGE

### A MOBILE, DISTRACTED WORLD

Attention spans are shrinking and more of your audience is on the move, reading emails during breakfast, on the train or between meetings. Crafting messages that drive action must take into account the context of where and how people are reading emails – often, that's in a hurry.

What's more, the volume of content continues to multiply. The average person encounters up to 5,000 advertisements per day (Source: Yankelovich) and receives about 100 emails per day. Grabbing someone's attention is no small task, but it can certainly be done.

### DESIGN SHIFT

Email newsletters are not new to the public sector. Designed after print newsletters, with multiple columns and text-heavy paragraphs, email newsletters were originally packed with information to be read with focused attention. Now, that's shifting.

Modern audiences interact with and digest digital information differently. They use smartphones and tablets to catch up on the go. They sort and delete messages swiftly. They scan and scroll through content. It's important to make sure your emails are designed to fit with a modern audience's needs. In this guide, we'll help you do that.

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Granicus partners with more than 3,000 public sector organizations around the world across federal, state, and local levels, and over the past 15 years we've been able to see what works in email design and what doesn't. Read on to see more details and the design tips that will make your emails better than ever.

# ANATOMY OF AN EMAIL

TRUSTED FROM NAME

FROM: DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION  
DATE: 11/05/2018  
TO: KAREN JOHNSON  
SUBJECT: THIS WEEK: CLEAN UP TIPS, EVENTS, AND MORE!

CLEAR, ATTENTION-GRABBING SUBJECT LINE

ORGANIZATION BRANDING



DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Promoting the usage and conservation of our natural resources.

VIEW AS WEBPAGE

## NEW REGULATIONS ARE HERE!

RELEVANT IMAGERY



NEW THIS MONTH: regulations for paper and plastic recycling. Do your part to help.

READ UPDATES

OBVIOUS CALL TO ACTION

VALUE PROPOSITION & CONTEXT



### LOCAL CLEAN-UP EVENTS

Check out our calendar for weekly events in your area and don't forget to share it with your friends!

GO TO CALENDAR

SHARE

SHAREABLE

Do you have a local event or initiative that you'd like to promote? Don't waste time - submit your project or event today and get featured on our calendar!

MORE VISUAL ELEMENTS



PROMOTE YOUR EVENT!

WEBSITE LINK

visit [deoc.org](http://deoc.org)

SOCIAL LINKS



UNSUBSCRIBE

## CAPTURE ATTENTION, GET OPENS

Whether the objective of your email is to inform, engage, or drive your audience to take action, you need them to open it first. Here are the best practices that we at Granicus see organizations use to get more opens.

### FROM NAME

The “from name” is the display name that appears in your audience’s inbox and is usually the first aspect of your email that they will see.

- Trust is a key factor in getting your audience to open your message, so a familiar “from name” helps increase trust.
- Clearly state your organization’s name so your audience members can recognize your emails instantly in their inbox.
- If you are sending on behalf of a department or smaller group at your organization, use your department or group name to tailor content to your audience.
- Avoid personal names unless you are an elected official.

### FROM ADDRESS

Your “from address” is the actual email domain from which your messages are sent (the words after the @ in your email address). Like the “from name,” the “from address” helps your audience recognize you so you can drive more opens.

- Use your organization or department name in the “from address” of the email address in addition to the “from name.” Example: organizationname@organizationname.gov.
- Make sure your sending domain is trusted by ISPs – a widely recognized “from address” will help improve message deliverability so your messages don’t get filtered by the inbox.



## SUBJECT LINES

Subject lines make the first impression for your message – it’s your shot to grab your audience’s attention and rise above the noise of the rest of their inbox.

- Keep subject lines concise, simple and descriptive.
- Limit subject lines to 50 characters, 8 words or less.
- The most relevant information should go at the front of the subject line – many mobile devices cut off subject lines at 35 characters.
- Test different subject lines with audience segments – for instance, use “September events” instead of “monthly newsletter” and see which performs better.
- Highlight the most compelling content for the broadest base of the readership in your subject line.
- Don’t use emojis in subject lines – they increase the likelihood that your email will go to spam.

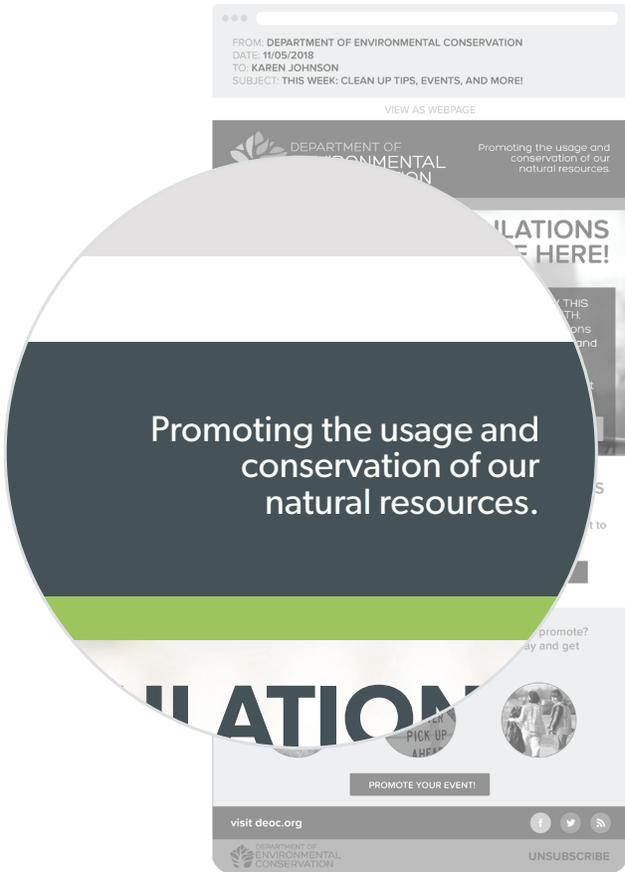


Great subject lines get opens. In fact, 64% of email users say the main reason they open an email is the subject line. (Source: Unbounce)

## PREHEADER TEXT

Many email clients, including Gmail, display a snippet of text after the subject line in the inbox called preheader text. This preheader text is pulled from the first piece of content in the body of an email and helps build on the subject line, further compelling your audience to open.

- Preheader text should be 75 characters or less – some of your audience may only see 35 characters, so keep the most important content at the beginning.
- Preheader text should be invisible so that it doesn't take away from the main call to action (CTA) – to do this, use HTML code to make the text the same color as the background of your email, which will be white in most cases.
- We recommend you update your preheader for every email, but a static general preheader works as well.
- Many messages offer a landing page version of the email for audiences who don't have images enabled – place your preheader text before the link to your landing page.



Promoting the usage and  
conservation of our  
natural resources.

The pre-header makes a difference. In a recent test with Michigan Department of Natural Resources, a contextual preheader garnered a 20% increase in open rates.

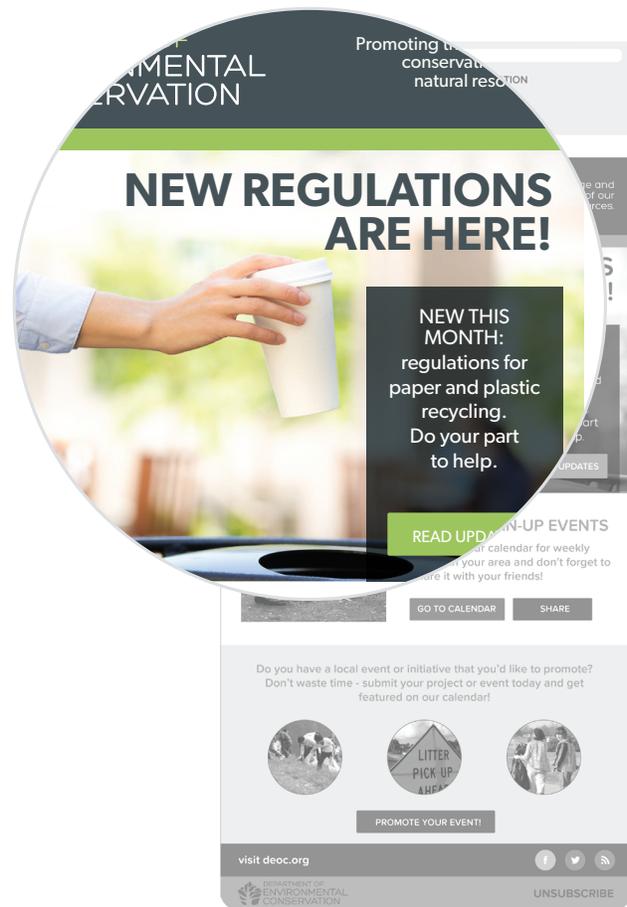
## VALUABLE SPACE AT THE TOP OF YOUR EMAIL

This is what your audience sees first when they open. Make it count.

### ABOVE THE FOLD

The “above the fold” area of an email is what displays in the preview pane of most email clients, including Outlook and Gmail. Your audience sees this first when they open, so put your most important messages here.

- The “above the fold” section is the top 2-4 inches or 300-500 pixels of your email.
- Take advantage of this space – include visually appealing design/layout and copy that reinforces the subject line without repeating it.
- Include a benefit-oriented headline that demonstrates value for the recipient – headline text font should be at least 22 pixels.
- Use a banner or masthead to reflect your organization’s brand identity, increase trust, and promote familiarity – height should be 150 pixels or less to avoid pushing the main message down.
- Your main message and primary CTAs should fall directly beneath the banner or masthead and above the fold so your audience can take action without scrolling.
- Include sharing options in the header or the body of the email, such as links to forward the message to a friend/colleague and to share it with the reader’s social network.
- While it’s critical to include your CTA above the fold, it’s equally important to include some at the bottom of the message so your audience can take action once they’ve finished reading.



## LANDING PAGE VERSION

You should provide a link to a hosted web version of your email. This is extremely helpful for anyone in your audience who doesn't have images enabled. A landing page version gives them the opportunity to navigate to a browser window to view images and content online

- Include a CTA to let readers know you offer a landing page version – font size for this text should be 3 pixels
- The CTA “View as a web page” yields the best results – avoid CTAs similar to “Doesn't look right? Click here.”
- The landing page link should come after the preheader text – otherwise, this will be the first text that displays in the preview pane/inbox.
- Don't use styling that distracts from the main content – basic text in the upper right corner works best.



# USER-FRIENDLY DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Keep your audience in mind when driving design. What are their behaviors and motivations and when and where do they read your messages?

## THINK MOBILE FIRST

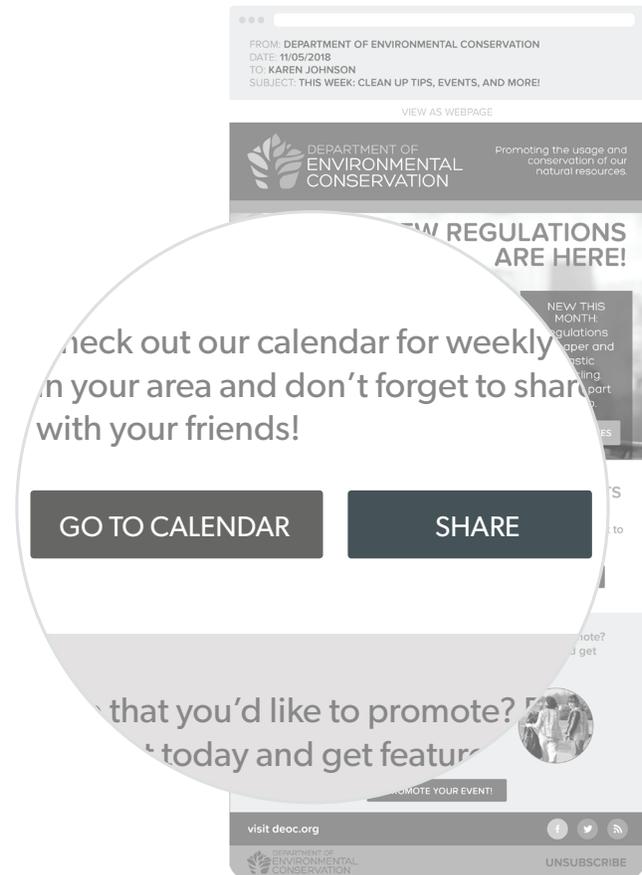
The “above the fold” area of an email is what displays in the preview pane of most email clients, including Outlook and Gmail. Your audience sees this first when they open, so put your most important messages here.

- Use short snippets of text with a large enough font (14 pixels).
- Design large buttons that can be tapped by a finger.

## NO MORE NEWSLETTERS

Short attention spans, flooded inboxes and a mobile lifestyle mean your audience typically doesn’t have time to read lengthy emails. Keep them scannable and mobile-friendly.

- Stick with a vertical, single column layout for quick and easy reading.
- Don’t use a sidebar to include additional information as this can distract from key content – instead, move sidebar information (such as contact details) to the bottom of your email or remove it.
- Don’t include a table of contents (TOC) – this will push critical content further down your message, requiring your audience to scroll. If you need a TOC, the email is too long.
- Don’t arrange articles side-by-side.



## CASE STUDY

The Diabetes Health Division at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) wanted to deliver critical diet, health, and exercise information to women who are affected by gestational diabetes, which can occur for non-diabetic women during pregnancy.

The CDC wanted to reach its audience with information about how a healthy diet and exercise can help control gestational diabetes.

To shape its email strategy, the CDC considered its target audience:

- She might have a full-time job, sometimes working late
- She may have young kids, whom she needs to pick up from daycare every day
- She could be active in her community, volunteering and helping coordinate events

The CDC understood that its target audience led a busy life that left little time for reading emails. So, when the CDC tested the two email options below, it was little surprise that the EMAIL OPTION 2 received 4x the number of opens and 5x the number of clicks as the longer, EMAIL OPTION 1.

The CDC also recognized that by uncluttering its email design and using white space with interesting visuals, its emails would have a better chance of getting read. Simple, but quality email design, paired with a strong understanding of your audience's needs, can help your emails reach more people and have a far greater impact.



## THE RIGHT SIZE

You don't want your audience to have to scroll to the left or right to digest your message, so keep your width within standards.

- The average email width is 500-700 pixels wide – we recommended staying as close as possible to 500 pixels.

## MAKE IT VISUAL

Use graphics that attract interest and visually convey the subject matter.

- All images should have alternative text (alt-text) that describes the image and should also be added to the title of your image.
- Avoid background images – many email clients don't support them.
- Don't make your entire email one large image (like a flyer). If your audience receives the email in plain text, they won't get the whole message.
- Videos should not be embedded – use a thumbnail image that links to the location where the video is hosted online.



500 TO 700 PIXELS

**Video content grabs audience attention. Including video can increase click rates by 300%.**  
(Source: Wistia)

**A clean layout that uses plenty of white space can improve reader comprehension by 20%.**  
(Source: Crazy Egg)

## WHITE SPACE

Design elements like spacing, color and white space can add clarity around your content and create a fresh, reader-friendly layout.

- Use spacing and alternating background colors to distinguish between content sections. If you are using lines (like horizontal rules), they must be styled.
- Incorporate white space to simplify your newsletter and provide a clean look.
- Don't crowd links and buttons – 44 pixels is the minimum size for clickable buttons or images.

## BODY CONTENT

Use graphics that attract interest and visually convey the subject matter.

- Use responsive design and leverage a template that uses @media queries – focus on simple steps you can take to make emails mobile-friendly.
- Include relevant images to complement your text – don't add images for visual effect alone.
- Unique images work well because they drive more curiosity than templates that have a static image.
- Make sure your copy uses straightforward language that's for the target audience segment and tells a story.
- Body text font should be at least 14 pixels.
- CTAs should be clearly visible and 46 pixels high for easy tappability (the width may depend on the language used in the call to action button).
- Use unique CTA text that informs users where they're going – for instance, write "download the report" instead of "read more."



**Make your content scannable –  
80% of email users only scan  
their messages.**  
(Source: Nielsen Norman Group)

## GET YOUR AUDIENCE TO CLICK

More people are reading emails on smartphones, especially if those emails are sent to personal addresses during business hours. In this mobile world, the finger is the new cursor – make sure you’re designing for touch.

### VISUAL ELEMENTS

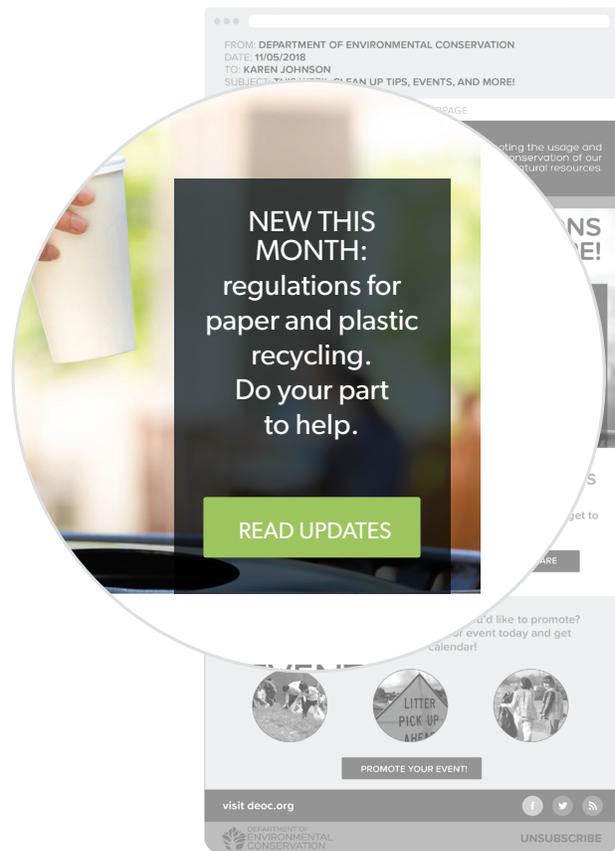
CTAs and clickables should be clearly visible – use arrows, buttons, and large hyperlinked text to make them stand out

- Use styling or images to make links into buttons, giving your audience more area to click with their finger.
- If you can’t use visual elements to indicate CTAs, make your hyperlinked text large and set off with some space.

### LINK OUTSIDE TEXT

While it’s acceptable to hyperlink words or phrases within paragraphs of text, links underneath a paragraph or outside of a paragraph will yield better results.

- You can still link in the paragraph, just make sure you link to it again after the paragraph if it’s an important destination for your audience.



## YOUR COPY AND VOICE

The text you use to communicate with your audience impacts your email visually and reflects your organization's personality. Use concise content that's consistent in tone.

### COPY LENGTH

Limit the amount of content in the email. While there are some exceptions, such as when sending technical, scientific or detailed information to an engaged audience, most readers scan content.

- Use short sentences, paragraphs, and snippets of content that link to a landing page.
- Think of your email as a tool to encourage people to click through to their topic of interest – don't try to include all the information in the email.
- Make sure your voice reflects your organization – your tone might be conversational, professional, authentic, inspiring – find what fits and keep it consistent.

### FONT CHOICES

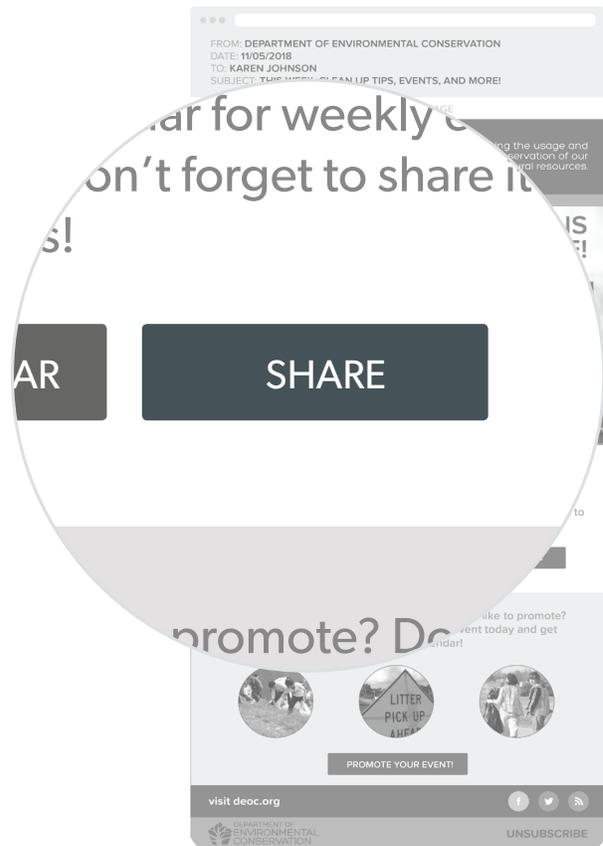
Make sure the font is large enough to read on a mobile device – 14 pixels is the minimum.

- Keep font sizing consistent and in proportion to images.
- Use web-safe standard fonts, such as Arial or Times New Roman.

### SHAREABILITY

Leverage your audience to help spread your content.

- Ask your audience to tweet or share your email with their social networks.
- Include social sharing tools in the header, footer, and throughout the email near the most engaging content as appropriate.



**Let your audience help – 94% of people consider how the content they share will be useful to others.**  
(Source: New York Times)

## DON'T FORGET THE FOOTER

The bottom of your email offers a great space for your audience to find resources.

### HELPFUL INFORMATION

Limit the amount of content in the email. While there are some exceptions, such as when sending technical, scientific or detailed information to an engaged audience, most readers scan content.

- People typically expect to find helpful resources at the bottom of email communications, so it's imperative to construct and design your footer to be as easy and useful as possible.
- Include links to your other online properties, like your website and social media sites.
- Provide a link to the online version of the message.
- Include a reminder of why subscribers are receiving the message – provide clear ways to manage subscription preferences or unsubscribe to reduce the chance of complaints.
- Direct your audience to an FAQ resource for more information.

### PREFERENCES

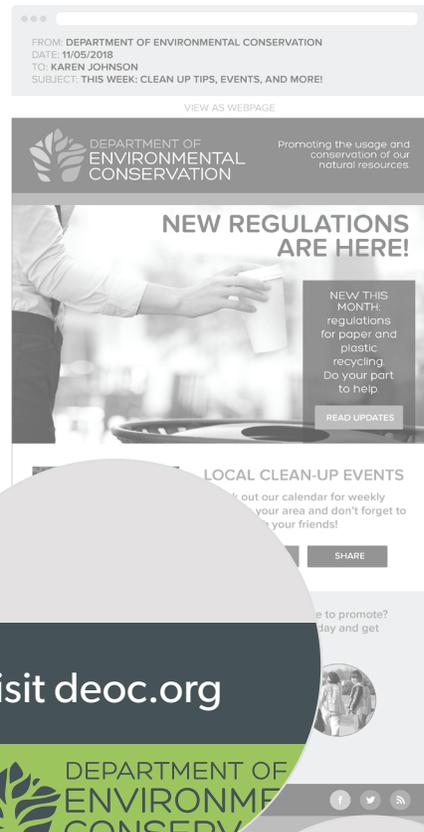
While it's acceptable to hyperlink words or phrases within paragraphs of text, links underneath a paragraph or outside of a paragraph will yield better results.

- Empower subscribers to manage the content they receive. Allow them to reduce the number of topics they receive updates on or reduce delivery frequency.
- Offer the ability to receive a digest of information rather than multiple individual emails.
- Give subscribers a topic-specific unsubscribe – this lets them opt out of individual topics rather than your entire account.

### NAME AND ADDRESS

Include your organization's name and physical address in the footer.

- While it's not required that government organizations follow the regulations of the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003, we recommend you include your address.



## TEST AND DETERMINE THE ROI OF YOUR MESSAGES

You can't keep improving your messages if you can't measure their impact. Drive your email strategy with data insights and do quality assurance checks to make sure everything's functioning as it should.

### SEGMENT, TEST, IMPROVE

Optimizing and testing email content can seem like a lot of work, but the right data is a powerful tool when working to improve email performance and drive audience engagement.

- Segment your audiences by persona so you can determine how different audiences respond to changes.
- Segment smaller groups of your audiences into control and test groups. The control group will receive your original email – the test group will receive a redesigned version with different subject lines, images or content.
- Test formatting and layout changes with different segments to gain email activity metrics – determine which changes positively impact the number of people who open and click on your messages and apply those changes moving forward.

### QUALITY ASSURANCE CHECK

Great content should be paired with high quality – make sure your emails deliver.

- Spellcheck and link check each message.
- Have multiple people proofread and check links to reduce errors.
- Use custom campaign parameter tags for message links to inform your organization's analytics and demonstrate the email's value to referral sites.
- Test template and message layouts across all browsers, email clients and devices to ensure they render correctly and consistently.
- Use template and message layouts that are Section 508-compliant – make sure your email offers a text-only version.

### ANALYZE RESULTS

Check out your analytics to find out what's working and see where you can improve.

- Review your communications and calibrate content based on open and click rates.
- If you have analytics reporting capabilities, you can use your results to measure communication goals and complete weekly, monthly, or yearly analyses.
- Use data to streamline and shape your messaging efforts moving forward.

# SUMMARY

As mobile use increases, attention spans shrink, and inboxes flood, it's becoming more challenging to get audiences to open, read, and click emails. By following the email design tips and best practices in this guide, you can provide a more meaningful, customer-centric experience that engages your audience – and turns more of your emails into action from your audience.

Our Digital Engagement Services team has worked with hundreds of government organizations of all sizes to help them meet and exceed their goals. And we're standing at the ready to help your organization meet its goals too.

