Email for All

ActionRocket & Beyond the Envelope™

Email Accessibility

2021 Report

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Introduction

ActionRocket is an award-winning creative studio that specialises in digital content and CRM. We focus on building customer relationships through human connections and aim to bring brands to life in the inbox. We have a senior team of strategists, planners, copywriters, designers and coders who are constantly pushing our clients with the latest design and code innovations.

We have come together with Paul Airy, founder of Beyond the Envelope™ with our shared commitment to accessibility to form Email for All. Shining a light on the things that can be done to make the email experience enjoyable for every single recipient.

Email for All was created to understand the value of the accessibility implementations we make every day. After finding a whole host of helpful content around web accessibility but minimal on email, we knew we needed to open up the conversation further for the email community. With that in mind we decided the best way to start was to carry out some usability testing.

About
the study

We conducted an international market research study to help us to identify valuable insights around email accessibility. Our aim is to replace what we think will improve the recipient experience with what will actually improve the recipient experience when it comes to implementing accessibility in email – making accessibility real.

162 people took part in the survey and the research was conducted over the period of one month between May and June 2021. The questions allowed for multiple answers, therefore giving us a wide range of data and not always forming the total value of 100%.

The importance of Accessibility

2 billion people worldwide have a vision impairment, and 2.5 billion people are projected to have some hearing loss by 2050.

1 in 5 people have some form of disability, a huge 20%! And that's not taking into account temporary situations.

Accessibility isn't only about making your emails appear well when using a screen reader, or about making sure your colours have enough contrast, it's about making sure your emails can reach and be understood by the largest possible number of your subscribers.

Taking accessibility into account when you are creating emails is important from a design point of view, and when building with HTML. Keep your recipients happy by making them feel valued, and if you still need a reason - don't get sued for not having accessible communications.

WCAG Guidelines

The Web Accessibility Initiative, has put together some Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) which is widely used as a basis for accessibility on the web, including all communications from an app, email or on a web page. There are three levels as defined by the guidelines:

A

This is the most basic level with some small adjustments for accessibility, including a link to a more accessible version elsewhere.

AA

Where most emails and websites sit, the content is accessible but without the restrictive design and styling that is needed for the highest level.

AAA

As accessible as possible, including simpler layouts, higher colour contrast and other techniques that would need to be considered from the outset. The two we are most interested in are AA and AAA which are both achievable when creating HTML emails.

Key Findings

Our findings showed that whilst 23% of participants revealed to having a disability and 79% did not, putting accessible best practices into place benefits everyone.

The study found that non-accessible implementations make elements difficult to read for those with disabilities and barriers and those without. We hope that by raising awareness of the incremental improvements that can be made, we can help email become more accessible for all.
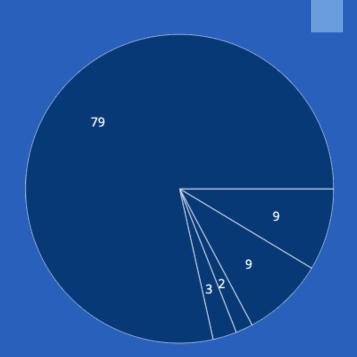
Conclusive results?

"As to whether the results are conclusive, the answer has to be no. We have more questions to ask."

Paul Airy

Do you have any disabilities or barriers?

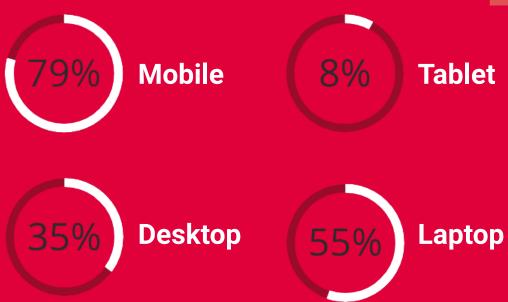|	
Visual	**9%**
Cognitive	**9%**
Auditory	**2%**
Physical	**3%**
None	**79%**

ANALYSIS

- **9% Visual**
- **9% Cognitive**, learning, and neurogical (Mental health disabilities, Perceptual disabilities, Seizure disorders, Other)
- **2% Auditory** (Hard of hearing, Deafness, Deaf-blindness, Other)
- **3% Physical** (Amputation, Arthritis, Tremor and spasms, Other)
- **79% None**

23% of those who took part in our survey reported having a disability or barrier possibly affecting their day to day ability to read or understand emails. This is not taking into account temporary or situational circumstances, such as a broken arm or holding a baby.

What type of device do you use to read emails?

2

79% **Mobile**

8% **Tablet**

35% **Desktop**

55% **Laptop**

ANALYSIS

The highest reported usage was upon mobile devices at 79%. With desktop and laptop both still highly considered, but usage of tablets was considerably lower at only 8%.

With this in mind, it is especially important for marketers to think about responsive code when creating emails. Designing for mobile does not mean ignoring desktop clients, most elements can be controlled and enhanced for each device.

Do you adjust your device settings to make emails easier to read?
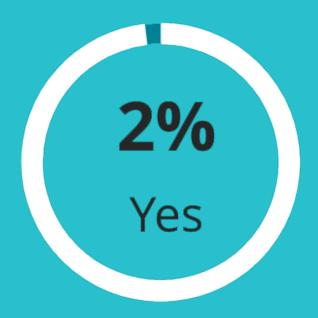
3

Yes   23%

No   77%

ANALYSIS

All devices now come with a range of features allowing users to adjust to meet their needs. 23% of our respondents said they do adjust these settings to make their emails easier to read.

This included use of Dark Mode features, adjusting device brightness, the use of system fonts, zoom, and altering text sizes.

Do you use any hardware to assist you in receiving and experiencing emails?

4

2%
Yes

ANALYSIS

Our research showed that only 2% of participants use hardware to assist them in receiving and experiencing emails. Although a small number, this still accounts for the importance of voice overs and online tools to help make the email experience as inclusive as possible.

Have you used a smart speaker to read out your emails?

5

6% Yes

ANALYSIS

Smartphones have made everyday experiences easier, faster, and more intuitive than ever before. Marketers are needing to turn from mobile to voice strategy, and begin thinking about how inbox and email habits will change.

6% answered yes to using a smart speaker to help read out emails. This number will only continue to increase, making it paramount for emails to be voice ready and accessible to be searched and read by digital assistants.

Do you use any assistive technology?

6

6%
Yes

ANALYSIS

6% of our questionnaire respondents revealed that they use some form of digital assistive technology. These answers included a variety of helpful tools and features, such as keyboard navigation, dictation apps, closed captioning, increased display scaling, and the addition of audio reading.

Which of these, in their font families can you read easily?

7

A

An elephant slept in his bunk,
And in slumber his chest rose and sunk.
But he snored — how he snored!
All the other beasts roared,
So his wife tied a knot in his trunk.

B

There was an old man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!
Two owls and a hen,
Four larks and a wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

C

A creature of charm is the gerbil
Its diet's exclusively herbal;
It grazes all day
On bunches of hay
Passing gas with an elegant burble.

D

A circus performer named Brian
Once smiled as he rode on a lion.
They came back from the ride
But with Brian inside,
And the smile on the face of the
lion.

RESULTS

79% A

2% B

74% C

45% D

ANALYSIS

> 79% of participants found Roboto, a sans-serif font, easy to read, and 74% found Roboto Slab, a slab-serif font, easy to read — resulting in the sans-serif font being only 5% more readable! However, this 5% difference could be explained by the fonts similarity in that they're both from the same typeface family.
>
> **Paul Airy**

Which of these, in their respective font sizes can you read easily?

8

A

An elephant slept in his bunk,
And in slumber his chest rose and sunk.
But he snored — how he snored!
All the other beasts roared,
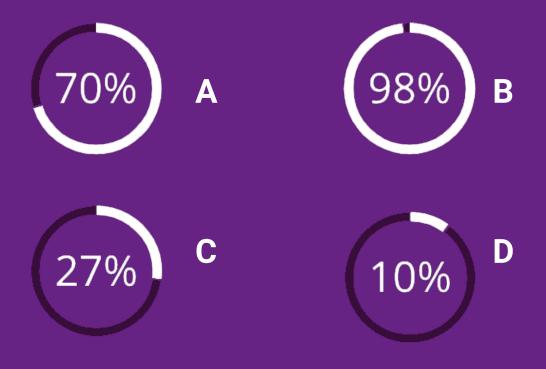So his wife tied a knot in his trunk.

B

There was an old man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!
Two owls and a hen,
Four larks and a wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

C

A creature of charm is the gerbil
Its diet's exclusively herbal;
It grazes all day
On bunches of hay
Passing gas with an elegant burble.

D

A circus performer named Brian
Once smiled as he rode on a lion.
They came back from the ride
But with Brian inside,
And the smile on the face of the lion.

RESULTS

70% A

98% B

27% C

10% D

ANALYSIS

98% of participants found 16px easily readable and 73% found 12px hard to read which was to be expected, although surprisingly 70% found the size 14px easy to read. Our best practice minimum text size for all body copy is 16px, and it's also important to ensure the line-height isn't too tight. This will ensure all your text is as easy to read and understand as possible.

Which of these, in their respective font weights can you read easily?

9

A

An elephant slept in his bunk,
And in slumber his chest rose and sunk.
But he snored — how he snored!
All the other beasts roared,
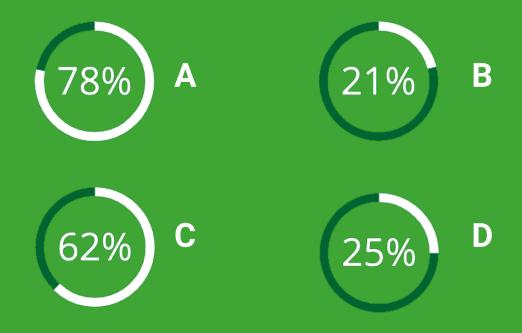So his wife tied a knot in his trunk.

B

There was an old man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!
Two owls and a hen,
Four larks and a wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

C

A creature of charm is the gerbil
Its diet's exclusively herbal;
It grazes all day
On bunches of hay
Passing gas with an elegant burble.

D

A circus performer named Brian
Once smiled as he rode on a lion.
They came back from the ride
But with Brian inside,
And the smile on the face of the lion.

RESULTS

78% A

21% B

62% C

25% D

ANALYSIS

> The normal (400) font-weight was found easy to read by 78% of participants. 62% found bold (700) easy to read, the black (900) font-weight was found easy to read by only 25% of participants, which suggests that bolder is not always better. The extra light (200) font-weight was readable by only 21%, supporting the case that many have made for avoiding light fonts.
>
> **Paul Airy**

Which of these, in their respective alignments can you read easily?

10

A

The original. The timeless. The spiced hammiest of all SPAM® varieties. This is the taste that started it all back in 1937. Like a true original, SPAM® Classic is the variety that has captured hearts and taste buds by consistently bringing deliciousness and creativity to a wide range of meals.

B

The original. The timeless. The spiced hammiest of all SPAM® varieties. This is the taste that started it all back in 1937. Like a true original, SPAM® Classic is the variety that has captured hearts and taste buds by consistently bringing deliciousness and creativity to a wide range of meals.

C

The original. The timeless. The spiced hammiest of all SPAM® varieties. This is the taste that started it all back in 1937. Like a true original, SPAM® Classic is the variety that has captured hearts and taste buds by consistently bringing deliciousness and creativity to a wide range of meals.

D

The original. The timeless. The spiced hammiest of all SPAM® varieties. This is the taste that started it all back in 1937. Like a true original, SPAM® Classic is the variety that has captured hearts and taste buds by consistently bringing deliciousness and creativity to a wide range of meals.

RESULTS

17% A

88% B

39% C

38% D

ANALYSIS

88% of participants agreed that left aligned text is easier to read and understand. We suggest this for paragraphs of text that run longer than one or two lines. Although with only 39% of respondents finding center aligned text easy to read it does claim that left aligned may be best where possible.

Which of these, in their foreground and background colours can you read easily?

11

A

An elephant slept in his bunk,
And in slumber his chest rose and sunk.
But he snored — how he snored!
All the other beasts roared,
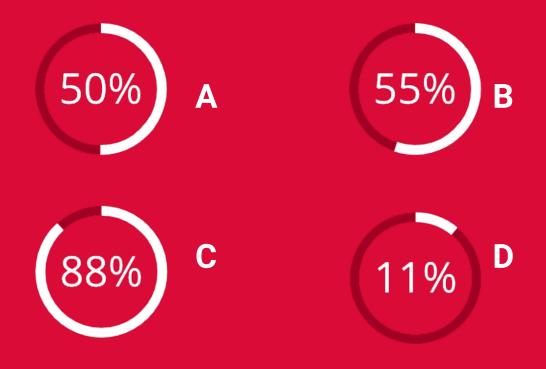So his wife tied a knot in his trunk.

B

There was an old man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!
Two owls and a hen,
Four larks and a wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

C

A creature of charm is the gerbil
Its diet's exclusively herbal;
It grazes all day
On bunches of hay
Passing gas with an elegant burble.

D

A circus performer named Brian
Once smiled as he rode on a lion.
They came back from the ride
But with Brian inside,
And the smile on the face of the lion.

RESULTS

50% A

55% B

88% C

11% D

ANALYSIS

These results show the importance of using the right background and foreground colours to convey a message. Options D and A are examples of where visually impared readers would struggle to understand the content.

We would recommend allowing for high contrast between your background and foreground colours. Especially when it comes to text and ensuring it is as legible as it possibly can be, our best practice for minimum contrast level is 4.5:1.

Which of these paragraphs, with their respective line spacing, can you read easily?

12

A

An elephant slept in his bunk,
And in slumber his chest rose and sunk.
But he snored — how he snored!
All the other beasts roared,
So his wife tied a knot in his trunk.

B

There was an old man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!
Two owls and a hen,
Four larks and a wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

C

A creature of charm is the gerbil
Its diet's exclusively herbal;
It grazes all day
On bunches of hay
Passing gas with an elegant burble.

D

A circus performer named Brian

Once smiled as he rode on a lion.

They came back from the ride

But with Brian inside,

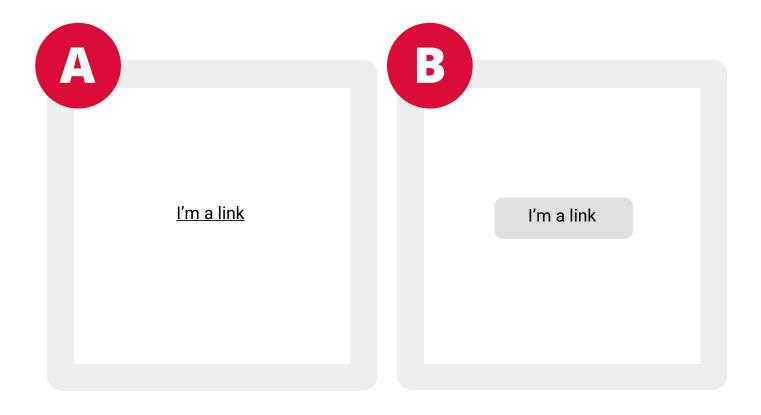And the smile on the face of the lion.

RESULTS

13% A

88% B

59% C

53% D

ANALYSIS

88% of participants agreed that text with a 1.5em line-height was easiest to read. When we increased the line-height to double the font size, only 53% of participants found it easy to read. When we removed the spacing entirely from the paragraph, this resulted in only 13% of finding it easy to read.
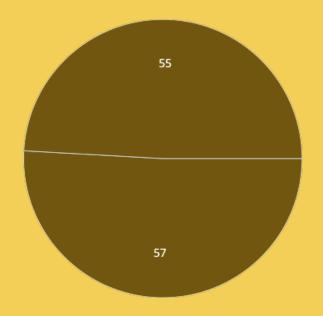
Which of these, the link or the button, can you see more easily?

13

A

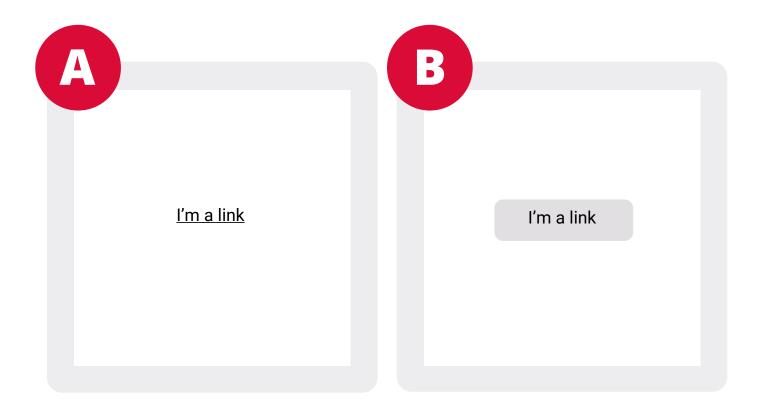I'm a link

B

I'm a link

RESULTS

A   57%

B   55%

ANALYSIS

With an almost 50/50 split, 57% of participants found the link easier to read and 55% found the button easier to read. Call to actions are a key element to any email campaign, serving as the locator for whatever action you want the reader to take. They should be clear and consistent so your subscribers know to look out for them.
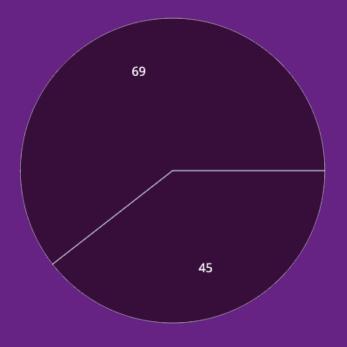
Which of these, the link or the button, can you select more easily?

14

A

I'm a link

B

I'm a link

RESULTS

A   45%

B   69%

ANALYSIS

Upon selecting the link or the button, 69% of respondents found the button easier vs. 45% who found the link easier. To help aid the selection of calls to action, they should always have a minimum tappable size of 44pt. Anything smaller than this can make it hard for users to tap on mobile or smaller devices.

Which of these links, in their respective colours, are easier to identify as links?
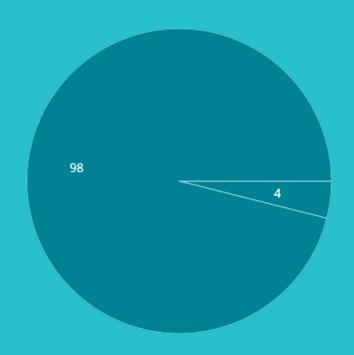
15

A

For three days and nights the internet was out, With intense and sleepless boredom I did bout, An old book I did spot, Many words I knew not, Sadly, I was a dictionary without

B

For three days and nights the internet was out, With intense and sleepless boredom I did bout, An old book I did spot, Many words I knew not, Sadly, I was a dictionary without
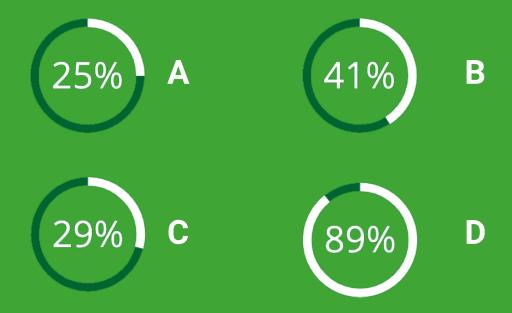
RESULTS

A 4%

B 98%

ANALYSIS

Only 4% of participants found the link in option A readable. Although this link was still underlined it remained difficult compared to option B, where 98% of participants agreed it was easier to identify as a link.

Of these animations, which ones distract you from their content, based on their speed?

16

View animations here

RESULTS

25% A

41% B

29% C

89% D

ANALYSIS

Animation is a great way for marketers to add creativity and help their emails to stand out in the inbox. It's important to ensure these animations are silky-smooth by keeping the speed low and the file size down, we would recommend keeping animated GIFs below 1MB in size where possible.

This will help with the loading time of the email, and keep the user experience accessible across all devices.

Which layout is easiest to understand?

17

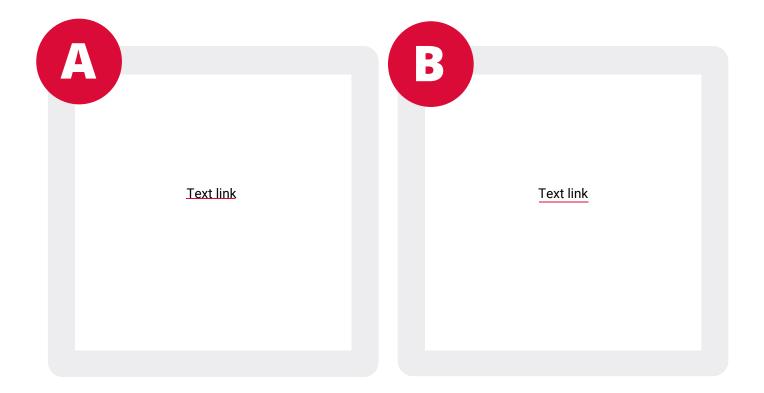**A**

B

C

D

RESULTS

83% A

59% B

35% C

4% D

ANALYSIS

83% of respondents thought option A was the easiest to understand, with a high 59% also choosing option B. Both of these options allow for plenty of space between the module elements, making the message easier to understand.

Don't over clutter your designs, and make your message flow in an obvious and logical manner. Headlines and titles should be clear, with the main call to action near to the top of the email. This will help ensure the email can be scanned quickly and understood by someone who has difficulty reading large amounts of text.

Which of these links, can you read more easily?

A

Text link

B

Text link

RESULTS

A 19.5%

19.5%

B 80.5%

80.5%

ANALYSIS

These results show a huge 80.5% of participants found option B easier to read. This text link included the same underline beneath the text, but with the addition of extra spacing. Only 19.5% found the standard text link easy to read, this is really important to note when including text links within larger paragraphs of text.

Key takeaways

Short Term

- Provide an accessible alternative to your email through including a view online link.

- Using sans-serif fonts, with at least 1.5 line-height and aligning left will improve the text accessibility.

- Choose high contrast colours, this will help those who are visually impaired and colour blind.

- Be mindful when using animation to make sure it's not distracting, or making it harder to read the email.

Long term

- Ensure your HTML is both accessible and semantic.

- Include alt attributes for all images and ensure text within images are kept to a minimum.

- Colour contrast should be between 4.5:1 and 7:1 at all times.

- Consistent link styling should be in place through all emails.

Email for All

ActionRocket & Beyond the Envelope™

Beyond the Envelope™ exists to challenge conventions and deliver great email experiences in the inbox. Starting with typography when most emails were images and continuing with accessibility when most (if not all) emails were inaccessible, making email easy to read and easy to interact with has become its mission. Its founder, Paul Airy, is a regular conference speaker, publisher of email Type E:, author of the Beyond the Envelope™ blog and recognised global advocate of accessibility in email.

At ActionRocket we can help you to understand more about accessibility and how it affects your email audience. Our aim is to get every brand to be creating emails with accessibility in mind. If you think your emails could be more accessible we'd love to help, get in touch with us at hello@actionrocket.co.

If you want to keep up to date with more of this kind of content then subscribe to our weekly newsletter Email Weekly. Our industry round-up email, including strategy, design, and code articles curated by our team and from across the email community.