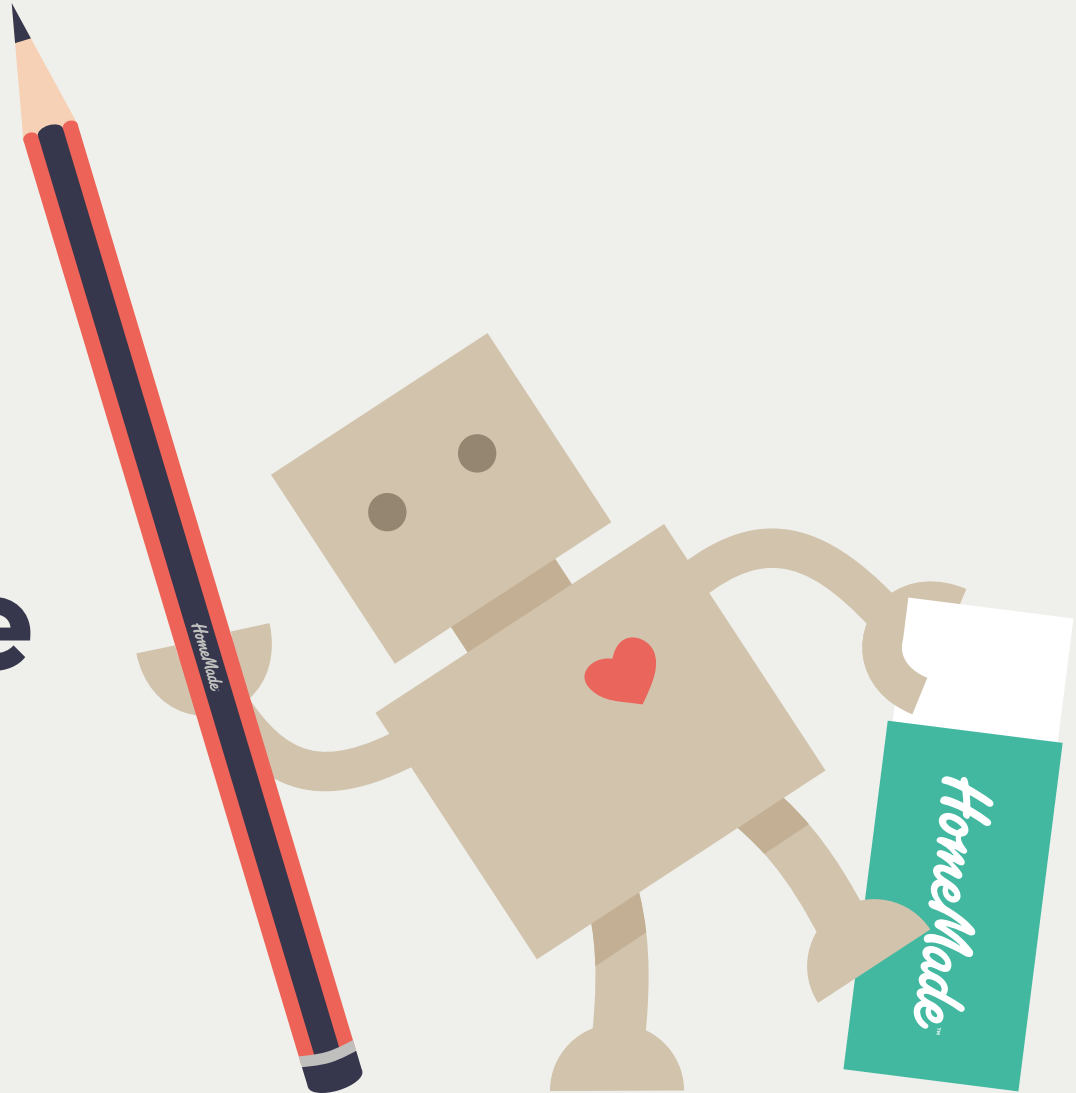




The anatomy of an effective eDM

(refreshed for Spring 2026)



Welcome to a refreshed HomeMade guide to creating emails that inspire action, nurture loyalty and raise more money.

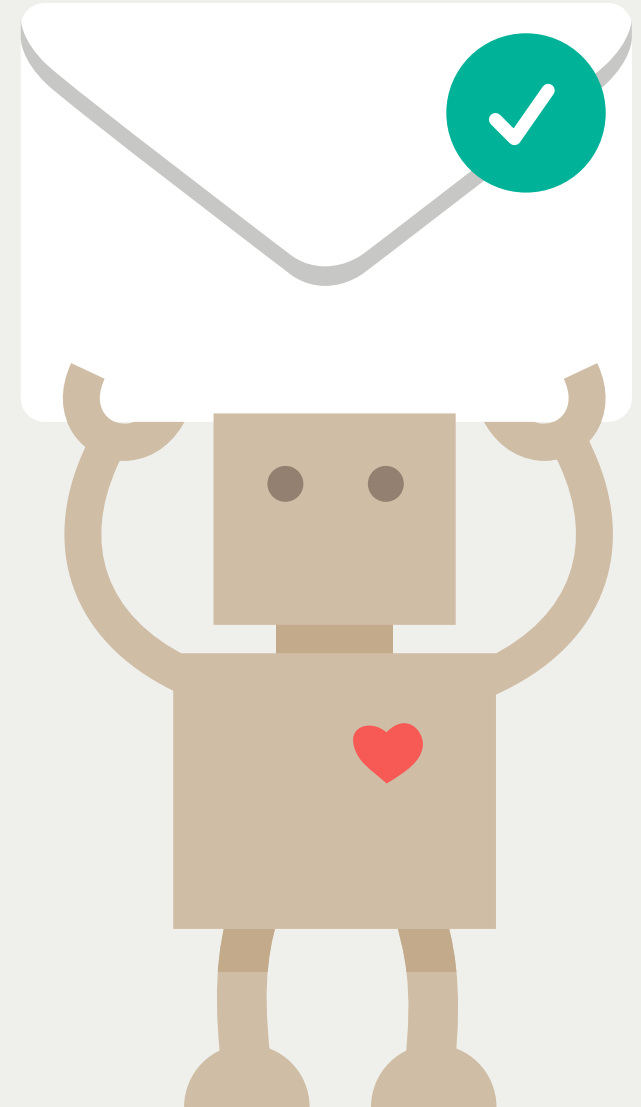
Why email still matters

Despite the noise about the growth in social and short-form content, plus AI everything, email remains one of the two most personal digital channels that charities have. The other? AI-driven SMS interactions, which we'll cover in a future guide!

Email is asynchronous, lands where people make decisions (on their mobile or desktop) and connects you to a core part of their lives: their inbox. When crafted well, each email can feel like a personal, friendly conversation with them, not a broadcast to them.

As ever, we need to look beyond goals such as 'more opens' or 'more clicks'. We need to strive for a deeper connection which permits us to aim for much more valuable, longer-term goals. Casual participants can become committed fundraisers. One-off donors might convert to lifelong supporters. Long-term supporters are attracted to legacy products, rather than needing a hard sell.

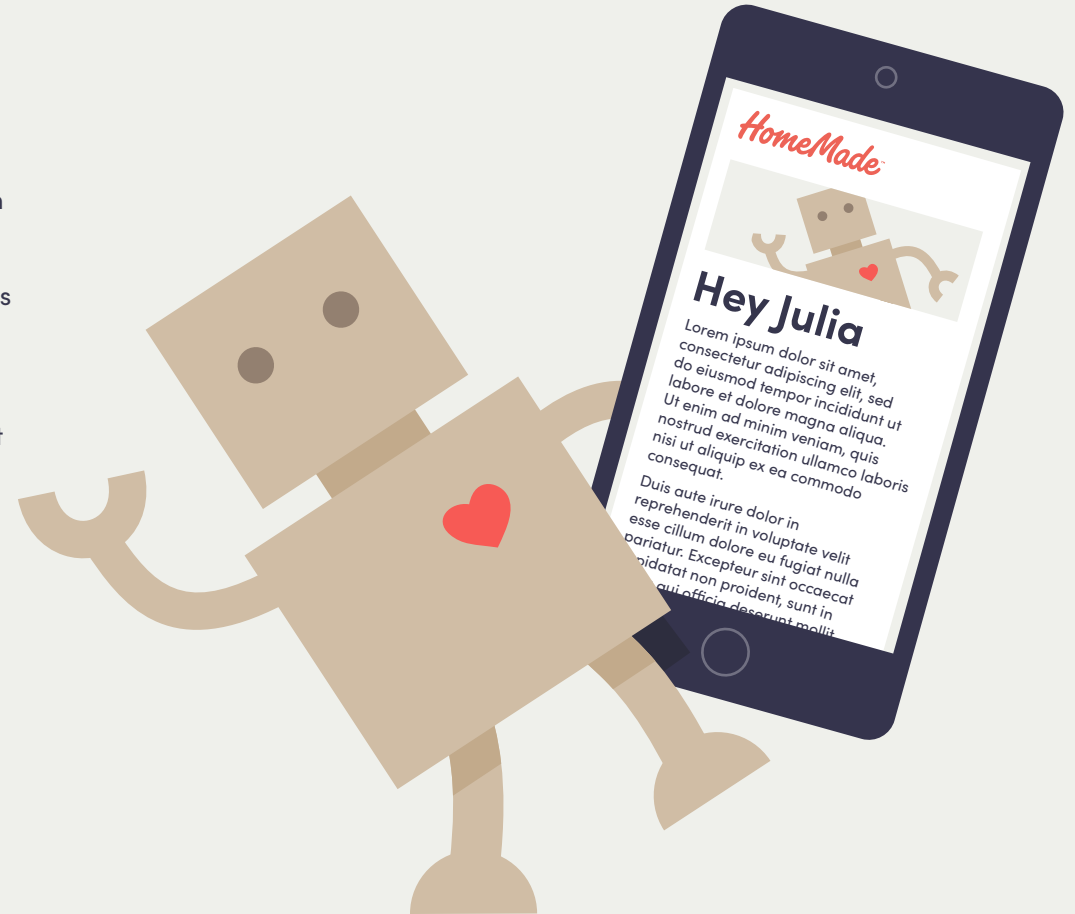
So, let's check the 11 vital signs of an effective eDM: 8 timeless tips, plus 3 new trends for 2026.



1 The foundations: design for humans and their context

Before the words, banners or buttons, let's think context (often a mobile device) and reader experience.

- A Mobile first.** Over 70% of emails are opened on a phone so design for thumbs not mice. Keep layouts single-column, buttons large and text comfortably scannable.
- B Accessible please.** Use real heading tags (H1, H2) rather than just enlarging text. Maintain minimum contrast ratios of 4.5:1 (WCAG 2.2 AA) but ideally aim for 7:1 (AAA standard). Add alt text for every image and avoid embedding key info in pictures since often they are not automatically displayed.
- C Dark mode-friendly.** Ensure logos and CTAs remain visible on dark backgrounds. Transparent PNGs and higher-contrast palettes help.
- D Web-safe fonts.** Stick with clean, readable fonts such as Arial, Georgia or Verdana.
- E Short and sweet.** The average email gets less than ten seconds of attention. Design for a skim-read, not a sit-down, tea-in-hand slow peruse.



Inbox essentials: subject line, sender and preview

Subject line:

- Aim for 40–60 characters (but test each email if possible since shorter regularly wins).
- Personalised content often helps: leading with <First_name> or 'You' can lift open rates.
-  One emoji can boost engagement; five can appear desperate. (Even adding just one or two to every line of an email can trigger spam filters.)

Deliverability and sender reputation:

- Keep your sending domain warm with regular, valuable communication. Going dark for months and then sending a big blast is a fast way to land in spam. If your primary use of email is event fundraising supporter comms, keep contacts connected between events with impact updates and monthly posts about the plans for the next event or cross-promotion of other activities.
- Authenticate your domain properly. Setting up SPF, DKIM and DMARC are essential.
- Use a consistent sending domain (not random subdomains or ESP-branded addresses). Familiarity boosts trust and inbox placement.
- Keep your data clean: remove hard bounces, suppress unengaged contacts and re-engage lapsed contacts thoughtfully.

Sender name and address:

- Always send from a named person, ideally someone recognisable or relevant to the event, appeal or campaign.
- Ideally between 20 and 60 characters e.g. **Caitlin | Super Swim** (but test how it displays since putting first name plus last name will often push the event / charity name off the preview).
- We're all working hard to establish and nurture relationships with supporters. So do everything in your power to avoid sending from a noreply@ address. It prevents conversation, sends the signal you've no intent to listen and appears corporate, not friendly. Email comms should invite and welcome engagement, not discourage it.
- Align your sender display name and email sign-off for authenticity. If your email closes with 'Cheers, Emma and the HomeMade team', make sure the sender line says Emma | HomeMade, not a more generic 'Fundraising Team'.
- If a staff member's inbox can't receive replies, route them to a monitored shared inbox (e.g. support@, events@, fundraising@). Someone should always be able to engage with supporters who 'reply'.

Crafting the message

Salutation:

- Make this warm and personal: 'Kia ora / Hey / Hello <first_name>' feels human.

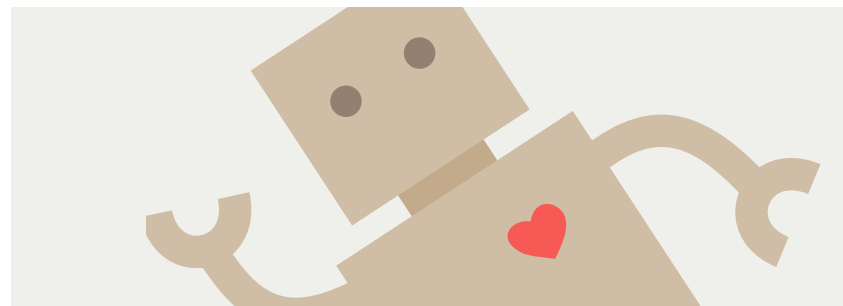
Headline:

- Always use an H1 headline block, as this is important for accessibility. Don't just use text in a large font. H1 should ideally be at least 22px. Headlines can be centre aligned but look at the overall readability of your layout and email. Keep headlines short. Ideally no more than seven words. Just like that sentence...

Hook them early:

- The opening line should make it instantly clear why this email matters to them personally.

HomeMade™



This heading is pretty short

Hey Julia!

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Structure:

Hook → Heart → Head → Hand

- **Hook:** Capture attention ('You've already changed three lives this month').
- **Heart:** Lead with emotional stories of impact.
- **Head:** Provide facts, progress or updates a little further into the content.
- **Hand:** Give them one, relevant and simple thing to do via a clear CTA.

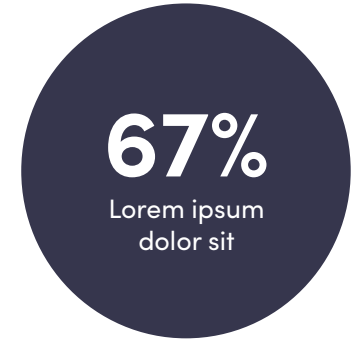
Copy style:

- Conversational, clear, not corporate.
- Use short paragraphs, active verbs and only one key idea per section.
- Avoid shouting (ALL CAPS) and heavy bolding **except for emphasis**.

P.S. lines:

- Still work, just as they do in DM comms. People will often scan down and read them first, so test them as well as the subject and preview lines.

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How you can help

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I want to help >

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Design that converts

Visual hierarchy:

- Use headers, whitespace and colour contrast to guide the reader's eye from message → proof → action.

CTA buttons:

- Use real HTML buttons, not images of buttons.
- High contrast, at least 18–20 pt text, generous padding and ideally rounded corners too.
- Always test button colour and copy ('Join the challenge' vs 'Start fundraising' vs 'Save my place now' etc.).

Banners:

- Each email deserves its own visual header which sets context for that specific message and CTA.
- Keep logos subtle (a thin strip works well, but consider dark mode too).
- Make the banner earn its space with emotion or purpose while thinking how much space it takes up on mobile views.

Alignment:

- Left-justify content / text for readability; headers (and only headers) might be centred as mentioned above.

Interaction:

- Subtle animations / GIFs, progress bars and recent stats can lift engagement, but stay under 100 KB to avoid being clipped by mail services such as Gmail.



5

Personalisation

Modern eDMs shouldn't feel templated; they should feel tailored to their reader.

Beyond first names:

- Reference achievements ('You've raised \$220 so far!')
- Geo-personalisation ('Your impact in Auckland...')
(If you know their actual location - don't rely on ESP geo-location as it is sometimes inaccurate)
- Behaviour-based triggers ('Still thinking about joining?')

Segmentation by motivation:

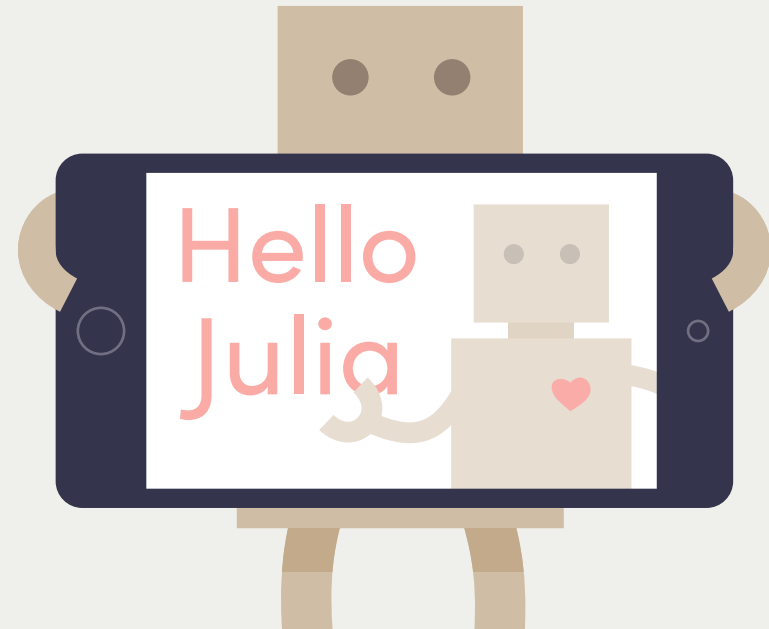
- Group supporters by why they participate (challenge / fitness, fun, your cause) and adjust language accordingly.

Conditional content:

- Swap images or blocks based upon their past engagements, role within your event or fundraising goal / total raised. A multi-year returning participant should see different stories compared with a newcomer.

Tone consistency:

- Whether automated or manual, every email should sound as if it's from the same warm, capable person or team.



Testing, learning and optimising

With potentially tens of thousands of contacts receiving tens of emails from you, testing shouldn't be a bolt-on only if there's time. Otherwise your sends are, at best, based upon experience or, at worst, guesswork.

Create a testing framework:

- Always isolate one variable per variant.
- Run A/B tests on statistically valid audience sizes.
- Keep a 'learnings library' of what performs for your cause and audience, when it performed, in what context and at what point during a wider journey.

Heatmaps and scroll depth:

- Use a tool like Litmus to see how far readers scroll. Adjust your CTA placements accordingly.

Tools:

- For inbox placement, deliverability and spam testing, we rate Mailgun Optimise, with Mailgun Inspect covering dark mode and accessibility. Mailgun's products are modular and billed monthly, so if your budget is tight, build core templates, subscribe for a month, then test everything robustly.

Send-time optimisation:

- Audience behaviour varies by time of year and region. So test and record the impact of these factors.
- For readers in Aus/NZ, Tuesday at 10am seems to still perform best, with Tuesday to Thursday the strongest window.
- For readers in the UK, early morning Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday work well.
- For actions such as registering for an event, we've seen lunchtime on Sunday work.
- We've seen appeals and registration drives perform brilliantly on moments such as public holidays, Boxing Day afternoon or even later on New Year's Day. They are each worth testing for your audience or content.
- Buyer beware: don't rely on tools that claim to send based upon a contact's local time zone and geography. Locations tend to be identified by where their email service is located or where they last opened an email (perhaps NYC or Bali) rather than where they are in real time.

7 Borrowing from e-commerce

Fundraising emails can learn from online retail.

- A Dropped basket = donation drop-off**
Trigger a gentle reminder: 'Looks like you were about to make something amazing happen...'
- B Product recommendations = impact stories**
Use dynamic content to surface relevant stories ('See what other swimmers / runners / walkers have achieved').
- C Progress bars = motivation**
Show personal or collective milestones since progress or completion of levels is exciting.
- D Urgency cues**
'Only 2 days left to double your impact' works just as well for charity events as it does for a sale.
- E Social proof**
Highlight peer action ('3,047 other brilliant humans are already taking part').
- F Commitment and consistency**
Small asks ('Share your fundraising page') pave the way for bigger ones ('Donate \$20 to kickstart your fundraising today').



Measure what matters

Don't just track opens and clicks. Follow the journey: open → click → onsite action → completion → re-engagement.

Core metrics:

- Click-to-action rate (CTR tied to your key goal)
- Conversion to and value of registration or donation actions
- Unsubscribe and spam report trends
- Time to next engagement
- Deliverability and inbox placement, not just "delivered" (see section 10)

Link results back to the supporter record within your CDP / CRM or marketing automation platform. Build a clearer picture of lifetime value, areas of interest plus also preferences for time of send or types of content.

Your quick pre-send checklist.

Before you click 'send', ask yourself:

- ✓ Is the single purpose of this email crystal clear?
- ✓ Will it look good and work well on a phone, even in dark mode?
- ✓ Can every reader access it, including screen reader users?
- ✓ Does the first screen they see tell them why they should care and act?
- ✓ Is the CTA relevant, obvious and irresistible?
- ✓ Have we tested something new (and are we ready to track the result)?
- ✓ Is the tone human, warm and unmistakably us?
- ✓ Have we done all we can so it will land in the inbox, not Promotions or spam?

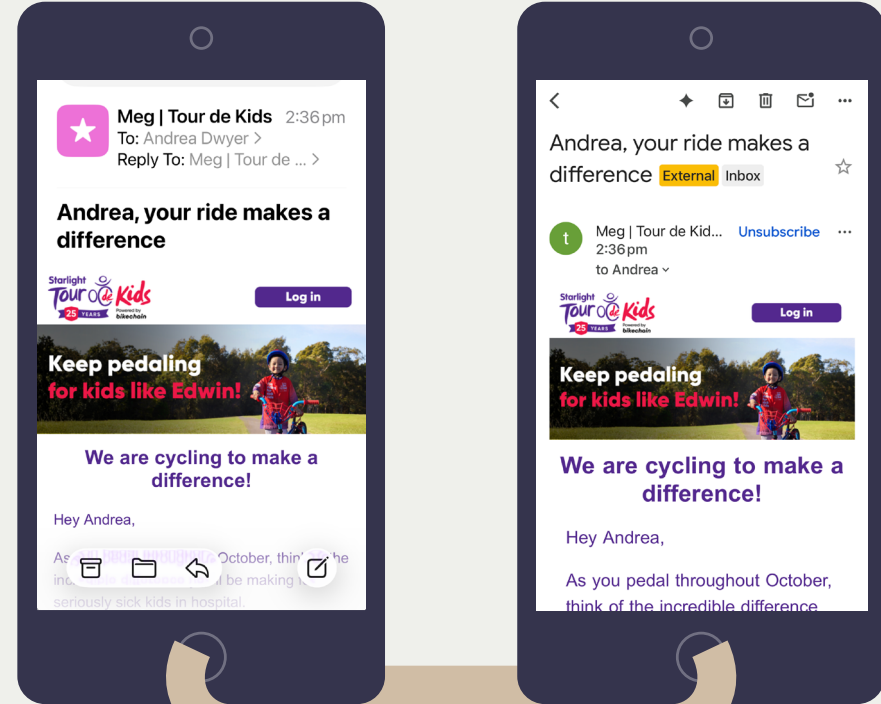
Ticked every box? You're an eDM super-hero and we're sure your campaign will work wonders!

9

AI is rewriting your subject lines

Apple Mail now shows an AI-written summary in place of your lovingly crafted subject and preview lines. Siri's AI twin reads your subject line, preview text and the opening of your email, then writes its own version for your supporter.

- **Don't bury the lede.** Your key message needs to appear early in the email itself, not held back for a big reveal further down. AI summarises what it finds first.
- **Write as if each part is an element of one statement.** Subject line, preview line, banner copy and H1 headline should build on each other to carry a single message. Each part now feeds both the summary and the supporter.
- **Test the reality.** Open a test email in Apple Mail to review what your supporters will see. A template and subject line, such as 'Andrea, your ride makes a difference', might appear very differently in Apple Mail vs Gmail.



10

When 'Delivered' is not the same as deliverability

Every email send / marketing automation platform reports key metrics a little differently. Sometimes 'delivered' can hide a serious problem.

We recently tested a large email contact list for a client where open rates had declined sharply. Their platform reported 98% of emails delivered, yet supporters on Gmail and Google Workspace weren't receiving them in any folder. Testing through Mailgun Optimise told the real story: 100% of sends to Google addresses were being spam-blocked before they ever reached the supporter.

Gmail represents 38% of personal email addresses in Australia - and for some of our clients higher than 50% - a massive potential loss.

- **Health-check your deliverability at least once a year.** Treat unexplained dips in metrics as a warning light worthy of investigation.
- **Engagement is reputation.** Google's spam screening increasingly weighs how supporters have engaged over the last 90 days. A solid, year-round stewardship programme is now a deliverability strategy, not just fundraising manners.
- **Set up Google Postmaster.** Monitor your status and standing with Gmail and troubleshoot issues if they arise.
- **Segment big sends by recency.** If older contacts aren't responding, run a reactivation programme for them or stop emailing them, since their inactivity could impact the performance of your entire campaign.

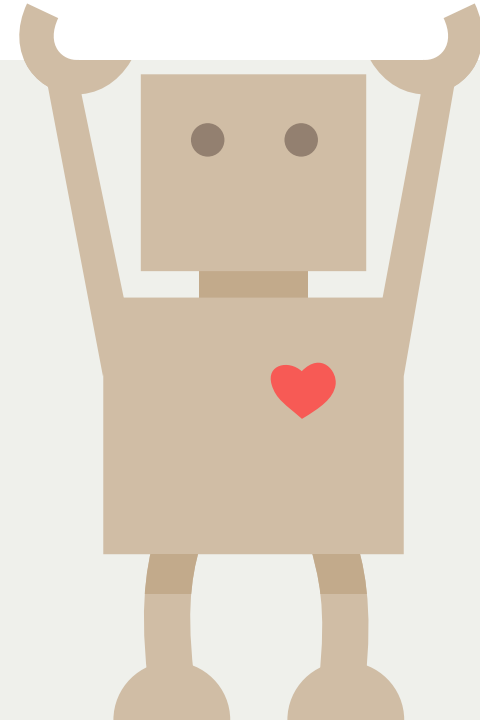
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How to escape the Promotions tab

Apple Mail and Gmail are increasingly filing charity emails under Promotions. This can lead to them being seen late, or never. A deliverability tool will show you where you're landing. The common culprits:

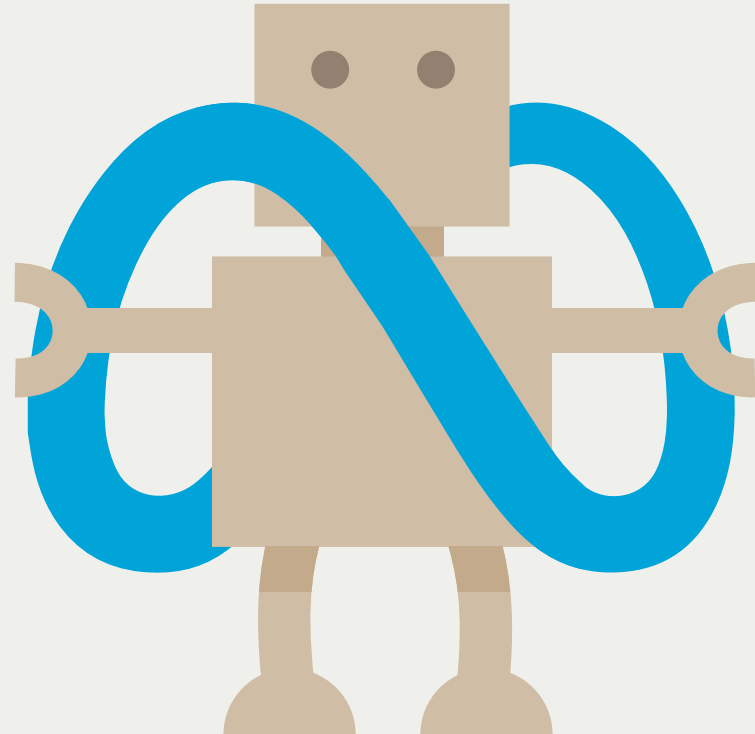
- **An HTML-heavy design** with too many images and too many links.
- **Retail-flavoured language.** Terms like 'discount', 'urgent', 'offer', 'free' and 'now'. Be especially careful with donation-match campaigns since your time-limited and double-impact copy could drift into 'buy one, get one free' territory as far as filters and AI reviews are concerned. (In this instance we have seen that a balance of urgency and cause-led copy helps give the match more context with less likelihood of being sent into Promotions.)
- **Generic sender details.** Addresses like info@, noreply@ or newsletter@yourcharity.com will underperform compared to a named, consistent sender.
- **Sending identical content to a huge list.** Personalisation isn't just polite, it's going to indicate to robots that you know your supporter, and it will help them to engage, leading to better placement.

(NOT A PROMOTION)



+ Bonus – Turn your social leads into inbox regulars

Are you running lead gen on Meta? Integrate those leads directly with your marketing automation platform. This will help you to shape a compelling first email such as a warm welcome. (It is also worth adding a PS asking them to move it from Promotions to their inbox if this initial email landed in the wrong folder.)

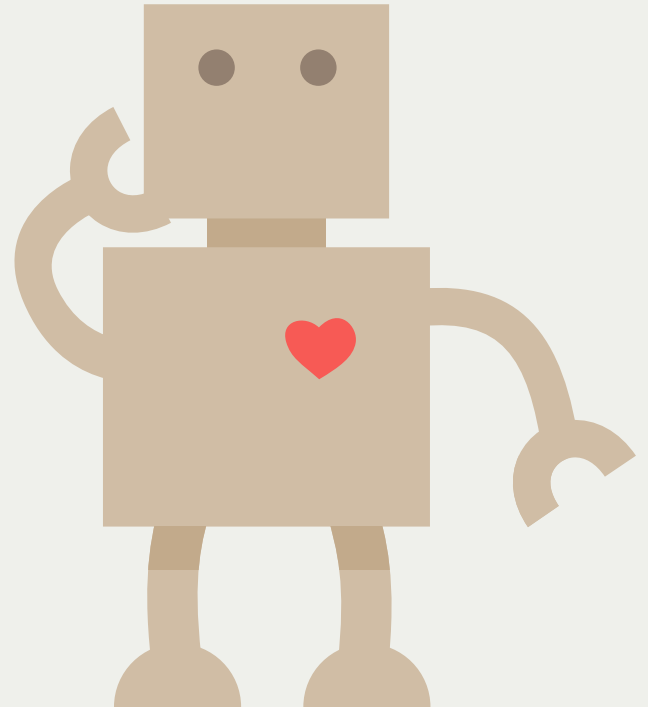


Final thoughts & tools

Let us know your tips and learnings from **2026**. Every effective eDM does one thing beautifully: it makes the reader feel they are seen and part of something bigger. Design, content and data all serve that single moment when someone reads: 'You can make a difference today.'

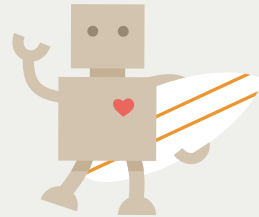
Tools we rate and use

- **Ortto**: an intuitive marketing automation platform that makes complex, segmented supporter journeys feel effortless.
- **Dynamics 365 and Salesforce (Marketing Cloud)**: enterprise-level CRM and CDP platforms that integrate deeply with fundraising workflows.
- **Google Analytics**: for tracking and understanding how email traffic behaves once it lands on your site.
- **Canva**: for quick, consistent creative assets that look sharp and on-brand.
- **Mailgun Optimise**: inbox placement, deliverability and spam testing.
- **Mailgun Inspect**: dark mode and accessibility previews.



Thank you

We're here to help. Appeals and nurture journeys not performing as you'd like? Contact us on hello@homemadedigital.com and we'll see what we can do.



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