

Whitepaper

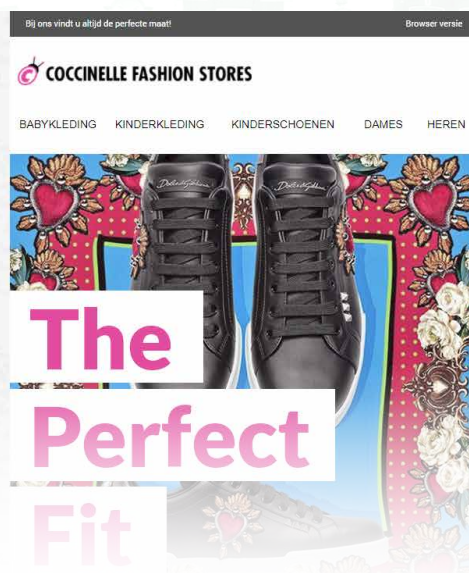
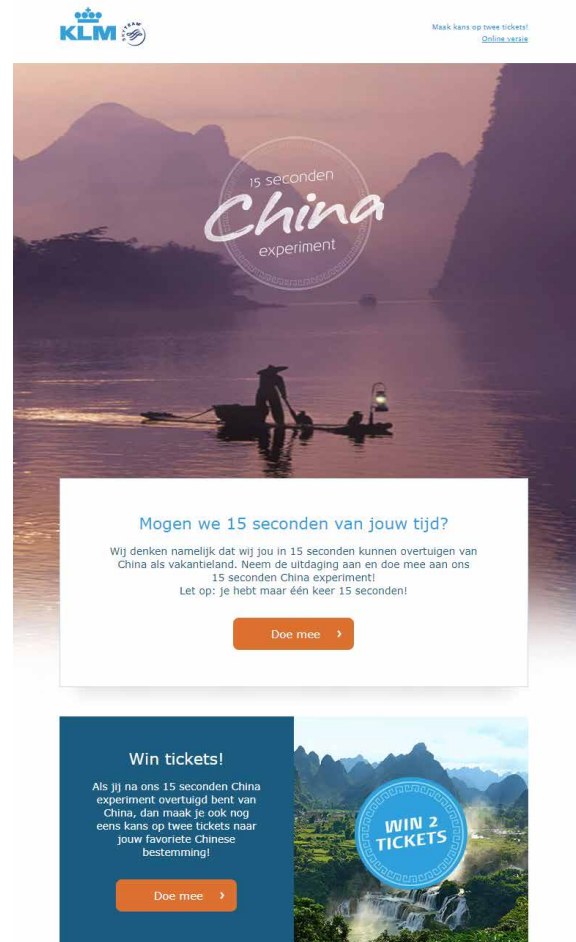
Backgrounds in email

Introduction

What background is to email, is like having the right wrapping paper to a present, or what the right frame is to your amazing wall art. A styled background can give an email more depth, and even more possibilities. However, the options for backgrounds in email aren't limitless. Quite the contrary, its support is very limited. How do you make the best use of a background when the support is iffy?

What makes backgrounds so great?

As mentioned in the intro, backgrounds can play a big part in your email; it can set the mood for your narrative, it can be used for brand recognition and it can indeed make sure the attention is drawn to your content. Not only can it be used to wrap your email, it can also highlight and divide your content. This can give your email, quite literally, more depth as it allows other content to be placed on top of it. Instead of using just images in your email, which demotes text to a lesser quality, the use of a background image can help you enjoy the sharpness of hardcoded text on top of an amazing product/promotional image. Not only is the text shown more clear, it's also visible when the images are turned off. This means that the reader can get an idea of the content, without any visual support.



The basics

There are different kinds of backgrounds. There are mono-colored backgrounds, backgrounds with CSS gradients and lastly, background images.

Background images include singular images and animated gifs. Mono-colored backgrounds are backgrounds that consist of only one color, whereas CSS gradients show a smooth transition between two or more colors (see the examples below).

Mono-colored



Most commonly used and has the best support amongst clients. Usually implemented as background of the entire email or to highlight/divide different sections in an email.

CSS gradient



CSS gradients are a more dynamic alternative to simple colored backgrounds. Often used to wrap an entire email or to divide an email in sections. Not widely supported.

Background image



Mostly used to enhance the content in the email itself (ex. using it as a mainimage with hardcoded text on top). Can also be used to wrap an entire email. Not widely supported.

Overall support: Good

- ✓ Apple mail
- ✓ Outlook for Windows
- ✓ Outlook for Mac
- ✓ Thunderbird
- ✓ Gmail webmail
- ✓ Gmail Android
- ✓ Gmail iOS
- ✓ Outlook.com
- ✓ Yahoo webmail
- ✓ Yahoo mobile
- ✓ Android email app

Overall support: Limited

- ✓ Apple mail
- ✗ Outlook for Windows
- ✓ Outlook for Mac
- ✓ Thunderbird
- ✓ Gmail webmail
- ✓ Gmail Android
- ✓ Gmail iOS
- ✗ Outlook.com
- ✓ Yahoo webmail
- ✗ Yahoo mobile
- ✓ Android email app

Overall support: Limited

- ✓ Apple mail
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- ✓ Gmail Android
- ✓ Gmail iOS
- ✓ Outlook.com
- ✓ Yahoo webmail
- ! Yahoo mobile
- ! Android email app

✓ Good support

✗ No support

! Limited/buggy support

How to pick the best method

Before you start designing your email, you need a basic idea of which email clients are being used by your readers. This includes the difference between mobile and desktop users as well. Knowing which 5 clients are used the most, you can check their background support via Campaign Monitor's [Ultimate Guide to CSS](#). Depending on the support, you can decide on what kind of background to use.



Are background images not supported in the email clients your users use the most? If that's the case, then it's best to stick to a mono-colored background. Overall, the best-supported background method is the `'bgcolor'` attribute. Be it grey, red, purple or blue, as long as it is one color, most clients (except for Windows 10 Mail) will support and show it.

A great alternative to mono-colored backgrounds would be using a CSS gradient if you want to give your email that little extra "va-va-voom". CSS gradients are supported by a lot of big clients such as Gmail, Yahoo, and Hotmail. Outlook for Windows being the exception. Fun fact; using gradients in backgrounds was actually trending in 2017.

Using background images would be most interesting when sending out special campaigns or campaigns where the content is centered around ambiance. In either one of these cases you'd want the email to stand out. A background image would be a perfect way to do so. Think about emails that want to trigger feelings of festivity (holidays) or wanderlust (travel).

Important: Keep in mind that while a CSS gradient or background image might be supported in a client, other CSS elements like positioning, repeating or locking an image might not be supported.

Bulletproof backgrounds (images)

While background images can be implemented by using either `background-image="LINK"` in the HTML element, or `background-image: url("LINK");` in your CSS, there is actually another method which is used pretty often: bulletproof backgrounds. Bulletproof, in this case, stands for backgrounds that don't break in most clients. By using bulletproof backgrounds you implement a specified code making sure Outlook respects your desire to use a background image. Therefore, aside from the regular HTML language, you'll need the Outlook-specific VML language as well.

A big plus of the bulletproof method is that, because of the VML language, background images will also be rendered in Outlook desktop clients, which generally does not support background images in any other way.

Upsides

- + Supported by most clients (including Outlook)
- + Makes your email more dynamic
- + High quality text on top of an image (no quality loss)
- + Preserve the readability when images are turned off

Downsides

- Some additional CSS gets stripped out in Outlook
- VML-based bulletproof buttons break in Outlook when put in tables containing the background image



The only downside to bulletproof backgrounds is a limited use of other CSS code such as padding. When using a bulletproof background, you must be sure to always use padding on the td/element containing the actual content and not another nested table. Padding that is added to td's in which another table is nested, rather than the actual content, will get stripped out of the email. Aside from that, ironically, bulletproof buttons that use the VML language tend to break in MS Outlook clients when they're used in a table containing a bulletproof background. This happens because the VML language for the background and the button clash with each other. If you really want a background image in Outlook, it would be best to pick another method for your bulletproof buttons. If you're curious about other bulletproof button methods, make sure to take a look at Litmus' [Ultimate Guide to Bulletproof Buttons](#).

How to implement bulletproof backgrounds

The easiest way to implement a bulletproof background is to get your code via backgrounds.cm. All you have to do is:

- 1 Insert the link of the image you want to use as background
- 2 Set a fallback color
- 3 Pick either full email body or single table cell
- 4 Implement the code into the intended part of your template
- 5 Test if the background is working correctly

It's very important to use a fitting fallback color. That way clients that don't support background images still show an email in line with your email guidelines. This is especially handy when you're using white text on top of a dark background. If you fail to edit the fallback color, your white text will not be visible on a light-colored/white background. If you want to get even more out of your background images, some extra background CSS features can be found via platforms such as [w3schools](https://w3schools.com/css/css3-backgrounds.asp). However, since most of these platforms are web-based, always make sure to check if these features are supported for email by using the CSS guide.

Deciding on and implementing the right background can be as simple as that. However, don't forget to always test your template before send-out to make sure your readers get a decent email experience.

Background/email with images on



Fallback is shown when images are off

