

XZList White Paper

# **The Perils & Promise Of Flash Email Marketing Campaigns In China**

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## Introduction

One of the first ideas would-be Internet marketers in China cling to is that the use of Flash in their email campaigns will bring them increased clickthroughs, better brand recognition, and heightened consumer interaction. But according to our recent study, using Flash in email campaigns should only be used in email campaigns targeted at users utilizing specific email services.

This is not to say that Flash can not be part of the campaign. Using Flash on landing pages is a great idea. However, embedding a Flash file within an HTML email will lead to problems, as we discovered, on many email services. At the best, an advertiser using Flash in an email will either deliver the intended animation or movie. At the worst, that advertiser will deliver blank emails or find themselves blocked in the future on recipients' email servers.

## Flash On The Web

Flash was originally created either for the display of offline animations or embedded in webpages to display an interactive message. Because of its size, it was never really intended for use on webpages, but with increased bandwidth over the years, it has become an acceptable part of many websites. Flash on websites can be used for games, greeting cards, and videos. Using Flash on webpages does have some drawbacks though:

- 1) The user must download a free Flash player. Though this has become ubiquitous, some Flash designers encourage users to upgrade their players to later versions, causing problems for users who are not so Web-savvy.
- 2) Most search engines can not index and "make searchable" data found within Flash files. Some search engines, like Google, are now making this possible, however it involves special attention on the part of an experienced Flash designer to embed certain markup code in their files. Therefore, though 100% Flash-based websites might have the "cool factor", they fail to deliver extremely important Web marketing fundamentals.

## Flash In Email

But for email, things get a bit more problematic. When Flash is embedded in a webpage or an email, it is surrounded by the <object> and <embed> tag. For Web-based email services like Gmail, Yahoo or Hotmail, they will actually strip or change that code, rendering the script and the Flash inoperable. Yahoo, for example, will actually add an "x" to the tag, so that it looks like <xobject>, making that tag useless. This means any recipient who tries to open an email sent with Flash to Gmail, Yahoo, or Hotmail will see nothing.

Most dangerously for marketers, some email administrators in China have been known to blacklist sending servers who send too many emails with embedded Flash tags. Why would an email administrator block these servers? Sometimes exploits, viruses, and phishers can try to embed themselves in iframes and Flash scripts, and though these are rendered useless in both Web-based and client-side email software, it is often easier to err on the side of caution and just block those sending email servers. This means that future messages sent from those servers, regardless if they contain Flash or not, will not arrive at their destinations.

And for client-side software, such as Outlook, sending Flash is also problematic, though not out of the question. If the email does make it through the recipient's anti-spam firewall and also around the email server's heuristics, Outlook can possibly display Flash. However, by default, Outlook will not display Flash emails. The user will receive a security warning if they receive a Flash email and then they must manually make changes to their software to be able to see the Flash email. With users using Outlook's Junk Filter, they may find the message instead in their "Junk E-mail" box and will only see the markup code in the email and not any of the design. As most Internet users will leave their default settings alone, or be scared by the security warning, the likelihood of them diminishing their security threshold to see a Flash-based email is perhaps very low.

### China Email Surprise!

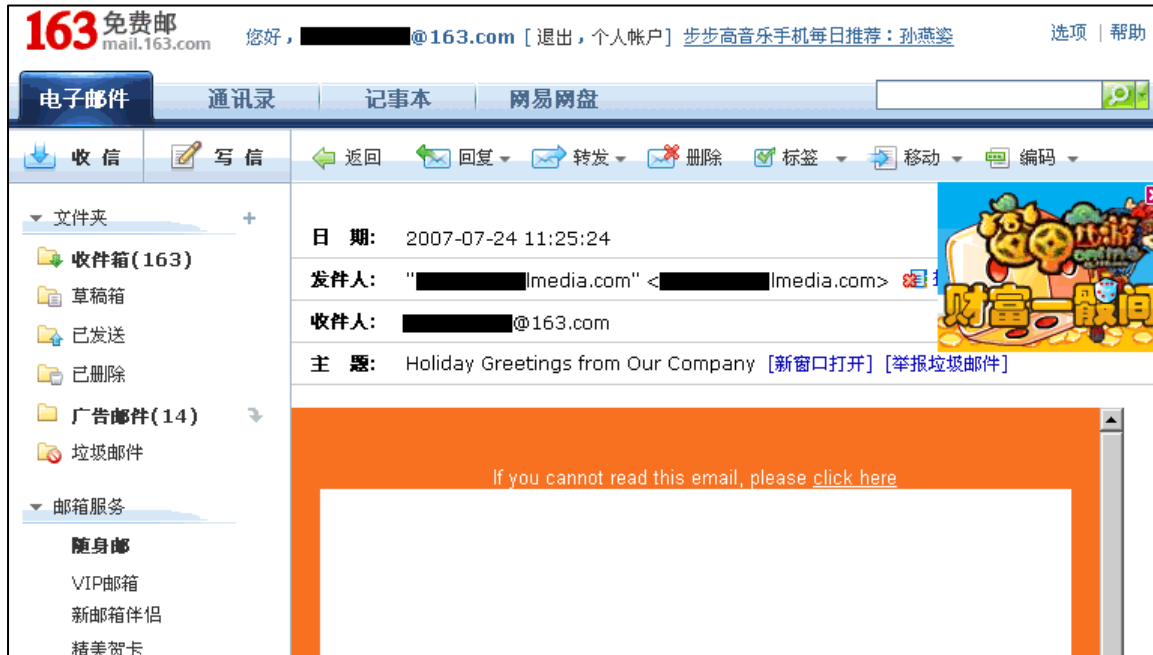
But Web-based email in China is different than popular Web-based email services in the rest of the world. While Yahoo, Gmail and Hotmail can not display Flash, Chinese email services like 163.com, Sohu.com, 21cn.com, and Sina.com do provide Web-based email services that can display Flash messages. Tom.com, another popular Chinese email service, however takes the lead of Yahoo and Hotmail and also can not normally display Flash-based emails. This comes as a surprise to many email marketers working outside of China who often assume that Chinese Web-based providers would also block Flash emails.

Here are the results of our findings, checking both popular web-based email services in China and around the world. Because of the penetration rates of PCs in China of over 95% for email-based communications, we did not test these on Linux or Mac operating systems.

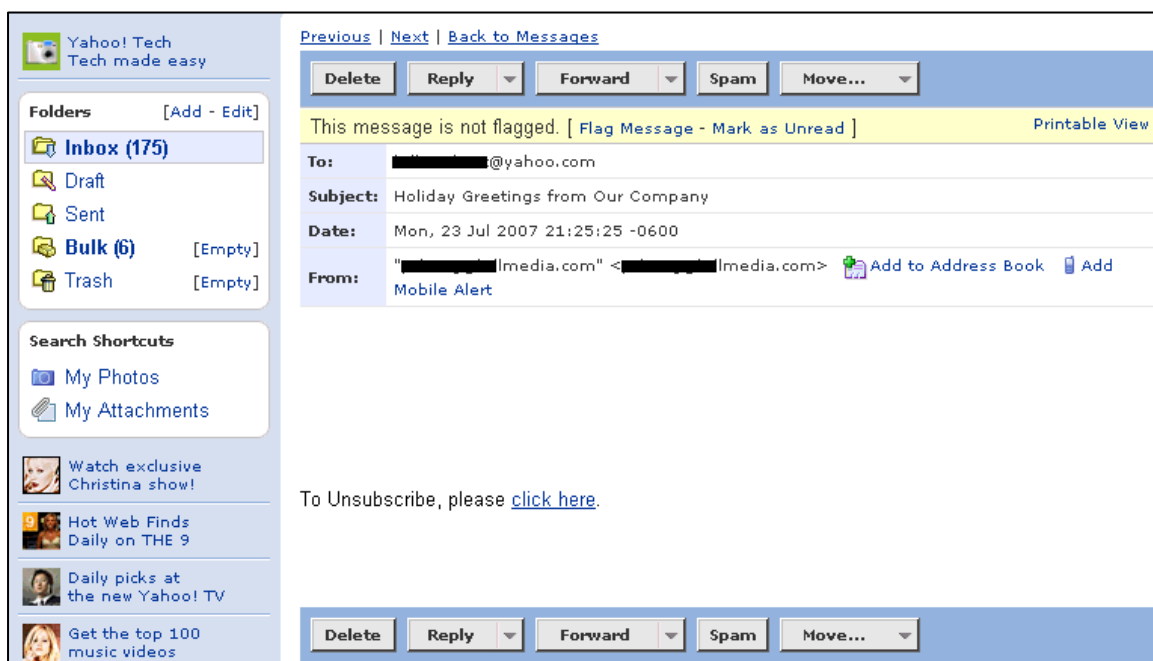
Email Software	Displayed by Default	Security Warning
Outlook 2003	X	☺
Outlook Express	X	☺
Eudora 7.1	X	X
Lotus Notes	X	X
<b>Web-Based Email</b>		
163.com	☺	X
Tom.com	X	X
Sohu.com	☺	X
Sina.com	☺	X
21CN.com	☺	X
Yahoo.com	X	X
Gmail.com	X	X
Hotmail.com	X	X

And here are some screenshots from those tests we conducted on Web-based services:

163.com



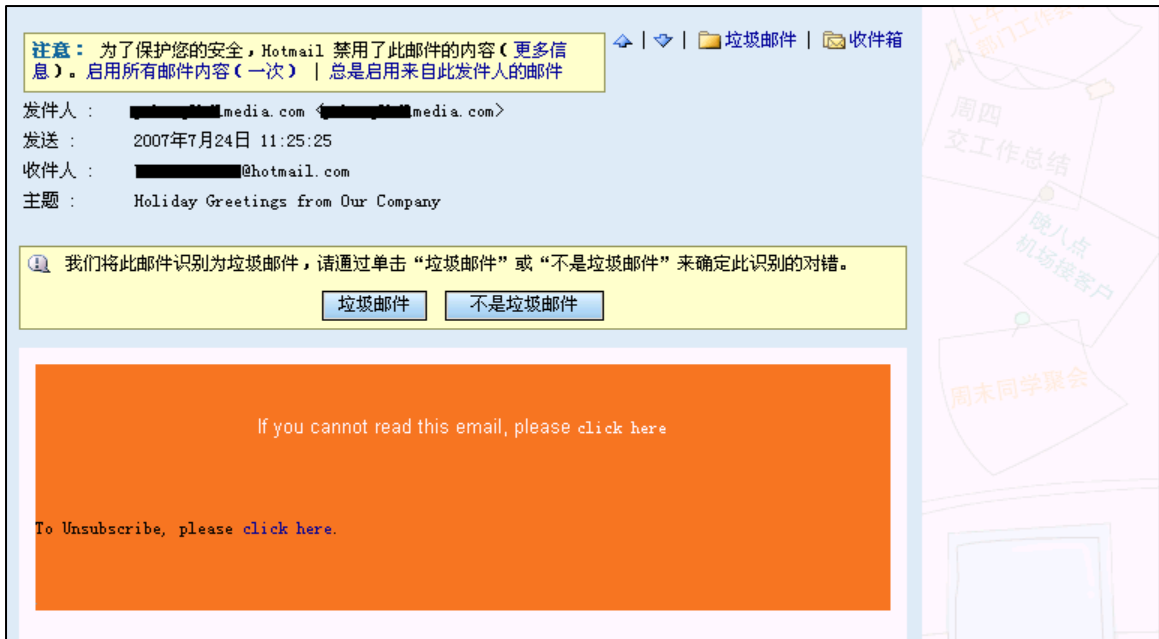
Yahoo.com



21CN.com



Hotmail.com



Sohu.com



Sina.com



## **So What Can Marketers Do?**

Segmentation is one way to ensure the correct users can get the message. For example, if an email database has Sohu.com, Sina.com, Tom.com, and Yahoo.com users, the Flash-based message would be sent to the Sohu and Sina users, while a normal HTML email without embedded Flash would be sent to Tom.com and Yahoo.com users.

But part of the reason email marketers use the medium of email is because they want to take advantage of email's viral capabilities. If a marketer spends lots of time crafting a beautiful Flash campaign, they want their email recipients to forward that email on to friends around the world. Marketers want to create buzz. However, if a Flash email is sent to a Sohu.com user who can see the nice campaign, but then that user forwards the Flash email to a friend using Yahoo.com, what happens? The Yahoo.com user unfortunately will not be able to see the embedded Flash animation.

So what should a marketer do in that situation? There is no easy answer, but there are possible solutions.

One way is to send the Flash emails with links back to a landing page that also contains the Flash animation. In this way, users who can not see the Flash within their email can click a link to visit a webpage. Problems might occur if their Flash-based email is sent to a Junk Bin where clickthroughs are disabled, but at least this assuages nervous marketers that perhaps some of the forwarded recipients will have access to the campaign.

Another method is to send a text-only (ASCII) email that will display pretty much the same on all computers and that always directs users to a landing page to view the Flash animation. This solution should be tested beforehand on a test group to see whether the particular campaign will work well with ASCII emails.

A final method is to send the Flash as an attachment. This has been done in the past, but causes many perils. First, because the file is coming in as either a .EXE or .SWF file, it will often be blocked by anti-virus software. Second, some of these files are large, and the email marketer will be using lots of bandwidth as emails are sent and bounced. Third, many users are trained not to open unknown file attachments, further limiting the ability of that Flash to be rendered on a user's computer.

For users with corporate email accounts, it's harder to decide what to do. In many cases, those users will use software that sits on their computers, like Outlook or Lotus Notes. As these types of email accounts are more likely to be overseen by email administrators sensitive to security and bandwidth usage, they might create rules within their servers that either block or grant high spam status to emails from IP addresses or domains that send Flash-based email. And of course, since users with that software can't see Flash anyway, it's best to avoid sending.

## **Ultimately, What Should You Do In China?**

There is a very good reason why Gmail, Yahoo, Tom, and Hotmail do not allow their users to see Flash: because it's possible to embed malicious code within Flash, these email providers are both limiting their own liability and decreasing the entry points where hackers and phishers can attack unaware computer users. But why do Sohu, Sina, and others not block Flash if it is so bad? We contacted Netease and they said

they don't usually block Flash because they have effective security solutions that ensure only good Flash emails get through their systems.

But often the important marketing message is wrapped up within a Flash animation and eager marketers want to get that message to consumers. However with many users unable to see Flash emails, but many more able to see the message in China, the best advice is to test campaigns thoroughly on test groups prior to launching a large campaign. For some campaigns, segmentation might work well. For others, a standard HTML email that links to a landing page with embedded Flash might work better. The ultimate solution resides in testing prior to a mass campaign and also sensitivity to how a corporate brand can be mangled or blocked by not thoroughly thinking how to execute an email campaign in China.

### **About the Author**

Danny Levinson has been working in China for over ten years, employed in the Internet and media fields. As head of China-based integrated media company BDL Media, he is also CEO of the company's email list management company XZList. Danny is an avid technologist, programmer, and designer and works with the Internet Society of China and Ministry of Information Industry to train China's email administrators to fight spam and to create efficient email networks.

### **About XZList**

With services dating back to 1997, XZList is China's largest and oldest email list management service, currently providing software, security, and consulting to corporations operating in China. XZList manages over 200 corporate email lists and ensures clients maximize their return on loyalty marketing, public relations campaigns, and email publishing. Our team has driven the email campaigns of some of the world's largest companies and some of Asia's most enduring brands. Since email is such a ubiquitous communication tool, it's not surprising that XZList list hosting clients are incredibly diverse. Our email hosting infrastructure is so robust and scalable that we easily support clients with a few thousand to several million list members; we also tailor our email hosting packages to a variety of functional needs, from thriving email discussion groups to compelling monthly email newsletters, from basic email marketing to sophisticated email analytics. XZList is a service of BDL Media Ltd, a company operating services and in China spanning communications, software, public relations, publishing, and media and with offices in Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. More information at <http://www.xzlist.com>.