
The Top 10 Email Signature Headaches For Large and Small Businesses

An Exclaimer White Paper addressing one of the most common IT painpoints



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Email Signature Updates: A Common IT Painpoint

Email signatures have come a long way since the days of text-based legal disclaimers. Logos, display banners, social media links; email signatures are now considered to be an important marketing touchpoint, especially in today's 24/7 business world. These signatures are placed on all manner of corporate emails in order to not just provide contact details, but to deliver another avenue to promote a company's brand and corporate offerings.

The principal issues around email signatures are those of control and change. Do you rely on every end user to update and manage their signatures on an ongoing basis? Staff can probably be relied upon to know their own contact details, department and job titles, but are they providing the same information as their colleagues? Are they presenting it in the same way with a consistent layout, spelling, capitalization and abbreviation?

That's why there should be an element of control when it comes to email signature management. What do you think customers, suppliers and partners will think when they see poor email signature designs? Will they really want to do business with a company that treats an important part of its branding so shabbily? It's possible that recipients might even start ignoring your company's emails altogether, which could cause you to lose business opportunities.

If you speak to any IT administrator, the one task that causes repeated stress is carrying out email signature updates. It's an arduous and repetitive job that does not always provide guaranteed results. What should be a simple task often turns into one that takes an inordinate amount of time. Even after all these updates are carried out successfully, users can still tamper with their signatures. Important elements such as promotional banners can be missed out, your brand reputation can become damaged, and in some cases, you could even face legal action.

This white paper aims to show you the top 10 issues that occur when manually managing email signatures at a corporate level. We'll take a look at the most common management techniques used, the difficulties around trying to control signatures using manual techniques, and how dedicated third-party email signature solutions can automate the whole process.

Do you rely on every end user to update and manage their signatures on an ongoing basis?



The Top 10 Email Signature Headaches

1. End users creating their own signatures

If you choose this method, you're basically opting for chaos. Each person will interpret your brand in a different way: one might list their job title incorrectly; another might give off a negative connotation by creating an amateurish template. Any of these "changes" will reflect badly on your company.

Employees often don't realize the emails they send reflect the tone of an organization just as much as letterheads, business cards etc. Companies that let their employees create their own email signatures may not realize how they might appear to external recipients.

A large majority of companies understand that in order to maintain a professional image, a level of control is needed over email signatures.

If you let staff build and design their own email signatures, they become unmanageable. Employees may not understand how to configure the more technical aspects of the signature. Some will make changes on a whim, or they won't care about adding that promotional banner Marketing want to use. And the IT department will most likely shoulder the blame.

2. Having to visit every user's desk

A very common method that IT will use to control employee signatures is a tried-and-true solution: visiting every PC in the office to copy-and-paste the signature into their email clients. It's also the most tedious.

Even with a small office of 20 staff members, this is still a time intensive cost for an IT manager to shoulder. You care about RAIDs, SANs, DAGs - the important aspects of running the company's IT systems. You were hired for your expertise, and this task does not utilize your skills to their fullest.

The impact of you going from one desk to another means that this task just becomes a chore you'll actively try to avoid. Every time senior management want to make a change or correct a mistake, you have to go through the same process again. Desk to desk, employee to employee...leading to many hours lost, more disputes over when you can schedule time to make the updates, and an increased workload.

3. Asking users to copy-and-paste templates

Now, you could avoid visiting every user's desk by simply emailing out a template. From our findings over the years, this is the most common method of ensuring everyone has an email signature. The idea is that everyone will copy-and-paste a company-approved template into their respective emails. This, in theory, avoids an IT labor cost and stops the chaos of DIY designs. Or does it?

For one thing, that clickable email address link is a ticking time bomb. It's a link, just like any other. The same way you can make any given text a link (i.e. changing "www.exclaimer.com" to "Exclaimer"), changing the visible text doesn't affect the link behind it.

When a user changes that sample text ("your.name@exclaimer.com"), they might not change the actual email address link behind it. So, clicking on "john.doe@exclaimer.com" will actually open a new message addressed to "your.name@exclaimer.com". That could mean important emails get lost or simply bounce.

You also still have the risk employees might still decide to make their own changes.

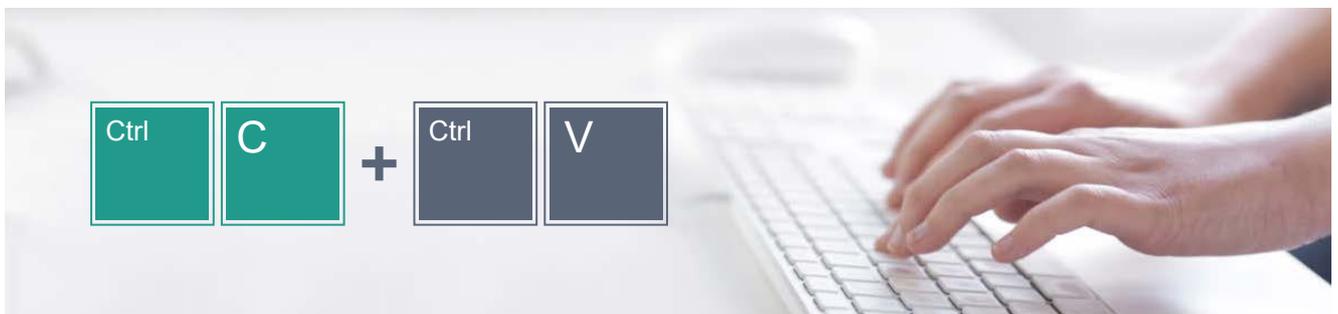
So, what do you do? You could ask everyone to email an example signature for you to review. That means every staff member sending you an email to proofread.

How many emails are you going to have to review? And what happens when you spot an error? You'll have to send the correction over to that employee, get them to send a new email, check it again and so on. And you still run the risk that they might just ignore the template, meaning you can't manage all these changes effectively.

4. Coding designs into HTML

If you have the time and you know how to, you can create a signature template using custom HTML code. This will then automatically be added to messages via your email system. This gives you a lot more control, but there are still limitations. Marketing might be able to design a signature they consider to be a modern masterpiece, but that doesn't mean you'll be able to replicate it accurately into HTML.

Then, you have to deal with the native issues of the email system you're using. For companies on Office 365 or Microsoft Exchange, it's well known the disclaimer function was never really designed with high-quality HTML in mind. The clue is in the name: as far as Microsoft is concerned, this function is to be used for a plain-text legal disclaimer. Any signature content will also end up appearing at the bottom of any message body. This means that when a recipient replies to one of your emails, the signature is not going to appear under your most recent message. Instead, it will appear at the bottom of the entire conversation, under all the replies and forwards in the email chain.



If you're using G Suite, you can use HTML in the Append footer setting, which gives you a bit more freedom. However, you won't be able to paste the HTML code directly into the editor, meaning you'll actually have to paste the signature design itself. The HTML code also has to be under 10,000 characters in length. This can prove difficult if you've been given a complex design to work with.

5. Receiving constant requests from Marketing

When it comes to signature updates, IT is not always the driver behind them: often it's the Marketing department.

As email signatures can be used for promotional purposes as part of an integrated campaign, Marketing often want to use display banners in all employee signatures. For example, there might be an important event coming up they want to promote. IT will often then be asked to add banners to all users' signatures. And Marketing will want this done ASAP, especially if it's for a time-limited promotion.

6. Signatures rendering differently on different devices

It's not commonly known, but HTML used in email signatures is actually very different to HTML used on web pages. There are many more email clients than web browsers, and each one interprets HTML in different ways. Every time a message is replied to, the sender's email software takes the whole email apart and rebuilds it into a new HTML structure.

iOS is one of the most notorious offenders when it comes to stripping HTML out of signatures. This is because the iPhone/iPad email app sends emails in the plain-text format. So, what might look great on a desktop computer might disappear completely on an iOS mobile device. Considering more than half of all emails are read on mobiles, that's a lot of people who won't see the signature you've created. Email signature management becomes pointless if over 50 percent of people won't even see the signature you've created.

With this in mind, you're going to have to send many test emails to see how the signature renders on different devices. If you're using Office 365 or G Suite, that means putting the signature live first and testing it during hours of low mail flow. This is to mitigate any interruption to a standard working day within your company.

Doing this will often mean going above and beyond your standard hours. And if the signature doesn't work the way you intended, it's back to the drawing board. Cue more HTML changes, lots of modifications, and one big headache.

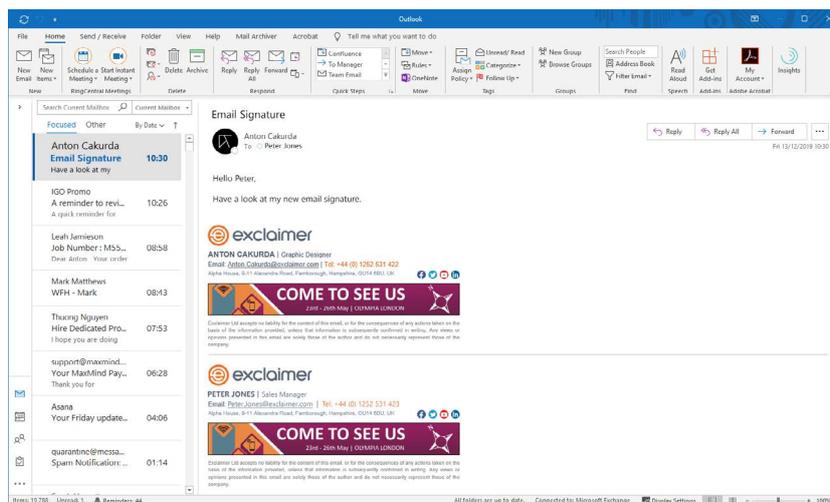


7. Signatures stacking at the bottom of email conversations

No matter which email service you use, you're guaranteed to encounter this issue as mentioned previously. As a user starts a "conversation" with someone over email, each reply will cause your well-thought-out signature to appear at the bottom of the chain. As more emails are sent, signatures will continue to stack and stack, to the point where a conversation can be flooded with signature content. This can lead to an email chain becoming unreadable and difficult to follow.

Native email signature functionality in both Office 365 and G Suite, as highlighted earlier, is primarily aimed at adding disclaimers to emails. These are designed to reduce a company's liability and so are required by many countries. However, the disclaimer/Append footer functions really aren't designed with high-quality HTML signatures in mind.

Now in G Suite, you can create a separate canned response for reply signatures, but these can only be set up on an individual basis, not on a corporate level. You'll then end up having to deal with all of the issues that come with letting individual users have control over their email signatures.



8. Signatures appearing with incomplete contact details

You will most likely have a directory containing all employee details and use this to populate their email signatures. This could be something like Azure AD, Office 365 Directory or Google Directory. However, it's important to note that not everyone will use the same contact details. Some may have mobile numbers while others don't. Some might not have an internal extension number while others do. Some may have direct dial numbers; the list goes on.

This means that certain employees can end up with blank fields in their signatures, which will look inconsistent to recipients outside your company. Getting around this involves complex workarounds that won't necessarily solve the issue. The only way you're going to know what's in everyone's signatures is for them to send you emails with their details appended to the message.

9. Images appearing as attachments

To deliver images within an email signature such as a company logo, you will usually have to host them online, but they won't be automatically displayed. Many email clients will, by default, automatically block any externally hosted images for security reasons. Recipients will have to mark your emails as from a safe sender or click a "Download Images" button before they can see any imagery.

If you try to copy-and-paste an image directly into the signature, the recipient is likely to see a blank square with a red "X" in its place, or find a separate attachment added to the email. What impact will this have on your company's IT systems? At best, embedded images will increase the size of all emails and will probably get stripped out altogether by certain clients like iOS.

10. Not knowing about third-party email signature management solutions

The idea that there are solutions out there that can solve the headache of email signature management often elicits interesting responses. A majority of IT professionals are unaware such products exist, or don't necessarily see the value in using one. However, if you can't get all those finicky email signature updates to work the way you want, why wouldn't you invest in something that would make the whole process easier? You utilize lots of other third-party products and services within your company, so investing in an email signature management solution should be no different.

Email Signature Management in the Modern Workplace

As we interact with thousands of customers every year, we encounter a number of common themes and painpoints from different companies.

Here are some key points we have consistently come across over the years:

Many companies have an email signature policy in place

More than two thirds of all businesses we have spoken to clearly understand the importance of having an email signature policy in place. After all, if left up to individual members of staff, email signatures will most likely become a sub-standard personal, electronic business card on email. Furthermore, the company is not able to change signatures for communications or promotional purposes. It then becomes virtually impossible to manage when left at the whim of every single employee.

IT don't want to own email signatures, but often have to

A majority of companies use their IT department to manage email signature updates on a corporate level. Generally, these signatures will be used via a client-side script with contact details taken from the company's main directory of users. At best, some IT departments use server-side mail transport rules to make sure simple text disclaimers are put in place for legal compliance.

This has been made more complicated with email signature designs using complex HTML and by the increase in web-enabled mobile devices. IT is often the only department that actually has the capabilities to implement signatures correctly due to their technical knowledge and access to important computing infrastructure.

Email signature updates are often triggered by specific events

As email signatures are time consuming to update on a corporate level, it usually takes something specific for an IT department to make any wide-sweeping changes. Events such as a rapid increase in employee headcount, new members of senior management joining (someone like a CIO or CMO) and migrating from on-premises architecture to a cloud service like Office 365 or G Suite are common catalysts.

Various marketing personas have an interest in email signatures

In the eyes of a marketing team, email signatures are a great way to broaden a company's social reach. They're also a good way to promote the latest communications activities and to maintain brand consistency. Marketing staff are usually much more interested in using the email signature channel compared to an IT professional. However, only about 15 percent of marketing teams are in charge of email signature management when compared with over 65 percent of IT departments.

Common marketing job roles involved with email signature design include "Senior," "Digital," "Comms," "Brand," "Social," and "Events." This means there is never usually a primary email signature owner within a standard marketing team.

Optimizing the Management of Email Signatures

A specialist email signature solution takes away all these IT headaches quickly and easily. The need for manual updates becomes a thing of the past and the design process is massively simplified. Once you've set it up and it has been integrated with your email systems, all updates are managed centrally. You can even give ownership of all email signature designs to your marketing department without having to worry about this affecting your IT infrastructure.

Centralized Control

End users don't get involved in email signature changes – they're done automatically. You can offer some flexibility by providing a choice of pre-set and pre-approved templates while retaining overall control of designs and deployment. Editing the signature is managed centrally and won't require other people to implement or enforce, reducing any likelihood of disagreement.

This scenario significantly reduces strain and dependency on IT resources. You continue to control the information system aspects of signatures, like defining the rules used to group employees into different departments or the data source used to auto-complete contact details. It involves minimal and manageable effort from end users.

Marketing Ownership

Marketing get to sign off the companywide signature, just like other branded marketing communications. A dedicated solution removes the unknown quantity that is individual staff activity so there's no room for misinterpretation or manual editing.

Even better, if you don't want to be involved in the design process after the setup, you can pass ownership over to Marketing. They won't have any access to your IT systems but will be able to make signature updates without needing your input.

This way, Marketing keep control of the aspects of signatures that naturally fall under their remit: the design, messaging and context.

Versatile Deployment

Not every email signature needs to be the same. A dedicated solution lets you change details easily to suit the company's needs by supplying bespoke templates for specific audiences. You may also need to change a signature temporarily and at short notice. This can be automated, and everyone will get the latest email signature without having to update it manually.

All amendments and enhancements can be tested prior to going live including previewing the design, ensuring brand compliance, spell-checks, testing hyperlinks as well as specific distribution before deployment.

Automated Consistency

With an email signature solution, you can preview everything before it is applied across the company. You can make sure every job title and name fits correctly. You can ensure each team is getting their assigned signature. From the job title to the phone number, every last pixel of the signature will appear as you designed it, whether emails are being sent from desktop computers or mobile devices.

And if there is an issue with someone's contact details, you can update them in a matter of seconds. Even better, you won't have to worry about any user having blank fields in their signature. A dedicated third-party solution can tell which contact fields are populated and hide any that are not.

Improved Convenience

Email signatures, no matter how easy they are in theory to create, will always strain the sinews when it comes to overall management. Email signature updates often test even the greatest IT minds as they are not convenient to update. Sooner or later, you get tired of doing them or you'll put them off until the last minute.

However, when it only takes a few clicks to design and manage email signatures, this task won't interfere with other actions you need to carry out. When it's simple and convenient to do, you don't have any reason to put it off. You don't want to have to go back to square one every time a signature doesn't render correctly, or someone's contact details are missing. An email signature solution removes these issues in seconds.

As soon as you're happy with the template and it's assigned to the correct users, you click "Save" and you're done. And if you need to update the template, you can do so easily. No extra waiting, no extra work, and no extra problems.

Increased Efficiency

You've probably heard of the old adage that time is money. Your time is precious and the amount of it you might spend conducting email signature updates on a companywide scale is significant. It can carry with it a hefty labor cost that should be focused elsewhere. It becomes even more of an issue the larger your organization is.

However, when an email signature solution can carry out updates instantly, you're looking at immediate time savings. It will reduce inconvenience, inconsistency, lack of flexibility, loss of credibility and human error.



Final Thoughts

Email is still the primary form of communication used by organizations today. It's not going anywhere in the foreseeable future, and therefore professional email signatures carry a lot of value. They're not just electronic business cards, but a representation of your brand identity, and Marketing will often want to leverage this channel for promotional purposes.

However, managing email signatures is easier said than done and issues can arise such as trying to change the design easily and quickly, maintaining a uniform visual style and ensuring contact details are correct. Do you really want to spend precious time carrying out a very tedious task that should be relatively simple?

The only way to completely control all elements of email signature management is through a dedicated email signature solution.

You don't have to hope all users will carry out updates themselves or ask them to copy a template or rely on time-consuming workarounds via mail transport rules. There is no need to tinker with your essential IT infrastructure or wander the office and paste templates into each user's email client. Everything is controlled from one central location designed with ease-of-use in mind.

Using a solution provides absolute certainty. You have total control, or you can delegate that control to Marketing, safe in the knowledge the only aspect that can be modified is the designs. There's no risk a template will be uploaded incorrectly or that someone will forget to add the right version to their email altogether.

When the need arises, adjustments can be made immediately. You won't come up against any unforeseen complications or lengthy follow-up tasks. When it's simple for everyone involved, no one minds if a signature needs to be updated at short notice.

That's why so many IT professionals have trusted Exclaimer with their email signature management requirements since 2001; in fact, we originated the concept of dedicated software. Our products are used by tens of thousands of companies worldwide including renowned organizations like the BBC, the Government of Canada, NBC, UNICEF, Sony and Mattel. Designed for Office 365, G Suite and Microsoft Exchange, they take the pain out of managing your email signature headaches in an easy-to use manner.

Learn more about Exclaimer by visiting www.exclaimer.com and try one of our products today.

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ABOUT EXCLAIMER

Exclaimer is the recognized global market leader in on-premises and cloud-based email signature software and solutions for Office 365, G Suite and Microsoft Exchange. Its products are used by over 75 million users in 150+ countries.

Its diverse customer base includes renowned international organizations such as Sony, Mattel, 10 Downing Street, NBC, the Government of Canada, the BBC and many more organizations of all sectors and sizes. The company has been the recipient of multiple industry awards over the years and is the only company of its type to have successfully achieved the ISO 27001 Certification for its cloud-based signature management service.

