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Designing email with room for the build

By Gyata Tabiri · Revised November 2, 2026

A fallback belongs in the design conversation. If it changes the emphasis, reading order, or relationship between an image and its text, it is doing visual work even when the reason for it is technical.

Design the narrow reading order

Two desktop columns do not tell us which content should come first on a phone. That choice depends on the message. I would establish the order deliberately, including what happens to an action attached to one column, instead of letting the source arrangement make the editorial decision by accident.

Look at what survives without the preferred treatment

Consider text over a background image. If the image is unavailable, the fallback still needs readable contrast and a coherent message. The solid-color version should be reviewed as a real state, not left as an emergency setting nobody has seen.

Bring uncertainty into a small coded example

A representative section can make a constraint easier to discuss than an abstract support warning. I have flagged background, layout, and button issues that led designers to revise their work. The useful conversation identifies what needs preserving and where a different implementation has room to help.

Decide which differences matter

A slight spacing variation and a missing primary action have different consequences. I would agree on what needs close consistency, what may adapt, and what interrupts the task. That makes the review more precise than asking for either identical pixels everywhere or unlimited technical compromise.

The best fallback feels considered. It lets the message remain itself when a preferred treatment is unavailable.

Read alongside: Carrying a brand across web and email · Working through an approved design.

Reference: Background-image fallback guidance.