

TN1010-11-2: Multipart/Alternative – Gracefully handling HTML-phobic email clients.

Contents

1	Multipart/Alternative content.....	1
2	The background - Multipart/Mixed sections	1
3	Multipart/Alternative sections	2
4	More complex multipart messages	2

1 Multipart/Alternative content

HTML emails are the flavour of the moment – glorious technicolor extravaganzas exploiting every feature of the latest whiz-bang email programs from Microsoft. HTML emails, however, won't get your message across to those who can't, or won't, read them. Unix email clients rarely display HTML emails and the security flaws in HTML enabled email clients have made many savvy Windows users install add-ins to remove HTML sections from emails before they are read.

Fortunately MIME provides a means – the multipart/alternative content type - for you to provide alternative formats for the same message – this gives you the best of both worlds – HTML enabled email programs will display your message in all it's glory, HTML-phobic programs can display a plain text representation of the same message.

The CSMAIL library provides full support for multipart MIME messages through the Message Object Model.

2 The background - Multipart/Mixed sections

You've probably already used the multipart/mixed content type – perhaps without even realising it!

Figure 1 shows a simple multipart message and the code to create it follows in Figure 1b.

Multipart/mixed is the default format for messages with more than one section and it indicates to the recipient that the message contains more than one section – each of which is intended to be viewed separately.

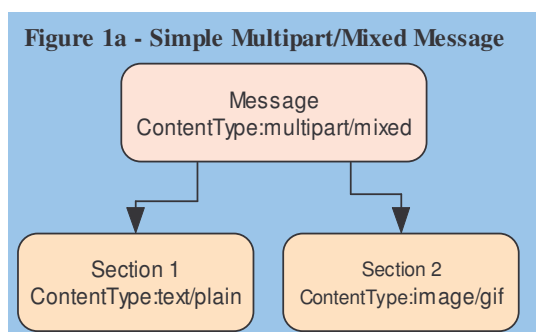


Figure 1b

```
' Section 1
MyMsg.Sections(1).Body="See the attached image"
' Section 2
MyMsg.Sections(2).AttachBodyFromFile("picture.gif") ' Section 1
```

3 Multipart/Alternative sections

While multipart/mixed sections present a series of items in an email message - multipart/alternative sections are designed to allow for the inclusion of one or more alternatives for the same item.

Figure 2 shows a simple multipart/alternative message. The code to create this message is slightly more complex than the previous example. In particular -

- The content-type of the top level section (the message itself) must be explicitly set to multipart/alternative rather than using the default value of multipart/mixed.
- The plain text section must come first; this is a requirement of RFC 1341.
- In this case the content-type of section 2 also needs to be set explicitly because the content was set through the Body property. If the content had been set through the ReadBodyFromFile method the content-type would have been set automatically.

Figure 2a - Simple Multipart/Alternative Message

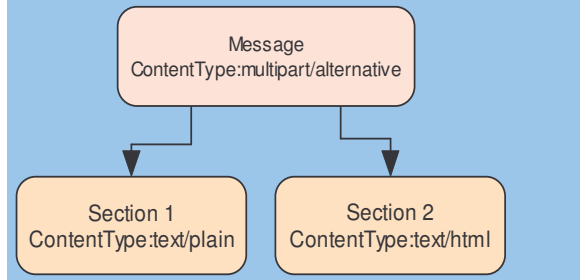


Figure 2b

```
MyMsg.Header("Content-Type")="multipart/alternative"

' Section 1
MyMsg.Sections(1).Body="Plain Old Text"

' Section 2
MyMsg.Sections(2).Body="<B>HTML!</B>"
MyMsg.Sections(2).Type="text"
MyMsg.Sections(2).SubType="html"
```

*Note that the CSMail library will **not** convert HTML into plain text or visa-versa - it is the responsibility of the developer to produce the two different versions of the text.*

4 More complex multipart messages

The examples in this document have concentrated on message models with a single layer of nesting – it's possible, and increasingly common, for message to have rather complex nested structures; this possible as each section can, itself, have sub-sections. The MIME standard also defines other multipart content types describing different relationships between message sections.

If you're interested in exploring multipart messages further than you may wish to have a look at Technote TN1010-11-1 'HTML Messages with Images.'

TN1010-11-1 is available from our website at:

<http://www.codestone.co.uk/software/docs/csmail/tn1010-11-1.pdf>

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