

A SYSTEMS DOCUMENT FOR DTC SKINCARE OPERATORS

The *Email* Design System.

How to build a brand-locked email engine inside Claude — and use it to ship emails that look like a \$5K/month designer made them. In about 90 minutes of setup.

— 00 · WHAT'S INSIDE

Read this *before* you build a single email.

Most DTC skincare brands don't have an email problem. They have a *consistency* problem. Every email looks like a different company sent it. This document fixes that.

Inside, you'll get the exact framework I use to run email for men's skincare brands — broken down into five layers, with a master prompt at the end that turns Claude into your in-house email designer.

This is the same system I run on my own brand, CLiYRA, and on every client brand I take on. It's not theory. It's the working file.

THE SEVEN SECTIONS

- **01** · Why most DTC email looks broken
- **02** · What a Design System actually is
- **03** · The five-layer framework
- **04** · Building it inside Claude, step by step
- **05** · The Master Prompt (copy-paste ready)
- **06** · A worked example — one full email built live
- **07** · What this gives you. What it doesn't.

A NOTE BEFORE YOU START

If you skim this and shelve it, you'll get nothing. If you set aside 90 minutes and build your own Design System file alongside the doc, you'll come out the other side with a working asset. Read with a tab open in Claude.

— 01 · THE PROBLEM

Your brand exists in *your head*. Not in the inbox.

Open any DTC brand's last twenty emails side by side. You'll see five different button styles, three different blues, two different header fonts, and a footer that mysteriously changes width every other send.

This is the silent killer of email retention. Not low open rates. Not weak subject lines. **Inconsistency.**

Here's why it matters: a customer's recognition of your brand is built in two-second glances. They see your email in a stack of thirty others. They scan. If your post-purchase email looks like a different sender than your welcome flow, the recognition pattern never locks. They don't remember you. They don't open the next one.

Inconsistency is the tax you pay for not having a system. Most brands pay it forever without knowing it exists.

WHAT "INCONSISTENT" ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

- Welcome 1 uses a serif headline. Welcome 3 uses a sans-serif headline.
- The CTA button is a different shade of black in the cart abandon flow than in the campaign emails.
- Some emails have generous whitespace; some are crammed.
- Body copy switches between first-person and second-person plural without reason.
- The unsubscribe footer has three different layouts depending on which template was used.

Most founders don't notice because they wrote every email themselves at different times in different moods. The customer notices — not consciously, but in the form of slower trust and lower lifetime value.

THE FIX ISN'T MORE DESIGNERS

It's a Design System. A locked, version-controlled document that every email — written by you, by a freelancer, by Claude — inherits from automatically. Set it once. Every email after that comes out on-brand by default.

— 02 · WHAT IT IS

A Design System has *two parts*. Tokens. And components.

Strip away the jargon and a Design System is just two layered documents. One holds the smallest decisions. The other holds the reusable blocks built from those decisions.

TOKENS — THE ATOMS

Tokens are the smallest brand decisions, written down so they never have to be re-decided. Each token is a single, immutable value.

TOKEN	VALUE
--color-primary	#0A0A0B
--color-bg	#FAF9F9
--font-headline	Cormorant Garamond, Italic, 32px
--font-body	Inter, 16px, line-height 1.6
--space-section	40px
--radius-button	2px

Once written, the brand never re-debates these values. They are facts. New emails inherit them.

COMPONENTS — THE MOLECULES

Components are pre-built blocks made from tokens. Each component is a reusable structure: header, footer, CTA button, image card, quote block, divider.

A button isn't designed from scratch each email. It's pulled from the library. The library says: *"primary button = primary color + 14px vertical padding + 28px horizontal padding + body font weight 600 + 2px radius."* Done. Same button, every time.

— 03 · THE FRAMEWORK

The five *layers* of an email system.

A working Design System for email isn't just visual tokens. It's five layers stacked on top of each other. Most brands build one or two. The brands that compound build all five.

Layer 01 — *Brand Profile*

Who you are, who you sell to, and the three reasons people don't buy. This layer is non-visual, but every other layer pulls from it.

WHAT IT CONTAINS

- **ICP:** One named person. Not a demographic. A character. Age, problem, daily life, what they've already tried.
- **Voice:** Three adjectives you are. Two adjectives you are *not*. (Example: confident, clinical, conflict-first. *Not* playful, *not* aspirational.)
- **The three objections:** The category-specific reasons your prospect won't buy. Trust, belief, conviction.
- **Mission line:** One sentence. Why the brand exists.

Layer 02 — *Visual Tokens*

The atoms. Colors, type, spacing, radius. Written as variables that the rest of the system inherits.

WHAT IT CONTAINS

- **Color palette:** Primary, secondary, accent, three neutrals, two semantic (success, error).
- **Typography scale:** Headline, subhead, body, caption, label. Each with font, size, weight, line-height.
- **Spacing scale:** 4px base unit. 8, 16, 24, 32, 48, 64. Use the scale; don't invent values.
- **Radius and borders:** Button radius, image radius, divider weight.

RULE

If a value isn't in your token list, it doesn't exist. No "just this once" overrides. Every override becomes the next inconsistency.

— 03 · THE FRAMEWORK (CONT.)

Layer 03 — *Component Library*

The molecules. Pre-assembled blocks that every email pulls from. You build each one once and reuse it forever.

THE MINIMUM EIGHT COMPONENTS

- **Header block** — logo, optional preheader, top divider
- **Headline block** — H1 + optional subhead, locked spacing above and below
- **Body block** — paragraph stack, locked line length, locked spacing between paragraphs
- **Image block** — image + optional caption, locked aspect ratio
- **Primary CTA button** — one per email, locked size, locked padding
- **Quote block** — for testimonials and pull quotes, distinct from body
- **Divider** — section break, locked weight and color
- **Footer** — address, unsubscribe, brand mark, social links

Layer 04 — *Voice Rules*

The constraints on how the brand speaks. Without this layer, every writer (human or AI) defaults to generic marketing tone.

WHAT IT CONTAINS

- **Words you use:** Specific vocabulary that signals your brand. (Example for skincare: "build," "stack," "clear" — not "glow," "radiance," "luxurious.")
- **Words you ban:** Industry clichés to avoid. ("Game-changing," "revolutionary," "amazing.")
- **Sentence cadence:** Short. Medium. Then sometimes a longer one that builds momentum. Then short again.
- **Punctuation rules:** Em-dashes — yes. Semicolons — no. Exclamation points — almost never.
- **Open/close patterns:** How every email opens. How every email closes. Locked.

Layer 05 — *Output Specs*

The constraints on the final email shape. This is what stops AI from generating a 900-word welcome email when a 200-word one would convert better.

WHAT IT CONTAINS

- **Subject line:** 30–50 characters. No emojis. No all-caps.
- **Preview text:** 50–90 characters. Must extend the subject, not repeat it.
- **Body length range:** By email type. Welcome 1: 150–250 words. Founder story: 400–600. Campaign: 200–350.

— 04 · BUILD IT IN CLAUDE

From blank file to *working system* in 90 minutes.

Here's the exact build sequence. Each step takes 10–20 minutes. Do them in order. Don't skip the brand profile — every later layer depends on it.

- 01 CREATE A CLAUDE PROJECT FOR THE BRAND**

Inside Claude, create a new Project. Name it after the brand. This project becomes the single source of truth — every email conversation pulls from its instructions and files.
- 02 WRITE THE BRAND PROFILE INTO CUSTOM INSTRUCTIONS**

Paste your ICP, voice rules, mission line, and three objections directly into the Project's custom instructions. This is the layer Claude reads on every single message — it never forgets.
- 03 UPLOAD VISUAL TOKENS AS A KNOWLEDGE FILE**

Create one markdown file called `tokens.md`. List every color, type, spacing, and radius token. Upload it to the Project. Claude can now reference exact values when describing emails.
- 04 BUILD THE COMPONENT LIBRARY DOC**

Create `components.md`. For each of the eight components, write: what it is, what tokens it uses, how it's spaced, what it looks like. Upload to the Project.
- 05 WRITE VOICE RULES AS A SEPARATE FILE**

Create `voice.md`. Words you use. Words you ban. Sentence cadence rules. Open/close patterns with three examples each. Upload to the Project.
- 06 ADD OUTPUT SPECS TO CUSTOM INSTRUCTIONS**

Add the length ranges, CTA rules, and image ratio to the Project's custom instructions, alongside the Brand Profile. Now every output Claude generates respects these constraints automatically.
- 07 TEST WITH ONE EMAIL, THEN REFINE**

Run the Master Prompt (next page). Generate your first email. Read it against your tokens, voice, and specs. Anywhere it drifts, update the relevant file. The system gets sharper every cycle.

— 05 · THE MASTER PROMPT

The prompt that *runs the system*.

Paste this into a fresh chat inside your brand's Claude Project. Fill in the variables in brackets. Claude pulls the Brand Profile, Tokens, Components, Voice, and Output Specs from the Project context automatically.

ROLE

You are the in-house email lead for [BRAND NAME]. You write and structure emails that strictly inherit from the Brand Profile, Visual Tokens, Component Library, Voice Rules, and Output Specs in this Project.

TASK

Write one email with the following parameters:

- Email type: [welcome / founder story / education / transparency / cart abandon / browse / post-purchase / winback / campaign]
- Flow position: [e.g. Welcome 02 of 06]
- Customer state: [cold / warm / cart / post-purchase / lapsed]
- Primary objection to address: [trust / belief / conviction]
- Specific angle: [one sentence describing the email's argument]
- Word count target: [pull from Output Specs based on email type]

CONSTRAINTS

- Use ONLY tokens defined in tokens.md. No new colors, fonts, or spacing.
- Use ONLY components defined in components.md. No new block types.
- Follow voice.md exactly. Words you use. Words you ban.
- Respect every rule in Output Specs (subject length, preview length, body length, CTA rule, image ratio).
- One primary CTA. Repeat it if needed. Never add a second goal.

DELIVERABLES

1. **Subject line** (30-50 chars)
2. **Preview text** (50-90 chars, extends subject, doesn't repeat it)
3. **Email body**, structured as a stack of named components from the Component Library. Format like this:

```
[HEADER BLOCK]
[HEADLINE BLOCK] "headline copy here"
[BODY BLOCK] paragraph one...
[PRIMARY CTA] "button copy"
[FOOTER BLOCK]
```

4. **Design notes** – any token or component decisions that need confirmation (e.g. "uses --color-accent for headline").

```
# Do not invent. Do not improvise outside the system.
# If a requirement conflicts with the system, flag it and stop.
```

— 06 · WORKED EXAMPLE

One email, *built live*.

The prompt filled in for Welcome Email 02 — the Founder Story — followed by the system's output. This is the real CLiYRA file.

INPUT

```
- Email type: founder story
- Flow position: Welcome 02 of 06
- Customer state: warm (just signed up)
- Primary objection: trust ("I don't know who you are")
- Specific angle: "I built this because nothing in the men's
  skincare aisle actually worked on the breakouts I had at 23."
- Word count target: 400-600 words
```

OUTPUT (ABBREVIATED)

SUBJECT

I started this because nothing worked.

PREVIEW

The aisle is full. None of it was built for guys like me.

BODY (OPENING)

I was 23 when I gave up on the skincare aisle. I'd tried the big names, the drugstore stuff, the "men's" lines that were just unscented versions of women's products with darker bottles. Nothing moved the needle on what I actually had.

RESULT

Prompt to ready-to-ship: **22 minutes** (vs. **3+ hours** from scratch). Subject, preview, voice, structure, and word count all landed inside spec on the first generation. Only human edits: a 30-word tightening and a CTA swap.

— 07 · HONEST FRAME

What this gives you. And what it *doesn't*.

A working Design System solves one problem completely. It does not solve every problem. Here's the honest map of what you now have, and what's still on the other side.

WHAT YOU NOW HAVE

- A brand-locked file Claude inherits from on every email
- Visual consistency across every flow and campaign
- Voice consistency across every writer who touches the brand
- 10× faster email production (22 minutes vs. 3 hours)
- A document that survives team changes, freelancer changes, AI model changes

WHAT THIS DOES NOT GIVE YOU

- **Flow architecture.** The system can write any email. It doesn't decide which email fires when, how long delays should be, what triggers what.
- **The eight foundational behavioral flows.** Welcome, browse abandon, cart abandon, checkout abandon, post-purchase, winback, sunset, site abandon. Each one needs its own design before the Design System writes its emails.
- **The campaign rotation.** Three campaigns per week, structured across the three buying objections, in a four-week cycle that never repeats. The system writes the emails — it doesn't build the rotation.
- **Klaviyo setup.** Segments, suppression lists, smart sending windows, deliverability monitoring, attribution and UTM tagging.
- **Weekly optimization.** KPI review, A/B testing, surgical overrides when data demands it.

If you build the Design System and stop there, you'll have consistent, well-designed emails. You'll be ahead of 90% of DTC brands on that one axis alone. That's a real win.

But the brands that actually compound on email — the ones doing 30–40% of revenue from this channel — don't stop at design. They build the full retention system on top of it.

The Design System is the floor. The retention system is the building. This doc gives you the floor.

— 10 · NEXT

If your skincare brand is *ready*.

You now have the floor. If you want the building — the full retention system, 8 foundational flows, the 4-week campaign rotation, Klaviyo configured, weekly KPI optimization — that's what I do for a small number of men's skincare brands at a time.

Same system I run on my own brand. Same system in this doc. Built around your brand, live in your Klaviyo, in 7 days.

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