2016 STATE OF EMAIL
PRODUCTION

A comprehensive look at how marketers plan, build, approve & send emails

litmus

Every brand's email production process is unique—with different planning, development, and approval processes. Every brand also has points of strength and points of weakness in their workflow.

In the inaugural State of Email Production report, we take a detailed look at:

Use the results to benchmark your own process, identifying opportunities for improvement and using this evidence to make a compelling argument for more resources or process streamlining.

All of this is made possible by the more than 900 marketers who took the time to take our Email Production Survey and share their insights with the industry. Thanks! We couldn't have done this without you.

Together, we can make email better!

WHO TOOK OUR SURVEY

More than 900 professionals involved in email marketing took our Email Production Survey between Aug. 27 and Nov. 24, 2015. The majority of respondents were involved in the coding, strategy, design, analysis, and planning aspects of email marketing. They represented a diverse range of industries and company sizes. More than one-third of respondents represented companies that primarily did business outside of the US. And respondents were also users of the full spectrum of email service providers, from the largest all the way down to the long tail of smaller ESPs, as you'll see later in the report.
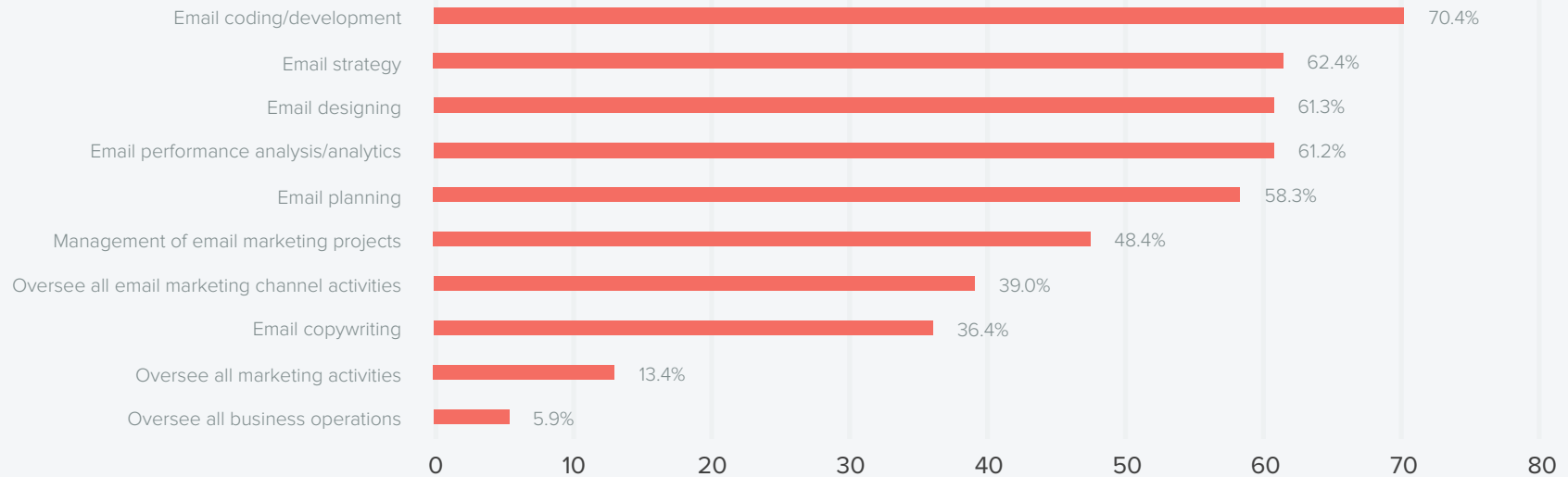
(Please note that because all questions in our survey were optional and "Not sure, don't know, or would rather not say" was almost always offered as an answer choice, not all respondents answered every question. For clarity, the number of respondents is noted for each question throughout this report.)

Job Functions

Which job function(s) do you perform?

Job Function	Percentage
Email coding/development	70.4%
Email strategy	62.4%
Email designing	61.3%
Email performance analysis/analytics	61.2%
Email planning	58.3%
Management of email marketing projects	48.4%
Oversee all email marketing channel activities	39.0%
Email copywriting	36.4%
Oversee all marketing activities	13.4%
Oversee all business operations	5.9%

902 respondents

Industry Type of Company

Which best describes the company you work for?

- B2C — 33.3%
- B2B — 26.2%
- Agency or Freelancer — 22.5%
- Nonprofit — 9.2%
- Other — 8.9%
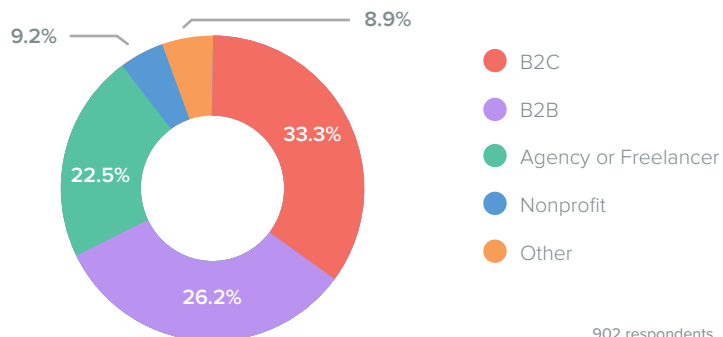
902 respondents

Number of Employees in Company

How many people does your company employ?

- Fewer than 20 — 17.6%
- 20-99 — 22.5%
- 100-499 — 24.7%
- 500-1999 — 14.5%
- 2,000-4,999 — 8.0%
- 5,000-9,999 — 5.7%
- 10,000 or more — 7.0%
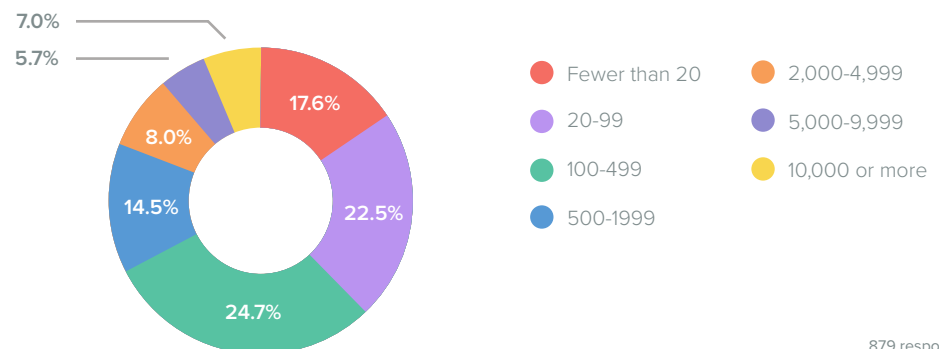
879 respondents

Primary Location of Company

Where is the company you work for primarily located?

4.6%

9.3%

15.0%

1.6%

63.9%

0.7%

1.0%

4.0%

● United States   ● Austrailia/New Zealand

● Europe   ● Asia

● United Kingdom   ● Mexico/Central & South America

● Canada   ● Africa
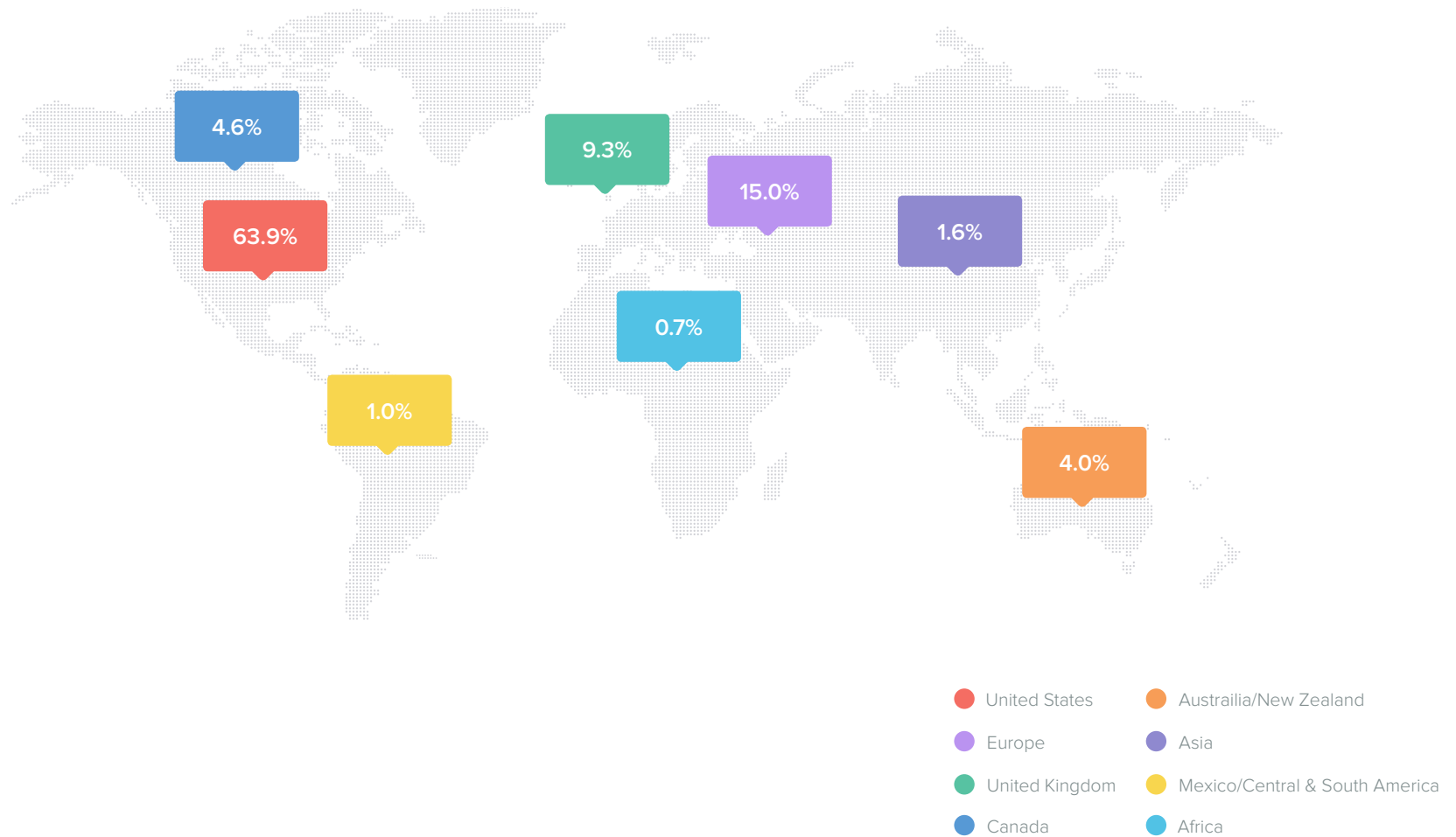
885 respondents

TEAM COMPOSITION

While there are a significant number of email shops of one, especially among smaller businesses, email marketing is generally a team sport. Nearly every team includes at least one person who knows HTML and CSS, and a large minority of businesses make use of freelancers and agencies, particularly among larger companies.

People on Team

How many people are on the email marketing team at your company? Include yourself and any of your co-workers who spend at least half their time on email marketing.
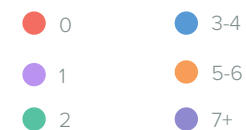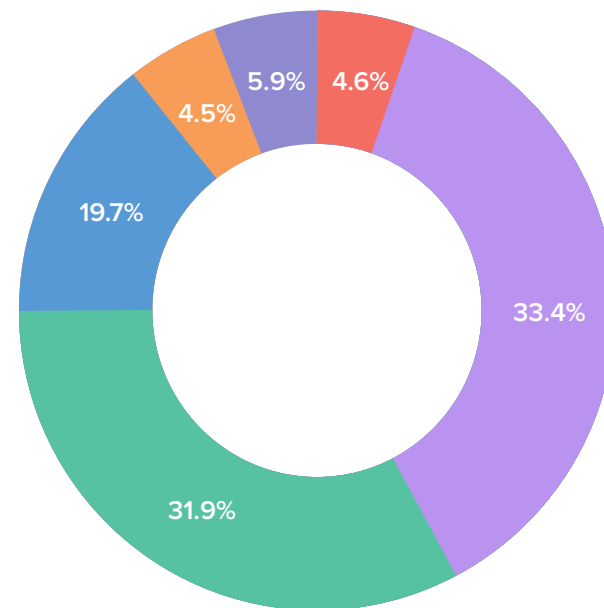
41.5%

26.9%

12.8%

4.7%

4.2%

9.9%
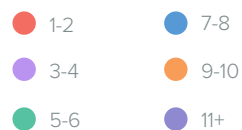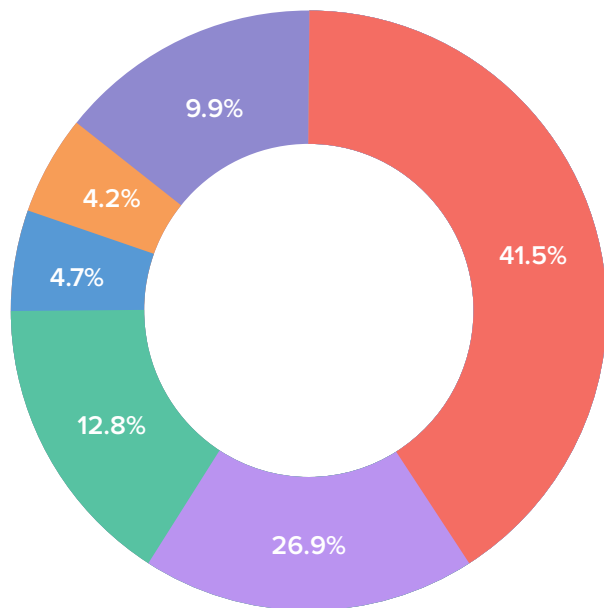
Nearly 48% of companies with fewer than 500 employees have an email team of just 1 or 2 people, compared to only 30.8% of larger companies.
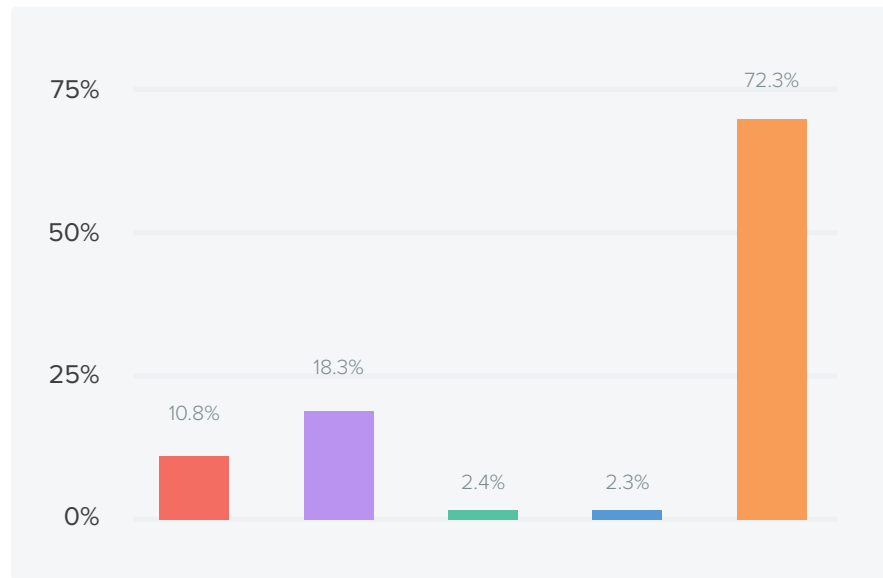
🐦 Tweet this

● 1-2   ● 7-8
● 3-4   ● 9-10
● 5-6   ● 11+

885 respondents

Email Developers Onboard

How many of those people know HTML and CSS? Include yourself if you know HTML and CSS.

4.6%

33.4%

31.9%

19.7%

4.5%

5.9%

● 0   ● 3-4
● 1   ● 5-6
● 2   ● 7+

884 respondents

Use of Freelancers

Does your company use freelancers or contractors for any of your email marketing?

75%

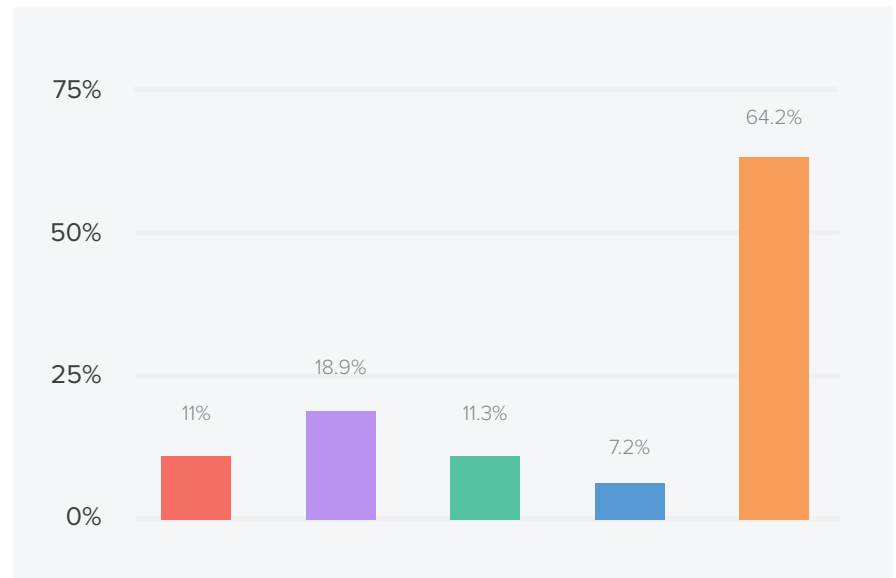50%

25%

0%

10.8% 18.3% 2.4% 2.3% 72.3%

877 respondents

● Yes, for day-to-day email production, design, or coding

● Yes, for occasional special projects, seasonal work, or template redesigns

● Yes, for analytics, performance monitoring, or subscriber/customer data insights

● Yes, for strategic planning or consulting

● No, we don't hire freelancers to assist with email marketing

Use of Agencies

Does your company use agencies or the services arm of your email service provider for any of your email marketing?

75%

50%

25%

0%

11% 18.9% 11.3% 7.2% 64.2%

845 respondents

● Yes, for day-to-day email production, design, or coding

● Yes, for occasional special projects, seasonal work, or template redesigns

● Yes, for analytics, performance monitoring, or subscriber/customer data insights

● Yes, for strategic planning or consulting

● No, we don't use agency services to assist with email marketing

Companies with 500 or more employees were twice as likely as smaller companies to use freelancers and agencies.

🐦 Tweet this

CONTENT PLANNING

It turns out that, practically speaking, email content planning is a little bit of an oxymoron. Half of email marketing programs functional largely on an ad hoc basis at least most of the time. Most content planning is done via Google and Microsoft document, spreadsheet, and calendar software, rather than software that's designed specifically for content planning. And while roughly 1 in 10 are planning email content out six or more months in the future, most are planning out only a month or two, even during key selling seasons.
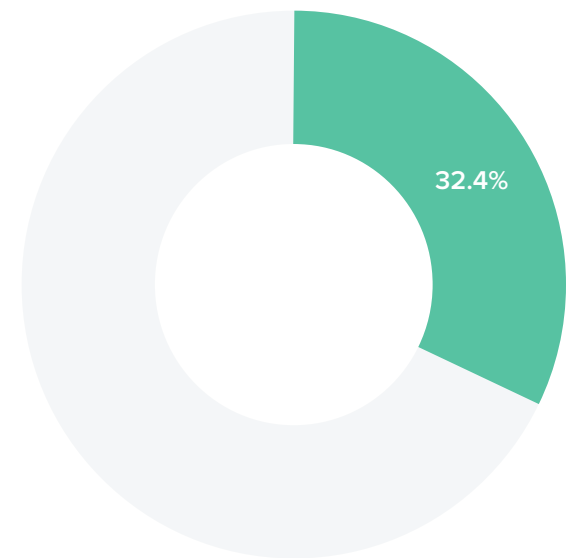
Use of Content Calendars

Does your email marketing program have a content calendar?

49.5%

18.0%

32.4%
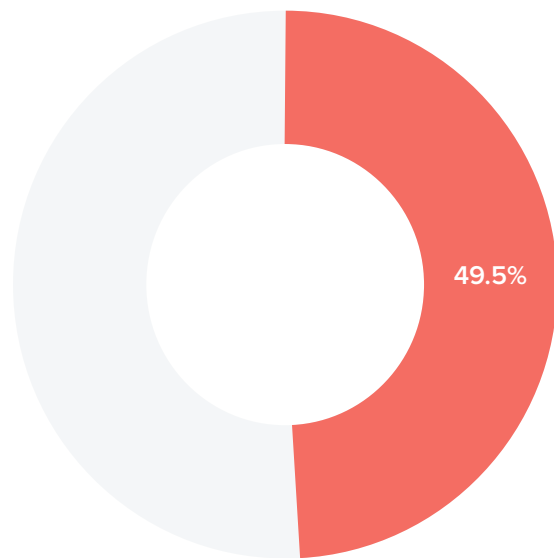
Yes, we maintain a content calendar year-round.
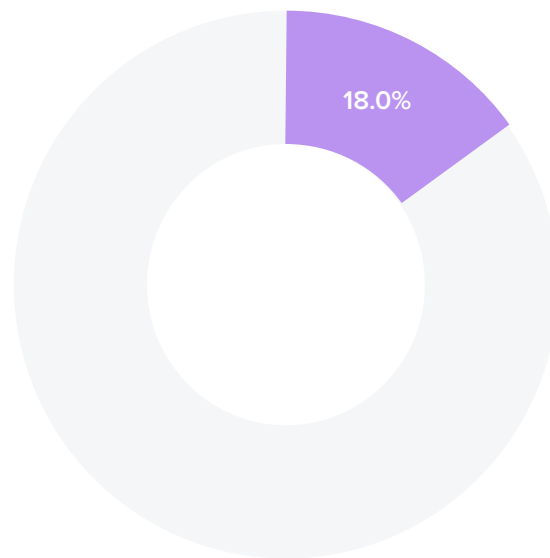
Yes, but we only use a content calendar to map out our key selling seasons.
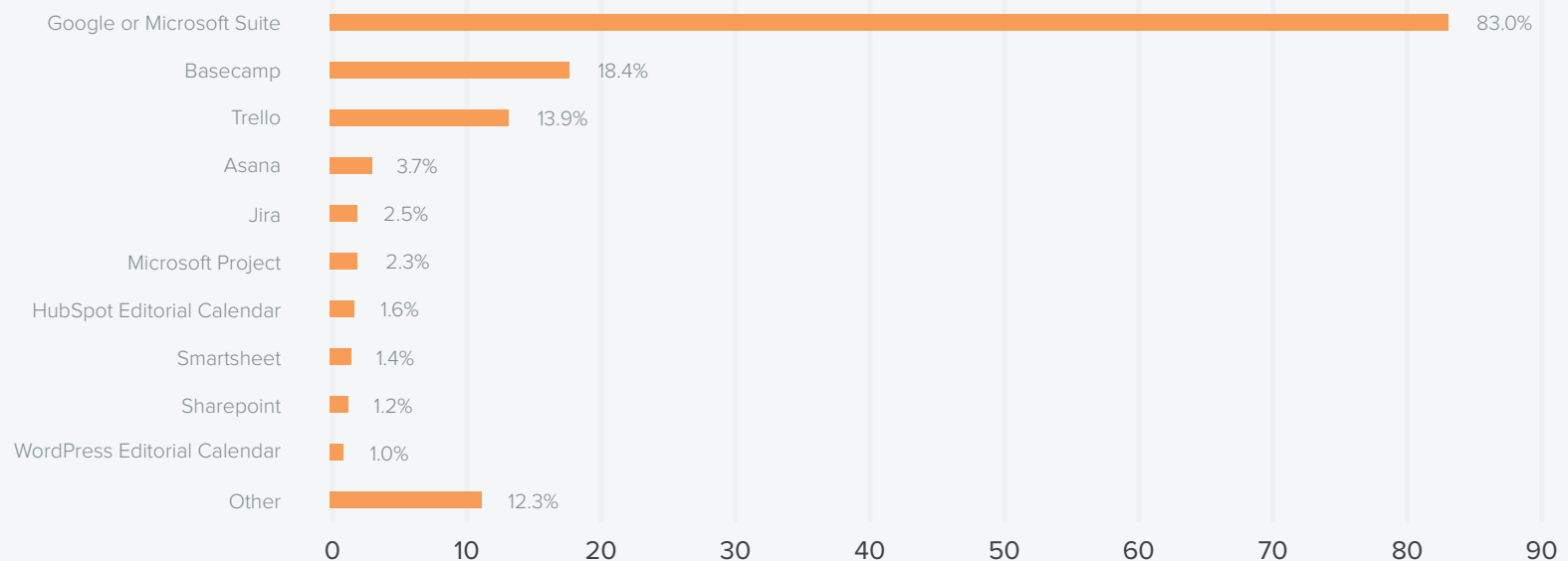
No, we plan and send emails ad hoc as needed.

825 respondents

Software Used for Content Planning

What software does your company use for content planning?

Outside of the US, it's reversed, with Trello the second (at 18.9%) and Basecamp the third (at 13.7%) most used content planning software.

🐦 Tweet this

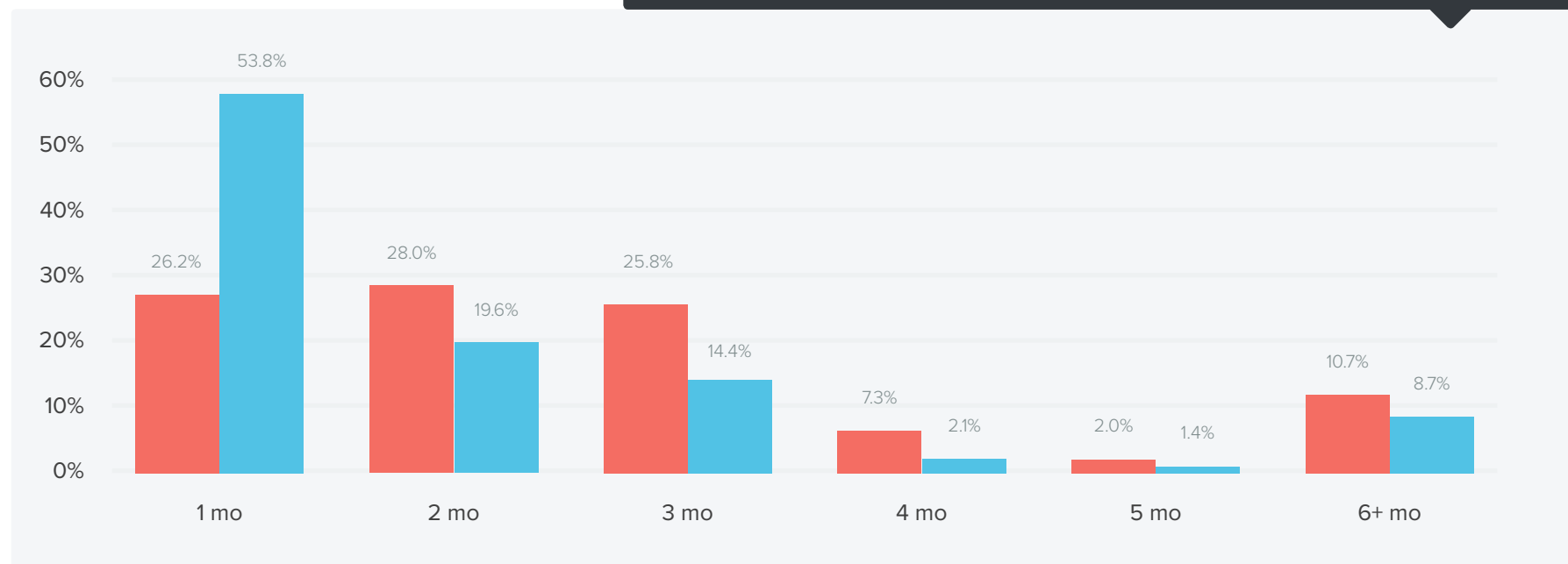| Software	Percentage
Google or Microsoft Suite	83.0%
Basecamp	18.4%
Trello	13.9%
Asana	3.7%
Jira	2.5%
Microsoft Project	2.3%
HubSpot Editorial Calendar	1.6%
Smartsheet	1.4%
Sharepoint	1.2%
WordPress Editorial Calendar	1.0%
Other	12.3%

510 respondents

Content Planning Horizon

Companies with 500 or more employees were roughly 50% more likely than smaller companies to plan their holiday or peak season email campaigns at least 6 months in advance.

🐦 Tweet this

	1 mo	2 mo	3 mo	4 mo	5 mo	6+ mo
For Holiday or Peak Season	26.2%	28.0%	25.8%	7.3%	2.0%	10.7%
Off Holiday or Peak Season	53.8%	19.6%	14.4%	2.1%	1.4%	8.7%

🔴 **For Holiday or Peak Season**   507 respondents

How far in advance does your company plan content for the holiday season or another key selling season?

🔵 **Off Holiday or Peak Season**   515 respondents

Outside of key selling seasons, how far in advance does your company typically plan content?

PRODUCTION CYCLES

Most businesses can take an email from drawing board to inbox in a week or less. They do this by spending generally under 2 hours on any given task associated with an email—whether it's copywriting, design, coding, data logic, or testing. This workflow allows the majority of companies to have at least 6 emails in production at any given time.

Use of Templates

Does your company typically use some form of an email template?

18.8%

14.1%

22.8%

32.4%

12.0%
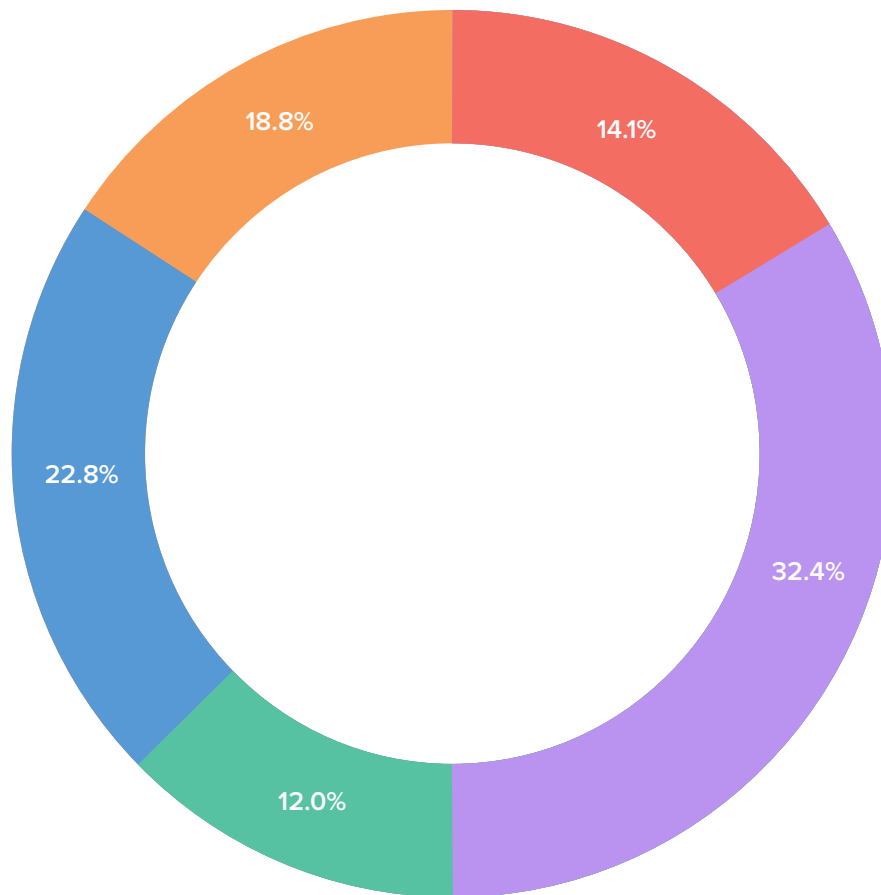
Agencies are more than twice as likely as other companies to code emails from scratch.

🐦 **Tweet this**

- No, we code all or most of our emails from scratch.
- Yes, we create new emails by replacing the text and image coding in our template, or by copy and pasting the code of a previous email and updating the content.
- Yes, we create new emails in a WYSIWYG editor by updating text and images.
- Yes, we reuse the same header and footer and largely build emails using snippets of code from previous emails.
- Yes, we use a library of standard components or modules to build our emails.
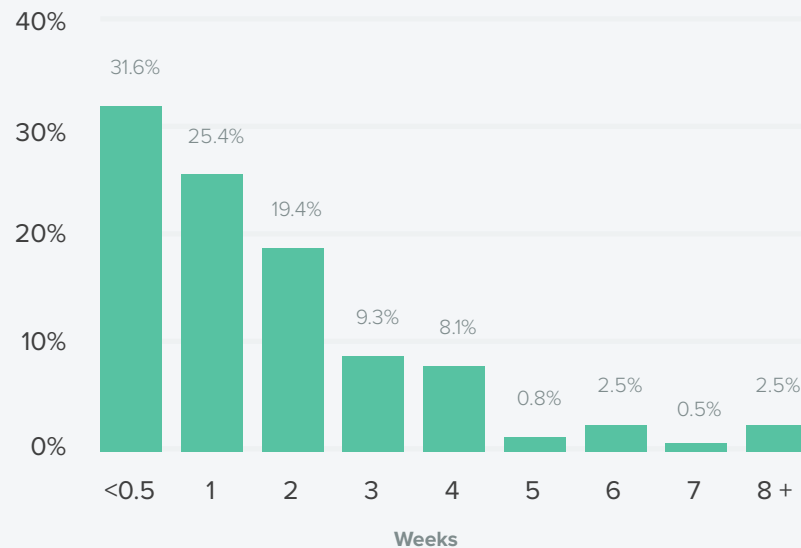
768 respondents

Emails in Production

At any given time, how many emails does your company typically have in production—that is, at any point between conception and being sent?

2.4%

10.2%

3.6%

7.2%

8.6%

45.1%

23.0%

- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31+
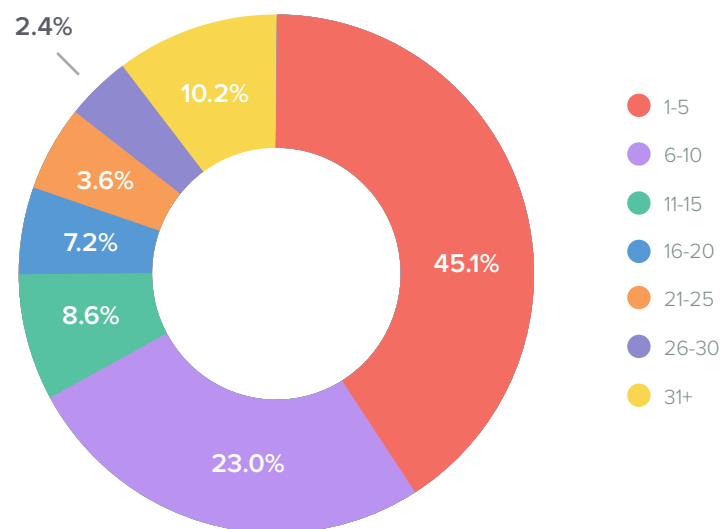
783 respondents

Email Production Cycle

How long is your company's production cycle typically for a single email—that is, from the time concepting begins on that email until it is sent?

Weeks	Percentage
<0.5	31.6%
1	25.4%
2	19.4%
3	9.3%
4	8.1%
5	0.8%
6	2.5%
7	0.5%
8 +	2.5%

794 respondents

Time Spent on Tasks

Among the five production tasks we asked about, companies spent the most time on email design, followed by coding, copywriting, data logic, and lastly testing.

🐦 Tweet this

	< 1 hour	1-2 hours	3-4 hours	5-8 hours	9-12 hours	13-24 hours	24 + hours

🔴 **Copywriting**   690 respondents

For each email that your company sends, how long is typically spent on copywriting?

🟢 **Design**   751 respondents

For each email that your company sends, how long is typically spent on graphics and design?

🟠 **Data Logic**   688 respondents

For each email that your company sends, how long is typically spent on data pulls and logic?

🟣 **Testing**   770 respondents

For each email that your company sends, how long is typically spent on testing and troubleshooting?

🔵 **Coding**   782 respondents

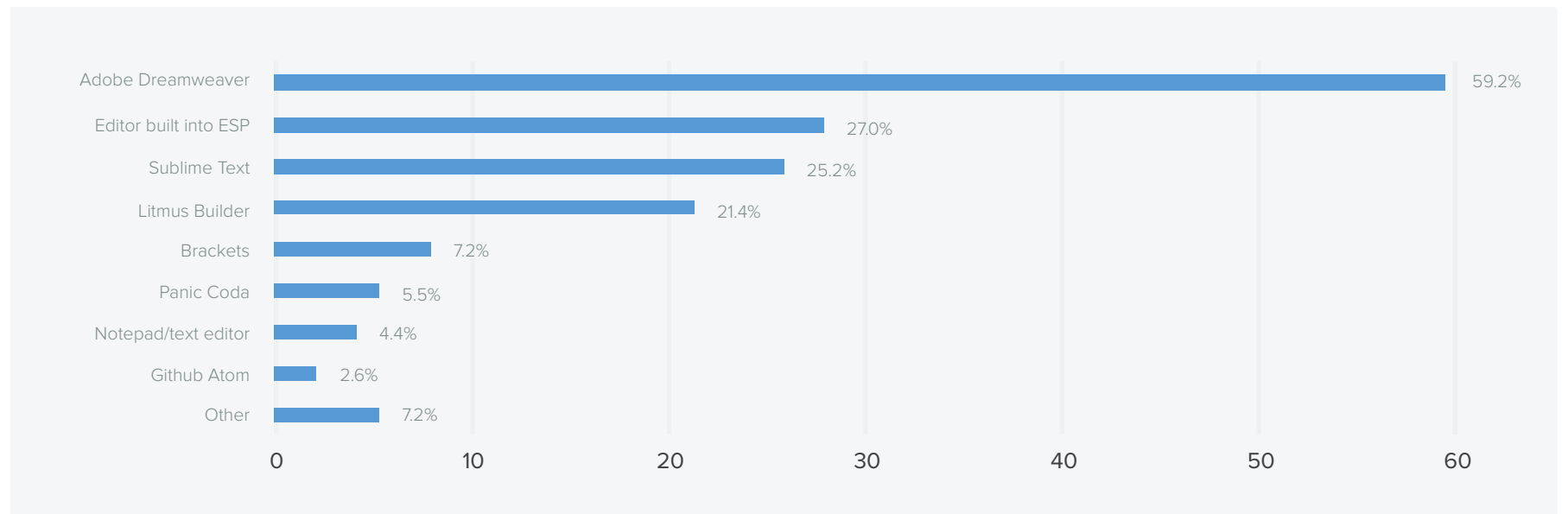For each email that your company sends, how long is typically spent on coding and development?

EMAIL DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

Adobe software dominates the design tools that companies use for their emails. However, in terms of development tools, this part of email creation is dominated by a lack of usage. Many of the tools we asked about were used by only a small percentage of respondents. We think that's an opportunity for many businesses to reduce their email development times and eliminate errors.

HTML Editors Used
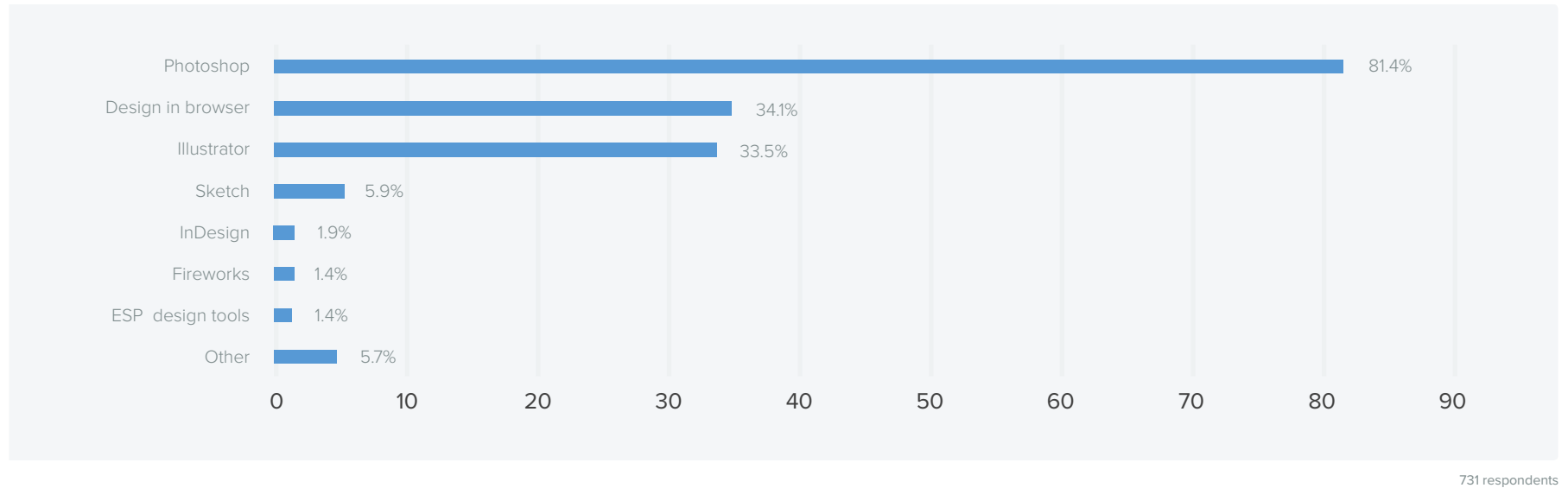
Which editor(s) does your company use for email development?

Editor	Percentage
Adobe Dreamweaver	59.2%
Editor built into ESP	27.0%
Sublime Text	25.2%
Litmus Builder	21.4%
Brackets	7.2%
Panic Coda	5.5%
Notepad/text editor	4.4%
Github Atom	2.6%
Other	7.2%

723 respondents

On average, marketers use 1.6 HTML editors when building their emails because many use different editors for different purposes at different stages of a build.

Tweet this

Design Programs Used

Which design program(s) does your company use for email marketing?

Program	Percentage
Photoshop	81.4%
Design in browser	34.1%
Illustrator	33.5%
Sketch	5.9%
InDesign	1.9%
Fireworks	1.4%
ESP design tools	1.4%
Other	5.7%

731 respondents

Emmet Plugin Usage

Does your company use the Emmet plugin for email development?

Yes — 6.4%

No — 93.6%
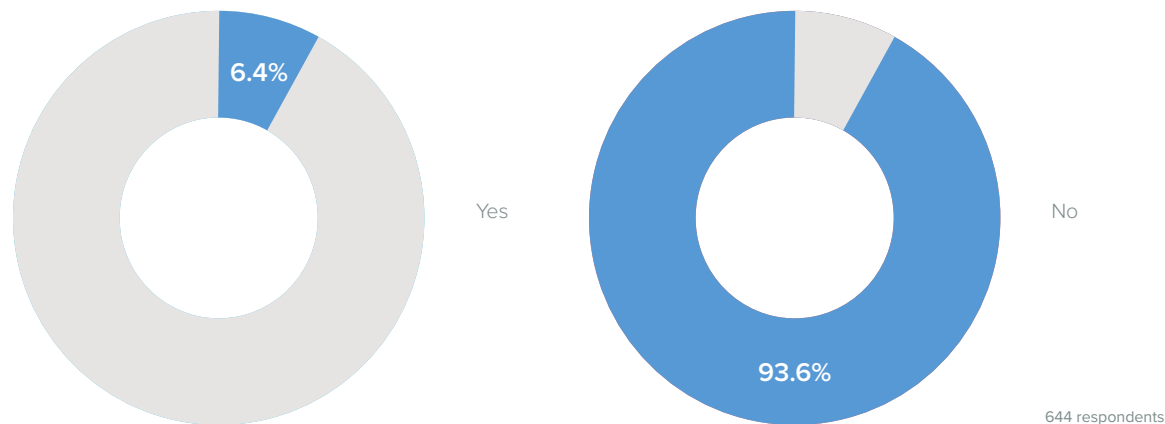
What's This? Emmet is a text-editor plugin that allows you to write HTML and CSS code quickly by using abbreviations that flow in snippets of code.

644 respondents

CSS Inliner Usage

Does your company use a CSS inliner for email development?

What's This? Since not all email clients support CSS, inliners transfer your CSS code from the head of your email to all the tags throughout your email so you get the desired rendering.

Yes, we use another CSS inliner	6.0%
Yes, we use MailChimp Inliner	10.0%
Yes, we use Campaign Monitor Inliner	5.8%
Yes, we use Dialect Premailer	4.2%
Yes, we use Litmus PutsMail	3.5%
Yes, we use Zurb Inliner	1.7%
No, we inline CSS by hand	73.3%
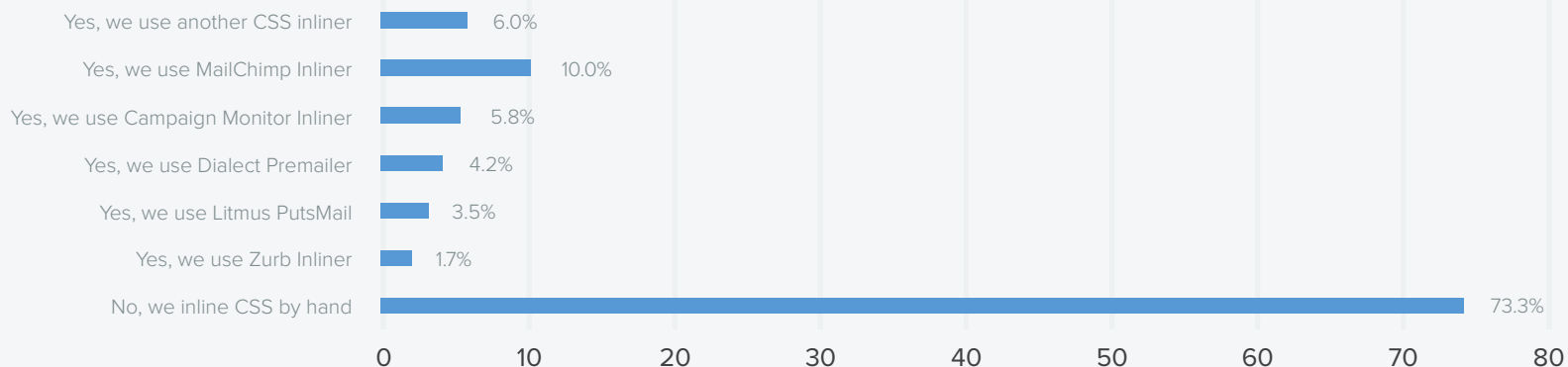
602 respondents

HTML Framework Usage

Does your company use an HTML framework for development?

What's This? An HTML Email Framework contains pattern-based elements such as tables, images, buttons, and links that help you quickly create HTML emails.

Yes, we use a custom, internally created framework	44.2%
Yes, we use HTML Email Boilerplate	8.0%
Yes, we use MailChimp's Blueprints	6.8%
Yes, we use Zurb's Ink	3.8%
Yes, we use Antwort	1.1%
Yes, we use another framework	5.1%
No	37.6%
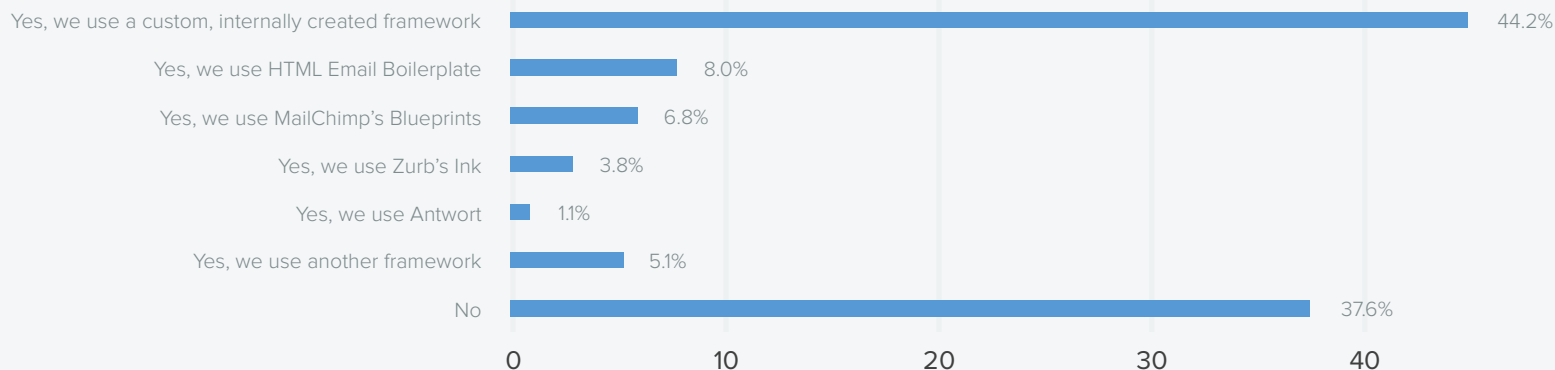
663 respondents

Static Site Generator Usage

Does your company use a static site generator for email development?

What's This? A static site generator is a build system for flat files that allows you to templatize and break down email elements, making them easier to edit and control.
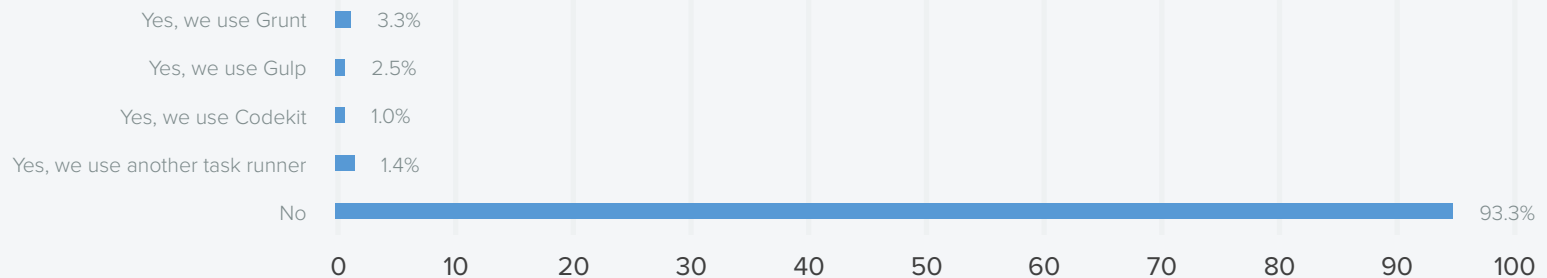
Yes, we use Handlebars	1.8%
Yes, we use Middleman	1.0%
Yes, we use Assemble	0.6%
Yes, we use Jekyll	0.5%
Yes, we use another static site generator	1.9%
No	94.8%

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
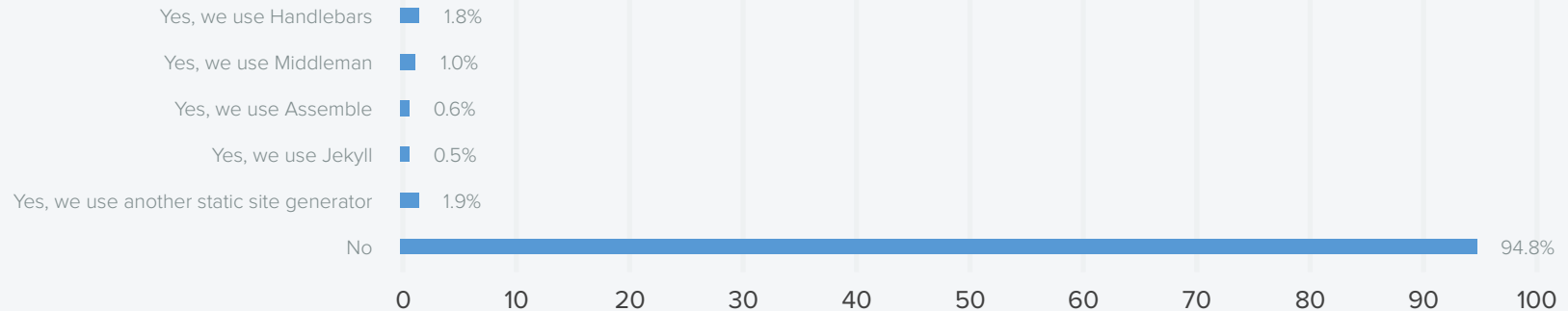
620 respondents

Task Runner Usage

Does your company use a task runner for email development?

What's This? Task runners automate repetitive tasks such as inlining CSS and sending test emails.

Yes, we use Grunt	3.3%
Yes, we use Gulp	2.5%
Yes, we use Codekit	1.0%
Yes, we use another task runner	1.4%
No	93.3%

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

631 respondents

Preprocessing Usage

Does your company use preprocessing languages for email development?

3.4%

1.8%

1.5%

1.5%

1.1%

92.2%
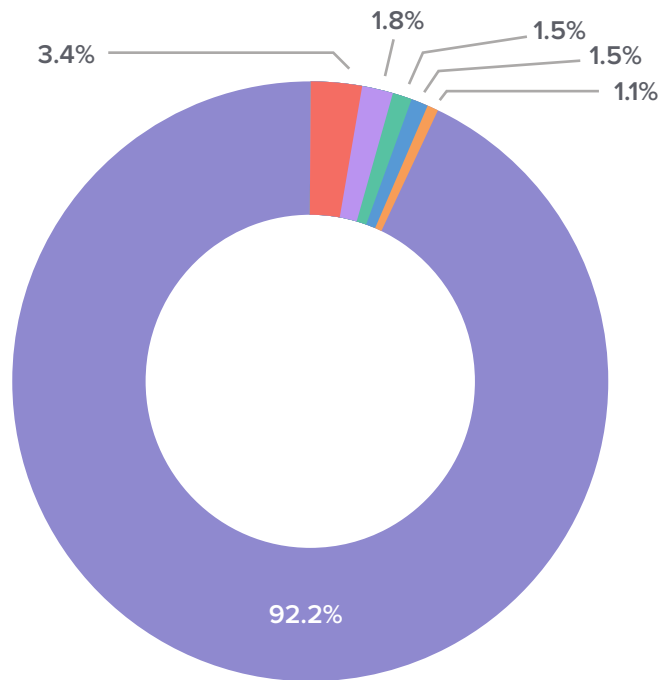
- ● Yes, we use Sass.
- ● Yes, we use Haml.
- ● Yes, we use Less.
- ● Yes, we use SCSS.
- ● Yes, we use another preprocessor.
- ● No

615 respondents

What's This? A postprocessor sanitizes your CSS and converts it into standards-compliant CSS to ensure compatibility across email clients.

What's This? A preprocessor converts code written in a preprocessing language into a standards-compliant HTML or CSS that can be rendered by a browser.

Postprocessor Usage

Does your company use postprocessing for email development?

7.1%

92.9%
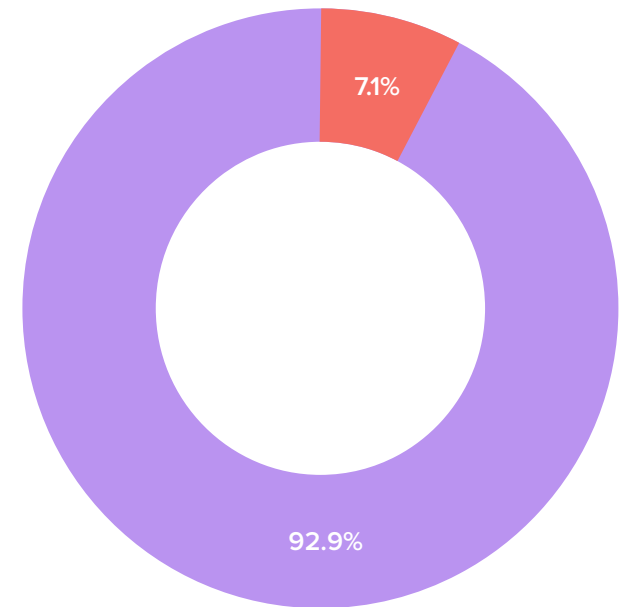
- ● Yes
- ● No

547 respondents

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The majority of businesses use at least a short checklist to help them catch mistakes before an email is sent. The majority also use email preview software to check the rendering and functionality of their emails, with a heavy focus on the most popular email clients. When QAing emails, companies use a variety of methods for sharing feedback, with the most common method being...email.

Checklist Usage

Does your company have a "pre-flight" checklist that it runs before sending every email?

21.0%

53.0%

26.0%

● Extensive checklist

● Short checklist

● No
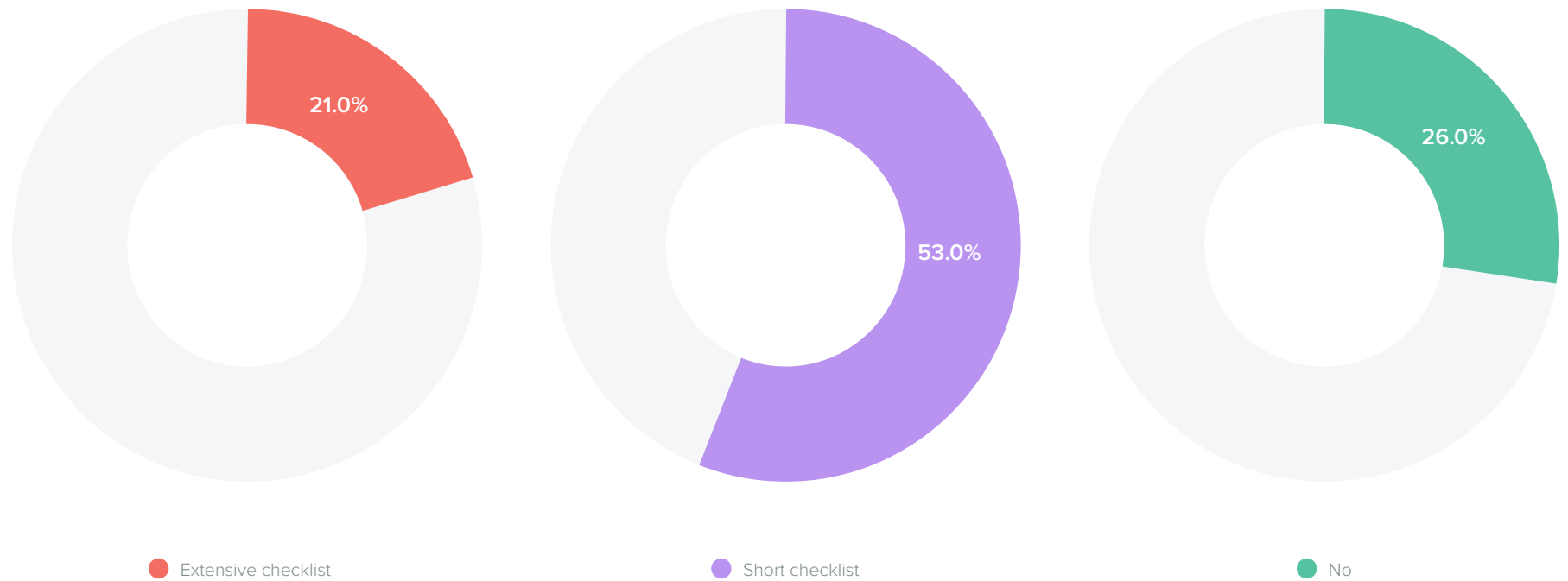
705 respondents

Email Preview Methods

Does your company test the rendering and functionality of its emails across email clients and devices before sending them?

60%

54.5%

18.2%

19.0%

40%

20%

1.7%

6.6%

0%

725 respondents
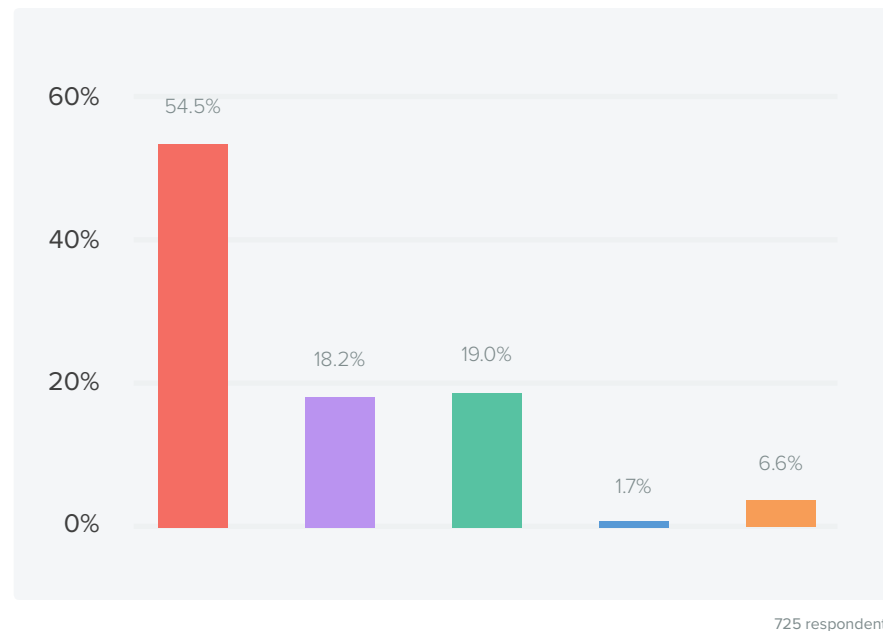
- ● Yes, we use email preview software.
- ● Yes, we've set up email accounts at a variety of inbox providers and have several devices on hand on which to test rendering.
- ● Yes, we send a test email to the various email inboxes of employees.
- ● Yes, but only occasionally or when redesigning our template.
- ● No

Email Preview Software Usage

Which email preview software does your company use?

100%

78.7%

75%

50%

25%

14.7%

13.6%

8.3%

3.5%

0%

375 respondents
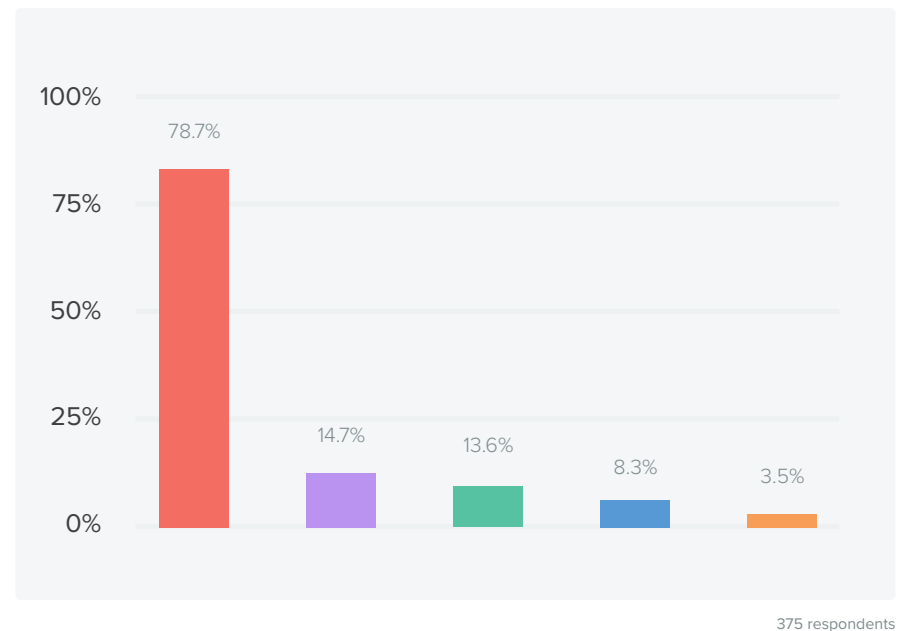
- ● We use Litmus.
- ● We use the email preview tool provided by our email service provider.
- ● We use Email on Acid.
- ● We use Return Path.
- ● We use another email preview tool.

Extent of Email Preview Testing

When testing the rendering and functionality of your emails, which email clients does your company generally focus on?

- **27.8%** We know which email clients our subscribers use most and focus our testing on those.

- **47.1%** We focus on the most popular email clients, such as the native iPhone email client, Gmail, the native Android email client, and Outlook.

- **25.1%** We want our emails to render and function well in every email client.
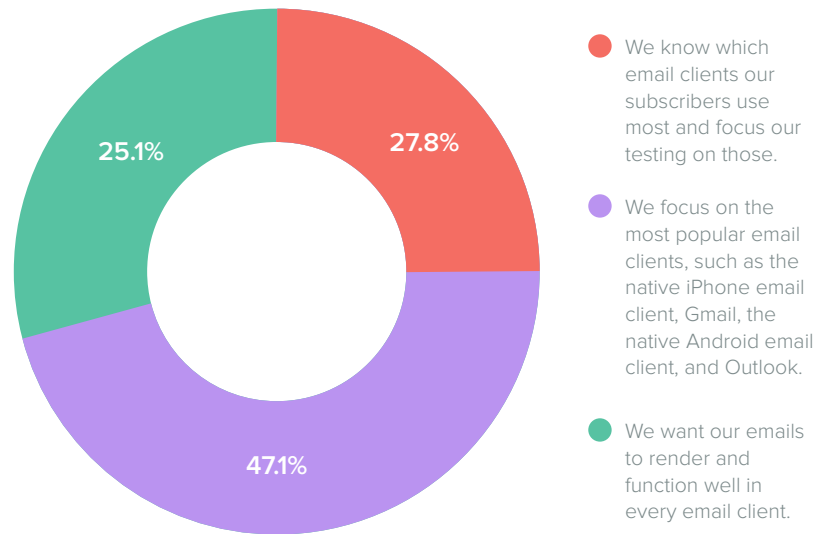
342 respondents

Companies with production cycles of a week or less were the least likely to document QA issues.

🐦 Tweet this

Documenting QA Issues

How does your company document quality assurance issues and collect feedback on email messaging and design?
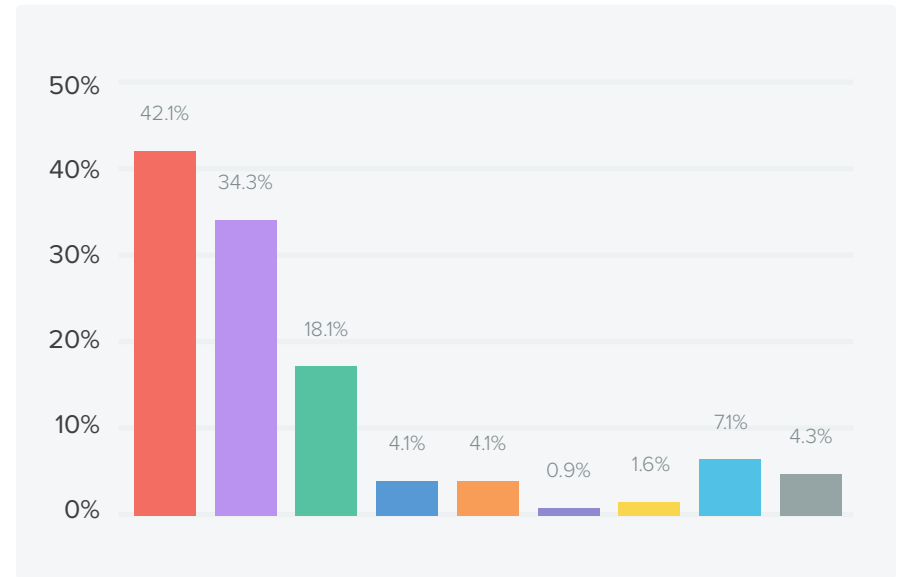
437 respondents

- Via an achievable messaging platform such as email or Slack
- Comments in a project management platform such as Basecamp, Trello, Workfront, or Redmine
- Via a ticket-tracking app such as Lighthouse, Jira, or Fogbugz
- Via shared docs like Google Docs
- Comments in a design feedback app such as Invision or Notable
- Comments in email service provider platform
- Verbally
- Via another method
- We don't

APPROVAL PROCESS

Getting final approval to send an email is generally
pretty straightforward. At the majority of businesses, the
approval of only 2 or 3 people is necessary, and it's fairly
rare to need the sign-off of a VP level executive or higher.
Most companies are able to secure approvals at least
one day before sending an email.

Number of Approvals

How many people generally have to approve an email before it is sent? Include yourself if you are a part of the approval process.

8.6%
30.7%
29.6%
13.7%
6.8%
10.6%

● 1
● 2
● 3
● 4
● 5
● 6+
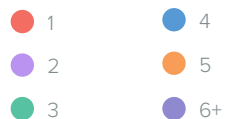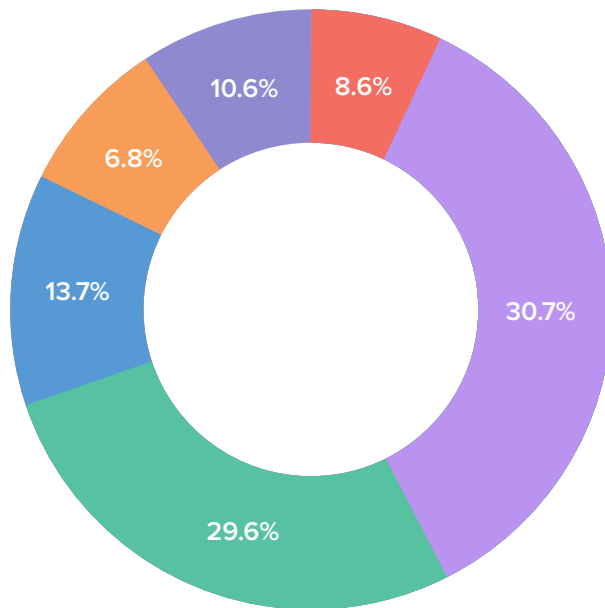
709 respondents

Nearly 38% of US companies need the approval of 4 or more people before sending an email, compared to only 18% of non-US companies.

🐦 Tweet this

Nearly 32% of US companies need the approval of a VP or higher before sending an email, compared to only 18.4% of non-US companies.

🐦 Tweet this

Highest Level of Approval

What's the highest level person that approves an email before it is sent?

19.0%
16.4%
37.6%
13.1%
13.9%

● Account/Client/ Project Manager
● Email Marketing Manager
● Marketing Manager or Director
● VP of Marketing or another VP-level officer
● Chief Marketing Officer or another C-level officer
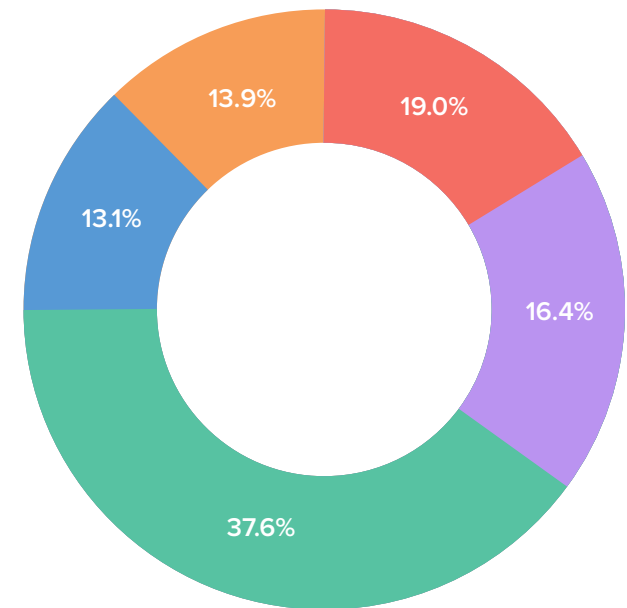
689 respondents

Approval Timing

When does final approval for an email send typically take place?

3.0%

6.6%

11.7%

42.2%

36.6%
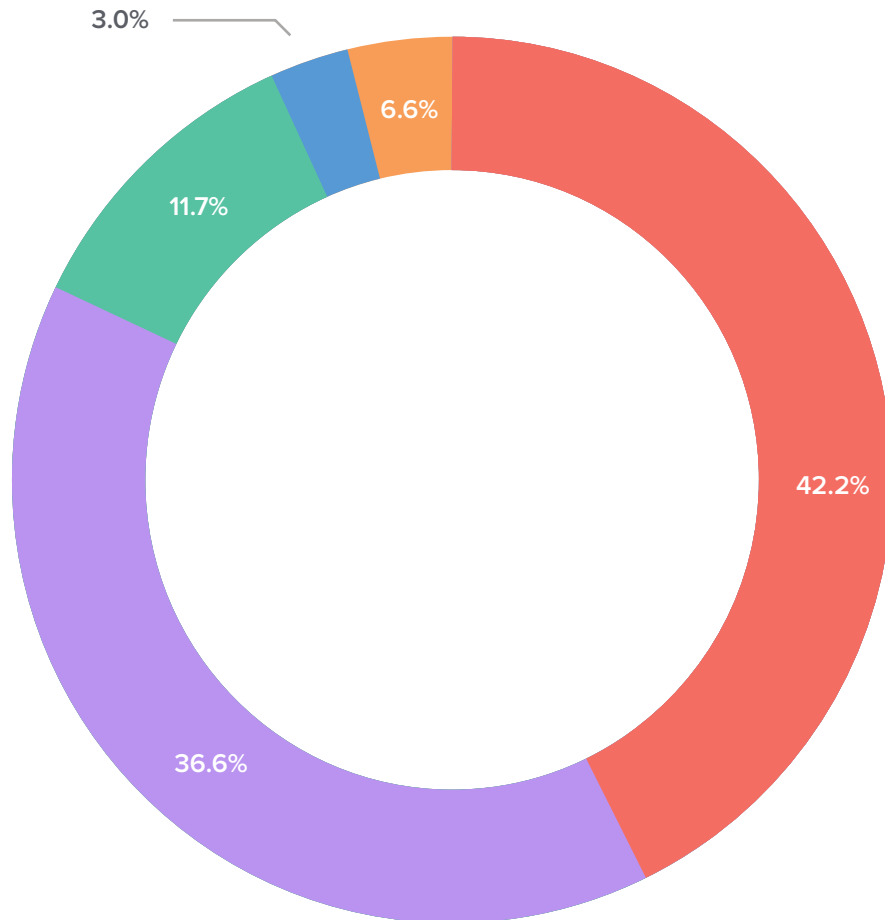
Having approvals more in advance of sends didn't have a significant impact on how often a brand halted an email send or sent correction or apology emails for email-specific errors.

Tweet this

- Same day as email send
- 1 day before email send
- 2 days before email send
- 3 days before email send
- 4 or more days before email send

702 respondents

EMAIL PLATFORMS

Companies were nearly evenly split among those using just one email platform and those using two or more for different purposes. The largest email service providers such as Salesforce, MailChimp, IBM, and Oracle were well-represented, but so were dozens of smaller ESPs.

Number of Email Platforms Used

How many email service providers (ESPs) or platforms does your company currently use to send its broadcast, segmented, triggered, and transactional emails?

9.3%

11.6%

51.5%

27.6%
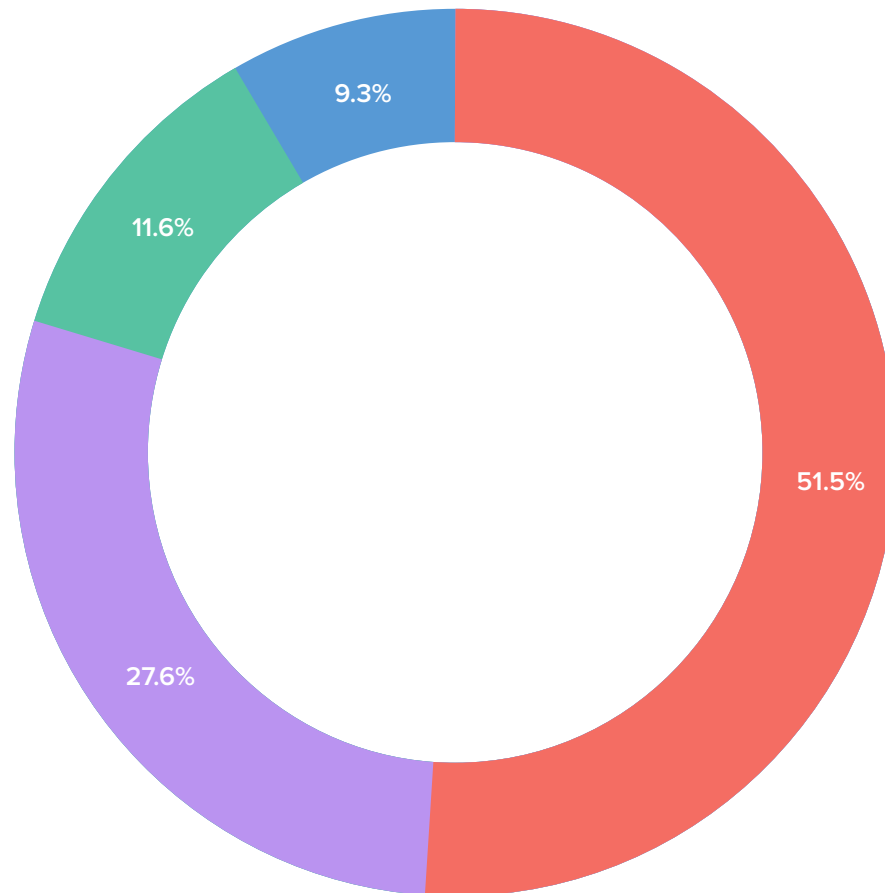
More than two-thirds of companies that use a homegrown email platform also use at least one other platform to send email. The findings indicate that most homegrown platforms are being used to send transactional emails.

🐦 Tweet this

Using two or more ESPs tends to be a marker of a more sophisticated production process, where teams are larger, more software and tools are used, more emails are in production at once, and production cycles are longer.

🐦 Tweet this

● 1   ● 2   ● 3   ● 4

674 respondents

Email Service Providers Used

Which email service provider(s) or platforms does your company currently use to send its marketing emails? (Those used by 1%+ shown.)

Provider	%
Salesforce	25.6%
MailChimp	22.4%
IBM	11.9%
Oracle	11.6%
Marketo	8.2%
Campaign Monitor	7.1%
Constant Contact	4.8%
SendGrid	3.0%
HubSpot	2.7%
Adobe	2.3%
Bronto	2.3%
dotmailer	2.3%
Experian	2.2%
iContact	2.2%
Act-On	1.9%
Blue Hornet	1.9%
Sailthru	1.9%
Emma	1.6%
Lyris	1.6%
SmartFocus	1.6%
Teradata	1.4%
Yesmail	1.4%
Blue State Digital	1.3%
Epsilon	1.3%
StrongView	1.3%
Listrak	1.2%
WhatCounts	1.2%
Homegrown	10.9%
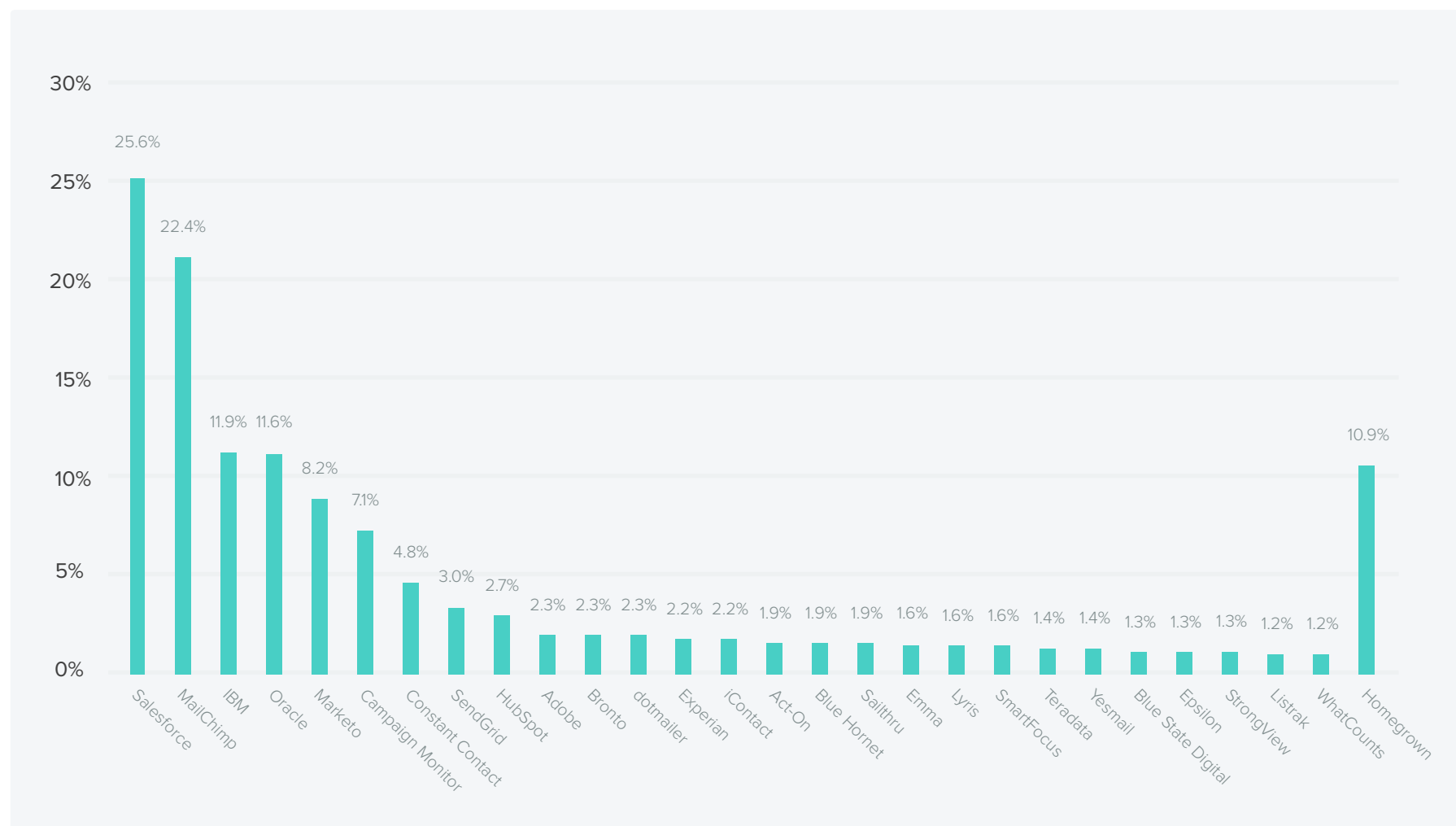
690 respondents

INTERVENTIONS & APOLOGIES

The majority of companies halt an email send no more than once a year, and correction and apology emails sent because of email mistakes were even more rare. While this may seem like cause for celebration, it wasn't clear if these companies were doing a better job at avoiding mistakes or if they were simply less aware of errors that they might be making.

Halted Sends

How many times in the past 12 months or so has your company had to halt an email send because an error was discovered in the email?

14.9%

3.4%

8.7%

18.5%

31.6%

22.9%

0
1
2
3
4
5+
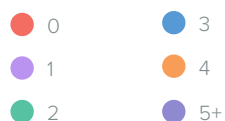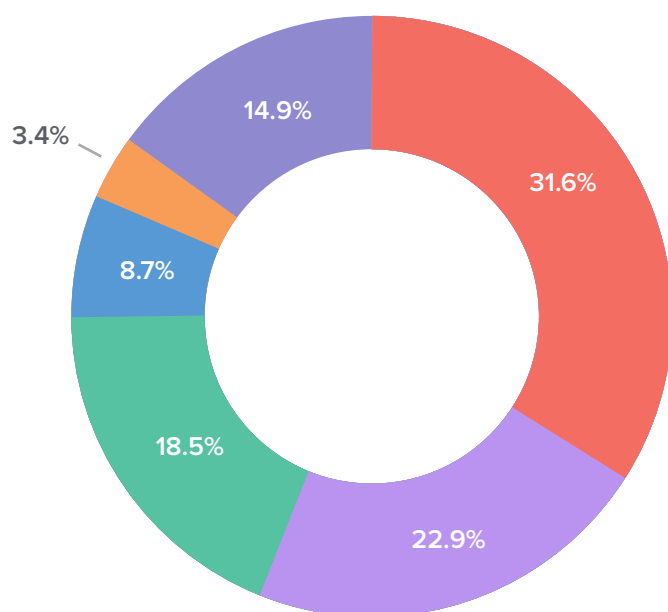
611 respondents

Companies that use two or more email platforms were a bit more likely to have halted an email send than those using only one ESP (72.0% vs. 64.6%), and also slightly more likely to have sent a correction or apology email (53.0% vs. 48.1%)

🐦 Tweet this

Apology Emails

How many times in the past 12 months has your company had to resend an email or send an apology email because of an email mistake? Don't count one sent for other reasons like site outages.

2.1%

2.6%

4.6%

14.4%

49.4%

26.9%

0
1
2
3
4
5+
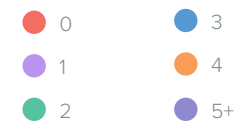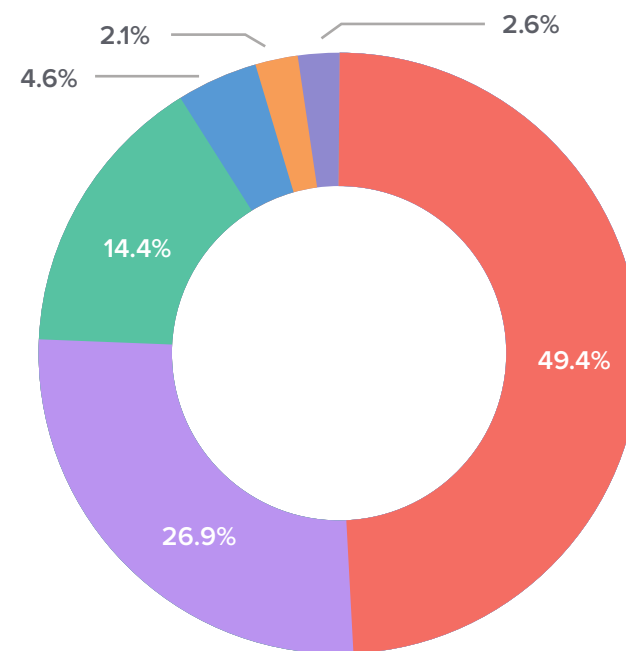
658 respondents

BETTER WORKFLOWS CREATE BETTER EMAILS

As marketers, designers, and developers who spend our days planning, coding, testing, and executing email campaigns, it's our job to streamline our workflows, coordinate with our teammates, and use tools that minimize mistakes so our subscribers have the best email experience possible.

Spend more time innovating

Creating an email that looks great everywhere can be hard. **Litmus Builder** makes it easier. Build your email inside Litmus' web-based editor and get instant previews in 40+ email clients as you go. Every change updates your previews in real time, so you can build, test, and troubleshoot faster than ever before—and spend more time focusing on optimizing your subscriber experience.

Put your best email foot forward

Ensuring that your emails display appropriately in every inbox is just the beginning. **Checklist** combines 10 years of Litmus research and best practices to optimize your sender name, subject line, and preview text; make sure your links, images, and tracking work properly; and much more. Checklist guarantees that important details aren't accidentally overlooked.

Optimize for your audience

While general email client open data is great for looking at trends, it's your audience that matters. With the addition of a small tracking code to your campaigns, **Email Analytics** generates a report of where your subscribers open your emails. Use that data to focus your testing efforts—and ensure your campaigns look great in inboxes where your subscribers are opening

START SENDING BETTER EMAILS TODAY.

Try Litmus free for 14 days

Send better email →

No credit card required

Dashboard

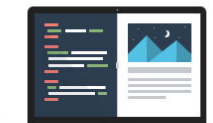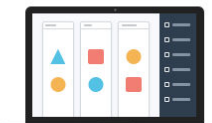Paul F.

Hi Paul!

Looks like you were last working on Design: TEDC Save the Date. Return to working on it?

Build, test, and get instant previews in 40+ clients as you troubleshoot

Paste your HTML

Send us your email to get instant previews and run a comprehensive checklist

Send us your email

Discover your audience and monitor the success of your campaigns

View your reports

Recent Builder projects   View All Projects   Recent Checklists   View all Checklists

MORE RESEARCH FROM LITMUS

Email Marketing in 2020

In this report, we take a look at what email marketing will be like in the year 2020—in terms of the subscriber experience, inbox functionality, deliverability, design and coding, technology provider landscape, and more. To provide the full picture, we surveyed marketers and consumers about the channel, and then asked 20 experts to share their vision of email's future.
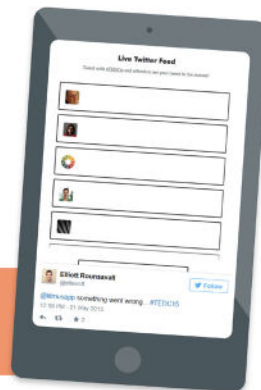
Get your copy ➔
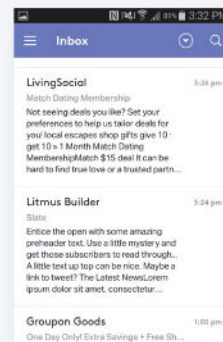
2016 State of Email

In this report, we dive into major innovations from the past year, providing insights and action items for email marketing professionals. Plus, we take a look at market share stats across desktop, mobile, and webmail inboxes. By the end, you'll be positioned for email success throughout 2016.

Get your copy ➜

How to Recover from Email Marketing Mistakes

In this report, we share a decision framework that will guide you to a response that's appropriate for the error made, one that minimizes the impact of the mistake and avoids an overreaction that could make the situation worse. We walk you through each step of the framework and share real-life stories of email marketing mishaps along the way.
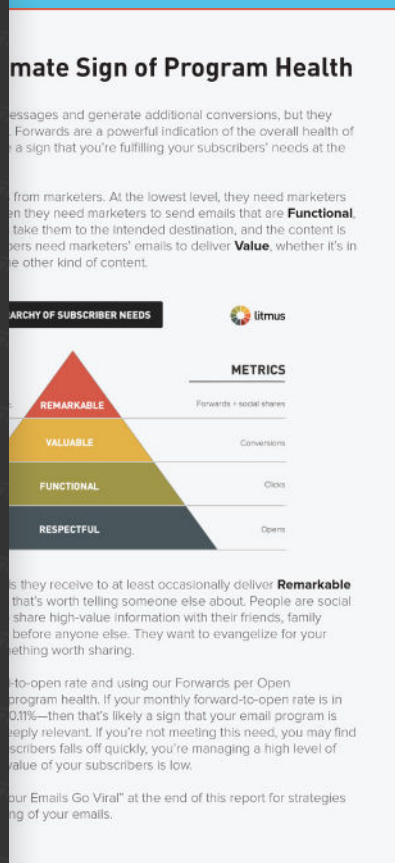
Get your copy ➔

The Viral Email

In this report, we examine the forwards generated by more than 400,000 email sends, with a deep analysis of messages from the top 1% of most viral campaigns. Based on this one-of-a-kind research, we provide benchmarks for forward-to-open rates, discuss different email tactics for spurring email forwards, and share real-world examples of highly viral emails.

Get your copy →

Methodology

More than 900 professionals involved in email marketing took the Email Production Survey between Aug. 27 and Nov. 24, 2015. All questions were optional, so the number of respondents is noted for each question throughout this report.

About Litmus

Litmus helps more than 250,000 marketers make email better. The web-based email creation, testing, and analytics platform empowers marketers, designers, and agencies to confidently deliver a superior subscriber experience. Litmus provides instant email previews and quality assurance tools across all major inbox providers, browsers, and devices, and features comprehensive analytics to help users quickly and easily build, test, troubleshoot, and optimize every campaign.

Headquartered in Cambridge, Mass., with additional offices in London, Litmus has partnered with more than 250 major email service providers and agencies, including MailChimp, IBM Silverpop, and BrightWave Marketing. For more information about Litmus and the latest email news and trends, visit **www.litmus.com.**

About the Author

Chad White is the Research Director at Litmus and the author of *Email Marketing Rules* and thousands of posts and articles about email marketing. A former journalist at Condé Nast and Dow Jones & Co., he has spent more than a decade researching email trends and best practices at the Direct Marketing Association, Responsys, Salesforce.com, and in his current role.

About the Designer

Amir Hamdi is the Content Designer at Litmus with a passion for doodling, good movies, nice cameras, and fast cars.