



2017 State of Email Workflows

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

Creating a high-performing email takes time and the right resources. Your workflow is an expression of the investment you make in every email—and is itself a predictor of email program success.

In our second annual State of Email Workflows report, we take a detailed look at how marketers:

Plan their email content	03	Get approvals	29
Allocate their time among tasks	09	Send their emails	34
Use technology in their workflow	12	Deal with email mistakes	37
Handle quality assurance	22	Use Litmus in their workflow	40

It's our hope that you'll use the results to benchmark your own process and identify opportunities for improvement, as well as using this report's findings as evidence to make a compelling argument for more resources or process changes.

All of this is made possible by the more than 3,500 marketers who generously took the time to take our State of Email Survey and share their insights with the industry. For a breakdown of the demographics of our respondents, check out this [snapshot of the email professional](#).

Now, let's make our email workflows better!



Content Planning

Email content planning continues to be relatively ad hoc. Only half of brands use a content calendar year-round. Most brands plan their off-peak season content one month out and their peak season content two months out, although roughly 1 in 10 brands are planning their email content six or more months in advance.

Most content planning is done via Google and Microsoft document, spreadsheet, and calendar software. However, software that's designed specifically for content planning like Trello and Jira gained traction this year.

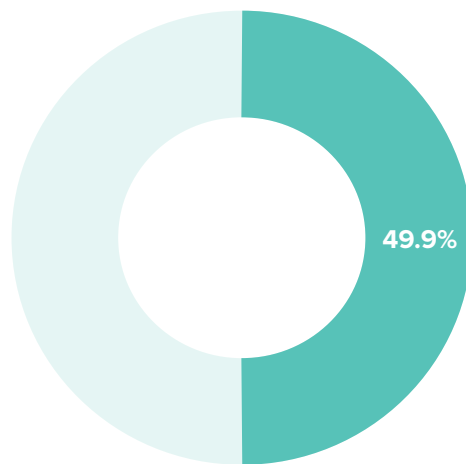
When it comes to planning individual emails, less than 19% of marketers create a brief for every email to set clear goals, guide production, and establish KPIs for post-send analytics. And 46% never create a brief, not even for their more important or complex emails.

Content Calendar Usage

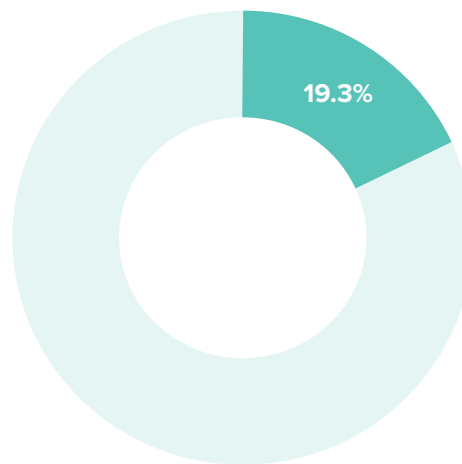
Does your company use a content calendar for their email marketing program?

2,759 respondents

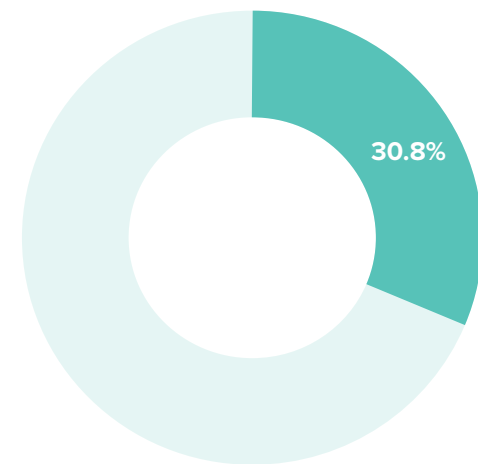
Marketers who consider their email marketing programs successful are 47% more likely than less successful programs (63.4% vs. 43.2%) to maintain an email content calendar year-round.



Yes, we maintain a content calendar year-round.



Yes, but we only use a content calendar to map out our peak season(s).



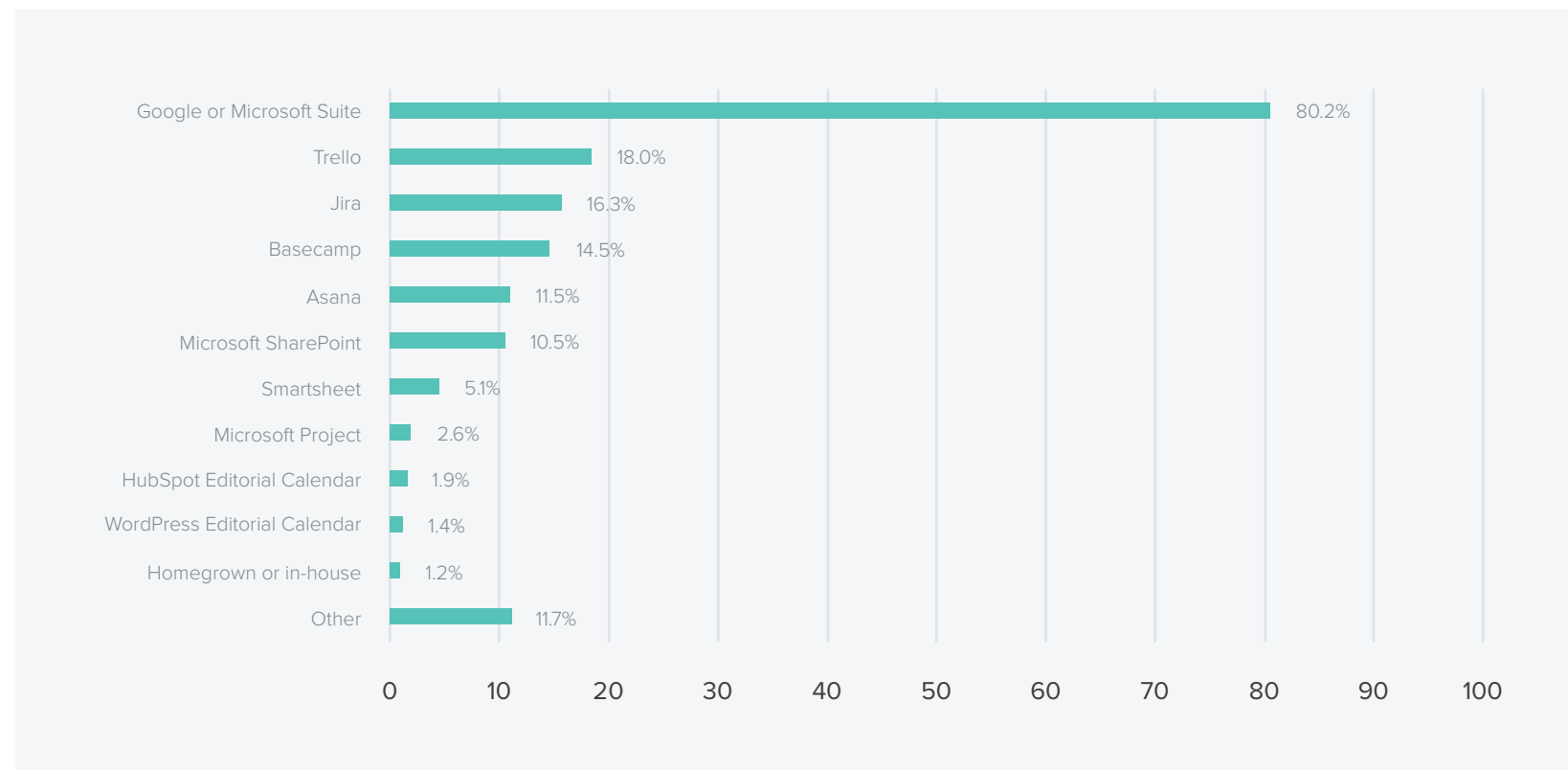
No, we plan and send emails ad hoc as needed.

Software Used for Email Content Planning

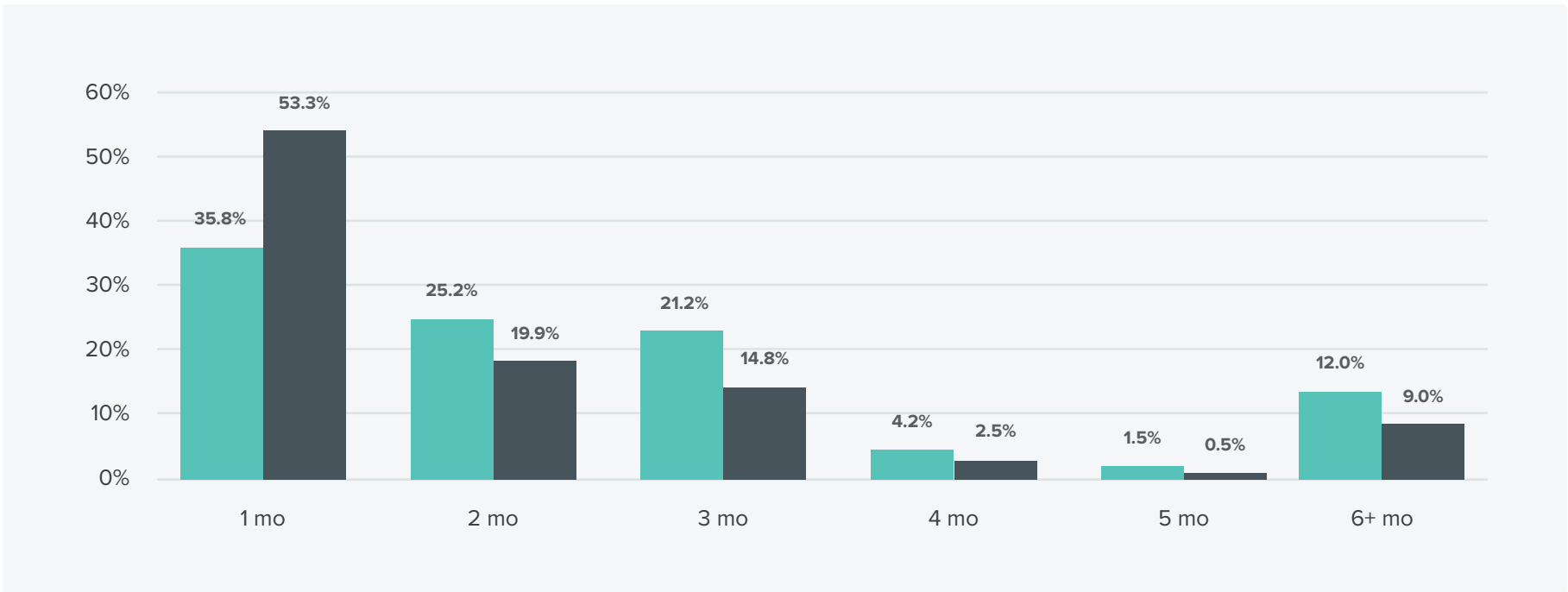
What software does your company use for email content planning?
(select all that apply)

1,728 respondents

Jira, Microsoft SharePoint, and Trello all saw a significant jump in usage for email content planning since 2015.



Content Planning Horizon



For Peak Season(s)

How far in advance does your company typically plan email content for your peak season(s)?

1,819 respondents

For Off-Peak Season(s)

How far in advance does your company typically plan email content for your off-peak season(s)?

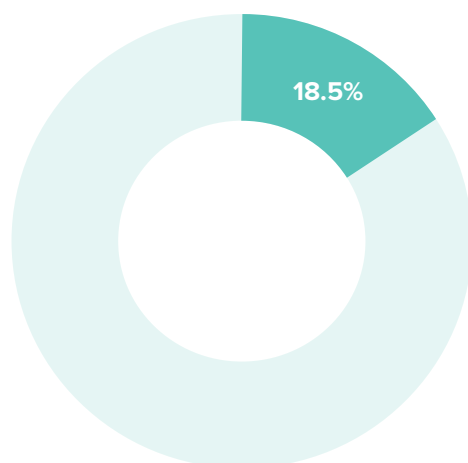
1,644 respondents

Email Brief Creation

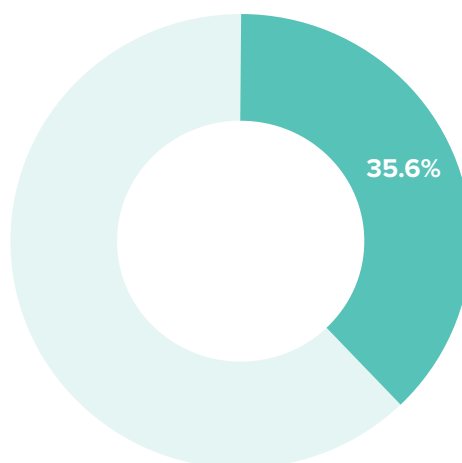
Does your company create a brief for every email you produce that outlines the email's goals, audience, messaging, KPIs, etc.?

2,872 respondents

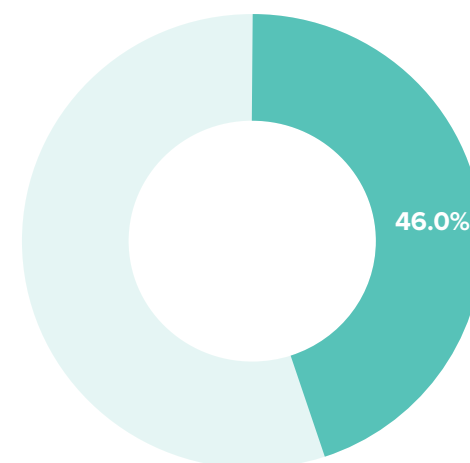
Marketers who consider their email marketing programs successful are more than twice as likely as less successful programs (24.5% vs. 11.0%) to create an email brief for every email they produce.



Yes, for every email we produce.



Yes, for some of the emails we produce.



No.

Kickstart Your Email Planning

At a minimum, your email brief should answer these four questions:

- Who are you sending the campaign to?
- What action(s) do you want your subscribers to take?
- Why should your subscribers care?
- How will you measure success?

The answers to these questions form the backbone of your campaign and will be top of mind as you navigate the creation of your email.

[Read more](#)



Production Cycles

The number of emails in production and the time it takes brands to produce an email varies significantly based on the sophistication of the email marketing program. For instance, marketers who describe their email programs as sophisticated have 11.1 emails in production at any given time on average—29% more than less sophisticated programs.

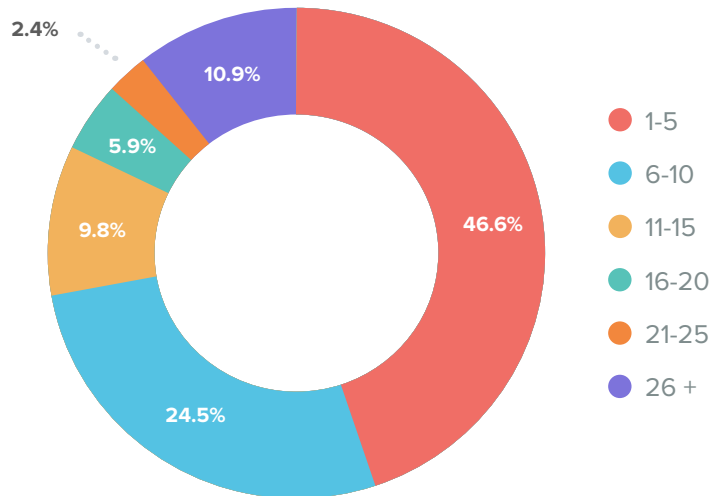
While brands spend two weeks on average taking an email from conception to deployed, sophisticated email programs pull up this average. Sophisticated brands spend 2.3 weeks on production on average, while less sophisticated programs spend 1.9 weeks producing each email they send.

While sophisticated marketers spend a little less time on average on copywriting and coding, they spend a bit more time on data logic and post-send analytics. This is in line with sophisticated marketers being more data-driven and investing more in personalization, segmentation, and automation.

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?

2,638 responses

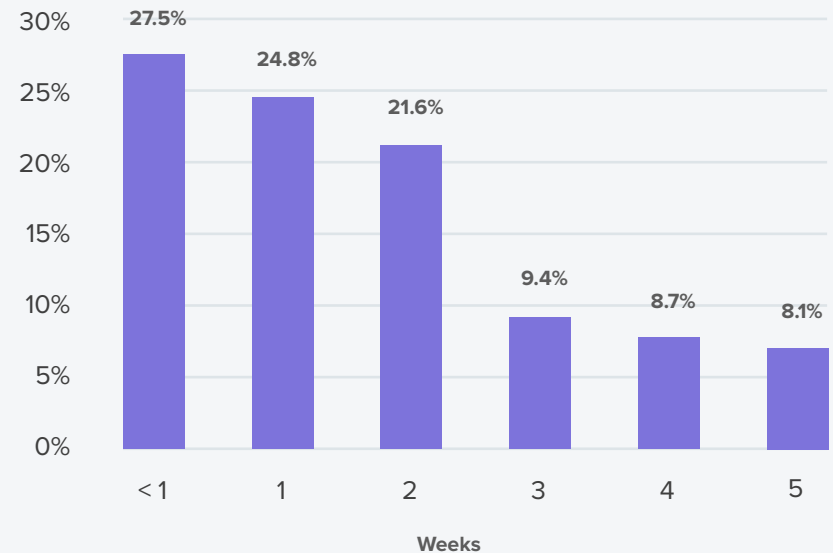


Marketers typically have 9.7 emails in production at any given time on average. However, brands with more than 500 employees have 64% more emails in production than smaller companies (13.2 vs 8.1 emails).

Email Production Cycle

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

2,670 respondents

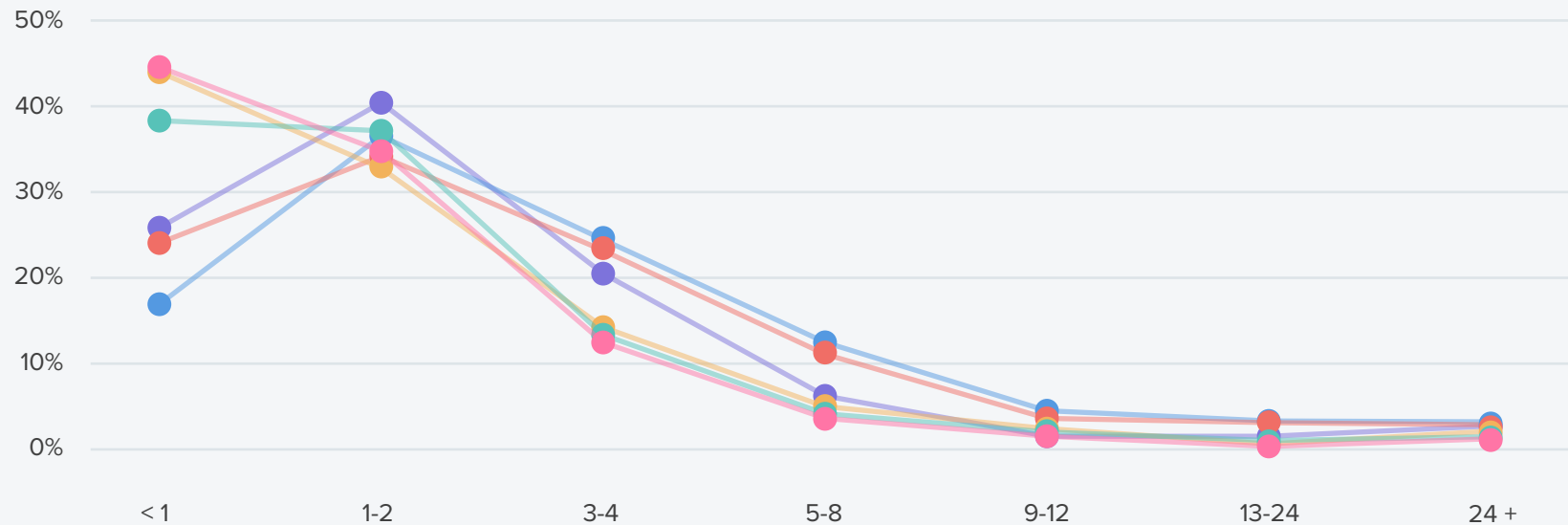


Marketers spend 2 weeks producing an email on average, but companies with 500 or more employees spend 47% more time on their emails than smaller companies (2.5 vs. 1.7 weeks).

Hours Spent on Tasks

For each email that your company sends, how long is typically spent on the following tasks?

Email marketers spend the most time on graphics and design (4.1 hours on average), followed by coding and development (3.8 hrs.), copywriting (3 hrs.), data pulls/logic (2.4 hrs.), testing and troubleshooting (2.3 hrs.), and post-send analytics and analysis (2.1 hrs.).



Copywriting

2,472 respondents

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

Graphics & Design

2,597 respondents

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

Data Pulls/Logic

2,312 respondents

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

Testing & Troubleshooting

2,644 respondents

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

Coding & Development

2,607 respondents

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

Analytics & Analysis

2,455 respondents

For each email that your company sends, how long is typically spent on post-send analytics & analysis?

Email Design & Development Tools

Extremes dominate email development. Some tools and techniques see wide usage, while others are rarely used. For instance, Adobe software is central to email design, with Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and Dreamweaver being very popular. Designers commonly use HTML Frameworks and CSS Inlining—though the practice of inlining CSS by hand is popular, too.

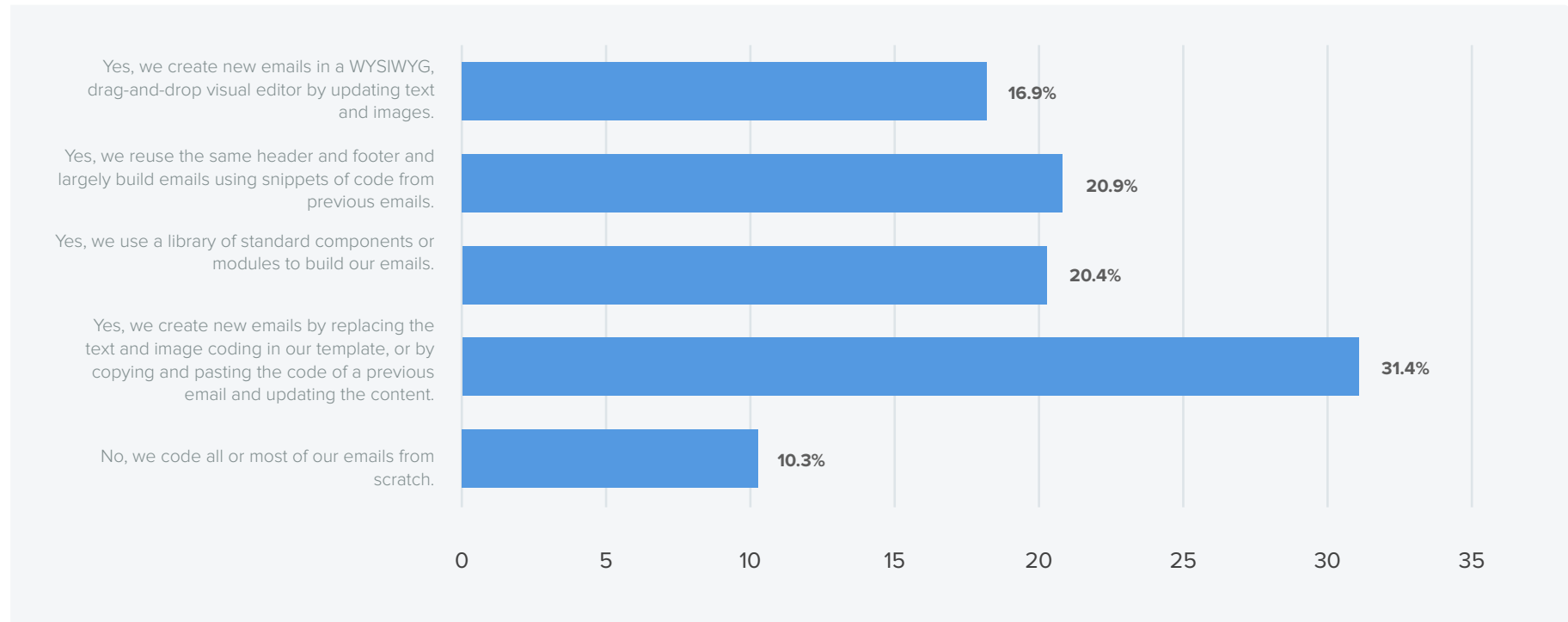
At the other end of the spectrum, designers don't use a lot of automation tools. For example, less than 10% of marketers use tools like Emmet, static site generators, and task runners. Preprocessors and post-processing make up part of the email build process for less than 13% of marketers. And little more than 18% of marketers use partials to quickly make changes across existing emails.

All of those low-usage tools are significantly more popular among marketers who describe their email programs as sophisticated. So for marketers looking to speed up or add more rigor to their email workflows, these tools represent opportunities that are well worth exploring.

Email Template Usage

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

2,647 respondents

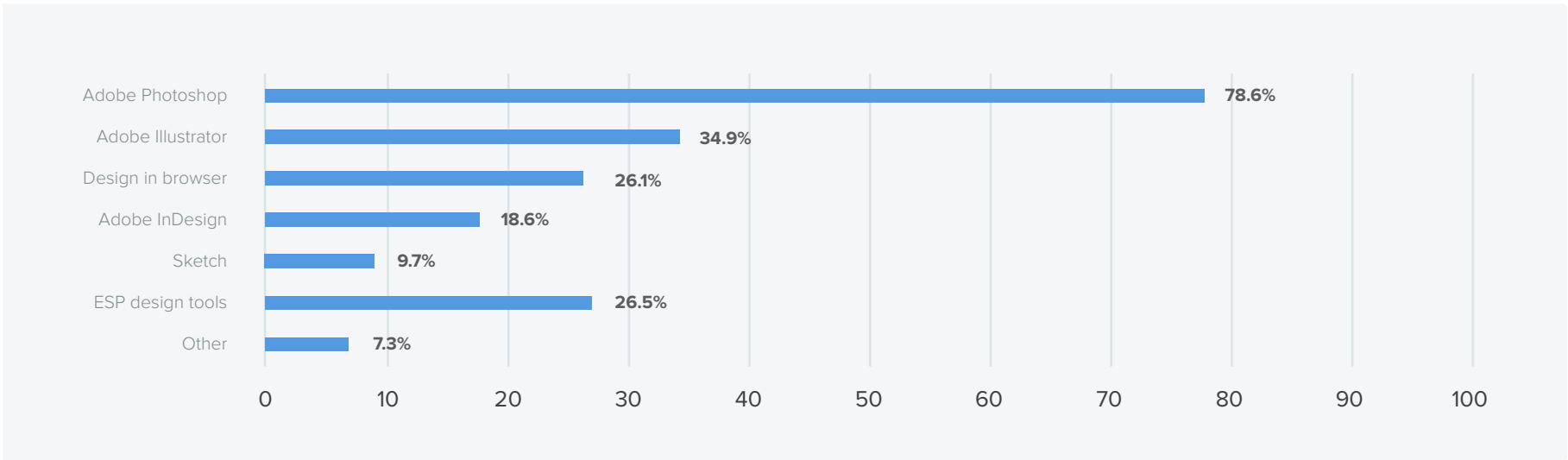


Many marketers are confused about what exactly an email template is. Check out [What Is an Email Template?](#) and the [free templates available in the Litmus Community](#).

Design Programs Used

Which design program(s) does your company use for email marketing? (select all that apply)

2,548 respondents

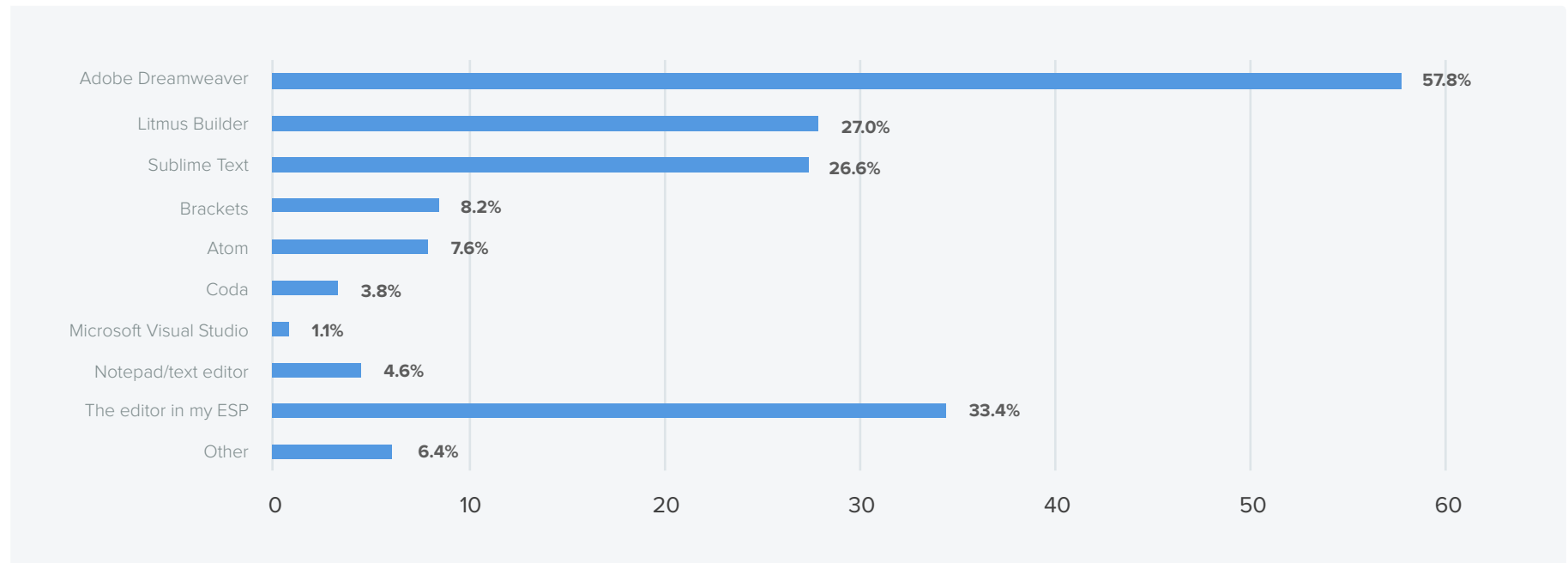


Marketers use two design programs on average to create their emails.

HTML Editors Used

Which editor(s) does your company use for email development? (select all that apply)

2,423 respondents



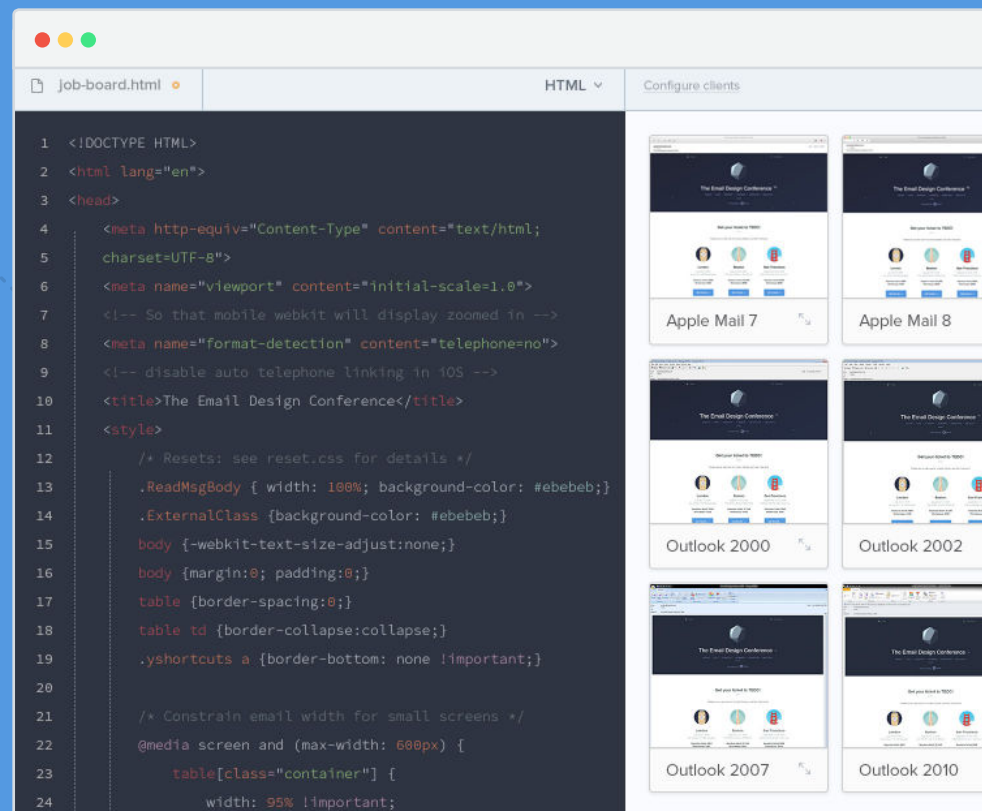
Marketers use 1.8 HTML editors on average to code their emails, suggesting that email developers use different editors for different stages of production.

The Only Editor Built Specifically for Email

Litmus Builder was created from the ground up to code emails, not webpages. Not only does it support Emmet shortcuts, Builder provides:

- Email Previews in 70+ email clients
- Images on/off views and desktop/mobile views across email clients
- Automatic CSS inlining
- Support for snippets and partials
- Timeline control so you can always revert to previous versions
- Code analysis to point out code not supported by specific email clients
- Grid view to easily navigate your code by clicking through your email design
- Email syncing to MailChimp, Campaign Monitor, and Salesforce Marketing Cloud—with more to come!

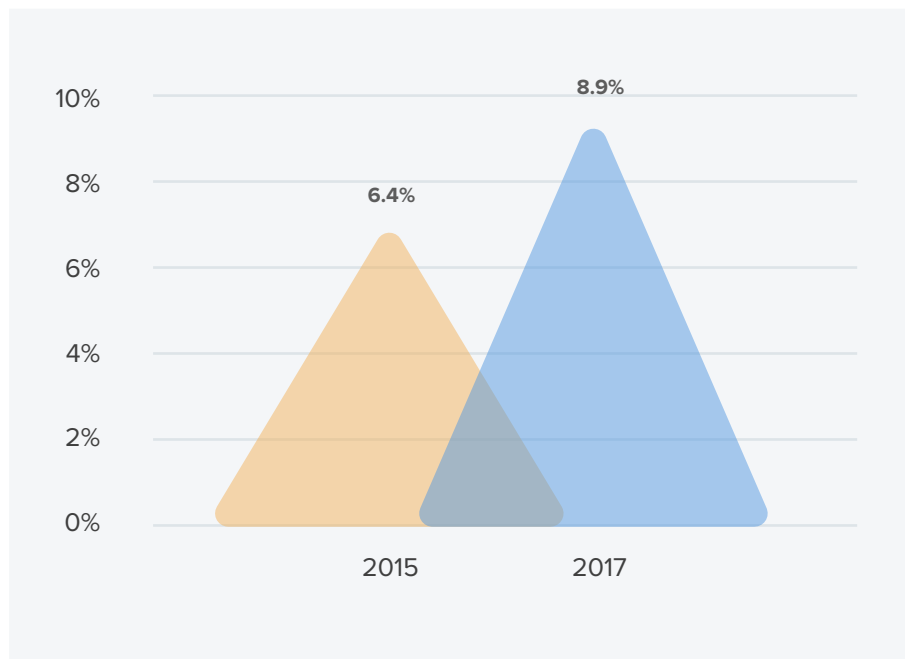
[Learn more about Litmus Builder](#)



Emmet Plugin Usage

Does your company use the Emmet plugin for email development?

2015: 664 respondents 2017: 2,217 respondents

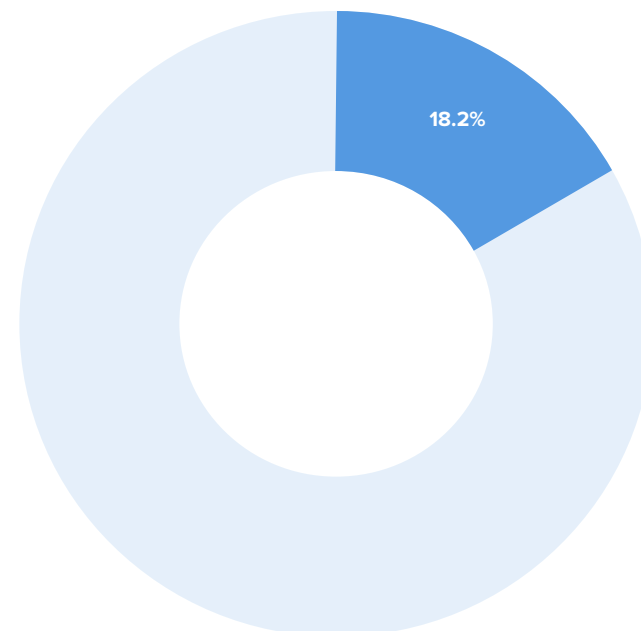


Emmet is a free add-on for your text editor that allows you to type shortcuts that are then expanded into full pieces of code. For a full explanation, check out [What Is Emmet?](#)

Partials Usage

Does your company use partials for email development?

1,620 respondents



● Yes ● No

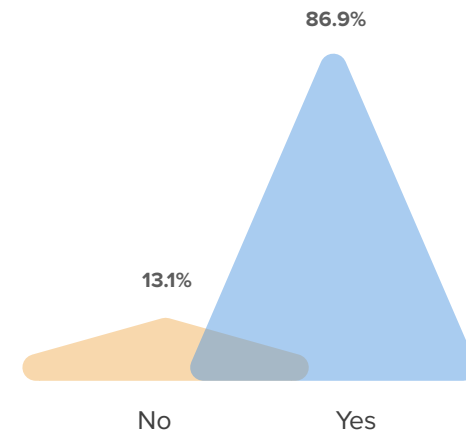
Snippets are a repository of pieces of code, while partials are special code blocks where any changes are reflected globally across all instances of it. To learn more, check out [Automate Your Emails in Two Ways: Snippets vs. Partials.](#)

CSS Inlining

Does your company inline the CSS styles in their emails?

2,298 respondents

Inline styles are applied directly to individual HTML elements—and are the safest way to ensure consistent rendering across email clients. However, inline styles can be time-consuming to write and challenging to manage. Our [Guide to CSS Inlining in Email](#) tells you what you need to know.

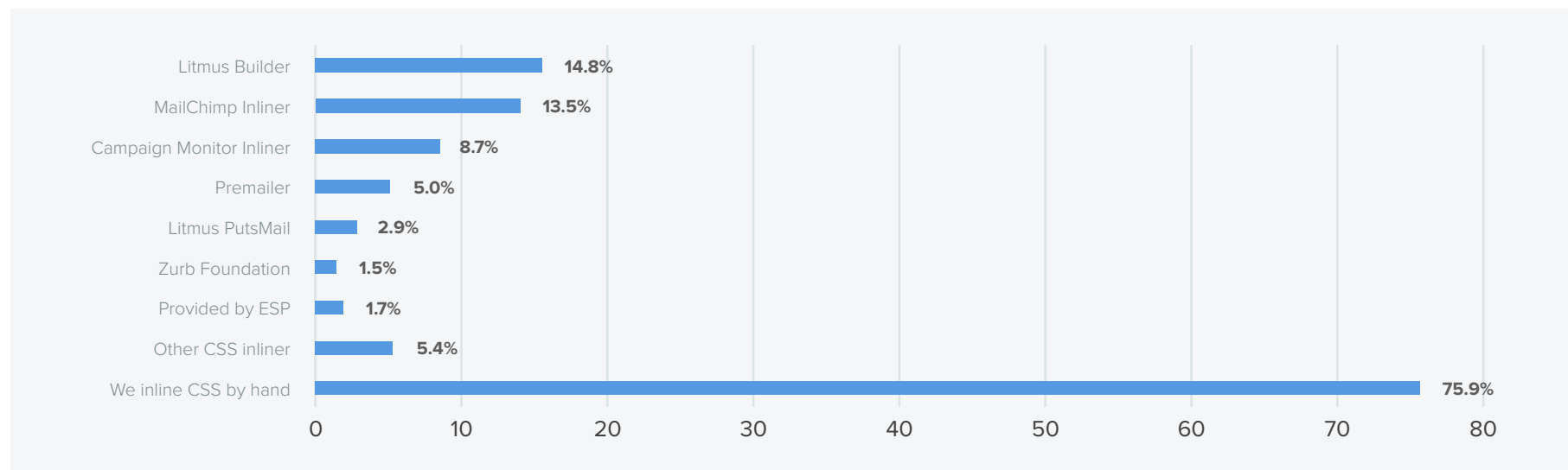


2,298 respondents

CSS Inliner Usage

Which CSS inliner tools does your company use? (select all that apply)

1,772 respondents

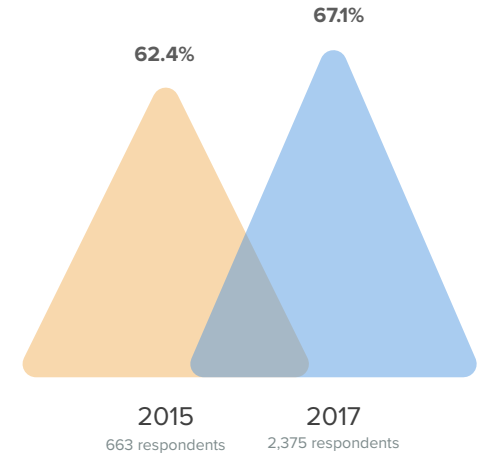


HTML Framework Usage

Does your company use an HTML email framework or templates for email development?

2,298 respondents

An HTML email framework contains pattern-based elements such as tables, images, buttons, and links that help you quickly create HTML emails.

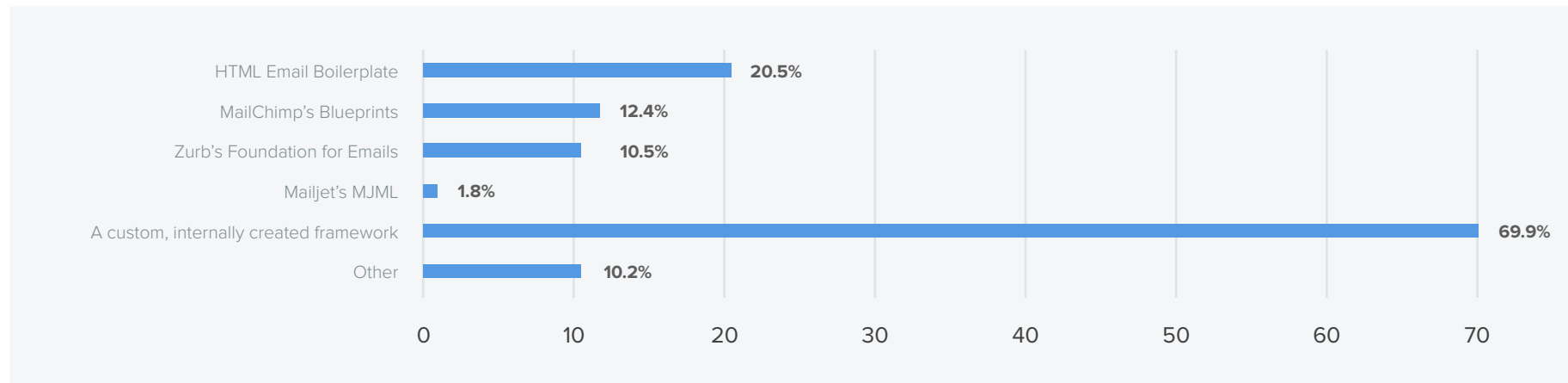


HTML Framework Used

Which HTML email framework(s) or template(s) does your company use for email development? (select all that apply)

1,357 respondents

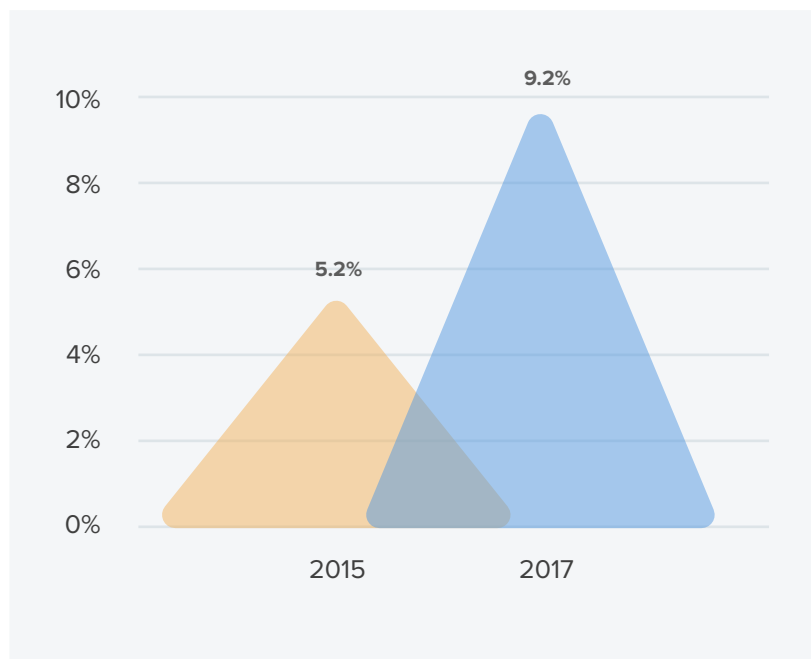
Custom, internally created HTML frameworks remain by far the most popular approach, slipping only slightly to 69.9% from 70.8% in 2015.



Static Site Generator Usage

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

2015: 620 respondents 2017: 1,830 respondents

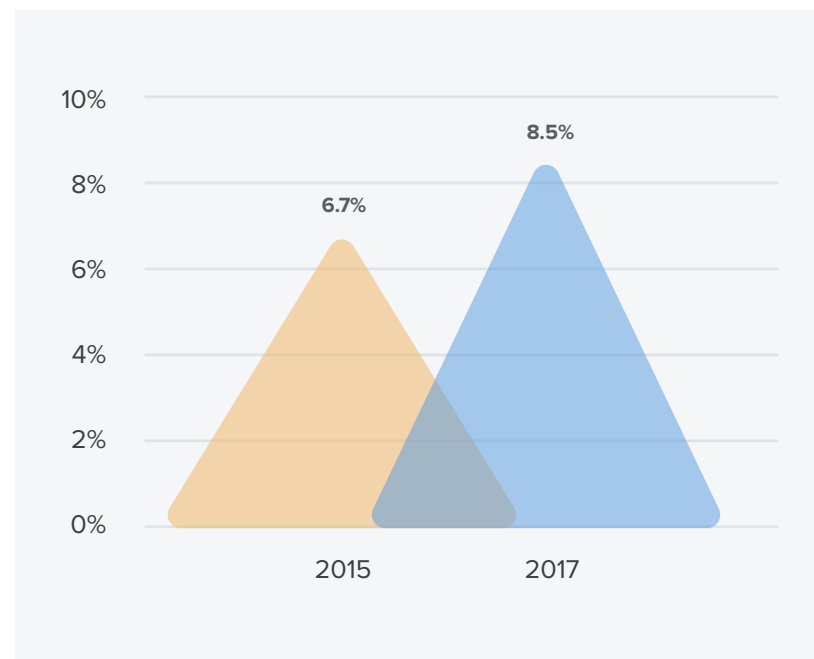


The top 4 used by email marketers are: (1) Litmus Builder, (2) Assemble, (3) Jekyll, and (4) Middleman. Learn how to [Speed Up Your Email Production Process with Static Site Generators](#).

Task Runner Usage

Does your company use task runner(s) for email development?

2015: 631 respondents 2017: 1,965 respondents

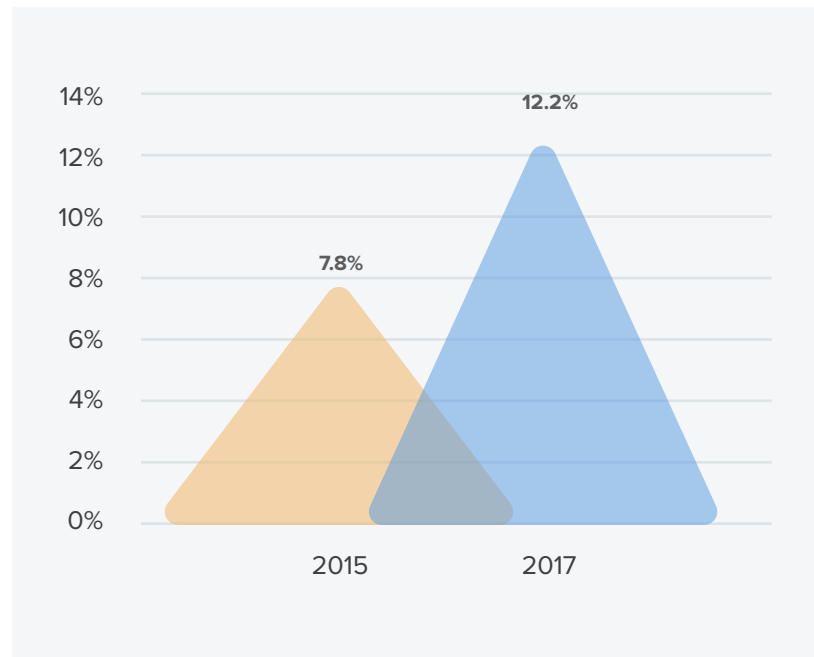


The top 3 task runners used by email marketers are: (1) Gulp, (2) Grunt, and (3) Codekit. Learn how to [Speed Up Your Email Production Process with Task Runners](#).

Preprocessor Usage

Does your company use preprocessing languages for email development?

2015: 615 respondents 2017: 1,802 respondents

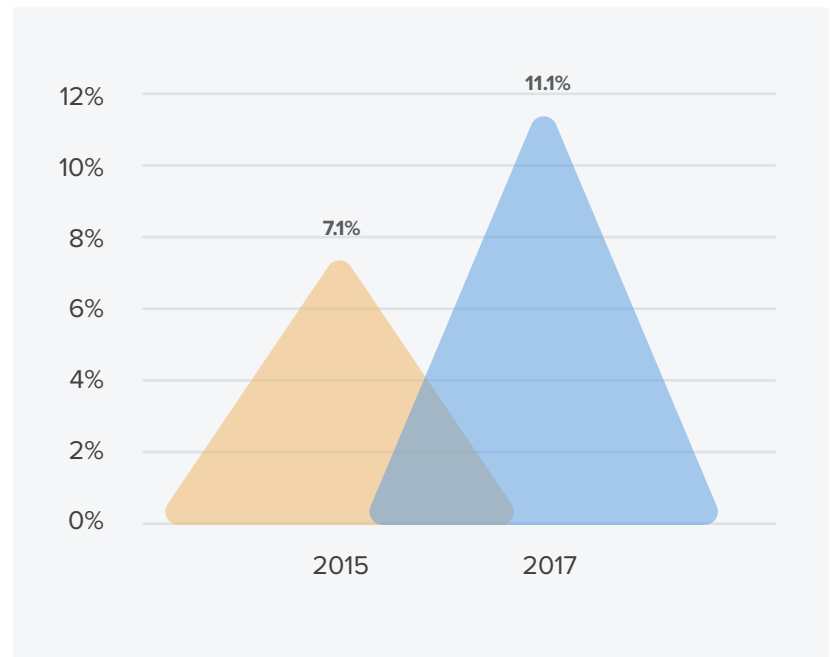


The top 5 preprocessing languages are: (1) SCSS, (2) Sass, (3) Less, (4) HamI, and (5) PHP.

Post-processing Usage

Does your company use post-processing for email development?

2015: 547 respondents 2017: 1,687 respondents



Using pre- and post-processing can save you 10-15 minutes per email. Learn about this and other time-saving tools in [7 Ways to Add Automation into Your Email Workflow](#).



Quality Assurance

Ensuring that your emails display and function as intended is an important step in every email workflow. Successful email programs recognize this.

Marketers who describe their email programs as successful are more than twice as likely to use an extensive pre-send checklist than less successful programs (28.1% vs. 12.1%) as part of their QA process. Successful email programs are also more likely to test every email they send, more likely to use email preview software, and slightly more likely to know which email clients their subscribers use most and focus their testing efforts on those.

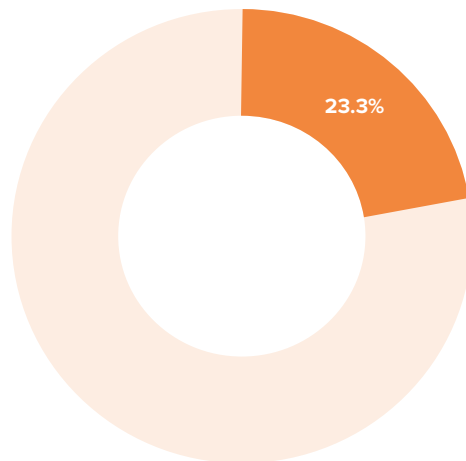
With only 23.3% of marketers using an extensive pre-send checklist and only 61.2% testing every email they send, marketers have some clear ways to improve their QA process.

Checklist Usage

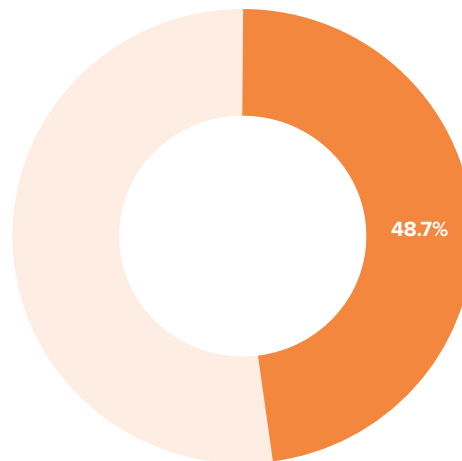
Does your company have a pre-send checklist that it runs before sending every email?

2,287 respondents

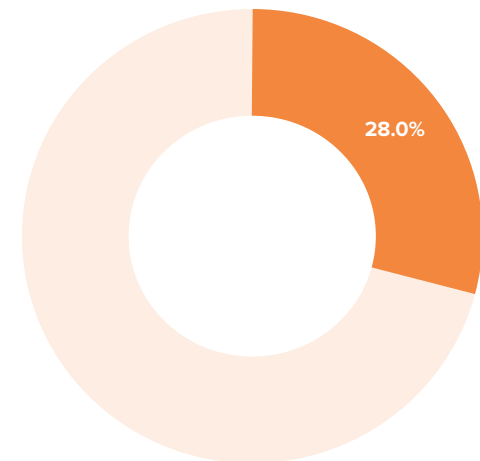
For guidance on what to include in your pre-send checklist, check out [The Ultimate Email Checklist: 24 Things to Check Before You Send](#) and [download our Email Marketing Checklist](#).



Yes, we have an extensive checklist that we use.



Yes, we have a short checklist that we use.



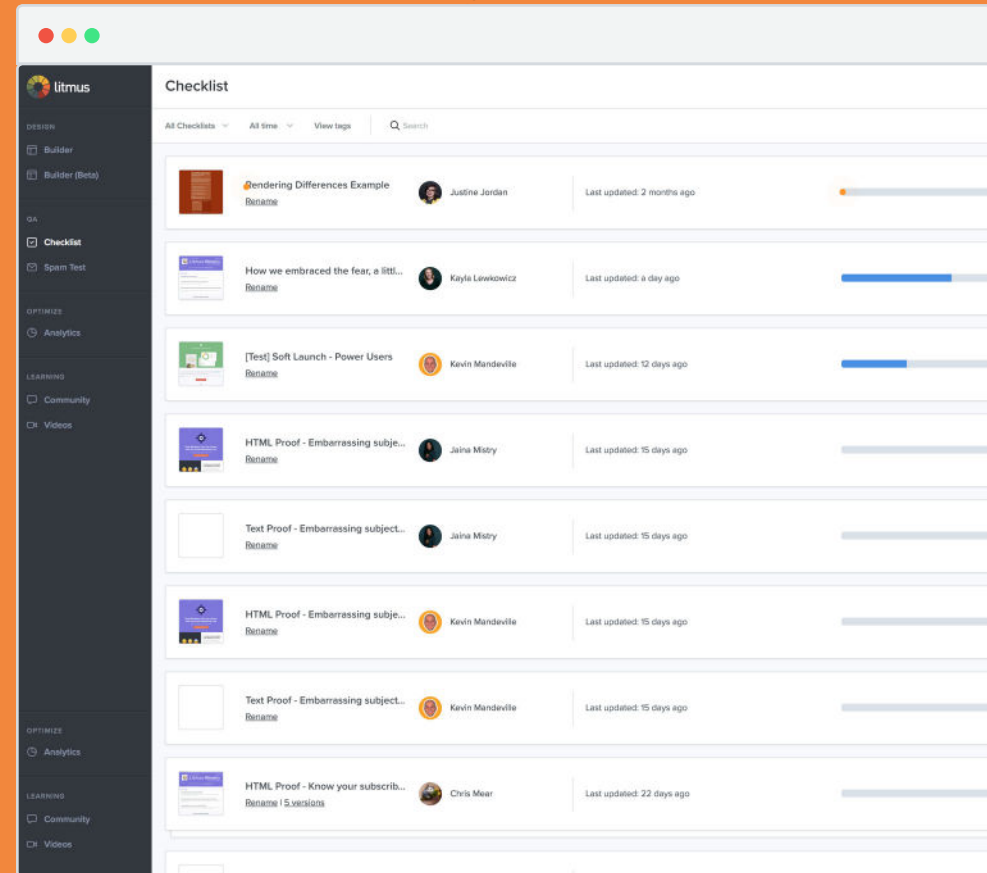
No.

Ensure You Don't Miss Any Errors

Litmus Checklist gives you a guided check of the critical elements that affect email performance before sending. With Checklist, you can easily:

- Preview your email in 70+ apps and devices
- Validate that your links, images, and analytics tracking work properly
- Test your email's load time
- Create a custom checklist that's unique to your workflow
- Preview your subject line, preview text, and sender name in 15+ apps and email clients

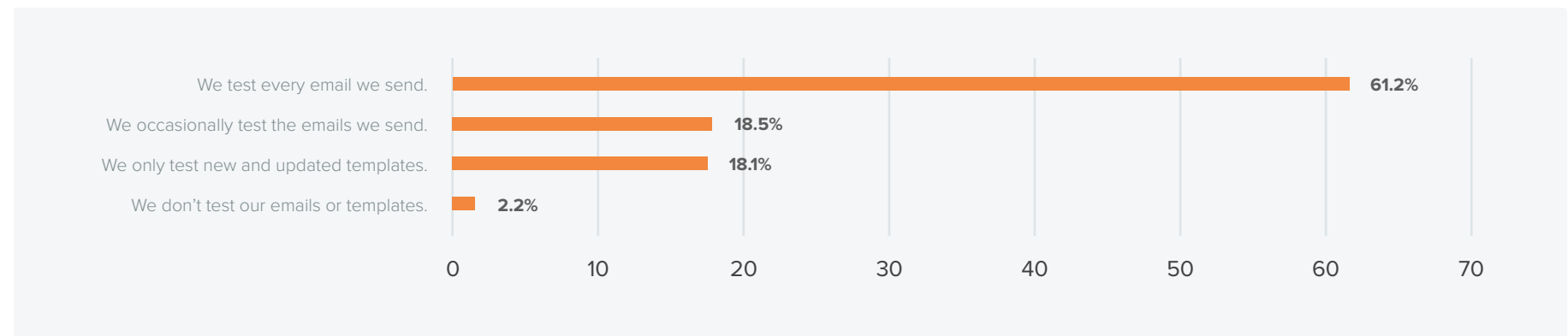
[Learn more about Litmus Checklist](#)



Email Preview Testing Approach

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

2,336 respondents

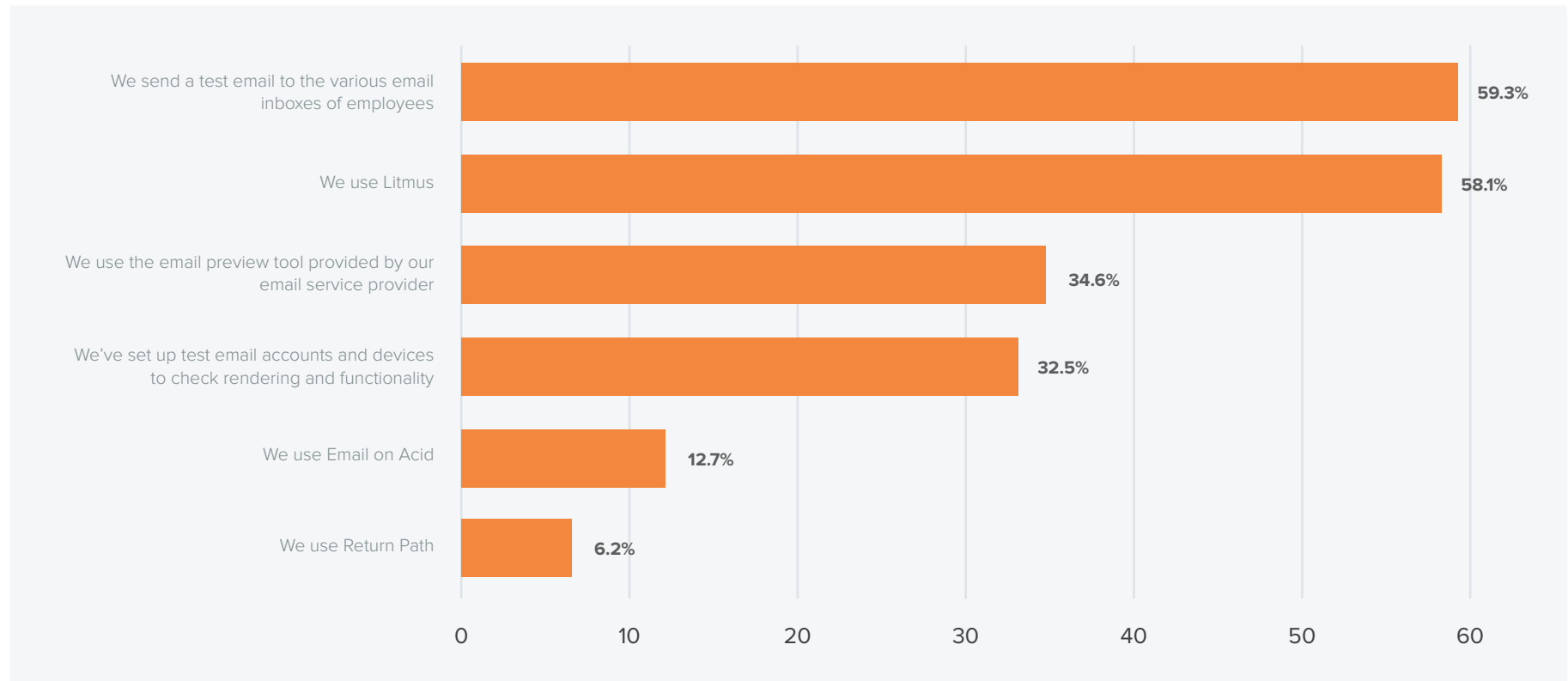


When you don't test every email, you leave a lot to chance, from email rendering to subject lines to deliverability. Here are [11 Reasons to Test Every Email Before You Send](#).

Email Preview Testing Method

How does your company test the rendering and functionality of its emails in different email clients and devices before sending them? (select all that apply)

2,213 respondents



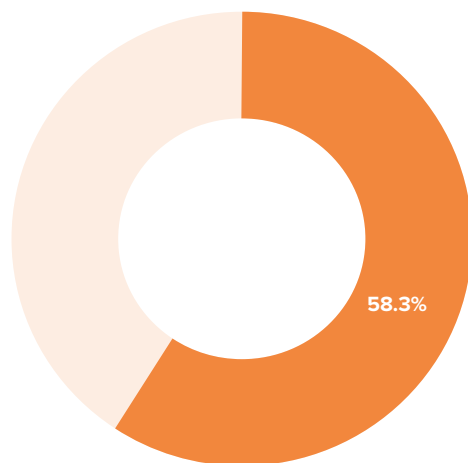
Marketers use an average of two methods to test the rendering of their emails.

Email Preview Testing Philosophy

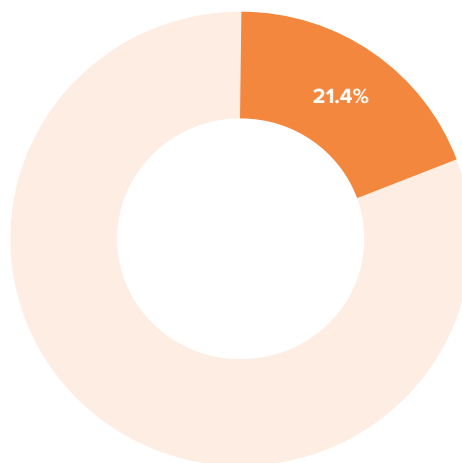
When testing the rendering and functionality of your emails, which email clients does your company generally focus on?

2,219 respondents

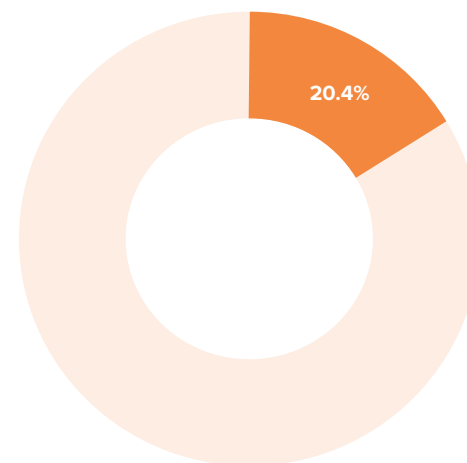
More brands are settling on having their emails only render and function properly in the most popular email clients, with 58.4% taking that approach, up from 47.1% in 2015. Knowing which email clients to focus on and wanting a consistent experience everywhere are better approaches.



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



We know which email clients our subscribers use most and focus our testing on those.



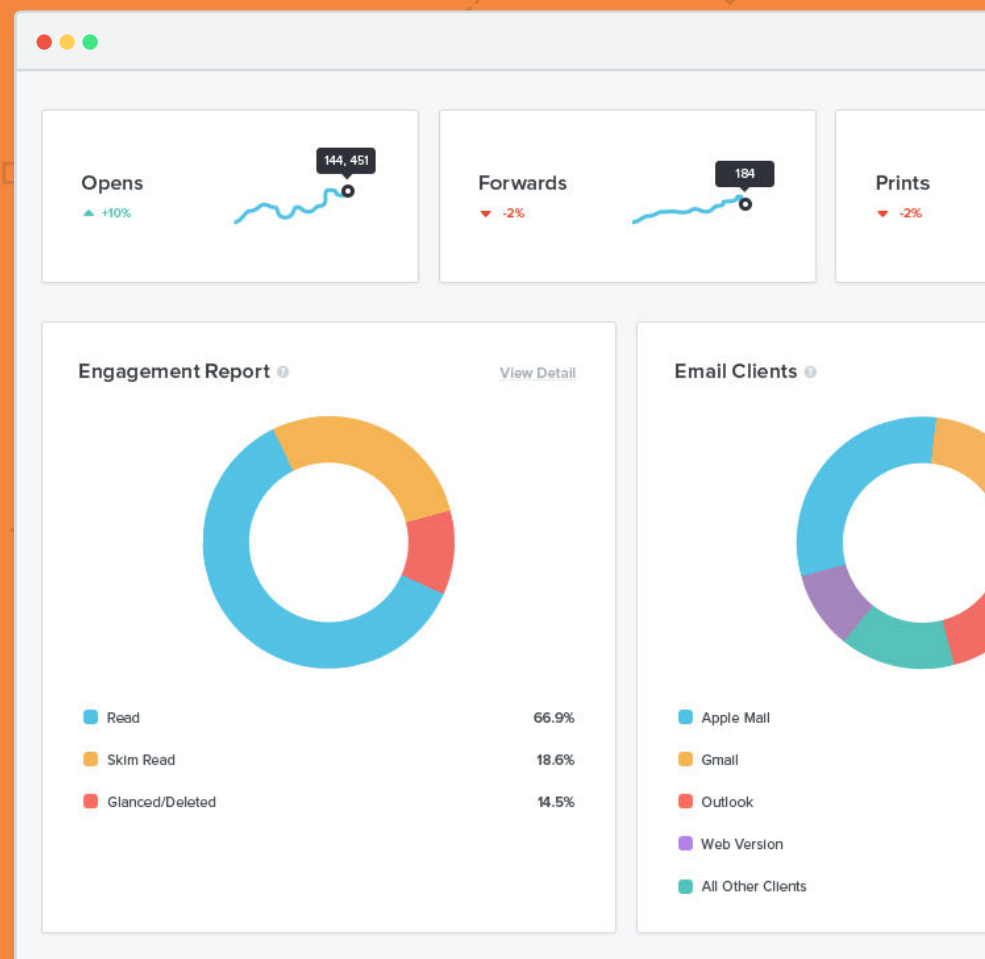
We want our emails to render and function well in every email client.

Email Analytics + Email Previews

Litmus Email Analytics can tell you exactly which email clients are the most popular *among your subscribers*, so you don't have to guess where to focus your email development efforts. In addition to discovering which email clients your emails are being opened in, you'll be able to track:

- Where your subscribers are physically located in the world
- How much time in seconds your subscribers spend reading your emails
- How many times your subscribers forward and print your emails

[Learn more about Litmus Email Analytics](#)



Approval Process

Successful email programs are significantly more likely than less successful programs to say they have an appropriately rigorous approval process (68.6% vs. 52.1%) rather than a burdensome process or one that's too lax. The two biggest factors affecting approval processes are:

- The number of people involved in approvals
- The frequency of last-minute changes

Having two or three people sign off on an email appears to be the sweet spot. If more people are involved, marketers say that the approval process becomes burdensome. If only one person is involved, it becomes too lax.

And having last-minute changes to emails tend to indicate an approval process that's out of balance. Marketers with burdensome or lax approval processes report that last-minute changes happen often or always at double to triple the rate of marketers with appropriately rigorous approval processes.

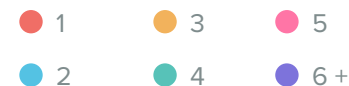
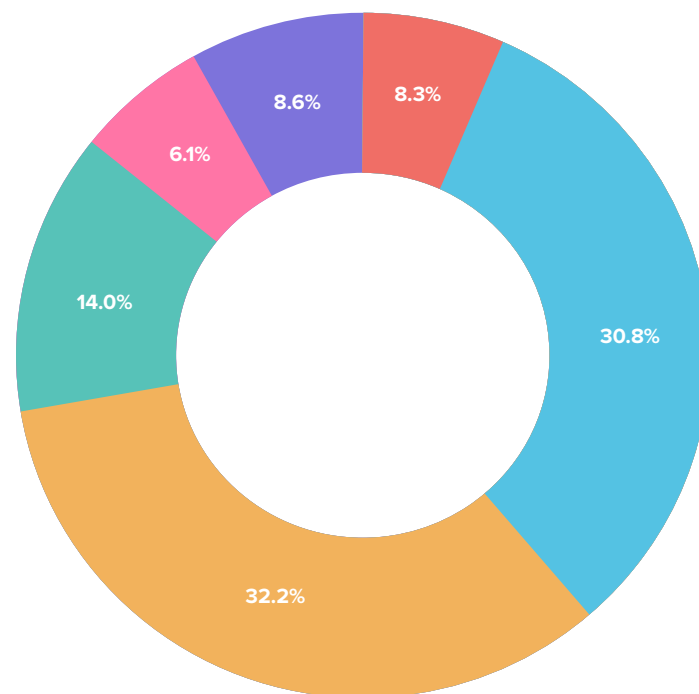
To a lesser extent, having high-level executives involved in email approvals generally makes the process more burdensome, and having emails approved very close to their send date can indicate an overly lax process.

Number of Approvals

How many people generally have to approve an email before it is sent?

2,272 respondents

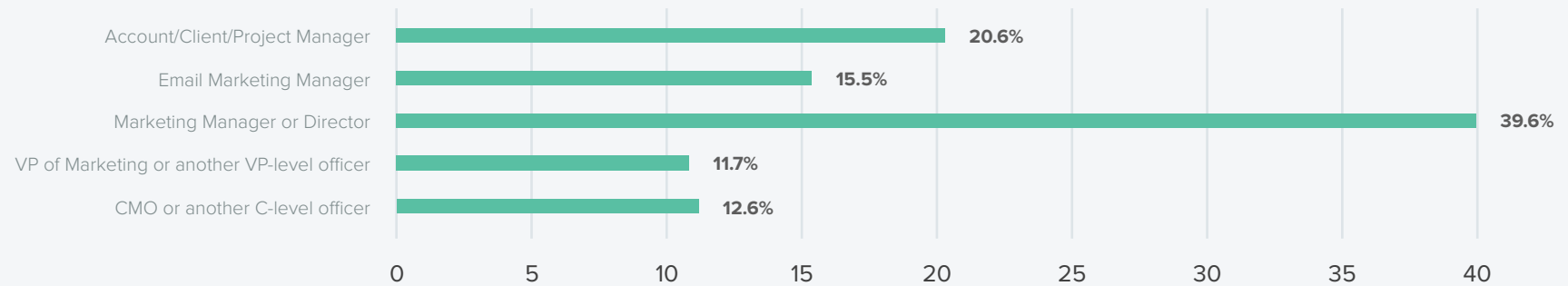
Marketers need the approval of approximately 3 people on average before they're clear to send an email. That number held steady across email programs that are described as successful and not, and sophisticated and not—although companies with more than 500 employees generally had more people involved in approvals.



Highest Level of Approval

What's the highest level person that approves an email before it is sent?
(choose best answer)

2,188 respondents



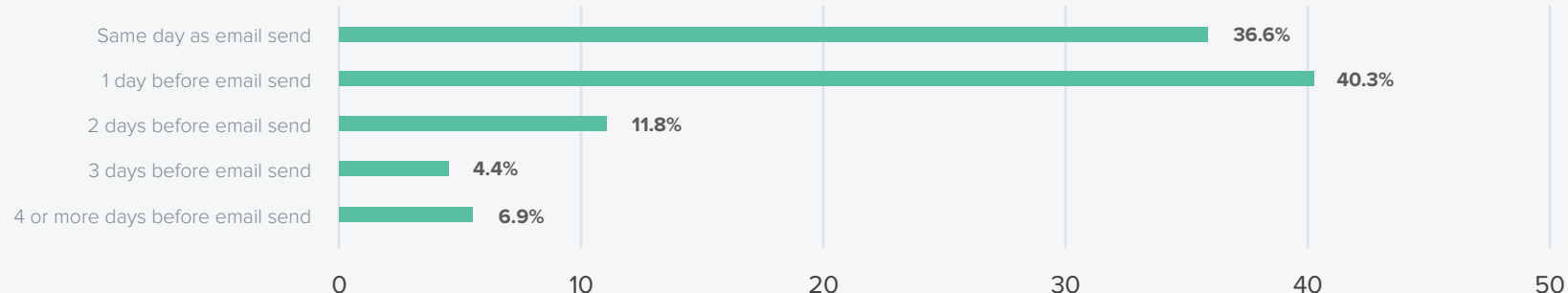
Companies with fewer than 500 employees are 152% more likely than larger companies to have their Chief Marketing Officer approving emails (16.0% vs. 6.3%).

Approval Timing

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

2,233 respondents

Companies with 500 or more employees are 48% more likely to get final approvals 2 or more days before an email is sent (29.4% vs. 19.8%).

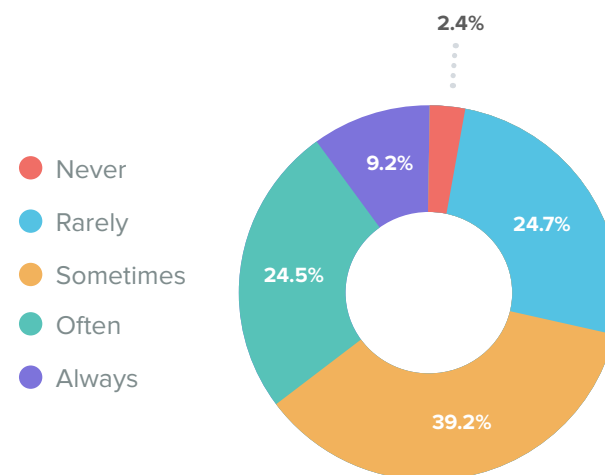


Frequency of Last-Minute Changes

How often are last-minute changes made to an email after it has been approved by all stakeholders?

2,298 respondents

Marketers that describe their email programs as successful are less likely than less successful email programs to say they “always” have last-minute changes (7.1% vs. 12.0%).

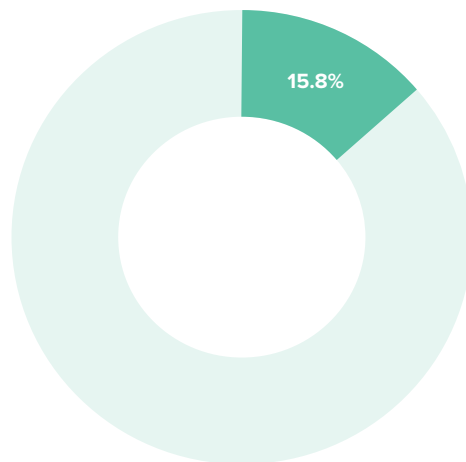


Rigorousness of Approval Process

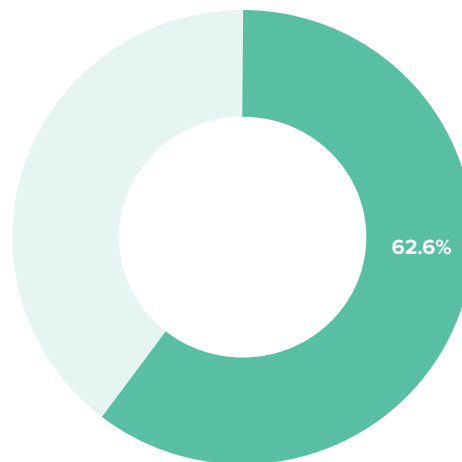
Do you feel that the email approval process at your company is too burdensome, appropriate as-is, or too lax?

2,196 respondents

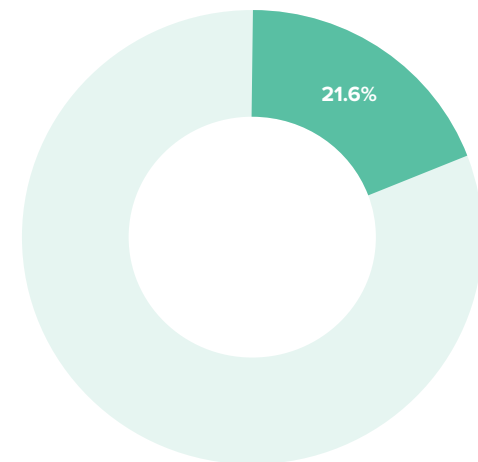
To better recognize the signs of having an overly burdensome or overly lax email approval process—and understand the consequences—check out [4 Signs Your Email Approval Process Is Hurting Performance](#).



Too lax



Appropriate as-is



Too burdensome

Email Platforms

Companies are roughly split between those using just one email platform and those using two or more. However, the balance has shifted toward more brands using just one email service provider (ESP). That's likely due to the widening capabilities of some ESPs, which make it slightly more attractive to have all your emails under one roof rather than having one ESP for your broadcast emails and another for your transactional emails, for example.

While there are hundreds of ESPs for brands to choose from, market share continues to be consolidated by the largest ESPs. Now just 22 ESPs have at least 1% market share among our respondents, whereas 27 did in 2015.

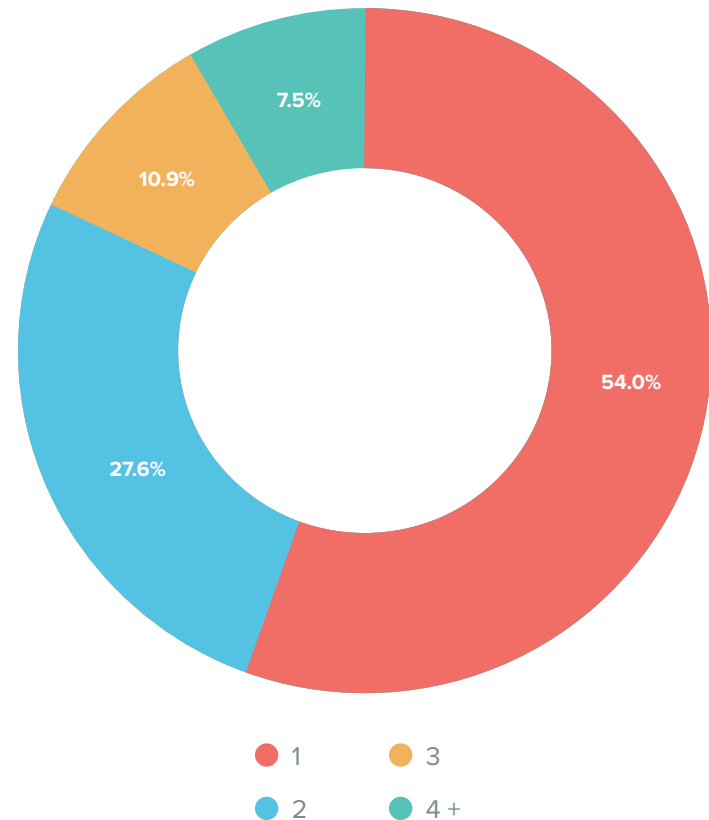
At the same time, brands are moving away from homegrown email platforms, likely because of the difficulties of keeping up with the advanced capabilities or savings offered by ESPs. The percentage of brands using homegrown email platforms to send their marketing emails fell to 7.1% from 10.9% in 2015. And only 2% of brands rely solely on a homegrown email platform.

Number of Email Platforms Used

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

2,759 respondents

Brands use more than 1.8 email platforms each on average to send their marketing emails.

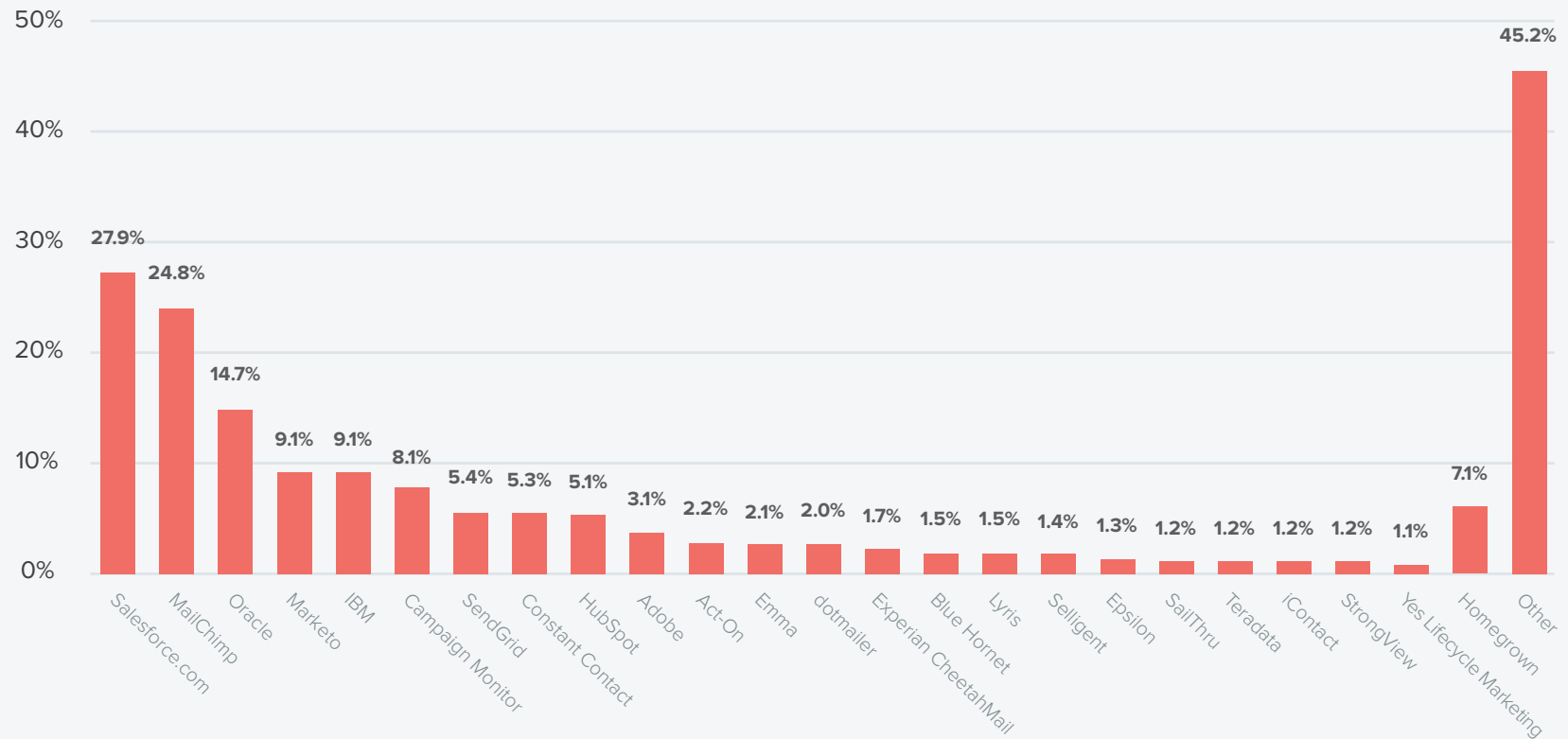


Email Service Providers Used

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

2,041 respondents

Helped by acquisitions, the top 10 email service providers used by our respondents now have nearly 58% market share, up from just shy of 56% in 2015. However, there continues to be a vibrant long-tail of smaller ESPs to serve brands.



Interventions & Apologies

Halting an email send is rare. Sending an apology email is even rarer. Forty-three percent of marketers haven't halted an email send in the past 12 months, and 51.5% haven't sent an apology email during that timeframe.

While that sounds great, that seeming lack of mistakes is actually a red flag, as our [State of Email Marketing Mistakes](#) research uncovered. In email marketing, at least occasional mistakes are pretty much inevitable. A lack of halting emails and sending apologies simply means that mistakes probably aren't being caught or recognized.

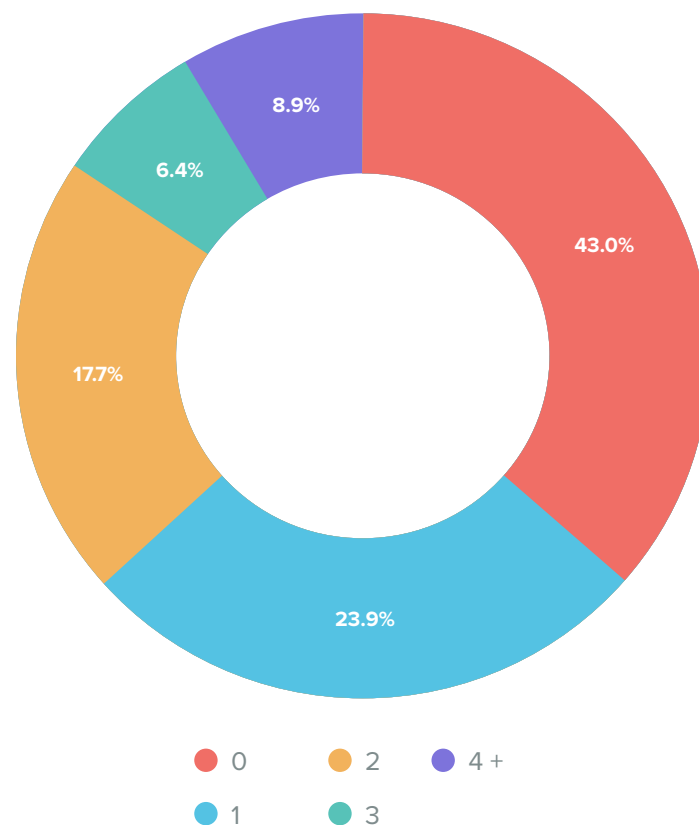
Further supporting those findings, our 2017 State of Email Survey found that marketers who describe their email program as successful are just as likely as less successful programs to halt emails, and successful programs are more likely to send apology emails for both email marketing mistakes and for a website, PR, or other issue. It's perhaps counterintuitive, but mistakes aren't a clear-cut sign of failure in the email marketing industry.

Halted Sends

How many times in the past 12 months or so has your company halted an email send because an error was discovered in the email post-send?

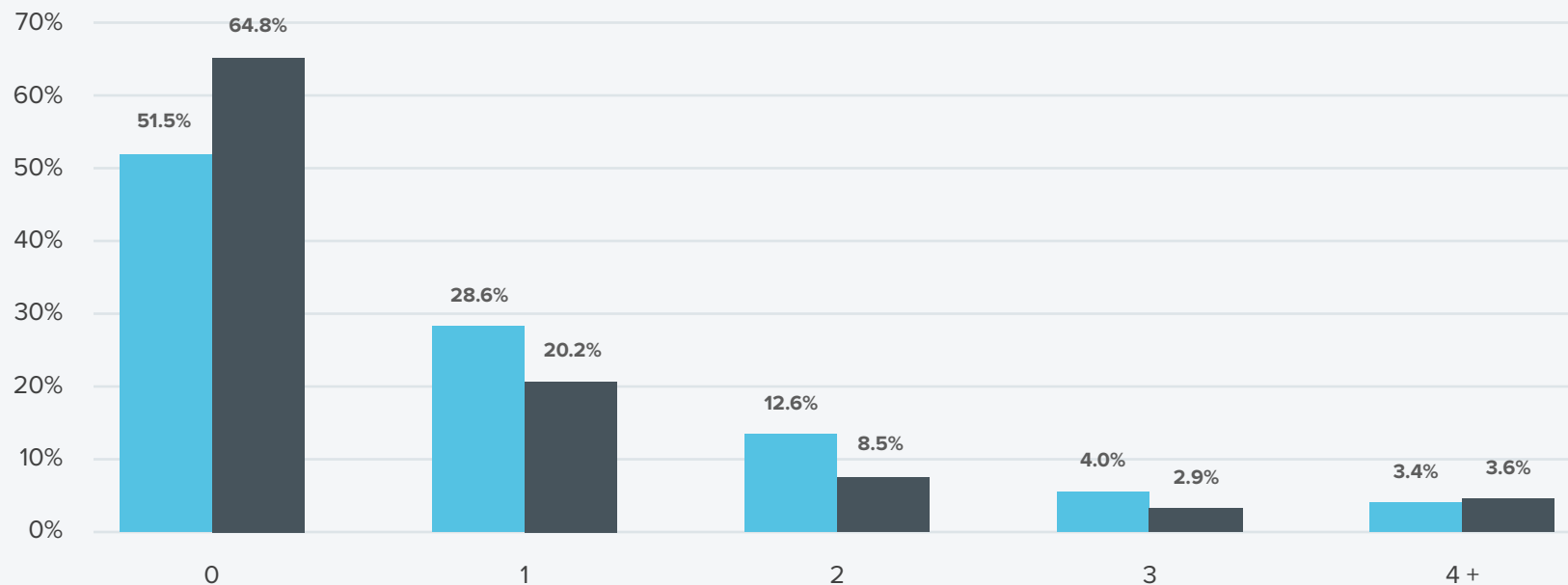
1,970 respondents

47% of marketers who describe their email approval process as burdensome say they halted 2 or more email sends in the past 12 months compared to just 26.7% of email programs with an appropriately rigorous approval process.



Apology Emails Sent

Apology emails sent because of email marketing mistakes are only slightly more frequent than apology emails sent because of web problems, PR, and other issues (0.8 per year vs. 0.6 per year on average).



● Because of an email marketing mistake

How many times in the past 12 months or so has your company resent an email or sent an apology email because of an email marketing mistake of some kind?

2,059 respondents

● Because of a website problem, PR, or another issue

How many times in the past 12 months or so has your company resent an email or sent an apology email because of a website problem, PR, or another issue?

1,914 respondents



Improve Your Workflow with Litmus

Successful companies rely on Litmus to help them to consistently create a better email experience. Marketers who describe their email programs as successful are 13% more likely than less successful programs to use Litmus as part of their email workflow (42.2% vs. 37.3%).

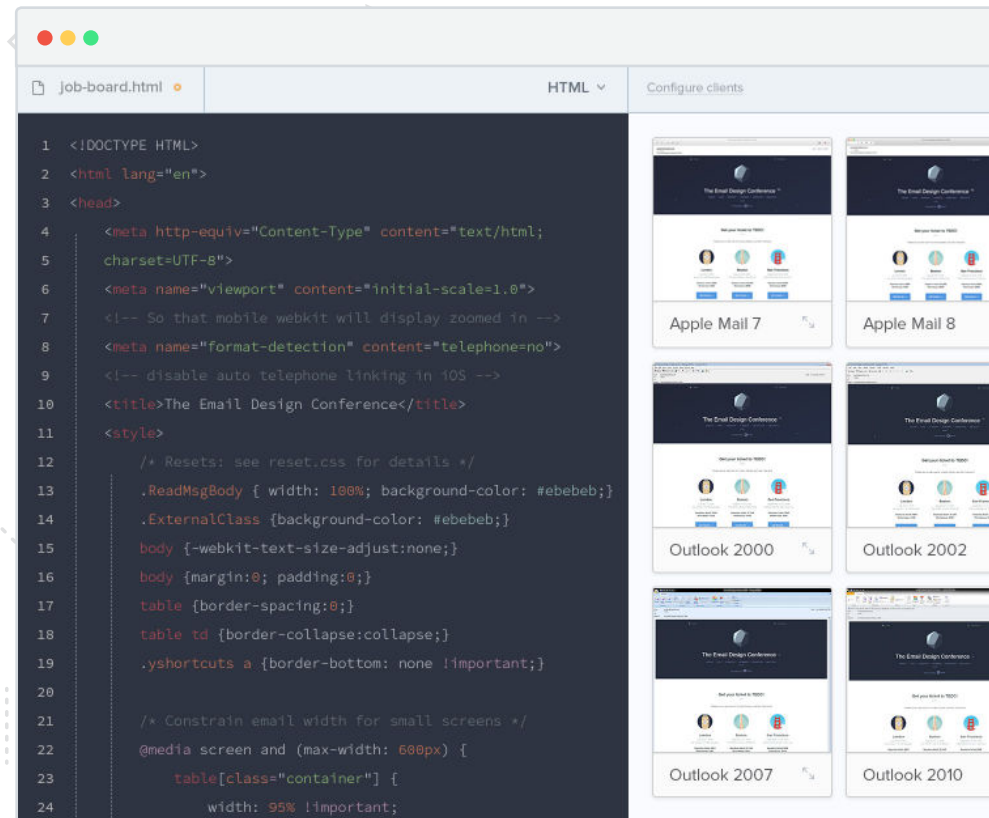
Litmus is even more vital in high-tech, high-volume email programs. Marketers who describe their email programs as sophisticated are 22% more likely than those with less sophisticated programs to use Litmus (30.5% vs. 24.9%). Email workflow tools from Litmus help our users produce 10% more emails every week than non-users (5.2 emails vs. 4.7).

Superior email programs rely on Litmus because our tools make it easy to follow best practices and create outstanding customer experiences. For example...

Brands that use Litmus Email Previews to check their emails in 70+ email clients worldwide are:

- 27% more likely than non-users to test every email they send to ensure they display and function error-free across email clients (67.7% vs. 53.2%)
- 81% more likely than non-users to have the goal of having their emails render and function well in every email client (25.2% vs. 13.9%)

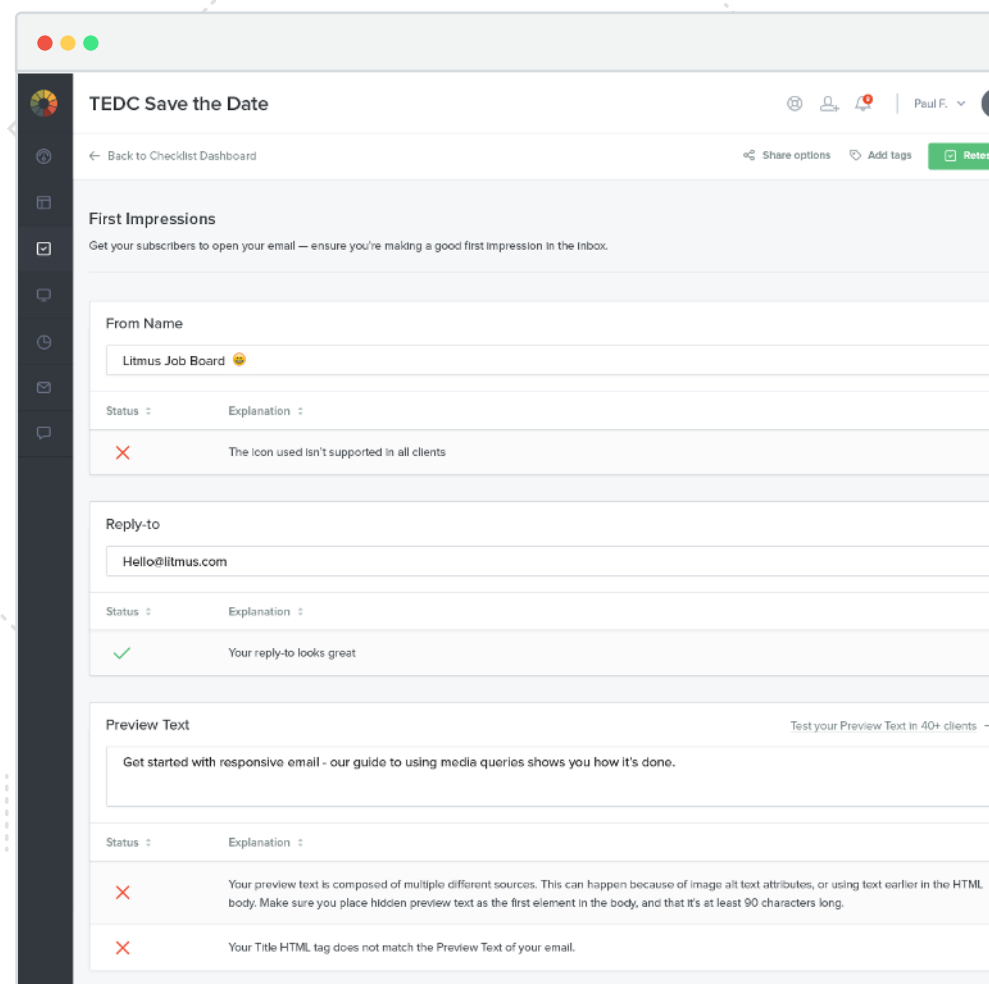
Make a great brand impression



Brands that use Litmus Checklist to check their rendering, images, load time, tracking, and more are:

- 69% more likely than non-users to use an extensive pre-send checklist that better protects their brand from costly and embarrassing mistakes than a short checklist or not using a checklist at all (28.6% vs. 16.9%)

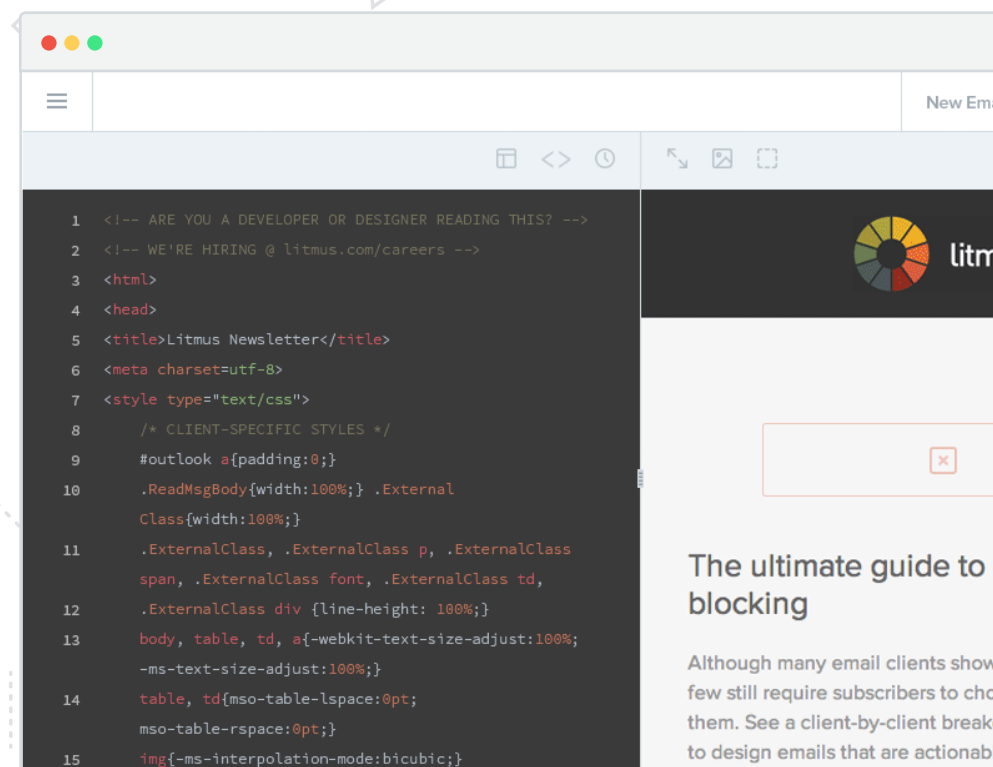
Never send another broken email



Brands that use Litmus Builder—which supports Emmet, partials, and code snippets, and inlines CSS automatically—are:

- 92% more likely than non-users to use the Emmet plugin to speed up their coding time and reduce errors (13.9% vs. 7.2%)
- 48% more likely than non-users to use partials to instantly update header, footer, and other content across all of their active emails (23.8% vs. 16.1%)
- 47% more likely than non-users to use a library of commonly used code snippets to quickly code emails and reduce the chance of mistakes (24.5% vs. 16.7%)
- 7% more likely than non-users to inline CSS styles in their emails to ensure their emails display properly across all email clients (91.1% vs. 85.4%)

Build the perfect email faster and more easily





Litmus is the platform to help you build, test,
and monitor every email so you can deliver
a superior customer experience.

[Try it free](#)



About Litmus

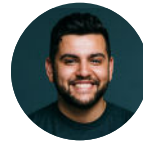
Litmus helps more than 250,000 marketers make email better. The web-based email creation, testing, and analytics platform empowers marketers, designers, and agencies to confidently deliver a superior subscriber experience. Litmus provides instant email previews and quality assurance tools across all 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.

