



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE:

Selecting an Email Service Provider

nebo



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01. Introduction

The ESP landscape is notoriously large, complex, difficult to navigate, and ever-changing. With mergers and acquisitions left and right and new boutique ESPs popping up like weeds, it gets increasingly difficult to keep track.

Not only are there a million-and-one ESPs on the market, but it can be almost impossible to find a comprehensive, unbiased, and holistic comparison between the different offerings. Almost every ESP comparison to be found is written by the ESPs themselves, which leaves you riddled with confusion and bias.

In this trend paper, we aim to help you through the ESP choosing process. We will share key peer insights and analysis from email marketing professionals like yourself, sourced from Litmus, as well as our own research and findings. We will then break down specific functions and features of ESPs that you can typically expect – versus ones that are not always guaranteed – along with the other functional considerations, and we will break down which ESPs are best for your business size, market, industry, and price range. We even included a handy-dandy worksheet to guide you through.

By the end of this paper, you should be able to identify your businesses' specific needs, what ESP functions are crucial versus nice-to-have, have an idea of which platforms are best suited to your business size, industry, and price range, and cross-reference this with relevant insights from email marketing peers.

1.1 Nebo's ESP Pros and Cons Survey Results

We want to thank the hundreds of marketers who generously took the time to respond to our 2021 ESP Pros and Cons Survey, and share their insights with the industry, including advanced capabilities, limitations, and what to anticipate as businesses grow and change.

Our survey respondents were asked fifteen questions about an ESP they have used within the last six months, including multiple-choice questions, checkboxes, and long-form responses related to their opinions on the tool, and other information such as business size, industry, and other factors that play into their perceptions of each tool.

Nebo surveyed 65 marketers from August 12, 2021, to August 26, 2021. Marketers were identified and recruited via the Email Geeks Slack Community, Marketing & Communications Facebook Groups, and LinkedIn. This survey was conducted via an online questionnaire and did not include telephone interviews.

1.2 The Value in Email

Email marketing is often undervalued in the digital marketing world. Many mistakenly claim that email marketing is on its way out and has outlived its relevance as a relic of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth: email marketing is stronger than ever. With increasing emphasis on user privacy, many paid channels are running into limitations due to privacy restrictions, forcing marketers to build their customer data first-hand, and email is the best way to do that. After all, where else are you getting explicit opt-ins from your consumers? When email marketing is done right, with the consumer's best interest in mind, it is one of the most cost-effective marketing channels available to marketers. The [average ROI is 4200%](#)³, compared to [200% using Google Ads](#)⁴, for example.

To run a successful email marketing program, your company will need to utilize the tools of the trade – namely, an ESP, or Email Service Provider.



**Avg. ROI
4200% using
Email**

vs

**Avg. ROI
200% using
Google Ads**





02. The Technology

2.1 What is an ESP?

An ESP is a standalone service that you use to send marketing emails. This includes tools to manage your audience, segment your lists, and build, send, and measure email campaigns. ESPs are designed to help email marketers build out intensive and strategic email marketing programs.



2.2 Why do you need an ESP?

You may be thinking, “*Why do I need an ESP if I can send mass emails from my Outlook account?*” There are 4 main reasons why having an ESP is essential to your email marketing success:

#1

Deliverability

The success of your email hinges on whether or not it makes it to the recipients’ inbox. Most ESPs are whitelisted by ISPs (Internet Service Provider), which allows you to deliver your content to the recipients. If you send mass emails from your own, personal email account, they are more than likely being sent to a spam folder, or even being block-bounced entirely.

#2

Tracking and Analytics

Most ESPs provide comprehensive tracking for all of their email campaigns. Tracking your emails allows you to monitor success through metrics like opens, clicks, deliveries, etc., which can help inform your strategy going forward. Most ESPs also allow you to integrate your data with other data platforms such as Google Analytics and Adobe, which can give you even more insight into your performance.

#3

List Management

Most ESPs include list management options built into their platforms. Manually updating and managing your lists is tedious and prone to mistakes, and with an ESP it can be done automatically. Additionally, ESPs often feature bounce management, which means they will monitor whether or not an email address is valid, and clear it from your list if it learns it is not.

#4

Easily Create Engaging HTML Emails

With the introduction of WYSIWYG editors to most ESPs, creating beautiful, eye-catching emails has become as easy as dragging and dropping your favorite modules into an email. Even without knowledge of coding, you’ll be able to create HTML emails that you wouldn’t be able to send from other platforms. However, we always recommend testing your emails on a variety of devices, or if possible, a testing tool to ensure it looks beautiful no matter what.

Not only that, but ESPs are becoming more and more powerful by the day, taking on more robust functionalities that were once exclusive to marketing automation and customer relationship management platforms (CRMs). What's the difference between each of these platforms anyway?

2.3 ESPs Compared to Marketing Automation Platforms and CRMs

Marketing automation platforms focus on multi-channel lead nurturing. They typically offer email, social media, SMS and MMS, push, and in-app message services designed to convert leads to be sales-ready. Marketing automation platforms can also include website management, landing page and form management, and tracking. Many marketing automation platforms include ESPs, but not all ESPs are marketing automation platforms.

Customer relationship management (CRM) platforms have more of a focus on the sales aspect of a business. They store vast amounts of customer and prospect data, and provide sales teams with the ability to track and share customer interactions. CRMs often integrate with your ESP to share valuable information between the two platforms, and allow for highly customized interactions.

Although each platform may contain cross-over functionality, they are three distinct types of platforms. Each is similar, in that they require large investments in time and money, but the primary purpose of each varies, which means that the functionality and features vary as well. This is why it is important to be able to note the difference between each as you shop.





03. The Industry Landscape

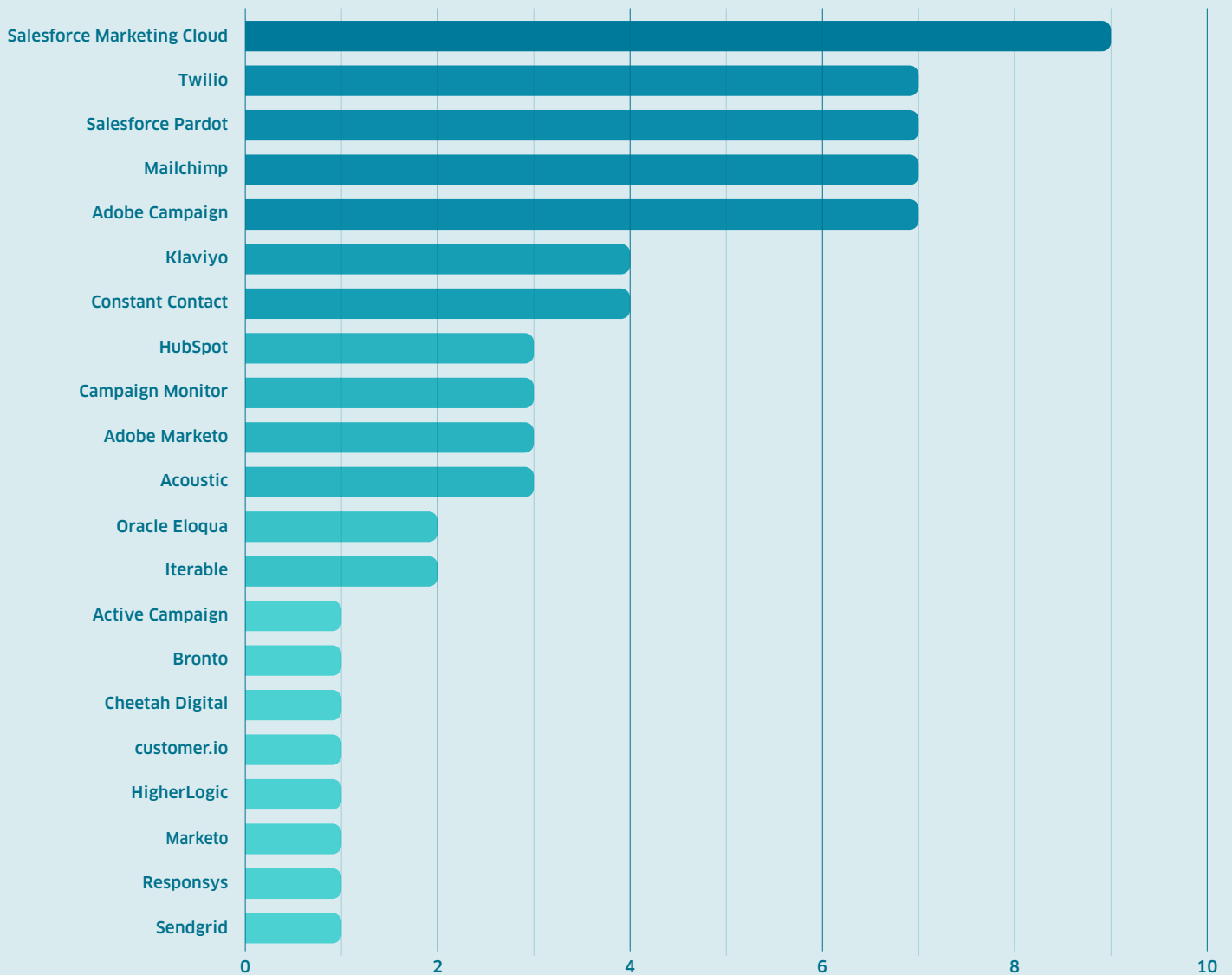
3.1 What does the current ESP industry look like, and why?

The current ESP landscape can be intimidating and difficult to navigate. There are hundreds of different ESPs, ranging from small boutique providers to CRM-integrated, cross-channel behemoths. Since the inception of ESPs, the industry has seen billions of dollars in acquisitions and mergers, and the landscape is constantly changing. The main reason for this is an ever-changing industry where supply and demand change rapidly, as new technologies enter the market at an alarming rate.

Oftentimes small, boutique ESPs will create new capabilities as their sole focus, only to be bought by larger ESPs or Marketing Automation Platforms who want to utilize said capabilities, but are unable or unwilling to spend the time to create them themselves. Small ESPs are constantly bought and outpriced, but the cycle continues because it's the small boutiques that challenge the market.

With hundreds of ESPs at your disposal, it can be challenging to find the one that's right for your business. With each company attempting to sell you on their product, it can be difficult to find a comprehensive, unbiased look at the differences between the ESPs on the market. This trend paper aims to be just that.

What ESP do you use for your current email program and/or a program you have worked on in the last 6 months?



The largest percentage of our survey respondents (13%) reported using **Salesforce Marketing Cloud**. The second most-used ESP, is a three-way tie between **Twilio (10%), Salesforce Pardot (10%), and Mailchimp (10%)**.

3.2 What does your business need in an ESP?

Before you begin researching ESPs, first evaluate your businesses' unique needs, wants, and nice-to-haves. Consider your overall email marketing strategy: What is the main goal of your email program? How do you want to reach that goal?

A lot of ESPs will attempt to win you over with their exciting features and capabilities. If you are prepared before you do your research, it will help you focus on finding the *right* fit for you and your team and prevent you from paying extra money for access to features you're likely not going to need.

How our respondents describe their current ESPs:



Most email marketers polled said their ESP was “convenient, efficient, fast, and easy.” However other common phrases listed the programs as “complicated, frustrating, unintuitive, and confusing.”¹

3.3 What Are the Functions and Features of an ESP?

At its core, an ESP helps you manage your email lists, collect new email addresses, build and send emails and analyze email performance. That said, specific functions and features will vary depending on the ESP—and no ESP really has it all. Below are the features and functions you can typically expect from the average ESP, versus ones that are not always guaranteed.

Functions and features you can expect from an ESP:

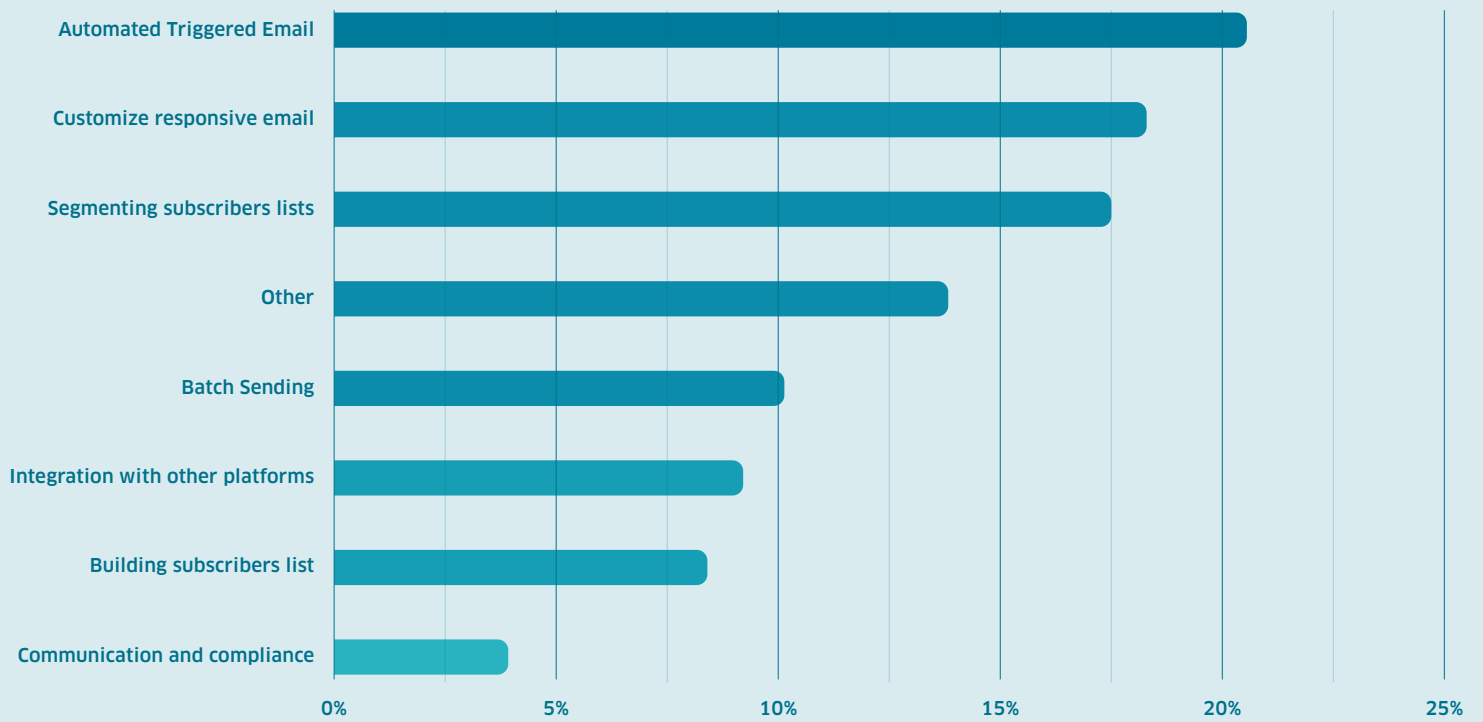
- ✔ - Batch sending
- ✔ - Communication and compliance
- ✔ - Building subscriber lists
- ✔ - Segmenting subscriber lists
- ✔ - Customize responsive email templates
- ✔ - Automated triggered email campaigns
- ✔ - Whitelisting services
- ✔ - Monitoring analytics and engagement
- ✔ - A/B testing
- ✔ - Integration with other platforms

Functions and features that are not always included in an ESP:

- ✘ - Third-party integrations
- ✘ - Multi-send journeys
- ✘ - Transactional email sends
- ✘ - Deliverability Insights
- ✘ - API integration
- ✘ - CRM management
- ✘ - Marketing Platform Management (includes website and landing page management)
- ✘ - Nurture Automations
- ✘ - Integrated Automation with other marketing channels

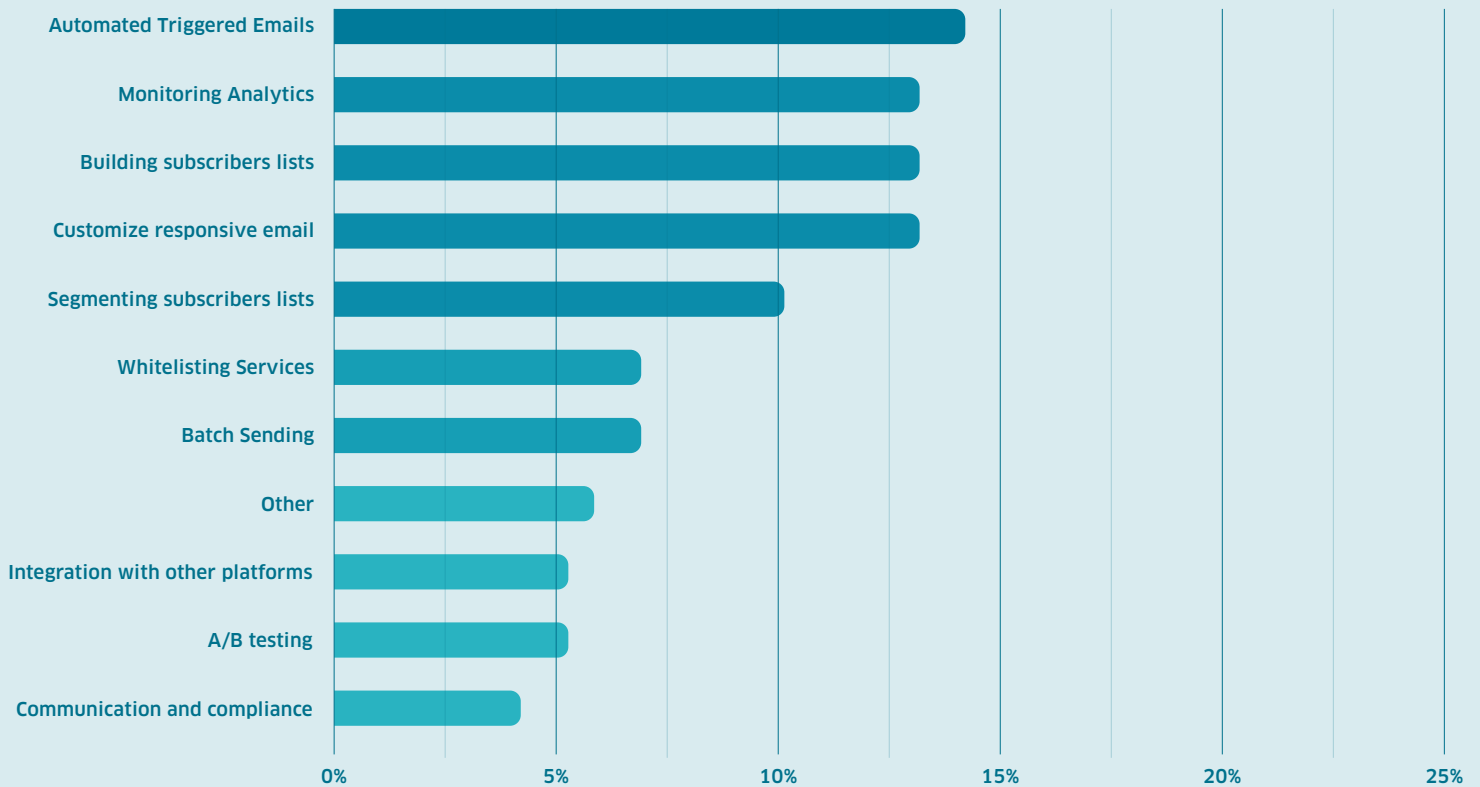
The results below from Nebo's 2021 ESP Pros & Cons survey reflect the importance of finding an ESP that prioritizes automation functionalities, first and foremost. It also highlights the need for an ESP to have functional proficiencies in customizing responsive email templates, as well as building, monitoring, and segmenting subscriber lists.

What is your favorite functionality in your ESP?

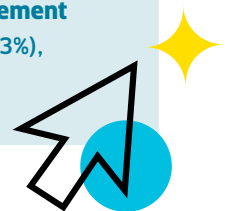


Our respondent's top five favorite functionalities within their ESPs are **automated triggered email campaigns (20.3%)**, **customizing responsive email templates (18.8%)**, **segmenting subscriber lists (17.4%)**, **batch sending (10.1%)**, and **integration with other platforms (8.7%)**.¹

What is one quality/functionality you feel your ESP is missing or could significantly improve upon?



Some functionalities within our respondent's ESPs that they felt could be improved upon, are **automated triggered email campaigns (14.5%)**, **monitoring analytics and engagement (13%)**, **customizing responsive email templates (13%)**, **building subscriber lists (13%)**, **segmenting subscriber lists (10.1%).¹**



3.4 What kind of ESP does your business need?

Use this worksheet as a resource before beginning your market research (and again as many times as needed during your research) to refine and determine what your email program needs from your ESP.

1. What are your goals for your email program?

2. Who is your target market and industry?

3. What is the total number of contacts in your database? _____

4. How fast are you expecting your database to grow? _____

5. What is the most important feature your ESP should have?

6. What is your budget, or budget range? _____

7. How many people on your team will need access to the tool? _____

8. Do you need to send transactional emails through your ESP or CRM? *Circle one.*

9. Do you require your own IP address or are you comfortable using a shared IP?

10. What is your level, or team's level, of technical ability? Depending on your answer, you should consider how much customer support you will need to rely on. *Circle one.*

Beginner

Intermediate

Advanced

11. Do you have an IT department able to assist if needed? Similar to the above question, this question should make you consider how much customer support you will need to rely on.

12. Do you require marketing automation or integration with an existing marketing automation platform?

13. Do you have a CRM that you want to integrate into your ESP, or will you need CRM capabilities on the same platform?

14. Do you require custom HTML coding or will you use a WYSIWYG editor?



04. Selecting Your ESP

4.1 Big Picture Thinking

In addition to the previously mentioned functions and features, there are also several big-picture considerations for ESPs relative to your specific business goals and needs.

Scalability

Will your ESP grow with the growth of your business?

When choosing your ESP, you want to make sure you pick something that can grow with your company. Where do you see your business in 5 - 10 years? Is email marketing going to be a focus of your business? If so, consider how your program will need to scale. Some ESPs allow for rapid growth, while others are intended to stay small and won't be able to handle programs at a larger scale. When your company grows, the requirements for your ESP will likely change.

Ease of Use

Is your ESP too technical, or not technical enough, for you and your team?

Is the ESP's interface easy to use, or does it require a large level of technical know-how from you or your team? Does it provide pre-made templates and WYSIWYG editors, or are you required to build everything from scratch? Also consider the inverse. If you have a team of tech-savvy HTML developers who are looking for the ability to build highly customizable HTML-based templates, be sure that the ESPs interface does not limit you in the ability to do so.



Ease-of-use is very important, for 94% of email marketers surveyed.
On a scale from 1-10, with 10 being the most important, 94% of email marketers polled that the importance of ease-of-use is between 7-10.¹

Customer Service & Support

What level of support will you need from your ESP?

ESPs have varying levels of customer service and support, based on the size and consumer focus of the company, as well as the payment level you're at. When choosing your ESP, consider whether or not you want access to things like a 24/7 chat or live help, or would be ok with service tickets that are assessed later. Also consider if you will need an ESP provider that offers professional services for more involved tasks, like migration or integration with other internal systems.

Customer service is very important, for 91% of email marketers surveyed.
On a scale from 1-10, with 10 being the most important, 91% of email marketers polled that the importance of customer service is between 7-10.¹



4.2 ESPs for Different Business Sizes

Are you a startup business with a smaller budget that can only afford one tool at the moment? Are you rapidly growing your email program with a plan to scale? Or are you a larger and more complex business that needs the ability to integrate across partners, third-party tools, sales, service, and commerce platforms? Certain ESPs are better suited for different business sizes, and it's important to consider yours when approaching the ESP market.

ESP for Small Businesses

Most ESPs for small businesses support a database at a fair price for about 50,000 or fewer contacts, though some can support larger audience sizes as well.

Free to low-cost options that are available for smaller businesses often include simple plans without many add-ons. Payment options are frequently dependent on the number of contacts and emails sent, with incremental increases depending on subscriber or program growth. Any integrations or additional features are likely to be an additional fee added to the base plan (i.e. custom coded templates, advanced automations, etc.).

The most common reason that small businesses choose these specific ESPs is that they provide shared IP addresses, which allow senders to deploy from an established IP address without having to purchase one, or build their own reputation while they're first beginning – a major pro if you are starting a new email program. However, by using these shared IPs, users must agree to terms and conditions that state they won't send to contacts who have not opted in, and must respect those who wish to opt-out. This is a general best practice in the email community, but it is something that these ESPs take very seriously.

These ESPs are a great fit for small businesses that don't have large budgets, are just beginning to establish marketing programs, and aren't looking for a full suite of features.



According to Litmus' 2021 State of Email Service Providers, 33% of small businesses rely on Mailchimp as their ESP, and 15% use HubSpot.²

ESP for Mid-Market Businesses

If your business isn't considered "small" anymore, but you're not quite at an enterprise-behemoth level, ESPs popular for mid-market businesses are likely best for your needs (generally between 50K-999K subscribers).

However, the tricky part with medium-sized businesses is that some of these ESPs may have the ability to handle a large volume of subscribers and sends but may not have many advanced functionalities, and vice versa. Unfortunately, mid-sized businesses often feel like they are left having to choose between advanced capabilities and scalability unless of course, there's an increase in budget.

ESPs popular among this group often allow for shared IP addresses as well as personalized IPs. This is great for businesses who have had issues in the past with deliverability or inbox placement, as having your own IP address gives you 100% control over your sender authentication and reputation.



According to Litmus' 2021 State of Email Service Providers, 22% of medium-sized businesses rely on Salesforce Marketing Cloud as their ESP.³

ESP for Enterprise-Level Businesses

If your email marketing team consists of at least four people, and you have around 1M+ subscribers, an ESP that specializes in enterprise-level brands is right for you. These systems can handle sophisticated, complex data, email integrations with a high degree of reporting, and cross-channel marketing beyond just email. Many also have a CRM component to them, and in fact, don't even consider themselves just an ESP, but rather an all-in-one Marketing Automation Platform.

These ESPs do not offer shared IP addresses, but rather insist that their customers create, own, and maintain their own sender reputation, often recommending owning more than one IP address – especially if you're sending transactional emails as well.

Advanced Features of an Enterprise-Level ESP

While ESPs that primarily service enterprise-level businesses have many advanced features, there are three that stand out above the rest, and mainly have to do with data collection, data organization, and efficiency, all at extremely large scales.

1. Data Collection via Robust APIs

The more robust your email program is, the more support you will need from your ESP and API. At much larger scales, it's important that your system effectively manages drip campaigns, import files, and export data.

2. Data Organization via Relational Databases

Relational databases (versus flat-file databases) allow you to keep different types of data in different tables, and relate them to one customer or group, while flat-file databases are limited to the fields contained within them, and require extra fields to be added to capture potentially numerous data points.

3. Efficiency and Speed

If your subscriber base is +1M contacts, sending a single email to each subscriber could take up to 24 hours with the wrong ESP. Systems that specialize in large subscriber audiences can send to an audience of that size within the hour. This makes a huge difference for large corporations that have marketing revenue on the line during highly stressful times like the final days of a sale.

According to Litmus' 2021 State of Email Service Providers,
44% of large businesses rely on Salesforce Marketing Cloud as their ESP.²



4.3 Table: Most Popular ESPs for Different Business Sizes

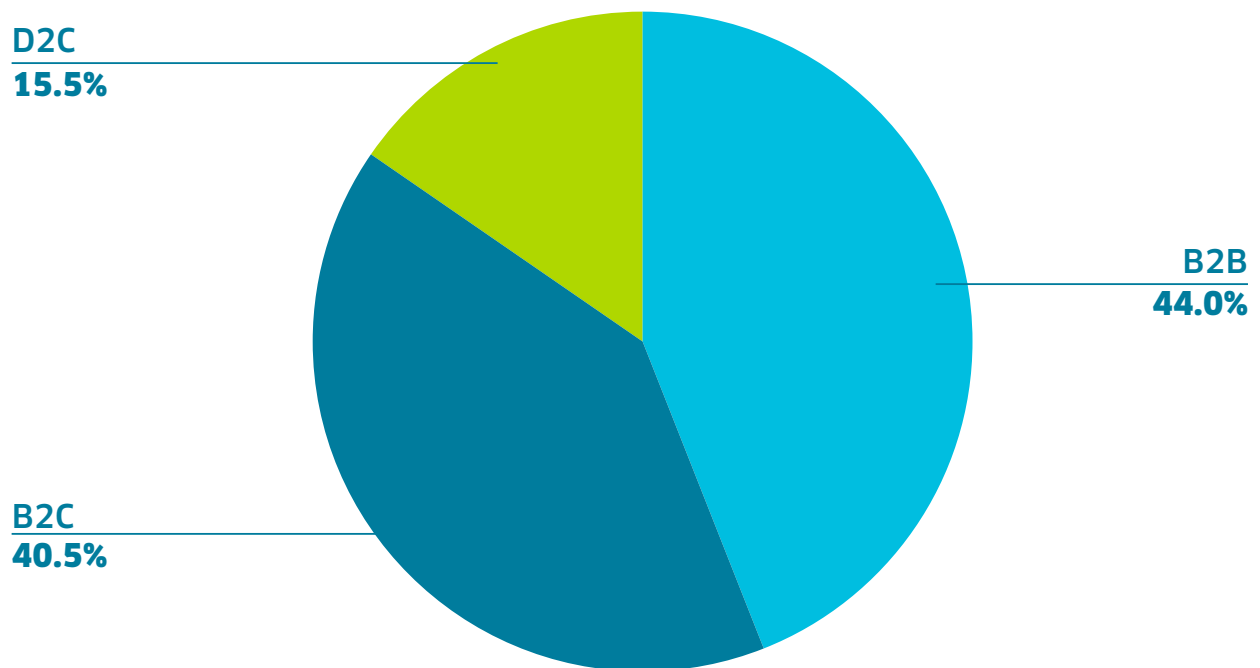
Salesforce Marketing Cloud, Mailchimp, Adobe Marketo, HubSpot, and Salesforce Pardot are ranked as the overall top five ESPs, based on survey data from [Litmus' State of Email Service Providers Third Edition](#). Of these top five, the table contains the percentage of businesses that are utilizing these ESPs based on business size, email team size, and list size, according to Litmus' findings.

	Salesforce Marketing Cloud 23% Market Share	Mailchimp 21% Market Share	Adobe Marketo 10% Market Share	Hubspot 10% Market Share	Salesforce Pardot 8% Market Share
Small Businesses	8%	34%	4%	15%	8%
One-Person Email Team	11%	26%	7%	12%	8%
Less than 100k Active Subscriber List Size	9%	33%	8%	16%	8%
Mid-Sized Business	22%	15%	14%	9%	9%
2-3 Person Email Teams	16%	25%	10%	10%	8%
100k-999,999 Active Subscriber List Size	24%	14%	11%	7%	9%
Large Businesses	44%	15%	14%	9%	9%
4+ Person Email Teams	46%	11%	11%	5%	10%
1+ Million Active Subscriber List Size	43%	11%	10%	4%	6%

4.4 Market & Industry Considerations

Finding an ESP that is best for you based on your market and industry can be tricky, especially when it's hard to determine what types of tools your competitors have access to. Although most ESPs can support both B2B and B2C markets, some are preferred for business-to-business use, while others are preferred for business-to-consumer. Retail companies may need an SMS push integration, but that might not be so important for a financial services brand, for example. However, there are some hybrids known for both, such as Salesforce Marketing Cloud and Mailchimp, who top the lists in nearly every industry.

What is your favorite functionality in your ESP?

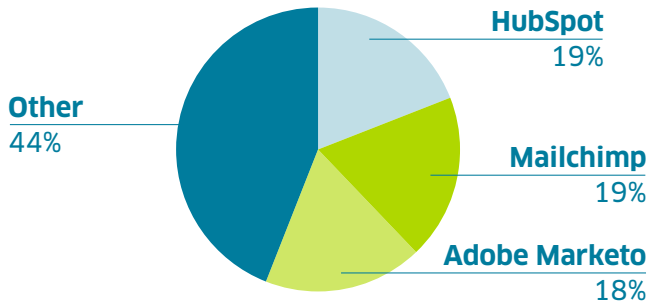


44% of our survey respondents are currently based in B2B markets, 40% within B2C, and 15% based in D2C.¹

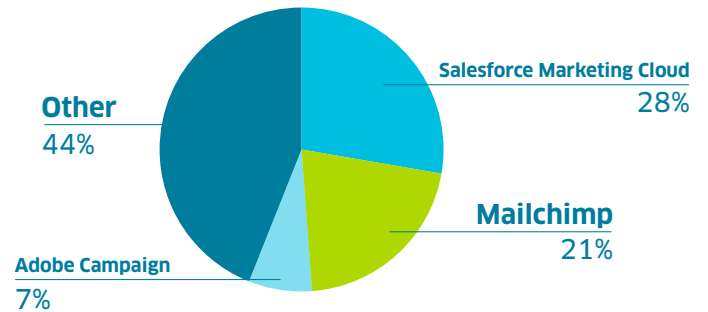


Graph: Most Popular ESP by Industry (via Litmus State of Email Service Providers)

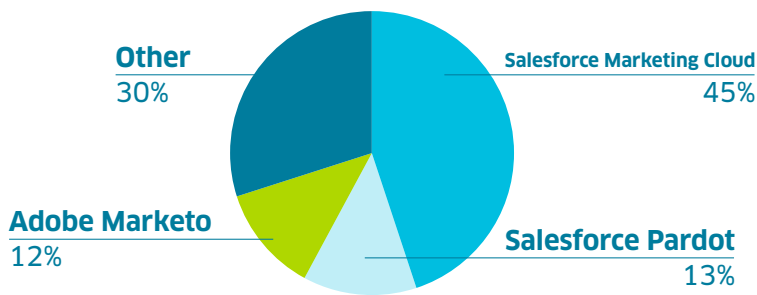
Software/Technology



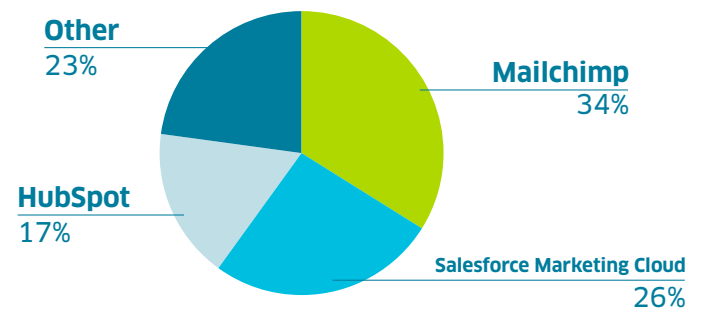
Retail, e-commerce & Consumer Goods & Services



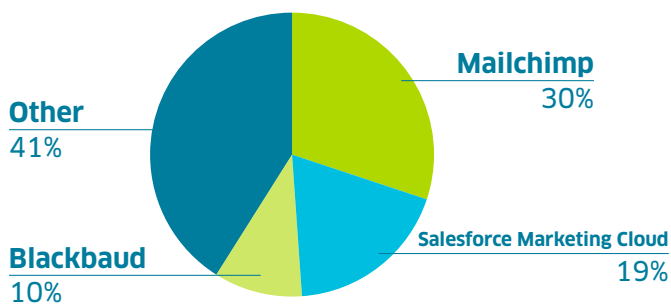
Financial Services & Insurance



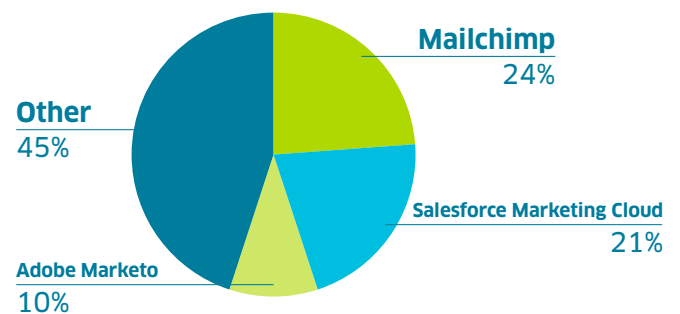
Marketing, PR & Ad Agencies



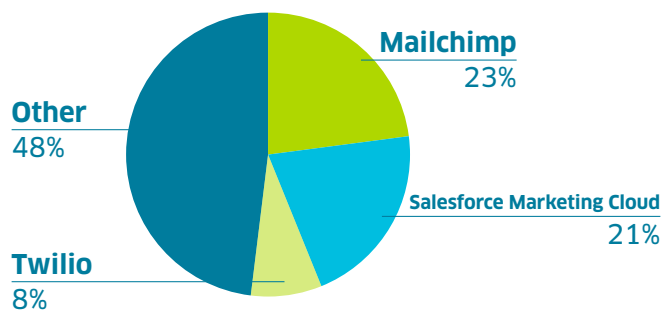
Nonprofit



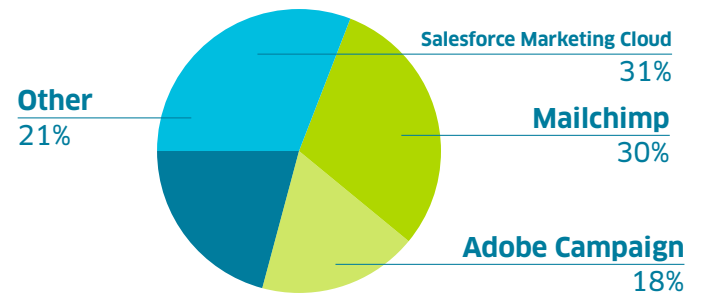
Education & training



Media, publishing, events, sports & entertainment



Healthcare





05. Pricing Considerations

2.1 What is an ESP?

Understanding the price comparison between ESPs can seem like a daunting experience. Marketers are often comparing apples to oranges after they've narrowed down their ESP selection to a shortlist. So how do you know which ones give your business the best value, and how do you know if the cost seems fair?

The best way to find out is to ask your point of contact about details like license costs, usage rates, and overage costs. These kinds of things can surprise you, if you're unaware. For example, some ESPs charge a 125% premium if you exceed your contracted volume, which happens more often than you think.

Before chatting with sales reps, make a list of all of the features and services you use with your current ESP that you will continue to want, plus add any new features you're looking for. Additionally, it's important to ask about the following factors:

Factors to inquire about:

- Setup fees
- Costs associated with migration from old ESP to new (if applicable)
- Deliverability monitoring during the migration/setup + ongoing support
- Training at the beginning of the migration/setup
- Training after an upgrade and/or on new features
- Customer Support
- Audience Segmentation
- Which features have additional costs vs. what is included for everyone
- Dynamic content
- Dedicated vs. shared IP addresses (we always recommend dedicated)
- API deployment
- Surveys
- Transactional messaging
- Data storage
- Hosted content and landing pages

In addition to the factors mentioned above, the below details also can affect the price of your ESP, so it's important to know these numbers during the RFP stage:

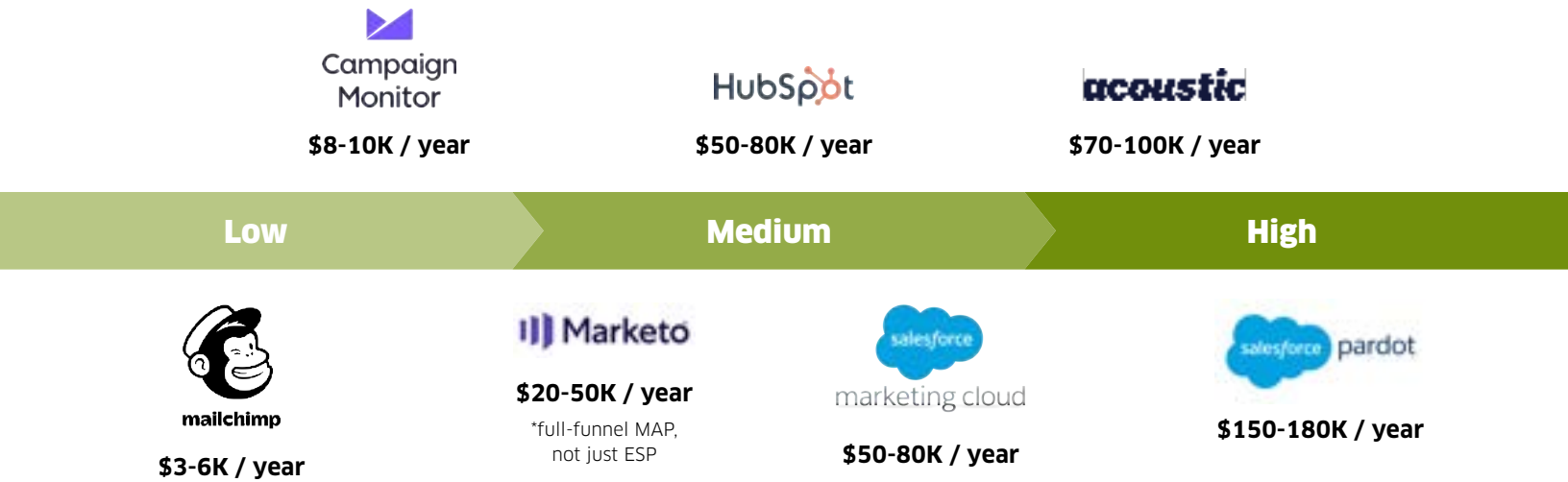
Numbers to keep in mind:

- Number of active subscribers/contacts
- Number of users needing access to the tool
- Customer service capabilities (from online tickets to immediate communication via phone, email, to professional services)
- Functions beyond email (i.e. SMS & push notification integration, landing page creation, etc.)

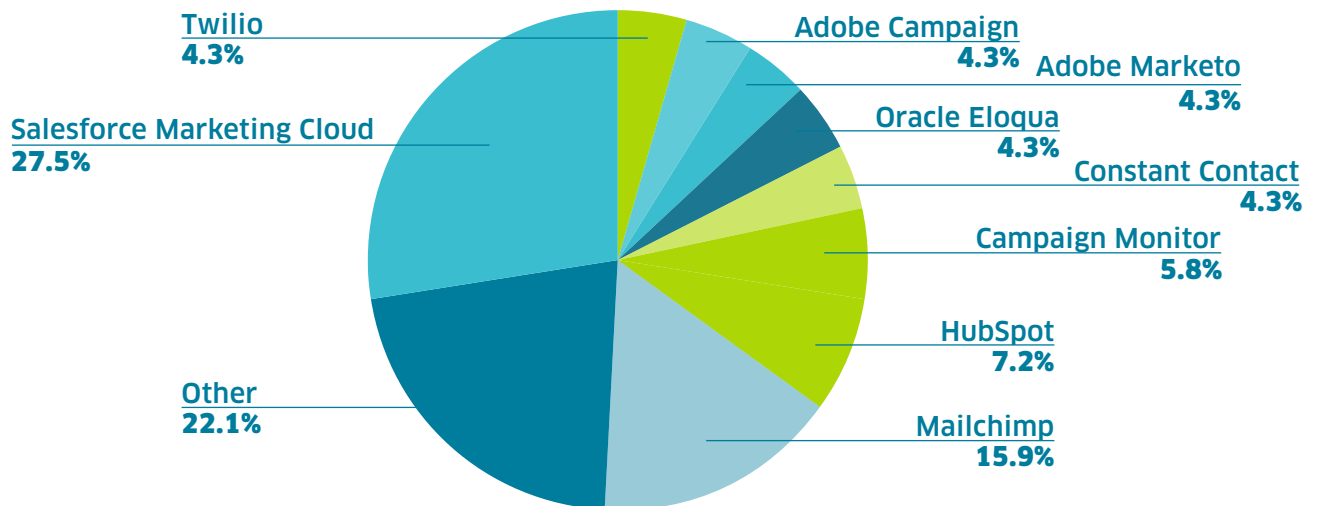
While everyone has a budget, it's important to look at factors outside of price when considering an ESP. Choosing the "cheapest" option can sometimes cost more in the long run, either through add-ons, unexpected fees, or requiring more time, money, and resources to make up for the areas in which the ESP lacks. Price is important, but it should be one of many factors considered when choosing an ESP.

ESP Price Points

*All ESP pricing fluctuates depending on your email program and needs. These numbers were based on pricing for each company's standard or mid-tier option that could support ~50K contacts, either available on the company's website or by speaking with a sales representative.



If you could use any ESP for your email program, which one would you choose?



A majority of our respondents report wanting to switch to **Salesforce Marketing Cloud** (27.5%) and **Mailchimp** (15.9%).¹



06. Conclusion

The ESP landscape can be very intimidating, especially for those who are new to the email marketing world, or are juggling many other items within their business outside of marketing.

However, through analyzing various data points and collecting our own survey results from peers in the email community, we can share a clearer picture of what email marketers like and don't like about various ESPs in the space, and identify what marketers need when shopping for a new one, depending on their business needs.

Many marketers want their ESPs to prioritize automation functionalities first and foremost, as well as provide an intuitive interface, customizable responsive email templates, and the ability to build, monitor, and segment different audiences. However, based on where your business and marketing team lie in the email marketing space, there may be other factors of importance to you, like integrations with other platforms, automated journeys, and more.

Now that you understand the general ESP landscape, technology, functions and features, industry, and business size variations, you should be able to approach your ESP selection process with the knowledge and confidence needed to make the right decision for your marketing team and your business.

07. Appendix

7.1 Survey Results

Nebo surveyed 65 marketers from August 12, 2021, to August 26, 2021. Marketers were identified and recruited via the Email Geeks Slack Community, Marketing & Communications Facebook Groups, and LinkedIn. This survey was conducted via an online questionnaire and did not include telephone interviews.

1. What ESP do you use for your current email program or a program you have worked on in the last 6 months (Based on Litmus 2021 State of ESPs)?



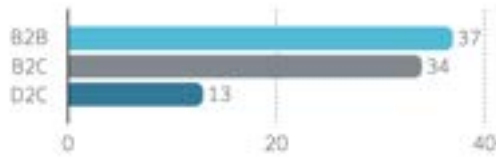
2. If you could use any ESP for your email program, which one would you choose (Based on Litmus 2021 State of ESPs)?



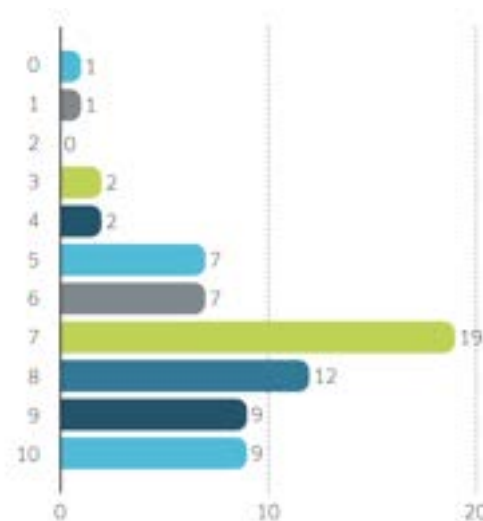
3. Why would you choose that ESP for your email program? (Open answer)

The most common answers include: convenience, ease of use, and integration options

4. What industry/market are you in? Please select all that apply.



5. On a scale of 0-10, how likely are you to recommend your current ESP to peers or colleagues?



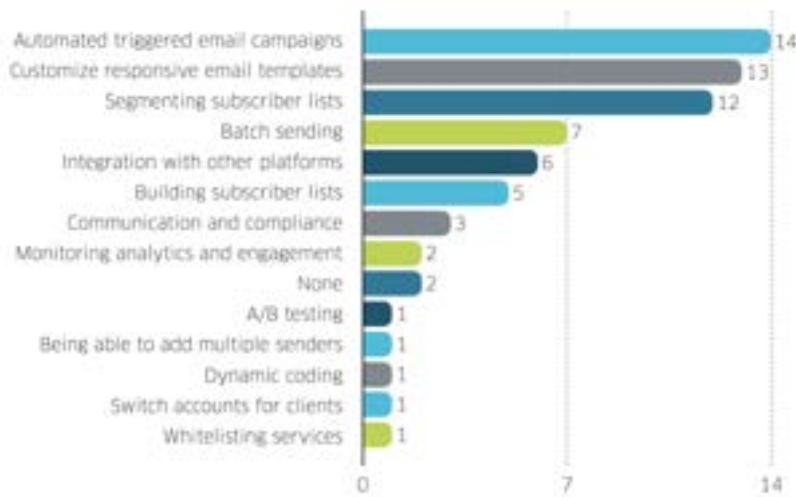
6. If you're unhappy with your current ESP, what is preventing you from switching to a new one (select all that apply)?



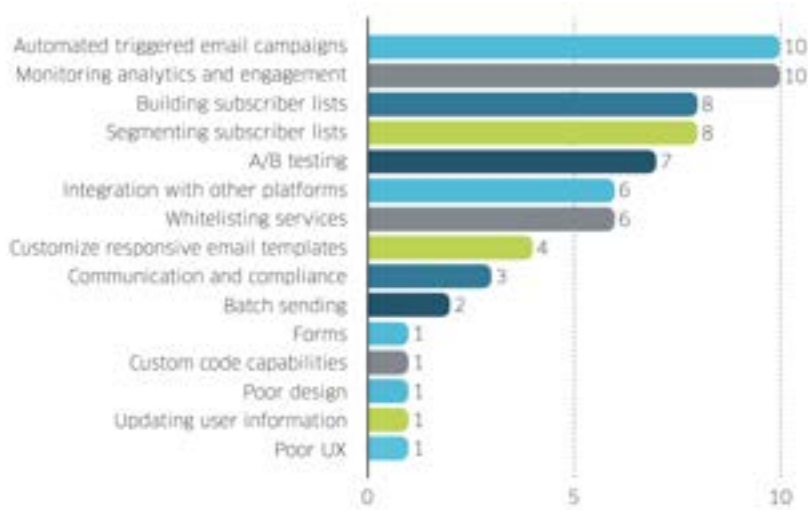
7. Choose 3 words to describe your current ESP (Open answer)

Top answers include: convenient, quick/fast, and easy to use. However, runner up answers include: complicated and confusing.

8. What is your favorite functionality in your ESP?



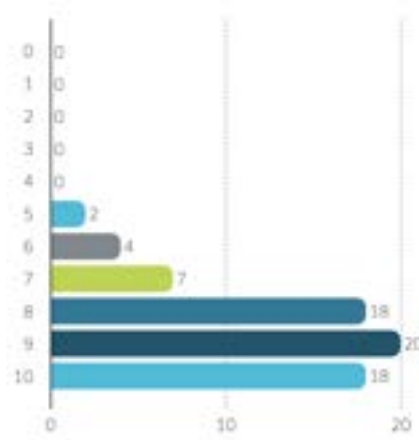
9. What is your least favorite functionality in your ESP?



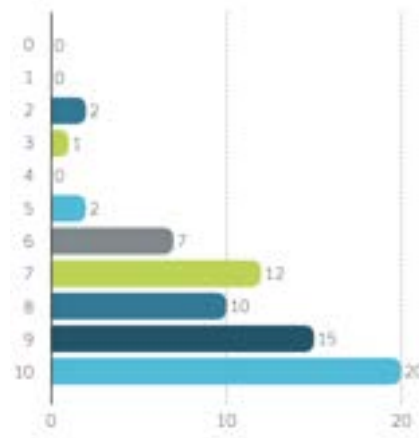
10. What is one quality or functionality you feel your ESP is missing or could significantly improve upon?



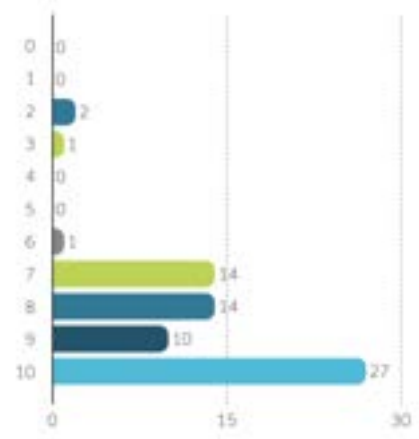
11. On a scale of 0-10, how important is customer service and support when it comes to your ESP?



12. On a scale of 0-10, how important is it to have your ESP integrate with other platforms?



13. On a scale of 0-10, how important is it to have an easy-to-use interface?



7.2 About Nebo

Nebo is a human-centered agency built for the digital age. We believe that trust and attention are the most valuable resources in this hyper-connected, omni-channel, multi-device, ad-saturated world. By creating human-centered digital experiences and buyer journey marketing campaigns, we inspire, educate, and empower consumers. Our research and strategy teams develop deep, authentic understandings of consumer behavior to earn a place in their hearts and minds. Our creative and copy teams use these insights to help brands tell great stories. Our marketing teams build campaigns that do more than drive awareness, they change consumer behavior.

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7.3 Sources

¹ 2021 ESP Pros & Cons Survey Data - Nebo

² 2021 State of Email Service Providers - Litmus

³ 106 Email Marketing Statistics You Should Know In 2021 - Snov IO Labs

⁴ Mind-Blowing Digital Marketing ROI Statistics (2021) - Lauro Media