

HOW TO CHOOSE AN EMAIL SERVICE PROVIDER

Looking for a new email service provider (ESP)?

Maybe you've been using a "free" or super-basic email service, but your marketing and support needs have outgrown what it can offer.
what it can offer.

You are an email newbie, looking to take the plunge for the very first time.

design choices. It's one of the keys to creating better campaigns.

Maybe you need some "real human" help, but your current ESP's support is lacking — or completely missing in action.

Maybe you're experiencing deliverability issues and need an ESP that will actively monitor your sending and help you get off a blacklist or improve your sending results.

Maybe you just need ... a change, a fresh burst of something to put some oomph into your email marketing strategy.

Whether you are choosing an email marketing platform for the first time or are looking for an ESP that better fits your existing sending needs, knowing what to ask and what to look — or look out — for can get you going and make the process a lot smoother.

A CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING AN ESP

Use this checklist of essential features to keep in mind when you shop around for an ESP: Free trial: Try it, test it, love it or hate it — you should be able to put the ESP's product to work with your data and use it in the way you need and for a decent amount of time to properly evaluate if the fit is right. If the ESP doesn't let you test-drive — run away. Solid IP address reputation: You want an ESP that is known to the ISPs (internet service providers) for delivering millions of awesome messages just like yours. For instance, at iContact, our IP addresses have a long-standing history of delivering large volumes of email; they are monitored, maintained, and watched by our deliverability pros to maintain whitelist status. As an individual sender, this gives you a head start and the ability to create your first email and get it going without having to worry about the IP reputation. So when you are choosing, make sure the ESP's reputation is solid and the company can demonstrate that to you. A nimble, easy-to-use editor: The ESP's email editor should be intuitive, easily customizable, and accommodating of different email "types," whether you're sending a newsletter, welcome message, or a basic promotion. Look for drag-and-drop editing — it will make your email creation a whole lot easier. Email basic "essentials": Look for autoresponders, campaign tracking, PDF links, mobile optimization; think of how you are using or want to use email and make sure those features are covered. API integration: Does the email platform integrate with the apps you use for your business? Does the ESP make its API available so you can integrate your email platform with the apps that make your life easier? A/B testing: If you can't test your campaigns, you are flying blind and wasting an opportunity to maximize performance. Look for a platform where you can easily test things like subject lines, colors, messages, CTAs, or even

Basic analytics: You don't have to be a math whiz, but your ESP should be providing important metrics in an easy-to-use and easy-to-understand format. You learn by doing, but if you don't have the data to learn from, then every campaign is guesswork.
Deliverability bona fides: This merits a separate category because it is so important; email is useless if you can't get it into your subscribers' inboxes. You need an ESP that consistently delivers and has a track record that it can prove.
Ability to scale: Maybe you're a small business now — but that may not always be the case. Pick a platform that will grow when you do, whether you are sending to 50 or 5 million subscribers. Make sure the platform's list management features are flexible and easy to use.
Easy social media linkup: Let's face it — today, if you're not on social media, you almost don't exist. Social media allows you to amplify your email messages exponentially; conversely, your email campaigns play an important role in growing your social media accounts and can provide you with content to talk about on social. Make sure your email platform can work together with your social accounts for posting and sharing.
Multiple users/folders: No (wo)man is an island, and you may need to have more than one user on your account or be able to manage different marketing projects in different folders. You may need this option as you grow or your campaigns become more ambitious.
Real customer support: Will you be treated like just one name in a million and have to wait eons before someone, maybe, eventually responds to a help form you've filled out? An ESP with phone and chat support can make a BIG difference when you're having an issue and need help NOW.
Onboarding help: This is especially critical if you are new to email marketing. And even if you aren't, it's always helpful to have real people support when you are using a new platform. It's also very good to be able to talk to a human when you have questions about things like transferring images and templates or uploading contacts.
Flexible payment options: Maybe your budget works with a monthly payment, or maybe you can afford to save a few bucks with an annual account. Your ESP should offer you the option.
Street cred: Look for testimonials or customer names on the ESP's website (if it doesn't have a professional-looking website, that's a bad sign). Check out its social media accounts and see what it shares and how it responds to comments. You are trusting an ESP with your very important business; you should feel comfortable that it is trustworthy enough to deserve it.
Additional educational resources: Maybe you want to try something new with your email or want to improve what you are currently doing or get a more in-depth understanding of what you <i>should</i> be doing. A good ESP will provide a variety of free educational material — webinars, infographics, e-books, training videos — that you can consult and feed the email pro in you.

Shopping around for an ESP is easier if you keep these important checklist items in mind. Do your homework, compare, and try them on for size. Email has great ROI if you find the platform that's right for you.

ABOUT ICONTACT

Since 2003, iContact has been offering comprehensive email marketing solutions for businesses, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions of all sizes. All our email marketing products offer award-winning customer support and a reliable 97 percent inbox delivery rate. iContact Pro, our answer to the growing demand for marketing automation, takes email marketing a huge step forward with workflows, lead scoring, landing pages, and more. It's the complete package to take your contacts on their journey from first interaction all the way through to marketing success.













