How to Improve Email Review Cycles and Email Approvals

litmus

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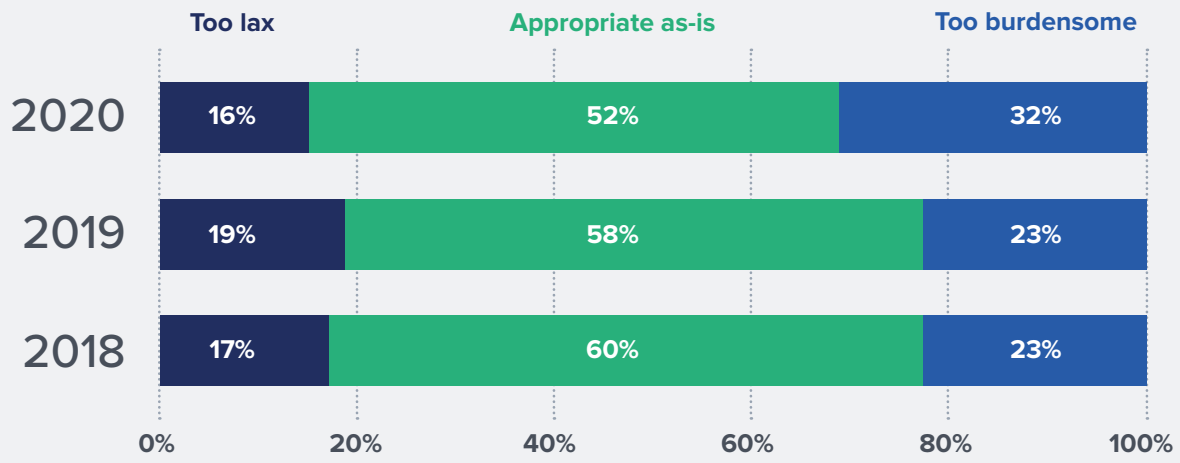
Half of email marketers see their email review and approval process as too lax or too burdensome. Here's how to fix them.

Email reviews and approval processes are almost always reported as the most time-consuming elements of an email workflow, and it doesn't appear to be getting any better. 52% of brands now say their process is appropriately rigorous, down from 58% in 2019, according to Litmus' 2020 State of Email Survey (2,000 respondents). The rest say theirs is either too lax or too burdensome, and for the first time, the percentage of marketers that find their processes too burdensome jumped to 32%.

Only Half of Marketers View Their Review & Approval Processes as Appropriate As-Is

Do you think the email review and approval process at your company is too burdensome, appropriate as-is, or too lax?



In previous years we've seen smaller companies feel their review process is too lax, while larger companies feel their process is too burdensome, although underlying issues are often the same for all companies. This year, we've seen companies of every size say that their review and approval processes are much too burdensome.

For smaller companies, the gap between those that find their process too lax versus those that find them too burdensome is relatively small. 62% of companies with fewer than 20 employees found their processes to be appropriate as-is, with 15% saying it's not enough, and 23% saying it's too time-consuming. That uncertainty about reviews and approvals can be shown in their quality assurance processes.

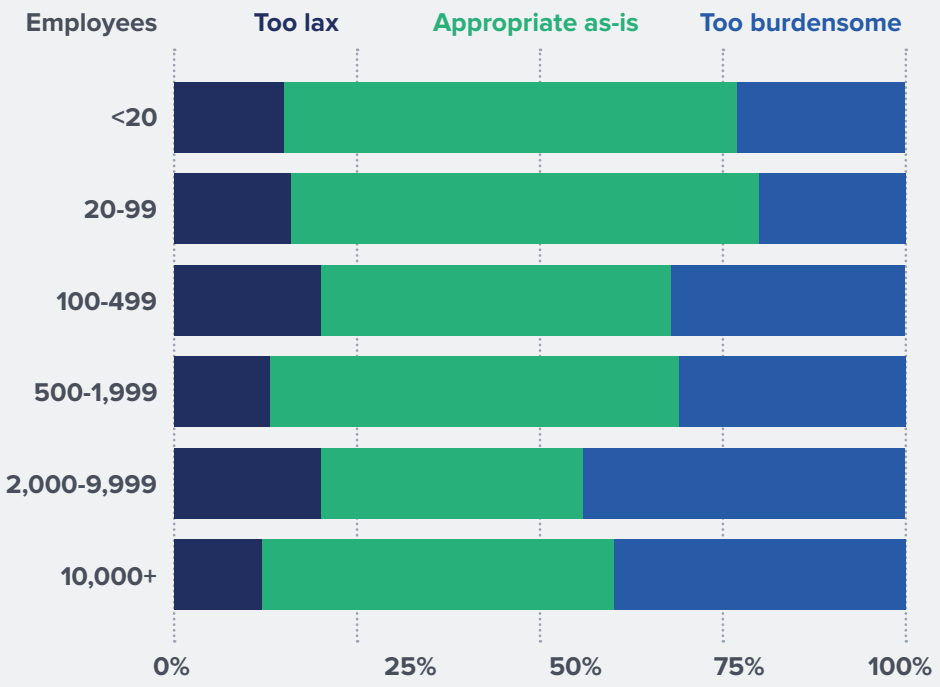
32% of brands that have an overly lax review process don't run through a pre-send checklist at all before they send their emails. For those that say their process is too burdensome, nearly two-thirds of respondents said they use a pre-send checklist, but 40% of those brands only use a short checklist.

Having too few checks in place can allow errors to slip through and create poor customer experiences that impact the success of your email marketing. Marketers who say their email programs never, rarely, or partially follow email marketing best practices are most likely to not have a pre-send checklist at all (45% of respondents) or only have a short checklist in place (37% of respondents).

For larger companies, the gap between lax and burdensome is significantly higher, with nearly the majority of marketers finding their process too time-consuming. 45% of brands with 2,000 or more employees say their process is too burdensome, with a small dip to 40% for brands with 10,000 or more employees.

The Larger the Company, the More Burdensome Their Email Review & Approval Process

Percentage of companies by size saying their email review and approval process is too lax, appropriate as-is, and too burdensome.



There is certainly evidence of a negative effect on subscribers with these numbers and processes, but the bigger effect here is on productivity.

Already, 40% of brands spend at least 3 hours on the review and approval of each email they create, with 8% taking a full day or more. That's more time than they spend on email design, coding, copywriting, or any other stage of the email creation process.

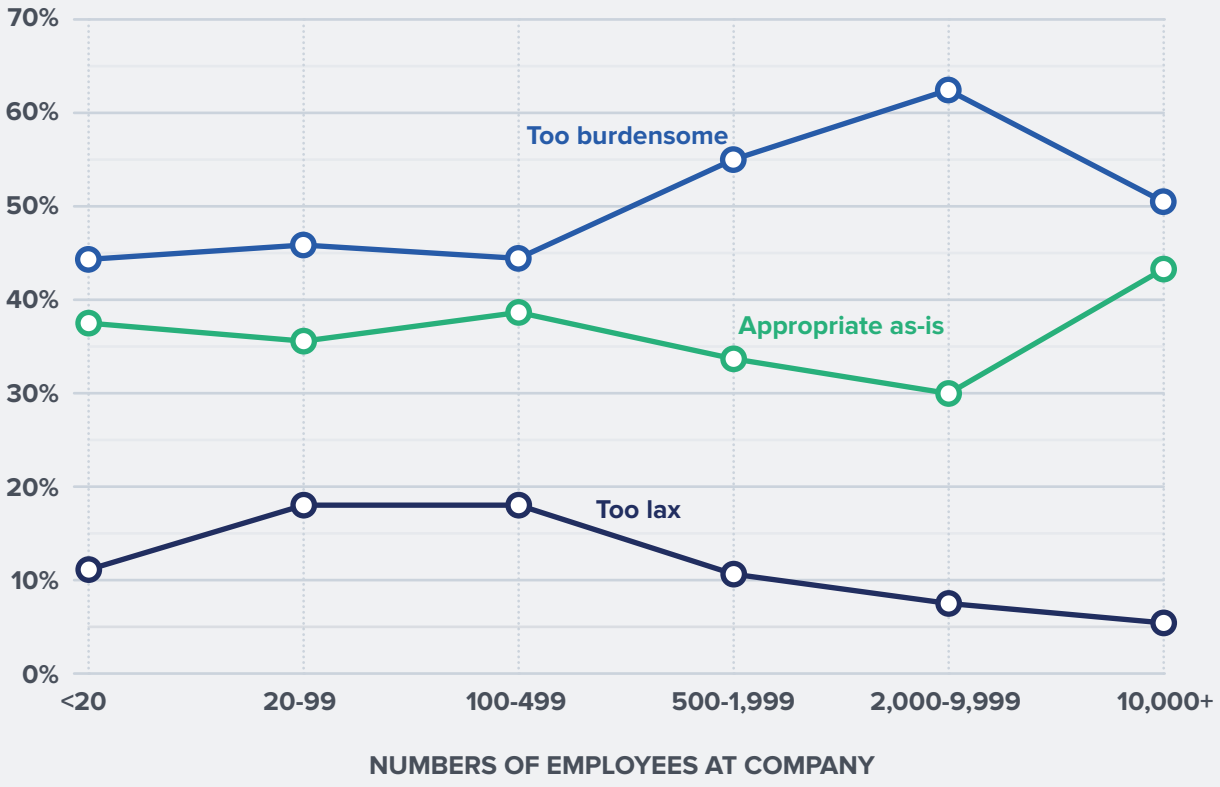
Large brands spend even more time. 40% of companies with between 500 and 1,999 employees spend 3 hours or more reviewing each email, but 54% of companies with more than 10,000 employees spend 3 hours or more—with 18% taking a full day or more.

The average brand sends each of their subscribers about 4-5 marketing emails a month, so you're talking **over a thousand hours a year spent reviewing emails** at the largest companies. And if you're among the 36% of brands that send more than 9 emails a month—or even the 3% of brands that send 33 or more emails a month—then your total review hours could be in the thousands per year.

Several factors can affect whether your review process becomes too lax or too burdensome, including the involvement of other departments, how far in advance of a send an email is approved, and the frequency of last-minute changes to approved emails.

More than Half of Companies That Spend More than 3 Hours on Reviews and Approvals View Their Process as Too Burdensome

The percentage of brands that spend 3 or more hours reviewing and approving each email sent for companies of various sizes with review and approval processes that are too lax, appropriate as-is, and too burdensome.



Other departments involved

Marketers typically work with 2-3 other departments on average to get marketing emails reviewed and approved. Overall, the number of other departments marketers work with doesn't appear to affect the process in a significant way.

That said, if your company has four or more departments plus marketing involved in email reviews and approvals, then it may be time to reevaluate how essential the participation of each of them is.

Identifying which departments are involved has a bigger impact on the email process. In addition to executives, the departments that seem to have the most negative effect on the email review and approval process are merchandising, legal and compliance, sales, and purchasing. Meanwhile, the manufacturing and production, human resources, IT, research and development, and finance and accounting departments are essentially neutral.

Even if a department's involvement isn't adding friction, you want it to be enriching the process. If a particular department is more burdensome, a process change would probably be wise.

Approval-to-send delays and changes post-approval

Having an email approved and ready to go at least one day ahead of the intended send date makes a significant difference in how a review process is perceived by email marketers.

When an email is sent on the same day that it's approved, marketers are both more likely to say their email review process is too lax and too burdensome. Whereas if the email is approved 1 day, 2 days, 3 days, or 4 or more days ahead of time, marketers are more likely to say their review process is appropriately rigorous in each of those cases.

We asked marketers how often last-minute changes are made to a marketing email after it has been approved by all stakeholders. It's worth pointing out that simple, routine emails could make last-minute changes relatively easy to implement. Conversely, complex and really important emails probably deserve an added cushion of being approved well ahead of time—just in case.

Brands with Appropriately Rigorous Review Processes Are More Likely to Never or Rarely Have Last-Minute Edits

The percentage of brands that get last-minute changes to a marketing email after is has been approved by all stakeholders at companies with review and approval processes that are too lax, appropriate as-is, and too burdensome.

First, let's recognize last-minute changes that happen after an email is approved are fairly common occurrences. Less than 2% of brands never have last-minute changes.

Sometimes changes are necessary because the content of the email is simply wrong, and the error just wasn't picked up earlier. Other times there's a change external to the email campaign, such as a reduction in product availability or extreme weather affecting a planned event, that requires the email's content to be adjusted. Just because a change is last-minute doesn't mean it shouldn't be made.

That said, having an appropriately rigorous review process can bring up more of the legitimate issues sooner and also limit frivolous and subjective last-minute changes.

Making last-minute changes rare is a great goal that clearly delivers benefits. However, for most email programs the more attainable goal is to only have last-minute changes sometimes.

Frequently having changes to emails post-approval causes clear stress on review processes. For instance, email programs with burdensome review processes are 2.5 times more likely than those with an appropriately rigorous process to say they always or often have last-minute changes. One way to reduce last-minute changes is to increase the number of days before a send you typically require approval.

Tools to manage reviews

In addition to all of the issues we've already discussed, take a hard look at the tools your program uses to facilitate the collection of feedback on email designs.

If your program is like most, it's using tools that aren't optimized for collecting feedback on email campaigns. Litmus research into review methods found that email is the most popular method to get feedback on a design. That can be cumbersome and, like many other methods currently used, doesn't allow reviewers to easily indicate exactly what part of the email design they're commenting on.

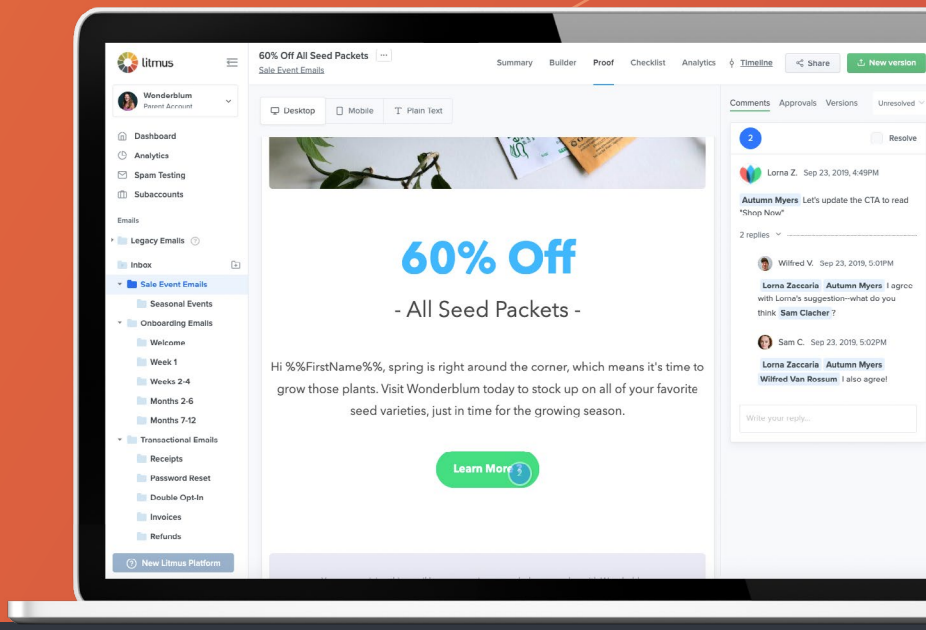
Our research showed that more than a quarter of brands are using **two or more methods of collecting feedback**, which makes it difficult for reviewers to see all comments and introduces opportunities for comments to be missed. When you're using email, Google Docs, Excel, Slack, and other methods, feedback becomes extra tricky to track across different versions of an email.

We recommend using tools where visual elements can be easily commented on, such as InVision and Adobe Acrobat. However, since those platforms aren't designed with email campaigns in mind, even they have significant limitations.

For that reason, we highly recommend using a tool like Litmus Proof that's designed specifically for reviewing email designs, so you can view the campaign's desktop, mobile, and plain text versions; click linked text and images; and review the sender name and subject line, all in a single location.

The review and approval process is one of the critical last legs of an email send, and the part of the email creation process on which brands spend the most time. Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of your review and approval process by:

- Getting the right people involved
- Getting the right departments involved
- Securing approvals at least a day ahead of sending an email
- Reducing the frequency of last-minute changes
- Using the right tool to manage your email review and approval process

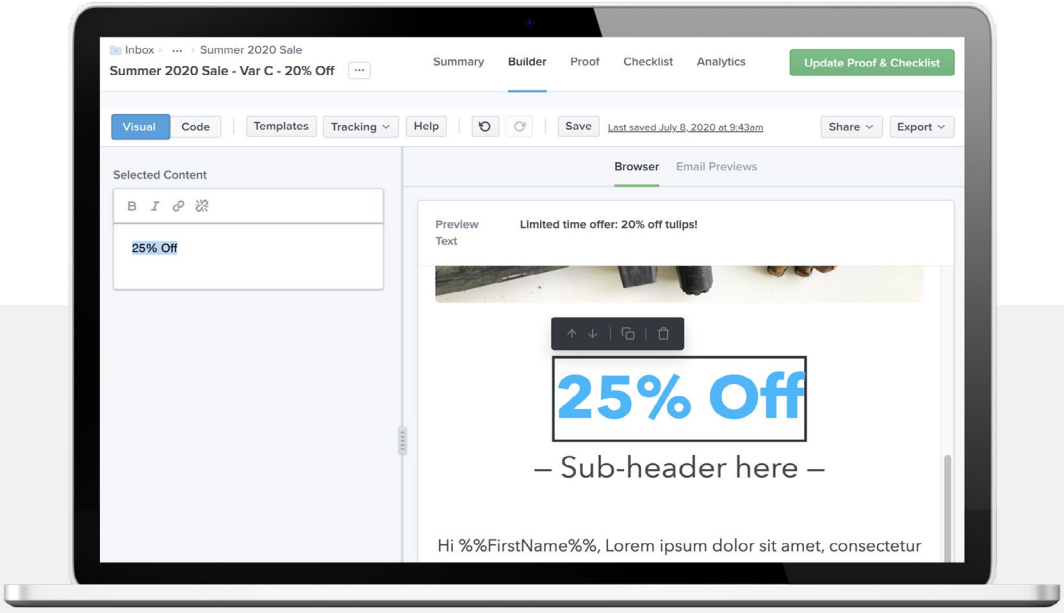


Stop a burdensome or lax approval process before it even starts

Too burdensome or too lax of an email review and approval process can take a toll on your program, your team, and even your subscribers. The best way to ensure an appropriate process is to take the precautions you need and get the tools you need—or optimize the ones you have—to set your team up for success.

Litmus Proof is an excellent tool for streamlining your approvals in one place, but what about before you get to that stage of your email workflow? Are there tools out there that can help you reduce errors like wrong imagery or incorrect brand coloring? You bet.

Visual Editor in Litmus Builder empowers every member of your team—no matter their technical skills—to quickly produce perfect emails. There's no lengthy set up or training needed for Visual Editor. It automatically works with your existing templates and doesn't change your code. Plus, you can use Visual Editor to control editing and lock down areas of your email to ensure brand consistency, like legal information in your footer or the type of logo you include.



Litmus' Design Library allows your developers to create and share templates with other developers that are just starting out and learning—or even non-developers. Design Library gives you a place to store reusable assets, like templates, so there is a single source of truth for your entire team regardless of where they choose to build, helping you avoid rogue design decisions or new, unapproved templates.

These tools can help you get ahead of a slow or inadequate review and approvals process by taking some of the pressure off of that step of your workflow.

Learn more about how Litmus can boost your team's collaboration

Resources to share with your email team

- Organizing Email Teams: Centralized vs. Decentralized Team Structures
- Say Goodbye to These Top 3 Email Pain Points
- How to Make Collecting Campaign Feedback Less Painful
- Wasting time getting your emails approved? Here's how to fix it.

For those resources and more, visit Litmus' industry-leading blog at litmus.com/blog.

How Litmus can help

A centralized tool for providing and collecting feedback, Litmus Proof helps your team increase efficiencies, improve collaboration, and reduce review cycles. With Proof, your team can...

EASILY SHARE EMAIL CAMPAIGNS

Share campaigns with clients, stakeholders, and other reviewers with just the click of a button.

ANNOTATE, COMMENT, AND COLLABORATE

Reviewers can click anywhere on an email to leave a comment or reply to others in one convenient place to speed up resolution.

CONTROL USER ACCESS

Assign clients, colleagues, and stakeholders to be Reviewers, so they can view and comment on emails. Reviewers cannot edit projects or change code, so there is no risk of unintended errors.

SIMPLIFY EMAIL DESIGN REVIEWS

Litmus Proof is no longer just for email code and email proofing. With PNG and JPEG support, you can now review and approve email graphics and design in addition to HTML.

For more information, contact your account executive. Don't have one yet? Please visit litmus.com/enterprise to talk with an expert.