

2020 State of Email Workflows

A peek behind the curtain of how everyone in marketing—from developers and designers to executives—create and analyze email campaigns.



litmus

Introduction

Changing conditions left some companies rethinking strategy, altering workflows, and reducing budget. Here are some of the top 2020 workflow trends:

Workflows changed because of COVID-19. Approvals were more burdensome as extra departments reviewed emails. Nearly 70% of companies altered their overall strategy, and teams were less likely to plan content with briefs.

Teams relied on ESP-provided tools more often. Tools to conduct code editing, CSS inlining, and testing happened in email service providers (ESPs) more often this year.

Email metrics and analysis fell by the wayside. The percent of people tracking or planning to track every metric except open rates declined, and fewer teams had a grasp on measuring ROI.

Even with 2020's challenges, 78% of email teams said email is important to their company's success. Email is a powerful channel to deliver [empathetic, customer-centric messaging](#), which isn't always easy. In fact, nearly 50% of marketers say optimizing email workflow is a priority.

This report is fueled thanks to 2,000+ email marketers who graciously shared their experiences in our 5th annual State of Email survey.



Here at Litmus, we're passionate about everything email marketing. We're on a mission to help brands access what they need to send better email, faster. Through our [blog](#), [Litmus Live conferences](#), [ebooks](#), [webinars](#), and more, we share best practices and trends to help your team stay at the forefront of the industry. Another thing we're into? Software that makes creating high-performing email easy. Marketers pair Litmus with existing email service providers (ESPs) to ensure a consistently great brand experience for every subscriber, work more efficiently, accelerate campaign performance, reduce errors, and stay out of the spam folder. With Litmus by your side, you'll have the tools and insights you need to provide your customers with an incredible email experience—and an incredible ROI.

Get practical email how-tos, tips, & trends

Join over 300,000 email marketing pros who rely on Litmus for expert advice and analysis. Sign up for our emails to get the Litmus newsletter, notifications of new reports and executive summaries, announcements of upcoming webinars and events, and more.

How long does it take to produce an email?

Taking an email through the full process is no small feat. Most teams take between one and two weeks to complete a single email, and nearly a quarter need a month or more.

Traditionally, email production was a linear process. You wouldn't move on to design without the copy in place, and you wouldn't develop an email without the design set. The problem with this workflow? One snag at any step has a ripple effect, leading to backed-up work logs and cumbersome timelines.

That's why this year, we introduced agile email workflows, which allow for simultaneous work. The concept of agile work isn't new, but it's just now making its way into marketing. By focusing on speed and simplicity, email teams can quickly learn, adapt, and grow.

How to improve

If you're able to, try writing, designing, and developing an email at the same time. This way, work can progress on multiple fronts. If you're too busy wearing multiple hats, focus on automating and streamlining each step to cut down on production time.

How to get ahead



Watch [Going Agile: The New Standard for Email Efficiency and Success](#)



Watch [Scrappy & From Scratch: Building an Email Production System as a 1-Person Team](#)



Read [Going Agile: The New Email Workflow](#)

Key takeaways

Email teams tended to work on fewer emails at once this year. 46% of email teams have between one and five messages in production at the same time. Thankfully, some organizations had less juggling to do, since the number of teams with 26+ emails in production slightly decreased in 2020. Perhaps some campaigns were [put on hold because of uncertain times](#).

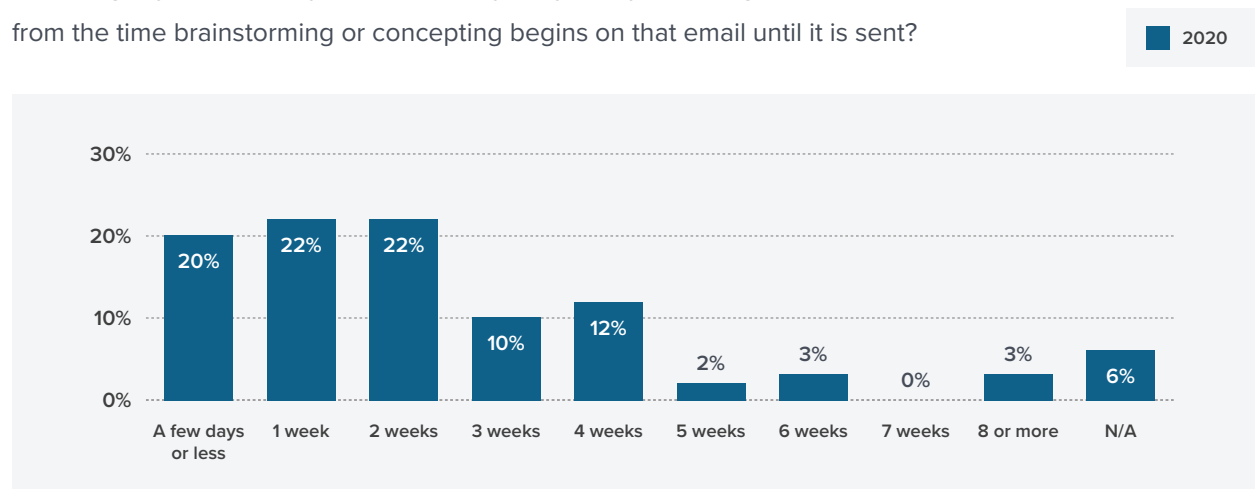
Most teams spend two hours or less on each element of production.

The speediest tasks are testing and post-send analytics, with nearly half of teams dedicating under an hour to them. Additionally, a third of companies spend three or more hours on both copywriting and design.

The time it takes for email teams to create an email is pretty split down the middle. 44% of email teams in 2020 spent between one and two weeks producing an email from beginning to end, while 52% spent two weeks or more (the same as last year!).

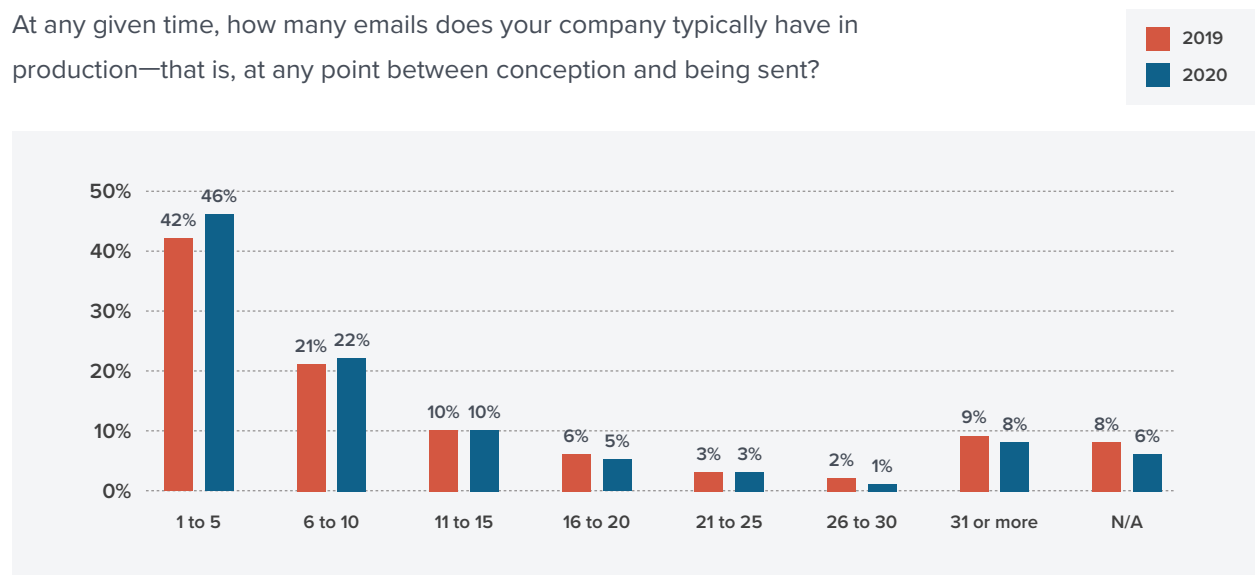
Most teams continue to need more than two weeks to complete a single email, and the entire process was a bit longer this year

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



Teams juggled fewer emails at once this year

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



Earlier we mentioned the agile email marketing workflow, which has four stages: [Strategize](#), [Build](#), [Test + Review](#), and [Send + Analyze](#).

Let's check out what's been happening in the first part of the workflow as we look at results.

Strategize

When you're strapped for time or being pulled in a million directions, sitting down to strategize can feel like a low priority. However, getting everyone on the same page reduces errors down the line. In an agile workflow, this phase includes reviewing insights from past campaigns, creating briefs, and assigning tasks.

How to improve

Define each email's purpose, goal, and audience. Even a single-sentence statement that you share with everyone involved can set the tone for the project.

How to get ahead



Work through the [Email Campaign Strategy Worksheet](#)



Watch [Strategizing Email Marketing Towards Your Marketing Goals](#)



Read [10 Ways You Can Use Email Insights Across Your Entire Company](#)

Key takeaways

As teams worked on the spot, email briefs weren't a priority. Fewer teams used email briefs this year, perhaps because plans felt uncertain and changing. In a webinar about [email marketing during a crisis](#), 49% of attendees said they had a plan, but weren't sure it was the right one. Our State of Email survey revealed 41% of teams never use an email brief (which is up from 31% in 2019!).

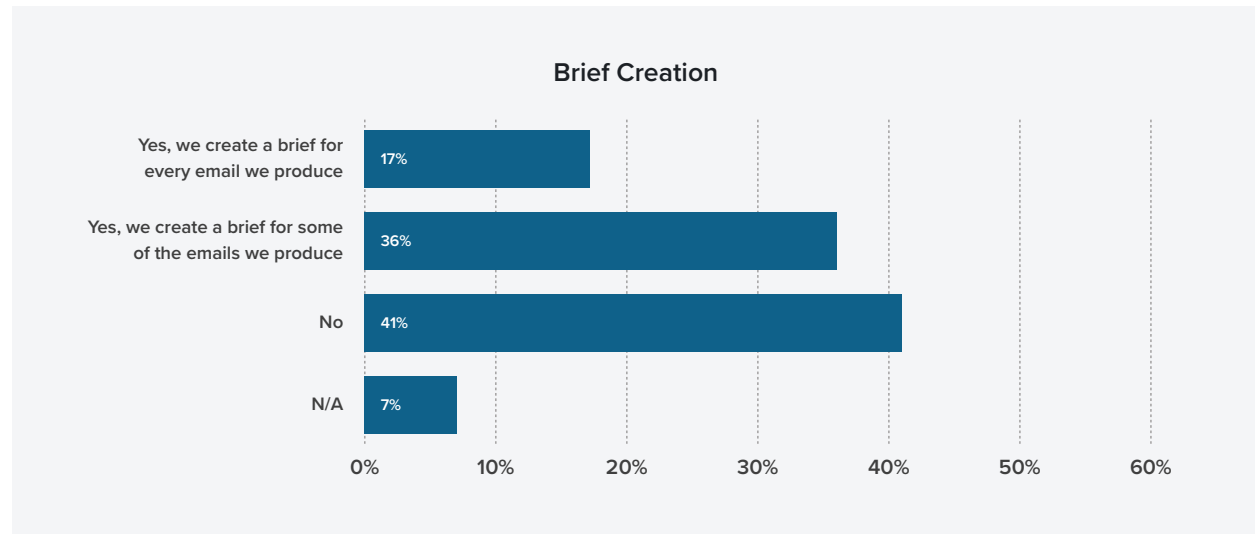
More teams are using a year-round content calendar. Email marketers may not have used briefs as often this year, but they tried to maintain a content calendar. 56% of teams plan their campaigns for the entire year, and only 15% use a calendar during peak seasons.

Teams are consolidating their planning software. Not surprisingly, tools like Google Docs and Microsoft Word are still the content planning tools of choice. We noticed that email departments are using fewer content planning tools. In 2019, teams indicated an average of 2.5 tools used, while that number fell to 1.98 in 2020.

Most teams use an email brief at least sometimes, but more teams abandoned briefs altogether

Does your company (or biggest client, if you're an agency) create a brief that outlines the email's goals, audience, messaging, KPIs, etc. for any of the emails it produces?

2020

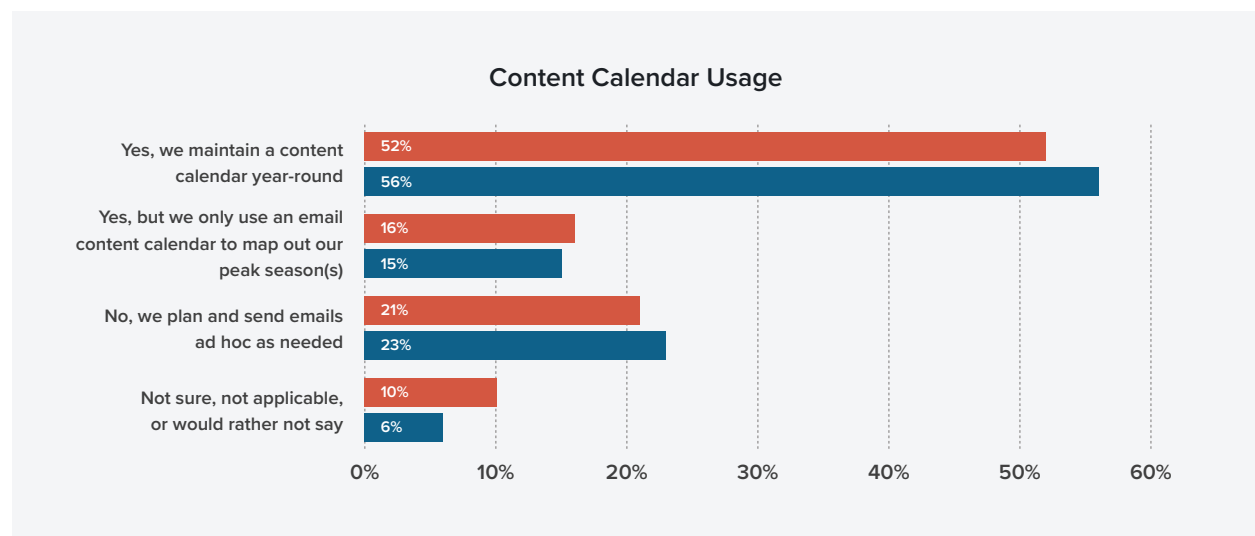


Year-round content calendars are growing in popularity, with more than half of teams taking advantage of long-term planning

Does your company (or biggest client, if you're an agency) use a content calendar for its email marketing program?

2019

2020



Teams are using fewer content planning tools and sticking to simple documents most of the time

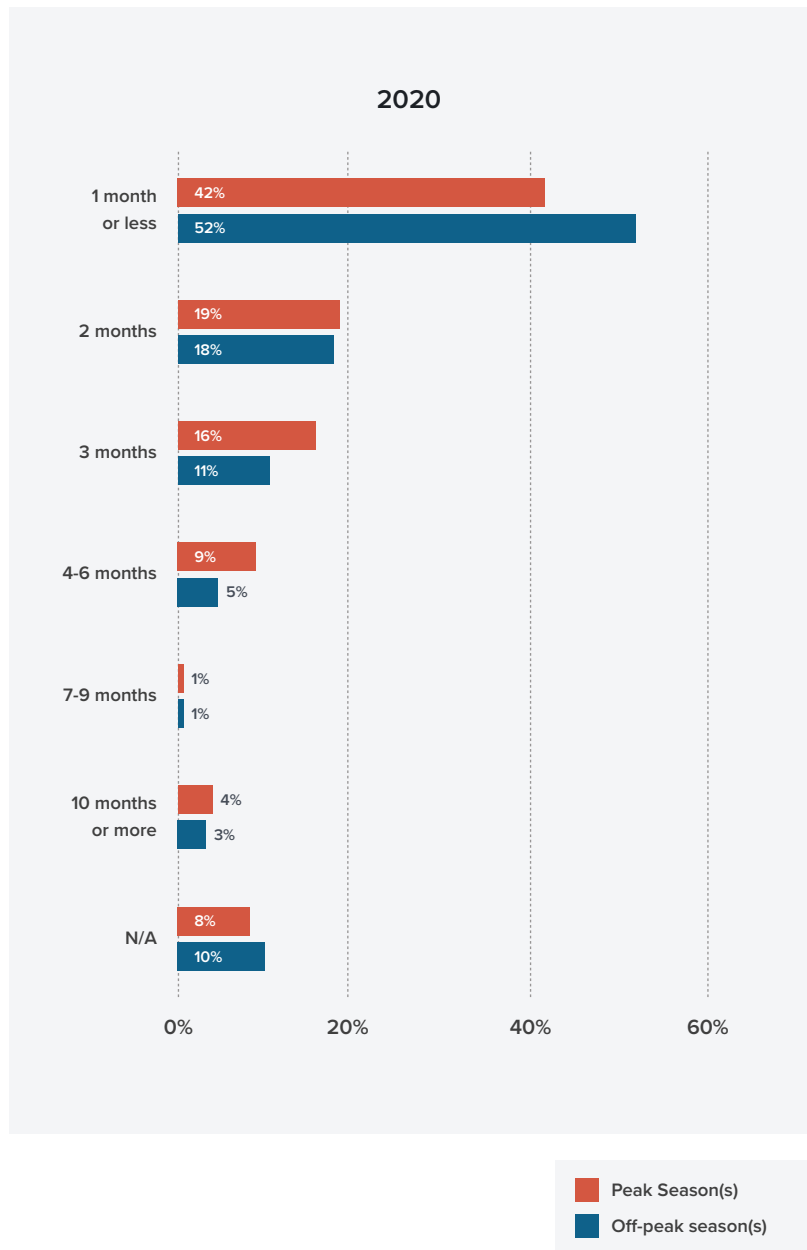
What software does your company (or biggest client, if you're an agency) use for email marketing content planning?

	2019	2020
Google Docs, Calendar, Drive, etc.	58%	47%
Microsoft Word, Excel, Outlook, etc.	48%	38%
Jira	17%	12%
Slack	21%	12%
Asana	12%	11%
Trello	15%	11%
SharePoint	8%	7%
Basecamp	9%	6%
Workfront	5%	6%
Confluence	8%	5%
Smartsheet	5%	4%
Wrike	4%	4%
Airtable	2%	4%
The one provided by our email service provider	3%	2%
HubSpot Editorial Calendar	1%	2%
Teamwork	2%	2%
CoSchedule	0%	2%
Paper-based system	3%	1%
Quip	1%	1%
Teamup	1%	1%
Apple iCal, etc.	2%	1%
Microsoft Project	1%	1%
RoboHead	0%	1%
ActiveCollab	1%	1%
Percolate	1%	1%
WordPress Editorial Calendar	1%	1%
Aprimo	1%	0%
Mavenlink	1%	0%
Workzone	1%	0%
Gather Content	4%	0%
Kapost Editorial Calendar	1%	0%
DivvyHQ	0%	0%
Homegrown, custom, or in-house solution	6%	6%
Other	7%	8%
N/A	3%	9%

No matter the season, most teams plan a month in advance

How far in advance does your company (or biggest client, if you're an agency) typically plan email content for your program?

While one month or less was the most common peak season runway in 2019, too, fewer teams overall started to plan campaigns two months or more in advance.



Now, let's dive into the next part of the agile workflow and what's happening there for email teams like yours.

Build

Building an email typically consists of copywriting, graphics & design, coding & development, and setting it up in your ESP. Since this part of the process can involve so many skills and stakeholders, an agile workflow has multiple processes running in unison to save time.

Even without agile workflows, email teams sped up their processes this year. In 2020, more teams spent two hours or less on design and development than in the previous year. There were fewer teams spending under an hour on copywriting and setting up an email in the ESP as well, but most teams still managed to keep these tasks under the two hour mark, which is a respectable speed.

How to improve

Adopting a template-based email design strategy cuts down on repetitive work and ensures a consistent look throughout your email program. For the development team, partials and snippets cut down on production time.

How to get ahead



Watch [Snip It Before You Ship It](#)



Read the [Ultimate Guide to Email Templates](#)



Read the [3 Pillars of a Successful Email Program Part 1—Pre: Set Your Email Campaigns Up for Success](#)

Key takeaways

Adobe design products are still top dog, but teams are integrating other tools, too. Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign are the three most-used email design tools in 2020. On average, email teams shared that they used two design programs, so what accounts for those additional slots? It seems that teams are using programs such as Canva, Adobe XD, and their own email service provider more often.

WYSIWYG editors are the apple of many email developers' eyes.

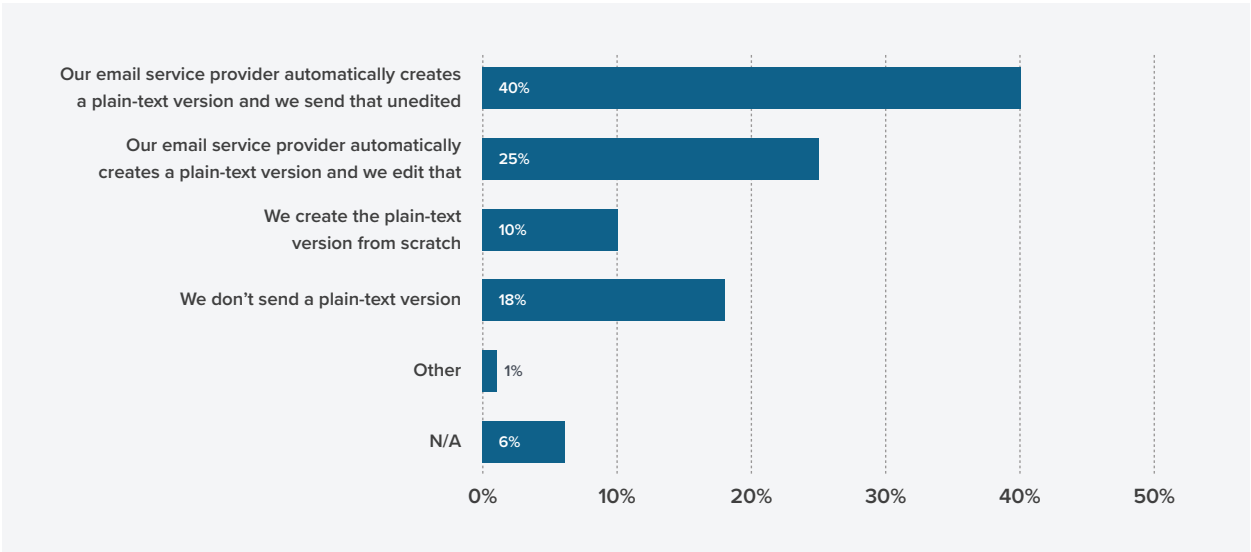
A third of email teams already use a WYSIWYG editor to build their marketing emails, and 37% said that's what they wished they used. Replacing text and code in a template is the most-used email build method again in 2020, but only 16% of respondents listed that as their preferred method.

Templates and non-manual CSS inlining show that teams save time where they can. Just over 3/4th of email teams used an HTML framework or template in 2020, which is consistent with last year's responses. Additionally, manual CSS inlining continued its fall from popularity to accounting for the workflow of just 24% of teams.

Three out of four teams rely on their email service provider for plain-text email versions, and usually end them unedited

How does your company create the plain-text version of your marketing emails?

2020



Email design program usage is becoming more diversified, and is another spot where we saw ESP-provided tool usage increase

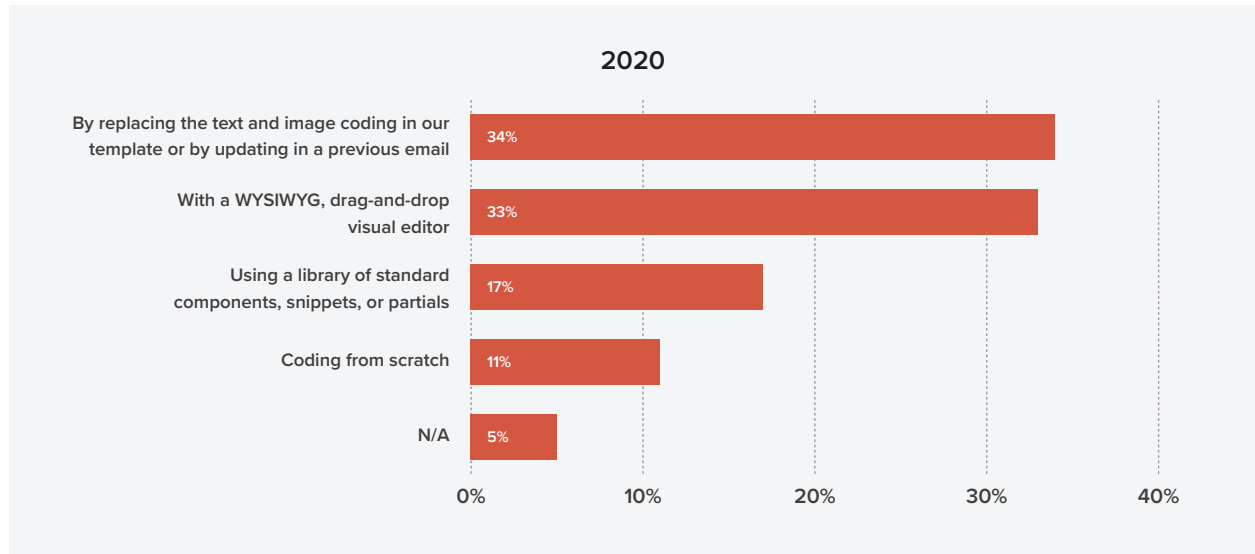
Which graphics design program(s) does your company use for email marketing? Respondents could select all that apply.

	2019	2020
Adobe Photoshop	80%	76%
Adobe Illustrator	43%	41%
Adobe InDesign	26%	24%
Sketch	16%	13%
Canva	7%	11%
The one provided by our email service provider	8%	11%
Adobe XD	5%	7%
Design in browser	5%	5%
Homegrown, custom, or in-house solution	4%	4%
GIMP	3%	2%
Affinity Photo	1%	1%
Adobe Fireworks	3%	0%
Pixlr	2%	0%
Other	3%	8%
N/A	9%	11%

Updating templates and using visual editors are the most popular email build methods

How does your company currently build its marketing emails?

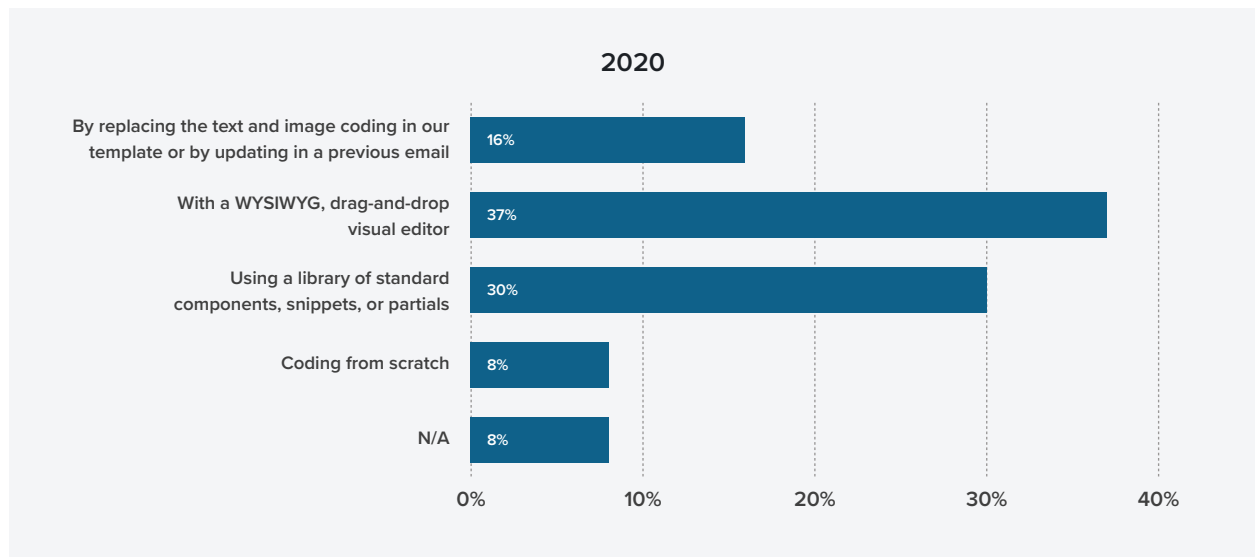
Current



Drag-and-Drop editors and a library of snippets and partials are the envy of many email teams

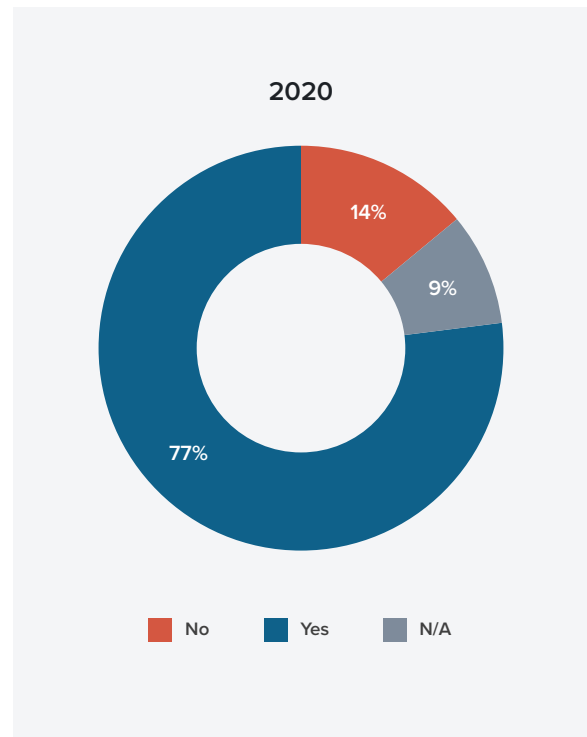
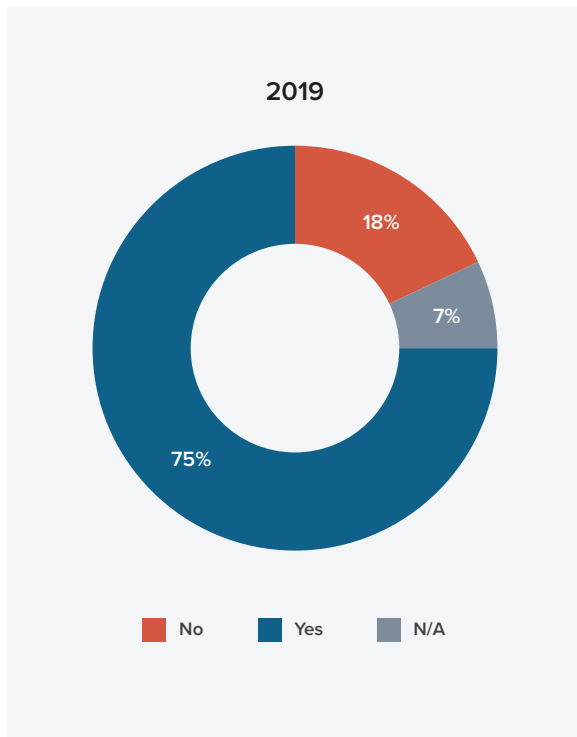
How would you prefer to build your marketing emails?

Preferred



Email templates are a clear, popular choice

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



Build better emails faster with Litmus Builder

Built by email professionals for email professionals, Litmus Builder is the leading code editor to help you streamline your email design and development workflow.

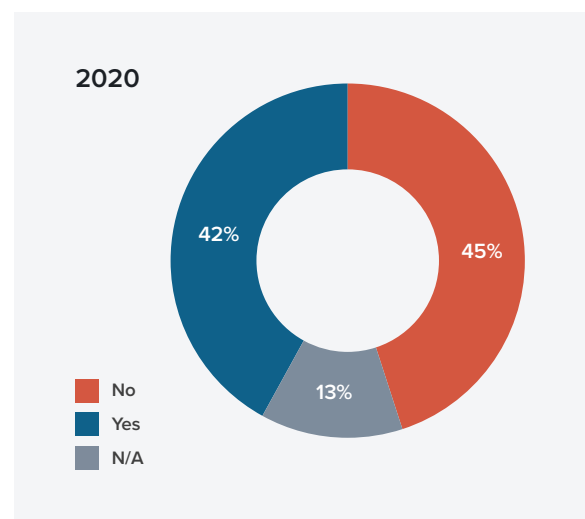
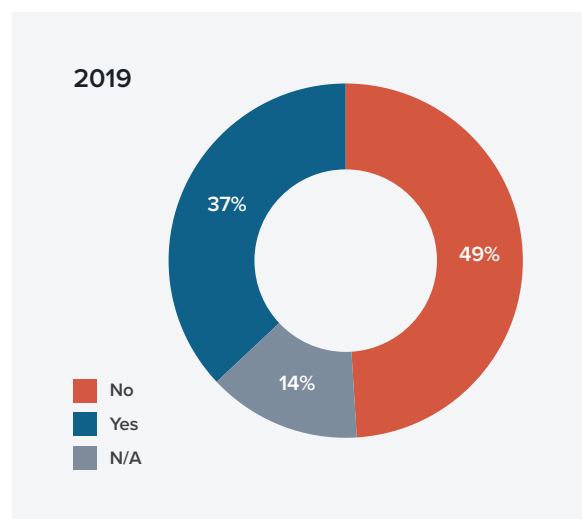
The percent of teams who rely on their ESP-provided code editors nearly doubled this year

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

	2019	2020
Adobe Dreamweaver (CC or CS)	41%	43%
The one provided by our email service provider	21%	39%
Litmus Builder	22%	17%
Notepad, Text Wrangler, TextMate, or other	14%	14%
Sublime Text	21%	13%
Atom	8%	6%
Brackets	8%	6%
Microsoft VisualStudio	5%	5%
Homegrown, custom, or in-house solution	6%	4%
Coda	3%	3%
Email on Acid Email Editor	4%	2%
Movable Ink Builder	2%	2%
Other	8%	6%
N/A	16%	14%

There's a nearly even split between teams who do and don't use partials, but the percent of pro-partial teams is on the rise

Partials are global, dynamic, reusable blocks of code that can be used across multiple emails. Changes made to a partial will apply to every single email where that partial is referenced. Does your company use partials for email development?

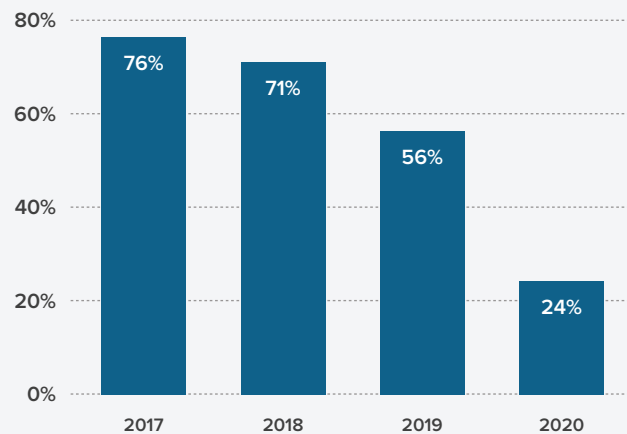


Manual CSS inlining usage fell by half, continuing its four-year downward trend

Which CSS inliner(s) does your company use?
Respondents could select all that apply.

50% more teams used the CSS inliner provided by their email service provider in 2020 than in the previous year.

	2019	2020
We inline CSS manually by hand or via snippets	56%	24%
The one provided by our email service provider	12%	18%
Litmus Builder	15%	5%
MailChimp Inliner	7%	4%
Campaign Monitor Inliner	7%	2%
Homegrown, custom, or in-house solution	11%	2%
Litmus PutsMail	2%	1%
Zurb Foundation	3%	1%
Gulp-inline-css	3%	0%
Premailer	2%	0%
Juice	1%	0%
Other	3%	1%
None. We do not use inliners	N/A	24%
N/A	11%	32%



Now, let's find out what email teams are experiencing in the next part of the agile workflow.

Test + Review

Your emails are a critical touchpoint between your brand and customers. That means you want to get them right the first time, as quickly as possible. Having a trusted testing tool, like [Litmus](#), helps you eliminate time-consuming manual tests. Luckily, 62% of teams tested the rendering of their emails often or always in 2020.

Unfortunately, the email review process was taxing in 2020. Email marketers shared the most difficult or frustrating part of email marketing was collecting feedback and internal approvals. We have a feeling this could have something to do with the fact that more departments were involved in approvals this year, and the percent of teams who spent more than two hours on these tasks rose from 20% in 2019 to 37% in 2020.

It doesn't have to be that way, though. Setting clear boundaries of what role each stakeholder plays can cut down on frustration, and consolidated feedback means you don't need to hunt down the comment from your boss you're pretty sure you saw somewhere.

How to improve

If you haven't already, create a [pre-send checklist](#). Get all of the appropriate steps and checks out of your head and into a shared location for a calmer and more thorough review process.

How to get ahead



Read [How to Improve Email Review Cycles & Approvals](#)



Watch [Streamline Your Pre-Send Process with Litmus](#)



Learn [if you should test that email](#)

Key takeaways

Most teams aim to save time by focusing their rendering testing on the popular email clients. The majority of teams focus on the most popular email clients. 25% test emails for the inbox providers and devices they know their audience is using, and only 15% check all email clients.

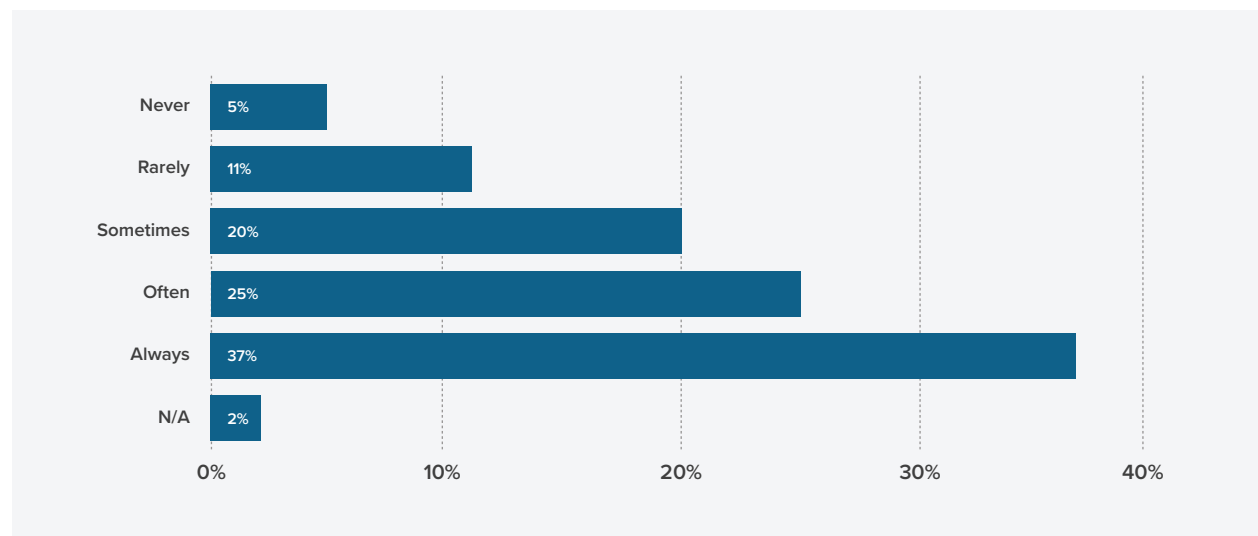
Changing landscapes may have contributed to more departments reviewing & approving. 30% of your peers felt reviews & approvals were too burdensome, up from 21% in 2019. One possible reason? More departments reviewing. While the marketing team is still the most likely collaborator, more teams in 2020 had to consult with executives, sales reps, and legal departments. While we didn't ask why review processes had changed, the ever changing landscape in 2020 may have had something to do with it.

Most teams used a pre-send checklist, but spam filter testing still isn't common. Let's have a round of applause for the 63% of teams who use a pre-send checklist. Just over half of teams rarely or never check for spam filters, so if you haven't picked up the practice yet, you aren't alone.

Quality Assurance

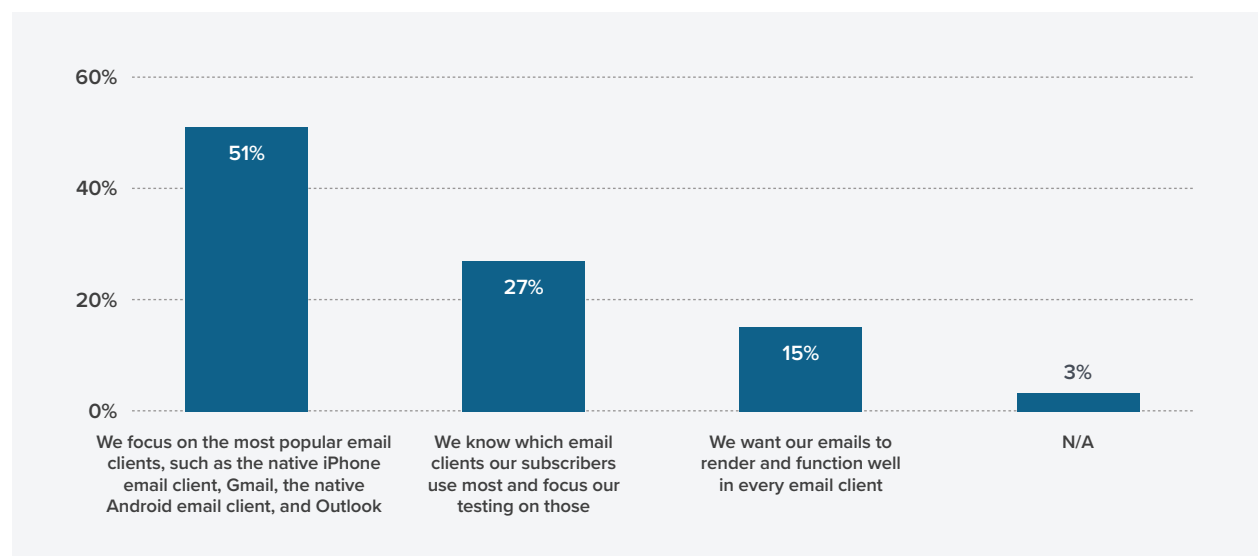
More than half of teams check email rendering often or always

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



Teams still prefer to prioritize testing to popular clients and devices

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



Sending test emails to coworkers is still the most common testing method (but it's losing its lead)

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

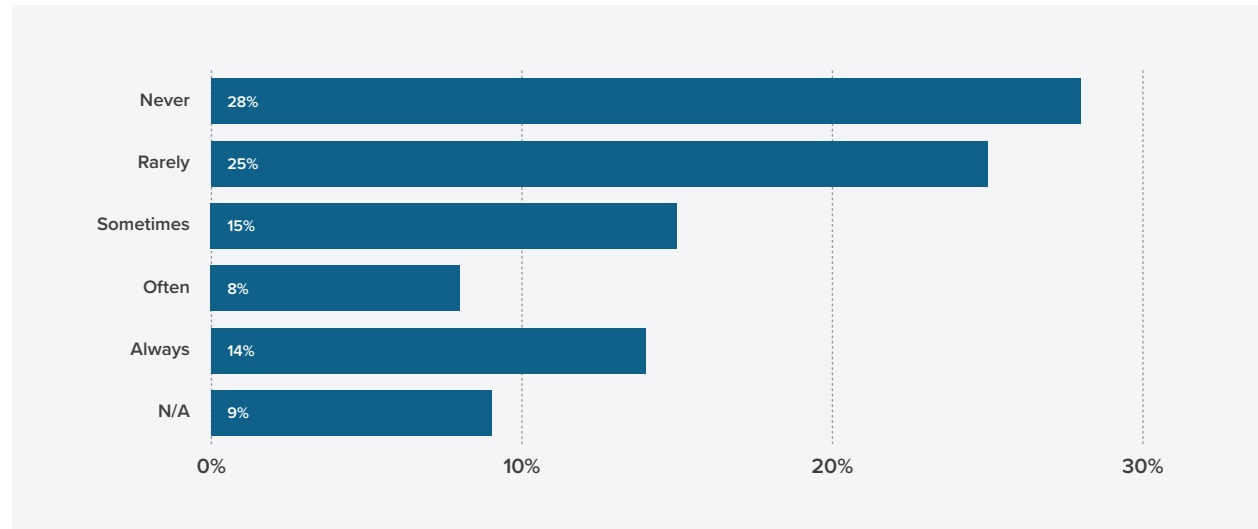
	2019	2020
We send a test email to the various email inboxes of employees	57%	55%
We use Litmus Email Previews	58%	50%
We use the email preview tool provided by our email service provider	28%	37%
We've set up email accounts at a variety of inbox providers and have several devices on hand on which to test rendering and functionality	25%	22%
We use Email on Acid's email previews	15%	16%
We use Return Path's email previews	5%	6%
Our agency or freelancer previews and QAs (quality assurance) our emails	7%	6%
We use 250ok's email previews	2%	4%
We use a homegrown, custom, or in-house solution	4%	3%
Other	1%	2%
N/A	3%	3%

Email testing is easy with Litmus Email Previews

Test your emails in 90+ email clients and reading environments in just seconds—and catch rendering errors before you send.

Spam filter tests for every email aren't the common practice

Before sending an email, how often does your company run it through spam filter tests to identify potential deliverability problems?



Make it to the inbox, not the spam folder

Identify issues that may prevent emails from being delivered—discover if you've been blocklisted, validate your email authentication, and get actionable advice on how to fix issues before you send with Litmus Spam Testing.

ESP spam filter tests and Litmus Spam Testing remain the most popular

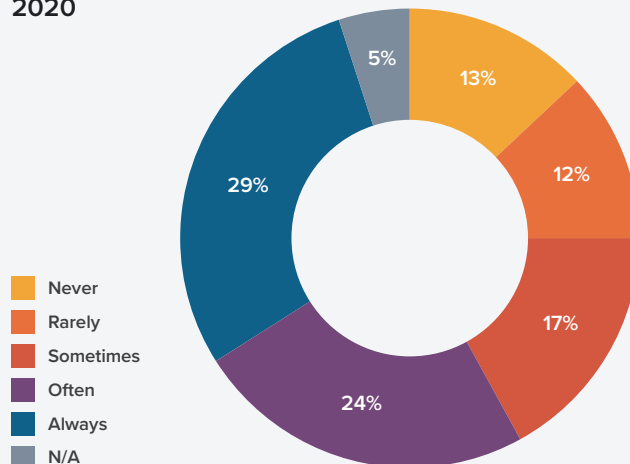
Which service(s) or tool(s) does your company use to check its emails against spam filters before it sends them? Respondents could select all that apply.

	2019	2020
The one provided by our email service provider	30%	32%
Litmus Spam Testing	43%	31%
Return Path	12%	12%
Email on Acid	12%	11%
250ok	5%	7%
Spam Assassin	9%	6%
Mail-Tester	5%	4%
GlockApps	2%	4%
Homegrown, custom, or in-house solution	4%	2%
eDataSource	1%	1%
MailMonitor	2%	1%
SendForensics	0%	1%
EmailReach	0%	1%
Other	3%	3%
N/A	10%	20%

A quarter of teams always monitor inbox placement

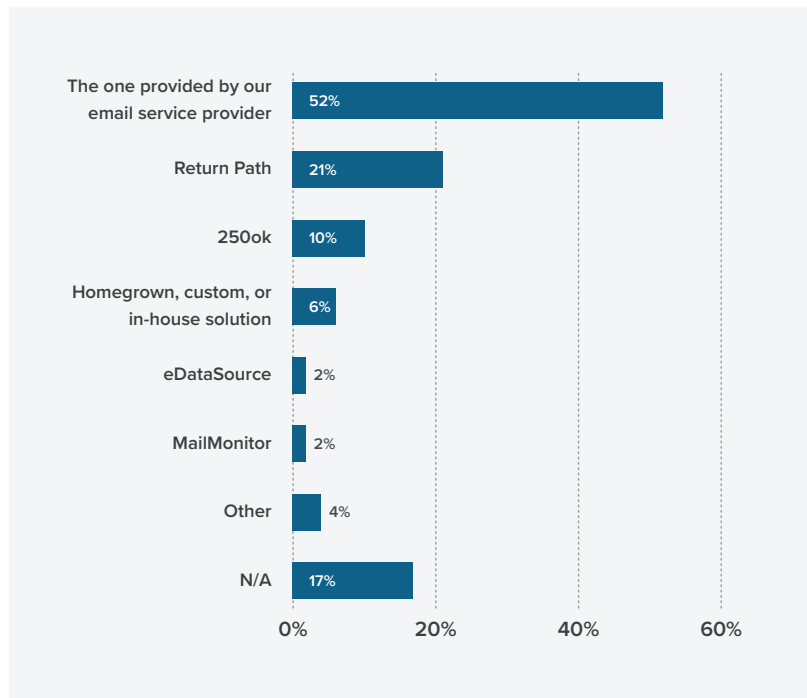
2020: Your inbox placement rate is the percentage of emails sent that are delivered to your subscribers and placed in their inboxes rather than their spam folders. How often does your company monitor its deliverability or inbox placement rate?

2020



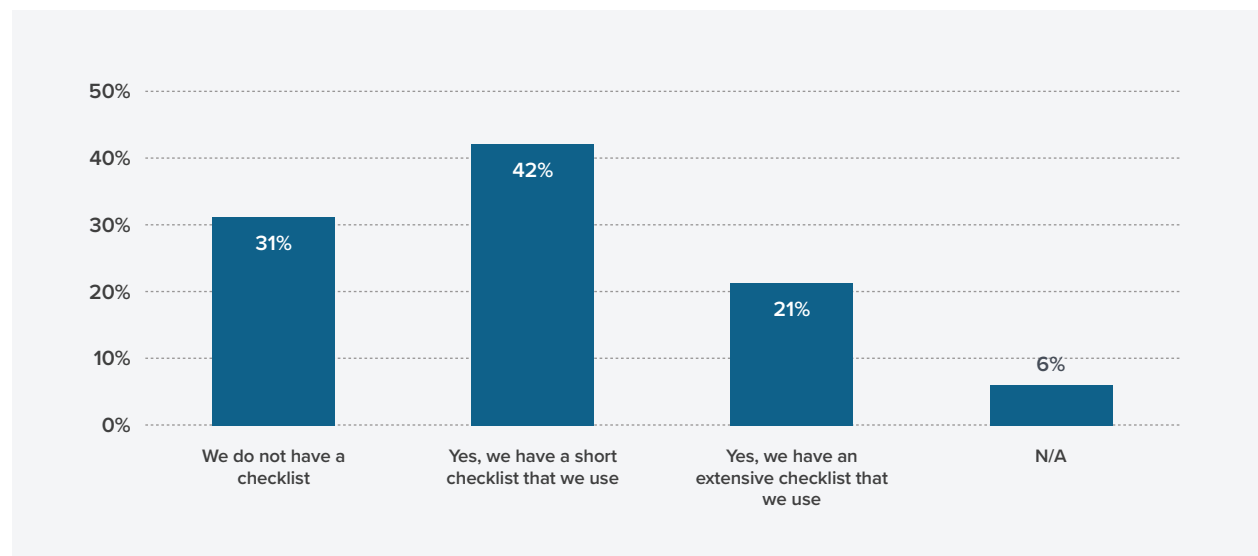
Half of teams rely on their email service provider to monitor deliverability

Which service(s) or tool(s) does your company use to monitor its deliverability or inbox placement rate? Respondents could select all that apply.



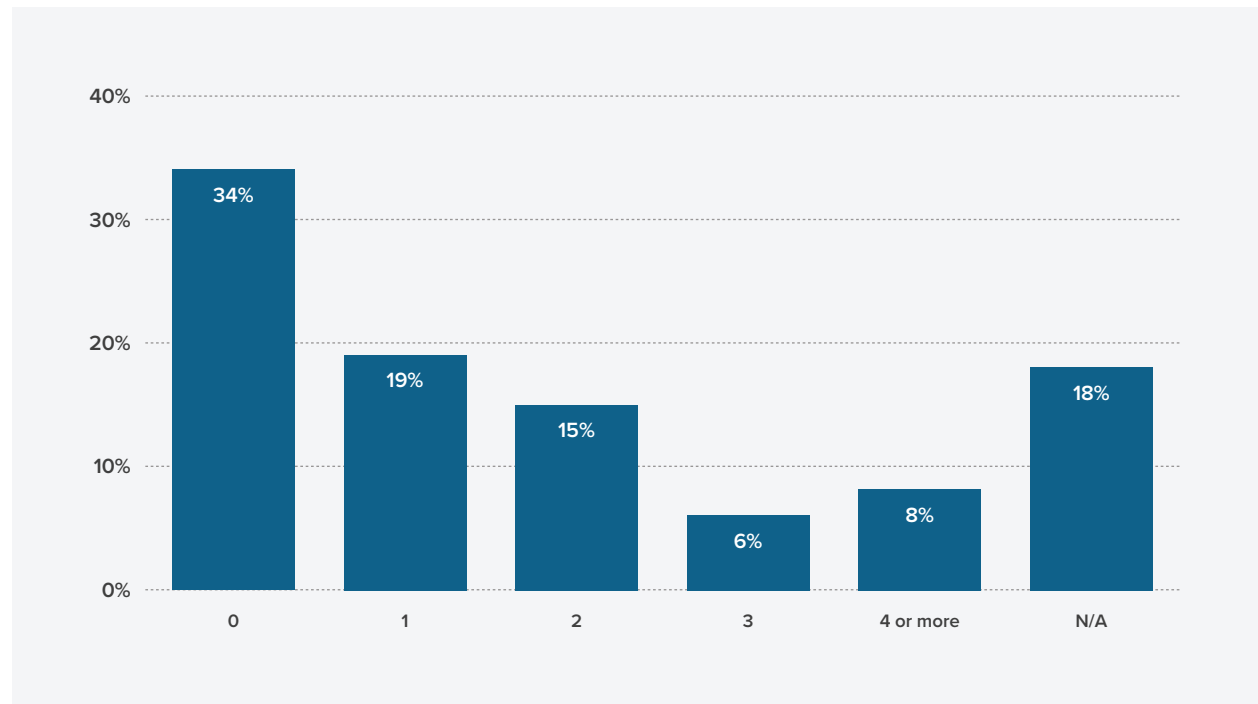
Most teams use a pre-send checklist of some sort

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



A third of teams halted an email or two during sending because of errors

How many times in the past 12 months has your company paused or halted a marketing email midway through sending because an error was discovered?



QA your emails with Litmus Checklist

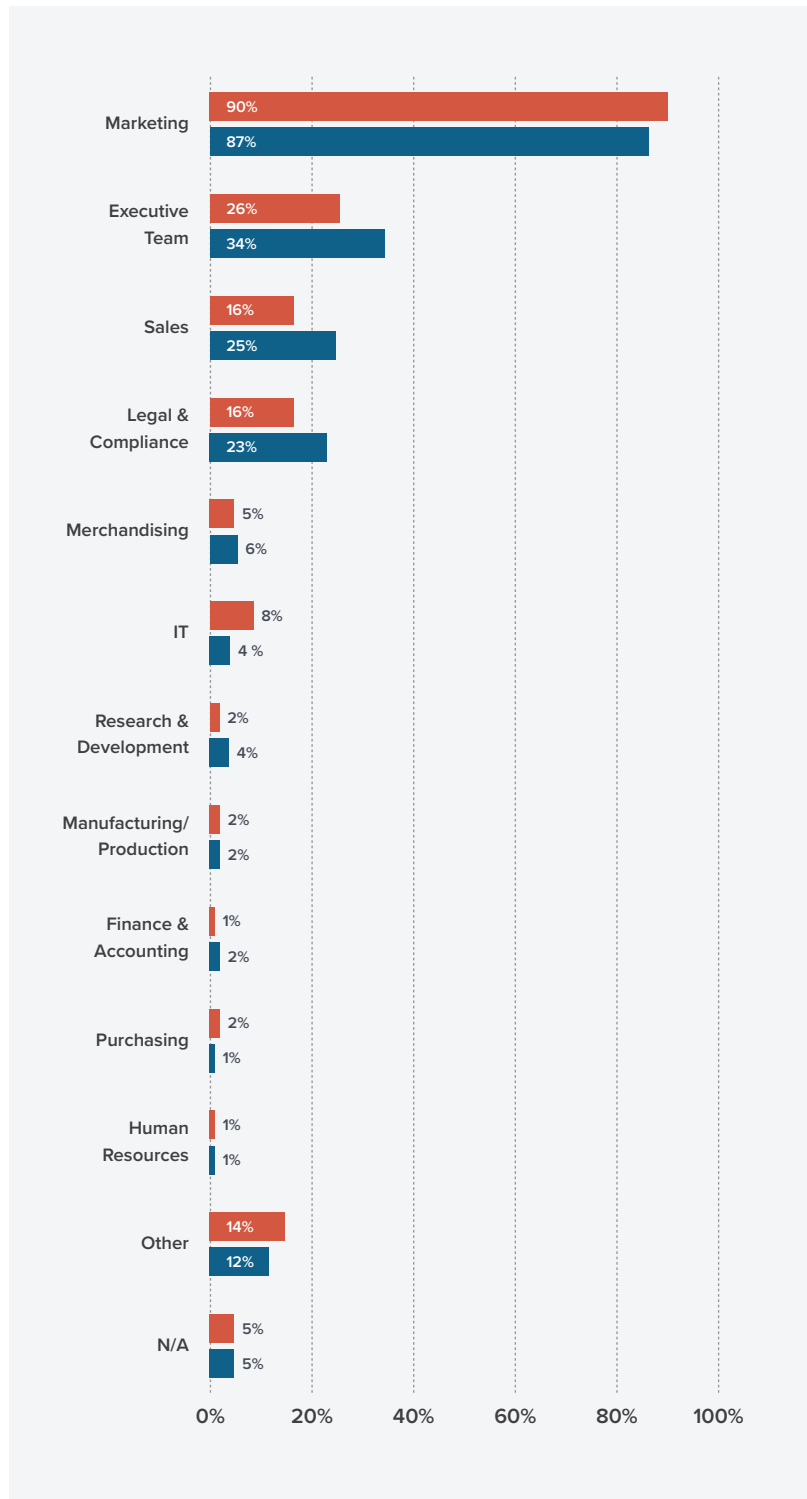
Litmus Checklist gives you a guided check of the critical elements that impact email performance. Preview your email in 90+ apps and devices, validate that links, images, and tracking work, and create an incredible email experience every time.

Reviews & Approvals

2019
2020

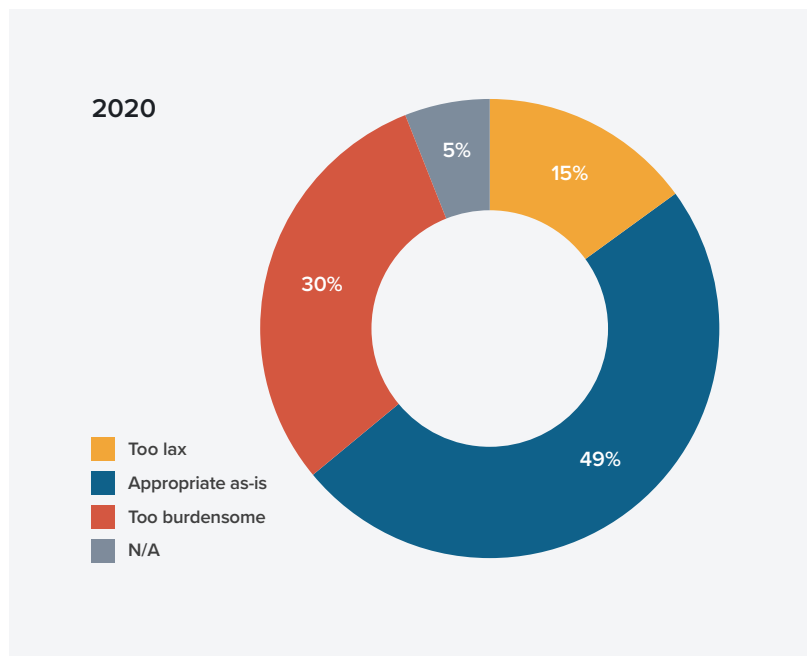
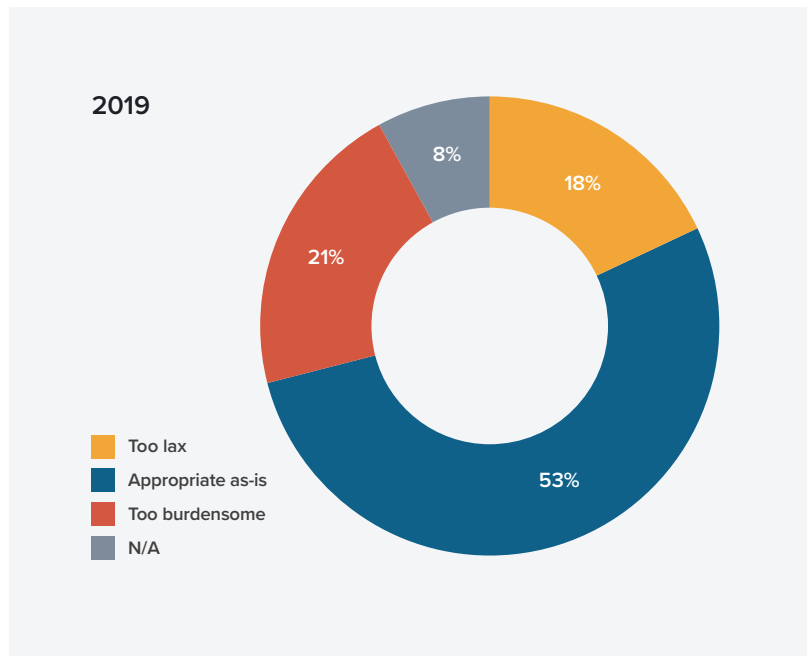
Teams were more likely to get approval from non-marketing functions this year

Which of the following departments are typically involved in the review and approval of your marketing emails?



The approval process felt too burdensome for more teams

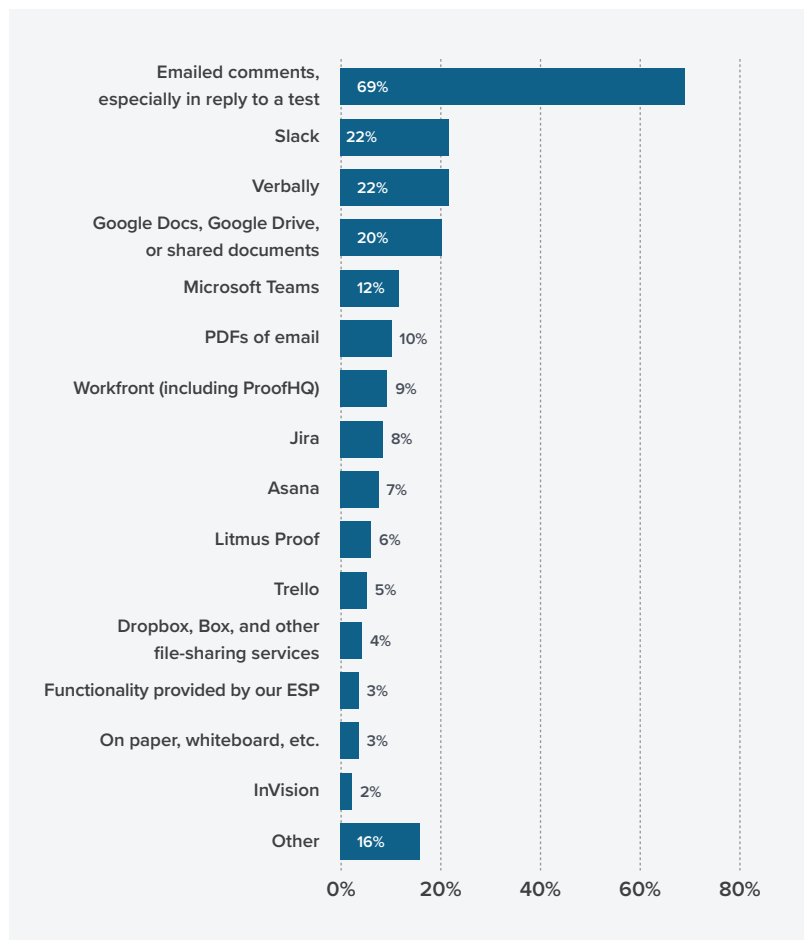
Do you feel that the email review and approval process at your company is too lax, appropriate as-is, or too burdensome?



Email chains and Slack messages are how most teams exchange email feedback and approvals

How do those involved in the review and approval of marketing emails at your company share their feedback? Respondents could select all that apply.

Let's explore what email marketers experienced this year in the Send + Analyze phase of the email workflow.



Streamline your email review process with Litmus Proof

With Proof as your centralized tool for collecting feedback, you can improve collaboration, get better visibility, and reduce review cycles.

Send + Analyze

Measuring the impact of what each email campaign can teach us is notoriously difficult. This year was no different, and teams seemed to take a step back from tracking and using many KPIs to focus on getting solid emails out the door.

The value of email can extend far beyond the inbox, and the insights gained from subscribers are applicable across all sales channels. If you're on a team that struggled with post-send analysis this year, you're not alone.

How to improve

We've all heard the phrase "Rome wasn't built in a day." The same concept applies to your email analysis workflow. Start with one metric or insight you'd like insight into and work on calculating it for a single message.

How to get ahead



Read [How To Get Actionable Email Insights and Share Results... Fast](#)



Learn [The Proven Tactics to Improve Email Marketing ROI](#)



Read the [2019 State of Email Analytics](#)

Key takeaways

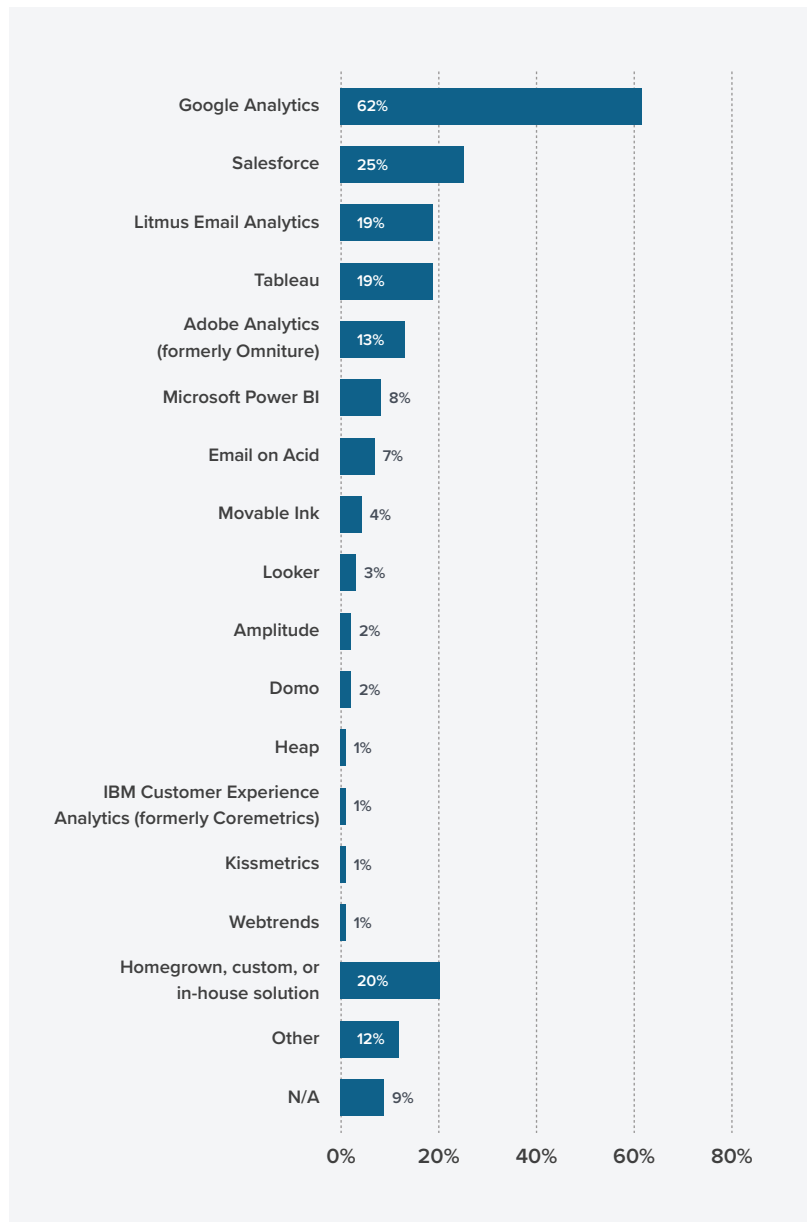
Advanced metrics (like ROI) are still really tricky for many email teams to track. Only 16% of email teams believe they can measure the ROI of their campaigns well or very well. While tracking basic metrics, such as open rates, is nearly universal, only 17% of teams used revenue per subscriber in 2020.

No surprise here—Google Analytics is by far the analytics tool of choice. 62% of email marketers use Google Analytics to track marketing performance, which is nearly three times the adoption of the next closest competitor, Salesforce. Litmus Email Analytics and Tableau round out the top four analytics tools in 2020.

Email teams are sharing insights with the marketing department and beyond. Nearly 80% of email marketers share email insights with other members of the marketing department at least sometimes, which is great! Insights from email campaigns are applicable across the entire organization. That's why we're jumping for joy that half of the email teams surveyed said they share email insights to other departments at least sometimes.

Google Analytics is still the top analytics tool of choice

Which analytics tools does your company use?
Respondents could select all that apply.



Open rate, click rate, and unsubscribe rate are the most likely to be monitored

Using any of the analytics tools available to you, which email metrics do you currently track, use as key performance indicators (KPIs), or plan to track in the next 12 months? Respondents could select all that apply.

	2020	VP-level	C-level
Open rate	95%	100%	86%
Click rate	88%	67%	77%
Unsubscribe rate	73%	67%	68%
Click-to-open rate	69%	33%	50%
Bounce rate	56%	67%	55%
Conversion rate	55%	33%	46%
Deliverability or inbox placement rate	47%	50%	23%
Email list size or growth rate	37%	17%	18%
Spam complaint rate	35%	17%	27%
Email device and client usage	26%	33%	5%
Email read time	18%	33%	5%
Revenue/value per subscriber	17%	--	5%
Return on Investment	18%	--	18%
Subscriber lifetime value	13%	--	18%
Acquisition cost per subscriber	11%	--	9%
Forwards	9%	33%	9%
Email production time	7%	--	--
Email mistakes or error rate	6%	--	5%
Email production time	2%	17%	5%

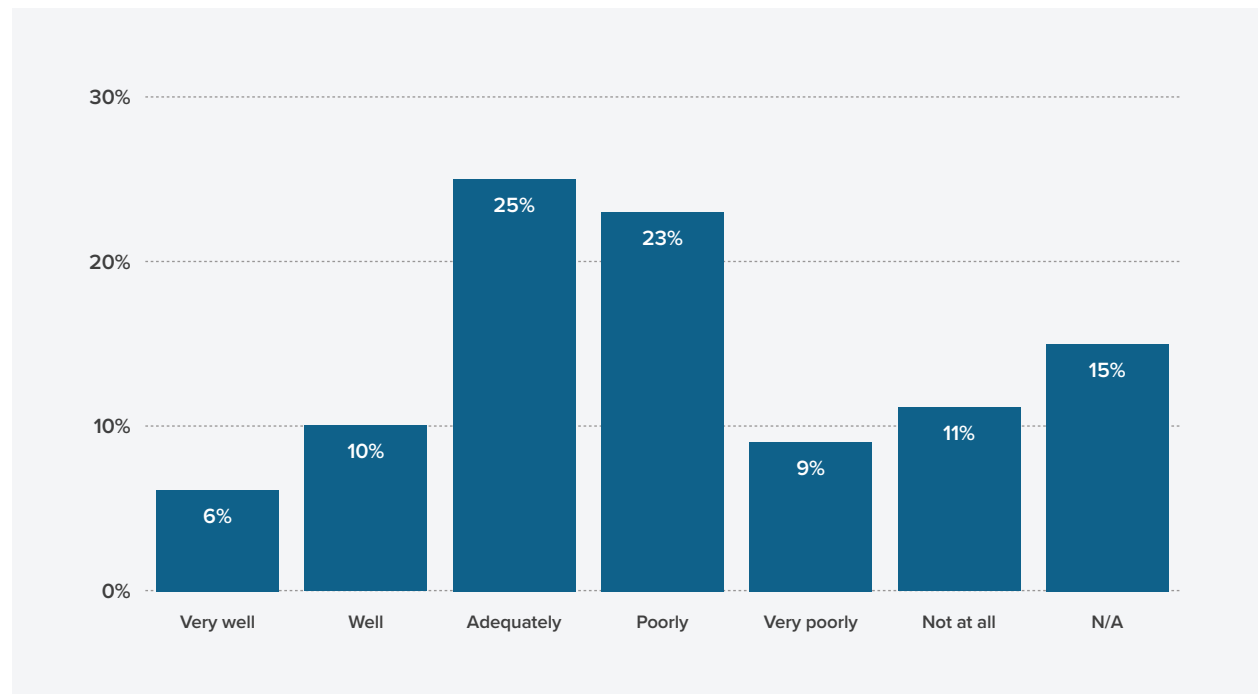
Tracking of every KPI except open rate fell in 2020, and advanced metrics, such as ROI, email read time, and subscriber lifetime value are rare

Using any of the analytics tools available to you, which email metrics do you currently track, use as key performance indicators (KPIs), or plan to track in the next 12 months? Respondents could select all that apply.

2019	Track and use as KPI	Track and don't use as KPI	Don't track but plan to
Open rate	75%	19%	1%
Click rate	71%	21%	1%
Unsubscribe rate	43%	41%	5%
Click-to-open rate	62%	23%	3%
Bounce rate	33%	51%	3%
Conversion rate	55%	16%	10%
Deliverability or inbox placement rate	27%	40%	13%
Email list size or growth rate	33%	28%	12%
Spam complaint rate	20%	43%	12%
Email device and client usage	14%	49%	14%
Email read time	8%	19%	20%
Revenue/value per subscriber	22%	13%	23%
Return on Investment	25%	15%	22%
Subscriber lifetime value	14%	13%	27%
Acquisition cost per subscriber	14%	15%	21%
Forwards	5%	21%	12%
Email production time	7%	16%	19%
Email mistakes or error rate	7%	13%	17%
Email production time	2%	10%	8%

Nearly half of teams have poor or non-existent ROI measurement efforts

How well does your company measure the return on investment of its email marketing efforts?

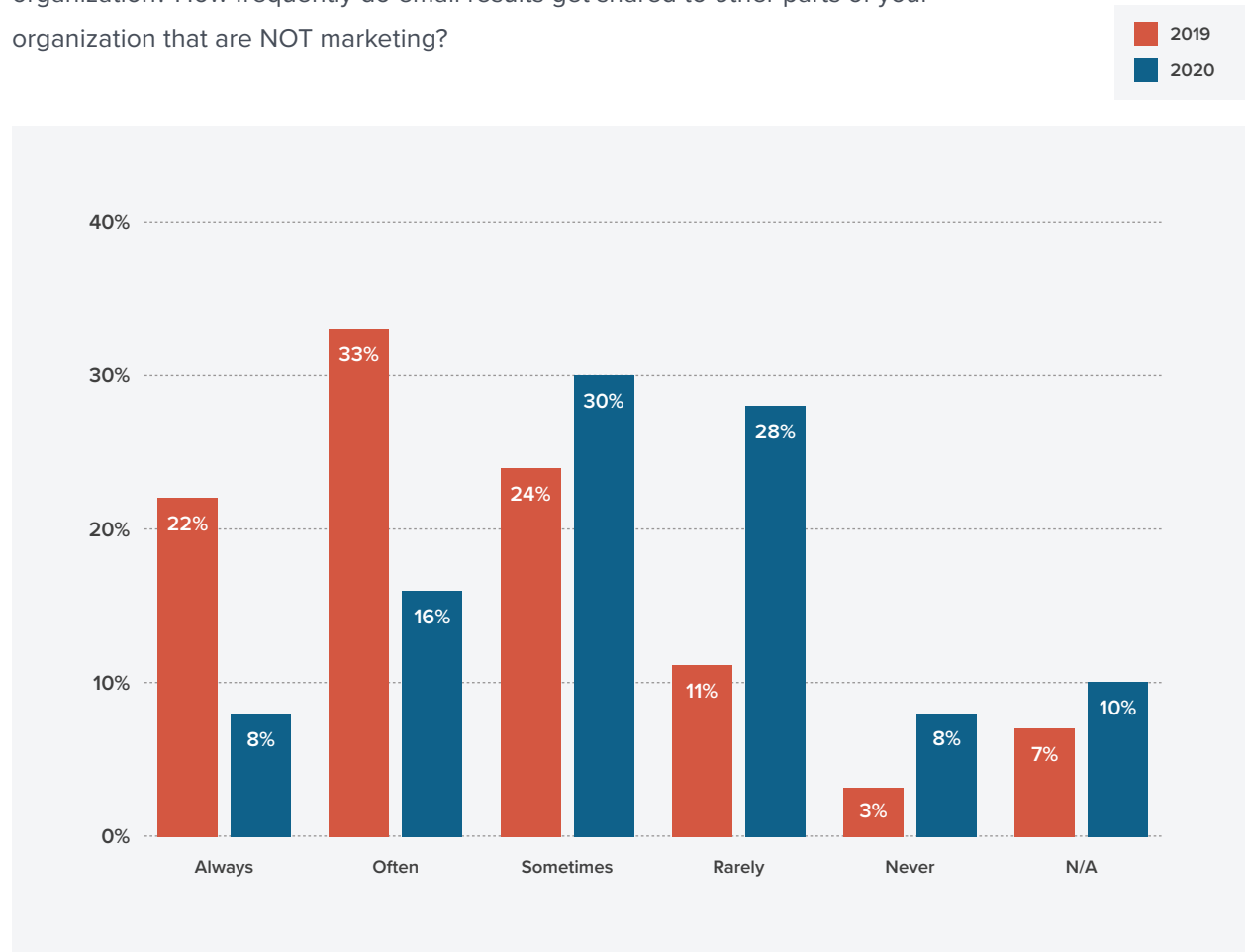


Go beyond opens and clicks with Litmus Email Analytics

Accelerate campaign performance with advanced data insights you won't get from your ESP. Fine-tune testing efforts and utilize engagement and geographic data to inform design, segmentation, and copywriting decisions.

Email results are most likely to be shared with other parts of the marketing organization

How frequently do email results get shared to other parts of your marketing organization? How frequently do email results get shared to other parts of your organization that are NOT marketing?



Now that we've zoomed into each phase, let's take a look at what's in store for email marketing workflows.

Looking ahead

Email teams in 2020 had to think on their feet even more than usual with changing budgets, strategies, and approvals processes. Despite the challenges, there's still plenty that email marketers are looking forward to. Here's what your peers are planning for the next 12 months.

How to get ahead



Learn about the [Three Pillars of a Successful Email Marketing Program](#), including pre-send planning and post-send analysis.



Read [How to Make Collecting Campaign Feedback Less Painful](#)

Key takeaways

Half of teams want to do more email planning and post-send analysis.

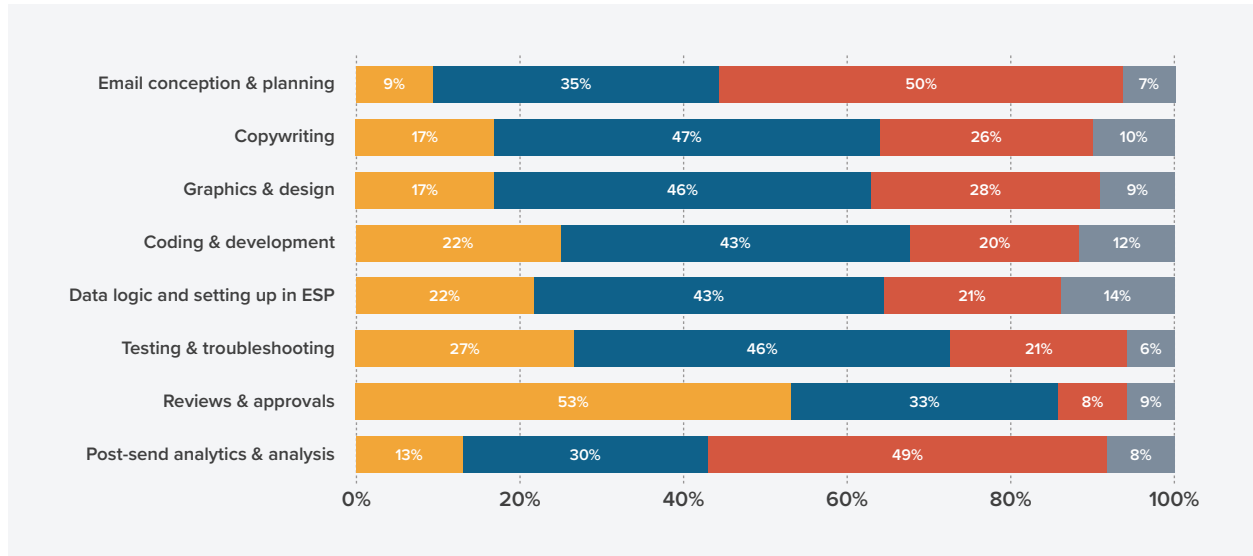
Creating and testing emails is a complex process, and it can eat up all of your time if you let it. It's no wonder, then, that email marketers want to spend more time in the future creating email concepts and learning from past campaigns.

The review & approval step is the area most marketers want to streamline. 53% of respondents hope to spend less time on reviews & approvals in the next 12 months, and we can't blame them. Getting a fresh perspective on your work is helpful, but too many cooks in the kitchen slows down the workflow.

A third of teams want to improve their overall email performance in the next year. When we asked marketers what skills they want to improve upon, email performance was the clear winner. The second most popular choice was building a seamless email workflow.

Teams want to spend more time on planning and analysis, and less on reviews

For each email that your company sends, would you ideally like to be able to spend more time, less time, or the same amount of time on the elements below?



Email marketers want to learn how to improve their overall email performance

What knowledge or skills are you interested in adding for yourself and/or your team in the next 12 months?

