



The Mail Privacy Protection
Survival Guide
for Marketers



How to navigate—and succeed—in an
email marketing world without opens

You've got this

Worried about Apple's Mail Privacy Protection? Still trying to figure out what it even means? What are you supposed to do now? So. Many. Questions. Well, we've got answers—so don't panic.

No, email isn't dead.

The email industry is constantly evolving. And it's *because* of email's challenges—like the lack of universal email development standards—that we've been able to innovate and shine. Because email marketers roll with the punches like no one else can. The result? An unmatched average return on investment of 36:1.* So stand up proudly.

You'll not only survive Mail Privacy Protection, **you'll thrive.**

We're here to help. Our engineering team has been testing things out in the developer beta. We now have a much better idea of how Mail Privacy Protection will work—and more importantly, how it'll affect email marketers. In this survival guide, we'll walk you through:

- [What Mail Privacy Protection is and how it'll work](#)
- [The impact on email marketing programs](#)
- [A step-by-step action plan to prepare now](#)

Let's overcome this together,

The Litmus Team

*Source: 2020 State of Email, Fall Edition

Be at the top of your email game

Join email marketing pros like you 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.

[Stay in the loop on email data and trends](#)

Demystifying Mail Privacy Protection

Apple kicked off their 2021 Worldwide Developers Conference on June 7th. Among a slew of features they revealed was [Mail Privacy Protection](#) for their Mail app on iOS 15, iPadOS 15, and macOS Monterey devices. According to Apple:



“Mail Privacy Protection stops senders from using invisible pixels to collect information about the user. [It prevents] senders from knowing when they open an email, and masks their IP address so it can’t be linked to other online activity or used to determine their location.”

When does it launch?

Apple said to expect the release this fall. Based on their last nine releases, we predict this one to launch around the same time: mid-September 2021. But it could also be as late as November. And based on previous adoption rates, expect the updates to take roughly a month to roll out to everyone. Just in time for the holiday email frenzy. So the sooner you act, the better.



Sept. 19, 2012



Sept. 18, 2013



Sept. 17, 2014



Sept. 16, 2015



Sept. 13, 2016



Sept. 9, 2017



Sept. 17, 2018



Sept. 19, 2019



Sept. 16, 2020

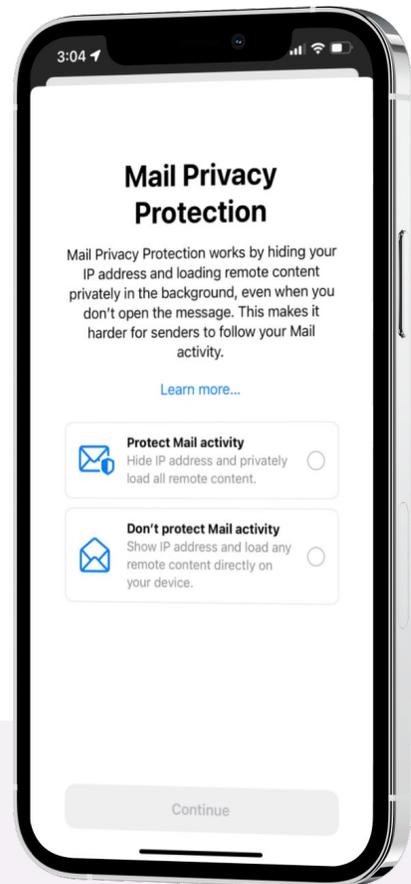


Sept. 2021?

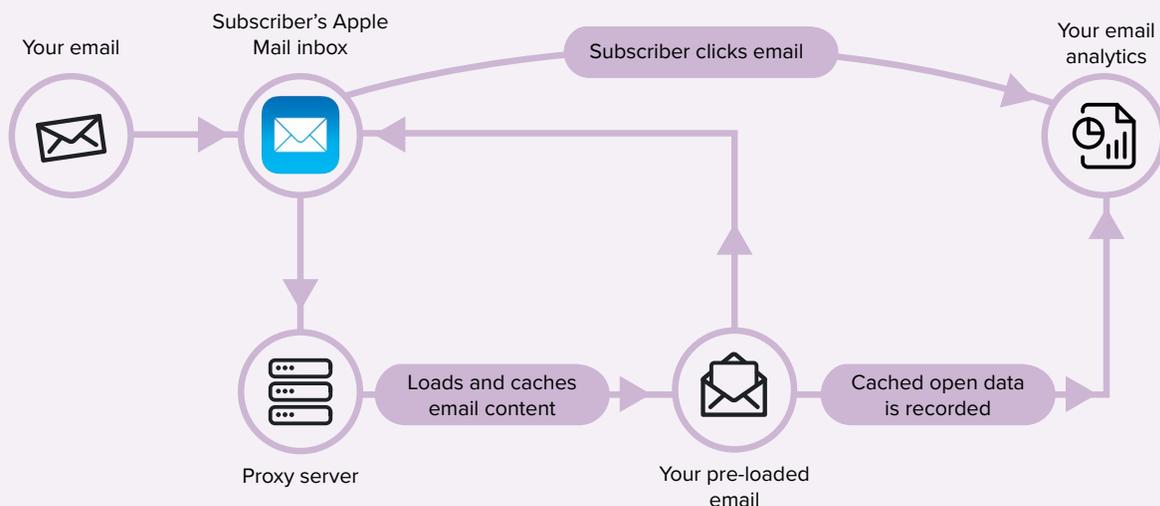
How does it work?

When someone first opens up the Apple Mail app, they'll get a message prompting them to either "Protect Mail activity" or "Don't protect Mail activity."

So, this will not be turned on by default. People will have to actively make a choice. But based on the [4% opt-in to ad tracking](#) from Apple's App Tracking Transparency tool and the language around the Mail Privacy Protection options, it's highly likely we'll see similar opt-in rates for email tracking. Who's going to want to essentially say, "Don't protect me"?



When someone selects the "Protect Mail activity" option, here's what'll happen:



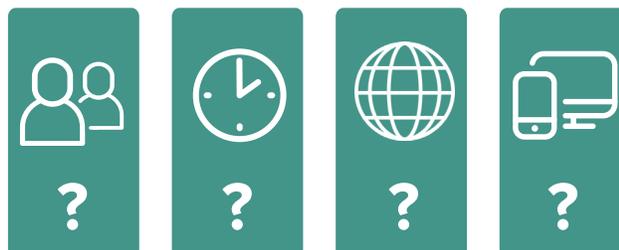
Apple will first route emails through a proxy server to pre-load message content—including tracking pixels—before serving to readers. Even if readers don't actually open those emails. However, our latest testing shows their device must be on WiFi with Mail running in the background.

This affects any email opened from the Apple Mail app on any device—no matter which email service is used such as Gmail or a work account. On the other hand, this shouldn't affect other email apps used on Apple devices like the Gmail app on an iPhone.

What this means for email marketing

Because of the way Mail Privacy Protection works, you won't be able to tell which Apple Mail recipients opened your emails (if at all), the time of open, their geolocation, and which device they use (yep, no more mobile vs. desktop insight). At least you can still track clicks.

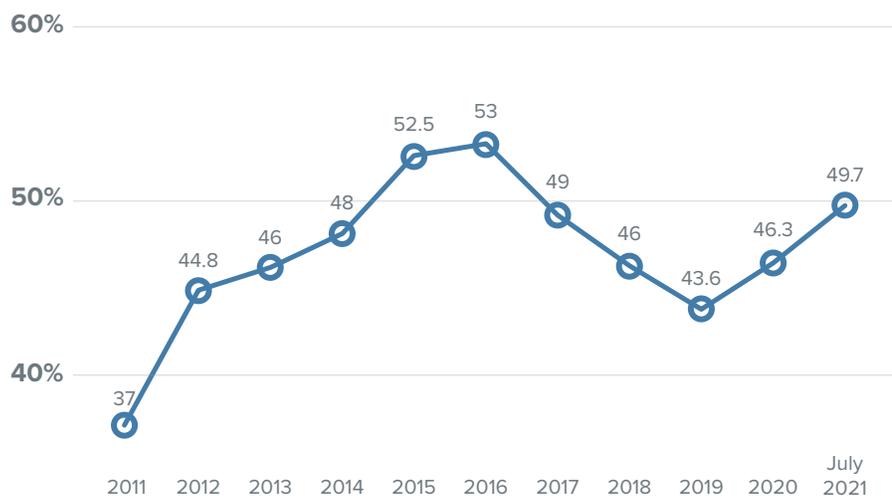
This near-complete mystery will throw off your email reporting and more. And its significance depends on how many Apple Mail users are on your list today and could be in the future.



How many people use Apple Mail today?

Our [email client market share data](#) shows the Apple Mail client—on iPhone, Mac, and iPad devices—with over 49% of combined email opens as of the end of July 2021.

Apple Mail's Email Client Market Share



Looking at the past 10 years, Apple Mail's stake in email client market share grew from barely a third, peaked at over half in 2016, slowly declined from there, and has been steadily growing again since 2020. Despite the ebbs and flows, its email client market share has remained fairly large. *Too large to ignore.*

How many of *your* subscribers use Apple Mail?

Over 49% of email opens come from Apple Mail, but your own might be more or less. With Litmus Email Analytics, see how much of an effect Apple's Mail Privacy Protection could have on your email marketing efforts so you can get ready (or not).

[Size up your impact](#)

Is the open rate dead?

If your audience makeup is also skewed toward Apple Mail users, your open rate will be over-inflated come this fall. Why? Emails sent to Apple Mail clients are expected to have around a 75% open rate (not 100% as originally thought due to some instances in our testing where some emails fail to cache images). And we expect 90% of Apple Mail users to both update to the latest release and opt in to Mail Privacy Protection.

You can predict your new average open rate with the following formula:

Open rate after Mail Privacy Protection

$$\left(\frac{\text{Percentage of Apple Mail openers}}{100} \right) \times 0.9 \times 75 + \text{Open rate today} \times \left(1 - \left[\frac{\text{Percentage of Apple Mail openers}}{100} \times 0.9 \right] \right)$$

Feel free to adjust the 0.9 representing the expected adoption rate as well as the 75 representing the expected Apple Mail open rate based on your own predictions.



Confused by the formula?

No worries—we created an open rate impact calculator for you.

[Try the calculator →](#)

For example, if 50% of your email opens come from Apple Mail today and your average open rate is 20%, your predicted average open rate after Mail Privacy Protection would be 44.75%. That's pretty far off from your 20%, right? On the flip side, let's say only 10% of your email opens come from Apple Mail. You can expect your open rate to climb to 24.95%. The difference isn't nearly as huge, but it's still significant.

You may even reverse the formula after Mail Privacy Protection launches to get an idea of what your open rate would've looked like if all of this never happened in the first place. This is useful for a more apples-to-apples comparison to older campaigns.

Many marketers have already considered the open rate a vanity metric, but we disagree. However, we believe you shouldn't lean on opens as your sole performance metric.

So, while it might not be time to put the open rate to rest yet, it's a great reminder to include—and perhaps emphasize—other metrics instead such as clicks and conversions in your reporting.

See the metrics brands track (and how they do it)

With Mail Privacy Protection on the horizon, the open rate may become unreliable. 95% of you track it today, but what else is there? And how do your email analytics capabilities compare to your peers? Find out in our latest State of Email Analytics report.

[Download the report](#)

What strategies and tactics are affected?

Beyond a simple metric, the almighty open is also commonly used for:

- Re-engagement campaigns
- Automated nurture flows
- Send time optimization (STO)
- Live, dynamic content
- Monitoring deliverability

So even if you decide to no longer use open rate as a measure of email marketing success, Mail Privacy Protection could still hurt your email program in other ways.

In a Mail Privacy Protection world...

Some of the potential effects for your Apple Mail audience who opts in to Mail Privacy Protection could be that:



Any audience cohort, segmentation, or targeting based on the last open date will be rendered useless—especially critical for purging unengaged contacts.



Automated flows and journeys that rely on someone opening an email will need to be re-engineered.



A/B testing subject lines (or anything else) using opens to determine the winner or to automatically send out the winner won't work anymore.



Send time optimization will become inaccurate.



Countdown timers might show outdated times as the cached version may be pulled at sent time, not opened time.



Localized content powered by opens or IP addresses, such as local weather or nearest store location, also won't be accurate.



Monitoring email deliverability and maintaining list hygiene will be much more challenging.



Artificial intelligence (AI) platforms that use email opens in their algorithm for creating optimized subject lines and copy may be a bit off.



Some interactive emails that reference external CSS may not work.

But subscribers are happy, right?

At the end of the day, it's all about our subscribers and what *they* want. If they prefer their privacy, we should respect that. However, privacy comes with a trade-off: personalization. And people want that, too.

- 83% of consumers are willing to share their data to create a more personalized experience. ([Accenture 2018 Personalization Pulse Check](#))
- 76% of buyers expect more personalized attention from marketers to develop an intimate relationship with your brand. ([Demand Gen Report 2020 Buyer Behavior Study](#))
- 80% of customers are more likely to make a purchase from a brand that provides personalized experiences. ([Epsilon research report](#))
- 6 in 10 marketers report that boosting personalization in email is a priority. ([Litmus 2020 State of Email, Fall Edition](#))

So while Apple's intention is to protect subscribers, it may backfire with people ultimately getting even more unwanted emails as marketers will have one less engagement signal to look at. How can you honor your subscribers' choices and still be a good marketer in the age of Mail Privacy Protection? That's up next.





Your step-by-step action plan

It's never too late to prepare your email marketing program for the future of email insights and analytics. But the sooner you get ready, the better. Here's a handy checklist to get started, followed by suggestions on how to tackle it. Check off each step you take to keep track of your progress.

Determine the email client breakdown of your audience:

- % of audience using Apple devices

- Mobile vs. desktop breakdown

- % of audience using Apple Dark Mode

- % on older versions of iOS

- Read time differences between Apple and non-Apple devices

Create a reliable opens audience using non-Apple Mail clients.

Expand the engagement metrics used to measure success.

Evaluate current activities for open rate reliance and update them:

- Automated nurture flow triggers

- Segmentation for re-engagement campaigns

- Send time optimization

- Content localization

- Identifying A/B test winners

- Real-time inventory updates or countdown timers

- Suppression lists of unengaged subscribers

- Deliverability or inbox placement monitoring

- Email performance reporting to leadership

- Any copy that references opening an email

Clean up your email list to stay on top of deliverability.

Update and promote your email preference center.

A/B test as much as possible for email optimization.

1

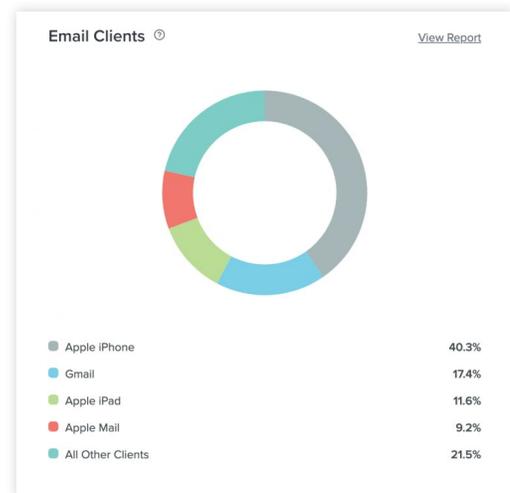
Determine the email client breakdown of your audience

A good first step in evaluating your approach—or if you even need to define one—is understanding what portion of your subscriber base uses Apple Mail today. Measure the repercussion of this coming change in email performance measurement through segmenting your audience by email client device. Not only will this help you understand the scope of impact, but it will also set you up to approximate email engagement in the future.

Some email service providers (ESPs) provide email client open data to help you determine this segmentation, but if yours doesn't, use a tool like [Litmus Email Analytics](#) to get this breakdown. Litmus Email Analytics also anonymizes and protects the privacy of your subscribers by blocking all personally identifiable information (PII) and removing IP addresses.

Pay particular attention to your:

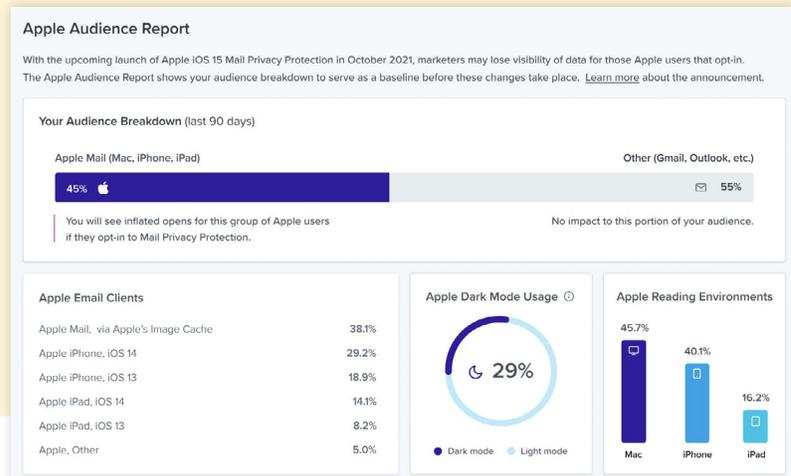
- % of audience using Apple devices
- Mobile vs. desktop breakdown
- % of audience using Apple Dark Mode
- % on older versions of iOS
- Read time differences between Apple devices and other devices



Be sure to check out our [open rate impact calculator](#) to see how your open rate may change.

New in Litmus

Get a baseline of your Apple Mail subscribers with an automated [Apple Audience Report](#) and easily estimate the influence of the upcoming changes to your email reporting.



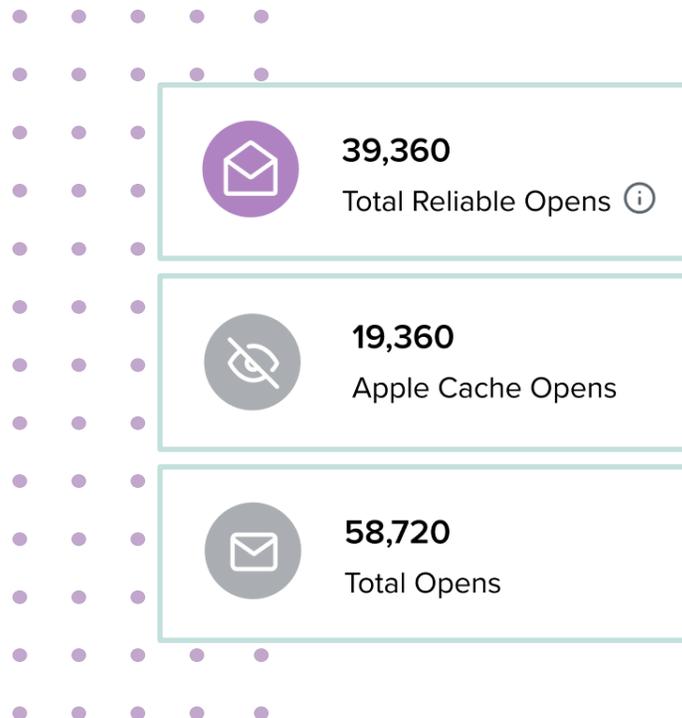
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Create a reliable opens audience

Device identification analytics help you create an audience segment known to be using non-Apple email clients—and this segment will continue to provide accurate open data after the roll out of Mail Privacy Protection. [Create a reliable opens audience](#), which is important to [identify real opens](#) and will be critical for:

- Serving as a proxy for overall engagement
- Substituting for email advertising impressions
- Standing in for mailbox provider engagement levels
- Warming up new IP addresses
- Calculating an accurate click-to-open rate
- Creating an A/B test audience

And consider this: Is the read time for Apple device subscribers similar to another like Gmail or Outlook? If so, you'll be able to use those non-Apple client read times as a proxy for read time of your emails going forward.



3

Expand your engagement metrics

Expand your email analytics beyond the use of opens, like swapping click-to-open rates for click-through rates over delivered, and redefine what success means for your email campaigns.

One suggestion? Email quality score. This is a concept [shared on the Really Good Emails podcast](#) by Lucas Chevillard, former Email Marketing Specialist at Airbnb. Email quality score shows you how many people are annoyed by vs. enjoy your emails. The formula is simple:

$$\text{Email quality score} = (1 - [\text{unsubscribers} / \text{responders}]) \times 100$$

Responders can be measured by unique clicks. So if you have 10 unsubscribers and 50 unique clicks in the same email, that gives you a score of 80. A good goal is to achieve at least an 80. This can help you understand engagement quality and should be added to your reporting. (Insider insight: We plan to include a similar metric in our [Integrated Insights Report](#) soon.)

You also need to start incorporating [cross-channel metrics](#) that show customer engagement. Think purchases, account activity, website visits, and SMS engagement. With all the changes hitting marketing as a whole, it's more important than ever to knock down your data silos and centralize omnichannel information—preferably in a customer data platform (CDP) if you can swing it.

Broadening the engagement metrics you capture will be especially important for newsletters and retention-related emails where you may be more focused on getting the subscriber to read instead of buy. These holistic metrics can help you better identify who's engaged and to what extent. And this sets you up for the next step...

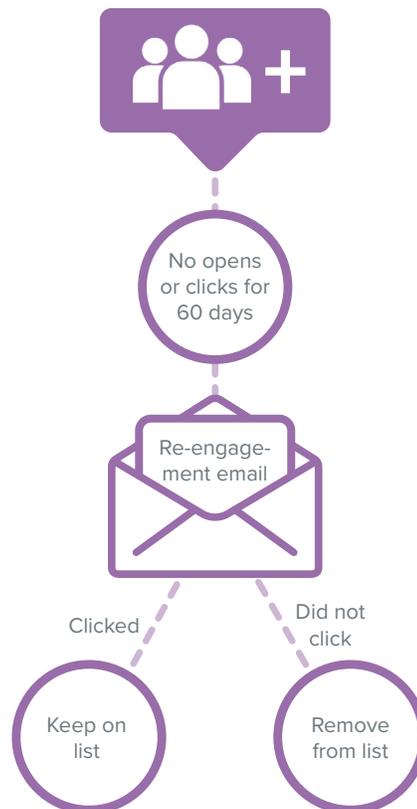
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Evaluate and redefine current activities

Before you begin developing new strategies to personalize, automate, and segment your email campaigns without relying on open rate, you need to have a clear view of where these dependencies already exist in your program. Evaluate your current activities to check for where you lean on open rates:

- Automated nurture flow triggers
- Segmentation for re-engagement campaigns
- Send time optimization
- Content localization
- Identifying A/B test winners
- Real-time inventory updates or countdown timers
- Suppression lists of unengaged subscribers
- Deliverability or inbox placement monitoring
- Email performance reporting to leadership
- Any copy that references opening an email

Then go ahead and eliminate any dependencies on open rate now so you don't have to worry about it later (and it gives you time to make adjustments as needed). Wondering how?



At Litmus, we're redefining re-engagement for our own lists using opens *and* clicks. Why keep opens in there? Because not every email has a call-to-action that requires a click. And not everyone uses Apple Mail! So, for the time being, we're keeping opens as part of our engagement criteria.

Or go the extra mile: Create a scoring system for subscribers based on holistic email metrics found in the previous step, like email clicks, website visits, and form fills to show each subscriber's level of engagement. This can end up powering a lot of the items above! (We're still in the middle of defining ours.)

Don't forget to look at how your emails are worded. Are you saying things like, "You haven't opened our emails in a while"? Change the verbiage to reflect low engagement, but not opens specifically. For example: "We haven't seen you around as much as before."

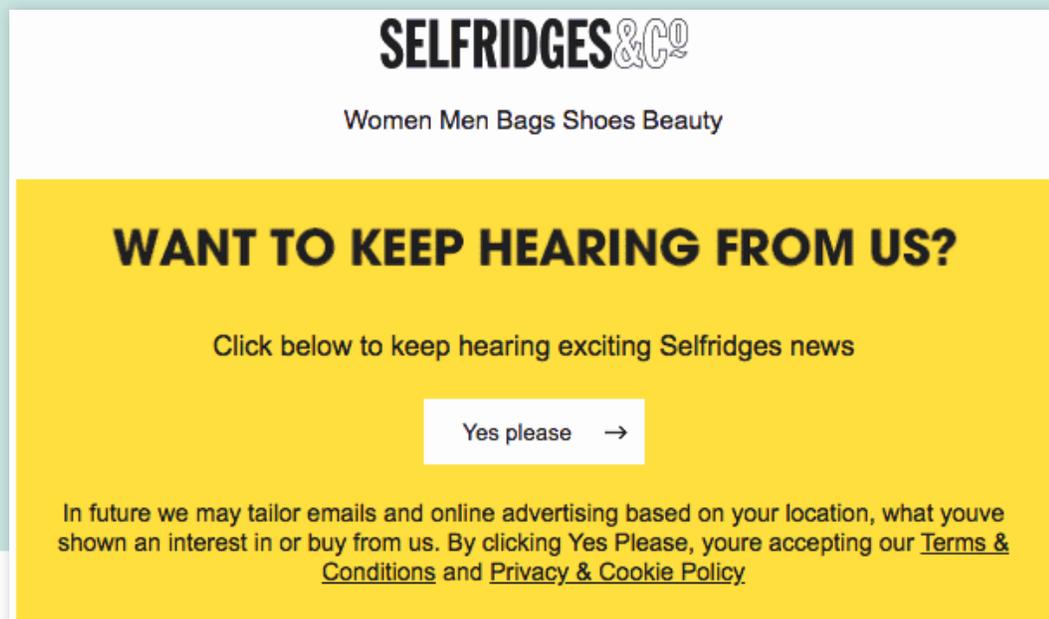
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Clean up your email list

It's a good idea to focus on email deliverability while you can still use opens as a sign of a problem. Clean up your lead quality, [list hygiene](#), and sender reputation with these action items:

- Review open rates by email client to check for inbox provider-specific issues.
- Ensure [SPF](#), [DKIM](#), [DMARC](#), and [BIMI](#) are correct for email authentication.
- Remove [inactive subscribers](#) from your active mailing list.
- Take care of [problematic subscriber acquisition sources](#).
- Create and send [reconfirmation campaigns](#).

What we particularly love about reconfirmation or re-permission emails is they help you stay in tune with your audience when you can't depend on opens as a measure of engagement.



The bonus? You get explicit opt-ins to email these folks. While it's not required in every country, it might be in the future, so might as well knock that out, too.

Word to the wise: Consider sending your reconfirmation campaign more than once to people who didn't re-confirm, since they may not have seen your email. Maybe even reach out through other channels like SMS. You can also use other metrics, like website activity or interaction with another email, to understand if they're still engaging with you in some capacity.

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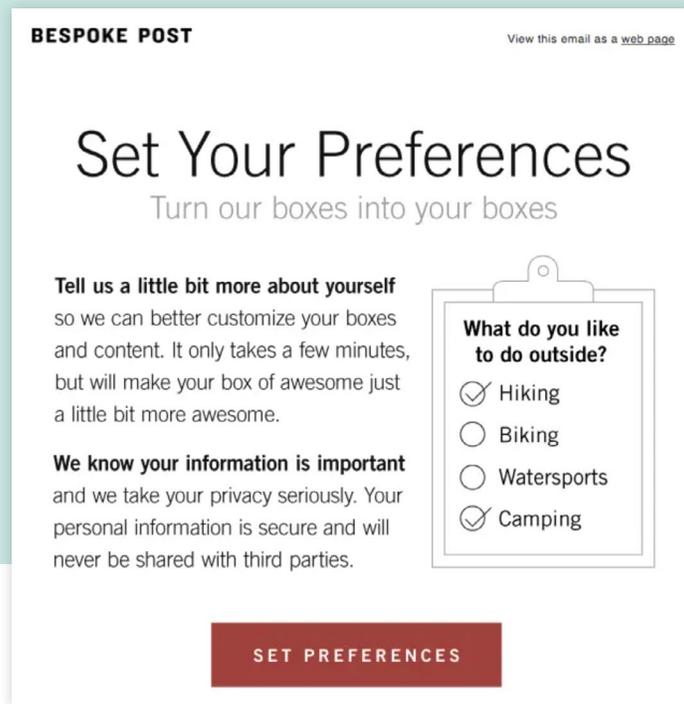
Promote your preference center

To ensure you don't lose the 1:1 relationships you've created with your subscribers through email, [optimize your email preference center](#) (or create one if you haven't already). This gives subscribers an opportunity to tell you what they want to receive from you and how frequently.

Then, promote it with greater intention as soon as someone signs up and throughout their time on your list. These tips can help you increase the chances of someone using your preference center:

- Put it in your welcome email.
- Make it standard in your email footer.
- Send emails to promote your preference center.
- Ask for information little by little (progressive profiling).
- Include it in your re-engagement campaign.

Use these explicit preferences to not only meet expectations and improve subscriber engagement but also enrich customer profiles and inform machine learning or AI tools used for personalization. Bonus points: You'll be ready for the loss of third-party cookies, too.



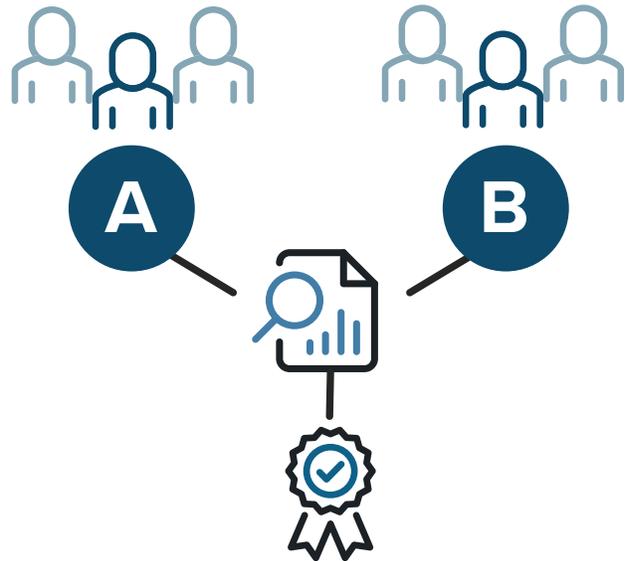
Source: Really Good Emails

7

A/B test for email optimization

[A/B test](#) as much as possible now to determine what works and what doesn't, especially if you want to use open rates or click-to-open rates to measure success before they're unreliable. Here are some ideas:

- Send time
- Statement vs. question in subject line
- Personalization in subject line
- "From" name and sender address
- Long vs. short emails
- Long vs. short subject lines
- Calls to action
- Positive vs. negative message framing
- Capitalization in subject line
- HTML vs. plain text



By understanding what's most compelling to your audience, you can confidently continue sending emails that drive engagement even after Mail Privacy Protection launches.

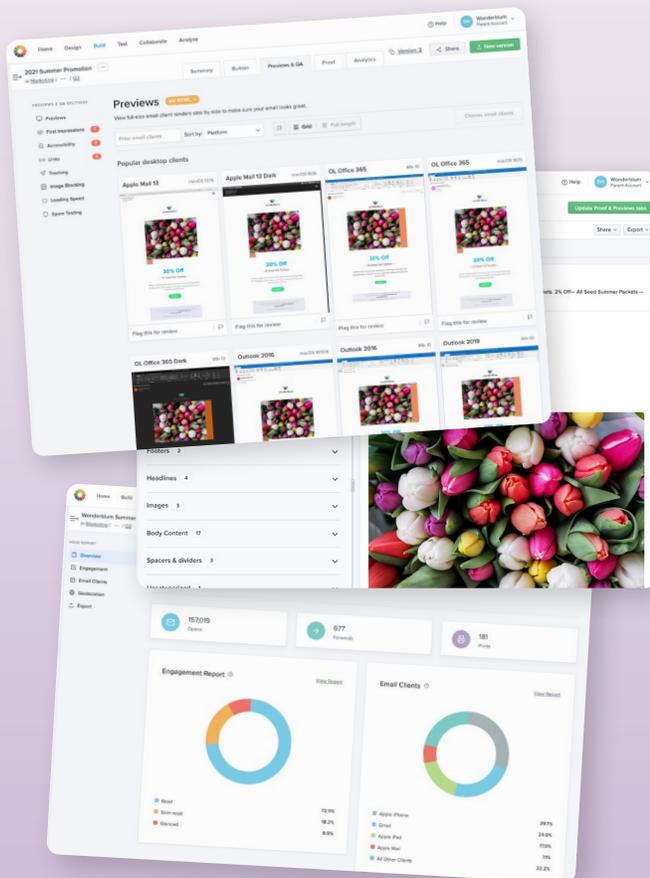
Another thing worth trying now? AI-powered tools such as Send Time Optimization (STO) and Subject Line Optimization (SLO). STO can help you predict the best time to send your emails, and SLO can help you predict the best-performing subject lines. Apple's privacy changes will create interference in these areas, so it's time to get out of spreadsheets and put these modern technologies into practice today.

Email marketing will continue to evolve

Just like Apple changed our expectations and use cases for personal mobile devices, the new privacy developments have the same potential for email marketing. Our iPhones are ringing, and all we need to do is answer the call with better engagement insights, personalized content, and a little AI sprinkled over the top. And like the iPhone, we'll look back on our legacy approaches to email marketing and wonder how we ever survived without comprehensive engagement insights.

Get more from your email marketing with Litmus

Litmus makes it easy to build, test, and analyze every email for the best results—perfecting your way to higher-performing campaigns.



Build on-brand, error-free emails

Empower your team (no matter their technical skills) to build on-brand emails with our HTML Code Editor or codeless Visual Editor.

Catch costly errors before you send

Instantly preview your email in 100+ popular clients, analyze subject lines, verify links, check for accessibility, and run a spam test.

Get quick, easy-to-use insights

Go beyond opens and clicks. Get the exact data you need, from read times and geolocation to sharing trends, with at-a-glance analytics.

Improve workflows with ESP integrations

Save time and get integrated Email Previews as you build, wherever you build—with seamless integrations with popular ESPs.

Perfect your way to higher-performing campaigns

Try Litmus for free