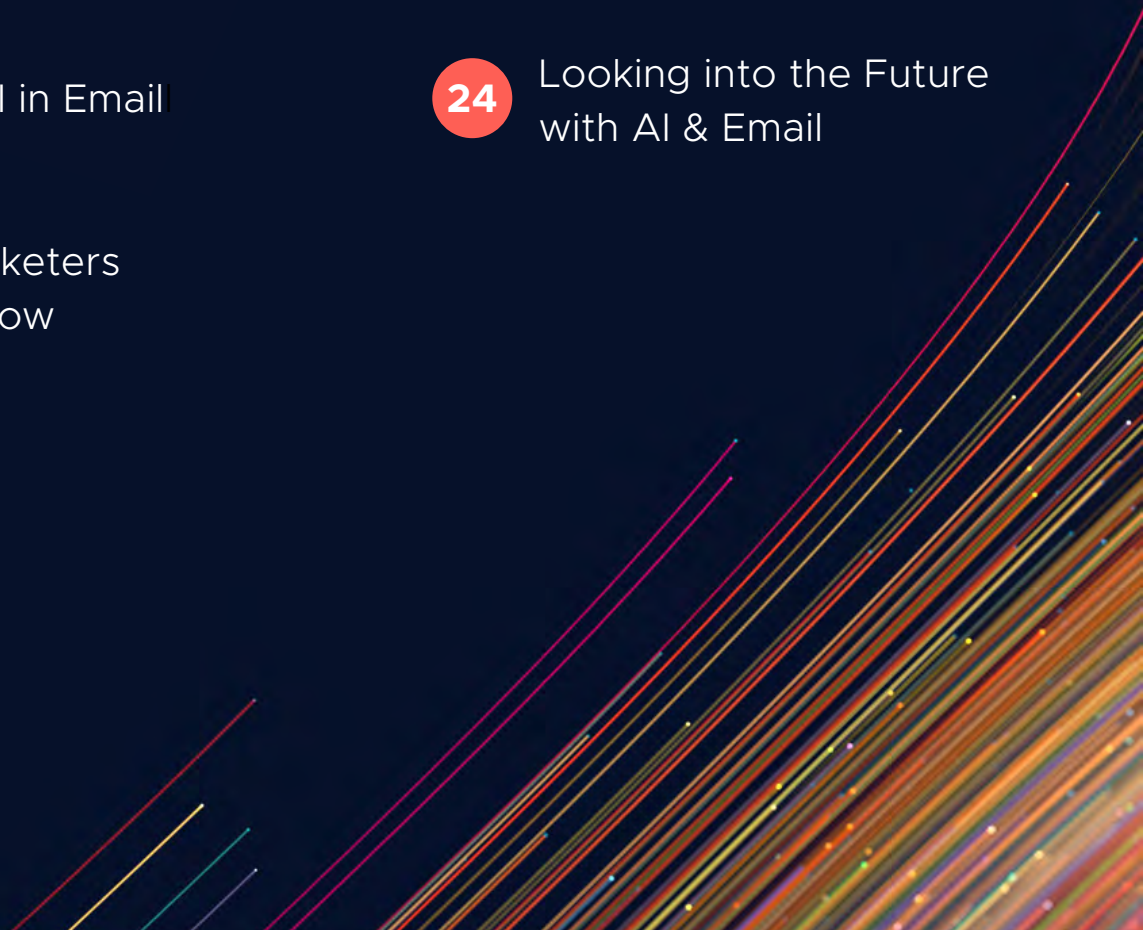


September 2023

# 2023 AI in Email Marketing Research Report

A Look at the Market for the Future of the Channel

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# Introduction

## WHAT DOES YOUR EMAIL MARKETING PROGRAM NEED MOST TO ACHIEVE THE RESULTS YOU WANT?

Historically, email marketing teams have been beset by three shortfalls: time, money, and human resources. **Today, we can add one more resource already in chronic short supply: knowledge.**

Know-how is more important than ever today to help us navigate through the demands of online customers and the growing sophistication of data and technology.

Our need to acquire new tech platforms is rapidly being outpaced by **how fast we have to learn about the technology** behind each one and the **data required to unlock new orchestration.**

The same is true about artificial intelligence (AI) and generative AI (GenAI). These technologies have become widely available for only a short time, but people are already **predicting that they will cost thousands of marketing jobs.**

Or, they'll turn email and digital marketers into mere button-pushers who let **the machines do the strategic decision-making.**

Nobody asked real email marketers what they think about generative AI, how they're using it and what their goals are for it. Until now.





In partnership with Ascend2, we asked marketers those questions and many more. We hope this report, which summarizes and analyzes their answers, will help you **structure your own thinking** and give you a guidebook that helps you **plan your own strategies, goals and objectives.**

For today, we invite you to read through the results and our analysis. Discover what your email marketing peers think about AI and how they're employing it now in their own programs. Then use it as your own launchpad to **begin or to refine and expand your own use of AI** within your email program.

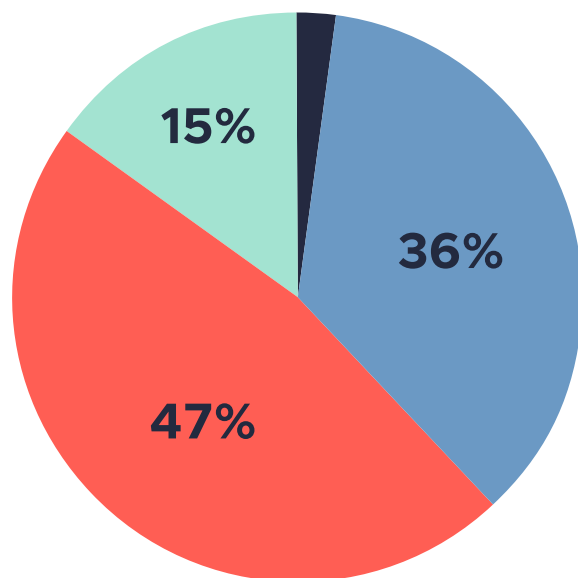
# Email Marketing Success

Ascend2 has years of research data on the tactics email marketers prioritize.

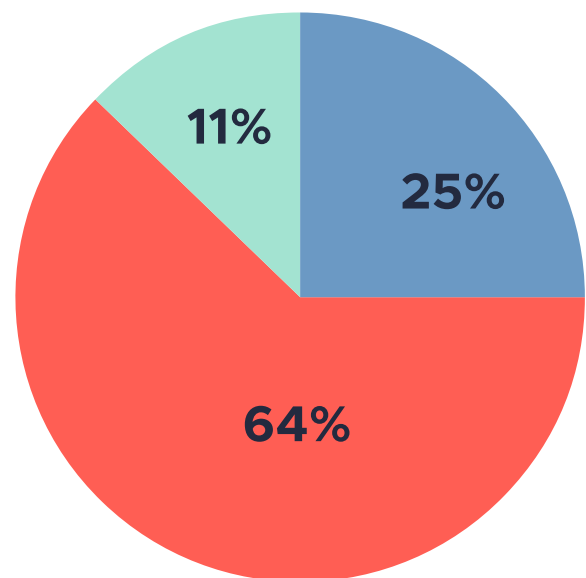
To give a good read of how the industry is doing, we compared the 2023 results with those from 2017. Here's what we found:

-  **36% thought they were very successful (25% IN 2023)**
-  **47% thought they were somewhat successful (64% IN 2023)**
-  **15% thought they were unsuccessful (11% IN 2023)**
-  **2% thought they were very unsuccessful (0% IN 2023)**

2017 Results



2023 Results



# Our Analysis

This tells us that even though fewer email marketers in 2023 thought they were very successful, **more marketers saw some degree of success than those in 2017.**

This means **email marketers see themselves as moving forward** and growing in their profession. They haven't stagnated. That's an amazingly positive finding considering the high churn rate as email marketers move on or move up in their jobs.

These statistics show us that email is getting smarter, and companies are getting better at doing email. But we always have room to improve.

If you put yourself among the 64% who say they are somewhat successful in their email marketing, it's time for some tough questions.

The 25% of marketers who say they are very successful likely got to that enviable position because they are **always looking to improve their results**, not just hit their numbers by increasing the volume. and logging off for the day.

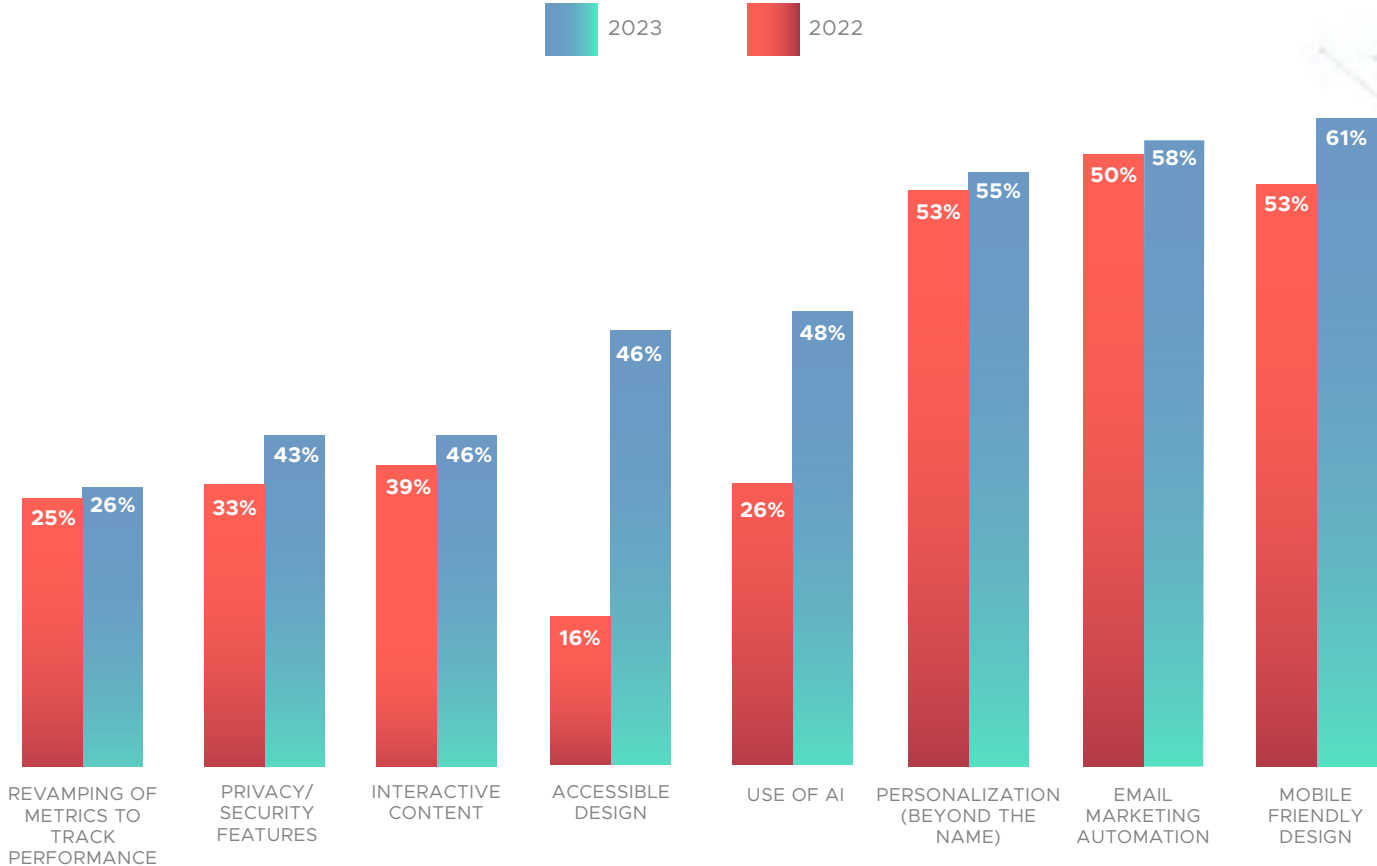
These improving success scores here give us hope for the future that **our email programs are improving and that email marketers are getting better at their work.** As a side note, one way to keep the industry evolving and improving is to leave documentation behind when you leave your job so your successors so they can learn from your wins and losses and get a running start on their jobs.

**ARE YOU TRYING TO DRIVE YOUR PROGRAM FORWARD, OR ARE YOU JUST TRYING TO GET THE NEXT CAMPAIGN OUT THE DOOR ON TIME?**

# Email Marketing Tactics 2023

Although it's beside the point for this report on email marketers' attitudes about AI, we're going to comment first on the other tactics that marketers are using in 2023. Our discussion of AI and its use will begin on Page 10.

## WHICH OF THESE TACTICS WILL BE INCLUDED IN YOUR EMAILS IN THE YEAR AHEAD?





# Our Analysis

**Mobile-friendly/accessible design:** These two design changes - mobile-friendly design (61%) and accessible design (16%) - should have been done by now. These would have been excellent tactics in 2016, but in 2023, email design that accommodates a wide range of devices and disabilities is table stakes.

If you're still trying to optimize to make your emails function for the widest audiences, you are behind the curve and should make that your top priority, even ahead of addressing AI.

An email template that isn't mobile-optimized and designs that don't accommodate users with visual, motor skills or cognition needs can harm your message, and ultimately your sender reputation. You're telling them they don't matter to you.

Redo your message templates and the associated landing pages on your website, or reach out to an agency skilled in these design decisions.

**Personalization beyond first name/Effective use of automation:** It's good to see personalization (55%) and automation (58%) continue to rank high on the list. When used along with optimized transactional emails, they can help you grow revenue from these personalized emails to account for more than 50% of revenue attributable to email. It's your money tree! Set it up right and watch the money roll in every day.

Think through your automations and think through your regular customer behavior. These are critical for using the technology you have now at your fingertips.

**Interactive content:** Interactive content (46%) bridges the gap between what you can do today and what technology can do for you. Like AI, companies like Movable Ink or Campaign Genius can vault your email program to the front of the line and not just through showy tricks like countdown timers. Technologies for content distribution and using data to power fluid dynamic content can help your company leapfrog over functionality limitations from ESPs or internal systems.



# Our Analysis Continued

**Privacy/security features:** Privacy and security (43%) are two areas email marketers need to be proficient in, not just your attorney. The landscape is rapidly changing state by state and country by country. Staying up to speed is part of your daily work as a marketer. So is respecting your state or national privacy laws and respecting the privacy and security of each customer.

Organizations like the Association for National Advertisers' Email Excellence Center (EEC) and the Email Senders & Providers Coalition (ESPC) have brought clarification and guidance to the landscape. Membership in these organizations is now table stakes for marketers.

**Revamping metrics/KPIs:** Apple's Mail Privacy Protection feature essentially depreciated the open rate. Now click bots and new moves by Apple are threatening the click rate, so clicks could be on the chopping block, too. The survey shows 18% of marketers have this on their agenda in 2023. Which KPIs will you use to measure your success rate if you lose clicks, too?

**TRY THIS TIP:** All of these tactics should be part of your annual planning process and reflected in your email strategy. How would you reorganize these from highest to lowest priority in your own organization?

Your annual email plan should prepare for changes. Google's cookie deprecation plan is still scheduled to happen in 2024, and other privacy changes still on the horizon will affect email and ad technology. Listen to conversations in the email community and take some time to prepare.

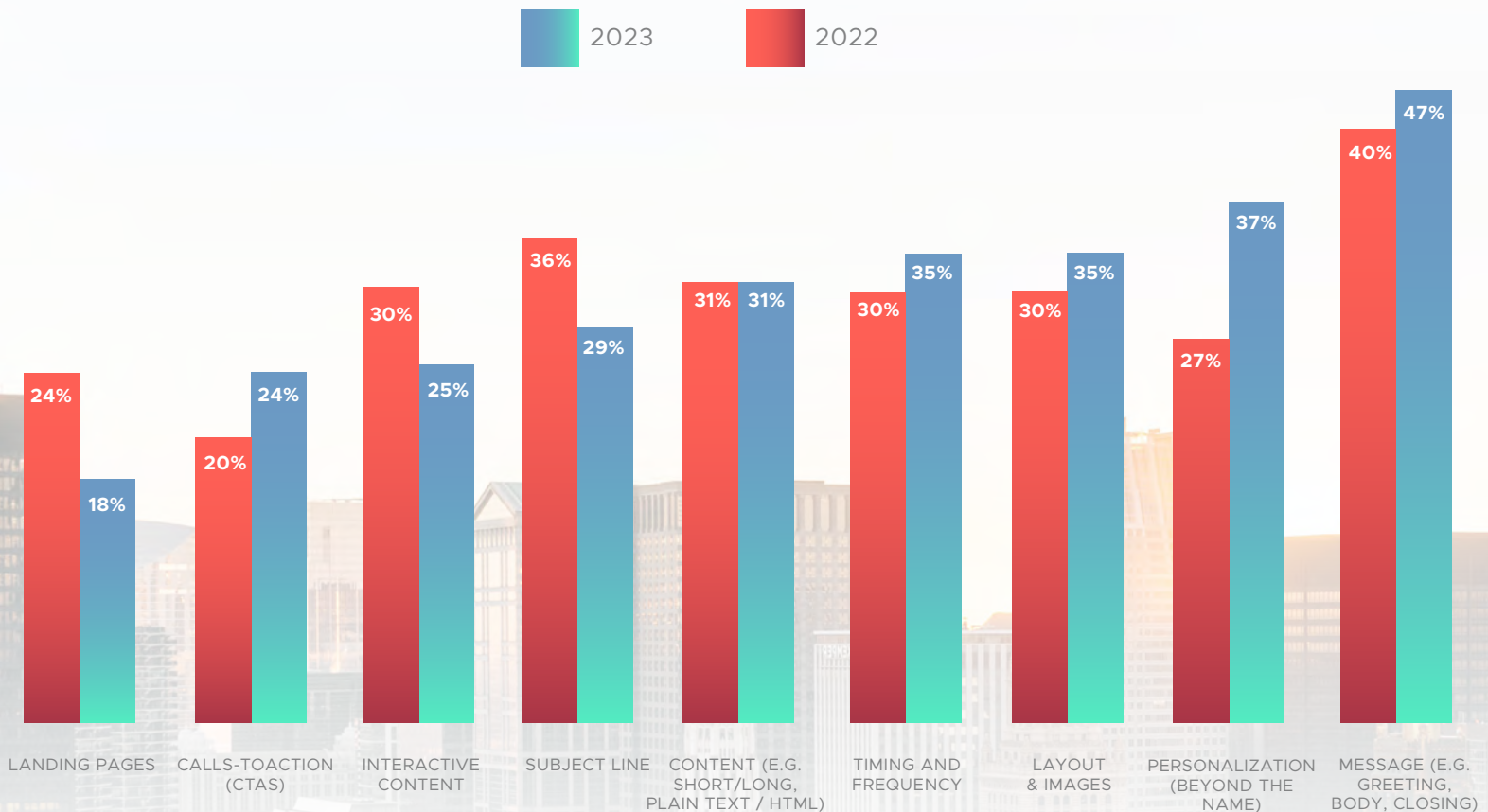


# Most Essential Email Tests

They might be thinking about the design of an email, but when we think of email headers and footers, we ask ourselves, “How do we communicate a brand-centric message with these?” Other areas to test:

- When was the last time you refreshed your email templates?
- Have you looked at your brand and your emails to see how well they align?
- Does your email header look exactly like your website?
- How does email adapt to every other channel?

## WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT EMAIL-RELATED TESTS THAT YOU CAN PERFORM?





# Our Analysis

This entire graph is a list of things email marketers should be testing regularly. With one exception. Can we please stop testing the subject line as 29% of marketers say they do? Yes, test it once in a while. But as an email marketer, you should be able to figure out which subject lines work best. Everyone tests subject lines because email service provider (ESPs) have made it so easy to do. They've baked it into their technology. But we are pleased to see marketers downgraded this as a testing priority in 2023.

But what if ESPs were to integrate the ability to test other factors with reporting that provides true insights? We would like to see ESPs make dynamic content easily reportable inside the ESP platform. What would change if that were possible?

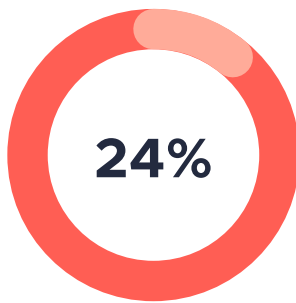
**TRY THIS TIP:** Your testing plan (and yes, you need a testing plan) should include all of the items in this graph and more. You need to think broadly about the issues that can reveal the greatest insights into your email success, not just which subject line got more opens in a short time.

Your plan also should include a schedule for testing these features, what you learned and how you will implement your findings, and regular updating. With this, you will be more confident that you're doing the right things with your email program and plan better for your next year.

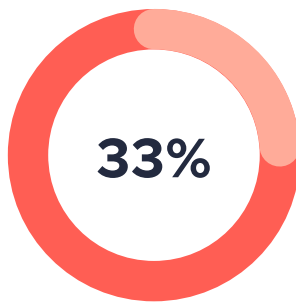
# Use of AI in Email

More than half of marketers are using AI in some form, while only 22% report no plans now or in the future. One quarter (33%) of those surveyed report some use with another one-third (25%) who say they have plans to use AI for email in the future. Just over one-quarter (14%) of marketing professionals are not using AI and do not have plans to implement it into their email strategies in the future.

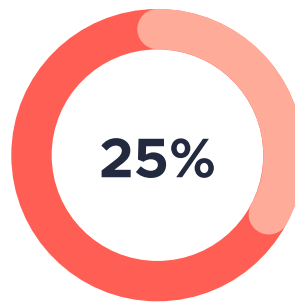
## ARE YOU CURRENTLY UTILIZING AI IN YOUR EMAIL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS?



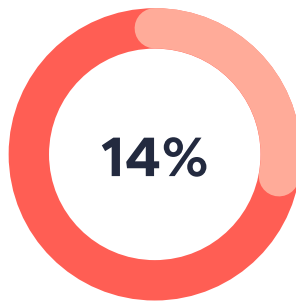
YES, EXTENSIVELY



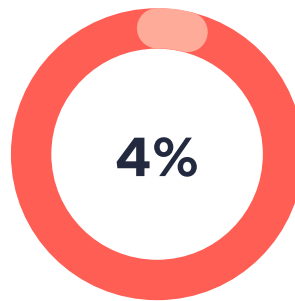
YES, TO  
SOME EXTENT



NOT YET, BUT  
HAVE PLANS TO



NO, WITH  
NO PLANS TO



UNSURE

# Our Analysis

Before we begin our analysis of AI and generative AI (GenAI) in email marketing, let's define both concepts so we're all on the same page about what they mean.

**AI in email marketing:** A set of algorithms that can identify patterns in data and behavior to drive automated decisions for every aspect of email marketing from acquisition to segmentation and targeting, from content generation and selection to message optimization.

**Generative AI:** McKinsey defines generative AI as algorithms (such as ChatGPT) that can be used to create new content, including audio, code, images, text, simulations, and videos.

On Page 10 we learned 57% of marketers in this study expect to use AI "somewhat" or "extensively" in email this year. That percentage is more than double number - 26% - in 2022. Marketers are diving into AI applications, not just talking about it.

This data reveals a more complex picture of AI adoption of email marketers – what's really happening.

Granted, AI in its newest forms, like GPT3 and GPT4, might look like the newest, brightest, shiniest toys in the toolbox, and maybe those other marketers think it's just a passing craze.

AI in simple form has been around for years, wrapped in vendor technologies to the point that the term is often used without foundation. In RFP discussions, we often challenge vendors to differentiate between Machine Learning and AI.

**Our take: AI in all of its forms will stick around.** Those who have no plans to use AI or aren't sure, like the combined 18% of respondents on this question, need to focus on the future and consider the possibilities that widespread AI could bring to their email programs.

Now is not the time to stick your corporate head in the sand. Across the board, AI will affect you, either directly in the work you do or indirectly if your competitors succeed with it and you don't.

As certain as we are that Apple's MPP got rid of the open rate as a success metric, that's how certain we are that AI will figure in our future. **So we need to start learning about it, developing a strategic plan for it, and playing with it to discover what it could do for us.**

Congratulations to the 24% who say they are using it extensively. Fantastic! Now your job is to spread the word and help your colleagues and the email industry chart a path.

Kudos, too, to anyone among the 33% who are dipping their toes into the technology, like writing copy using ChatGPT or Bard, creating images with DALL-E or even playing in OpenAI's GPT playground. That's where you should be right now. You might be limited by the technology you use, or maybe you're looking at the time-to-results ratio: how much time it takes you to get a job done with AI versus the old-fashioned way.

**TRY THIS TIP: If you're in the 25% of respondents who haven't yet written off AI or haven't incorporated it into your daily workflows, now is a good time to start experimenting with it.**

Many ESPs are adding basic AI-based tools such as ChatGPT into their dashboards. If you have access to these and other tools, set some time aside and test-drive them. *Need ideas? See the next section!*

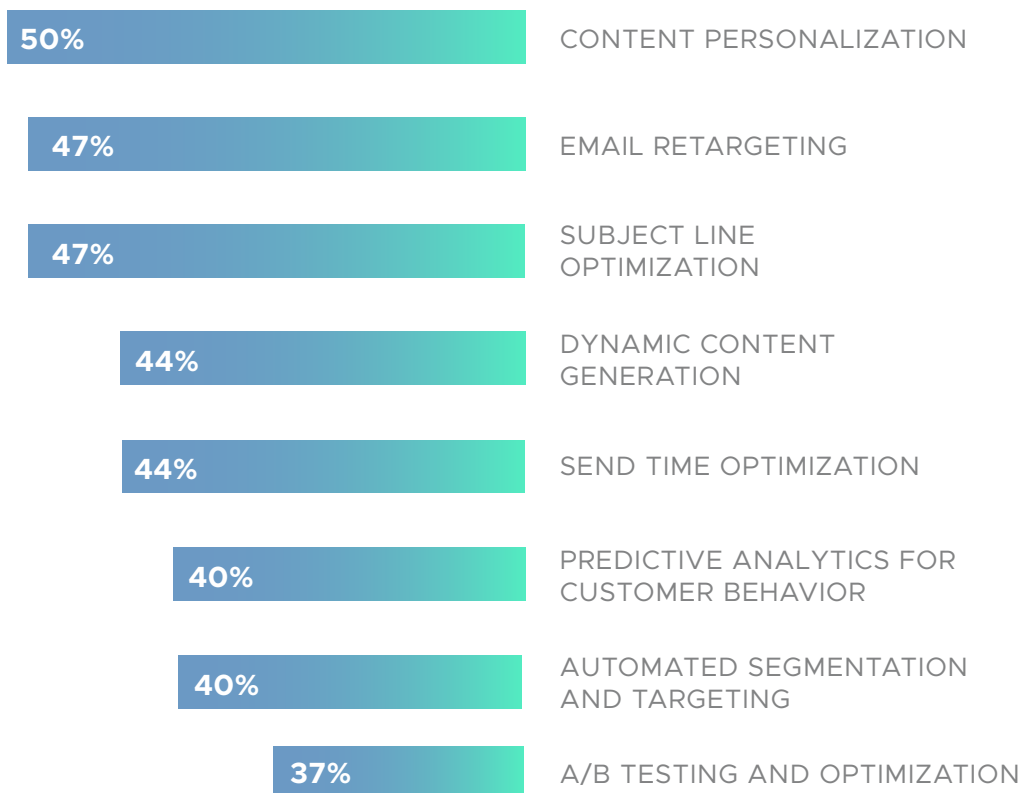


# How Marketers Use AI Now

The most helpful findings in all of the research here are in this graph: **What are marketers doing with AI right now?** That's the question nobody has asked in statistically relevant research until now. And we have the answers.

To discover how marketers are putting AI into practice today, we reviewed results from the 57% of respondents who are using AI extensively (24%) or somewhat (33%) to find the top uses for the combined group. We also looked to see whether extensive users have different priorities for AI from occasional users

## IN WHICH AREAS OF EMAIL MARKETING DO YOU CURRENTLY LEVERAGE (OR PLAN TO LEVERAGE) AI?





# Our Analysis

**1. Email retargeting is the No. 1 use for AI among all users** (50%), followed by email retargeting (47%) and subject line optimization (47%).

**2. Extensive users focus on objective-based outcomes for AI**, including content personalization (62%), dynamic content generation (54%) and advanced segmentation (48%).

**3. Occasional users focus more on process-related tactics** like subject line optimization and send time optimization, along with content personalization (42% each) and are less likely to use AI for dynamic content and automated segmentation.

These findings are the heart of this report. Up to this point, we've discussed AI as a road map, what you should be thinking about, what you should try, and what other priorities are competing with AI for marketers' time and attention.

But here are findings that haven't been asked in the industry before: **How, specifically, are you using AI, including generative AI?**

But, of course, true AI goes way beyond that into data analysis and manipulation, automated content and segmentation choices and other options like those listed in this report.

We find that marketers who are using AI in its many formats are unlocking AI's true potential and value.

It's great to discover that email retargeting is the top application of AI for all users. However, it's not a breakthrough technology. We have been able to automate email retargeting for some time, although AI makes the work even more seamless.

So what are the uses that are the most revolutionary for today's email marketers? **Content personalization, dynamic content generation and automated segmenting and targeting** – the top three uses for marketers who are the most experienced with AI.



# Our Analysis Continued

These three uses go hand in hand to bring us closer to the holy grail of email marketing: relevancy on top of speed to market.

Together these three uses allow marketers to create one-to-one messages at scale automatically, something we have been talking about and vendors have been working toward for years.

When using AI with these tactics, it becomes possible to build an email message for an individual or a cohort, have a list of products or a group of content modules, and have a machine choose what to send and whom to target.

This has been possible to achieve by using top-tier programs with price tags to match. AI can accelerate the typical marketer's ability to learn and implement the technology, thus democratizing the process at much lower cost.

Subject line optimization and targeting, while important, are not the big winners for marketing. Send-time optimization, intended to automatically post emails to the inbox when the recipient is most likely to see and open them, can work if you have an algorithm that looks wide and deep.

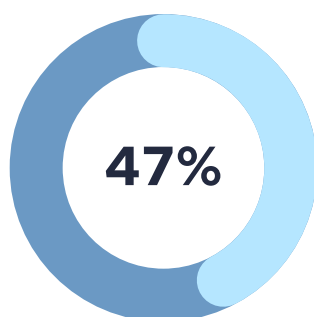
Predictive analytics and A/B testing are important as well. But **the Big Three for email marketers are content personalization, dynamic content generation and automated segmentation.** They are the future of AI and we are thrilled to see this is where extensive users are focusing.

**TRY THIS TIP:** This graph is like a shopping list for launching AI. Use it to create a mini-presentation. Hand it, email it, Slack it or text it to your boss when he or she turns to you in a meeting or stops you in a hallway and asks, "What are we going to do with generative AI?"

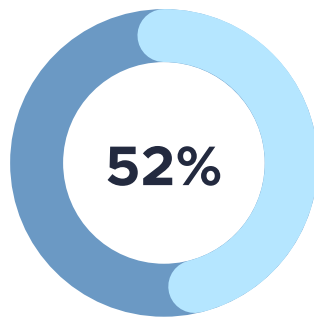
# Marketing AI Experiences

We found that 99% of marketers in our survey are extremely or somewhat positive about AI and its impact. That's amazing, given other research that says marketers are concerned about losing their jobs, losing their autonomy, the effects AI could have on organic content creation and other worries.

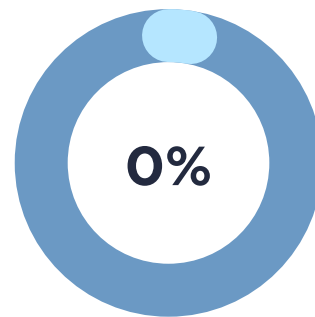
## DESCRIBE THE IMPACT OF AI ON YOUR EMAIL MARKETING PERFORMANCE



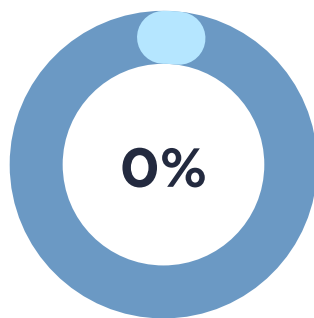
EXTREMELY  
POSITIVE



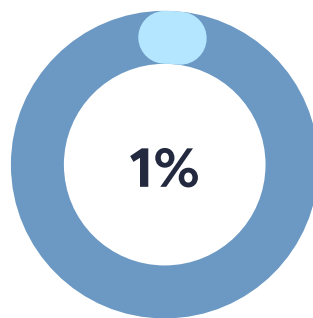
SOMEWHAT  
POSITIVE



SOMEWHAT  
NEGATIVE



EXTREMELY  
NEGATIVE



NO SIGNIFICANT  
IMPACT





# Our Analysis

Surprise! Marketers are open to the possibilities that AI brings for better results, more efficient workflows, less grunt work and more time to strategize.

But that's not where this story ends. If you are in one of the top two positive groups - you use AI, you see results, you're excited about the future – you should be talking about it.

It doesn't matter where you take the stage, or if you even have a stage. You could be speaking at a conference, on a webinar or in a business or trade-industry interview. Maybe you could write a blog post. Host or be a guest on a podcast.

But the industry needs your leadership and your experiences to help your fellow email marketers chart the path to the future with it.

When we think back over the years we've been in email marketing – some of us on the client side, some on the agency and vendor sides, some in retail, others in B2B – we remember the early days and how the email community formed itself and evolved into the industry it is today.

Today's thought leaders, the ones who are experimenting, testing, optimizing and reporting on it, met as strangers at meetings and conferences. We attended each other's presentations, asked questions and debated answers. We hung out together after the sessions and asked more questions and debated more points.

We didn't share our competitive secret sauces, but we did discuss in detail how to do this new thing called email. We all learned together, and what we learned became the foundation of our earliest best practices. Those best practices evolved as we learned more. Now AI has the potential to move email even further into the future.

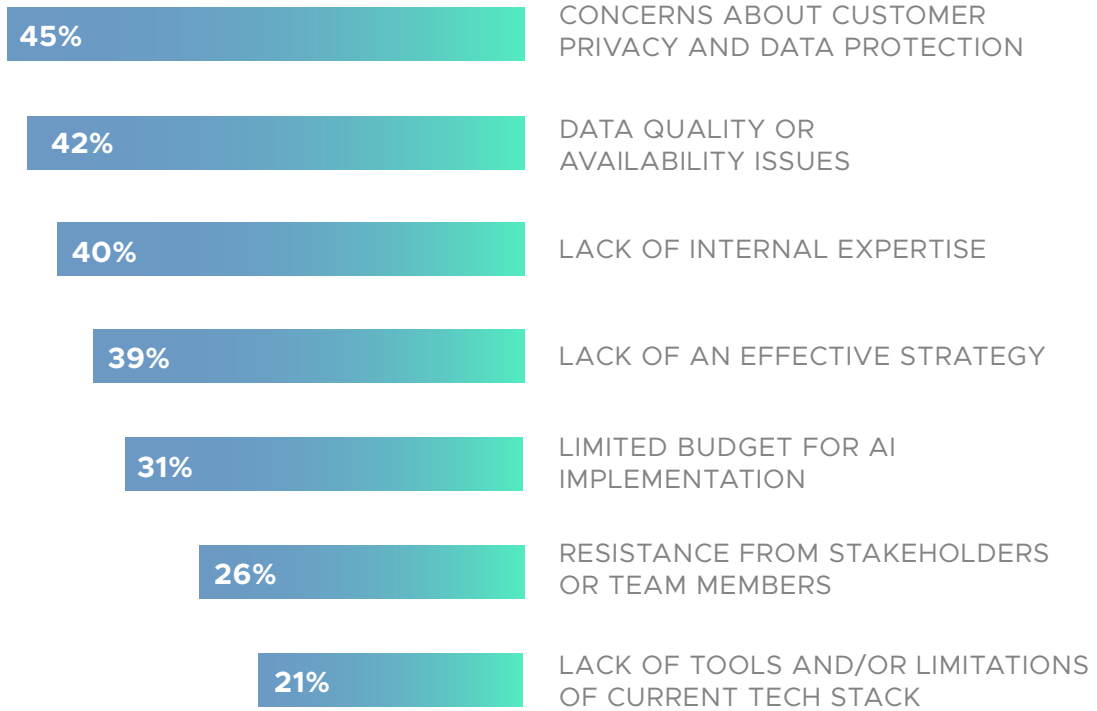
**TRY THIS TIP: Whether you use AI extensively or as one aspect of your overall responsibilities, you can help evolve the email community's thinking even further. Start talking. Start sharing. This is how we keep growing and learning.**



# Challenge Vendors to Improve

The graph on this page proves that the age-old challenges of email marketing – not enough time, money and resources – continue to hold marketers back in adopting AI. Add to this the lack of expertise we highlighted in the Introduction to this report and fresh concerns about having enough data and protecting people’s privacy, and it’s not hard to see why AI hasn’t taken over the email world yet.

## WHAT ARE THE TOP CHALLENGES THAT YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED WHEN IMPLEMENTING AI IN EMAIL MARKETING?





# Our Analysis

These challenges ranked higher than one we expected would be a major stumbling block: Lack of tools and/or limitations in current tech stack (21%). It came in just ahead of resistance from stakeholders or team members.

The tech industry hasn't had enough time to move into adding AI tools, but they need to. What can we as tech consumers do to drive that? These steps can help:

**1. Tell your vendors what you need and ask them how they plan to meet those needs.** The answers will tell you whether you're working with a tech partner who can help you grow your own skills and improve your email program. If the answer is light on details, it might be time to go shopping for a partner who can help you.

**2. Look around the tech marketplace to see what's available.** Our agency does many RFPs and platform migrations. We've learned over the years that companies switch tech platforms mainly because the tech no longer meets their marketing visions or needs.

But switching isn't always the answer. Ask yourself, "Could I do better with different technology? Or could I do better with the tech I already have?" Getting outside training or bringing on someone with the expertise you need could help you use more of the technology you pay for right now.

The remaining challenges are also not surprising. Everyone has problems with data quality and access (42%). Even the enterprise-level companies we work with don't have all the answers, processes and data you would expect.

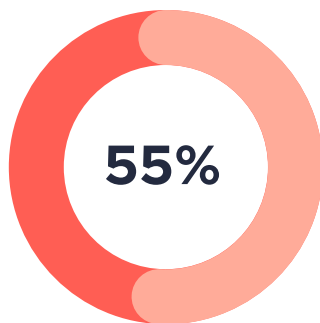
If you are like the 39% who feel stymied by the lack of an effective AI strategy, it might be time to find external voices to help you put one together. An agency with experience in planning and working with AI strategy gives you an advantage because it has perspectives it has gained from working across industry verticals and a wide range of clients instead of a narrow field of vision. Don't try to go it alone.

**TRY THIS TIP:** Read 3 steps to make AI work for you to learn how to have these necessary conversations with your vendors, and discover more tactics for talking with vendors in the next section.

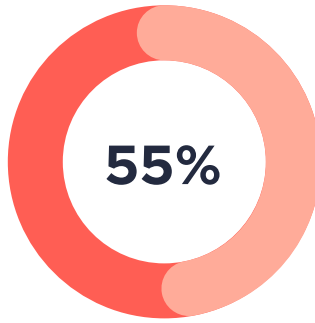
# AI Capabilities Wishlist

Take a quick look at all the things marketers wish their ESPs offered. The first thing we noticed is that a request for enhanced personalization (55%) aligns with the way marketers prioritize content personalization for both extensive and occasional users.

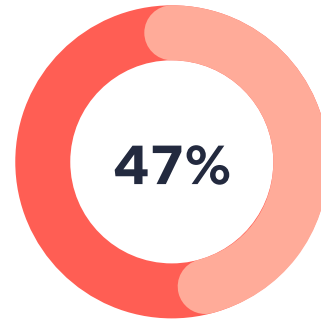
## WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD BE THE MOST VALUABLE IN EMAIL MARKETING PLATFORMS?



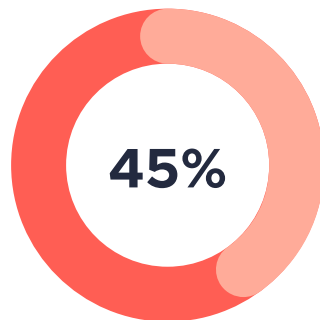
ENHANCED PERSONALIZATION ALGORITHMS & RECOMMENDATION ENGINES



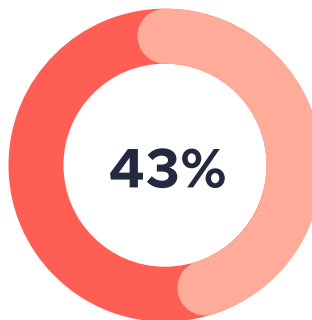
IMPROVED PRODUCTIVE ANALYTICS & CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR



ADVANCED TESTING & AUTOMATION FUNCTIONALITIES



BETTER INTEGRATION WITH CRM & OTHER MARKETING TOOLS



AUTOMATED CONTENT CREATION & COPYWRITING



## Our Analysis

The next thing we noticed is that all of these capabilities would be wonderful to have and to access via a dashboard in the ESP. But we would challenge providers in RFPs to explain their roadmaps for generative AI. Not just adding a subject line creation or testing tool but their plans for providing the advanced capabilities that marketers wish for here.

If your ESP has not launched any new AI tools, either for all users or for VIPs, call your account or customer-success rep and ask about it. Many of us at RPE Origin have worked on the tech side of the martech equation, so we know that a product or feature roadmap often gets defined by what needs to be fixed or updated or what our customers are asking for. ESPs wouldn't consider adding something unless a lot of clients wanted it and we had a way to monetize it.

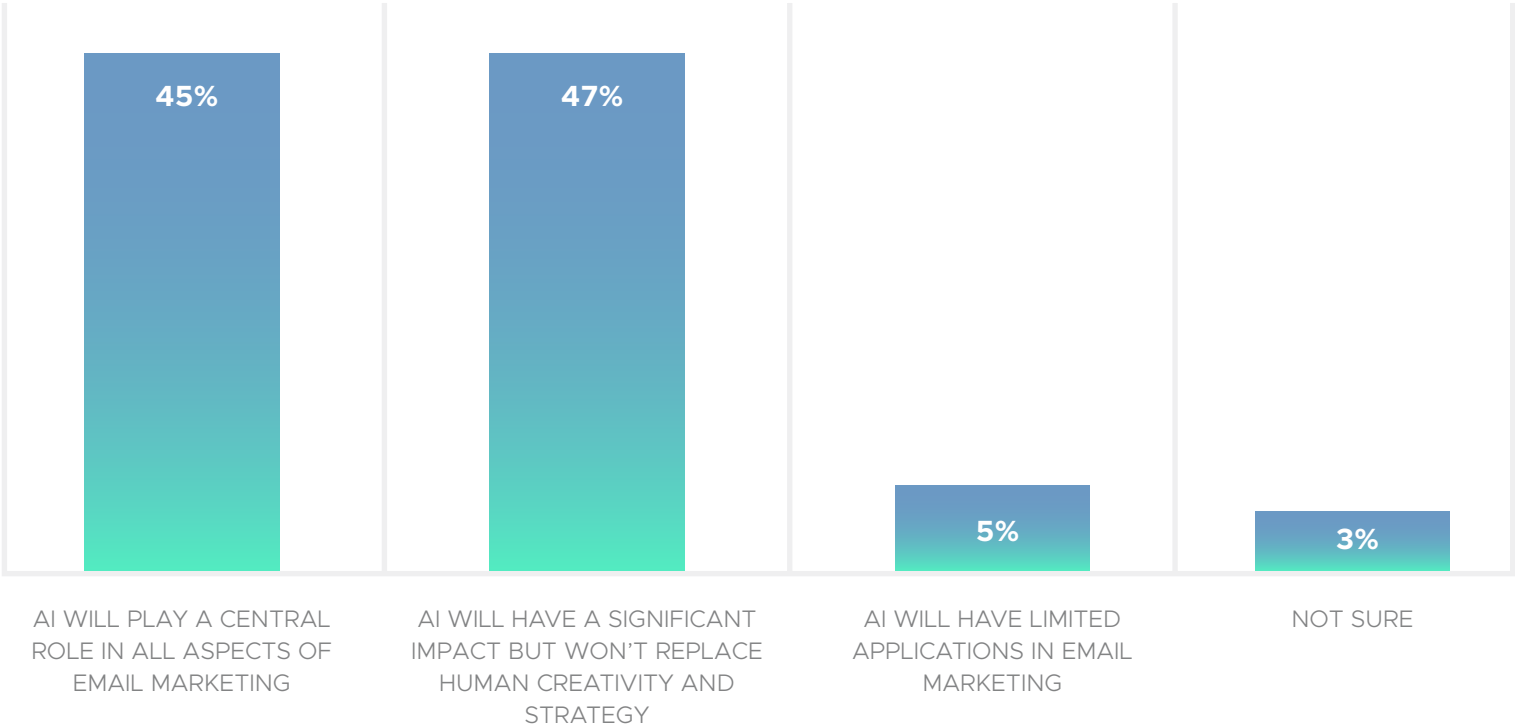
Seek to have a handy in the process of adding AI technology. As the saying goes, if you don't ask, you don't get.

**TRY THIS TIP: Not sure how to start the conversation? Send this report to your tech rep, point them to this section, and ask for feedback.**

# Outlook for AI on Email

As if we needed any more confirmation, this finding makes it clear: Marketers expect AI will play a major role in their work from now on.

## HOW DO YOU ENVISION THE FUTURE ROLE OF AI IN EMAIL MARKETING?



# Our Analysis

The attitudes in this finding sum up the mindset for the future of AI.

Congratulations to the 45% who say AI will play a central role in all aspects of their email marketing! You have reached the email promised land of enlightenment. It's not perfect yet, but it also acknowledges that **AI will grow into a presence we all must adapt to.** (That aside was for the 8% who say AI will have limited application in email or who don't know.)

For the 47% who say AI will have a significant role but won't replace human creativity and strategy, think about the impact this way: **It might not replace the human touch, but it will enhance it.**

Back at the dawn of email marketing in the 1990s, people worried that it would eliminate jobs and be bad for the economy. We hear the same things about AI today. Yes, maybe some people will lose their jobs. Maybe they don't have the skills they need to compete with people who do know how to use AI. Or they work for managers who think they can copy and paste creative content into an email campaign and get better results.

**Many more marketers will evolve and learn new skills,** the way old-line direct marketers discovered they could put their knowledge to put in this new medium called email.

# Our Analysis Continued

We email marketers need to learn to use what we know and to learn the skills that will keep us in charge of AI. It's not a question of one set of skills replacing another but **how these new skills will evolve digital marketing as an industry**. Not just email but also web design, martech, data science, SEO and every facet of the customer experience.

If you're among the 8% of nay-sayers, we're sorry to say you're on the wrong side of history. AI had already made inroads in places like adjacent technologies outside of your ESP or even in your ESP, where the platform might now have capabilities you don't know about.

Because you're reading this report, we hope it means we might change your mind and encourage you to reach out and learn more. Some people were convinced email wouldn't survive spam, social media, or video. But here we are today, stronger than ever.

We have the same wish for everyone in the 16% of doubters. You know enough to know something's happening, but you don't know whether it will come for your company or your industry.

**TRY THIS TIP:** First, let's reassure you that AI and generative AI in particular are not a flash in the pan. So broaden your horizons.

Look through resources like MarTech for basic guides that will get you started on the path. Sign up for a webinar, and learn from people like the 57% of marketers who are already using AI in some capacity, as reported on Page 10.

Will AI kill email? No. Will it make email, and email marketers, better? Yes, in many ways, and we're just beginning to learn how.





# Looking into the Future with AI & Email

As we publish this report, we acknowledge that we're standing on the launchpad of what could be the technology that brings permanent change to the way we think about, plan and carry out digital marketing.

The strategic thinking and industry best practices around **generative AI will evolve along with the technology** and what we learn about using it. As a practitioner, you can be part of that evolutionary process so that someday you can look back on the information in this report and smile at how quaint it appears in retrospect.

With this report, we now have the data we need to begin or continue discussions for people who want to learn how to use AI or need to be persuaded about its benefits. RPE Origin has been involved in many research projects over the years, but this was a great project to be part of. Our thanks go to Ascend2 for their work in gathering and presenting this data.

## **Now what?**

Many people are unsure about the future of email marketing itself and about AI and how it will change or enhance email. They're looking for a path through the wilderness. This report is that path. It presents a telling snapshot of a particular moment in time, in AI's childhood, to show us what to focus on as we grow and learn.

Of course, email marketers don't need yet another task added to the daily to-do list. But this is important because it represents the future of email and every other digital channel. The team at RPE Origin is excited about the future that AI represents as well as the prospects of reaping the benefits and managing the challenges for our clients.

Thank you for taking the time to read our research and our thoughts. AI in email marketing will be a great ride, and we would love to have you join us on the trip.



# Advancing the Art of Email Marketing

Our team of email experts delivers the best outcomes in the most efficient and effective way possible for enterprise and agency clients.

Marketing is constantly evolving. As marketing evolutionists, we're at the forefront of a new way to think about email and how it connects to everything in the marketing ecosystem. We deliver smart strategy, solid execution, and data analysis to fuel continual success.

As the only vendor agnostic, end-to-end email agency, our experience is about sophisticated, scalable strategies and tactics that drive results. From award-winning creative to pushing the button, our cross vertical experience brings every client the significant learnings and successes from some of the largest brands in the world.

Contact Ryan Phelan ([ryanp@rpeorigin.com](mailto:ryanp@rpeorigin.com)) or visit [www.rpeorigin.com](http://www.rpeorigin.com) if you'd like to chat about how we could help!



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