



# ***THE **NEXT** AGE OF EMAIL MARKETING***

*Reflections from **20 years** of email*



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As we celebrate **20 years of RPE Origin**, our team reflects on the founding of the company, the power of community and collaboration within the industry, and what the next age of email marketing will look like.



## AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

*Reflections from John Caldwell, Founder*

Twenty years ago, I felt stuck in my corporate role. No matter what I did, my growth felt limited – not by my abilities, but by the hierarchy involved. I wanted more. So, with no big plan in place, I took a leap. All I knew was I wanted to work for myself and share my knowledge and experience with anyone willing to pay for it.



Once I took that leap, ideas I'd pitched and had rejected in the corporate world were embraced and implemented by clients who truly valued them. That was when I knew I had made the right choice, and I kept going.



About a year into the solo adventure, Jeremy Grecco joined me, and a clearer vision for the company started to take shape. For years, it was just the two of us figuring things out along the way to meet our client's needs. Then Evan Diaz came on board and added a new spark to our small but mighty team. We stayed small and scrappy until Ryan Phelan joined the team, and everything shifted. Ryan's vision helped grow RPE Origin into what it is today – a team of email experts delivering the best possible outcomes to enterprise and agency clients. I'm so proud of what this company has become!

If you had told me 20 years ago that the journey led to this point, I probably would've laughed. But here we are, thanks to the trust and support of our incredible clients and the hard work of an amazing team.

As we celebrate this milestone, I want to say thank you. Thank you for being part of this journey, for believing in us, and for helping us grow. Here's to 20 years of RPE Origin – and to the exciting road ahead! Ryan has some thoughts on what that might look like.





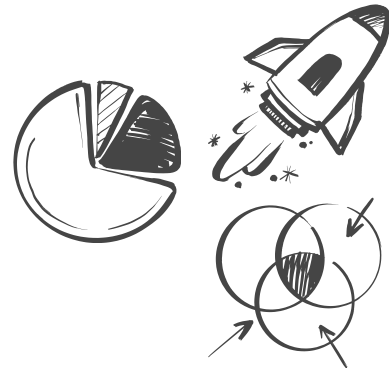
# WE ARE EMAIL PEOPLE

*Reflections from Ryan Phelan, CEO*

On this 20th anniversary of RPE Origin, formerly Red Pill Email, many of us on the team have been thinking about all the changes that 20 years in email have brought – how email has changed our lives, how it has become not just something we do but our whole career, our specialty, our reason for being. In many ways, email looks nothing like it did when I entered the business 26 years ago – and yet, some things have not changed.

One benefit of being in email for as long as we have is that we have seen the cycles – not just in marketers' advancement and maturity, but also the cycles in business, of leadership thinking, tactics and strategies.

Like many industries, email is circular. What we learned 20 years ago about how to approach and engage audiences with email is still being taught today. We who have been around since the early days have developed a global picture of email. This is an advantage as we both look back at what works and envision where we can take email further.



Now, some people will mock us old-timers and tell us that it's time we retire and turn the limelight over to younger players. And I'm all for innovation. But if you don't know what happened before, you can't easily predict what's going to happen next, whether the next new thing will pay off or become just another shiny distraction.

Email platforms and marketing slogans come and go. People move from one company to another. It's a constant reminder about how small our industry really is. Many of us at RPE Origin met years ago at other companies, or we even competed against each other. It astonishes me to discover that people I worked with 15 years ago are now prominent influencers in our community – and I get to work with them again!





# THE FOUR AGES OF EMAIL

In looking back over the 20 years since RPE Origin first came into being, it's important to review that history. Not so I can brag about how, in my day, I walked to school up a hill both ways in a snowstorm (I did) but to help us understand where the email industry goes from here.



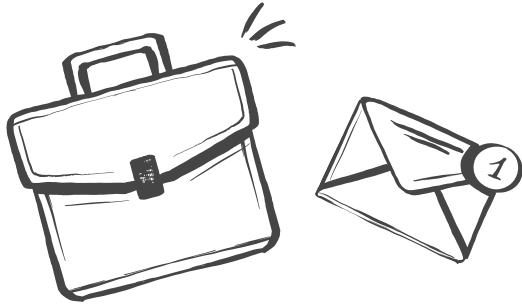
## 1 THE WILD WEST

You also could call this **"The Age of Making It Up as We Go Along."** Email was new to companies and new to customers. It was something to be monetized, yes, but also something we could play with and experiment with. We lived in a constant state of trying new things, testing them, seeing if they worked, and then sharing what we learned in communities that sprang up to trade ideas and learn from each other.

Back then, we reveled in everyone's success, even if it came from a competitor. We learned from others' failures because that was the path to success and learning. We were open to sharing, learning, trying new things, discovering what worked and what didn't.



We debated everything, from frequency to content to the value of a pre-checked opt-in box. One email team would try something and succeed. A team from another company would try the same thing in a different way and succeed. So, we got together at meet-ups and conferences and tried to figure out why it happened and how to make it happen for everybody.



One theme of speakers at conferences back then sticks with me. It was the marketer's job to lead the customer through the experience of shopping online. It was all new back then. It's hard to imagine today that people just 20 to 25 years ago didn't understand how to browse websites, compare products, put them in carts and complete the purchase.

Consumers came from the gated communities of services like AOL and CompuServe into the vast unstructured internet, filled with shopping, information, access, and communications.



Email marketers understood the challenges our customers faced because we were – and still are – the closest to them. They didn't have to stumble through a search engine to find us. We came to them and spoke to them in the privacy of their inboxes.

Many of the advances that made email more valuable to customers and companies alike came from early leaders to solve problems. Think about the perpetual problem of abandoned carts. Then as now, people would fill their carts with items but change their minds, hold them for later, drop out of the buying session, have technical issues, or balk at the shipping costs and leave their carts in the virtual aisles of the online store.

We solved part of that problem by learning to automate an email that would remind people to come back and finish their purchases. But that email wouldn't go out until 24 hours later. Why? Because that's when the web analytics provider updated its feeds. In the meantime, people forgot to come back, or they bought from someone else.

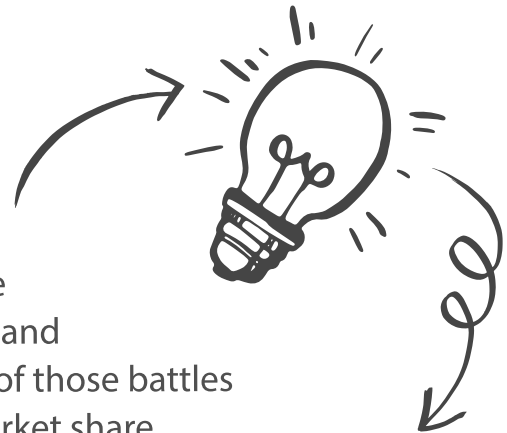


Then a company called SeeWhy said it could launch an abandoned-cart email within an hour. Revolutionary! From that technological advance, we also gained new insights into customer buying and abandonment patterns and developed new strategies for email journeys and timing. We learned that from each other. That's why you'll see close relationships among people who have been in email for a long time. We shared our experiences and learned together.

So, even though email marketing in its infancy was the Wild West, hundreds of campfires dotted the landscape, marking places where marketers huddled up and helped each other succeed.

## 2 THE RISE AND FALL OF INNOVATION

The great email wars that marked this age sparked intense competition from companies like Responsys, ExactTarget, and CheetahMail. Everyone fought to disrupt the market. Out of those battles came a constant flow of innovation as a means to gain market share.



Consider the ability to link email behavior to online banners, which gave rise to cross-channel marketing. We take that for granted today, being able to target shoppers or dormant subscribers through ad networks. But it was born from a tech company's quest to solve a problem.

At one time I worked for Responsys in Chicago. We had an energetic team working on a slew of enterprise projects. Our mantra was "You might not need this feature today, but you will, and when you do, we'll turn it on."



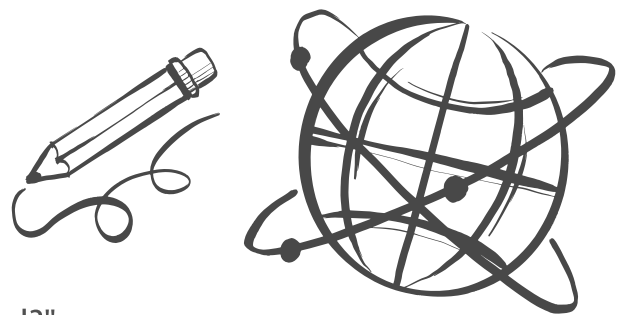
During that time, innovation from top players trickled down to mid-market providers and eventually to entry-level email platforms. That innovation powered some of the greatest opportunities for ESPs in the space.

Those email wars continued until the acquisitions began. First, Oracle bought Responsys. Then Salesforce bought ExactTarget. And innovation died. Nobody needed to innovate. These companies had achieved their goals to be acquired. The new owners often cut loose the development teams. A great silence descended.

Instead of spending money to develop new ways to solve problems, ESPs worked on scale and throughput to handle ever-growing volumes of email. C-suites, when they thought about email at all, defined success by list size and email volume. The bigger your list, the higher your volume, the more successful you were.

We saw nothing new in email for a long time. And then we did.

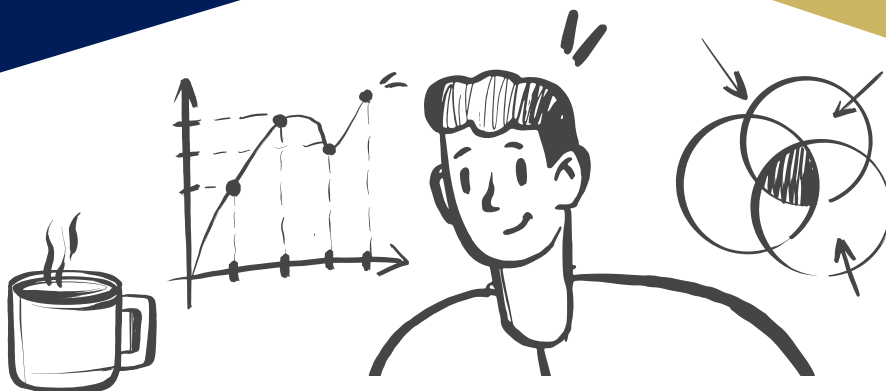
## 3 INNOVATION REBORN



Where were you when you first heard about "the Cloud?"

Being able to host mail transfer agents (MTAs) on third-party servers sparked the next revolution. They cost less than storing data on in-house data centers and were instantly scalable. New ESPs operating cloud-based services, like Emma (now part of Marigold), Cordial and DotDigital led the field of smaller, nimbler ESPs that rebuilt the equation of sending email. Some legacy companies saw it as a way out of stagnation.

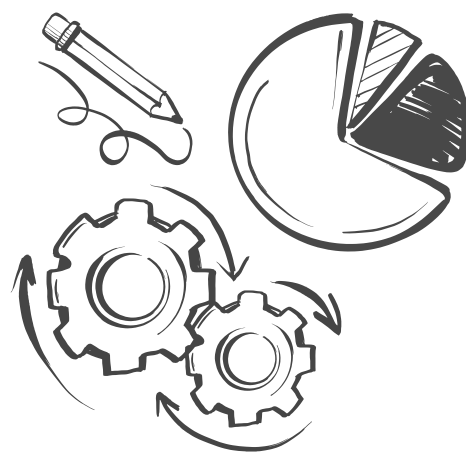




Market share, not acquisition, became the goal. We saw renewed innovation in the processes and structures of ESPs. Requests for proposals from vendors became bigger. Consumer demands and expectations grew. Gmail launched. Better access to data meant marketers could segment and target messages more accurately and complete projects in days instead of six months or more.

This rejuvenation of innovation not only gave us more effective technology but also freed marketers to discover new ways to use email.

Forrester analyst Shar Van Boskirk has an excellent way to measure the value of innovation: "Prove to me that this development is useful to the marketer." I agree with her. We have much to choose from when we work with clients on RFPs. We include on-site players like MessageGears. We look at Marigold and its collection of companies like Emma, Campaign Monitor, Sailthru, Vuture, Liveclicker, Selligent, and Cheetah Digital, at Zeta and its access to external data.



At the same time, our migrations from one platform to another are more complex because of a company's access to and use of data.

We're still holding on to that innovation today, which in turn powers the fourth age of email.

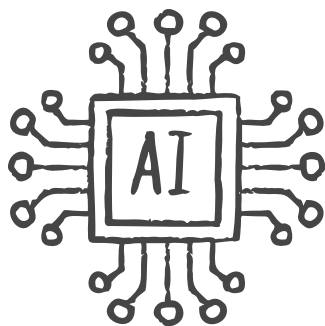


## 4 RISE OF THE MACHINES

That's more than a title borrowed from "Terminator 3", but it fits in this current age. I'm talking AI, as in "artificial intelligence." AI is an essential part of the decision-making process and the marketing mix.

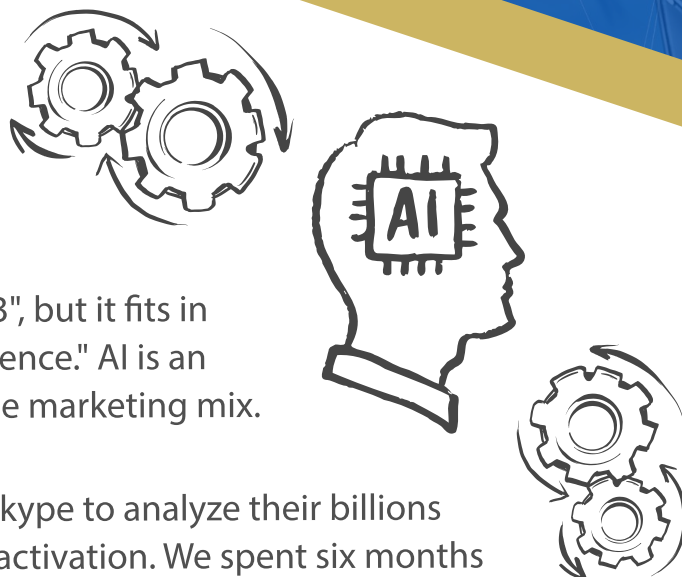
I once worked for Acxiom on a complex project for Skype to analyze their billions of customer names on how to market to them for reactivation. We spent six months working with teams of data scientists and strategists and big data sets from Acxiom's library to develop personas and models for messages, timing, and offers.

Today, an agent on the AI side can complete that work in minutes.



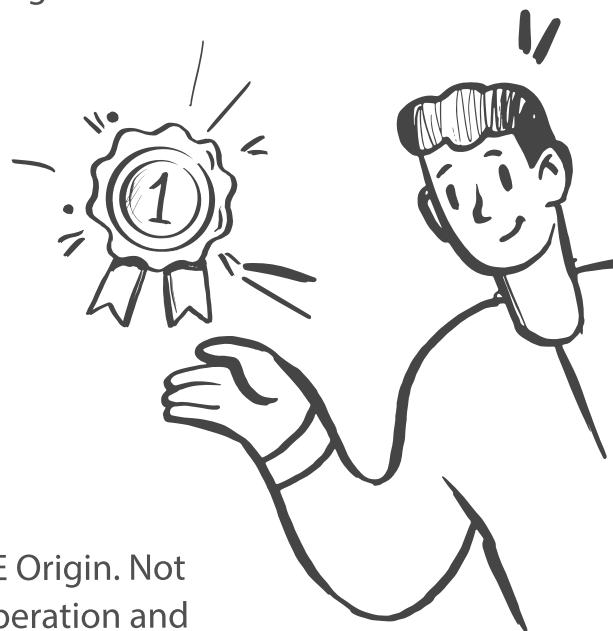
The practical use of AI not just in marketing decision-making but in enterprise applications is immense, and we are just getting started. Language models like ChatGPT are great, but they are just a gateway to bigger opportunities, such as innovative ways to use data. One example is using AI to help with determining customers' propensity to buy based on signals that they're seeing inside and outside of our experience.

This fourth age of email is still being written. But one thing is clear: It's as if we've gone back 20 years to the Wild West where we're making it up as we go along again. We're discovering what we can do, what AI can do, what the future case will be. And we're sharing what we learn. We still have that spirit of cooperation and discovery, of sharing and community.



No one knows what the next age of the email industry will look like. It could look like it does today, just improved. It could look like the invasive culture of "Minority Report." Who knows? But one of email's defining terms is the ability to grow, bend, fold and adapt, and I don't see that changing.

Remember Apple's Mail Privacy Protection feature? People said it spelled the death of personalization. We got past that. CAN-SPAM? GDPR? CASL? Gmail Tabs? Email adapted to all of them and survived because our community came together to find the answers.



## WRAPPING UP

This look back over the last 20 years has been energizing for RPE Origin. Not because we're trapped in the past but because the spirit of cooperation and learning that marked email's early years is alive and well in today's AI age.

I've been lucky enough to be surrounded by tremendously talented people in our industry, some of whom have become my closest friends. I could not see myself working in another industry. Many of us share that same devotion to email. **We are email people!**

As we progress through the coming years in email, remember where we came from. Let's keep those campfires burning!

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