# Email Deliverability: A Journey into the Inbox

## 2020

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# / Introduction

Email remains the central channel around which any successful customer engagement strategy should be built. It's the core thread around which to create a multi-channel approach. This is something we've heard from both customers and marketers, with the latter now reporting the return on email marketing investment at just over £35 for every £1 spent.

This report focuses on the beginning of the email journey – investigating the knowledge and practices of businesses when it comes to email deliverability. This first step in email's journey to the consumer's inbox is crucial. Mistakes at this early stage may cause significant financial impact – as over 90% of marketers told us in this survey.

Starting with data collection, it's key that good practices are in place and to ensure compliance with relevant legislation. This step is fundamental when building email programmes, as marketers need to make sure that these practices echo the clear guidelines offered by both the law and mailbox providers.

The findings from this report bring to light how much harder this first step is for smaller businesses and marketing teams, but by no means an impossible task either. Indeed, awareness and measurement are critical for organisations to not just avoid the negative, but to also reap the benefits of good deliverability. Marketers simply cannot know what they don't know and can't see.

Putting the customer at the heart of your email programmes, even at this early stage, is the key to success. Being diligent with their data, acting in accordance with their expectations and taking responsibility for your actions isn't too much to ask. Especially as the upside is not just the benefit of ROI, but also the potential of increasing the lifetime value of that customer.

Tim Bond, Head of Insight, Data & Marketing Association

# / Foreword – Validity

At Validity, email deliverability is a topic close to our hearts, and helping customers achieve great deliverability underpins our core philosophy of "trust your data". It's the starting point for increased inbox placement, greater subscriber reach, and enhanced program ROI.

But the path to the inbox is far more complex than many email marketers think. Part science, part art, deliverability is the classic mystery inside an enigma. While there are established best practices that all senders should follow, the goalposts also get moved on a regular basis!

Mailbox providers constantly evolve their filtering practices, increasing focus on subscriber engagement means a deep understanding of how subscribers interact with their emails is vital, and there is a wealth of different data sources that senders need to monitor (and respond to) as they manage the health of their programs.

This challenge is reflected in Validity's Deliverability Benchmark report. Globally, only 83% of permission-based emails achieve inbox placement! One in every six emails sent don't – representing a significant opportunity cost for many senders

It's a classic case of "known unknowns" and we're all about helping our clients eliminate the unknowns! Understanding how marketers think about email deliverability (and how they measure it) is vital for improved performance against this most challenging metric.

We love the idea that it's far more than just another benchmark report. It takes input from a broad range of major email program owners on themes like; how strong is your understanding of deliverability?; what are the biggest obstacles to achieving good deliverability?; how do you measure success?; and what is the financial impact for your business?

What emerges is that deliverability is program critical, and a good deliverability strategy needs to be both broad-ranging and multi-disciplinary. While respondents are clear about the relationship between observing legislation and good deliverability, there is also a clear gap between understanding deliverability best practices, and implementing them. Good measurement is also critical.

It's also much harder if you are a smaller team. Deliverability success involves committing budget and resource if you're going to do it well. Not all senders have either the personnel or financial capacity, although those that do clearly see the positive returns from doing so.

As we see in this report, the approach of many senders is to combine in-house skills with third-party expertise. Validity is the trusted advisor used by many email programs around the world, and is ideally positioned to help, with solutions spanning verification, data quality, deliverability, program certification, and consulting services. The learnings from this report provide a great starting point for senders asking themselves "Where's the gap?" – which aspects of their deliverability strategy should they prioritise for improvement?

This is why Validity is delighted to partner with the DMA to produce the 2020 edition of this report. We trust you will find it a highly informative and valuable deliverability resource for your email marketing decisions. We're already looking forward to collaborating with the DMA on future editions!

#### **Guy Hanson**

Vice President of Customer Engagement Validity International

# / Exec Summary

### Awareness and Importance

- The majority of marketers are aware and agree with the importance of email deliverability – 48% saying they are 'Completely aware' with 38% 'Familiar', and 17% saying it is 'Most important' and 38% 'Important'
- Most organisations take responsibility for their email deliverability in-house (62%), while a third (32%) rely on external send platforms spending, on average, around a quarter (23.0%) of their email marketing budget on this area

## Good Practice vs. Reality

- A growing number of marketers rate their own best practice knowledge as 'Poor'
   – rising from 10% in 2019 to 16% this year with most appearing to be putting
   faith in this knowledge being elsewhere within their organisations (49% rating
   this is 'Good' and 17% 'Very good')
- When asked what they considered to be best practices and which their company does currently, most respondents were aligned – with 'Compliance with legislation/standards' leading the way across both (40% & 38% respectively)

## Data and Technology

- The most common source of email list data is a company's website (63%), followed by a range of others that are used 'Often' or 'Always' by around half of businesses (47-56%) the majority are using single (33%) or double (37%) opt-in to gain consent, and an increasing number utilising 'Soft opt-in' (rising from 10% to 21% in 2020)
- The estimated percentage of inaccurate or invalid email data businesses hold has also fallen from an average of 12.8% to 11.1% year-on-year, the biggest contributor this being 'Human error' (22%), followed by 'Old data' (13%), 'Collection/source' (11%) and 'Fakes/blacklisting' (10%)

## **Concerns and Blacklisting**

- Marketers cite a range of different concerns when it comes to email deliverability, with 'High bounces' (20%) coming top but closely followed by 'IP address reputation' (18%), 'Low reader engagement/spam complaints' (18%) and 'Being blacklisted' (17%) – just 0.5% say they have no concerns
- 42% of organisations report having been blacklisted in the last five years, with the average over this period being 2.5 times although that also means half (50%) have not been blacklisted (or believe they haven't been)

• The main reasons cited by those that have been blacklisted are 'Spam complaint' (28%), 'Email content' (25%) and 'Recipient complaint' (22%) – although there appear to be a wide range of factors at play and that marketers have to contend with

### Measurement and Impacts

- The primary measures used to monitor email deliverability are 'Emails bounced' not bounced' (50%), 'Low engagement' (44%), 'Inbox placement' (40%) and a third tracking 'Complaints' too (29%) with most appearing confident in their organisation's ability to measure these too (email deliverability, but a notable one in five are confident in their team's ability to measure 'Tabs placement' or 'Inbox placement' (both 19%)
- Most concerningly, one in five organisations report doing 'Nothing' and that they don't suppress emails, whether they're a hard (17%) or soft bounce (19%) – despite most at least taking some form of action either immediately or within a clear timeframe
- Meanwhile, 91% understanding the financial impact of good or bad deliverability, with one in ten saying this is 'Severe' (8%) and a further third reporting it as 'Moderate' (32%)

## / Awareness and Importance

Awareness of email deliverability among marketers has remained broadly high, with just 14% reporting no familiarity with the concept at all this year (13% in 2019). However, just under half (48%) say they are completely aware of this integral part of their email programme, leaving 38% reporting they are merely familiar.

Given its importance to the success of any email programme, and how email is the central thread around which multi-channel approaches should be built (as we saw in our 'Consumer Email Tracker 2020' research from earlier this year), this may come as a surprise to some.

However, we also see a significant shift in awareness according to the size of the business. One in four (25%) of 'Small/micro businesses' (with less than 50 employees) declare they're not aware of deliverability. Meanwhile, 61% of 'Large businesses' (with over 250 employees) report being completely familiar with email deliverability, markedly higher than the average. This disparity between smaller and larger organisations is a theme that recurs throughout the results of this research.

When it comes to the importance of email deliverability, again we see the majority of marketers agreeing that it is important – with just 13% considering it unimportant. However, there is still almost a third (31%) that recognise a partial level of importance to this key area – although most (55%) agree of its high importance in comparison to other areas of email marketing.

What importance does your organisation place on email deliverability (in comparison to other aspects of your email marketing)?



Here again, we see a clear difference between larger (21%) and mid-sized (19%) organisations who believe deliverability is one of the most important aspects of the email programmes.

This is compared to just 7% of 'Small/micro businesses' and one in ten (9%) of these marketers rating it as the 'Least important' – something also felt by marketers we surveyed in B2B (also 9%).

When asked about who has responsibility for the success of their organisation's email deliverability, most said this is an in-house obligation (62%). Around a third (32%) rely on external send platforms, while 5% weren't sure where ownership lay. The proportion of businesses looking after their own deliverability reinforces the importance of this discipline, and how it's about much more than just handling bounced messages and implementing feedback loops.

Considering the factors that impact deliverability, the vast majority understand that there are a multitude of different influences. The highest among them is 'Data quality' (45%), followed by 'Email content' (44%) and 'Sender's reputation' (42%). This feeling that data and reputation are key is less surprising when you factor in that GDPR remains high on the agenda for many organisations – not to mention concerns about compliance and the threat of fines (as we found in the 'Marketer Email Tracker 2020').



#### In your opinion, what's the impact of the following factors on email deliverability?

Interestingly, larger organisations are more likely to say 'Technology' has a significant impact on their deliverability – 46% compared to 35% for all businesses surveyed. This may be down to bigger businesses having the budget and scale to successfully implement new technologies more readily. Smaller companies, on the other hand, are more likely to believe there's no impact on their email deliverability across almost all these factors – including 'Data quality' (19%), 'Email content' (14%), 'Sender's reputation' (14%), 'Technology' (14%) and 'Authentication' (11%).

Most marketers (45%) spend between 11-30% of their email budgets on email deliverability and a further 19% from 31-40%. Using the mid-point of these percentage ranges, the average proportion of this budget comes to 23.0%. The graph below shows the possible range within which this average sits too, using the highest and lowest values to show most marketers spend between 18-28% of their email budgets on this vital first step.



#### What percentage of your email marketing budget is spent on email deliverability?

However, there are some notable differences in this estimation from different respondents and businesses. For example, senior marketers believe this to be higher (27.1%) compared to both mid-level (21.2%) and junior (16.6%) colleagues.

This is also reflected in the number of members of the team, as those with more than 20 people in their marketing team, report the proportion of budget dedicated to deliverability as significantly higher (29.4%). For those with 10-19 people this drops to 26.1% – although still above average – and businesses with less than 10 marketers estimate this at just 16.4%.

As such, you'd expect smaller organisations to estimate their spend as lower too, which they do at just 14.4%. However, it's medium-sized businesses that appear to commit the most to their email deliverability success (26.7%) – even above large businesses' 24.3%.

# / Good Practice vs. Reality

Despite the clear awareness and understanding of the importance of email deliverability, it may come as some concern that a rising number of marketers rate their knowledge of best practice in this area as 'Poor'. This rose from one in ten (10%) last year to one in six (16%).

Those believing their knowledge to be 'Good' also fell from 41% in 2019 to 31% this year, while the number that believes their best practice understanding is 'Average' remained around half (49% in 2019; 52% in 2020). This could well be down to the perceived complexity of deliverability increasing, as mailbox providers like Gmail continue to change their algorithms and guidance, making it hard for some to keep up.

This points to a possible growing problem of understanding when it comes to this key area of email marketing. In fact, when asked about their team's knowledge of best practice in some of the specific areas of email deliverability, the number rating this as poor increased even further. Although those rating it as 'Good' or 'Very good' also increased, this could be – righty or misplaced – trust that the right knowledge is elsewhere in the team.



## How would you rate your team's knowledge about best practices in the following areas?

'Small/micro' businesses, in particular, do not believe they have the best practice knowledge they need within their teams. Respondents from these organisations were almost twice as likely to report all three factors as 'Poor' – 34% for both 'Email Deliverability' and 'Tabs placement', and 30% for 'Inbox placement'.

When asked what they considered to be best practices and which of these their organisation does currently, marketers were broadly aligned. Leading the way across both was 'Compliance with legislation/standards' highlighting how laws like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) have effectively codified a lot of existing best practice. This has allowed many organisations, and their deliverability performance to benefit as a result too.

Other notable areas of good practice being implemented are areas around clear unsubscribe options, only contacting active recipients and being rigorous about data hygiene. These are all areas that we've seen are a clear focus for both email specialists and marketers in general in recent year as part of our 'Data Privacy: An Industry Perspective' research series, which has tracked sentiment and compliance with the GDPR since the final text was finalised in 2016.

However, it's also potentially concerning that just one in five marketers believe 'List-unsubscribe message header' is best practice. Less are putting these into place (15%), although this may be down to awareness among those who responded to the survey. This is an important area of good practice that all the major mailbox providers strongly recommend. However, it's also an aspect that may more commonly be implemented by an email service provider, so the in-house teams may simply not be fully aware are have assumed their provider has this covered.



## Which of the following would you categorise as email deliverability best practices and which does your company currently do?

These questions also had some interesting demographic differences in responses. Senior-level marketers are more likely to believe 'Double opt-in' is best practice (35%) and that they're already 'Enrolled in all major feedback loops' (29%).

'Small/micro' businesses are less likely to understand that 'List-unsubscribe message headers' are best practice (5%). Meanwhile, B2B businesses are less likely to currently be 'Rigorous about hygiene practices (15%) and ensure they 'Stagger sends' (13%).

The size of the marketing team also seems to have an impact. On best practice, those with teams under 10 people are more likely to believe 'Compliance with legislation/standard' (57%) is important, whereas teams with more than 20 are less likely to feel this way (25%). This may be due to smaller teams only having the time to achieve compliance, as a minimum requirement, where larger teams are able to create an additional layer of best practice and the performance benefits this also affords them. When it comes to actual practices, those smaller teams are more likely to have a 'Clear unsubscribe button' (51%), while bigger teams are more likely to be implementing 'Program white-listing' (32%).

# / Data and Technology

The General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) came into force in May 2018. Despite being 2 years ago, many are still seeing the impact of the change to the laws.

Encouragingly, over half of marketers (53%) report the impact of the new rules as being positive on their email deliverability specifically. Just 19% reported a negative impact, with the remaining 28% saying these had not made any significant difference.

This positive sentiment toward the rules has been echoed across many other areas of marketing and email, as highlighted across various research conducted by the DMA since GDPR came into force. This is particularly interesting given the new privacy rules are, essentially, a piece of consumer protection legislation. Seeing such positive feedback is encouraging and shows they must have struck the right balance.

The most common sources of email data to build contact lists are organisations' websites, although it's also clear there is a wide variety of options marketers are using. Indeed, almost half of those surveyed use all the options listed below, either always or often, with the least popular being 'Purchased list'.



## Which of the following methods does your company use to build email lists and how often?

Smaller businesses, as we've seen previously, are less likely to use many of these sources too. In fact, significantly more report 'Never' building their email lists via 'Purchased list' (28%), 'Sales team outreach' (23%), 'Lead collection at an event' (21%) or 'Point of sale/email receipts' (16%). Businesses with smaller teams (less than 10 people) also reported never using 'Purchased list' as a source (26%).

To build their email lists, the majority of organisations are using single (33%) or double (37%) opt-in. An increasing number are also utilising 'Soft opt-in' – rising from 10% in 2019 to 21% this year. This is, again, clearly linked to GDPR and the initial caution many had in the run-up and immediately after May 2018. However, this has also softened over time, something we've seen in the 'Marketer Email Tracker 2020' report, as more organisations come to realise that soft opt-in is a legitimate and legal way to gain email marketing permission.

When asked about the inaccuracy of their email data, most marketers (65%) estimated this to be between 1% and 15%. This has also reduced year-on-year, with the estimated average falling from 12.8% to 11.1% – the possible high and low of these ranges also falling. Given that 'Data quality' was cited by almost half of marketers (45%) as having a significant impact on their email deliverability, it's encouraging that this quality appears to be improving.



In your opinion, what percentage of your company's email lists would you say are either inaccurate or invalid?

The biggest contributing factors to this inaccuracy are clearly directed at the point of collection. 'Human error' (22%) is the most cited reason, whether that's a mistake by the customer or employee, and 'Collection/source' was third (11%) – while having 'Old data' split these two (13%). It's also interesting to note that B2C businesses are more likely to cite 'Cleaning/hygiene' as a key issue (15%), although we don't know whether this is down to it being a bigger issue or simply higher awareness.

There are also several possible concerns for marketers to note here too. For instance, one in ten (10%) of organisations are already seeing 'Fakes/blacklisting' as an issue. This is being driven by the rise in bot-driven fake sign-ups, which will also harm both deliverability and response rates is brands are not able to identify and resolve these in their data.

Most concerning may be that a quarter of businesses may not even know where this inaccuracy is coming from -25% saying they either don't know or aren't sure. This not only makes it impossible to understand how to reduce the inaccuracy and its impact but also potentially means these respondents are under-estimating the problem in the first place.

Moving on to the technology organisations use to send their emails, there is a broadly even split between in-house solutions (37%), external service providers (31%) and hybrid systems using elements of both (29%). Most of these programmes and technologies go on to utilise 'Dedicated IP' strategies (58%), while a notable one in five (21%) aren't sure on this point. Although this is driven by smaller businesses, as half of these respondents (50%) report not knowing or being sure.





One in five marketers also report not being sure which of the authentication protocols they currently use as part of the email programme – with a further 5% believing they use none. This may be connected to awareness and email service providers implementing these as standard practices without the marketing team needing to worry. 'Small/micro' businesses were also much more likely to say they used none of these (18%) or didn't know (36%).

Authentication is a near mandatory requirement from most of the large mailbox providers, so organisations should ensure this is in place – whoever's responsibility it is to implement them. Of those that are aware, the most common protocols used were DMARC (27%), BIMI (25%) and DKIM (24%), with SPF slightly behind (17%).

When it comes to implementing 'List-Unsubscribe Header' within their email programmes, most businesses are using the 'One-click' (39%) or 'URL' (36%) parameter. Just under one in five is using 'Mailto' (17%), although senior-level marketers appear to use this more (25%). Smaller organisations are, again, significantly more likely to report using none of these parameters (30%) – particularly 'URL' parameter, which is used by just 14% of these businesses.

Most encouraging is that just one in five believe they're either using none of these options (12%) or don't know (10%). Indicating there might be more understanding of the importance and implementation of 'List-Unsubscribe Header' options than we saw in previous questions, possibly marketers recognise these parameters within their programmes.

# / Concerns and Blacklisting

Marketers cite a range of different concerns when it comes to their email deliverability programmes. Top of their list is 'High bounces' (20%), closely followed by 'IP address reputation' (18%), 'Low reader engagement/spam complaints' (18%) and 'Being blacklisted' (17%). Even beyond these, there's still 14% that cited 'Triggering spam filters' and 13% 'Domain reputation' – with just 0.5% saying they have no concerns.

Encouragingly, this year's Consumer Email Tracker 2020 showed a marked decrease in the number of people opting to mark messages as spam when what they really want to do is unsubscribe. This has gone from 27% in 2017 to 18% in the latest study, which is a likely benefit of GDPR's ensuring more visible and easier to use unsubscribe options. Ultimately, this is good news for marketers and the deliverability of their email programmes.

This range of concerns highlights the myriad of challenges organisations must tackle to successfully start their email marketing messages on the journey to the inbox. For instance, being blacklisted is something no organisation wants, but 42% have found themselves in this position in the last five years. On average, organisations' email programmes have been blacklisted 2.5 times in the last five years, although this could be as high as 3.2 or low as 1.7.



How many times has your email marketing programme been blacklisted in the last five years?

On the positive, that means half (50%) have not been blacklisted in the last halfdecade, with the remaining one in ten (9%) either unsure or preferring not to say. In fact, 'Small/micro' businesses believe they have not been blacklisted in the last five years significantly more (70%) than others. However, this could be down to the lack of awareness and knowledge seen at the start of this report – as, logically, it's impossible to monitor something you are unaware of in the first place.

The main reasons cited by those that have been blacklisted in the past are 'Spam complaint' (28%), 'Email content' (25%) and 'Recipient complaint' (22%). Although again, there appears to be a wide range of factors at play that marketers must contend with, as explained in the next chart.



#### Can you briefly explain why you've been blacklisted in the past?

# / Measurement and Impacts

The majority of marketers we surveyed believe their company does monitor email deliverability (77%). However, this still leaves one in five (19%) no tracking this vital part of the email's journey – with 4% unsure or preferring not to say.

When asked which metrics they primarily use to measure their deliverability, the trio of 'Emails bounced/not bounced' (50%), 'Low engagement' (44%) and 'Inbox placement' (40%) were the most popular. 'Complaints' are also tracked by nearly a third of organisations (29%). Smaller businesses are also significantly less likely to track 'Emails bounced/not bounced' (21%).

Asked about their ability to measure specific aspects, most appear confident their organisation has the required skills within their team. However, it's still notable that one in five is not confident in their team's ability to measure 'Tabs placement' or 'Inbox placement' (both 19%). This also rises to around a third for 'Small/micro' businesses – 36% 'Poor' for 'Tabs placement' and 30% for 'Inbox placement'.



#### How would you rate your organisation's ability to measure the following?

Interestingly, comparing this belief in their ability to measure with the question about knowledge (from the first chapter of this report), there is a clear correlation between the two. Specifically, teams with 'Good' or 'Very good' knowledge are more likely to be confident in their ability to measure these metrics too.

However, one of the most significant concerns to come from this survey stems from organisations actions when they receive a bounced email – whether this is hard of soft. While most organisations appear to act either immediately or within a clear timeframe, it's concerning that almost one in five claims to simply do 'Nothing' and that they don't suppress emails based on bounces.



## What does your organisation do when it receives a hard or soft bounced email from a recipient on your list?

Even more concerning, when we investigated the types of organisation that claim not to be suppressing bounced emails, we found no significant differences. Meaning the issue doesn't only sit within the smaller organisations and teams that, as we've seen throughout this report, have less ability and resources when it comes to email deliverability.

The sender guidelines for every major mailbox provider are very clear: bounces should be suppressed. So, for at least these one in five businesses there's a quick fix to improve what we can only assume is currently a bad deliverability performance: implementing some form of bounce suppression.

Indeed, the financial impact of poor deliverability is almost universally acknowledged by marketers – 91% understand the impact of good or bad deliverability on their email programme. One in ten say this impact is 'Severe' (8%) with a further third reporting it as 'Moderate' (32%). Half of marketers believe the impact financial impact is 'Limited' (47%), leaving less than one in ten to believe it has no impact (5%) or that they don't know (3%).



## Which of the following do you believe best describes the financial impact of poor email deliverability on your business?

# About the Data & Marketing Association

The Data  $\vartheta$  Marketing Association (DMA) comprises the DMA, Institute of Data  $\vartheta$  Marketing (IDM) and DMA Talent.

We seek to guide and inspire industry leaders; to advance careers; and to nurture the next generation of aspiring marketers.

We champion the way things should done, through a rich fusion of technology, diverse talent, creativity, insight – underpinned by our customer-focused principles.

We set the standards marketers must meet in order to thrive, representing over 1,000 members drawn from the UK's data and marketing landscape.

By working responsibly, sustainably and creatively, together we will drive the data and marketing industry forward to meet the needs of people today and tomorrow.

www.dma.org.uk

# / About Validity

Validity provides industry-leading email solutions Return Path, BriteVerify, and 250ok. For over 20 years, tens of thousands of organizations throughout the world have relied on Validity solutions to target, contact, engage, and keep customers – using trustworthy data as a key advantage.

Validity's flagship products – DemandTools, BriteVerify, Return Path, Trust Assessments, and GridBuddy – are top rated solutions for CRM data management, email address verification, inbox deliverability, avoiding the spam folder, and grid CRM applications. These solutions deliver smarter campaigns, more qualified leads, more productive sales, and ultimately faster growth.

For more information, visit Validity.com and connect with us on LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter.

# / Methodology

The 'Email Deliverability 2020: A Journey into the Inbox' report is an initiative undertaken by the DMA in partnership with Validity.

The research was conducted in April 2020 via an online survey of 205 respondents that work in marketing in the UK (details below). The data was collected and collated by Qualtrics, then analysed by the DMA Insight department. The report was written by the DMA Insight department and it was produced in collaboration with Validity. The report was proofed and designed by the DMA's in-house Brand and Content team.

The survey consisted of a maximum of 32 questions. These questions were reviewed by the DMA and Validity to ensure relevance to the current state of the email industry. Unless referenced, all data included in this report is taken from this survey.

If you have any questions about the methodology used in the report, you can contact the DMA's research team via email: research@dma.org.uk



Which of the following comes closest to

describing your current job title? (Please

select one)

## Is your business primarily B2B, B2C or both? (Please select one)





How would you classify your

organisation? (Please select one)

### How many people are currently employed within your email marketing team? (Please select one)



# / Copyright and disclaimer

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