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As commercial email becomes more prevalent, the task of delivering it is becoming more complex. In the early days of email marketing, the main issue for sending commercial email consisted basically by obtaining the addresses and the corresponding permissions. Nowadays, carrying a message safely through the ISPs' assortment of spam filters and avoiding recipients' junk mail folders until it finally reaches an inbox entails artful wording and mastering a myriad of time-consuming details and strategies. So ESPs came to be.

ESPs (for 'email service providers) are companies specializing in handling and distributing email. They have the knowledge, the technology and the type of relationships with a number of ISPs that can significantly raise the delivery rate for email marketing messages. Hence, a growing number of online marketers trust their email channels to ESPs.

Still, ESPs are not a universal panacea –there is not one at this time. In fact, perfectly reputable organizations' official, permission-based email messages are often rejected as spam by receiving ISPs. Hence, email marketers still have some homework to do in order to reach the deliverability rates they aim for, and that includes developing an awareness of the tools available to further ensure that messages actually reach their target and demanding proper service from their ESPs.

As an email marketer, you want to make sure that your ESP can provide some basic features before you actually sign a deal. Here are a few questions you can ask potential ESPs before you make your decision:

1. What services do you provide?

Make sure that the ESP you sign up with offers ISP relations and mediation, feedback loop set-up, blacklist monitoring, whitelisting, abuse board monitoring, and support for future authentication standards. Request information on pricing for each service and flip through sample reports, case studies and other documents generated by the potential ESP.

2. What tracking, auditing and delivery metrics can you provide?

You simply can't remain satisfied with simple mailed/bounced rates per campaign any more. You need to know how many messages are or are not actually delivered into the intended recipients' inboxes. You need to know how many end up in the spam/junk folders. You need to know how many are bounced, but also who bounces them, and why they are bounced. You need to know how many were actually opened and how many progressed into an actual click-through. And not all ESPs can provide you all this information. In fact, many can't do more than you would do on your own. And that is exactly the case if your ESP can't provide you with stats on the final placement of your messages, whether it is in the inbox or in the spam/junk folder –or was bounced, or simply deleted without notice. So make sure they can provide you with inbox and spam folder tracking and also give you access to reports. Or simply contract an independent delivery auditor. Remember you want a positive impact on your ability to deliver your messages through the major ISPs

3. Can you provide my company with a dedicated IP address?

It pays to pay for a dedicated IP address. You want to be in the white list at all times. You want to protect your reputation. If your mail and that of other of your ESP's clients comes from the same IP address, and one or several of your ESP's clients are spammers (or are labeled as spammers), you might end up in the same bag with them: the blacklist.

4. Do you serve only Can Spam-compliant clients?

Having your own IP address, however, will not be a guarantee for whitelisting if your ESP accepts clients that are not Can Spam compliant, since often –after just a few complaints come in– ISPs block the whole gamut of IP addresses coming from ESPs suspected of harboring spammers.

5. How will you check our HTML code for correctness?

Your ESP should have the tools that test your HTML code for compliance with the standards of the WWW Consortium and provide you with explanations when this is not the case. You don't want your hard work to appear scrambled in the recipients' screens.

6. What spam filters do you use to check deliverability?

Don't settle for an ESP that uses a single popular and readily available tool. Rather, find an ESP that uses a battery of both simple and sophisticated tools to test your content.

7. Are you familiar with the bounce policies of the ISPs I will be mailing to?

All ISP's have bounce policies of some sort, and your ESP should have its own bounced mail management policies and tools. ESPs should go to lengths in order to learn the policies of the ISPs you mail to and categorize their bounces, so correctives can be applied in your campaigns.

Remember that ESPs exist to assist you in raising the delivery rate for your email marketing messages.