

Which is the *\*right\** email service provider (ESP) for your newsroom? There are so many options out there, so I've tried to look at some of the most commonly used ESPs, and walk through the strengths, weaknesses, and costs of each. I've looked at five to start, and tried to lay out, as best I can, the case for each:

- [Campaign Monitor](#)
- [Constant Contact](#)
- [ConvertKit](#)
- [Mailchimp](#)
- [Revue](#)

You may be wondering: How can we trust your recommendations? So a bit about me: I used to run the email teams at both BuzzFeed and The New Yorker. Now I run [Inbox Collective](#), a consultancy where I work with dozens of different newsrooms and non-profits on email strategy, and write [Not a Newsletter](#), a monthly Google Doc about the world of email. My recommendations are based on 8+ years of working both in and with newsrooms and non-profits on email strategy.

One more thing: This list is far from comprehensive! Later in 2020, I'm hoping to add additional ESP reviews to this list. (Among the ESPs I want to give a closer look: ActiveCampaign, AWeber, Mailerlite, SailThru, Second Street, Sendinblue, and Substack.) I also want to dive into options for individuals or creators building out a newsletter strategy.

If there's anything you'd like to see in this doc that might help you make the right decision, or if you have specific questions about an ESP, email me at [dan@inboxcollective.com](mailto:dan@inboxcollective.com). Making an ESP decision is tough, and I'm happy to help you figure out which is the right one for you!

—Dan Oshinsky

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## **Campaign Monitor**

[campaignmonitor.com](https://campaignmonitor.com)

**Which newsrooms use it?:** The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, The Conversation, The Daily Maverick, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Wall Street Journal

**Who is it best for?:** Newsrooms that need to be able to send lots of different types of emails — newsletters, automations, and transactional messages — from a single ESP. This is an ESP for a newsroom that's a bit more advanced with their email strategy.

**What is it good at?:** I think the Campaign Monitor drag-and-drop builder is one of the best on the market. It's easy to use, but also allows for the customization — from fonts to dynamic content — that you'd want to build fairly advanced campaigns. (You can also upload your own HTML, or integrate with an email builder like [Stripo](#) or [Chamaileon](#).) For readers on their Premier tier, you'll also get access to engagement segments to show you who's reading (and who's not), which allows you to easily set up campaigns to target specific readers — for instance, you could use it to launch a reactivation campaign for less-engaged users. Two more fun features: Unlimited or Premier users can add countdown clocks to certain emails (like a limited-run sale or pledge drive), and design and spam testing is built in.

Their automation tool is also very sophisticated. You can create journeys for users based on a reader's level of engagement, personal information (like where they live), or a custom field, which allows you to build an automation — like a welcome series — that feels incredibly personal to every reader.

They offer a transactional email tool that allows you to send messages based on specific actions, like when a reader buys a subscription or donates to your newsroom. These require a bit of developer work to link to your site, but the fact that Campaign Monitor offers this as part of their suite is a really nice feature.

For anyone on your team with a login to Campaign Monitor, they also offer a two-factor confirmation process (password + Google Authenticator code) to keep your data safe.

**What does it lack?:** Campaign Monitor does just about everything you'd want it to do — but many of their best features require you to pay at a higher price point, or require a third-party integration. For instance: Campaign Monitor has a survey feature built into their drag-and-drop builder, but only for customers who also pay for a survey tool called GetFeedback. Using Campaign Monitor is a little like taking a vacation to an all-inclusive beach resort where getting access to the coolest stuff (a round of golf, a fishing trip, a nicer table at dinner) requires an upgrade — but if you're willing to pay, you do get a pretty impressive package.

**What does it cost?:** Campaign Monitor offers three tiers, though most newsrooms would be served best by the Unlimited or Premier tier. (The big difference between the two: Premier gets you access to phone support, and you'll also get access to those subscriber engagement segments.) For a newsroom with 10,000 contacts, the Unlimited tier costs \$149 per month, and Premier costs \$249 per month.

**What integrations does it offer?:** Campaign Monitor offers a robust set of integrations, including native integrations with Salesforce, Shopify, and Google Analytics. Their Zapier integration connects you to dozens of other tools, and they've built an

integration for WordPress to allow you to add a simple sign-up form to your site. It integrates with [Sparkloop](#), my favorite referral program. One other thing I like: They have integrations with email verification services like BriteVerify and Kickbox to help keep your lists clean.

**Is there anything else I should know about it?:** Campaign Monitor gets pricey quickly, so if you're using it, make sure you're using all of their tools (newsletters, automations, and transactional messages) to the absolute fullest. If you're just doing one of the three, you might be able to find an ESP that offers similar features at a lower price point.

*[Click here to read more about the features of Campaign Monitor](#)*

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## **Constant Contact**

[constantcontact.com](http://constantcontact.com)

**Which newsrooms use it?:** The AFRO, The Philadelphia Tribune

**Who is it best for?:** Constant Contact's the right tool for anyone who needs very basic functionality — the ability to send newsletters or a welcome series — and might need regular phone support, too.

**What is it good at?:** In a way, Constant Contact reminds me a lot of GoDaddy — it's a tool that works fine for beginners, and if you ever need help, you can always call their customer service line to get the assistance you need. The fact that you can call a customer service agent to get help is probably their strongest selling point.

Constant Contact isn't best-in-class at any one feature, but you do get a lot with an account as long as you're on their Email Plus plan. (The regular Email plan excludes many of these features.) It goes far beyond email, too — they let you set up simple surveys or even build entire websites if you'd like. Their email tool is fairly straightforward to use. The automation feature can be used to build a simple welcome series, and their drag-and-drop builder offers the basics you'd want: Changing layouts, customizing fonts, adding buttons to an email, etc. It's nothing particularly fancy, but it's very easy to use.

Transactional emails are built in to Constant Contact, and you can use it to sell products, like books or merchandise. (They collect a 1.5% transaction fee.)

They also offer their only growth tools, so you can create a pop-up, in-line unit, landing page, or even a Facebook lead ad from within Constant Contact.

**What does it lack?:** Their automation tool does the bare minimum. It'll send a welcome series to new subscribers, but you can't add branches ("If a reader does this, then send them this") to a series. The automation tool also can't be used for more advanced cases, like a reactivation series.

Their reporting is fairly basic: Opens and clicks per campaign. You'd have to download reports and analyze them outside of Constant Contact to really dig into engagement data.

Constant Contact does a little bit of everything, but I also think their feature set when it comes to email isn't as strong as the other ESPs listed here.

**What does it cost?:** A newsroom with 10,000 contacts would pay \$195 per month for their Email Plus plan, which includes the ability to send automations, get access to more advanced growth tools, and more. All plans with Constant Contact include phone support.

**What integrations does it offer?:** They do offer a nice set of integrations, particularly through Zapier. When it comes to native integrations, they connect directly to Shopify, SurveyMonkey, and WooCommerce, and have a plugin to capture email addresses on a WordPress site.

**Is there anything else I should know about it?:** If you're a non-profit, Constant Contact will offer you a discount, assuming that you pay upfront. They offer a 20% discount if you pay for 6 months of service, and 30% off for a full year.

*[Click here to read more about the features of Constant Contact](#)*

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## **ConvertKit**

[convertkit.com](https://convertkit.com)

**Which newsrooms use it?:** No traditional newsrooms use it, per the ConvertKit team — but several large digital publications use the platform, including sites like The Write Life, writers like James Clear, and paid subscription products like Seedtable.

**Who is it best for?:** Bloggers or writers seeking to build a product that could be monetized through paid subscriptions or sales of digital products.

**What is it good at?:** ConvertKit has one of the most powerful automation tools on the market. Most ESPs allow for simple, linear automations, but ConvertKit's tool allows you to create dozens of different branches, funneling a reader down a path that's personalized just for them. It's also incredibly useful for readers who come via paid acquisition, allowing you to customize that journey for that user. Their automation tool could also be used to power basic RSS-driven emails.

The visual editor for a newsletter is fairly easy to use. One feature I really like about it is the ability to tell ConvertKit to tag readers who click on specific links. For instance: A reader clicking on a story about a local business could be tagged as interested in "business news," allowing you to target that reader later on with personalized content within a campaign or automation.

Another nice tagging feature: For WordPress-powered sites, you can use their Subscriber ID parameter to sync data between your site and your emails. When a reader reads certain stories on your site, it can add a tag in ConvertKit to track that. When a reader visits your site from a newsletter, you can personalize those pages to guide them to take specific steps, like encouraging them to buy a subscription.

For writers or creators who need to build attractive landing pages — but don't want to hire an outside designer — ConvertKit makes it easy to build those pages.

**What does it lack?:** ConvertKit encourages users to keep their emails simple, with an emphasis on text and content instead of additional design elements. For a lot of individual writers, that's not an issue — but for a newsroom that wants a newsletter with lots of design, you'll want to build a custom template within ConvertKit.

ConvertKit's A/B testing functionality is also limited: It only allows for A/B testing of subject lines. To A/B test a new design or another feature, you'd need to manually split the lists into your A and B segments.

**What does it cost?:** A newsroom with 10,000 subscribers should expect to pay \$119 per month for ConvertKit's Creator tier, or \$167 for the Creator Pro account, which includes advanced segmentation features. Creator Pro users also get a complimentary deliverability audit from the ConvertKit team — a nice feature for those who may have had deliverability issues in the past — as well as a referral tool, [Sparkloop](#), built into the platform. One more great feature: ConvertKit offers a free migration from your current ESP to theirs for all users, regardless of tier.

**What integrations does it offer?:** Their WordPress integration allows you to really personalize content for readers. They're really focused on writers and creators who are looking to sell products or subscriptions, which is why they offer direct integrations with platforms to sell products, subscriptions, or memberships, like Patreon, Stripe, Shopify, and Teachable. They've got an integration with OptinMonster, as well as dozens more through Zapier. If you'd like to integrate with Google Analytics, that takes just a single click.

**Is there anything else I should know about it?:** ConvertKit uses slightly different terminology for their features. For instance: An email campaign isn't a campaign — it's a "broadcast." If you're switching from another platform to ConvertKit, it might take a minute to get used to it.

*[Click here to read more about the features of ConvertKit](#)*

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## **Mailchimp** [mailchimp.com](https://mailchimp.com)

**Which newsrooms use it?:** 6AM City, The 19th, Block Club Chicago, Pew Research Center, The Salt Lake Tribune, WBUR

**Who is it best for?:** Any newsroom that's just getting started with email.

**What is it good at?** Mailchimp is the most commonly-used ESP in the marketplace — both for email marketers and for newsrooms — and it's because it does a lot of things well:

- It has an easy-to-use drag-and-drop builder for creating templates and email campaigns.
- It allows you to A/B test all parts of your newsletters, from subject lines to content.
- It offers an incredible number of integrations.
- It has an automation tool, called Customer Journeys, that allows you to create complex automated emails for things like a welcome series, or that can be used to thank a paying supporter and guide them through next steps.
- It allows you to use tags or merge fields to personalize the content of the emails you send to readers.
- It has an RSS-to-email tool that can be used to send automated emails, like breaking news alerts.

- It offers two different ways to measure reader loyalty — star rating, or email engagement status. Both are useful in identifying the readers who might one day become paying supporters.

If Mailchimp was a restaurant, it'd be the local diner with one of those endless menus covering everything from brunch to seafood dinners to late-night fare. It's a very versatile ESP — it does a little bit of everything, and does it all pretty well.

For anyone on your team with a login to Mailchimp, they also offer a two-factor confirmation process (password + text message or Google Authenticator code) to keep your data safe.

### **What does it lack?**

The biggest complaint I hear from Mailchimp customers is about their customer service — they often take multiple days to respond to email requests for help. (If you need an ASAP response, try using their chat feature.) The user interface can also be a bit strange. Simple tasks, like adding a campaign name to track your newsletter in Google Analytics, require a series of scrolls and clicks. One more thing: The data in Mailchimp is good, but not great. In many cases, you'll have to download a report in order to slice and dice your data in Excel or Google Sheets. In other cases, you'll be able to access data (like open rates for certain email clients), but only on an individual campaign level.

Mailchimp does offer the ability to send transactional messages through their Mandrill service, but that will come at an additional cost.

### **What does it cost?:**

Mailchimp offers four tiers, but most newsrooms would be best served by the Standard plan. If you have 10,000 contacts, Mailchimp's Standard plan will cost \$99 per month.

Of note: Unless you're grandfathered in to one of Mailchimp's legacy plans (if you signed up for an account before 2019, you may be on one of these), Mailchimp charges based on the number of contacts on your list — including contacts who have unsubscribed. I'd recommend going into your list of contacts and archiving those unsubscribed users every month. (Archived users don't count against your total number of contacts.)

### **What integrations does it offer?**

Mailchimp offers more integrations than any other ESP — it's the thing they're truly best-in-class at. Among the ones to note: Direct integrations with Salesforce, Survey Monkey, and Google Analytics, as well as integrations with publisher-friendly services like the News Revenue Hub. They have a robust integration with Zapier and Segment.io, and pretty much any third-party growth tool, from Pico to OptInMonster,

connects directly with Mailchimp. It integrates with [Sparkloop](#) if you want to build a referral program, like the ones being run by Morning Brew or TheSkimm. You can also integrate with email builders like [Stripo](#) or [Chamaileon](#) if you'd like to build custom designs.

### **Is there anything else I should know about it?**

When you're building out your lists in Mailchimp, most publishers use groups to organize their newsletters, tags to identify certain types of users (i.e. paying subscribers), and merge fields to personalize data (i.e. a reader's first name).

Note: If you're encouraging readers to reply directly to your newsletter, make sure there's an inbox tied to the email address you're sending from. Mailchimp won't let you send from one email (say, newsletters@yoursite.com) and have a reader reply to a different address (feedback@yoursite.com).

Also beware Gmail clipping issues with Mailchimp's drag-and-drop builder. It's easy to build emails that have too much code and get clipped in Gmail, causing issues with reporting data and sometimes leading to issues with deliverability.

[Click here to read more about the features of Mailchimp](#)

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## **Revue**

[revue.co](http://revue.co)

**Which newsrooms use it?:** The Chicago Sun-Times, Fast Company, NOS, The Markup

**Who is it best for?:** A newsroom that needs an ESP specifically for their editorial team.

**What is it good at?:** Revue's campaign builder allows you to create a campaign incredibly quickly. It allows you to pull stories from an RSS feed or one of your social channels so that you can drag and drop stories into a newsletter. Something that Revue does that's really smart: When you add in a link to a campaign, it automatically pulls in the headline, description, and image from your site. It's the kind of feature that — especially for link-heavy emails — might save you 15 or 20 minutes every time you send an email. If you want to add original content to an email — like an intro from an editor — that's also easy to do with their builder.

Revue's one of the first ESPs built specifically for publishers, so their data is designed with the needs of publishers in mind. That includes built-in dashboards to show you

which readers are most (or least) engaged. Their tool allows you to easily incorporate ads into a newsletter. And if you want to send emails from one address but ask readers to reply to a different address, that only takes a click.

They're also a small team, and their customer service is unusually personal. (Of the ESPs listed here, Revue's the only one where you might get a reply to a support ticket from the CEO.) With their Publisher pricing plan, they'll also design a custom template for your organization — they're the only ESP on this list that offers that feature.

**What does it lack?:** Revue only does newsletters. If you want to create complex automations or send transactional messages, you'll have to use another ESP to handle those messages. The teams that use Revue use them as the tool specifically for their editorial operations, and then pair that with a secondary ESP to handle other sorts of messages. If you do use Revue, you're probably syncing all of your contact information with another ESP or with a central database.

**What does it cost?:** Pricing for publishers varies based on the volume of emails sent, but a newsroom with 10,000 subscribers that sends a daily newsletter would spend about \$200 per month.

**What integrations does it offer?:** Revue offers a plugin for WordPress to drive sign-ups, an integration with Stripe to build out a paid newsletter, and a Zapier integration that allows you to connect it with dozens of other tools. Adding campaign tracking information for Google Analytics is easy. They also connect with your Twitter, Facebook, Pocket, or Instagram account, to allow you to easily pull stories from those feeds into your newsletter.

[Click here to read more about the features of Revue](#)

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*A few disclosures, for the sake of full transparency: Campaign Monitor is what I use to send Not a Newsletter-related emails, and it was the ESP we used during my time at BuzzFeed, though I have no financial ties to any of the CM Group properties. I'm in the MailChimp Expert Directory, although I neither pay nor am paid for my participation there. Revue has been a sponsor of [Not a Newsletter](#) since 2019, and I use Revue to send a newsletter tied to my personal blog on [danoshinsky.com](#). I'm a member of the affiliate programs for Chamaileon, ConvertKit, Sparkloop, and Stripo, and do receive a small commission for new customers who sign up via my affiliate links for those services.*