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TECHNOLOGY WEEKLY

How to select an email service provider

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This week, Karen Broderick, Marketing Communication Manager at Harveys looks at the process Harvey's used in order to select its email service provider and how they took their final decision.

Being a marketing manager of a large retail organisation means I'm constantly being bombarded with sales messages from various companies wanting to sell me their products and services. It can be tiring at times, making sure we keep abreast of the latest developments in technology and strategic thinking but without losing sight of our real objective which is to ensure our marketing messages reaches our existing and prospective customers.

Earlier this year, we started out on a path to select an email service provider. As per our existing marketing activity, we're constantly on the lookout and exploring new ways to increase our brand affinity as well as developing long term customer loyalty. We identified email as a key channel that could help us achieve this. We wanted a provider that had a strong understanding of our sector, retail and with the expertise in house that meant they could work with our internal teams to implement a customer contact strategy. Critically for us, it was important to have a provider on board who would not only help us deliver our email marketing campaigns, but who would be able to keep us updated on the best practice, compliance and forward thinking from the sector.

When selecting a provider, it's important to have a clear idea of exactly what you're after and what you want to achieve from the relationship. As simple as it sounds, ensuring you have the answers ready to hand to the questions below will put you in a greater position to sift through the various providers out there and identify those that meet your needs.

- What are we trying to achieve from our email marketing campaigns?
- How will this complement our existing marketing activity?
- Are we looking for multiple email designs for various campaigns? Or a consistent template?
- How many emails do we want to send out?
- Where will we get email addresses and permissions from?

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Web Designer Network

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Retail Graphic Designer Network

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In addition, design a pitch process that is tailored for your individual needs as identified through the questions above. Look for the following factors in each providers offering:


- Types of services and solutions offered
- Commitment to deliverability
- Product features, flexibility and functionality
- Reporting Capabilities
- Integration with other applications
- Training and support offered

Whilst a regimented pitch process is best method for some companies, we found it equally effective to develop a list of requirements and then divide them into the minimum and the extras. Obviously, price plays an important role here but it helps to be clear from the onset what you're not willing to compromise on.

With our list of requirements to hand, we held various meetings with suppliers who each came to us with various different benefits. Many companies are often torn between looking for a specialist email service provider or going for a full service agency. In our experience we found that many full service agencies work with specialist ESPs behind the scenes anyway and we keen to work directly with the specialists and benefit from their greater level of expertise. I also tend to have greater confidence that a specialist in this case would be able to maximize my deliverability and also increase our sender reputation.

Make sure you allow enough time to see the pitch process through right from developing your list of requirements to the final decision. In the end our entire process took around three months. A priority for us was ensuring that found a provider that was a true partner to us rather than having someone uin place for a specific date, although obviously that's important as well. We wanted to ensure we could develop the most effective working relationship with our chosen provider not only for our immediate needs but for the future as well and this takes time.

In the end we chose email marketing company eCircle. By following the process outlined above, it was clear that not only did they meet all our technical and strategic needs, but their proven track record in the retail industry meant they intricately understood the challenges we faced. Throughout the process they demonstrated a strong understanding of the fast paced nature of our business and identified not only how they could deliver on our existing strategy but also how they could help us to stretch and grow our e-marketing activity in the future.

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