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Remarkable Truth on B2B Email Address Quality

A Fresh Review

Email address quality has never been more important than it is today. With ISPs and companies continuing to tighten the reins on which email communications get delivered and which get discarded, B2B marketers face difficult and complex challenges. Effective January 1, 2020, the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) will be granting rights to California residents to demand disclosure on how their personally identifiable information (PII) is shared and used for business purposes. Online targeting, identity graphs, and the increasing need for one-to-one marketing communications, however, are all dependent on some form of PII in order to be effective.

So, what is the solution?

The email address is at the top of the list for enabling cost-effective, measurable B2B advertising. Without it, there is limited access to professional communications and linkage across channels and sources. However, the quality of email addresses is highly dependent on their original source, recency and method acquired. Accordingly, serious problems arise without a robust process to verify the quality and accuracy of business email addresses, but how do you know if that process is reliable?

There is no shortcut to answering that question, but if you want to responsibly drive the highest returns from your email marketing programs, then please read on.

Having requested hundreds of email data verification jobs over the years, I was intrigued about the varied results from providers. How do I know if an email address is truly a spam trap? How can I confirm that an email address represents a person with a high propensity to complain or unsubscribe? What if the email verification process resulted in the flagging of safe emails as bad (false negatives), or unsafe emails as valid (false positives)? The easy way, is to trust the output, accept the information provided and move on. This is riskier than you think, especially if you must live with the consequences.

Unfortunately, the process of properly cleaning, correcting, and validating the delivery of email addresses is easier said than done and will never be perfect. Therefore, any valid assessment of service providers and their email verification processes must be conducted in that context.

Programmatic B2B ran a head-to-head test with three email verification service providers. The first company is a leader in data-driven digital marketing with several complementary solutions, including email verification services. The second company is FreshAddress, LLC (FreshAddress), known amongst industry peers as the premiere leader in this category of email data services. The third company is another leading global provider of email verification service, with pricing consistent with the US industry average.

Advertisers need to be assured that their email addresses are active and deliverable to their intended recipients. If this does not happen, then there could be negative consequences that lead to 'blacklisting' or at the very least, poor return-on-ad spend (ROAS).

Provided below is the analysis that Programmatic B2B performed on these three providers:

The file evaluated was a marketing professionals' database with full contact record including email address for 61,731 individuals. This file was constructed by pulling all available records for marketing professionals employed by companies listed as the top 200 advertisers in 2019. The file also included a dozen data-driven marketing agencies where Programmatic B2B has existing relationships. This helped prove out the validity of the results without having to conduct additional research.

Here are the results:

Category	Incumbent ESP	FreshAddress	Global Supplier
Gross Input Quantity	61,731	61,731	61,731
DMA Suppression	N/A	39	N/A
Spam Trap	69	29	N/A
Invalid Email	1,841	4,716	12,059
Suspect Email	123	57	N/A
Format Issue	7	3	N/A
Domain Issue	13,740	174	104
Unsubscribe	305	N/A	N/A
Complaints	224	1	N/A
Role Account	N/A	4	N/A
Unknown	1,958	N/A	3,941
Net Output Quantity	43,464	56,708	45,627
<i>Catch All</i>	34,552	N/A	15,845
<i>Valid Email</i>	8,912	44,733	29,782
<i>Valid Email Guarantee</i>	N/A	11,975	N/A

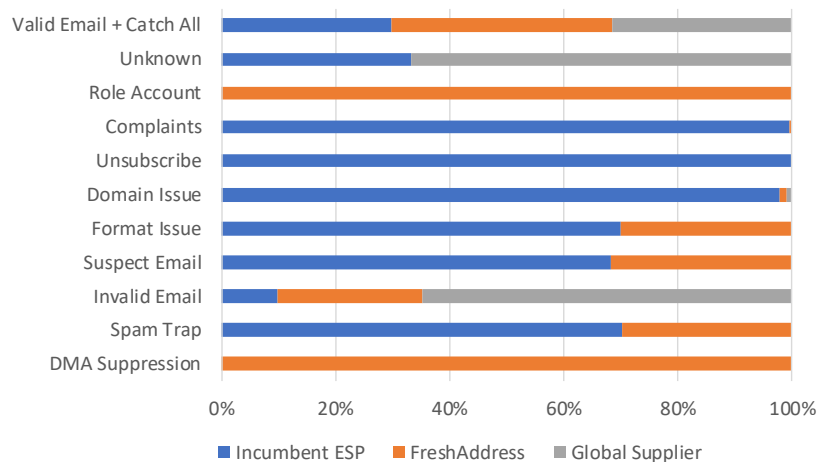
The immediate takeaway here is that email verification service providers vary greatly in their methodology. The Incumbent ESP placed significant emphasis on the inability to deliver to specific corporate domains, while adding value by sharing information regarding opt-outs and complaints from campaign activity.

FreshAddress emphasized their commitment to privacy by matching records against the DMA’s Email Preference Service (eMPS) suppression file, and to for identifying spam traps and invalid email addresses by maintaining a robust network of sources.

The Global Supplier appears to place greater emphasis on the technical aspects of delivery by verifying an email address without sending an email message (pinging). Pinging is not always effective at conclusively determining if a mailbox exists or not, so additional efforts are required to have a reliable process.

As for an industry standard for email address verification, we have a long way to go. Clearly, we are working with three unique marketing data services providers with different processes.

A deeper look at the results reveals the **remarkable truth about email quality** and the service providers who help us improve it. Let’s start with spam traps.



Spam traps are faceless hazards for email marketers, regardless of reputation. Their intent is to catch malicious senders, but reputable senders can be snared as well. It’s not uncommon to be tagged guilty when innocent or simply negligent. If this happens, your sender reputation will be negatively impacted, which at a minimum will make it difficult to get your marketing emails delivered to the inboxes of intended recipients. More likely, if your spam traps are controlled by any of the leading spam-filtering organizations like Spamhaus¹, then your entire email marketing program will quickly grind to a halt.

Therefore, an understanding of spam traps is essential to recognizing the relative value of email verification services providers.

The Test Results for Spam Traps

Although the incumbent ESP identified 69 spam traps and FreshAddress identified 28, it is the accuracy of the results that matters most. A deeper investigation is needed here to compare the efficacy of the processes, so we randomly (max 1 per domain) selected 10 email addresses from each provider that were flagged as spam traps. Note that identification of spam traps was only provided by the Incumbent ESP and FreshAddress.

Here are the results, with email addresses suppressed for privacy purposes:

Email Address	Flagged Spam Trap	Review
xxxx@espn.com	Incumbent ESP	VP of Communication, ESPN: determined SafeToSend email address of this individual by FreshAddress.
xxxx@chwab.com	FreshAddress	chwab.com is a domain reported as catch-all by Incumbent ESP. This domain is invalid and likely a typo trap owned by Spamhaus.
xxxx@apple.com	Incumbent ESP	Senior Communications Manager, Apple: determined valid email address of this individual by FreshAddress.
xxxx@edq.com	FreshAddress	Domain reported as catch all by the Incumbent ESP. The domain is for Experian Data Quality, so the risk is high given the potential for this individual email address to be part of the Spamhaus network.
xxxx@marriott.com	Incumbent ESP	Event Administrator, Marriott: determined valid email address for this individual by FreshAddress.
xxxx@howardpress.com	FreshAddress	Domain reported as catch all by Incumbent ESP. Howard Press is a FedEx company, but the domain is not active. This could be a trap.
xxxx@dowjones.com	Incumbent ESP	Graphic Designer, Dow Jones: determined valid email for this individual by FreshAddress.
xxxx@waltdisneymuseum.org	FreshAddress	Email reported valid by Incumbent ESP. The domain is correct for the website and there is an associated contact identity; nevertheless, spam traps must be valid emails in order to work.
xxxx@us.ibm.com	Incumbent ESP	Former IBM employee: this was determined an invalid email address by FreshAddress, but not spam trap.
xxxx@hmiservices.com	FreshAddress	Email text flagged as 'bad word' by Incumbent ESP, but domain is valid. It is an invalid email address that may have been recycled as a spam trap as the associated contact left firm in May 2017. ²

Of the 69 email addresses flagged by the incumbent as spam traps, five of them were flagged by FreshAddress as invalid emails and therefore couldn't possibly be spam traps. The remaining 64 email addresses were valid by FreshAddress. They were not spam traps, honeypots or email addresses with high complaint rates, but a couple of them could possibly bounce. Furthermore, 18 of these emails were approved by FreshAddress for its SafeToSend guarantee (deliverable, safe and accurate).

Programmatic B2B took additional steps to research more of these contacts to confirm their employment and job functions via company directories and/or LinkedIn, proving them to mirror the pattern of the examples above.

It is important to note that **no service can identify every spam trap**, because it is impossible to do so given the volume of recycled emails and ability to create spam traps that mirror valid email addresses. FreshAddress does claim that they have processed over 11 billion email addresses through its SafeToSend service, so they are working diligently to prove me wrong.

Nevertheless, it is clear from this review that FreshAddress has done their homework with continuous improvement since the company was founded by Bill Kaplan 20 years ago. Bill was also the leader of the MIT Blackjack Team, featured in the bestseller, "Bringing Down the House," and the blockbuster movie, "21." His quantitative approach to mastering blackjack, now applied to email address hygiene, is now paying off for top advertisers like AAA, Disney, Honda, Petco, Staples and many more.

The Test Results for Privacy

Although spam traps can be the most detrimental to an organization's IP reputation, consumer privacy and compliance are of greatest importance to your audience. Therefore, Programmatic B2B also pulled the list of email contacts flagged for [eMPS](#) – the DMA's Email Preference Service. Here are those results:

FreshAddress matched 39 of the 61,731 records input to individuals who have registered their email address with eMPS. DMA Members who wish to send unsolicited commercial email are strongly encouraged to purge their e-mail prospecting lists of these records.

On the other hand, the Incumbent ESP coded those same eMPS records as follows:

Bad Domain = 14, Catch All = 14, Invalid Email = 3, Unknown = 1, Unsubscribe = 3 and Valid = 4

The Global Provider reported those same eMPS records as follows:

Catch All = 7, Invalid Email = 3, Unknown = 3 and Valid = 26

Note that 'Bad Domain' here is a term to reflect any domain that has a low delivery rate. This could be due to corporate spam filters, especially given the fact that the top 200 US advertisers represent several of the largest global brands and corporate enterprises. Therefore, in most cases there is nothing wrong with the domain itself and it could reflect the ESP sending high volume campaigns and getting blocked. Nevertheless, the takeaway here is that the DMA eMPS suppression file was only applied by FreshAddress.

Role Accounts

One additional verification category that FreshAddress provided was that of role accounts. A role account is assigned to a generic email address lacking personalization. An example of a role account is accounting@programmaticb2b.com. This is an active and valid email account, but it is not personalized. Of the four role accounts that FreshAddress provided, only one of them was truly generic.

Here they are:

1. publicrelations@subway.com (true role account)
2. store@domain.com (first initial is S; last name is Tore)
3. charity@domain.com (first name is Charity)
4. award@domain.com (first initial is A; last name is Ward)

You can still send email to role accounts but, given that these often go to many more people than simply the original subscriber, you risk generating an inordinate number of spam complaints, which will hurt your overall deliverability. “Better safe than sorry” generally applies here, even when personalization is not a factor in the creative. For example, the public relations email for Subway had a high complaint rate matched to it by the Incumbent ESP. When identified correctly, true role accounts are probably worth suppressing.

The Seed Factor

Programmatic B2B seeded the file to uncover any practices that needed to be further reviewed. A couple, highly relevant insights were gained by doing this.

1. **The Sydney Set-up:** Sydney is a one-year old, 5 lb., apricot, miniature poodle with no other PII assigned to her. The fictitious email address, syd@programmaticb2b.com was seeded on her behalf. Both FreshAddress and the Incumbent ESP flagged the email address as valid. Hey, nobody’s perfect – even those who can take on Trump at the blackjack table. However, the Global Supplier scores on this one, by determining that the *‘mailbox does not exist’*. The insight here is that, with no other known issues a safe domain will likely indicate a valid email; two of the fictitious email seeds (Syd and another Canadian email) were coded as valid. By the way, none of the three test participants flagged the fictitious Canadian email address (seed) as invalid.
2. **Bad Words or Good Contacts:** Included in the seed list were 7 email addresses known to be safe based on recent email correspondence and a personal relationship. Of those seven, FreshAddress returned them all as valid emails. However, the incumbent flagged one of the emails as ‘Bad Word’ – likely to be based on a text algorithm. The Global Provider coded this email address as ‘Unverifiable’ (Unknown). Only FreshAddress accurately coded the same email as valid and SafeToSend; the email address is for a current Programmatic B2B contact at Infogroup.



Wrapping Up

So, what is the remarkable truth about email quality? Confirmed opt-in at the point of registration is the only guaranteed assurance that your email database is clean and deliverable. However, depending on your business use, you can lose up to 90 percent of your file by forcing of a confirmed opt-in process – it’s just an unrealistic expectation unless you’re required by law to do so (CASL). Even using confirmed opt-in, valid email addresses turn bad up to 20 percent or more per year.

For that and other reasons we've explored, utilizing the right email address hygiene, correction, and validation provider is extremely important for keeping your database fresh.

There are hundreds of email verification providers out there, but many of them are simply performing a pinging service or reselling the services of others. Pinging services are unable to resolve catch-all and accept-all domains and are lacking relative to many of the major consumer domains as well. This is particularly true with regards to the Oath (Verizon Media) domains, which include Yahoo, AOL and Verizon. Furthermore, as demonstrated, properly identifying the spam traps in your file can make or break your email marketing program – and potentially your business at large.

The bottom line is this. Do not make decisions based on price or how impressed you are with the presentation of the service. It is essential that you review the output of any email verification providers you are working with and ask the tough questions. Your job and your company's livelihood depend on this. Navigating the rocky waters of email deliverability isn't easy but with companies like FreshAddress at the helm, you will be able to rest much easier knowing you will be able to see those Spamhaus icebergs before they sink you.

¹Spamhaus (www.spamhaus.org) is an international organization, based in both London and Geneva, founded in 1998 by Steve Linford to track email spammers and spam-related activity.

²Spamhaus spam traps primarily consist of old email addresses, closed domains and domain typo traps.