

# Real-Time Email Address Validation: Build or Buy?

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You've spent countless hours working on your email campaigns — choosing just the right timing, crafting and re-crafting your content and creative both for the email as well as the landing pages, making sure every marketing dollar invested will yield you the highest possible return. Now you're ready to let it fly. But are you? How many of the resulting online email registrations for which you've worked so hard and paid so much will contain typos or, worse yet, malicious email addresses?

Market research as well as our company's experience over the last 7 years indicate that anywhere from 5-25% of email addresses entered on websites are erroneous or malicious. This can be quite costly to a marketer in the form of wasted marketing dollars, lost or unhappy customers, spam traps, and potential ISP blacklisting, all of which lead down the same road — LOST NET REVENUE!

Given that you've done everything else right, don't ignore the last step: optimizing your landing pages to verify and spell-check email address entries.

The solution: validation technology that will enable you to catch email address errors in real-time.

## What is Real-Time Email Validation?

Email address validation technology is an effective and user-friendly way to keep your email database clean from the get-go by catching and correcting invalid and problematic entries instantaneously at the point of registration on your website or web-enabled POS or call center terminals.

But what's the surest, most cost-effective way to implement this solution? Build or buy?

## BUILD: Developing Email Validation Technology In-House

Building a truly effective, user-friendly real-time email validation tool is an ambitious task for any IT and Marketing department.

First and foremost, you must ensure there is 100% buy-in from both your Marketing and IT departments on this project — including development, implementation, and ongoing maintenance.

Second, confirm your developers and programmers have a solid understanding of email addressing standards and practices, access to a sizeable, robust database of common addressing errors, advanced coding experience, and a firm commitment to quality and accuracy. Typical IT requirements to build a robust email validation platform include:

1. A clear understanding of email addressing standards and practices:
  - Familiarity with appropriate RFC standards
  - Active monitoring of forums that discuss changes to allowable email addressing formats (universal & by individual ISPs)
  - Knowledge of incoming emails & required code adjustments for deviations from standards
  - Monitoring of appropriate national and international bodies that maintain authoritative lists of top-level domains

2. The development and maintenance of sizeable, robust databases of common addressing errors, including:
  - Characters that should never be in an email address (e.g. "EOF")
  - Characters that are unlikely to be in an email address (e.g. "www")
  - Common typographical characters, based on position in the email address (e.g. "fjones2hotmail.com")
  - Handles that you never want to message (e.g. "spam")
  - Domains that are commonly used for bogus registrations (e.g. "test.com")
  - Domains that are used for masking or faking an email address (e.g. "mailinator.com")
  - Closed domains / ISPs that are out of business (e.g. "home.com")
  - Known high-risk email addresses (e.g. the email addresses of activists who have complained or sued companies for sending them email)
  - Known unwitting-target email addresses (e.g. email addresses of public figures and others likely to be signed up without their permission)
  - Known spamtrap email addresses
  - Common domain typos and corrections (e.g. "hotmial.com")
  - Common top-level domain typos and corrections (e.g. ".cmo")
  - Deliverability history and popularity ranking of domains (so when two different corrections are possible, the more likely recommendation can be implemented.)
  - Irregular addresses (addresses that are allowable even if one of the above rules is triggered)

3. A commitment to ongoing monitoring and maintenance to ensure quality and accuracy:
  - Tracking acceptance and rejection rates of each typo/correction maintained
  - Automatic flagging for manual review any values with unacceptable rejection rates
  - Manual review of all sensitive values on a routine basis
  - Manual review of all flagged values and performance of necessary research to ensure accuracy (e.g. call ISP, send test messages, etc)
  - Maintenance of logs of each manual review

A final requirement to building a real-time email validation system in-house is confirming that the system meet the needs of the marketer. Is the look and feel of the registration page consistent with the brand? If you employ an error message, is the text user-friendly and personalized? Is the platform compatible with your existing CRM system? Are the necessary metrics in place so you can monitor the success of the system – e.g.: number of validations, % of errors/problems, list of corrections made, etc?

There are several advantages to building in-house, including:

***Flexibility.***

Building any technology in-house will provide you with more control over every aspect of the process, from the original specifications to the actual coding to the look and feel of the end product.

***Continuity.***

If you build it, you will own it and will be able to easily modify the coding as necessary and quickly fix any technical problems as they arise.

***Vested Interests.***

Inside staffers have a vested interest in the success of your company. Given the time and resources, they will undoubtedly produce an excellent product. Outside vendors will also have an interest in ensuring your satisfaction; however, they have many clients with differing demands, which will ultimately drive the direction of their baseline technology.

However, despite these advantages, based on the requirements outlined above, you can imagine how intensive and expensive it can be for a company to build an effective, user-friendly real-time email address validation service.

Your alternative: outsource the technology to a reputable and experienced vendor.

## Buy: Implementing Email Validation Technology Through a Reputable Vendor

Outsourcing is becoming increasingly popular as businesses are focusing more and more on core competencies. Outside vendors can offer unique benefits when used and managed properly:

### **Cost Savings.**

Outside vendors offer economies of scale that companies often can't realize themselves. Vendors can typically replicate and/or customize a standard service at a much lower cost than companies could do on their own. As indicated above, a significant investment of time and money is required to develop a robust real-time email validation system in-house.

### **Faster Implementation.**

Given an outside vendor's competency and experience, implementation time is typically a fraction of what it would be if the technology were built in-house. Turnkey solutions are often available and ready to implement at a moment's notice.

### **Reduced Burden on Internal Resources.**

By outsourcing a project of such substantial size and scope, companies can invest valuable time, money, and technical resources in other projects that are tied more directly to their core businesses and technical competencies.

### **Mitigated Risk.**

No individual company has expertise and experience in every technology they need to employ. The key to success is to complement your strengths with the strengths and capabilities of trusted partners, thereby speeding time-to-market and reducing your overall risk exposure.

When evaluating whether and how to outsource, consider the following:

1. Determine if outsourcing is right for your company:
  - a. Do Marketing and IT decision-makers support the large scope of this project, and is the development and maintenance of this technology considered a high priority?
  - b. Considering the requirements detailed in the first section of this paper, does your in-house IT department have the capability, bandwidth, and budget to build the technology themselves?

If your answer is **no** to either of the above questions, then your company is a strong candidate for outsourcing real-time email validation technology.
2. If you choose to outsource, take the time to find the right partner:
  - a. Get vested parties (e.g. Marketing, IT) involved early on in the process.
  - b. Do your homework by conducting a thorough review of vendors' reputations and processes before signing on with a partner:
    - **Reputation:**  
Look for testimonials, references, and a credible partner and client list.
    - **Price:**  
The least expensive solution is not always the best solution, so be sure you know exactly how the vendor is providing you quality service and results for that bargain-basement price.
    - **Experience:**  
Knowledge, expertise and hands-on experience are crucial. Ask how long they've been in business, which professional associations they belong to, what kind of industry presence they have, and what other services they offer. The last thing you want to do is implement a solution that is either not supported, not kept up-to-date with the latest hygiene and suppression processes, or one that might disappear overnight - Don't risk being a

guinea pig for some fly-by-night company.

- **Data Cleaning/Hygiene:**  
Ensure the vendor offers list hygiene as a separate service and has a robust and up-to-date knowledgebase to support it. Without this, it's tough for a vendor to substantiate claims that they can effectively and cost-efficiently identify and correct email address errors.
- **Reporting:**  
Find out about content and frequency of reports.
- **Data Protection:**  
Ask how your data is protected throughout the process, and thoroughly read all contracts to ensure you understand what will happen.
- **Legal Compliance:**  
Your vendor should adhere to all CAN-SPAM regulations, including FCC Wireless Domains and the DMA Do-Not-Email guidelines. Your vendor should also offer the capability to catch malicious and/or abusive email addresses that may be prevalent in your industry.
- **Vigilance:**  
Good vendors are as careful about their client's reputation as they are about their own.

buy it?" Building an in-house solution may require a significant investment of time and money, while providing you with greater control over the technical specifications and more flexibility for future modifications. Outsourcing a solution through a reputable and experienced vendor will enable you to leverage others' expertise and experience in this area, speed implementation, and save you considerable money that can best be spent elsewhere. The key is to select the right provider who will provide you with a state-of-the-art service for many years to come.

Whatever decision you make, make it now. The costs of waiting are simply too great to ignore.



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## The Question's Not "If?" But "How?"

The costs and potential lost revenues from improper email address registration are substantial. In contrast to the early days of the Internet, companies no longer have the luxury of an endless, free stream of website visitors who are enchanted by the novelty of signing up for everything offered online. Moreover, ISPs' blocking technologies and parameters are tightening, forcing even the most reputable marketers to vigilantly monitor their email efforts to ensure deliverability. High bounce rates, excessive "This is Spam" clicks, and the existence of spamtraps can bring your entire email marketing program to a grinding halt, costing thousands, even millions, of dollars, depending on your company size.

The need for real-time email address validation is clear. The question is "Should I build it in-house or