

2026 EMAIL MARKETING SYSTEM COMPARISON GUIDE

A plain-English comparison for
small business owners and not-for-
profits planning smarter systems
for 2026



INTRODUCTION

Overwhelmed by Email Marketing Systems?

This guide is for you if...

- You've been using MailChimp and are frustrated by recent changes, restrictions, or rising costs
- You're currently emailing from Gmail or Outlook and know it's time to get more strategic
- You've been researching email marketing systems and now feel overwhelmed by choice
- You're worried about picking the wrong system and having to migrate everything again later
- You want better value for money, clearer data, and systems that will support your growth in 2026 and beyond

If any of that sounds familiar, you're not alone, and you're not behind.

But let's be clear...this is not about finding the cheapest or no-cost solution out there.

You're not doing this as a hobby. You need to invest money in tools and systems for your business, and this includes your email marketing.

But you don't want to be pouring good money down the drain on the latest shiny object that promises to fix ALL your problems.

It needs to suit:

- your overall business operations needs (how you deliver your products or services to your leads and customers)
- Your current budget and planned cash flow
- The size and scale of your business while also having the ability to grow with you.

You're not imagining it: why email marketing feels harder right now

Many small business owners and not-for-profits (NFPs) have been caught off guard by changes to email platforms; particularly **MailChimp's free plan**, which has become increasingly restrictive.

For some, this has meant:

- automations you counted on suddenly being disabled
- tight limits on contacts
- pressure to upgrade with little notice
- panic to find alternatives

At the same time, people who've been emailing from Gmail or Outlook are realising those tools weren't designed for email marketing; especially when it comes to automation, insights, and growth.

This combination has created a lot of stress, urgency, overwhelm and decision fatigue.

This guide is designed to help you make a **considered, confident choice for 2026** - not a rushed one.

What most small businesses and NFPs actually need from an email marketing system

You don't need every feature under the sun. Most micro to small business owners and NFPs are simply looking for a system that supports consistent, effective communication; without unnecessary complexity.

Here are the core capabilities that matter, explained in plain English:

Email broadcasts

Send one email to many people at once without BCCs, daily limits, or worrying about deliverability.

Tags

Simple labels you can apply to contacts so you know *why* they joined your list or what they're interested in.

Automations

Emails that send automatically when something happens; for example, when someone signs up, downloads a freebie, purchases something or clicks on a link. This saves time and ensures people receive the right message at the right time.

Email analytics

Clear insights into what's working - opens, clicks, and engagement - so you're not guessing.

Room to grow (without migrating again)

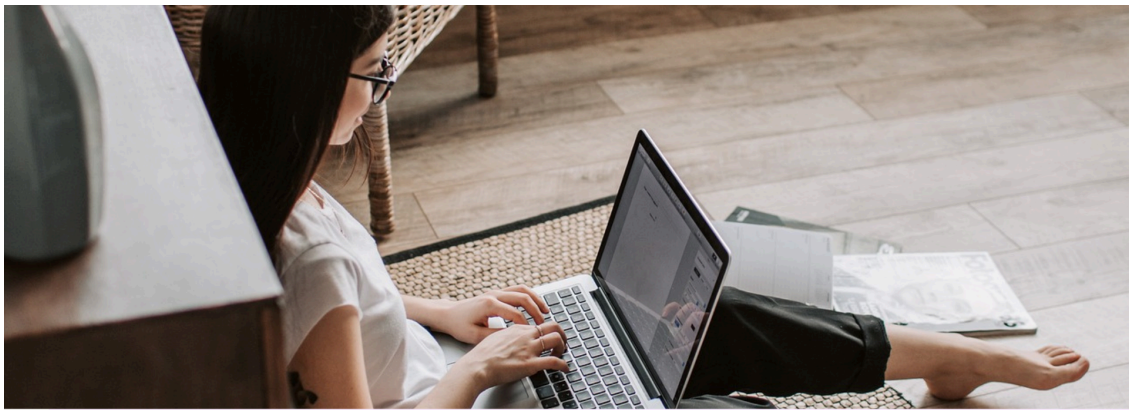
Choose a system that gives you space to grow **without surprise costs or forced upgrades**.

Your number of contacts drives your costs

Many platforms increase your monthly fee every time your contact list grows, sometimes by as little as **1,000 subscribers**. This means a successful launch or free challenge can increase your software costs overnight.

List growth for small businesses is often *fast*, not gradual. When growth is penalised, it creates stress around something that should feel exciting.

A future-ready system allows you to grow confidently, knowing one successful campaign won't immediately push you into a higher pricing tier.



Check yourself - is fear driving your decision?

Don't be held back from telling people about your newsletter, your new course or VIP package. Picking the right email marketing system will help you make a smarter investment.

The higher your contact numbers, the more people you can nurture and show your offers to, and the greater your revenue could be - which helps to pay for your investment in tools and systems so you can:

- Free up your time through automating niggly admin tasks
- Create more mental space to get into creative mode and focus on what you do best
- Be present when family, life and emergencies happen, knowing your business will keep serving your leads and customers.

Email Marketing System Comparison (2026 Snapshot of Free and Starter Plans)

Platform	Free Plan	No of Contacts	Monthly Emails	Free Trial Days	No of Contacts	Monthly Emails	Monthly Cost 1,000 -> 5,000 contacts
Brevo	Yes	2,000	300 p/day	N/A	2,000	100,000	A\$12
Gmail / Outlook	Yes	N/A	~500 p/day	N/A	N/A	N/A	From approx A\$12+
MailerLite	Yes	500	12,000	14	Limited	Limited	USD\$15 -> USD\$39
ActiveCampaign	No	N/A	N/A	14	1,000	10,000	A\$23 ->A\$119
HubSpot	Yes*	0*	0*	30	1,000	5,000	A\$24
Systeme.io	Yes	2000	Unlimited	N/A	5,000	Unlimited	USD\$17
Flodesk	Yes*	Unlimited	0	14	25,000	Unlimited	USD\$19 -> USD\$66
MailChimp	Yes	250	500	14	50,000	500,000	A\$39 -> A\$111
Klaviyo	Yes	250	500	0	1,000	10,000	USD\$30 -> USD\$100
Kit	Yes	10,000	Unlimited	14	95,000	Unlimited	USD\$39 -> USD\$89
HighLevel (GHL)	No	N/A	N/A	14	Unlimited	Unlimited	USD\$97

+ You can purchase Google Workspace or MS365 Business for increased contact/email allowances, but without marketing tools/analytics.

* Flodesk and Hubspot don't allow sending of email broadcasts on their free plan, only collection of contacts.

PLATFORM DEEP DIVES

Systeme.io (recommended)

Best for: Micro to small businesses wanting simplicity, value, and room to grow

Systeme.io is an all-in-one platform that combines email marketing with tools many businesses eventually need, without forcing you to pay for multiple subscriptions.

Strengths

- Ability to use every feature on the Free Plan
- Unlimited monthly emails
- Generous contact limits
- Automations and tagging
- Excellent value for money
- Active support options - knowledge base, email support, free Facebook group

Extra Inclusions

- Websites and blogs
- Sales funnels (opt-ins, upsells, downsells)
- Online courses and digital products
- Forms and pop-up windows
- Event bookings, webinars, basic CRM, communities
- Simply connect Stripe or PayPal to take payments

Plans worth knowing about

- **Free forever:** up to 2,000 contacts, unlimited emails, one tag, one automation.
- **Startup plan:** up to 5,000 contacts, unlimited emails, ten tags, ten automations.

Why I recommend it

From a tech consultant's perspective, Systeme.io offers one of the lowest-stress growth paths available. You're not boxed in early, and you're far less likely to need to migrate again as your business evolves.

This is especially valuable for Australian small business owners and NFPs wanting predictable costs and fewer moving parts.

MailerLite

Best for: Email-first businesses wanting a clean, modern interface

MailerLite is a solid option if your needs are mostly limited to email campaigns and basic automation.

Pros

- Clean design
- Good deliverability
- Straightforward automations
- Connect your Stripe account for payments

Cons

- No pre-designed templates on free plan
- Costs increase as your list grows
- More than double the cost per month of Systeme.io for 5000 contacts, with less sales and marketing features
- Digital products must be created in Stripe, not in Mailerlite
- May require adding other tools later

Extra inclusions

- Websites and blogs
- Sales funnels
- Digital products (limited to 3 products, upgrade required for more products)

If you only need simple emails, don't have a growing need for digital product sales and are happy to create your emails from scratch, Mailerlite could be a good fit.

Flodesk

Best for: Design-focused businesses where aesthetics are the priority

Flodesk is loved for its beautiful templates and simplicity.

Pros

- Stunning email designs
- Very easy to use
- Pre-built automations

Cons

- Limited tagging / segmentation
- Not suited to complex journeys
- Free plan only allows collecting emails - no sending emails to your list
- Extra inclusions for eCommerce (sales funnels, product sales, etc) only available on advanced level Pro plan.
- Flat-rate pricing is no longer available to new users.

Extra inclusions

- None included in their Starter level plan (i.e. their "Lite" plan).

If visual branding is everything and your email needs are simple, Flodesk can be a good fit.

ActiveCampaign

Best for: Businesses needing advanced segmentation and complex automation

ActiveCampaign is powerful - but that power comes with complexity.

Pros

- Very advanced automation
- Deep segmentation

Cons

- Steep learning curve
- Often more than small businesses actually need
- Extra inclusions for eCommerce (sales funnels, product sales, etc) only available on advanced level Plus plan or above.
- Significantly higher costs compared with Systeme.io - A\$23 per month for up to 1,000 contacts, from A\$119 per month for 5,000 contacts

(Prices and contact limits as at 25 January 2026)

Extra inclusions

- Can be linked with a separate website platform like WordPress, Wix, Squarespace (additional cost for chosen platform).
- Can be linked with a separate eCommerce platform like Shopify, Square, WooCommerce (additional cost for chosen platform).

For many micro/small businesses and NFPs, it's more system than necessary.

A note on Mailchimp

MailChimp isn't a bad platform; but it's no longer well aligned with the needs of many small businesses and NFPs.

Recent changes have created friction, stress, and unexpected limitations for users who relied on its free or lower-cost plans. For many, this guide exists because that alignment has shifted.

MY RECOMMENDATION FOR 2026

If you want:

- predictable costs
- generous contact limits
- unlimited monthly emails
- room to grow without migrating again
- fewer tools to manage

Systeme.io is the strongest all-round choice for most small businesses and NFPs.

You can start on the **Free plan**, try everything out, make sales, and upgrade to the Starter plan when you're ready. There's no risk of forgetting to cancel or being charged unexpectedly.

Try Systeme.io

You can road test Systeme.io properly - without pressure.

- No credit card required
- Unlimited emails
- Easy to upgrade when your business is ready

✨ [Start with Systeme.io using my link](#) ✨

And if you'd rather not set it up yourself, I also offer done-for-you Systeme.io setup services so everything is configured correctly from the start.

You don't need to figure this out alone.

HEY THERE, I'M INES!

I help solo business owners grow their impact, increase their income and lower their stress levels with my love of tech, systems and strategy and use plain English to explain it all.

I love working with heart-centred women to create powerful transformations for their clients - being able to co-create and witness the magic that occurs.

Why me? While I love a bit of woo-woo, sparkles and all things Human Design, I also bring the practicalities and implementation to the table, with over 20 years of experience in IT support, change management, contracts and purchasing; working with businesses across the not-for-profit sector, roads and transport, judicial, disability services, health and wellness, and handicraft / cottage industries.

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