Wunderkind

BUYER'S GUIDE:

Building the 2026 Marketing Tech Stack

*Why ESPs Alone Aren't Enough — and What Comes Next*

The ESP Reality Check

Email and text remain the backbone of digital marketing. For years, Email Service Providers (ESPs) have played a critical role in helping brands orchestrate campaigns, manage customer journeys, and deliver messages at scale. They are indispensable to modern marketing teams.

But by 2026, it's no longer enough to ask what your ESP can send. The more urgent question is who it can actually reach and when it can reach them.

As cookies disappear and consumers move fluidly across devices, ESPs are increasingly constrained by identity. They can only act on customers they already know. In practice, that means as much as 95% of website traffic — high-intent visitors included — remains anonymous.

The next generation of marketing stacks doesn't replace the ESP. It complements it. The future pairs best-in-class orchestration with best-in-class identity and real-time decisioning, allowing brands to recognize more people, act on real intent signals, and deliver messages that perform, at the right time — without replatforming or ripping out existing investments.
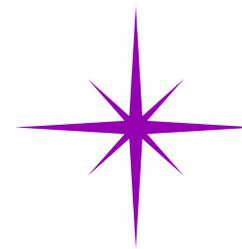
What ESPs Do Well — and Where They Fall Short

ESPs excel at orchestration. They manage flows, sends, and reporting once a user is known. But they were never built to solve identity at scale or to make real-time decisions across fragmented signals.

When identity is missing, even the best ESP stack struggles to:

- → Reach users who browse without logging in

- → Recognize customers across devices and sessions

- → Trigger messages from real-time or high-intent behavior that doesn't fit predefined rules

- → Expand audience reach without increasing send volume

- → Sustain performance as cookies and third-party identifiers disappear

This gap compounds over time. Fewer identifiable users means fewer effective triggers, which leads to heavier reliance on stale and impersonal batch messaging — often at the cost of engagement and unsubscribes.
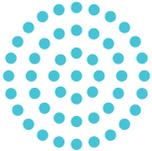
A Performance Reality Check

When identity and real-time decisioning are layered onto the ESP, performance changes materially — not marginally.

Requirement	ESP-Only Stack	ESP + Wunderkind
Identity resolution (cross-device)	Limited	3–6x more reach
AI-powered, real-time decisioning	Basic/Manual	Adaptive, dynamic
Audience expansion	Minimal	Up to 10x faster
Dynamic, multi-signal triggers	Rigid rules	Real-time, intent-driven
Cross-platform and channel	Siloed	Unified, seamless
Creative control	Yes	Yes
No replatforming required	Yes	Yes

The difference isn't more messages.
It's smarter decisioning applied to a larger, more accurate audience.

The Triggered Messaging Maturity Curve
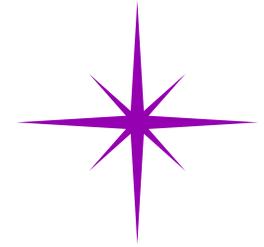
Most brands believe they are "advanced" because they run triggered campaigns.
In reality, many are stalled at early stages of maturity.

LEVEL 1

Static Triggers
Rule-based cart and browse abandonment with fixed delays. Performance depends on manual tuning and degrades over time.

LEVEL 2

Multichannel Triggers
Email and SMS are combined, but still limited to known users and rigid rules. Reach improves slightly; identity gaps remain.

LEVEL 3

Action-Aware Journeys
Behavioral data informs journeys — but only for users the ESP already recognizes. High-intent anonymous traffic is still excluded.

LEVEL 4

Identity + AI Decisioning
Identity resolution expands reach, while AI determines timing, channel, and content dynamically. Conversion rates lift 15–30%, unsubscribes drop 30%, and revenue per send rises materially.

LEVEL 5

Next-Level AI
Always-on intelligence augments traditional triggers and journeys. AI continuously evaluates real-time intent signals and determines the next-best action across channels—allowing brands to evolve beyond static flows at their own pace.

Most ESPs cap out at Level 2 or 3.
Wunderkind is purpose-built to move brands directly into Levels 4 and 5 — without replatforming.

The Identity Readiness Checklist

Before evaluating new orchestration features, brands should
ask a simpler question: *Are we identity-ready?*

Use this checklist to assess your current stack:

- ○ Can we recognize users who haven't logged in?

- ○ Do we connect behavior across devices and sessions?

- ○ Are high-intent visitors reachable even if they never cart?

- ○ Can we trigger messages from real-time behavior, not just past actions?

- ○ Do we expand our addressable audience without increasing send volume?

- ○ Can identity data activate both owned channels and paid media?

- ○ Are we resilient to cookie loss and privacy changes?

- ○ Can we measure incremental revenue from newly identified users?

If you answered "no" to more than two of these,
your ESP is likely operating without the intelligence layer it needs for 2026.
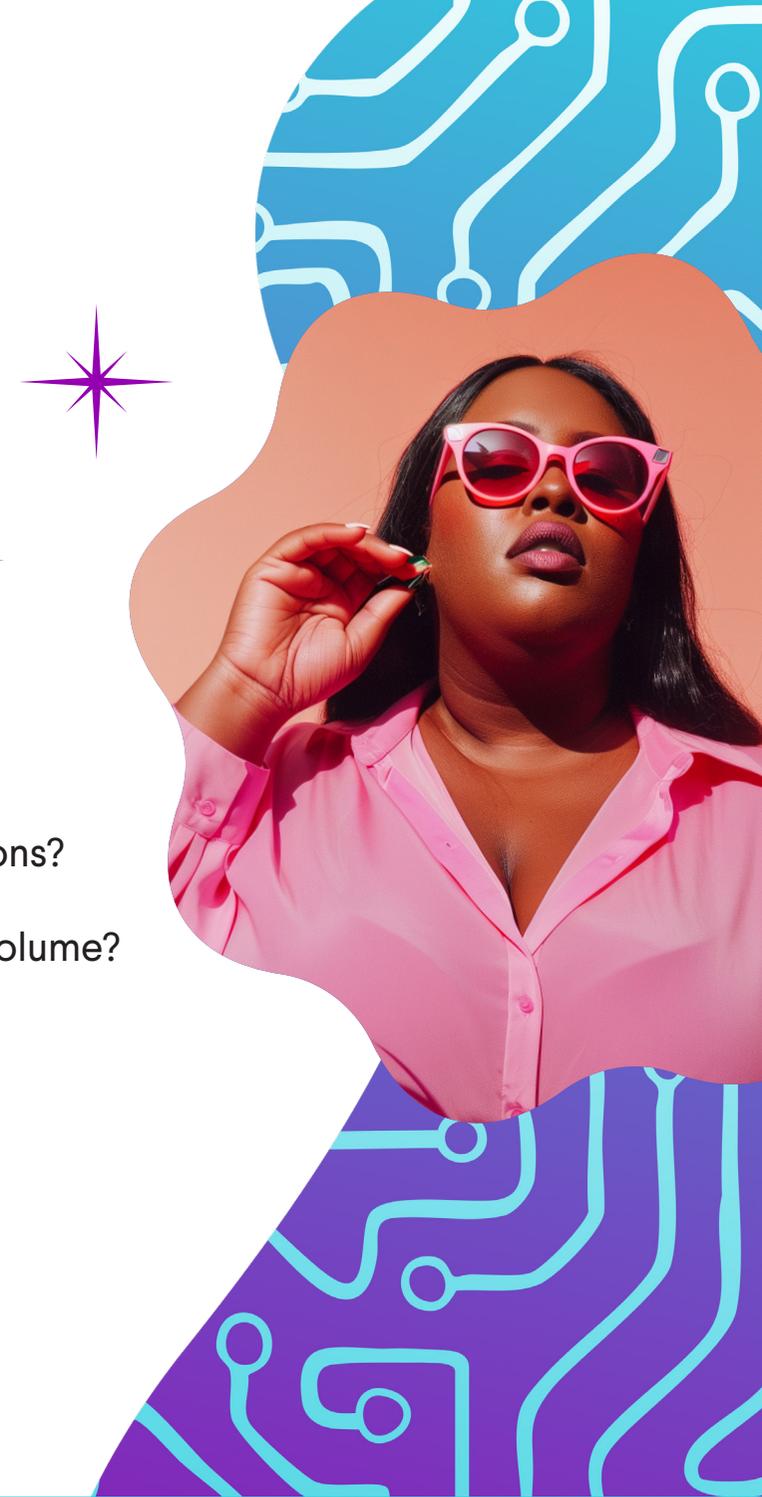
Measuring What Actually Matters

As stacks evolve, so must measurement.

Success is no longer defined by open rates alone, but by metrics that reflect expanded reach, incremental revenue, and long-term value. Brands integrating identity and AI into their ESP stack consistently see higher conversion rates, increased revenue per send, lower unsubscribe rates, faster list growth, and meaningful gains in AOV and LTV.

Wunderkind's reporting framework makes this impact visible through standardized signals reporting and customizable dashboards that span web behavior, triggered messaging, and paid media performance. The result is clearer attribution and a more accurate picture of how identity-driven orchestration drives growth.
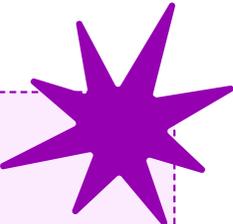
When evaluating success, focus on KPIs that reflect **expanded reach and incremental value**, including:

* **Audience expansion** (unique users reached)

* **Revenue per send**

* **Emails or texts per visit**

* **Conversion rate from triggered messages**

* **AOV for message using propensity and affinity scoring**

* **Unsubscribe rate trends**

* **Opt-in velocity** (email and SMS)

* **AOV and LTV from triggered programs**

* **Cost per purchase in paid media**

* **Share of revenue driven by triggered messaging**

These metrics reveal whether your stack is simply orchestrating — or actually learning and improving.
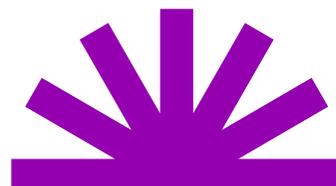
What to Look for in a 2026-Ready Tech Stack

As you plan for the next evolution of your stack, the goal isn't to replace what works — it's to extend it.

A future-ready stack should:

- ⊙ Preserve your existing ESP investment
- ⊙ Expand who you can recognize and reach
- ⊙ Adapt messaging based on live intent signals
- ⊙ Reduce operational complexity, not add to it
- ⊙ Deliver measurable revenue lift, not vanity metrics

Wunderkind as the Intelligence Layer
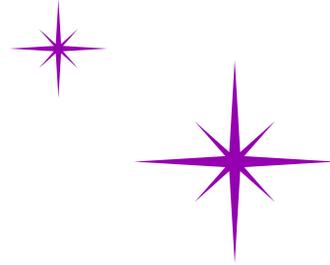
Wunderkind is not an ESP replacement. It's an intelligence layer that sits alongside your existing stack and makes it more powerful.

Integration is straightforward. Wunderkind connects to leading ESPs like Klaviyo, Salesforce, and Braze through APIs, SDKs, and real-time signals, passing enriched identity and behavioral data directly into the systems teams already use. Orchestration, reporting, and creative control remain exactly where they are today.

What changes is what the ESP can see — and what it can act on.

With Wunderkind, brands gain access to AI-powered experiences, predictive audiences, and identity-driven paid media activation, all without replatforming. Marketing teams keep full ownership of strategy and creative while benefiting from smarter decisioning behind the scenes.

Orchestration determines how you message. Identity determines who you can message. You need both to win in 2026.

Evaluating Your 2026 ESP Stack

Use this scorecard to assess whether your current or planned ESP stack is built for a post-cookie, cross-device world — or whether it's optimized for an environment that no longer exists.

X	Requirement	ESP-Only Stack	ESP + Wunderkind
☐	Identity resolution (cross-device)	Limited	3–6x more reach
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☐	Dynamic, multi-signal triggers	Rigid rules	Real-time, intent-driven
☐	Cross-platform and channel	Siloed	Unified, seamless
☐	Creative control	Yes	Yes
☐	No replatforming required	Yes	Yes
☐	Measurable revenue lift	Unproven	30–150%+

How to Use This Scorecard

If your stack scores primarily in the left column, you're optimizing orchestration for a shrinking audience.

Stacks that score in the right column combine the strengths of the ESP with identity and intelligence — expanding reach, improving performance, and future-proofing growth without replacing existing systems.

Wunderkind

Wunderkind is the leading AI-driven performance marketing solution that collects consent-based, first-party data and identifies anonymous traffic for leading brands in order to scale hyper-personalised one-to-one messages. Brands lean on the Wunderkind Identity Network, a proprietary database recognising 9 billion devices and 1 billion consumers, and observing 2 trillion digital transactions every year, to trigger the most impactful offers to their target audience at the right moment and in the right channel. This proprietary data is accessed by Wunderkind's Autonomous Marketing Platform, an AI engine that integrates seamlessly into a brand's existing ESP to boost performance across email, text and advertising channels.

Wunderkind is the only performance solution that guarantees a lift in revenue for its clients and delivers over $5 billion in directly attributable revenue annually for brands across a number of industries, often ranking as a top 3 revenue channel in clients' own analytics platforms. Brands such as HelloFresh, Omni Hotels, AAA Northeast and Clarks partner with Wunderkind to drive top-line revenue through its guaranteed results.

HELLO FRESH

MoMA

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