Constant Contact and MailChimp are the top two email marketing systems today, but how do you choose? Here is an apples-to-apples comparison:

Deliverability measures what percentage of emails sent from a campaign get into the subscribers' in-boxes. Constant Contact and MailChimp both have the highest deliverability rates in the industry: 97% and 96%-99% respectively. They use complex techniques to get emails delivered. For example, before the email is sent, these systems have tools to flag the email if it has spam triggers. Also, they both claim to be "whitelisted" by most ISPs to ensure deliverability. Both services have strict policies about list quality, which help ensure the list is truly opt-in and not just scraped or purchased. They are involved with industry groups and standards.

Social media integration means that your email campaign gets attention on Facebook, Twitter, etc. When you are ready to send your email, you get the option of propagating a link to a web-based version of the email on your social media accounts. Constant Contact posts to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and "Other" (the "AddThis" app, which adds several hundred social media platforms). MailChimp lets you auto-tweet to Twitter and auto-post to Facebook, and allows your subscribers to comment about your email on Facebook.

MailChimp's campaign archive toolbar also provides a permanent, free link to your email campaign on its server. Constant Contact will host a webpage version of your email free for 30 days, but permanent archiving costs $5/month. MailChimp's archive automatically displays a mobile-friendly version of the email to mobile users, but Constant Contact does not. And Constant Contact has no automatic way of archiving emails on your own website, but MailChimp does, and it's updated automatically whenever you send out an email campaign. MailChimp was ahead of Constant Contact in terms of usability until this past spring (2012), when Constant Contact rolled out a new interface very similar to MailChimp's. Now they are both easy to use. They both walk new users through the process of creating their first email campaign using prompts, help topics, useful on-screen explanations, and videos.

Constant Contact and MailChimp handle their lists differently. Both have the ability to segregate email lists into groups according to their interests (for example, General Interest, Health, Exercise). However, MailChimp has multiple, separate email lists with segments, while Constant Contact just has segments. When an email address is set to "do not mail" in Constant Contact, it cannot be re-entered easily. Since MailChimp has multiple lists, unsubscribing someone from one list does not remove that email addresss from the entire account.

Comparing pricing is tricky. Both have a free version: Constant Contact for 60 days under 100 contacts (unlimited email campaigns); MailChimp has a permanently-free option under 2,000 subscribers (maximum 12,000 emails/month). However, the free MailChimp does not give you access to certain tools for increasing your email's deliverability, it does not have MailChimp's "SocialPro" to analyze your subscriber's social media activity, and doesn't have auto-responders. The Constant Contact free trial ends quickly for many beginners because if they are doing it right, they exceed 99 subscribers before 60 days is up. Constant Contact's fees are $15/month <500 subscribers, plus $5/month for image hosting (not needed if you have a website to store your images), and it includes 5 active auto-responders. MailChimp costs $10/month <500 subscribers, and $15/month <1000 subscribers. After that, their pricing converges. Constant Contact wants you to pay monthly and have pre-payment and non-profit discounts. MailChimp offers monthly plans as well as pay-as-you-go plans that act like stamps. (Tip: If you

aren't sending email to your list at least once a month, don't bother — your subscribers have forgotten about you.)

Having done a great number of newsletters for clients who use both MailChimp and Constant Contant, when we've set up accounts for clients with Constant Contact, they have contacted us with follow up calls trying to sell more features from their service. MailChimp has been more laid back. One time they sent us a free MailChimp T-shirt when we used their Delivery Doctor, which costs $10 to have an email analyzed and run dozens of tests until to ensure the email is optimized and will not get blocked by email clients. Nonetheless, even when we used the Delivery Doctor we didn't see a significant increase in delivered emails. In fairness to Constant Contact, they have more services to offer so you can't fault them for offering more – they DO offer more. Also, when you open a new account with them, they assign an account manager to contact you and help you with everything from the day you sign up – not sure if MailChimp does that but our phone hasn't rung since we signed up for a MailChimp account

Both Constant Contact and MailChimp have hundreds of built-in, pre-designed, professional-looking templates that set them apart from most of the other email marketing systems. They are beautiful, perfectly programmed in HTML and easy to style. MailChimp even allows you to choose from a list of color schemes. They both use standard email marketing protocols including typical "safe" email widths starting at 600 pixels. MailChimp has a special button called "Get Colors from My Site," which tries to auto-generate colors and images on your chosen template to match your website.

If you are running events, surveys, or "Groupon-like" specials, you can add these systems on in Constant Contact using your email list. It's handy to be able to track all the email addresses related to your events, surveys and special offers in one place. The pricing for each product you add on is cheaper than buying one alone. (They also have an add-on social campaign feature whose value is somewhat questionable.) MailChimp is just email marketing with some social integration at this time.

Consider what you need. If you want to promote events and conduct surveys, Constant Contact is more convenient. Both are quick to start up, but MailChimp's "Get Colors from My Site " and color scheme features might save you some time. MailChimp has better, free, permanent email archiving versus Constant Contact's $5/month option. Fully-featured MailChimp is cheaper than Constant Contact if you have fewer than 1000 subscribers. And MailChimp's free account can have lasting value if you don't need all the system's features. These two companies are constantly adding features, to the point that the differences between them are difficult to detect.