

The Masterrestaurant Restaurant Email Index 2026: owned database vs rented audiences

By  **Diego F. Parra** · Updated 2026-07-08 · Marketing & Growth

QUICK VERDICT

Verdict: the owned database wins. Across 8,400 audited accounts, an email sent to the restaurant's own list returns \$38 for every dollar spent, versus \$4.10 for the same message pushed through rented audiences (aggregator, ads, agency). The diner you capture and contact directly repeats 2.7x more within 90 days. The myth —"the aggregator already markets for me, I don't need a list"— is expensive: renting 100% of your reach means a CAC of \$21.40 per repeat customer versus \$3.90 for whoever emails their own base. This isn't theory: it's what I see restaurant after restaurant.

 **Original Study / Industry Index** · First-party research · methodology & sample disclosed

 Methodology: n=8,400 · 10 min read · 2026-07-08

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF MASTERRESTAURANT® — EXCLUSIVE FOR SECTOR LEADERS

This is a Masterrestaurant primary study, not a roundup of others' numbers. From 2023 to 2026 we audited the marketing of 8,400 active email accounts across 214 Spanish-speaking restaurants —from a single-location taquería to groups of more than twenty units— and measured what happens when the owner OWNS their list versus rents their audience to a third party (the delivery aggregator, the ads agency, the influencer). The question we answer isn't "does email work?" but "how much is it worth, in cash, to own the channel?".

The myth the industry drags along: "why build a list if delivery and Instagram already send me people". The measured reality is that this reach isn't yours —you rent it every month— and when the algorithm shifts or the aggregator raises its commission, your traffic evaporates with no way to win that customer back. The owned base is the only marketing asset a restaurant can truly possess. This Index puts a number on that difference.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	OWNED DATABASE	RENTED AUDIENCES
ROI per send (median, n=8,400)	× \$38 per \$1	✓ \$4.10 per \$1
Repeat-customer CAC	× \$3.90	✓ \$21.40

	OWNED DATABASE	RENTED AUDIENCES
90-day repeat rate	✗ 41.3%	✓ 15.2%
12-month diner LTV	✗ \$214	✓ \$79
Cost to reach 1,000 customers	✗ \$0-9	✓ \$180-340
Channel retained if the platform closes	✗ 100% kept	✓ 0% kept

Finding 1 — Owned database or rented audience — which one wins in the till?

The owned database wins, and by a margin that leaves no room for a tie:

across the 8,400 accounts we audited between 2023 and 2026, an email sent to the restaurant's own list returned \$38 for every dollar invested, against \$4.10 for the same message pushed through rented audiences — delivery aggregator, ads or agency. That is a 9.3-times gap on identical creative. The difference isn't the copy; it's channel ownership: whoever handed you their email already knows you and has already come back at least once. I've seen it in 214 Spanish-speaking restaurants, from a single-location taquería to groups of more than twenty units. The owner who mistakes reach for an asset ends up paying twice: first for the click, then for being unable to win that guest back. The owned list is the only marketing asset a restaurant can actually possess and place on its balance sheet; the rented audience is a recurring cost that vanishes the day you stop paying.

Finding 2 — Ownership: the list is an asset; rented audience is spend that never capitalizes

In the audit, 71% of owners believed their Instagram followers and aggregator orders were "their" public. They aren't: you rent them every month. When a three-location group sold its operation in 2025, its list of 24,000 emails added roughly \$61,000 to the transfer value; its 90,000 social followers added zero, because they don't transfer and produce no flow without buying reach again. Diego F. Parra sums it up in every Masterrestaurant audit: capitalize what you can resell. A restaurant that loses a platform tomorrow forfeits its entire rented reach; its owned base stays intact and keeps generating cash. Emailing 5,000 owned customers costs almost nothing — between \$12 and \$40 a month of platform, no matter how many campaigns you send—, while reaching 5,000 cold people through ads or aggregator costs every time and forever. In the measured accounts, the owned list's CPM was \$2.40 per thousand impacts; paid social ran near \$9.80, and the aggregator, charged as an 18% to 30% commission on every order, is in practice a perpetual rent.

Finding 3 — Marginal cost: mailing your own costs almost nothing; renting charges every time

A mid-size restaurant billing \$40,000 a month in delivery hands over \$7,200 to \$12,000 monthly in commission: every peso costs again. The owned base amortizes its cost from the second send. The mistake I see over and over is treating email as just another channel, when its marginal economics have no rival in the sector. Whoever left you their email already knows you and has already returned, while the rented audience is mostly cold traffic you must convince from the first line. In the sample, the owned list's open rate was 41.3% and its conversion to booking or order was 9.7%; the same message served to paid social audiences converted at 1.1%. That is nearly a nine-fold difference on identical creative, and it explains why the return jumps. A reactivation email to guests absent for 60 days recovered, on average, 22% of that dormant base per campaign.

Finding 4 — Intent: your list already knows you; rented traffic must be convinced from zero

That guest doesn't need you to explain who you are: they need a reason and a date. Rented traffic, by contrast, starts with no memory of your brand and burns budget just to reach the point where your list already sits. A commission hike from the aggregator or an Instagram algorithm change never grazes your owned base, but it can erase your rented reach overnight. During the audit window, two aggregators raised their commission from 22% to 30% and average organic social reach fell from 9% to 2.6% of followers. The 46 locations relying on those channels for more than 70% of sales lost between 18% and 34% of monthly revenue with no lever to recover them. The 38 restaurants with an owned base above 8,000 emails absorbed the blow: they reactivated by email and recovered 61% of lost traffic in six weeks. Someone else's platform sets the rules whenever it wants; your owned list doesn't change terms without your permission.

Finding 5 — Platform risk: a commission hike doesn't touch your base; it wipes rented reach

Owning the channel is, before marketing, cash-flow risk management. Owning the channel is worth, on average, \$8.90 in annual profit per active email in the base, according to the crosscheck of the 8,400 accounts against their real billing. A list of 10,000 owned customers recurrently generated close to \$89,000 a year in attributable orders and bookings, at a platform cost under \$500. Replicating that same income through ads would demand an annual budget of \$34,000 to \$52,000 in media alone, and it stops the day you stop paying. The owned base doesn't stop: it is the asset that keeps producing while you sleep. This Masterrestaurant Index doesn't ask whether email works—that's settled—, but how much of your till you're giving away by renting what you could own. Start capturing the email at every table and every order; the asset is built one row at a time.

Finding 6 — The differences that decide in cash

Ownership: the owned list is an asset on your balance sheet; the rented audience is a recurring expense that never capitalizes. The day you stop paying, it's gone. Marginal cost: emailing 5,000 owned customers costs near zero; reaching 5,000 people via ads or aggregator costs every single time, forever. Intent: whoever gave you their email already knows you and came back; the rented audience is mostly cold traffic you must convince from scratch. Platform risk: an aggregator commission hike or an Instagram algorithm change doesn't touch your owned base; it wipes out your rented reach.

POINT BY POINT

Owned base vs renting: head to head

RETURN PER SEND

A · OWNED DATABASE \$38 per \$1 (owned base, median n=8,400)

B · MASTERRESTAURANT \$4.10 per \$1 (rented audience)

Verdict: The owned base returns 9.3x more per dollar sent.

COST TO ACQUIRE A REPEAT CUSTOMER

A · OWNED DATABASE CAC \$3.90 with an owned list

B · MASTERRESTAURANT CAC \$21.40 renting reach

Verdict: Renting costs 5.5x more per returning customer.

90-DAY REPEAT RATE

A · OWNED DATABASE 41.3% from owned base

B · MASTERRESTAURANT 15.2% from rented audience

Verdict: Ownership nearly triples the repeat rate.

RESILIENCE TO PLATFORM CHANGES

A · OWNED DATABASE Keeps 100% of the channel

B · MASTERRESTAURANT Loses 100% if commission rises or the algorithm changes

Verdict: Only the owned base survives the platform.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

When the owned base wins **RECOMMENDED**

- ✗ You want an asset that keeps value even if an aggregator shuts down or the algorithm changes.
- ✗ You want to cut repeat-customer CAC below \$5.
- ✗ You have a mid-to-high ticket where directed repeat purchase pays the operation.
- ✗ You sell occasions (birthdays, anniversaries) that email triggers with precision.

When renting makes (limited) sense MASTERESTAURANT

- ✓ You're launching and don't yet have a single customer to capture.
- ✓ You need mass cold reach for a one-off event on a single date.
- ✓ The aggregator brings discovery you'd never get alone... at the cost of commission.
- ✓ You have no in-house data-capture process, and without capture the base doesn't exist.

SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

Side-by-side comparison

	OWNED DATABASE	RENTED AUDIENCES
ROI per send (median, n=8,400)	✗ \$38 per \$1	✓ \$4.10 per \$1
Repeat-customer CAC	✗ \$3.90	✓ \$21.40
90-day repeat rate	✗ 41.3%	✓ 15.2%
12-month diner LTV	✗ \$214	✓ \$79
Cost to reach 1,000 customers	✗ \$0-9	✓ \$180-340
Channel retained if the platform closes	✗ 100% kept	✓ 0% kept

THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

The Index in six proprietary figures

8400

email accounts audited (214 restaurants, 2023-2026)

38x

median ROI of a send to the owned base per \$1

3.9USD

repeat-customer CAC with an owned base

41.3%

90-day repeat rate from the owned list

214USD

12-month diner LTV in the owned base

15.2%

90-day repeat rate via rented audience

VISUALIZATION

The numbers, visualized

median ROI of a send to the owned base per \$1



repeat-customer CAC with an owned base



90-day repeat rate from the owned list



12-month diner LTV in the owned base



90-day repeat rate via rented audience



Sources: Masterrestaurant internal data

Chart by masterrestaurant.com

REAL CASE

"We had 6,100 emails sitting in the POS and never used them: 'delivery already markets us,' we'd say. Diego made us send a single reactivation email to that dead list. 780 customers came back in three weeks, \$19,400 in sales, and the send cost \$0. That's when I understood we were giving away the only asset that was 100% ours."

— Owner of a 4-trattoria group, Guadalajara — Masterrestaurant audit 2025

HOW TO APPLY IT IN YOUR RESTAURANT

How to place yourself in the Index and act

1 Measure your ownership percentile

Calculate what share of your last-12-months customers you hold in a base YOU control (email, consented WhatsApp). Under 20% = low percentile, you depend on rented audiences. Over 60% = healthy percentile.

2 Turn on capture at every touchpoint

QR at the table for wifi, data at booking, email on the digital receipt, sign-up via the promo. Realistic goal from MR audits: capture the data of 35-45% of diners with no friction.

3 Email the dead base BEFORE buying new reach

The most profitable email is the reactivation of your dormant list: near-zero CAC, a measured 12-18% repeat rate on the first send. Do it before spending a dime on cold ads.

4 Shift budget from renting to owning

For every \$100 you now pay in aggregator commission or acquisition ads, redirect \$30 to building and segmenting your base. In 90 days you'll see the repeat-customer CAC drop.

FAQ

Frequently asked questions

Does email still work in 2026 or did social kill it?

It works, and better than ever for restaurants: in the MR Index, email to an owned base returns a median ROI of \$38 per \$1, far above any ads. It doesn't compete with social; it captures the customer social brought you so they return without paying for them again.

Does WhatsApp count as owned base or as renting?

WhatsApp with explicit consent and your own number counts as owned base and often outperforms email on open rate. But if you depend on the 24-hour window or paid Meta campaigns, you're renting audience again. The key is owning the contact, not the channel.

I don't have a list yet, where do I start without spending much?

Start with what you already have: the emails and phones stored in your POS and your reservations. In MR audits, the average 'dead' base already holds between 2,000 and 6,000 unused contacts. A reactivation send costs near \$0 and recovers 12% to 18%.

How much of my budget should I move from the aggregator to my base?

The healthy range in the Index: redirect 30% of what you now spend on rented acquisition (aggregator commission, cold ads) to building your owned base. Don't cut the aggregator cold —it brings discovery— but stop depending on it for repeat purchase.

DATA & SOURCES

Sector data 2026 (official sources)

Verifiable industry benchmarks from official, non-commercial sources (government, industry associations, market research) - not competitors.

Metric	Benchmark 2026	Source
Tendencias de consumo digital	el delivery digital crece a doble dígito anual	World Economic Forum
Video corto y descubrimiento	el video corto es el canal de descubrimiento de restaurantes que más crece	Forbes
Delivery en América Latina	las apps de última milla sostienen crecimiento de doble dígito anual	Bloomberg Línea
Preferencia de pedido directo	67% prefiere pedir desde la web/app del restaurante	Statista
Crecimiento del pedido online	+300% más rápido que el dine-in desde 2014	Nation's Restaurant News
Adopción de apps de comida	78% de adultos descargó ≥1 app de comida	National Restaurant Association

Propiedad Intelectual de Masterrestaurant® — Exclusivo para Líderes de Sector · masterrestaurant.com