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Research and analysis by TrustRadius

The B2B Buying Disconnect

A landmark study on the gaps, opportunities and changing dynamics between technology buyers and vendors

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Introduction

Current research on the B2B purchasing process makes it clear that the buyer's journey has changed. Existing studies from Forrester, Sirius Decisions, and Demand Gen Report show the new technology buyer is more empowered — and behaves more like a consumer — than ever before. Yet there has been no comprehensive study of both buyers and vendors, looking at the gaps between how B2B buyers make purchasing decisions and how B2B vendors influence them.

TrustRadius invited technology buyers and vendors to take aligning surveys about the B2B buying process. A total of 608 individuals completed our surveys, including buyers who had recently played a significant role in an important software purchase decision for their organization and professionals who work in sales management or marketing for a vendor. With this study, we set out to discover:

- Which information sources do buyers use, find most helpful, and consider most trustworthy, versus what resources do vendors focus on providing buyers?
- Which selection criteria do buyers care about, versus what vendors think is important to buyers?
- How do buyers view the role of vendors, and how do vendors try to engage their buyers?
- Based on any disconnects, what can vendors do differently?

This report outlines our key findings and what they mean for the future of B2B buying and selling.

About Us

TrustRadius is a B2B technology research and customer voice platform that serves both buyers and vendors. Each month, about 300,000 B2B technology buyers use over 60,000 verified reviews and ratings on TrustRadius.com to make informed purchasing decisions. An additional 1 million buyers per month read TrustRadius content in other venues, including review syndication feeds. We also work directly with technology vendors. As a trusted third-party research venue, we aim to ensure all relevant products are accurately listed and represented on TrustRadius.com. Additionally, vendors use our customer voice platform to leverage TrustRadius content beyond the review site, from gaining valuable feedback about their product to proactively using reviews across their sales and marketing channels.

To learn more about our vendor offering, visit vendors.trustradius.com.

Key Disconnects

1 Vendors focus on providing material that buyers don’t find very useful or trustworthy

Aside from direct experience with the product through demos and free trials, buyers ranked vendor-provided materials as the least helpful and trustworthy information sources. Vendor marketers themselves see marketing collateral, ranging from their own website to white papers, as the least effective content types at helping to convert prospects. Yet, perhaps because they are also the easiest to produce, they are among the content types most commonly shared with prospects.

2 Buyers don’t trust all vendor claims, nor do they expect to

Buyers readily described examples of vendor claims they didn’t quite believe, from obvious over-promises to the availability of specific features. Nearly 60% of respondents said the questionable claim came from the vendor they ultimately purchased from. Buyers might distrust vendor claims, but it doesn’t stop them from purchasing the product. Rather, buyers increasingly use other sources to investigate claims and inform their final decision.

3 Vendors see their role as strategic, yet most buyers said the vendor played a pragmatic role

Buyers may be skeptical of vendor claims, but the majority acknowledge the vendor played a significant role in the purchasing process. This indicates that despite the trend towards independent research, business technology is still “sold” through personalized interactions with the vendor, rather than a commodity that is simply “bought.” However, that does not directly translate into the vendor playing a strategic role in the buying process. When buyers were asked how the vendor was involved in their decision, 62% described vendors playing a pragmatic or tactical role, such as answering questions, facilitating a standard demo, providing technical support, or setting up packaging and pricing.

Key Opportunities

1 Buyers want hands-on experience with the product and insights from customers

Product demos and free trials were the best resources for buyers, who use them frequently and for the most part find them helpful and trustworthy. After hands-on experience with the product, peer resources such as direct referrals from colleagues and user reviews were the next most helpful and trustworthy information sources. This clearly indicates buyers want to understand and validate what it will be like to use the product on a daily basis.

2 Vendors have an arsenal of satisfied customers they are not leveraging

Nearly half of surveyed buyers are promoters of the product, giving it a 9 or 10 on the satisfaction scale, and 91% intend to renew. Additionally, 42% have independently recommended the product directly to a peer or colleague. Yet few buyers have taken an action on behalf of the vendor that can be more broadly shared with prospects, such as serving as a reference or providing a testimonial. This is a significant untapped resource for vendors, particularly since buyers want to hear directly from users.

3 Strategic vendors are in the best position to influence buyers

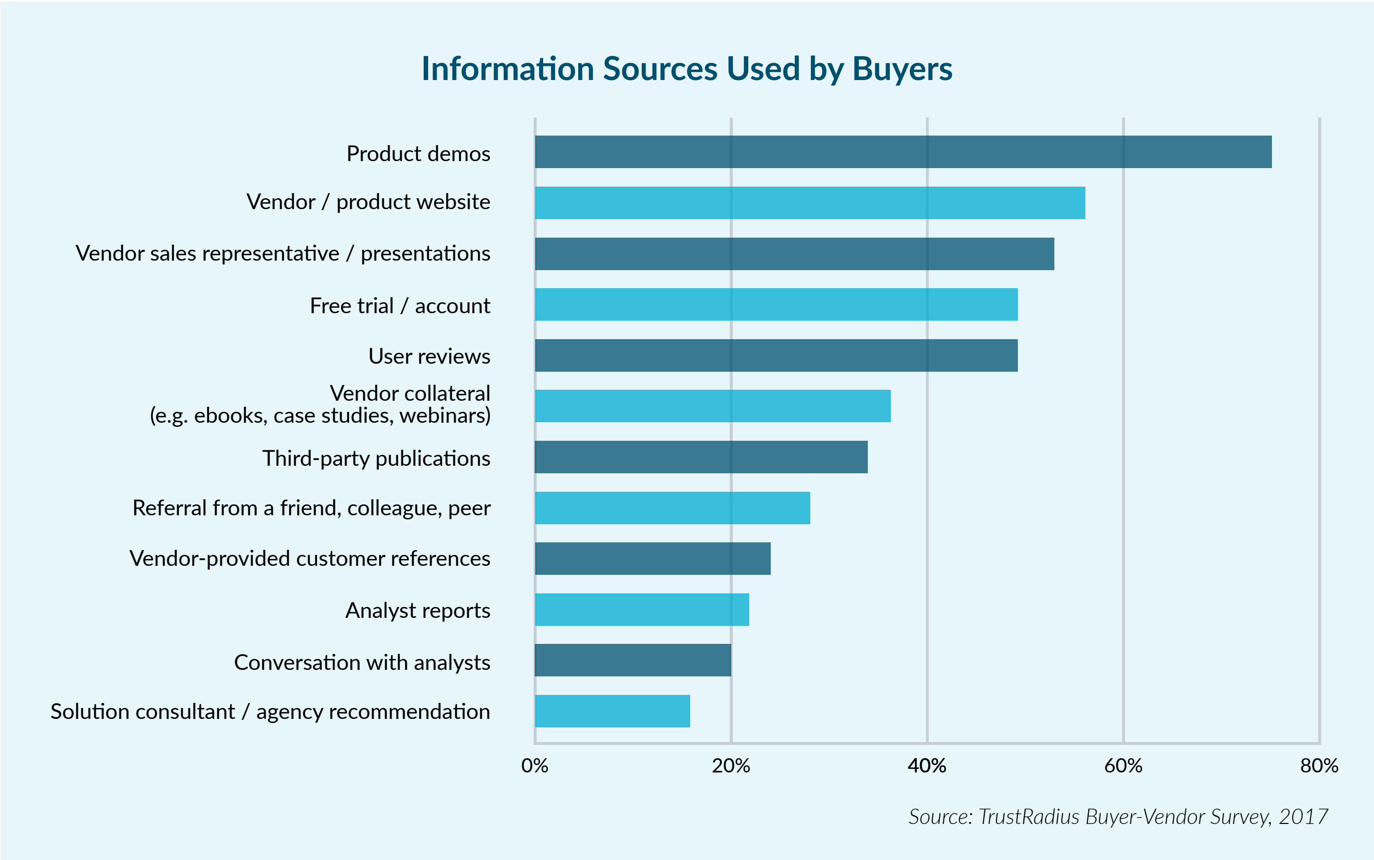
Of the 23% of vendors described as strategic, 89% were considered influential in the buying decision. Strategic activities included on-site visits, extended trials, demos with real data, and customization options. Overall, vendors are more influential when the buyer feel they are providing valuable, balanced and authentic information to support the selection decision. Sharing a diverse range of resources, with an eye towards painting a realistic view of the product, is clearly the best approach for vendors.

INFORMATION SOURCES

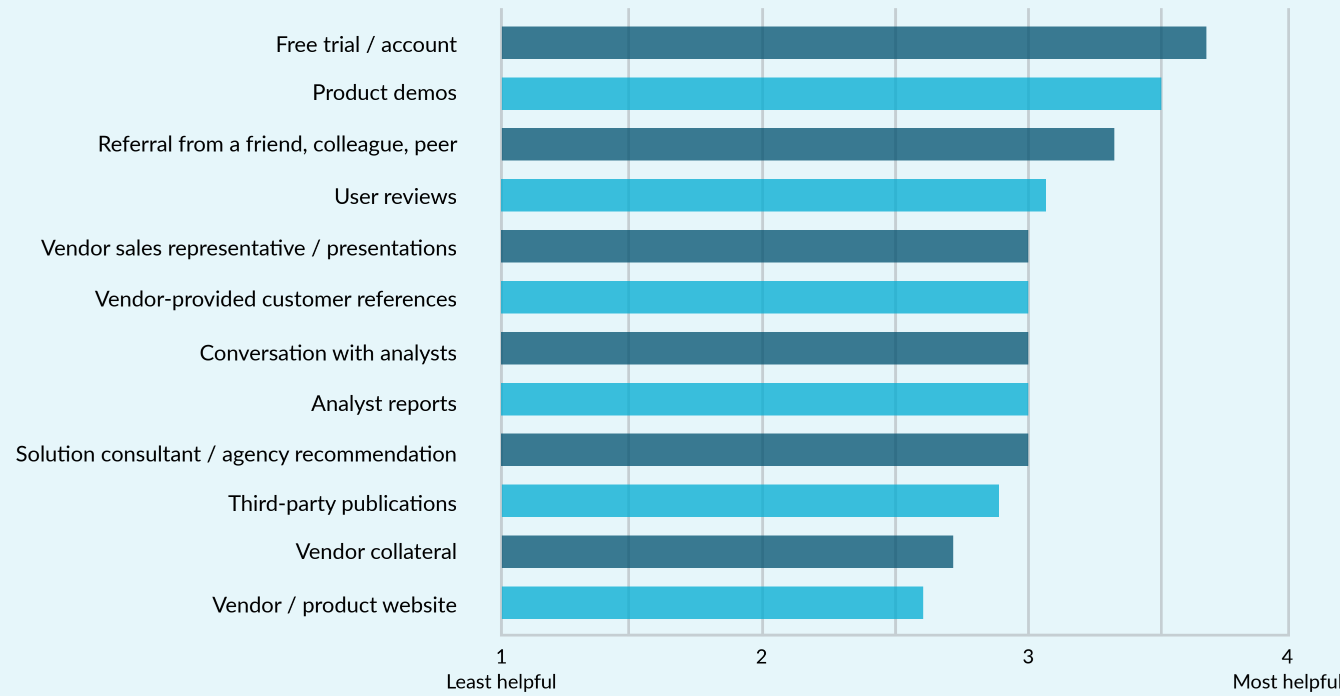
Buyers want hands-on experience with the product and insights from customers

We asked buyers to select which information sources they used during their purchasing process from a list of 12 options. Buyers then rated each source in terms of helpfulness and trustworthiness. We also asked buyers to describe what they liked about the most helpful and most trustworthy sources, as well as what they didn't like about the least helpful and least trustworthy sources.

Buyers preferred resources that provided them with genuine insights into the product. The most helpful and trustworthy information sources included product demos, free trials, peer referrals, and user reviews. It is clear buyers want a realistic view of how a product will work for them on a day-to-day basis.

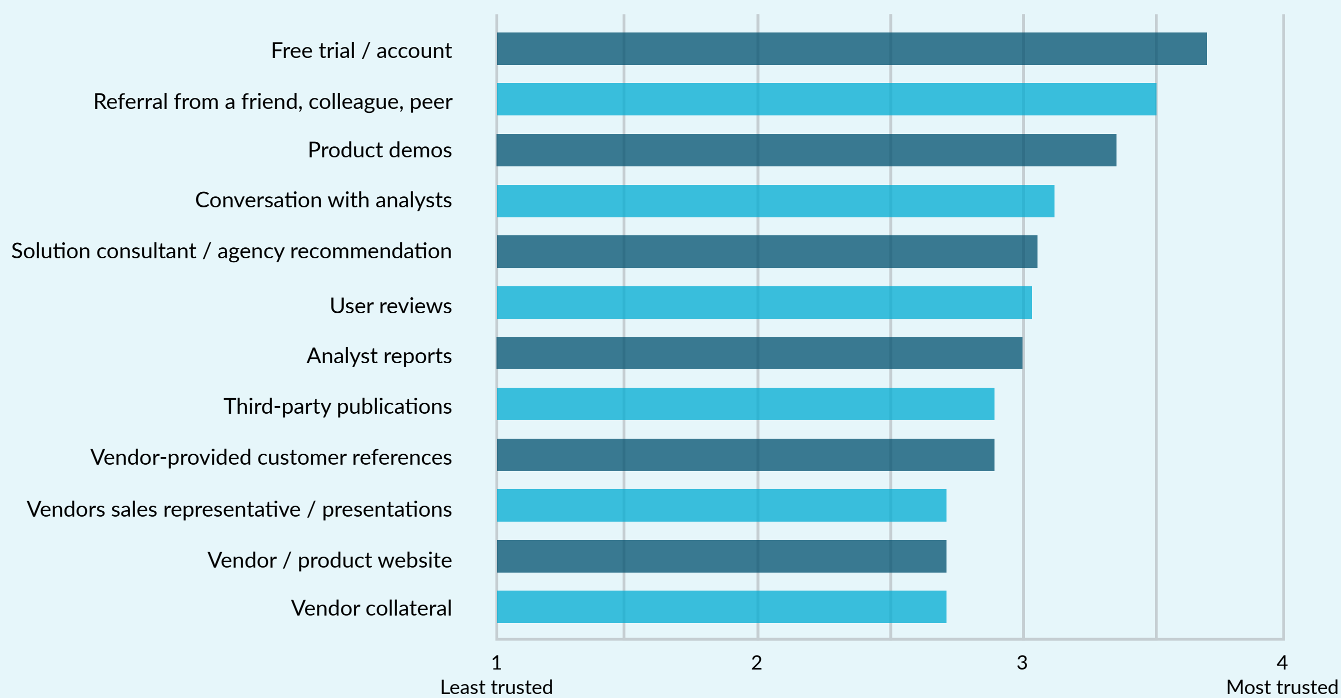


Helpfulness of Information Sources



Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2017

Trustworthiness of Information Sources



Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2017

Product demos & free trials

Product demos and free trials sat at or near the top of the list in terms of usage, helpfulness and trustworthiness. Buyers recognize that direct experience with a product is the best way to evaluate it. Note that in qualitative responses, buyers especially liked demos that were personalized for their situation or use case. Conversely, they questioned the value of demos that felt biased, rehearsed, or too general.

Example quotes about why product demos and free trials are helpful:

> *The product demos and trials are always my favorite deciding factor in purchases. You get to have the real feel of the product and how it works in your environment with a free trial. The demo on the other hand gives you the perfect installed/configured product to see how it is designed to work from the engineers.*

> *The vendor *really* caught my attention with a couple of well-thought-out demonstration steps. I could immediately see how the product would be easier to use than all of its competitors.*

> *The product demos helped to show us what the product could do, while the free trial gave us an opportunity to see if we could recreate those scenarios shown for us, as well as understand if the software meets our needs.*

> *Nothing works better than the actual demo. Analysts and reps make tall claims but only way to verify is to have them setup demo around your needs.*

> *The product demos and presentations were the best because this is where we actually saw the products. We were able to bring up test scenarios and have the analysts show how those would work on the screen. We were also shown how easy it was to program on the back end in real time, and how that would work on rollout.*

> *Being able to trial a software without having to have the vendor demo it for you is infinitely important for us. We self-implement at my company, so if we can use it before we buy it, it helps to make the best decision.*

Peer referrals

Direct referrals from friends and colleagues were also among the top three information sources in terms of helpfulness and trustworthiness, though they were used by only 28% of buyers. The less common usage shows that getting an independent peer referral is not always an option buyers have available to them — they may not have acquaintances with similar use cases or experience with the software they are considering. However, when it is an option, buyers like hearing directly about a product from someone they know and trust.

Example quotes about why peer referrals are helpful:

> *Referrals from real users that I know and have worked with are always better and more honest than anything else.*

> *Peer recommendations always trump anything a sales person says.*

> *Referrals from colleagues gave pluses and minuses to each solution from people in our industry.*

> *We knew that our colleague was invested in our company and wanted to see us succeed more so than a salesperson would be.*

Third-party reviews

Reviews from end users were the most popular third-party resource, leveraged by 49% of buyers. After hands-on experience with the product and peer referrals, they were also ranked as the most helpful resource. When asked what type of information they were looking for in user reviews, details on ease of use and ease of implementation were the two most common responses.

Example quotes about why third-party reviews are helpful:

> *User reviews were great to get a feel of whether the product is working for others in our industry.*

> *User reviews are less biased, and provide a more complete picture than talking to a sales rep.*

> *[Re: User reviews] There is no better reference for a product than someone who uses it day in and day out.*

> *User reviews are always most helpful because they talk to the user experience with the product and service provider and tend to be a differentiator.*

> *It was great to see a listing of vendors and their capabilities plus user reviews. It was almost like reading Consumer Reports when buying a car!*

Buyers piece together information from multiple sources

It is important to note that not all buyers had the same views on these sources, and no one source is sufficient from a buyer perspective. Ultimately buyers are piecing together information from multiple sources to make their decision. On average, buyers used nearly five of the information sources we asked about. Providing a diverse range of resources, with an eye towards painting a realistic view of the product, is the best approach for vendors.

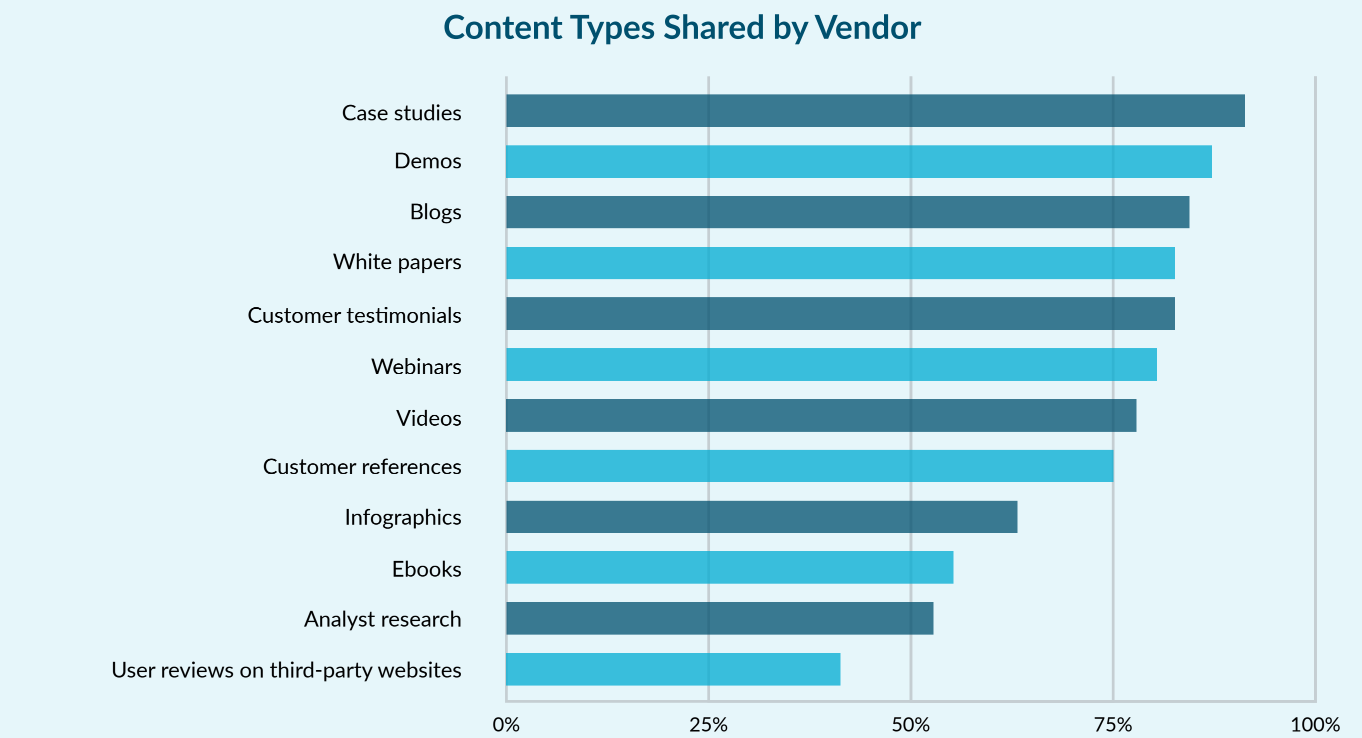
Word Cloud: What did you like about the **most helpful** resource?

Vendors focus on providing material that buyers don't find very useful or trustworthy

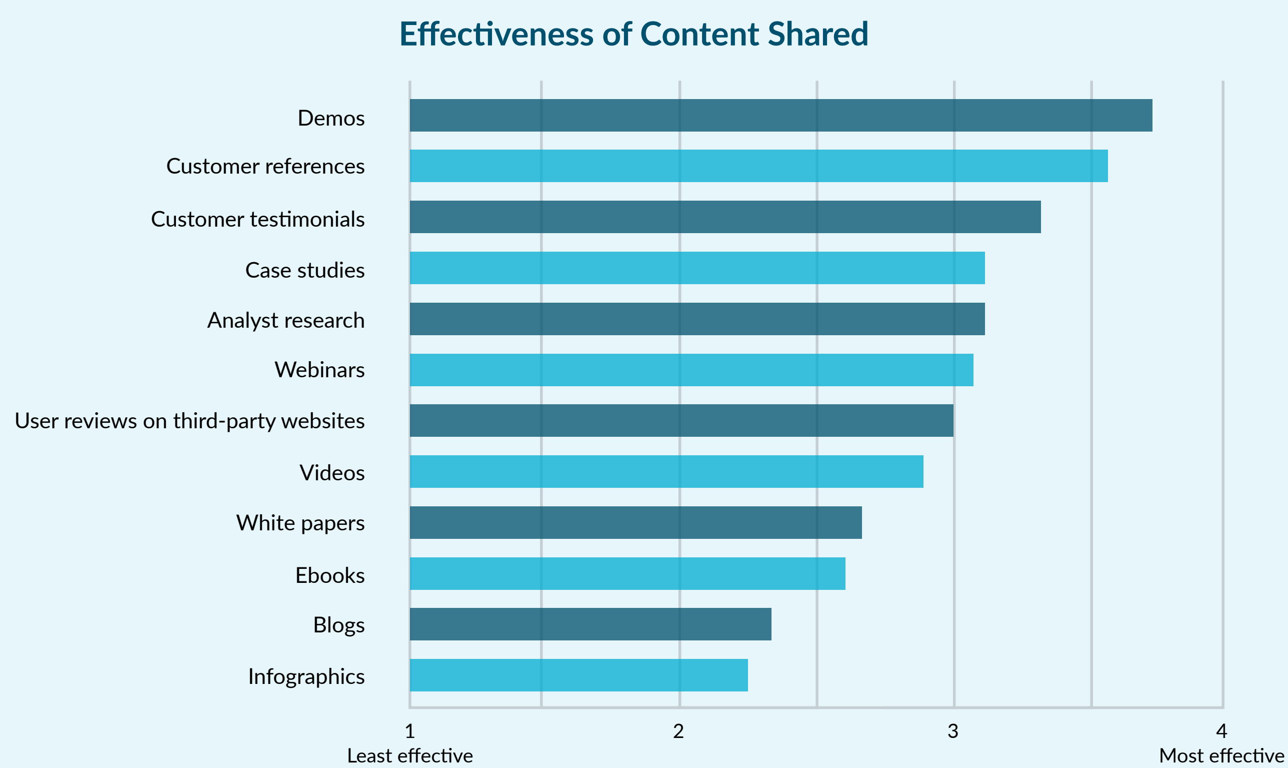
We gave vendors a list of 11 content types and asked them which ones they share with prospects. Vendors then rated each content type in terms of effectiveness at convincing prospects and how challenging it is to provide, on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being most effective and most challenging.

Overall, one big theme is that vendors share a lot of content. On average, respondents selected nearly nine content types. The most commonly shared content types included: case studies (91%), demos (87%), blogs (85%), white papers (83%), customer testimonials (82%), webinars (81%), videos (78%), and customer references (74%).

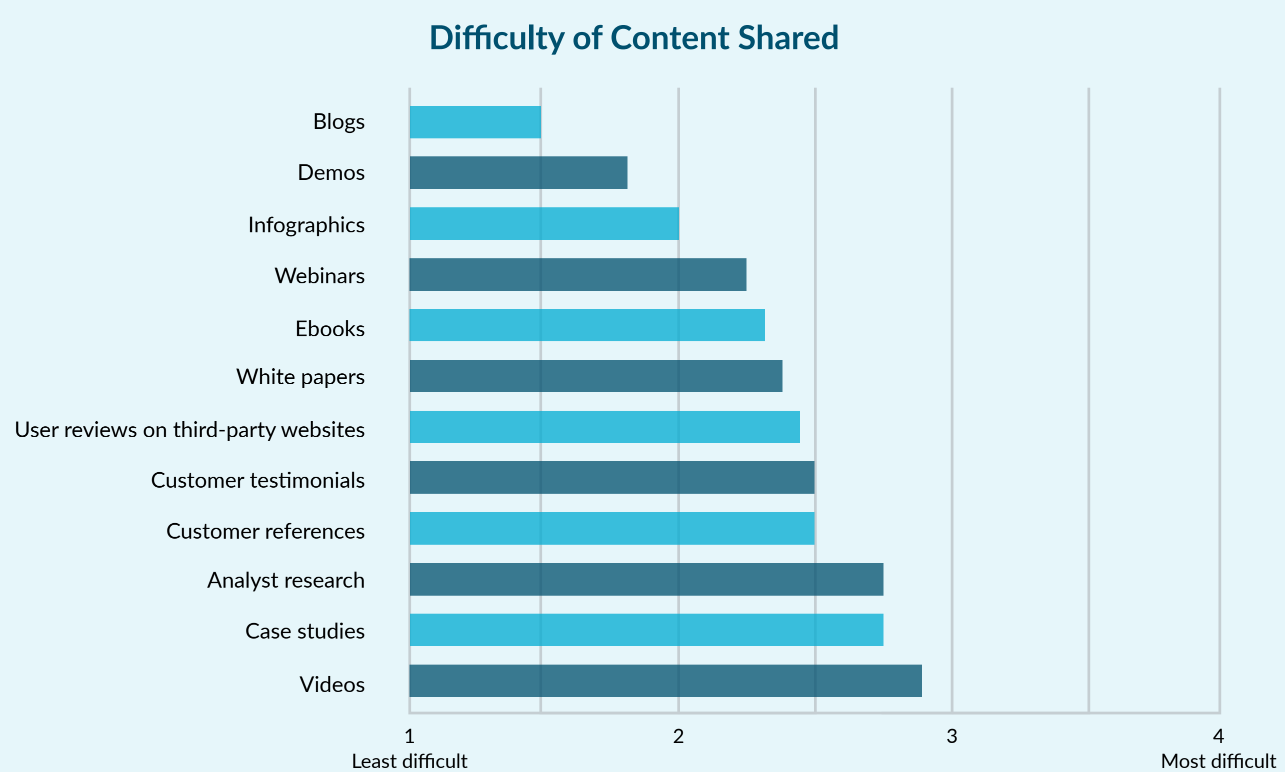
This line of questioning, when compared with buyer usage and views on information sources, also revealed some areas of alignment as well as disconnects.



Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2017



Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2017



Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2017

Best Alignment: Product demos

Vendors are well aware of buyers' desire for hands-on experience with the product. Demos are the obvious winner in terms of content shared by vendors: they are frequently used, the most effective, and the second least challenging to provide. They also align well with buyer preferences, as they are used frequently and for the most part considered both helpful and trustworthy.

Biggest Disconnect: Marketing collateral

More than half of vendors produce and share each of the following types of marketing collateral: blogs (85%), white papers (83%), videos (78%), infographics (63%), and ebooks (56%). Aside from videos, they are also the least challenging to produce or provide. Yet vendors identified these five content types as the least effective at convincing prospects.

On the buyer side, vendor collateral and the vendor website are the least helpful and least trustworthy information sources. Specifically, buyers who didn't like this type of marketing collateral felt that it was aimed at converting them into leads rather than providing helpful information about the product.

Example quotes from buyers about why vendor collateral can be unhelpful:

> *Vendor collateral is often puffery and glosses over important details.*

> *Vendor websites are limited, provide little insight, and are only geared to get your information for a sales call.*

> *Being in marketing, I know the types of information that is put on a website - it's useful but I find resources from outside the company to be more trust-worthy and honest.*

Missed Opportunity: Third-party validation

After demos and vendor-provided customer evidence, the next most effective content types according to vendors are forms of external validation — analyst research and user reviews on third-party websites. While these are only moderately challenging to produce, they are at the bottom of the list in terms of content shared with prospects. This could be because vendors feel they have less impact over the message, or because they feel prospects are already finding those information sources on their own.

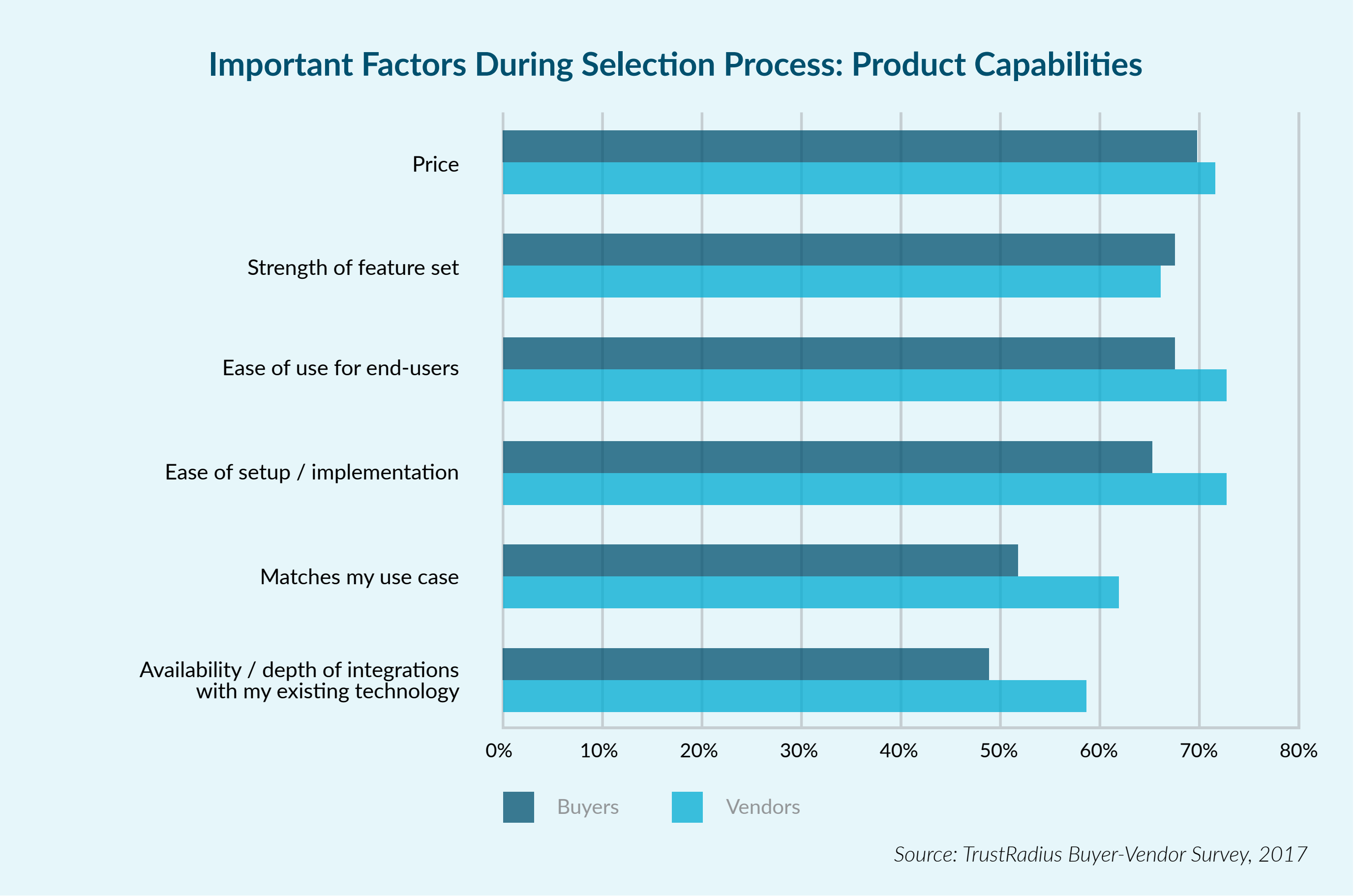
This disconnect stands out as a missed opportunity for vendors, since buyers find third-party validation fairly helpful and trustworthy. In particular, third-party reviews are unique in that they are the only form of customer evidence not controlled by the vendor. Buyers said they were more helpful as well as more trustworthy than vendor-provided references, and vendors themselves said they were slightly easier to provide than customer references.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Vendors overemphasize selection criteria that aren't important to buyers

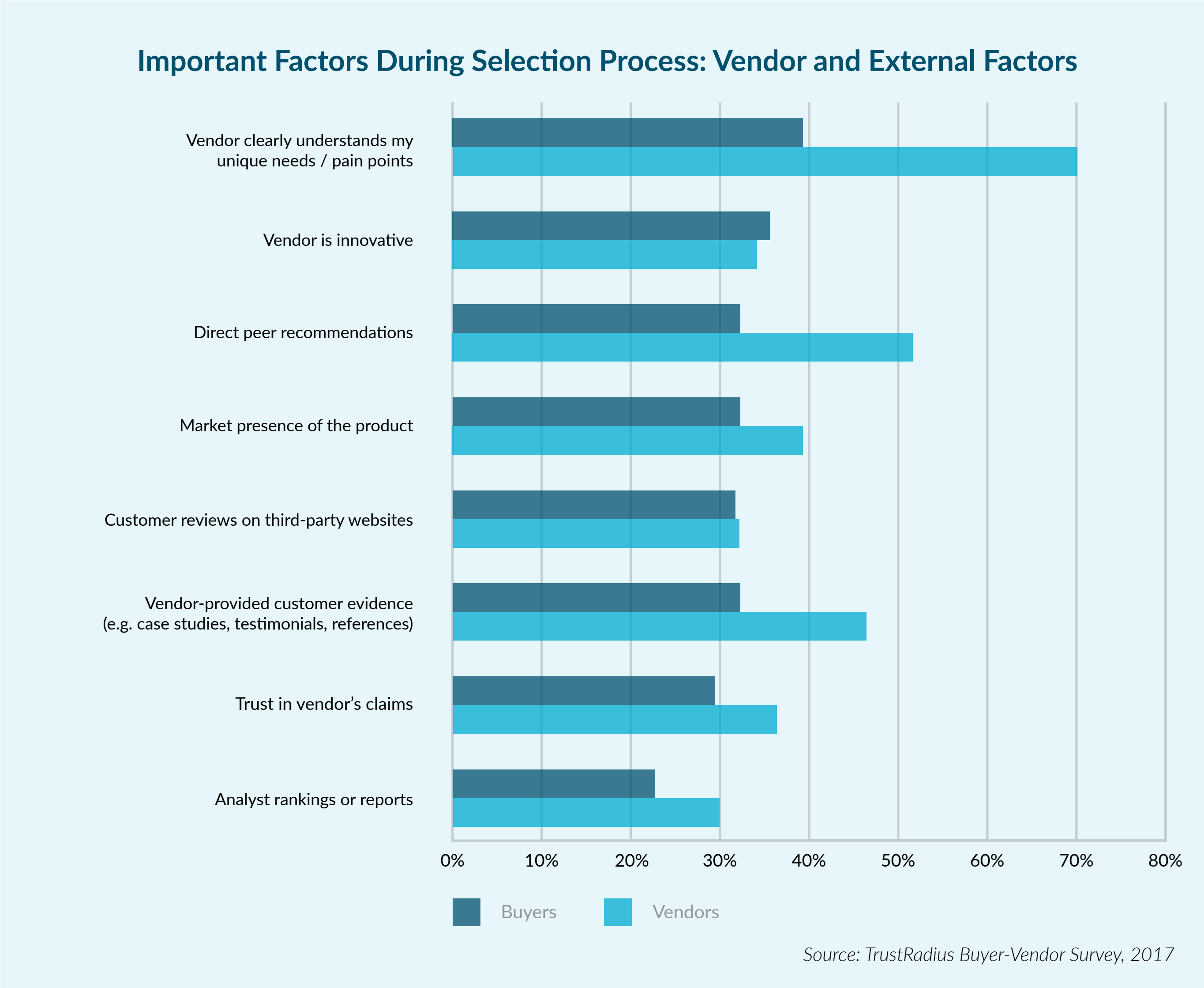
We asked buyers what factors were important to their company during the selection process. They could select multiple options from factors related to product capabilities, vendor qualities, and external sources of validation. Vendors were asked a corresponding question with the same list of options asking them which factors they thought were important to buyers evaluating their product.

When individual factors were compared side by side, some notable trends emerged around areas of alignment as well as disconnects.



Best Alignment: Price & strength of feature set

There was relative alignment between vendors and buyers around the importance of product capabilities. Price and strength of feature set were the most important factors to buyers, and vendors reflected that.



Biggest Disconnect: Understanding unique needs

Nearly 70% of vendor respondents thought "vendor clearly understands my unique needs/pain points" was an important factor to buyers, while only 39% of buyers selected this option. This data could indicate that vendors see their role as being more strategic by tailoring their interactions based on the buyer's unique situation. However, buyers either aren't recognizing this role or don't feel it's as important of a factor in their selection process.

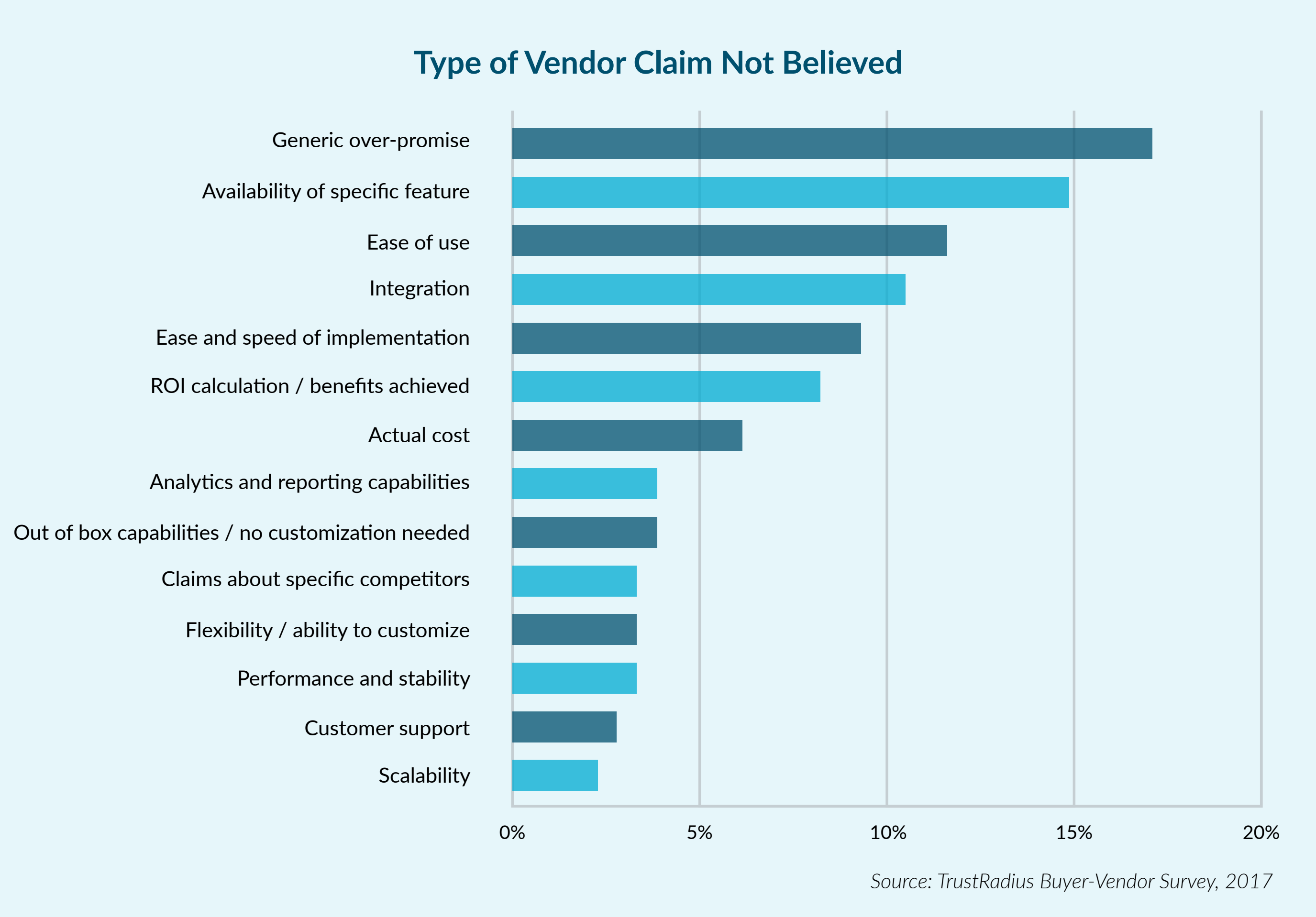
Challenge: Peer recommendations

To a lesser degree, more vendors thought peer recommendations were important than buyers — 52% versus 32%. This likely reflects the difficulty in personally connecting with peers who use the exact products they are considering. As previously noted, buyers do find peer recommendations extremely helpful and trustworthy. So vendors aren't necessarily overstating the impact of peer recommendations when they are available, but they may be overestimating the access that prospects have to such referrals.

THE BUYER-VENDOR DYNAMIC

Buyers don't trust all vendor claims, nor do they expect to

We asked buyers to describe a vendor claim they didn't quite believe during their purchasing process and explain why they found it questionable. The most common type of claim described by buyers were generic and obvious over-promises, such as unlimited flexibility or the ability to solve all of a buyer's problems. The second most common type of claim described was the availability of a specific feature or capability that the buyer knew from other sources or experience to be untrue. Other common themes included ease of use, integration capabilities (whether with other products or within the vendor's own product suite), ease and speed of implementation, ROI calculation estimates, and actual cost of product (due to undisclosed hidden costs).



Even though buyers often distrust vendor claims, this lack of trust doesn't prevent them from purchasing a product. When asked who made the claim they found questionable — the vendor they ultimately bought from or another vendor — 58% of buyers said the questionable claim was made by the vendor they bought from.

Talking to the vendor and their vetted customer references are fairly helpful, but buyers know to take that information with a grain of salt. As a result, buyers make a decision by combining insights provided by the vendor with less biased resources. User reviews, third-party publications, peer recommendations, analyst reports, and consultants are all resources that buyers use to investigate vendor claims and make a final decision.

Example responses describing a vendor claim not quite believed:

> *This product is seamless to install and manage. I didn't believe this because no product can possibly be easy to configure and use in every environment.*

> *That [the product] could connect to any third-party platform out there easily. We found this questionable because they made it seem like no technical resources would be needed, which is almost never the case.*

> *Vendors always say how easy things are which never proves to be true. We would prefer a more honest approach.*

> *Stats on ROI seemed to be a tad inflated.*

> *'Out of the box solution' – customization is usually always needed depending on the organizations/cultures.*

> *User friendly. Everyone says it. No one has it. Most companies don't even have UI people for admin tools. They think features are more important - true if you just want to make the sale and run. Long-term relationships require high adoption rates = usability.*

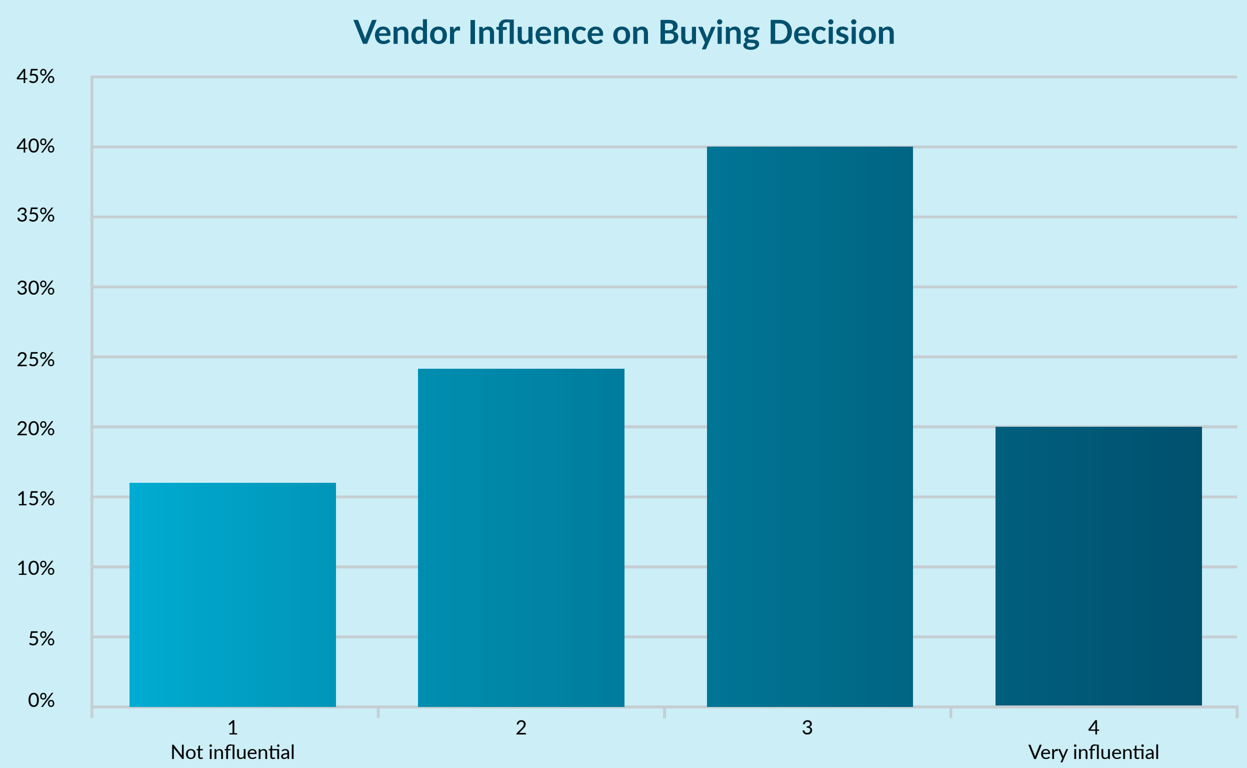
> *It's the 'best' out there or that it will 'solve all my problems.'*

> *Superior customer service but web site search proved different.*

> *That the system could fully integrate with all of our systems and implement the disparate data as a unified whole.*

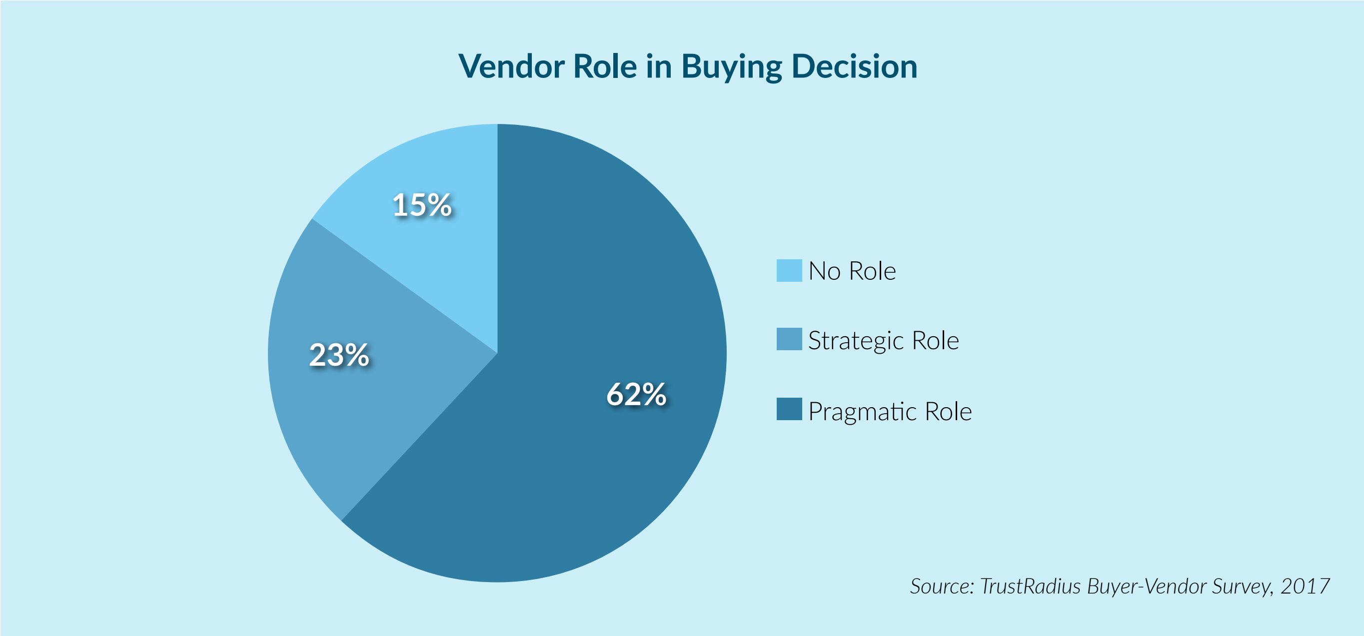
Most buyers said the vendor played a pragmatic role in the sales process

Buyers may be skeptical of vendor claims and are conducting more independent research than ever before, but the majority acknowledged the vendor played a significant role in the purchasing process. Overall, 60% of buyer respondents ranked the vendor as somewhat or very influential in their selection decision. This indicates that despite the trend towards independent research, business technology is still largely sold rather than bought. Given the complexity of software solutions as well as the need to create personalized packages and pricing, vendor representatives continue to have a seat at the table.



Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2017

However, that does not directly translate into the vendor playing a strategic role in the buying process. When buyers were asked to describe how the vendor was involved in their decision, 62% described a purely pragmatic role. They emphasized tactical interactions that only the vendor could provide, such as answering questions, describing functionality, facilitating a standard demo, offering technical support, providing pricing and packaging information, or offering a discount.



Example quotes where the vendor played a pragmatic role:

> *Mostly just by providing information on functionality of the tool and showing me a demo so I could see the interface.*

> *The vendor worked with our budgeted amount for this software so we could ultimately choose their product over their main competitor.*

> *They were available to answer questions, but we knew the ins and outs of the product already.*

> *Provided demos and was flexible on payment plan.*

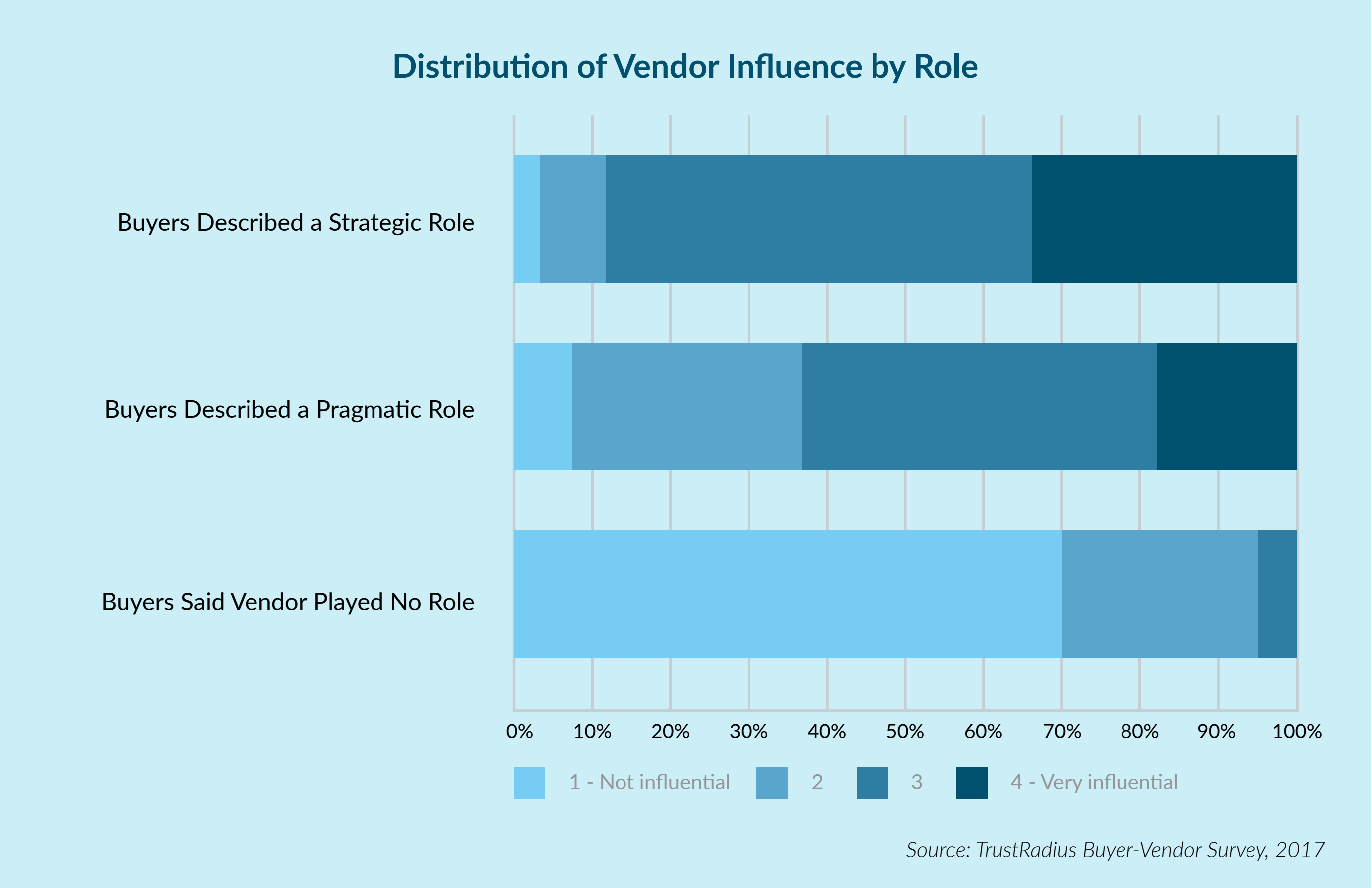
> *Provided a demo and price. The software sold itself.*

> *They helped explain their pricing model.*

> *He showed me the software in detail and explained to me what it was capable of. He even showed me concrete example from other companies.*

Strategic vendors are in the best position to influence buyers

Most buyers described the vendor as a necessary and practical resource rather than a strategic partner. Still, about 23% of buyers described a more strategic role on the part of the vendor, with an emphasis on providing personalized resources, engaging leadership, and coming up with creative solutions. Those buyers also said the vendor was more influential in their decision. Among buyers who described a strategic role, 89% said the vendor was somewhat or very influential on their selection decision, compared to 62% of those who indicated a pragmatic role.



Buyers who described a strategic role mentioned activities such as on-site visits, extended trials, demos with real data, customization options, and demonstrating ROI. They also highlighted help with convincing stakeholders and positive "non-salesy" interactions with vendor representatives.

Example quotes where the vendor played a strategic and influential role:

> *Great sales pitch, brought senior team to really sell us on the product as well as great success stories from current customers.*

> *They presented a custom demo and did deep dives into the intricate functionality of the software, reviewing several modules that were applicable to our business. They tried to understand our sales and marketing process and used specific scenarios.*

> *It went beyond a sales pitch. They were able to demonstrate the immense value that the product would add to our strategic objectives as opposed to just reviewing software components. Any company worth its salt doesn't focus purely on 'the how' but instead turns to 'the why.'*

> *Open to customization of the tool to our specific needs and highly flexible with pricing options.*

> *We had several hour long discussions with various members of their organization so that I could understand how my company would benefit from their software. I was able to demo the product and they gave me a playbook of use cases that we could hit the ground running with.*

> *In addition to providing live demos of their toolset and tailoring those demos for our needs and content, they also allowed us a product trial where we were able to test the tools and ensure they would operate the way we would expect them to.*

> *The gentleman working with us did not come off 'salesy.' He was very genuine and just showed us exactly what the product could do and was very helpful in answering ALL of our questions. He even did a training session with us and our sales team to get feedback about it. Just all around very good at showing off what the product could do without a slideshow presentation.*

A notable trend in these descriptions of strategic behavior is vendors embracing authenticity and transparency. Across all information sources, including vendor-provided content and interaction with vendor representatives, buyers appreciate unbiased and balanced perspectives. For example, buyers especially liked demos that were thorough or tailored for the buyer's use case — and they questioned the value of demos that felt biased, rehearsed or not targeted to their business needs.

Buyers are savvy. They seek an understanding of the possible areas for improvement of a product before purchasing, despite the filtered view vendors often provide. When buyers aren't getting what they need from the vendor, they don't hesitate to do their own research and independently verify claims. However, when vendors do provide balanced and relevant information, their buyers see them as playing a more significant role in the selection decision.

For example, while on average vendor materials were the least trustworthy and often least helpful information sources, some buyers did find them helpful and trustworthy. Comments around why vendor collateral, references, sales reps, and presentations were helpful tended to describe balanced, thorough, personalized and detailed approaches.

Examples quotes from buyers who thought vendor materials were helpful or trustworthy:

> *[Re: Vendor sales rep] Honesty on what to look out for - about the good and the bad things. Pros and cons.*

> *[Re: Vendor collateral] Really helped to understand the product and service, the pitfalls, the options.*

> *I liked that [the vendor] was open and did not hide anything about their product.*

> *[Re: Vendor collateral] Clear, concise, and with demonstrated results.*

> *The references provided by the vendor shared the same experiences that the vendor told us to expect. There was transparency in the process.*

> *Vendor presentations were the most helpful as there was direct feedback and we were able to probe in-depth on topics that were most important to us.*

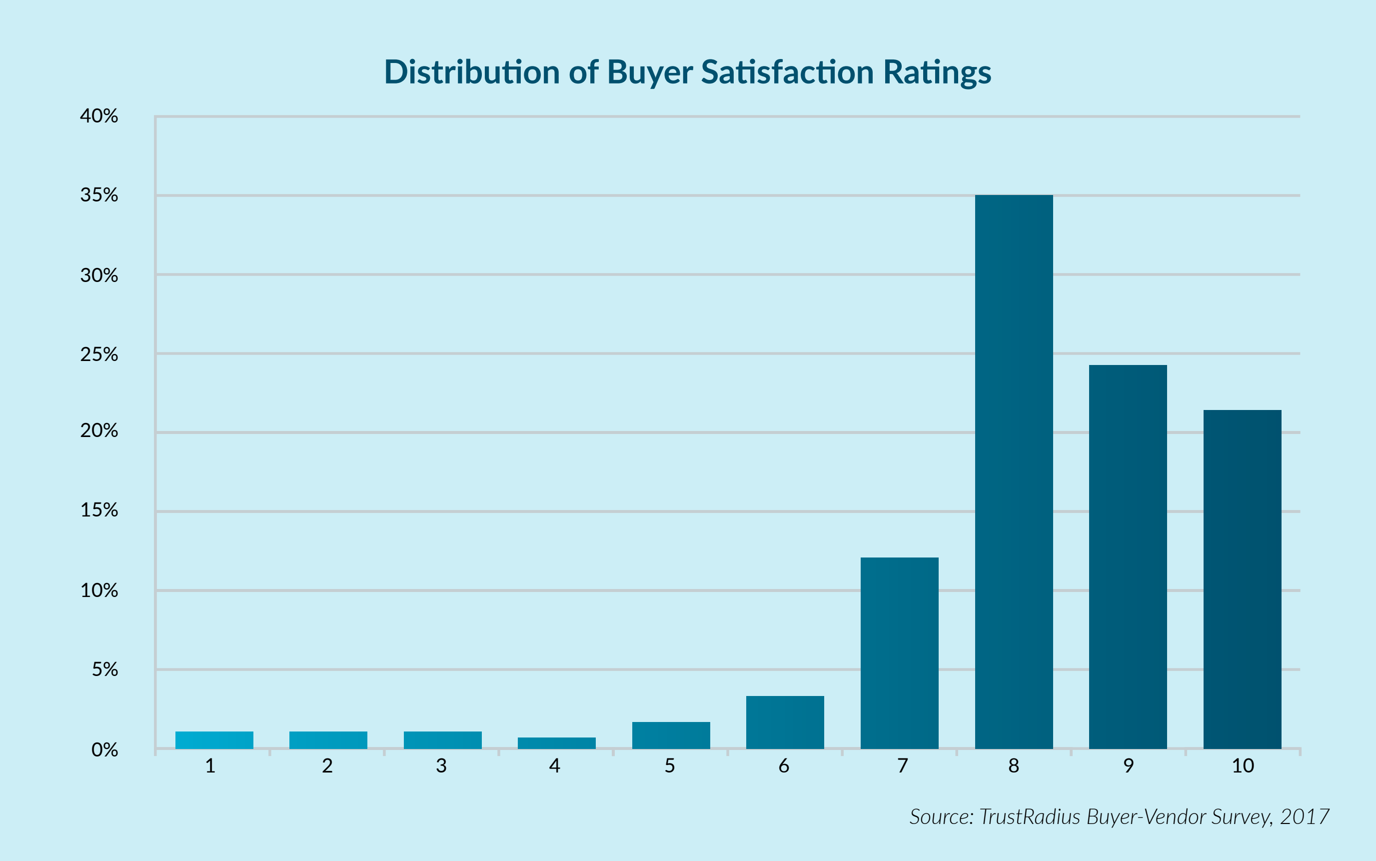
> *I also appreciated the vendor provided references... I found the 2 people I spoke to be knowledgeable and balanced in their POV.*

Another way to interpret the data is that vendors don't need to fear the impact of honesty and transparency. Creating materials that offer balanced perspectives as well as proactively connecting buyers with the resources they find helpful and trustworthy — even those the vendor does not control — can go a long way in building an influential relationship.

THE UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITY

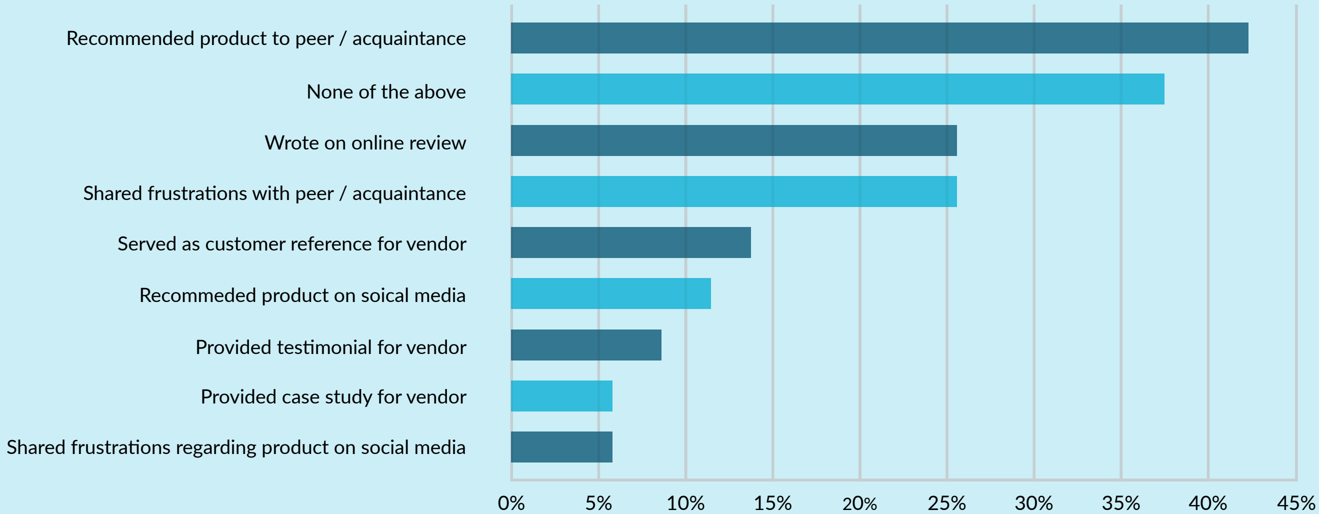
Vendors have an arsenal of satisfied customers they aren't leveraging

Overall, most buyers are highly satisfied with products they purchased. Based on Net Promoter Score definitions, 46% are promoters (9 or 10 in satisfaction rating), and 91% intend to renew the product. Only 8% of buyers are detractors (1 through 6 in satisfaction rating). Overall, the average NPS was 38. This data confirms trends we see in independently sourced ratings and reviews from end users on TrustRadius as well. Though reviewers offer balanced criticisms and areas for improvement of the products they use, they still rate the product highly.



Yet vendors aren't fully leveraging these customers. Though 46% of buyers are by definition promoters and 42% have recommended the product directly to a peer, most have not taken any action on behalf of the vendor to promote the product. Overall, just 20% of buyers said they took one or more of the following actions: served as a customer reference, provided a testimonial, or provided a case study. Of the buyers who independently recommended the product to a peer, only 30% also provided an official reference, testimonial, or case study. This represents a missed opportunity for vendors, who have an arsenal of satisfied customers not speaking on their behalf in a way that can reach prospects at scale.

Buyer Actions Taken Since Purchase



Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2017

When asked to describe the role their customers play in their marketing strategies, the vast majority of vendors said existing customers play an important role. They described topics such as advocacy, case studies, customer examples, testimonials, references, success stories, proof points, and speaking engagements. A few talked about using customer feedback to inform product strategy and improvements, identify best-fit prospects, and identify retention and upsell opportunities.

However, based on the buyer responses, these activities are limited to a very small pool of customers. This may be because vendor marketers have traditionally found it difficult to get their customers on the record, that they prefer to focus their efforts on their most ardent promoters, or a combination of the two. Yet authentic user feedback is precisely the type of helpful and trustworthy resource that buyers find valuable. And in the case of peer referrals, they don't always have easy access to them. It is critical for vendors to find opportunities to activate, use, and promote their untapped goldmine of customers.

Appendix: Respondent Demographics

Buyer Survey

A total of 418 individuals completed our buyer survey. They must have played a key role in a significant software purchase during the last two years.

Type of Software Purchased

Software Purchased	Percent
IT	16%
Marketing Automation	15%
CRM	10%
Business Intelligence	9%
HR	9%
Finance	7%
Project Management	3%
Sales Technology	3%
Social Media Management	3%
Web Content Management	3%
Other	22%

Company Size of Buyer

Company Size	Percent
1-10 employees	9%
11-50 employees	18%
51-250 employees	16%
251-500 employees	13%
501-1,000 employees	12%
1,001-5,000 employees	15%
5,001-10,000 employees	8%
10,001+ employees	7%

Age of Buyer

Age	Percent
24 or younger	4%
25-34	49%
35-44	27%
45-54	16%
55-64	3%
65 or older	1%

Job Title of Buyer

Job Title	Percent
Manager	28%
Analyst / Associate	21%
Director	12%
Senior Manager	12%
Consultant	5%
Vice President	4%
C-level executive (except CEO)	3%
Owner/Principal	3%
Founder / Co-Founder	2%
CEO	1%
Entry Level	1%
Other	6%

Department of Buyer

Department	Percent
Information Technology	31%
Marketing	27%
Accounting / Finance	7%
Human Resources	7%
Operations	6%
Engineering	4%
Research & Development	4%
Consultant	3%
Sales	3%
Customer Service	2%
Other	7%

Vendor Survey

A total of 190 individuals completed our vendor survey. They must work for a software vendor in a marketing or sales leadership capacity.

Company Size of Vendor	
Company Size	**Percent**
1-10 employees	1%
11-50 employees	20%
51-250 employees	47%
251-500 employees	15%
501-1,000 employees	9%
1,001-5,000 employees	6%
5,001-10,000 employees	1%
10,001+ employees	2%

Annual Cost of Product	
Cost	**Percent**
Less than $10k	25%
$11k-50k	33%
$51k-$100k	16%
$101k-$250k	17%
$251k-500k	7%
More than $500k	3%

Primary Target Market of Vendor	
Target Market	**Percent**
Small businesses (1-50 employees)	15%
Mid-sized companies (51-1,000 employees)	46%
Enterprises (1,001+ employees)	39%