The 2019 B2B Buying Disconnect

An In-Depth Study on Buying Preferences, Vendor Impact, and the Persistent Trust Gap in B2B Technology

TrustRadius

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About this Report

For our annual industry study, we surveyed 941 people who helped buy or sell business technology for their company in the past year. **712 buyers and 229 vendor marketers and salespeople** took aligning surveys. We asked buyers about what they bought, who was involved, how they did their due diligence and why, as well as what it's like to be a customer now. (It needed to be a major technology purchase in order to qualify for the study.) We asked vendors for their side of the story, too: from the the tactics they use to educate and engage prospects, to the difficulties they face in deal cycles.

Let's just say they don't see eye to eye! Since we take this pulse every year, we can also observe change in motion by looking at the YoY results.

Maybe you just want a quick pulse on the state of B2B tech purchases. But maybe you're really looking to understand how the buyer's journey has changed, because your old strategies aren't working as well as they used to. Maybe your organization aspires to be "customer-obsessed." Maybe you're looking for any edge you can get on competitors in a hotly contested, crowded space. **This report's for you.**
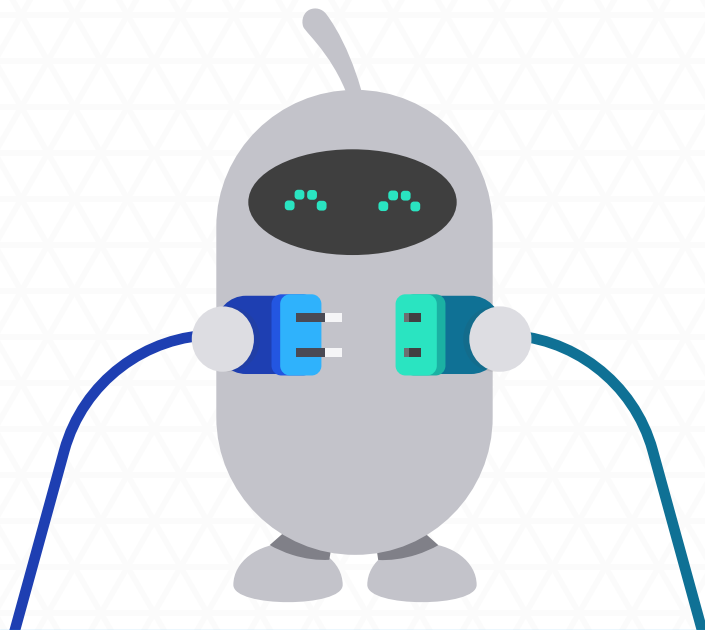
Executive Brief

Don't have time to get your hands on the data, and want to skip right to the juiciest results? If you're hoping for some controversial headlines you can use to stir the pot, shake things up with your coworkers or clients, and advocate for change, we've got you covered. Here's what you need to know:

There remains a trust gap in the B2B buying process—and it's as wide as ever.

Vendors overestimate their own transparency—i.e. how well they've earned buyer trust—by more than 2x! According to buyers, who ranked all of the sources they used during their process in terms of how trustworthy and influential they were, vendor-controlled sources of information (reps, blog, website, marketing collateral, etc.) come in last.

The effects of the trust gap are starting to snowball. Because of the gap, fewer customers than ever take your representatives seriously.

Vendor failure to meet buyer expectations year over year is starting to lead to a decline in the trustworthiness, influence, and effectiveness of vendor representatives. This year, only 11% of buyers said vendor representatives were very trustworthy, and only 19% said vendor representatives were very influential in making their decision. This is far below the 53% of vendors who said they thought reps were very effective at helping move their buyers towards a decision. Even vendors recognize that the effectiveness of reps is slipping—that number fell 7 points from last year. Doubt and uncertainty are at an all-time high.

Only 1 in 5 buyers said the vendor they bought from was very influential in helping them choose the product over alternatives.

On average, across buyers, vendor representatives and vendor-provided resources had low influence. Buyers see vendors' overall influence as less than that of every other individual source of information they used, except for third-party publications & independent media and the sources of information produced by vendors themselves (vendor reps, case studies, websites, marketing collateral, and blogs)!

We've passed a tipping point. Now over half of buyers rely on reviews, while less than one in four buyers relies on analysts.

Reviews grew about 13% in usage year over year. Reviews are now tied with the vendor/product website for #2 most used information source (behind product demos, which is #1). Meanwhile, analyst rankings & reports saw a 22% YoY decrease in buyer usage. So why are vendors investing more in analysts, if, according to vendors in our survey, they're tricky to work with and not particularly effective, and they're being used less and less by buyers?

59% of our buyer survey respondents were millennials. Around 1 in 3 millennials identified themselves as the lead buyer.

They are the people you need to influence to get the deal done. Millennial buyers rely on user reviews, free trials/accounts, and vendor blogs slightly more than other age groups. They also have higher standards for transparency, and trust vendor representatives less than older buyers.

According to buyers, the top thing vendors can do to speed up purchase cycles is to be more transparent about product capabilities and limitations.

But only 42% of vendors thought it was very important to their buyers to understand the cons before buying the product. This perhaps helps explain why only 36% of buyers felt the vendor they bought from was very forthcoming about product limitations—since it's about the same amount who acknowledge that the cons are crucial information! The reality, of course, is that 71% of buyers say it's very important to understand the cons before buying. One thing buyers and vendors can agree on: when it comes to investigating the cons, reviews are by far the go-to resource.

Customer-centric vendors had more influence with their buyers, and were 4x more likely to say their reps were very effective.

When vendors made customer voice central to their business strategy, they were more than 4X as likely to say their own reps were very effective. Since 3 out of 4 buyers said they'd be willing to advocate for the product they bought, there's plenty on the table for vendors to scale their customer voice programs. This is the key to a virtuous cycle — or a marketing flywheel, to use HubSpot's terminology. After all, vendors who metabolize customer voice throughout their business end up being more influential with buyers.
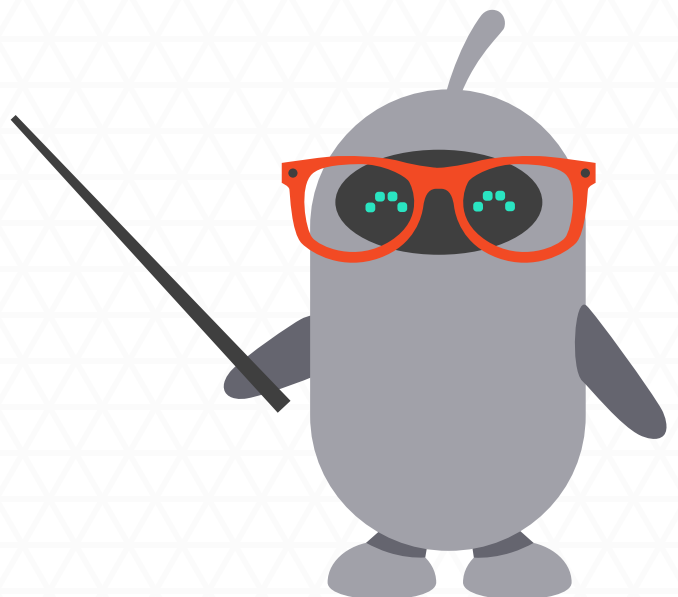
What Do B2B Technology Purchases Look Like in 2019?

Type of Tech Purchased, Money Spent, & Buyers' Overall Timeline

Let's start by looking at the types of technology purchased in the last year, the amount of money spent, and buyers' overall timeline for the process. (For a deeper look at the stages of the buyer's journey and how it feels to move through them, check out *The B2B Buying Experience Map*.)

It's helpful to benchmark against not only your own category/department, but also purchasing behavior more broadly. Just as you might end up competing for budget with other potential investments (not just your direct competitors), like it or not, every tech buying experience informs individual and institutional expectations for what the purchase process will, could, or should be like with your product. Use this to your advantage! **Don't get tunnel vision.**

The data in this section is important, because it shows us what's happening on a macro level—the state and stakes of B2B buying, if you will. In the next section of the report we'll dig in to analyze the people, information sources, marketing tactics, and questions that influence changing buyer behavior in more detail.
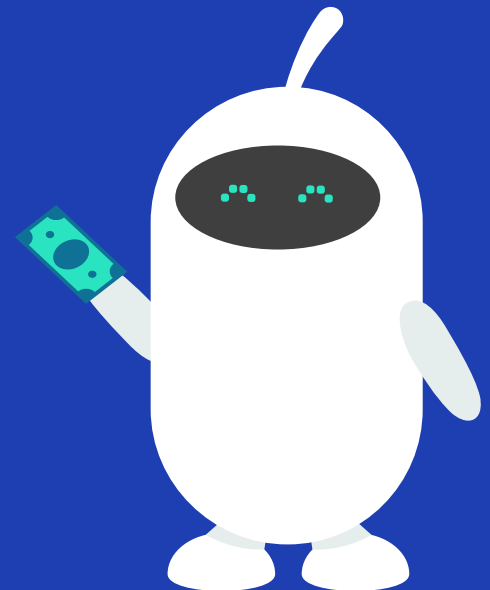
The Tech They Bought

IT, Marketing, and Business Intelligence tools topped the charts.

We asked buyers to choose one product to reflect on: the most significant purchase for their company that they were involved in. The largest chunk of respondents (24%) bought an IT solution, followed by Marketing technology (13%) and Business Intelligence (10%).

What Type of Technology Did You Help Your Company Buy?
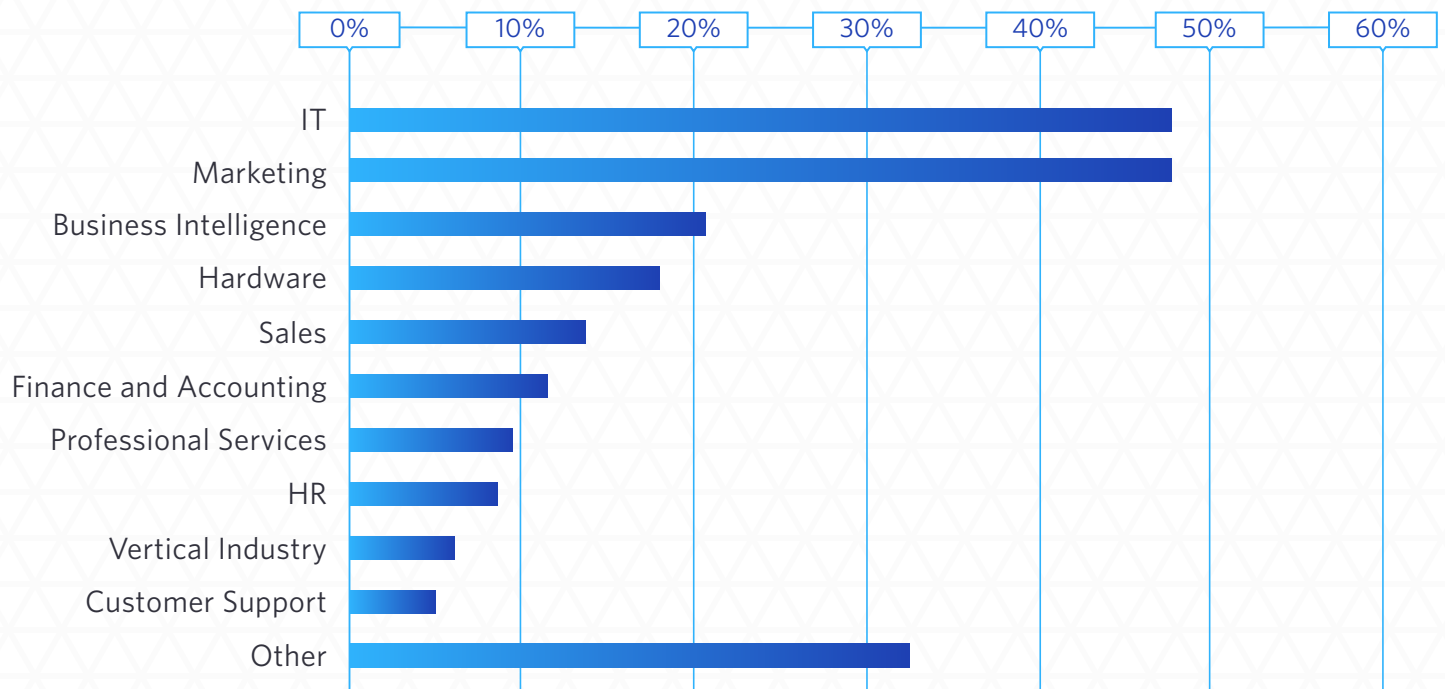
"Other" types of technology included a broad range of answers like cloud storage, collaboration, communication, fundraising, monitoring, security, data analytics, eLearning, customer success management, warehousing and inventory, graphic design, video, web hosting, robotics, privacy and consent management, video game development, etc.

The Money They Spent

Nearly 1 in 3 buyers had over $50K on the line.

27% of the buyers who took our survey reported spending from $51K/year to more than $500K/year on their purchase. (This is the ticket price; services and internal resources needed to support it were not included.) Another 30% said the product their company bought cost between $11K/year to $50K/year. Technology investments of this size put buyers' professional reputations under the gun. **Success can pay off mightily, but making a wrong decision is not an option.**

Even a $10K/year purchase can be quite impactful on a company's bottom line (in terms of costs and potential ROI)—especially at small businesses, where more than half of the $10K or less purchases occurred. Only 5% of buyers were not sure of the product's approximate annual cost.

What is The Approximate Annual Cost of This Product (excluding services, etc.)?
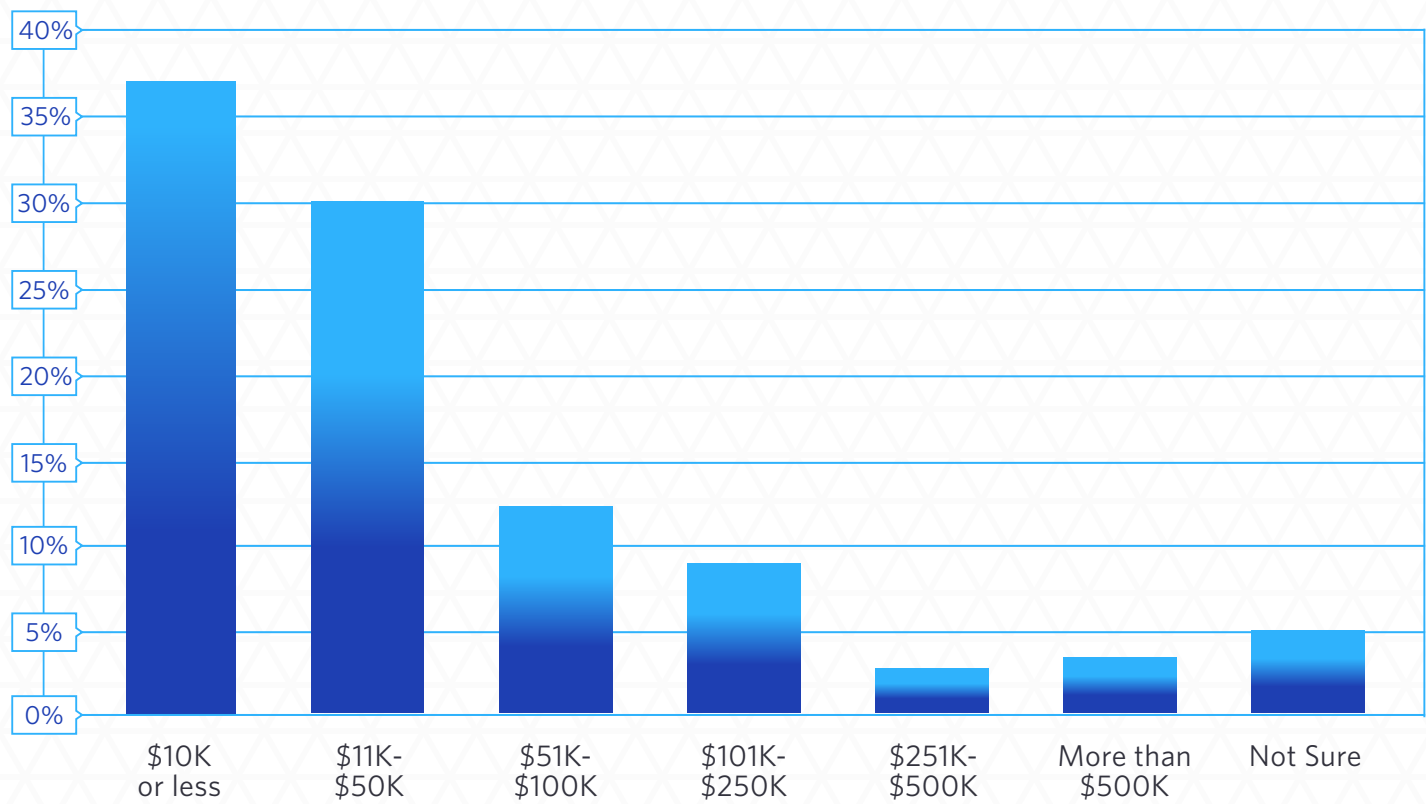
The People in the Room

95% of purchases were collaborative.

Only 5% of purchases were made by a single buyer. Most buyers (64%) were part of a buying group of **2-5 people involved in influencing or making the decision**. Nearly a third of buyers reported working as part of a much larger buying committee.

About How Many Individuals at Your Company Were Involved in the Purchase Process?

1	2-5	6-10	11-20	More than 20
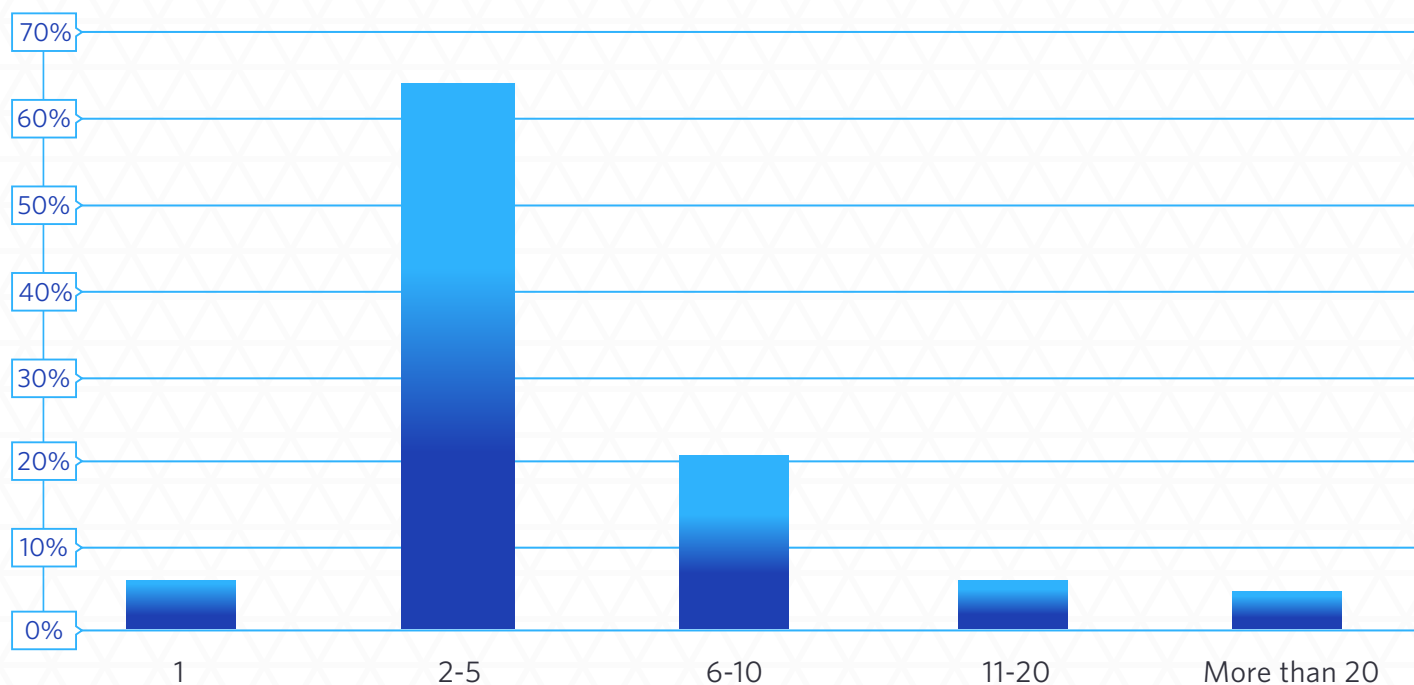
Many buyers wear multiple hats within these committees. They might handle the discovery and evaluation stages, they might be invited to demo calls with vendors and be a part of the final selection decision, or they might be responsible for leading the process end to end.

2 out of 3 buyers identified options and helped evaluate

**Identified or
Researched Options**

62%

**Trialed or
Evaluated Options**

67%
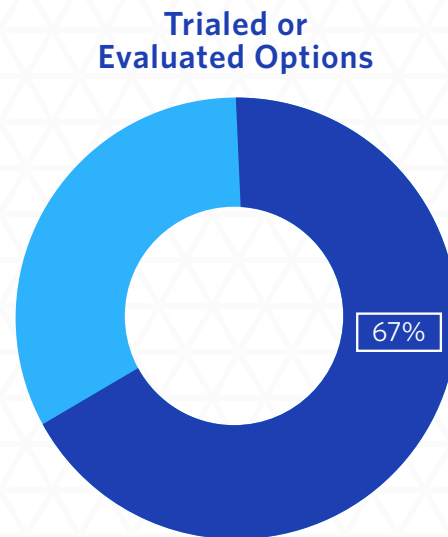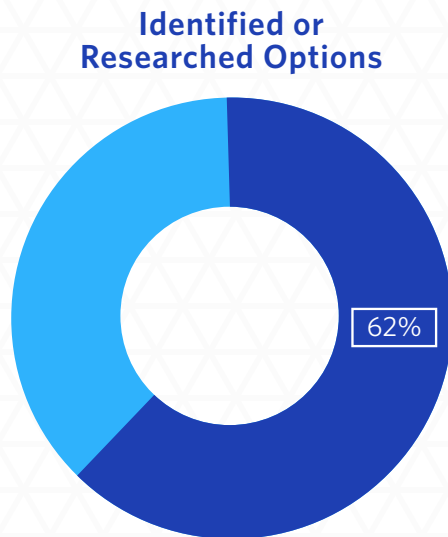
1 in 2 buyers engaged directly with the vendor

**Engaged Directly with One of
the Vendor's Representative**

53%
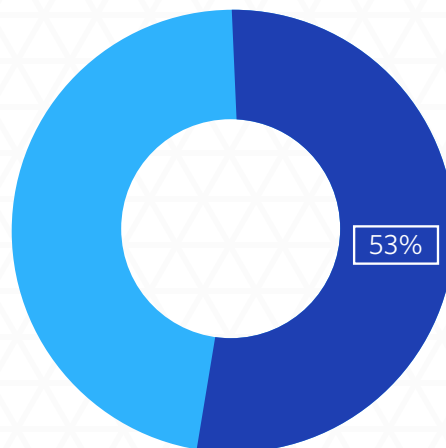
1 in 3 buyers lead the decision but only 1 in 10 approved funding

Lead Buyer

34%

Funding Approver

13%

Procurement

17%
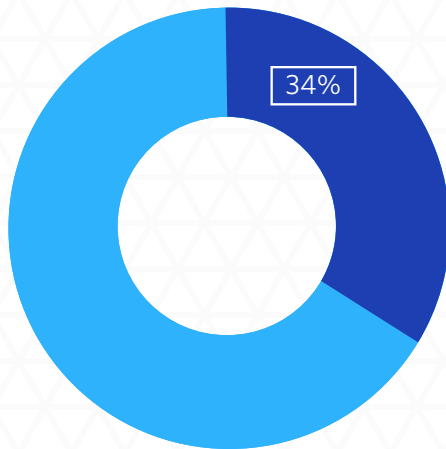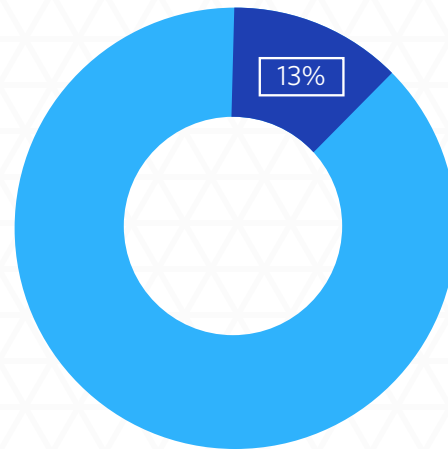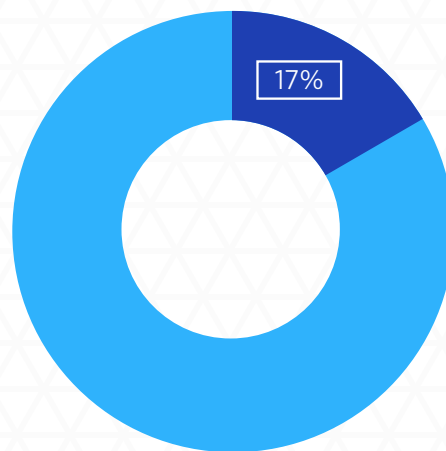
The Shortlist—and How They Picked a Winner

85% of buyers seriously weighed multiple options.

For most buyers, there wasn't one obvious winner that emerged from the pack based on advertising and online research alone.

How Many Products Made It Onto Buyers' Shortlists?

Shortlist size	Percentage
1	~14%
2	~40%
3	~37%
4	~7%
5 or more	~3%
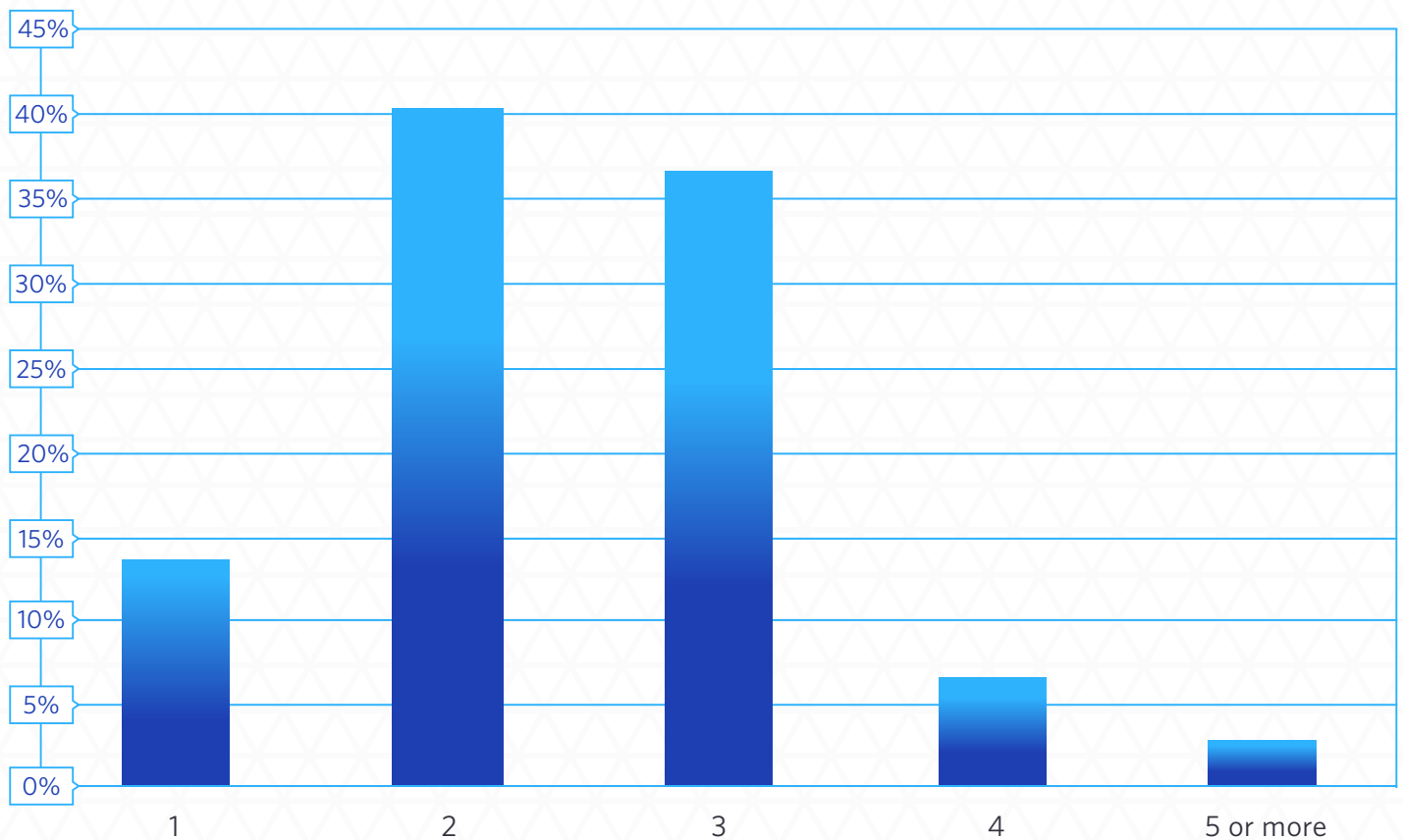
41% of buyers evaluated two products head to head, while 44% shortlisted 3 or more products. That means they had a lot of features, trials, demos, pricing and packaging, and other information to juggle during evaluation.

Meets requirements, within budget... but do I trust it?

Without a doubt, pragmatic factors like features, price, integrations, etc. are important in making the final selection decision. If your budget is non-negotiable, or if certain missing features or integrations are a deal-breaker, boom! Those factors sometimes help buyers narrow things down to a single option.

But often, it's not so clear cut—especially in crowded tech spaces where products may offer similar capabilities at similar prices, or in situations where requirements are squishy and subject to change.

Two other common reasons buyers gave for sealing the deal with one product over another were:

1) how easily they can envision using the product in their particular circumstances, and

2) their confidence in the relationship with the vendor, i.e. level of trust.

These considerations worked in conjunction with pragmatic factors. Sometimes they were tie-breakers, tipping buyers' favor towards one product. But across the board, they helped build confidence in the favorite option. **There were a number of different ways buyers seemed to gauge trust** in their use case and the future of their relationship with the vendor, from the tenor of sales communications to feedback from existing customers. Here are some examples on this theme of what buyers said when we asked them why they chose the product they bought over alternatives on their shortlist.

1. One of 2 products that met 100% of requirements 2. More transparent of the vendors — "straight up, no bull" 3. Significant cost advantage over other shortlist vendors

Zendesk seemed the most straightforward and had the most capabilities when compared to similar products. We also felt it could grow with the company.

Pricing, features, feedback from Zoom's other customers. And feedback from my own team.

They were willing to work with me more than the competition to make their solution fit. Their product is also well known and has a strong reputation.

It was clearly superior and highly capable for our use case, backed by a trusted brand.

The user experience was easier and the rep was more responsive.

It was the best suited to our needs. We were able to easily create a custom solution tailored to our workflow.

We couldn't find a product to completely integrate with our existing database, but [the product we chose] had the most features that we wanted, and the rep helped us figure out how to bring info into our database manually.

[The product we bought] had the strongest presentation for the main features we were looking for, especially an integrated payment processor and dynamic form-building. As a smaller company, they also appeared to be more agile and willing to take customer feedback seriously and implement new features more quickly than larger B2B companies.

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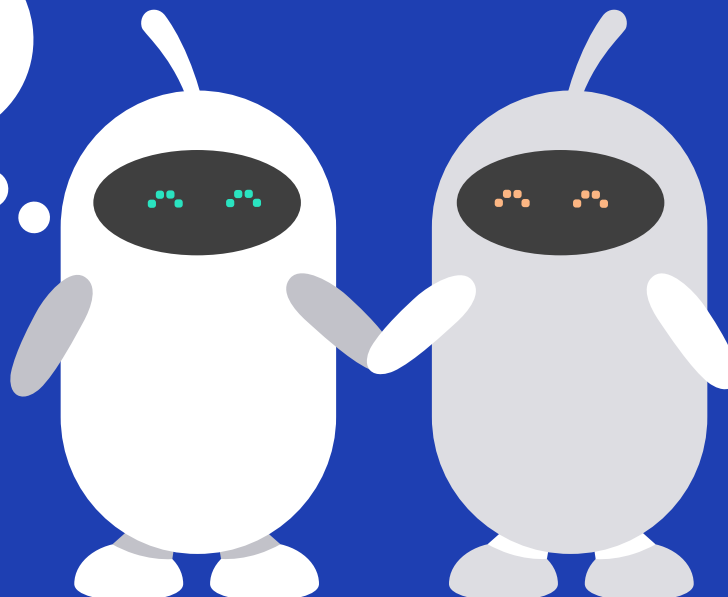
The Timeline

It's not a linear process—pricing, sales reps, hands-on experience & user feedback are important throughout.

We asked buyers to identify the steps they took at each stage—discovery, evaluation, and selection. Not all buyers incorporated all of these actions into their process (they chose "N/A"). Many buyers repeated actions during multiple phases of their process. Collecting information on pricing, speaking to sales reps, getting hands-on experience through a demo or free trial, and seeking customer feedback were the most common repeat steps. Rather than being limited to a single stage, buyers take these actions for different purposes throughout their journey.

What Was Your Timeline for Taking the Following Steps in Your Buying Process?

Legend: Discovery, Evaluation, Selection, N/A

Categories (top to bottom):
- Collected Information on Pricing & Costs
- Spoke to & Engaged with Sales Rep
- Had a Demo or Participated in Free Trial
- Sought Input from Peers/Feedback From Existing Users in the Community
- Responded to Outreach from Vendors
- Sought Input from Industry Analysts/Consultants
- Brought in Other Team Members to Help with Research Process
- Sought RFP/Competitive Bids from a Select List of Providers

Top 5 Most Common Steps Taken by Buyers During Discovery

1 Collected information on pricing and costs

2 Conducted anonymous research on potential solutions

3 Spoke to and engaged with a sales rep

4 Had a demo or participated in a free trial

5 Sought input from peers/ feedback from existing users in the community

Top 5 Most Common Steps Taken by Buyers During Evaluation

1 Had a demo or participated in a free trial

2 Collected information on pricing and costs

3 Brought in other team members to help with research process

4 Spoke to and engaged with a sales rep

5 Sought input from peers/ feedback from existing users in the community

Top 5 Most Common Steps Taken by Buyers During Selection

1 Spoke to and engaged with a sales rep

2 Collected information on pricing and costs

3 Brought in other team members to help with research process

4 Had a demo or participated in a free trial

5 Sought input from peers/feedback from existing users in the community

At the start of the process, ballpark pricing information is a hot commodity, and buyers are most likely to want to stay off vendor radar, surveying the landscape to get a sense of all of their options. They often reach out to a sales rep with questions, check out the product for themselves, and tap their network or search online to see what others think of the products they've discovered.

When they're ready to evaluate their options, firsthand exposure to products through demos or free trials becomes becomes the key step for buyers. Pricing remains a major concern. But now other stakeholders are asked to weigh in on product functionality and cost/benefit ratio as well. Buyers may ask sales reps more specific questions and leverage them for product walkthroughs. They'll also compare user feedback between products they're evaluating, and try to get insight into specific areas they're worried or wondering about.

Come selection time, the buyer's relationship with their vendor point of contact guides the way. Pricing, other stakeholders, the product itself, and user feedback are all at play to inform the decision and help them cross the finish line.

At every stage of the process (Discovery, Evaluation, Selection), more buyers sought input from peers/feedback from existing users in the community than responded to outreach from vendors. At every stage of the process, more buyers sought user feedback than sought input from industry analysts/consultants. Sending out RFPs and checking expert opinions were the two steps least-taken by buyers overall.

For 46% of buyers, the process took longer than one quarter.

Though some purchases were completed relatively quickly—13% happened in less than a month—more often the purchase process extended for up to a quarter (42%), or across multiple quarters (46%). 4% of buyers reported spending over a year on the purchase process for a single product!

All in All, from Researching Your Options to Evalution, Selection, and Purchase, How Long Did it Take Your Organization to Buy the Product?
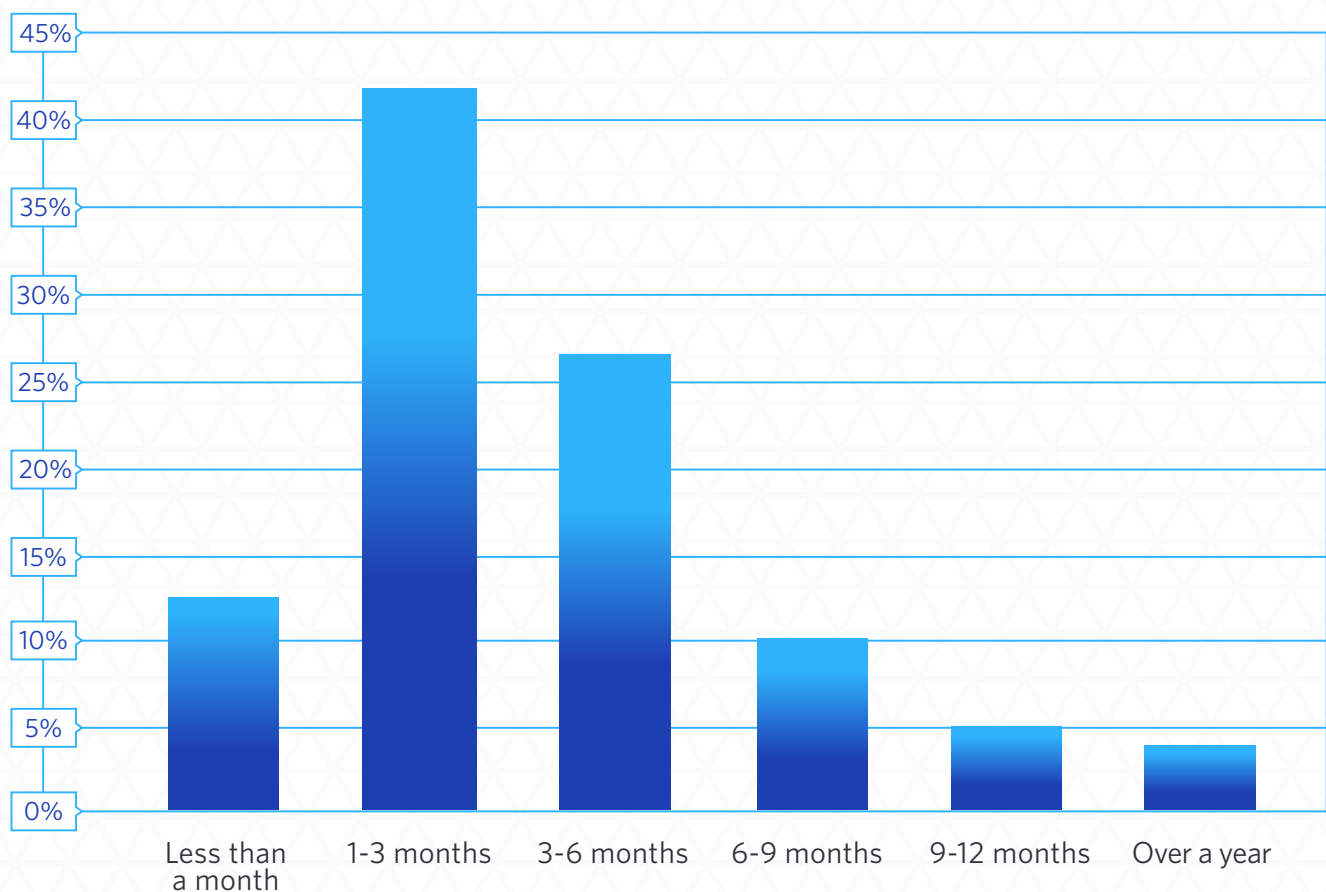
The Obstacles Slowing Things Down

Hurry up and wait to get smart.

We asked buyers to reflect on the biggest things slowing them down along the way. While logistical factors (that are out of your control as a marketer) like time, employee turnover, budget, integrations/implementations, bureaucracy, etc. slow things down, a major undercurrent across buyer feedback was uncertainty. **The process of becoming confident enough to buy is slow going,** from knowing exactly what you're getting, to making sure it will work in your environment, to making sure it will work for end users, making sure you're getting a good deal and a good partner in the vendor you buy from, to trying to make sure it's a good long term investment that can grow with them as their needs change. Getting educated enough to make a confident decision when you're juggling other stakeholders, schedules, projects, and changing budgets takes even more time when the information is hard to find, when you don't have time to test everything yourself, when you're waiting on salespeople to get back to you with answers, and when questions from different stakeholder viewpoints keep getting added to the mix.

As you know all too well, the biggest deal killer is the status quo, or no action. That's a safe default when buyers don't have the full picture and can't muster up enough clear-sighted confidence to make a purchase. There are some flat-out factors that shape their choice of product and the speed at which they can move, but at every stage, doubts can creep in. For example, buyers are doubtful about pricing specifics, because vendors aren't forthcoming about price structure and packaging, and often don't want it to be easy to compare pricing with their competitors.

And no matter how excited they are about your product, if it's a collaborative decision it can take time to juggle calendars and get everyone in the room for a decision. But stakeholders drag their feet more when they feel unsure about whether the product will work, how it will impact their processes, exactly how much it will cost, or what kind of results it's going to provide—and don't have time to dig in themselves to become sure.

No buyer wants the process to take forever, but they also don't want to be told to hurry up and hope for the best. They're smart, and their ability to excel at their job is on the line. Buyers want to be informed, and except for small transactional purchases of products that are easily replaced, they'll wait and move slowly in order to find the whole story. Here are some examples of how buyers expressed doubt and uncertainty slowing them down:

Getting sufficient product knowledge prior to going live.

Getting accurate information from representatives

Confusing package options, lack of a single point of contact on the sales team.

Determining our needs exactly.

Figuring out if we had the resources to support the use of it.

We are still a small company, so an expense of this size had a big impact. We had to make sure we knew everything we could about it to justify the expense before purchasing.

The need for more opinions from real users of the product, which are the best sources of reliable information about it.

Figuring out if the product was going to work with our existing products (data sets). This took some time to determine as we had to build out many test cases.

Analyzing results of the evaluations —the time spent considering all the other options - Debating if the purchase was absolutely necessary

Hard to obtain same features among different products for comparison. Web info sometimes trivial and hard to understand.

Getting all the information necessary to ensure we were choosing the correct vendor and had the procedures ready.

Approval from supervisors / leadership, investing the time in learning the platforms enough to make an educated (or somewhat educated) decision about keeping or eliminating the platform from consideration, finding resources that indicated the platform could, or had been, used in the way I'd need it to work.

Limited availability of trusted sources from within the industry verifying the decision-making process slowed down the implementation as we had to get proof of the usability of the products to Management.

Buyers & vendors see two sides of the same coin.

We asked vendors for their view, too. The vendor perspective lined up pretty well with buyer experience. Vendors said the biggest obstacles that can slow down deal cycles are decision makers, budget, uncertainty/indecision, competition, and functional or technical requirements. You have limited control over most of these—from internal buying processes, to the time they have available for testing and evaluation, to the buyer's financial situation, offerings from other competitors, and the features and performance of your product itself. But you do have the power to educate buyers about your product, the market, and responsible decision-making criteria, and to **help them find proof that the product has worked for others and will work for them**.

Here are some examples of what vendors said about grappling with uncertainty/indecision, and how it can slow down deal cycles:

Lack of prospect understanding around KPIs they are looking to achieve.

Education—fairly new product segment requires a bit of education to understand how it fits.

Status Quo, Lack of Resources.

Buyer indecision; Fear of making a bad decision.

Limited budget, lack of awareness/education.

Confusion over alternatives.

Lack of an internal champion at prospect company, prospect evaluating too many solutions, lack of prospect resources to conduct proof of concept.

Our buyers typically don't know how to buy technology, so they don't understand the SOEs [Statements of Expectation] that need to take place within their organization

Economic uncertainty; Changes in company management.

You're better equipped to deal with the "burden" of proof than your buyers are, since you're an expert on how, why, and when customers buy your product and achieve great results. You have more resources, and arguably, more to gain, from solving this problem. But since trust between buyers and vendors is at an all time low (more in the next section on this), to really grease the wheels here, **vendors need to rely more on concrete evidence and less on glitzy messaging** to help buyers build confidence.

As you reflect on how effective vs. how difficult your marketing tactics have been thus far, where the gaps are, and plan your strategy for the upcoming quarters, think about how you can remove some of the friction caused by doubt and uncertainty. Are there ways you can help buyers get a clearer picture, and reach the confidence threshold needed to make a purchase decision? How can you make education more efficient, so that it allows you to speed up the sales cycle rather than feeling like it slows things down? Which educational tactics will move the needle on buyer trust in your product and your company?

In the next section of the report, we'll look at the different people, information sources, marketing tactics, and one area of uncertainty in particular that influence buyer behavior. Then in the final section, we'll lay out recommendations for you based buyers' own feedback and the proven strategies of the most effective and influential vendors who are leading the pack.

Understanding Why:

The People, Questions, & Information Sources That Influence Buyer Behavior

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Now that we have a birds-eye view, what does this mean on the ground? How have things changed, and why? What are the actual dynamics between buyers and sellers, and where's the disconnect?

In this section, we'll take a closer look at buyer/seller dynamics. We'll lay out some of the forces driving behaviors and change on both sides of the purchase.

Information Sources

The overall number of resources buyers consult is on the rise.

This year, buyers used an average of 5.2 information sources, up from 4.9 last year. The top 5 resources they used were:

1

PRODUCT DEMOS

2

IT'S A TIE!
USER REVIEWS
VENDOR/PRODUCT WEBSITE

3

FREE TRIAL/ ACCOUNT

4

VENDOR REPRESENTATIVE
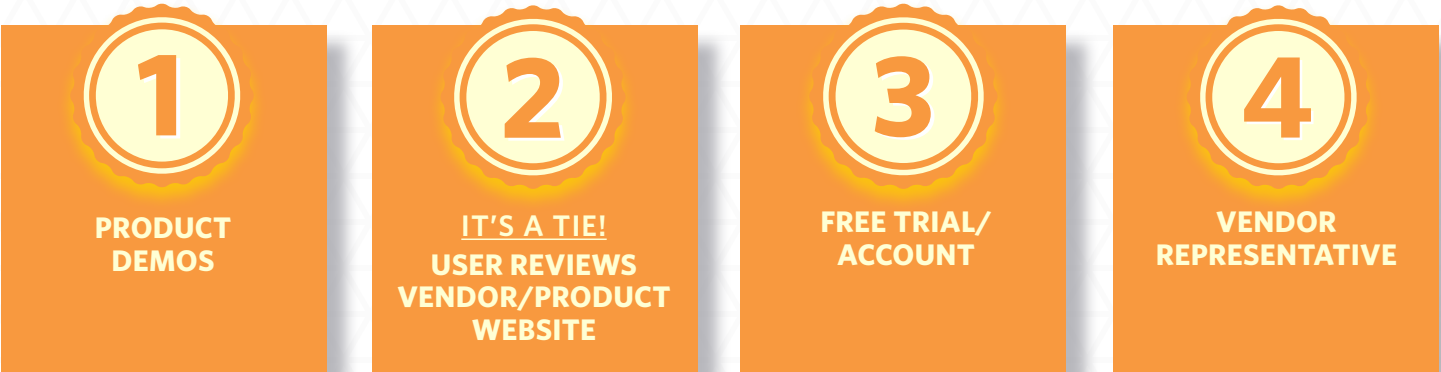
Which of the Following Information Sources Did You Use?

Horizontal bar chart with x-axis from 0% to 70% in 10% increments:

- Product Demos
- User Reviews
- Vendor/Product Website
- Free Trial/Account
- Vendor Reps. (e.g. Account Executive, Sales Engineer, Support)
- Your Own Prior Experience with the Product
- Referral From a Friend, Colleague, Peer
- Communities/Forums
- Vendor Marketing Collateral (e.g. eBooks, Whitepapers, Webinars)
- Third Party Publication & Independent Media
- Analyst Rankings & Reports (e.g. Gartner, Forrester)
- Vendor-Produced Case Studies
- Vendor-Provided Customer References
- Solution Consultant/Agency Recommendation
- Vendor Blog
- Other

Reviews grew 13% in usage, while analyst rankings & reports fell 22%.

Now over half of buyers rely on reviews, while less than one in four buyers relies on analysts. Reviews are trending up. Analysts are trending down. Last year (2018) 30.6% of buyers used analyst rankings and reports, whereas this year (2019) only 24% of buyers used them. On the other hand, where last year 49% of buyers used reviews in their research process, this year that number was 56%. We've passed the tipping point, where buyers are now more likely to use reviews than not.

REVIEWS

ANALYSTS

Buyers actively compile their truth from multiple perspectives.

In general, buyers' due diligence is becoming more democratic. Groomed, authoritative sources like analysts, consultants, and third-party publications, and customer references trended downward in usage, while practical DIY or on-demand sources like user reviews, free trials, the vendor website, and even live vendor representatives trended slightly upward in usage. What do all of these trending resources have in common? They tend to be more human, more specific, and less lofty.

(Note that product demos also grew in usage. Depending on how the demos are done, they can be very specific and practical, or high-level and groomed. In their comments, buyers explained that the most helpful product demos show real step-by-step workflows and not just best-case scenarios. They also liked when vendors presenting the demos were able to really show the answers to their questions.)

It's easier for buyers to identify and account for biases in these resources, because they have a clearer, more contextualized point of view. They're more accessible, more personal, more transparent, less guarded, less elite. They don't come from on high. They're relatable, so buyers can determine what the inputs mean for them. Buyers don't give any one source final authority; rather, the 5+ resources work together. They're the feeds buyers use to compile a complete picture of the product. **Buyers want to feel they have control in the investigation.** In a very basic way, they not only need to feel confident enough to buy, they need to feel that they've done a good job getting there.

Trust = influence, and vendors are misfiring.

Buyers don't digest resources in isolation. Thus no one source of information merits complete trust, nor exercises total influence. But there is a tight correlation between trust and influence. More trustworthy sources of information are also more influential with buyers.

As in years past, firsthand experience–whether you've used it before, seen a demo, or played around with a free version—and feedback from peers—in the form of personal recommendations or reviews—rank among the top most trustworthy and most influential resources. Notably, while analyst rankings and reports were not widely used, for those buyers who used them they did rank among the top five most trustworthy resources, though not among the top five most influential. (Buyers who do use analyst reports tend to spend a lot of money on them—so of course they're going to trust them!) Reviews were slightly more influential, while analysts were slightly more trustworthy.

Vendor-controlled sources of information (reps, blog, website, marketing collateral, etc.) are at the bottom of the barrel for both trustworthiness and influence for the second year in a row.

On a Scale of 1-4, How Trustworthy was the Resource?

Resource	Rating
Your Own Prior Experience with the Product	3.8
Free Trial/Account	3.65
Referral From a Friend, Colleague, Peer	3.5
Product Demos	3.2
Analyst Rankings & Reports (e.g. Gartner, Forrester)	3.05
User Review	2.95
Communities/Forums	2.95
Vendor-Provided Customer References	2.8
Third Part Publications & Independent Media	2.8
Solution Consultant/Agency Recommendation	2.75
Vendor-Produced Case Studies	2.55
Vendor Reps. (e.g. Account Executive, Sales Engineer, Support)	2.5
Vendor Blog	2.45
Vendor Marketing Collateral (e.g. eBooks, Whitepapers, Webinars)	2.4
Vendor/Product Website	2.4

Scale: 1.0 – 4.0

So why do buyers use resources that aren't very trustworthy?

The vendor website and vendor representatives are some of the most used by buyers, but are not viewed as trustworthy, nor are they very influential in comparison to other sources of information. So why don't buyers just ignore them? Wouldn't that make their due diligence faster, simpler, cleaner?

The short answer is no. Buyers want information straight from the source, not just hearsay. Vendors have essential, proprietary, pragmatic information that buyers need. (Especially on topics like pricing and packaging, many vendors keep information close to the vest so that buyers have no choice but to come to them.)

Information from vendor websites and vendor reps is rarely straightforward, but buyers recognize that **vendors know their own products best**, and that the answers they need are deep down there

somewhere. Some buyers are jaded by past purchase experiences, but many are optimistic, and they all have high expectations for what they'd like to be able to find. They're hoping that vendors will help, not hinder, their investigation.

Buyers are also putting out feelers to test the relationship, since that will be important in the long run. Post-purchase, once the buyer becomes a customer, they'll be relying on the vendor a lot. Ultimately the vendor holds the keys to the kingdom in terms of enabling success with their product. Resources like the vendor website and vendor representatives are crucial in the patchwork of truth, as is the experience of trying to work with the vendor. Here are some examples of how buyers explained the value of working with vendor reps:

> *Having a vendor rep. was highly meaningful & allowed for the back & forth of conversation to weave through the product's value and shortcomings.*

> *Talking to the sales rep got me answers that would not be possible to get from marketing materials.*

> *Account reps and pre-sales engineers are great, as long as you know what questions to ask. They have a huge depth of knowledge on the subject matter, but it's up to us to ensure they understand our needs & environment.*

> *It was very helpful to be able to talk to a vendor rep & have them address our concerns. We were able to see that they had a dedicated team available to help out customers & potential customers, & it reassured us that if we had any problems in the future that they would be handled by the company.*

Vendors

Which tactics did vendors use, and how well did they perform?

The top five tactics vendors used to educate and engage prospects were:

1 MARKETING COLLATERAL

2 PRODUCT DEMOS

3 COMPANY/ PRODUCT WEBSITE

4 CASE STUDIES

5 CUSTOMER REFERENCES

Which Tactics Do You Use to Educate & Engage Prospects?

Tactic	
Marketing Collateral (e.g. eBooks, Whitepapers, Webinars)	
Product Demos	
Company/Product Website	
Case Studies	
Customer References	
Blog	
Vendor Reps. (e.g. Account Executive, Sales Engineer, Support)	
Third Party Publication & Independent Media	
Analyst Rankings & Reports (e.g. Gartner, Forrester)	
User Reviews	
Partner/Agency Network	
Free Trial/Account	
Customer Referral Program	
Communities/Forums	
Re-Engage Former Users	

How Effective is Each One?
(in terms of helping to move your buyers towards a decision)

Category	Value
Product Demos	3.65
Customer References	3.55
Vendor Reps. (e.g. Account Executive, Sales Engineer, Support)	3.45
Free Trial/Account	3.3
Customer Referral Program	3.2
User Reviews	3.15
Partner/Agency Network	3.05
Case Studies	3.05
Analyst Rankings & Reports (e.g. Gartner, Forrester)	3.0
Communities/Forums	2.85
Company/Product Website	2.85
Re-Engage Former User	2.75
Marketing Collateral (e.g. eBooks, Whitepapers, Webinars)	2.75
Third Part Publications & Independent Media	2.7
Blog	2.35

Scale: 1.0 – 4.0

How Challenging/Difficult is Each One to Create or Manage?

Category	Value
Analyst Rankings & Reports (e.g. Gartner, Forrester)	2.85
Customer Referral Program	2.85
Case Studies	2.7
Customer References	2.65
Partner/Agency Network	2.55
User Reviews	2.45
Third Part Publications & Independent Media	2.45
Marketing Collateral (e.g. eBooks, Whitepapers, Webinars)	2.45
Communities/Forums	2.35
Company/Product Website	2.35
Vendor Rep. (e.g. Account Executive, Sales Engineer, Support)	2.25
Re-Engage Former User	2.25
Free Trial/Account	2.2
Product Demos	2.2
Blog	2.0

Scale: 1.0 – 4.0

Marketing Collateral Performance & Buyer Feedback

Report Card — D

No	Do most buyers use it?
9%	of buyers said it was very influential.
8%	of buyers said it was very trustworthy.
14%	of vendors said it was very effective.
5%	of vendors said it was very challenging.

I trust user reviews and more unbiased resources than company-created collateral.

I don't trust marketing pamphlets since they often only reflect the "good" things and rarely dive into anything relevant for our research.

Vendor collateral valuable for initial research but from there, really a matter of needing to actually see the functionality work as opposed to pretty pictures & glowing case studies...

Providers are known for their platitudes, and less known for the substance of their claims, so I took their marketing materials with a grain of salt.

The product demos showed you what it actually did as opposed to what the marketing said it did. Also, sometimes the marketing was vague so it was difficult to understand what the features actually were. Likewise, talking to the sales rep got me answers that would not be possible to get from marketing materials.

I prefer to hear what other people have to say, & what I know. Often I don't trust sales or marketing ads anymore.

Any vendor can put up collateral and a good website, but trying the service for ourselves was crucial in understanding if the product was a fit for our team.

Product Demos Performance & Buyer Feedback

Report Card   A

Yes — Do most buyers use it?

51% of buyers said it was very influential.

42% of buyers said it was very trustworthy.

70% of vendors said it was very effective.

10% of vendors said it was very challenging.

The demo got everyone excited about what the product can do.

Ultimately, for us, the proof is in testing and working through demos.

Vendor reps who understood our needs/use cases better were easier to work with. Product demos substantiated claims made by the reps.

I like to see what I'm buying. The demo goes a long way.

Demos allowed us to see the product capability and they were able to answer all the technical questions regarding the requirements and operation of the system.

I found that web pages and whitepapers, while informative, were not nearly as helpful to determining if the product was going to be an suitable solution for us as actually using the product under the trial, and seeing it in action in a demo.

Hands on demos tend to beat any marketing collateral, as you can put the solution to the test with real data

Demos are a lot more useful to see how the user interacts with the system in the real world.

Demos and playing with the technology is the best way to find out if it matches your requirements. The bigger the purchase is, the bigger you need the evaluation period to be.

Company/Product Website Performance & Buyer Feedback

Report Card (B-)

Yes — Do most buyers use it?

10% — of buyers said it was very influential.

8% — of buyers said it was very trustworthy.

18% — of vendors said it was very effective.

8% — of vendors said it was very challenging.

The website itself [was helpful] because it had a feature list that was useful for comparison.

Websites are boring.

The vendor website is by nature biased.

The vendor website and case-studies are often too verbose for the information they provide, and they may not be targeted to our use-case.

Giving a free trial is critical, as is having a good website that answers questions before we have to engage.

Used vendor website to learn about newest version of product.

I am hesitant to believe the vendor's own website and staff. I feel like they are always trying to just put the product in the best light not necessarily find out if it is the right fit for our company's situation.

Hands on is always best, reviewing the website is always next as I can review what I want without a rep pushing me and trying to upsell me on things I don't care about. Information from a vendor website or whitepage is not necessarily dependable as there will be a lot of possible hype or stretch.

Case Studies Performance & Buyer Feedback

Report Card

C

No Do most buyers use it?

15% of buyers who used it said it was very influential.

14% of buyers who used it said it was very trustworthy.

23% of buyers who used it said it was very effective.

13% of buyers who used it said it was very challenging.

Vendor provided case studies —these are hand picked success stories /[we] preferred independent reviews.

Actual user cases vary from what is often published.

Whitepapers and case studies are geared towards selling you the product so I don't put a whole lot of weight into those.

When looking for new software I want to ensure similar companies to mine are successfully using the software. I look at case studies, referrals, and blog posts as a way to get this information and validate my assumptions.

Case studies were more helpful than other things as well, because I could see how similar companies migrated to [the product] and use their ROI examples to demonstrate the sort of ROI we could expect.

Customer case studies are going to be essential, but without a reference to speak to about it in the wild not as important.

Customer References Performance & Buyer Feedback

Report Card

B

No — Do most buyers use it?

23% of buyers who used it said it was very influential.

22% of buyers who used it said it was very trustworthy.

65% of buyers who used it said it was very effective.

19% of buyers who used it said it was very challenging.

What vendor or individual would provide a reference that was less than glowing?

Customer references & case studies are helpful, but curated and need to be taken with a grain of salt.

Customer references solidified our understanding of strengths and limitations.

Other references matter but I always tend to discount them a bit because I have no baseline for their standards. If I talked to another HR leader and they say that this is a great tool for onboarding, maybe that's because they were using pen and paper before... it's harder to qualify than my own direct knowledge and experience.

Customer references are always most valuable. Having the ability to speak to customers who have used the product and experienced implementation challenges and understanding those is essential.

There's a huge chasm between the transparency buyers need and how forthcoming vendors can actually be.

84% of vendors said they aim to be clear about where their product works well and where something else might be a better fit, but only 36% of buyers felt the vendor they bought from was very forthcoming about product limitations (where the product works well and where it is not a good fit). That means vendors overestimate their own transparency — i.e. how well they've earned buyer trust — by more than 2x! This is consistent with last year's findings. According to buyers, vendor-controlled sources of information (reps, blog, website, marketing collateral, etc.) are still at the bottom of the pile for trustworthiness and influence. There remains a trust gap in the B2B buying process, and it's as wide as ever.

Vendors Who Aim to be Forthcoming About Product Limitations

Buyers Who Found Their Vendor Forthcoming About Product Limitations

THE TRUST GAP

84%

36%
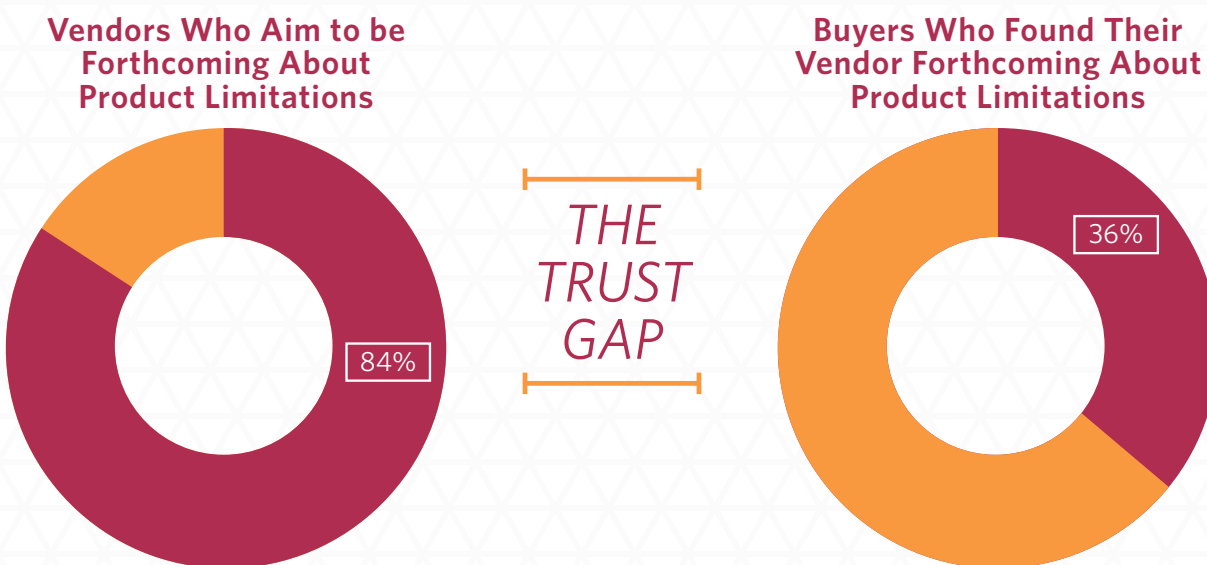
Year over year this is getting more dangerous and less sustainable for vendors, who risk losing their credibility. Buyers are maturing faster, and vendors' good intentions to meet their needs won't cut it. The only way to catch up is to open the aperture. Trying to practice radical honesty will help, but sales and marketing communications can only get so transparent in the eyes of buyers, who know they're motivated to make the sale.

It's also a fact of life that tech marketers just aren't always as aware of their product limitations as actual day-to-day users are. Even your executives might not know exactly what the product doesn't do, because they are focused on big picture strategy rather than the intimate details.

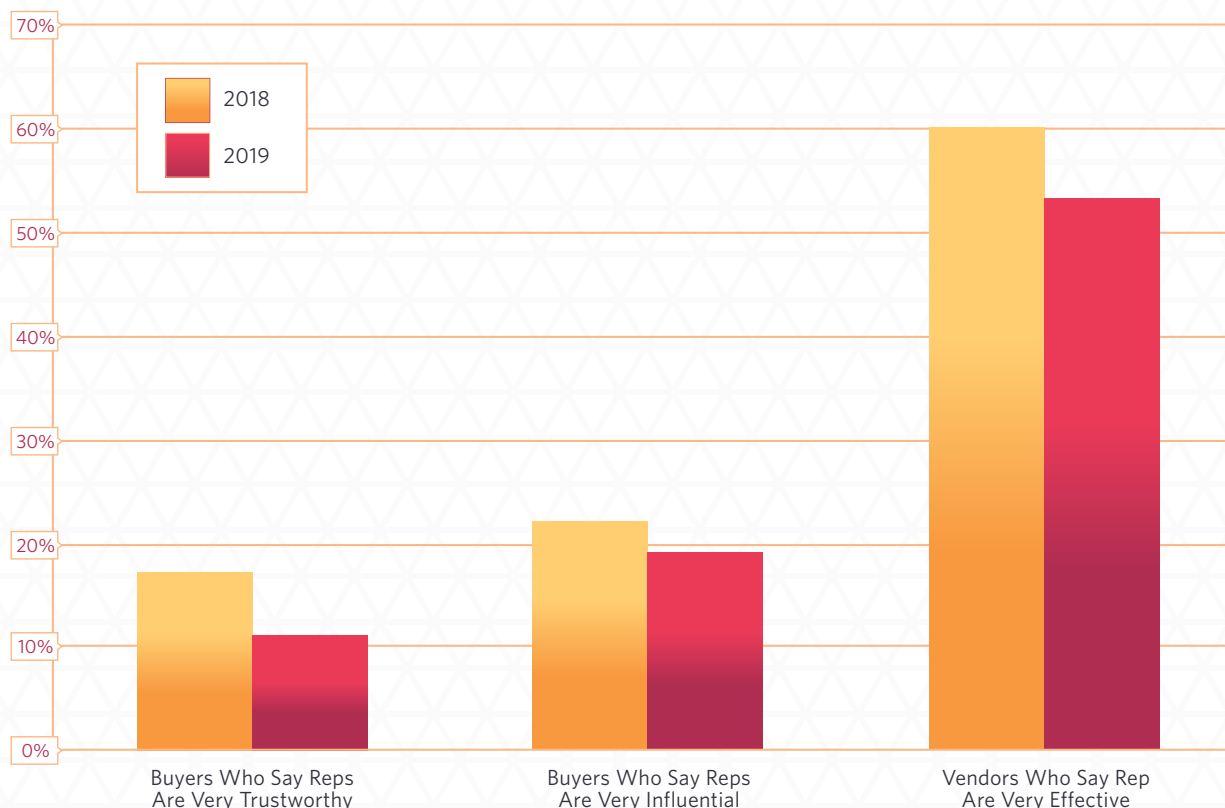And you can't very well speak to shortcomings if you don't know what they are!

Because of this "trust ceiling," vendors need to bring more voices into the fold, and increase the variety of sources of information that are available to buyers. If they don't rebuild trust and promote transparency in more productive ways, vendors can expect to get worse results from their usual tactics.

The effectiveness of vendor reps is suffering—it fell 6 points YoY.

Vendor failure to meet buyer expectations year over year is starting to lead to a decline in the trustworthiness, influence, and effectiveness of vendor representatives. Fewer customers than ever take your representatives at face value. Trust is degrading, and with it goes influence. The effects of the trust gap are starting to snowball.

This year, only 11% of buyers said vendor representatives were very trustworthy, and only 19% said vendor representatives were very influential in making their decision (down from 17% and 22% last year, respectively). This is far below the 53% of vendors who said they thought reps were very effective at helping move their buyers towards a decision. Regardless of whether vendors overestimate their own influence or buyers underestimate it, even vendors recognize the effectiveness of reps is slipping—that number fell 7 points, from 60% last year.

Decline in Buyer Trust & Influence and Vendor-Observed Effectiveness of Reps

Legend:
- 2018
- 2019

Categories (x-axis):
- Buyers Who Say Reps Are Very Trustworthy
- Buyers Who Say Reps Are Very Influential
- Vendors Who Say Rep Are Very Effective

Buyers build confidence by cross-referencing vendor claims.

You may not be able to grant your buyers the x-ray vision their hearts desire, but you can help them piece together a 360-degree view. For buyers, specs from product experts (you!) + hands-on experience + hearing directly from other people like them = the shortest path to the truth. When you give them the tools to get there, without strong-arming or "airlifting" them all the way, you're a hero! They see you as more trustworthy, truly a partner they can rely on, and grant you more influence. **Your best allies on this front are your customers and the product itself.**

Here's how buyers describe the importance of having first-hand exposure, insider perspectives from customers, and clear information from vendors to feel confident:

Sales reps & vendor reps are inherently motivated by getting the sale & will say just about anything to get the sale. When you can do the research for yourself, you can trust your interpretation of the product.

Sometimes it feels good to see independent resources to confirm what vendors are telling you.

More potentially unbiased sources of information equals more trust from us.

We need to see it with our own eyes through demos, the website needs to be transparent and user reviews need to be authentic.

The proof is always in the trial as you can try your day-to-day workflows. Checking the forums to see how a vendor supports people after the initial purchase is also crucial to us.

Seeing live demo helped truly see the conceptual explanations provided until that point. Customer references solidified our understanding. Vendor reps were not consistently reliable & [analyst] rankings were not always meaningful.

The free trial/demo is something that I can see with my own eyes. Referrals are unbiased, and so they are more trustworthy than the vendor, who it trying to sell you the product.

Information from third parties and others in forums and reviews are important, but believing everything you read is a bad thing. There is always the possibility of personal bias or manipulation of information in both positive and negative information. Personal past experience combined with a direct use through free trial & account gives the on hand limited experience to help evaluate and gives a level of trust to other sources of information and reviews.

Prebuilt demos can be over simplified and intended to deliver a specific message based on the audience. User reviews are trustworthy to some extent. Marketing campaigns/ vendor sites hide the bad. Customer references can't be really verified. Independent media is not really independent. The most trustworthy [approach] is playing with the technology.

With a product demo there were limits to what could and could not been done. Again the same as before any vendor will only show you the best parts of them, not the works in process. That doesn't mean their product isn't good we just had to be more diligent in the research we had to do on our own.
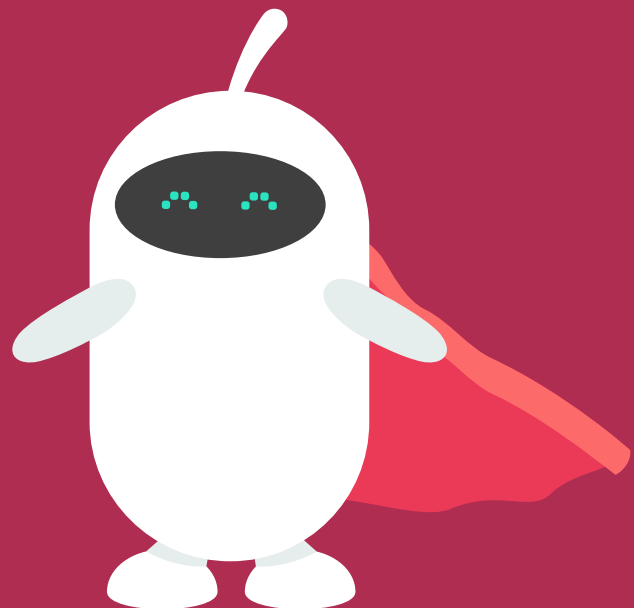
Analyst endorsements don't cut it anymore.

Traditionally, vendors worked with analysts to get their products covered in analyst reports, ranked, and legitimized. Analysts were one avenue buyers could use to cross-reference vendor claims and check up on their reputations at a high level. Vendors recognized that buyers wanted outside perspectives, so they subsidized analyst research. But this tactic is becoming less and less viable, as buyers rely on analyst research less, and become even less likely to seek it out on their own. Analysts don't address buyers' key questions about how products will work for them, what the limitations might be for their specific use case, or what they should expect on a pragmatic level, going in.

This is one of the areas where the disconnect between buyers and vendors is most visceral. Despite waning buyer interest, vendor investment in analyst rankings and reports actually increased year over year. Last year 35% of vendors reported using analyst rankings and reports as a tactic to educate and enable prospects, whereas this year 44% did.

Even vendors themselves see the effectiveness of analysts wavering. Last year, 33% of vendors said analyst rankings and reports were very effective, whereas this year that dropped slightly to 30%. Furthermore, analysts are less effective than other easier-to-manage tactics like product demos, free trials, user reviews, etc.

Vendors continue to rank analysts as one of if not the most challenging/difficult to manage tactics, and though category leaders can see a big top of funnel impact from participating, for most vendors the effectiveness of investing in analyst relations is unpredictable. Here's how some vendors put it:

> *Analyst rankings are a lot of hoops to jump through—usually worth it—but still a lot of work.*

> *Analyst relations require lots of investment (time and money) and the results aren't always expected.*

Should vendors continue to invest more in analysts as a key part of their marketing and sales strategy, if they're tricky to work with, not particularly effective, and are being used less and less by buyers?

> *Navigating analyst and vendor relationships can be hairy.*

The downward trend in buyer reliance on analysts is likely to continue, given the texture of buyers' doubts—what they're looking to find out in their due diligence—and the buyer demographics that are increasingly influencing purchase decisions (i.e. millennials).

All in all, how much influence do vendors have in 2019?

36% of buyers said vendors had low or no influence over their selection decision, and only 20% of vendors said the vendor they bought from was very influential in helping them choose. For the remaining 44% of buyers, vendors played a somewhat influential role.
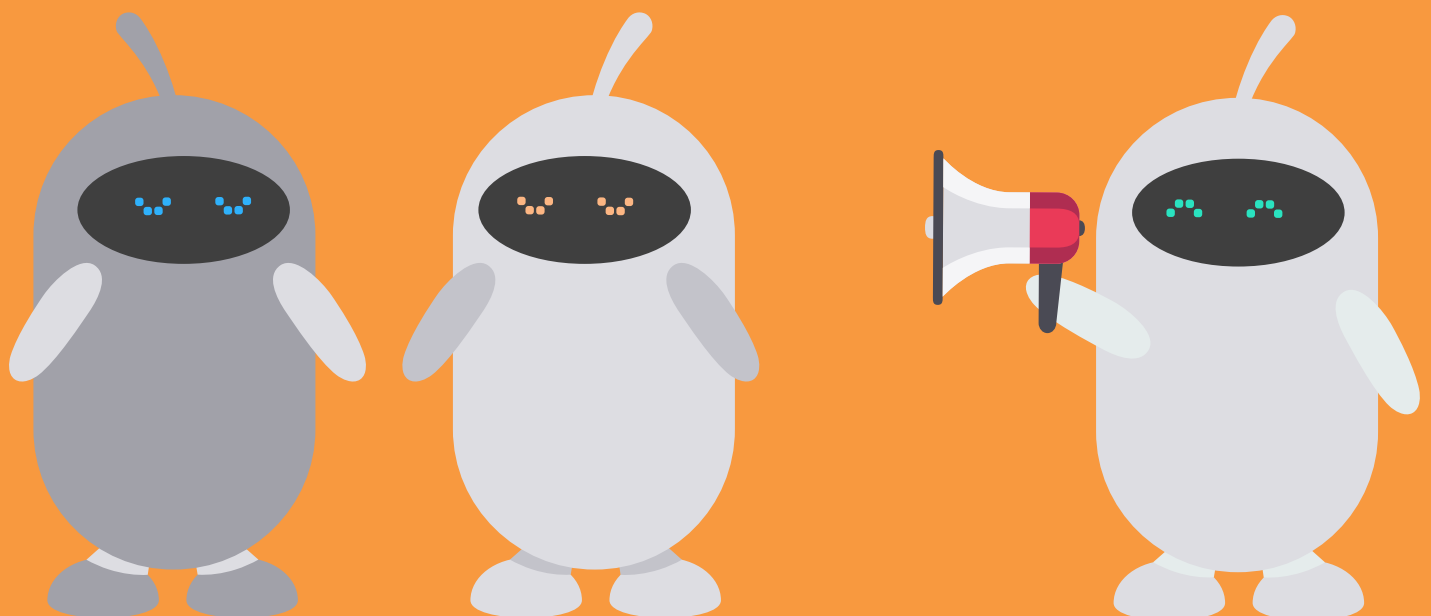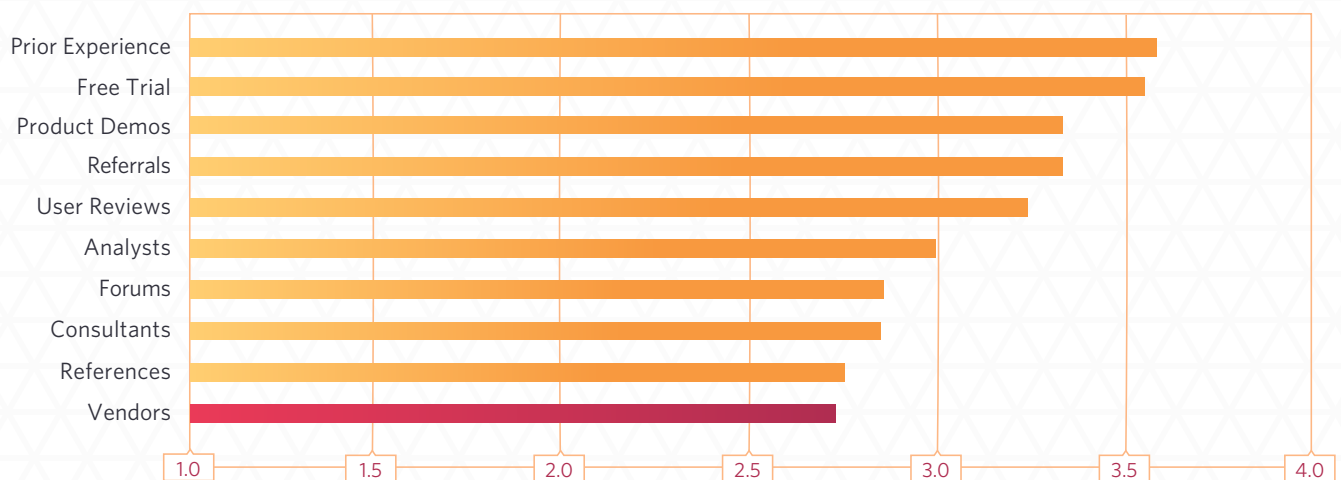
How Influential Was the Vendor in Helping You Choose the Product You Brought Over Alternatives?

Response	Percentage
1 - Not Influential	~12%
2	~24%
3	~44%
4 - Very Influential	~20%
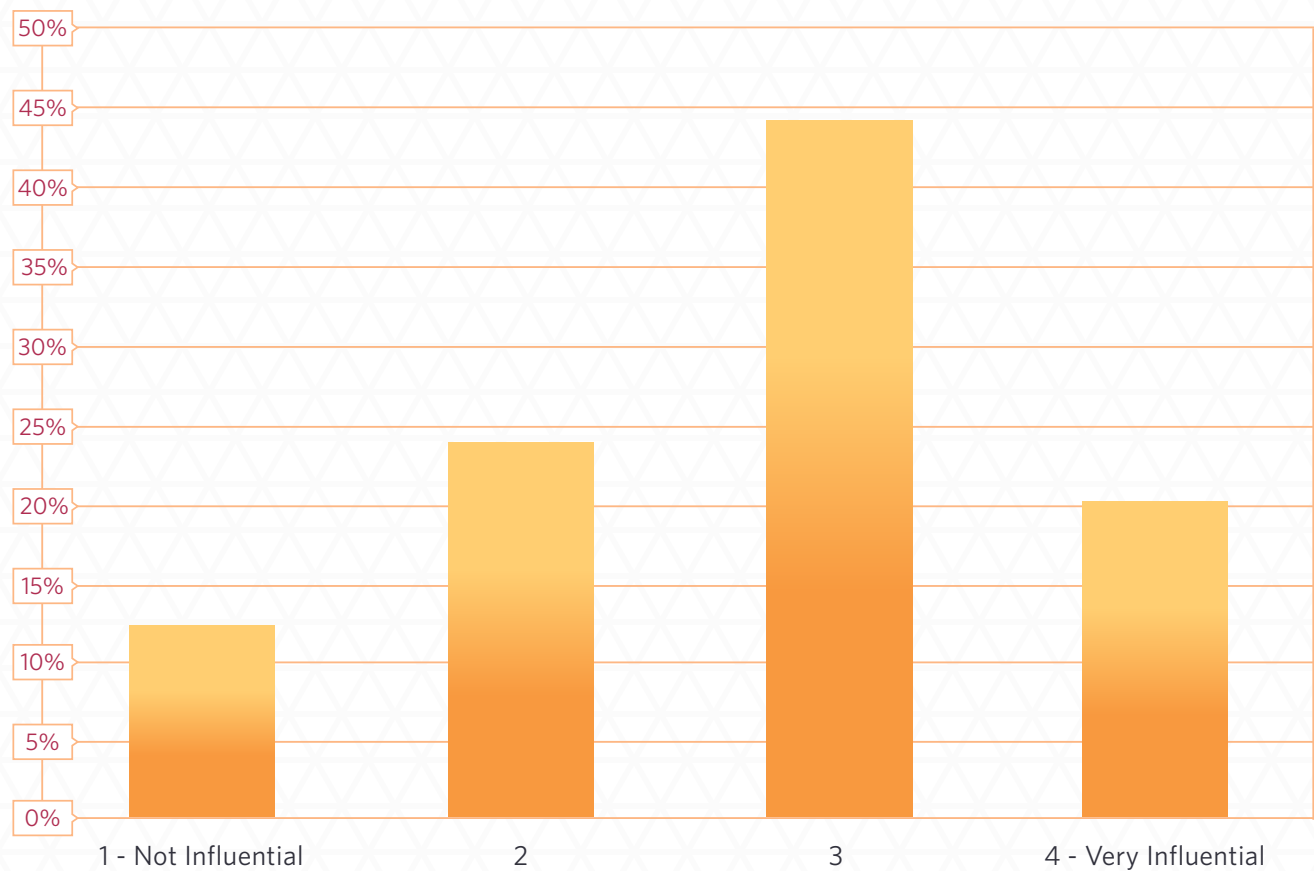
Vendors have lower influence than other info sources.

That might not sound so bad, except... it means buyers see vendors' overall influence as less than that of every other individual source of information they used, except for third-party publications and independent media and the sources of information produced by vendors themselves (vendor reps, case studies, websites, marketing collateral, and blogs)!

Overall Influence of Vendors Compared to Other Sources of Information

| Source	Influence
Prior Experience	3.6
Free Trial	3.55
Product Demos	3.35
Referrals	3.35
User Reviews	3.25
Analysts	3.0
Forums	2.85
Consultants	2.85
References	2.75
Vendors	2.7

Questions About Product Limitations/ What to Know Going In

Whether you like it or not, curiosity about the cons drives buyer behaviour.

Only 42% of vendors thought it was very important to their buyers to understand the cons before buying the product. This perhaps helps explain why only 36% of buyers felt the vendor they bought from was very forthcoming about product limitations—since it's about the same amount who acknowledge that the cons are crucial information!

The reality, of course, is that buyers are far more driven by their desire to know the good, the bad, and the ugly than vendors would like to think. 71% of buyers say it's very important to understand the cons before buying. This is another big disconnect between buyers and vendors perpetuating the trust gap.

Buyers Who Thought It Was
Very Important to Understand
the Cons Before Buying

71%

THE
TRUST
GAP
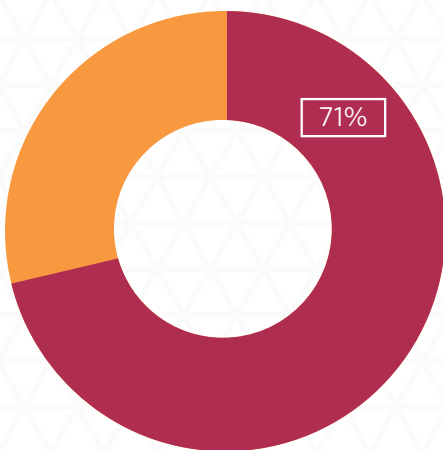
Vendors Who Thought It Was
Very Important to Buyers to
Understand the Cons Before Buying

42%
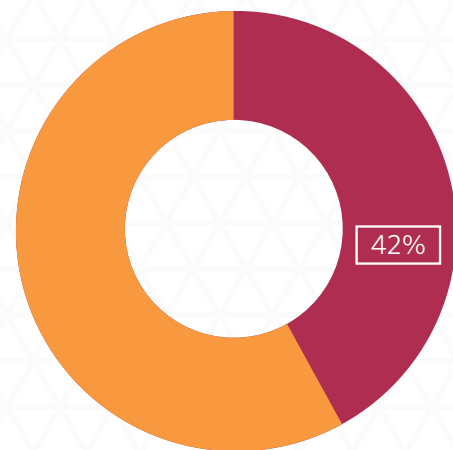
Savvy buyers are not going to make a decision until they have a full picture of the product, including its dark underbelly and what to watch out for. They know that life with any product, no matter how visionary, is not all puppies and rainbows, and they don't want to be caught unawares. Learning the cons—and deciding whether they're dealbreakers, irrelevant to their use case, or simply something to prepare for ahead of time—is a big part of how buyers reach the confidence threshold. With purchases this significant, most can't afford buyer's remorse.

This is fueling the rise of reviews.

One thing buyers and vendors can agree on: when it comes to investigating the cons, reviews are by far the #1 go-to resource buyers rely on. They also use practical experience, peers, and other third-party resources to get a realistic sense of tradeoffs and shortcomings. Occasionally they're able to check with vendor reps or the vendor website directly, to follow up on product limitations, but this was pretty rare (only 16% and 12% of buyers used these resources to investigate the cons, respectively). Other vendor-provided resources were even less helpful to answer questions about shortcomings, challenges, and drawbacks.

Information Sources Buyers Used to Investigate the Cons

Source	
User Reviews	
Free Trial/Account	
Product Demos	
Your Own Prior Experience with the Product	
Communities/Forums	
Referral From a Friend, Colleague, Peer	
Vendor Reps. (e.g. Account Executive, Sales Engineer, Support)	
Third Party Publication & Independent Media	
Vendor/Product Website	
Analyst Rankings & Reports (e.g. Gartner, Forrester)	
Vendor-Provided Customer References	
Solution Consultant/Agency Recommendation	
Vendor Marketing Collateral (e.g. eBooks, Whitepapers, Webinars)	
Vendor-Produced Case Studies	
Vendor Blog	

As a vendor, you may not be able to put their concerns to rest on your own. But you should recognize that these doubts lead buyers to drag their heels while they search for tell-alls outside of your influence. Affirming the importance of knowing the cons is the first step in better enabling your buyers and making the process easier and faster for them. (More on the positive impact of negative feedback here.) The next step is investing in programs and tactics that can help you help them get these questions answered in a way they trust. Section 3 of this report addresses just that, by showcasing vendors who are ahead of the curve.

Other Stakeholders (Buying Committee)

Who's influencing the purchase internally?

As the trend towards purchase by committee continues, buying groups are getting larger and more collaborative. If you're a fan of Brent Adamson, author of *The Challenger Sale and The Challenger Customer*, you know you need to work more than 5 individuals at the account to be successful. (In 2014, he found that number to be 5.2; by 2016 it was 6.8 and rising.)

There are a lot of people in the room, and both vendors and buyers recognized that this can slow things down. More stakeholders helping make the decision means more questions to be answered — a higher collective level of confidence to be reached. It can also mean competing priorities. Companies want to use more tech to work smarter, but it takes time to define internal requirements and agree on the most important decision making criteria.

Here are some examples of how buyers described the way collaboration influences their timeline and approach:

The approval and selection process required many steps and different groups to make decisions.

Once the initial evaluation was done & the top two vendors were selected we brought in the rest of the team to help make a selection. A major disagreement arose over which vendor to select, or if we even needed to make a change at all. We then had to stop and do an extra set of demos for the people that were unsure of the change.

Getting everyone to decide — 4 people making the same decision was difficult.

Stakeholders not understanding the value, differing team opinions and requirements.

The biggest thing that was slowing us down was gathering research and information within a group to find out the most viable option for the good of our company. I must say it took quite a while to finally settle on a mutual agreement.

Internal buy-in and content suitable for all decision makers/stakeholders.

Mixed reviews about the program and different people looking for it to be doing different things.

The size of the group providing input and the number of possible vendors to select from.

On top of that, individual buyers may have different approaches to due diligence, and different pet peeves based on past experiences, specific issues that need to be put to rest before they're ready to get on board with the product. Though still relatively few people are in charge of cutting the check, many more are helping with the research and evaluation phase, including working with vendor representatives. Learning more about their preferences and the buyer's journey from their perspective can help you focus your efforts. Changing buyer demographics, and the trend toward collaborative purchases, should guide the tactics you plan to test and invest more in this year.
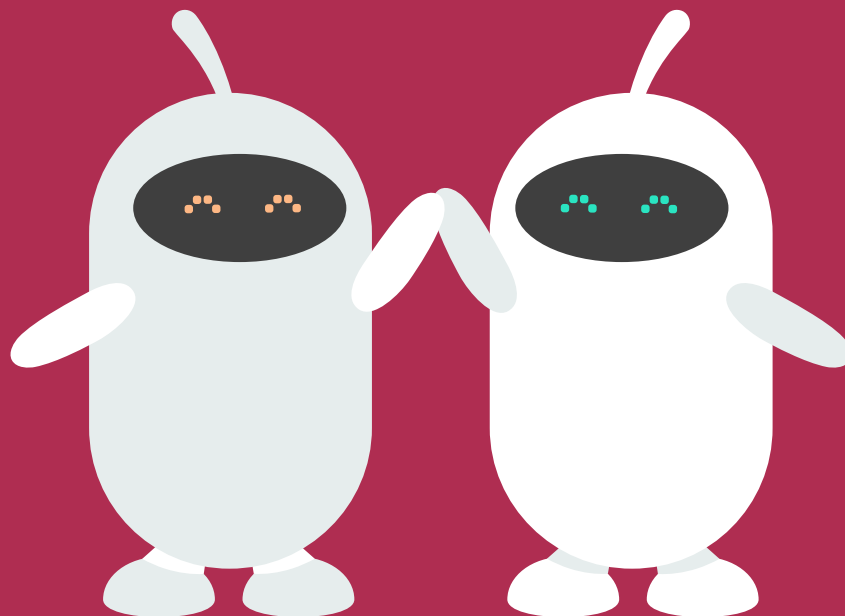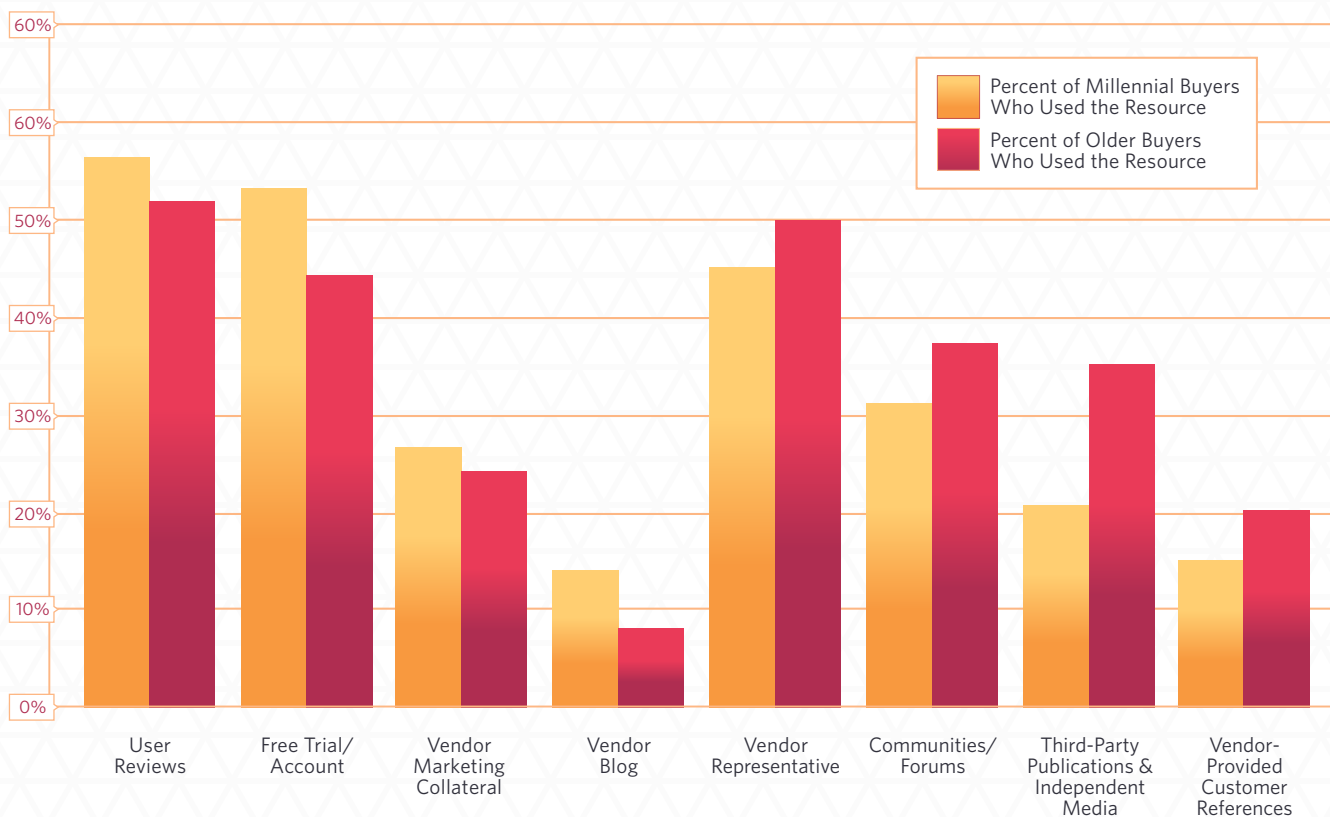
59% of our buyer survey respondents were millennials.

More than half the individuals making up your buying committees are most likely millennials. The typical committee has 2-5 individuals involved in the purchase process, either as influencers or decision makers. **If there are 5 stakeholders, 3 of them will be millennials.**

Millennial buyers rely on user reviews, free trials/accounts, vendor blogs, and vendor marketing collateral slightly more than older buyers. They rely less than older buyers on vendor representatives. They also rely slightly less on traditional sources of validation like customer references, independent media, and forums, gravitating instead towards more self-service options that allow them to find information quickly and (where possible) organically, without waiting on answers.

Buyers' Content Preferences are Changing as Millennials Gain More Mindshare on Purchase Committees

Legend:
- Percent of Millennial Buyers Who Used the Resource
- Percent of Older Buyers Who Used the Resource

Categories: User Reviews, Free Trial/Account, Vendor Marketing Collateral, Vendor Blog, Vendor Representative, Communities/Forums, Third-Party Publications & Independent Media, Vendor-Provided Customer References

These preferences and expectations will shape buying committees more and more as millennials continue to grow up in the workforce. They're also a good predictor for how Gen Z may behave — though Gen Z's influence in buying committees hasn't had much time to sink in yet, since they're just starting to enter the cadre and aren't yet typically included in business technology purchases.

Around 1 in 3 millennials identified themselves as the lead buyer.

Not only are millennials *"in the room"* so to speak — there's a good chance a millennial will be leading the project! **Almost 30% of millennial respondents said they were the lead buyer for their company.** They are often the people you need to influence to get the deal done.
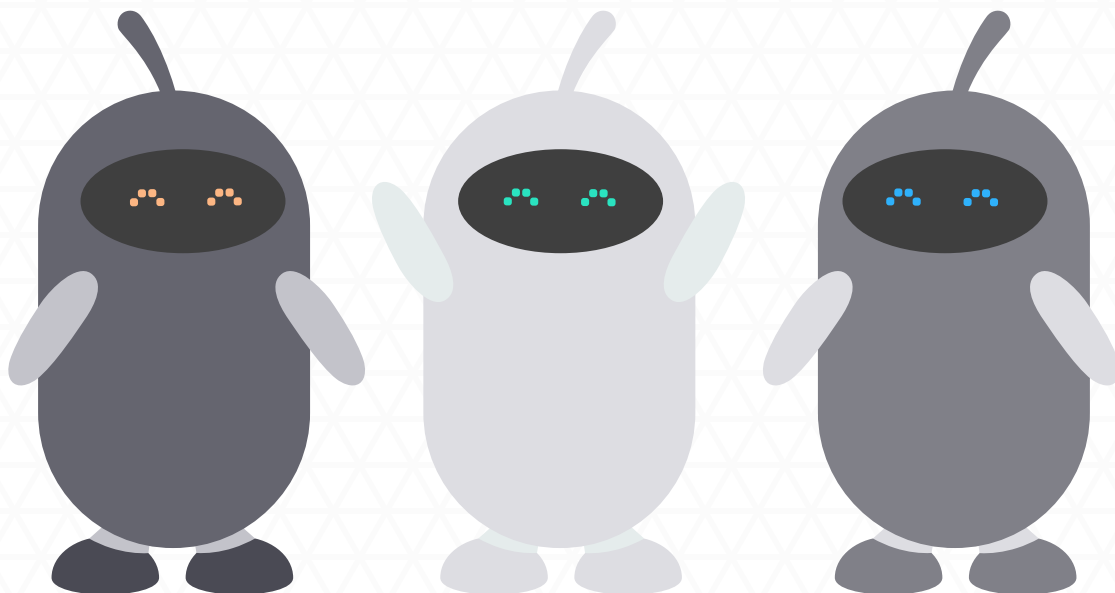
Turn Insights Into Action

How Vendors Can Use This Research to be More Influential in the New Buyer's Journey

Does this whole idea of a trust gap and trust ceiling have you feeling like you can't catch a break? Never fear! Your hands are far from tied. There's plenty you can do to build trust in your product, strengthen your relationship with buyers (and customers), and speed up deal cycles.

In this section, we'll show you opportunities revealed by the data, and how you can turn this research into actionable improvements! The insights in this section are based on proven methods an elite cohort of very influential vendors are using to beat the curve. The buyer's journey has changed, but with knowledge comes power. You've got the power to ride this new wave, as long as you tap into your most valuable resource to get you there: **your customers**.
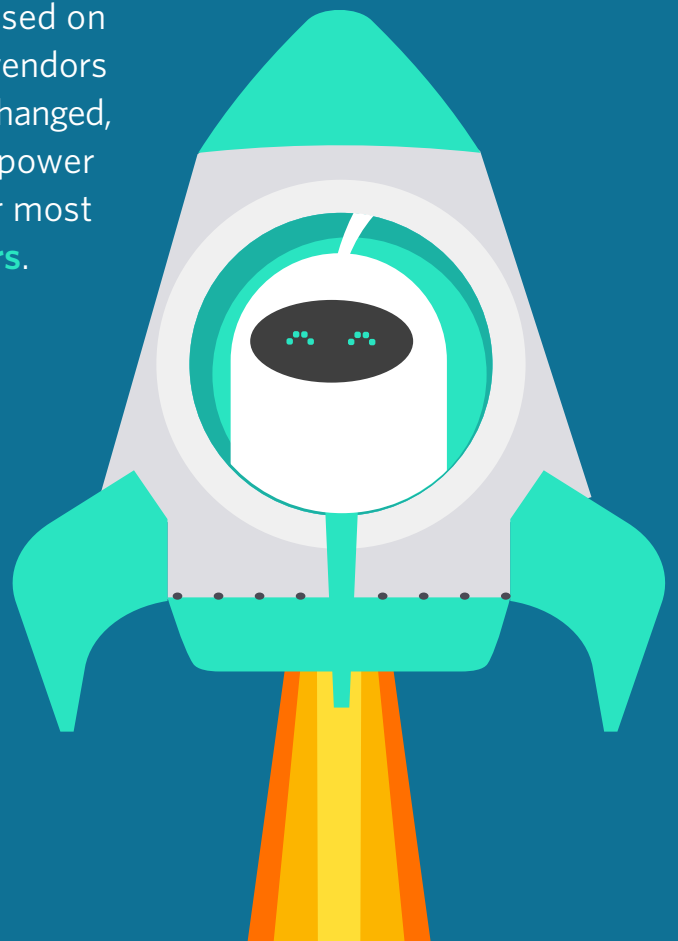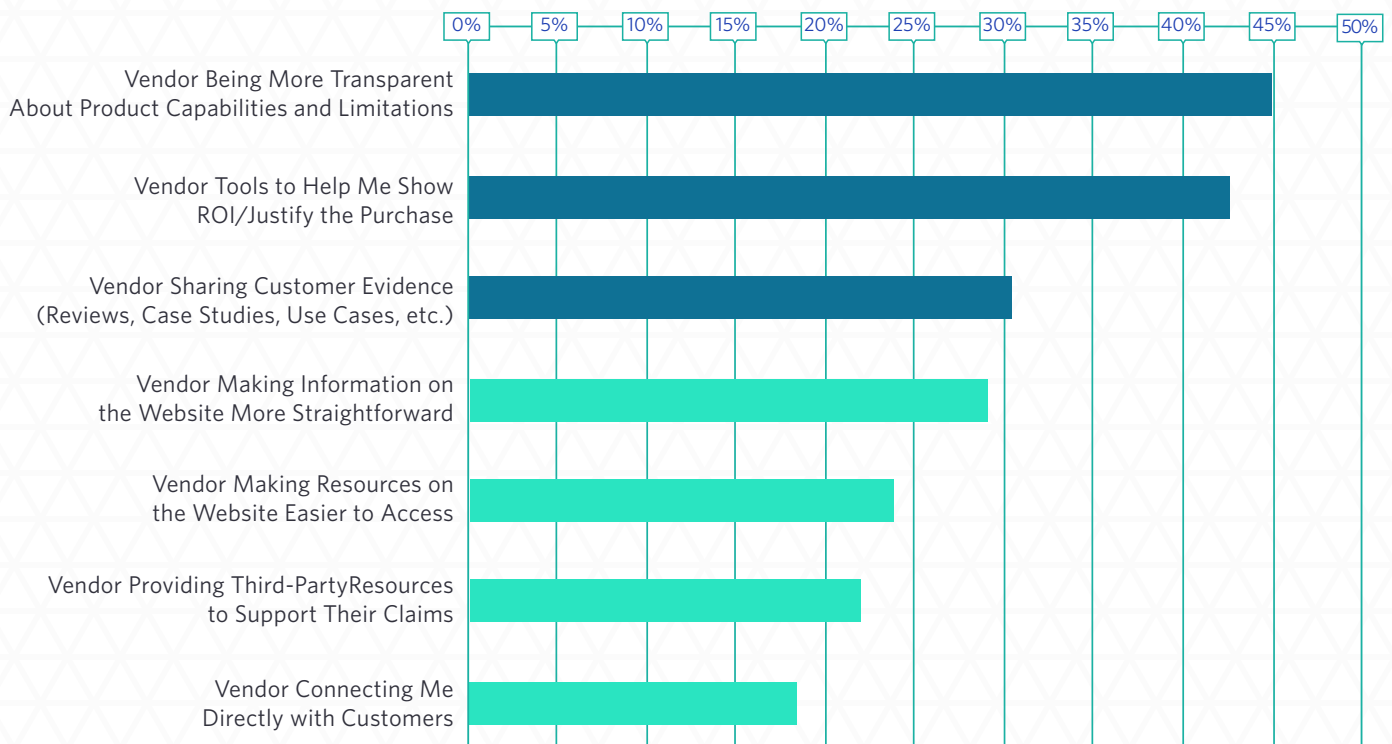
Shorten the Timeline

Buyers want vendors to help them move faster.

We asked buyers to identify the top three ways vendors could have made the process easier or faster for them. Here's how they'd like vendors to better grease the wheels:

1. Vendor being more transparent about product capabilities and limitations.
2. Vendor tools to help me show ROI/justify the purchase
3. Vendor sharing customer evidence (reviews, case studies, use cases, etc.)

Top Ways Vendors Can Make the Purchase Process Easier or Faster for Buyers

Category	Value
Vendor Being More Transparent About Product Capabilities and Limitations	~45%
Vendor Tools to Help Me Show ROI/Justify the Purchase	~42%
Vendor Sharing Customer Evidence (Reviews, Case Studies, Use Cases, etc.)	~30%
Vendor Making Information on the Website More Straightforward	~28%
Vendor Making Resources on the Website Easier to Access	~24%
Vendor Providing Third-PartyResources to Support Their Claims	~22%
Vendor Connecting Me Directly with Customers	~18%

Scale: 0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45% 50%

All three of these relate back to the trust gap—buyers' need to ensure that the product will work for their specific needs, that it's worth it, and that they really know what to expect on a practical level going into the purchase. If vendors can increase trust and clarity for buyers, there are not only stronger customer relationships to be gained, but also real pipeline efficiency.

Of course, buyers would like the vendor's website and online marketing materials to be more straightforward and accessible too. And third-party resources to back up the hype never hurt.

Customer references are nice as well, but can be harder to schedule and take more work to ask the right questions that get down to the nitty gritty of what buyers need to know. They're usually top promoters at flagship companies. That's part of why almost twice as many buyers preferred use-case specific customer evidence like reviews. Customer evidence is also easier to take back to a committee, and easier to bake into a comparison matrix or presentation, or attach to a proposal to support a recommendation. Though talking with another customer on the phone can put a buyer more at ease, they can also feel skeptical, since they know vendors only connect them with cherry-picked advocates.

Use customer proof to speed up deals.

Vendors themselves actually chose sharing customer evidence as the number one tactic they use to speed up deal cycles. They affirm that it's a good way to accelerate the time it takes for buyers to reach the confidence threshold where they're ready to buy.

Which of the Following Tactics Does Your Organization Use to Help Speed Up the Deal Cycles
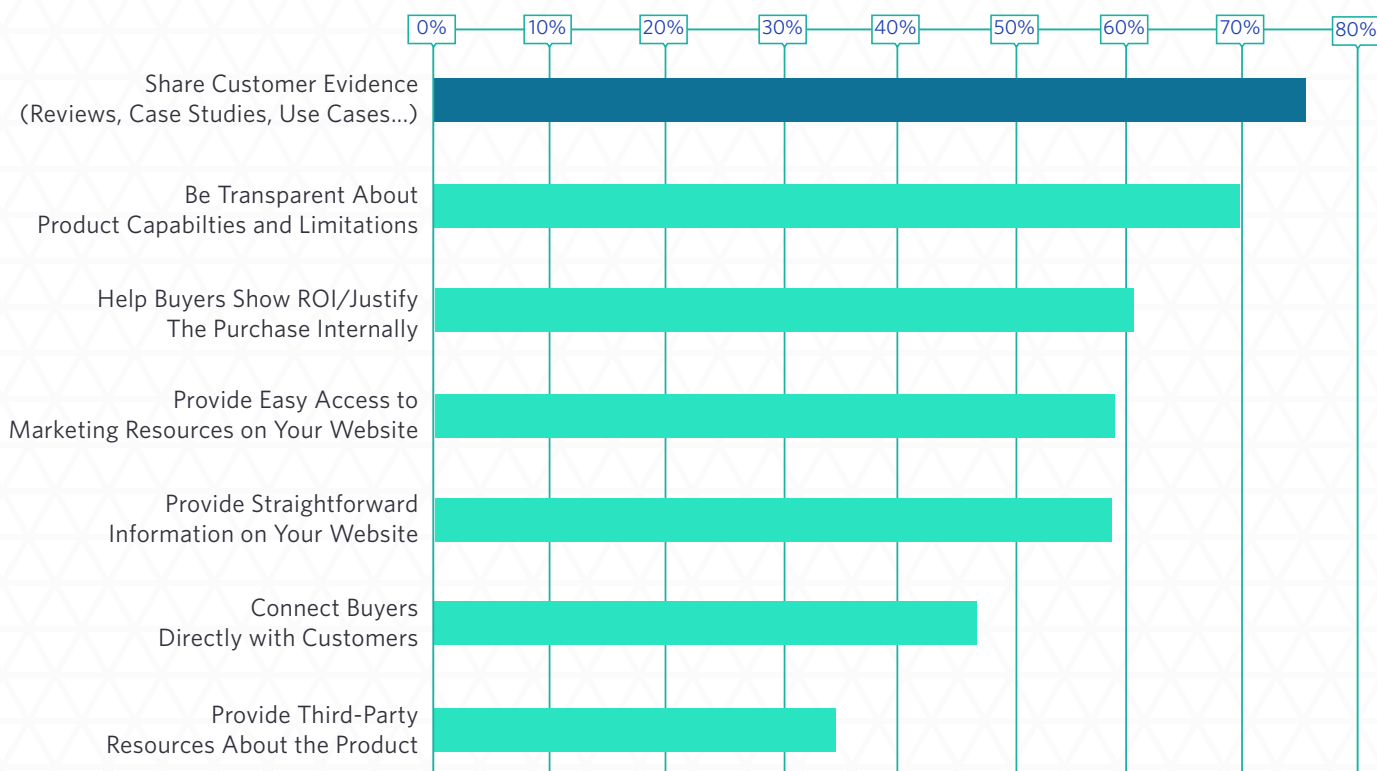
But, if most vendors are already using this strategy, why is there so much doubt and uncertainty still holding up the process? The answer may lie in which customers vendors choose to feature, and how customer evidence fits into their marketing and sales mix and overall business strategy. It's also a matter of perception. We know that buyers and vendors have different expectations around what a complete picture entails. For example, 70% of vendors say that transparency about product capabilities and limitations is a tactic they use to speed up deal cycles, but clearly buyers don't feel like they are doing this effectively.

Invest in Customer Voice

73% of customers are ready to help, so take them up on it

Buyers depend on current customers as an important source of information. And once they become customers themselves, 3 out of 4 are willing to give back! 73% of buyers said now that they're customers, they'd be willing to advocate for the product to others—by serving as a reference, writing a review, etc. When one has completed a harrowing journey and reached the summit, it's only natural to want to share success, tips, and guidance with those who are coming next.

Customers Who Are Willing to Advocate for the Product to Others (Serve as a Reference, Write a Review, etc.)

73%
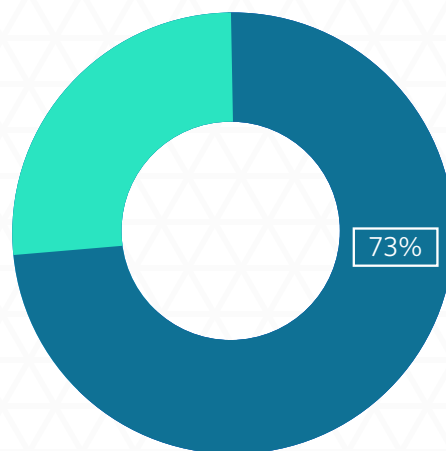
But like your buyers, your customers are busy using your product to meet their business goals. **Most of them won't take advocacy actions unless you show them the way**, and invite them to share their experience via a particular medium.

Often vendors leave 40% of the opportunity on the table—and that 40% could be the most impactful.

Not many buyers are openly unhappy with the product they bought, and few are planning to take their business elsewhere. By NPS standards, just under 10% of buyers are "detractors" (product satisfaction rating of 6/10 or lower), and 93% said they intend to renew their contract for this purchase.

Less Than 10% Are Detractors (Satisfaction Rating 6 or Below)

9.55%

93% of Buyers Intend to Renew

93%
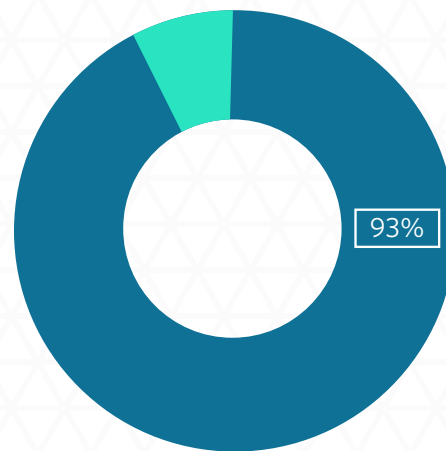
Yet traditionally, vendors have been very cautious with their customer bases. Many draw customer proof only from their happiest customers: "promoters" with a satisfaction rating of 9 or 10.

This is a shortsighted strategy, for a couple of reasons. At the most basic level, it means vendors have less to work with, and have to lean more on that cohort of customers. Consider that 73% of customers are willing to advocate for the product to others, but only 44% qualify as "promoters." Vendors could garner 40% more customer evidence if they expanded their programs beyond their comfort zone.
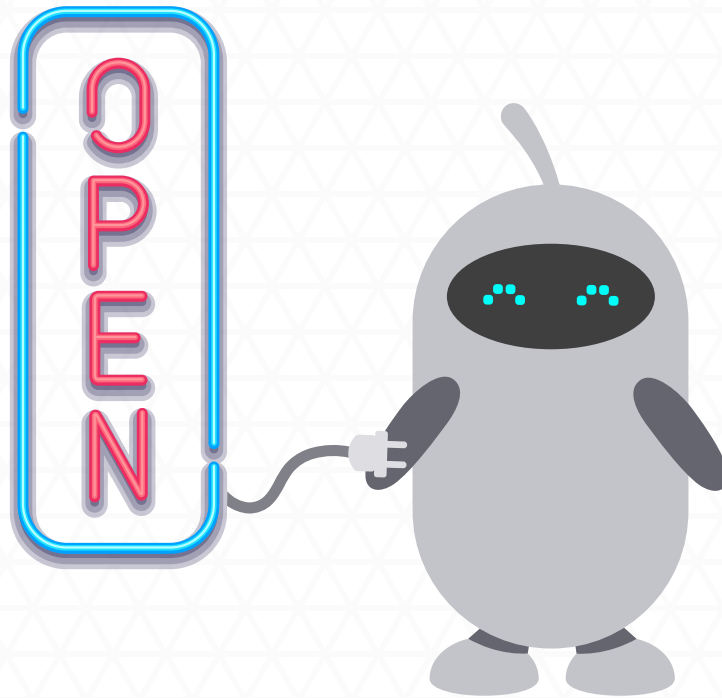
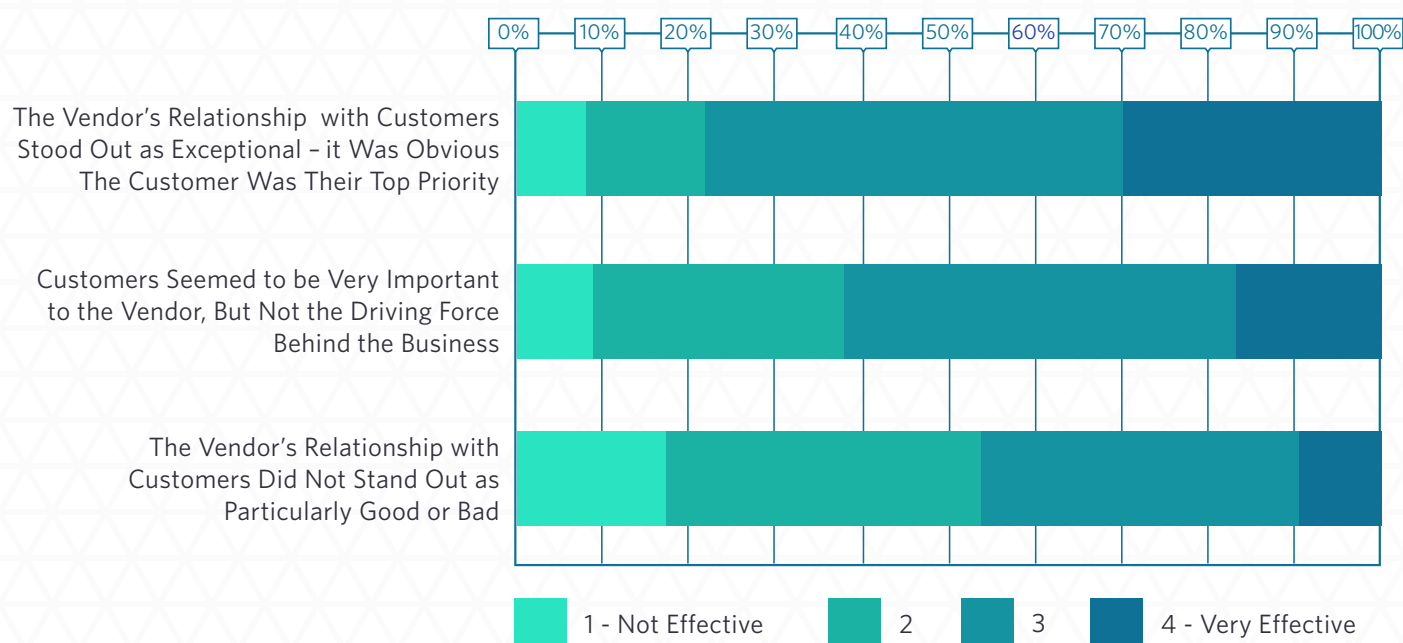On another level, when vendors only give buyers access to promoters, it undercuts their influence. This may seem counterintuitive, because the impulse that leads vendors to only share perspectives from happy customers comes from their desire to control the narrative, and exert more influence. But think back specifically on why buyers are interested in customer perspectives, which customers they want to hear from, and what questions they need to get answered. Promoters may add a momentary feel-good confidence boost, but they often can't resolve buyers' doubt and uncertainty about their specific use case and the skeletons in the closet. A smaller pool of advocates means there are fewer use cases available for buyers to identify with. Customers who gave a "perfectly satisfied" rating are less likely to help buyers discover the cons—and figure out if they can live with them.

Opening the aperture would not only help vendors get a bigger volume of customer proof, it would also help them get more effective customer proof that can truly speed up the purchase process.

If you want to be very influential, become more customer-powered

Buyers who said "the vendor's relationship with customers stood out as exceptional—it was obvious the customers were their top priority" were also more likely to say their vendors were very influential, compared to other buyers who said their vendors relationship with customers seemed problematic, neutral, or important but not the driving force behind their business.

Influence by Customer Centricity

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

The Vendor's Relationship with Customers Stood Out as Exceptional – it Was Obvious The Customer Was Their Top Priority

Customers Seemed to be Very Important to the Vendor, But Not the Driving Force Behind the Business

The Vendor's Relationship with Customers Did Not Stand Out as Particularly Good or Bad

Legend:
- 1 - Not Effective
- 2
- 3
- 4 - Very Effective
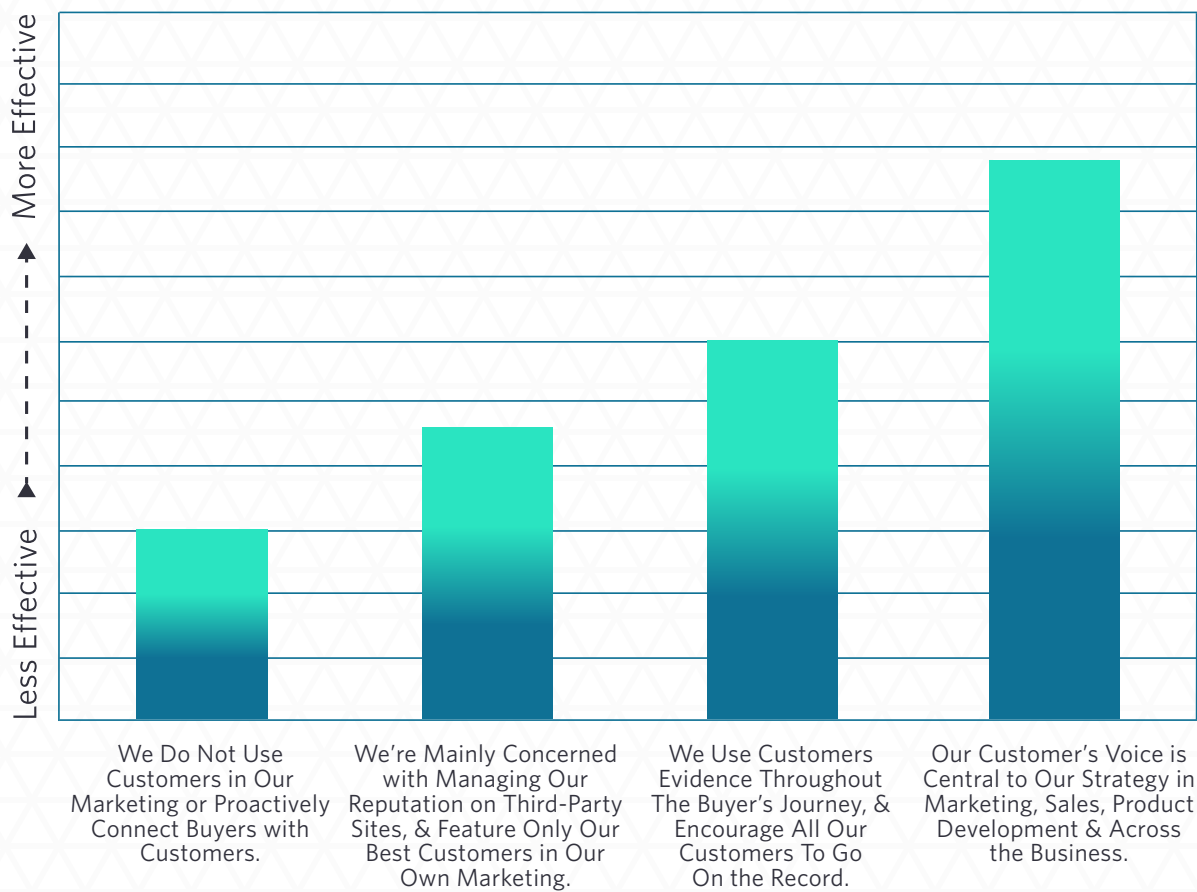
From our vendor survey respondents, more customer-centric vendors also tend to use more tactics on average and have a more diverse marketing strategy. The way these more customer-centric vendors sell is better aligned with how buyers want to buy in the new buyer's journey. They make more information and different formats/perspectives available to buyers.

Vendors who say their customer's voice is "central to their strategy in marketing, sales, product development and across the business," and vendors who say they use customer evidence "throughout the buyer's journey, and encourage all their customers to go on the record" indicated that they use a higher number and broader range of tactics to educate and engage prospects, compared to vendors who are "mainly concerned with managing their reputation on third-party sites, and feature only our best customers in our own marketing" or "don't use customers in our marketing or proactively connect buyers with customers." **The most progressive vendors use 8.6 tactics on average**, whereas the most defensive vendors use 5.8 tactics on average. More customer-centric vendors are also more likely to use reviews as a tactic to educate and engage prospects, and to find them more effective.

More Customer-Centric Vendors Found User Reviews to be More Effective

Bar chart. Y-axis ranges from "Less Effective" to "More Effective."

- We Do Not Use Customers in Our Marketing or Proactively Connect Buyers with Customers.
- We're Mainly Concerned with Managing Our Reputation on Third-Party Sites, & Feature Only Our Best Customers in Our Own Marketing.
- We Use Customers Evidence Throughout The Buyer's Journey, & Encourage All Our Customers To Go On the Record.
- Our Customer's Voice is Central to Our Strategy in Marketing, Sales, Product Development & Across the Business.
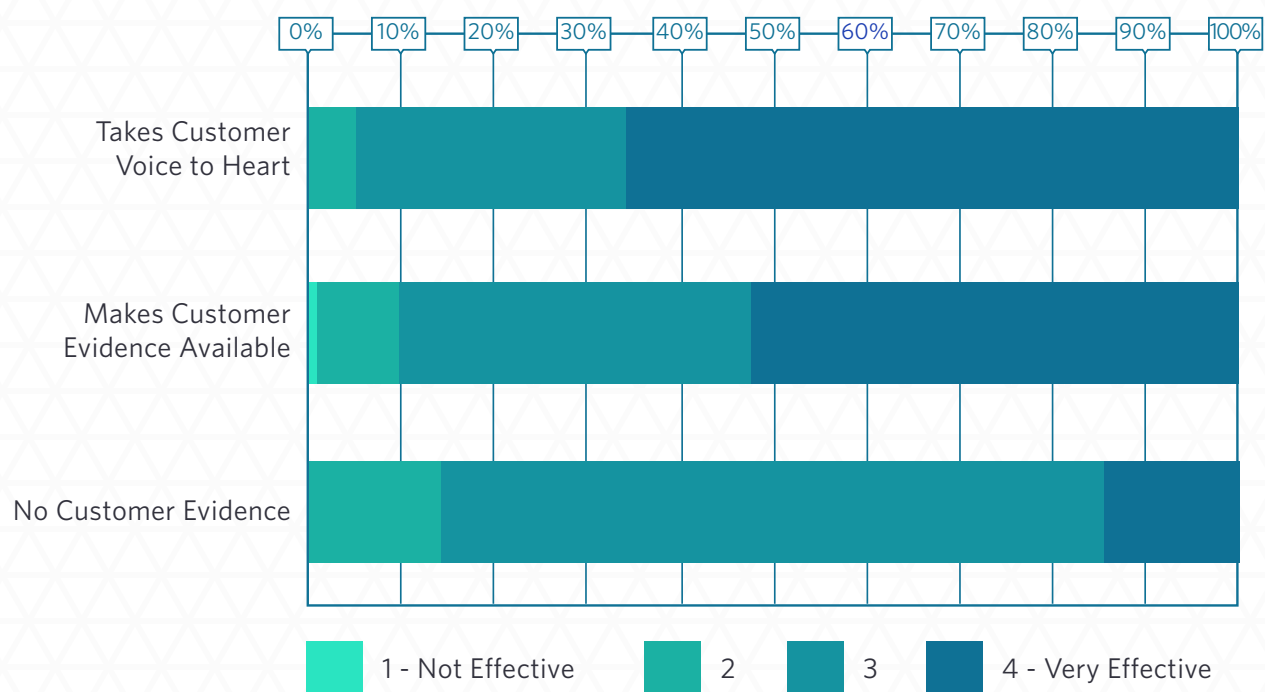
Improve Other Tactics

Customer-powered vendors notice reps are more effective

It's a virtuous cycle. Not only does sowing customer voice throughout your business scratch buyers' itch for insider perspectives, it also makes the company as a whole feel more trustworthy. Because information is open and available, it's easier for buyers to cross-reference sources, get an insider view, and feel like they have the full picture. Life as a customer no longer seems photoshopped, or like a black box. There's less "beyond the veil" effect causing anxiety and sowing mistrust. It's easier to assess the validity and biases of each resource they consult, because there are more data points available.

With practical feedback and real customer results out in the open, vendor representatives are more educated and free to speak more directly. This shows not only in how influential buyers felt them to be, but also in rep performance. Indeed, customer-centric vendors found their reps to be more effective. In fact, **customer-centric vendors were 4x more likely to say their reps were very effective** than vendors who don't feature their customers. 63% of customer-centric vendors (those whose customer's voice is central to strategy in marketing, sales, product development and across the business) found their reps to be very effective, while only 14% of those who do not use customers in marketing or proactively connect buyers with customers found their reps very effective.

Vendor Rep Effectiveness by Company Attitude Towards Customer Examples

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%

Takes Customer Voice to Heart

Makes Customer Evidence Available

No Customer Evidence

Legend: 1 - Not Effective · 2 · 3 · 4 - Very Effective

Customer Voice Can Help Vendors Get Better Grades on Top Tactics Too

Even though their scores for usage, trust, influence, ease, and effectiveness aren't stellar, buyers don't want vendors to stop offering websites, marketing collateral, or customer references. Those resources play an important role in educating buyers throughout the journey, from low-touch independent research, to verifying product capabilities/limitations post-demo, to personal endorsements that set executives signing off on the purchase at ease. What they want is for vendors to make their top tactics more straightforward, specific, relatable, and pluralistic.

Infusing customer voice—customer examples and proof points, but also their actual words, comments, and vocabulary—onto your website can be a great place to start. **Your customers speak the same language as your buyers.** It's far from the marketing-speak buyers hate, which sad to say, your website and marketing collateral are probably guilty of using. Small advocacy asks, like review invitations, will make your customers feel heard (especially if you reply to thank them or follow up on any issues that are surfaced) and garner you invaluable quotes from customers. Requesting the favor will not only help you get to know them better and bring you closer to your buyers, it may actually make your customers like you more.

If you start asking more customers for more feedback more often, you'll also be able to uncover more success stories that can turn into case studies and references. With a broader, and more diverse set of customer voices on the record, there's a greater chance your buyers will be able to answer their burning questions, satisfy their thirst for transparency, and find feedback from customers with similar use cases to their own.

TrustRadius Can Help You Get There!

If you're ready to turn knowledge into action, we'll partner with you to:

> Get a broad sample of your customers on the record.
> Drive the detailed, balanced customer feedback your buyers need.
> Identify hand-raisers who want to be references for you.
> Make reviews of your product independently available, easy to find and understand.
> Curate topical quotes for your website that will uplevel trust and conversion.
> Produce authentic collateral infused with customer voice.
> Enable your sales reps with the social proof they need to catch prospects' attention, handle objections, and keep deals moving with multiple stakeholders.
> Help you analyze trends in customer feedback and buyer activity.

CONTACT US TO FIND OUT HOW!

But don't just take our word for it. We practice what we preach. See what our customers have to say:

We use the TrustRadius site for a variety of things. The first being for our Sales team to share reviews with prospects who are seeking a customer reference. Sometimes we pair up a review(s) along with the contact info so the prospect has both options. Additionally, we market the reviews to our prospects and customers as a 3rd party validation site. We have links to the TrustRadius site on a number of our AlienVault pages as well as include links in our demand gen outreach. Other groups such as training, professional services, support and product development also use the TrustRadius site to gather info on our customer base. The main benefit to our prospective customers is that by having the reviews on a 3rd party site such as TrustRadius, they are assured these are totally unbiased and credible.

The content collected by the TrustRadius team for our reviews is hands down very complete and concise. I like that our customers have the option to self-identify or remain anonymous but the questions remain the same for everyone. This gives the AlienVault teams a great insight into what our customer truly thinks about the product as well as the different orgs at AlienVault (i.e. sales, support, etc.) that we might not otherwise be privy to.

Tami Andrews, Sr. Customer Programs Manager, AlienVault

Read Tami's full review here

The insights have proven valuable to match up with the sales pipeline.

Our collaboration so far has given us extra reviews, extra insights and the ability to create better marketing content. The fact we could tailor the questions to include what we really wanted to get out of this and get true insights in what our customers are experiencing has been great. The reviews give us the ability to start a more in depth discussion with our customers on what can be improved and where we can do better.

Very well suited if you want to leverage expertise, focus, time and effort from TrustRadius to bring your review strategy to the next level.

Nancy Van Elsacker Louisnord, President, TopDesk
Read Nancy's full review here

We are always looking for ways to expand our positive online reputation. While we can get this through many online review websites, TrustRadius's approach generates more authentic and impartial reviews that our sales team loves, while taking that task off my marketing team's plate. We know that many of our won deals checked out our reviews on TrustRadius before purchasing, and we've even been able to generate new leads through TrustRadius's Visitor Insights Dashboard.

We have only had it for a few months but we have been able to credit TrustRadius with some won deals. More directly, it has allowed our marketing team to concentrate on other tasks rather than chasing customers down to leave reviews. We have been able to uncover references that we may not have been able to discover quickly on our own. TrustRadius really shines when you have a customer success team that can build a reference library based on what is generated.

Steven Shattuck, Chief Engagement Officer, Bloomerang
Read Steven's full review here
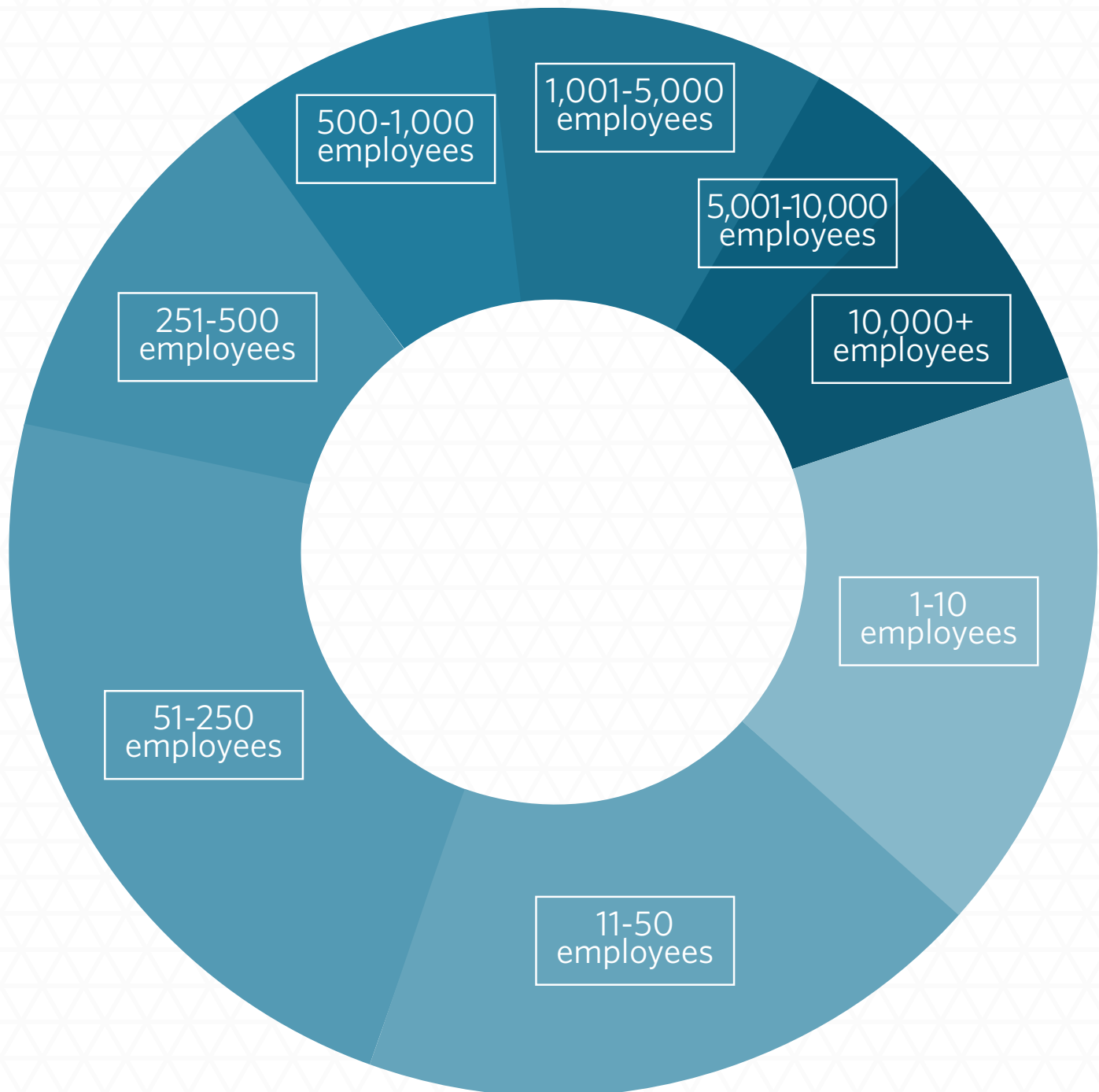
READ ALL TRUSTRADIUS FOR VENDORS REVIEWS HERE.

Still not convinced?

See for yourself what buyers have to say about using TrustRadius reviews vs. other sources of information in their buying journey. (And yes, we invited them to write meta-reviews.)
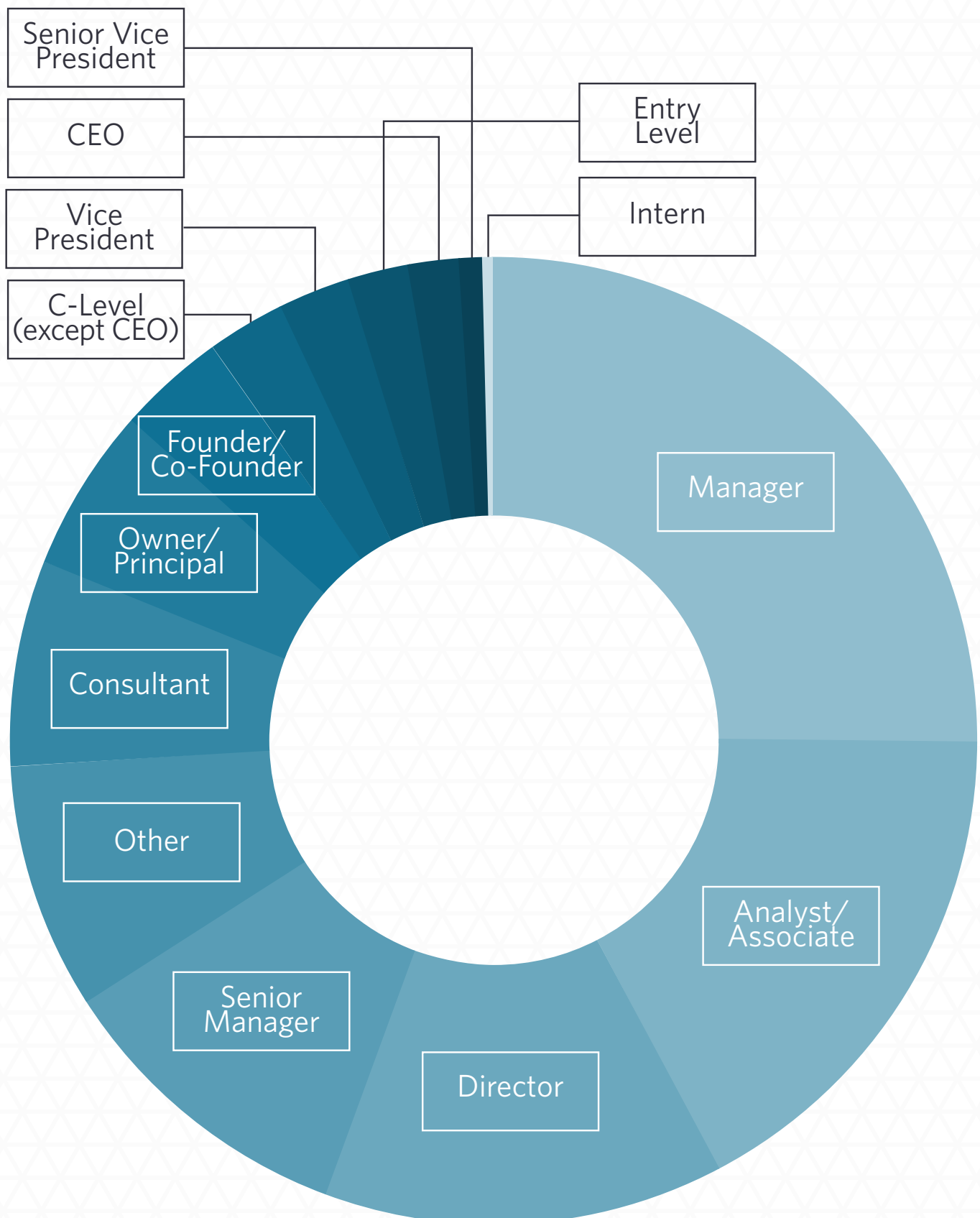
What is your company size?

- 1,001-5,000 employees
- 500-1,000 employees
- 5,001-10,000 employees
- 251-500 employees
- 10,000+ employees
- 1-10 employees
- 51-250 employees
- 11-50 employees

Which of the following most closely matches your job title?

Senior Vice President

CEO

Vice President

C-Level (except CEO)

Entry Level

Intern

Founder/ Co-Founder

Owner/ Principal

Consultant

Other

Manager

Analyst/ Associate

Director

Senior Manager

To which department do you belong?

Consultant

Information Technology

Marketing

Operations

Other

Engineering

Sales

Accounting/Finance

Human Resources

Research & Development

What is your age?

30-37

22-29

38-53

54-72

21 or younger

73 or older
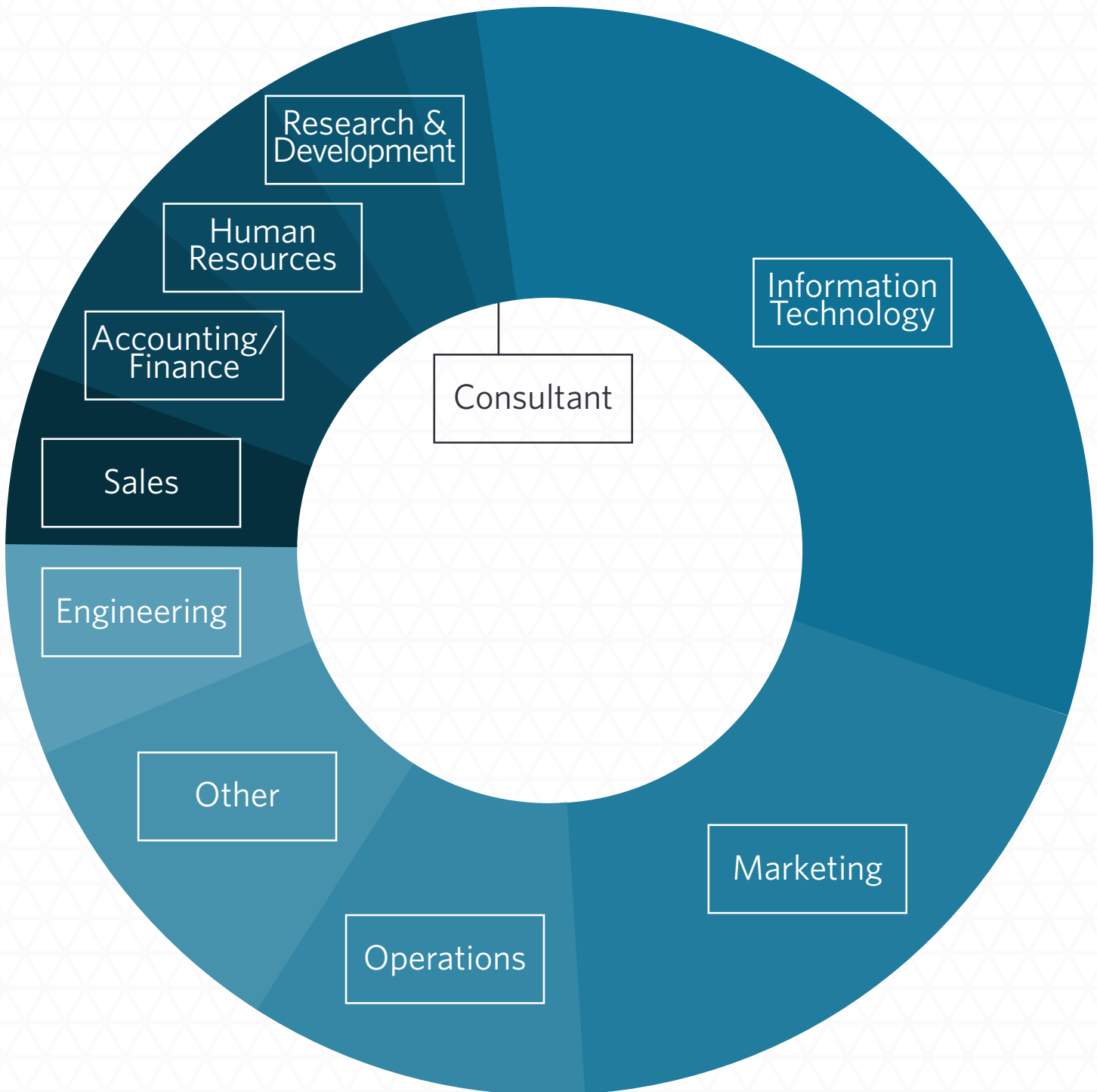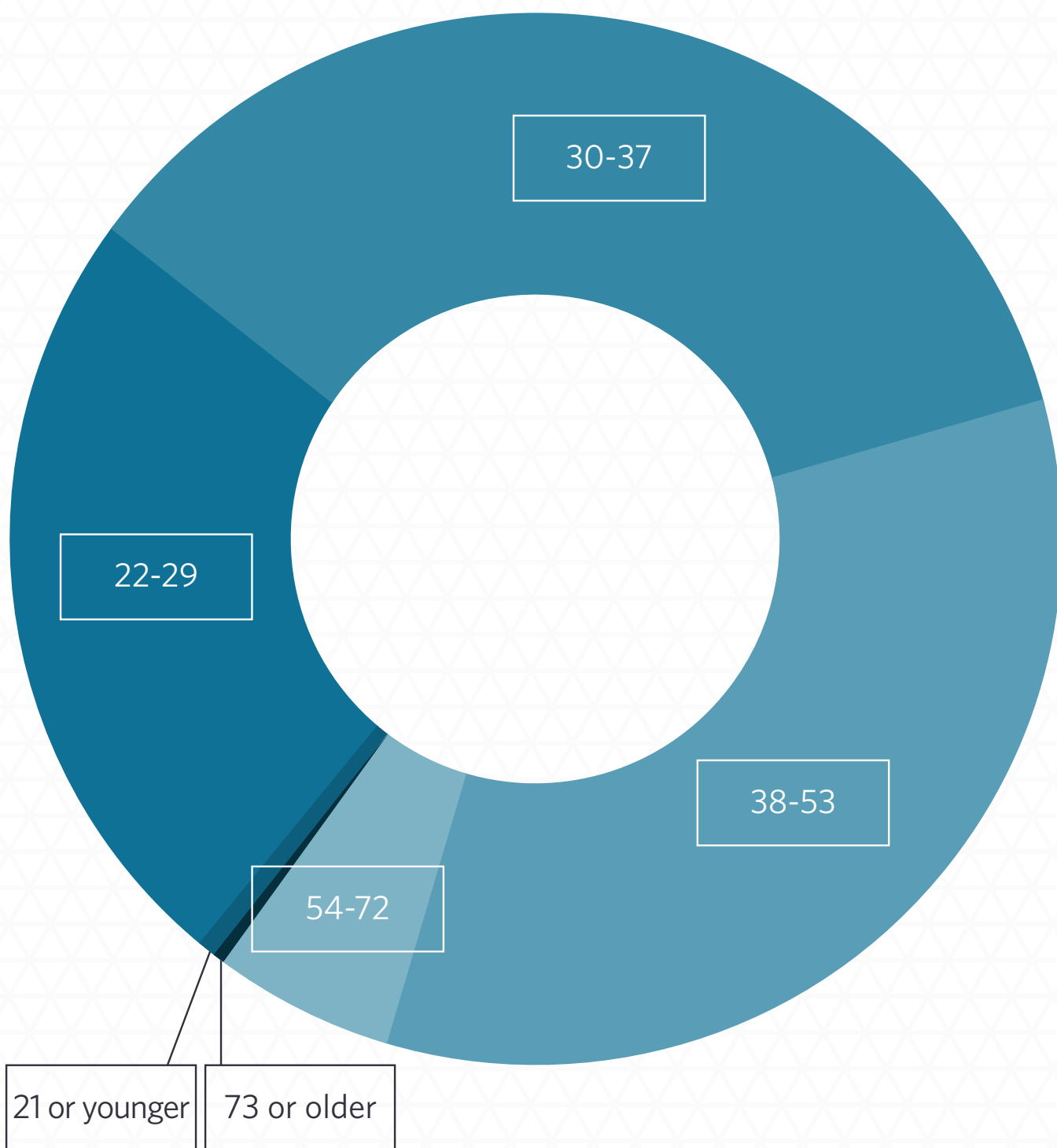
What is your organization size?

1-10
employees

11-50
employees

1,001-5,000
employees

10,000+
employees

5,001-10,000
employees

500-1,000
employees

51-250
employees

251-500
employees
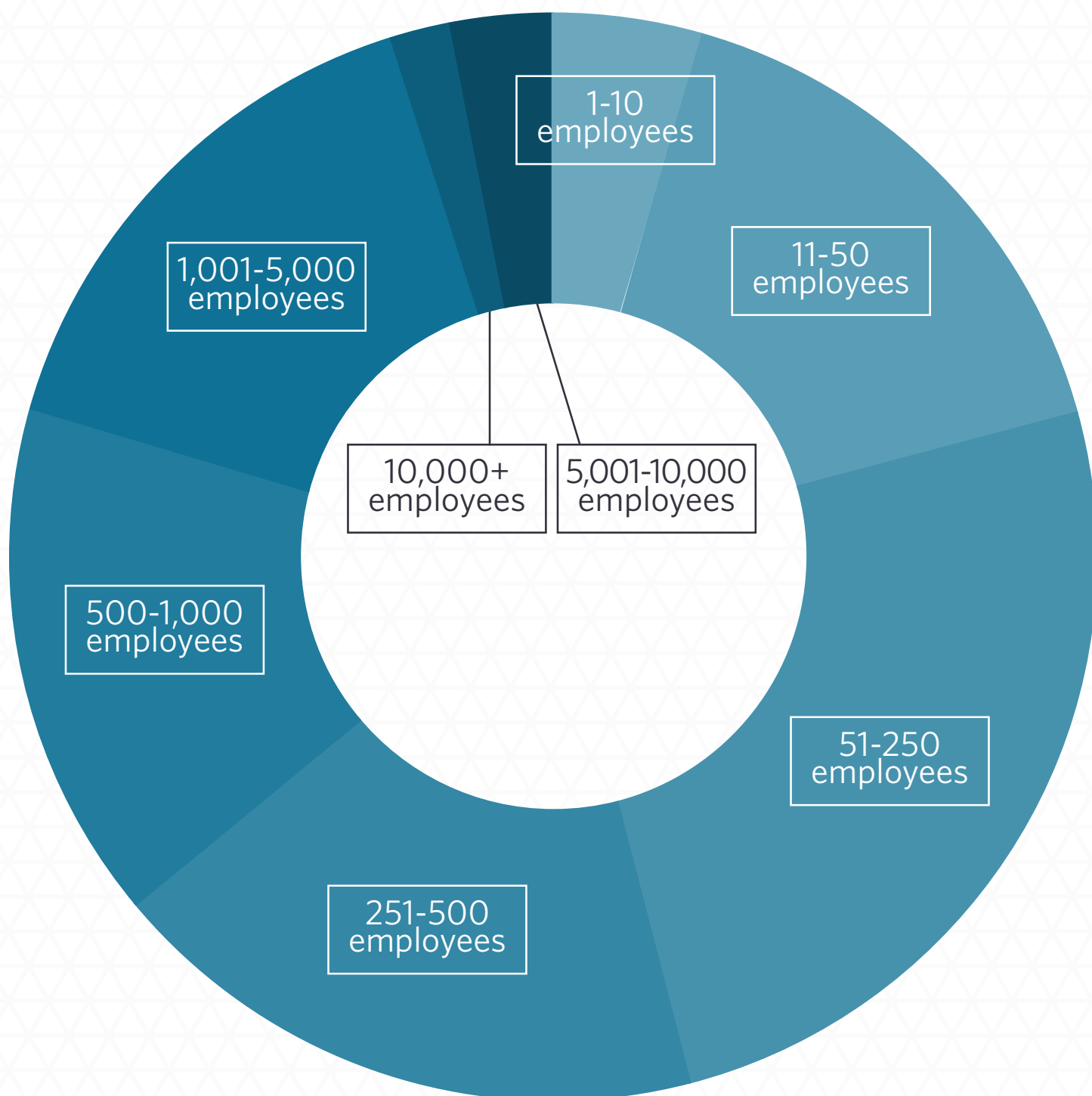
What is your role in sales or marketing for your organization? (Select all that apply.)

Role	
C-Suite (CEO, COO)	
Marketing Leadership	
Sales Leadership	
Deman Generation/ Digital Marketing	
Customer Marketing/ Customer Advocacy	
Public Relations/ Communications/Analyst Relations	
Product Marketing	
Sales Enablement	
Customer References	
Account Executive	
MDR/BDR/SDR	
Consultant	
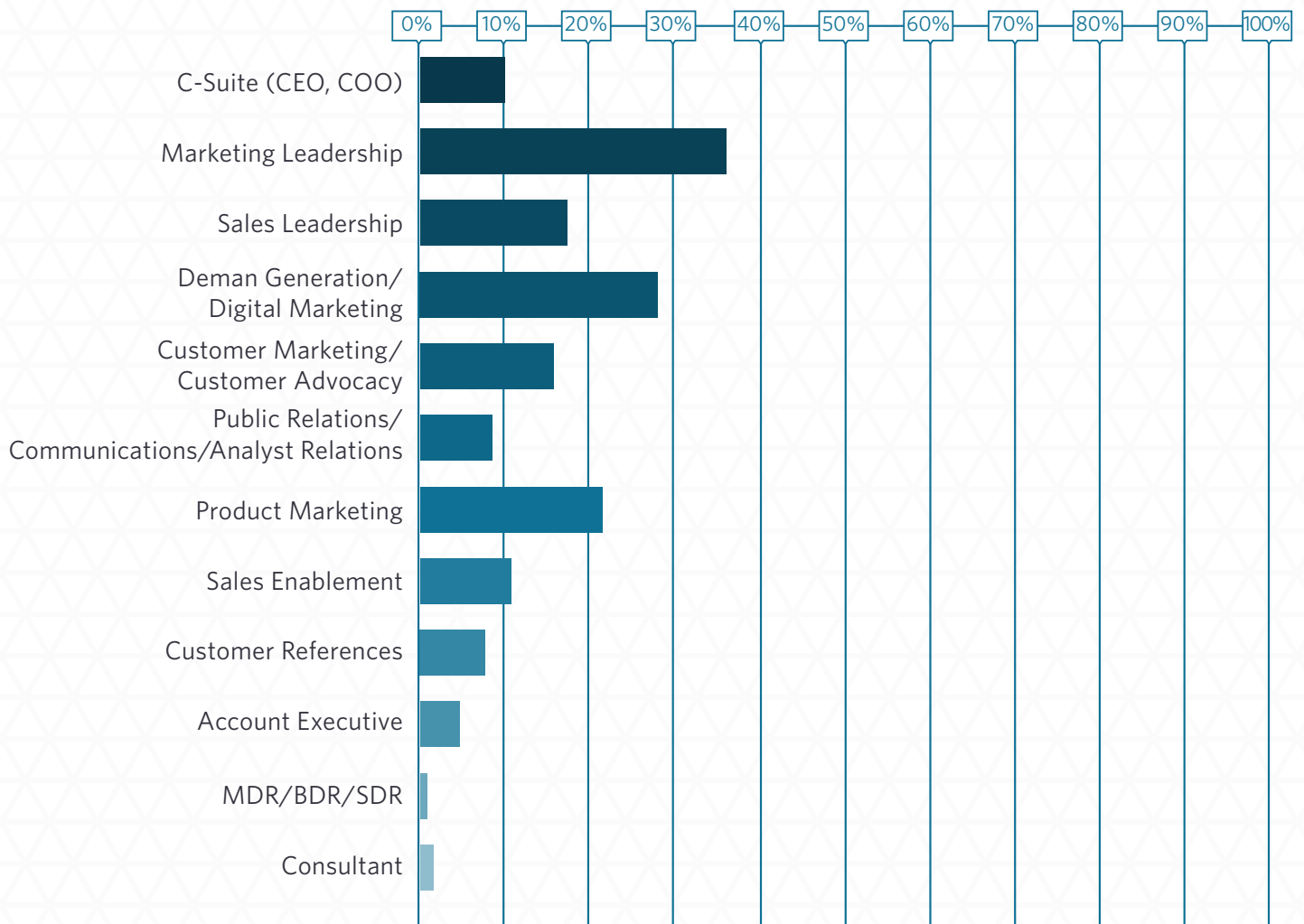
What type of technology product is your flagship product?

Other

IT

Marketing

Vertical Industry

HR

Business Intelligence

Sales

Professional Services

Customer Service

Finance & Accounting
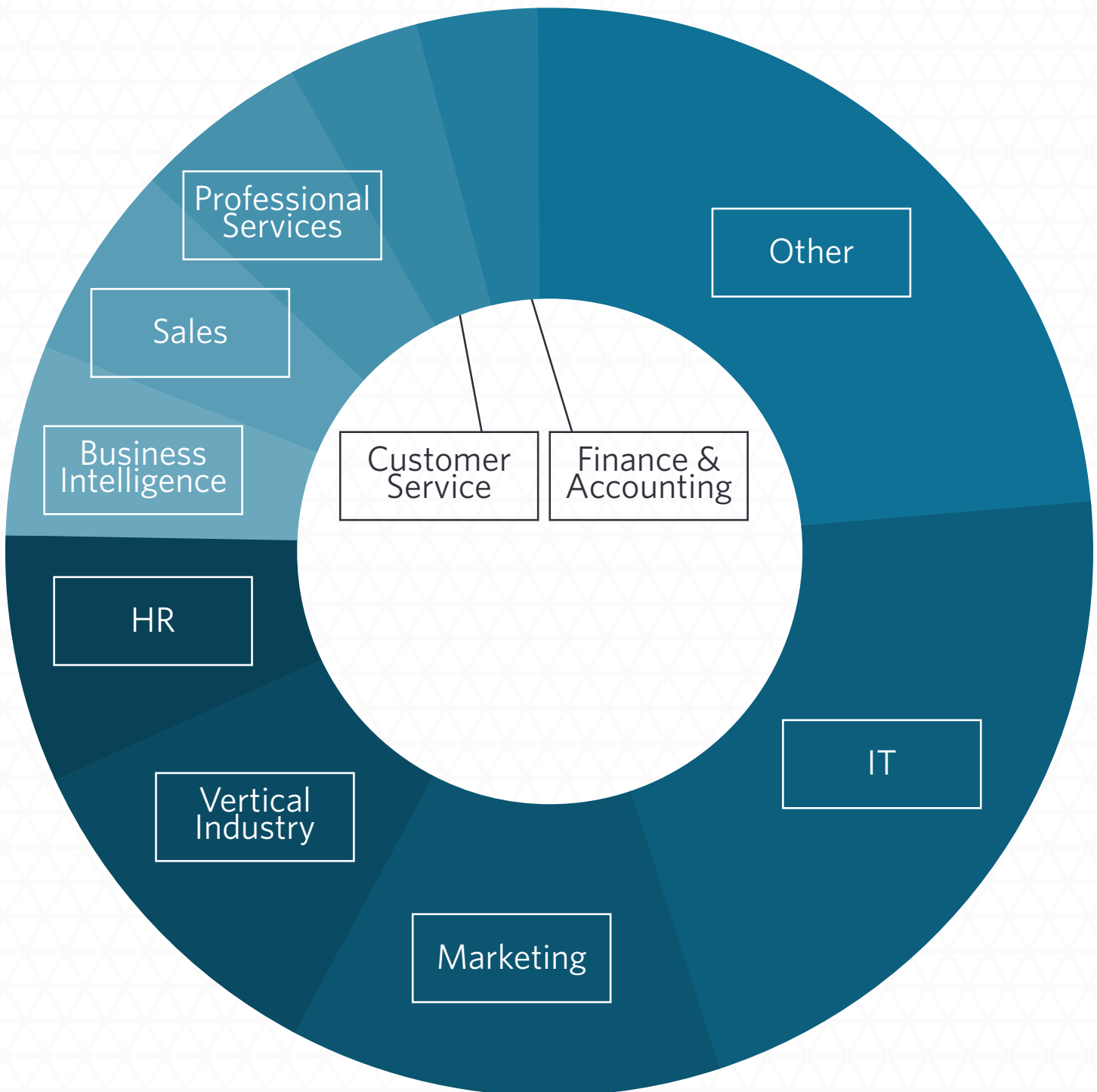
What is the approximate annual cost of your flagship product for a typical deployment?

$101-$250K

$251K-$500K

More than $500K

$51K-$100K

Not Sure

$11K-$50K

$10K or less
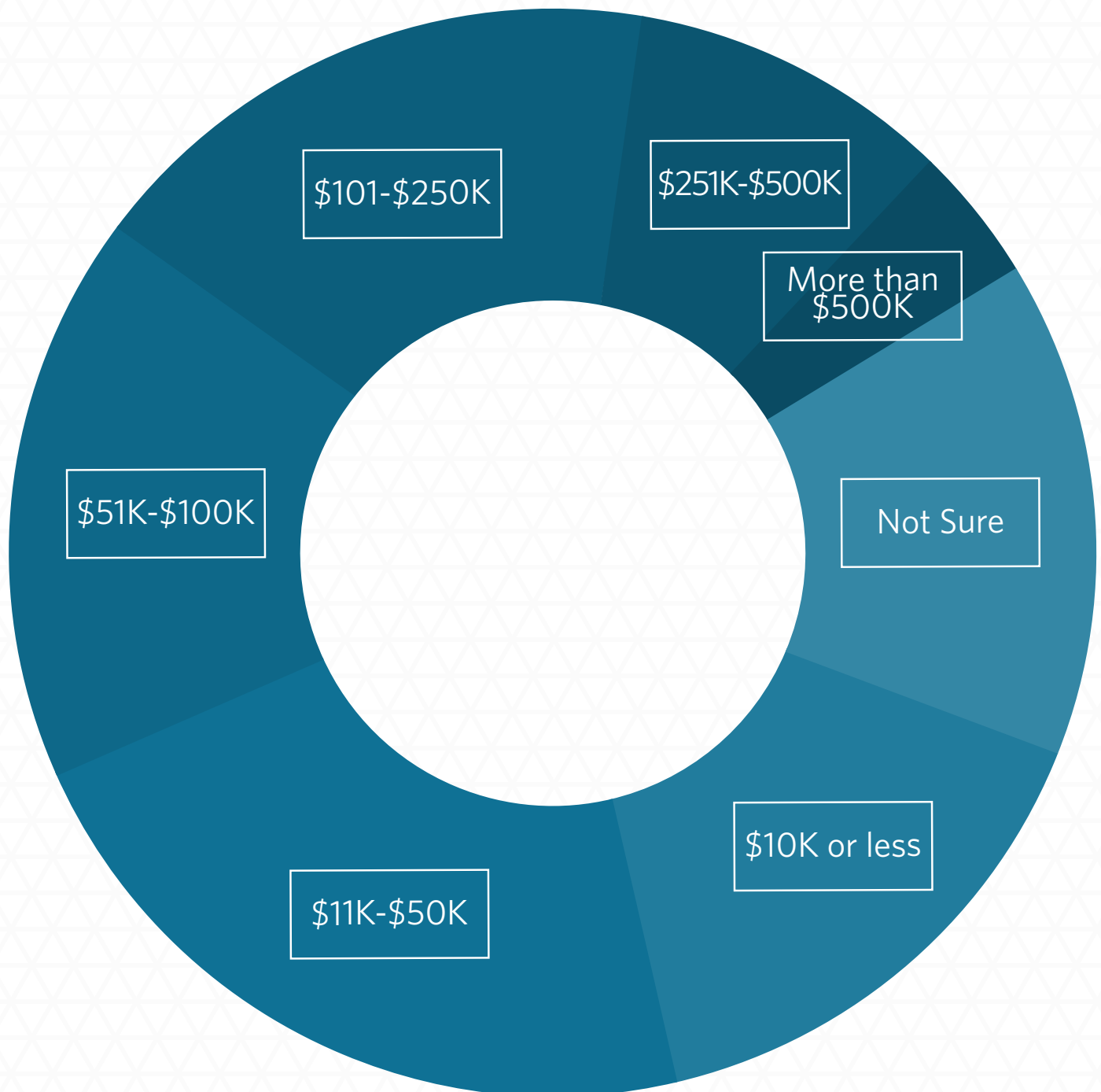
Which of the following company size brackets represents the largest segment of companies using your flagship product?

Mid-Sized Companies (51-1,000 employees)

Evenly Split Across Multiple Segments

Small Businesses (1-50 employees

Enterprises (1,001+ employees)

Not Sure