TrustRadius

The 2018 B2B Buying Disconnect

An in-depth study on buyer preferences, vendor impact, and the persistent trust gap in B2B technology

Table of contents

TrustRadius

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, TrustRadius conducted the [first B2B Buying Disconnect study](#), which explored the gaps, opportunities, and changing dynamics between technology buyers and vendors. This research expanded upon studies from Forrester, SiriusDecisions, Demand Gen Report, and others on the changing behaviors of B2B technology buyers, who are more empowered than ever before. Our research also included the vendor perspective, enabling a direct comparison between how vendors attempt to influence buyers versus how buyers make purchasing decisions. 608 individuals completed our surveys, spanning buyers who played a significant role in an important software purchase decision for their organization and professionals who work in sales or marketing for a vendor.

Based on their responses, we identified three key disconnects and three key opportunities for vendors:

Key Disconnects

1. Vendors focus on providing material that buyers don't find very useful or trustworthy.
2. Buyers don't trust all vendor claims, nor do they expect to.
3. Vendors see their role as strategic, yet most buyers said the vendor played a pragmatic role.

Key Opportunities

1. Buyers want hands-on experience with the product and insights from customers.
2. Vendors have an arsenal of satisfied customers they are not leveraging.
3. Strategic vendors are in the best position to influence buyers.

For our second annual B2B Buying Disconnect study, 678 individuals (438 buyers and 240 vendors) completed aligning surveys. We checked in on the state of B2B information sources, selection criteria, and the buyer-vendor dynamic to see if anything had changed year over year. But we also added new lines of questioning to probe more deeply into buyers' priorities/motivations and the specific tactics that make vendors trustworthy and influential. Our goal was to provide a clearer, more actionable picture of the opportunities for vendors.

Last year's report focused on identifying the gaps between buyers and vendors. The 2018 report takes it a step further by exploring the texture of those gaps, why they persist, and what we can learn from the vendors who are making strides to bridge that disconnect.

Key Findings

1. Buyers use multiple resources when researching products because none are perfectly adequate or trustworthy.

Similar to last year, on average buyers use about five sources of information. The top resources used were product demos, user reviews, vendor website, free trial, and vendor representatives. According to buyers, the vendor's website and representatives are less trustworthy and less influential than the other sources, though they become more powerful when supported by outside sources of information. In general, when buyers have access to a diverse mix of resources, they can cross-reference and validate information more effectively.

2. For some key selection criteria, buyers don't believe vendors are the right source of information.

Buyers say it is critical to get a complete picture of the product before they buy, and this means consulting sources beyond the vendor's purview. Adoption and scalability are two examples of areas where buyers want hands-on product experience, insights from customers, and third-party perspectives.

3. Users are an important resource for many buyers, yet vendors aren't sufficiently leveraging their advocates.

Less than a quarter of buyers have served as a customer reference, provided a testimonial, or participated in a case study for the vendor they bought from, though most are highly satisfied with the product they purchased. This participation rate has remained relatively constant year over year, despite the fact that more than 75% are willing to do more to advocate for their vendors and share feedback with other buyers. Vendors must find more ways to activate their users to meet buyers' needs for customer feedback.

4. Buyers are more influenced by vendors who are transparent and trustworthy.

23% of buyers said the vendors they bought from were very influential, and those very influential vendors engaged with their buyers differently than the rest, suggesting that there are specific types of interaction that tend to lead to a bigger influence over buyers. Highly influential vendors were more open, honest and responsive. Notably, vendors that want to be more influential with their buyers should focus on cultivating authentic interactions during the buying process.

5. Reviews are an effective and efficient way for vendors to embrace authenticity.

Year over year, vendors continue to invest in tactics that, for buyers, are not widely used, not very trustworthy, and not very influential. This is likely because vendors are working with limited time, resources, and budget. User reviews present a valuable opportunity for vendors to efficiently leverage their customer base and establish greater trust and influence with a broader set of their buyers.

About Us

TrustRadius is a B2B technology review platform that serves both buyers and vendors. Each month, about 300,000 B2B technology buyers use over 120,000 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 resource, 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.

Buyers use multiple resources when researching products because none are perfectly adequate or trustworthy

We asked buyers to select which information sources they used during their purchasing process from a list of 15 options. Buyers then rated each source in terms of how influential and how trustworthy it was. We also asked buyers to describe what they liked about the most influential and most trustworthy resources, what they didn't like about the least influential and least trustworthy sources, and how trust impacted influence.

On average, buyers consulted 4.9 information sources, which is consistent with last year's findings. Of the top five information sources used by buyers this year, two involved hands-on experience with the product (product demos and free trial/account), one involved peer feedback about the product (user reviews), and two involved vendors providing information about the product (vendor/product website and vendor representatives). Product demos were again the most commonly used resource. The biggest movement came in user reviews, which jumped from fifth to the second most popular source, surpassing vendor websites, free trials, and vendor representatives.
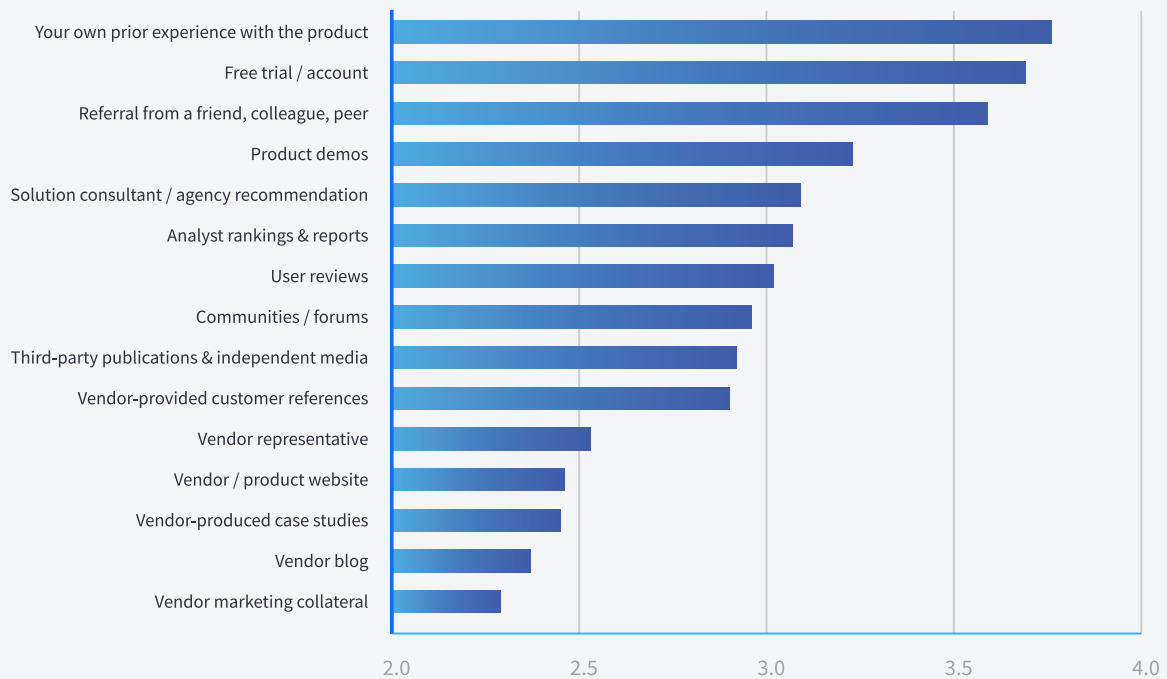
Information Sources Used by Buyers

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018
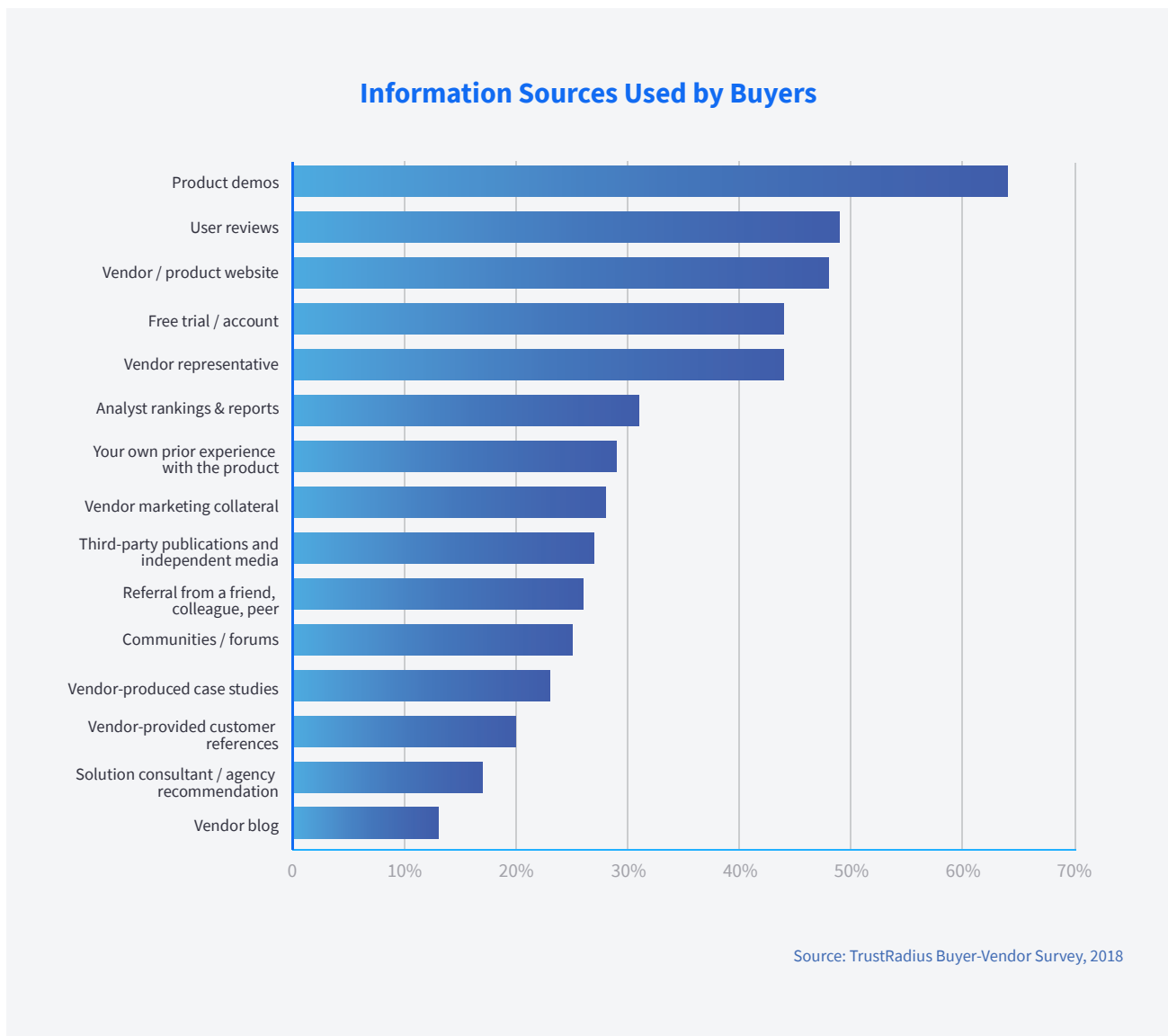
Influence of Information Sources

Source	Value
Your own prior experience with the product	
Free trial / account	
Product demos	
Referral from a friend, colleague, peer	
Solution consultant / agency recommendation	
User reviews	
Analyst rankings & reports	
Third-party publications & independent media	
Communities / forums	
Vendor-provided customer references	
Vendor representative	
Vendor-produced case studies	
Vendor / product website	
Vendor marketing collateral	
Vendor blog	

2.0   2.5   3.0   3.5   4.0

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

Trustworthiness of Information Sources

Source	Value
Your own prior experience with the product	
Free trial / account	
Referral from a friend, colleague, peer	
Product demos	
Solution consultant / agency recommendation	
Analyst rankings & reports	
User reviews	
Communities / forums	
Third-party publications & independent media	
Vendor-provided customer references	
Vendor representative	
Vendor / product website	
Vendor-produced case studies	
Vendor blog	
Vendor marketing collateral	

2.0   2.5   3.0   3.5   4.0

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

TrustRadius

The relationship between trust, influence, and usage

The most trustworthy resources were also the most influential. However these did not always match up with the most widely used resources. For example, fewer buyers had prior experience with the product, a friend who could make a referral, or access to a consultant. But for those who did, these sources of information were highly trustworthy and influential.

Free trials, product demos, and user reviews were the most trustworthy and influential of the top five most used resources, far surpassing the vendor website and vendor representatives, which were among the least trustworthy and least influential despite being widely used. All of the vendor-provided sources of information scored at the bottom of the barrel for trustworthiness and influence.

It is clear that buyers continue to want a realistic view of how a product will work for them on a day-to-day basis, and that finding information from sources not controlled by the vendor is crucial to getting a complete picture. While buyers rely on the vendor's website and representatives as key sources for some product information, they don't always trust them to be transparent and comprehensive, which limits their influence over purchase decisions.

> *"Salespeople, no matter how honest, will always have a strong bias and be the least objective voice in the process."*

> *"Websites can be helpful for finding objective facts like technical specs, etc, but at the end of the day they're a marketing tool and therefore not going to give you the full picture."*

> *"While data sheets and demos from product vendor are helpful to customers in making an informed decision, it cannot be the sole source of truth. It is critical to have an unbiased perspective."*

"It was difficult to trust vendor resources completely. Also vendor resources did not always cover all the perspectives of our business needs."

"A wider set of experiences tends to provide a better picture of the product. Vendor materials are not necessarily always accurate."

This fits into the larger trend of buyers being more empowered and doing more independent research beyond the purview of vendors. But buyers recognize that even outside sources have their limitations and biases. Many buyers said that using distributed information from a range of sources is more trustworthy and influential than any one source in particular, especially when the sources show consensus.

"It's hard to find independent information on the internet — everyone has an agenda."

"Sometimes a resource is not accurate. So you have to research in almost all information resources."

"It's easy to chalk up praise from sources that are either potentially biased or not using the product in the same way we intended to deploy it."

"Product demos are where the rubber meets the road. You can measure and verify claims made on websites and in case studies."

"Seeing a demo of the product itself, being able to try it out and combining that with actual user feedback was most valuable to us. The vendor's website along with what their own reps say about it carries the least amount of weight in our mind."

Differences between vendor tactics and buyer preferences

We gave vendors a list of the same 15 tactics and asked them which ones they use to educate and enable prospects.

Tactics Used by Vendors

Tactic	
Company / product website	~81%
Product demos	~77%
Marketing collateral	~74%
Case studies	~73%
Blog	~66%
Customer references	~65%
Vendor representative	~59%
Third-party publications and independent media	~46%
Partner / agency network	~44%
Free trial / account	~41%
User reviews	~40%
Customer referral program	~35%
Analyst rankings & reports	~34%
Communities / forums	~30%
Re-engage former users	~29%

Similar to last year, aside from product demos (where there is again good alignment between what buyers find helpful and what vendors provide) we found that vendors are focused on providing material that buyers don't use as often, and don't find very influential or trustworthy. Here are the top five tactics used by vendors, with the breakdown of buyer usage, influence, and trustworthiness:

Vendor Website

Used by **48%** of buyers, but **54%** said it was less influential, and **55%** said it was less trustworthy.

Product Demos

Used by **64%** of buyers, **88%** of buyers said they were more influential, and **81%** said they were more trustworthy.

Marketing Collateral

Used by only **28%** of buyers. **63%** said it was less influential, and **60%** said it was less trustworthy.

Case Studies

Used by only **23%** of buyers. **56%** said they were more influential, but **52%** said they were less trustworthy.

Blog

Used by only **13%** of buyers. **69%** said it was less influential, and **52%** said it was less trustworthy.

It's not that vendors aren't sharing *enough* content. On average, vendors selected about eight tactics, 60% more than the number of resources used by buyers. It just may not be the *right* content to influence buyers. Vendors would be better served by helping buyers find all of the resources they need to get a complete picture of the product — focusing exclusively on branded resources that are relatively easy to manage in-house does not help buyers feel sufficiently informed.

The three most important types of information are hands-on experience with the product, insights from customers, plus information from the vendor. Analyst rankings and reports, the sixth most used and trustworthy and seventh most influential, also came up in buyers' qualitative responses as a popular resource to take into account. Without these external sources of validation, buyers aren't confident that they can make an informed decision, since they worry the product information they receive from vendors is too glowing or too high-level.

> *"Being able to trial a product is always important to me because it lets me understand whether or not the solution will truly fit my needs. User reviews are also important because they give me insights into some challenges that might arise with the solutions the vendor isn't likely to disclose."*

> *"Typically product demos show what's possible while free trials, user reviews and analyst rankings validate the capabilities shown in the demo.*
> *The [vendor provided] use case studies typically do not get into the details of what was involved with implementation and are not tailored for the specific use case we are looking to tackle."*

> *"User reviews are a must - the product needs to have a good reputation. Analyst rankings - definitely something to look at as it is compiled by independent professionals. Vendor representative - crucial factor in terms of how the product is presented, explained, what customer support can we expect based on the encounter, live source of answers. Free trial - we wanted to see ourselves what we are buying, to have an opportunity to work with the software in order to believe in it. Vendor blog [was the least influential] - might contain some interesting stuff but rather marginal in terms of decision making."*

It is clear that vendors need to branch out to work with other organizations, including their customers, as well as share external information sources, even though it may involve giving up some control of the narrative. It seems some vendors are starting to recognize this and diversify their priorities within their marketing mix. Vendors' use of case studies and blogs (two of the least-utilized and least-trustworthy resources for buyers) went down somewhat from last year, though they still remained in the top five tactics used.

For some key selection criteria, buyers don't believe vendors are the right source of information

We asked buyers to identify their top three most important selection criteria, while vendors were asked to identify what they see as the top three most important factors for buyers. We wanted to see how well buyers and vendors align on important factors, and whether this could shed any light on a few of last year's disconnects. We'd found that vendors focus on providing material that buyers don't find very useful or trustworthy, and that buyers don't trust all vendor claims, nor do they expect to.

This year we wanted to know, which vendor claims are most important to investigate? Why are information sources like hands-on experience with the product and insights from customers so valuable, while the material vendors focus on providing is less influential and trustworthy? In other words, where and why do vendors fall short — is it because of the way they provide information, or because of buyer expectations about the kind of information vendors are able to provide?

Alignment in important factors, with one significant outlier

Though buyers and vendors agree that it's most important for a product to be able to adapt to the organization's processes, scale as they grow, and show measurable results, there was a bit of a disconnect when it comes to ease of adoption.

For buyers, adoption ranked a close fourth in importance, with 34% of selecting "Will be adopted quickly" as one of the top three most important factors in their selection decision, just behind the 35% that selected "Shows measurable results." But among vendors, adoption ranked seventh, below factors like support, integrations, and price that were in fact less important to buyers.

Priority	Most Important Factors for Buyers	According to Vendors
1	Can adapt to fit your processes	Can adapt to fit their processes
2	Will scale as you grow	Shows measurable results **+1**
3	Shows measurable results	Will scale as they grow **-1**
4	Will be adopted quickly	Has good customer support **+1**
5	Has good customer support	Integrates with their stack **+1**
6	Integrates with your stack	Does not exceed their budget **+1**
7	Does not exceed budget	Will be adopted quickly **-3**
8	Is the category leader	Is the category leader
9	Requires little to no IT involvement	Requires little to no IT involvement
10	Has all the bells and whistles	Has all the bells and whistles
11	Has a robust user community	Has a robust user community

Personal experience is ideal

Vendors may underestimate the importance of ease of adoption partly because buyers don't see vendors as the right authority on the issue, meaning that it may factor into conversations between vendors and buyers less often. Notably, the criteria vendors ranked above adoption — support, integrations, and price — are topics where buyers consider vendors a more authoritative resource.

Adoption, like scalability, is a forward-looking consideration that can only be proved through experience, and differs from context to context. It's one of those claims buyers feel the need to validate through hands-on experience.

> *"Product demos got us interested. Having a free trial account that had full functionality allowed us to use the tool in our everyday projects to find issues for adoption."*

> *"Got to try the product in our own business environment. Test reality vs. staged demo. Ease of adoption and compatibility."*

> *"Seeing the product/platform is essential. You can't know if it will work for your company (will it be scalable, will it work with your processes, etc). You just don't know until you see it."*

> *"The trial allowed us to make sure that it was something our teams would use and ensure it was adaptable for our needs."*

Buyers also seek external validation beyond what vendors can provide

But not everyone has the time, resources, or access to the product ahead of time to test it themselves. In their qualitative responses, some buyers said third-party analysts, consultants, and customers who have already experienced roll-outs or expanded their use of the product are the best source of feedback in these areas.

The advantage is that these sources are less biased than vendors and can clue you into issues you might not have thought of, plus they are likely easier and more efficient than testing it yourself. The limitation is that their use case and priorities may not be quite the same as yours.

> *"Understanding the ceiling of the product was very important for us to establish how much we can scale. We used web searches, discussion forums as well as other user reviews for our investigations."*

> *"[We took] a short tour of different IT communities to ask for advice, [and] we had a third party vendor that sells different solution advise us on the best solution for our use case. We wanted to understand any limitation in order to be sure that the solution would scale with us and not be a deterrent to our growth."*

> *"Word of mouth is powerful, and I trust my colleagues — they're more experienced than I, and have been through the proverbial "trenches" before."*

> *"[To investigate product limitations] we spoke to other users of the software where they had scaled up."*

> *"[We] searched for user reviews, industry reports and video content. It was incredibly important to understand the limitations to know what could prevent the team from using the product and scaling it as we grew."*

Users are an important resource for many buyers, yet vendors aren't sufficiently leveraging their advocates

Overall, most buyers are highly satisfied with the products they purchased. Based on Net Promoter Score Definitions, 42% of buyers are promoters (rated the product they bought a 9 or 10), and only 11% are detractors (rated the product they bought a 1 through 6). Additionally 90% say they intend to renew. This data shows a similar post-purchase satisfaction distribution to last year's study, and 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.

Distribution of Buyer Satisfaction Ratings
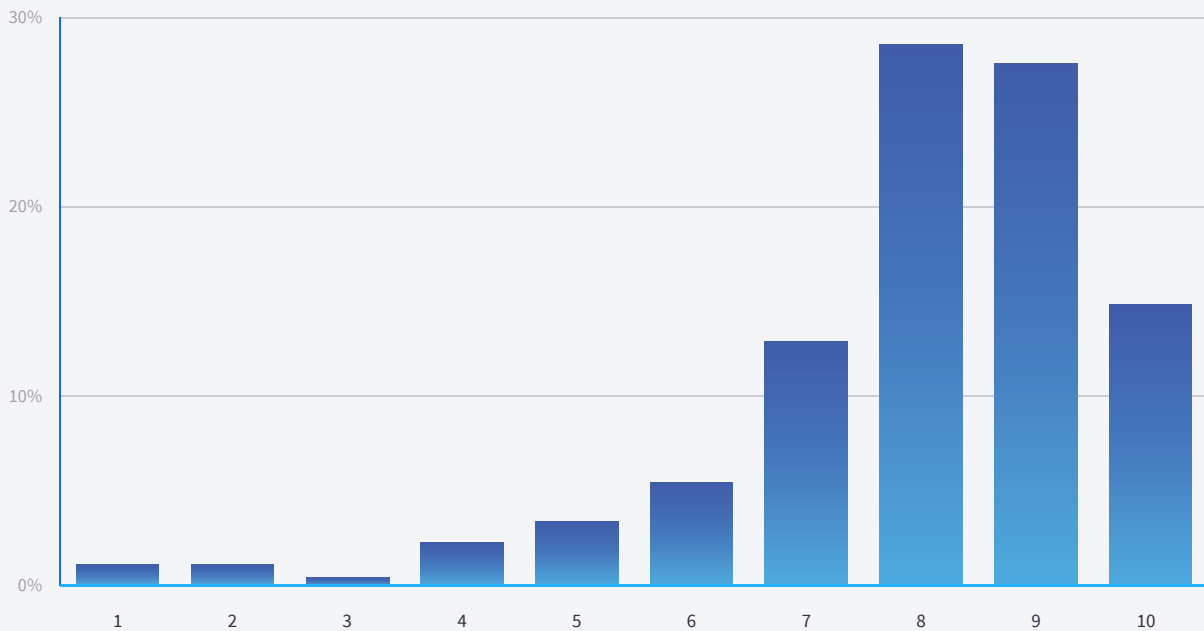
Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

The majority of customers are potential advocates

There's a clear opportunity for vendors to connect more of their buyers with customer perspectives, beyond their star advocates. Your advocates shouldn't be limited to the handful of customers with perfect use cases, nor do you need to airbrush/polish their results into branded content. No product is perfect, but if customers are satisfied with the results they've achieved, they are more likely to be willing to share their success and lessons learned along the way. It's actually more helpful for buyers to get a sense of the range of use cases for the product, with results alongside challenges. By widening the pool of advocates, vendors can be more authentic and more influential with more of their buyers.

Buyers obviously value customer insights as a critical part of their research, evaluation, and decision-making process. So once they themselves become customers, it's not surprising that they're willing to pay it forward.

The most common way for buyers to do this today is casual and happenstance, without vendor involvement. 42% of buyers recommended the product they purchased to a peer directly, a figure that's been consistent year over year. While word of mouth is great, it's not scalable — a referral from a friend, colleague, or peer was among the most trustworthy and influential resources for buyers, but wasn't used by most buyers, likely due to lack of availability.

84% are willing to do more, but vendors need to ask

A much smaller group of buyers had been involved in vendors' advocacy programs. Only 21% had served as a customer reference, provided a testimonial, or participated in a case study, though 42% are by definition promoters. This does not show significant growth from 2017, when 20% of buyers said they had been involved in vendors' advocacy programs.

We decided to probe further to see where vendors had the most viable opportunities to increase customer advocacy. This year we asked buyers not only what actions they've taken since their purchase, but also what more they'd be willing to do.

Customer Advocacy Actions

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018
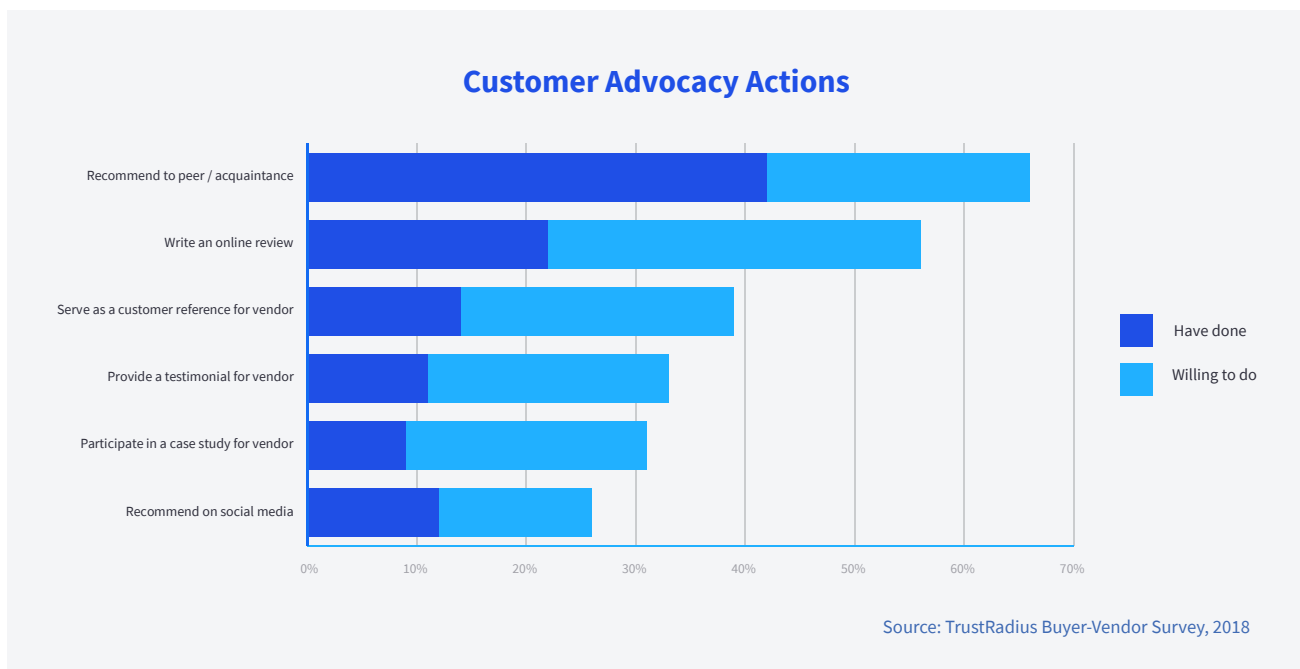
The big takeaway is that 84% would be willing to do more than they have already. According to buyers, there is the potential for double the participation in formal advocacy programs. An additional 27% would be willing to serve as a customer reference for the vendor, which is about twice as many as today. An additional 24% would be willing to provide a testimonial for the vendor, more than twice as many as today. And finally another 24% would be willing to participate in a case study, almost three times as many as today.

Though reviews are not always a facet of vendor advocacy programs, a review strategy is worth considering. An additional 37% of buyers said they would be willing to write an online review, almost twice the number who have done so already. The added benefit to vendors is that unlike recommending a product to a peer or acquaintance, reviews get customers on the record in a format that is sharable and thus scalable.

Since a far greater total percentage of buyers are willing to write an online review than serve as a reference, provide a testimonial, participate in a case study, or even discuss the product on social media, it can be very fruitful to encourage customers to share their experience by writing reviews. Reviews are also more commonly used by buyers than customer references and case studies, and are considered to be more influential and trustworthy than vendor-provided customer evidence.

Buyers are more influenced by vendors who are transparent and trustworthy

Vendor influence over purchase decisions remains on par with last year's findings: 42% of buyers ranked the vendor somewhat influential in helping them choose their product, with only 23% considering the vendor they bought from very influential. So what can vendors do to level up their influence on buyers? To answer this question, we turned to the "Very influential" slice to see how those 23% of vendors interact with their buyers differently.

Vendor Influence on Buying Decision
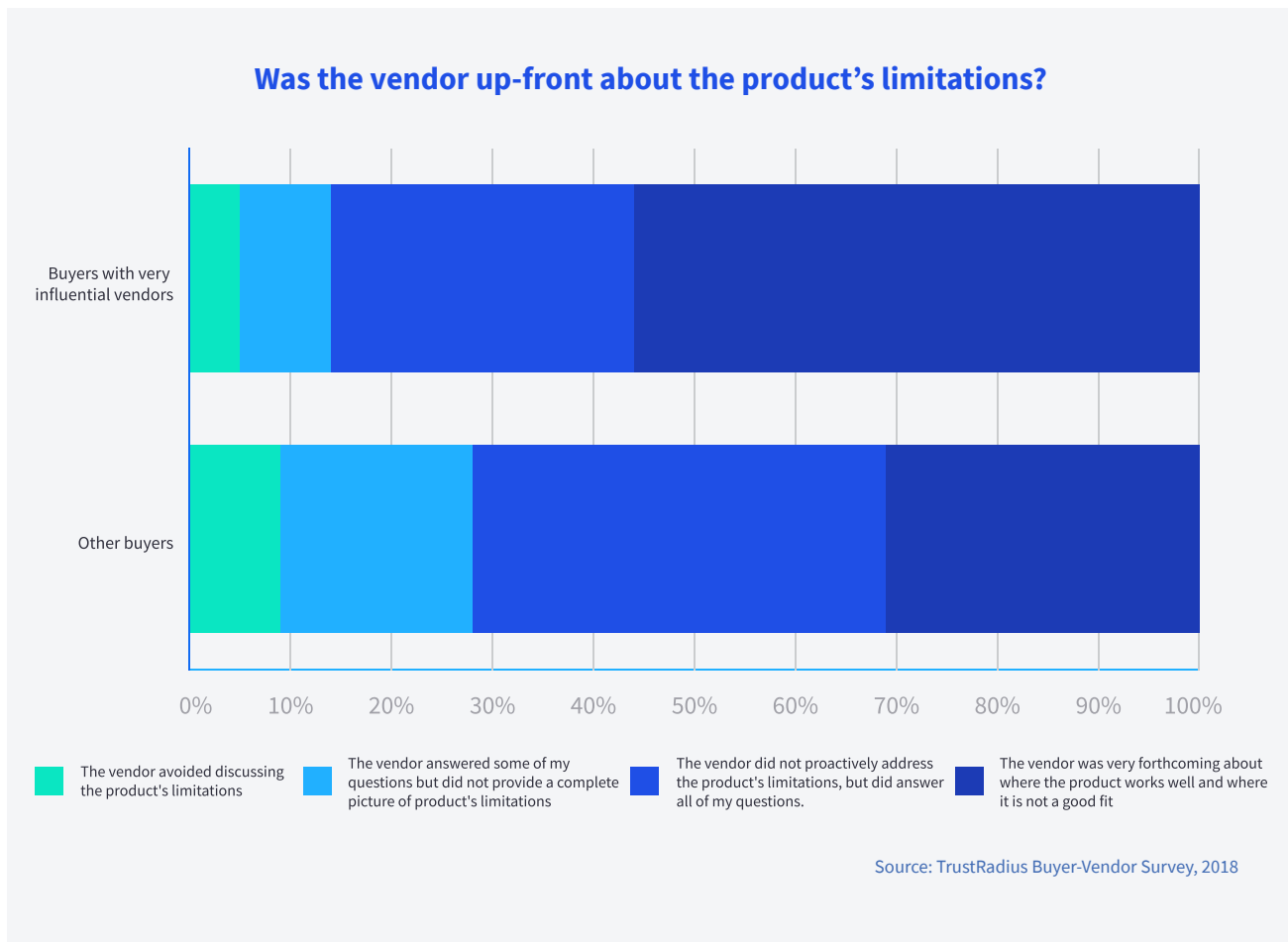

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018
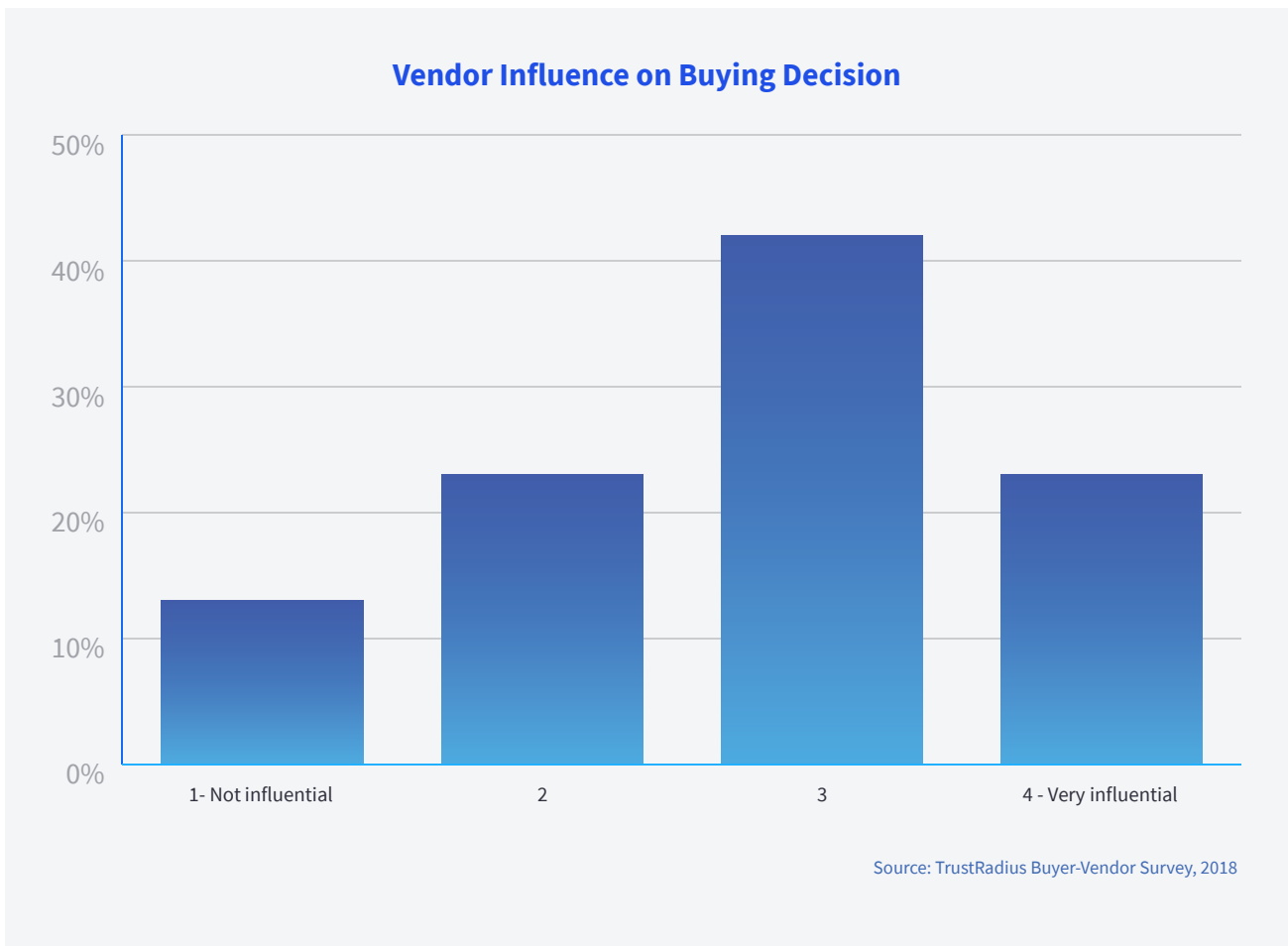
More influential vendors were more transparent during the sales process

According to buyers, highly influential vendors were more trustworthy, more open, and more likely to play a strategic role during the sales process. Here are some tips for vendors striving to be more influential, based on trends in our data.

Be brutally honest about product limitations

Influential vendors were more forthcoming about where the product works well and where it is not a good fit. 56% of buyers who said their vendors were very influential also said they were very forthcoming about product limitations, versus 31% of buyers with less influential vendors, and fewer felt their vendors avoided discussing the product's limitations or left them with an incomplete picture.

Was the vendor up-front about the product's limitations?

- The vendor avoided discussing the product's limitations
- The vendor answered some of my questions but did not provide a complete picture of product's limitations
- The vendor did not proactively address the product's limitations, but did answer all of my questions.
- The vendor was very forthcoming about where the product works well and where it is not a good fit

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

There may be a disconnect here between what buyers and vendors consider "forthcoming," or between what vendors would like to be doing versus what they actually do. A whopping 85% of vendors said they "aim to be clear about where the product works well and where something else might be a better fit," which is far more than the 37% benchmark of all buyers who felt they succeeded.

This could mean that vendors are developing new attitudes towards transparency about product limitations but haven't necessarily had the opportunity to execute them yet, or it could mean that buyers' expectations for transparency are more radical than what vendors are prepared (or able) to deliver.

Vendors who aim to be forthcoming about product limitations

85%

Buyers who found their vendor forthcoming about product limitations

37%

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018
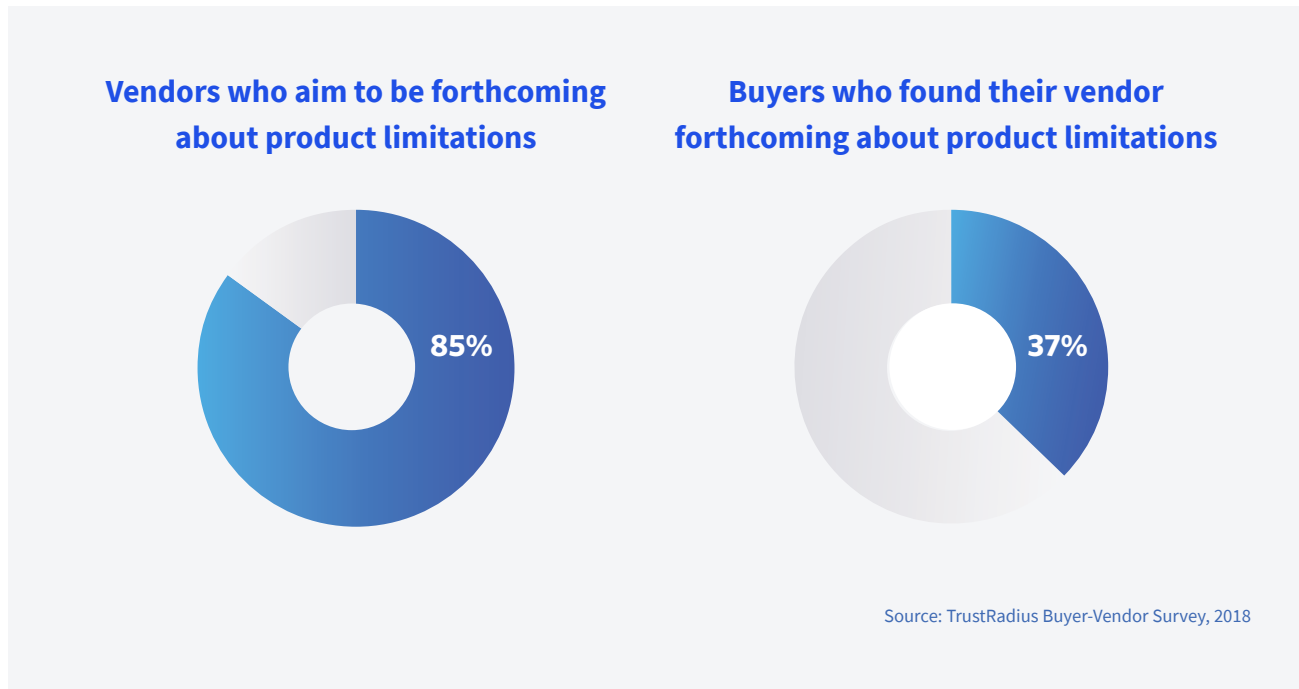
Provide more strategic and authentic resources

Unsurprisingly, buyers with very influential vendors described their vendor playing a more active role overall. When asked to select among various actions describing the role of their vendor, buyers with very influential vendors selected an average of 5 tactics, while other buyers selected an average of 3.3.

How would you describe the vendor's role in helping you choose their product?

Chart categories (top to bottom):
- The vendor worked with us on pricing and/or packaging.
- The vendor answered questions and provided examples based on our Request For Proposal.
- The vendor presented an overview of product features and/or a standard demo.
- The vendor presented a custom demo and/or helped us run a proof of concept.
- The vendor was consultative and helped us strategize the best approach for our use case.
- The vendor provided us with customer evidence (e.g. reviews, case studies).
- The vendor invited us to events, workshops, or other learning opportunities.
- The vendor helped us understand potential ROI and/or sell internally.
- The vendor connected us with customer references.
- The vendor was very salesy and mainly tried to convince us to buy the product.
- We bought from a partner or reseller, rather than the vendor.
- We didn't interact with the vendor at all.
- The vendor was hands-off or not very involved.

Legend:
- Buyers with very influential vendors
- Other buyers

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

But not all tactics were strong differentiators for influential vendors. For example, 56% of very influential vendors provided an overview of features or a standard demo compared to 52% of other vendors. A standard demo or product overview is certainly necessary, but has become more of a table stakes tactic, rather than a significant differentiator for influencing buyers.

On the other hand, influential vendors did do a few things differently when it came to their marketing and sales tactics. Very influential vendors were about twice as likely to provide buyers with additional learning opportunities, connect them with customer references, help them understand ROI or make a case internally, help them strategize the best approach, and provide them with customer evidence.

They also shared more trustworthy vendor-produced resources with buyers, therefore buyers were more likely to rely on and be influenced by those resources. Finally, their buyers had a better perception of vendor representatives, ranking them as significantly more trustworthy and influential. This is especially important considering reps have a significant impact on how buyers view the vendor, both in terms of what their product can do and what it would be like to work with them on a daily basis.

> *"Vendor representative - crucial factor in terms of how the product is presented, explained, what customer support can we expect based on the encounter, live source of answers."*

> *"Seeing something in action and having someone knowledgeable to answer questions is key for me. I am an interactive learner."*

> *"With the demos we were able to ask detailed questions and if the vendor gave answers that may not always be positive it gives a sense they are providing an honest demo."*

> *"The most important thing a salesperson can do for me is be honest about what isn't in the product so there are no surprise and I can strategize how to work around it."*

Proactively bring trusted voices into the conversation

Peers and other users are among the most trustworthy sources for buyers, and influential vendors connected buyers with customer perspectives more frequently. 50% of buyers with very influential vendors said the vendor provided them with customer evidence like reviews and case studies, versus 27% of other buyers. 42% of buyers with very influential vendors also said the vendor connected them with customer references, versus 20% of other buyers. Access to relevant information, especially when it can be verified by customers and other sources, is a huge part of what makes vendors seem authentic and makes buyers feel confident moving forward with a purchase.

"For an established product like [the product we purchased] and established category like marketing automation, I wanted to validate what I had heard about the product and how it compared to its primary competitors. So user reviews and customer testimonials were important, and I relied on the analyst reviews to validate functionality. The vendor reps were critical for me because one of the main reasons I was switching such a core platform was that [our previous platform's] rep and customer support was so terrible."

"The ability to see proven results through case studies and talk through use cases with staff/product demo were invaluable. The Product demo was the under the hood look we needed. We knew what questions we needed to ask and details we needed to confirm being familiar with marketing automation already. User reviews were valuable in gauging overall opinion, but it was hard to find other companies like ours to compare reviews with to hear how it worked for them."

"Vendor websites show you what they want to show you. The things you want to know are often hidden and only disclosed during on-boarding. When users give real feedback, it helps make decisions. We're at a point that we need something that's going to get us to the next step as a company. Everyone is going to advertise that they will get the job done for you. Hearing from those who are having success is game changing in the decision making process."

Reviews are an effective and efficient way for vendors to embrace authenticity

With so many competing needs and limited resources, it can be difficult for vendors to prioritize their efforts. We asked vendors to rate the tactics they use to educate and engage prospects in terms of effectiveness at helping move buyers towards a decision and how challenging/difficult it is to create or manage, on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being most effective and most challenging.
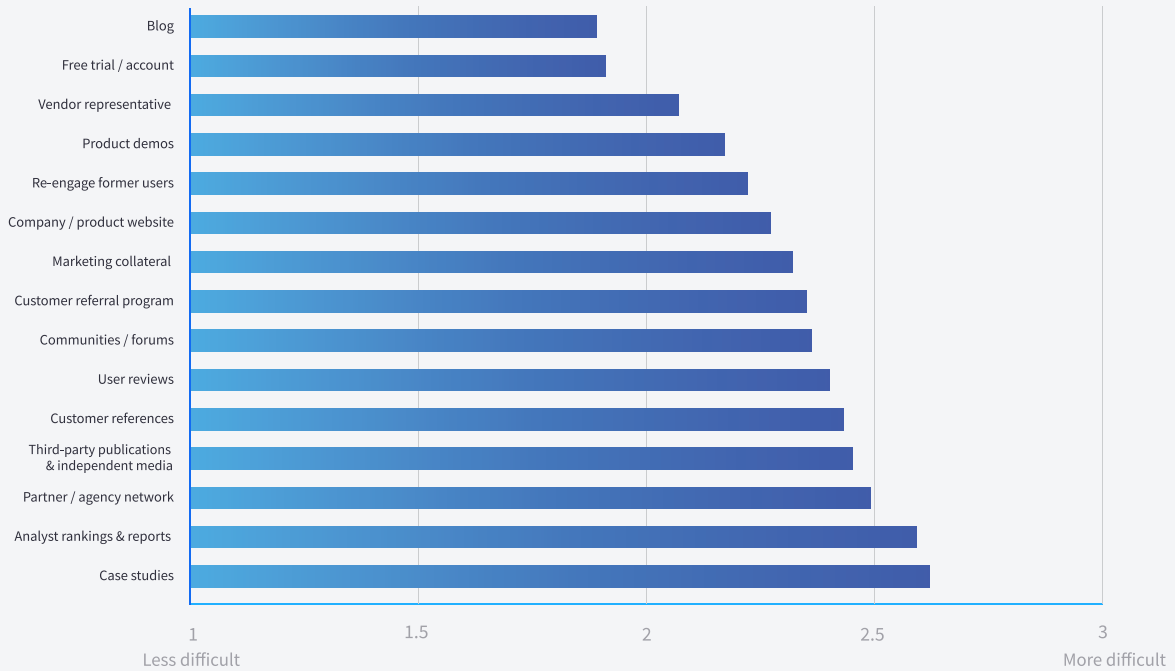
Unfortunately, some of the least effective approaches are the easiest to create and manage, and some of the most effective are the most challenging to create and manage. For example, vendors ranked having a blog as the least effective tactic, and buyers agree wholeheartedly, but nevertheless it is the easiest tactic and among the top five implemented.

Effectiveness of Vendor Tactics

Tactic	
Product demos	
Customer references	
Vendor representative	
Free trial / account	
User reviews	
Customer referral program	
Case studies	
Analyst rankings & reports	
Partner / agency network	
Company / product website	
Re-engage former users	
Marketing collateral	
Communities / forums	
Third-party publications & independent media	
Blog	

2 — Less effective   2.5   3   3.5   4 — More effective
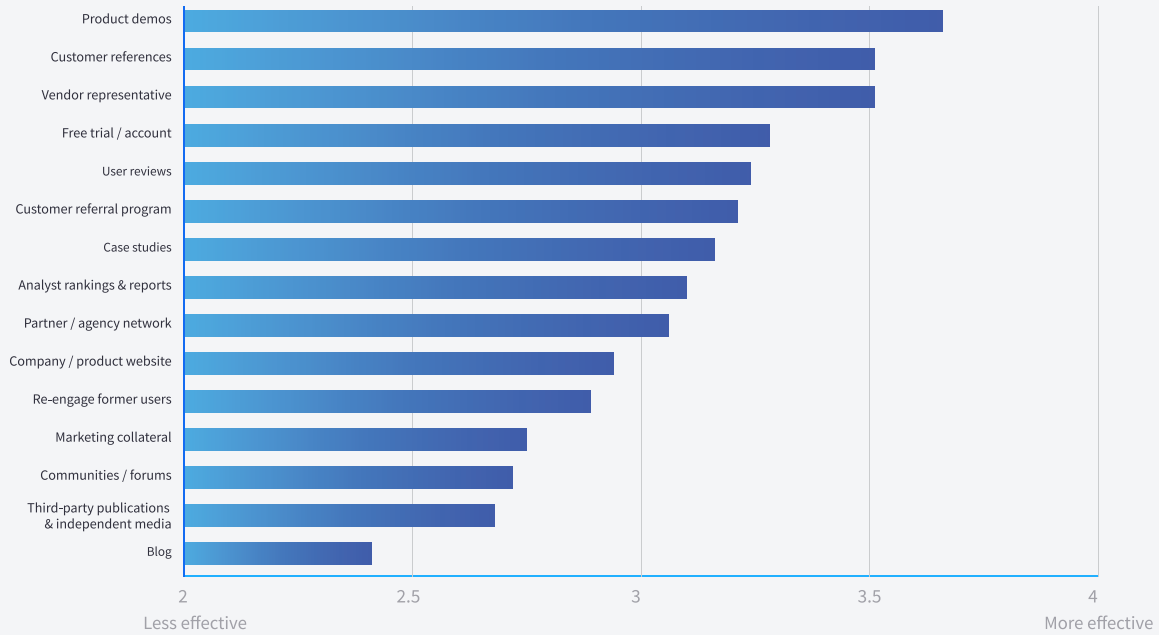
Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

Difficulty of Vendor Tactics

Tactic	
Blog	
Free trial / account	
Vendor representative	
Product demos	
Re-engage former users	
Company / product website	
Marketing collateral	
Customer referral program	
Communities / forums	
User reviews	
Customer references	
Third-party publications & independent media	
Partner / agency network	
Analyst rankings & reports	
Case studies	

1 — Less difficult   1.5   2   2.5   3 — More difficult

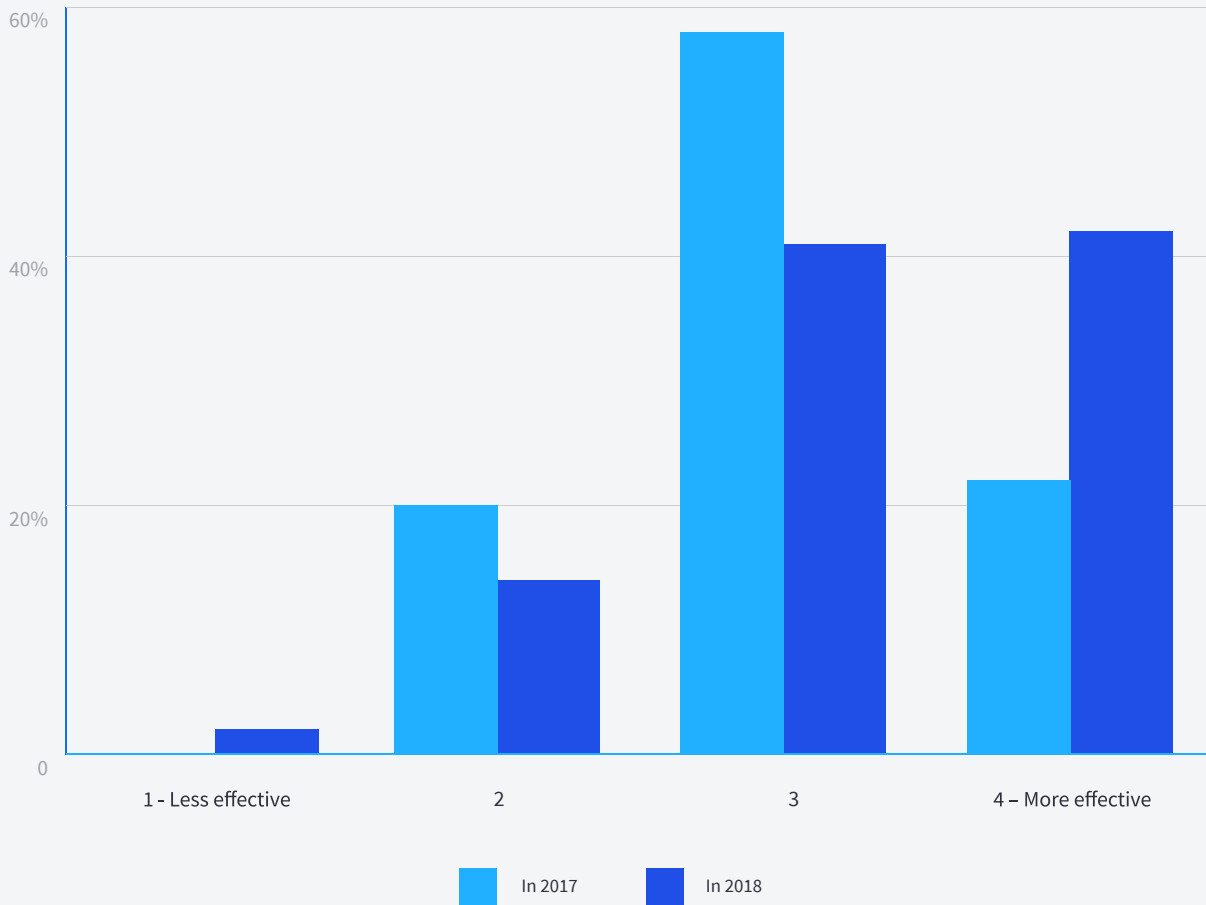Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

TrustRadius

While the product-based tactics like demos and trials are highly effective and relatively easy to provide — which helps to explain why there's such good alignment between what buyers want and what vendors provide in that area — the balancer is trickier when it comes to customer insights. Customer references are the second most effective tactic, but are understandably among the most difficult to manage. Case studies are even trickier, since both buyers and vendors find them less effective than customer references, and according to vendors they are the most difficult to create and manage. User reviews, however, are among the top five most effective tactics for vendors, and are easier to manage than case studies or customer references.

Reviews present a unique opportunity to share customer insights

Vendors need to invest their time wisely, and find a mix of tactics that address their buyers' diverse needs, are influential, but collectively are not too difficult to manage. Reviews sit at this nexus. When it comes to sources for customer insights, they are the least difficult to manage according to vendors, as well as the most influential and most trustworthy according to buyers.

Writing a review is also the advocacy step respondents were most willing to do, beyond recommending the product to a peer or acquaintance. Reviews therefore present a significant opportunity for ROI with their unique combination of scalability, manageability, and buyer influence. Indeed, vendors increasingly recognize the effectiveness of reviews. This year, the number of vendors who considered user reviews to be more effective doubled, from 21% to 42%.

Effectiveness of Reviews as a Tactic for Vendors
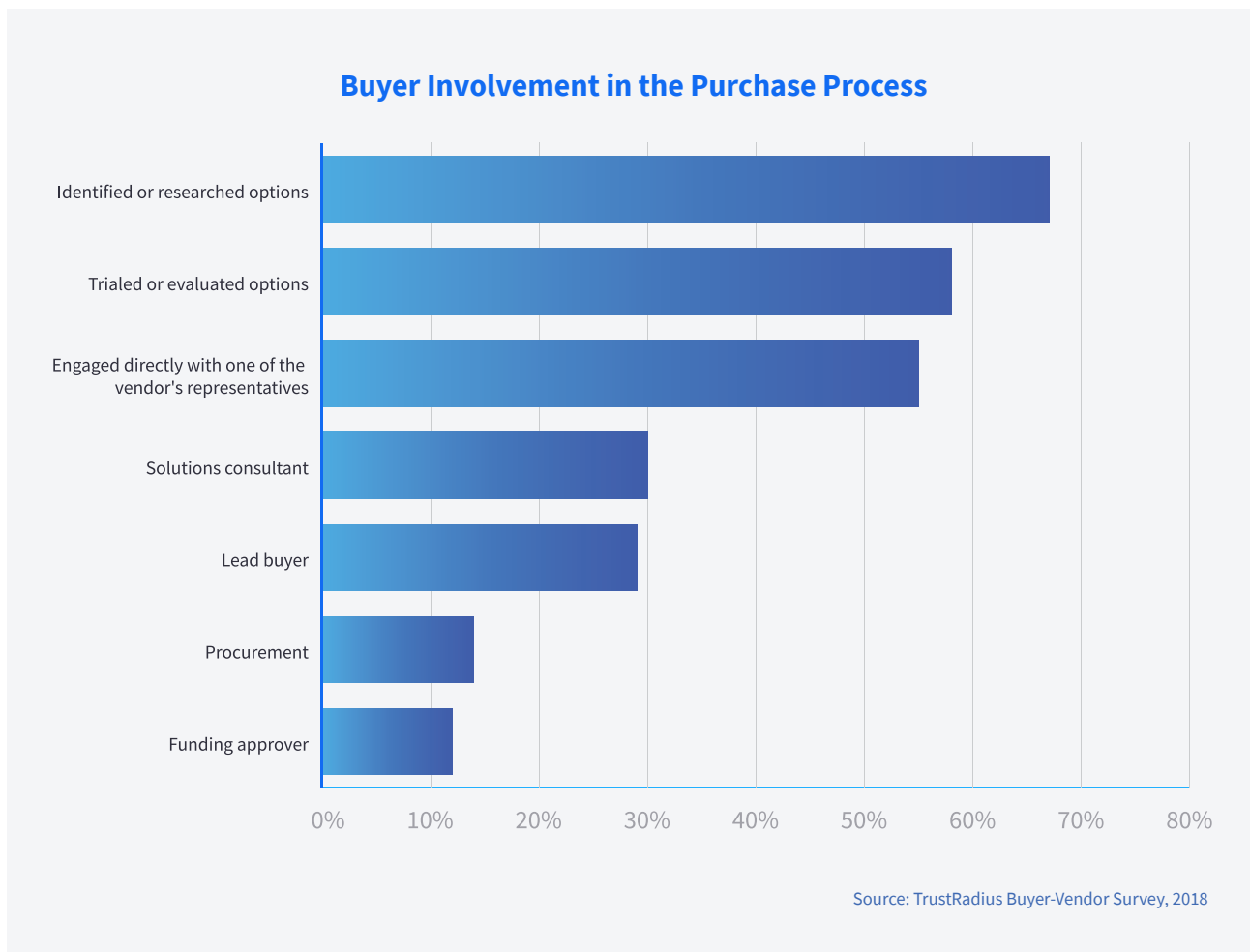

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

Vendors and buyers have mixed views on the effectiveness of user reviews, customer references and case studies. But these customer voice tactics aren't mutually exclusive — in fact, they can and should be complementary. Reviews can validate marketing claims and supplement vendor-provided material by providing social proof from a broader range of use cases, personas, and industries. They are also a scalable way to identify possible reference and case study participants, helping to streamline those two programs.

How buyers use reviews

At the end of our survey, we revisited the question of reviews again, asking buyers if they consulted reviews while researching products. 74% said that they did, a notably higher percentage than those who selected them from a list of information sources used during the selection process.

On average, buyers used reviews at three points in the research process, with the most common being to compare products and to understand options. These review use cases align with the most common roles in the purchasing process. Identifying or researching products (67%) was followed closely by trialing or evaluating options (58%) and engaging directly with a vendor representative (55%). Arming buyers with third-party evidence they can bring to their peers is another key use case, as 56% said two to five individuals were involved in the purchasing decision, while 25% said six to 10 were involved.

Why did you use review sites?

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

Buyer Involvement in the Purchase Process

Role	Percentage
Identified or researched options	~67%
Trialed or evaluated options	~58%
Engaged directly with one of the vendor's representatives	~55%
Solutions consultant	~30%
Lead buyer	~29%
Procurement	~14%
Funding approver	~12%

Source: TrustRadius Buyer-Vendor Survey, 2018

In addition to roles, demographics are impacting these trends. The majority of B2B buyers are now millennials. Over 45% of buyers were 25-34-years-old, followed by 30% in the 35-44 age range. Numerous studies have shown that millennials are less trusting of brands and advertising, and more likely to turn to their peers for buying recommendations. Customer insights that are not controlled by the vendor are particularly relevant to this influential age group.

Why buyers use reviews

We also asked buyers what they remembered about the review sites they visited, as well as what stood out as the strengths or weaknesses of those sites. Their responses provided a nuanced perspective on why buyers use reviews, as well as which review elements are most helpful.

Reviews provide a unique opportunity to get balanced feedback

> *"The reviews that outlined detailed positive and negative outcomes when dealing with this particular product and company were taken into account."*

> *"Sites that ask 'What did you NOT like' are always a big plus for me, allows me to see the hidden bits that you may not even think to ask."*

> *"Candid and balanced in the array of feedback. Looked for specifics, not generalizations."*

> *"Some platforms seem to have a good mix of reviews. I will read dozens of reviews both good and bad and take them all into consideration."*

> *"Segmented pros and cons easily, so we could put together a high-level summary before the RFP."*

> *"There were good reviews and bad, but I found it comforting to find that the bad reviews didn't say anything that would negatively impact my need for the product."*

Depth and detail make reviews more useful

> *"Some sites go into granular detail on the specific aspects and functionality of each product, while others take a more holistic 'out of 5 stars' approach. I much prefer the former."*

> *"Reviews that are comprehensive are valued because it talks about how it fits in their business and what limitations they are seeing."*

"I think that a website that can get users that have a lot of experience with the products is very valuable. This helps get in-depth information."

"The description of the features, use cases and covering the nitty-gritty of the platform leaving no detail for assumption."

"There were instances where the users reviews were very short, and therefore useless for anyone needing real, concrete reviews based on facts and not just a quick overview."

"The depth of the explanations given varied slightly. I liked the more detailed ones better."

Trust is a important benefit of, and factor in, reviews

"We only used one site. This site was not moderated by the vendor and reviews where very honest."

"The site was very open about their reviews, honest, and extremely helpful."

"Verified reviews were key."

"I wanted to see if the people were real about their responses. You can tell if it's something they wrote by themselves or if it's something the vendor wrote for them."

"As long as they were not connected to the products, I felt they were useful. Independent sites with users who were not anonymous were helpful."

"I remember finding one which corroborated my experience perfectly and told the truth all round. Any which had significant adverts really put me off. The significance of a good review site is a guarantee of no commercial bias."

Reviews provide relevant perspectives from similar users

"The review sites were helpful in getting real life experiences and reviews from current customers."

"Reviews were clear to read and from reliable sources. There were many users in my same situation (buyer/user)."

"Users in similar business situations as ours. Others were not relevant."

"In general, the sites that let me search for solutions by both industry and company size were the most useful."

CONCLUSION

Being an influential vendor no longer means dominating the conversation with your own voice. Instead, vendors who leverage a wide variety of sources are better poised to impact their buyers. The new imperative is to widen the aperture, both in terms of viewpoints and tactics, so that buyers can easily find and connect with the sources they prefer.

Vendors who proactively bring a diverse mix of resources to the table — particularly resources that aren't completely within their control — build trust with their buyers and can create a competitive edge. Putting all your energy into slick messaging and overly-produced assets is a surefire way to build an inauthentic relationship with your buyers. It also forces them to look elsewhere to find trusted sources of information.

Instead, challenge your team to build a transparent buyer's journey. Create branded content that is authentic, clear, and useful. Make it easy for your buyers to experience your product directly, and help them determine whether or not it is the right fit for their use case. Finally, connect buyers with those who are better equipped to provide them with the balanced feedback they need: your customers. Doing these three things will help you bridge the trust gap and foster an authentic connection with your buyers.

Ready to take the next step?

Download The Definitive Guide to B2B Reviews for everything you need to know to launch a 5-star review program.

Request a Demo to learn how TrustRadius helps vendors scale in-depth reviews and put that customer content to work.

Buyer Survey Demographics

A total of 438 individuals completed our buyer survey. They must have played a key role in a significant business technology purchase during the last year.

Type of Technology Purchased

Technology Purchased	Percent
IT	22%
Marketing	21%
Business Intelligence	10%
Sales	7%
HR	5%
Customer Support	5%
Professional Services	5%
Hardware	5%
Finance and Accounting	3%
Vertical Industry	2%
Other	15%

Annual Cost of Product

Cost	Percent
$10k or less	29%
$11k-50k	31%
$51k-$100k	13%
$101k-$250k	11%
$251k-$500k	6%
More than $500k	6%
Not Sure	4%

Size of Buying Group

People Involved	Percent
1	5%
2-5	56%
6-10	25%
11-20	8%
More than 20	4%
Not Sure	2%

Age of Buyer

Age	Percent
24 or younger	4%
25-34	45%
35-44	30%
45-54	16%
55-64	5%
65 or older	0%

Buyer Involvement in the Purchase Process

Buyer Roles	Percent
Identified or researched options	67%
Trialed or evaluated options	58%
Engaged directly with one of the vendor's representatives	55%
Solutions consultant	30%
Lead buyer	29%
Procurement	14%
Funding approver	12%
Other	4%

Company Size of Buyer

Company Size	Percent
1-50 employees	28%
51-1,000 employees	46%
1,001+ employees	26%

Department of Buyer

Department	Percent
Information Technology	31%
Marketing	24%
Operations	10%
Sales	8%
Human Resources	4%
Accounting / Finance	4%
Engineering	3%
Research & Development	3%
Customer Service	2%
Consultant	2%
Other	8%

Job Title of Buyer

Job Title	Percent
Manager	21%
Analyst / Associate	18%
Director	16%
Senior Manager	13%
Consultant	9%
Owner / Principal	5%
Vice President / SVP	4%
C-level executive (including CEO)	2%
Founder / Co-Founder	1%
Other	5%

Vendor Survey Demographics

A total of 240 individuals completed our vendor survey. They must work for a business technology vendor in a marketing or sales capacity.

Primary Target Market of Vendor

Target Market	Percent
Small businesses (1-50 employees)	13%
Mid-sized companies (51-1,000 employees)	38%
Enterprises (1,001+ employees)	31%
Evenly split across multiple segments	16%
Not Sure	2%

Annual Cost of Product

Average Cost	Percent
$10k or less	24%
$11k-50k	23%
$51k-$100k	16%
$101k-$250k	11%
$251k-$500k	4%
More than $500k	5%
Not sure	17%

Company Size of Vendor

Company Size	Percent
1-50 employees	32%
51-1,000 employees	48%
1,001+ employees	20%

Type of Technology Sold

Technology Purchased	Percent
IT	18%
Marketing	13%
Business Intelligence	5%
Sales	6%
HR	10%
Customer Support	2%
Professional Services	3%
Hardware	3%
Finance and Accounting	5%
Vertical Industry	9%
Other	26%

Role in Marketing or Sales

Role	Percent
Marketing Leadership	33%
Demand Generation / Digital Marketing	32%
Product Marketing	23%
Sales Enablement	18%
Sales Leadership	17%
Customer Marketing / Customer Advocacy	17%
C-level executive (including CEO)	15%
Public Relations / Communications / Analyst Relations	14%
Account Executive	8%
Customer References	6%
Consultant	2%
MDR / BDR / SDR	2%