

Research indicates buyers relying on trusted third-party information

New content marketing research by the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Council, conducted in partnership with NetLine Corporation, surveyed the online content sourcing and sharing behaviours of 352 business buyers worldwide.

It found that content downloaded from trusted sources on the Internet was essential to pre-sales discovery, qualification and selection of vendors. It also showed that the sourcing, sharing and consumption of content occurred mostly among three types of informally structured buying groups within enterprise organisations.



Sharing circles' strengths

These three sharing circles are led by organisations where content radiates from the execution or mid-level of the organisation outward, informing both senior and junior/functional roles to gain alignment over vendor selection. The three primary content sharing circles include:

- **From the middle out (35%):** Content sourcing and purchase decisions are driven by tactically focused executives, but senior management is informed about how and why key decisions were made.
- **From the bottom up (30%):** Junior or mid-level managers source primary content and share upstream to members of senior management, who then make the final purchase decision.
- **From the top down (29%):** Senior management consumes content, sending information downstream for product identification and final purchase and execution.

Three key segments of content personas, each with their own behaviours, needs and expectations, are powering these content sharing circles.

- **Researchers:** Primarily seek out the most broad and expansive content and are focused on new industry reports and research to inform them of advancements in solutions, trends impacting the market and opportunities for improvement
- **Influencers:** Interested in both the broad thought leadership consumed through trusted third-party channels, as well as vendor-branded technology specifications, data sheets and use cases. This group emerges as the segment most interested in summarised content, including infographics, video and blog commentary.
- **Decision makers:** Want to stay informed through research reports and analyst commentary, but also expect to have access to data in order to speed and enable better decision making in the tail end of the decision funnel

Marketers need to fine-tune strategies

The research is just one indication that marketers need to fine-tune their content strategies and capabilities as they seek to engage today's customer audiences effectively.

"B2B marketers annually invest an estimated \$16.6 billion in digital content publishing to acquire business leads, influence customer specification and consideration, as well as educate and engage prospects," notes Donovan Neale-May, executive director of the CMO Council. "Despite spending about 25% of their marketing budgets on content creation, most companies lack the necessary strategies, competencies and best practices to engage their markets effectively and very few have content performance metrics in place to measure effectiveness and calculate ROI."

The study validates earlier CMO Council research that revealed 88% of 400 business buyers believe online content plays a major to moderate role in vendor selection, yet just 9% of respondents think of vendors as trusted sources of content. Furthermore, the study shows that the most influential types of content across both the awareness and evaluation phases of the buying journey are third-party validated research reports and studies.

Additional key findings

1. The web wins...just not the vendor's web: The Internet is the primary place where business buyers begin the path to purchase. Some 68% start their content sourcing at search engines and portals, 40% go to vendor websites and 25% are activated by an email from a trusted source or peer.

2. Objectivity trumps push messaging every time: Buyers are seeking thought leadership from third parties but still expect facts and data-driven insights from vendors to help make critical vendor selection decisions. A noticeable 44% see technical details and specs about products as the second-most valued source of content across their buying journey. The top five most sought-after types of content include:

- Comprehensive industry/category surveys and studies (52%)
- Technical details about products and solutions (44%)
- Analyst reviews or recommendations (43%)
- Expert-originated content with supporting facts and research (35%)
- Content published by third-party sources (35%)

3. Buyers Want to Get Smarter, and Not Just Smarter About You: The top five reasons that business buyers use content are to:

- Identify best practices and best-of-breed solutions (51%)
- Determine where competitive differentiation can be achieved (50%)
- Clarify the position of a specific vendor or partner (43%)
- Set the strategic agenda and assess areas of need and prioritisation (42%)
- Provide perspective from a trusted, neutral source (33%)

4. Content impacts a lifetime...lifetime value: Content plays a pivotal role in add-on buying decisions or supplemental purchases following the initial contract. A majority (86%) frequently or sometimes use digital content to identify complementary or add-on products while just 12% rarely undertake further content sourcing. This third-party content is also frequently or sometimes used by 92% of buyers to maintain a vendor relationship or advocate the use of the vendor's products or services.

Download research

A new 39-page strategic brief based on this research 'The Content Connection to Vendor Selection' has been published by the CMO Council and NetLine to provide insights into how different types of marketing content impact critical phases of vendor identification, qualification and consideration, as well as the path to selection and purchase.

[Download the full report here.](#)