

Content to Conversion:

DECODING THE B2B BUYER JOURNEY

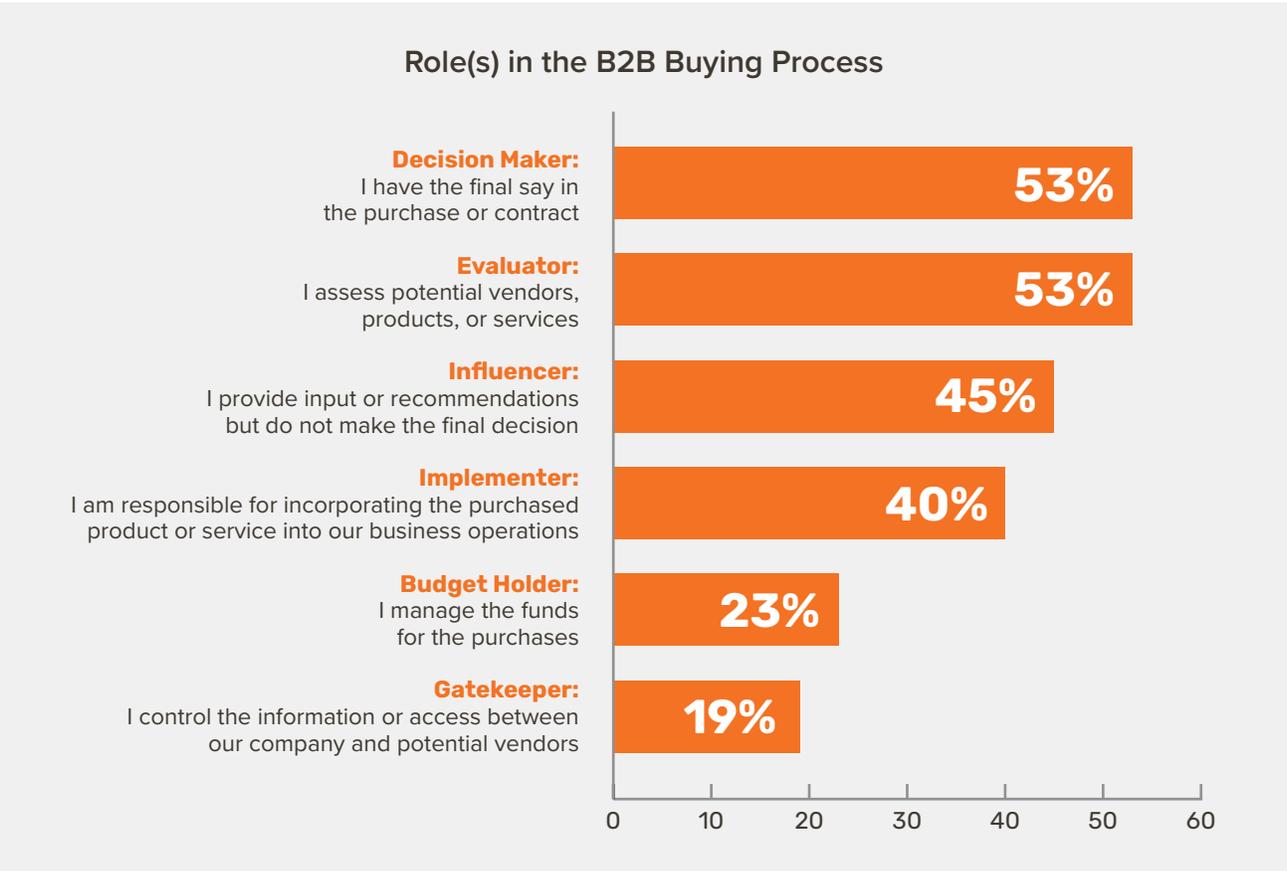


Introduction

First coined in 1996 by billionaire philanthropist [Bill Gates](#), the phrase “content is king” is still as ubiquitous as it is accurate in 2023. While Mr. Gates may not have been referring to B2B sales and marketing content at the time, the phrase rings true for contemporary go-to-market (GTM) teams designing robust content strategies to hit their numbers in a down economy.

To understand the full extent of content’s reign, Kickstand and Pavilion surveyed full-time employees across North America and the United Kingdom who have participated in a B2B buying process within the past year.

Respondents played a vast array of roles in the B2B buying process:



In this report, we’ll dive into the role of content in the B2B buying process, buyers’ preferences for different types of content, and various strategic considerations for your brand’s GTM motions.

With **73%** of B2B buyers surveyed agreeing their purchase decisions were directly influenced by a brand's content, providing buyers with the right information at the right time is no longer a nice-to-have; it's an expected and integral part of the sales process.

The role of content

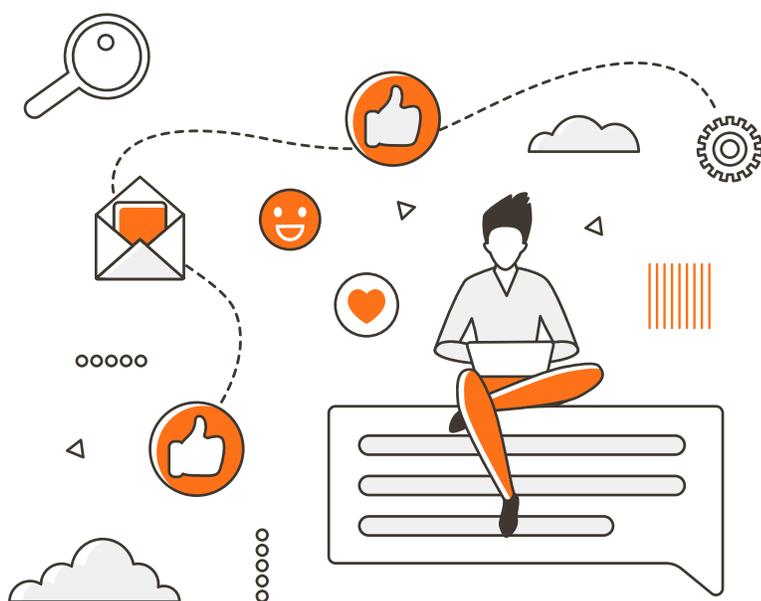
Before we dive into *what* types of content different personas prefer and *where* they like to access it, let's dig into *why* it's important and how they actually use it.

In a broad sense, content is the first step to getting your brand's foot in the door with a potential buyer. Fifty-five percent of respondents whose purchase decisions were influenced by content say they've added a company to their consideration set based on said content. Another 64% of these respondents noted content has led them to request a product or service demo.

As such, the vast majority of buyers (92%) agreed content is a critical factor in differentiating between competing vendors or service providers. **With 86% of panelists arguing that engaging with content has accelerated their purchase decisions, brands should be addressing their sales and marketing content strategies with a renewed sense of urgency.**

Getting content right from the get-go can also lead to satisfied stakeholders evangelizing their favorite brands within their professional networks: nearly half (49%) of content-influenced buyers agreed they've recommended a company to colleagues due to the content shared. Note: Buyers working in the SaaS space were 31% more likely than average to do this.

Content can even improve the onboarding process once buyers decide to adopt your solution: 87% told us they were able to develop a comprehensive understanding of products and/or services they purchased due to content provided by the brand. Nine in ten agreed helpful content improves the onboarding process overall, and 86% noted content reduces time to value for B2B purchases.



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It also has the power to positively impact client satisfaction:



78%

of buyers said helpful content has increased their company's ROI on B2B purchases.



82%

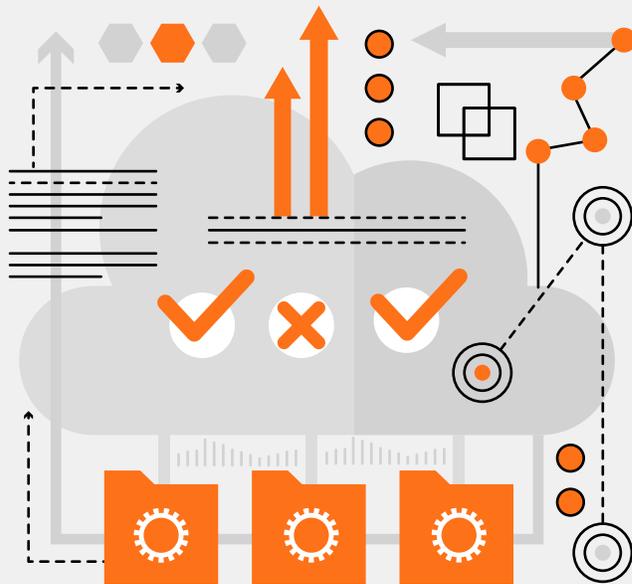
felt increased satisfaction with purchases driven by valuable content compared to other purchases.



Eight in ten

agreed they feel more affinity for brands that regularly provide valuable content compared to those that do not.

This ultimately leads to greater client retention, a priority for every company in today's macroeconomic environment. Content is also the key to unlocking upselling and cross-selling opportunities, with 89% saying helpful content has influenced their decision to do more business with a vendor and 86% agreeing they're more likely to continue purchasing from brands that consistently provide valuable content compared to those that do not.



All told, respondents estimated **nearly half (48%)**

of their total B2B purchases have been directly influenced by content.

Brands that fail to adequately incorporate content into their GTM strategies are missing a major component to earning, keeping, and converting customers' attention.

Content's many forms

When evaluating the solutions available to them, buyers seek out content across many formats. Here are a few examples:

58% of B2B buyers currently purchase from brands they originally found through content on **social media.***

56% currently purchase from brands they originally found through content at **conferences.**

Nearly half of B2B buyers purchase from brands they originally found through **video (45%) or webinar (44%) content.**

**Note: Buyers working in the SaaS industry were 29% more likely than average to say this.*

But it's critical for brands to understand that there's no single type of content they can churn out to guarantee buyer interest. Format preferences will differ based on a number of factors (more on this later), so creators should focus their energy on ensuring every piece of content they provide - no matter what shape it takes - is chock full of valuable, helpful information.

We asked our panel of B2B buyers what they believe constitutes high-value content. They listed the following as the top three most impactful elements content can and should include:

- 1 Customization to their specific industry and/or needs**
- 2 Success metrics**
- 3 Original research or data**

Executive Snapshot

Our survey revealed that buyers in executive-level roles are particularly interested in original research and data:



Executives were **20% more likely** than average to consider this information a key element of high-value content.



They were also **27% more likely** than other employees to agree that original data increases their trust in a brand.

Other meaningful components of B2B content included:

- Customer testimonials or success stories (43%)
- Actionable advice (36%)
- Graphics and illustrations (36%)
- Educational content/courses (36%)
- Useful templates or checklists (31%)
- Video (30%)

For some buyers, certain inclusions can drive higher engagement and even deepen overall brand trust. Approximately three out of four B2B buyers said they're more likely to interact with brands that provide personalized content compared to those that do not, and 57% said the same for content that's accompanied by video. A third of those who find original data impactful noted it also increases their trust in a brand. Panelists also listed customer testimonials, actionable advice, and educational content as elements that improve trust.

One size does not fit all

We hinted at this earlier, but format preferences vary widely based on the role of individual buyers, their industry, company size, and geographical market. The content that one customer subset considers important and impactful may be completely ineffectual for another. Let's explore this diversity in content preferences for a better understanding of how to appeal to various personas.

Due to the divergent responsibilities they shoulder during the B2B buying process, different stakeholders have different content needs. For example, "Decision Makers," or buyers with the final say in purchase decisions, were 41% more likely than average to say they buy from brands they found through eBook content. Buyers in senior leadership roles tended to prefer eBooks as well.



But executive-level buyers in particular, whose part in the buying process is always changing, were **32% more likely** than average to say they purchase from brands they discovered via blog content.

When it comes to variance by industry, SaaS buyers are hungry for eBooks and blog content: these respondents were **153% more likely than average** to base purchase decisions on eBooks, and 97% more likely to leverage blog posts. Meanwhile, healthcare buyers emerged as an outlier here, and were 20% more likely than those in other industries to buy from brands based on content shared at conferences.

It should come as no surprise that stakeholders at enterprises and small to medium-sized businesses (SMBs) have contrasting content needs as well. While SMB buyers were 33% more likely than those at the enterprise level to say they buy from brands based on blog content, enterprise buyers were more intrigued by brands they found through conferences.

The survey also revealed that buyers in the United States were a whopping **237% more likely** than those in the United Kingdom to make a purchase decision based on an eBook. Additionally, North American customers at large were 54% more likely than those in the UK to buy based on blog content, and Canadian buyers specifically were 18% more likely than average to prefer videos.

Preferences change throughout the sales funnel

Brands should also be aware that customers' content needs will change based on where they're located in the buyer journey. We learned that as folks progress closer towards making a decision, their appetite for more granular, informative content grows. Here's what panelists listed as the content most helpful to them during the Awareness, Consideration, and Decision phases of the sales funnel:



Location is everything

Before getting a content strategy off the ground, brands must familiarize themselves with the most impactful and sought-after channels. Even the best content needs a promotion strategy, so it's essential to know where buyers go looking for information.

Here's where our panelists told us they find high-value content:



Brand website
55%



Professional communities
54%



Search engines
48%



Social media
46%



Peer recommendations
46%



Industry newsletters
42%



Partner content or co-marketing
28%



Brand newsletters
23%



Media coverage
23%

Executive Snapshot

When it comes to tracking down the content they find most useful, buyers at the executive level were **37%** more likely than average to turn to social media and **30%** more likely to purchase from vendors they discovered through media coverage.



More broadly, Decision Makers were also **11% more likely to use social media**, which suggests this channel in particular is ripe for attracting attention from those with the power to purchase.



Blog content surfaced as another favorite, with executive buyers 54% more likely and Decision Makers 21% more likely to frequently engage with these assets. Executives were also 43% more likely than average to say they frequently engage with eBooks and/or whitepapers.



Additionally, executive- and enterprise-level buyers were **more likely to frequently engage with webinar content** (14% and 28% respectively), making this format a go-to for those looking to sell upmarket.

Understanding the frequency of engagement

The frequency at which buyers engage with different content channels is key to determining their overall preferences and developing an effective, multifaceted content strategy.

Our survey revealed that 47% of buyers frequently engage with social media posts, making this the format most regularly interacted with among respondents.*

Email newsletters also emerged as a popular choice, with 42% noting they frequently engage with these messages. Respondents who identified themselves as part of the “Baby Boomer” generational cohort were 22% more likely than average to turn to email newsletters.

And when curiosity meets content, the results can be impactful: 38% of buyers said they frequently engage with courses or educational content, seeking depth and knowledge in their asset consumption. Another 36% said they frequently turn to webinars for the same reason.

**Note: Buyers in the healthcare and medical industry were 19% less likely than average to engage frequently with social media content.*

The information exchange

At its very core, the purpose of branded content is to provide prospective buyers with the information they need to make a purchase decision. But the flow of information is not a one-way street; to continuously optimize their content strategies, brands need to learn about their customers, too.

Many brands gather data in exchange for their expertise by gating content, which means readers can only access these materials by providing basic demographic information. When it comes to what tidbits they're willing to share in order to gain access to gated content, panelists had this to say:

- 73% were willing to share their email address.
- 64% were willing to share their company name.
- 60% were willing to share their job title.

When gating your content, just make sure you don't require a phone number - only 31% of respondents said they'd be willing to provide one in exchange for content access.

We also found that a mere 7% of all panelists weren't willing to share any personal data for gated content, even if they perceive it to be of high value. Interestingly enough, respondents in the United Kingdom were **175% more likely** than those in North America to be unwilling to share their information.

But information isn't the only currency prospects are willing to exchange:



53% said they've paid for premium content online, with executive-level buyers 15% more likely than others to say this.

When buyers did shell out for content, **62%** opted for educational courses, making this the most popular paid format followed closely by eBooks and webinars.

Gated vs. ungated

Our survey revealed that buyers are relatively split on their preferences for gated vs. ungated content, with nearly one in four buyers saying they have no preference between the two.

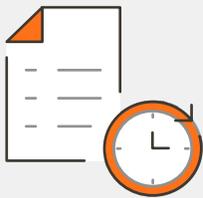
Ungated content barely pulled through as the frontrunner, with 47% of respondents agreeing they prefer this approach — and it may be worth noting that 53% of buyers perceive brands that offer ungated content to be more authentic.*

53%

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69%

of those who said they'd exchange information to access gated collateral agreed they're more likely to respond to outreach from sales reps at that brand.



Buyers told us they prefer when brands wait an average of **six days** after a download before engaging in sales outreach.

But gated assets appeal to prospects with extra influence: Decision Makers were 14% more likely than average to say they prefer gated content. Gated content does have its fair share of benefits according to our respondents, such as improving their perception of a brand as knowledgeable (57%) and trustworthy (56%).

Downloading gated content indicates buyers are more active, with 69% of those who said they'd exchange information to access such collateral agreeing they're more likely to respond to outreach from sales reps at that brand. Once a prospect downloads your gated eBook or case study, however, it's important to exercise patience: buyers told us they prefer when brands wait an average of six days after a download before engaging in sales outreach.

GTM teams are constantly walking the line between pacing themselves and keeping prospects engaged. While 49% of panelists said their perception would sour if a sales rep reached out to them three to four times without a response, 10% said the number of contact attempts wouldn't faze them. Decision Makers were a noteworthy 40% more likely than average to say this wouldn't negatively impact their experience, so keep that in mind when determining the cadence of your outreach efforts.

**Note: Buyers in the United Kingdom were 29% more likely than those in North America to say this.*

Content, meet AI

We can't talk content without acknowledging the growing conversation around artificial intelligence (AI) and its role in B2B content creation.

While panelists did not come to a consensus on whether AI is “good” or “bad,” one thing the majority (89%) agreed upon was the expectation that generative AI will play a prominent role in B2B content creation in the coming years.

As AI's influence grows and the battle between tech enthusiasm and wariness wages on, 85% of buyers said they believe this will spur demand for demonstrably human-touched content. Nearly a third of all buyers were either somewhat (22%) or very (9%) resistant to AI-generated content and preferred human connection above all else. Buyers in senior leadership were **twice as likely** than average to share this resistance, underscoring the necessity of human touch in high-level engagements.

Buyers in senior leadership were **twice as likely** than average to be resistant to AI-generated content, underscoring the necessity of human touch in high-level engagements.



40% of B2B buyers stated they'd trust content less if they knew it was generated by AI

Whenever discussions surrounding the role of AI in content crop up, the buzzword we tend to hear the most is “trust.” In the digital age, there's no shortage of threats to brand trust — many of which are outside of our control. **But with four in ten B2B buyers stating they'd trust content less if they knew it was generated by AI, vendors need to be exceedingly thoughtful about how they implement this technology.**

Despite hesitation amongst some respondents, we learned that many are excited by the possibilities AI presents. Seventeen percent told us they'd actually trust content more if they knew it was generated by AI, and 19% said they're “very open” to interacting with AI-generated content during B2B purchasing and feel it can enhance the process. North American buyers were particularly open-minded here: this cohort was **108% more likely** than their UK counterparts to say this.

Conclusion

The fact of the matter is, there is no singular “right” way to develop a B2B content strategy in the digital age. Preferences and habits differ from industry to industry and buyer to buyer. As such, prioritizing a multichannel approach that prioritizes varying persona preferences and habits is key.

Want to learn more about designing an impactful content strategy from the best in the business? Contact Kickstand and join the Pavilion community of revenue leaders to tap into a vast network of expertise.

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ABOUT KICKSTAND

Kickstand is a global marketing agency specializing in support of high-growth technology brands. Offering a scientific approach to PR and services that include media and analyst relations, research, content, crisis communications, and influencer marketing, Kickstand helps build well-defended market leaders in some of today's most innovative industries. For more information about our approach and how we help brands scale and successfully exit, visit www.meetkickstand.com



ABOUT PAVILION

Pavilion was founded in 2016 as a support network for revenue leaders. Since then, it has grown into a 10,000+ member international community of go-to-market leaders. Through structured training in Pavilion University; private, moderated peer groups; and in-person events, Pavilion delivers on its mission to help revenue leaders unlock and achieve their full professional potential. For more information about Pavilion or to become a member, please visit www.joinpavilion.com

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The Content to Conversion: Decoding the B2B Buyer Journey report was conducted between August 8th-September 1st, 2023. Kickstand surveyed a total of 824 full-time employees across North America and the United Kingdom who have participated in a B2B buying process in the past year. The study was conducted at 95% confidence with a +/- 5% margin of error. The most populous industry representation was seen from — but was in no way limited to — information and communication technology; healthcare and medical; banking and financial services; education and training; and manufacturing, transport, and logistics.

