2013 B2B CONTENT PREFERENCES SURVEY

TRUST IS A MAKE-OR-BREAK ISSUE FOR TODAY'S B2B BUYER

DEMAND GEN REPORT

More than ever, B2B buyers rely on content — all types of content — to research and make purchasing decisions. That's good news for content marketers working to validate their approach and secure more resources for their campaigns.

According to our 2013 B2B Content Preferences Survey, however, content marketers also face a growing number of challenges. Many buyers say they are overwhelmed by the amount of content available to them; they are more concerned about finding trustworthy content that focuses on hard data and demonstrable value, rather than still-typical sales messages.

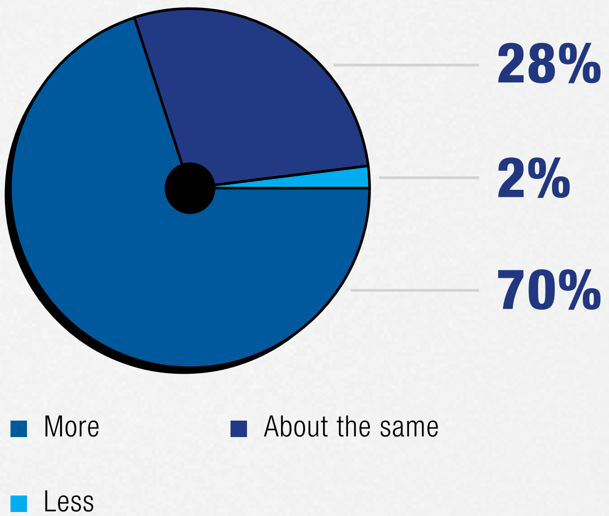
More than two thirds of respondents rely on content more than they did the previous year.

Content Matters More Than Ever

Here's the good news for content marketers: B2B buyers continue to attach growing importance to the role of content in their purchasing decisions. Our 2013 survey found that **69.7% of the respondents rely more on content** than they did a year ago, and just 2.3% say they rely less on content. That's a notable trend, given the **important role that content already plays** in the B2B buying process.

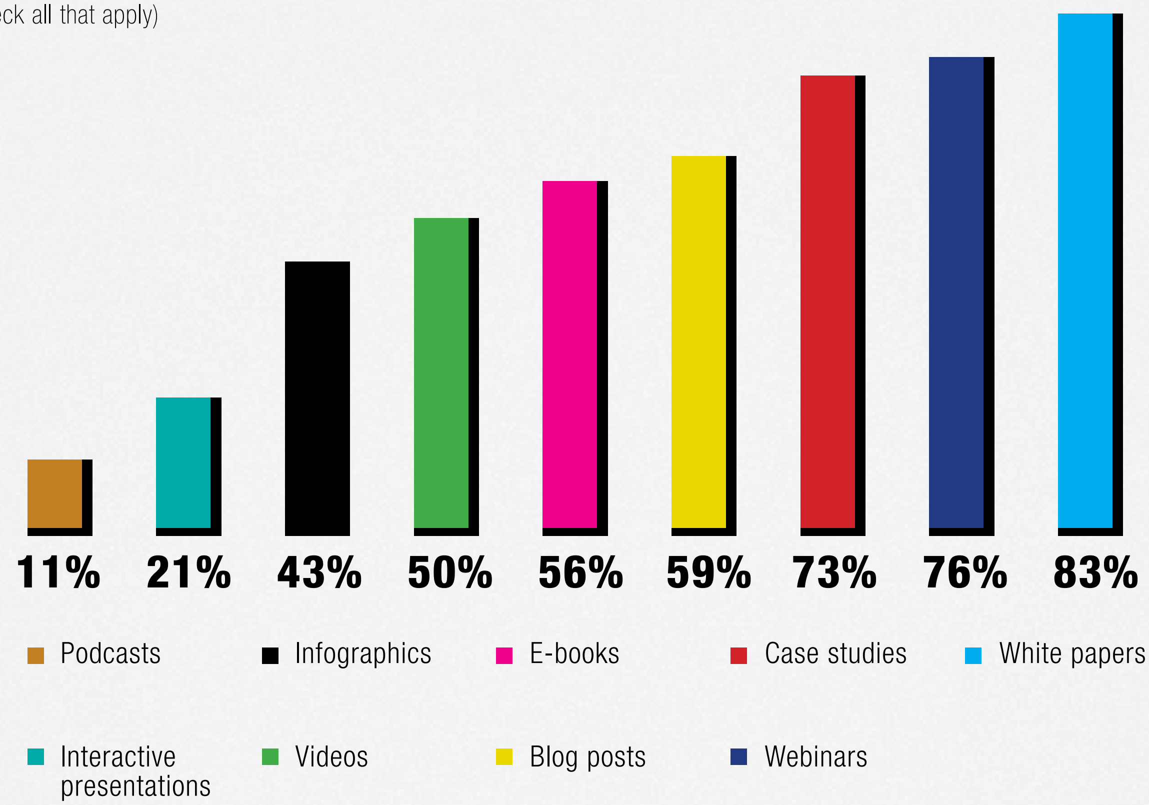
There's also evidence that buyers are seeking out an increasingly diverse range of content assets. This year's survey found that while white papers, webinars and case studies are the most popular options for researching B2B purchases, **a majority of respondents have used five different content types**, with two more (video and infographics) ranking above 40%.

Compared to a year ago, do you now rely more or less on content to research and make B2B purchasing decisions?



Which types of content have you used in the past 12 months to research B2B purchasing decisions?

(Check all that apply)

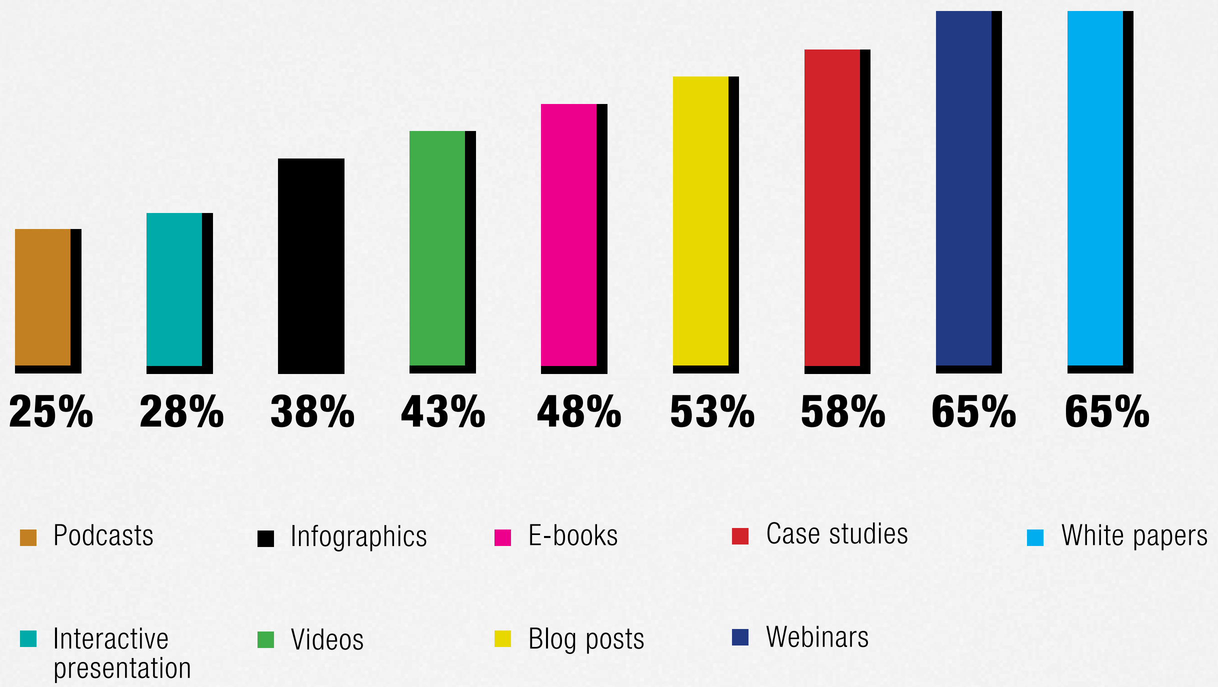


These findings, by the way, indicate a significant trend when compared to our 2012 survey results. Out of nine common content formats, five gained in popularity, two remained about as popular as they were in 2012, and just two — podcasts and interactive presentations — saw a significant drop-off in popularity since last year's survey.

Where do you go to begin the process of researching a B2B purchasing decision?

(Rank your top three responses.)

What do you feel are the most valuable online content formats for researching B2B purchases?



The Web Still Wins For Early-Stage Research

We also asked our respondents to rank their three top choices for where to *begin* the process of researching a B2B purchasing decision. Based on these ranked responses, two options – general web search (e.g. Google and Bing) and vendor web sites — were far more popular than the others.

As we discuss elsewhere in this report, it’s clear that SEO continues to play a crucial role in reaching and influencing B2B buyers. The difference today is the role that content plays here, both in affecting search rankings and in educating early-stage B2B buyers.

We also asked respondents to rate the value of each of these content formats, on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being most important. The results generally showed the same trend: **Buyers attached a higher overall value this year** to every format except for podcasts and interactive presentations.

In terms of overall value, however, four formats stand out in 2013: white papers, E-books, webinars and case studies. Even as other content formats play an important part in the B2B decision-making mix, it's increasingly clear that these **"staple" formats will remain essential** for most companies' content marketing activities.

Content May Be King, But Web Search Holds The Crown

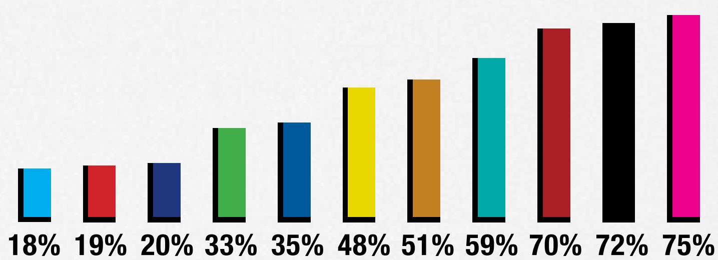
Of course, even the best content isn't very useful if buyers can't find it. That's why we once again asked respondents **to rate the importance** of a variety of common channels for seeking out content used in B2B buying decisions. The data we gathered on this topic is complex, and some of the findings are more statistically significant than others. Here are a few key points that stood out:

- **SEO is still a critical tool.** Once again, "web search" stood out as the single most important channel for finding B2B content. This may sound obvious, but it's worth repeating at a time when social media gets so much attention: SEO can still make or break a content marketing campaign.

- **Some social media is increasingly valuable.** Survey respondents attached increased value to two social media networks in this year's survey compared to our 2012 results: LinkedIn and SlideShare. Neither channel is as valuable to buyers as web search, peer referrals or even vendor web sites, but both stand out given our next finding:

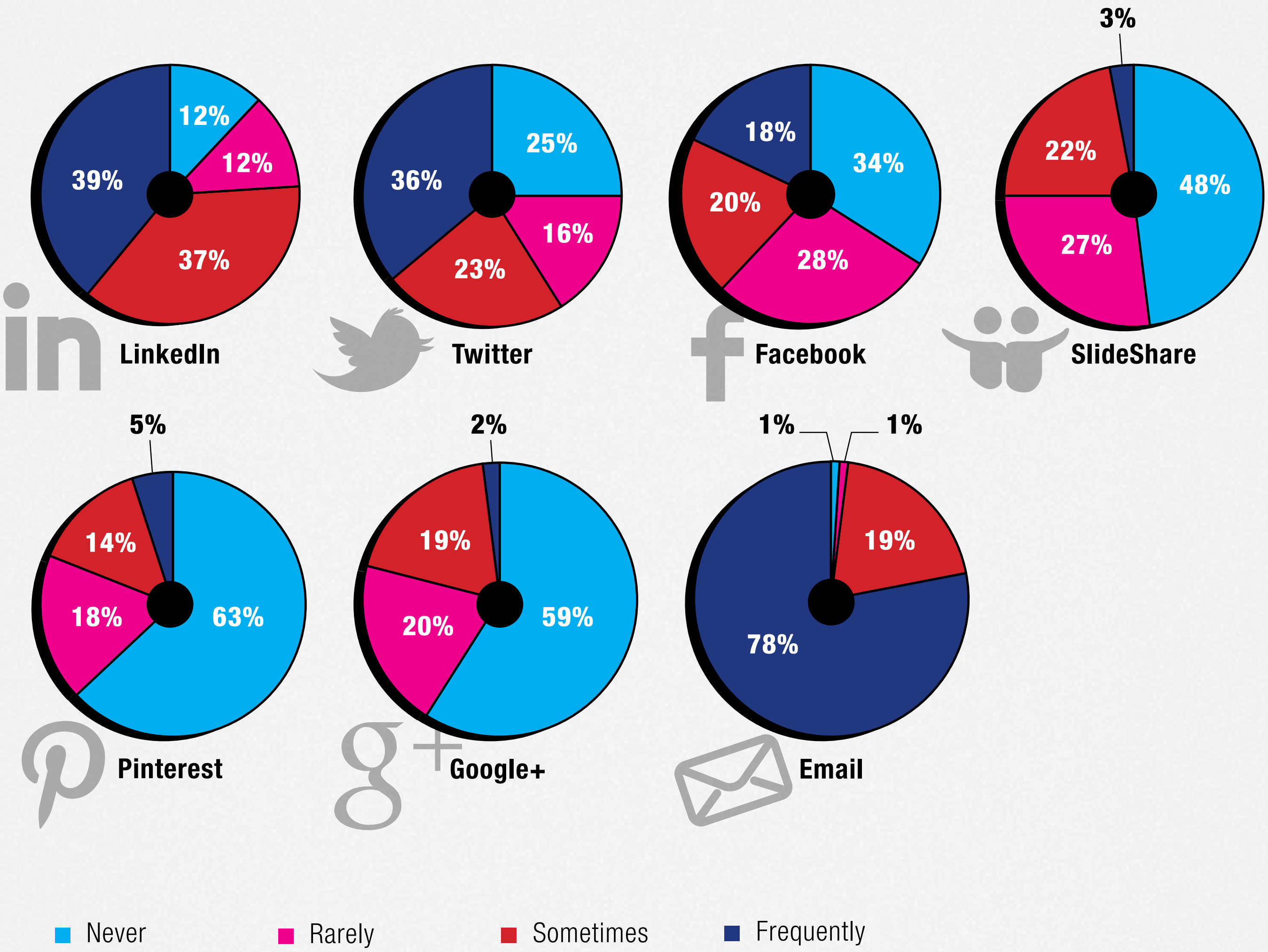
- **Some social media is less valuable.** Twitter fell a bit in terms of its value to B2B buyers this year versus 2012, but not as much as some other social media channels. In fact, Facebook and Google+ were virtually tied for last place on this count; whatever their merits in other areas, neither currently plays a very significant role for B2B buyers seeking out content to guide their purchasing decisions.

Rank the following channels or sources you use to find relevant content for making B2B purchasing decisions:



- Google+
- Facebook
- Twitter
- SlideShare
- YouTube/Video sites
- Blogs
- LinkedIn
- Vendor web sites
- Industry publications/ newsletters/analyst reports
- Peer referrals
- Web search

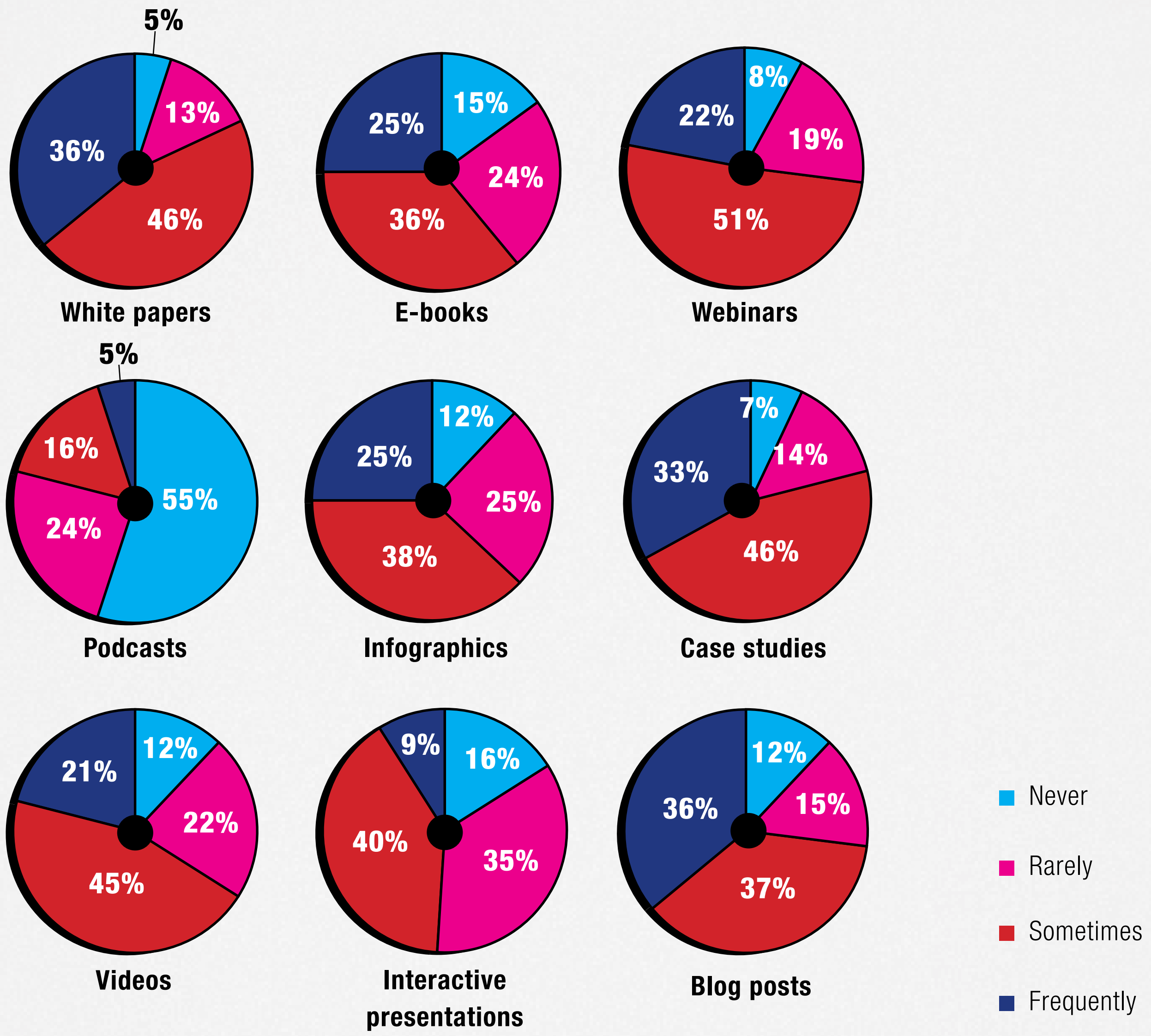
I share content over the following channels:



We also asked respondents how they **share content** with their colleagues, and the results once again pointed to a growing dichotomy between social media winners (in this case LinkedIn and Twitter) and losers (other social media platforms).

The **biggest winner** here, however, was good **old-fashioned email,** which handily beats any other content-sharing channel: 78% of our respondents share content frequently via email, a response that was nearly twice as high as the second-place sharing option (LinkedIn).

I share the following content types with my colleagues. (Check all that apply)



When we asked respondents what type of content they share, the results were a bit surprising. B2B **buyers were most likely to say they “frequently” share white papers,** blog posts and case studies, followed by E-books and infographics – even though the latter is often cited for its “shareable” nature.

Widening the responses to include both “sometimes” and “frequently” shared formats, it’s notable that every type of content except podcasts and interactive presentations earned a majority response — and we’re inclined to believe that **presentation tools such as Brainshark and SlideShare** will gain ground as they become more widely adopted.

Less Time, More Choices Add Up To Big Challenges

Buyers are using more content to make purchasing decisions, and they are also using a **wider range of content.** Yet according to our survey, 81.6% of the respondents say they have less time to devote to reading and research, including 29.3% who strongly agree with this statement. Clearly, given this tension between relying more on content and having less time to spend with content, **B2B buyers are going to face some hard choices** about what they read and when they read it.

Given that fact, it's important to note two other findings. First, **98.8%** of our 2013 survey respondents say they now **"place a higher emphasis on the trustworthiness"** of the content they view, including 73.7% who strongly agree with this sentiment.

Second, while 92% of the respondents say they are willing to consider vendor-created content as trustworthy, just 29.7% of this group strongly agrees with this statement.

Here's our take on these findings: Given growing pressure to make the most of limited time, B2B buyers are going to make **trust a critical issue** when they decide whether to spend time with a vendor's content. At the same time, buyers are expressing **"soft" support** for the notion that **vendor-supplied content** deserves their trust. This **sets the stage** for a potential **shakeout** as buyers decide whether individual vendors are trustworthy — and whether their content is worth considering.

An overwhelming majority of respondents place a high value on trustworthiness of content

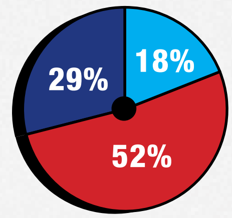
Mobile Matters, But Don't Count Out The Desktop

Another question in this year's survey told us something we already suspected: **mobile devices continue to gain importance** as platforms for consuming B2B content. In 2012, 31% of our respondents said they rarely or never used a smartphone to access business-related content, and 50% rarely or never used a tablet for this purpose. In 2013, these rarely/don't use numbers fell to 19.1% for smartphones and 44% for tablets.

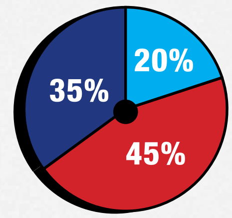
The takeaway is clear: With four out of five B2B buyers accessing content on their smartphones, mobile-ready content is no longer a "nice to have" option for many vendors. On the other hand, it's a mistake to dismiss the desktop just yet: a whopping **99%** of our respondents said they **occasionally or frequently access content on a desktop or laptop system.**

Smartphones and tablets are gaining popularity as devices for consuming content.

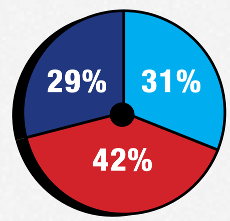
How have your B2B content consumption habits changed over the past year?



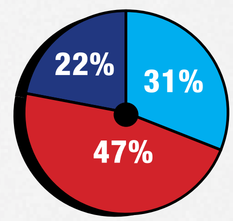
I have less time to devote to reading/research



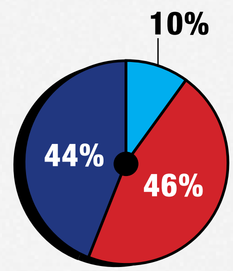
I prefer interactive (audio/video) content i can access on demand



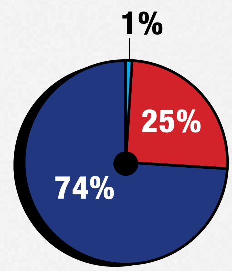
I require mobile-optimized content (for access on a tablet or mobile device)



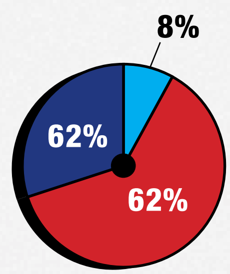
I get more of my content through social networks or peer recommendations



I find myself overwhelmed by the amount of content available



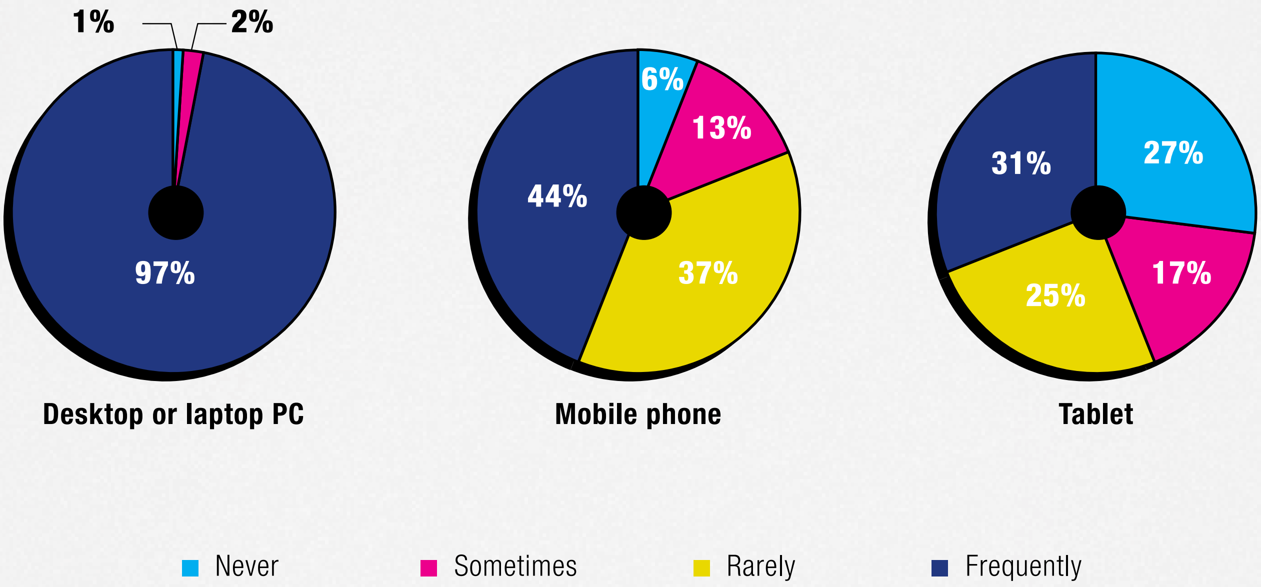
I place a higher emphasis on the trustworthiness of the source



I am willing to consider vendor-created content as trustworthy

- Disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

What devices do you use, and how often, to access business-related content?
(rate all that apply)



More Content, But Also More Challenges

No matter where B2B buyers view content, they are often asked to provide at least **some personal information** in exchange for access. It's a fundamental part of the prospect-vendor relationship — but it's **still difficult to do in practice.**

According to this year's survey, it's still fine to ask prospects for basic information such as their name, company and email address. The problems start when vendors ask for more detailed information:

- 11% of buyers say they will provide detailed information in return for access to a white paper;
- 10% are willing to provide detailed information in return for access to an E-book; and
- Just 9% are willing to provide this information in return for access to a case study.

Even in the case of **webinars** — one of the highest-value content formats — **just 20%** of respondents are **willing to provide detailed information** on themselves or their buying plans as part of the registration process.
The good news is that these percentages are generally higher than our 2012 results. The bad news, clearly, is that B2B vendors continue to face major challenges when using gated content to learn more about potential buyers.

Sales Messages (Still) Kill The Deal

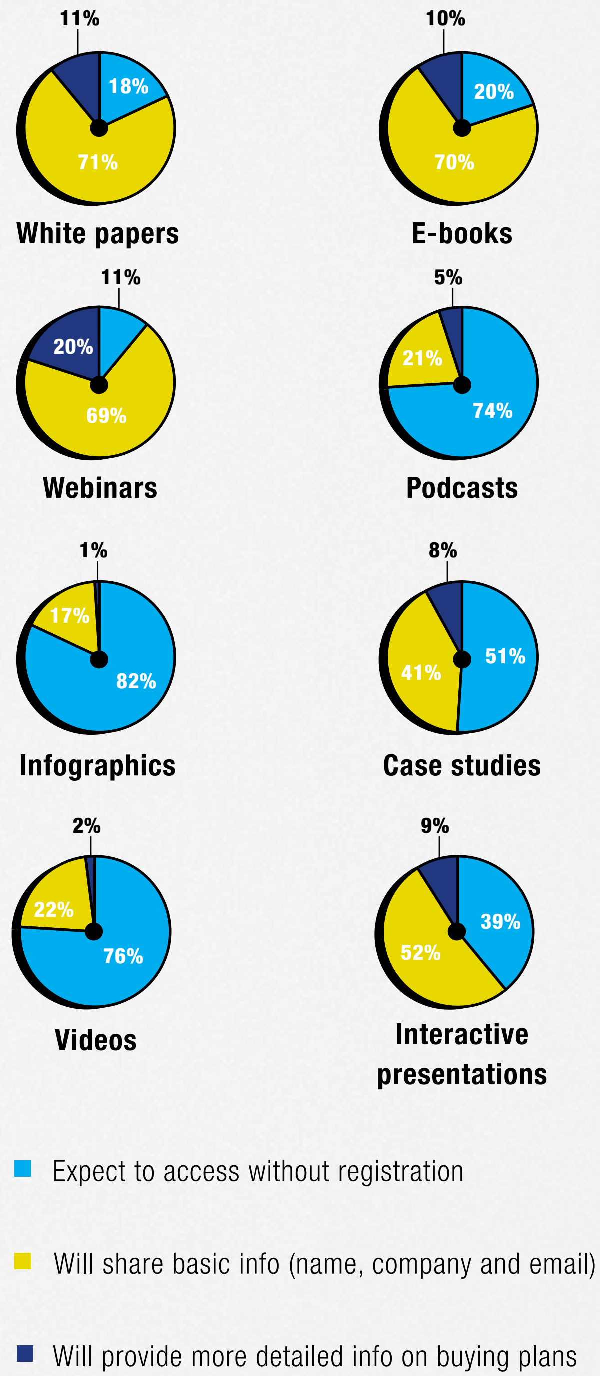
Nevertheless, our 2013 respondents told us that they would like B2B marketers to take a number of actions to improve the quality of their content:

- **Make content more readable.** Nearly two thirds of the respondents (65%) strongly agree that B2B vendors should stop overloading content with text-heavy pages and small print.
- **Focus on value.** A majority (62%) of respondents strongly agree that B2B vendors focus their content too much on product specifications and not enough on value — on the ability to solve specific business problems.
- **Show readers your research.** For the first time this year, we also asked respondents whether vendors need to use more data and research to support their content, and a solid majority (63.2%) strongly agreed with this statement.

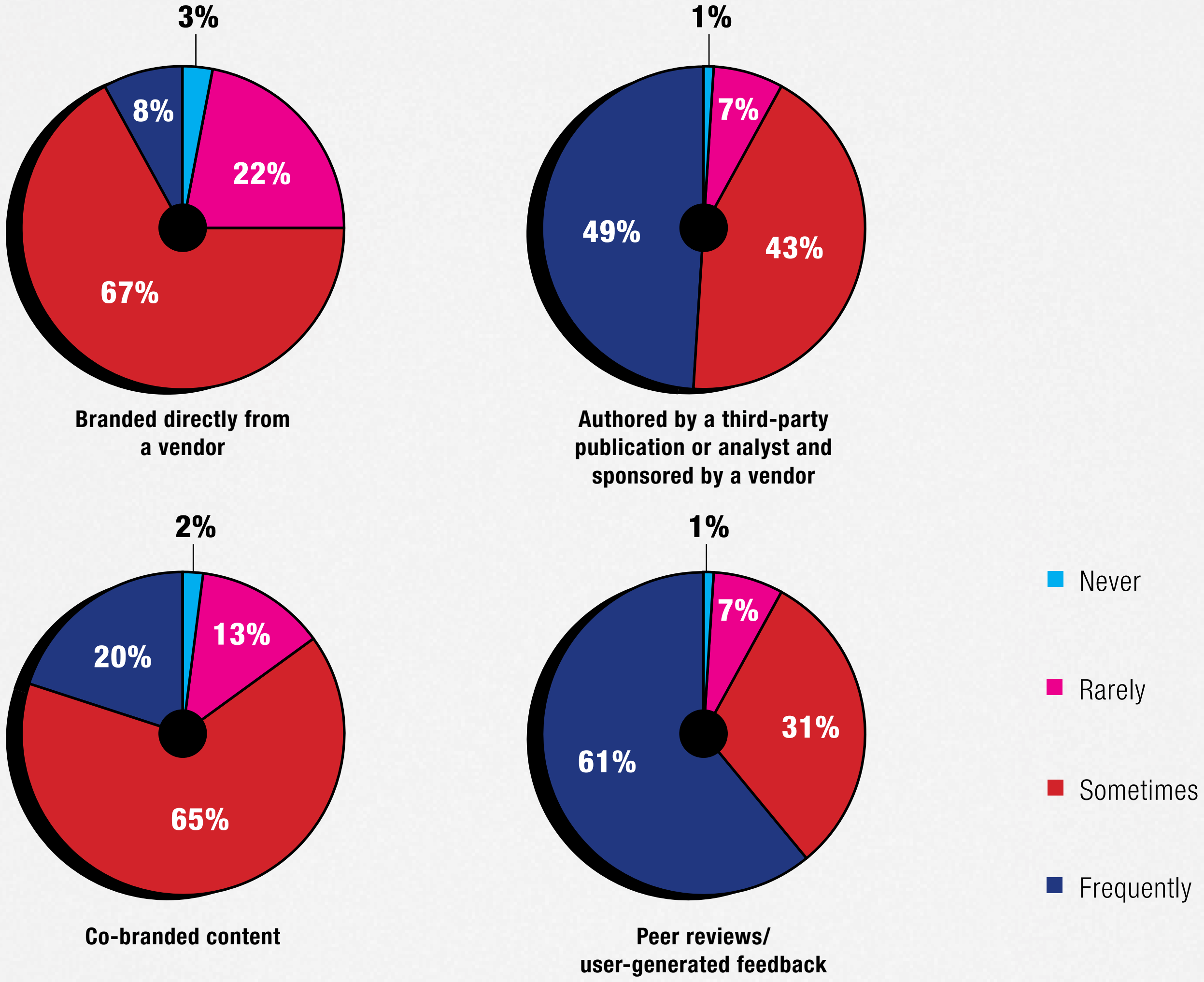
In addition, two-thirds of the respondents (66%) strongly agree that **vendors need to make content easier to access** by using **shorter registration forms.** That's a wake-up call for B2B marketers to take advantage of data-appending and progressive profiling solutions — especially since, as we noted above, most buyers are reluctant to provide detailed information in return for content offers.

We also asked buyers whether different types of content branding or attribution affected the credibility of the content. **A near-majority** (49%) said they are most likely to **give credence to content authored by a third-party publication or analyst,** although many buyers are at least sometimes willing to view vendor-created content as credible.

Which type of content assets are you willing to register for and share information about you and/or your company?



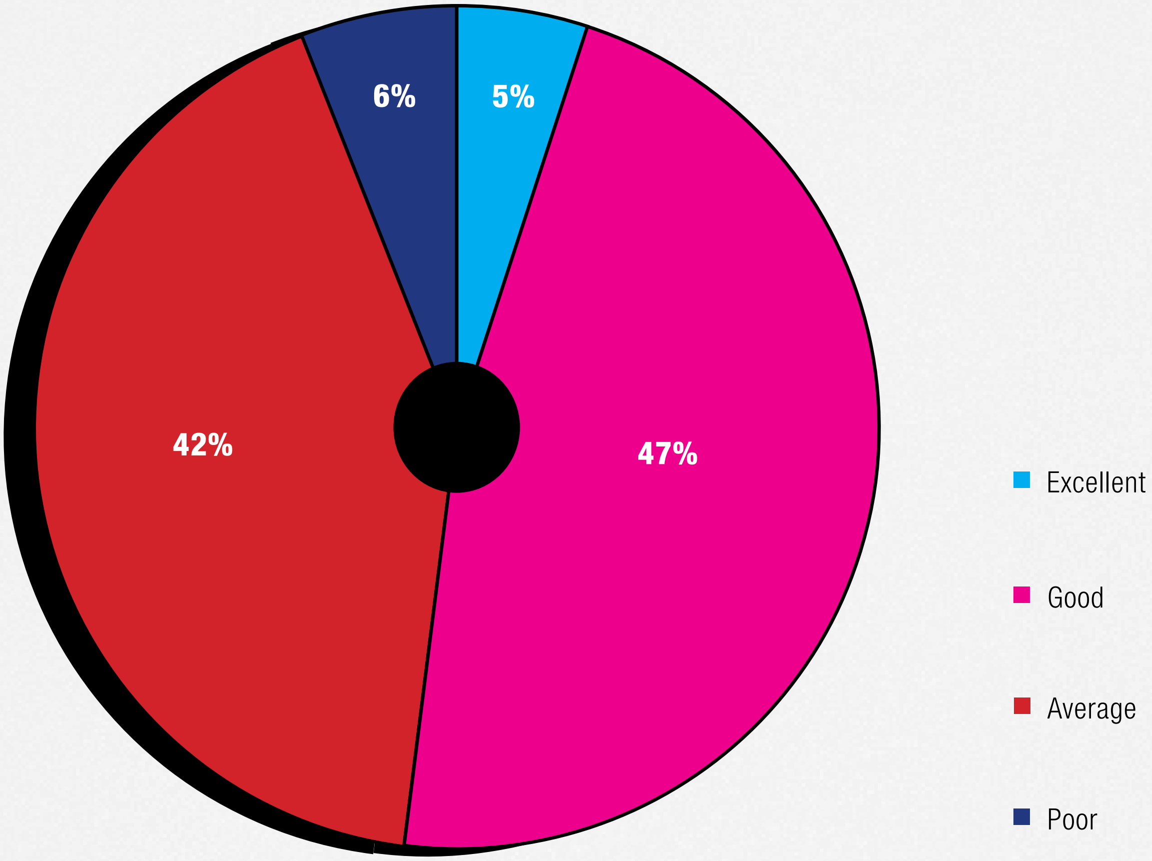
Which of the following types of content do you give more credence to?



How Should Vendors Organize B2B Content?

This year's survey found that just 5% of B2B buyers think vendors are doing an "excellent" job of organizing and presenting content on their web sites, although a large majority (88.6%) think vendors so a "good" or "average" job. That's good news on the whole, although there is clearly room here for improvement.

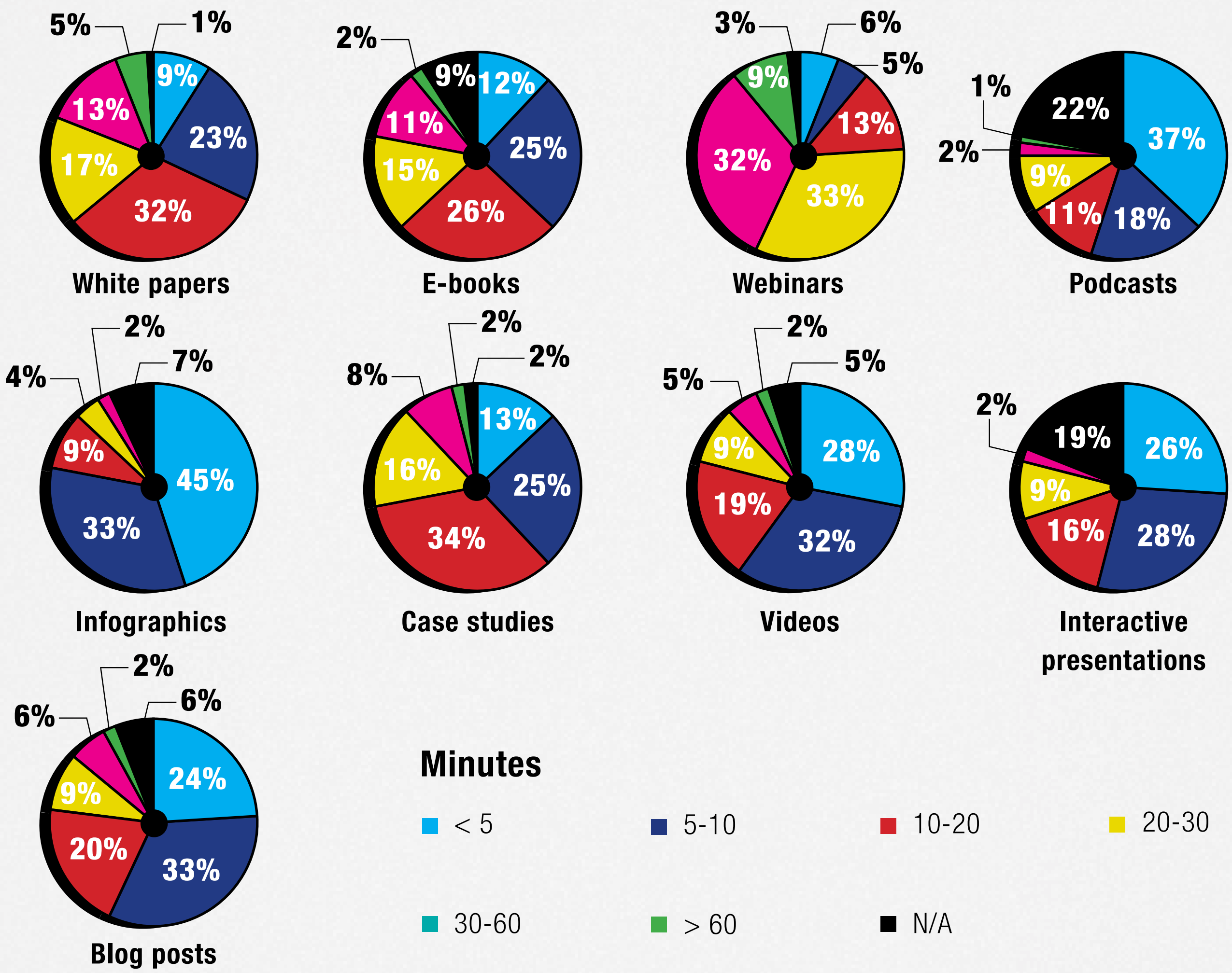
How would you rate the job B2B solution providers typically do in organizing and presenting relevant content on their web sites?



Tailoring Content To A Buyer’s Available Time

We noted above that the vast majority of B2B buyers say they have less time available to review content when making a purchase. How does that impact the amount of time buyers are willing to spend on a particular piece of content? Here’s a breakdown of the numbers:

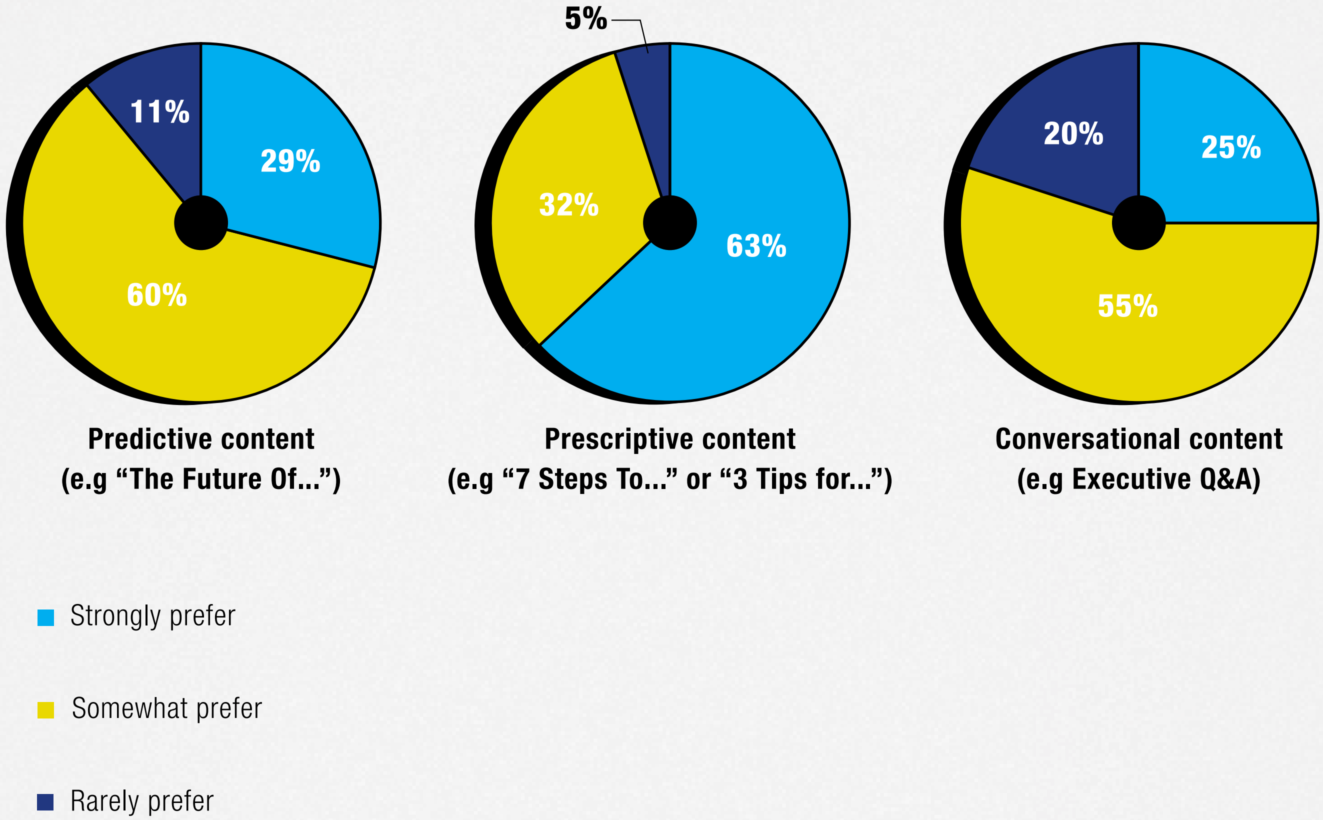
When researching a B2B purchase, how much time do you typically spend reviewing content in the following formats?



It's not surprising that, for example, very few buyers are willing to spend more than 30 minutes with a white paper or more than 10 minutes with an infographic. On the other hand, some buyers are willing to invest considerably more time with certain (often text-based) formats.

If there's a lesson here, it might be that shorter is almost always better with interactive content, while there's more room for flexibility when developing text-based content.

Please describe your preferences for the following general content types.



A Tale Of Three Title Options

We asked survey respondents to state their preferences for different content title treatments. The percentage that strongly prefer prescriptive (i.e. "how to" or "tips and tricks") content outnumbered the other options by more than a 2-1 margin.

On the other hand, respondents were far more likely to give a thumbs-down to conversational content such as executive Q&A pieces.

Our question did not offer an exhaustive list of content descriptions, but we think it's a useful reminder that busy readers are more likely to prefer content with a clear and unambiguous value proposition.

Conclusion:

B2B Buyers Want More Choices — And Fewer Hassles

Vendors that rely on content marketing to educate and engage with buyers clearly have their work cut out for them. Buyers increasingly **rely on content to make purchasing decisions,** yet they have less time to review content — even as they are inundated with it. They **consume and share a wide range of content formats,** yet they are less willing to fill out long and detailed forms to access this content.

Perhaps more important, buyers are focusing more than ever on the **trustworthiness** of content sources. That's a vital point at a time when these buyers also think vendors include too many sales-heavy messages in the content they create.

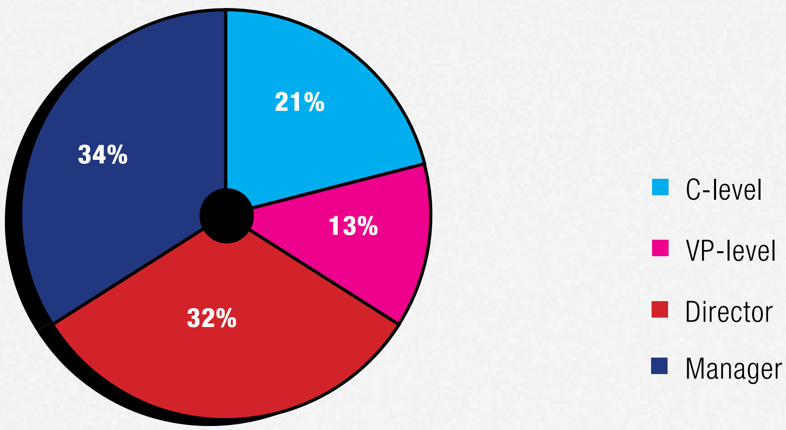
B2B content **marketers that address these concerns** will gain an advantage in an increasingly crowded and competitive marketplace of ideas. Those that don't are increasingly likely to see their content and their campaigns play to an empty house.

Develop trustworthy content and go easy on the sales messaging.

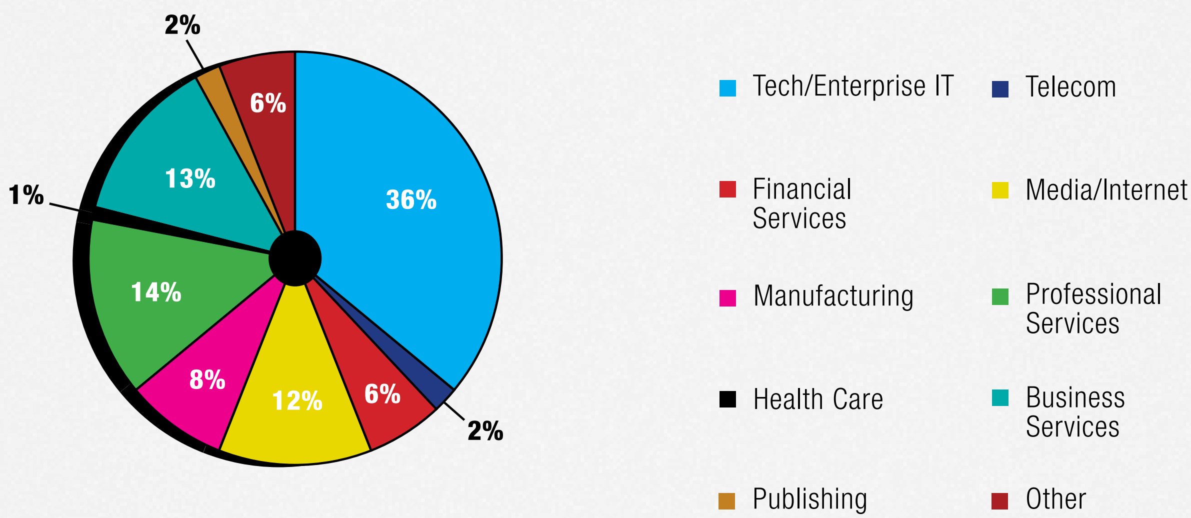
Survey Details

This year's B2B Content Preferences Survey polled 175 consumers of B2B products and services about their use of content in making purchasing decisions. Approximately 34% of the respondents held C-level or VP-level positions at their companies, while 32% held director-level positions.

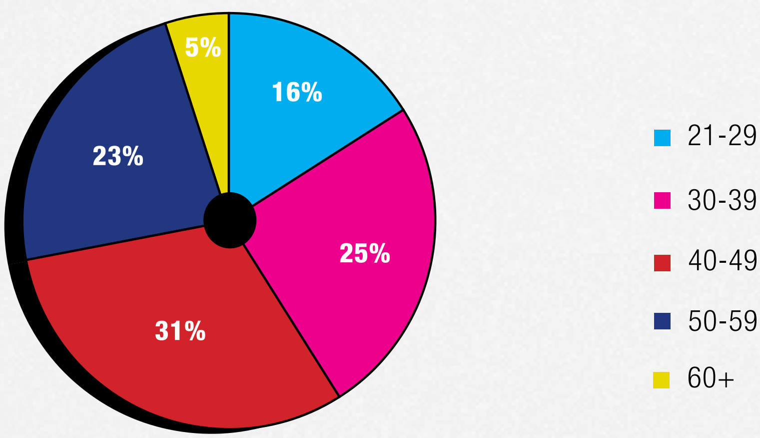
Which type of content assets are you willing to register for and share information about you and/or your company?



Industry:



What is your age?



A plurality of the respondents (37%) work in the technology or enterprise IT industries, with additional representation from B2B buyers in a variety of other industries.

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