

A Forrester Consulting  
Thought Leadership Paper  
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# Beyond The Lead

How Content Marketing Builds Lasting  
Relationships



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Marketing content initiates a company's relationship with B2B buyers. What impression will your content make?

## Executive Summary

B2B marketing today is not what it was five years ago — or even three years ago. Business buyers increasingly expect to be able to find information through self-service and digital channels across their purchase journeys, without sacrificing a personalized experience or access to real salespeople. As Marketers, you are on the hook to build relationships: More and more often, B2B customer experience is initiated by Marketing content, at the prospect's first touch with the brand. Making that experience thoughtful, resonant, and enduring requires content focused not on products, but on the needs, challenges, and desired business outcomes of the buyer.

In February 2018, Forrester Consulting conducted a survey of 610 global enterprise technology decision makers to assess their needs and expectations, with a specific focus on the types of content and business interactions that are most influential to purchase decisions. This study, validated by Forrester's B2B Marketing research, uncovered many important findings that indicate how B2B marketers can best reach and engage their intended audiences.

### KEY FINDINGS

- › **Content must be about your buyers, not your company.** Content itself must provide value for a reader to engage with it. Marketers will miss most of their audiences if they attempt to start a conversation by bragging about differentiated product features. Instead, they must start by showing that they understand why it matters, demonstrating a deep understanding of their clients' pain points.
- › **Relationship-building content must tell a story.** In a world of sensory overload, it's increasingly difficult to hook prospects with content. Leveraging customer insights to tell relevant and empathetic stories in formats that are digestible and interactive will maximize engagement and ROI.
- › **Sales enablement is a mandate for marketers.** In the B2B world, the sales organization is critical to distributing and driving home marketing messaging. But sales reps often want to jump right to the product stuff, leaving the buyer-focused thought leadership content on the shelf. Enabling sales teams to internalize and amplify your messaging in their conversations with buyers is critical.

# The B2B Consumer Defines Your Content Agenda

For the last few years, Forrester has been leading thinking around the age of the customer — the dramatic shift in power between buyers and sellers driven by growth cloud, social, mobile, and software-as-a-service (SaaS). The initial and most dramatic shift was for B2C consumers, but it was only a matter of time before the experiences buyers came to expect in their consumer lives would impact their business decisions. For example, according to Forrester Analytics' Q1 2017 Internet Retailer Study, among B2B buyers:

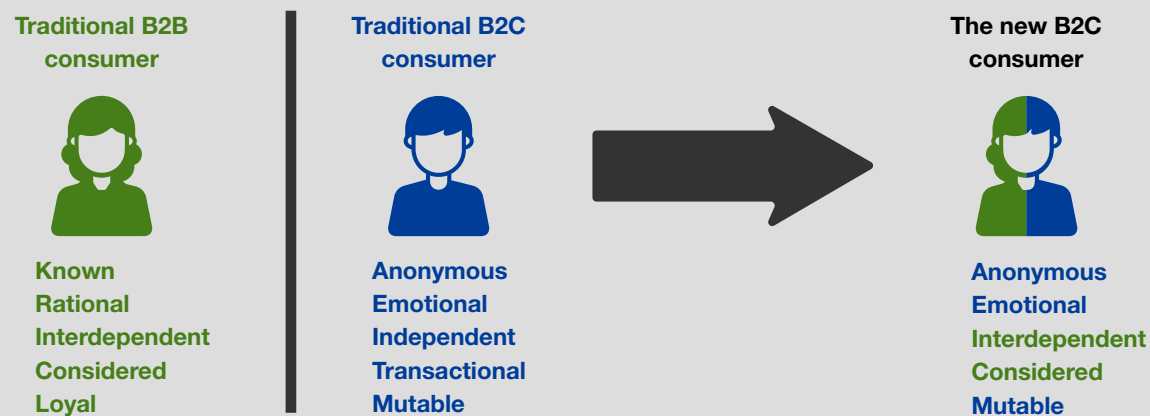
- › **Sixty-eight percent** prefer to research online, on their own (up from 53% two years ago).
- › **Sixty-one percent** use smartphones to research work purchases.
- › **Sixty-two percent** can develop selection criteria or finalize vendor list based *solely* on digital content.

Reflecting a range of demographic and behavioral changes, the once rational, loyal business buyer you knew so well is now anonymous, far less loyal, and far more emotional in their decision-making (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Your prospects expect you to start a whole new kind of relationship with them, and that relationship is largely driven by marketing content.



Today's business buyer is more anonymous, less loyal, and more emotional in their decision making.

Figure 1: The B2B Consumer Is Here



## WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO THEM IN A SOLUTION/SERVICE PROVIDER?\*

- 72%** They can prove the value/return of my organization's investment on their tool/service
- 71%** They understand my business/industry/market conditions
- 70%** They are leading and innovative thinkers in their space
- 69%** They provide relevant content at each stage of the buying process without relying on sales reps

Source: "The Birth Of The B2B Consumer," Forrester Research, Inc., October 5, 2017

# B2B Marketers Aren't Keeping Up With Buyer Demands

Most marketers understand the demand for content across channels and are producing more assets than they ever have in the past. But a modern content marketing approach requires not just more content, but different content than has been used in past approaches. For too many B2B marketers, this particular light bulb hasn't clicked on just yet. And B2B buyers are running out of patience for traditional content approaches. Our study found that 66% of buyers feel that they get too much material, 57% feel that much of the material is useless, and 58% feel that the material is more style than substance (see Figure 2).

If you're looking for proof that customers aren't happy with current marketing practices, look no further than the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). European consumers grew so disgruntled with marketing tactics that they asked their regulators to make it stop, because marketers weren't listening. As Forrester B2B marketing VP, Principal Analyst Lori Wizdo asserts in recent research, "the GDPR will eventually obliterate the "volume = value" equation with many specific regulations about the collection and storage of data."<sup>2</sup> A higher bar for consent means that tactics like email blasts are going to be increasingly difficult to pull off, less reliable for lead creation, and eventually sunset as a primary activity. Opt-in is the new standard, and anything less will be punished.

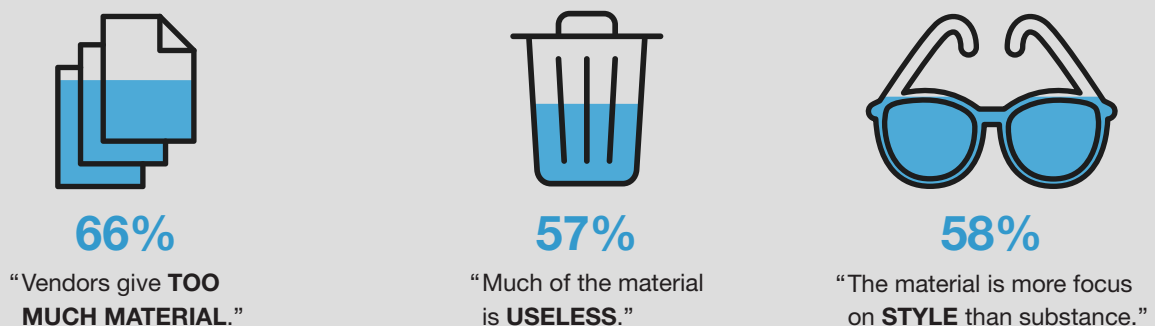
Yes, this only applies to European customers today, but GDPR is the product of a changing tide: customers' increasing (and deserved) mistrust of marketers' motives and use of their personal information and diminishing tolerance for being treated like a data point.

Forrester also recently spoke to the VP of marketing at a global digital identity management firm about removing the gating info on some of their most valuable content in response to the GDPR. "We knew it wasn't the best experience, but only when we were pressed by GDPR did we change. Removing those data elements from our forms yielded a 400% increase in requests for contact," she said.<sup>3</sup>

This is a game-changing opportunity to build better customer and prospect experience and marketing return on investment.

Too much pretty but useless material – content fails to connect with decision makers.

Figure 2: B2B Content Fails To Connect With Decision Makers



Base: 253 global technology final decision makers at companies with 500+ employees  
Source: Forrester Consulting B2B Content Preferences Study, February 2018

# How To Create Engaging, Relationship-Building Content

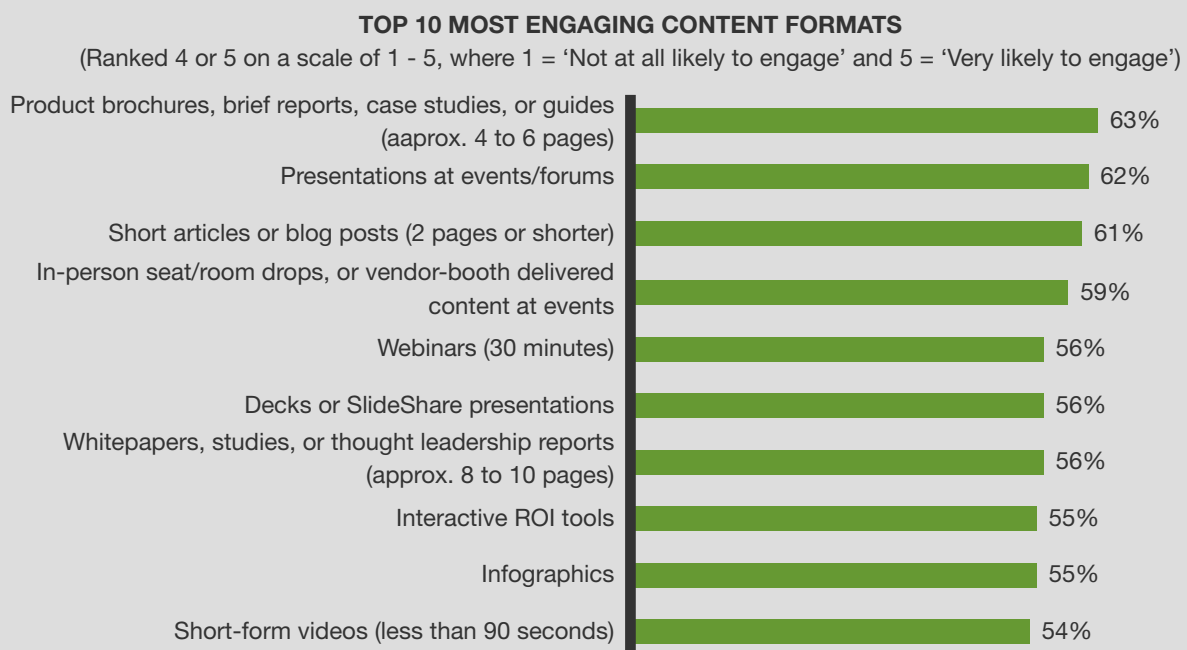
So, how do you get customers to opt in to reading the content that you're creating? What is the magic formula for building content that your buyers will actually care about? Forrester's research found that the best content is:

- › **Easy to consume.** When we asked B2B buyers what content formats they were most likely to engage with, shorter publications and presentations rose to the top — though respondents find this content most valuable when it's linked to longer and more robust studies. The responses to this question varied across roles and geographies, e.g., APAC respondents preferred more interactive content than their global counterparts (see Figure 3). This is not great news for marketers, who must do exactly what we just warned against: create a *ton* of content that satisfies every potential buyer.



**81%** of respondents agree that “short format content is more valuable when linked to detailed reports/studies.”

Figure 3 : Be Easy To Find Across Channels And Formats

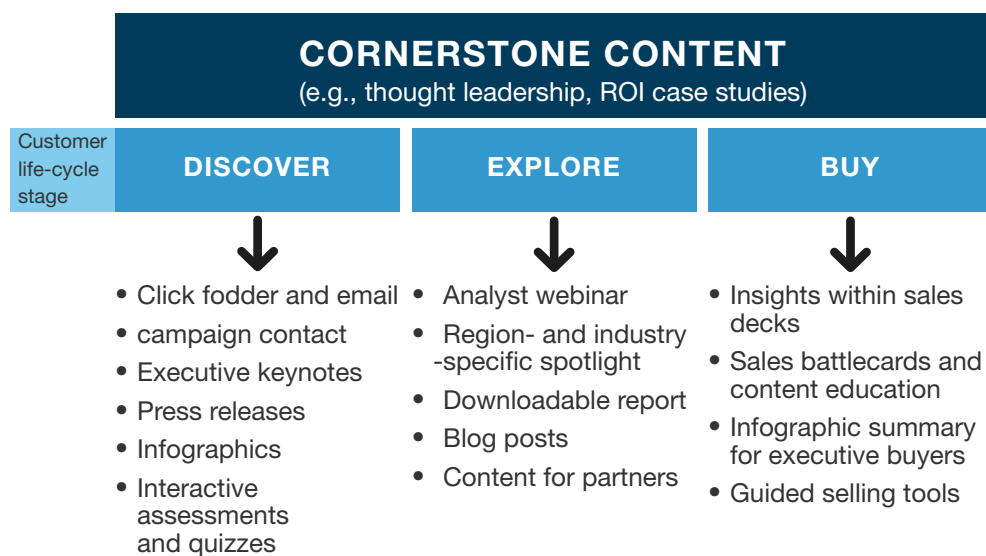


Base: 610 global technology decision makers at companies with 500+ employees  
Source: Forrester Consulting B2B Content Preferences Study, February 2018

The key is to focus your energy on anchor content that will bear the most fruit. This is deep, rich, data-backed intellectual property with layers and a deeply relevant narrative for your customer. Then you can spin it off into dozens of formats, specialized for multiple regions, industries, or other customer segments. Create a narrative architecture that allows you to drip applicable data and key messages over time, driving prospects forward in every stage of their journeys (see Figure 4). Not only will you get the most bang for your buck here, but you guarantee consistency in the message at every stage and format, which has a powerful amplification effect. By employing this Cornerstone approach to content you can:

- Maximize investment in cornerstone content.
- Fuel many customer paths across channels.
- Deliver consistent messages in every stage and format.

**Figure 4 : Atomize Content To Make It Work Harder For You**



- › **Empathetic.** How many websites lead with “who we are, what we do”? Marketers instinctively feel a need to put the company’s value out there — “here’s why we’re different” forms the core of many marketing messages. But buyers are more interested in learning how they can solve their business challenges (see Figure 5). B2B consumers don’t buy a product; they buy into an approach to solving their problem. And to reach them, marketers need to appeal to them as people.<sup>4</sup> Forrester’s research has taught us that great content brings the customer along on an engaging story about themselves. It must solve the customers’ problems, speak to them as people with a narrative voice, and compel the reader to act.

Speaking with a human voice requires understanding the power of narrative — the classic setup, conflict, resolution approach that people are hard-wired to respond to. Bringing customer problems to life in an engaging way primes the buyer to be ready for you to deliver a resolution. Great content taps into these tendencies and delivers empathy and value in a compelling way.

**B2B buyers do not want to purchase your product. They want you to solve their problem.**

**Figure 5: For B2B Buyers, Empathy = Insight + Personalization**



**79%**

“It’s important that content be backed by data.”



**79%**

“I value content that’s tailored to my industry, role, or department.”



**74%**

“I value content that showcases my country or region.”

Base: 253 global technology final decision makers at companies with 500+ employees  
Source: Forrester Consulting B2B Content Preferences Study, February 2018



- › **Data backed.** One surefire way to demonstrate empathy is through data — insights and intelligence on your customers and what they need. Our own studies have shown us that customers believe that great content is backed by quantitative or qualitative data and that it reflects their specific situations, be it industry, job function, or geographic location. Once you know you're speaking directly to your customer's needs and situation, your content must speak with a human voice. We are showcasing data in this lovely digital asset, but that data is only as effective as the context in which it is wrapped.

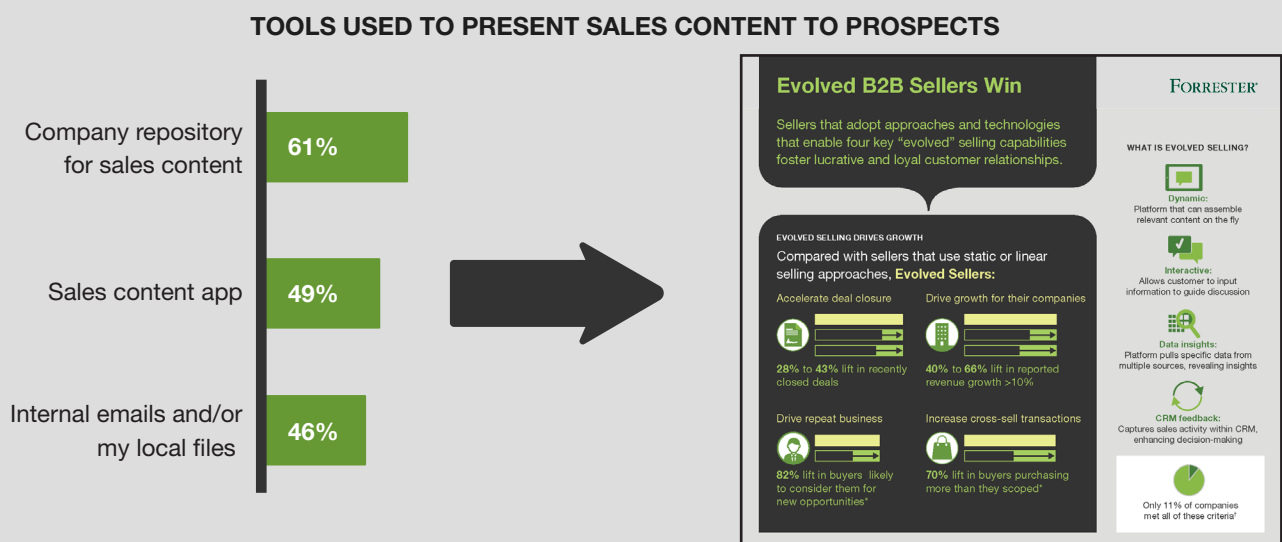
What does this look like in action? Mediafly, a sales enablement software provider, commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate sales tools adoption and educate the market on how the toolkits are changing. The company wanted to learn and help on this topic. The study produced the below data finding on the left, which is not likely to grab prospects' attention on its own. But Mediafly worked with Forrester to then create "the story," on the right, which connects that data point and others to a framework for evolved selling success, complete with characteristics and business outcomes of sellers who have the right combination of skills, tools, and talent. That story delivers value to readers while generating attention and interest in their way of thinking.

Once you have a dataset to employ within your marketing content, ask yourself: What is the story this core nugget of truth is supposed to deliver? How does this fit into the larger story we are looking to tell? (see Figure 6).



Great content means relevant, data-driven stories that connect directly to the reader's way of thinking.

Figure 6: Data Is Not Enough; Become A Data Storyteller



Base: 150 quota-carrying sales professionals at US companies

Source: "How B2B Sellers Win in the Age of the Customer," a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Mediafly

- › **Interactive.** The most effective marketing content hooks the reader and then provides opportunities to opt in to continue the conversation. Engaging in real conversation can be extremely difficult with static content — a give and take requires interactivity. We know from our own data that decision makers are hungry for content that brings them in — half prefer interactive formats in general, and more than half want customized insights. These decision makers are interested in interactive elements like assessments, quizzes, polls, and tools that help them better frame their technology investments.

Bringing customers into a conversation through interactivity is also a great opportunity to stand out from the deluge of content that technology decision makers told us they waded through every day. When we asked 41 North American B2B Marketers in a November 2017 webinar, just 44% were offering interactive content. B2B buyers are ready and willing to engage with these new formats, and you can be among the first to provide.

So what kinds of interactive elements should you consider? Provide links and menus to easily let buyers request a demo or connect with sales, and actively seek feedback from buyers — ask “is this helpful?” below each piece of content (and follow up if the answer is no). Forrester has seen a significant trend toward interactivity in content, and the sustainable conversation idea backs up why — tools like personal assessments, ROI calculators, and feedback forms give buyers personalized and contextual information and value, and when executed well, they give marketers with invaluable lead information that can qualify those leads quickly.



Interactive content lets the buyer frame their needs and challenges and get immediate, customized value from you.

# Engage Sales To Convert With Content

At some point in the prospect journey, if we've all gotten it right so far, the customer lands in the hands of the sales organization, which has the potential to be the best channel for content distribution and best proof of content value. But Forrester constantly hears from clients that the great content they develop is met by a lack of enthusiasm from sales. Why?

Modern marketing content must focus on the buyer — leaving less time and appetite in marketing for developing traditional marketing assets. But sales relies on these assets. As our research shows, perhaps they shouldn't, or at least not exclusively. Our study found that:

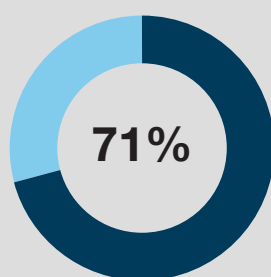
- › **Sales reps are critical to brand perception.** In a single face-to-face meeting, a sales rep will either validate or totally negate your branding efforts. When reps are well-versed in marketing messages, customer trust increases. When they are misaligned, customers view it as a red flag about your company and your brand. Marketing content reinvention thus also necessitates sales content reinvention. Marketers are on the hook for arming sales reps with key messaging points in formats that they can easily access, such as slide decks, one-sheets, and infographics.
- › **Buyers want sales reps to have a mix of case studies and personalized insights.** Our study found that 71% of final decision-makers on tech purchases expect sales reps to understand issues and explain where they can help, 70% expect them to bring relevant examples or case studies to share, and 72% expect them to continue the conversation started with the content (see Figure 7). Just as content must build empathy, reps need messages and content that helps them show empathy and engage customers in meaningful conversations. They need content that is data backed, shows the real experiences of their peers, and teaches them something new. They need a human voice, focused on buyer issues, instead of product-speak. Your buyer doesn't care about your swim lanes. They're on a nonlinear journey engaging with your content and your reps, and so the principles of great customer engagement and experience are the same for marketing and for sales; only the format of delivering those messages changes.

In a single face-to-face meeting, a sales rep will either validate or totally negate your branding efforts.

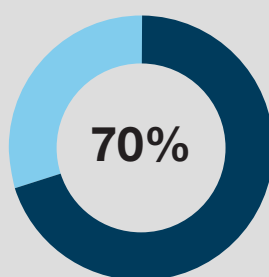
**72%** of tech buying decision makers want their sales rep to “continue the conversation started with messaging and content.”

Figure 7: Customers Expect A Single, Continuous Buying Journey

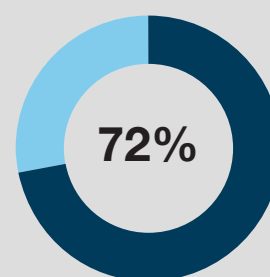
SALES REPS NEED TO . . .



“ . . . understand issues and can explain where they can help.”



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Base: 253 global technology final decision makers at companies with 500+ employees  
Source: Forrester Consulting B2B Content Preferences Study, February 2018

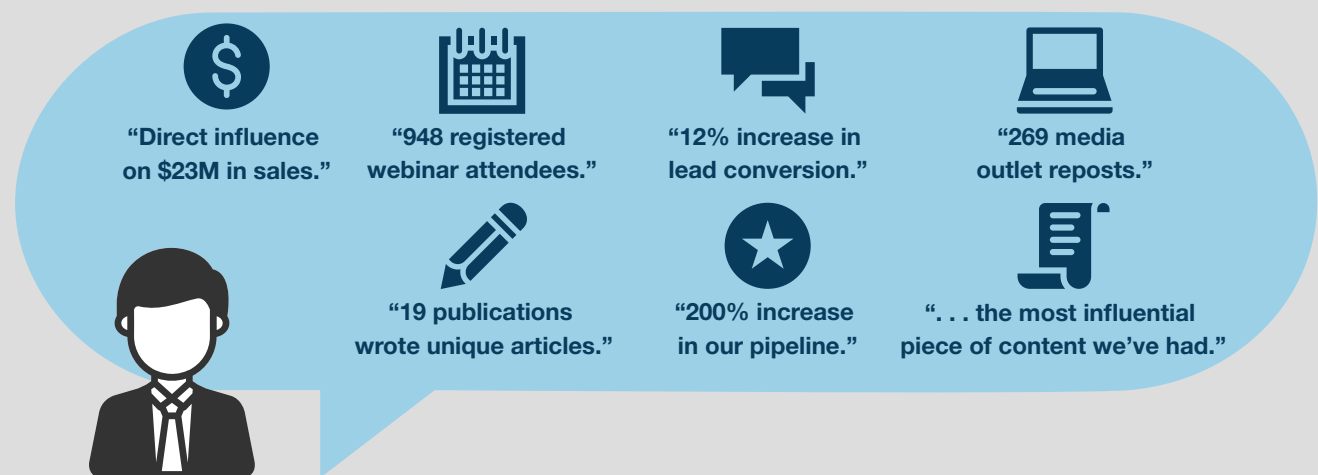
- › **Emerging sales approaches reinforce the shift in buyer expectations.** Some exciting emerging sales approaches inherently span the range from empathetic to personalized. Approaches like account-based marketing (ABM) and social selling require market and customer research, highly-personalized insights, and sales rep engagement, often intermingled with a self-service content journey. And it won't be good enough for a rep to answer a question by just handing over a piece of collateral — they'll need that content, plus context, buyer knowledge, and the ability to weave it all together into a consultative conversation.

An interactive tool such as an ROI calculator is a perfect example of a tool that is empathetic, engaging, and personalized. First, it is based on the experience of previous customers; second, it asks for a series of inputs. Those are perfect topics for a sales rep to discuss with a prospect to understand the size, scale, and complexity of their environment. Third, it provides a custom output that gives the customer a financial impact estimate that is tailored to their environment.

## What About My Lead Gen Metrics?

When you shift your focus away from lead gen and toward engagement, there are going to be some tradeoffs. Where the be-all-end-all metric might have been downloads, clicks, and views, those lead-gen metrics don't disappear, but they will sit in equal measure with sales-influence metrics, engagement metrics, and brand-lift metrics. If you can achieve a 200% increase in pipeline, or a 12% increase in conversion attributed to your content strategy, it's a tradeoff worth considering. Check out the metrics some of our most mature clients are measuring while employing an empathetic, atomized, interactive approach to content (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 : Measurable Outcomes Of Great Content Strategy



Source: Results seen by Forrester's Content Marketing Consulting clients

# Key Recommendations

Creating meaningful content is often not a quick process, especially if you're planning to drive it with custom research. A successful content campaign requires careful planning of both the content and the distribution channels, an understanding of your customers' needs and potential purchase paths, and metrics for success. As you build your next content road map, consider the following:



**Assess your current content.** It must connect on three levels. First and foremost, is it a customer-centric view? If you are selling at your customers (rather than solving a problem they care about), they'll just go somewhere else. Second, are you engaging the reader/viewer to start a two-way conversation? Give the reader an urgent call to action. Third, is your sales team prepared to continue the conversation started by your content? Sales is most effective leveraging content if you have prepared them to build on, personalize, and continue the conversation.



**Plan your cornerstone content for the next 18 months now.** Fortune favors the well-prepared, and having a theme or several themes already backed up with solid data feeds both your planned campaigns and those seemingly random key opportunities. Every touchpoint should make sense and lead your target market to you, and that is only accomplished consistently with a strong content strategy.



**Understand that creation and distribution go together.** Theme, order, cadence, and coherence dictate that you think about two things — the story itself and how you are going to communicate to your target audience(s).



**Measure your work as completely as you can.** Yes, that's probably one of the biggest challenges — to look beyond download stats and dig deeper. But you can't improve (or get funding for next year) if you don't try to move beyond downloads and measure engagement and business return.

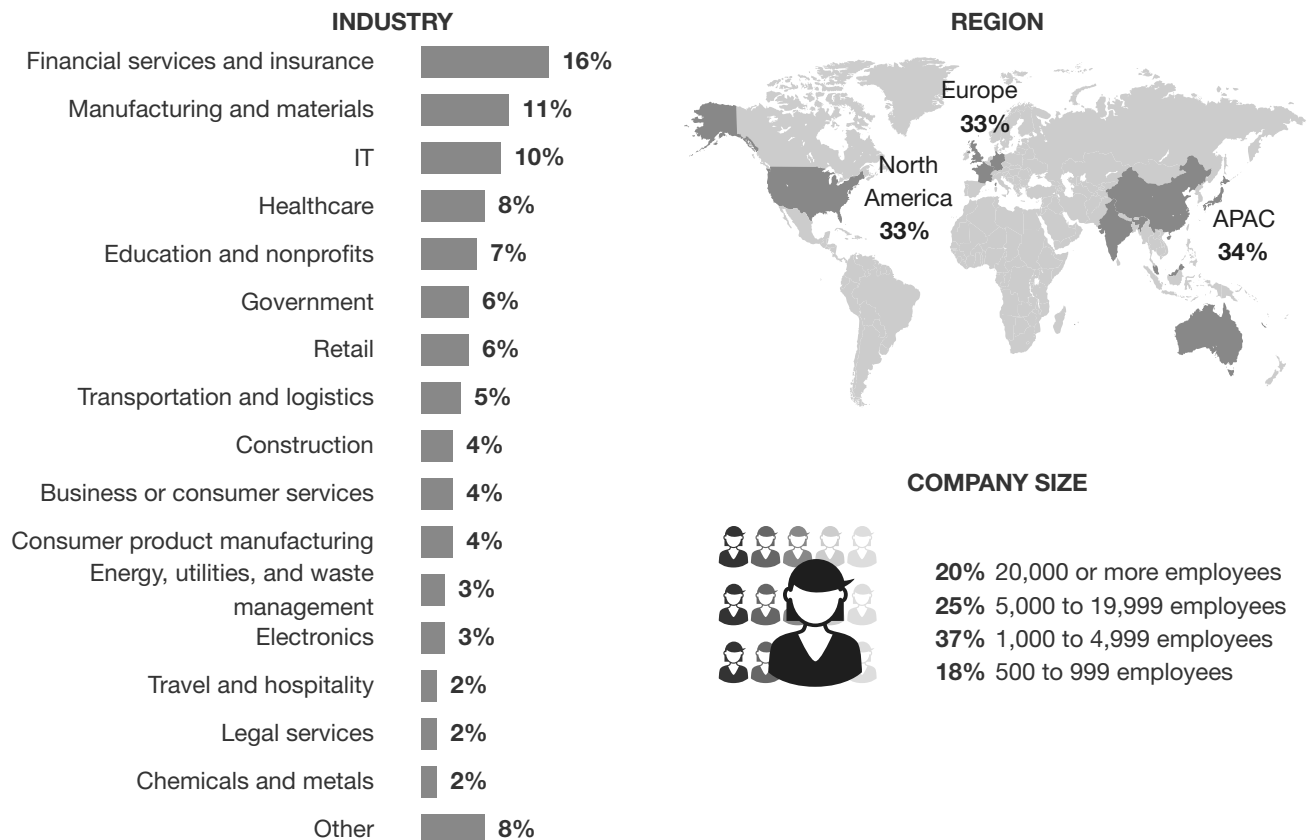


**Ask for help.** Contrary to popular belief, making creative content with the data to back it up is a group effort. Look to subject matter experts inside and outside your firm. The goal of content marketing is to build credibility and trust and to ease the journey to purchase for both your customers and you. A third-party content provider with a great reputation and brand of its own can give your content the head start it needs to win the right minds and hearts.

## Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 610 manager-level and above technology purchase decision makers from the US, the UK, Germany, France, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, India, Hong Kong, China, and Australia to assess their perceptions toward various content types that they encounter in their purchase journeys. Respondents were offered a small incentive as a thank you for time spent on the survey. The study was conducted in February 2018.

## Appendix B: Demographics/Data



Base: 610 global technology decision makers at companies with 500+ employees  
Source: Forrester Consulting B2B Content Preferences Study, February 2018

## Appendix C: Supplemental Materials

### RELATED FORRESTER RESEARCH

“The Birth Of The B2B Consumer,” Forrester Research, Inc., October 5, 2017.

“Evaluate Your Approach To Successful B2B Content Marketing,” Forrester Research, Inc., April 13, 2018.

## Appendix D: Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Source: “The Birth Of The B2B Consumer,” Forrester Research, Inc., October 5, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Source: “The GDPR And The B2B Marketer,” Forrester Research, Inc., March 13, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Source: “The GDPR And The B2B Marketer,” Forrester Research, Inc., March 13, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Laura Ramos, “Empathy Is Key To Engaging B2B Buyers,” March 16, 2017 ([https://go.forrester.com/blogs/17-03-14-empathy\\_is\\_key\\_to\\_engaging\\_b2b\\_buyers/](https://go.forrester.com/blogs/17-03-14-empathy_is_key_to_engaging_b2b_buyers/))