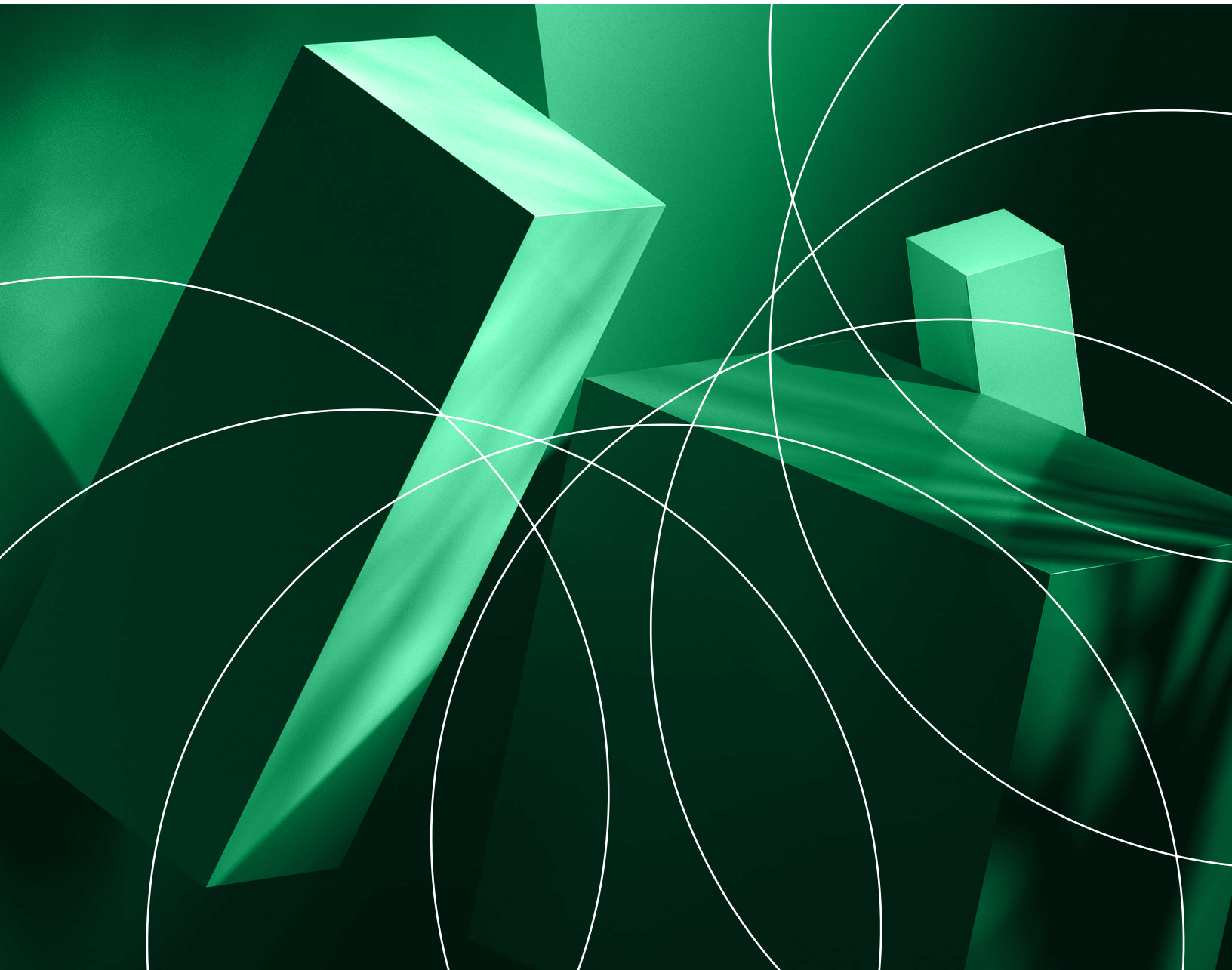


# A Guide To Creating Compelling Customer-Centric Content

A FORRESTER CONSULTING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PAPER, JANUARY 2024



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### ABOUT FORRESTER CONSULTING

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## Executive Summary

The goal of B2B content is to inspire action. For the customer, that could mean building support internally, motivating innovation, or helping make a decision. For B2B marketers, it's to influence a purchase decision. The most effective way to do this is by crafting and executing your content through the lens of your buyer. Too often, B2B marketing messaging is product-centric and sounds impersonal, irrelevant, and biased. Instead, the goal should be customer-centric content marketing — understanding and addressing their needs, challenges, and goals with your content and promoting it at the right time, in the right channels, to reach your key buyers.

In May 2023, Forrester conducted a double-blind survey of 767 B2B technology buyers to understand their content preferences and experiences throughout the buying journey. We found that while buyers rely on vendor-provided thought leadership to inform their strategies and purchase decisions, they struggle to trust and find value in much of the content they receive. If B2B marketers do not improve the value and validity of their thought leadership, they risk losing customers and wallet share.



## Key Findings

**B2B buyers need objective, data-based thought leadership to achieve their goals.** Buyers use B2B content to get a better understanding of trends, expand their sphere of influence, and inform decision-making. They need to know that the data they are using for this is credible, accurate, and current. For this reason, it is critical that your thought leadership is received as objective, data-backed, and timely.

**Unfortunately, much of the content today misses the mark.** B2B marketing decision-makers understand the importance of objective, personalized content. However, the majority of B2B buyers say that much of the content they receive today is biased, more often focused on a vendor's capabilities rather than an understanding of buyers' needs and challenges.

**Audience-centric content starts with understanding buyers' needs and preferences.** Your thought leadership should focus on what your buyers care about — their challenges, needs, and goals. You also need to determine how and where your buyers prefer to consume content — formats, channels, and timing. Utilize buyer and persona frameworks to understand these key inputs to developing content focused on your audience.



# Buyers Use Your Thought Leadership To Inform And Influence

This should serve as a wake-up call to B2B marketers: According to Forrester Consulting Content Preferences Study, 2023, 77% of buyers say they will not expand their current contracts if the content you provide isn't valuable or helpful.

What makes thought leadership valuable for your buyers? They are looking for content that (see Figure 1):

**FIGURE 1**

## “How often do you use thought leadership that you receive in the following ways?”

● Always    ● Frequently



Base: Variable respondents who are technology-buying decision-makers at global enterprises

Note: Showing top two from a 5-point scale of “Never” to “Always”; total percentages may not equal separate values due to rounding.

Source: Forrester’s Content Preferences Study, 2023

Sixty-two percent of survey respondents frequently or always use thought leadership to inform their purchase decisions, and 61% say it impacts the perception of a vendor's brand, vision, and values.

- **Demonstrates an understanding of what is happening now.** B2B buyers rely on thought leadership to stay ahead of market trends and competitors through a combination of data-backed expertise and market intelligence. This means that besides being data-based and unbiased, it is also essential that thought leadership is timely, reflecting the current state of the market.
- **Expands their sphere of influence.** Truly transformative thought leadership should change how a company does business — whether that is driving internal innovation, shaping business strategy, or influencing internal stakeholders. To do this, it is critical that the content is original, providing a new and distinct viewpoint, as well as authoritative, coming from a source that is both viewed as trusted and an expert in the market.
- **Informs a purchase decision.** Thought leadership is a crucial component of the buyer journey. Sixty-two percent of survey respondents frequently or always use thought leadership to inform their purchase decisions, and 61% say it impacts the perception of a vendor's brand, vision, and values. There are many types of content that buyers rely on to inform purchase decisions. The top three used by survey respondents in their most recent technology purchase were product-specific content like feature lists, tech specs, and demos, technology trends and forecast content to help predict future needs, and business case/ROI content to show cost-benefit analysis.
- **Presents an objective and data-backed point of view.** In order to do any of the above, trust in content is paramount for buyers. They do not want to share information that may be wrong with others, and they do not want to make decisions on information that may be biased.

When asked about the defining characteristics of thought leadership, “data-backed”, “original”, and “unbiased” were the top three responses. In a world where too much vendor content appears biased and unhelpful, making sure readers trust your content is critical to success.

These goals align with Forrester’s own definition of thought leadership:

*“The act or process of exercising knowledge, skills, and expertise to change perceptions and increase mindshare across a buying audience or market for a business purpose. The mission of thought leadership is to support the value proposition, core competencies, and competitive differentiation upon which a brand is based.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Too Much Product-Centric Content Is Demotivating Your Buyers

With your buyers' goals as the cornerstone of your strategy, thought leadership should represent a deliberate investment in staking out a leadership position as an expert and trusted source within an industry or market — which requires engaging in transformative “big idea” conversations rather than product-specific conversations.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately for too many B2B marketers, the temptation of product-centric thought leadership overtakes customer-centricity, leading to content seen by buyers as biased, unoriginal, and irrelevant to their needs.

*“Buyers are drowning in a sea of sameness. They fail to find any value in the content they receive because much of it is myopically focused on the vendor and its products and services — not on the cares and concerns of the recipient.*

*This is especially true of thought leadership content, which is frequently thinly disguised pitches for business, boastful claims about a product's latest feature or capability, or a labored retreading of familiar ground or the latest business fad, with little original thought or insight.”<sup>3</sup>*

— Ian Bruce, VP and principal analyst, Forrester

This is a challenge that has plagued B2B marketers for years. According to Forrester's 2022 State Of B2B Content Survey, 74% of global B2B marketing decision-makers recognize that buyers expect an experience that is [personalized](#) to their needs and preferences.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, our 2023 Content Preferences survey shows that buyers are still frustrated with most content they receive from vendors (see Figure 2).

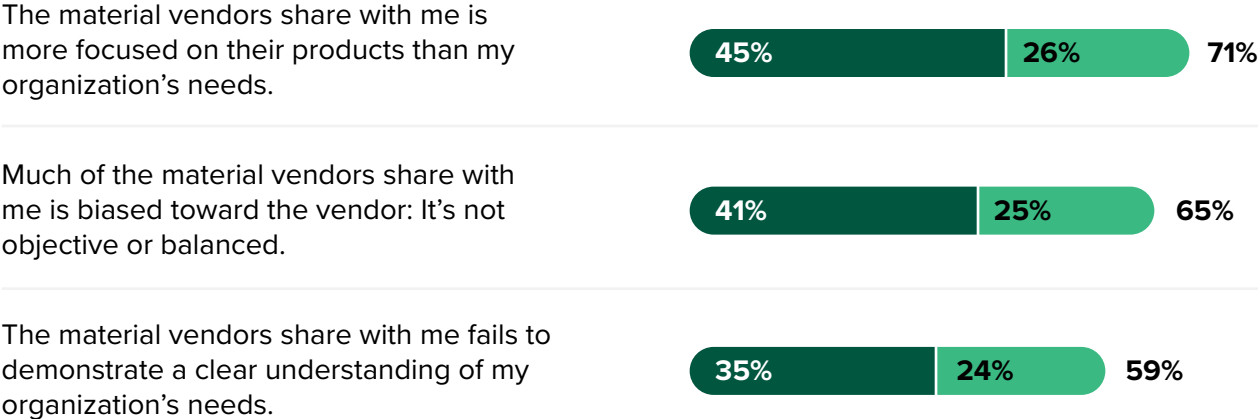
**74%**  
of global B2B marketing decision-makers recognize that buyers expect an experience that is personalized to their needs and preferences.



FIGURE 2

“To what extent do you agree with the following statements?”

● Agree      ● Strongly agree



Base: 767 respondents who are technology-buying decision-makers at global enterprises  
Note: Total percentages may not equal separate values due to rounding.  
Source: Forrester’s Content Preferences Study, 2023

Buyers are clear in their expectations: B2B marketers must get better at creating useful content, that’s relevant to buyer needs, tells a clear story, and is backed by objective data and expertise they can trust. Those that do not, risk losing customers and wallet share:

**77%**  
of customers are unlikely to expand contracts if content isn’t valuable or helpful.

# Create Customer-Centric Experiences To Drive Growth

*“Content is integral to the customer experience. It’s how customers find us, engage with us, and choose us. Given just how much content is pushed to business buyers, however, finding ways to stand out is critical.”*

– Phyllis Davidson, VP and principal analyst, Forrester

The goal is to develop customer-centric thought leadership content that improves audience engagement and drives action. In order to do this effectively, B2B marketers must answer four key questions to inform content experiences:<sup>5</sup>

- **Who is the right audience?**
- **What is the right content to meet their needs?**
- **Where is the right place to share that content?**
- **What is the right time to deliver that content?**

Forrester has mapped these questions to the four P’s of the content lifecycle: Planning, Production, Promotion, and Performance (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3**

## Creating Audience-Centric Experiences That Drive Growth

Maximizing the return on content investments requires B2B marketers to answer four questions that inform content experiences.



Source: “From One To Many: How To Maximize B2B Content Reuse,” Forrester Research, Inc., June 9, 2022

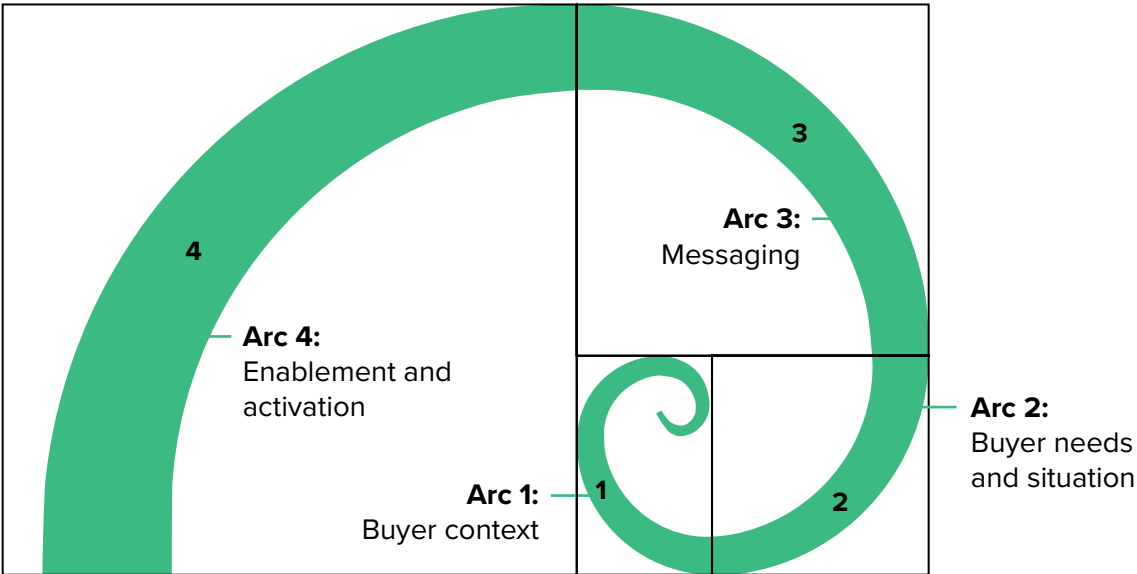
**PLANNING: SELECTING THE RIGHT AUDIENCE**

Creating great content begins in the planning phase, with a deep understanding of your target audience. Start by identifying who you are developing content for (your buyers), based on attributes like region, company size, industry, and buying group. Next, utilize a [buying decision framework](#) to understand the key questions and needs of your audience throughout the buyer’s journey. These inputs should influence the topics for your content to appeal to and reflect your target audience. Finally, consider your audience’s preferences and priorities for the form and function of content — how do they prefer to consume and interact with content, and what are their trusted information sources? Answering these questions can ensure you are personalizing content to your buyers’ needs and wants.

Frameworks can help you select your audience and get deep insights into their preferences. Forrester’s [Messaging Nautilus™: Buyer’s Journey](#) is designed to help marketers deliver audience-centric content through the entire buying journey (see Figure 4).<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 4**

**The Forrester Messaging Nautilus: Buyer’s Journey**



Source: “The Forrester Messaging Nautilus®: Buyer’s Journey Toolkit,” January 3, 2023

## PRODUCTION AND PROMOTION: PUTTING THE RIGHT CONTENT IN THE RIGHT PLACE

B2B marketers must consider three key questions for successful content production and promotion:

- **How will I source this content?**
- **What is the form factor(s) for this content?**
- **Where is the best channel for each content asset to deliver maximum value?**

Marketers have three choices when sourcing content: Use an existing asset, buy a new asset from a third party, or build a new asset internally. They must consider many factors when making this choice, such as resource constraints, timing, skill sets, and customer preferences. An important consideration here is the power of third-party content in shaping buyer perceptions.

Eighty-six percent of respondents in Forrester

Consulting's content preferences study say they are more likely to trust a vendor's thought leadership position and claims if they are backed up by objective, third-party content or data. Given customers' wariness about biased content, a third party can imbue your thought leadership with the credibility and authority that customers value highly.

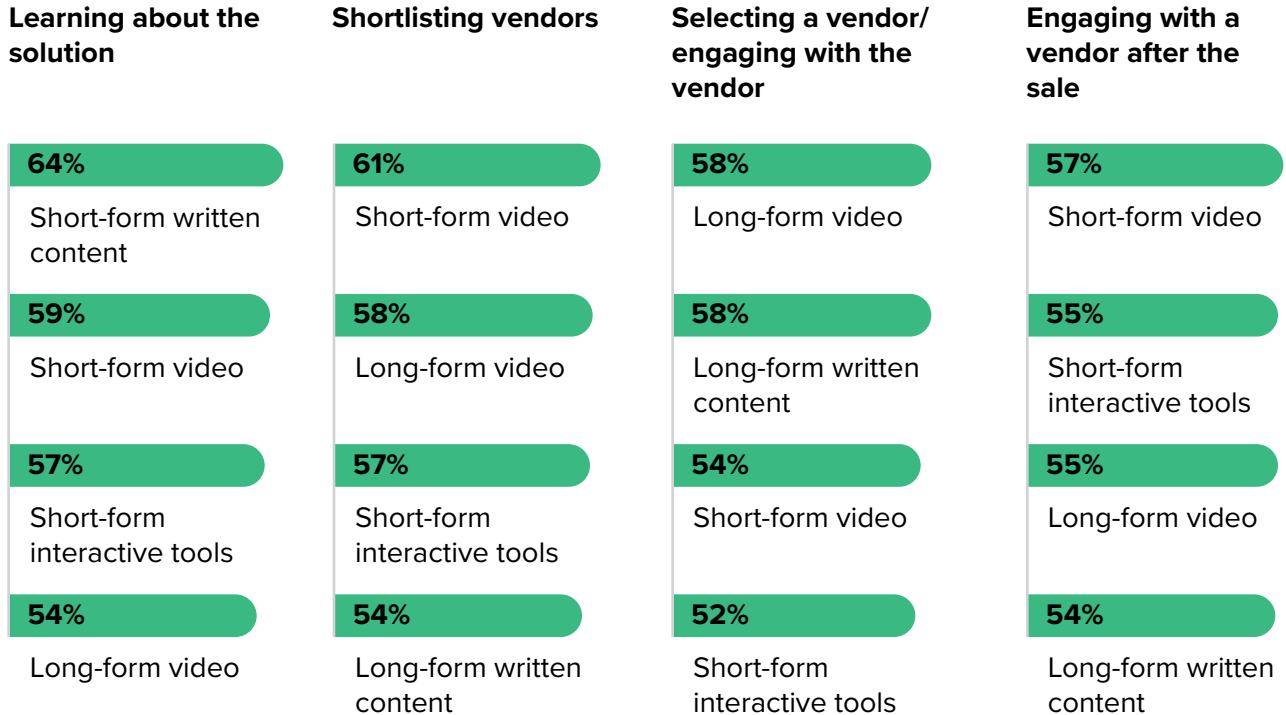
The next decision concerns the form factors and channels for your content. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to content, and if you have done your persona homework during content planning, you should know their preferences for consuming and interacting with content. However, it is important to note that buyers' content preferences can change depending on where they are in their buying journey (see Figure 5). For example, B2B-buying decision-makers value short-form content when learning about a potential solution. However, as they become more invested in vendor selection, they increasingly start to value long-form written content. For this reason, Forrester recommends a primary and derivative asset approach, where one core asset is used to fuel content of different types across many channels.<sup>7</sup>

**86%**

of respondents say they are more likely to trust a vendor's thought leadership position and claims if they are backed up by objective, third-party content or data.

FIGURE 5

**“What format types and lengths did you find most valuable in each phase of your purchase journey?”**



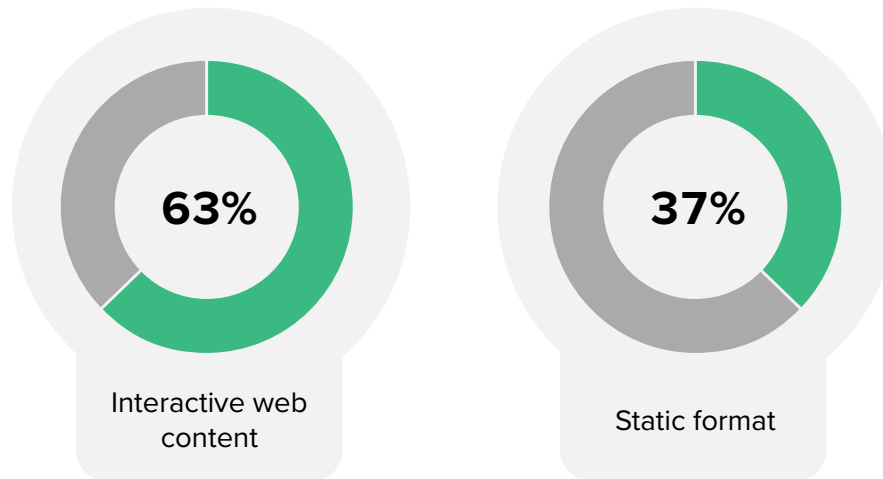
Base: 767 technology-buying decision-makers at global enterprises  
 Source: Forrester’s Content Preferences Study, 2023

A final consideration about content type is the level of customization. Buyers want to see themselves reflected in your content — an understanding of their situation, challenges, and needs. This desire fuels the increasing popularity of interactive content, where readers can control the content experience and personalize it to drive greater value. Sixty-three percent of buying decision-makers in our Content Preferences study prefer interactive web content, compared to 37% who prefer static content (see Figure 6). The top benefits of interactive content for buyers are:

- **Better control over the content experience.**
- **More engaging experience when consuming content.**
- **Ease of sharing with peers and colleagues.**

**FIGURE 6**

**“In which format do you prefer to experience written content (e.g., white paper, ROI case study, thought leadership paper, e-book, etc.)?”**



Base: 767 technology-buying decision-makers at global enterprises  
Source: Forrester’s Content Preferences Study, 2023

### **PERFORMANCE: INSIGHTS FEEDBACK LOOPS INFORM THE RIGHT TIME TO DELIVER CONTENT**

[Capturing the right metrics](#) can fuel insights that can improve your content programs over time, creating an insights feedback loop (see Figure 7). By monitoring a consistent and comprehensive set of metrics across [your primary and derivative assets](#), you can compare them to determine which derivative assets perform the best in specific channels, the right time to introduce assets, and more. The goal is to test and tune your activation plan and campaigns over time to drive greater value for your audience.

FIGURE 7

# A Feedback Loop Across All Assets Is Critical To Maximizing The Value Of Your B2B Content

## Primary format

Long-form asset (e.g., research report, white paper, e-book)

## Derivative formats

- Infographics
- Polls/quizzes
- Landing pages
- Emails
- Webinars
- Presentations
- Social posts
- Apps/tools
- Videos
- Podcasts
- Blogs
- Articles

## Channels

Syndication    Social    Website    Email    Retargeting    SEO/SEM

## Metrics

Measurement and analytics:  
MAP, CRM, web analytics, social media tools, SEO, adtech, video software, online event software

Content insights feedback loop

Source: "From One To Many: How To Maximize B2B Content Reuse," Forrester Research, Inc., June 9, 2022

## Key Recommendations

Our in-depth survey of B2B technology buyers combined with Forrester's portfolio marketing playbook, [Craft Messaging And Content That Motivates Buyers](#), yields several important recommendations for developing and executing on customer-centric thought leadership content:

### **Start with a clear picture of your target audience.**

It is critical that you define a targeted audience for thought leadership to make content that is relevant and personalized. At a minimum, this audience should be defined at the regional, company size, industry, and buying group levels. Take care not to go too broad with your audience, or you risk developing watered-down, less relevant thought leadership that fails to pique the interest of your target buying groups.

### **Use frameworks to focus your content structure.**

Buyers get the most value from content that is hyper-focused on their situation and challenges. Utilize frameworks like persona and buying group frameworks to understand what matters to your audience, and then craft content to deliver your message through the lens of what matters to your buyers.

### **Leverage interactive assets to enhance the reader experience.**

Buyers in our content preferences study prefer interactive thought leadership content for a more engaging, experience. Interactive assets also allow readers to customize content, delivering a more personalized experience for your audience.



### **Maximize your content reach.**

Your content should not be “one and done” — promoting content across multiple channels over an extended period of time will yield the best results. Align asset promotion to audience preferences to be where they want to be when they are ready to engage. Do not forget your internal channels as well — your sales and executive teams can be a powerful amplifier of your messaging to customers if they are armed with the right content and talking points.

### **Organize promotion with a content calendar.**

You need cross-functional visibility into how content is being activated across your organization. A content calendar can ensure that promotion is well-aligned and that primary and derivative content assets are making the greatest impact possible.

### **Consistent metrics are key.**

Consistent metrics are the key to continuous improvement. Make sure you are tracking the same metrics to measure the performance of your core and derivative assets over time, as consistent metrics allow you to compare performance across channels, asset types, timing, and more.

## Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 767 decision-makers at organizations with 500 or more employees in Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Nordics, Singapore, the UK, and the US to evaluate the current state of B2B content marketing and thought leadership. Survey participants included decision-makers who actively participated in a technology purchase decision in the past 12 months. Respondents were offered a small incentive as a thank-you for time spent on the survey. The study was completed in May 2023.

## Appendix B: Demographics

REGION	
EMEA	36%
North America	33%
APAC	31%

INDUSTRY (TOP FOUR SHOWN)	
Technology/technology services	15%
Manufacturing/materials	13%
Financial services and/or insurance	12%
Retail	9%

DEPARTMENT (TOP FOUR SHOWN)	
IT	29%
Marketing/advertising	19%
Customer experience	19%
Customer service	18%

COMPANY SIZE	
500 to 999 employees	15%
1,000 to 4,999 employees	43%
5,000 to 19,999 employees	25%
20,000 or more employees	18%

TITLE	
C-level executive	19%
Vice president	7%
Director	29%
Manager	45%

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

## Appendix C: Supplemental Material

### RELATED FORRESTER RESEARCH

"[Content Measurement: A Step-By-Step Guide](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., September 21, 2023

"[It's Not About You: Effective B2B Personalization Means Putting The Customer First](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., August 2, 2023

"[The Future Of B2B Content](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., March 8, 2023

"[The Forrester Messaging Nautilus®: Buyer's Journey Toolkit](#)," January 3, 2023

"[From One To Many: How To Maximize B2B Content Reuse](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., June 9, 2022

"[The Thought Leadership Maturity Model](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., January 1, 2018

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

October 25, 2023, "[Maximize Your Results With Third-Party Content](#)," Webinar

Ian Bruce and Lisa Gately, "[Most Thought Leadership Isn't Thoughtful Or Leading: How Can We Fix That?](#)," Forrester Blogs

## Appendix D: Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Source: "[The Sirius Decisions Thought Leadership Maturity Model](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., January 1, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Ian Bruce and Lisa Gately, "[Most Thought Leadership Isn't Thoughtful Or Leading: How Can We Fix That?](#)," Forrester Blogs.

<sup>4</sup> Source: "[From One To Many: How To Maximize B2B Content Reuse](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., June 9, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Source: "[The Forrester Messaging Nautilus®: Buyer's Journey Toolkit](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., January 3, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Source: "[From One To Many: How To Maximize B2B Content Reuse](#)," Forrester Research, Inc., June 9, 2022.



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