

The changing face of influence



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Executive summary

Social media has eroded the traditional divides between personal and professional media channels – decision makers are as comfortable finding information about vendors on Facebook as they are on LinkedIn or through websites.

This report explores the ways decision makers interact with different forms of media and the relative values they apply to different sources of information. Our findings reveal that decision makers are active across a wide range of channels and believe vendors are too.

Social media is particularly important at the start of any purchasing process when decision makers are looking to absorb as much information as possible.

Its value unsurprisingly lessens as decision makers narrow their focus – at this stage it's about the depth of the information and the reputation of its source.

Our findings make clear that it's not the channel it's shared on or the volume of content being shared which is important. Instead, the quality and relevance of content is now the key point of difference for vendors looking to stand out – 50% of UK decision makers would like to see more impartial and independent commentary being issued by vendors (e.g. analysts' reports).

The challenge is in cutting through the noise and securing positive independent opinion furthering their case. This preference for opinion helps explain why traditional media is as relevant as ever for marketing and IT decision makers alike – they still view the media as a reliable, impartial source of opinion.

This report explores what our findings reveal about how marketing and IT decision makers find and process information and what this means for vendors looking to influence them and ultimately sell products or services.



Introduction

The way we consume media has changed beyond all recognition in the 21st century. New channels pop up every day and old stalwarts like newspapers and television find themselves fighting for market share and relevance.

It's easy to get lost in the excitement and blindly follow new channels regardless of whether our target audience is on them. But, it's equally dangerous to do what you've always done without examining where your audience is finding and sharing information.

To help make sense of the way marketing and IT departments really engage with media sources, Hotwire and Vanson Bourne carried out a survey of 1,000 decision makers – exploring their habits, preferred channels and the ways they make use of different sources of information to make purchasing decisions.

Information is plentiful

Information is no longer a scarce resource – 89% of decision makers agreed it's easier than ever to find relevant information about vendors, particularly when they're first researching a potential purchase.

Traditional media, events and social media all play their part here, as does relevant owned content. Despite the criticism they receive, the humble whitepaper and webinar are still viewed as extremely useful by over two thirds of decision makers. What links these channels? They're all about sharing an experience – when we think about the information we consume in our daily lives we want it to be underpinned by a human voice.

A consistent theme throughout is the continued relevance of the written word. Video continues to become more important as a source of information to decision makers and it's something we expect to see become a primary source of information for marketing and IT buyers in the next 12 months.

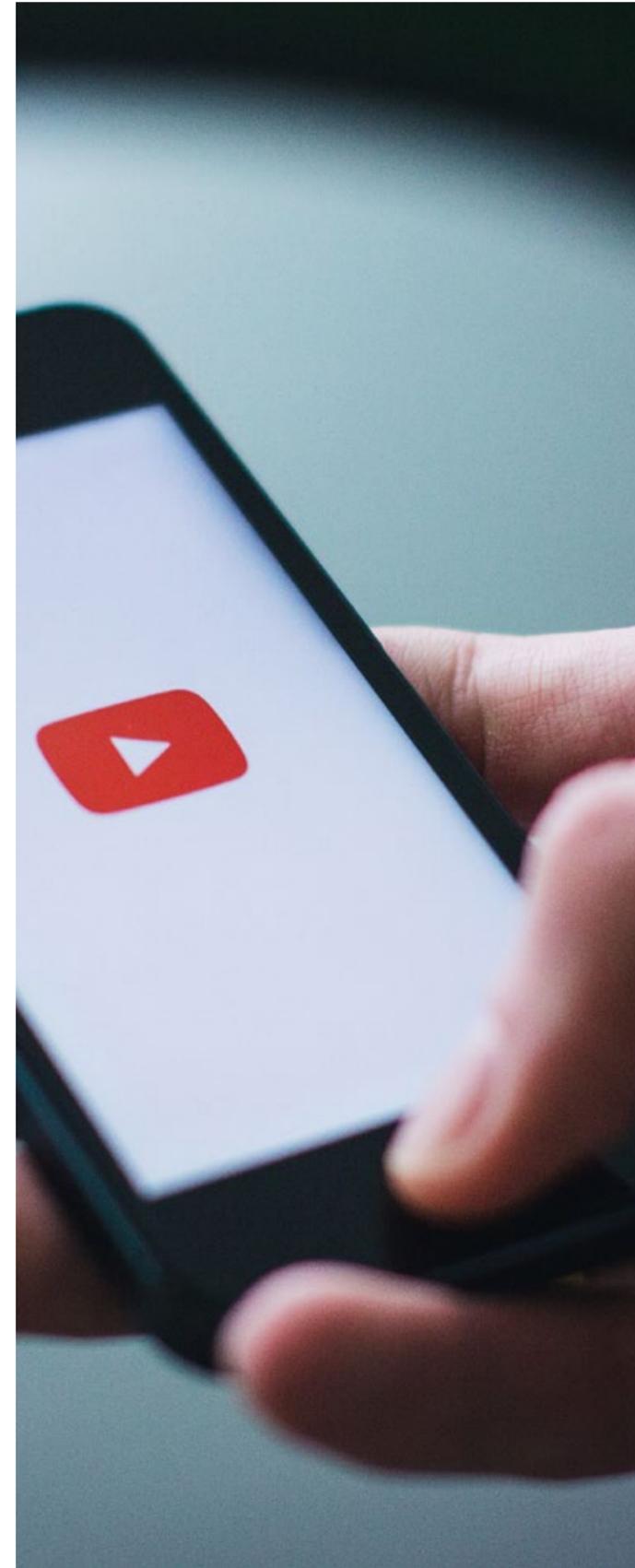
But, the growth of video is complementary, rather than competitive to written sources. Newsletters, eBooks and print

magazines are all cited as extremely important in discovering information by the vast majority of decision makers.

Video will prove valuable as a way to add a human dimension to marketing – being able to see an analyst or customer talk about a vendor's strengths is a powerful asset and one companies aren't close to making the most of yet.

Despite this wealth of information, there's still a challenge for decision makers the closer they get to making a final decision about a purchase or vendor. Over a third of our survey respondents (37%) said they find it difficult to find relevant information around a vendor's qualities and service when they are making their final decision to select one vendor over another.

For IT decision makers, there's a clear focus on using external sources of information as a source of research, rather than as an aid to decision making. By the time it comes to shortlisting and subsequently selecting a new vendor, the opinion of friends and colleagues becomes decisive.



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The blurring of personal and professional

The days when work stops when you leave the office are long since dead, if they ever even existed.

But, when we discuss the ways people engage with different forms of media we still instinctively construct barriers between what we consider consumer media – for our personal lives and business media – for our work selves.

It's a divide which dictates how marketing vendors define themselves – do you offer B2B or B2C services as your primary focus? It's a divide which may have made sense in the past, but in the age of social media and always-on communications do key business decision makers across the marketing and IT functions still separate channels in this way?

Our research shows that they don't – when asked which social media platforms decision makers consult when making a purchase decision it's clear that these individuals are willing to consider relevant information regardless of the channel they find it on.

This holds true even on channels which are traditionally seen as

being alien to B2B marketing – for example Snapchat, Tumblr and Reddit.

Reddit offers a classic case study in the difficulty of engaging with a community led platform. To outsiders it's near impossible to understand how content gains

traction on the platform and how brands can influence what is voted up. It's a platform which requires immersion and is also fiercely proud of the independence of its influencers – both factors which play into the reason it can be considered a trustworthy source of information.

Most strikingly, when asked which one channel they'd turn to for information on a purchasing decision, 1 in 4 (24%) decision makers said Facebook would be their social channel of choice.

This places Facebook ahead of LinkedIn at **17%** and far ahead of Twitter which, despite both marketers and IT decision makers saying they are using more than ever, would be relied upon as a sole source of information by just **6%** of decision makers.

Why? Because we use it more – our study reveals the average decision maker uses Facebook 18 days a month, compared to 13 for LinkedIn. Decision makers look to the channels they're using as part of their daily routine – we don't want to check whole new sources of information if we don't have to.

This pattern is only likely to become more obvious as time goes on – **51% of senior marketers and 39% of IT decision makers think they'll be making more use of Facebook to help with decision making in a year's time.**

This shouldn't come as a surprise. Facebook has devoted significant time and money to making itself



a business friendly platform and making its new consumer tools accessible to brands.

Facebook Live is the newest example of this – although nominally a tool for media and influencers to share experiences with their followers, we expect it to become a powerful part of the marketing arsenal deployed by brands.

With Twitter struggling and LinkedIn failing to carve out a defined identity as a publishing platform, we expect to see Facebook further expand its reach and relevance in the B2B marketing community. It has the user base, it has the innovation and its paid targeting ability is unmatched. Don't be surprised to see 2017 trends pieces all lead with the renewed importance of Facebook.

Despite these personal preferences, there's still some way to go before vendors and clients alike start practicing what they preach. In Vanson Bourne's Technology Marketing Monitor – marketers revealed LinkedIn and Twitter are still the go-to channels for digital B2B marketing Facebook was fourth, with just 70% of marketers planning to make use of it – a stark contrast with how they find information themselves.

For newspaper publishers, this need to merge consumer and business news wouldn't be a surprise – for hundreds of years they've mixed information about

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big issues, local gossip, business news and everything in between.

But, the marketing community has been reluctant to blur the lines – in large part because of a fear of audience backlash. No one wants to be the company cited as an example of bad form, but the reality is our peers just don't care about this.

So what role does social media play in the purchasing process for decision makers? It's about the initial curation of information – taking advantage of the sheer breadth of these channels to compile first impressions.

The breadth of information is made even more relevant because it comes through relationships we've chosen to cultivate – every organic post we see on social media comes from someone we believe is worth listening to. When we're initially seeking information, it's only natural we turn to these people for insight.

As decision makers get further into the selection process, social media's importance lessens. But, consider who you're speaking to – **a third of senior marketers will make use of social media in helping decide on which vendors to shortlist.** If your social media strategy only focuses on raising awareness amongst new audiences or providing top level information then you're missing a trick.

Earned media – relevant, but when?

Traditional media is dead. Or is it? Commentators in the industry can't make their minds up, but the one thing everyone agrees on is that earned media is becoming less important as a form of marketing.

Everyone that is, except business decision makers. 87% cite traditional media as being as important as social media in the purchasing decision making process – and in particular stress its value when starting to shortlist and negotiate with individual vendors.

What this means is vendors should continue to seek earned media coverage – 71% of the decision makers we surveyed highly value earned coverage about vendors they are considering. There's a distinct contrast here between marketing and IT decision makers. IT decision makers in the UK and US focus on publications with heritage which have a track record in the IT sector – Forbes, Computer Weekly, Wired, etc.

Marketing decision makers are more likely to engage with newer outlets which have a digital only focus – Business Insider and Huffington Post are the two

most widely read publications amongst marketers and **Business Insider was the most consulted publication throughout the buying process.**

It's not enough just to have news stories about new hires, product updates or company focused pieces. If earned coverage is to generate cut through and stand out, it's vital it's supported by third party testimony. 50% of decision makers would like to see more impartial and independent commentary being issued by vendors to assist them with the purchasing process.

In particular, industry analysts continue to carry considerable weight as a trustworthy source of opinion – over 60% of UK and US decision makers look to them as a primary source of information. Being featured in analyst reports will continue to be important, as will involving analysts in events and briefings.

This is remarkably consistent with the ways these decision makers are using their social channels. Find out as much information as possible to begin with and then narrow down your thinking



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by consulting reliable, impartial sources of information.

This might take the form of client case studies, independent analyst reports or relevant, credible third party data. What matters is that decision makers get that external perspective.

This gives vendors who want to stand out a clear line of action to take over the next 12 months – identify who your potential advocates are and work with them to add depth to your marketing strategy. Once you've secured these allies, they'll provide valuable support across all your

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marketing channels – whether it's appearing as a guest speaker on a webinar or panel event or providing quotes as part of your next blog or press release.

It's about getting your owned marketing in order – this research makes clear that buyers trust the information vendors are supplying. Focusing on earned or paid without getting your owned

presence right is like designing a beautiful shopfront for a store with empty shelves – you'll attract attention, but fail to make sales.

Getting there is simple – audit the content you have, identify what works and where the gaps are. Then, build a content calendar around your strengths and identify where new content can be found to fill the holes.

Statistics matter — but we trust people more

Decision makers still care about statistics, but they want to see them in context. Statistics alone are interesting, but it's when we package them with case studies that they become genuinely useful in the decision making process. Nearly half of decision makers proactively seek out case studies when researching vendors, while just a third look for research that the vendor has commissioned.

This is particularly true for IT decision makers – they're more likely to use case studies and similar customer evidence than marketers. They prefer fewer, more concrete sources of information, whereas marketers are much more likely to lean on their wider network, particularly social media channels.

Regardless of how they're consumed, statistics are effectively a hygiene factor – vendors need to show relevant research and information about their business to show their credibility.

What they aren't is a point of difference – they're never going to provoke an emotional reaction or allow us to have one of those 'me too' moments. It's when we

wrap these statistics up in case studies or use them as context for opinion, whether from the vendor or a third party that they become truly useful.

This desire for human interaction is backed up by the continued importance decision makers

place on events as a source of information. 75% of marketers and 71% of IT decision makers view small events like seminars and briefings as extremely important sources of information. These numbers only diminish slightly for larger events, reinforcing the importance of networks and forming relationships with advocates when selling to in-house decision makers.

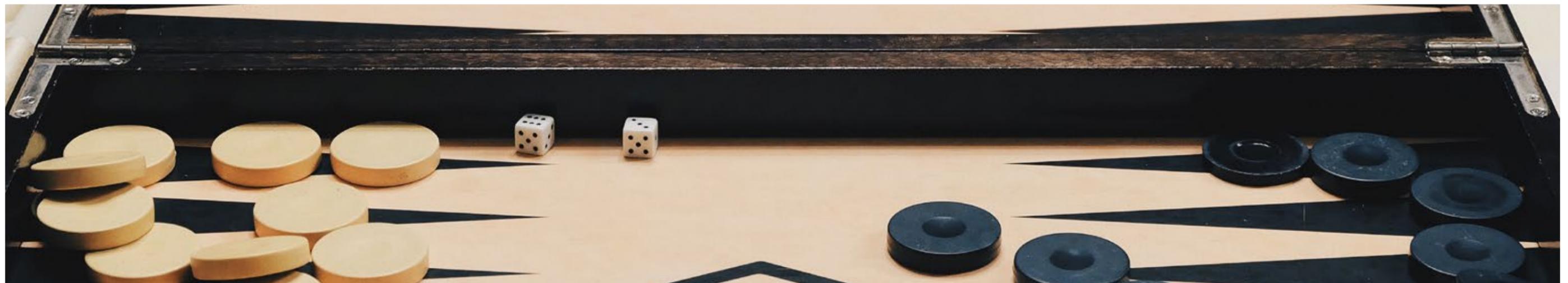
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What's next for vendors?

- » Our findings show a clear path for vendors looking to maximise their impact with IT and marketing decision makers. **41% of decision makers say the single biggest change vendors can make is by sharing more external opinion as part of their overall marketing strategy.**
- » Identify relevant external advocates who can talk about your business and what it's done – either for them or for the industry.
- » Once you've identified and engaged with these advocates, it's time to build a content marketing strategy around them. Decision makers value independent opinion, but they also seek out information across a broad range of channels.
- » Therefore the vendor's job is to distribute this information in different forms – it might mean inviting an advocate to speak at your next event, while also looking to secure a case study to distribute through earned media channels and post on your website.

- » To make this work, vendors need to involve third parties in the planning process – identifying opportunities for content co-creation, joint speaker opportunities or mutual ways to promote the other's brand.
- » Statistics then play a supporting role – they help inform the topics we're talking about and provide the proof points to complement the endorsements we're getting from our advocates. This combination of information will maximise the chance of not only getting noticed by decision makers, but actually making it onto their shortlist.
- » Our final challenge and one which will require a substantial shift in the way we think concerns the channels we're using to distribute content. It's time to forget about marking out some channels as B2B and some as B2C.
- » We now know decision makers would opt for Facebook as their sole social media source of information, so if your brand isn't using Facebook then you're missing an opportunity to engage directly with your customers.
- » Decision makers want the personal and this is where Facebook can become a powerful part of a B2B marketing strategy. It's not a channel to churn out company news, but instead can become a key distribution point for our case studies, earned media coverage and third party endorsements.



Want to know more?

We like to think we know a little bit about building integrated marketing campaigns which speak directly to decision makers. If you'd like to chat about what we've done before or how we can help you we'd love to meet for a coffee. Just tweet us @hotwirepr or drop our Chief Development Officer Andy West a note – andy.west@hotwirepr.com

About this report

The data cited in this report is based on interviews with 1,000 marketing and IT decision makers from large organisations across various sectors in the US, UK, Germany, Spain, France, Australia and New Zealand. The survey was conducted during March and April 2016.

For more information about this report please contact Ruth Mathias, Senior International Marketing Manager –

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