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Business Communication in the COVID-19 Era

REFLECTING THE NEW B2B PURCHASING PARADIGM

Commissioned by FleishmanHillard UK and TRUE Global Intelligence





It has been more than a year since coronavirus transformed our lives forever, both professionally and personally. With the new normal still unfolding, has the behaviour of UK business decision-makers continued to change since the pandemic first took hold?

The research, developed in partnership with our TRUE Global Intelligence (TGI) team, follows on from our original report published in September 2020, **The Power of Business Communication: Navigating the Changing Landscape of B2B Buying**. We revisited a number of questions, and added some new ones, to see how the buying experience of 150 business leaders has evolved as lockdown living has persisted.

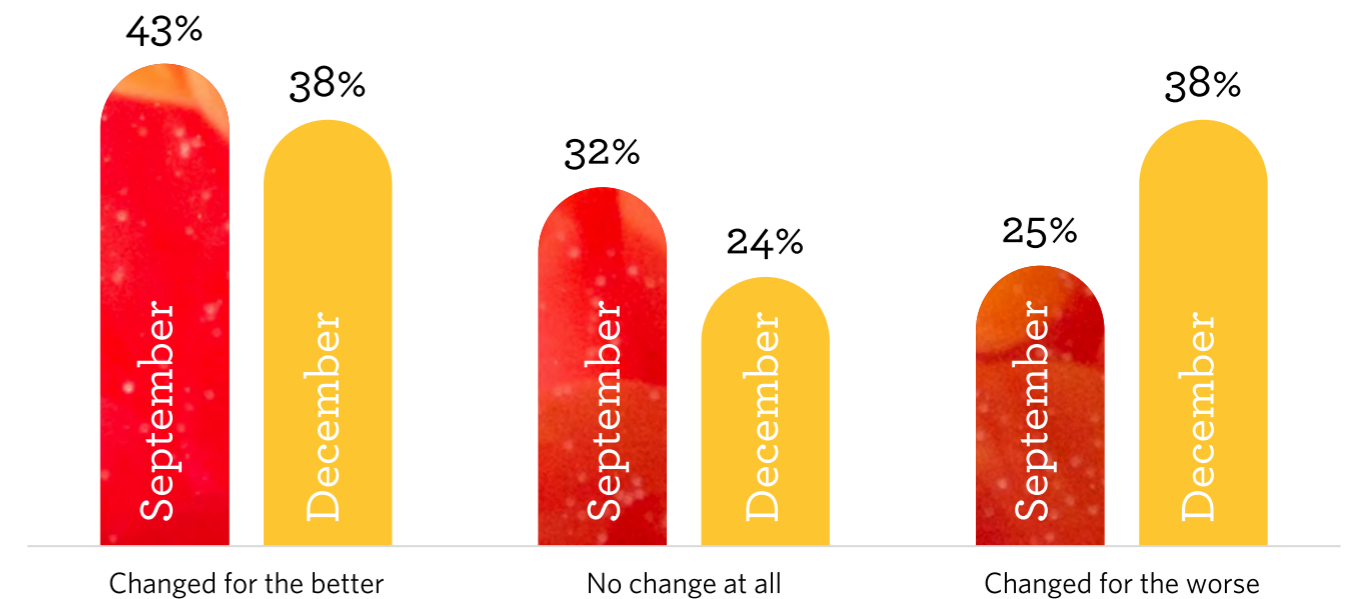
Combined with a number of US comparisons, this latest survey provides an up-to-date snapshot of the B2B sales landscape after the turbulence of 2020, as we enter a new financial year with ongoing uncertainty but burgeoning hope for more freedom and economic recovery.

From *Boardroom* to *Spare Room*

Many months of working from home, with only virtual access to colleagues and suppliers, have made B2B buying more challenging for many. The process has become less efficient, more people have become involved, and budgets have been cut.

No panic buying for businesses

After an initial need for speed in the first few months of the pandemic, the decision-making process slowed down for almost four in 10 B2B buyers. Continuing to operate in an uncertain climate saw a growing number of respondents delay decisions and potentially press pause on projects.



Change in efficiency of decision making due to COVID-19 pandemic

More support or just greater inefficiency?

In a world of uncertainty, it is perhaps unsurprising that decisions have been hampered and procurement teams have become more cautious.

Significantly, almost double the number of respondents in the US reported involving more people in the decision-making process because of the pandemic (31%), compared to the UK (16%), suggesting a greater focus on managing risk.



31%

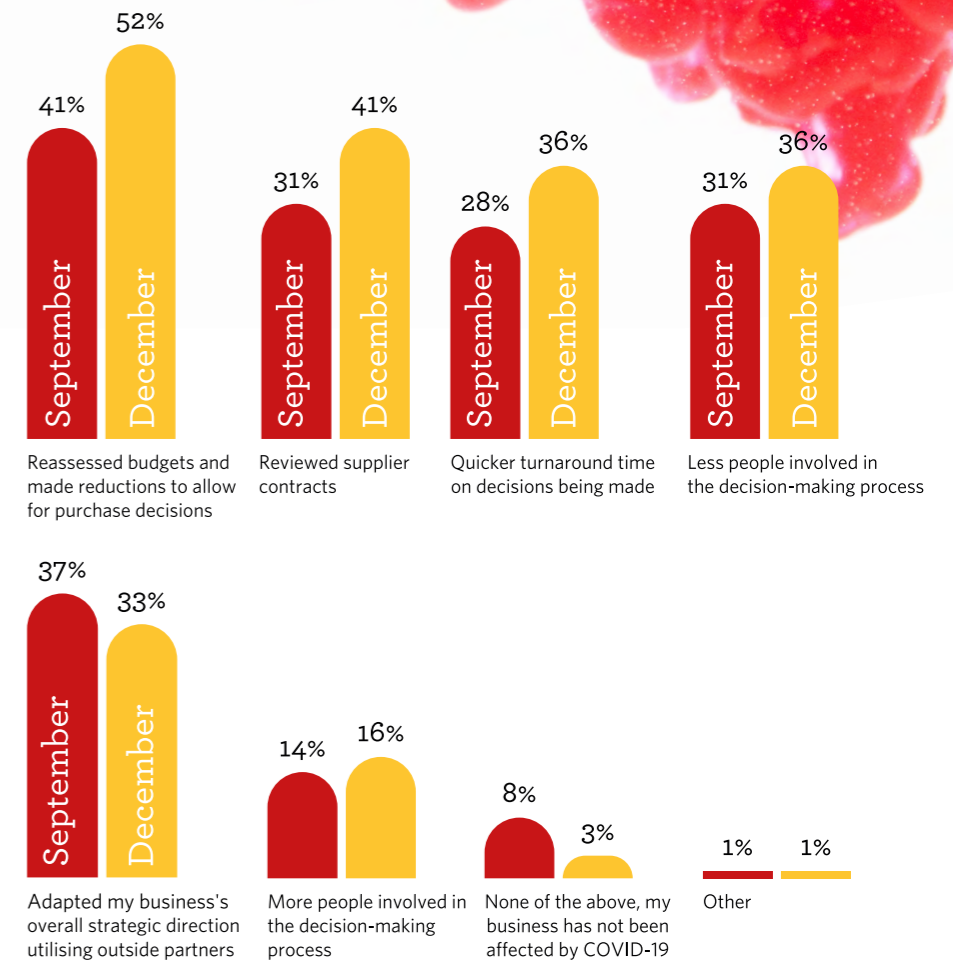


16%

More people in the decision-making process

Suppliers squeezed by pandemic

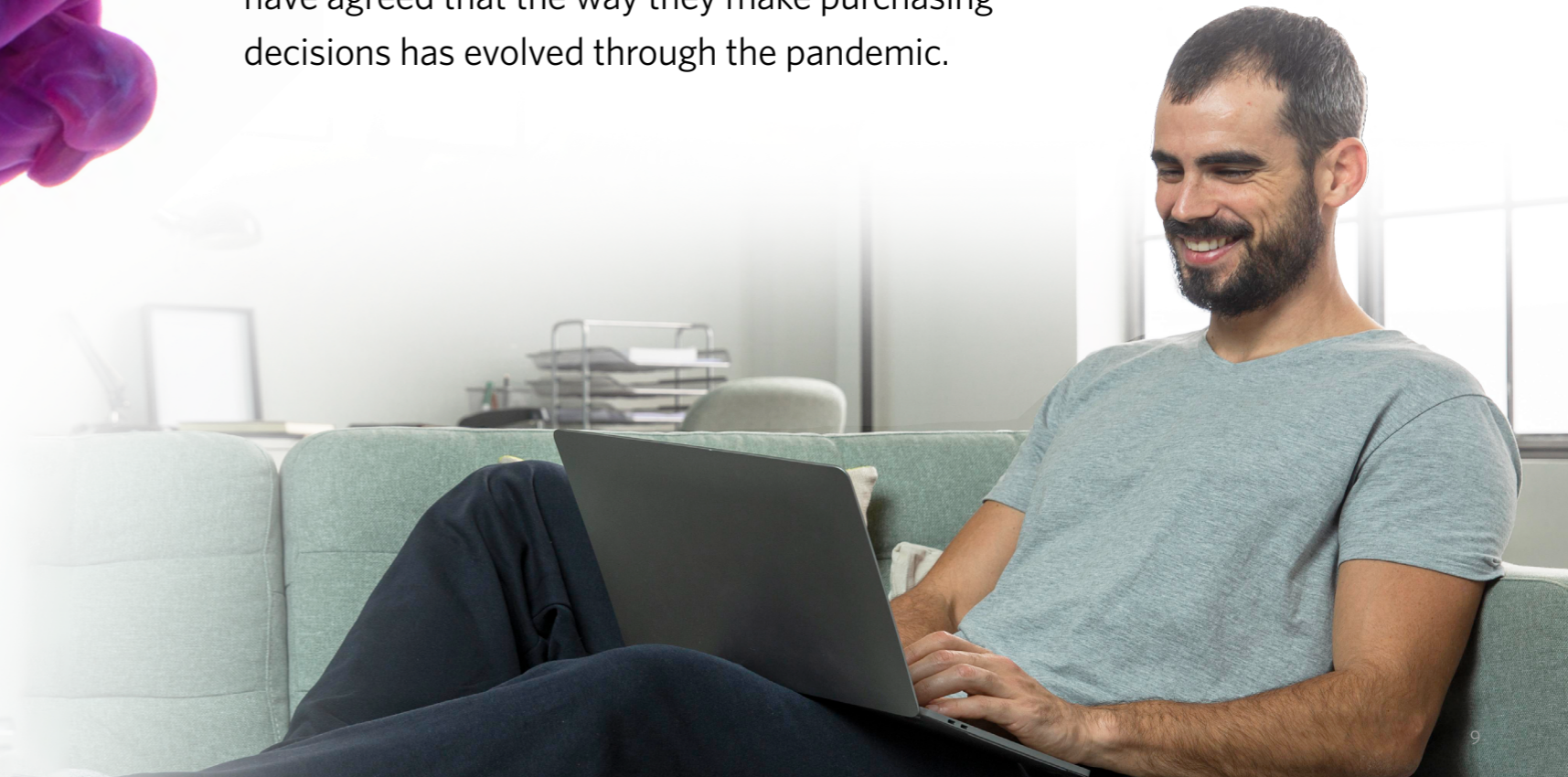
Actions taken by B2B buyers due to COVID-19 have largely stayed the same, but there has been a marked increase in those who have tightened their belts or reviewed existing supplier contracts as they try to find a better deal elsewhere.





From *Tradeshows* to *Trackpants*

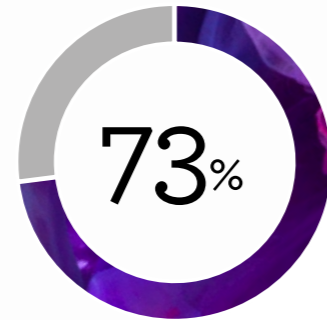
Being forced to work from home, away from colleagues, face-to-face meetings and industry events, has undeniably transformed how companies do business. Decision-makers are harder to reach through the traditional channels, as they explore new sources to inform their choices. Most people have agreed that the way they make purchasing decisions has evolved through the pandemic.



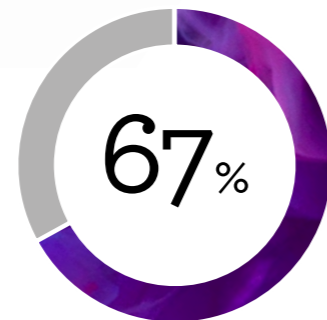


Business experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

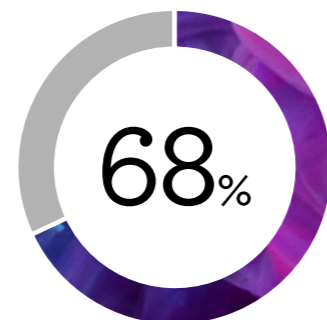
NET Agreement (8-10)



Remote working has significantly changed how my company makes purchasing decisions



Since remote working, I've utilised more sources than usual for purchasing decisions



Since remote working, suppliers' social media content has become more influential in purchasing decisions

NB: These new questions were posed in our most recent survey so there are no September comparisons

Boundaries are blurring

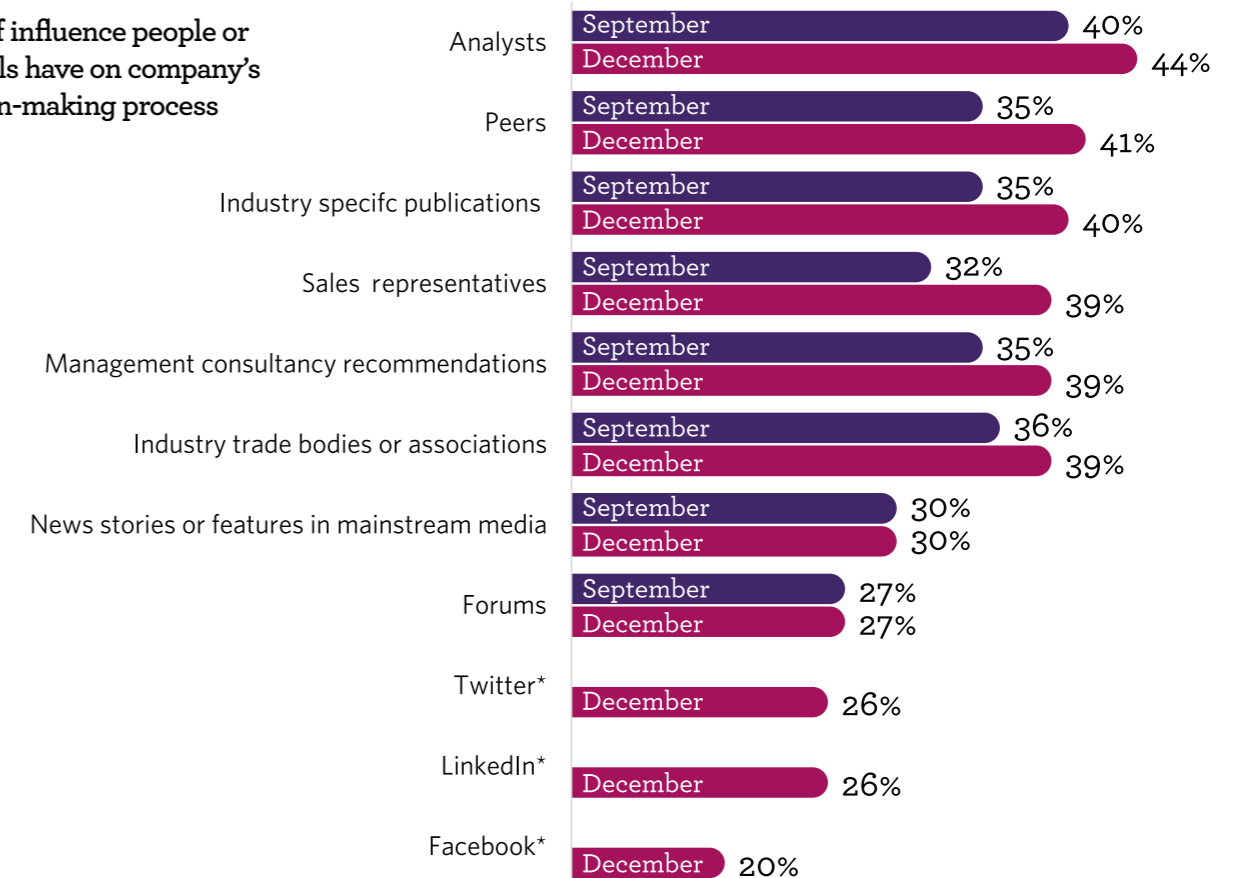
As professional and personal lives have merged into one through a new home-based way of working, buyers have increasingly consulted a blend of content to make their purchasing decisions.

Less sociable but more social

Analysts, peers and industry publications continued to be the most influential information sources for B2B buyers. However, while social media may have been less persuasive, over a quarter of respondents admitted to drawing on LinkedIn and Twitter content for their decision-making.

While there were similar opinions on LinkedIn and Twitter, US respondents were almost twice as likely to consider Facebook very influential compared to their UK counterparts (34% versus 20%).

Level of influence people or channels have on company's decision-making process



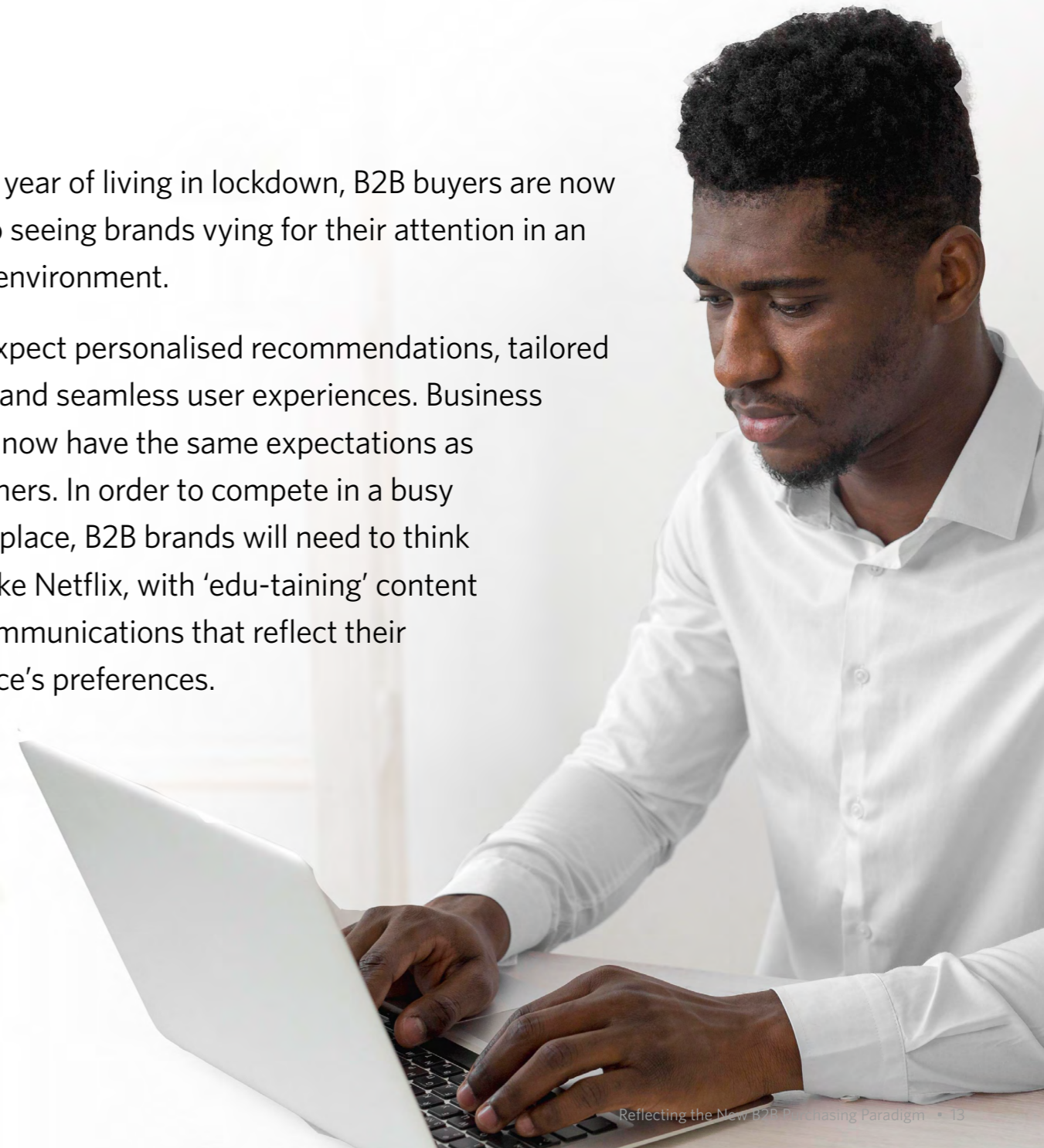
NB: Questions on social channels were posed in our most recent survey so there are no September comparisons



Making it *Personal*

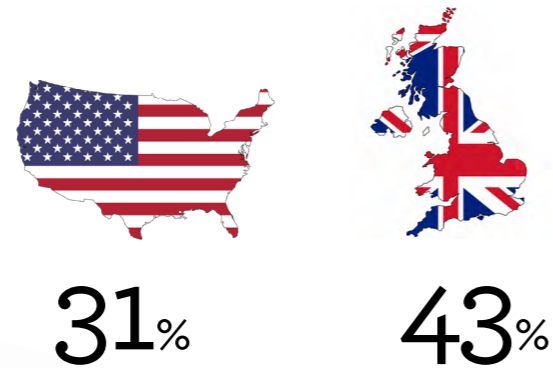
After a year of living in lockdown, B2B buyers are now used to seeing brands vying for their attention in an online environment.

They expect personalised recommendations, tailored emails and seamless user experiences. Business buyers now have the same expectations as consumers. In order to compete in a busy marketplace, B2B brands will need to think more like Netflix, with 'edu-taining' content and communications that reflect their audience's preferences.



Bespoke or be boring

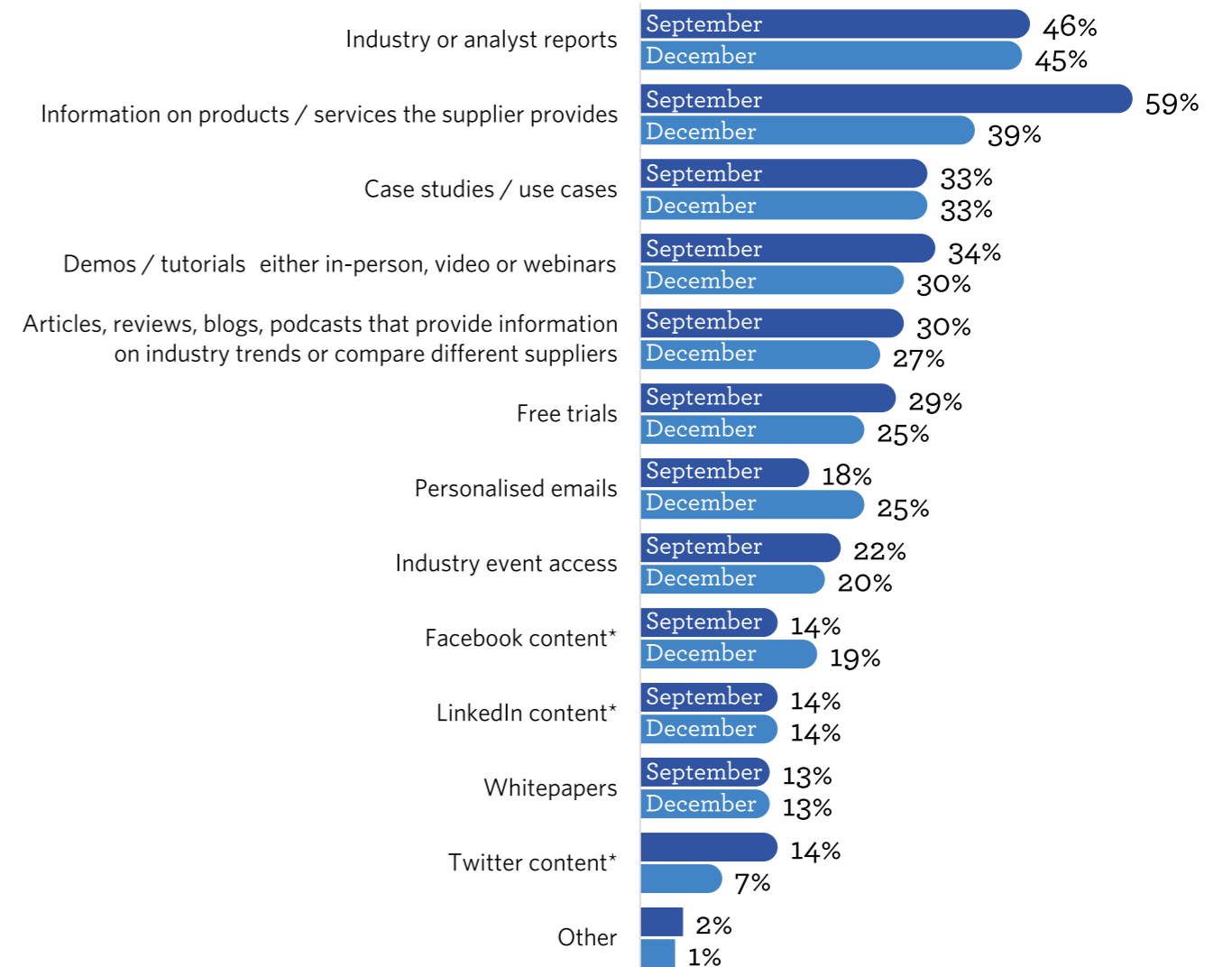
Sales information on product and services is far less useful to B2B buyers as it was last year. Third-party industry and analyst reports have overtaken them as a preferred source, while media activity, including articles, reviews, blogs and podcasts, continue to remain one of the top five most useful marketing tactics. There has significantly been a 7%-point increase in appetite for personalised emails and newsletters.



Personal emails ranked in top 5

Personalisation is considered more important by UK versus US B2B buyers. Just 31% of US respondents ranked personalised emails in their top five, compared to 43% of UK respondents.

Level of helpfulness supplier's tactics or marketing tactics have on company's decision-making process



Consumerisation of content

Two-thirds of B2B buyers are using content from their personal life in their professional life. Suppliers should look to adapt their approach to B2B marketing to reflect this and appreciate that audiences are now wearing two hats almost simultaneously.



61%

“Since remote working, the content I consume for my professional life has become the content I consume in my personal life”





Reaching B2B buyers in the *new normal*

COVID-19 has transformed B2B buying, not always for the better. For many it's a less effective process, with more layers of approval and smaller budgets to spend. However, alongside the frustration, B2B buyers might well prefer their new ways of working, including how they source their information. Based on what we know as communications specialists, how can we help drive lead generation and sales in a post-COVID environment?

1.

Focus on fostering connection

B2B buyers are seeking a more personal touch in their business communications as business and pleasure converge. That's why it's important to talk directly to your audiences through tailored and relevant communications that reflect their needs, not yours.

2.

Explore new channels

Are you still going to the same places your business customers are for their information? Think about new ways of reaching them beyond traditional routes, such as an industry podcast, media promotion or video series. Understand their buying journey and follow them at every stage.

3.

Get creative on content

Now more than ever, it's important to think outside the box. More interactive and engaging types of content will not only resonate with B2B buyers, but will help your message stand out, as they look to more diverse sources to inform their decisions.





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To find out more about how FleishmanHillard can work with your team and partners to integrate PR into your marketing and sales programmes, please get in touch:

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About the report

FleishmanHillard's TRUE Global Intelligence surveyed a nationally representative sample of the UK totalling 150 respondents. Data collection took place in December 2020.