

2026 B2B BUYER JOURNEY: THE POWER OF AI AND TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS

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Buyer Journey |
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AI visibility gets you considered; trust closes the deal

The B2B buying process is becoming more complex. Decision-makers face an overwhelming number of vendor options, increasing stakeholder involvement and pressure to make the right investments for their organizations. At the same time, AI is becoming an important part of procurement, helping buyers research, compare, and evaluate vendors more efficiently. Yet despite greater access to information, buyers are overwhelmed, so trusted relationships remain central to decision-making.

This report, based on feedback from the Ipsos Business Insights Collective and Fresh Lab communities, sheds light on the new way B2B products are bought in the AI era, and what it means for:

1. Marketing Leaders
2. Sales Management
3. Senior Executives

While this doesn't represent the views of every B2B buyer in the U.S., the 288 B2B decision-makers we spoke with lay the roadmap to a new B2B buyer journey at this exact moment of profound technological change.

Throughout this report we highlight the specific steps to help your prospects start and complete their journeys ... with you!

-Holly, Anne, & Kristyna



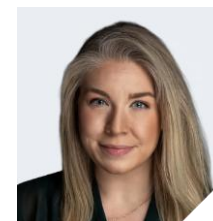
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Key takeaways: What we heard from 288 senior business decision-makers about the B2B buying journey today

1

**INFORMATION
OVERLOAD IS
SLOWING DECISIONS**

2

**AI ENABLES
BUYER
INDEPENDENCE**

3

**TRUSTED ADVOCATES
INCREASE CONFIDENCE
TO TAKE ACTION**

1

INFORMATION OVERLOAD



There is an abundance of vendors, so this can be a painstaking process going through the pros and cons of each one.”

-Manager, resources and construction industry

1 Information overload

Compelling messaging is the foundation

As organizations evaluate an expanding universe of vendors while balancing diverse stakeholder requirements, differentiated messaging becomes critical, before you spend a dime on marketing and media.

Clear message differentiation is especially important for both human and AI buyers to quickly understand the problems you solve and what makes your approach the best.

Implication for vendors: Make it easier for buyers to rule you in

Buyers are overwhelmed by choices and spend significant time researching and comparing vendors. Vendors should focus on clearly communicating differentiation, ideal use cases, and fit-for-purpose messaging rather than creating simple awareness.

The challenge isn't discovery, it's validation

Implication for vendors: reduce buyer effort

Organizations need help validating claims, comparing alternatives, and building confidence in shortlists. Vendors that provide clear comparisons, customer proof, implementation guidance, and solid data can reduce friction during the most time-consuming stage of the journey.

77%

of participants say vendor research is the most time-consuming stage of the buying journey as organizations work to compare vendors, validate claims, and build confidence in the shortlist.

Q. Please rank the following stages of the purchase journey in order of which requires the most time to the least.

Source: Ipsos 2026 B2B Buyer Journey Report, U.S. August 2026

Numerous vendors and products make quick assessment challenging, especially for small organizations lacking procurement teams. Comprehensive evaluation of vendor capabilities and technical specs is required. Verifying vendor reliability and integrity demands checking track records. Misinformation must be addressed by validating facts with third parties and customer references. Vendor selection must align with budget and scalability needs, which is critical for small to mid-sized businesses.

Reasons why vendor research takes too long

- 1. Too many choices** — the sheer volume of vendors and product choices makes it difficult to quickly assess due to the time it takes to identify, review, and compare options for placement on the shortlist for further investigation. This constraint is particularly cumbersome for small organizations without a dedicated procurement team.
- 2. Too many questions** — taking an exhaustive approach to evaluating vendor capabilities and comparing technical specifications. This due diligence requires comprehensive review and comparison of all vendor aspects, including:
 - 1. Reliability and integrity verification** — the task to ensure vendors are reliable, trustworthy, and can deliver on promises without delays requires effort to validate vendor claims based on their track record.
 - 2. Misinformation and validation** — cutting through misinformation necessitates the validation of facts through third-party sources and customer referrals. This is particularly necessary due to the prevalence of biased or incomplete information online and from vendors themselves.
- 3. Too many considerations** — aligning vendors with budget constraints and can scale as needed.

Internal consensus is the biggest barrier to purchase

Implication for vendors: Help buyers sell internally

The biggest hurdle is not identifying solutions but gaining approval across finance, IT, procurement, and leadership stakeholders. Create materials that address common objections and provide ROI justification, business cases, and stakeholder-specific messaging.

While vendor research is the most time-consuming part of the process, participants do not view it as the primary challenge in their purchasing journey. Rather, financial concerns related to budgets and demonstrated ROI, along with the effort needed to align needs, preferences, and consensus among numerous stakeholders, are considered the main obstacles to making a purchase decision. This frequently necessitates further research to accommodate the diverse requirements and considerations of various stakeholders.



Everyone has their own idea of what is best and how to produce, procure, and deliver. Generally, a vetting process is completed, which greatly narrows down which products and services get procured.”

–Executive leader, construction industry

Biggest internal hurdles in the purchase process

- **Securing approval:** The process to obtain approval, especially for significant expenses, involves multiple stakeholders. This leads to delays as it requires agreement and sign-off from various departments such as finance, IT, and the executive team.
- **Stakeholder alignment:** The ability to achieve consensus among various departments is a substantial effort. Organizations often struggle with aligning different priorities and interests, causing indecision and procrastination.
- **Budget and ROI:** Budget limitations consistently impede the purchase process. The lack of available funds and approval delays are significant obstacles since budgets are often inflexible and heavily scrutinized. Consequently, organizations need to justify expenses upfront, and confirming that the benefits outweigh costs is a recurring concern.

2

INDEPENDENCE THROUGH AI



AI made the early stages faster. I use it to research vendors, compare options and narrow the shortlist before speaking with sales, but I still rely on demos and implementation details to make the final decision."

–Executive leader, professional services industry

2

Buyer independence

Sales engagement is happening later in the journey

AI is helping buyers accelerate research, evaluate alternatives, and expand consideration sets before engaging vendors. It acts as an independent research assistant, allowing organizations to compare options, validate information, and build shortlists more efficiently. AI supports early-stage consideration but doesn't replace human judgment during the final selection process.

Implication for vendors: Assume buyers arrive informed

Many buyers complete significant research before engaging vendors. Marketing, websites, product content, reviews, and AI-discoverable assets are increasingly shaping perceptions and determining whether you are even considered before a sales conversation occurs.

AI's primary role is discovery

Implication for vendors: Optimize AI visibility

As buyers use AI to identify vendors that they would not otherwise consider, vendors need clear, accessible, and machine-readable content that can be surfaced by AI tools. If AI cannot find or understand your value proposition, buyers may never consider you.

70%

of participants
leverage AI in
their vendor
selection
process

Q. To what extent has AI impacted your organization's approach to finding and selecting business suppliers?

Source: Ipsos 2026 B2B Buyer Journey Report, U.S. August 2026

Overall, while AI has potential benefits in efficiency, broader supplier options, and data-driven decision-making, many organizations are still in the early stages of integrating AI into their procurement processes.

Almost half of the respondents (42%) indicated that AI is used to generate an initial list of vendors they wouldn't have otherwise considered.



AI impact on vendor selection process

- 1. Enhanced research capabilities:** AI has improved the ability to gather and synthesize information about suppliers, providing comprehensive lists of potential suppliers, facilitating comparisons, and evaluating alternatives based on specific criteria (e.g., capabilities, market positions, and customer sentiment).
- 2. Expanded supplier options:** Some respondents note that AI opens up a wider array of choices by identifying suppliers and opportunities not previously considered, thus expanding the range of selection.
- 3. Objective filtering and validation:** AI tools serve as an objective filter during the supplier selection process, helping to independently validate choices and reduce the subjective element in decision-making.

AI improves confidence more than compliance

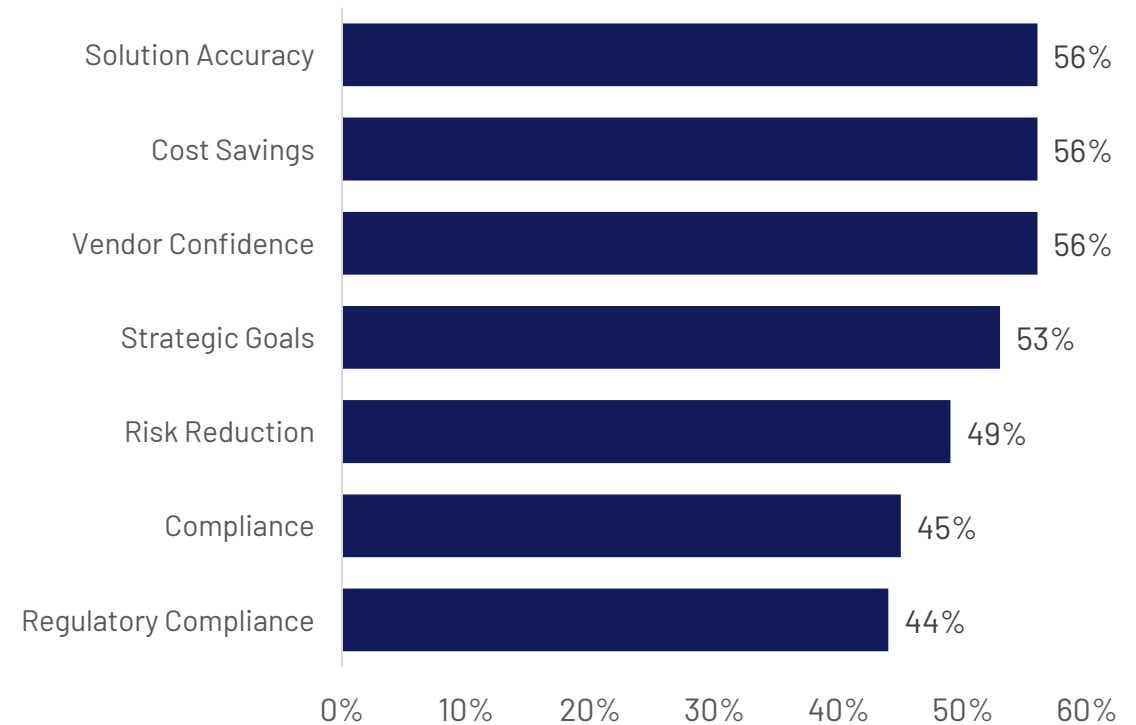
Implication for vendors: Use AI to support buyer confidence

Buyers view AI as a method to improve decision quality, accuracy, and confidence. Vendors should provide structured data, benchmarking information, and objective proof points that help buyers validate decisions independently.

The level of impact varies widely. Some respondents feel it has a significant or major impact (30%), while others find that AI is an additional tool but has not significantly changed their procurement process yet.

While 43% feel that the use of AI has made them personally feel more confident in their decisions because the data provided by AI is more “objective.”

AI efficacy impact on the procurement journey



Q. Now, considering the use of AI in your procurement journey, how has it impacted purchasing efficacy in the following ways: (n=288)

Source: Ipsos 2026 B2B Buyer Journey Report, U.S. August 2026

AI is reducing buyer dependence on sales representatives

Implication for vendors: Shift sales conversations from education to validation

Buyers increasingly arrive with research completed and specific questions prepared. Sales teams should focus less on explaining products and more on addressing risks, demonstrating fit, validating assumptions, and supporting stakeholder alignment.

40%

of participants trust AI slightly more than documents provided by vendors

Q. How much do you trust an AI-generated summary of a product compared to the official product documentation provided by the vendor?

Source: Ipsos 2026 B2B Buyer Journey Report, U.S. August 2026

AI is shifting how buyers engage with vendors. By the time the decision-makers reach sales conversations, they have often already researched vendors, compared options, and narrowed down their shortlist using AI.

This growing independence is reflected in buyer trust and behavior even after the proposal is received. Nearly half of the respondents' organizations use AI to evaluate and validate vendor options, which means proposals should be optimized for AI analysis.



Effect of AI on sales representative interactions

- 1. Efficiency and speed:** AI tools streamline the research process, making it faster and easier to gather information, compare products, and create shortlists.
- 2. Reduced sales interaction:** AI tools allow respondents to independently research, compare, and narrow down options before reaching out to sales reps for deeper discussions.
- 3. Clear validation:** Create the ability to quickly validate vendor claims and capture a more detailed understanding of vendor offerings and industry positioning.
- 4. Increased independence:** AI tools help conduct robust analyses and formulate focused questions, which enables productive engagements with vendors and enhances autonomy in the decision-making process.

3

TRUSTED ADVOCATES INCREASE CONFIDENCE



We now use LLMs, review sites, analyst content, public documentation, pricing pages, and peer feedback to narrow the field before engaging sales.”

-Senior manager, technology industry

3

Trusted advocates

Buyers increasingly seek proof, not promotion

When making purchase decisions, buyers rely on trusted sources to validate vendor claims and reduce risk. Word-of-mouth recommendations, customer experiences, industry experts, and third-party reviews are more influential than direct vendor communications.

Implication for vendors: Trust is built through multiple advocates, not a single source

Buyers increasingly validate vendors through reviews, peer recommendations, customer references, industry experts, and AI-assisted research. Vendors should build influence across the validation ecosystem rather than relying solely on sales outreach.

The New B2B Funnel: Validation drives AI consideration



THE NEW AI-ENABLED BUYER JOURNEY

☆☆☆
Comparison &
review sites

Media coverage

Your website

Expert POVs

Client advocacy

Sales demos
and materials



AI

Proposal & pricing



AI

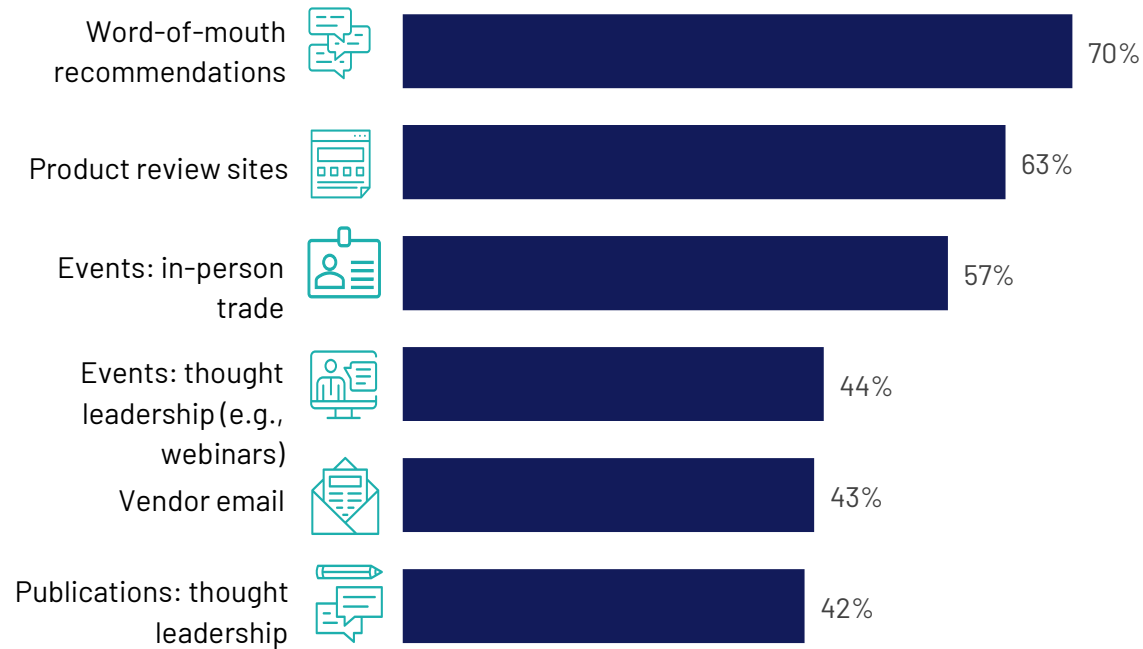
Sales relationships

Peer
recommendations

Purchase

Buyers trust other people more than promotions

Top 6 preferred information channels



Q. Please rank the top 5 venues you prefer for receiving information on vendor offerings by their importance, where 1 is the most useful. (n=288)

Source: Ipsos 2026 B2B Buyer Journey Report, U.S. August 2026

Implication for vendors: Invest in customer advocacy programs

Word-of-mouth recommendations, review platforms, and peer experiences carry more weight than direct vendor outreach. Turning customers into advocates may generate more influence than increasing promotional activity.

The decision-makers we spoke with said they often depend on the insights of others to learn about vendors. This includes a more personal, human approach such as word-of-mouth and attending in-person events, as well as gathering information from experts and customers via review sites.

C-suite respondents were more likely to rely on human information, both from their networks and vendors. These senior executives uniquely seek direct contact from vendors (50%) regarding their offerings.

Buyers need evidence, not claims to finalize their decisions

Implication for vendors: Prove outcomes, don't describe features.

Buyers want documentation, demonstration, case studies, proof-of-concept opportunities, and evidence of past success. Shift content from product-centric messaging toward outcome-centric proof.

56%

of participants indicate case studies are as important as they have always been

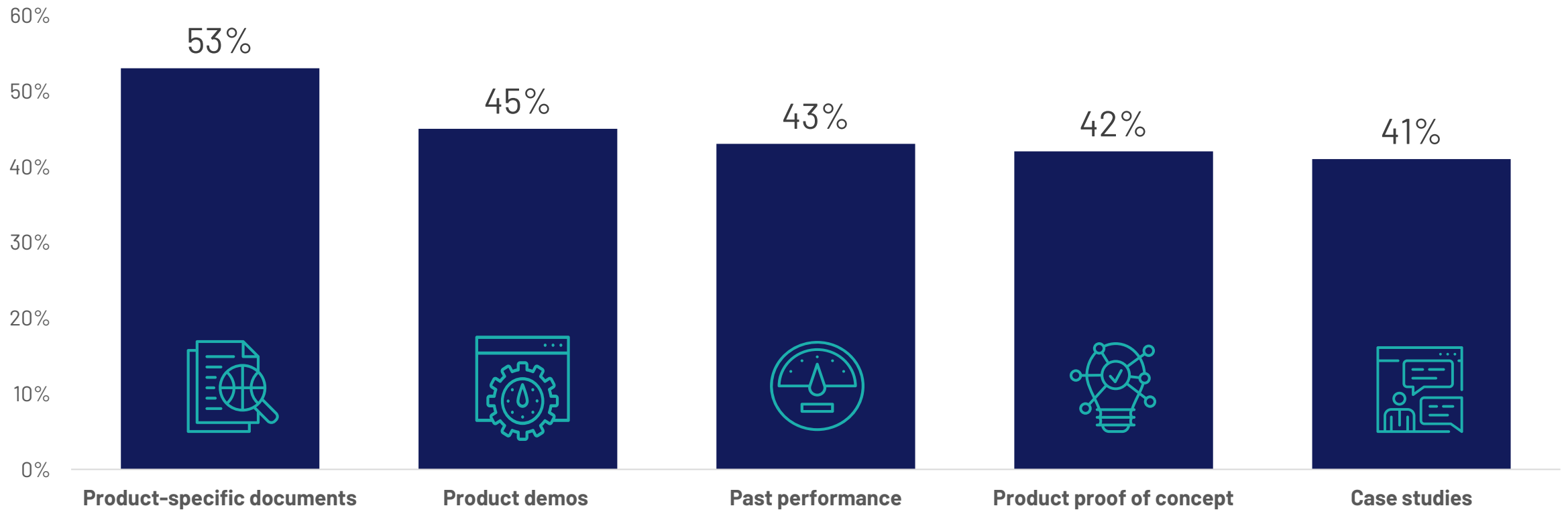
Q. Compared to last year, how has the influence of case studies evolved in your vendor selection process?

Source: Ipsos 2026 B2B Buyer Journey Report, U.S. August 2026

Decision-makers find a broad array of inputs ranging from details of the product through documentation, demos, and performance history with applications and success stories that put the product in the context of outcomes and solutions.

Executive management respondents rely more on brand and broad educational materials. Senior management respondents rely on how the solution works in the context of the related problem and its outcomes through case studies, product demos, and proof of concepts. While general management respondents rely on demos to provide information about the product in action.

Top 5 most helpful materials for decision-making



Q. When making new purchases for your organization, which of the following materials are most helpful in choosing a vendor? (n=288)

Source: Ipsos 2026 B2B Buyer Journey Report, U.S. August 2026

10 concrete actions to take today to meet the B2B buyer along their journey



1. **Rewrite your positioning around differentiation, not awareness.** Make it immediately clear who you serve, what problem you solve, and why you're different from alternatives.
2. **Build AI-friendly product content.** Ensure your website, product pages, documentation, and thought leadership are structured so AI tools can easily discover, interpret, and summarize your value proposition.
3. **Publish side-by-side competitive comparisons.** Help buyers evaluate options faster with transparent comparison guides, capability matrices, and decision frameworks.
4. **Give buyers an ROI toolkit.** Provide ROI calculators, business case templates, cost-benefit analyses, and budget justification materials that help internal champions secure approval.
5. **Create stakeholder-specific content.** Develop tailored messaging and materials for Finance, IT, Procurement, Operations, and Executive audiences to address their unique concerns and decision criteria.
6. **Shift sales conversations from education to validation.** Assume buyers have already done substantial research. Focus sales interactions on implementation, risk mitigation, fit, assumptions, and stakeholder alignment.
7. **Lead with proof, not product features.** Put case studies, customer outcomes, proof-of-concept programs, implementation success stories, and performance data at the center of your go-to-market strategy.
8. **Build a formal customer advocacy program.** Systematically generate references, reviews, referrals, testimonials, and peer-to-peer conversations that influence buying decisions.
9. **Provide objective validation assets.** Publish benchmarks, third-party research, analyst perspectives, implementation metrics, and customer results that help buyers independently verify your claims.
10. **Invest in the channels that buyers trust.** Prioritize review sites, customer communities, industry experts, thought leadership, webinars, analyst relations, and in-person events over purely promotional outreach.

METHODOLOGY

Business decision-makers surveyed for this report

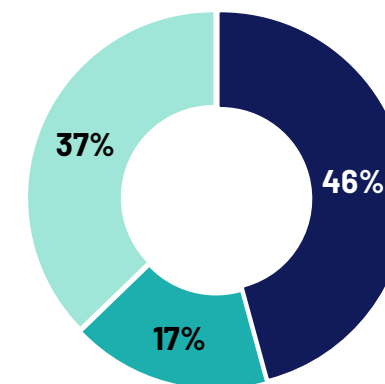
Data for this study was collected via an asynchronous, self-administered online survey hosted on the Ipsos Community platform. The sample comprises 288 U.S.-based business decision-makers, defined as those who are the final decision-maker or part of a team or committee that makes purchasing decisions for indirect procurement within their organization.

The respondents were recruited from the *Ipsos Business Insights Collective* and *Fresh Labs* communities, with fieldwork conducted between May 20, 2026, and June 1, 2026. The Business Insights Collective and Fresh Lab use the Ipsos community platform to engage business decision-makers across industries and seniority levels.

To ensure the highest standard of data integrity and mitigate the risk of fraud or self-selection bias, our proprietary **IVET** framework (**I**dentify, **V**alidate, **E**ngage, **T**est & **E**valuate) was deployed. Ipsos delivers high-quality data from verified B2B decision-makers by combining automated ID authentication with hands-on cross-referencing of LinkedIn and professional profiles to validate key roles. Additionally, our team maintains an ongoing verification process to track employment shifts and maintain response consistency over time.

Source: Business Decision Makers in Ipsos Syndicated Research communities May-June 2026

Decision Maker Seniority



- Executive management (e.g., C-Suite)
- Senior management (e.g., SVP, EVP, department head)
- Management (e.g., VP, director or manager)

METHODOLOGY

Industry representation

The 2026 B2B Buyer Journey research employed a non-probability, purposive sampling design aimed at maximizing the respondent representation within specific, high-impact B2B purchasing sectors selected from these Communities. Because the primary objective of this research is to explore the mechanisms of the B2B buying journey, post-stratification weights were deliberately omitted.

The respondent profile (N = 288) was benchmarked against the 2024 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) National Employment Matrix, specifically isolating professional, managerial, and technical occupations (SOC Codes 11, 13, and 15) to represent the B2B buyer universe. A comparative analysis reveals that the sample exhibits strong natural alignment with the BLS professional population across several key sectors, most notably Technology (11.11% in this study vs. 11.70% benchmark vs. 11.11%), Retail (6.25% in this study vs. 7.27% benchmark), and Education (5.90% in this study vs. 6.27% benchmark). However, the raw sample is overrepresented in Construction & Manufacturing (+20.03 percentage points). This aligns with the fact that Construction and Manufacturing are true B2B purchases. It is underrepresented in Business Services (-6.93 percentage points), Government (-6.92 percentage points), and Finance (-5.99 percentage points). In Business Services and Finance, the BLS data set classification also includes some business to consumer roles which were intentionally not included in the study, such as sales of consumer insurance. The underrepresentation in Government is intentional as the Government procurement process differs greatly from the typical B2B buying journey.

Based on these minor variances from the BLS data and the intention of the study to represent the true B2B buyer journey, the data has intentionally not been weighted.

Industry	2026 Ipsos B2B Buyer Journey Study	BLS 2024 % of B2B manager roles
Business Services	13.55%	20.48%
Construction & Manufacturing	30.20%	10.17%
Education	5.90%	6.27%
Energy & Utilities	2.08%	0.53%
Finance	7.29%	13.28%
Government	1.74%	8.66%
Healthcare	7.64%	5.44%
Non-profit	1.39%	1.25%
Other	10.76%	13.18%
Retail	6.25%	7.27%
Technology	11.11%	11.70%
Transportation	2.09%	1.77%

Source: Business Decision Makers in Ipsos Syndicated Research communities May-June 2026

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT B2B BUSINESS DECISION- MAKERS THINK, CHECK OUT THE IPSOS BUSINESS INSIGHTS COLLECTIVE

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