

2026 CONSUMER SURVEY REPORT

Digital authenticity in the age of AI

What today's consumers trust and
how marketers can earn it





INTRODUCTION

What does authenticity really mean to consumers in 2026?

In a digital world shaped by AI, automation, and endless content, consumers are becoming more selective about who they trust — and more skeptical of what brands say.

Marketing messages are everywhere. But trust is not.

Today's consumers don't take brand claims at face value. They verify. They research. They read reviews. They compare experiences across platforms. And when something feels exaggerated, scripted, or artificial, they move on, unless you proactively feed them the information they need.

Authenticity has become the deciding factor, not just in how people feel about brands, but in whether they buy from them at all.

Authenticity is no longer optional

This research explores how consumers in the U.S. and U.K. define authenticity across:

- > Product research
- > Reviews and recommendations
- > AI-generated content
- > Customer service interactions
- > Purchase and loyalty decisions

How to use this report

This report is designed to help marketers:

- > **Understand** how consumers evaluate authenticity today
- > **Identify** where trust is won, and lost
- > **Align** marketing, content, and customer experience to what consumers actually value

Authenticity doesn't live in a single campaign. It's built across every interaction.

This report shows you how.



What you will find in this survey report

This report examines the top-line data from a survey of U.S. and U.K. based social media users from a wide spectrum of ages and demographics to understand their behavior, preferences, and expectations for brand interactions on social media.

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Methodology

Nature of survey: This was an 8-minute online survey offered in English only

Sample size: The sample was 1,650 consumers (U.S.-813, U.K.-837)

When: Data collected January 2026

Qualifications: To qualify, respondents had to:

- Use at least 2 major social platforms at least twice per week
- Made an online purchase within the past 6 months



BEHAVIOR

How consumers approach digital purchases today

Consumers don't shop online impulsively, especially as prices rise. As purchase value increases, decision-making slows and scrutiny intensifies. What begins as browsing quickly becomes investigation.

Retail and food purchases dominate everyday online shopping. But higher-value purchases, led by technology and travel, trigger a fundamental behavioral shift, where confidence matters more than convenience.

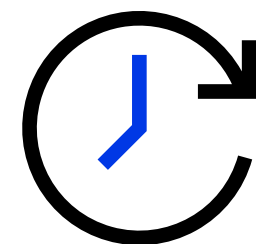
For purchases over \$/£500, more than half of consumers visit three or more websites and spend over an hour researching, actively validating brand claims across websites, reviews, search results, and marketplaces.

What hasn't changed

For purchases above \$/£100, consumers still routinely cross-check multiple websites before buying. Multi-source validation remains standard behavior.

What's new in 2026

Research intensity increases sharply once purchase value exceeds \$/£500. Consumers spend more time, consult more sources, and scrutinize decisions more deeply.



Benchmark shift (2023 vs. 2026)

+24pp increase

in consumers spending over **an hour** researching high-value purchases.

WHAT WE KNOW



Retail and food

The most common online purchases.



Mid-range purchases (£21-100)

Most frequent across everyday categories.



Higher-priced purchases (£100+)

Shift toward tech and travel.



Research increases with price

More time and more sites are involved.

WHAT YOU CAN DO



Support research, not just conversion

- Show products in action
- Assist instead of repeating ads



Align messaging across channels

- Site, search, reviews, and social
- Speak to the buying cycle



Assume every channel influences

- Maintain a unified experience
- Design for confidence



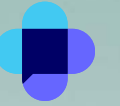
Build validation into every journey

- Surface reviews and comparisons
- Feature customer content and FAQs

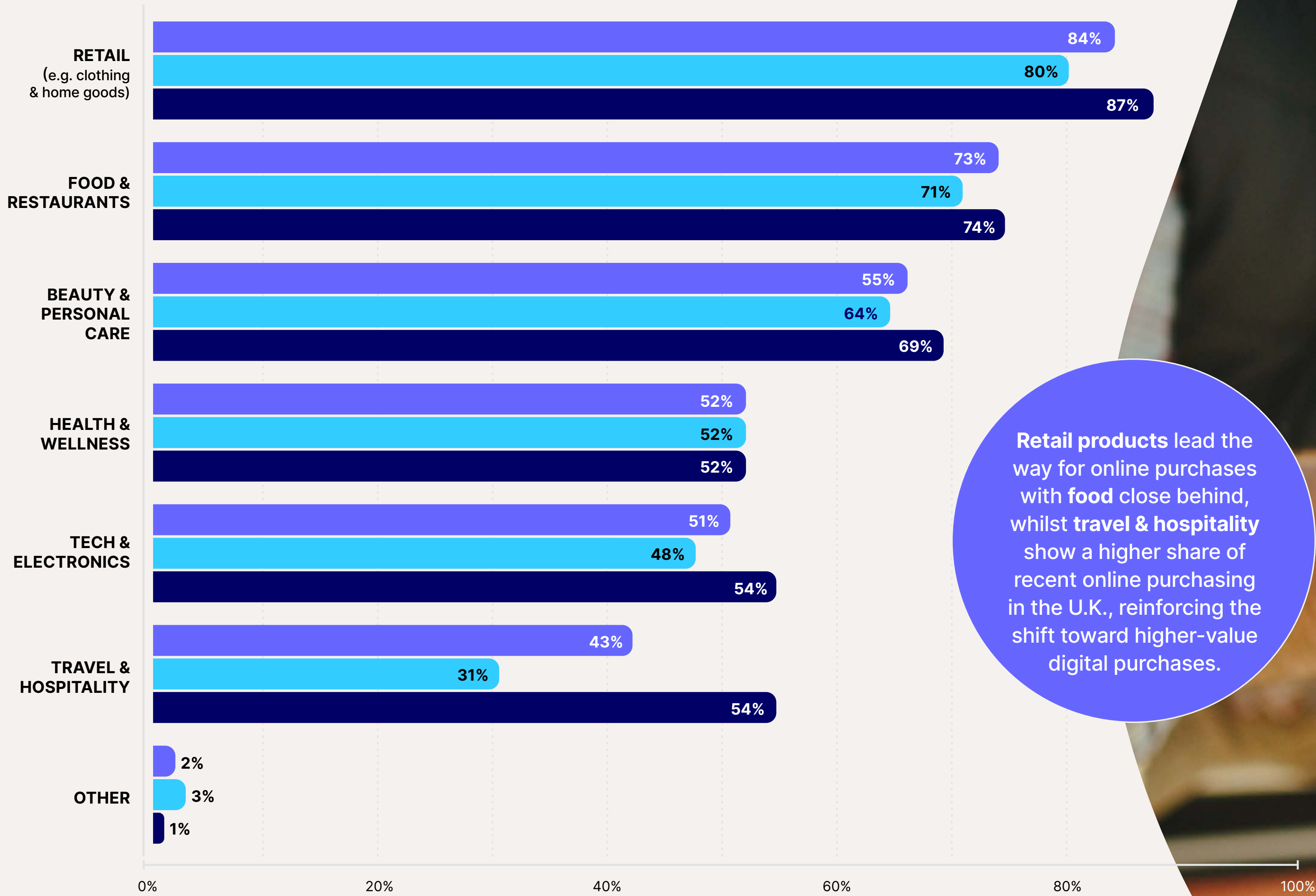
Takeway:

Consumers don't move through funnels, they evaluate and build confidence. One inconsistent touchpoint can undermine the entire purchase decision.





Products / Services purchased online in the past 6 months



Retail products lead the way for online purchases with food close behind, whilst travel & hospitality show a higher share of recent online purchasing in the U.K., reinforcing the shift toward higher-value digital purchases.

Turn every purchase moment into a brand advantage

Emplifi helps you connect content, care, and commerce to drive conversions across categories.

[Book a demo](#)

Base: Total Respondents (n=1,650) | U.S. (n=813) | U.K. (n=837) | Gen Z (n=463) | Millennial (n=447) | Gen X (n=450) | Boomer (n=287)
Which, if any, of the following products or services have you purchased online in the past 6 months?

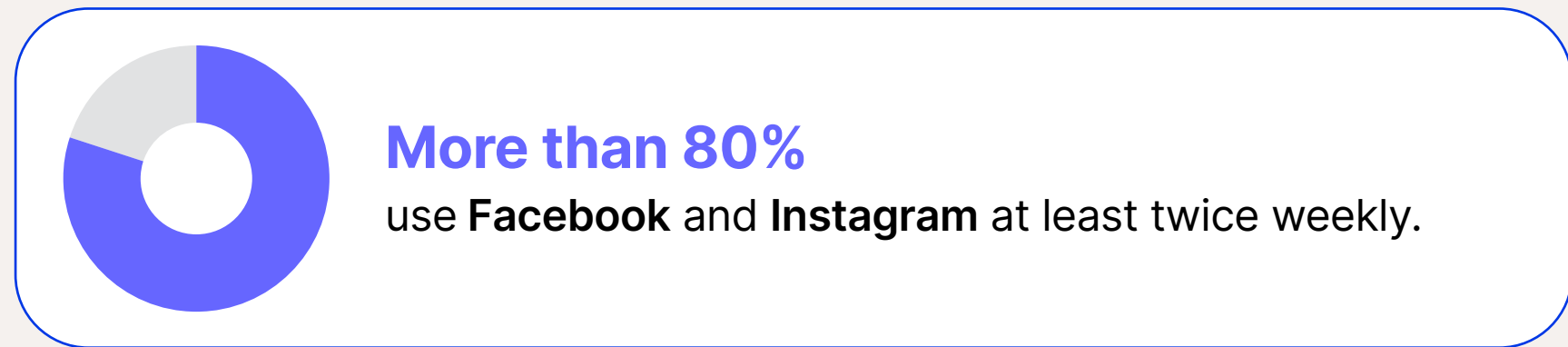
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PLATFORM USAGE

Where consumers spend time (and how it differs by generation)

Social platforms are deeply embedded in consumers' daily routines. But platform dominance, and trust visibility, varies significantly by generation.



BABY BOOMERS

Born between 1946 & 1964



GEN X

Born between 1965 & 1980



MILLENNIALS

Born between 1981 & 1996



GEN Z

Born between 1997 & 2012

WHAT WE KNOW

- Social media is habitual across markets**
—
50%+ of U.S. and U.K. consumers use Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok at least twice a week.
- Facebook drives the highest frequency**
—
80%+ of consumers use Facebook and Instagram at least twice weekly.
- Facebook skews older**
—
90%+ of Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers use it regularly vs. ~70% of Gen Z.
- Instagram skews younger**
—
90%+ of Gen Z use Instagram regularly vs. ~75% of Boomers.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Align channels to audience behavior**
Focus your mix on where your audience spends time - not where your brand is most active.
- Prioritize authenticity on high-usage platforms**
Surface reviews, ratings, and customer content where engagement is highest.
- Adapt creative by platform and generation**
Match tone, format, and proof points to audience expectations.
- Support social with cross-channel investment**
Reinforce with email, web, and paid media to maximize impact.

Takeway: Social usage is universal, but platform influence is not. Brands that align channel strategy to generational behavior will show up where trust is actually built.

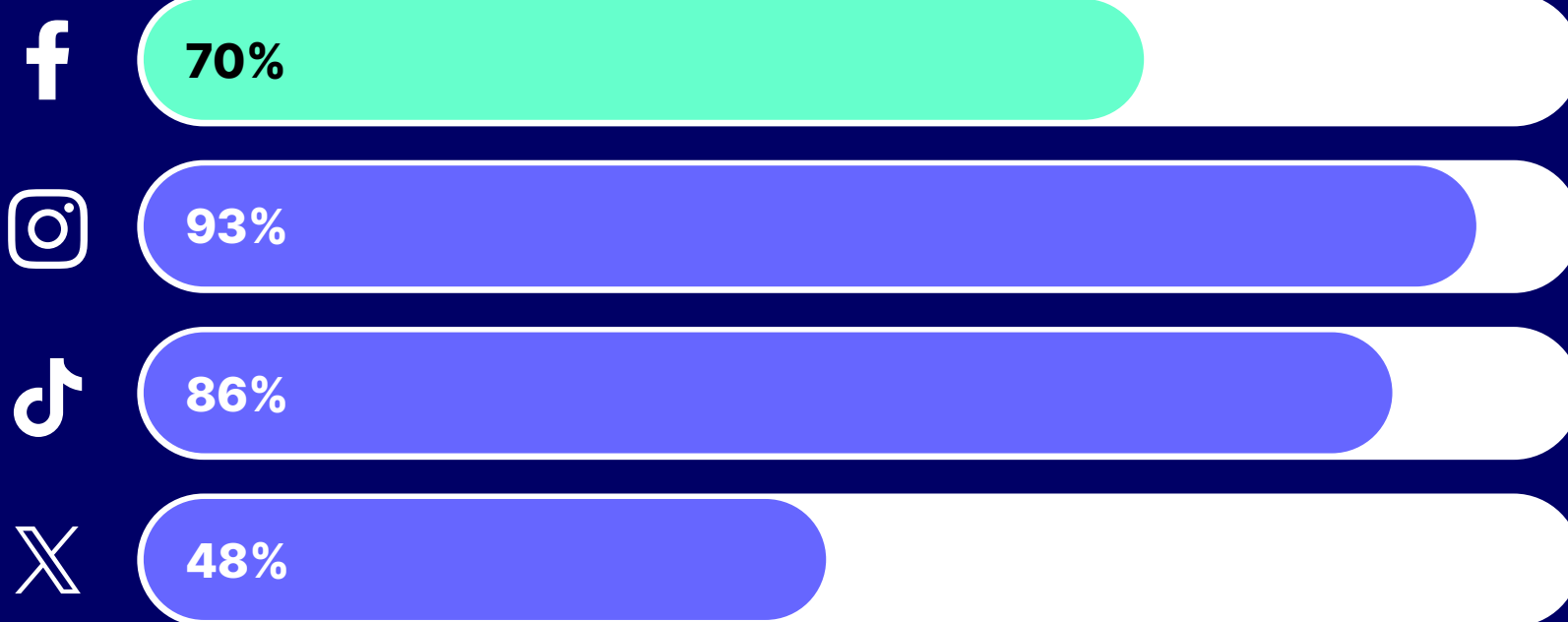
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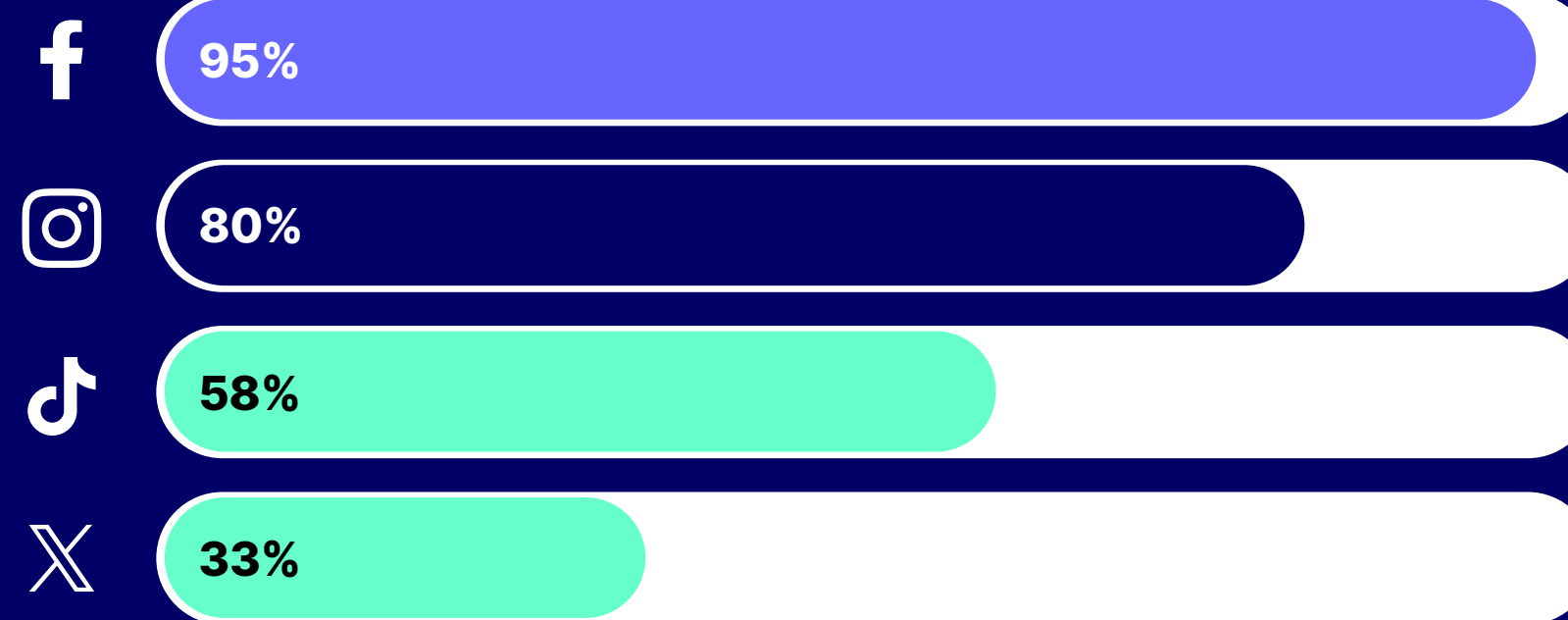
Platforms used at least 2x per week by generation



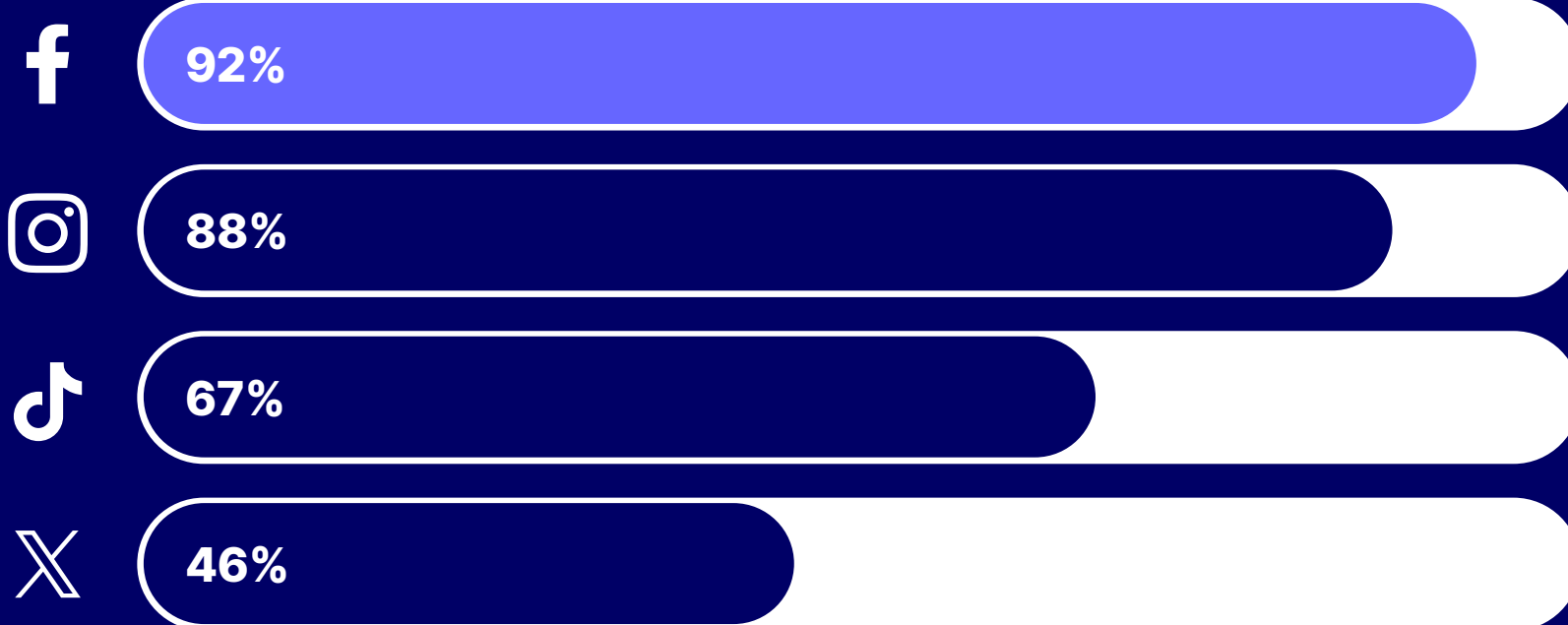
GEN Z



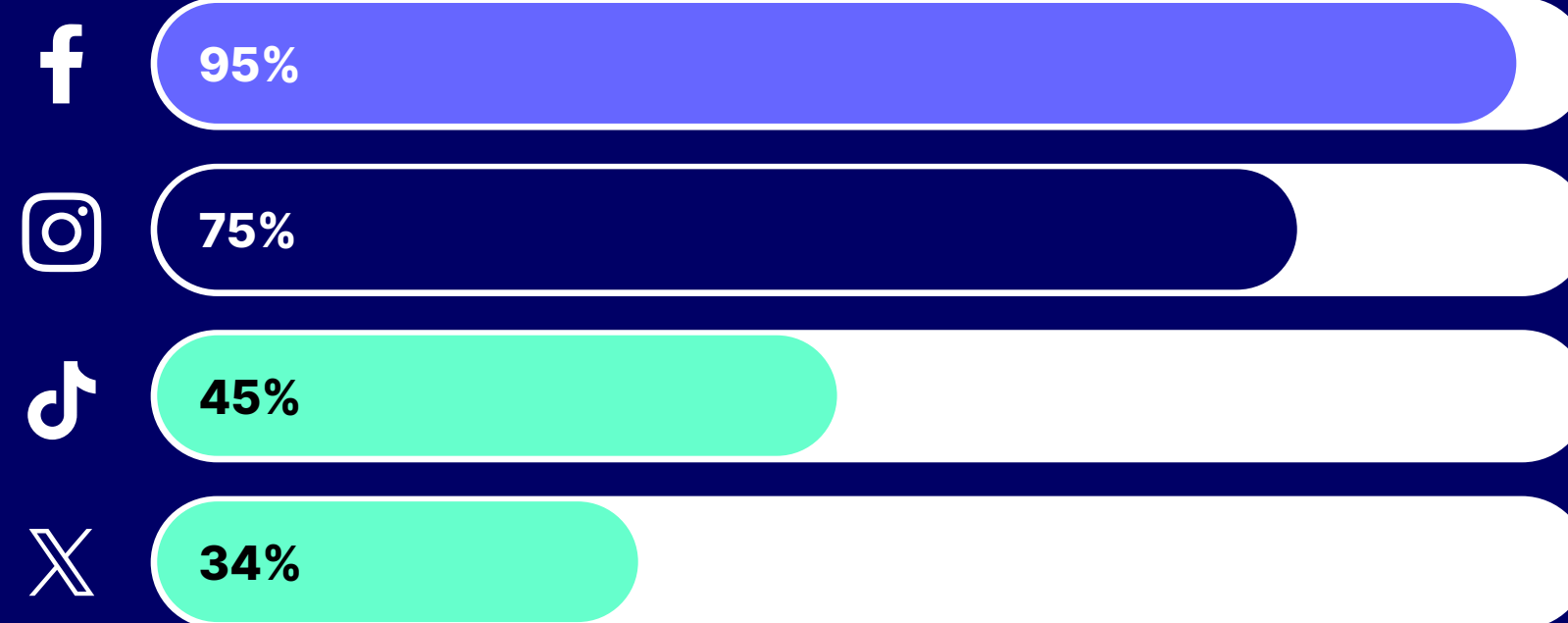
GEN X



MILLENNIALS



BOOMER



Bonus insight:

Reddit is used regularly by 29% of U.S. consumers vs. 21% in the U.K., reinforcing its role as a discussion-driven research channel.

GEN Z



MILLENNIAL



GEN X



BOOMER



■ SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER ■ SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER VS. OTHER CATEGORY AT A 95% CONFIDENCE LEVEL

Base: Total Respondents (n=1,650) | U.S. (n=813) | U.K. (n=837) | Gen Z (n=463) | Millennial (n=447) | Gen X (n=450) | Boomer (n=287)
Which platforms, if any, do you use at least twice per week? Select all that apply.



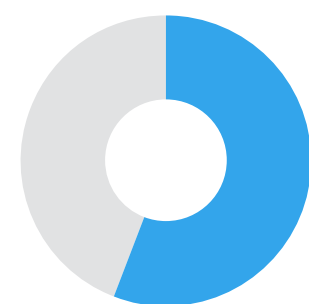
PRODUCT RESEARCH

Where consumers begin their research (and why it matters)

Consumers don't all start their purchase journey in the same place. While low-cost purchases often begin on marketplaces or quick search, higher-value purchases push consumers toward deeper research and more trusted sources.

As spending increases, the path becomes more fragmented. Consumers move between marketplaces, brand websites, review platforms, search engines, and even AI tools, cross-checking information to validate claims and reduce risk before committing.

Across multiple price tiers, U.S. consumers are most likely to start product research on marketplaces, reinforcing the importance of being discoverable where shopping begins.



56% of consumers

visit 3+ websites before buying items priced between **\$/£501-\$/£1,000**



WHAT WE KNOW

For purchases under \$/£20, research most commonly begins on marketplaces and company websites.

U.K. consumers are more likely to start **research on brand websites**, while U.S. consumers are more likely to start on marketplaces.

As purchase value increases, consumers visit more sites and spend significantly more time researching.

For purchases above \$/£500, search engines and AI assistants become more likely starting points.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Optimize discovery across the channels where research starts: marketplaces, brand websites, search, and social.

Strengthen your trust layer early by surfacing ratings, reviews, and customer content where consumers begin their journey.

Use UGC and review content to support SEO performance, ensuring your brand appears credible when consumers search.

Keep social media aligned with your review ecosystem, reinforcing product claims with real customer validation.

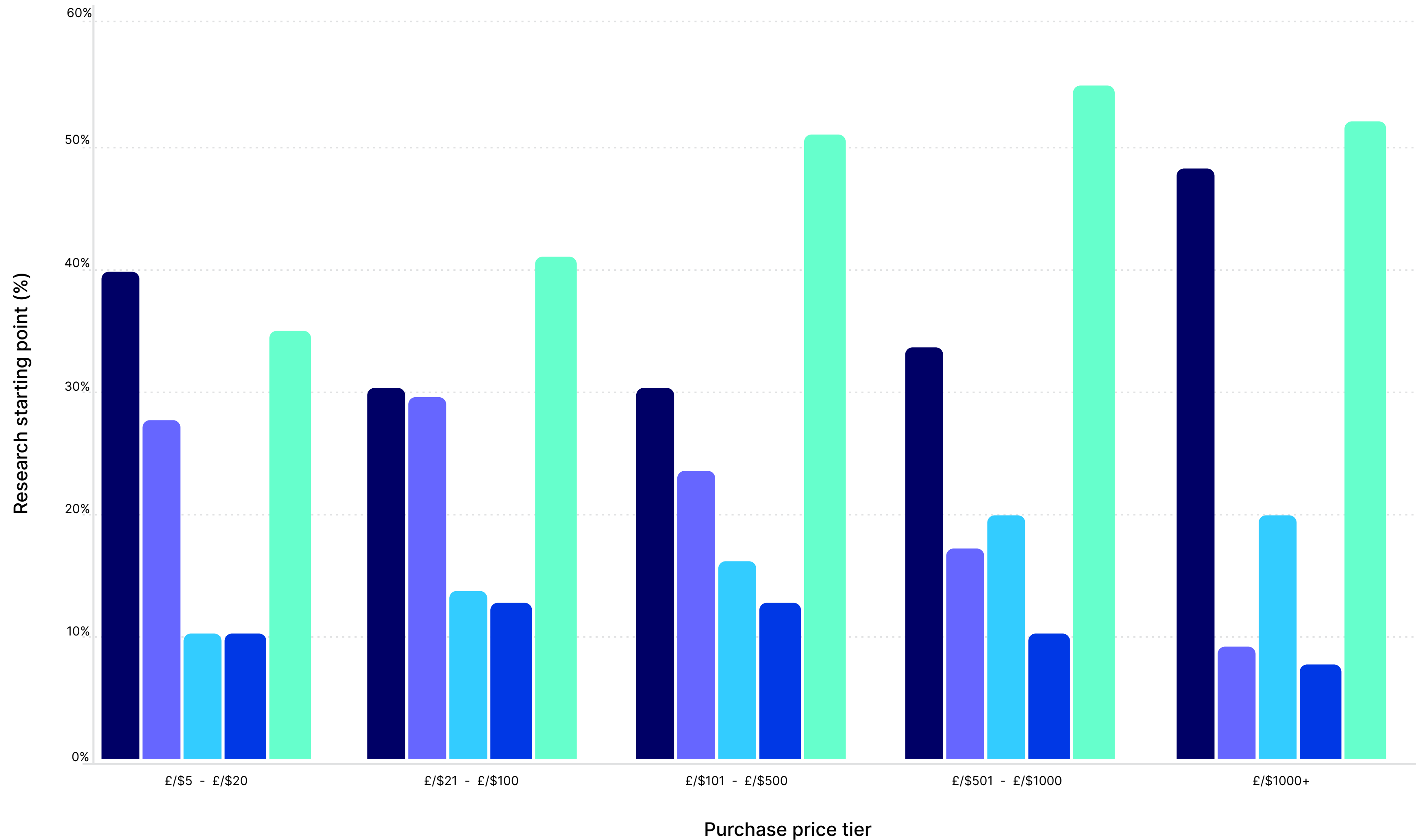
Takeway:

Brands can no longer rely on a single discovery channel. To win, marketers must show up consistently everywhere consumers look.

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Where research begins and how research depth increases with price



Marketplace
Social media

Company website
Visit 3+ websites

Search / AI

Note: Chart reflects top research starting points. Remaining percentage includes app stores, review sites, and forums.

Turn ratings and reviews into your strongest growth driver

Emplifi helps you collect, manage, and amplify authentic customer proof at scale.

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TRUST

Consumers trust people more than brands

Consumers don't just research products, they research credibility.

In a digital environment saturated with marketing messages, buyers increasingly rely on social proof to validate what brands claim. Ratings, reviews, and customer-generated content act as trust shortcuts, helping consumers reduce uncertainty and build confidence before committing.

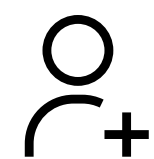
Trust is no longer shaped by what brands say, it's shaped by what customers experience, and how they talk about that experience.

Benchmark Shift (2023 vs. 2026)



+14pp increase

in consumers who say **authenticity** in customer service matters



Peer reviews

continue to rank as the most **trusted and authentic interaction**



Reading 3+ reviews

remains near-universal behavior (77% → 79%)

For consumers, honesty and transparency outrank every other authenticity lever when it comes to the brand-consumer relationship.



WHAT WE KNOW

Trust is behavioral

79% read three or more reviews before buying.

Trust is comparative

Reviews and search results rank as the most authentic content types.

Trust is emotional

93% say authentic engagement builds trust.

Trust is economic

85% are willing to pay more for authentic brands.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Treat ratings and reviews as **high-impact marketing assets** not just post-purchase feedback.

Increase review volume and recency
Ensure your most trusted content stays current and competitive.

Activate UGC across campaigns
Reinforce product claims with real customer proof.

Surface ratings, review averages, and customer proof at key conversion points to justify premium pricing.

Takeway:

When brands operationalize social proof, trust becomes a competitive advantage, not just a reputation metric.



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Qualities that matter most for an authentic brand

Honest and truthful (communicates clearly without exaggeration)

58%

Keeps its promise (does what it says it will do)

44%

Feels genuine and relatable (down-to-earth, not overly polished or fake)

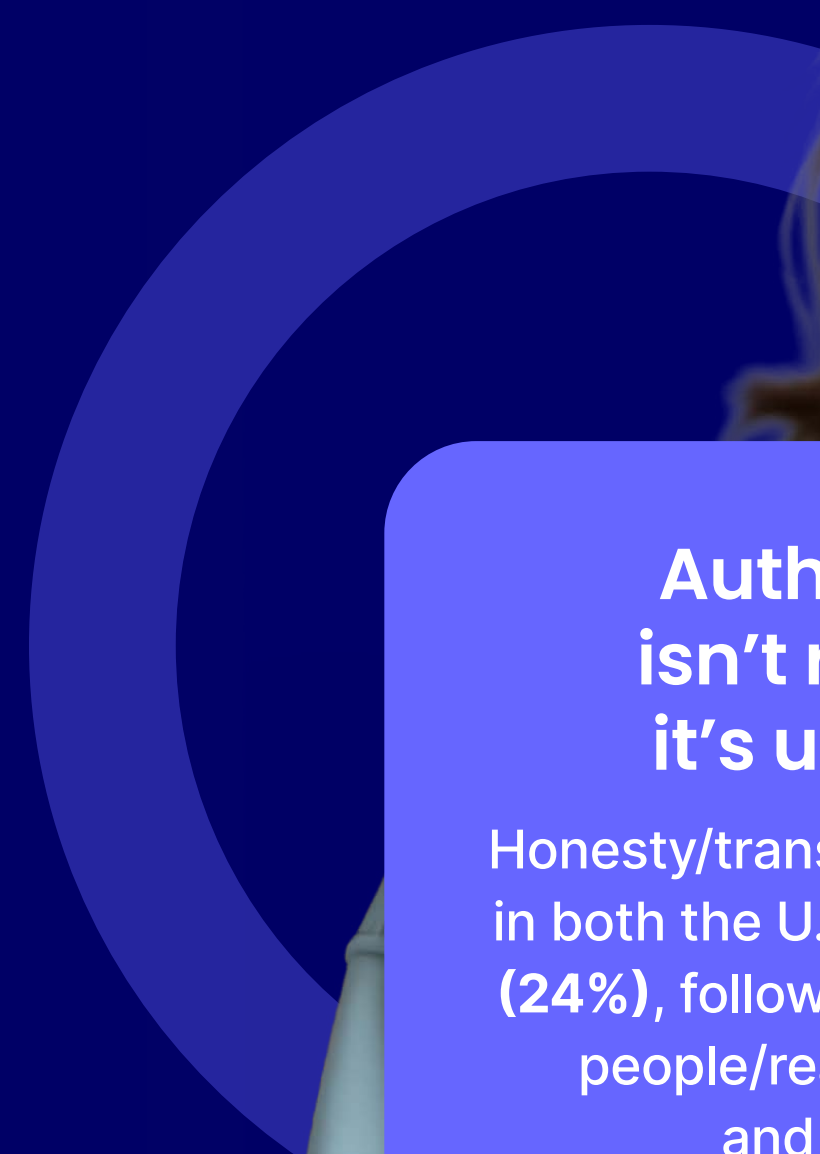
39%

Behaves consistently over time (across channels and situations)

33%

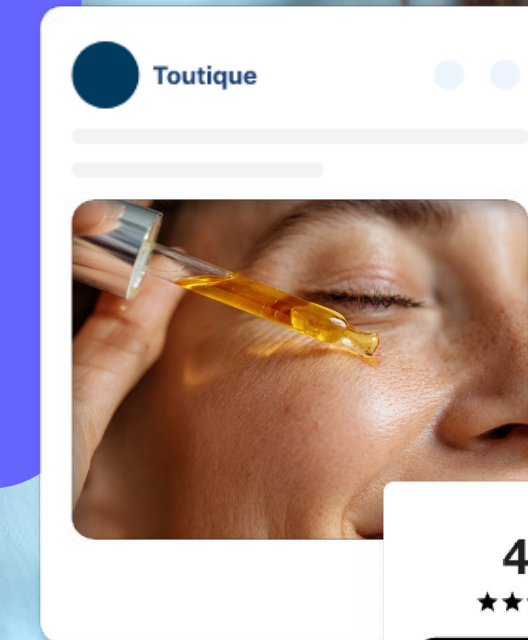
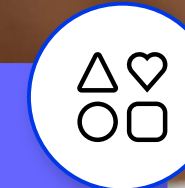
Acts with strong values (does the right thing when it's difficult)

26%



Authenticity isn't regional, it's universal

Honesty/transparency ranks #1 in both the U.S. (23%) and U.K. (24%), followed closely by real people/real experiences and reviews.



Turn authenticity into impact

See how Emplifi helps brands build trust with real customer insights.

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Base: Total Respondents (n=1,650)
When you think about an authentic brand, which of the following qualities matter most to you? Rank 1/2
Please tell us, in your own words, how a brand can demonstrate authenticity to you.



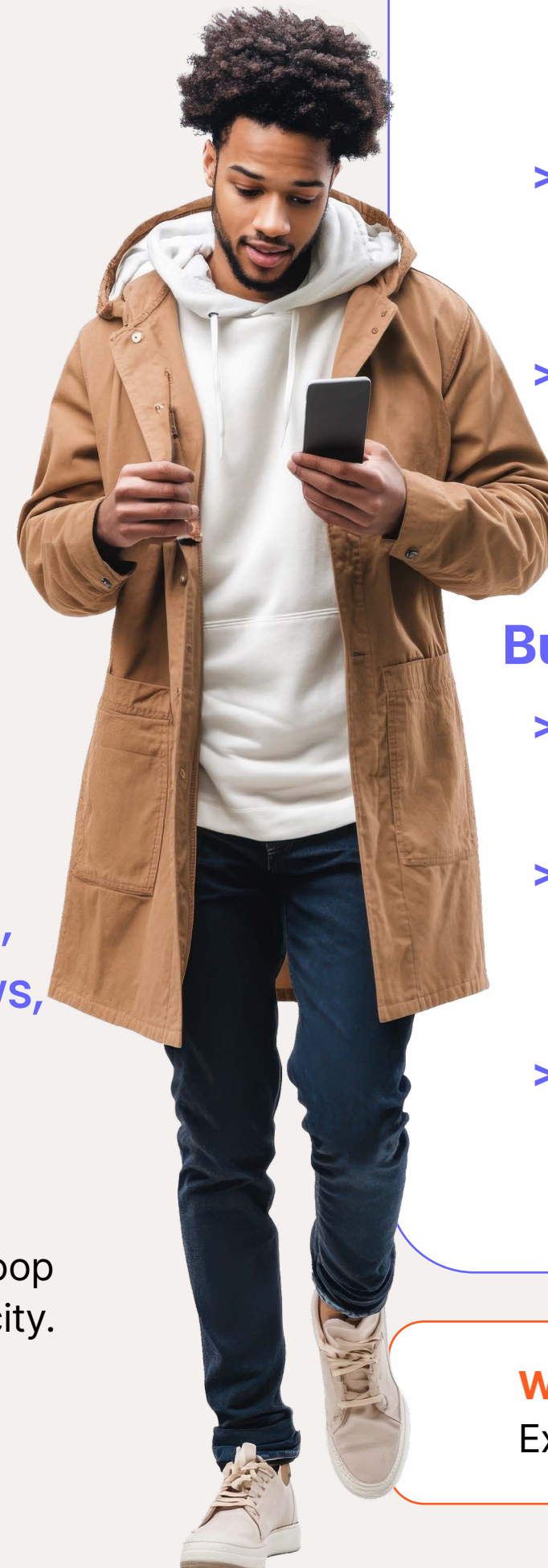
CUSTOMER SPOTLIGHT



How Carhartt turns real customer voices into authentic brand equity

Carhartt's heritage isn't just a marketing story, it's lived and shared by a passionate community of customers. Rather than relying solely on polished brand messaging, Carhartt leverages real-world user stories across reviews, social media, and owned channels to make its legacy feel tangible and trustworthy.

By elevating unfiltered customer experiences, Carhartt creates a feedback loop where authenticity fuels engagement, and engagement fuels more authenticity. This approach aligns directly with how today's consumers validate brands: through peer voices rather than promotional content alone.



What they did:

- > **Highlighted** real customer stories on product pages and social.
- > **Amplified** reviews and user content to make the brand's heritage felt, not just broadcast.
- > **Encouraged** community participation to generate ongoing content.

Business impact:

- > **Increased** engagement on social platforms.
- > **Strengthened** emotional connection with long-time and new customers.
- > **Reinforced** a cycle of authentic advocacy.

Carhartt snapshot

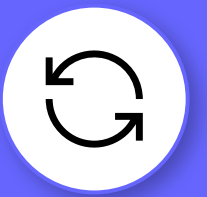
85K+

Consumer engagements with UGC content



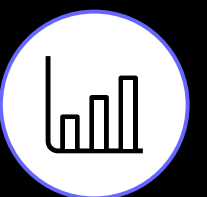
27%

Conversion rate influenced by UGC gallery interaction



150K

Revenue attributed to user-submitted content



Want to turn customer content into conversion?

Explore how Emplifi helps brands collect, curate, and activate UGC at scale.

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AUTHENTICITY

Where transparency matters (and why it affects authenticity)

Consumers aren't automatically anti-AI – but they are highly sensitive to anything that feels inauthentic.

As AI-generated marketing becomes more common, evaluation shifts from what brands say to how content is created. Consumers want clarity around origin, intent, and disclosure.

AI increases efficiency and responsiveness. It also introduces a credibility risk: when automation feels hidden or manipulative, perceived authenticity drops - even if the message is accurate.

Consumers are drawing a clear line around transparency. Brands that disclose AI use and reinforce claims with real customer proof maintain trust. Brands that don't, create friction in the decision process.



Takeway:

AI itself isn't the issue. Lack of transparency is. Trust strengthens when automation is visible, explained, and supported by human proof.

WHAT WE KNOW

Consumers trust organic proof over AI content

Search results (**66%**) and user reviews (**63%**) are seen as the most authentic content types.

AI disclosure expectations are high

91% of consumers expect brands to disclose AI use in marketing.

AI trust varies by region

U.S. consumers are more likely to trust AI content (**35%**) than U.K. consumers (**28%**).

Speed signals authenticity more than personalization

Fast response times (**84%**) matter more than personalization (**67%**).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Use AI to drive efficiency, not visibility

Keep storytelling, campaigns, and positioning human-led.

Set clear rules for AI disclosure

Apply consistently across marketing, ads, imagery, and support.

Adjust AI strategy by market maturity

Lean into AI where accepted, reinforce human credibility where skepticism is higher.

Prioritize speed before personalization

Lead with fast response, then layer in personalization.

See how Emplifi helps brands build trust at scale

Use AI efficiently, while keeping your marketing authentic, transparent, and human.

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Most trusted sources for consumers: Search results & user-generated reviews lead the way

Search engine results (e.g. Google results)

66%

User-generated ratings and reviews

63%

Promotional or marketing emails

42%

Influencer ratings and reviews

42%

Social media ads

38%

AI-generated content (e.g. text, images, or ads)

31%



35%

of U.S. consumers
are more inclined to
find AI-generated
content authentic
(vs 28% in U.K.)



Base: Total respondents (n=1,650)
For each of the following types of marketing or online content, please indicate how authentic or inauthentic you feel it is. Top2Box Summary



CUSTOMER SERVICE

Where authenticity is tested in real time

Authenticity isn't only communicated through marketing, it's experienced when customers need help.

As consumer expectations rise, customer service interactions have become one of the most visible moments of truth for brands. People aren't just evaluating whether their issue gets resolved. They're evaluating how the brand responds, how quickly they respond, and whether the interaction feels human.

In 2026, customer service has moved from the back office to the front stage. It now shapes trust, reputation, and perceived authenticity in real time.

Takeway:

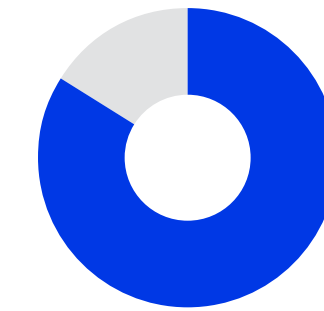
Authenticity isn't proven in campaigns, it's proven in conversations.

Brands that deliver fast, flexible, human-centered service build trust in the moments that matter most. And that trust builds long term loyalty.



WHAT WE KNOW

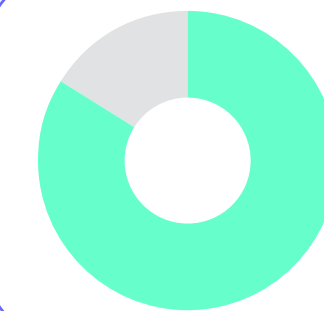
WHAT YOU CAN DO



84% say customer service interactions should **feel authentic**.



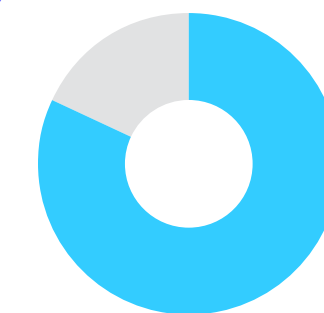
Treat **response speed** as a trust signal, not just an efficiency metric.



84% say **quick response time** is critical to authentic service.



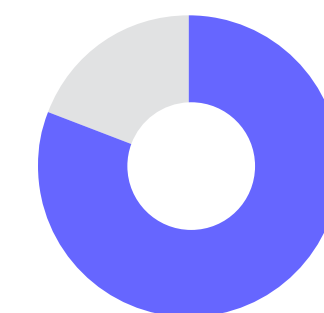
Build **consistent brand voice guidelines** across marketing and support teams.



82% value flexibility in **communication channels**.



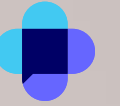
Offer **flexible support channels** and ensure handoffs feel seamless.



81% say a **human tone** matters in service interactions.









Use **automation** to assist routing and scale, but maintain human oversight where trust is at stake.



Authentic service readiness checklist

What brands must operationalize to protect trust at scale

-  **Unified social care across channels**
Simplify platform management in one connected workspace.
-  **Speed with visibility**
Track response times and prioritize urgent issues.
-  **Human tone at scale**
Use automation without sounding robotic.
-  **Conversation continuity**
Avoid forcing customers to repeat themselves.
-  **Clear escalation paths**
Route high-risk issues to the right team, fast.
-  **Performance measurement**
Track trust signals, not just resolution time.



 **Cameron Williamson** #455644 [OPEN](#)

 | I need to change my booking ASAP

5 min Watching 

Let me help you with that!

Turn this checklist into action
Emplifi helps you operationalize every step of authentic, AI-powered service. [Book a demo](#)

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CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Authentic service builds loyalty – inauthentic service creates churn

Customer service is where authenticity is tested.
Customer experience is where it pays off.

Modern consumers don't just remember whether a problem was fixed, they remember how the interaction made them feel. When service feels authentic, trust strengthens. When it feels dismissive, inconsistent, or artificial, confidence drops and loyalty vanishes.

This means service interactions don't just affect satisfaction in the moment - they influence whether customers return, recommend, or quietly switch to a competitor.

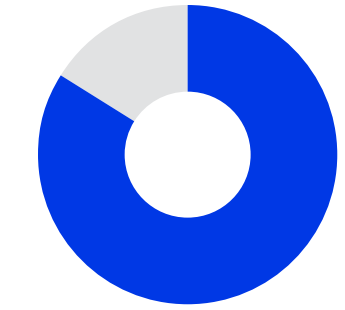
Takeway:

Resolution builds satisfaction.
Authentic service drives retention.

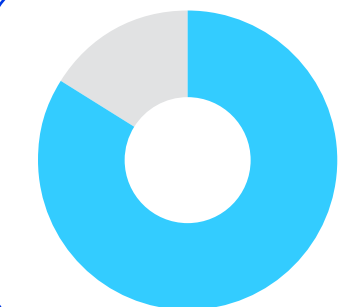
Brands that treat customer experience as part of their authenticity strategy create greater loyalty and reduce churn over time.



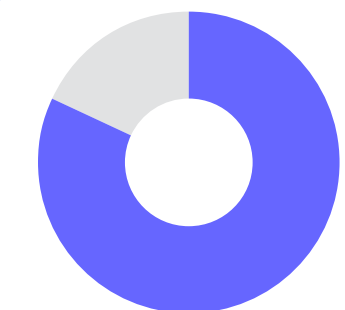
WHAT WE KNOW



43% of consumers needed **customer support** in the past six months.



77% say their issue was completely **resolved**.



70% believe a **human agent** ultimately solved their issue.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Track service outcomes as a **retention KPI**, not just a support metric.

Follow up after resolution to reinforce trust and improve loyalty.

Use service feedback and review trends to **identify recurring friction points**.

Positive resolution:

59% bought from the brand again

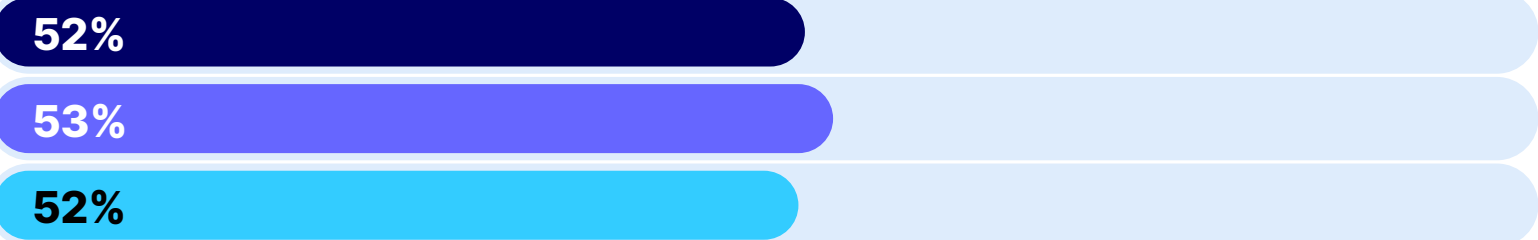
Inauthentic experience:

52% would stop buying from the brand

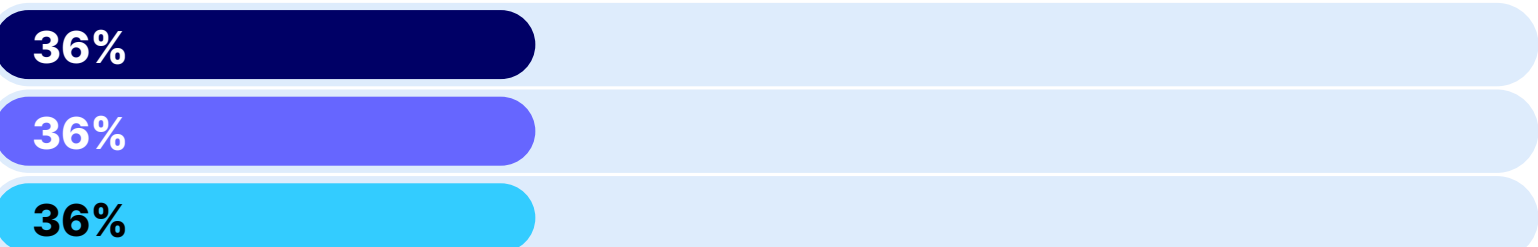


Inauthentic experience: What would you do?

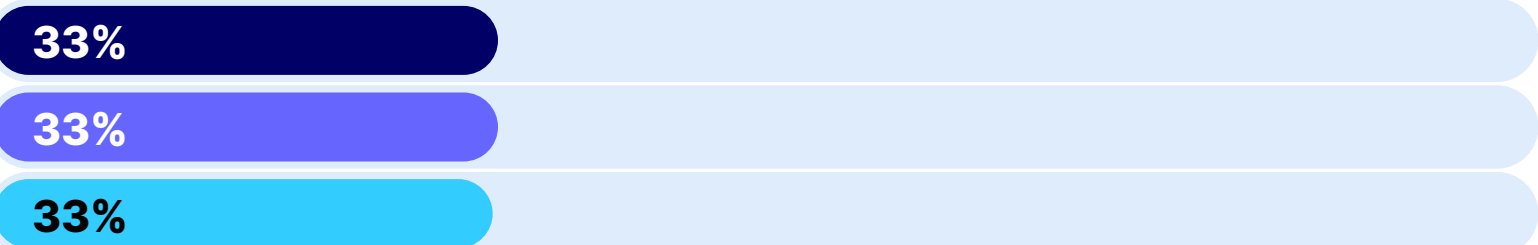
Stop buying from the brand



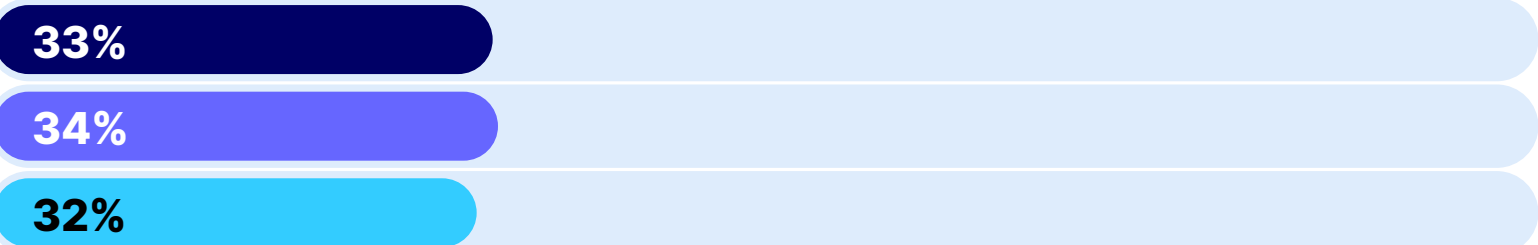
Switch to a competitor



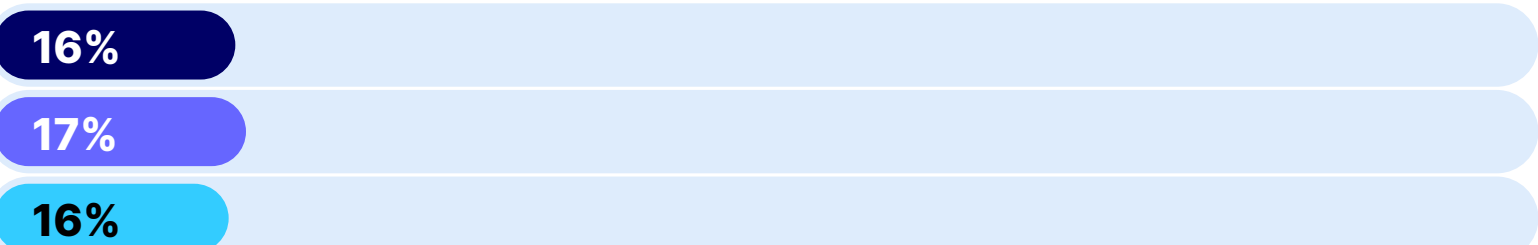
Complain to people you know



Post a negative rating or review



None of the above



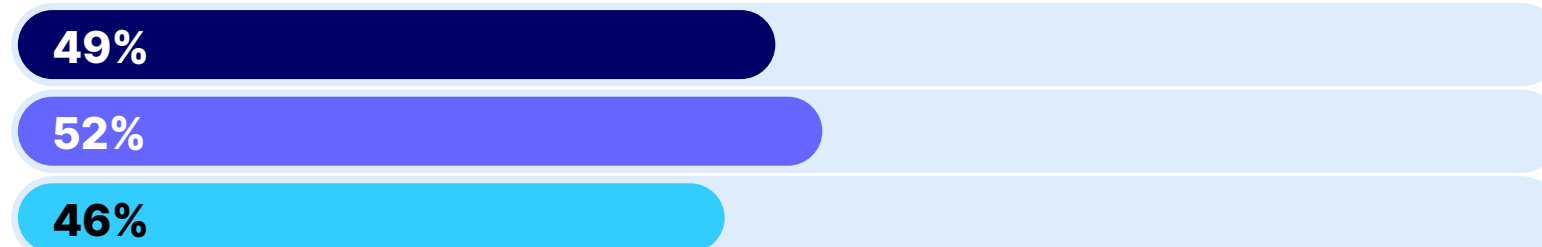
Total
 U.S.
 U.K.

Positive resolution: What have you done?

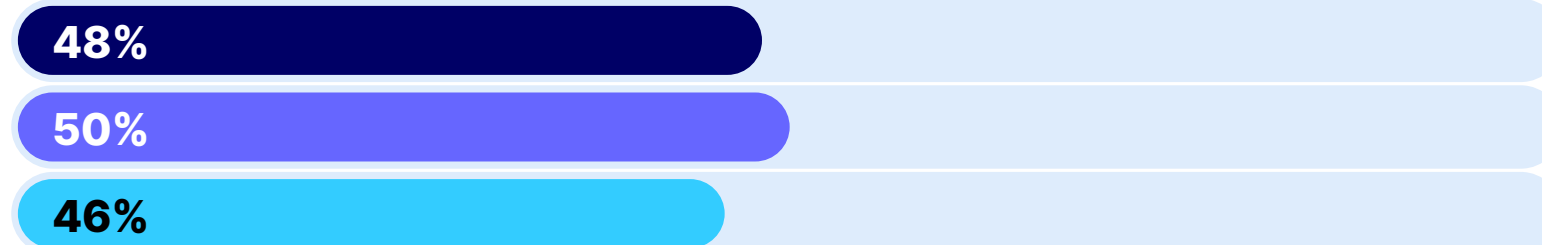
Brought from the brand again



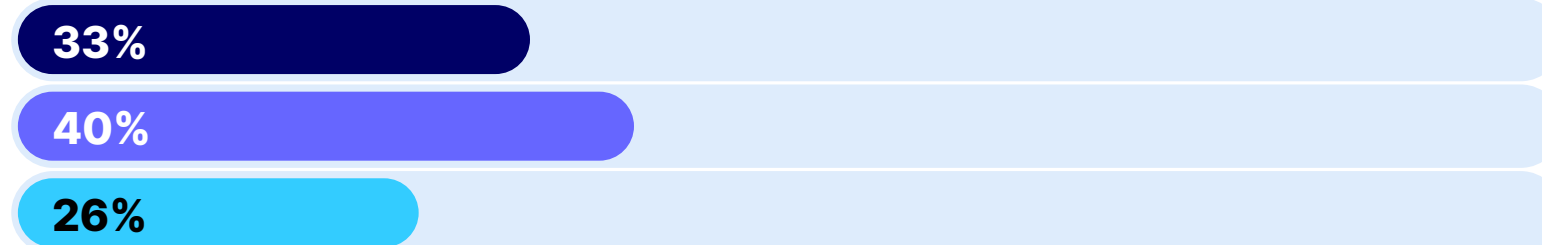
Recommend the brand to others



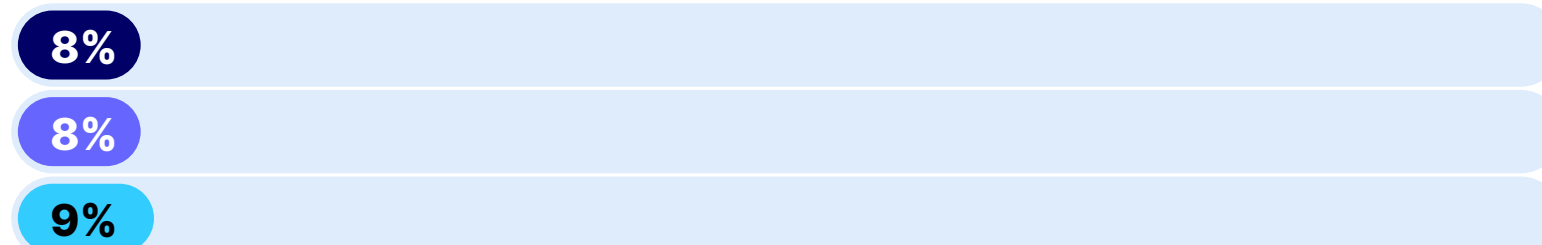
Posted a positive rating or review



Gave more of my business to the brand



None of the above



Total
 U.S.
 U.K.



STRATEGY

Strategic recommendations for brands

Authenticity is no longer a messaging strategy. It is an operating model.

Consumers don't evaluate brands based on a single campaign. They evaluate consistency across search results, reviews, AI usage, customer service interactions, and post-purchase experiences.

Trust is built when what a brand promises aligns with what customers experience, everywhere.

The brands that win in 2026 will not be those that communicate the most. They will be the ones that engage authentically with their community.



1

Make authenticity operational, not just aspirational.

Authenticity can't live in brand messaging alone. It must show up consistently in marketing, customer service, and product experience - and be measured like any other performance metric.

2

Be consistent everywhere customers look.

Consumers research across search, marketplaces, reviews, and social. If your tone, claims, or proof don't match across channels, trust drops fast.

3

Build transparency into your foundation.

Be clear about how you use AI, data, and automation. Transparency shouldn't be reactive, it should be standard practice.

4

Turn customer proof into a growth engine.

Reviews, ratings, and user-generated content aren't "nice to have." They directly influence conversion, retention, and even pricing power.

5

Balance automation with human connection.

Automation drives speed and scale. Humans build loyalty and emotional trust. Winning brands know when to use each.

6

Treat customer service as a brand builder.

Support isn't just a cost center. Every interaction either strengthens trust, or weakens it.



The infrastructure behind authenticity

Authentic content comes from real customer voices, consistent brand interactions, and transparent engagement. To deliver this at scale, brands need connected systems that unify listening, content, and service into a single source of truth.

Authenticity at scale requires:

- ✓ **Unified** social listening and engagement
- ✓ **Review** and UGC management
- ✓ **Cross-channel** customer service tools
- ✓ **AI governance** and visibility
- ✓ **Analytics** that tie trust to revenue



Emplifi helps brands bring these capabilities together in one connected platform.

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Emplifi provides exceptional digital customer experiences via a platform trusted by more than 20,000 of the world's leading brands. With comprehensive and integrated social media marketing, social commerce, and care, combined with unified analytics and AI, Emplifi fuels growth, resulting in happy customers, increased product sales, and improved brand loyalty.

Get your personalized demo today

Increase insights, efficiency, and business impact with Emplifi.

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