

# Is Social Selling **CREEPY?**



Buyers & Consumers  
Define the Normal /  
Stalker Divide

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Introduction | pg. 2

5 Major Findings | pg. 3

LinkedIn | pg. 5

Twitter | pg. 18

Facebook | pg. 23

Email | pg. 27

General Sales Preferences | pg. 30

What To Do With This Data | pg. 36

Resources | pg. 38

## PRODUCED BY:

**Emma Snider**

[@emmajs24](#)

Staff Writer,  
HubSpot Sales blog



# INTRODUCTION

---

The perception among salespeople that social selling is “creepy” blocks the path to adoption for many sales teams. Think about it. The prospect thinks they’re getting a totally cold call when in reality, the rep has done significant research on the buyer’s background, career history, and maybe even their personal interests. It can definitely be a little off-putting.

The information imbalance is disconcerting to some reps, especially since they fear coming off as stalker-ish. And there’s nothing that will scare a prospect away (or anyone, for that matter) more than the knowledge they’ve been “creeped on” without their knowledge.

The fear is so pervasive that a fair amount of thought has been devoted to how to avoid the creepiness factor when using social selling tactics. Google “social selling creepy” and such titles will appear as “Social Selling: How Not to Be Creepy,” “Social Selling: The Non-Creepy Solution,” and “Social Selling ... Without Being Creepy.”

While I’d hate to call such resources misguided, I can’t help but think they’re missing a fundamental part of the equation. Yes, some salespeople are inclined to think social selling is creepy. But is it, really? Perception doesn’t equal reality. How can we actually know if social selling comes off as creepy or not?

The missing link here is the buyer’s perception. What do prospects think of social selling tactics? After all, they’re the ones that truly matter, right? To answer this question, HubSpot conducted a study in Q4 2014 - Q1 2015 that surveyed 273 B2B buyers and B2C consumers on their reactions to a variety of social selling scenarios.

Are you ready to cut through the creepy? Then read on.

[The survey “How Social Selling Tactics Are Perceived” was conducted via SurveyMonkey between Q4 2014 and Q1 2015. The survey was taken by US-based buyers and consumers working in a wide range of industries.]

# 5 MAJOR FINDINGS

First, let's be precise about language. "Creepy" is the word most often used to describe social selling's dark side, but what does it mean? An action that would provoke a bloodcurdling scream? Or just a mere tilt of the head? To clear up any misunderstanding, all survey-takers received this prompt before answering the questions: Creepy (adj.): Disconcerting; off-putting.

On the whole, the research found buyers and consumers skew toward thinking social selling tactics are not creepy. However, it's not the prevalent opinion by far -- the split tends to be more 60/40 than 100/0.

Here are the five most important -- and sometimes unexpected -- findings from this data.

## **1) BUYERS AND CONSUMERS ARE LESS LIKELY TO PERCEIVE SOCIAL SELLING TACTICS AS CREEPY IF THEY SHARE CONNECTIONS WITH THE SALESPERSON.**

A common acquaintance seems to soften the blow of an out-of-the-blue LinkedIn connection request or message.

## 2) MESSAGES CUSTOMIZED TO A PARTICULAR BUYER OR CONSUMER ARE USUALLY PERCEIVED AS LESS CREEPY THAN NON-CUSTOMIZED MESSAGES.

There is one notable exception to this takeaway that I suspect will raise a few eyebrows...

## 3) FACEBOOK IS STRICTLY OUT OF BOUNDS FOR SOCIAL SELLING.

Social selling interactions conducted through Facebook were rated as more creepy than any other network.

## 4) IN GENERAL, "LIGHT" SOCIAL SELLING INTERACTIONS (LIKING, RETWEETING, FAVORITING) ARE CONSIDERED TO BE LESS CREEPY THAN MORE IN-DEPTH INTERACTIONS (COMMENTING, MESSAGING).

Everybody likes social support, but not everyone likes social contact.

## 5) BUYERS' AND CONSUMERS' STATED PREFERENCES TOWARD SALESPERSON BEHAVIOR AND THEIR GUT REACTIONS TO SALES PRACTICES ARE SOMETIMES AT ODDS.

This finding is the most critical for salespeople. Although respondents at times labeled a specific social selling practice as creepy, questions that asked about generic sales practices revealed a discrepancy between rational thinking and gut reaction.

We've divided the results into five categories based on the convention of the survey questions: **LinkedIn**, **Twitter**, **Facebook**, **Email**, and **General Sales Preferences**. After perusing the data, check out the final chapter to discover what to do with this data.



# LINKEDIN

LinkedIn is perhaps the most-used network for social selling. Experts recommend reading, commenting on, liking, and sharing prospects' posts. In addition, thought leaders encourage reps to connect with prospects on the network even if they've never met them in person (albeit with a customized message) to start fostering a relationship.

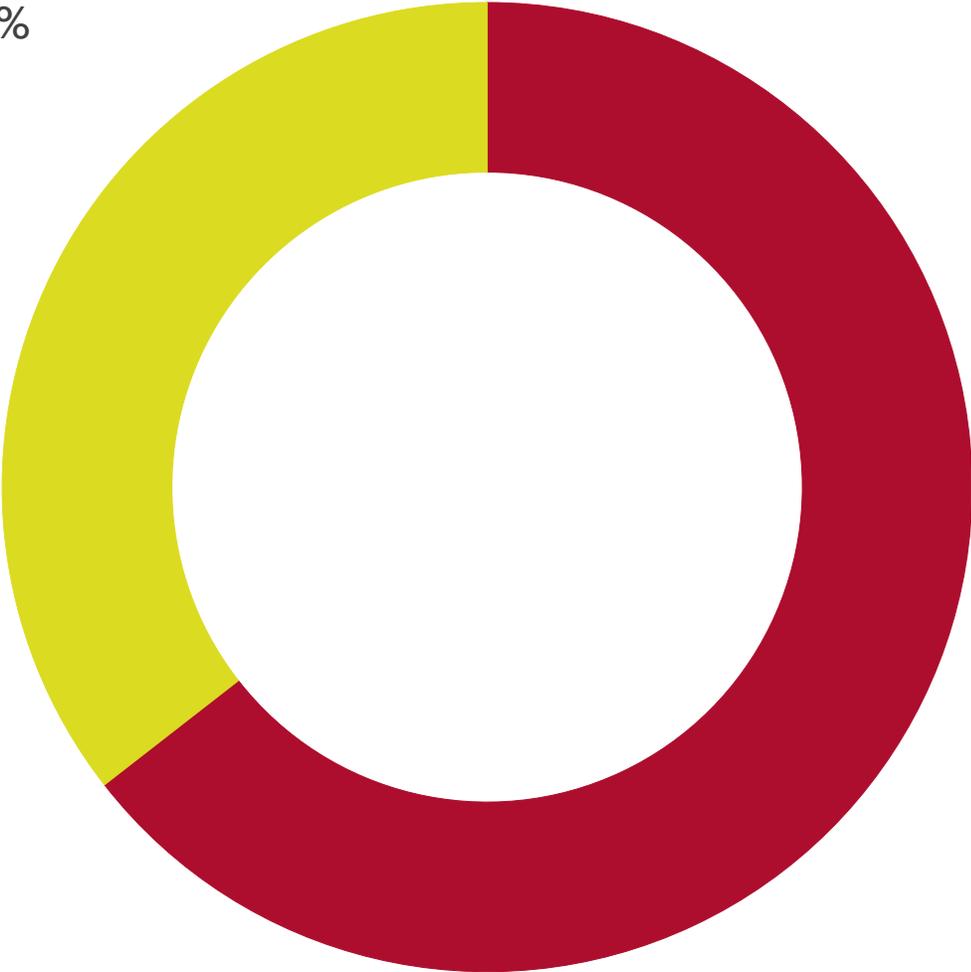
So what do buyers and consumers think about this behavior? We broke out specific interactions into different questions to separate the actions that are most acceptable from those which seem downright creepy.

The request to connect is likely the LinkedIn behavior that salespeople perform the most, so it seems logical to start here.

# Would you find it creepy if a salesperson requested to connect with you on LinkedIn with a generic message?

---

Yes: 64%  
No: 36%

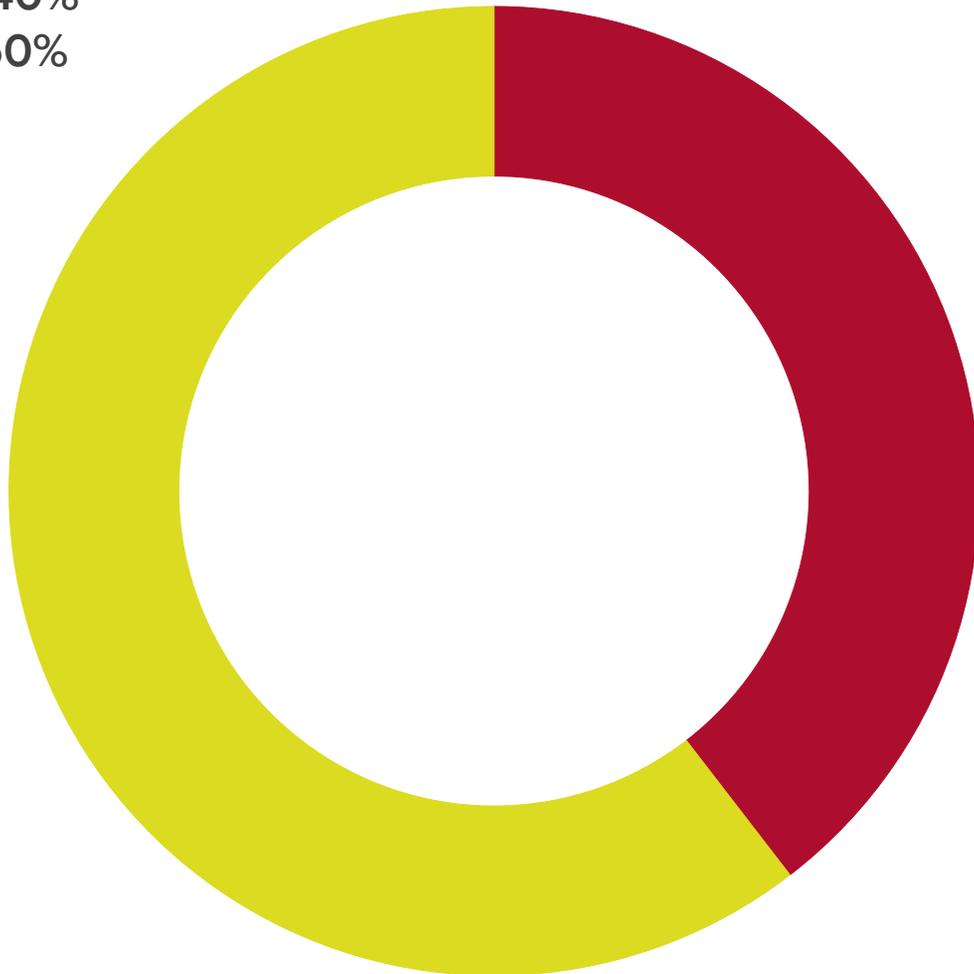


Yes No

# Would you find it creepy if a salesperson requested to connect with you on LinkedIn with a message customized to your or your company?

---

Yes: 40%  
No: 60%



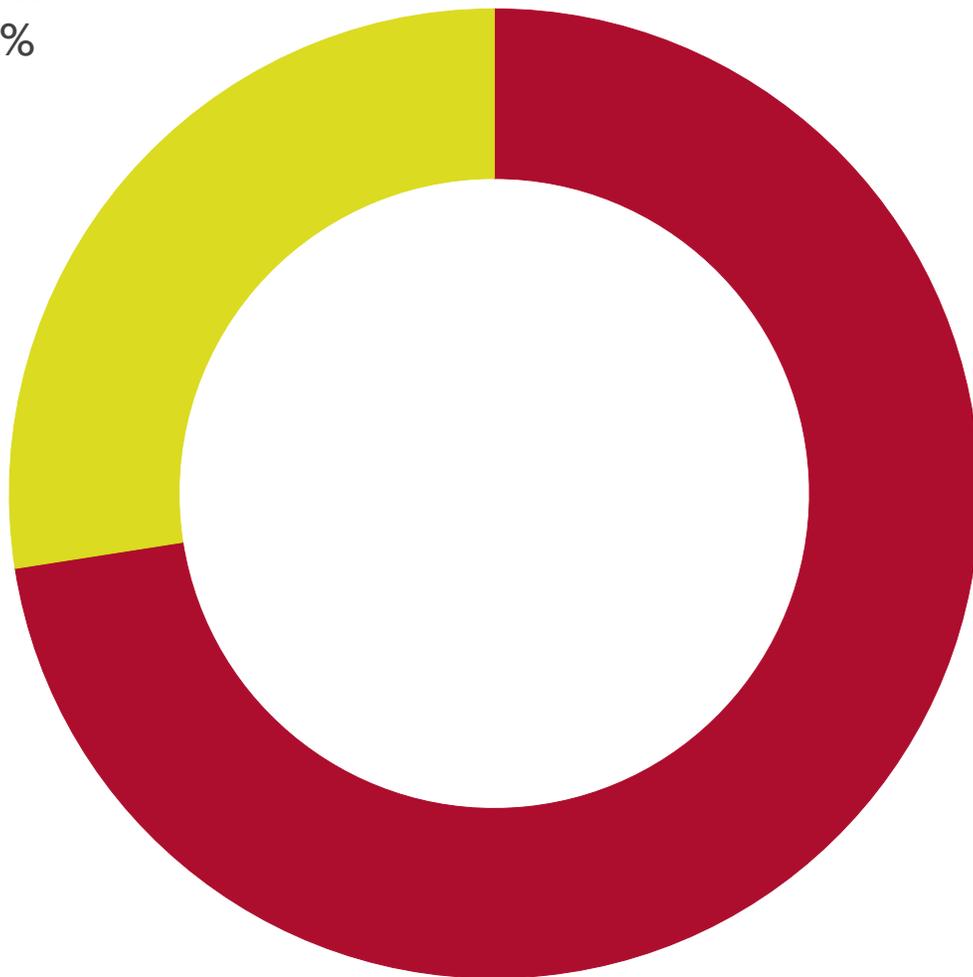
Yes No

# Would you find it creepy to receive a LinkedIn message from a salesperson with whom you have no connections in common?

---

Yes: 73%

No: 27%



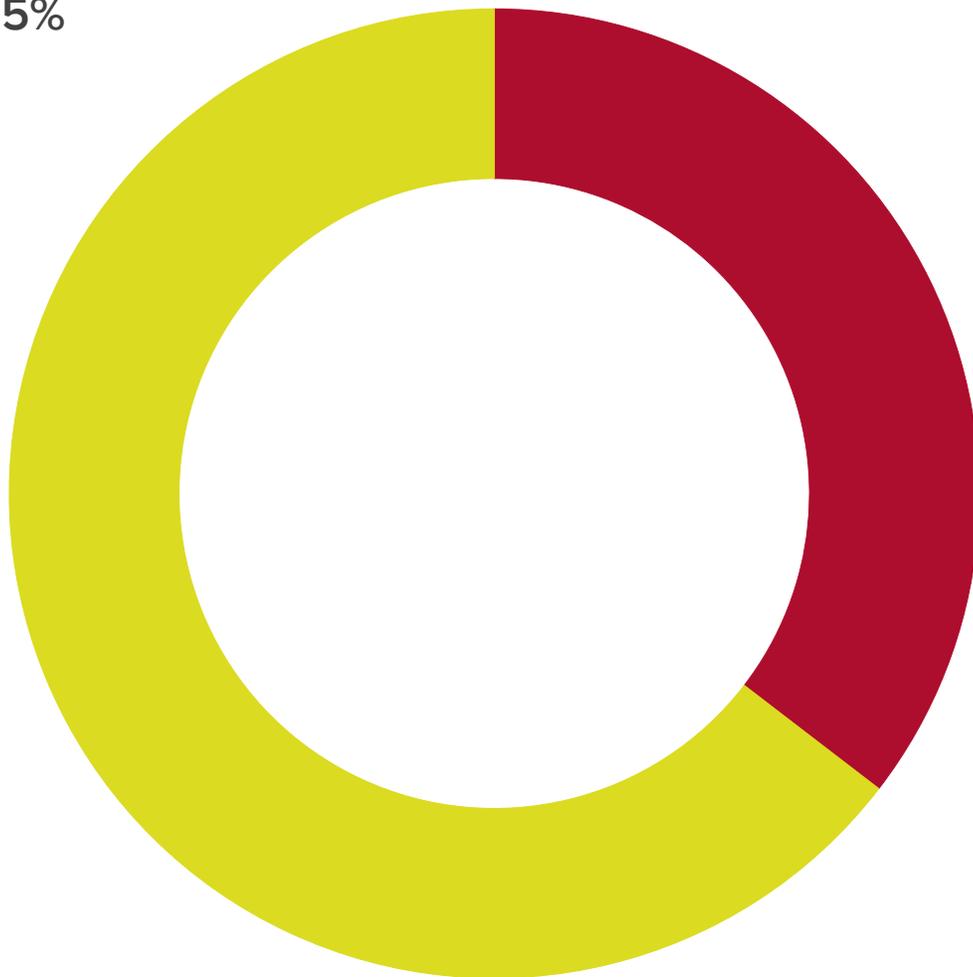
Yes No

# Would you find it creepy to receive a LinkedIn message from a salesperson with whom you do have connections in common?

---

Yes: 35%

No: 65%



Yes No

# TAKEAWAYS

As with all other forms of cold outreach, the results emphasized that customized messages are preferable to prospects. Salespeople should only use “I would like to connect with you on LinkedIn” in a LinkedIn invitation if they want to creep out their potential buyers.

However, it’s interesting to note that a solid 39% of buyers and consumers responded that even a request customized to them or their company would still come off as creepy.

After the request comes the message. Nearly three-quarters of respondents said they would find it creepy if a salesperson with whom they shared no connections messaged them on LinkedIn.

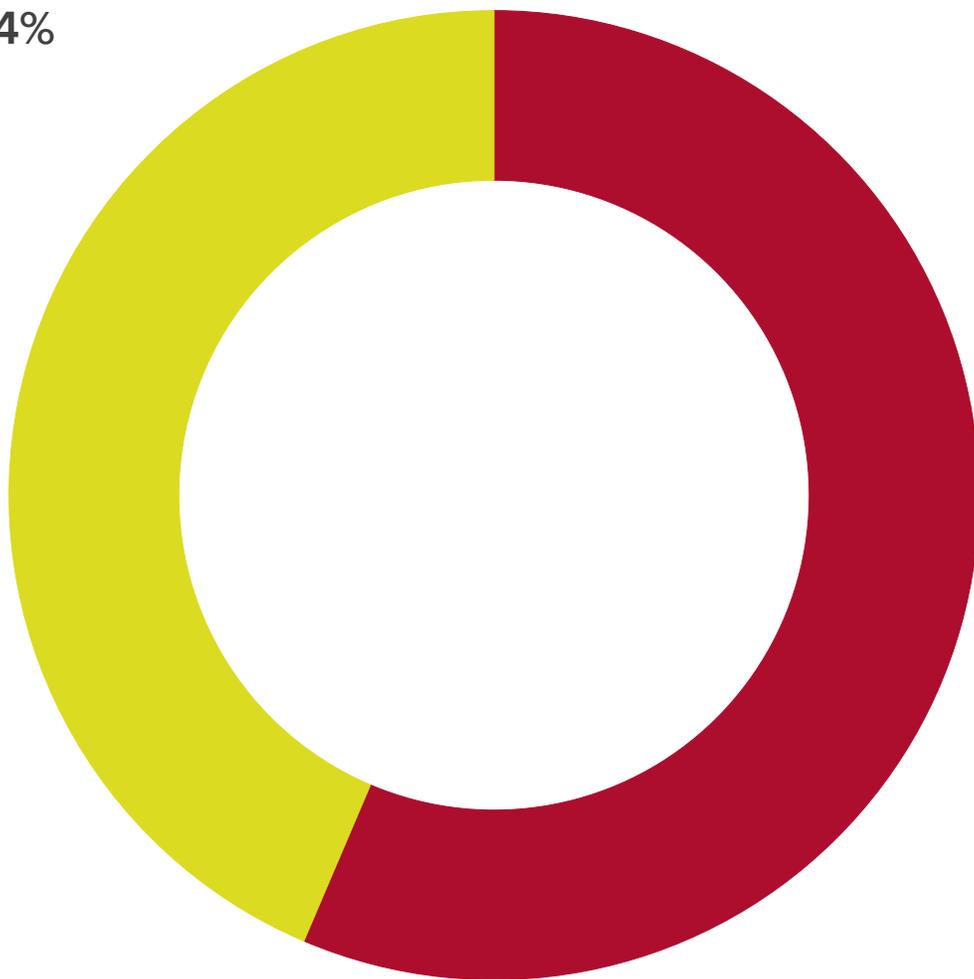
However, the situation flipped when there was a shared connection: only 35% said they would consider a message creepy when a common acquaintance did exist.

# Would you find it creepy if you received a LinkedIn message from a salesperson that referenced a recent event or leadership change at your company?

---

Yes: 56%

No: 44%



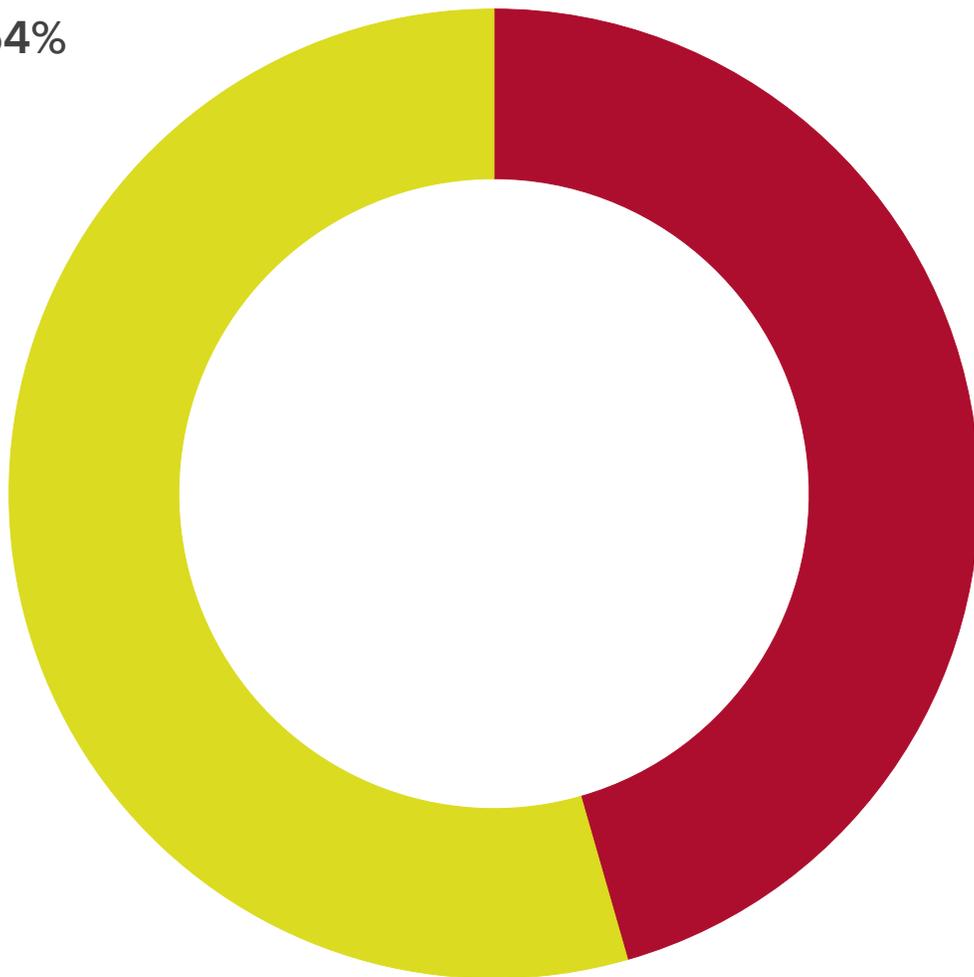
Yes No

# Would you find it creepy if you received a LinkedIn message from a salesperson that referenced an article you posted or blog you wrote?

---

Yes: 46%

No: 54%



Yes No

# TAKEAWAYS

Looking at LinkedIn messages from another angle, we asked survey respondents how personalization -- both in terms of the prospect's company and their individual social activity -- affected their perception.

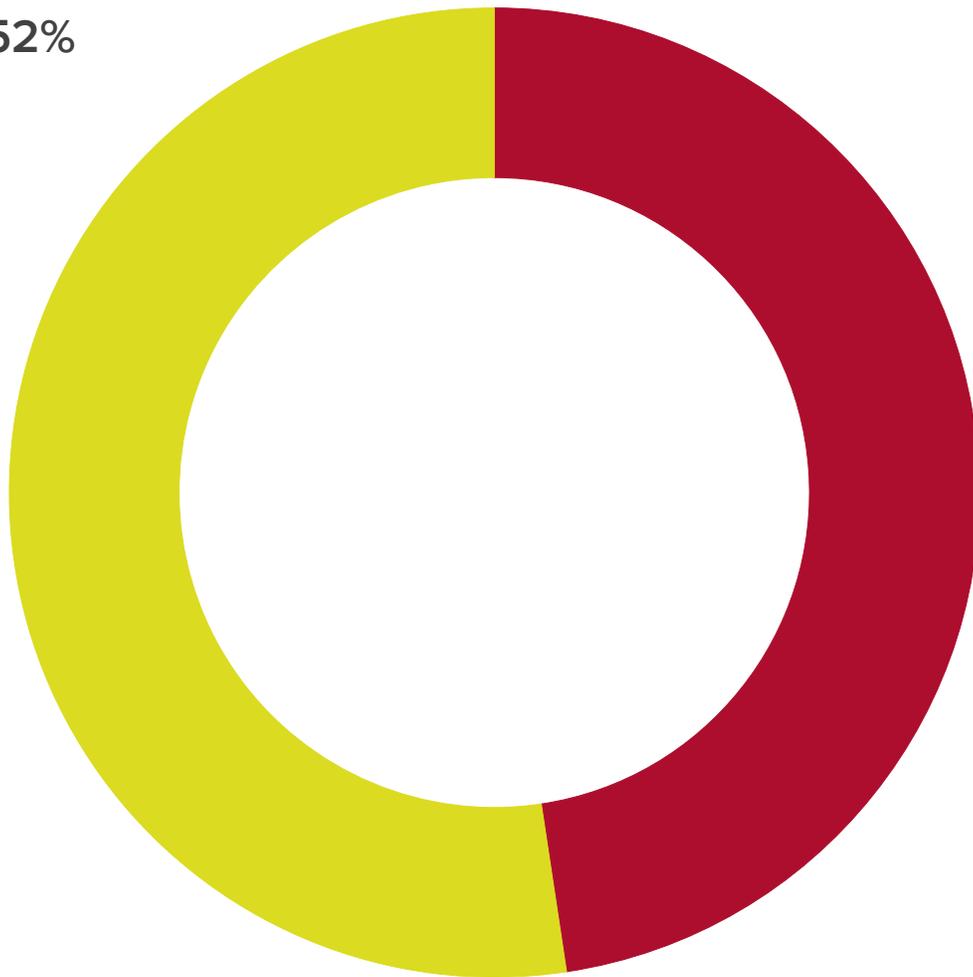
Interestingly, messages spurring from the classic sales trigger events of company events or leadership changes were regarded as creepy on the whole, with approximately 56% of respondents affixing a "creepy" label to such a message.

Messages customized to the particular prospect's social activity were regarded as less creepy, but the split was nearly 50-50.

# Would you find it creepy if a salesperson you didn't know commented on an article, discussion, or comment you posted on LinkedIn?

---

Yes: 48%  
No: 52%

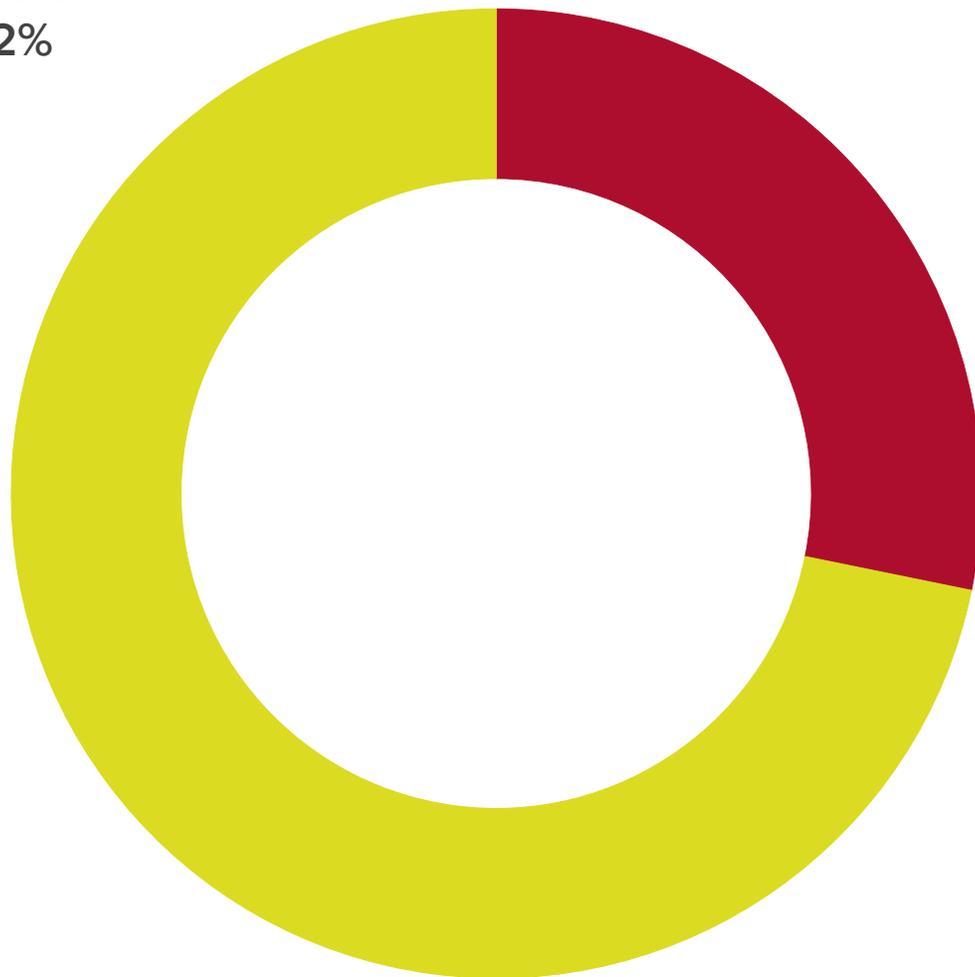


Yes No

# Would you find it creepy if a salesperson liked an article, discussion, or comment you posted on LinkedIn?

---

Yes: 28%  
No: 72%



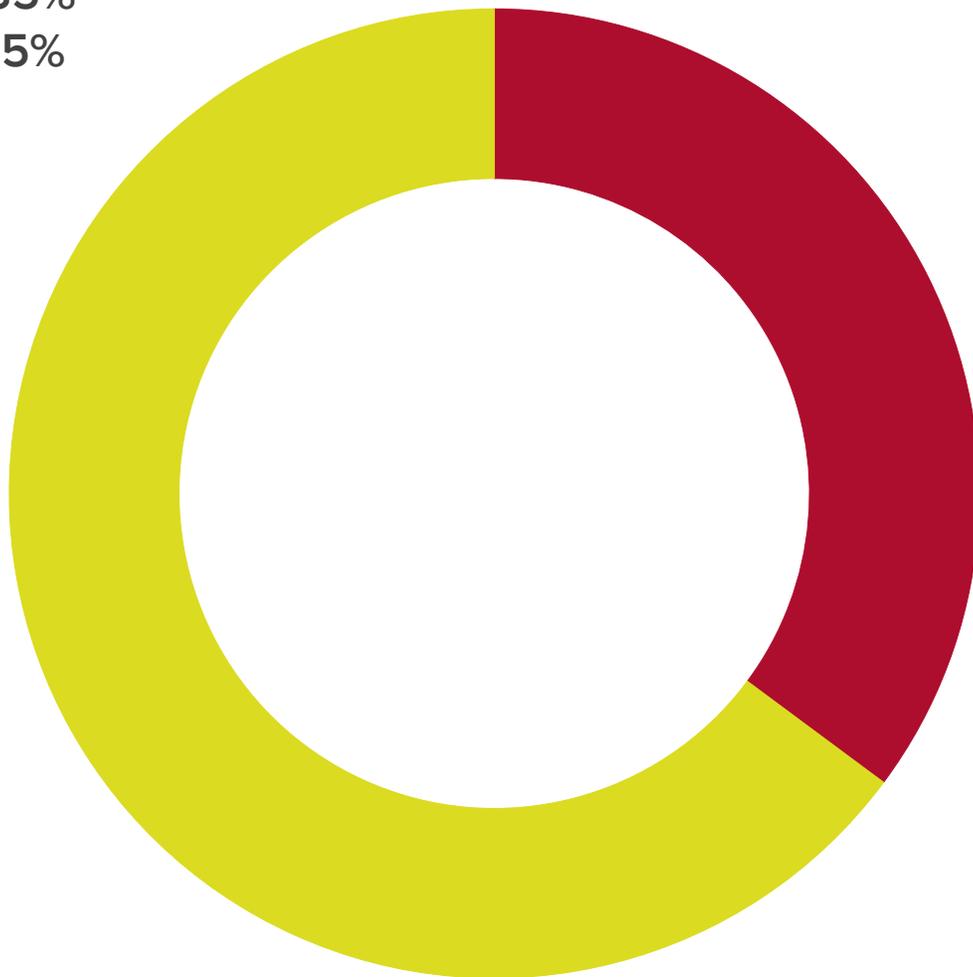
Yes No

# Would you find it creepy if a LinkedIn connection introduced you to a salesperson they knew on LinkedIn?

---

Yes: 35%

No: 65%



Yes No

# TAKEAWAYS

Forget requests or messaging -- what about merely posting a comment, the next interaction tier down? When we asked about commenting on a post, respondents were fairly evenly split once again. While the majority ruling was that such behavior was not creepy, reps should still tread lightly considering the narrow divide.

This question was followed by one regarding the lightest social touch of all: liking. Here the response was clear -- most prospects do not regard a "like" from a salesperson as creepy behavior.

Finally, we asked about a common way salespeople get referrals: By asking a shared LinkedIn connection to introduce the rep to the prospect.

Approximately 65% of respondents indicated that they would not be put off by such an introduction. What a difference a common connection can make in the initial outreach.



# TWITTER

Next up is Twitter. Although following prospects on Twitter is a social selling action widely endorsed by experts and thought leaders, we did not ask about this behavior on our survey since it is commonly accepted on this platform that people will be followed by people they don't know.

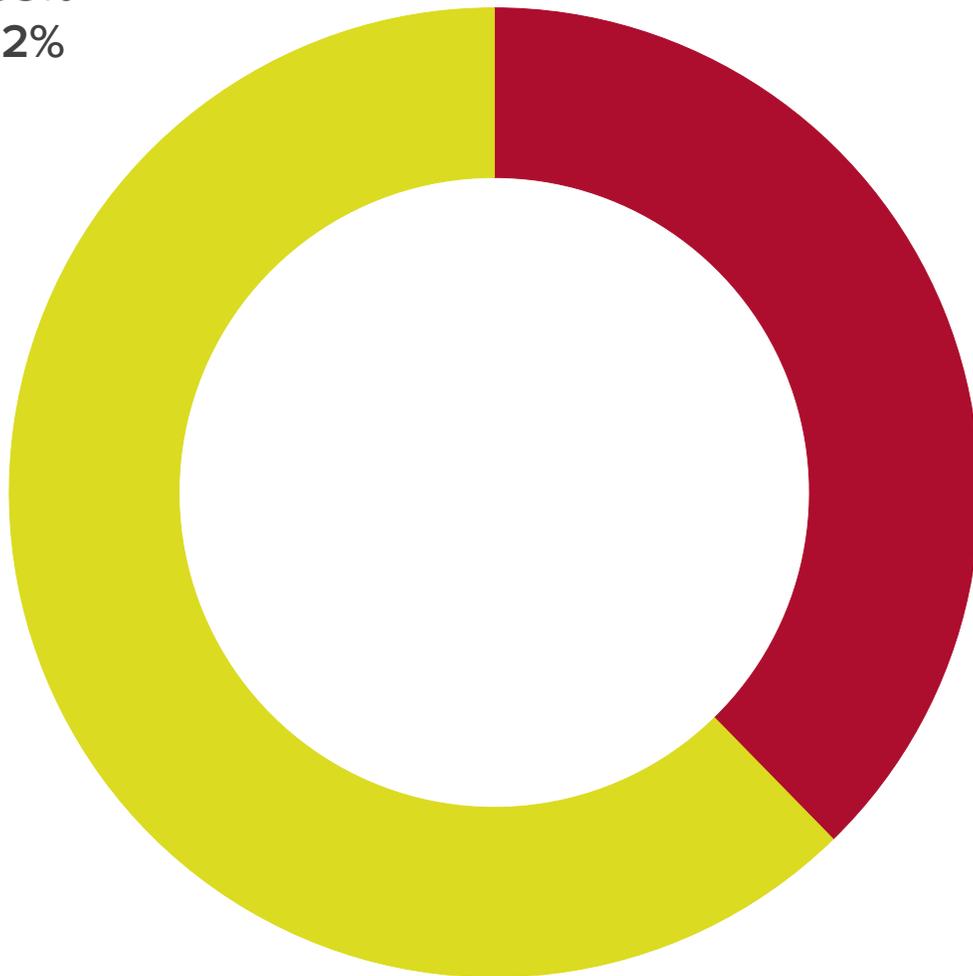
With this in mind, our Twitter survey questions concentrated on non-follow activities, like favoriting and retweeting.

# Would you find it creepy if a salesperson favorited or retweeted one of your tweets?

---

Yes: 38%

No: 62%

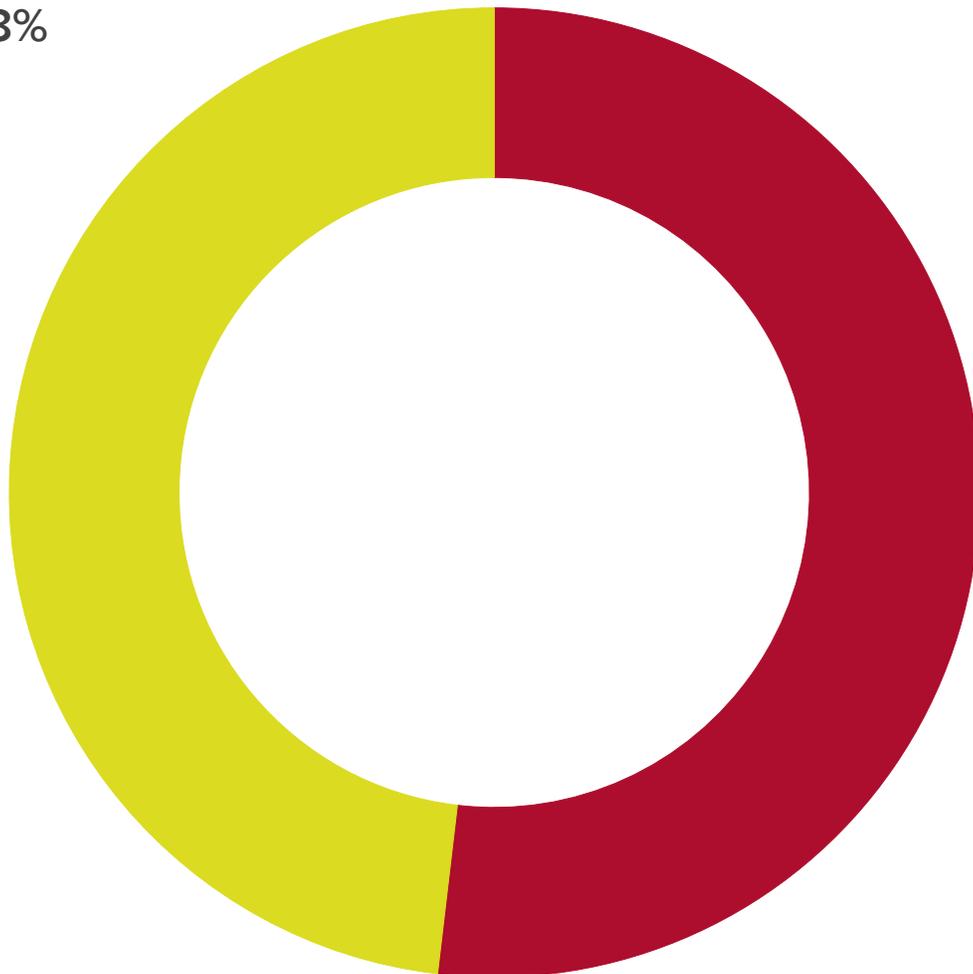


Yes No

# Would you find it creepy if you received a direct tweet from a salesperson?

---

Yes: 52%  
No: 48%

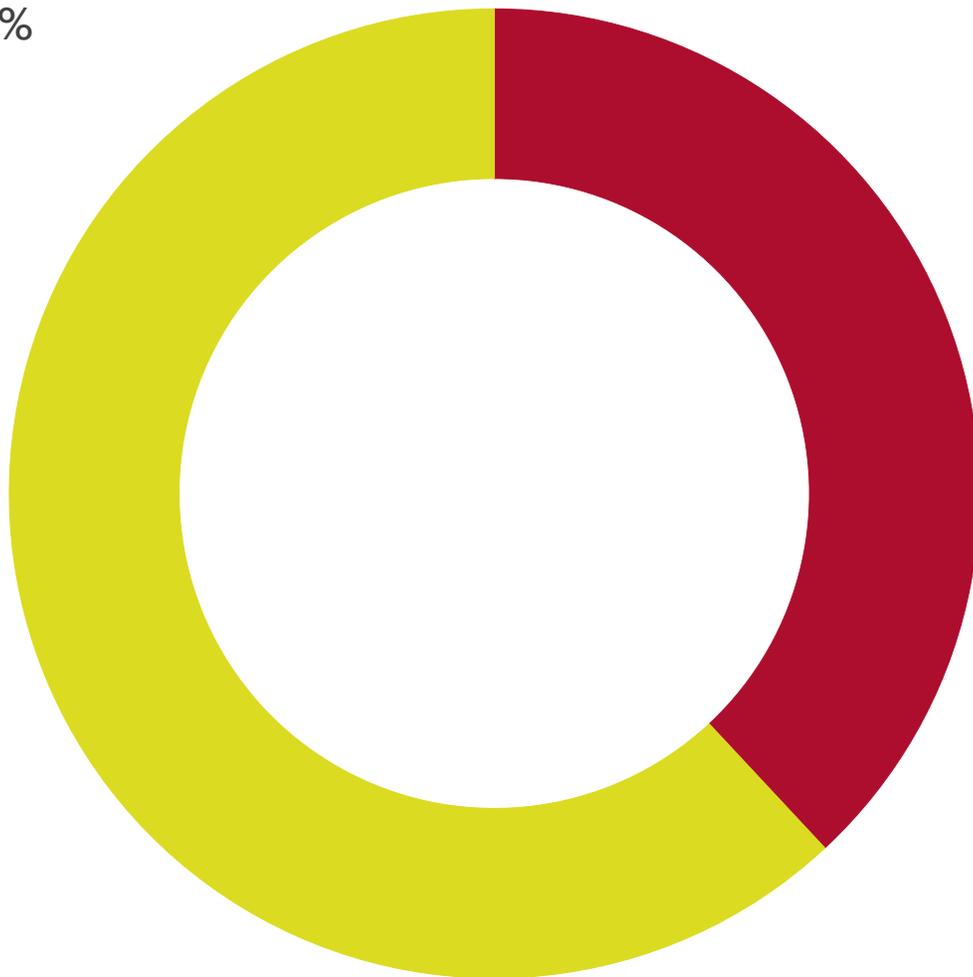


Yes No

# Would you find it creepy if you received a direct tweet from a salesperson referencing a question or article you tweeted?

---

Yes: 38%  
No: 62%



Yes No

# TAKEAWAYS

Just like “liking” on LinkedIn, favoriting or retweeting a prospect’s tweets is not perceived as creepy by the majority. What’s more surprising is the significant number of respondents -- nearly 38% -- who indicated these actions would be off-putting.

Direct tweets -- a.k.a. direct messages, or DMs -- are those addressed to one particular person rather than the entire Twitterverse. These tweets follow the form of “@user [message].”

While the response on direct tweets was nearly split down the middle, there was a slight leaning toward the “creepy” end of the spectrum. This could be due to a failure in the question’s phrasing -- it did not specify whether the direct tweet would refer to the salesperson’s offering. However, this question was intentionally left vague as a segue to the following.

When the subject of the direct tweet is defined, the response is much different. Prospects who tweet out a question or an article are much less inclined to perceive a direct response tweet from a salesperson as creepy.



# FACEBOOK

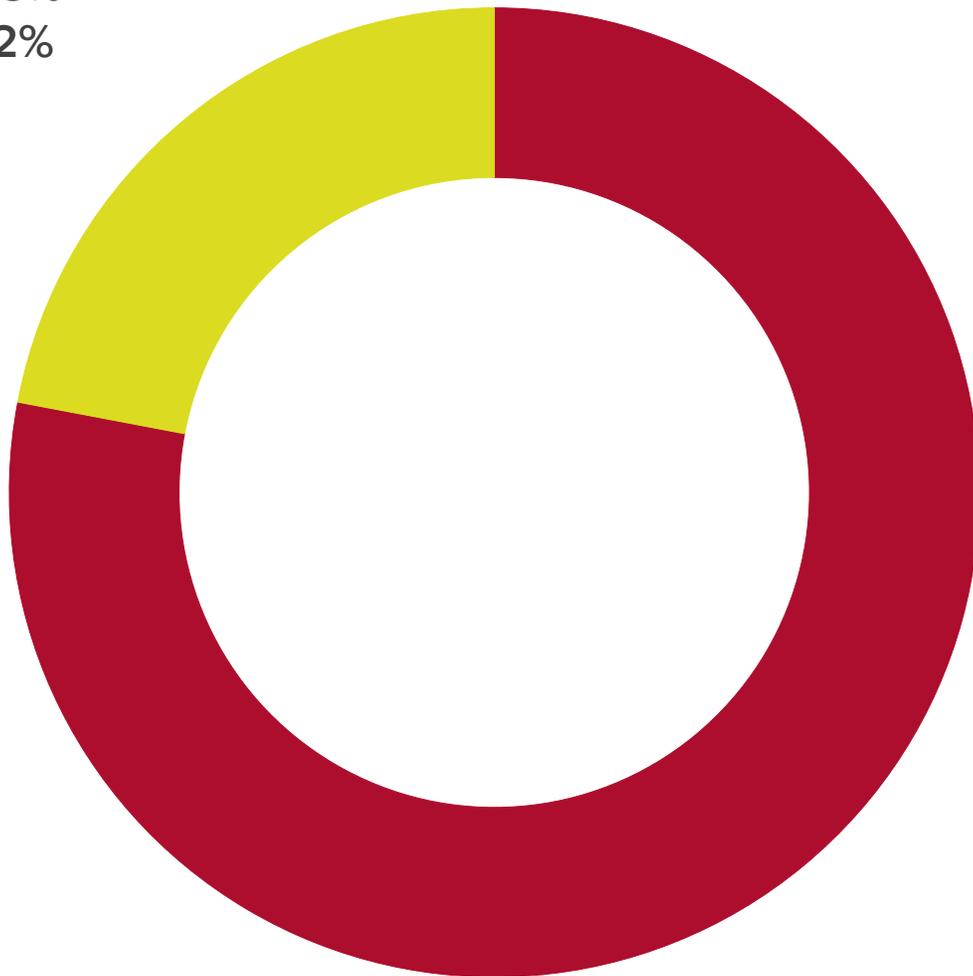
Our data showed prospects are most sensitive about social selling interactions on Facebook. This indicates that Facebook is still very much regarded as a personal network, while LinkedIn and Twitter are either classified as “professional,” or straddling the line between the two worlds.

# Would you find it creepy if you received a friend request from a salesperson on Facebook?

---

Yes: 78%

No: 22%



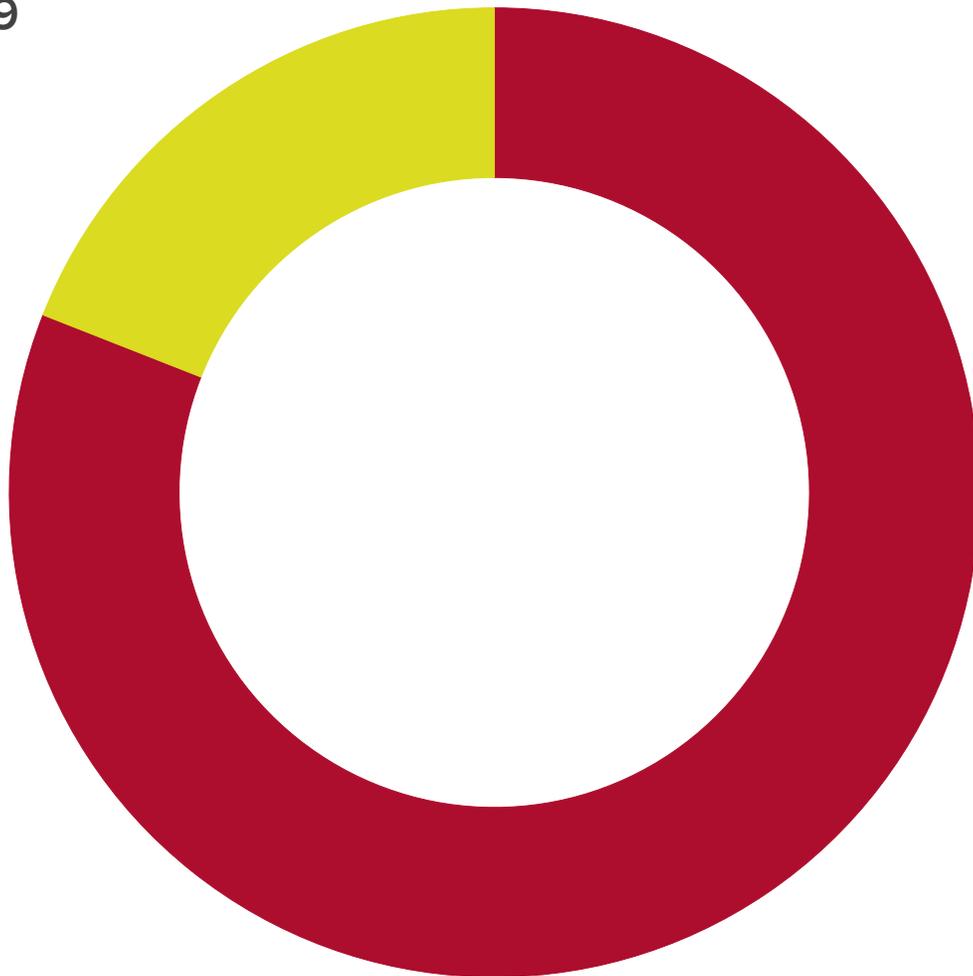
Yes No

# Would you find it creepy if you received a message from a salesperson on Facebook?

---

Yes: 81%

No: 19



Yes No

# TAKEAWAYS

“Friend” is a charged word, according to our survey’s results. Nearly 78% of respondents said they would find a Facebook friend request from a salesperson to be off-putting. Only 22% indicated they would not find such an invitation disconcerting.

Judging from the data, a Facebook message is even creepier than a friend request. An overwhelming 81% said receiving a Facebook message from a salesperson -- even one that did not mention the product or service they sold -- would edge into stalker territory.



# EMAIL

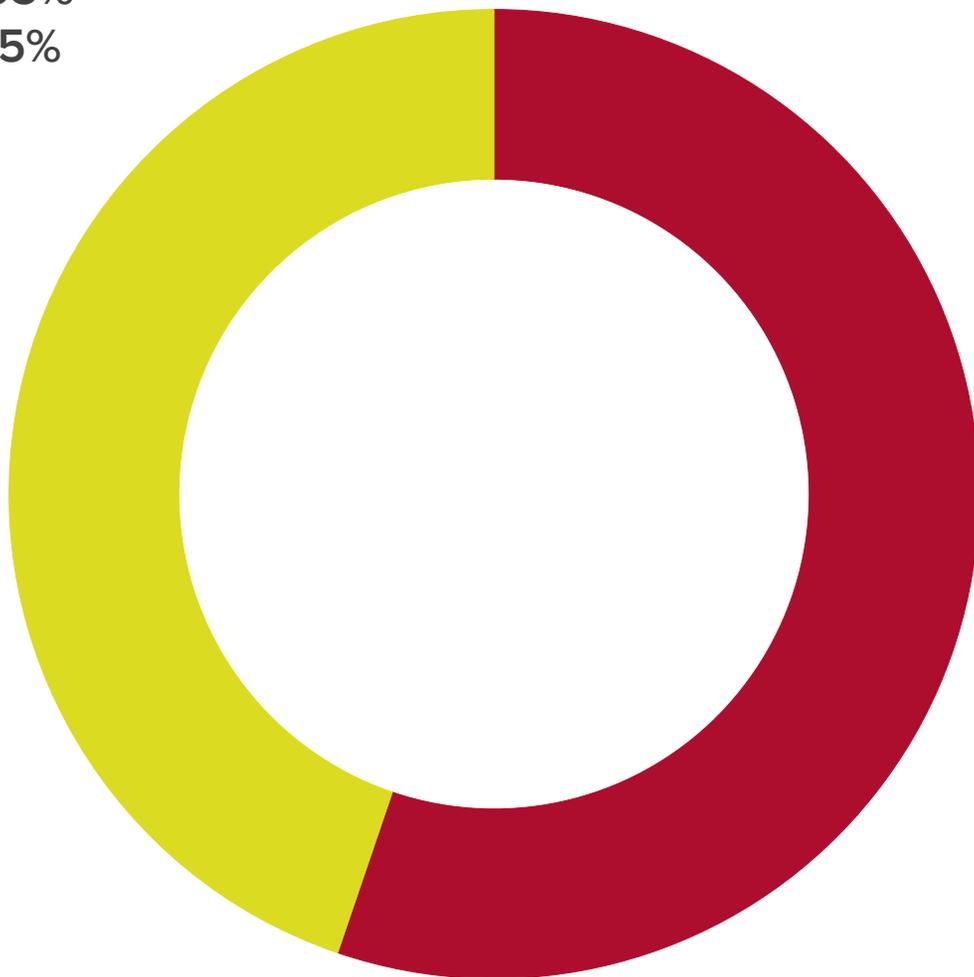
Since this survey concentrated on social selling, we relegated most of the questions to focus exclusively on interactions taking place through social networks. However, the only question that centered exclusively on email garnered eyebrow-raising results.

# Would you find it creepy if you received an email from a salesperson that referred to a tweet, comment, or discussion you posted on LinkedIn or Twitter?

---

Yes: 55%

No: 45%



Yes No

# TAKEAWAYS

This data flies in the face of advice from social selling experts and thought leaders to customize sales emails to respond to or comment on prospects' recent social activity. However, don't give up on socially-customized emails quite yet -- read the following section for a surprise.

# GENERAL PREFERENCES

The survey wrapped up with a few questions about how buyers and consumers would like to be sold to in general. Instead of asking about their perceptions of specific social selling activities, we posed inquiries to uncover their overall feelings about selling and buying processes.

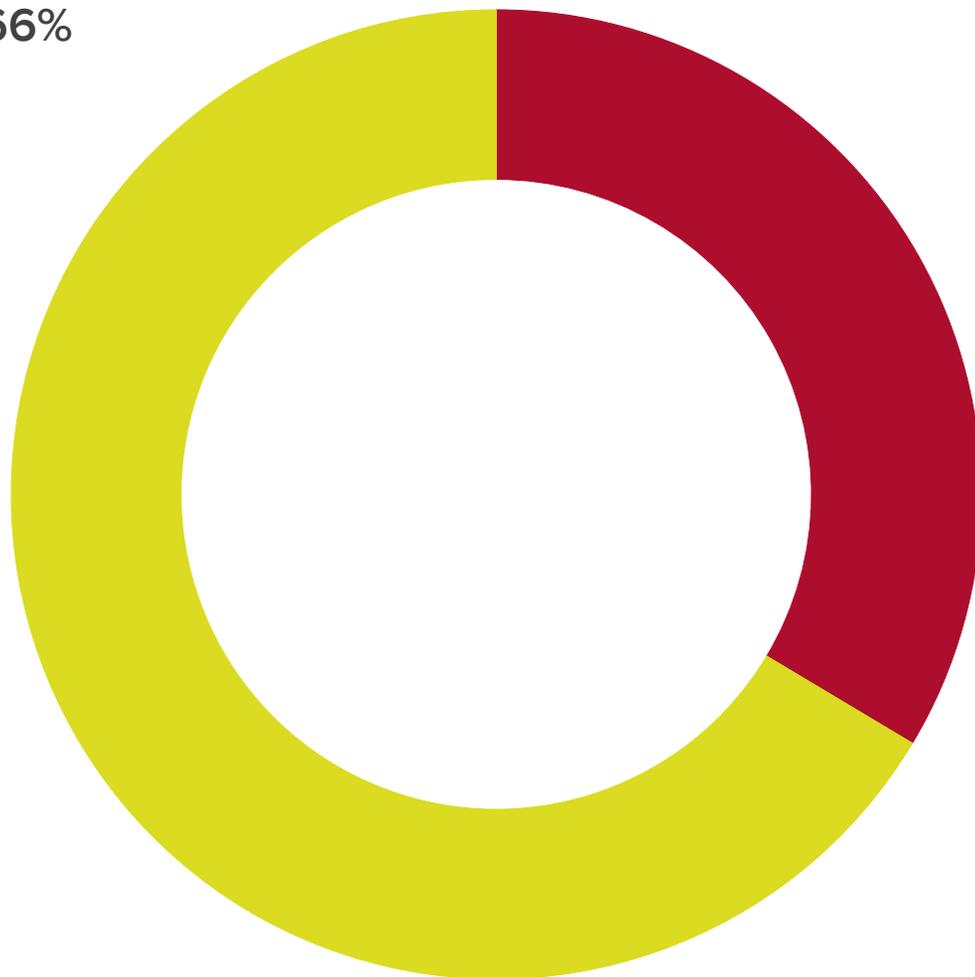
In light of the four preceding sections, these questions generated startling results.

# Would you find it creepy if a salesperson looked at your LinkedIn profile before sending a cold email or making a cold call?

---

Yes: 34%

No: 66%

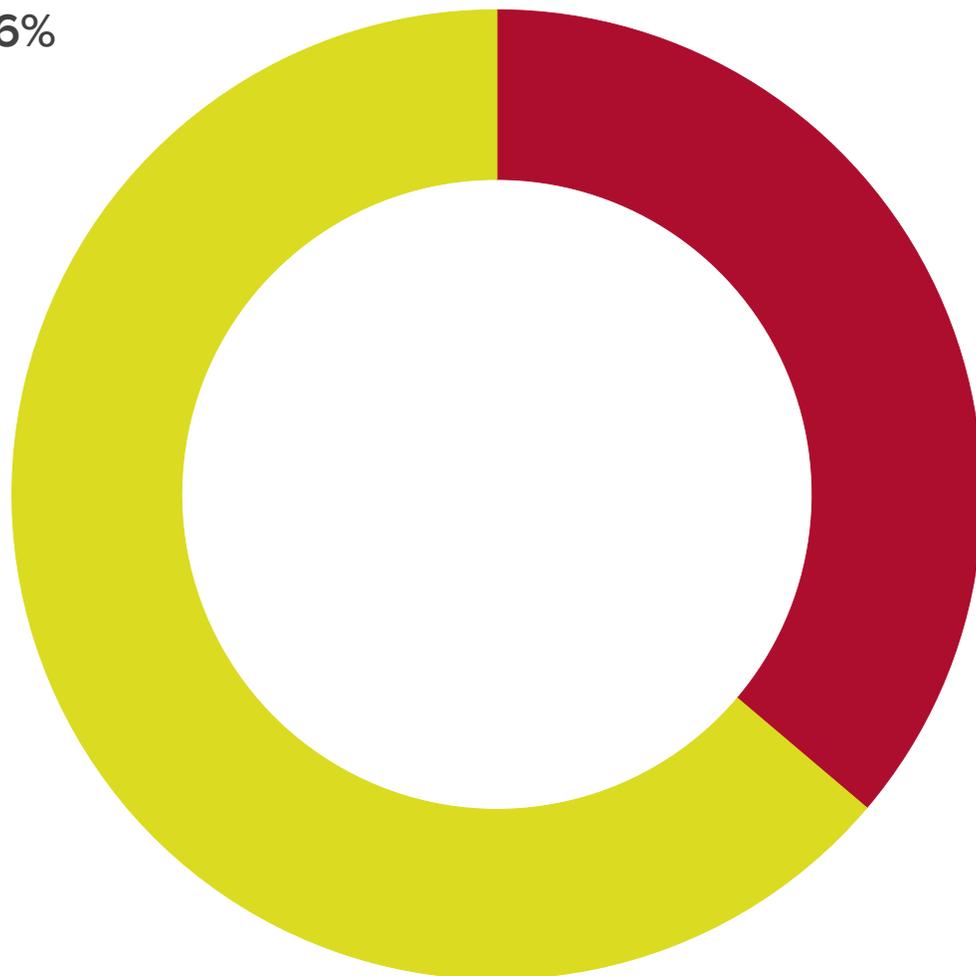


Yes No

# True or False: I like it when a salesperson does internet and social media research about me and my company before reaching out to me.

---

Yes: 64%  
No: 36%

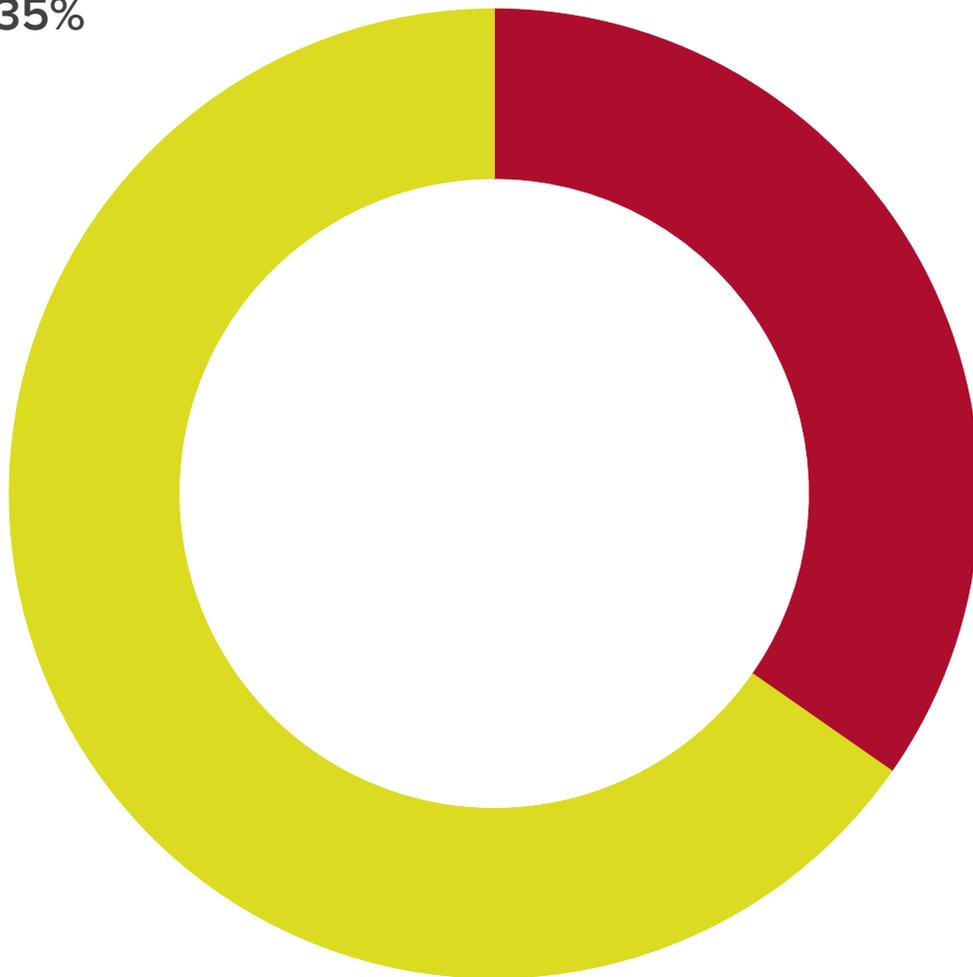


False True

# True or False: I would like cold sales pitches to customized to me and my company as much as possible.

---

Yes: 65%  
No: 35%



False True

# TAKEAWAYS

Although a sizable portion of respondents indicated that they found LinkedIn messages and requests customized to them or their companies to be creepy, they nevertheless did not find it creepy if a salesperson researched them on LinkedIn before issuing a cold call or email. This was the first of several dissonances revealed in this final line of questioning.

When the question was broadened to encompass all social media networks and the internet at large, the majority of respondents agreed that they desire salespeople to research them and their companies before making a cold call or sending a cold email.

To get a true appreciation of the results of this question, consider three earlier findings:

39% of buyers and consumers indicated that a LinkedIn request customized to them or their company would be creepy.

56% of respondents said that a LinkedIn message referring to a recent company event or leadership change would be creepy.

55% of survey takers responded that an email from a salesperson that referred to a tweet, comment, or discussion they recently posted on LinkedIn or Twitter would be creepy.

Huh? While the majority of respondents agreed that they would like cold outreach to be as customized to their company as possible, a significant portion -- in some cases, the majority -- found customization to be unsavory in specific situations.

This indicates a cognitive dissonance that is of no small significance to salespeople. When buyers' and consumers' attention is specifically raised to the fact that a salesperson has researched them in advance of a given interaction, they might balk. But in the abstract, this behavior is not just normal -- it's wanted!

This dissonance is reminiscent of a visitor experience initiative at Disneyworld. If you've been to Disneyworld recently, you'll have noticed that guests are no longer given keys to their hotel rooms -- instead, each guest is issued a "MagicBand" wristband, with embedded RFID and radio technology. The resort stores information in the wearable such as the hotel room you're staying in and your credit card number, so visitors are always a mere wrist tap away from settling in for the night or buying a set of giant mouse ears. Wristbands also enable Disney employees to track the whereabouts of guests.

Creepy, right? Well, when you think about it, it might be a little disconcerting. But when your family is greeted by name the minute you enter a Disney restaurant and ushered off to the table especially reserved for you, it seems closer to "magic." Blissfully unaware of the work going on behind the scene, the experience becomes more pleasurable than creepy.

Salespeople, take note.

# WHAT TO DO WITH THIS DATA

So, is social selling creepy? Although this data doesn't underscore a resounding "yes" or "no," it at least provides solid ground on which to base an opinion in certain scenarios.

With all the data in mind, we've distilled five action items for social salespeople who don't want to come off as stalkers:

## 1) DON'T MENTION THE MECHANICS.

Buyers and consumers may think social selling tactics are creepy when they're made aware that salespeople are looking at their social profiles online. However, they are attracted to the "magic" of receiving a cold sales pitch "somehow" tailored to their situation.

Therefore, reps shouldn't stop researching their prospects online, but they would be wise to not advertise the practice. Instead of sending an email that starts, "After looking at your LinkedIn profile, I noticed you were promoted. Congratulations!" -- a better opening might be "Congratulations on your recent promotion to director!" The prospect will likely respond more favorably to your research if they're none the wiser that you've done it.

## 2) GET INTRODUCED.

Respondents were less likely to regard a LinkedIn request or message as creepy if they had a shared connection with the salesperson. Even better, -- the majority of survey takers said they would not regard an introduction to a salesperson from someone they knew to be creepy.

Don't underestimate the importance of referrals and common connections. Before sending a cold message or request, take time and see if someone would be willing to introduce you to the prospect. With an introduction, the recipient will be much more open to your message.

### **3) FAVOR "SOFT" SOCIAL TOUCHES OVER "HARD" ONES.**

The point of social selling isn't necessarily to close new customers -- it's to increase familiarity for both salesperson and prospect. While you learn more about the prospect from following their stream and understanding what interests them, the prospect starts to recognize your name so when you finally do send a cold email, it's not as chilly.

Likes, comments, retweets, and favorites all foster familiarity, but respondents in this survey generally preferred the gentler interactions (retweets, favorites, and likes) over the more assertive ones (comments). With this in mind, favor softer touches in your social selling behavior. Not only are these actions more agreeable to prospects, they also take less time. Win-win.

### **4) DO NOT INTERACT WITH PROSPECTS ON FACEBOOK.**

While it is acceptable to passively research buyers on Facebook, do not attempt interactions on the social network.

### **5) TREAD LIGHTLY.**

More than anything, this survey revealed that whether or not social selling is regarded as creepy depends on the individual buyer or consumer you ask. With this in mind, don't wholly dismiss or embrace social selling based on one prospect's reaction. Everyone is different, and they are entitled to their opinions.

# RESOURCES

Thanks for reading! Want to find out how to do social selling the non-creepy way? Subscribe to the HubSpot Sales blog:

