



Trustworthiness in Advertising

Understanding the Power of Advertising
and Sponsored Content on Purchasing



Introduction

The digital marketing landscape is characterized by intensity and diversity: In the battle for consumers' attention, **brands are spending big on an unprecedented array of platforms.** Marketers' [social media budgets](#) have exploded in recent years, while companies spent an [estimated \\$33 billion](#) on native advertising in 2018. Simultaneously, longstanding techniques show no signs of fading. Search ads remain the largest form of online advertising, accounting for [roughly 42 percent](#) of 2018 ad spending. As the opportunities – and obligations – of digital marketing evolve, it's clear that relevance requires messaging on multiple channels.

Yet, recent research calls companies' cross-platform efforts into question. Consumers are [increasingly frustrated](#) with digital ads they deem intrusive, causing many to install [ad blockers](#). Additionally, the [influence of online reviews](#) has swelled in recent years, as shoppers seek to understand if brands' advertising claims are credible. Which digital marketing tactics actually drive consumers' purchase decisions? And how can advertising effectively complement customer reviews?

To explore these questions, **we surveyed over 2,000 individuals in the U.S. and U.K., studying how various advertising tactics affect their buying behavior.** We also analyzed the impact of online reviews and the most powerful aspects of customer feedback. Our results provide a holistic view of attracting customers online through multiple brand touch points. To understand which digital marketing channels matter most to real consumers, keep reading.

Impact of Advertising on Purchases

Percentage of respondents reporting these advertising methods influence their purchasing decisions

Search advertising

30.7%

Weekly marketing emails

30.3%

Targeted ads on social media

29.6%

Sponsored ads on websites or social media

25.6%

Commercials for product/services during
online streaming

24.8%

Advertising Immunity?

Regardless of the particular platform, most consumers voiced skepticism about the power of digital advertising to affect their own purchase decisions. **Indeed, for each advertising platform included in our survey, less than a third of individuals admitted to being influenced by ads of that kind.** This finding may support the notion of [effective frequency](#), which suggests that advertising convinces through cumulative exposure over time. Accordingly, we may find our choices shaped subconsciously, even though we find any single ad unpersuasive.

Still, our data imply that most shoppers are unimpressed by the advertising content they encounter, whether through search engines or social media. **Commercials that interrupt online streaming were deemed least influential overall**, with merely a quarter of respondents saying such ads informed their buying behavior. Viewers have registered strong opposition to such commercials in the past: One [recent study](#) found that roughly a quarter of Netflix subscribers would drop the service if it began to run ads.

In some cases, women were significantly more likely to admit that certain ads affected their purchase decisions. **Roughly 1 in 3 women said targeted social media ads influenced their purchase decisions**, and 27 percent said they'd been swayed by sponsored content on websites or social networking platforms. This gender gap might reflect how female-centric categories, such as the [beauty industry](#), have been revolutionized by social media in recent years. Additionally, women are [more likely than men](#) to use social media, therefore increasing the odds they'll be influenced on such platforms.

Impact of Advertising on Purchases

Percentage of respondents reporting these advertising methods influence their purchasing decisions

By Gender

Men
Woman

Search advertising



Weekly marketing emails



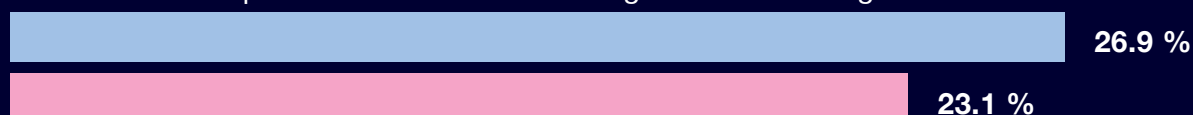
Targeted ads on social media



Sponsored ads on websites or social media



Commercials for products and services during online streaming



Persuasion by Nation

Our data suggest that some modes of digital marketing may resonate to a greater extent with audiences in the U.S. than consumers in the U.K. Individuals in both countries were roughly equally likely to say that search ads and weekly marketing emails affected their purchase decisions. **Yet, a greater percentage of Americans reported being influenced by targeted social media ads, and an even larger gap emerged around sponsored content.** Commercials on streaming services seemed far more effective for U.S. audiences as well.

If U.K. consumers are less likely to feel influenced by marketing on social media, it's not for a lack of effort on the part of British brands. Social media advertising is set to reach [£4.59 billion by 2020](#), surpassing the entire U.K. television ad market. However, the U.K. is a particularly difficult climate for advertisers, whose efforts are viewed with intense suspicion. Indeed, one [recent study](#) found that advertising executives were the nation's least trusted profession overall.

In most regions of the U.K., respondents were most likely to report being influenced by search ads. There were some exceptions to this trend, however: Scotland, Greater London, and Yorkshire and the Humber were areas particularly receptive to targeted social media ads. In the U.S., the Northeast and South also regarded targeted ads on social media as especially effective, whereas the West was more inclined toward sponsored content. **This finding confirms the complexity of consumer experiences: No single platform can dominate countrywide.**

International Impact

Percentage of respondents reporting these advertising methods influence their purchasing decisions

By Gender



By Nationality



Search advertising



Weekly marketing emails



Targeted ads on social media



Sponsored ads on websites or social media

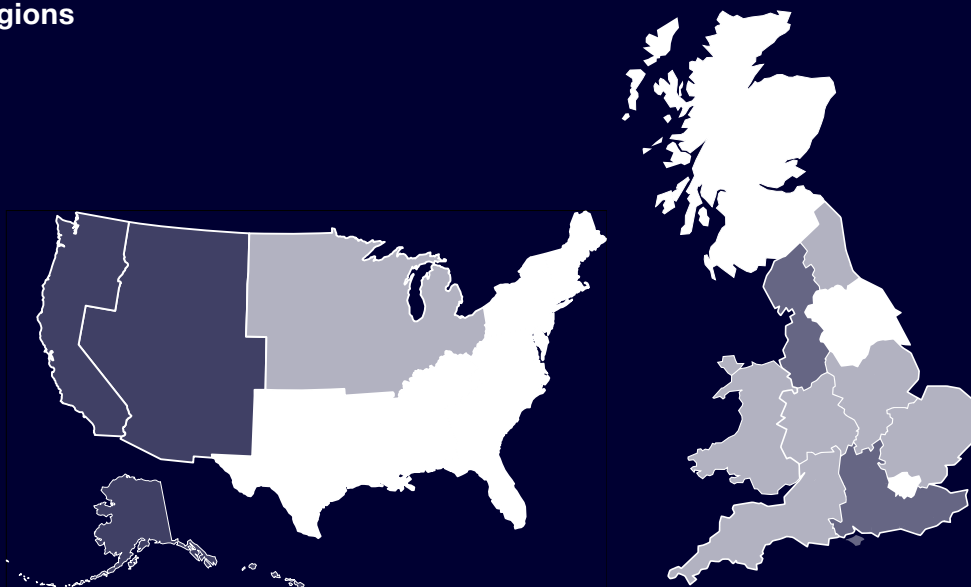


Commercials for products and services during online streaming



By U.K. Country and English Regions

- Targeted ads on social media
- Search advertising
- Weekly marketing emails
- Sponsored ads on websites and/or social media



Trust Troubles

Thus far, our results have varied substantially across demographic categories. Yet, one overarching theme holds true: With regard to each kind of digital platform, most consumers regard ads as ineffective in influencing their behavior. Could these dismissive attitudes reflect a deficit of trust in advertisers' claims?

Our findings imply that suspicion is widespread: **Less than 3 in 10 consumers said they trusted each kind of digital advertising.** Targeted ads on social media and sponsored ads on social platforms and websites were viewed with particular skepticism. These data points suggest that consumer trust won't be won through new trends and technologies. As some [marketing experts](#) have recently noted, influencer endorsements can be forced and ineffective in connection with particular products.

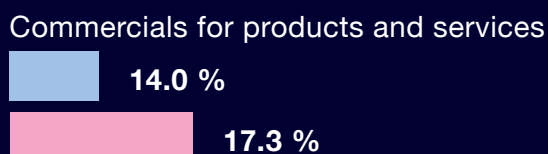
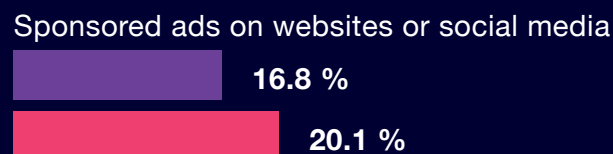
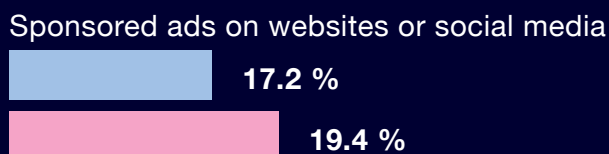
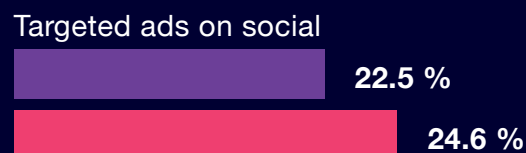
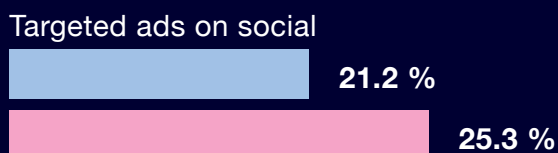
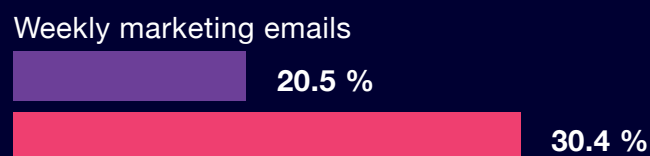
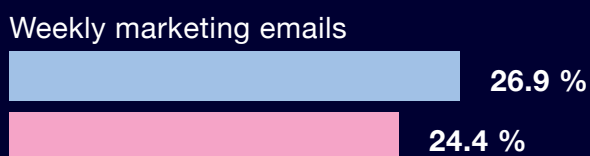
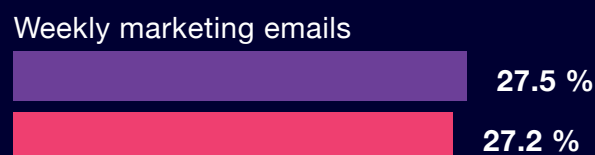
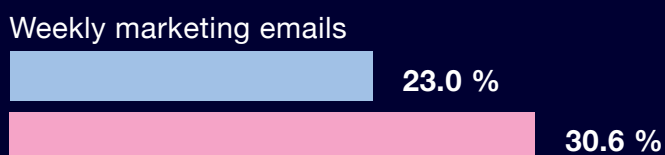
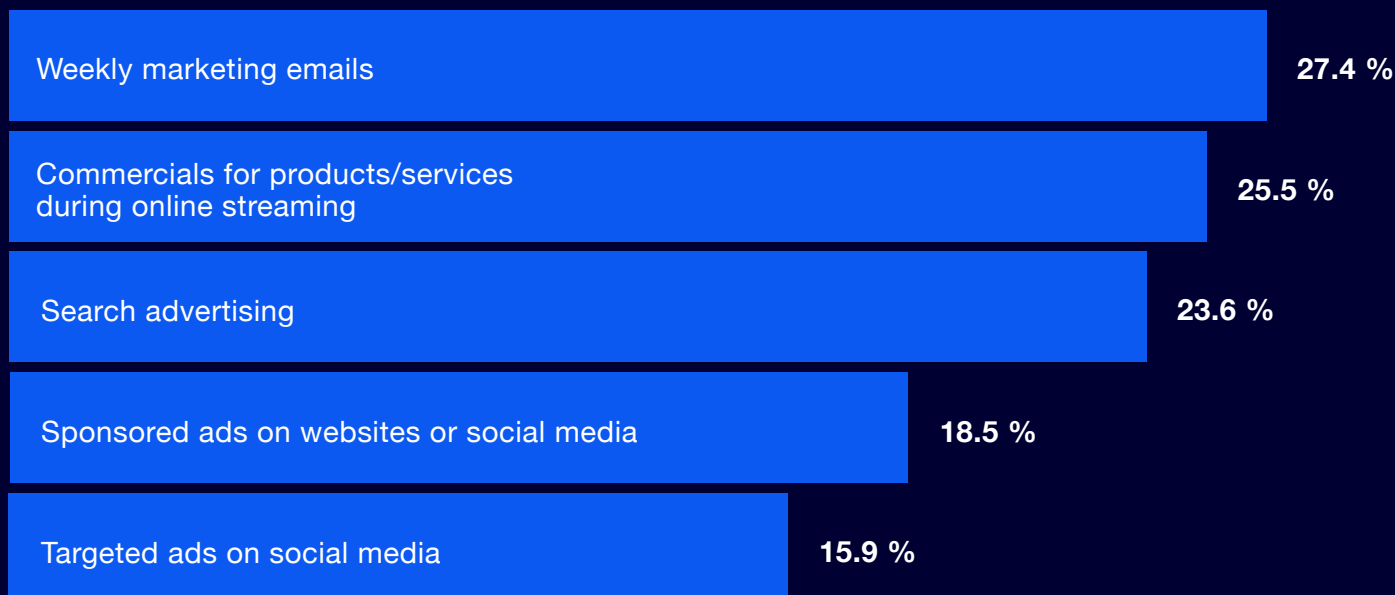
Compared to U.K. residents, American respondents were more trusting of advertising platforms overall. Additionally, women tended to trust digital ads of different kinds at higher rates than men. **However, even the most credulous demographic categories were largely resistant to advertisers' claims** – a far-reaching trend that researchers have labeled a “[consumer trust crisis](#).” If the vast majority of consumers doubt the veracity of digital advertising, when is it actually effective?

Gaining Trust

Percentage of respondents who trust specific advertising methods

By Nationality

U.K.
U.S.



Convincing Content

U.S. and U.K. residents alike valued an attractive price: When asked why they purchased something from an ad, **over three-quarters of respondents in each region said they were driven by a good deal**. Another top reason – especially among Americans – was that the ad reminded them of a product or service they’d previously considered. Although this dynamic can occur organically, this sort of reminder is often more than mere coincidence. Advertisers often “[retarget](#)” consumers who have reviewed their products or services in the past, using tracking pixels to serve up related ads across the internet.

These top two reasons share a central purpose: Their goal is to encourage the completion of a purchase, rather than drive initial awareness of a product or service. Indeed, comparably few individuals said they purchased something after an ad offered more information or attempted to forge an emotional connection. If effective ads capitalize on pre-existing impressions, how do consumers form opinions about the things they eventually buy?

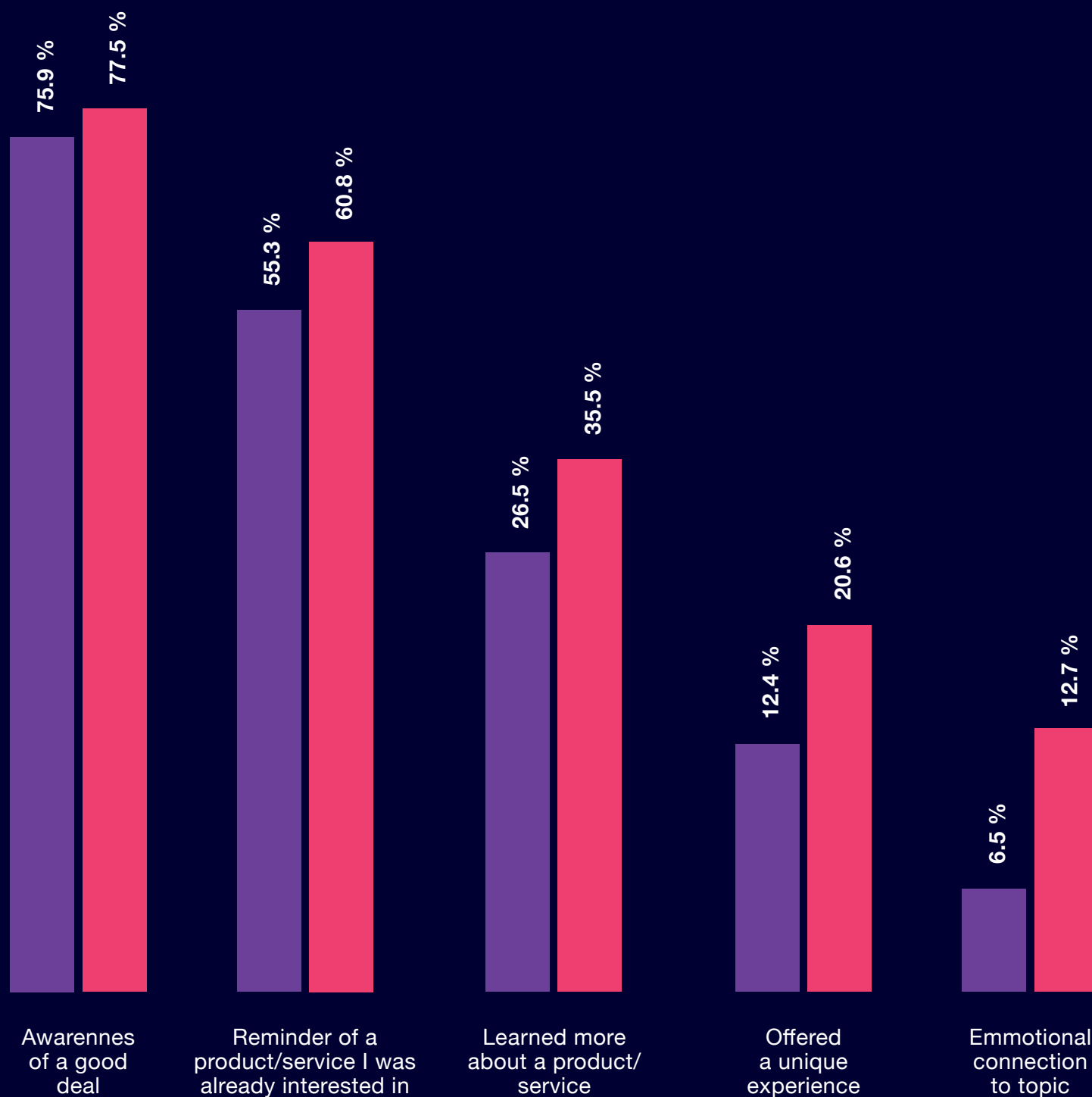
For many individuals, the answer is online reviews. According to one recent study, [84 percent of consumers](#) trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations from people they know – a stark contrast to the widespread suspicion of advertising discussed above. Yet, if reviews are an essential part of consumer research, what makes authentic customer feedback particularly powerful?

Why Advertisements Lead People to Make Purchases

The No. 1 reason respondents purchased something from an advertisement was because it made them aware of a good deal (76.8%)

By Nationality

U.K.
U.S.



Reviewing Reviews

Our data confirm the centrality of reviews in the customer journey: **More than two-thirds of respondents said they usually or regularly consulted online reviews before buying a product or service.** Not all reviews are weighed equally, however, with certain characteristics viewed as essential markers of credibility and quality.

In both the U.S. and the U.K., approximately 6 in 10 individuals said the inclusion of both pros and cons was a key indicator of review quality. This perspective may reflect concerns about the prevalence of [fake reviews](#) on some platforms. Balanced reviews are more likely to be real than feedback that is effusively and exclusively positive. Similarly, images were important for 37 percent of U.K. residents and 45 percent of U.S. respondents. A picture might serve as another form of proof that a review is real – and that the delivered product resembles images presented by the brand.

Which kinds of sponsored content reviews did respondents find most believable? **User-generated reviews proved most credible for U.K. and U.S. respondents alike**, with ratings claiming a distant second place. This finding implies that real user reviews, when incorporated into a larger digital strategy, may be a powerful antidote to the advertising trust deficit discussed above. Indeed, the marketing industry is increasingly [emphasizing user-generated content](#) as an essential dimension of brand activity online – particularly as consumers grow wary of more direct modes of advertising.

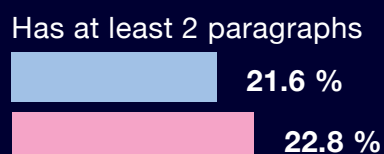
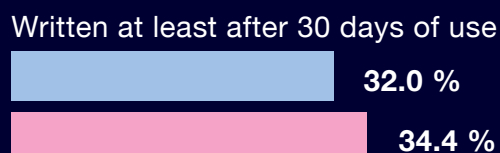
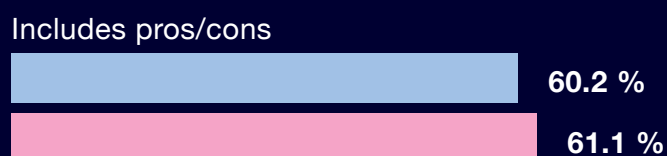
What Makes a Good Review?

68% of respondents always or often check reviews before making a purchase of a product or service.

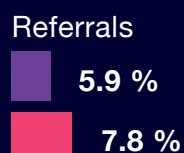
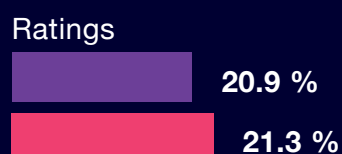
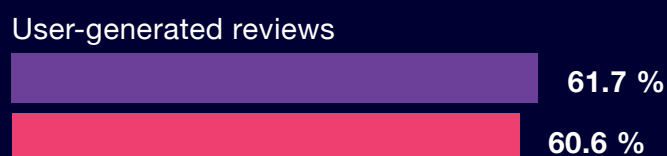
By Nationality

■ U.K.
■ U.S.

Percentage of Respondents Rating Review Quality as Important



Most Believable Sponsored Content Reviews



Authenticity: A Principle for All Platforms

While our findings vary somewhat by gender and geography, the prevailing themes are clear: **Across various platforms, digital advertising is met with indifference or suspicion by most consumers.** Conversely, most shoppers proactively seek reviews before completing a purchase, prizing real feedback from past customers.

Yet, no brand should renounce advertising entirely or focus exclusively on driving positive reviews. Rather, companies must utilize advertising channels in an authentic manner, echoing positive sentiments voiced by customers.

When brands can back their advertising claims with real testimonials, they can transcend the widespread skepticism evident in our findings. This approach is both holistic and transparent. Truthful brand messaging endures across channels, matching rhetoric and reality.

At [Trustpilot](#), we're leaders in helping companies integrate customer reviews into their broader digital strategies. By empowering customers to leave authentic feedback, our platform yields tremendous benefits for businesses large and small. From improved search performance to conversion optimization, find out how your company can thrive by earning

Our clients

The logo for Sage, featuring the word "sage" in a lowercase, green, sans-serif font.The logo for Kayak, featuring the word "KAYAK" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font with each letter in its own square.The logo for Staples, featuring the word "STAPLES" in a bold, red, sans-serif font.The logo for PostNord, featuring the word "postnord" in a lowercase, blue, sans-serif font.The logo for Argos, featuring the word "Argos" in a red, sans-serif font with a red swoosh underneath.The logo for The Princeton Review, featuring the text "The Princeton Review" in a black, sans-serif font inside a black-bordered box with a yellow triangle at the bottom right.The logo for WordPress, featuring a circular icon with a 'W' and the word "WORDPRESS" in a blue, sans-serif font.The logo for StubHub, featuring the word "StubHub" in a white, sans-serif font inside a dark blue, rounded rectangle.The logo for Western Union, featuring the words "WESTERN UNION" and "WU" in a yellow, sans-serif font inside a black-bordered box.

Methodology

We collected responses from 2,048 consumers via a survey. U.S. respondents were collected using Amazon's Mechanical Turk and U.K. respondents through Prolific. 49.6% of participants currently resided in the U.K., and 50.4% currently resided in the U.S. 86.4% of participants currently resided in England, 8.9% in Scotland, and 4.7% in Wales. 10.8% of participants resided in the East Midlands, and 7.1% in East of England. 42.6% of participants were men, and 57.4% were women.

Demographics with a sample size below 26 were excluded from the analysis; for this study, that included residents of Northern Ireland. Also, data presented in this study rely on self-reporting, which can introduce issues such as, but not limited to, selective memory and exaggeration. Statistical testing was not conducted in this study, and the research conducted was exploratory. Future research could explore reviews and purchasing behavior.

Sources

Social spend accelerating despite most marketers not being able to prove impact

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Native will dominate display spending in 2018

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Advertisers will spend \$40 billion more on internet ads than on TV ads this year

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Social media ad spend to overtake TV's in spite of Facebook woes

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'Influencers aren't effective for product marketing' - Edelman's head of influencer

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How Brands Should Be Working To Fix The Consumer Trust Crisis

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84 Percent of People Trust Online Reviews As Much As Friends. Here's How to Manage What They See

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This Is Why You Should Not Trust Online Reviews

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Here's How Your Brand Can Make The Most Of User-Generated Content

Read here: [forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com)

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About Trustpilot

Trustpilot is a leading independent review platform - free and open to all. With more than 50 million reviews of over 245,000 companies, Trustpilot gives people a place to share and discover reviews of businesses, while giving every business the tools to turn consumer feedback into business results. Our mission is to bring consumers and companies together to create ever improving experiences that upgrade the world.

We'll be your partner in reviews

With a named customer success manager and ongoing customer support, we will be there to lend a hand.



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★ Trustpilot (Oct 2018)