2021 WIDEN CONNECTIVITY REPORT

Connecting the dots between marketing, information, and customer experience

WIDEN

AN Acquia COMPANY

The 2021 Connectivity Report from Widen, an Acquia company, is an ongoing study about the challenges marketers and creatives face when trying to balance technology with human touch. As part of our quest to understand these challenges, we set out each year to explore a new area on the topic of connectivity. Connectivity, as we define it, is the state of interdependence between people, objects, systems, and information — as well as the nature of those relationships.

Last year, we discussed the role of visual design in connectivity. We learned that design and an organization's ability to achieve their marketing goals are connected and closely intertwined. This year, we shift our gaze to the role of information — specifically product information — in fostering deeper audience connections. Product information includes product data, product marketing data, and product digital assets (see Diagram A). We feel the topic of product information and its role in driving customer connection is an important topic, particularly during a time when many of us feel a great disconnection.

The pandemic created a greater distance between people and made it harder for them to connect with each other. This challenge extends to brands, many of whom were forced to accelerate their growth in digital spaces and adopt new or emerging platforms and capabilities faster than their original "digital transformation" plan laid out. Plenty of these brands have landed on their feet, ultimately rewarded with the extra push they needed to launch a digital capability or service. For others, we know, the speed of transformation was overwhelming at times, and the struggle to create meaningful, connected experiences was a very real challenge. We hope that the stories shared in this report will inspire and inform new options for teams looking to ignite greater connectivity.

At Acquia, we're in the business of helping brands leverage their digital content to build stronger, more trusting, and longer-lasting relationships with their customers. As we look into the future, it's clear that e-commerce continues to rise in importance and is quickly becoming a determining factor in a brand's success. Online retailers need to publish the right information about merchandise; that we know. But how can brands leverage product information to deepen audience connections and succeed in a space that is increasingly disconnected and inundated with information?

This report summarizes our key findings.

Key findings

Product data is critical in building customer trust, but it cannot act alone

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Complete and utter accuracy is table stakes
for the digital shelf

Objective information is the backbone
of a strong marketing story

Personalization takes a back seat to lending
a helpful hand

Technology is needed to translate information
into engaging customer experiences

What is product information?

Product information is an overarching category that includes the product data, product marketing copy, and product digital assets that brands use to describe and market their products.

Product information

Product data

SKUs
Weight
Sizes
Colors
Materials/ingredients

Product marketing content

Marketing descriptions
Features and benefits
Upsell/cross-sell highlights

Product digital assets
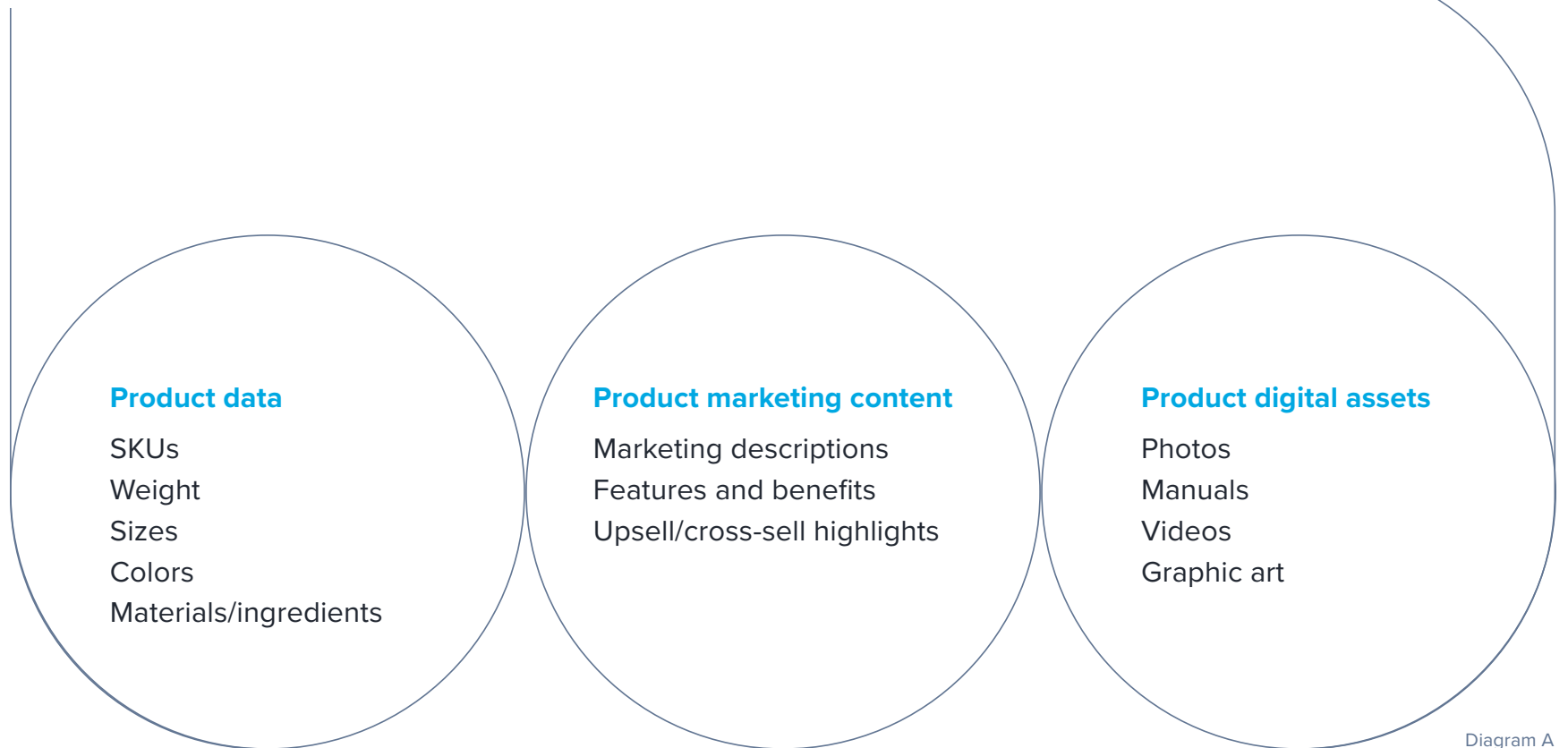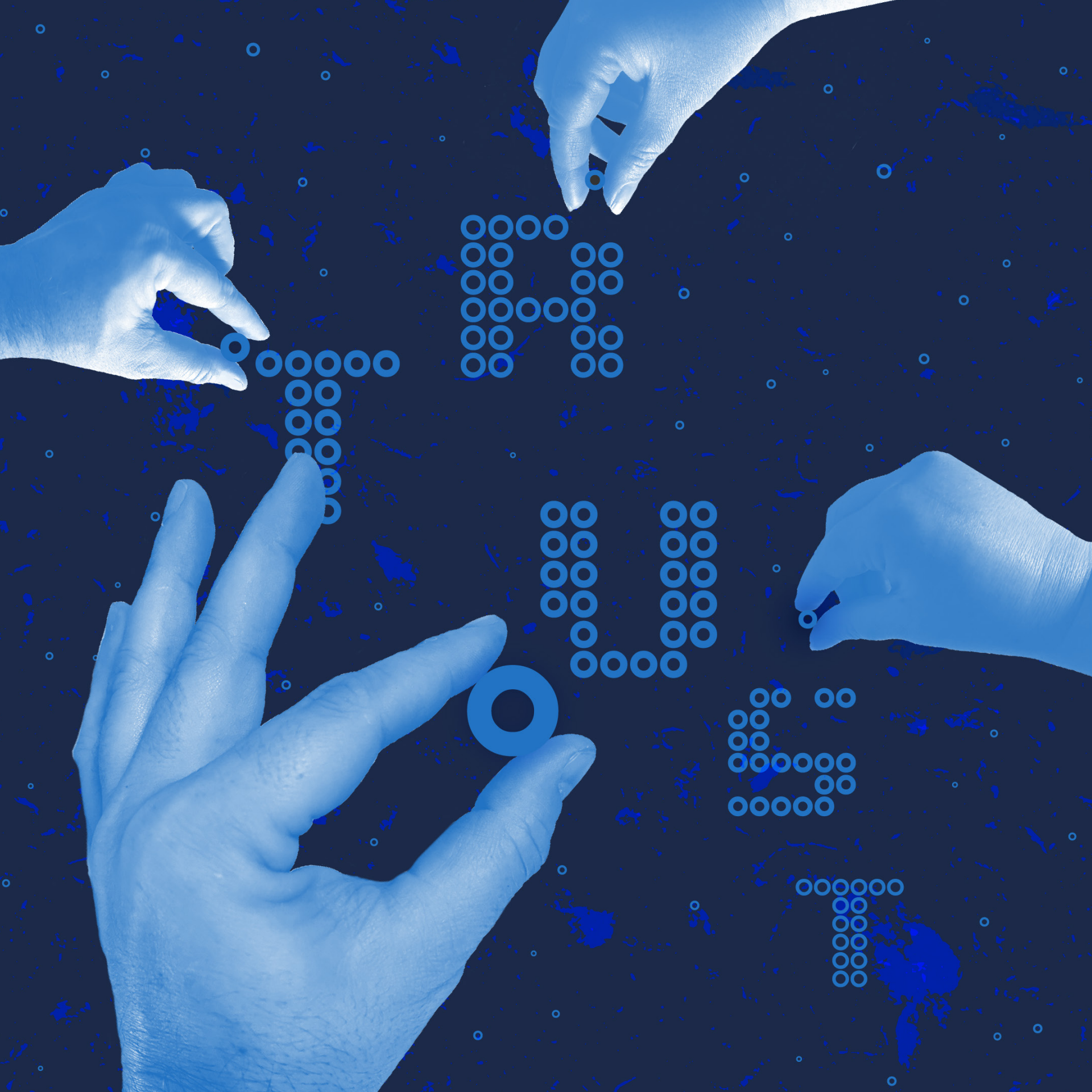
Photos
Manuals
Videos
Graphic art

Diagram A

A total of 155 leading marketers and creatives from the US and UK participated in the research study for this year's Connectivity Report. Findings are based on data gathered through a 21-question digital survey and a series of interviews conducted from August to September 2020.

Research participants

American Eagle Outfitters

AndersenAprilaire

Bain & Company

BCD Travel

Beech-Nut

Exactech

FASTSIGNS

Framebridge

GOJO

Gulfstream

H-E-B

Hand2mind

Harry & David

ICON
Health & Fitness

Igus

KI

Kohl's

Koi

Laura Mercier

Lutron

Moen

NVIDIA

Pima County

Red Wing Shoe Company

Ring

Rite-Hite

Sargento Foods

SC Johnson

Sheridan College

Shorelight

Soulo

Stand Together

Target

Tektronix

Treasury Wine Estates

Venafi

VSP Vision Care

Wisconsin Department of Tourism

Industries

Apparel and fashion

Aviation and aerospace

Computers

Consulting

Consumer goods

Consumer services

Cosmetics

Food and beverage

Furniture

Government agency

Health, wellness, and fitness

Higher education

Insurance

Internet

Manufacturing

Marketing and advertising

Medical device

Network security

Nonprofit

Plastics

Printing

Publishing

Retail

Travel, leisure, and tourism

Wine and spirits

Product data is critical in building customer trust, but it cannot act alone

Trust is a critical element in a brand's ability to connect with their audiences and drive sales. As one interview participant put it, "Without trust, there is no business." And most marketers agree. When asked how important it is to know whether customers trust their marketing efforts, over 87% of our survey respondents say that trust is indeed important. In fact, it's more important than ever. According to a 2020 Edelman report, 70% of consumers believe that being able to trust a brand is more critical today than in the past.[1]

Product data plays a notable role in helping marketers achieve this trust. After all, consumers rely on sizes, colors, materials, and other product information to understand each and every item they purchase online. Therefore, it's no surprise that nearly 50% of marketers we surveyed credit product data as the information type that has the biggest impact on building customer trust. But why?

Online shoppers don't have the

benefit of interacting with products in person. They can't take a product off the shelf, feel its texture, and experience it in the same way they can in a store. They rely on product data to help them understand a product and to feel more confident that a purchase will meet their needs and expectations.

"The value in all of the groups starting to use more and more [product] data is really focused on making the customer more comfortable," shares one interviewee from a major US retail corporation. Beyond comfort, this same marketer believes that strong product data leads to better conversion and sales because a website visitor can gather information, compare options, and then make a purchase — all from within the same shopping experience. This not only keeps a visitor on a particular e-commerce site, but it also helps establish the brand or site as a trusted source and go-to shopping destination.

With that said, marketers aren't

giving product data all of the credit. According to our survey, product digital assets and product marketing content also play a critical role in establishing trust. However, where they really shine is when it comes to turning trust into sales. The majority of survey respondents (72%) say that digital assets like photography and videos — along with product marketing content like descriptions and other sales-driven highlights — are the information types that have the biggest impact on actually driving sales.

Together, product digital assets, product marketing content, and product data move the customer through the trust-building stages of their journey to conversion. The reason why is easy to see. When a high-quality marketing or digital asset, such as an engaging description or product demo video, is paired with product data, the combined information is more convincing. Through sight, sound, motion, or even text-based content, brands can bring raw product data to life, better engage and

connect with buyers, and ultimately encourage a shopper to make a purchase. These three product information types can stand on their own, but they are stronger together. And in the words of one interviewee, "Each one of them are ultimately required to put a good experience out there."

Delivering an A+ experience with product information

Brands leverage product information to create more engaging, compelling customer experiences. But, it's the brands that leverage the trifecta of product information — product data, product marketing content, and product digital assets — that have the real advantage.

Interview spotlight

Amazon A+ Content is a feature that allows brands to enhance the product data on their Amazon product pages with robust marketing copy, charts, featured images, and other marketing and digital assets. One interviewee we spoke with talks about how Amazon A+ Content is a perfect example of how brands, including a major competitor of theirs, leverage all three product information types to create more compelling shopping experiences.

"They are kind of pioneers in this space," says the interviewee of a competitor. "They have an immense amount of content, like visual content, that'll break down the parts of the product, and [that's] why it [their Amazon product page] looks so visually enhancing." The payout, according to Amazon, is worth the effort, as brands using Amazon A+ content typically see higher conversion rates, greater traffic, and increased sales.

Complete and utter accuracy is table stakes for the digital shelf

As we learned, product information — product data, marketing assets, and digital assets — are essential in helping brands build trusting, sales-driving connections with their audiences. However, our findings show that the mere presence of product information is not enough.

According to our survey, over 81% of brands "always" or "usually" use product information in their e-commerce marketing efforts. Marketers clearly see the value. Yet, they also recognize that product information does more damage than good if it's not 100% accurate.

"While product information may seem like a very small detail in a much larger picture, that information needs to be correct. It needs to be updated. Customers need to not encounter discrepancies between what they received and what we have on the web," explains one interview participant. "All of that matters because it all factors into how they feel about us as a brand."
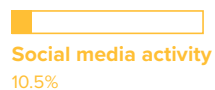
Recent Forrester research shows that one in five US adults returned an item bought online because the description was inaccurate.[2] Inaccurate product information, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can result in a loss of revenue and time for brands. With that said, it also has deeper, more lasting connectivity implications concerning trust.

The majority of marketers we surveyed (33%) say that accurate product information — even more so than customer reviews (28%), visual design (16%), and social media activity (10.5%) — has the biggest impact on customer trust in marketing efforts.

"From an e-commerce and digital standpoint, there's still a lot of trust that needs to be built with customers to get them to continue to leverage it," remarks one interviewee. "It only takes a one-time [online] purchase and getting the wrong thing to say, 'Well, I'm okay with going to the store for this because I know I'm going to get the right thing because I'm going to grab it and hold it in my hand before I buy it.'"

Impact on customer trust

Accurate product information
33%

Customer reviews
28%

Visual design
16%

Social media activity
10.5%

But trust has a delicate shelf life. Even if brands have earned the trust of their customers, that doesn't mean they'll automatically have that connection tomorrow, or the next day, or the next."You don't just earn trust once. You have to keep re-earning it," asserts one senior marketing manager. "One piece of trust can be damaged so much easier than building it."

Whether discussing correct product data on their e-commerce sites, up-to-date visuals in publisher feeds, or consistent marketing language across channels, interviewees do not shy away from conveying the importance of accuracy in all applications. With that said, there's a disconnect between what marketers know to be important and what they are experiencing in their own e-commerce and digital efforts.

When asked to evaluate the level of control they have over the information presented at various touchpoints, only 36% of the marketers we surveyed claim to have "very high" control over information on their e-commerce sites. Furthermore, when discussing their own website, just over half (55%) say they have "very high" control over the information presented. While those numbers could be worse, they certainly leave significant room for improvement.

Control is an important factor in a brand's ability to ensure their product information is presented accurately across digital channels. Control, however, is difficult to achieve when brands pull this content from disparate systems and organize it in bulky and error-prone spreadsheets. "It's not all in one place; it's in these different places," says one digital asset coordinator. "And that's the whole issue."

The connection between accuracy and experience in an omnichannel world

Accurate product information isn't only important in digital environments. Brands must also ensure that product information is accurate and consistent across all customer touchpoints — including both online and offline channels.

Online to offline

According to Forrester, 41% of US adults feel more confident about their in-store purchases when they use their smartphones to research on the spot.[3] But what if the information they find online contradicts what they encounter in-store? This discrepancy could be enough to deter them from making the purchase altogether.

Offline to online

On the flipside, if a shopper is familiar with how a product looks because they've seen it in stores, they must also be able to effortlessly recognize it online. Inconsistent images or inaccurate and outdated product labels, images, or descriptions on either channel can confuse shoppers and drive them to an alternative option that they are more comfortable with.
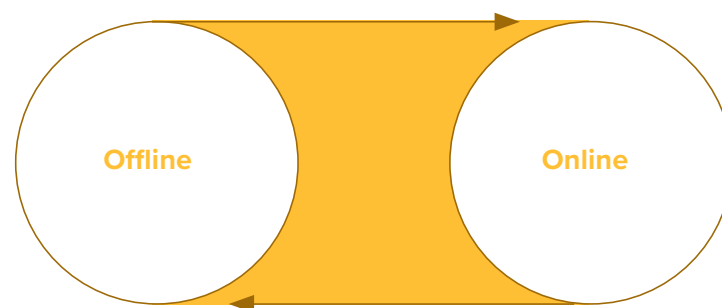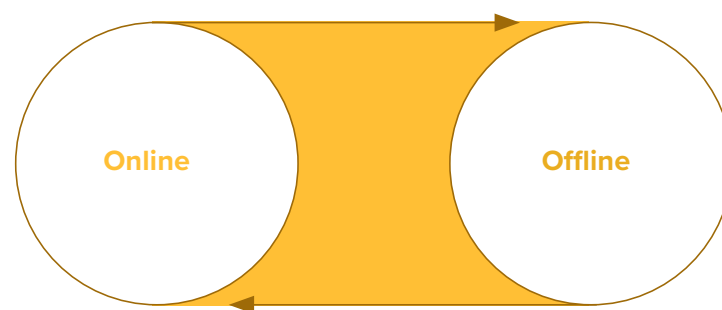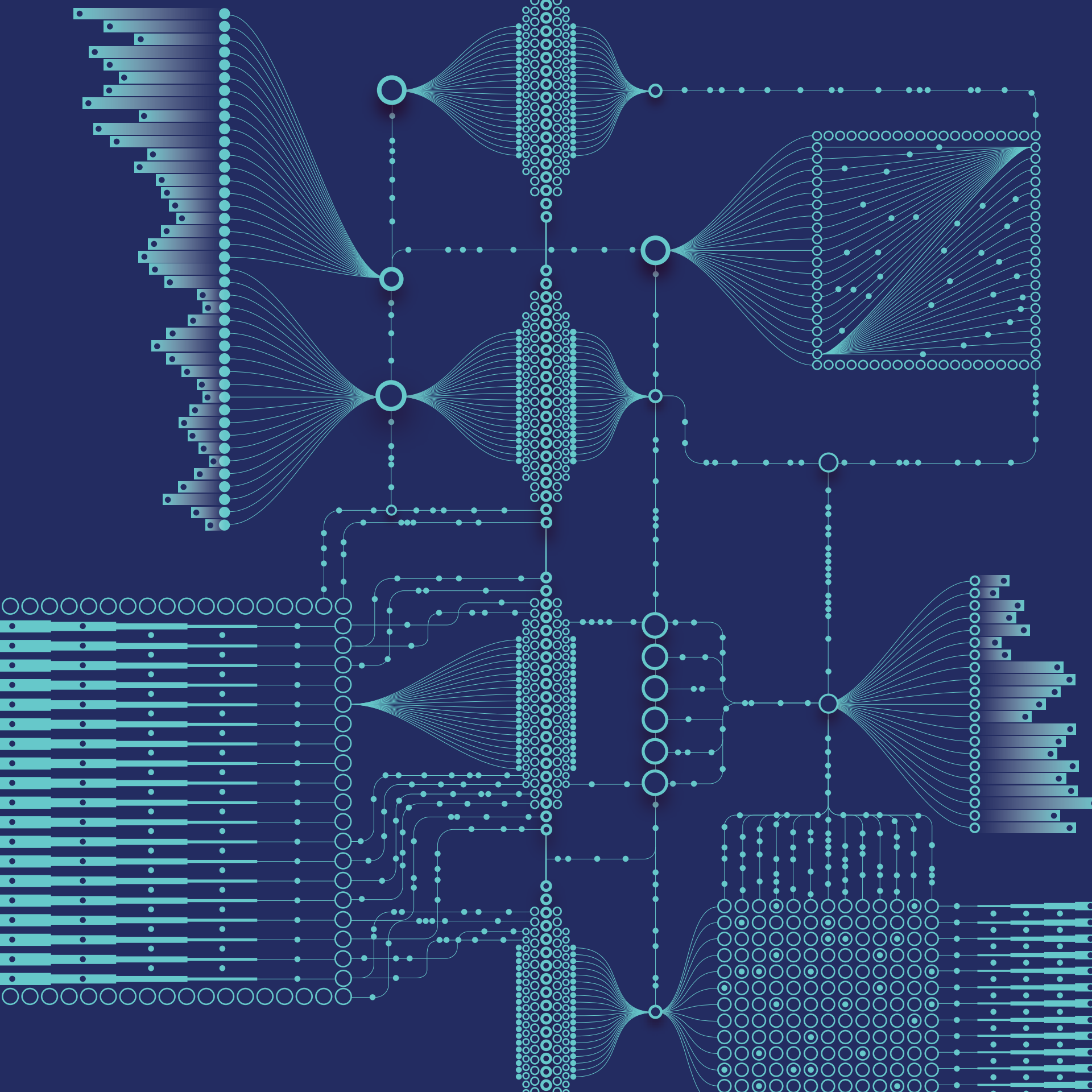
Online ⟷ Offline

Offline ⟷ Online

Diagram B

Objective information is the backbone of a strong marketing story

Importance of company beliefs and values by age group

18-34
83%

35-54
73%

54 and above
60%

Most product information is objective. The height, width, and depth of a manufacturing component. The weight, brand, and ingredients of a grocery item. Or the 360º videos and product photos used to showcase a clothing line. These are all examples of objective information; these are the facts about a product.

Not surprisingly, marketers find this kind of factual information valuable. When asked about the importance of objective information in their marketing efforts, the majority of survey respondents say it is "very important" or "somewhat important" across all of the channels we inquired about.

But regardless of channel, marketers know their audiences aren't only buying the facts. They're also buying an image, a lifestyle, a belief system. During one interview, a major clothing and accessory retailer admired how their brand isn't afraid to embrace a viewpoint. "They take a social stance. They tell you what they believe and what they stand

for," he says of their brand. "I think the customers value that."

In fact, research has long shown that customers do indeed value brands with a point of view, or at least one that matches their own. A recent 2020 consumer purchasing report, for example, finds that 83% of consumers between the ages of 18-34, 73% between the ages of 35-54, and 60% above the age of 54 say it is important that the companies they buy from align with their beliefs and values.[4]

Marketing stories are a critical part of a brand's ability to express what they stand for and to communicate who they are as a company. However, to tell marketing stories well, brands must create a narrative that's deeply rooted in and driven by facts, or objective product information. Without this level of reliance, as one interviewee shares, brands aren't able to communicate their message authentically and effectively.

"It just felt like the customer

**How important
is objective product
information in each of
the following contexts?**
Percent of marketers
that indicate it is
"somewhat important"
or "very important":

Your website(s)
77%

E-commerce sites
73%

In-store experiences
71%

Social media
70%

Email marketing
66%

didn't know what we were really telling them. They had to think about it a little too much," shares the interviewee about a recent marketing initiative around sustainability. His brand, at its core, is genuinely focused on sustainability, as the majority of their products are responsibly sourced from factories that meet or exceed environmental standards. But customers don't necessarily think of them that way (like they would an REI or a Patagonia). Reason being, the brand's efforts to communicate this part of their identity have been more or less cosmetic — a badge designating a product as sustainable or a clever campaign name. "We need to lean harder on true marketing to tell a story," the interviewee concludes. And for that, they need to elevate the role of objective product information in their efforts.

Product information, according to our survey, is used by 57% of marketers to tell stories about their brands, and by 71% to tell stories about their products. This factual information gives stories the footing and depth needed to make them believable and authentic. In short, objective product information (when used to its full potential) allows brands to create narratives that capture and effectively communicate their true identity. "There [are] some companies that send one message or market it in a different way, but it's not part of their DNA. It's not truly who they are," says one interviewee. "I think customers can see through that…It's hard to fake your way through things digitally that you could years ago and get away with it if you're not authentic."

Interview spotlight

We interviewed a well-respected, 115-year-old supermarket chain with a long history and a strong reputation built on integrity, customer service, and community. Customers have such a strong connection with the corporate brand that their brand's "story" is more of an identity at this point. As a result, customers automatically trust any of the company's in-house or private-label products.

To translate this brand affinity into opportunity, the grocery chain uses objective product information, such as images and copy, to highlight the brand name and make it clear that a product is a house brand. By leveraging objective information about their products, the company is able to use their brand's well-established story to their advantage — and effectively turn reputation into revenue.

"They just have such a great reputation for how they treat their community, how they treat their partners. And that kind of resonates in the products that we have. It's nice to have that national brand affinity." — brand representative for the grocery chain.

Personalization takes a back seat to lending a helping hand

"Personalization" has long been a buzzword in the marketing world. Our past connectivity research even tells us that it was the most important marketing, technology, and/or business trend that organizations were focused on in 2018.[5] Fast forward to today and our research begs the question: Are delivering customer experiences that are handcrafted for the individual really the most critical priority?

Personalization matters. In fact, we've seen in our own efforts how it is often effective in getting buyers' attention or giving them the extra push they need to take action. But there's a prerequisite to this. Before brands spend the time or money to segment audience data and custom tailor communications, recommendations, or ads — they must ensure they are meeting a fundamental consumer need. Brands, no matter how rudimentary it sounds, must be helpful.

"Establishing ourselves as a partner to them, [showing] that we are here to support them regardless of what's happening in the environment... that has had a big impact on e-commerce traffic, conversion, and what's happening with sales," shares one digital publishing company we spoke with.

One way brands can fill the role of "helpful partner" is by ensuring shoppers have the product information they need to make informed and confident purchasing decisions.

According to Forrester, "customers want more video, product spins, and relevant product content to build confidence in their purchasing decisions."[6] And this makes sense. Many marketers we spoke with credit product information with making digital products more tangible and helping buyers to better understand and compare product capabilities, features, and differentiators.

In fact, brands that create digital environments that enable easier comparison shopping do more than

just build customer confidence — they drive results. "You see really good engagement with guests using that [comparison shopping] flow through the system [website] and often [at] a generally higher conversion rate, too," shares one major US retailer.

Product information is important at every stage in the buyers' journey, but it is seemingly most important in the consideration stage. "That's when we're really starting to break down the attributes of the product...so they [shoppers] know why you would choose our product versus a competitor," another interviewee states.

Business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) buyers want to be empowered to be the experts in their purchasing journeys. So rather than forcing personalization on them in the form of retargeted ads or behavior-triggered offers, it seems brands are better

off meeting customers where they are in their purchasing journeys. When buyers come looking — when the intent to buy is there — brands that are ready with accurate, rich product information have the advantage.

"The growing belief is that any time you can add more information about the product — the better, especially online," reports one digital marketer. "Products that have all of those updated features and callouts marked can show up more prominently in search results or might have their own section on a site, so it really helps our visibility and it just gets us in a better place to be the chosen product online."

Product information is a critical factor in strong search engine optimization (SEO), both on search engines like Google and across marketplaces and sites like Amazon and Target. Strong SEO results also have the added benefit of connecting brands

with new customers. Outbound personalization efforts typically rely on data about an existing pool of contacts and therefore don't afford brands with the same opportunity for lead generation as an SEO-driven strategy.

And the best part? The byproduct of product information and SEO is personalization. When a shopper types their specific query into a search box, they are instantly connected with the personalized results that best align with their request. The potential here is interesting, as one interviewee points out while discussing bananas (of all things). In his example, he talks about how brands have the opportunity to connect buyers with products, such as bananas, that meet the shopper's exact, nuanced criteria — be that unripened green bananas or yellow versus brown or very brown.

There's a catch of course. Brands need accurate, up-to-date, detailed product information to provide buyers with a deeper level of selection and personalization. But really, robust and quality information is always needed, regardless of how granular the search experience. In-depth product information leads to stronger SEO. And of course, correct information ensures that SEO results and product listings are actually accurate. The end result? More helpful information and stronger audience connections.

Reimagining personalization

Brands typically try to achieve personalization in their marketing efforts via outbound efforts like targeted ads or emails. However, there's another way. Brands can also achieve personalization with inbound marketing efforts like SEO that better connect customers with the information they want, when they want it.

Technology is needed to translate information into engaging customer experiences

With the growing popularity of e-commerce, brands are looking for ways to close the gap between digital and in-person shopping experiences. Digital shoppers need robust, accurate, compelling product information to feel confident in their purchasing decisions; that we've established. But the question of how to turn this information into customer experiences that are actually engaging is worth some attention.

When we asked survey participants how they translate raw product information into engaging content, the top responses centered around having the right tools and technology. Interestingly, other popular answers mentioned the use of product information itself, specifically in the form of effective written copy, visuals, or content in general.

The fact that marketers cite technology and product information as a means to more engaging customer experiences is not surprising. Many brands today are already marrying these two worlds to provide customers with immersive digital experiences that more closely resemble shopping in a physical store.

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are a good example of this. Many brands leverage VR and AR technologies, along with product data, marketing content, and digital assets, to deliver experiences where shoppers can "try on" glasses or even see how a paint color looks in their own living room.

One digital merchandising manager we interviewed also talked about an emerging 3D digital shopping technology that simulates the customer experience of walking down the aisle and selecting a product. "I would love to see that in the future. I think that'd be awesome to have a more similar experience to being in store," she says. "But I'm not exactly sure how close we would be to executing that — or, you know, if that's too much of a change for an

online shopper."

While these types of customer experiences are certainly engaging, they are not always attainable or even necessary for some brands. By definition, "engaging" means to occupy or attract someone's interest or attention, cause someone to become involved, or to establish a meaningful connection. Brands can engage customers in a magnitude of ways — a positive customer service experience, an alluring photo, or even the right promotion. But to truly translate their product information into engaging customer experiences, brands need to replicate positive product and brand engagements across all customer touchpoints. In other words, they need to deliver an omnichannel experience.

To deliver these engaging experiences at scale, brands (as our survey shows) need the right tools and technology. One interviewee highlights the necessity of this, particularly when crisis hits. "Can we give the customer what they want at the end of the day?" she asks while reflecting on her experience as a grocery brand at the onset of the pandemic. "The panic buying was a nightmare. We're pulling down like hundreds of thousands of items. You don't have an off switch...It's 100% manual."

Brands must be able to manipulate and remove product information across channels at a moment's notice, or risk putting inaccurate, unreliable information in front of their customers. But this level of control isn't just necessary during emergency situations. A brand's ability to connect with their audiences and deliver an engaging, omnichannel experience often hinges on the every day. Without the right technology — or combination of technologies in place— it's hard to infuse speed, automation, organization, and control into the day-to-day management of product information.
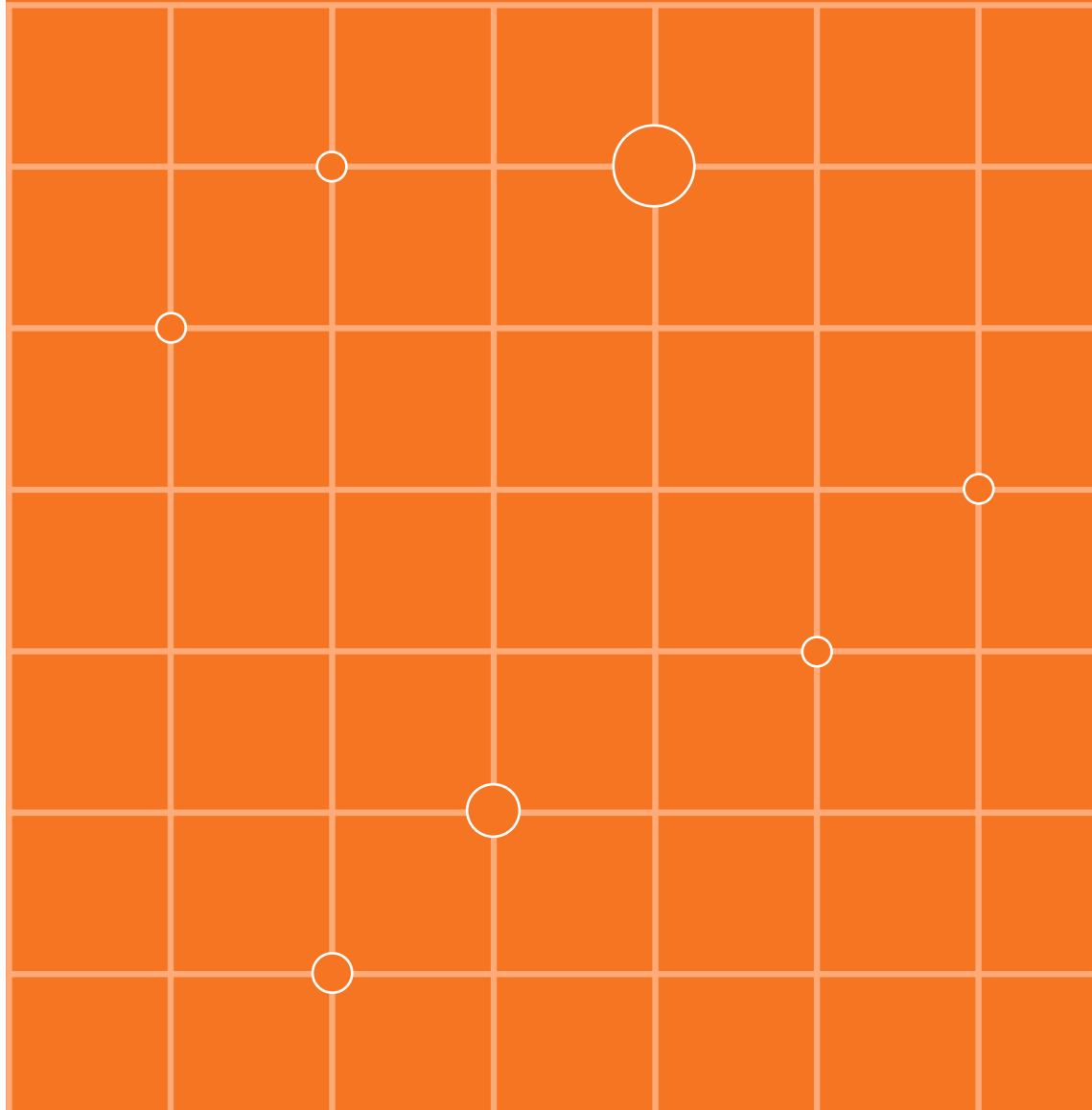
One digital asset coordinator we spoke with talks about how a gap in their technologies makes gathering the information their customers need cumbersome and prone to error. She shares how they have a digital asset management (DAM) system to centralize all of their videos, images, and other media. But when it comes to the rest of their product information (their product data and marketing content), they are left with makeshift, manual processes.

"They had someone make a product information [spec] sheet," she shares regarding one corporate workaround."If we had a product information management [PIM] system, that copy, that description would be in there and you would just update it in one place. But we have these sheets...so they don't match," she laments about the discrepancies between

their consumer website and what should be their product information of record.

Many other interviewees went on to share stories about the successes and challenges they've faced with trying to translate their product information into engaging customer experiences.No two stories were identical, but the underlying theme remained the same: Marketing technology, no matter what kind, should ultimately help brands build stronger, more lasting connections with their audiences. connections with their audiences.

Marketers cite technology and product information when asked how they translate raw product information into engaging content.

We hope that this year's Connectivity Report illuminates opportunities for you and your brand to build stronger, more trusting, and resilient connections with your audiences. As you look into the days and months ahead, we challenge you to think about ways you can better leverage and manage your product information to advance your brand and deliver truly exceptional customer experiences.

Need help determining your best path forward?

Question thought starters:

There's no one-size-fits-all checklist for turning product information into winning customer experiences. However, with the right line of questioning, you can identify where your greatest opportunities reside. We encourage you to collaborate with members throughout your organization and put together a list of questions to kickstart your journey.

Which digital assets do you use on your e-commerce channels? Is there an opportunity to use video or other media types to bring your raw product information to life?

Do customers trust your brand? What are customer reviews saying? Is your customer service team repeatedly hearing about the same product information discrepancies or problems?
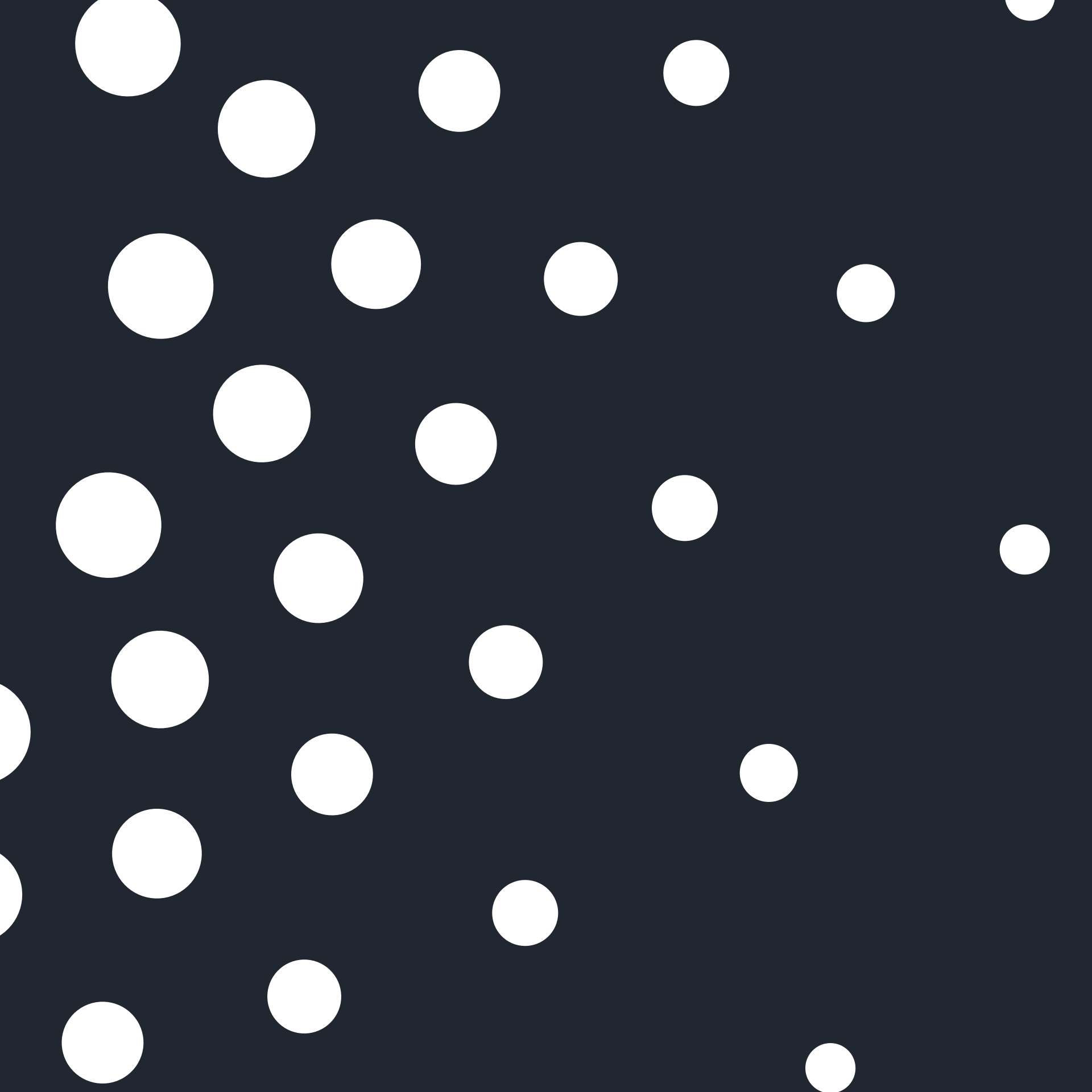
Are you confident that your product information is 100% accurate across all of your channels and customer touchpoints? If not, what is the root of the issue? Are there issues on all channels or just certain channels?

Do you use product information to tell marketing stories? What is your brand's story? Is it believable and authentic?

Are you focused on outbound or inbound personalization efforts?

When customers come looking, are you ready with accurate, helpful information to assist them with making informed, confident purchasing decisions?

Are you leveraging technology to better manage your product information? If so, what's working and not working?

Notes

1   Edelman, *Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Brand Trust in 2020*, June 25, 2020, https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2020-06/2020%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Specl%20Rept%20Brand%20Trust%20in%202020.pdf.

2   Forrester, *Forrester Infographic: Focus On Digital Customer Experience Puts PIM In The Spotlight*, September 21, 2020, https://www.forrester.com/report/Forrester+Infographic+Focus+On+Digital+Customer+Experience+Puts+PIM+In+The+Spotlight/-/E-RES161484.

3   Forrester, *PIM and DAM are the Power Couple for Your Content Strategy*, October 29, 2020, https://www.forrester.com/report/PIM+And+DAM+Are+The+Power+Couple+For+Your+Content+Strategy/-/E-RES159640?objectid=RES159640.

4   5W Public Relations, *2020 Consumer Culture Report*, January 12, 2021, https://www.5wpr.com/new/wp-content/uploads/pdf/5W_consumer_culture_report_2020final.pdf.

5   Widen, *2018 Widen Connectivity Report*, January 2018, https://www.widen.com/the-2018-connectivity-report-thank-you.

6   Forrester, *PIM and DAM are the Power Couple for Your Content Strategy*.