



The state of commerce content in 2021

*Benchmarks, challenges, and
recommendations for brands*

Executive summary

The partnerships channel is evolving at a rapid pace — programs today look drastically different than they did even a few years ago. Consumer behavior is changing (for example, 26 percent of U.S. consumers used ad blockers in 2020¹), and brands need new ways to engage with their target audience — in ways that consumers can trust.

The team at impact.com qualitatively observed that commerce content is an emerging partnership type in the partnerships channel that brands use to increase brand awareness, acquire new customers, and grow revenue. Commerce content offers a promising opportunity for brands that want to grow their program by diversifying their partner mix.

In light of these observations, impact.com conducted a customer survey in 2021 to better understand how brands engage in commerce content initiatives and to examine the challenges they face. This report provides data that allow you to benchmark your program against others, discusses some of the biggest challenges marketers face with commerce content today, and reveals how to overcome those obstacles.

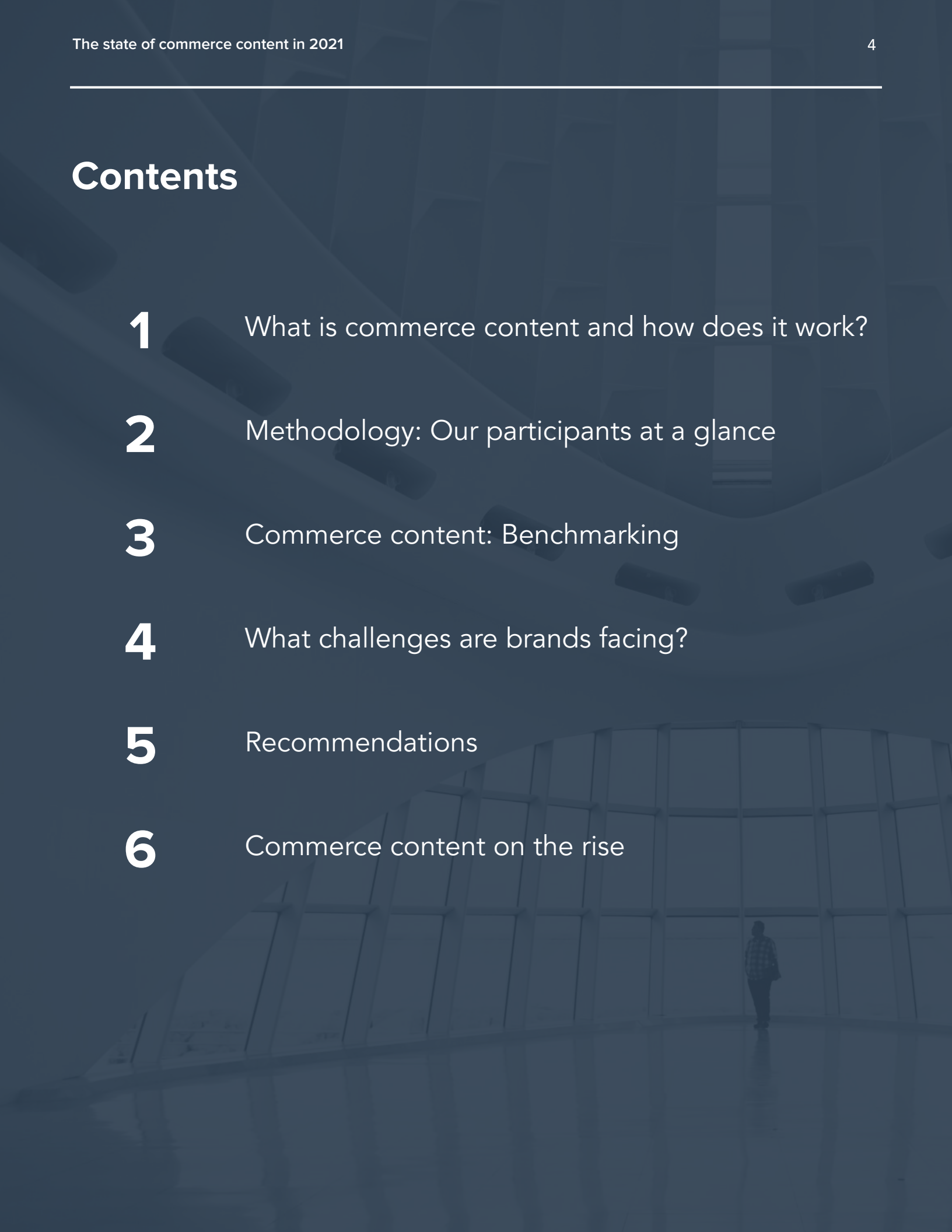
Key findings

- Commerce content is somewhat new in the industry but is already a part of 72 percent of partnerships programs.
- 65 percent of brands said commerce content was an important part of their strategy this year and 40 percent said they expect it to receive increased budget.
- More than half (56 percent) of brands work with 10 or more content publishers and 18 percent work with 1 to 5.
- Product reviews are the most common format, with 86 percent of brands saying they use it. New product announcements and comparison shopping articles followed closely behind, at 75 percent and 71 percent, respectively.

¹ Statista Research Department, "Ad blocking user penetration rate in the United States from 2014 to 2021," Statista.com, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/804008/ad-blocking-reach-usage-us/>

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- Most brands (83 percent) use cost per action (CPA) as their primary payment method, but 78 percent of brands sometimes use a hybrid model that combines paid placement and CPA.
 - Common positive business outcomes among brands engaging in commerce content are:
 - Improved brand awareness (73 percent)
 - New customer acquisition (55 percent)
 - Increased revenue (49 percent)
 - Brands with mature programs that have at least 20 content publishers are almost two times more likely to see increased revenue than those working with five or fewer.
 - Brands often struggle to gain the attention of publishers they want to work with (67 percent) and don't know how to grow their existing content partnerships (56 percent).

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 - 2** Methodology: Our participants at a glance
 - 3** Commerce content: Benchmarking
 - 4** What challenges are brands facing?
 - 5** Recommendations
 - 6** Commerce content on the rise
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- A person is standing in a large, modern, glass-walled atrium. The person is silhouetted against the bright light coming from the glass walls. The atrium has a high ceiling with several circular recessed lights. The floor is highly reflective, showing the person's reflection. The overall atmosphere is clean, bright, and modern.

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Benchmarks, challenges, and recommendations for brands

The partnerships channel is evolving at a rapid pace — programs today look drastically different than they did even a few years ago. Consumer behavior is changing (for example, 26 percent of U.S. consumers used ad blockers in 2020¹), and brands need new ways to engage with their target audience — in ways that consumers can trust.

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What is commerce content and how does it work?

Commerce content (also called affiliate content, affiliate commerce, content partnerships, or mass media partnerships) is editorialized content publishers produce about a product or service that appears native to their publication. In general, two main publisher groups help facilitate commerce content partnerships.

The first publisher group is the editorial team, who is directly responsible for creating content. It generally has complete control over what it chooses to write about, which preserves editorial integrity and allows the publication to maintain reader trust.

² Statista Research Department, "Ad blocking user penetration rate in the United States from 2014 to 2021," Statista.com, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/804008/ad-blocking-reach-usage-us/>

The second publisher group is the commercial team (or commerce/partnerships team). This team is in charge of securing partnerships with brands based on content the editorial team chooses to produce. The goal is to help drive revenue.

One of the main reasons commerce content works so well is because of the separation between the editorial team and business team that secures the deals. Publishers are empowered to stay focused on serving the consumer rather than having to compromise editorial integrity for revenue.

“In display advertising, what you are actually doing as a publisher is selling your audience data to an advertiser who is targeting that audience. [On the other hand] when you are writing commerce content, you are actually selling to your audience. So you actually need to create the content and the offerings that your audience will like.”



Hanan Maayan
CEO, Trackonomics³

“We want to make sure that we are getting the best products in front of our audience at all times.”



Yasmin Lashley
General Manager, Commerce
Partnerships and Strategy
Apartment Therapy Media⁴

³ PX21, “Monetize not just what’s around your content, but within your content.” Global perspectives panel discussion, EMEA. Impact Tech, Inc., 2021.
https://go.impact.com/VD-PC-ED-global-perspectives-the-partnership-economy-and-commerce-and-content.html?_ga=2.181544162.416594773.1629133287-1439959755.1607533467

⁴ PX21, “Monetize not just what’s around your content, but within your content.” Global perspectives panel discussion, the Americas. Impact Tech, Inc., 2021.
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Methodology: Participants at a glance

impact.com sent the survey to its brand users around the world in Q1 2021.

A total of 168 respondents from brands across multiple industries took the survey.

Most responses came from North America (115) and Europe (30). The majority of respondents identified themselves as an affiliate/partnerships manager or multichannel marketing manager (109 managers in total). An additional 19 respondents came from agencies.

Responses came in from brands of all sizes, but the majority of respondents were from medium enterprises (74) or small businesses (75).

When the report references company size, the breakdown is as follows (based on number of employees):

Small business: 1–499

Medium enterprise: 500–1,000

Large enterprise: 1,001–5,000

Global enterprise: 5,000+

Commerce content: Benchmarking

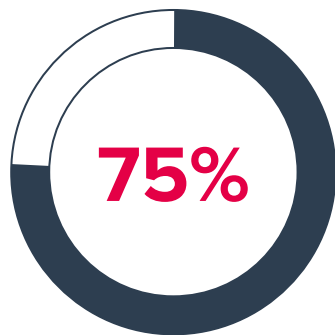
Affiliate and partnerships managers need to diversify their partner mix to maximize the channel's productivity and drive growth. One of the biggest frontiers for growth impact.com has qualitatively seen over the past several years is commerce content. Commerce content partners are working with brands in meaningful ways through the affiliate partnerships model.

How are other brands using commerce content? What benefits have they seen? In the survey questions that follow, find out how other brands are engaging with commerce content today to understand how your program stacks up against the competition.

How familiar are you with commerce content?

Of customers surveyed, 75 percent said they were familiar with commerce content. All but 4 percent were at least somewhat familiar with it.

Interestingly, only 13 percent of the large and global enterprises surveyed said they were very familiar with commerce content, as opposed to 34 percent of total respondents.



75% of surveyed organizations are familiar with commerce content⁵

How are you approaching your commerce content initiatives?

Commerce content is already a part of 72 percent of surveyed organizations' partnerships programs, which means if you have yet to get started with commerce content now may be a good time.



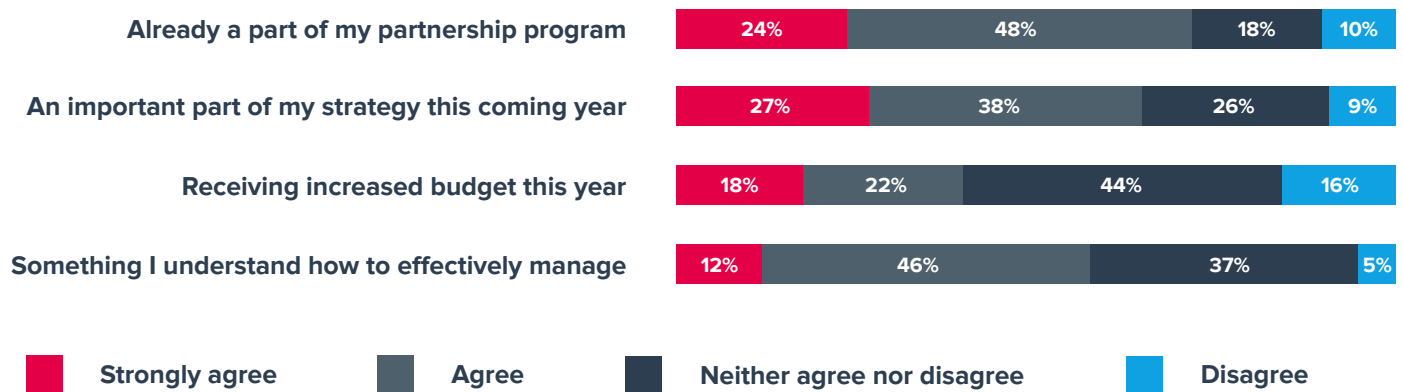
72% of surveyed organizations say that commerce content is already a part of their partnerships program

⁵ All impact.com Customer Statistic tech facts in this report can be found in the TechValidate customer research library at <https://www.techvalidate.com/product-research/impact/facts>.

However, only 12 percent of respondents strongly agreed that they knew how to effectively manage commerce content. So although it's part of almost three out of four programs, organizations are still trying to get a handle on how it's done best.

Among those surveyed, 65 percent said commerce content was an important part of their strategy and 40 percent said they were receiving increased budget this year.

Please rate your level of agreement: Commerce content is⁶:



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](https://www.techvalidate.com/product-research/impact.com/users/2021/)

“Content partners are an integral part of our overall growth strategy for all our clients, and we anticipate a greater focus and increased budgets on these partnerships in the coming year.”



Karen Garcia
Co-founder, Lab6 Media⁷

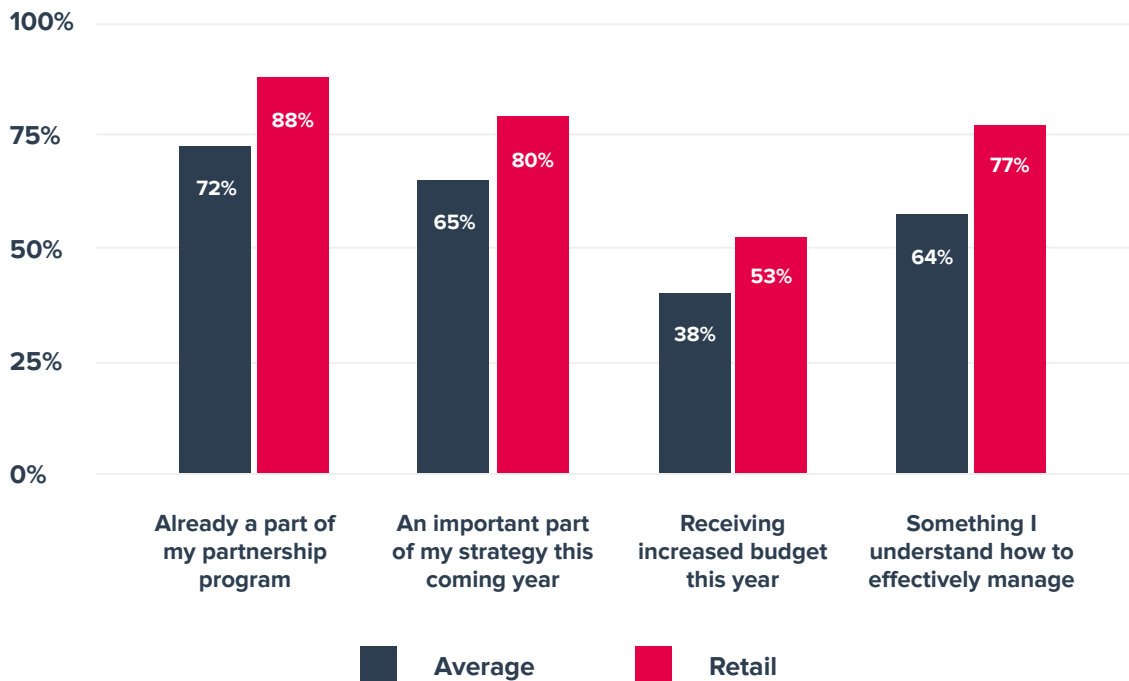
⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all charts in this report can be found in the TechValidate customer research library at <https://www.techvalidate.com/product-research/impact/charts>

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all impact.com customer testimonials can be found in the TechValidate customer research library at <https://www.techvalidate.com/product-research/impact/facts>

Companies within the retail vertical seem to be more comfortable with commerce content than average companies:

- 88 percent said it is already a part of their partnerships program (16 percent above the average)
- 80 percent agreed it is an important part of their strategy for the coming year (15 percent above the average)
- 53 percent said commerce content would receive increased budget this year (13 percent above the average)
- 77 percent agreed that they understand how to effectively manage commerce content (13 percent above the average)

Commerce content is:

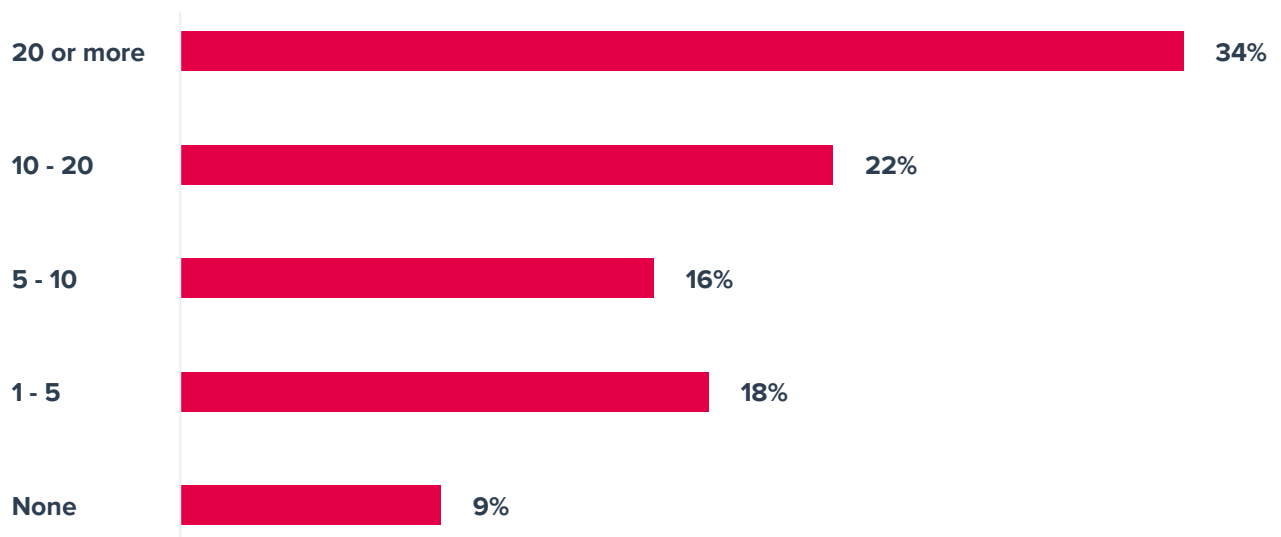


Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

How many commerce content publishers do you work with?

As far as how many content partners brands work with today, 56 percent of surveyed organizations work with at least 10 commerce content publishers and 18 percent work with 1–5.

How many commerce content publishers do you work with?



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

Brands that have mature partnerships programs with at least 20 content publishers are almost twice as likely to see increased revenue than those that work with five or fewer. In addition, 90 percent of brands working with 20 or more content publishers said they have seen improved brand awareness (17 percent higher than the average).

Brands working with 20 or more content publishers

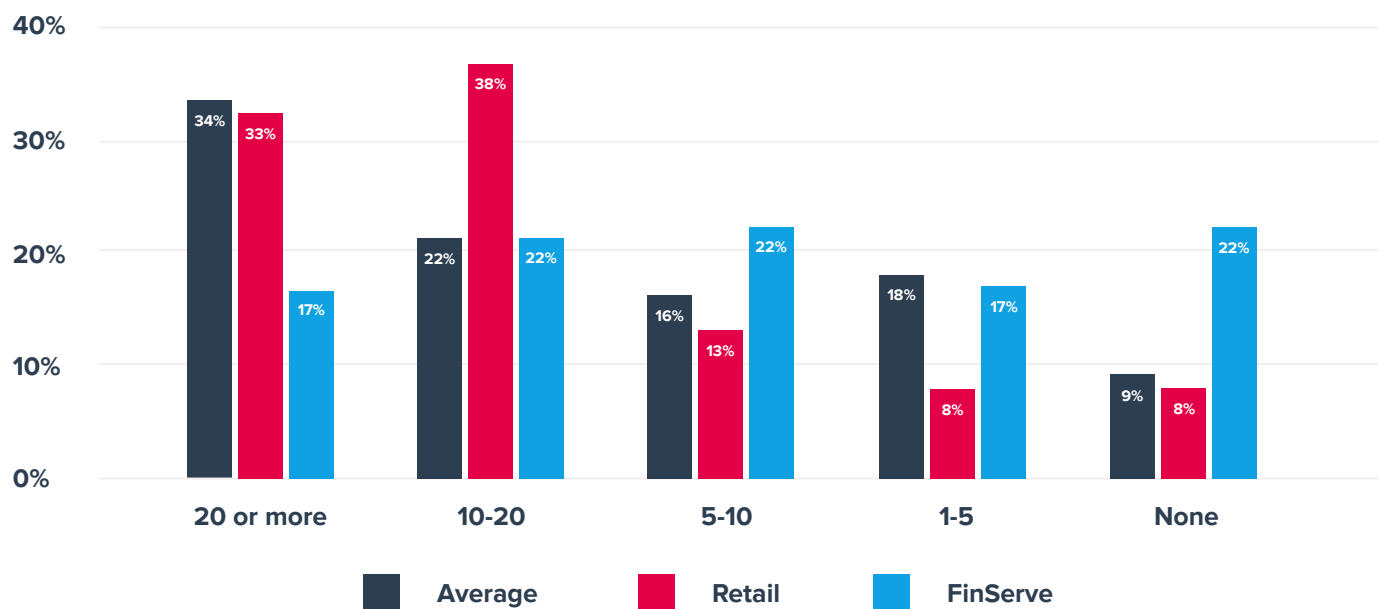
With content commerce, I have seen improved...



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

The number of retail companies working with 10+ publishers was 15 percent above the average. On the other hand, financial services (finserv) companies fell short of the average, with only 39 percent working with 10+ publishers (17 percent below the average).

How many commerce content partners do you work with?



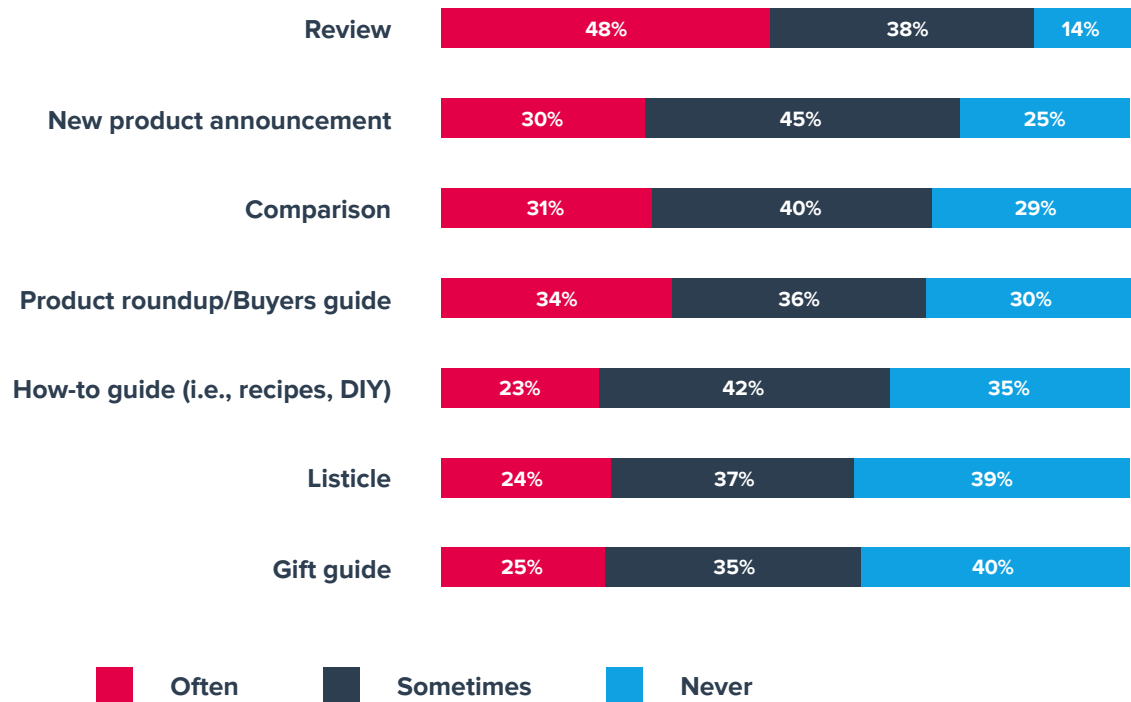
Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

What are some examples of commerce content formats and which are the most popular with brands today?

Commerce content exists in a number of different content formats designed to educate the consumer and help them make well-informed buying decisions. The main content formats typically used today are:

- New product announcements
- How-to guides (i.e., recipes, DIY)
- Gift guides
- Buyers guides/product roundups
- Product reviews
- Comparisons
- Listicles

How often do you use commerce content in these formats



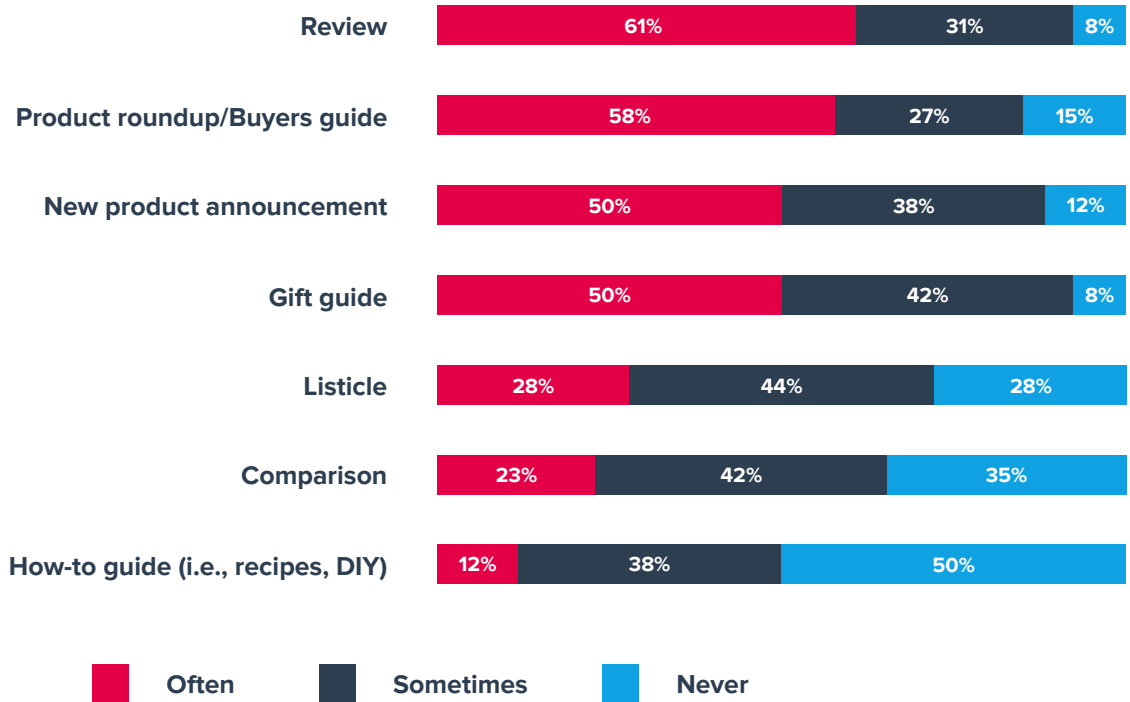
Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021](#).

Based on the survey results, product reviews are the most common commerce content format, with 86 percent of brands saying they use the format. New product announcements and comparison shopping articles followed close behind, at 75 percent and 71 percent, respectively.

However, depending on a company's vertical, the most popular formats were sometimes different. For example, in the retail vertical, gift guides and product reviews tied as the most popular format, with 92 percent of brands using them. New product announcements were the next most popular (88 percent) while product roundup/buyers guides followed in fourth place (85 percent). The survey also found that some formats, such as how-to guides, were less popular with retail companies (15 percent below the average).

Retail commerce content formats

How often do you use commerce content in these formats?



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

For the finserv industry, the most popular format was product reviews — at 76 percent, still 10 percent lower than the average. New product announcements fell way below the average (88 percent), with only 48 percent of finserv companies using this format.

“Review sites are a continued area of focus for us. These publishers are valuable as in-market software buyers leverage this content in their decision-making process.”



Zenefits Affiliates
Multi-channel Marketing Manager,
Zenefits

Most content can exist in an evergreen setting or aim to drive traffic over a shorter period of time. For example, an evergreen listicle could note the “8 best suitcases for air travel” while a short-term seasonal listicle could provide “14 Christmas gift ideas under \$30.”

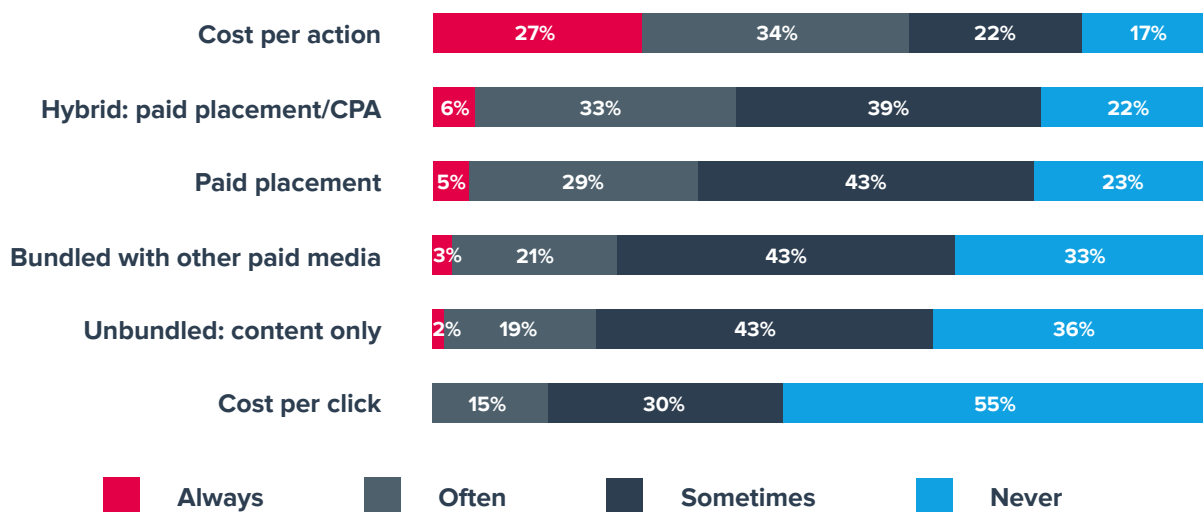
During a recent panel about commerce content, Business Insider and Apartment Therapy executives both stated that they like to diversify their content and split it roughly 50/50 between short-term and evergreen content⁸. Thus they provide readers with seasonally relevant content such as a Father’s Day gift guide, as well as evergreen content such as a mattress product review.

How are brands paying for commerce content?

Are organizations bundling payments with other paid media or paying unbundled for commerce content only? Most organizations chose a blend, with 67 percent of brands at least sometimes bundling and 64 percent at least sometimes paying unbundled.

The most common payment structure is cost per action (CPA), with 83 percent of organizations using this payment method. CPA is generally advantageous to all parties since it reduces brand risk and gives publishers long-term monetization of content.

How do you pay for commerce content? (All respondents)

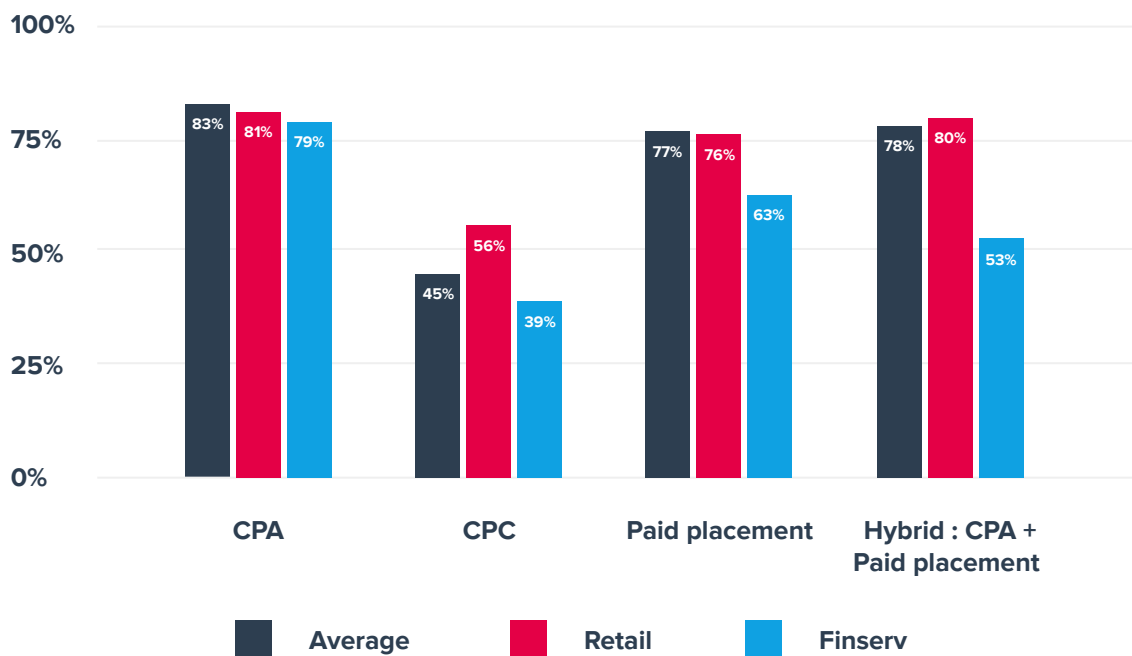


Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021](#).

⁸ PX21, “Monetize not just what’s around your content, but within your content.” Global perspectives panel discussion, the Americas. Impact Tech, Inc., 2021. <https://bit.ly/3ECKVNr>

Finserv companies are less likely than the average to pay via paid placement or a hybrid model, with 37 percent and 47 percent, respectively, never using these methods (vs 23 percent and 22 percent, respectively, for the average).

How does retail and finserv pay for commerce content?



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021](#).

For brands working with publishers that may be new to the space and are still a bit uncomfortable with the CPA-only payment model, a hybrid approach can be an effective way to educate publishers and provide proof of concept. This model is common since 78 percent of surveyed organizations paid for commerce content initiatives using a hybrid framework that combined paid placement and CPA at least some of the time.

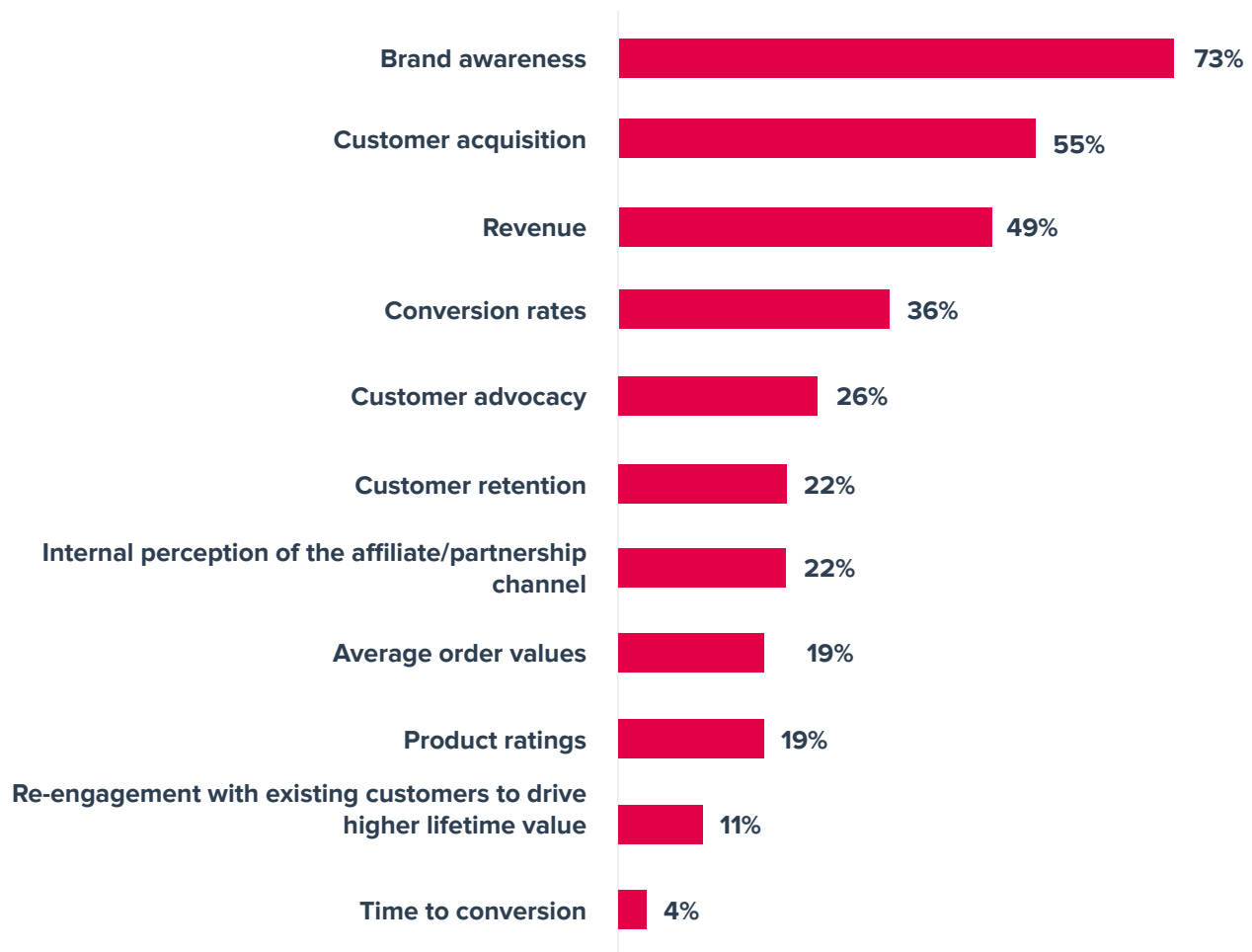
Cost per click (CPC) is the main payment model brands are not using. The survey found that 55 percent of surveyed organizations never paid for commerce content initiatives using CPC.

What business benefits have brands seen with commerce content?

In order to invest in a new partnership type, brands need to see positive business outcomes. Here are some of the most common benefits that brands identified they had received through commerce content.

Almost three quarters (73 percent) of respondents said they saw improved brand awareness and over half (55 percent) said commerce content helped with customer acquisition. Since many mass media publishers have access to an enormous audience, commerce content can help brands reach consumers they may not otherwise have had access.

With commerce content, I have seen improved . . .



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

“Commerce content plays a key role in our strategy to build brand awareness, educate prospective customers, and improve our SEO through backlinks.”



Dew Alam
Multi-channel Marketing Manager,
TransferGo Ltd.

Almost half of respondents (49 percent) said they saw improved revenue with commerce content, and about one in three (36 percent) said they saw improvements in their conversion rate.

Commerce content was the biggest revenue driver of our affiliate program last year and we believe that should be the same case for this year. The opportunities are pretty much endless and the ability to pay on a cost-per-action basis makes this a very safe vertical to further explore.



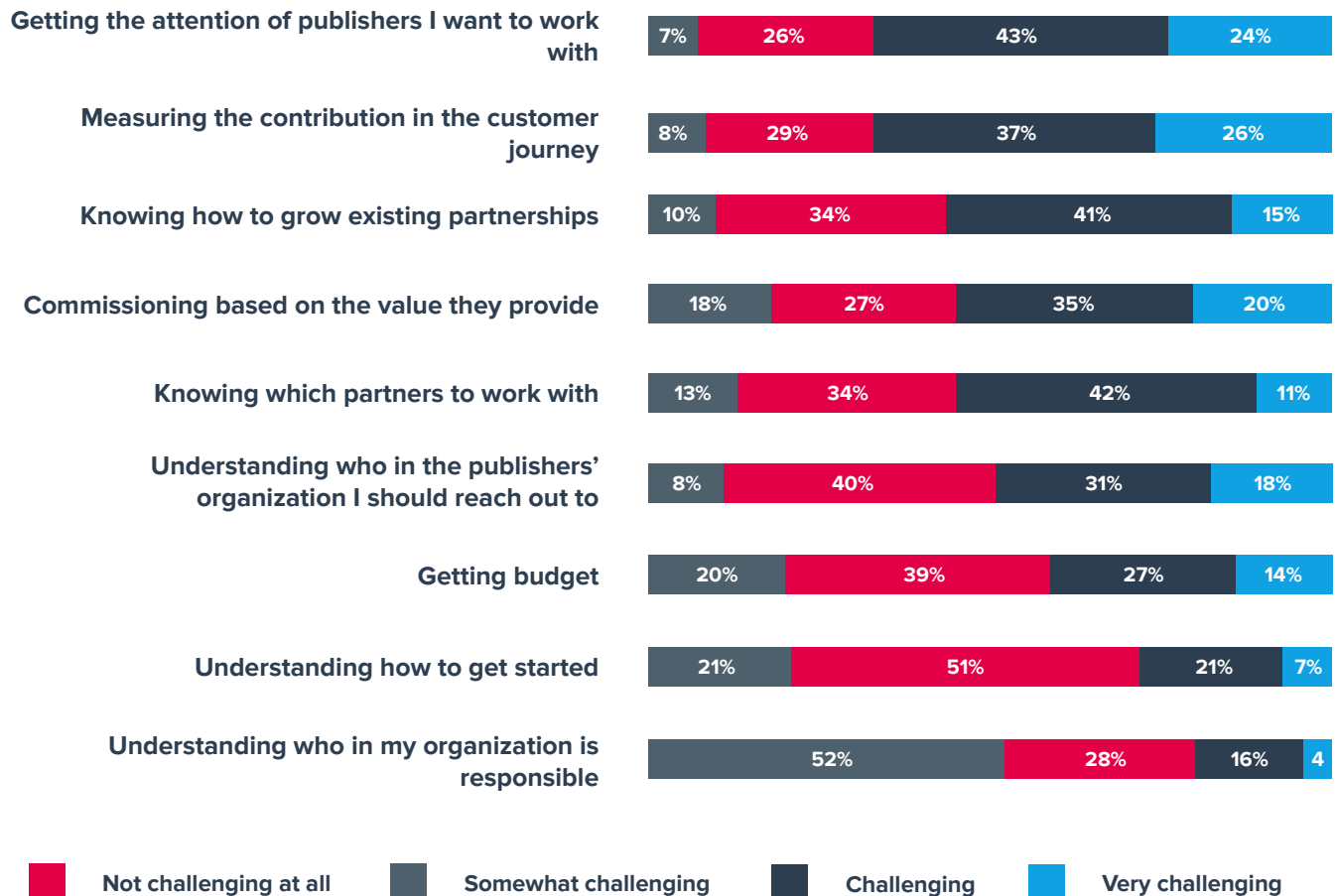
Affiliate/Partnerships Manager,
Medium enterprise retail company

Interestingly, one in five respondents (22 percent) said that commerce content actually helped internal perception of the affiliate/partnerships channel at their company. This is likely because partnering with recognizable media companies helps other internal teams understand what they are doing while improving the credibility of the channel. Even if other teams within an organization aren't familiar with affiliate marketing, they can easily understand the concept of a media company writing about a brand in exchange for a commission. Working with companies of this size also creates legitimacy. When looking for a way to gain more buy-in, this could be a good partnerships avenue to explore.

What challenges are brands facing?

Every partnership type comes with its own unique challenges, and commerce content is no different. It's important to learn about the biggest hurdles other brands are trying to overcome in order to effectively navigate the space yourself.

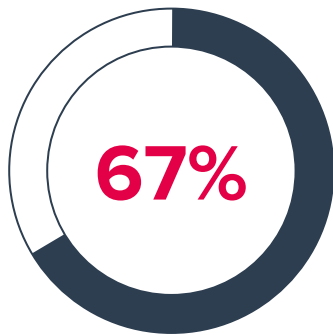
How challenging are these factors in your commerce content initiatives?



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

How do I get the attention of publishers I want to work with?

Based on the survey results, 67 percent of organizations found it challenging to gain the attention of publishers they wanted to work with on commerce content initiatives. They were uncertain who they should reach out to or how to engage in order to get a publisher's attention. In a recent panel discussion on commerce content, a publisher said it typically got around 200–300 newsletters each week.⁹



67% of surveyed organizations find it challenging to get the attention of publishers they want to work with for their commerce content initiatives

“Commerce content is a bit challenging, especially for some of my newer brands because they want to work with the top players in this space but the ROI or responsiveness isn’t necessarily there.”

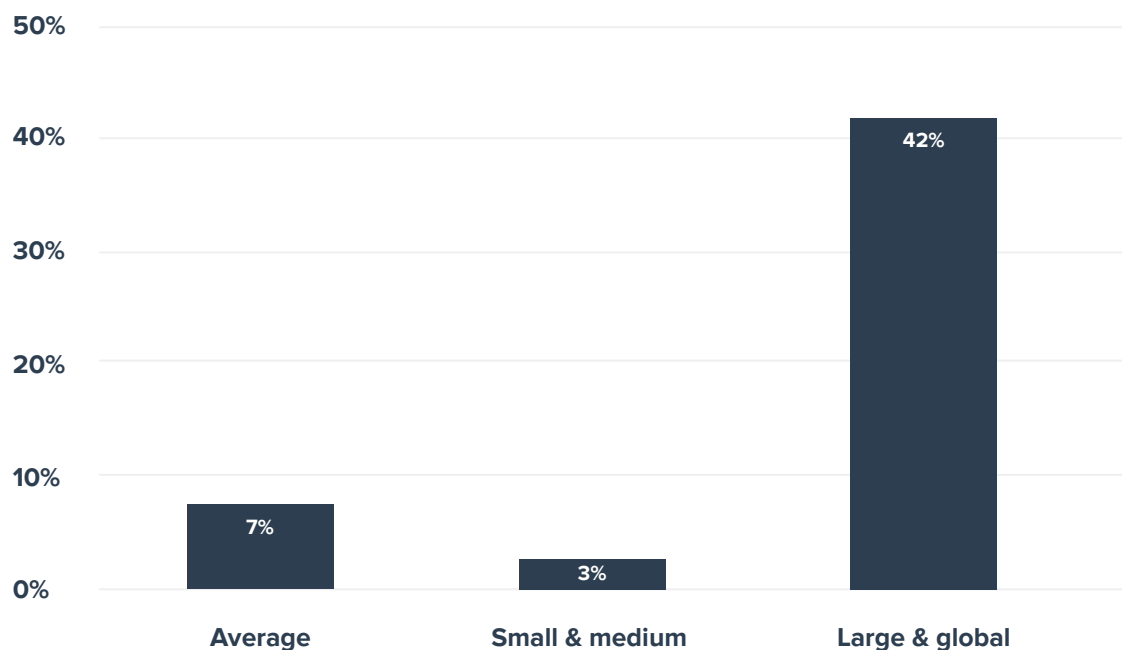


Samantha Arias
Agency, PartnerCentric

⁹ PX21, “Monetize not just what’s around your content, but within your content.” Global perspectives panel discussion, EMEA. Impact Tech, Inc., 2021.
https://go.impact.com/VD-PC-ED-global-perspectives-the-partnership-economy-and-commerce-and-content.html?_ga=2.181544162.416594773.1629133287-1439959755.1607533467

Levels of challenge can be drastically different depending on whether you're a small/medium-sized enterprise or a large/global enterprise. For example, a mere 3 percent of small/medium-sized businesses felt it was not challenging to get the attention of publishers they wanted to work with. By contrast, 42 percent of large/global enterprises felt it was not challenging.

How many brands think getting the attention of publishers they want to work with is not challenging:

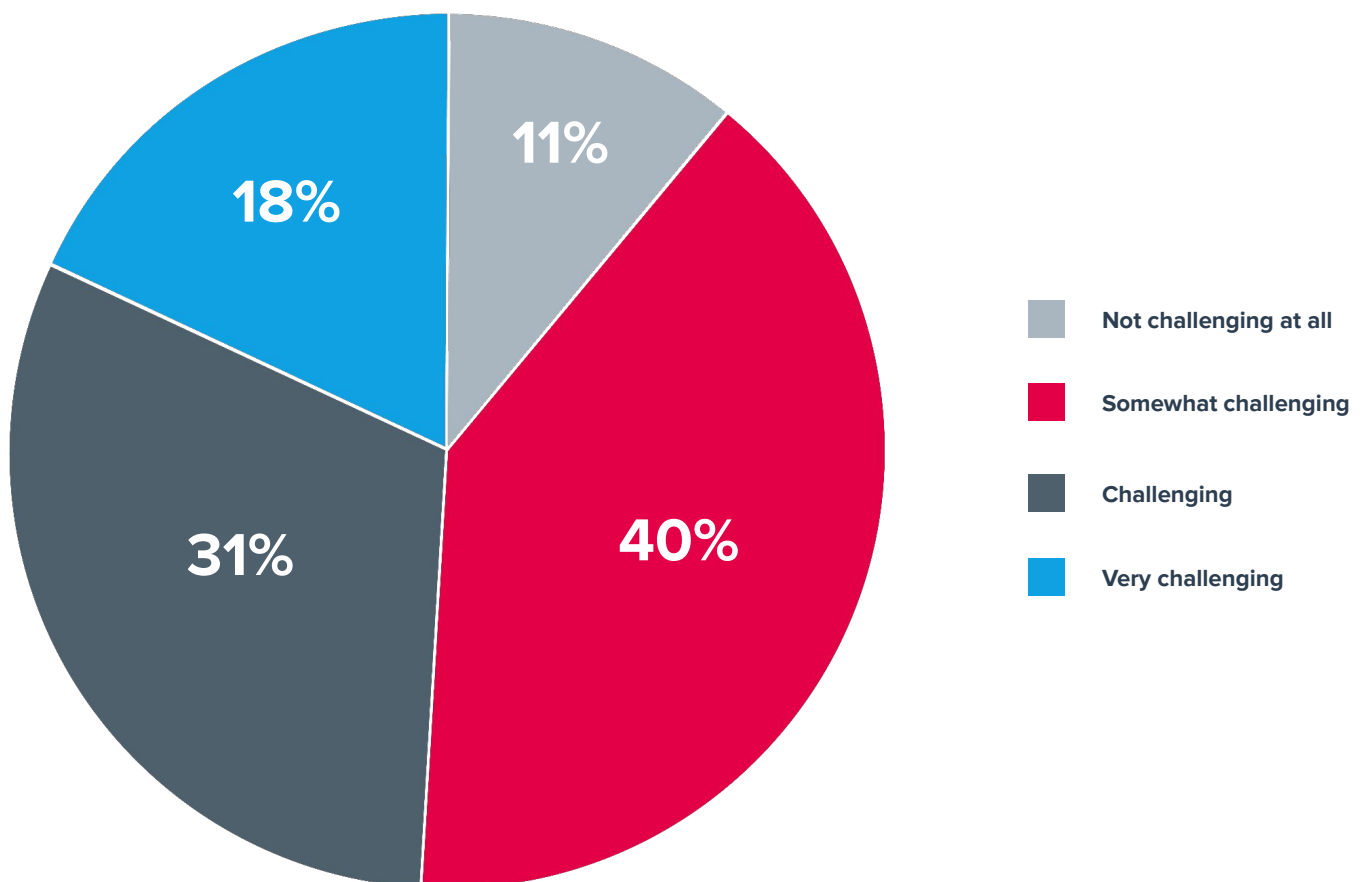


Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

Who should I reach out to at the publisher organization?

One of the biggest challenges brands face is trying to navigate the publisher organization. It can be difficult to know who to reach out to and who's in charge. In fact, 89 percent of survey respondents said it was at least somewhat challenging to understand who in a publisher organization to contact. The problem isn't limited to small/medium-sized businesses; 81 percent of large/global enterprises found this task to be at least somewhat challenging as well.

How challenging is it to find the correct contact at publishers for commerce content initiatives? Organizations said:

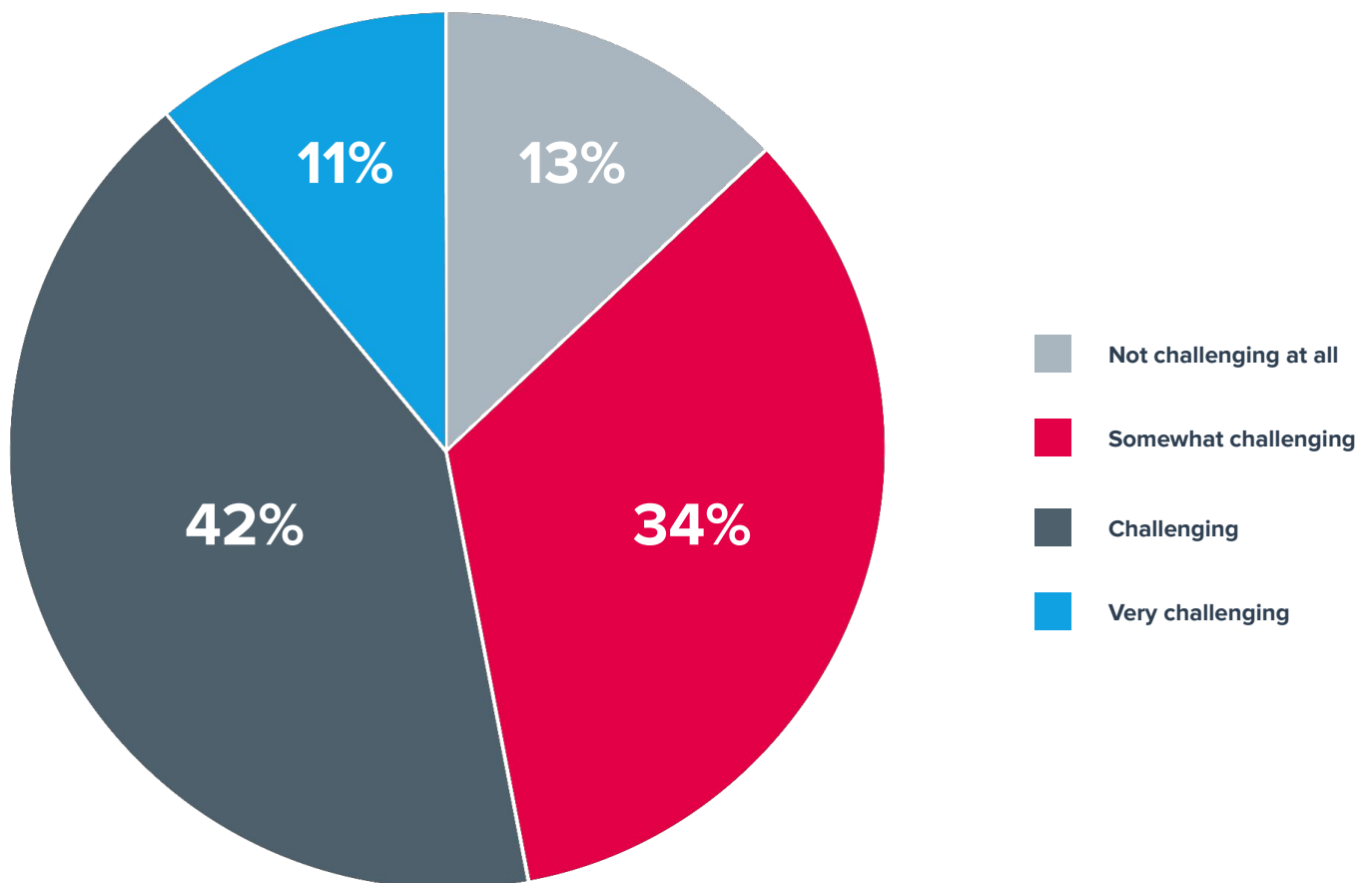


Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021](#).

How do I know which publishers to work with?

There are many publications to partner with and it can be daunting to figure out where to focus your efforts. A little over half (53 percent) of brands surveyed said it was challenging or very challenging to know who to work with.

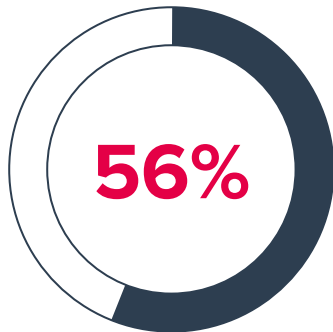
How challenging is it to know which partners to choose for your commerce initiatives? Organizations said:



Source: [TechValidate survey of impact.com users, 2021.](#)

How do I grow my existing content partnerships?

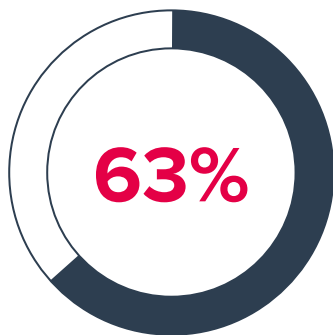
Another common hurdle marketers face with commerce content is how to grow their existing partnerships. A little more than half (56 percent) of survey respondents said they found it challenging.



56% of surveyed organizations said that knowing how to grow existing commerce content partnerships is challenging

How do I effectively measure the contribution of commerce content publishers in the customer journey?

Measuring the contribution of a commerce content publisher in the customer journey can be challenging. Since most commerce content activity happens toward the beginning of the customer journey, helping to build awareness and educate consumers, it can be especially difficult to see how content publishers are performing with a last-click payment model. The survey found 63 percent of brands thought that measuring commerce content publisher contributions was challenging or very challenging.



63% of surveyed organizations find it challenging to measure the contribution in the customer journey of their commerce content initiatives

“Our goal is to increase revenue, but we understand brand awareness is fundamental. . . . The company understands the need for budget allocation and a different approach to measuring ROI.”



Priscila Dexheimer
Affiliate/Partnerships Manager,
1st Formations Ltd..

Recommendations

Commerce content is a sensible solution for brands that want to diversify their partner mix and drive growth. However, the road to success can be daunting if you're new to the space. The impact.com survey helped uncover some of the top challenges brands face with commerce content. Here are some ways to overcome these challenges and get the most out of your commerce content partnerships.

How do I get the attention of publishers I want to work with?

- **Tailor your pitches.** Brands can review content on a publisher's site to make sure they're in a vertical the publisher already talks about. When you're pitching, look at the content that's been written in the past and clearly communicate how you fit in. Be specific, lean into seasonality, and give the publisher concrete ideas on how and when they can write about your brand.
- **Communicate early.** When you send a newsletter to a publisher it's often too late for their editorial team to strategically think about how to cover your brand. This shrinks your chances of getting picked up. On the other hand, by reaching out early and having a conversation about your priorities for the next quarter or the next half, your chances significantly increase.

- **Tap into fear of missing out.** When you're able to show prospective partners the success you've had in the past (especially with one of their competitors), it gives them some friendly encouragement to work with you.
- **Work with your PR team.** Your PR team can help make sure you're building brand awareness among the editorial teams. When editors already know who you are, they're more likely to write about you when the partnerships team mentions your brand name.

Who should I reach out to at the publisher organization?

- **Look for publisher contacts with the term “commerce,” “business development,” “affiliate,” or “partnerships” in their title.** As commerce content grows in popularity, affiliate manager and partnerships manager titles are becoming more common at publishers. However, many publisher organizations still maintain the role under a different title.
- **Work with an agency.** Agencies are a great resource for helping brands navigate new commerce content deals since they often work with many desired publishers in the programs they manage. This is especially useful for small brands because agencies often aggregate commerce content pitches across many of the brands they work with, making it easier to get your brand picked up.

How do I grow my existing content partnerships?

- **Keep the audience at the heart.** Commerce content publishers focus on audience experience. When you put the consumer and their needs first, you'll have greater success with publishers.
- **Follow the data.** The data can really tell you what resonates with an audience. Publishers typically dive deep into the data to see what their audience responds to. It's important to give your publishers full visibility into their contributions — all the way through conversion — so they can optimize efforts based on what's selling best.

- **Know when it's time to move on.** When a certain publisher isn't interested in covering your product or they've already featured your brand and don't have any opportunities coming soon, don't force it. Your time is better spent reaching out to new publishers or optimizing with publishers interested in working with your brand in the near term.

How do I know which publishers to work with?

- **Keep an open mind about who to work with.** Find publishers that have an audience interested in your product instead of just trying to get in front of the largest audience possible. For example, a sports merchandise brand probably has more traction with readers of a sports publication than it has with a beauty publication with a larger audience.
- **Research publishers that already write about your vertical.** This is especially relevant for brands in sensitive industries such as CBD. Engage with publishers that already write about your space or those that work with your competitors. It's more effective than trying to convince a publication to start writing about your vertical or industry.

How do I effectively measure the contribution of commerce content publishers in the customer journey?

- **Use multi-touch attribution models.** Last click usually isn't favorable to top-of-funnel publishers, and often doesn't paint a fair picture of their actual contribution. Multitouch models can help show the strength of content.
- **Have content-specific metrics.** Focus on metrics that are relevant to content, such as brand awareness and new user acquisition, instead of using the same key performance indicators (KPIs) you use for coupon partners.
- **Tinker with ways to attribute value.** Testing exclusive promo codes, referral windows, and performance bonus tiers are great ways to more effectively attribute credit to your content partners.

Commerce content on the rise

The impact.com study found that brands use commerce content to capitalize on the trust publishers have with their audiences to increase brand awareness, grow revenue, and acquire new customers. Most brands already use commerce content today and see it as a priority for growth over the coming months and years. Certain aspects of commerce content can be challenging for brands. However, brands that want to diversify their partner mix and find new ways to effectively engage with their target audiences may consider investing in commerce content.

Key takeaways:

- Commerce content is an important part of most brands' strategies for the coming year (65 percent).
- Investing in commerce content has benefits. Brands with at least 20 content publishers are twice as likely to see increased revenue than when working with five or fewer.
- Brands in the retail vertical are more invested in commerce content than average. In fact, 53 percent of retail brands said commerce content would receive increased budget this year (13 percent above average).
- Brands benefit from increased brand awareness (73 percent), improved customer acquisition (55 percent), and revenue growth (49 percent).
- Product reviews (86 percent) and new product announcements (75 percent) are the most common content formats that brands use.
- Commerce content fits into the typical partnership marketing compensation model — 83 percent of brands pay on CPA.

About impact.com

[impact.com](https://www.impact.com), the leading global partnership management platform, has been transforming the way enterprises discover and manage all types of partnerships — including affiliates, influencers, commerce content publishers, B2B, and more — since its founding in 2008. Its powerful, purpose-built platform helps businesses, including brands, publishers and agencies, to build authentic, enduring and rewarding relationships with both publishers and consumers. By providing visibility across the entire consumer journey they are able to aggregate, orchestrate and optimize the total value of the entire mix of partnerships with ease and transparency, driving growth and creating new value for consumers.

To learn more about how [impact.com](https://www.impact.com)'s technology platform and partnerships marketplace is driving revenue growth for global enterprise brands such as Walmart, Uber, Shopify, Lenovo, L'Oreal, Fanatics, Levi's, and 1-800-Flowers, visit www.impact.com.

