A Forrester Consulting
Thought Leadership Paper
Commissioned By FocusVision

June 2019

How Customers Think, Feel, And Act: The Paradigm Of Business Outcomes

Small Data Collection And Analysis Unlocks Deeper Customer Understanding And Business Opportunity

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Marketers are better poised than ever to understand customer behavior, but many are left to wonder: What data is the best fit for building a holistic picture of my customers?

Executive Summary

There is an inherent complexity and messiness when it comes to designing brand experiences. Like humans, what makes for a compelling experience isn't static. Each customer has a unique profile of tendencies and preferences that shape how they think, feel, and act — meaning that two people can undergo the same experience and come away with opposing viewpoints.[1] This dynamic is understandably frustrating for marketers looking to build loyalty, advocacy, and revenue growth for their brand.

In order to accurately measure the perceptions and impact of brand experience, marketers must seek the truth behind their customers' evolving expectations. The good news is that understanding the subconscious impact of brand experience is becoming increasingly powerful and reliable — improved technology, a vast and variable array of available customer data, and emerging neuroscience-based measurement techniques all contribute advancements.[2] However, while marketers are better poised than ever to understand customer behavior, many are left to wonder: 1) what data is the best fit for building a holistic picture of customers, 2) how do I get it, and 3) how do I make it the engine of our decision making?

In March 2019, FocusVision commissioned Forrester Consulting to investigate the motivations underlying consumer decision making. We asked 522 US consumers to recall and describe how they thought, felt, and acted throughout a memorable brand experience.[3] We also conducted a survey of 228 US B2C marketing and customer insights decision makers, including 54 CMOs, to gain insight into how they seek to understand their customers and what key challenges are holding them back. We found that the way customers think and feel about an experience can predict how they will act toward a brand. However, B2C companies struggle to gather and operationalize the data that most reliably measures true customer motivation.

KEY FINDINGS

- **The way customers think and feel predicts how they act.** Understanding how customers think and feel empowers brands to understand the "why" behind business outcomes. The think-feel-act model in our study predicts how changing the way customers think and feel about a brand will increase revenue, advocacy, and loyalty.
- **Companies have become over reliant on big data to understand their customers.** Brands misconceive which data properly measures how customers think and feel. As a result, 56% of brands say their strategy is informed nearly or fully by big data. This overreliance has led to challenges in customer understanding, technology, and organizational communication.
- **Small data is better at conveying how customers think and feel.** Brands using small data as a basis for their knowledge of how customers think and feel are more likely to say they know why one customer chooses to buy while another doesn't. They're also better equipped to avoid or overcome key challenges in the areas of people, process, and technology.

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Mind The Gap Between What Consumers Say And What They Do

In the age of the customer, expectations are ever-evolving. Our survey of B2C companies found that brands rely on metrics like loyalty (60%), revenue growth (60%), and brand awareness (46%) to track their success with customers. However, brands that focus on creating positive experiences to drive these metrics upward will only be able to explain part of their effort's success. Our consumer survey revealed that a customer who has a positive brand experience is not necessarily:

- **Guaranteed to purchase.** Our survey grouped consumers by their relationship to the brand they opted to recall: one group for consumers who make one-off purchases of the brand and one group for consumers who subscribe to the brand. Eighty percent of the consumers who make one-off purchases described their brand experience as positive, but only 67% are likely to buy from that brand in the next three months (a 13-point difference). If you limit the sample to consumers who purchase regularly from the brand in question, thereby eliminating brands that sell products or services which are more infrequently purchased (e.g., cars, luxury goods, etc.), 80% of those consumers had a positive experience — but only 73% are likely to buy in the next three months (still a 7-point difference). Meanwhile, 89% of subscriber consumers described their brand experience as positive, and only 82% are likely to continue subscribing.
- **Guaranteed to advocate and stay loyal:** Eighty-five percent of all consumers described their brand experience as positive, but 81% are likely to advocate for the brand. More surprisingly, only 75% say they are likely to be loyal to the brand (a 10-point difference).

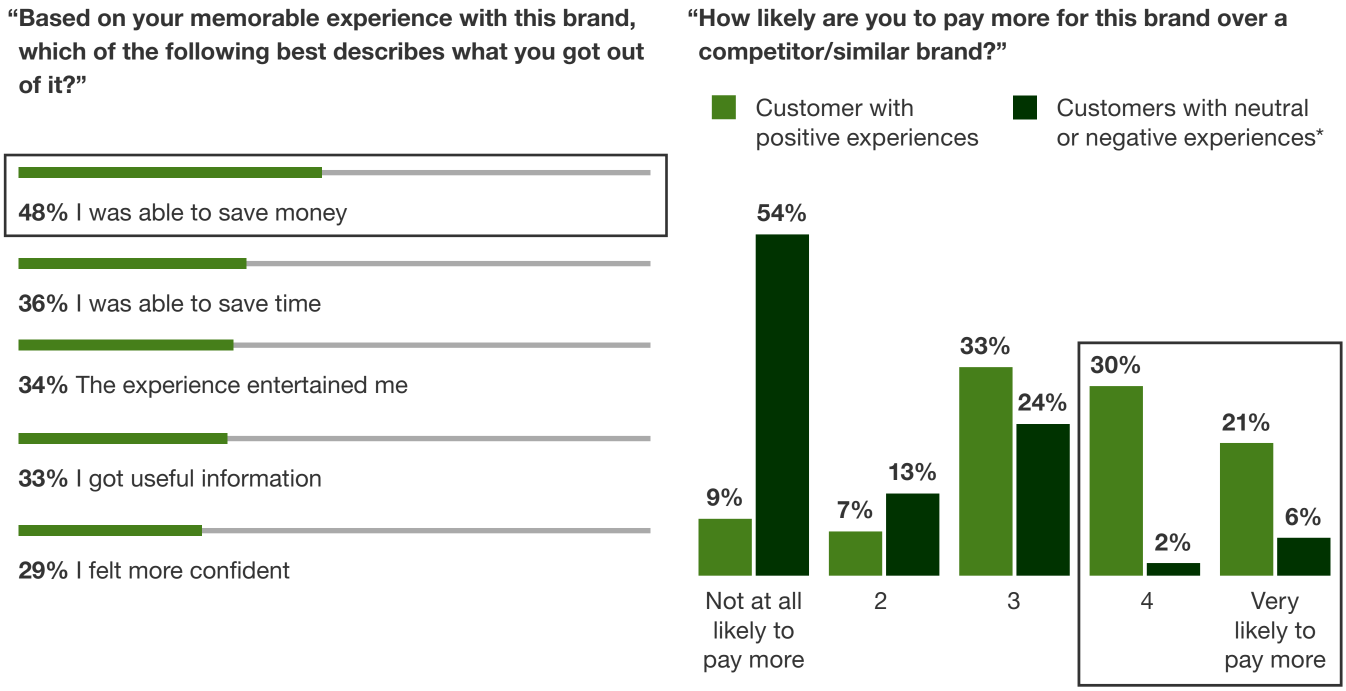
We see that a brand experience can be positive but still fall short of driving the customer to take positive actions toward the brand. The gap also reveals itself in another way. A customer can name the reason they had a positive experience and still be likely to opt for the opposite. For example (see Figure 1):

- **Saving money tops the list of things that consumers say they get out of their positive experience.** It's not surprising to find that nearly half of consumers who had a positive experience say a key outcome was the ability to save money.
- **Yet consumers who have positive experiences are also more likely to say they would pay more for that same brand.** According to consumers who had positive experiences, saving money was a key outcome of their positive experience. However, at the same time, they say they would pay more for the same brand over a competitor. A positive brand experience only partially explains how and why consumers decide to act — clearly there are other drivers of purchase, advocacy, loyalty, or paying a premium.

Brand experience can be positive but still fall short of driving the customer to take further action.

Figure 1

Consumers will say one thing and do another — there are hidden drivers behind customer action.



Base: 440 US-based consumers who described their experience as mostly or fully positive
*Base: 82 US-based consumers who described their experience as neutral or negative
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

BRANDS WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE DRIVERS OF CUSTOMER ACTION BUT FEW ARE ABLE TO

Nearly all the brands we surveyed agree that customers have greater affinity for brands that resonate with them more deeply — a connection to their identity beyond what is merely a positive or negative experience. However, few brands understand their customers enough to grasp what changes would drive positive customer outcomes. We found that:

› **Brands understand that consumers will seek out and pay for a more personal brand connection.** Ninety-one percent of brands agree that customers want convenient and highly personalized experiences when interacting with a brand, and 93% agree that consumers are more likely to spend money with a brand they feel connected to.

› **Brands know their business will perform better given a better understanding of how their customers think and feel.** Brands agree that a deeper understanding of their customers will empower them to win new customers (88%), innovate better and faster (86%), and better engage customers (86%).

› **While many brands say they already know how customers think and feel, far fewer understand why customers act.** More than half of brands strongly agree that they understand how their customers think and feel (see Figure 2). Given that brands recognize how a deeper customer understanding would lead them to win new customers, it would follow that a majority of brands would then say they know why a customer buys from them. However, that's not the case: Only 38% of brands strongly agree they know why one customer chooses to buy from their brand while another doesn't.

There is a telling disconnect between what brands say they understand about customers and what value that understanding lends them. What's missing from the equation? What is holding them back from deeper customer understanding?

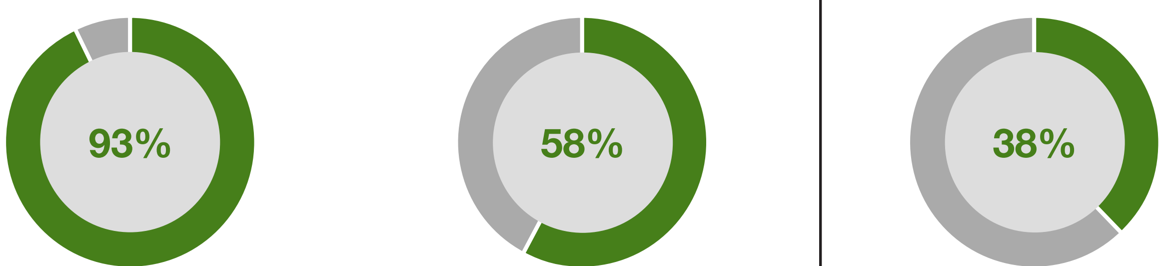
Figure 2

There is a disconnect between what brands say they understand and the value that understanding brings them.

93% of brands agree that **consumers are more likely to spend money with a brand that they feel connected to.**

Yet only 58% of brands strongly agree **they understand how their customers think and feel.**

And even fewer — 38% — strongly agree **they know why one customer chooses to buy from their brand while another doesn't.**



Base: 228 marketing and customer insights decision makers
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

The Way That Customers Think And Feel Explains Why They Take Action

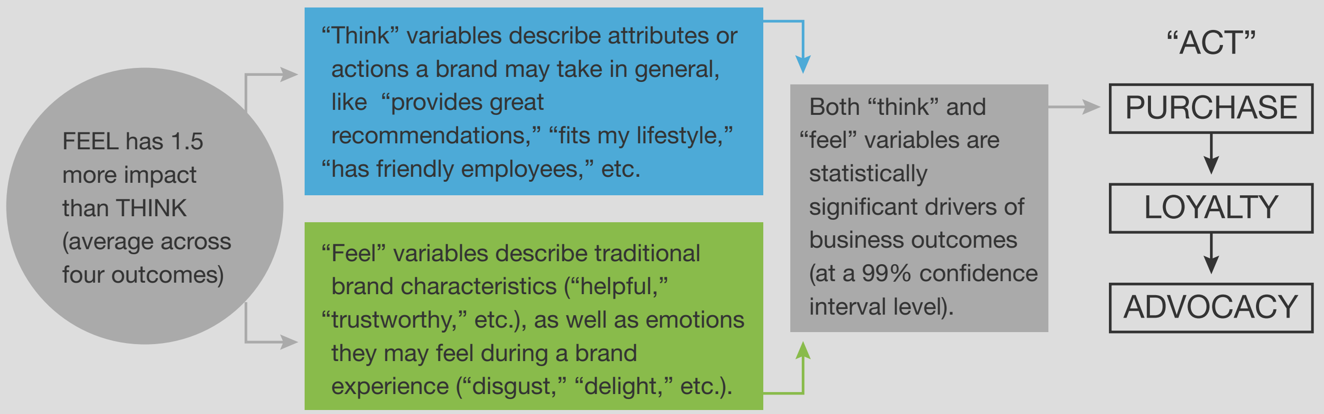
Brand measurement has long relied on observing the conscious actions and feedback of consumers. However, business value is created when an underlying system of emotional activation and perceptions induce a customer to act. Diving below the surface empowers marketers to understand the cognitive processes and emotions that drive customers toward and away from their brand.[4] We did this in our survey by asking customers to recall a memorable brand experience, to describe the brand through its attributes, and to describe how the experience with the brand made them feel. We grouped these characteristics into larger variables we'll call "think" and "feel." We then asked how likely consumers are to take certain actions toward the brand, classifying each of these as an "act" variable.[5] The think-feel-act paradigm defines a customer's reality. It revealed:

› **The way customers think and feel drives business outcomes.** Consistent with Forrester's brand energy framework, which takes a similarly quantitative approach to investigating what aspects of a brand drive financial value, our model found that how a customer thinks and feels about a brand are both statistically significant drivers of business outcomes like purchase, loyalty, and advocacy.[6] Also consistent with Forrester's supporting research, we found that how customers feel has a greater impact on business outcomes than how they think (about 1.5x the impact, on average) (see Figure 3).

› **Brand qualities like trust, helpfulness, and value play the strongest role in driving action.** Looking at the variables nested within our "think" and "feel" categories, we find that some underlying emotions and attributes play a stronger role in driving outcomes: 1) "trustworthy" and "has reasonable prices" drive purchase; 2) "helpful" and "reliable" drive loyalty; and 3) "has reasonable prices" and "reliable" drive advocacy. Overall, as we noted with the larger categorical variables, aspects of how customers feel are most relevant.

Figure 3

The way customers think and feel drives outcomes



Base: 522 US-based consumers
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

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- **Brands can predict business outcomes by examining how their customers think and feel.** The model also helps to predict how moving the needle on how customers think and feel will drive business outcomes upward (see Figure 4). By placing a customer's average positive sentiment on a scale, marketers can observe how changes to their brand experience move customers up or down. For example, we found that if a brand were able to consistently communicate "reliability" to consumers, such that average positive sentiment rose 20%, the brand could expect likelihood for consumer advocacy to rise by as much as 15.4%.
- **To understand customers and predict business outcomes, some data is better than others.** As a point of comparison, we ran similar regressions using the type of data marketers will find in their CRM systems to see if they could meaningfully predict outcomes in the same way as thoughts and emotions. We found that the frequency with which consumers interact with the brand, the length of time the consumer has subscribed to the brand, and the frequency with which consumers purchase from the brand are not statistically relevant indicators of brand loyalty, brand advocacy, or the intent to continue subscribing.[7]

When looking to understand customers and predict business outcomes, brands will fail unless they leverage the right tools to ask the right questions to get the right data.

Figure 4

Brands can predict business outcomes by examining how their customers think and feel.

Increasing **average positive thoughts or feelings** toward a brand —

1 point on a scale of 5, increases likelihood to *continue subscribing* by as much as **10.2%**

1 point on a scale of 5, increases likelihood to *purchase in the next three months* by as much as **11.2%**

1 point on a scale of 5, increases likelihood to be *loyal* by as much as **14.8%**

1 point on a scale of 5, increases likelihood to *advocate* by as much as **15.4%**

Base: 522 US-based consumers
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

In The Midst Of The Big Data Deluge, Customer Understanding Gets Buried

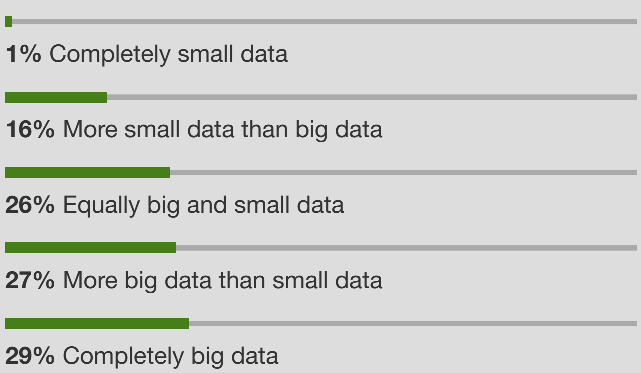
Understanding how customers think and feel empowers brands to understand the *why* behind key business outcomes. Recall that many brands say they understand how their customers think and feel, but few are able to understand why customers buy. It's clear then that while brands believe they understand their customers on a deeper level, they are mistaken. Our analysis identified four interconnected challenges standing between brands and deeper customer understanding:

› **Brands wrongly believe CRM data will reveal how customers think and feel.** We asked brands what types of data they use to understand how their customers think and feel. At the top of the list are customer data from their CRM, loyalty program activity, and past purchase behaviors. We know from our model that past purchase and historical interaction data do not predict brand affinity, so they can't be an accurate basis for how customers think and feel. By comparison, voice-of-the-customer programs (VoC) — which are designed to collect customer thoughts and feelings through conversations, surveys, and ratings — are a much less common methodology.[8] Brands aren't looking for answers in the right places.

› **Brands over rely on big data to inform their overall customer strategy.** We found that not only do brands have misconceptions of what data properly measures how customers think and feel, the data they then use to execute on the customer's experience is greatly skewed — 56% of brands say their strategy is informed nearly or fully by big data (see Figure 5 for the full definitions of small and big data used in the survey). It's not uncommon for brands today to swim in big data: internal applications, public sources, mobile platforms, and data services are generating a deluge of new data. Advancements in technology like descriptive, predictive, and prescriptive analytics help brands analyze enormous data sets, find nonobvious insights, and uncover competitive advantages.[9] Despite the obvious strengths of big data, we know it can't do everything — brands are missing small data that reveals how customers think and feel.

Figure 5

"Would you say your customer experience strategy and execution is more informed by big data or by small data?"



Big data is a combination of structured and unstructured data, including log files, transaction information, internet of things (IoT), social media metrics, etc.

Small data is a combination of VOC data, customer journey data, user focus groups, surveys, behavioral user experience data, etc.

Base: 214 marketing and customer insights decision makers whose customer experience strategy is informed by customer data
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

- **Overreliance on big data has led to a shift where marketers and customer insights no longer own customer understanding.** We asked brands who in their organization should be leading the effort to better understand how customers think and feel. Shockingly, brands selected IT more than any other single department (38%). When asked why, respondents tended to note the technology skills that modern data management requires (see sidebar). Meanwhile, the reasons respondents gave for customer insights (CI) or marketing departments leading the effort revolved around their proximity to and knowledge of the customer. It appears that the focus on big data has required many brands to lean on IT, leaving the traditional brand stewards to sit and wait for insight.
- **Customer insights and marketing are talking, but they are not speaking the same language.** Even if the effort to better understand how customers think and feel were properly led by marketing or CI, rather than IT, we found that these two groups are often siloed. Only 54% say that CI and marketing regularly communicate with one another. Even fewer — 38% — say they regularly share data with one another in formats that the other can understand and use. This is worrisome — whether caused by technology, process, people, or all of the above, data silos hinder progress. Sharing data in easily digestible formats that enable self-service insights is critical because it may not be obvious who in the organization will get value from the information.[10]

The road to understanding how customers think, feel, and act is pitted with obstacles. To overcome these challenges, brands will need to look for opportunities to improve how people work, the processes that connect them, and the technology that gathers, analyzes, and shares insight.

"What organization within your company should be leading the effort to better understand how customers think and feel?"

"It is essential for IT to lead in the technical innovation of the company as it relates to new data initiatives."

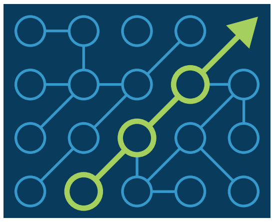
"[Customer insights should lead because] they understand the customer very well, so that they can provide helpful advice for other departments."

"[Marketing should lead. Since] they advertise our product, they will get feedback from customers who have used the product before and tell them what they expect next."

Three marketing and customer insights decision makers

Unlock Deeper Customer Understanding With Small Data

We've seen that brands have invested tremendous resources in big data. Its value lies in its ability to track the actions customers take and even predict what they'll do next. But as marketers, CI, and IT decision makers think through how to close the gap between what they know about customers and what outcomes they wish to drive, they can begin by looking at what's so far been ignored: small data. We found:



Many brands are cognizant that small data is a powerful and missing piece.

› **A majority of brands agree small data conveys the thoughts and feelings behind actions.** Fifty-two percent of brands agree or strongly agree that small data is better than big data at helping brands understand the thoughts and emotions behind the actions that customers take. Nearly half of brands agree they don't have enough small data insights on their customers. So while the focus has so far been on big data, many brands are cognizant that small data is a powerful and missing piece.

› **Brands using small data are more likely to know why customers take action.** Forty-one percent of brands using small data, like VoC and shopper journey data as a basis for their knowledge of how customers think or feel, strongly agree they know why one customer chooses to buy from them while another customer doesn't. This figure drops 10 points when you look at brands not using small data.

› **Small data unlocks customer understanding and opens the door to business opportunity.** We asked brands what they are unable to do today that would be possible given a better understanding of how customers think and feel. The responses were powerful:

"Freedom to go out of the box to enhance the customer experience."

"Our products could be made exactly in a way the end user wants."

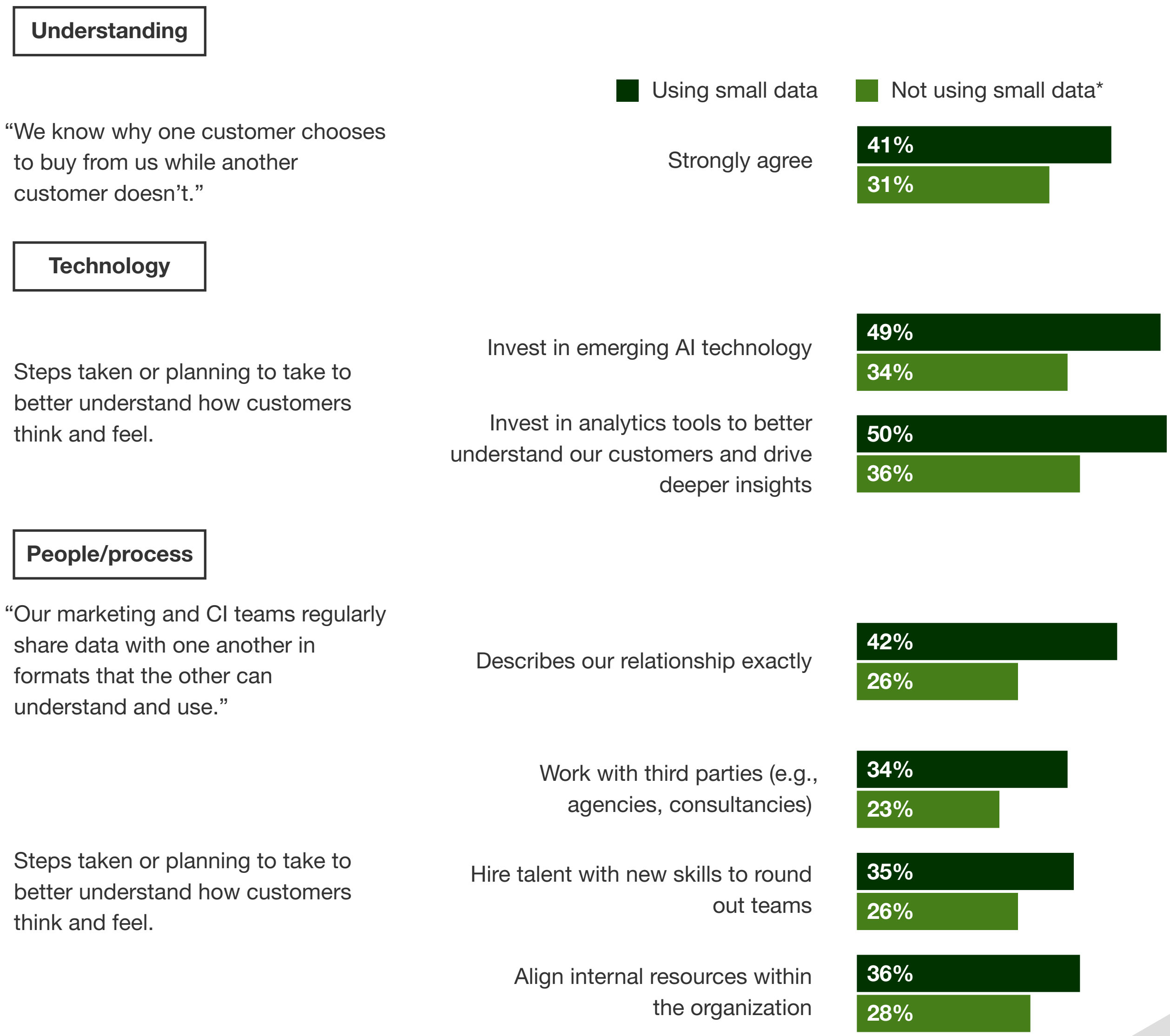
"Make us a better brand and a better company."

"Customers will be delighted if we act according to their needs."

We looked more closely at brands that use small data. Not only are they better equipped to understand how customers think, feel, and act, we also found that they are more likely to have made strides in major challenge areas (see Figure 6):

Figure 6

Brands using small data like VOC and shopper journey data are better equipped to understand customer actions, as well as make strides in areas of people, process, and technology.



Base: 167 marketing and customer insights decision makers using small data
*Base: 61 marketing and customer insights decision makers not using small data
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

- **Brands using small data are better positioned or more likely to invest in technology and analytics.** It should go without saying that brands using small data are less likely to say their customer strategy is mostly or fully informed by big data. But it's deeper than that: They are more likely to say marketing should lead the effort to understand customers and are less likely to say IT should lead the effort. Meanwhile, the fact that they rely less on IT for insight hasn't stopped them from investing in complex technology to help them scale. They're more likely to invest in analytics tools and AI in their effort to better understand how customers think and feel.
- **Brands using small data are better equipped to work across silos.** One major strength of small data is the relative ease with which it can be interpreted — it's often qualitative and, by nature, lives in small, but rich, data sets. Perhaps due to its native format, brands using small data are more likely to say their marketing and CI teams regularly share data with one another in formats that the other can understand and use. Meanwhile, brands using small data succeed with other critical organizational efforts. They are more likely to have attempted to align internal resources within the organization, hire talent with new skills to round out teams, and work with third parties like agencies and consultancies to get the help they need.

With greater use of small data, brands have the opportunity to shape customer perceptions and maximize the impact on actions. For brands, the discovery of the truth behind customer action is about isolating the catalysts of action in customers' thoughts and feelings to drive business outcomes.

Brands using small data have the opportunity to shape customer perceptions and maximize the impact on outcomes.

Key Recommendations

Forrester's in-depth survey of 228 marketing and CI decision makers and 522 consumers about the business value of understanding how customers think and feel yielded several important recommendations:

Add context with small data. The outcomes of big data research and analytics can be unusually cryptic because the process is wired to look for relationships without any prerequisite of context. But to make sense of these outcomes, marketers need the texture and color of small data. A variety of methods — including intercepts, interviews, groups, and ethnographies — help shape insights by making them applicable for the brand and category and readying them for implementation as part of marketing programs. Quantitative research on thoughts and feelings need to be expanded upon using qualitative means to better understand, for example how feelings like trust, helpfulness, and fun play out within the environment of particular brands, their categories, and the consumer segments that matter.

Develop a holistic customer view. As devices proliferate, interactions trend digital, and data explodes, it is tempting for marketers to binge on transaction and interaction data to explain how consumers act. However, as our research shows, just because the data is plentiful it doesn't mean it's all-powerful. The predictive power of this big data is considerably hampered when considered in isolation. And even when big data predicts, it does so without a plausible explanation, thwarting the ability of marketers to problem solve and add value. A well-rounded understanding must be contextually rich, and when data that better explains thoughts and feelings of the actors are incorporated into customer understanding, it is a far better predictor of action.

Break silos, lead with customer obsession. The journey from data to action ought to be a highly deliberate one that begins with knowing what data to collect, how to connect the various data streams, and how to make sense of what the data is saying. None of this is possible to do in isolation, as facets of this work lie with technology, insight, and marketing functions. Our research shows an alarming level of disconnect across these functions (somewhat ameliorated in organizations that are small data champions). The process to begin the integration and utilization of small data must anchor to the holistic customer view we have recommended, and the organizational units must seamlessly meld together in service of the data that will best serve the commitment to customer obsession.

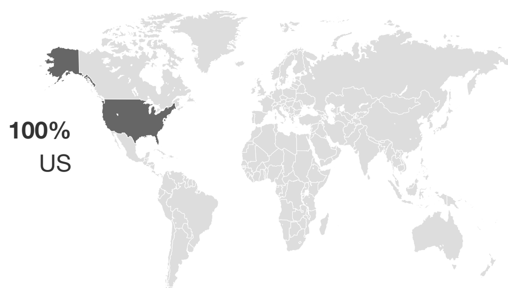
Shift your perspective on branding. Our research is conclusive: How people think and feel determines how they act. What appears to be a simple notion has eluded marketers for decades; dyed-in-the-wool brand marketers have been reluctant to let go of inside-out marketing principles focused on product, pricing, and promotions. In the last several years, a growing movement of psychology-influenced marketing, behavioral economics, and proof points like Forrester's Brand Energy framework illustrates the importance of emotions in consumer decision making. The first step to collecting the right data and performing the right research is to frame the issue correctly, and organizations looking to impact consumer decision making must afford primacy to how people think and feel.

Appendix A: Methodology

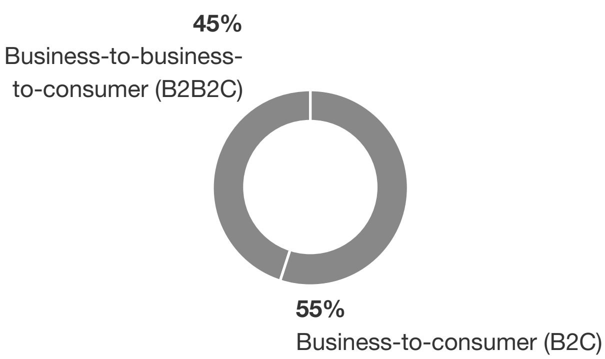
In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey 522 consumers in the US to evaluate brand experiences. We also conducted a survey of 228 B2C marketing and customer insights decision makers in the US, including 54 CMOs, to gain insight into how they seek to understand their customers and what key brand experience challenges holding them back. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive as a thank you for time spent on the survey. The study began in March 2019 and was completed in May 2019.

Appendix B: Demographics/Data

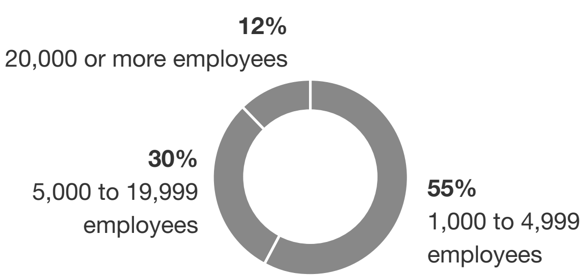
Business demographics



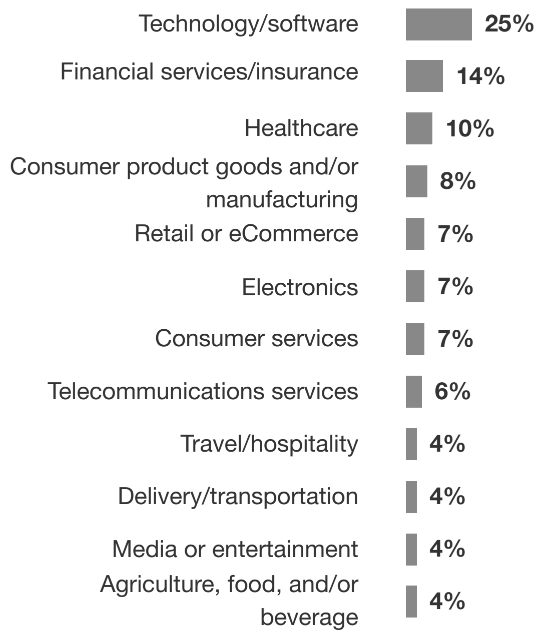
BUSINESS SCOPE



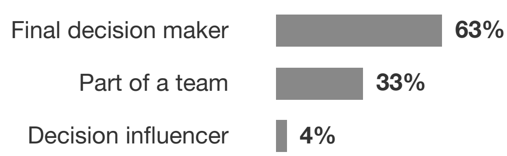
COMPANY SIZE



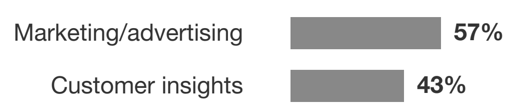
INDUSTRY



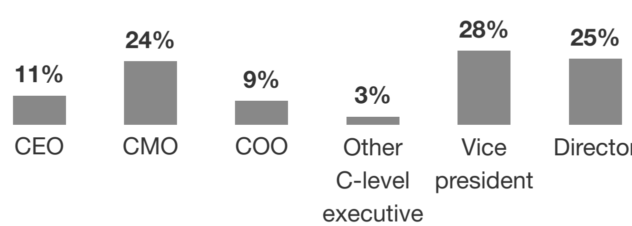
RESPONSIBILITY



DEPARTMENT



RESPONDENT LEVEL



Base: 228 marketing and customer insights decision makers
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

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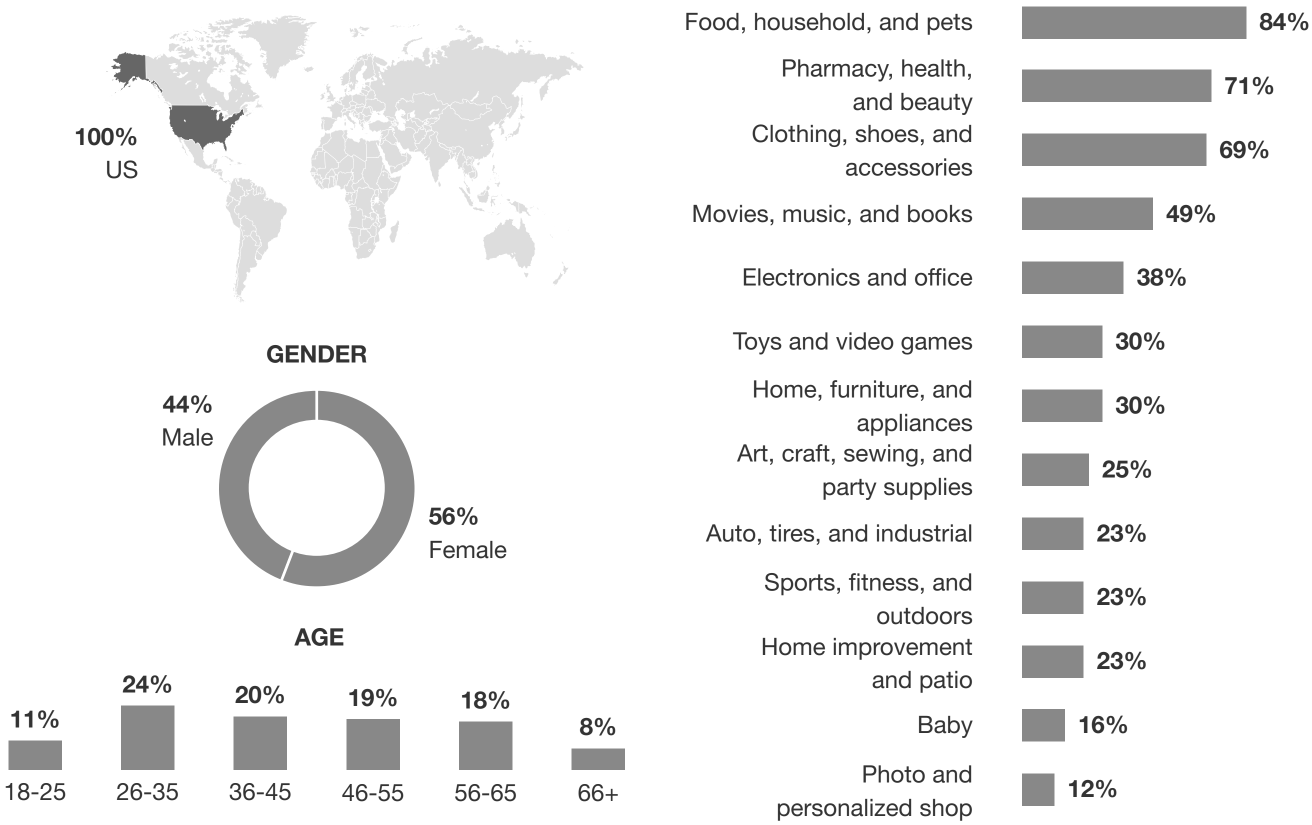
Consumer demographics



Base: 522 US-based consumers
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of FocusVision, April 2019

Appendix C: Supplemental Material

RELATED FORRESTER RESEARCH

Forrester's Brand Energy Framework Methodology, described in, "Emotions Fuel Your Brand Energy," Forrester Research, Inc., November 19, 2018.

"Branding Never Sleeps: Relentlessly Measure, Manage, And Improve Your Brand," Forrester Research, Inc., November 21, 2018.

Appendix D: Endnotes

[1] Source: "Prioritize CX Investments By Understanding Empowered Customers," Forrester Research, Inc., May 29, 2019.

[2] Source: "Branding Never Sleeps: Relentlessly Measure, Manage, And Improve Your Brand," Forrester Research, Inc., November 21, 2018.

[3] Respondents were given instructions to think of a memorable experience they've had with a brand at any point in time. It could include any type of experience a consumer may have with a brand, including but not limited to: 1) use of a subscription-based product/service; 2) purchase of a product/service; 3) a customer service question; or 4) browsing at a store. They were prompted throughout the survey to respond in relation to this memorable experience with the brand or in relation to that brand in general. Respondents were asked what brand they recalled and the answers ranged. However, four out of the five organizations can be considered digital-first companies that have had a large hand in shaping consumer behavior and

expectations in recent years. When asked what types of interactions the experience consisted of, "digitally with the brand," was the top response at 50%. However, 43% selected "in-person with the brand," and 20% selected "over the phone with the brand" — meaning that while half of respondents are recalling a digital experience, traditional channels remain an important aspect of the experiences they described.

[4] Source: "Branding Never Sleeps: Relentlessly Measure, Manage, And Improve Your Brand," Forrester Research, Inc., November 21, 2018.

[5] Our model consisted of two larger independent variables, "think" and "feel" and three dependent variables we denoted as "act" variables. "Think" variables described attributes or actions a brand may take in general: "provides great recommendations," "fits my lifestyle," "has friendly employees," etc. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much each phrase describes how they think about the brand in general. "Feel" variables described traditional brand characteristics ("helpful," "trustworthy," "genuine," etc.) as well as emotions they may feel during a brand experience ("disgust," "stress," "delight," "relaxed," etc.). Each of the variables in this latter category fell within one of 10 categories outlined in HUMAINE's emotion annotation and representation language (EARL). For traditional brand characteristics, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much each describes the brand in general. For emotions, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much each describes how they felt during the experience in question. It should be noted that negative emotions we retroactively coded in the positive so as to match the logic of the scale of all other independent variables. "Act" variables consist of purchase, loyalty, and advocacy. Purchase is measured by one of two variables depending on the type of relationship the respondent has to the brand: if they make one-off purchases, rather than subscribe, their purchase variable is measured by "likelihood to purchase from the brand in the next three months"; if they subscribe to the brand, their purchase variable is measured by "likelihood to continue subscribing for the next three months." For all respondents, loyalty is measured by "likelihood to choose the brand over a competitor" and advocacy is measured by "likelihood to recommend the brand to a friend or family member." Our multiple regression model examined independent variables at the larger category level of "think" and "feel" (by taking the average sum across each of the individual variables in each), as well as at the individual variable level, in relation to each of the dependent "act" variables. We used the model to determine the relative strength of "think" and "feel" variables in driving each type of action in relation to the brand (also described as business outcomes).

[6] Source: "Emotions Fuel Your Brand Energy," Forrester Research, Inc., November 19, 2018.

[7] Frequency of purchase was a relevant indicator of intent to purchase, but less than 10% of the variability in the outcome could be explained by the frequency of past purchases.

[8] Source: "Now Tech: Voice Of The Customer (VoC) Vendors, Q4 2018," Forrester Research, Inc., October 9, 2018.

[9] Source: "Four Steps To A Data Management Strategy In Light Of Big Data," Forrester Research, Inc., November 16, 2018.

[10] Source: Ibid.

[11] Source: Ibid.