MARKETING TO GODS

The Definitive Guide to Reaching, Engaging, and Retaining the Modern, Empowered Consumer
How we got here

In navigating today’s digital landscape, there’s a greater need than ever for clear, actionable insights to help brands cut through the complexity and get to the heart of what’s driving connected consumers.

But finding this information isn’t easy. In fact, after reviewing hundreds of industry publications and reams of academic research, we at Zen Media still found ourselves with questions:

Who are connected consumers? What is meant by the concept of “connectivity?” What paradoxes and troublesome “gaps” are “built-in” to this connectivity, and how can brands hack them?

Are connected consumers merely a product of the wireless revolution or evidence of a global social phenomenon that goes far beyond the ubiquitous use of technology? And how does all this fundamentally shift a brand’s understanding of itself and its strategy?

We had hunches about the answers to these questions, but to create what would become the Definitive Guide to the Connected Consumer, we needed data to bear out and back up our suspicions. For this reason, we undertook a robust and varied research study, integrating in-depth qualitative interviews with quantitative statistical analysis to provide you with the actionable insights and practical tools to successfully hack the gaps in connected consumers’ purchasing journeys.
Our research approach

**IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS**

We knew if we wanted to uncover the more subtle nuances of the connected consumer, we couldn’t rely on quantitative research alone. Qualitative research had to be a key piece of the puzzle. For us, this meant conducting in-depth interviews and compiling firsthand accounts with a select sample of connected consumers.

Each interviewee represented a different economic background and had recently made a large purchase relative to their income. These interviews afforded us a human perspective on the pain points, challenges, and opportunities of connected consumers’ purchase journeys. Significantly, the discovery of broad areas of overlap between the reports of our research participants allowed us to identify common themes that are crucial for brands to understand.

**QUANTITATIVE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

Our quantitative research was conducted using an extensive survey of more than 200 participants vetted as connected consumers. Participants responded to increasingly detailed questions about their digital habits, online shopping practices, and specific stages of their purchasing journey. To gain an even deeper understanding, the survey posed questions about participants’ relationships with brands and social media, as well as questions designed to determine opportunities for empowering connected consumers. A portion of our participants qualified as B2B candidates. It was from this group we gained insight into what hacking the gaps of the connected consumer means from a business- or brand-centric perspective.

**OUR FINDINGS**

Each participant reported looking at more than 80 products and as a combined group, poring over hundreds of reviews. Much of the initial quest for information was handled at home on a laptop or desktop, but once the consumers felt they had a clearer understanding of the general product offering, they took the plunge into the realm of physical storefronts, actively picking up their purchase journey at the very place their digital search left off.

While our research participants’ purchase journeys may appear seamless, the paradoxes that characterize them reveal distinct gaps that businesses and brands must successfully hack with sensitivity and strategic know-how.
A complete picture of the connected consumer

By analyzing and integrating qualitative and quantitative data sets, we discovered the human and technological dimensions of the connected consumer are properly understood as falling under a larger social umbrella that gives rise to 4 distinct paradoxes and 4 correspondent gaps in the purchasing journey.

It is these 4 paradoxes that hold the key to cutting through the complexity of today’s digital landscape and getting to the heart of what’s driving connected consumers.

Four Paradoxes

**PARADOX ONE**
Connected consumers are independent, yet interconnected

**PARADOX TWO**
Connected consumers are digitally native, yet highly hands-on

**PARADOX THREE**
Connected consumers are idealistic, yet discriminating

**PARADOX FOUR**
Connected consumers are gods, yet also all too human
A quick Google search shows the term first appeared online more than ten years ago. It was coined by marketing analysts who were trying to identify, understand, relate and respond to:

1. The rapidly-increasing number of “wired” (now “wireless”) consumers

The idea of the connected consumer has evolved to exceed its original meaning, becoming more complex as the digital and social world has at once expanded and become more pervasive.

2. The exponential growth of the digital social sphere

The digital social sphere can no longer be accurately understood as confined to dedicated social media platforms. Rather, it constitutes the principles, perspectives, and practices of consumer engagement across all types of digital platforms as seamlessly integrated with consumers’ non-digital worlds. These platforms include aggregation, social, mobilization, and learning.

Essentially, while the “connected” in “connected consumer” does refer to the Internet of Things (IoT) and consumers’ connections to their digital devices, for brands to understand the connected consumer on these terms exclusively is to merely scratch the surface and miss the deeper implications of what “connected” means for brands and consumers alike.
It all starts with social

To understand the advent of the connected consumer, it’s helpful to look to the root of the word “social,” which means “to be associated with others.”

The connected consumer is “associated with others” in ways that are much more closely linked to the concept of self-organizing systems and to the notion of the global commons than to social media use or even digital connectivity.

This means marketers must no longer think of social as just a platform or channel they “use” to reach connected consumers. Instead, social must be understood as the inescapable context of integral interconnectivity in which all marketing approaches take place and through which all strategy must be shaped. Said differently, social is not simply one approach among many but rather the water in which we’re all swimming, or the very “air” that brands and consumers alike are breathing.

The connected consumers we interviewed for this report shared two things in common. First, they had each made recent, higher-end purchases that represented above-average expenditures for them. Second, before they began their purchase journey, they knew little about the items they would eventually purchase.

The view from the ground:
An overview of our research into the connected consumer

They had each made recent, higher-end purchases that represented above-average expenditures for them. These items ranged from an electric lawn mower to an armchair.

Before they began their purchase journey, they knew little about the items they would eventually purchase.
As illustrated in the graphic to the right, we found the participants in our study followed a nearly identical discovery and purchase process consisting of three steps.

Let’s take a closer look at the connected consumer’s purchase journey and how businesses and brands can hack the gaps found within the four paradoxes.

“"We found that the participants in our study followed a nearly identical discovery and purchase process."

**STEP ONE**
The underlying rationale for their search was to find a product to meet a need by remedying a pain point or improving their quality of life.

**STEP TWO**
Once they identified this need, they began their journey of independent information-gathering using broad internet searches related to the items. At this point, they weren’t looking for a retailer’s site per se, but rather relying on digitally mediated social connectivity to access general product information in blogs or articles.

**STEP THREE**
Once they had a grasp of the general context of their items of interest, they were ready to take a deeper dive by turning to retail websites and online marketplaces to find reviews from others who had already bought items in the same product family. They were at once idealistic about finding the perfect item and discriminating in their expectations of the product and brand.
PARADOX 1

Connected consumers are independent, yet interconnected
Connected consumers are independent, yet interconnected

Connected consumers exhibit extraordinary amounts of independence and personal initiative in taking control of their purchase journey, yet they are highly dependent on their relationships with other consumers and brands in determining where they want to go in the first place and how they will get there.

Though they are confident they can access the information they need and chart their own course, the way is often unclear and the road bumpy and winding. Even as connected consumers take pride in their independence and celebrate their individuality, they are reliant on other consumers and brands/products to express, confirm, and even define this independence and individuality.
Meet Nicole
Looking for a supportive armchair to reduce neck pain.

Age: 37  
Location: Chicago, IL  
Job: Archivist  
HHI: $70,000–79,999  
Device preference: laptop followed by a mobile phone

Purchase Journey

First, Nicole identified her preferences: a comfortable high-backed chair with colors that matched her living room.

She looked for Top 10 lists that compared the products she had been considering so she could make an informed choice.

She also searched online reviews that mentioned her specific type of back pain to find a similar purchasing journey.
PARADOX 1: CONNECTED CONSUMERS ARE INDEPENDENT, YET INTERCONNECTED

Digital Navigation of Personal Needs: The Search is On

“I had neck pain and realized I had no seating in my house that was tall enough to support my upper back and neck,” said one participant, Nicole. She explained how realizing a literal pain point developed into her quest to find the perfect armchair.

First, she identified her preferences: a comfortable high-backed chair with colors that matched her living room.

“I wanted to find something I could relax in after work,” said Nicole. She had never shopped for an armchair before and took her time gathering information before looking into specific products. Nicole said she goes to trusted blogs to research tech products but had a hard time finding useful articles posted about products in other industries. “I was looking for some “top 10” lists that compared the products I was considering that had been tested and used for a long time so I could make an informed choice.”

Nicole also described searching online reviews for mentions of her specific type of back pain in hopes of finding another person who had completed a similar purchasing journey. It is important to note the high level of detail Nicole sifted through online. She was committed to finding a product that checked every box.

Most participants mentioned sorting through anywhere from 50 to 100 items during their search. They passed over some of those items pretty quickly, but saved others, either in a document or by bookmarking it on their browser. Price was a factor in the initial shopping stage; if something was too far out of their budget, participants dismissed it immediately.

We discovered users typically use their home laptops or desktops during the information gathering period. This is when they narrowed down what features or specifications they were looking for. Because information is rarely housed in a format that lets users easily compare multiple products’ features and benefits, two of our participants reported the need to organize and curate this information for themselves. They did this by creating digital documents or spreadsheets with product categories, names, and embedded links, demonstrating yet another example of the independence and empowerment connected consumers exhibit in driving their own purchase journey. Nicole did just this, organizing more than 50 online options by categories, including neck support, back pain relief, color, and price.

“I was looking for some “top 10” lists that compared the products I was considering that had been tested and used for a long time so I could make an informed choice.”
PARADOX 1: CONNECTED CONSUMERS ARE INDEPENDENT, YET INTERCONNECTED

Hacking the gap

**Personalize, curate, and customize**

Connected consumers prefer to start with a wide survey of products rather than focusing on one in particular. They need to match personal needs with product features, and can do this most efficiently by comparing many products at once.

**WHAT WE LEARNED**

Connected consumers don’t settle for the first item they find that happens to be on sale or available in the right color. Rather, they insist that products precisely match their specific needs, even to the point of personalization or customization.

**THE TAKEAWAY FOR YOUR BRAND**

Capitalize on the front-end gap by reaching connected consumers in more personalized ways, and capitalize on the back-end gap by offering them better ways to organize and curate information across product categories or partner brands.

Don’t just “push” content to followers, help them “pull” customized content to themselves. This is a value-added service that puts even greater control in their hands to help them get exactly what they want on-demand.
PARADOX 2

Connected consumers are idealistic, yet discriminating
PARADOX 2: CONNECTED CONSUMERS ARE IDEALISTIC, YET DISCRIMINATING

Connected consumers are idealistic, yet discriminating

Connected consumers hold brands to very high standards (product-, service-, and ethics-wise) and fully believe the perfect item or brand is out there.

At the same time, they’re also shrewd. Their ability to see inside and scrutinize a product or brand also makes them highly discriminating and demanding, as well as increasingly suspicious of a brand’s authenticity. “I want a brand that doesn’t just ‘talk the talk’ but chooses to ‘walk the walk,’” said study participant Karen.
Purchase Journey

She tried finding something at Best Buy, but didn’t like dealing with sales people, preferring instead to search online with her phone and laptop using filters and product comparison tools.

Her research led her to create a spreadsheet of more than 40 different computers to choose from.

In the end, she purchased the computer online from Best Buy because they had the computer she most wanted, the price matching she needed, and the rewards program that sweetened the deal.

Meet Karen

Needed a new laptop with better battery life.

Age: 28
Location: Buffalo Grove, IL
Job: Greeting card writer
HHI: $125,000–129,000
Device preference: mobile phone
Digital Navigation of Personal Needs: Finding a trustworthy “guru”

Connected consumers consult many resources and their final purchase destination is guided as much by information they have gathered along the way as by preexisting brand biases. However, longstanding research indicates that consumers faced with an overwhelming amount of choices will tend to go with one of the first three brands they initially considered. In fact, these brands are three times more likely to be purchased than any others. That’s why brand awareness is key. Setting yourself up to be top-of-mind when your customer is making a decision carries considerable weight.

Our research indicated the information connected consumers rely on most is online product reviews, followed by their friends’ and family’s personal experiences. However, a notable exception to this rule is found in cases where the connected consumer consults someone they consider a “guru.”

The first type of guru has amassed vast amounts of social capital by attracting loyal followers. The second type of guru is known personally by the connected consumer as a trustable source of experience or expertise on a particular product or service in which they are interested.

Reporting on her own experience with a trusted guru, Karen explained, “I talked to my little brother because he is an expert with computers... (I asked him) ‘Is there anything I’m missing that I should be looking for?’” Beyond close family and friends, the connected consumers in our study expressed mixed feelings about following a celebrity or social media personality for advice on what to buy. True to the paradox of connected consumers being both idealistic and discriminating, reactions varied between a sense that an influencer’s content was clearly paid for and therefore inauthentic and that it was a heartfelt and trustworthy endorsement.

If the endorsement felt like an ad — if it felt scripted, overproduced or inauthentic — our connected consumers wanted no part of it. The more genuine an endorsement was perceived to be, however, the more likely they were to form a favorable impression of the product and factor the endorsement into their research. That is, provided the endorsement didn’t close the deal.

With regard to higher-end expenditures or luxury items, some of the most idealistic connected consumers in our study said they wouldn’t share their purchasing experience on social media for fear of appearing boastful or overly status-conscious. Instead, if the brand had either disappointed or exceeded their expectations, they would post a digital review of their purchase experience to warn prospective consumers or praise the business or brand.
PARADOX 2: CONNECTED CONSUMERS ARE IDEALISTIC, YET DISCRIMINATING

Hacking the gap

Show your authenticity...authentically

From the perspective of influencer marketing and its foundation in C2B, gurus are the equivalent of a micro-influencer. Within the non-linear, interconnected world of the connected consumer where the potential for the "butterfly effect" is omnipresent, "micro" is not necessarily synonymous with "insignificant" and brands should not underestimate a guru’s influence for good or ill, however seemingly small.

However short their reach may appear, an influencer’s relationship to a product or brand and their often-extensive knowledge and opinion of it — especially as shared through social channels — constitutes the potential for the kind of "chaotic perturbation" that can be the difference between a business or brand enjoying a reputation as a trusted partner or fighting a bad rap as a snake-oil salesman.

"I want a brand that doesn't just ‘talk the talk’ but chooses to ‘walk the walk.’" - Karen, participant

WHAT WE LEARNED

Connected consumers are aware of brand hypocrisy and are calling brands out on it - not just on social media but using their wallets.

THE TAKEAWAY FOR BRANDS

Take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate authenticity, alignment, integrity and social responsibility.

But remember - don’t talk the talk unless you can walk the walk. Be careful not to piggyback on or co-opt social justice movements, implying that support of a brand or consumption of a product is tantamount to moral virtue. Pepsi’s April 2017 “Revolution” ad is a perfect example of how a brand may disastrously confirm consumers’ suspicion that they are conflating their brand with a social movement for the express and disingenuous purpose of profit.

This is not to say that brands should withdraw their involvement in cultural conversations about social justice. It is actually impossible for brands not to have these conversations, so the issue is not if brands will have these conversations but how they will have them, and on what authority. It is one thing for a brand to take a principled (and potentially costly) stand. Many industry insiders and consumers alike would contend Procter & Gamble did this in their July 2017 ad, "The Talk." It's quite another thing for a brand to pose as a virtual agent of social justice by selectively dressing itself up in the most marketable images or slogans of grassroots activism.
PARADOX 3

Connected consumers are digitally native, yet highly hands-on
Connected consumers are digitally native, yet highly hands-on

Though many connected consumers are digital natives (or at least tech-savvy) who grease the wheels of e-commerce, they are not entirely abandoning brick-and-mortar retail.

Instead, they are pioneering the integration of digital space with a physical place. Connected consumers are partnering with forward-thinking businesses and visionary brands to reinvent localized retail, transforming stores into hands-on hubs of brick-and-data hospitality that pick up where digital leaves off.
Meet Cory
Looking for a battery-operated lawn mower.

Age: 33
Location: Philadelphia, PA
Job: Senior User Experience Design Lead
HHI: $175,000–179,000
Device preference: Equal use of laptop, iPad and iPhone

Purchase Journey

Cory researched lawn mowers on the internet using his iPhone, iPad, and laptop, then compared reviews and narrowed down his options. He also consulted friends, family, and sales people.

He bought a lawn mower online from Lowe’s using a coupon code and picked it up in the store on the same day.

The coupon he used also enabled him to purchase an additional lawn care item that used the same battery system as the lawn mower.
Digital Navigation of Personal Needs: Seeking “real-life” experiences

A fascinating phenomenon is taking place. At the peak of digital domination and the apex of e-commerce, offline retail is making a comeback. Only this time, it’s on the connected consumer’s terms. Even when shopping in traditional retail stores, those in our study exhibited interconnected independence, keeping their smartphones primed and ready for a quick search. They reported declining help from salespeople, preferring to turn to digitally mediated social resources to find information and support.

While a visit to a physical store was often mentioned in purchase journeys, it was but one step along the way. Instead of purchasing in-store, shoppers preferred to return home and continue their research.

For example, while Cory’s search for a lawn mower included a visit to Lowe’s and Home Depot, and he made his purchase from Lowe’s, he bought the lawn mower online because it got him a better deal.

“I wanted to see the actual lawn mower and compare it to the others I was considering,” he said. “I ended up getting the best deal at Lowe’s with some coupons I found online, and even got a good price on a weed whacker. But I didn’t buy in-store. I bought online so I could use my coupons and picked it up in the store the same day.”

Despite being digital natives, connected consumers highly value and seek out hands-on, real-life experiences to inform their purchase journey. Nicole said she stopped by a retail store to examine the fabric of the chair she had been researching online. Karen shared that she learns about new products by investigating them at retail stores.

Despite being digital natives, connected consumers highly value and seek out hands-on, real-life experiences to inform their purchase journey.
PARADOX 3: CONNECTED CONSUMERS ARE DIGITALLY NATIVE, YET HIGHLY HANDS-ON

Hacking the gap
Online, meet offline

WHAT WE LEARNED
Connected consumers augment their knowledge of products through brick-and-mortar/brick-and-mortar retail outlets in a way they don’t believe is possible when searching strictly online. Traditional retailers that adopt service-based models are hacking the gap of the third paradox. Many of our connected consumers were repeatedly attracted to physical stores by features like membership points, on-site repairs, competitive comparisons, and being able to see prospective purchases in person.

THE TAKEAWAY FOR BRANDS

Bring your otherwise traditional retail environments online by integrating digital shopping assistance technology into the built environment via interactive displays, voice-activated service, and IoT applications. This will allow shoppers to independently access high levels of support.

Stores and mall operators are utilizing IoT infrastructure to capitalize on the technology that is already in the hands of connected consumers. Through chat-based tools accessed via their mobile devices, shoppers can command product information, support service, and navigation assistance in pinpointing exactly where on the retail floor a particular item is located. The idea here is that assistance anticipates the shopper, generating real-time information, customized messaging, and rewards, and making a hunt for a sales associate entirely optional depending on the shopper’s needs and personal preferences.

Retailers can add effectiveness and value to in-person shopping by providing salesmanship and hospitality, creating an overall shopping experience that makes connected consumers feel like they are being hosted, not sold to.
PARADOX 4

Connected consumers are gods, yet all too human
PARADOX 4: CONNECTED CONSUMERS ARE GODS, YET ALL TOO HUMAN

Connected consumers are gods, yet all too human

In a paradoxical twist of the digital age, connected consumers now wield god-like technological power and social influence, yet the very conditions that have afforded them this power have also rendered them vulnerable.

Connected consumers feel empowered by the huge effect their digital dialogue can have on a brand’s/product’s reputation and image. However, they are also overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available to them. Though they may be doing most of the driving on their purchase journey, and even posting signs that show other consumers where to go, it is not uncommon for connected consumers to second guess their sense of direction. Even when they arrive at their purchase destination, connected consumers frequently question whether they’ve come to the right place.
Meet Mark
Looking for a laptop with cutting-edge capabilities.

Age: 42
Location: Phoenix, AZ
Job: Consultant
HHI: $20,000–29,000
Device preference: Mobile phone

Purchase Journey

Starting out with 8 options, Mark used his phone to decide in under an hour which laptop he wanted.

Mark conducted his research online because he wanted to compare products himself.

He spent two hours searching for the best deals online. He considered buying used, but went with new since he could get same-day shipping.
Digital Navigation of Personal Needs: Anxiety mounts upon approaching the purchase destination

With so much information comes the fear of not having the right information or enough of it. Connected consumers often worry they are missing a crucial piece of their purchase puzzle. When they can’t find the tie-breaking piece of information that will tip them toward a confident purchase of one product or service over another, search fatigue or a deadlock between different products or services often occurs.

Connected consumers are more informed than any consumer who has preceded them, but with more knowledge also comes more choices. Price and quality are no longer the only key factors in a purchase, although they remain highly influential variables. Connected consumers aren’t just paying attention to brands – they’re paying attention to vendors. Add to this connected consumers’ insistence on fast or even free shipping and the stakes are raised even higher. This means vendors have more requirements to meet than ever before. “I don’t really feel good about it until I have it in my hands,” reported our participant, Mark, explaining why he placed such a premium on fast shipping. Other participants also discussed worrying they would regret their choices; a few said they wanted to wait to leave product reviews of their own until making certain they were satisfied with their purchases.

In being confronted with too much of a good thing (information and choice), connected consumers find themselves in danger of being defeated by the very information they arm themselves with. Many of our participants reported anxiety over making the wrong choice, or simply not making the best choice. As they prepared to pull the trigger on their purchase, they described opening multiple browser tabs to view their options and have a last look at user reviews to lend confirmation to their choice. Even post purchase, they found themselves instantly reviewing their order in an attempt to bolster their confidence that they’d made the right decision.
Hacking the gap
A more positive purchase experience

WHAT WE LEARNED

Connected consumers are empowered but overwhelmed and the source of their power is also the source of their weakness. They want to be in the driver’s seat, but they need help navigating the massive amount of information they encounter en route to their purchase.

Even after extensive research, consultation with trusted gurus, and in-store visits, they continue to feel less-than-confident about their choices. This may stem from the pressure they put on themselves to become instant experts on items of interest, but it’s more likely caused by the leftover anxiety of the purchase journey itself. When the journey is fraught with tension, that tension carries over into the destination, leaving connected consumers feeling unsettled about their purchase as well as the business or brand behind it.

THE TAKEAWAY FOR BRANDS

Brands need to have a healthy respect for the god-like power connected consumers wield, but also a keen sensitivity to the pain points, anxieties, longings, and vulnerabilities that make them deeply human.

Brands that are worthy of connected consumers’ trust and advocacy cannot afford to lose touch with either side of this paradox. If brands lose touch with the god-like power connected consumers wield, they risk falling prey to the dangerous illusion that their audience is comprised of passive consumers rather than active co-creators of brand identity and content.

Brands must relieve connected consumers’ anxiety by creating a simple, stress-free purchase process. They can do this by streamlining online interfaces, offering real-time assistance via chat-bots or live agents, adopting a “try before you buy” model, and installing reassuring safeguards like free shipping and free returns. Embrace the reality that connected consumers’ satisfaction and loyalty depends as much on the quality and ease of their purchase journey as on the actual product or service that constitutes their final destination.
THE ROLE OF CONNECTED CONSUMERS

in brand and business interactions
The role of connected consumers in brand and business interactions

The phenomenon of the connected consumer means that brands’ external stakeholders (customers) and internal stakeholders (their employees, vendors, supply chain, etc.) qualify as connected consumers.

In other words, customers consume businesses and brands, but businesses and brands also consume customers. In this sense, brands’ relationships with consumers are reciprocal and cyclical.

In essence, this underscores the idea of the connected consumer as composed of the inseparable, reciprocal relationships of B2C, C2B, B2E, B2B, etc. This understanding is the basis for the following exploration of what hacking the gaps of the prior four paradoxes means from a business- or brand-centric perspective.
B2E: Attracting connected employees

As a connected consumer, the connected employee is empowered to access more information than ever before, including employee reviews of the companies for which they’ve worked. True to the first and second paradoxes, connected consumers want to work for top companies and for brands they feel represent them or have beliefs that align with their own (Salesforce, 2016). Businesses and brands, for their part, often spend ample time and marketing dollars trying to attract top talent.

We asked our B2E participants to rank the importance of different factors in deciding whether or not to take a job with a prospective employer. Participants identified levels of importance by ranking each factor on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). Not surprisingly, pay (monetary compensation) was ranked most important, with 89 percent of participants ranking it as Very Important or Extremely Important. The second-most-important factor was work/life balance, with 84.6 percent of participants ranking it as Very Important or Extremely Important. Healthcare was ranked third-most-important, followed closely by vacation time, 401K matching, and dental care. Company brand identity was moderately ranked, while help with childcare and access to a gym were considered least important.

“Before I consider working anywhere, I check out its employee reviews on Glassdoor,” said Cory. “I want to know how they treat their employees, whether their employees are happy, whether there’s a good work/life balance, and whether the work is interesting.”

While some of these benefits may be more valuable at a certain age, age did not significantly correlate with one group valuing any benefit more or less. Some of these benefits, such as childcare and gym access, may be ranked lower because of personal preference. Respondents’ children may already attend a suitable facility, or they may favor a gym they already frequent. Further investigation is needed to fully understand the reasoning behind these rankings. However, companies attempting to attract highly talented employees should be mindful of where resources are best allocated and how they market themselves to prospective employees.
Innovation vs. diversity vs. equality

Many companies spend large amounts of time and effort in crafting mission statements that include buzzwords like innovation, diversity, and equality, but what do these statements and words actually mean to connected consumers? We sought answers by asking prospective employees how a company’s commitment to innovation, diversity, and equality affected its attractiveness to them.

Respondents rated those characteristics on a scale of attractiveness ranging from strongly increasing to strongly decreasing. All three qualities were related to a company’s perceived attractiveness to employment-seeking connected consumers. Business organizations with a demonstrated commitment to and actualization of innovation, diversity, and equality across multiple scales (not only within the microcosm of their company culture and consumer relations but within the macrocosm of their supply chain, vendors, and other stakeholders) are well-served by referencing it in literature or on websites designed to attract and recruit top talent.

Interestingly, of the three variables, respondents ranked equality the highest. Traditionally, from a human resources perspective, equality and diversity would tend to refer to the makeup of workplace demographics. For the purposes of this study, equality could also be understood as referring to equitable treatment among employees, or the employee’s perception of fair leadership, rather than a particular demographic composition.

In other words, equality can be understood not only in terms of equal “voice” and opportunity between employees or across departments and teams, but also in terms of leadership’s role in rejecting “command and control” organizational structures in favor of models where power is distributive. (Management science refers to such models as self-organizing, entrepreneurial, innovative, and agile.) This means in addition to the ideals that constitute equality from a human resources perspective, it might benefit companies to also include statements from leadership about its commitment to championing highly democratic or “participatory” organizational culture and governance.

Of the three variables, respondents ranked equality the highest.
The role of social systems in the workplace

More and more companies are abandoning email as a primary communication tool and opting for more synchronous interoffice communication systems like Slack, which make it easier to share files, organize conversations, and respond quickly.

Over the last several years, interoffice communication has seen a rise in the number of platforms that offer synchronous communication, so we asked our participants how they thought these new communication systems affected office productivity. Do they increase output, or are they just new platforms on which to do the same old things? Our respondents perceived slightly increased overall productivity. Specifically, 28 percent of them said the new systems increased productivity slightly, with an additional 18 percent saying they had a significant impact. Conversely, 31 percent said the systems had no effect, while 22 percent said they had a negative impact on productivity.

However, according to a study conducted by the McKinsey Global Institute (2016), office social systems can objectively lead to a 20-25 percent overall increase in productivity among employees. The difference in these numbers is likely related to the fact that the employees in our survey based their assessment on subjective experience, while the McKinsey Group based their assessment on objective metrics. Researchers, Leonardi and Neely (2017), followed up these results by exploring why some offices had higher increases in productivity than others, and were able to offer several reasons some offices fall short of these productivity increases. While their findings are extensive, we do not have space to fully explore them here. Those interested are encouraged to read their cited work.

Overall productivity due to interoffice communications

- 28% Increased slightly
- 18% Significant impact
- 31% No effect
- 22% Negative impact
B2B: Attracting, generating, and purchasing connected business

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN B2B PURCHASES

Participants were placed in our B2B category if they were involved in the purchase of items from one business for another or involved in the employee recruitment process in some way.4

Out of our 268 participants, 29 were eligible to participate in our exploratory B2B connected consumer survey. The first thing we asked these individuals about was the role social media played in their business-related decision-making. When asked how often they used social media to research a business purchase, 66 percent indicated they used social media somewhere between "occasionally" and "always." This means that even for companies that are primarily in the business of attracting other businesses, social media can play an important role, as two-thirds of their potential market base relies on it as a source of information about possible business purchases. Business consumers are no less demanding than other connected consumers on social media with 87 percent of business buyers saying they expect an immediate response when seeking support on social media, and this influences their loyalty (Hyder, 2018).

The next obvious question: In a landscape of multiple social media platforms, which one should I use?

According to our survey, the most-used platform for researching B2B purchases was Facebook, followed by Instagram and Twitter, then LinkedIn and Reddit. Next, we asked what the most likely source for finding links to a new business was. Unsurprisingly, Google search was the most popular choice, followed by Facebook, then LinkedIn and Twitter, and then Instagram, personal recommendations, and Reddit. This shows that while B2B businesses would not always think it necessary to have a presence on social media, B2B consumers still expect to be able to connect with B2B brands through these platforms.5

THE CONTINUED IMPORTANCE OF WEB DESIGN

Next, we asked our connected consumers to identify their favored source for finding links to a new business. We presented it as an open-ended question to allow for participants to elaborate on as many of their specific needs as possible within their given industries. Despite this, there were three common themes cited at least once by all participants: products, cost, and reviews. This shows that while B2B businesses would not always think it necessary to have a presence on social media, B2B consumers still expect to be able to connect with B2B brands through these platforms.

66 percent of participants indicated they used social media somewhere between “occasionally” and “always.”
Many B2B consumers first went on a seller’s website to look at products, product specs, and product photos. We consider this an exploratory search of what the company can offer. Many consumers wanted photos that would enlarge when clicked and specs that were easy to find and view. They looked at price next. If they are looking at price, we can assume that the customer already knows the company has products to meet their needs and just needs to know the price point.

This also implies the consumer is comparing the item’s price with that of other similar products. Several individuals cited their company’s policies for their focus on price, as well as the sense of “getting a deal.” Finally, many customers were looking for company reviews before shopping for product or price, meaning they were most focused on getting high-quality customer service with their purchases. This would indicate that having ratings or reviews on the company website would be beneficial, as viewers would not have to leave the site to find this information.

Additionally, we asked our B2B consumers what would discourage them from buying from a particular company, to which the most common answer was poor web design or difficult site navigation. B2B consumers want a clean, easily navigable site without too many words or sales tactics. This means it’s imperative that businesses invest in high-quality web design, conducting usability tests to make sure the website is intuitively navigable, in order to increase their sales and make their brands more identifiable. One way many of our participants suggested making a site easily and quickly navigable was to include a search bar that is accessible from every page.

B2B consumers did not like unnecessary words or clutter, especially verbiage that overhyped the product by claiming that it was “revolutionary” without data to back up the claim. Many connected professionals, like other consumers, felt they had the resources to make the best decisions about their product needs without vendors resorting to obvious sales tactics. Additionally, these buyers disliked seeing numerous ads on the website, or being offered extra services or products they did not need.

Connected business professionals feel qualified to determine their own needs for products and services, and brands whose websites generate an unwanted suggestion strike B2B buyers as disingenuous and as overstepping.

Finally, we asked these consumers what type of content, in addition to products and cost, they liked to see on a company’s website. Testimonials and manuals or guides were the most popular, as they generally allow a consumer greater insight into the typical product usage experience. Next were videos and tutorials, and last were top 10 lists and white papers, presumably because these have the least to do with the specific product being researched by the company.4

Brands whose websites generate an unwanted suggestion strike B2B buyers as disingenuous and overstepping.
DIGITAL VERSUS PERSONABLE: THE ROLE OF SALES REPRESENTATIVES IN THE ONLINE MARKETPLACE

The last question we asked our B2B connected consumers was what they like to learn about from a company's website rather than directly from a sales representative.

Most B2B consumers wanted to learn product specs, price, availability, and ship time from the product page. However, consumers liked getting bulk pricing and shipping options, warranty information, product usage information, and business-specific benefit information via tutorials or demonstrations.

Some participants expressed frustration with sales representatives who were not knowledgeable in these areas. These tended to be our connected consumers who preferred to interact only digitally and not with a sales representative.

In addition to the key role price plays in the consideration of products, we observed how B2B is weighing vendors as separate entities from brands, taking account of not only who made the product but whom is selling it, thus complexifying their purchase journey.

Shipping is a key element; with the standardization of 2-day shipping, many consumers said they expected it and it would dictate their choice of vendor.

Another factor attracting consumers to particular vendors is membership services, with Amazon Prime representing the leading membership service in e-commerce that entices users to continue returning to Amazon as a preferred vendor.

We observed how consumers weighed vendors as separate entities from brands.
CONCLUSION

Footnotes, Citations, Methodology
Conclusion

The connected consumer is a boundary-defying and boundary-defining global social phenomenon—a living ecosystem—that blurs the lines between investors, employees, corporate buyers, consumers, and entrepreneurs and demands that brands display increased alignment, integration, and social responsibility.

Like it or not, brands and consumers are in it together. As demonstrated in this report, consumers can increasingly see inside brands and the business operations behind them, down to their supply chain, hiring practices, organizational culture, environmental record, and so forth. They drive and define a brand’s identity and ongoing reputation at least as much—and often much more than—in-house campaign-crafters.

The four paradoxes explored in this report represent the leading-edge paradigm for helping brands hack the gaps of connected consumers’ purchase journeys. Depending on a brand’s ability to grasp and respond to these paradoxes, the sociality that is the source of connected consumers’ god-like power as well as their vulnerability brings with it great peril or great promise. Brands with the social ethos and digital agility to creatively participate with the very phenomenon of which they are part will evolve the next generation of connected consumers and profitably pioneer the frontiers of an unfolding age.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Very Important Percentage</th>
<th>Extremely Important Percentage</th>
<th>Total Percentage</th>
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<td>1.08</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Footnotes

1. **TABLE ONE**

   Importance rankings of benefits for employees deciding whether to work for a company.

2. It is interesting to note that equality ranked the **highest of the three**
   - **Innovation** = 5.34, SD=1.08;
   - **Diversity** = 5.12, SD=1.47;
   - **Equality** = 5.46, SD=1.49

3. Our sample indicated that using social systems in the office just slightly increased their overall perception of worker productivity (M=4.34, SD=1.31).

4. For more details about how individuals were sorted into business-to-business consumers or business-to-employee, please see the methodology section of this report.
Footnotes

5 According to our survey, the most-used website by B2B consumers was Facebook, with 19/29 participants saying they used this platform for researching B2B purchases. Facebook was followed by Instagram and Twitter, with 9/29 using these platforms, then LinkedIn (6/29) and finally Reddit* (4/29). Next, we asked what was the most likely source of links to a new business. Using a Google search was most common, with 41.4% of B2B consumers using it most of the time, followed by Facebook with 17.2% of B2B consumers using it most often. LinkedIn and Twitter were tied at 10.9%, then Instagram and personal recommendation at 6.9%, and lastly Reddit at 3.4%.

*Note: Reddit was not originally an option in the survey but was written in under “other” by several participants.

6 TABLE TWO
This table shows the number out of 29 participants who enjoyed each type of additional content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Content</th>
<th>N participants preference</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testimonials</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manuals or Guides</td>
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<tr>
<td>Videos</td>
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<td>Ranked Top 10 Lists</td>
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<tr>
<td>White Papers</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>
Citations


Methodology

This white paper has used a two-part research method to effectively deliver personal accounts from subjects interviewed as well as a quantitative data set from survey results. The two methods used in partnership build upon each other to add to the richness of the report, providing readers with both qualitative and quantitative data.

INTERVIEW METHODS

We conducted interviews with (4) respondents who met requirements set by a specific screener. The screener included questions related to purchase history, social media use, and basic demographics. Thirty-minute interviews were conducted via web conferencing or over the phone, with the interviewees being asked detailed questions about their most recent purchases as well as their followership and their thoughts about brands on social media. The result was a varied group that shared in great detail.

B2C SURVEY METHODS

For the B2B and B2E section, participants were sorted into either the employee category or the business-to-business buyer category on the basis of their answers to two questions: (1) Have you worked in any capacity to form deals or make sales from one business to another? [22 Yes] (2) Are you involved in any way with employee recruitment for a business? [15 Yes] On the basis of their answers to these (an affirmative to either), individuals were placed in the business-to-business (B2B) section. If both questions were answered with a negative, these participants were placed in the business-to-employee (B2E) section. Thus no one answered both sections in our survey. There were a total of 28/268 participants placed in the B2B section, while the rest were placed in the B2E section. We expected the number of B2B participants to be greatly reduced from the total given the special population this section targeted, but there are still enough participants here to draw some general, exploratory conclusions about this population.