

ACXIOM

Is partnership the key to **martech** success?

A brand perspective on service partners



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Executive Summary

Modern martech success requires both internal readiness and external expertise.

Brands depend on marketing technology (martech) solutions to automate their workflows and to deliver the personalized brand experiences that their customers have come to expect. With the rapid growth of AI, martech solutions are increasingly complex, leaving few brands with the capabilities and expertise to implement and manage a suite of solutions in-house. As a result, many brands choose to on-board an external martech service partner to act as a strategic advisor and to help with the deployment, integration, and optimization of solutions.

This whitepaper explores how brands are approaching martech service partnerships, from selecting a partner to acquiring services. It also highlights the challenges and opportunities that partnerships present, and how brands and partners can work together to future-proof relationships.

Report Highlights

Service Partners Are Essential: As martech becomes more complex, brands increasingly rely on external service partners for implementation, optimization, and ongoing management.

Strategic Fit Matters: Successful partnerships depend on technical expertise, industry experience, and cultural alignment.

Selection Is Complex: Choosing the right partner is an important multi-stakeholder process - and can be the defining factor between a solution that delivers results and one that produces incomplete insight.

Seven Pillars for Success: Acxiom outlines a framework including tech evaluation, data readiness, governance, and daily management planning.

Future-Proofing: Brands must ensure partners can scale with them and adapt to evolving needs.

Acxiom partnered with research and strategy agency MTM to survey 200 business decision-makers from brands across the UK and the U.S. to gain insight into the state of the martech service partner landscape. Survey participants are senior leaders in marketing, technology, data, or other departments, and are from businesses with \$100m+ annual revenue across a variety of sectors.

As the world of marketing technology rapidly evolves, service partnerships are becoming increasingly important, commanding an increasing share of martech budgets.

According to our survey, on average nearly half of martech budgets are dedicated to service partnerships, and this figure is predicted to grow over the next 12 months.

With an increasing amount of budget on the line, it is more important than ever that brands select a service partner that is a good fit for their organization to set themselves up for success.

The decision-making process can be difficult, as it often invites input from a number of stakeholders (e.g. marketing, data and analytics, IT, customer intelligence) with differing objectives and priorities.

Ultimately, successful martech partnerships rest on the actions of both partners and the brands that engage them.



Part 01

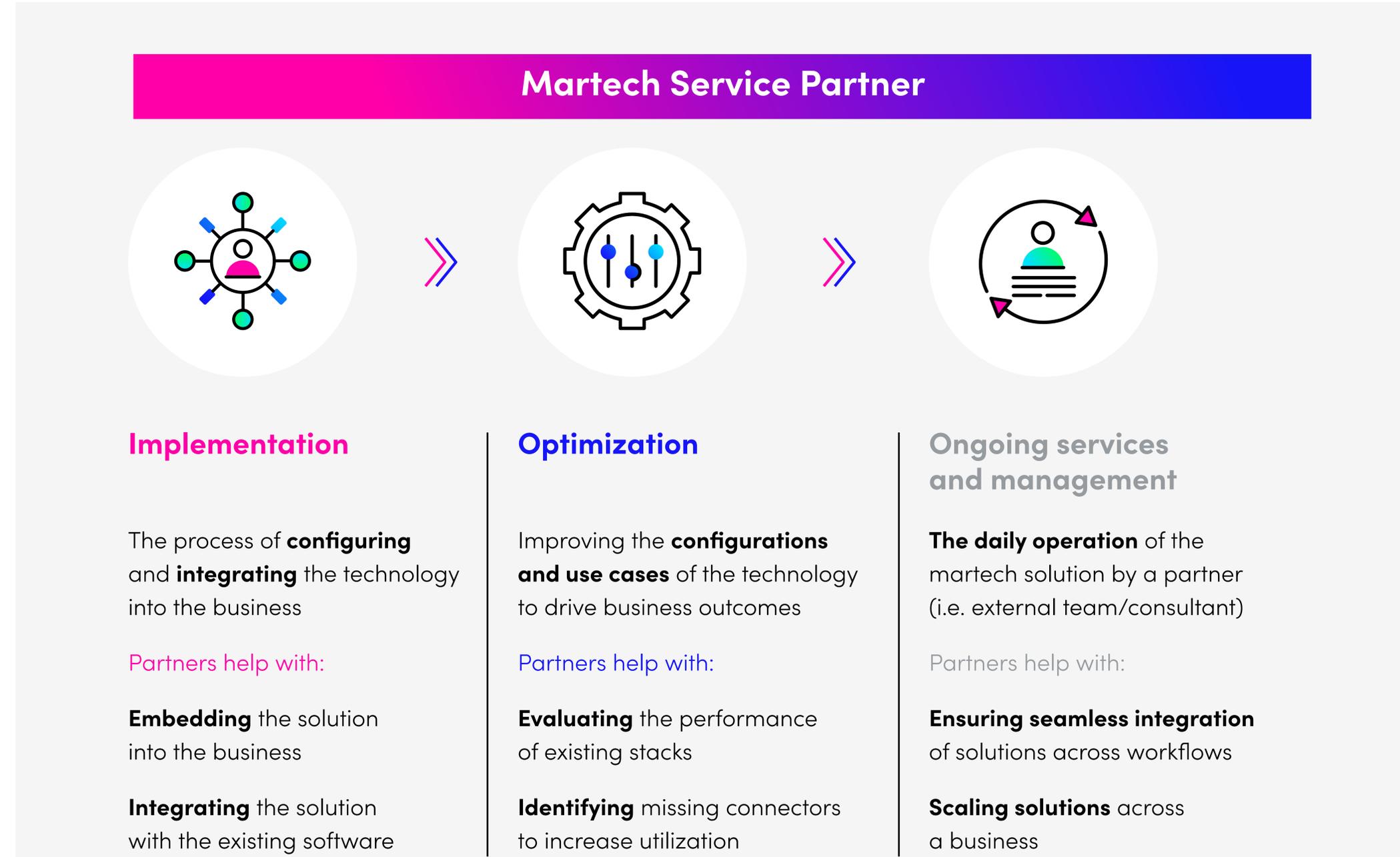
The role of the martech service partner

The marketing landscape has changed significantly over the last 10 years as people work, shop, socialize, and relax via an increasingly fragmented set of digital and traditional channels. And this evolution shows no sign of stopping, which presents marketers with both new opportunities and rising challenges.



Brands rely on martech to deliver efficiencies and solutions across several initiatives. The martech sector includes solutions across a broad range of capabilities, including campaign execution and optimization, customer relationship management (CRM), and reporting and analytics, all of which must be underpinned by data. Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming a critical feature to power solutions and facilitate rapid technological advances in the martech space.

As the martech landscape becomes progressively more complex, few brands have the in-house experience and expertise to implement and manage all the solutions they need to meet their business objectives. Many choose to on-board an external martech service partner to act as a strategic advisor and to help with the deployment, integration, and optimization of more complex martech solutions.



Part 02

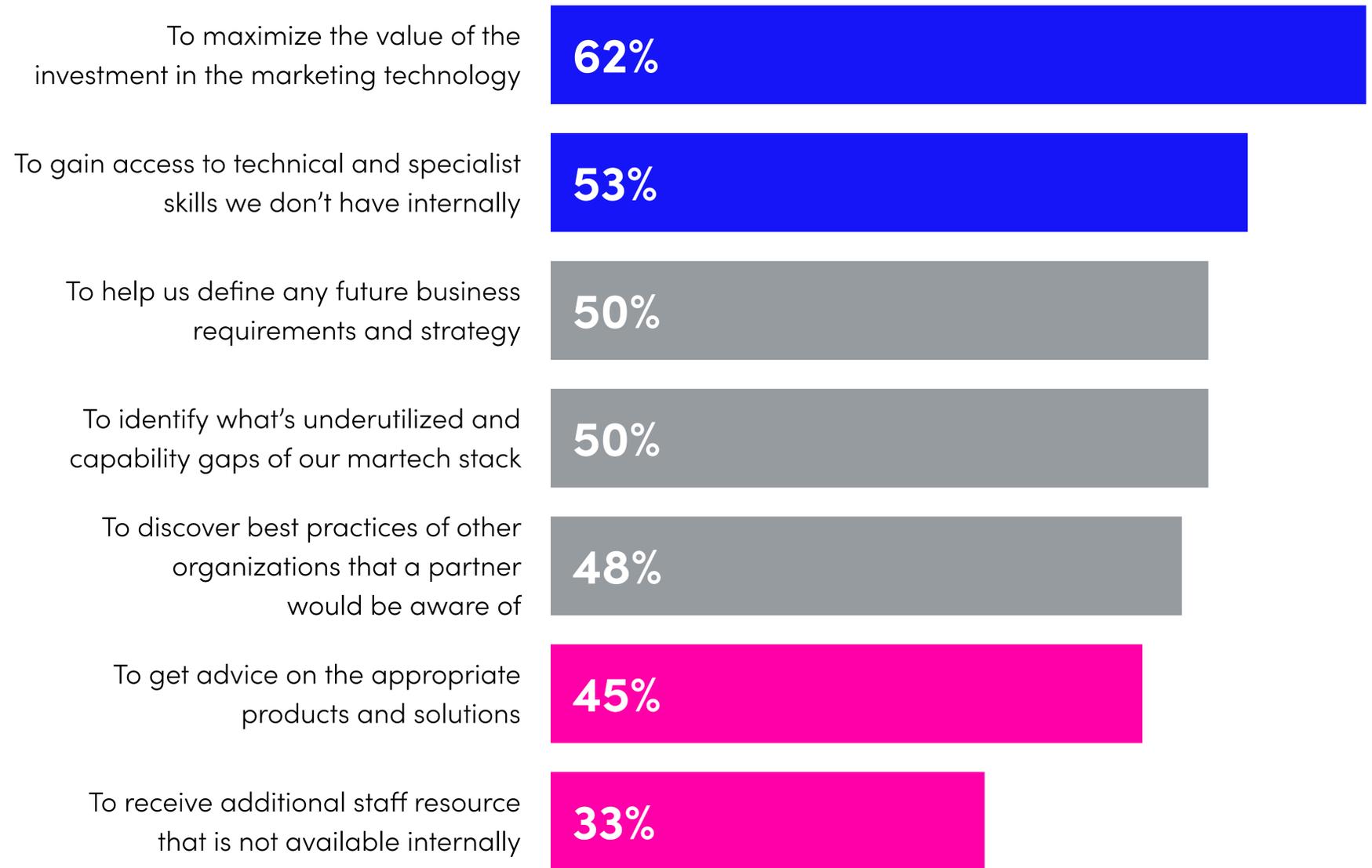
The martech landscape and the purpose of partnerships

A sophisticated martech stack is critical to optimize marketing efforts and drive business results. Brands are increasingly reliant on martech solutions that can harness data from a growing variety of touchpoints to power personalized customer experiences that are consistent across channels.



As such, by far the most common reason for brands to hire service partners is to maximize the value of their investment in martech (62%). The second most cited reason is to gain access to technical and specialist skills that they don't have internally (53%). This is indicative of the difficulties many brands have attracting and retaining talent with expertise in the martech sector.

Of the following choices, which, if any, address why your company decided to bring in an external marketing technology service partner(s) to help with your marketing technology?



Almost a quarter (24%) of organizations decided to bring on a service partner before purchasing and implementing a solution, presumably to help them select the best solution or to validate a choice they had already made. And a further 13% looked for a partner once the technology was fully implemented to help them scale up its use.

Smaller companies that took part in the survey displayed a more cautious approach to bringing on service partners at the implementation stage or earlier, compared to medium and large companies. This may be because they have tighter budgets than larger companies, and are therefore more likely to attempt an in-house implementation before turning to a partner for help.

Which of the following best describes the stage at which your organization decided to bring on a service partner(s) for your martech?

All organizations



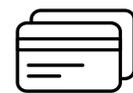
\$100m-\$499m (organizational revenue)



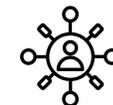
\$500m-\$999m (organizational revenue)



\$1bn+ (organizational revenue)



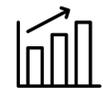
Before purchasing and implementing the martech



At implementation stage



After implementing the martech and realizing we needed help



After implementing the martech and when we were ready to upscale our solutions

Part 03

The decision-making process: finding the right partner

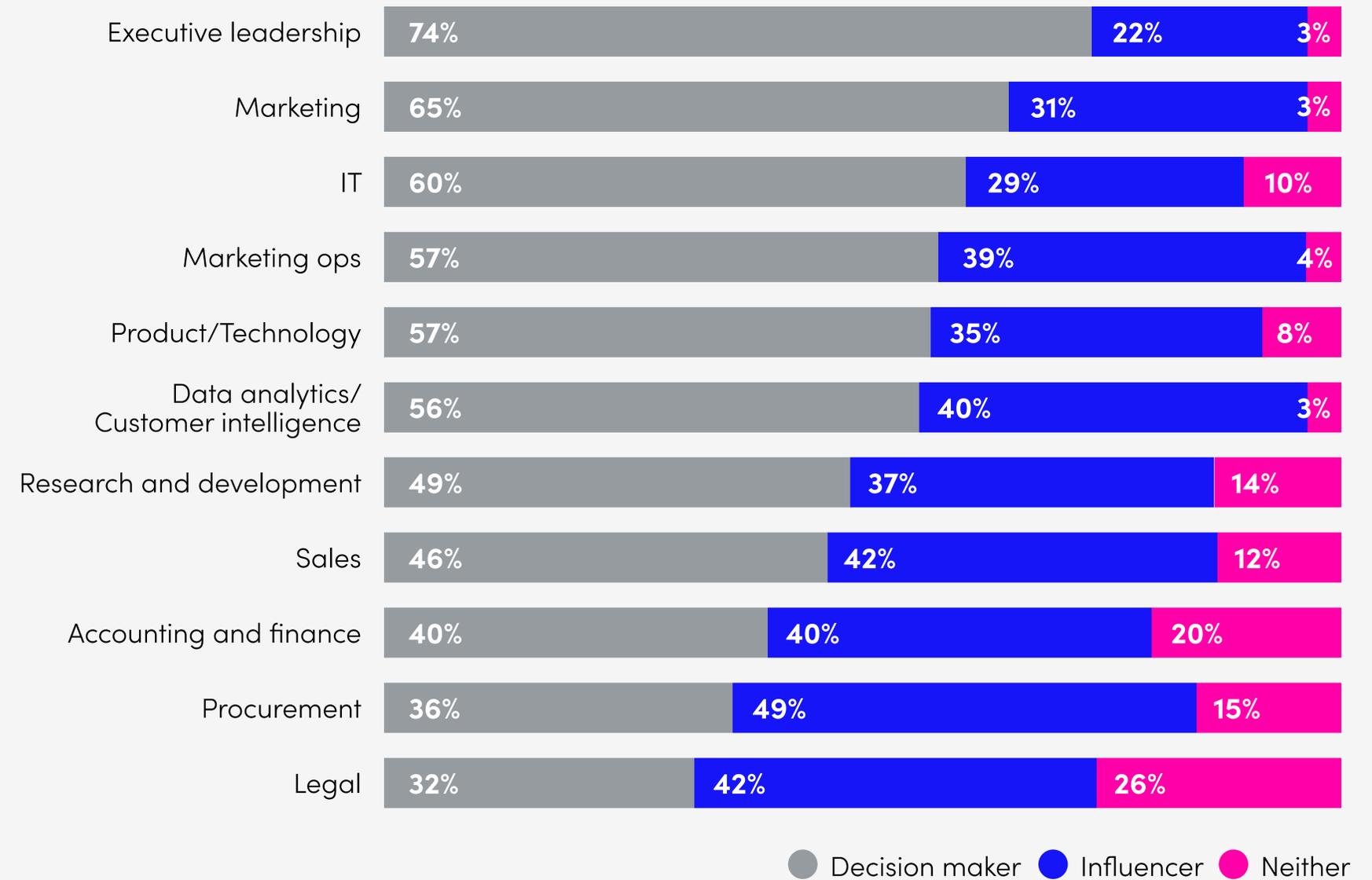
Selecting a service partner is the first major decision that a brand must make on their service partner journey. While the decision can often prove to be challenging, it is crucial to get right. Businesses want to ensure that the value extracted from their martech investment is maximized, and choosing the right partner can be the defining factor between a solution that delivers results and one that produces incomplete insight.

Decisions around marketing investments would traditionally have sat with the marketing department. However, as marketing becomes increasingly automated and moves further into the technology space, IT teams have become an important stakeholder in these selection processes. Over half of the survey's respondents reported that both the marketing and IT teams were key decision-makers in their selection of martech partners.

Decision-making power usually sits with senior leaders in marketing and IT teams, with final sign-off given by executive leadership, but many other teams will influence the selection of a martech partner. Decision-makers are likely to consult teams that will interface with the technology such as marketing ops, product, and data analytics or customer intelligence. In addition, stakeholders may turn to procurement, sales, and legal teams for support and guidance during the procurement and onboarding process.

Having looked at the practicalities of the decision-making process, such as how long it takes and who is involved, it's time to explore what brands are actually looking for in a martech service partner. What criteria do they use and what factors will influence their ultimate decision?

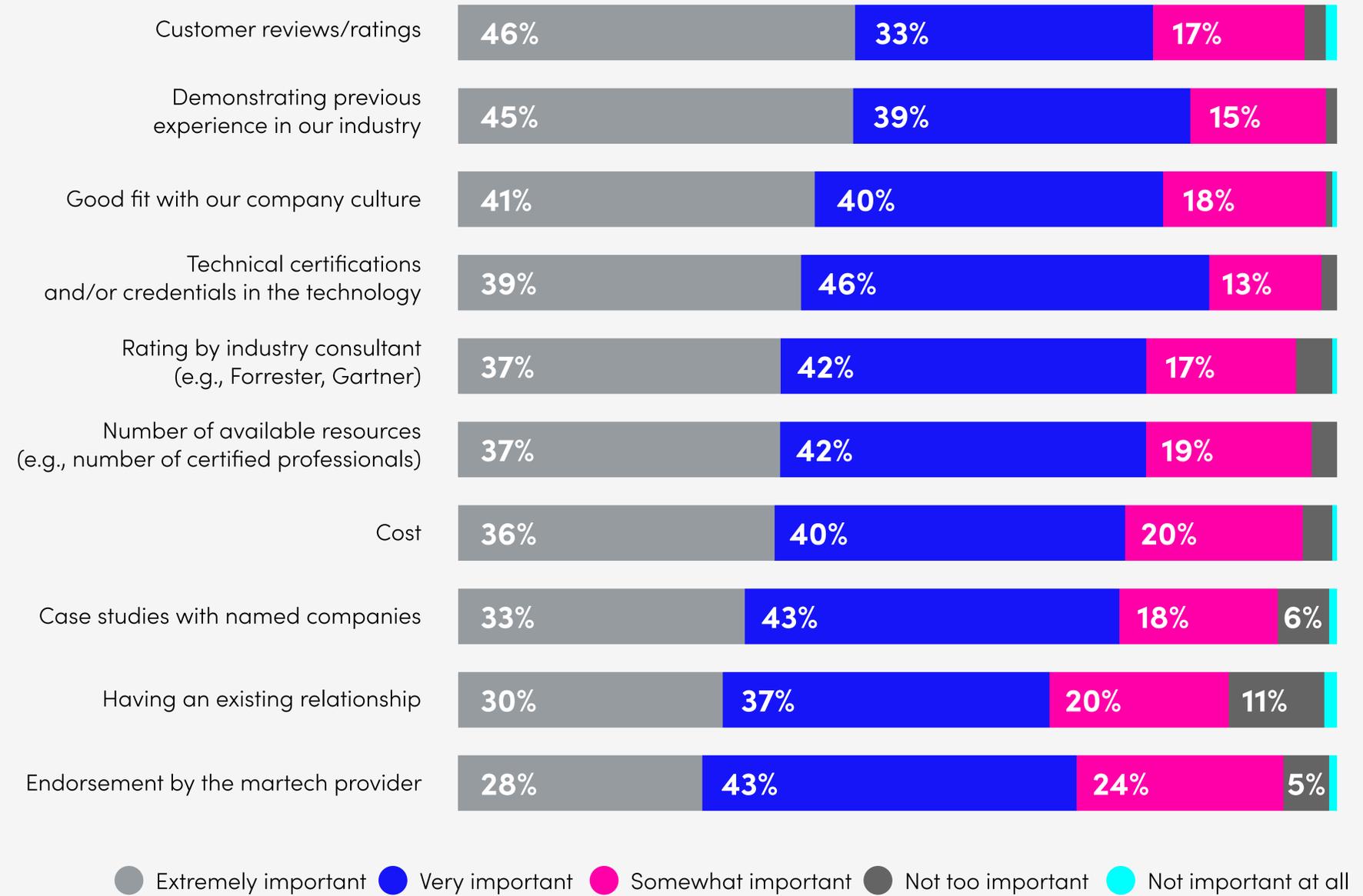
When selecting the partner to implement or manage your marketing technology, which of these teams were involved as an influencer or decision maker?



When survey participants were asked how important different criteria were to the selection process, two clear non-negotiables emerged. A convincing 85% of respondents said that technical certifications or credentials in the specific technology were very or extremely important, while 84% said the same about the ability to demonstrate previous experience in their industry.

Interestingly, endorsement by the martech provider and having an existing relationship were ranked as the two least important criteria, although around 70% of respondents still felt they were very or extremely important.

When selecting a martech partner, how important were each of the following criteria?



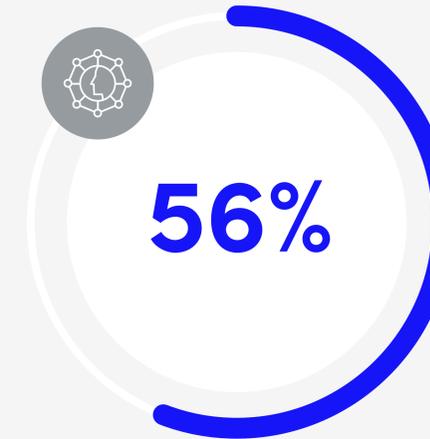
Depending on their specific needs and use-cases, brands may look for certain specialisms in a martech service partner. But there are also general qualities that most brands look for in their service partners. These include:

1. **An understanding of a company's problem and the solution (64%)**
2. **The ability to deliver bespoke solutions (56%)**
3. **Being a well-known company in the field (50%)**

Which of the following company qualities, were you looking for in a martech partner?



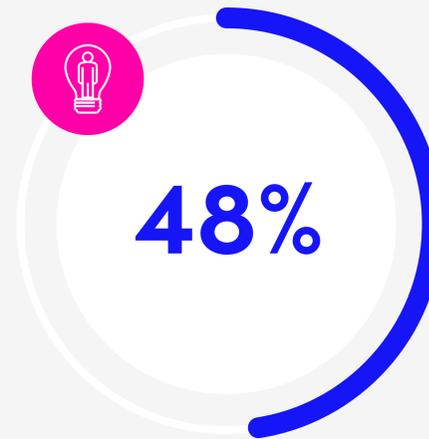
Demonstrates an understanding of my company problem and solution



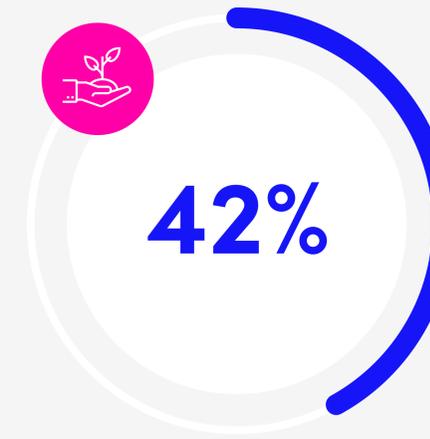
Demonstrates the ability to deliver bespoke creative solutions



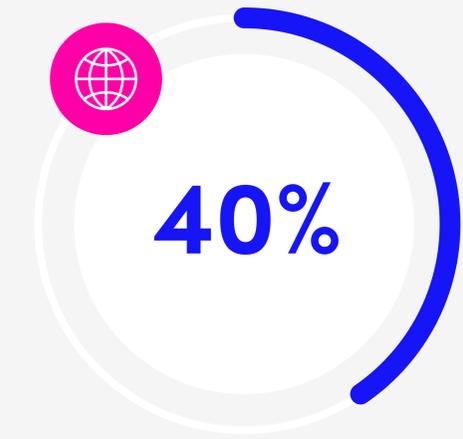
Is a well-known company in this field



Participates in martech thought leadership



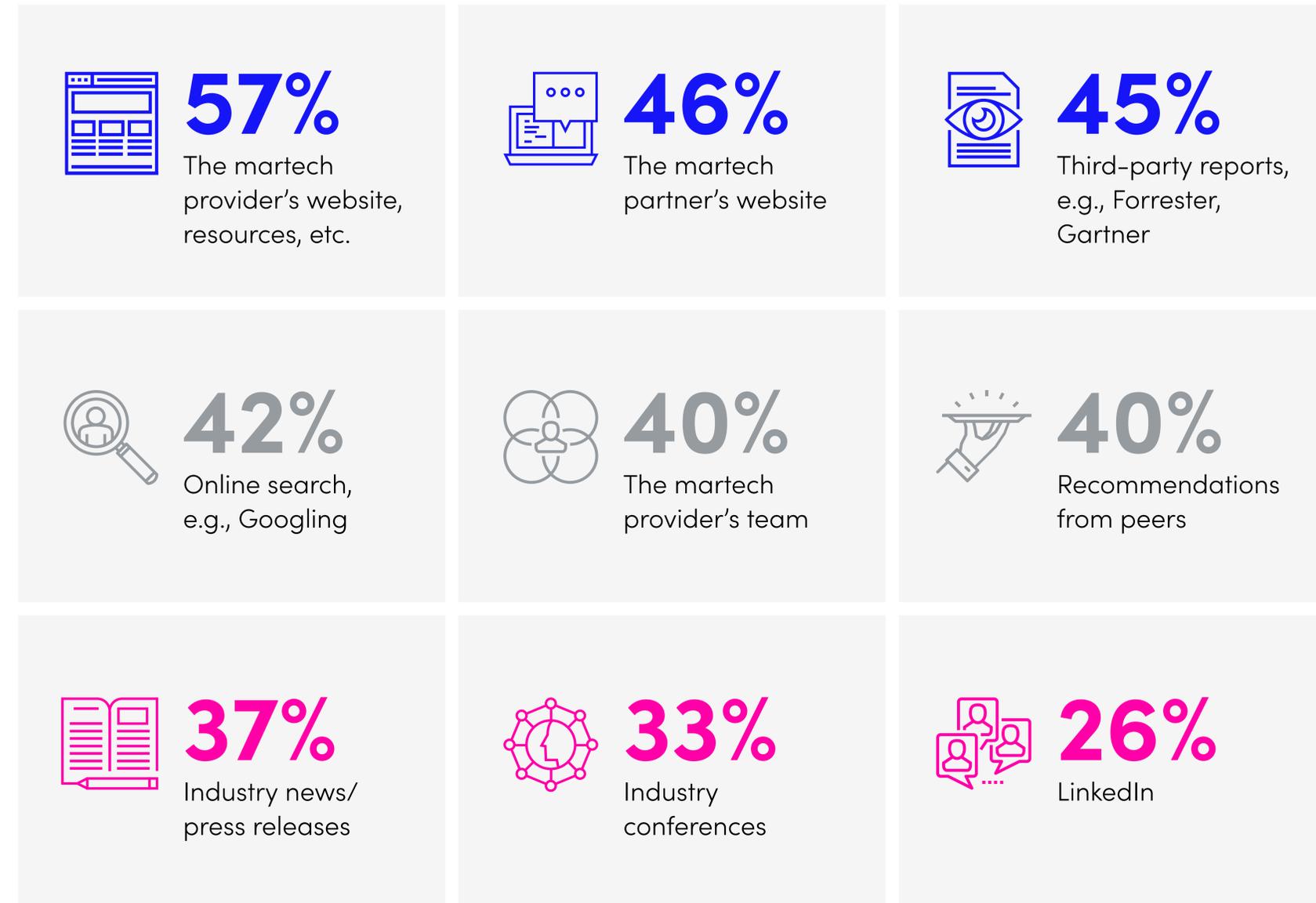
Is committed to social and/or environmental responsibility



Has a global footprint

The information sources used to research martech partners vary according to the size of the business. Smaller companies use a wider range of resources, including peer recommendations, industry news, and online search, while larger companies are more likely to skip online search and go straight to trusted third-party reports or leverage an existing relationship with the martech provider's teams.

While researching potential martech partners, which of the following information sources did you use to inform your partner selection decision?



Part 04

Building strong partner relationships

Implementing, optimizing, and managing martech is no easy feat. Service partners must combine an in-depth understanding of a brand's specific needs, use-cases, and internal workflows, with comprehensive knowledge of the platform (or platforms) to deliver the desired results. Even if brands feel they have taken part in a rigorous selection process, they can still face challenges in their service partnerships.

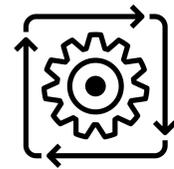


Almost a third (29%) of survey respondents report experiencing challenges with their service partner related to early mistakes made during the configuration process that have led to further issues down the line. While small errors made in the initial stages of configuration may seem insignificant, they can create major inefficiencies in the future.

Over a quarter (28%) of respondents have had to repeat steps or processes over the course of working with a service partner. Some of these issues may be related to the previous challenge, with steps repeated to remedy an oversight that occurred in the early phases of configuration and implementation.

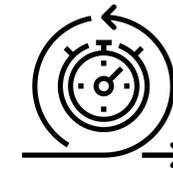
The third most common issue brands have with martech partners is the time taken to implement a solution, which was cited as a challenge by 27% of respondents. This can have a negative effect on ROMI and a brand's ability to meet financial targets.

Top 5 challenges faced with martech partners



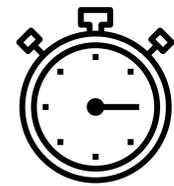
29%

Early mistakes in configuration create issues later



28%

Repeating steps or processes



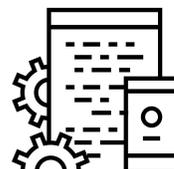
27%

Too much time taken to implement



23%

Poor communication across internal teams



22%

Partner lacked experience with the tool, in our industry, etc., causing issues

Part 05

Scaling martech and future-proofing the relationship

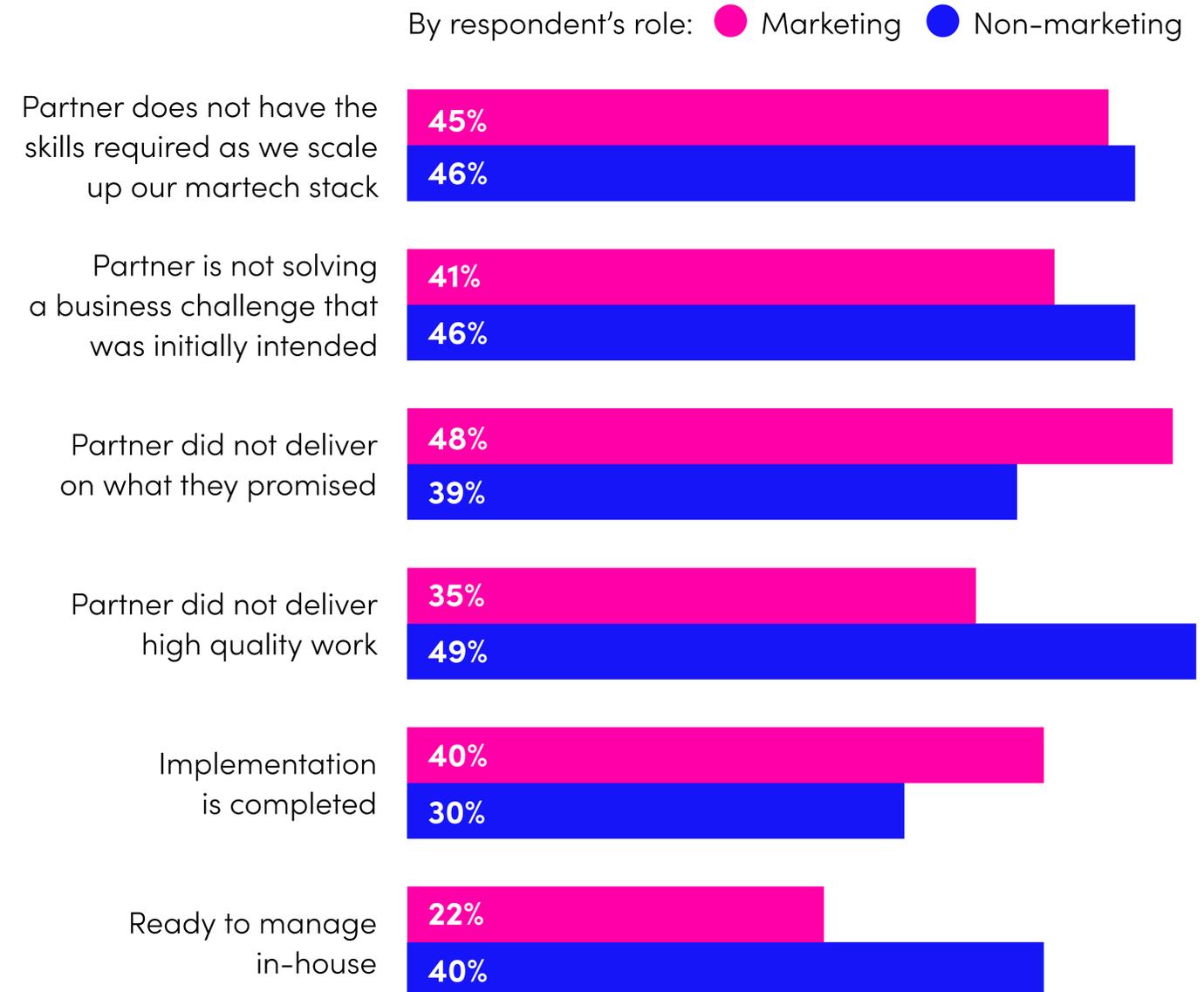
As martech solutions become progressively more complex and technical, the need for experienced partners is greater than ever. To ensure service partnerships withstand the test of time, partners must have capabilities that can evolve to meet the changing needs of a business over time. Partners must be versatile in their approach, and tailor their support to serve the needs of a range of stakeholders with varying objectives.

Non-marketing decision makers are much more likely than their marketing counterparts to end a partnership if a partner does not deliver high-quality work. Conversely, marketing stakeholders are looking for partners to deliver on their promises and are more likely than non-marketing stakeholders to consider ending a partnership or switching partners if a partner fails to uphold their end of a contract.

What's more, marketing and non-marketing teams may require different forms of guidance due to varying levels of technical knowledge. Non-marketing decision makers in technical and data roles may have the skills within their team to operate solutions in-house and are more inclined to end a partnership when they feel they are ready to manage a solution themselves. On the other hand, marketing stakeholders are likely to be less technically experienced, and may rely more heavily on partners to guide them through each stage of the process.

Whether brand stakeholders come from marketing or non-marketing teams, there are certain outcomes that are considered essential for a successful martech service partnership. First, there is a strong need for partners that can help brands understand their current martech needs and identify the solutions that will enable them to achieve their business goals. And second, brands want a partner that will prioritize empowering teams with the skills necessary to manage solutions internally once a partnership has concluded.

At what point have you or would you consider ending a partnership or switching partners?

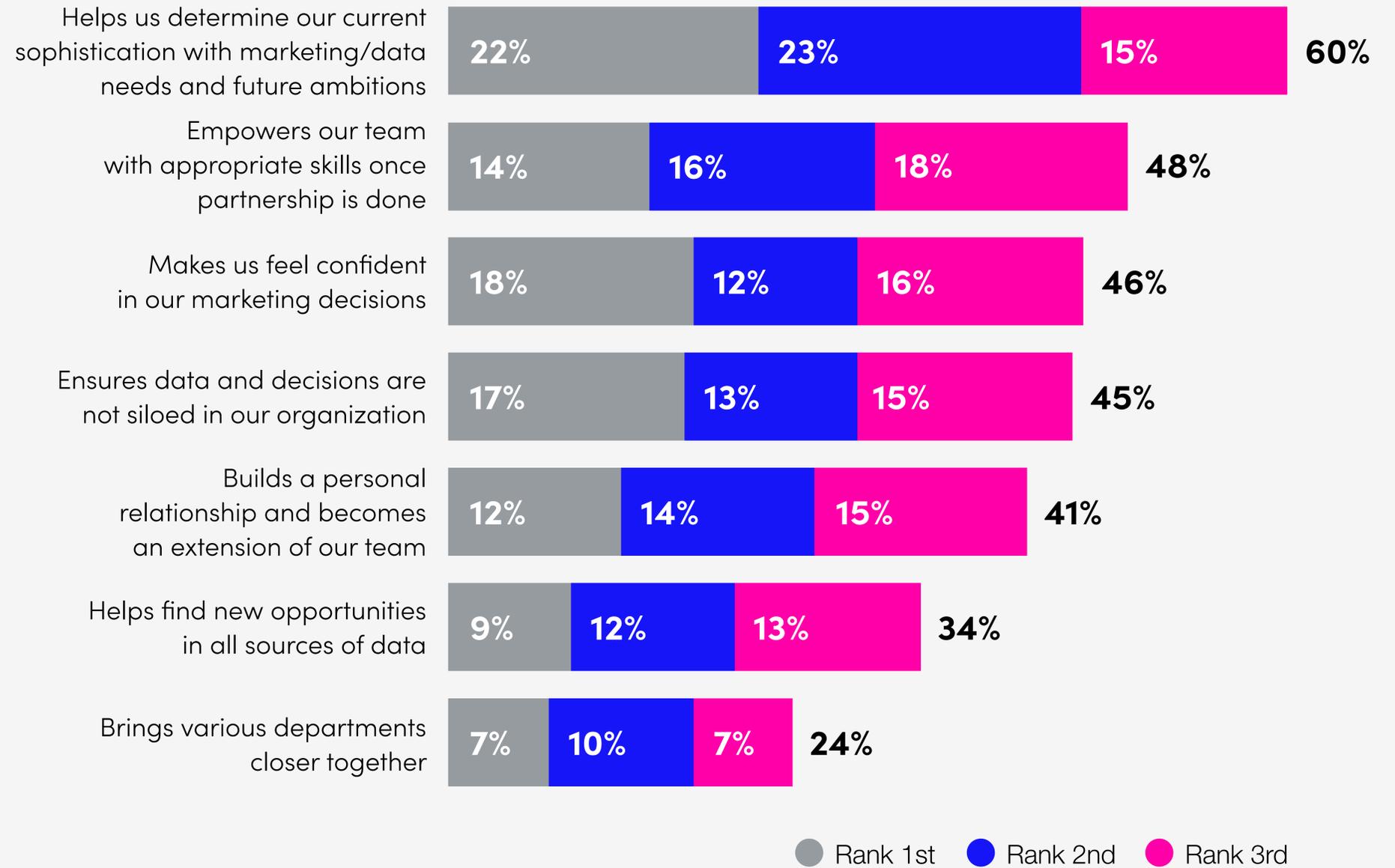


Our survey respondents defined the following as essential outcomes for a successful martech partnership that delivers real value, ranked in order of importance:

1. The partner helps the brand to **determine their current sophistication with marketing and data**, as well as their needs and future ambitions
2. The **brand is empowered with the appropriate skills** to use once a partnership is over
3. The brand **feels more confident in their marketing decisions** as a result of the partnership
4. The partner helps the brand to ensure **data and decisions are not siloed** within the organization

Of course there are countless other ways in which partners can provide additional value. This could be by helping brands stay abreast of technological and regulatory changes, or by recommending data solutions or tools to improve marketing performance. Overall they must be a trusted source of advice and continual support across the lifecycle of a partnership.

Which of the following are the three most essential outcomes for a successful martech partnership?



Part 06

Positive partnerships drive exceptional experiences

Martech is central to a brand's ability to keep up with the continually evolving marketing landscape and to deliver personalized experiences that will resonate with individual customers.

Successful martech partnerships rest on the actions of both partners and the brands that engage them. Many of the challenges listed above can be prevented with effective communication and attentive planning in the early stages of partner engagement.

Acxiom has identified seven key pillars to help brands ensure the effective implementation and ongoing success of any martech investment.



#1

Technology evaluation

Decide the most suitable martech solution for your ecosystem taking into account platform fit, scalability, and customization needs



#2

Use case review

Determine how the solution will be used to meet your objectives



#3

Data evaluation

Define what data is needed to underpin the solution and consider availability, permissions, and destinations



#4

Operational readiness assessment

Prepare the business to onboard the martech tool factoring in skills, ownership, availability, and stakeholder buy-in



#5

Internal operational planning

Plan for the project and working with a partner, including assigning SMEs, completing impact assessments, and setting timelines



#6

Project governance agreement

Create a model for execution that encompasses KPIs, forums, compliance, and project tracking



#7

Daily management plan

Define day-to-day operations and tools required to meet objectives

Survey Demographics

Which country do you work in?



50%



50%

Approximately, what was the annual revenue of your organization during the most recent financial year?



\$100m-\$499m

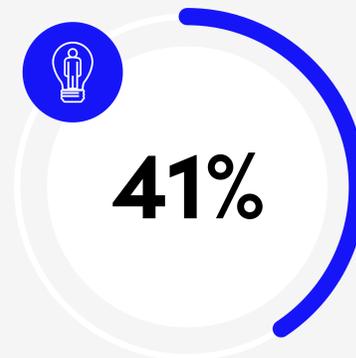


\$500m-\$999m

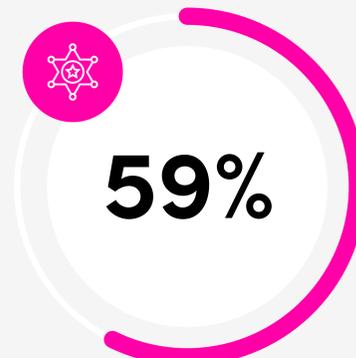


\$1bn or more

Which of the following is closest to your job level within the business?



Senior Manager, Director, Vice President, Senior Vice President



C-suite

Please rank the top functions you perform in your job in order of what you spend the most time on. Ranked first or second.



50%
Marketing



31%
Executive Leadership



30%
Technology



20%
Marketing Operations



14%
Analytics/Data



13%
Finance/Accounting



11%
Advertising



6%
Sales/Business Development



6%
Human Resources



5%
Administration



5%
Customer/Client Service



2%
Product

About Acxiom

Acxiom puts data to work, solving complex challenges for the world's leading brands and agencies. As the connected data and technology foundation of the Interpublic Group of Companies, Inc. (IPG), Acxiom unifies, connects, and prepares data for AI-driven marketing and decision-making, maximizing technology investments. As leaders in data ethics and governance, Acxiom brings a privacy-first approach to serving clients globally, with locations in the U.S., UK, Germany, China, Poland, and Mexico. Connect with Acxiom on [LinkedIn](#) and discover more at [Acxiom.com](#).

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