



Considering influence:

The new art of
word-of-mouth marketing



What's in a recommendation?

Think back to the last time you needed to buy something kind of expensive. The amount of money doesn't matter; it can be any purchase that made you pause before swiping your credit card. It could have been a TV, a stroller, a tent, or even a new pair of running shoes.

Do you remember the steps you took before making the purchase? Did you visit a store? Read online reviews? Create spreadsheets to compare models, prices, and pros and cons with a section for notes? (Maybe that's just me.)

What helped you feel comfortable with the cost?

If you're like [92% of consumers](#), you took a recommendation from a friend or family member — someone you trust — in making that purchase.

There are people you trust for recommendations, and they don't have to be friends or family. It could be a colleague who geeks out about new technology, or your sister's track coach. It could also be a Best Buy employee in the blue shirt, or someone from your local running store (shout out to Salt Lake Running Company).

We recently surveyed over 1,000 of these trusted retail associates and pros — we call them experts — to determine what kind of recommendations they give, when they happen, and where they take place. So let's jump in and see how you can grow your brand's influence with consumers through expert recommendations.

Author's note: for the purpose of clarity, we'll refer to two different groups that were surveyed — retail associates and category professionals (or pros).



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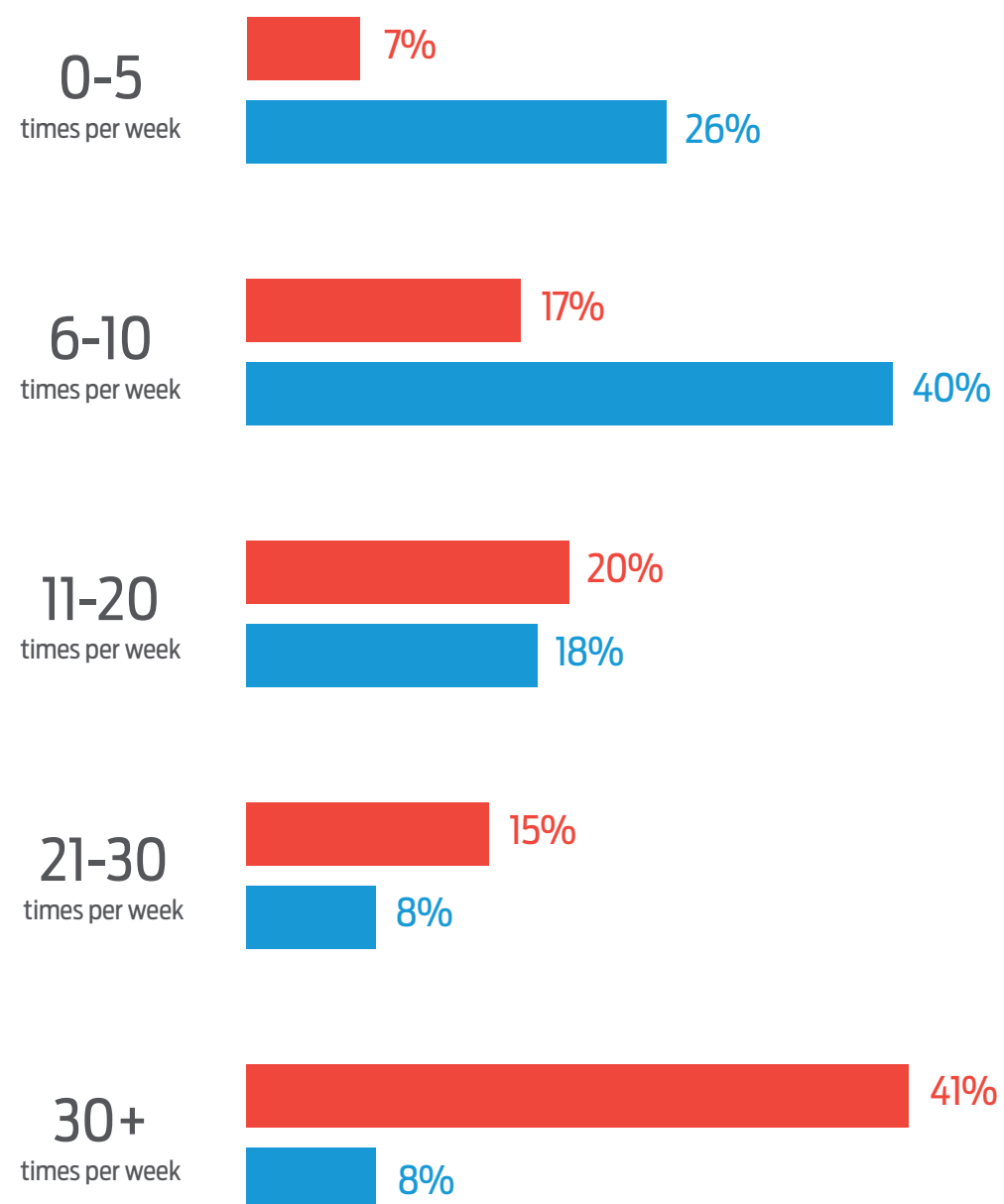
How experts influence consumer consideration

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Who do you work with to increase your brand's visibility? Relying on a social media influencer or a celebrity to create brand awareness is a great idea — and it works. But what happens next? Before making a buying decision, consumers want more information. A personal recommendation from an informed expert can help them decide on the right product for their unique needs. Social influencers provide great awareness, but their powers are limited in the interactions they can have with consumers.

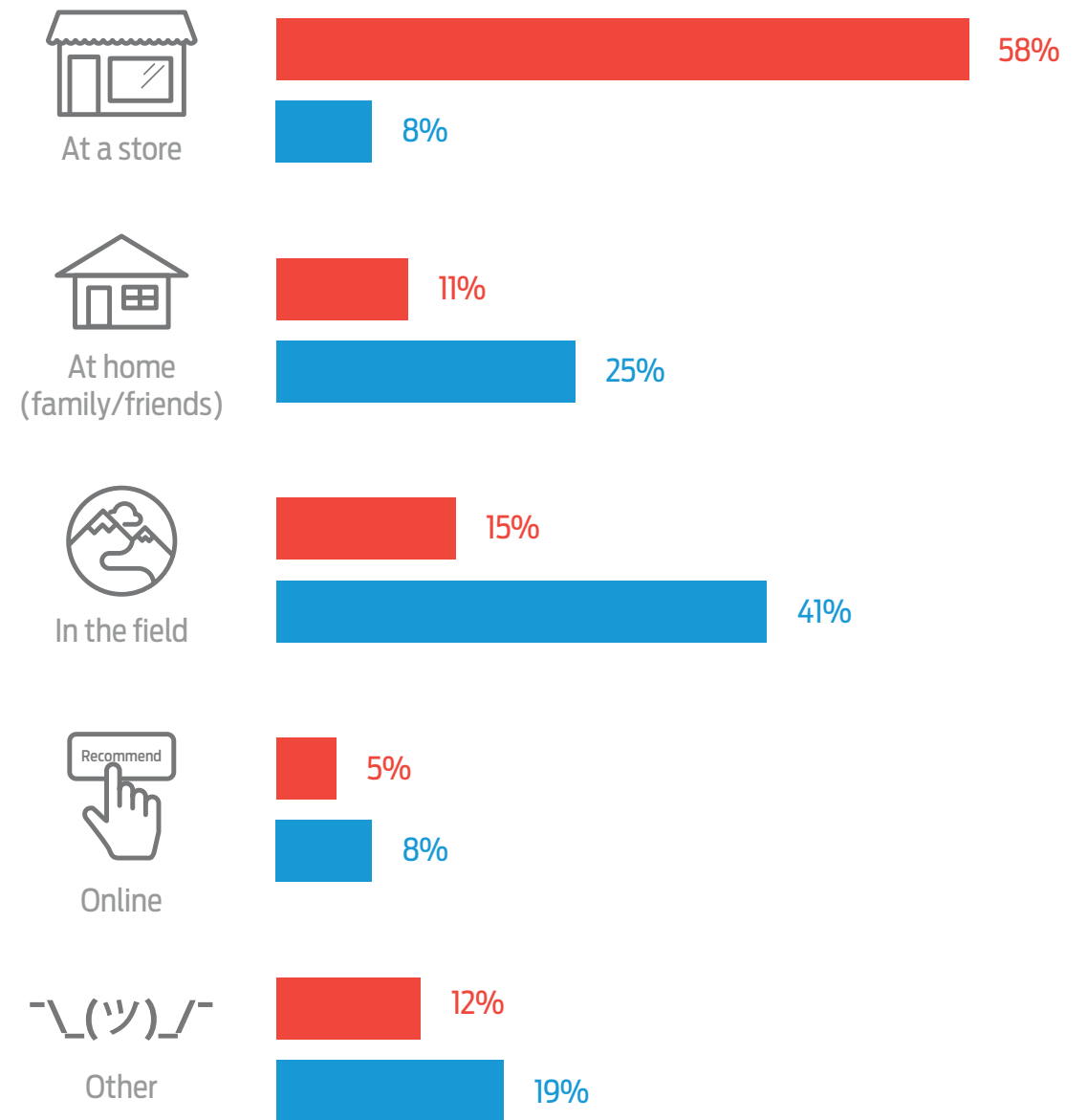
The experts we surveyed do have that one-on-one interaction, however. More than 75% of retail associates make at least 11 product recommendations per week, with 41% making a minimum of 30 recommendations in an average week. That should be expected, as they work in a retail environment. However, it's not just sales associates who are making recommendations. 73% of pros stated that they make at least 6 product recommendations per week, with 34% providing more than 11 recommendations weekly.

Thinking about an average week, how often do you make product recommendations?



Both retail associates and pros conduct most product recommendation conversations in a face-to-face environment, whether in a retail store, with family or friends, or at the place of the activity.

When you last made a product recommendation, where did you make the recommendation?



A woman with short, bright white hair is smiling broadly, showing her teeth. She is flexing her right bicep. She is wearing a white tank top over a black sports bra. On her right wrist, she has a black fitness tracker and a silver bracelet with small charms. She is also wearing a ring on her right hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden fence and a bright light source, possibly the sun, creating a warm, golden glow.

**Empower
recommendations
with training and
product seeding**



Author Jen Robinson

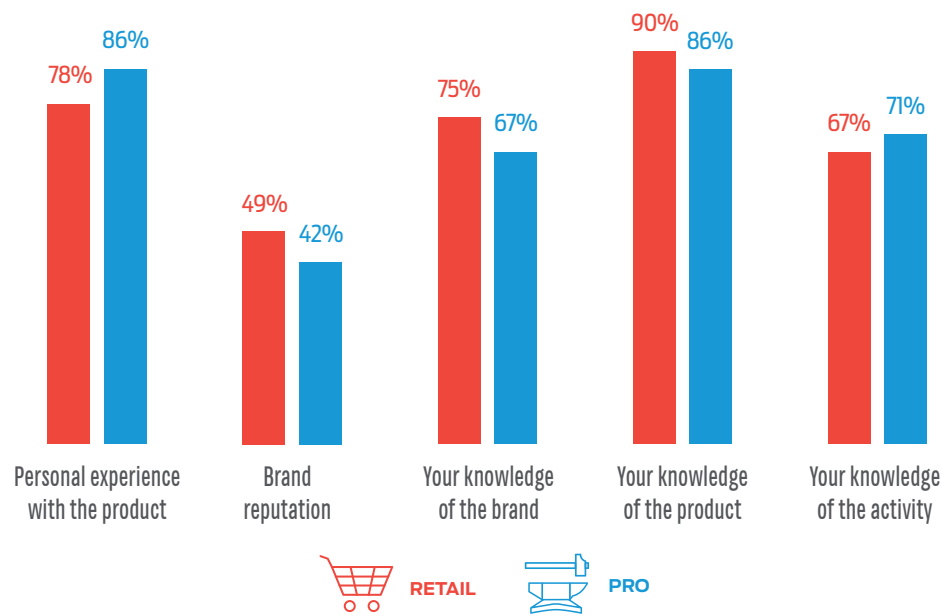
Have you ever received a recommendation that was just...wrong?

While in college I decided to chase away my testing nerves with yoga. After my first class, I wandered into the quaint boutique attached to the studio. I approached the girl at the counter and shared my need for a yoga mat to accompany me on my journey to becoming more mindfully at ease. She was new, but she was just so enthusiastic that I took

her advice and bought a really fancy, really thick mat that I'm embarrassed to admit I never, ever used (this thing needed its own set of bungee cords). When I mentioned my purchase to a friend who teaches yoga, she shook her head. As a beginner, I need gear to suit my experience level, not the gear of a seasoned pro.

Sometimes we get information and recommendations that are, well, bad. The recommendations coming from these retail associates and category pros aren't recommendations from beginners in their industry. They're experts, and they don't give a recommendation until they have the proper building blocks in place: personal experience and training about both the brand and product.

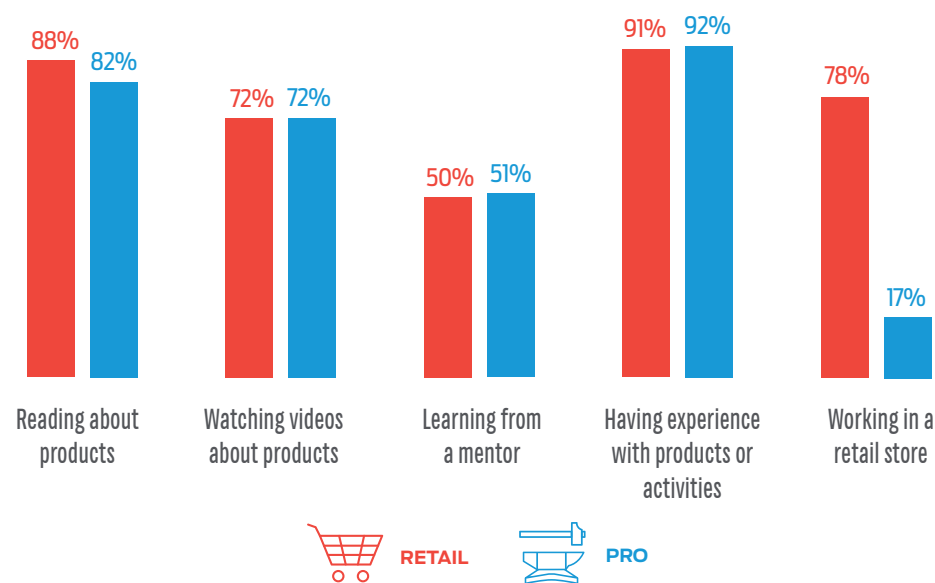
Which of the following must be in place for you to recommend a product?



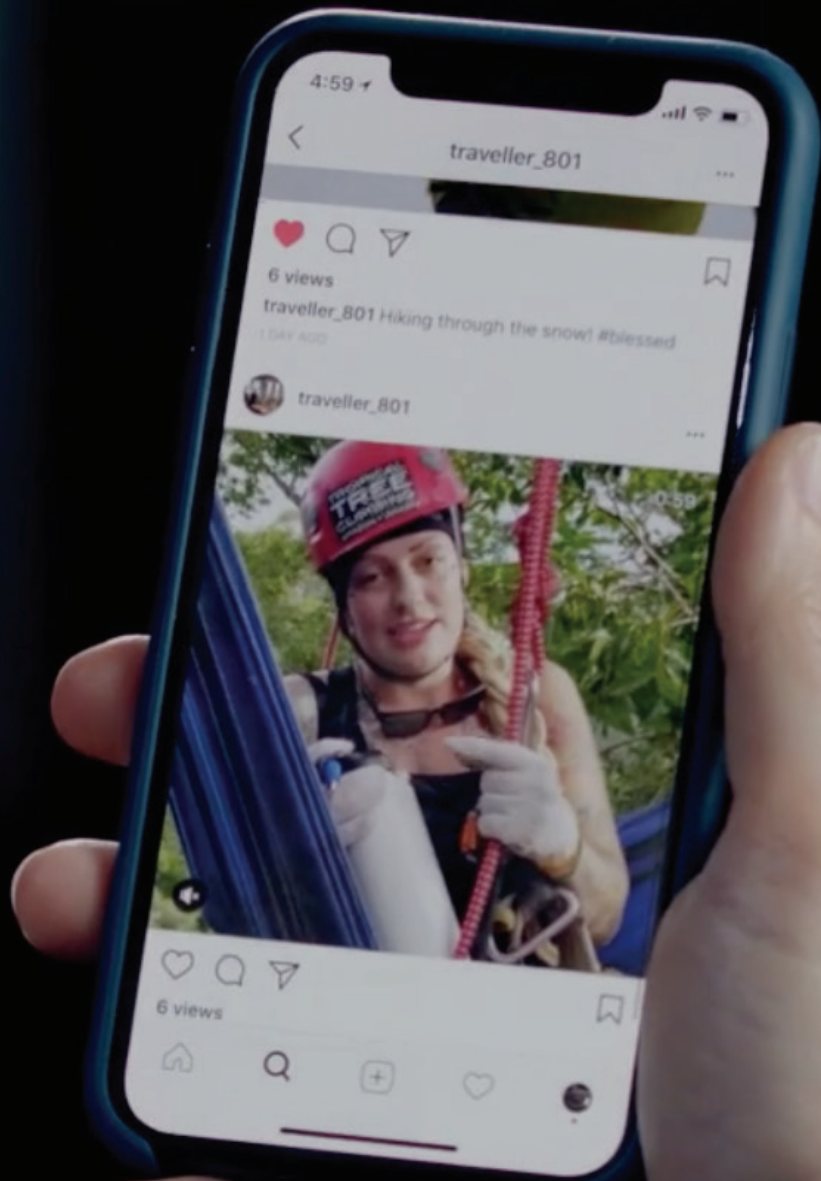
When combined with passion, experience and knowledge are the defining features to a more credible, trusted recommendation. It's easy to assume big advertising budgets from global brands sway recommendation behavior. However, when we asked the experts, they stated that they care more about the products themselves than the brand's reputation. When it comes to expert recommendations, brands are on a level playing field. If your product is high quality, experts will say so.

Interestingly enough, when asked about how they've built their product knowledge base, retail associates and category pros are nearly identical in their answers. Having experience with products or activities are most important, followed closely by education. This means brands need to approach these expert voices by first educating them, and then by enabling them with easy access to try the products for themselves. While many brands are familiar with giving retail associates product training, or by seeding product via pro deals, the combination of the two will lead to the best possible recommendation for a consumer — which will translate into a higher likelihood for consumer conversion.

Which of these has been an important factor in helping you to build your knowledge in a category that you're passionate about?

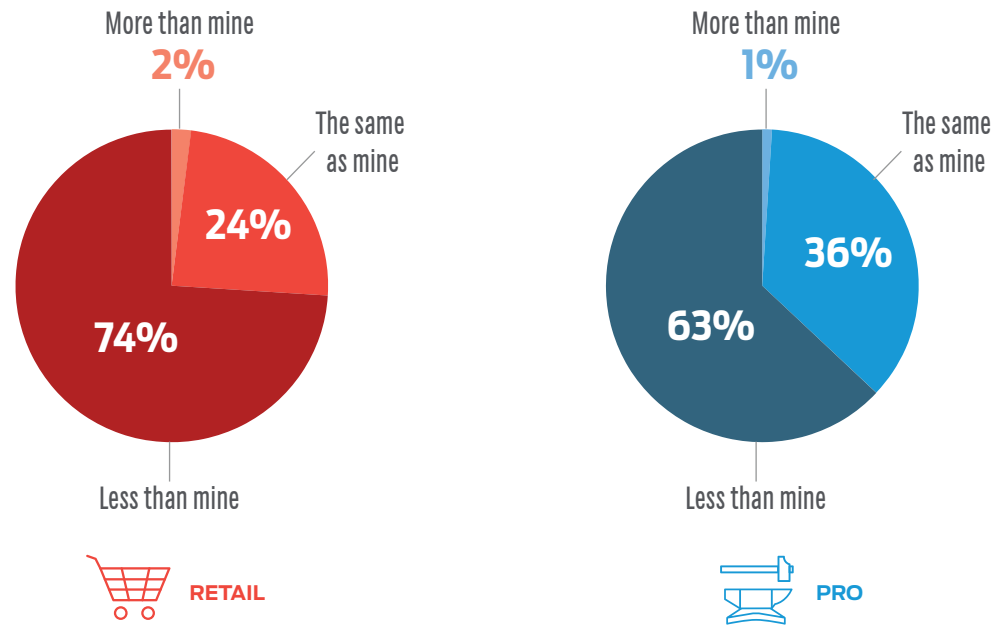


Why and Who



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When making a product recommendation, it's most often to people whose experience in the category is:

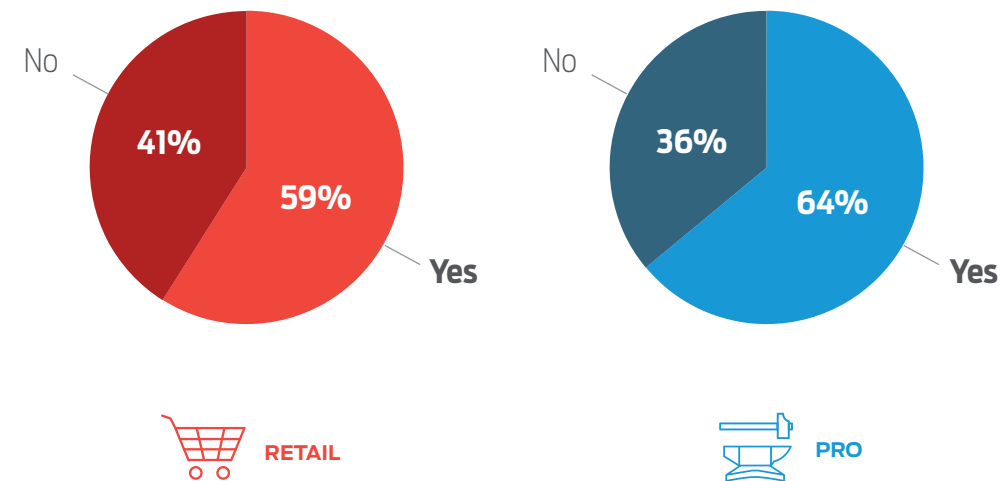


24% of retail associates make product recommendations to people whose experience is the same as their own, with 36% providing recommendations to those with similar experience levels. Experts aren't just influencing beginners

(and therefore introductory-level product purchases). They're also influencing other experts — experts who often purchase higher price point products to accompany their higher level of expertise.

In fact, 59% of retail experts, and 64% of pro experts state they've purchased a product recommended to them in the last 6 months.

Have you purchased a product that was recommended to you in the last 6 months?



We know who the experts are, where and how often they share product recommendations, and the importance of educating, training, and providing products to them at a discounted price.

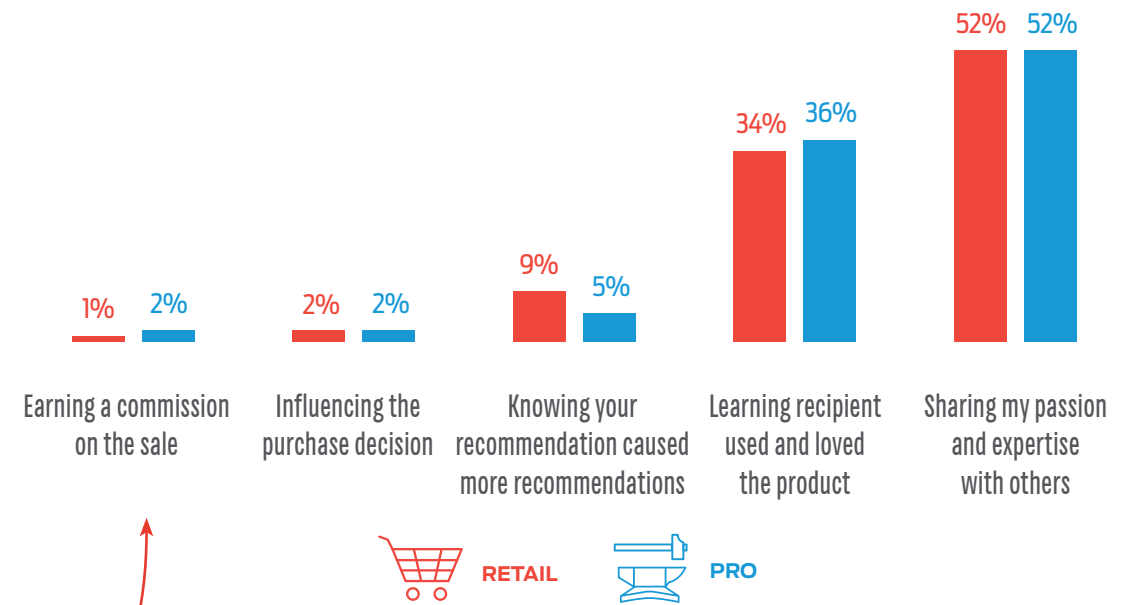
But why do experts share recommendations?

We asked them what the best reward for sharing a recommendation is, and we can tell you that — even for a retail sales associate — earning a commission isn't it.

For both groups, the best reward for sharing a recommendation is sharing their passion and expertise with others.

In other words: experts aren't motivated by money, but by the love of helpful expertise.

What's the best reward for giving a recommendation?



A man with a large, colorful tattoo of a tiger on his left arm and glasses is smiling as he looks at a piece of clothing. A woman in a red polo shirt is holding the clothing and showing it to him. They are in a store with many items hanging in the background.

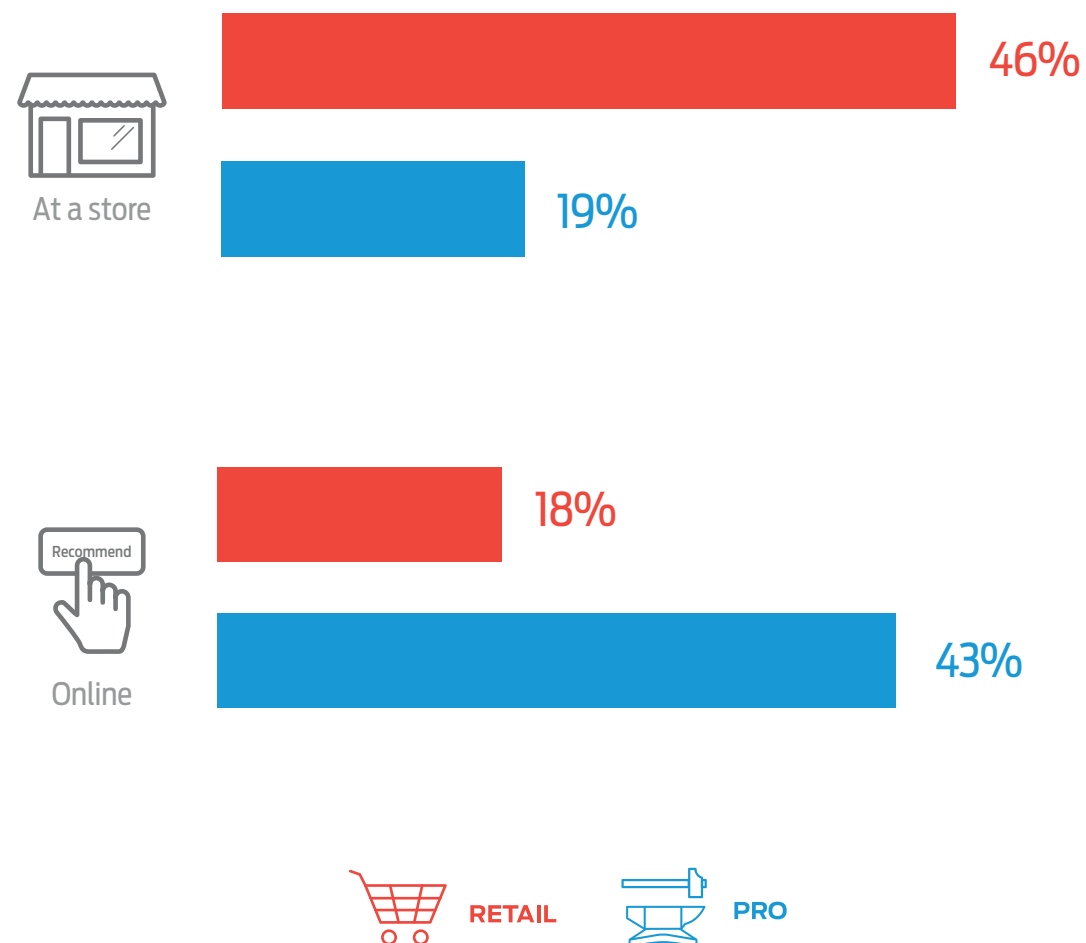
What brands can do

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There are experts out there giving recommendations every week (many of them in excess of 30 recommendations) — people whose recommendations drive consumers to make a purchase. As evidenced by the panel’s responses, experience and knowledge about a product or brand are critical to both retail and pro experts, and the brands who take the opportunity to influence a consumer’s purchase through educated consideration not only sell more product, they develop loyal customers for life.

Brands typically view retail associates and category pros as separate entities — for good reasons — which often translates to treating them differently. Many brands who educate retail sales associates neglect their pro audience, however as survey data shows, these two groups work together in providing recommendations to consumers. When specifically asked about where they send consumers to make a purchase, retail associates recommend purchasing in a store, while category pros recommend purchasing online. By targeting both groups, brands can ensure knowledgeable recommendations will affect both in-store and online conversion.

When you made that product recommendation, where did you tell people to purchase the product (online, at a store, etc.)?





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About the author

Jen Robinson is the Content Strategist at ExpertVoice. Jen enjoys traveling the world, cooking with her husband, and getting as much sleep as one can with a young infant.