

2018

The Architect's Journey to Specification

**Rethinking the Relationship Between
Architects and Manufacturers**

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Executive summary

Architects are the most important decision makers when it comes to selecting and specifying manufacturers’ products.

The majority of architects want to build strong relationships with the manufacturers behind the products they specify.

Their time is often spread thin, and meeting their client’s needs requires a great deal of product knowledge to ensure the solutions they pick are optimal for their projects and the built environment.

Many architects, therefore, look for manufacturers to become trusted advisors whom they can call on for advice on product selection, specification, and more.

Unfortunately, many manufacturers are not stepping up to the plate and miss out on meaningful relationships with architects, as well as the product consideration and specification that comes from those relationships.

Architects find that only three in five manufacturers meet their expectations and,

consequently, fewer than half are considered appropriate for the types of partnerships they want to form with manufacturers.

Many manufacturers recognize this challenge. They struggle to facilitate introductions, get a foot in the door, and find meaningful ways to connect with architects to build relationships. Yet 9 in 10 manufacturers believe their organization would benefit from a greater focus on architects.

Manufacturers who want to grow their specifications need an architect engagement strategy that is based on rethinking the two primary touchpoints through which they engage with architects: Reps and websites.

Rethinking the role of the rep

Reps are crucial to the relationship between manufacturers and architects and will remain so going forward.

However, what architects expect from reps has changed, and many manufacturers have not caught up with these expectations. Architects want manufacturer sales

representatives to have a consultative skill set and to work as trusted advisors for selecting and specifying their own products. Architects also desire engagement with people who understand an entire product category.

Architects need sales representatives to be someone they can trust to provide impartial advice and provide detailed technical guidance beyond just products and systems.

Rethinking the purpose of the website

The most frequent way an architect engages with a manufacturer is through its website. However, the website is often a significant pain point in the relationship between architects and manufacturers.

Architects primarily use manufacturer websites to access detailed product information or documents, but most websites are not designed with this purpose in mind.

Many websites are not built from the architect’s perspective; instead they are built from the manufacturer’s perspective with proprietary specs, logins, and other obstacles

that protect the manufacturer’s information to the detriment of the online experience.

Architects have little patience for cumbersome websites and are quick to move on to a competing manufacturer’s website and specifications if they cannot find what they need in a few clicks.

Seizing the opportunity

Manufacturers have a unique opportunity to engage with architects. They are open to building relationships, have respect for the expertise manufacturers can provide, and are willing to find common ground.

Manufacturers who are focused on specification of their products in the long-term should make the most of this opportunity. Meeting the high requirements of architects pays dividends, but it requires bold and strategic rethinking of the role a manufacturer plays in the life of the architect.

Section 1

The relationship architects want with manufacturers

Chapter 1

The three roles architects want manufacturers to play in their careers

KEY FINDINGS

Architects are positive about forming partnerships with manufacturers and recognize them as important to their careers. However, many manufacturers misunderstand the role architects want them to play and miss out on the increased specification that comes from strong relationships with architects.

In most instances, architects have the greatest influence on product choice and specification across product divisions. Although they have broad foundational knowledge in different categories, they frequently need to supplement this with guidance and technical advice. Often, they look to a manufacturer to provide that.

Many architects also want manufacturers to be more proactively involved in the specification process, including crossing that uncomfortable line of advising on the suitability and specification of competitor products.

Partner

Architects recognize the value of the expertise and support manufacturers can offer. Most are actively looking to partner with manufacturers that can help them with projects and career progression: 88% of architects agree that building relationships with manufacturers is important to their professional success.

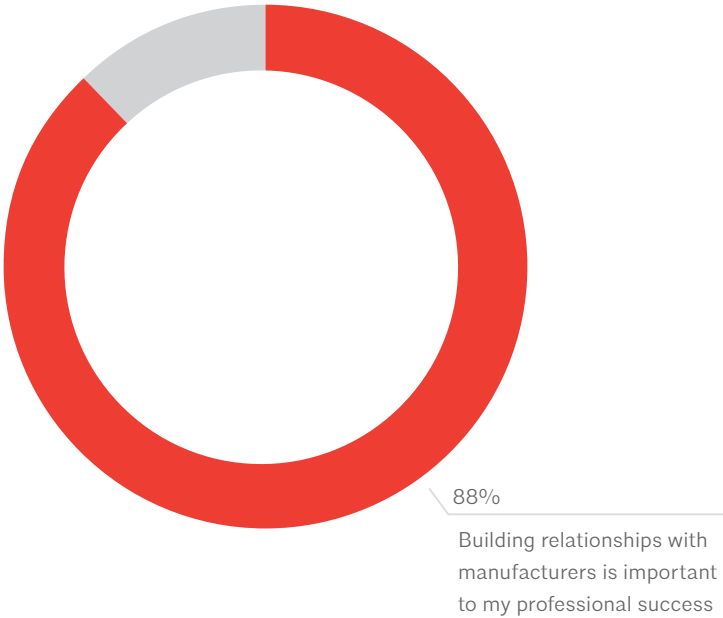
Partnerships offer an important upside for manufacturers because being a trusted partner results in more specification.

Architects specify a manufacturer brand in most instances, most commonly because a relationship already exists with the manufacturer.

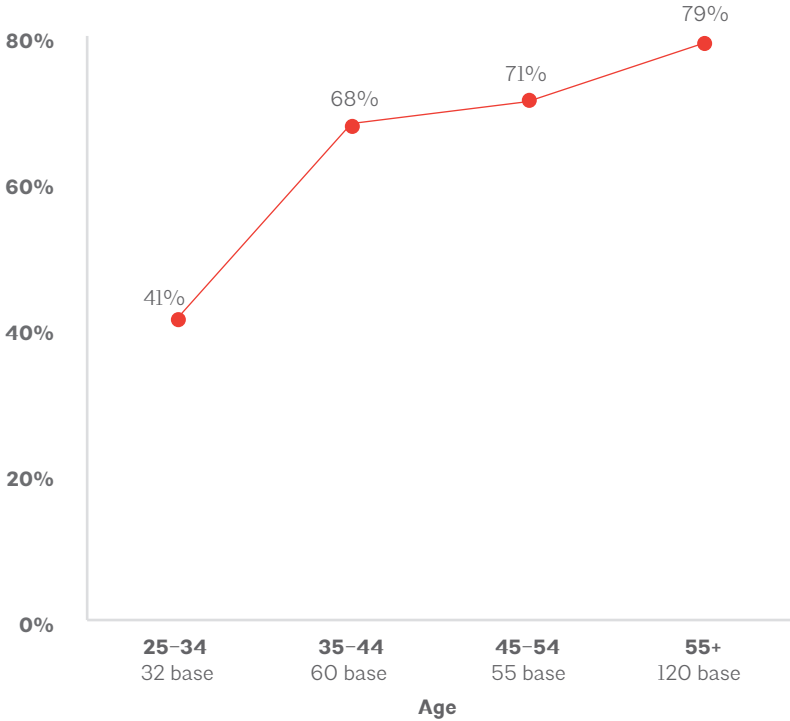
The older the architect, the more likely they are to specify a manufacturer brand. This shows that architects “walk the talk” when they say they are looking to build manufacturer relationships. They retain relationships built throughout their career and prefer to specify manufacturers that they trust and have past experience with.

Older architects also tend to hold more senior responsibility in their firms, which can lead them to be more risk averse in their product

Attitude towards manufacturers
% who agree



% Who specify manufacturer brand most or all of the time



(Source: The Architect’s Journey to Specification, AIA, 2016 – unpublished)

choices. This reinforces the tendency to specify known manufacturers.

It is therefore imperative that manufacturers engage with architects from an early stage to ensure their products are considered and specified in the long run.

Consultant

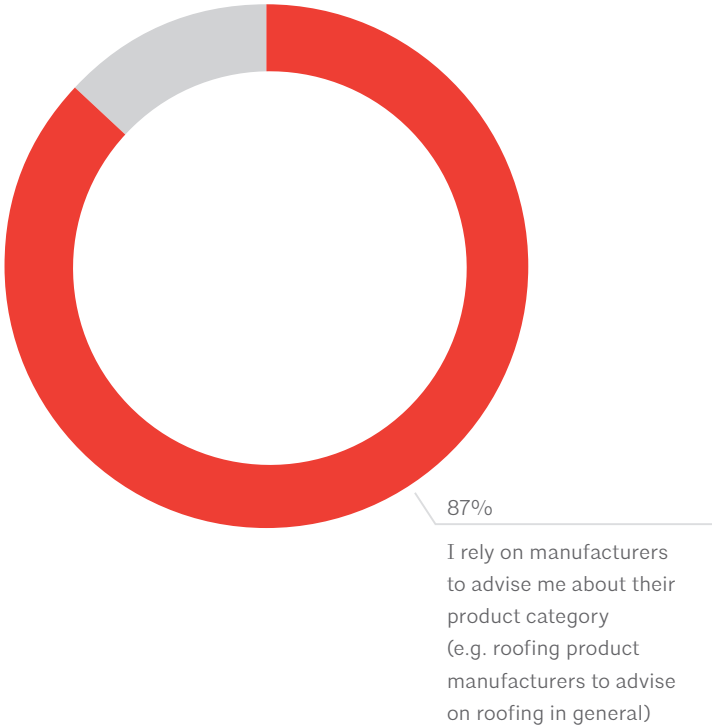
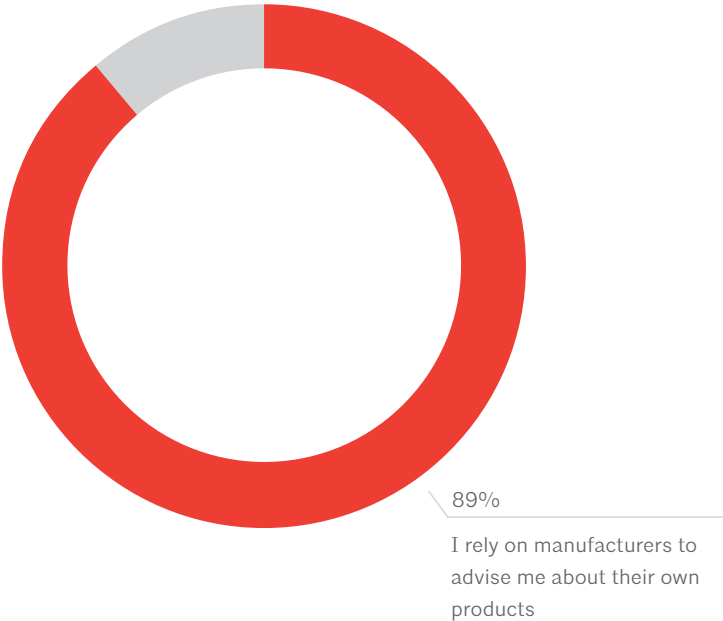
A respondent to the AIA survey is quoted as saying, “Architects know a little bit about everything, but not everything about everything.” Most people who engage with architects will have come across this phrase, which rings particularly true when it comes to specification.

Because architects select and specify products across many categories, they often require technical information and product advice in different product categories.

Helping fill this knowledge gap is one of the primary roles architects look for manufacturers to play: 89% of architects rely on manufacturers to advise them about their products, and 87% rely on manufacturers to advise them on their wider product category.

Manufacturers, therefore, have to be consultative providers of information and trusted advice for their broader product category.

Attitude towards manufacturers
% who agree



Specifier

Nine in ten architects want manufacturers to be actively involved in the specification process. Whether it is writing, editing, or reviewing specifications, about a quarter of architects expect a manufacturer to offer such assistance. Among those who do not expect it, it is usually seen as a popular value-added service.

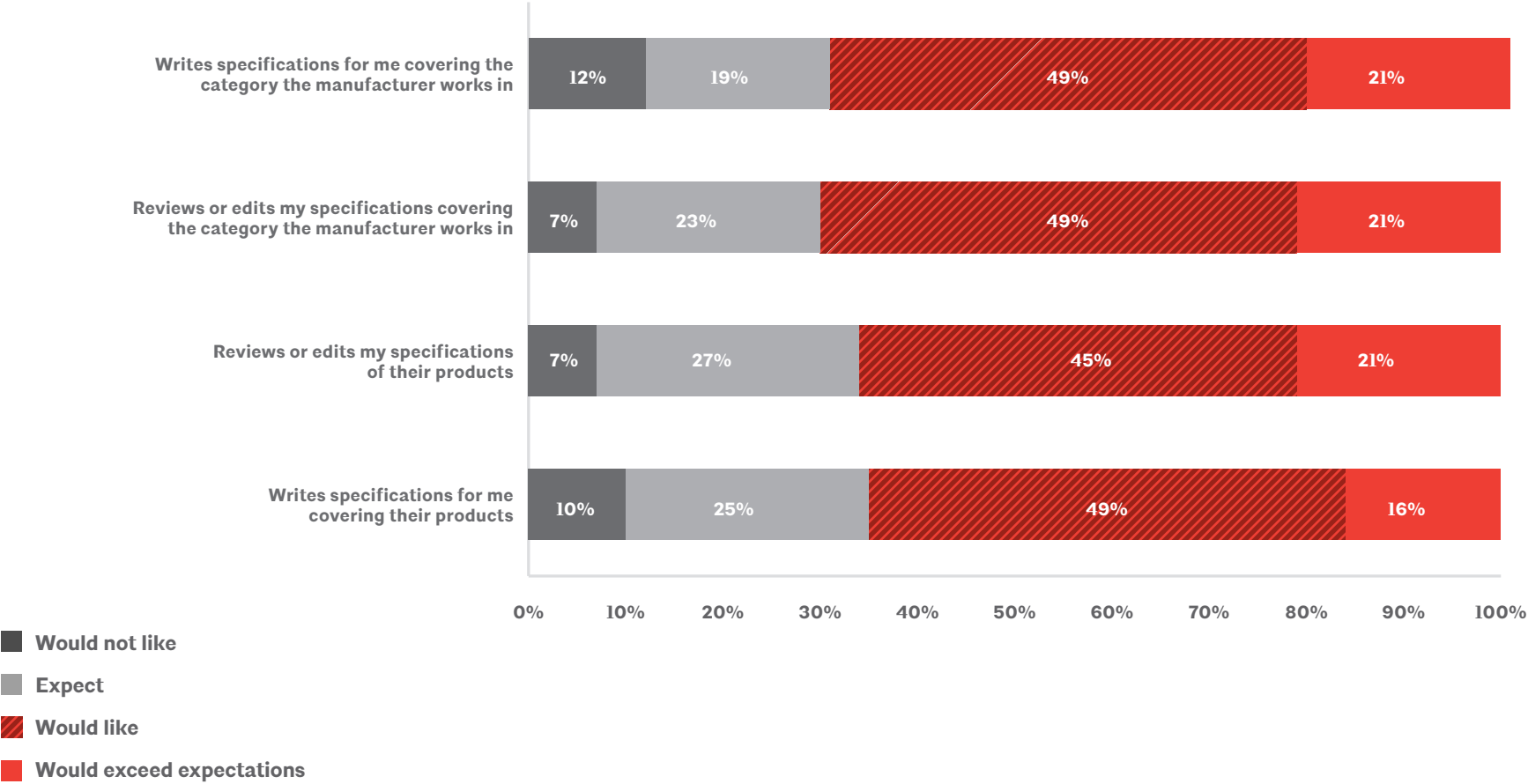
Younger architects (18–34) expect significantly more assistance from manufacturers in this area: 78% of young architects expect or would like manufacturers to write specifications for them covering the manufacturers’ own products.

An interesting dimension to the demand for specification assistance is that architects want manufacturers to increase their involvement beyond their own products and also cover complementary and competitive products.

From the architect’s perspective, specifications are usually done by division, and having to piece together different proprietary specifications from different manufacturers is cumbersome. They value manufacturers that can help with specification of their whole category, including competitive products.

This explains why architects expect the same from manufacturers when it comes to their whole product category as their own products.

Expectations of a manufacturer



Considerations for manufacturers

1. Do you have a strategy for building partnerships with younger architects?
2. Does your company communicate the benefits, services, and expertise it offers to help architects further their careers?
3. Do you have a process in place to support architects by reviewing or editing specs for all your specified solutions?
4. Does your specification support cover non-proprietary and competitive solutions and products as well as your own?

Chapter 2

Interacting with architects

KEY FINDINGS

Architects primarily rely on manufacturers to provide information used for product selection and specification.

Their primary source of product information is manufacturers’ websites, but many architects expect to be able to supplement this by calling a manufacturer rep for expertise and follow-up questions.

Face-to-face meetings are popular with architects, particularly when being introduced to a new manufacturer that they do not have previous experience working with.

However, manufacturers find it difficult to schedule time with architects, get a foot in the door, and find the resources necessary to meet face-to-face.

Preferred ways of engaging with manufacturers

Two touchpoints are crucial when engaging with architects: The manufacturer’s website and its reps. These are architects’ most frequently used and preferred ways of interacting with manufacturers.

Manufacturer websites

Most architects use manufacturer websites. They usually visit a website to find specific product information, and they primarily judge a website on its ability to quickly and smoothly let them find what they need.

Digital engagement is important with younger architects (18–34), 14% of whom would prefer online chat despite this service rarely being made available by manufacturers.

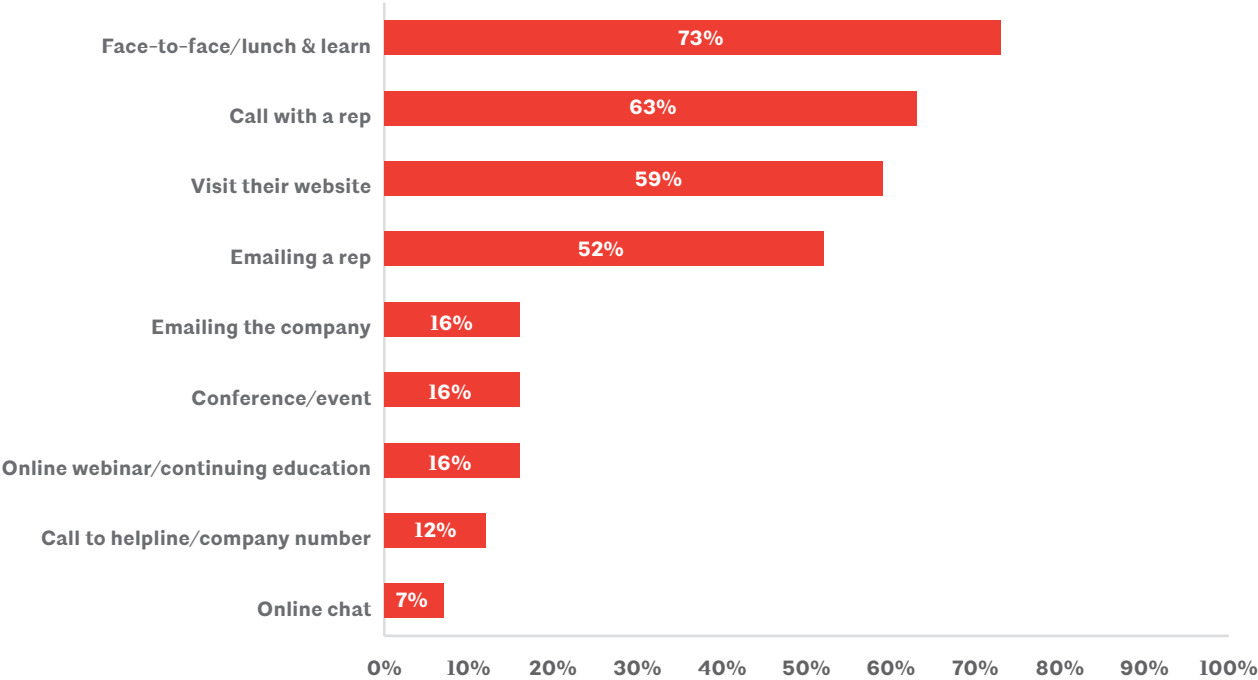
Manufacturer reps

Reps are the voice through which a manufacturer can offer architects trusted advice. Therefore it is important that reps are knowledgeable, responsive, and accessible.

73% of architects prefer interacting with a rep through a face-to-face meeting or lunch & learn. Calling a rep is preferred by 63% of architects, whereas only 12% of architects would prefer calling the manufacturer and being redirected. As a result, it is important to have named, accessible reps available for inquiries.

The second section of this report provides a deep dive on these two most important touchpoints, along with architects’ suggestions about how manufacturers can improve in these areas and build stronger relationships.

% Who prefer



The elusive face-to-face interaction

Architects like meeting manufacturers face-to-face. They like it because it establishes a connection, makes interaction easy, and demonstrates commitment when the manufacturer takes time to come meet them.

Difficulties getting face time

Although manufacturers recognize this, simply getting in front of architects is the most commonly mentioned challenge facing manufacturers. While architects like face-to-face interactions, they are busy and often cannot find the time.

There is a widely-held perception among manufacturers that architects want to initiate contact and do not like being cold called or contacted by manufacturers.

“The primary challenge I face with architects is getting in front of them. Architects are notorious for being hard to speak to unless they have a specific need.” —Manufacturer

Manufacturers can also struggle to “get past the gatekeeper” and find an appropriate contact within the architecture firm to set up a meeting.

Lack of resources

Architects note that manufacturer reps are getting fewer in number and their areas are getting larger, making them difficult to reach.

This is also a challenge recognized by manufacturers, who can struggle to find the resources required to meet architects face-to-face.

“There are a lot of architects out there, and we do not have enough people to cover them all.” —Manufacturer

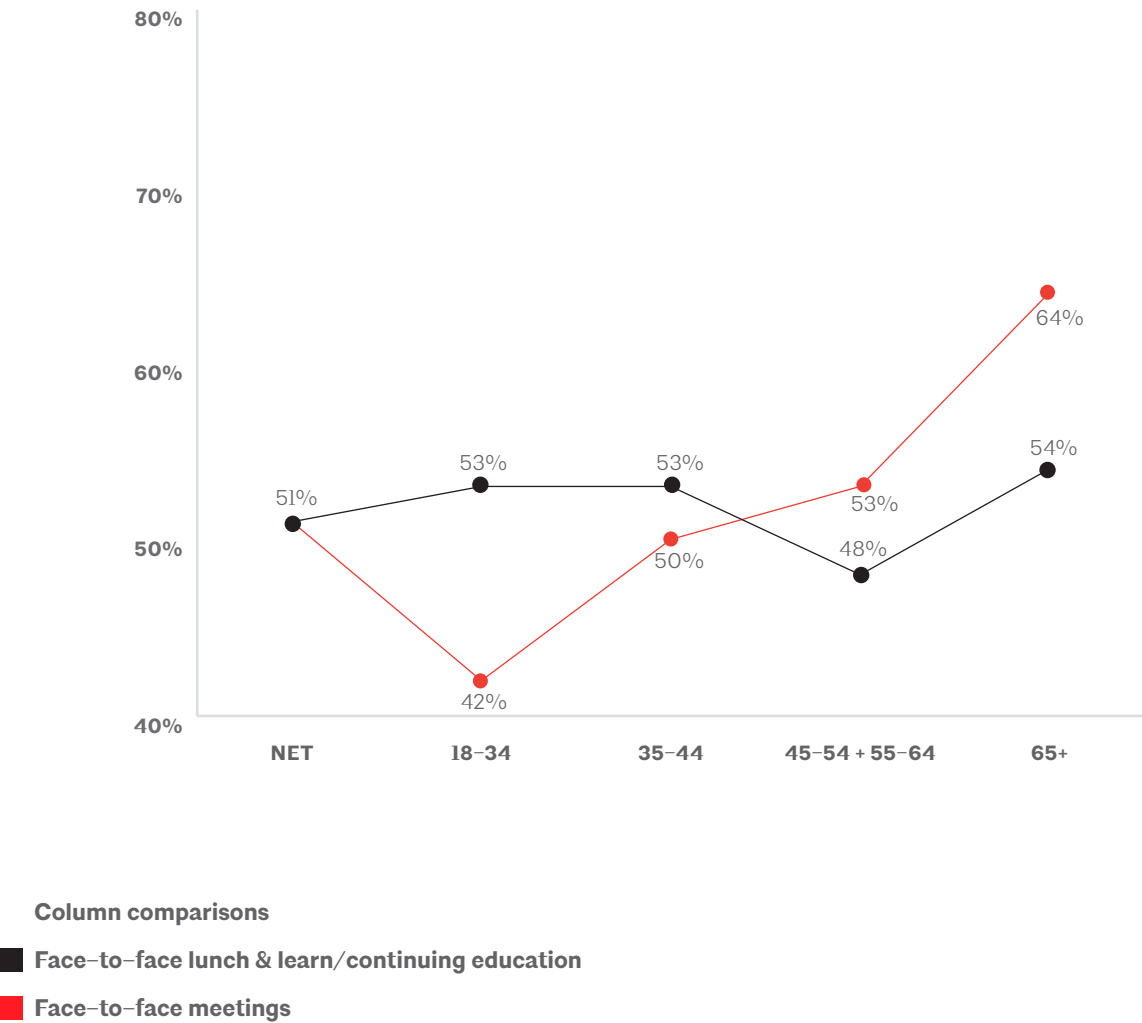
The CE opportunity

One way for manufacturers to increase the likelihood of getting face time with architects is to meet them at events, both national and local.

Another is to offer something valuable in return, particularly accredited continuing education (CE) courses and lunch & learns (L&L).

This is particularly the case for younger architects, who are more demanding of their face-to-face engagements. In contrast to their older colleagues, millennial architects (18–34) prefer face-to-face meetings with manufacturers if it is an accredited CE course or L&L.

% Who prefer face-to-face/lunch & learn



Considerations for manufacturers

1. Are your time and resources spent on communications that are aligned with how architects prefer to communicate (website and reps)?
2. Does your website provide quick and direct access to knowledgeable reps when architects call with a technical question?
3. Are you utilizing accredited CE to get face time with architects and introduce your solutions?
4. Is the decline of the face-to-face lunch & learns preferred by architects a challenge or an opportunity?

Chapter 3

Assessing the current performance of manufacturers

KEY FINDINGS

Architects come across many different manufacturers every week. Yet only 6 in 10 manufacturers meet their expectations.

Part of the reason for this is that manufacturers and architects expect different things from a partnership.

Another reason is that manufacturers overestimate how well they perform when engaging with architects at the two most important touchpoints: Their websites and reps.

Although architects are keen on building relationships with manufacturers, they find fewer than half the manufacturers they come across a good fit for such partnerships.

The manufacturer’s perspective

Most manufacturers who seek specification of their products would like to focus more on architects than they currently do.

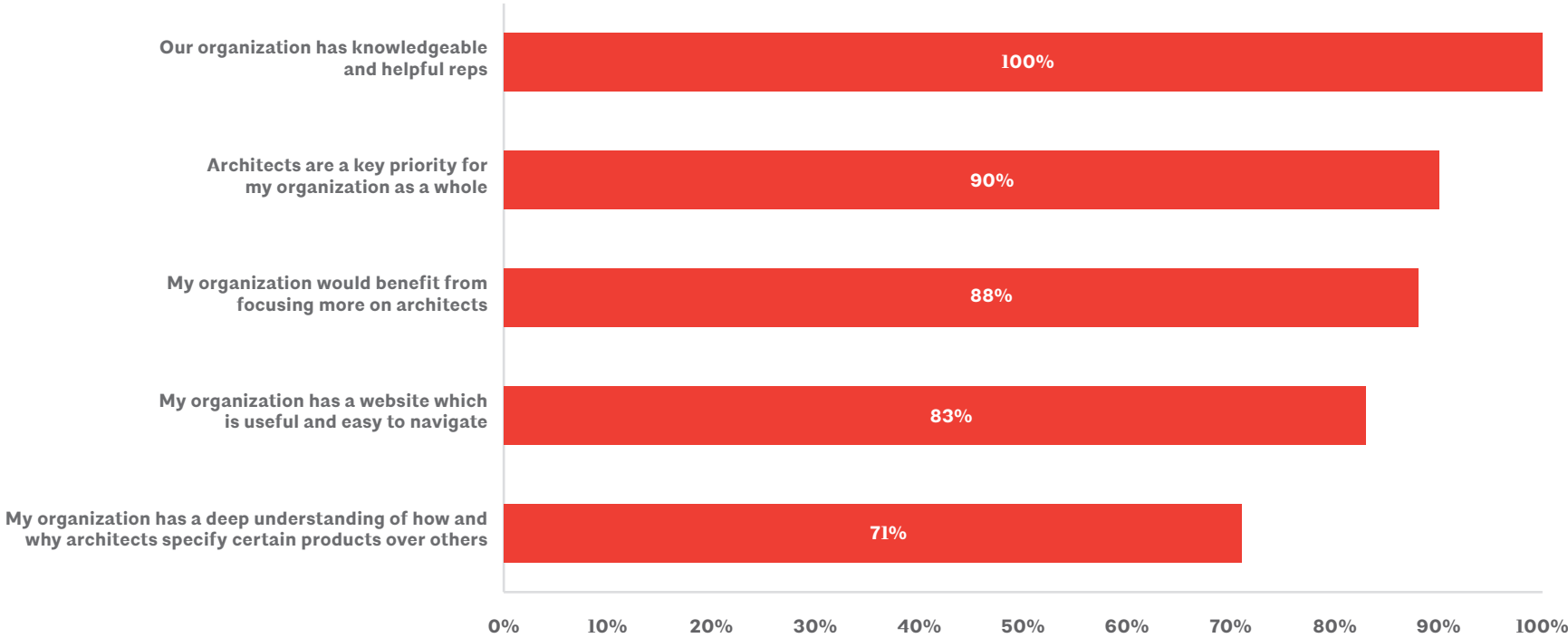
90% of manufacturers interviewed consider architects a key target for their organization, yet 88% believe their organization would benefit from focusing more on architects.

Manufacturers are also upbeat about how well they meet the most important needs of architects. All manufacturers interviewed believe they have knowledgeable and helpful reps, and more than four in five believe their website is useful and easy to navigate.

In general, manufacturers have a good appreciation of which channels architects prefer to use and which content they need from them. They understand that reps and websites are key touchpoints.

However, manufacturers overestimate how well they meet the needs of architects and understand what architects expect from them.

% Manufacturers who agree



Manufacturers underestimate relationship interest

While nearly 9 in 10 architects are looking to build relationships with manufacturers and feel these relationships are vital to their professional success, only 6 in 10 manufacturers recognize this.

As a consequence, many manufacturers do not identify opportunities to build relationships with architects, often believing that they do not want to be bothered.

While many architects prefer to initiate contact, and can be quick to dismiss introductions by manufacturers who come across as sales-oriented, they have interest in building relationships. In fact, most architects hold manufacturer brands in high esteem and have deep respect for their knowledgeable reps.

Another reason manufacturers seeking to build relationships may find it difficult to do so is that many architects have existing relationships in place. This is why focusing on younger architects is especially important.

When architects are not actively seeking out partners in a particular category, most are still interested in innovation and new products to consider. A manufacturer with a compelling proposition may find it easier to make a connection.

Architects also prefer being introduced to new manufacturers face-to-face, whether at their offices or at a conference or event, and they value being introduced to a designated point of contact.

Manufacturers underestimate the depth of advice needed

While 87% of architects expect and rely on manufacturers to advise them broadly on their product category as a whole, only just over half of manufacturers recognize this.

Architects want to work with manufacturers who can provide knowledgeable advice on competitors’ products as well as complementary products and systems.

However, today many manufacturers do not recognize this expectation, and fewer deliver on it to a satisfactory standard.

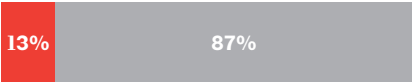
% Manufacturers who agree

Building relationships with manufacturers is important to my professional success



Architects

I rely on manufacturers to advise me about their product category (e.g. roofing product manufacturers to advise on roofing in general)



Manufacturers



No Yes

Two-thirds of manufacturers consider architects a primary target

Architects are crucial to specification. They are involved in specification on 92% of projects, most often as the primary decision maker.¹

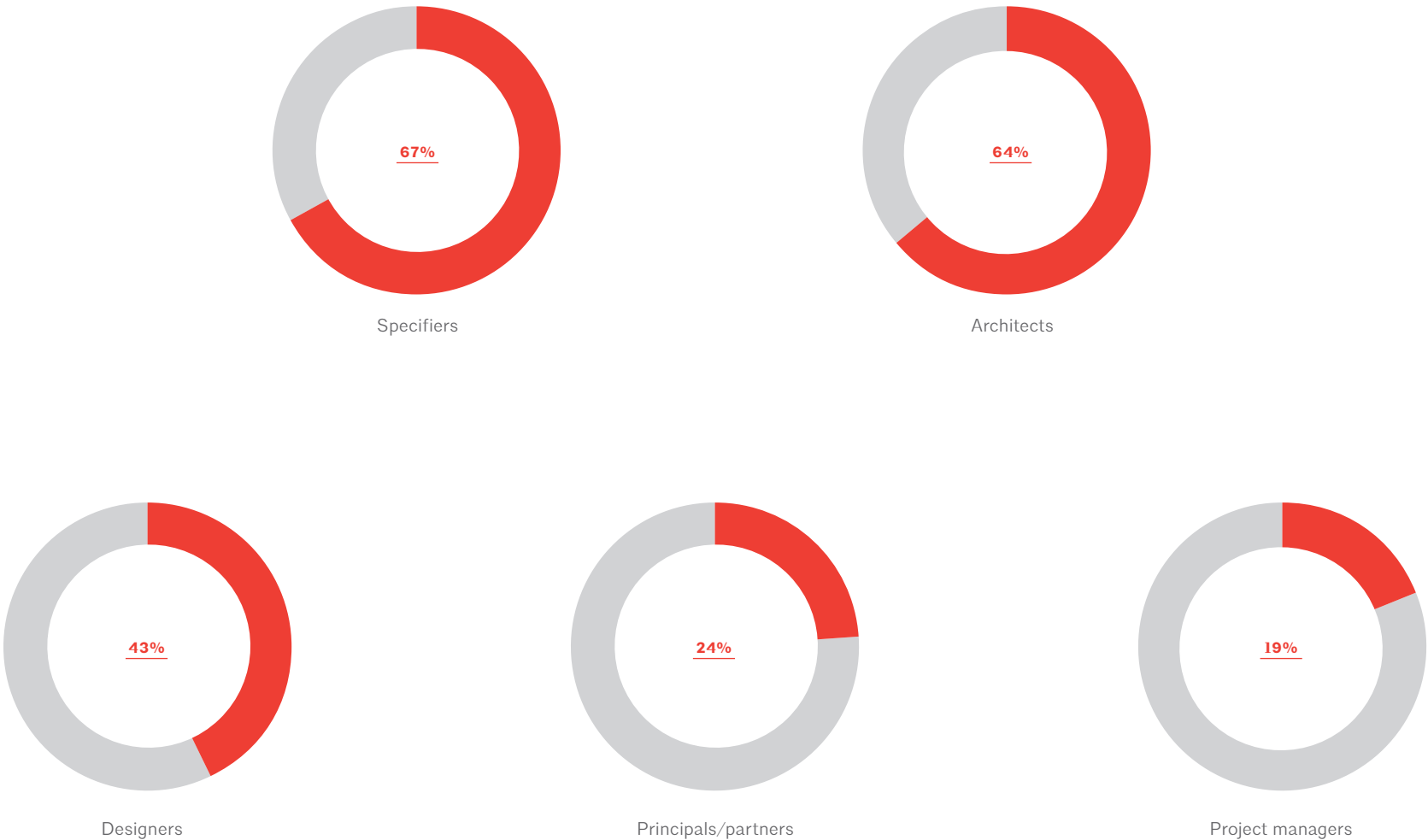
Nevertheless, only two-thirds of manufacturers consider architects as a primary target of their organization’s sales and marketing efforts.

Although other stakeholders within the architectural firm, like specifiers, designers, and principals, play a role in specification, architects are almost always part of the decision-making unit for building product selection and specification.

Therefore as a minimum, they should be considered a primary target of efforts and resources among manufacturers.

Given the needs and demands of architects, a manufacturer who is not focused on them is likely to find itself among the majority of manufacturers who do not meet their expectations, and they will lose out of specifications as a result.

% Who consider these roles as primary targets for marketing/sales efforts



1 The Architect’s Journey to Specification (AIA, 2016)

What architects expect of manufacturers

Architects report significant differences in how well different manufacturers engage with them and meet their needs. They are also notably less satisfied than manufacturers expect.

Of all the manufacturers the average architect comes across, only 6 in 10 meet their expectations.

Room for improvement on key touchpoints

Although 83% of manufacturers interviewed consider their website useful and easy to navigate, architects estimate that just over half of manufacturers’ websites are. Cumbersome websites are a particular pain point because they remain the most frequently used way for architects to get information from manufacturers.

All manufacturers interviewed consider their reps knowledgeable and helpful, whereas architects on average consider two in three manufacturers to meet this need. Responsiveness, manner, and expertise are particular gaps identified by architects.

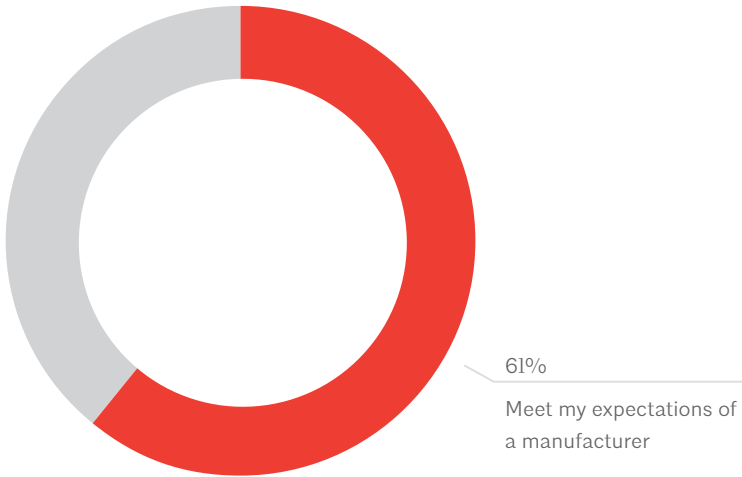
Implications for specification

Although architects are keen to build relationships with manufacturers and expect them to be involved in the specification process, they would only consider partnering with 46% of the manufacturers they come across.

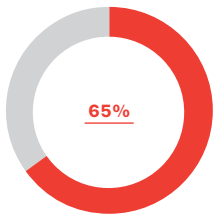
Over half of manufacturers are therefore missing out on potentially fruitful partnerships and specifications.

This is partly due to the lack of priority placed on architects as a target audience. It is also due to lack of investment in, and focus on, a seamless website experience, and positioning reps as consultants.

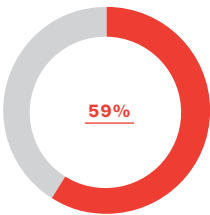
Architect’s views of manufacturers’ efforts to meet their needs



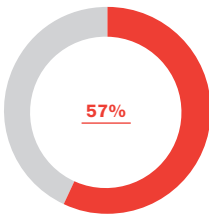
% Of manufacturers who



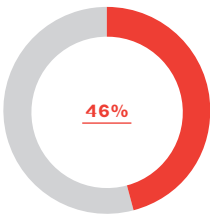
Have knowledgeable & helpful reps



Have comprehensive information available



Have useful websites that are easy to navigate



I would like to partner with for specification

Considerations for manufacturers

1. Are your plans for engaging architects built on the premise that the majority are looking to partner with manufacturers for knowledge and expertise?
2. Is the expertise you provide—online, through thought leadership, and through reps—category-wide expertise, which transcends your own products and solutions?
3. How important does your organization consider architects to its commercial success and why?
4. Is your organization among the 46% architects would partner with for specification? Why?

Section 2

How to improve engagement with architects

Chapter 4

Meeting and exceeding the architect’s expectation of reps

KEY FINDINGS

Architects expect a lot from manufacturer reps and reward those who meet their expectations with strong loyalty and consideration of their products.

Although relationships between architects and reps are likely to remain a strong feature in this market, demands of reps are changing.

Tomorrow’s manufacturer rep will need a different skill set, which focuses on the rep as a trusted consultant and advisor.

Whereas being a knowledgeable expert might have differentiated a manufacturer in the past, offering category expertise has become an expectation to most architects.

Similarly, the rules of engagement are changing, with younger architects and technology putting pressure on reps to be more responsive when architects get in touch.

Most manufacturer reps have not yet adjusted to these requirements in the eyes of architects, offering opportunities for manufacturers to stand out with superior service.

As the face and voice of the manufacturer in the eyes of many architects, reps are a crucial aspect of any architect engagement strategy.

73% of architects agree that “a rep can make or break my relationship with a company and its products.”²

Younger architects show just as much interest as older architects in building partnerships with manufacturers, so the role of the rep will remain of utmost importance to manufacturers.

However, what architects expect from reps is changing. They want to see reps as trusted consultants who share expertise beyond their products.

What architects need from reps can be broken down into three categories: Expectations that must be met (threshold factors), attributes most architects value but don’t necessarily expect (value-added factors), and traits that certain architects value (niche factors).

How architects assess reps

Threshold factors

Three key criteria are universally expected by architects when they engage with manufacturer reps.

2 AIA Proprietary research, online survey with n=150 specifying architects (April, 2018)

Responsiveness

Third, reps must be responsive when the architect gets in touch, and they must be readily available.

Wide category knowledge

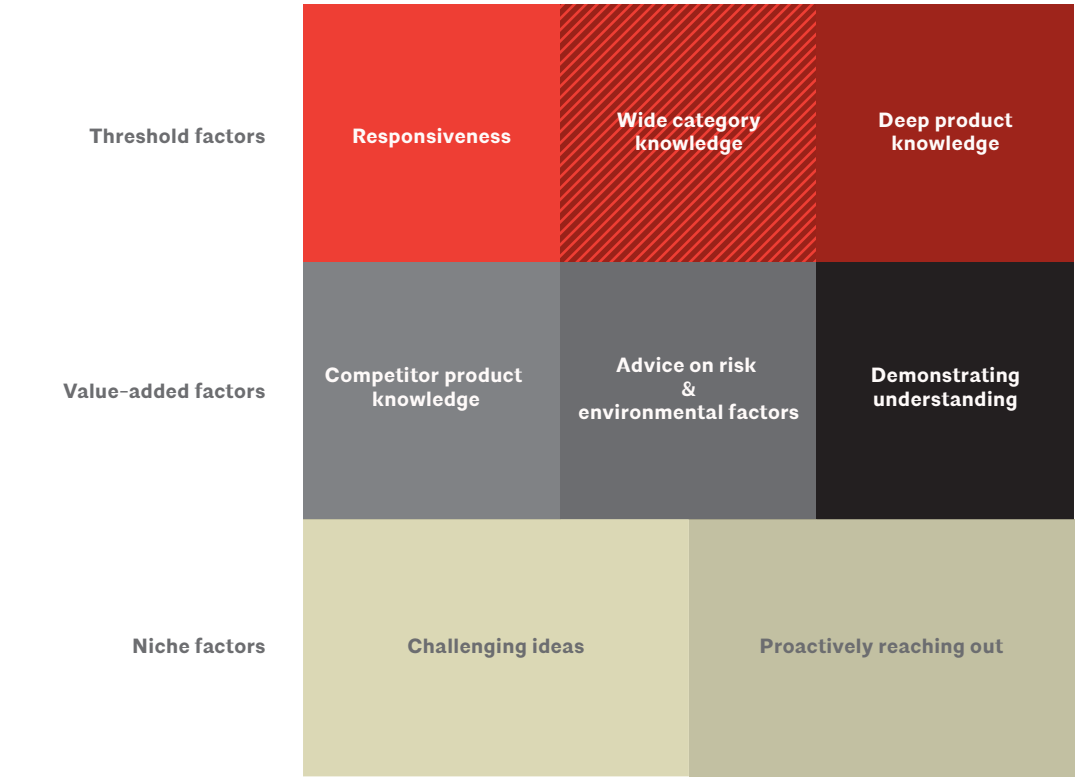
Second, architects expect that reps have knowledge about the manufacturer’s wider product category. The rep must be able to speak knowledgeably about complementary products and systems, as well as have a good understanding of codes, applications, and relevant category knowledge.

Deep product knowledge

First, reps must have deep knowledge of their own products. It is important that they know their product line in a great level of technical detail, because architects often require specific technical information. A rep who can provide this is a prerequisite to being considered a trusted advisor.

While demanding, these basic requirements are rated as very important expectations by the vast majority of architects and should be the first priority for any rep training or review.

Architects’ views on the qualities they seek in manufacturers’ representatives



Value-added factors

When reps deliver well on the most important expectations, they can add value by focusing more on subject-matter expertise and transparency.

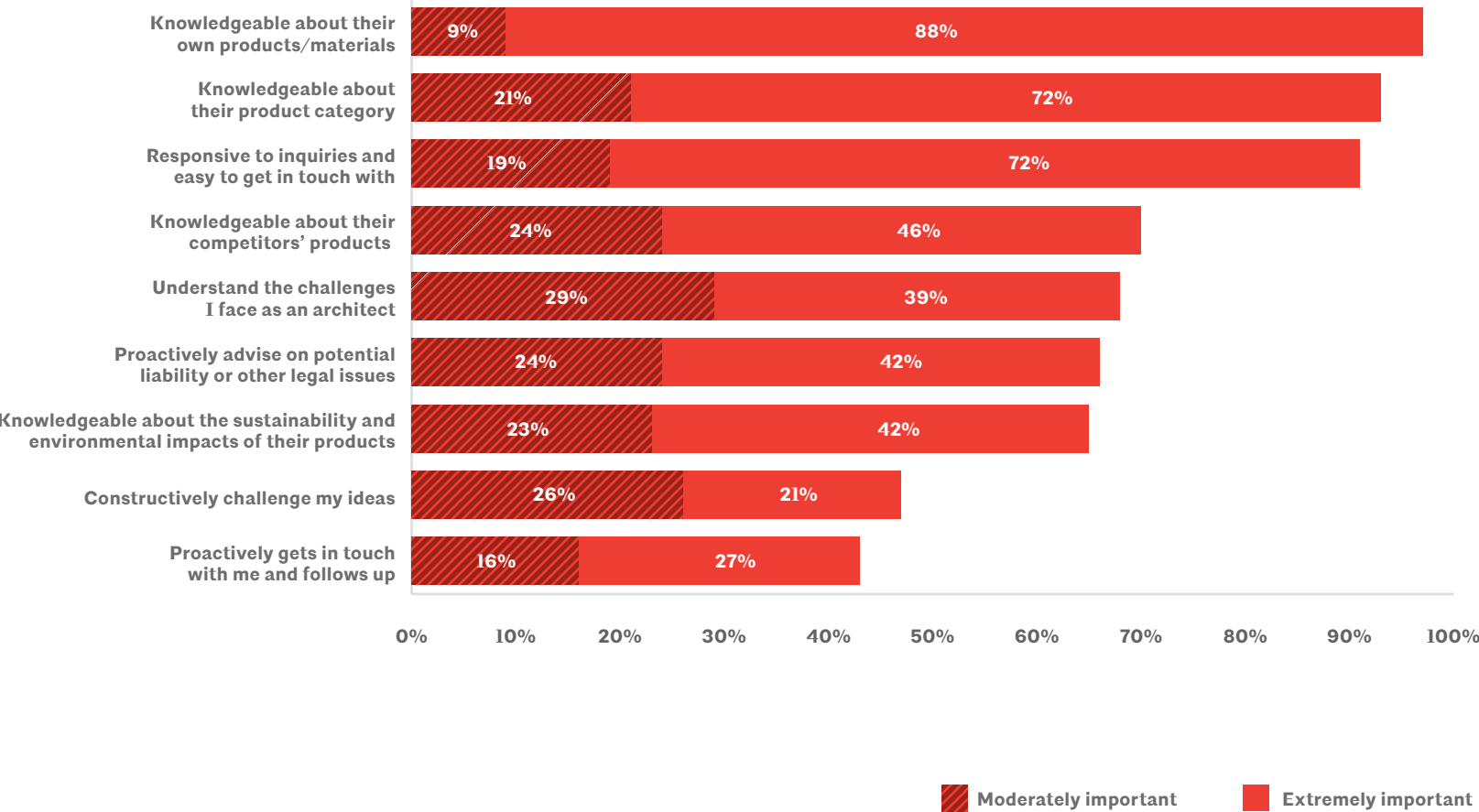
Competitor product knowledge

Architects trust reps that can outline different product solutions, including competitors’ products, and advise accordingly. This requires a deep understanding of their competitors’ products and a willingness to discuss these with architects.

Whereas most architects do not expect reps to advise on competitors’ products, those that do can build strong relationships based on honesty and the architect’s best interest, which works in the manufacturer’s favor in the long-term:

“[Architects want] someone who can give them honest answers about their products and their competitor’s products, because they want a resource and not a sales person. They want it to be a more consultative contact than a sales contact. It is important for my credibility to provide them with the right product rather than just my product, because when they need my product, they will come back.” —Manufacturer

Importance of manufacturer reps’ attributes to architects



Advice on risk and environmental factors

Architects also value reps who can advise on liability issues and risk factors associated with different products and solutions. This is important across categories, but it is particularly important when an architect is considering a new material or product.

This is less important to millennial architects (18–34) who tend to be more junior in the firm and focus less on liability issues than their senior colleagues.

Relatedly, reps can add value by advising on the environmental impact and compliance of products and solutions. This pertains both to environmental certifications and sharing knowledge about how and where a product is produced.

Demonstrate understanding

The third area in which reps can add value is to demonstrate an understanding of the general challenges architects face.

“The best reps understand the challenges architects are facing during the product selection process.” —Architect

Architects do not usually require a rep to have a background in architecture, but it is important that they take time to understand the wider context of the project their product is being considered for.

They should also demonstrate an understanding of the hectic and demanding everyday lives of architects, who can be hard to reach but require immediate responsiveness when they get in touch.

Niche factors

While threshold factors are expected by all architects and value-added factors are liked by most architects, there is a subset of architects who value specific personal qualities in reps.

Reps can differentiate themselves by delivering on these personal qualities, using their best judgment for when an architect would value it.

Challenging ideas

One in five architects consider it extremely important that reps constructively challenge their ideas. When they trust a rep, they appreciate the honesty demonstrated by pushing back on ideas and suggesting an alternative. They value the immersion and understanding necessary to provide such constructive challenges.

Those valuing constructive challenges tend to be baby boomers (55–64), whereas millennial architects (18–34) are significantly less likely to want it.

Proactively reaching out

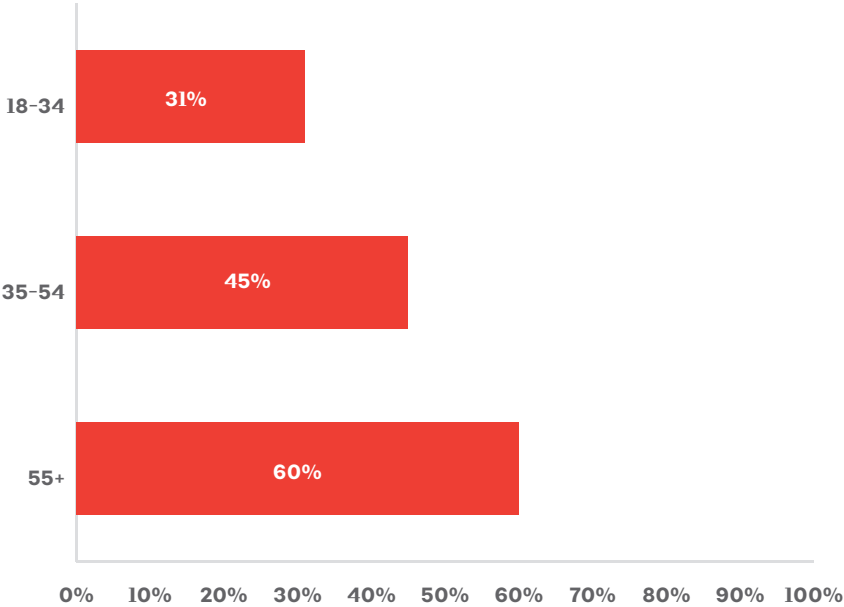
Most architects prefer initiating contact with a manufacturer rep, as their need for advice will depend on the stage of a project and which building product solution is being considered.

However, one in four architects consider it extremely important that reps proactively get in touch and follow-up.

This subset of architects values when reps check in with them and demonstrates a commitment to maintaining the relationship.

It is important to strike the right balance for checking in and following up; a topic covered in the next chapter.

% Of architects valuing reps who constructively challenge their ideas (by age group)



Assessing the current performance of reps

According to architects, 65% of manufacturers have knowledgeable and helpful reps. Reps are an extremely important touchpoint but one that is too often not used to its full potential by manufacturers.

Responsiveness is the main pain point

The primary pain point architects have when engaging with reps is lack of responsiveness. Although 91% of architects consider responsiveness very important, only 36% are satisfied with the responsiveness of reps they come across.

Architects will often call on a rep when they require immediate assistance, such as resolving an issue with a product or specification or when they have a question that is holding up their progress on a project.

It is important that manufacturers have processes and resources in place that help reps to be responsive. Although most architects do not expect reps to pick up the phone the moment they call, they require them to quickly return their call or email.

“What sets the best reps apart from the rest is those who are easy to instantly get in contact with or return calls or emails within an hour.”—Architect

Only half of architects are satisfied with category knowledge among reps

Although most architects have relationships with reps they consider partners and trusted advisors, the overall picture shows significant room for improvement.

Although most reps’ primary strength is their product and category knowledge, only half of architects are satisfied with the level of category knowledge of reps in general.

Similarly, only 62% of architects are satisfied with reps when it comes to deep knowledge about their own products. In particular, lack of technical knowledge is a problem. Some reps can broadly advise on product fit, but some lack the depth of knowledge required to advise on technical details.



Considerations for manufacturers

1. How would a rep’s role be described in a job ad? What purpose do they serve?
2. Is a career as a rep attractive enough to retain talent and their architect relationships?
3. Do your reps have KPIs and solutions in place to encourage high responsiveness?
4. Are you differentiating on product category expertise or do you offer broader advice (e.g. systems, codes, trends)?
5. Are your reps incentivized to build knowledge and share advice with architects?

Chapter 5

The rep as the trusted advisor

KEY FINDINGS

Architects are very intelligent and demanding professionals. They are expected to keep up with building product innovation, codes, and trends at the same time as managing projects, designing, and specifying. Their time is precious, and they are acutely aware of that.

To become a trusted advisor, a rep needs to be responsive and must be able to help architects solve wider challenges than just product selection and specification.

Transparency is key to building relationships with architects, and becoming a truly trusted advisor requires rethinking how and why reps provide advice to architects.

Category knowledge goes beyond products

Architects build networks of trusted advisors across different product categories, consisting of colleagues, other architects, and, very often, manufacturer reps.

“We have a great window rep that has been invaluable over the years. We always specify his product because of this.” —Architect

For reps to become trusted advisors, they need to demonstrate broad knowledge within a category that is relevant to the architect—usually their organization’s product line.

In addition to knowing their own products, competitor products, and complementary systems in a great level of detail, many architects require reps to have non-product knowledge as well, including being able to advise on compliance, standards, certifications, and general trends within their area of expertise.

“Their knowledge must be up to date on current certifications and testing; LEED v4 and WELL among other sustainable certifications.” —Architect

Most important categories

Although category expertise is important for all product categories, 91% of architects

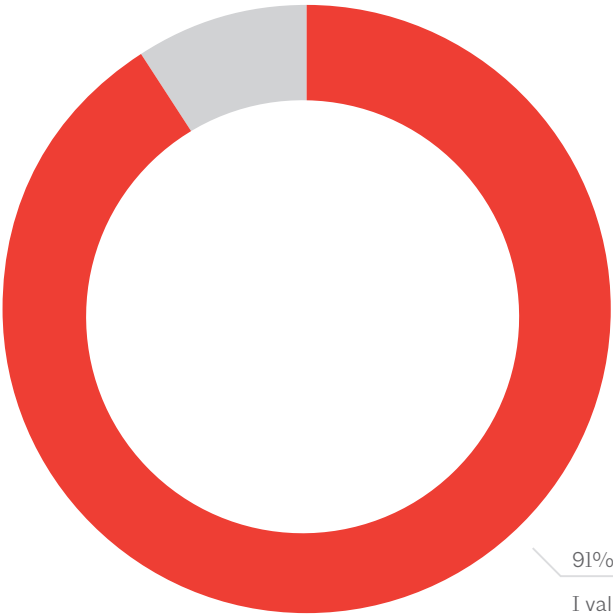
have product categories in which they value category advice more than others. These tend to be more technical categories or products where perceived risks and liability concerns are greater.

Architects who value advice more in certain categories than others were asked which categories were most important; 34% mentioned roofing, 17% mentioned waterproofing solutions, and 13% mentioned building envelopes. Other notable mentions were exterior materials, glazing, windows, doors and insulation.

These are perceived as high-risk categories, which are integral to any building and also require a high level of technical expertise in terms of matching systems, meeting codes, and ensuring they are installed properly.

The opportunity to position reps as category experts and become trusted advisors to architects is particularly strong for manufacturers supplying one or more of these product lines.

Attitude towards manufacturers



91%

I value manufacturer advice more in some product categories than others

Transparency builds trust

To become trusted advisors, manufacturers are expected to demonstrate their best intentions.

At the moment, 71% of architects believe manufacturers have their best interests at heart when advising them about products or specifications.

Through numerous research studies, advisory boards, and focus groups, AIA has explored what builds trust in a manufacturer’s rep. The answer almost always comes down to honesty and transparency.

The most common example is when reps admit their product is not best suited for an application. When this is not the case, reps can still demonstrate their best intentions by:

- informing architects of drawbacks and limitations of their own product line
- not speaking negatively about a competitor’s products
- recommending a competitor’s product that would be better suited for a particular application
- providing specifications or product descriptions of a competitor’s products when more than one option needs to be specified by the architect

What differentiates a trusted partner from other reps?

“Being able to explain the differences in their product and competitors, as well as telling me which product is best; even though their product may not be the best choice for my application.” —Architect

Manufacturers who empower and incentivize reps to advise with the best interests of the architect in mind will win in the long run, as the architect will come back to them and consider their product favorably.

Getting the follow-up right

In building a relationship with an architect, a rep has to strike a difficult balance between maintaining contact and not harassing the architect:

“I think the biggest challenge we face is following up with architects. Many times after something like a lunch & learn where we meet with architects, we both leave and that’s the end of it. The challenge is finding ways to make sure that both parties follow up.” – Manufacturer

Although personal preference varies between architects as to how often they want to be in touch with reps, the majority draw a clear line between an appropriate follow-up and a sales follow-up.

The sales follow-up

Many architects can recall stories of reps who followed up with the intention of making sure their product was specified, or touching base too frequently:

“The best reps have the ability to follow a project with good advice and follow-up while not bugging or annoying me.” –Architect

“Understand that architects don’t always get to make the decision and sometimes it just isn’t the right project fit.” –Architect

Unwelcome follow-ups usually occur when a rep checks in during the specification process. At this point, it is more important to be on hand for questions.

The constructive follow-up

The key is not to follow up during the specification writing process unless prompted to. Instead, most architects value a rep that follows up after the specification is made, to hear if there were any issues and offer advice.

It is also important that reps follow up promptly with any data or files promised on a call. Some architects also value a rep who offers to recap key points from a discussion in a short email.

Considerations for manufacturers

1. How do your reps build category knowledge to advise architects? How effective is this?
2. Are your reps empowered and encouraged to advise on competitive products and make competitive recommendations if those solutions are better suited for a particular application?
3. Is a process in place for tracking that follow-ups happen in a timely manner (e.g., after inquiries, after specification)?
4. Is best practice for introductions, presentations, and follow-ups effectively shared among your reps?

Chapter 6

Optimizing websites—the primary means of architect interaction

KEY FINDINGS

Websites are the primary way architects engage with manufacturers and are their preferred means of collecting product information.

However, manufacturers overestimate how satisfied architects are with their online offering.

Cumbersome websites that are not built with the architect’s research process and needs in mind do not just disappoint the architect—they cost manufacturers specifications.

A successful digital engagement strategy needs to have an “architect-friendly” website at its core.

How a manufacturer serves the architect online is fundamental to its perception among architects.

The average architect visits approximately 47 different manufacturer websites every year. Therefore they have a good frame of comparison with which to judge the usefulness of a manufacturer’s website and know what they are looking for.

How architects assess manufacturer websites

Convenience and speed are key attributes by which architects judge a manufacturer’s website. In most instances, architects are seeking product-specific information when they access a manufacturer website. Therefore it has to be easy to find the information the architect needs, and the information has to be complete once they find it.

Architects focus on functionality; specifically, they pay attention to the flow of content access, from the general menus to the specific information they require. They are less concerned about the visual design of the website, as long as it is intuitive to use.

AIA Proprietary research used a trade-off exercise to determine the most important factors of a manufacturer’s website; “ease of finding relevant information” (41%) and

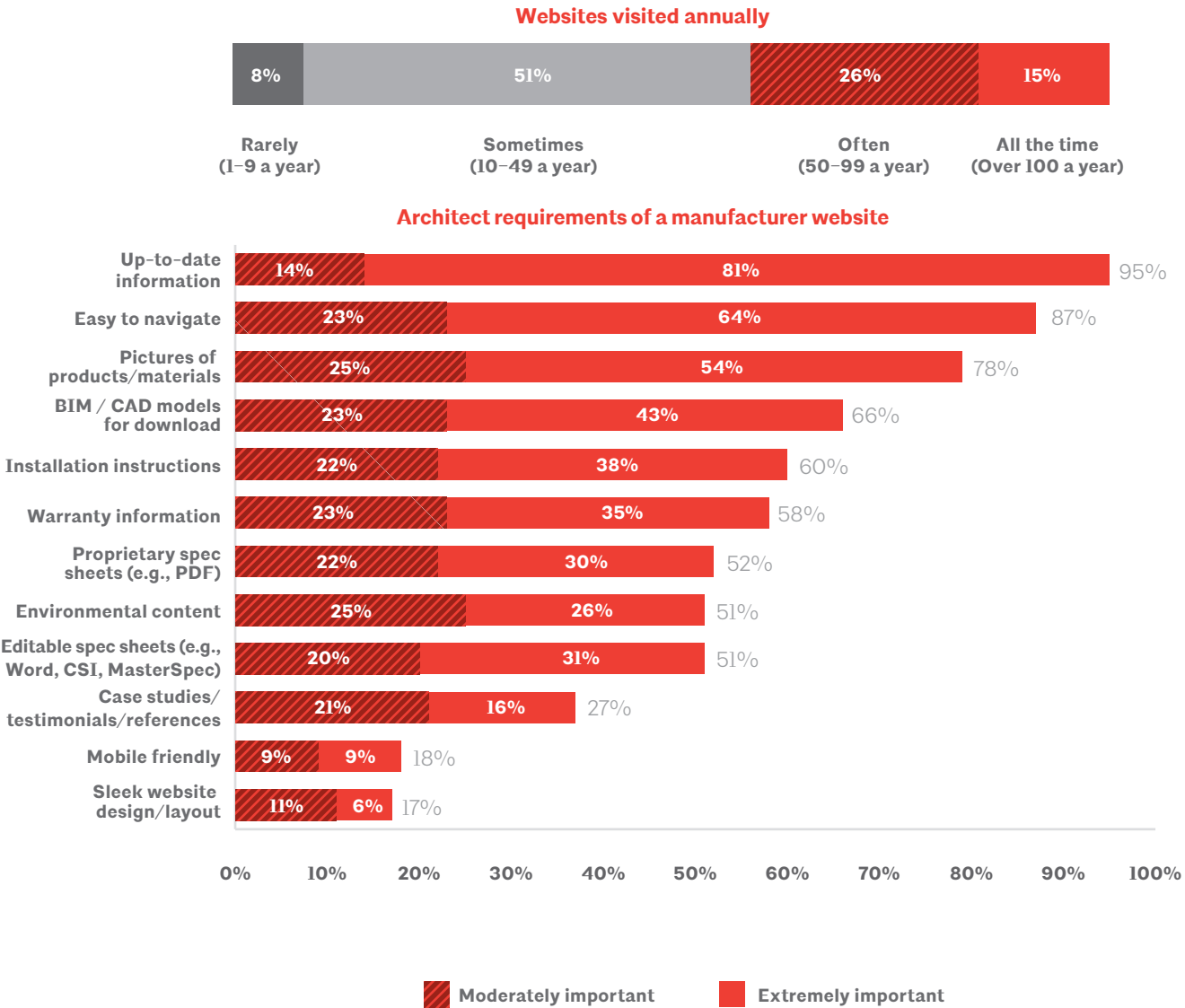
“completeness of information” (35%) were the most important.³

Mobile-friendly websites are less of a concern, as the use of drawings, pictures and detailed information mean that architects primarily access websites from a computer.

The relatively low importance placed on evidence like case studies and testimonials reflects the fact that architects often seek product-specific information on manufacturers’ websites. Case studies are accessed less frequently when considering new products.

It is nevertheless important to have access to performance evidence such as case studies on a manufacturer’s website. They are important for architects in the less frequent instances, such as when new product research is done on a manufacturer’s website.

3 AIA Proprietary research, online survey with n= 150 specifying architects (April, 2018)



Assessing manufacturer websites today

Websites are the primary pain point architects face when they engage with manufacturers. Architects have specific needs and ways of using websites, which many manufacturers do not accommodate.

Ease of navigation is the main pain point

Ease of navigation is the primary area in which manufacturers need to improve their websites. It is rated as important by 87% of architects, but only 20% of architects rate manufacturers well on this.

Since architects are often looking for a product-specific document or piece of information, they require websites that make it quick to get to the product they are looking for, without too many clicks.

“Make websites more intuitive and search functions more responsive to product details.”
—Architect

Many features used to protect manufacturer information and capture data are seen as obstacles to architects. They have little patience for websites that require signing up or logging in and often find proprietary specifications cumbersome to work with.

Many are frustrated with search functions because manufacturer website search boxes tend to be word searches that do not prioritize product content.

When asked what to improve, architects recommend that good manufacturer websites have:

- a specific section for architects with relevant information
- an easy way to drill down into the right product category and products within it
- product-specific pages with an easy overview of available product information, pictures, and the ability to drill down into to detailed information
- an optimized search function that prioritizes specific products (i.e., does not just find key words across all pages)
- BIM / CAD models for download
- no requirements to log in or sign up to access content
- complementary guides for installation, warranty, compliance and environmental content
- access to downloadable specifications in a non-proprietary, editable format

Improving ease of navigation would provide a high return on investment, as other attributes are closely tied to this.

Architects’ satisfaction with access to digital content



Cumbersome websites cost specifications

Architects use manufacturer websites extensively and have very little patience when faced with a cumbersome website.

Manufacturers should not expect architects to get in touch if they cannot find what they are looking for on the manufacturer’s website. Only 23% of architects will spend as long as it takes to find the information they are looking for on a website.

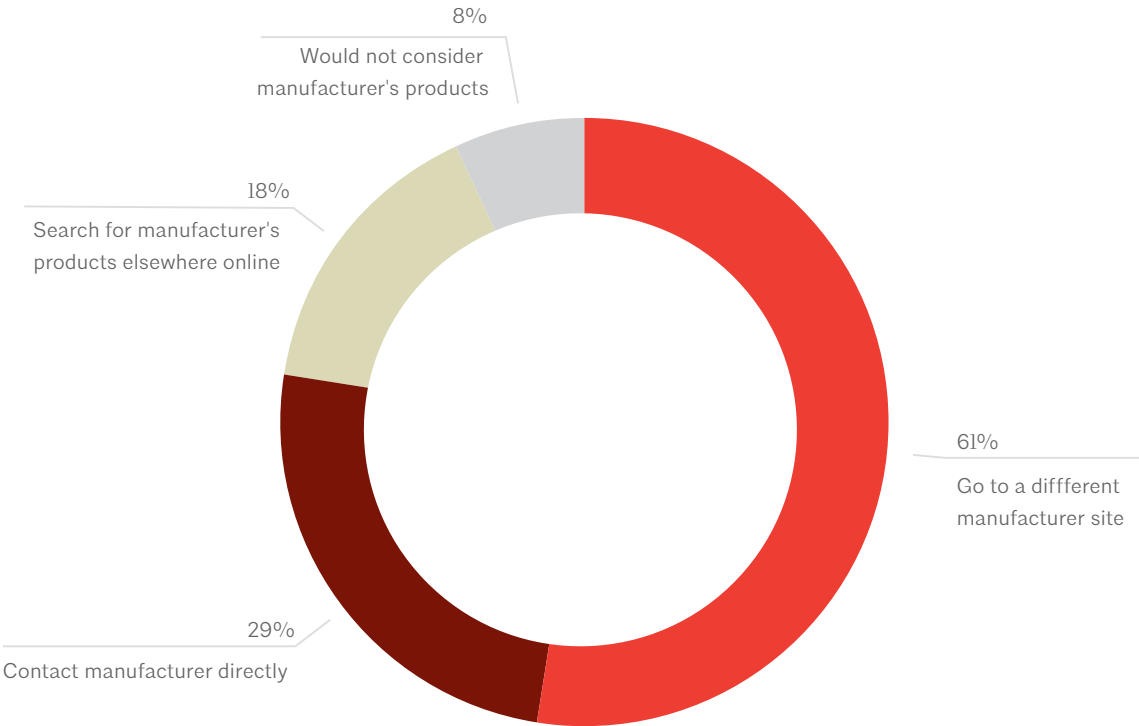
By contrast, 74% of architects will leave a manufacturer’s website if they cannot find what they need “within a few clicks.” When this happens, the most common action an architect will take is to go to a competing manufacturer’s website for information, potentially costing the previous manufacturer its specification.

“Make the websites as simple as possible. We are always on a deadline, and if the website has the information for specifications, downloads, etc., we specify [their products]. The more difficult websites, we do not specify [their products].” —Architect

In fact, architects are twice as likely to look for product information on a competitor’s website than they are to contact the manufacturer.

Therefore, manufacturers should expect that for each architect that calls them for information they cannot find on the website, two went to a competitor instead.

Likely actions if architects cannot find what they are looking for within a few clicks



SEO is important

Architects almost always seek out manufacturer websites when they need product or specification information; only 4% would go to a directory website.

However, architects rarely bookmark websites or type in a URL (e.g., www.manufacturer.com). Instead, they go through a search engine like Google.

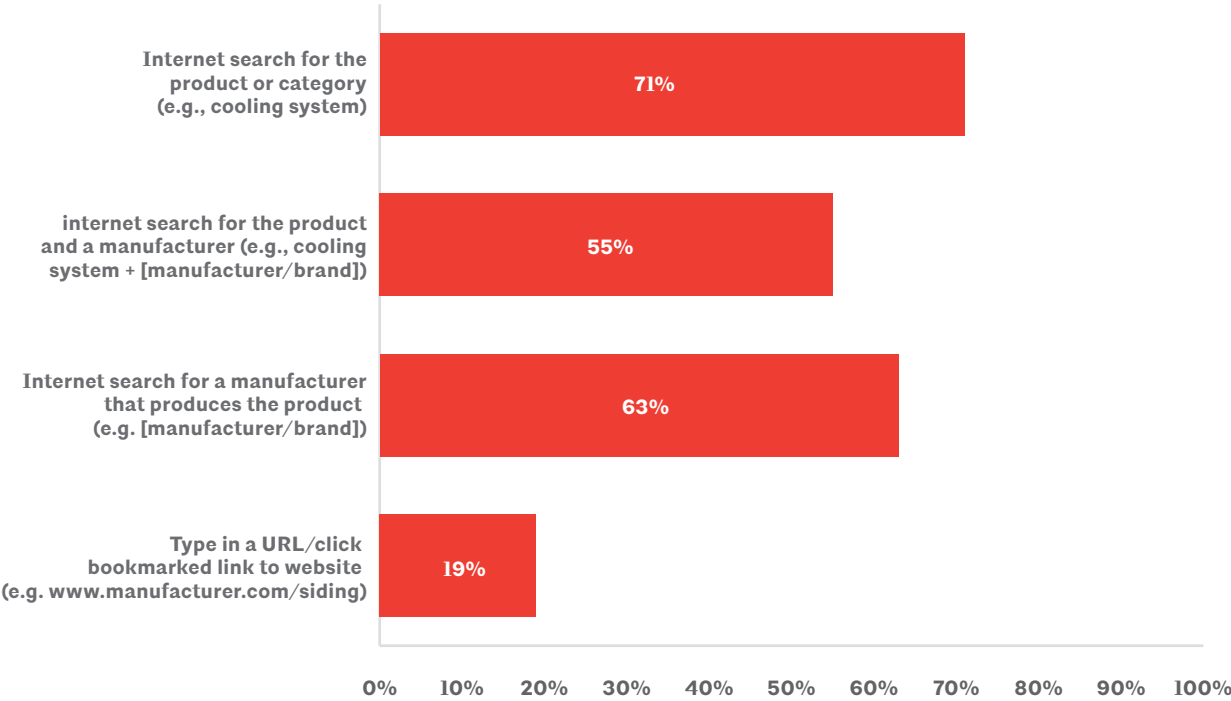
Most commonly, they will simply search for the category or product type they are after and then click on to a manufacturer’s website. This has important implications for manufacturers and their digital strategy:

First, search engine optimization (SEO) is extremely important. Because architects will usually search for a product type, key words associated with products, product documents, manufacturer brands, architects, and specifications are important for ensuring a manufacturer is considered.

This also offers a big opportunity for manufacturers to earn consideration through paid and unpaid SEO and search-engine advertising. Even architects with a specific manufacturer in mind will usually go to their website via a search engine, so other manufacturers should ensure their name is brought into consideration in these instances.

Because architects are quick and impatient if they cannot find what they need on a manufacturer’s website, the need to be high on a search engine list is even greater.

How do architects search for product information?



A content strategy based on ease of navigation

The information most commonly sought during specification is product specification data or technical product descriptions. Because architects primarily look for specific detailed information on manufacturer’s websites, it is important that websites are well suited for this purpose.

“I’m usually looking for a specific answer on a detail or material/composition. If your website doesn’t offer that, I may go on to another manufacturer if I don’t have much time.” — Architect

Make it easy to find the needle in the haystack

Architects require between 10 and 15 different types of information to consider a building material in most instances. These include general types of information like warranty, installation guides, design guides, and a specific range of performance attributes, depending on the category.⁴

Manufacturers therefore have a difficult challenge on their hands: They need to make websites easier to navigate, but they cannot limit the information available.

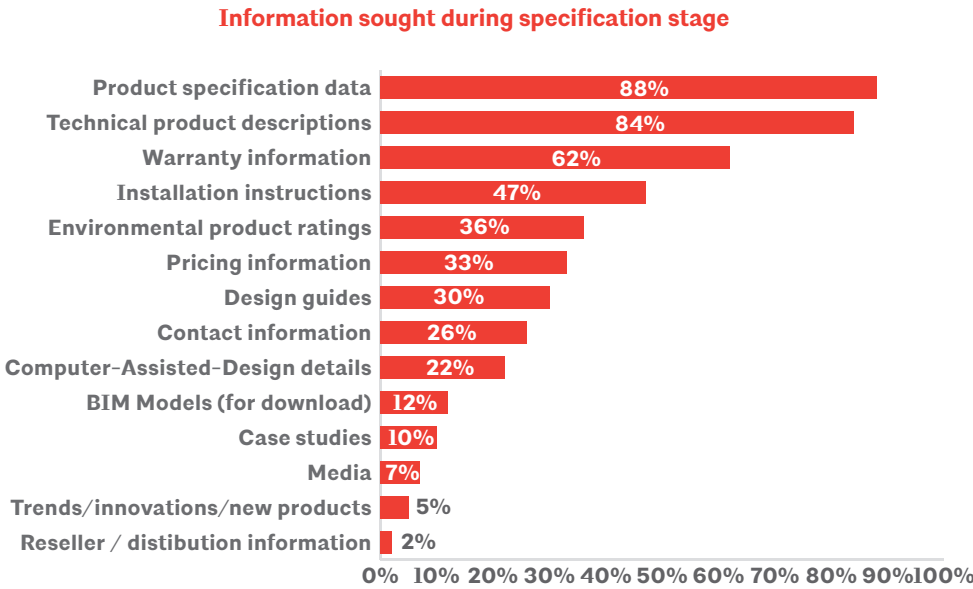
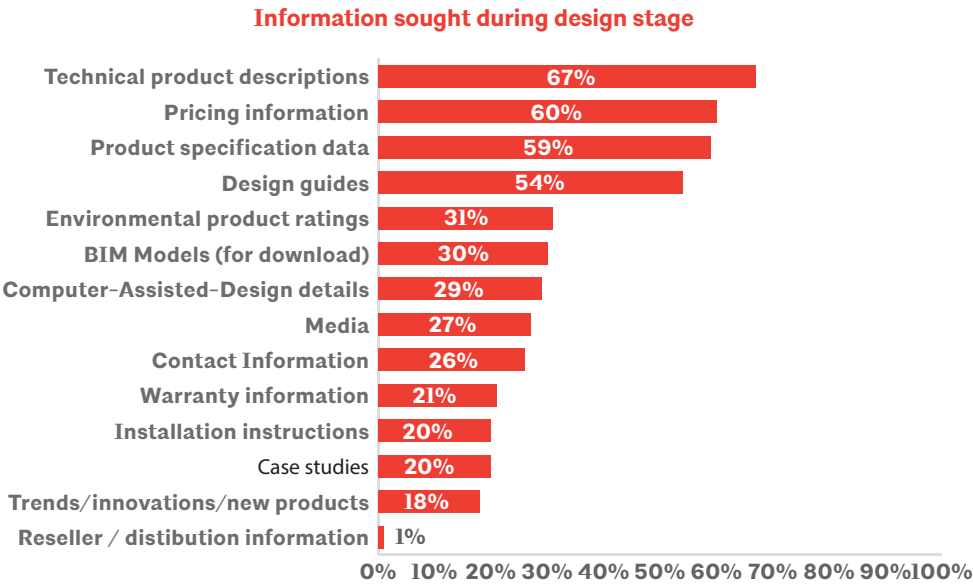
The optimal online content strategy is therefore to focus on creating intuitive

ways for the architect to find the specific information they are looking for.

Many architects say that “best-in-class” websites do this by organizing the website with a meaningful division of content (e.g., by product category or application), and then making it easy to drill down into subcategories and products without too many distractions.

The best websites have product pages that function in the same way, by providing an overview of different types of information available for that product, prioritizing performance attributes and downloadable specification documents and “cut sheets.”

4 AIA Proprietary research, online survey with n= 169 specifying architects (July, 2017); AIA Proprietary research, online survey with n= 276 specifying architects (October, 2017); AIA Proprietary research, online survey with n= 150 specifying architects (April, 2018)



The Architect’s Journey to Specification (AIA, 2016)

Considerations for manufacturers

1. Architects most often seek out product-specific information on your website—is it built with that purpose in mind?
2. Have you done usability testing on your website to test how quickly and intuitively an architect can find specific product information?
3. Does your website require logging in or other cumbersome processes that slow users down?
4. Do you have a comprehensive SEO strategy covering key category and competitor terms?
5. Is your product content strategy based on providing an easy overview with navigation to specific details?
6. Is your search function optimized to search product content instead of a word search?

Methodology

This report is an initiative of AIA, drawn from a study AIA developed in collaboration with B2B International (B2B), an independent research company. Survey questionnaire development was done in partnership between AIA and B2B. B2B managed survey programming, data collection and tabulation, and raw data analysis.

The research contained in this report was conducted in March and April 2018 using a mixed-mode methodology.

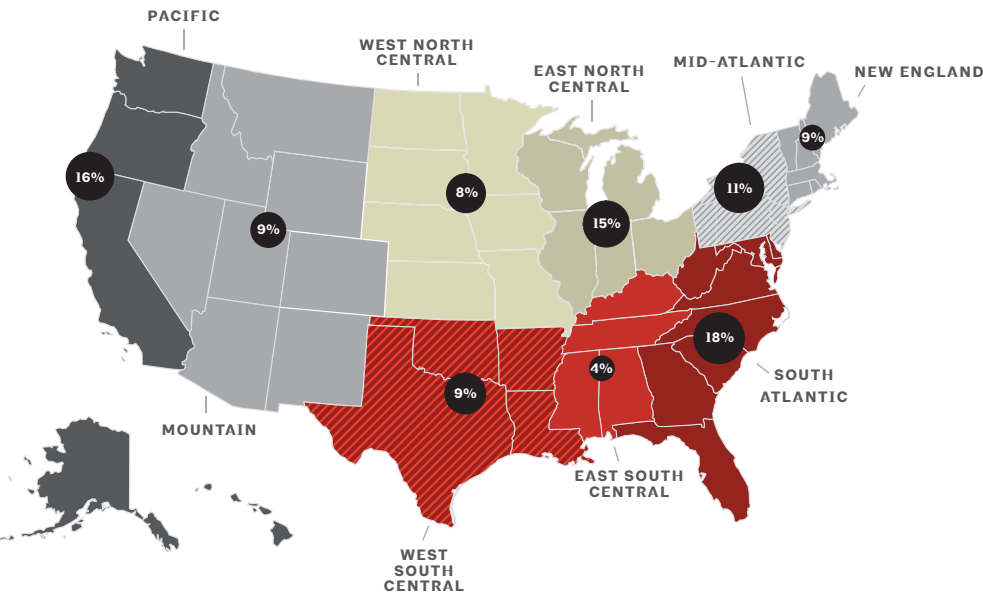
Architects were interviewed using an online survey with a representative sampling of AIA’s membership, which comprises approximately half of all registered architects in the US.

The survey yielded 400 completed responses, 83% of which were from licensed architects. All respondents were screened on their involvement in product selection and specification.

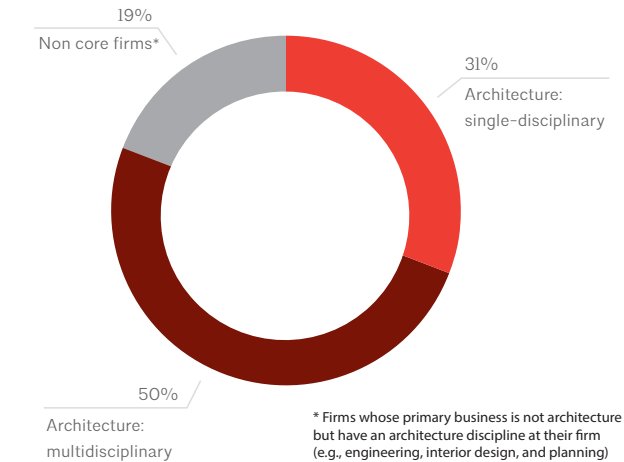
A cross-section of manufacturers who seek specification of products were interviewed via telephone about their perspective on engaging with architects. Interviews spanned mid- and senior-level decision makers across marketing, strategy, and sales. All were responsible for planning and/or executing their organization’s engagement with architects. 42 were interviewed.

Base: 400 (Architects)

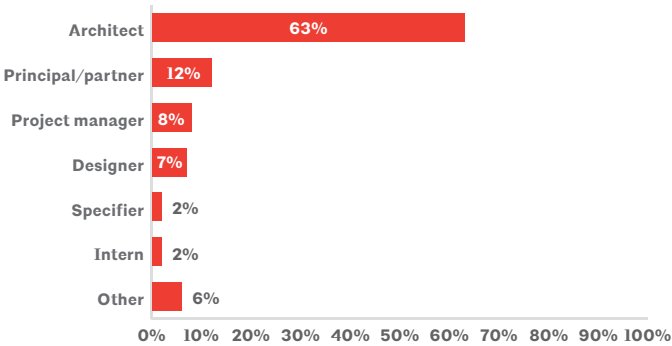
Geographic distribution of respondents



Firm type



Job role



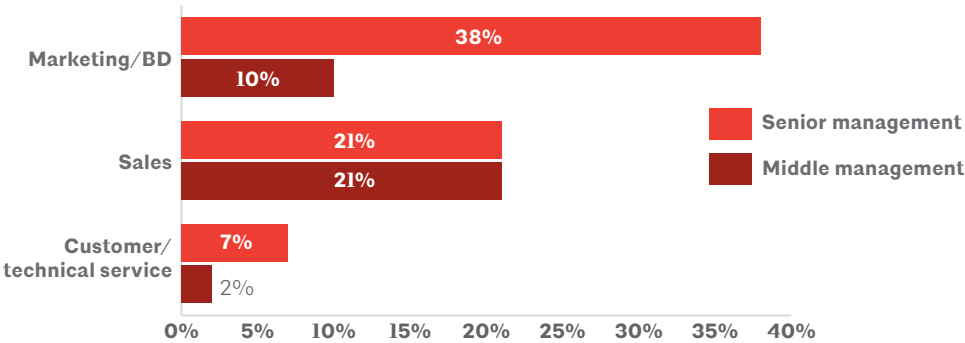
Overview of the
psychographic personas

	34% CONSERVATIVES	35% DYNAMISTS	31% RISK-TAKERS
Profile	More likely to be older baby boomers and likely male.	More likely younger and tech-savvy people who like to work digitally.	Tend to be younger; more often working for West-Coast firms.
Mindset	Stick with tried and tested solutions they know about and have experience with.	Like working with BIM/CAD, and interacting digitally with manufacturers.	Committed to sustainability; open to exploring new and innovative solutions.
Specification	Heavily reliant on experience with products. Have or seek relationships with reps and brands.	Reliant on experience with products; require BIM/CAD support.	Focus on products that are unique or environmentally superior; scrutinize new solutions and value advice.
Support	Focus on product descriptions and specifications. Are less likely to require that reps have sustainability knowledge. Prefer to call reps or see them face-to-face. Use a wide range of sources, including websites.	Prefer to visit a manufacturer website and are more likely to email a rep or a company than call or meet face-to-face. Prefers to initiate contact; more likely to value reps with knowledge of competitor products and less likely to value reps who proactively reach out.	Require reps who are knowledgeable about sustainability and environmental impact. More likely to look for environmental information on websites. Not afraid to try new solutions; requires information about warranty, compliance and editable specs in non-proprietary format.

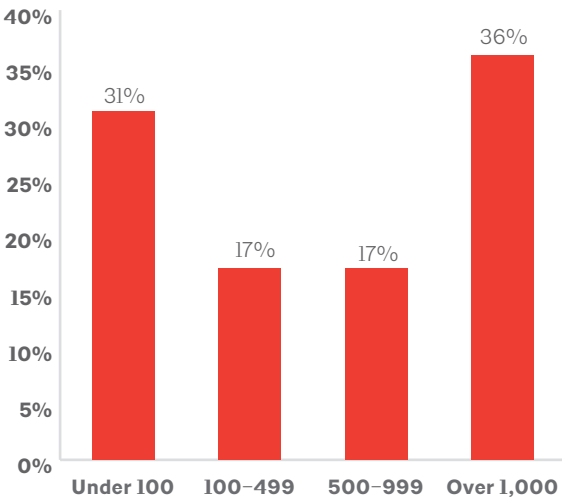
Base: 400 (Architects)

Profiling manufacturers

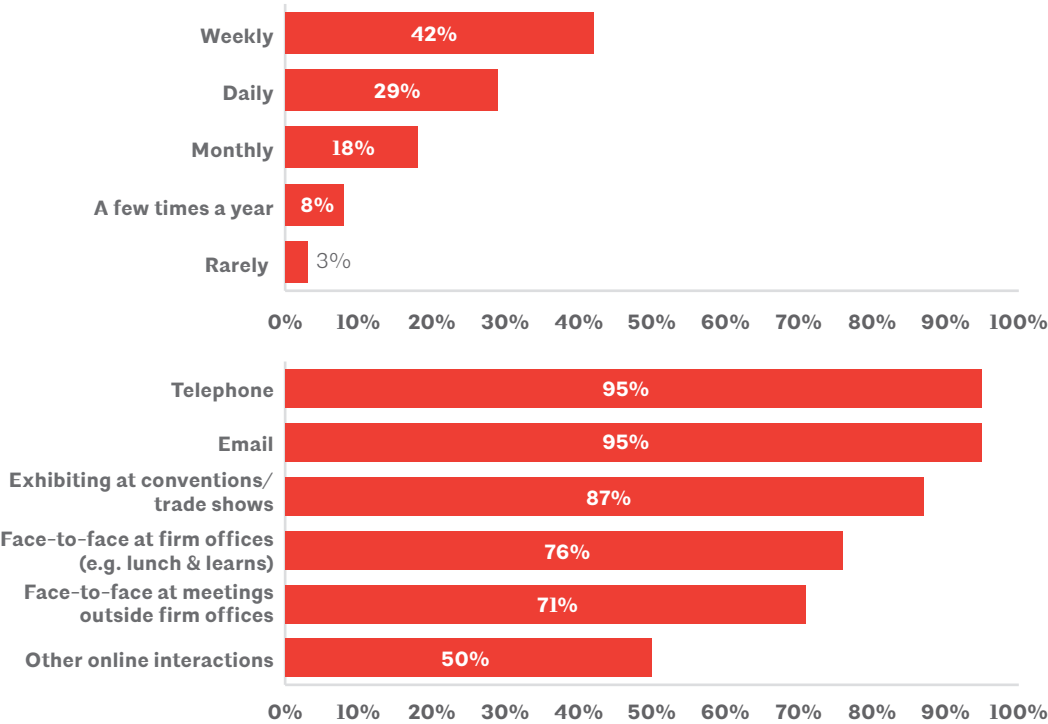
Job role



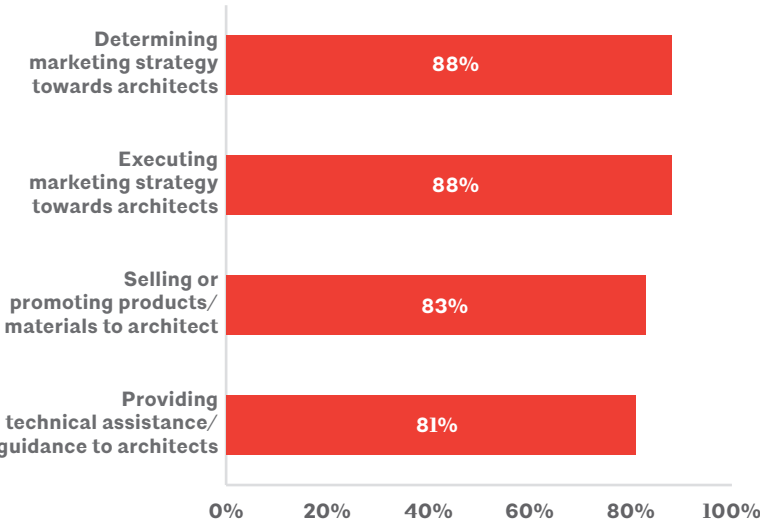
Firm size



Communicating with architects



Architect engagement responsibilities



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