

realize:

The Data Advantage Report:

Navigating Identity and Intent in a Fragmented Ecosystem

October 2026

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realize:

• Reads a news article

• Subscribes

• Chats with DeeperDive

• Watches ¾ of a video ad

• Completes an interactive

• Adds to basket

• Reads a product page

• Searches the web

• Browses a retail site

• Watches a video

• Reads a sports article

• Requests a quote

• Hovers over an ad

• Checks email

• Reads a financial article

• Bounces off a site

• Checks a finance app

• Clicks on an ad

Introduction and Key Findings

Introduction & Methodology

The digital ecosystem is fragmenting faster than most marketing organizations can adapt to it. The rise of AI-powered search and discovery, from LLM-driven queries to AI overviews replacing traditional search results has fundamentally changed how consumers search, browse, and buy, making intent far harder to observe and act on than it was even a year or two ago. Users now split their attention across search, social, open web publishers, apps, and AI interfaces in ways that don't leave the clean, trackable trail marketers have historically relied on. In this ecosystem, finding the right audience with genuine intent to buy is harder than ever.

And yet identifying new audiences and understanding their intent is often the difference between growth and stagnation. Every audience an organization targets has a ceiling, and the same segment, bid on repeatedly over time, becomes more expensive to reach and less responsive to messaging it's already seen dozens of times before. Growth requires continually finding the next pool of high-intent buyers. As competition for attention intensifies and cost per acquisition climbs across the most familiar channels, the organizations that can reliably identify and act on new, high-intent audiences hold a structural advantage over those that can't.

Walled gardens like Google, Meta, and Amazon make it easy: they have spent years building the infrastructure to identify the right audiences with precision. Marketers know how to work within them, trust the data they provide, and can prove results to leadership with confidence. The open web offers something walled gardens can't: access to untapped audiences. But it asks marketers to operate with less certainty about who they're actually targeting and whether that spend is paying off.

This report sets out to help with that friction, and to understand how marketing and advertising leaders are responding to it: whether growing budgets are translating into audience expansion, what's standing in the way when they're not, and what it would take for marketers to invest with the same confidence outside of walled gardens as they do inside them. What we found reveals a clear and consistent story about where the market stands today, and where the opportunity lies for the organizations willing to be first adopters.

Methodology

To shine a light on how organizations are adapting their audience targeting and budget allocation in a fragmented digital ecosystem, we commissioned a survey of more than 300 senior marketing and advertising leaders from the US and UK in companies with 1,000+ employees. The survey was completed by Qualtrics, an independent survey company.

Respondents all work for companies in the automotive, banking or financial services, or eCommerce industries, split roughly evenly across the three, and have monthly marketing spend of \$300K or more. Respondents held roles ranging from Senior Manager through VP. The respondents were recruited through a global B2B research panel, and invited via email to complete the survey, with all responses collected during August 2026. The order of the answers in the majority of the non-numerical questions was randomized, to prevent order bias.

Key Findings

01 | 81% of marketing and advertising leaders are stuck in a targeting rut

Despite growing budgets and stated intentions to reach new audiences, 81% of advertisers admit they tend to keep targeting the same audience segments over time. Budgets are increasing by 9% on average, and reaching new audiences is the top priority for that extra spend. Yet in practice, most organizations default back to familiar audience pools. The result is a widening gap between ambition and execution, with incremental budget likely to be used to reinforce existing reach rather than expand it.

02 | Outside closed ecosystems, businesses have an identity blind spot

Most marketers are operating without a clear, unified view of who they're reaching outside closed ecosystems. 79% describe their performance marketing channels as not fully integrated, and 75% say it's not very easy to recognize the same customer across multiple touchpoints before they convert. At the root of the problem is identity: 35% point to a lack of standardized audience/identity data across the open web as their top obstacle to understanding consumer intent. Until that visibility gap closes, marketers are effectively advertising into a fog.

03 | Solve identity, and 92% of marketing leaders say they would move their budget

81% of advertisers are open to shifting ad spend to the open web, and lower confidence in targeting accuracy compared to walled gardens is the top reason organizations haven't shifted more spend there already. When asked what would change their behavior, 92% say they'd be likely to shift ad budget to the open web if it offered a true closed-loop: the ability to identify one consumer's journey from first touch to conversion and know it's the same person throughout. Driving the point home further, 48% say they would reallocate more than a quarter of their budget for this purpose.

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Survey Report Findings

Marketing Leaders are Increasing their Spend on Paid Media and Advertising

We asked respondents to describe the change to their budget for advertising over the past year, and found marketing and advertising leaders are generally putting more money behind paid media. Over the past 12 months, budgets grew by an average of 9%, with more than three-quarters of respondents (77%) reporting an increase. 15% increased their budget significantly (by more than 20%), while 62% saw a slighter increase of 1-20%.

Only a small minority are holding back: 21% of respondents kept spend flat, and just 2% decreased their budget slightly. As we did not ask respondents where this additional budget is being directed, it could be that some are “spending more to stay in place”, as marketing becomes more expensive and it costs more just to keep pace with the same activities as in previous years. Whether the rising budgets are due to rising costs or accelerated growth, the overall picture is one of sustained investment, with businesses that are increasing spend far outnumbering those tightening the purse strings.

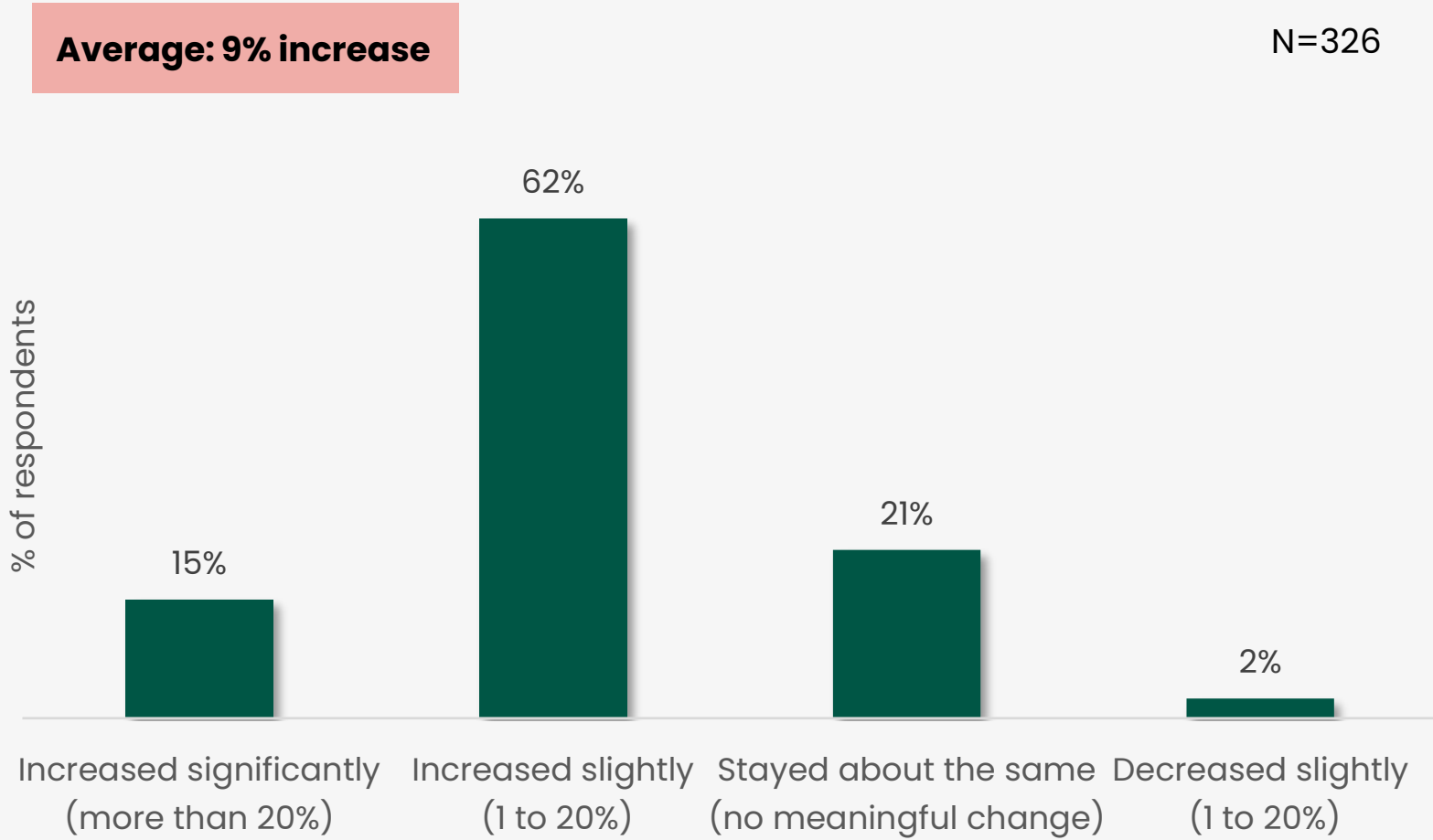


Figure 1: Paid Media and Advertising Budget Changes

Budget Growth is Primarily Being Directed to Audience Reach

When it comes to putting this additional budget to work, reaching new audiences is the clear priority, cited by 30% of respondents as their desired primary outcome. The remaining three options, increasing frequency against existing audiences (24%), testing new creative or messaging (24%), and bidding more aggressively on existing audience pools (22%), are all clustered closely together, suggesting advertisers aren't betting on a single strategy but spreading budget across several approaches at once. As noted previously, the need to spend more on existing audience pools also suggests that for many companies, additional budget is being used as a way to keep pace.

This pattern points to a period of active exploration rather than simple optimization, as marketing leaders appear to be testing the waters across multiple tactics simultaneously. The emphasis on new audience reach may also reflect a broader shift in the discovery landscape, as in the AI era, some traditional channels deliver diminishing returns, pushing advertisers to look further afield for new audiences.

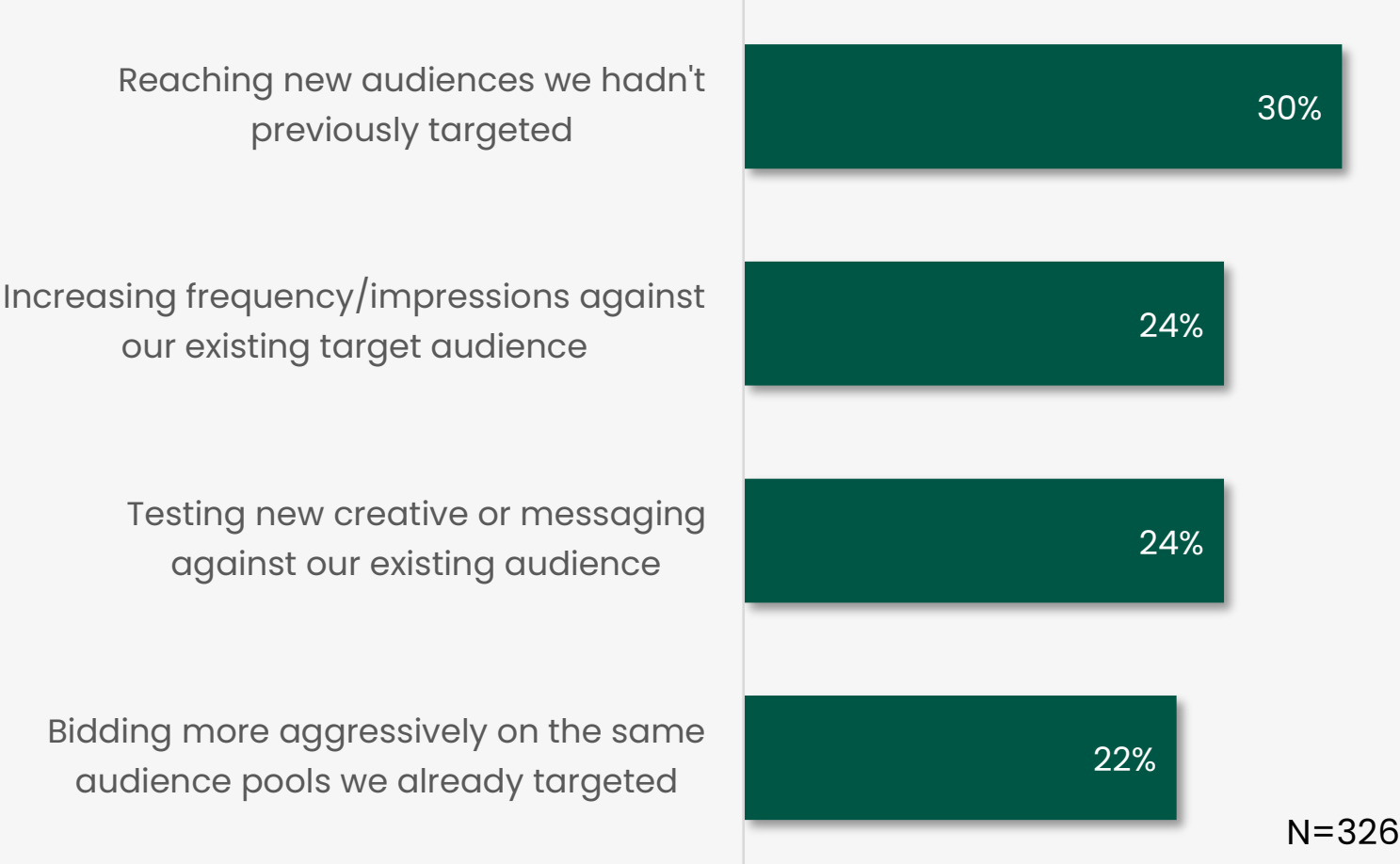


Figure 2: Primary Desired Outcome of Additional Paid Media Budget Allocations

The Pressure is On to Prove Incremental Growth from New Audiences

When justifying budget increases to finance leadership, marketers are roughly split on the pressure they feel to demonstrate incremental growth that specifically heralds from new audiences.

Just under half (46%) feel very or somewhat pressured to prove that additional spend is reaching new audiences rather than simply continuing to invest in existing ones, while 32% feel comparatively free of that expectation. 21% of respondents say they feel neither pressured nor unpressured.

This split suggests two different standards for success operating side by side. For roughly half of organizations, consistent performance against existing audiences may be sufficient to justify spend, as long as it hits performance goals. But for the other half, finance leadership expects more: any budget increase needs to demonstrably reach beyond the same recycled audience pools.

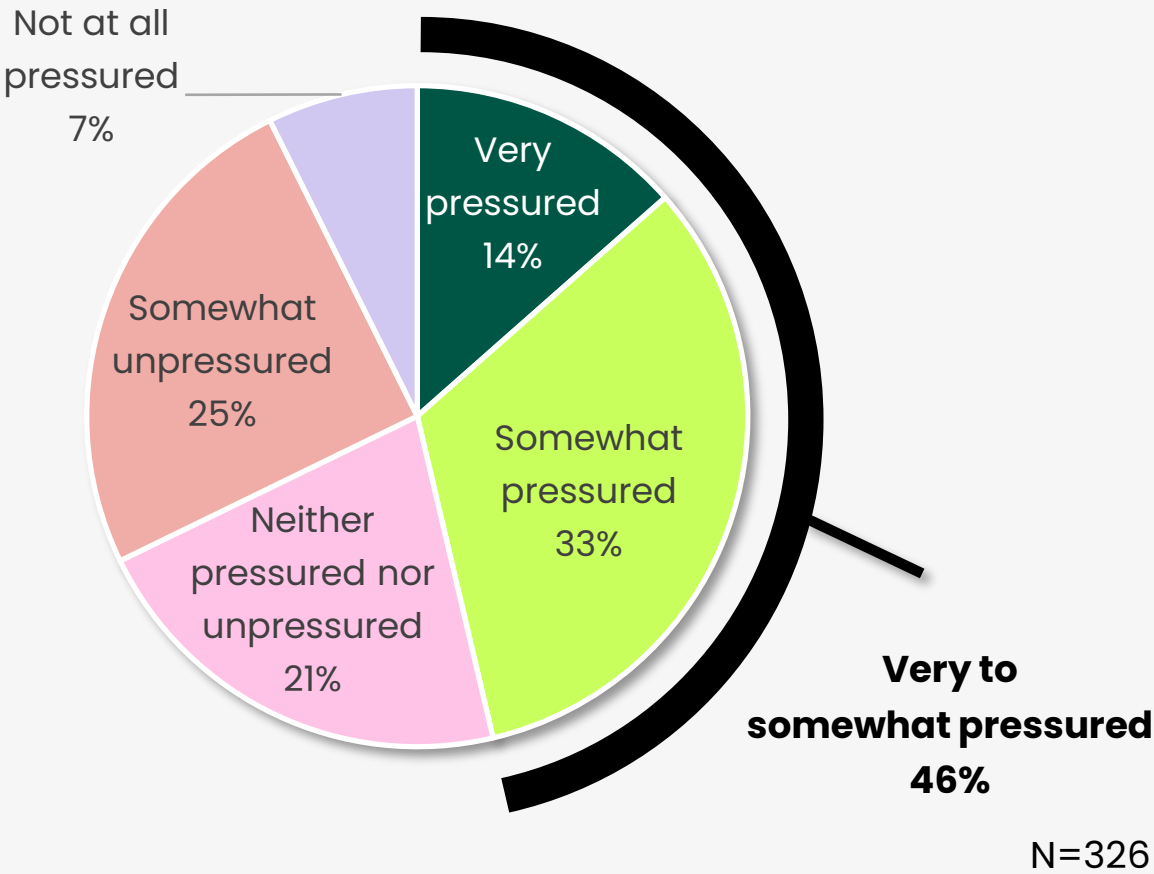


Figure 3: Pressure to Prove Incremental Growth from New Audiences to Finance Leadership

The Gap Between Ambition and Execution in Attracting New Audiences

Despite the appetite to reach new audiences, most organizations are struggling to do so. 81% of respondents agree that their organization tends to keep targeting the same audience segments over time, even as budget increases, with 29% strongly agreeing and 52% somewhat agreeing. Just 13% disagree with this statement.

Intention and execution are not the same yard stick. While additional budget is meant to fund audience expansion, in practice much of that spend is likely being funneled back into familiar, already-targeted pools, which is a pattern that suggests inefficient use of incremental budget and a missed opportunity for genuine growth in reach.

As a result, advertisers may be paying more to reach a cohort made up of largely the same people, rather than the new audiences that the extra investment was intended to unlock.

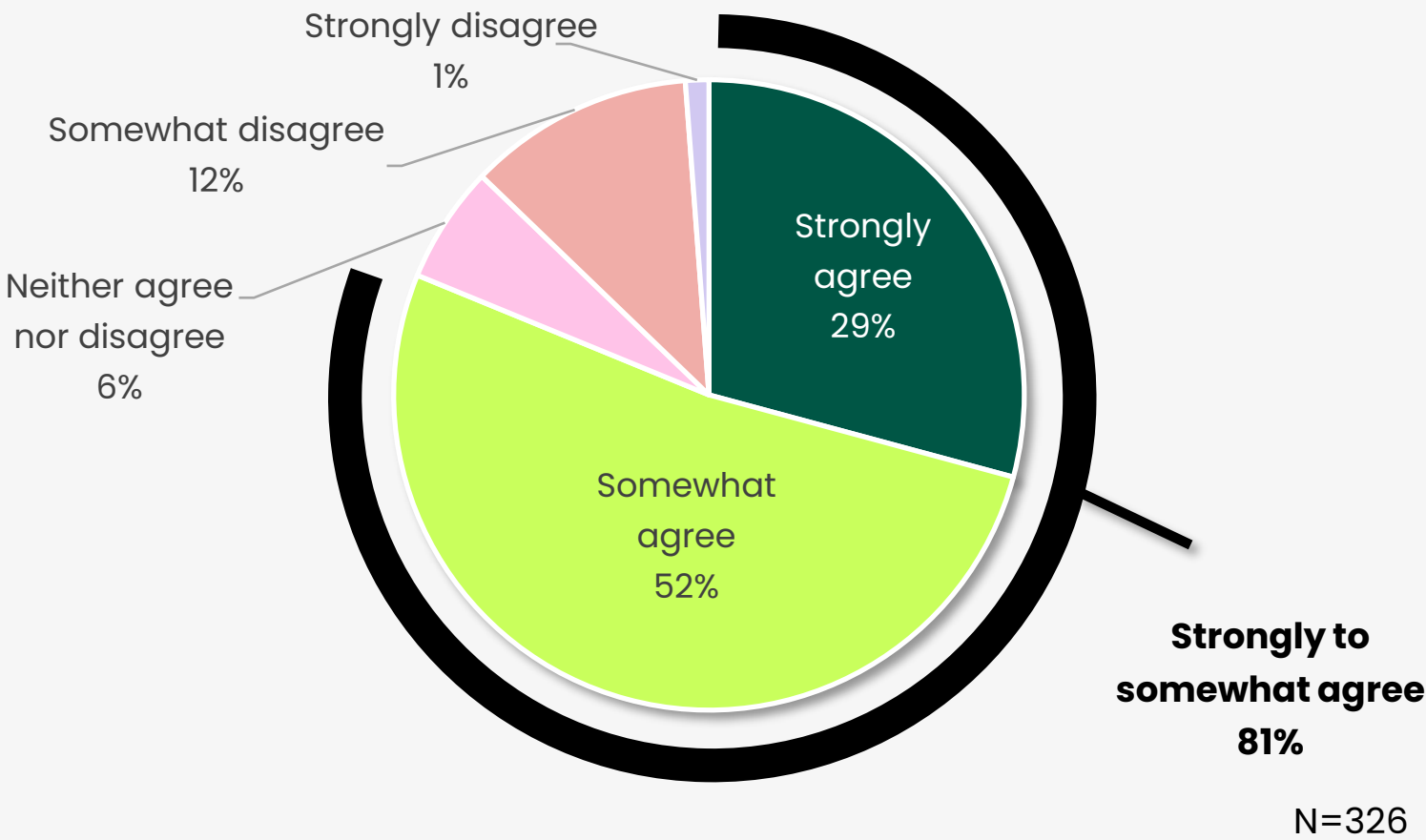


Figure 4: Tendency to Retain Same Audience Segments Over Time Despite Budget Growth

Level of Integration Across Performance Marketing Channels

Despite the push toward reaching new audiences, most organizations still can't answer a basic question: is the person who watched a video online the same person who read an article on the open web and later opened a marketing email? Just 21% of respondents rate their performance marketing channels as fully integrated, meaning the vast majority, 79%, lack a complete, unified view of their audience across the fragmented media ecosystem.

The 52% who describe themselves as "somewhat integrated" likely reflects a lower bar than it sounds. Connecting two channels, like search and social, is a relatively achievable technical lift; true integration means unifying identity and measurement across search, social, display, open web, and email simultaneously, which is a materially harder problem, and one most of the market hasn't solved.

Even the 21% claiming full integration may be describing simpler stacks with fewer channels to reconcile in the first place, rather than a genuine end-to-end solution. The underlying story is of a market still largely operating with a fragmented, incomplete picture of its own audiences, for reasons that are as much technical and structural as they are strategic.

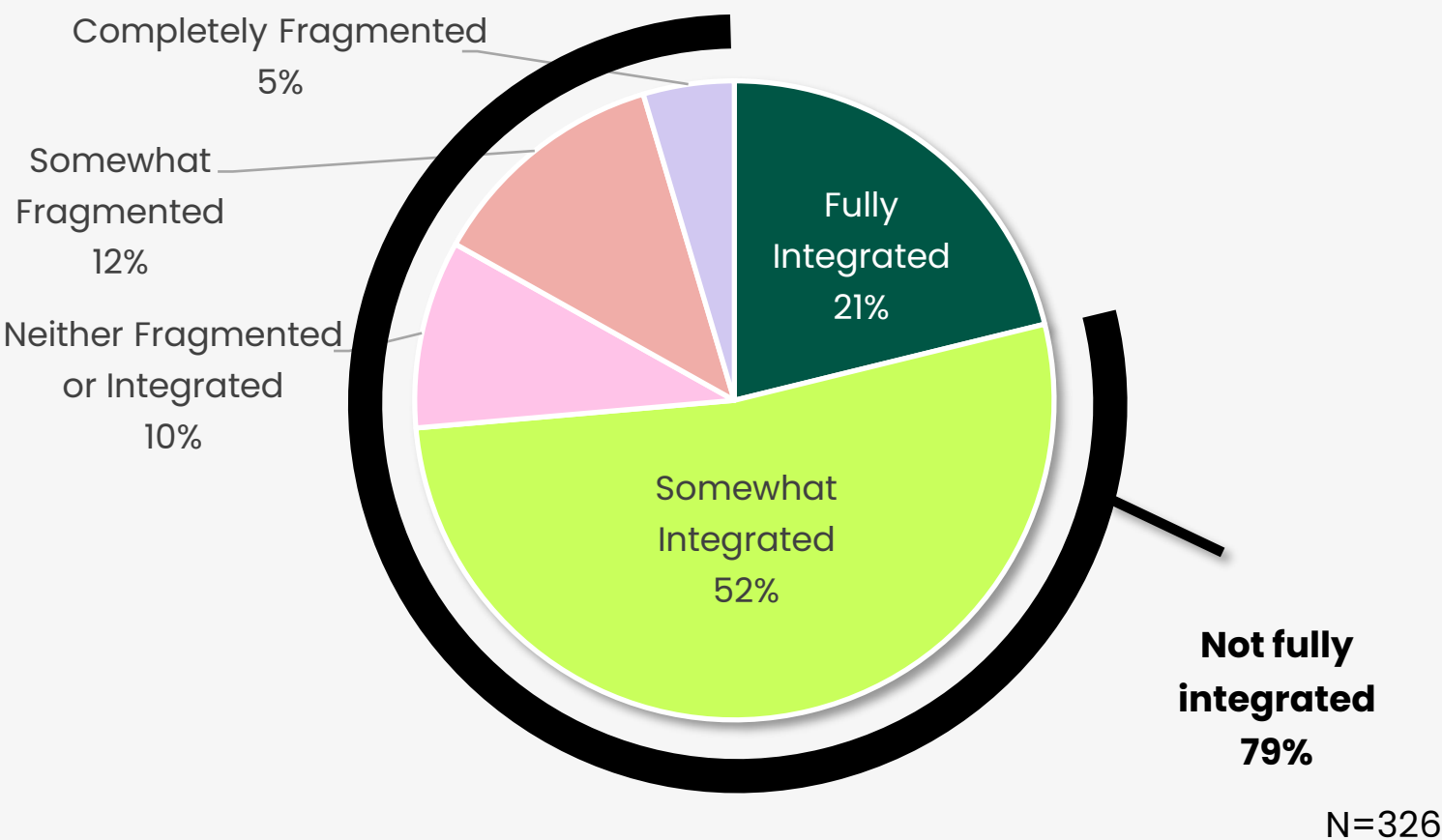


Figure 5: Level of Integration Across Performance Marketing Channels

**The Root of the Fragmentation Problem:
Difficulty in Identifying Across Pre-
Conversion Touchpoints**

When asked how difficult it is to identify the same customer across multiple touchpoints before they convert, 56% say it's at least somewhat easy, leaving 44% who do not find it easy at all. Close to a third of respondents (32%) describe it as an active challenge.

This is likely a root cause of the fragmentation problem highlighted on the previous page. If organizations struggle to recognize that a single user moved from watching a video to reading an article to checking an email before converting, true cross-channel integration becomes structurally difficult to achieve, regardless of intent or investment. The technical challenge of stitching together identity across touchpoints appears to be a barrier standing between marketers and the unified view they need to reach new audiences rather than repeatedly targeting existing ones.

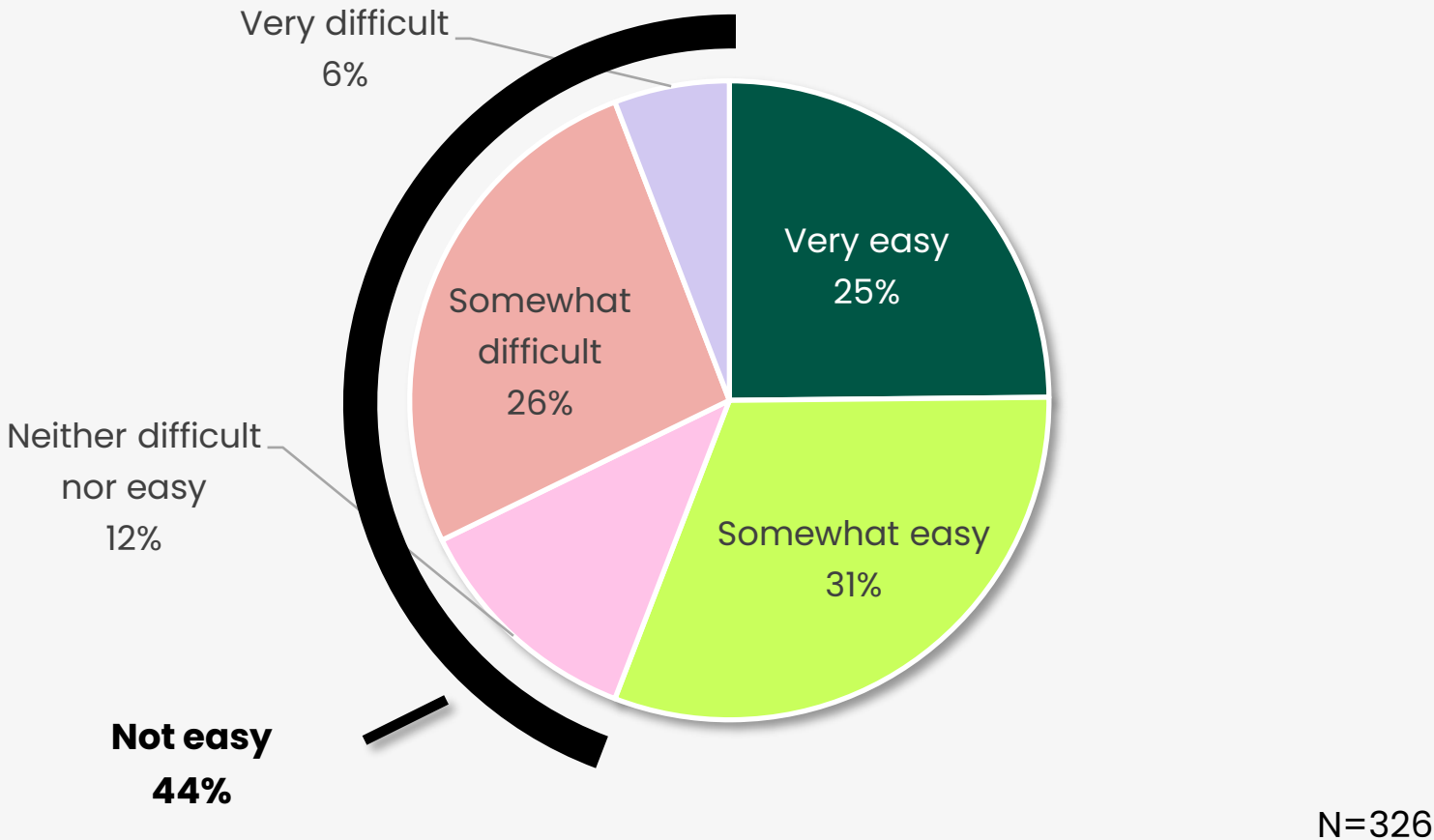


Figure 6: Difficulty in Identifying Unconverted Customers Across Pre-Conversion Touchpoints

Consumer Intent Gets Lost Outside Walled Gardens

Building on the identity challenges seen in the previous finding, this data points to their underlying source: the open web itself lacks a consistent way to identify users. The top barrier to understanding consumer intent outside walled gardens is limited standardization of audience/identity data across the open web (35%): in other words, the inability to reliably recognize that the same person who browsed on one device subsequently switched browsers, then moved from an app to a domain, and back again is, in fact, one continuous user.

The ongoing loss of third-party cookies and tracking signals (21%), a lack of reliable, privacy-safe identity solutions (17%), and fragmented data across publisher sites (16%), round out a fairly even spread of related obstacles.

Taken together, these barriers describe an open web that is simply too fragmented to navigate efficiently. Without a standardized identity layer, advertisers can't consistently find the users most likely to convert, let alone track them across multiple touchpoints. The open web's structural lack of a common identity standard makes reaching new audiences difficult to achieve in practice.

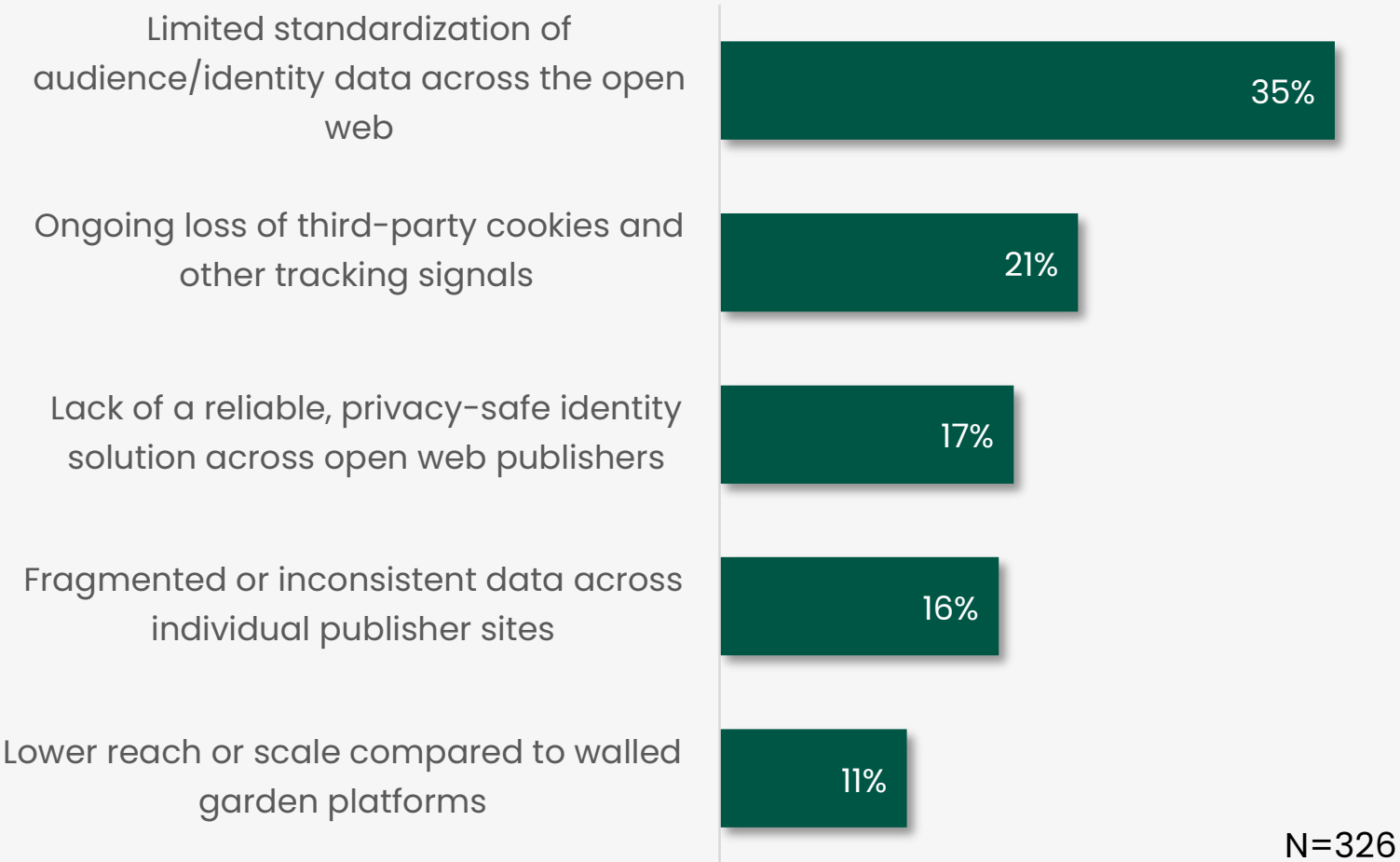


Figure 7: Limitations to Understanding Consumer Intent Outside Walled Gardens

Without an Identity Solution, How Difficult is it to Understand Consumer Intent Outside of Closed Ecosystems?

The lack of an identity solution is cited as a main blocker to understanding consumer intent.

When asked specifically how difficult it is to understand and act on consumer intent outside closed ecosystems like Google, Meta, and Amazon without a robust identity solution in place, close to half (49%) say it's not easy, and only 17% call it very easy. More than a third (35%) describe it as an outright challenge.

This reinforces the throughline connecting these last few findings: it isn't a lack of ambition holding advertisers back from reaching new audiences on the open web, it's a lack of the identity infrastructure needed to do it well. Without a way to resolve who a user is across the open web, marketers are left guessing at intent rather than acting on it. This helps explain why so much incremental budget still flows back to the same walled gardens and the same familiar audiences, even when the stated goal is to expand beyond them.

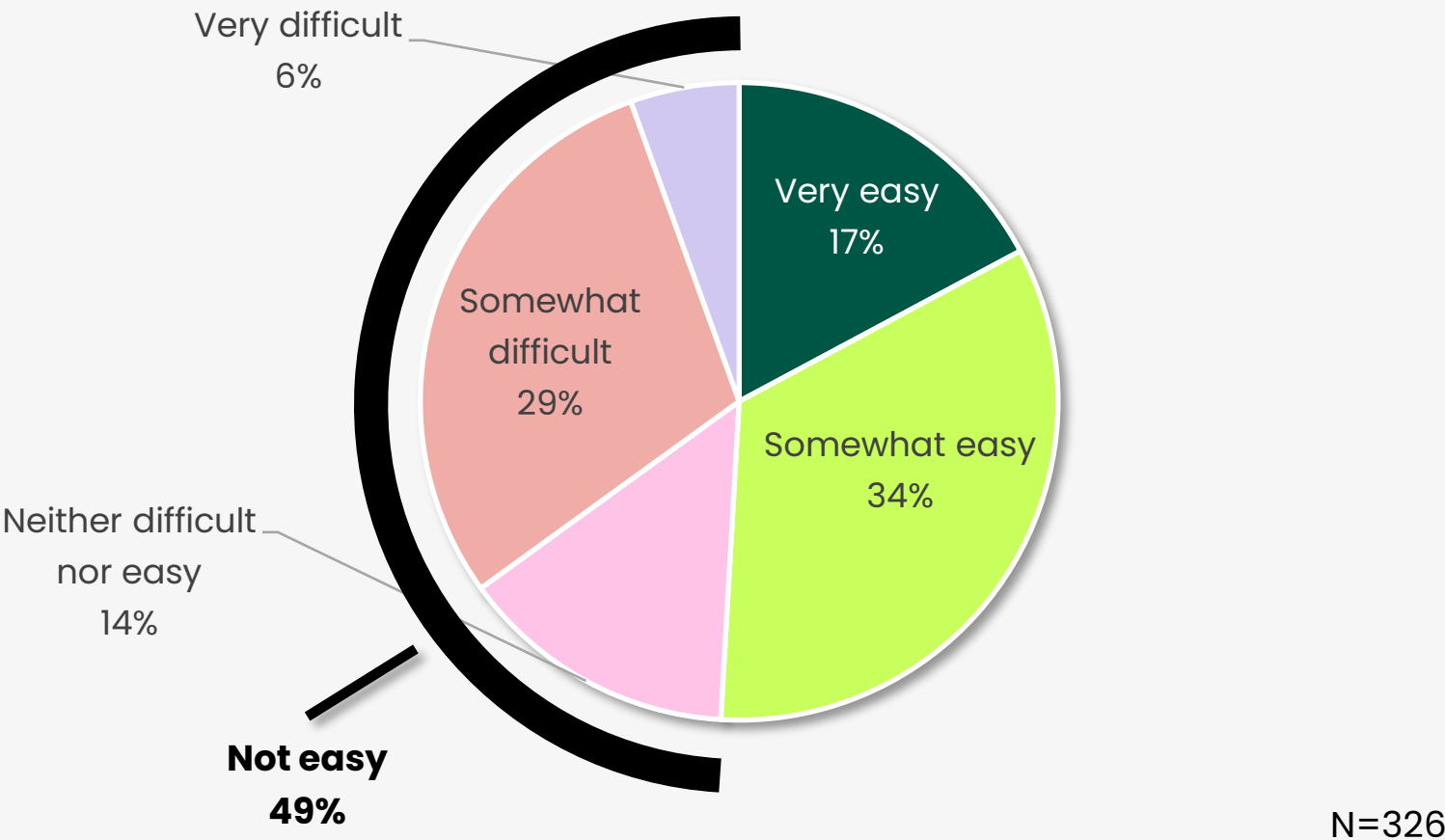


Figure 8: Difficulty Understanding and Acting on Intent Outside Closed Ecosystems Without an Identity Solution

Organizational Appetite for Shifting Ad Spend from Walled Gardens to the Open Web

Despite the identity and fragmentation challenges outlined in the previous findings, the appeal of the open web remains strong.

A large majority of respondents (81%) say their organization is very or somewhat open to increasing ad spend on the open web, including on independent publishers, news sites, and blogs, relative to walled garden platforms like Google, Meta, and Amazon. Just 6% describe their organization as resistant to the shift.

This means that the barriers holding advertisers back from the open web aren't a matter of will. Organizations recognize the potential of reaching audiences beyond walled gardens and are largely willing to shift spend there.

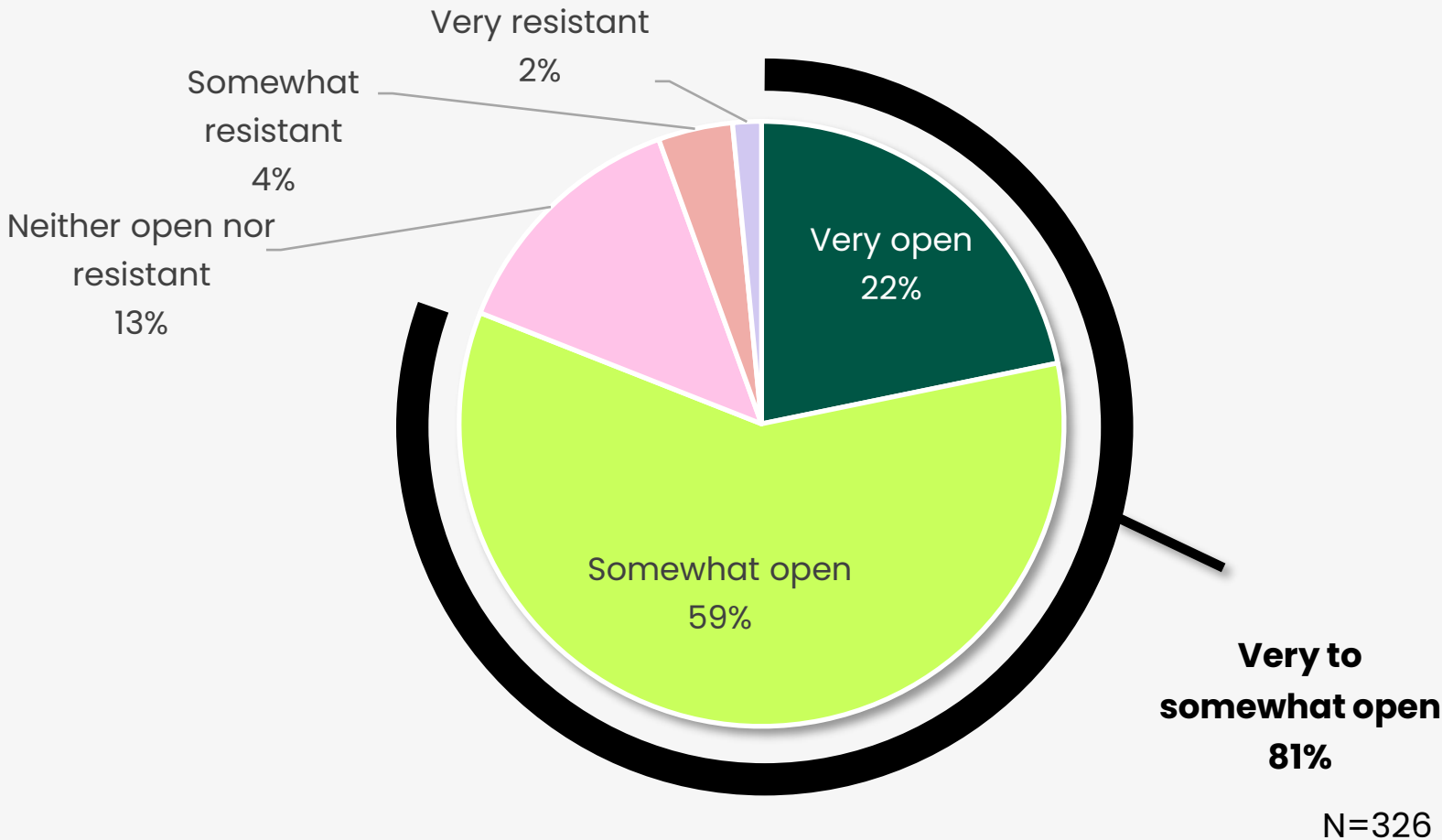


Figure 9: Organizational Openness to Shifting Ad Spend from Walled Gardens to the Open Web

Why The Open Web Loses Out on Ad Spend to Walled Gardens

The barriers to shifting ad spend to the open web are spread fairly evenly across a range of concerns, each reinforcing the fragmentation and identity challenges already covered. The top barrier is lower confidence in targeting accuracy (18%): marketers simply trust their ability to precisely reach a defined audience, like women who demonstrate a likelihood of buying a new car or college students who are looking for healthy meals, more inside a walled garden than outside one. Difficulty proving incremental ROI to leadership follows closely (17%), a challenge directly tied to the audience expansion problem; if you can't confidently reach new audiences who are likely to buy your product, it's hard to prove the incremental performance that justifies the spend in the first place.

The remaining answers round out the picture: While 14% are satisfied with results from other platforms and feel no pressure to diversify, attribution and tracking a journey outside closed ecosystems (13%), brand safety and content quality concerns (13%), and internal processes that favor walled gardens by default (13%) all contribute meaningfully as well.

Taken together, this is a story of accumulated friction, where targeting, measurement, satisfaction, tracking, safety, and process all pull in the same direction, and collectively keep spend anchored to walled gardens even as appetite to diversify.

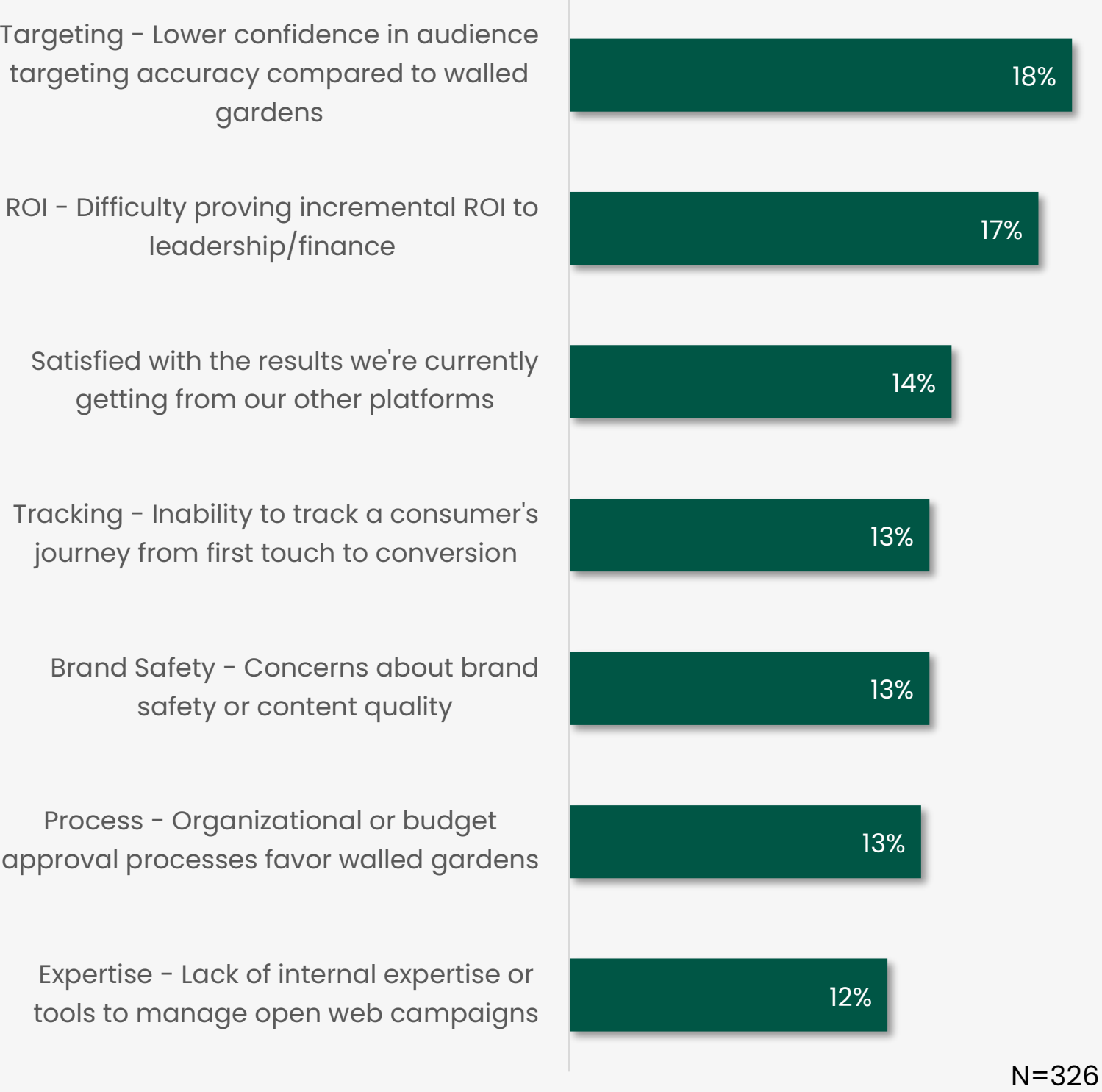


Figure 10: Primary Reasons Inhibiting Shift of Ad Spend to the Open Web

Solve Identity and Intent, and You Unlock the Open Web

We asked marketing and advertising leaders, if the open web offered a true closed-loop targeting environment, meaning the ability to track a consumer's journey from first touch all the way to conversion, how likely would your organization be to shift a portion of its ad budget to the open web?

92% of advertisers say they'd shift budget to the open web if they could confidently identify a single consumer across their entire journey, from what they're reading, to what they click, to what they ultimately buy. This is fundamentally about the ability to know that the person who read an article, clicked a display ad, and converted is one single user, rather than three disconnected touchpoints. That level of identity confidence is exactly what walled gardens already offer marketers today, and its absence on the open web, as shown throughout this report, is the core reason budget keeps defaulting back to familiar platforms and familiar audiences.

Close that identity gap, and almost all advertisers say they're ready to act.

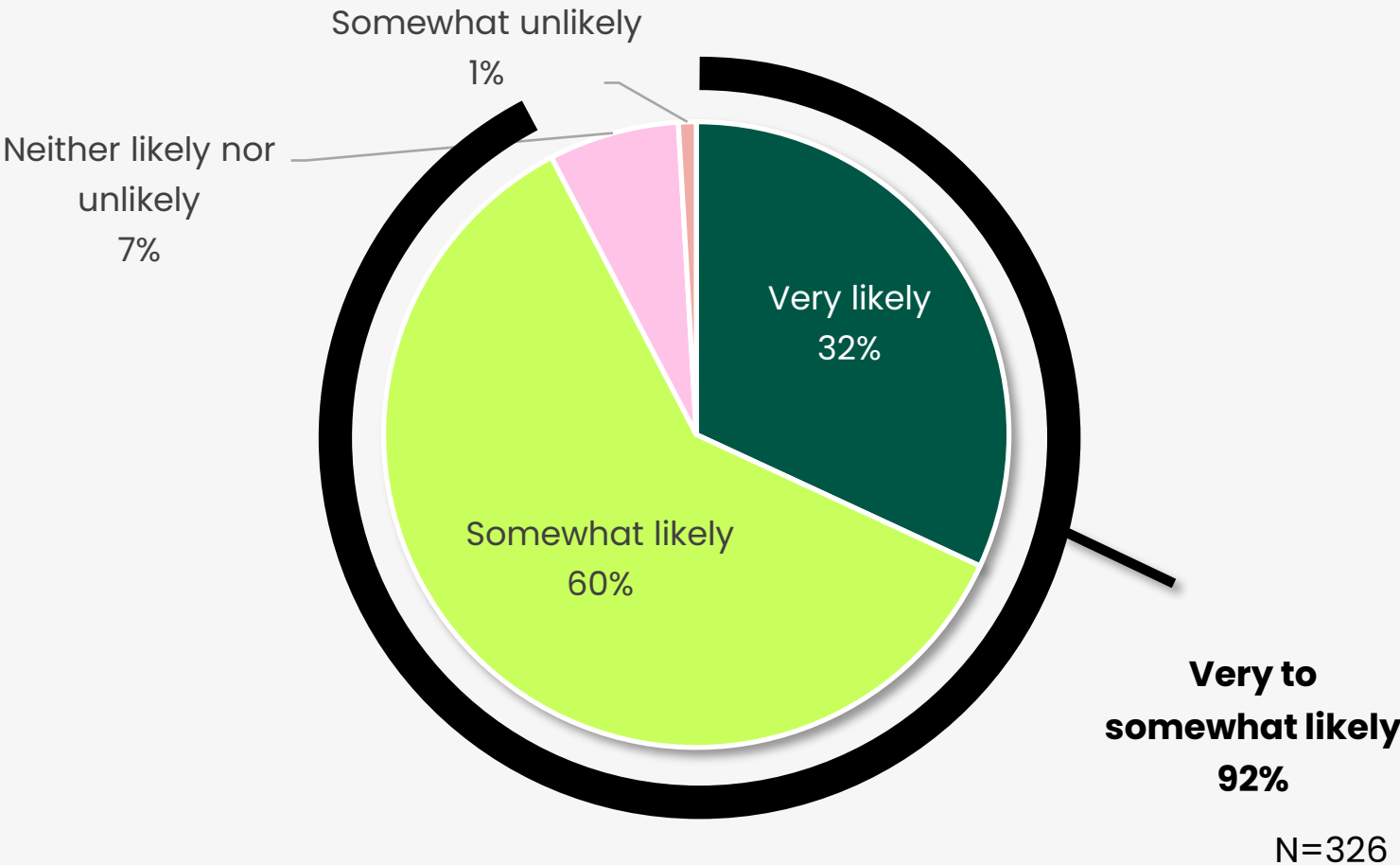


Figure 11: Likelihood of Reallocating Budget to Open Web Given True Closed-Loop Targeting Environment

Projected Proportion of Ad Budget Reallocation if the Open Web Offered a True Closed-Loop Targeting Environment

If this view of identity was in place, what percentage of budget would move to the open web? On average, advertisers say they'd reallocate 28% of their current ad budget to the open web if it offered a true closed-loop targeting environment, and notably, 0% of respondents said they'd move nothing. Every single organization surveyed would put at least some budget behind the open web if they could closely follow the customer journey wherever it moved, with 38% willing to reallocate 26–50% of their budget, and 10% that would consider moving more than half their budget for this purpose. This data suggests that solving the open web's identity gap would unlock a substantial, immediate reallocation of budget which is already in motion elsewhere.

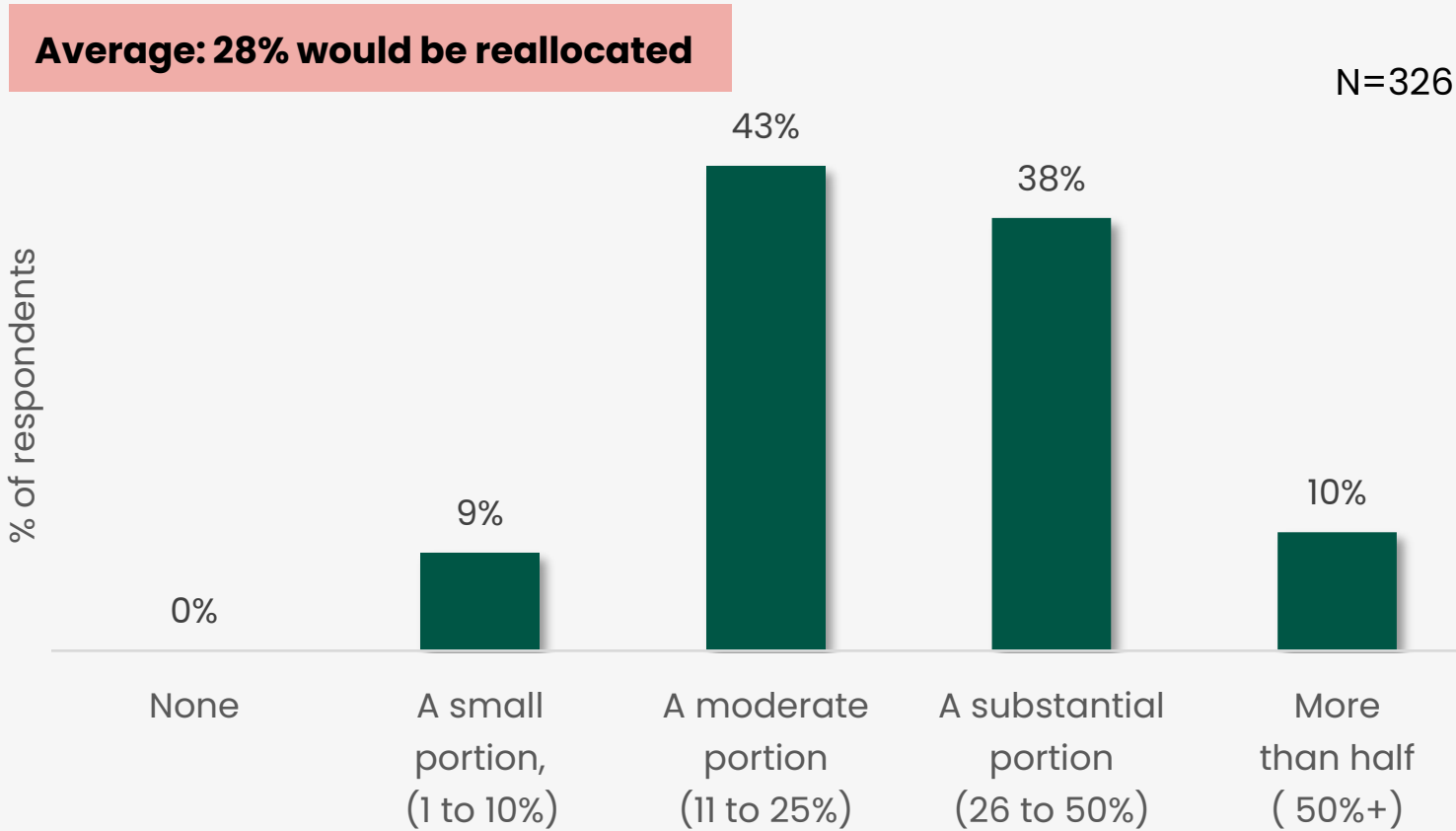


Figure 12: Projected Proportion of Current Ad Budget Reallocated to Open Web with Closed-Loop Targeting Environment

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Demographics

Country, Industry, Company Size, Job Seniority, Company’s approximate total monthly marketing spend (USD)

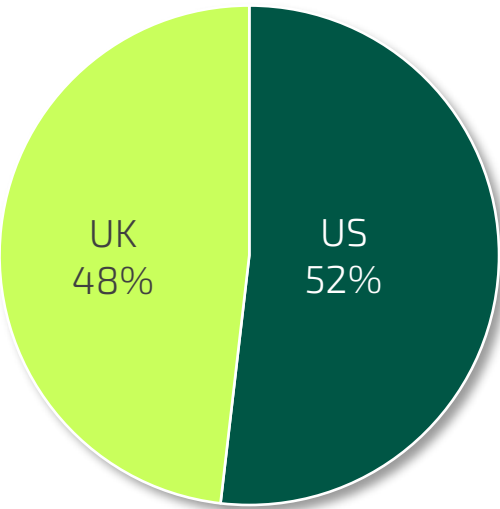


Figure 13: Country

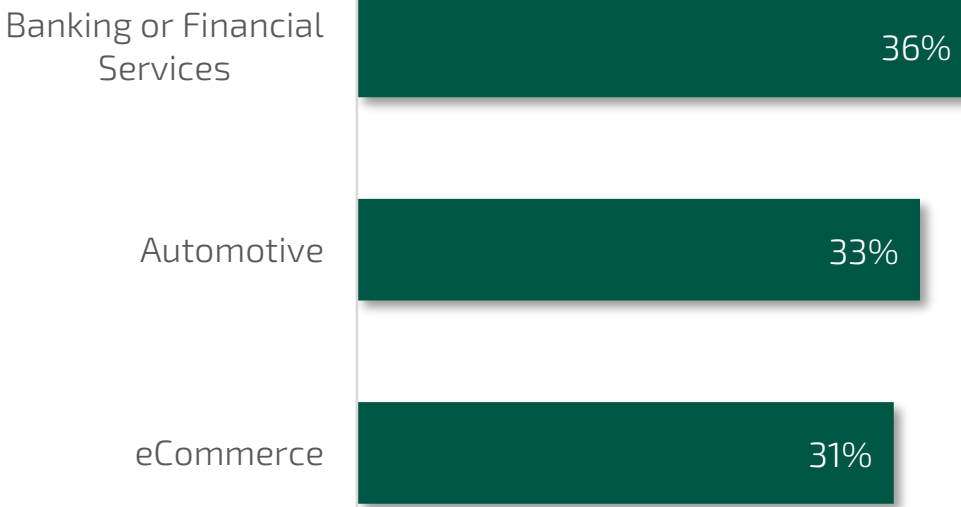


Figure 14: Industry

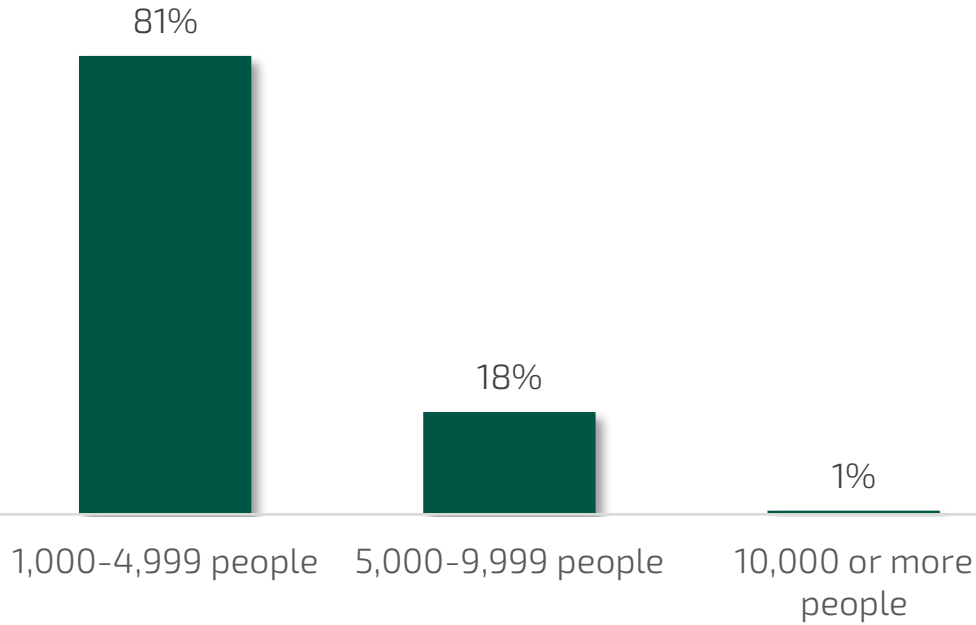


Figure 15: Company Size

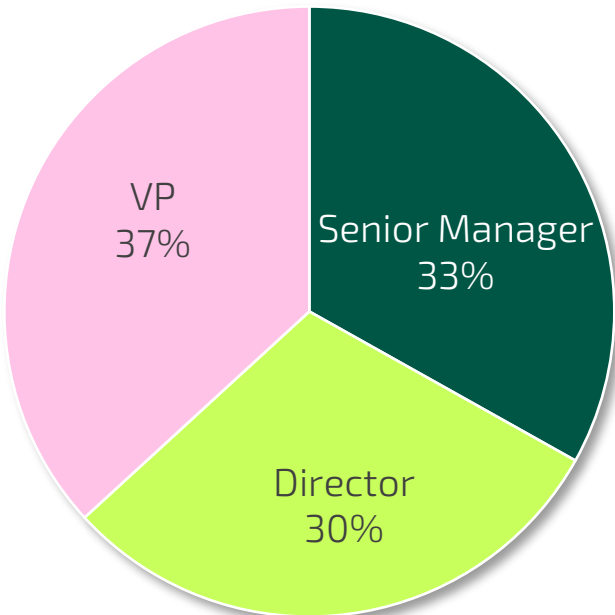


Figure 16: Job Seniority

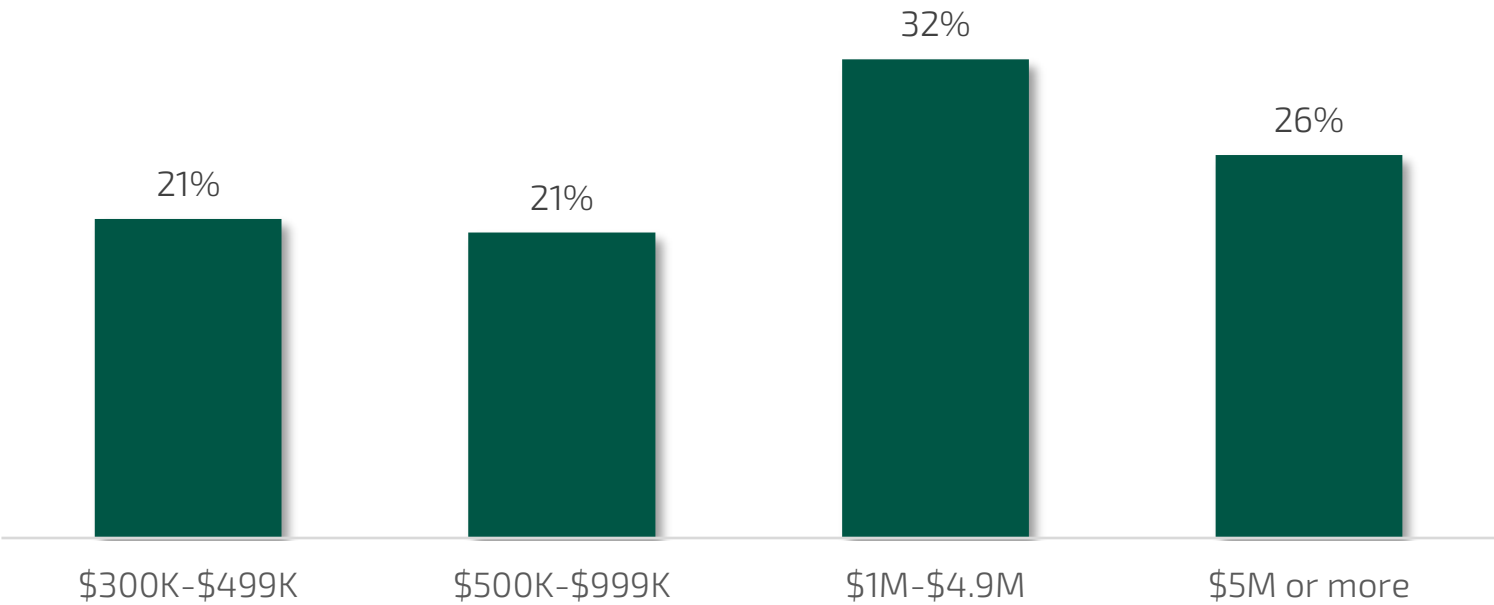


Figure 17: Company’s approximate total monthly marketing spend (USD)

About Realize

Realize is Taboola's performance advertising platform built for advertisers, unlocking measurable outcomes at scale beyond search and social.

It brings together premium publisher supply, first-party data, and AI-powered technology, enabling marketers to reach more than 600 million daily active users in brand-safe environments, across formats including display, video, and app promotion, with the same simplicity and confidence they expect from walled gardens.

Realize ID is Realize's identity and signal infrastructure, designed to recognize a single user across the open web's fragmented mix of publishers, devices, and domains. Most identity graph providers can confirm that a user returned, but recognition alone reveals little about what that user actually wants. Realize ID clusters the identifiers a person leaves behind—including cookie-based IDs, mobile advertising IDs, publisher IDs, hashed emails, and RampID—into a single persistent profile, processing hundreds of millions of these clusters daily so that each profile stays current.

Because Taboola's code sits on both ends of the customer journey, on the publisher page where interest first appears and on the advertiser's site where the purchase is completed, every signal in between, including search intent, engagement, cart abandonment, and conversion, writes back to the same ID, producing a closed loop that platforms working from only one side of the transaction, such as DSPs, SSPs, or identity providers, are structurally unable to build on their own.

The result is a profile that reflects what a user is likely to buy rather than simply who they resemble demographically, and the effect is measurable. Campaigns built on Realize ID's directly observed signals have produced CPAs up to 40% lower and conversion rates up to 144% higher. Advertisers and agencies can also connect their own CRM, DMP or CDP, or identity graph data to enrich the profile further, turning an audience they already own into one with live purchase intent attached.

[Start Your Realize Campaign](#)



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