

46% of Consumers Trust Brands More When Partnerships Support a Cause

SponsorCX research finds transparent sponsorships, customer content, & meaningful partnerships outperform marketing that feels overly polished or performative.

LEHI, UT, UNITED STATES, August 4, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Consumers are not turning away from brand partnerships, but they are becoming more selective about which ones earn their trust. A [new study from SponsorCX](#) finds that 46% of Americans trust a company more when its partnerships support charitable causes or meaningful social impact.



Seven in ten Americans trust recommendations from friends and family, while 59% say clearly labeled sponsorships make content more credible.

Transparency also matters. Fifty-nine percent say clearly labeled sponsorships make them more likely to trust the content, while 44% strongly trust photos, videos, and other content created by real customers.

The survey of 1,000 U.S. adults, conducted through Pollfish, examined consumer trust in sponsorships, online reviews, influencer and celebrity endorsements, user-generated content, and artificial intelligence-assisted product research.

The results show that consumers respond most positively to partnerships that have a clear purpose, disclose the commercial relationship, and feature credible human experiences. Marketing that feels overly polished, automated, or disconnected from a brand's actions is increasingly met with skepticism.

Key Takeaways

- 46% say partnerships tied to charitable causes or social impact increase their trust in a company

- 59% say clearly labeled sponsorships make content more trustworthy
- 70% strongly or completely trust recommendations from friends and family
- 44% strongly trust user-generated content
- 45% say customer-submitted photos or videos influence whether they purchase
- 39% say brand-to-brand collaborations increase trust
- 78% say modern marketing often feels more performative than genuine
- 67% say brands overuse the word “authentic” without supporting it through their actions
- 94% check online reviews before making a purchase
- 82% say artificial intelligence-generated content makes it harder to determine what is genuine online

Purpose-Based Partnerships Build Consumer Trust

Consumers are more likely to respond positively when a brand partnership supports a clear purpose beyond promotion.

Nearly half of Americans, 46%, say partnerships tied to charitable causes or meaningful social impact increase their trust in a company. Only 12% say those partnerships decrease trust, creating a substantial positive difference between favorable and unfavorable reactions.

Cause-based partnerships performed especially well among younger consumers. Fifty-seven percent of Generation Z say these relationships increase their trust in a brand, compared with 36% of Baby Boomers.

Traditional collaborations between companies also received a positive response.

- 39% say brand-to-brand collaborations increase trust
- 10% say brand-to-brand collaborations decrease trust
- 26% say influencer partnerships increase trust
- 25% say influencer partnerships decrease trust

The data shows that consumers evaluate more than who is involved in a partnership. They also consider why the relationship exists, whether it aligns with the brand’s values, and whether it creates a meaningful benefit for customers or communities.

Partnerships linked to charitable work, community support, or a shared mission give consumers a clearer reason to believe the relationship extends beyond paid exposure.

Transparency Makes Sponsored Content More Credible

Consumers understand that brands pay for sponsorships and partnerships. What matters is whether those commercial relationships are communicated clearly.

Fifty-nine percent say clearly labeled sponsorships make them more likely to trust the content. At the same time, 74% say there is too much sponsored content across digital platforms, and 69% question the motives behind the sponsored material they encounter.

- 46% feel confident distinguishing paid content from organic content
- 64% believe search results are influenced more by marketing than content quality
- 48% say celebrity or influencer endorsements mainly signal that a brand paid for promotion
- 8% believe an endorsement necessarily reflects the promoter's genuine opinion

Consumers are not rejecting sponsored content simply because money is involved. They are more skeptical when the relationship is unclear, the partner appears disconnected from the brand, or promotional content is presented as an independent recommendation. Clear labeling allows consumers to understand the context and evaluate the message on its merits.

Authenticity Has Become Harder for Brands to Prove

Brands frequently describe themselves as authentic, but many consumers believe the term has been overused.

More than three-quarters of Americans, 78%, say modern marketing often feels performative rather than genuine. That sentiment appeared consistently across generations, including 72% of Generation Z, 74% of Millennials, and 79% of both Generation X and Baby Boomers.

More than two-thirds, 67%, say companies use the word "authentic" too often without supporting it through meaningful action.

For consumers, authenticity is less about the language a brand uses and more about the evidence it provides. That evidence may include transparent partnerships, recognizable customer experiences, consistent company behavior, or programs that create a measurable benefit for a community.

Brands that repeatedly describe themselves as authentic without demonstrating those values risk creating greater skepticism rather than trust.

Friends and Family Remain the Most Trusted Source

As digital content becomes easier to produce and harder to verify, consumers continue to place the greatest confidence in people they know personally.

Seven in ten Americans, 70%, strongly or completely trust recommendations from friends and family.

That trust level remained consistent across genders and generations and was more than twice as

high as the trust associated with influencers, sponsored content, or artificial intelligence-generated recommendations.

Customer-created content also performed well.

- 44% strongly trust user-generated content
- 45% say customer-submitted photos or videos influence whether they purchase
- 32% strongly or completely trust third-party review websites
- 17% trust influencer recommendations

Real customer photos, videos, and stories provide evidence that feels more personal and verifiable than polished advertising. For brands, this creates an opportunity to build partnerships and campaigns that encourage genuine participation rather than relying entirely on professionally produced promotional content.

Online Reviews Remain Essential but Harder to Verify

Online reviews continue to play a major role in purchasing decisions. Ninety-four percent of Americans check reviews before buying a product.

However, the growing presence of artificial intelligence-generated content and suspicious activity has made consumers less certain about what they are reading.

More than four in five Americans, 82%, say artificial intelligence-generated content makes online reviews harder to trust.

Suspicious reviews can also cause consumers to avoid a company entirely.

- 55% have avoided a brand because of artificial intelligence-generated reviews
- 55% have avoided a company because it had too many suspicious reviews
- 49% have been discouraged by endorsements that appeared fake or untrustworthy
- 39% have avoided a brand because of artificial intelligence-generated content
- 34% have been discouraged by excessive advertising
- 33% have reacted negatively to branding that felt overly polished

More than one-quarter of consumers, 26%, say they have regretted a purchase because the reviews or promotional content were misleading. That figure rises to 38% among Generation Z.

Women were more likely than men to regularly read reviews before buying, at 55% compared with 43%. Women were also more likely to avoid brands using artificial intelligence-generated material, at 42% compared with 35% of men.

Reviews remain important, but consumers are increasingly treating them as one piece of

evidence rather than a definitive source of truth.

Artificial Intelligence Is Changing How Consumers Research Products

Artificial intelligence has created a complicated relationship between convenience and credibility. More than half of Americans, 51%, say they have used tools such as ChatGPT to research a product rather than relying solely on traditional reviews or search engines.

Use was highest among younger consumers.

- 70% of Generation Z have used artificial intelligence for product research
- 60% of Millennials have used it
- 44% of Generation X have used it
- 33% of Baby Boomers have used it

Thirty-five percent of Generation Z use artificial intelligence tools regularly when researching products. At the same time, 82% of Americans say artificial intelligence-generated material makes it harder to determine what is genuine online.

Consumers are using the technology to help evaluate information while also questioning whether the content they encounter may have been created or manipulated by the same tools.

Nearly one-third, 31%, now cross-reference several sources before making a purchase. Only 18% primarily rely on reviews and recommendations alone.

Men were more likely than women to replace traditional research with artificial intelligence tools, at 58% compared with 45%. Men were also more likely to strongly trust artificial intelligence-generated information, at 23% compared with 12% of women.

The growing use of artificial intelligence makes consistency and transparency increasingly important. Brands need to ensure that claims, reviews, partnership disclosures, and customer experiences remain aligned across every platform where consumers may encounter them.

Influencer Marketing Works Best When the Partnership Makes Sense

Consumers encounter paid influencer content frequently, but exposure alone does not create trust.

Nearly half of Americans, 48%, say they often see paid influencer promotions online. Sixty percent report having little or no trust in influencer recommendations, while 17% say they trust them.

Trust was higher among Generation Z, at 37%, showing that influencer partnerships can still

resonate with audiences when the relationship feels relevant.

- 35% notice influencer promotions but continue scrolling without taking action
- 20% ignore influencer promotions entirely
- 27% interpret a major endorsement as evidence of a large marketing budget
- 48% primarily view an endorsement as proof that the brand paid for promotion

Influencer partnerships are also received differently across generations. Eighty percent of Baby Boomers report little or no trust in influencer recommendations, and 38% have avoided a brand because of the influencer it selected.

The data does not mean brands should abandon influencer partnerships. It shows that the choice of partner, the relevance of the relationship, and the transparency of the promotion all affect how consumers respond.

A recognizable personality may generate reach, but credibility depends on whether consumers understand why that person is connected to the product, organization, or cause.

Customer Participation Can Strengthen Brand Credibility

Content created by actual customers provides a stronger trust signal than many professionally produced promotions.

Forty-four percent strongly trust user-generated content, while 45% say customer-submitted photos or videos influence their purchasing decisions.

Customer content gives consumers a view of how a product or service works outside a controlled advertising environment. It can also demonstrate that a brand has an active community rather than an audience that only receives promotional messages.

Brands can strengthen customer participation by creating campaigns, sponsorship activations, and partnership programs that invite people to contribute their own experiences.

This may include event content, customer stories, community challenges, charitable initiatives, or opportunities for customers to show how they use a product in everyday life.

The most effective programs give participants a meaningful role rather than treating them as an additional distribution channel.

Consumers Want Proof, Not Just Promises

Consumers are not abandoning sponsorships, online reviews, influencer content, or artificial intelligence-assisted research. They are becoming more deliberate about which information

deserves their trust.

Personal recommendations remain the strongest influence because they come from people consumers already know. Customer-created content performs well because it reflects recognizable experiences. Transparent sponsorships give audiences enough context to judge a commercial relationship fairly.

Purpose-based partnerships stand out because they demonstrate what a brand values through action.

For companies, building trust requires more than broad visibility or polished creative work. Consumers want to understand why a partnership exists, how it benefits the people involved, and whether it aligns with the company's stated values.

Brands that clearly disclose sponsorships, select relevant partners, encourage genuine customer participation, and connect campaigns to meaningful outcomes are better positioned to build lasting credibility.

View the full study here:

<https://www.sponsorcx.com/social-proof-trust-marketing-study/>

About SponsorCX

SponsorCX powers modern partnership operations for sports and entertainment organizations and the brands that invest in them. It supports properties and brands through every stage of the sponsorship lifecycle, including sales, inventory, fulfillment, scheduling, agreements, and reporting. As sponsorships grow more complex, SponsorCX helps teams and partners move beyond legacy systems and manual processes with a flexible platform that simplifies workflows, improves visibility, and drives measurable results. With a focus on innovation, including emerging AI capabilities, SponsorCX is helping lead the shift toward a more connected, efficient, and data-driven future for sponsorships.

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