

**Merritt**GROUP

# MARKETING & SELLING TO THE CISO

**2020** EDITION



Marketing to today's CISO is no easy task. CISOs have an unprecedented amount of work on their plates with constantly shifting technology, vast amounts of data in motion, regulatory requirements and new threats arising daily.

Despite all of this, the CISO still has to find and patch every possible vulnerability to minimize risks to their organization. [Top CISOs](#) do an extensive amount of research to learn what they need, and they often find that the typical sales approach fails to understand what that process looks like.

To learn how B2B cybersecurity vendors can do better, [Merritt Group](#) partnered with [T.E.N.](#), a technology and information security executive networking and relationship-marketing firm with extensive experience in the space, to survey a select group of leading CISOs to find out how to most effectively get their attention and trigger a sale.



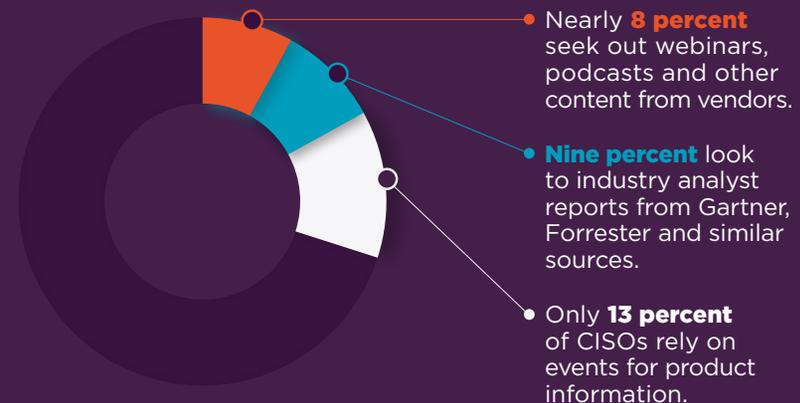
It's important to note that this survey was conducted between November 2019 and January 2020, before in-person events and face-to-face meetings were canceled due to COVID-19. To ensure newer CISO perspectives were captured, Merritt Group augmented this report with real-world feedback from their CISO network on how they are managing vendor relations in the newer, more virtual world. Following is the output of that collective analysis.

## THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION: HOW CISOs LOOK AT PRODUCT NEEDS

With so much information to consume, CISOs have to be strategic about the resources they leverage to drive their security decisions and purchases. In an effort to get the best information possible, they tend to educate themselves constantly, strongly preferring third-party informative content over marketing materials. They also trust their colleagues, valuing peer experience more than anything else.

### CISOs VALUE PEER INPUT MOST

For CISOs in 2020, peer-to-peer experiences carry more weight than any other factor. Around **64 percent** of surveyed CISOs say they rely on peer communications and word of mouth to learn about new security products and vendors. That's far more than they rely on any other source.



Notice that market influencers don't have a presence on this list. That's because 60 percent of surveyed CISOs don't even follow influencers, let alone turn to them first for information. That's good news for vendors, who can spend less time courting influencer favor and more time building valuable, long-term relationships with customers.

Strong customer relationships may be a cybersecurity vendor's most important asset in this market. When peer opinions matter most, referrals are gold.

**CISOs PREFER OBJECTIVE THIRD-PARTY MATERIAL**

CISOs have to be up to the minute on what's going on in the industry, and for that, they turn to their colleagues far more than any other source.



**13 percent**  
depend on videos and webinars.



**28 percent**  
look to research reports.



**43 percent**  
of CISOs rely on peers to connect on cyber trends.

CISOs are also looking for sources that will give them important information quickly.



**89 percent** of CISOs read vendor blogs.

Of those CISOs:



**11 percent**  
read about new products.

**25 percent**  
look for evolving market trends and predictions.

**53 percent** read articles on new threats or attacks.



CISOs also follow security trade media outlets and blogs like KrebsOnSecurity, CSO and SC Magazine to stay current with industry news. These sources carry more weight than general business press like CNN or The Wall Street Journal.

For vendors, the key takeaway here is clear: an up-to-date and informative blog is important, but so is a good reputation and solid brand awareness among industry trade press. PR teams should consider what information is valuable to CISOs when pitching reporters and deliver value through data-driven insights.

### What Sources Should Vendors Avoid?

CISOs aren't using podcasts or social media to keep up with industry news. Approximately **13 percent of CISOs don't use social media at all**. Now is a great time for vendors to take money out of their social media budget and put it into public relations and blog content.

Another investment to avoid is the industry analyst report. CISOs seem to be particularly skeptical of these vendor assessments and market analyses. These have a reputation for featuring vendors that pay for analyst engagements, resulting in inclusion. This system has hurt the credibility of industry analyst reports, and thus the impact they have on CISO purchasing behavior.

### CISOs EVALUATE FACE-TO-FACE AND HANDS-ON

Today's CISOs don't want to be passive recipients of sales pitches. Just the opposite — they want to discuss, evaluate and continue to educate themselves. Among our survey respondents in 2020, the most popular settings for evaluating cybersecurity vendor solutions were **roundtable events and dinners, which 38 percent of respondents ranked as their top choice**.

Much has changed since these results came in. COVID-19 has put a pause on most in-person events, requiring CISOs to find new ways to meet face-to-face. Roundtables and conferences have gone virtual. Webinars, which **15 percent of CISOs named as preferred ways of evaluating vendor solutions**, have also become more widespread. However, if you're going to plan a virtual event you need to make sure it will be worthwhile for the CISO. Organizations are planning more events than ever before and the quality is being impacted.



Vendors have needed to change how they deliver technical demos and proofs of concept (POCs), also preferred methods for accessing information about solutions. **Whitepapers, ebooks and case studies, preferred by 13 percent to 15 percent of CISOs, have remained evergreen.**

Vendor material, like internally conducted surveys and blog posts, also remains unchanged in perception, but CISOs don't tend to seek it out. In fact, less than **4 percent depend on marketing collateral and/or vendor website content** to evaluate a solution.

### **CISOs EXPECT VENDORS TO DO THEIR RESEARCH**

Above all else, marketing to the CISO requires a personalized and problem-focused approach. There's no such thing as a one-size-fits-all solution in cybersecurity, and CISOs tend to be wary of any such promise.

CISOs do want solutions that address their unique pain points, and nearly half of all CISOs want vendors to do their homework before making a sales or marketing call. More than a quarter of those surveyed say that a phone call from an uninformed sales rep will ruin any chances that rep had of building a relationship.

To earn the attention and trust of CISOs, vendors need to focus on providing solutions. **Around 34 percent of survey respondents say that vendors have a better chance of success if they understand the CISO's problems.**

Once vendors understand what the CISO needs, the next step is to show — not tell — how a particular solution can help. CISOs much prefer product demos to any other form of follow-up. About **34 percent of our survey respondents expressed this preference.**

**Virtual and digital meetings came in second (24 percent)** for preferred follow-up methods, with **in-person meetings (22 percent)** following close behind. **Emails and phone calls (13 percent and five percent)** proved to be the least popular.



## **THE TAKEAWAY?**

Today's CISOs don't want to be told what the best solution is. They want to see the product in action so they can decide for themselves.

# THE EVOLUTION OF CISO MARKETING

Things change quickly in the digital world, and that includes the marketing and sales preferences of CISOs. We recently went back and reviewed the responses from our 2018 edition of Marketing and Selling to the CISO, and we found some important parallels.



## WHAT'S THE SAME?

In 2018, CISOs were already greeting marketing material with a degree of skepticism. **Fewer than 16 percent** of 2018 survey respondents preferred to learn about security problems from sales sheets and brochures, while **66.7 percent preferred to read case studies** and **50 percent looked toward white papers**. In terms of follow-up methods, **digital meetings (27.5 percent)** and **product demos (26.5 percent)** were CISOs' top choices.

Another important similarity is that word of mouth and networking remain respondents' preferred sources for product and vendor information. The consistency here shows that collegial trust remains strong in the cybersecurity world. Reputation still matters.



## WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

In the past two years, conversation and participation have become more important in the cybersecurity decision-making process. Marketing collateral, already a lower priority, has shifted further toward the fringes of CISOs' attention.

Instead, CISOs are seeking out ways to discuss solutions with others. They're relying more on dinners, roundtable events and webinars. They still want to try out products and they're still in favor of virtual discussions, but they favor face-to-face interactions even more.

At the beginning of 2020, that wasn't a problem. Now, however, COVID-19 has made in-person meetings and demos challenging, if not impossible.



## LOOKING AHEAD: MARKETING TO CISOs IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

CISOs are scrambling to close security gaps that simply didn't exist in January. Entire teams are now working remotely, and that means fast-tracking things like risk assessment and control implementation. They're putting new security features in place while battling against new scams, including COVID-related phishing and the infamous "[Zoom bombing](#)."

There are opportunities here for vendors. CISOs need solutions immediately. They need tools for authentication, identity management, cloud security and more. Vendors can help, but they need to be more problem-focused than ever. They need to educate themselves about the issue and then approach CISOs with a solution tailored to their specific problem. The security vendor community has also been coming together to offer free solutions for specific industries under fire right now, like [healthcare](#).



## STRAIGHT FROM THE CISOs

In Q2 2020, Merritt has been in direct touch with CISOs to find out how they're handling vendor interactions without events and how they're managing the challenges presented by COVID-19. We asked about the pros and cons to taking events online and other ways that CISOs are evaluating vendor options. Here's what we learned:

### TOP CISO AT A NETWORK VISIBILITY FIRM:

---

“

*“My time has become even more strained with the additional work of COVID-19, so I'm relying a lot less on things like webinars, sales emails, and so on; instead, I'm spending a lot more time talking to my peers, doing direct research, and asking trusted partners for recommendations. For certain kinds of technology, POCs have become very challenging, and so I'm moving a lot slower on those decisions and spending more time looking to side-by-side products to see where I can get the best value. I personally get most of my recommendations from partners/VARs that I trust, respected industry pubs and leaders, and peer interaction. If you want my attention, ask me a question.”*

“

### FORMER CISO OF NASDAQ:

---

*“There are a number of internal processes changing to align with ‘the new normal,’ whatever that really means going into 2021. We are now relying on platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, etc. Not much has really changed on doing webinars. A lot of new techniques have been taught around Outreach, Sales Navigator, and LinkedIn for content delivery. I don't think I wrote a blog in months. The goal is more new ARR and aligning to Threat Detection and Response.”*

### DIRECTOR OF IT GOVERNANCE IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY:

---

“Each security leader will have their own preference and comfort level with meeting in person or virtual. Please understand that spending and roadmaps will now vary greatly by industry. If you are in shipping or grocery, I’m sure their budgets have remained high or even grown. All of restaurants and hospitality are going to be shrinking. We are still having our monthly ISSA meetings and will have a hybrid meeting next month with our board in person together and the rest of the chapter remote. I think we all need to start moving to a hybrid approach to marketing events where some will feel more comfortable virtually and others will prefer to be in the same room.”

### VICE PRESIDENT & CHIEF INFORMATION SECURITY OFFICER IN THE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY:

---

“I’m attending more webinars, but there have been too many. Organizations are scheduling more events to make up for not being able to events in person. I attended a lot in the beginning, but there are just too many. Because there are so many the quality has gone down. I am setting up my own vendors which fill current gaps.”

### CHIEF INFORMATION SECURITY OFFICER IN THE AUTOMOTIVE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY:

---

“We continue to actively work with vendors -- just via video conferencing now. When it comes to video calls, my advice is to make sure that you have the right folks on these calls. This is not significantly different than before, but more critical now with the remote workforce, furloughs, tighter budgets, etc. Getting the right folks on the call the first time is that much more important.”

These insights from CISOs in the COVID-19 era show that many of their previous preferences and buying priorities are much the same, and simply being emphasized given the pandemic. The job of a CISO is a busy one, and the onset of COVID-19 has only added to their plate. This means that they still have very little time to read marketing materials, prefer trusted peer conversations, and have to be mindful of which security tools will provide the best value. While they still enjoy networking and events, the pandemic has brought those to a major halt and as a result, CISOs are becoming more particular about which virtual sessions they plan to attend.

## IN CONCLUSION: NEXT STEPS

At Merritt Group, we're committed to supporting cybersecurity vendors and CISOs as they navigate a challenging environment. We're encouraging CISOs to keep peer-to-peer conversations going because — now more than ever — there's value in sharing what we know.

Fortunately, with so many virtual communication platforms around today, cybersecurity teams and leaders can still have face-to-face time without having to be in the same room. Those platforms will also help CISOs communicate with vendors — though there will inevitably be some roadblocks.

If you are a security vendor looking to learn more about how to reach your target audience and understand the CISOs mindset, please reach out to

 **MICHELLE SCHAFER**  
[schafer@merrittgrp.com](mailto:schafer@merrittgrp.com)

at Merritt Group today for an informational discussion and recommendations to help you meet your marketing and sales goals.

