



# MARKETING STRATEGY FOR THE FEDERAL BUYING PROCESS

An E-Book Based on the Findings of the 2017 Federal Content Marketing Review



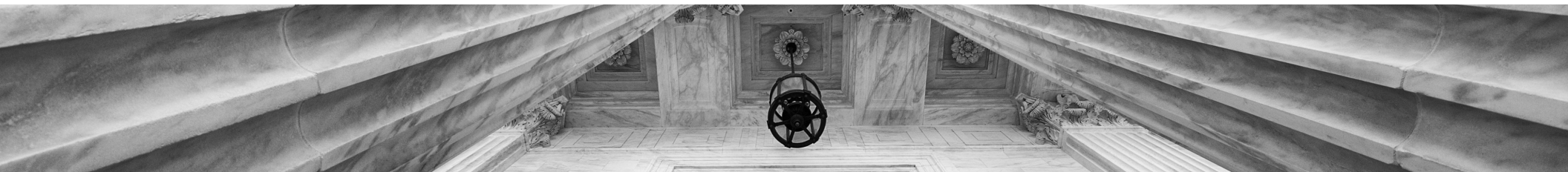
**MerrittGROUP**  
MARKETING | PR | CREATIVE



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# THE STATE OF FEDERAL MARKETING

*The right strategy for getting great content in front of federal buyers is constantly evolving and requires a focus on your target market's changing needs. Contractors and vendors have to not only keep up with the changes in how government decision-makers consume content, but also need the agility to change with administrations and their varied budgets.*

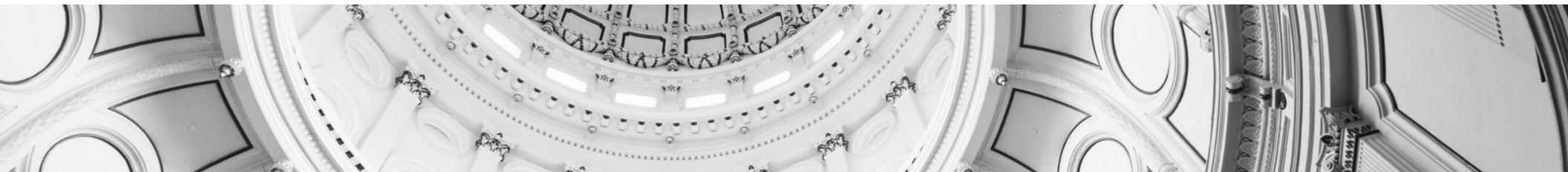
**Despite recent changes, there is one clear message running through the federal government in 2017:**

## FRESH TACTICS: NOW IS THE TIME TO EXPERIMENT.

We are in a political landscape that changes frequently, and companies must be nimble and novel to keep up. Bolder companies that take a “fail fast” approach to new tactics will be rewarded with higher returns on their investments.

Merritt Group and Market Connections are acutely aware of how difficult it is to keep up in this environment. In response, we’ve teamed up again to provide insights into current best practices through our bi-annual Federal Content Marketing Review. This year, we honed in on what makes government decision-makers tick during different parts of the federal buying process.

Our latest research shows how and why federal decision-makers choose the content they do — and through which medium — revealing there is a nuanced roadmap marketers should take to get noticed and land contracts. By looking at the data, we’ve determined that contractors and vendors must invest their energy in differentiated, compelling content for the different stages of the buying process. But this isn’t just about the “what” when it comes to content.



# BREAKING DOWN FEDERAL MARKETING BARRIERS

*Since 2015, there has been a significant increase in barriers preventing content from reaching the federal buyer.*

Have you been hesitant to provide federal decision-makers with mobile content or share content through social mediums, imagining they are stuck on government-owned computers with blocked access to content? Don't be. Since our last survey in 2015, federal decision-makers are increasingly finding work-arounds by accessing work-related content on personal devices and while on the go.

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MARKETERS?

**1**

### **Make content accessible, regardless of where it's being consumed.**

You also need to care about the “where” factor to do it right. Consider investing in content channels you may have previously avoided, like sponsored social posts and native advertising. Then hone your message for the right channel to reach them effectively, wherever they are.

**2**

### **Develop a mobile device strategy to specifically reach commuters.**

While the majority of federal employees are spending their day in front of government-owned devices, our data show that federal decision-makers are consuming content just like the rest of us — on mobile devices — specifically, when commuting to and from work. This presents marketers with an opportunity to engage them on platforms like social media, leading them to content like short videos and podcasts, which can be easily consumed in a short period.





# ALIGNING CONTENT TO THE FEDERAL BUYING PROCESS

*Do you want to get the attention of your federal decision-maker audience? Then you need to provide them the most relevant content to inform each stage of their buying process.*

*Don't go it alone. It's time for marketers and sales professionals to team up. We're living in a new era where both marketing and business development (BD) goals center around nurturing leads through the sales and marketing funnel.*

As agencies move from identifying a need, to writing a request for information/proposal (RFI/RFP), to awarding a contract, make sure marketing is in lockstep with sales to efficiently generate informative content at every stage. The data show shifting content needs for each stage of the federal buying process. Marketing should work in close collaboration with sales to ensure they have the right content to move their federal customers through the sales funnel.

## **Determining Needs and Specifications**

Educate decision-makers on your solutions to problems they don't even know they have. At this stage, position yourself as a thought leader, understanding their key pain points while highlighting your solutions. Information is king, with research reports, white papers and product demos topping the list. This type of content and unbiased research brings new opportunities to light.

## **Shaping RFIs and RFPs**

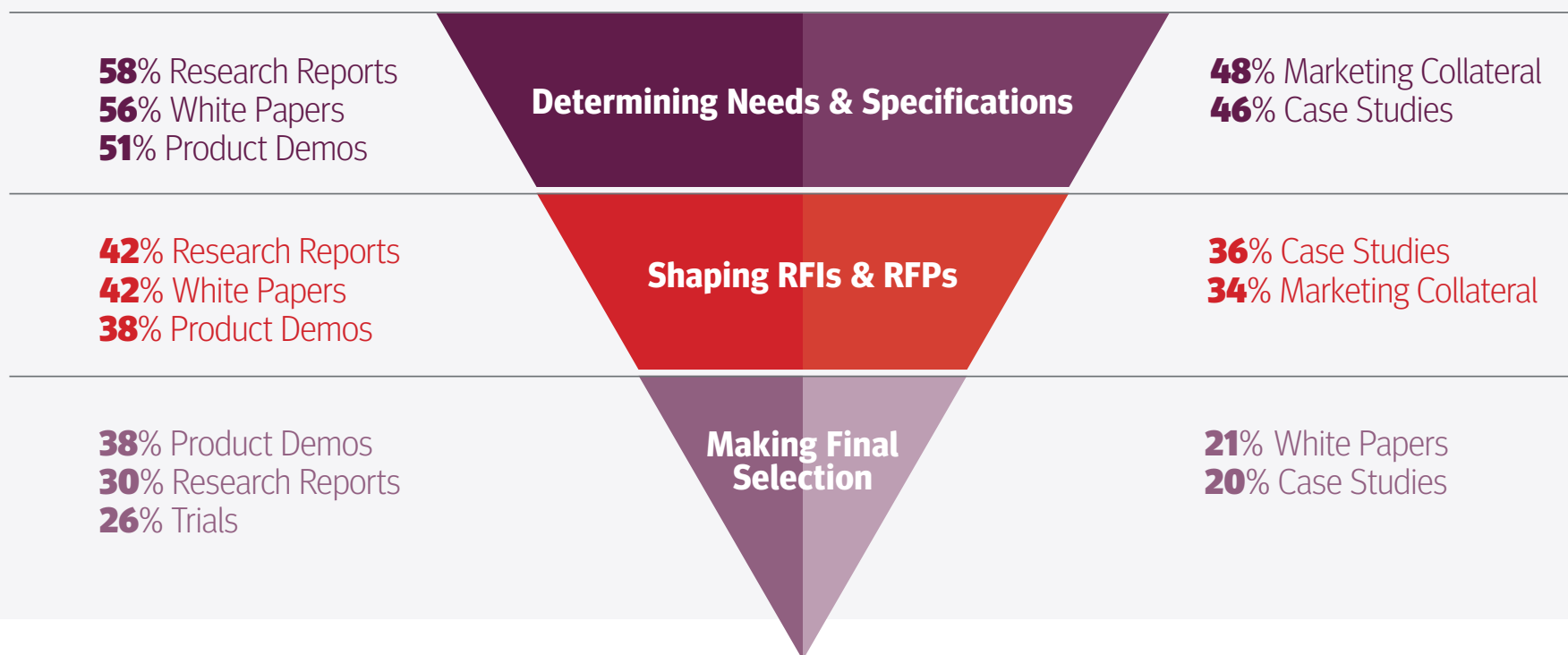
At this stage, government decision-makers are seeking detailed information that will help them flesh out new requirements. They are looking for rich and unique expertise, as well as validation through work with agencies that have faced similar challenges in the past. Third-party research and case studies are critical during this sensitive phase of the process.

## **Making Final Selection**

At this stage, source-selection committees have whittled down their short list of potential awardees and are looking for clear, tangible ways to engage and interact with your solutions. Product demonstrations rise to the top of the list, and trials make it into the top three for the first time. Make sure product demos and trials are available online and are comprehensive, because there is not always an opportunity to present these to source-selection committees in person.

# ALIGNING CONTENT TO THE FEDERAL BUYING PROCESS

## CONTENT MOST VALUED BY FEDERAL DECISION-MAKERS During the Different Stages of Buying Process





# BUILD TRUST THROUGH CONTENT

*Is your federal marketing content specifically tailored to the most important features decision-makers are looking for?*

*To build trust with your buyer, be sure to include the following:*

## Product Specifications —

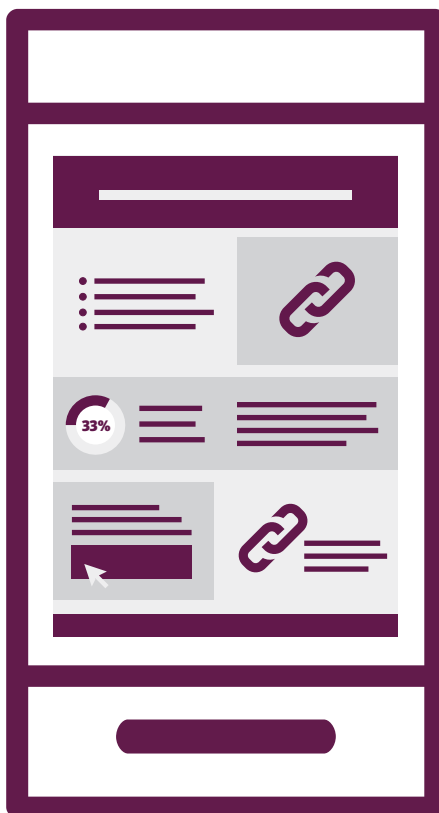
This doesn't just mean data points. Provide them with specifications for the ideal solution and demonstrate how your offering fits those needs.

## Data and Research to Support Content —

More than half of decision-makers want informative, heavy-hitting content backed up by unbiased data and research that supports it.

## Examples of Past Performance/Case Studies —

Federal decision-makers are risk averse. Assuage their concerns with case studies that prove your solution has positively impacted other agencies with similar challenges.



## Content That is Not Gated —

Build trust first with ungated, valuable content. Once you establish trust, federal decision-makers will be more willing to provide their contact information.

## In-Depth and Detailed Content —

Help acquisitions professionals identify and clarify requirements for RFIs and RFPs with content that answers all their questions.

## Third-Party Content —

Third-party validation is incredibly important among federal decision-makers. Make sure third-party research and content is available alongside your corporate marketing materials.

***“We are trying to get the right balance. It’s not just snackable versus long form, but it’s also interest-based content versus human interest stories. Having a mix of personal and professional is important.”***

*— Pamela Merritt, Managing Director of Marketing and Communications, Accenture Federal Services*

# OPTIMIZE THE CHANNELS YOU OWN

*In the marketing triad of paid, earned and owned channels, marketers typically have the most control over the latter. This isn't always true for the federal marketer, who often must contend with a corporate web team that controls a national, or even global, web presence. Customizing content, gaining visibility into success metrics and tracking activity on your part of a larger site can be challenging.*

*Here are tips to maximize your federal web presence:*

- 1 Make the Most of Your Corporate Site** — Work with your web team to maximize the federal-specific real estate on the corporate site. Ask them about alternate page templates that may give you more control over federal messages and content updates. No luck? Consider standing up brand-compliant landing pages or federal issues-focused microsites that you own and control.
- 2 Search is Still King** — According to our research, search engines top the list of effective channels to reach federal decision-makers. Free online tools and blogs provide plenty of best practices to keep your site structure, copy, content and metatags search engine optimized. A moderate investment in search engine marketing can also boost traffic.
- 3 A Blog Won't Win You That Contract** — Before you invest a lot of time and resources in that corporate blog, our research shows that blogs fell to the bottom of valued content types during every stage of the federal buying process. That being said, blogs are still a great owned channel to regularly publish new thought leadership content, which drives search optimization (See tip No. 2).
- 4 Product Demos Should Live Online** — Product demos are an important tool for BD teams during in-person meetings with federal buyers. However, be sure that demos and product videos are hosted on your website and social channels (YouTube) as well. Demos are the No. 1 most valued content asset during the final stages of the federal buying process. Make them available on your owned channels 24/7 so they can be found and seen on-demand.
- 5 Let Social Do the Mobile Heavy Lifting** — Federal marketers should think of new ways to leverage social platforms as mobile channels they control. Many social platforms, like LinkedIn, are mobile-optimized by default. By posting your content to LinkedIn, it is automatically mobile-friendly, making it easily consumed by decision-makers on the go.





## EARNED TRUST: THIRD-PARTY CHANNELS

*Extending your message through third parties, also known as earned media, is especially important when trying to influence the federal buying process.*

When researchers, journalists and social media influencers extend your message, content and ideas under their brand banner, it validates your position as a trusted expert and builds credibility that owned and paid channels simply cannot emulate.

While you technically cannot pay for this third-party validation, sponsoring research studies, securing media interviews or reaching social influencers doesn't come without a price. When it comes to third-party content that influences the federal buying process, make sure you are spending your time and resources in the right place.



**Government-Focused Online Communities** — Seventy percent of the federal decision-makers we surveyed said that these niche-focused sites are an effective way to reach them. While posting banner ads and sponsored content on these sites is a good way to generate brand visibility, to truly tap their third-party potential as an earned media channel, try injecting an exclusive piece of thought leadership content (like an infographic) into the discourse on these sites through one of your internal or external subject matter expert's accounts.



**News Websites Focused on Federal Content** — Two-thirds of the government decision-makers we surveyed agreed that federal news websites are an effective channel to reach them. Editorial staffs at many of these publications are stretched, so they will accept vendor-neutral contributed content tailored to the publication's audience. A contributed byline by one of your subject matter experts is a great way to get your perspective in front of decision-makers, while establishing eminence for your executive team. And the byline of the story may hyperlink back to your website — a big SEO bonus!



**Research Partners** — Research reports published by third-party research firms continue to be a significant draw for federal decision-makers, with one-third listing this as valuable content. Partnering with a notable research firm to design and sponsor a survey related to a topic of importance for your organization can help validate your message and position you as a credible thought leader. You can also leverage findings across multiple media channels and use them to create derivative content, including co-authored blog posts and joint media interviews.



# PAY TO PLAY: THE PLAYING FIELD IS CHANGING

*When it comes to the paid media landscape, federal marketers have an ever-expanding set of options for their budgets. Make sure you are choosing wisely — the obvious choice isn't always the most effective.*



**Social Algorithms Prioritize Paid** — Most social media platforms have monetized their business model with a variety of paid options. Sponsored social campaigns are a highly effective way to reach a targeted federal audience with a limited budget. Plus, algorithms built into most social platforms give sponsored posts prime billing over organic posts.



**E-Newsletters: Fast, Effective, Frequent** — The federal decision-makers we surveyed ranked e-newsletters as the second most frequently viewed content type, behind contractor websites. Many federal associations, research firms and news publishers push their latest stories and breaking news to robust subscriber lists via these daily, mobile-friendly channels. Sponsors typically get a hyperlink and short copy at the beginning or end of the e-newsletter. Niche audiences mean better targeting for your content, and they are often more affordable than banner ads on the publishers' websites.



**Hit 'Em with the Pre-Roll** — With YouTube ranking as the No. 1 social network among federal decision-makers we surveyed, and nearly half of decision-makers consuming content going to and from work, sponsoring pre-roll ads on videos and podcasts is a great way to reach federal buyers. Specialized ad networks allow you to hyper-target specific demographics based on geographic location, interests, even by email addresses, if you have them in your database.



**Not All Federal Buyers Look Alike ... or Do They?** — With sponsored social campaigns on LinkedIn and Facebook becoming increasingly popular among federal decision-makers, federal marketers should consider using the look-alike audience feature built into these platforms. Have a list of email addresses from the last event or webinar you sponsored? Upload them to your social ad platform to create audiences that emulate key demographics to the ones found in your contact database.





# PAY TO PLAY: THE PLAYING FIELD IS CHANGING



**Test Your Message and CTA** — Many digital and social ad platforms make it easy and affordable to A/B test your federal marketing messages and calls to action. When running an ad campaign, set up the first few weeks to test two different ad options with varied copy, offers and CTAs. After a few weeks, spiral down the least effective ad and double down on the most effective option. Watch your metrics carefully though — ad fatigue can set in quickly.



**Measure Paid Effectiveness** — Federal marketers, like marketers in every industry, are being called upon by senior leaders to justify every dollar spent on raising awareness, driving leads and ensuring that your company is on the source-selection committee short list. Web and social analytics platforms provide powerful quantitative success metrics, while attitude and awareness surveys of your target audience demonstrate success in qualitative measures like brand perception and sentiment. Be sure to measure both for a balanced picture of paid ROI.



**Podcast Ad Buys** — When federal employees commute, they listen to podcasts like the rest of us. Place ads at the beginning of podcasts to get federal buyers' attention.

**“YOU CANNOT CREATE A SOCIAL CAMPAIGN THAT  
DOESN'T INCLUDE A PAID BUDGET IN THIS WORLD.**

STILL CREATE ORGANIC POSTS — YOUR EMPLOYEES AND NETWORKS WILL SHARE IT.  
BUT IF YOU WANT TO BE IN FRONT OF DECISION-MAKERS,

**THINK OF PAID SOCIAL.”**

— **Dan Horowitz**, Director of Advocacy and Campaigns, LinkedIn Marketing Solutions

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## Merritt Group

For more than 20 years, Merritt Group has served as an award-winning, woman-owned marketing communications agency with 55 professionals across two offices in Tysons Corner, VA, and San Francisco, CA.

We are a full-service agency, with an expert staff that spans the digital marketing, public relations and creative disciplines. The success of our campaigns is rooted in our deep domain expertise in technology, security, government, health care and energy.

Merritt Group's amazing culture has earned us the distinction of being a four-time winner of the Washingtonian Magazine "Best Places to Work" award. The campaigns we develop for our clients have been recognized with awards from the American Advertising Federation (Addys), PRWeek, Bulldog Reporter and others.

**For more information, visit:** [www.merrittgrp.com](http://www.merrittgrp.com)

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## Market Connections

For over 20 years, Market Connections has delivered actionable intelligence and insights that enable improved business performance and positioning for leading businesses, nonprofits, trade associations and the public sector.

The custom market research firm is a sought-after authority on preferences, perceptions and trends, offering deep domain expertise in information technology and telecommunications, health care, education, and diversity and inclusion.

Market Connections also provides the tools for organizations to expand thought leadership in their respective markets and is known for the annual "Federal Media and Marketing Study" and ongoing PulsePolls™ of the government market.

**For more information, visit:** [www.marketconnectionsinc.com](http://www.marketconnectionsinc.com)

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