

GovExec Intelligence

# Engaging the Defense Buyer in 2026

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The Defense market promises to be very fluid in 2026. Despite focus and funding for Defense, agencies are still seeing turnover, evolving political influence, and rapid shifts in procurement processes. All will reshape how Defense buyers evaluate and acquire technology. Engaging buyers has never been more important... and more challenging.

Going into the new year, how can Defense marketers connect to decision makers? It comes down to:

- 1. Being Present:** Showing up regularly in the places your audience is spending time.
- 2. Connecting:** Creating trusted content that sticks—which means it is well researched, educational, and helpful.

In 2025, GovExec Intelligence conducted two studies that provide a clear picture of where the Defense industry goes for information and what they are looking for from their vendors—the Buyer’s Journey Study and the annual Media Engagement Study. This report provides a comprehensive look at what is happening in the market today that will impact your marketing and business development efforts over the next year.

Before going into the data from the two studies, it’s important to paint a picture of what is happening in the market today.

**WORKFORCE SHIFTS:** 60,000 employees, or about 7.6% of the Pentagon’s civilian workforce, have departed under the Deferred Resignation Program and Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (as of September 25, 2025).

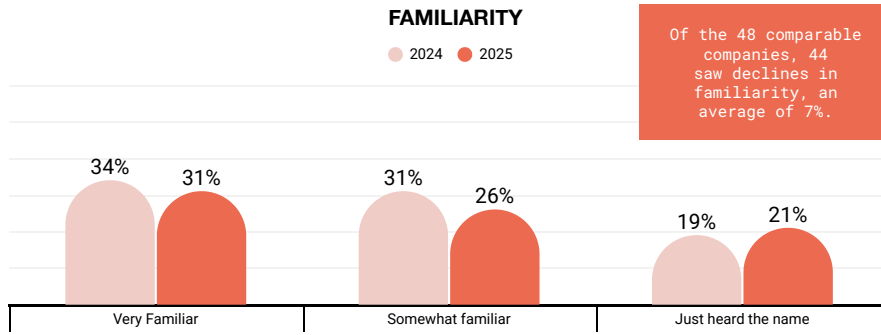
**FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES:** The Department of Defense is a key beneficiary of the Big Beautiful Bill, which explicitly funds modernization and cyber initiatives—offering near-term opportunities for contractors supporting cyber, IT, and AI modernization.

**CHANGING COLLABORATION:** FAR 2.0 is redefining how agencies and technology providers work together, opening the door to more strategic and tailored partnerships. With greater agency discretion, vendors have new opportunities to engage directly. (While there may be additional changes required to DFARS, it isn’t happening yet.)

From a marketing perspective, one of the most significant shifts is workforce change: new people in new roles. New decision makers may be familiar with how the DoD operates, but they are coming in with new priorities and may not know legacy contractors or their offerings.

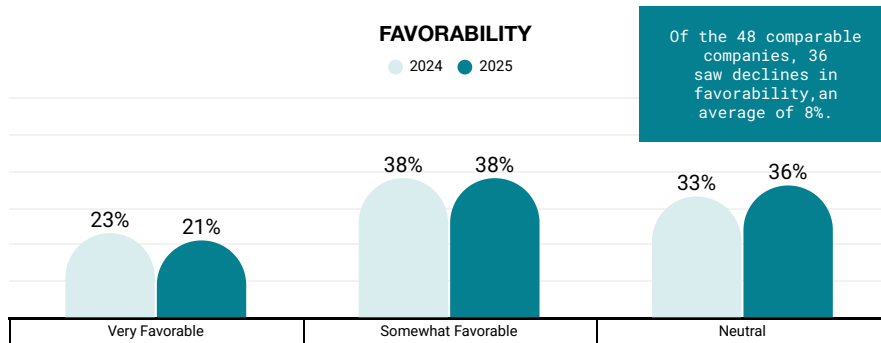
Our annual study measuring familiarity and favorability among 50 government contractors—48 of whom operate in the Defense space—illustrates this challenge. Familiarity declined across all brands, which typically correlates with lower favorability. Whether this reflects respondents’ reluctance to show preference or simply a lack of exposure to vendors, it underscores a pressing challenge for all government contractors.

### In 2025, familiarity with Defense contractors fell, leading to declines in favorability



From the annual brand assessment study:

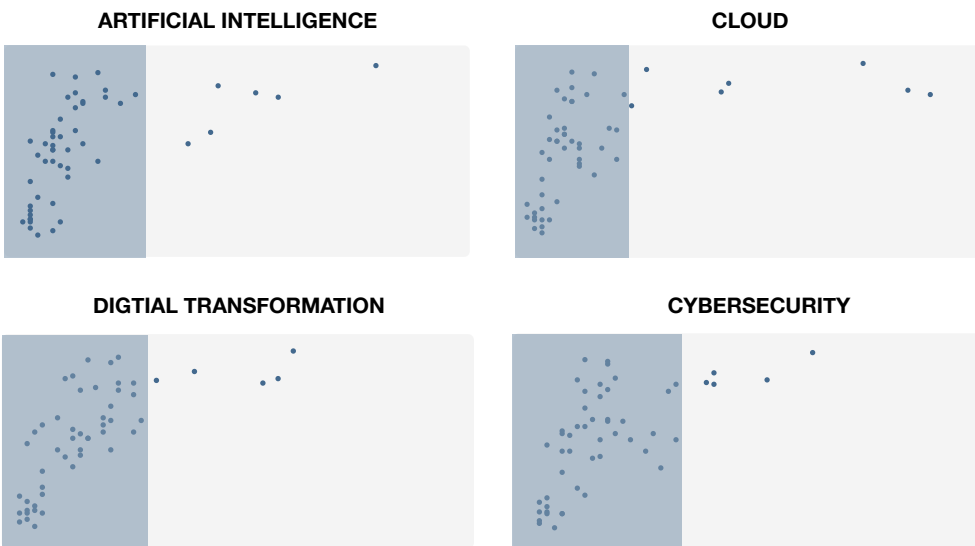
Q: Please indicate your level of familiarity with each of the following firms as it relates to their work with government agencies.



From the annual brand assessment study:

Q: When it comes to their work with government agencies, are your opinions of the following contractors favorable or unfavorable?

### Respondents view few contractors as standing out in priority technology areas



From the annual brand assessment study:

Q: Do you associate any of the following brands with [technology area]? Please select all that apply.



Photo by dvidshub.net.

The bottom line for you: companies will enter 2026 needing to address:



**Declining brand familiarity:** Decision makers are less likely to recognize—or trust—vendor brands than in previous years.



**Content skepticism:** Trust in self-published materials continues to fall, pushing vendors to rely on media and SMEs to lend credibility.



**Multi-channel engagement:** Buyers toggle between news outlets, newsletters, social platforms, podcasts, and AI-driven summaries to stay informed.

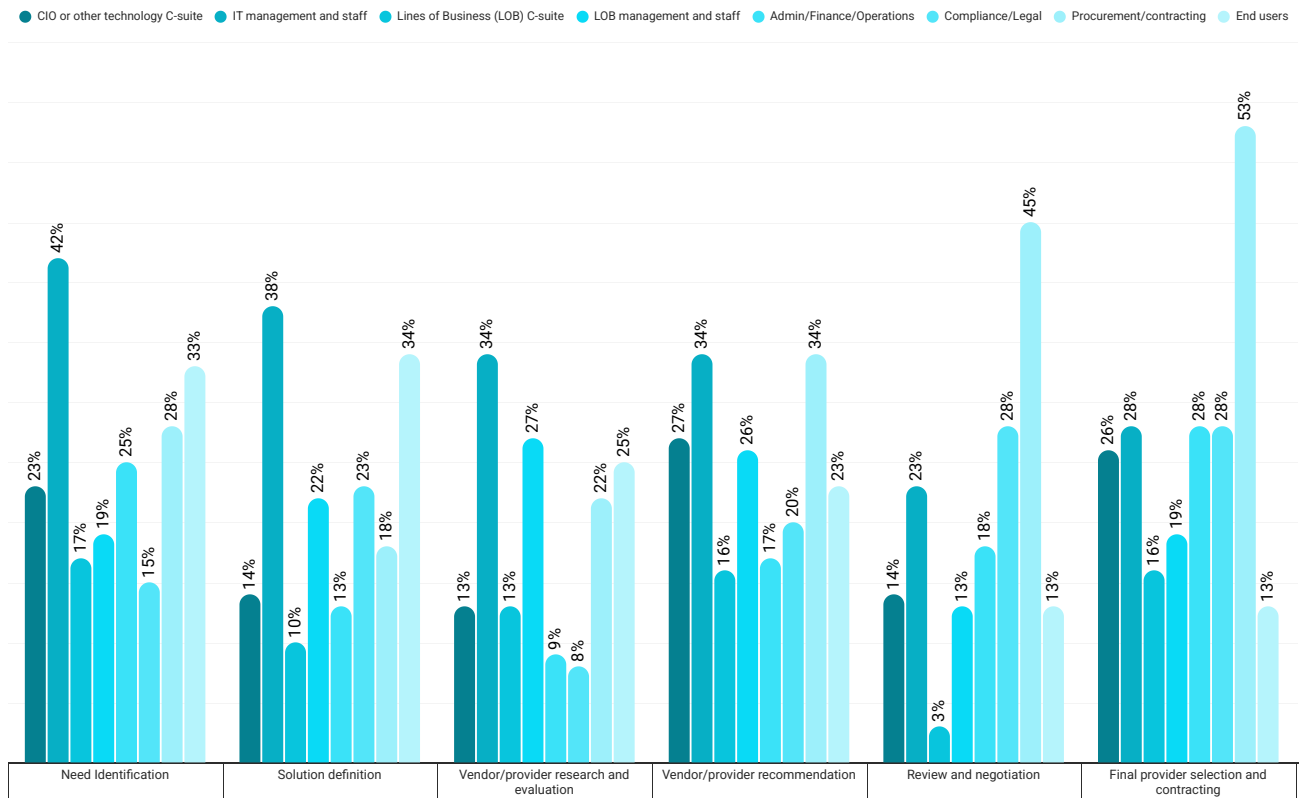
Despite these challenges, we believe there is a tremendous opportunity for companies that are both present and connecting with their audience. By consistently appearing in trusted channels and delivering content that answers real questions, vendors can rebuild familiarity, earn credibility, and position themselves as go-to partners. The following pages summarize 2025 data to show where Defense buyers spend their time and how vendors can engage them effectively.

# Defense IT Buyer Journey

The public sector has a complex ecosystem where stakeholder involvement ebbs and flows throughout the decision cycle. This has always been true and continues to be so. However, there is a shift coming: expect to see executives and political leaders more involved at every point in the buying process.

This year also saw an increase of C-suite involvement in vendor research and recommendations, where in the past it has fallen to the IT and Program Managers to do this legwork. Whether these changes will speed or stall technology investments remains to be seen.

## IT management & staff have the most influence throughout the procurement process



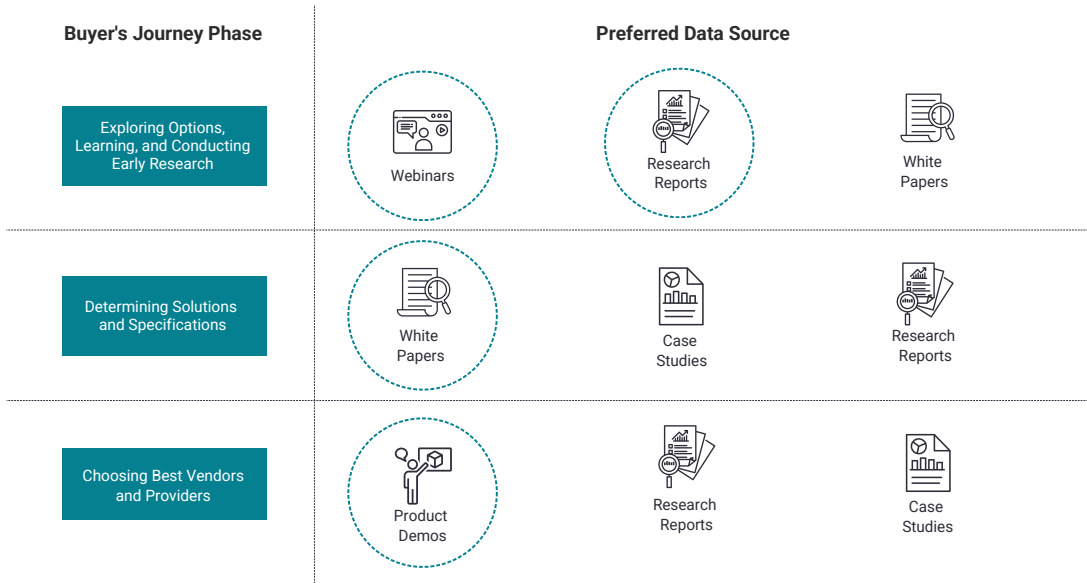
From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study

Q: How involved are each of the following stakeholders in your organization's IT product, service, and solution procurements during:

Regardless of where they are in the buyer journey, decision makers rely on a mix of information sources, from vendor subject matter experts to trusted media outlets. Later in this report, we look in more detail at their media preferences.

From a procurement standpoint, influence at the solutions definition stage is important because this will help shape the requirements. Defense buyers rely heavily on federal and agency-specific contract vehicles—most commonly GSA Schedules, agency-specific contracts, and Blanket Purchase Agreements—to streamline IT solution procurements. Pre-approved vehicles remain the most effective tool for accelerating the process, complemented by early engagement with procurement teams and efforts to simplify requirements and documentation.

### Buyers turn to various sources for information at different stages of the journey

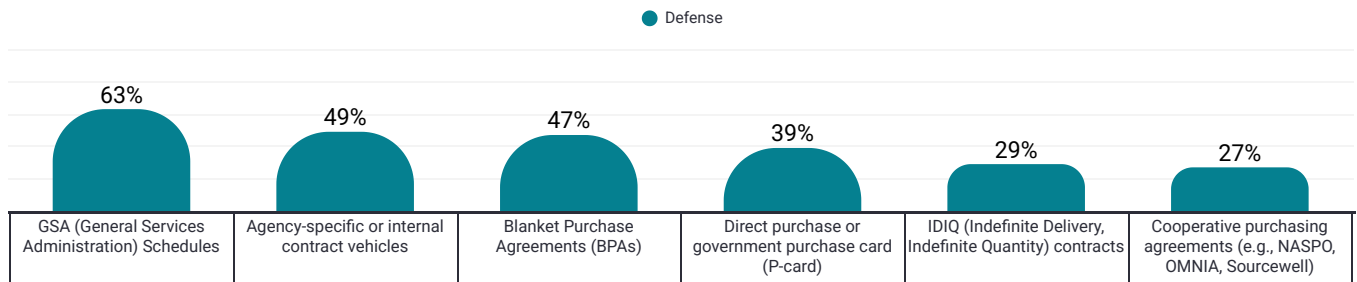


From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study

Q: Thinking about the last time you were involved with an IT solution (products and services) purchase, what external sources of information did you obtain information from when involved in each of the following steps in the procurement process? Select up to three.

## The Procurement Process

### Agile contracts are becoming more prevalent across the defense agencies

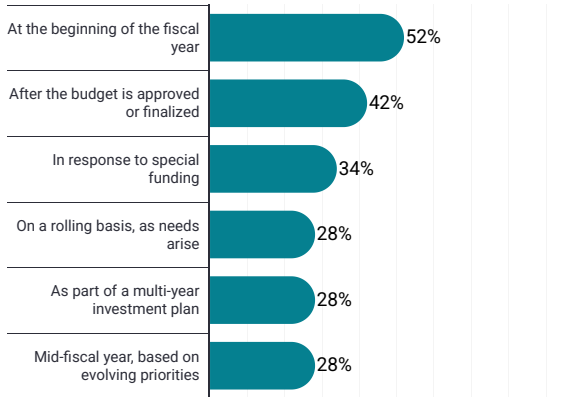


From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study

Q: Which of the following types of contract vehicles does your organization typically use for IT solution purchases?

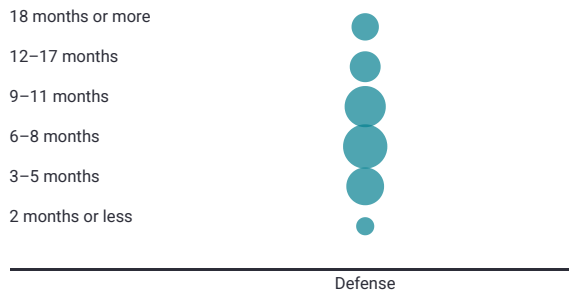
Selling to Defense agencies is a long game, but with all the other changes happening in the government, we were curious how procurement might change in the coming year. It is still, for the most part, a long process, but there are some changes happening. One area of change across Defense is the consolidation and centralization of contract vehicles. The use of GWACs, OTAs, and other agile, quick-turnaround types of contracts is becoming increasingly popular, likely due to the need for more rapid technology adoption. While the process will never be “quick,” these contracts offer a way to help shorten procurement times for some projects.

**Across the Defense agencies, budget allocations are most commonly tied to the fiscal year**



*From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study*  
Q: When is funding allocated for new IT solution purchases in your organization? Select all that apply.

**Government contracting is a long game—most procurements take more than six months**



*From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study*  
Q: On average, how long does your organization’s IT solution procurement process take, from identifying a need to awarding a contract?

While respondents are turning to these consolidated contract mechanisms, they must still manage the realities of funding cycles, which are most often tied to the beginning of the fiscal year or after the budget is approved. There may be some opportunity to shorten the sales cycle in some cases—respondents indicate some purchases can be made in a few months—but in general, procurements will take six to twelve months. This means contractors will need to consistently be present and top of mind to ensure an invitation to define solutions.

**Procurement Insights from**



There is an ongoing tug-of-war over contracting mechanisms (i.e. fixed-price vs cost-plus, etc.). We’re seeing different preferences arise depending on the situation and type of programs in play.

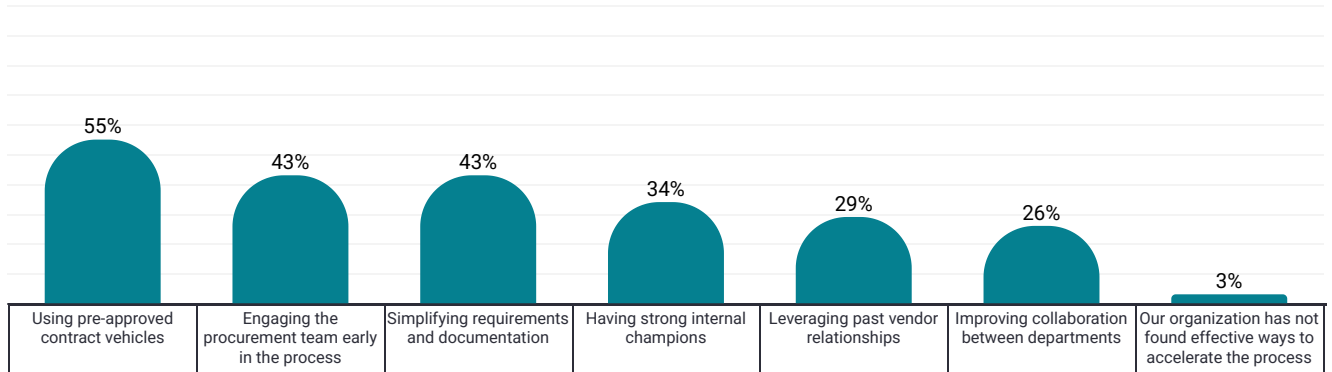
Some officials still show a preference for fixed-price (for example the Space Force is pushing fixed-price contracts), and Congress sometimes recommends fixed-price to take risk off of the government. But fixed-price contracts pose a risk for programs that have fluctuating requirements and for large deals where buying conditions can change over time. As a result, we could see more hybrid contract models coming into play, especially for emerging technologies or software-driven capabilities. These vehicles would potentially give contractors more flexibility and reduce some of their risk. In either case, contractors need to take these factors into account when bidding on programs.

In addition, Congress continues to shape defense procurement at both the macro and micro level. Lawmakers often make specific policy recommendations and funding adjustments based on the interests of their districts. Contractors can gain an advantage by knowing what changes are coming and which lawmakers to potentially work with. It’s a dynamic relationship, especially now, when the Pentagon is trying to get more flexibility to make funding adjustments without needing prior approval from Congress. We saw some of that in the FY25 continuing resolution, which provided the DoD with some of this leeway. It’s important for contractors to understand that relationship.

One final thought: The budget environment is unstable right now. Whether a continuing resolution, government shutdown, or something else, contractors need to be prepared for disruptions.

Traditionally a challenge in Defense contracting is how difficult it is to modify existing contracts, and that isn't likely to change. Once a contract is in place, more than half of respondents say it is difficult to modify it—pointing to the importance of working with stakeholders to ensure the requirements allow for technology advances and changes throughout the period of performance.

### Buyers use pre-approved vehicles to speed procurement



From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study

Q: What has your organization found to be the most effective ways to accelerate the IT solution procurement process? Select up to three.

### Respondents find existing contract modification difficult



From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study

Q: How easy or difficult is it for your organization to modify or augment existing IT contracts to respond to new or evolving needs and requirements?

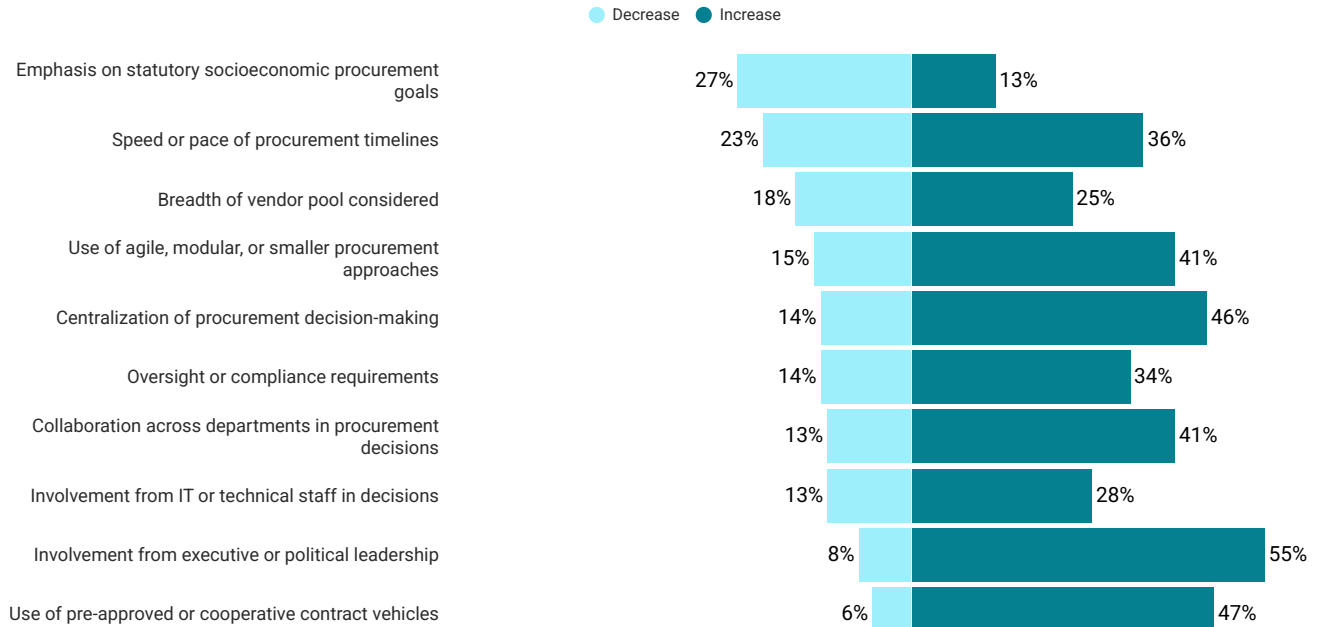


Photo by dvidshub.net

To sum up the big changes in the next one to two years:

- Executive and political leaders will have a larger role in the procurement process.
- Centralizing procurement decision making and use of pre-approved or cooperative contract vehicles will increase throughout the Defense market.

**Respondents expect increased involvement from executives and political leaders**



*From the 2025 Buyer Journey Study*

Q: Over the next 12-24 months, do you expect the following aspects of your organization's IT solution procurement process to increase, decrease, or stay the same?



## Putting this Information into Action

The complexity of this buying landscape, coupled with the challenges Defense vendors face across the board, means it is not only about targeting advertising and marketing dollars to the channels where your specific prospects are spending time – it's about aligning with the channels they trust.

Be present in the right place, connect to the individuals with the right message at the right time, and deliver the information they need to help make decisions. The following pages explore findings from the 2025 Media Engagement study, focusing on the sources Defense personnel turn to and their trust in the information.

# Trust Is Key in Connecting

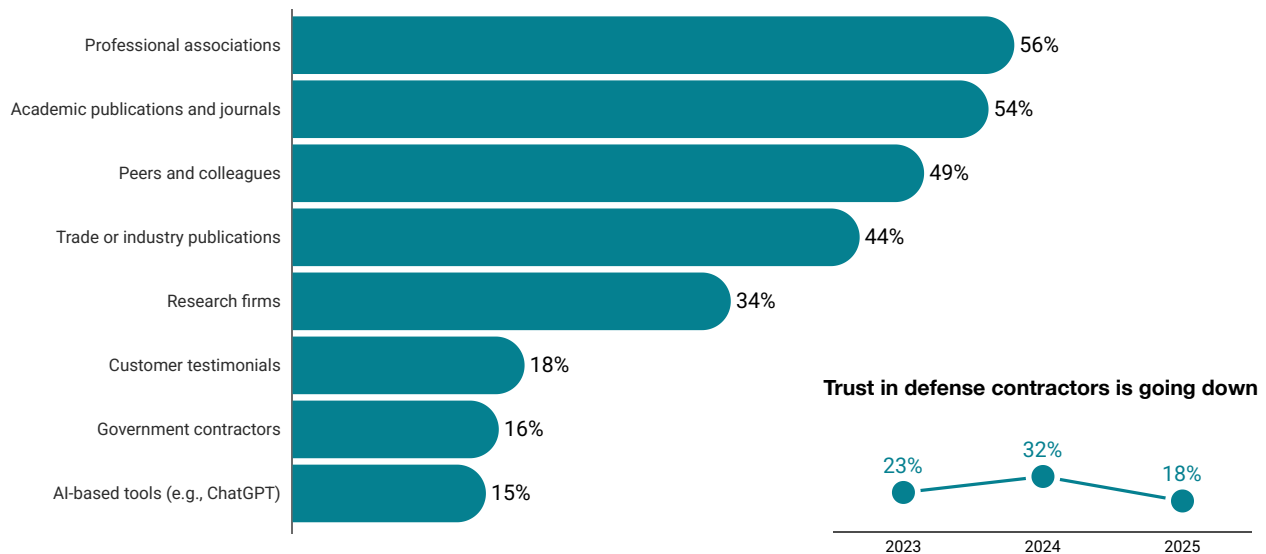
“Brands that advertise on trusted news platforms experience 1.5x higher perceived trust.”

—WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

While the media engagement study takes a deep dive into digital channels, we always ask what sources, in general, respondents trust. Defense personnel generally trust government contractors as partners, but they don't see contractors (or customer testimonials) as reliable sources of news and information. They do trust professional associations, academic publications, and their peers—sources where they can go for direct answers to direct questions.

This raises a key question: how can contractors effectively reach their audience through trusted channels? The answer is being present in trade or industry publications. After the top-three peer-focused sources they trust, half of the respondents say they trust trade and industry publications. This is likely due to the perception that information in these sources is unbiased.

## Respondents are skeptical of contractors and the testimonials they use



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: Generally, to what extent do you trust news and information you seek for your job from each of the following?

This raises a key question: how can contractors effectively reach their audience through trusted channels? The answer is trade or government-focused publications. While trust in trade and government-focused publications is down from the previous two years, 44% trust these sources.

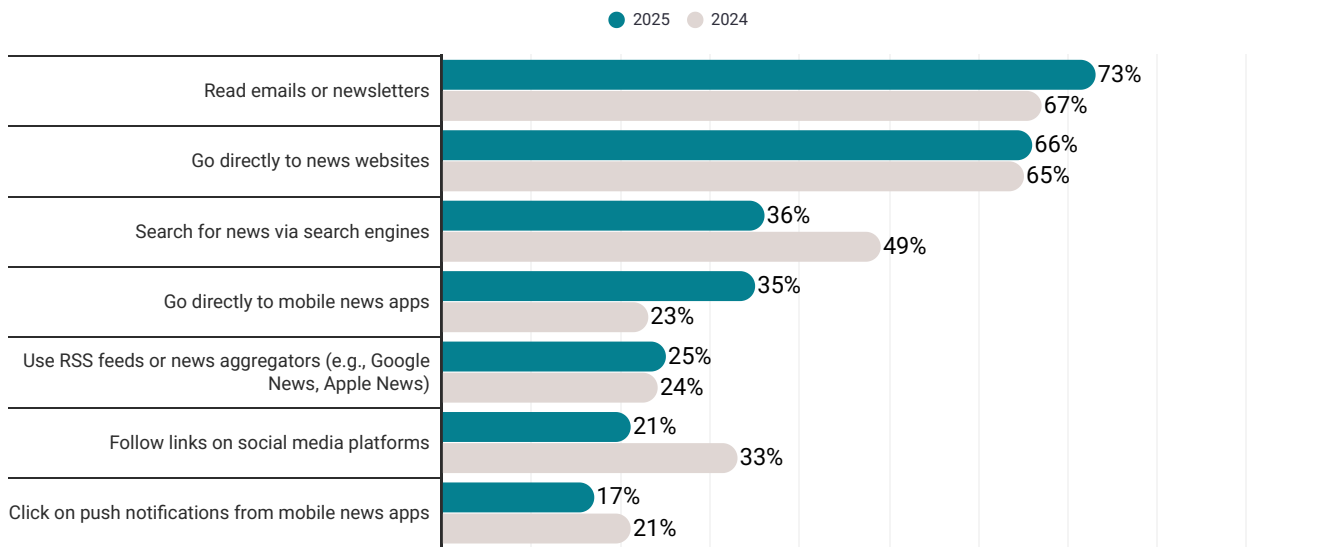
Simply being seen in digital channels your customers and prospects already trust will help shape a favorable opinion of your brand: A January study from the *World Economic Forum* found that **brands that advertise on trusted news platforms experience 1.5x higher perceived trust**<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum. “[Future of News](#).” January 2025.

## Engaging Buyers Through Online News

When it comes to staying informed about agency changes, program updates, or administration priorities, Defense respondents rely most heavily on official government websites, with 61% citing them as a primary source. Internal agency communications and intranet and national or local news sources also play a key role, followed by colleagues or professional networks and trade or government-focused news outlets. Other channels, including social media, search engines, events, and video platforms, are used less frequently, highlighting the continued preference for authoritative and direct sources of information.

### Respondents turn to read newsletters and turn to news sites for job-related information



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study  
Q: How do you typically access general news and work-related news?

Keeping abreast of rapid changes keeps respondents consuming work-related news. They are looking for updates about government agency operations and leadership priorities, new policies and regulations, and workforce-related issues. In short, if it impacts their job, they are keeping up to date on it.

### Defense respondents prefer to read articles



Reading articles



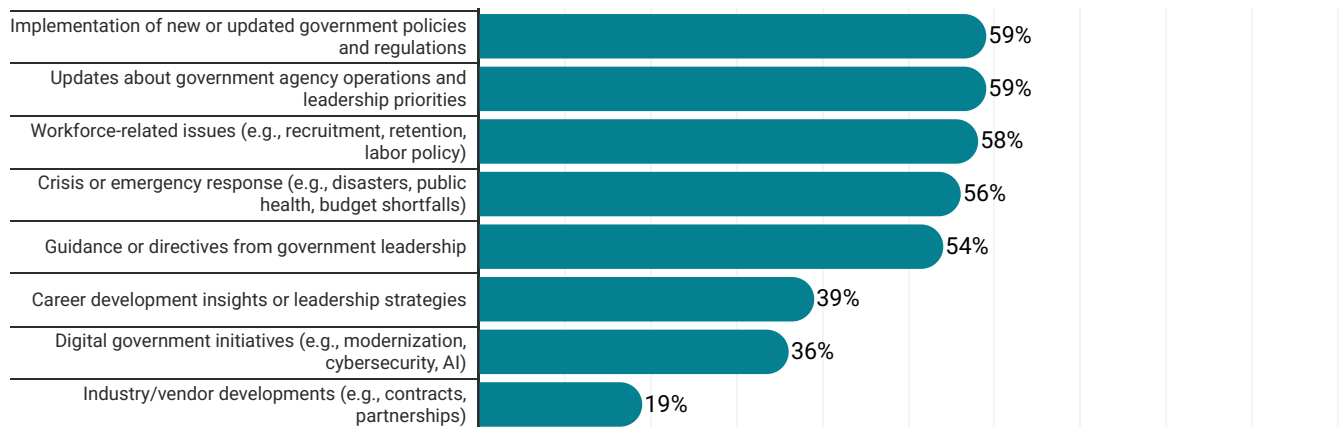
Watching videos



Listening to podcasts or audio clips

From the 2025 Media Engagement Study  
Q: Which is your preferred way to consume online news content?

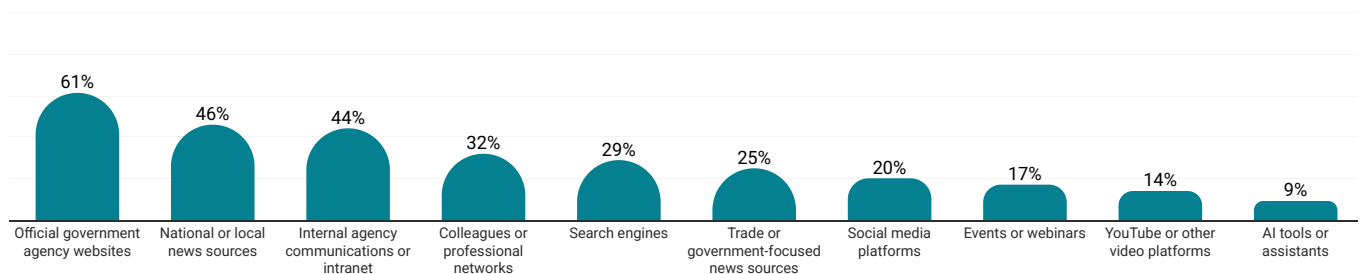
### Respondents visit news sources to keep up-to-date on changes impacting their job



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: Which of the following topics most often motivates you to read work-related news and reporting? Select all that apply.

### Defense audiences go to a variety of sources for news and information

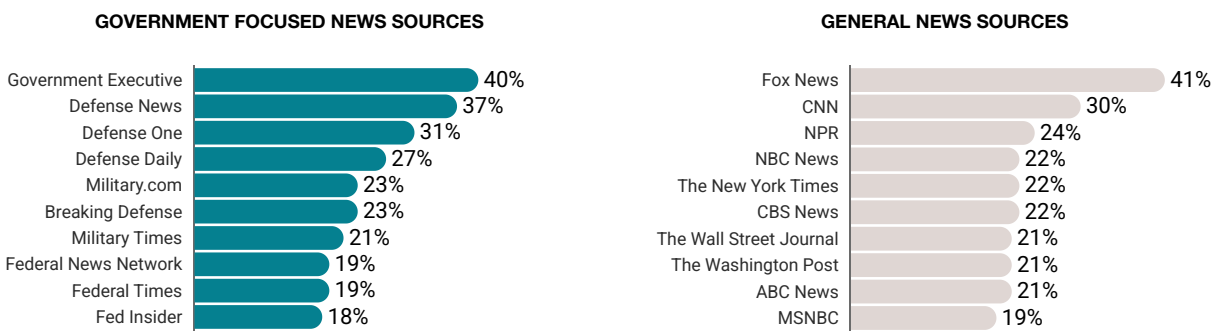


From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: Where do you go to stay informed about government agency changes, program updates, or administration priorities?

For work-related news, Defense buyers prioritize government-focused publications such as Defense One and Defense News, which deliver timely updates that align closely with their professional needs. They turn to these government-focused news sites because they have confidence in what is being delivered to them—three quarters of respondents have confidence in the top five Defense news sources.

### Respondents visit both government-focused and general news sites

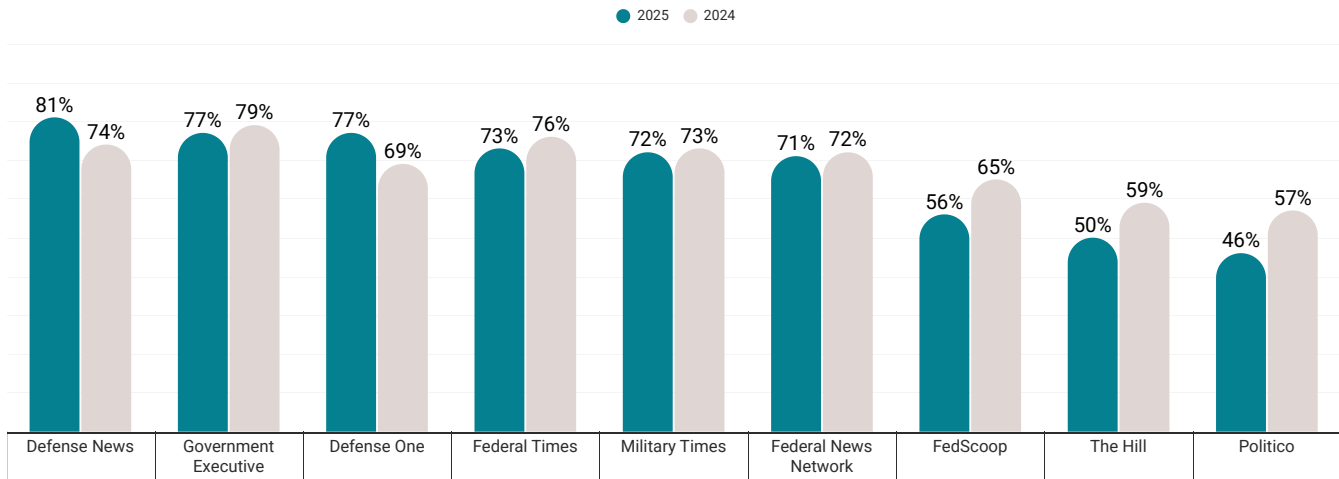


From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: From the list below, please indicate which of the following you access digitally (i.e. websites, mobile sites, apps) for news or information. (visit 2 times a week or more)

For work-related news, Defense buyers prioritize government-focused publications such as Defense One and Defense News, which deliver timely updates that align closely with their professional needs. They turn to these government-focused news sites because they have confidence in what is being delivered to them—three quarters of respondents have confidence in the top five Defense news sources.

**Respondents trust government-focused sites more than last year**



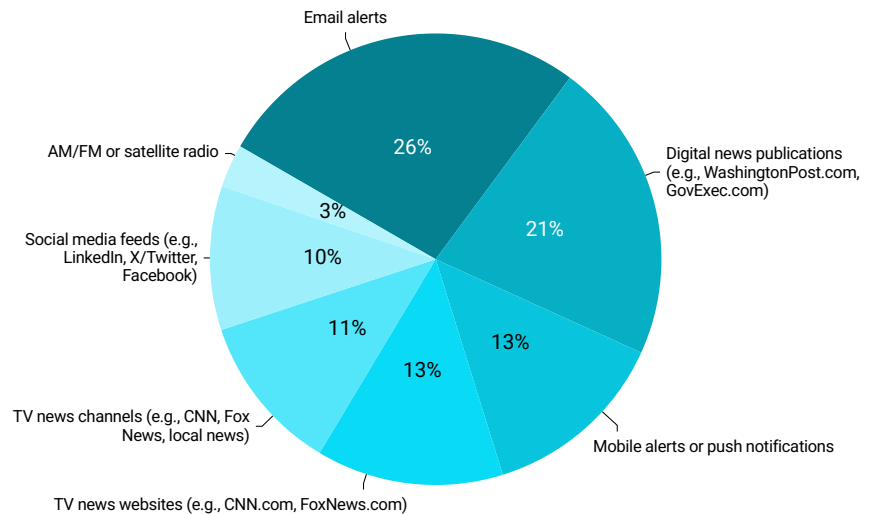
From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: How much confidence do you have in the following sources in the news that they report?

This confidence matters because right now, that is where Defense decision makers are most likely to turn for news and information about their jobs. Connecting is about being where the audience is.

While company leaders often want their stories in national business publications like *The Wall Street Journal* or *Forbes*, the reality is that Defense audiences place far more weight on outlets that specialize in their world. A Defense IT manager scanning their inbox is far more likely to click into a newsletter from a trusted industry-focused source than to actively seek out a vendor’s article in the general press.

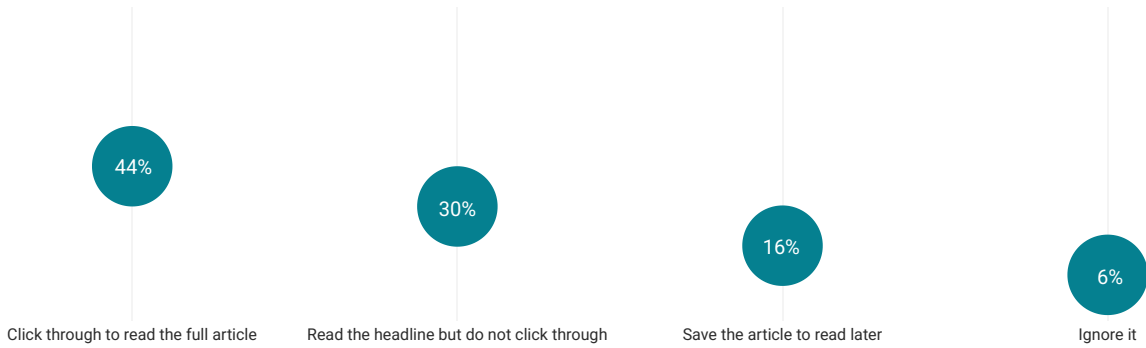
**Respondents most often access news via email or directly from the website**



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: Where do you typically get the majority of your work-related breaking news and reporting?

### Respondents are most likely to click through to the article



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: [IF NEWS DELIVERED IS >0%] When news is pushed/delivered to you, what do you usually do?

When it comes to access, e-newsletters dominate: 73% say it's their typical access point for news. The second most common is going directly to news websites, followed by a search for news via search engines.

For contractors, the implication is clear: it is not sufficient to expect buyers to “find” vendor content organically. Instead, effective outreach requires meeting audiences where they already go, embedding messages within the trusted newsletters and news apps they rely on daily.



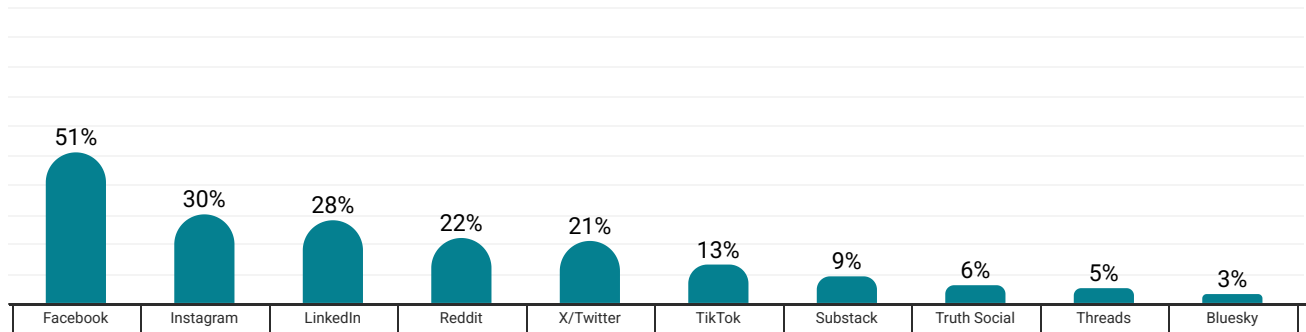
Photo by davidshub.net

# Engaging Buyers Through Social Media

While Defense decision makers don't turn to social media to access trusted information, it is a mechanism for delivering information to them. Among platforms, LinkedIn remains the dominant force for work-related information. It is both the most trusted and the most integrated into professional life, with personnel viewing it as an extension of their daily responsibilities. This makes LinkedIn a particularly valuable channel for thought leadership and SME-driven content.

## Respondents may use Facebook most often, but they go to LinkedIn and Reddit for work

TOP SITES (OVERALL)



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

Q: Please indicate how often you visit the following social media sites:

TOP 5 SITES (WORK RELATED)



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study

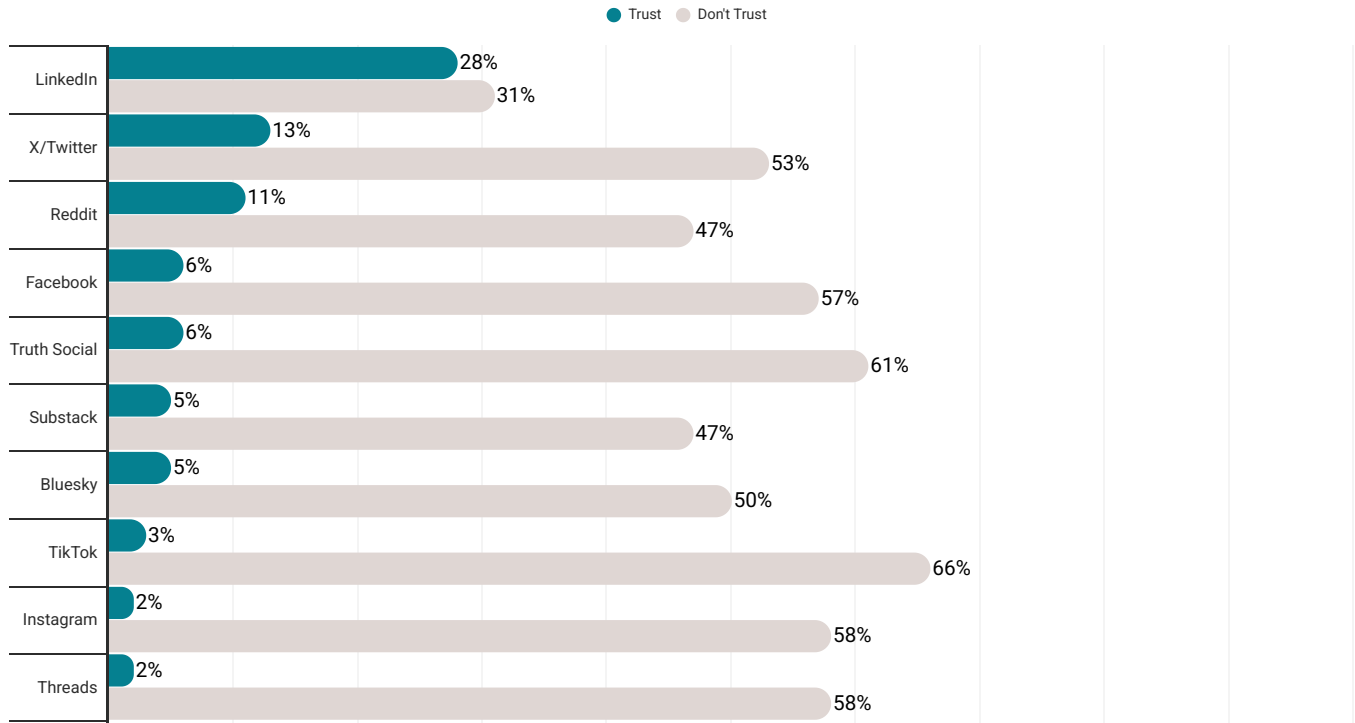
Q: How frequently do you use each of the following social media sites for work-related purposes? [INSERT THOSE VISITED AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK OR LESS] NOTE: Base is those that use the site. (n>30)

The social media data illustrates a newer trend we're seeing: the extent to which people want specific answers to specific questions. The rise of Reddit shows this trend. Just two years ago, only 23% of Defense personnel who use Reddit reported using it for professional purposes. This year that number rose to 37%.

With the pace of change this administration is pushing, it makes sense that people would be trying to gain insights from their peers in a "boots on the ground" setting. Therefore, what makes Reddit compelling is not broad-brush corporate messaging but the micro-communities. These niche forums allow decision makers to ask specific, practical questions and receive peer-to-peer answers.

People want genuine connections, and Reddit gives it to them. The power of Reddit is that it's authentic, crowdsourced expertise rather than top-down corporate promotion—making it a powerful way to build relationships via social media.

**While Defense respondents use Reddit, they don't trust it as much as LinkedIn**



From the 2025 Media Engagement Study  
Q: Generally, to what extent do you trust news and information on each of the following social media sites? Added in 2025: Substack, Bluesky

Trust also is a significant factor in the use of various social media platforms for news and information. LinkedIn continues to top the rankings with 28% of users trusting it. Reddit now occupies third place, with 11% trusting it in 2025, a slight increase from 10% in 2024. X (Twitter) holds 13% trust in 2024, down from 16% in 2024. In contrast, platforms like Facebook, Truth Social, and Bluesky show significantly lower levels of trust, with Facebook and Truth Social at 6%, and Bluesky at 5%.

What the usage and trust data suggest is that social media is no longer about broadcasting—it's about using the platform to build real connections through people-first engagement. It also means that time and resources should be carefully allocated: pursuing engagement on every platform is far less effective than doubling down where buyers are most active and most trusting.

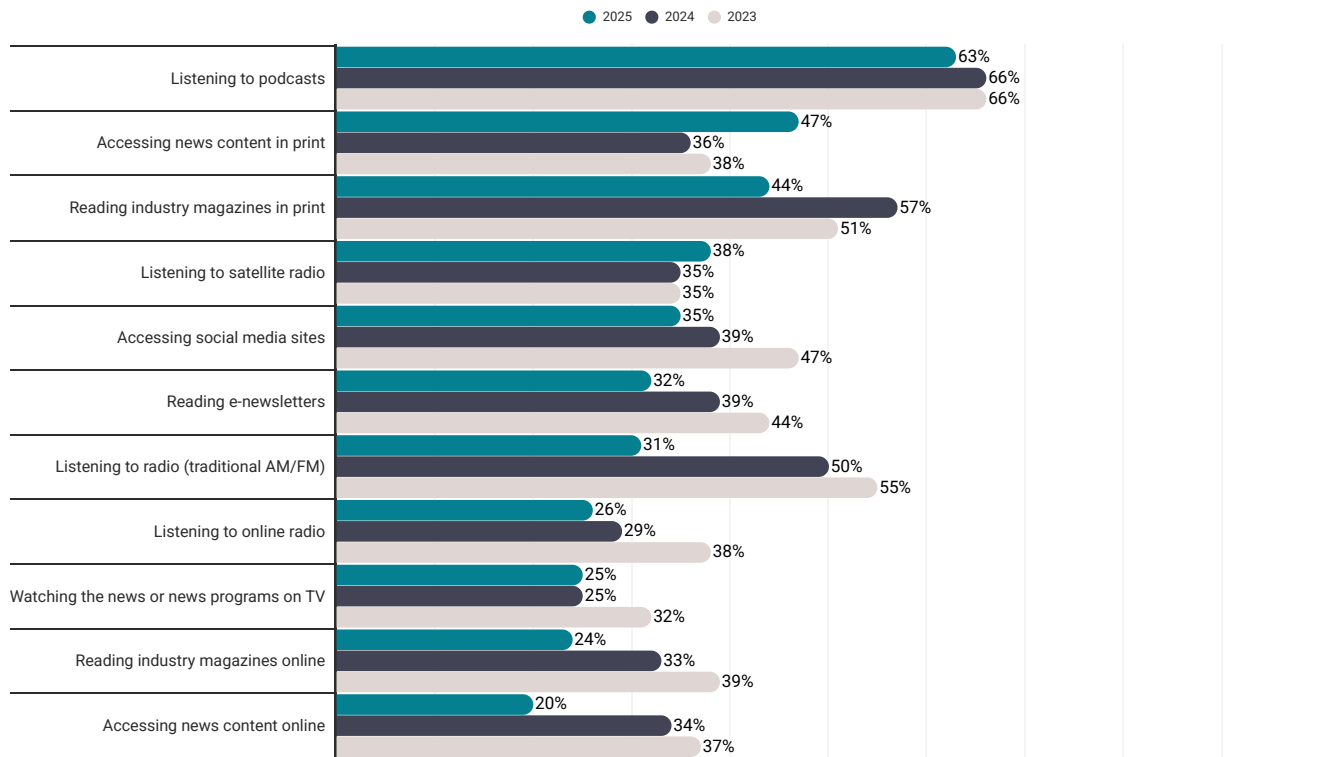


Photo by davidshub.net

## Expanding Engagement Channels

Buyers are diversifying how they consume information, giving you more opportunities to engage with them.

### Respondents spend time during the workday listening to podcasts



From the 2025 Media Engagement Report  
Q: "On an average workday, how much time do you spend..." (15+ minutes per day")

**Advertise on Podcasts and Radio:** Two thirds of Defense buyers report listening to podcasts during work hours. They are most interested in news and politics (although not necessarily work related news), but more than a quarter love a true crime podcast.

Regardless of the topic, podcasts offer a unique opportunity for vendors to engage audiences during commutes, workouts, or other moments when traditional media consumption isn't possible. Now that federal workers are back in the office, they are spending commute time listening.

Nearly 4 in 10 respondents listen to online or FM radio during business hours. Radio continues to be a good way for vendors to engage audiences while they are sitting at their desk listening.

**Partner with Associations:** Data shows Defense buyers want to hear from colleagues and peers, and they are far more likely to consider a solution a colleague endorses or presents at a trusted association conference than a standalone vendor pitch. Therefore, contractors can amplify their credibility by partnering with associations to co-sponsor research, co-develop content, or simply show up where buyers are already congregating. These partnerships provide a dual benefit—boosting the association's value while positioning the vendor as a trusted, credible source of expertise.

# Using AI for Search and Discovery

We can't talk about engagement without addressing AI. As AI tools evolve, they are reshaping how Defense buyers discover information. Roughly 19% of buyers are now experimenting with AI-enabled search, though adoption is uneven. While that may not seem significant, remember that these tools are relatively new. We expect that number to be much larger next year.

For those who use AI search, behaviors vary. Many will read the AI-generated summary before scrolling to traditional results, but 40% rely solely on the summary without clicking through to the summary without clicking through to vendor websites. This creates a new risk: even if contractors produce high-quality content, it may never be seen if it doesn't appear in the AI-generated overview.

The takeaway is that SEO alone is no longer enough. Contractors must now embrace Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)—structuring content so that it is easily scraped, summarized, and cited by AI models. This means crafting content that is fact-based, concise, expert-cited, and written in a Q&A style that directly addresses the questions buyers are asking. Increasingly, AI summaries function as the new “newsletter”—the first thing a buyer sees, and often the only thing they need.

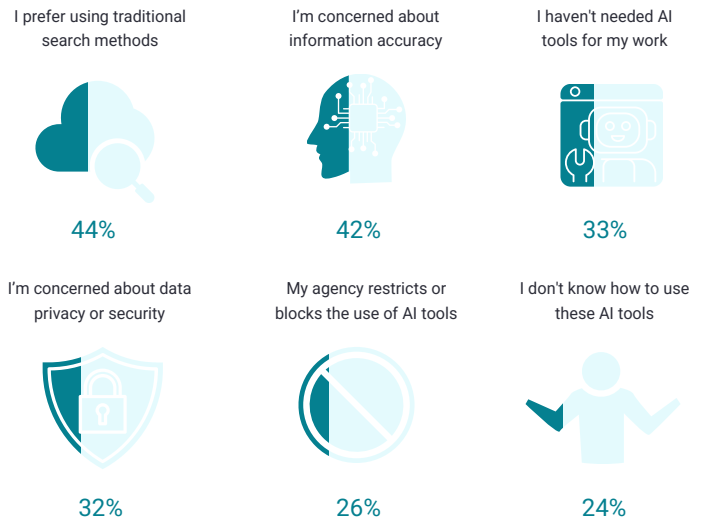
## Most respondents rarely use AI tools instead of search



From the 2025 Media Engagement Report

Q: How often do you use AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, or Copilot) instead of a traditional search engine (e.g., Google, Bing) to find work-related information?

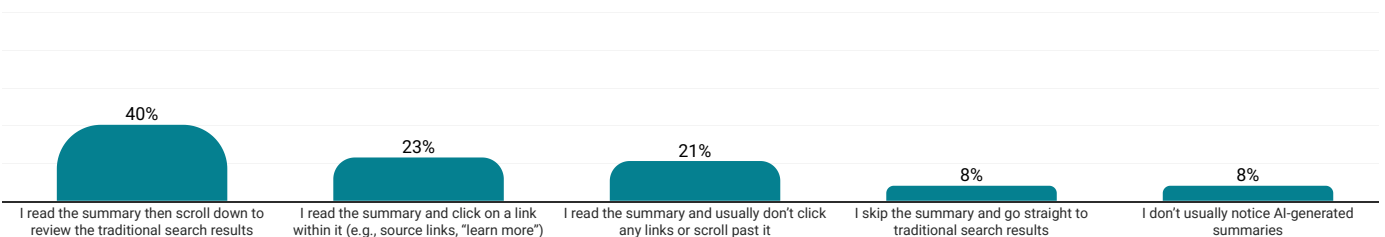
## Respondents don't trust the accuracy of the AI results



From the 2025 Media Engagement Report

Q: [IF RARELY OR NEVER] Why do you [pipe in previous response of "rarely" or "never"] use AI tools instead of a traditional search engine to find work-related information? Select all that apply.

## But they still read the summary before scrolling on to search results



From the 2025 Media Engagement Report

Q: Which of the following best describes what you typically do when you see an AI-generated summary that appears at the top of search engine results (e.g., Google, Bing)?

## Strategic Implications for 2026

As the market heads into 2026, the path forward for contractors is both clearer and more demanding. Success will depend on aligning outreach with buyer habits while building credibility through trusted channels. To cut through the noise, contractors need to:

- 1 Be Present and Connected.** Buyers make decisions in stages, and vendors must ensure their brand is visible at each point—whether through newsletters, social platforms, or association events.
- 2 Prioritize Trust.** Confidence in vendor-produced content continues to decline. Contractors must instead lean on associations, trade media, and SMEs to deliver messages buyers will believe.
- 3 Adopt People-First Thought Leadership.** Elevating SMEs and human voices—particularly on LinkedIn and Reddit—will generate stronger engagement than corporate branding alone.
- 4 Prepare for AI Discovery.** GEO is no longer optional. Vendors must anticipate that buyers will encounter their brand through AI summaries and structure content accordingly.

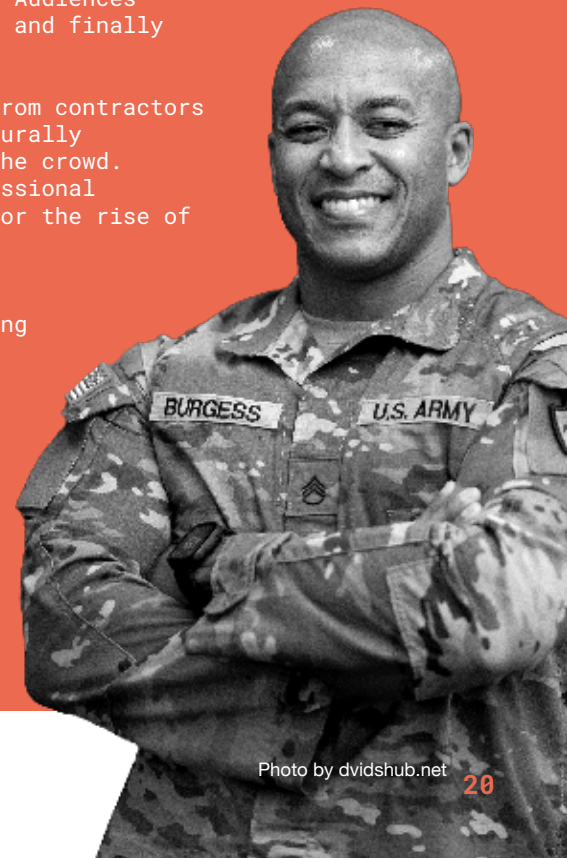
## Conclusion

The 2026 Defense buyer is more informed, more selective, and more skeptical than ever before. Most importantly, they respond to people, not brands. Audiences first trust the content, then the individual creating the content, and finally the brand behind the individual.

In a space where the audience is inundated with similar messages from contractors claiming to be “trusted partners,” meeting them where they are naturally gravitating for meaningful connection is a way to stand out from the crowd. By showing up consistently in trusted media, partnering with professional associations, empowering SMEs as authentic voices, and preparing for the rise of AI-driven discovery, contractors can get their message heard.

Those who embrace credibility and adaptability will stand out in a crowded market. Those who cling to traditional approaches risk being overlooked entirely.

The mandate for 2026 is clear: build trust, diversify channels, and prepare for a future where discovery is mediated not just by search engines, but by algorithms, associations, and authentic human voices.



## ABOUT THE STUDIES

### Annual Brand Assessment Study

The online blind survey of more than 1,000 federal IT purchasers was fielded in March-April 2025. The survey assessed brand awareness and perceptions of more than 50 government contractors working in both the Federal Civilian and Defense markets.

### 2025 Buyer Journey Methodology

The online blind survey of 600 IT purchasers fielded in April-May 2025. Respondents included 40% from Defense agencies.

### 2025 Media Engagement Methodology

The online, blind survey of 1,000 government personnel was fielded in July 2025. The data was weighted to ensure sample sources were not over- or under-represented. Respondents included 42% from Defense agencies.

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