



How to ignite the flame of brand advocacy — and not get burned

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every brand wants to be recommended by the people who consumers trust most for advice on what to buy. In a digital age, implementing a brand advocacy program is more vital to a brand's success than ever — but it's also riskier. A well-run advocacy program gathers your most influential advocates and gets them talking about your brand more frequently and more powerfully so they can help your consumers buy more confidently.

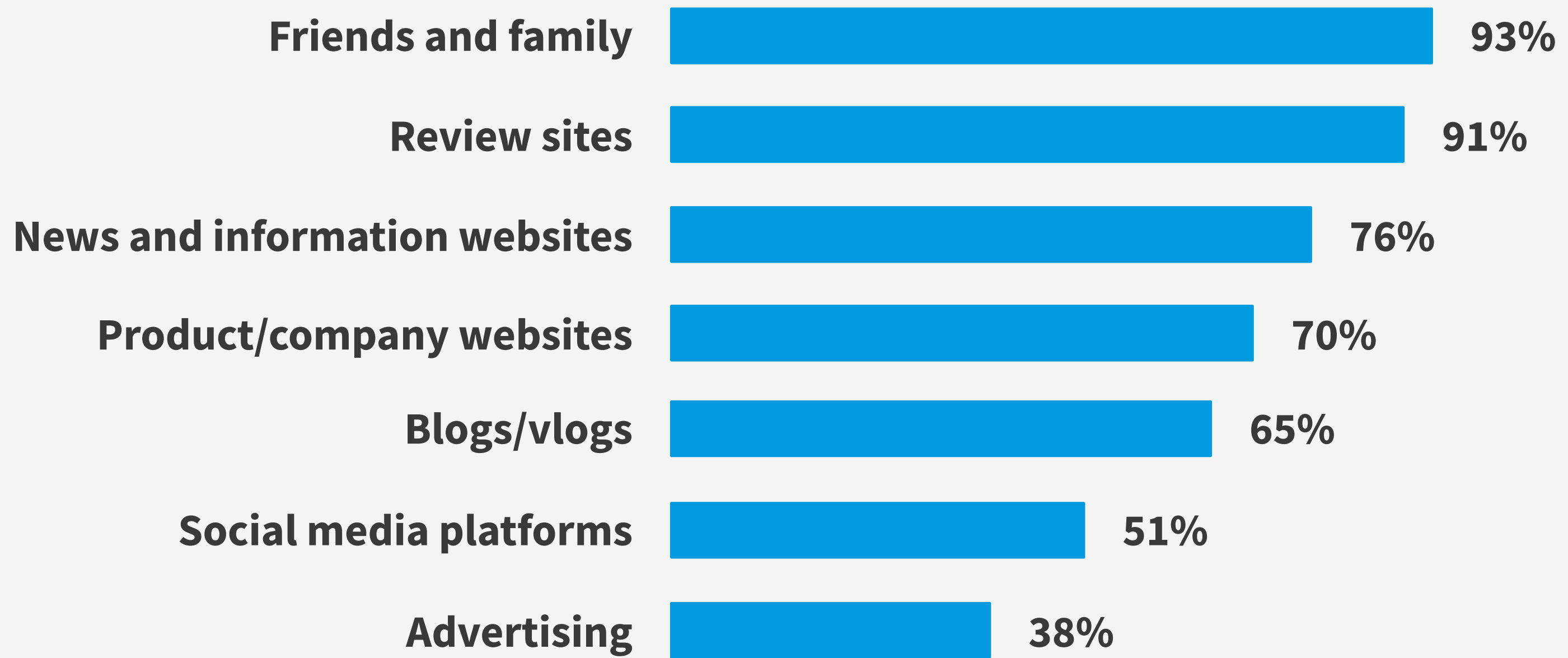
Because advocacy programs typically reward members with insider pricing, or even free products, they also must be designed to address common challenges, such as: identifying the most impactful people, credentialing them, renewing or expiring those credentials on an ongoing basis, and preventing abuse from pretenders who would try to game the system.

Based on our experience in securely creating these types of programs for 950+ brands over the past two decades, these are best practices that we recommend brands follow.

Why run a brand advocacy program?

Marketing research continues to show that consumers are less and less interested in hearing what brands say about themselves, and more interested in what people they trust have to say about the brand. Friends and family are trusted the most for their product recommendations, followed closely by online consumer reviews. These are both trusted more than celebrities, social influencers or, of course, paid advertising, which perpetually ranks the lowest in consumer trust.¹

Consumer trust in information sources



Source: Kantar Media, based on a 2020 survey of 7,753 global consumers, responding to “Which of the following do you particularly trust to get information about brands and services?”

A well-run advocacy program powers up credible people to talk about a brand and helps consumers to buy more confidently. It gives brands visibility into how the program is performing so they can measure success. An advocacy program can include many components — pro deals, ambassador programs, referral marketing and retail training, to name a few.

The opposite is true of a poorly run program. If discounts, and other forms of special access, are offered too broadly or without clear guidelines and safeguards in place, it can cause consumers to second guess purchasing an item at full price. It can undermine the brand’s value.

The good news is there is a tried-and-true, 3-step formula to getting this right:

- 1.** Identify and gather the people who can be your most powerful advocates into a secure program. Ensure ongoing verification of their credentials.
- 2.** Increase the frequency and improve the quality of their recommendations through exclusive education and product access.
- 3.** Get your advocates’ advice to as many consumers as possible.

Let’s explore each of these steps in more detail.

Step 1:

Identify and gather the people who can be your most powerful advocates.

Think about who your consumers trust for advice on what to buy. Who is the most influential and knowledgeable in recommending your products? You may want to reach out to the retail sales associates who are speaking with your consumers every day, members of key professional organizations in your industry, people who are exceptional at creating digital content about products like yours, or a combination of all three.

It's important to establish strong and objective criteria for who qualifies for your program — criteria that can be verified, creating a credential. You're about to invite your potential advocates to belong to an exclusive club that comes with special privileges. One of the most common criticisms of a poorly run ambassador or pro program is that “everyone can get in,” which disincentivizes your consumers from paying full price and jeopardizes your relationships with your retail partners.

If 50% of your consumers qualify for your program, you've made it far too broad. But if your criteria would apply to less than 5% of your consumers, the ones who truly qualify for special access, you're in the right zone. You've kept your program small enough to reach only legitimate brand advocates who will have the greatest impact on your consumers.

Your advocates will not be a monolithic group. You'll have different types and tiers of members. The type of advocate is tied to their credentials — or what makes them a valuable advocate. The tier is how influential you perceive them to be.

For example, an outdoor gear brand may want to reach sales associates at multiple retailers, along with outdoor guides who are heavy users and recommenders of outdoor products. Each affiliation with a retailer or guiding organization is its own credential, representing a type of advocate. Your advocates may have multiple credentials — the most impactful ones often do.

As a brand, you will want to evaluate which credentials are most valuable to you, placing your advocates into tiers. It's best to revisit your types and tiers regularly. And as your program grows, you'll discover which advocates are most engaged with learning about your brand, purchasing your products and sharing their online content and reviews. This will give you valuable insight as you continuously review whether your program includes the correct types and tiers and whether you are reaching enough of these advocates.

Segment your advocates into types and tiers so you can tailor your program to activate this diverse and powerful audience in the most effective ways. Your advocates vary widely by type and tier and your program should, too. With a well-functioning, multi-layered advocacy program, you can offer the greatest rewards to your most valuable advocates. At the same time, you're cultivating relationships with your more casual recommenders and helping them grow in their expertise and impact.

All of this is made easier with technology. In the past, brands managed pro deals and ambassador programs manually. They reviewed written applications or emails, added members and tracked their activity in a spreadsheet. Digital tools make it much easier to handle recruiting, onboarding and verification of new members. But it also makes it easier for people to find out about these programs and attempt to game them, accessing rewards they don't deserve. Past programs could only count people as "in" or "out." Now, with more sophisticated targeting, individuals can get different levels of access depending on their credentials.

A state-of-the-art advocacy program uses rigorous verification and monitoring to ensure the program is secure and continuously updated. It blends automated and manual verification, auditing processes, time-based credential expiration, some form of credential hierarchy, and supports multiple credentials per individual. It also ties a sophisticated targeting system to the credentials so that people with different types and tiers get different degrees of access.

After you identify and gather your brand advocates, the next steps are about deepening their product knowledge, sparking their recommendations and getting those recommendations in front of your consumers.

Step 1 Checklist

- ✓ Identify who the key advocates are in your product category and for your brand, specifically.
- ✓ Define what credentials are required to gain membership.
- ✓ Verify credentials for membership.
- ✓ Differentiate your advocates by type and tier.
- ✓ Monitor activity of members and require verification at least annually to prevent abuse.



How it works on ExpertVoice

ExpertVoice has an audience of more than 1 million advocates, whom we call experts. Each expert has many different credentials, allowing brands to pick and choose whom they want to reach. Credentials most commonly are an affiliation with an established retailer or industry organization.

Our largest 100 brand partners each engage with an average of 25,000 experts over the course of a year. The next 100 reach approximately 7,000 experts each.

Every month, we verify 20,000-25,000 applications manually and another 15,000-20,000 through automated methods (direct ties to partners' databases, team codes, manager approvals, email address domain verification or a brand rep referral.) At the same time, we expire the credentials of approximately 40,000 members each month. These members no longer work for the retail organization or belong to the industry group tied to the credential.

Depending on the affiliation, we use one or more of these 8 different verification methods to determine whether an expert qualifies for the credential:

- ① Manual verification by the ExpertVoice credentials team: The expert must upload documentation, such as a pay stub or membership card, that shows they are employed by a retailer or belong to an industry group.
- ② Automatic verification based on the applicant's email address domain.
- ③ Automatic verification based on a match with a partner organization's membership list.
- ④ Automatic verification based on team codes distributed by the organization.
- ⑤ Automatic verification based on a brand rep referral.
- ⑥ Manual verification by the retailer or partner organization.
- ⑦ Manual verification for each order placed.
- ⑧ Require the member to ship purchases to their retail store location.

With this rigorous vetting by our in-house team, 17% of people who apply for a specific affiliation are not approved.

Our team constantly works on improvements to the above to ensure that only qualified experts retain access to brands on ExpertVoice.

Step 2:

Increase and improve their recommendations.

With your potential brand advocates identified and gathered, be thoughtful about how you can strengthen their advice and inspire them to share it more often, with more people. Think of your program as cultivating a long-term relationship with your most influential advocates — a relationship based on more than just incentive pricing or one-time initiatives, like a single product launch.

This is your most impactful and most engaged audience. And you will not only want to recognize them with exclusive pricing but also strengthen their knowledge with a regular cadence of learning content that keeps them up to date on your key brand stories, core technologies and latest products.

Pairing product seeding with learning content allows you to educate experts about your brand's key differentiators, coach them on the features of your products and share behind-the-scenes information that further endears them to you. You can both empower them with the latest product knowledge and inspire them with your most resonant and relevant stories.

Education is important for all your advocates, because it helps them make better recommendations about your products wherever they are sharing their advice: in retail stores, in online reviews, on social media or face to face. And better recommendations create better sales. In a two-year study involving more than 63,500 retail associates on ExpertVoice in 330 stores, those who had completed brand education sold 87% more than those who didn't.²



Associates who had completed brand education sold **87% more** than their peers who didn't.

Along with sharing education with your brand advocates, you also will want to gather their insights via product reviews and surveys. Not only will this generate content you can get in front of your consumers, it gives you helpful product feedback you can share with your product design and marketing teams.

Offering your advocates exclusive pricing on your products isn't simply an incentive for your advocates to participate in your program. It's also an essential strategy for increasing and improving their recommendations.

It's important to note that you are offering your advocates exclusive rewards because of their expertise and influence — *not* in exchange for their online reviews or social media posts. A quid pro quo turns an authentic, expert recommendation into a paid ad. You don't need to require feedback from your advocates. They'll do this voluntarily and organically, resulting in recommendations that are more trusted by your consumers.

Every product seeding program needs boundaries. What will the pricing structure be? Will everyone have the same level of access or will access be tiered? Because you've identified different types and tiers of advocates, you also can use their credentials to offer different levels of insider pricing and access to exclusive, educational content.

As a best practice, share clear order guidelines so that members understand the rules of participation.

Common special-access order guidelines include:

- Purchases are for yourself only — do not buy for friends and family.
- Please don't talk about your insider pricing with others.
- Possible limits to the volume or frequency of orders.

Transparency about the expectations for your purchasing program is key. Share the rules every time your member is placing an order. Most members strive to uphold the rules and ensure their continued access.

For the few bad actors who try to abuse the system, technology offers continuous monitoring to detect and prevent abuse. For instance, Sift's Digital Trust & Safety suite, used by AirBnB, Zillow, ExpertVoice and others, leverages machine learning for always-on monitoring of online activities to prevent fraud.

Step 2 Checklist

- ✓ Determine how you would like to increase your advocates' knowledge with education and first-hand experience.
- ✓ Reward your advocates, based on their tier, with exclusive pricing.
- ✓ Establish clear guidelines for belonging to your purchase program.
- ✓ Share new learning content at least once per quarter.
- ✓ Gather your members' feedback, content and product reviews.



How it works on ExpertVoice

Every brand advocacy program is tailored to the particular needs of each partner brand. There are four main engagement types: education, product seeding, product sampling and surveys. Some brands offer product seeding alone, while others require completing a learning campaign before experts can unlock their exclusive pricing. Based on audience surveys, our experts want to see new content from their favorite brands at least once per quarter and as often as monthly. On average, they say they're willing to spend 16 minutes learning about a brand each time they visit.³

Brands that offer both learning and product seeding on ExpertVoice reap the benefits: They receive 2x as many digital product recommendations and 2x the order conversion of brands that offer product seeding alone.⁴ And they are twice as likely to be recommended in their advocates' day-to-day conversations.

Step 3:

Get your advocates' advice to consumers.

Your best advocates will recommend your brand and your products to consumers, with little or no prompting from you. They will talk about your products in online reviews, social media content, conversations on the retail sales floor and other day-to-day interactions.

Your goal — having given these people deep knowledge, firsthand product experiences and examples of what helpful advice looks like — is to expand your advocates' ability to reach more of your consumers, more often. You will want to continually surface their content and reviews in the places where it can help your consumers most, ensuring they readily find relevant, timely and trusted advice across your product line.

First, consider how best to capture and evaluate the content your advocates create about your products. Do you have your own systems in place for gathering product reviews and user-generated content? How will you identify the most helpful content from your most credible advocates and share that with your consumers? When an advocate provides high-quality content, is someone from your brand responding to it? Knowing you are listening encourages your advocates to continue sharing their insights and reviews with you.

Next, think about where your consumers go for advice when they are deciding what to buy. They may search for helpful videos or content on YouTube and other social media, speak to retail associates in brick-and-mortar or read online product reviews on retail sites. They will also visit your brand website, whether or not you offer direct-to-consumer purchasing. How can you get your advocates' content in these places and refresh it frequently?

A fully functioning brand advocacy program results in trusted, high-quality user-generated content and product reviews that are helpful to consumers. Featuring this content in your paid media can amplify its reach and make your advertising more trusted and more effective.

Your advocates' advice is more valuable than ever. 97% of consumers consult online product reviews when making purchasing decisions. And of those shoppers, 26% consult reviews for every purchase they make online, according to a 2018 survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers.⁵



That's why the most successful brands think strategically about how to gather their most impactful advocates, increase and improve their recommendations and get their advice in front of consumers. A well-run advocacy program drives full-price consumer sales that benefit your brand, your retail partners and your consumers, who are able to buy more confidently.

Step 3 Checklist

- ✓ Gather your advocates' product insights, content and digital reviews.
- ✓ Review, analyze and respond to what your advocates share.
- ✓ Identify the places online where your consumers go for product advice.
- ✓ Surface high-quality content and reviews in the places online where your consumers seek product information.
- ✓ Continue to evaluate the performance of your program and improve.



How it works on ExpertVoice

Brand advocates on ExpertVoice have 22x more conversations each week about what to buy than the average consumer. And 82% of consumers are likely to buy or try based on one of their recommendations.⁶

One way that ExpertVoice gets digital recommendations in front of consumers is by enabling brands to display them as trusted, expert reviews on their own e-commerce pages. Recommendations are collected within our closed network and can be reviewed, syndicated and published by a brand using our software.

- The Advocacy Platform (AP) has tools for managing recommendations and expert-generated content.
- The recommendation display can add selected expert recommendations to your e-commerce site.
- Through our syndication tools, the recommendations can also go to third-party networks like Bazaarvoice to be displayed on retailer websites.

Expert recommendation display has been shown to lift revenue per session on brand e-commerce pages by 15-30%.⁷ We are constantly improving and will soon launch ways to amplify this kind of expert-generated content on social platforms, like Instagram, as well.

¹ 2020 Kantar Media Dimension Report

² Marshall Fisher Report, commissioned by ExpertVoice

³ 2021 What Experts Want Survey, ExpertVoice

⁴ 2020 ExpertVoice analysis

⁵ The Growing Power of Reviews, Power Reviews

⁶ 2016 Keller Fay Study, commissioned by ExpertVoice

⁷ 2021 ExpertVoice analysis of data shared by shared partner brands