

2026

Database Strategies & Contact Acquisition Benchmark Survey

Charting the Course in 2026



Executive Summary

Your database is the heartbeat of marketing and sales operations, the infrastructure that carries vital information, enabling every action, from a simple email send to a complex, multi-touch attribution model.

Marketers in recent years have been drowning in data but starved for insight. While they were diligent in tracking top-of-funnel metrics like web traffic and email engagement, a significant gap existed in their ability to connect these activities to meaningful business outcomes. The struggle was clear: a lack of visibility across the buyer's journey, messy CRM data, and an inability to track activity between channels. This left many teams unable to prove their ROI, fueling a cycle of budget constraints and resource limitations.

As a result, the landscape has undergone a transformation from simply measuring what's easy to strategically building what's necessary. Our 2026 Database Strategies & Contact Acquisition Benchmark Survey revealed where marketers have sharpened their focus, moving from a reactive stance on measurement to a proactive approach that builds and enriches the foundational data that powers the entire revenue engine.

To get a historical perspective, we compared the results of our 2024 report that was defined by the struggle to connect disparate dots with 2026 that is characterized by a deliberate effort to create a more cohesive and intelligent data ecosystem from the ground up.

We asked about the biggest force that has impacted the industry the last two year: the usage of artificial intelligence (AI). The results are marketers now have data-driven empowerment, enabling them to build the infrastructure need to not demonstrate value but actively create it as well.

Are you planning to increase your investment in database strategies in 2026?

57% Yes 13% No 30% Unsure



A Strategic Pivot to Database Priorities

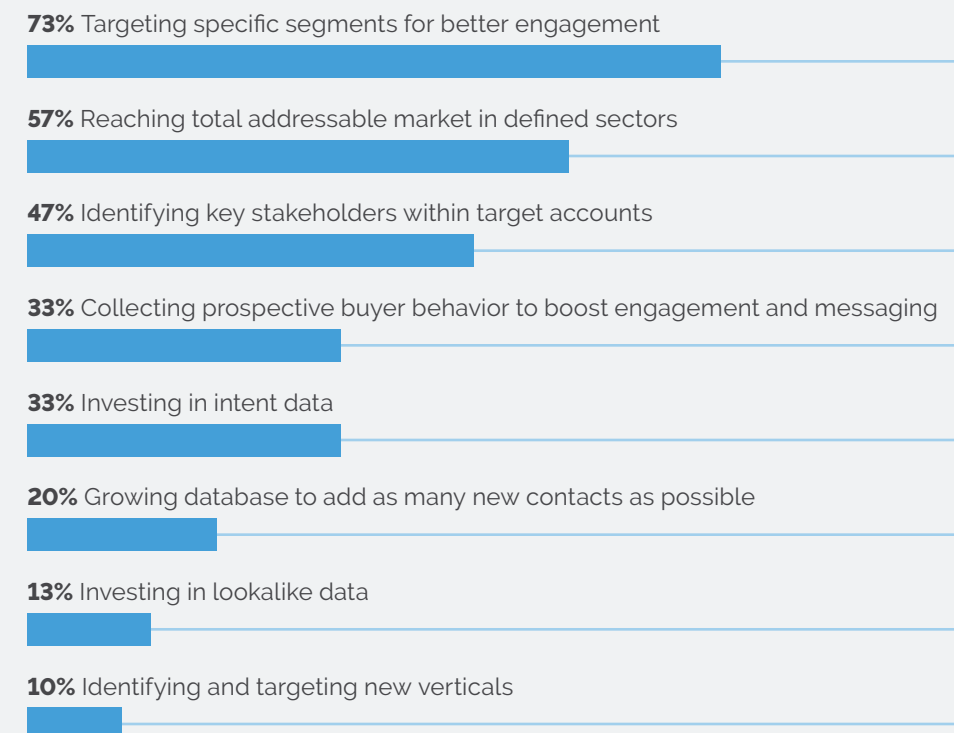
The marketing landscape has shifted from the frustration of measurement challenges to the strategic imperative of building robust database strategies. A notable 58% of organizations plan to increase their investment in database strategies, prioritizing not just the collection of data but ensuring it is the right data—actionable and insightful.

The top database priority in 2026 is targeting specific segments for better engagement (72%). This marks a direct response to the channel-tracking failures of 2024. Instead of retroactively connecting siloed channels, marketers are now designing databases with segmentation in mind from the outset. This proactive approach enables them to craft personalized narratives for distinct audiences, a fundamental marketing principle that was previously overshadowed by tactical struggles.

In 2024, the primary pain point was measurement as 86% of organizations reported that marketing measurement was a growing priority, driven by the need to demonstrate ROI (73%) and connect marketing efforts to revenue (70%). The ability to achieve this was severely hampered by an inability to track activity across channels and buyer stages as their biggest challenge. This fragmented view left marketers piecing together incomplete puzzles.

This struggle with measurement was symptomatic of a deeper issue: the quality and structure of underlying data. The realization that better data infrastructure was essential set the stage for the strategic pivot heading into 2026.

What are your top three database priorities for 2026? (Select top three)



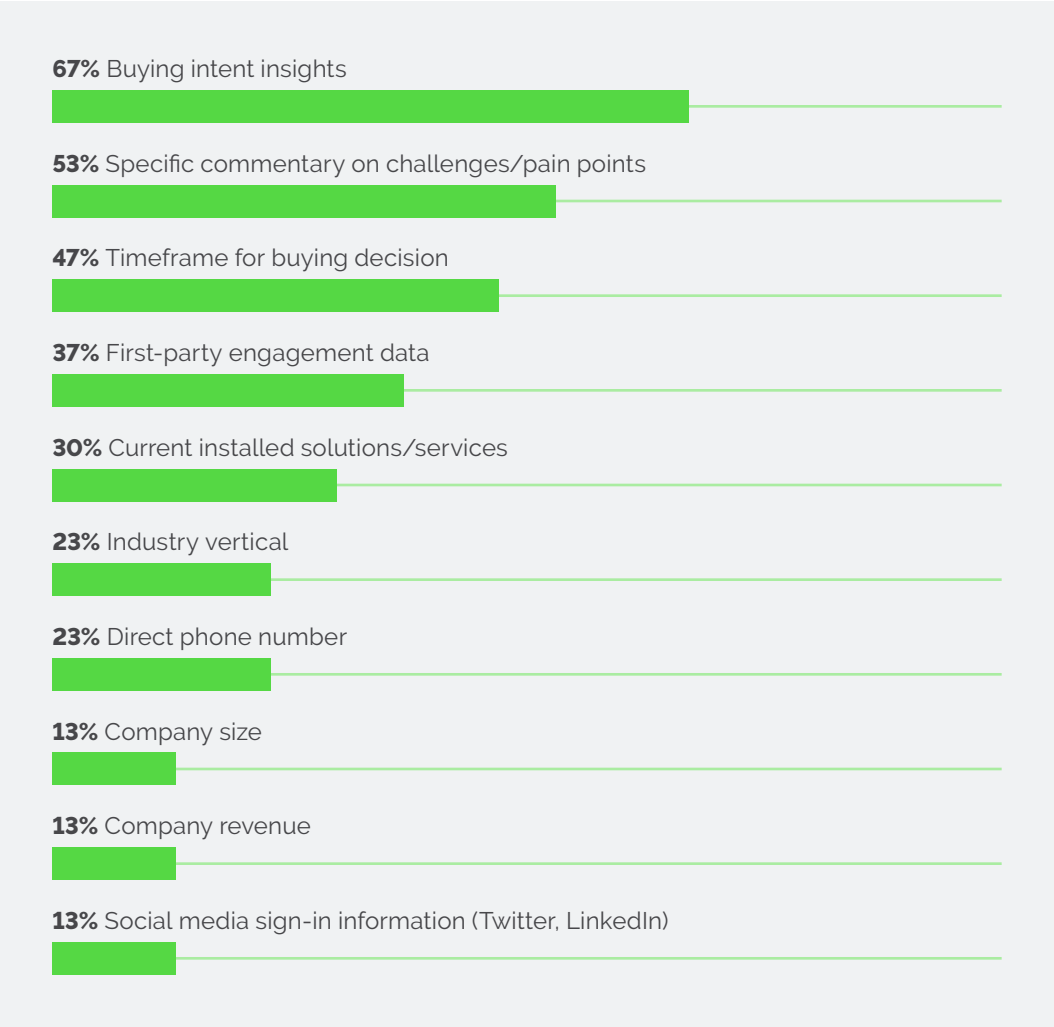
The Widening Data Gap: From “What” to “Why”

Marketers have shifted their focus to prescriptive insights from descriptive data as we start 2026. The biggest gaps in contact data are no longer about activity but about intent and context. The most valuable insights include buying intent (66%), customer challenges (52%), and the timeframe for buying decisions (48%). This represents a monumental leap from knowing that a prospect opened an email to understanding why they are interested and what they plan to do next.

This shift explains the rise of data enrichment as a critical strategy. Currently, the primary reason for investing in enrichment is to personalize content and messaging (74%). Marketers are no longer satisfied with surface-level data; they are building comprehensive profiles to enable truly relevant and timely engagement.

This is a departure from the last survey dominated by concerns about the “what” and “where” of engagement. Metrics like web traffic (84%) and email clicks (86%) were the primary focus. While useful, these metrics offered little insight into the buyer’s mindset and left marketers with limited ability to predict or influence buyer behavior.

Where do you have the biggest gaps in your current data with contact information?



The Persistent Challenge of Data Quality

Despite the evolution of priorities, one challenge remains consistent: data quality. In 2026, the top challenges in maintaining data quality are a lack of time and resources (72%) and the absence of standard operating procedures (67%). A majority of organizations (61%) still handle data cleansing manually, a labor-intensive and error-prone process that is unsustainable at scale.

This is a key area where AI is emerging as a potential solution, but adoption remains tentative as 39% of organizations are not using AI in their database strategy, primarily due to concerns about data quality and completeness (56%). This creates a frustrating catch-22: better data is needed to implement AI effectively, but AI is one of the most powerful tools for improving data quality.

The most impactful AI use cases identified were lead enrichment (53%) and automated data hygiene (27%).

What are your biggest challenges in maintaining data quality in your contact database? (Select top three)



72%

Don't have enough time/resources to implement an effective process



67%

Don't have a standard operating procedure for marketing/sales teams to keep data up to date



50%

Data is old/outdated



33%

Data is siloed



33%

Not enough data on current customers

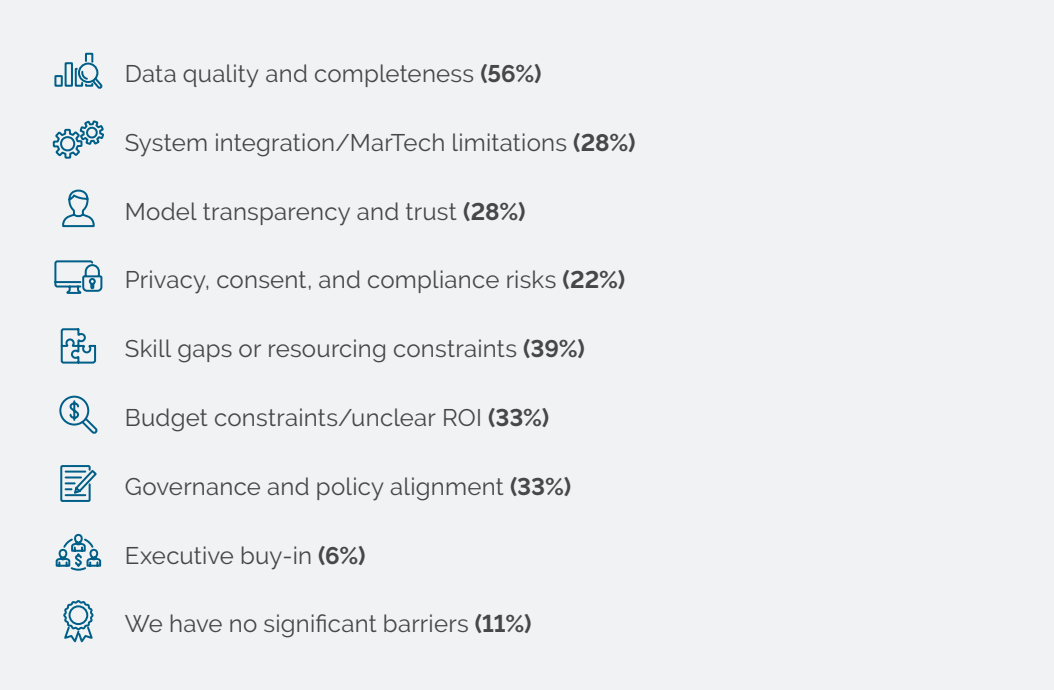


22%

Legacy technology issues/limitations

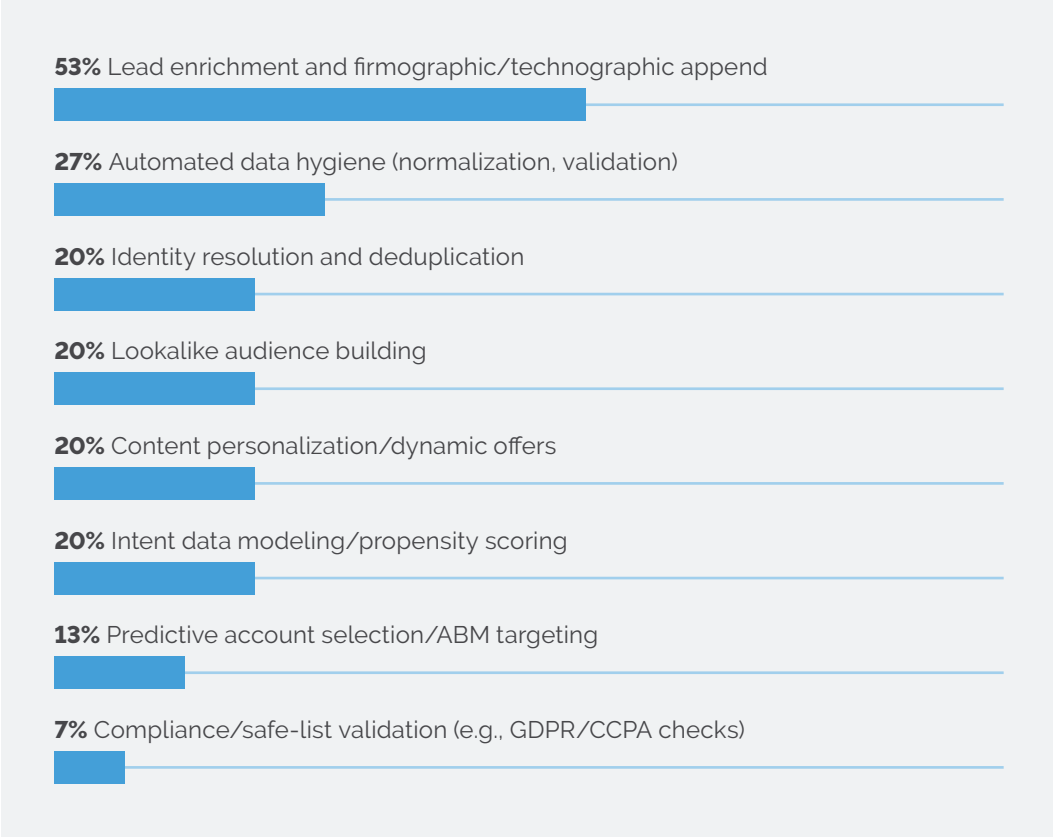
When asked which AI use cases had the greatest impact on outcomes in the past 12 months, the results paint a clear picture: data quality and enrichment are king. The most significant finding is the overwhelming dominance of **lead enrichment and firmographic/technographic append**, cited by 53% of respondents as a top driver of success. This suggests that for more than half of organizations, the primary value of AI lies in its ability to fill in the blanks. Following this, **automated data hygiene (normalization and validation)** secured the second spot with 27%.

What are the top barriers limiting AI adoption in your database and acquisition programs? (Select top three)



In 2024, data quality was already a significant hurdle to effective measurement. However, the diagnosis of the problem was less clear. The fragmented and manual processes that plagued data management two years earlier laid the groundwork for the operational challenges that persist in 2026.

Which AI use cases have had the greatest impact on your contact acquisition outcomes in the past 12 months? (Select top three)



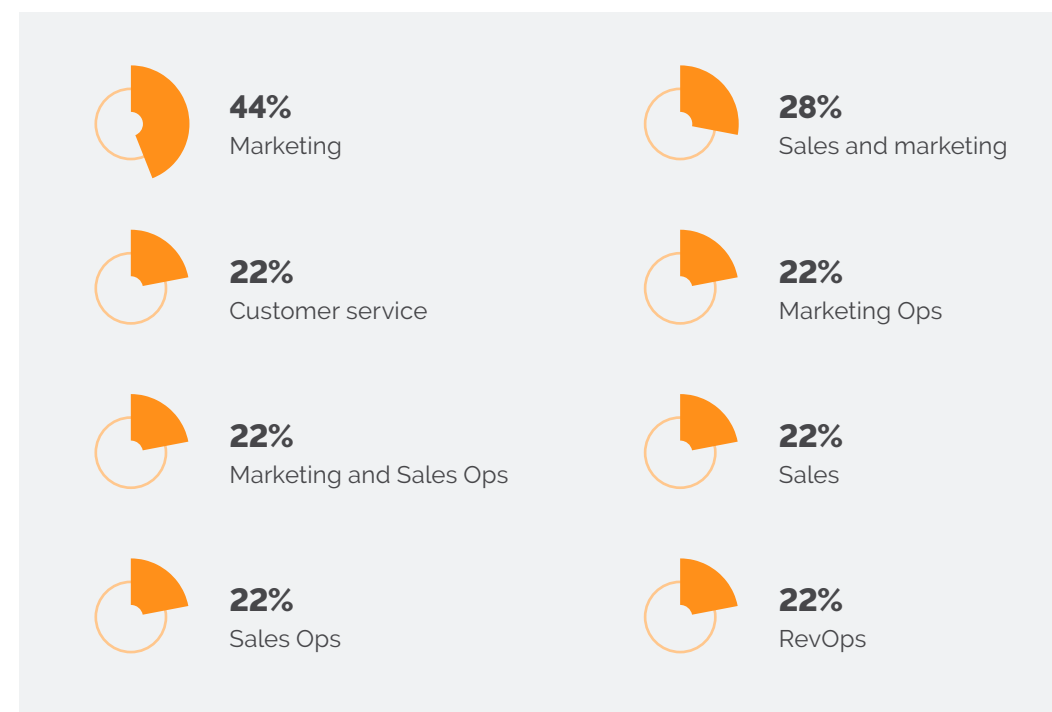
The Dawn of a Unified Data Strategy

A clear trend toward consolidation has emerged from our respondents. Half of all organizations now have a single source of truth for sales and marketing data, breaking down the silos that previously prevented a cohesive view of the customer journey. When sales and marketing operate from the same playbook, alignment results in a better outcome.

Responsibility for data management is becoming more centralized in marketing (44%) or a joint sales and marketing team (28%) now most often responsible for updating data. This consolidation of ownership is seen as enforcing standard operating procedures, improving quality, and creating a more reliable and strategic data infrastructure.

In 2024, data was scattered across a patchwork of systems: CRM (70%), web analytics (62%), marketing automation (59%), and even manual Excel sheets (57%). This fragmentation was a primary cause of the measurement and attribution challenges that defined the era. The lack of a unified data strategy made it nearly impossible to achieve a holistic view of the customer journey.

Which department is mainly responsible for accessing and updating the data?



A New Chapter for Data Management

The focus for marketers in the last two years has rightly shifted an inability to measure ROI to concentrating on a weak data foundation. The investment in database strategies, the focus on segmentation, and the quest for contextual data are the blueprints for this new infrastructure.

However, the journey is far from over. The persistent challenges of manual data cleansing and slow AI adoption show that having the architectural plans is not the same as having the skilled workforce and advanced tools to execute them.

The next chapter will be defined by how organizations bridge this operational gap. They must move beyond manual processes and embrace the automation and intelligence offered by AI to manage their data at scale. Overcoming the barriers to AI will be crucial for unlocking the full potential of the strategic databases they are now so focused on building.

The future of marketing is not just about telling the right story to the right audience, but about building an intelligent system that knows who that audience is, what they need, and when they need it. For marketers who embrace this new role, the opportunity is immense: to move beyond simply justifying their existence with metrics and start designing the very engine of their company's growth.

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About the Survey

The respondents to the 2026 "Database Strategies & Contact Acquisition Report" included those at the C-level (33%), director-level (22%), Manager-level (17%), and VP-level (11%). They encompass various industries, but most commonly advertising and marketing; and education, government, insurance and manufacturing. Finally, 33% of respondents are with companies that generate less than \$10 million in annual revenue, while 50% bring in between \$10 million and \$1 billion and 16% report more than \$1 billion.



Demand Gen Report is a targeted online publication that uncovers the strategies and solutions that help companies better align their sales and marketing organizations, and ultimately, drive growth. A key component of the publication's editorial coverage focuses on the sales and marketing automation tools that enable companies to better measure and manage their multichannel demand generation efforts.

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