



SURGE DETECTED... OR IS IT?

FREE RESEARCH PAPER • OCTOBER 2026

B2B Intent Data Reality Check 2026

What it tells you. What it doesn't.

Sourced numbers, a bias map of who is saying what, a vendor question list and a 30-day pilot you can run before you renew.

6

REASONS A SURGE ISN'T A BUYER

10

VENDOR QUESTIONS

30

DAY PILOT PLAN

START HERE

Why this paper exists

Intent data promises to tell you who is ready to buy. Many teams pay for it and still cannot say what it changed. This paper lays out what intent data is, what the numbers actually say and where every number comes from.

Inside

- 03** Five findings in two minutes
- 04** Intent data 101
- 05** How a “surge” is made
- 06** What buyers do before they talk to you
- 07** The reality-check numbers
- 08** Six reasons a surge isn’t a buyer
- 09** The bias map: who is saying what
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- 16** Keep reading

How to read the badges

Every number in this paper carries a badge for who produced it.

VENDOR SOURCE

The publisher sells intent data, or services near it. Read as directional.

PRIMARY / REGULATOR

A regulator or the original text. The strongest kind.

ARS REASONING

Our own reasoning. It is a view, not a measurement.

UNVERIFIED CLAIM

A claim we could not verify, shown so you can weigh it.

TWO-MINUTE VERSION

Treat a surge as a hypothesis about an account. Test it against a holdout before you pay again. Keep consent rules in front of any message that follows a signal.

Who it's for

Demand generation heads, ABM and marketing-ops leads, SDR managers and CMOs who buy, renew or defend an intent data contract.

Built by [ARS B2B Social Bridge](#). It pairs with our [B2B Lead Quality Report 2026](#) and our [B2B Email Compliance Atlas 2026](#).

THE HEADLINE

Five findings in two minutes

1

A surge is a guess about an account, not a confirmed buyer.

Per Bombora, in-market intent is inferred from how many people at an organisation research a topic, and how much more than usual.

2

Intent matters because the shortlist forms early.

6sense's 2025 study of 4,000+ buyers found 94% of buying groups ranked their preferred vendors before first contact.

3

Almost every accuracy number comes from a seller.

6sense, Bombora, DemandScience and LeadGenius all sell something near intent data. Page 9 maps who says what.

4

The most useful number is not flattering.

In a DemandScience survey of 750 marketing leaders, only 26% of "intent" signals converted to qualified opportunities. Treat it as directional.

5

Privacy rules apply to the people behind the signal.

A signal does not replace consent. Under the UK ICO's test, direct marketing can be a legitimate interest, but it must still pass the necessity and balancing steps.

SO WHAT

Do not cancel intent data and do not trust it blindly. Test it, with a holdout, on your own pipeline.

Sources: Bombora, 6sense, DemandScience, UK ICO. Details and source quality on pages 5 to 10 and 15.

BASICS

Intent data 101

Intent data is evidence that a person or company is researching something. The source of that evidence decides how much you can trust it and how much privacy risk it carries.

First-party

Activity on properties you control: your website, emails, webinars and product. Direct signals from your own audience. Knowlee calls it the “GDPR-safer complement”.

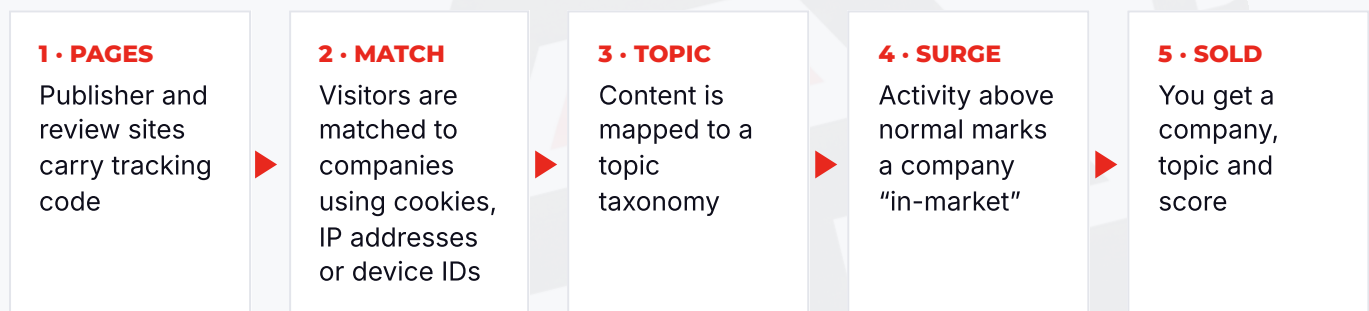
VENDOR SOURCE

Third-party

Research activity on properties outside your control, bought from vendors who aggregate it across publisher sites, review platforms and content networks.

VENDOR SOURCE

How third-party intent is made, step by step



Steps 1, 2 and 5: Knowlee glossary (vendor, own description). Steps 3 and 4: Bombora's own description of its method.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Every step is an inference. The match in step 2 can be wrong, the topic in step 3 can be loose and the surge in step 4 is relative to that company's normal behaviour. Errors stack.

ALSO EXISTS

Review-site signals and contact-level monitoring are sold as intent too. This paper covers the general pattern, not one product.

UNDER THE HOOD

How a “surge” is made

We use Bombora as the example because it publishes the most about its method. Everything on this page is Bombora’s own description and has not been independently verified.

5,000+

Websites in the publisher co-op

Bombora, “Our data”

VENDOR SOURCE

4.7M

Unique domains, “nearly”

Bombora, “Our data”

VENDOR SOURCE

15.8B

Interactions a month

Bombora, “Our data”

VENDOR SOURCE

2.8M

Businesses resolved by identity mapping

Bombora, “Our data”

VENDOR SOURCE

21,600+

B2B topics in the taxonomy

Bombora, “Our data”

VENDOR SOURCE

86%

Of co-op sites it says are exclusive to Bombora

Bombora, “Our data”

VENDOR SOURCE

What Bombora says a surge is

Per Bombora, in-market intent is inferred from how many people at an organisation research a topic, how often they read, and how deeply they research relative to their normal activity.

It says its data comes from “a cooperative of B2B publishers”, collected “with consent”, and not scraped. It describes BERT-based machine learning to read page content.

WHAT THE PAGE DOES NOT SAY

It gives no numeric surge score and no explanation of how the score is calculated. It states “with consent” but does not explain the consent mechanism. Ask both questions (page 12).

All figures on this page are Bombora marketing claims. Bombora sells the product described.

WHY INTENT IS TEMPTING

What buyers do before they talk to you

94%

Buying groups that ranked preferred vendors before first contact

6sense Buyer Experience Report 2025 (4,000+ buyers)

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

77%

Deals bought from the top-ranked vendor. 6sense's text elsewhere says 80%

6sense, same report

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

~5

Vendors buyers evaluated

6sense, via CustomerThink

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

10.1 mo

Average buying cycle, down from 11.3 months

6sense, via CustomerThink

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

70/30 → 60/40

Independent research versus seller engagement

6sense, via Business Wire

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

61%

How far into the process first seller contact happens, from 69%

6sense, via CustomerThink

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

READ WITH CARE

Independent commentary on the study notes that part of the shorter global cycle comes from more physical-goods purchases in the sample. North America was nearly flat (11.4 to 11.1 months). The reasons buyers gave for earlier contact are self-reported. Nearly half of respondents were VP-level or above and 80% worked in technology or services.

Forrester predictions 2025

Over half of large B2B deals (US\$1 million or more) will go through self-serve channels. Half of younger buyers will include 10 or more external influencers.

[INDEPENDENT ADVISORY](#)

[PREDICTION, NOT MEASUREMENT](#)

The takeaway

If buyers shortlist before they talk to you, knowing which accounts are researching has value. That is the best case for intent data. It is not proof that a given feed delivers it.

6sense sells intent and ABM tools, so treat its figures as directional. Sources are listed on page 15.

THE REALITY CHECK

The numbers nobody puts on the sales deck

One 2025 survey of 750 senior marketing leaders (revenue of \$100 million to \$5 billion or more) asked about signals and metrics. It was run by TrendCandy for DemandScience, a performance marketing vendor.

87%

Say their marketing investments yield unreliable or inflated intent signals

DemandScience, 2026 State of Performance Marketing

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

26%

Of “intent” signals convert to qualified opportunities

DemandScience, same survey

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

66%

Say campaign metrics often look successful but fail to drive revenue

DemandScience, same survey

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

Of every 100 “intent” signals

26 convert

74 do not

DemandScience survey figure, self-reported by marketing leaders. It is not a measured conversion rate from our data.

25%

Average share of marketing budget respondents say is wasted

DemandScience, same survey

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

~90% vs 62%

Unclear ROI in stacks of 11–25 tools versus 6–10 tools

DemandScience, same survey

[VENDOR SOURCE](#)

CAVEATS

The fieldwork dates were not stated. The release gives the sample as both “hundreds” and 750. DemandScience sells services that its own findings favour. We use the figures to ask better questions, not to set targets.

CRITICAL VIEW

Six reasons a surge isn't a buyer

01 Research is not buying.

Certification study, blog writing and onboarding can look the same as a purchase in the data. Source: LeadGenius, a competing vendor.

VENDOR SOURCE

02 False positives waste sales time.

Surges can come from job requirements, competitor benchmarking or general interest. Source: LeadGenius.

VENDOR SOURCE

03 Ambiguous keywords blur the signal.

Signals aggregated across domains or tied to loose keywords become probabilistic. Source: LeadGenius.

VENDOR SOURCE

04 Accounts are not people.

Intent flags an account. Sales talks to individuals. You still have to find the right person, and consent rules apply to that person.

ARS REASONING

05 "Above normal" depends on normal.

Bombora measures against an organisation's usual activity. We have not seen evidence on how that behaves for very large or very small accounts.

ARS REASONING

06 The outcome evidence is thin.

LeadGenius says six senior leaders told it they saw no gain and did not renew. That is six unnamed anecdotes. Treat it as a claim.

UNVERIFIED CLAIM

FAIR WARNING

LeadGenius sells contact data and its own signal products. Its article also says intent remains useful as one signal among many. We include its points because they match how the data is made, not because the source is neutral.

WHAT SURVIVES

Intent can still rank accounts for human attention. It is a poor trigger for automatic outreach.

FOLLOW THE INCENTIVE

The bias map: who is saying what

Before you quote a statistic, ask what its publisher sells. This table does that for every source we use.

SOURCE	SELLS	SAYS	READ IT AS	TYPE
6sense Buyer Experience Report 2025	Intent and ABM platform	94% rank vendors before contact	Large sample (4,000+), but vendor-run. Method not specified in the release.	VENDOR SOURCE
DemandScience State of Performance Marketing 2026	B2B performance marketing	87% unreliable signals; 26% convert	750 leaders, run by TrendCandy. Fieldwork dates not stated.	VENDOR SOURCE
Bombora, "Our data"	Intent data	Scale: 5,000+ sites, 15.8B interactions a month	Marketing claims, unverified.	VENDOR SOURCE
LeadGenius, "Is intent data BS?"	Contact data and competing signals	Intent often wrong; six leaders did not renew	Six unnamed anecdotes from a competitor.	UNVERIFIED CLAIM
Knowlee glossary	AI sales and signal tools	GDPR Art. 6 risks of third-party data	Own legal view, not legal advice.	VENDOR SOURCE
Forrester Predictions 2025	Research and advisory	Self-serve share, 10+ influencers	Predictions, not measurements.	INDEPENDENT ADVISORY
UK ICO guidance	Regulator	Legitimate interests three-part test	Primary guidance.	PRIMARY / REGULATOR

OUR OWN BIAS

ARS B2B Social Bridge is a lead generation business. We sell neither intent data nor compliance advice, but we benefit when marketers care about lead quality. We have tried to keep our view separate from the sourced numbers.

Omnibound's statistics roundup helped us locate sources. We cite the originals, not the roundup.

BEFORE YOU MESSAGE ANYONE

Privacy and consent

Third-party intent starts with data about people, even when it is sold as company data. That brings privacy rules into the picture before any email is sent.

1 • Collection

Knowlee describes visitors being matched to companies through cookies, IP addresses or device IDs against an identity graph.

VENDOR SOURCE

2 • Lawful basis

The UK ICO's legitimate interests test has three parts: purpose, necessity and balancing. You must pass all three before you start.

PRIMARY / REGULATOR

3 • Channel rules

The ICO notes that PECR requires consent for unsolicited marketing messages. In Germany, per Overloop, intent signals do not replace prior express consent for email.

ICO

VENDOR SOURCE

THE GAP

Knowlee argues that consent given for advertising personalisation may not cover selling research activity for outbound targeting, and that a buyer of the data needs its own documented basis. This is its own characterisation, not legal advice.

A SAFER DEFAULT

Use third-party intent to prioritise accounts and shape content. Use your own first-party and consented data to reach individuals. Knowlee suggests the same approach. Our reading is that it fits the ICO's necessity and balancing steps.

Go deeper

Country-by-country rules for email, calls and lead sharing are in the free [B2B Email Compliance Atlas 2026](#). Read the card for each market before a signal turns into a message.

General information, not legal advice. Check with local counsel.

EDITORIAL FRAMEWORK

The signal-to-action ladder

Not every signal deserves a message. Climb only as far as the evidence and the rules allow.

1

Watch

Log the surge. Do nothing yet. See how often it repeats for the same account.

2

Prioritise

Move the account up the list for human research and account planning.

3

Tailor

Match ads, content and landing pages to the surging topic.

CHECK AD-TARGETING RULES

4

Warm

Send relevant content to known contacts who have already opted in.

CONSENT ON FILE

5

Reach out

Contact named individuals directly, only where the market's rule is met.

ATLAS CARD FIRST

WHY A LADDER

Because a surge is a guess. Low rungs cost little if the guess is wrong. High rungs cost trust and can break consent rules.

HOW TO USE IT

Write down the signal that moves an account from one rung to the next. Review it against your pilot results (page 13).

This framework is ARS reasoning, not a published standard.

ARS REASONING

BEFORE YOU SIGN OR RENEW

Ten questions for your intent data vendor

If a vendor cannot answer these in writing, you are buying on trust. Keep the answers on file for your renewal review.

- 01** What exactly counts as a surge, and how is the score calculated?
- 02** How many people at an account must show activity before it flags?
- 03** Over what time window, and compared with what baseline?
- 04** How do you match visitors to companies, and what is your match error rate?
- 05** What consent was given, to whom, and can I see the wording?
- 06** Is any signal repackaged from another vendor or from first-party data?
- 07** How often is each topic refreshed, and how old can a signal be?
- 08** Can you show a result that was measured against a holdout?
- 09** What happens to my data and spend if I leave after year one?
- 10** Can I run a paid 30-day pilot with a clean exit?

RED FLAG

A case study with a pipeline number and no holdout is a story, not a test.

DO THIS NEXT

A 30-day pilot you can run

Compare accounts that show a surge with similar accounts that do not, run by the same reps with the same offer.

W1**Define**

Pick one topic and one segment. Choose one success metric: meeting rate, SQL rate or cost per SQL. Freeze your baseline. Write your pass mark now.

W2**Split**

Match accounts by size and industry. Half get signal-led attention. Half get your normal process. Same reps, same offer.

W3**Run and log**

Reps note whether the contact recognised the topic. Check consent rules before each message (Atlas).

W4**Read out**

Compare the two groups on your metric. Renew, shrink or stop. Share the result with your vendor.

DECISION RULE

We do not quote an industry pass mark because we found no independently sourced one. Set yours from your own baseline before the pilot starts.

WHY IT WORKS

A matched control group tells you whether the signal helped or whether those accounts would have replied anyway.

Pilot design: ARS reasoning. [ARS REASONING](#) Pair it with the scoring approach in our [B2B Lead Quality Report 2026](#).

HONEST LIMITS

Where this paper stops

What it is not

It is not legal or investment advice, and it does not rank intent data products. It describes the evidence as we read it in October 2026.

What it leaves out

Pricing, which we could not source independently. Review-site and contact-level intent products. Any non-English market study.

What is vendor-sourced

Most figures. Each is badged. We use them to frame questions, not to set targets.

What we could not verify

Bombora's scale and consent claims, DemandScience's fieldwork dates, 6sense's method, and LeadGenius's six interviews.

COUNTERPOINT

Vendors publish case studies showing large pipeline gains from intent data, often attributed by the client. We did not use them. We found no independent controlled trial, so we cannot say the gains are false or real. The pilot on page 13 is how you find out for your own business.

OUR ADVICE

Judge intent data like any media spend. Ask for a test, read the contract exit and keep consent rules in front of every message.

ARS B2B Social Bridge accepts no liability for decisions taken on the basis of this document.

SHOW YOUR WORKING

Method and sources

We read each source page in October 2026 and recorded who published it and what they sell. Where two pages of the same study disagreed (6sense gives both 77% and 80%), we say so. We left out figures with no traceable source, including unsourced price ranges and an uncited “95% of buyers” claim. Gartner buyer-journey figures could not be verified from the page we reached, so we did not use them.

SOURCE	WHAT WE READ	TYPE
6sense Buyer Experience Report 2025	Business Wire release (via Financial Content) and CustomerThink commentary	Vendor
DemandScience State of Performance Marketing 2026	GlobeNewswire press release, 17 Dec 2025	Vendor
Bombora	“Our data” page on bombora.com	Vendor
Forrester Predictions 2025	Forrester press page	Independent advisory
UK ICO	Legitimate interests guidance	Regulator
Knowlee	Third-party intent data glossary	Vendor
LeadGenius	“Is intent data BS?”	Vendor
Overloop	B2B cold email in Germany	Industry summary

Links

- [6sense 2025 Buyer Experience Report insights \(Business Wire\)](#)
- [CustomerThink: 6sense study round-up](#)
- [DemandScience: 2026 State of Performance Marketing](#)
- [Bombora: Our data](#)
- [Forrester: Predictions 2025, B2B marketing and sales](#)
- [ICO: What is the legitimate interests basis?](#)
- [Knowlee: Third-party intent data](#)
- [LeadGenius: Is intent data BS?](#)
- [Overloop: B2B cold email in Germany](#)

Accessed October 2026.



NEXT STEP

A signal is where the work starts.

Test the signal, check the consent, then judge the lead. These three papers from ARS B2B Social Bridge cover each step.

B2B Lead Quality Report 2026 →

Benchmarks, a vendor scorecard and a lead scoring model · arsb2bsocialbridge.com/b2b-lead-quality-report

B2B Email Compliance Atlas 2026 →

Email, call and lead-sharing rules in ten countries · arsb2bsocialbridge.com/b2b-email-compliance

VISIT

arsb2bsocialbridge.com

Lead generation, qualification and demand programmes.

READ MORE

The Business Perspective

Business and marketing analysis · thebusinessperspective.com