SALES FACTORY

STATE OF THE PRO

VOL. 1, 2026

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RAL
CONNECTING YOUR BRAND TO HARDWORKIN' HANDS

EARNED, NOT CLAIMED.

WHAT 1,168 TRADESPEOPLE TOLD US ABOUT TRUST, TOOLS, AND WHAT IT TAKES TO WIN IN THEIR WORLD.

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TRUSTED BY THE BRANDS THAT PROS REACH FOR FIRST

A LETTER FROM **ROB BELK**

I believe trust is core to doing good business. Trusting your team, your information, and your gut. Today, it matters more than ever, and nowhere is it more evident than from our conversations with Pros.

Long before Sales Factory, I worked the sales floor at the mall in my family's store. Customers came to us because they knew they would get great service, prices, and products. They knew our values and trusted us with where they wanted to spend their hard-earned cash.

At the time, I was selling women's shoes. But really, I was selling confidence. Shoes that gave our customers confidence to look and feel their best. Today, at Sales Factory, we partner with brands that sell trust through the tools, supplies, and products that must perform on the jobsite and in the home.

The State of the Pro 2026 is the proof. Over a thousand tradespeople across eight trades. Eighteen pulse surveys. Ten in-depth interviews. And one unmistakable conclusion:

The trades pro world doesn't slow down or settle. And it definitely doesn't hand out trust to those who haven't earned it. Some of what we found will make brand marketers uncomfortable. More than half of Pros say store brands can perform better than national brands. Nine in ten are confident they can spot AI-generated or staged advertising. And the most trusted source in the trades isn't a channel you can buy, but a coworker on the jobsite.

The trades pro world rewards the brands that earn their place in it. That's where we come in.

Rob Belk
CEO, Sales Factory

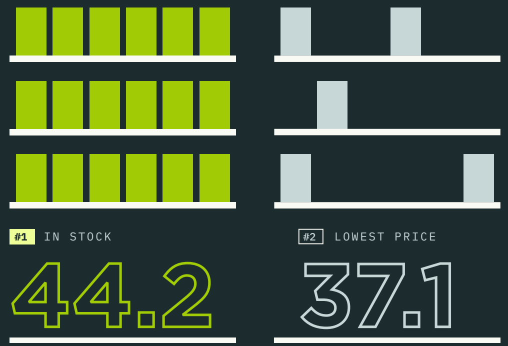
BY THE NUMBERS

01 / STORE BRANDS

54%

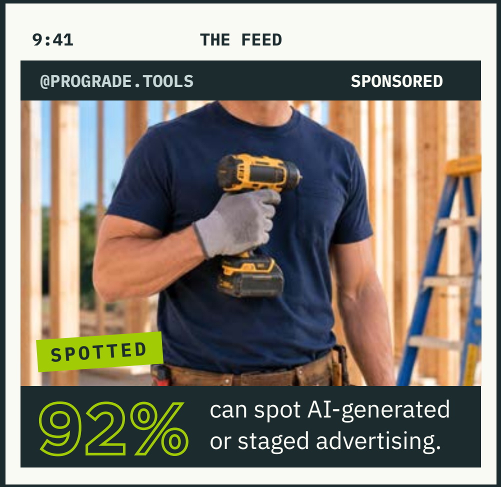
of trades Pros say store brands can perform **better** than national brands.

05 / WHERE PROS BUY



In-stock availability outranks lowest price as the #1 reason Pros choose where to buy — a Pro who finds a hole in your shelf doesn't come back for the discount.

02 / AD DETECTION



06 / AI ADOPTION

18–29

30–39

40–49

50+

30-49 year olds lead AI adoption in the trades.

NOT GEN Z.

03 / PEER LEARNING

94%

learn from a coworker on the jobsite, **not an ad.**

04 / AI USE

49%

use **generative AI** to look up specs and product comparisons.

07 / THE TRADES AHEAD

96%

of trades Pros would encourage a younger person to enter the trades.

08 / RETENTION

72%

rank quality tools as a crew retention driver, just above higher pay at 70%.

EARNED, NOT CLAIMED.

THE BUYING ETHIC THAT RUNS THE TRADES.

THE TRADES PRO DOESN'T TAKE YOUR WORD FOR IT.

The trades pro doesn't take your word for it. Their world runs on proof, because their livelihood does. Every job is a test. Every callback costs money.

So they hold everything to the same standard they hold themselves. The product that performs gets bought again. The store that's in stock gets the morning trip. The brand that shows up, holds up, and backs it up earns something no budget can buy: a permanent place in the truck. Everything else gets left on the shelf.

This ethic has always run their world. What's changed is how fast they can verify and how many options they have when you fall short.

Store brands are outperforming national names. AI answers before your website loads. And the last word still belongs to a coworker on the jobsite.

The bar isn't higher. It's just harder to fake.

WE SURVEYED 1,168 TRADESPEOPLE ACROSS EIGHT TRADES to understand how they decide what to buy, where to shop, what to adopt, and who to believe.

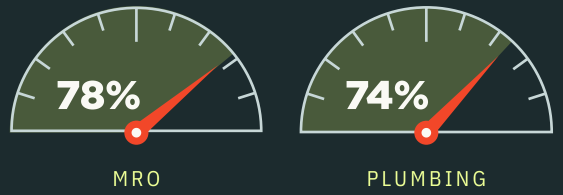
HERE'S WHAT WE FOUND.

MORE WORK THAN HANDS.

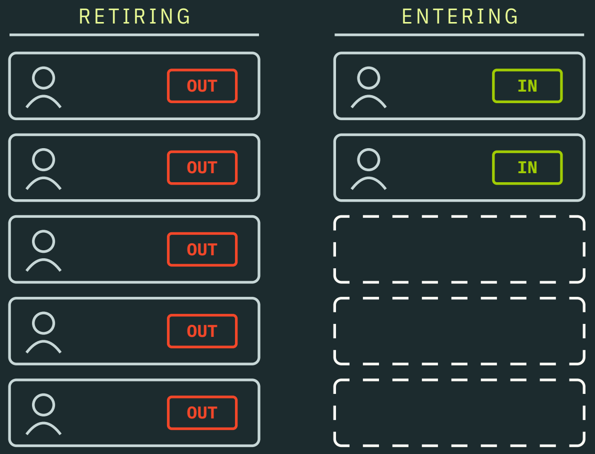
THE STATE OF THE TRADES PRO BUSINESS IN 2026.

Here's the contradiction at the heart of the trades in 2026: the work has never been more in demand, and the hands have never been harder to find.

PERCENTAGE OF PROS THAT
EXPECT REVENUE TO RISE IN 2026



The labor math is unforgiving. Roughly 1.7 million skilled-trade openings go unfilled every year against 1.25 million newly trained workers. For every five Pros who retire, two enter. A quarter of contractors have already turned down work for lack of crew.



The costs keep coming too. Materials top the concern list at 52%, followed by tariffs (43%), interest rates (42%), and labor (40%).

And yet the outlook holds. Most Pros expect revenue to grow this year. Half plan to invest in tools. Because the trades run on something more durable than market sentiment: the world's stuff keeps breaking, and somebody has to fix it.

The good news: the pipeline is starting to turn. Gen Z's share of the construction workforce has more than doubled since 2019. Apprenticeships have nearly doubled in a decade. And the people who know this work best are its loudest advocates:

96% **of Pros** would encourage a young person to enter the trades

NOW HERE'S HOW THEY DECIDE WHO'S EARNED A PLACE IN THEIR WORLD.

SECTION I

THEY KNOW WHEN YOU’RE FAKING IT

HOW PROS LEARN, WHAT THEY TRUST, AND WHY AI CHANGED EVERYTHING.

THEY KNOW WHEN YOU’RE FAKING IT

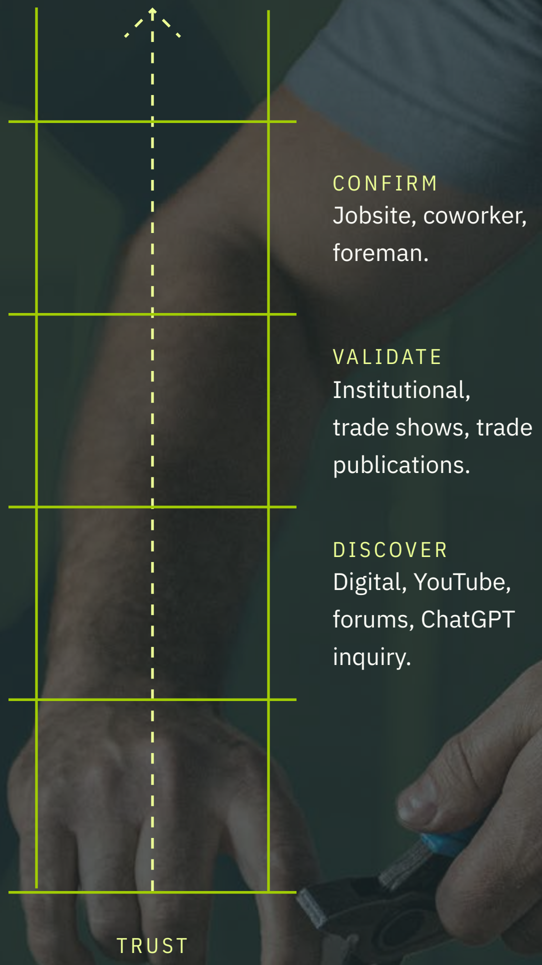
CREDIBILITY LADDER

TRUST DOESN’T HAPPEN WHERE DISCOVERY HAPPENS. IT GETS EARNED ONE RUNG AT A TIME.

The first rung is digital. YouTube, forums, a quick question typed into ChatGPT at the counter. This is where a new tool or technique enters the conversation.

The second rung is institutional. Trade shows and trade publications, the sources that look dead if you only measure daily habits, come roaring back as the place Pros go to check it out: 66% use trade events and 65% use trade press to verify what they encountered online. They’re not where Pros learn first. They’re where Pros confirm.

The last rung is the one no media plan can reach. When the question is “would you actually use this”, the answer comes from somebody with dust on their boots standing ten feet away.



94% **of Pros** regularly learn about new tools, materials, and techniques from a coworker or foreman on the jobsite.

DISCOVERY IS DIGITAL. TRUST IS HUMAN.

AND THE LADDER ONLY MOVES IN ONE DIRECTION.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Discovery and trust require two different strategies. Don’t confuse reach with credibility.

Build for the whole ladder. Social gets you found. Trade press and events get you validated. A coworker on the jobsite gets you trusted.

The most powerful endorsement in the trades can’t be bought. It has to be earned through product performance and peer recommendation.

AI IS ALREADY HERE. ON THEIR TERMS.

THE TRADES DIDN'T WAIT FOR PERMISSION TO ADOPT AI. THEY JUST PUT IT ON A SHORT LEASH.

Forget the storyline where the trades are the last to modernize:

49%
USE GENERATIVE AI TO LOOK UP SPECS & COMPARE PRODUCTS

39%
WOULD PICK AI OVER SEARCH

75% OF PROS

In active workplace use, ChatGPT holds a 75% share.

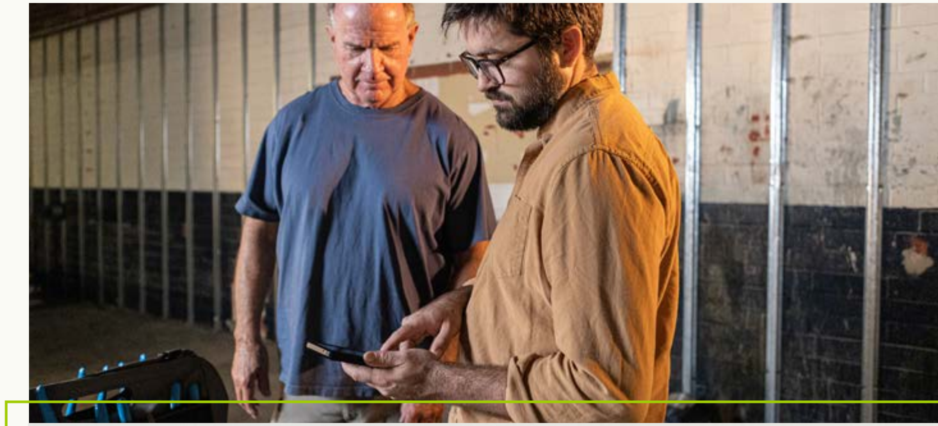
The adoption is real. So are the terms. AI earns its place in the same way anything else does in this world: by doing useful work without creating risk. Looking up a part number. Drafting a customer summary. Turning field photos into documentation. Speeding up an estimate. Back-office relief, gladly accepted.

But the moment AI touches the two things a Pro actually sells, technical judgment and customer trust, the leash snaps tight. The heavy equipment mechanic who uses AI hands-free to source parts still calls to verify stock, because the tool once returned a part the seller didn't have. The fleet mechanic three weeks into adoption already has a firm rule: you're the end user, you'd better read it again.

And then there's the industrial electrician, who fired a plumber over an AI receptionist that mishandled his call.

> "IF YOU'RE GOING TO CUT CORNERS WITH ME WHEN I CALL YOU, YOU'RE GOING TO CUT CORNERS IN MY CRAWL SPACE TOO."
>
> — MATT, INDUSTRIAL ELECTRICIAN

That's the whole ethic in one sentence. AI that augments the work gets adopted. AI that replaces the judgment gets fired. Same standard as everything else on the jobsite: earn it or lose it.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Every touchpoint is now part of the proof. If an AI receptionist can cost a plumber a job, a bad chatbot can cost you a customer.

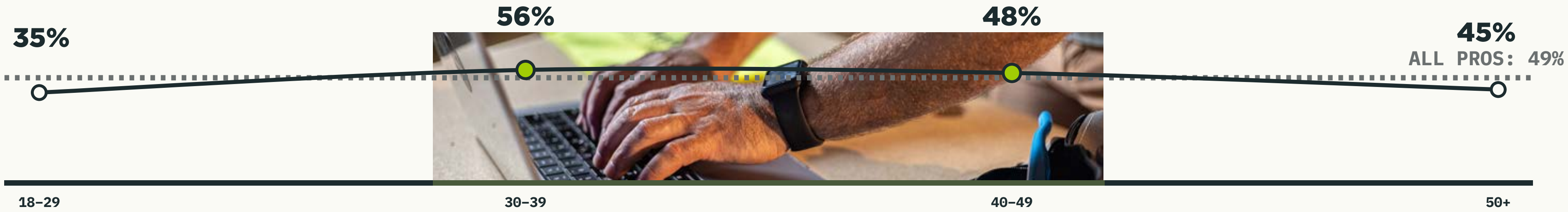
AI is reading your product content before Pros are. Make sure it's accurate, structured, and complete.

Welcome AI where it helps. Never let it replace the human judgment your brand promises.

THE MID-CAREER SURPRISE

THE HEAVIEST AI ADOPTERS IN THE TRADES AREN'T THE KIDS. THEY'RE THE ONES RUNNING THE JOBS.

% WHO USE AI FOR SPECS & PRODUCT RESEARCH, BY AGE



AI adoption peaks in the 30-to-49 band, significantly higher than both the youngest and oldest cohorts across nearly every use case: product research, estimating, quoting, diagnosing. The people leaning hardest on AI are the ones with the most on their plate. Established enough to run the business, stretched enough to need the help.

Stop thinking about age and start thinking about workload. The 40-year-old juggling three crews, a bid deadline, and a truck full of receipts has more to gain from a shortcut than the 24-year-old apprentice.

Gen Z has its own lane, and it's narrower than the hype suggests. Their niche: 42% use AI to auto-build online supply carts, routing over half their purchases through it. That's a real behavior worth designing for, but a shopping habit, not a leadership signal. The barriers that remain are practical. **Data and privacy (26%). Time to learn (23%). Cost (18%). Only 5% see no value at all.**

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Stop targeting Gen Z and start targeting the decision-maker. The 30-49 year-old Pro is running the job, managing the crew, and controlling the spend.

Build tools and content that save time. The mid-career Pro isn't skeptical of AI. They're too busy to learn it slowly.

Gen Z's auto-cart behavior is a real opportunity. Make sure your products are in the right digital assortments.

PROS DON’T TUNE OUT ADVERTISING. THEY TEST IT. HERE’S WHAT PASSES.

Start with the number that should be pinned to every creative brief in the category:

92%
CAN SPOT AI-GENERATED ADS

52%
WANT AI USE DISCLOSED

That’s not an audience that ignores advertising. It’s an audience that inspects it, the same way they inspect everything else that wants a place on their jobsite. Which is good news for brands willing to hold up under inspection.

Because the data is clear about what passes the test. **Detailed reviews and comparisons convert 46% of Pros to purchase. Personal stories showing a tool in real use on a real site convert 44%.** A person who does the work, showing the work, in conditions the viewer recognizes. That’s advertising a Pro will act on.

What to actually shoot is refreshingly simple: real field conditions. Show the tool dropped on concrete, gripped with a rubber glove, worked in a crawl space with bad light. Feature practitioners who explain the why, mistakes included. To this audience, real conditions are the production value.

And one more audience is now watching your content: the machines. **With 49% of Pros running product lookups through generative AI**, your spec sheets, compatibility data, and product pages are being read and repeated by AI long before a human sees them. Clean, structured product data is now a creative asset.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

- Shoot in real field conditions. Dust, wear, and tight spaces are trust signals.
- Partner with working practitioners, not scripted influencers. Lead with quantifiable proof: specs, comparisons, torture tests.
- Structure product data so AI reads it right. The machines are part of your audience now.

SECTION II

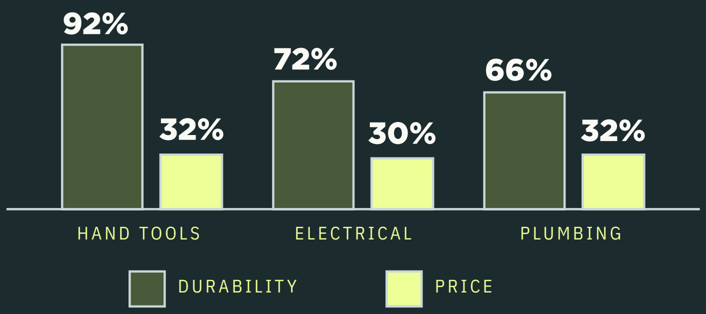
PROVE IT OR LOSE IT

WHAT PROS BUY, WHY THEY STAY LOYAL, AND WHERE THAT LOYALTY IS CRACKING.

DURABILITY IS THE PRICE OF ENTRY

BEFORE PRICE. BEFORE BRAND. BEFORE EVERYTHING: WILL IT HOLD UP?

Force a Pro to rank what matters in a product and the answer comes back the same in every trade. Durability leads at 60.9 on a 100-point priority scale. Price trails at 55.3. Availability and brand familiarity sit further back. Sustainability runs last.



DURABILITY WINS ACROSS EVERY TRADE
PRICE SENSITIVITY NEVER BREAKS 32% IN ANY TRADE

A tool is an income-generating asset. When a wrench fails, the cost isn't the wrench. It's the stalled job, the drive back, the callback, the name on the truck looking bad.

Pros don't pay for durability because they're brand romantics. They pay because failure is the most expensive thing on the invoice.

For GC/Remodelers, the durability lead balloons to 80.0. The more consequences ride on the work, the less price matters. It's not a differentiator. It's the entry fee.

SUSTAINABILITY

RANKED LAST AT 47.1 TRANSLATES TO

DURABILITY

69% of Pros say durability and lifespan are the most influential attributes of a sustainable product.

48% point to long-term energy savings.

13% trust standard eco labels.

GREEN DOESN'T SELL. LASTING DOES.

Pros don't buy the feel-good pitch. They tune out the save-the-planet angle. A product that lasts twice as long is the green story, told in the only language that converts here: fewer callbacks, longer life, lower operating cost.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Lead with performance, not heritage. Durability has to be proven, not claimed.

"Built to last" is table stakes. The brands that win go beyond the baseline with certifications, warranties, and field proof.

Sustainability messaging works when it's framed as durability. Longevity and operating cost are the language that converts.

BRAND STILL MATTERS. IT JUST HAS TO EARN IT.

BRAND NAME READS LOW WHEN PROS ARE FORCED TO CHOOSE. DON'T BELIEVE IT.

Brand familiarity scores low in forced trade-offs. Read that alone and you'd conclude brand doesn't matter in the trades. Then you'd look at the influence data: past experience with a brand is the number-two purchase influence at 68%, behind only the Pro's own judgment at 76%. Manufacturer reps sit at the bottom at 36%.

The reconciliation is the insight. When a Pro says brand doesn't matter, what they mean is the logo doesn't matter. What matters is the memory. The impact driver that survived a two-story drop. The sealant that didn't get a callback. Brand, here, is shorthand for 'I've used this before and it held up.'

On commodity materials, brand barely registers. On durable goods and tools, brand is "very important." Brand in the trades isn't built where most brand budgets get spent. It's built in the field, one held-up promise at a time.

> "A TOOL IS DEFINED BY ITS PERFORMANCE STABILITY, NOT THE LOGO ON THE CASING."

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Past experience is your most powerful marketing channel. Every interaction is building or eroding the next purchase decision.

Brand investment in durable goods pays. Brand investment in commodities doesn't. Know where you are on that spectrum.

Your rep, your warranty, your field team are brand-building touchpoints as much as any campaign.

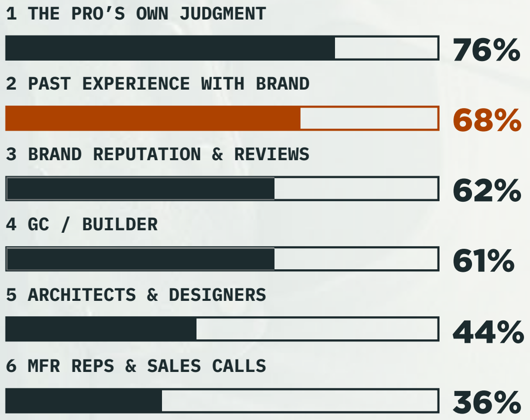
FORCED CHOICE

rank weighted priority score, 0–100

Only 16% of GC/Remodelers pick brand reputation as their single most important factor

REAL INFLUENCE

% citing each as a top influence on purchase decisions



THE PRIVATE LABEL PROBLEM

THE MOST UNCOMFORTABLE NUMBER IN THIS REPORT BELONGS TO EVERY NATIONAL BRAND.

54%

A striking 54% of Pros say store brands can perform better than national brands. Add the 36% who see no difference, and nine in ten believe the private label shelf is at or above the one next to it.

9 IN 10 PROS

54%	36%	10%
PERFORMS BETTER	NO DIFFERENCE	*

* NATIONAL STILL BETTER

BELIEVE PRIVATE LABEL PERFORMS **AT OR ABOVE** THE NATIONAL BRAND NEXT TO IT.

The behavior follows the belief. **Only 25% of Pros buy national brands exclusively.** Narrow the frame to tools and home improvement and 42% now default to private label, with just 18% holding strictly national.

For decades, the premium brand playbook assumed a performance gap that justified the price gap. This data says that gap has closed in the Pro's mind, and in the categories where they buy most often. The question is no longer price. It's proof.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Legacy reputation alone won't close the performance gap in the Pro's mind. Proof will.

If you don't know how Pros perceive your brand relative to private label in your category, find out. Now.

The brands that survive this shift will be the ones that make performance undeniable and visible at the point of decision.

THEY PAY WHERE IT HURTS TO FAIL

PROS HAVEN'T STOPPED PAYING FOR BRANDS. THEY'VE GOTTEN PRECISE ABOUT WHEN.

In the trades, loyalty now tracks how much a failure costs. Where failure carries safety consequences, liability exposure, or expensive rework, Pros pay up and stay loyal. The diagnostic tool. The power platform. The gear their crew's safety rides on. Where failure is cheap, they swap freely and pocket the difference.

Daily-use and high-consequence tools justify the spend. Everything else is negotiable. Same ethic, every trade: spend where it protects the work, save where it doesn't.

30% will trade down brands under acute cost pressure, but the structural shift is bigger than the reactive one, and it maps to risk, not price alone.

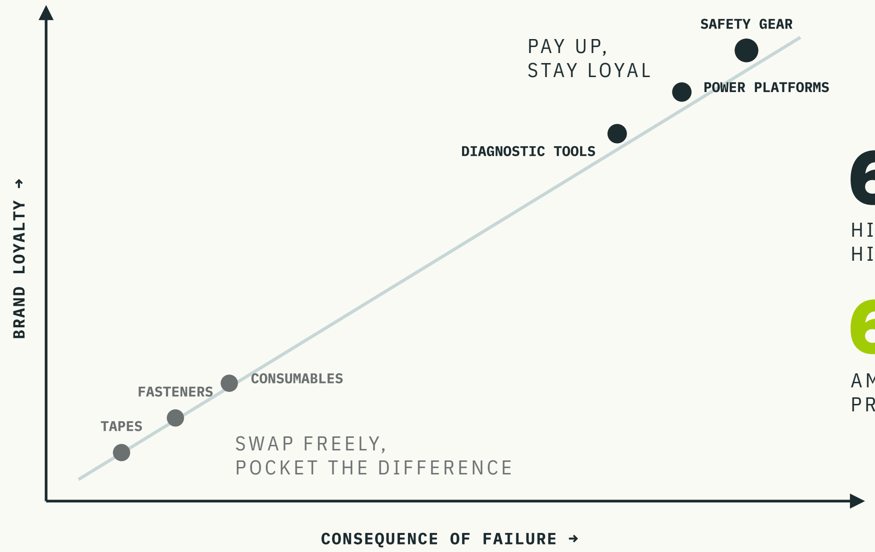
For premium brands, the play is to concentrate your fire. Legacy reputation alone won't defend a price premium. What defends it: warranties that get honored, certifications that transfer liability, and field sampling that lets the product prove itself in the Pro's hands. That's the fastest way to change a Pro's mind that everything's the same. Fight hardest on the high-consequence tier, where loyalty still lives. And make a conscious decision about the commodity tier instead of slowly losing it.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Map your product portfolio to the risk spectrum. Fight hardest for loyalty where failure is expensive.

Warranty, certification, and field sampling are your best premium defense tools. Deploy them where the stakes are highest.

On the commodity tier, compete on availability and reliability, not price. The Pro who swaps brands isn't disloyal. They're pragmatic.



63% HIGHER LOYALTY ON HIGH-COST ITEMS

67% AMONG YOUNGER PROS

SECTION III

THE JOB AFTER THE JOB

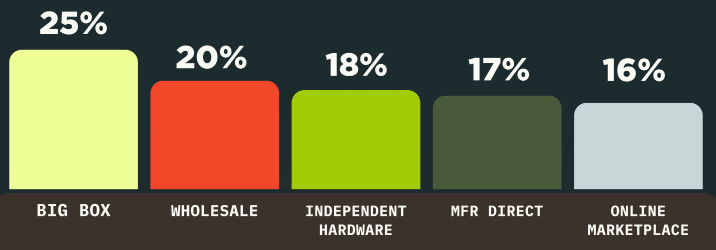
HOW PROS SHOP, MARKET,
HIRE, AND KEEP THEIR CREWS.

NO DOMINANT CHANNEL

ONE RETAILER OWNS THE MORNING TRIP. NOBODY OWNS THE WALLET.

Ask where Pros shop and you'll get two answers that sound like a contradiction. Half of all Pros name Home Depot their primary supplier, and 88% shop there regularly. **Yet big-box captures just 25.6% of total Pro spend, and no channel in the study clears 26%.** Both numbers are true. They're just measuring two different fights.

"Primary supplier" measures the default: the store that gets the routine trip, the 6:40 AM run, the first stop when the job needs something now. "Share of wallet" measures the dollars, and the dollars scatter: wholesale distributors take 20%, independent hardware 18.3%, manufacturer-direct 17.3%, online marketplaces 16%. The Pro who calls Home Depot their supplier still buys trade-specific SKUs at the supply house, big-ticket gear direct, and fill-in orders online.



THE WALLET

% of total Pro spend, nobody owns it

The mix shifts hard by trade. GC/Remodelers over-index big-box at 38.9%. Automotive leans manufacturer-direct. HVAC and Masonry lean wholesale. And digital already rivals the counter: the two online buying modes combined (57%) now exceed in-person purchasing (42.5%).

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Winning the default trip and winning the wallet are two different strategies. Make sure you have both.

Digital now rivals the counter. Your online presence, PDP quality, and e-commerce execution matter as much as your in-store presence.

Trade-specific channel behavior varies significantly. Know where your trade over-indexes and show up there first.

For brands and retailers, this splits the strategy in two. Winning frequency means winning the default trip: presence, availability, and speed where the routine lives. Winning wallet means showing up across the whole fragmented map, because no single channel holds more than a quarter of it.

SOURCING ISN'T SHOPPING. IT'S A TIMED EVENT WITH MONEY ON THE LINE.

Every minute between the supply stop and the jobsite is unpaid windshield time. The store isn't competing on experience. It's competing on how fast a Pro can get in, get the thing, and get gone.

Which is why the number-one factor in where Pros buy isn't price. It's whether the item is on the shelf right now. **In-stock availability leads the priority ranking at 44.2, ahead of lowest price at 37.1.**

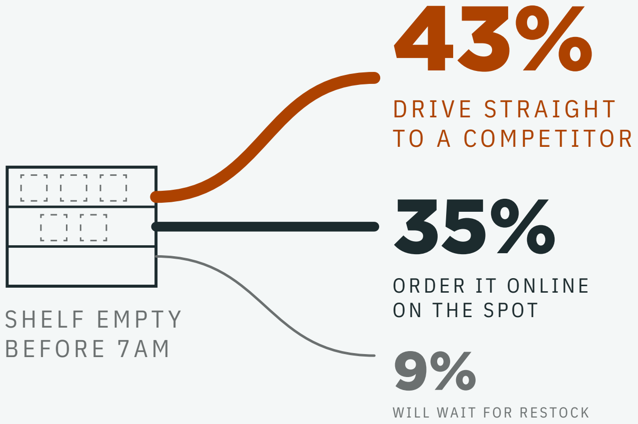
WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Availability is the most important variable in your retail strategy. An empty shelf loses a customer, not just a sale.

Real-time inventory visibility is a competitive weapon. Invest in it.

Early store hours, proximity, and speed of transaction matter more to this buyer than loyalty programs or promotional pricing.

The takeaway for the store is obvious: real-time inventory visibility beats promotional pricing. Early doors beat loyalty programs. A pre-packed, grab-and-go pro section near the desk isn't a nice-to-have. It's a competitive weapon measured in minutes.



An empty shelf isn't a stockout. It's a customer, handed to the store across the street, before 7 AM.

THE PRO IS THE MARKETER

THE REWORK ECONOMY ISN'T A FRUSTRATION. IT'S A REVENUE STREAM.

If you're trying to reach the person who makes the marketing and buying decisions in the trades, here's where to look: on the ladder, in the truck, at the counter. **A surprising 71% of Pros personally lead their marketing and customer-acquisition decisions, a number that holds from solo operators to large firms.** And 76% personally pay for and choose their crew's equipment. The Pro isn't a stakeholder in the decision. The Pro is the decision.

How they acquire customers splits cleanly by size. Solo and small firms run on earned trust: word-of-mouth and referrals at 52%, repeat customers at 48%. Large firms buy their pipeline: paid social at 41%, email, lead-gen platforms. Two completely different marketing economies wearing the same work boots.

For anyone selling to Pros, the door isn't another pitch. It's relief. Show up with time back, margin protected, and reputation simplified. Show up with buzzwords and you're frustration number three.

WHAT ACTUALLY WORKS

28%

RATE WORD-OF-MOUTH THE MOST EFFECTIVE CHANNEL

42%

AMONG SMALL FIRMS, WHO RUN ON EARNED TRUST

THE JOB AFTER THE JOB

43%	22%
5–10 HRS/WK	11–20 HRS/WK

HOURS SPENT ON ADMIN, PER WEEK

HOW THEY MANAGE IT

65% TEXT THREADS

64% PHONE CALLS

56% PAPER SCHEDULES

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

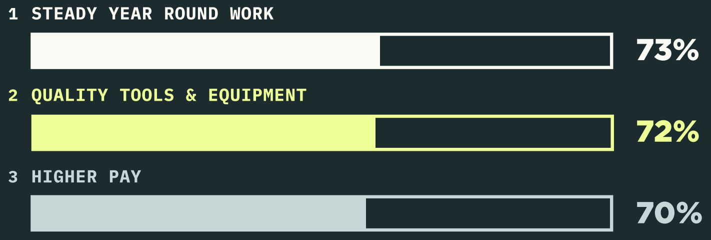
The Pro making the buying decision is also making the marketing decision. Reach them as both.

Word-of-mouth is the most effective channel in the trades. The best way to generate it is to give Pros something worth talking about.

Show up with relief, not a pitch. Time, margin, and reputation are the currencies that matter to this audience.

WHAT KEEPS A CREW ISN'T JUST THE PAYCHECK. IT'S WHAT YOU PUT IN THEIR HANDS.

Everyone assumes retention in the trades is a bidding war. The data says otherwise.



Sit with that ordering. In a sector famous for labor scarcity, the tools on the truck outrank the number on the check. Because in a world where your output is your name, handing someone worn-out equipment tells them exactly what you think of their work. Outfitting them well says the opposite. Quality tools aren't a productivity line item. They're respect, made tangible.

Hiring runs on the same values. Credentials barely register. What Pros screen for: reliability, punctuality, honesty, willingness to learn. Character first, résumé later. The field is teaching a lot right now: 59% of veteran contractors report frequent rookie mistakes in planning, communication, and time estimation. The inflow is real. The readiness is uneven.

Nobody in the category owns this story yet: your product is a retention strategy. The first brand to tell it gets to own respect.

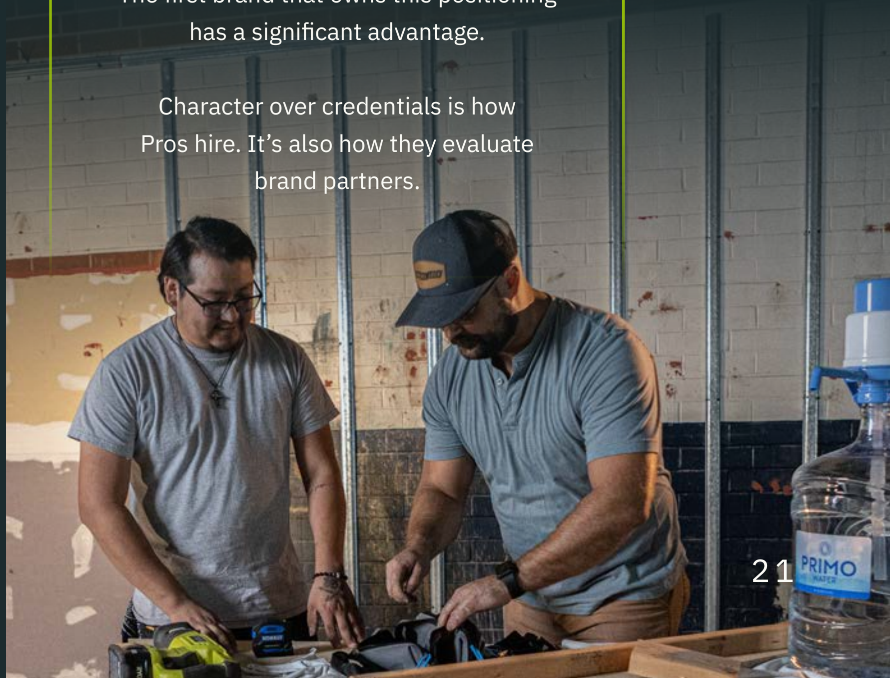
> "BASICALLY GOING TO SCHOOL AND GETTING PAID FOR IT."
> — PLUMBER,
> ON WHY HE'D RECOMMEND THE TRADES

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

Position your products as a retention tool, not just a productivity tool. The Pro who outfits their crew well is making a statement about how they value their people.

Quality tools are a crew recruitment signal. The first brand that owns this positioning has a significant advantage.

Character over credentials is how Pros hire. It's also how they evaluate brand partners.



SOMEBODY HAS TO FIX IT.

THE DECISION-MAKER ISN'T IN A CORNER OFFICE. THEY'RE ON A LADDER.

The trades pro has become the safety net for the DIY boom. Nine in ten are regularly hired to fix what homeowners started.

The DIY boom handed homeowners infinite tutorials and unearned certainty. **58% of Pros report more self-installation attempts than a few years ago, and 80% say homeowner confidence is detached from capability.** 80% of those rescue jobs require complete tear-out, 70% run long, 63% cost the customer more than calling a Pro first.

Homeowners underestimate electrical work most (70%), then plumbing (63%) and structural (63%). When Pros name the one place a homeowner should never go, the answer is electrical, decisively. Some lines exist because crossing them burns houses down.

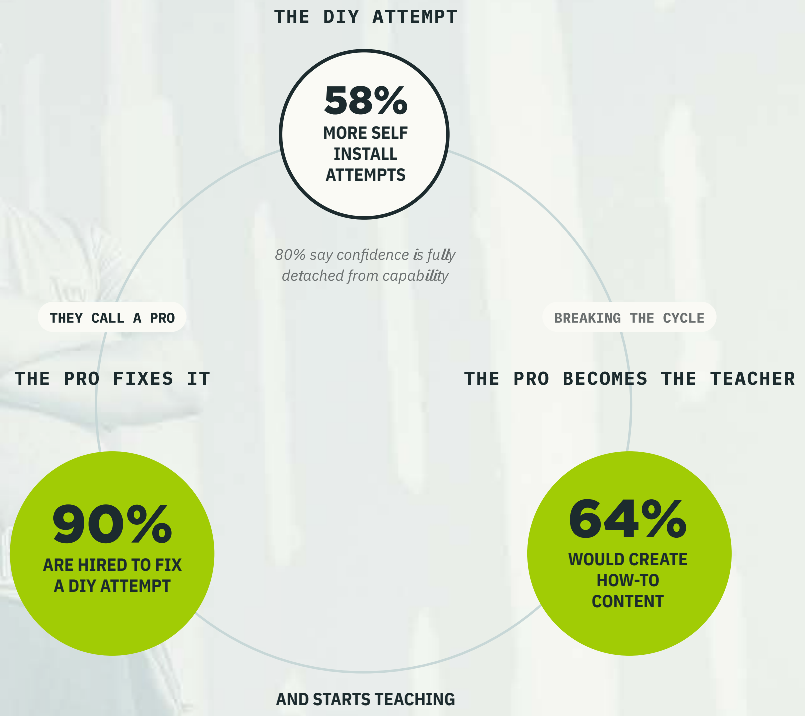
The most interesting number isn't the failure rate. **It's this: 64% of Pros would consider creating how-to content themselves, and 54% already have.** The people fixing the internet's mistakes are ready to become the internet's teachers, and they carry the one credential no influencer can fake: they've seen exactly how it goes wrong.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOUR BRAND

The rework economy is a content opportunity. The Pro fixing someone else's mistake is the most credible voice on why doing it right matters.

64% of Pros would create how-to content. Partner with them before your competitors do.

The never-DIY categories are your highest-trust zones. Lead with safety, liability, and consequence where the stakes are highest.



THAT'S THE STATE OF THE PRO IN 2026. WHICH LEAVES ONE QUESTION:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU?

THE SALES FACTORY POV.

EVERYTHING IN THIS REPORT POINTS ONE DIRECTION.

The trades pro applies the same standard to your brand that they apply to their own work. They verify what they discover. They pay for what performs. They stay loyal where failure is expensive and swap freely where it's not.

EARNED, NOT CLAIMED. IT RUNS THEIR WORLD.

For a lot of brands, that's uncomfortable. Legacy reputation doesn't carry like it used to. Private label closed the perception gap. AI answers before your website loads. And 92% of your audience is inspecting your advertising for anything staged.

But the data just showed you the whole playbook.

When a Pro decides you've earned it, you're not a purchase anymore. You're in the truck. You're on the crew. And they'll bring the next generation to you by hand.

THAT'S WHAT'S WAITING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PROVE-IT STANDARD.

We should know. Understanding this world is what we do and this report is just a fraction of what we see.

If your brand is ready to earn its place in the trades, you know where to find us.

SALESFACTORY.COM/CONNECT

LET'S GET TO WORK.

THE PUNCH LIST

WHAT TO DO WITH EVERYTHING YOU JUST READ.

ON YOUR CREATIVE:

Real field conditions are the production value. Show the tool getting dirty. Feature practitioners, not influencers. And structure your product data for AI — the machines are reading your content before Pros are.

ON YOUR RETAIL STRATEGY:

Availability beats price every single morning. An empty shelf isn't a stockout. It's a customer handed to the competition before 7 AM. Invest in real-time inventory visibility. Open early.

ON YOUR BRAND:

Past experience is your most powerful marketing channel. Every interaction is building or eroding the next purchase decision. Brand investment in durable goods pays. In commodities, it doesn't. Know where you are on that spectrum.

ON PRIVATE LABEL:

If you don't know how Pros perceive your brand relative to store brands in your category, find out. Now. Legacy reputation alone won't close the performance gap. Proof will.

ON LOYALTY:

Map your portfolio to the risk spectrum. Fight hardest where failure is expensive. On the commodity tier, compete on availability and reliability, not price. Deploy warranties, certifications, and field sampling where the stakes are highest.

ON CONTENT:

64% of Pros would create how-to content. Partner with them before your competitors do. The never-DIY categories are your highest-trust zones. Lead with safety, liability, and consequence where the stakes are highest.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

The State of the Pro 2026 draws on four distinct research streams, each designed to capture a different dimension of the trades pro's world.

THE CORE STUDY

is the foundation. We surveyed 1,168 professional tradespeople across eight trades: General Contractors and Remodelers, Electricians, HVAC Technicians, MRO Professionals, Plumbers, Automotive Technicians, Masonry and Concrete Specialists, and Landscapers. The core study established the baseline data on business outlook, purchasing behavior, channel preference, workforce dynamics, and technology adoption. All significance testing was conducted at the 95% confidence level using a two-tailed test.

TRADES PROPULSE™ (TPP)

is Sales Factory's proprietary community of 1,000+ verified tradespeople who share their real-world experiences, opinions, and behaviors throughout the year. Their ongoing input gave us the ability to go beyond the core survey and dig deeper into the topics that matter most to the trades pro world, from how they shop in the morning to how they feel about AI on the job.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS (IDIS)

bring the numbers to life. Ten trades pros participated in one-on-one qualitative conversations, anonymized by trade throughout this report. Their voices appear as pull quotes and narrative context across every section.

TRADE SYNTHESES

round out the picture. Nine discipline-specific analyses examined purchasing behavior, channel preference, and brand loyalty patterns within individual trades, providing the granular lens that a single cross-trade survey can't fully capture.

Together, these four streams give the State of the Pro 2026 both the statistical foundation and the human texture to tell the trades pro's story the way it deserves to be told.

SALES FACTORY

ABOUT SALES FACTORY

Sales Factory is a research-and insights-driven agency with a specialty in the trades.

Since 1984, we've made it our business to understand what customers want, what drives them, and what earns their trust. With that understanding, we help brands earn their place where it matters most: on the shelf and in the hands of the people who choose them.

READY TO GET YOUR BRAND IN THEIR HANDS?

LET'S GET TO WORK.
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