

A Metia Report

Understanding the Seven Drivers of Customer Reference Program Performance

Highlights and key learnings from the *Metia Group
Customer Reference Program Performance Study* –
December 2017



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Executive summary



The topic of customer advocacy has moved center stage. With a widespread business focus upon improving customer experience, achieving advocacy is considered the ultimate test of the quality of experience delivered. Once advocacy is achieved, brands seek to harness and amplify positive endorsements through ‘voice of the customer’ style marketing campaigns and, in a more structured manner, through formal customer reference programs.

Over the past twenty years, Metia Group has helped design, develop and evolve customer reference programs for many leading brands. To inform the advocacy strategies of clients and to contribute to the wider industry discussion, the Metia Insights team were tasked with undertaking a detailed analysis of leading brands in the technology arena, in order to determine what factors determine the effectiveness of customer reference programs.

Thirteen leading technology brands were selected for examination. Several but not all are Metia clients. Using structured digital ethnography techniques and data analysis of the reference landscape, social ethnographers were then able to determine the factors that defined the performance of customer reference programs: the Seven Drivers of Customer Reference Performance.

The objective of the study was to discover new innovations and the most effective techniques. The purpose was not to ‘name and shame’ under performers but to celebrate the best practices identified. Therefore, the individual scores of each brand are not revealed.

This summary report outlines the highlights and key learnings of the study. If you would like to learn more about the detail of the study, or wish for your organization to be benchmarked in subsequent studies, please get in touch.

If a tree falls in the forest and no-one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

Organizations invest hugely in customer experience. They grapple with satisfaction initiatives. They generate large volumes of content. But often they fail to amplify their most powerful asset: customer advocacy.

If a brand enables and then captures their customers' success, but the customer story isn't shared or amplified, does it impact awareness, consideration, and sales? The answer must be, no.

Technology brands, both big and small, make significant investments in their customer reference strategy – allowing their customers to tell the brand story and speak to the benefits they experienced. These customer stories are crucial to establishing the credibility of a business and its applicability to each customers' key challenges and 'unique' business environment.

Brands are increasingly investing and expanding these customer reference strategies, competition is making it difficult to stand out – each business tries to 'one-up' the competition with a bigger and more well-known brand, stronger statements, and a more engaging content format.

In this competitive environment, businesses need to know how to better highlight their customer successes and differentiate those stories from the growing volume of noise from its competitors? How can businesses ensure that these stories are not only heard, but that they move the needle in a customer's evaluation process?

Mapping the customer reference landscape

Customer reference materials used to live only in central case study libraries and/or were embedded into product and solution pages. But, as brands increasingly amplify these customer stories within broader campaigns and attempt to make them more discoverable throughout the customer journey – this landscape has started to evolve and expand.

The Metia Insights team has experience of conducting digital ethnographies for close to a decade. The use of new analytics tools and data science techniques now allows the successful organization and measurement of large volumes of data into meaningful categories and visualizations, adding greater insight. At the start of the research process for the Customer Reference Program Performance Study 2018, the landscape for analysis was determined.

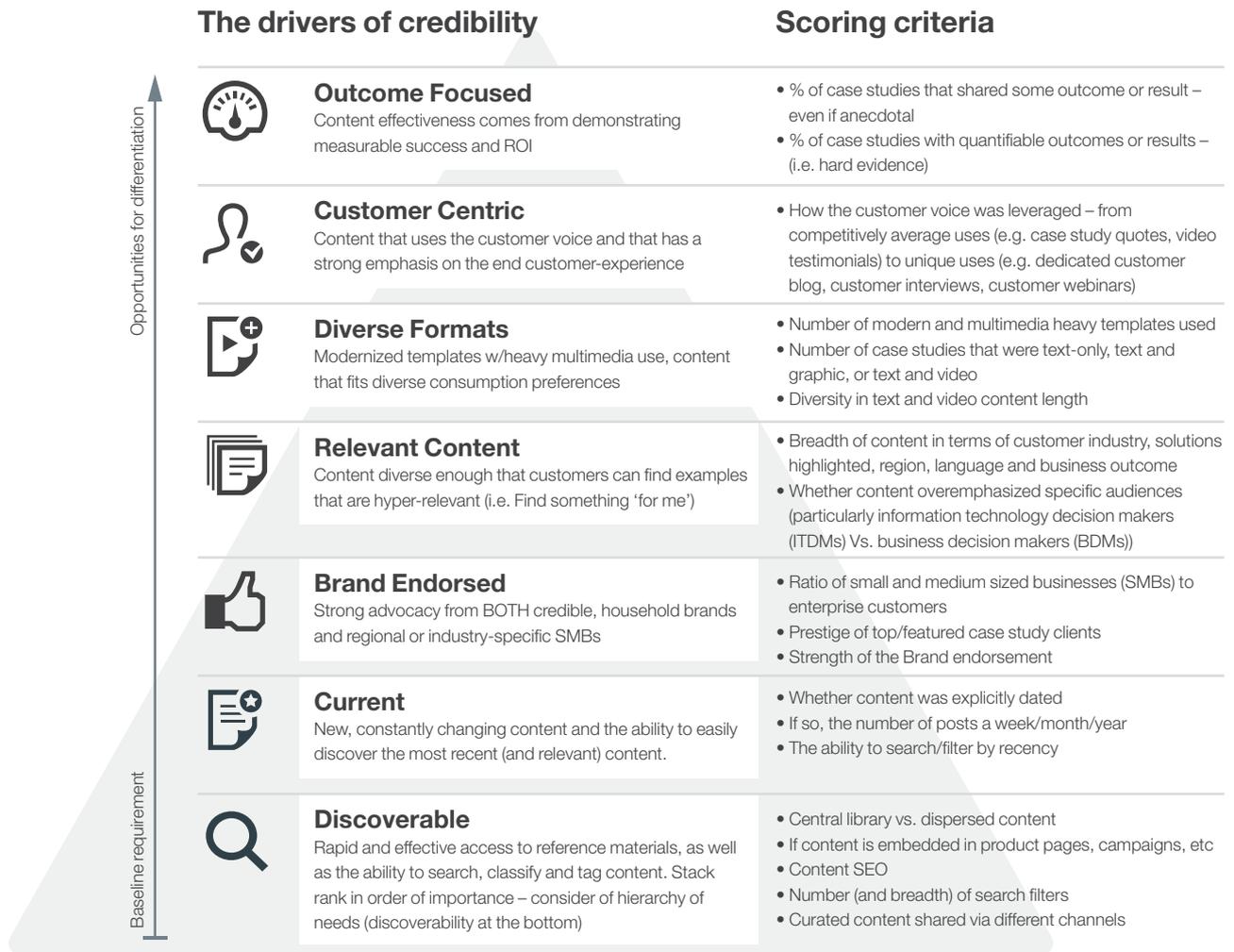
Modern customer reference programs surface content through a wide number of channels. For the purposes of the study, the primary destinations and platforms through which customer reference assets are published were grouped into the seven territories outlined.



The Seven Drivers of Customer Reference Performance

Credibility is confirmed as the single over-arching key to the performance of reference programs. But the notion of what makes a program credible is built upon seven drivers, each of which must be recognized, understood and tuned for success.

Following structured and systematic analysis of the thirteen programs under consideration, covering hundreds of individual components within each program, seven essential drivers of customer reference performance were identified.



Q Discoverable

Is content easy to find?

Intuitively, discoverability seems to be a top priority for all brands analyzed – if customers can't find relevant content, it does not matter how impressive the customer brand name is, or how remarkable the outcomes might be. Discoverability is the ultimate table stakes of any customer reference strategy.

The Don'ts

What are common missteps

Neglecting specific search engines

Some brands had a strong presence on Google (often the first result was the central library), but that same discoverability was not seen on Bing. Ensure customers can find your content, no matter where they start their search.

Not leading current readers to other, relevant content

Once a customer has found a piece of customer reference content, there is a huge opportunity to bring them further into the library. Many brands neglected to use 'similar stories' and linked videos to drive customers deeper into the content library.

The MUST Do's

What are baseline requirements?

A central case study library

11 of the 13 brands analyzed had a central case study library, with anywhere from 75 to 3,000 case studies. These libraries often had searching/filtering abilities, to help customers find relevant and recent content.

Case study content embedded into product pages

It is also crucial to embed content throughout solution pages, to make content more discoverable during the evaluation process.

Basic filtering and search options to find hyper relevant content

Typical filter capabilities include customer industry, region, solution type, and recency.

Link to similar content at the end of case studies and video testimonials

Pull customers deeper into the customer reference library.

The SHOULD Do's

Best practices to leverage for differentiation

Create both a central and product-specific case study library

Oracle was the only brand analyzed that had both a central and a product-specific case study library, as well as ample customer reference content embedded into solution pages. No matter what path customers take, they can easily find relevant content.

Feature popular content in curated lists

Dell, Microsoft, and HPE featured curated lists of content on their customer reference landing pages, including content for specific sub-groups (e.g. SMBs, specific regions), content about how they used their own technology, and content around technology trends.

Consider customer-centric filtering options

For example, one competitor provided role-specific filters (with 20+ different ITDM & BDM titles), while Cisco offered the ability to filter by business outcome (with 30+ pre-coded outcomes).

Amplify case study content through social media, partner and customer websites, and the mainstream media



Current

Is content new enough to still be relevant?

Technology changes fast and customer reference content needs to change with it. Previous research has shown that recent customer reference content is important to decision makers than older case studies about even the most prestigious of brands.

The Don'ts

What are common missteps

Don't let content become stagnant

While some brands (Microsoft, Dell, Cisco) post monthly, weekly or even daily, other brands have posted only a handful of new content since the previous analysis six months ago.

Date customer reference content – don't try to mask old content

Very few brands explicitly dated customer reference content, making it difficult to see how recent (and relevant) customer reference content was.

The MUST Do's

What are baseline requirements?

Offer the ability to filter customer reference content by date

Half of the brands analyzed included an option to filter by recency and many of the brands ordered content by recency as a default.

The SHOULD Do's

Best practices to leverage for differentiation

Create an archive for content that is older than six months old

Oracle has taken the ability to filter content by recency to the next level. The brand offers a list of recency filters – content that is a week old, one month old, two months old, and older than six months.

Provide a constant stream of content to build a comprehensive library and drive anticipation for new content

Oracle often posts 3-4 times a week (if not daily). Microsoft, which has a similarly sized customer reference library, posts most of its content in large groups (for example, in a single day in September, Microsoft posted 50+ new case studies).



Brand Endorsed

Is the advocacy from a variety of credible brands?

Brand Endorsement is a credibility driver that most businesses strongly emphasized in their customer reference strategy – making it difficult for a single brand to ‘stand out’ in terms of their portfolio of customer stories and advocates

The Don'ts

What are common missteps

Don't confuse 'bigger' for 'better'

While large household names drive buzz, many customers are looking for case studies that are applicable to their vertical. For a ITDM working in a hospital, a case study about regional medical organizations will be much more relevant than a case study about Coca Cola. Providing a mix of content makes it easier for customers to find hyper-relevant information, while still highlighting those attention-grabbing brand names.

The MUST Do's

What are baseline requirements?

All brands' content provides strong endorsements from customers

Often through the power of customer voice, which makes each endorsement more impactful and authentic.

Provide business-size filters and regional filters

Again, customers want content that is relevant to their unique situation. While household names are often highlighted on the customer stories landing page or in curated content lists, brands typically provided search filters to help customers find those regional, vertical-specific, and SMB.

The SHOULD Do's

Best practices to leverage for differentiation

Highlight areas of expertise

The brands that received the highest ratings had strong endorsements from local/regional organizations and brands in verticals where they have a strong presence. For example, IBM and Oracle posted many case studies from SMBs in technology consulting (some of which were partners), while Cisco and HPE both emphasized content from local and regional educational institutions and healthcare organizations.

Show how the company uses its own technology and solutions

HPE, Microsoft, and Dell also include case studies in which they use their own technology. These brands act as both the vendor and their own customer advocate.



Relevant Content

Is the content relevant to me?

Prospects seek reassurance from finding examples of people or businesses just like themselves using the product or service. Big brands may catch headlines but SMBs want to see other SMBs. A bank wants to read about another bank.

The Don'ts

What are common missteps

Don't take on a 'one size fits all strategy'

Customers have diverse needs, consumption preferences, and use cases – don't over-emphasize a specific group, at the expense of another. For example, NTT's communication case study library was overwhelmingly about large Japanese enterprises looking to expand globally and increase collaboration and communication – but there was little content that customers in other countries or smaller organizations could relate to.

The MUST Do's

What are baseline requirements?

Offer filtering capabilities which speak to the factors that decision makers apply to their unique situation

Including the ability to filter and search by region, language, vertical, solution type, and (ideally) role/title.

Serve all decision maker and decision influencers

While most brands provided ample content for BDMs, some (Salesforce, Tableau and Oracle) offer little to no content for ITDMs (i.e. little technical language, no time dedicated to deployment and maintenance, impact to IT teams, etc).

Provide customer stories from across industries

Decision makers want to know that businesses know the nuances (e.g. customer needs, regulations, limitations) of their industry. Outside of Oracle and AWS (which both overindexed in technology clients), businesses had a healthy mix of verticals.

The SHOULD Do's

Best practices to leverage for differentiation

Localization is key to differentiation

Regional blogs and regional case study libraries (offered by Intel) provide curated, relevant and resonant case studies that address the customers' business environment. Consider not only the ability to filter by region and the creation of regional case study libraries, but also region-specific blogs and social media channels to amplify that localized content.

Provide content that addresses ITDMs and BDMs

While a third of brands offered a mix of content that was applicable to ITDMs and BDMs, some brands (HPE, Microsoft, Cisco, and F5) content included both high-level, strategic content for BDMs, as well as highly technical content for ITDMs. HPE was effective in creating this '2-in-one' content, by including an 'IT Matters' and 'Business Matters' section in every summary, which outlines the ITDM and BDM outcomes and benefits in list form.

The brands with the highest ratings also offered diverse content across the customer journey

Microsoft's recently revamped case study library and Cisco's content does this well – offering insight into evaluation, procurement, deployment, training and ongoing use and maintenance.



Diverse Formats

Is the story packaged in a format of choice?

Brands are increasingly diversifying their templates and use of multimedia customer reference content, to align with customers' evolving consumption preferences. Most brands analyzed performed well in this respect.

The Don'ts

What are common missteps

Don't rely on text to tell your customers' story. Text-only case studies are a thing of the past

Most brands are moving away from text-heavy case studies and are incorporating visual aids – primarily video, data charts, and to a lesser extent infographics, webinars, and downloadable presentations. For example, Microsoft recently revamped its library – introducing more video, shortening content, and making content more skimmable. From Spring to Fall 2017 Microsoft's content evolved from 10% video use to 50% video use and the average case study length decreased by an 400 words. F5 (85%), Oracle (75%), and AWS (53%) are the only brands that still rely heavily on classic, text-only case studies.

The MUST Do's

What are baseline requirements?

Content must be easy to skim, with relevant and outcome-based summaries

The majority of brands analyzed included a short summary of each case study (either on the case study landing page or at the start of the document). These short summaries were often in a challenge-solution-benefits framework, making them easier to scan at a glance.

The SHOULD Do's

Best practices to leverage for differentiation

Brands with a 5-star rating made video the star of their customer reference libraries

Cisco (68%), Microsoft (55%), and Salesforce (38%) had the strongest use of video.

Brands need to use a clear organizational framework that keeps content about the same case study connected – otherwise the story (and the library) feel fragmented

Cisco is one of the few competitors that did this successfully, by having a landing page for the overarching customer case study (often with a summary and quote). This landing page also led to other content about the same customer, including video testimonials and video interviews, long-form case studies, one page executive summaries, press releases, and infographics.

Tableau has a wide diversity of content, not seen in other competitive libraries

Primarily the use of brand-mediated interviews (vs. typical video testimonials) and webinar content.



Customer Centric

Is the content tuned to the different types of stakeholder?

All brands fared well in customer-centricity – leveraging the customer voice heavily throughout video testimonials and interviews, as well as through heavy use of quotes in text case studies and summaries.

The Don'ts

What are common missteps

Always give the customer some voice – even if they don't have a name

The few case studies without a customer brand identified were whitewashed and anonymized. While this is a requirement for some customers, if possible, it is important to still include BDM or end user quotes (ideally, with the customers' role highlighted).

...But don't share a quote out of context

While Oracle posted new content daily, some of the quotes were short and out of context – with no accompanying case study, video, or even a summary of the challenges, solutions, benefits. Without context, quotes are much less impactful (and understandable).

The MUST Do's

What are baseline requirements?

All brands included the customer voice in some way, typically though ample customer quotes

The brands that used quotes most effectively used them both throughout the case study (with more quotes than business narration) and highlighted quotes (in very large type and graphic call-outs) throughout the study.

Video testimonials are becoming the norm

Brands are increasingly leveraging video testimonials and interviews (sometimes with multiple stakeholders) to bring case studies to life and to better highlight the customers' strong advocacy for the brand.

The SHOULD Do's

Best practices to leverage for differentiation

Because every brand performs relatively well in terms of highlighting the customer voice, brands must consider innovative ways to leverages the customer voice to tell the customer story. For example:

IBM

IBM's Fieldnotes customer blog featured 200-400 word blogs, written by IBM customers, detailing the benefits their experience and the benefits of using IBM technology

Tableau

Tableau has many 'best practices' in customer centricity, including having customers co-host educational webinars, providing full transcripts of video interviews, and videos of benefits-focused customer presentations at Tableau events

AWS

Amazon featured 10+ minute videos customer presentations from Amazon events and conferences; particularly at ReInvent its annual customer conference.



Outcome Focused

Are meaningful and measurable outcomes featured?

While almost all brands included some outcomes in its customer reference content, these outcomes were sometimes anecdotal. The brands with the highest ratings provided quantifiable outcomes, particularly in terms of productivities gained (in hours), money saved, and decrease in maintenance issues and downtime.

The Don'ts

What are common missteps

Don't leave out the results and the benefits – that is where the value is

A case study lacks relevance (and credibility) if there is no outcome or benefit shared.

Customers need proof that the vendor helped their client succeed. Without this proof, it is hard for decision makers to support their procurement decision with their team and with management. Give customers' the support they need to take decisions.

Note: Video testimonials and press releases were the most likely formats to lack explicit benefits.

The MUST Do's

What are baseline requirements?

Most brands included a short summary section, with highlighted benefits in a succinct list

Many vendors' case study summaries were in an easy to follow challenge, solution, and benefits framework – making it easy to skim the material and quickly find the business outcome.

Ensure that customer quotes speak to the benefits/results

Most brands successfully leveraged customer quotes that supported their stated outcomes – giving the outcome more credibility, even if it is still anecdotal (vs. quantifiable).

The SHOULD Do's

Best practices to leverage for differentiation

Brands with the highest ratings, featured outcomes in 100% of case studies – but more importantly, 70%+ those case studies featured measurable outcomes and ROI

Anecdotal outcomes can be subjective – 'increased collaboration' or 'better customer experience' – but risk-averse customers want objectives, measurable outcomes.

Cisco provided quantifiable outcomes in 85% of customer reference content. It also made all content searchable by those business outcomes

Cisco was the only brand with a filter for business outcome, with 20+ pre-coded tags for different business results – including security, collaboration, mobility, enhanced agility, and digital transformation.

The credibility drivers in action

The four customer reference strategies

From this analysis, we discovered that there are four primary types of customer reference strategies, largely based on how and where content is shared (i.e. whether it is in a centralized library or embedded into the customer journey) and whether the content is largely brand-narrated or customer-narrated.

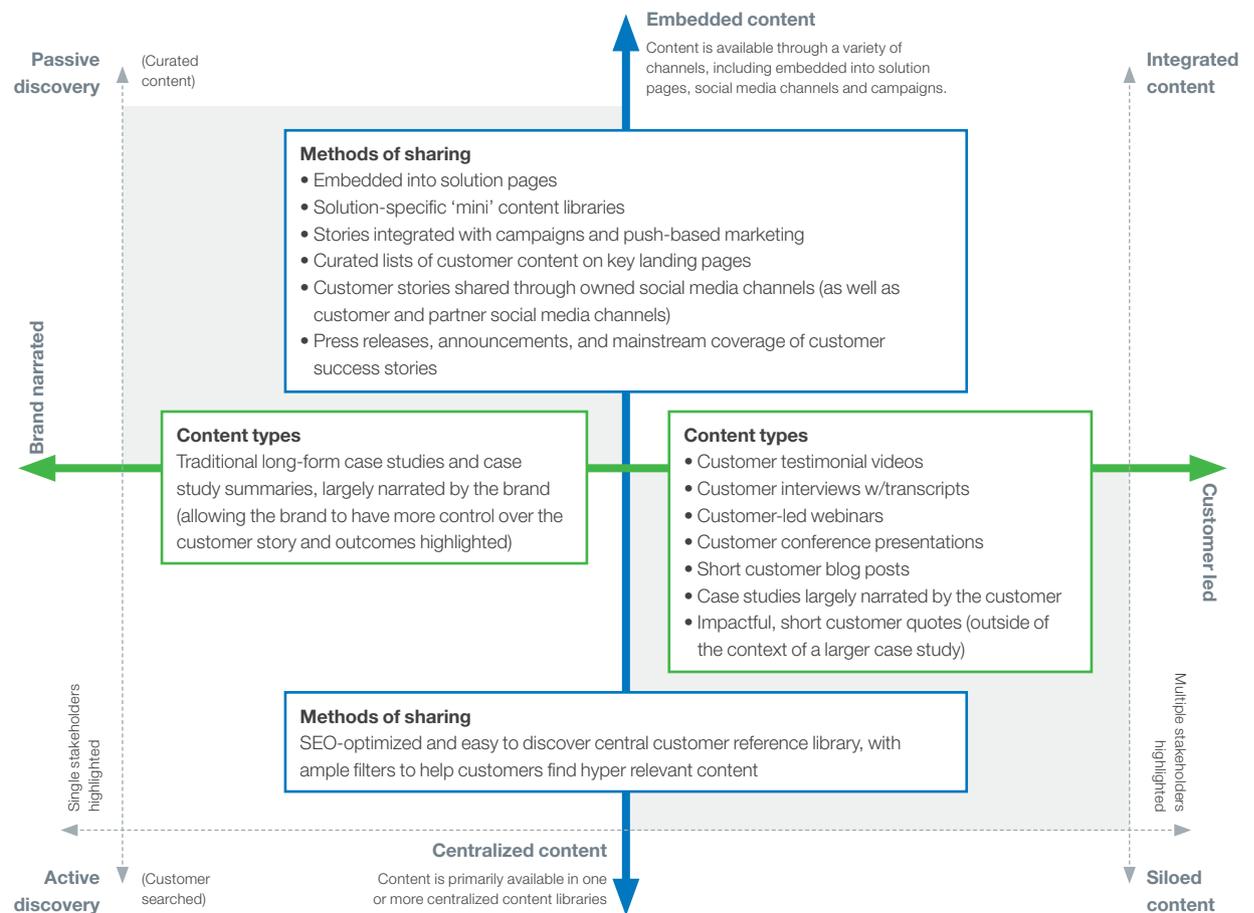
Based on these key continuums, there are four overarching customer reference strategies we identified – but, these strategies are not mutually exclusive and many brands have content that fits into 2+ quadrants. This diversification helps to ensure that customers, no matter what path they choose to find content, can find hyper relevant customer stories.



The credibility drivers in action

Tactical opportunities

No quadrant is inherently 'better' than the others – each strategy serves its own purpose and serves an audience with different consumption preferences. That being said, the upper righthand quadrant (i.e. integrated and embedded content, led largely by the customer) is the most underserved and a potential area for differentiation.



About Metia

Metia Group is a global marketing agency with offices in London, Seattle, Austin, and Singapore. We employ some 140 marketing professionals; each is expert in a particular area of specialization.

Our clients include big corporations and ambitious businesses. We provide them with structured marketing programs that reach across geographies, scale massively, can be deployed systematically, and are measured relentlessly.

Metia has specialist services designed to support our clients in the areas of Insight, Demand, Content and Advocacy. These services are based upon deep expertise, proven methodologies, and are enabled by unique tools and systems.

To learn more about our capabilities and discuss how we could help you reach and engage your target audiences with focused, measurable campaigns, please contact us at info@metia.com.

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