

sproutsocial

The Sprout Social Index™  
Edition XIX:

# Breakthrough



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# Social media marketing grew up. Now what?

Something new is happening. As social becomes more entrenched in our day-to-day lives, social media teams are at long last receiving the recognition they deserve.

Industry trailblazers—those who have championed a new era of brand relevance—have made consumers more receptive than ever to seeing businesses in their feeds. Audiences aren't just passively consuming branded content, they're looking for it.

As a result, social media teams have captured the attention of executives and senior leaders looking to tap into the value of social. They realize the channel can drive a substantial business impact, but are looking to their teams to show them how.

We're in uncharted territory, and that's a good thing. Extraordinary brands and careers are made during times of high ambiguity. Rising to the challenges of today can affirm your value as a leader tomorrow.

You're at the helm of the ship, and you have everything you need to guide your team into the future.

In the 19th edition of the Sprout Social Index™, we surveyed over 1,800 consumers and 900 marketers across the US and UK to uncover the most effective ways to capitalize on this critical moment. These findings reveal what both parties are prioritizing in today's shifting social media landscape, where the gaps are and how to close them.

# What consumers want

The pandemic-era surge in social media usage wasn't just a passing trend. As consumers settle into a new normal, they continue to value their online connections and habits.



**SCREEN TIME**  
**Weekly Report Available**  
Your screen time was up 59% last week, for an average of 3 hours and 26 minutes a day.

Amid a fractured cultural landscape, social media has emerged to fill a seemingly endless need for content. Brands benefit from offering a variety of it to support the full customer journey.

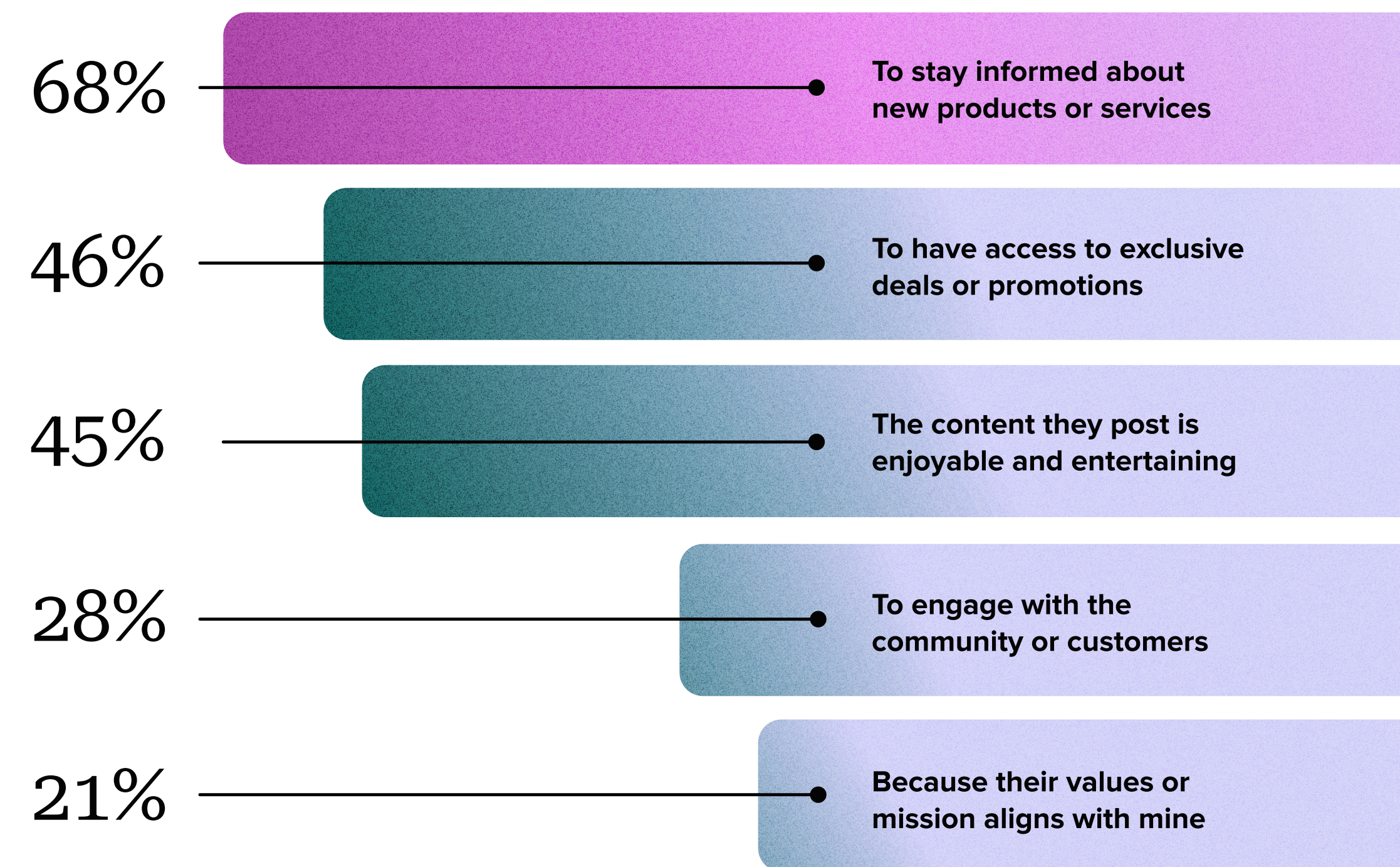
53%

of consumers say their social media usage has been higher over the last two years than the previous two years.



During the discovery phase, audiences seek authentic content that promotes transparency around business practices and values. These posts help further establish your brand ethos and personality, driving credibility that builds deeper connections with consumers.

## Consumers' primary reasons for following a brand on social



Once they hit follow, hard sells are back on the table. The most common reason consumers follow brands is to stay up to date on new products and services. The second most common reason is for access to exclusive deals and promotions.

Going for the hard sell on social media used to be a faux pas, but consumer attitudes have shifted. Now, social media is the new mall. Marketers can capitalize on this shift by creating a steady stream of content for audiences actively looking to shop their feeds.



## What consumers don't see enough of from brands on social

- 1 Authentic, non-promotional content**
- 2 Transparency about business practices and values**
- 3 Information about how products are made or sourced**
- 4 Educational content related to the brand's industry**
- 5 User-generated content or customer testimonials**

# Leaving a lasting impression

For all the discourse on generational differences, consumers of all ages have similar opinions on what makes a brand memorable.

A few years ago, brands taking a stand on tough issues was non-negotiable. Today, only 25% of consumers believe brands must speak out on causes and news that align with their values to be memorable. With skepticism around performative activism on the rise, audiences value brands that prioritize providing excellent service over public statements.

The most memorable thing a brand can do across all age groups is respond to customers, proving that responsiveness leaves an impression on everyone. These one-on-one connections are even more important to younger consumers, who prioritize engagement over publishing volume and on-trend content.

The most memorable brands on social...

51%

Respond to customers

38%

Prioritize original content over following trending topics

37%

Prioritize engaging directly with their audience vs. publishing a lot of content

33%

Publish timely, on-trend content

28%

Highlight the stories of their audiences over their own products/services

26%

Take risks with their content

25%

Collaborate with content creators and influencers

25%

Speak out about causes and news that align with their values

# The bottom line

Consumer behavior is dynamic, regardless of which demographics you want to reach. As you think about your brand's social presence, ask yourself:

Does your brand show up on social with content to support all stages of a buyer's experience?

Reflect on how much time you spend on content creation vs. audience engagement. Is now the time to shift that balance?

How does your brand showcase authenticity with current and future customers?



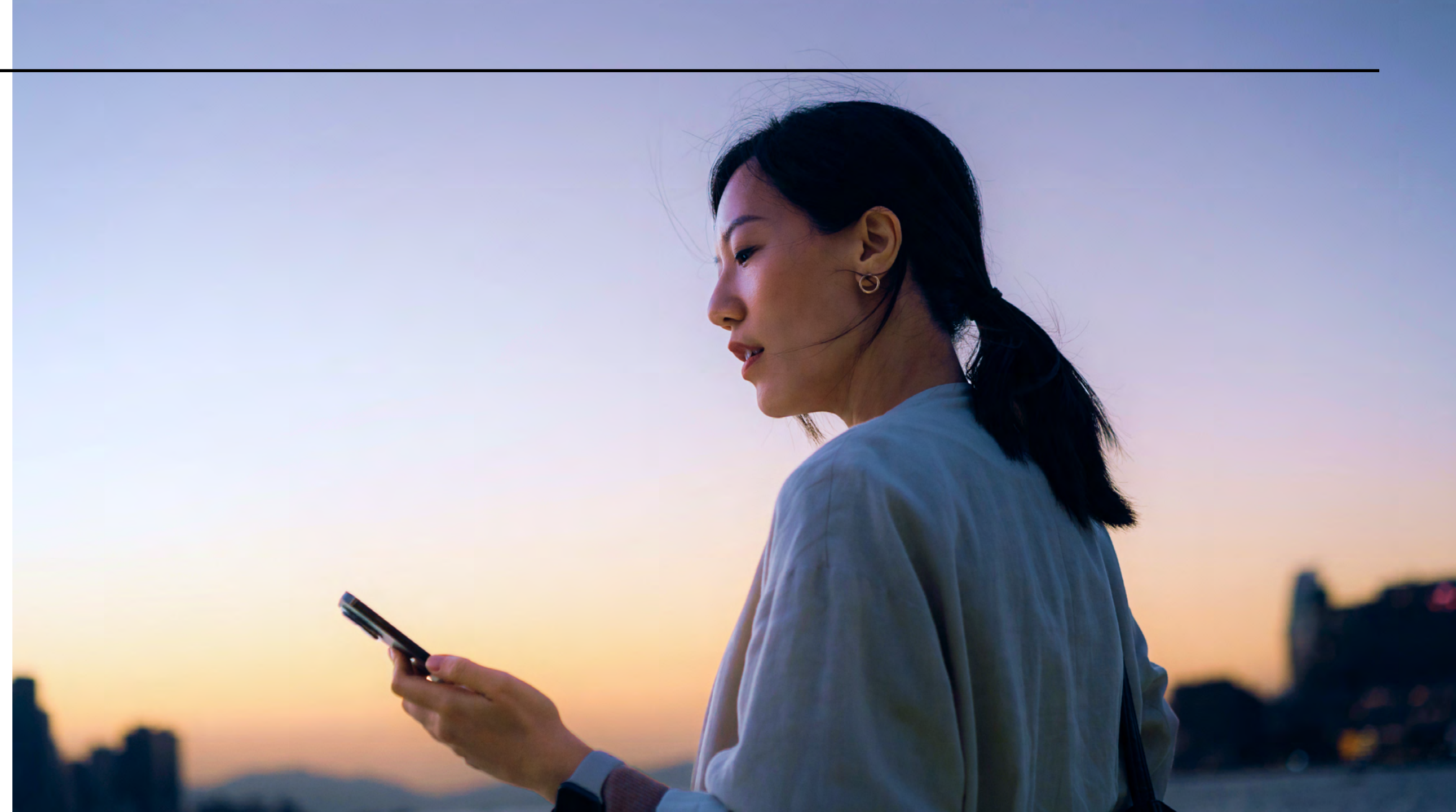
# Cracking the customer care code

When it comes to delivering exceptional customer experiences, speed and quality carry equal weight.



Social has amplified the importance of strong customer relationships for brands. A single interaction between a brand and their customer can create a lasting impression on more than just the individual. It can create connections with an entire audience, too.

But what it takes to make memorable customer experiences is changing. In the past, providing superior customer service was a matter of speed. But as consumer expectations continue to evolve, so does the need for quality, personalized care on social.



76%

of consumers notice and appreciate when companies prioritize customer support

76%

of consumers value how quickly a brand can respond to their needs

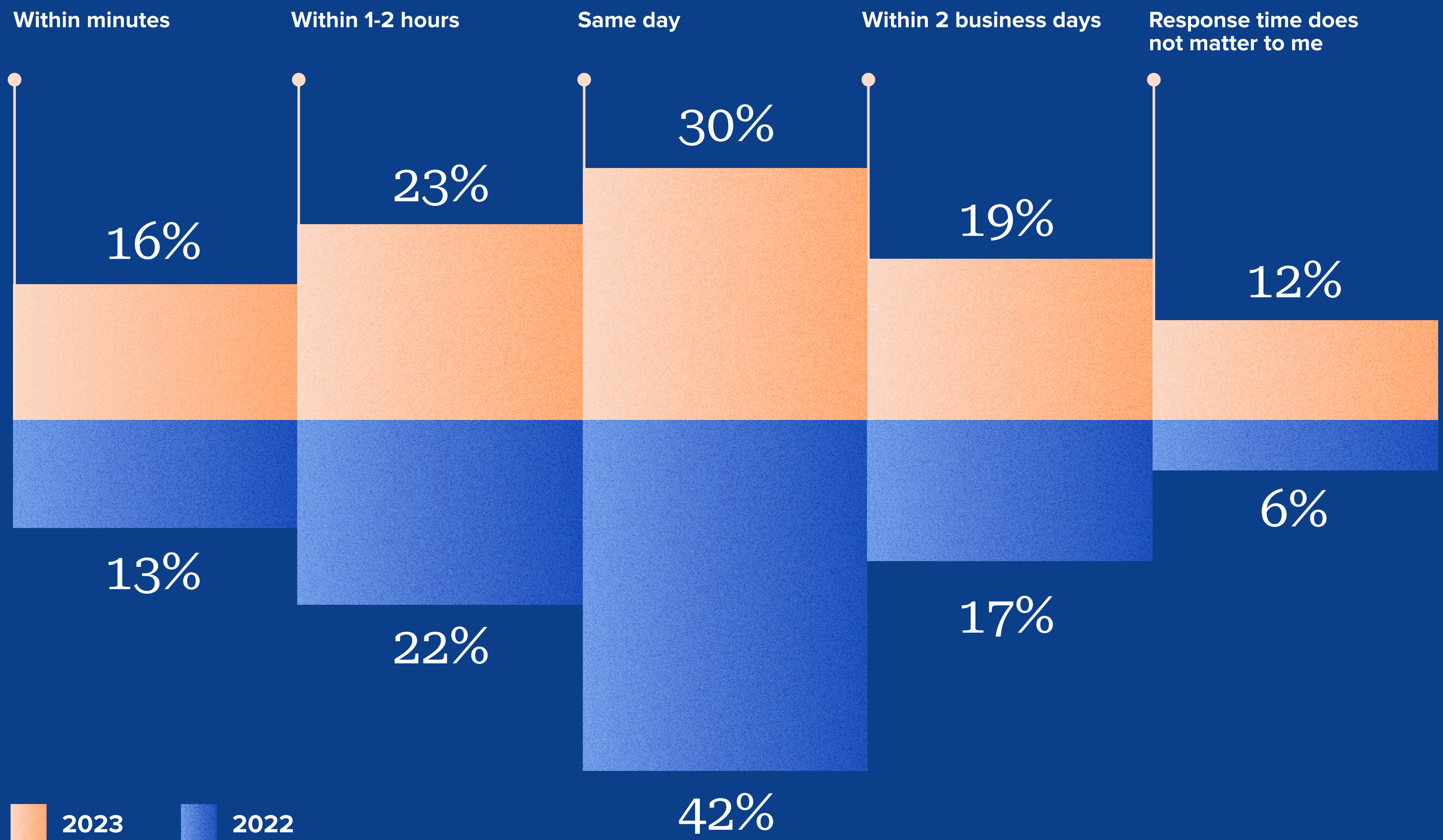
70%

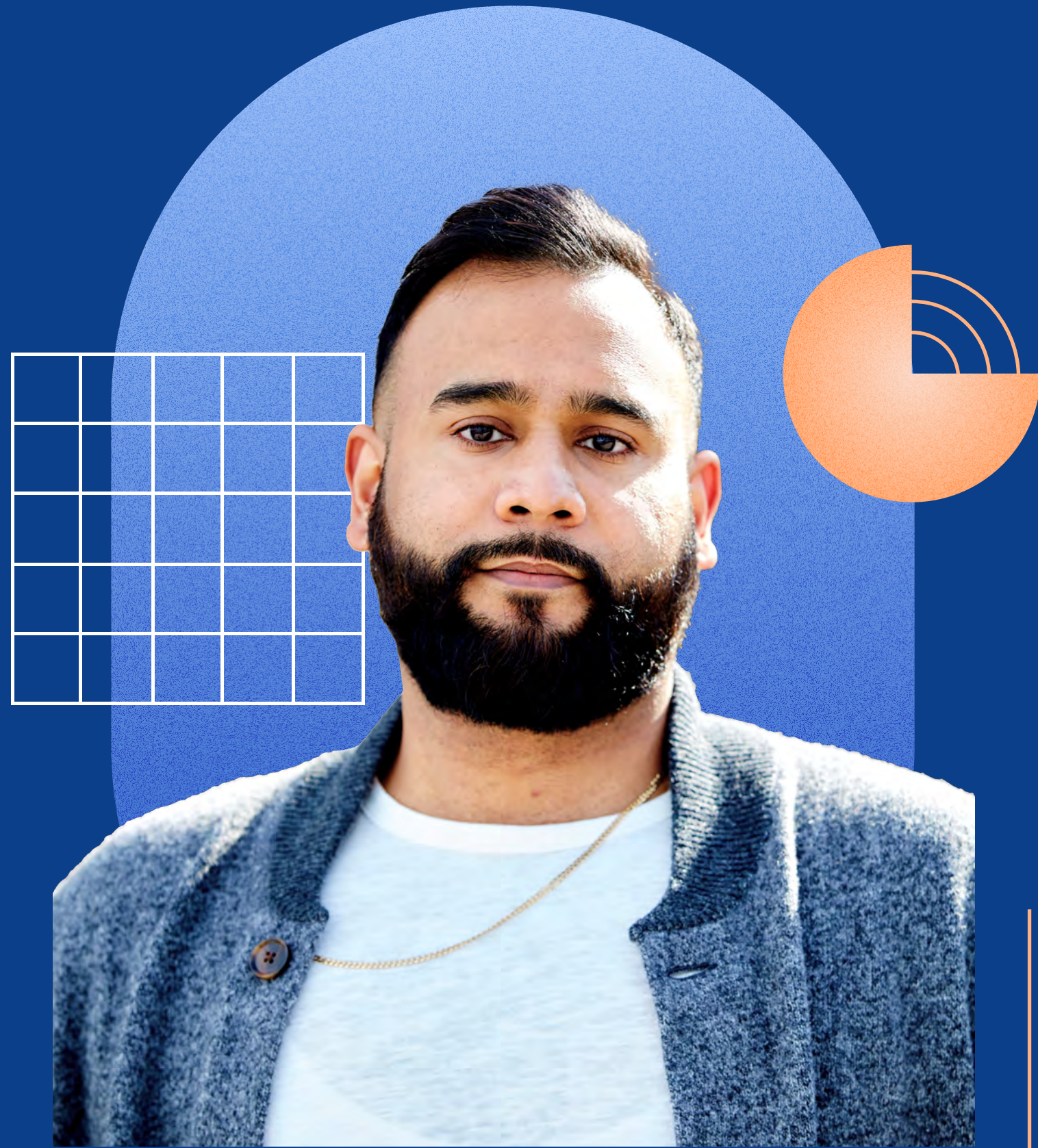
of consumers expect a company to provide personalized responses to customer service needs

Today, the majority of consumers (76%) place equal value on brands that prioritize customer support and brands that respond quickly to customer needs. It's not enough to resolve an issue quickly anymore. Businesses need to meet their customers with the personalized service they're used to on channels beyond social.

Achieving the level of personalization consumers desire can't be done without an integrated tech stack that enables a clear flow of information between marketing and service teams. Your team brings the compassion and skills; it's your job to supply them with the context needed to solve customer issues.

## How quickly consumers expect a response from brands on social





**Azad Yakatally**

Head of Social Media, Klaviyo

“As the *most accessible* touchpoint for consumers, social media has become the call center, suggestion box and customer service desk for brands. Give your team the resources to *effectively care for your customer* via social media.”

# Customer experiences are only as strong as the processes that support them

Social is no longer a single touchpoint in the customer experience—it's an essential element of the customer journey. So who owns social customer care?

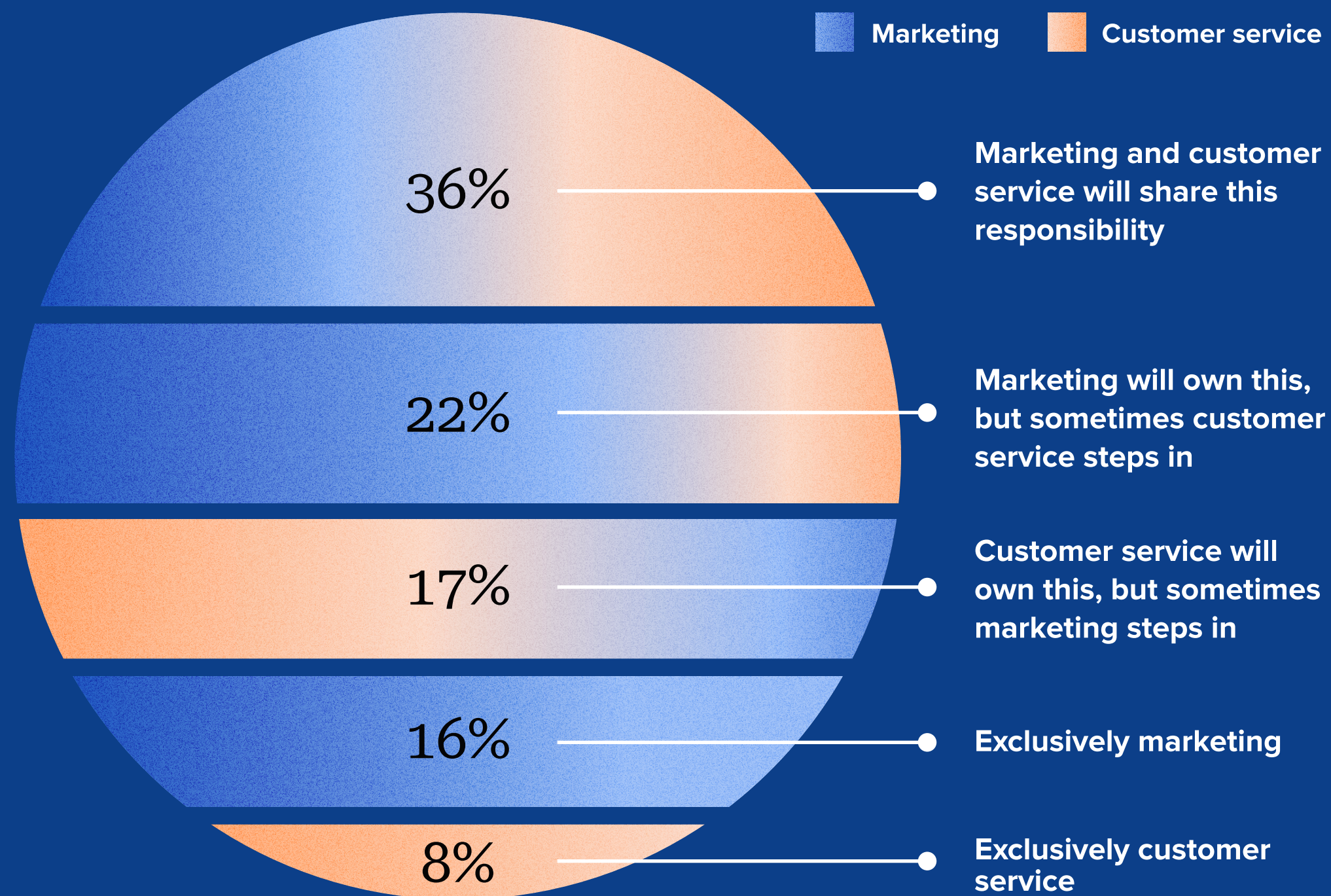
The discipline sits at the crossroads of service and brand marketing, complicating workflows and strategy. Only 8% of social marketers believe themselves to be leaders in customer care on social media, likely because the function lacks a clear owner.

Businesses looking to centralize social customer care responsibilities within a specific team will have to embrace well-defined collaboration instead. Even agreeing on a straightforward responsibility assignment matrix—like the RACI model, for example—can create much-needed structure around internal processes.



When it comes to ownership, many businesses (36%) plan on making the channel a shared responsibility between marketing and service teams. Ironing out your approach today can help you stay competitive in your offerings tomorrow.

## Who will own social customer care in 2024



For many marketing teams, these changes will feel like a natural progression of their department's involvement in ensuring a cohesive customer experience. The majority (60%) already collaborate with other departments to align social efforts with overall customer experiences, and 43% are implementing proactive social media listening and monitoring strategies to identify and address customer concerns.

As customer experiences continue to go digital, social sets up marketing teams to own the end-to-end customer journey.

# Tech and people power quality customer care

Scaling customer care across departments can't be done without technology. Although teams already share these responsibilities, only 30% of brands have adopted customer care processes and tools to actively engage with customers on social—a significant hurdle to developing a sophisticated strategy.

Brands looking to rectify this issue are making savvy investments in tools that streamline workflows and increase efficiency. Half of marketers plan to implement advanced social media management software to scale social customer care, underscoring the need for a platform that can handle both.

The addition of these tools will enable marketers to collaborate more effectively with their service counterparts, resulting in more exceptional customer experiences. Increasing visibility between teams decreases the chance of missing priority customer concerns and questions.

Setting industry standards in social customer care will require an advanced understanding of data analysis and customer relationship management (CRM) systems to pass information effectively between teams. Integrated solutions simplify those workflows, allowing everyone to focus on creating stand-out customer experiences.

54%

Customer self-service tools and resources like FAQs, forms and chatbots

50%

Advanced social media management tools to streamline workflows and increase efficiency

## Strategies marketers plan to employ to scale social customer care

35%

Comprehensive training for existing team members to enhance their productivity

47%

AI and automation to handle basic customer inquiries and tasks

# The bottom line

Customer experience should be a driving force for any social program, and yet few organizations have dedicated resources or infrastructure to support sophisticated social customer care. Heading into 2024, ask yourself:

Audit all of the tools and processes your organization currently uses to support social customer care. Where are the gaps? Are there redundancies that can be simplified?

Does social customer care have a clear owner within your organization today? Can you build the case for one?

What new skills do you and your team need to support or lead a robust social care strategy?



# Mind, meet machine

Creativity and authenticity are key to success on social. Team bandwidth has long threatened both, and AI offers a solution.

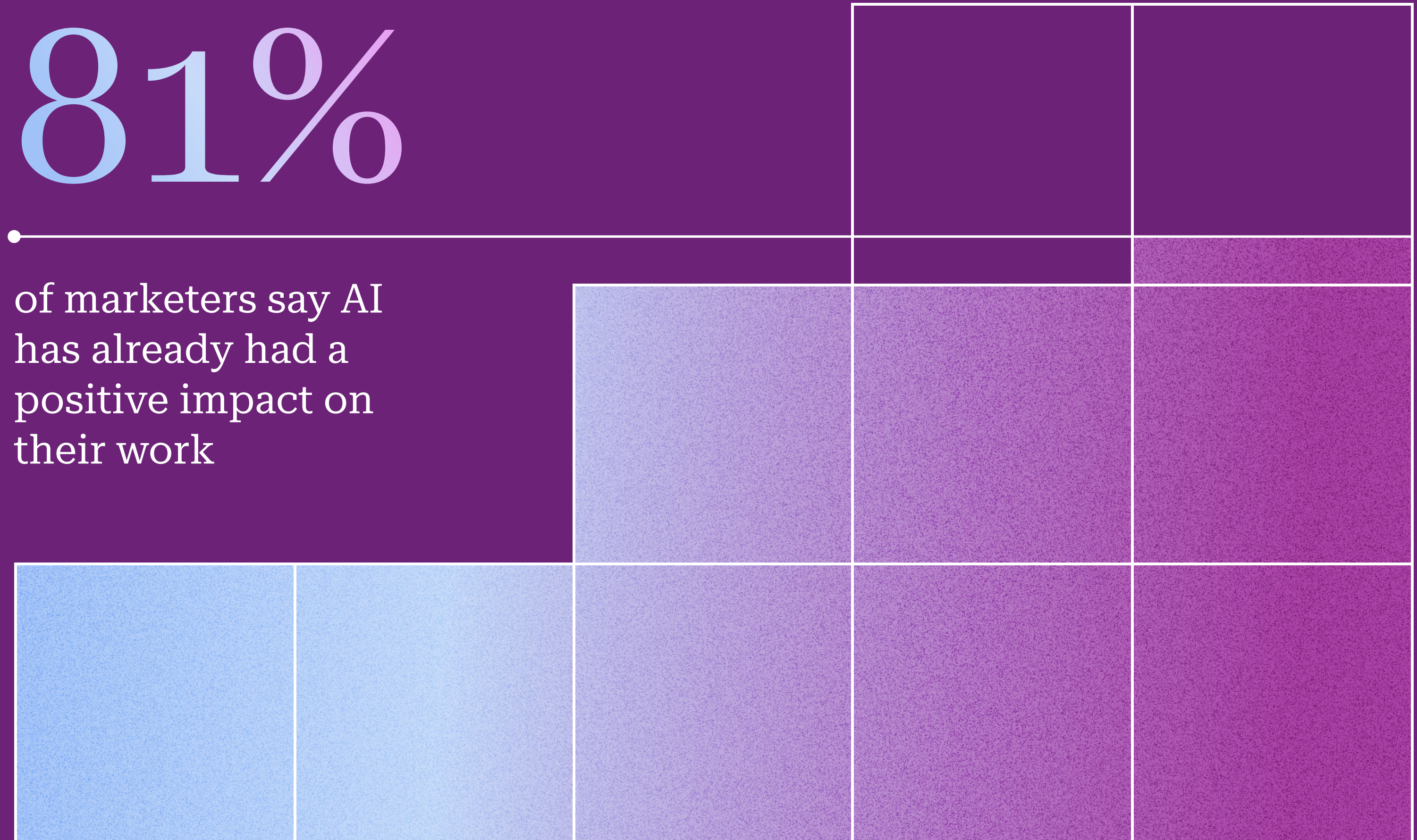


Artificial intelligence is already positively impacting the way social media marketers work, but we're still only scratching the surface of its capabilities. Its applications extend well beyond the generative use cases making headlines today.

More than 80% of marketers say AI has already positively impacted their work, citing main benefits like more time for creativity (78%) and increased efficiency (73%). It may sound counterintuitive, but emerging technologies can help marketers meet consumers' demands for authenticity and human connection.

# 81%

of marketers say AI has already had a positive impact on their work



Today, content creation is not only one of social marketers' most time-consuming tasks, it's also the first to be deprioritized. AI and automation can take on the tedious work—data analysis, reporting, message triage—that depletes energy better spent on content production and engagement.

And though only 20% of marketers say AI is helping them understand customer needs, we already know the technology's power lies in its ability to make sense of large amounts of data. Going forward, social teams have an opportunity to recruit AI to surface new or unexpected customer insights—information that can help brands produce stronger content and become more responsive to their audience's demands.

## AI's current impact and expected growth in 2024

Marketers have already seen AI's positive impacts on

- 1 Analyzing social media data
- 2 Social media advertising and campaign targeting
- 3 Social media scheduling/posting; Content creation
- 4 Image and video recognition
- 5 Social media measurement
- 6 Sentiment analysis
- 7 Building chatbots

In 2024, marketers plan on using AI to support

- 1 Analyzing social media data
- 2 Content creation
- 3 Social media advertising and campaign targeting
- 4 Social media scheduling/posting
- 5 Building chatbots
- 6 Social media measurement
- 7 Sentiment analysis





**Clayton Norman**

Social Media Marketing Manager, CeriFi

“Smart social marketers are already learning AI tools and finding ways to incorporate them into their work in ways that *save time* and amplify the human elements they bring to their craft to make themselves even more *vital to their organizations' goals.*”

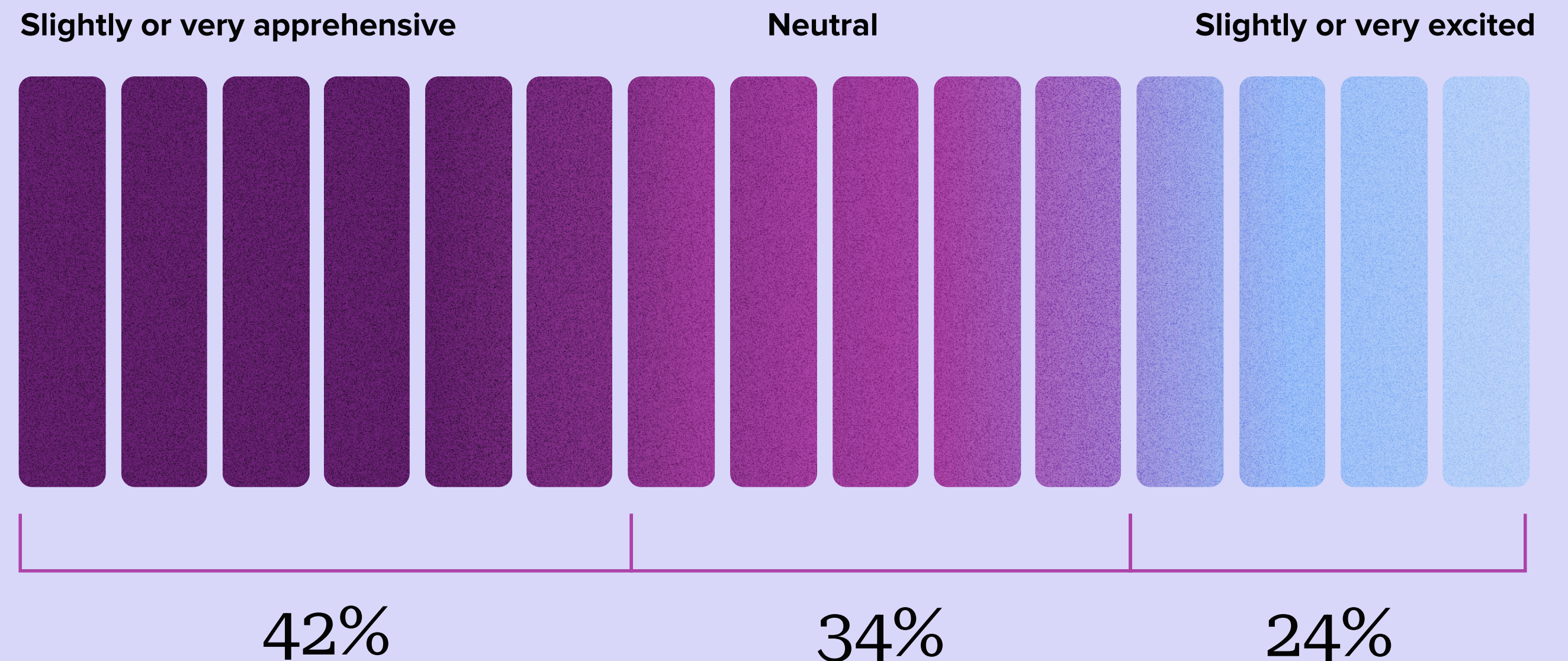
# Marketers and consumers share AI apprehensions

Nearly half (49%) of marketers say their top concern in regards to AI is job displacement or reduced human involvement in social media management. Consumers—who already crave more human interaction with brands on social—share these worries as well.

Over a third (42%) of consumers say they are slightly or very apprehensive about the use of AI in social media interactions. Ironically enough, digital natives are most likely to be concerned about the increasing presence of emerging tech in social—46% of 18-24 year olds say they're apprehensive about increased AI usage, making them second only to consumers ages 57-75.

These shared perspectives show that we haven't lost sight of the real power of social. Creating connection and building community requires a human touch that machines simply cannot replicate on their own. But it also requires one of social teams' most finite resources: time.

## How consumers feel about brands using AI in social media interactions



By thoughtfully tagging in AI to handle manual to-do's, to shoulder the burden of interacting with spreadsheets and dashboards (rather than people), marketers can focus on work that makes them indispensable.

# The bottom line

We're in the early innings of understanding how AI can support social teams. Framing these technologies as supporting players—rather than substitutes for human perspective—can free marketers to deliver on what consumers really want. To make the most of these innovations, ask yourself:

Identify the tasks that most often push content creation, engagement or customer care down your to-do list. Which can be delegated to AI?

How could existing team processes be reimaged or simplified with AI in the mix?

With a few hours back in the week, what will you reprioritize to have the greatest impact—brainstorming? Audience research?

# The team structure of tomorrow

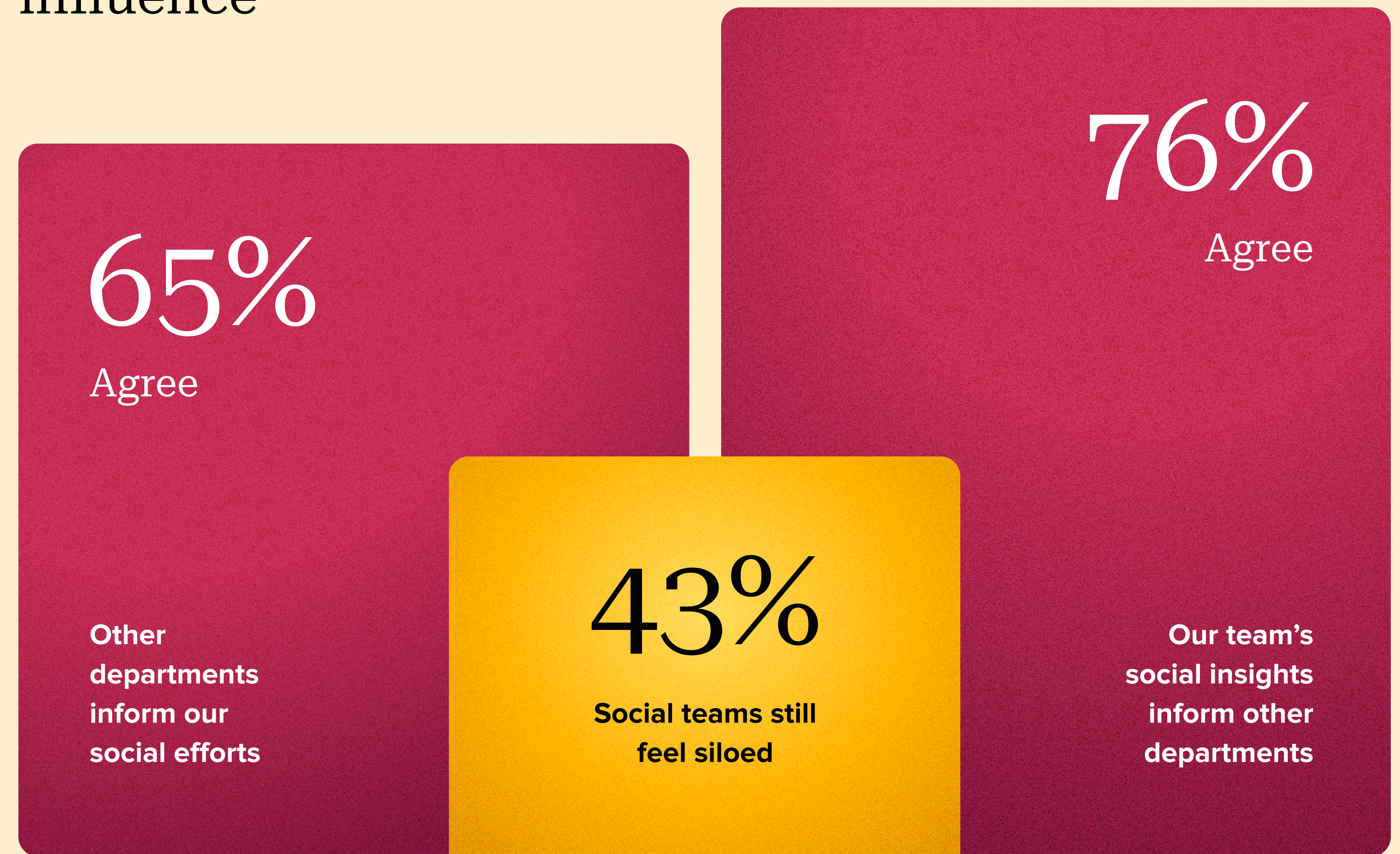
Properly staffing the most dynamic channel in marketing is about more than capacity planning. To get the most out of social, silos must become a thing of the past.



Social's role has expanded well beyond marketing, touching nearly every corner of a business. Today, 76% of social marketers say their team's insights inform other departments, and 65% say other teams inform their social efforts.

Despite this consistent exchange of information, nearly half (43%) of social teams still feel siloed from other departments. This sentiment is especially true for mid-market and enterprise organizations, who are more likely to feel siloed than their small business counterparts.

## Marketers' POV on social's business-wide influence





Social teams  
that report  
feeling siloed,  
by business size

48%

Mid-market  
(100-4,999 employees)

33%

SMBs  
(1-99 employees)

44%

Enterprise  
(5,000+ employees)

The interactions that happen on social and the insights they yield benefit more than the marketing department. Social media is a business intelligence source that can fuel all parts of an organization—product, sales, communications, R&D, employer brand. But only if there’s a culture of collaboration, an expectation for open communication and an investment in team structures that support both.





**Nycole Hampton**

Senior Director of Social, GoodRx

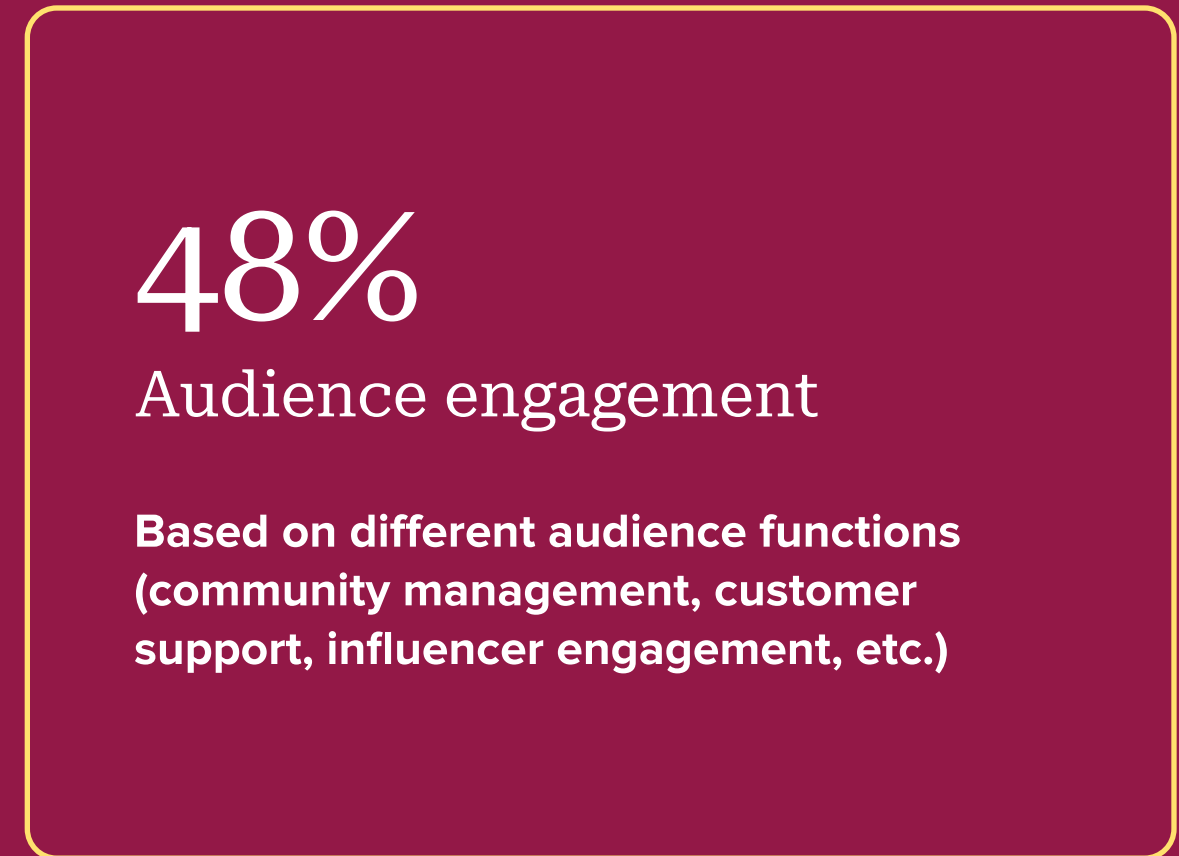
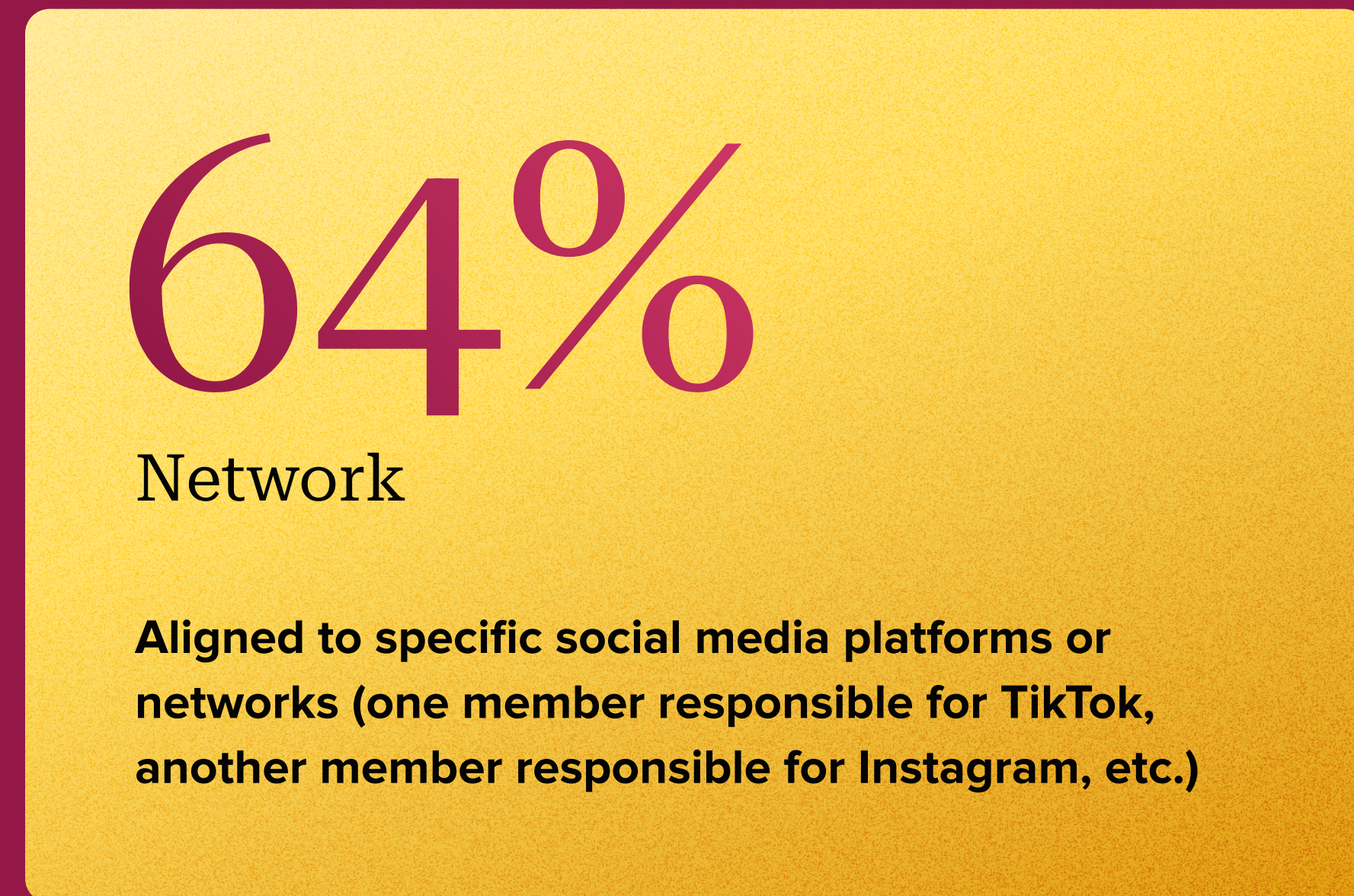
“Social and community teams are often the *most connected with customers* on a daily basis—so it's important for them to be connected with not only marketing and communications but also product, customer care and research teams as well. There are rarely any internal teams that *social should not partner with*. Your head of social should be plugged into everything going on across the organization, and tapped early to advise on how social can *bring new initiatives to life*.”

# Adaptable teams create adaptable strategies

The only constant in social is change. Team structures, on the other hand, evolve at a slower pace.

The majority (64%) of social media teams are organized by network, but changes to the social media landscape threaten the long-term viability of that approach. As new platforms emerge and consumer preferences shift at a faster rate, staffing team members to specific networks can create both gaps and redundancies.

## The most prominent social team structure today



Case in point: No one could have predicted that 100 million users would have signed up for Threads less than a week after its launch. Situations like these create a unique issue for network-based teams. Do you add more to your Instagram team's plate due to the connection between the platforms? Or do you bring your X (formerly known as Twitter) team into a new terrain?

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to social team management. Teams that want to remain agile while breaking down silos should experiment with less common structures based around audience engagement, distribution, internal function support or even a combination of the three. Given many brands' plans for shared social customer care ownership, what new models might that open up? The next few years could see customer experience functions graduate from dotted line project teams to mature departments that unify social media marketing, community management and customer service.

Whatever you choose, base your decisions around what provides everyone—marketers, cross-functional collaborators and business leaders—with clarity around how social strategies support business goals.





**Sam Wells**

Director of Social Media, C4 Energy,  
Cellucor and XTEND

“One of the most underrated marketing team hires is a *community manager*. The role is critical to cultivating brand evangelists and creating memorable brand experiences at scale. Community managers in particular are *uniquely qualified to bridge social and customer care*, and build the correct standard operating procedures to relay information internally and respond to your audience.”

# The bottom line

Don't let traditional team structures limit social's impact across your organization. Start building a case for where social should sit, and how it should intersect with other functions, to create the strongest experience for current and future customers. Ask yourself:

How much time does your team spend interacting with departments beyond marketing? What rituals can you institute to change that?

What are the main barriers to working more closely across teams? Incompatible tools? Cumbersome processes? Internal education?

What business goals (not just marketing) could inform the next iteration of your team structure?

# Social's revenue impact, redefined

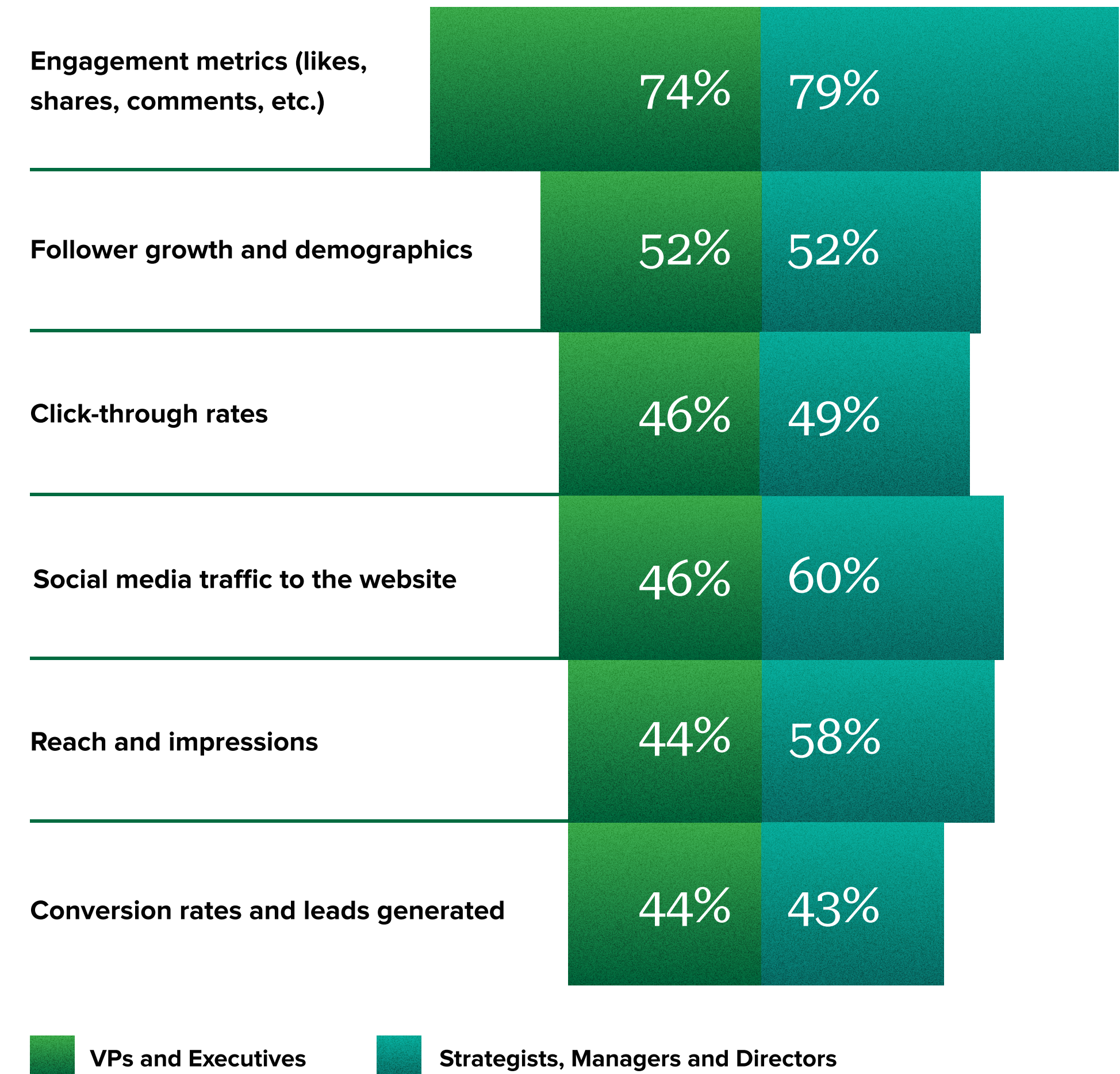
What's an engagement worth? A click? The right answer is the one everyone—from practitioner to executive—agrees on.



Leaders are bought in on the value of social, but measurement is a different story. While stakeholders at the executive, VP and middle management level all regularly track engagement, they aren't looking at reach and traffic with a unified lens.



## The social media metrics marketers track regularly



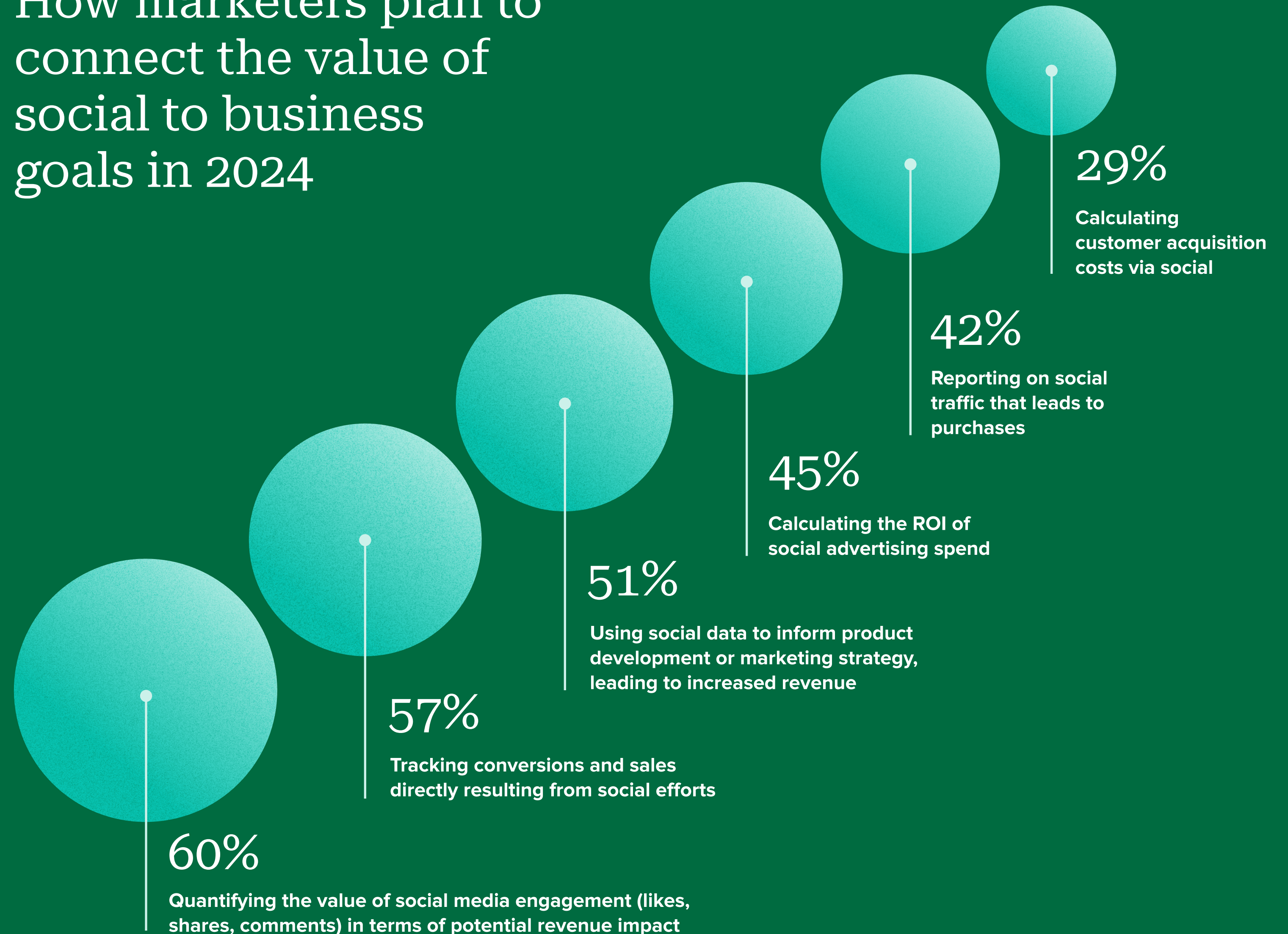


Discrepancies aside, it does show that the majority of organizations have graduated to a new level of social media maturity. There's a growing recognition that social efforts and interactions earlier in the customer journey—think, audience engagement metrics—are not just interesting, they translate to revenue. It's clear now that measuring impact in terms of conversion and direct sales alone only tells part of the story.

In 2024, quantifying the value of social media engagement in terms of revenue will be marketers' primary way of demonstrating social's impact on business goals. Of course, you can use marketing mix modeling to calculate how much a social media interaction is worth, but none of it matters if there's no unified understanding of how you got there.

It's up to social marketers to champion their work by building internal consensus over what is being measured and how.

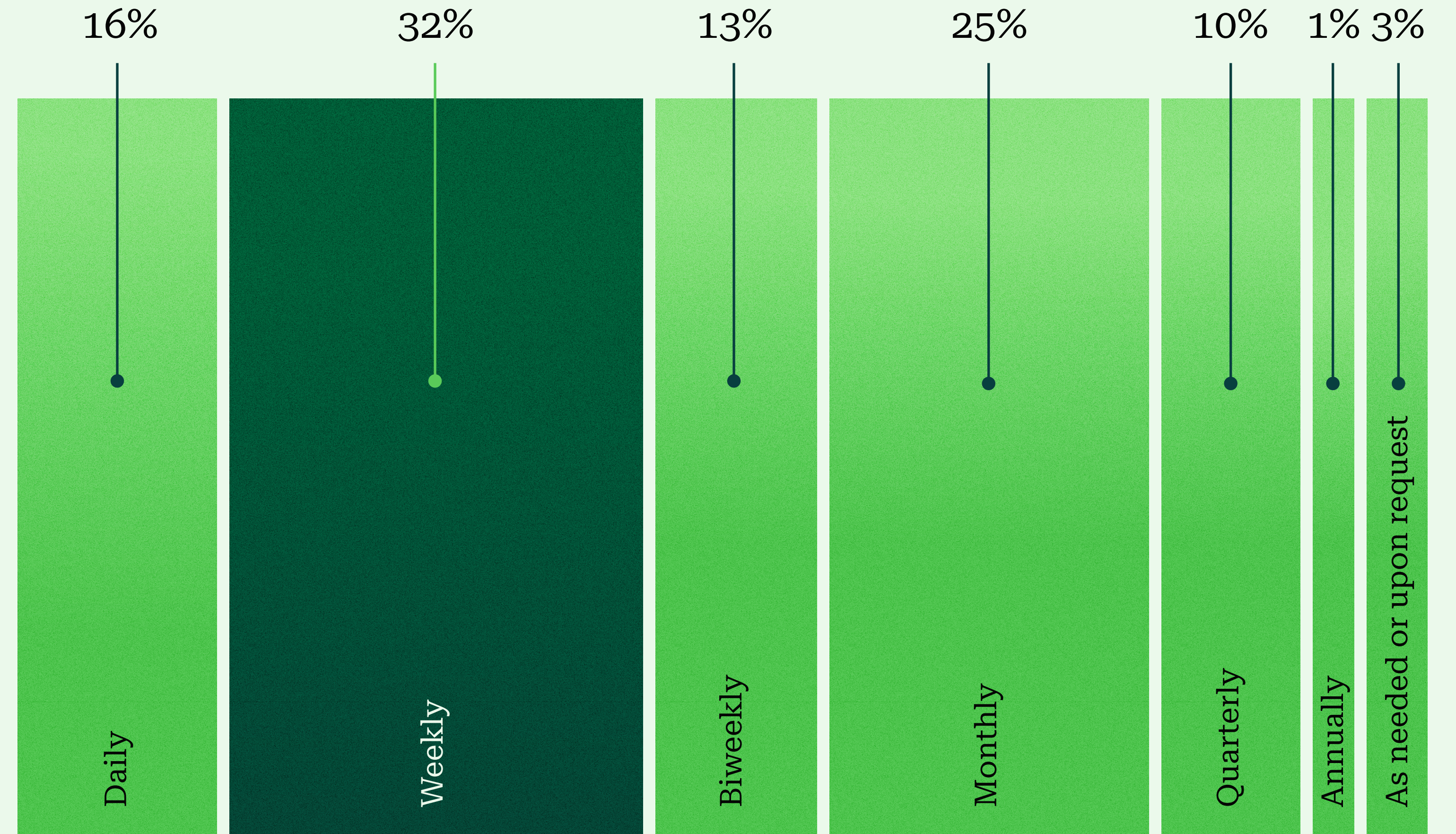
## How marketers plan to connect the value of social to business goals in 2024



# Make every report count

When it comes to performance reports, the majority of social media marketers are taking a more is more approach—32% share metrics and insights with executive leadership weekly, and 16% do it daily.

## How often marketers share social metrics with executive leadership



To ensure these updates are a strategic endeavor and not just a checkbox activity, it's time to ask the hard question—are your reports creating value or noise?

An emailed link or PDF works to provide visibility in a pinch, but only you can communicate your team's impact effectively. More than half (61%) of marketers agree the most effective way to share social metrics with executive leadership is through in-person presentations or meetings.

Remember: People bring numbers to life. You may look at your dashboard and be able to draw distinct conclusions, but it's not guaranteed that executive leaders will share that instinct. It's up to you to lead with this context, both to strengthen your reporting and position your team as strategic partners.



## The most effective ways to share social metrics with executive leadership

- 1 In-person presentations or meetings**
- 2 Dashboards (e.g., interactive visualizations in Tableau or other tools)**
- 3 Formal static reports (PDFs); or scheduled stand-ups**
- 4 Email summaries or updates**
- 5 Project management tools**
- 6 Marketing mix modeling**



**Rachael Goulet**

Director of Social Media, Sprout Social

“Everyone wants to know that social is 'working.' The most important thing you can do is *show what 'working' means for your business.* Are you attracting new fans? Are you driving sales? Can you quantify how much your advocacy program is saving you on ad spend? *Talk to your teams about the value* you're seeing from your efforts, quickly and often. Share insights as they come up—*they are that influential* and can change your business strategies rapidly.”

# The bottom line

As social evolves, so should your approach to measuring and conveying its business impact. Defining the metrics that matter most to your brand is more valuable than tracking every possible KPI. To get there, ask yourself:

Think about the typical buying process for your brand and where customers turn to social as a touchpoint. How can you weight different interactions to quantify their revenue impact?

Where are your measurement blind spots today? How can you combine social data with other business intelligence sources to paint a more detailed picture?

How often are you sharing performance updates with leadership live? How can you advocate for that face time?



## Bigger challenges reap greater rewards

As social becomes more complex, social media marketers become more indispensable to their organization's success.

Consumer expectations will continue to rise as social platforms emerge and evolve. Living up to those standards means embracing new collaborators, processes and technology—not as additional work, but as essential components of a modern social media strategy.

Breaking through to the next era of social starts with marketers who are willing to try what others have not: a radical team structure, a reinvented workflow, and novel approach to communicating within and outside your business.

We're ready. Are you?

# About the Data

This research was conducted online in the US and UK by Cint on behalf of Sprout Social. Participants included 1,817 consumers who follow at least five brands on social media. Additionally, 903 full-time social marketers involved in managing their brand's social media strategy (i.e., performed the job themselves or managed someone who does) were surveyed from a cross section of US and UK businesses. Both surveys were conducted from June 12 to June 23, 2023.

Relationships between variables collected were analyzed using parametric statistics for statistical significance.

For questions about the data, please contact [pr@sproutsocial.com](mailto:pr@sproutsocial.com).

# Sprout Social

**Sprout Social** is a global leader in social media management and analytics software. Sprout's intuitive platform puts powerful social data into the hands of more than 30,000 brands so they can deliver smarter, faster business impact. With a full suite of social media management solutions, Sprout offers comprehensive publishing and engagement functionality, customer care, advocacy, and AI-powered business intelligence. Sprout's **award-winning** software operates across all major social media networks and digital platforms. For more information about Sprout Social (NASDAQ: SPT), visit [sproutsocial.com](https://sproutsocial.com).

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