SURVEY REPORT

The state of social media marketing 2026

Data-driven insights from marketers on trends, tools, and team dynamics

emplifi™



INTRODUCTION

The future of marketing is already here

Marketing has always been about adapting to new platforms, new audiences, and new expectations. But 2026 presents a sharper turning point. Teams are under mounting pressure to deliver more content, drive measurable ROI, and keep pace with technologies like AI; all while managing finite resources and the very real risk of burnout.

The story is clear:

Marketing is scaling faster than ever, while team size and budgets stay flat, so success depends on scale and sustainability.

This report unpacks what marketers say is working, what's breaking, and what they expect will define 2026. It offers actionable insights for leaders who want to turn pressure into progress, ensuring their teams aren't just keeping up, but building strategies that drive improvement to the bottom line.



Did you know...?

82%
of marketers say AI tools have made them more productive.

76%
report experiencing feelings of burnout at least occasionally.

73%
say short-form video will dominate content strategy in 2026.

What you will find in this survey report

This study explores the forces shaping modern marketing while revealing how marketing teams are adapting, surviving the AI onslaught and learning to thrive.

Methodology

Nature of survey: This was an online survey offered in English only

Sample size: The sample was 564 marketers across B2C and B2B roles

When: Data collected September, 2025

Qualifications: Must work in a marketing-related role

CONTENTS

(CLICK SECTIONS TO JUMP TO PAGE)

AI in marketing 04

Influencer marketing 06

User-generated content (UGC) 08

Social media marketing strategy 11

Leadership support & collaboration 13

Team capacity & burnout 16

Future 18

AI IN MARKETING

The new reality of AI in marketing

AI is proving its value where marketers need it most: time. A striking 82% say AI tools have improved productivity, but for most, the gains are incremental. Only 35% describe the lift as significant, while nearly half (47%) say it's moderate, a signal that AI is embedded in daily workflows but hasn't yet transformed them.

Looking ahead, marketers are not just optimistic but also planning concrete next steps. The top areas of future AI adoption include predictive analytics and customer insights (**30%**), automated content creation (**28%**), and AI-driven ad targeting (**26%**), followed by visual recognition (**25%**) and conversational AI (**17%**).

This shows that while current usage is delivering moderate wins, investment is shifting toward tools that can scale personalization, content, and insights more effectively.

Still, challenges remain: data privacy concerns (**27%**), technology integration issues (**23%**), and limited internal skills (**21%**) are the biggest barriers preventing teams from moving beyond incremental gains.

These findings underscore that the primary obstacles are less about the technology itself and more about the readiness of organizations to integrate and scale it effectively.

Actionable insight: Build on early productivity wins by seeking a platform that embeds AI as a co-pilot, not just a feature. Look for tools that use AI to automate content creation with an AI Composer, summarize listening trends with AI Query Highlights, and predict content performance. Give teams the guardrails they need with built-in AI governance and approval workflows to move from moderate gains to breakthrough results.



82%
say AI tools have improved productivity

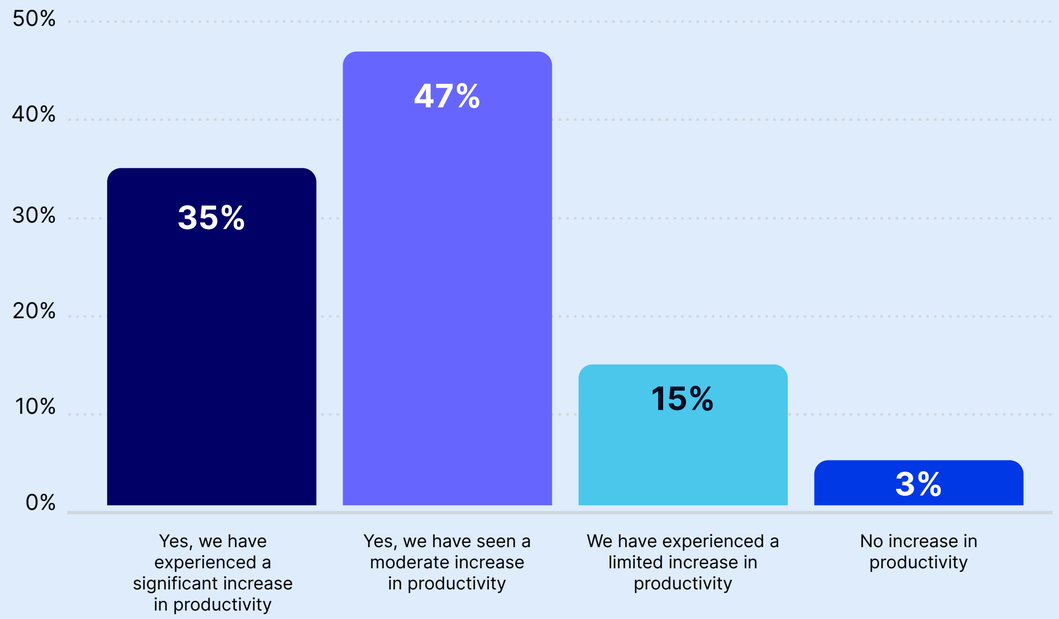
What brands should do now

1. **Build confidence through training**
   Provide clear AI workflows, governance, and upskilling so teams can move from moderate productivity gains to transformational results.
2. **Align leadership and execution teams**
   Establish shared KPIs and regular cross-functional planning to break down silos and accelerate innovation.
3. **Integrate AI into core workflows**
   Move beyond isolated experiments. Embed AI tools directly into planning, content creation, reporting, and campaign management processes.
4. **Measure AI's impact rigorously**
   Track not just time saved, but downstream effects on campaign performance, engagement, and ROI using a unified analytics dashboard to prove value and refine usage.

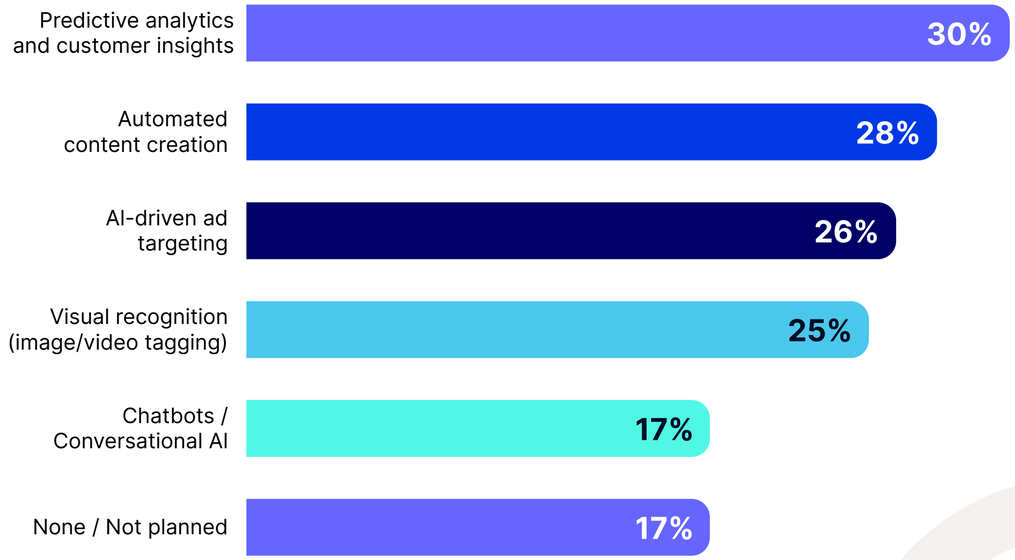
Back to contents

AI IN MARKETING

Impact of AI-driven marketing tools



AI-driven marketing tools marketers are planning to adopt



Back to contents

INFLUENCER MARKETING

Influencer marketing is entering its next phase

Influencer content is no longer a side tactic - it's now at the heart of brand strategy. Nearly two-thirds of marketers (67%) plan to boost their influencer budgets in 2026, underscoring a growing focus on authenticity. Consumers agree: 65% say relatable, creator-style content influences their purchases, while only 14% are swayed by celebrities[1].

Much of this investment will flow to the mid-tiers of influence: both micro (**47%**) and macro (**47%**) creators are top priorities, far ahead of mega influencers (**25%**) or nano influencers (**20%**). This signals that brands use micro-creators for trust, engagement, niche targeting, and content creation at scale. And they use macro-creators for awareness, brand building, cultural cachet, and global reach.

The most effective strategies often combine both: "hero" macros for mass visibility + a "halo" of micros for depth and authenticity paired with increased volume of posts.

The goals behind these campaigns are clear: brand awareness (**70%**) is the leading driver, followed by community growth (**49%**) and content creation (**48%**). While **43%** cite sales and **33%** product launches as objectives, it's evident that influencer marketing is evolving into a full-fledged discipline; not just a transactional channel.

Looking forward, experimentation is accelerating, and one area seeing momentum is virtual influencers, with 58% of marketers planning to increase collaborations in 2026.

Ready to scale your influencer strategy with smarter tools? Let's talk



Influencer content

Brand strategy is front and center

67%
of marketers plan to increase influencer budgets

65%
of consumers say relatable, content drives purchases

How investment is distributed

Campaign goals

70%
Brand awareness

49%
Community growth

43%
Content creation

AI policies for influencers

Brands split on implementing usage

52%
Yes

48%
No

[1] Consumer brand social engagement 2025 survey, Emplifi

Back to contents

INFLUENCER MARKETING

Influencer marketing tips for 2026

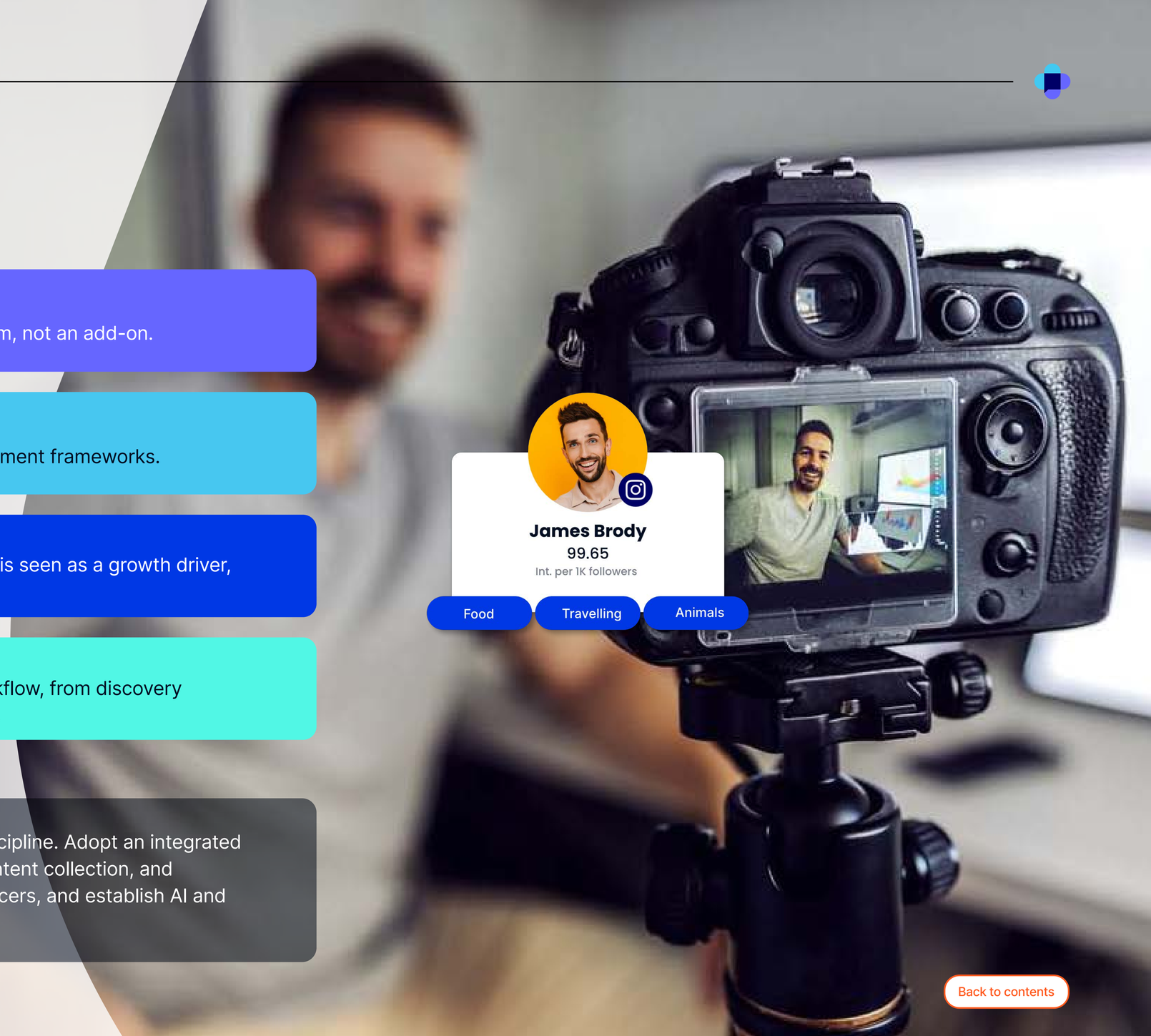
Make video the centerpiece
Treat influencer-driven video as a core content stream, not an add-on.

Grow with discipline
Match budget increases with clear KPIs and measurement frameworks.

Prove the value
Prioritize ROI tracking to ensure influencer marketing is seen as a growth driver, not a cost center.

Leverage smart tools
Partner with platforms that streamline the entire workflow, from discovery and vetting to communication and content approvals.

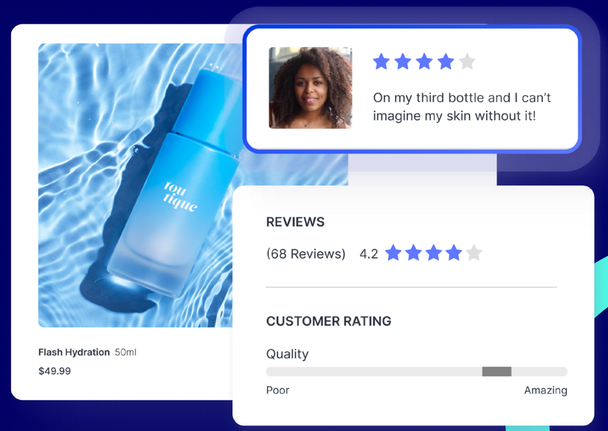
Actionable insight: Treat influencer marketing as a full-funnel discipline. Adopt an integrated solution that handles discovery, vetting, campaign workflows, content collection, and measurable performance tracking. Experiment with virtual influencers, and establish AI and built-in ROI governance to scale with consistency.



Back to contents

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Marketers trust UGC but few have scaled it effectively



Marketers overwhelmingly see UGC as a core pillar of modern content strategies with more than four in five (82%) rating it as very or somewhat important. But when it comes to execution, most are still in the early stages. Only 31% actively encourage and incorporate UGC, while nearly half (44%) do so only occasionally.

Marketers lean most heavily on social media mentions and tags (**65%**), customer reviews and testimonials (**64%**), and photos or videos shared by customers (**56%**). Fewer are running UGC contests (**31%**) or repurposing influencer-created content as UGC (**41%**). It's important to note that software can uniquely scale these efforts.

65%
Mentions and tags

64%
Reviews and testimonials

56%
Photos/videos shared by customers

Looking ahead, the formats most marketers plan to expand into are UGC contests and campaigns (**28%**), influencer content repurposed as UGC (**25%**), and photos and videos shared by customers (**23%**). By contrast, fewer intend to increase reliance on reviews or social mentions, suggesting brands may be seeking more controlled and campaign-driven UGC formats in 2026.

28%
UGC contests and campaigns

25%
Influencer content repurposed as UGC

23%
Photos/videos shared by customers

Actionable insight:

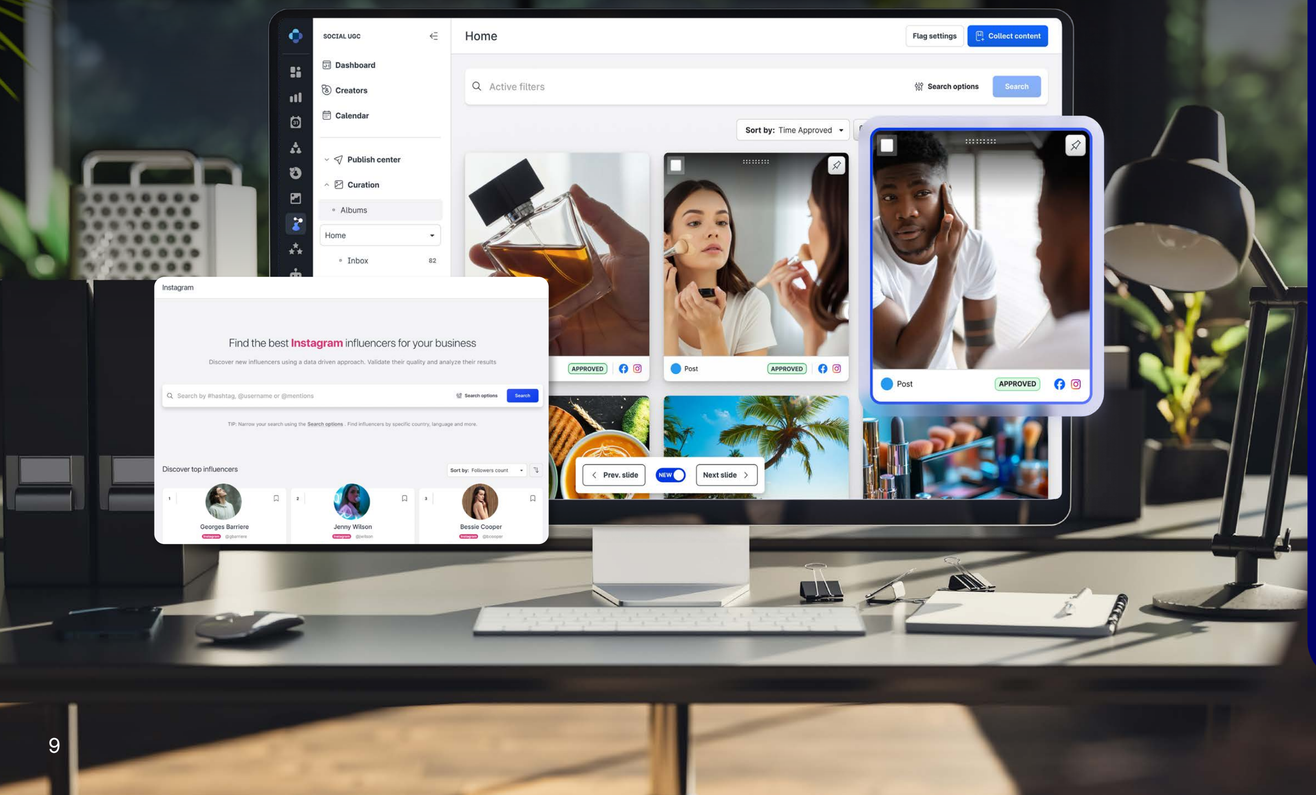
Treat UGC as a primary, affordable content engine, not just a 'nice-to-have.' By operationalizing it, you slash production costs while scaling the authentic content that actually drives results. Invest in integrated tools that help you discover authentic content across all channels, automate rights management in seconds, organize approved assets in a central library, and track direct impact on revenue with shoppable galleries and conversion metrics.

Back to contents

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

What's holding UGC back

The biggest hurdles are collecting enough quality content (**31%**) and measuring ROI (**24%**). This is where technology comes in, find tools that support discovery and automation around UGC. Moderation and rights management can add further friction (**17%** and **15%**, respectively), keeping UGC from being a fully scaled, systematic content stream.



UGC checklist

Encourage participation

Actively prompt customers to share content through campaigns and community engagement.

Incentivize smartly

Use rewards, recognition, or loyalty perks to motivate quality contributions.

Curate and scale

Use a unified platform to filter, moderate, tag products, and manage rights permissions before publishing.

Prioritize high-impact formats

Focus on reviews, customer photos/videos, and campaign-driven UGC that can be repurposed.

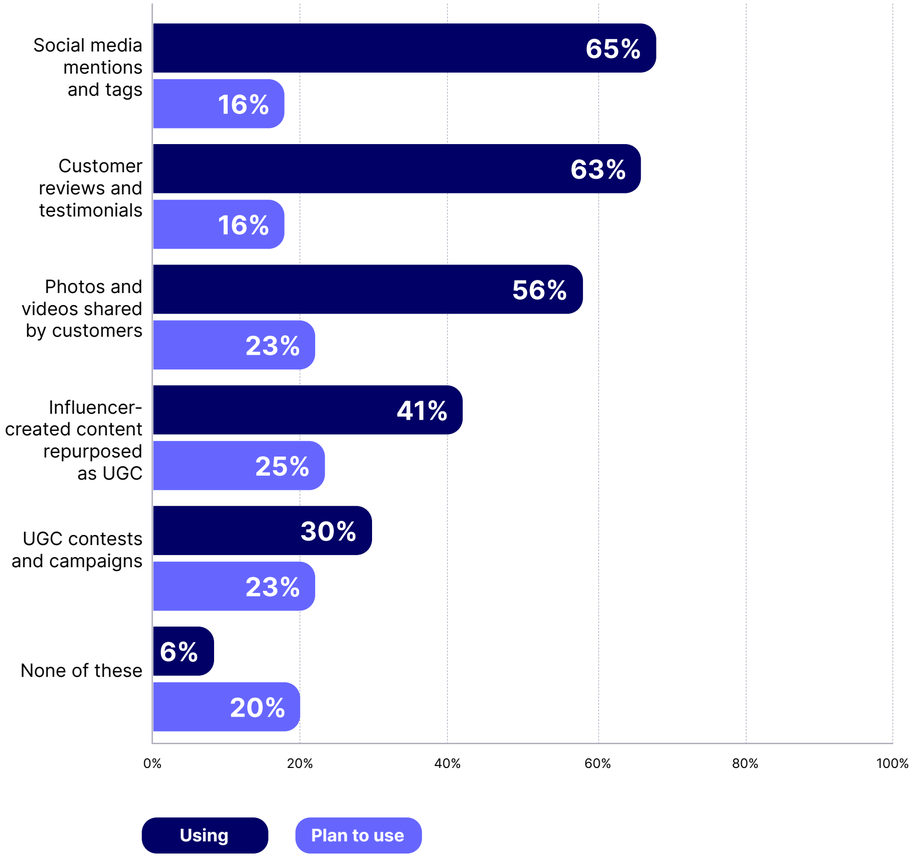
Measure ROI

Track UGC performance down to the stock-keeping unit (SKU) level alongside branded content to validate its impact on conversion and average order value (AOV).

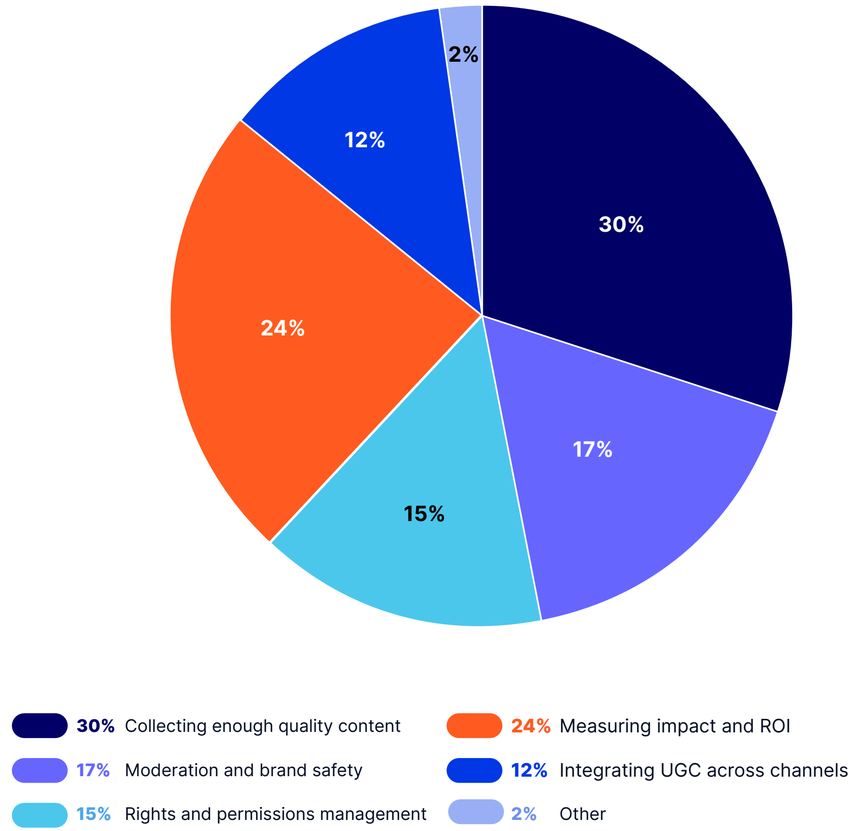
Back to contents

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Adoption and future intent for UGC strategies



What is your biggest challenge with UGC?



Struggling to collect enough quality UGC? Emplifi UGC uses AI to help you discover, tag, and showcase authentic customer content. Talk to an expert

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Social media strategy: Scale, substance, and shifting platforms

Social media continues to evolve from a reach driver to a commercial engine. While brand awareness remains the top goal (69%), marketers are increasingly focused on community loyalty (52%) and conversions (51%).

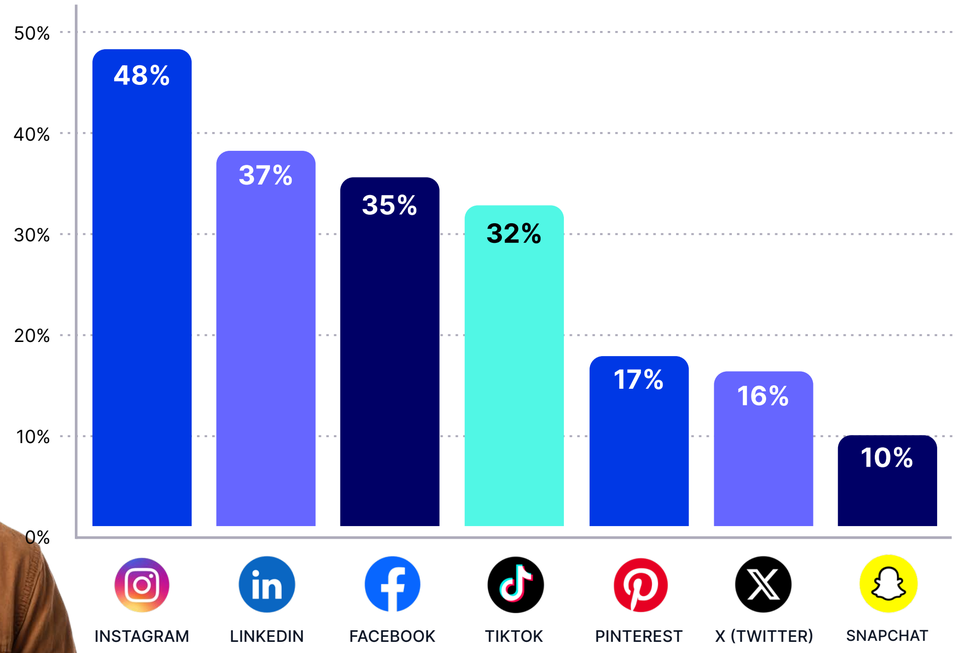
Platform priorities: Expanding presence through technology

Instagram leads the way (**48%**), followed by LinkedIn (**37%**), Facebook (**35%**), and TikTok (**32%**). The real story is diversification. As budgets and teams stretch across multiple platforms, technology becomes essential to maintain efficiency. Automation, AI scheduling, and cross-channel analytics help brands grow their organic reach and community presence without burnout.

Each platform now serves a distinct purpose: Instagram drives storytelling and community; LinkedIn delivers thought leadership and lead generation; TikTok fuels discovery and authenticity. Leading brands will be those that tailor creative to each platform's audience and strengths, prioritizing relevance and impact over sheer reach.



Social media platforms – top priorities in 2026



Emerging trend: One in five marketers say they plan to increase focus on Reddit, signaling early interest in community-led engagement.

Back to contents

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Content priorities: Maximizing efficiency and creativity

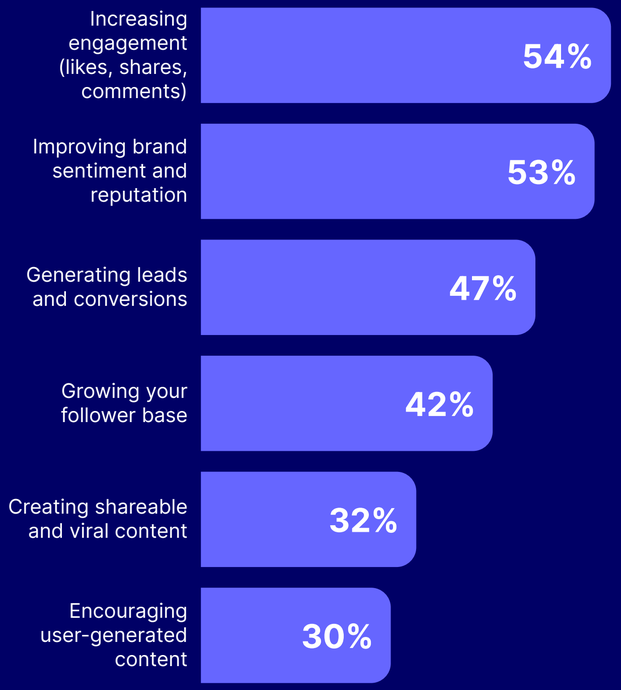
Video dominates social, with short-form clips (**73%**) leading the charge. When budgets are tight, creativity becomes the differentiator: tap into user-generated content (see UGC section), use AI tools to repurpose or build clips, or run employee contests to generate authentic participation.

Short-form formats perform best because they are fast, authentic, and algorithm-friendly, making them the most efficient path to engagement and conversion.

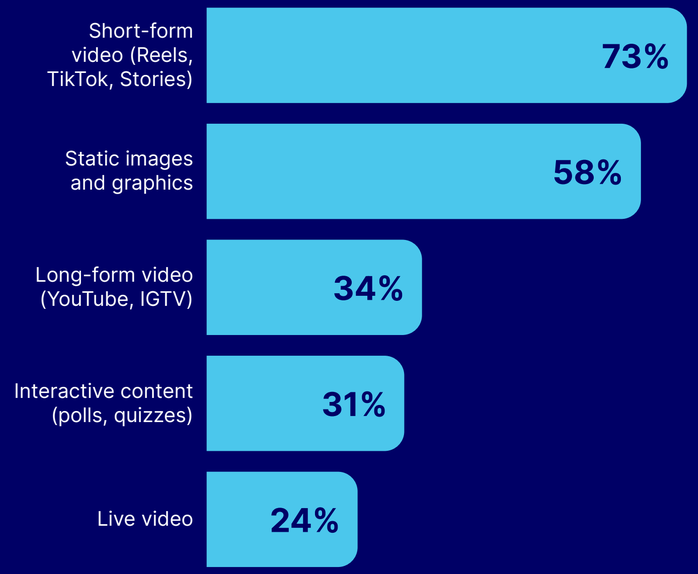
Actionable insight: Use a unified content platform to scale your presence across platforms. When resources are limited, combine a UGC management tool (to source authentic content), an AI Composer (to draft and repurpose copy), and a central asset library to stay consistent without overspending. Brands that balance broad reach with agile, insights-backed content execution will lead the next wave of social-driven growth.

Get a FREE assessment

Content goals prioritized for 2026



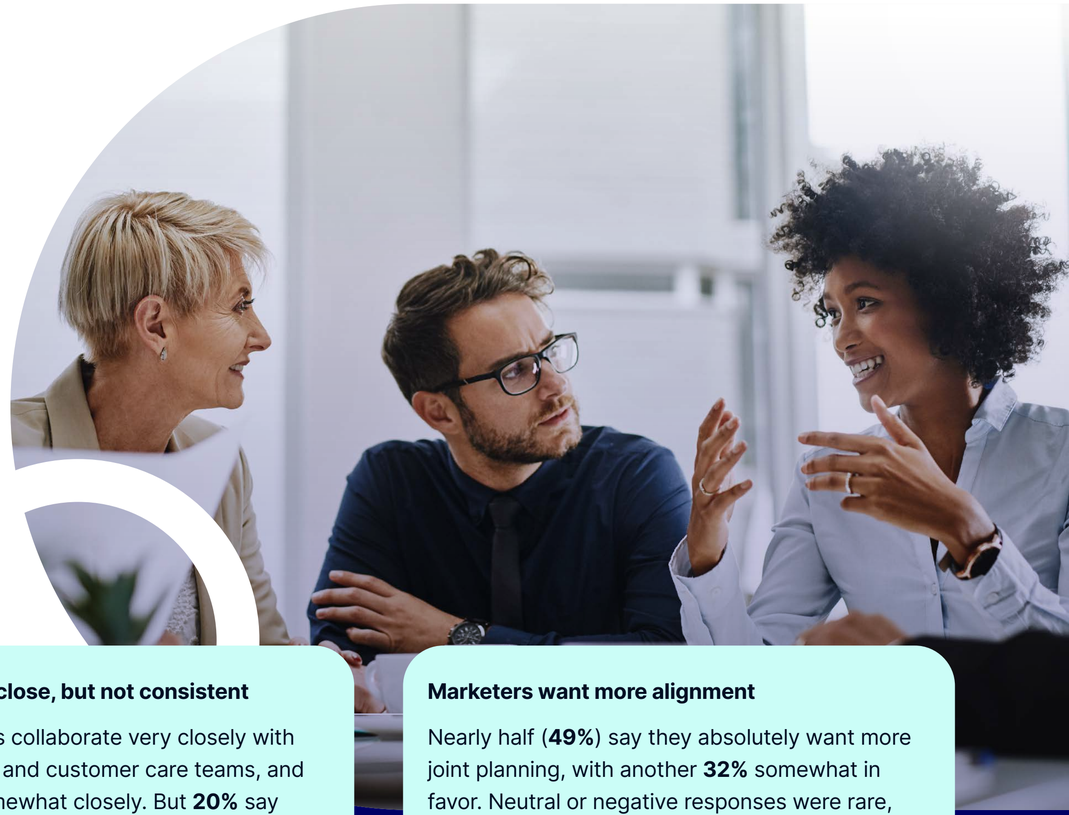
Most prioritized types of social media content



Back to contents

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT & COLLABORATION

Leadership support and cross-team collaboration are critical to scale



Leadership sets the tone by encouraging experimentation and providing resources, while collaboration between marketing, commerce, and care ensures that strategies are executed consistently across the customer journey. Without both, even the best ideas risk stalling.

Leadership backing is strong, but not universal

Most marketers feel supported: **42%** say leadership actively encourages adopting new technologies, and another **42%** feel somewhat supported. Still, **16%** describe leadership as neutral or resistant, showing hesitation is a barrier for some teams.

Support doesn't always come with resources

65% say leadership always or often provides adequate budgets and tools to test new marketing technologies. But nearly **30%** only "sometimes" receive that support, exposing a gap between encouragement and actual enablement.

Collaboration is close, but not consistent

37% of marketers collaborate very closely with social commerce and customer care teams, and another **36%** somewhat closely. But **20%** say collaboration happens only occasionally, leaving opportunities to unify strategies across the customer journey.

Marketers want more alignment

Nearly half (**49%**) say they absolutely want more joint planning, with another **32%** somewhat in favor. Neutral or negative responses were rare, underscoring strong demand for closer integration between marketing, commerce, and care.

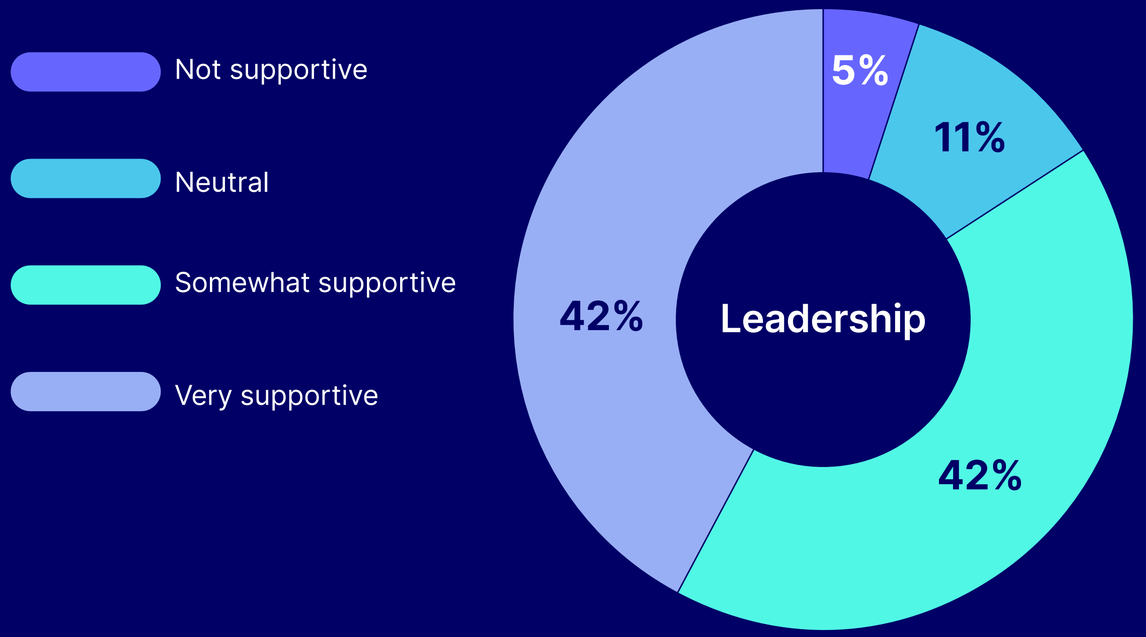
Unify marketing, commerce, and care under one platform.

Let's talk

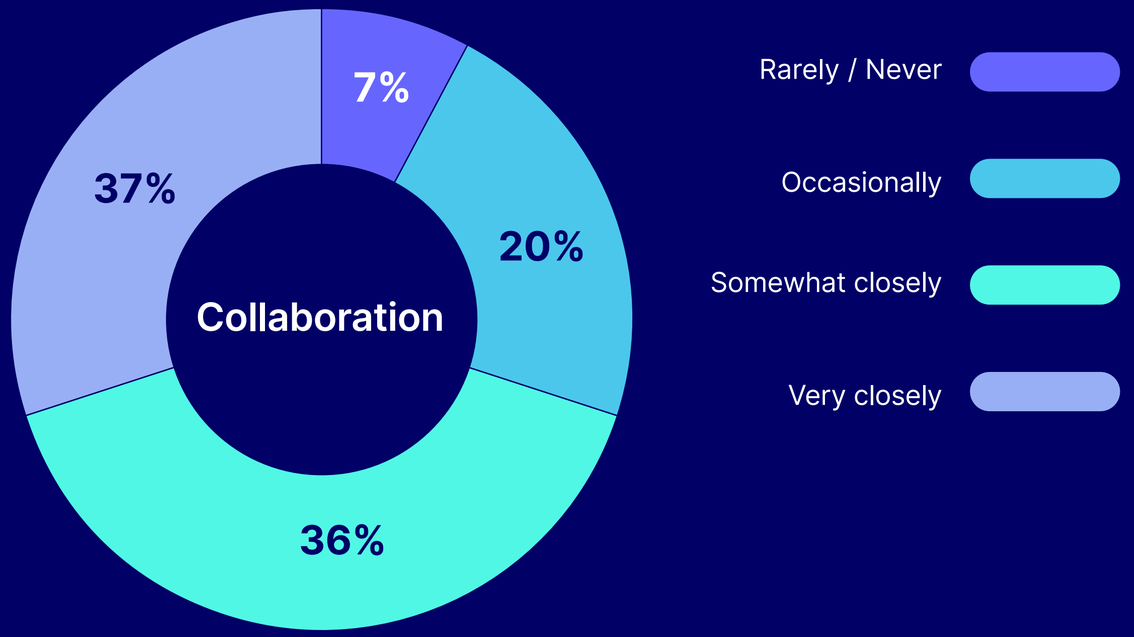
Back to contents

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT & COLLABORATION

Leadership support for innovation



Collaboration across teams



Actionable insight:

Leaders should back encouragement with consistent budgets and unified tools that provide a shared view of the customer, consolidated analytics, and connected workflows based on real insights. When your care agents see the same data as your social team, you stop just talking about collaboration and start embedding alignment that turns siloed experiments into scalable practices.

Back to contents

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT & COLLABORATION

Benefits when marketing, commerce, and care connect

Seamless customer experience
Customers get consistent messaging from first touch through purchase and support

Faster insights
Care feedback and commerce data feed into marketing strategies in real time

Higher ROI
Coordinated campaigns ensure investments in one area amplify results in another

Smarter resource use
Shared planning reduces duplication and makes lean teams more effective

Stronger innovation
Cross-pollination across teams accelerates testing and adoption of new tools



Back to contents

TEAM CAPACITY & BURNOUT

Team capacity and burnout: The hidden strain on social marketers

Capacity, not creativity, is the biggest constraint on today's social teams. With lean headcounts juggling wide responsibilities, even "manageable" workloads can tip quickly into burnout, a silent strain that threatens long-term sustainability.

Small but mighty teams

Most social media teams remain lean: more than half (**57%**) have fewer than six people, and **36%** are operating with fewer than four. These teams juggle multiple functions, from content creation (**62%**) and analytics (**61%**) to community management (**50%**) and paid advertising (**48%**). With such broad responsibilities concentrated in small groups, capacity constraints are inevitable.

Workload is often manageable - until it isn't

On the surface, most marketers describe their workload as manageable, with **38%** saying it's "very manageable" and another **41%** "somewhat manageable." But this masks underlying strain: one in four still find their workload neutral to unmanageable, showing cracks in sustainability.

Burnout is widespread

Mental fatigue is a reality for the majority. Over half (**52%**) say they feel burnout either sometimes or very often, with another **24%** experiencing it occasionally. Only **7%** say they never feel burnout.

See how Emplifi helps social teams scale without burnout. Talk to an expert

CUSTOMER SPOTLIGHT

vessi

With only two people managing TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, Vessi used **Emplifi's automation and listening tools to:**

Cut response times by **50%**

Fuel growth with **community content**

Read more

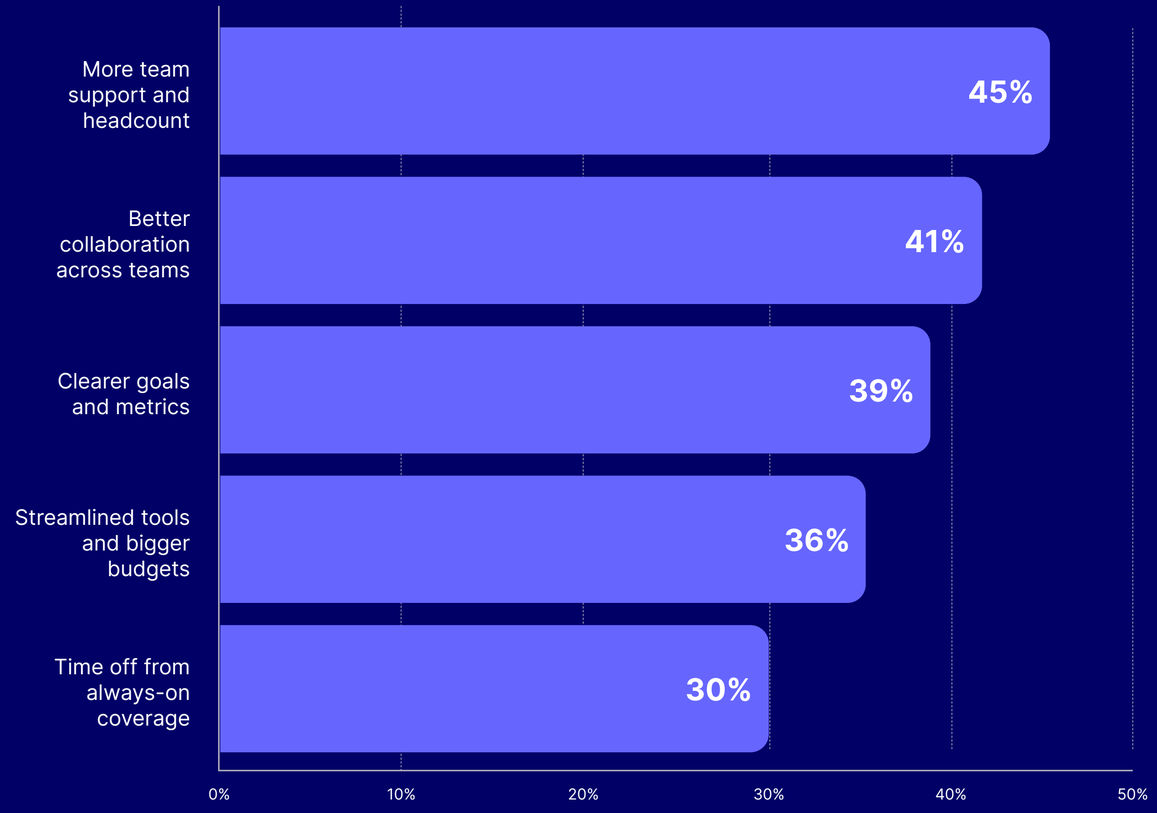
Actionable insight:

To reduce burnout and unlock creativity, leaders should treat social teams as strategic growth drivers, not just execution arms. By using AI-first tools like workflow automation, content summarization, and intelligent community management that automatically routes and tags messages, small teams can scale their impact with less effort.

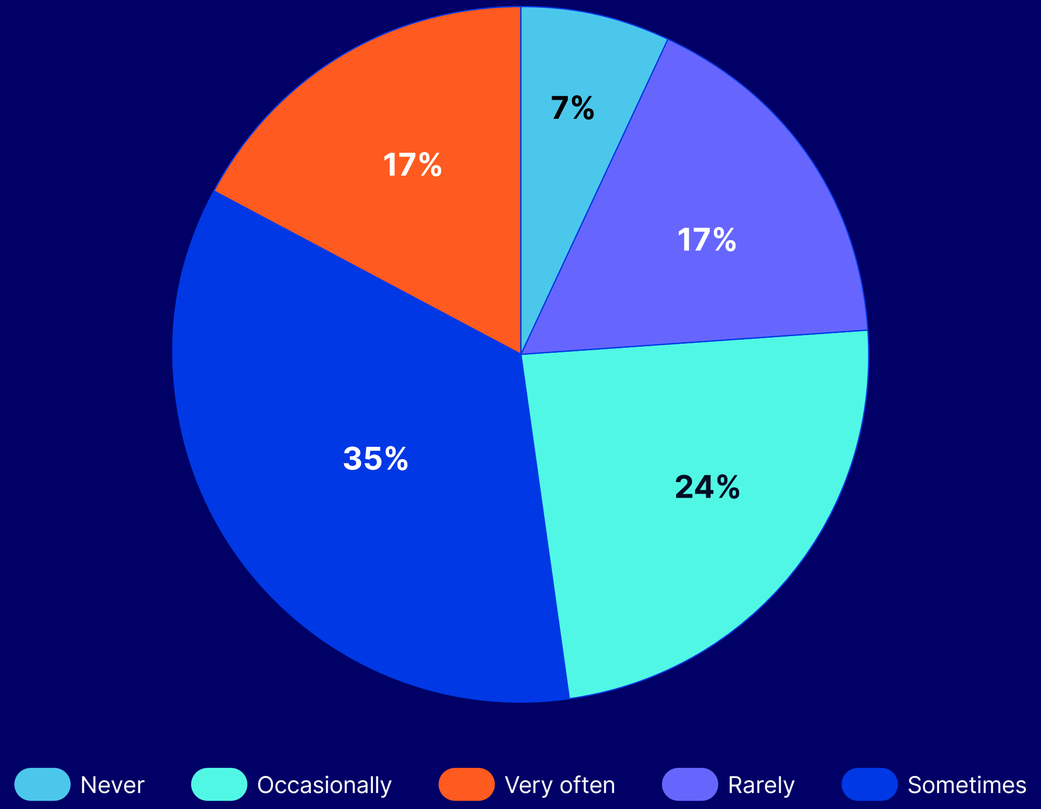
Back to contents

TEAM CAPACITY & BURNOUT

What marketers need to succeed



Frequency of burnout among marketers



Back to contents

FUTURE

Building the marketing playbook for 2026 and beyond

The next era of marketing won't be defined by who adopts the most tools, but by who uses them with purpose. AI, influencer partnerships, UGC, and social media are already essential. What's changing is how these forces converge to reshape the way brands earn trust and deliver growth.

Selecting the right tools for the future

> **Integration over fragmentation**
Choose platforms that unify publishing, analytics, influencer, and care functions to cut duplication.

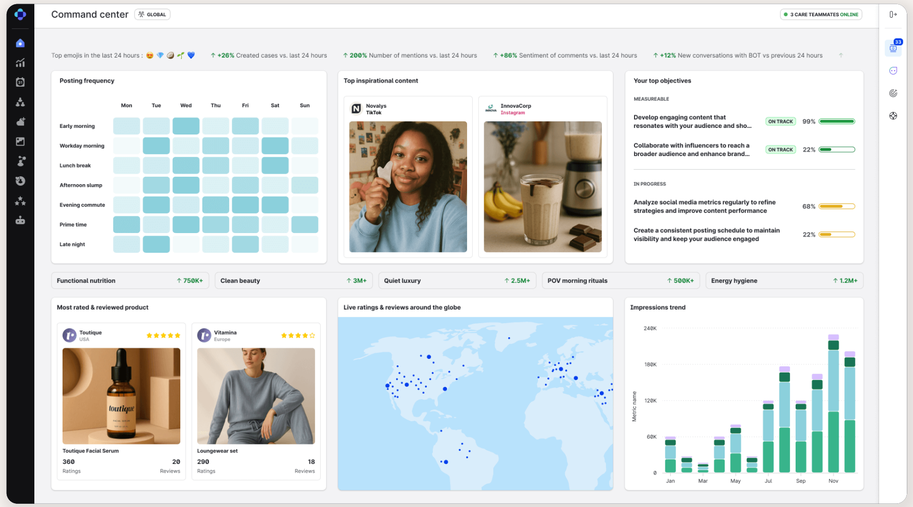
> **AI with guardrails**
Prioritize tools that embed transparency, governance, and brand-safe AI workflows.

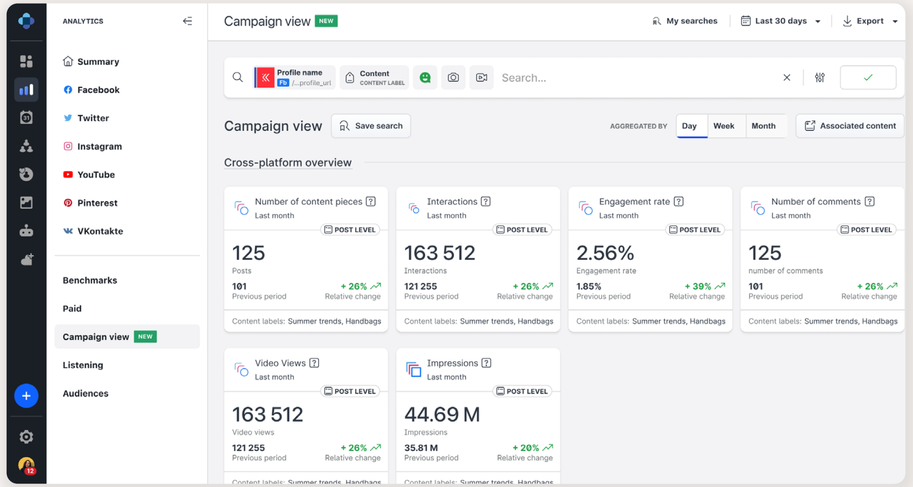
> **Collaboration-friendly**
Invest in solutions that connect marketing, commerce, and care teams with shared dashboards and workflows.

> **Scalable creativity**
Look for video-first capabilities, UGC management, and content approvals that support growth without burnout.

> **Performance clarity**
Demand built-in ROI measurement that links campaigns directly to sales, sentiment, and retention outcomes.

> **Future-proof design**
Select partners that are innovating in areas like personalization, social commerce, and cross-channel automation.





Back to contents

FUTURE

Marketers who thrive in 2026 will be those who:

- Harness AI for productivity without losing human creativity.
- Make social strategy video-first, personal, and performance-driven.
- Treat influencers (human or virtual) as long-term partners, not one-off campaigns.
- Ensure leadership and cross-team collaboration fuel, rather than slow, innovation.
- Scale UGC through structured, campaign-driven approaches that build trust.
- Address burnout by resourcing teams adequately and investing in smarter workflows.



Turn today's challenges into tomorrow's growth advantage. Let's talk