



The State of Social Media Marketing

Insights from nearly 400 U.S. marketers
on the future of social media strategy

photoshelter.com

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Introduction

The data is clear: Social media is where teams spend their time, their money, and their effort because that's where the results come from.

Ninety-five percent of marketers in our survey said social is important, and nearly two-thirds called it the primary way they deliver outcomes for their organization. Budgets, staff hours, and creative energy all reflect that reality.

But marketers are struggling to keep up. What worked last year, or even last month, may be totally different today. Teams are already stretched thin and platforms keep changing the rules.

We surveyed nearly 400 marketers across industries to understand how they're navigating this environment: The challenges they're facing, the strategies that are paying off, and the tools they believe will shape what comes next.

Here's what we uncovered.

The power of social media: The 2026 outlook

95%

marketers that say social media is important to their overall strategy

62%

marketers that say social media is their #1 results driver

1 in 3

organizations are posting on social media multiple times per day

95% of marketers say that social media is important to their overarching marketing strategy. While close to two-thirds said that social media is the primary way they drive results in marketing. Only 1% said social media wasn't important at all.

The numbers showcase the effort teams are putting in. Over 70% of orgs are posting daily, with one in three posting multiple times per day. Only 2% are posting monthly.

This commitment to social media is consistent across company size, revenue, and industry.

Marketers only grade themselves a “B” on social media

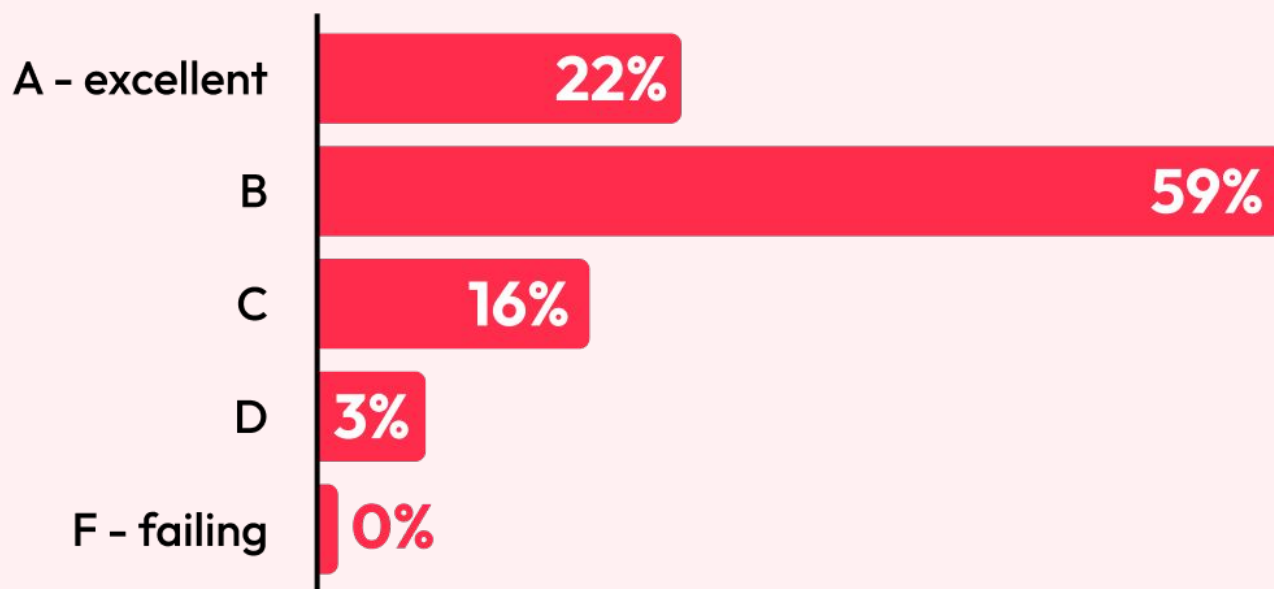
Over 60% of survey respondents find social media critical to driving results in marketing, yet most give their organization a “B” grade on their social media efforts.

The gap comes down to strategy, staffing, and execution. 28% say they need a stronger content strategy, and 19% cite staffing and bandwidth as their biggest hurdles.

Who is getting an A? And why?

Winners post/create authentic content consistently, have enough staff to support their efforts, and are driving engagement in their community.

IF YOU WERE GRADING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S SOCIAL MEDIA EFFORTS WHAT GRADE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR ORGANIZATION?

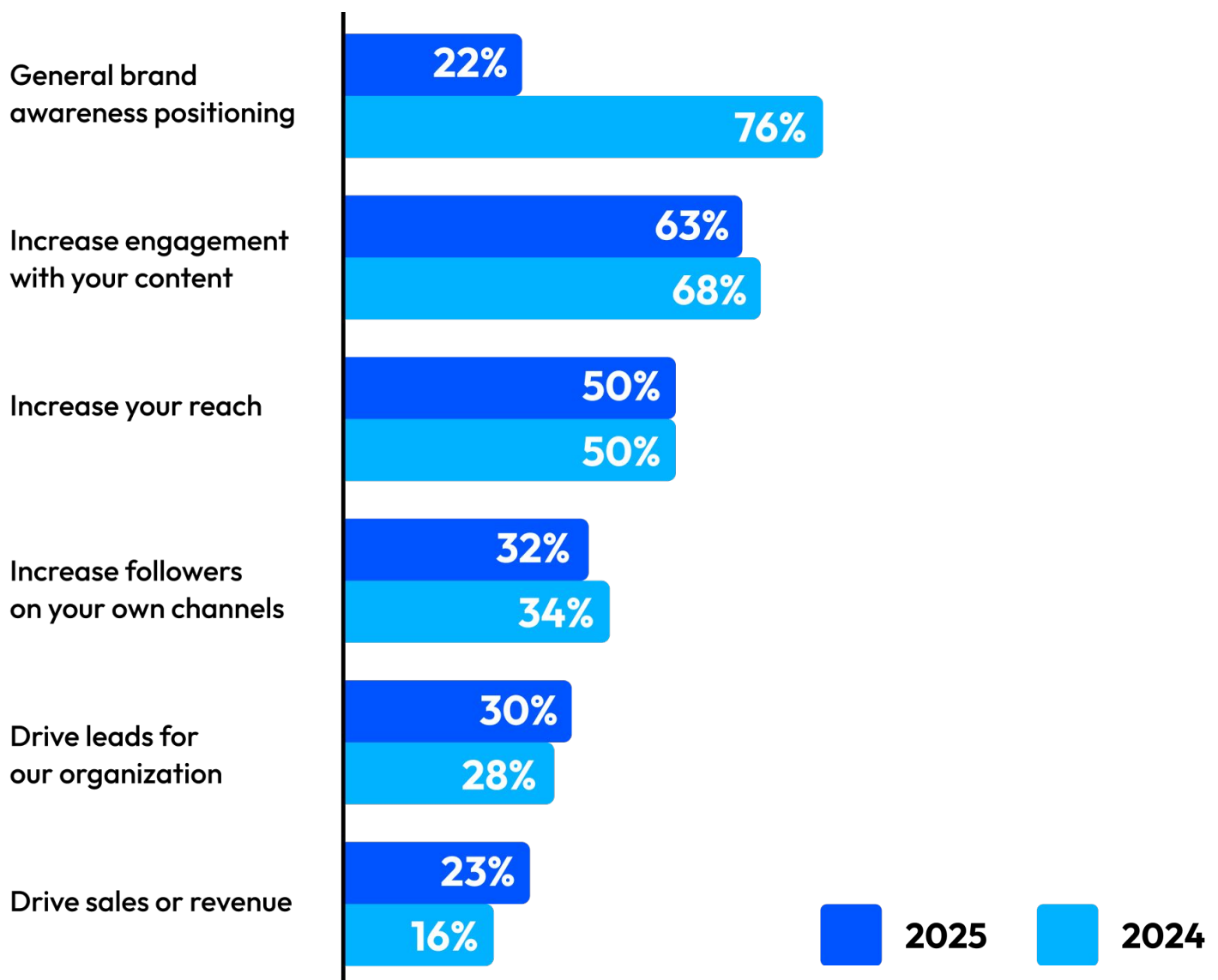


What results social media is expected to drive

Between 2024 and 2025, marketers pivoted. In 2024, social was still treated as a top-of-funnel tool, with brand awareness ranked the #1 goal by 76% of marketers. In 2025, that number plummeted to 22%,

replaced by expectations for engagement, reach, leads, and even sales. Engagement remains the top goal, but now it's tied directly to measurable outcomes.

WHAT ARE YOUR TOP 3 GOALS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA?



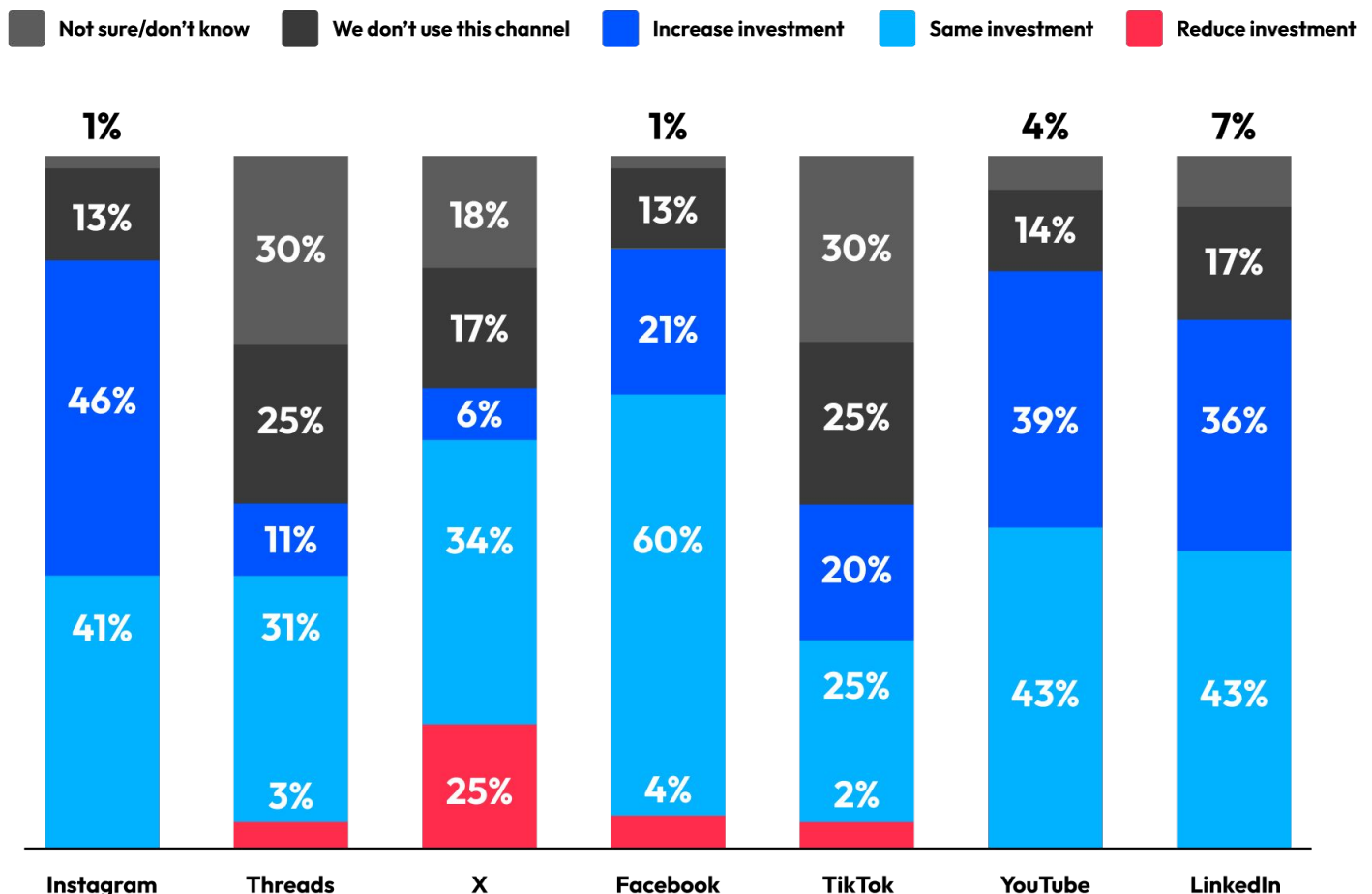
Where organizations plan to invest in social over the next 12-18 months

Budgets are following suit. In 2025, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn all sat near-universal adoption, but spending patterns were flat.

In 2026 and beyond marketers are planning to invest more money and resources into Instagram (46% increasing investment), YouTube (39%), and LinkedIn (36%).

At the same time, confidence in X (formerly Twitter) has eroded, nearly 1 in 5 say they are reducing spend, signaling a withdrawal from the platform. TikTok is maturing fast, with 20% increasing investment, while Threads and Snapchat remain niche experiments.

HOW DO YOU EXPECT YOUR ORGANIZATION TO INVEST IN SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS OVER THE NEXT 12-18 MONTHS?



Top challenges marketers are facing on social media

Even with social media at the center of their strategy, most marketers admit it's tough to keep up. Teams are stretched thin, content demands never stop, and the platforms themselves keep changing the rules.

Bandwidth

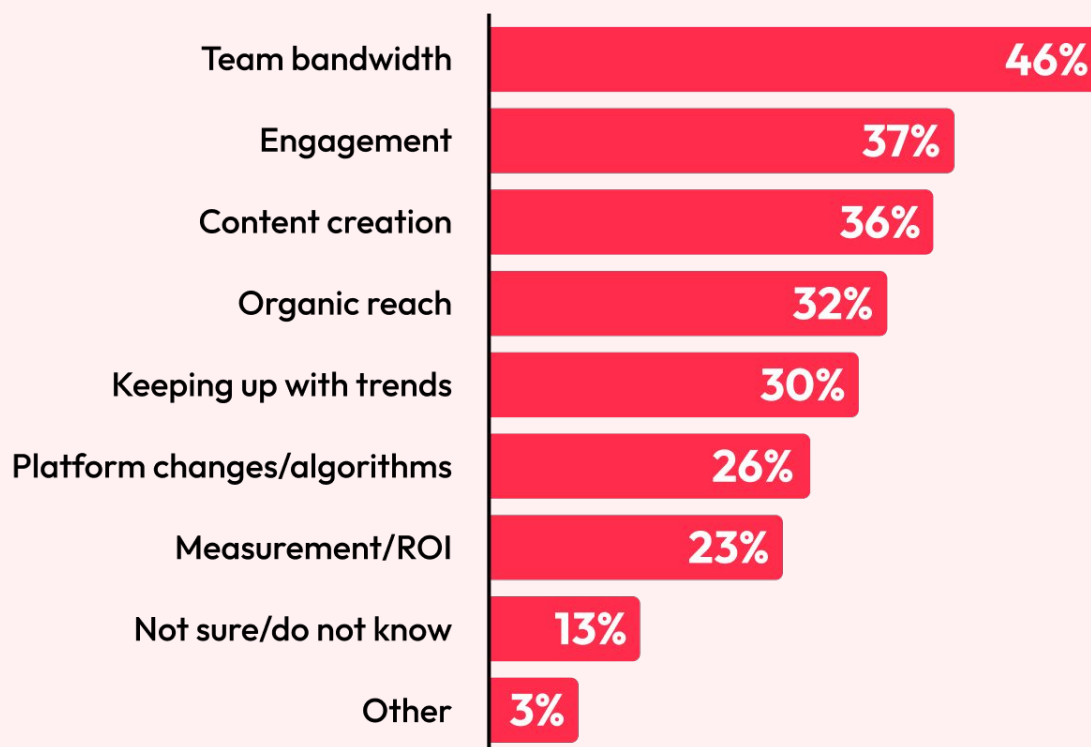
46% of marketers said bandwidth is one of their top challenges. Many teams are

too small to keep up with the demands of social. The work often falls to staff who already have full-time responsibilities, which means social media is squeezed in around other priorities.

Engagement

37% of respondents ranked engagement as a top challenge. As one marketer put it, "Right now it's tough to measure

WHAT ARE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S BIGGEST SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING CHALLENGES RIGHT NOW?



feedback, so just throwing darts at a board.” Without better ways to understand what resonates, teams waste time and energy on content that may or may not connect with their audience.

Campaign optimization

36% of marketers say their content isn’t engaging or varied enough. They want more personal, human stories, with a stronger mix of videos and photos. They also want content that connects more clearly to organizational goals. Without variety and personal stories, audiences scroll past instead of interacting.

Algorithm changes

26% of all respondents cited algorithm changes as a top challenge, but the issue is even sharper for heavy posters: 32% of organizations posting multiple times per day put algorithms in their top three. For teams already struggling with bandwidth and content needs, every shift makes results less predictable and undermines reach.

“

As much as we post, we would like to scale our reach, but with the pain-point of team capacity being low, it has affected our ability to meet that goal consistently.”

- Survey respondent

“

I believe we could do better about sourcing user-generated content and influencer outreach.”

- Survey respondent

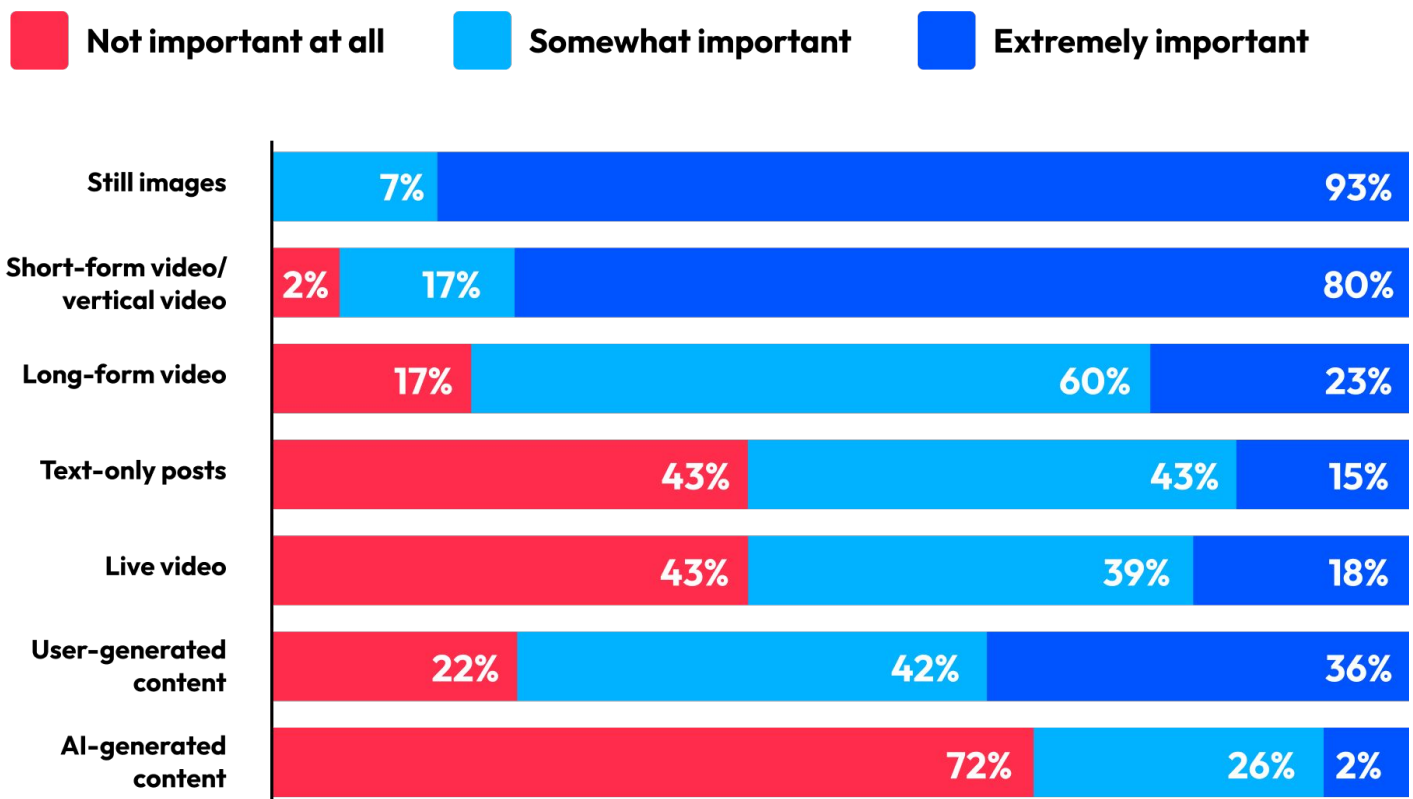
What's working for marketers on social media

Even with the challenges, the survey shows clear patterns in what's driving results. Marketers pointed to a handful of practices that set top performers apart: authentic content, community engagement, and consistency. The data reinforces what audiences already tell us every day: People respond to content that feels human, is delivered reliably, and creates room for real interaction.

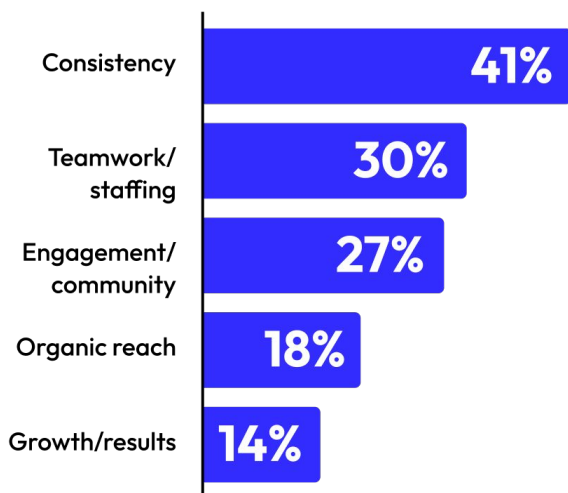
Authentic content

Marketers agree the posts that work are the ones that feel like they're from a real person. 78% of respondents rated user-generated content as important. Human stories, quick videos, and photos resonate, building credibility and driving stronger engagement.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF CONTENT TO YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY?



SECRETS TO SUCCESS (KEY THEMES)



Community engagement

Strong teams focus on building real connections with their audience. In the survey, 27% of respondents credited engagement and community as a key factor in their success. They focus on content that encourages interaction, which results in steady growth in both engagement and followers.

Consistency

41% of marketers highlighted consistency as a driver of their success. Top performers keep content varied, authentic, and audience-focused. They produce high-quality posts and avoid the generic filler that clutters feeds. This approach results in a steady, reliable flow of content that builds trust and keeps audiences engaged.

“We are utilizing many different content creation forms and reaching our desired audience.”

- Survey respondent

“We’ve seen consistent growth in reach and followers through influencer partnerships.”

- Survey respondent

How are marketers keeping up on social media? AI

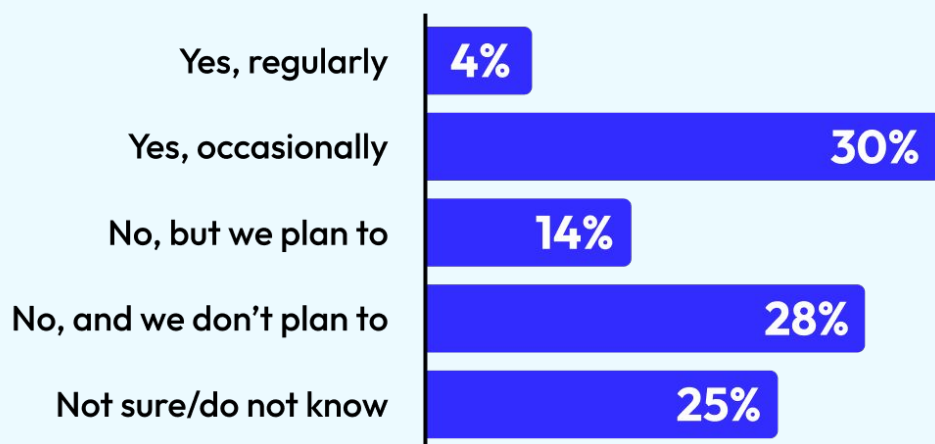
Top teams are using AI to keep up with content demand. In the survey, 45% of marketers said they use AI for social media, and that number climbs to 53% among those posting multiple times a day. The heavier the posting load, the more likely teams are to rely on AI.

[PhotoShelter's AI: The Next Frontier for Brands](#) study reinforces these results. 39% of marketing and creative professionals use generative AI for both written and visual content, and 82% believe AI will redefine branding and marketing. Teams also reported significant time savings: about 24 hours/month on content generation, alone.

The cost of not using AI is visible in the same study. Among non-users, 32% reported increased expenses, 32% reported bandwidth constraints, and 29% reported campaign-performance issues; respondents in social media roles specifically were 16% more likely to report higher expenses and 28% more likely to report performance problems.

Marketers are also clear about the guardrails. Many flagged ethics, transparency, and bias as areas to watch as adoption grows, which is useful context for teams that want to produce faster without sacrificing trust or voice.

DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION USE AI TO SUPPORT ITS SOCIAL MEDIA EFFORTS?





The Buffalo Bills

Highlights:

\$120k+

saved by automating workflows with AI

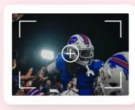
4x

increase in social media reach with PhotoShelter

840k+

assets stored, organized and distributed through PhotoShelter

Life with AI and Content Distribution



1

Image Created
Photos taken during the game are live-transmitted to a remote editor



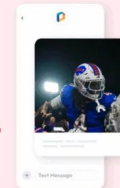
2

Image edited
Editors download photos, crop & edit, then upload to PhotoShelter



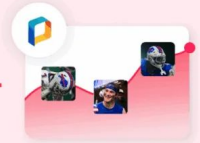
3

PlayerID
AI automatically tags player names & numbers with facial & jersey recognition



4

Content distribution
PhotoShelter pulls images from galleries & sends directly to players for social media



5

Automated tracking
Once delivered, the Bills can see what content players are posting, & what's performing the best.

How the Buffalo Bills are leveraging AI to get ahead on social media

The [Buffalo Bills](#) capture more than 1,200 edited photos every game, but getting them tagged, organized, and into players' hands was once a race against the clock. With PhotoShelter's AI-powered [PlayerID](#), the team now skips hours of manual work. Photos are automatically tagged by player name using facial recognition and jersey numbers, making it seamless to identify and send the right shots.

That automation connects directly to PhotoShelter's content distribution platform, where images flow to players and team accounts in near real time. Instead of waiting days for photos, players can now share content instantly with their millions of combined followers, expanding the Bills' reach by more than 4X on social media.

"That level of content distribution has really changed our lives," said Ben Green, Manager of Photography. "We're getting them the content before they even think to ask."

User-generated content

Marketers are turning to user-generated content (UGC) as one of the most credible ways to stand out on social. In our Social Media Study, 41% of organizations said they are investing in UGC programs.

Why is UGC content so important? The numbers speak for themselves.

[PhotoShelter's UGC Guide](#) shows that organic UGC is 8x more effective than influencer content.

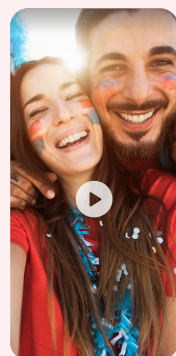
Additionally, people trust content from other peers, more than they do from brands. Reviews (78%), Q&As (77%), and photos (69%) impact purchasing decisions the most. Compared to branded content, UGC performs better across every key metric: it's more authentic, drives more engagement, and delivers higher ROI.

But most teams are still collecting it manually. 64% said they track it down themselves on social or by email, with only a small share using a platform to streamline the process.

1

Capture

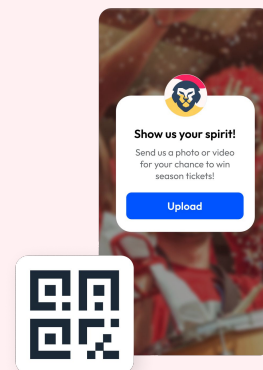
Let your audience capture authentic photos and videos



2

Upload

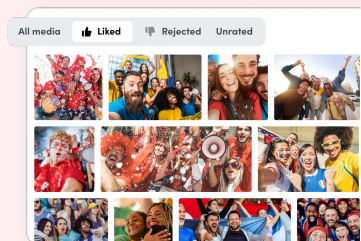
Audience can upload content via mobile or desktop



3

Collect

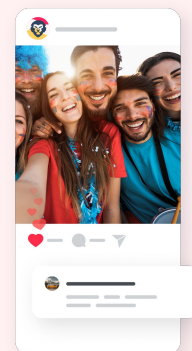
Collect and organize assets in your library



4

Distribute

Post content on social media or use in campaigns





Hartford HealthCare

Highlights:

37k+

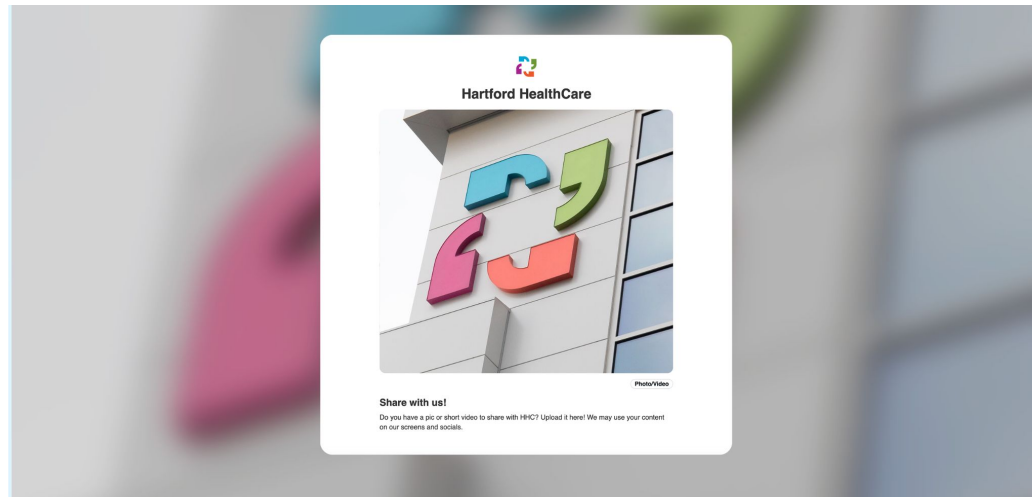
employees with access to PhotoShelter

~160k+

assets housed in PhotoShelter

106k+

followers across social media platforms



How Hartford HealthCare uses UGC collection to tell real patient stories

[Hartford HealthCare](#) invited patients and visitors to [share photos and short videos](#) through a branded upload link powered by PhotoShelter. The experience was simple and direct, allowing people to contribute content without needing a login or social media. Submissions could be featured on screens and official HHC channels, making everyday patient moments part of the story they tell.

This approach reflects what [healthcare research](#) shows: authentic patient stories are one of the most powerful tools for connection. Studies have found that narrative content improves patient well-being and quality of care, while authentic images convert 35% higher than stock photos in A/B testing.

By opening the door for patients to contribute their own content, HHC not only created more inclusive storytelling, but also tapped into the formats audiences trust most.

Content distribution

Marketers know their content goes further when it's shared by more than just their brand account. In our Social Media Study, 1 in 2 organizations said they distribute content to key stakeholders so it can be posted on personal or partner channels. That includes employees and fans (33%), sponsors and partners (25%), and athletes or influencers (15%).

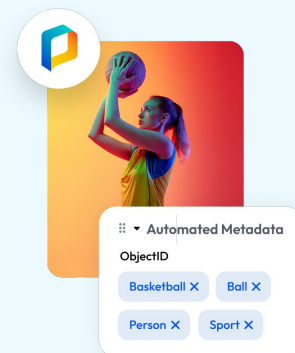
According to [PhotoShelter's Social Content Amplification Buyer's Guide](#), brands that activate their ecosystem, employees, athletes, sponsors, and partners, can see as much as a 10x increase in reach.

The same guide found that content shared this way isn't just about awareness. It drives revenue (through ticket and merchandise sales), increases sponsor value, and improves ROI on content that would otherwise stay limited to brand-owned channels.

1

Upload & tag

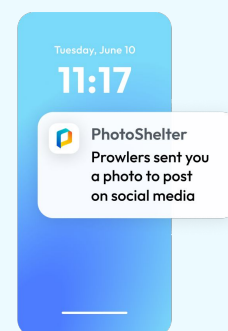
Content uploaded and tagged in PhotoShelter



2

Distribute

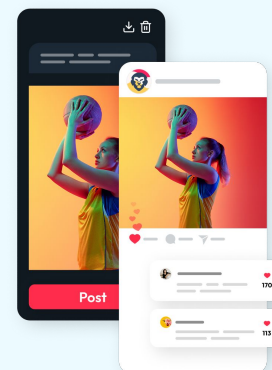
Content distributed to key influencers via PhotoShelter's social content distribution tool



3

Post

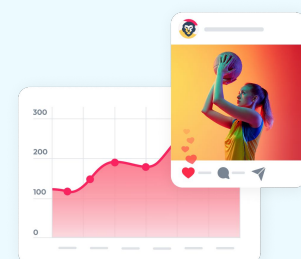
Content posted by key influencers like athletes, employees/staff, media/partners etc.



4

Analyze

Track engagement across channels and determine content ROI





University of Virginia Athletics

Highlights:

121k

assets housed in
PhotoShelter

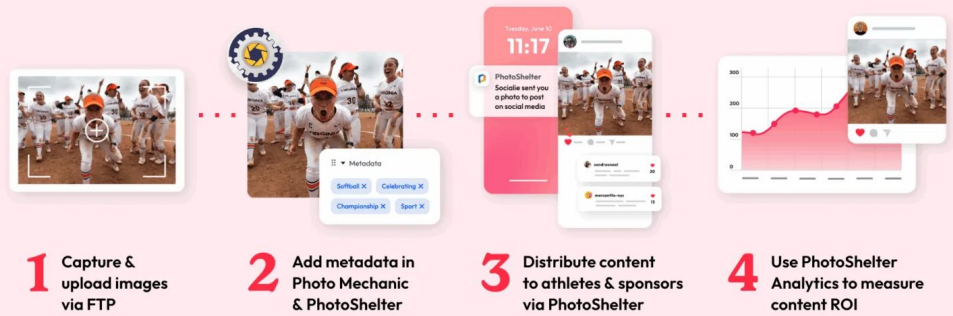
900+

users & publishers with
access to PhotoShelter

752%

increase in reach on
social media

UVA Athletics' Workflow



How UVA increased their reach 752% with effective content distribution

With PhotoShelter, [UVA Athletics](#) can move photos from camera to social media faster than ever. During events, images are live-transferred through PhotoShelter's [content distribution platform](#), giving athletes and team accounts immediate access. Instead of waiting for files to be manually shared, they can post photos within minutes while the action is still unfolding.

By making it easier for athletes and teams to share authentic content in real time, UVA has seen a 752% increase in follower reach on social media. "When I'm live-transferring at an event, it'll get sent to their sports accounts directly in PhotoShelter's platform, and they can post a photo really quickly right from there," said Jamie Holt, Director of Athletics Photography.

The team can also track what happens next, seeing when a photo is downloaded, posted, and how it performs. Holt explained, "It's very hard to quantify our job sometimes... but I can actually start to quantify that a little bit more now, thanks to PhotoShelter."

Why PhotoShelter

PhotoShelter brings the core pieces of your social media workflow into one place, making it easier to manage content from creation to distribution and analytics.

AI is built in to save time on repetitive tasks. Assets are uploaded, automatically tagged, and instantly searchable, cutting hours from the process of finding and reusing content.

With [user-generated content \(UGC\)](#) built into the platform, you don't have to rely on manual collection or chasing content across email and social.

PhotoShelter makes it simple to gather, organize, and ensure the right permissions for community photos, videos, and stories.

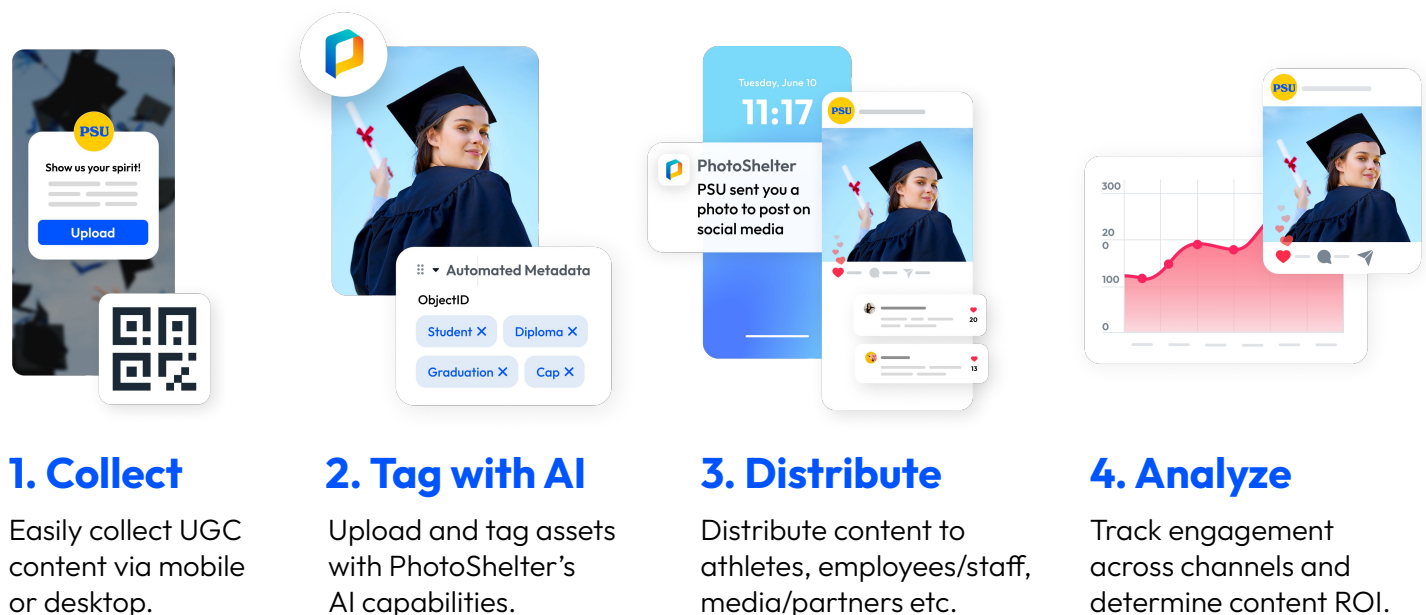
That means marketers can bring authentic voices to their feeds at scale, while staying compliant and protecting their brand.

[Content distribution](#) allows you to extend the reach of your existing and UGC content beyond your branded channels.

PhotoShelter helps teams put approved content directly into the hands of employees, athletes, sponsors, and partners so they can post it themselves.

The combination of fast organization, authentic content, and simple distribution gives social teams the speed and scale they need while remaining in control of their content and brand.

YOUR WORKFLOW WITH PHOTOSHELTER



Methodology

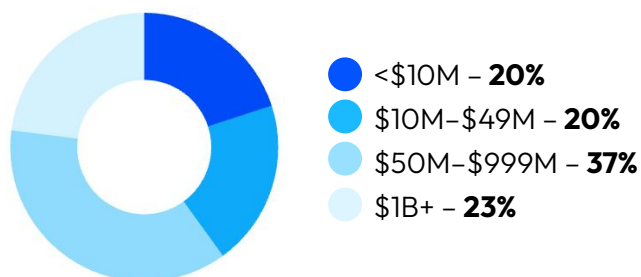
Results based on PhotoShelter's social media survey completed by 397 marketers in the summer of 2025.

Respondents

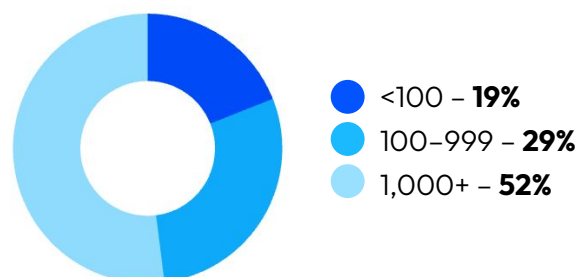
- 397 respondents completed the survey
- Reside globally but vast majority in North America and EMEA
- Work full-time in marketing or serving marketing purposes within an organization (e.g. creative, communications, marketing, digital, content, social, IT, etc.)

Business size

Survey respondents represented marketing and creative professionals at companies of varying sizes and across a wide range of industries.



Company annual revenue



Company size
(by number of employees)

About PhotoShelter

Founded in 2005, PhotoShelter is a leading DAM platform for marketers and creatives. Our AI-driven solution simplifies content collection, organization, and distribution. Trusted by global brands like the NFL, MLB, Purdue University, Fresh Direct, Sports Illustrated, and Delta Air Lines, we securely manage over 5 billion assets and support nearly 100 million annual downloads.

We talk to marketing professionals every day about the hurdles they face on social media and advise on solutions that align with their content strategy and company goals.

Contact **brands@photoshelter.com** to get started.

Follow us on [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [X \(Twitter\)](#) for the latest social media, AI, and digital marketing trends.

TRUSTED BY THOUSANDS OF THE FASTEST-GROWING BRANDS

