

THE INTELLIGENCE GAP



 Explore sentiment spikes

 What themes are trending?

*Why Organizations Are Falling Behind
in the Age of Real-Time Insight*

THE SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE IMPERATIVE

To my social media innovators,

We're drowning in data. It's everywhere; in dashboards, in decks no one reads, in meetings that should have been an email.

What's missing is the signal, the piece that tells you what to do next. You're sitting on it, and those decisions are what tie your team's work to business outcomes, reputation, revenue and retention.

Too often, that signal stays trapped in a marketing silo, treated like a scorecard for yesterday's posts when it should be shaping what the business does next. Today, only 10% of organizations say social intelligence is embedded into enterprise strategy.

That gap is the opportunity.

Many leaders rely on Business Intelligence (BI) to understand performance. BI tells you where the business has been. Social intelligence shows you where it's going and acts as a forward-looking radar, capturing real-time human behavior before it ever shows up in a sales report or revenue dashboard.

Take e.l.f. Cosmetics. When customers on TikTok started hacking empty concealer bottles to mix custom shades, the brand didn't just respond. They adapted. By offering free empty bottles with a \$15 purchase, they turned a social signal into a business decision that increased average order value while delivering something customers already wanted.

That is social intelligence in action.

This report is about how to operationalize that advantage. It is about closing the gap between hearing the market and acting on it, and turning signals into action across the business, with AI helping you cut through the noise.

The signal is there. **Act on it.**



“

Brittany Hennessy

*VP of Social Intelligence
Evangelism, Sprout Social*

Key learnings from this report

STRATEGIC CONSENSUS

There is near-universal agreement that social intelligence is a business imperative, with 93% of professionals viewing it as important for future growth. By 2029, 71% of directors predict social data will become more influential than traditional market research in shaping core enterprise strategy.

SILOED DATA

Strategic insights are currently hitting a ceiling within marketing departments, as just 36% of respondents say their social data regularly informs decisions in other business functions. This siloed approach means high-value intelligence reaches R&D teams less than 20% of the time, often due to a lingering perception of social as a communications tool rather than a research engine.

THE SPEED TRAP

While social data offers an inherent acceleration advantage over traditional methods, the majority of organizations remain caught in a speed trap where they take one to two weeks to act on a signal. Currently, only 10% of businesses possess the operational agility to translate real-time social insights into business actions within hours.

THE PATH TO SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

To bridge the intelligence gap, organizations are prioritizing AI investment to automate tactical execution and free up practitioners for strategic analysis. The path to maturity requires dedicating resources to social intelligence and integrating social signals directly into existing Business Intelligence and CRM systems, shifting the focus from vanity metrics to boardroom revenue-indicators.

Social intelligence is your competitive advantage

Social intelligence may be a relatively new term, but the shift it represents is a fundamental one.

For years, organizations have invested in social listening to monitor conversations. But listening alone is not enough. The advantage lies in the ability to translate real-time signals into business action.

Social intelligence is emerging as that strategic infrastructure for modern enterprises. It's a system for continuously capturing, interpreting and operationalizing the world's largest real-time focus group.

The most mature organizations have already made this shift. They have embedded social intelligence into their internal systems, creating a feedback loop that informs everything from product development and innovation to customer experience and corporate strategy.

While slower-moving competitors rely on periodic research and retrospective reporting, intelligence-first organizations are able to adapt in real time, identifying shifts earlier, responding faster and acting with greater confidence.





The risk is clear

Organizations that fail to operationalize social intelligence are not only underutilizing a data source, they are operating with a delayed understanding of their market. And in an environment where consumer preferences and competitive dynamics shift daily, that delay is a direct threat to growth.

To understand how organizations are navigating this shift, we surveyed 705 social and marketing professionals that work with social data across the US, UK and Australia. This report explores the current state of social intelligence, the value it is delivering and, critically, the gaps preventing organizations from realizing its full potential.

When we reference social intelligence maturity in this report, unless otherwise stated we are referring to teams that have invested in social intelligence teams already, and have headcount of six or more that focus directly on social intelligence insights.

Proven value, untapped potential

Even in its relative infancy, investing in social intelligence is already delivering significant business impact. An overwhelming 98% of professionals agree that it has driven them to achieve cross-functional business outcomes.

This is a near-universal acknowledgment that we have moved beyond social intelligence in an experimental capability, and toward the understanding of it as a proven advantage.

The most commonly reported outcomes highlight social intelligence's ability to drive impact well beyond marketing. Customer retention is the most cited benefit (45%) and a clear indicator of ROI at a business level.

At first glance, this can be attributed to more proactive customer care. With access to real-time social data, teams are able to identify and respond to issues faster, often before they escalate. But the real impact of social intelligence on retention goes much deeper.

Social intelligence provides continuous context. It captures not just what customers are saying about a brand, but how they're feeling, what they expect, what they're comparing experiences against and how those expectations are shifting in real time. In doing so, it gives organizations access to a layer of understanding that traditional feedback channels often miss.

Due to the cross-functional use of social intelligence, my organization:

- 1 Improved customer retention through proactive engagement (45%)
- 2 Identified a new target audience or emerging market segment (40%)
- 3 Adjusted messaging or campaign strategy in real time (39%)
- 4 Strengthened executive decision-making or long-term strategy (37%)

SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

Burger King ad centers customer feedback

It takes a confident brand to admit when it has fallen short, and an even more strategic one to turn that moment into a catalyst for change. That's what Burger King did in their "There's a New King and It's You" ad spot that premiered during the Oscars this year. It turned social intelligence into a visible business pivot.

The fast-food restaurant ad campaign-turned-mea culpa openly acknowledges gaps between its brand promise and the customer experience, using real social content as proof. The creative execution, including the symbolic "crowning" of customers as the new king, reinforced a deeper commitment that customer perspective would not just be heard, but acted upon.

This is where social intelligence becomes transformative. The campaign reflects a commitment to ongoing, targeted improvements driven directly by infusing the unique insights uncovered on social as a continuous input into the business.

That level of accountability and understanding builds trust. And over time, this translates into stronger retention and sustained growth.



this is one of the better commercials i've seen in awhile. felt genuine.



The old days are coming back baby!!!!!!!!

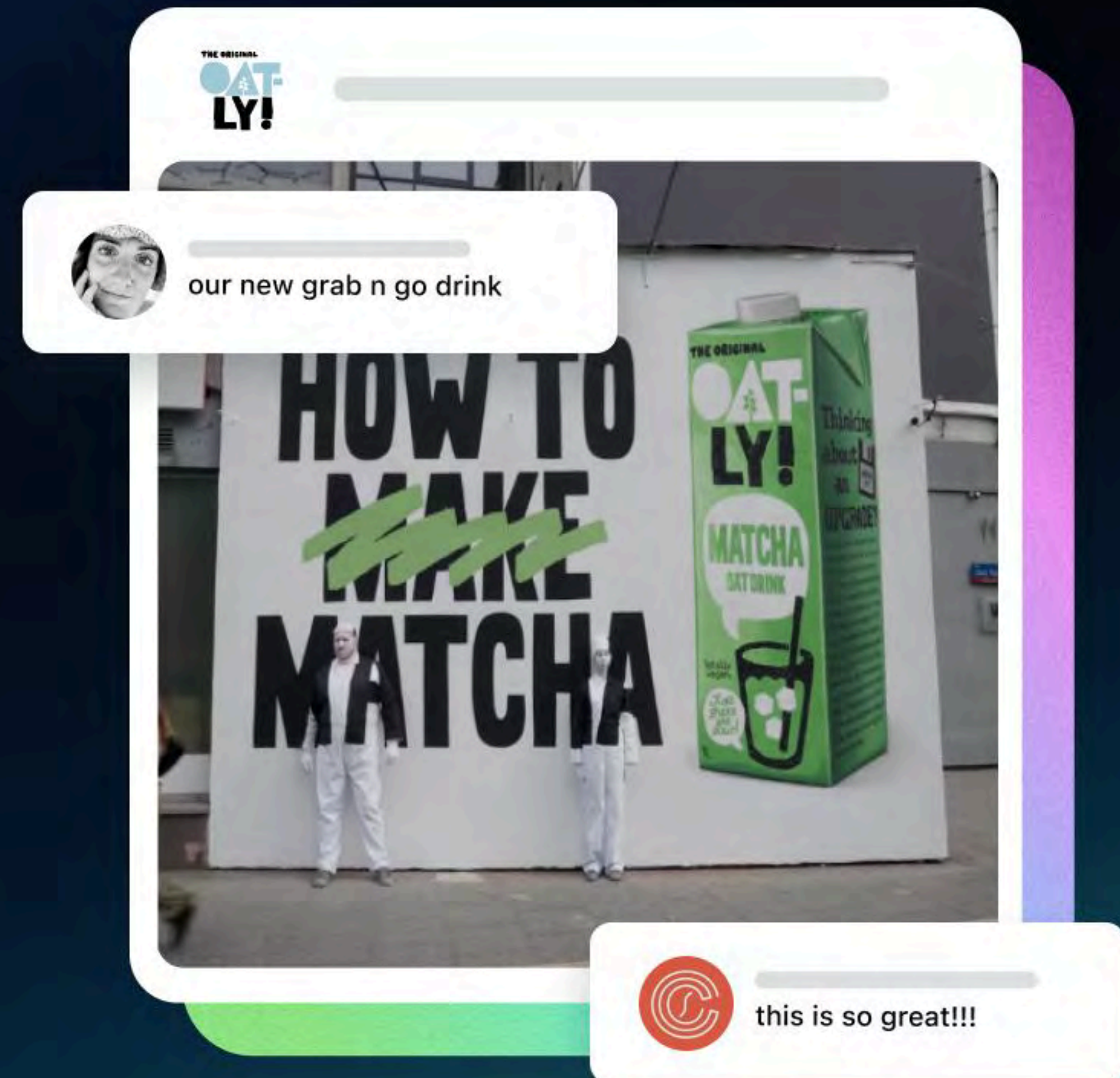
SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

Oatly builds community and new products

Social intelligence done well is more than just the insights gathered from social listening, it's the deployment of those insights into new products and services.

Oatly is a perfect example of that, with the launch of their new Matcha Latte offering. They realized there was a demand for the product through listening to their audience giving unfiltered feedback across the likes of Reddit, X and Instagram, as well as seeing TikTok influencers talk about using Oatly for making matchas.

This feedback was shared internally with the Innovation and R&D teams. With the input from the market research team and others, this facilitated the launch of the new flavor. Here social intelligence was used to help push a product from concept to reality, using social data as one of the proof points.



When social intelligence insight is embedded across the organization, it fundamentally changes how customer relationships are managed. Customer care teams are no longer operating in isolation, reacting to individual tickets or complaints. Instead, they are equipped with a broader, real-time view of customer sentiment and behavior.

And as organizations continue to embed social intelligence more deeply into their operations, that advantage is only set to grow.

“

It's shifted from being a 'cool thing to have' that provided extra context to becoming a more consistent input into **business decision making**."

— *Paul McEnaney-Rodriguez, Director, Communications Insights & Intelligence, UnitedHealth Group*

“

Social intelligence gives us access to consumers' unfiltered thoughts so we can be more informed, empathetic and relevant as brands.

— *Paige Walker, Manager, Cultural Intelligence and Trends, The Hershey Company*

The high stakes of the intelligence gap

While the upside of social intelligence is clear, so is the cost of inaction.

Eighty-six percent of respondents acknowledge their organization may have missed opportunities over the past two years due to delayed, siloed or underutilized consumer insights.

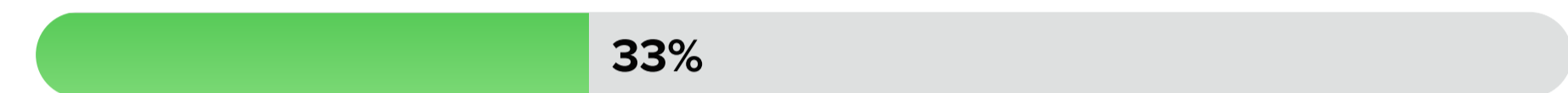
Speed is a clear theme, as reacting too slowly to a market shift was the most common response when it came to potential missed opportunities (33%). Missing early signals of changing customer preferences featured in 31% of answers, and delayed customer care was mentioned by 26% of respondents.

Individual contributors, the practitioners working directly with social insights, are more likely to see the full scope of missed opportunities. Only 12% say their organization has not missed any significant business opportunities, compared to 18% of directors. This underscores a growing disconnect between those generating insights and those making decisions.

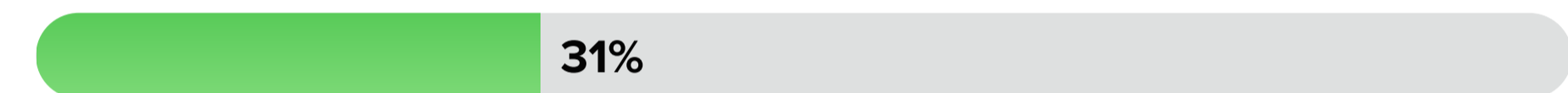
Closing this gap requires tools and processes. But organizations also need to shift how they perceive and operationalize social data. Access to data and insights is increasing for everyone, and the biggest risk is not being able to act on it.

In the past 12-24 months, my organization missed these opportunities because of delayed, siloed or underutilized consumer insights:

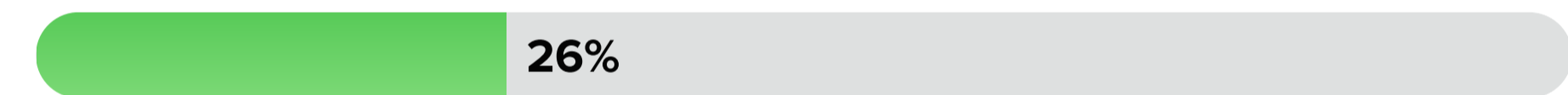
Reacting too slowly to a cultural or market shift



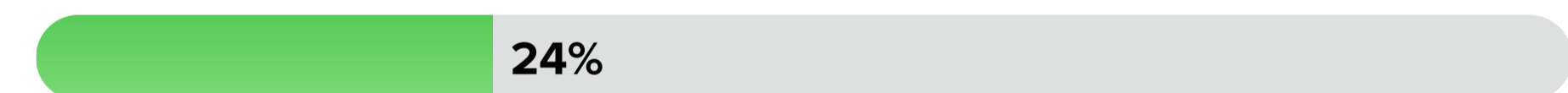
Missing early signals of changing customer preferences



Escalated customer issues that could have been mitigated earlier



Delayed product or messaging adjustments



Losing market share to a more agile competitor



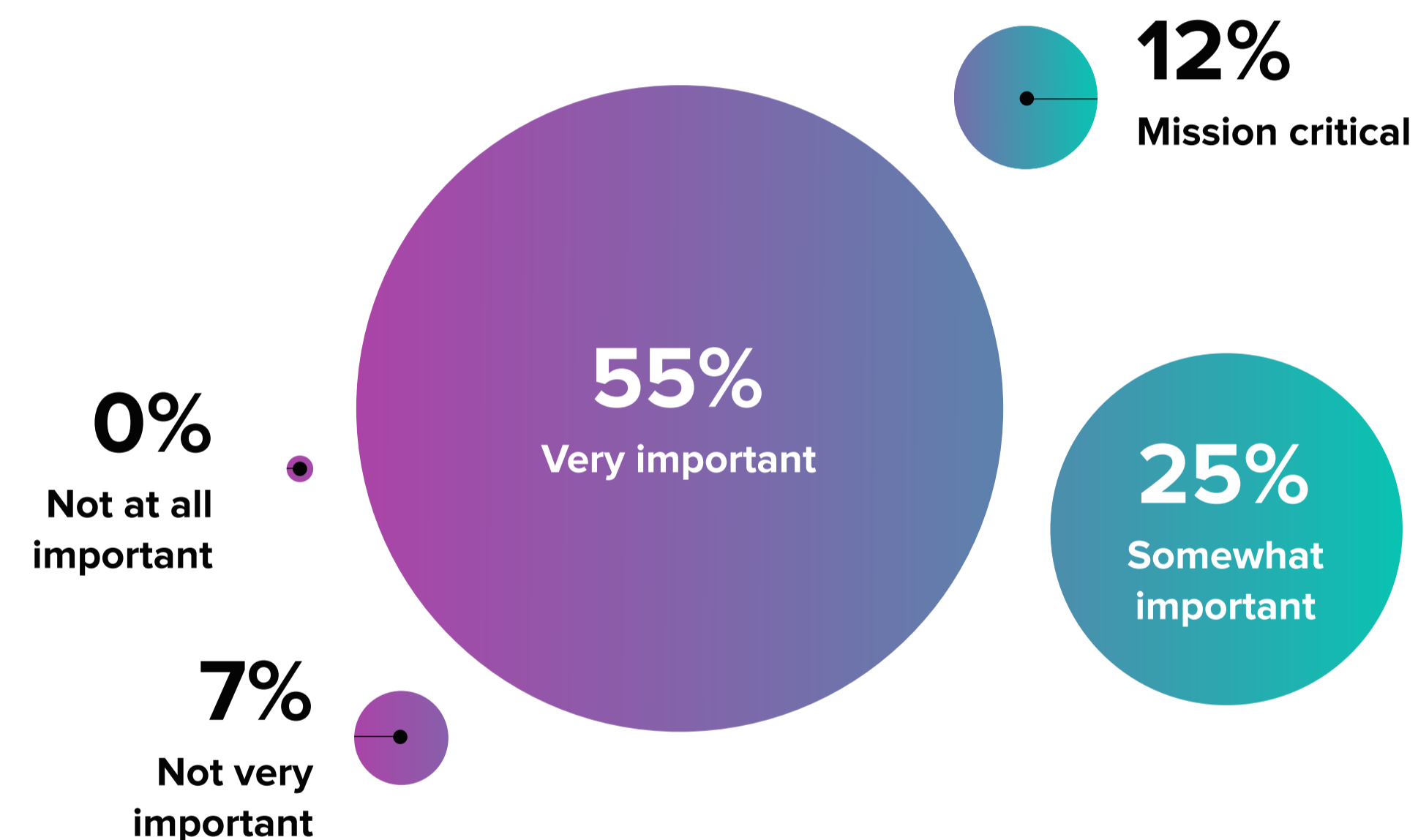
No significant opportunities missed



Social intelligence is a strategic north star

Across industries and business sizes, there is a growing consensus that the ability to understand and act on real-time insight is crucial for future success. In fact, 67% of professionals agree social intelligence is either very important or mission critical for the future growth of their organization.

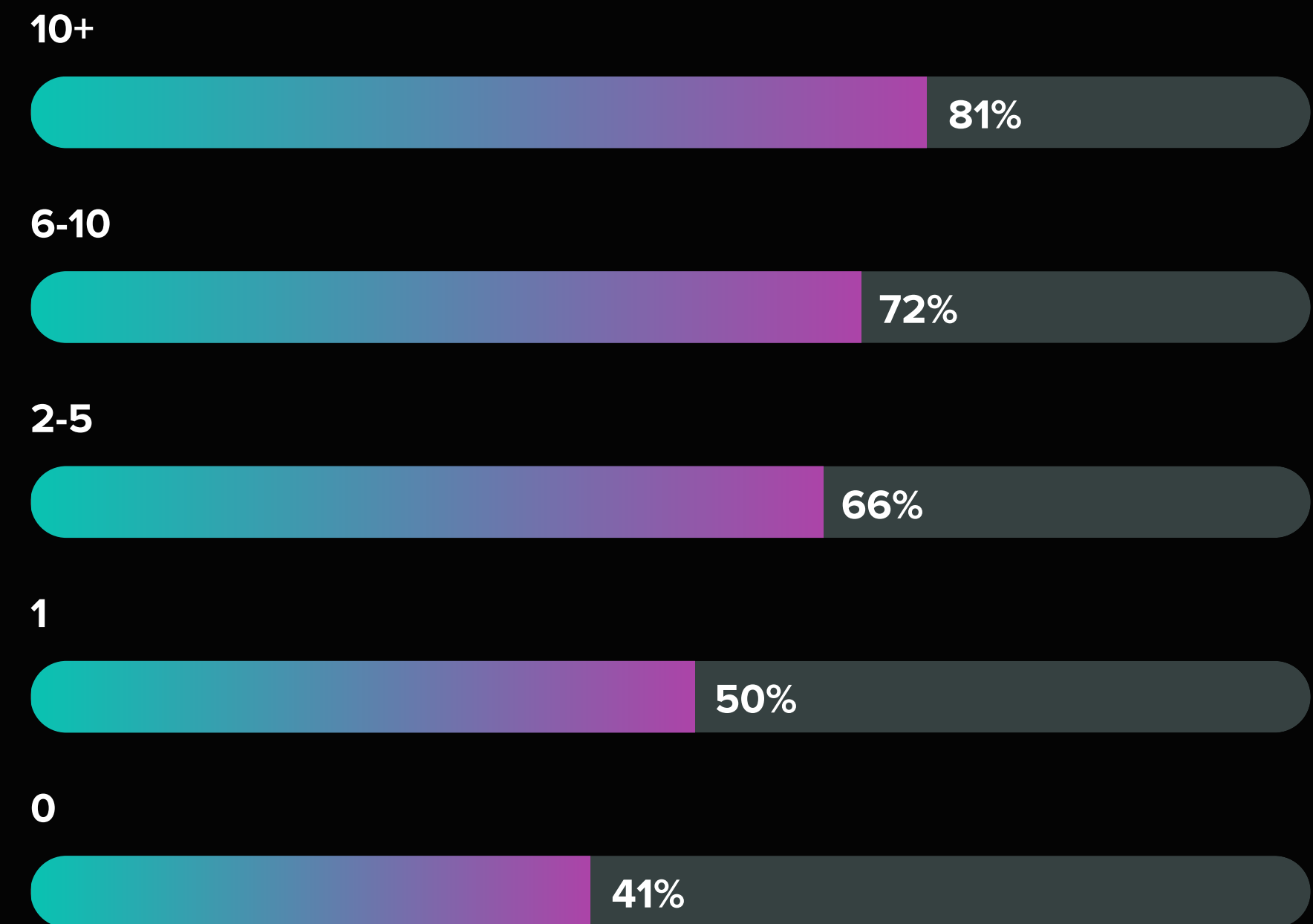
How important is social intelligence to your organization's future growth?



This belief is not limited to highly mature teams. Even among organizations with few dedicated resources, the importance of the function is recognized. Half of teams with only one person dedicated to social intelligence consider it mission critical or very important to future growth, and that number rises steadily aligned with team size and maturity, reaching over 80% among larger, more established functions.

Depending on organization size, even one dedicated hire can be significant. That's why it makes sense for maturing social organizations to deputize frontline social media workers to act on this data set. They are already familiar with the insights and know the potential impact for the business. Empowering them to be the voice of social data across the organization ensures it's acted on effectively, and can help prove out the value and make the case for even more dedicated resources.

Respondents who say social intelligence is mission critical or very important to their organization's future growth, based on social intelligence team size.



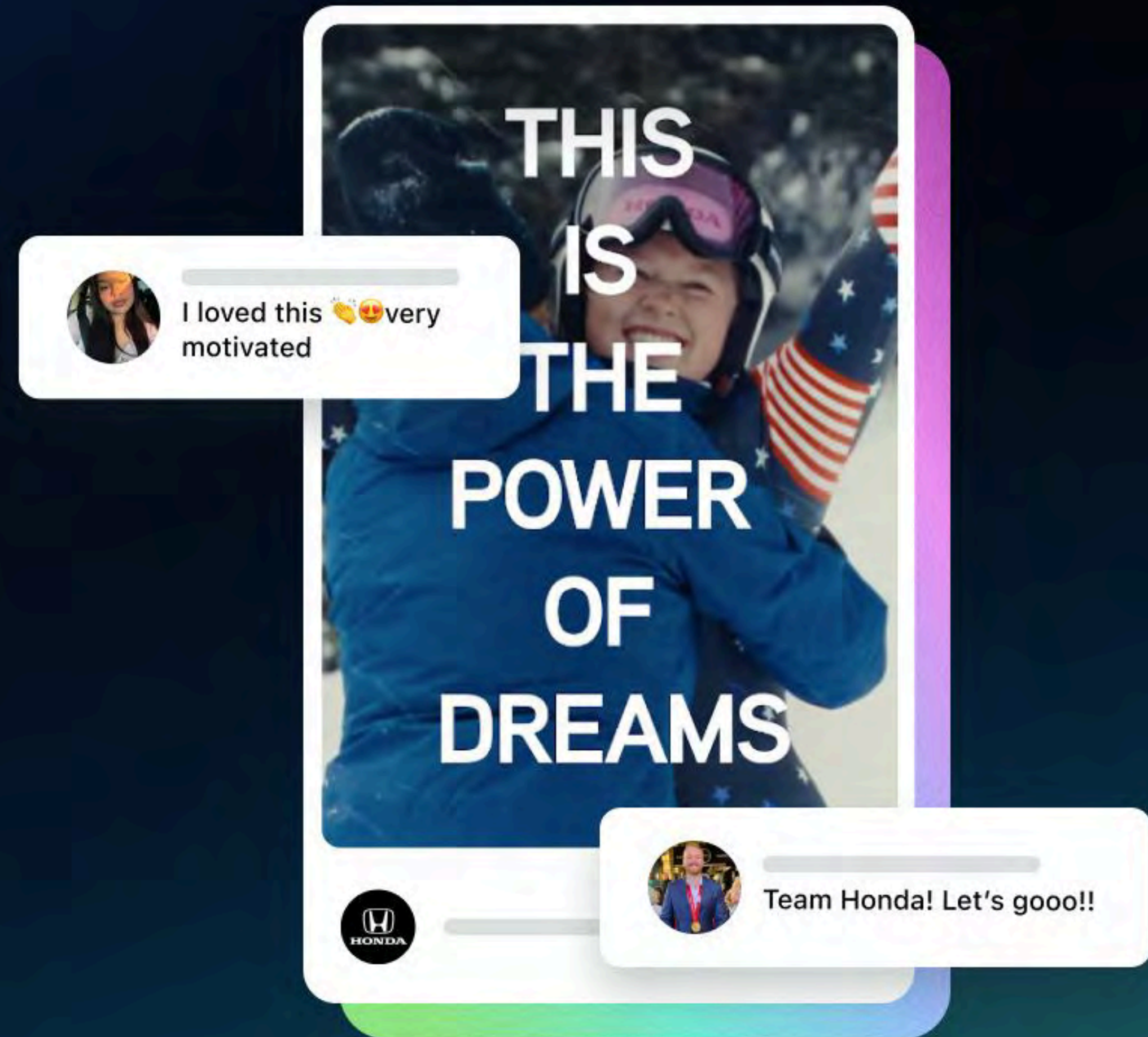
SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

Honda shifts gears with centralized social intelligence

For a global powerhouse like American Honda, maintaining a personal touch across a massive vehicle portfolio is a challenge. To bridge the gap between global scale and local engagement, the brand shifted from basic monitoring to a unified social intelligence strategy.

Rather than just monitoring social at large, the team turned it into a core data source for the entire business. Today, American Honda relies on its mature social practice as a key driver in major business initiatives, including becoming a founding partner of the 2028 Olympics—fondly known as “LA28”—and Team USA. Social insights now also flow directly to R&D and marketing to shape sentiment around innovations like electric vehicles, showing how a well-defined social intelligence program can feed back into other departments and influence tangible business actions and products.

By changing gears from routine maintenance to strategic intelligence, Honda transformed social into a primary engine for brand loyalty.



Organizations are rethinking traditional sources of insight. Sixty-seven percent of professionals agree that within the next three years, social intelligence will become more influential than traditional market research in shaping business strategy.

Traditional research is designed around defined questions, fixed timelines and relatively small sample sizes. Social intelligence, by contrast, captures continuous, unprompted feedback at scale. It reflects not what consumers say when asked, but what they choose to say on their own, in real time and in context.

"A survey is guided by a researcher; on social, they are freely sharing their feelings. Social offers unprompted consumer thoughts."

— Paige Walker, Manager, Cultural Intelligence and Trends at Hershey

"Social media comments are free focus groups; you have to take the comments seriously, treating them with as much weight as a consumer trend report."

— Paula Perez, Founder at Feeling Seen Studio

In the next three years, social intelligence will become more influential than traditional market research in shaping business strategy.

- 1 Strongly agree - 19%
- 2 Agree - 48%
- 3 Neither agree nor disagree - 22%
- 4 Disagree - 9%
- 5 Strongly disagree - 2%

SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

Slack hears the music in the noise

Slack uses social media as a signal for human behavior, and that's how the team noticed a peculiar trend. Users weren't just using the Huddles feature for meetings; they were obsessed with its hold music. People were joking about staying in empty Huddles just to listen to the tracks and asking if they could access the music outside of a call. Slack recognized this was something they could use.

Rather than commissioning a lengthy survey or a massive product build, the team acted on the unprompted truth they found. They took three of the most popular Huddles tracks and turned them into 25-minute YouTube videos. It was a simple, agile move that directly implemented user feedback.

The response was immediate and emotional, with users praising the brand for its user-inspired creativity and for actually listening to its customers and applying their feedback. This once again proves the power of action built on the data that businesses have available to them through social already, turning insight into a brand win.



I thought I was alone in enjoying the Slack huddle music lol -- love that y'all did this 🔥



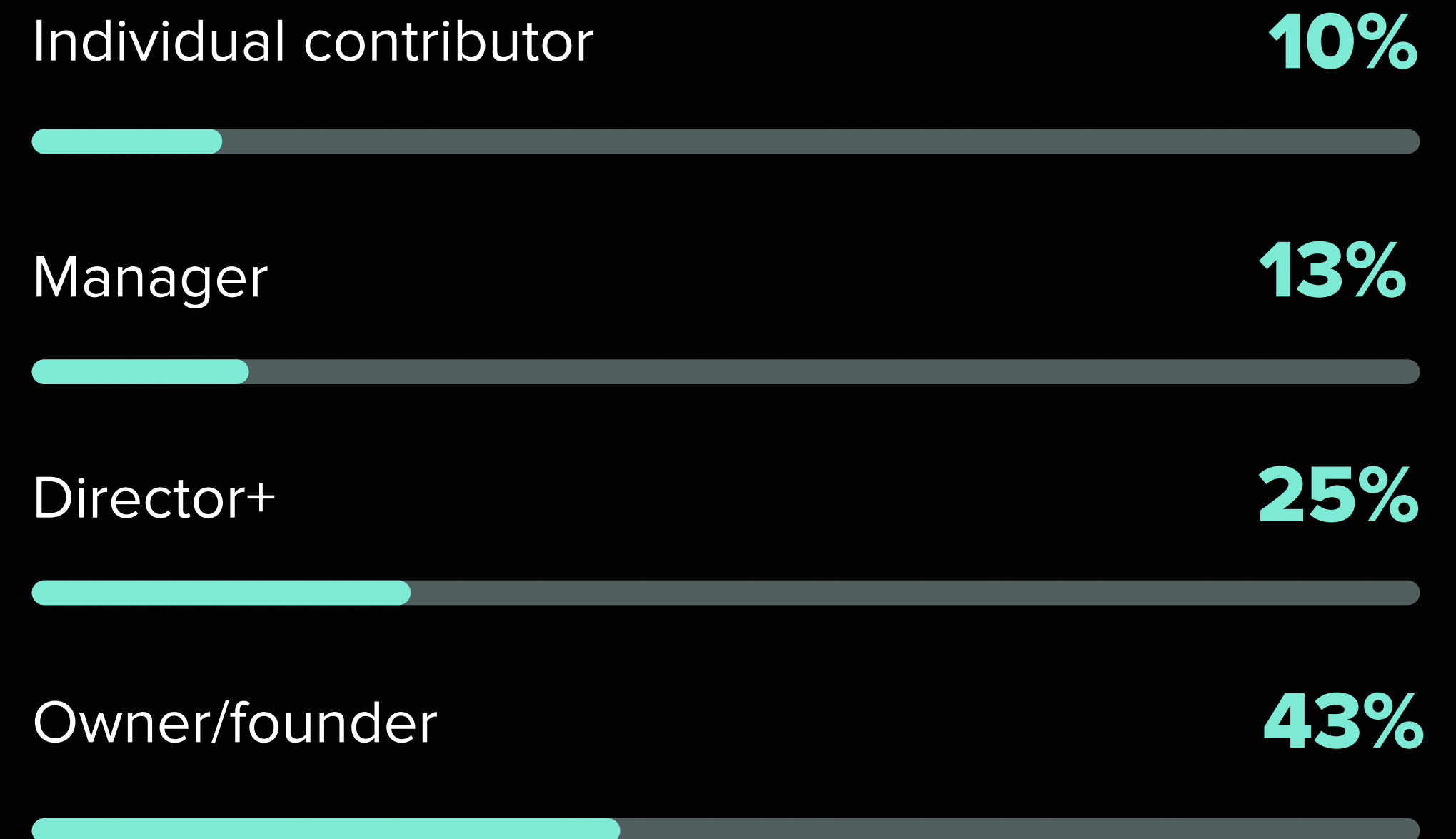
Brilliantly creative. Love it. I love the Slack huddle music

Despite the clear benefits that social intelligence offers, only 17% of professionals say they are extremely confident that their organization is maximizing the value of social media data today, revealing a significant gap between perceived importance and real-world execution.

This becomes even more pronounced when we look at responses by role. Among individual contributors, confidence drops to just 10%, while senior leaders are significantly more optimistic. Put simply, the people with the most direct access to the data are far less confident than those at the top that the data is being used to its full potential.

This lack of confidence represents a deeper issue. While leadership may believe they are operating as data-driven organizations, the people working directly with social data see firsthand how much insight is left unused. The result is a false sense of maturity. One that masks missed opportunities and slows progress. Executives are making high-stakes decisions based on incomplete "safe" data while ignoring the signals visible to the front lines.

Respondents who are extremely confident their organization is maximizing the value of its social data.



The speed trap

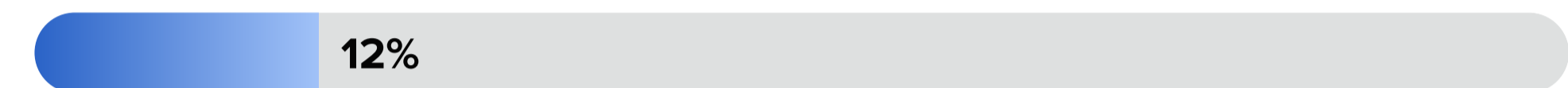
Unlike surveys, panels or focus groups, social intelligence captures consumer sentiment as it happens. It allows organizations to detect emerging trends, shifting preferences and potential risks in near real time. It's no surprise, then, that 74% of respondents say social intelligence delivers insights faster than traditional research methods, with 44% saying it could surface signals days or even weeks faster.

The win of the work is the quickness. If something happens in the morning and you need an update by midday, the data is already there, and we can quickly analyze it to surface what matters.

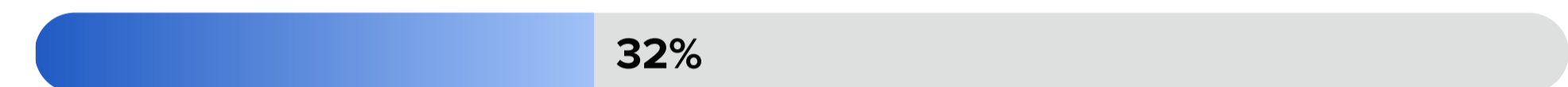
— Paul McEnaney-Rodriguez, Director, Communications Insights & Intelligence, UnitedHealth Group

How much faster can your organization identify shifts in consumer preferences compared to traditional research methods?

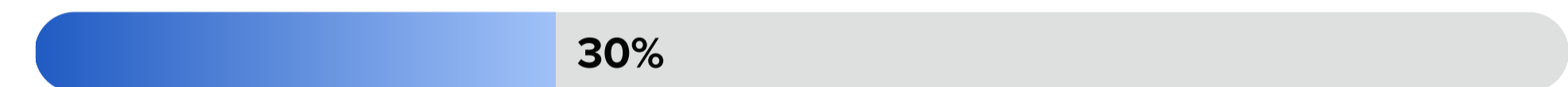
Significantly faster (weeks earlier)



Moderately faster (days earlier)



Slightly faster



About the same



Slower



Not sure



In theory, this speed should lead to faster decisions, quicker adjustments and a greater ability to stay ahead of the market. In practice, that advantage often breaks down.

While insights are identified in real time, action is still bound by legacy workflows that turn that data into weeks of deliberation. Only a small minority of respondents (10%) say their organization can take tangible business action (e.g. campaign adjustment, product update or a customer care response) on a social insight within hours. For most, the timeline stretches far longer: weeks for some (34%) and months for others (18%).

This is the central paradox of social intelligence today. Organizations have access to the data, but lack the governance and ownership required to maximize its potential.

In many cases, social intelligence remains too far removed from decision-making. Individual contributors generate insights, but those insights do not consistently reach leadership in time to influence outcomes. Only 14% of practitioners report being included in strategic discussions on a weekly basis, meaning that valuable signals are often delayed, diluted or lost entirely before they can drive action.



Even when insights do reach decision-makers, they are not always consumed in a way that reflects their timeliness. Just 15% of professionals say they look at social intelligence insights in a real-time dashboard, while 18% report reviewing insights on only a quarterly basis. Removing the real-time nature of the feedback from the equation blunts its usefulness. When the value of immediacy has been lost, what was a leading indicator becomes retrospective analysis.

This creates a compounding effect. Delays in surfacing insight lead to delays in decision-making, which in turn lead to missed opportunities.

Organizations are still designed around slower, more linear workflows like quarterly planning cycles, layered approvals and siloed ownership. These structures were built for a different era of data. They are not equipped to handle the speed and volume of real-time intelligence.

Closing this gap requires more than simply generating better insights. It requires rethinking how those insights move through the organization. How they are surfaced, who has access to them and how quickly decisions can be made as a result.

Increasingly, organizations are looking to automation and AI to help bridge this gap. The organizations that succeed will be those that align the speed of decision-making with the speed of insight embedding social intelligence directly into workflows rather than treating it as a reporting layer.

Organizations with 10+ employees dedicated to social intelligence are already leading the way here, with 18% saying insights could be acted on within hours, and a further 41% saying it took less than three days. This is a level to aspire towards and build on for everyone else.

10%

said their organization was able to translate a meaningful social insight into tangible business action within hours. 18% said it took 1-3 months.

69%

of the time insights go to leadership less than weekly.

15%

of respondents are looking at real-time dashboards for social intelligence insights.

SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

e.l.f. Cosmetics fuels the fire of consumer creativity

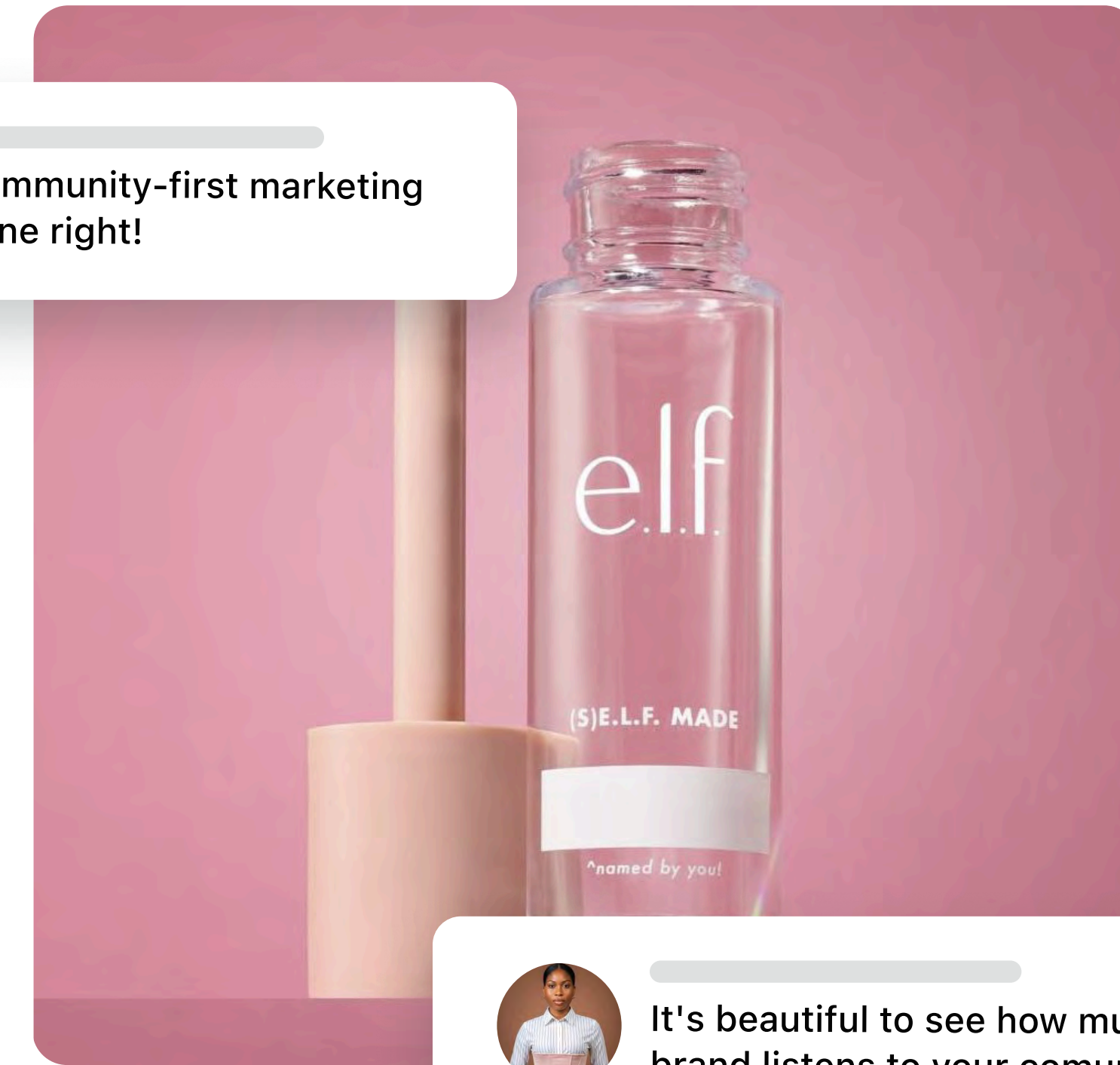
e.l.f. Cosmetics proves that the most powerful product launches aren't always engineered in a lab. Sometimes, they start on TikTok. When the brand saw users scrubbing out empty Halo Glow bottles to create DIY "jumbo" lip glosses, they didn't ignore or even just praise the hack, they legitimized it.

e.l.f. launched exactly what the community was trying to create. They offered an empty bottle exclusively as a free gift with any \$15 purchase. By acknowledging its customers in its product and sales strategy, e.l.f. transformed a DIY trend into an incentive for their most loyal customers.

They later doubled down with a full DIY Lip Balm Kit, complete with rhinestones and flavors. By amplifying an existing behavior and meeting their audience where it was, e.l.f. turned a viral moment into a cultural event.



Community-first marketing done right!



It's beautiful to see how much your brand listens to your community

Why social intelligence breaks down inside organizations

For many organizations, social intelligence as a function remains early in its maturity. They are struggling to maximize its potential, held back by persistent silos and an inability to act on insights at the speed they are generated.

Much of this is driven by leadership and practitioners often having different views on how social data is being used, how embedded it is in decision-making and what role it plays within the organization.

Understanding where this gap comes from and how more mature organizations are closing it, reveals a clear pattern that we can learn from.



“

I am not just saying, 'Here's some funny viral posts.' I am digging into **the why and the implications for the business.**

— *Paige Walker, Manager,
Cultural Intelligence and Trends
at The Hershey Company*

The social intelligence perception issue

The most immediate barrier to greater adoption across the business is how social intelligence is viewed within an organization.

Today, it is still most commonly viewed as social media performance analytics, rather than as a source of real-time intelligence. Twenty-eight percent of professionals say their organization primarily sees it this way, while far fewer (19%) believe it is treated as real-time market research.

This distinction has consequences. When social intelligence is seen as retrospective, it is naturally confined to marketing and measured against campaign performance. Practitioners are asked to justify spend after the fact, rather than shape strategy before decisions are made.

28% of professionals said that social intelligence is mostly viewed as social media performance analytics

By contrast, organizations with more mature social intelligence capabilities tell a different story. Those with larger, dedicated teams are more likely to report that their work is viewed as strategic business intelligence. At organizations without dedicated roles, 50% of respondents say social intelligence is still seen primarily as performance analytics.

Perception, in this sense, defines potential. If social intelligence is framed as reporting, it will remain tactical. If it is framed as intelligence, it can become transformative.

For practitioners, shifting this perception is often the first step toward influence. That means going beyond surface-level metrics to uncover the underlying drivers, patterns and implications behind the data. It means connecting social insight to broader business questions, whether that's product performance, customer experience or market shifts.

This perception gap is reinforced by how organizations themselves define the role of social. When asked about the primary barriers to social intelligence influencing strategic decisions, the most common response (23%) was that social media is viewed primarily as a communications channel, not a strategic insights function. Other factors include limited budget (16%), technology limitations (14%) and organizational silos (13%).

Even in more mature organizations, these challenges persist. As teams scale, the complexity of integrating social data with other business systems becomes more pronounced. But the underlying issue remains. When social intelligence is artificially limited to performance analytics, it becomes a missing layer in corporate decision-making.

What is the primary barrier preventing social intelligence from influencing strategic decisions in your organization?

- 1 **Social media is viewed primarily as a communications channel, not a strategic insights function - 23%**
- 2 **Limited budget or dedicated resources - 16%**
- 3 **Technology or data integration limitations - 14%**
- 4 **Organizational silos between departments - 13%**

Fragmented ownership, fragmented insights

Social intelligence does not have a clear home in most organizations. Instead, it is distributed across marketing, analytics, communications, insights and even product teams. While this reflects its cross-functional value, in practice it creates fragmentation.

Without clear ownership, there is no consistent accountability for outcomes and insights struggle to translate into action.

The social media team is currently the most common owner of social intelligence functions, but that is only true in less than a third of organizations. Multiple other teams claim partial ownership, and in some cases, no formal ownership exists at all. This fragmentation makes it difficult to scale impact because insights are generated and maybe even shared, but they are not looked at holistically.

“

The future is about unsiloing your data, letting social, survey data and even stock tickers talk to each other to find the hidden story.

— Paul McEnaney-Rodriguez, Director, Communications Insights & Intelligence, UnitedHealth Group

Where does the responsibility of social intelligence primarily sit within your company?

The social media team



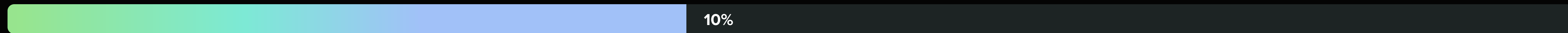
Data/analytics team



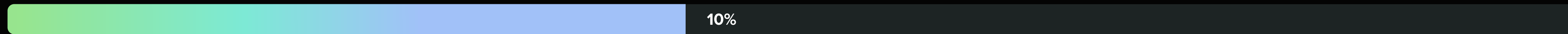
The wider marketing team



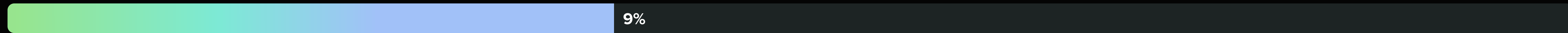
Communications/PR team



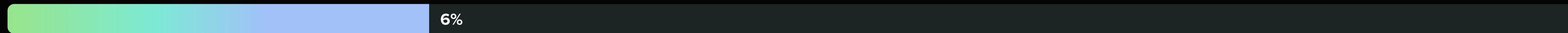
Insights/research team



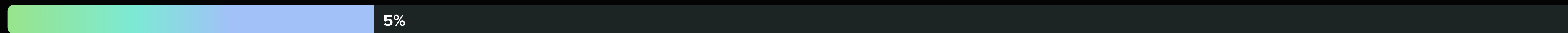
Corporate strategy team



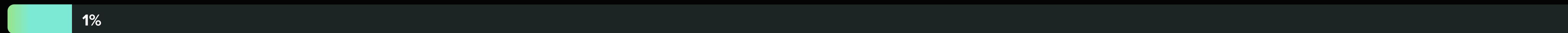
Shared responsibility



Product team



Not formally owned



Why data stagnates within marketing

While social intelligence is inherently cross-functional, its application is not. In practice, social insights and data are largely confined to marketing, limiting its ability to influence the broader business and slowing an organization's response to the market in real time. This is the bottleneck.

Only 36% of professionals say social intelligence regularly informs decisions outside of marketing.

More mature organizations offer a glimpse of what's possible. Among those with larger, more established social intelligence teams, 51% say social intelligence regularly informs decisions outside of marketing. As investment, ownership and influence increase, so does the reach of the insights themselves.

However, for most organizations, that expansion hasn't happened yet.

“

Social intelligence can work on its own and unfortunately this is the current state of affairs in too many organizations—a single person, a team of a few people at best, handles mainly monitoring and listening as part of brand health/crisis prevention operations. The truth is a number of departments can benefit from social intelligence.

— *Martin Miliev, VP Social Intelligence, Publicis Groupe*

“

If I had to pick a few, brand marketing, consumer insights, innovation and R&D, social strategy and communications could all benefit from being aligned with social intelligence. Each team needs to be informed about what consumers are saying about a product or category so they can effectively plan their marketing strategies and innovations to have the greatest positive impact on consumers and, in turn, the business.

— *Paige Walker, Manager, Cultural Intelligence and Trends, The Hershey Company*

Within marketing, adoption is strong. Beyond that, usage drops off sharply. Product teams, which are responsible for shaping what a company builds, engage with social intelligence far less frequently. R&D teams, arguably the function that could benefit most from real-time, unprompted consumer feedback, use it even less.

When these teams operate without social intelligence, they are effectively building in the absence of real-time context. They are relying on slower, more structured forms of research, while competitors who are leveraging social intelligence can identify shifts earlier and adapt faster.

We would identify quality issues from an X comment before the QA team knew it was happening. That saved the company time and money.

— Paula Perez, Founder at Feeling Seen Studio

Which departments actively use social intelligence insights?

Marketing



Customer experience



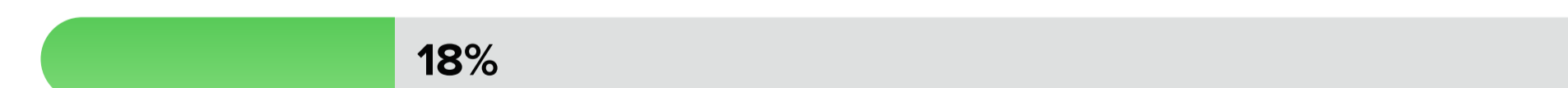
Corporate strategy



Product



R&D



Investor relations



Measurement reinforces limitations

Even when organizations break down silos, another challenge is what they choose to measure. Today, most social intelligence efforts are still anchored in owned-channel performance, including engagement, comments and direct interactions with brand content. While these metrics are useful, they represent only a fraction of what social data can reveal.

Engagement on owned posts is the most commonly analyzed data source, while fewer teams consistently look at industry-wide conversations, competitive dynamics or unprompted public discussions. This creates a narrow view of reality, and one that is inherently reactive and incomplete.

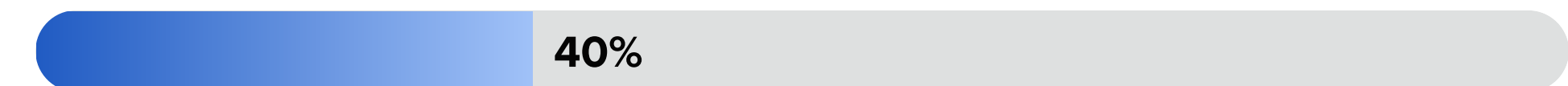
Interestingly, this pattern doesn't meaningfully change as organizations become more mature. Even as teams grow and investment increases, the underlying metrics often remain the same. This highlights the need for a more robust approach to defining data sources. Because measuring only what you did will never tell you where the market is going.

When your organization analyzes social intelligence, which of the following data sources are included in your analysis?

Engagement data on your organization's owned social content (likes, shares, comments)



Public posts that mention your brand (tagged or untagged)



Direct messages or inbound customer inquiries



Public conversations about your industry or category



Public conversations about competitors



Competitors' owned social content



Capacity constraints

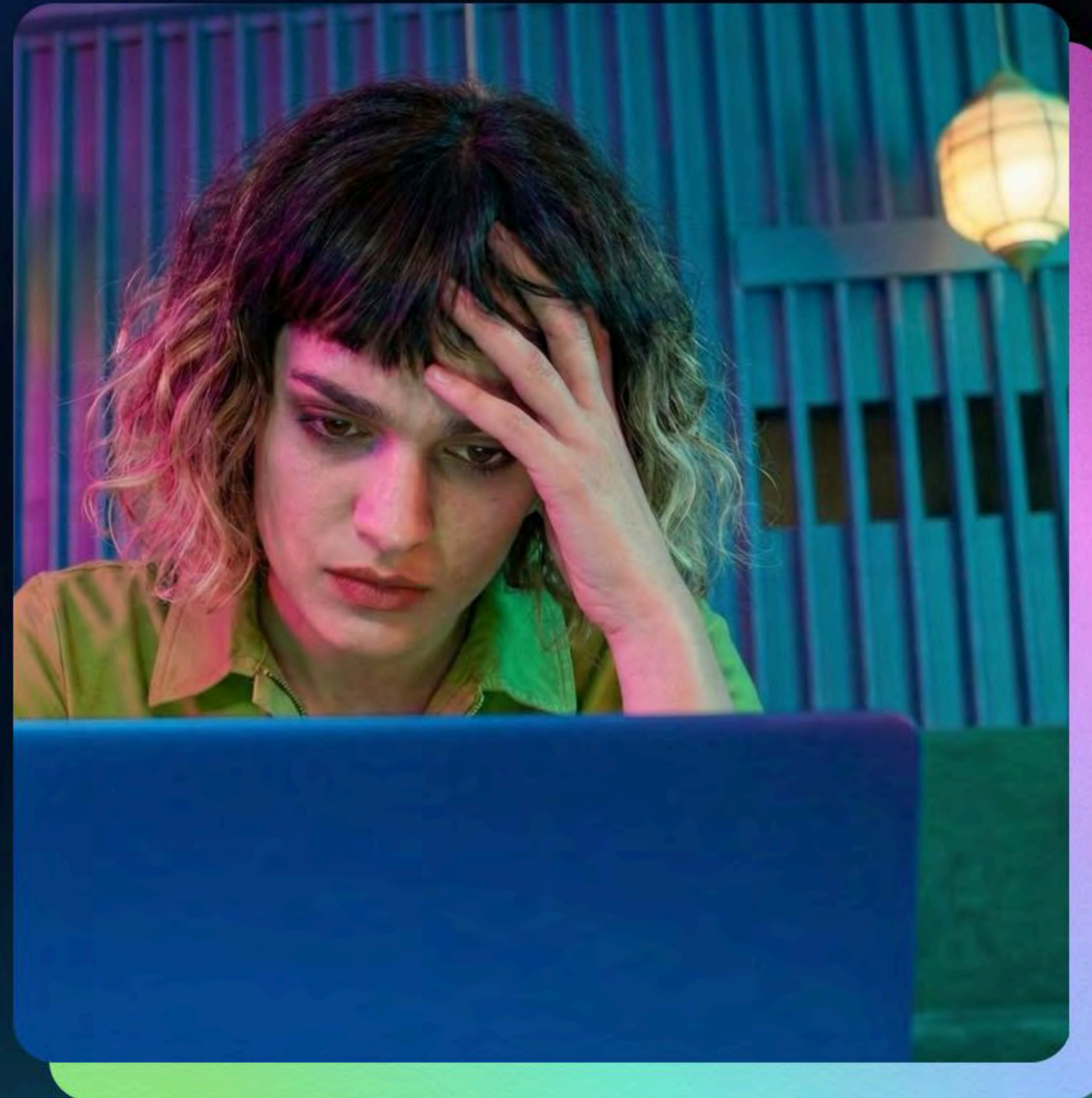
Across organizations, there is an imbalance between operational execution and strategic analysis. Social teams are still heavily focused on publishing, monitoring and reporting, leaving limited room for deeper insight generation.

While many managers believe their teams are spending the majority of their time on strategic work, individual contributors report a different reality—one where operational demands drive the day-to-day.

Strategic insight requires time to analyze data and translate findings into meaningful recommendations. Without that space, social intelligence becomes reactive by default, limited to reporting on what has already happened. In effect, organizations are keeping one of their most valuable early-warning systems focused on execution rather than strategy.

80%

of individual contributors say they spend 50%+ of their time on operational execution vs. strategic insight work



Then there's the actual monetary budget.

Investment in social intelligence varies depending on organizational maturity. More advanced organizations are more likely to allocate dedicated budgets to tools, platforms and infrastructure, enabling them to scale analysis and integrate social data into broader business systems. Less mature organizations can lack this foundation, making it difficult to move beyond fragmented or ad hoc use.

Consistency in investment is what enables consistency in impact. Without it, organizations struggle to define meaningful KPIs, build integrated systems or elevate social intelligence beyond a tactical function.

91%

of professionals at social-first organizations allocate a dedicated budget for social intelligence tools or platforms.

57%

of professionals at non-social-first organizations allocate a dedicated budget for social intelligence tools or platforms.

Closing the gap: How to operationalize social intelligence

The path forward for social intelligence requires a shift in how organizations prioritize, trust and act on the data. Social intelligence cannot remain a passive input. It must become an operational system that drives decisions all the way through to execution.

That shift starts with investment. Organizations overwhelmingly point to better technology and clearer KPIs as the biggest accelerators of maturity, with many already planning to increase spend in AI, data integration and dedicated roles over the next 12 months. Encouragingly, only a small minority report no planned investment—a strong signal that leaders recognize the growing importance of this capability, even if its full ROI is not yet consistently measured.



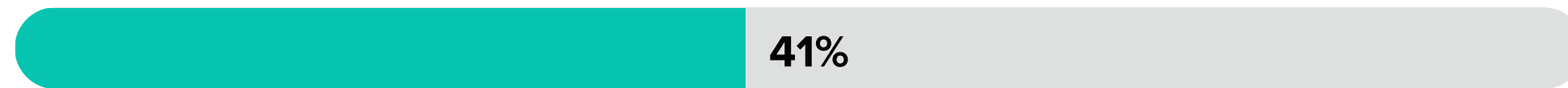


What investment would **MOST** accelerate your organization's social intelligence maturity?

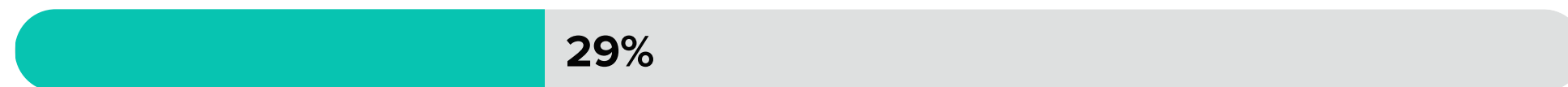
- 1 **Better technology (29%)**
- 2 **Clear KPIs and standards (22%)**
- 3 **Dedicated team expansion (17%)**
- 4 **Executive sponsorship (13%)**
- 5 **Integration into BI systems (11%)**
- 6 **Cross-functional training (7%)**

Looking ahead to the next 12 months, my organization plans to increase investment in social intelligence through:

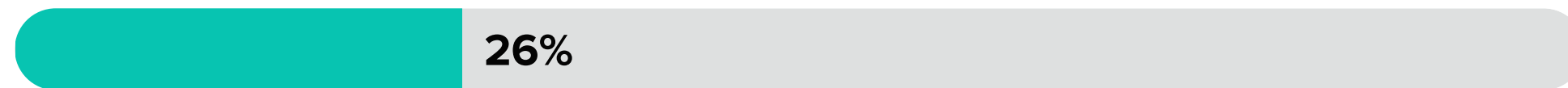
Technology & AI (upgrading tools, automation, analytics or AI capabilities)



Integration (connecting social intelligence with BI systems, CRM or other enterprise data platforms)



Headcount (hiring analysts, strategists or dedicated social intelligence roles)



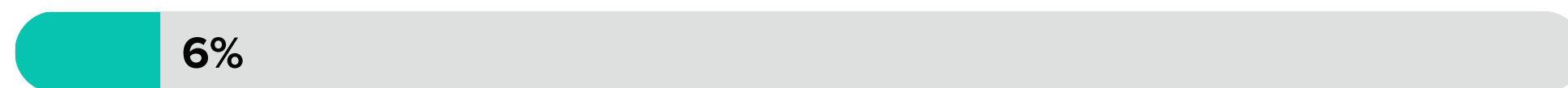
Enablement & training (educating cross-functional teams to interpret and apply social insights)



Data expansion (accessing additional platforms, data sources or APIs)



No planned investment



But investment alone is not enough. Without governance, even the most advanced tools will fail to deliver impact.

Fewer than half of organizations (43%) have clearly defined success metrics for social intelligence. This lack of standardization makes it difficult to translate insights into business outcomes or communicate their value in a way that resonates with leadership. To close that gap, organizations must establish shared definitions of success and align teams around metrics that connect social intelligence directly to business performance.

At the same time, organizations must address fragmentation. Social intelligence cannot drive impact if it doesn't have a clear home. Whether centralized or cross-functional, ownership and accountability are essential to ensuring insights don't get lost between teams and instead translate into coordinated action.

AI serves as the critical engine in this transition, moving beyond mere processing power. While the sheer volume of social data makes manual analysis a bottleneck, AI's true strategic value lies in its ability to synthesize a sea of disparate signals into the human truths that resonate in the boardroom. It acts as the bridge between raw, real-time data and the high-level narratives required for executive decision-making, ensuring that the voice of the customer is heard and understood at the highest levels of the organization.

“

We need to move toward ‘Boardroom Metrics,’ like engagement velocity and benchmarking, that give executives a clearer picture of performance.

— Paul McEnaney-Rodriguez, Director, Communications Insights & Intelligence, UnitedHealth Group

“

Your organization can take the first step by building out a governance framework, but don't get too caught up in the exact numbers. Taking insight to action is more important than the exact number that triggers that. I want to bring my executives the truth. They don't want to know and pick apart the number, but data needs to inform the insight.

— Senior Manager, Research and Insights at a large hospitality brand

However, AI's role remains augmentative, not definitive. While it surfaces the patterns that constitute these truths, human judgment is essential for interpreting cultural nuance, validating insights against broader business context and building the trust necessary for leaders to act on them with confidence.



“

AI doesn't understand all of your nuance and context yet. We use it as a helpful guide, but we also make sure to walk that path on our own as well.

— Senior Manager, Research and Insights at a large hospitality brand

“

In my experience, leaders don't trust a 'black box' AI recommendation as much as a human analyst's. AI can help synthesize large datasets and unearth themes in conversations, but it doesn't understand nuance or the true "why" behind certain consumer behaviors.

— Paige Walker, Manager, Cultural Intelligence and Trends, The Hershey Company

Next steps to accelerate your organization's social intelligence maturity

Closing the intelligence gap is about behavior. Organizations must move beyond measuring owned performance and start analyzing the broader market. They must create the space for teams to focus on proactive insight, not just execution. They must integrate social data into the same systems and conversations that drive business decisions. And critically, they must empower the people closest to the data to influence those decisions in real time.

While the intelligence gap presents a challenge for enterprises, it also offers an unprecedented opportunity for those ready to lead the next era of business. Social is no longer a communications channel, it is the strategic intelligence of a modern organization. By operationalizing AI-driven signals and treating unprompted human truth as a core asset, businesses can innovate with the confidence of having insights from the world's largest, real-time focus group behind them.

This path is not linear, nor achieved overnight, but here are five steps you can take to evolve from execution to proactive insight:

- 1. Move beyond owned metrics:** Shift focus from engagement on brand posts to holistic social listening and competitive analysis. Distill these signals into insights for departments across the enterprise.
- 2. Establish centralized governance:** Define clear ownership and cross-functional metrics. Social intelligence needs a formal home to ensure accountability and consistency.
- 3. Eliminate operational friction:** Bureaucracy kills the primary advantage of social data—speed. Streamline approval workflows to match the real-time pace of social trends.
- 4. Integrate with executive systems:** Embed social data into existing Business Intelligence and CRM platforms. To influence the boardroom, social insights must live where business decisions are made.
- 5. Break the 'practitioner paradox':** Empower those closest to the data to collaborate with Product and R&D teams early in the development cycle, ensuring insights shape the roadmap rather than just the launch.

About the data

The research cited in this report was conducted online by Panoplai on behalf of Sprout Social. Participants included 705 professionals who work with social media data across the US, UK and Australia. Data was collected between February 20th and March 16th, 2026.

About Sprout Social

Sprout Social is a leading AI-powered social intelligence platform, built on the belief that All Business is SocialSM. Powered by Trellis, Sprout's proprietary AI agent, the platform transforms real-time social media signals into actionable insights that drive business forward. Consistently recognized **as a top software by G2**, Sprout enables brands to deliver smarter, faster business impact through a suite of solutions including comprehensive publishing and engagement, customer care, influencer marketing, advocacy and predictive media intelligence. Sprout's software operates across all major social networks and digital platforms. For more information about Sprout Social (NASDAQ: SPT), visit sproutsocial.com.

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