

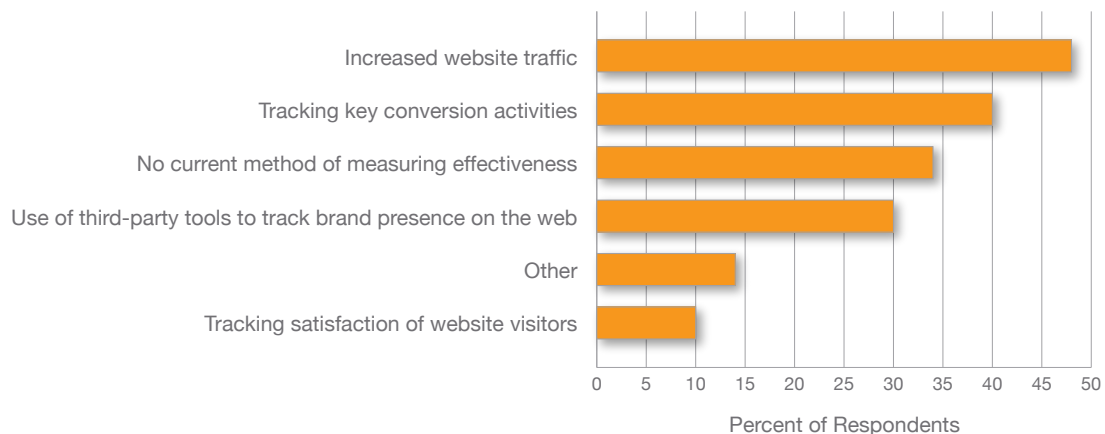
Social Media: The Marketer's Challenge

Over the last few years, the use of social media has been a hot topic, and one that has generated more questions but few answers. Aquent recently conducted a study to understand marketers' uses of and challenges with social media. The study found that marketers realize that social media is an important part of their overall strategy, but that many struggle to find optimal ways to use it.

Companies use five main channels for their social media strategy: Facebook and Twitter being the leaders at number one and number two (78% and 72%, respectively); LinkedIn (66%), YouTube (57%), and blogs (56%) round out the group. Companies struggle with using social media because of the difficulty measuring the response to each initiative. Of the 123 study respondents, 71% stated that measuring effectiveness is the main challenge of utilizing social media channels.

"If you don't know how effective the social media strategy is, it is difficult to justify adding resources because you can't prove that it is positively affecting the bottom line," says Eric Waldinger, Online Marketing Practice leader at Aquent. "And if you don't have the resources to figure out return on investment, there is risk of entering into a vicious circle that could ultimately hold the company back from utilizing effective marketing channels and put you behind your competition." It is disconcerting that 35% of our respondents said they have no current method of tracking return on investment.

Figure 1. How Do You Measure the Effectiveness of Your Social Media Marketing Initiatives?



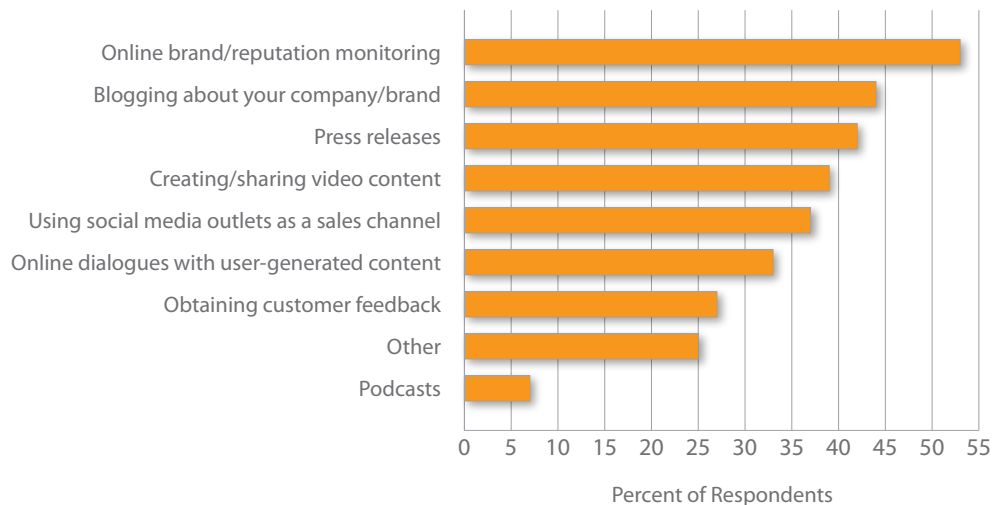
Skill Gaps and Staff Shortages

Other challenges faced by our respondents revolve around finding staff for their social media projects. Sixty percent of respondents said a lack of available staff is holding them back, and 34% have trouble finding people with the appropriate skills to execute their social media programs. Other obstacles to utilizing social media include obtaining management approval (26%) and justifying budget (21%). Just under one-third of the respondents felt that the available social media outlets are not relevant to their company's objectives.

No Clear Model for Social Media

Companies are all over the map regarding social media strategies mainly because their objectives are unclear. Since this is a relatively new marketing channel, companies are not yet sure how to best harness its power. The three main objectives are online brand/reputation monitoring (53%), blogging about the company/brand (44%), and press releases (42%).

Figure 2: What Is the Focus of Your Social Media Strategy?



Breaking the Cycle: Driving Effective Test Programs for Social Media

Escaping the trap that prevents an organization achieving its social media objectives lies in outlining a test strategy and temporary program to develop a model for your organization. Find someone knowledgeable about social media to develop a test for you. Marketers don't need to invest in a lot of tools or media to get started; it is actually more important to run small tests and realize small wins using key metrics.

The most important step is to find a skilled contractor or group of contractors who have targeted expertise in social media programs and understand the technology to manage the elements needed for your trial run. Consider the following steps:

- **Define success.** Every organization will define success in a different way.
- **Design the test program** (social media channels, offers, advertising, use of widgets and features).
- **Identify the technology and methodology that will work for your tracking,** but avoid overcomplicating it.

If you are not experienced in recruiting social media contractors, you should know that there are distinct sets of skills available in the marketplace. There are technology- and content-oriented contractors. You may need both, but don't make the mistake of assuming that you can get both in one person. Be clear about what you need to achieve your goals.

Beware of non-expert consultants. There are many people jumping into the social media spotlight who may think they understand the landscape but don't have firsthand experience. You will need to vet the skills of the people you hire. Get a rundown of the contractor's history in social media, as well as specific hands-on examples of the projects they've completed.

Once you hire the right consultant(s), run a small test. After small successes, you can start to invest more time and money and execute planned campaigns focused on taking your success to a larger scale.

Tests aren't always successful at the first attempt, so be willing to move onto a different approach and try something else by modifying the goals or tactics used on your original test. Verify that your tracking was executed correctly.

Social Media Is Here to Stay

Having a social media marketing strategy is an important part of an integrated marketing plan. Channels and formats may change, but as we continue to develop communication outlets at an exponential rate, social media marketing is not going away anytime soon. With the proper marketing talent and skill sets, companies can learn how to utilize the media to achieve their objectives, be it obtaining customer feedback or using the outlets as a sales tool.

About Aquent

At Aquent, we pair marketing and design specialists with challenging jobs to create inspired, productive partnerships that produce meaningful work for our client companies and the talent we represent.

That said, we're more than a talent placement company. We're a world-leading innovator in improving the way companies, and talent, work. From pioneering benefits for project-focused designers and marketers to creating solutions to help companies test drive talent before hiring them, we are building a worldwide network of subject matter specialists who understand the special needs of marketing niches globally and the world's increased need for specialized talent. Visit aquent.com or call **877 2 AQUENT** to learn more.

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