

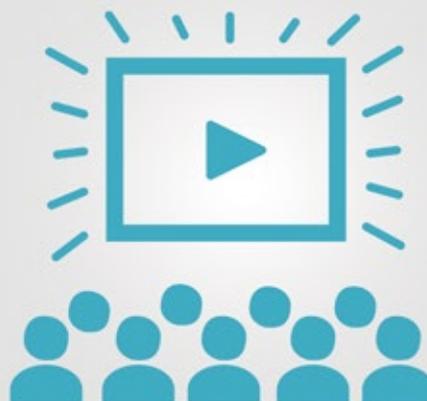
Marketing in the Modern Digital Age

The phrase “time is money” has never held truer than it does today. In a culture increasingly obsessed with productivity and progress, and with modern technologies appearing to constantly offer us new ways to increase our efficiency, we are left with a skewed perception of time and a terrible fear of wasting it.

People are spending more time online than ever before, where they've got all the information and tools they could possibly need right at their fingertips.

At first glance, this growth in the online presence of consumers may seem like a positive development for digital marketers, giving them unprecedented access to their audiences and presenting them with opportunities to expand to new markets. However, all of this doesn't come without a price.

*Audiences are more accessible,
but they're also much pickier.*



Today's consumers are faced with constant pressure to use their time wisely—along with an overwhelming influx of ads and information from which to choose—and as a result, they're actually becoming harder to reach. They have less time to spend on any given activity (or at least that's how they feel), and they're less willing to spend that time on anything that doesn't offer some immediately discernable level of value.

In a nutshell, modern digital consumers are more likely to pay attention to content that meets at least one of these two requirements:

- 1. It offers something in which the consumer was already interested and had some intention of buying or pursuing.**
- 2. It is presented in such a compelling way that the consumer is persuaded to give up a few minutes to learn more.**

While these criteria may seem straightforward, they present challenges far beyond whether you're able to create good content. For the first requirement, you must have a deep understanding of your audience, right down to the specific likes and interests of each individual customer, so you can target them with exactly what they want to see.

For the second, you need to identify which formats and platforms are most effective for communicating your message to your audience. That is to say that your content—no matter how rich it might be—won't do you any good if people aren't even stopping to look at it.

So what's the solution?

Luckily, it just so happens that the answer to these challenges (and many more) lies in a place where people are already spending a majority of their time—social media.

Social media provides you with important details on the interests and preferences of your customers, so you can market to them on a more personal level. Moreover, if you use social media itself as a main channel for communicating your message, you not only increase the visibility of your brand among your immediate leads and prospects, but you also give your audience many options for interacting with your content—including sharing it with their friends and followers.

Increasingly, digital marketers are discovering the benefits of social media marketing, and they're shifting their focus (and their campaign dollars) further in that direction. Many are also facing new obstacles, however, as they race to keep up with the constantly evolving nature of online platforms and modern technologies.

In an effort to find out how digital agencies in particular are overcoming some of these obstacles, SharpSpring partnered with Ascend2 to field the *Social Media Marketing Trends Survey*. This paper draws on the results of that study to offer an in-depth view of the challenges involved in successful social media marketing, as well as the different ways in which agencies are helping their clients stay ahead of the curve.

Is Social Media Really Dying?

Spoiler alert: The answer is no.

In the past couple of years, many younger people have started engaging with platforms that offer more intimate settings for them to socialize with friends. As a result, it's been suggested by some that the age of broadcast social media is waning, and that a new era of private, narrowcast communications platforms is on the rise.

While it's true that people are using a wider variety of tools to communicate and socialize, this doesn't mean that the more mature social media channels—like Facebook and Twitter—are losing their value. Rather, people are simply distributing their time in new ways as they are presented with more and more places to spend it. Some platforms offer the allure of privacy or ephemerality, while others serve as public focal points for sharing entertainment and news. In short, although people might be spending less time than they used to on certain platforms, it's by no means an indication that those platforms have become less integral to their lives.

If one thing is certain when it comes to social media, it's this:

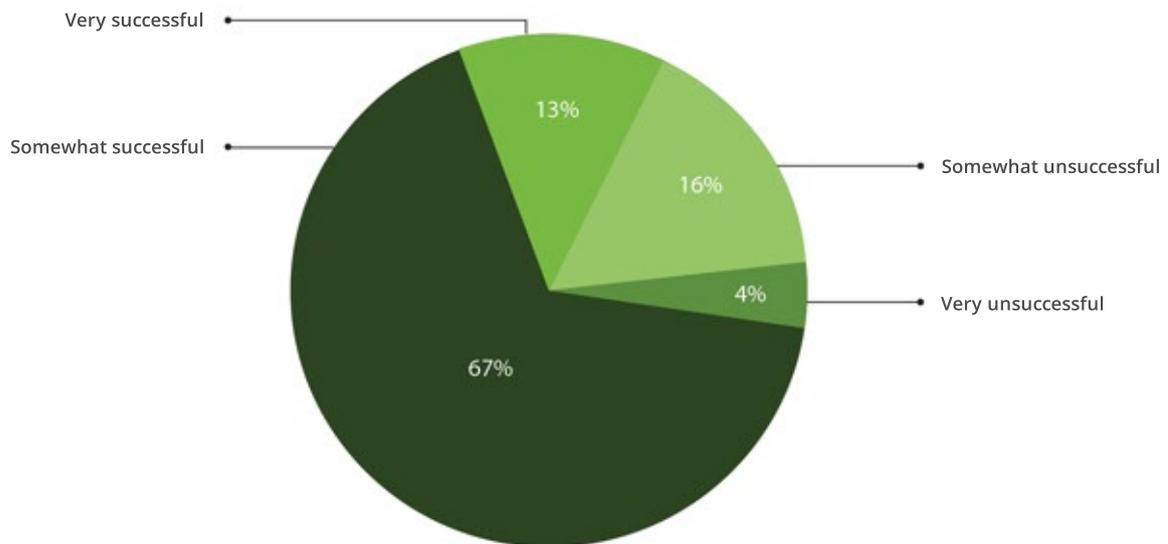
Sometimes we love it, sometimes we hate it—but ultimately, we can't live without it.

The effectiveness of social media as a means for quickly sharing information on a mass scale has caught on with many groups and businesses—including the more traditional news outlets themselves. A number of big-name publishers (like The New York Times and BBC News) have begun working to create social-based alternatives for readers to access their stories more easily.

Social media has also become a popular forum for organizing political and ideological movements. Political groups and candidates are increasingly turning to platforms like Facebook and Twitter to exchange information and connect with their audiences.

But what does all of this mean for marketers?

80% of agencies rated social media as somewhat or very successful at achieving important marketing objectives.



It has become virtually impossible to maximize your reach without the aid of social media platforms. While marketing has traditionally been based on “spray-and-pray” tactics, social media has begun to change it into a dynamic, two-way street, where businesses can engage in a direct conversation with their audiences. Now, you can see exactly what customers are saying (as they’re saying it) and then respond immediately—whether that means modifying a product, providing additional information, mitigating the damage of negative feedback, or even thanking customers for their input.

More than half of agencies said that increasing brand awareness and audience engagement are the most important objectives of their social media marketing strategies.

Furthermore, social media offers endless opportunities for you to syndicate content and grow your brand recognition. When used effectively, it not only can increase your visibility among prospects and newer customers, but also can make you more familiar and recognizable to existing customers—which can in turn lead to higher brand loyalty and conversion rates.

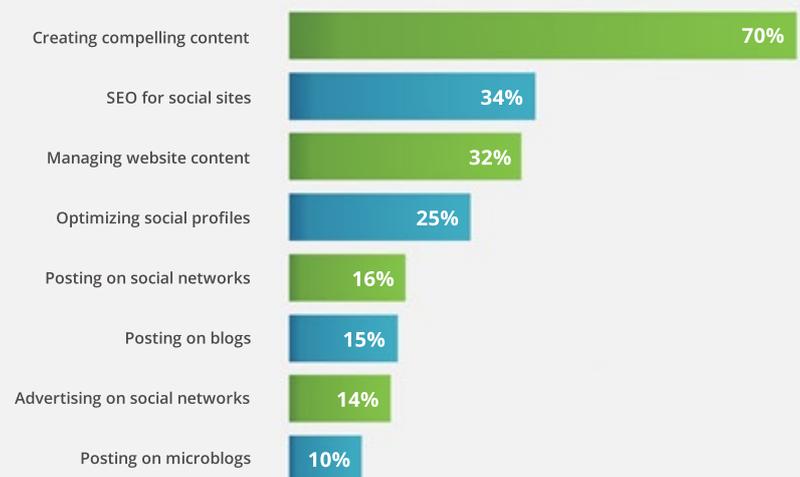
Shaping Your Message

One of the most important steps to attracting and retaining customers is to provide them with a message that really speaks to them. Whether you're promoting your product to an entirely new audience or simply trying to keep your existing customers interested, your content is your strongest asset.

According to 80% of agencies, creating compelling content is the most effective tactic for successful social media marketing. But most of those agencies also say that creating compelling content is the hardest tactic to execute.

According to 70% of agencies, creating compelling content is the most difficult tactic to execute.

Most Difficult Tactics To Execute



On a daily basis, people are bombarded with more newsflashes, ads and videos than they have time for, so they develop ways to sift through it all, only stopping for the stuff that really grabs them. It therefore comes as no surprise that one of the most challenging obstacles for businesses is to create content compelling enough to beat the competition and catch people's eyes.

Knowing your audience is key to creating great content.

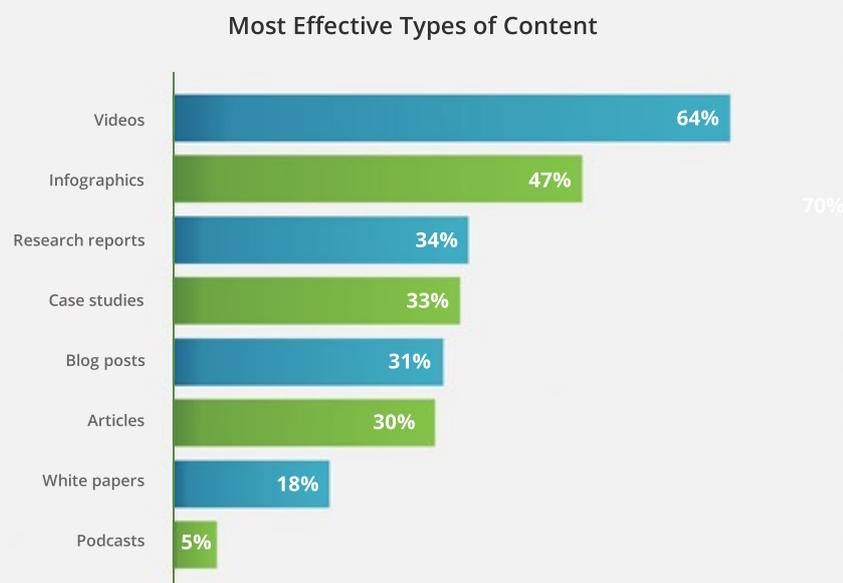
Marketing to your customers without a clear understanding of what they're interested in is like taking a shot in the dark. More than ever, people expect products and services to address their own specific needs, and that doesn't change when it comes to advertising. If a consumer does not immediately feel like your content is worth their time (this is assuming they even noticed it in the first place), they'll be quick to disregard it.

Increasingly, businesses are using behavioral data to "get to know" their leads and customers on a more personal level, and many have found that social media is one of the most reliable sources for collecting data that's accurate and up to date.

With effective social media marketing, you can gather relevant details from your leads' online profiles (and even follow their social activity to see what they most frequently like or share), and then use that information to develop highly personalized, targeted messaging that will improve your chances of catching their attention.

Another advantage of social media is that it offers a variety of opportunities for playing around with your voice and content. Whether that means switching up some language to fit into a tweet, or repurposing a video so you can share it on Facebook, using a cross-channel strategy for syndicating your content allows you to be more flexible in your tone and ensures you'll get the most out of your creative efforts.

64% of agencies rated videos as the most effective type of content to use in social media marketing campaigns, with infographics following in second place at 47%.



With people spending less time in front of their televisions and more time on their computers and mobile devices, social media sites have begun to surpass TV commercials in reach and impact. Some things never change, however, and the convenience of watching a video clip is something that continues to dominate consumer preferences when it comes to content.

As a result, online videos are one of the most popular formats for businesses to market their products and services. But they are also among the most difficult to create, as an effective video must be rich and informative enough to provide clear value for your viewers, while also remaining digestible enough not to seem like a waste of their time.

If you can manage to strike this perfect balance—and on top of things make your content more compelling than the rest—you just might have a shot at turning some heads and “going viral.”

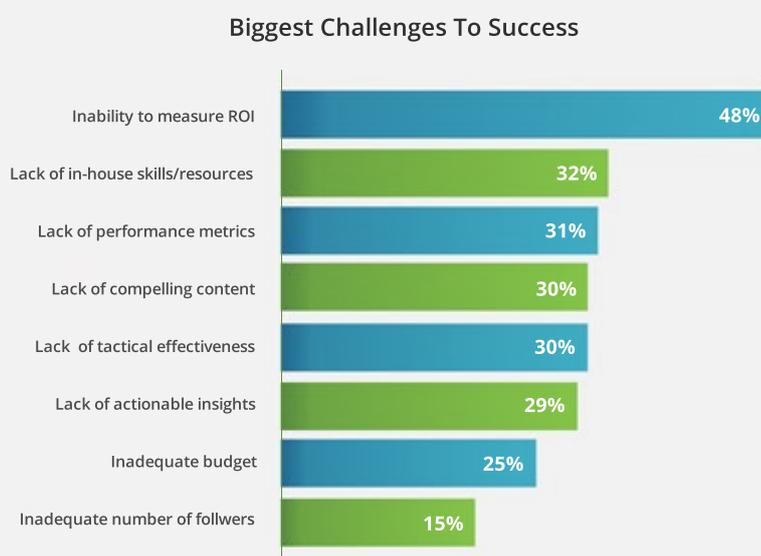
The Missing Puzzle Piece: Marketing Automation

When it comes to personalizing your content, social media can give you some of the information you need. Yet sometimes it's not enough just to have a prospect's name, her hometown, and a list of her favorite songs and movies.

This is where marketing automation comes in.

By combining the information you already have on your leads and customers with the insights you get from tracking their online activities, you can take content personalization to a whole new level. Marketing automation allows you to track how people are interacting with your content (e.g., liking it, sharing it with their friends, clicking through on your calls to action), giving you the visibility you need to identify what's working and what's not.

According to 48% of agencies, the inability to measure ROI is the most challenging obstacle to successful social media marketing.



Marketing automation makes it easier to attribute revenue to your social media campaigns by monitoring exactly what people are doing after they come across your content.

For example, if someone sees a Facebook post about a product you offer and ultimately visits your site to make a purchase, you can attribute the revenue from that purchase to your Facebook marketing campaign.

You can even take things a step further with marketing automation by setting up workflows to keep leads engaged once they've shown interest. If you see that someone has liked or shared a post about your product but hasn't visited your site, you can reach out to him with an email nudging him to check out a particular product or service. If he decides to click through at that point and make a purchase, you can then attribute that revenue to the Facebook post that initially triggered the workflow.

Marketing automation gives you the hard numbers you need to back your efforts, so that when your client calls, you can attribute a clear revenue stream to your social media campaigns and demand your fair share in the company budget.

Interested in learning more about marketing automation? Sign up now for a live demo:

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Where Are We Headed Next?

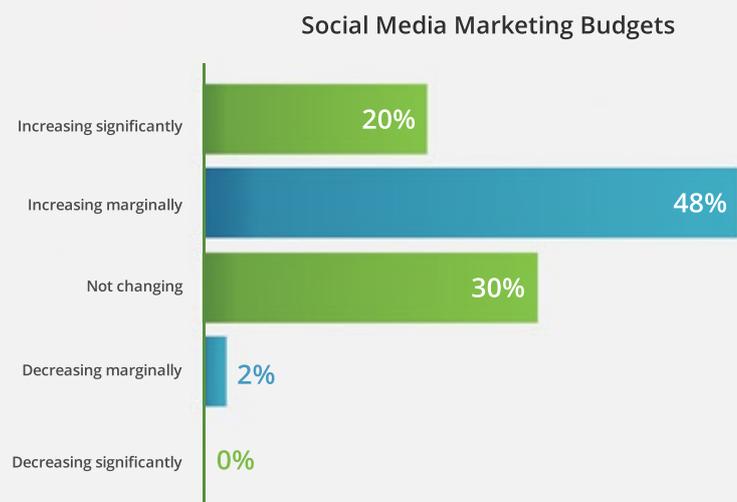
According to 77% of agencies, the effectiveness of social media is increasing.

The world seems to be headed firmly in the direction of growing more and more dependent on social media—and it's hard to imagine ever going back. While that may present some new challenges for marketers, it also opens up a whole new range of opportunities for engaging with people in more personalized ways.

Social media provides you with valuable insights on the behaviors and interests of your customers, so you can tailor your content to fit their exact needs. And as the number and variety of social media platforms continue to grow, there are countless new ways to syndicate your content to maximize viewership and engagement.

The more personal you can get with your marketing, and the more visibility you can get out of each piece of content, the more luck you'll have in beating out the competition and winning over a few minutes of someone's time.

68% of agencies said that budgets for social media marketing are increasing.



It is clear from the budget trends that businesses are seeing the value of social media and are working hard to incorporate it into their marketing campaigns.

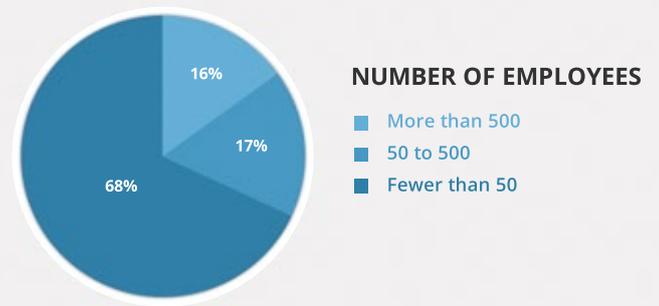
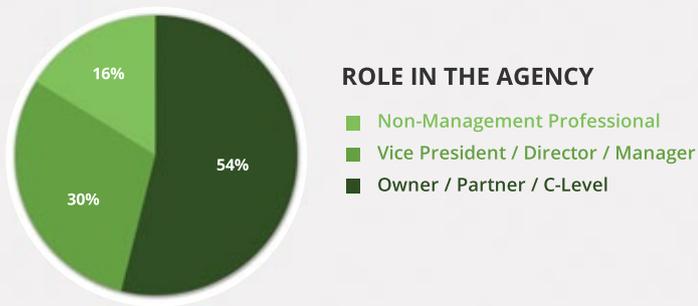
According to eMarketer, social media ad spending was poised to hit \$23.68 billion worldwide by the end of 2015, and it's now projected to reach \$35.98 billion by 2017, making up 16% of all digital ad spending worldwide.

As long as consumers are using it at such high rates, social media will continue to be one of the most lucrative channels for marketers to attract new customers, maintain brand loyalty among existing customers, and optimize their ROI.

About the Research

Ascend2 benchmarks the performance of popular digital marketing strategies and practices using a standardized questionnaire, research methodology and survey format. Findings are examined in a quantitative context by experienced analysts and reported objectively.

This survey was conducted online from a panel of more than 50,000 US and international marketing, sales and business professionals. The following is a breakout of the demographics represented in this report:



Simple Marketing Automation for Agencies

SharpSpring provides powerful, affordable marketing solutions to businesses around the globe—helping them automate workflows, drive more leads, and convert those leads to sales. The company rivals industry leaders with its competitive pricing, agency-focused business model, and robust platform.

Learn more at www.SharpSpring.com



Research-Based Demand Generation for Marketing Solution Providers

Marketing software firms and marketing agencies partner with Ascend2 to reliably generate new business opportunities. Its integrated research, content creation and demand generation programs are transparent—putting the spotlight on your brand and the interests of your audience.

Learn more at www.Ascend2.com

Interested in learning more about marketing automation? Sign up now for a live demo:

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