# EFFECTIVELY MANAGING THE VOLUME OF
SOCIAL ACTIVITY

HGS Digital Roundtable Whitepaper

With an estimated 3 billion people using social media this year, it's not surprising that more customers are using it to connect with businesses when they have questions, compliments, or complaints. Customers expect the ability to connect with companies online, which means more customer service teams are turning to social media as their primary way of reaching out.

Yet, while the *Online Marketing Institute* estimates it costs $1 to solve a customer service issue on social media compared to customer call centers, which can cost six times as much, brands generally spend only 2% of their time and resources in customer care, according to *Sprinklr*.

That may be changing as customers increasingly turn to social channels to engage with brands. In fact, *ValueWalk* studies reports, "About 63% of customers expect companies to offer support via social media, and 35% of customers prefer it over other channels."

According to Sprinklr, *80% of consumers* engage with brands online, and 54% of customers prefer social messaging channels for care instead of phone or email.
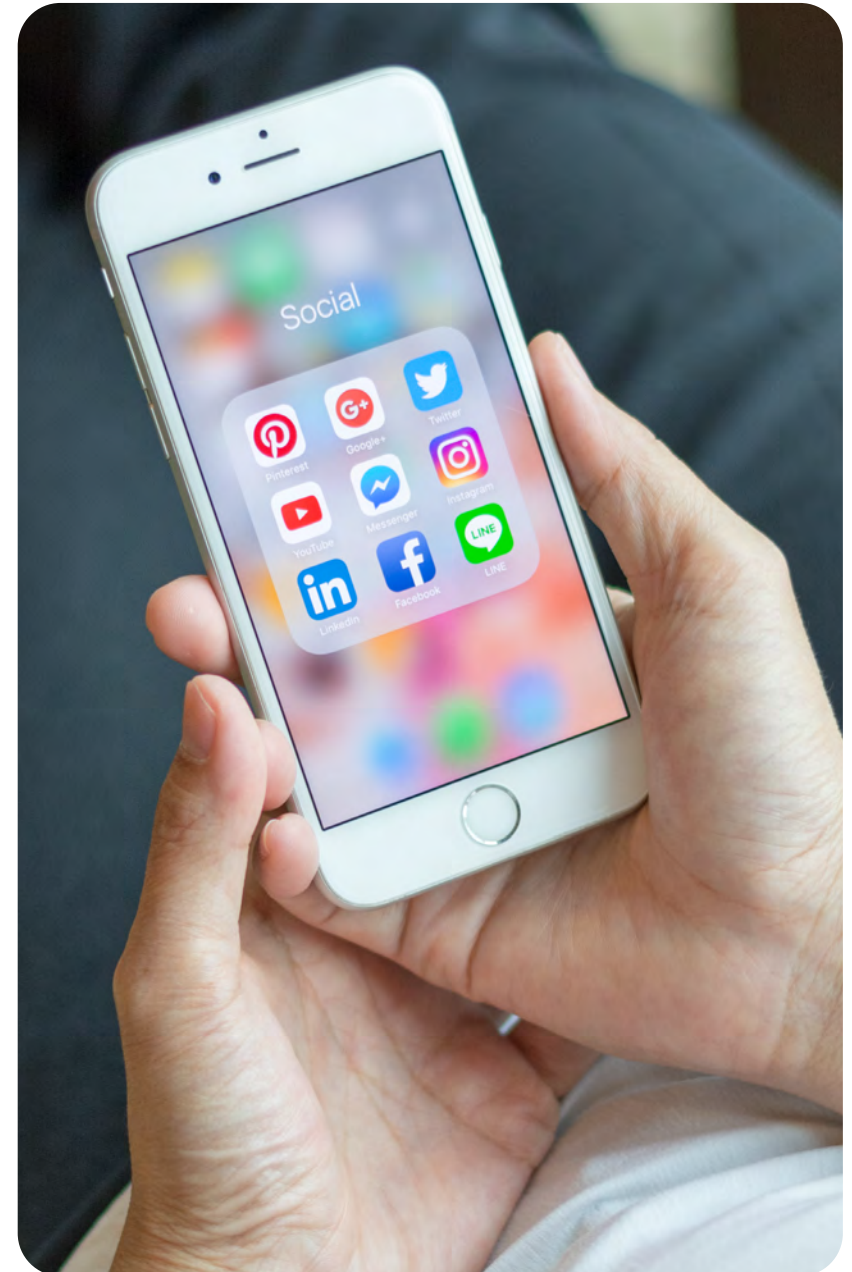
Coping with customer experience challenges

That increased customer engagement in social media channels translates to a number of key obstacles that brands need to overcome. First and foremost is the challenge of tracking and managing increased volume of activity.

As *Peter Ryan*, Principal Analyst and the head of *Ryan Strategic Advisory*, acknowledged during a recent *HGS Digital* virtual roundtable, "Social media is not just one channel," he said. "It's several different channels so brands must face the epic challenge of managing multiple public forums. Imagine you're a customer experience manager responsible for not just voice and traditional digital networks, but also managing best practices for several different social networks. That can be incredibly time- and resource-consuming."

One major restaurant brand reported it must navigate 32 million mentions and manage 2.5 million inbound conversations, with just fewer than half resulting in responses via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The heaviest volume (80% of weekly conversations) occurs on Twitter.

"If you're not listening for your flashpoint triggers, your keywords, then you really can be missing a trick. And there'll be a lot of content that is potentially harmful for your brand. This content is just going to be out in the public domain, and if it's not being dealt with, it looks much worse.

Izzy Arlott, Business Development Manager, HGS EPIC™ Social Care

A second challenge is extracting the right analytical information from various social networks to contribute to a full view of the customer. There's been a tremendous shift over time to listening to the voice of customer by using insights via speech analytics and other tools to understand how people are behaving in social channels. Too often, the true voice of the customer is still not being heard.

Third, as social media continues to be a channel of choice for customer complaints, brands must monitor and take into account non-traditional channels and open platforms where a lot of customer communication is taking place. It is important that brands constantly listen, monitor key sentiments, and identify core keywords in these conversations. This includes keeping a lookout for potential security threats.

AI and automation

The solution to these critical challenges may come in the form of a hybrid "bots-and-brains" approach to social customer experience. When it comes to providing a compelling customer experience in social channels today, our current environment warrants anything but business as usual. Given the large volume of interactions via social channels, today's brands are charged with gaining relevance in a post-pandemic digital economy via speed to value, personalization, and intelligence.

AI and automation are key technologies that can be leveraged in a social media customer care and engagement strategy to create efficiencies that make agents and operations more productive by increasing response rates and response times. In fact, according to a recent Salesforce survey, marketers report a 186% increase in AI adoption since 2018. AI for social media is a market that is projected to grow from $633 million in 2018 to more than $2.1 billion by 2023, according to estimates from *Markets and Markets*.

Plenty of brands have already hopped on the automation bandwagon, including the social channels themselves. Consider that Facebook uses advanced machine learning to do everything from serve you content to recognize your face in photos to target users with advertising. Instagram uses AI to identify visuals. LinkedIn uses AI to offer job recommendations, suggest people you might like to connect with, and serve you specific posts in your feed. Snapchat leverages the power of computer vision, an AI technology, to track your features and overlay filters that move with your face in real time.

Artificial intelligence is especially valuable in addressing one of the biggest challenges in social media management: handling an ever-growing volume of posts with limited resources. Engaging with actionable posts and weeding out in-actionable posts is a time-consuming process. AI can extract spam, news articles, retweets, international posts, and other unactionable content so that agents don't waste valuable time reviewing posts that don't warrant a response. Moreover, it can be used to help prioritize posts in the order of importance.

In addition, based on keywords and context, an automated rules-based engine can route the right post to the right team member or internal department to deliver the right response. Both AI and automation can result in huge cost savings and efficiency gains.

Consider some of these use cases to apply AI and automation to your social media management strategy:

> ### Social creation and management

AI can handle certain types of social media creation and management in minutes. With AI, brands can completely auto-generate social media content across channels, including incorporating hashtags and shortened links. Tools can also auto-schedule these shares in bulk.

Additionally, AI tools can be configured to study the type of content brands in your industry post (including your competitors), and how and when users engage with it. The tool can align this with customer feedback, data about purchases, and information from other sources to make a scientific calculation on what influences prospective buyers. Big brands like the New York Times, Reuters, and *USA Today are already using AI* to guide their content production. Spotify assembles a weekly playlist for users to discover new music based on their tastes, while Netflix and Amazon Prime show you films they think you might like based on your viewing habits.

> ### Social insights

AI-powered predictive abilities can be used to give your social media marketing superpowers. A number of AI-powered tools exist to deliver insights from your brand's social media profiles and audience. This often involves using the power of AI to analyze social media posts at scale, understand what's being said in them, and then extracting insights based on that information.

That data, properly applied, allows AI social media tools to help you track your global brand equity, discover emerging consumer trends, find new audiences to target, keep tabs on brand reputation, and identify promising new avenues for social media promotion.

Armed with this arsenal of insights, brands can target "look-alike" groups who share similar characteristics with existing successful audience segments. This will give them the power to develop hyper-personalized messaging to use on social posts and engagement responses.
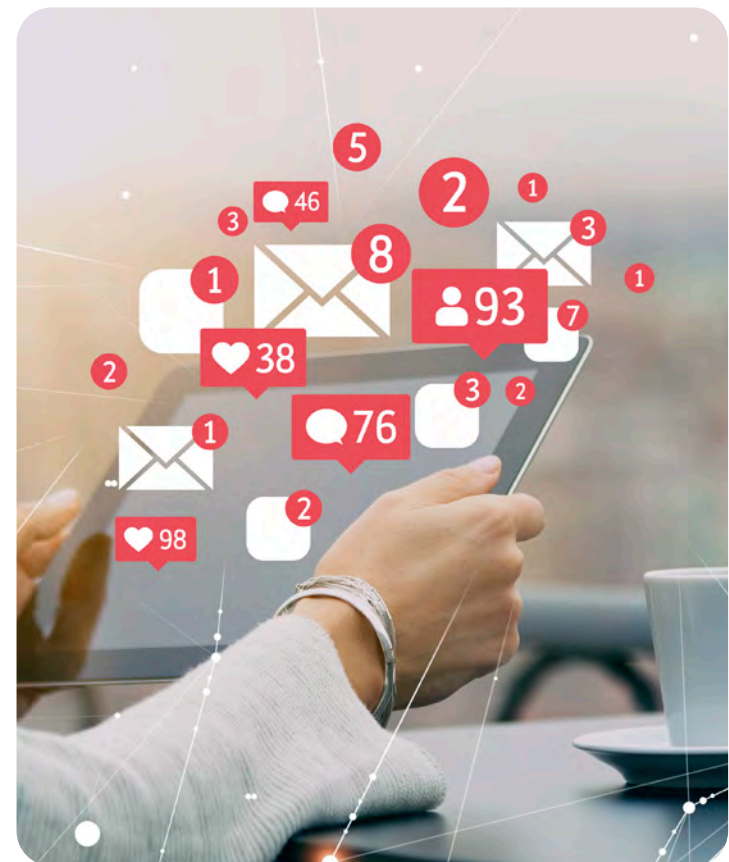
Examples of AI-delivered, data-driven knowledge nuggets

> Which social media platforms various audience segments use

> How much time target audiences spend online

> Typical uses of different social media platforms by various audiences

> Preferred forms of social content customers consume

> Online behavior when customers are presented with a particular type of content

> Types of products and brands that nab the most views

> Typical buying patterns, characterized by industry and product

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> ## Emotion AI

The power of social media gives everyone a platform to let their voice and opinion be heard, and more often than not, it is negative. Sentiment analysis, also known as emotion AI, uses natural language processing (NLP) to identify positive and negative words in posts and comments on social media. With the help of sentiment analysis, companies can detect negative words across tweets and other social posts to gain understanding of how customers feel toward their brand. With this information, businesses can proactively reach out and respond to customer complaints in a timely and impactful way.

AI-generated influencers

There is no denying that *social media influencer marketing is a powerful tool* for brand awareness and increased sales. AI has taken this to another level with the introduction of virtual personalities popping up as social influencers–most prominently on Instagram. For example, the world's first digital supermodel, *Shudu*, is 100 percent computer-generated and has almost 200,000 followers. These AI-generated influencers merge digital with reality and are quickly gaining popularity.

Amanda Sternquist, HGS Digital's Global Social Care Practice Lead, noted that using the AI technology is the best way to get the right messages to the right people and weed out some of the noise. "Our focus is on getting the most engageable content to the team first," she explained. "AI can help prioritize and route some of those mentions."

However, Sternquist cautioned that AI does take a little bit of time to implement, potentially 90 to 120 days to get it really working for a brand. One critical step is to write rules into the technology platform that creates a workflow, which deviates based on keywords, topics and themes.

She suggested that for some quick wins, brands select two or three questions that can be integrated into a self-help bot for customers. "Whether it's Facebook or Twitter, if customers enter a private channel, they can have some of those initial questions answered quickly with a self-help bot."

$8 billion

CHATBOT-RELATED COST SAVINGS BY 2022

Recruiting the right talent

While AI and automation can help build in efficiencies that reduce the strain on resources, the value of the human element in social customer care and engagement can't be left out of the equation. Hiring the right talent—individuals who are empathetic, natural problem-solvers, and excellent communicators—and training them to engage, respond, and resolve any situation that may arise will ensure success of your social customer care strategy. By allowing AI and automation to organize and prioritize the constant flood of social media posts, customer care representatives can truly shine, engaging with empathy, fun, and surprise.

Ryan noted that effective social media agents are those who are "engaged with the network, passionate about the brand, and who are able to think a little bit outside of the box when they're interacting with someone to keep the user's interest.

One online fashion retailer that targets a 20-something audience notes it is critical that social media agents are avid users of social media themselves. The retailer adopts specific recruitment strategies targeting a multi-skilled workforce that emphasizes deep knowledge of social channels, demonstrates the ability to adopt the correct tone of voice for the brand, possesses the flexibility to respond to pressure and manage multiple channels, and exercises creativity in engaging with customers.

> " When we look at hiring candidates into managed social programs, we're really looking to match a candidate with a brand voice or objective. "
>
> **Amanda Sternquist, Global Social Care Practice Lead,** HGS Digital

HGS Digital's Sternquist explained that "From an HGS perspective, when we look at hiring candidates into managed social programs, we're really looking to match a candidate with a brand voice or objective. For example, if the brand provides a persona of who they envision as engaging on their channels in terms of brand voice, level of empathy, and customer service mindedness, we can create a unique profile. Our overarching goal for these candidates is to not just respond to inquiries on behalf of a brand but to really learn on-the-job skills and build careers in social media."

It is important to recruit candidates who will really invest effort into the opportunity and take ownership of their actions as if they are part of the brand, according to Sternquist. "If you ask our teams who they work for, they won't say they work for HGS. They'll tell you that they work for the client because they really strive to become integrated into that brand culture," she explained.

However, she cautioned that it's not a one-size-fits-all when it comes to recruiting for social media agent roles. Someone might be much better at customer care than someone who is in tune to cultural trends and internet fandoms where they might be able to engage in a much more creative way that will help drive additional brand following and re-engagement.

The bottom line is that social care is care. Period. Agent responses must be timely, accurate, sensitive, brief, and friendly—a tall order. In general, all tenets of excellent customer service apply to social media. A great response will help show?

> Correctly identify the issue or problem

> Provide links to additional information

> Close the loop (even to a "thank you" comment or tweet)

> Include a personal touch, such as signing off with the agent's first name or initials

> Be consistent across the organization, with regard to tone and response time

Ongoing training is critical for social media agents who need to become adept at understanding how to read into a customer's emotional state and properly determine when the informal nature of social media, such as the use of smiley faces or emojis, are appropriate for conveying friendliness and willingness to help, or when a more formal statement of empathy or apology might be required before addressing an issue.

Once agents are trained at responding over social media, they have the potential to be more efficient, handling four to eight times the number of contacts received through social media as they can by phone, according to a report by Gartner. In addition to improved efficiency, it was also reported that providing excellent social care helps to foster a deeper emotional commitment to your brand, directly impacting your *Net Promoter Score*.

Getting on board with GigCX

Brands would also do well to consider Incorporating GigCX in their customer experience service delivery model for social media. With gig customer service, workers are crowdsourced using gig technology platforms. GigCX agents work on an on-demand basis from their homes (or anywhere, for that matter), helping companies to strip out fixed brick-and-mortar costs, which they can in turn reinvest in their people.

GigCX is different from home working because these gig workers work on a per-task and per-case basis rather than a defined schedule. A recent study by the *Everest Group* states that GigCX will make up 20% of the contact center outsourcing market in terms of headcount in the next two years.

In this new CX service delivery model, crowdsourced gig workers are sourced from customer pools that are well acquainted with the brands. This creates a trusted "crowd" of product experts who are available to deliver better service on demand, based on personal experience. At the heart of it, GigCX is about empowering anyone, anywhere on the planet, to earn money for providing brilliant customer service for brands they love.

Coupling a GigCX delivery platform with automation be a powerful combination to help address both customer experience quality and volume challenges. The GigCX model is especially useful when the standard of transactions and regulated environments can't be managed through social channels because of restrictions related to personal information. Brand champions of companies can leverage a GigCX platform to respond to their peers in these situations.

Overcoming channel challenges

Today's brands are challenged with not only keeping up with customer mentions on multiple platforms but also pivoting focus as emerging channels such as TikTok and Instagram become channels of choice. Consider that *nine out of 10 consumers* buy products and services from companies they follow on social media, and 75% of people spend money with a brand they follow on social media (up 12% from 2019 levels).

A Ryan Strategic Advisory survey of 542 different demand markets around the world found that three-quarters of respondents use Twitter and Facebook while 60% leverage Instagram to interact with their consumer base, and nearly half indicated they have brought Pinterest into their social channel mix.
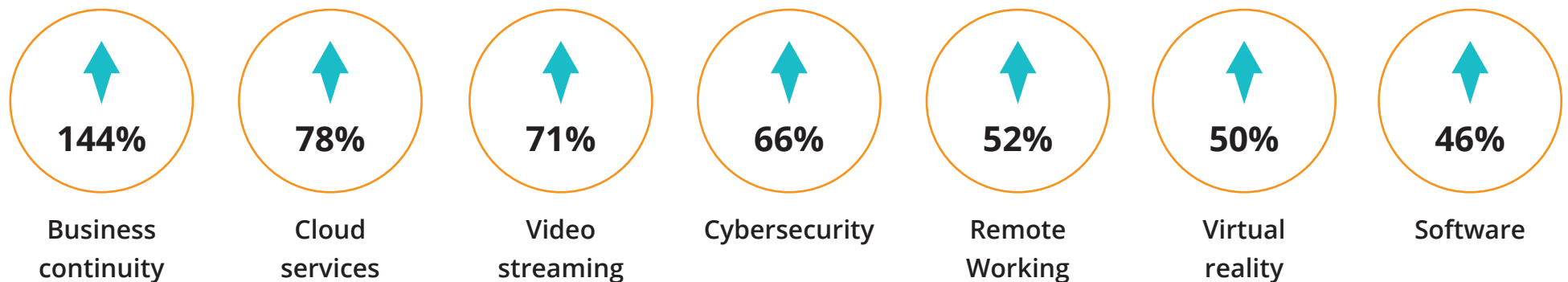
HGS Digital's Arlott noted that among her clients there is a significant uptick in Instagram traffic, especially with the retail sector. "Traditional channels of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram remain the main channels of focus, but in order to manage volume, it is important that you are using a solution that has an API so that can feed into one particular platform and manage everything in the same place," she explained.

LinkedIn, while not normally considered a priority social channel, is gaining some surprising traction for some brands. Once known as a platform for white-collar professionals to host their resumes, LinkedIn is now a learning platform, a media company, and a software-as-a-service provider.

Perhaps the best measure of LinkedIn is its impact on business culture. LinkedIn has become a site that millions of people check every day even when they're not looking for a new job. As co-founder Konstantin Guericke once said, "We're here to build a business, not to create something cool."

Srividya Gopani, Director of Brand and Consumer Marketing at LinkedIn, *reported* a 55% year-over-year increase in conversations among connections globally since March 2019. Thanks, in part, to a member reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, content creation is up 60% compared to last year.

TOPICS SPIKING LINKEDIN ENGAGEMENT

144%	78%	71%	66%	52%	50%	46%
Business continuity	Cloud services	Video streaming	Cybersecurity	Remote Working	Virtual reality	Software

One financial guidance organization in the public sector has found that LinkedIn outperforms some of the more traditional B2C channels and is currently its fastest-growing social media platform. With the quality of thought leadership particularly strong on LinkedIn, the channel may be an area of focus for some brands to assess the professional personas of their customers.
It is also an excellent channel to build brand reputation and provide a more holistic image of the brand.
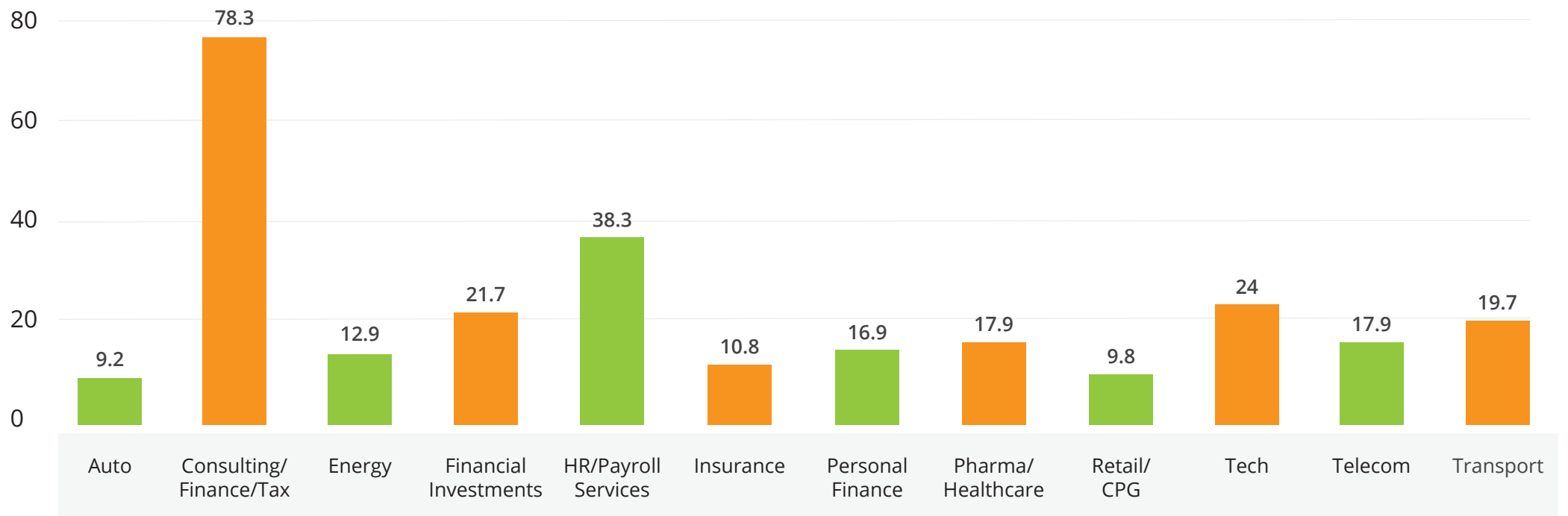
Social customer care in a COVID world

Managing customer expectations and an increase in social media mentions are critical goals for brands at any time but present even more urgent challenges during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Customers are increasingly turning to social channels to get their questions answered, resulting in a significant uptake of social media mentions and inquiries.

Salesforce recently surveyed over 3,500 consumers worldwide to gain a pulse check on how consumers are engaging with brands on different channels and what type of content is most engaging during the pandemic. Not surprisingly, social media is the most influential channel for communicating with consumers.

In its sixth annual *"State of Marketing"* report, Salesforce reveals that in the wake of the *COVID-19 pandemic*, standards of customer engagement are shifting yet again, requiring enhanced strategies and innovation.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF CONTENT PIECES

Category	Value
Auto	9.2
Consulting/Finance/Tax	78.3
Energy	12.9
Financial Investments	21.7
HR/Payroll Services	38.3
Insurance	10.8
Personal Finance	16.9
Pharma/Healthcare	17.9
Retail/CPG	9.8
Tech	24
Telecom	17.9
Transport	19.7

According to the report, social media is the clear winner of consumer attention, with 65% of consumers indicating interest. Sixty percent of consumers are interested in instructional digital content from brands, such as a PDF or web page that provides tips and guidance on matters they care about. Fifty-four percent of consumers say they notice brand content on social media always or frequently—a higher figure than any other channel.
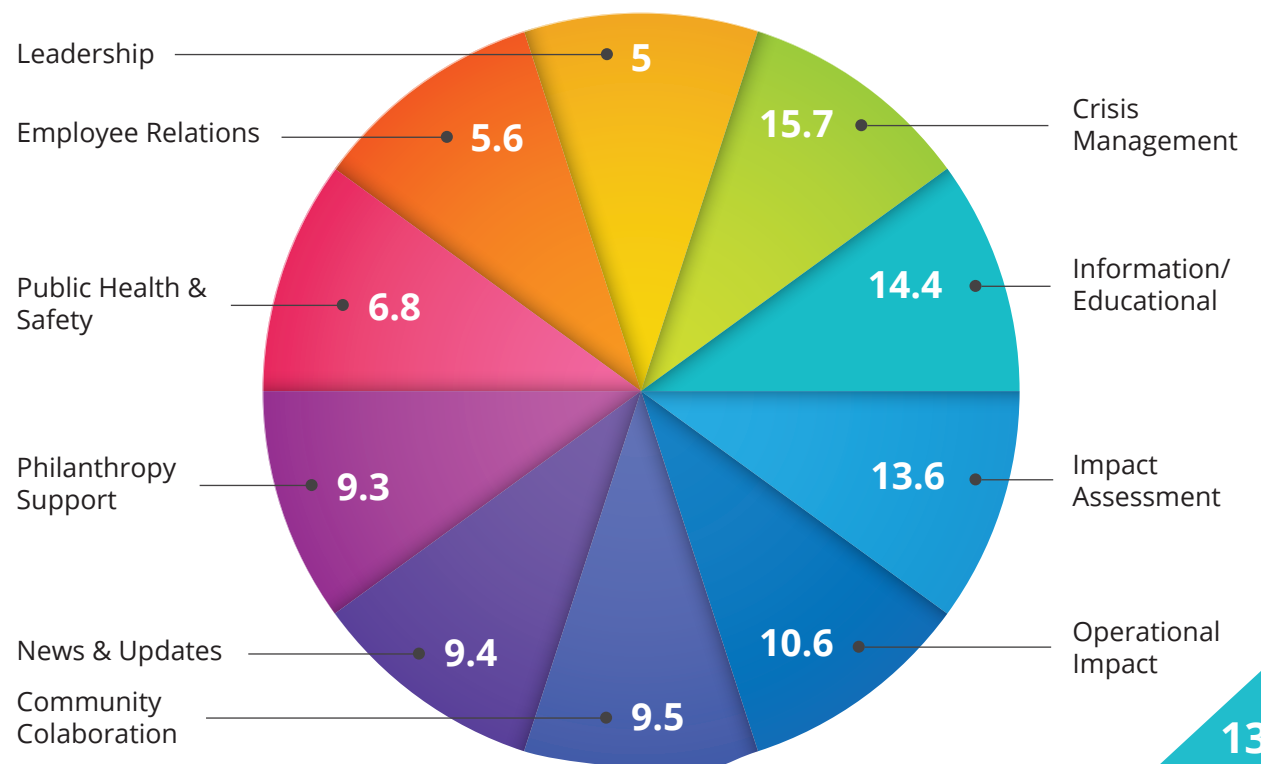
These insights seem to be in line with an increase in social media activity during the pandemic. One major car sharing membership brand revealed that its Instagram inbound messages have increased by 400% over the last 90 days. Similarly, its Twitter and Facebook messages have increased 200%. Moreover, the brand needs to address this increasing volume of inquiries via direct message because it needs to identify the name of the member in question. The brand reported that 95% of comments are inbound messages from people who generally need help or wish to log complaints about the call center. The result is increased pressure to address the volume of inquiries in a time-bound manner.

Since the emergence of the pandemic, brands have not only had to manage the significant increase in volume of customer inquiries and social media channels, but they've also had to up the ante when creating content.

In its *State of Marketing Volume 4 Report*, Knotch revealed that based on a content analysis of 196 Fortune 500 brands, content was viewed as an important tool in crisis response. For example, businesses in the consulting/finance, and tax space published an average of 78 content assets between April and May.

Certain topic themes have specifically resonated with customers during the pandemic, including crisis management, information and education, impact assessment, and operational impact.

POPULARITY OF THEMES ACROSS All CONTENT (%)

- Leadership — 5
- Employee Relations — 5.6
- Public Health & Safety — 6.8
- Philanthropy Support — 9.3
- News & Updates — 9.4
- Community Colaboration — 9.5
- Operational Impact — 10.6
- Impact Assessment — 13.6
- Information/ Educational — 14.4
- Crisis Management — 15.7

13

Ramp up your social media care performance

Whether your brand needs to better manage an increasing volume of social media activity, integrate AI and automation into your social customer care strategy, or enhance your brand reputation during the COVID-19 crisis, your first step should be to evaluate your current social media performance. Ask yourself these key questions:

How effective is your brand in capitalizing on opportunities?

The best social care professionals are skilled in recognizing critical windows that could lead to improved customer rapport, loyalty and sales.

How many mentions does your brand engage with?

Creating personalized content that engages customers in social media is a key driver of delivering exceptional experiences.

### What is the quality level of response your brand provides in social media?

Your customers deserve quality replies that effectively convey genuine empathy and consistently reflect your brand's voice.

How would you characterize the sentiment of mentions about your brand?

Leveraging the power of highly satisfied customers who serve as brand advocates can have bottom-line business benefits.

Rate your social performance vs. your competition

Make your social media investments count. Start by getting a FREE **HGS EPIC™ Social Media Score Report** highlighting six key metrics.

Response Rate

63%
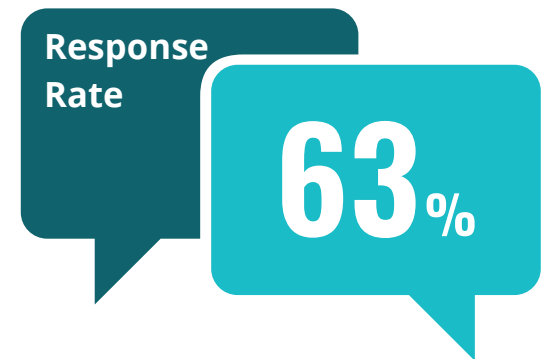
GET YOUR SCORE

How quickly does your brand respond to mentions?

With demand for real-time social customer care on the rise, brands must ramp up response times to meet growing customer expectations.

How many unique users are actively engaging with your brand?

Understand the size of your potential audience and the context of your content by measuring the spread.

The expectations and behaviors of customers are shifting with unprecedented speed and magnitude. Social media professionals are under tremendous pressure to overhaul their delivery models and use of technology to provide differentiated, digital-first customer engagement.

As brands navigate the next normal, shifting from crisis triage to recovery and adaptation, they have a unique opportunity to turn trusted customer relationships into business opportunities. With the help of data-driven insights and technology tools combined with the right talent, brands can gain a holistic picture of what's working and what isn't across the customer journey.

The time is now to evaluate and ramp up your social customer care strategy to prepare to meet new and emerging customer expectations in the social channels of today and tomorrow.

Need help getting started? *Contact us* for a free social media benchmark analysis or to learn more about our tiered HGS EPIC™ Social Care solutions.

With over 250 digital successes and stellar client satisfaction ratings, HGS Digital creates frictionless customer experiences that solve complex business problems and improve people's lives.

We work with leading brands across the world to improve their customer engagement, optimize their operations, reduce costs, and increase revenue. As a technology-agnostic consultant—with partners ranging from Amazon, Salesforce, Google, IBM, Microsoft, and more—we are well-equipped to help you select and successfully implement the right tools for your specific needs.

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