



# Taking Social Media From Talk to Action

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The New Conversation:

## **Taking Social Media from Talk to Action**

*"Conventional marketing wisdom long held that a dissatisfied customer tells ten people. But... in the new age of social media, he or she has the tools to tell ten million."*

### **Executive Summary**

The exponential growth of social media, from blogs, Facebook and Twitter to LinkedIn and YouTube, offers organizations the chance to join a conversation with millions of customers around the globe every day.

This promise is why nearly two-thirds of the 2,100 companies who participated in a recent survey by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services said they are either currently using social media channels or have social media plans in the works. But many still say social media is an experiment, as they try to understand how to best use the different channels, gauge their effectiveness, and integrate social media into their strategy.

Despite the vast potential social media brings, many companies seem focused on social media activity primarily as a one-way promotional channel and have yet to capitalize on the ability to not only listen to, but analyze, consumer conversations and turn the information into insights that impact the bottom line.

For instance:

- Three-quarters (75%) of the companies in the survey said they did not know where their most valuable customers were talking about them.
- Nearly one-third (31%) do not measure effectiveness of social media.
- Less than one-quarter (23%) are using social media analytic tools.
- A fraction (7%) of participating companies are able to integrate social media into their marketing activities.

While still searching for best practice and measurements, two-thirds of the companies surveyed are convinced their use of social media will grow, and many anticipate investing more in it next year, even as spending in traditional media declines.

Only a small group — 12 percent — of the companies in the survey said they felt they were currently effective users of social media. These were the companies most likely to deploy multiple channels, use metrics, have a strategy for social media use, and integrate their social media into their overall marketing operations.

Clearly, most companies are still searching for the best practices and metrics so they can understand where to invest and target their social media activities and build their own competitive advantage. It will take those new tools and strategies to create what Avinash Kaushik, Google's Analytics Evangelist, describes as a new reality in harnessing the power of social media.

“Too many companies have not evolved from what I call ‘shout marketing’ — think TV, newspapers, magazine ads — to influence by initiating and participating in conversations with consumers,” he said. “There needs to be a generational shift.”

The emergence of Internet-based social media has started a new kind of conversation among consumers and companies, challenging traditional ideas about marketing and brand management while creating new opportunities for organizations to understand customers and connect with them instantly.

The proliferation of social media channels is mind-boggling. Publishing tools like TypePad and WordPress offer any company or customer the chance to write a blog, while microblogging on Twitter allows a rapid-fire stream of real-time commentary, complaints, and recommendations. Social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn bring together friends, fans, and detractors, while wikis and social news sites like Delicious and Digg quickly move links and ideas around the Web. Customers planning a vacation, a meal, or a haircut can turn to customer review sites like Trip Advisor and Yelp. Meanwhile, on multimedia sites like YouTube, companies can post promotional clips, while disgruntled consumers can capture scenes of poor service or damaged products on their iPhones and quickly upload the video.

The growth in use of these channels is equally astounding. Twitter reached a benchmark of 50 million tweets this year. Facebook has over 500 million worldwide users, and based on current growth rates, projects one billion total users by 2011. The average amount of time spent on social networking sites increased 82% last year. And it is not just a phenomenon among the young: according to Forrester research, a third of adults post at least once a week to social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and about 70% read blogs and tweets, and watch YouTube.

Never before have companies had the opportunity to talk to millions of customers, send out messages, get fast feedback, and experiment with offers at relatively low costs. And never before have millions of consumers had the ability to talk to each other, criticizing or recommending products — without the knowledge or input from a company. “Conventional marketing wisdom long held that a dissatisfied customer tells ten people. But...in the new age of social media, he or she has the tools to tell ten million.” says Paul Gillin, author of *The New Influencers*.

It is that power that companies are seeking ways to harness, as social media has moved from the margins to the mainstream; according to a new survey by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, more than three-quarters (79% ) of the 2,100 organizations surveyed said they are either currently using social media channels (58%) or preparing to launch social media initiatives (21%).

But the majority of these companies also said they were still struggling with how to best use the different channels, gauge their effectiveness, and integrate social media into their strategies. Two-thirds of users have no formalized social media strategy in place. Sixty-one percent reported a significant learning curve before they can truly utilize social media. Many companies reported they are still searching to find the best way to demonstrate the impact of social media and the contribution to the bottom line. (Figure 1)

Many organizations seem to operate under old paradigms, viewing social media as one-way flow marketing messages, instead of capitalizing on the opportunity to monitor, analyze, and participate in the millions of conversations between consumers.

For instance, while more than half are using social media, only about one-quarter of users said they could identify where their most valuable customers are “talking” about them. And, less than one-quarter (23%) are using any form of social media analytic tools, with only 5% using some form of customer sentiment analysis.

**FIGURE 1 Attitudes Toward Social Media**

**QUESTION:** Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements about social media in your organization?



*"Without monitoring conversations on the Web, you won't know who's talking about your brand, your products, or your services..."*

Only a handful of users (7%) said they are able to integrate social media into their overall marketing strategy, such as campaign management, retail analytics, CRM and business intelligence.

Without such information and integration, companies are missing the chance to effectively market products, find new opportunity and manage their reputation, says leading author and analytics expert Tom Davenport.

"Without monitoring conversations on the Web, you won't know who's talking about your brand and your products or services, and what the positive and negative sentiments are about them," says Davenport. "You won't know how influential a particular praising or criticizing customer is. You won't be

able to compare different brand messages, commercial videos, etc. and see what the quick reaction is to them. In short, you're missing a lot of marketing opportunity."

In the survey, there was a small group of companies — just 12% — who described themselves as effective users. This group comprised a kind of "best practices" segment. They were much more likely to be fully leveraging the benefits of social media by using multiple social media channels to reach customers, learn about customers, research new products, and establish user groups among customers. This group was also far more likely than others to integrate their social media monitoring solution with their other marketing solutions.

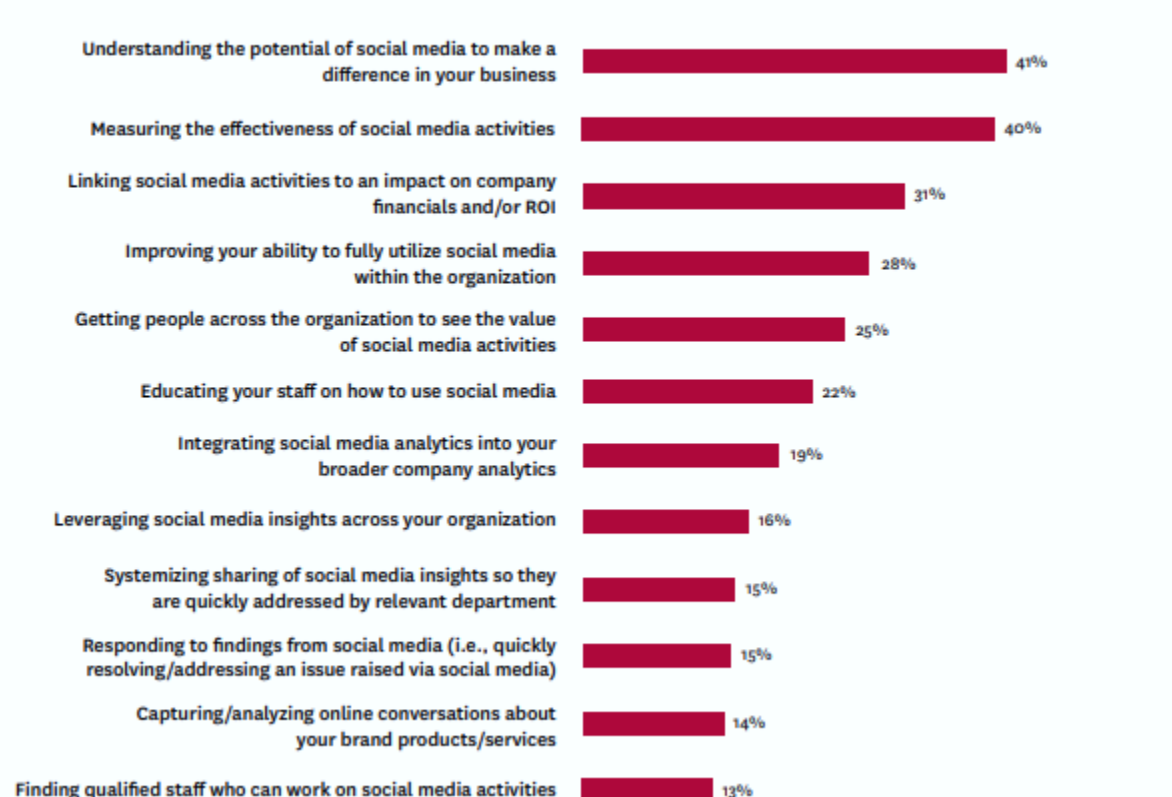
Given these findings, it is not surprising that for many companies the most pressing challenges with social media are in understanding the potential to make a difference in their business, measuring its effectiveness, and aligning social media activities to an impact on company financials. (Figure 2)

Yet without good metrics and tangible evidence of impact, the majority of the executives in the survey said their organizations cannot take social media efforts seriously. And that poses a challenge for companies, says Avinash Kaushik, Google's Analytics Evangelist and author of *Web Analytics 2.0*, because social media can build up a great deal of data, but not necessarily generate great insights that translate into action and then more customers and sales.

Counting clicks and tweets and postings is nice, he says, but, "our bosses care about something far simpler — what has the Web done for me today?"

**FIGURE 2 Most Pressing Current Challenges**

**QUESTION:** Which of the following are the three most pressing challenges that your organization currently faces (or anticipate you'll face) with regard to social media? (Select up to three)



### The Current User View: Experimenting to Find a Strategy

For many companies, social media use is still viewed as an experiment, where discrete projects are launched, usually by a few individuals in marketing or communications. Some said they limit their activities because they are in a “test” mode and lack resources to do more. Others said the organizations are wary because they perceive dangers in exposure and lack of control of the conversation on the Web.

“Social media is a big ocean and we are pulling in a little bay where we are more protected,” said a global partner in a health and benefits consulting company.

Among companies currently using social media in the survey, half said the main benefit of their activity was increasing awareness of the organization and its products and services among target customers. Twenty-six percent said social media usage lead to more favorable perceptions of the organization, products, or services. Another 30% see an increase in traffic to their website as a prime benefit, but only 29% report collecting and tracking customer reviews on their website or other websites. (Figure 3)

It was striking that more accountable benefits were far lower down the list.



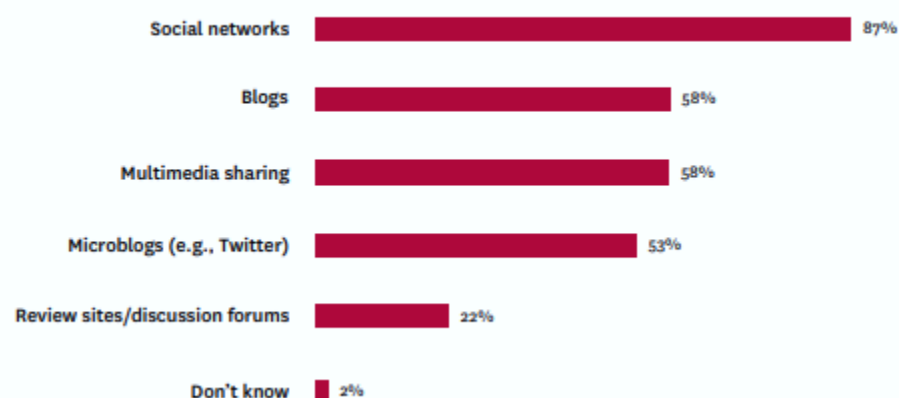
FIGURE 3 Primary Benefits

**QUESTION:** What have been the three primary benefits that use of social media has brought to your organization?  
(Select up to three)



FIGURE 4 Current Usage of Social Media

**QUESTION:** Is your organization using any of the following media channels? (Check all that apply)



While 23% said social media did give them some ability to monitor what was being said, only 9% said that the ability to measure the frequency of discussion about the organization was a current benefit and only 18% said they were able to identify positive and negative comments.

In short, many organizations' activities seem more focused on "making noise" about their company and products, and less on understanding and participating in the conversations already going on about them on the Web.

Among all companies, social networking sites were the most popular form of social media, with the majority (87%) using sites like Facebook. More than half (58%) reported using blogs or multimedia sharing. Fifty-three percent use microblogs. (Figure 4)

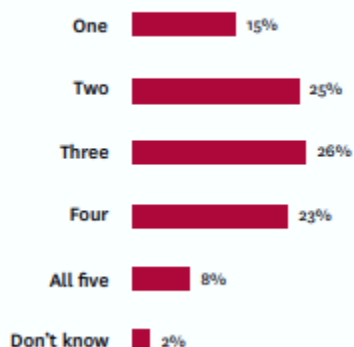
The most common combinations of channels are blogs, social networking sites, and either multimedia sharing sites like YouTube, or microblogs. (Figure 5)

Some examples:

- A mid-sized U.S. industrial supply company uses a blog to comment on business issues, which reporters follow, while also using Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter to reach customers. The company monitors customers' and analysts' comments to take a proactive approach in responding. "If we reach out and respond to someone who makes a comment about us in a social media channel, it makes a huge impact," says the director of customer experience. "We know that people are out in social media channels seeking information and researching. We need to use social media to influence their buying behavior."

**FIGURE 5 Number of Channels/Technologies Used**

**QUESTION:** Is your organization using any of the following media channels? (Check all that apply)



The average organization is utilizing three different social media channels. The most common combinations are:

- Blogs + social network + multimedia sharing (36%)
- Blogs + social network + microblogs (35%)

*"We know that people are out in social media channels seeking information and researching. We need to use social media to influence their buying behavior."*

- A major publishing and training company uses social media for recruitment by posting interviews of employees on YouTube: "It gets a lot of attention and it is an easy, inexpensive way of getting the message out about the kind of company we are," says the director of communications. The company also uses Twitter and Facebook for marketing and generating PR

about new books and other products and has launched internal blogs to keep employees connected to each other.

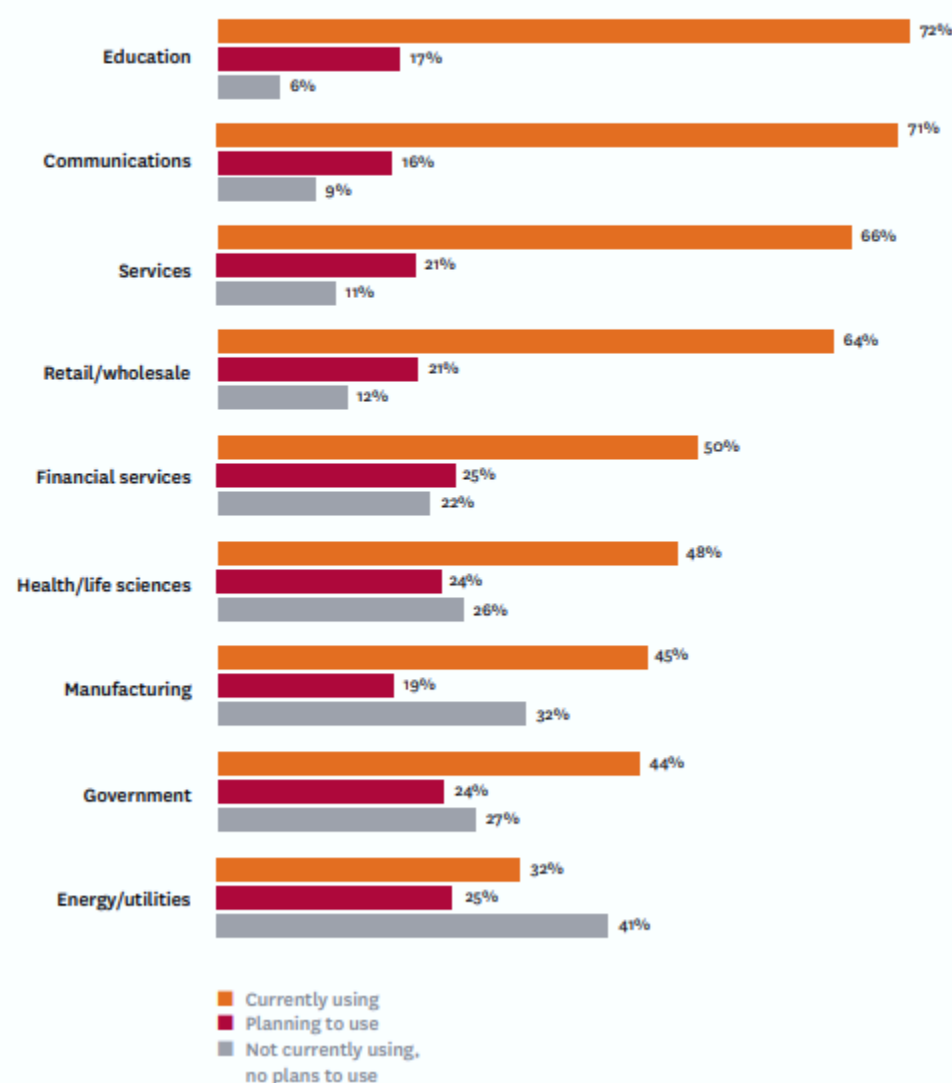
- A large U.S.-based industrial production management company launched a blog to gain more visibility for its experts who install and optimize products in plants. The program has now expanded to include LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Email exchanges between experts and customers with problems are regularly posted in the social media channels. “Right now, there is a lot of expertise trapped in mailboxes and folders and it’s not visible,” says the chief blogger. “Marketing brochures are not the language customers use. Social media lets the experts escape the prim and proper marketing talk.”
- A European company, with supermarkets as well as food and beverage manufacturing operations, focuses social media efforts around Facebook. Some pages focus on the company; others, built by customers, discuss specific products. The company is building a site where consumers receive information about new products and vote pro or con on the product ideas. A moderating system also is used to screen blogs. “Sometimes, you find little jewels of insight. It can also be a warning system if anything is growing into an uproar,” says the vice president of corporate development. “Speed is important too. Social media tells you whether people like a TV commercial without waiting for their buying behaviors to show you.”

Both small and large companies reported some form of social media use, like those described above. Smaller organizations more often described social media as an opportunity for increasing awareness, Web traffic, and new business. Larger organizations were more likely to see social media in terms of tools that help them monitor perceptions and identify positive and negative comments.

Social media use was most often reported in the education (72%), communications (71%), services (66%), and retail/wholesale (61%) sectors. The least active were energy and utility companies (41%), manufacturing companies (32%), and government organizations (27%). (Figure 6)

**FIGURE 6 Adoption of Social Media**

**QUESTION:** Which of the following indicates how your organization is using social media in any way for business purposes?  
By social media, we mean Web based channels and technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, discussion forums, online communities, etc.



One-quarter of the respondents said they do not use social media and have no plans to do so. “Investors and customers are not using social media to find out about us,” said a vice president of investor relations at a multinational packaging firm. “We don’t interact directly with consumers; we go through business channels. We are very sensitive about any part of the company that interacts with the public.”

Within user organizations, the marketing department plays a key role with social media efforts most likely to be directed by the marketing department (69%), followed by the communications, PR, and Web teams. (Figure 7)

Just 20% of social media users have a dedicated budget for their social media activities, with marketing controlling that budget in almost half the companies.

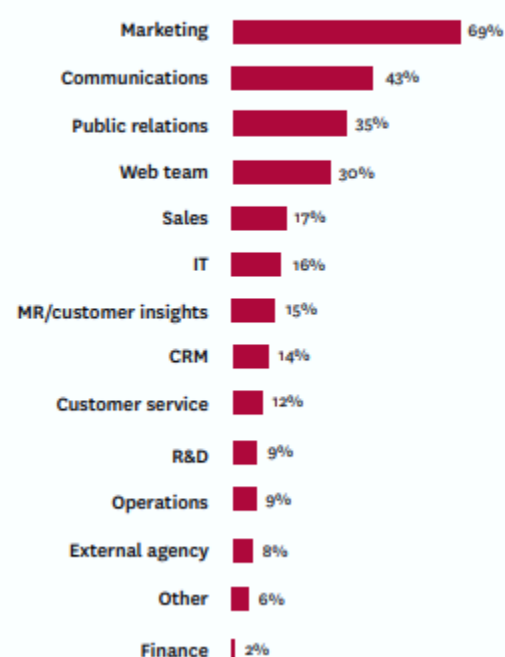
About a quarter of the users outsource some social media activities to public relations agencies or others. Only a handful of organizations (12%) have dedicated staffs who work only on social media: the rest said that social media is only “part of the job” for employees in areas like marketing, PR, and communications. Overall, half (49%) have up to one full-time equivalent working on social media.

This reflects just how experimental many organizations view social media and how they have been reluctant to commit resources, perhaps because they are still not certain of its goals, effectiveness, and impact on the organization.

“At the C-suite level, they don’t want to talk about social media because they don’t understand it,” said the vice president for strategy at a multinational construction company. “If we don’t get education out about the benefits of social media and get businesspeople to adopt it, it could put us at a serious disadvantage.”

**FIGURE 7 Social Media Responsibility**

**QUESTION:** Which areas of your organization are responsible for the development of your organization's social media strategy?  
(Check all that apply)



*"It's hard to define value when we are still trying to measure it. We will get it eventually, but right now we are stabbing in the dark for measurement criteria."*

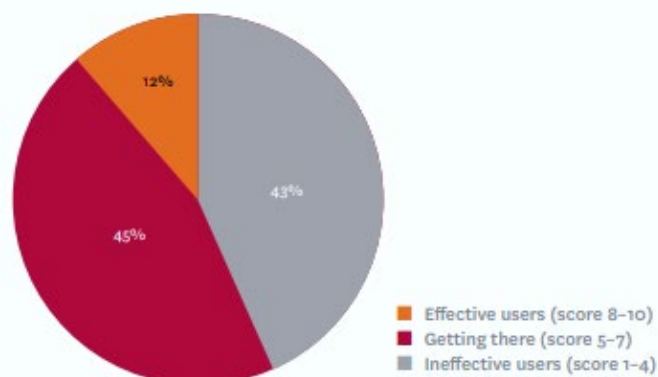
## Effective Users: A Snapshot of Best Practices

Within the survey, a small group of companies (12%) who identified themselves as “effective users” of social media shared some common practices. (Figure 8) They have moved beyond seeing social media as a “shiny object” or fad and have started to see it as another part of their overall marketing strategy. While experimenting with their own social media offerings, they were more likely to be measuring their efforts as well as the social conversations about them. (Figures 9 and 10)

- Effective users are far more likely to use more social media channels — four or more — and much more likely to be doing more multi-media sharing, and participating in review sites, discussion forums, and blogs.
- Sixty-three percent of the effective users said they have developed and implemented a social media strategy.

**FIGURE 8 Effectiveness of Use**

**QUESTION:** How effectively do you feel your organization is currently using social media?  
Please use a scale of 1 to 10 where 1=not at all effectively and 10=extremely effectively.



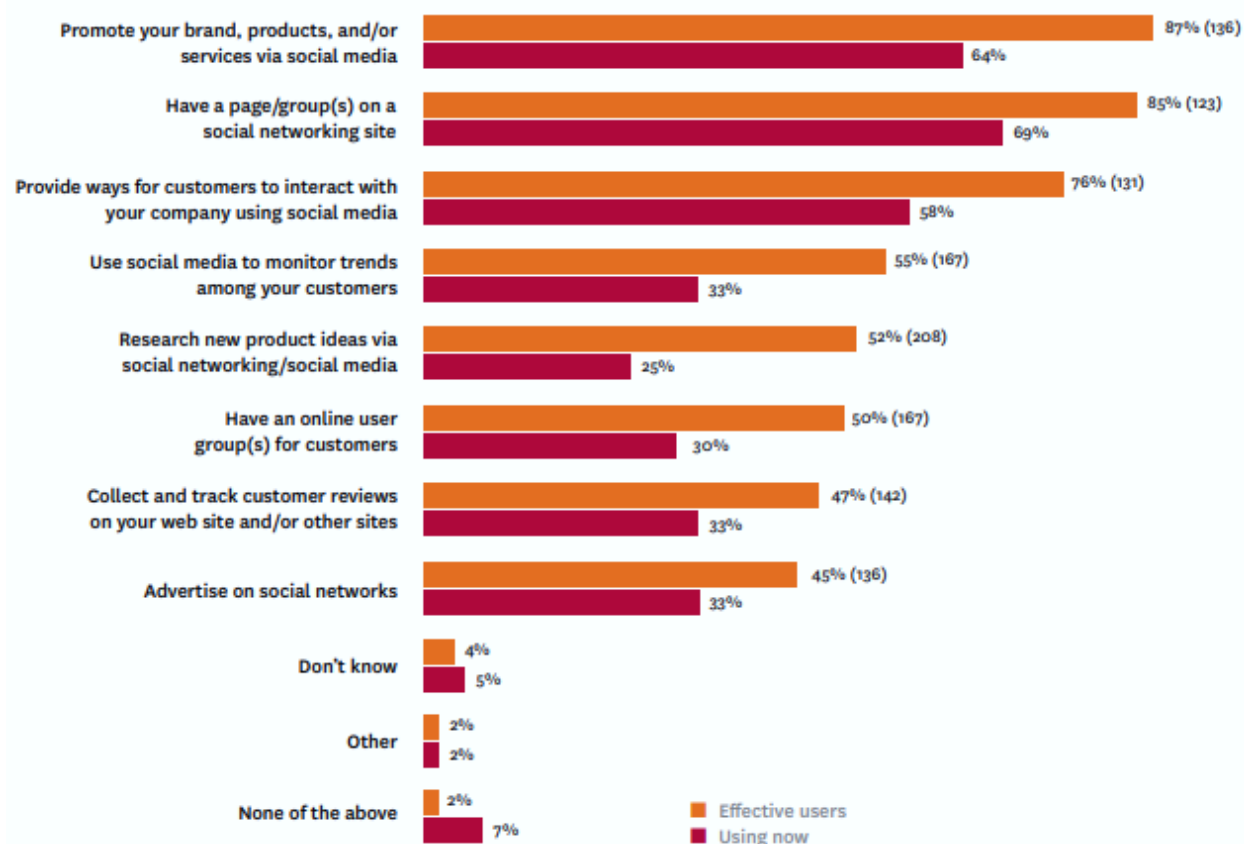
Only around 1 in 10 feel they are utilizing social media effectively. Those more likely than others to say their usage of social media is effective are:

- Retail sector (index of 160)
- Orgs with 10,000+ employees (143)
- Computer services sector (133)
- Professional services sector (126)

FIGURE 9 Type of Social Media Usage

All currently using social media vs. effective users (index in brackets)

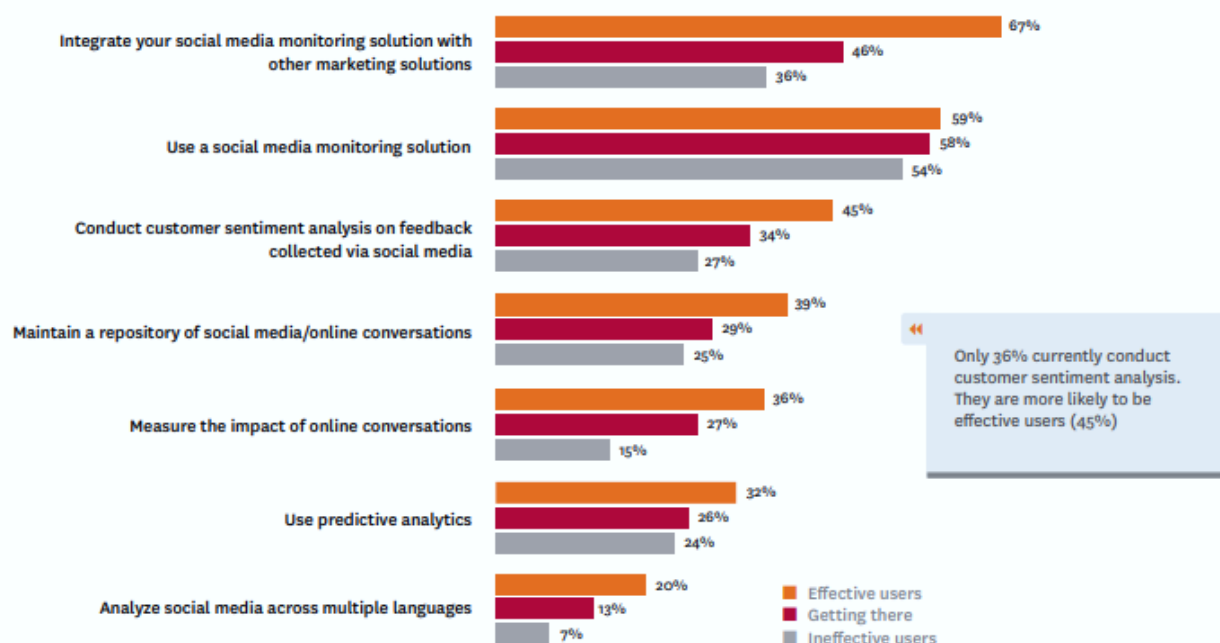
QUESTIONS: Does your organization currently... (check all that apply)



- Effective users are more likely to use social media to monitor trends, research new product ideas via social networks, have an online user group for customers, and collect and track customer reviews on their website.
- Effective users are more likely to know where customers are talking about them on the Web and prioritize their social media activities accordingly. Out of all the executives in the survey, only one-quarter said they could target where their most important customer segments discussed their brands and services. That number rose to almost 70% among effective users.
  - For instance, a team at a large U.S. construction materials firm set out to research how their different customer segments found information using social media and devised a four-channel social media strategy based on that research. The company uses Twitter to get news in front of reporters; LinkedIn is where company salespeople post scholarly articles to share with each other and their customers; their Facebook page focuses on the company's social responsibility efforts, while the company blog is more of an exchange with customers.

FIGURE 10 Social Media Analytics Undertaken

QUESTIONS: Which of the following social media analytic activities do you currently do? (Check all that apply)



- A major health and benefits firm is offering online interactive conferences and sets up “fence posts” on LinkedIn, YouTube and Facebook. “Our strategy is not about a bunch of hits in the short term, but in developing a relationship with the younger generations, who know social media and will someday be the boss,” said the director of global marketing. The company found social media is a “huge driver” of traffic to their corporate website.
- Just 20% of social media users have a dedicated budget for their social media activities. Effective users are twice as likely (44%) to have a social media budget as those who are in the “getting there” category.

*“If we don’t get education out about the benefits of social media, and get businesspeople to adopt it, it could put us at a serious disadvantage.”*

The use of metrics and analytic tools also sets the effective users apart. (Figure 11)

Effective users are much more focused on measurement: 45% of effective users reported they conduct customer sentiment analysis on feedback collected via social media. And effective users were far more likely than others to integrate their social media monitoring solution with other marketing solutions such as campaign management and email marketing.

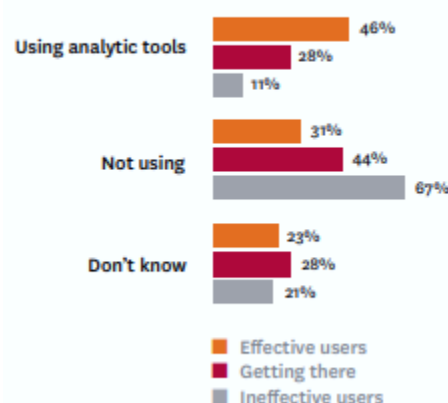
But even among this group much experimentation and uncertainty exist around measurement of social media. “It’s hard to define value when we are still trying to measure it,” said an executive at a global



education publishing and training company. “We will get it eventually, but right now we are stabbing in the dark for measurement criteria.”

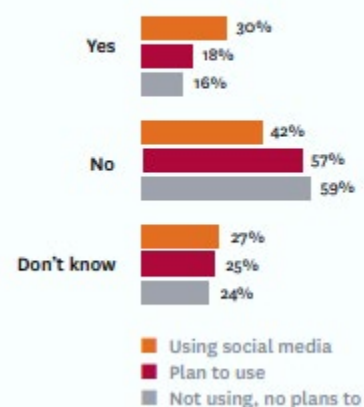
**FIGURE 11 Usage of Social Media Analytic Tools**

**QUESTION:** Are you using any type of social media analytic tools to continuously monitor and understand what people are saying about your brand, products and/or services online?



**FIGURE 12 Ability to Identify Where Most Important Customers Are Talking About Your Brand/Services**

**QUESTIONS:** Are you able to identify where on the Web your most important customers and/or segments of customers are “talking” about your brand, products, and/or services?



## The Case — and the Search — for Analytics

While the channels for conversation on the Web have proliferated, a huge amount of information is becoming available that could be extremely valuable to companies in fostering relationships with customers, developing new products, and monitoring their competition.

For instance, in April 2010, a study by Performics and ROI Research found that 33% of Twitter users share opinions about companies or products at least once per week. More than 30% make recommendations or seek guidance.

So companies might rightfully be anxious to understand who is talking about them on such channels and what are they saying, as well as trying to understand how their own social media efforts are perceived.

Yet nearly two-thirds of the companies in this survey did not know where their most important customers were talking about them on the Web. (See Figure 12)

About a third of those now using social media said they were not currently measuring its effectiveness. 60% of this group classified themselves as ineffective users.

Indeed, many companies are just beginning to see the need for social media measurement. Only half (51%) said they were aware of the term social media analytics, which are the tools used for measuring, analyzing and interpreting the results of interactions between brands and consumers across digital channels. That recognition of the term jumped to 75% among effective users.

Nearly half of users said that internal staff was responsible for measurement of social media. Another 19% used a mix of internal and external resources. But many relied on anecdotal monitoring instead of analysis.

“We have some people in the company privately monitoring Web comments, reading the blogs and getting a feel of what’s floating around,” said an executive from a European grocery and food products chain. “But that is without rigorous analysis, not quantitative or qualitative. We want to establish a rigorous process.”

There was a good deal of uncertainty about which measures, and tools should be used.

“Right now, we have a paucity of good analytic models to quantify the impact of social media,” said the vice president for strategy in an international construction company. “It’s like the old joke of asking five blind-folded people to touch an elephant and describe what it is. Social media is different things to different people and there is no good analytical framework to measure it. Just as TV advertising had to figure out an ROI, there will be the same evolution in social media.”

Only 5% reported using customer sentiment analysis, tools that gather information about the topics and opinions — positive and negative — that appear in conversations on the Web. With such an ocean of reviews, ratings, and recommendations available, these tools offer the promise of filtering out the noise, identifying relevant content and understanding trends.

But a great deal of concern seemed to surround the efficacy of current customer sentiment analysis tools. Among those effective users who have customer sentiment analysis tools in place, only about one-third (37%) are confident in the accuracy of the findings from the tools. Some of this stems from worries that the computer algorithms could not accurately distinguish linguistic nuance, differing context, or cultural factors in deciphering the meaning of a blog post or a tweet, since humans themselves often disagree on the meaning of a word or a comment.

“I think some analytics can get a sense of a trend, if a product is being mentioned, but I haven’t seen proof that can really get at emotion and sort it out,” says a marketing executive in a global restaurant business. “I think we still have a way to go to get there.”

But clearly there is growing interest in this form of analytics. Thirty-six percent of the companies in the survey said they plan to conduct customer sentiment analysis in the next two to three years, 33% said

they would be using social monitoring solutions, and one-quarter (27%) said they would use predictive analytics and one-quarter (26%) will measure the impact of online conversations.

“My bottom line is anybody who isn’t actively listening in social media channels is naïve — anyone is crazy not to,” said the director of customer experience at a midsized B2B supply firm. “A lot of companies who spend a lot of money in formal customer data collection would be surprised at the extra dimension of listening to informal comments. It’s like you are eavesdropping on a phone conversation, when the average Joe on the street is tweeting online at the supermarket. You find people who you didn’t know were strong detractors or supporters of your company.”

*"When it comes to really groundbreaking ways of reaching people, social media has so many more legs still to go. We are just at the beginning of this."*

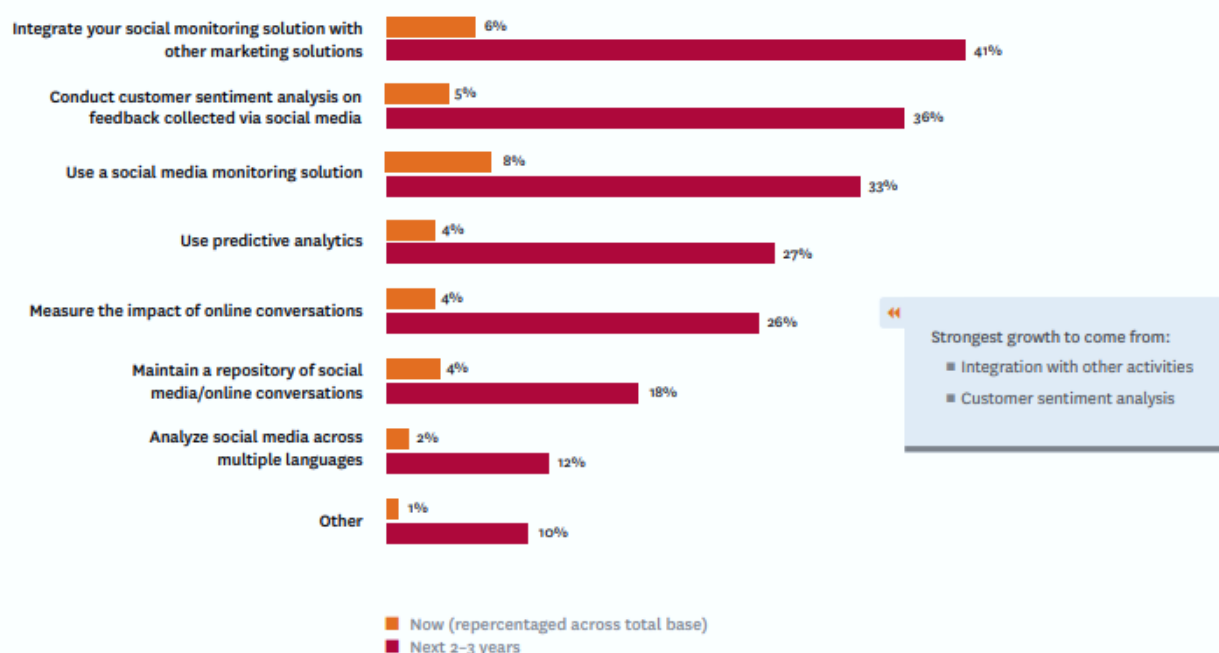
Looking to the future, 41% said a primary goal will be to integrate social media monitoring solutions with other marketing solutions, so that they can understand not just what is being said, but who is saying and its impact. (Figure 13)

Said an executive at a global insurance company who described his organization as an effective user: “We’d like to combine social media and marketing analytic tools at some point. But right now, we’re not a well-oiled machine. We just have bits and pieces.”

**FIGURE 13 Analytic Usage: Current vs. Future Intentions**

**QUESTION 1:** Which of the following social media analytic activities do you currently do? (Check all that apply)

**QUESTION 2:** Which of the following social media analytic activities do you plan on doing in the next two to three years? (Check all that apply)



## CONCLUSION

Social media is rapidly becoming a new force in organizations around the world, allowing them to reach out to and understand consumers as never before. In many companies, it will move from a “one-off initiative” to be an important, integrated tool in marketing and communications strategies.

Use of social media will clearly expand in the coming years. Two-thirds of the companies in the survey predicted their use of social media would grow significantly over the next few years, as the awareness of the power of social media has grown in their companies. Among organizations that already have a budget for social media, spending was expected to increase by 30% or more over the next 12 months, even as overall dollars for marketing and advertising have dropped for many companies during the recession.

But as social media creates new opportunity, it also demands a shift in thinking about marketing and the measures of success. Those companies who are most effective in social media now are not only experimenting with multiple channels, but also creating metrics to measure impact and using new tools to understand how to enter into a new conversation with their customers. In the future, effective use of social media will be led by these organizations that are able to enter into this new relationship with customers, employees, and partners.

“Things that change relationships fundamentally are the things that you really need to pay attention to, because those are the things that matter and change the way that you have to run and act in your business,” said Charlene Li, author of *Groundswell* and *Open Leadership*.

“I think when it comes to really groundbreaking ways of reaching people, social media has so many more legs still to go. We are just at the beginning of this.”