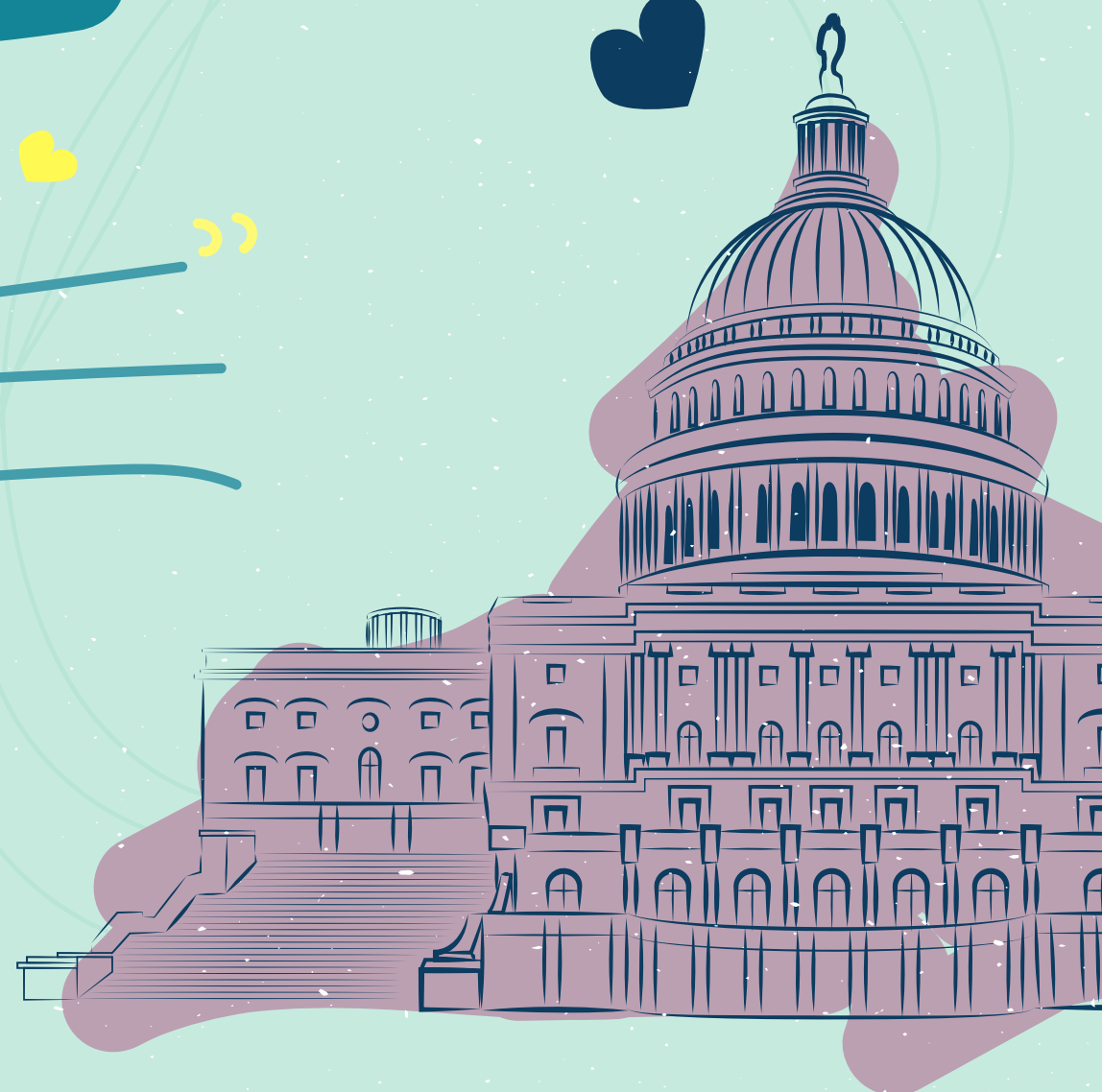# THE STATE OF
Social Media
in the Public Sector

ArchiveSocial

INTRODUCTION

The past year transformed social media communication for public entities, accelerating the use and intensity of dialog, as well as the rates of lawsuits and legislation involving social media.

We saw public sector social media pages face new volumes of comments, trolling, and misinformation. And the speed of change combined with the constant demand for engagement put great amounts of stress on communicators to successfully utilize each platform.

In 2020 we started an annual initiative to help public sector communicators keep up with the always evolving networks and prepare their social media presence for the future. This year, we surveyed more than 600 government agencies, police departments and school districts, and interestingly enough found more than half of respondents are a team of one or two people - that means managing your time efficiently is going to be paramount. With this report, we aim to help public communicators get a better handle on how best to manage their time, mitigate risk, measure success, and have a resource to take to their leadership that highlights the proven value of social media.

Alix Bowman
Director of Customer Experience
for ArchiveSocial

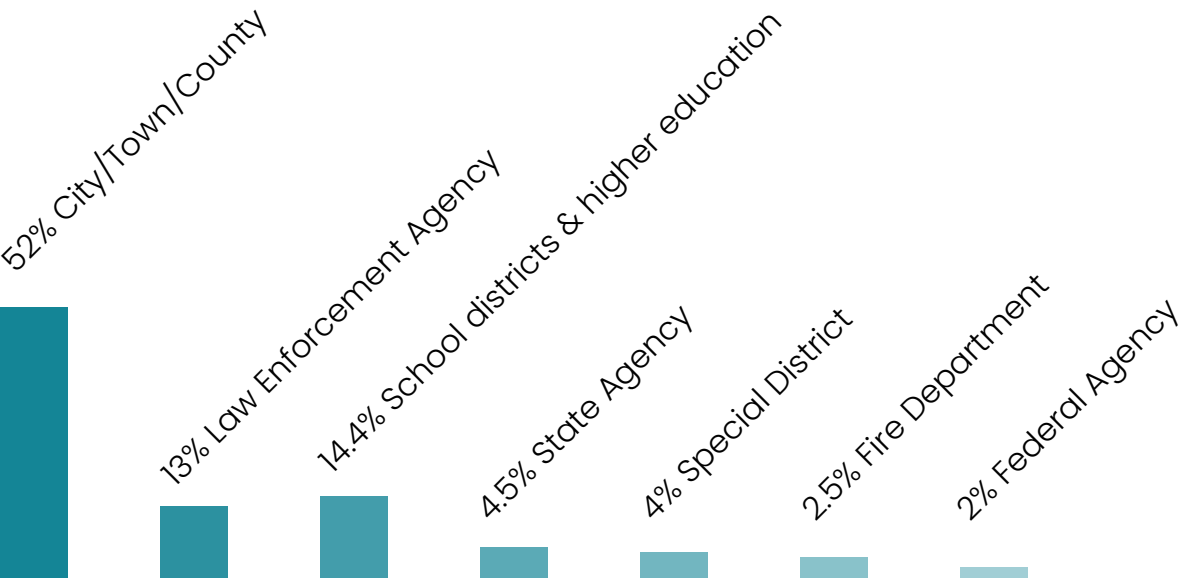We're happy to present you the Second-Annual State of Social Media in the Public Sector 2021 Survey Report!
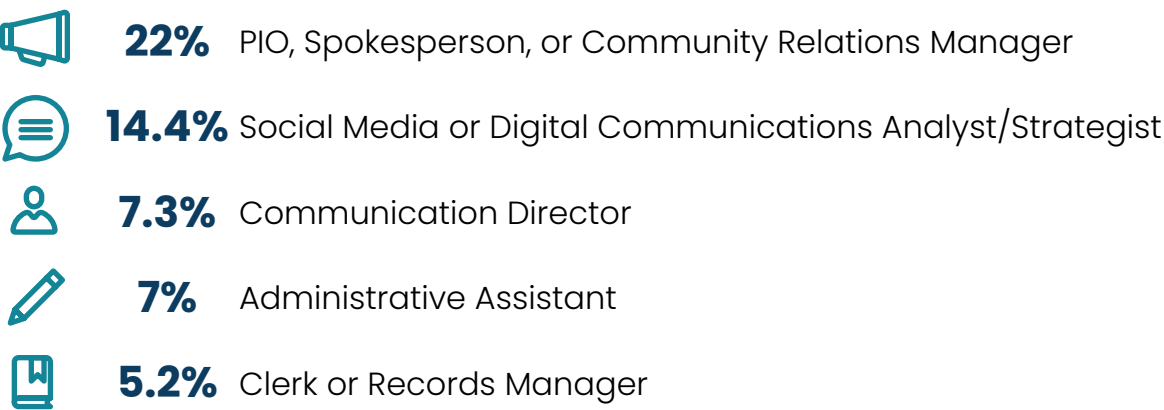
CONTENTS

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

This year, communicators from more than 600 government agencies, police departments and school districts, responded to our survey on the State of Social Media in the Public Sector. These respondents answered questions on how their agencies are using social media, the challenges they face, and the success they've foun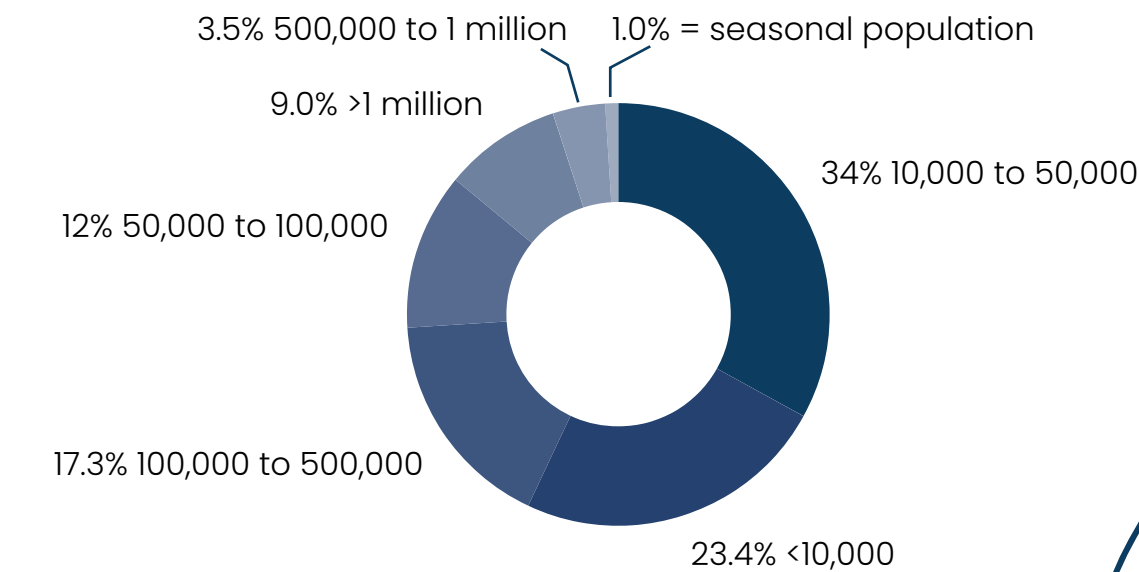d, even in the dark days of 2020. With this report, we aim to help you in your role as a public communicator, to better manage your time, mitigate risk, and measure your success. Most of all, we want to provide you with concrete data from your peers that can help you highlight the value of social media to others in your organization and demonstrate the need to fully support this crucial channel in your communication strategy.

Who did we talk to?

- 52% City/Town/County
- 13% Law Enforcement Agency
- 14.4% School districts & higher education
- 4.5% State Agency
- 4% Special District
- 2.5% Fire Department
- 2% Federal Agency

Populations served

- 3.5% 500,000 to 1 million
- 1.0% = seasonal population
- 9.0% >1 million
- 34% 10,000 to 50,000
- 12% 50,000 to 100,000
- 17.3% 100,000 to 500,000
- 23.4% <10,000

Roles

- **22%** PIO, Spokesperson, or Community Relations Manager
- **14.4%** Social Media or Digital Communications Analyst/Strategist
- **7.3%** Communication Director
- **7%** Administrative Assistant
- **5.2%** Clerk or Records Manager
- **4.2%** Public Relations Coordinator/Strategist
- **4%** IT Director/Manager
- **3.1%** Chief Administrator
- **3.1%** Chief of Police
- **3%** Marketing Manager/Director
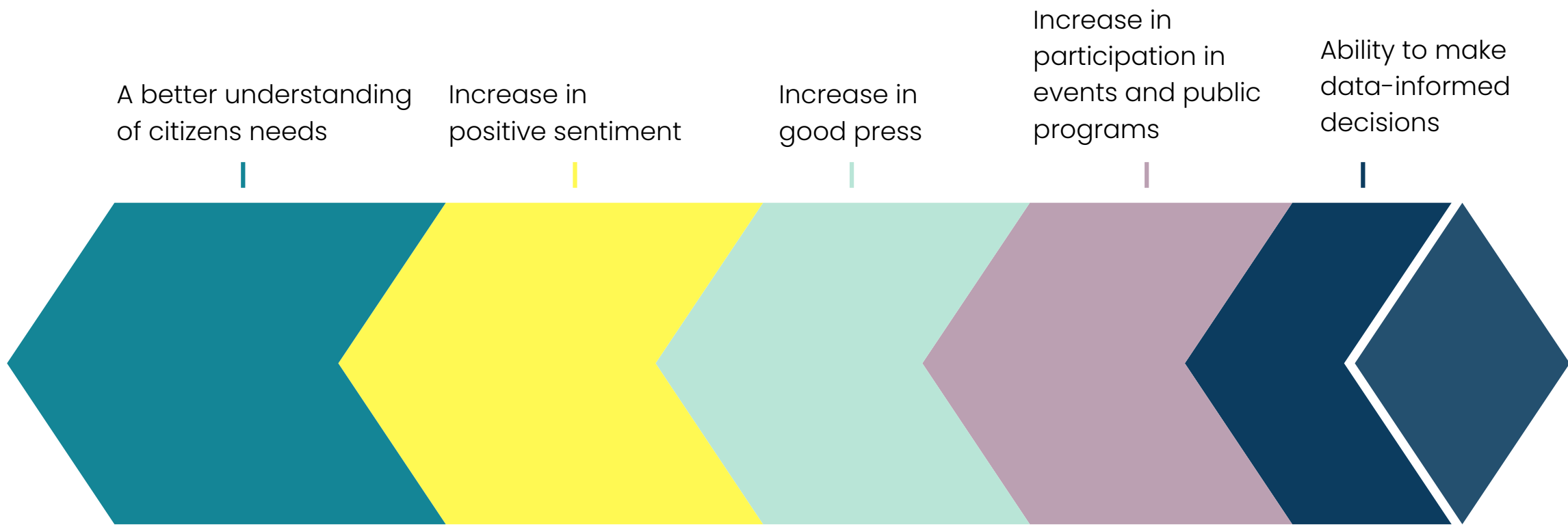
# WHY AGENCIES & DISTRICTS ARE PRIORITIZING SOCIAL MEDIA NOW MORE THAN EVER

Social media has become ingrained in our daily life. Even those who say they "don't do social" are impacted by its influence on our politics, our schools, and our families. For public communicators, it is a cost-effective way to connect with local audiences, humanize public servants, and garner support. In addition, social media has allowed the public sector to participate in community conversations, share valuable content, and build public trust in ways they've never been able to before.

Which of the following benefits has your public entity seen as the result of using social media for citizen engagement?

A better understanding of citizens needs

Increase in positive sentiment

Increase in good press

Increase in participation in events and public programs

Ability to make data-informed decisions

Which of the following benefits has your public entity seen as the result of using social media for customer care/service delivery?

Faster avg. response times

Reduction in volume of call

1

Cost savings

2

3
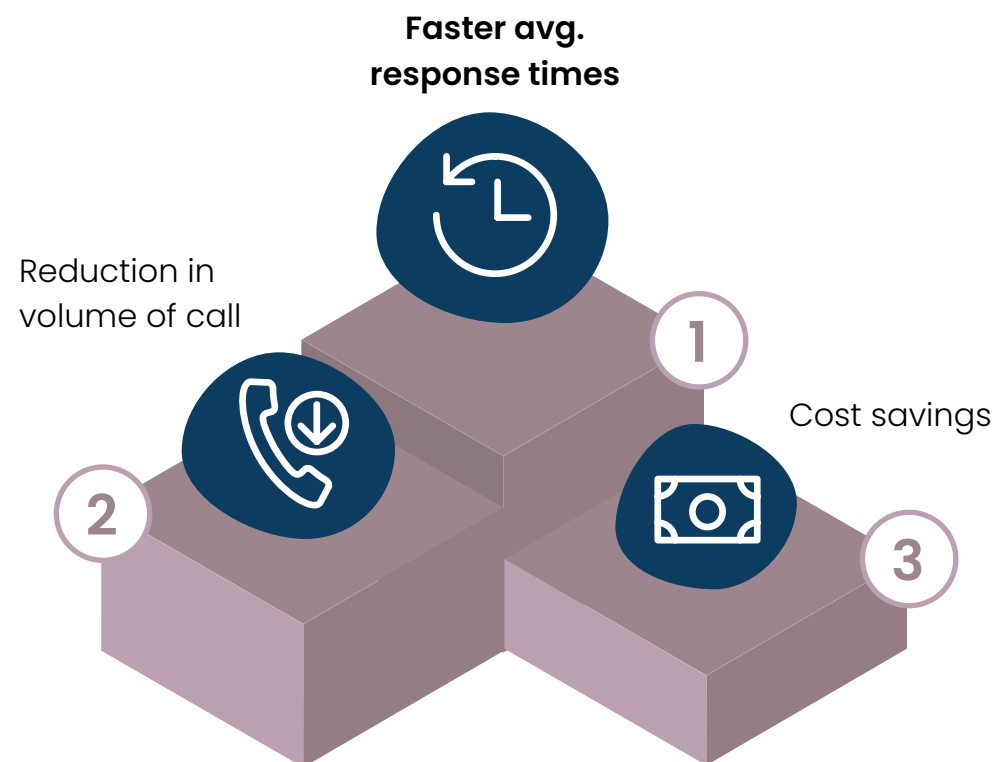
More than half the world now uses social media to seek out answers to questions and to get help. Public agencies and school districts who offer service to their constituents on these channels have seen tremendous benefits from having an established presence. Our survey revealed that the top benefits of using customer care and service delivery include **cost savings, faster average response times, and a reduction in call volume.**

School districts and higher education providers in particular shared that social media has been crucial in their efforts to maintain community connection during remote learning. These organizations have relied on their social channels to encourage participation in virtual events and community programming.

The majority of school district and higher education respondents (57%) indicated seeing an increase in participation in events and public programs as a result of using social media, and listed a better understanding of citizens needs and an increase in positive sentiment as a close second (44.3%).
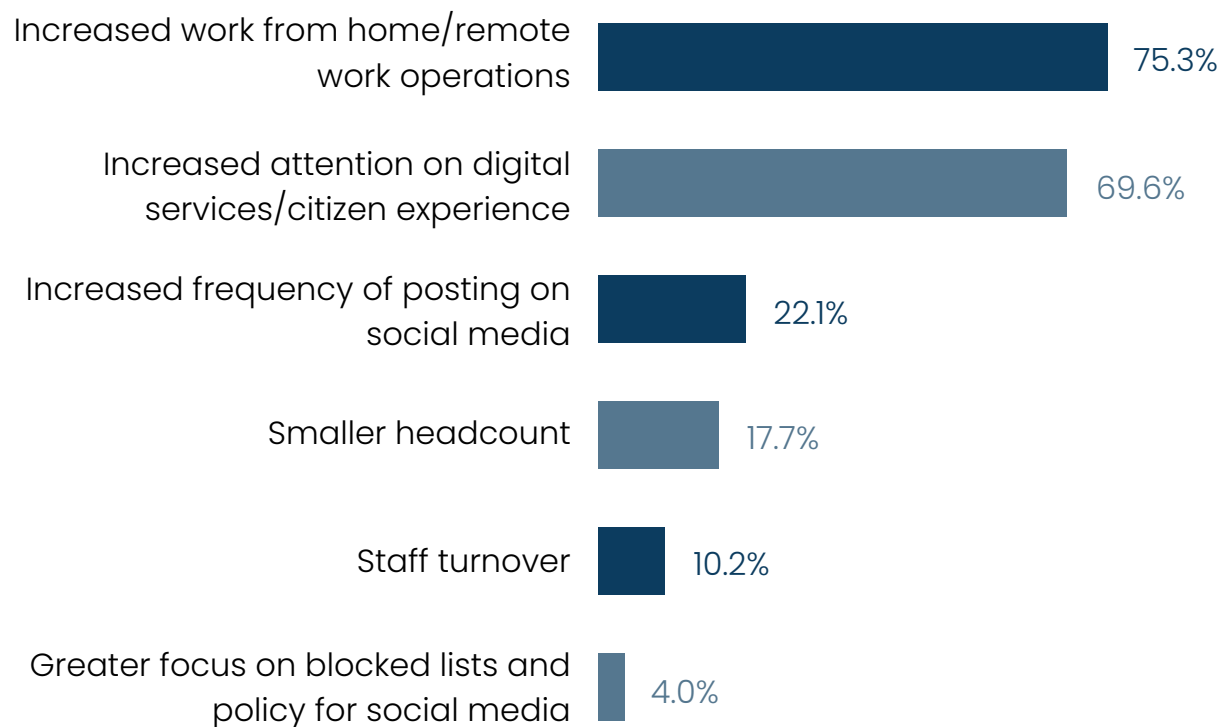
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 & THE EVENTS OF 2020

There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 had a significant impact on human interaction. Everything from school and work to personal celebrations and city council meetings moved online. This increase in online time included an increase in social media usage, providing an unexpected boost to engagement on these platforms. According to eMarketer[1], as many as half of US adults said they were using social media more now than before the pandemic, and all of the major social platforms also reported strong increases in engagement. Furthermore, a 2020 study by We Are Social[2] revealed that Americans spend an average of 6.43 hours a day online, which adds up to almost 100 days per year.

When we asked survey respondents how their public entity changed since COVID-19. **For the majority of respondents (75%), remote work operations increased. Not surprisingly, attention to digital services and citizen experience was not far behind (70%).** As schools and municipal offices closed, and public in-person events were canceled, communicators had no choice but to prioritize online access to information.

How has your public entity changed since COVID-19?

Category	Percentage
Increased work from home/remote work operations	75.3%
Increased attention on digital services/citizen experience	69.6%
Increased frequency of posting on social media	22.1%
Smaller headcount	17.7%
Staff turnover	10.2%
Greater focus on blocked lists and policy for social media	4.0%

Agencies and school districts responded to COVID-19 by focusing more on digital (follower counts increased, engagement increased, questions increased, posting frequency increased, rumors/misinformation increased), yet resources remained the same.
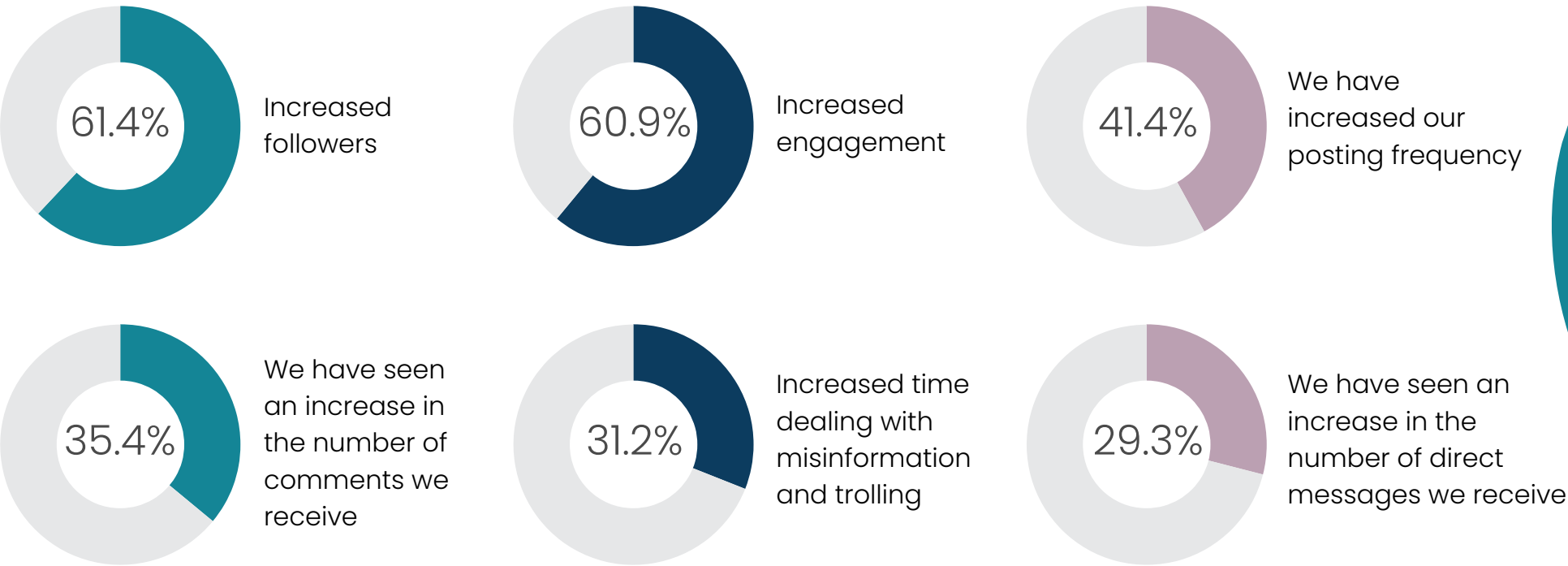
Public communicators were able to see the true power of social media as platforms became one of the only places for agencies and school districts to reach their communities and get critical information out to them in time. It also meant agencies and districts had to tackle a wave of misinformation and get ahead of rumors.

As attention to digital services accelerated, so did the toll it began to take on public communicators. As issues of widespread political unrest, racial inequality, and COVID-19 amplified levels of uncertainty online, agencies and school districts were forced to confront a huge spike in misinformation and troll activity. Public communicators quickly became overwhelmed, burnt out, under-resourced and looking for support.

Our prior-year survey indicated that social media teams were already operating with teams of only one or two, so with the COVID-related budget cuts, the sharp increase in questions and commentary on social media, and the stress of living through everything else that happened in the year, it should come as no surprise that staff-turnover was higher than usual, exacerbating the stress and pressure on already under-resourced teams.

How has your social media presence changed since COVID-19?

61.4% Increased followers

60.9% Increased engagement

41.4% We have increased our posting frequency

35.4% We have seen an increase in the number of comments we receive

31.2% Increased time dealing with misinformation and trolling

29.3% We have seen an increase in the number of direct messages we receive

The majority of school district and higher education respondents indicated seeing an increase in engagement (58%) and followers (52%).

So on the one hand, public communicators got the high engagement and reach that they are always hoping for, but on the other hand, the tenor of the discussion became difficult to manage. Many social media managers who had previously dreamed of receiving more comments and questions on their posts, and who had started the year in the habit of responding to everything found this approach unsustainable and were forced to develop new strategies and get serious about finding and building support for social media.

The top benefits school district and higher education saw included citizens being better informed (77.3%) and rumor control (64%).

Which of the following benefits has your public entity seen as the result of using social media for critical response communications?
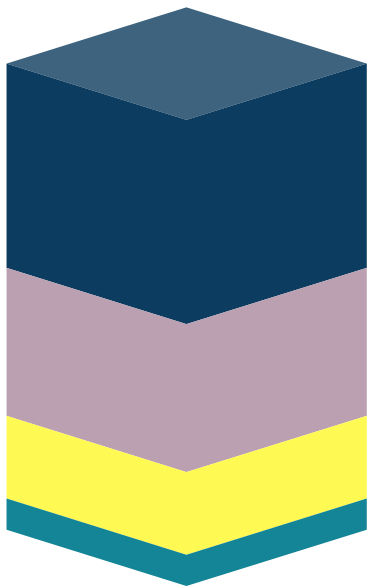
- 83.5% - Citizens are better informed
- 60.7% - Rumor control
- 33.9% - Faster response times
- 13.2% - Better coordinated teams
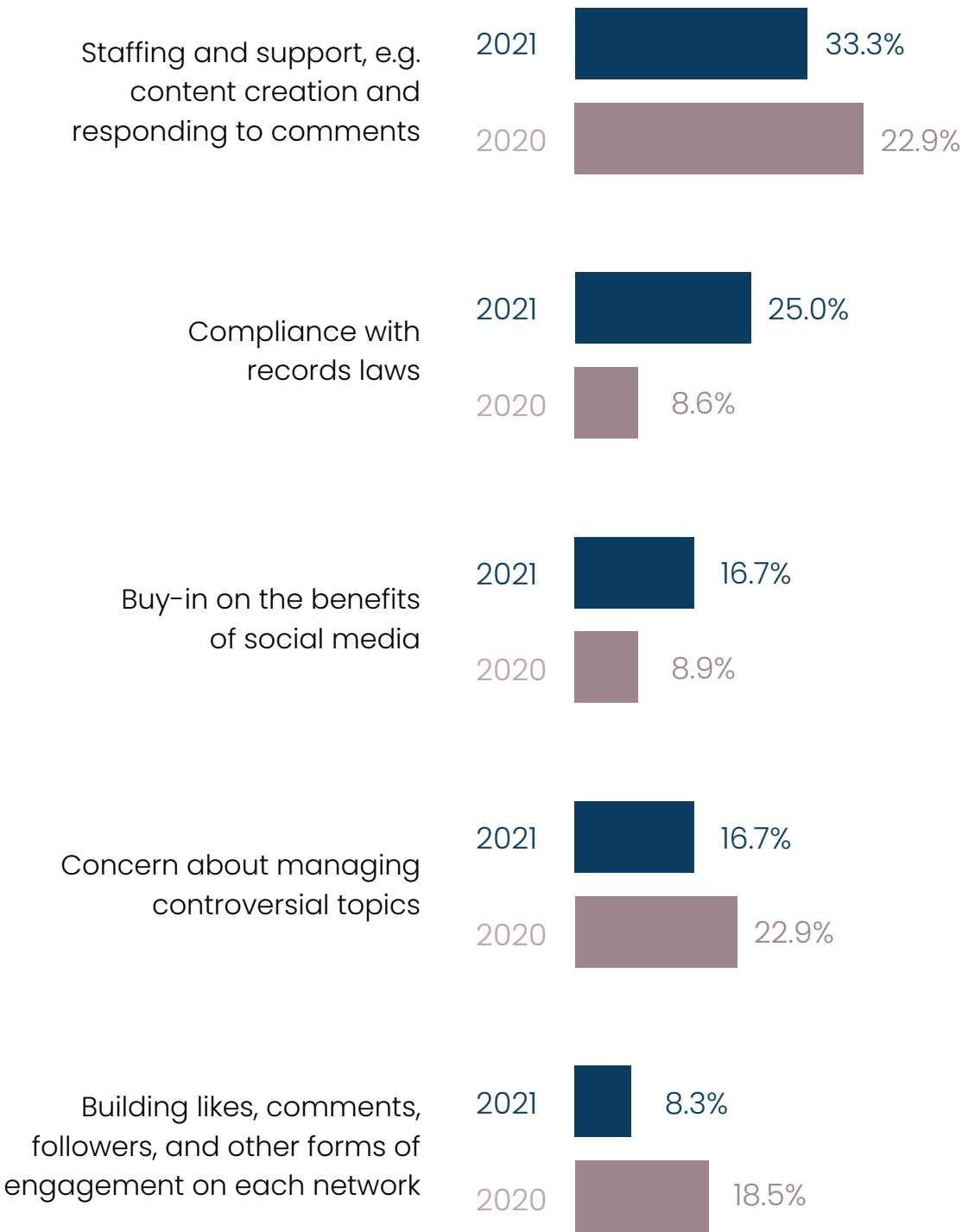
THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC SOCIAL MEDIA

Challenges to Adoption

One of the most revealing questions in the survey asked, "what is the biggest challenge to social media adoption by your district or agency?" Compared to last year's report, the number one challenge still had not changed: staffing and support (33%). While it's clear that the majority of agencies see the benefits of social media, and see it as necessary, these same districts and agencies are often unaware of the resources required to support an effective social media strategy.

Those who have recognized the necessity of social media are now gaining awareness that these channels have to be managed with an eye on compliance. With increased time spent online, public agencies and school districts have seen a corresponding rise in social media-related lawsuits. Agencies and districts have become more concerned over compliance with records laws, as evidenced by a 16.4% year over year increase in respondents citing this as the biggest challenge to adoption. This may also have contributed to the increase in communicators having trouble getting buy-in on the benefits of social media, which increased 7.8% YoY, as more people are asking, "is it worth it?".

On the plus side, even though higher-ups are more concerned about compliance, it does appear that there's an increased understanding of how to manage controversial topics. We saw concerns about managing controversial topics decrease 6.2% YoY.

The Biggest Challenge to Social Media Adoption by Agencies and Districts

Staffing and support, e.g. content creation and responding to comments
- 2021: 33.3%
- 2020: 22.9%

Compliance with records laws
- 2021: 25.0%
- 2020: 8.6%

Buy-in on the benefits of social media
- 2021: 16.7%
- 2020: 8.9%

Concern about managing controversial topics
- 2021: 16.7%
- 2020: 22.9%

Building likes, comments, followers, and other forms of engagement on each network
- 2021: 8.3%
- 2020: 18.5%

With 56.2% of respondents being a team of two or less, and almost 30% of respondents managing six or more accounts, staffing and support continues to be a major challenge that needs attention. A lot is expected of communicators and there can be a misconception that social media is easy to manage. But it's the opposite. These communicators are responsible for building a branded presence, continuously creating compelling content, responding to questions and messages, engaging with other people and content, and managing hot topics. Keep in mind, social media doesn't exist in a vacuum. All of this has to be managed in the context of the overall communications standards and goals of the agency or school district.

As if that's not enough, public communicators also have to mitigate risk for every account the agency or school district has, on every platform. And that's no easy job, as illustrated by the recent rise of records requests related to social media mentioned earlier There have been **100+ lawsuits and claims filed against local government public agencies and their employees over social media moderation issues** since January 2019.
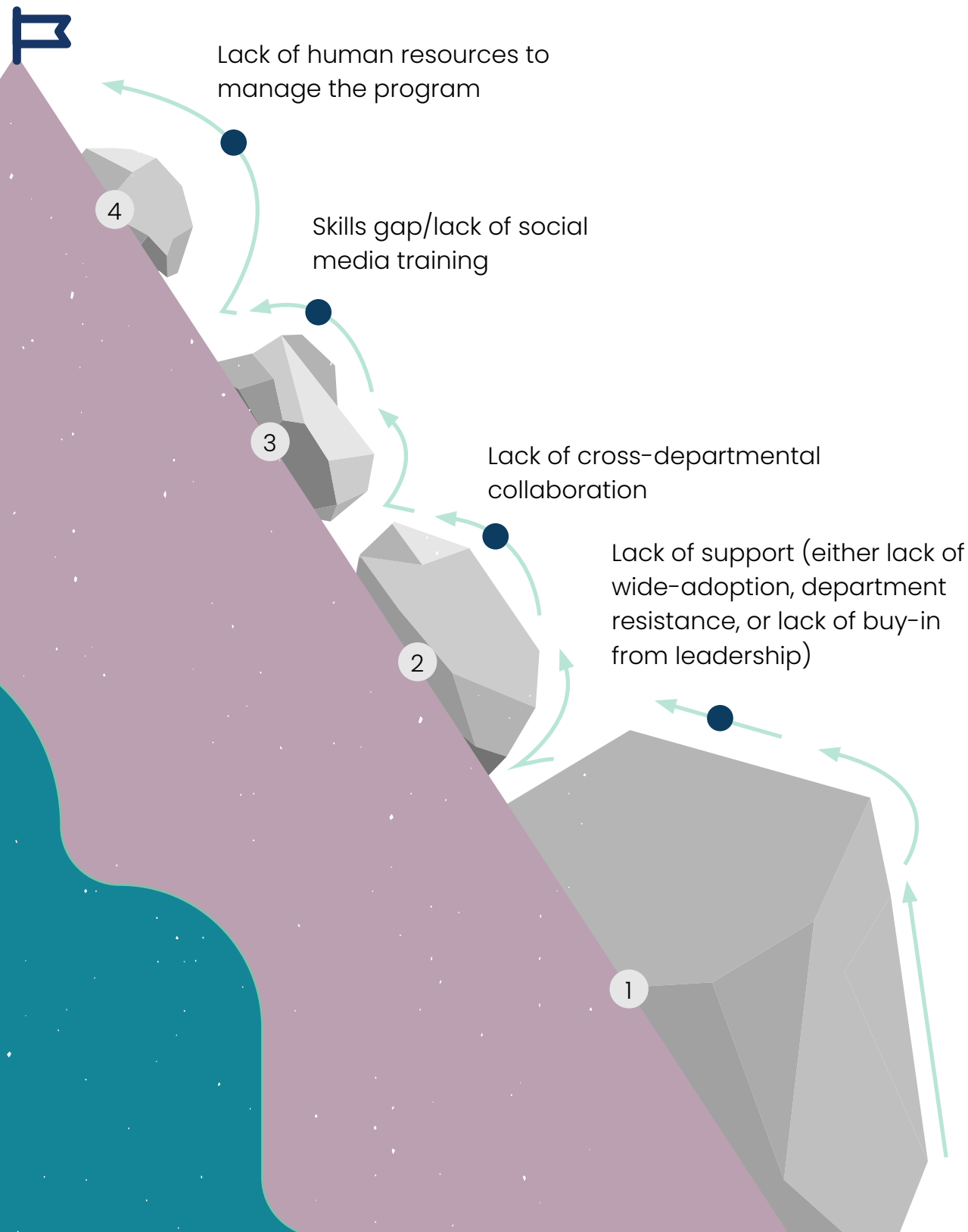
This is why a good, consistent policy and training is so important for everyone with access to your district or agency's social media. There is also a clear need for centralized oversight of accounts, and for districts and agencies to get serious about how they set up and manage their social media pages. In particular, municipalities need to consider offering training and support to their elected officials, whose actions on social media can end up costing municipalities thousands in legal fees and settlements. When elected officials aren't properly trained on things like public records law, personal and professional account separation, digital record policies, open meetings law, and campaigning on municipal pages, it is the districts and agencies they represent that often bear the consequences. We will cover trends in policy and training later in this report.
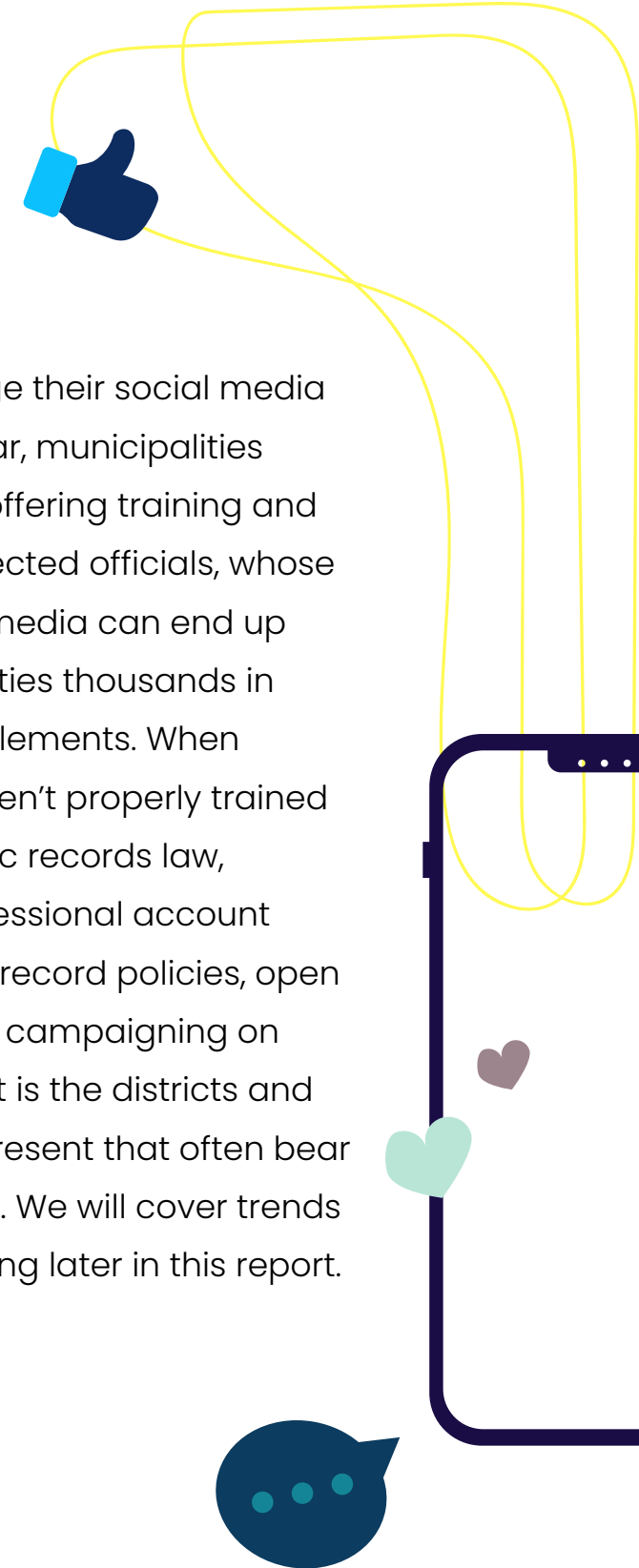
What are the top challenges you face with social media that inhibit your success?

Lack of human resources to manage the program

4

Skills gap/lack of social media training

3

Lack of cross-departmental collaboration

2

Lack of support (either lack of wide-adoption, department resistance, or lack of buy-in from leadership)

1

Challenges to Growth

When asked about the top challenges that inhibit the growth and success of social media programs, 38.3% of respondents said lack of support. This starts at the top with a lack of buy-in from leadership. Without this internal support, it's hard to foster collaboration. This is why 37% of respondents indicated a lack of cross-departmental collaboration as the second challenge they face. Not far behind at were lack of social media training, and lack of human resources to manage the program.

The data revealed those who are a team of two or less have the most trouble with cross-department collaboration. Unfortunately, it's common for coworkers outside of your department to not understand the expectations and work behind managing a social media presence. Many communicators have shared that they have a hard time conveying the benefits of social media to others and helping them understand that social media can be used to support the mission of all departments. Fortunately, a good policy coupled with training can go a long way towards getting support and collaboration from other teams and unlocking the potential of social media in achieving district or agency-wide goals.

Now that the challenges are plain, let's discuss how communicators have found success in meeting them. This next section will cover how our respondents are using social media to achieve their goals.

SOCIAL MEDIA ADOPTION & PRACTICE

Despite the challenges addressed in the previous section, social media continues to serve as an essential communication tool for the public sector. As we've discussed, social media usage was higher than ever in 2020 with more people isolated in their homes due to the pandemic. According to datareportal3, there were 240 million social media users in the U.S. as of January 2021 (up 4.3% from 2020) — that's 72.3% of the total U.S. population!

So how are public agencies and school districts taking advantage of this trend? The majority of respondents leverage social media for citizen engagement (92.3%), critical response communications (74.4%), and customer care and service (57.0%). But keeping the community informed isn't the only benefit social media offers the public sector. These platforms have also helped public agencies and school districts increase enrollment and staffing, which is why half of the respondents said they also use social media for employer branding and recruitment.

For what purpose does your public entity currently use social media?

92.3% Citizen Engagement

57% Customer Care/Service

74.4% Critical Response Communications

**48%** Employer Branding & Recruitment

91.9% of respondents in education said that social media is important to their communication with parents and students. Respondents also found social media important for engagement, critical response, and employer branding & recruitment for their school district.

Social media has been around in some form or another since the turn of the century, but adoption amongst public agencies and school districts has increased in the past decade. When asked how long their public agency or school district had been using social media, over half of the respondents stated that they have been using social media as a regular part of their job responsibilities for three to seven years. 27.6% of respondents have been on social media for over eight years.

How many years have you been using social media as part of your regular responsibilities?

31.2%

23.2%

17%

11%

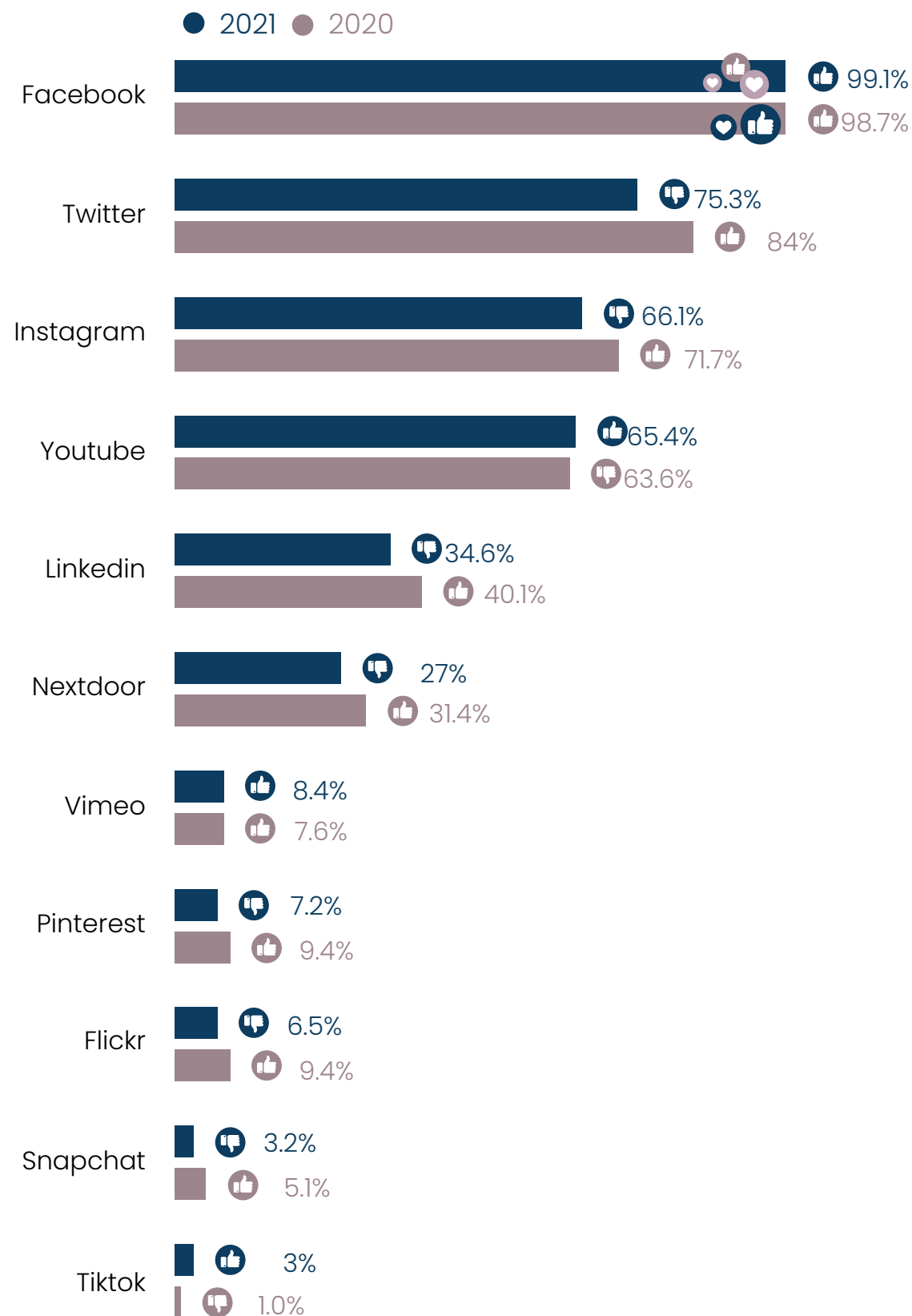3 to 5 years   5 to 7 years   8 to 10 years   more than 10 years
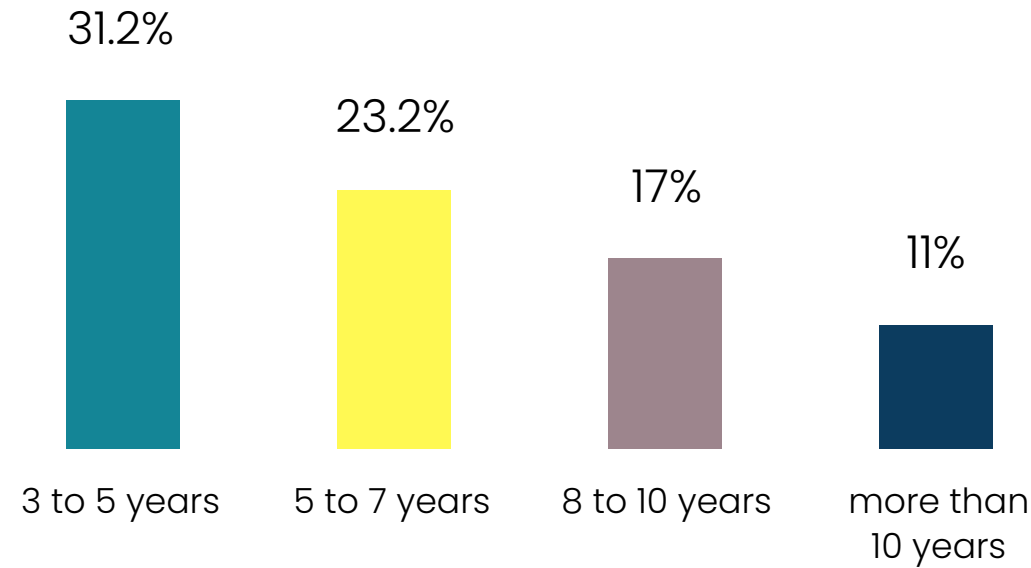
17.3% joined social media within the last 2 years or less

Trying to reach parents? Facebook has become the primary means of communication for many school districts. Some schools even reported Facebook as the only way to get information out to their parents.

Agencies and School Districts still can't live without Facebook

● 2021　● 2020

Platform	2021	2020
Facebook	99.1%	98.7%
Twitter	75.3%	84%
Instagram	66.1%	71.7%
Youtube	65.4%	63.6%
Linkedin	34.6%	40.1%
Nextdoor	27%	31.4%
Vimeo	8.4%	7.6%
Pinterest	7.2%	9.4%
Flickr	6.5%	9.4%
Snapchat	3.2%	5.1%
Tiktok	3%	1.0%

Preferred Platforms

While Facebook can present a lot of challenges, it continues to be the number one platform used by public agencies and school districts. When survey participants were asked to identify the current social media platforms they use, the majority of public sector communicators chose Facebook (99.1%). Twitter came in second (75.3%), and Instagram and Youtube for a close third (66.1% vs 65.4%).

YouTube usage increased by roughly 2% with the need to move more meetings online, and TikTok, which barely registered on our previous survey due to concerns over regulations, is showing some signs of being a fast-rising social media darling. It will be interesting to see how much ground it gains in 2021.

Some platforms have become slightly less popular, though they still make up a significant portion of the social media landscape. Twitter had the biggest drop by roughly 9%, followed by LinkedIn and Instagram at roughly 5.5%. Pinterest and Flickr, both of which already had limited adoption, both dropped by 2-3%.

It should come as no surprise that the overwhelming majority of all respondents (82.3%) agreed that Facebook remains their most valuable platform. Facebook continues to be the leading social media platform in the U.S. by share of visits, according to Statista4. As of April 2020, the platform recorded over 190 million account holders in the United States. And contrary to popular belief, Facebook continues to attract users of all ages and genders, with the majority of users falling between the ages of 18-44.

For school district and higher education respondents, 77% found Facebook to be the most valuable platform, followed by Instagram and then YouTube.

Most valuable platforms: "If you could only be on one platform"		Least valuable platforms: "The most trouble with engagement"	
Facebook 82.3%	Instagram 4%	Twitter 26.3%	Instagram 4%
Twitter 8.2%	Nextdoor 8.2%	YouTube 13.2%	LinkedIn 11.2%

TIP

There can be an expectation to be "everywhere" online. But with limited resources, today's social media communications have to be sophisticated with their social strategy to not go crazy. So remember when you're managing multiple platforms to be focused on your end goal, and funnel the majority of your time to the networks that matter most. Don't get distracted by vanity metrics that don't meet your goals, and get savvy about your audience and play to them.

Plan to launch next:

5.1%
Tiktok

5%
YouTube

8.1%
Instagram

4%
Linkedin

5%
Nextdoor

66.7%
None, happy with
our presence

Respondents were also asked which platform they found least valuable, meaning they had the most trouble with engagement on it. Interestingly, 26.3% of respondents said they have trouble with engagement on Twitter, followed by YouTube (13.2%) and Instagram (12%).

Finally, when asked about launching future networks at the agency or district level, more than half of respondents (67%) said that they did not have any plans to add new networks in the coming year as they are content with their current social media presence. For those that do plan to launch new networks, Instagram was number one (8.1%), followed by TikTok (5.1%), Nextdoor (5%), YouTube (5%), and LinkedIn (4%).

As social media usage continues to accelerate, there is a big move to live video with Facebook Live and YouTube. According to Pew Research Center5, YouTube is one of the only platforms that has seen significant growth since 2019. **81% of adults surveyed say they use YouTube, up from 73% in 2019.** The survey also noted that 40% of adults say they use Instagram, and about three in ten reported using Pinterest or LinkedIn.

This yielded similar results compared to last year's data with one major change to mention: TikTok. As we already mentioned in this report, no one was even considering TikTok as a top priority last year. We did not ask about newcomer, Clubhouse, as they haven't opened to everyone yet, we are keeping our eye on this audio-only network to see if it gains ground in the government social media space in 2021.

The People Behind the Profiles

Managing social media for the public sector is no easy task, especially amid a pandemic and global unrest. It can be very nuanced, demanding work, and it can be hard to enforce boundaries. For most public sector communicators, social media isn't even their primary responsibility but just a part of their overall role. Despite the ubiquity of social media in government, relatively few agencies have a dedicated social media manager position. Less than 15% of our survey respondents even had social or digital media in their titles.

The majority of respondents (57%) managed their agency's social media with a team of two or less, a two percent year-over-year (YoY) increase. After that, the most common team size is three to five (31.1%), a 3.6% YoY increase. And despite the growth in the volume of posts and the comments to manage, only 12% of respondents reported larger teams (down almost 6% from last year).

There was no direct correlation between the size of the team and the population served. For example, teams of one or two were just as likely to be contributing to social media for populations in the range of 50,000 - 100,000+ as teams of three to five. However, the data did reveal that smaller teams are more likely to manage seasonal populations.

How many people in your agency/district are directly responsible for managing official social media pages

● Team of 1 or 2   ● Team of 3- 5   ● Team of 6+

2021: 12%, 31.1%, 57%

2020: 17.9%, 27.5%, 55%
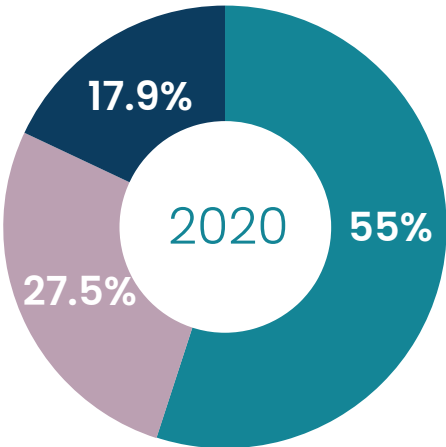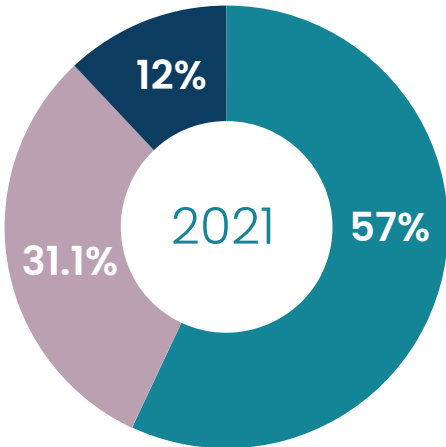
> For school districts and higher education, teams of three to five were more likely to contribute to social media populations with <10,000 than teams of one or two.

How many social media accounts represent your agency or school district?

29.8%
4-5 Accounts

29.6%
2-3 Accounts

29.5%
6 Or more accounts

11.1%
1 Account

These 24/7 networks never take a break, which means communicators are faced with a constant stream of comments, messages, and posts that they need to manage and moderate across all the different platforms. This was especially true in 2020. And rarely are these communicators managing only one account. Only 11% of respondents only have one page to wrangle.

The data revealed a correlation between the number of social media accounts managed and the size of the team. It's no surprise that the bigger the team, the bigger the presence. On average, teams of six or more manage six or more accounts (76%).

This was true for school districts too! On average, teams with one or two people manage two to three accounts (50%), and teams of six or more manage six or more accounts (81%)

How, When, & What to Post

Social media algorithms require regular care and feeding if you want your agency to stay relevant and your content to appear in your audience's timelines. There is a lot of competition for real estate on users' feeds and attention spans, and the major networks acknowledge that recency of content matters in claiming a place. Over half of our respondents recognize that it is necessary to post at least once a day on their accounts. This corresponds to roughly a third of the respondents (34%) indicating that they post daily, with 26% posting more than two times a day. Among those who post less often, 20.4% still find time to post three to four times a week.
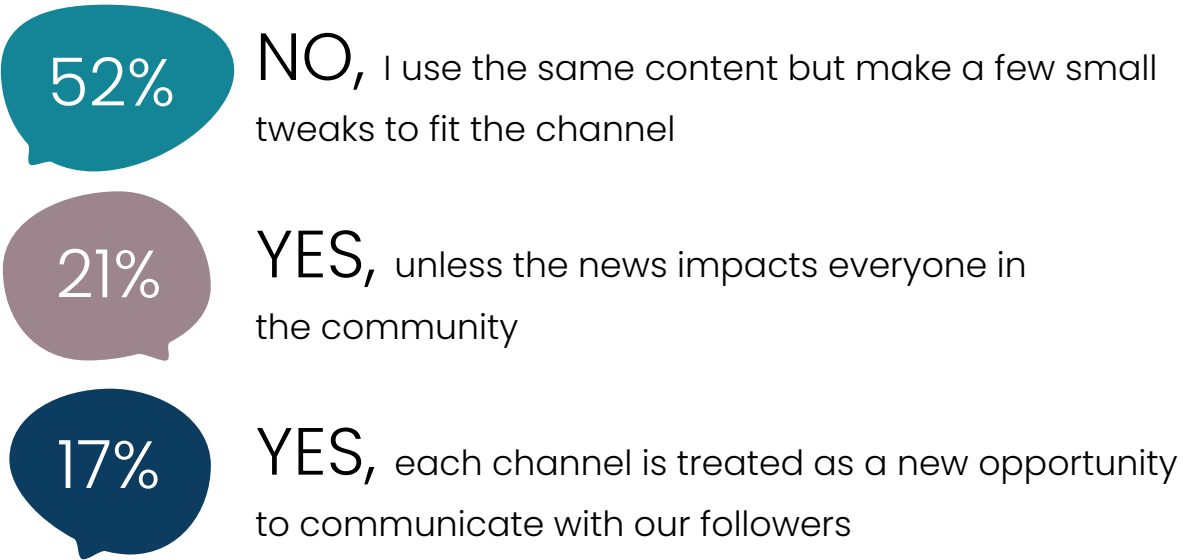
It's important to note that posting often does not always mean that each piece of content is brand new. More than half of respondents (52%) say that they don't post unique content every time, but instead repurpose posts across networks and days with a few small tweaks to keep it fresh and relevant. This can make the difference between falling into obscurity, and staying in the public eye.

On average, how often does your public entity post on at least one network?

33.9%
Daily

20.4%
3-4 times a week

26.1%
more than 2 times a day

12.3%
1-2 times a week
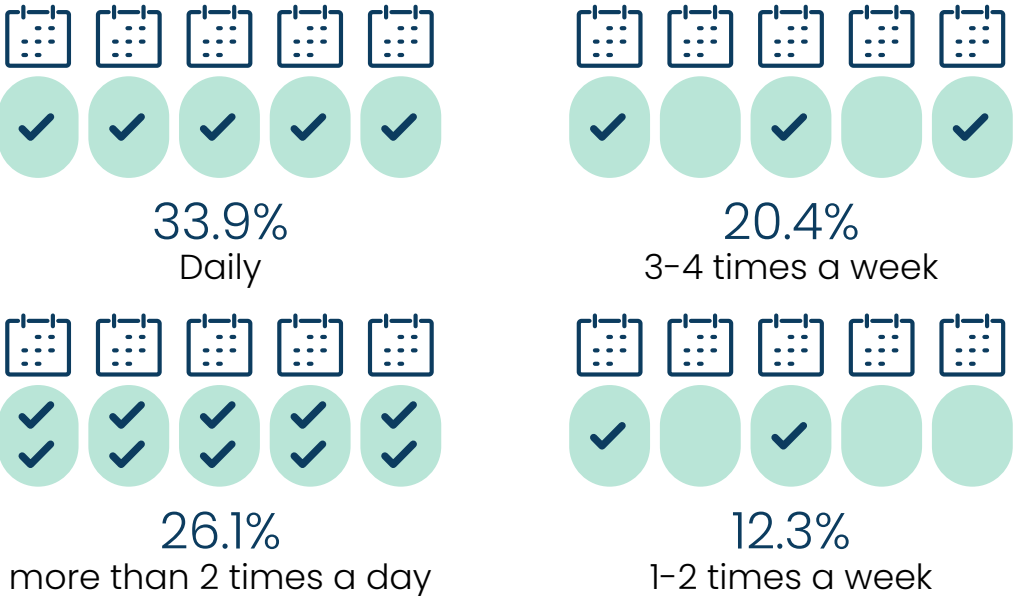
37% of school district and higher education respondents said they posted daily, and 31% said they post more than two times a day.

Do you post unique content on each of the channels you use?

52% NO, I use the same content but make a few small tweaks to fit the channel

21% YES, unless the news impacts everyone in the community

17% YES, each channel is treated as a new opportunity to communicate with our followers

The majority of school district and higher education respondents post the same content but make a few small tweaks to fit the channel (57%), but 40.2% are treating each channel as a new opportunity and posting unique content.

This data reveals an important opportunity for communicators, especially those who are a team of two or less. You don't have to create new content for each channel, every time you post. Pros look for ways to spin the same content by changing up the language, the format, and the network. They also leverage evergreen content when the calendar is looking light. There's always something your public could use reminding about, so keep those posts on hand for when you need to keep your hard-won position in the algorithm hierarchy.

Another tool in a communicator's toolbox is software designed to manage and execute content across social media platforms. We asked respondents if they used any software, and the top tools cited by the 36% who say they use it include Hootsuite, Sprout, Tweetdeck, and Buffer. This social media management software allows teams to schedule and carry out campaigns across all of their networks, saving time and resources, particularly for small teams.

TIP

Don't get discouraged if you post something once and it doesn't get engagement, may not have just been the right time for that content – try again.

Which of the following software does your public entity use to manage/execute social media?
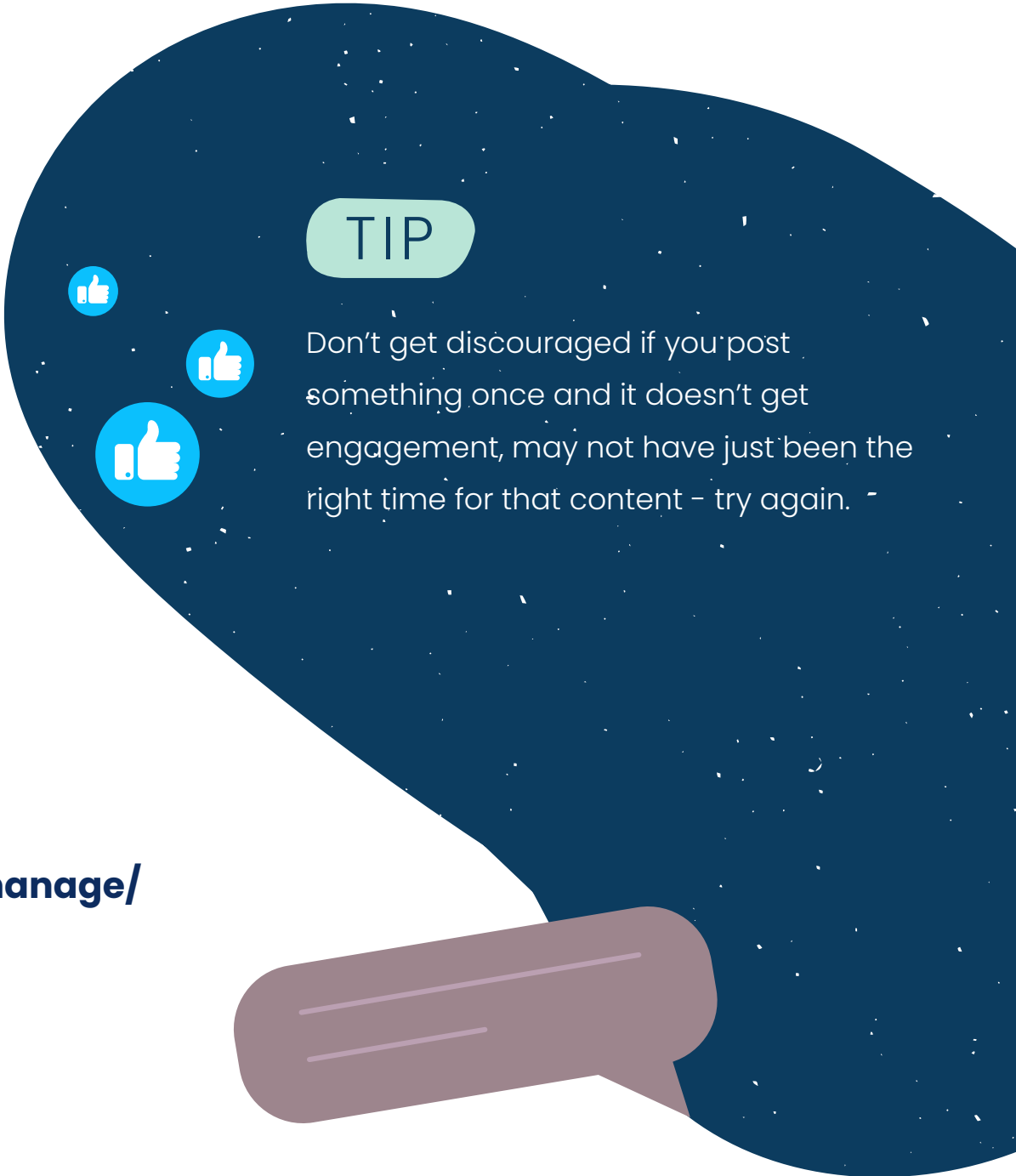
58.6% I do not use software to manage/execute social media

4.7% Other

35.8% Social media management software (Hootsuite, Sprout, Tweetdeck, Buffer)

3.5% Social listening software (Brandwatch, etc.)

40.2% of school district and higher education respondents use software to help manage/execute social media

POLICY & COMPLIANCE

Earlier in the report, we discussed concerns about compliance as the second biggest challenge to social media adoption, so let's dig deeper into how communicators are maintaining compliance for their agency or school district on social media. This section will cover survey questions regarding social media policy, comment moderation, and compliance with public record laws.

The Need for Policy (Both Internal & External)

The survey explored how respondents use social media policy to educate and manage both internal contributors and external page visitors.

Internal policy

While a lot of public sector managed social media pages are managed in large part by only one or two people, the majority of respondents (75%) indicated that multiple people across their organization contribute content to their pages. This is a 4% increase from last year's report.

How many individual contributors do you have on your page?

2-3 Contributors

1 Contributors

6-9 Contributors

4-5 Contributors

10 Or more contributors
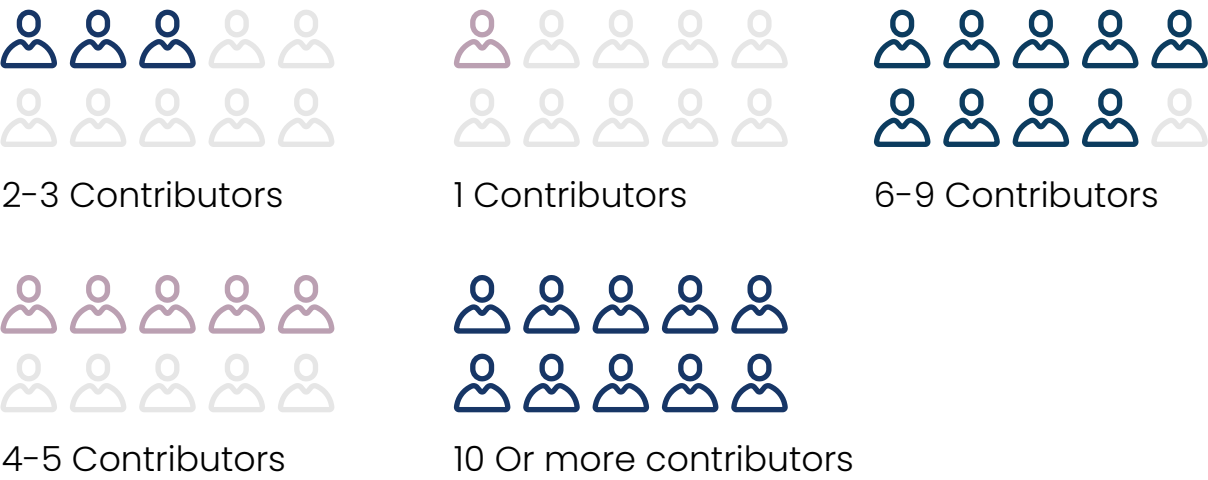
The majority of school district and higher education respondents indicated having two to three contributors (38%), followed by four to five contributors (19.6%) and 10 or more contributors (19.6%).

TIP

Put effort into educating & leveling up contributors on social media, this can pay off in terms of getting more content and support, and having a more consistent presence.

The benefit of an internal social media policy is that it provides guidance for employees and contributors posting to your sites, which in turn encourages contribution. Many districts and agencies also provide employees with guidance on how to best manage their social media in a way that keeps it separate from agency business and ensures that employee speech is protected alongside the agency's or district's reputation. Failing to develop an internal policy opens the door to potential PR and legal headaches, including neglected pages that reflect poorly on your agency or district, or inappropriate posts and comments by employees. Another major benefit of training more employees means you'll have more help when you need it.

While 74% of respondents have a social media policy for internal contributors, an alarming 26.1% indicated they do not. However, the trend is moving in the right direction. Compared to last year, the amount of agencies and districts with a social media policy for employees has increased 6.2%, and the amount without a policy is down by 6.1%.

External Policy

Social media platforms can sometimes become magnets for inappropriate or off-topic comments that distract citizens from the important information being shared. The ability to hide or remove comments may be an option for public entities, but the fear of First Amendment lawsuits makes many agencies feel like they can't always maintain a productive dialogue on social media. This is where an external social media policy can help.

An external social media policy promotes civil public discourse by establishing the ground rules for your agency's or district's social media. It sets the rules of engagement for the limited public forum that is your official Facebook page, Twitter handle, YouTube channel, or whatever social network you are using to promote dialogue with your constituents. A good social media policy affords First Amendment protections on public speech and should include disclosure regarding the preservation of content for public records law compliance.

The majority of respondents (63%) have a formal policy in place for external users, a 4.3% increase compared to last year's report, but only 30% of those with a formal policy in place have that policy posted publicly on their website and the appropriate social media network. An unpublished policy is as good as no policy at all, so most agencies and districts are still leaving themselves vulnerable by not making their policy accessible. This is a critical lapse in safe online communication for government agencies and school districts.

Do you have a policy for managing public engagement on your social media?

YES
63%

NO
37%
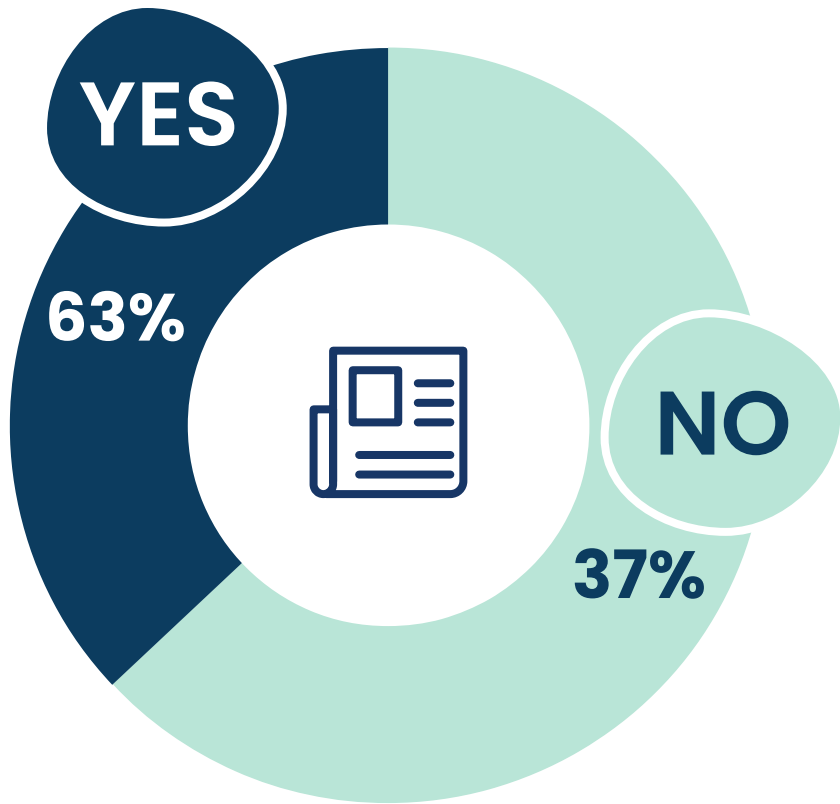
49.5% of school districts and higher education respondents indicated having a policy, but 47% indicated they do not

Of those 63% - 30% don't have it published

Respondents were also asked how they manage their public comments on social media. While 39% had no formal process, **45% said they use their social media policy to guide public comments on their accounts.** Of the 39% with no formal process, **24% said they use their best judgment, and nearly 15% said they don't remove anything at all.** A published social media policy is the external document that sets the ground rules, but it works best when paired with a comment moderation guide. A comment moderation guide is an internally-facing document that shows employees how to fairly and legally apply the rules outlined in the social media policy.

Comment moderation should always be done as a last resort and should be used sparingly. It is crucial to involve your legal counsel in the development of your comment moderation policy and in training staff to apply it to avoid legal entanglements from First Amendment violations. The truth is that there are very few instances in which hiding or removing comments is advisable, and your agency or district is best served by allowing most comments to remain, however unpalatable the opinions expressed may be.

What About Blocking?

One of the hottest topics right now in public record compliance and First Amendment lawsuits is the blocking of users from accessing public social media pages. While we did not specifically ask a question on this year's survey regarding whether or not public communicators are blocking users, in conversations with the thousands of agencies and districts we serve, we have heard again and again that most agencies and districts believe that they aren't blocking users or have a policy against it. Unfortunately, the numbers tell a different story.

As of March 2021, **1 out of 3 Facebook and Twitter accounts we archive has a blocked list** with at least one user blocked. Facebook had the highest rate of blocked users, with **7 out of 10 organizations actively blocking users on Facebook.** On average, there are 10 users on a given Facebook blocked list. That's a lot of potential lawsuits for agencies and districts who don't even think they are doing it. This is why it's not only important to have a policy and train employees to apply it fairly, but you also have to provide records that show strong supporting evidence as to why a comment was moderated or a user blocked. You need to be prepared to defend your actions and demonstrate that your social media policy was applied correctly.

BLOCK
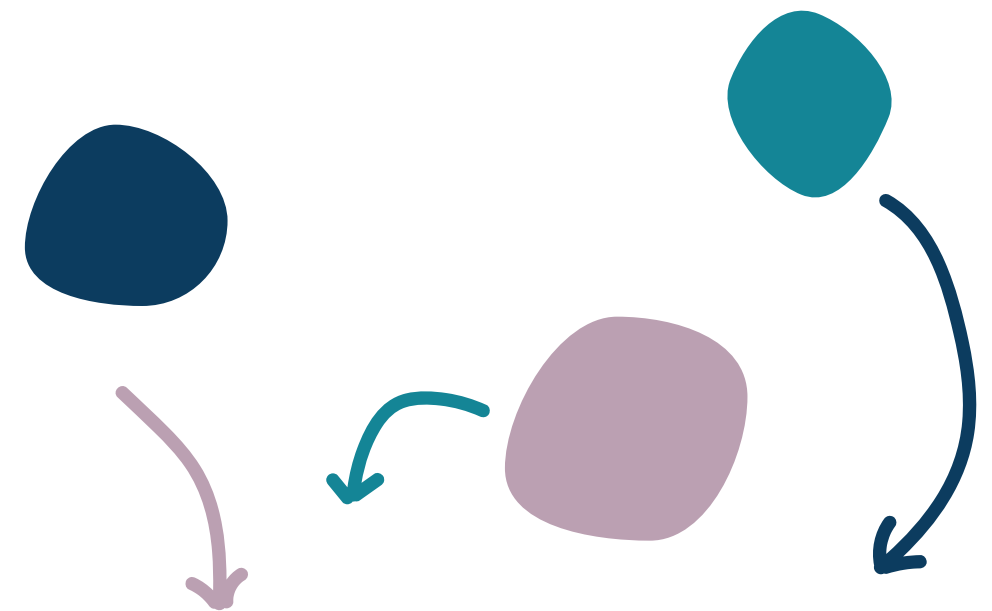
# Public Record Law & Requests for Social Media Data

In all 50 states, social media is a public record. Even states that don't explicitly call out social media use language that includes all communication regardless of physical form. Public record laws require that public entities are responsible for responding to FOIA/Open Records requests related to social media and website content.

When asked whether or not the responders' public entity had received a public record request specifically for social media in the past two years, 17.2% said yes. In truth, this number may be higher as 20.4% of respondents were not sure. Requests often employ broad language that seeks records of "all communications" regarding a given topic, and despite the reliance on social media for communication, many agencies and school districts still don't consider these platforms when preparing their responses.

Of those that received a public records request for social media, a majority **(73%) were using archiving software to preserve social media content.** However, 27% of respondents do not archive their social media content and either rely on the networks, use manual screenshots, or do nothing.

How many public record requests for social media content have you received in the past 2 years?

1 – 2 69.4%

3–5 21.4%

6 – 8 3.1%

More than 8 6.1%
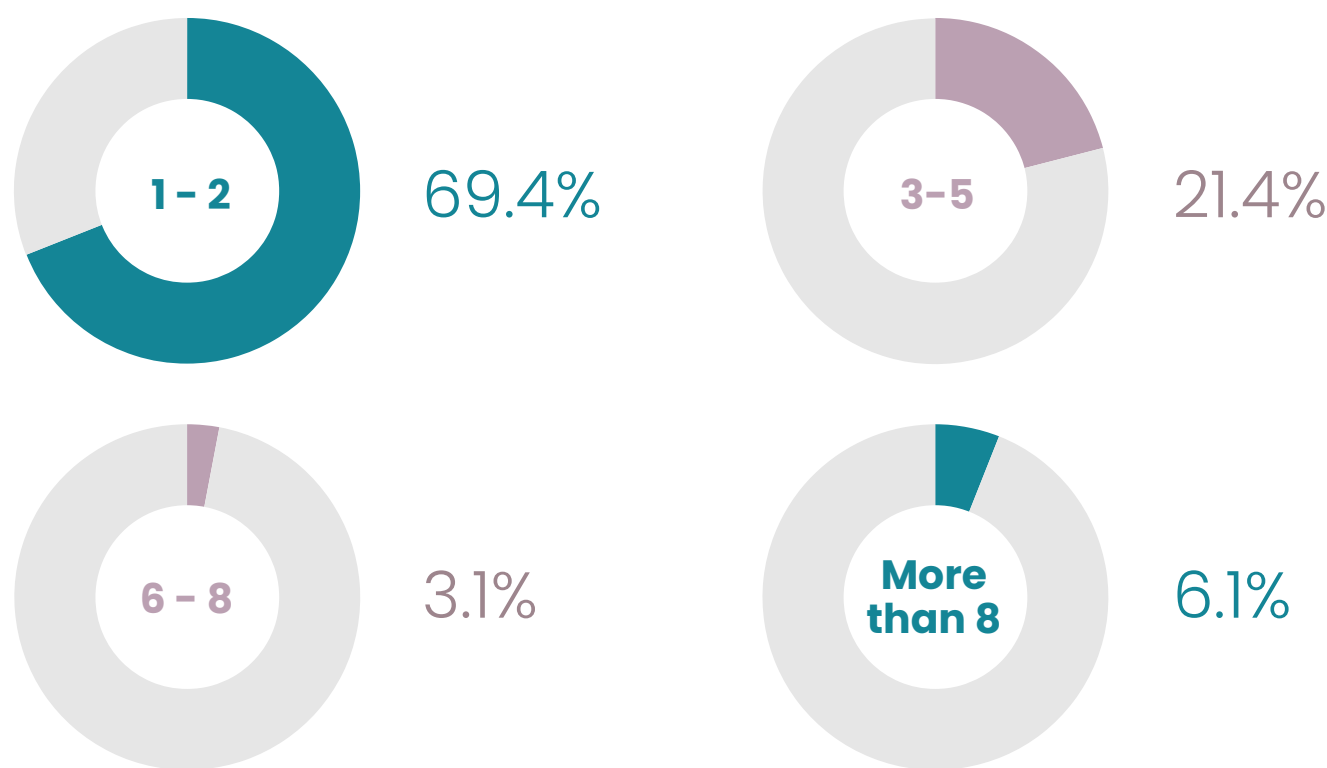
For respondents who received a records request, 73% were archiving.

30% of agencies and districts have received 3 or more social media records requests

Not only is the process of manual screenshots very time-consuming, but it's also unstable. It's impossible to keep pace with the 24/7 nature of social media, records can easily get deleted or edited before you have a chance to screenshot them, or you can just miss them while trying to search or scroll. And without metadata, it's difficult to prove the authenticity of a screenshotted record or prove that it hasn't been tampered with. At ArchiveSocial we have seen a 43% increase in daily posts and an 18-20% average increase in record volume growth since March. Additionally, we found that over 4M were deleted (that's roughly 1 in 12 records). With this accelerated rate of content, it's become increasingly important to remain compliant on social media.

The 73% of respondents who are using archiving software were asked if they are currently archiving other forms of media for compliance and security as well. The majority (70.5%) archive email, followed closely by other documents and types of digital records (53.9%). Almost 20% of respondents archive text messages.

As mobile becomes our 'first' screen, this growth in digital media archiving reflects current trends in the market. Last May, eMarketer6 increased their previous forecast for the amount of time US adults will spend on mobile messaging from four minutes to 24 minutes per day. This was due not only to the pandemic but also to strong engagement with Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Apple iMessage, and others, according to their US Social Media Usage Report 2020.

Respondents explained the need to archive these other forms of media included record management, open communication, OPRA requests, compliance with state laws, and regulatory requirements

Amongst all respondents to the survey, 22% also use records management software.

Are you currently archiving other forms of media for compliance and security?

70.5% – Email

53.9% – Other documents or type of digital records

19.8% – Text

19.1% –Collaboration tools (Teams, Slack, Facebook Workplace, or Zoom)

67% of school district and higher education respondents said they are archiving email.

Feeling overwhelmed? Buy yourself some space by setting clear expectations and creating go-to responses:

- Signal that you got the message with an acknowledgment

- Weed out spam DM's by marking them as such to preserve your responsiveness stats

- Redirect common questions to a website FAQ page

SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS IN 2021 & BEYOND

As has already been addressed multiple times thus far, public communicators have had more on their plates than ever before this past year, and they continue to struggle with inadequate staff and resources. This next section will address how some respondents are dealing with the increased demands of social media and how you can work smarter, not harder to maintain your sanity.
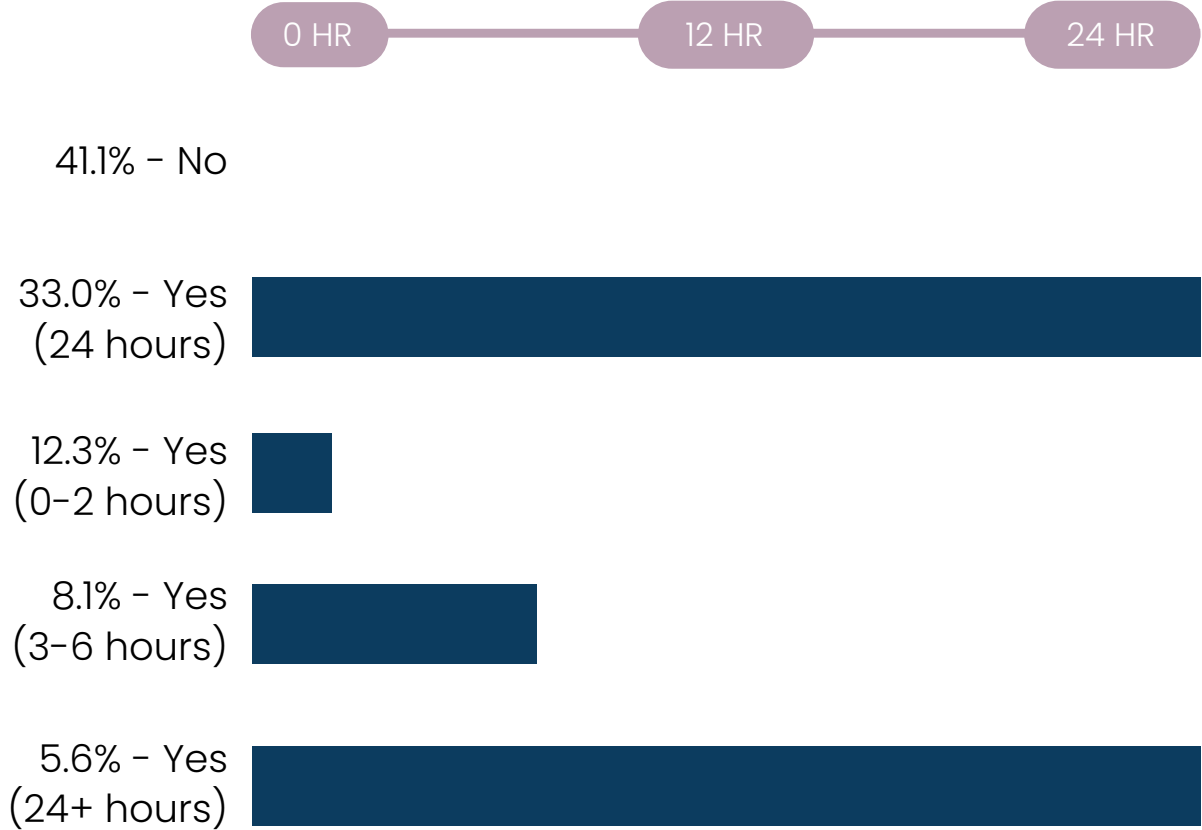
Setting Expectations to Build Trust and Gain Allies

Social media allows you the opportunity to respond publicly to common questions, address complaints and build a reputation as a public entity that truly listens to its community. While social media can be plagued with misinformation, its real-time nature also offers public agencies and school districts the opportunity to correct this misinformation quickly, and develop allies who pitch in to help correct the record. By building this trust, you create an engaged audience who will turn to you when it matters most — during an emergency. These platforms are often the quickest ways to share information during and after a crisis, but they are only truly effective if you have already established an authoritative presence.

To build a loyal following, you have to have good customer service, which makes timely responses critical. When asked, "Do you have a goal or mandate on how quickly you respond to comments from your community?", 59% said yes. This is a 6% increase from last year, where only 53% of respondents had a goal. However, of those who do have a goal, 30.1% don't feel sufficiently staffed to meet it

A third of the respondents who have a response policy (33%) indicated that their goal is to respond within 24 hours. With the steep rise in users seeking information on social media this past year, it can be hard to keep up without a strategy. Public entities should treat questions on social media the same way they would treat them in person. Even if you don't have the answer ready, you still need to acknowledge the question and let the asker know you're working on it. Be consistent with your answers and provide sharable content that makes it easy for others to amplify your message and take the pressure off of your team. When you make the information more accessible it can travel farther with less direct effort.

Do you have a goal or mandate on how quickly you respond to comments from your community?

| 0 HR | 12 HR | 24 HR |

- 41.1% - No
- 33.0% - Yes (24 hours)
- 12.3% - Yes (0-2 hours)
- 8.1% - Yes (3-6 hours)
- 5.6% - Yes (24+ hours)

TIP

Set response expectations:

- Decide what needs a response - not everything requires one!

- Share your response policy

- Provide alternate resources

- Post about where citizens can find answers

Of those who did have a goal, 30.1% don't feel staffed to meet those goals

57% of school district and higher education respondents indicated having a goal, while 40.2% do not.

TIP

To help manage the increased volume of communication, leverage your comment moderation and response policy, and create a simple rubric for what requires a response and what doesn't:

Remember, not every critic is a troll, and it's important to not hide from feedback or differing opinions. Two-way communication is core to social media. It is an incredible source for feedback, and it enables you to understand what kind of information your audience wants and needs. The trick is recognizing those who want to participate in honest dialogue and those who are just there to make noise and aren't interested in what you have to say. It often doesn't take long to suss out the difference.

ALWAYS RESPOND	RESPOND WHEN POSSIBLE	IGNORE
• New questions • To correct misinformation • Specific criticism/concerns (can be directed to a call or email)	• Praise (say thanks!) • Frequently Asked Questions (provide links or allow others to share answers)	• Bad faith questions/baiting • General criticism/negativity • Spam/off-topic
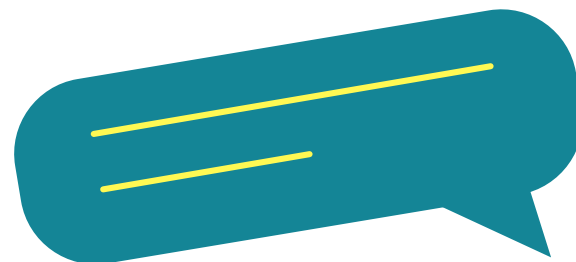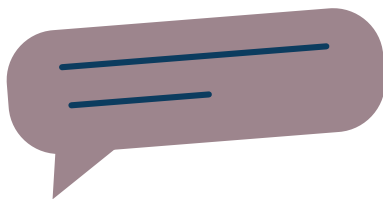
For the 41% of respondents that indicated they do not have a goal for how quickly they respond, it can be a real time and sanity saver to create one. Start by creating a rubric for the kinds of comments that need a response, build out some ready-made replies to address common questions, measure how effective you are at meeting your goal, and adjust as needed.

Authenticity and transparency will continue to be paramount as consumers want agencies and districts that listen. The multiple crises in 2020 required agencies and districts to quickly calibrate proper responses, and effective social listening can help you find out what constituents want and how to best fit into the conversation.

Finally, it's important to set up your social media networks for success by using them as designed and understanding the limitations of what you can do as a public agency. If you haven't already, make time this year to organize your accounts, improve security and access controls, and make sure you have full visibility into who is posting content to your pages and how. This means getting rid of dummy profiles, prohibiting shared logins, and employing the organizational tools provided by the networks to improve transparency and trust.

CHECKLIST

To prevent headaches and get the most from your tools, use the platforms as designed.

Stay in control: no dummy accounts, no shared logins, set-up 2FA, use strong passwords (and change them), organize pages using platform tools.

- Use **Facebook Business Manager/ Business Suite** to connect and manage all of your accounts

- Use Twitter Teams to grant different levels of permissions to multiple users, who can access your account while logged into their handles

- Use YouTube Brand Account for multiple people to manage the channel from their Google Accounts without a separate username or password

Finding & Measuring Success

The dramatic uptick in social media use presented a huge number of new opportunities. But you have to know where to look to make sure that you're putting your time, effort, and resources into the right place. As social media has become a necessary part of public sector communication and purpose-driven campaigns take center stage, an established process can simplify how you assess effectiveness. There seem to be as many approaches to measuring success on social media as there are social media managers, so it's no surprise that a full 23% of respondents still don't evaluate their success on social media.

That said, we did find some commonalities among the survey respondents who do measure success. Unsurprisingly, engagement metrics such as likes, comments, retweets, and shares still top the chart, possibly because they are the most visible and accessible, and are easy to convey to higher-ups.

Which of the following metrics does your organization use to measure the success of social initiatives?

Engagement metrics:
likes/comments/retweets/shares

Follower metrics:
fans, followers, subscribers

Consumption metrics:
photo/video/post views

Even though likes and followers are easy to explain, who you reach can be as much, if not more important than how many people you reach. Yet of the (73%) survey respondents that measure the success of their social initiatives, only 17% filter their metrics by the audience. 83% of respondents indicated that they do not.

Audience matters. And while it's nice to have your fellow communication peers from across the country follow you, they aren't furthering your goal of reaching your community. As competition for screen share continues to increase, savvy social media managers will need to turn their attention to their audience metrics and become increasingly hyper-local in their focus.

Platform-wide metrics can't mean much unless they are tied to a specific goal. So while you need followers to get your message across, it's time to be more micro-focused on the engagement of specific campaigns and how they fit into your broader communication strategy on the topic. It's easy to get distracted by vanity metrics, but it's important to put your goals first and use metrics as a way to measure the progress of those goals. Agencies and school districts are now looking at regional metrics and using tools that limit reach for regions. By switching to campaign-oriented metrics that stretch across channels, you can better integrate social media into your goals and build internal buy-in for these platforms.

Coincidence or correlation? The data revealed that 23.3% of respondents listed "inability to measure the ROI of social programs" as a top challenge that inhibits their success on social media, which is roughly the same number (23%) of respondents that listed that they don't measure the success of social initiatives.

TIP

To measure what is most effective at reaching your targeted audience, use "How did you hear about this?" surveys.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

Please share this report with your agency or school district peers, and use it to start the conversation around the importance of social media in modern communication. Take a close look at what channels you're using to reach your community, and how you're measuring effectiveness. Are you putting your goals first and using metrics to measure the progress of those goals? Or are you simply collecting likes for likes' sake? Try to identify two to three key areas for improvement that you can put in place for the year (consider your policy, response plan, security as good starting points).

This year has also highlighted the importance of remembering to practice self-care. Consider what healthy boundaries look like specifically for you, and make an effort to set and protect them. It's up to you to teach leadership how they can best support you. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. Here are a few other helpful tips to help you advocate for yourself:

- Establish predictability & routine

- Learn to say no

- Use your metrics to get help

- Lean on your network

- Snooze or unfollow your profile

- Consider deleting social media apps from your phone (if possible)

- For Facebook on mobile, use the Pages app

You should also use this report as a way to evaluate your practices against the benchmark of your peers. As a good starting point, see below **for helpful resources and a checklist of best practices to consider adopting:**

- **Initial Security Assessment Checklist**

- Social Media Policy Template:
  - **For Government Agencies**
  - **For School Districts**
  - **For Law Enforcement**

- **Comment Moderation Guide**

- **Semi-Annual Social Media Check-up**

WHAT'S NEXT?

According to eMarketer's 2021 report on US Time Spent with Media6, US adults spent an average of 7 hours, 50 minutes per day with digital last year, a 15.0% increase from 2019. They project that this growth will mostly be retained in 2021.

Overall, it's evident that the events of 2020 accelerated digital, giving social media a boost that's expected to last. And if last year showed us anything, it's that social media can circulate information and misinformation at unprecedented speeds, and create an environment of heightened uncertainty, leaving your community in need of immediate, transparent communication.

The fact is, social media has become a crucial part of modern communication. These platforms continue to be the quickest way to ask questions and discover new information. And if you're not there to represent your agency or district, someone else will be. Social media gives your organization a voice and allows you to better control the narrative.

But as we've seen, increased online time creates an environment trolls love to take advantage of. This can make it extremely tempting to moderate interactions and block users, but doing so can lead you to run afoul of the First Amendment.

This online world is even more challenging when budgets and resources are not allocated to manage it. Whether it is funding for staff, high-quality content, promotion, or the tools needed to manage the never-ending stream of information, many agencies and school districts are struggling to do more with less. This is why it's more important than ever to find ways to work smarter, not harder, and focus your efforts to reach your goals.

We hope that by elevating the issues and trends that are common across agencies and districts, there will be a greater understanding among those who control budgets that social media is not a fad, but rather the primary way the world communicates now. This report, in conjunction with your metrics, can be used to start the conversation around funding your communications budget to make the most of social media.

METHODOLOGY

The State of Social Media in the Public Sector survey was designed as a benchmarking tool for public sector agencies who are using social media as a channel for official communication. The topics covered in the survey were based on frequently asked questions from customers, members of online forums for public sector communicators, and attendees at public sector webinars and virtual conferences.
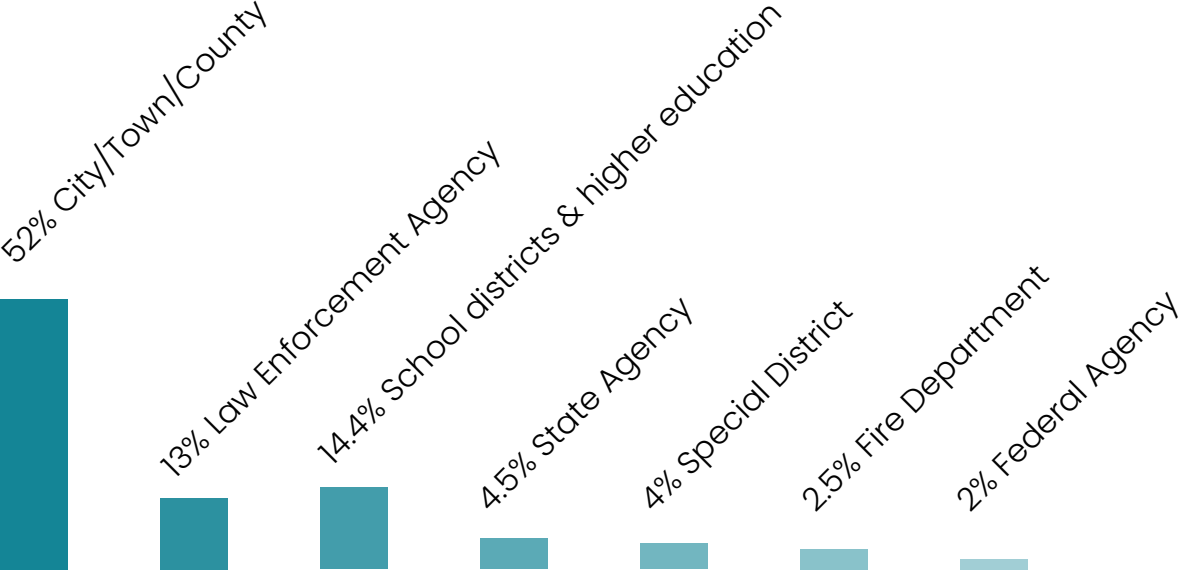
The survey included questions about demographic information, social media platforms, social media policy and practice, social media software, metrics, and public records. Some respondents received a more limited set of questions based on their preliminary responses.

The research aimed to collect insightful information about the current and future trends of public sector social media and how COVID-19 and the events of 2020 impacted the industry.
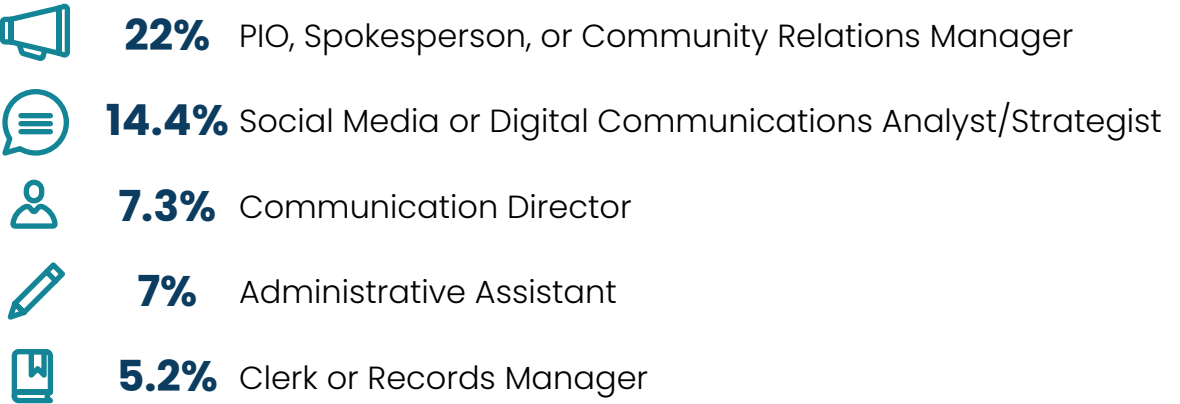
This year, in February 2021, ArchiveSocial surveyed over six hundred state and local governments, law enforcement agencies, and school districts. Full anonymity was guaranteed for all of the respondents. With the knowledge gained from research questions, our goal is for readers to be able to optimize their social media strategy for stronger security, compliance, and engagement.

Close to half of the respondents represent town, city, or county governments (52%). The next two largest groups of participants represented school districts (14.4%) and law enforcement (13%).
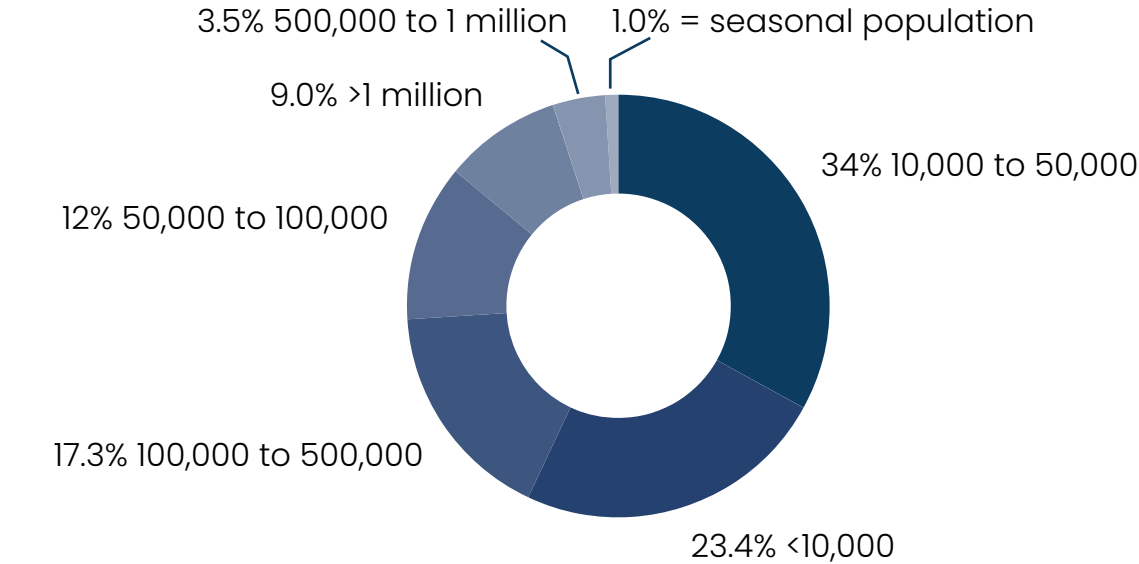
Who did we talk to?

- 52% City/Town/County
- 13% Law Enforcement Agency
- 14.4% School districts & higher education
- 4.5% State Agency
- 4% Special District
- 2.5% Fire Department
- 2% Federal Agency

Roles

22%	PIO, Spokesperson, or Community Relations Manager	
14.4%	Social Media or Digital Communications Analyst/Strategist	
7.3%	Communication Director	
7%	Administrative Assistant	
5.2%	Clerk or Records Manager	

4.2%	Public Relations Coordinator/Strategist
4%	IT Director/Manager
3.1%	Chief Administrator
3.1%	Chief of Police
3%	Marketing Manager/Director

Populations served

- 3.5% 500,000 to 1 million
- 1.0% = seasonal population
- 9.0% >1 million
- 12% 50,000 to 100,000
- 34% 10,000 to 50,000
- 17.3% 100,000 to 500,000
- 23.4% <10,000

The largest group of respondents (34%) represented populations between 10,000–50,000, while the second largest respondent group (23.4%) represented populations of <10,000.

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ArchiveSocial

About ArchiveSocial

ArchiveSocial is the world's leading provider of social media archiving technology in the public sector. ArchiveSocial enables more than 3,000 forward-thinking government entities, law enforcement agencies, and K-12 school districts to openly and transparently communicate across social networking platforms while ensuring legal protection and compliance with public records.

To learn more about safe social media practices, and how you can start archiving, visit ArchiveSocial.com