Channels, goals, and resources: Highlights from the 2021 Social Media Survey

By Rachel Cooper, Cory Coggins
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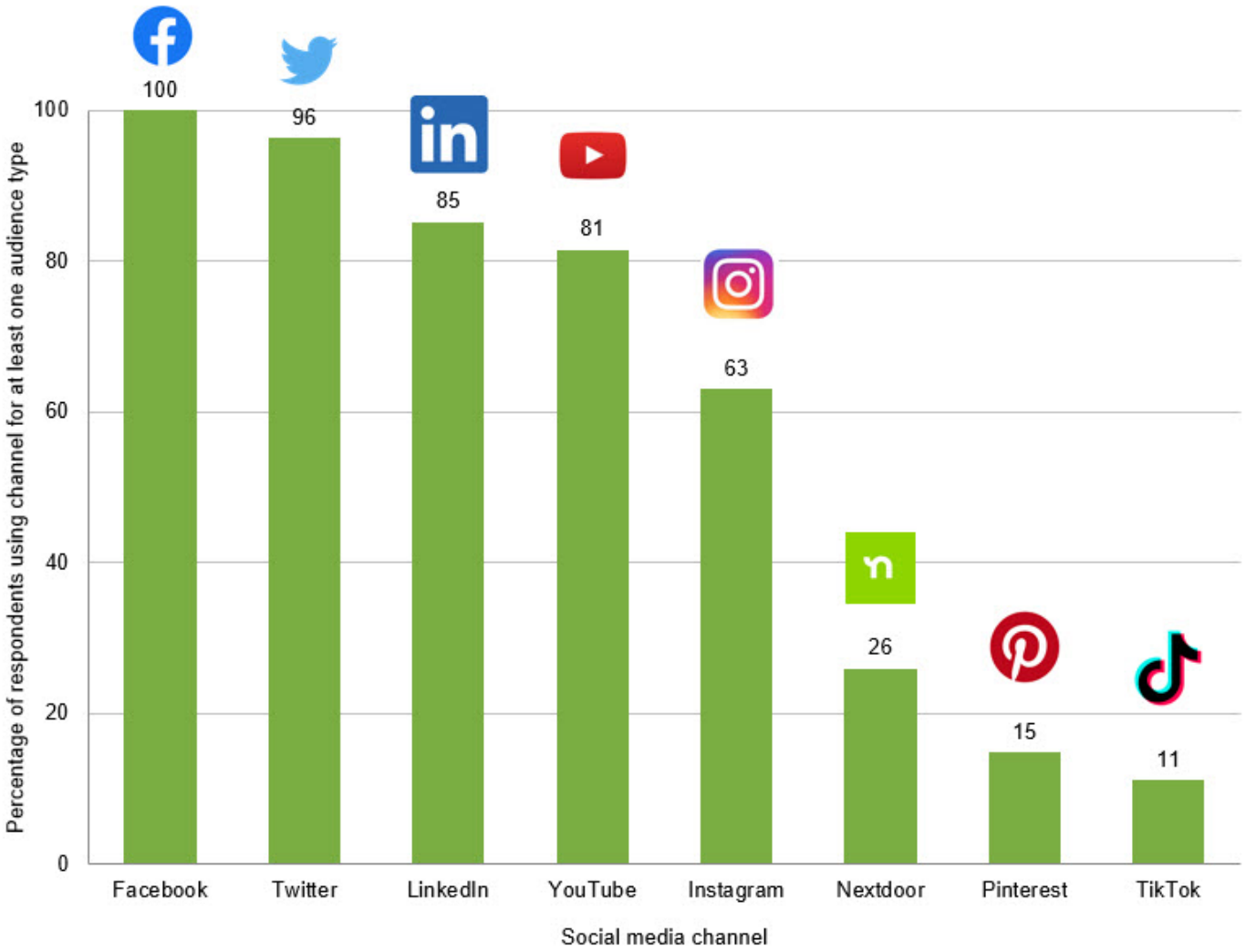
In the E Source 2021 Social Media Survey, we asked utilities about their social media strategies, budgets, staffing, and execution. Use the insights from this survey to compare your organization's social media tactics to those of your peers, and gather ideas for improving or supporting your social media efforts.

Utilities' use of social media channels

Utilities rely heavily on primary channels like Twitter and Facebook (**figure 1**). And they use these platforms to reach more than one type of audience. (We asked respondents if they used a given channel for at least one of the following audiences: residential customers, small or midsize business customers, managed or key account customers, potential employees, news media, and trade allies.) Utilities tend to use other channels, including Nextdoor and Pinterest, to reach more-specific groups. But Facebook is the most popular channel for communications targeted at seniors and multilingual, low-income, and multifamily residential customers.

Figure 1: Social media channels used most often

Utilities use Facebook and Twitter most often. And utilities have been using these two channels for the longest amount of time: about 80% of respondents have used them for six or more years.



Base: n = 27 utilities. **Question S1_1**: Please indicate which of the following social media channels your organization currently uses for communicating with the following audiences. Select all that apply for each channel. **Note:** Use caution when sample size falls below 30.
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New channels. TikTok isn't included in plans for most of the utilities that participated in the 2021 survey. However, those considering it want to try it as a way to reach a younger audience. Utilities using Nextdoor, which groups users by location, find the platform helpful when communicating outage information to specific neighborhoods.

New techniques in established channels. About half of respondents reported that they plan to use LinkedIn and Instagram more in the next 12 months. Those wanting to give Instagram more focus want to use Reels, Stories, Instagram Live, and Guides.

Would you like to participate in the next survey?

If you're responsible for social media strategy and implementation at your organization and you'd like to participate in the next survey, please fill out the participation form.

Goals and objectives for social media

In the 2021 study, as in previous years, the most common use of social media at utilities was to communicate about outages and emergencies (96% of respondents chose it as a top goal). Other leading uses were to improve customer satisfaction and the utility relationship (89%) and manage, develop, or protect the brand (89%) (**figure 2**).

Figure 2: Top five goals or objectives for social media

Social media has several important functions at a utility. Year after year, respondents indicate that communicating about outages or emergencies is the channel's primary use.



Base: n = 27 utilities. **Question S3_1:** What are your utility's primary social media goals and objectives? Select all that apply. **Note:** Only the top five results are shown. © E Source (2021 Social Media Survey)

Ways to build engagement. Most respondents use paid or promoted posts, and they do so most often on Facebook. Posts that receive good organic engagement are often about employees (specifically lineworkers), outage or emergency updates, and promotions for giveaways. Some customers might encounter your social media account for the first time during an emergency, so providing timely and useful updates is important. Posts that highlight people in your company or the wider community help build a connection to your customers—they'll see you as more than just an energy provider.

Meeting social media goals. Respondents feel confident in how they communicate about outages or emergencies. When asked how successful their use of social media was at communicating about outages, respondents rated their efforts an average of 8.6 out of 10 (10 being most successful), just behind "Delivering corporate communications messaging" (an average of 8.7).

Learn how to organize your social media team

Our report Organizational structures of utility social media teams gives examples of utility social media

org charts and advice on how to structure your group.

Organizational structure, resources, and operation

Departments responsible for social media. Most study participants responded that the corporate communications team has primary control or ownership over social media activities. Almost every utility said that this group is involved to some degree. How utilities involve other departments with their social media varies. Customer service and marketing were the other groups most often involved, but some utilities bring in a broader range of departments.

We learned that some utilities are involving several departments to help answer customer service questions that come in through social media. They do this to improve customer satisfaction and the utility-customer relationship. Thirty-seven percent of respondents said that answering customer service questions via social media is the responsibility of an individual within the corporate communications, public relations, or media relations department. So involving someone from the contact center or another department (including subject-matter experts) could help provide the best customer support.

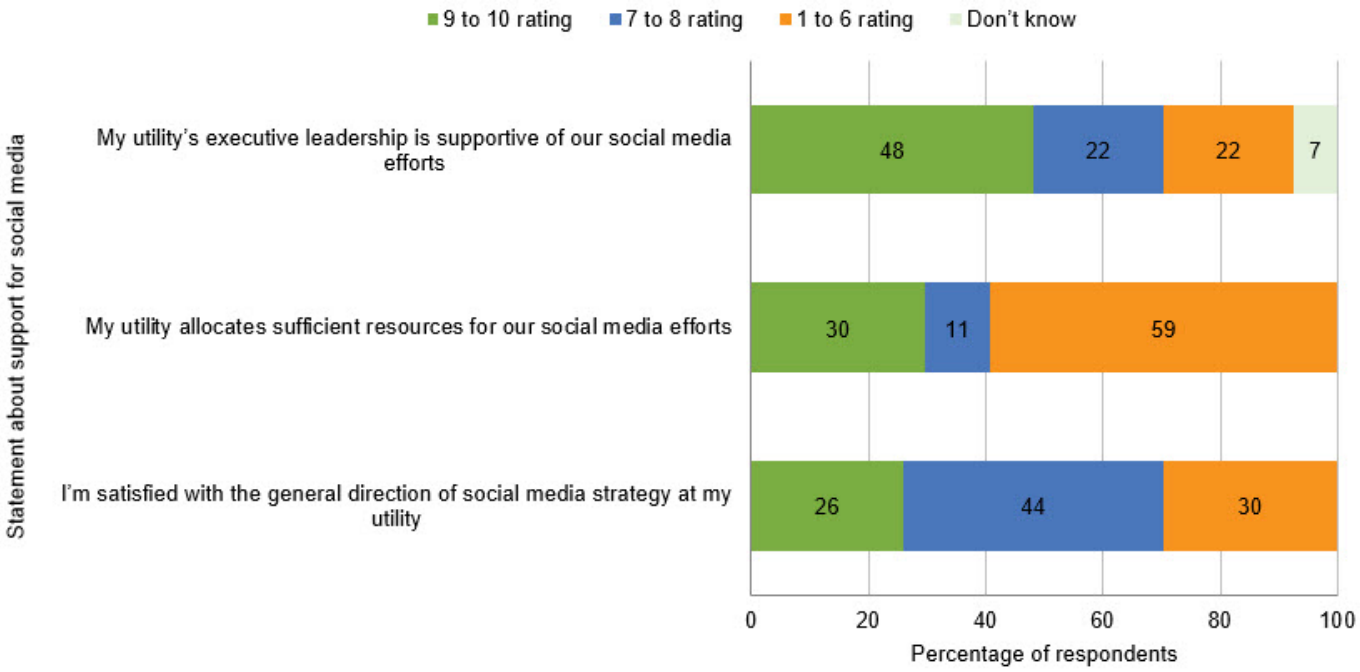
Support, staffing, and strategy. Other trends in organizational structure and support include:

- Social media managers want leadership and other departments to better understand the benefits of social media and how it affects customer experience.
- Two-thirds of respondents said they have one or fewer full-time equivalents dedicated to social media activities.
- Social media budgets are small or requested as needed for many utilities.
- Most respondents expect staffing and budgets to remain the same in the next 12 months.
- Respondents want more user-generated content from employees and for the customer service centers to play a larger role in social media engagement.

Figure 3 shows that more than half of respondents didn't think that they were receiving sufficient resources for their social media efforts. With more staff and larger budgets, they could produce more valuable and creative content. On the other hand, 48% of respondents felt strongly that their leadership is supportive of their efforts. Continuing to show the value of social media and planning how to use more resources may help those who already have the support of leadership. But until social media staff gain more resources, they'll have to continue to find efficient ways to communicate and connect with customers through social media on their own.

Figure 3: Support for social media resources and strategy

About half of study respondents feel that their social media efforts have the support of leadership, but even more don't feel that they have sufficient resources.



Base: n = 27 utilities. **Question S2_14:** Using a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means strongly disagree and 10 means strongly agree, please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. If you have no opinion, check the box at the far right ("don't know"). **Note:** Use caution when sample size falls below 30. © E Source (2021 Social Media Survey)

Content planning. One way of improving operations is to use a detailed editorial calendar. Forty-one percent of respondents have no formal editorial calendar or planning process, are in the process of developing an editorial calendar, or set just an annual calendar. Some respondents said that planning has been helpful in becoming more successful. One respondent said, "We have also drafted an entire digital plan for 2021, so while it hasn't proven to be a success, just having something on paper to lead our strategy so far has been hugely successful."

Our report Strategies for effective internal communications: How to inform and engage employees discusses in detail how to set up an editorial calendar and content review process. Video clips in our report Utility content strategy tips from the experts show how utility and non-utility content strategists use these tools.

About the Social Media Survey

The Social Media Survey is an online survey designed to understand utilities' social media efforts. What we've uncovered from the survey can inform you and your peers on social media strategy, design, and implementation. The survey also identifies social media trends and common practices at utilities. The survey polls leaders in utility social media on a variety of topics, including:

- Channels and audience
- Uses and goals
- Policies and other documentation
- Digital strategy
- Staffing and budgets
- Metrics and reporting
- The state of the industry

- Lessons learned

We conducted the 2021 survey in May and June 2021, and we received responses from 27 utilities across the US and Canada. The survey focused on utilities with more than 400,000 customers but also included a small sample of smaller utilities. Only one set of responses was accepted per utility. A mix of utility types responded, including investor-owned, municipality or public power, and cooperative with electric only, dual fuel, or multiple-commodity offerings. Only companies that completed the entire survey were included in the analysis.

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