

2020 COMMS REPORT

MEASURING UP TO THE MOMENT

In a year like no other, this fourth annual Comms Report from Cision and PRWeek tells the story of an industry that is confidently confronting old and new challenges by bolstering its C-suite influence, amplifying its real-time data capabilities and advancing its social media prowess.

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CHALLENGE: ACCEPTED AND CONFRONTED

Numerous obstacles comms has long faced – such as tech adoption and proving ROI – have only been heightened by the perpetual uncertainty of 2020. As evidenced by this fourth annual PRWeek/Cision Comms Report, PR is up to the task – and others are recognizing it.

Words **Chris Daniels**

There comes a time when a corporate discipline needs to step up for the health and future of not only itself, but also the organization and sector it represents. Perhaps more than ever, that moment for comms is now. PR is being asked to rise to that challenge – and is doing so, suggest the findings of the fourth annual Comms Report from PRWeek and software and services company Cision.

Entering 2020, PR had already established itself as a trusted adviser to top management. That status, however, is reaching a new level this year. Of the 314 survey respondents, all U.S.-based PR and marketing professionals, 85% said the C-suite sought the counsel of comms even more after COVID-19 hit our country.

The challenges are formidable. The novel coronavirus has left employees anxious about how to safely do their jobs (not to mention whether they will continue to even have those jobs). Meanwhile, consumers are worried about how to conduct themselves as the pandemic stretches on.

Counsel increasingly sought

“I don’t know if the pandemic has changed the mandate of comms, but it certainly has highlighted its relevance,” says Alberto Canal, VP of strategic comms at Panasonic North America. “Priorities have had to be rebalanced. There has been a shift to new strategic imperatives.”

“More than ever, PR has been connecting with so many other parts of the business, from HR and sales to IR and marketing,” he adds. “This is one of those incredibly challenging times in history where we have been given a platform to show our value and the ways in which we can support the organization.”

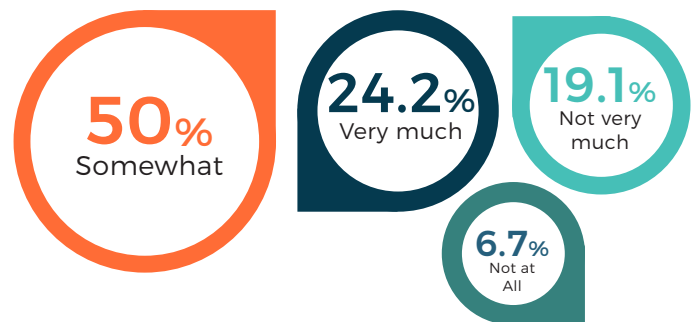
Marisa Bradley, internal comms director at Ford Motor Co., agrees.

“As we have had to grapple with so many unknowns, the role of communications has been elevated, in particular internal comms,” she explains. “It has underscored our need for really integrated partnerships, including with the C-suite and HR teams. Only if we are united can we deliver a clarity and consistency of message, which is so critical right now.”

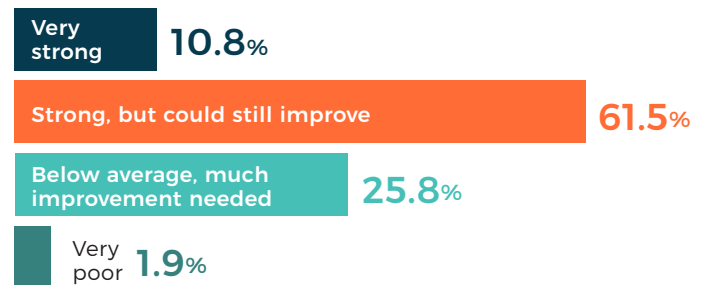
And the survey data indicates comms has answered that call

Talent assessment

Whether through new hires or training of current employees, is your team better staffed to take advantage of the latest technology and analytics tools as compared to three years ago?



How would you rate your overall staff in terms of its ability to fully take advantage of the latest technology and analytics tools?



Key takeaway: There is still room for comms to get better in terms of most effectively using the latest tech and analytics tools, say nearly 90% of respondents.

from above. More than 95% of respondents said their relationship with the CEO is positive, which is surely a testament to how comms has stepped up. It is equally a recognition of the more powerful force it has become internally.

This advancement is not relegated to in-house departments. Agency pros have gained more access to the C-suite, too.

"We are certainly being elevated to a level within the client's business beyond the marketing and comms team, with whom we typically interact," notes James Wright, global chairman of Havas PR Collective and CEO of Red Havas U.S. "Now, we are talking to the C-suite more often. That's because the issues we are being brought into address and help communicate about – such as business continuity and transformation – play a big role across organizations."

Intelligence – right now

In a constantly changing world, intelligence is not only needed, but it's also needed in real time. Only then can actions be well informed, decisive and impactful.

The survey results highlight this, as 38% of respondents identified "real-time alerts from high-priority messaging" as their clear top earned media monitoring goal. (No other option was chosen by even 25% of the survey pool.)

This is made more noteworthy by the fact that "real-time alerts" ranked fourth in last year's report behind options such as "We want to compare coverage for our brands and our competitors" and "We want to ensure we never miss an external mention of our brand."

Canal says "one of the first things we did" when he joined Panasonic from IBM in 2018 was to start real-time alerts.

"It is critical to being able to identify issues early and to know what to focus on," he notes. "This is especially true for a company such as ours that services so many industries – including food, retail, automotive and immersive entertainment – and supplies computing devices to frontline workers and in other critical environments."

The comms function curates the alerts to various internal stakeholders based on what they need to know "in as much real time as possible" to do their jobs, continues Canal. This includes the C-suite. For example, he says real-time alerts informed Panasonic to "move quicker" on the development of their smart locker and mobile payment retail solutions.

It matters to multiple audiences

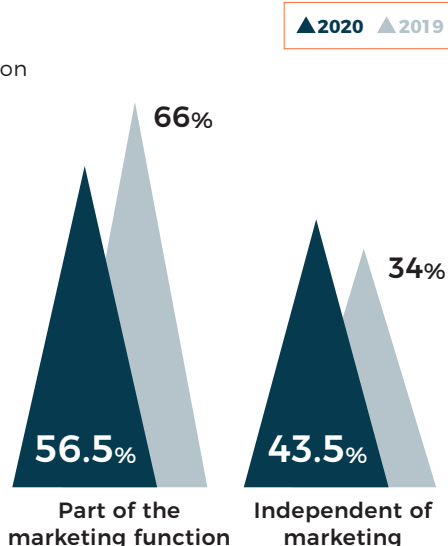
Ford's Bradley shares another important reason "real-time alerts for high-priority mentions" are so important. She says while Ford has significantly ramped up internal comms channels, employees still consume mainstream media.

"We are followed and covered closely by mainstream and automotive media," explains Bradley. "Sometimes our employees get information about what we're doing from media first. So real-time monitoring becomes very important for us to ensure accuracy and that we are getting our messaging out. We also want real-time conversations happening with our media contacts."

Sticking with information consumption, the survey also reveals that online features are deemed the most effective at influencing consumer purchasing behavior. (Online features scored higher than seven other options including social media posts, broadcast features and brand videos.)

Team structure

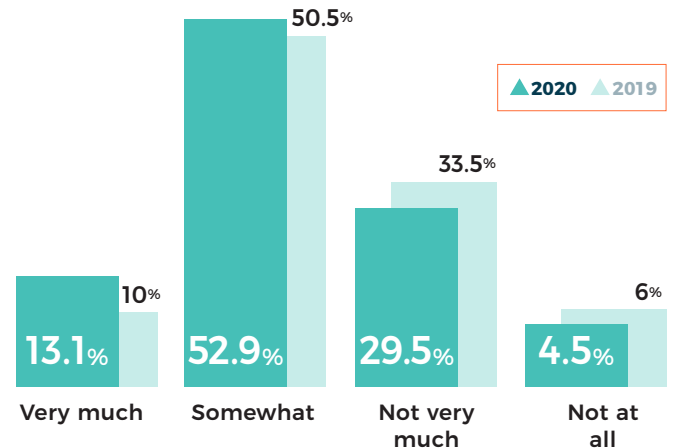
Is your comms department part of the marketing function or does it operate independently from marketing? (Only asked of non-agency respondents.)



Key takeaway: The year-on-year numbers signify comms' rise to be more on par with marketing in the eyes of leaders across the business.

Stronger proof

Respondents were asked whether or not they agreed that the comms industry effectively measures – and proves – the impact of its work on business objectives.



Key takeaway: While the industry still has a long way to go on this front, year-on-year improvement is evident – and encouraging.

Bradley notes that Ford has embraced online features as a way for its vehicles to be promoted (including two new models launched this summer), especially given how pandemic restrictions have curtailed traditional media test drives and auto shows.

"We are looking at creative tactics to keep the business going and our story told in the media," she says.

Helen Shelton, senior partner at Finn Partners, believes consumers today are looking for richer, deeper content online.

"There is a place for all content, especially now with people having more time to discover things on the internet," she suggests. "Every piece of content has the same potential to be shared."

Online features can originate from mainstream media, but Shelton says it can also be owned media, such as a blog or LinkedIn post.

"It is incumbent on us to give it the same level of critique and analysis, approvals and all that, as we would for a mainstream media article," she advises. "Audiences aren't as forgiving about mistakes."

Above all else, the industry leaders who took this survey agree on the importance of cohesiveness between brands' earned, owned and paid media strategies. Maximum impact — including the potential to influence consumer behavior — demands that balance.

Staff up, stars down

When it comes to the type of influencer who has the most impact on consumer purchasing behavior, the mainstream journalist ranked at the very top, just as it did last year. The big change this year is how employees catapulted up the list, while celebrities, who at one point ranked high on the survey, continued to dip.

Red Havas' Wright attributes that to the thirst for authenticity. Employees bring a high level of it to their comments, he says, while "there were just too many celebrities out there trying to push messages across that were essentially fluff. There is a role for fluff and distraction, but that is not what people want to hear about right now."

With the "right influencers" seeming to change all the time, a key challenge for communicators is identifying them in tandem with cultural trends and consumer sentiments.

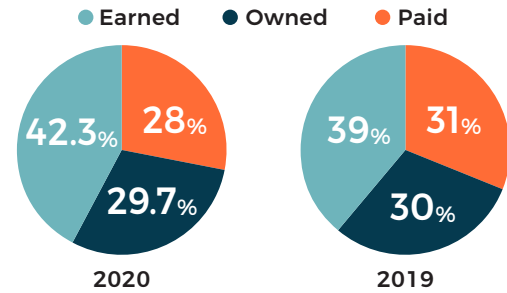
And the metrics by which to evaluate influencers have changed, reports Shelton. In fact, they have become so advanced that it allows brands to identify celebrities who possess the unquestioned authenticity consumers now demand.

She points to a trilogy of music video PSAs her agency launched for Hip Hop Public Health featuring R&B singer Raheem DeVaughn and rappers Doug E. Fresh and Darryl "DMC" McDaniels. The spots encouraged urban African-Americans and Latinx individuals to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in their communities, especially as research indicates these groups are disproportionately impacted by the disease.

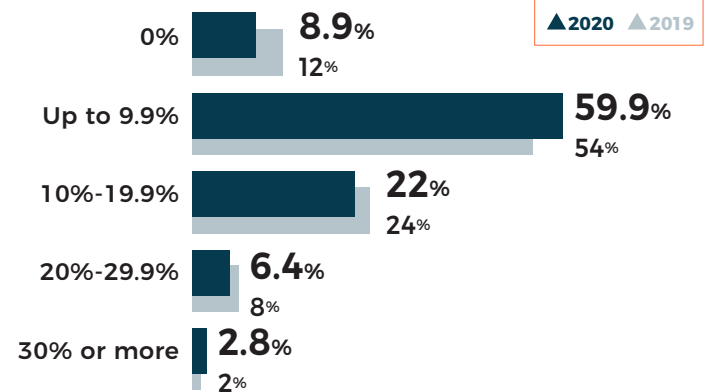
"Consumers want to feel a sense of trust and a shared commonality as we face the pandemic and extraordinary social unrest," she concludes. "So, while influencers and celebrities still play an important role in brand storytelling and in engagement strategies, it's their appeal to things such as a deep love for cultural heritage, family, and community that matters. It's their authentic community ties and proven track records of serving the interests of everyday people." •

In the budget

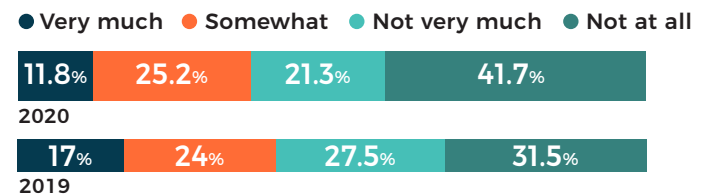
How much of your media budget is allocated to the following?



How much of your company's annual budget is devoted to measuring/monitoring/understanding the impact of comms programs?



Is paying influencers an important part of your influencer strategy?



About the comms report: Since 2017, Cision and PRWeek — inspired by the continuing evolution in how PR is both practiced and perceived — have joined forces on an initiative to clearly identify and more deeply understand the challenges and opportunities communicators have in terms of their use of/interaction with technology, data, measurement, content and influencers.

This year, of course, the survey was conducted — and its findings being presented — as we still confront a global pandemic. Many of the observations within underscore the impact COVID-19 is having — and will have — on the industry and the practice of communications.

A constant, however, is this study's helpful role in bringing clarity to the areas in which PR is making real progress, as well as where it needs to make more.

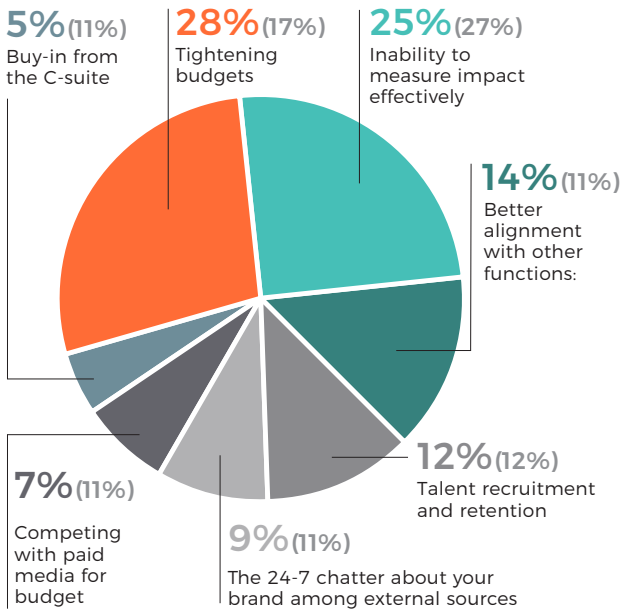
UP TO THE TASK (Part 1)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate last year's responses

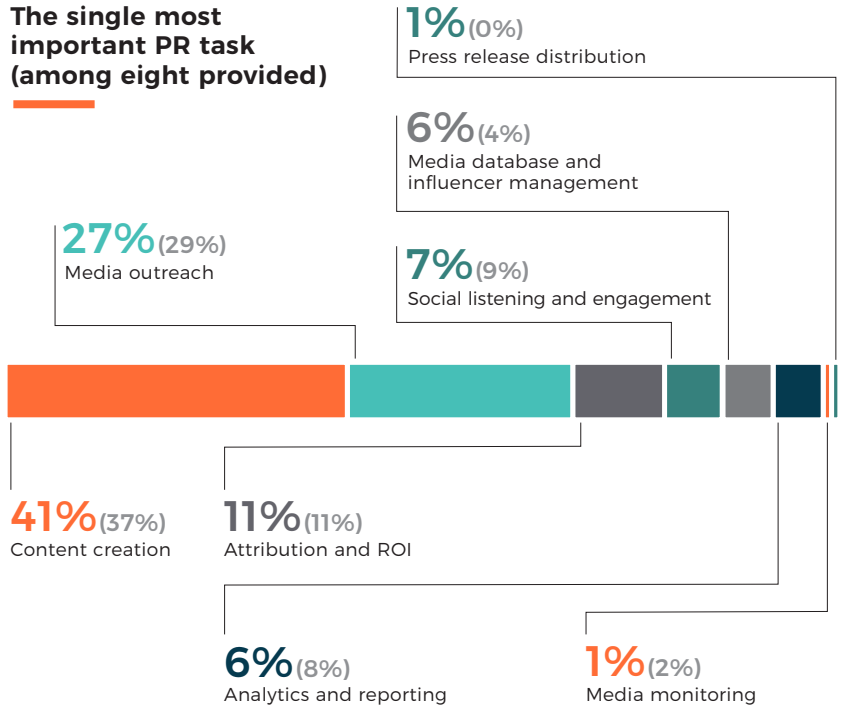
From tightening budgets to tech adoption, comms teams face numerous challenges as they continually seek optimal performance. To tackle such obstacles, you first must realize what they are.

THE BIGGEST ISSUES

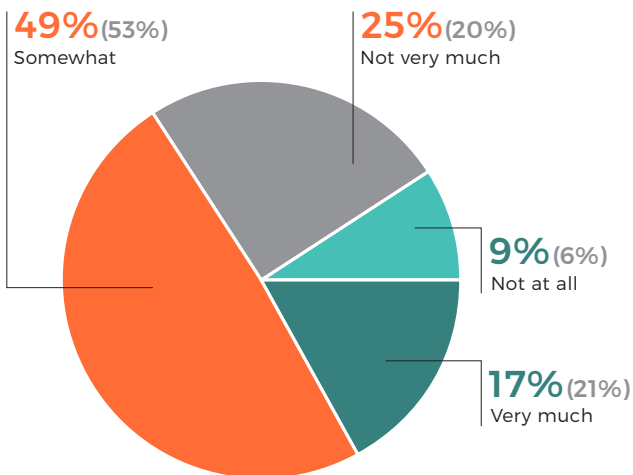
The single most difficult challenge comms pros face



The single most important PR task (among eight provided)



Level of agreement with this statement: We have adequate financial resources to ensure that our agency/department has the latest and best comms measurement technology



Identify the single most difficult challenge related to comms measurement

- Aligning metrics to revenue or vital business KPIs: **39%** (38%)
- Proving/validating PR's impact to the C-suite: **19%** (21%)
- Converting data into actionable insights: **18%** (16%)
- Identifying the best tools to measure most effectively: **15%** (10%)
- Continued overreliance on media impressions: **9%** (15%)

Of these four earned media monitoring goals, identify the one that is most important

- We want real-time alerts for high-priority mentions: **37.6%** (12%)
- We want to compare coverage for our brands and our competitors: **24.8%** (29%)
- We want to ensure we never miss an external mention of our brand: **21%** (18%)
- We want to track earned media and social media side-by-side: **16.6%** (27%)

Note: Last year, 14% indicated they didn't really have any earned media monitoring goals. That response was not an option available to them this year.

UP TO THE TASK (Part 2)

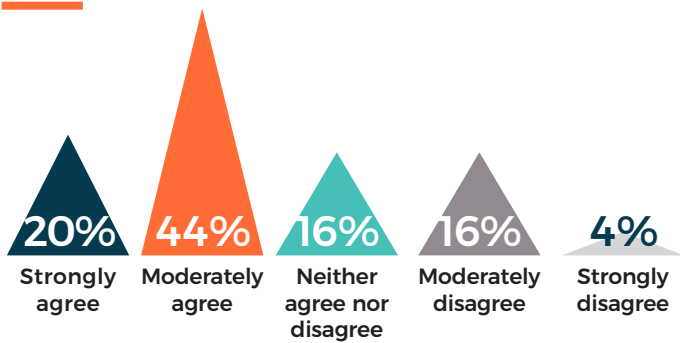
From consumer activity spurred by content to understanding the profiles of those who consume it, this page highlights additional challenges many comms pros face.

IMPACT OF CONTENT

Content is only effective if it facilitates an active response from those who consume it. We presented four such metrics and asked respondents to indicate how confident they are in the strength and accuracy of the related data they collect.

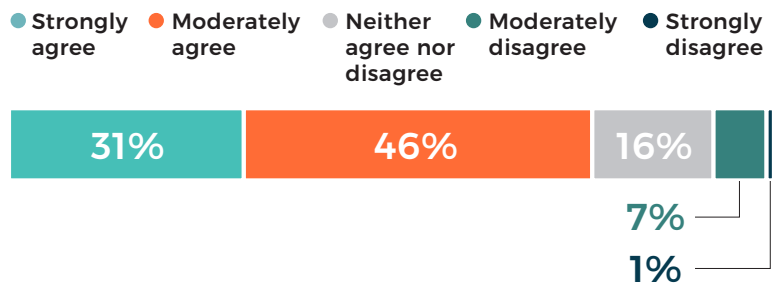
All four questions in this section were asked as YES/NO last year.

People actually read the content



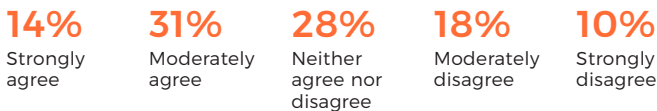
Note: Last year, 53% said they had strong data to tell them this, while 47% said they did not.

People clicked a link within the content



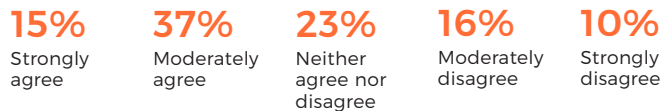
Note: Last year, 68% said they had strong data to tell them this, while 32% said they did not.

People's immediate, instant reaction to the content



Note: Last year, 23% said they had strong data to tell them this, while 77% said they did not.

Whether there was any real-world behavior driven by the content

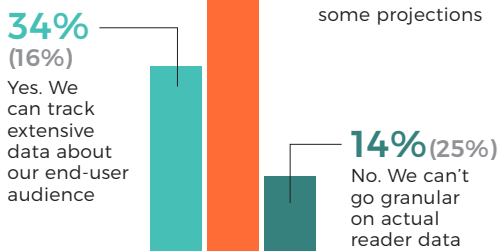


Note: Last year, 32% said they had strong data to tell them this, while 68% said they did not.

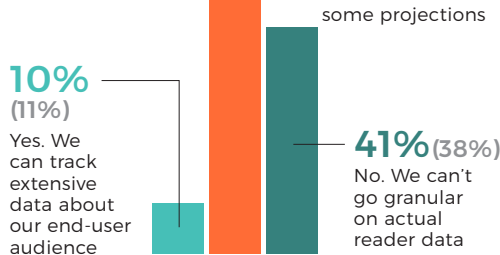
AUDIENCE RECOGNITION

We asked respondents how confident they are about their tools and abilities to fully understand the profiles of the people who view their content on both earned and owned channels. (Numbers in parentheses indicate last year's responses)

Owned

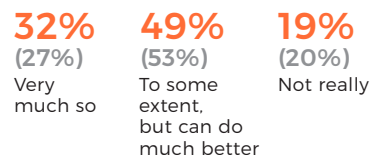


Earned



HOW POWERFUL IS YOUR VOICE?

Are you able to measure your brand's share of voice compared to your competition? (Numbers in parentheses indicate last year's responses.)



OBSERVATIONS

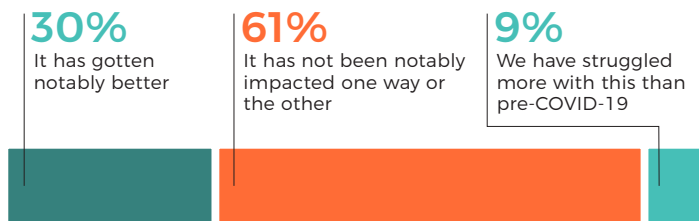
Tightening budgets are not only the biggest challenge comms faces, but it is an issue that is notably more prevalent among this year's respondents as compared to last year. Content creation was also deemed the most important function for more than four out of 10 respondents. Meanwhile, there remains notable room for improvement in terms of comms' ability to truly understand the impact of content on consumer behavior.

COMMS AMID COVID-19

Operating in a crisis is nothing new for communicators, but 2020 tested the industry like never before. Everything from message tone to performing daily work functions has been impacted by COVID-19. We asked respondents numerous questions to delve deeply into just how much the industry – and the discipline – has been forced to adjust.

TECH ADOPTION

We gave respondents three options and asked them to choose the one that best captures the impact of COVID-19 in their adoption of the latest tech and data tools.



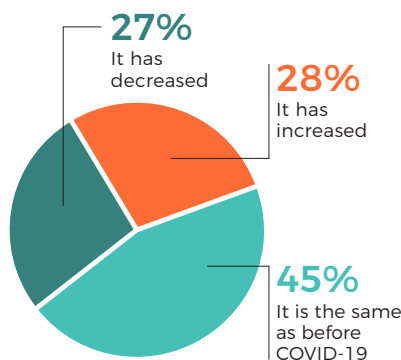
CONTENT WITH THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Which of the following best captures the biggest change to your content creation process since the start of COVID-19?

- We've notably adapted the tone of our content to better fit current societal realities **44.3%**
- We've increased engagement with our audience **19.1%**
- We've experimented far more with new platforms **15.9%**
- We've become less siloed and are working more with other creative disciplines **12.4%**
- We have not notably changed our content creation process **8.3%**

MEDIA APPETITE

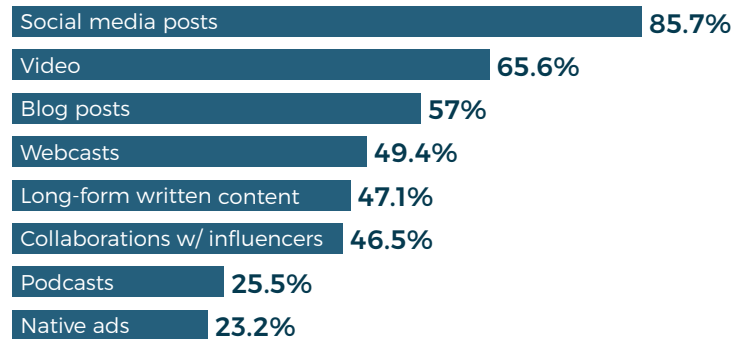
As it pertains to non-COVID-related stories/news, how would you best describe the current appetite of the media (traditional and new) for your content?



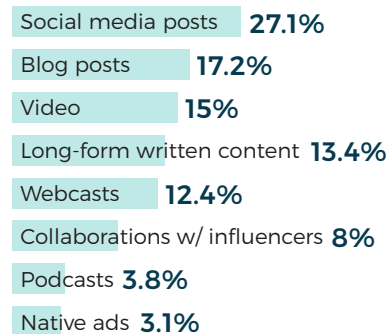
RELIABLE SOURCES

We presented eight forms of content commonly produced by/for brands and sought to find out which our respondents have increased their reliance on the most since the start of COVID-19.

The following indicates responses that were placed among the top four

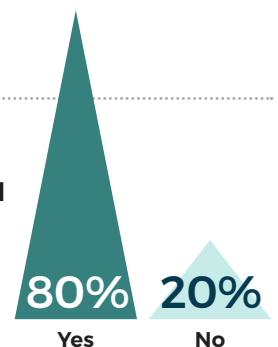


The following indicates how many respondents chose each option as their No. 1 choice



A PLACE FOR PURPOSE

Given the current health and social environment, has your brand increased its focus on matters of purpose and social responsibility in terms of its outreach to media?



OBSERVATIONS

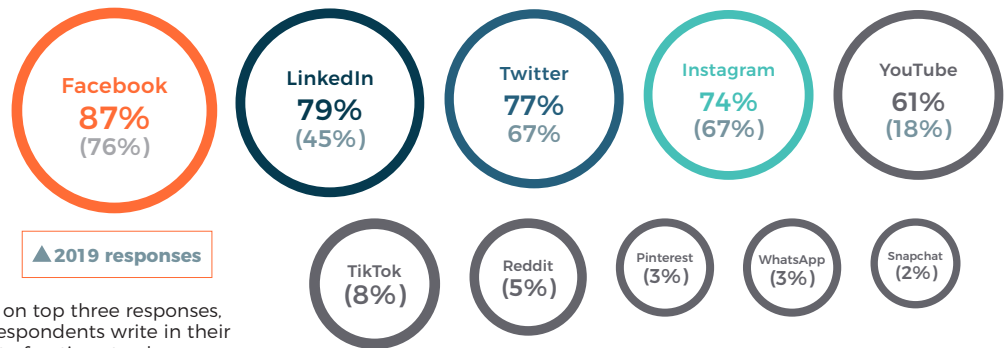
From tech adoption to content creation, it is clear COVID-19 has changed the way communicators work. That is certainly the case with media relations, as the focus on purpose has notably increased. It is equally clear that the need to adapt message tone is very much top of mind. And while social media and blog posts have been popular channels for a while, our respondents have reported an increased reliance on them.

CHANNEL YOUR EFFORTS

Social platforms clearly play a huge role in earned media effectiveness. It is incumbent upon comms pros to choose the right one for the right audience to have maximum impact. We gave respondents 10 different channels and asked them to indicate which one(s) were most important to their broader content strategy.

THE FANTASTIC FOUR (OUT OF TEN)

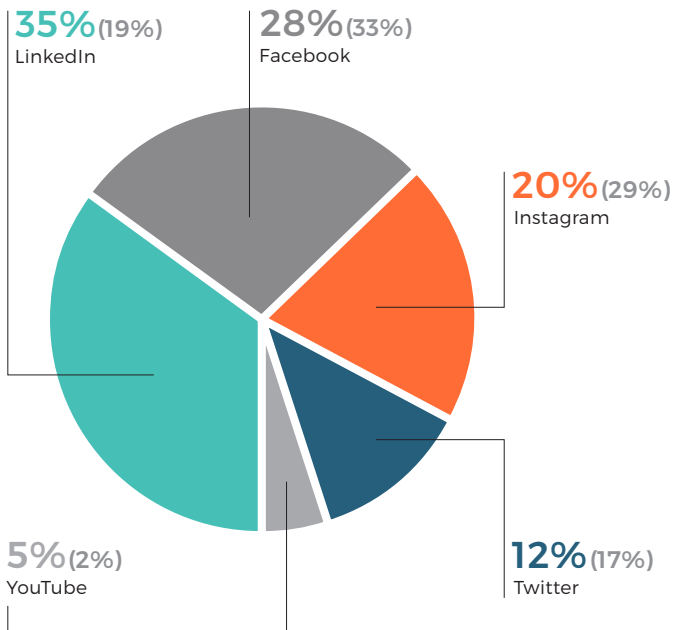
The percentages indicate how many respondents chose that social media platform among their top four most important in terms of their broader content strategy.



Note: Last year, the data compiled only focused on top three responses, not top four. In addition, last year's survey had respondents write in their answers, as opposed to this year's, in which a list of options to choose from was provided.

THE ONE AND ONLY

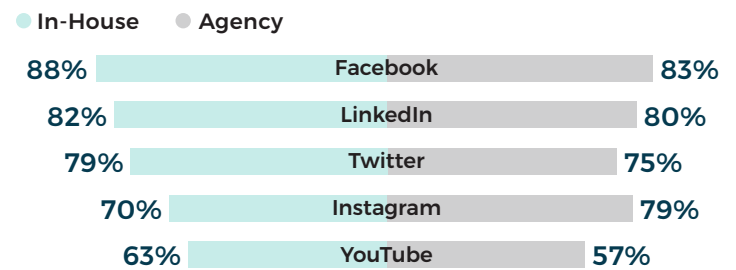
The percentages below indicate how many respondents chose that social media platform as the single-most important one to their broader content strategy. (The numbers in parentheses indicate last year's responses.)



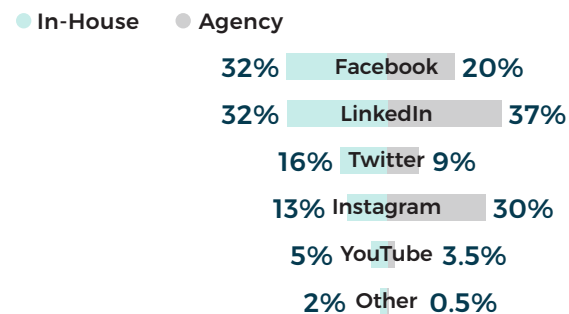
AGENCY vs. IN-HOUSE

The percentages below indicate how many respondents chose that social media platform both among their top four most important and as their single most important in terms of their broader content strategy.

Among top four



Single most important



OBSERVATIONS

The rise of LinkedIn's importance to communicators' broader content strategies is the story here. A distant fourth last year among top four answers (behind Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), it is a strong second this year. And when respondents were asked to identify the top channel, LinkedIn was chosen more than any other option.

INSIGHTS ON INFLUENCE

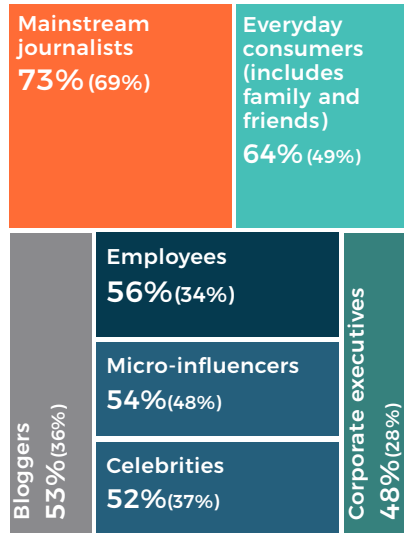
*Numbers in parentheses indicate last year's responses

Who do communicators deem to be the most effective influencers with whom to partner? Are those efforts truly giving brands the intelligence they need? Our survey delved deep into these and related matters.

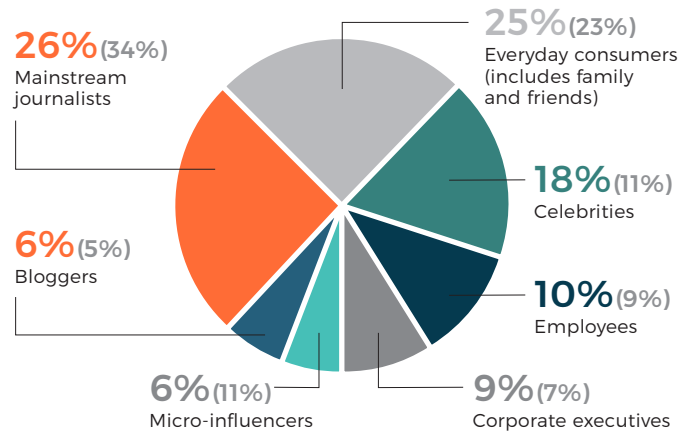
VITAL VOICES

We presented seven different types of influencers and asked respondents to rank them from most to least effective in terms of impacting customer behavior. The percentages indicate how often each influencer type was chosen among the top four.

Note: Last year, respondents were asked to indicate answers among their top three, not top four.

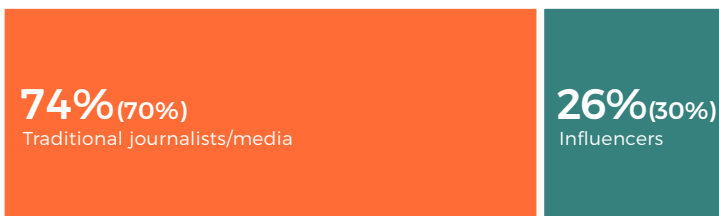


Here we indicate how often each influencer type was chosen as the single most effective at impacting consumer behavior.



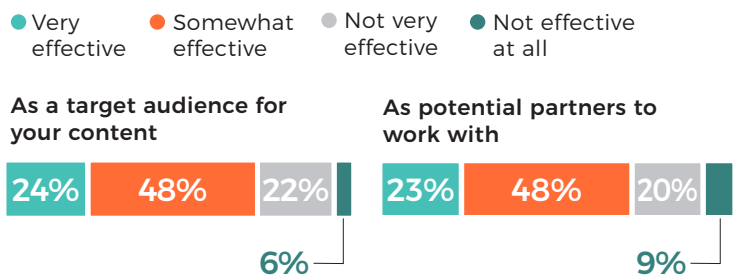
TRADITIONAL THINKING

How much of your engagement efforts are focused on traditional journalists/media and how much are focused on influencers (bloggers, online influencers, social media personalities, etc.)?



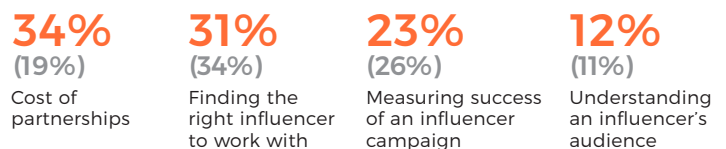
IS DATA DELIVERING?

We asked respondents how effective they are at using data, including customer data, to target influencers for two different scenarios.



OBSTACLES TO INFLUENCE

We presented four common challenges brands come across when working with influencers. We asked respondents to indicate the one they find most challenging.



Note: Last year, we offered an "other" option and 10% chose it.

OBSERVATIONS

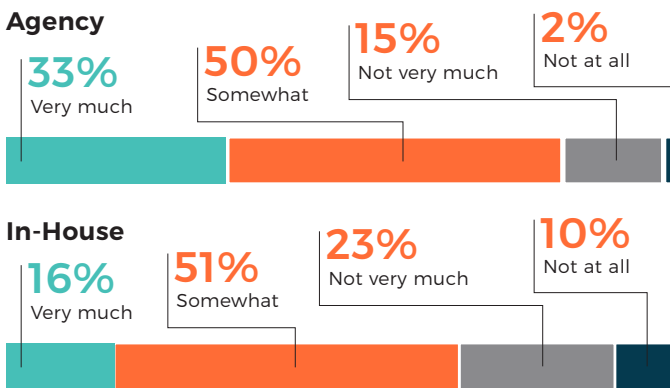
The importance of employees as brand ambassadors has long been noted by communicators - and the data shared here indicates a notable boost that underscores this group's rising impact on consumer behavior (as noted in the feature earlier in this eBook). And in terms of media engagement efforts, traditional media continues to outpace "new media," with nearly three-quarters of respondents indicating they devote more effort to engaging the former.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

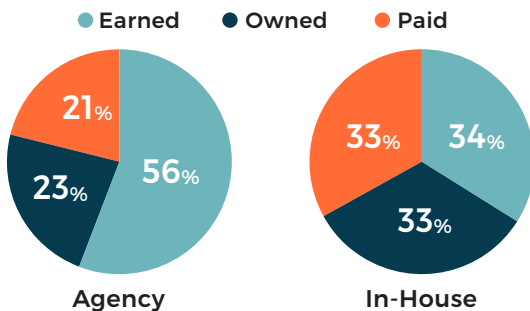
(Agency and In-House)

For nearly all questions from this year's survey, specific data was gleaned to compare how both agency pros and in-house communicators responded. On this page we share a few interesting comparisons.

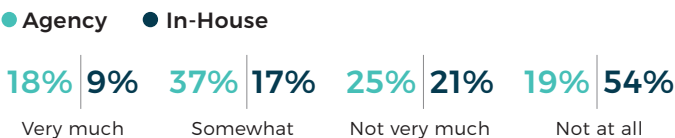
In the past three years, whether through new hires or training of current employees, is your team better staffed to take advantage of the latest technology and analytics tools?



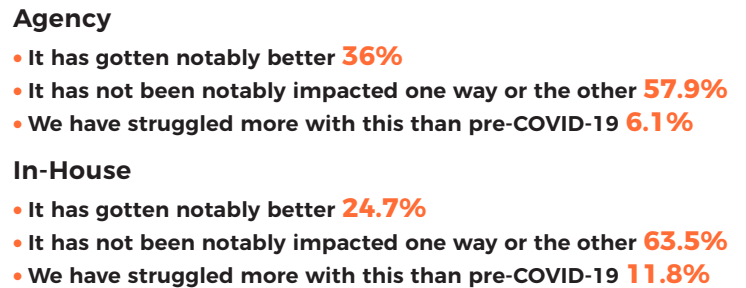
As best as you can, indicate in percentages how much of your media budget is allocated to each of the following.



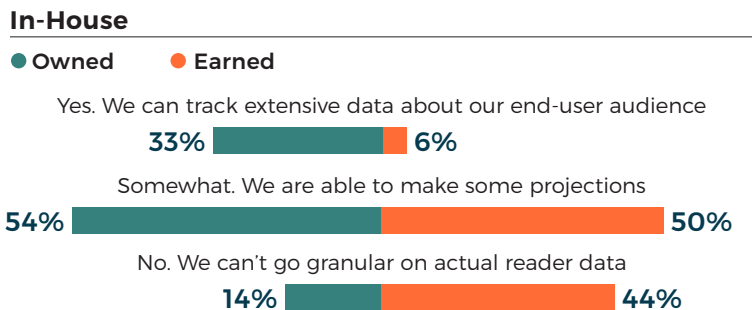
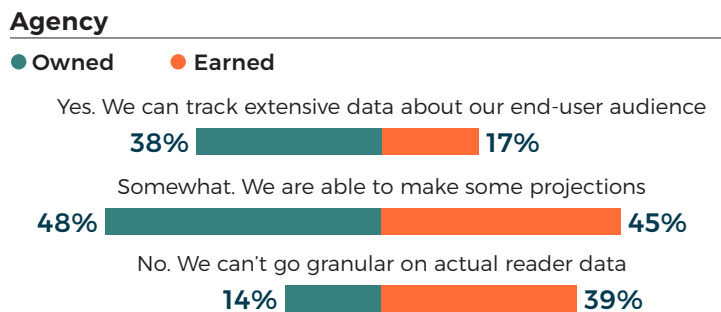
Is paying influencers an important part of your influencer strategy?



Which of the following best captures the impact COVID-19 has had on your agency's/in-house comms department's adoption of the latest tech and data tools?



We asked respondents how confident they are about their tools and abilities to fully understand the profiles of the people who view their content on both earned and owned channels.



OBSERVATIONS

On both the staffing and implementation fronts, agencies are a bit stronger in tech adoption than their in-house counterparts. Meanwhile, while both agencies and in-house departments devote more budget to earned than any other media, PR firms clearly allocate much more toward it. And while neither overwhelmingly pays influencers, the practice is far more common among agency respondents.

Methodology

PRWeek partnered with Cision on this survey, which was sent via email to both communications and marketing professionals in the U.S. A total of 314 senior-level professionals, from both agencies and in-house, completed the online survey, conducted by PRWeek, between August 12 and September 14, 2020. Results are not weighted and are statistically tested at confidence levels of 90% and 95%.

About the respondents

Total: 314 (all in the U.S.)

• 39 of the 50 U.S. states are represented among the respondent pool. The five states most represented are New York (19.4%), California (15.3%), Illinois (8.3%), New Jersey (6.4%) and Florida (4.8%)

By region

- Northeast: 34%
- West: 25%
- South: 22%
- Midwest: 19%

By gender

- Male: 37.6%
- Female: 61.8%
- Prefer not to say: 0.6%

By organization type

- PR agency: 36.3%
- Corporation/In-House: 63.7%
- 94.3% of respondents were manager/director or above, with 59.2% overall being VP or above. In addition, 29% overall were the most senior level (either an agency CEO/managing partner/president or an in-house CCO or similar).



About Cision

Cision is a leading global provider of earned media software and wire distribution services to public relations and marketing communications professionals. Cision's software allows users to identify key influencers, craft and distribute strategic content, and measure meaningful impact. Cision has over 4,800 employees with offices in 24 countries throughout the Americas, EMEA, and APAC. For more information about Cision's award-winning products and services, including the Cision Communications Cloud®, visit www.cision.co.uk and follow Cision UK on Twitter [@CisionUK](https://twitter.com/CisionUK).



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PRWeek epitomizes the modern business publishing brand, spanning online, print, events and social media, incorporating a paid-for content strategy and gated website. Launched in November 1998, it is the essential title for PR pros.

PRWeek reflects an industry playing a more pivotal role than ever, not only in the marketing strategies of companies, brands, and organizations, but also within boardrooms and in the C-suite. In the transparent world epitomized by social media, corporate reputation is crucial. Executives need timely, authoritative, insightful content to navigate this landscape — that's where PRWeek comes in.

Breaking news, analysis, and opinion fuels PRWeek's content. And the brand extends into the iconic PRWeek Awards, annual conferences, roundtables, webcasts, and virtual forums. For more, visit www.prweek.com.



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