

Sprout Social Q2 2026 Pulse Survey

[Public Expectations for Brand Crisis Management](#)

[Creator Dynamics: Trust, Tier Breakdown, and Follow Intent](#)

[Consumer Sentiment Toward AI Influencers](#)

[The Impact of Employee-Generated Content \(EGC\)](#)

[Social Media and Live Events](#)

[The Nuances of 'Unhinged' Marketing](#)

[Social Search](#)

[Methodology](#)

1. Public Expectations for Brand Crisis Management

When a brand faces a controversy, social media acts as the definitive first point of contact and the expected venue for communication. Consumers favor immediate public statements on social platforms, where response speed heavily dictates public perception.

- **First Notice:** Social media is the **#1 place** consumers hear about a brand crisis first.
- **Communication Channel Preference:** **64%** of consumers say it's important for a brand to respond to a crisis publicly on social media rather than through a press release or website statement.
- **The Impact of Response Speed:** Speed heavily influences consumer sentiment. Only **16%** of general consumers said that speed does not affect whether they view a public response positively or negatively. Among Gen Z, that buffer drops to just **10%**.

2. Creator Dynamics: Trust, Tier Breakdown, and Follow Intent

While everyday peers command the highest baseline trust, creators across all tiers remain vital drivers of product discovery. Audiences look past simple follower counts to evaluate content by subject matter and partner brands, shifting their follow intent based on whether they want entertainment from macro-creators or community from niche experts.

Product Discovery and Everyday Trust

Across all demographics, consumers trust everyday users (57%) for product recommendations over subject matter experts (26%), mega-influencers (9%), and brand employees (8%).

However, influencers and content creators still drive significant product discovery. In the past year, 67% of consumers have made a purchase directly because of an influencer's recommendation—that figure rises to 73% for Millennials and 81% for Gen Z. Meanwhile, one in

three consumers find new products through creators at least once a month, while 22% of all consumers—and more than a third of Gen Z—find them weekly.

This creates a unique dynamic: consumers trust the unvarnished opinions of everyday peers the most, yet they still rely heavily on larger creators for initial product awareness. Because of this, micro-influencers and niche creators are stepping in to bridge the gap, combining the broad visibility of a traditional creator with the relatable, personal feel of an everyday user.

The Role of Follower Counts

Only 17% of social users look at an influencer's follower count before deciding to follow them. The top information they look for are:

1. The subjects they discuss in their social media content (**47%**)
2. The brands or companies that they partner with (**29%**)
3. Their most recent posts (**29%**)

Primary Reasons for Following Creators (Mega vs. Micro)

Audience intent shifts depending on the size of the creator, with high-profile accounts leading on entertainment and niche creators pulling slightly stronger numbers for community and deep-dive learning.

Primary Reason(s) to Follow	High-Profile Celebrities / Large Influencers	Smaller Influencers with a Specific Niche
Entertainment	59% (64% Gen Z / 61% Millennials)	51%
Educational value / learning a skill or hobby	33%	38%
Product discovery and finding reliable reviews	32%	36%
Feeling a sense of community or belonging	26%	31%

Purchasing Likelihood & The Authenticity Mandate

When asked whether they are more likely to buy a product based on the recommendation of a large influencer or a smaller niche influencer, consumers answered:

- **Equally likely to buy from either:** 39%
- **Micro-influencers:** 21% (*Rises to 29% for Gen Z*)
- **Mega-influencers:** 15% (*Sits at 18% for Gen Z*)

When it comes to product promotion, authenticity matters most. **81%** of respondents say it matters if an influencer has used a product they are promoting, while **44%** of those respondents say they prefer if the influencer is a long-time user of the product.

3. Consumer Sentiment Toward AI Influencers

Audiences maintain a cautious approach to AI influencers, coupled with a notable layer of uncertainty around identifying them. While younger cohorts are more aware of their exposure to AI influencers, consumer comfort with brand-led AI usage remains low overall.

User Awareness: Do Consumers Know Who They Follow?

When asked if they currently follow any AI-generated influencers, consumer awareness varies significantly by generation:

- **No, I am sure that none of the influencers I follow are AI-generated:** 60%
- **I'm not sure if any of the influencers I follow are AI-generated:** 27% (*Millennials are the most unsure at 30%*)
- **Yes, I know I do:** 13% (*Gen Z leads this segment at 21%*)

Brand Sentiment: Comfort with Corporate AI Usage

When it comes to companies leveraging AI influencers for marketing, the majority of the market expresses clear hesitation across all generations:

- **Uncomfortable with brands using AI influencers:** 44%
- **Comfort level depends entirely on the situation:** 30%
- **Comfortable with brands using AI influencers:** 25%

4. The Impact of Employee-Generated Content (EGC)

Featuring a company's own workforce, especially frontline staff, is an effective way to build trust. Consumers view these employee perspectives as more authentic than corporate accounts, directly driving product discovery and purchases among younger audiences.

Perceived Authenticity of EGC

Do you find employee-generated content more or less authentic than other content from the brand's main account?

- **More authentic:** 40% (51% for Gen Z consumers)
- **About the same:** 41%
- **Less authentic:** 19%

Direct Impact on Discovery and Purchases

When it comes to employee-generated content, the #1 people consumers want to hear from are frontline workers (e.g., [Staples Baddie](#) to [employee-generated Library content](#)).

This brand affinity translates directly into the purchase funnel:

- **40%** of all consumers frequently (once a month or more) discover a product or service through employee-generated content.
- This number jumps to **62%** for Gen Z consumers and **48%** for Millennial consumers.
- Because of this traction, **61%** of consumers think brands should compensate employees for their social promotion.

5. Social Media and Live Events

Social platforms have become a critical companion piece for experiencing live culture. An overwhelming majority of consumers now track, watch, and participate in sports or concerts via a mix of official, creator, and attendee-led social content.

- **The Mass Audience:** Across all demographics, **80%** of consumers watch live events through social media.
- **The Youth Surge:** When following live events, **93%** of Gen Z and **85%** of Millennials do so by tracking social posts (via official event channels, attendee uploads, influencers, or news outlets).

6. The Nuances of ‘Unhinged’ Marketing

Audiences are highly receptive to chaotic or unfiltered brand humor, provided it matches the product category. While consumers value the humanizing element of this strategy, they draw a strict line when it comes to high-stakes industries.

Consumer Views on Bold/Chaotic Brand Humor:

- **It depends:** I like it for fun brands (snacks, games), but find it unprofessional for serious brands (banks, tech): **47%** (*Rises to 50% for Gen Z*)
- **I love it:** It makes the brand feel more human and less corporate: **24%**
- **It’s overplayed:** It feels like the brand is trying too hard to be 'young' or viral: **17%**
- **I dislike it:** I prefer brands to be professional and focused on their products/services: **12%**

7. Social Search

Search engines and social media are the two most commonly used platforms for search across all age groups and demographics. Among younger users, the gap between the two is narrowing significantly, with consumers routinely splitting their search habits based on their exact intent.

Where consumers go first to search
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Google/Traditional Search Engine: 53% 2. Social media: 21% 3. Chat-based AI: 12% 4. Ask friends or family directly: 8% 5. Virtual assistants (Alexa/Siri): 5%

Where Social Steps Up as the Preferred Tool:

Consumers actively favor social platforms over traditional search engines when looking for experiential, highly visual, or peer-led information:

- Restaurants, bars, or things to do (**38%**)
- Product reviews or recommendations (**30%**)
- News or trending topics (**30%**)
- Travel ideas and itineraries (**30%**)
- *Gender Insight:* **35%** of female consumers prefer social media for fashion or beauty inspiration.

The social platforms consumers most regularly use for search varies among generations.

Generation	Which social network do you regularly use to search for information (vs. casually scrolling)?		
Gen Z	TikTok (47%)	Instagram (41%)	Youtube (34%)
Millennial	Facebook (48%)	Youtube (35%)	Instagram (33%)
Gen X	Facebook (53%)	Youtube (34%)	Instagram (21%)
Boomer	Facebook (41%)	I don't regularly use any social networks for search (32%)	Youtube (24%)

Methodology: This consumer survey was conducted online by Glimpse, a global market research firm, on behalf of Sprout Social. Participants included 2,250 social media users across the US, UK and Australia. The survey was conducted from May 14 2026 to May 20 2026.

Demographic Highlights:

- Country: 1,000 US, 1,000 UK, 250 AUS
- Ages
 - 559 Gen Z
 - 696 Millennial
 - 632 Gen X
 - 363 Boomers
- Gender
 - 1,199 Female
 - 1,051 Male