Sprout Social Q3 2026 Pulse Survey

1. Holiday shopping and seasonal marketing

As economic conditions and tariffs impact spending plans, many consumers are reducing their budgets and shopping earlier this year. At the same time, social media has emerged as a leading channel for discovering gifts and executing direct holiday purchases.

Economic conditions are impacting holiday shopping plans

More than half of people (69%) are concerned about price rises due to tariffs this year, while 36% say they plan to shop earlier specifically to avoid tariff-related price increases.

This carries over into overall spending plans too, with 56% saying they plan to reduce their holiday spending this year due to economic conditions. This holds true across all generations, with a majority indicating this across Gen Z, millennials, Gen X and baby boomers.

Social media tops the list for holiday gift purchase discovery

Social media (46%) is level at the top of the list with physical stores, both of which were ahead of friends and family, TV and review sites.

Where consumers turn for gift ideas

1. Social media: 46% (rising to 54% for Gen Z)
2. Physical stores: 46%
3. Recommendations from friends and family: 34%
4. TV: 31%
5. Review sites: 23%
6. AI chatbots: 15%
7. Print or digital media: 13%
8. Online retailers: 2%

And while 18% don't intend to use social media to find gifts, 78% of people expect to use it to an equal or greater degree than they did in 2025, with more than a quarter of people (28%) saying they intend to use it more.

When it comes to how consumers execute those purchases, more than half said they're open to making purchases directly within a social media app (TikTok shop, Facebook Marketplace, Instagram Checkout etc.):

- **I've done this before and would do it again** (38%)
- **I'd try it for the first time this year** (19%)
- **I won't do purchase from a social media app directly** (30%)
- **I'm not sure** (13%)

Promo codes were the most likely driver to purchase for consumers, whether they came from the brand itself or influencers associated with the brand. Seeing the product in action was the next most persuasive, and targeted ads are the least likely to drive purchases.

What will make consumers more likely to buy from companies during the holiday season
1. Promo codes the company or an influencer shares on social media: 30% 2. Posts from a brand showing their product in action: 28% 3. The originality of their holiday-specific social media content: 26% 4. The quality of the company's social media customer service: 23% 5. Content from regular social media users (not influencers): 22% 6. Targeted social media ads from the company: 18%

2. Social media customer care & service

Brands must prepare for an influx of inquiries as consumers increasingly turn to platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for support. Speed is critical during these interactions, with a large portion of users expecting rapid responses to their direct messages.

Customer care for the holidays

Compared to the 2025 holiday season, 27% of consumers plan to use social media more to get customer service questions answered, while 59% expect to use it about the same amount. More than 90% of Gen Z consumers say they will use social media more or the same amount as 2025.

Generation	Will you use social media for care outreach during the holidays more, less or the same compared to 2025?		
Gen Z	More (44%)	The same (49%)	Less (7%)
Millennial	More (31%)	The same (59%)	Less (10%)
Gen X	More (18%)	The same (65%)	Less (17%)
Boomer	More (12%)	The same (63%)	Less (25%)

When reaching out, consumers are primarily heading to Facebook (46%) and Instagram (44%), and TikTok (50%), as well as X (28%), and WhatsApp (17%).

Generation	Top three social accounts for customer care outreach as % of people that use each platform (for networks with more than 50 users)		
Gen Z	Instagram (58%)	TikTok (55%)	Facebook (43%)
Millennial	Facebook (53%)	TikTok (50%)	Instagram (48%)
Gen X	Facebook (47%)	TikTok (45%)	Instagram (35%)
Boomer	TikTok (44%)	Facebook (38%)	WhatsApp (23%)

Expectations of customer care on social media

For contacting brands on social media, direct messages are the most common option (selecting all that applied):

- **Direct message:** (55%)
- **Comment section:** (31%)
- **Tagging or mentioning them publicly**: (13%)
- **Replying to a story:** (11%)

When people reach out to a brand about a care issue, speed is paramount, with 38% saying they expect a response within 1-2 hours, of which 14% want a reply within minutes:

- **Within minutes**: 14%
- **Within 1-2 hours**: 24%
- **Same day:** 32%
- **Within 2 business days**: 19%
- **Response speed doesn't matter to me**: 11%

3. AI transparency & perception

In the interest of speed of response, a clear majority of people were comfortable with companies using AI such as chatbots to deliver faster customer service on social media. 70% are at least somewhat comfortable with the idea, compared to 30% who say they are not. For Gen Z that number rose to 77% vs. 22%.

Generation	Comfort levels with companies using AI to deliver faster customer service on social media.			
Gen Z	Very comfortable (32%)	Somewhat comfortable (45%)	Somewhat uncomfortable (17%)	Very uncomfortable (5%)
Millennial	Very comfortable (32%)	Somewhat comfortable (44%)	Somewhat uncomfortable (14%)	Very uncomfortable (10%)
Gen X	Very comfortable (20%)	Somewhat comfortable (45%)	Somewhat uncomfortable (20%)	Very uncomfortable (15%)
Boomer	Very comfortable (15%)	Somewhat comfortable (38%)	Somewhat uncomfortable (22%)	Very uncomfortable (25%)

AI still generates mixed feelings among consumers beyond customer care. When brands clearly label content as AI-generated, there was an exactly even split in whether it made people view the brand more positively or negatively

How labeling posts as AI-generated affects brand perception.
1. More positive: 23% 2. More negative: 23% 3. Depends on the type of content: 13% 4. No impact: 14%

4. Politics, midterms & civic engagement

As the 2026 midterms approach, TV news and social media are the primary platforms voters rely on for political information. Direct engagement from politicians on social media can actively change voter opinions, though there is widespread concern regarding AI-generated deepfakes this election season

TV News and social media lead the way for how people will get their news about politics. 38% will rely on TV news, followed by 30% relying on social media platforms, and 28% relying on friends and family.

This flips for Gen Z and millennials, for whom social media will be the main source at 33% and 38% respectively.

Generation	Top sources for information on the midterms		
Gen Z	Social media (33%)	News websites or apps (27%)	Official sources like election office websites, voter guides (25%)
Millennial	Social media (38%)	TV news (32%)	Friends and family (28%)
Gen X	TV news (44%)	News websites or apps (30%)	Social media (28%)
Boomer	TV news (54%)	News websites or apps (31%)	Friends and family (24%)

Political discourse on social

Direct engagement from politicians has a mixed impact. A plurality of people (45%) say they do not follow any politician on social media, with 26% saying they follow 1-2.

But people do think it makes them more approachable (33%), and 55% of people say seeing a post has informed or changed their opinion on something:

- **Informed my opinion**: 28%
- **Changed my opinion**: 27%
- **Neither**: 45%

Almost half of Gen Z consumers say they have changed their mind on an issue because of a post from a politician.

AI and elections

AI and deepfakes are a cause for concern among voters for the elections. 84% are at least somewhat concerned about encountering AI-generated deepfakes (fake video or audio of candidates) during voting season, with 40% saying they are very concerned:

- **Extremely concerned**: 40%
- **Somewhat concerned**: 44%
- **Not concerned**: 16%

5. Brand culture, discovery and engagement

Social media is the top source for keeping up with trends and cultural moments, followed by TV and streaming and talking to friends and family.

Sources to keep up with trends
1. Social media: 54% 2. TV and streaming: 45% 3. Talking to friends and family: 42% 4. Digital media (websites, blogs, newsletters): 24% 5. Print media (newspapers, magazines, books): 18% 6. Podcasts: 18% 7. AI chatbots: 12%

Some 85% of people agree that most companies' social media content does a good job of keeping up with online culture, and the same amount think it's important that they do so.

Brands should be more authentic, less salesy on social media

Consumers' first priority in building loyalty is the quality of the product or service (44%), but this is followed by the originality of their content (33%).

What makes a brand stand out on social media
1. The quality of their product or service: 44% 2. The originality of their content: 33% 3. How quickly they respond to customers: 25%

Consumers also want brands to stop using a corporate/salesy tone (50% combined) and start using an authentic/relatable tone.

Most important characteristics of brand social content, ranked	**Brands should be less ____ on social media**

1. Authentic: 50% 2. Relatable: 41% 3. Entertaining: 31% 4. Educational 5. Product-centric: 20% 6. Polished: 16% 7. Off-the-cuff: 12%	1. Corporate: 26% 2. Salesy: 24% 3. Funny: 13% 4. Trendy: 12% 5. Earnest: 7% 6. All of the above: 16%

Methodology:

This consumer survey was conducted online by Glimpse, a global market research firm, on behalf of Sprout Social. Participants included 2,286 social media users across the US, UK and Australia. The survey was conducted from August 11 2026 to August 18 2026.

Demographic Highlights:

- Country: 1,026 US, 1,006 UK, 254 AUS
- Ages
  - 495 Gen Z
  - 714 Millennial
  - 678 Gen X
  - 399 Boomers
- Gender
  - 1,175 Female
  - 1,111 Male