

EBOOK

Senior Living Marketing in 2026

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LOCK**®

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SENIOR HOUSING NEWS

Marketing Strategy in Senior Living Enters a **New Era** of Accountability

Marketing in senior living is no longer viewed as a support function. It has become a central lever for occupancy growth, brand positioning, and competitive resilience. As digital channels reshape how families evaluate communities, marketing leaders are being asked to deliver measurable performance while navigating intensifying competition and disciplined budget environments.

In partnership with Unlock Health, Senior Housing News conducted the Senior Living Marketing in 2026 survey between December 30, 2025, and February 2, 2026. The results offer a snapshot of how senior living organizations are refining their marketing strategies in response to shifting consumer expectations, evolving digital tools, and heightened executive oversight.

Senior Housing News is proud to present these findings, which reflect how marketing strategy is being recalibrated to meet the demands of a more competitive and digitally driven senior living landscape.



Tim Regan

Editor, Senior Housing News

A Foreword from **UN LOCK**

For the fourth consecutive year, Unlock Health is proud to partner with Senior Housing News to produce the Senior Living Marketing Survey Report. Each year, this research provides a clear view into how senior living marketing is evolving, and the 2026 findings signal a significant shift: a maturing of marketing knowledge across the industry. That maturity shows up in more intentional, data-driven investments and a stronger emphasis on execution.

Last year, connecting the dots emerged as my defining theme. This year, the word that best represents the data is intentionality as marketing teams are adopting more sophisticated practices, taking greater ownership of their strategies, and making smarter, insight-led decisions. The focus is no longer on doing more; it's on doing what matters. That shift is evident in a commitment to higher-quality leads, stronger return on investment, and closer alignment with the real needs of families, future residents, and communities. We are clearly entering a quality-over-quantity phase.

As technology, buyer behavior, and brand strategy continue to evolve rapidly, success depends on alignment across marketing, sales, operations, and technology. This report is designed to serve as both a benchmark and a roadmap, helping marketers turn insight into action and deliver experiences that drive growth and build trust.

Thank you for being on this journey with us.



Larry Williams

Director of Market Strategy and Growth Solutions
Unlock Health

Executive Summary

This marks the fourth consecutive year Senior Housing News has conducted this research in partnership with Unlock Health, following the 2023-2024 Dreamscape report and the 2025 Unlock survey. This continuity enables meaningful year-over-year comparisons across evolving marketing priorities, competitive pressures, and digital investment strategies within senior living.

86 marketing professionals contributed to this year's findings, all of whom work for organizations that serve the senior living industry. The respondent mix skews heavily toward senior-level leadership, providing a strategic lens on how organizations are approaching marketing in 2026.

Together, these findings show how companies of all sizes are:

- Responding to intensifying competitive pressure by strengthening digital execution and brand differentiation.
- Elevating digital marketing as the primary engine of census growth while refining channel mix and performance accountability.
- Stabilizing marketing investment while increasing executive oversight and strategic control of marketing direction.

With nearly 90% of respondents serving in VP, director, or executive-level roles, the findings reflect strategic decision-making perspectives rather than purely operational sentiment. This leadership-weighted sample strengthens the credibility of the data and provides meaningful insight into how senior living organizations are allocating marketing resources and shaping growth strategy at the highest levels of the decision chain.

Why 2026 Marks a **Turning Point** for Senior Living Marketing

Senior living operators are navigating a period defined by sustained competitive pressure, shifting consumer expectations, tighter margins, and increasing scrutiny on performance transparency. At the same time, prospective residents and their families are moving earlier in the decision journey online, raising the bar for digital visibility, brand trust, and messaging clarity. Marketing is no longer operating at the periphery of growth strategy. It sits closer to the center of occupancy, reputation, and long-term positioning.

In this environment, marketing functions are being recalibrated. Investment decisions are under greater executive oversight, digital channels are expected to produce measurable impact, and differentiation must extend beyond amenities alone. The 2026 findings reflect a broader industry shift toward disciplined execution, clearer accountability, and more strategic use of marketing as a competitive lever.

“ **In 2026, senior living marketers should be paying close attention to how search is evolving**, especially AEO, and how it’s rewriting the buyer’s journey. Prospective residents and, more often, their adult children aren’t moving through a linear funnel or browsing websites first. They’re turning to AI-powered search experiences and language learning models with nuanced, emotionally driven questions to research care, compare communities, verify credibility, and build trust.



Aleshia Moyamba

Director of Marketing, Claiborne Senior Living

Summary of **Key Findings**

1. Digital Marketing Has Fully Cemented Its Role in Census Growth

Across the 2023 and 2024 Dreamscape reports and the 2025 Unlock survey, digital marketing consistently ranked as a leading driver of census growth. The 2026 data reinforces that position, with digital channels clearly outpacing referrals and traditional tactics. What has evolved is not the importance of digital, but the sophistication with which organizations are structuring their channel mix.

2. Competition Continues to Intensify

Competitive pressure has ranked among the top challenges in the 2023, 2024 and 2025 surveys, and it remains the leading concern in 2026. As markets become more saturated, differentiation and brand visibility are emerging as core marketing priorities rather than secondary initiatives.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

As digital channels continue to dominate lead generation, marketing leaders may evaluate whether their digital investments are aligned with long-term brand positioning and measurable conversion pathways. The shift from experimentation to structured execution suggests increasing pressure to connect channel activity with performance outcomes.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

Organizations operating in competitive markets may assess how clearly their messaging distinguishes their communities beyond amenities alone. Elevated competition often increases scrutiny on positioning, narrative clarity, and consistency across digital touchpoints.

Summary of **Key Findings**

3. Marketing Strategy Is Increasingly Executive-Led

Compared to prior reports, the 2026 respondent pool skews more heavily toward senior-level marketing leaders. This shift suggests that marketing strategy, budget allocation, and channel prioritization are being guided more directly by executive oversight than in earlier years.

4. Messaging Complexity Remains a Structural Challenge

Since 2023, marketers have consistently reported challenges in aligning messaging across multiple decision makers. The 2026 data continues to show a skew toward adult-child decision makers while maintaining the need to communicate effectively with residents and other stakeholders. Differentiation and brand visibility are emerging as core marketing priorities rather than secondary initiatives.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

As marketing decision-making consolidates at the leadership level, there may be increased focus on accountability, measurement, and alignment with broader organizational growth strategies. Executive visibility often brings greater emphasis on clarity of return and operational efficiency.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

Multi-audience messaging environments often require structured segmentation and tailored communication strategies. Organizations may benefit from evaluating whether their content architecture reflects the realities of complex, family-driven decision journeys.

Summary of **Key Findings**

5. Planning Continues to Outpace Measurement

Across the past four survey reports, marketing teams consistently report spending the most time planning and executing initiatives, while reporting ranks last. Despite widespread adoption of analytics dashboards and CRMs, measurement remains comparatively underprioritized.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

When reporting receives less time allocation than planning or execution, organizations may evaluate whether performance insights are being fully leveraged to inform strategy. Greater integration between reporting and planning cycles can support more adaptive marketing programs.

6. Digital Confidence Is Improving, but Maturity Is Uneven

Compared to 2023, confidence in online marketing capabilities has increased. However, a meaningful share of respondents still describe themselves as only somewhat confident, indicating variability in digital maturity across organizations.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

As digital expectations continue to rise, variability in internal capability may influence how organizations allocate training, agency support, or technology resources. Evaluating confidence levels alongside performance metrics can provide additional context for capability development.

Summary of **Key Findings**

7. Marketing Investment Is Stabilizing

The 2024 and 2025 reports reflected upward momentum in marketing investment. In 2026, budgets are more likely to increase modestly or remain flat, suggesting a stabilization phase rather than aggressive expansion.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

Stable budgets often heighten the importance of efficiency and prioritization. Organizations may consider how to balance sustained digital investment with disciplined resource allocation to maintain competitive positioning.

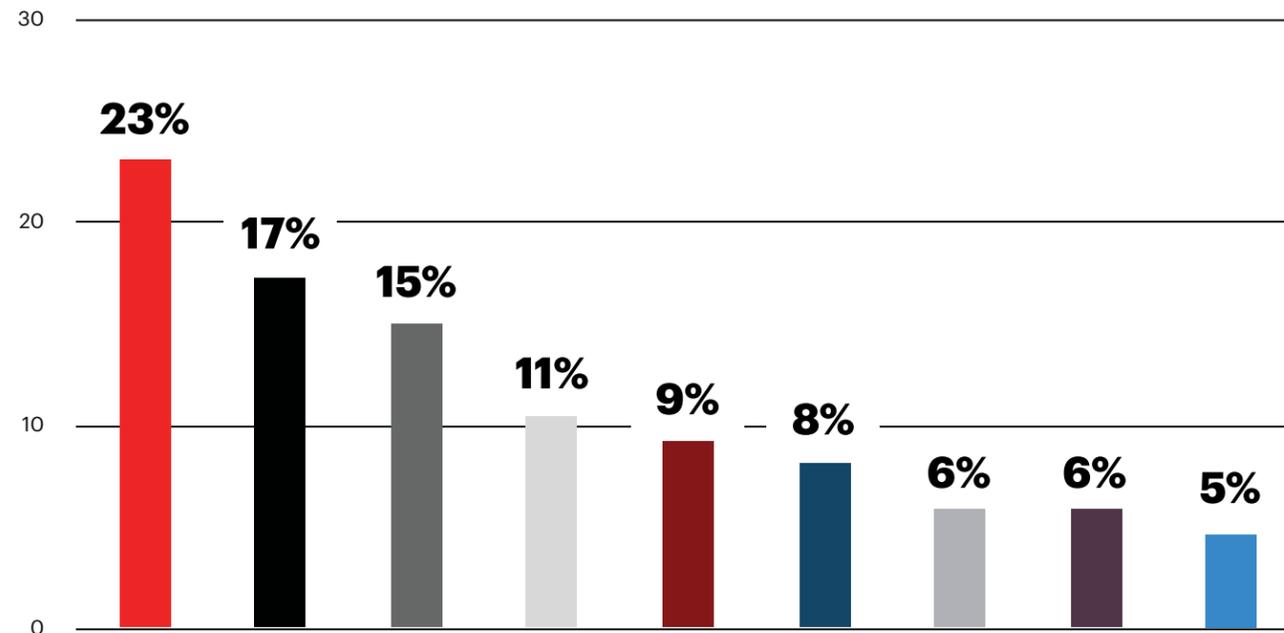
8. Agencies Are Valued for Digital Execution Depth

In both 2025 and 2026, respondents identified digital expertise as the most valued attribute in agency partnerships. While external support remains important, strategic direction appears increasingly retained internally.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATION

As internal marketing leadership strengthens, agency relationships may shift toward executional specialization rather than broad strategic oversight. Clear delineation between in-house strategy and external execution can enhance partnership effectiveness.

What is the **biggest challenge** facing senior living marketing in 2026? (Choose one)



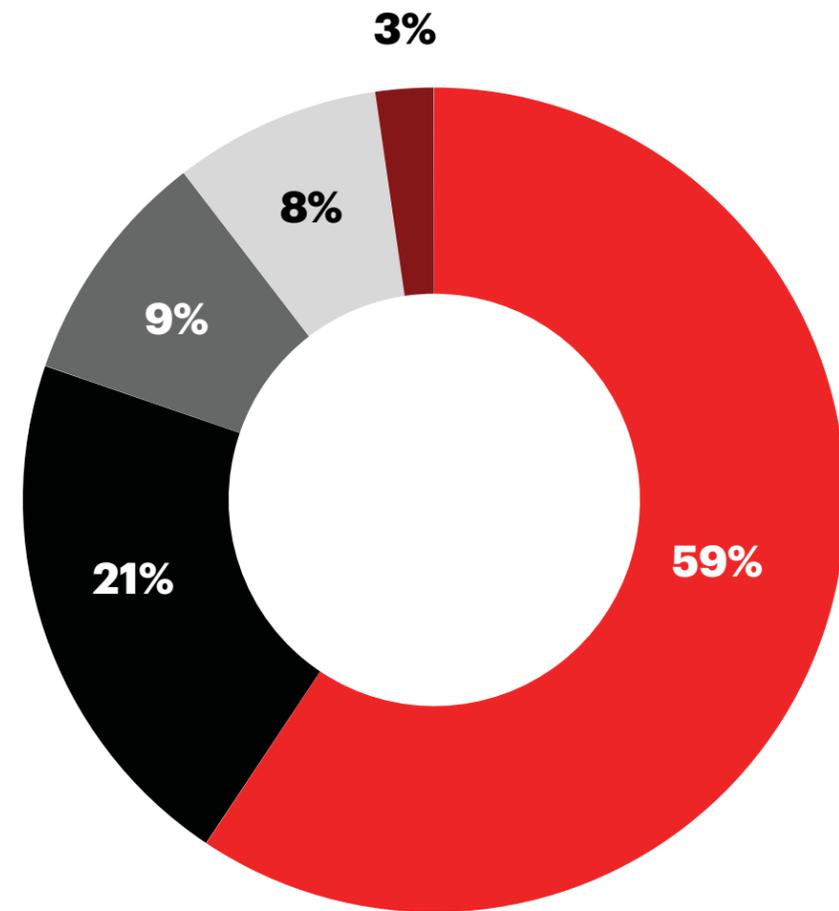
- Competitive environment **23%**
- Changing landscape of marketing tools **17%**
- Budget **15%**
- Messaging: presenting a clear and consistent value proposition and/or product position **11%**
- Differentiation from competitors **9%**
- Marketing to multiple audiences (prospects and other decision makers) **8%**
- Internal marketing processes (too many internal decision makers involved, communication challenges, lack of clear strategic goals, etc.) **6%**
- Integration of AI into marketing / sales operations **6%**
- Lack of prospect data / market research **5%**

KEY TAKEAWAY

Competitive Pressure Tops Marketing Challenges in 2026

The most cited challenge facing senior living marketing in 2026 is an increasingly competitive environment, followed by the rapidly changing marketing tool landscape and ongoing budget constraints.

What will be the **greatest driver** of census growth in 2026? (Choose one)



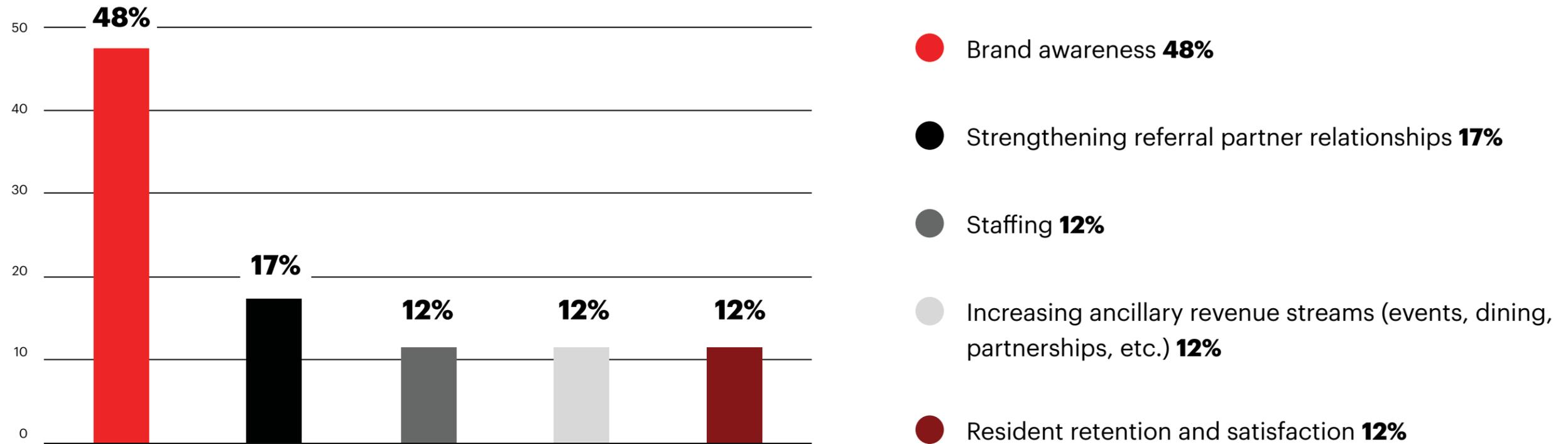
- Digital marketing **59%**
- Personal referrals **21%**
- Medical referrals **9%**
- Traditional marketing **8%**
- Aggregators (platforms that centralize information from multiple sources) **3%**

KEY TAKEAWAY

Digital Marketing Is Expected to Drive Census Growth

Digital marketing was overwhelmingly identified as the greatest projected driver of census growth in 2026, far outpacing personal referrals, medical referrals, and traditional marketing channels.

Aside from new resident acquisition, what **primary business objective** does your organization aim to achieve through its marketing efforts?

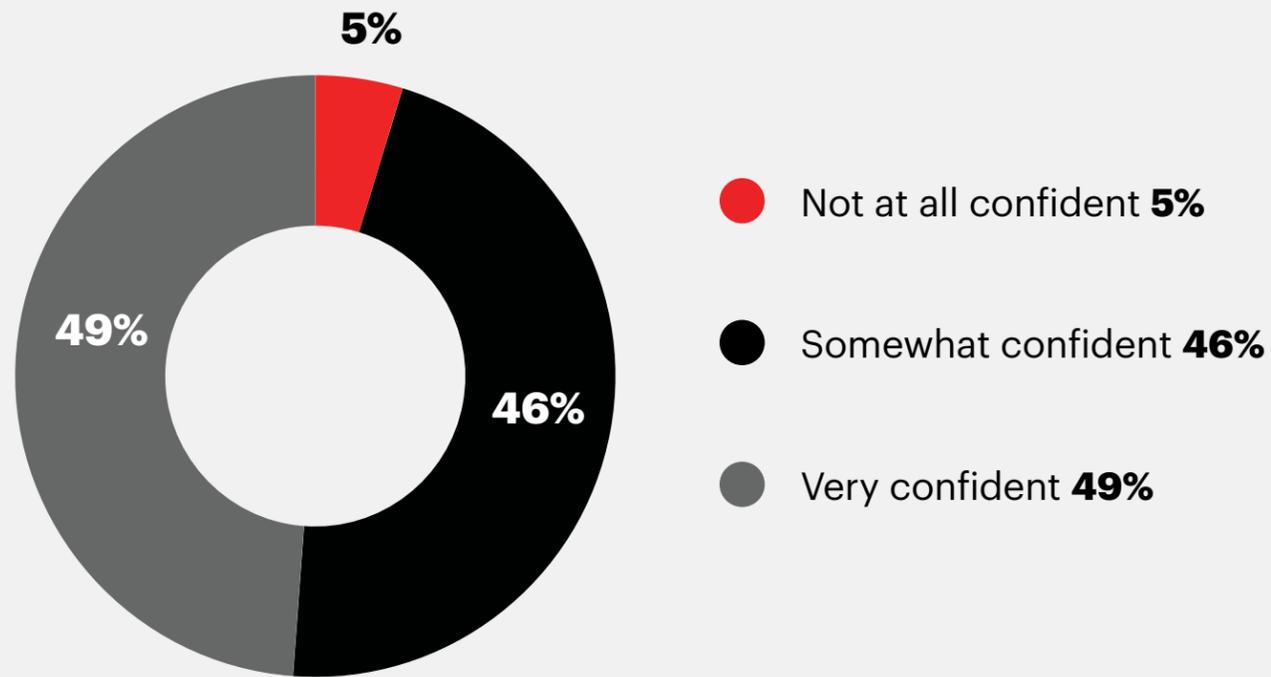


KEY TAKEAWAY

Brand Awareness Is the Primary Marketing Objective Beyond Acquisition

Outside of new resident acquisition, organizations are most focused on increasing brand awareness, with secondary priorities including strengthening referral relationships, staffing support, and resident retention.

How confident are you in your company's ability to **market to prospects online?**



KEY TAKEAWAY

Confidence in Online Marketing Is High, but Not Universal

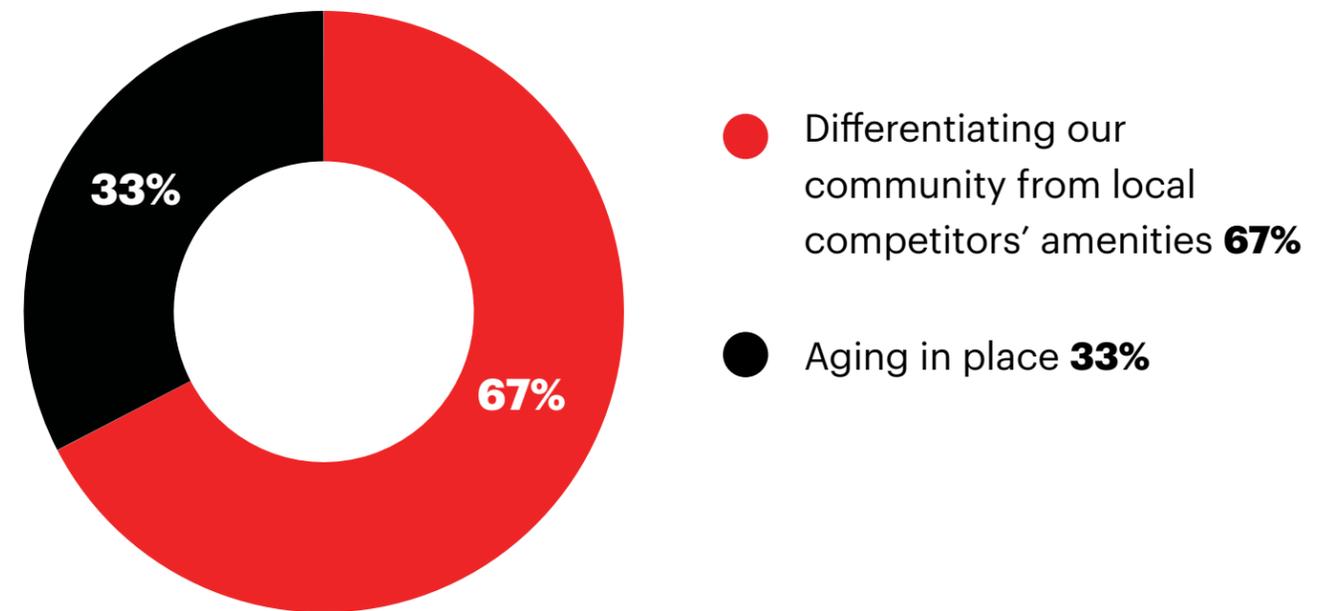
Nearly half of respondents reported being very confident in their ability to market online, while a similar share said they are only somewhat confident, suggesting room for continued digital optimization.

KEY TAKEAWAY

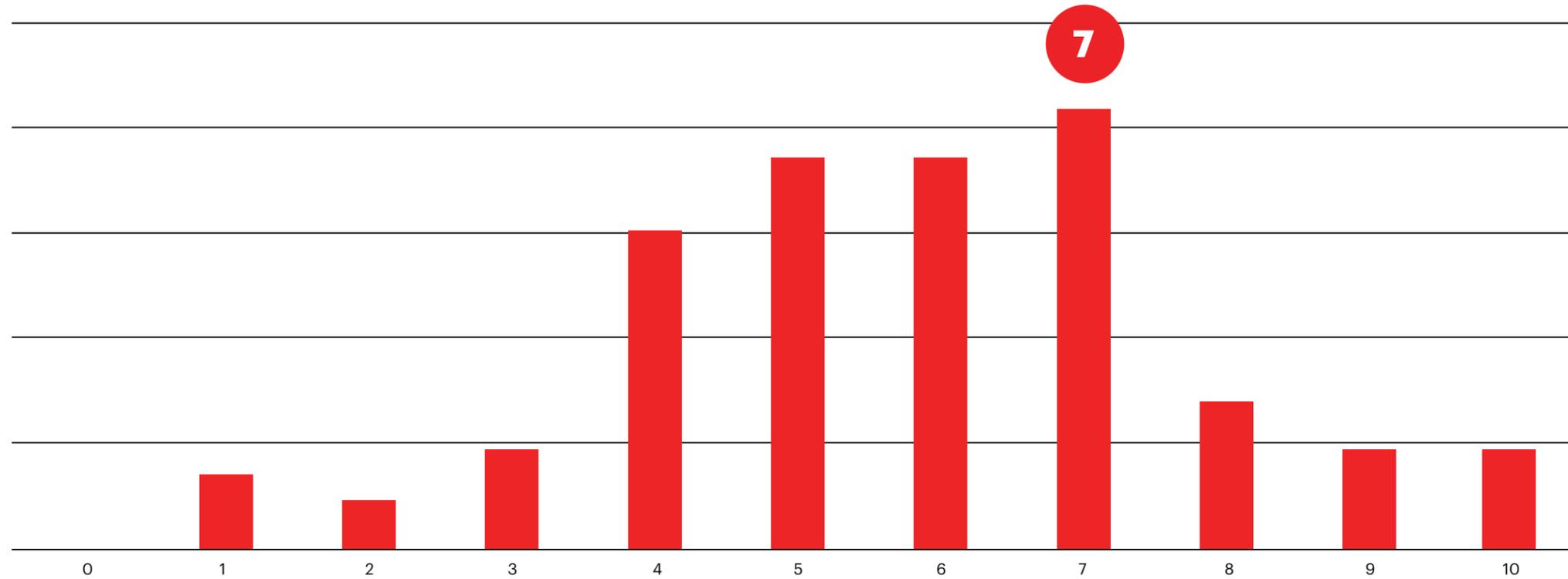
Marketing Messaging Focuses More on Differentiation Than Aging in Place

Most organizations prioritize differentiating their communities from local competitors' amenities over emphasizing aging in place within their marketing messaging.

Does the messaging in your **new resident marketing** focus more on differentiating your community from your local competitors' amenities or aging in place?



On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most, how much of your marketing effort is focused on **adult-child decision makers versus residents themselves**?

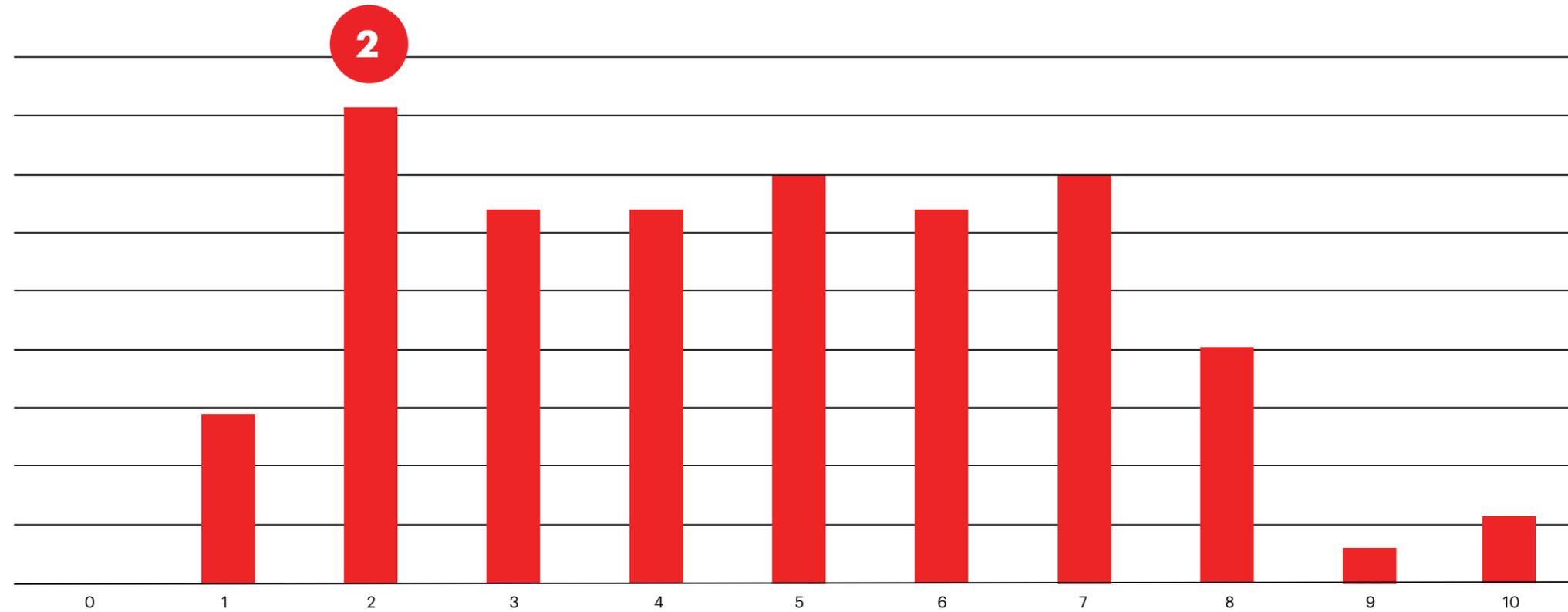


KEY TAKEAWAY

Marketing Efforts Lean Toward Adult-Child Decision Makers

Marketing strategies tend to skew toward adult-child decision makers rather than residents themselves, reflecting the complex, multi-audience nature of senior living decision-making.

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most, how much of your marketing effort is focused on **internal culture and staffing**?

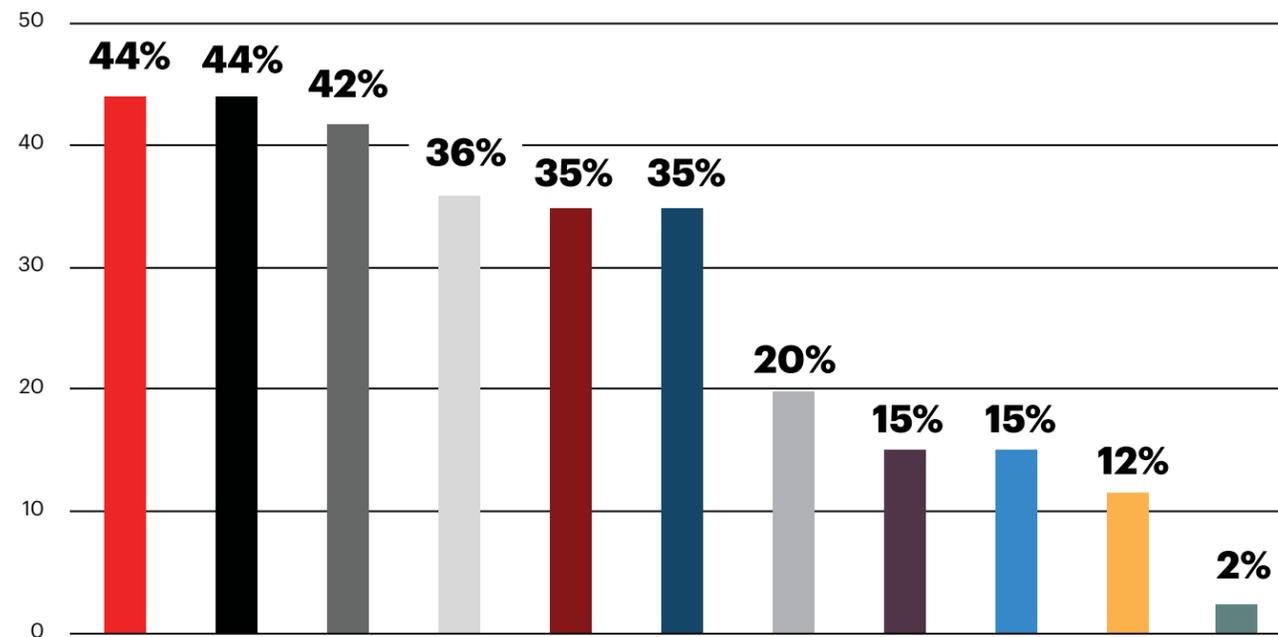


KEY TAKEAWAY

Internal Culture and Staffing Play a Meaningful Role in Marketing Strategy

Respondents indicated a moderate to high focus on internal culture and staffing within their marketing efforts, highlighting the link between employee engagement and external brand perception.

With **digital becoming the predominant** lead-generation channel, where is your organization focusing its marketing efforts? (Select the top 3)



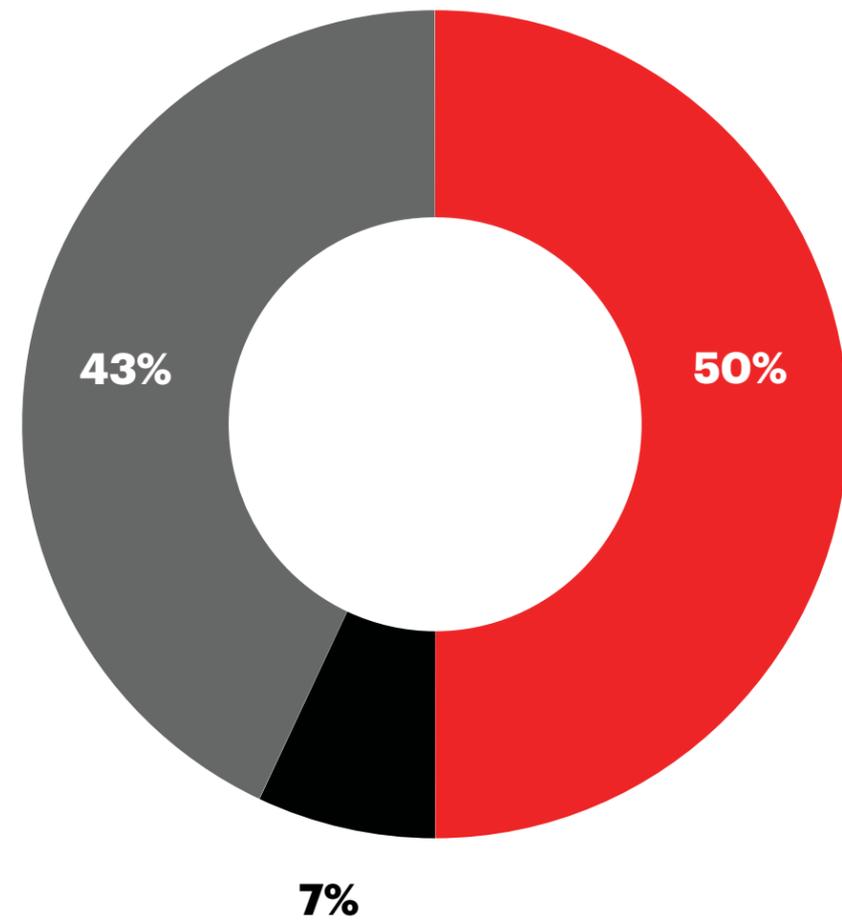
- Content marketing (blog / video content) **44%**
- SEO **44%**
- PPC / paid search / display advertising **42%**
- Web design **36%**
- Social **35%**
- Marketing automation **35%**
- Integrating AI tools **20%**
- Email **15%**
- Partnership / referral marketing **15%**
- Affiliate marketing **12%**
- Mobile **2%**

KEY TAKEAWAY

Content, SEO, and Paid Media Are the Key Focus Areas in Digital Marketing

Content marketing, SEO, and paid search or display advertising are the top areas where organizations are concentrating their digital marketing efforts as lead generation becomes increasingly digital-first.

How do you expect your company's **marketing spend** to change in the next 12 months?



- Marketing spend will increase **50%**
- Marketing spend will decrease **7%**
- Marketing spend will stay the same **43%**

KEY TAKEAWAY

Marketing Spend Is Expected to Increase or Hold Steady

Half of respondents expect marketing spend to increase over the next 12 months, while most others anticipate budgets will remain flat, signaling cautious but sustained investment.

Rank the following marketing processes from top to bottom, with **top being the greatest and bottom being the least**, based on the amount of time your organization spends on each one.

1. Planning	225
2. Executing	179
3. Reporting	112

KEY TAKEAWAY

Planning Burns the Most Marketing Hours

Organizations spend the most time planning marketing initiatives, followed by execution, then reporting, suggesting that measurement and insight generation continue to receive the least attention.

“**As we head into 2026, we’ll be far more disciplined about tracking cost per lead and cost per move in by source.** Digital budgets will continue to rise, but so will our expectations around return on investment. Digital marketing continues to be the #1 focus, even in smaller or more rural markets. When it’s done well, it drives real results and real occupancy.



Christy Van Der Westhuizen

Senior Vice President of Sales & Marketing, Jaybird Senior Living

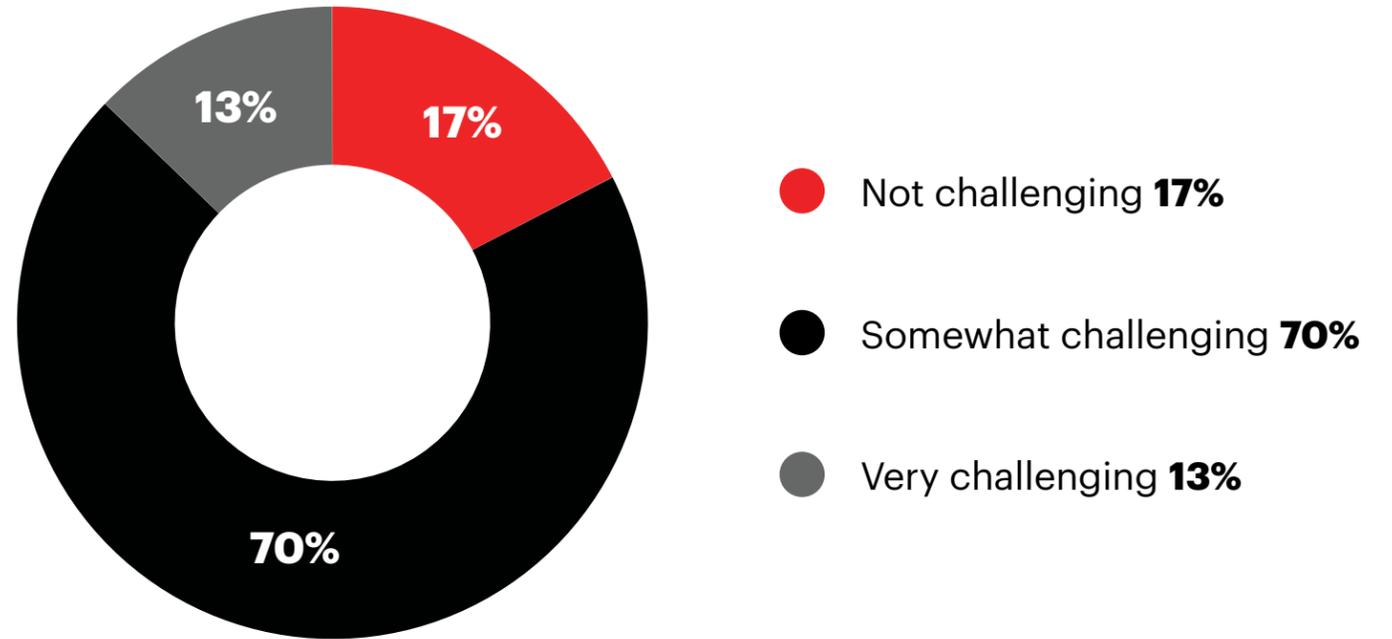
“ **Success in 2026 will come to organizations that pair meaningful, in-person relationships with transparency, smart automation, and personalized content.** Leaders who consistently deliver memorable face-to-face experiences will rise above a crowded field. That kind of excellence requires clear customer service expectations, intentional investment in ongoing coaching and practice, and the discipline to let well-designed systems do their work.



Jessi Weldon

Executive VP of Sales & Marketing,
Primrose Retirement Communities, LLC

Rate the challenge of **messaging to different audiences** involved in the decision-making process.

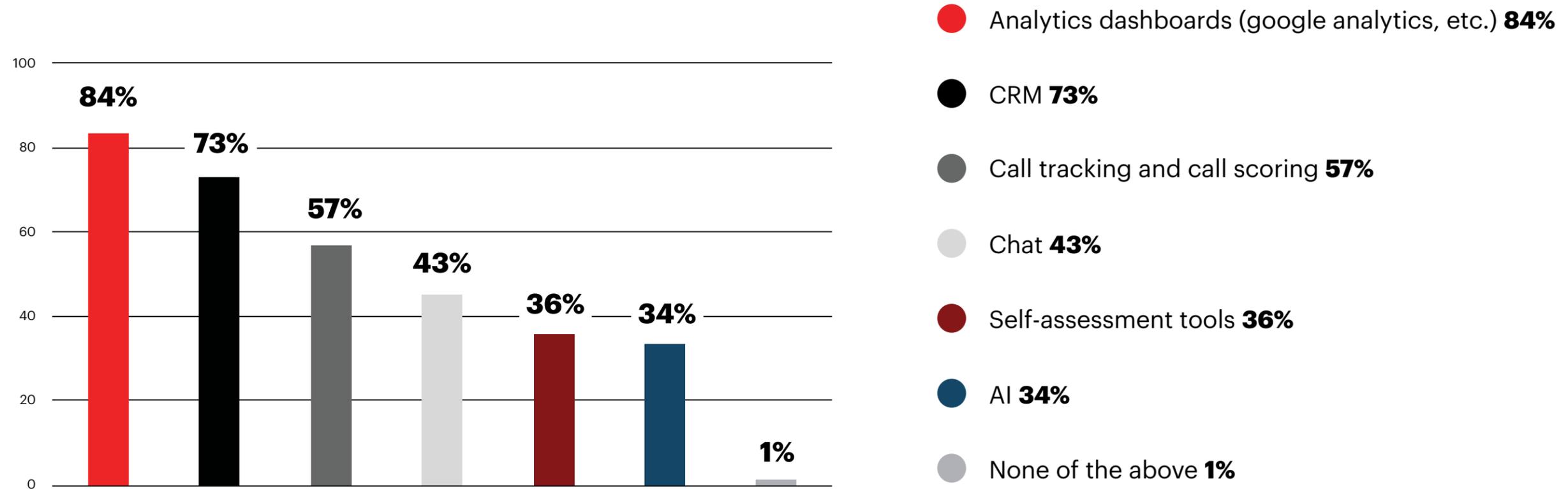


KEY TAKEAWAY

Messaging to Multiple Audiences Remains a Challenge

The majority of respondents described messaging to different decision-making audiences as somewhat challenging, underscoring the complexity of aligning messaging across stakeholders.

What **assessment tools** is your company using? (Select all that apply)

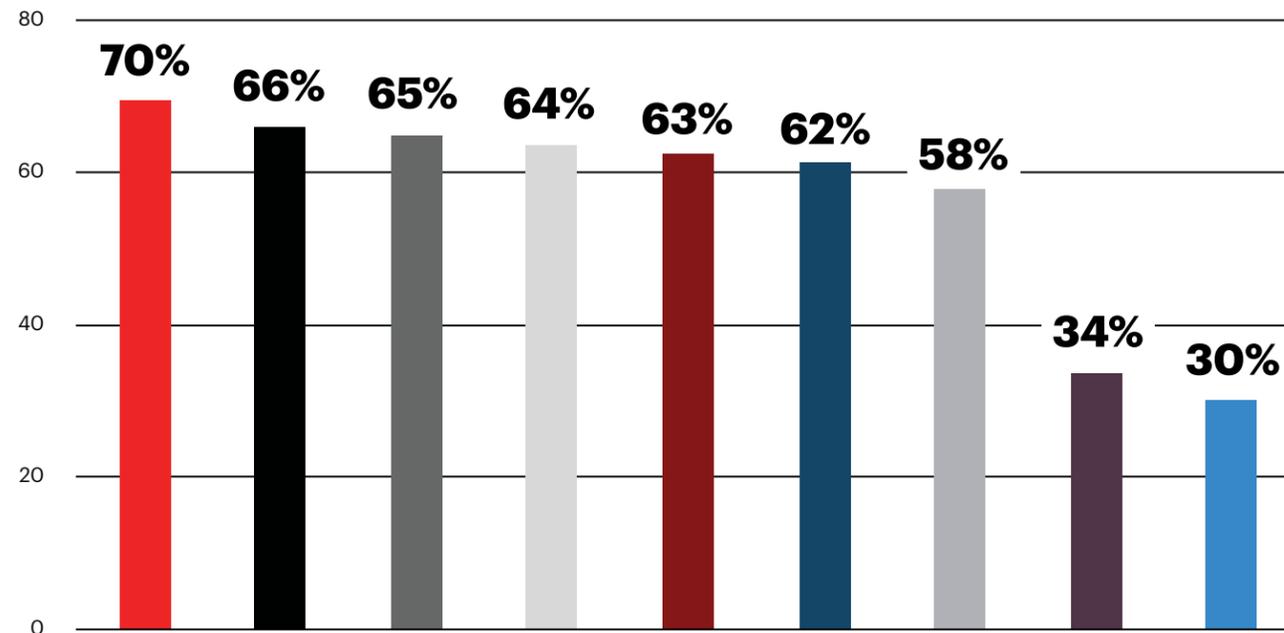


KEY TAKEAWAY

Analytics Dashboards and CRMs Are Widely Adopted Assessment Tools

Most organizations rely on analytics dashboards and CRM systems to assess marketing performance, with call tracking and chat tools also playing a significant role.

Which of the following **marketing tools** are you comfortable using? (Select all that apply)



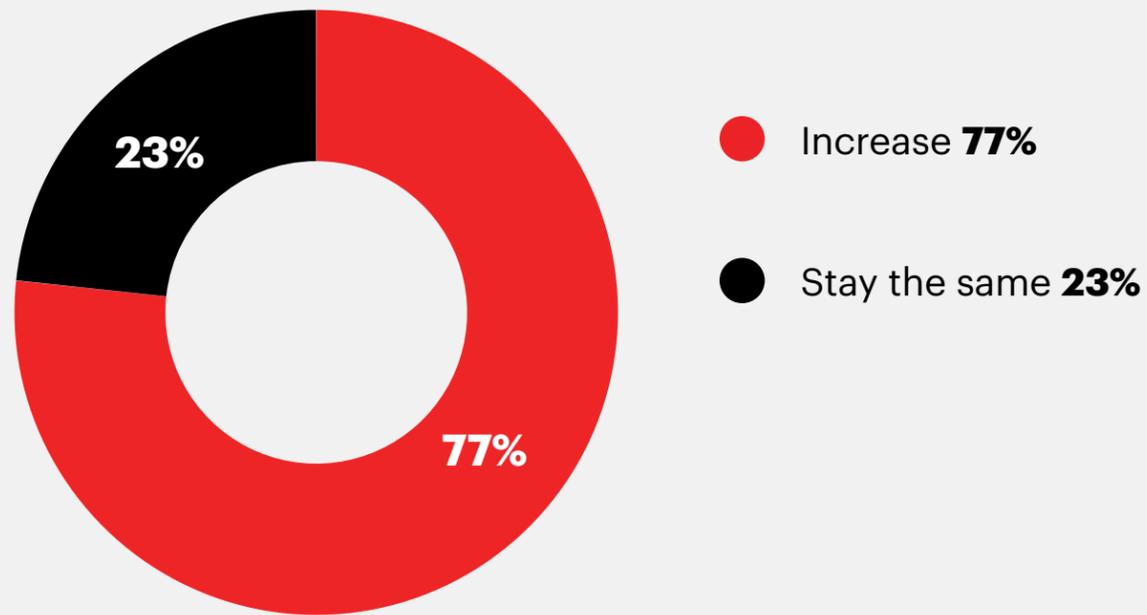
- Social media marketing platforms **70%**
- Data analytics **66%**
- Email marketing **65%**
- Organic online search (SEO) **64%**
- Marketing automation **63%**
- Traditional media (branding, reputation, public relations) **62%**
- Paid online search (SEM) **58%**
- AI to support marketing tasks **34%**
- Online experimentation and/or A/B testing **30%**

KEY TAKEAWAY

Familiarity with Core Digital Marketing Tools Is Strong

Respondents reported high levels of comfortability with social media platforms, data analytics, email marketing, SEO, and marketing automation, while comfort with AI tools and experimentation remains lower.

Do you plan to increase your **social media presence** in 2026?



KEY TAKEAWAY

Social Media Investment Is Set to Grow in 2026

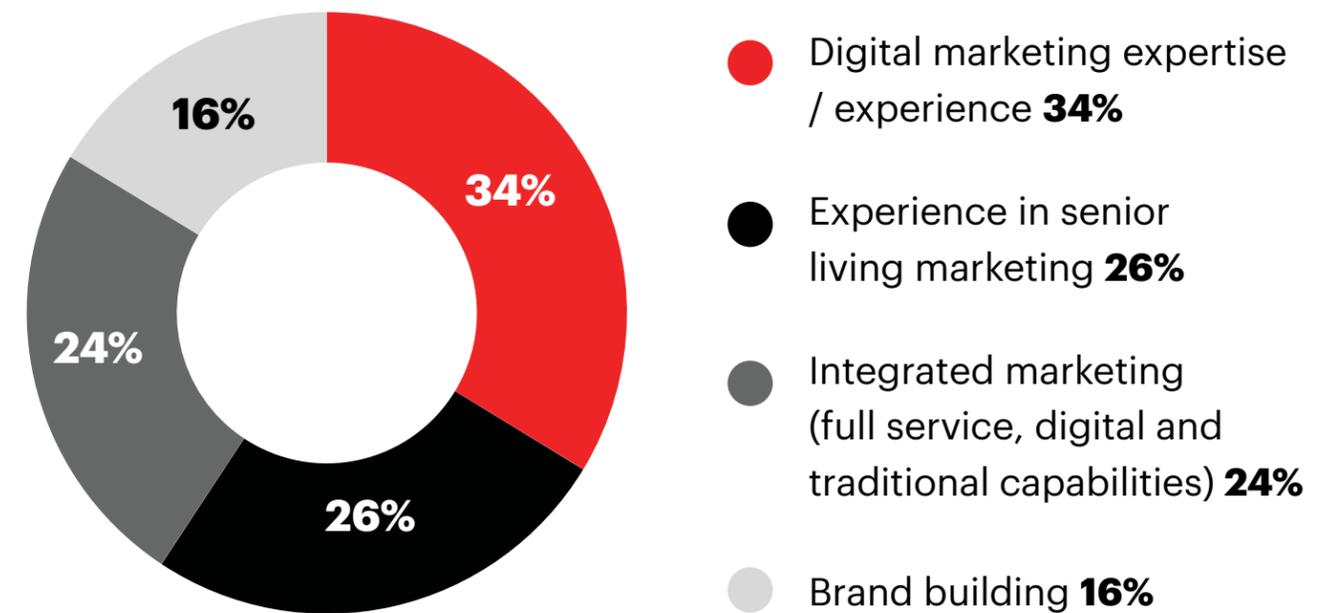
More than three-quarters of respondents plan to increase their social media presence in 2026, reinforcing its role as a core engagement channel.

KEY TAKEAWAY

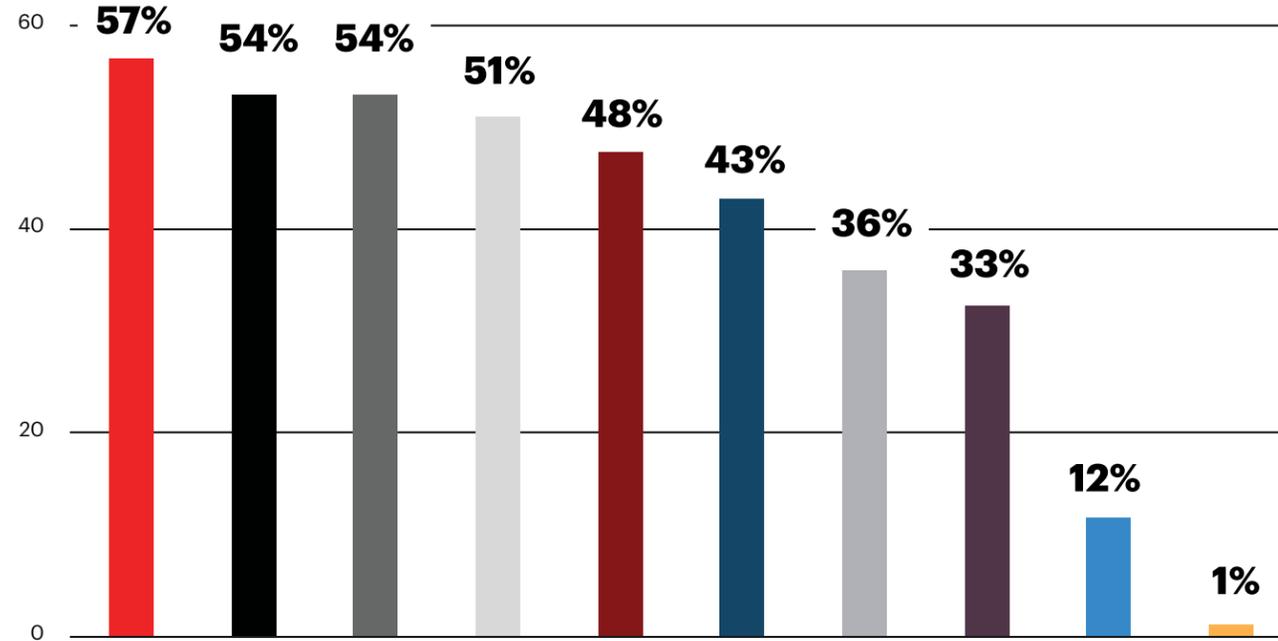
Digital Expertise Is the Top Attribute Valued in Agency Partners

When evaluating agency partnerships, respondents most value digital marketing expertise, followed by senior living experience and integrated marketing capabilities.

What service or aspect of a partnership do you **value most** in an agency partner?



Where do you currently turn for **marketing advice or thought leadership?** (Select all that apply)



- National or regional conferences / events **57%**
- Peer networks or industry groups **54%**
- LinkedIn or other social media **54%**
- Webinars or virtual panels **51%**
- Marketing or PR agency partnerships **48%**
- Trade publications or industry news sites **43%**
- Podcasts related to senior living or marketing **36%**
- Internal company resources **33%**
- YouTube channels or video content **12%**
- Other **1%**

KEY TAKEAWAY

Conferences, Peer Networks, and Social Platforms Drive Thought Leadership

Industry conferences, peer networks, and LinkedIn or other social platforms are the most common sources of marketing insight and thought leadership for senior living marketers.

ABOUT US

For too long healthcare organizations have had to settle for incomplete insights and disjointed data in the absence of a partner who could deliver a unified growth solution. We rose to that challenge and created a first-of-its-kind platform supported by an integrated team of marketing, technology, and revenue strategy experts to take the guesswork out of growth.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT:

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