

# Social Media Today's State of Marketing Automation

Survey Report 2019





# Introduction

Automation is a dirty word to some marketers. They see it as impersonal, intrusive and interruptive — three things that run counter to the strengths of social media communication. But at the same time, most businesses see a level of automation as being inevitable. With advances in AI and machine learning enabling systems to better perform processes than their human counterparts, it's going to happen. At some stage, your business will need to consider automating certain marketing elements.

But how much of your marketing process should you automate, and when?

To get a better handle on the broader industry sentiment around automation — and what processes are acceptable to automate (versus those that aren't) — we put out the call to our SMT community for their thoughts on where they see things heading. **More than 300 marketers responded to our 2019 State of Marketing Automation Survey**, giving us a wide range of perspectives and insights. In this report, we examine the current state of marketing automation, the biggest concerns about relying on automated processes, and where marketers are headed next.

# Current State of Automation

Many marketers still have significant concerns about automation — especially given the wider industry push to incorporate more human connection and personalization in order to improve response. In reality, these shifts go hand-in-hand when used the right way, but a delicate balance is required. No one wants to receive generic marketing emails addressed to ‘Dear [insert name here]’, and responses to retargeting will be mixed, especially if your behavioral matching is too broad.

What is the overall industry stance on automation, and which elements are acceptable to automate?

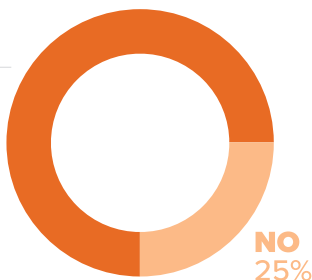
The first question we asked survey respondents was ‘Does your business currently use automation tools?’ To which, a whopping 75% responded that they do.

So, automation tools are already accepted, to at least some degree, by most marketers. But more importantly, which marketing processes do businesses believe can be viably automated?

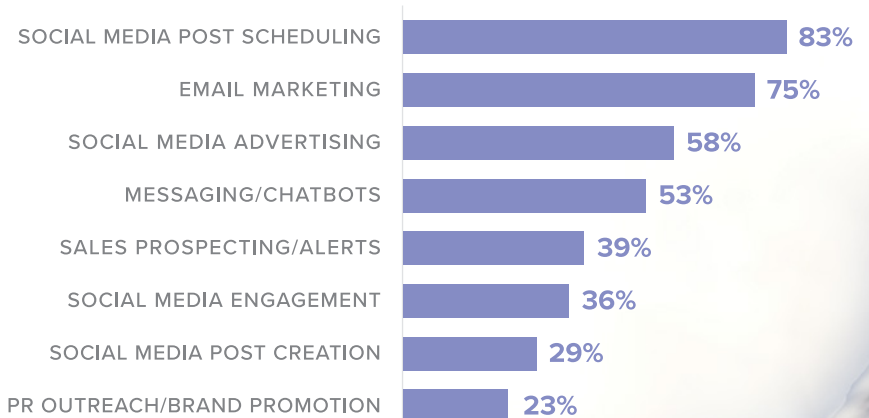
According to our survey, social media post scheduling, email marketing (including audience targeting and the use of templated messages) and social media advertising (retargeting) are the top three processes that can be safely automated without reducing overall effectiveness or audience connection.

## DOES YOUR BUSINESS CURRENTLY USE AUTOMATION TOOLS?

**YES**  
75%



## WHICH DIGITAL MARKETING ELEMENTS, IN YOUR OPINION, ARE SUITABLE FOR AUTOMATION?



Most social media managers would no doubt agree that post scheduling is acceptable — especially those who manage multiple accounts — and the capability to analyze audience behavior, and target your posting based on when they're active online, is a solid bet and a sensible use of basic automation processes.

But even then, you want to be proactive and engage with people who react to your scheduled content. At this basic level of automation, there are additional considerations to keep in mind — it won't entirely be a 'set it and forget it' option for most.

Email marketing automation, based on audience segmentation and user behavior

triggers, is also a commonly used, and largely beneficial option — but implementation is key. Without effective audience segmentation you could inadvertently send a follow-up email of offers for new cars to people who've just purchased a new vehicle and are not likely to be in the market again for some time. The extra step of filtering your email contacts into specific groupings can have a big impact in this regard, ensuring your automated processes generate optimal response. The more focused the better.

Social ad retargeting also makes perfect sense, tapping into that initial interest which can be particularly effective when using targeted offers.





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It's interesting to note, based on these responses, that automation is already widely accepted. Not for everything or every element, but clearly for a variety of marketing tasks. That could suggest that all aspects of automation will eventually see broader adoption as the industry gets up to speed on each application. Chatbots, for example, which came in fourth on our list, are likely less of a priority at this stage because they're not seeing widespread consumer use, but many brands that are utilizing them are seeing good response. Will that mean that we'll see greater brand adoption as more use cases come to light?

The less accepted forms of automation noted here relate to systems which seek to replicate human engagement or activity. The bottom three processes — social media engagement,

social post creation and PR outreach—are all processes which most would suggest requires a personal element to make them feel genuine.

But will attitudes change as automation gets better? Is there a limit on what's possible if AI can evolve to the point where it's able to accurately simulate personal response? The use cases we've seen thus far would suggest that these types of elements are a little too advanced for AI to replicate just yet.

Worth noting too, in another element of our study, we asked respondents that are using some level of automation whether those automated processes have been effective for them. A full 66% of respondents indicated that such tools have been either 'moderately' or 'very' effective, underlining the expanding potential.

# Marketing Automation Concerns

More than just wanting to know how brands are currently utilizing automated processes, we also wanted to know, for those that aren't or for those that are holding out on expanding their usage of machine learning tools, what their concerns are and what needs to improve to make such options more viable for their businesses.

The main concern? 'Lack of personalization', with 'Risk of harming brand perception' coming in second with our audience.

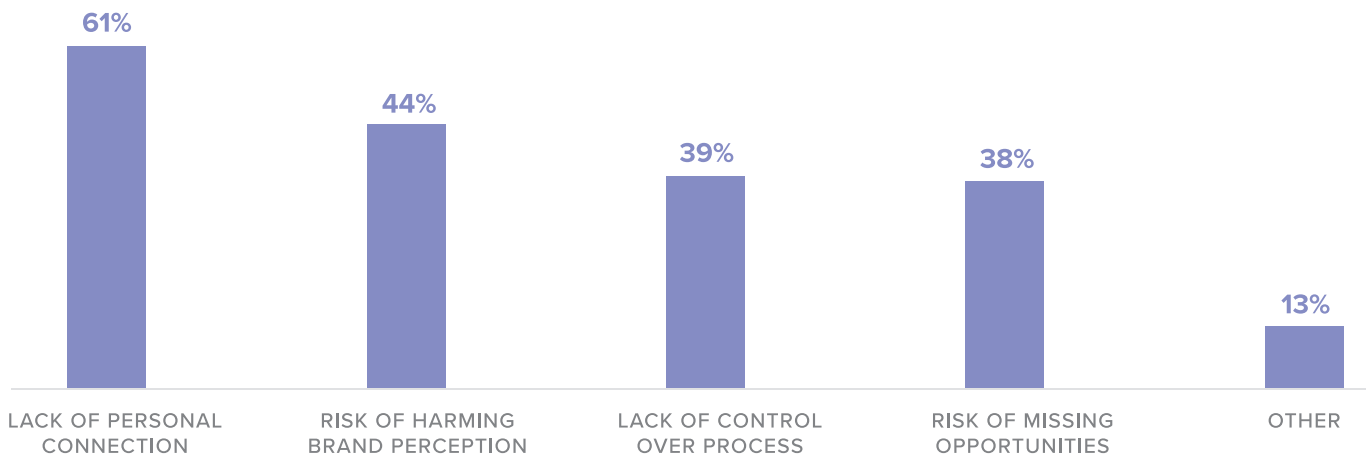
Of course, that lack of connection to your audience makes sense, you need that link to strengthen your audience bonds. It can be difficult to ensure if you're not actively monitoring each step of the process, which then

leads to the second consideration—harming overall brand perception.

Interesting to note that losing out on potential opportunities is not a key concern with automation, suggesting most accept that these tools would likely pick up on any anomalies, enabling marketers to capitalize where possible. It's not finding and connecting with the right people that marketers are most caught up on, it's capitalizing on those prospects once they've been identified.

Can automation tools be relied on to 'speak' with potential customers in an engaging, beneficial way in order to maximize such opportunities? That seems to be where the key question currently lies.

## WHAT ARE YOUR CONCERNS WITH AUTOMATION TOOLS?



# Opportunities for Automation

Of all the responses we saw to our Marketing Automation survey, the considerations over what may be coming next were the most revealing.

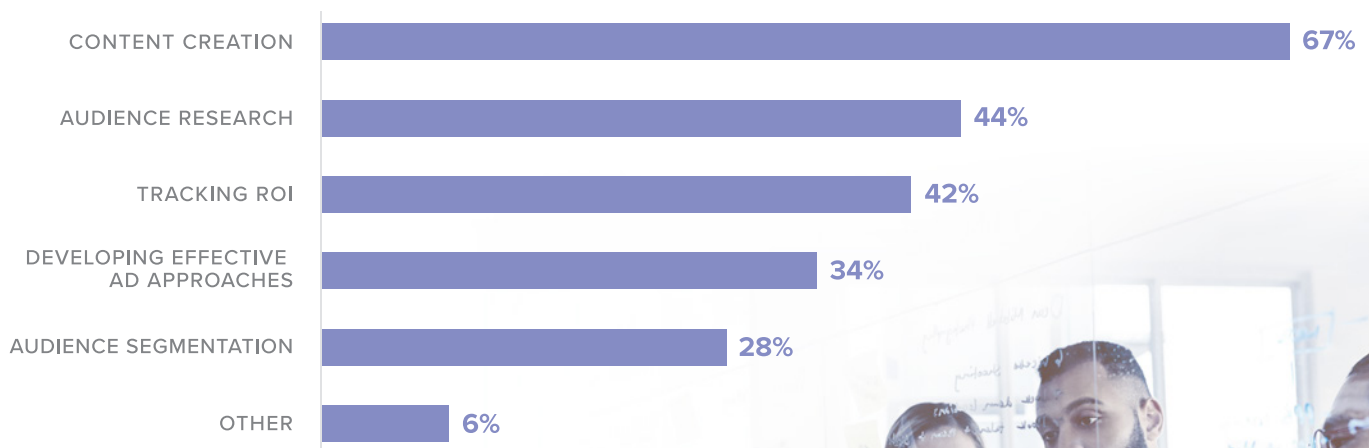
First, in order to understand current thinking in relation to the potential of automation, we asked our audience ‘Which marketing tasks currently take up the most time for your business?’

The demands of content creation weigh heavy, and for the most part, this is an element that automation can’t fulfill (yet), given the complexities of writing compelling, informative material that delivers on your audience needs.

But there are aspects of these processes that can be automated. Sure, you can’t rely on automation to create content for you, but you can use it to highlight rising trends, which could provide direction as to which subjects your business should be writing about.

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## WHICH MARKETING TASKS TAKE UP THE MOST TIME/ARE THE MOST CHALLENGING FOR YOUR BUSINESS?



That also relates to the second challenge: 'Audience research'. Given its prominence in our results, that would suggest that there's a desire in the industry for automation tools that help with analytics — brands not only want the raw data, they want to understand what it means.

Can that be automated? Google is certainly trying for one — the platform has been slowly rolling out more actionable insight prompts within Google Analytics that indicate not only the key data points of note, but what they mean, and how you can use them in your

planning and process. Facebook, too, offers some level of actionable insight, providing tips on how to optimize your on-platform ad performance. None of these tools are all-encompassing as of yet, and marketers are clearly not placing too much reliance on them, preferring to go with their experience. But such tools are improving. There may well come a time in the near future where such tools can do a lot more than merely uncover relevant peaks and troughs, which could cover almost all elements of the feedback provided in our survey.

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If businesses understood more about how the technical processes of such systems work, they would be more willing to **rely on automation tools** for a wider purpose.

But interestingly, for many businesses, they may not even be at that point yet. Following the question of which elements take up the most time, we asked our readers if they've researched whether automation tools might be able to help with their key challenges.

The responses were split down the middle—52% of marketers indicated that they had looked into it, while 48% said they had not.

As digital literacy improves more broadly, there is an opportunity for marketing tool providers to communicate their offerings to marketers who simply haven't even got around to investigating their options in this regard.

The results may also relate to how the systems themselves function. As noted in the previous section, much of the concern around automation tools relates to how they may

impact brand perception, with marketers losing control over key touchpoints, which could impede results. But maybe, if businesses understood more about how the technical processes of such systems work, they would be more willing to rely on automation tools for a wider purpose. If you knew, for example, exactly how Google's algorithm decided on search rankings, you'd feel much more confident in your capability to influence them.

Of course, Google's never going to reveal its algorithms, but the same principle applies—if more marketers had a better technical understanding of the algorithms at play, they might be more willing to adopt automated tools. This would not only provide them with a better understanding of exactly what each potential customer is seeing, but they'd also, theoretically, be able to exert more control over each step of the process to ensure optimal results.

This suggests that the next generation of marketers will need to take on a more technical capability, not just in terms of broadly understanding (e.g., 'I get how social media works'), but in terms of the specific processes at play and how they can influence them.

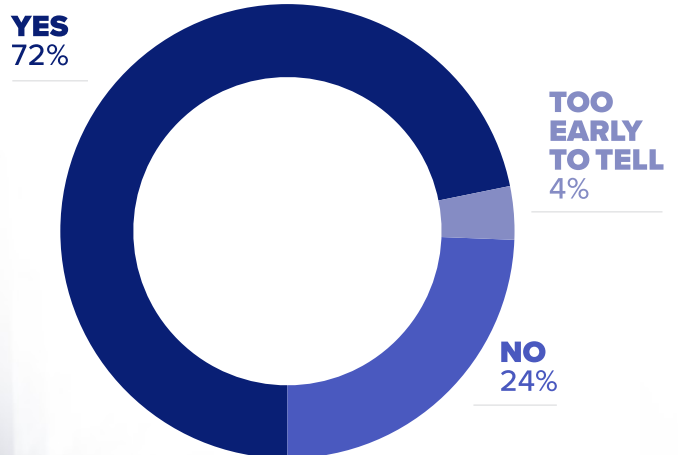
That either means marketers need a greater digital education or marketing teams need to take on data and systems analysts to make the best use of such tools. The automation platforms themselves also need to provide more educational resources to show their inner workings and ensure users can both understand and utilize them. And that could be a significant challenge, particularly in the case of smaller organizations who don't have dedicated marketing teams.

But one way or another, it seems that most believe the expanded implementation of marketing AI is inevitable.

In the final element of our survey, we asked respondents whether they feel automation is coming to their industry, regardless of their inclination to use it.

We received a fairly definitive response with 72% of respondents answering 'Yes.' That's not really a surprise, especially given the broader coverage of the implementation of AI and machine learning, and the coming impacts for all industries. But even so, our results show that though marketers know it's coming, they're not willing to go all-in on automated tools just yet.

**DO YOU FEEL A LEVEL OF AUTOMATION IS INEVITABLE FOR YOUR BUSINESS SPECIFICALLY?**



Broader adoption will depend on a range of tools, but expanded education seems to be the key message of our results. Businesses understand such tools are coming, and they will change how they do things. But they're not willing to cede control to machines just yet.

The onus is on both business owners and automation providers to gain and facilitate more understanding of such processes, and not only how they can be of benefit, but how, specifically, they can work to deliver better results.

As with many elements of the new media landscape, digital literacy is key. If we're going to evolve to the next stage — which most concede is coming — then we need to invest in understanding and develop processes that deliver effective, personalized and responsive performance.

This is possible with automation tools, but it may require a different way of thinking in how they're adopted.

