

Survey Report 2019

# Building the Case for an Employee Advocacy Program



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**S**ocial media has changed the way we communicate. We used to rely on telephone calls and in-person meetings to stay in touch, but these days, you can get a full rundown of what's happening in the lives of friends and family before you even get up in the morning—and without making any direct contact.

That has its own positives and negatives, but essentially we're more connected to other people—and their thoughts and opinions on everything—than we've ever been. And that has altered the way people make decisions, particularly related to purchases.

Where ad exposure and in-person recommendations used to be the driving

forces, social media has shifted the paradigm. In fact, [41% of consumers use Pinterest](#) to help guide them when shopping in-store. And [31% say they use social media](#) to browse for new items to purchase. According to one report, social media posts by friends and family now influence [81% of all consumer purchasing decisions](#) in some capacity.

Given that our media inputs have changed so significantly, it's logical that brands seeking to reach consumers also need to update their processes and look beyond traditional mediums to maximize their promotional efforts.

Which is why **employee advocacy** (EA) is now so important.





Much like influencer marketing, employee advocacy enables businesses to use the power of people, and their influential capacity, as opposed to relying on ads, which are increasingly being ignored as users refine their social streams. Previous research has shown that content shared by employees sees [eight times more engagement](#), on average, than content shared through branded channels. Furthermore, [61% of consumers](#) say they're more likely to research a product or service after seeing a friend's social media post about it, compared with 36% if the same were mentioned by an influencer or celebrity.

**Employee advocacy** enables businesses to use the power of people, and their influential capacity, as opposed to relying on ads, which are increasingly being ignored as users refine their social streams.

All in all, employee advocacy may be even more effective than influencer marketing. Is your business tapping into that opportunity?

To get a better sense of the EA landscape, and to provide a comparative measure of how brands use the option, we partnered with [GaggleAMP](#) to conduct a survey among the Social Media Today community. More than 400 marketers responded, giving us an indicative pool to highlight trends and future opportunities. Here's an overview of what we found, and what it means for your EA program.



# Part 1: The Current State of Employee Advocacy

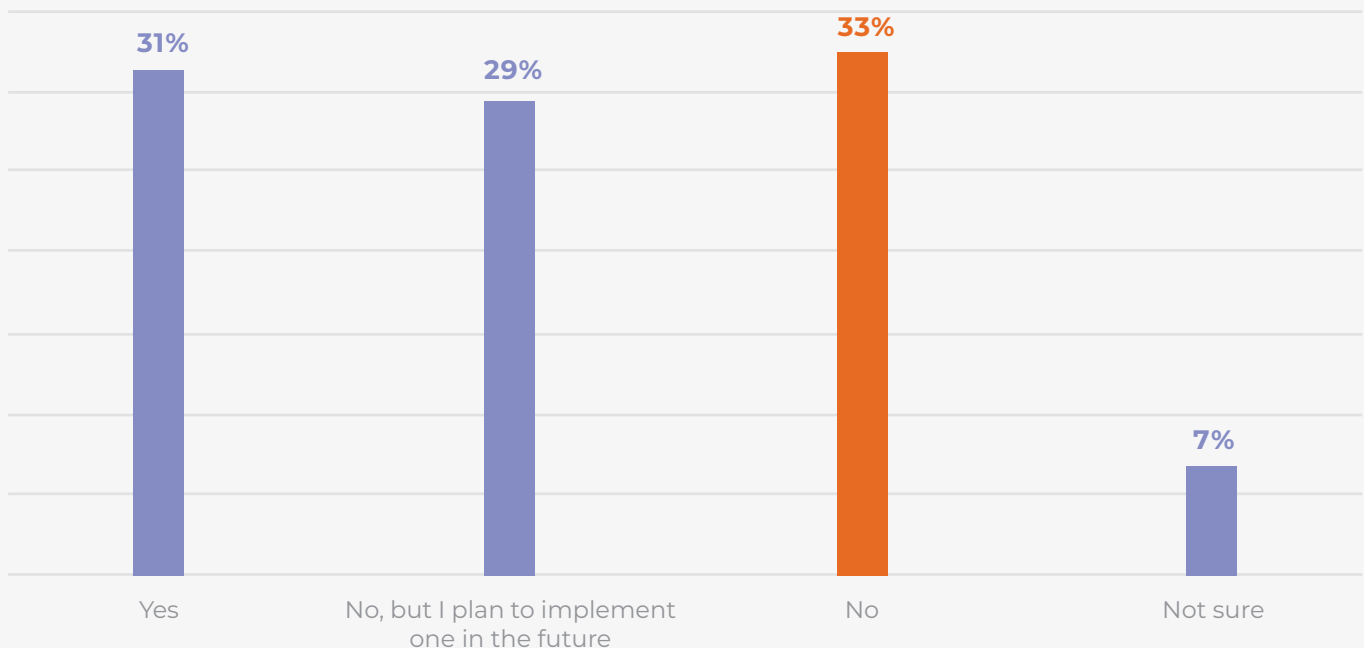
**F**irst, we wanted to get a handle on how brands use employee advocacy, and how many businesses tap into the option. Given the aforementioned stats, you'd think it would be a key focus, but the responses didn't indicate that.

Only 31% of respondents have an EA program, while 29% plan to implement one. That means 40% of businesses don't have an EA program, nor plan to—which is a lot of missed opportunity.

Of course, EA programs take resources and effort, two things most businesses often don't have an abundance of. But again, as various research reports highlight, the payoff can be significant—if you get it right.

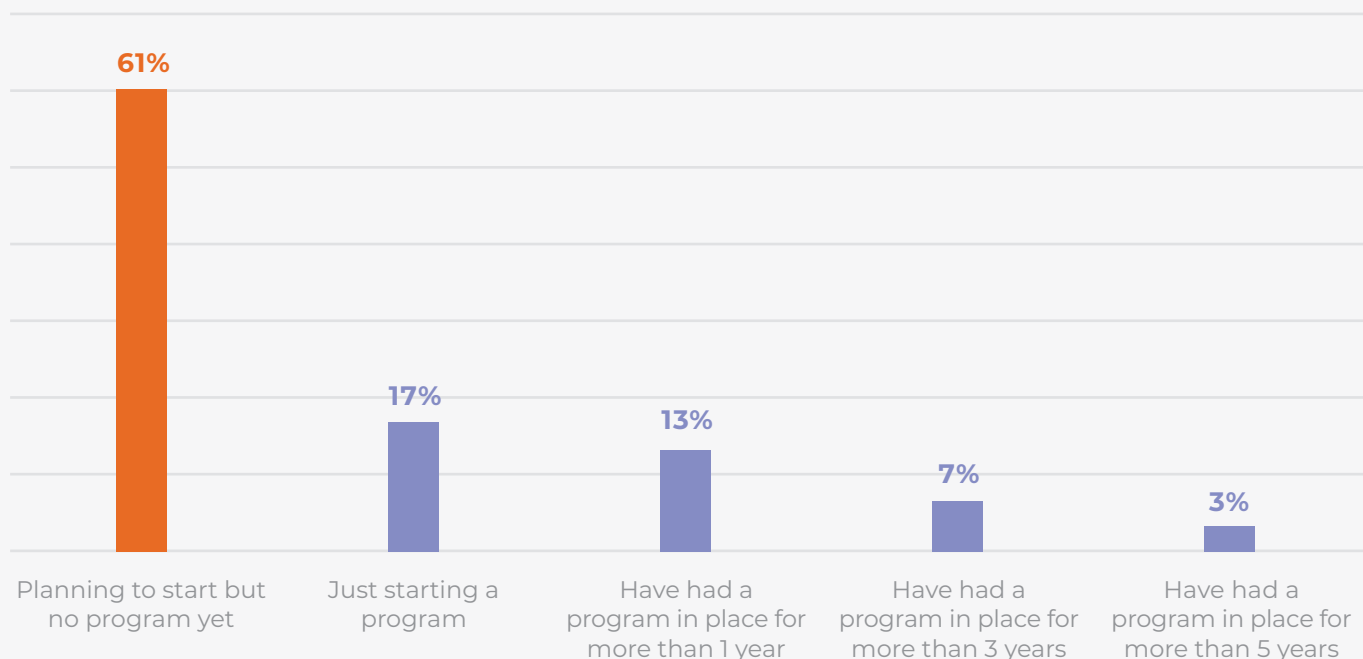
And getting it right seems to be a sticking point, particularly given the relative immaturity of employee advocacy. In the second element of our survey, we asked respondents how long they've been developing their EA program.

## DO YOU CURRENTLY HAVE AN EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY PROGRAM IN PLACE IN YOUR BUSINESS?





## WHAT IS THE MATURITY LEVEL OF YOUR EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY PROGRAM?



More than 60% of respondents indicated they were still implementing a full strategy, with 17% just starting out. Given this, it's reasonable to assume that a lot of businesses aren't willing to go all out in their EA efforts since there are few solid examples of effective strategy. Those that get it right, as indicated by the research, see major benefits, but with limited adoption, the

case for making a significant investment may not be enough to push most business across the line.

That means more brands may have to implement their own approach to solidify ROI considerations. Based on responses to the rest of our survey, the case for employee advocacy is fairly clear.

# Part 2: Opportunities and Benefits of Employee Advocacy

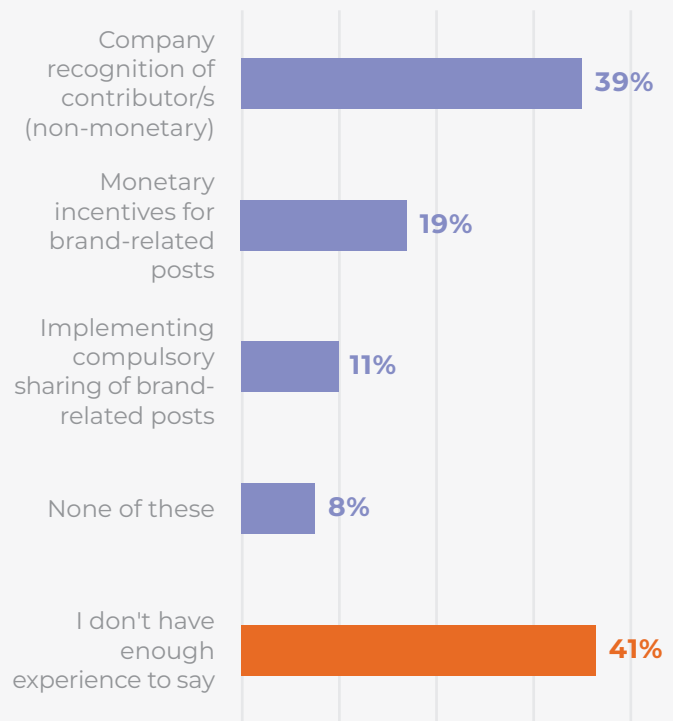
**W**ith a handle on the scale at which employee advocacy is being adopted, we wanted to dig further into the specifics.

What works for brands that have an EA program? And how can businesses maximize the ROI of their own strategy if they take the leap?

We asked respondents who had experience with EA programs which types of incentives delivered the best responses.

Internal recognition—whether through broad shout-outs, promotion of posts on branded social channels or positive recognition from peers—was the most effective incentive highlighted, with others falling well behind.

## IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHICH EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY INCENTIVES ARE MOST EFFECTIVE?





Monetary incentives—such as offering staff a bonus for getting a certain amount of likes or shares on a post promoting the company—were considered far less effective, as were compulsory-sharing programs, which expect staff to post company-related content.

The latter is probably one of the more common EA missteps. How many times have you seen someone post a generic update or promotion related to their company with little personal flair, attachment or emotion?

More than 39% of respondents indicated they were **not adequately trained on how to find and share brand- or business-related updates**, while only 35% indicated they felt confident in what they could say.

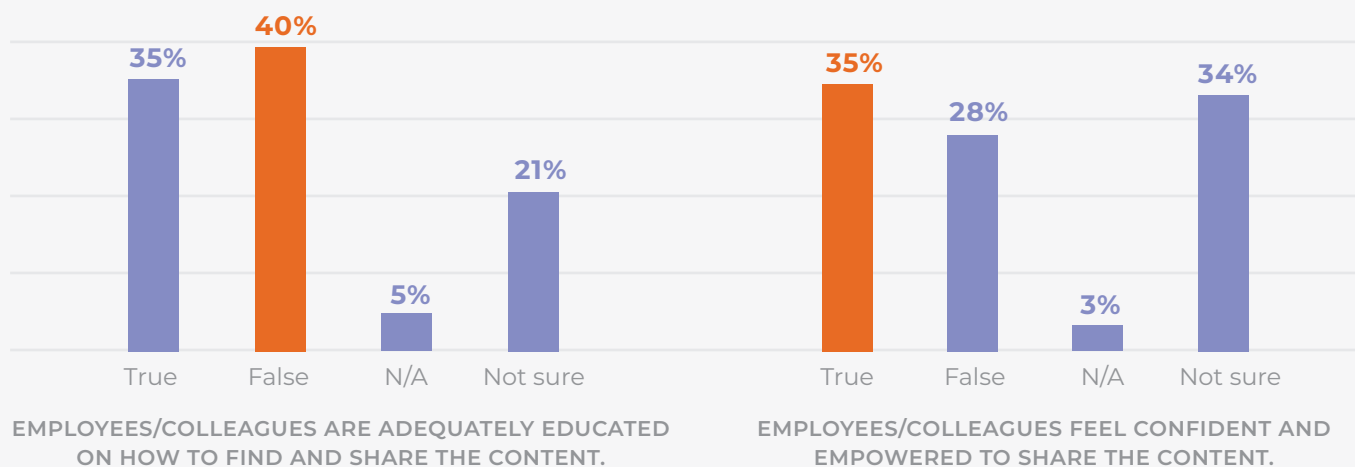
That gets even worse when the exact same update is shared by another employee from the same company. We'll go out on a limb: Compulsory sharing of this type, which overlooks the value of personal input in a social media update, is a major fail in employee advocacy.

If you have to force your employees to share your brand messaging, maybe you need to address other issues.

That element was also touched upon in our next question, which looked at how employees find branded content and share it on their social profiles.

A key issue with EA programs is that staff often don't feel empowered to share brand-related content, whether that's finding the latest updates or content to post or feeling confident in what they're allowed to share.

#### IN REGARD TO THE CONTENT YOUR COMPANY CURRENTLY CREATES AND SHARES ONLINE: TRUE OR FALSE





More than 39% of respondents indicated they were not adequately trained on how to find and share brand- or business-related updates, while only 35% indicated they felt confident in what they could say.

This underscores the need for further investment in a dedicated EA strategy. If your staff doesn't know what to share, you can't expect to benefit from employee advocacy.

Brands need to educate staffs on the benefits of sharing—and not just in terms of how the company will benefit but also how individuals can build their own professional profiles by sharing their opinions and expertise on their social channels, helping to maximize engagement and exposure.

To facilitate this, your company needs to create not only its own content but also content that engages your staff enough to want to talk about it and share it on their personal channels. Providing guidance on how to do this and making it clear what they can say on behalf of the company will improve your EA results significantly, as evident by these findings.

That's also a key aspect of the next element of our survey.





Note that it's not that people don't believe in their own knowledge or expertise, it's either they don't want to say the wrong thing, they're not engaged enough in their own industry or—the biggest factor—they don't want to spam friends with work-related content.

That makes perfect sense. You don't want to be that person who's always sharing your company's latest awesome deals. But effective employee advocacy takes this into consideration—you need content that's engaging, not just “our company is the best, buy from us” promotions.

What does your company do that affects people's daily lives in a positive way? What would affect and benefit people if they knew about it? If you can engage employees first, by highlighting the importance of what you do—and why you do it—you'll stand a better chance of engaging their connections through the same.

Employees need to know what they can say, that you want them to share and that they are empowered to do so. But also, it must be applicable. Social media is not an ad platform; it's built for connecting and sharing relevant, informative updates. If your business content is purely promotional, it's likely not built for an advocacy program.

# Part 3: Effective Approaches to Employee Advocacy

**B**uilding on the previous point, we wanted to dig deeper into the specific types of content that help solidify an EA program. And it probably comes as little surprise that thought-leadership content leads the way, as opposed to overly promotional updates.

Showcasing the expertise of your internal leaders—ideally via video—seems to be the most effective approach. Video is not always the most cost-effective or simple option, but as many other studies and reports have highlighted, video is the most effective medium for social sharing and can help maximize your results.

But the key consideration here is thought-leadership posts. The temptation for many companies is to approach employee

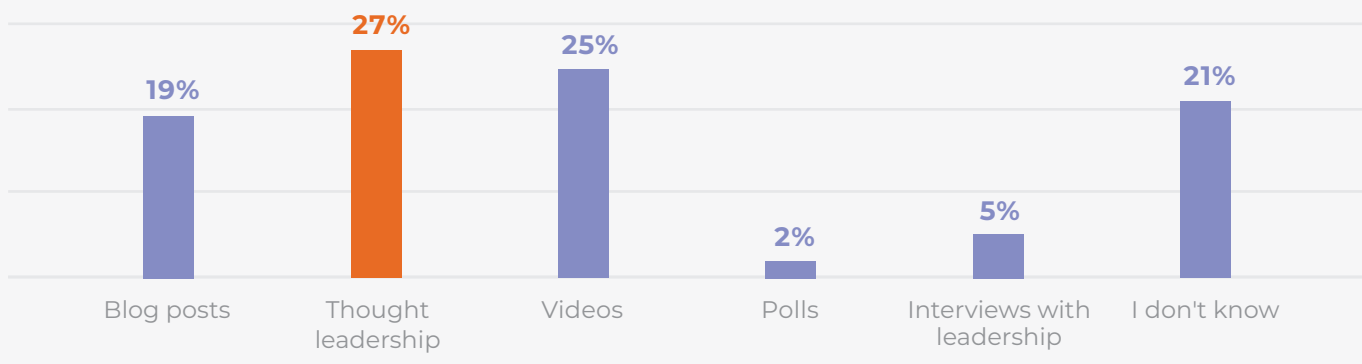
advocacy as another media-distribution process through which they can get employees to share updates about their latest promotion or sale. That's not the best way to go about it.

By tapping into your internal experts—enabling them to share their expertise and build their own personal profiles, while also expanding the company's presence—you'll be better placed to maximize the benefits of employee advocacy.

Add in a video element and you'll be on track to glean the benefits of employee advocacy.

Underscoring this even further, our last two survey questions asked how respondents themselves felt about employee advocacy, and what they found most effective.

## WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF COMPANY CONTENT SHARED BY EMPLOYEES/ COLLEAGUES PRODUCES THE BEST RESULTS?



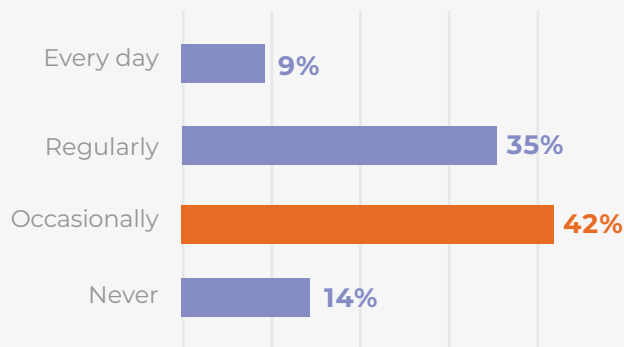
First, we sought to find out how engaged people are in professional discussions online.

While about 35% of respondents regularly share company updates through their personal profiles, the majority do so only occasionally or not at all, leaving a lot of opportunity for businesses to build a more engaging, active EA program.

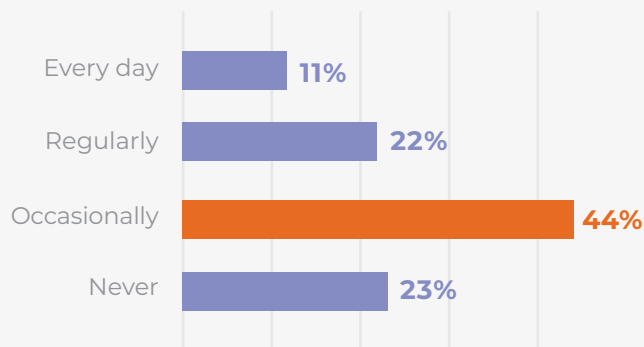
More than 73% of respondents indicated that **company updates shared via personal profiles** were more persuasive than those posted by brands.

Particularly concerning is that many business experts aren't even participating in relevant industry discussions. This seems like a key area where brands could offer training on how and where to find relevant discussions and how to participate. Again, that would help build their personal profiles, while also showcasing their business expertise. The question may also come down to what they can and can't say, so empowering staff with that knowledge remains a critical component.

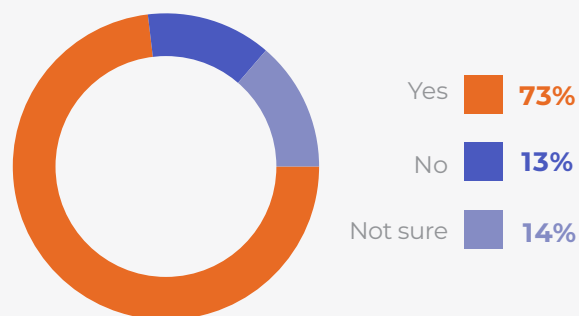
#### HOW OFTEN DO YOU PERSONALLY SHARE YOUR OWN COMPANY'S CONTENT FROM YOUR PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES?



#### HOW OFTEN DO YOU PERSONALLY ENGAGE IN DISCUSSIONS RELEVANT TO YOUR PROFESSIONAL INDUSTRY ONLINE?



#### DO YOU PERSONALLY FIND POSTS SHARED FROM PEOPLE'S PERSONAL PROFILES MORE PERSUASIVE THAN THOSE FROM BRAND PROFILES?





But if you want another reminder of the potential effectiveness of employee advocacy, there's also this:

More than 73% of respondents indicated that company updates shared via personal profiles were more persuasive than those posted by brands.

The evidence is very clear: Employee advocacy is effective and can be key to amplifying your brand messaging, especially in the age of algorithms, which is increasingly seeing business page reach in decline.

You likely know this from your personal experience. You're more likely to respond to a post from a friend than from a brand. The keys, then, lie in ensuring that your brand content aligns with personal-sharing behaviors and in educating your employees on what they can share—and why they should want to.

*The 2019 Social Media Today Employee Advocacy Survey was conducted in July and August 2019, incorporating responses from 402 participants. Of those respondents, 54% indicated they worked for a B2B organization, while 29% indicated they worked for a B2C brand.*

