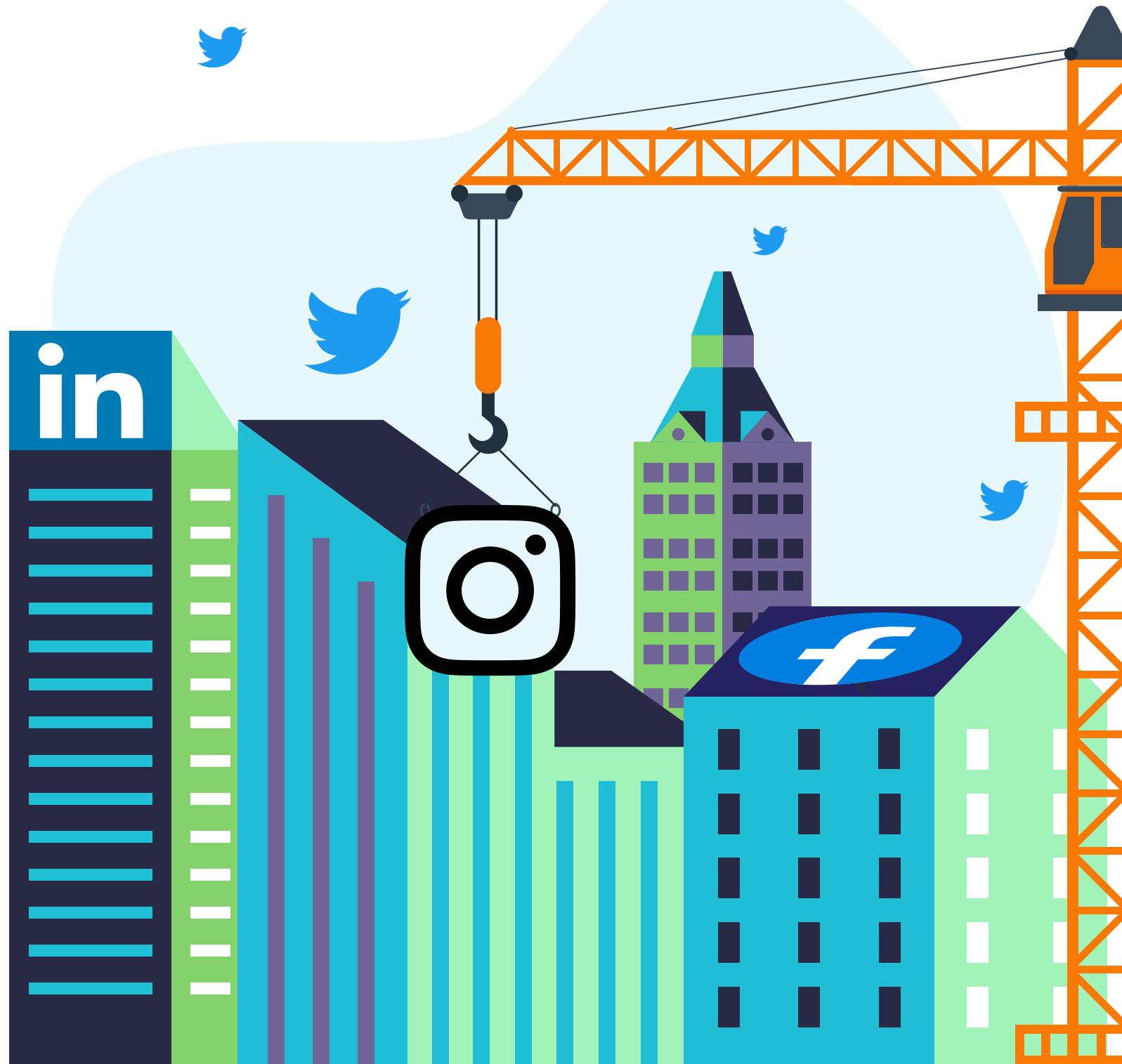


Social Media and the Architecture, Engineering and Construction Industry

An assessment of usage and attitudes





ocial media is the fastest growing marketing and public relations instrument, bringing businesses closer to customers and clients in an unprecedented way. But is it being embraced fully by the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) industry for communication, business development and recruiting?

To better understand the role of social media in the industry, Reichman Frankle Inc. (RFI) conducted a survey of AEC organizations, including firms and trade/business associations. This white paper seeks to assess the community's usage, behavior, attitudes towards, and the perceived effectiveness of, the platforms for promoting businesses and associations.

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01: Introduction and Survey Methodology

Objective

A qualitative survey of the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) community was undertaken in the fall of 2022 to obtain firsthand information on the industry's engagement with social media. While strides to integrate social media marketing have been made, we hypothesize that the industry remains behind the curve on the effective utilization of these platforms and their far-reaching potential to attract new talent, educate, inform, and generate business. This research examines that hypothesis by identifying current trends in usage and attitudes toward social media, and provides a snapshot of what organizations are doing to increase visibility, credibility, and sustainability in the social media sphere, where the talent and future of the industry resides.

Methodology

RFI conducted a 17-question survey among 27 small, medium and large architecture, engineering and construction companies and trade associations in the New York/New Jersey metro area. The questionnaire, created and disseminated via Google Forms, was designed to elicit responses related to: usage, platforms, frequency, content, administration, strategy, staffing, behavior, attitudes, impressions, efficacy, and awareness of services. A combination of yes/no, short answer and rating scale questions were employed.

The survey was distributed in mid-August to marketing and/or communications professionals. An appropriate contact was sought at each organization. Below are the specific questions posed:

1. Does your organization use social media currently?
2. Which platforms does your organization use?
3. How often does your organization post?
4. What types of content does your organization post?
5. Who does the posting for your organization? Is it centralized?
6. In your opinion, what posts have been most successful?
7. Does your organization have a social media strategy?
8. Does your organization have a dedicated social media team?
9. Do you personally engage with/follow social media accounts for AEC Industry information?
10. What type of posts are you most attracted to?
11. Do you like or comment on posts? If so, what types of posts would you be more likely to comment on?
12. Are there firms or organizations in the industry that you think use social media well?
13. Would it be beneficial to the growth of your organization to use or increase the use of social media? Why?
14. What are your attitudes on using social media? Likes and dislikes?
15. On a scale of 1-5, how effective do you think social media is for reaching your B2B audience?
(5 = extremely effective; 1 = not effective)
16. On a scale of 1-5, how effective do you think social media is for attracting talent?
17. Are you aware of any social media companies or apps that provide all-in-one services, i.e., content development, scheduling, posting, sharing, employee engagement, etc.?



The term "organization" is used throughout the report to reference both firms and trade associations. All survey responses are presented anonymously; no names or identifiers are used. Due to the limited nature of the survey, findings are primarily anecdotal, offering a window into the current state of social media use in the industry.

02: Social Media and the AEC Industry: Survey Topline Results



Below are key findings from the survey responses:

- Among participating organizations, social media is almost universally used as a marketing tool, and used often. Only one firm said they were not currently using social media. Posting several times per week or more is the norm.
- The vast majority of respondents (85%) said they engage with social media for AEC industry news.
- LinkedIn is the industry's social media of choice, followed by the traditional "big 3" platforms: Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. More than half of respondents use all 4 platforms.
- Video apps, such as YouTube, TikTok and Vimeo, have not been embraced by most of those surveyed.
- Social media account activity is executed via a planned strategy in about half of the organizations surveyed. Activity is most often the purview of a social media or communications team/person.
- Employee advocacy and influencer platforms that can help with consolidation of posting and employee engagement are somewhat known but have not taken hold, either due to skepticism in terms of usefulness or perceived lack of return on investment.
- Posts by the organizations surveyed primarily feature projects, followed by news about people and events. Posts about people are perceived to be more successful.
- While a greater number of respondents say they are attracted to "project" posts, familiarity rules when it comes to liking or commenting on posts. Respondents said they tend to comment more on "people" posts, particularly when it's about someone they know personally, as well as on posts in which their organization is mentioned or tagged.

02: Social Media and the AEC Industry: Survey Topline Results *(continued)*

- Most respondents were able to identify one or more organizations they perceived as “using social media well.” Those named were more likely to be architectural firms. Characteristics of these “good” social media accounts include: diversity of content and formats; high-quality graphics; music; creativity and authenticity.
- Respondents’ attitudes were generally positive toward the use of social media in their business lives. What they like about social media is the content, reach, immediacy, quick access, and ability to promote/advocate for the business.
- In addition, three-quarters of respondents believe that increasing their social media would be beneficial to the growth of their organization. Reasons cited included generating new business leads, increased brand awareness and visibility, building credibility, and reaching potential job candidates and new members for organizations.
- Negative aspects of social media mentioned include the time required versus perceived return; low quality content; difficulty in understanding the algorithms and competition to get posts seen; unwanted exposure to advertising, echochambers and disinformation; and a belief that some platforms are becoming “pay to play,” making it increasingly hard to get exposure for free.
- When asked to rank social media’s effectiveness, respondents ranked the platforms higher on “recruiting talent” versus “reaching their B2B audience”. On a scale of 1 to 5 (5= extremely effective), 73% of respondents rated social media a 4 or 5 for “recruiting talent”, while only 46 % rated social media 4 or 5 for “reaching B2B audience.”



03: Social Media Survey Findings

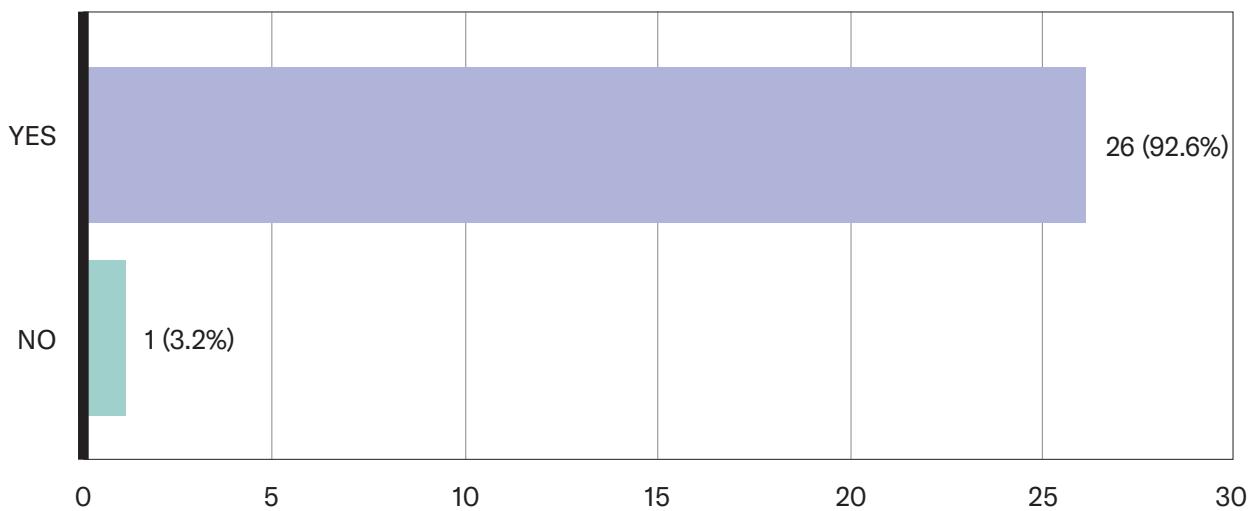
Consolidated responses from the participants are provided in this section of the report. We have segmented the findings into seven categories:

- Social media usage
- Organizational behavior
- Content posted
- Interaction with social media
- Perception of industry accounts
- Attitudes toward social media
- Effectiveness rankings

Social Media Usage

The AEC organizations surveyed have almost universally embraced some degree of social media use, with all but one firm saying they currently use social media.

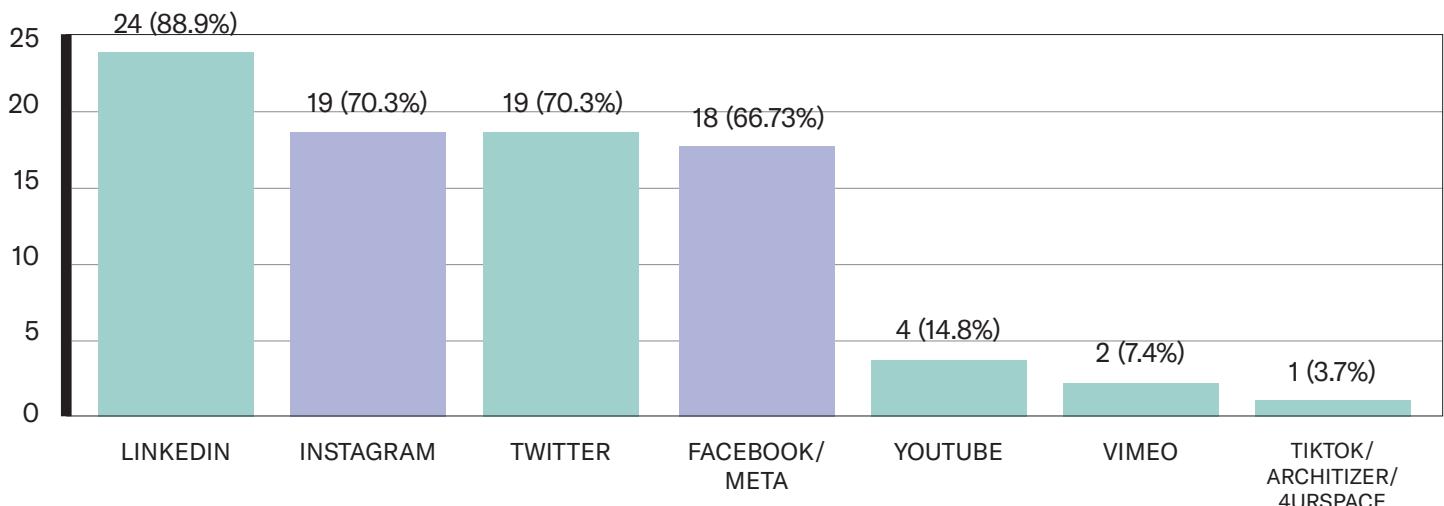
DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION USE SOCIAL MEDIA CURRENTLY?



LinkedIn is the preferred platform, employed by nearly 90% of respondents, followed by Instagram and Twitter, both used by 70% of respondents, and Facebook/Meta, used by 67% of respondents. Only 4 respondents said they use the video app YouTube, two mentioned Vimeo, and one said they use TikTok. One respondent mentioned Architizer and 4UrSpace.

03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS USED:



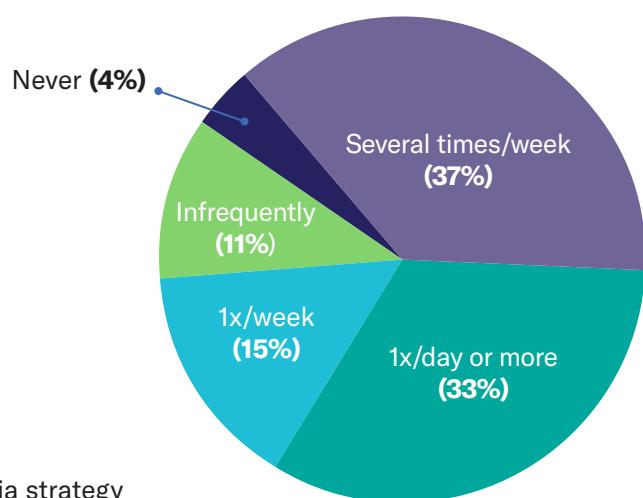
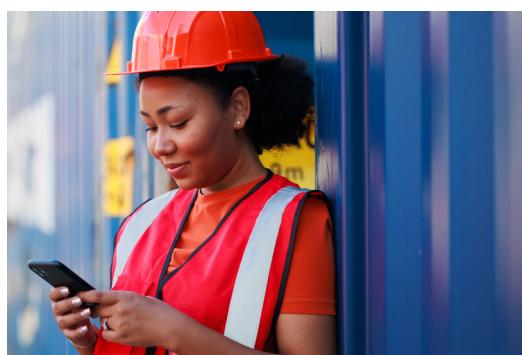
Looking further into usage, more than half (55%) of the respondents said they use all 4 of the more traditional apps (LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook). Only 5 respondents use a single platform: LinkedIn (3), Twitter (1) and Instagram (1).

Although Facebook was mentioned by 18 respondents, there were a few comments indicating that LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram are used more regularly, with several respondents mentioning in particular the significance of LinkedIn for reaching their audience. One respondent said that, “From a B2B perspective, social media—mostly LinkedIn—is important in getting news to your technical practitioner connections.”

Organizational Behavior

The vast majority of organizations surveyed (70%) post several times per week or more, with a third of respondents saying they post at least once per day or more.

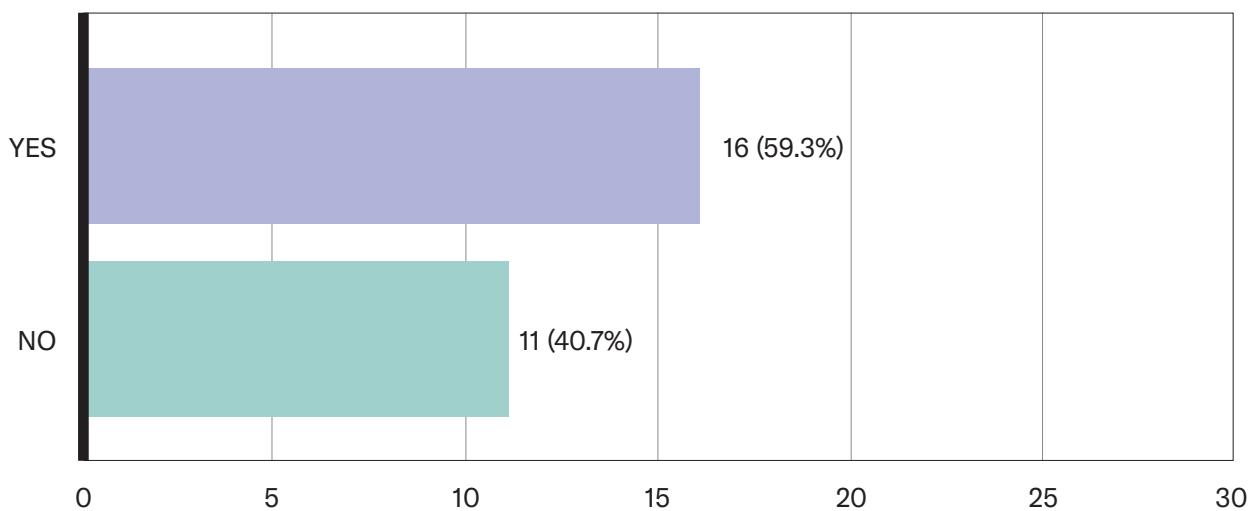
HOW OFTEN DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION POST?



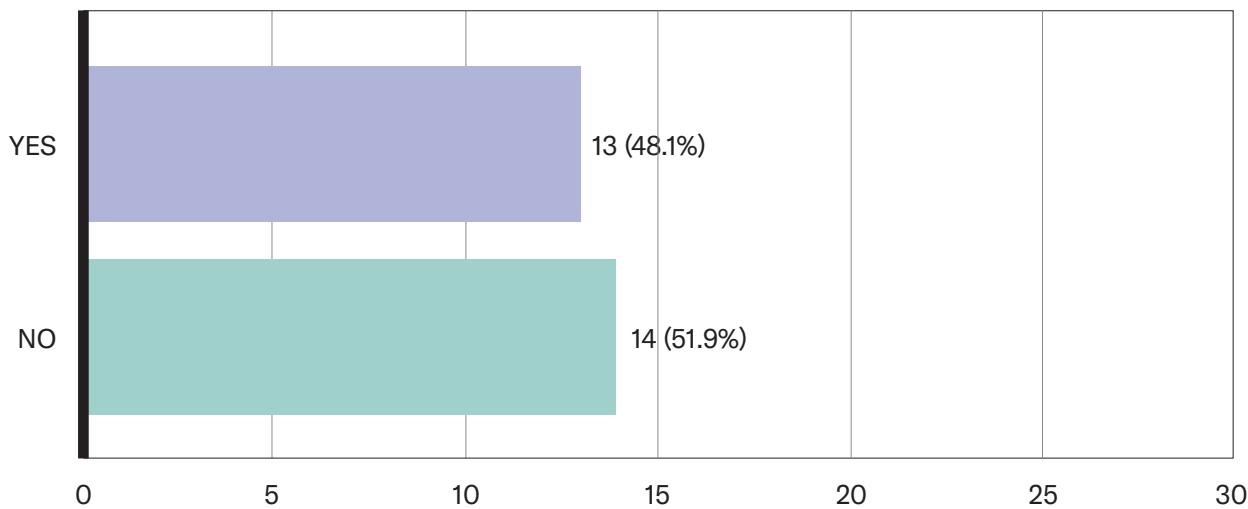
In terms of the process, 59% have a social media strategy and just less than half 48% have a dedicated social media team.

03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)

DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION HAVE A SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY?



DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION HAVE A DEDICATED SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM?



With regard to specifically who does the posting and how centralized it is, 9 respondents mentioned either a social media or digital content staffer and 10 mentioned the communications manager or team. One firm surveyed uses an outside social media consultant for their postings. Other mentions include: professional staff, business development, office manager, and a “group of employees.” On the whole, posting is the responsibility of a designated individual or group, not an adhoc activity by all employees.

03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)



A few organizations mentioned a more sophisticated process with dedicated staff at the corporate level being responsible for posting/activity on the “main channel account”, and local offices or ambassadors (employees) contributing content to corporate or posting directly on regional or studio accounts.

When asked if respondents were aware of any social media management platforms that provide all-in-one services, 48% said yes, with specific mentions for the employee influencer and advocacy platforms Sprout Social, Hootsuite, Hubspot, Canva, and Marketo. Only 3 respondents said they had any direct interaction with these services. One respondent said they “have tried a couple of these, but for a post to look good on each channel, you really have to post from each channel manually.” Another respondent mentioned that they are “not worth the ROI.”

Content Posted

When queried on what types of content their organization posts, responses were as follows:

- Project-related information, including wins, completed projects and milestones, was mentioned the most, with 19 of the 26 active organizations saying they post project content.
- People news (13) and events (12) were the next most mentioned, followed by thought leadership/blogs and articles (9), firm culture/team building and social activities (8).
- Other posts mentioned include: legislative, policy and industry news, awards, new hires, traditional and social media holidays, recruitment, corporate social responsibility, and podcast releases.

One respondent differentiated among the channels, i.e., “...on Instagram we focus more on the design process with renderings and other design-related graphics.”

Looking further into the perception of the content posted by their respective organizations, we asked the respondents which type of posts, in their opinion, have been most successful. “Employee news/accomplishments” (12 mentions) surpassed “project posts” (10 mentions). Other types of posts were mentioned to a much lesser degree, including industry trends/topics, culture, internal office happenings, volunteer projects, career opportunities, and podcasts.

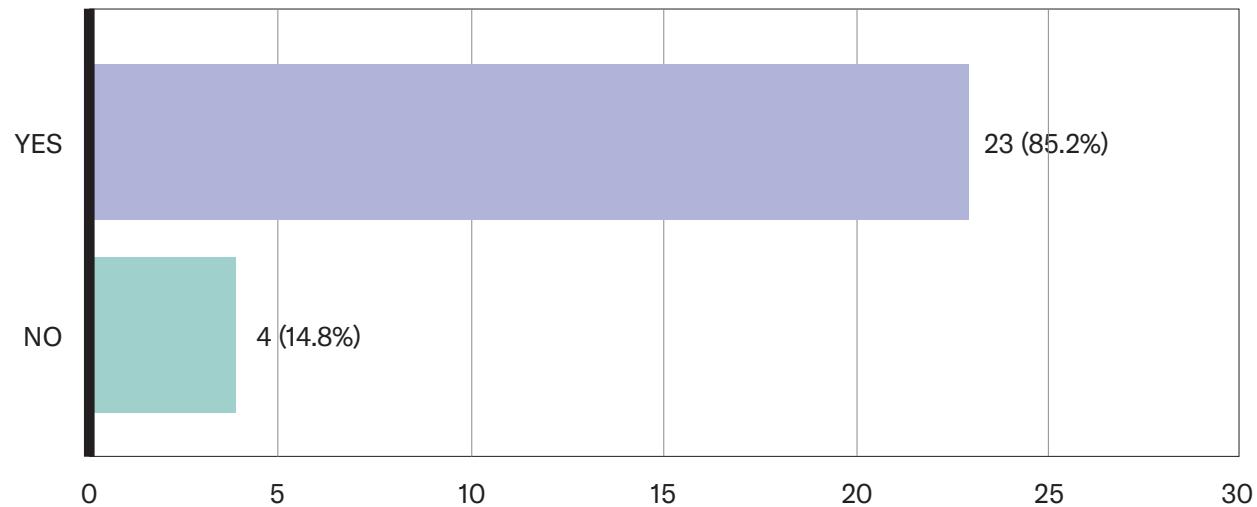
A few respondents differentiated here as well among the social platforms. One respondent said, “LinkedIn (is successful) for employee accomplishments, click-thru and event marketing; Instagram for wider reach and broad awareness, e-commerce.”

03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)

Interaction with Social Media

Looking at individual behavior among respondents, 85% said they personally follow and/or engage with social media accounts for AEC industry information.

DO YOU PERSONALLY FOLLOW/ENGAGE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS FOR AEC INDUSTRY INFORMATION?



When asked what posts they are most attracted to, respondents mentioned, in rank order:

- Project-related posts: 13 mentions
- People-related posts: 11 mentions
- Industry trends/news: 5 mentions
- Posts with great visuals/graphics: 4 mentions

Other post types had three or less mentions, including innovative engineering efforts, policy/climate change, community participation, and social media holidays. This was asked with no prompts and represents top-of-mind recall.

03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)

Most respondents said they like or comment on posts, with only 2 respondents saying this question was not applicable to them. Respondents were much more likely to like or comment on posts about their peers (13 respondents), especially if it is about someone they know, versus project posts (4 respondents). Some respondents (5) offered they were more likely to like or comment on posts from their organization or those that tagged or mentioned their organization.

Perception of Industry Accounts

When asked in an open-ended question if there were firms or organizations in the industry that use social media well, most respondents could name at least one organization whose social media resonated with them. Responses were quite varied, but in general architectural firms were named more often than engineering or construction firms.

Among the firms perceived as using social media well, we observed the following characteristics of their accounts: **diversity of content; diversity of format (still images, videos, stop motion graphics and animation, podcasts); high-quality images; interesting use of camera angles; entertaining and upbeat music; creativity and originality; and an authentic and inviting tone.**

Examples of the varied content included:

- Project stories told in video and stills, sometimes introduced by a project manager or superintendent; project anniversaries; multiple posts (chapters) for one project
- People highlights: A Day in the Life of...; Meet our Summer Intern; A Q&A with...; new hire profiles
- Cultural and Social Media Holidays: Pride Month, Arab Heritage Month, Women's History Month, Black History Month, UN International Day of Charity, NJ Architecture Week, etc.
- Guest takeovers of the account by a supplier or partnering firm
- Tags and shout outs to suppliers, clients and partnering firms
- Recruiting videos
- Podcasts with industry guests
- Thematic posts, e.g., a series of posts based on the colors of the rainbow; the use of game boards, such as Scrabble, to create a message
- Conferences, speaking engagements
- Lively, fun events at interesting venues
- White Papers

03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)

Attitudes Toward Social Media

In general, respondents attitudes toward social media for business are mostly positive, although some were measured, noting “It’s a necessary evil”, “not too sure how effective it is” and “growth is not guaranteed.” Others qualified their responses with statements such as, “I like it if it isn’t overdone” and “social media can be a useful, possibly essential tool...if it’s used correctly.”

A couple of respondents mentioned the difficulty in understanding the algorithms for increasing exposure, as well as the bias toward paid content. One social media professional noted that they view social media objectively, as a business tool. “It’s marketing and communication for a purpose; liking or disliking a trend or social in general isn’t applicable.”

When probed on specific likes and dislikes about social media, respondents provided the following comments:

Specific Likes mentioned:



- [LinkedIn] for keeping in touch with contacts, recognizing team members, recruiting, promoting projects and company activities
- Engaging content
- Allows you to reach anyone at any given time
- Allows you to reach people where they are, online
- Immediacy of sharing information; exposure
- Quick entry and access to data
- Easy to share content/company good news in a variety of ways
- Collaboration
- A way for a younger generation to be company advocates without having to be in a professional organization right away.
- Good way to communicate policy positions

Specific Dislikes mentioned:



- Takes a lot of time
- A lot of work for little ROI
- There is a lot of content that is not good or useful; stale “posting just to post” stuff
- A challenge to maintain a professional/business style post
- Paid advertising
- Frequent interface updates that favor paid content
- Quality content not always seen and discovered; a lot of competition
- Disingenuous accounts
- Getting funneled into an echochamber
- Disinformation
- Potential for cybercrime/fake accounts
- Keeping up with compelling weekly content can be challenging

03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)



When asked if increasing the use of social media would be beneficial to the growth of their organization, nearly three-quarters of respondents said yes, with one stipulating that it's hard to quantify and another mentioning that involvement at the principal level would be beneficial. An additional respondent was more equivocal; "It's good for employer branding and for brand recognition but lead generation is minimal." Three respondents said they did not think increasing their social media use would be beneficial because "we post enough" or the "preference right now is to consolidate channels for a more focused and intentional message."

Those who responded positively believe that increased social media use would help to:

- Generate new business leads, expand clientele
- Increase visibility and engagement; involvement with members
- Increase brand awareness
- Build community and client trust, credibility
- Get information out on a broader basis
- Publicity/PR
- Reach emerging audiences
- Engage with potential job candidates; attract prospective members
- Engage with next generation, who currently uses social for info, news, and life in general.
- Allow prospects to gain "a ton of information" about company culture, types of projects, transparency

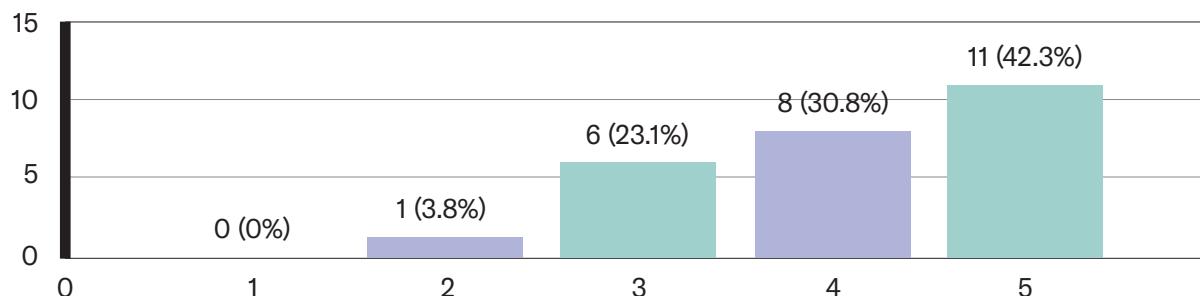
03: Social Media Survey Findings (continued)

Effectiveness Rankings

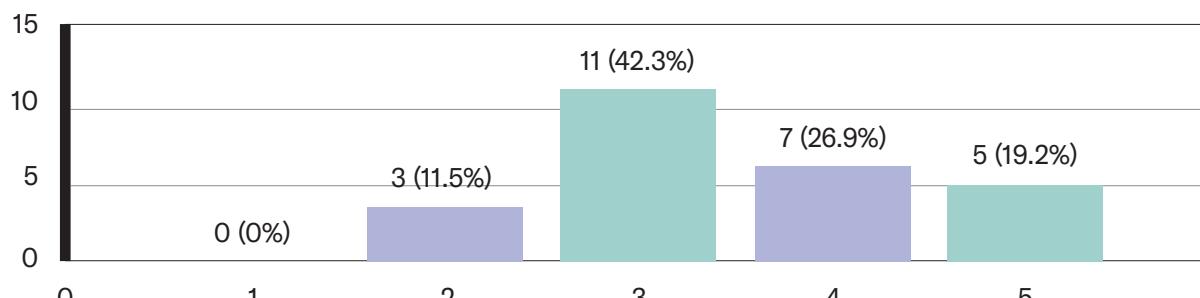
Finally, we asked respondents to rank the effectiveness of social media on a scale of 1-5 (5 = extremely effective and 1 = not effective at all) for “reaching their B2B audience” and “attracting talent”.

Overall, respondents view social media as more effective for attracting talent than reaching their B2B audience. While 73% of respondents gave social media a 4 or 5 on the effectiveness scale for attracting talent, only 46% rated the platforms with a 4 or 5 for reaching their business audience. An almost equal amount (42%) rated social media a 3 for effectiveness in reaching their B2B audience. One respondent abstained from the ranking.

ON A SCALE OF 1-5, HOW EFFECTIVE DO YOU THINK SOCIAL MEDIA IS FOR ATTRACTING TALENT? (5= EXTREMELY EFFECTIVE; 1=NOT EFFECTIVE).



ON A SCALE OF 1-5, HOW EFFECTIVE DO YOU THINK SOCIAL MEDIA IS FOR REACHING YOUR B2B AUDIENCE? (5 = EXTREMELY EFFECTIVE; 1 = NOT EFFECTIVE).



04: Conclusions

Below are several general conclusions we can draw from our qualitative survey on social media and the AEC industry.

1

Results of the survey indicate pervasive and frequent usage of social media in the AEC industry and a positive attitude toward the more established platforms, particularly LinkedIn, as well as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. On the other hand, newer and video-based apps, e.g. TikTok, YouTube and Vimeo, have not been incorporated into most firms' and organizations' social media strategies or activities, suggesting that the industry may be more reluctant to embrace these increasingly important channels. YouTube is now the second largest social media app in the world according to Statista. TikTok is the 6th largest and the fastest growing among the platforms.

2

Social media has been accepted as an essential marketing tool by the industry. Respondents conveyed generally positive attitudes toward social media for business, viewing the platforms as a way to enhance their marketing with broader reach, greater exposure, a means for promoting services and project work, and building community. Most of those surveyed believe that increased use of social media will help grow their business/organization. The platforms are seen as particularly effective for recruiting talent.

3

Posting and social media responsibility is generally limited to a designated group or individual. Apps and outside services that formalize employee advocacy/influence and exponentially expand the social audience have not been embraced.

4

Despite general positivity, based on comments and effectiveness ratings for reaching their B2B audience, there still appears to be some frustration or skepticism regarding social media among respondents. Concerns included: the time investment required and questions about return on that investment; difficulty understanding the algorithms for increased exposure; uncertainty if posts are being viewed/reaching the target audience; and a feeling that the platforms are moving toward pay to play, which makes it harder for smaller, B2B users to compete for exposure.

5

From a user perspective, content, format and manner of presentation matter. Industry social media users want to see diverse, high quality and interesting posts with attractive graphics, presented in a variety of formats. Authenticity of voice and originality break through, while posting uninteresting items for the sake of posting is transparent.

6

When it comes to engagement, familiarity is key. Industry members are reluctant to like or engage with a post unless they have some familiarity. People-related posts, especially if they involve a personal connection, generate the most activity. Tagging is another way to increase engagement. People tend to like or comment if their particular firm is called out in the post.

05: Helpful Links

General Information

<https://brand.ucsb.edu/social-media/best-practices>
<https://www.ismartrecruit.com/blog-practices-recruiting-social-media>
<https://newlightdigital.com/blog/social-media-for-architects/>
<https://roclogicmarketing.com/social-media-for-engineering-companies/>
<https://www.wordstream.com/social-media-marketing>
<https://buffer.com/library/social-media-sites/>

About Those Algorithms

<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/how-social-media-algorithms-work/380642/>
<https://blog.hootsuite.com/how-the-linkedin-algorithm-works-hacks/>
<https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-algorithm/>

Getting Started on YouTube and TikTok

<https://blog.hootsuite.com/tiktok-stats/>
<https://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/4-ways-to-use-tiktok-business/>
<https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/9854-youtube-for-business.html>

**For questions regarding this survey, please contact Nancy Coopersmith,
ncoopersmith@reichmanfrankle.com, 201-816-1211.**

About RFI

Reichman Frankle Inc. (RFI), a WBE/SBE/DBE formed in 1990, is a full-service marketing and public relations firm specializing in the built environment. RFI provides marketing strategy, branding, content development, promotional and technical writing, graphic design, media relations, and community outreach services to firms and associations in the architecture, engineering and construction industry. For more than 30 years, the firm has served a diverse group of private and public sector clients throughout the New York metropolitan area.