Moments & Milestones: UGC, Brands & Emotional Touchpoints on Social

79%

of consumers have shared a life milestone on social

48%

of consumers have made a purchase for a milestone after seeing it on social

1 in 3

consumers would mention a brand when sharing a personal accomplishment on social

Intro

Birth announcements, vacation photo albums, engagement parties: Humans are wired to want to share their most significant life events with those closest to them. So it's no surprise that so much of what consumers post about on social involves the full lifecycle of planning, celebrating and sharing our major milestones and most meaningful moments.

And while milestone marketing is a long-standing business strategy, social presents a unique opportunity for brands to become part of these moments in an authentic, consumer-driven way. Because in addition to sharing and celebrating these significant events, many people are also using these posts to acknowledge the people, products and services that helped them along the way, assuming the role of brand ambassador in their recognition and recommendations. It's why someone might include their Nike shoes when posting about running their first marathon, or tag Le Creuset when posting photos of their first Thanksgiving as host.

Brands long ago started weaving this user-generated content (UGC) into their social strategies, but there's much to be learned about what drives people to share personal milestones, what inspires someone to name a brand in those posts and how brands can play a role in helping consumers memorialize, celebrate and share more of these major moments. Sprout Social surveyed more than 1,200 consumers to find out.
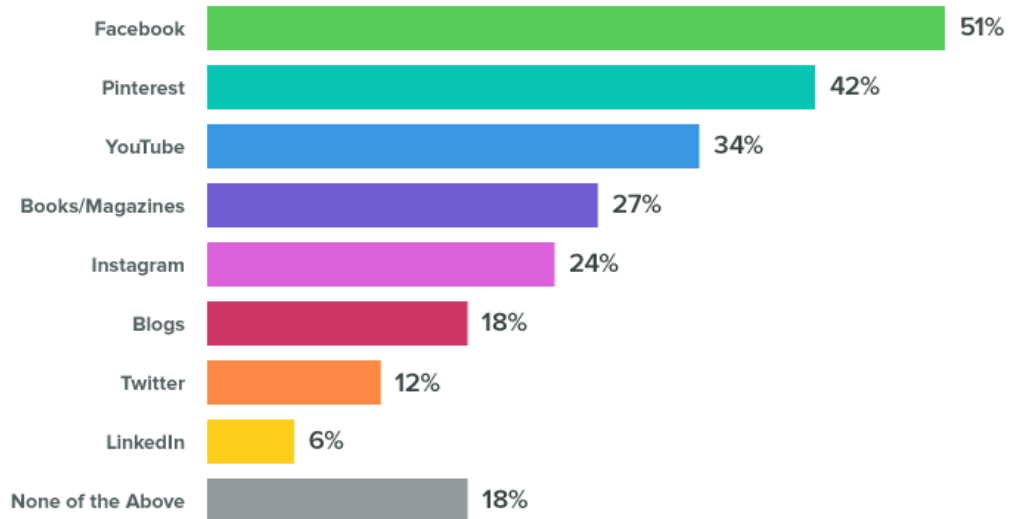
The Reco Revolution: Using Social to Plan for Major Life Milestones

The Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising report recently found that recommendations from friends and family remain the most credible form of advertising for 83% of today's consumers. Because milestones are of substantial significance, people want product and service suggestions they can trust. So where do they turn to find out which wedding photographers and baby diaper brands their peers are championing?

More than half of consumers (51%) turn to Facebook, ranking it above any other source, 42% use Pinterest and 34% use YouTube. And while 1 in 4 consumers turn to Instagram, the number increases for Millennials, with 35% of this generation using the visual-focused app to find recommendations and research.

Where Consumers Find Recommendations & Research When Planning Life Milestones

Q4 2017

Facebook	51%
Pinterest	42%
YouTube	34%
Books/Magazines	27%
Instagram	24%
Blogs	18%
Twitter	12%
LinkedIn	6%
None of the Above	18%

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And people aren't just using social to get the lay of the land—it's also directly informing their purchasing decisions while planning for a major life event. Nearly half (48%) of consumers have made a purchase for a milestone after seeing that product, service or brand on social. Broken out by generations, that comprises 58% of Millennials, 45% of Gen Xers and 24% of Baby Boomers.

Percentage of Consumers Who Have Purchased for a Life Milestone After Seeing Brand/Product/Service on Social Media

Q4 2017

- Millennials
- Generation X
- Baby Boomers

24%

45%

58%
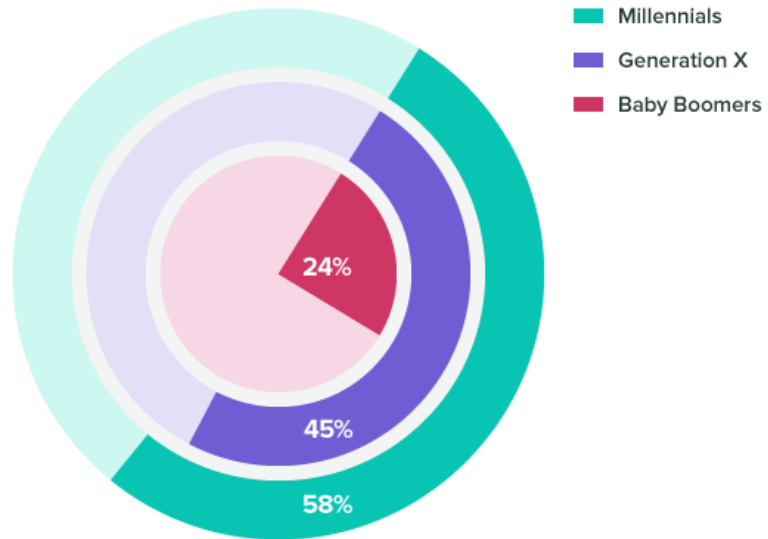
Sprout Stance:

Knowing that life milestones often encourage and even require people to make significant purchases—and that they're looking to their peers for suggestions—brands need to ensure that their products or services are easy to both discover and recommend on social. The Langham is one of Chicago's newest Forbes Five-Star Hotels and has become a coveted wedding venue for brides and grooms looking to marry love with luxury. To feature their incredible event space on Instagram, The Langham curates photos being shared by their recent brides, grooms, vendors and guests to their own feeds using the hashtag #LanghamLoveStories.

By incorporating heavily searched hashtags like #WeddingWednesdays, #WeddingInspo and #ChicagoWeddings, they ensure their content reaches new audiences using the platform to plan, gather inspiration and celebrate. They also tap into the brand equity of popular wedding planning publications like The Knot by tagging them in their posts, knowing that The Knot's community is another source of trusted peer recommendations and inspiration in their industry. To top it all off, they make sure to give credit where credit's due by tagging featured photographers and designers whenever applicable, knowing those businesses have an interest in building their own reputation and amplifying examples of their work.

Think about your own customer's journey from start to finish, including the people and networks that have the greatest influence in their decision-making process. Are there relevant conversations or communities you need to be a part of? When people are recommending your brand to others, are you recognizing and rewarding them in any way? Furthermore, how are you amplifying those recommendations? Capitalizing on these opportunities to create connections and inspire advocacy from your satisfied customers will help keep your brand front and center, all while building trust that your products and services can play a role in one of life's major moments.
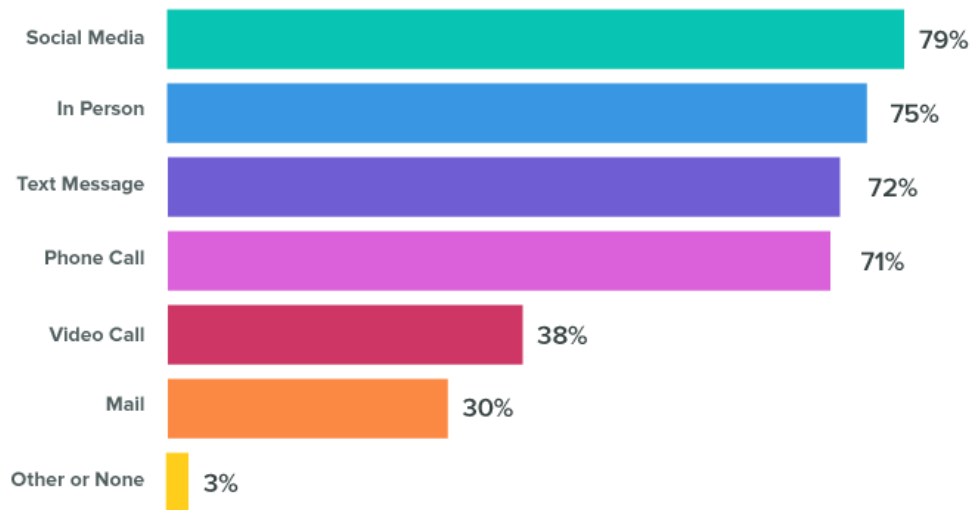
With This Brand, I Thee Wed: Acknowledging the Role Our Favorite Products Play in Life Events

So we know that consumers are turning to their social networks for recommendations, especially in preparation for major life events where stakes are high. Trust is a must. But once the milestone or moment finally takes place, are they returning to social to share their experience? According to our data, 79% of consumers say they've used social to share a life milestone with their network, compared to 75% who have shared in person, 72% who have texted and 71% who picked up the phone.

## How People Share Life Milestones With Their Friends & Family
Q4 2017

Method	Percentage
Social Media	79%
In Person	75%
Text Message	72%
Phone Call	71%
Video Call	38%
Mail	30%
Other or None	3%

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Of course "social" means different platforms to different people, so where specifically are people most likely to share? Of people who had previously shared a life milestone on social, 94% said Facebook was their platform of choice, followed by Instagram (39%) and Snapchat (27%). One reason you see more posts about these big life events on Facebook is because Facebook wants you to—the platform's News Feed Algorithm includes the boosting of posts where the word "congratulations" appears in the comments. The move was part of an ongoing effort to provide users with the most relevant, engaging feed.

Preferred Social Platform for Sharing Life Milestones

Q4 2017

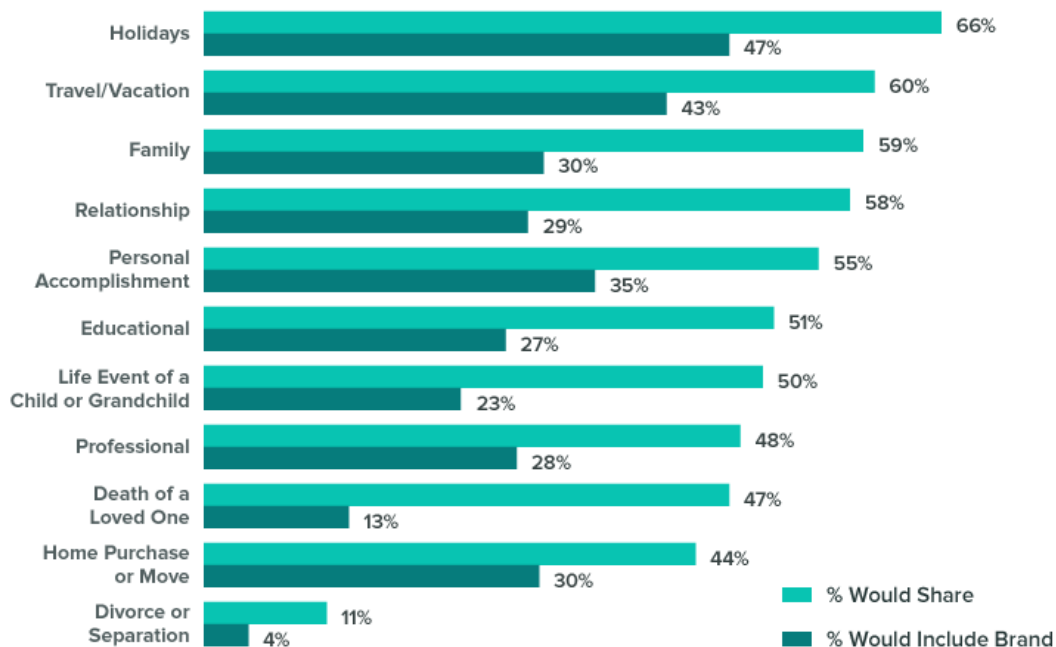| Platform	
Facebook	94%
Instagram	39%
Snapchat	27%
Twitter	22%
Youtube	14%
Pinterest	9%
LinkedIn	6%
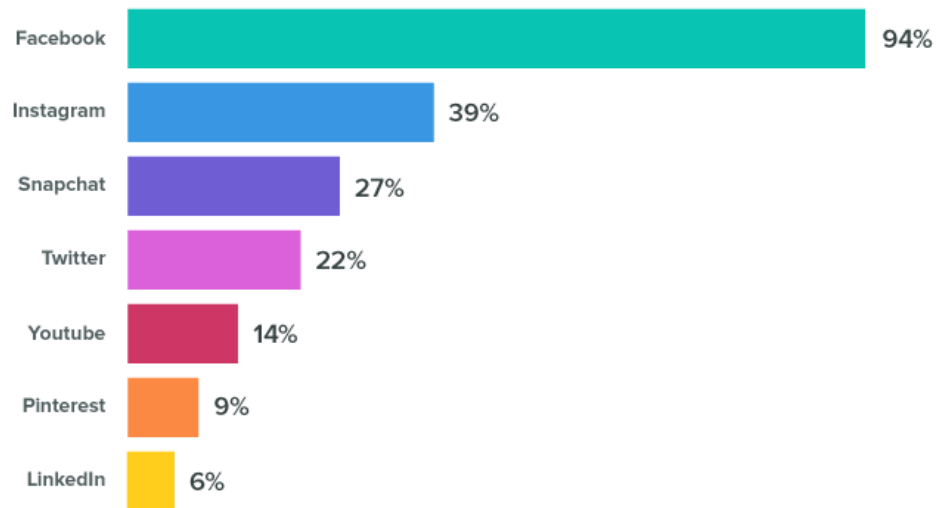
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When breaking out sharing by generations, it appears that Millennials are slightly less likely than Baby Boomers and Gen Xers to share on Facebook (92% vs. 97%). Instagram and Snapchat make significant gains among Millennials, with 53% of this generation saying they would use Instagram to share a milestone compared to 25% of other generations, and 42% saying they would use Snapchat compared to just 12% of other generations.

So what type of milestones are most prevalently shared on social? While people may assume that most social announcements are celebrations or #humblebrags, people aren't only sharing the Pinterest-perfect or "Insta-worthy" moments in their lives. The joyful moments are important and topped the list with 66% of people saying they'd post about holiday celebrations, followed by travel or vacation milestones (60%), family milestones (59%) and relationship milestones (58%). But nearly half—47% of people—said they've shared a difficult milestone—the death of a loved one—on social. While 55% of Baby Boomers and 47% of Gen Xers would share this milestone on social, only 43% of Millennials said they would. In fact, Millennials were more likely to post about almost every milestone than their Baby Boomer and Gen X counterparts—except this one.

Types of Milestones Consumers Would Share on Social Media & When They're Most Likely to Mention a Brand

Q4 2017

Milestone	% Would Share	% Would Include Brand
Holidays	66%	47%
Travel/Vacation	60%	43%
Family	59%	30%
Relationship	58%	29%
Personal Accomplishment	55%	35%
Educational	51%	27%
Life Event of a Child or Grandchild	50%	23%
Professional	48%	28%
Death of a Loved One	47%	13%
Home Purchase or Move	44%	30%
Divorce or Separation	11%	4%

■ % Would Share
■ % Would Include Brand

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When we examine which life milestones people are most likely to mention a brand while sharing, celebratory milestones come out on top: 47% say they'd include a brand in posts about holiday celebrations, 43% in a travel/vacation milestone and 35% when sharing a personal accomplishment. However, nearly 1 in 3 (29%) people say they'd incorporate a brand in even more intimate moments like engagements or weddings, family milestones like having a baby (30%) and posts about buying a home or relocating (30%).

Millennials were more likely than older generations to recognize brands across the board. In particular, they were 48% more likely than older generations to include a brand in a post about a personal accomplishment.

Sprout Stance:

These special moments all share one important thing in common: they're all highly emotional. While some brands may not feel their product or service naturally lends itself to this narrative, understanding those emotions, their role and the impact they have on the full lifecycle of significant life events gives brands the necessary insight they need to find—and even create—a relevant space for themselves in that conversation. It's the sentiment around these life events that becomes the opportunity. One of the best ways to understand consumers' natural behaviors and how they're already talking about your brand is through social listening. The insights derived from the world's largest, most open and accessible focus group—social media—can inform brand content that has a much greater potential to resonate with your audience by leveraging the ways they're already acting and engaging on social.

Mint, the personal budgeting software, used the inherent emotion in making your dreams come true for its recent Instagram contest, #MyMintMoment. Mint asked users to share photos of the milestones they were finally able to achieve (like buying a car, a new home, or getting married) as a result of good financial planning using the hashtag #MyMintMoment for a chance to win $1,000. By looking to the big picture results of day-to-day product use, Mint connected a somewhat dispassionate product with a deeply emotional touchpoint. This contest tapped an existing consumer behavior—celebrating major milestones on social—to authentically demonstrate what Mint's product could enable consumers to achieve, without the brand doing any of the talking.
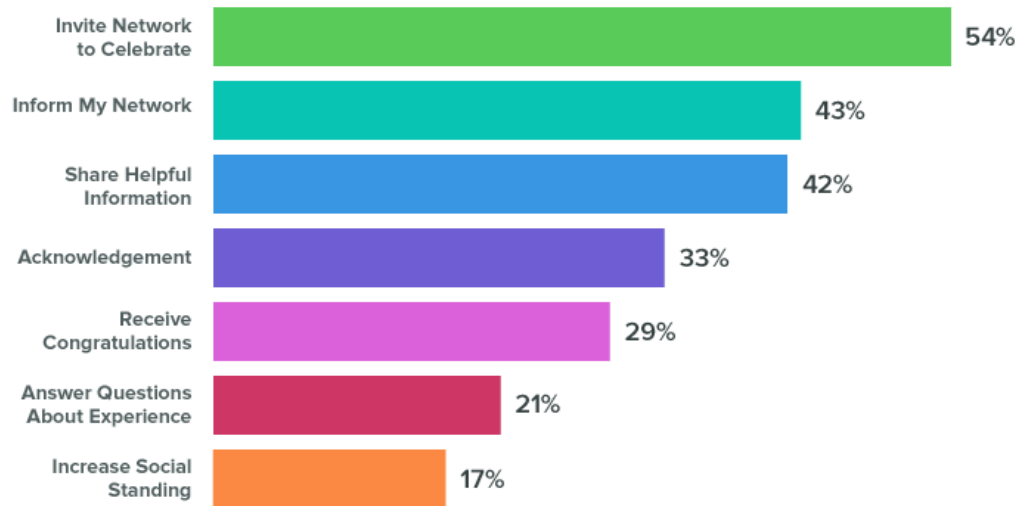
For the People, By the People: How UGC Transforms Consumers into Creators

The lifecycle of consumer to creator begins with asking for recommendations and ends with making them. Those same people who once tapped their peers for product and service suggestions will eventually develop their own brand affinity. And when that affinity deepens to loyalty, that's when we see the milestone sharing and brand recommendations—even in the absence of a specific request.

After digging a bit deeper into the overall motivations behind sharing a life milestone on social, we found that more than half (54%) of consumers want their network to celebrate with them, while 43% post purely to inform and 42% want to share because they want to provide helpful information to others.

Why Consumers Share Life Milestones on Social Media
Q4 2017

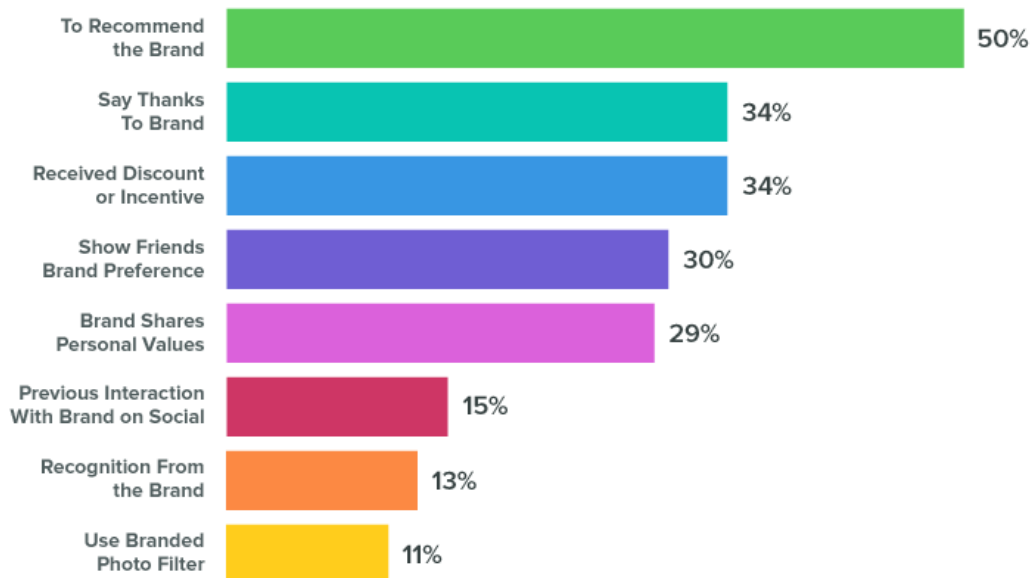|	
Invite Network to Celebrate	54%
Inform My Network	43%
Share Helpful Information	42%
Acknowledgement	33%
Receive Congratulations	29%
Answer Questions About Experience	21%
Increase Social Standing	17%

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But as might be expected, Millennials demonstrate a few key differences in what fuels their desire to share. Millennials were much more likely to want to tell their story and be acknowledged (41%) than members of older generations (27%). Additionally, Millennials wanted a specific social response from their network: recognition and congratulations (likes, comments) than older generations (36% vs. 23%).

Seeing as though most of the milestones people share on social are highly personal, what would motivate them to include a brand in their posts? Half of consumers (50%) do so to recommend that brand to others. One in three (34%) want to thank or recognize that brand for being part of their life event—and for Millennials, the desire to share that gratitude increases to 41%.

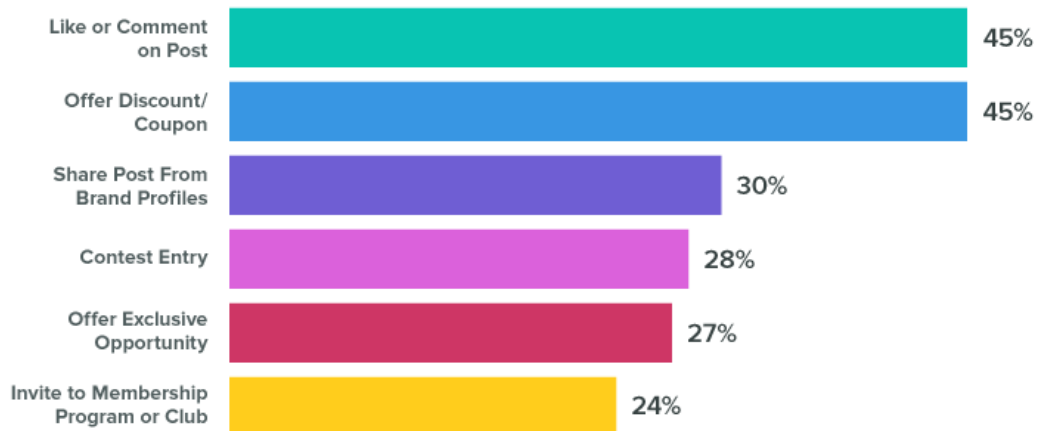## Why Consumers Would Include a Brand in Social Posts About Life Milestones

Q4 2017

To Recommend the Brand	50%
Say Thanks To Brand	34%
Received Discount or Incentive	34%
Show Friends Brand Preference	30%
Brand Shares Personal Values	29%
Previous Interaction With Brand on Social	15%
Recognition From the Brand	13%
Use Branded Photo Filter	11%

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And while some of the motivation might stem from incentives—34% of consumers said that a discount, free product or contest entry would motivate them to include a brand—some want to show brand affinity for other reasons. These include wanting friends and family to see them using a specific brand (30%) and because the brand's values match their personal beliefs (29%). This shows an opportunity for brands to take a more public stance on their values and issues to encourage this deeper level of social engagement.

When consumers mention brands in their social posts about life milestones, 45% want the brand to engage in return by liking or commenting on that content—and yes, 45% are hoping for a discount or deal. But one statistic that jumped out was the 30% of all consumers who want the brand to share their post from the brand's profile.

Response Consumers Want When Mentioning Brands in Social Posts About Life Milestones

Q4 2017

Like or Comment on Post	45%
Offer Discount/ Coupon	45%
Share Post From Brand Profiles	30%
Contest Entry	28%
Offer Exclusive Opportunity	27%
Invite to Membership Program or Club	24%

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This desire to have their content shared by brands is highest among Millennials: 41% would want the brand to share their post from its profile, compared to only 23% of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers who'd want the same. Consumers know that brands often encourage and share content from their fans, and it appears that having your post chosen is an exciting motivation to mention or tag a brand when experiencing a significant event.

Sprout Stance:

With everything we've learned about purchase and recommendation behaviors on social, it's not a question of whether UGC is right for your brand, it's how to do it right. UGC fails when it feels forced, and it's not as simple as just asking your fans to share photos with a branded hashtag. Brands must take great care in ensuring that their UGC campaigns are customer-centric—celebrating people and their content, not just products. Ask consumers for behaviors or actions your audience is already committing on social, and make sure the product or service tie-in so tight it doesn't need an explanation.

When Walgreens was looking for a way to connect with consumers during graduation season, they created a campaign that checked off virtually every one of the aforementioned boxes. The company asked consumers to share Throwback Thursday (#TBT) photos, an already well-established behavior, of their favorite grad with the hashtag **#tbtWalgreens** for a chance to win a $100 Walgreens Photo gift card. The call to action was not unreasonable as consumers were already regularly sharing their "tbt" photos—or even just baby photos in general—and tied perfectly into the sentimental reflections associated with a loved one's transition into the next stage of their life. The contest prize was also a subtle, natural product tie-in for Walgreens' photo services. Walgreens didn't ask anything more of their consumers than what they'd already been doing, and made sure that their brand took a backseat to the content—which took the form of nostalgic photos, family storytelling and sharing poignant memories from their audience.

Industry UGC & Engagement Trends

Engagement is a key component in encouraging UGC. As we saw in the data above, people want likes, comments and shares when they mention brands in their content. But UGC isn't all roses. Consumers often reach out with customer service issues or less than positive experiences to resolve.

Every time your brand interacts with a member of their audience on social, you have the opportunity to leave a positive impression that could lead to greater brand loyalty. So how do different industries compare when it comes to that social responsiveness?

The list below ranks 15 key industries, their rates of inbound messages requiring a response and their actual performance in terms of social responsiveness. As a refresher, here's what each metric means:

- Response Rate: the percent of consumer messages needing a response that actually get one
- Response Time: how long brands take (in hours) to respond to the consumer messages that need a response
- % Needs Response: how many messages brands receive on social that require a response (based on Sprout's algorithm, which analyzes identifiers such as question marks, @mentions and keywords)
- Posts per Replies: how many promotional messages brands publish compared to how many responses they give to their audience
- Brand Engagement Ranking: how responsive brands are to consumers
- Consumer Engagement Ranking: how vocal consumers are with brands

Brand & Consumer Index Spotlight by Industry
Q3 2017

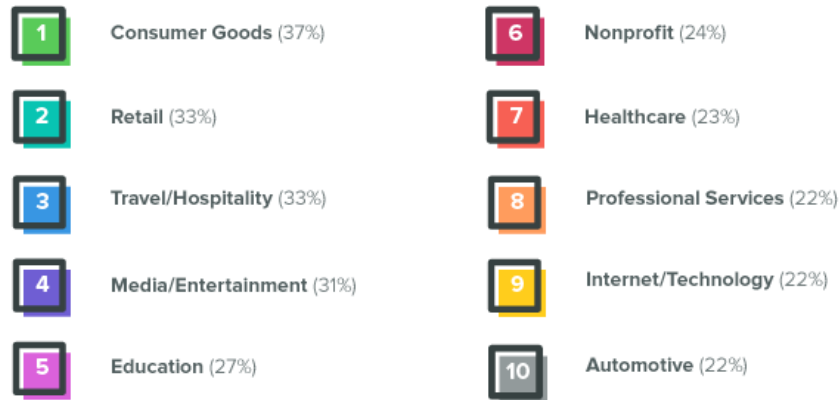| Industry	Avg. Response Rate	Avg. Response Time (Hours)	Avg. % Messages Needing Response	Avg. Posts per Replies	Brand Engagement Ranking	Consumer Engagement Ranking
Automotive	11%	13.2	25%	13	#8	#2
Banking/Finance	13%	11.7	19%	14	#3	#8
Consumer Goods	14%	15.2	24%	13	#4	#9
Education	7%	9.9	25%	22	#13	#11
Government	8%	11.6	29%	24	#14	#6
Healthcare	9%	12.2	30%	18	#12	#5
Internet/Technology	11%	12.1	23%	21	#5	#16
Marketing/Advertising	11%	13.4	24%	17	#10	#14
Media/Entertainment	6%	10.5	26%	80	#16	#12
Nonprofit	7%	11.3	25%	23	#15	#13
Professional Services	9%	11.3	24%	21	#11	#10
Real Estate	10%	11.0	32%	32	#7	#7
Retail	16%	11.3	28%	17	#2	#1
Travel/Hospitality	12%	13.5	25%	11	#6	#4
Utilities	18%	9.2	22%	16	#1	#3

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Some of the most engaged industries topping this Index are those that have the most influence on consumers' day-to-day activities—for example, utilities and banking/finance—as well as major life moments like setting up a new home or taking a loan for a substantial purchase. Yet for the most part, consumers are more likely to incorporate other industries in their milestones on social: The top three were CPG (37%), retail and travel/hospitality (tied at 33%).

Industries Consumers Are Most Likely to Include in Social Posts About Life Milestones

Q4 2017

1	Consumer Goods (37%)	6	Nonprofit (24%)
2	Retail (33%)	7	Healthcare (23%)
3	Travel/Hospitality (33%)	8	Professional Services (22%)
4	Media/Entertainment (31%)	9	Internet/Technology (22%)
5	Education (27%)	10	Automotive (22%)

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A curious takeaway from this data is the increased likelihood of Millennials over their older counterparts to include brands in the following industries in their milestone posts: They're 81% more likely than Gen Xers and Baby Boomers to include education, 105% more likely to include banking/finance and 103% more likely to include real estate.

While these industries might seem less obvious in terms of easy UGC territory, it's no secret Millennials face bigger financial hurdles related to these industries compared to previous generations. So when they win in that space, be it by paying off student loans or buying their first home, they may be more likely to celebrate with the brand on social. It's a sign that even the least likely brands can find and engage in this type of conversation—they just need to identify the right audience.

Sprout Stance:

While high quality, responsive customer service is key for brands to satisfy their customers on social, some of the most engaged industries aren't necessarily the first to come to mind when consumers are celebrating a personal milestone. But if you go a level deeper than surface-level perception, these industries' products and services are key to some significant milestones: Seamless utility setup makes a new house a home; shipping companies deliver meaningful gifts to celebrate major holidays and occasions. So how else can more "behind-the-scenes" brands engage with their audience in a way that keeps them top of mind and relevant during those special moments?

First and foremost, find out how your product or service uniquely benefits your audience during a highly charged life experience and then, to put it simply, get out of the way. Give consumers the space and platform they need to authentically share their stories and create a genuine, emotional tie to your brand. **The UPS Store** knows that consumers aren't going to engage with an Instagram page full of packaging and shipping supply photos. Cardboard boxes are not inherently emotional—but the stories of the people who need and use them are. When the store identified the fundamental emotionality of starting your own business—as well as the roles their products and services play in the execution of these entrepreneurial endeavors—they began asking customers to share details about their small business using the hashtag **#TheUPSStoreCustomer**, with great results. Instead of forcing a focus on their product and services, they focused on real people and how those product and services benefit and empower them in their lives' biggest endeavors.

As social media's role as internet time capsule grows, so do the opportunities for brands to connect with consumers during some of life's most significant, emotional moments. Whether it's polling their peers for their latest recommendations, or shouting the praises of their most trusted products, today's consumers are already recognizing and sharing the role their favorite brands play in their lives' major moments and milestones. And the more brands can learn how to tap into the motivations and emotions behind that behavior, the better their chances of connecting with their audiences and turning consumers into loyal, lifelong advocates.

About the Data

The Sprout Social Index is a report compiled and released by Sprout Social. All referenced data is based on 357,000 public social profiles (171,000 Facebook; 134,000 Twitter; 52,000 Instagram) of continually active accounts between Q3 2016 and Q3 2017. More than 5.7 billion messages sent and received during that time were analyzed for the purposes of this report.

Some data may have shifted from the last Sprout Social Index report due to a shift in the social profiles analyzed; however, all overarching trends remain consistent. Industry classifications were based on LinkedIn industry categories. In some cases, closely related industries were merged into a single overarching industry. All messages analyzed that were considered casual mentions or not in need of a response were excluded from engagement, response rate and response time calculations with the intention of eliminating noise. Analysis of which messages required attention was done using Sprout's proprietary technologies. Response time and response rate calculations were done using Sprout's Engagement Reporting technology found in the Sprout Social product.

This survey was conducted by Survata, an independent research firm in San Francisco. Survata interviewed 1220 online respondents between September 20, 2017 and September 21, 2017. For further information, visit www.survata.com.

For questions about the Index data, please contact pr@sproutsocial.com.