



RESEARCH REPORT  
SPRING 2025



# 2024-2025 NAIS State of Independent School Marketing

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*Insights and tips provided by Metric Marketing*

# About NAIS

The National Association of Independent Schools provides services to more than 2,000 schools and associations of schools in the United States and abroad, including more than 1,700 nonprofit, private K-12 schools in the U.S. that are self-determining in mission and program and are governed by independent boards. For more information, visit [www.nais.org](http://www.nais.org).

NAIS conducts research among schools nationally and then provides you with targeted, digested reports you can use to evaluate your own practices. Our research clearinghouse also identifies external research relevant to independent schools and helps you understand how to use the findings in your work.

See the full suite of NAIS research reports at [www.nais.org](http://www.nais.org).

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# About Metric Marketing

Metric Marketing is a digitally-focused agency that specializes in enrollment marketing for private schools across North America. Metric Marketing helps schools strengthen all aspects of their digital ecosystem from enrollment campaigns to websites, social media strategy and prospect communications, using better data and insights to prove the value of school marketing efforts. Learn more about Metric Marketing at [metricmarketing.ca](http://metricmarketing.ca).

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# Executive Summary

When NAIS first began surveying marketing professionals in independent schools in 2011, the marketing landscape looked much different. Now, schools must rely heavily on digital marketing to boost enrollment and keep up with competition. NAIS has once again partnered with Metric Marketing to survey independent school marketing professionals to better understand their work, with extra focus on digital strategies, software, and tools. In particular, NAIS aimed to understand where schools were struggling and to provide insights from Metric's marketing professionals.

About two-thirds of responding independent schools reported having a dedicated, centralized marketing team, while 30% have a single person in charge of marketing. Six out of 10 have an overarching communications department that handles marketing, and about seven out of 10 of the chief marketers report directly to the head of school. Over half report on website analytics, and more than four out of 10 report on campaign performance and customer relationship management (CRM). About two-thirds of marketing teams work closely with the advancement team but are part of separate teams. Virtually all marketing teams surveyed run advertising, school websites, public relations, and publications. To handle all of this, the typical independent school employs three or fewer full-time staff with marketing responsibilities, although the number of staff increases with school size and department budget. Fifty-four percent of all schools have annual marketing budgets of more than \$70,000, and 28% have budgets over \$120,000. Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) received a good or a great deal of support from their head of school.

Marketing staff had a wide range of goals. The top two were growing enrollment and building or strengthening the school's brand, with over half of respondents selecting these two goals. The most common challenges, alternatively, were identifying three unique advantages that competitors would struggle to match and promoting awareness of the school among audiences. Despite digital marketing becoming more prominent, schools continued to use traditional marketing tactics. Virtually all schools used word of mouth, and seven out of 10 used advertisements in magazines. In-person events were by far the most effective traditional marketing tactic, followed by school fairs. Individual tours and group open houses were the most effective admissions touchpoints.

While these traditional channels are effective, many schools have been increasingly turning to digital marketing. More than a third of schools allocated 30% or less of their overall media budget to digital channels, and over a quarter allocated more than 60%. These schools are leveraging their staff's expertise with digital marketing. Two-thirds of marketing staff reported that they had been using digital marketing for a while, and nearly all are familiar with SEO (search engine optimization). However, four out of 10 staff members are not familiar with digital marketing analysis.

Schools used a variety of digital channels. Most popular were social media, organic searches (searches that find results not prompted by ads or sponsored content), and paid advertising. Over three-fifths of respondents (67%) were satisfied that they were reaching the right applicant pool for some grades, and 27% were satisfied with their reach for all grade levels. Their satisfaction with the reach of their digital marketing speaks to the effectiveness of the strategies. Two-thirds found their digital marketing to be somewhat (35%) or generally (37%) effective, with social media, organic searches, and paid advertising being the most effective digital channels. For enrollment management through digital marketing, more than four out of 10 schools worked with external agencies, while over a quarter had implemented a full digital marketing capability within their school. Almost half of the schools are satisfied with their conversion goals but would like to fine-tune them for better accuracy. The top two challenges about digital marketing were measuring its effectiveness and knowing how to convert clicks into inquiries.

Many schools used paid advertising to better promote their school. Half of schools allocated \$25,000 or less to paid advertising from their media budget, and almost six out of 10 staff were familiar with using paid search engine marketing, such as Google Adwords (now Google Ads). The most popular paid advertising was on Facebook and Instagram, but the most effective were Google Adwords and Niche.com. Half of staff estimated that 25% or less of their digital traffic came from paid digital advertisements.

Schools used several different online platforms and had different approaches to their websites. Over a third used Blackbaud for email marketing, and others reported using Veracross or Finalsite. Three out of 10 marketing staff also used Blackbaud for admissions software, while others used Veracross or FACTS. Just a third of marketing staff reported using a CRM tool to automate follow-ups with prospective families, with popular platforms including HubSpot, Finalsite, Veracross, and Blackbaud.

Four out of 10 staff reported that they were not using AI in their marketing efforts. Of those who do use AI, 45% used it for content creation and curation.

Schools' views of their websites also varied. Almost three-quarters of schools found their website to be successful or very successful in attracting prospective families and encouraging them to apply. This success rate may be attributed to schools keeping their websites up-to-date. Over half of schools consider updating their websites every three years or more often. About half have found that visits to their websites from organic searches have increased compared to the previous year.

Branding is likewise a crucial tool for independent schools, increasing familiarity among target audiences and improving name recognition. About six out of 10 schools reported allocating 20% or less of their overall media budget to branding, and about third had engaged in a branding project within the past two years. A quarter of schools had not engaged with branding in seven years or more.

Schools have employed a variety of strategies for promoting their brand. The most popular strategies included developing a strong online presence, highlighting success stories, and using paid advertising. Schools incorporated their brand into their website, printed material, advertisements, and newsletters.

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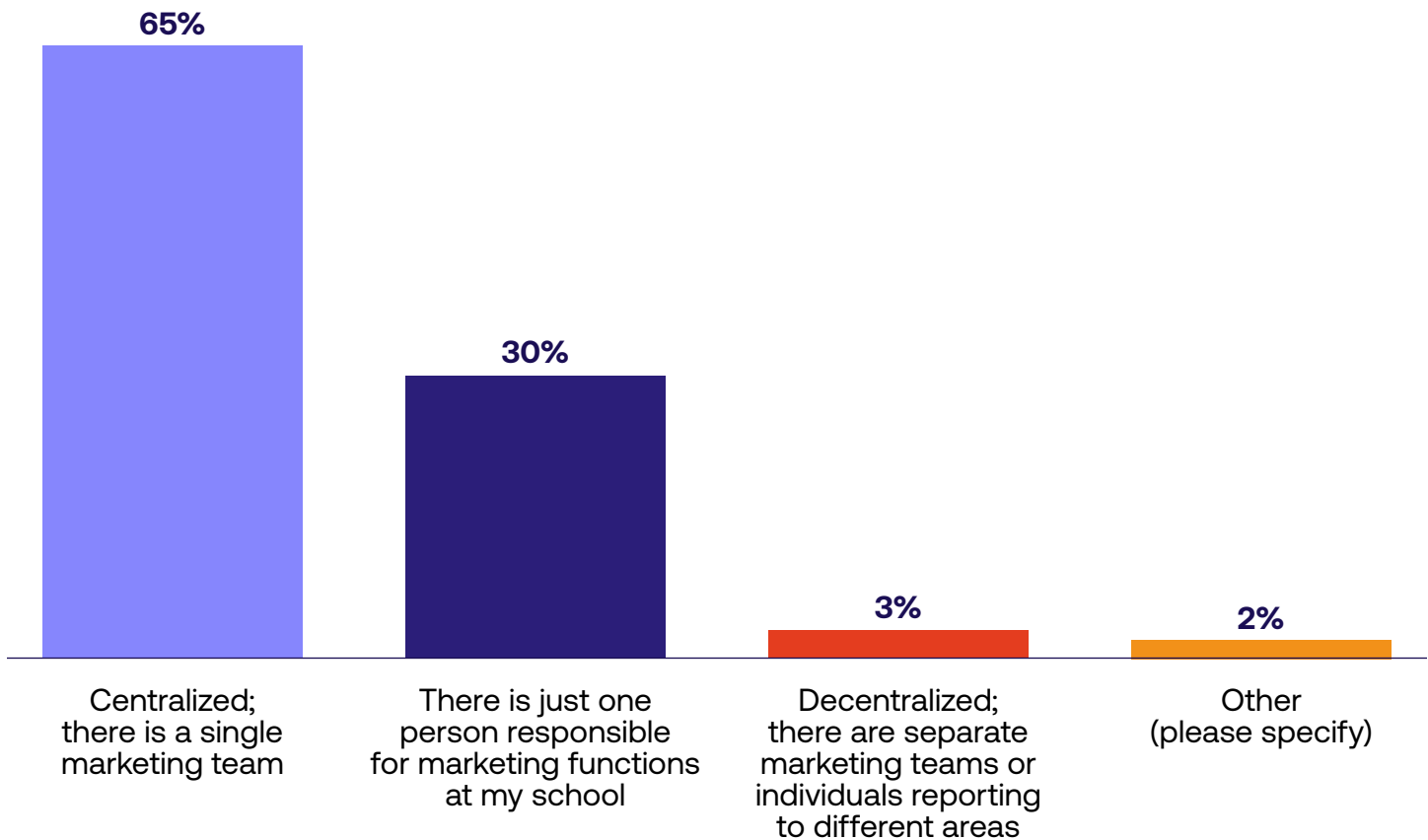
# Chapter

# 1

# Structure and Size

More than six out of 10 (65%) of responding independent schools reported that they had a centralized, single marketing team. Just under a third (30%) reported having just one person responsible for all marketing functions. Very few schools (just 3%) reported having a decentralized marketing structure, with separate teams or individuals reporting to different areas. These numbers are similar to those from 2021, when 64% reported a centralized structure, 29% had just one individual responsible, and 3% reported a decentralized structure.

How is marketing structured in your school?



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## OTHER ANSWERS

- Marketing and Communications team
- Marketing is shared between Communications and Admissions or Advancement
- Marketing is centralized except for Athletics, which handles its own marketing

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

These numbers differ among different types of independent schools. For instance, single-sex schools are more likely to report having a centralized marketing structure, with 93% of boys' schools and 70% of girls' schools reporting this structure.

Well over half (58%) of schools with under 201 students reported having a single person responsible for marketing, which is in line with these schools often having fewer staff. Schools with more than 700 students, on the other hand, were much less likely to have just one person responsible for marketing. Just 11% of schools this size reported having one marketing employee compared to 83% that had a centralized team.

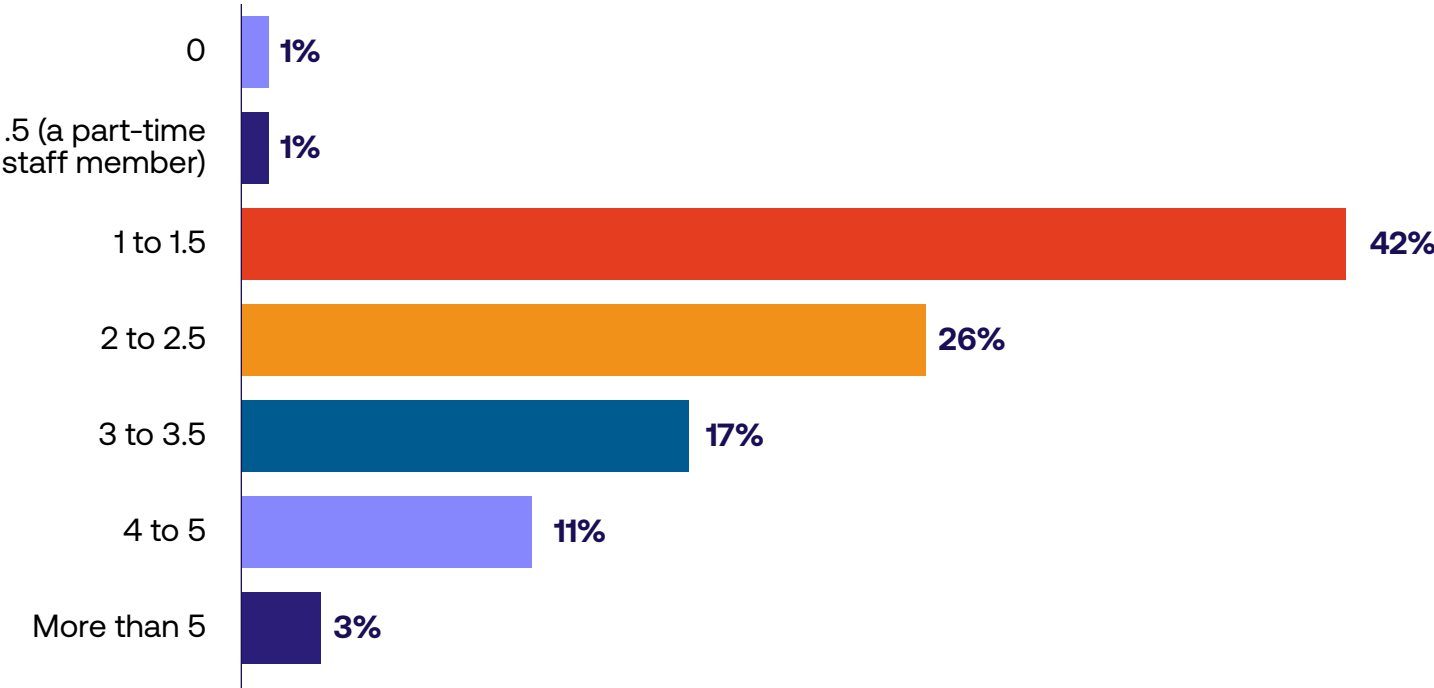
Secondary schools were less likely (11%) to have just one person responsible for marketing than elementary schools (49%) and elementary-secondary schools (24%), and schools of all three grade levels were unlikely to have a decentralized marketing structure. Schools with a boarding component were much more likely to have a centralized marketing structure (82%) than just one marketing employee (13%), while day schools mirrored overall numbers more closely.

	Centralized, there is a single marketing team	There is just one person responsible for marketing functions at my school	Decentralized; there are separate marketing teams or individuals reporting to different areas	Other
<b>School Gender</b>				
Boys	93%	0%	7%	0%
Girls	70%	22%	7%	0%
Coed	63%	32%	3%	2%
<b>School Size</b>				
Under 201	34%	58%	6%	2%
201-300	51%	46%	3%	0%
301-500	65%	32%	3%	0%
501-700	74%	18%	2%	6%
701+	83%	11%	4%	1%
<b>Grade Level</b>				
Elementary	44%	49%	5%	1%
Secondary	83%	11%	7%	0%
Elementary-Secondary	71%	24%	2%	3%
<b>School Type</b>				
Schools with boarding component	82%	13%	5%	0%
Day schools	62%	33%	3%	2%



Over two-thirds of schools (68%) reported having one to two and a half full-time-equivalent staff working in marketing. Generally, larger schools had more full-time marketing staff than smaller schools. About 68% of schools with more than 700 students reported having three or more full-time-equivalent staff, while 72% of schools with 200 students or fewer reported having one full-time-equivalent staff or one full-time-equivalent staff and a part-time-equivalent staff.

How many full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff work in marketing at your school?



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**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Balancing a team of two or three individuals with different strengths is a great way to widen your school’s reach, distribute workload, and foster skill-sharing between teammates. If you’re considering growing your team, focus on areas that will complement your team’s skill set. For example, if your current strengths include copywriting, editing, and oversight of the school magazine, consider growing your team in digital strategy. If you have a talent gap and hiring additional staff isn’t feasible, consider partnering with an outside resource that can fill your team’s skill gaps, collaborate on priority projects, and share valuable industry insights.

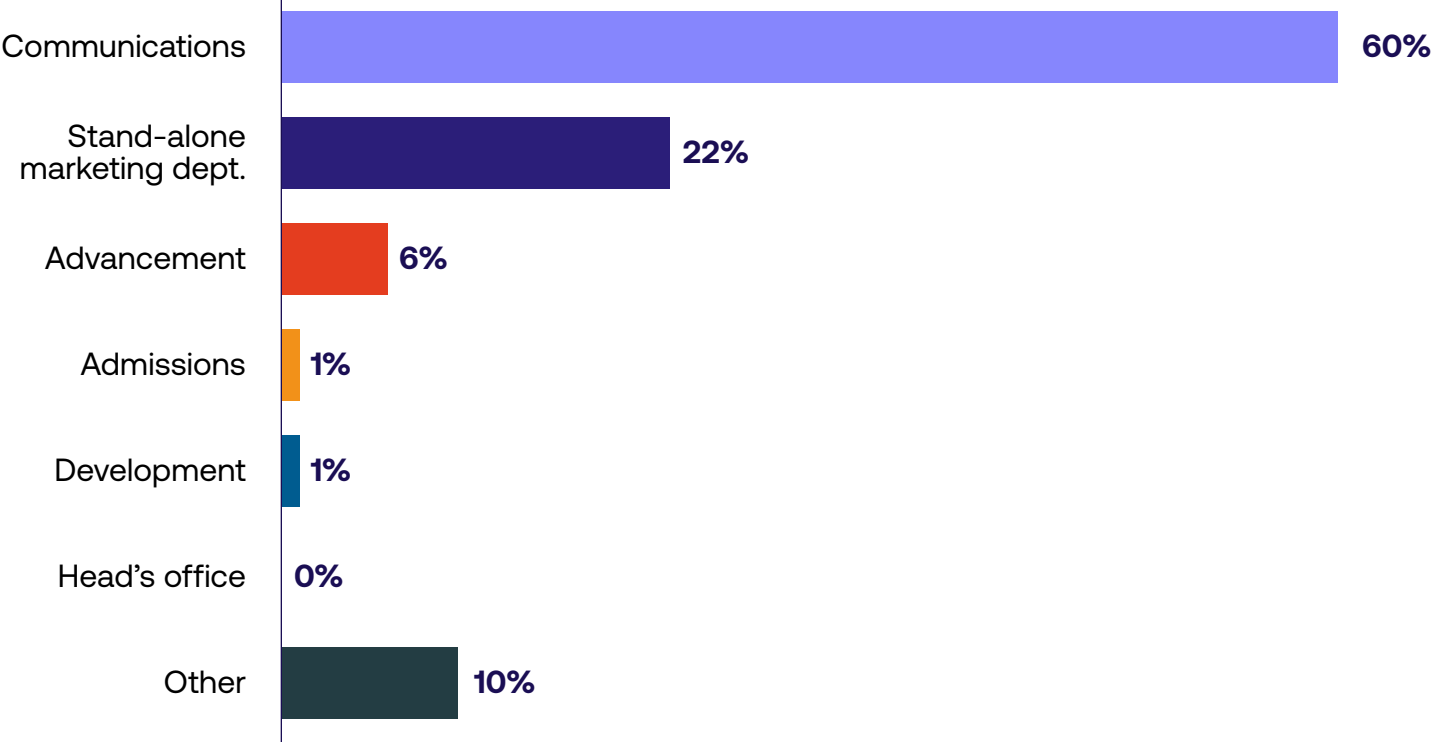
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Schools with secondary grade levels also tended to have more staffers working in marketing than elementary schools.

	0	.5 (part-time staff member)	1-1.5	2-2.5	3-3.5	4-5	More than 5
<b>School Size</b>							
Under 201	4%	4%	72%	15%	6%	0%	0%
201-300	0%	3%	59%	23%	15%	0%	0%
301-500	1%	0%	45%	36%	11%	6%	1%
501-700	0%	0%	32%	39%	16%	8%	5%
701+	0%	0%	19%	13%	31%	29%	8%
<b>Grade Level</b>							
Elementary	3%	3%	66%	21%	5%	2%	0%
Secondary	0%	0%	20%	28%	24%	13%	15%
Elementary-Secondary	0%	0%	35%	28%	21%	15%	2%

Most independent schools kept their marketing functions within the communications department (60%) or a stand-alone marketing department (22%). Very few housed marketing within advancement (6%), admissions (1%), or development (1%). No schools reported that marketing was housed in the head's office.

Which department handles most of the functions of marketing in your school?



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**OTHER ANSWERS**

- Marketing and Communications Team
- External Affairs
- Admissions and/or Advancement

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** School communications directors often wear multiple hats, including functioning as marketing directors. Both communications and marketing roles can share important areas of expertise, such as messaging to key audiences, content creation that reinforces the school’s mission and values, and strategic planning.

Marketing responsibilities focus those efforts—and more—on attracting prospective families and tracking them from initial interest in a school through to enrollment. Often, both of these functions reside in one department and complement each other but require a wide range of skill sets to execute effectively.

If strengthening your digital marketing efforts is on your to-do list, center your team around analytics and strategy development, rather than deep expertise in one tactical marketing area. Focusing on metrics related to engagement with your website and social media will empower you to make informed decisions and create impactful marketing strategies.

To achieve the most significant impact, it’s important that various departments within your school coordinate their efforts. While your admissions, advancement, and marketing teams may operate under separate budgets, they all share the overarching goal of growing your school. Everyone benefits from making decisions and building strategies together.

Two-thirds (66%) of schools reported that their marketing team and advancement office worked closely together but were not part of the same team. Just 11% reported that they operated as separate units, and 23% reported that they were part of the same department.

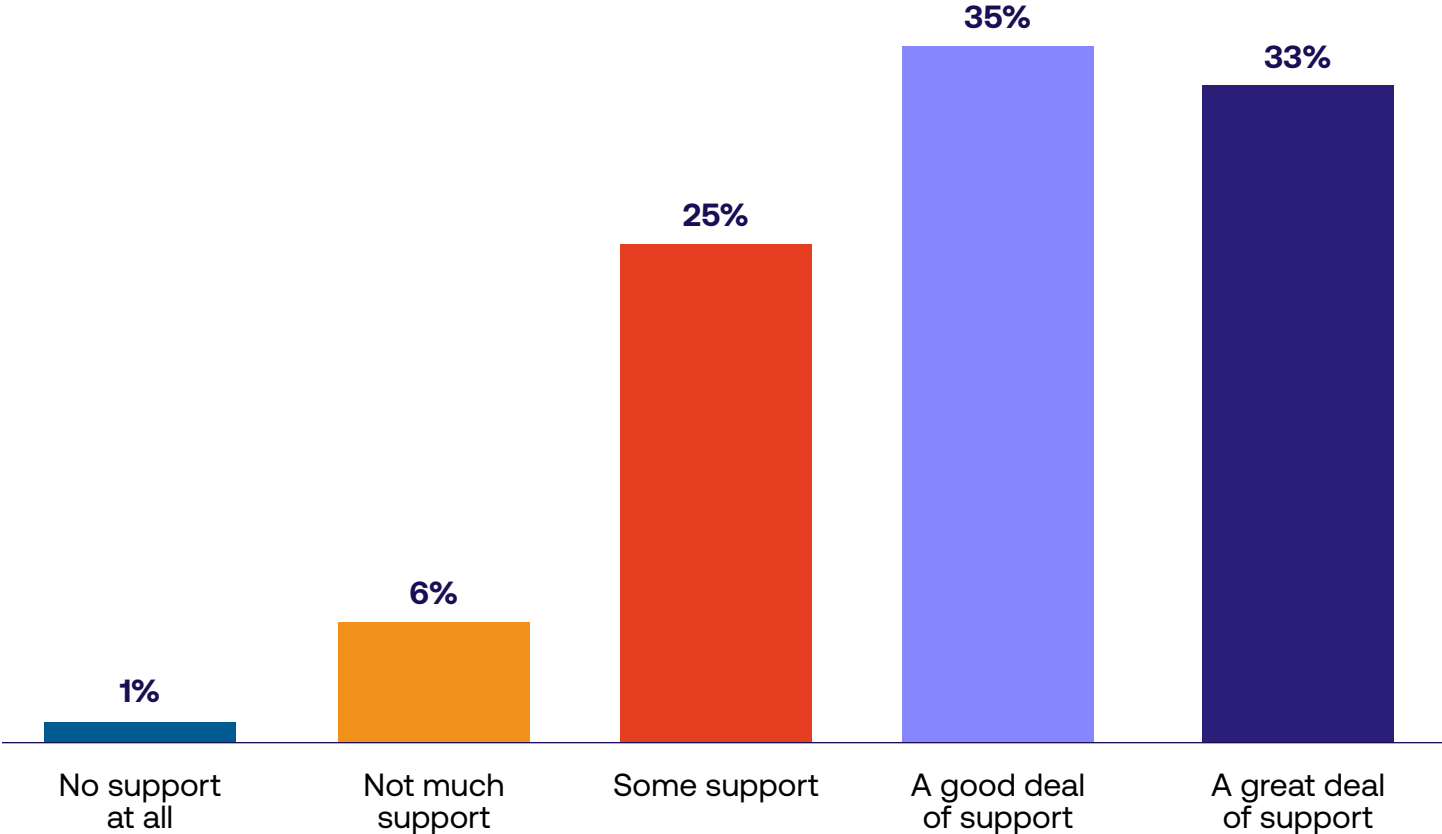
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

The relationship between advancement and marketing is affected by school size and grade level. A higher percentage of elementary schools and schools with fewer than 301 students reported that their marketing and advancement offices were integrated.

	They are integrated into the same department	They operate as two separate units	They work closely together but are not part of the same team
<b>School Size</b>			
Under 201	36%	13%	51%
201-300	36%	10%	54%
301-500	18%	11%	71%
501-700	21%	8%	70%
701+	17%	12%	71%
<b>Grade Level</b>			
Elementary	31%	10%	59%
Secondary	15%	11%	74%
Elementary-Secondary	21%	12%	68%

Most marketing staff reported receiving support from their heads of school. A third reported receiving a great deal of support, and 35% a good deal of support. Just 1% reported receiving no support at all. Marketing staff at small and large schools reported similar levels of support—45% of marketing staff at schools with fewer than 201 students and 40% of those at schools with more than 700 students reported receiving a great deal of support. Marketing staff at single-gender schools also reported receiving a great deal of support from their heads compared to coed schools (43% for boys’ schools and 52% for girls’ schools, compared to 31% of coed schools).

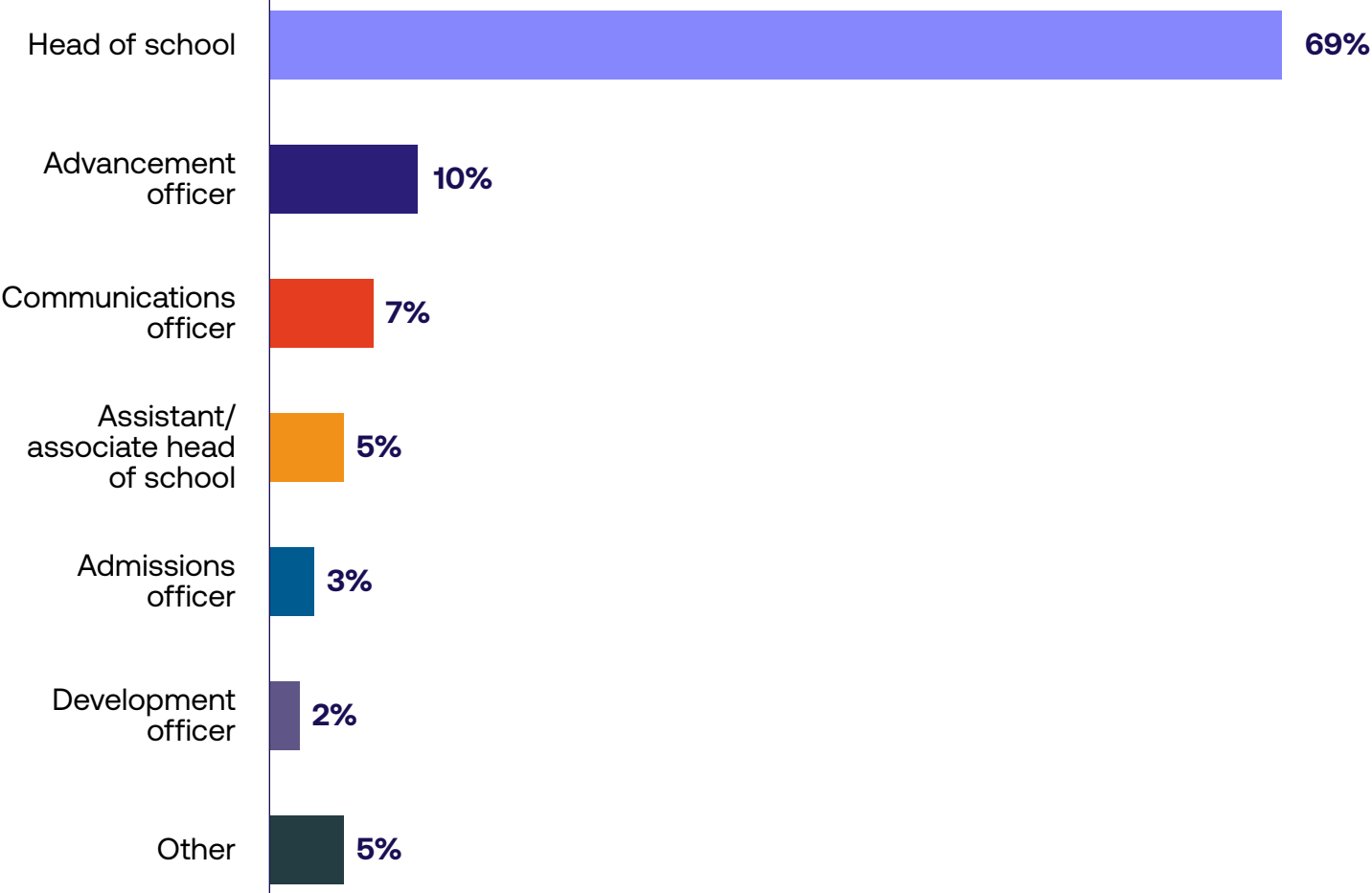
How much support do you receive from your head of school?



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Almost seven out of 10 (69%) of schools reported that their main staffer responsible for marketing reported directly to the head of school. Less common answers included the advancement officer (10%) and communications officer (7%). Girls' schools were especially likely to have their marketing employee report to the head of school, with 85% of girls' schools reporting this. There were few differences by school characteristics otherwise.

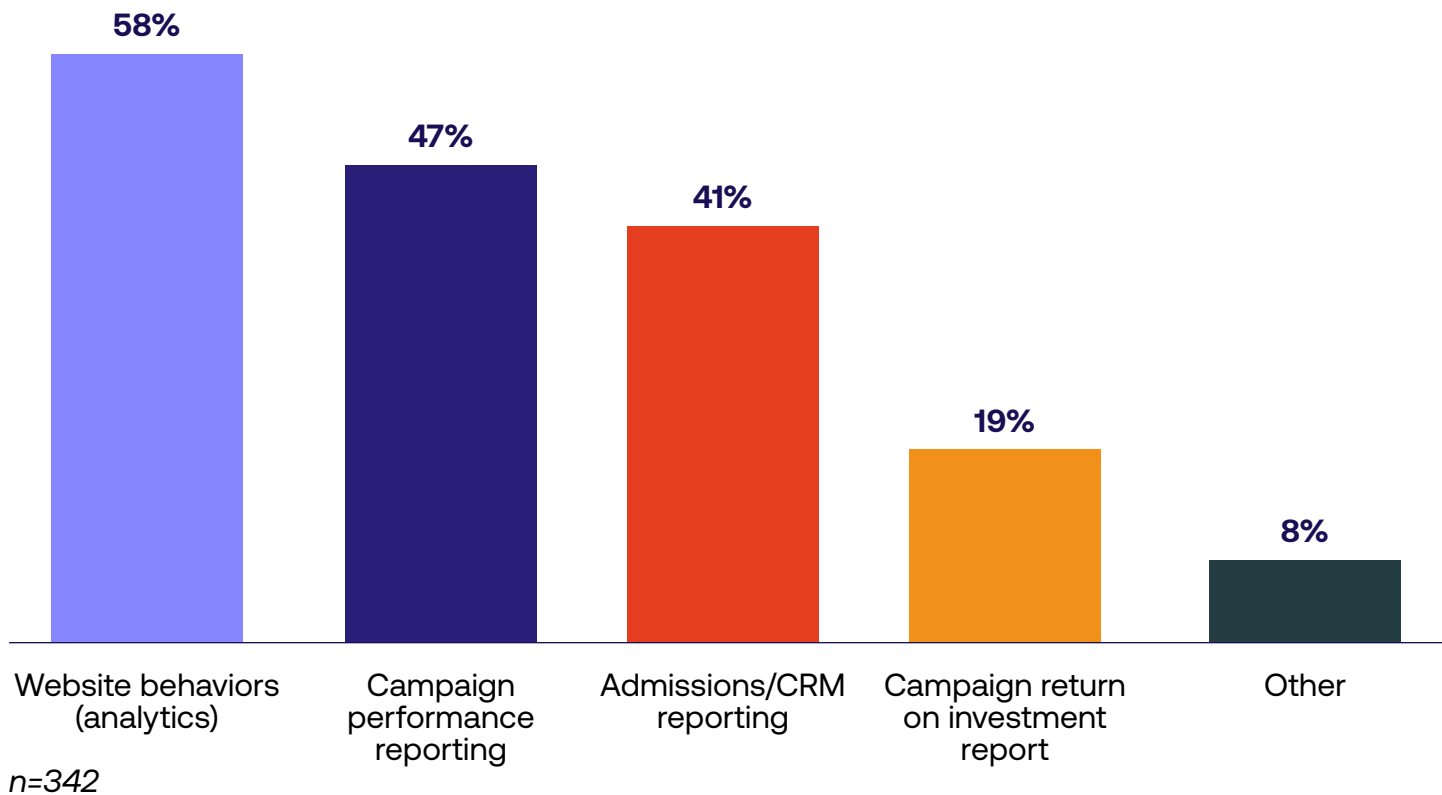
To whom does the main staffer responsible for marketing report directly in your school?



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When asked what kind of data marketing staff present to their head of school, more than half (58%) reported on website behaviors. Forty-seven percent reported on campaign performance, and 41% reported admissions/CRM data. Just 19% reported on campaign returns on investment (ROI). Other data presented to heads included marketing impacts, social media data, and various project updates.

What types of marketing data do you present to your head of school or leadership team?



**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Reporting information to your head of school can be daunting, but understanding what information is most important to share helps address the challenge. Heads of schools rely on marketing teams to provide data and insights that can inform leadership decisions, demonstrate return on investment, and help secure funding.

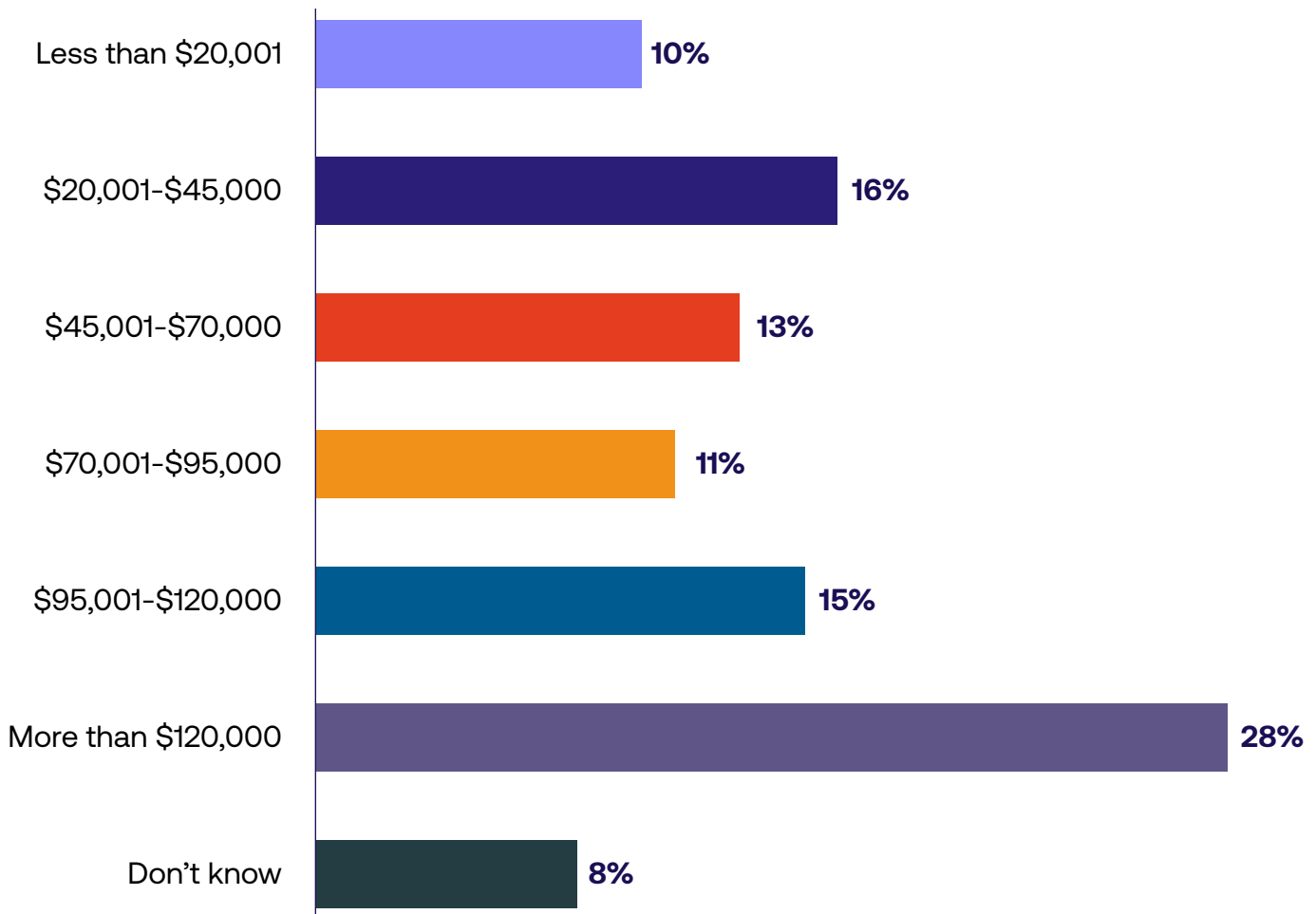
Marketing reporting needs to illustrate a family’s entire journey with the school, detailing all the components that work together to drive a conversion. Therefore, report on the conversion points along the family’s entire journey—from first hearing about your brand to taking an action deemed a conversion, such as inquiring, signing up for an open house, applying, and, ultimately, enrolling.

Additionally, providing a simplified ROI report can effectively inform your head of school and board members, who often have strong business backgrounds and can act as partners in improving the school’s overall ROI. For example, saying, “If we spend X amount across these platforms, the expected ROI will fall between Y and Z” can help clarify the potential benefits.

# Budget and Responsibilities

Over half (54%) of independent schools reported that their marketing budget (excluding salaries and media) was over \$70,000, with 28% reporting that their budget was over \$120,000.

What is the marketing budget at your school excluding salaries and media (advertising)?

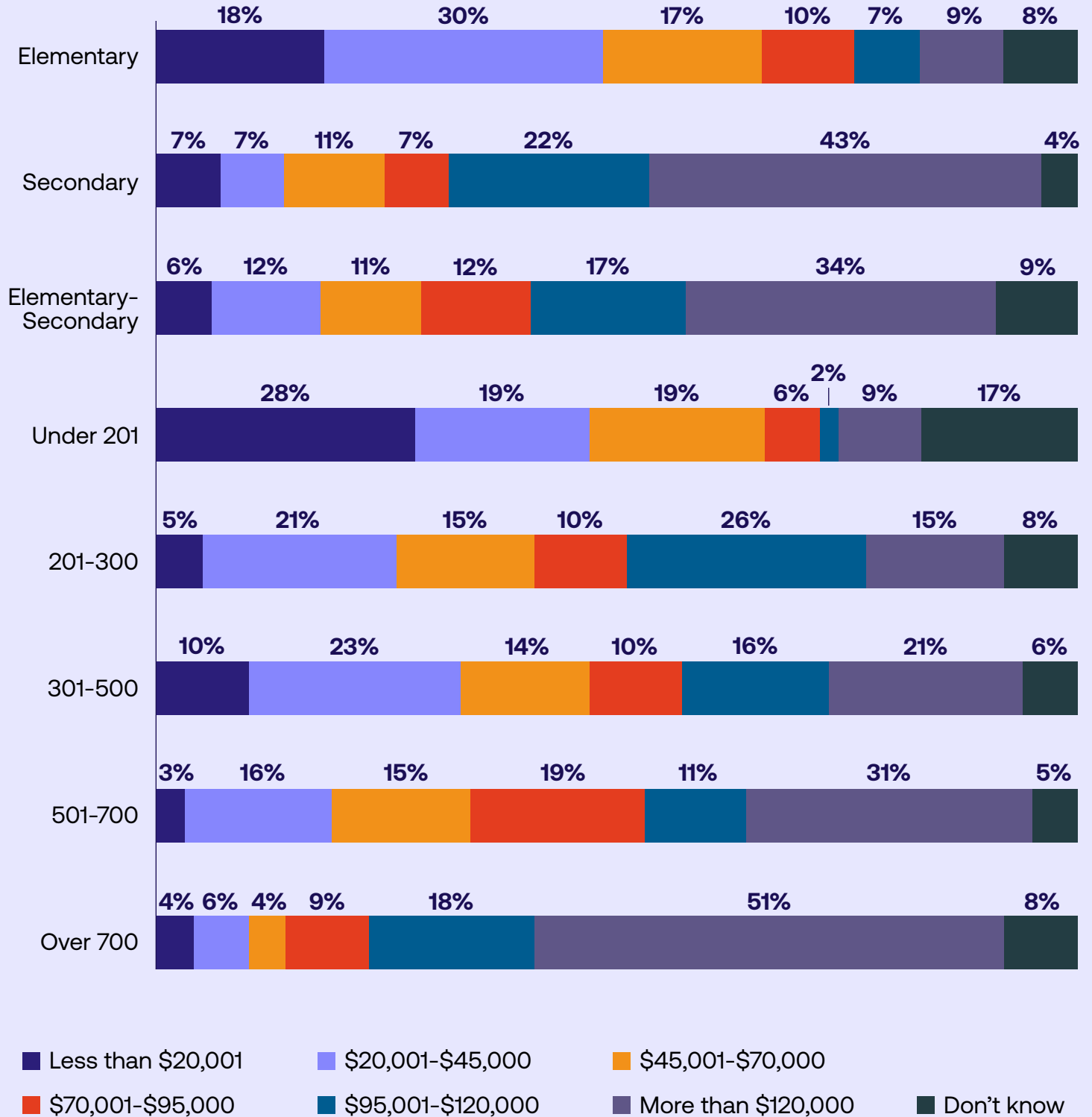


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## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Marketing budgets differed by school size. About two-thirds of schools with fewer than 201 students reported a marketing budget of \$70,000 or under, while over half of the larger schools (more than 700 students) reported budgets of over \$120,000. Forty-three percent of secondary schools also reported budgets of over \$120,000, compared to just 9% of elementary schools.



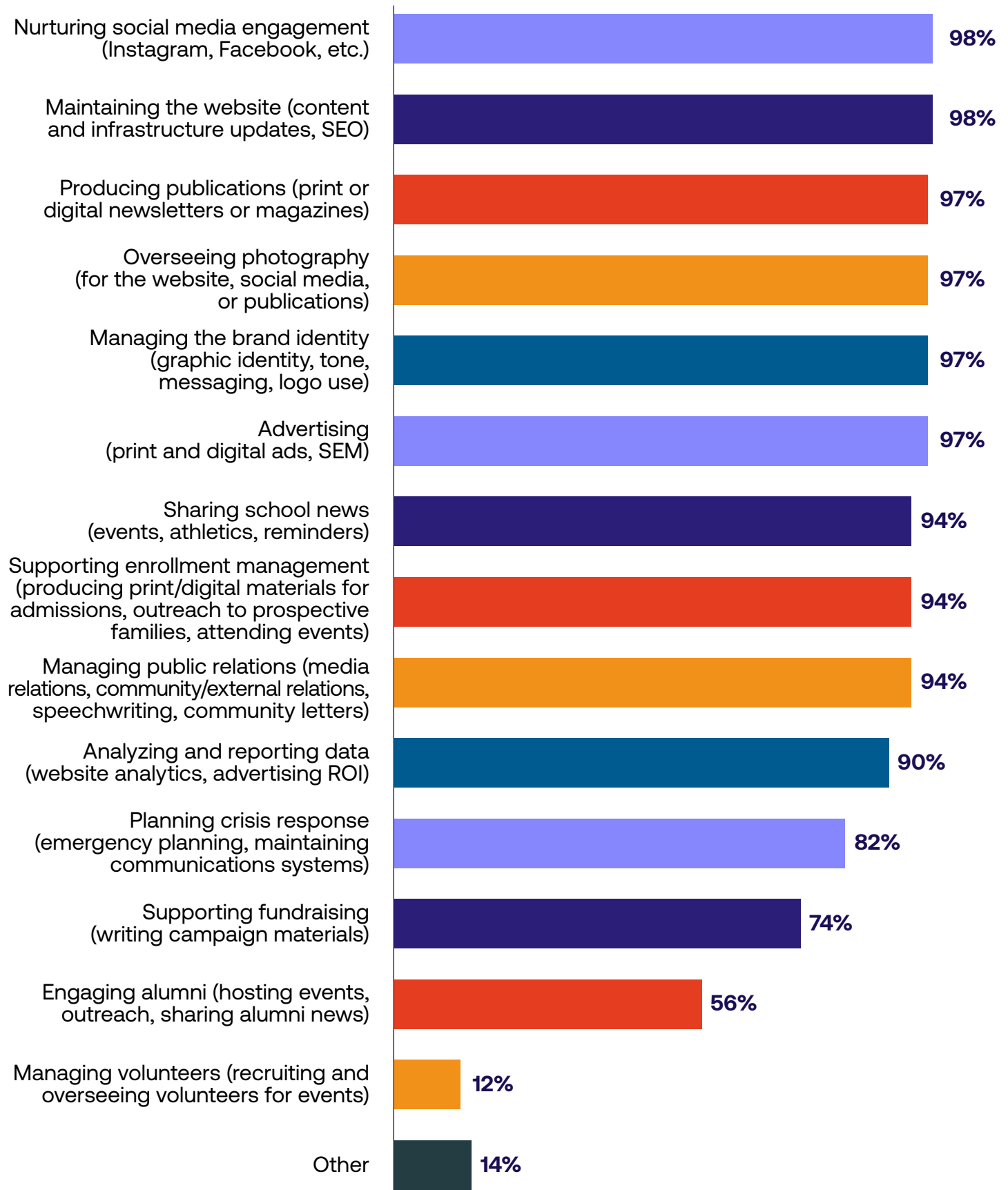
The top two responsibilities included in marketing at independent schools were nurturing social media engagement—on sites such as Instagram and Facebook—and maintaining the school’s website, including content and infrastructure. Ninety-eight percent of schools reported that these two activities were part of their marketing responsibilities.

Other common answers for 97% of respondents included producing publications, overseeing photography, managing the brand identity, and advertising. Less common responsibilities included supporting fundraising (74%) and engaging alumni (56%). The least common responsibility was managing volunteers, reported by just 12% of schools.

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Your marketing efforts should align with your school’s goals. By scheduling regular reviews of your goals and objectives, you can ensure that your strategies remain relevant and effective. For example, if increasing admissions is a school priority, your marketing initiatives should emphasize growth in that area. But if the focus shifts to fundraising or reducing attrition, targeted marketing strategies should be updated to support those objectives.

When planning recruitment campaigns to attract the right families to your admissions funnel, make sure these efforts are coordinated. A common mistake schools make is using individual, disconnected tactics, such as running Facebook ads or Google Adwords, without planning how these channels can work together. One-touch tactics rarely convert a family. A coordinated effort is essential, engaging prospects multiple times across their customer journey at the various stages of awareness, familiarity, consideration, conversion, and loyalty. Focus on integrating all recruitment channels into a cohesive campaign to achieve better results with less effort.

## What responsibilities are included under the umbrella of marketing your school?

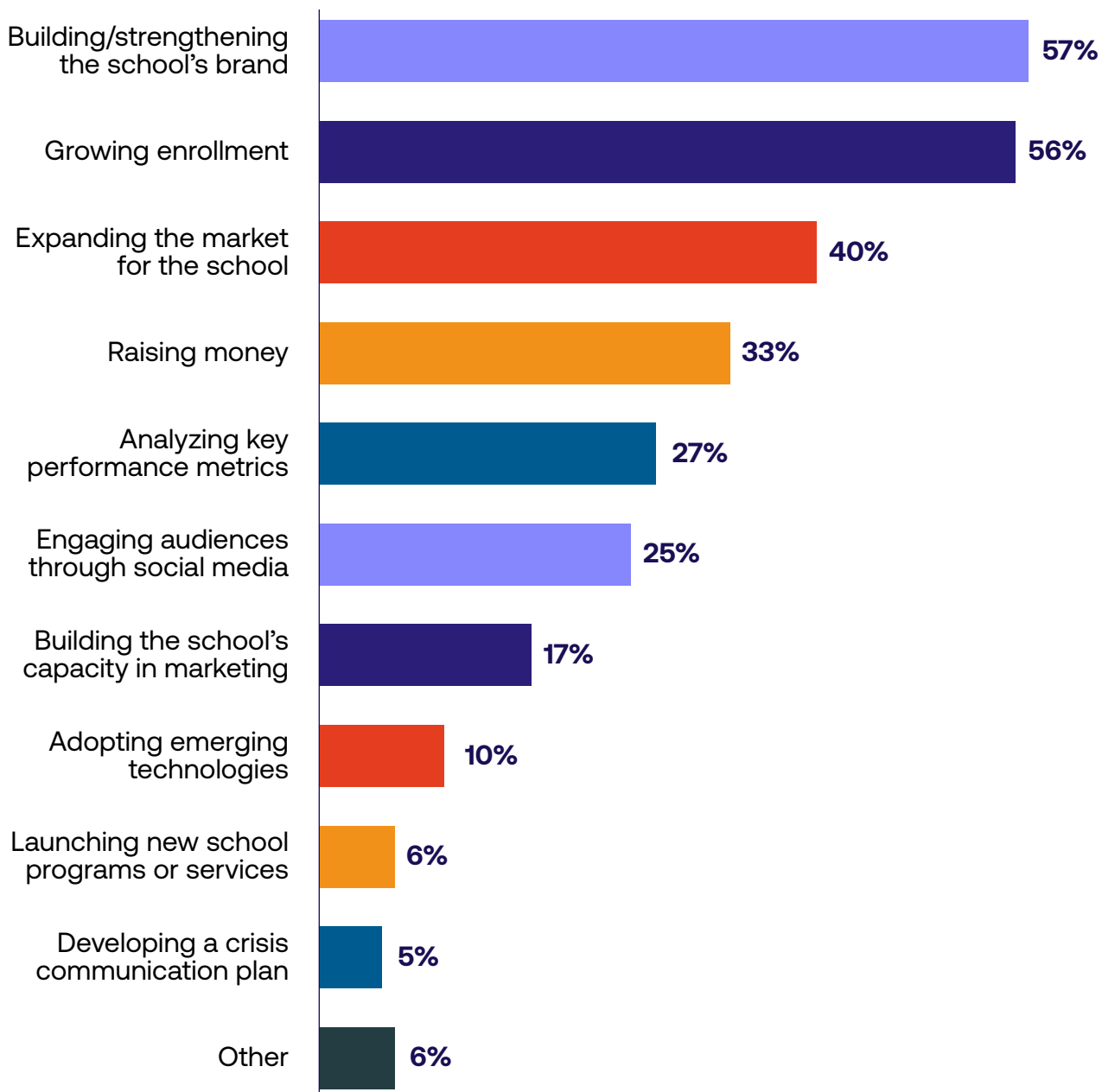


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# Goals and Challenges

While schools reported having many marketing goals for the next year, some were more common than others. Fifty-seven percent of independent schools reported that one of their top goals was building or strengthening the school’s brand. Fifty-six percent reported that their goal was to grow enrollment. Other goals included expanding the market for the school (40%), raising money (33%), and analyzing key performance metrics (27%). Less common goals included launching new school programs or services (6%) and developing a crisis communication plan (5%).

What are your top marketing goals for next year? Select the top 2.



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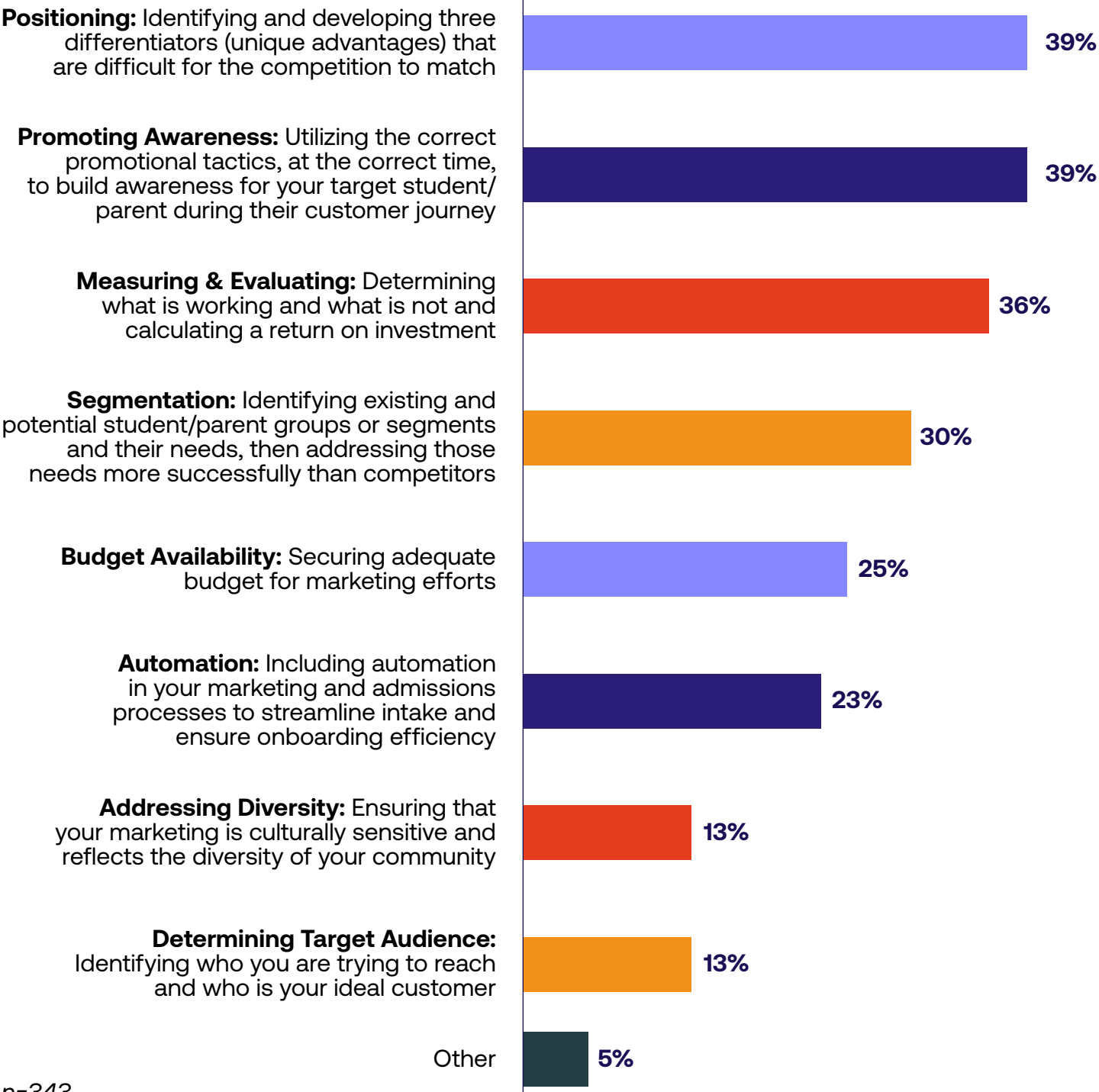
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Marketing goals also differed based on school demographics. For instance, 83% of schools with fewer than 201 students were focusing on growing enrollment, 72% of secondary schools were focusing on building the school’s brand, and 57% of boys’ schools reported that their goal was to raise money.

	Building/ strengthening the school’s brand	Growing enrollment	Expanding the market for the school	Raising money	Analyzing key performance metrics	Engaging audiences through social media
<b>School Gender</b>						
Boys	36%	43%	43%	57%	43%	14%
Girls	63%	59%	37%	26%	22%	22%
Coed	57%	57%	40%	33%	26%	25%
<b>School Size</b>						
Under 201	45%	83%	47%	34%	26%	36%
201-300	54%	69%	33%	46%	23%	18%
301-500	66%	56%	42%	29%	23%	24%
501-700	58%	48%	37%	35%	27%	21%
701+	53%	41%	38%	30%	32%	24%
<b>Grade Level</b>						
Elementary	56%	54%	42%	36%	23%	31%
Secondary	72%	41%	48%	35%	30%	20%
Elementary- Secondary	54%	61%	37%	31%	28%	23%

When asked about their top challenges, independent schools had a range of answers. About four out of 10 (39%) reported that their top challenges were positioning or identifying differentiators difficult for the competition to match and promoting awareness (using the correct promotional tactics at the right time to build awareness for their target student or parent during their customer journey). Thirty-six percent of schools reported their top challenges as measuring and evaluating—determining what was working and what was not and calculating a return on investment. Other challenges included segmentation (30%), securing an adequate budget (25%), and automation (23%).

What are the top marketing challenges you may face next year? Select the top 2.



n=343

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

These challenges also varied depending on school demographics. For instance, 53% of schools with fewer than 201 students indicated that promoting awareness was among their top two challenges; half of boys' schools identified measuring and evaluating as among the top two; and 35% of secondary schools mentioned segmentation as a challenge.

	Positioning	Promoting Awareness	Measuring & Evaluating	Segmentation	Budget Availability
<b>School Gender</b>					
Boys	36%	43%	50%	36%	14%
Girls	44%	37%	30%	22%	15%
Coed	39%	39%	36%	30%	27%
<b>School Size</b>					
Under 201	45%	53%	28%	25%	30%
201-300	38%	44%	36%	36%	31%
301-500	34%	43%	30%	25%	25%
501-700	39%	29%	40%	29%	26%
701+	41%	30%	43%	36%	20%
<b>Grade Level</b>					
Elementary	32%	53%	30%	27%	29%
Secondary	39%	33%	46%	35%	17%
Elementary-Secondary	42%	33%	36%	30%	25%

**Positioning:** Identifying and developing three differentiators (unique advantages) that are difficult for the competition to match

**Promoting Awareness:** Utilizing the correct promotional tactics, at the correct time, to build awareness for your target student/parent during their customer journey

**Measuring & Evaluating:** Determining what is working and what is not and calculating a return on investment

**Segmentation:** Identifying existing and potential student/parent groups or segments and their needs, then addressing those needs more successfully than competitors

**Budget Availability:** Securing adequate budget for marketing efforts

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# Chapter

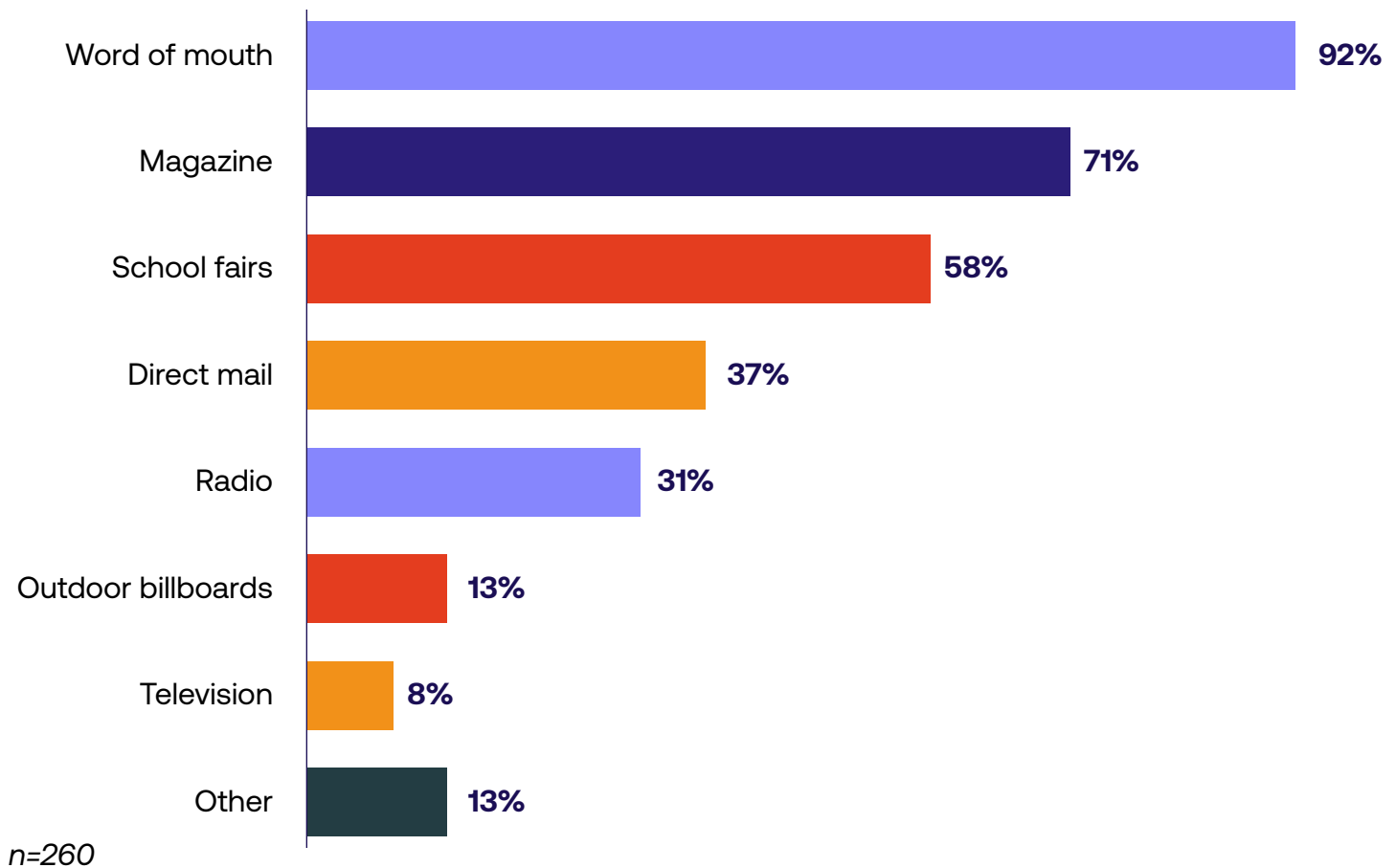




# Traditional Marketing

Independent schools use a range of traditional marketing channels. These include magazine ads, direct mailing campaigns, radio advertisements, and billboards. The most common traditional advertisement channel was word of mouth, with 92% of schools reporting that they relied on this channel. Magazine ads were the second most popular at 71%, followed by school fairs (58%), direct mail (37%), radio (31%), outdoor billboards (13%), and television commercials (8%). Other responses included lawn signs, storefront signage, newspapers, event sponsorships, and information sessions.

Which traditional channels has your marketing department used in the past 12 months?



**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** In the digital age, word of mouth relies on easily shareable content, making social media an ideal platform for word-of-mouth advertising. “Push” strategies involve creating and publishing engaging content like contests, news, and events. You can use your analytics to determine which types of content are most likely to be shared by your audiences. Additionally, you can use “pull” techniques to encourage your followers to leave online reviews. These reviews function as credible, shareable word-of-mouth testimonials and can boost your credibility with search engine algorithms.

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

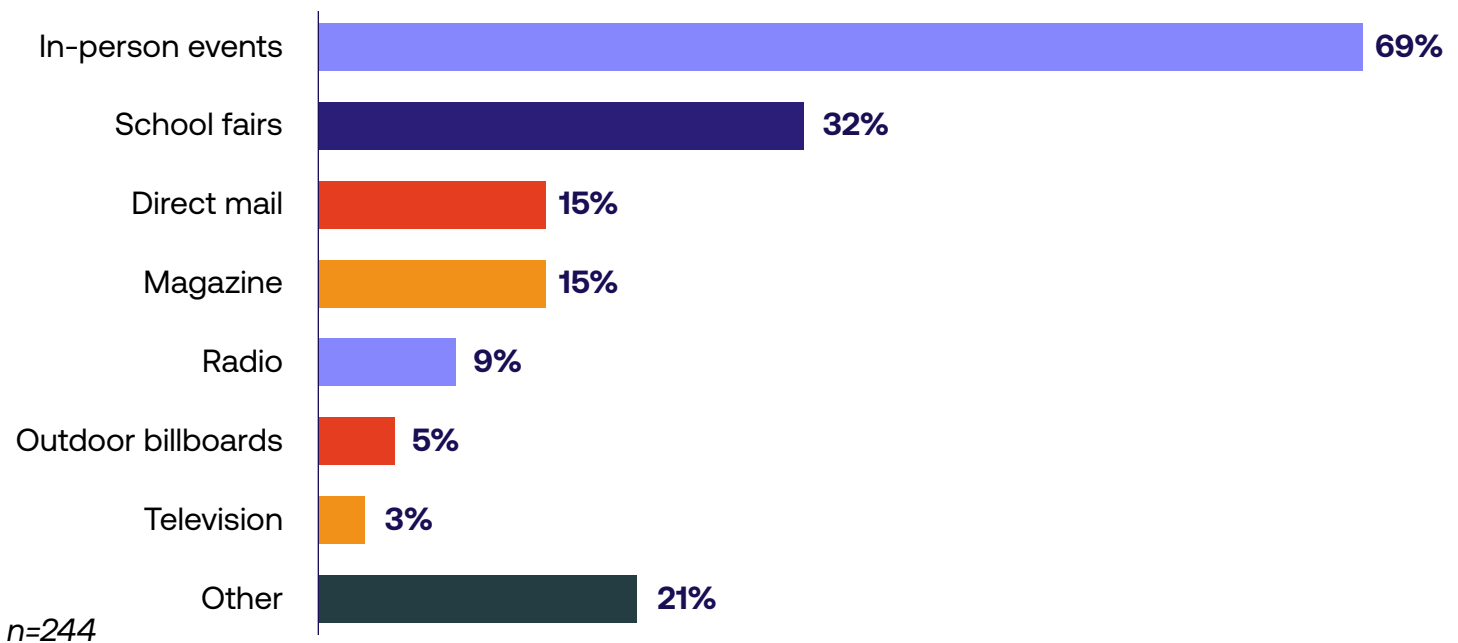
The use of these channels varied by school demographics. While 82% of girls' schools and 79% of schools with more than 700 students used magazines, only 59% of both boarding schools and secondary schools did so. In contrast, boarding schools (73%), secondary schools (74%), and boys' schools (77%) were more likely to participate in school fairs than all schools (58%). Additionally, over half (54%) of schools with fewer than 201 students used direct mail, 17 percentage points above the overall rate.

	Word of mouth	Magazine	School fairs	Direct mail	Radio
<b>School Gender</b>					
Boys	100%	69%	77%	8%	31%
Girls	94%	82%	47%	65%	47%
Coed	92%	71%	58%	36%	29%
<b>School Size</b>					
Under 201	95%	67%	62%	54%	33%
201-300	88%	70%	52%	18%	27%
301-500	90%	71%	63%	29%	32%
501-700	94%	67%	56%	50%	35%
701+	94%	79%	57%	34%	26%
<b>Grade Level</b>					
Elementary	89%	69%	56%	27%	30%
Secondary	91%	59%	74%	44%	18%
Elementary-Secondary	94%	75%	56%	39%	34%
<b>School Type</b>					
Schools with boarding component	93%	59%	73%	37%	27%
Day schools	92%	74%	56%	37%	31%

The most effective of these channels by far was the in-person event, with 69% naming this as the most effective channel in driving new student leads. School fairs were also effective (32%). Less effective were direct mail campaigns (15%), magazine ads (15%), radio commercials (9%), outdoor billboards (5%), and television commercials (3%). Respondents also reported that word of mouth was very effective. Others noted that they did not find traditional channels particularly effective.

There were only two significant differences by school demographics: 52% of secondary schools found school fairs effective, compared to 32% overall; and 27% of girls' schools and 29% of schools with fewer than 201 students indicated that direct mail was most effective, above the 15% for all schools.

What traditional channels do you feel have been most effective in driving new student leads in the past 12 months?



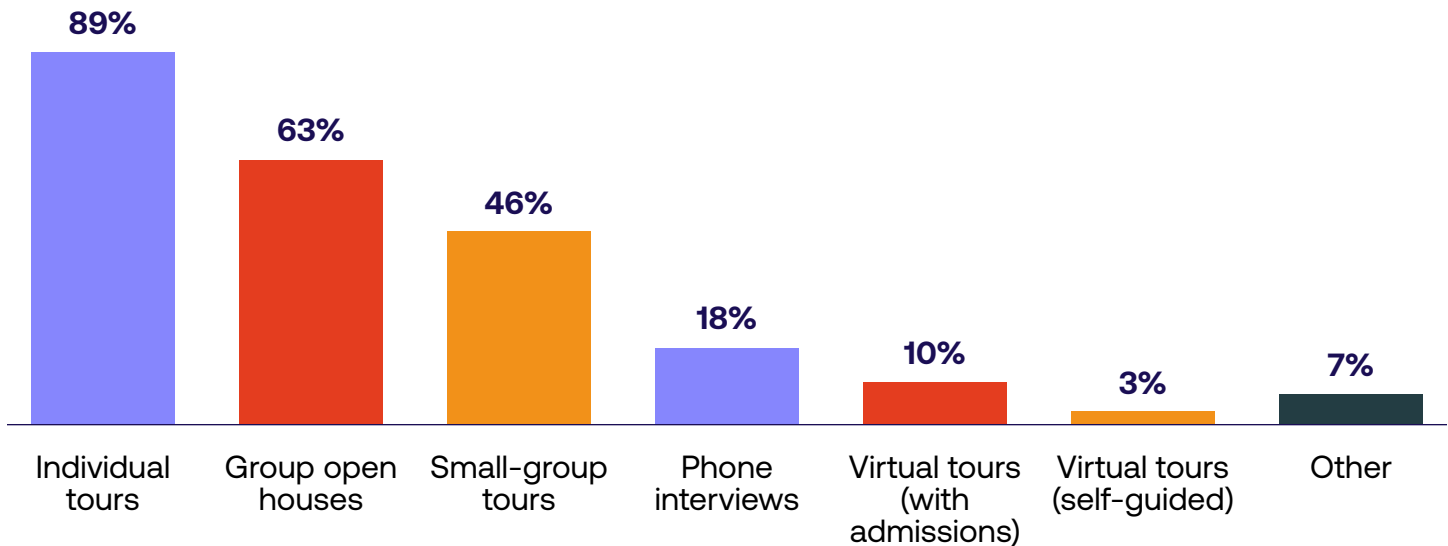
**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** In recent years, many schools have increasingly turned to digital advertising to successfully raise awareness and expand their reach. However, families still want to experience firsthand the culture and community of their child's future school, especially after enduring a few years of virtual-only opportunities.

So, focus your calls to action on your traditional marketing efforts to encourage parents, consultants, or other decision-makers to visit, connect with you at a fair, or meet members of your communities. This will help bridge the gap between what they've learned about you in a small amount of ad space real estate and what they feel about your school after having met with you.

Are you thinking about data tracking for traditional measures? Ensure that the links, QR codes, and vanity URLs in your traditional ads are trackable. In other words, if you're encouraging families to register for an open house on a billboard ad, ensure that the QR code is equipped with UTM parameters—pieces of code that track performance—so that you can trace the success of your traditional ad spend.

The most effective admissions touchpoints were individual tours (89%), followed by group open houses (63%) and small-group tours (46%). The least effective were virtual tours with admissions (10%) or self-guided (3%).

What are your most effective admissions touchpoints?



n=261

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Families are increasingly prioritizing personalized education and individual attention when selecting a new school for their children. Given the importance of in-person visits, it's not surprising that individual tours (89%) followed by group open houses (63%) ranked as the two most effective admissions touchpoints. To ensure that these experiences are successful for your school, prioritize these essential elements with your families:

- **Promotion:** Connect with audiences on the platforms they use, focusing on key stages of the customer journey with messaging that communicates the value of your visit opportunities.
- **Convenience:** Website visitors are often quick to exit when met with a frustrating user experience. Make sure that information about the visit is easy to access and clear about where, when, and how your audiences should engage with the school before, during, and after the event.
- **Experience:** Find out what's important to your audiences—the people they want to talk to, the places they want to see, and the duration that works for them—and then provide that in an experience that reflects your school's brand quality and essence.
- **Data collection:** Look for opportunities to gather data and contact info from your audiences at each step of the journey, from their initial awareness of the tour through other successful touchpoints to their eventual enrollment. Identify what's driving their conversions, and change the key inflection points you find for unsuccessful sessions.
- **Follow up:** Whether families have attended a personal tour or a virtual tour or have dropped off after signing up, follow up with them. Ask questions, offer advice or new ways to get in touch, and make it easy for them to take the next step. If you haven't already done so, consider automating this process in your CRM and email marketing software.

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Admissions touchpoints varied by school demographics. Individual tours were more effective for smaller schools, while small-group tours and group open houses were more effective for larger schools. Secondary schools found small-group tours less effective than elementary schools, and elementary schools found phone interviews less effective.

	Individual tours	Group open houses	Small-group tours	Phone interviews
<b>School Gender</b>				
Boys	100%	85%	54%	15%
Girls	81%	63%	38%	6%
Coed	88%	62%	47%	19%
<b>School Size</b>				
Under 201	93%	48%	35%	30%
201-300	91%	61%	39%	27%
301-500	90%	63%	50%	11%
501-700	94%	70%	49%	11%
701+	80%	69%	51%	18%
<b>Grade Level</b>				
Elementary	91%	64%	46%	11%
Secondary	91%	61%	36%	21%
Elementary-Secondary	87%	63%	49%	20%
<b>School Type</b>				
Schools with boarding component	90%	56%	39%	29%
Day schools	88%	65%	48%	16%

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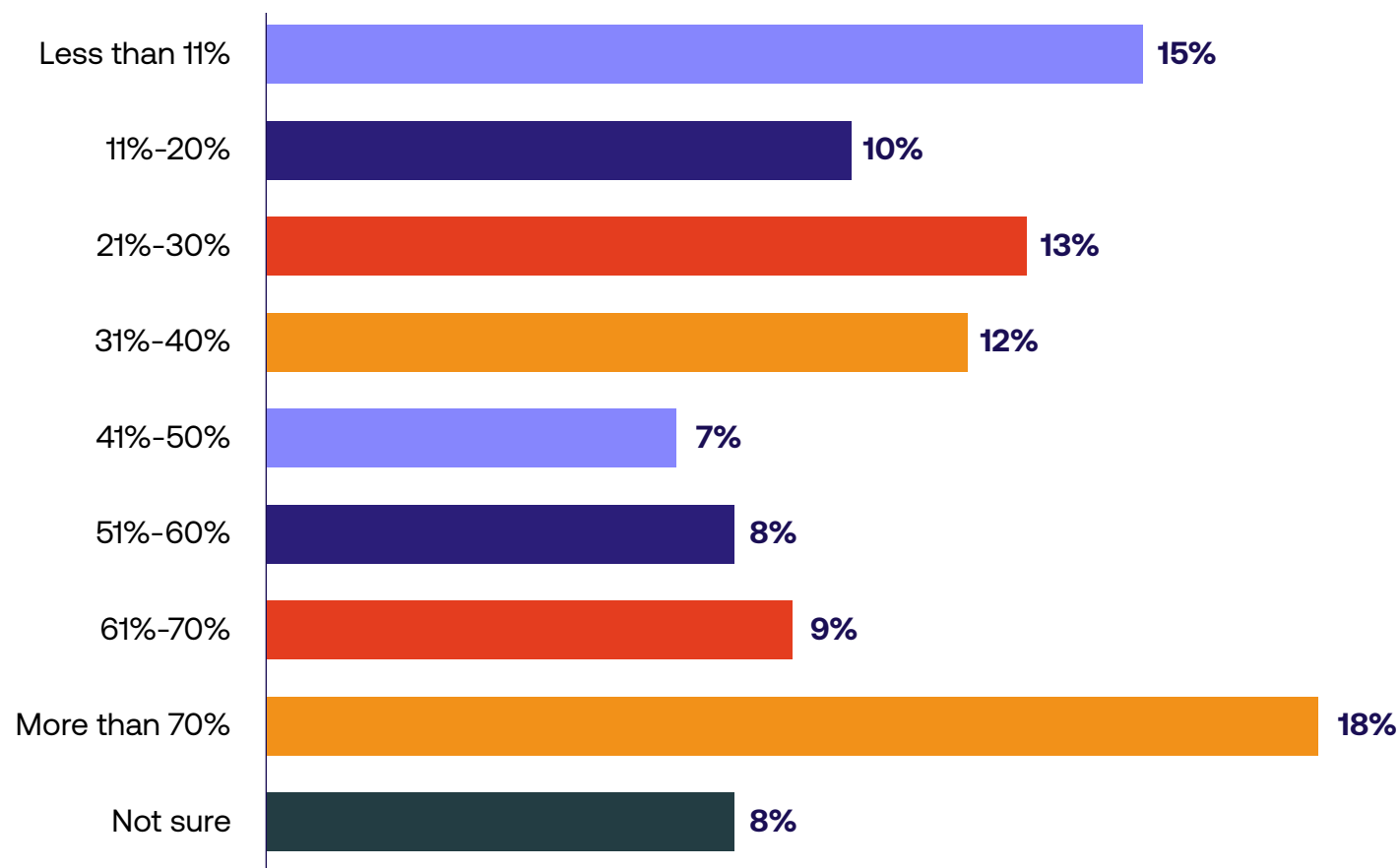
# Chapter



# Digital Marketing

Schools reported spending a wide range on digital channels. Almost a fifth (18%) reported spending more than 70% of their media budget on digital channels, while a quarter reported spending 20% or less of the budget on digital channels.

What percentage of your media budget is spent on digital channels?



n=264

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

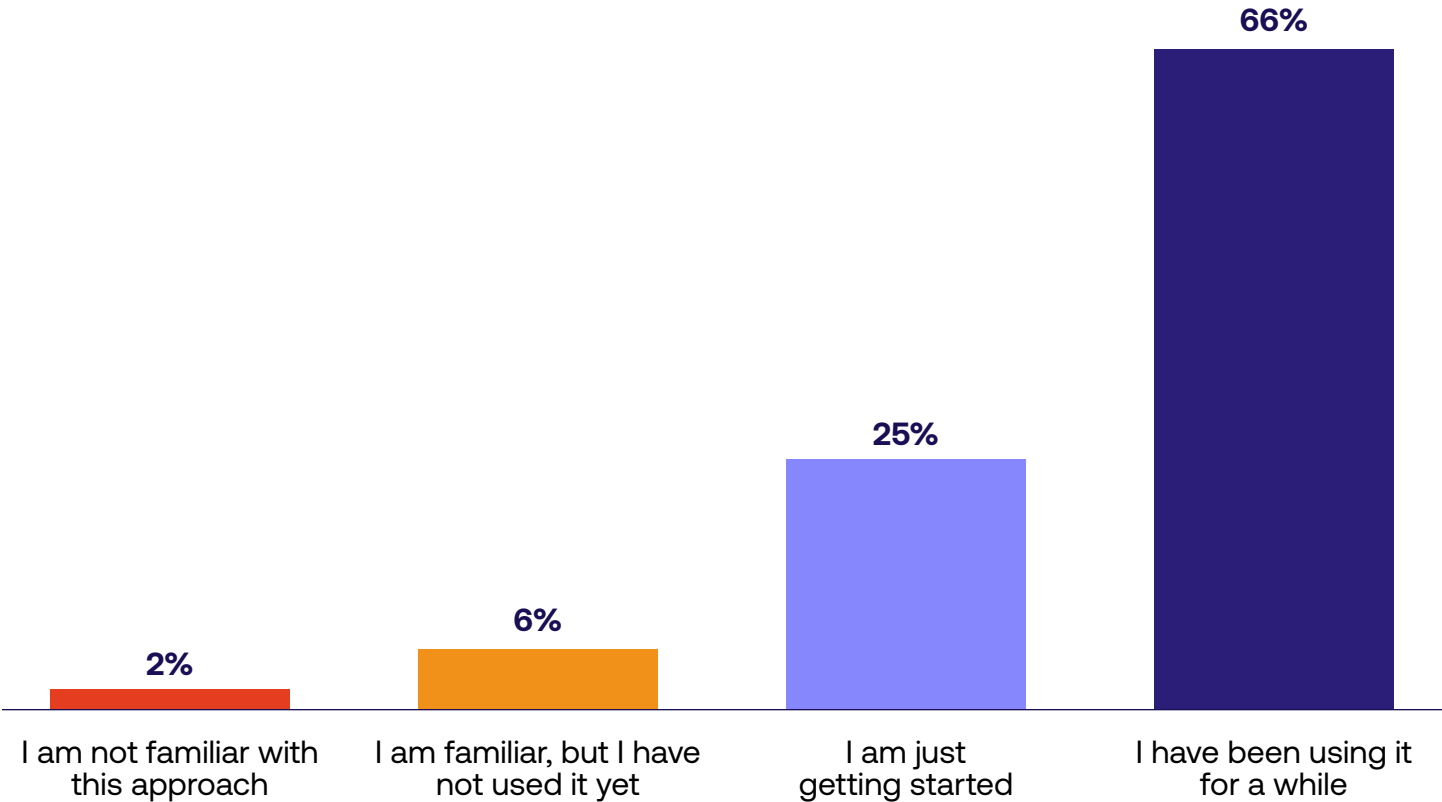
School demographics appear to play a role in the way money is allocated to digital channels. For instance, 58% of boys' schools dedicated more than half of their media budget to digital channels compared to 39% of girls' schools. Similarly, about four out of 10 secondary schools and schools with more than 500 students allocated more than 50% of their budget to digital channels.

Most marketing staff are familiar with digital marketing. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents reported that they had been using digital marketing for a while, while a quarter were just getting started. Very few (8%) had either not used digital marketing or were not familiar with it.

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** If you're questioning how much to allocate for your digital channels, the best approach is to map out your family journey and identify the traditional and digital channels your audiences rely on at each stage when making decisions about a school. Check your analytics to identify which channels are better at moving leads down your funnel. Balancing the benefit-cost ratio of these channels against your acceptable cost per acquisition (or the aggregate cost to acquire one paying customer on a campaign or channel level) will give you a sense of the best places to allocate your budget.

You will likely end up with some traditional channels in the mix, particularly at the awareness stage of the customer journey. If you believe in the role of thoughtful, actionable marketing data, your strategy will lean heavily toward the digital space.

### What is your level of expertise with digital marketing?



n=283



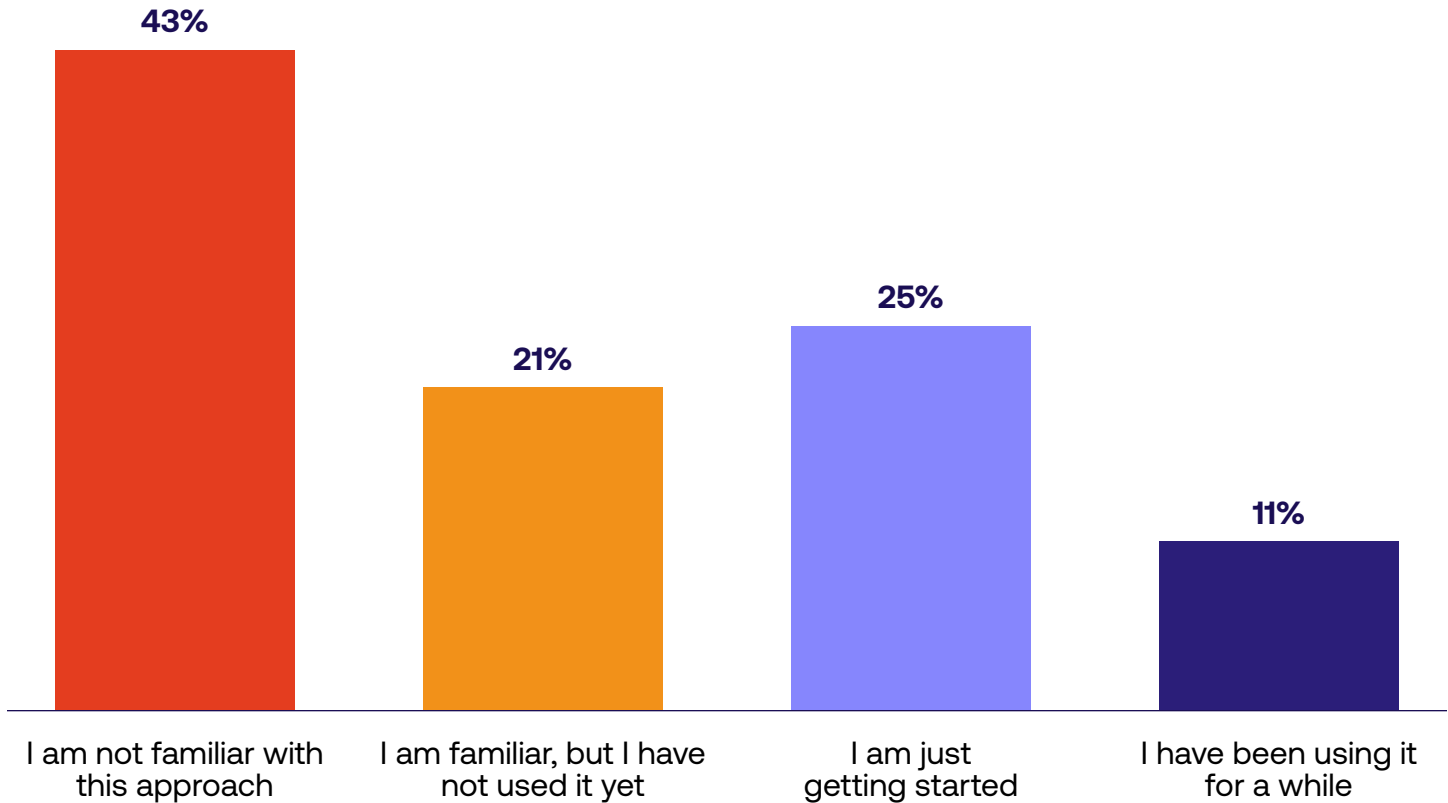
**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** If you've been using digital marketing for a while, exploring attribution modeling could be an essential next step. Through attribution modeling, you will better understand how well your digital marketing efforts work throughout the family journey, which will help you report your ROI to leadership more effectively.

Attribution modeling identifies and assigns credit to each digital touchpoint that you create along the family journey—from awareness to ultimate conversion. This journey is long and complex but well-researched. Touchpoints in a single channel aren't sufficient for moving a family through their journey to enrollment. It takes multiple touchpoints across multiple channels, working together, to influence families to take that critical step. Attribution modeling helps you see all the touchpoints along the journey that are responsible for converting the family—not just the first or last touchpoint but the full path of touchpoints necessary to convince the family to enroll.

While attribution modeling can be challenging, it is necessary for discussions involving the head of school, admissions department, and board about what is and what isn't working in marketing. Attribution modeling shifts the conversation from “I think Facebook advertising is working because it drives conversions” to “Facebook is doing its job as a middle touchpoint to build familiarity with our school before families convert.” You might overlook successful digital marketing efforts if you only look at the last touchpoint attribution in your reporting. Instead, look to Google's data-driven attribution (DDA) model, which uses an algorithm to assign credit to various touchpoints before a conversion. In reality, these tactics could be performing well—once you understand their role in the journey.

Few schools reported being familiar with digital marketing analysis. Just 11% reported that they have been using digital marketing analysis for some time, and 21% reported that they were familiar with it but had not used it yet. Forty-three percent reported no familiarity, and a quarter reported that they were just getting started.

Please indicate your current experience with digital marketing analysis.

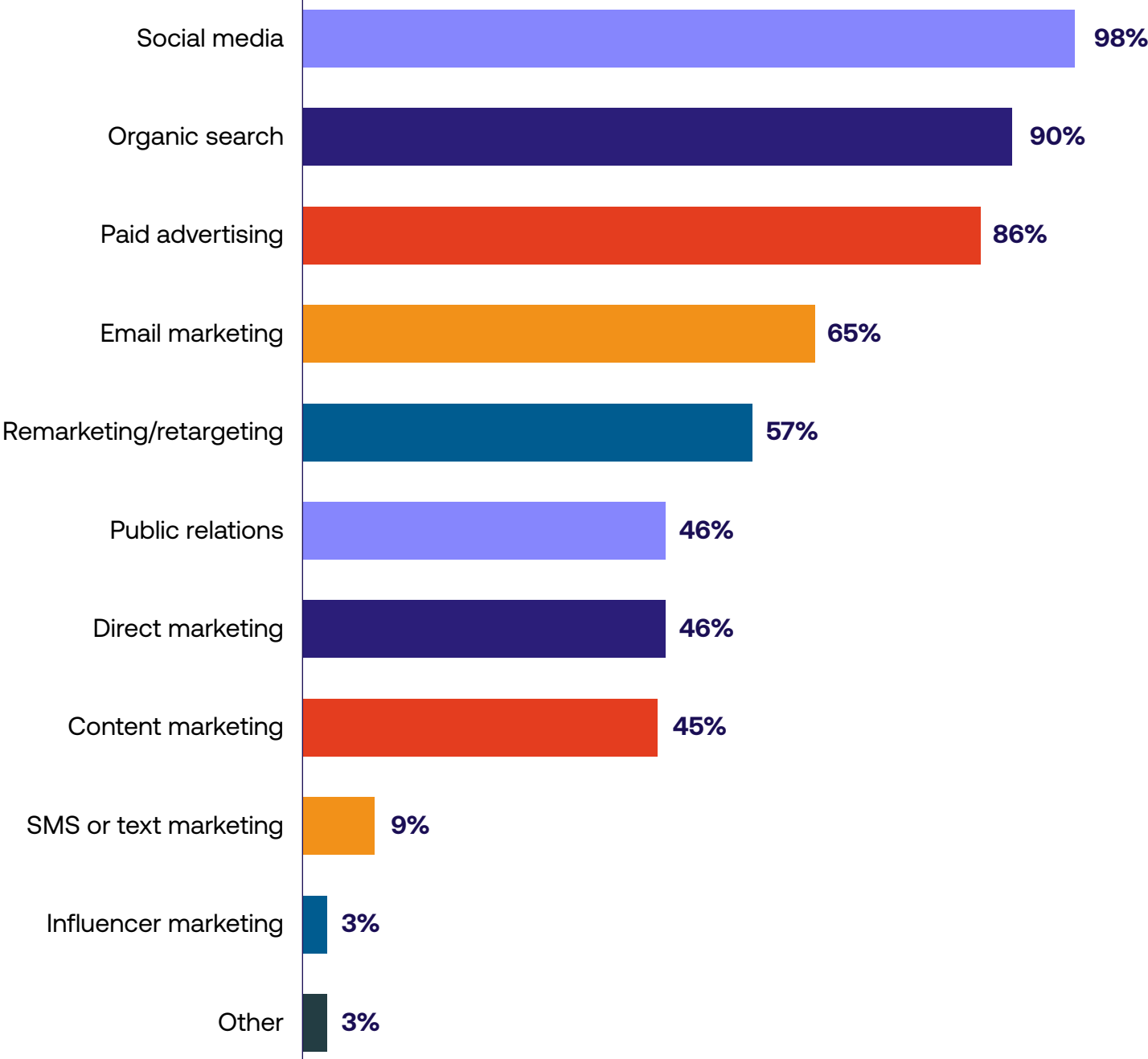


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**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** If you're struggling with analytics but hiring a digital marketing expert isn't feasible, consider advocating for professional development opportunities for your team in the digital space. Many digital marketing platforms (Google, Meta, etc.) offer resources, courses, and certification programs to equip folks with the tools—or, at a minimum, a grasp of the concepts—for little to no cost. Use these resources to become more familiar with data analysis or to approach a digital marketing partner with a deeper level of understanding to know what you need.

The most popular digital channel for marketing among independent school marketing staff was social media (98%). Organic search (results not prompted by ads or sponsored content) and paid advertising were also popular, with 90% and 86%, respectively, reporting that they used these channels. Less popular digital channels were SMS (or text) marketing (9%) and influencer marketing (3%).

Which digital marketing channels has your school used in the past 12 months?



n=265

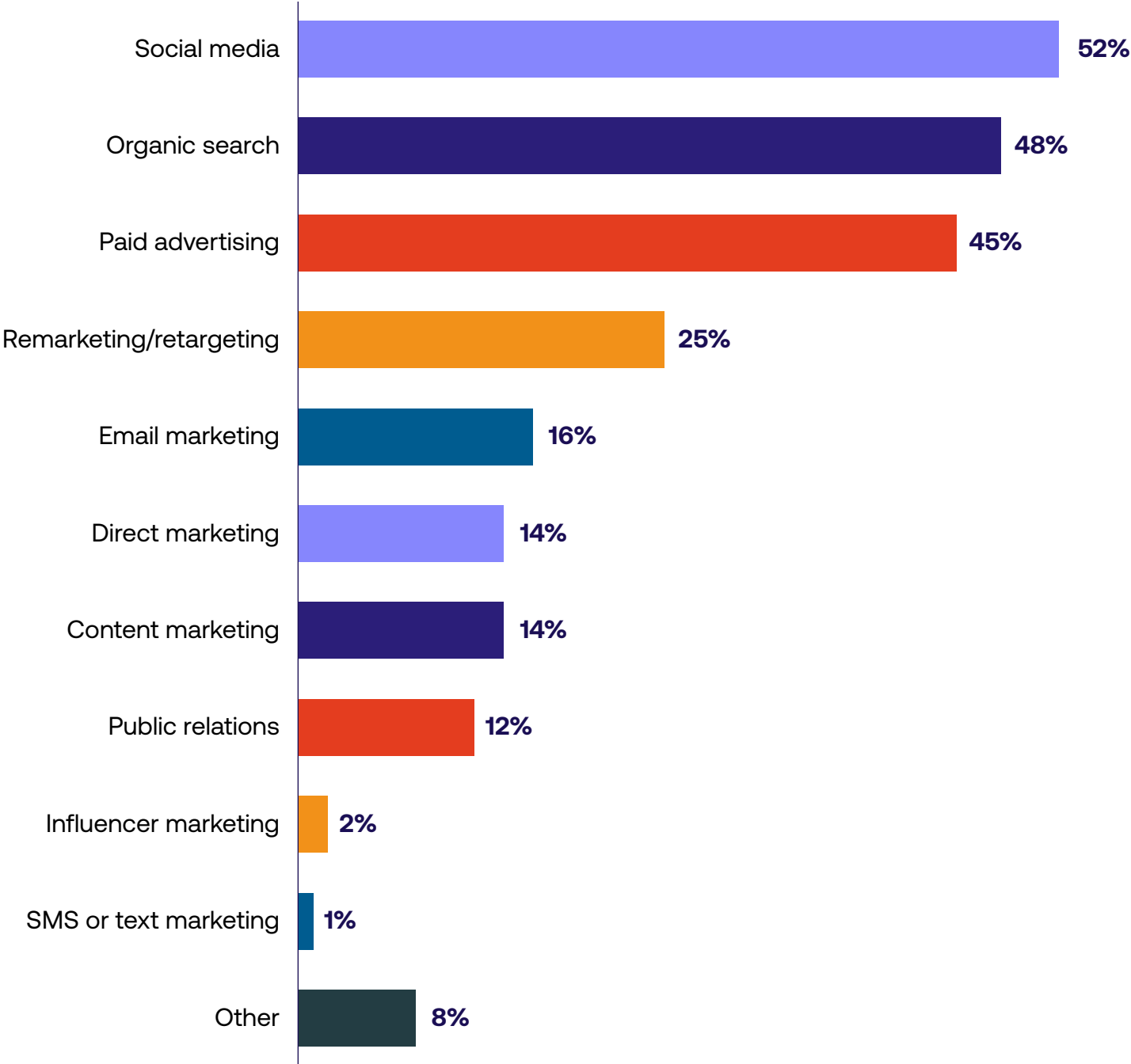
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

There were some notable differences in the use of digital marketing based on school demographics. For instance, 81% of boarding schools used email marketing compared to only 62% of day schools. Also, more elementary-secondary schools used public relations, direct marketing, and content marketing than their elementary and secondary counterparts.

	Social media	Organic search	Paid advertising	Email marketing	Remarketing/ retargeting	Public relations	Direct marketing	Content marketing
<b>School Gender</b>								
Boys	100%	100%	100%	77%	54%	62%	38%	54%
Girls	100%	83%	67%	67%	56%	56%	39%	50%
Coed	97%	90%	87%	64%	57%	45%	47%	44%
<b>School Size</b>								
Under 201	98%	76%	88%	66%	37%	34%	51%	32%
201-300	97%	91%	79%	73%	55%	52%	36%	45%
301-500	97%	94%	85%	63%	64%	47%	36%	50%
501-700	100%	92%	88%	73%	60%	48%	58%	46%
701+	97%	92%	89%	58%	61%	49%	48%	48%
<b>Grade Level</b>								
Elementary	99%	85%	86%	51%	51%	38%	31%	39%
Secondary	97%	94%	68%	85%	68%	41%	32%	38%
Elementary-Secondary	98%	91%	90%	67%	58%	51%	55%	49%
<b>School Type</b>								
Schools with boarding component	98%	95%	76%	81%	60%	38%	33%	48%
Day schools	98%	89%	88%	62%	57%	48%	48%	45%

The most effective digital channels for driving new student leads were social media (52%), organic searches (48%), and paid advertising (45%). Less effective were influencer marketing (2%) and SMS marketing (1%), likely because fewer schools used these marketing channels.

What digital marketing channels do you feel have been the most effective in driving new student leads during the past 12 months?



n=251

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

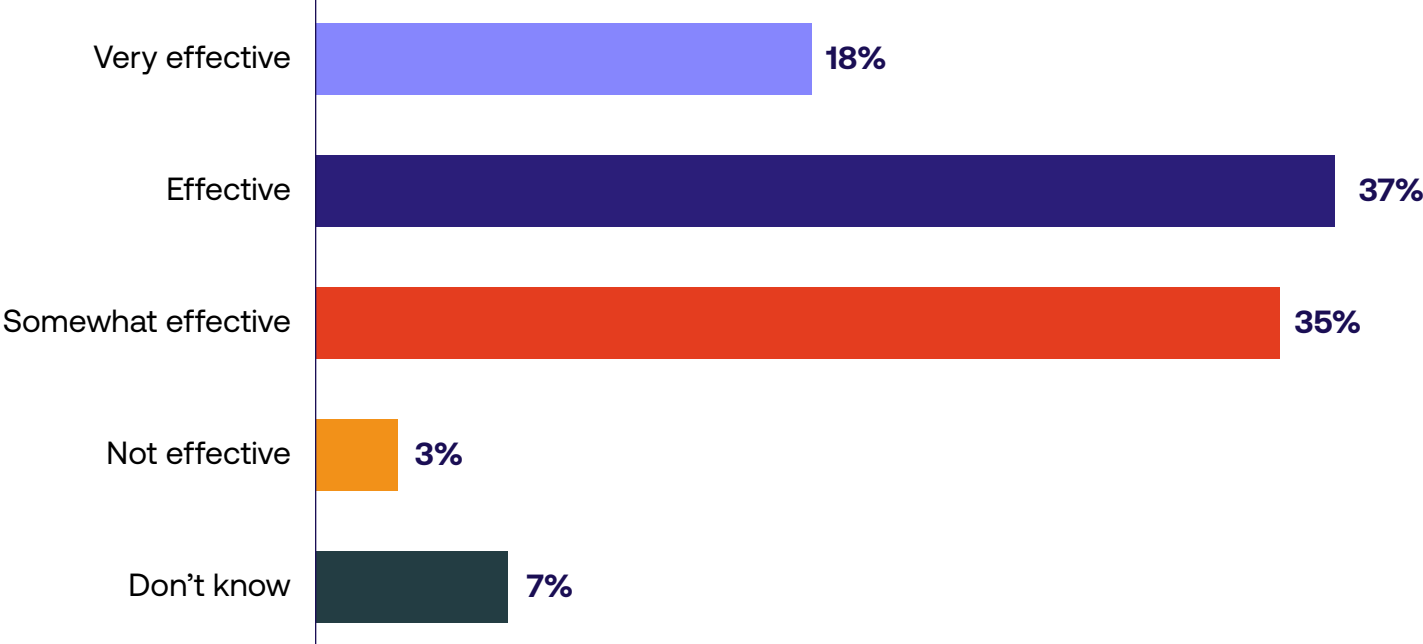
Girls' schools, schools with 501-700 students, and secondary schools were more likely to report that social media was effective at driving student leads (60% in each case). Twenty-four percent of schools with under 201 students indicated that email marketing was effective—8 percentage points higher than the overall results.

	Social media	Organic search	Paid advertising	Remarketing/retargeting	Email marketing	Direct marketing	Content marketing	Public relations
<b>School Gender</b>								
Boys	54%	62%	54%	38%	15%	8%	23%	15%
Girls	60%	40%	27%	27%	13%	33%	20%	13%
Coed	51%	48%	45%	24%	16%	13%	13%	11%
<b>School Size</b>								
Under 201	50%	37%	47%	8%	24%	16%	11%	11%
201-300	47%	56%	34%	34%	16%	16%	28%	9%
301-500	53%	53%	56%	27%	14%	11%	6%	9%
501-700	60%	45%	45%	28%	17%	17%	11%	9%
701+	49%	49%	37%	26%	13%	15%	19%	18%
<b>Grade Level</b>								
Elementary	44%	52%	47%	18%	12%	11%	8%	11%
Secondary	60%	47%	43%	37%	17%	13%	13%	10%
Elementary-Secondary	54%	47%	44%	26%	17%	16%	17%	12%
<b>School Type</b>								
Schools with boarding component	55%	55%	50%	21%	11%	13%	8%	13%
Day schools	51%	47%	44%	26%	17%	15%	15%	11%

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** When prioritizing your digital marketing channels and tactics, start with a campaign strategy that has clearly defined objectives and measurable outcomes. Then map your campaign strategy to your customer journey, which will illuminate where your audiences look for answers and what content they want to see. For example, if your goal is increasing awareness, leverage Google Display campaigns and serve your ads on the Google Display Network, helping you reach people as they browse websites, apps, YouTube and Gmail, to name a few. Keep in mind that your marketing channels operate like an ecosystem. Each channel or tactic has a specific role, and they all work together to move your prospects through the funnel.

Six percent of the respondents did not use digital marketing. Of those schools that used digital marketing, 90% rated their digital marketing performance as effective, with 18% reporting them as very effective, 37% as effective, and 35% as somewhat effective.

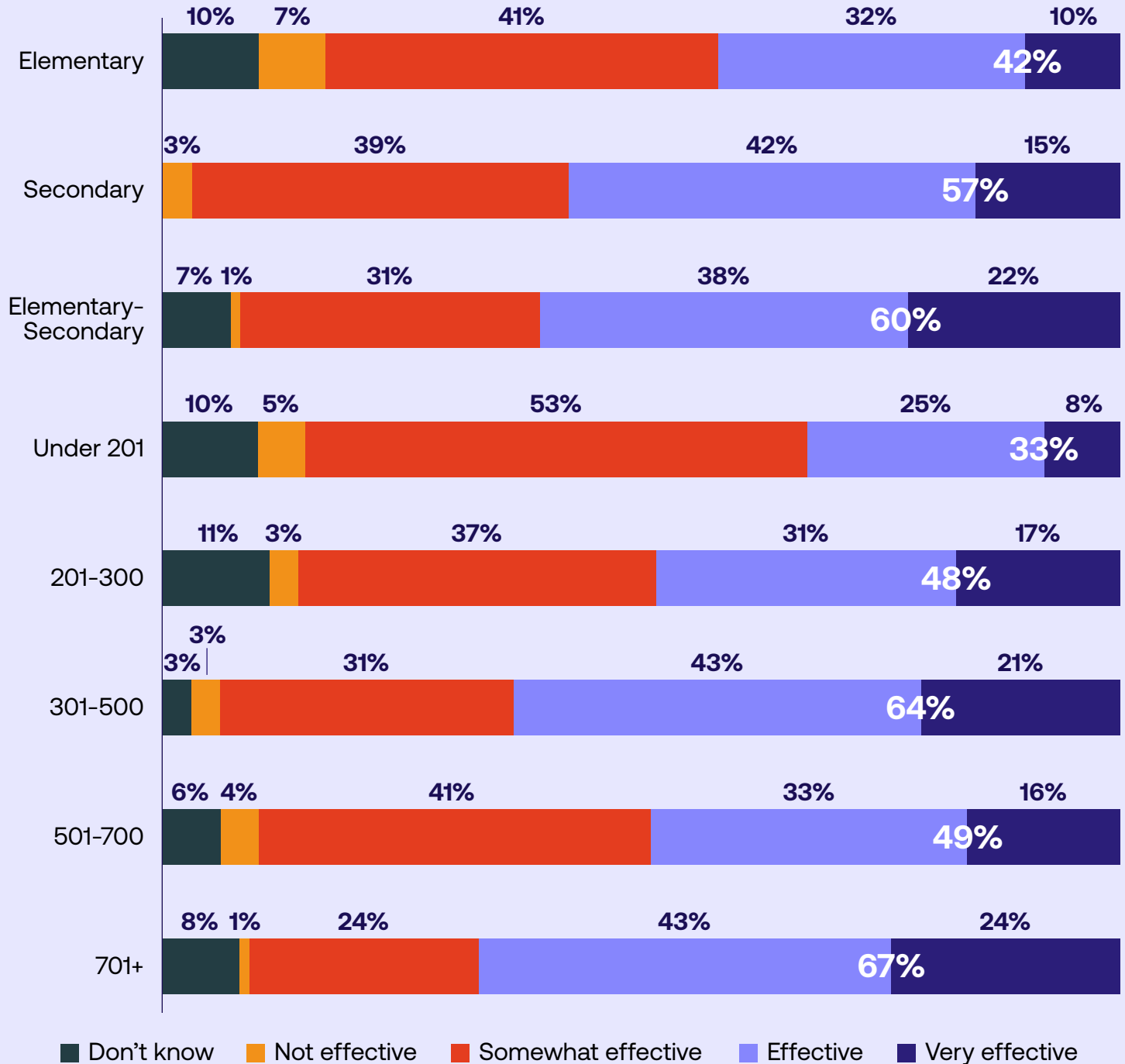
How effective was your overall digital marketing performance last year?



n=284

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

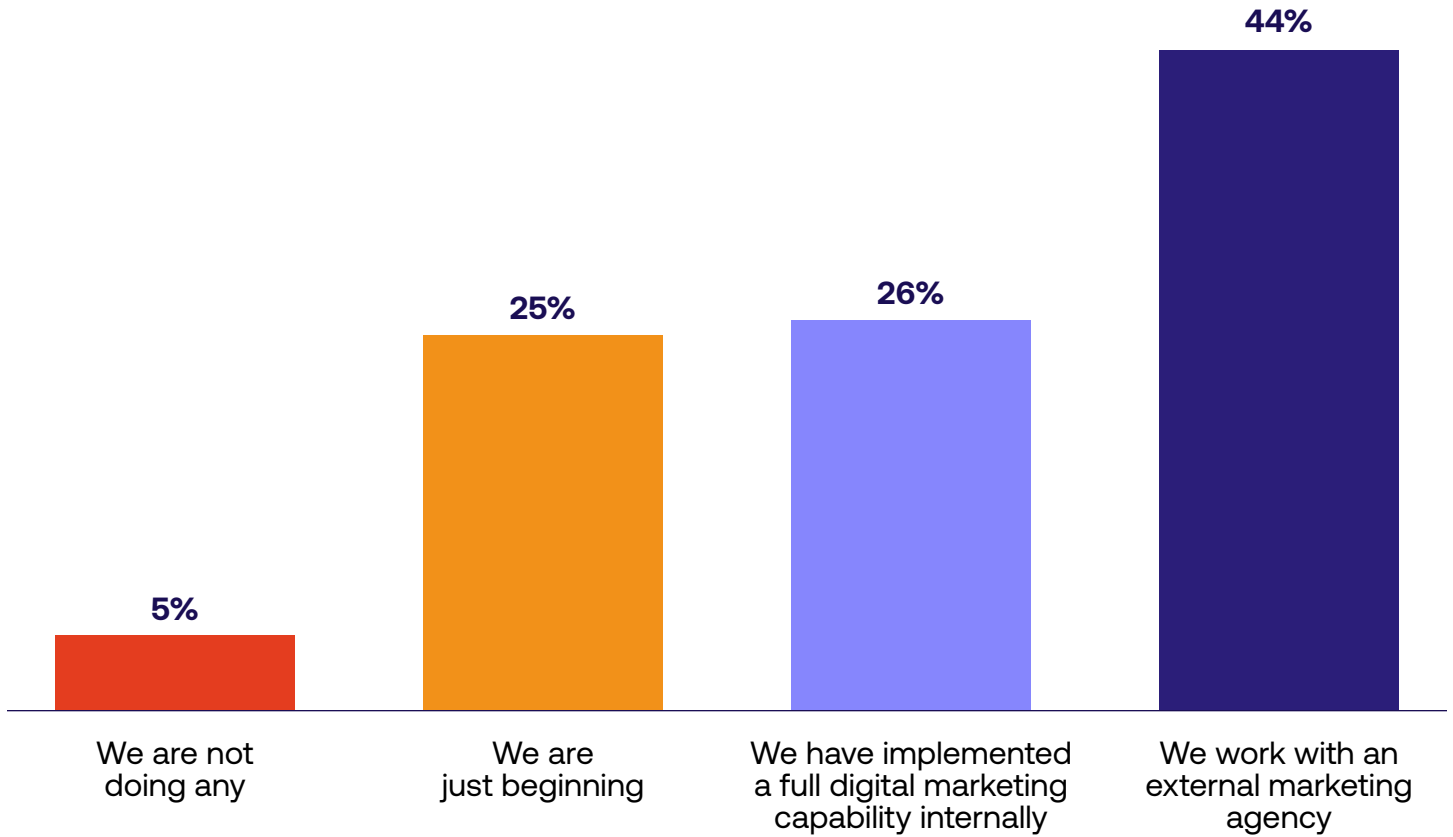
The reported effectiveness of digital marketing varied by school characteristics. Elementary schools were slightly less likely to report their performance as very or extremely effective (42%) compared to secondary schools (57%) and combination elementary-secondary schools (60%). Most of the larger schools rated their digital marketing performance as very or extremely effective. Smaller schools were less likely to give positive ratings—about 33% of schools with fewer than 201 students and 48% of schools with 201-300 students said their digital marketing performance was very or extremely effective, compared to 64% of schools with 301-500 students and 67% of schools with over 700 students. However, there was a substantial dip in performance rating among schools with 501-700 students (49%).





Most schools reported using digital marketing to manage enrollment. Just 5% reported that they were not using any digital marketing for this purpose. Over half (51%) reported that they did digital marketing internally—26% reported that they had implemented a full internal capacity for digital marketing, while 25% had just begun the process. Forty-four percent said that they had worked with an external agency.

How would you describe your use of digital marketing for enrollment management?



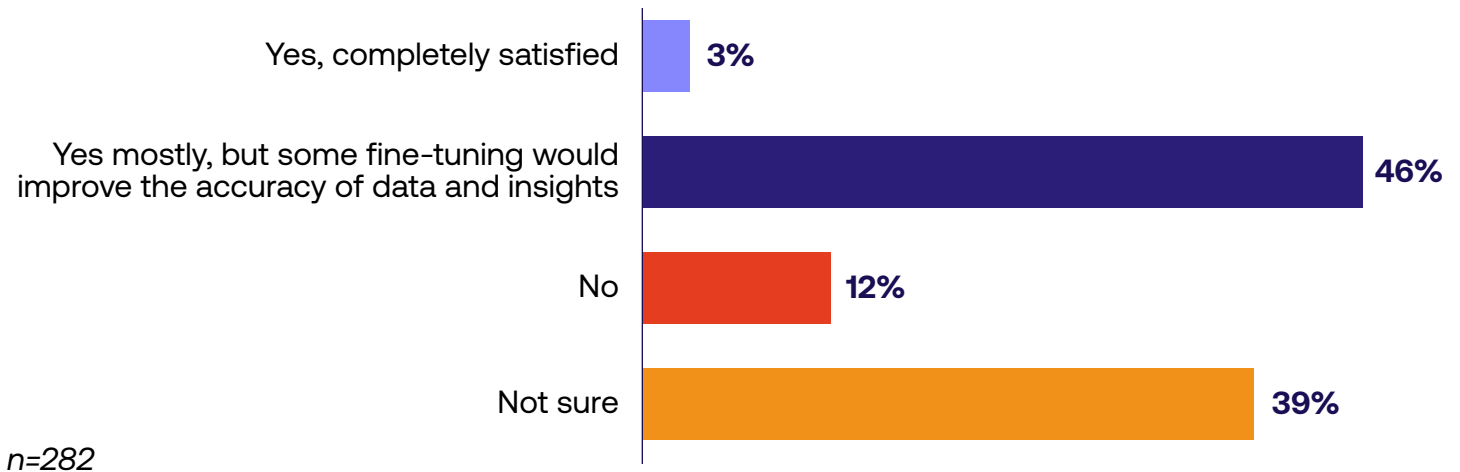
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## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Single-sex schools were less likely to have implemented a full digital marketing capability internally for enrollment management. More boys' school (86%) worked with an external agency than all schools (44%). Elementary schools (36%) and those with under 201 students (40%) were more likely to be just beginning to use digital marketing for enrollment management.

Just 3% of respondents reported that they were completely satisfied with the conversion goals they tracked. Just about half, 46%, were mostly satisfied but felt that fine-tuning could improve the accuracy of the data. Thirty-nine percent were not sure, and 12% were not satisfied.

Are you satisfied with the conversion goals you are tracking in your reporting software, such as Google Analytics?



## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Boarding schools and those with 501-700 students appeared to be more satisfied with the conversion goals tracked in their reporting software. However, 58% of schools with fewer than 201 students and 49% of elementary schools were not sure.

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** If you're not sure that you're tracking the right conversion goals or if you want to fine-tune them, some common admission-related conversion goals include inquiry form fills, requests for an application, open house registrations, click-to-call admissions, and emails to the team. Other conversion goals can be related to higher-level objectives, like communication with current families or fundraising.

The trick to getting the right data is understanding all the goals you wish to track, making sure they all align with your objectives, and then organizing them in your analytics account as events, micro-conversions, and macro-conversions. To ensure that your conversion goals are aligning with your marketing objectives, ask yourself:

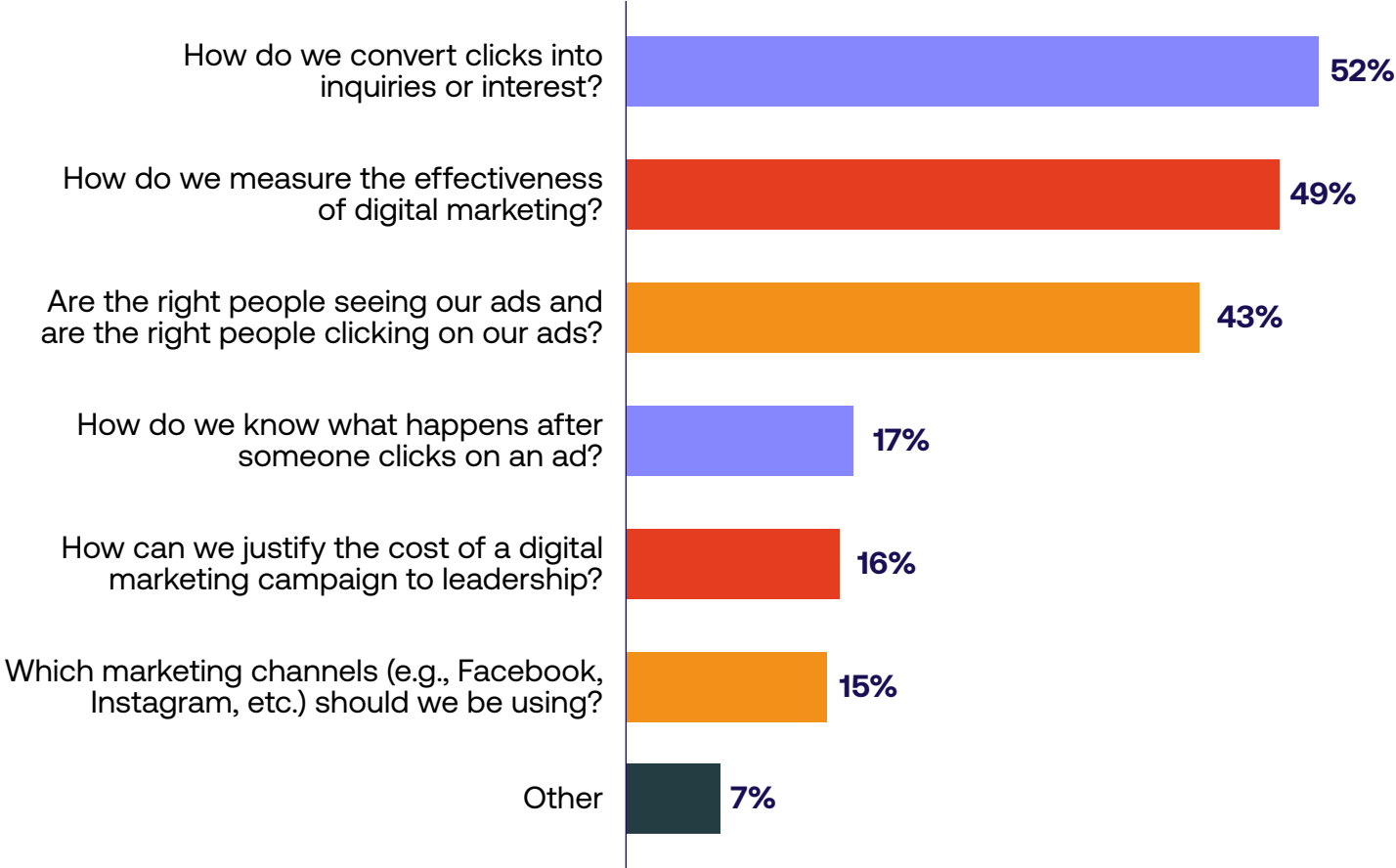
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What objective or goal are you trying to achieve?
- What challenge are you trying to overcome?

Once you have established your purpose, work backward to find the data points or conversion goals that will guide user paths toward your primary objectives.

Respondents reported a variety of challenges. The two most common challenges were converting clicks into inquiries or interest (52%) and measuring the effectiveness of digital marketing (49%). The third most common was knowing whether the right people were seeing and clicking on the school’s ads (43%). Some of the least common challenges focused on knowing what happens after someone clicks on an ad (17%), justifying the cost of a digital marketing campaign (16%), and knowing which marketing channels to use (15%).

Other common challenges were related to staffing. Many noted that it was difficult to handle a school’s marketing needs with just one full-time staff. Other challenges included automation, budgeting, and keeping up with changing technology.

Select your top two challenges about digital marketing.



n=281

**DATA SPOTLIGHT**

There were a few differences based on school demographics. For example, only 29% of boys’ schools reported converting clicks into inquiries or interest as a challenge. A higher percentage of boys’ schools (79%) and boarding schools (58%) than all schools (49%) indicated measuring the effectiveness of digital marketing as one of their top two challenges.

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** If you're finding yourself struggling to understand how well your ads are performing, don't worry that you're "running behind" or have done something wrong. This is one of the most common issues faced by school marketing teams.

This struggle occurs because the technologies schools commonly use (e.g., School-Admin, Blackbaud, Ravenna, etc.) have made tracking the right outcomes difficult. These platforms tend to focus on admissions-related processes (application processing, communication, etc.) rather than conversions and seamless integration into other data-driven platforms.

While you may know the clicks, visits, and impressions your school's website receives, these data points need to be tied directly to outcomes that drive your school forward, such as whether those clicks lead directly to inquiries and applicants. If your data are disconnected from goal-oriented outcomes, you end up monitoring key performance indicators that seem irrelevant. It's like having every stat in a football game except the score and then asking the two rival coaches to use these stats to determine who won the game.

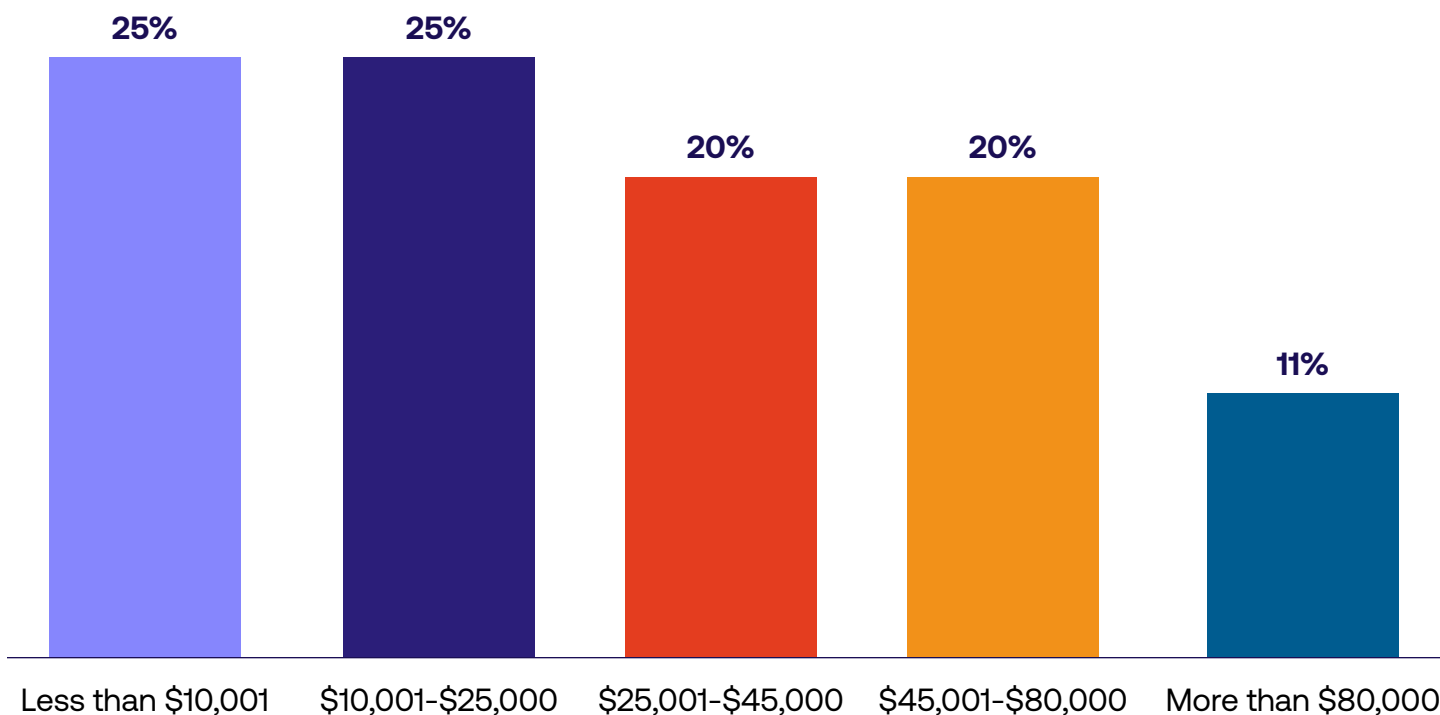
Analyzing data to determine the ROI of marketing efforts will tell you about how people get to your website, when they are most likely to leave, and what they did between arriving and departing. Scrutinize the successful (converting) sessions on your website, and change the key inflection points you find for unsuccessful sessions.

Getting small wins on the way to a big win will increase your overall conversions. A more advanced marketing tactic is to identify your micro- versus macro-conversion goals and then use micro-conversions (e.g., clicking a link, downloading a file) to drive right-fit families to inquire or apply (macro-conversions).

# Paid Advertising

Half of respondents reported that they allocated \$25,000 or less to paid media, with 25% reporting less than \$10,001. Just 11% reported allocating more than \$80,000.

What proportion of your marketing budget is devoted to paid media (e.g., advertising, pay-per-click ads, social media boosts and ads, SEM [search engine marketing], etc.)?



n=337

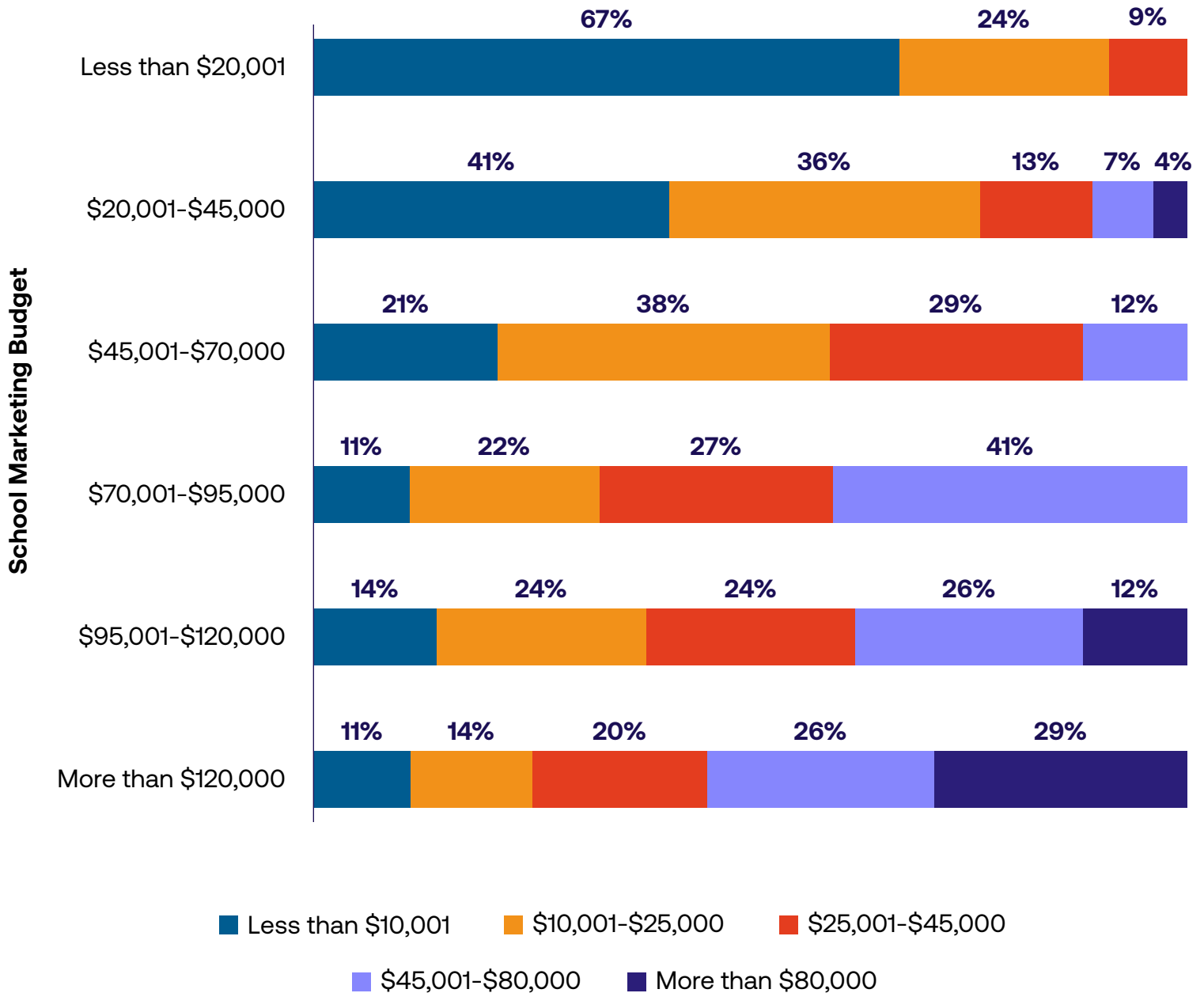
**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Paid traffic isn't necessarily better than organic traffic, but it can be more targeted and extremely trackable. Before choosing your paid advertising tactics, take a step back and develop an advertising strategy that's unique to your school, brand, audience, and market.

The ideal mix varies from school to school—and at different stages in the customer journey—but effective mixes often involve paid social media advertising (Meta Platforms like Facebook and Instagram), Google search (Google pay-per-click), and Google responsive display (Google display ad network).

Whatever proportions you choose, make sure that you can target your prospects through various stages of the customer journey.

Not surprisingly, schools with a greater overall budget reported allocating larger amounts to paid advertising. About 29% of schools with a media budget of more than \$120,000 allocated more than \$80,000 of that budget to paid advertising. Alternatively, 67% of schools with a media budget of less than \$20,001 reported allocating less than \$20,000 to paid advertising.

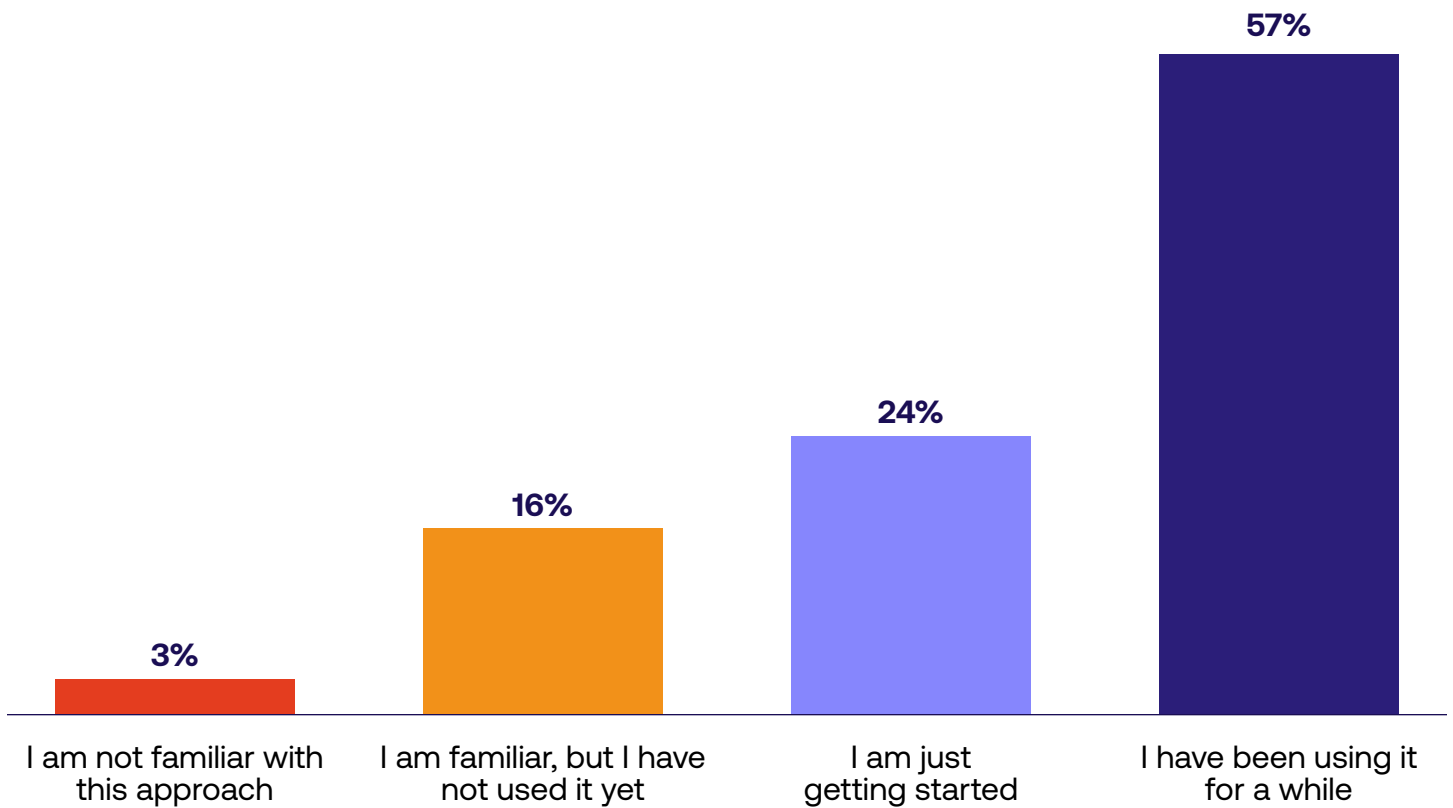
Share of budget allocated to paid advertising, by overall marketing budget



Share of Budget Allocated to Paid Advertising

Many marketing staff were familiar with paid search engine marketing (SEM), such as Google Adwords. Well over half (57%) reported having used paid SEM for some time, and 24% have just started using it.

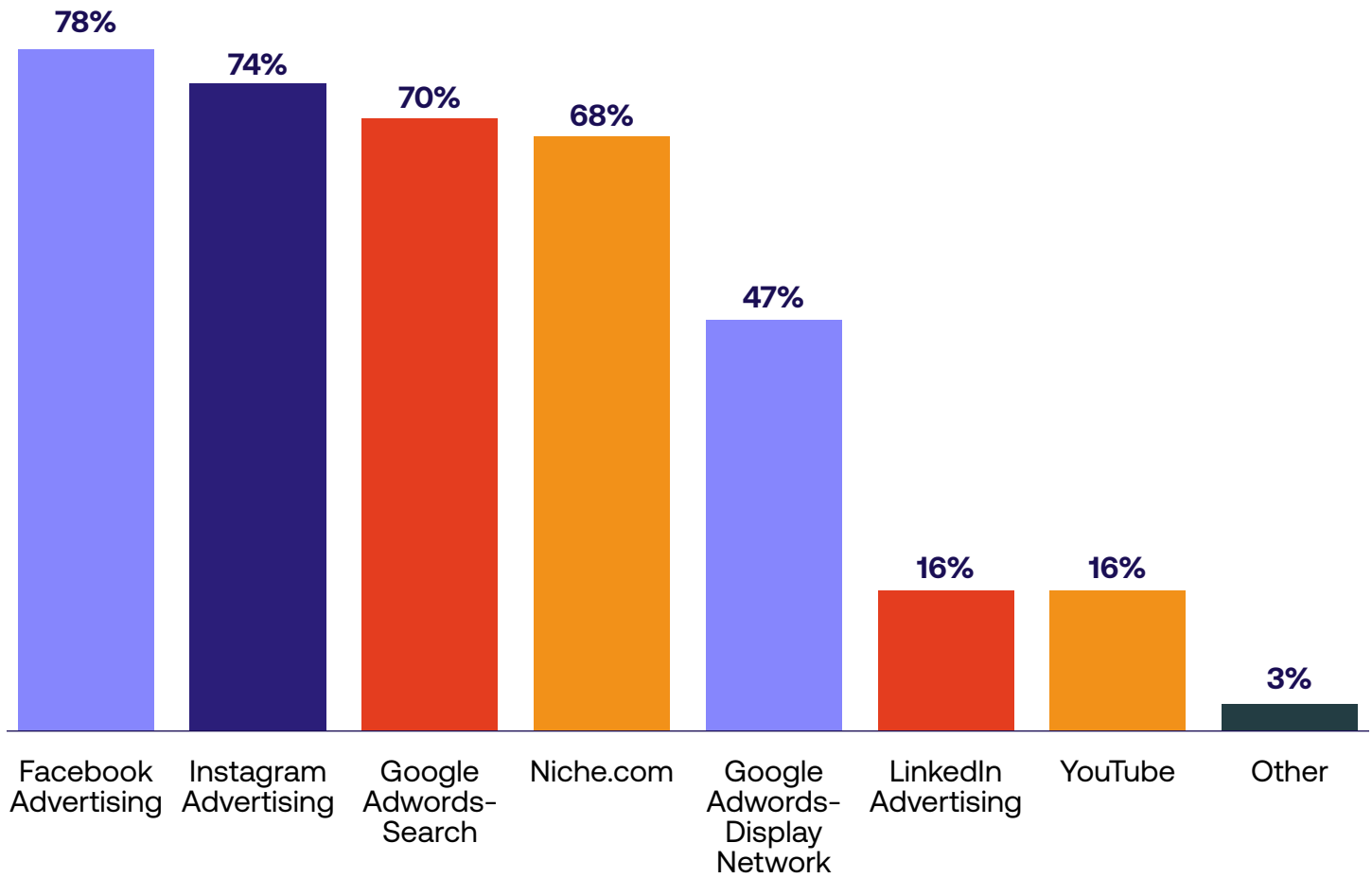
What is your level of expertise with paid search engine marketing, such as Google Adwords?



*n*=264

The most popular paid digital advertising among independent schools was Facebook, with 78% of schools reporting that they used this channel. Instagram (74%), Google Adwords - Search (70%), and Niche.com (68%) were also popular. The least popular paid digital advertising were LinkedIn advertising and YouTube—both at 16%.

Which paid digital advertising has your marketing department used in the past 12 months?



n=264

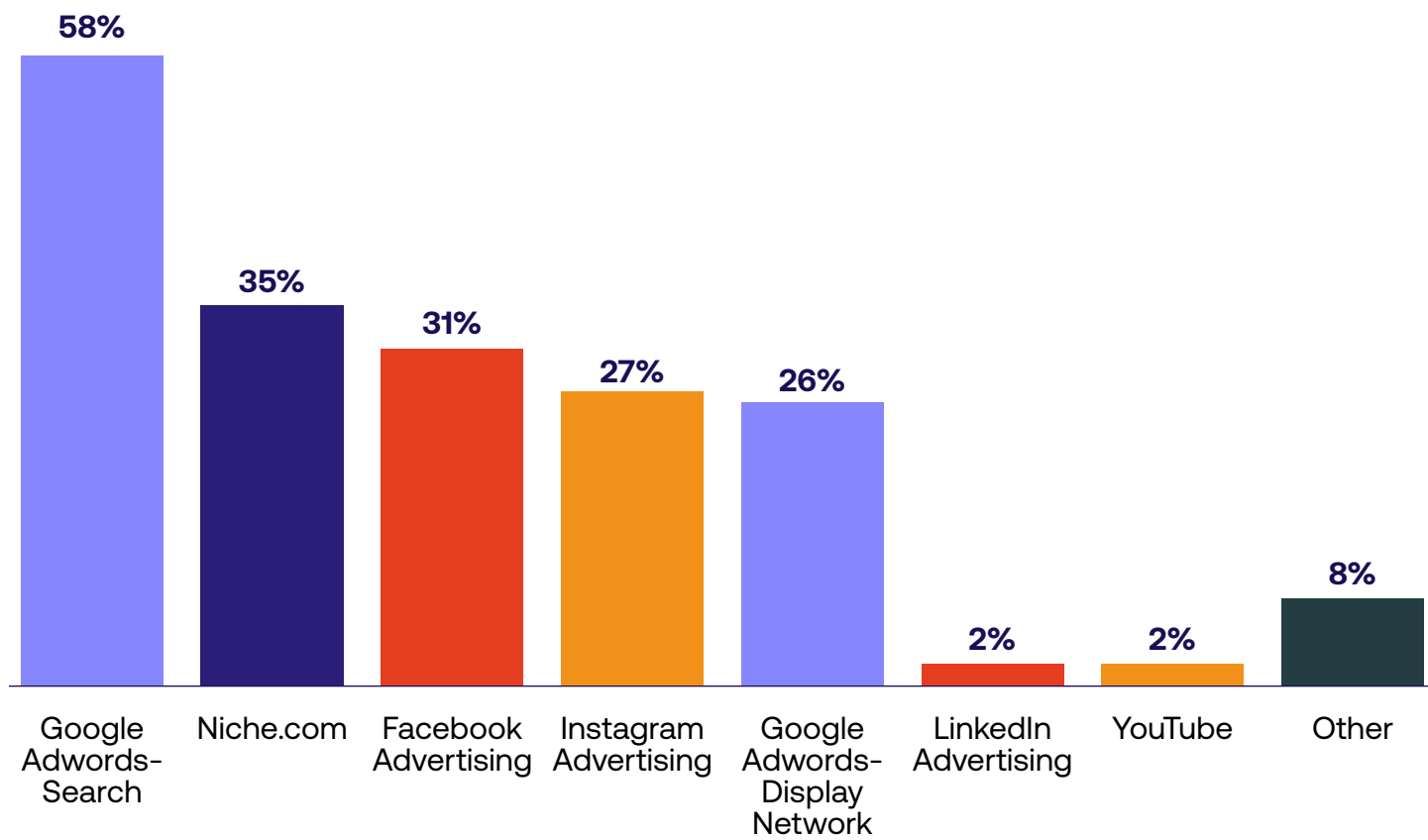
### DATA SPOTLIGHT

Only about two-thirds of boarding and secondary schools used Facebook and Instagram, below the 78% and 74% of the overall results. Also, 92% of boys' schools used Google Adwords - Search compared to only half of girls' schools. About 79% of boys' schools and 79% of schools with more than 700 students used Niche.com, while only 53% of schools with fewer than 201 students did.



Although Facebook and Instagram were the most popular paid digital advertising, Google Adwords searches were the most effective in driving new student leads. Over half (58%) of schools reported that Google Adwords – Search was the most effective paid digital advertising. Niche.com, Facebook, Instagram, and Google Adwords – Display Network advertising lagged behind, at 35%, 31%, 27%, and 26% respectively.

What types of paid digital advertising do you feel have been most effective in driving new student leads in the past 12 months?



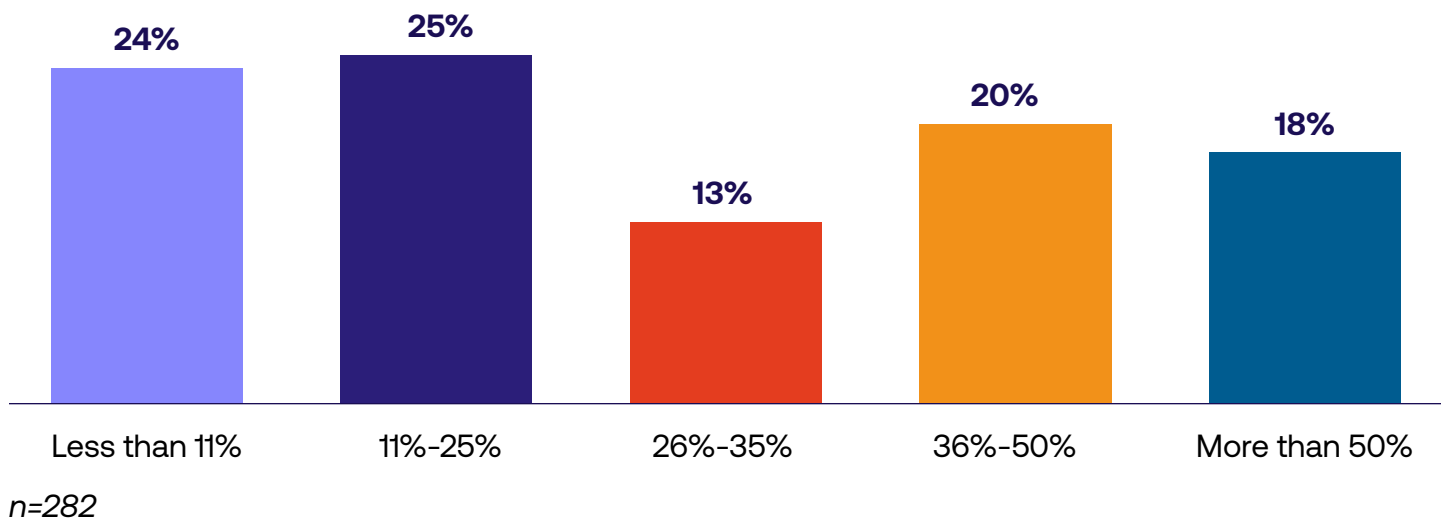
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### DATA SPOTLIGHT

A larger percentage of schools with fewer than 201 students (67%) indicated that Google AdWords - Search was the most effective in generating new student leads. In contrast, fewer girls' schools (44%) and secondary schools (48%) shared this view. About half of schools with over 700 students (47%) identified Niche.com as most effective, compared to only 19% of schools with fewer than 201 students and 13% of girls' schools. Schools with fewer than 201 students also found Facebook to be effective (44%). Additionally, Instagram was seen as a strong platform, with 54% of boys' schools and 44% of girls' schools rating it most effective—significantly higher than the overall percentage for all schools (27%).

Of responding marketing staff, 26% were not sure how much of their digital traffic came through paid channels, and 8% did not use paid channels. The remaining two-thirds reported varying levels of results from paid channels. Half of these respondents (49%) reported that 25% or less of their digital traffic came from paid channels. Just 18% reported that over half of their digital traffic was prompted by paid channels.

What percentage of your digital traffic comes from paid channels like paid search, display advertising, and paid social media? (Results exclude those who do not use paid channels or were "not sure.")



## DATA SPOTLIGHT

While results were generally consistent across school demographics, a larger percentage of girls' schools (21%) and secondary schools (17%) reported not using paid channels, compared to just 8% of schools overall.

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Paid advertising can drive awareness of your brand and lead families into the customer journey through familiarity, consideration, and conversion (on a micro or macro level). However, many schools often overlook those leads, making it difficult to demonstrate the effectiveness of paid avenues.

For instance, search terms that are set up in your paid search strategy need to live somewhere on your website or landing page in order for Google's algorithms to place your listing higher on your viewers' results. So, if your paid search terms claim that your school offers Boston's top IB diploma program, your website needs to state that somewhere as well.

Additionally, if your audiences move their way through your desired conversion point—such as completing an inquiry form—but the infrastructure isn't in place to nurture a family through to the next steps, you may have lost your chance to enroll a mission-fit family. Consider the entire customer journey, and provide your audiences with all the information they need to take the appropriate actions through the admissions process.

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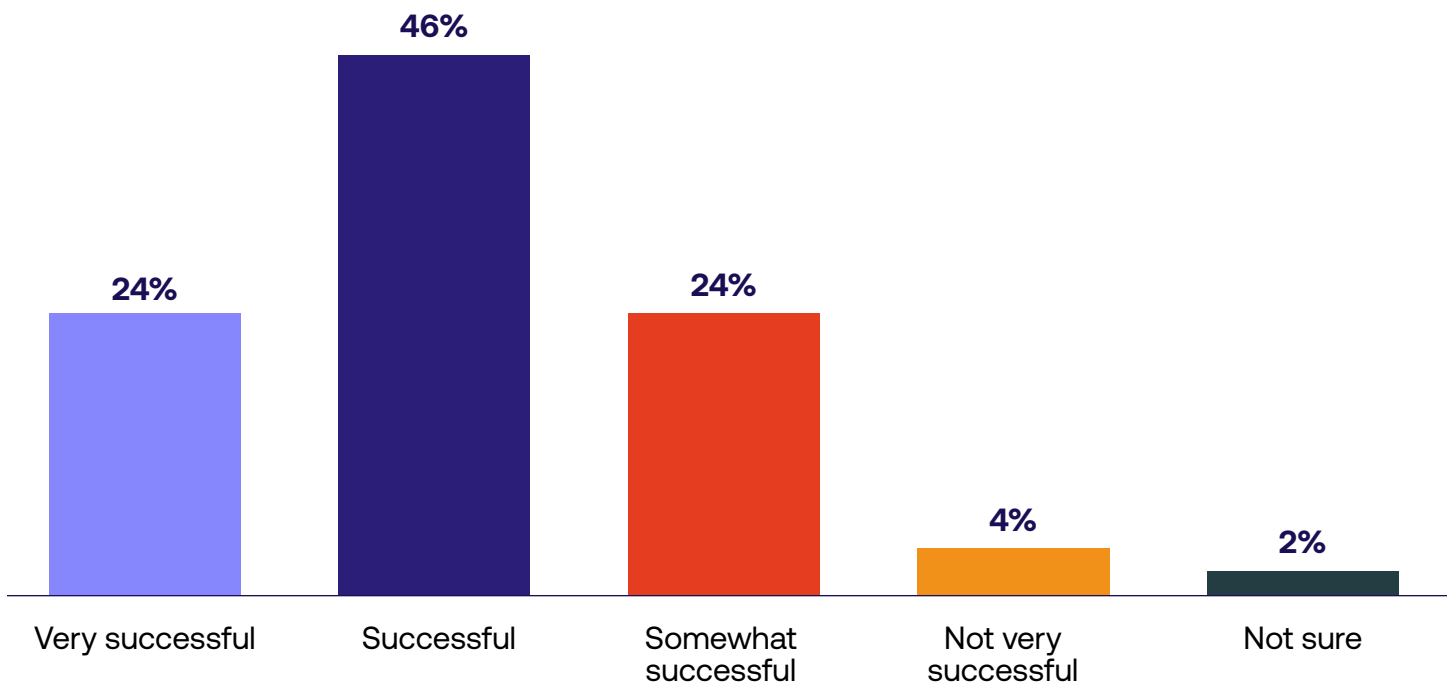
# Chapter



# Website

Schools generally felt positively about their websites. Well over half reported that their website attracts and encourages applications from prospective families. Almost a quarter (24%) said that their website was very successful in doing so, and 46% described it as successful. Just 4% said that their website did not successfully attract prospective families.

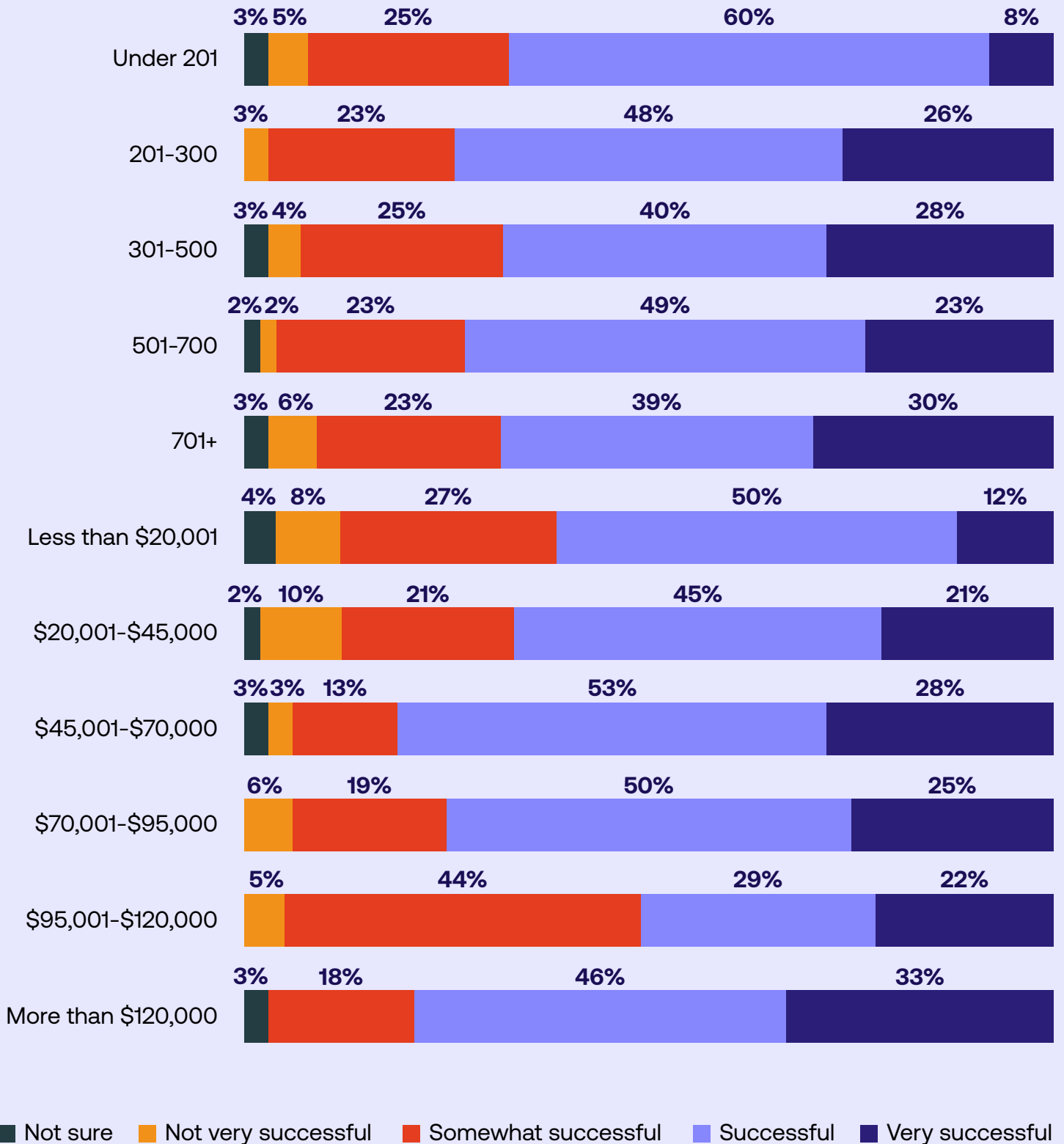
How well do you think your website performs for attracting prospective families and encouraging them to apply?



*n=261*

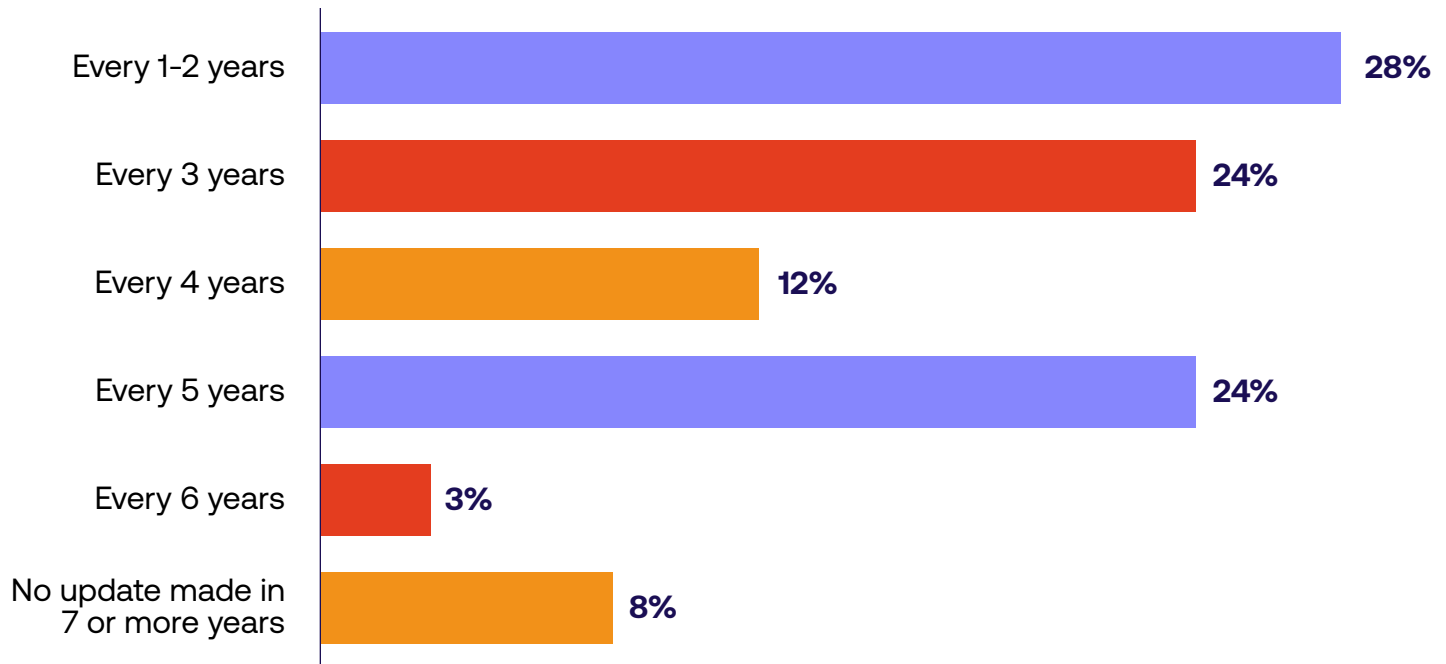
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Schools with over 700 students were less likely to report their website as very successful (8%), while mid-sized schools reported higher rates of very successful (23% to 26%). Schools with larger budgets were more likely than those with smaller budgets to say their website was very successful.



Independent schools consider updating their websites fairly frequently. Twenty-eight percent consider an update every one to two years, while 24% consider it every three years. Very few schools go over six years without considering an update—just 8% have not made an update in seven or more years.

How often do you think about updating your website?



n=261

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** One of the most important things to consider when approaching your website is the difference between maintaining it and updating it. Maintaining a website frequently (and having a centralized team dedicated to this task) is important to ensure that dates and program offerings are always as current as possible. Including outdated information on your website creates a negative impression and can impact turnout for key events and programs.

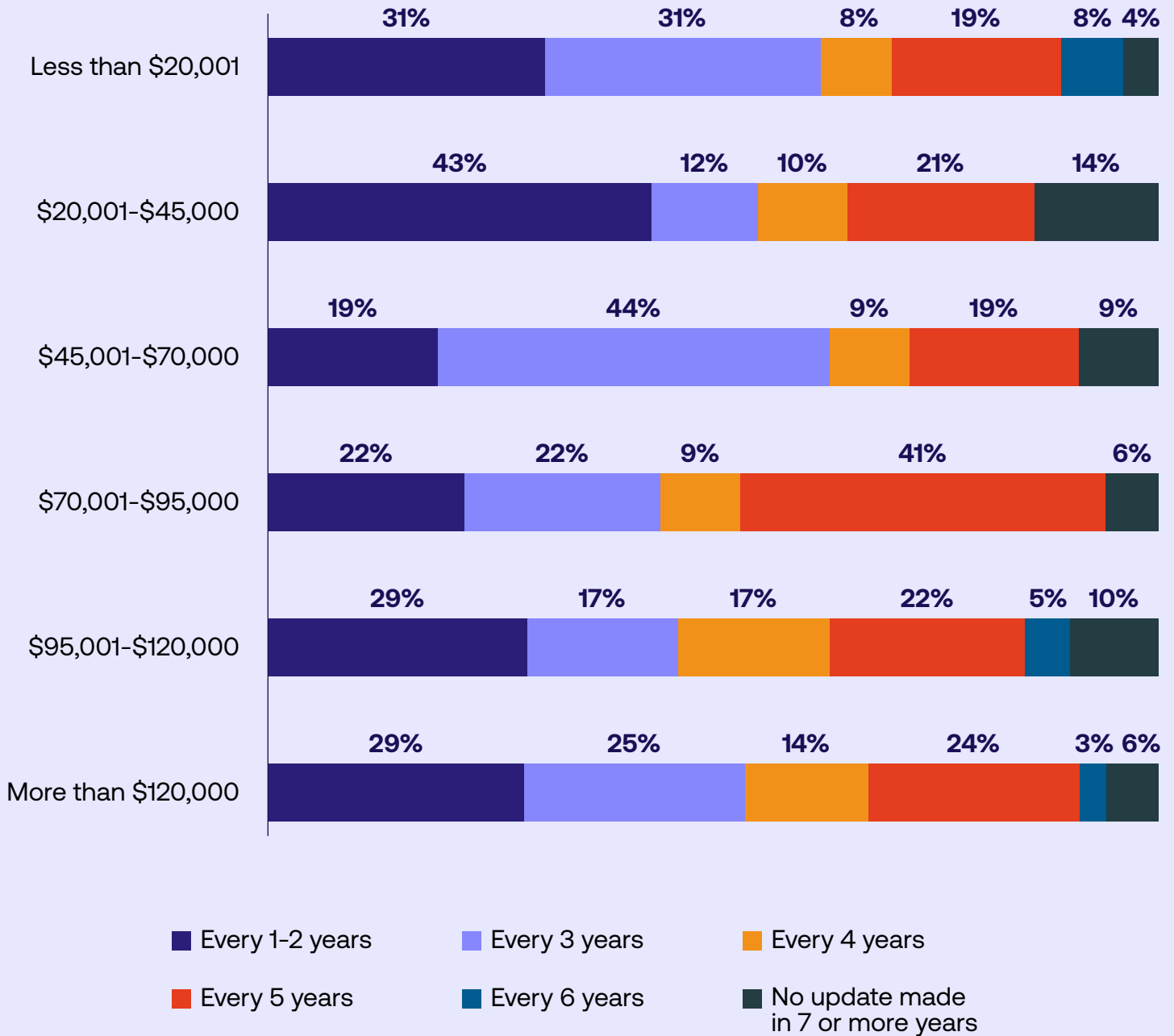
Updating your website can include a range of activities. Every few years, take a hard look at your site to assess whether the content and design are communicating your brand and connecting with your audiences effectively. This can include visual updates to design, photography, and video, as well as refining messages for different audiences and sharing new stories from your school community. Your website is one of the most important opportunities to engage with prospective families. You can lose them quickly if the site doesn't easily convey what makes your school different in ways that families find relevant and interesting.

Helping families find your website by optimizing your content for search engine rankings is another type of update to consider.

More in-depth updates can include improving functionality, user experience, and technical performance. These types of changes should be considered every four to six years.

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

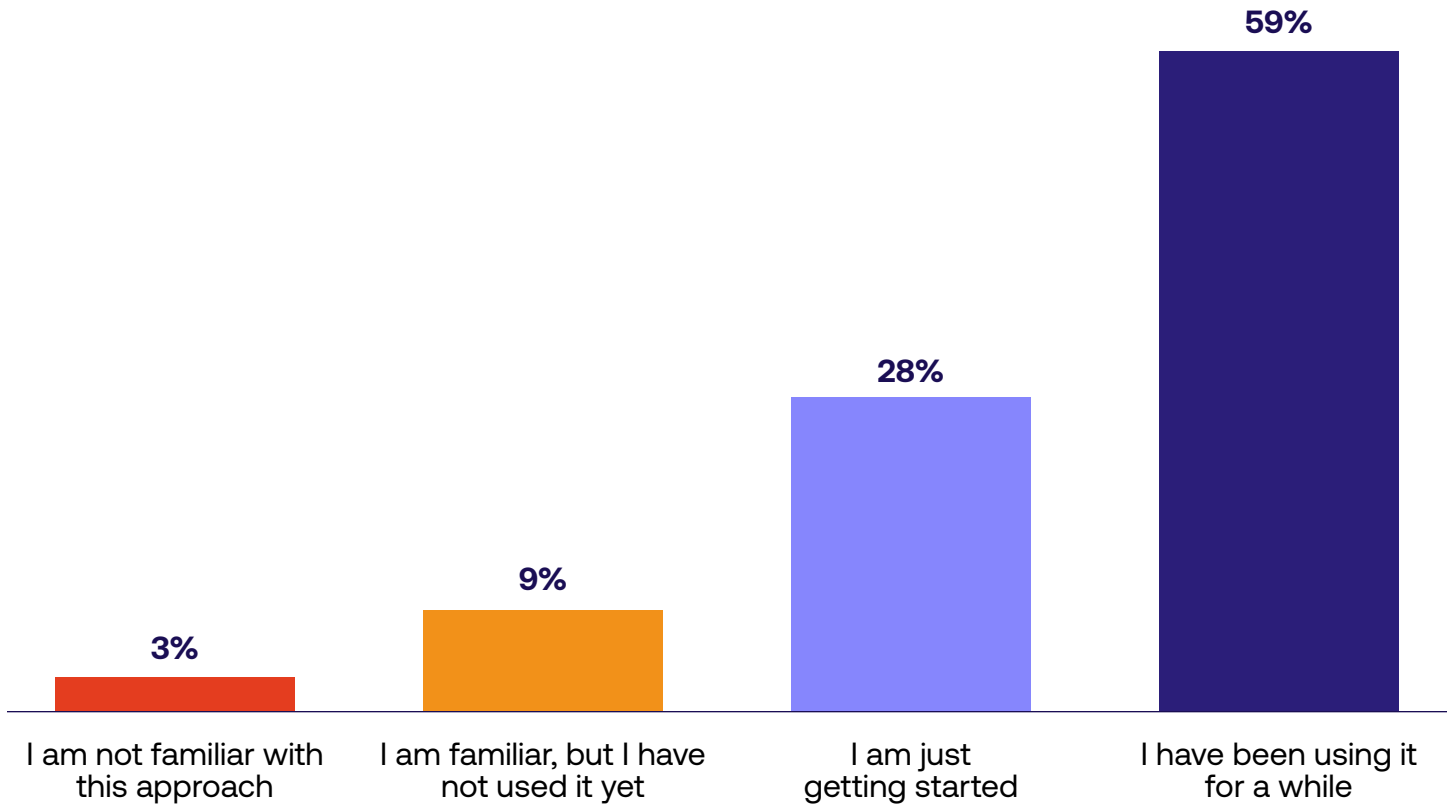
Schools with smaller budgets (under \$45,001) and larger budgets (over \$95,000) were more likely to have made website updates within the past one or two years (31% and 43% for schools with smaller budgets and 29% for schools with larger budgets) than schools in the middle \$45,001-\$95,000 range. Only 19% and 22% of these schools had updated their website as recently.



Search engine optimization (SEO) is an important part of bringing traffic to the school’s website. SEO is a process in which website owners improve their website’s ranking in order to increase the quantity and quality of traffic to their site. For independent schools, SEO is an important tool in the admissions process.

About six out of 10 schools (59%) reported that they have been using SEO for a while. Twenty-eight percent have just started using SEO.

What is your level of expertise with search engine optimization (SEO)?



n=264

### DATA SPOTLIGHT

About half of schools with fewer than 201 students (48%) and 41% of secondary schools indicated that they were just beginning to use SEO. In contrast, 92% of boys’ schools, 68% of schools with more than 700 students, and 67% of girls’ schools reported having used SEO for a while.



**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** When optimizing your website for search engines, it helps to think in terms of two distinct sections or channels: on-site SEO and off-site SEO.

For on-site SEO, your primary audience is search engine robots. The goal is to use technical enhancements throughout your site to ensure that these bots can easily and accurately list it.

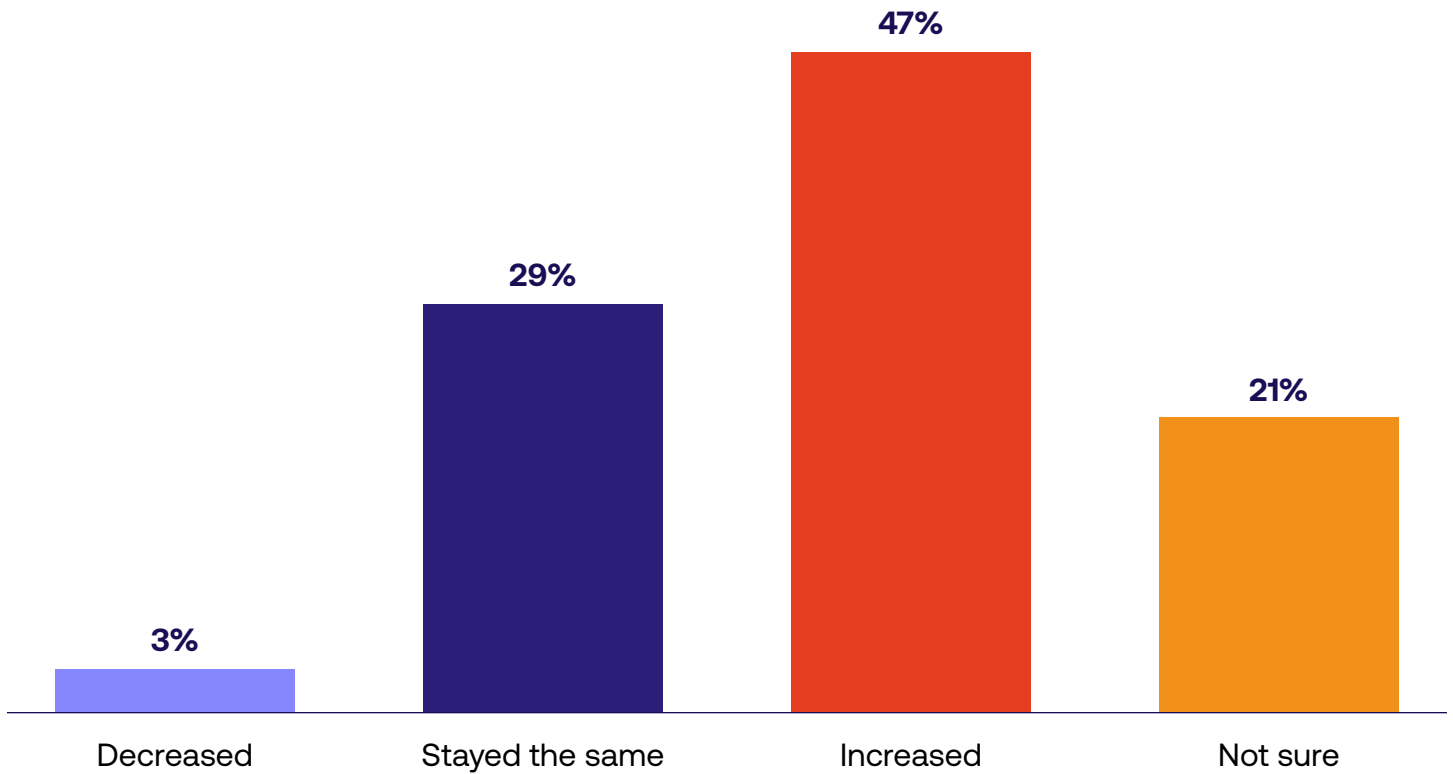
For off-site SEO, your primary audience is web users. The goal here is to create attractive and valuable content for users who fit your target audience persona and then publish it in the places they're most likely to be (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, blogs). When you manage on-site and off-site SEO well, you send a signal to search engines' algorithms to rank your website highly for relevant search criteria.

Every page of your website should meet certain criteria to rank highly in a search engine. Running an audit on your website will help you understand how your content could be improved for SEO. SEO audits are complex and involved but crucial. They can uncover a range of opportunities and challenges, from simple on-page adjustments to complex server and coding issues. Once the audit is complete, engage your marketing and web support teams to help determine priorities and make development plans.

If you're interested in how SEO functions and want to learn simple steps for optimization, check out the many free SEO guides available online from reputable sites such as Moz.com and searchenginejournal.com.

Almost half (47%) of respondents reported that visits from organic searches have increased from last year. About three in 10 (29%) reported that the number stayed the same, and just 3% reported that they decreased.

Have the visits to your website from organic search changed compared to last year?



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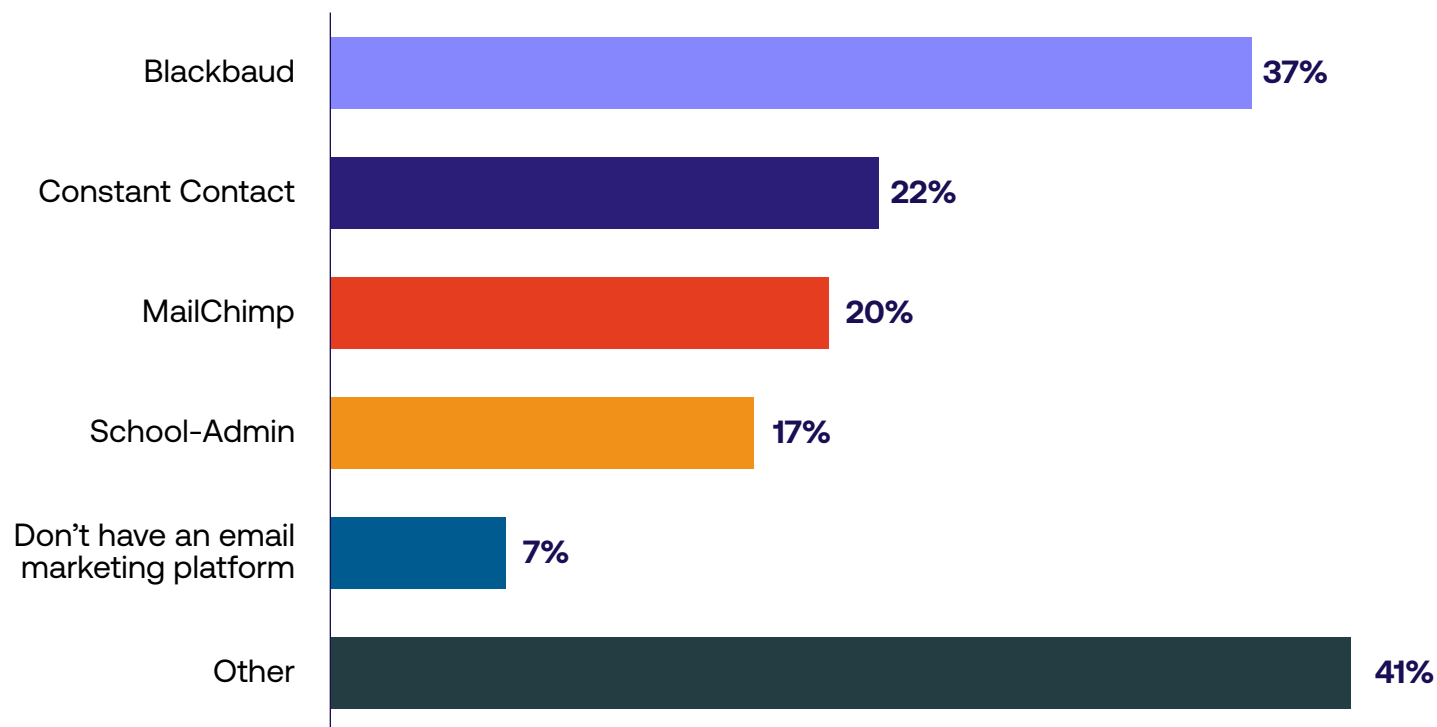
### DATA SPOTLIGHT

The only significant differences across school demographics were that 61% of girls' schools reported an increase in web visits from organic search, compared to 47% of schools overall; and 44% of secondary schools noted that web visits remained the same, higher than the 29% for schools overall.

# Platforms and Tools

Over a third of schools (37%) used Blackbaud for their email marketing. About one-fifth each used Constant Contact (22%) and MailChimp (20%). Other popular email platforms were Veracross, Finalsite, and HubSpot.

Which email marketing platforms, if any, does your school currently use?



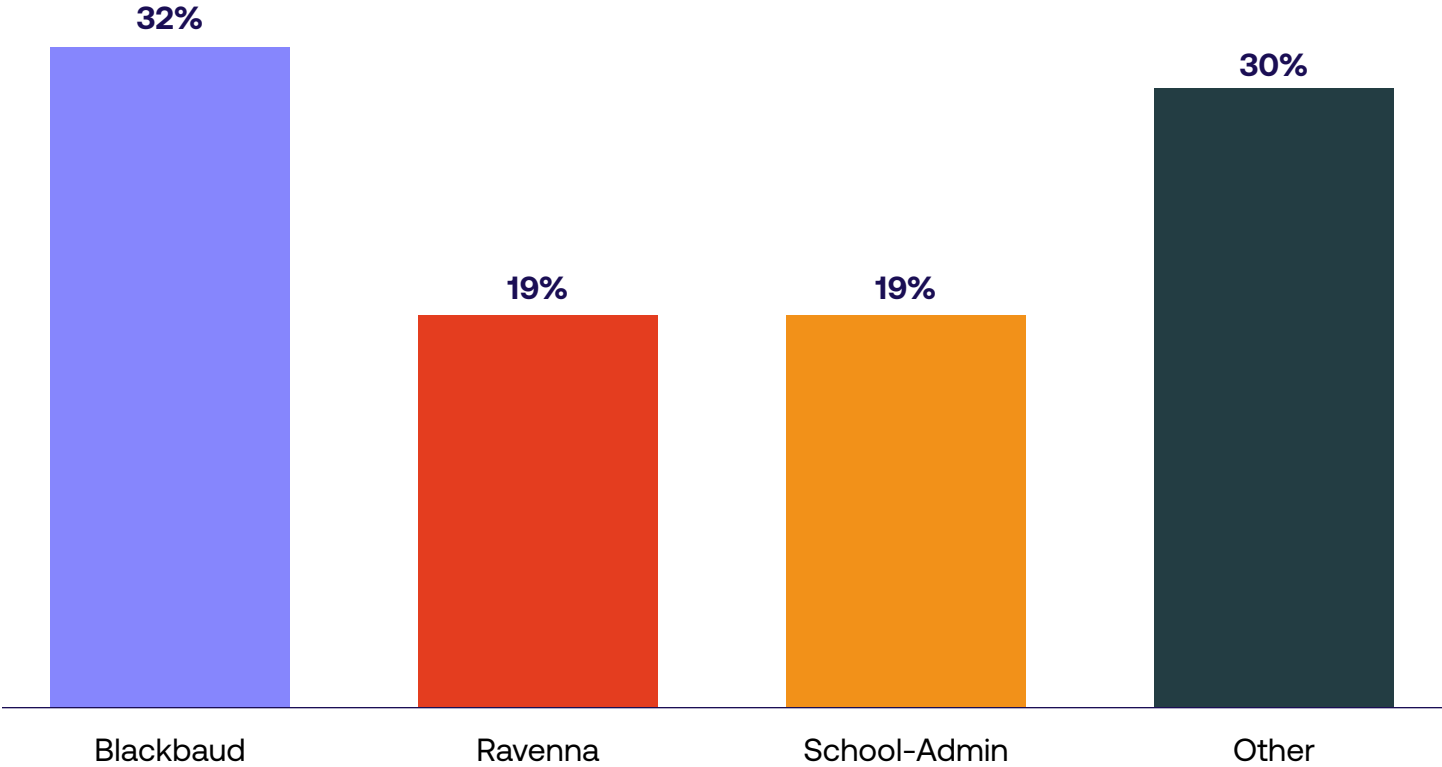
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## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Boys' schools (46%) and schools with 501-700 students (47%) were more likely to use Blackbaud as their email platform, compared to 37% of schools overall. In contrast, only about 30% of schools with fewer than 301 students used Blackbaud. Additionally, 35% of schools with fewer than 201 students opted for Constant Contact, which is 13 percentage points higher than the overall percentage of schools using this platform. Finally, a higher percentage of boys' schools (31%) and secondary schools (27%) reported using School-Admin compared to the overall percentage.

The most popular admissions software among independent schools was Blackbaud, with 32% of respondents reporting that they used Blackbaud admissions software. Nineteen percent used Ravenna and School-Admin each. Other common software included Veracross, FACTS, Slate, and AIMS.

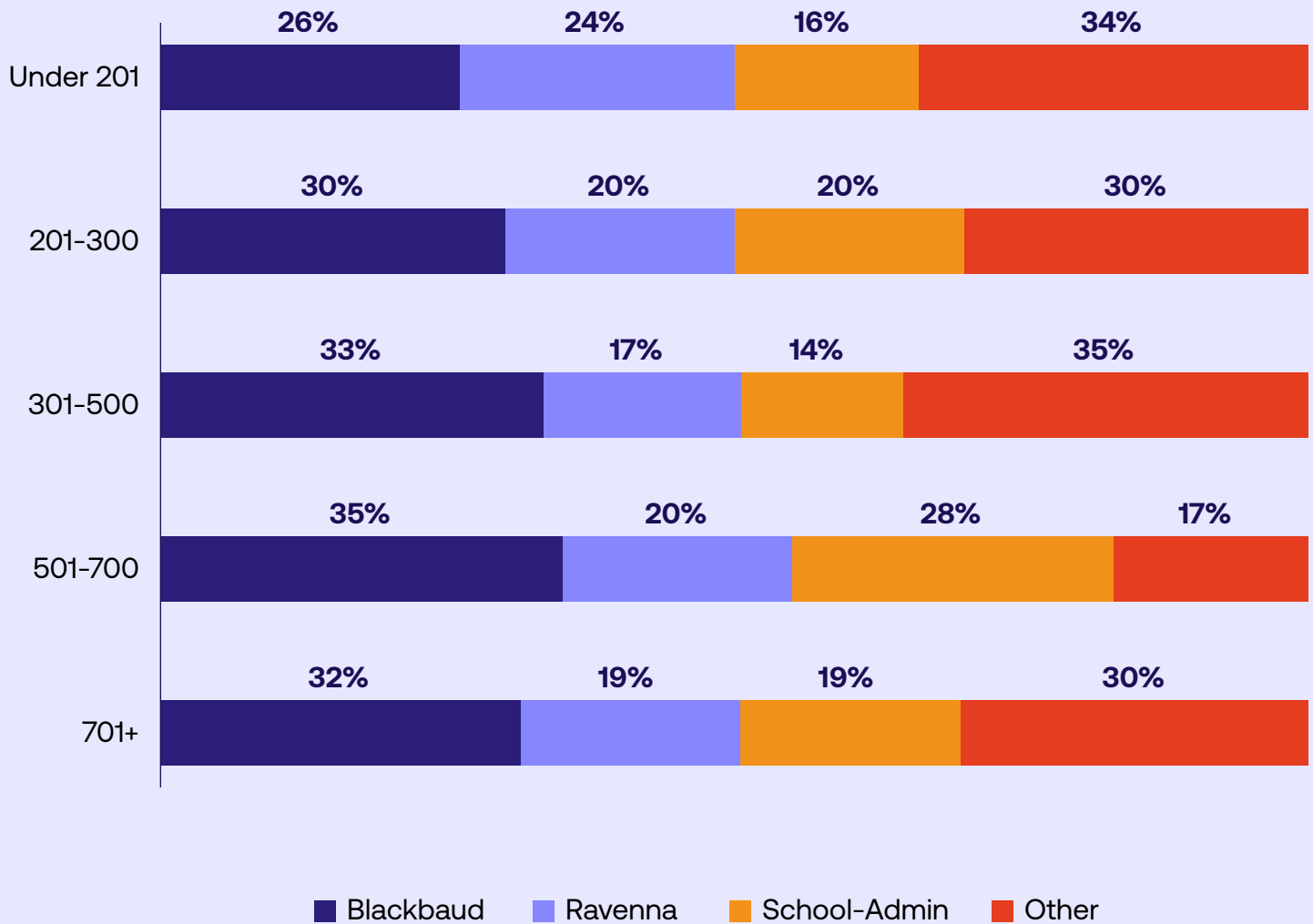
What admissions software do you currently use?



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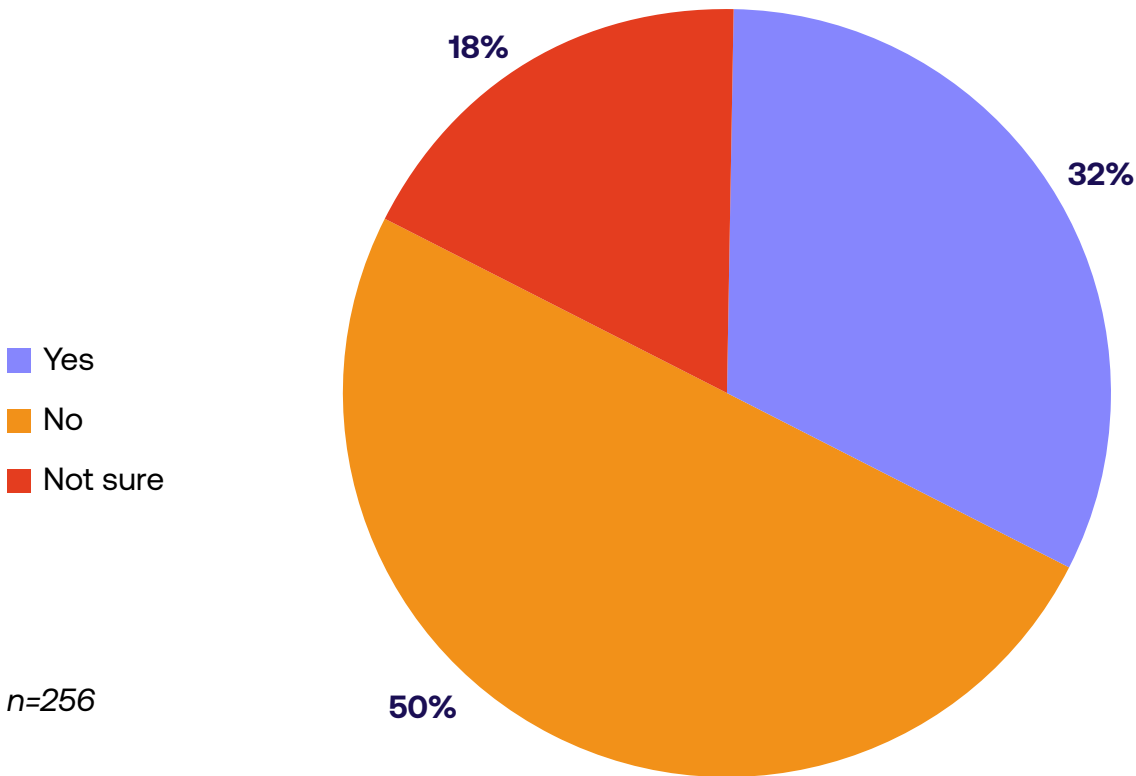
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

While there were few differences in admissions software based on school size, schools with between 501 and 700 students were slightly more likely to use Blackbaud and less likely to use other admissions software not listed in the survey. Elementary schools were more likely to use Ravenna (29%), while secondary schools were more likely to use School-Admin.



Half of schools reported that they did not use a customer relationship management (CRM) tool to automate follow-ups with prospective families. Just about a third (32%) did so, while 18% were not sure. The most popular CRM tools included HubSpot, Finalsite, Veracross, School-Admin, and Blackbaud.

Does your school utilize a customer relationship management (CRM) tool/program to automate follow-up with new prospective family leads?



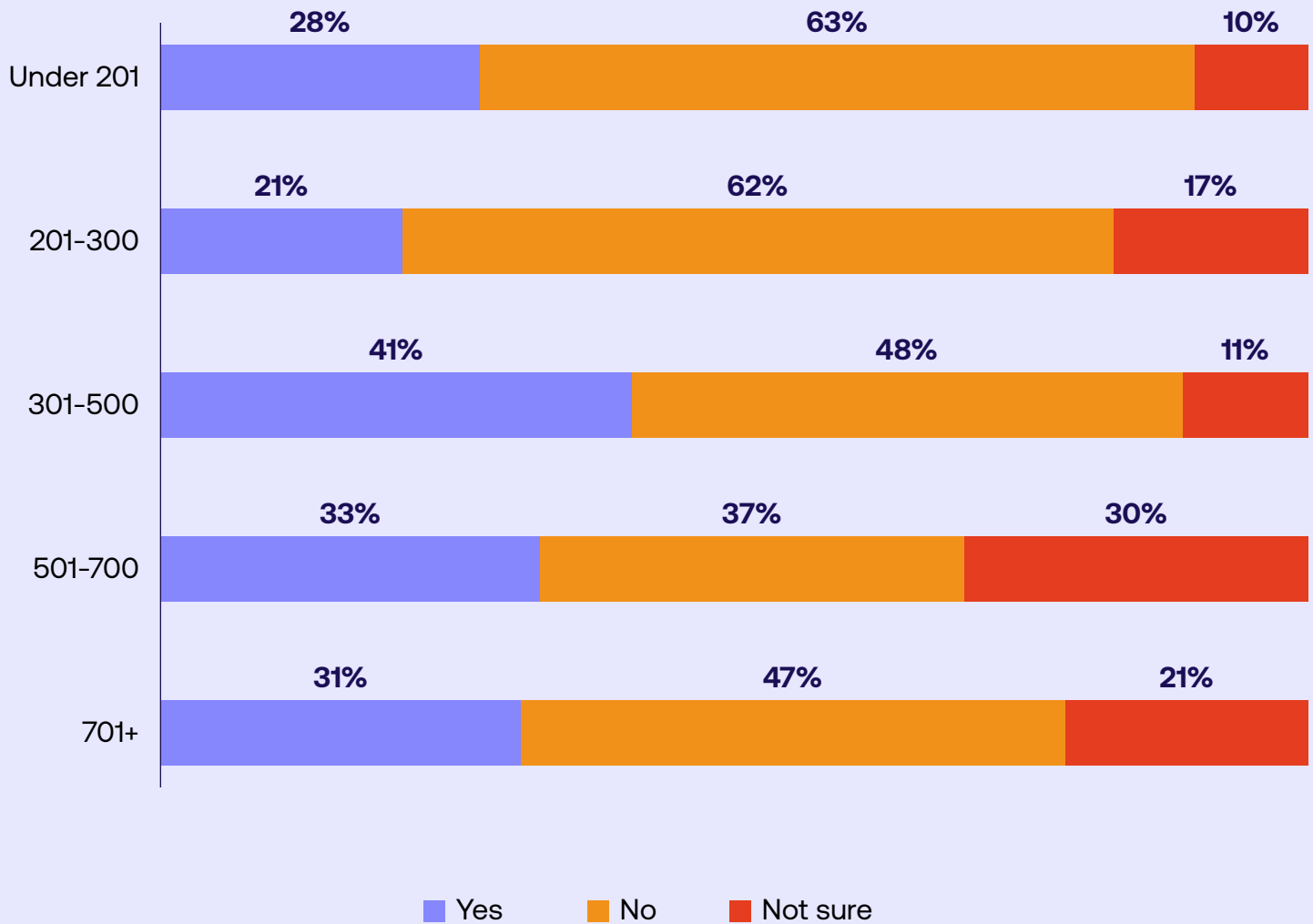
**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Because the admissions process requires a high degree of personalization, automation can seem daunting and even unsuitable for the task. Many admissions and marketing professionals fear that automation could disrupt the personalized touchpoints and relationship-driven approach that move families from inquiry to enrollment.

However, automation can be a valuable partner to your team rather than a replacement. Take the time to understand what families need or want to know at each inflection point along the admissions journey. Craft content that you can schedule to usher them through their next steps. Higher-level content generally performs better in this context, especially if you offer audiences the opportunity to learn more, get in touch, and understand exactly where they are in the process.

Take it a step further, and consider hiring a subject matter expert (whether that's personnel or an agency) who can recommend which CRMs will integrate seamlessly with your current tools or suggest replacing your existing tools with options that can make your life a bit easier.

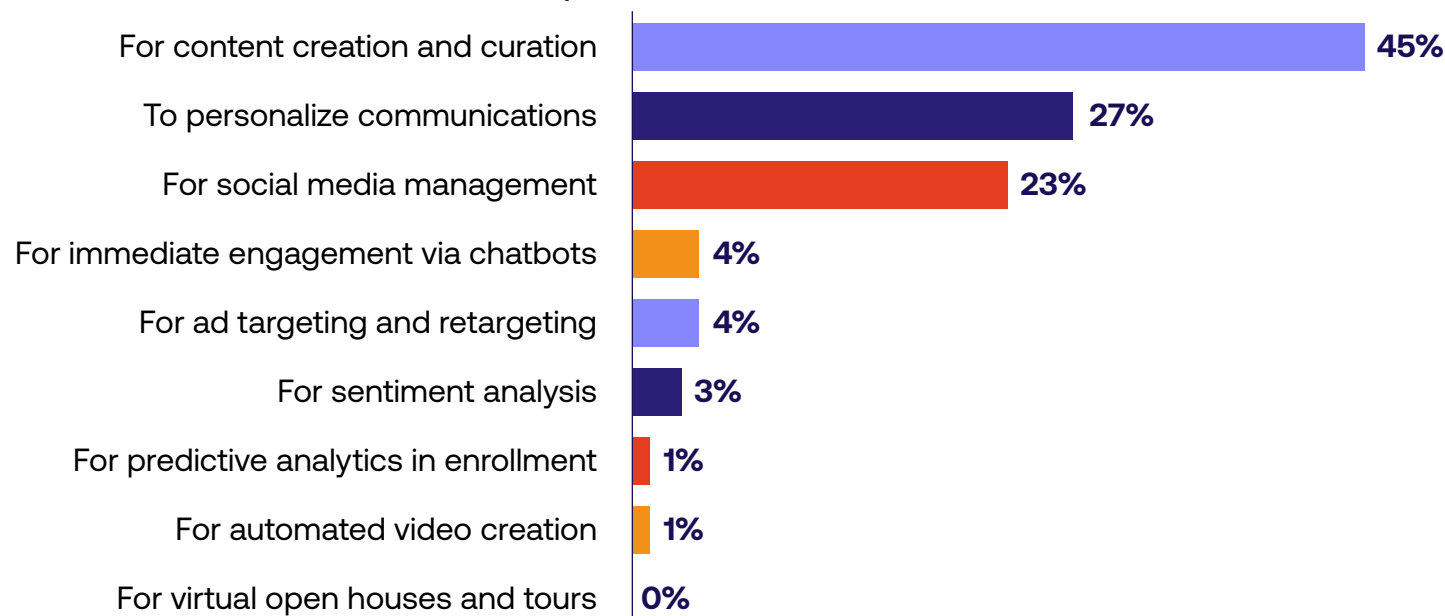
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Smaller schools were much more likely to not have a CRM tool to automate follow-ups with their families, with almost two-thirds of schools with under 201 students (63%) or between 201 and 300 (62%) reporting that they did not have this tool. Elementary schools (59%) were also more likely not to have a CRM tool than boys' schools (38%) and girls' schools (41%).



AI is a rapidly growing tool, with a wide variety of applications. However, 40% of schools reported that they did not use AI in their marketing efforts. Those who did use AI most commonly used it to assist their marketing efforts by creating and curating content (45%), personalizing communications (27%), and managing social media (23%). There is room for independent schools to expand their use of AI in marketing. For instance, just 4% of schools reported using AI for ad targeting, and just 3% used it for sentiment analysis. Even fewer, 1%, used AI for predictive enrollment analytics.

In what ways are you currently using AI tools in your marketing efforts? (Results exclude those who do not use AI.)



n=157

## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Fewer boarding schools (37%) and secondary schools (27%) used AI tools for content creation and curation. More boys' schools used AI for social media management (31%), immediate engagement via chatbots (15%), and predictive analytics in enrollment (15%).

**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** Generative AI is rapidly transforming the marketing landscape, offering exciting opportunities for innovation and efficiency. However, it's crucial to approach this technology with caution, as concerns regarding security, accuracy, and transparency persist. To mitigate risks, marketers should prioritize specialized AI tools where you can monitor the privacy and understand how they work, ensuring responsible and inclusive content creation. While generative AI can automate tasks like writing code and generating content, its true value lies in its ability to augment human creativity and strategic thinking. The future of marketing will likely involve a synergistic collaboration between human expertise and the capabilities of generative AI.



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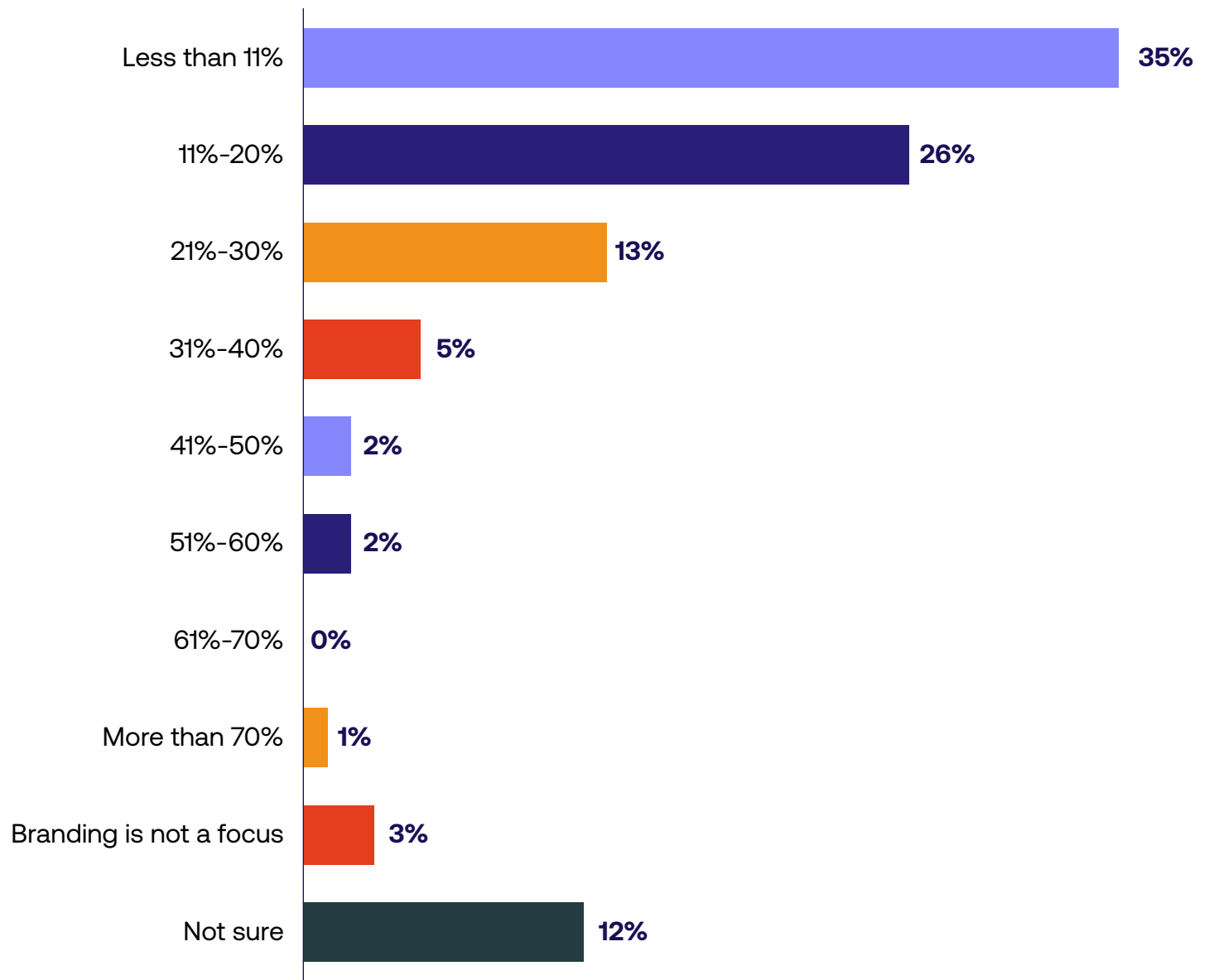
# Chapter



# Branding

Most schools do not dedicate much of their marketing budget to branding. More than six in 10 (61%) allocated 20% or less of the budget to branding, with 35% spending less than 11%. Just 10% of schools reported allocating more than 30% of the budget to branding.

What percentage of your marketing budget is spent on branding?

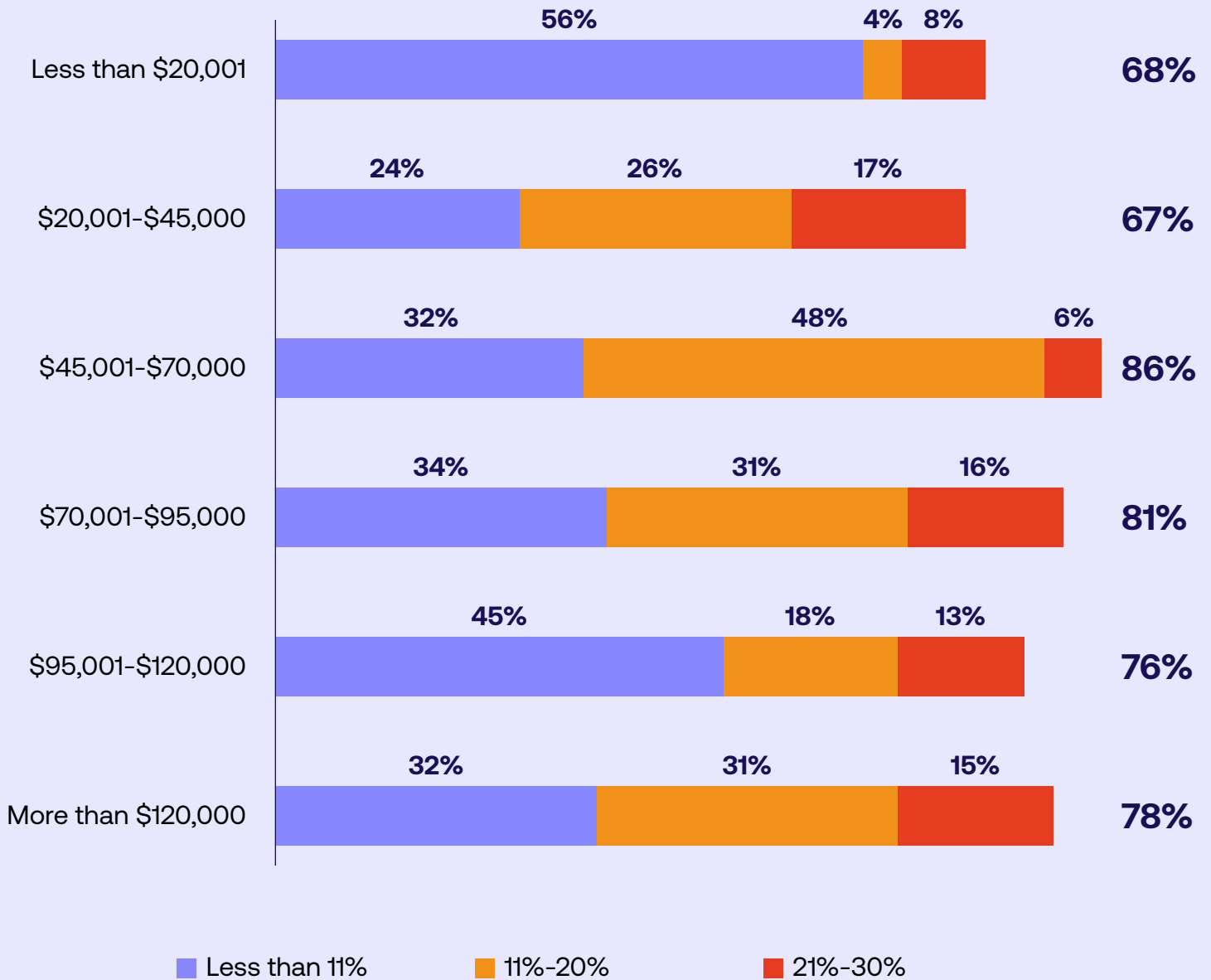


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## DATA SPOTLIGHT

Schools with larger budgets tended to allocate more to branding than those with smaller budgets. However, schools with a budget between \$45,001 and \$70,000 allocated the highest percentage of their budget to branding, at 86%.

Percent of budget allocated to branding, by overall budget



## DATA SPOTLIGHT

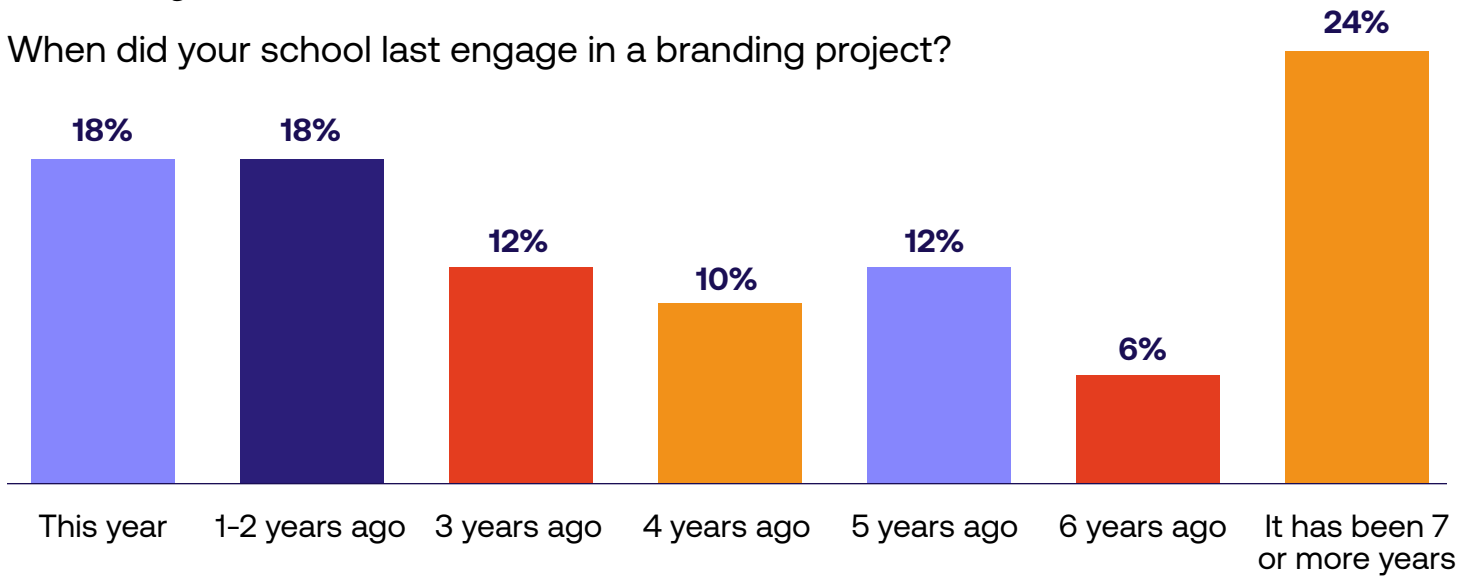
Half of girls' schools allocated less than 11% of their marketing budget to branding, while 46% of boys' schools allocated between 21% and 30%.

Percent who allocated 30% or less of their marketing budget to branding

	Less than 11%	11%-20%	21%-30%
<b>School Gender</b>			
Boys	23%	31%	46%
Girls	50%	28%	—
Coed	35%	26%	12%
<b>School Size</b>			
Under 201	36%	26%	10%
201-300	40%	13%	20%
301-500	38%	33%	11%
501-700	30%	26%	17%
701+	34%	25%	10%
<b>Grade Level</b>			
Elementary	36%	30%	9%
Secondary	42%	24%	9%
Elementary-Secondary	33%	25%	16%

Fewer than two in 10 schools have undertaken a branding project this year or in the past two years, with only 18% doing so in each case. Meanwhile, 24% reported that it has been seven years or more since their last branding effort.

When did your school last engage in a branding project?



n=259

### DATA SPOTLIGHT

A sizable percentage of boarding schools (44%) and schools with 201-300 students (52%) reported undertaking a branding project within the past two years. In contrast, 54% of elementary schools indicated that they last engaged in a branding project more than five years ago.

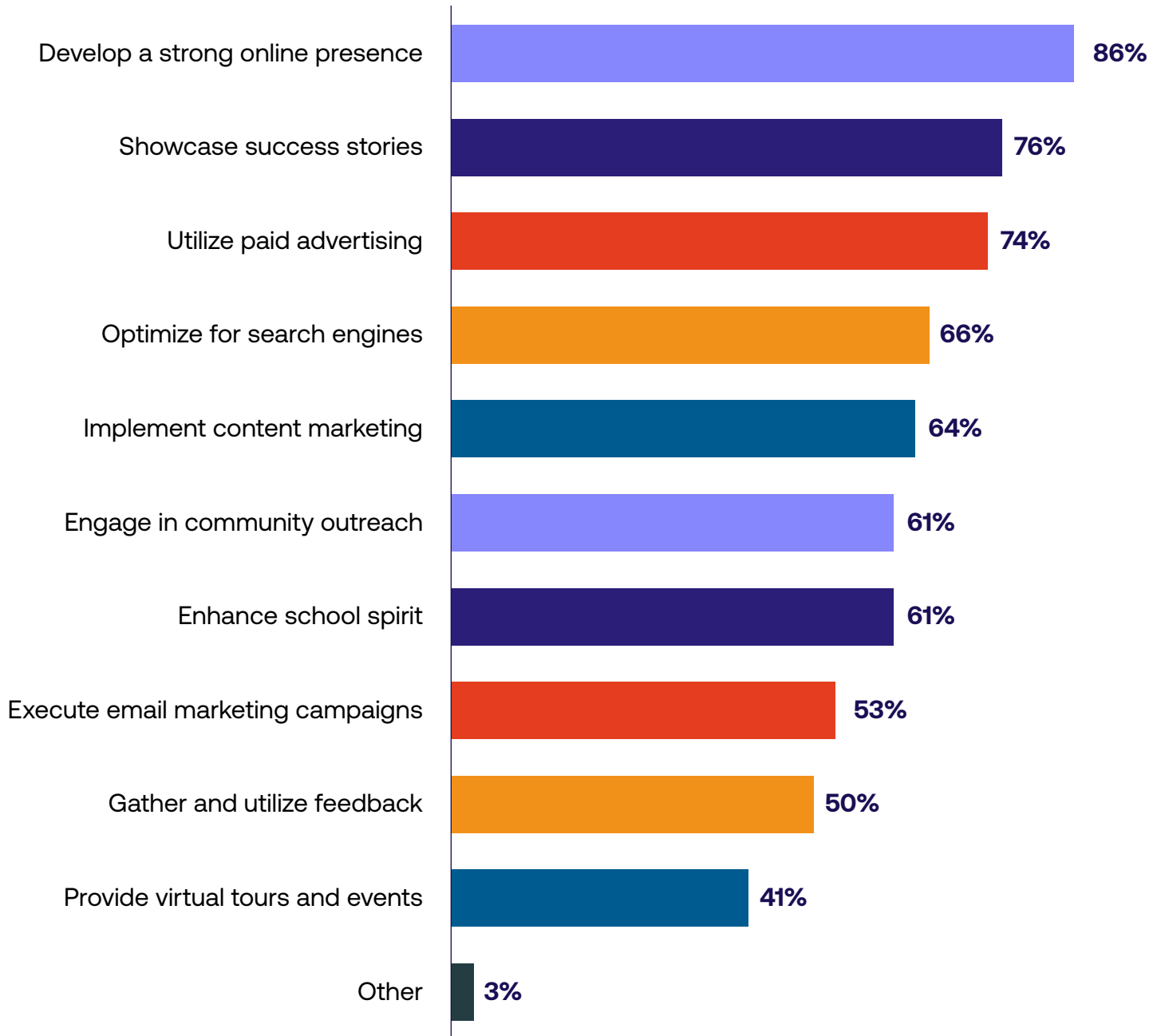
**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** These self-reflective questions can help you test the strength of your brand:

1. How well do current prospective families know your school?
2. Are your mission and values reflected in your marketing efforts?
3. Can members of the community differentiate your school from your competitors if asked?
4. Has your community undergone any changes in the last few years, and have you reviewed your school's positioning to stay relevant?
5. Does every staff member who interacts with families use consistent and current messaging about your school, not only in materials but in conversation?

If any of these questions are challenging to answer, it may be time to embark on a brand project. Whether that's a simple brand refresh or a full overhaul, starting with solid brand positioning will set up future marketing efforts to thrive. Once your brand is in a place that your board, head of school, and marketing communications team are comfortable with, you can approach future initiatives with clarity and alignment on your shared goals.

Schools used a variety of methods to promote their brand. Almost nine out of 10 schools (86%) developed a strong online presence, and 76% showcased success stories. About three-quarters (74%) utilized paid advertising, and 66% used SEO.

### What types of strategies has your school used to promote your brand?



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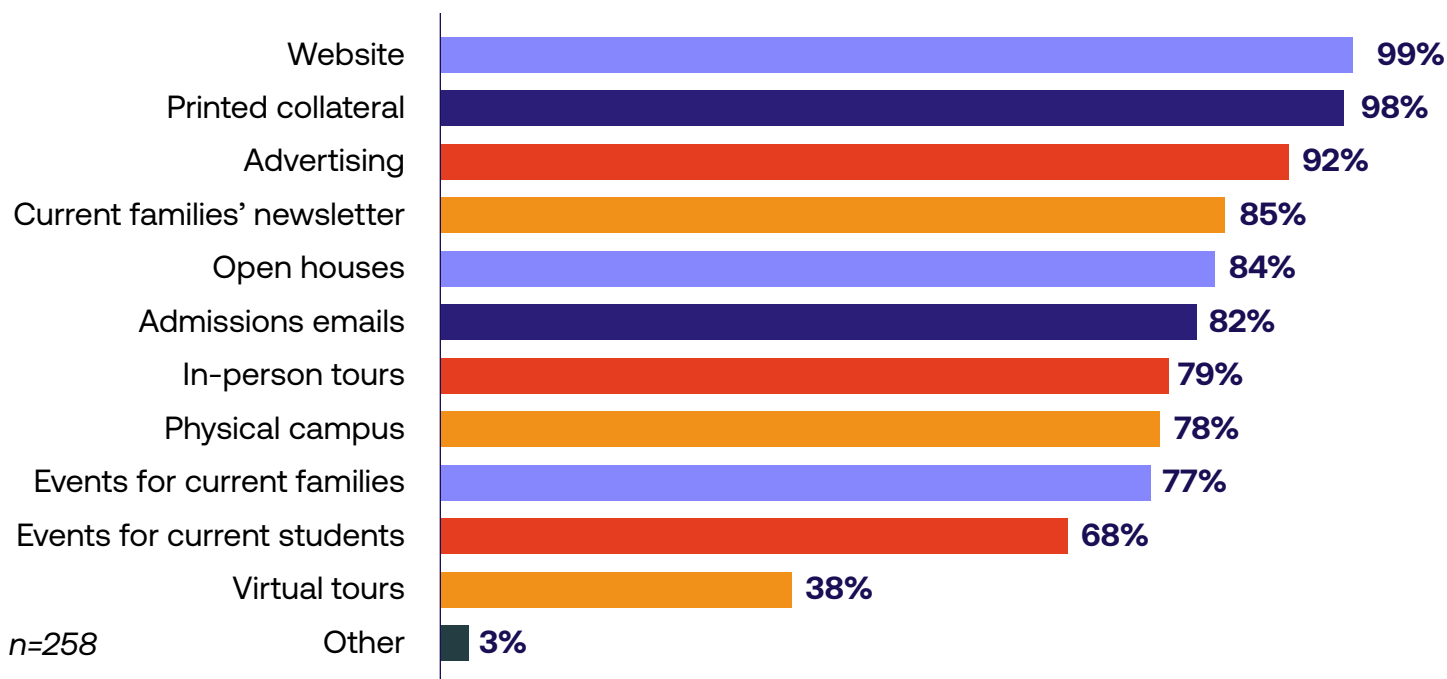
## DATA SPOTLIGHT

All single-sex schools in this study have built a strong online presence to promote their brands. Boys' schools have adopted several strategies at higher rates than other school types, including showcasing success stories (100%), using paid advertising (92%), optimizing for search engines (92%), engaging in community outreach (77%), and offering virtual tours and events (54%). By contrast, fewer elementary schools showcased success stories (68%) or used content marketing (56%). Similarly, schools with fewer than 201 students were less likely to showcase success stories (65%) or to optimize for search engines (51%).

	Develop a strong online presence	Showcase success stories	Utilize paid advertising	Optimize for search engines	Implement content marketing	Engage in community outreach	Provide virtual tours and events
<b>School Gender</b>							
Boys	100%	100%	92%	92%	54%	77%	54%
Girls	100%	83%	78%	72%	56%	61%	44%
Coed	84%	74%	72%	64%	65%	60%	40%
<b>School Size</b>							
Under 201	78%	65%	78%	51%	62%	76%	38%
201-300	81%	77%	65%	71%	61%	71%	42%
301-500	88%	69%	76%	69%	56%	63%	50%
501-700	91%	81%	74%	72%	72%	57%	32%
701+	87%	84%	72%	64%	68%	51%	41%
<b>Grade Level</b>							
Elementary	74%	68%	72%	60%	56%	63%	46%
Secondary	91%	64%	55%	64%	58%	52%	36%
Elementary-Secondary	90%	82%	79%	69%	68%	63%	41%
<b>School Type</b>							
Schools with boarding component	93%	71%	61%	71%	68%	54%	44%
Day schools	85%	77%	76%	65%	63%	63%	41%

A school's branding is crucial to the admissions cycle. Having a clear and recognizable brand will increase familiarity among the community. Schools incorporated their brand into a number of places. Virtually all schools (99%) incorporated their brand into their website. A similar percentage embedded their brand into printed collateral (98%) and advertising (92%). Slightly fewer did so in their family newsletters (85%), open houses (84%), and admissions emails (82%). Generally, schools reported incorporating their brand into most advertising, including in-person tours (79%), the physical campus (78%), and events for current families (77%) and students (68%).

### Where do you incorporate your school's brand messages?



**EXPERT INSIGHTS:** While it's encouraging that nearly all schools integrate branding into key materials like websites and printed collateral, some schools are missing opportunities to strengthen how their brand connects and builds trust with families.

Newsletters, open houses, and admissions emails are high-touch opportunities for a strong brand presence to directly influence decisions and reinforce your value. Similarly, physical spaces like your campus may have room to grow as immersive brand experiences that leave lasting impressions.

Leverage your events as brand "amplifiers." By consistently conveying your brand through speaking points, handouts, visuals, and the overall experience, you can help families build trust, engage more deeply, and strengthen their connections to your school.

### DATA SPOTLIGHT

A larger percentage of boys' schools (92%) incorporated their brand into their physical campus, events for current families, and events for current students. In contrast, only 69% of boys' schools included their brand in admissions emails and in-person tours. Similarly, fewer elementary schools incorporated their brand into admissions emails (74%) and on their physical campus (70%).



# Conclusion

What top marketing items can significantly move the needle in your overall marketing effectiveness?



**Get better data to inform your decisions.** Achieving ongoing improvements year after year is nearly impossible without knowing what works and what doesn't. Your answers are in good data.



**Build a recruitment campaign that engages families throughout the customer journey.** This maximizes your media spend and converts more good-fit families. It involves delivering the right message, with the right visuals, to the right audience at the right time.



**Execute an automation strategy.** Use your customer relationship management (CRM) software, email marketing, or other automation software to connect with prospects at key inflection points. This approach helps guide families through your marketing pipeline and admissions funnel more effectively, leveraging your critical in-person efforts.



**Assess your website.** This critical touchpoint needs to position your school effectively and provide relevant information easily, so you don't lose families early in their journey and miss opportunities to engage with them later.

# Methodology

NAIS surveyed marketing staff at member schools to learn more about the state, structure, practices, and needs of marketing teams at independent schools. A total of 344 people responded to the survey, representing a 36% completion rate. The survey was open August 14 to August 30, 2024. This report was written by Brenna Foley, a research analyst at NAIS. Insights and tips were provided by Metric Marketing's team of private school marketing experts.

Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.



National Association  
of *Independent* Schools