



CallRail

2026 marketing outlook for real estate

Can tech help overcome housing market turbulence?

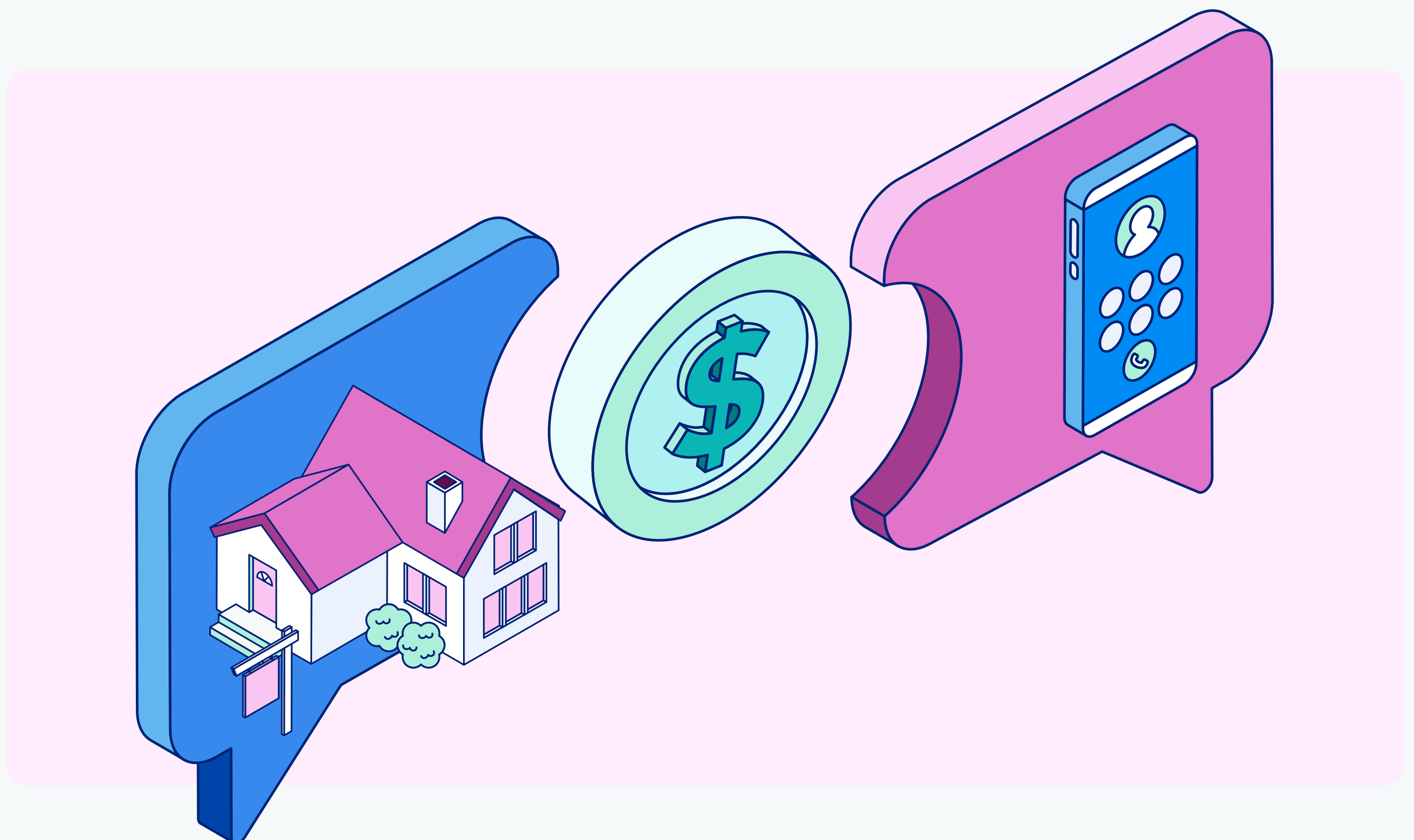
Introduction

The real estate market heads into 2026 with a mix of pressure and possibility. Interest rates and affordability challenges continue to shape the decisions of buyers, renters, and owners. Frozen markets are leading fewer companies (**55%**) to forecast good or excellent profitability compared to last year (**65%**), according to PwC. Marketing remains a bright spot, however. Despite the headwinds, **56%** of real estate businesses plan to increase their marketing budgets in 2026.

The path forward is less about waiting for conditions to change and more about refining the tools and processes to capture those precious qualified leads and keep deals moving. Rising marketing budgets reflect the impact of modernizing their marketing strategies and tools. At a time when every lead is critical, growing businesses are the ones that respond quickly and personally — no matter when the lead comes in.

To understand how real estate companies are preparing for the year ahead, CallRail surveyed 100 U.S. brokerages, home builders, developers, rental agencies, and property management businesses. The results show a sector doubling down on digital — from PPC and SEO to video and paid social. Simultaneously, teams are increasingly relying on AI to drive lead scoring, attribution, and follow-up. However, the survey also reveals gaps that hinder teams, particularly in areas such as responsiveness and the handoff between marketing and sales, or agent teams.

This report outlines how real estate businesses perceive the current marketing landscape — and how they plan to differentiate themselves, remain responsive, and identify their most promising leads to navigate what may be a turbulent 2026.



Key findings

01

Real estate businesses remain bullish on marketing

56% of real estate businesses expect to increase their 2026 marketing budgets, while **35%** say budgets will stay the same.

02

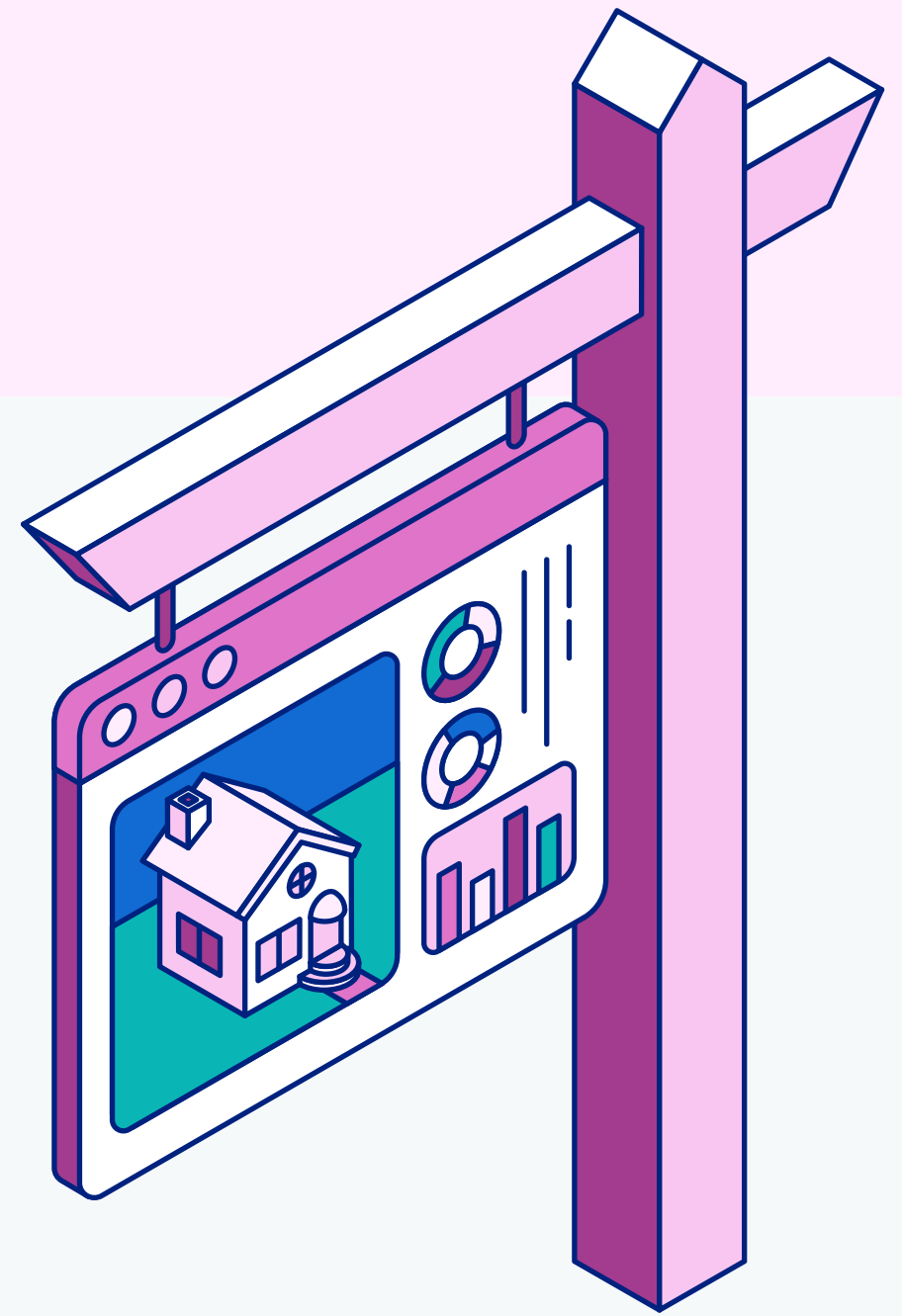
Traditional marketing still gets budget, but isn't driving growth like digital

Traditional marketing ranked as the second-highest priority for businesses, but despite this priority, it was the least likely to receive a budget increase in 2026 (**11%**), suggesting a tension between perceived necessity and ROI.

03

Real estate businesses are adopting new tactics at high rates

In the past year, nearly half of the respondents have implemented paid social (**52%**), email (**49%**), and video (**48%**) marketing tactics.



04

Marketing drives leads, but response time is a key concern

Responsiveness and price sensitivity were tied as the leading customer decision drivers, but only **41%** of businesses respond to after-hours inquiries immediately.

05

Many teams are overlooking automation as an opportunity to solve key challenges

Only **45%** of businesses say they plan to use AI for automating communication, despite responsiveness to customers being the top challenge.

06

AI use cases are advancing from content to conversions

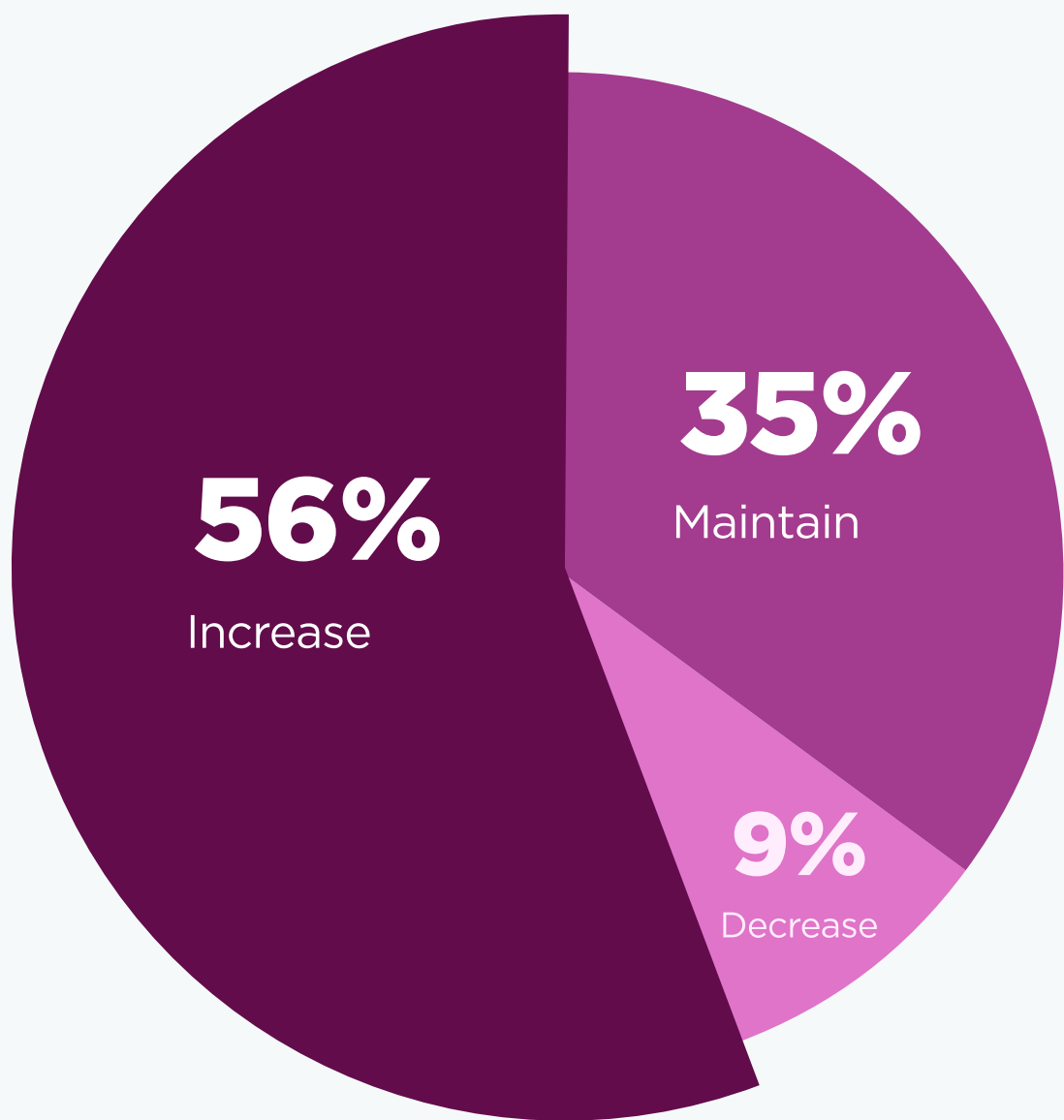
Last year's survey found that the top use for AI in real estate marketing was copy and content generation; this year, lead scoring (**63%**) and attribution (**60%**) lead the way over content (**55%**).

The state of marketing in real estate

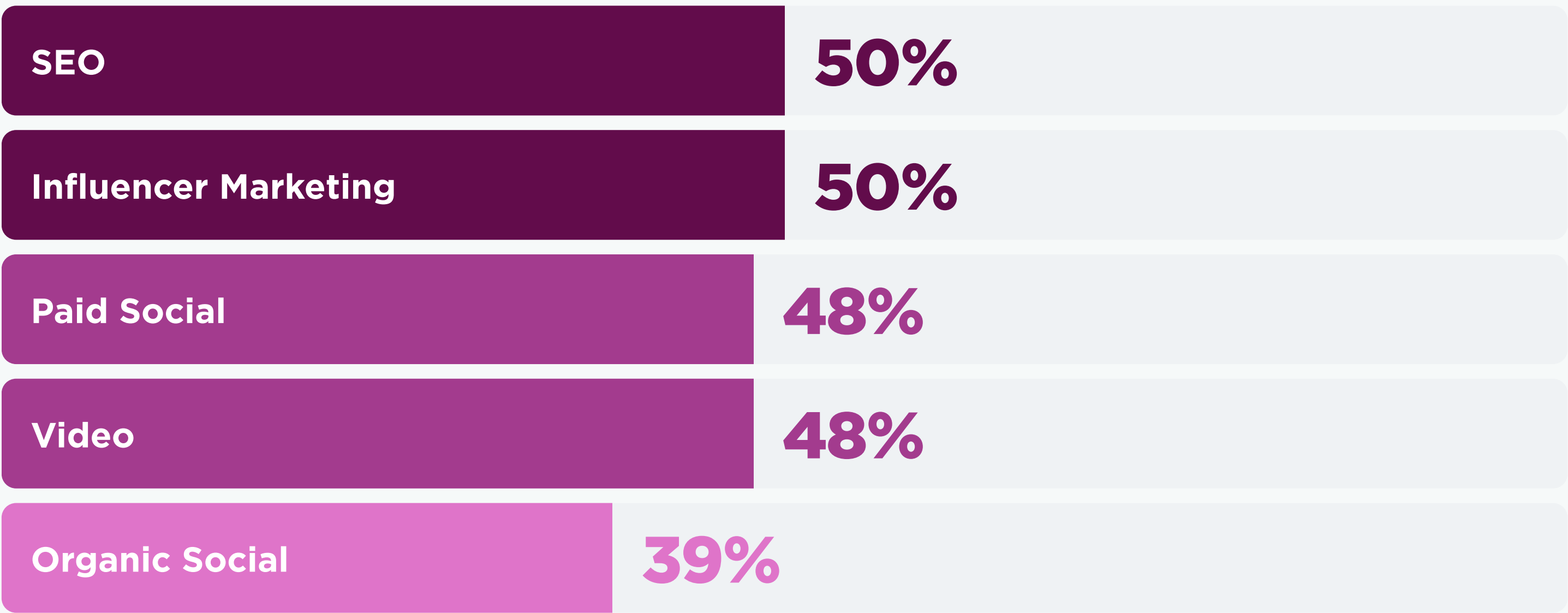
Despite many in real estate pulling back investments due to high interest rates, the same can't be said about the industry's investment in marketing. For 2026, only **9%** of those surveyed plan to reduce their marketing budget, while **57%** plan to increase it, and **35%** plan to maintain it at the current level. With many markets still frozen and leads hard to come by, marketers will need to be strategic in using that budget to generate and convert the right leads.

Budget changes can be largely attributed to digital marketing spend. SEO and influencer marketing tied for the top spot with **50%** of businesses saying they'd be increasing budgets for those line items, while paid social and video tied for a close third with **48%**. Traditional advertising (TV, radio, billboards) was by far the least likely to see an increase (**11%**).

Real estate businesses' budget change expectations

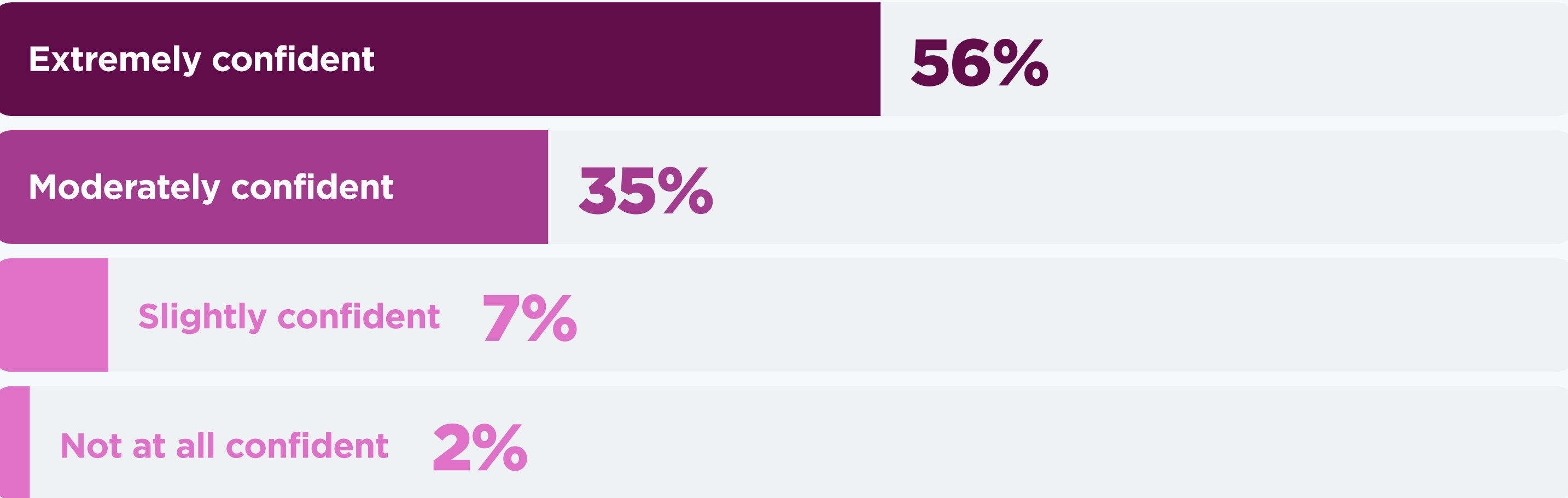


Where budgets will change the most

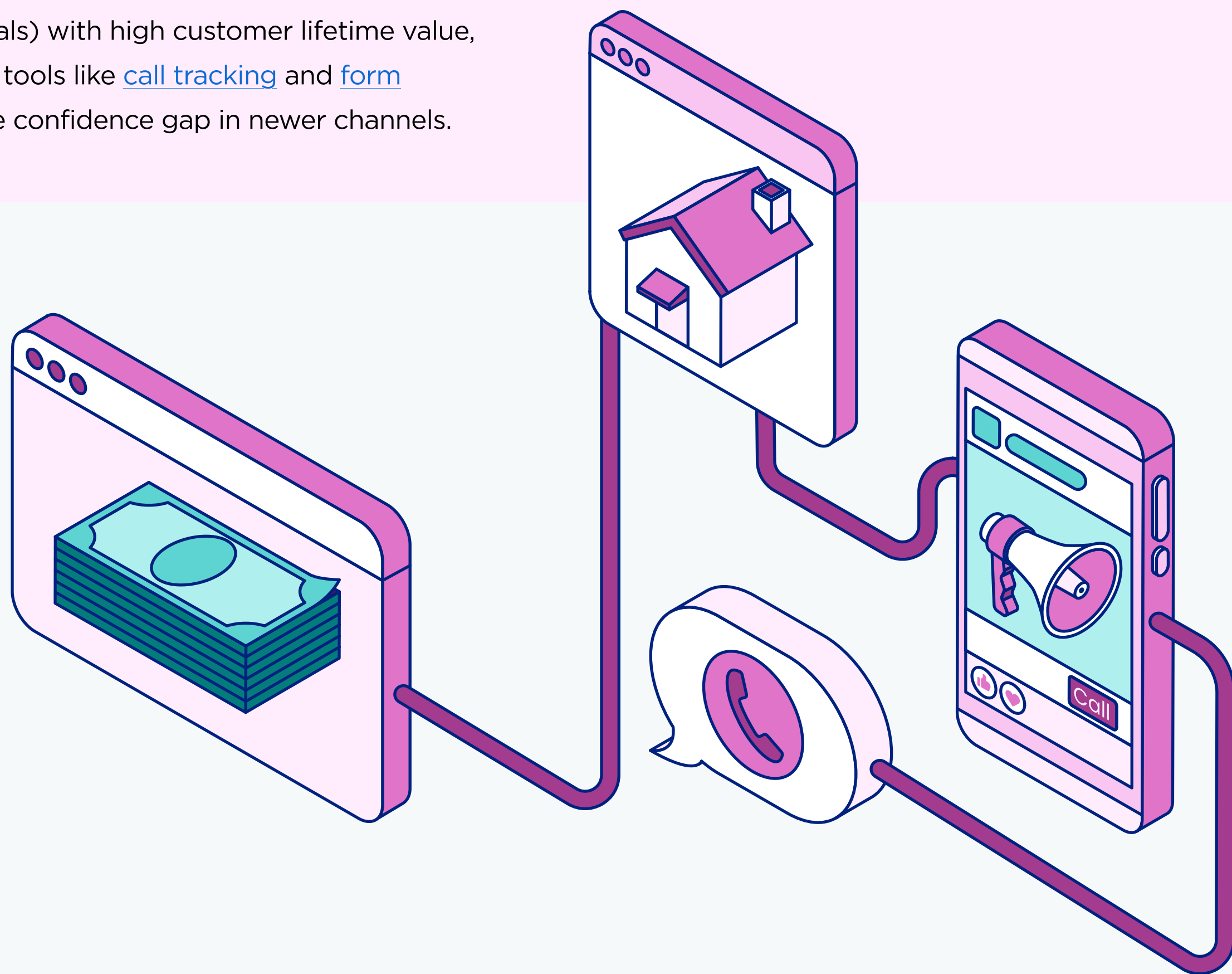


Overall, real estate teams feel confident they know which channels are generating their best customers: **56%** of businesses are extremely confident, and **35%** are moderately confident. However, the confidence gap between smaller businesses (1-19 employees) and larger businesses is stark: only **14%** of smaller businesses are confident they know which channels are working best.

How confident are businesses that they know which channels are delivering their best customers?



For businesses lacking confidence in their lead attribution, 2026 should be a year to focus on already measurable channels (like referrals) with high customer lifetime value, while implementing tools like [call tracking](#) and [form tracking](#) to close the confidence gap in newer channels.



Real estate businesses are doubling down on what's working

For real estate teams, the channels driving new business are closely correlated with the channels most likely to receive budget increases. This strategic alignment demonstrates that businesses are doubling down on core digital channels — SEO, paid social, and video — that have already proven their effectiveness in driving new business.

How top channels impact budget increases



When it comes to the budget priorities for 2026, traditional advertising presents a paradox. It is the second-highest budget priority, yet only **11%** of teams plan to increase spending on it, likely because it is seen as less effective for driving new leads (**26%**). This suggests that teams feel obligated to maintain a presence in print and on billboards, but are hesitant to invest further in a stagnant channel.

It raises an important question: are traditional ads truly under-performing, or do businesses simply lack the ability to track how those offline touchpoints drive calls and website visits?

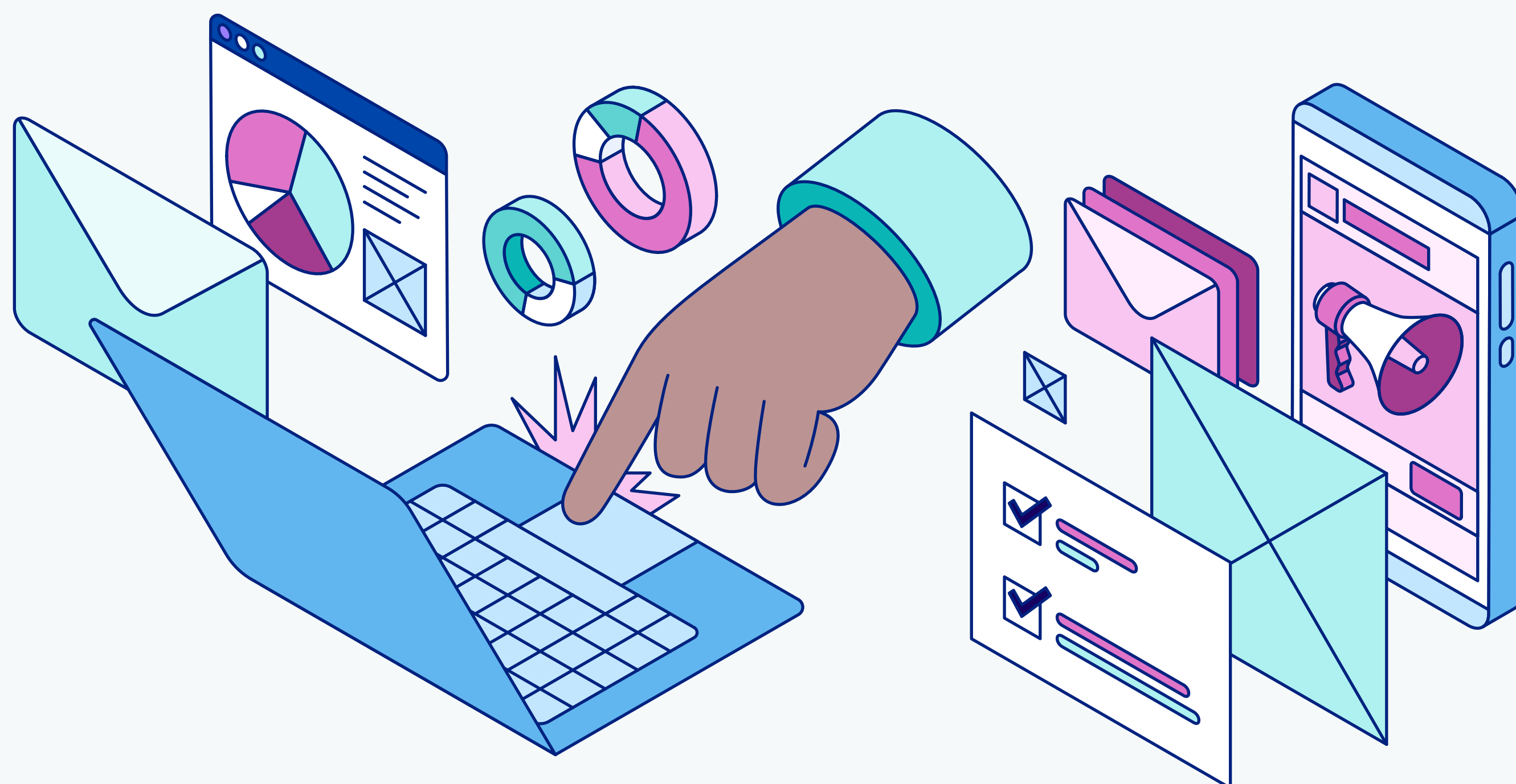
Marketing budget priorities for 2026

#1 SEO

#2 Traditional advertising

#3 Paid / Organic social

#4 Video / Content marketing



Trends driving the industry's marketing in 2026

While real estate businesses have a clear sense of which channels deserve more of their own marketing budget in 2026, they expect the industry as a whole to lean into slightly different trends. Around half of respondents view AI, personalization, and short-form video content as influential trends in the industry — all of which reflect how buyers and renters find information today through search and social media. And beyond these digital trends, many businesses also expect customer communities (46%) to play a bigger role.

Industry-wide marketing approaches for 2026

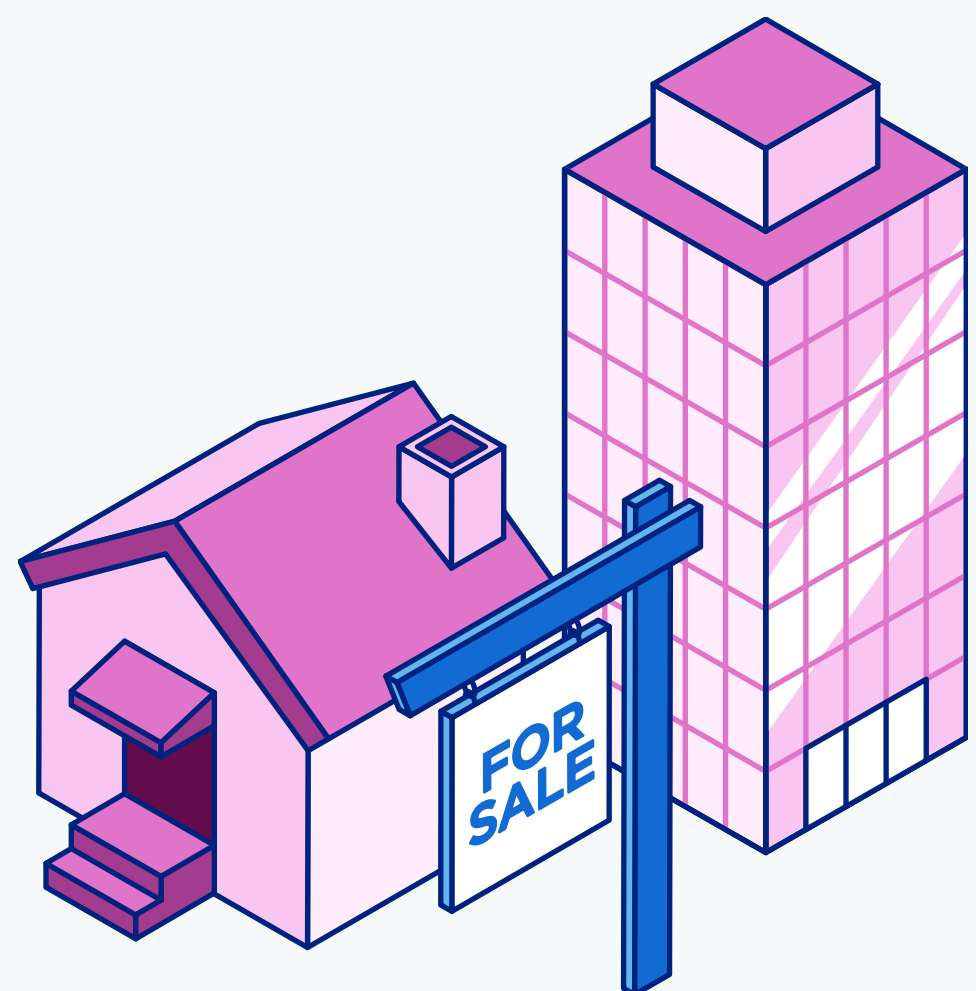
#1 AI/Generative AI

#2 Personalization

#3 Short-form video

#4 Customer communities

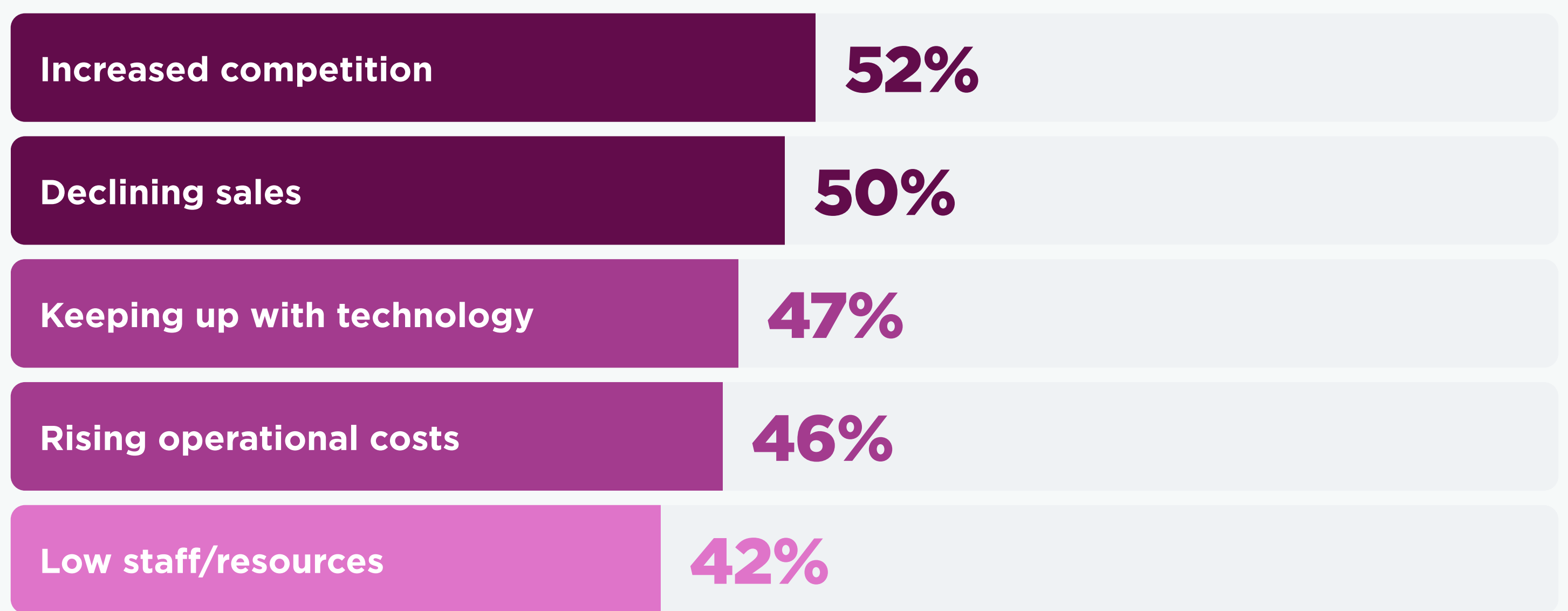
Local competition also plays a significant role in shaping the marketing strategies of real estate businesses. While **33%** of real estate pros say that seasonality is the top factor influencing their 2026 strategies, twice as many (**66%**) say their 2026 plans will be influenced by local competitors. That focus on the local market helps explain why building customer communities ranks so highly and why traditional advertising in neighborhood papers, billboards, and local TV still feels necessary for many teams.



Challenges driving real estate businesses' marketing strategies

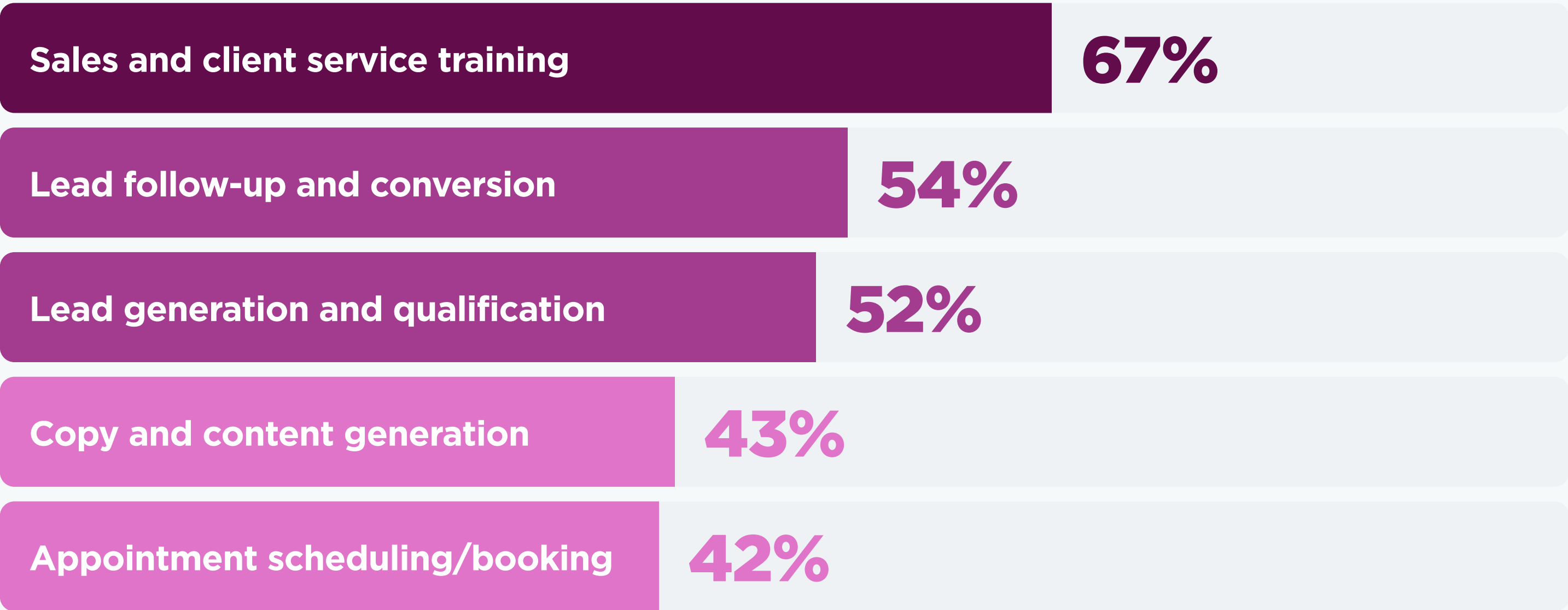
When asked what challenges they face in 2026, real estate businesses indicate the top stressors are largely external factors, with increased competition (**52%**) and declining sales (**50%**) topping the list. Concerns regarding internal factors, such as outdated systems (**16%**) and attribution (**11%**), were minimal, highlighting an overall satisfaction with their marketing capabilities.

The biggest challenges real estate businesses face in 2026



Most real estate businesses also face challenges with their marketing and operations. When asked about their top operational and marketing challenges for 2026, sales and customer service training (**67%**) and lead follow-up/conversion topped the list. Yet, only **8%** were concerned about the effective adoption of AI.

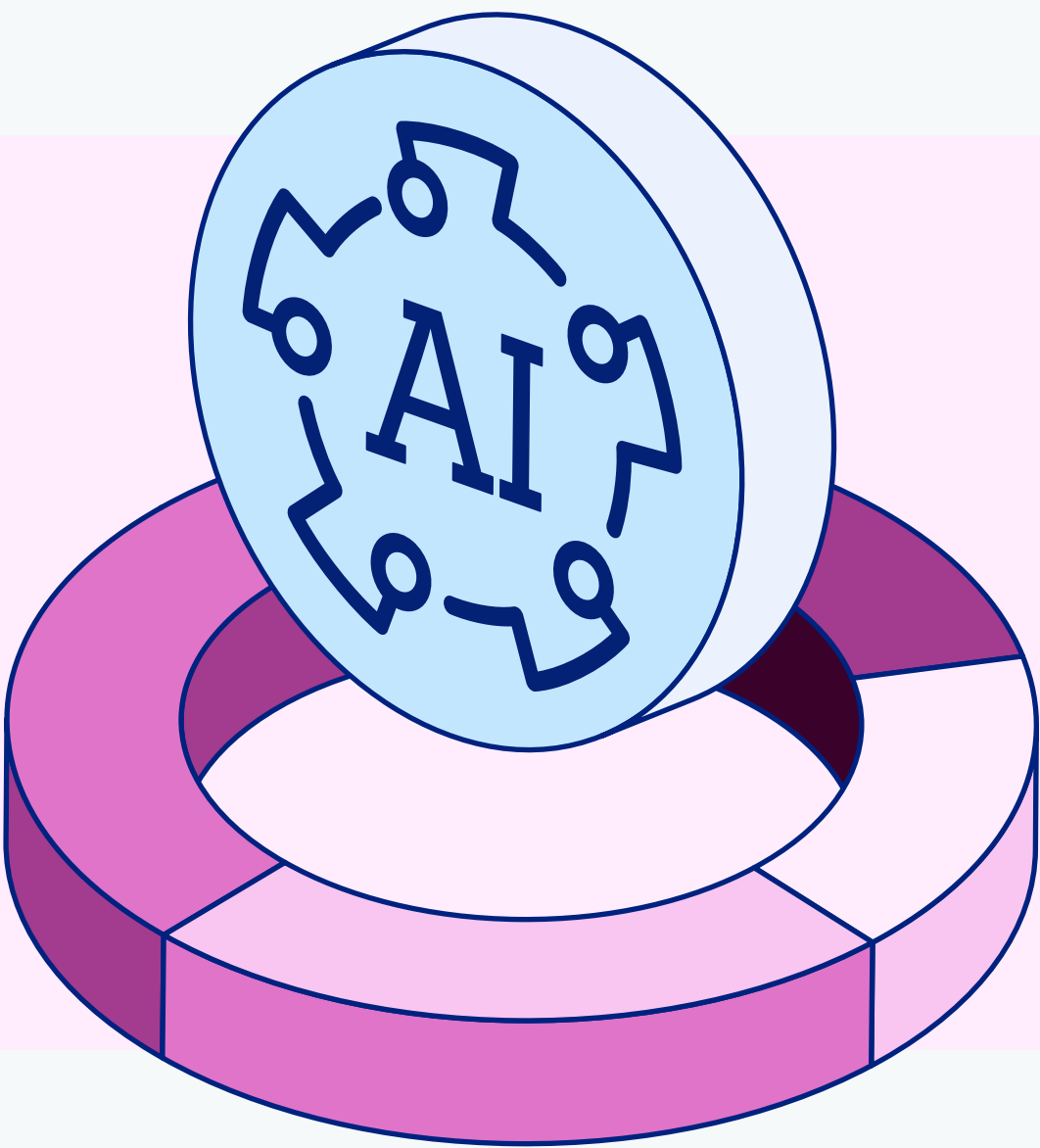
Top marketing and operational challenges



The fact that only **8%** see AI adoption as a challenge suggests that many real estate teams feel comfortable with AI’s early, accessible use cases and that AI presents an untapped opportunity to solve sales training and follow-up challenges. AI-powered tools can deliver immediate insights into the trends driving conversations, help coach sales teams on improving customer interactions, or ensure every lead gets a timely response.

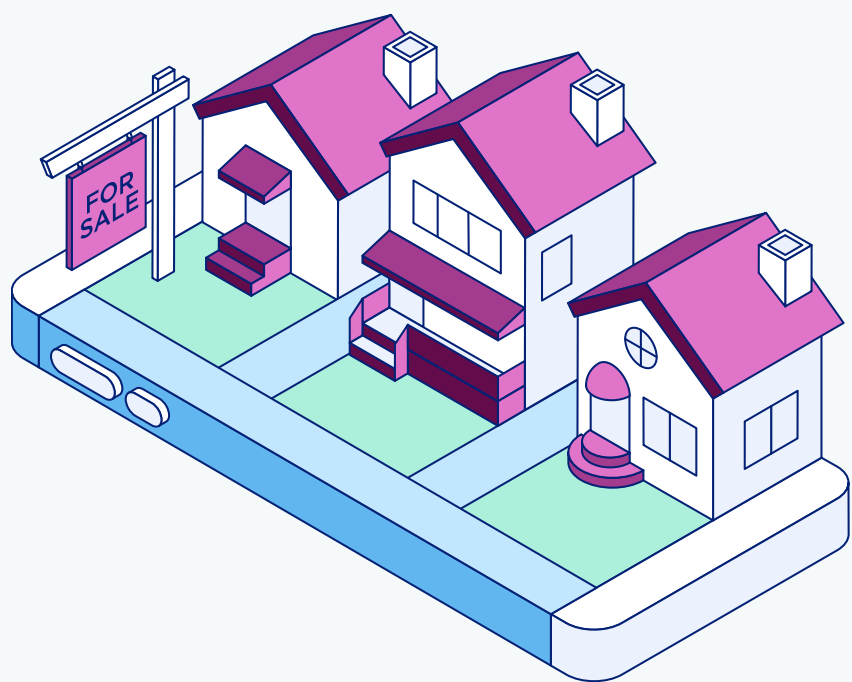
The real estate businesses that can leverage AI to solve the challenges inhibiting growth will be better prepared for a roller coaster market in 2026.

92% of real estate businesses are confident in their ability to adopt AI in 2026, while **8%** say effective AI adoption will be a top challenge.

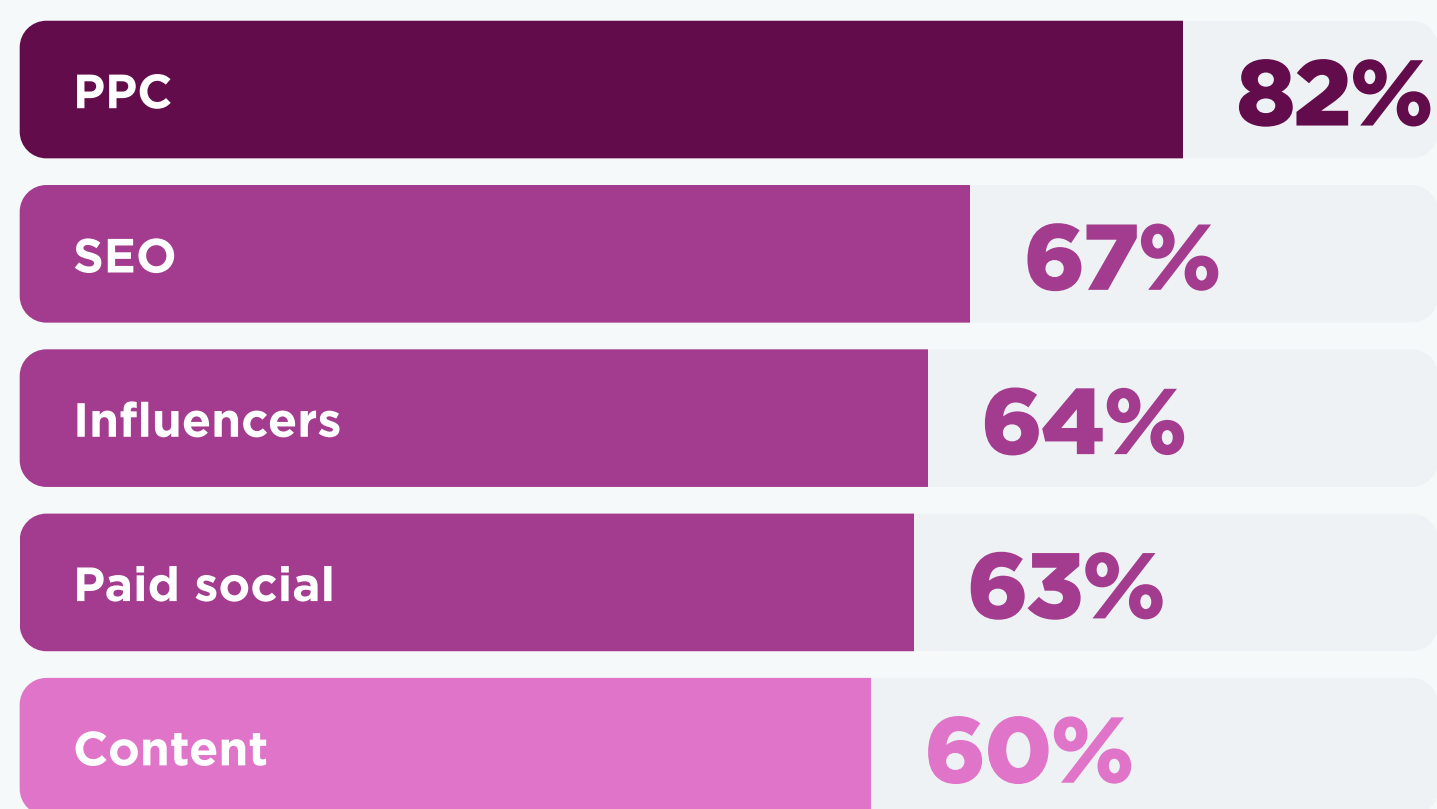


Customer acquisition and conversion trends

Many real estate teams are sticking to tried-and-true tactics, but there is still a strong desire to experiment with new approaches that haven't been tested yet. In the past year, about half have implemented paid social (**52%**), email (**49%**), and video (**48%**) marketing tactics.

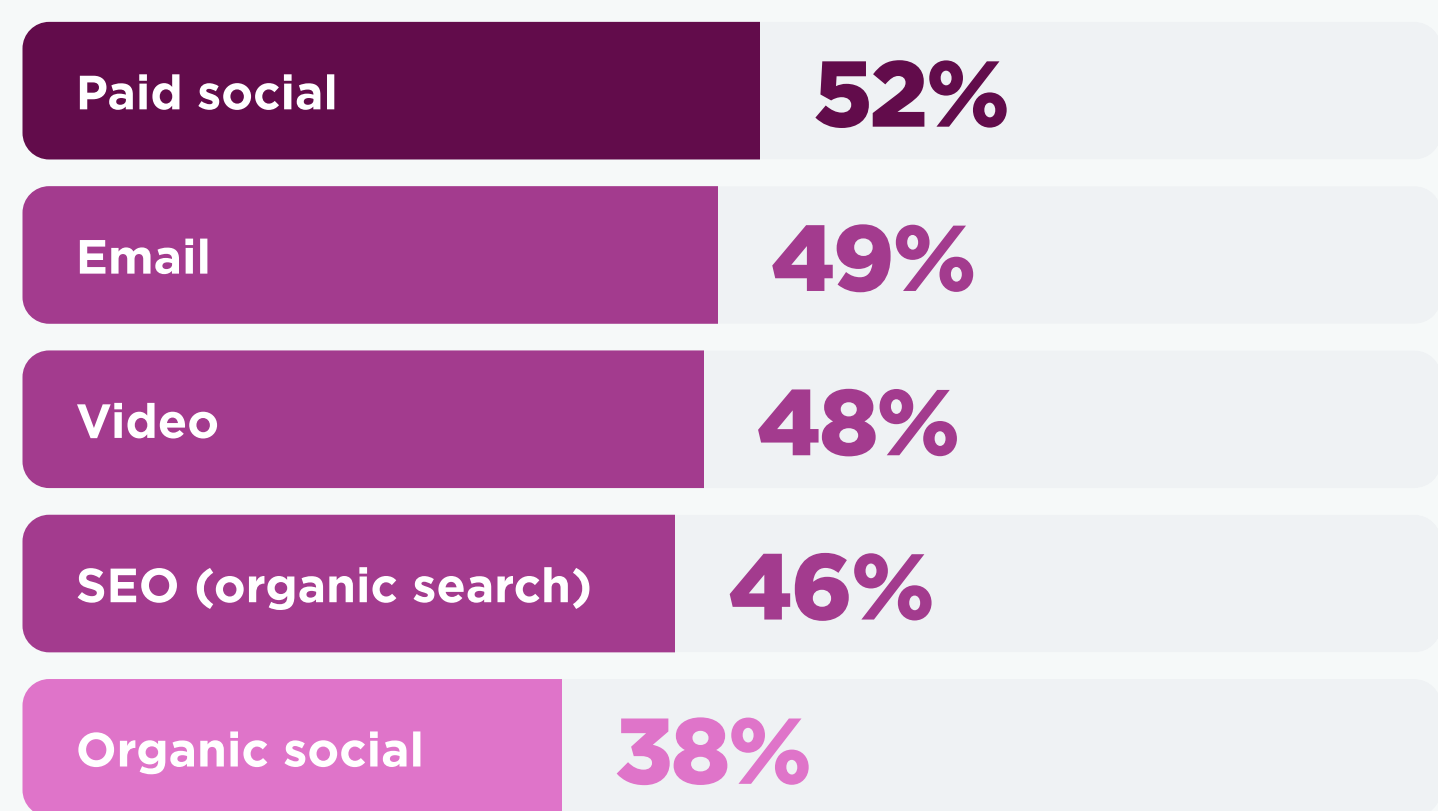


How real estate businesses will prioritize existing tactics in 2026



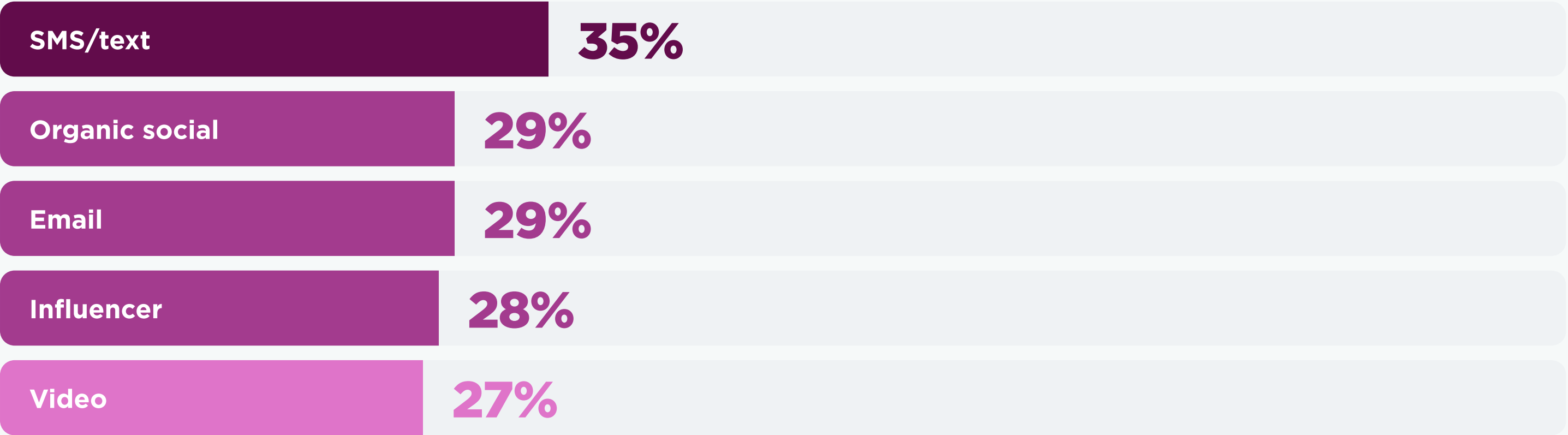
When we surveyed the real estate industry for our 2025 trends report, the top three marketing tactics professionals were planning to test were SMS, Social media, and Video. For 2026, SMS/text and Social media remain the top tactics, while Email replaces Video. This shift toward SMS/text and email reflects a growing focus on one-to-one communication to address the operational challenges of lead follow-up and conversion. The shift from Video to Email also reflects a growing focus on fast, personalized follow-up and growing customer databases to nurture — a critical advantage in competitive local markets.

Marketing tactics implemented in the past year



When asked how various tactics would be prioritized, many real estate businesses recognize the need to balance between showing up where customers are to drive awareness — through influencers (**64%**) and paid social (**63%**) — and being present when customers are ready to take action — through PPC (**82%**) and SEO (**67%**).

Top new marketing tactics businesses plan to try in 2026



Even though SMS and email weren’t ranked as top current tactics, their position at the top of the “to-test” list shows how much interest there is in channels that support quick, personal follow-up. With the help of AI and automation, SMS and email marketing tactics can be pathways to solving the top organizational challenges real estate businesses face: sales and customer service training and lead follow-up/conversion.

To find a scalable solution, businesses will need to adopt tools like conversation intelligence that reveal insights from every call, automated coaching to improve sales conversations, and AI voice assistants that are available when the team isn’t. The real estate businesses that can successfully implement these new tactics will be more responsive — and respond better — to new leads.



For home builders, speed to lead is the most significant differentiators in lead management and conversion. Too many leads managed poorly does not equate to better conversion. We see the best results when response time is within 15 minutes or less, and inbound answer rates are 80% or higher.

— **Jen Barkan**, Do You Convert

Responsiveness is now a top competitive battleground — and many teams are falling behind

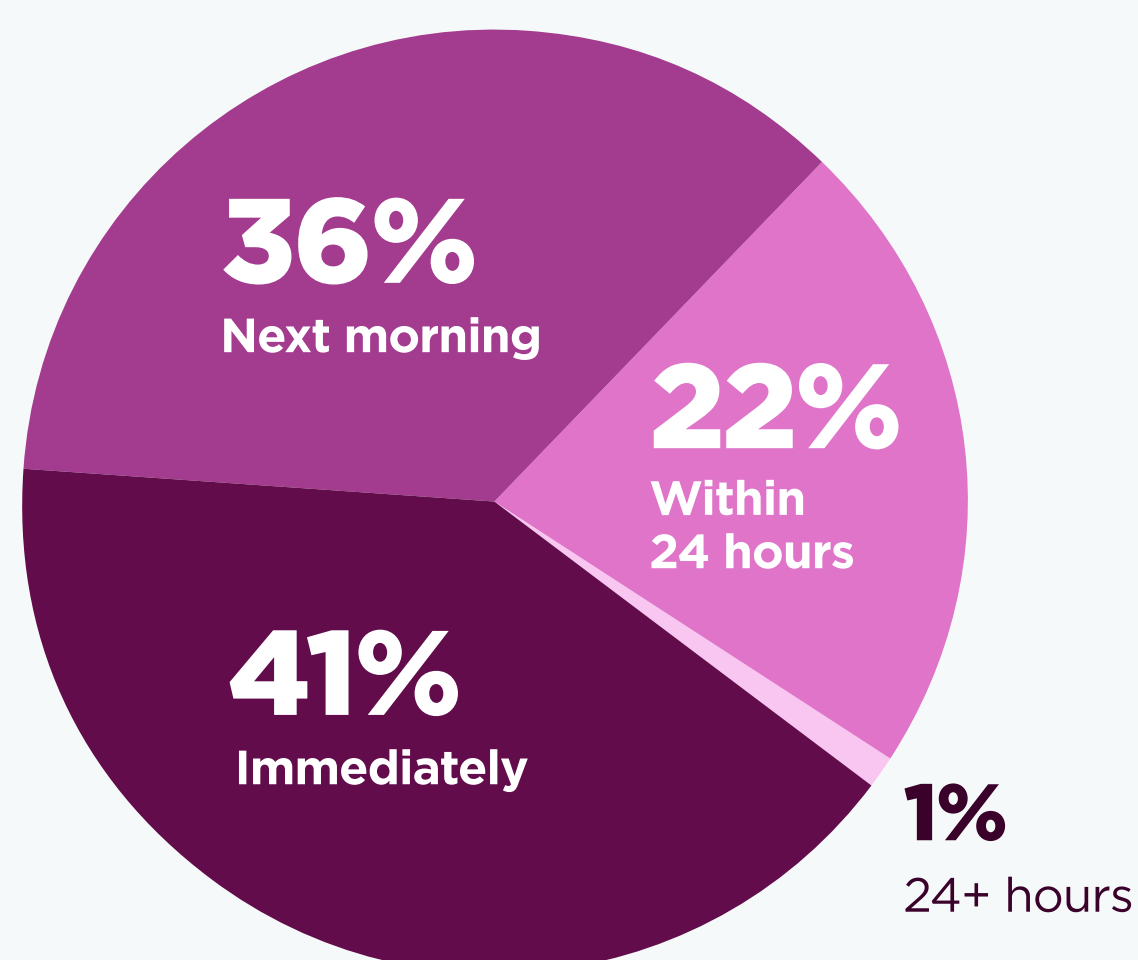
Compared to 2025, when rising costs and crowded channels topped the list of challenges, real estate businesses now say increased competition (**52%**) and declining sales (**50%**) are the biggest pressures. Sales cycles haven't gotten easier either: **35%** describe them as long and complex, and **34%** say they're highly price-driven.

In this environment, one factor stands out more than ever: **responsiveness**. It's now tied with price (**67%**) as the top driver of whether a customer chooses one business over another. In fact, **67%** of real estate businesses say response time directly influences customers' decisions when selecting a business or agent to work with.

67%

say **response time** directly influences whether a customer chooses them over a competitor

Typical response times to off-hours customer communications



However, despite its importance, responsiveness remains a significant weakness.

Only **41% of businesses can respond to new leads immediately**, whether through 24/7 live coverage or AI-assisted tools, while **58% wait until at least the next morning** to follow up on off-hours inquiries. In a market where leads are precious, and prospects can easily switch to a competitor with a single click or call, those delays can cost teams deals they should be winning.

When no one answers, **56% of businesses** receive an automatic notification and *could* follow up quickly, but many still don't. And **39% still manually check voicemail or missed-call lists**, creating even longer delays and increasing the chances that a lead has already moved on by the time someone returns the call.



When it comes to longer sales cycle purchases like a home, consumers will expect to reach a human anytime they want one. This means that the organizations that truly plan to differentiate or justify their pricing on customer experience will realize that they must invest as needed in both tools and humans, while companies who only want to compete on the lowest price will reduce human investment at any opportunity.

— **Kevin Oakley**, [Do You Convert](#)

What happens when a customer's communication goes unanswered?

We receive an immediate, automatic notification and can follow up right away
eg. email, text, app alert

56%

We check our voicemails or a list of missed calls manually to return the call

39%

We usually only find out about the missed call if the customer reaches out again

6%

This lack of responsiveness is especially risky in a sector where listings move quickly, renters compare availability across multiple properties, and property owners often request multiple quotes. In these “long and complex” and highly competitive sales cycles, slow follow-up doesn't just inconvenience customers — it directly impacts revenue.

To stay competitive in 2026, businesses will need tools and processes that help them respond promptly, follow up reliably, and eliminate the gaps that allow leads to slip through the cracks.

AI shifts from content to conversion in 2026

AI is poised to play a crucial role in real estate marketing in 2026. Real estate businesses anticipate AI as the top trend to shape the industry's marketing approach. Real estate teams are becoming increasingly comfortable using AI across a wide range of use cases, as **92%** of respondents say AI adoption will not be a challenge in 2026.

Last year, copy and content generation ranked as the top use for AI in real estate marketing. This year, more sophisticated use cases, such as lead scoring/qualification (**63%**), attribution/ROI measurement (**60%**), and personalization (**57%**), all ranked higher than content generation (**55%**).

Current uses for AI in marketing

2025: Content generation

- 1 **Copy and content generation**
- 2 **Lead follow-up**
- 3 **Lead generation**
- 4 **Appointment scheduling**
- 5 **Sales and customer service training**

2026: Lead generation

- 1 **Lead scoring or qualification**
- 2 **Attribution or ROI measurement**
- 3 **Personalization of campaigns or experiences**
- 4 **Copy and content generation**
- 5 **Automating customer communications**
chatbots, email, SMS

With more than half of real estate businesses already using AI in their most important marketing functions, it's clear that AI is becoming a core part of the customer journey. But there are still major opportunities ahead. Use cases such as automating customer communications and analyzing marketing performance data remain underutilized, even though they directly address two of the industry's biggest challenges for 2026: faster lead follow-up and improved sales/customer service training.

How real estate teams can capture and convert more leads in 2026

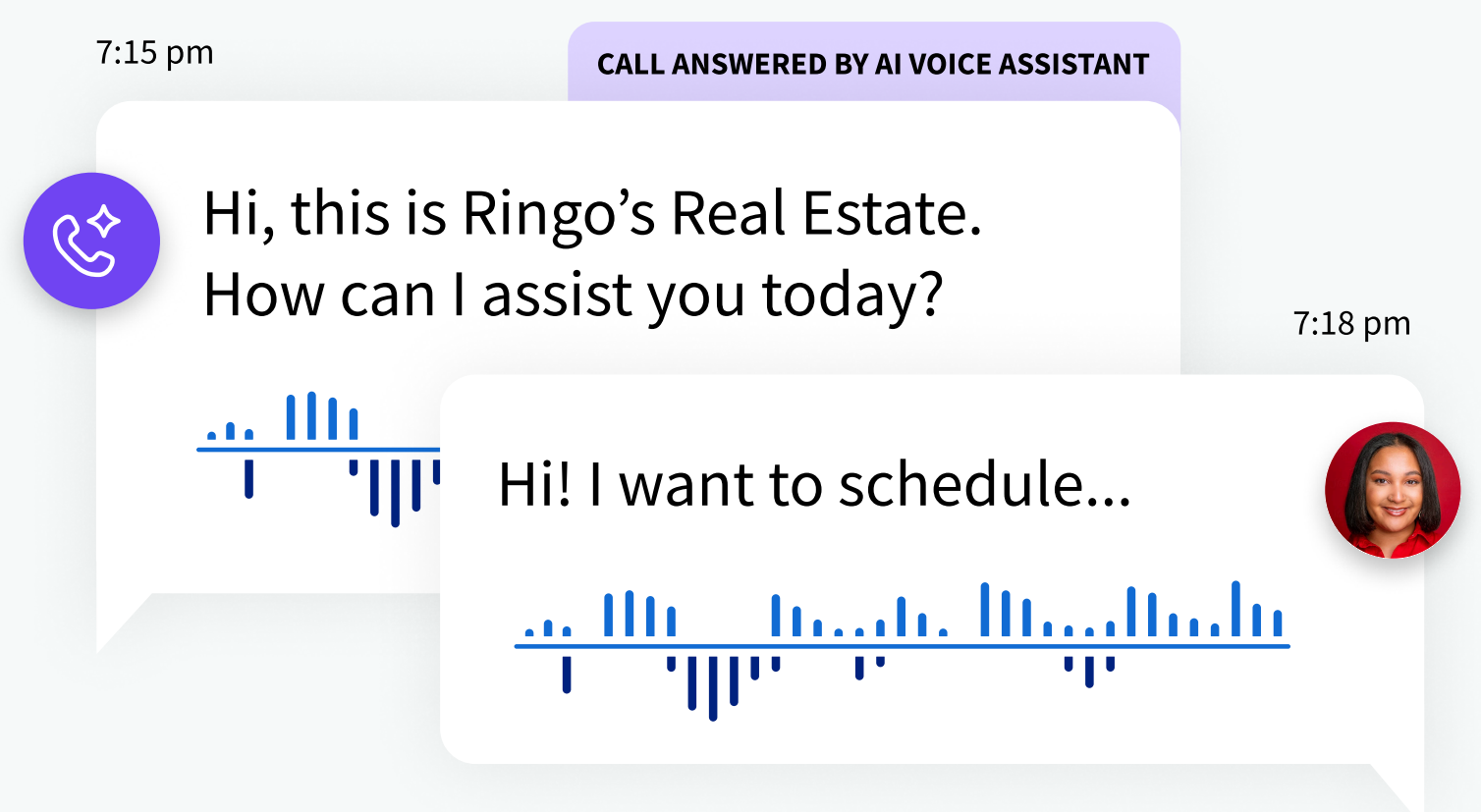
While real estate businesses remain tied to Traditional advertising, 2026 will be defined by the ways they advance their digital marketing capabilities to maintain sales and fill rentals. Real estate teams are effective at generating interest, but many still struggle to be available when customers actually reach out.


Based on the data from our study, we've put together our recommendations to help you stay ahead in 2026.

01


Make responsiveness your competitive advantage


Renters and buyers want to work with businesses that respond quickly — even outside of business hours. Improving how your team follows up is possible with automated alerts for after-hours calls and AI-powered voice assistants like [Voice Assist from CallRail](#) that can answer when you're not there.





Melanie Flowers
Source: Paid search



 AI GENERATED

Action PlanSmart Follow-UpCoaching

Positive:
First-time home buyer is excited to work with you based on recent reviews they found online.

Areas to Improve:
Have schedule opened to finalize home showings more quickly.

02

Take charge of factors in your control

While market conditions like interest rates are external, internal factors like lead conversion rates and sales performance are within your control. With AI-powered tools, understanding what conversations drive conversions and sales has never been easier. [CallRail's Premium Conversation Intelligence™](#), for example, automatically summarizes calls, identifies key topics, and surfaces customer sentiment, giving you actionable insights, while AI assistants can even provide coaching tips and next steps for every conversation.



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03

Think locally to stick close to your potential clients

In a crowded market where customers can easily choose another agent, developer, or property management business, you must adapt quickly and respond even more quickly. Using tools like call tracking and form tracking helps you understand which ads and channels brought in each lead, while conversation intelligence tools unlock insights into what people are asking about. To stay on top of every lead, AI-powered assistants can respond when you can't, helping ensure you never lose a prospect due to slow response times.



04

Use AI to solve operational challenges and increase lead conversion

AI is for more than content creation — take your marketing to the next level in 2026 by using it to unearth new insights and improve conversions. For teams struggling with missed calls or inconsistent sales training, AI-powered tools like Voice Assist and Premium Conversation Intelligence can fill the gaps to ensure every call is answered, every lead is captured, and personalized follow-up happens automatically.

Put a down payment on marketing success in 2026

See how CallRail's lead engagement platform can help you respond faster and convert more deals in 2026.

[Start your free trial today →](#)



Methodology and Demographics

This report is based on a survey of 100 real estate professionals conducted in October 2025. Respondents represented a mix of seniority and functional roles, including Executive Leadership (43%), Marketing (general) (25%), Operations (22%), SEO/Organic (5%), Paid Social (3%), Strategy (1%), and Social Media Management (1%). Agencies of varying sizes were included, with 4% employing 1-19 people, 19% employing 20-99 people, 37% employing 100-249 people, and 40% employing 250-499 people. The survey was conducted at a 95% confidence level with a +/-5% margin of error.