



CallRail

The 2026 marketing outlook for law firms

Why modern marketing needs modern intake

Table of Contents



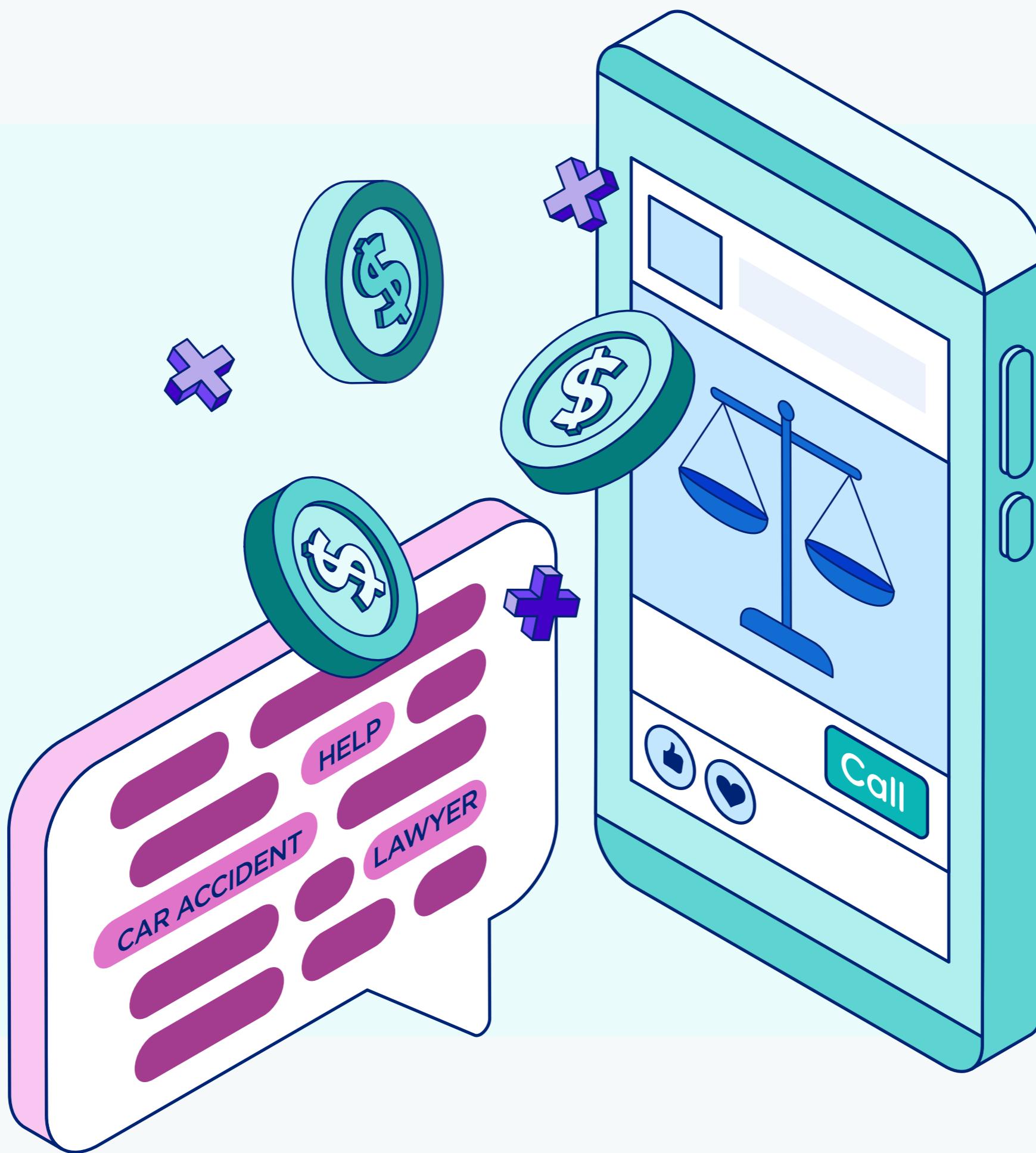
- 03 Introduction
- 04 Key findings
- 05 The state of marketing at law firms
- 06 Challenges driving law firms' budget strategies in 2026
- 08 Firms are expanding into new channels in 2026
- 10 Legal industry marketing trends for 2026
- 11 The shifting role of AI in law firm marketing
- 12 AI use cases for legal marketers
- 14 Client acquisition in 2026
- 16 New channels firms plan to implement in 2026
- 20 Phone remains the preferred channel for first touch and ongoing communications
- 21 Turning legal trends into tactics for 2026
- 23 Take control of your marketing and client intake in 2026

Introduction

Legal marketing in 2026 is defined by rapid evolution. With AI tools changing how people search for legal help, today's clients start with conversational queries and expect instant, accurate answers — whether from a search bar or your firm's intake team. To keep pace with clients and competitors, firms are quickly adopting new strategies and technology.

But getting found is only half the battle. The intake experience is where many firms are still falling short: **eight in ten firms say slow responses have cost them cases.** Even as marketing strategies modernize, firms continue to lose revenue to missed calls, delayed follow-ups, and manual workflows that can't support growing demand.

CallRail surveyed 100 U.S. law firms to uncover the trends defining legal marketing in 2026. The results show growing confidence with AI, a willingness to test new tactics and channels, and a focus on capturing strong consumer demand. Yet they also reveal persistent gaps in response times, intake efficiency, and performance visibility. The following insights reveal how firms are addressing those gaps — and how they are aligning modern marketing with modern intake — to convert today's opportunities into tomorrow's growth.



Key findings

What's shaping legal marketing in 2026

01

Budget growth is slowing

Only **57%** of law firms expect to increase their marketing budgets in 2026, down sharply from **86%** who reported the same expectation last year.

02

Slow responses continue to cost firms business

81% have lost business due to slow responses, and **35%** have lost *significant* business, up to **11-25%** of their revenue

03

Phones reign supreme for customer communications

69% of firms said phone calls and emails are first contact channels, while a surprising 36% say text messages are a first contact channel.

04

AI moves beyond content generation

68% of law firms now use AI to personalize marketing, while over half use it for lead scoring (**55%**) and ROI measurement (**53%**).

05

Firms are experimenting to stave off competition

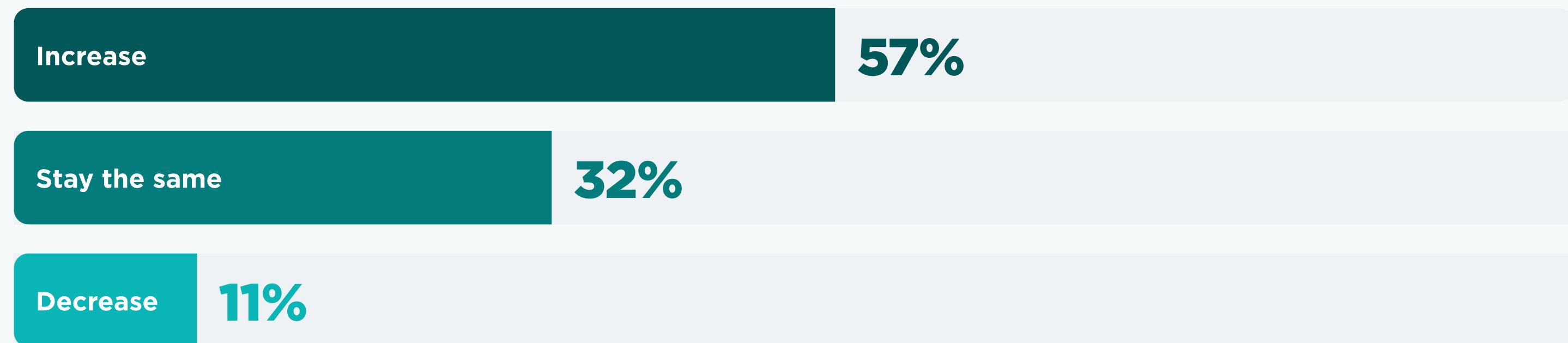
Future testing plans highlight SMS/text (**39%**), organic social (**36%**), and video (**33%**) as emerging tactics.



The state of marketing at law firms

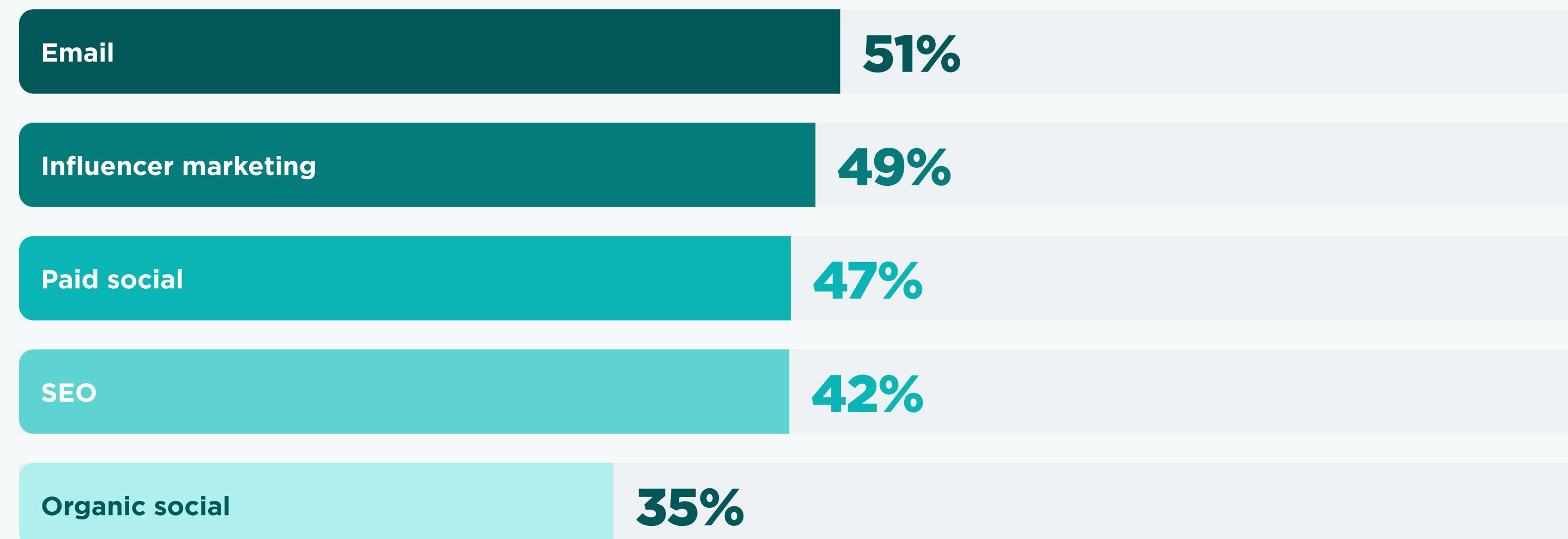
In 2025, **86%** of respondents reported expecting their marketing budgets to increase. In 2026, only **57%** of firms expect to raise their marketing budgets. Overall, only **11%** of firms plan to decrease their marketing budgets, revealing an industry-wide belief in the value of marketing.

Law firms budget change expectations



For law firms planning budget increases, the largest areas of investment will be email (**51%**), influencer marketing (**49%**), and paid social (**47%**), while budgets for trade shows (**25%**) and traditional advertising (**12%**) will see the least increase.

Channels seeing increased spend

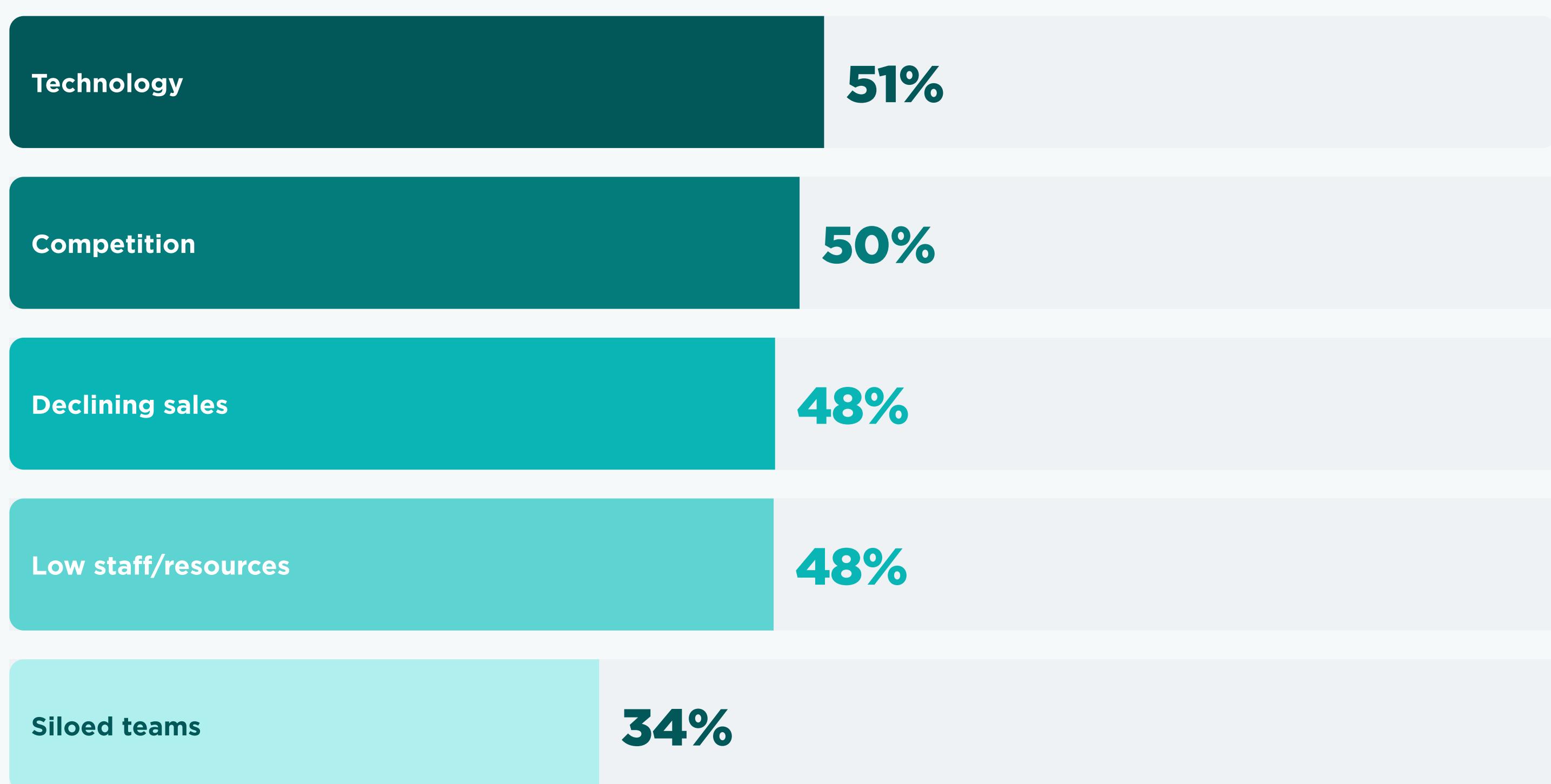


For the small minority (**11%**) of firms planning to decrease budgets, video is the first item to go. Conversely, growth-focused firms are doubling down on video, suggesting it is a high-risk, high-reward channel. Despite video being one of the top tactics firms want to test in 2026, it remains a potentially expensive and unproven approach.

Challenges driving law firms' budget strategies in 2026

Law firms feel confident in many of the fundamental marketing functions like lead generation, attribution, and reporting. The most common challenges in 2026 are things largely out of their control, ranging from keeping up with rapidly evolving technology (51%) to increased competition (50%) and declining demand (48%).

Law firms' biggest challenges in 2026



Though keeping up with technology is seen as the biggest challenge, the anxiety doesn't seem to stem from using AI — only 4% of firms cited AI adoption as a concern. Instead, many firms are understandably anxious that they'll miss out on new advancements, only to be left behind by the competition and changing consumer habits. However, solving the technology challenge with AI-powered automation — like lead scoring, conversation analysis, and voice assistants — can directly alleviate other challenges, like staff shortages, training, and lead follow-up.



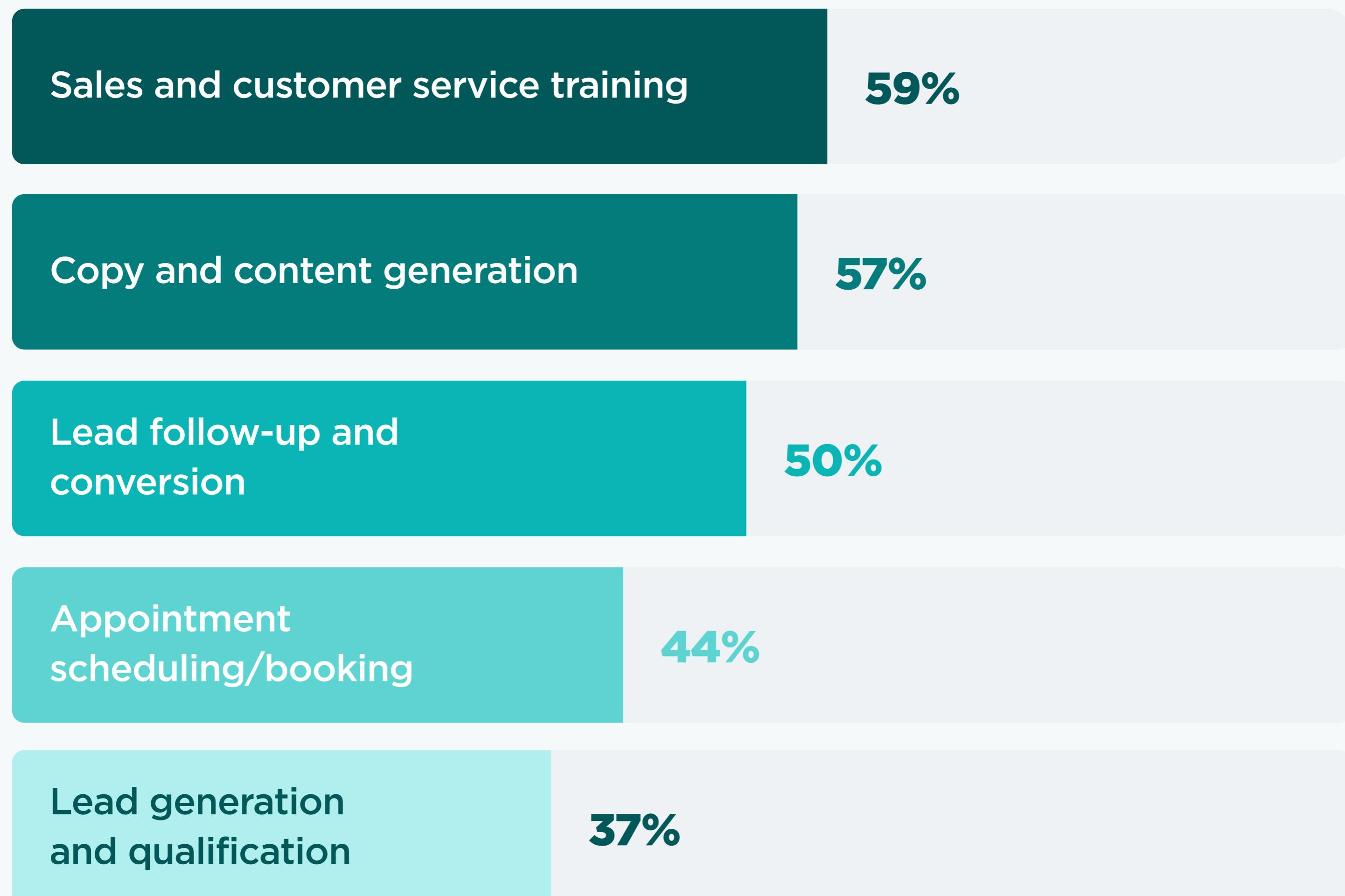
Within firms' own marketing and operations, many of the leading challenges center on the client intake process, like sales and customer service training (59%), lead follow-up and conversion (50%), and appointment scheduling (46%). To address these challenges, firms need tools that provide greater visibility into intake conversations, such as **call recording and transcriptions**, to coach staff and improve conversion rates. Additionally, they require tools like **AI voice assistants** that can automatically facilitate higher consultation booking rates.



Growing law firms — those seeing a 20% increase in revenue over the last few years — are twice as likely to consider client experience when adopting new tech compared to shrinking law firms.

— Clio's, [Legal Trends Report](#)

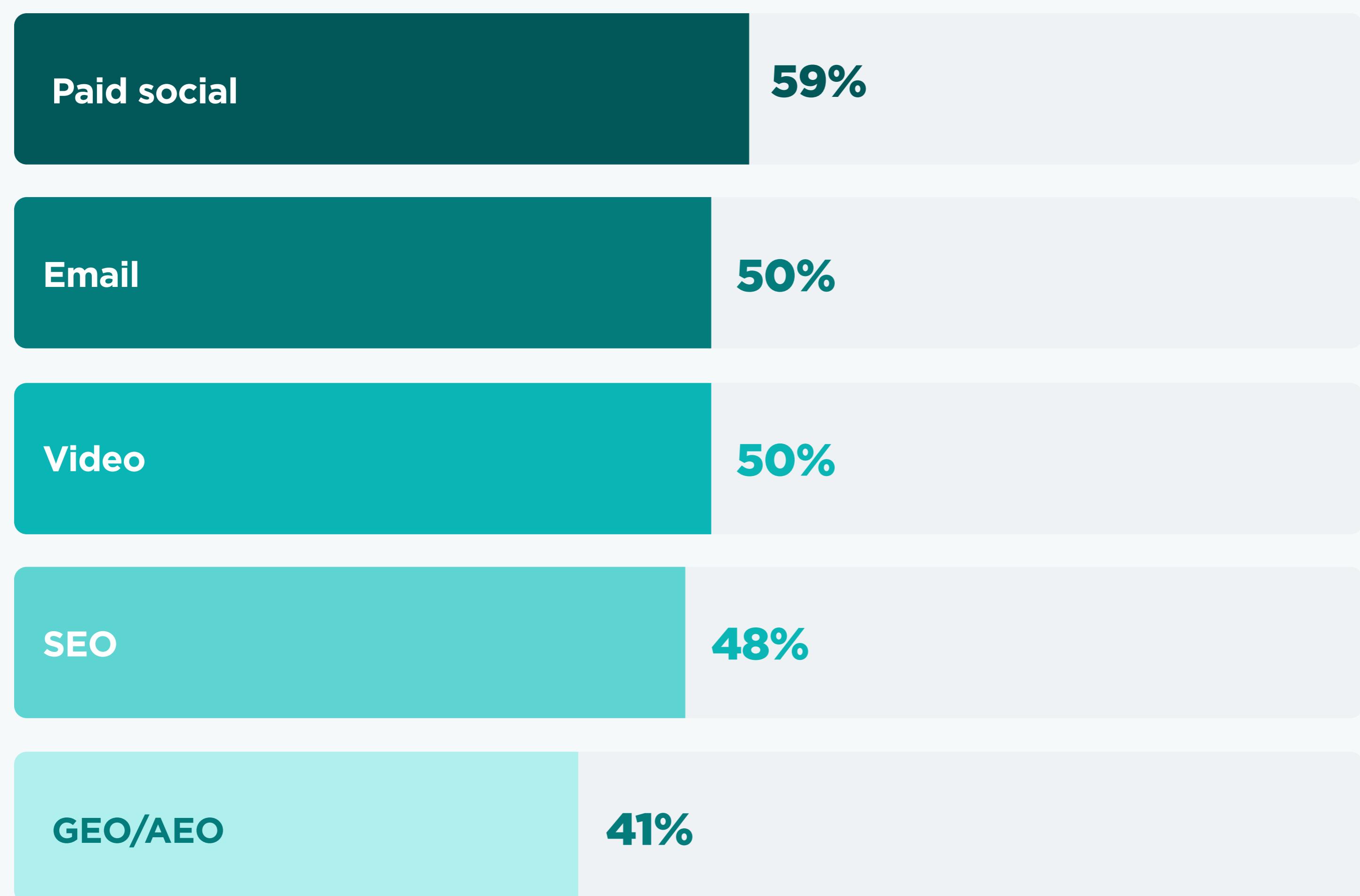
Law firms' biggest marketing and operations challenges



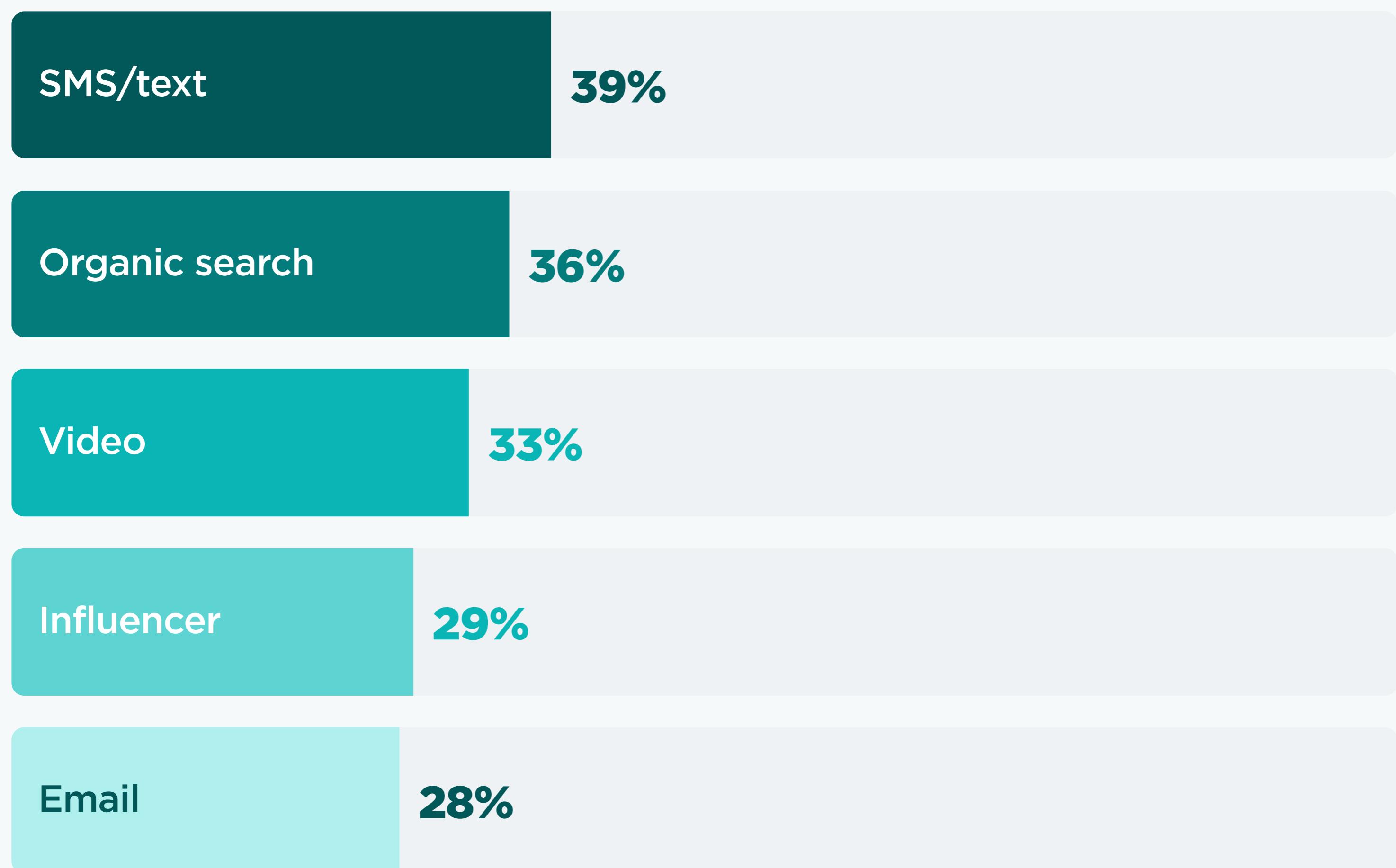
Firms are expanding into new channels in 2026

With a better understanding of marketing fundamentals, firms are rapidly implementing new channels. In the past year, at least half of the firms have implemented paid social, email, and video as part of their marketing strategies.

New channels law firms implemented in 2025

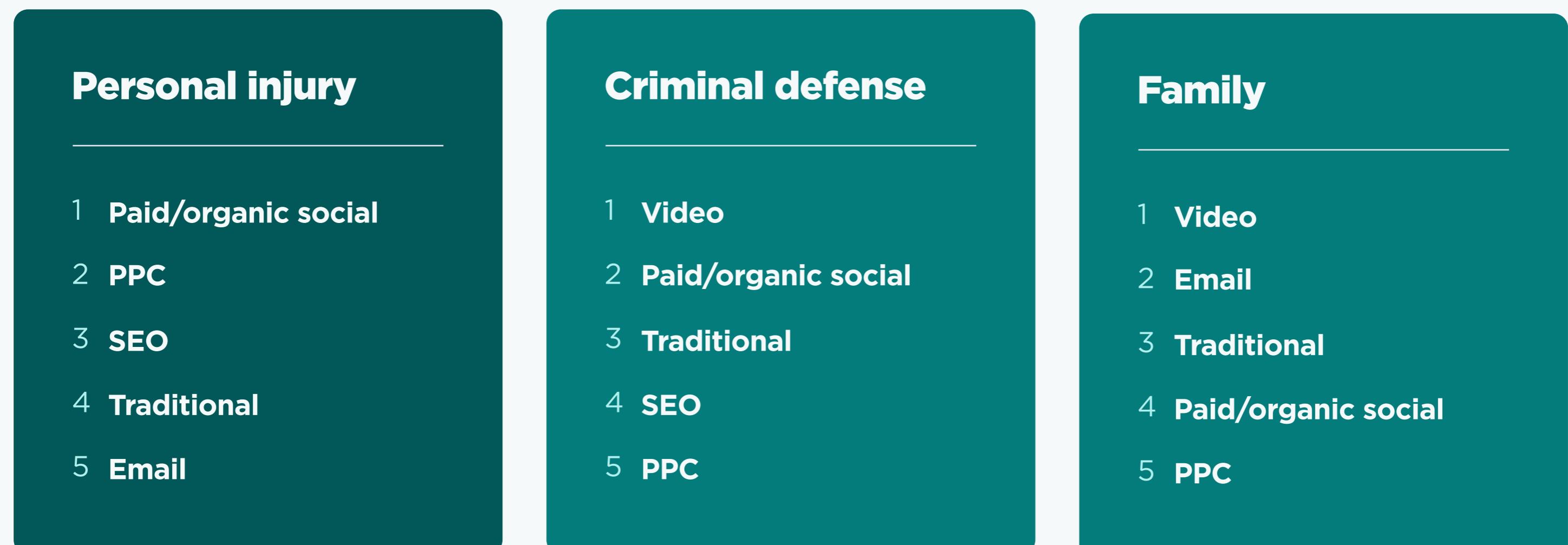


New channels law firms plan to test in 2026



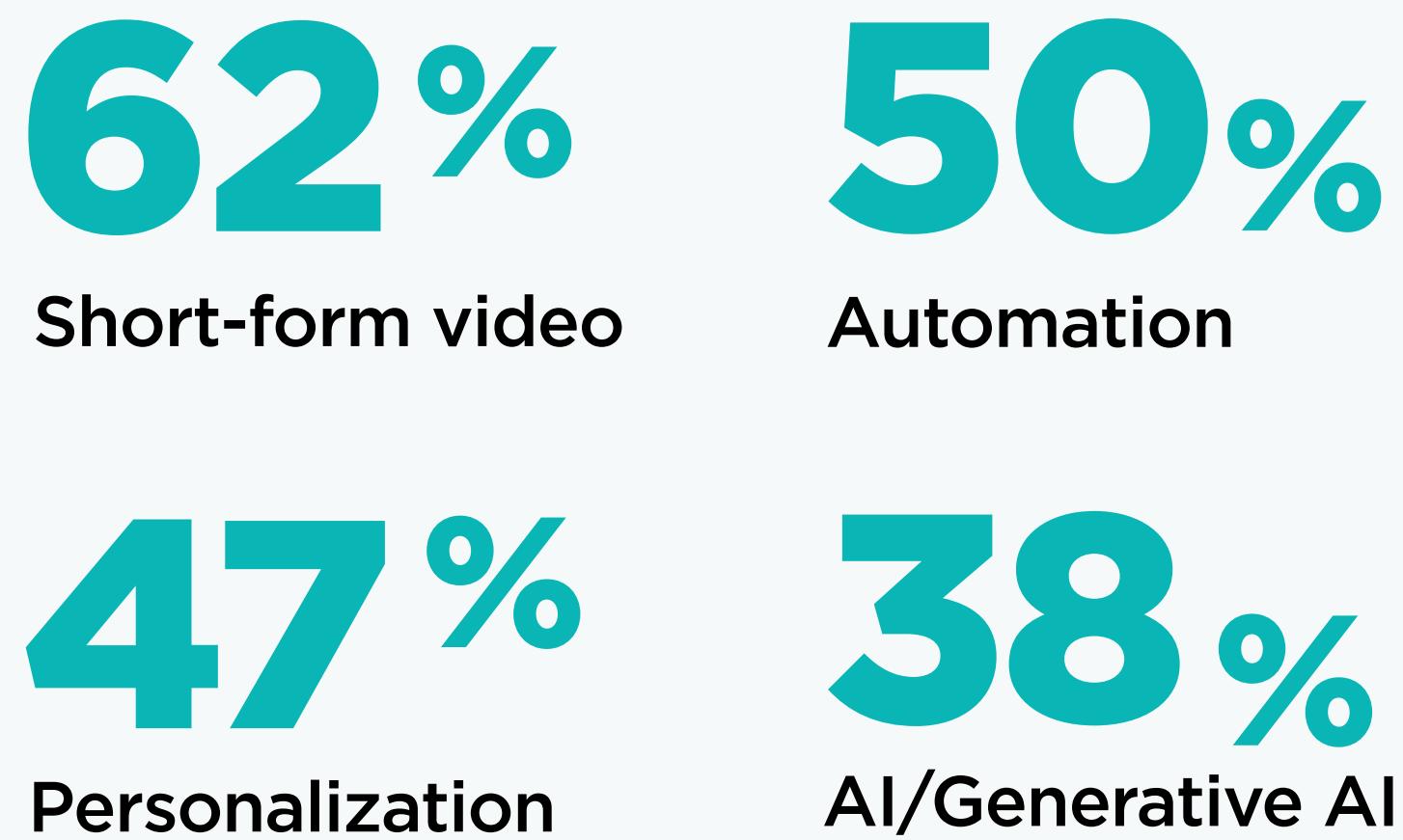
For many firms, 2026 represents a pivotal year of experimentation. At least one out of three firms plans to implement SMS/text (39%), organic social (33%), and video (33%) as new additions to their marketing efforts, followed closely by influencer marketing (29%) and email marketing (28%).

Marketing budget priorities by practice area

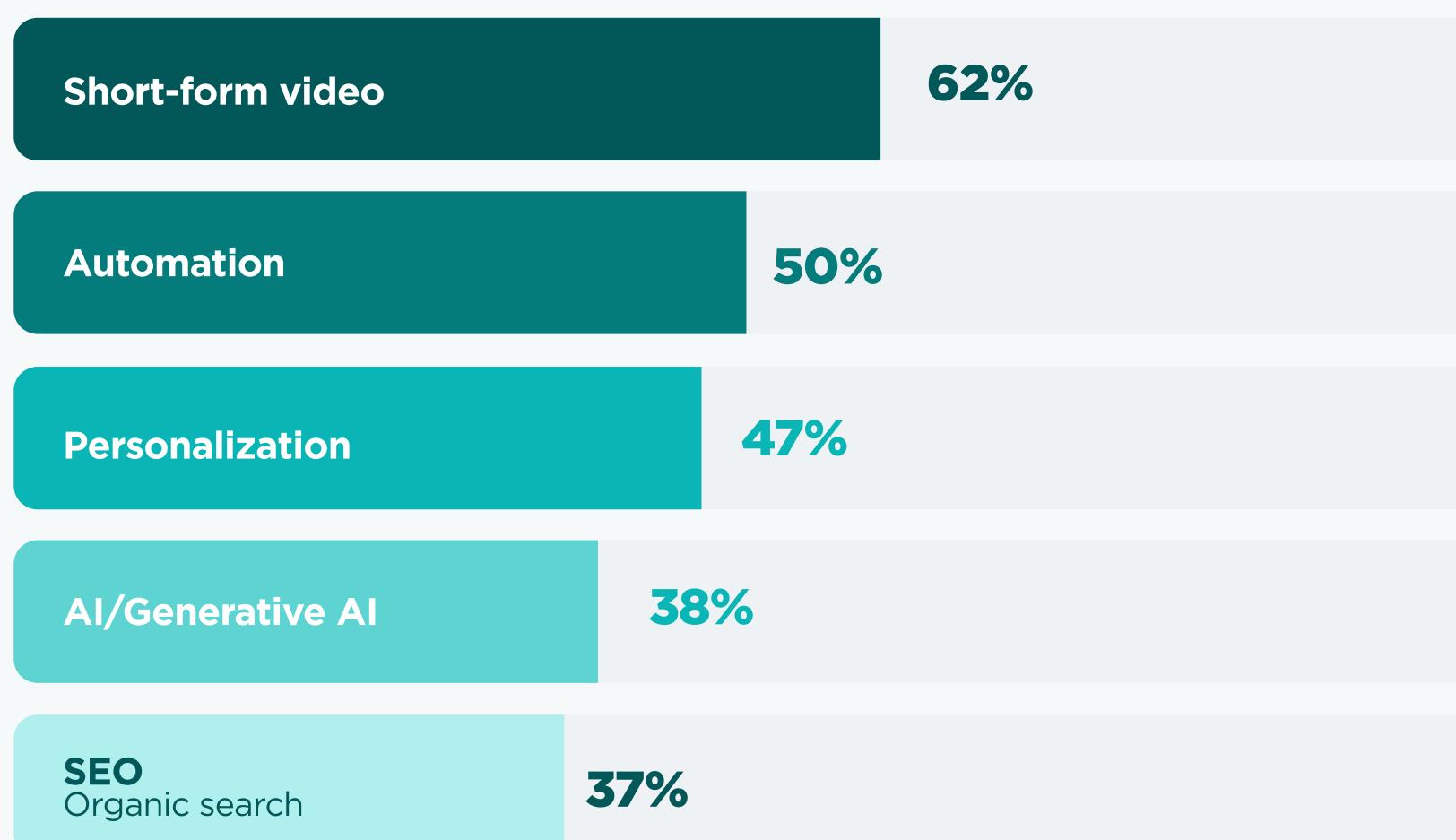


Legal industry marketing trends for 2026

When we asked law firms which trends will define legal marketing in 2026, a few themes rose to the top. Most pointed to short-form video (62%), followed by automation (50%), with personalization (47%) and AI/Generative AI (38%) close behind.



Trends likely to define legal industry marketing in 2026



These expectations indicate that firms believe the legal marketing landscape is evolving — and that keeping pace in areas such as automation, personalization, and short-form video will be crucial for staying competitive.

The shifting role of AI in law firm marketing

The role of AI in the legal industry is expanding quickly. According to Thomson Reuters, 80% of law firms believe AI will have the biggest impact on the profession over the next five years. Firms that have already adopted it are nearly three times more likely to report revenue growth than those that have not.

From courtrooms to conversion rates, keeping up with technology is one of the leading challenges facing the legal industry. AI will play a significant role as both a pressure and a solution. While firms will have to navigate new challenges — such as consumers turning to AI for legal advice — it can also help law firms address several persistent issues, including inefficient intake workflows and the growing need for personalized, high-quality content.



We are seeing a dramatic rise in the number of potential clients who have used AI to review their legal case and formed all sorts of overly confident and blatantly wrong opinions about either the validity or strength of their claims. They then tend to push back on our evaluation process and, as a result, may jeopardize their chances of the firm offering representation.

— **Chris Cahill**, General Manager at Auto Fraud Legal Center

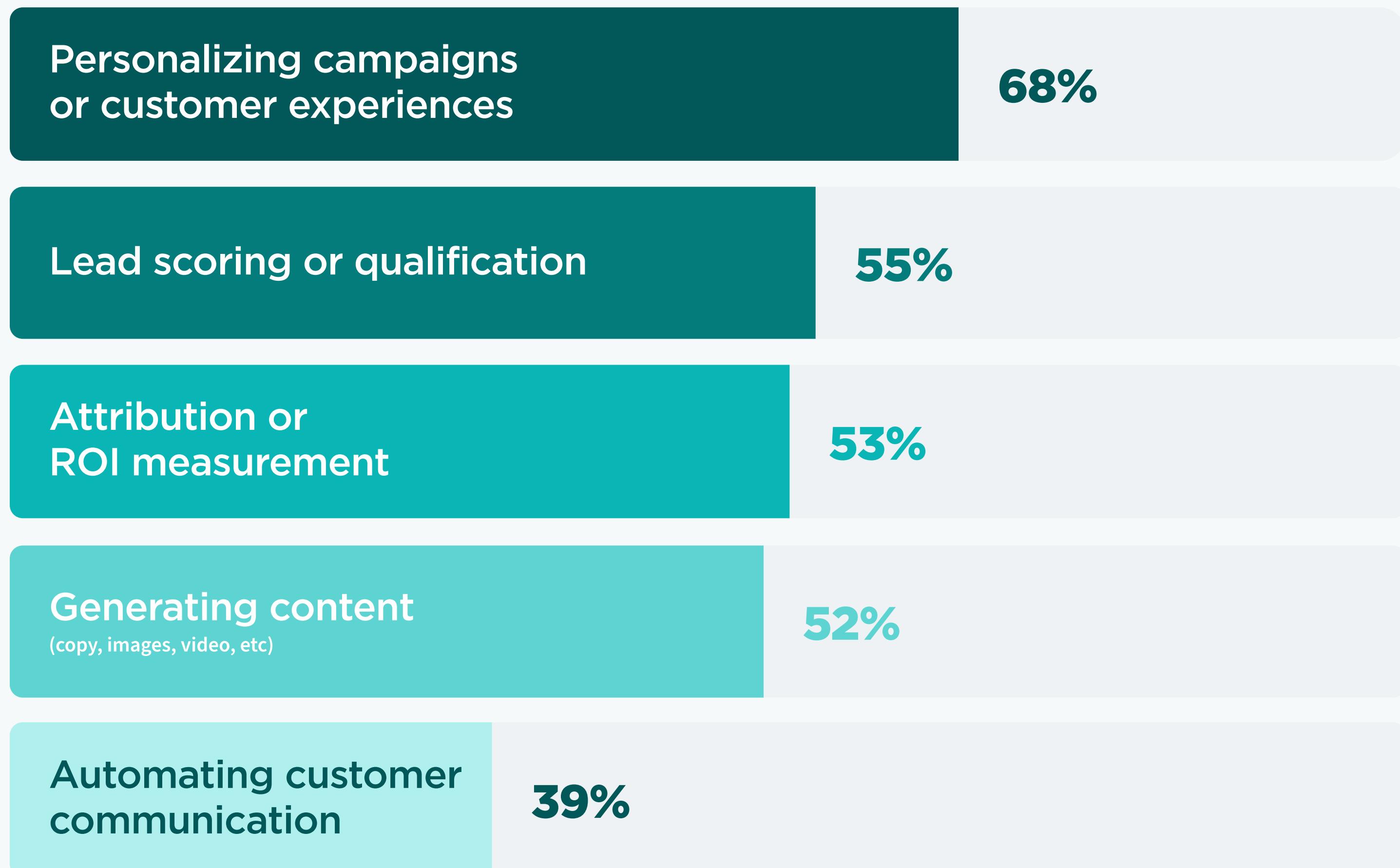


AI use cases for legal marketers

Most law firms have adopted AI in at least one part of their marketing, with personalization leading the way. However, adoption is uneven: while many firms utilize AI to tailor campaigns and client experiences, nearly half have yet to apply it to other high-impact marketing functions, like analyzing performance data or automating communications through chatbots or voice assistants like CallRail's **Voice Assist**, which can capture leads and schedule consultations even when attorneys are unavailable.

Personal injury firms, for example, lead in using AI for personalization (**84%** vs. **68%** overall) but lag behind in attribution and ROI measurement (**36%** vs. **53%** overall), suggesting some firms may be jumping ahead to advanced use cases without first strengthening the basics.

How law firms use AI today



It's not surprising, then, that **AI-driven innovation** was the top reason law firms cited for shifting their marketing strategies in 2026. This year will mark a turning point — one where firms must determine how to implement AI in ways that improve efficiency, enhance client experience, and drive measurable results.

Leading AI use cases by practice area

84%

Personal injury

Personalization

67%

Criminal defense

Personalization

82%

Family

Attribution or ROI measurement

To meet the demand for personalized experiences, firms will need to invest in AI-powered tools across the client journey. Tools like CallRail's **Voice Assist**, which learn from a firm's own call data and website, can deliver tailored intake experiences that align with personalized marketing approaches.



Client acquisition in 2026

The investments that law firms have made in marketing technology and strategies over the past few years have yielded dividends in their success in client acquisition. A combined **89%** of firms are moderately (**51%**) or extremely confident (**38%**) that they know how to use marketing to find their best clients.



Google's Local Services Ads have made it easier than ever for one lead to message the same issue to four different law firms at once. Everyone gets charged for the lead, so the game now is simple: the fastest follow-up wins. But that follow-up also has to be personal and actually close the sale. Automation might buy a little time, but it won't close business on its own."

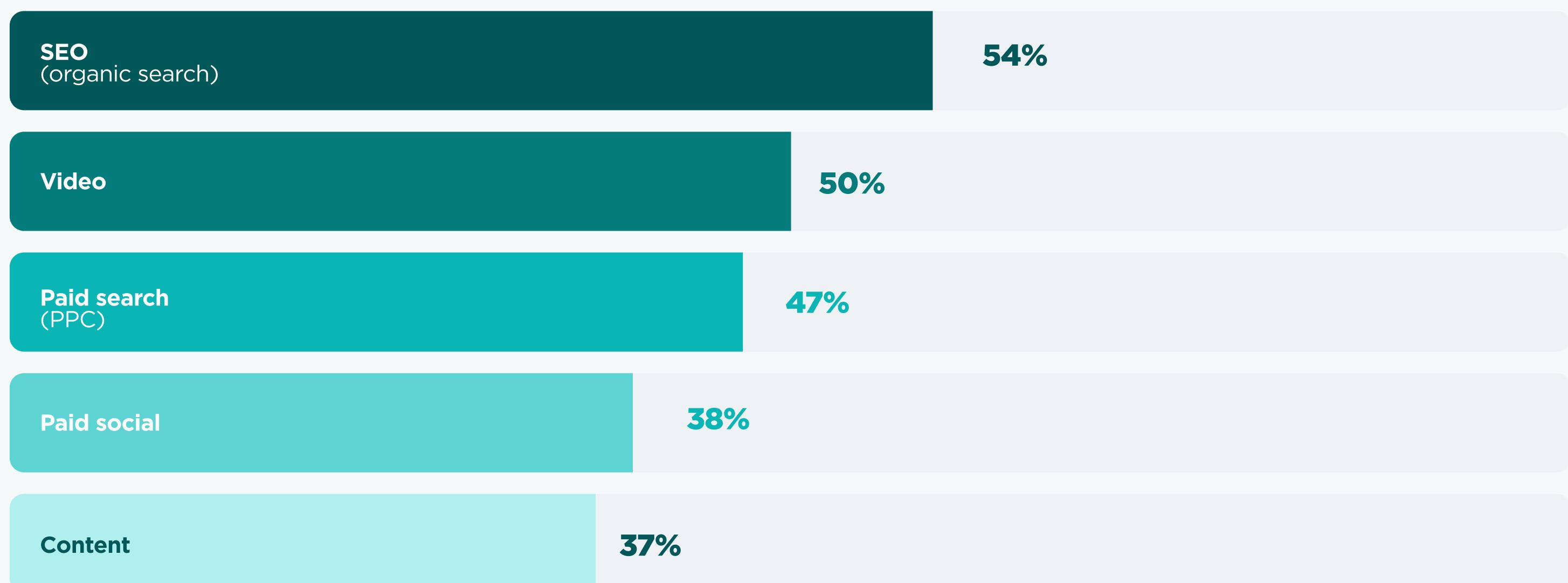
- **Anthony Higman**, CEO at [Adsquire](#)

Top channels driving new business

Digital marketing now dominates client acquisition for law firms, with channels like SEO, video, and paid search taking the lead. Traditional advertising — billboards, TV, radio, etc. — still plays a vital role in law firms' marketing strategies.

Firms must be careful when evaluating the effectiveness of digital marketing. Although traditional advertising isn't receiving budget increases, it remains a strategic part of many firms' strategies. Without allowing for self-reported attribution (asking 'how did you hear about us?'), leads attributed to search may actually be driven by a billboard or TV ad.

New business drivers by channel



Firm size can play a role in which of these channels make the cut as a strategic driver of new business. Larger firms, for example, report that paid search (**63%**) is a critical channel for new business, compared to **53%** overall. These firms have the resources that smaller firms don't have to compete for expensive keywords.

How do different practice areas drive new business?

68%

Personal injury

Pay per Click

56%

Criminal defense

SEO

47%

Family

PPC, SEO, and Video



New channels firms plan to implement in 2026

Even with solid results from their current marketing mix, many firms plan to broaden their channel strategies in 2026.

While the majority have implemented paid social (59%), email (50%), and video (50%) as channels to find new clients in the past year, law firms will be spending their budget diversely, including new tactics (video) and old (traditional marketing).

The top ways firms will spend their budget to find new clients in 2026

#1 Video Content

#2 Paid/Organic Social

#3 Traditional Marketing

#4 Email

Firms view video content as a complementary tool to their paid and organic social media strategies. For those who view paid social as their most important business driver, video also ranked as the top planned investment. But for firms more reliant on search engines, video was less likely to be part of their 2026 marketing strategy.

The top channels firms want to test in 2026

36%

Content

Personal injury

46%

SMS

Criminal defense

41%

Paid social

Family

Law firms struggle with client intake processes

Law firms have modernized their marketing, but client intake processes have not kept pace with these advancements. And the impact is real: slow responses, missed calls, and manual workflows continue to erode revenue and client trust.

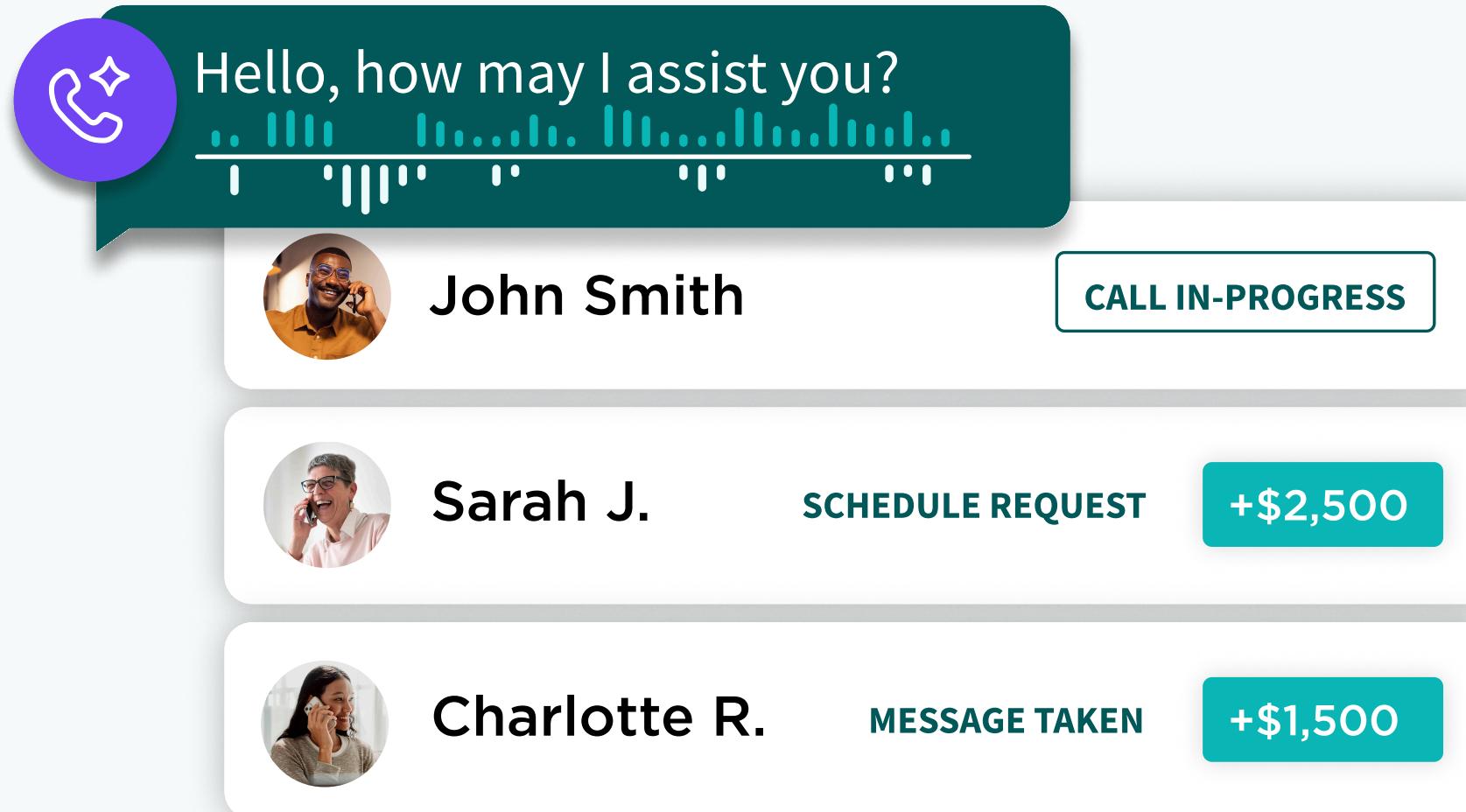
Our survey reveals three challenges plaguing the client intake process.

01

Attorneys are still doing intake — and it's costing firms revenue

The majority of firms (**68%**) rely on lawyers and paralegals to handle most of the client intake process, in addition to managing caseloads, deadlines, and billable hours. When attorneys are in court or otherwise unavailable, prospective clients are forced to either wait or find a different, more responsive firm.

Firms with dedicated intake staff see a positive impact on their bottom lines. The firms with dedicated intake staff were less likely to report lost business due to missed calls (**34%** compared to **52%** overall). For firms that can't perform intake around the clock, **AI-powered voice assistants** offer similar benefits by ensuring no call goes unanswered.



02

Slow response times remain the biggest revenue leak

For some prospective clients, a slow response is equivalent to no response at all. Firms feel the impact of slow response times, with **81% losing business as a result of slow responses to inbound calls, texts or webforms**. More than half of firms attribute the issue to incoming calls.

Where firms lose business due to slow responses:



Most concerning, **35% of firms report losing 'significant business'** — estimated at **11-25% of their annual revenue** — simply because they couldn't respond fast enough. Missed calls, especially those made after hours or during busy periods, have a similar bottom-line impact.



“If a firm doesn’t answer the first call, the chance of signing that client drops by roughly **40%**. In 2026, speed-to-lead will be the single biggest competitive advantage a law firm can have.”

– **Ivan Vislavskiy**, CEO & Co-Founder of [Grow Law](#)

Across practice areas, the impact varies dramatically, but it tends to be more significant where cases are more time-sensitive.

Impact of missed calls by practice area

Column %	Personal injury	Family	Criminal defense
Minimal (less than 5%)	57% ↑	44%	05% ↓
Moderate (5-10%)	43%	22%	40%
Significant (11-25%)	--	22%	55% ↑
Severe (25%+)	--	11% ↑	--

In 2026, “the office was closed” is no longer an acceptable excuse for missing out on a client. Modern, **AI-powered voice assistants** enable responses even during off-hours, peak call times, or lunch breaks.

03

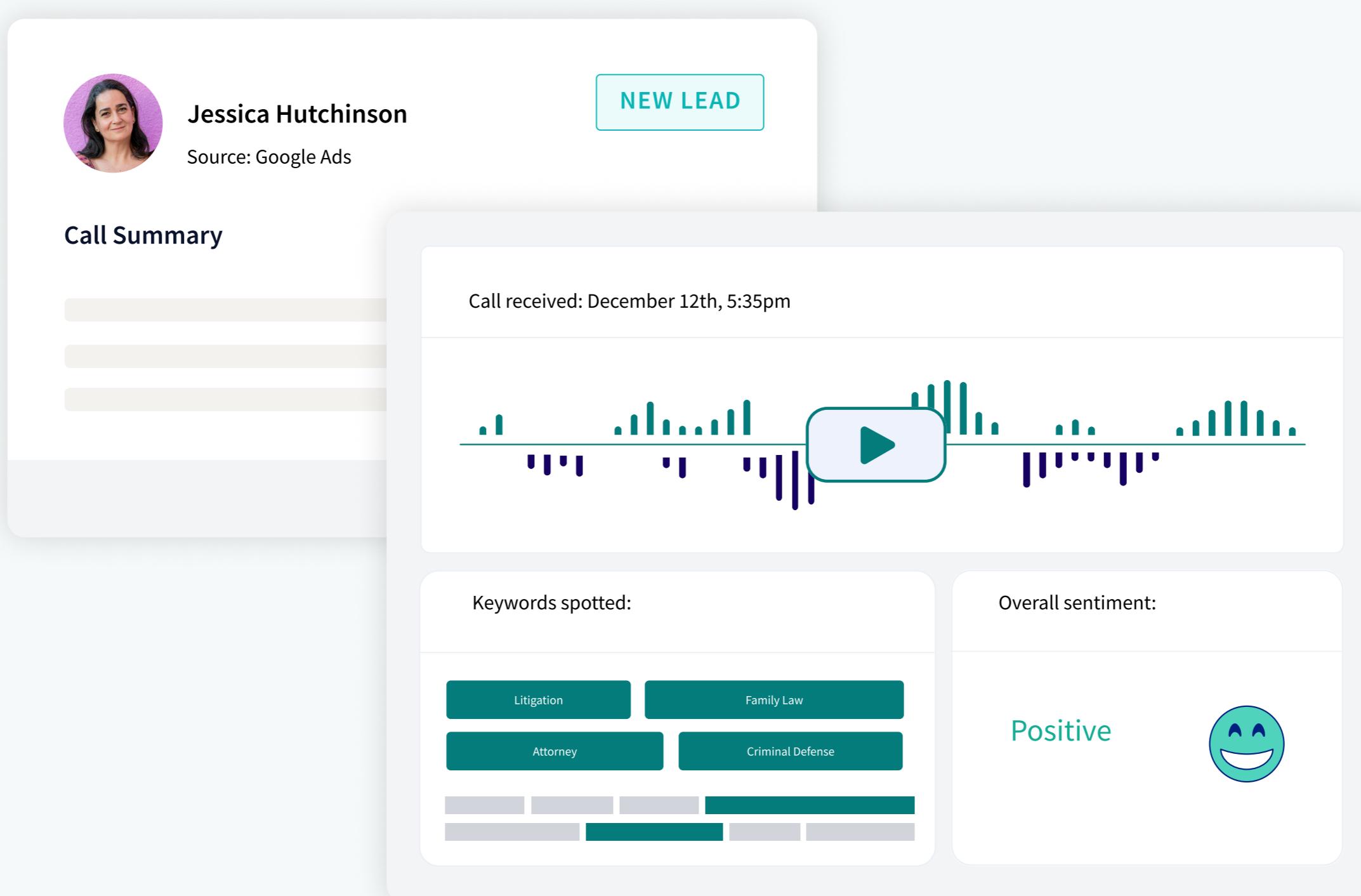
Firms are missing critical technology to modernize intake workflows

Despite modernization elsewhere, client intake remains an overwhelmingly manual process at most firms.

- Barely half (**51%**) have a CRM or client management system
- Only **22%** use call tracking or call recording
- Only **11%** use virtual receptionists



The gap persists even at larger firms. Those with 100 or more employees are **20% more likely to rely on attorneys or paralegals for intake**, but only marginally more likely to have systems that support this process. Tools such as call tracking, call recording, CRMs, and automated routing are crucial for reducing missed calls, speeding responses, standardizing follow-up, and surfacing the insights needed to understand which inquiries become clients.



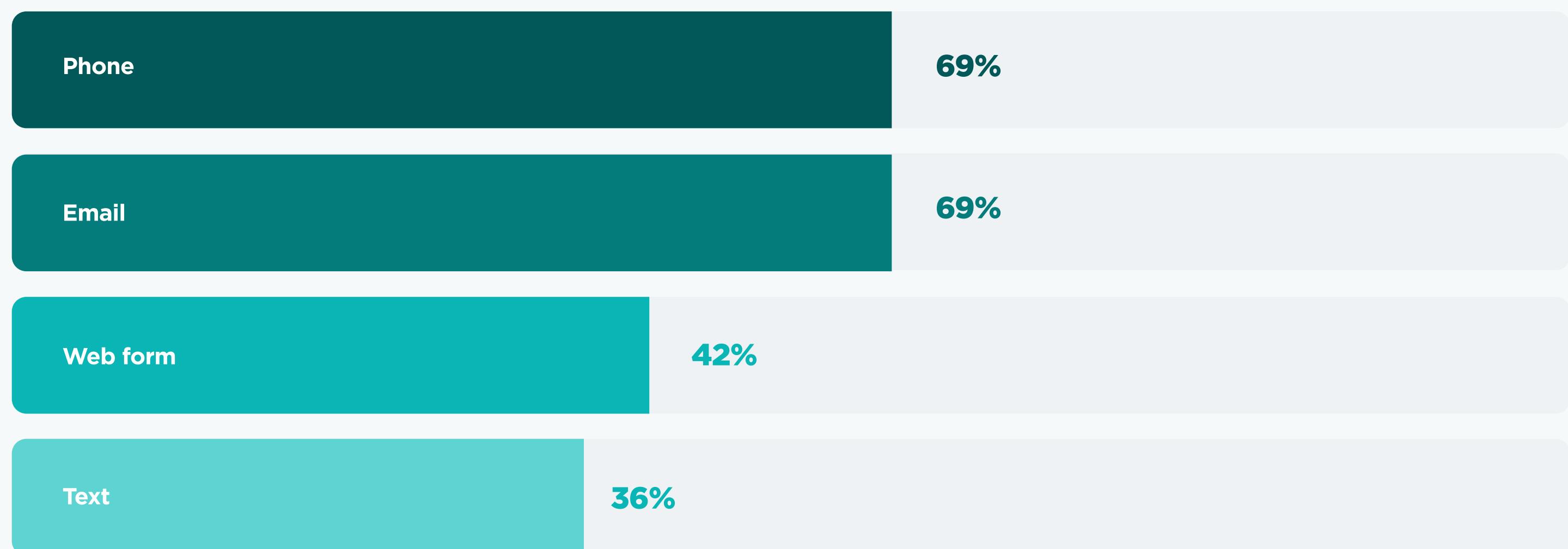
Phone remains the preferred channel for first touch and ongoing communications

Despite the rise of newer, more convenient channels, clients still overwhelmingly prefer to speak with lawyers by phone, likely because these conversations are complex and sensitive.

When it comes to first contact, law firms report that clients are equally likely to use phone calls or emails (both at **69%**). For ongoing communications, however, firms report that clients rely on their phones as the preferred channel — whether by calling or texting — **69%** of the time, while email drops to only **20%**.

There is also a strong correlation between first contact channels and ongoing communication preferences. For example, **84%** of clients who initially reach out by phone prefer to use the phone for ongoing communications. For clients who reach out by text first, **91%** prefer to continue the conversation over text.

Client preferences for first contact



First-contact preferences by practice area

60%

Phone

Personal injury

72%

Email

Criminal defense

76%

Phone

Family

Turning legal trends into tactics for 2026

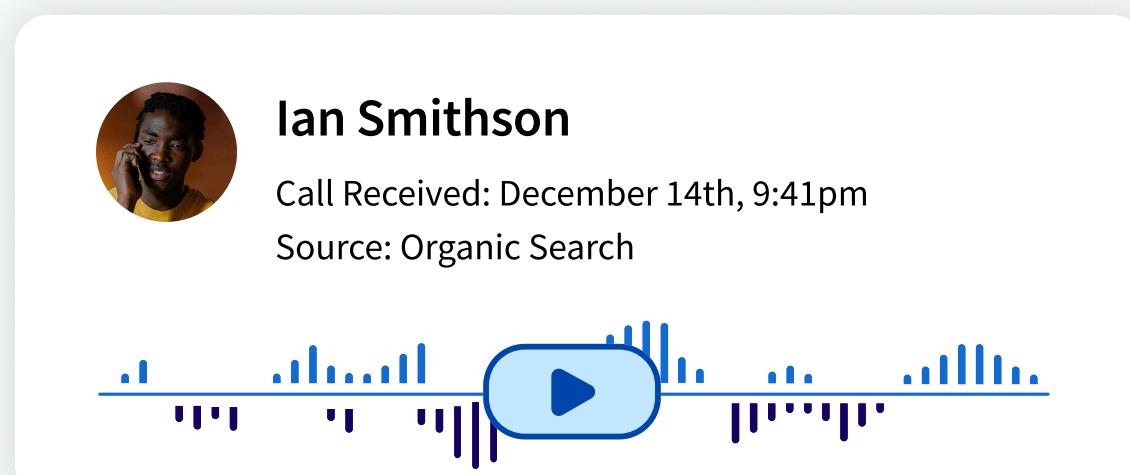
Law firms have made significant strides to modernize their marketing efforts over the past few years. Yet, too many law firms are losing out on those hard-fought clients when it comes time to close the deal.

While you cannot control technology's advancement or your competitors' moves, 2026 presents a new opportunity: build upon your successful marketing foundation and close the leaks in your intake funnel. Based on our research, here are our recommendations to focus your firm's efforts for maximum returns in 2026:

01

Make new channels measurable from day one

Firms are confident in their ability to attract clients, but adding new channels requires more than simply testing tactics. Before investing in video, paid social, or other emerging channels, ensure you have the tools to track whether those efforts are generating qualified leads — and, ultimately, new clients. **Call tracking, form tracking, and multi-touch attribution** make it easier to understand which campaigns drive calls, texts, and form submissions that convert.



Ian Smithson
Call Received: December 14th, 9:41pm
Source: Organic Search

Action Plan Smart Follow-Up Coaching

Generated on April 14th

1. Cancel the noon appointment
2. Remove Ian from the schedule
3. Note that Ian will call back
4. Clarify final concerns and details for the next appointment

02

Free up attorneys' time with *always-on* AI-powered intake

Missed calls and poor follow-up can undermine even the most effective lead generation programs. You cannot staff phones 24/7, but you also can't afford to miss calls. Implement solutions like CallRail's **AI Voice Assist** to answer calls, qualify leads, and book consultations during off-hours or busy days, minimizing lost business. For those times an attorney handles the intake, there are AI tools that can help by **creating action plans and automating follow-up tasks** to reduce the time burden.

03

Find high-impact AI use cases

In 2025, law firms reported content generation as their top use for AI. In 2026, the strategy must shift to operational efficiency. Utilize AI to surface insights from conversations that would be impossible to analyze manually, and use automation to handle intake tasks that your staff lacks the time to manage.



04

Modernize your firm's most critical channel — the phone

The phone remains the heart of the client relationship, yet it is also the most neglected channel. Only **22%** of firms use fundamental tools like call tracking and recording. To close the modernization gap, firms need a unified platform like CallRail.

The CallRail platform supports this by bringing key measurement capabilities together in one place, enabling you to:

- **Track and attribute interactions across calls, texts, and forms** back to the marketing sources that generated them.
- **Generate conversation-based insights** from **calls, texts, and forms** to better understand buyer intent and conversion signals.
- **Unlock the full value of every conversation using a premium suite of AI tools** that provide rich insights and **help you convert more leads.**

CallRail combines these capabilities into a connected lead engagement platform that supports the entire client journey. From tracking which channels generate your best cases to automating intake and follow-up, CallRail helps you attract better clients and convert them efficiently — all while eliminating the costly manual tasks that slow you down.

Take control of your marketing and client intake in 2026

See how CallRail can help you attract better clients and convert more of them.

[Start your free trial today →](#)



Methodology and Demographics

This report is based on a survey of 100 legal 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%). Firms 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.