Marketers Need to Stop Chasing Data and Start Harnessing Audience Signals

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Brands have more data than ever, but most of it remains untapped. What's missing isn't more data. It's the signal that tells teams what to do.

During a Social Media Week session co-hosted with Sprout Social, the idea of turning social intelligence noise into action was explored. Sabrina Barekzai, director of social media strategy at Slack, joined Brittany Hennessy, VP of social intelligence evangelism at Sprout Social, to discuss how teams can identify meaningful signals, act on them quickly, and connect social insights to business impact.

Defining social intelligence

Hennessy started by defining social intelligence as "getting all the data you have, getting it out of the content spreadsheet, and into insights that your business can actually use."

She outlined a clear system for turning data into action. It starts with conversation—what audiences say, react to, and engage with across platforms, trends, and culture. Then comes detection, where teams filter noise and identify what matters. Interpretation follows, translating signals into meaning. Activation turns insight into action, and outcome measures the impact on the business.

While the framework appears linear, Hennessy explained that it’s a loop. “Once you have that outcome, you’re going to take that data, and you’re going to bring it back to the conversation,” she said. “The more effectively you can move through this, the quicker you can respond.”

Treating social like a coworker

Barekzai expanded on Hennessy’s commentary by explaining how Slack approaches social interaction.

“We want to be intuitive, we want to be human, we want to be participatory, and we want to be pleasant,” she shared. [4.04] Slack treats social media like a coworker—someone you tag in a joke or pull into a conversation.

“I like to say comments are the new currency,” Barekzai added. That means showing up proactively and participating in conversations and cultural moments.

This method has driven strong performance, with 485 LinkedIn posts over the past year and a 6.2% engagement rate, while the industry average is about 2%, she said.

Spotting signals and acting on them

The real test of social intelligence is how quickly teams act on signals.

One example came from Slack’s “Seasonal Delight” campaign, which included holiday and seasonal-themed status updates. The campaign was originally launched as a one-time feature for Halloween, but the team quickly saw demand.

“We immediately saw the signal,” Barekzai shared. “We went to our product team and said, ‘Hey, we think there’s something here. The comments on social are amazing. How can we take this and make it a product commitment?’”

What started as a limited release turned into a product

opportunity. The team used social feedback to push for expansion into more holidays and other moments.

Listening is the strategy

The conversation closed with Barekzai suggesting a mindset shift. Instead of asking what to publish next, teams should focus on what audiences are already saying.

“When we stopped asking, ‘What should we post?’ and started asking, ‘What are people saying back to us?’ That led to creating that social intelligence loop, collaborating with other teams, and coming up with really fun ideas,” Barekzai said.

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