RESEARCH REPORT — NORTH ATLANTA SMALL BUSINESS SERIES, STUDY 5

The Social Media ROI Reality Check

What North Atlanta Small Businesses Are Getting From Social Media — and What the Data Says About the Channel Most Are Over-Investing In

Prepared by MakeItLoud | North Atlanta Small Business Research Series

Data Sources: LocaliQ Big Small Business Marketing Trends Report 2026 | HubSpot State of Marketing 2026 | Hootsuite Social Media Trends 2026 | Sprout Social Index 2025 | Meta / Social@Ogilvy published organic reach data | BizIQ / Revenue Memo Small Business Marketing Statistics 2026 | U.S. Small Business Administration marketing budget guidance | U.S. Census Bureau / ACS 2025 population estimates

66%	2–5%	$22–$36+	24%
of small businesses use unpaid social media — the single most-used marketing channel (LocaliQ 2026)	of followers a Facebook business post now reaches organically, down from ~16% in 2012	returned per $1 spent on SEO and email — the two most under-used channels	of small businesses plan to cut traditional media in 2026 while organic social spend holds steady

BOTTOM LINE

Unpaid social media is the most-used marketing channel among small businesses — used by 66%, ahead of social ads (56%) and SEO and email (53% each). But the return data tells a different story: published industry research puts email marketing's ROI at $36–$42 per dollar spent and SEO at roughly $22 per dollar, while social advertising returns closer to $5 and organic social's directly attributable return is both the hardest of the four to measure and, by most published estimates, the lowest. Layered on top of that gap is a structural problem unique to organic social: Facebook's organic reach for business pages has fallen from roughly 16% of followers in 2012 to somewhere between 2% and 5% today. A North Atlanta business with 2,000 followers posting to Facebook is typically reaching somewhere between 40 and 100 people per post — not the audience most owners believe they're paying time and attention to reach. This report uses published platform and industry data to quantify what that mismatch is likely costing North Atlanta's small business community, and what the data says about where the same hours would pay off better.

Executive Summary

Every small-business owner has a limited amount of marketing time and money, and channel choice is one of the highest-leverage decisions they make all year. The 2026 data on where small businesses are actually putting that time tells a consistent story: the most-used channel in America is unpaid social media (66% of small businesses), followed closely by social media ads (56%) and a tie between SEO and email marketing (53% each). Roughly a quarter of small businesses say they plan to invest less in traditional media this year — a sign that budget is actively shifting, not just staying flat.

The problem is where that shifted budget tends to land. Organic social is the channel most small businesses default to because it feels free — no media spend, just time. But "free" is a function of ignoring the labor cost, and it ignores a decade-long structural decline in how many of a page's own followers ever see what it posts. Facebook's organic reach for business pages was around 16% of followers in 2012; multiple independent analyses now place it at 2% to 5%. That means the audience a small business believes it is reaching every time it posts is, in practice, a small fraction of the people who chose to follow it.

Meanwhile, the channels with the best-documented return — email marketing and SEO — are used by barely half of small businesses, at 53% each, despite delivering multiples of the return of social. This report walks through the usage-versus-ROI mismatch, quantifies the reach math for a representative North Atlanta small business, and estimates what re-balancing a marketing budget toward higher-ROI channels could mean using the SBA's own marketing investment guidance.

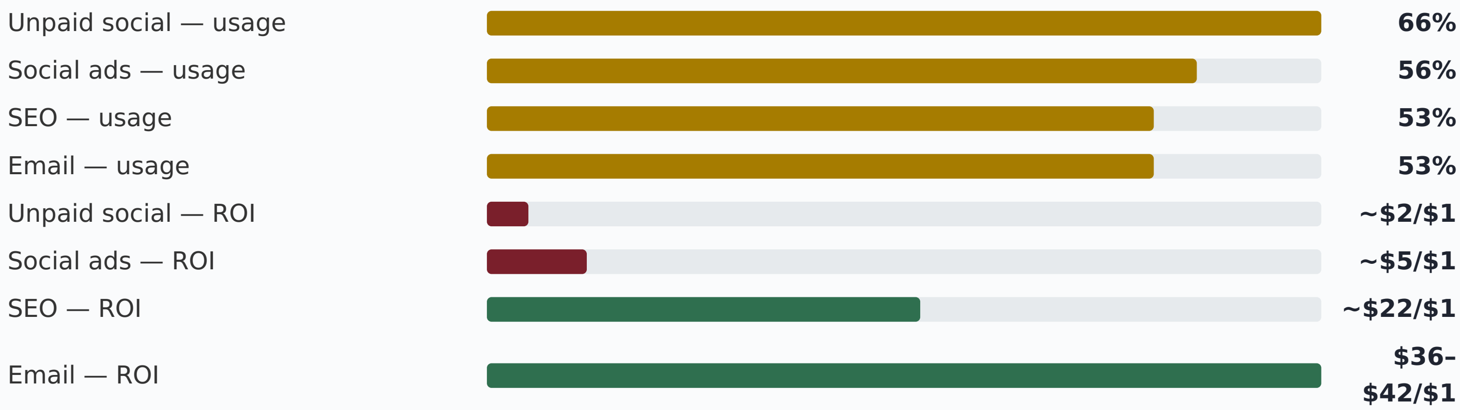
Finding 1 | The Three Most-Used Channels Are Not the Three Best-Performing Channels

LocaliQ's 2026 survey of small businesses found that the three most-used marketing channels are unpaid social media marketing (66%), social media ads (56%), and SEO and email marketing (tied at 53% each). On usage alone, social — paid and unpaid combined — dominates the small business marketing landscape more than any other channel category.

> **Unpaid social (66%) is the most-used small business marketing channel, but email and SEO — used by just 53% each — return far more per dollar**

But usage and return are two different measurements, and the gap between them is large. Industry ROI research consistently places email marketing at the top of the return table, with commonly cited figures in the $36–$42 range per dollar spent — the highest of any widely tracked channel. SEO follows at roughly $22 per dollar invested. Social advertising, by contrast, is more commonly cited around $5 per dollar spent — a real, positive return, but a fraction of email's or SEO's. Organic (unpaid) social's directly attributable ROI is both the hardest of the four to isolate from brand-awareness effects and, where researchers have tried to isolate it, is generally estimated below $2 per dollar of labor invested — before accounting for the platform's own downward pressure on how many people ever see a given post.

Small Business Channel Usage vs. Documented ROI per $1 Spent



Usage: LocaliQ Big Small Business Marketing Trends Report, 2026. ROI: BizIQ / Revenue Memo Small Business Marketing Statistics 2026 (SEO $22:1, email $36:1); industry ROI compilations placing email as high as $42:1 (Litmus/Campaign Monitor) and social advertising near $5:1; organic social's isolated, directly attributable ROI is not consistently published and is estimated below $2:1 by researchers who separate it from paid social (Sender.net Marketing ROI Statistics 2025-2026). Figures are industry benchmarks, not measurements of any specific North Atlanta business.

Finding 2 | Organic Reach Has Been Declining for Over a Decade — and the Decline Is Structural, Not Temporary

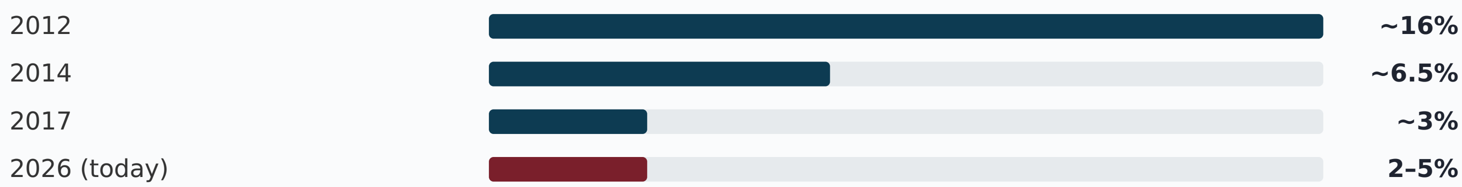
The channel small businesses use the most is also the one whose core mechanic — free distribution to your own followers — has been shrinking for over a decade. Multiple independently published analyses (Social@Ogilvy, Edgerank Checker, and current 2026 industry benchmarks) trace the same arc: Facebook business page posts reached roughly 16% of followers in 2012, fell to around 6–6.5% by 2014 as Facebook's News Feed algorithm began prioritizing friends-and-family content over Page content, and continued declining through subsequent algorithm

> **Facebook business page organic reach: ~16% (2012) → ~6.5% (2014) → 2–5% (today)**

changes. Current 2026 estimates place average organic reach for Facebook business pages at 2% to 5% of followers per post — with some analyses citing figures as low as 1–2%.

This is not a temporary dip a business can wait out. The decline tracks Meta's own advertising revenue growth over the same period, and every major platform change since 2014 has moved in the same direction: less free distribution, more pressure to pay for reach. Instagram and LinkedIn show similar patterns, with some 2025–2026 data showing year-over-year organic reach declines in the double digits on both platforms.

Facebook Business Page Organic Reach Over Time (% of Followers Reached per Post)



Source: Social@Ogilvy organic reach research (2012–2014 data points); Edgerank Checker studies; 2026 industry benchmarks compiled across Hootsuite, InflowAve, and independent marketing research (2–5% current range; some sources cite 1–2% for large pages). Figures represent averages; individual page performance varies by content type and engagement.

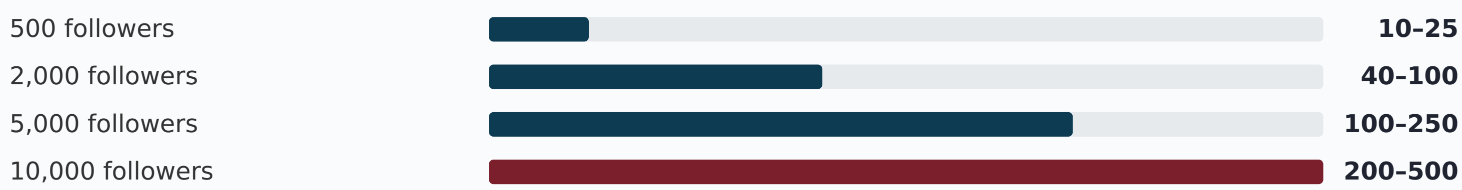
Finding 3 | What This Looks Like for an Actual North Atlanta Small Business

2,000 followers × 2–5% organic reach = roughly 40–100 people reached per post

Translated into real numbers, a North Atlanta small business with a reasonably healthy Facebook following of 2,000 people is, on average, reaching somewhere between 40 and 100 of them with each organic post — not the 2,000 people the follower count implies. A business that spends an hour writing and designing a post, and another hour responding to comments and messages, is investing real time against an audience roughly the size of a single neighborhood block party.

By comparison, that same hour invested in local SEO — optimizing a Google Business Profile, building city-specific landing pages, or earning local backlinks — compounds. Search rankings, once earned, keep delivering visibility to new searchers every day without repeated content production. Email, once a list is built, delivers a message to the same list at effectively 100% delivery-attempt rate (subject to inbox placement and open rates), not a shrinking single-digit percentage set by a platform's algorithm.

Estimated People Reached per Post, by Follower Count (at 2–5% Organic Reach)



Calculated from published 2–5% average organic reach range applied to representative follower counts. Not a measurement of any specific business's page; actual reach varies by content type, posting time, and engagement history.

Finding 4 | Budgets Are Shifting, But Not Necessarily Toward the Highest-ROI Channels

Small business marketing behavior is genuinely in motion. LocaliQ's 2026 data found that 24% of small businesses plan to invest less in traditional media this year, up sharply from 16% in the prior year's report — a real acceleration away from print, direct mail, and broadcast. At the same time, most small businesses plan to hold their organic social investment roughly steady rather than redirect it, even as the same survey data shows social media marketing and online listings post some of the lowest satisfaction scores of any tactic small businesses use — a sign that owners sense the channel isn't delivering proportional to the effort, without necessarily reallocating away from it.

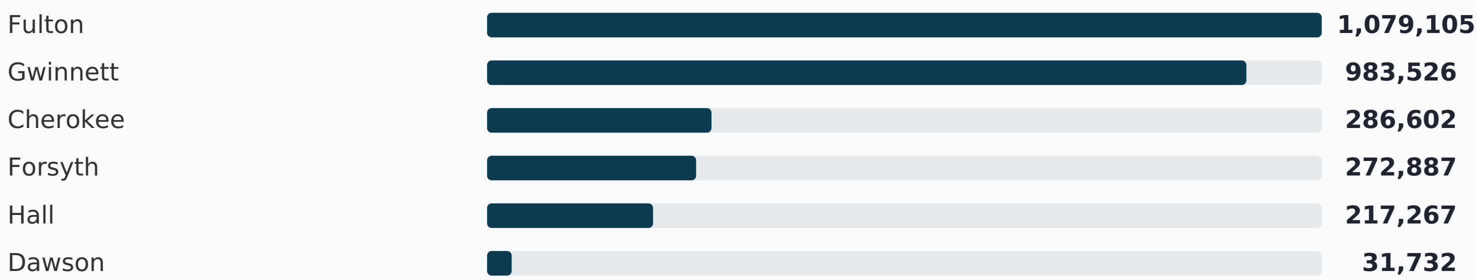
The pattern that emerges across the 2026 research is a business community that is willing to cut the channels it's already skeptical of (traditional media) but has not yet applied the same scrutiny to organic social, which occupies a similar "low measured ROI, high perceived necessity" position. Separately, research on multi-channel marketing found that small businesses relying on a single marketing channel dropped from 24% in 2022 to 11% in 2025 — real diversification progress — but diversification only pays off if the channels being added are the ones with the strongest return, not simply the most familiar ones.

Finding 5 | Sizing the Opportunity Cost for North Atlanta's Small Business Community

The U.S. Small Business Administration recommends that businesses with under $5 million in annual revenue allocate 7–8% of gross revenue to marketing. Applying that benchmark to a representative North Atlanta small business generating $400,000 in annual revenue implies a marketing budget in the $28,000–$32,000 range. Industry data shows small businesses currently direct close to 15% of their marketing budget toward social media specifically — meaning roughly $4,200–$4,800 of that budget is social-focused in a typical year, split between the ad spend that returns roughly $5 per dollar and the labor cost of organic posting that returns closer to $2 per dollar or less once isolated from paid amplification.

Shifting even a third of that social allocation — call it $1,400–$1,600 — toward SEO or email, at their respective $22:1 and $36:1 benchmarks, models out to a meaningfully larger return than leaving it in organic social's sub-$2:1 range. This is a directional illustration, not a guarantee for any individual business — actual results depend heavily on execution quality in any channel — but the size of the gap between the ROI benchmarks is large enough that the channel-mix decision is one of the highest-leverage marketing choices a small business owner can make each year.

Six-County North Atlanta Area — Estimated Small Business Population (Modeled)



SIX-COUNTY TOTAL POPULATION: ~2,871,000 (U.S. Census Bureau / ACS 2025 estimates, compiled via Neilsberg). Applying the national ratio of roughly 1 small business per 9.7 residents (34.8 million U.S. small businesses per ~340 million population, SBA/Revenue Memo 2025) yields a modeled estimate of approximately 296,000 small businesses across the six-county North Atlanta area. This is a calculated estimate, not a direct business-registry count.

What North Atlanta Small Businesses Can Do — Evidence-Based Starting Points

1 Keep a social presence, but stop treating it as free.

Organic posting still has real value for brand voice, customer service, and social proof — but the labor hours behind it are a real cost, and the 2–5% reach ceiling means that value is mostly about depth of relationship with existing followers, not new-customer reach. Budget the time honestly and stop expecting it to substitute for a discovery channel.

2 Move the next new marketing dollar toward SEO or email before adding more organic social.
At roughly $22 and $36+ return per dollar respectively, these are the two channels with the clearest documented payoff and the lowest current adoption (53% each) relative to social's 66%. A Google Business Profile overhaul or a basic email list and monthly send is more accessible than most owners assume.

3 If a paid budget exists for social, direct it to ads rather than organic boosting alone.
Paid social's roughly $5:1 return is real and meaningfully higher than organic's isolated return. Businesses that keep organic content flowing but put actual media dollars behind promotion see a materially different result than those relying on the algorithm to surface unpaid posts.

4 Use the SBA's 7–8% of revenue benchmark as a floor, then allocate by ROI, not habit.
Most small businesses under-invest in marketing overall — but for those already spending close to the benchmark, the bigger lever is often reallocation between channels rather than simply spending more on the channels already in use.

The Data: North Atlanta Social Media ROI Reference 2026

Data Point	Figure	Source
Small businesses using unpaid social media marketing	66%	LocaliQ Big SMB Marketing Trends Report 2026
Small businesses using social media ads	56%	LocaliQ Big SMB Marketing Trends Report 2026
Small businesses using SEO / using email marketing	53% each	LocaliQ Big SMB Marketing Trends Report 2026
Small businesses planning to invest less in traditional media in 2026	24% (up from 16% prior year)	LocaliQ Big SMB Marketing Trends Report 2026
Email marketing ROI per $1 spent	$36–$42	Revenue Memo 2026 / Litmus-Campaign Monitor
SEO ROI per $1 invested	~$22	Revenue Memo / BizIQ Small Business Marketing Statistics 2026
Social advertising ROI per $1 spent	~$5	BizIQ Small Business Marketing Statistics 2026
Organic social isolated ROI per $1 of labor (estimated)	Under $2	Sender.net Marketing ROI Statistics 2025-2026
Facebook business page organic reach, 2012	~16%	Social@Ogilvy
Facebook business page organic reach, 2014	~6–6.5%	Edgerank Checker / Social@Ogilvy
Facebook business page organic reach, 2026	2–5%	Compiled 2026 industry benchmarks (Hootsuite, InflowAve, others)
SBA recommended marketing budget (revenue under $5M)	7–8% of gross revenue	U.S. Small Business Administration
Share of SMB marketing budget spent on social media	~14.9%	Revenue Memo Small Business Marketing Budget Statistics 2026
SMBs relying on a single marketing channel	11% (down from 24% in 2022)	Constant Contact 2025 / Revenue Memo
Six-county North Atlanta population (Fulton, Gwinnett, Cherokee, Forsyth, Hall, Dawson)	~2,871,000	U.S. Census Bureau / ACS 2025 (via Neilsberg)
Modeled small business count, six-county North Atlanta area	~296,000 (estimated)	Calculated from national small-business-per-capita ratio, SBA/Revenue Memo 2025

ROI figures are industry benchmarks compiled from multiple published sources and vary by methodology, industry, and measurement window. They describe typical/average findings, not guarantees for any individual business.

About MakeItLoud

MakeItLoud works with small and local businesses across North Atlanta to build marketing strategies grounded in measurable return, not channel habit. This report is part of an ongoing research series examining how North Atlanta small businesses market themselves and what the data says about where their time and budget pay off best.

Methodology, Limitations & Sources

This report synthesizes published national survey data and industry ROI research with U.S. Census Bureau population estimates for the six-county North Atlanta area (Fulton, Gwinnett, Cherokee, Forsyth, Hall, and Dawson counties). There is no county-level survey directly measuring social media ROI or channel usage for small businesses specifically within these six counties; national small-business survey data is applied as a reasonable proxy, and the local small-business count is an explicitly modeled estimate based on national small-business-per-capita ratios, not a direct registry count. ROI figures for each channel come from multiple independent industry sources and represent typical or average findings across broad samples of businesses; actual results vary significantly by industry, execution quality, and measurement methodology. Organic social's directly attributable ROI is inherently difficult to isolate from brand-awareness and word-of-mouth effects, and figures describing it should be read as directional rather than precise.

LocaliQ. The Big Small Business Marketing Trends Report for 2026. Channel usage rates (66% unpaid social, 56% social ads, 53% SEO/email); 24% planning reduced traditional media investment (up from 16%). localiq.com

HubSpot. State of Marketing 2026. Channel ROI rankings; email and organic social usage and ROI perception data. hubspot.com/marketing-statistics

Revenue Memo / BizIQ. Small Business Marketing Statistics 2026; Digital Marketing Statistics 2026. Email ROI ($36:1), SEO ROI ($22:1), social advertising ROI (~$5:1), SBA marketing budget benchmarks, social media budget share (~14.9%), single-channel reliance decline (24% to 11%). revenuememo.com, biziq.com

Sender.net. Marketing ROI Statistics 2025-2026: Benchmarks by Industry and Channel. Organic social isolated ROI estimate (under $2:1); influencer marketing ROI range ($5.20-$5.78:1). sender.net

Social@Ogilvy / Edgerank Checker. Historical Facebook organic reach research, 2012-2014 (16% to 6-6.5% decline).

Hootsuite. Social Media Trends 2026 (organic reach decline commentary, current benchmarks). blog.hootsuite.com

InflowAve / industry compilations. Current Facebook organic reach benchmarks (2-5% of followers, 2026). inflowave.io

U.S. Small Business Administration. Marketing budget guidance: 7-8% of gross revenue for businesses under $5 million.

U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey 2025 population estimates for Fulton, Gwinnett, Cherokee, Forsyth, Hall, and Dawson counties (compiled via Neilsberg Research). census.gov

Note on the channel labeled "unpaid social" ROI: published industry data most consistently attributes a ~$5-per-dollar return specifically to paid social advertising. Organic (unpaid) social's directly attributable return is rarely isolated in published research and is generally estimated lower — below $2 per dollar of labor invested — once separated from paid amplification and brand-awareness effects. This report presents both figures explicitly rather than treating them as interchangeable.