






# Facebook Trends for Brand Pages in 2015

We analyzed 8 million posts from over 8,000 brands to bring you insights on Facebook audience growth, engagement, and post frequency.





Despite competition from other platforms, digital marketers still relied on Facebook in 2015. Agencies and in-house marketers worked to prove their worth, building followers and boosting engagement. Meanwhile, publications like the Washington Post wrote about Facebook's declining growth, a March Facebook-wide fan purge, and ever-changing newsfeed algorithms.

All this talk got us wondering how brands actually performed on Facebook in 2015. Here are the biggest questions we wanted to answer about brands' performance on Facebook last year.

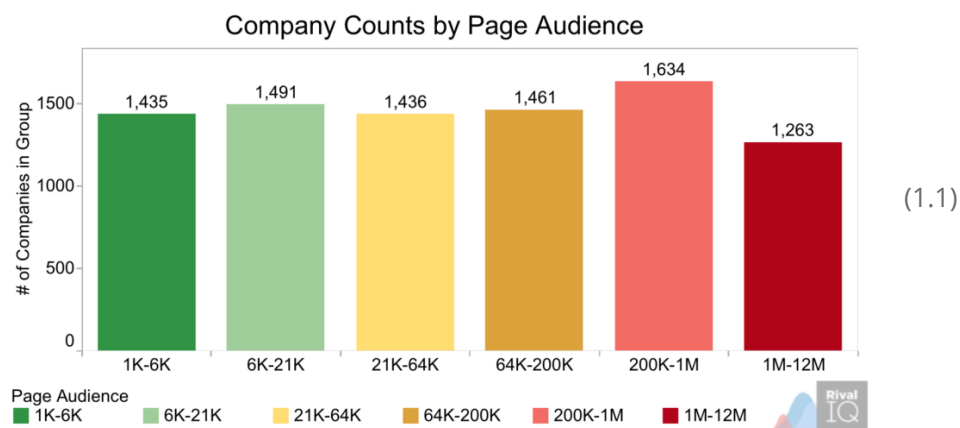
1. Was growth slowing or flat, or did brands continue to grow their audience?
2. How often are brands posting, and how does that correlate with page audience size, category, and audience.
3. Was engagement declining across the board? Were social marketers creating compelling content?

At Rival IQ, we don't have to just sit and wonder about these things. We also want to empower marketers with data. So we took a year's worth of data from thousands of companies stored in our database. We dug in and found the most interesting Facebook data and observations from 2015 — and what that may mean for marketers looking to benchmark their success in 2016 and beyond.

## OUR PROCESS

We started our research with a little over 8,000 different companies that we had been tracking since at least the beginning of 2015. To normalize the data set, we excluded all tracked companies that had fewer than 1,000 fans and we excluded the top 1% of pages by audience. From those brands, we tracked data on a total of 8.1 million posts which saw 11.5 billion interactions (likes, comments, and shares).

To gain a deeper understanding of how trends differed by audience size, we first grouped pages by their number of fans. We ended up with six tiers with approximately 1,500 brands in each tier, divided by audience size.





Where possible, we used medians rather than means/averages where outliers may skew averages, including paid promotion. It's important to note that some promoted posts and pages are in our analysis. But we did not attempt to remove or adjust based on those posts alone, since there is no clear way to determine whether a post was promoted based on public data.

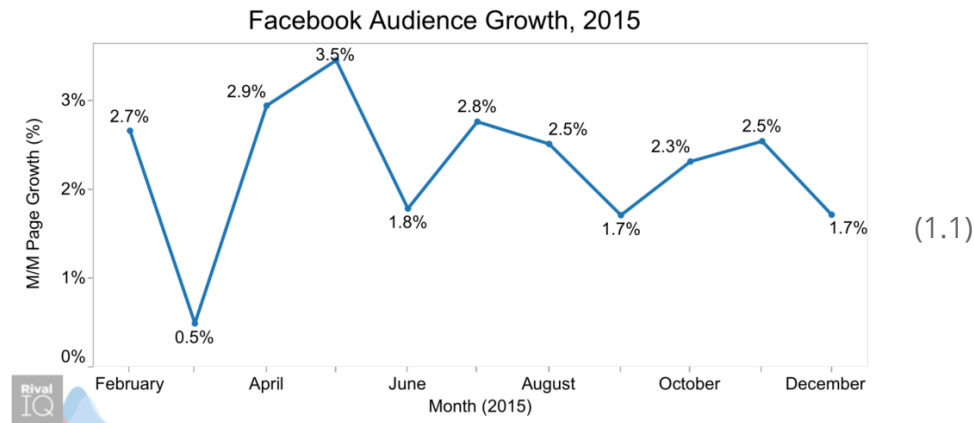
## AUDIENCE GROWTH: A YEAR OF EBBS AND FLOWS

Arguably, the most easily tracked metric of Facebook success is a brand's social audience size. Its importance as a measure of success is often debated, but, as the most visible metric for a brand page on Facebook, we wanted to review and discuss it in our study.

### Facebook Overall

Looking at Facebook as a whole isn't going to give us the most actionable data for insight or benchmarking. However, it's helpful to see general 2015 trends.

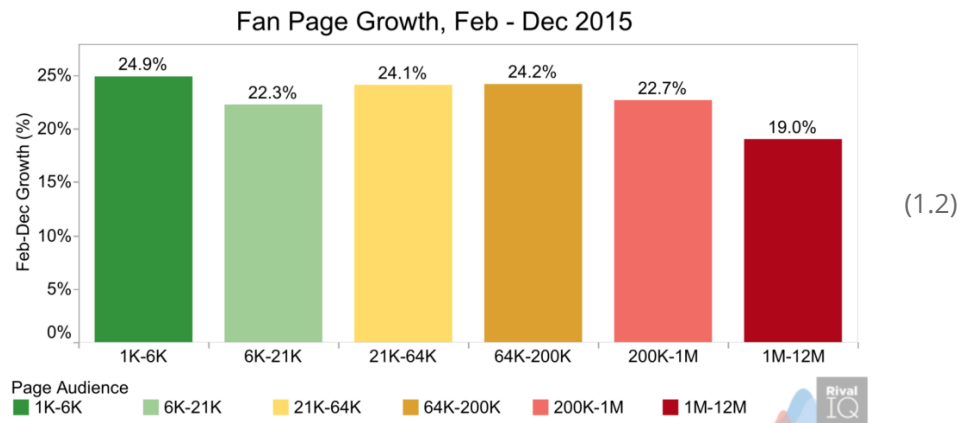
As you can see from the chart below, **Facebook brand pages were able to grow their audiences consistently throughout 2015**. Growth was consistent month-to-month with fairly little variation. Over the entire year, Facebook



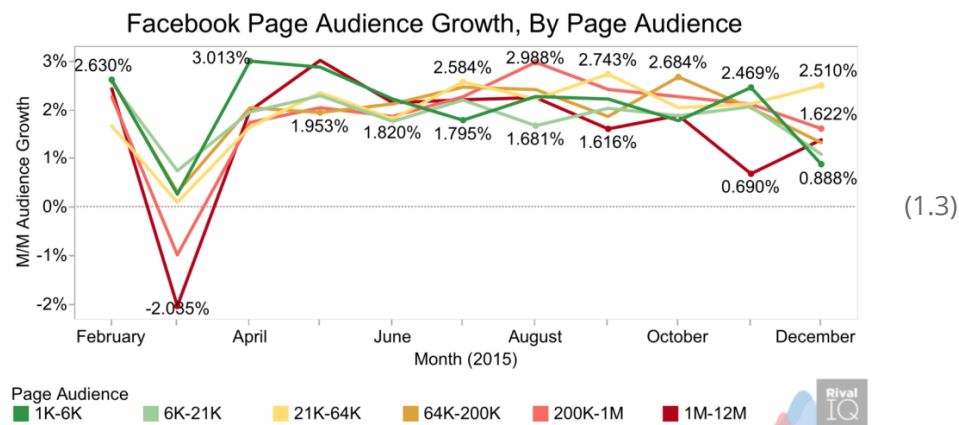
brand pages were able to grow 27.8% from February through December, or an average of 2.26% per month. The largest variation in the chart above relates to a March fan cull. That event led to only 0.5% growth that month — the lowest growth of any month. Again, over the entire year, the average monthly growth for brand page page likes is 2.26%. Using that average month-to-month growth rate, we can assume that, on average, brand pages lost 1.76% of their entire Facebook audience in March.

## GROWTH BY PAGE AUDIENCE SIZE

As mentioned above, overall page growth for Facebook pages isn't the most actionable data. What's more telling is growth by page audience size.



Above, our chart shows page audience growth between the end of January 2015 and the end of the year. There isn't a precise relationship between growth and page audience size, but you can see that the largest pages saw the least fan growth and the smallest category saw the most. This is helpful for benchmarking growth, but the difference in growth by page size is more interesting when we look at a month-by-month analysis.



As you can see above, in general, the smallest of the brand pages (shown in dark green) have higher growth rates, likely because they still have a lot of audience to tap, and the fact that small absolute growth rates equal big percentages for them.

On the other end, largest of the pages (shown in red) have smaller month-to-month median growth. Despite likely having a larger target audience, larger pages have possibly saturated their potential market and fanbase by the time they enter the top few audience size tiers.

The real exception there is December. Taking the holiday season and the Facebook-wide chart in the previous section (1.1) into account, one would assume that all or most brand pages would see a spike in audience growth in December. However, only two audience size segments saw an increase in growth in December over November.



Brand pages with audiences larger than 1 million saw some growth after a big drop-off in November, but the 21,000-64,000 audience segment was the month's real winner.

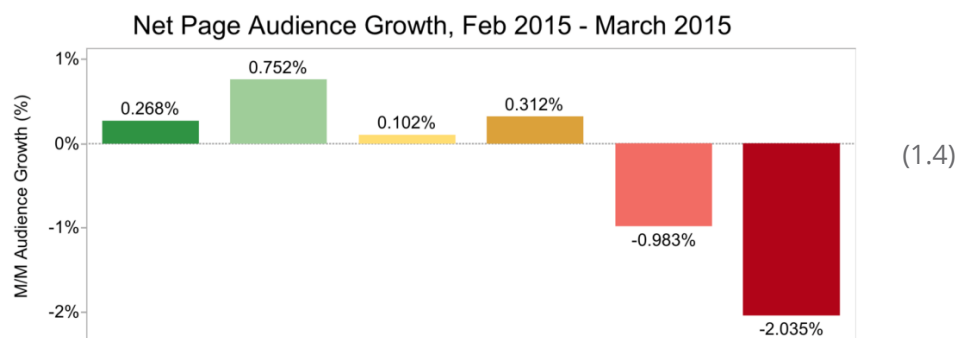
So, **what caused these segments to out-perform other segments in December?** Since most other segments didn't see this spike, it can't be fully attributed to a natural holiday boost. December is notoriously a competitive time for all advertising, and any PPC advertiser will tell you that more competition means a higher CPC. This will inevitably favor larger pages that have more sizable budgets. That explains how the largest pages were able to out-perform smaller pages.

Still, it doesn't explain the 21,000-64,000 category's growth. It seems that those mid-tier pages were either doing something right, or that Facebook's system was somehow helping them grow.

## MARCH 2015 FAN CULL

It's possible that 2015 was one of the oddest years ever for Facebook fan growth, for one major reason. In March, Facebook removed millions of brand page likes from certain Facebook users. These users were spam likes, inactive accounts, and accounts of deceased users.

While Facebook hasn't released any numbers on the amount of users removed during this cull — Facebook said that pages would only notice a "small dip" in their audience size — some pages saw extreme drops. One notable example is Beyonce. She lost 4.9 million fans — 7.30% of her entire audience — almost overnight.



In the chart above, we've broken down the percent difference in median Facebook page likes (net growth) in March. You can see that larger pages (like Beyonce, Disney, Oreo, MTV, and Red Bull) took the hardest hit. Pages boasting more than a million fans seeing an more than 2% drop. Meanwhile, pages with less than 200,000 likes were still able to grow or maintain their audiences in March. Fake users are more likely to follow popular pages to make their profile look more "normal," thus less likely to be flagged for deletion.

A lot of brand managers want to know, will a fan cull like this ever happen again? While there's nothing preventing



Facebook from cleaning house in the future, Facebook claims that a cull won't happen again — at least not for the same reason.

The bulk of removed inactive fans were from pages of deceased individuals. Now, friends of loved ones who die will be able to “memorialize” that loved one’s Facebook page. Since the March cull, **Facebook has been removing brand page likes from any page that becomes memorialized.** That will remove the need for an identical cull to happen in the future.

A Mature Platform

- 1. We see consistent growth.
- 2. That growth isn't coming at a particularly high speed.

Looking at audience growth throughout the year, we have two big takeaways:

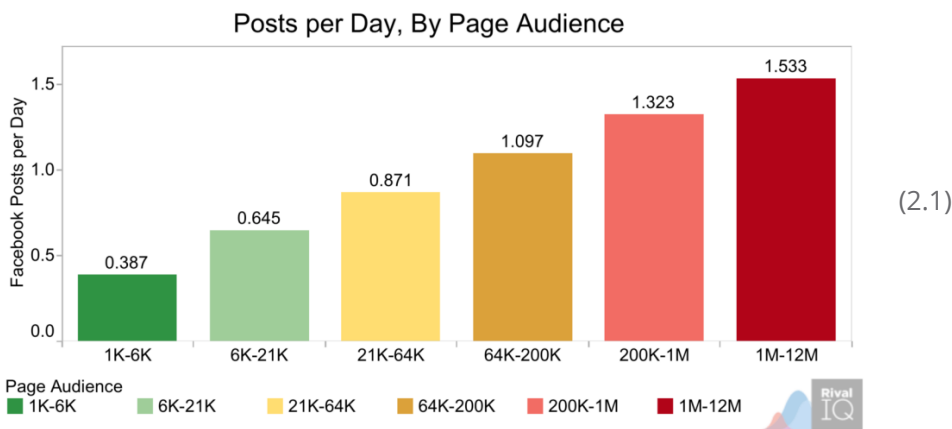
Both of these are signs of a mature platform. Facebook, unlike newer platforms, offers **consistency and predictable performance.** Even a fan cull in March didn't stop Facebook brand pages from seeing growth in 2015. Facebook may not be the newest social or digital marketing platform, but its maturity and consistency still make it one of the best places to invest your digital marketing resources.

POSTING FREQUENCY: IS MORE REALLY MORE?

The perfect posting frequency has always been elusive to social marketers. Post too much and you dilute your messaging, annoy your fans, and get organic reach throttled. Post too infrequently and your fans might forget you exist.

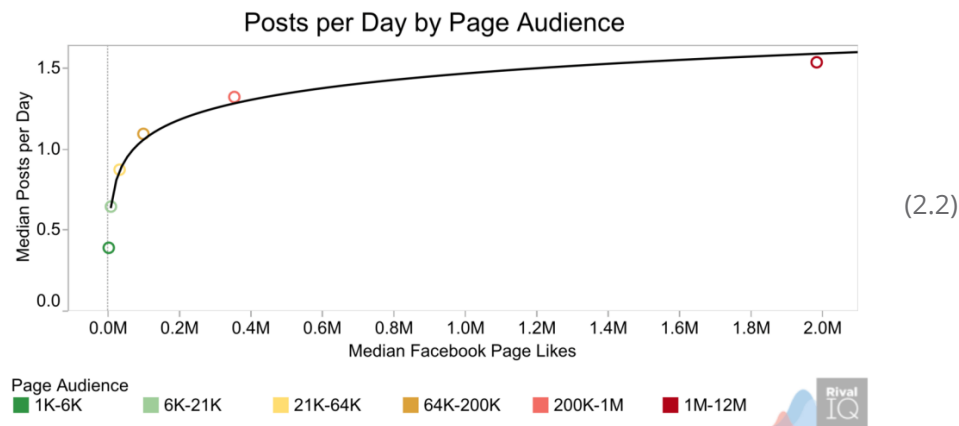
Posts Per Day

The key metric in determining the success of your posting cadence is likely engagement. But before we talk about post frequency and interactions, let's look at how often brands post based on audience size.





The chart above shows the median number of Facebook posts over the course of a day. It's easy to see that pages with larger audiences tend to post more frequently. In the next graph (2.2, looking at the data plotted against the median audience size shows us that **for every 10x increase in page fans, we see an increase of 0.4 posts per day**. Pages with fan bases under 6,000 (shown in dark green) post about 0.4 times per day (12x per month), and pages with more than a million fans (shown in dark red) post closer to 1.5 times per day (46x per month).



That makes us wonder how and why bigger pages post more often. **Is there something about larger pages that enables them to sustain a higher posting frequency?**

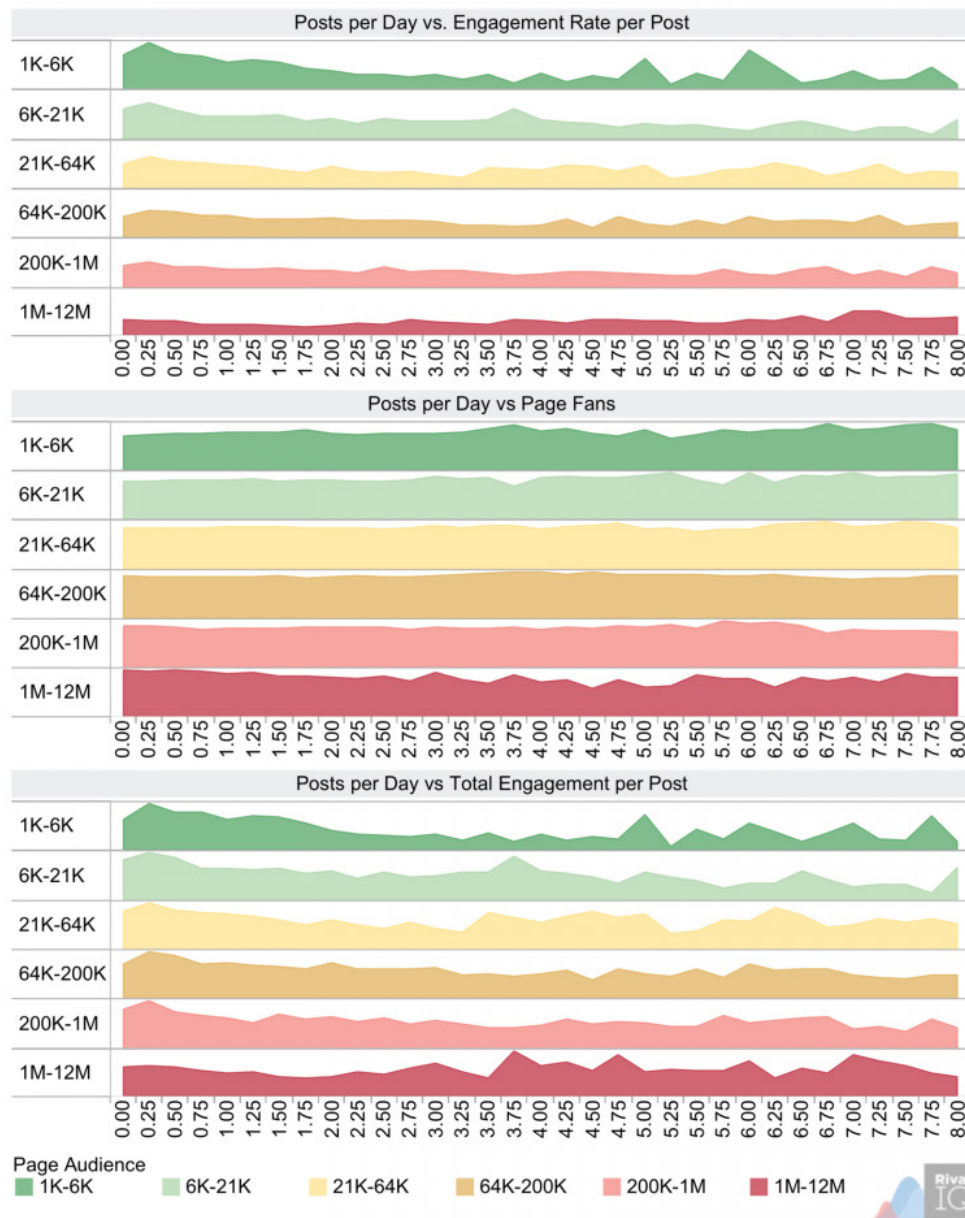
Bigger brand pages are more likely to hire many social media managers or agencies to run their pages. Smaller pages are likely seeing social run by a marketing manager who wears several hats. That usually means less time to create and curate social content.

## Post Volume and Engagement

So, larger pages post more frequently. What effect does that have on engagement? As you'll see in more detail in our next section (chart 3.1), the engagement rate per post (the number of interactions a post receives, normalized by the size of a page's audience size and expressed as a percentage) falls as pages get larger.

Of course, correlation doesn't prove causation. Still, it made us wonder if audience size or posting frequency affects engagement more. **Are engagement rates down because larger pages post too often? Or do brands increase posting frequency to keep overall interactions up, including clicks back to their website?**

Well, we don't like unanswered questions. The chart below shows average engagement rate per post, average audience size, and average total engagement per post. This is all plotted against the number of posts per day. Note that each y-axis in this chart is scaled independently.



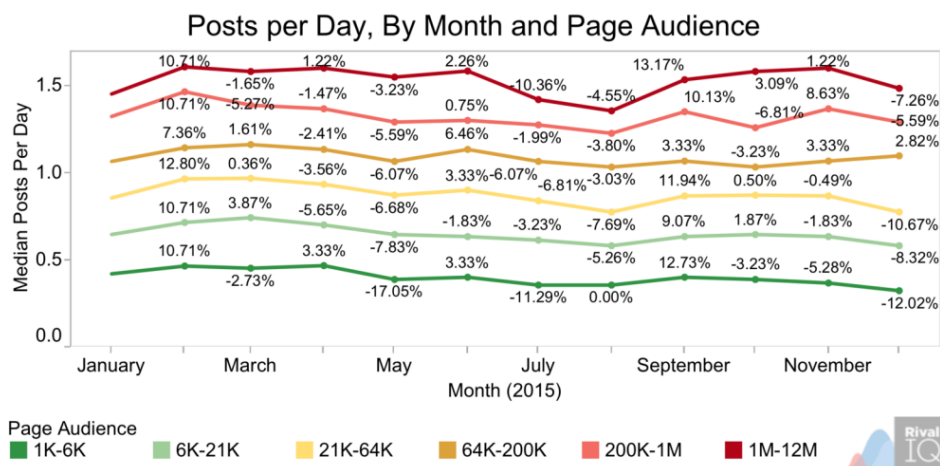
(2.3)

You can see that engagement by audience is consistent but the total engagement drops. In short, **posting volume is what drives down engagement rate per post, not just page size**. The takeaway is that each extra post per day gets incremental engagement, but with diminishing returns. Those returns vary by audience size, with larger pages generally having smaller per-post engagement rates. Said differently, it can be worth it to post more frequently. But, don't expect to maintain your engagement rate on a per-post basis.

## Posts Per Day Over Time

Now that we've looked at median posts per day, we wanted to see how posting frequency changed over the course of 2015.





(2.4)

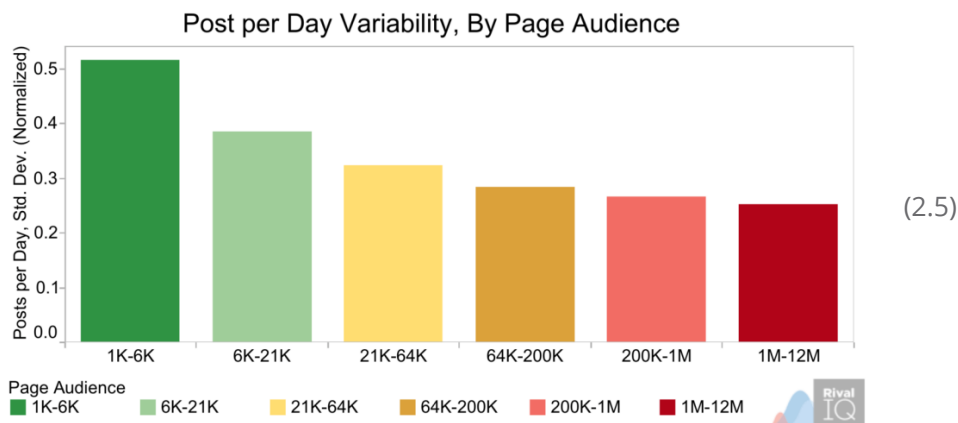
Unlike our growth charts (1.2), you won't find any overlap in posting frequency by page audience size. **At no point in 2015 did pages with smaller audiences have a higher median post frequency than larger pages.**

One question we had looking at this data involves the drops in posting frequency in August and in almost every segment in December. What could have caused these dips?

It seems possible that this dip in posting frequency could be caused by social managers taking summer and winter vacations. In summer months, when employees tend to take vacations, we see lower posting frequency than seen in the spring and fall. One might expect this to be the cause for smaller pages rather than larger ones that likely hire many social managers or agencies. But the dip is clearest in August for larger pages.

This may not be about social media managers being online less at all. Instead, social managers might be posting less because they think their audiences are online less in the summer, during the holidays, and late at night. After all, it makes sense to post when your fans are online and to pull back the frequency when they're not.

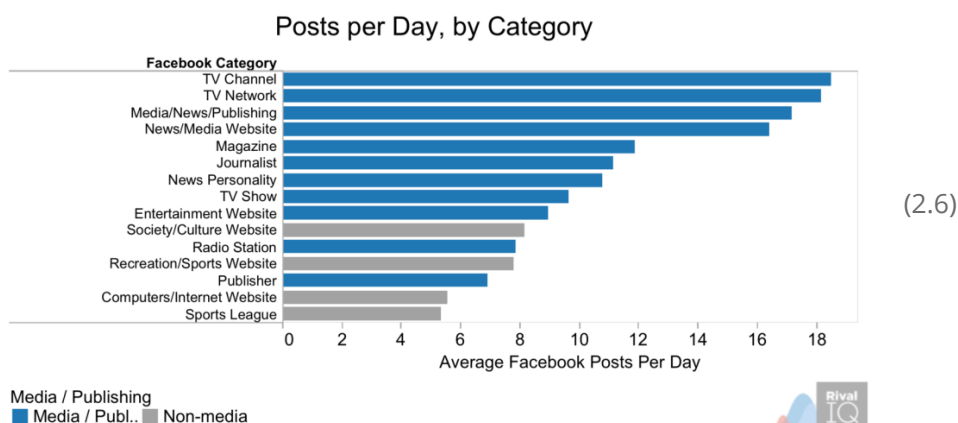
Another question we had looking at the chart above related to consistency in posting frequency. From looking at the month-to-month median post volumes, smaller pages seemed to have more consistent posting schedules. But looks can be deceiving.



To calculate the post-volume variability for each page audience grouping, we calculated the median variability score on a company-by-company basis, where the score is the standard deviation in posting volume as a fraction of the median post volume. As you see in the graph above, **pages with a larger audience are more consistent with their posting volumes than pages that have smaller audiences**. That's the opposite of our initial assumption from chart 2.4. It is important to note that the pages with larger audiences also post more frequently, on average, than do those pages with smaller audiences.

## Posts Frequency by Category

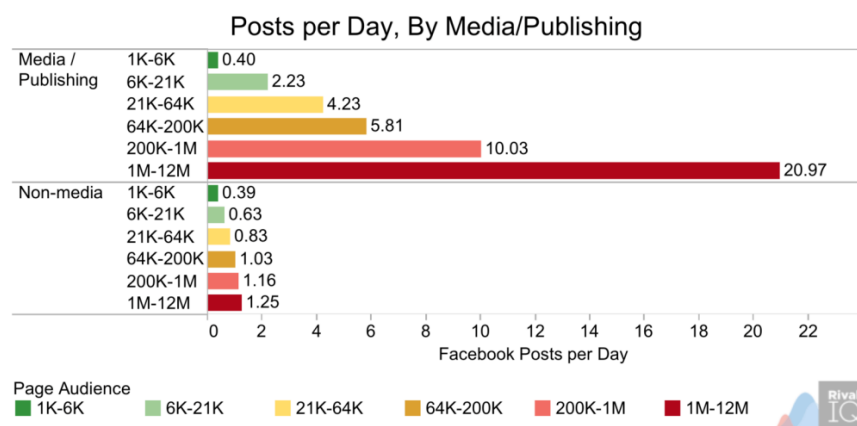
As mentioned above, larger pages were more likely to post more often. But size doesn't tell us everything about how a page can sustain a more frequent posting schedule. That's why we used Facebook's category data to get a more in-depth look at which pages post the most by type.



In a landslide, news publishers, news websites, and magazines (shown above in blue) maintain the highest posting frequency. They push out a combined total of approximately 3.923 million posts in 2015 in our sample alone. **That's 48.3% of all the posts we researched despite only accounting for 8.5% of all the brand pages in our study**. This distinction is clear in the next graph (2.7) when you see post volumes for these media pages separated out. At all but

the smallest page audience grouping, the media pages publish between 4x and 16x more per day than the average page.

Of course, this makes a lot of sense. Their fan bases expect and demand dozens of posts featuring relevant content each day. They are also likely to have bigger and broader audiences (even in smaller communities). Plus, they have a major goal of directing traffic back to their websites where they can earn ad revenue.



(2.7)

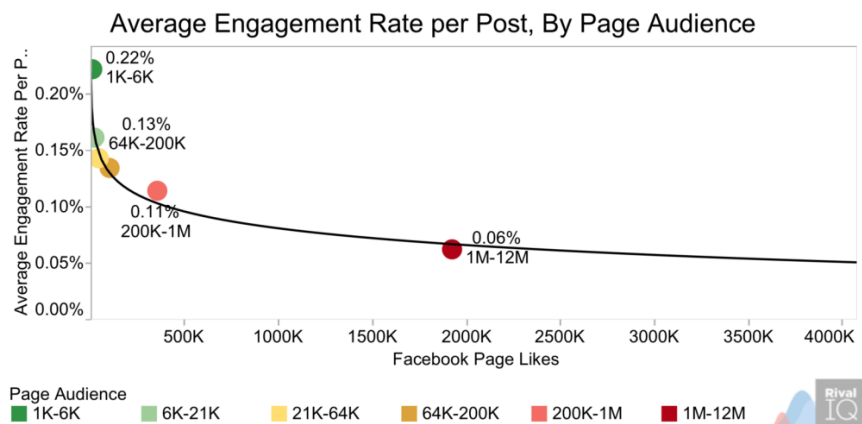
As we mentioned above, publishing pages tend to have larger audiences in general. As a percentage of the page audience group, they grow to 15.2% of the 1M-12M category (see chart 4.1 in appendix). Even more impressively, they account for over 66% of the posts in that page audience group (see chart 4.2 in appendix).

Even without looking at engagement statistics, it should be clear that **there is no single right posting frequency**. If median posting frequency is any sign — which we believe to be the case — ideal posting cadence depends upon several factors, including page type and audience size.

## ENGAGEMENT: A CULTURE OF SHARING

When it comes to measuring social marketing success, engagement is key. You can have millions of fans and push content several times per day, but if no one is interacting with your posts, you have a problem. So, what does average engagement look like for brand pages of different audience sizes?

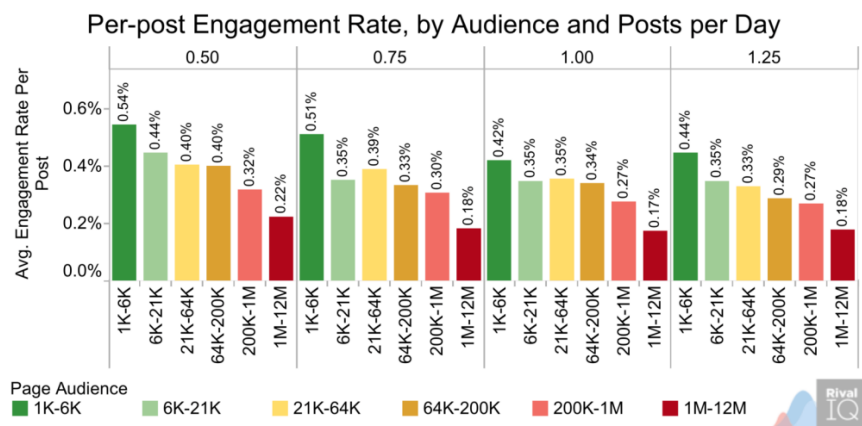
## Engagement Rate Per Post



(3.1)

Average engagement rate per post as a function of audience size seems to be inversely proportional to audience size. **Bigger pages, on average, have a smaller engagement rate per post.** That averages 0.22% for smaller pages and 0.06% for larger pages. It's worth noting that this chart is almost the exact opposite of posting frequency chart 2.2.

Earlier, we discussed that increased post volumes do lead to decreasing engagement rates on a per-post basis (chart 2.3). In the next chart (3.1a), you can see that even when we control for post volume, it is the case that per-post engagement rates drop for pages with larger audiences.



(3.1a)

But why is it harder to keep up fan engagement as your page grows? It's possible that Facebook reduces your organic reach on a per-post basis. It's also likely that, **as your fan base grows larger, it also grows more varied.** That makes it difficult to appeal to all your fans with one messaging type.

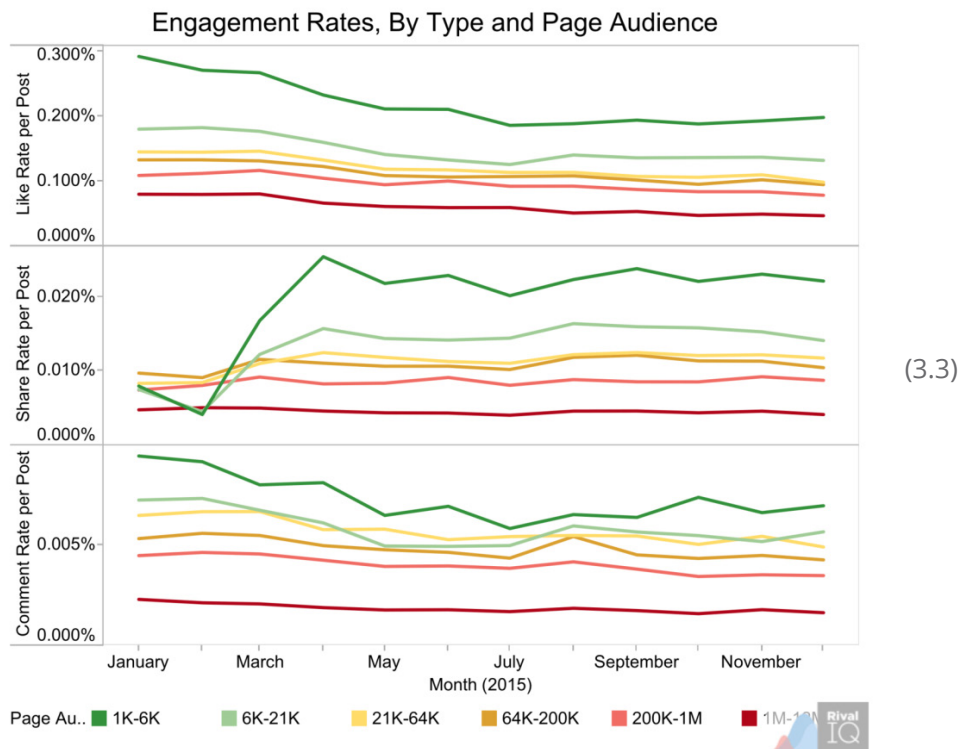
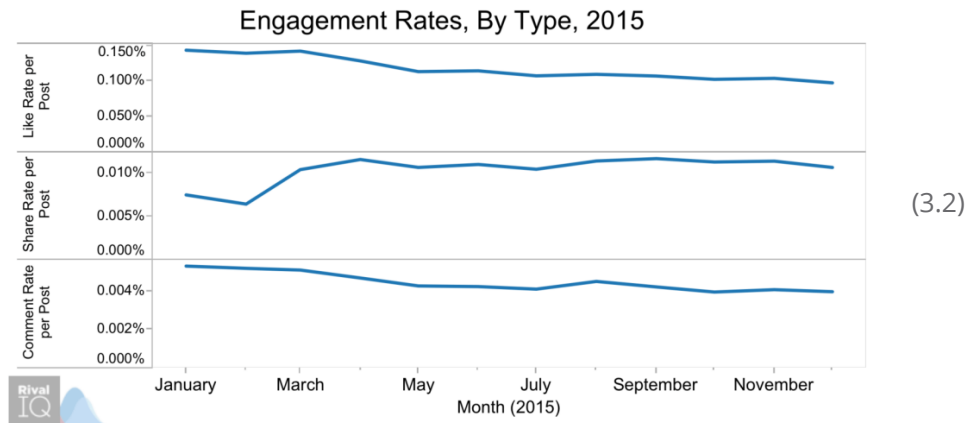
Think about a single, local restaurant vs. a regional chain restaurant vs. a national chain. The single, local restaurant just needs to appeal to people in its neighborhood. The regional chain needs to appeal to several cities or even a few states. The national chain needs to appeal to all of America. The farther you branch out from that local restaurant, the



more diverse the audience is for everything from economics to general culture.

## Engagement Rate Over Time

The thing about engagement rate, as many social marketers can tell you, is that it ebbs and flows. For Facebook, 2015 was no different. In the next two charts, we examine how engagement rates, by type of engagement, changed over 2015.



The charts above have a lot of data — all normalized engagement per follower per post — so we'll take it one step at a time. Starting with median Facebook likes rate (likes per follower per post), shown in the top lines of chart 3.2 and 3.3, you see that it fell year-over-year, with an especially big drop for smaller pages. Skipping down to the third set of



lines in these charts, comments seemed to bounce slightly throughout the year, but still fell over the course of 2015.

Shares saw a huge boom for certain page sizes in the spring (between February and April), and continued at these elevated levels for the rest of the year. **The median shares rate is the only engagement metric that saw a year-over-year increase** among Facebook brand pages.

**But why are likes and comments are down while shares are up?** And why did the share rate for pages with fewer than 21,000 fans see such a big jump in Q1?

Let's start with the slow decline of likes and comments, a trend that did not come without warning. Since April 2014, Facebook has told pages that they'll start to see less engagement when they tell fans to like, comment, or share their posts. In late 2014, Facebook warned pages that overly-promotional content would see a reduced organic reach. In April 2015, Facebook announced that users would begin to see content from friends over content from brands. For both likes and comments, most of the decline came in the first few months of the year, and then leveled out. Our belief is that the early decline is due to those actions announced by Facebook.

Another theory for the decrease in likes and comments is a shift in how users interact. **Fans are more aware that posts they like or comment on could appear in their friends' news feeds, even if they don't share it.** Fans may be more discerning about engaging with posts that they wouldn't want their Facebook friends to see.

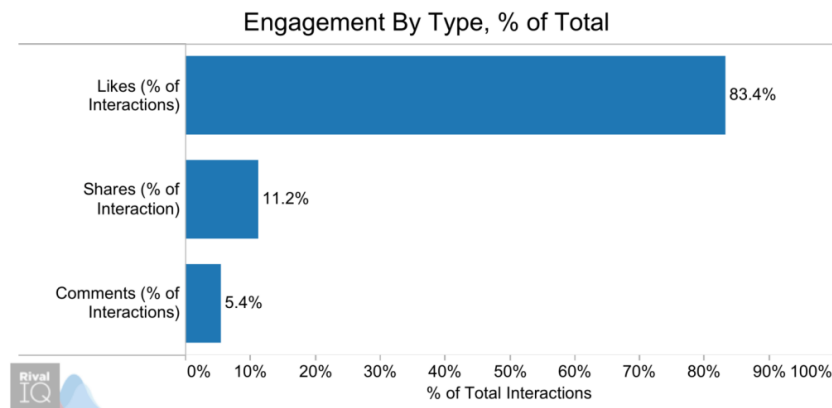
But what about that increase in shares? We think it's possible that **marketers have gotten better at extracting shares from their fans.** It makes sense that marketers, who value shares and clicks over likes and comments, would figure out what makes their fans more likely to share. Perhaps even at the expense of likes and comments.

However, that dramatic jump in Q1 points to a change on Facebook's end. From an iOS sharing extension to new sharing features in messenger, **Facebook prioritized sharing in 2015.** With that in mind, it seems probable that Facebook has implemented tweaks in their feed algorithm that boost share reach, potentially at a cost to likes and comments. This seems to make sense; Facebook wants users to have the best experience possible while using their platform. Tailoring your feed to include more content that your network shares should generally increase the likelihood that you, too, might enjoy this content.

It's also possible that sharing begets more sharing and increases viral reach. Facebook displays shared posts in users' newsfeeds in a stacked way. It emphasizes which of their friends have already shared a link. **By taking content that has already been shared and displaying it in a way that encourages sharing,** Facebook has increased the number of shares that brand pages see.

## Engagement Ratios

As we mentioned above, social media managers tend to value likes, comments, and shares differently, with shares often being the most highly valued and believed to be the most difficult to obtain. However, as seen below, **shares actually occur more than twice as frequently as comments** on an average per post basis.

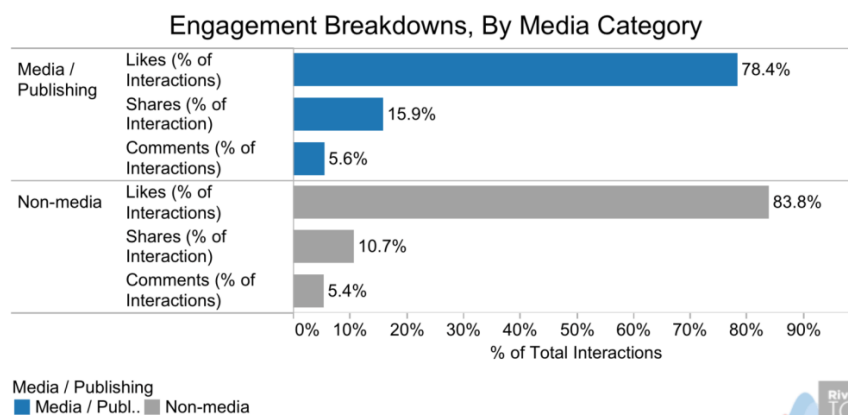


(3.4)

Overall, the average post gets 83.4% of interactions in the form of likes. Comments and shares make up the rest at 11.2% (shares) and 5.4% (comments).

However, we know from our posting frequency section, especially looking at charts 2.4 and 2.5, that publishers on Facebook can be a significant outlier. That's true with engagement, too.

Below you'll find two charts. The first shows the engagement breakdown including strictly publisher and media pages, and the second chart is every page in our study minus those publisher and media pages.

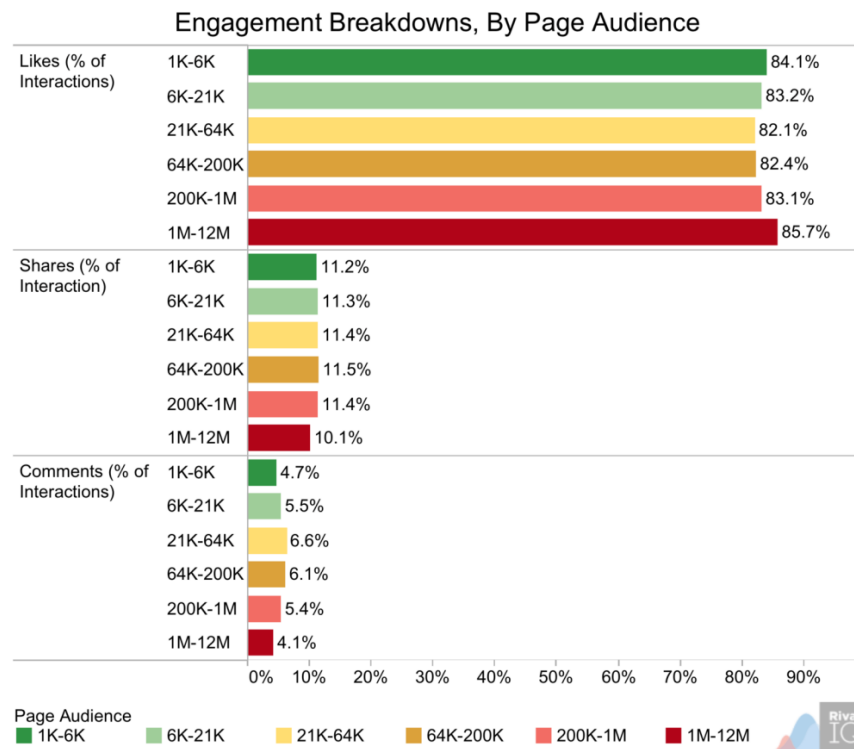


(3.5)  
&  
(3.6)

As you can see, the comment ratio is about the same whether you're looking at publishers or any other page, but, though publishers see fewer likes as a percentage of their overall engagement, **publishers are almost 50% more successful getting higher-value shares** than non-publishers. While publishers see 78.4% of their engagement in the form of likes and 15.9% as shares, non-publishers see 83.8% of their engagement as likes and just 10.7% as shares.

### Engagement Ratios by Audience Size

Earlier, we saw how audience growth, posting frequency, and engagement rates vary depending



(3.7)

on page size. However, **engagement ratios tend to remain constant across pages with different audience sizes**, as noted in the chart below.

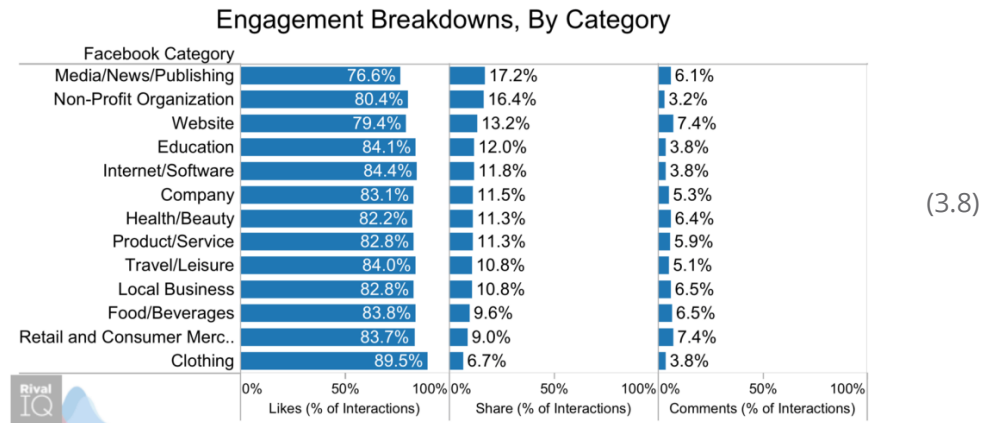
The largest and smallest pages tend to have more likes and fewer comments as a total of their entire engagement. Meanwhile, the largest pages have fewer shares. Still, engagement ratios have the lowest differentiation of any metrics we've reviewed in this study.





## Engagement Ratios by Page Category

Of course, just as categories played a role in post frequency, engagement ratios change depending on the category.



Unlike with page sizes, it appears as though **there isn't a true normal share or comment rate on Facebook** in regards to categories. For example, let's look at clothing companies vs. non-profit organizations.

Clothing companies see about 89.5% of their engagement coming from likes — the highest in our study. They also have one of the lowest share ratios and are in a three-way tie for second-lowest comment ratios. That tells us that **fans of clothing companies are more passive in their engagement**. This minimizes the viral reach that comments and shares allow.

Moving to the other end of the engagement ratio spectrum, we find non-profits. With 80.4% of their engagement coming from likes, they boast the second-lowest like ratio we found in our study. **Non-profits also have the second highest share ratio of the categories we pulled (16.4%), yet the lowest comment ratio (3.2%).**

This shows us that non-profits are better at getting their audience to share their content, which helps them maximize their viral reach. But, non-profits are struggling to engage their followers in conversation via comments.

## SO, WHAT ABOUT THE THREE QUESTIONS WE STARTED THIS STUDY WITH?

**1. Was growth slowed down or flat, or were brands still able to grow their audiences?** Despite the fan cull of 2015, brand were still able to grow their audiences on a consistent basis year-to-year and month-to-month, with an apparent slowdown in later in the year. The relatively steady growth is indicative of a mature platform.

**2. How frequently are brands posting, and how does that correlate with page size, category, and audience engagement?** On average, smaller pages post less frequently than larger pages and publishers post at a significantly higher rate than other page categories — so much so that excluding them from the data set results in a decrease in



posting frequency across the board.

As for engagement, we can show that interactions decrease as post frequency increases. How much engagement decreases changes with page size.

**3. Was engagement declining across the board, or were social marketers creating compelling content? Did this change as pages grew their audiences?** Engagement in the form of likes and comments did decrease in 2015, but it was up in regards to shares. The cause for both the decline in likes and comments and the increase in shares likely has to do with Facebook's ever-changing newsfeed algorithms.

Additionally, fans are twice as likely to share a brand's content than comment on it. But, likes were still likely to account for over 80% of all engagement. Though the like/comment/share ratio was consistent across audience sizes, these ratios vary depending on page category.

## IN CONCLUSION

When it comes to analyzing Facebook, it would be easy to lump all pages together in an attempt to find overarching trends. The truth is, **Facebook is not one-size-fits-all**. Everything from posting frequency to growth to engagement can change drastically from one page size or category to the next.

Take the percent difference in median Facebook audience growth overall versus (1.1) by page size (1.3). The difference in how the March fan cull affected pages is a matter of approximately two percentage points. That's not an insignificant difference.

Additionally, if you look at median Facebook audience growth overall (1.1), it looks like Facebook pages saw more growth in December versus November. In fact, only two audience size tiers saw more growth in December than November. One of those two tiers that saw growth had a larger audience size, skewing the entire chart.

Engagement also changes as audience size grows, both with overall engagement and types of engagement. Filtering by audience sizes enables us to see the ratio change in engagement types as pages get bigger or categories change. This makes it easier to benchmark your own success.

Categories also have an effect on data. Chart 2.6 shows how posting frequency changes as categories change. Though larger pages still posted more when we removed publishers, it was a smaller difference.

Here's the bottom line: you can read Facebook trends all day from dozens of sources, but those **overarching charts aren't going to tell you anything meaningful about your own performance**. No study currently in existence will



give you the exact data and insights you need.

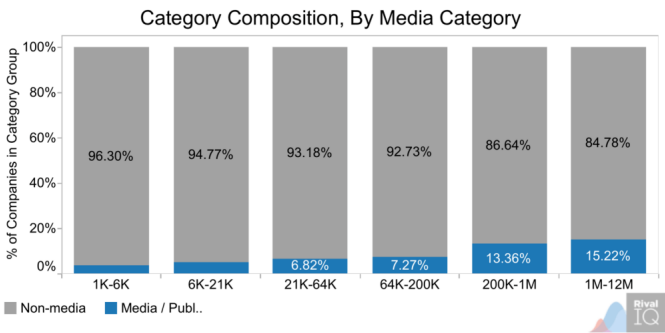
When it comes to benchmarking and setting goals, it's important to compare your brand to similar brands. Look for those that have approximately the same number of Facebook fans within a shared category. Otherwise, you could be knee-deep in data that isn't applicable to you and your brand.

As you continue building reports and analyzing your Facebook performance, keep the data in this report in mind. Start by comparing your monthly growth by audience size to 2015 averages (1.3). Then, see how your posting frequency compares with pages of a similar size (2.1 and 2.2). After that, check on how your engagement compares to brands within your category (3.8), and more.

Of course, if you want to get detailed competitive benchmarking on all your digital and social marketing, give Rival IQ a try. We'll help you get the insights you need to improve your social strategy and execution.

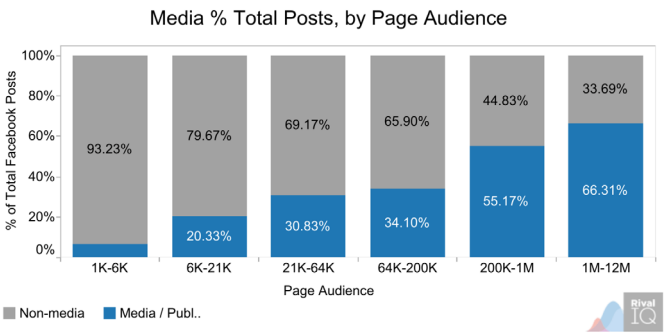
For more information, please visit us at [www.RivalIQ.com](http://www.RivalIQ.com).

# APPENDIX



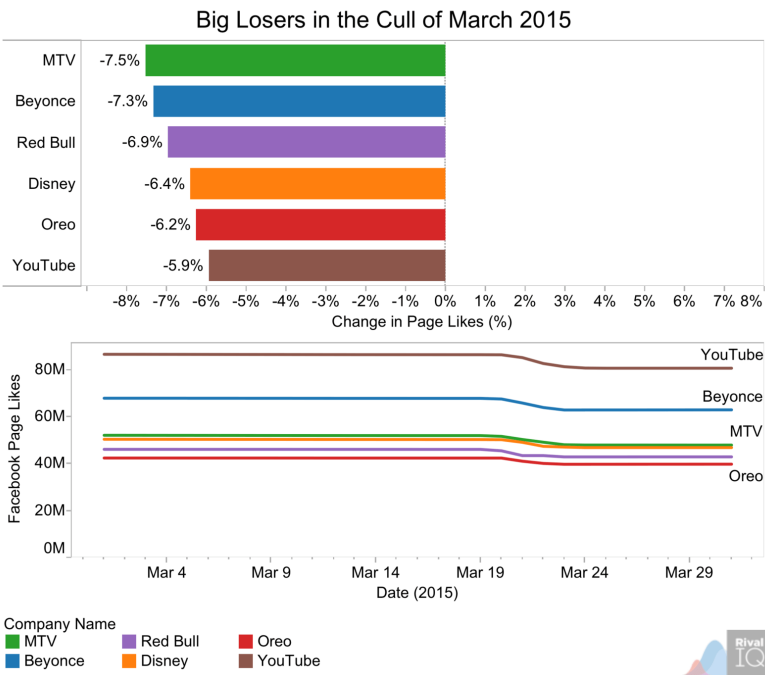
(4.1)

Chart 4.1 shows that media and publishing pages are more likely to have more than 200,000 fans. This is a major reason pages with a larger audience post with a higher frequency, as was previously detailed in chart 2.7.



(4.2)

Chart 4.2 further shows how much media and publishing pages influence overall post frequency based on audience size. Although only 15.22% of pages with 1-12 million fans fall into the publishing category, they account for 66.31% of all posts in that audience size category.



(4.2)

Of all the brands in our study, MTV, Beyonce, Red Bull, Disney, Oreo, and YouTube lost the most fans by percentage during the March 2015 fan cull.



## Interested in how Rival IQ can help you make informed decisions on Facebook and other social media channels?

With Rival IQ, you can,

### **Understand Your Social Landscape**

Track results across all social profiles, including engagement, influencers, social bios, and sentiment—for you and your competitors.

### **Simplify Access to Data**

Find comprehensive analytics for all major social channels and the web, both for your company and your competitors--all from one source.

### **Gain Competitive Insight**

Conduct competitive analysis in minutes. Monitor your industry, create benchmarks, and evaluate competitor activity in time to respond before the market shifts direction.

Get hands-on with Rival IQ via our free trial at  
**[WWW.RIVALIQ.COM](http://WWW.RIVALIQ.COM)**.