# The Forrester Wave<sup>™</sup>: Social Suites, Q3 2021

The Nine Providers That Matter Most And How They Stack Up

August 9, 2021

By Jessica Liu, Sarah Dawson with Emily Collins, Chahiti Asarpota, Christine Turley, Diane Lynch

FORRESTER\*

# **Summary**

In our 36-criterion evaluation of Social Suites providers, we identified the nine most significant ones — Facelift, Falcon.io, Hootsuite, Khoros, Meltwater, Reputation, Socialbakers, Sprinklr, and Sprout Social — and researched, analyzed, and scored them. This report shows how each provider measures up and helps B2C marketers select the right one for their needs.

# Social Suites Must Unify More Than Core Social Capabilities

Brand customers continue to pursue social tech consolidation to escape the disjointed ecosystem of point solutions. In response, social suites try to centralize social media capabilities across listening, organic publishing, advertising, customer response, and other secondary social capabilities. Since The Forrester Wave™: Social Suites, Q4 2019 evaluation, social suites vendors have shored up core capabilities with M&A and improved lackluster areas such as listening. Going forward, these vendors must pursue one of two paths: continue to address critical challenges within social media or move beyond it to tackle other channels and experiences like customer service or commerce. Regardless of their chosen focus, social suites vendors must deliver on brand customers' desire to unify social media execution and analytics.

As a result of these trends, social suites customers should look for providers that:

- Aggregate ads (paid), organic (owned), and/or listening (earned) data in one dashboard. Marketers can easily see the content impact of social through number of likes and shares but struggle to measure its marketing or business impact. Social suites provide a more holistic view of social media performance by visualizing paid, owned, and earned data together. Some go a step further in tracking social media activity against the customer lifecycle or sales funnel or against brand health and brand satisfaction. Buyers shouldn't be satisfied with dashboards displaying standard profile and engagement metrics; instead, they should seek vendors that assess social media programs against business objectives like brand health and sales.
- Use consumer insights from listening and response to inform marketing decisions.

Social listening provides consumer insights to help brands activate, measure, and recalibrate marketing and business programs. Brands also gather critical feedback from social customer service interactions. Consumer insights and customer service feedback provide brands with a rich understanding of the consumers they're trying to reach. Vendors tightly link their social listening and customer service modules to the rest of the social suite, allowing brands to develop marketing initiatives based on emerging trends and customer feedback. This yields stronger social media programs born out of consumers' desires and not internal brand motivations.

• Offer a fully interoperable platform. Social suites have prioritized uniting acquired or organically built capabilities into a single streamlined user interface. But to act on that

data, brand customers also need the ability to pull data from one module into another. For example, some vendors use unified social user profiles and integrations with third-party CRM suites to facilitate cohesive customer service and then leverage that profile data for identifying influencers. Several social suites repurpose content and its associated parameters (e.g., audiences, assets, or campaign dates) across the suite in organic publishing, advertising, and user-generated content via a universal tagging or labeling system.

## **Evaluation Summary**

The Forrester Wave evaluation highlights Leaders, Strong Performers, Contenders, and Challengers. It's an assessment of the top vendors in the market and doesn't represent the entire vendor landscape. You'll find more information about this market in our reports Now Tech: Social Suites, Q1 2021 and The Social Technology Convergence Stalls Out.

We intend this evaluation to be a starting point only and encourage clients to view product evaluations and adapt criteria weightings using the Excel-based vendor comparison tool (see Figure 1 and see Figure 2). Click the link at the beginning of this report on Forrester.com to download the tool.

#### Figure 1

Forrester Wave™: Social Suites, Q3 2021

#### THE FORRESTER WAVE™

Social Suites

Q3 2021



176006

Source: Forrester Research, Inc. Unauthorized reproduction, citation, or distribution prohibited.

#### Not Licensed For Distribution.

Figure 2
Forrester Wave™: Social Suites Scorecard, Q3 2021

	fortestay	ting	ii <sup>R</sup>	on.io	guite	OS Melti	water*	tation Soci	albakers Spri	Sprout
	koungio	king	elift Falco	400	Eslite Axo	Welt	4ed	Soci	all diversion	ii sprou
Current offering	50%	1.94	2.24	2.71	3.98	2.28	1.59	2.41	4.45	3.07
Social listening	15%	1.00	1.70	1.70	3.70	4.30	3.00	2.40	5.00	1.60
Social customer response	15%	1.70	3.00	1.60	5.00	2.40	1.00	2.30	4.30	3.60
Social organic publishing	15%	2.00	2.00	3.00	5.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	5.00	3.00
Social advertising	5%	1.00	3.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	5.00	1.00
Secondary social capabilities	5%	3.00	1.00	3.00	5.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00
Reporting	15%	1.80	2.60	4.10	3.30	2.60	1.80	2.20	4.20	2.60
Data interoperability	5%	2.00	4.00	2.00	4.00	2.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	4.00
Technology integration	10%	1.70	1.60	4.30	4.30	3.00	2.40	3.60	5.00	3.00
Usability	10%	2.90	1.80	1.20	3.00	1.80	1.80	3.60	3.70	5.00
Security and privacy	5%	4.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	3.00
Strategy	50%	2.10	3.00	3.50	4.20	2.30	1.80	3.40	3.80	3.90
Product vision	20%	1.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	5.00	3.00
Execution roadmap	20%	1.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	3.00
Onboarding and account management	20%	1.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	3.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	5.00
Supporting services	15%	3.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	3.00
Performance	10%	3.00	3.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	5.00
Commercial model	15%	5.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	1.00	5.00
Market presence	0%	2.00	1.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	4.00
Revenue	50%	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	3.00	1.00	3.00	5.00	3.00
Customers	50%	3.00	1.00	5.00	3.00	5.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	5.00

All scores are based on a scale of 0 (weak) to 5 (strong).

176006

Source: Forrester Research, Inc. Unauthorized reproduction, citation, or distribution prohibited.

<sup>\*</sup>Indicates a nonparticipating vendor.

# **Vendor Offerings**

Forrester included nine vendors in this assessment: Facelift, Falcon.io, Hootsuite, Khoros, Meltwater, Reputation, Socialbakers, Sprinklr, and Sprout Social (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Evaluated Vendors And Product Information

Vendor	Product evaluated
Facelift	Facelift Cloud
Falcon.io	Falcon.io
Hootsuite	Hootsuite Platform
Khoros	Khoros Platform
Meltwater	Meltwater Explore and Meltwater Engage
Reputation	RXM Platform
Socialbakers	Socialbakers (now Emplifi Social Marketing Cloud)
Sprinklr	Unified CXM
Sprout Social	Sprout Social

161559

Source: Forrester Research, Inc. Unauthorized reproduction, citation, or distribution prohibited.

### **Vendor Profiles**

Our analysis uncovered the following strengths and weaknesses of individual vendors.

#### Leaders

• Sprinklr competes by offering a formidable and intensely customizable unified platform. This heavyweight vendor, based in New York, presented one of the first broader visions beyond social media: to become a "customer experience management" platform and solve the chaos of using multiple point solutions across digital channels. The vendor's execution roadmap focuses on solidifying core areas of its platform by adding to its extensive list of channels, use cases, and third-party integrations (though not with other social technology). Armed with new FedRAMP-ready status, Sprinklr is expanding its target market to include public sector organizations. While other vendors go deep in only a few social media modules, Sprinklr delivers

across all social media needs at equal depth — listening, customer service, organic publishing, and advertising — plus some secondary social products like influencer management and employee advocacy. Al "smart" features persist across the platform, from autodetecting themes to ensuring compliance against guidelines to recommending customer service responses. Customer references appreciate the new Hyperspace user interface, noting that it's more intuitive and easier to use than previous iterations. However, the vendor's pricing model remains a vast array of addons and opaque pricing. Sprinklr is ideal for enterprises that have cross-functional needs and can implement a rigorous setup to make the Sprinklr engine run effectively.

#### Khoros differentiates on customer care and sets its sights beyond social media.

Khoros continues to make steady progress uniting its legacy Lithium and Spredfast platforms into a single suite — and now has more work ahead to integrate new acquisitions Topbox (now called Khoros CX Insights) for customer experience analytics and Flow, ai (now Khoros Flow) for conversational Al. This vendor, headquartered in Austin, Texas, caters to enterprise buyers with a lofty vision to provide a single unified platform to "connect and improve digital customer experiences." Khoros' emphasis on "people first" and building relationships applies to both customers and employees and is notable for its focus on diverse and inclusive hiring efforts, employee resource groups, and corporate social initiatives. Khoros' deep capabilities in customer care and brand communities set it apart from other vendors in this space. The vendor's Intelligence module offers light social listening, augmented by an integration with Talkwalker for deeper listening. The Marketing module offers solid organic publishing but with limited advertising options — though it has unified paid and organic reporting. While the Care and Marketing products remain somewhat gated, users are now able to carry customer data and insights across multiple areas of the platform. A unique Vault product controls and locks down platform user access, and Khoros' personally identifiable information (PII) redaction feature adds to its strengthened consumer privacy practices. Customer references praised the vendor's "fantastic" and "phenomenal" account management, emphasizing its strength as a partner. For enterprises with diverse needs across departments that don't necessarily have shared goals, Khoros is a good fit.

#### **Strong Performers**

• Sprout Social's culture-first mindset drives its strong service and unified social suite. Sprout Social's emphatic "culture as a business model" go-to-market approach translates into strong account management, employee retention, and overall customer

satisfaction. This Chicago vendor has a singular focus on solving social media problems and perfecting its craft there. It has taken a deliberate — and slower — approach to organically build a truly unified social suite that sits on a single code base. Sprout Social opts to hone its core capabilities rather than build or acquire an abundance of new feature and functionality. It also offers a simple and clear pricing model to serve companies ranging from small firms to large enterprises. Newcomers to Sprout Social will find the platform easy to set up and use from the start. Foundational user experience, user management, and collaboration and workflow capabilities are Sprout Social's strengths, culminating in unified dashboards and reporting. Expansion into social commerce is evident with a soon-to-be generally available Shopify integration in the Inbox module and an Instagram bio link-to-shop feature in the Publishing module. But listening is lighter weight, and advertising is limited compared with other vendors. Bambu, the lone product that sits outside the Sprout Social platform, fulfills employee advocacy programs. Customer references gave unanimous high marks for how Sprout Social manages and services their accounts. For social marketers seeking a unified platform that checks the core boxes and is easy for all to access, Sprout Social delivers.

#### Hootsuite tackles social measurement with a patchwork of new and old

acquisitions. Hootsuite's newest acquisition of Sparkcentral for customer service joins past acquisitions AdEspresso for advertising and LiftMetrix for analytics, plus the already-integrated Brandwatch for listening, in a one-stop shop with separate URLs. Hootsuite hyperfocuses on helping marketers advance their social media maturity and solve the social measurement conundrum with assessment tools, attribution models, and a macro view of social media activity across paid, owned, and earned. Originating in Vancouver, this vendor is garnering positive feedback with its account management and professional services. Hootsuite recently received a new design makeover and continues to refine its legacy publishing and Streams products. It's working to reconcile dashboards (Analytics vs. Impact), customer service (Inbox vs. Assignments vs. Sparkcentral), and advertising (Ads vs. Publisher) and would benefit from also reconciling listening (Streams vs. Insights) in the platform. Hootsuite also leans on a variety of third-party integrations for ratings and reviews, content discovery, and regulatory needs. The result is a social suite packed with functionality, but disparate and duplicative elements abound. Customer references confirmed that the user experience has improved but still feels disjointed. Hootsuite also offers an Amplify employee advocacy product for companies arming employees with social media content, especially regulated industries or the public sector, with its new FedRAMP certification. Hootsuite's à la carte menu of social media capabilities is good for social media managers with an array of needs, large and small.

#### Not Licensed For Distribution.

 Socialbakers, now Emplifi, delivers primarily social marketing and analytics in a clean UI. Astute Solutions acquired Socialbakers, based in Prague, Czech Republic, and rebranded to Emplifi in July 2021 (after the time of this evaluation), setting in motion a three-pronged vision of social marketing, care, and commerce within a customer experience cloud. This vendor's roadmap tightly aligns to development in those three focus areas. However, during this evaluation, legacy Socialbakers and Astute Solutions have remained separate platforms with different pricing models. For the time being, the former continues to deliver its core listening, marketing, and analytics offerings under a new product name: Emplifi Social Marketing Cloud. Socialbakers impresses with a streamlined user interface and unified social suite that uses labels to carry data across modules for listening, personas, and content. Customer references confirmed that the UI was intuitive and a reason for buying Socialbakers. Unlike other social suites, this vendor focuses on content discovery rather than creation. Social listening is spread across Content, Audiences, Influencers, and Analytics modules and is designed to discover content, audiences, and influencers — though data is disparate, and users can't view it all in one place. But dashboards do prolifically compare data with previous periods; customer references appreciate this but stated that they lack flexibility and deeper metrics. Also noteworthy: Its benchmarking product uses aggregated Socialbakers brand customer data to index against competitors. Socialbakers is interesting for social marketers who are seeking an array of data visualizations and are eager for Emplifi to integrate care and commerce in the future.

#### **Contenders**

• Falcon.io fortifies listening by adding Brandwatch to its everyday social suite. Two years ago, Cision acquired Falcon.io out of Copenhagen to shore up social media offerings for its PR and communications buyers. This year, Cision acquired Brandwatch, a social listening platform, and quickly fused it with Falcon.io, an original social media management solution, to yield a stronger social suite and target more enterprise prospects. However, the assembled collection — spanning Falcon.io, previously acquired Unmetric for competitive benchmarking, and now Brandwatch — yields a more disjointed social suite than its previous unified platform.

Independently, Falcon.io's vision remains firmly rooted in social media use cases that benefit midmarket customers. Falcon.io's Listen module is augmented by Brandwatch for deeper listening needs, though users must use a separate URL because the integration isn't yet accessible from the main

navigation. Falcon.io's Engage module for customer service provides chatbot capabilities and other on-par features. The Publish module offers limited organic publishing functionality, with no ability to post simultaneously on multiple social media platforms. While the Advertise module provides users with some advertising capabilities, it's restricted to Facebook and Instagram. Falcon.io notably offers its own CRM in its Audiences module and leans on its Unmetric integration for competitive benchmarking. Customer references appreciate the persistent labeling system that enables data interoperability throughout the suite but wish some modules — such as Advertise and Benchmark — were better integrated. Falcon.io is a good fit for midmarket companies or enterprises that need standard social media execution.

 Meltwater is strong in listening but lacks functional depth in other social media needs. Meltwater aims to connect the worlds of media relations and marketing with a vision of helping brand customers understand, influence, and engage with consumers. The vendor's niche but targeted approach is a nod to the combined legacies of Meltwater and Sysomos, which Meltwater acquired in 2018. Since then, the company, founded in Oslo, Norway, but based in San Francisco, has continued its active M&A streak. The 2021 additions of Linkfluence, a social listening platform, and Klear, an influencer marketing solution, are helping Meltwater expand to new influencer marketing and consumer insights use cases while reducing its reliance on partnerships and integrations. Meltwater is strongest in its Explore module for listening, with rich data sources that include news and broadcast media, as well as a unique podcast integration that monitors media coverage on audio content. The vendor also offers embedded, white-labeled features, such as audience analysis from Audiense, UGC management from TINT, and data visualizations from Tickr. The Engage module offers organic publishing, customer response, and advertising but lacks some functionality that other vendors provide, such as comprehensive organic and paid post creation and robust customer response. Analyze dashboards aim to bridge Explore and Engage modules by housing owned and earned sentiment, paid data, and competitive benchmarking in a single place. Meltwater is a good fit for PR, corporate communications, and marketing buyers from a wide range of business sizes. Meltwater declined to participate in the full Forrester Wave evaluation process.

#### Facelift keeps consumer privacy top of mind but lags in feature

development. Under DuMont Media Group ownership, Facelift's mission is to reduce complexity; provide rapid time-to-value; and offer a reliable, scalable, and secure platform for its predominantly European customers. Operating out of Hamburg, Germany, the vendor works to enable all departments to use centralized campaign templates at the regional or local level. Facelift has historically stayed in a social-media-

only swim lane but is now pushing into broader digital marketing planning orchestration and more aggressive investment in growth. Unlike some other vendors, Facelift's commercial model is transparent and easy to follow. Facelift Cloud is strongest in organic publishing: The planner tool provides a bird's-eye view across campaigns, whereas the publisher tool executes the content. The vendor also offers lightweight listening with proprietary Trendwatch and a more sophisticated option via an integration with Talkwalker skinned inside Facelift Cloud. The Moderation module for customer service and the Advertising module (which copies the Facebook Ads Manager interface) both offer basic functionality. Facelift Cloud's user experience, user management, and collaboration and workflow capabilities strive for uniform efficiency but don't allow for much customization. Customer references praised Facelift Cloud's simple and easy-to-use features but expressed a desire for more-flexible dashboards and reports offering more metrics (both in number and relevancy). For European customers that have straightforward hub-and-spoke social marketing needs and seek strong security and data privacy, Facelift is a solid option.

#### Challengers

 Reputation manages multilocation brands' reviews, but social capabilities are nascent. Compared with other vendors in this evaluation, this vendor, based in Redwood City, California, has a unique heritage in ratings and reviews management and serving multilocation companies with decentralized needs. With its recent acquisition of Nuvi for social listening, Reputation aims to present a holistic "reputation experience management" platform enabling continuity from central headquarters to local regions. However, its roadmap focuses on integrating Nuvi into the core Reputation platform and enhancing social media functionality that other social suites may already offer. Reputation's social suite exists as a single module within the larger reputation management platform, with Nuvi sitting outside the platform for now. Nuvi's social listening platform offers an endless menu of visualizations with notable emotion and attribute analysis, an improvement over Reputation's existing listening product. Reputation also offers organic social publishing but leans on its bread and butter: ratings and reviews management and the aptly named proprietary Reputation Score. The vendor's scant customer service options are split between the social suite module and Nuvi, and it doesn't offer advertising within the platform. Customer references noted some account management challenges as the company scaled. Reputation is best suited for multilocation brands' niche reputation experience, reviews management, and social marketing needs.

### **Evaluation Overview**

We evaluated vendors against 36 criteria, which we grouped into three high-level categories:

- **Current offering.** Each vendor's position on the vertical axis of the Forrester Wave graphic indicates the strength of its current offering. Key criteria for these solutions include social listening, social customer response, and social organic publishing.
- **Strategy.** Placement on the horizontal axis indicates the strength of the vendors' strategies. We evaluated product vision, execution roadmap, onboarding and account management, supporting services, performance, and commercial model.
- Market presence. Represented by the size of the markers on the graphic, our market presence scores reflect each vendor's revenue and customers.

#### **Vendor Inclusion Criteria**

Forrester included nine vendors in the assessment: Facelift, Falcon.io, Hootsuite, Khoros, Meltwater, Reputation, Socialbakers, Sprinklr, and Sprout Social. Each of these vendors has:

- Annual social suites revenue above \$40 million. Each vendor had a social suites revenue of more than \$40 million in 2020.
- Social suites that combine multiple social tech capabilities into a single unified platform. This includes social listening, organic publishing, and customer response, plus at least one other social technology capability (e.g., influencer marketing, social community, or employee advocacy).
- Relevance to Forrester's client base. Each vendor's social suites offering is of interest to Forrester's client base. We included platforms referenced in the context of client inquiries and discussions about social suites solutions.

# Supplemental Material

#### **Online Resource**

We publish all our Forrester Wave scores and weightings in an Excel file that provides detailed product evaluations and customizable rankings; download this tool by clicking the link at the beginning of this report on Forrester.com. We intend these scores and default weightings to serve only as a starting point and encourage readers to adapt the weightings to fit their individual needs.

#### The Forrester Wave Methodology

A Forrester Wave is a guide for buyers considering their purchasing options in a technology marketplace. To offer an equitable process for all participants, Forrester follows The Forrester Wave™ Methodology Guide to evaluate participating vendors.

In our review, we conduct primary research to develop a list of vendors to consider for the evaluation. From that initial pool of vendors, we narrow our final list based on the inclusion criteria. We then gather details of product and strategy through a detailed questionnaire, demos/briefings, and customer reference surveys/interviews. We use those inputs, along with the analyst's experience and expertise in the marketplace, to score vendors, using a relative rating system that compares each vendor against the others in the evaluation.

We include the Forrester Wave publishing date (quarter and year) clearly in the title of each Forrester Wave report. We evaluated the vendors participating in this Forrester Wave using materials they provided to us by May 13, 2021, and did not allow additional information after that point. We encourage readers to evaluate how the market and vendor offerings change over time.

In accordance with The Forrester Wave<sup>™</sup> And New Wave<sup>™</sup> Vendor Review Policy,
Forrester asks vendors to review our findings prior to publishing to check for accuracy.
Vendors marked as nonparticipating vendors in the Forrester Wave graphic met our
defined inclusion criteria but declined to participate in or contributed only partially to
the evaluation. We score these vendors in accordance with The Forrester Wave<sup>™</sup> And
The Forrester New Wave<sup>™</sup> Nonparticipating And Incomplete Participation Vendor
Policy and publish their positioning along with those of the participating vendors.

#### **Integrity Policy**

We conduct all our research, including Forrester Wave evaluations, in accordance with the Integrity Policy posted on our website.



# We help business and technology leaders use customer obsession to accelerate growth.

FORRESTER.COM

#### **Obsessed With Customer Obsession**

At Forrester, customer obsession is at the core of everything we do. We're on your side and by your side to help you become more customer obsessed.

#### Research

Accelerate your impact on the market with a proven path to growth.

- Customer and market dynamics
- Curated tools and frameworks
- Objective advice
- Hands-on guidance

Learn more.

#### Consulting

Implement modern strategies that align and empower teams.

- In-depth strategic projects
- Webinars, speeches, and workshops
- · Custom content

Learn more.

#### **Events**

Develop fresh perspectives, draw inspiration from leaders, and network with peers.

- Thought leadership, frameworks, and models
- One-on-ones with peers and analysts
- In-person and virtual experiences

Learn more.

**FOLLOW FORRESTER** 









#### **Contact Us**

Contact Forrester at www.forrester.com/contactus. For information on hard-copy or electronic reprints, please contact your Account Team or reprints@forrester.com. We offer quantity discounts and special pricing for academic and nonprofit institutions.

Forrester Research, Inc., 60 Acorn Park Drive, Cambridge, MA 02140 USA Tel: +1 617-613-6000 | Fax: +1 617-613-5000 | forrester.com

#### Not Licensed For Distribution.