

PLAYBOOK

# Decoding Internal Traffic

What Recirculation Tells Us about  
Discovery, Depth, and Loyalty



**At any given time, around 40% of your website's traffic is internal traffic, or traffic that's already on your website and recirculating to additional pages. This behavior is a sign of a healthy and happy readership because recirculation doesn't just boost engagement, it starts the journey toward loyalty.**

To truly unlock the value of these visitors, we need to trace them back to their original entry point. How are these readers finding your website — search, social, direct? — and how does this shape what they do next?

To answer these questions, we analyzed traffic patterns across more than 4,000 websites in 70 countries, mapping both the origins and behaviors of recirculating readers. Our goal? To help media companies understand who's most likely to engage deeply and how they can build better on-site experiences to convert more visitors into loyal readers.

## What's Inside

Why internal traffic is your biggest source of pageviews, and what that really means

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A breakdown of where internal traffic first lands on your website

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Which referrers and devices drive the deepest sessions and highest engagement

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What you can do to turn visits from all of these sources into loyalty

# 5 Types of Site Visitors

What we mean when we say...

## Internal

arrived to their current page via another page on your site

## Direct

arrived directly to your pages by typing in the URL or using a bookmark

## Search

arrived via search engines, such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo

## Social

arrived via social platforms like Facebook, X, Pinterest, or Reddit

## External

arrived from any other source that doesn't fit into the previous categories

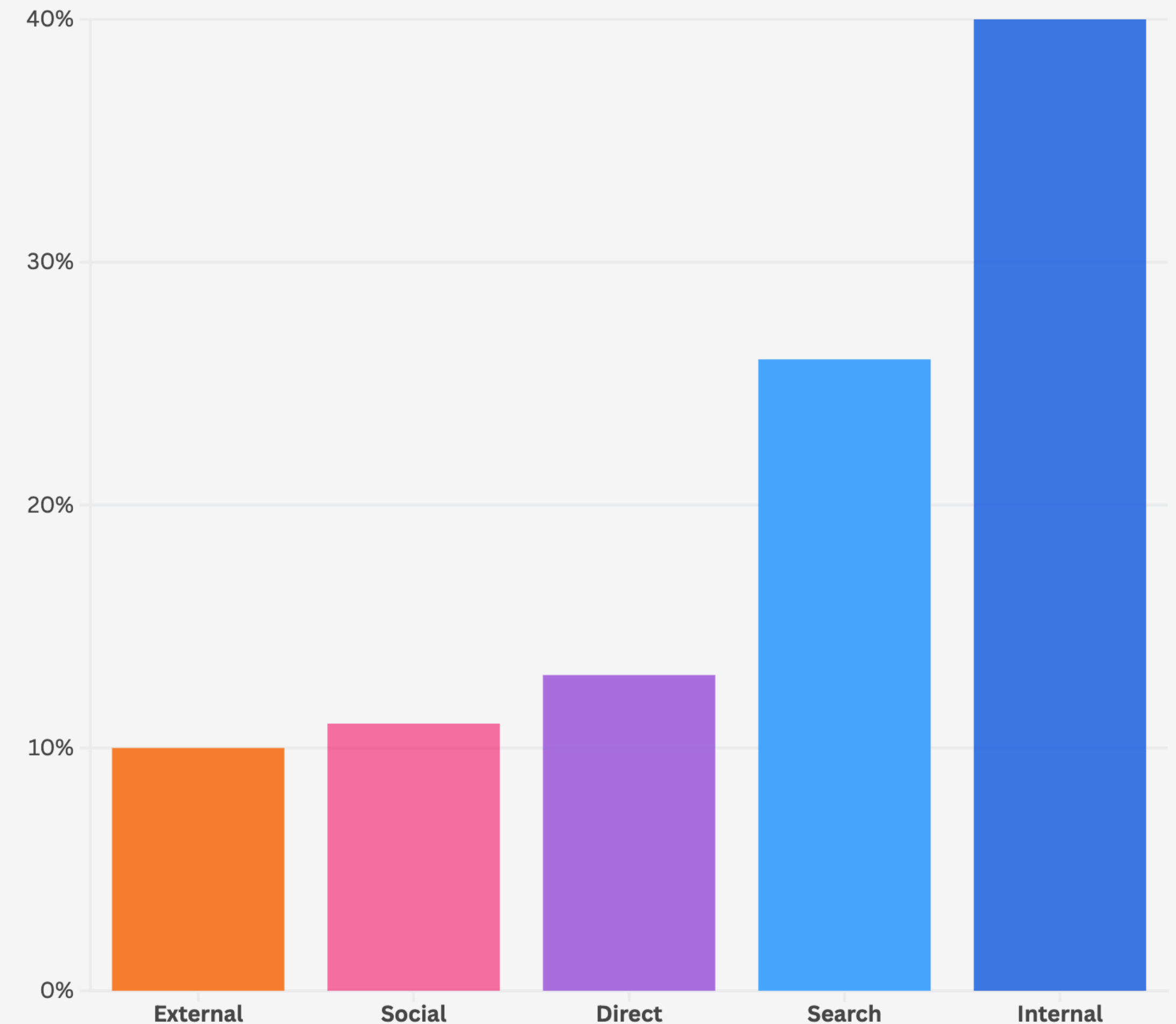
# A breakdown of referral sources at the pageview level

Before we can understand how reader journeys evolve, we first need to examine which traffic sources account for the most pageviews on your website.

Internal traffic is the largest category, accounting for about 40% of pageviews. Search refers the second most pageviews, and direct, social, and external referrers account for between 10% - 13% each. Despite concerns that AI search overviews are diverting traffic from publishers, the monthly average percentage of pageviews from search so far in 2025 is actually higher than the same time period last year. Social referrals, on the other hand, have declined. As recently as 2022, social platforms referred more than 15% of pageviews while today that value is just 10%.

While we know that internal traffic comes from a previous page on your website, we also know that these journeys don't necessarily start on your website. So what does this picture look like when we redistribute internal pageviews to their original source of entry, and what can we learn from analyzing referrals at the site level?

Share of Pageviews by Referrer



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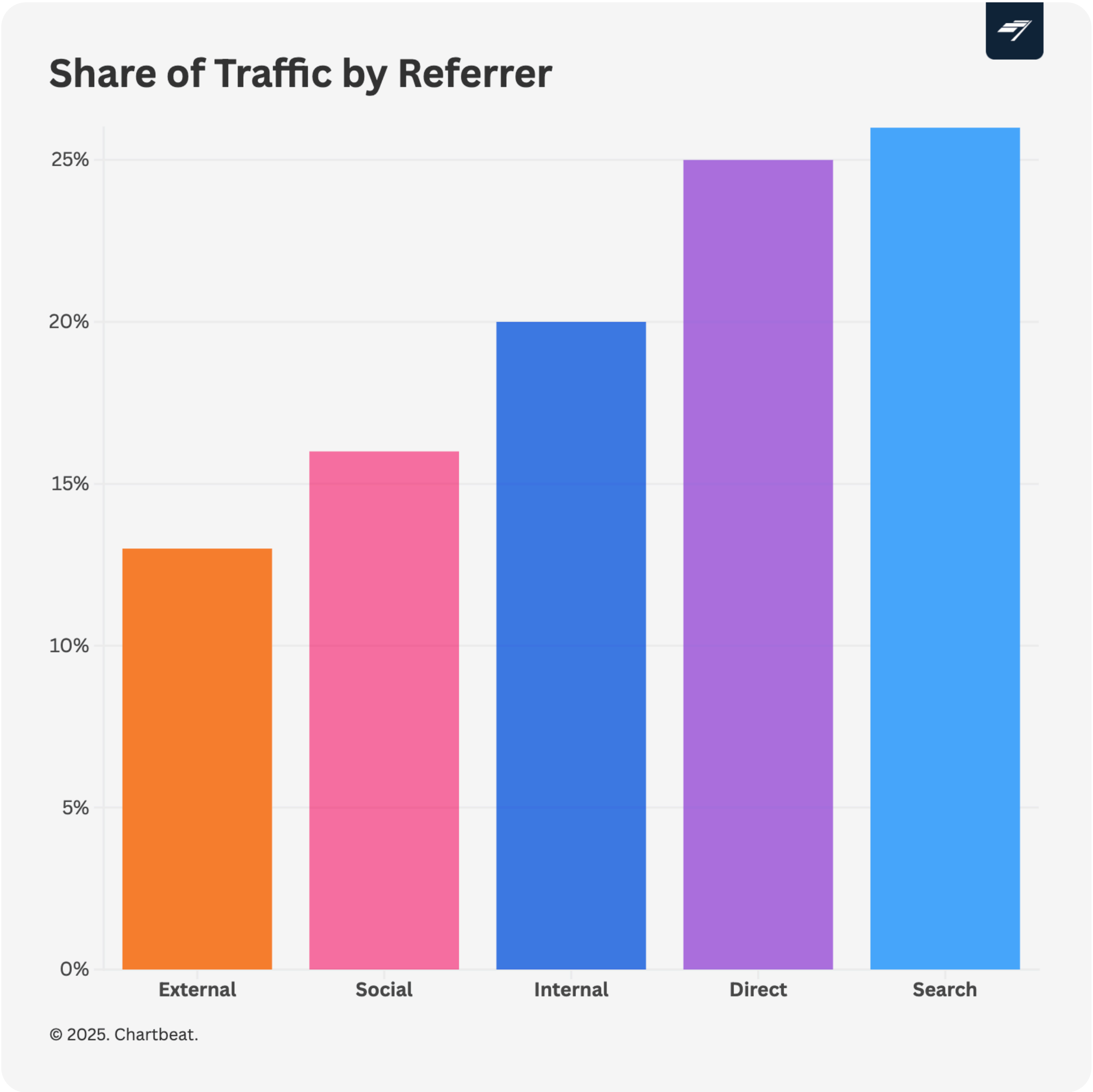


# Redistributing traffic by original referrer

When we redistribute internal pageviews to the source of their original referrer, we observe the sharpest increase in direct traffic, which surges from 13% to 25%. Search remains unchanged at 26% of traffic while external traffic increases from 10% to 13% and social traffic increases from 12% to 16%.

This leads us to believe that many internal pageviews originally come from a direct visit. If we consider the intent of each visitor, this makes sense. A direct visitor is someone who arrives on a website by using a bookmark or manually typing in the URL. They're someone who has been there before, knows what to expect, and wants more of it. A search visitor, on the other hand, wants to find a specific answer to a specific query and return to the activity that surfaced the question, ultimately leading to less pageviews per visit.

You might be wondering how internal referrals still account for 20% of traffic after redistribution. It has to do with Chartbeat's definition of a session. When an open browser session shows no signs of engagement for two continuous hours, we stop tracking the session. However, as long as the visitor doesn't leave the website entirely, a new session begins when they return to the same tab.



## What to Know for Your Website

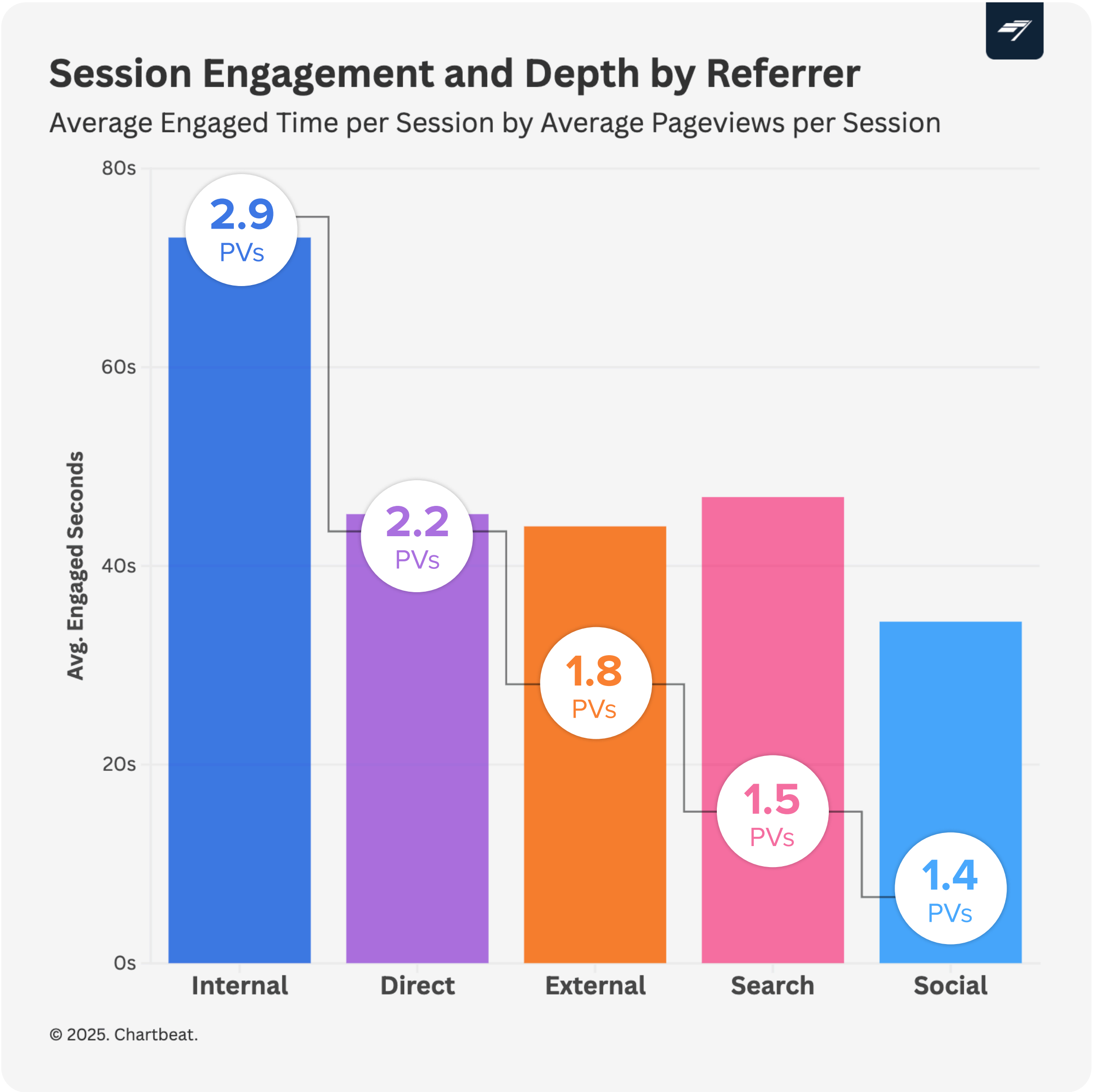
About half of the traffic recirculating on your site is coming directly. Knowing where visitors are coming from – and how often – allows you to create paths that lead to loyalty.

## How to Take Action

Offer low-friction loyalty hooks like signing up for a newsletter or push notifications related to the content category they landed on. If they're hesitant to explore more pages now, give them a reason to come back later.

# How sessions vary by referral source

By definition, sessions that include internal referrals should have more pageviews than other sources, and they do. Not only do these sessions average nearly 3 pageviews, they also log more than a minute of average engaged time per page. Of sessions that originated offsite, direct traffic has the highest average pages per session at 2.2 and the third-most average engaged time with 45.2 seconds. Social traffic averages both the least pageviews (1.4) and engaged time (34.4 seconds) per session.



## What to Know for Your Website

Though search- and social-referred visitors explore a similar number of pages per session, visitors from search engines actively engage with those pages for more than 12 seconds longer than their social counterparts.

## How to Take Action

The key to engaging visitors from social is doubling down on the content that interrupted their scrolling and brought them to your website. Make sure the content on your site matches what a social audience would expect to find, and offer opportunities to click through to related content early and often.



# How device and loyalty influence sessions from each referrer

Not all visitors from a single source behave the same way, but when we analyze session performance by device type, loyalty, and site referrer, a clear pattern emerges: **higher loyalty and larger screen sizes contribute to longer and deeper sessions.** Among major traffic sources, loyal visitors on desktop consistently show higher average pageviews per session, average engaged time, and average session duration than other referrer types.

Loyal visitors who find your website via search and desktop, for example, average 107 seconds of engaged time and 3.5 pageviews.

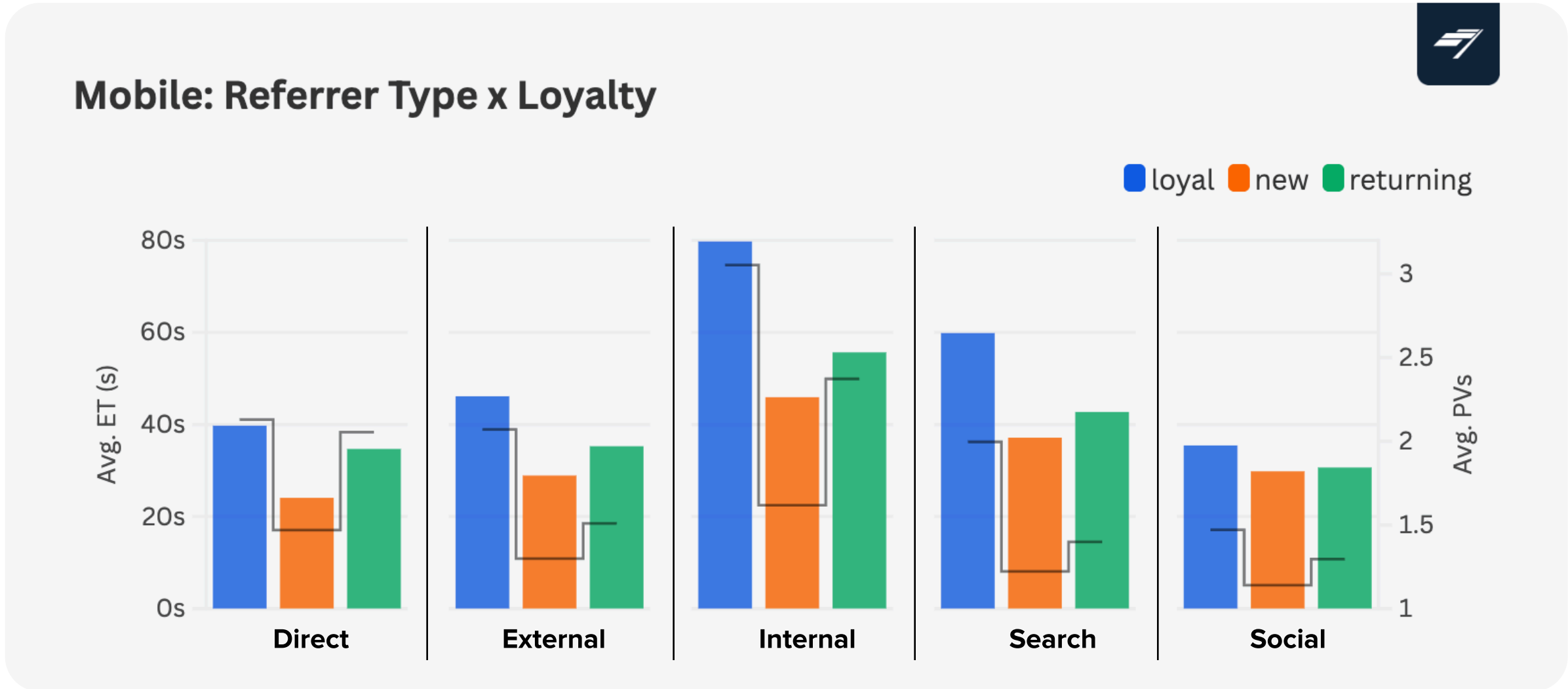
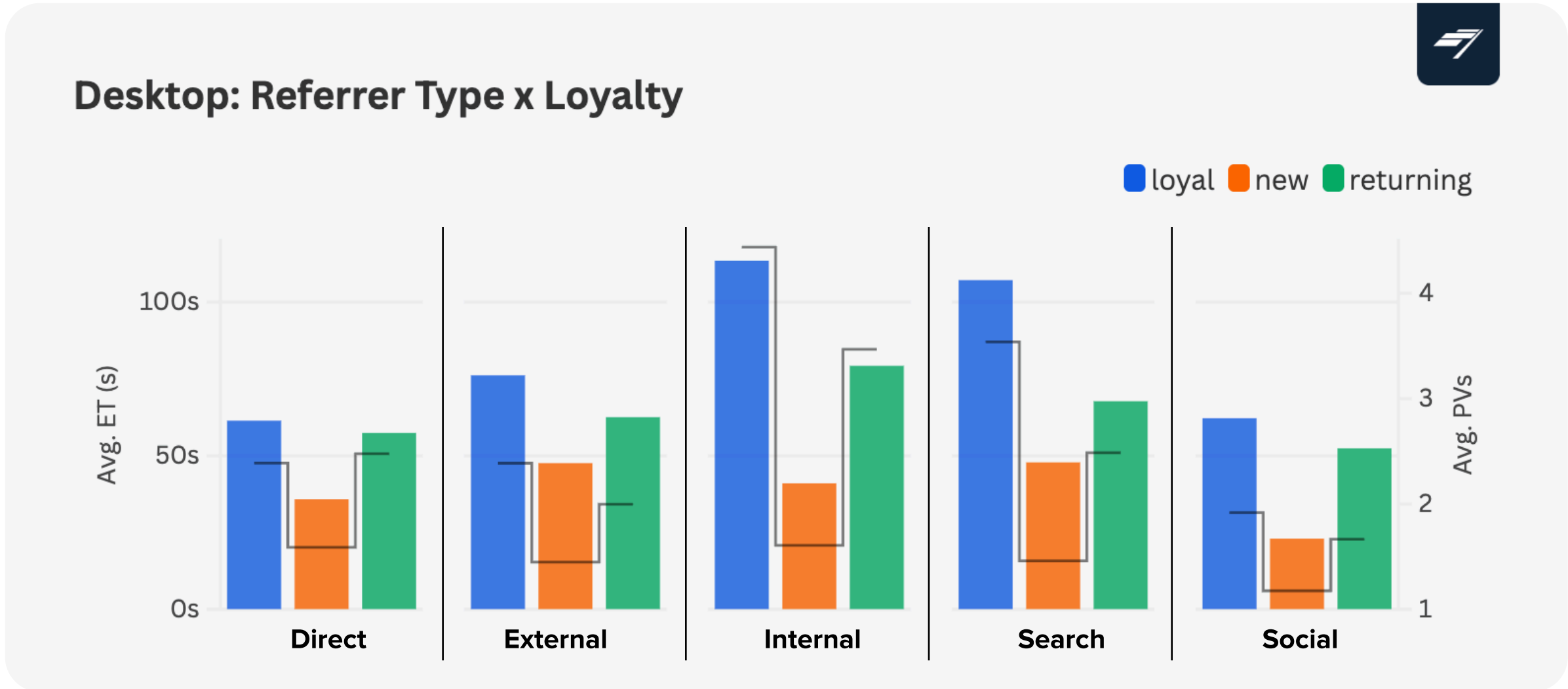
Mobile visitors, on the other hand, have much lower engagement. Those same loyal visitors who arrive via search engage for only 60 seconds when using mobile devices, and the loyalists who come via social sources engage for less than 30 seconds on average.

**Loyal visitors** have visited your site at least eight of the last 16 days — about every other day or more.  
**Returning visitors** have visited your site more than once in the past 30 days, but less frequently than every other day.  
**New visitors** are on your site for the first time in 30 days.



Average Engaged Seconds per Session

Average Pageviews per Session



## What to Know for Your Website

Visitors using desktop and tablet devices engage more deeply, viewing more pages and spending significantly more time per session compared to mobile users. Meanwhile, loyalty is a powerful predictor of engagement. Loyal readers not only view more pages but also spend 20 more seconds actively engaged per session than new visitors. As loyalty increases, so does the depth and quality of interaction.

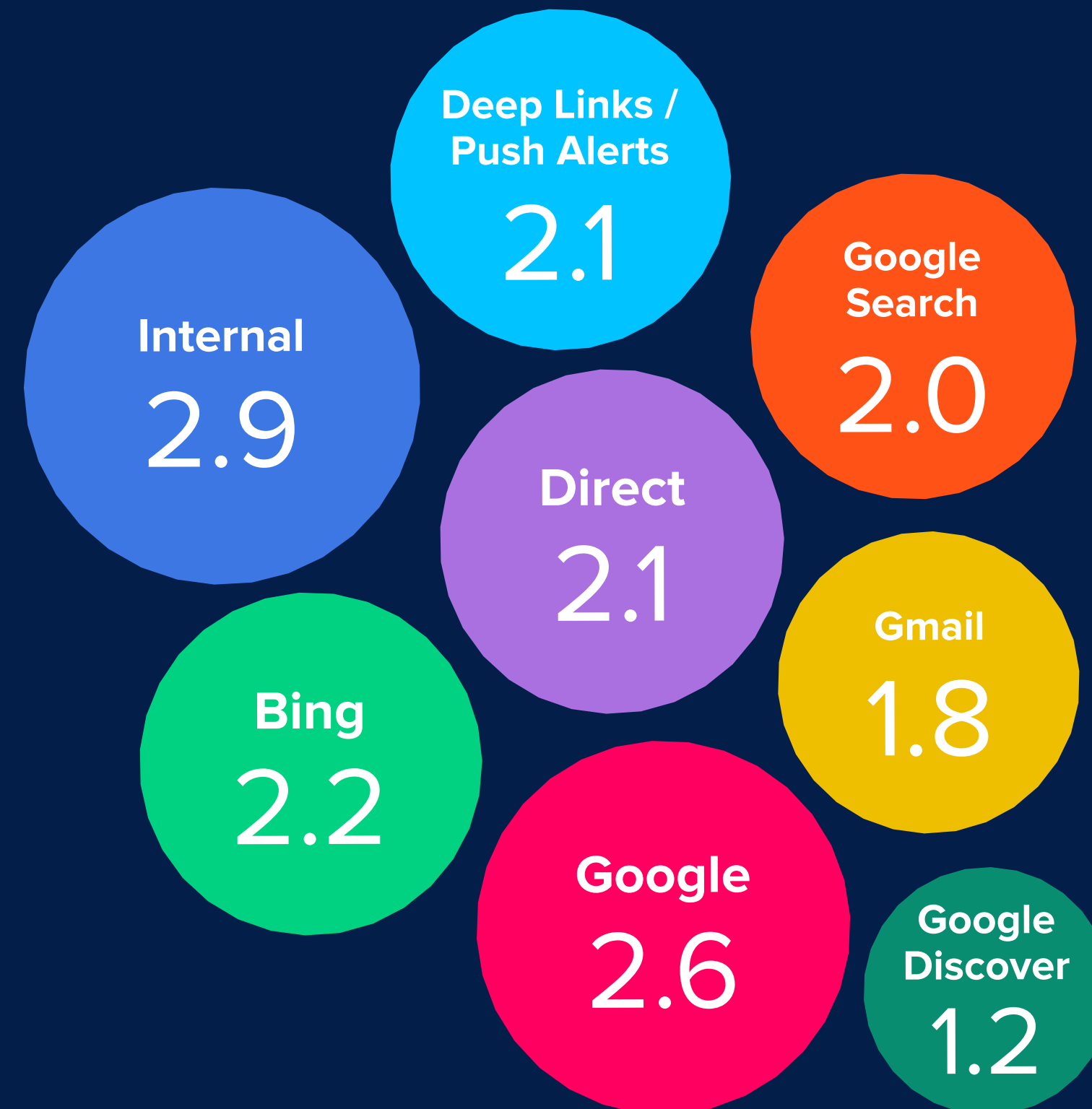
## How to Take Action

Design for depth on desktop and remove friction on mobile. While you can afford to use more robust article layouts on desktop to encourage continued reading, mobile visitors spend less time per session so fast loadtimes, skimmable formats, and concise storytelling can help hold their attention and lead to return visits.

# How specific platforms like Google Discover and Facebook compare

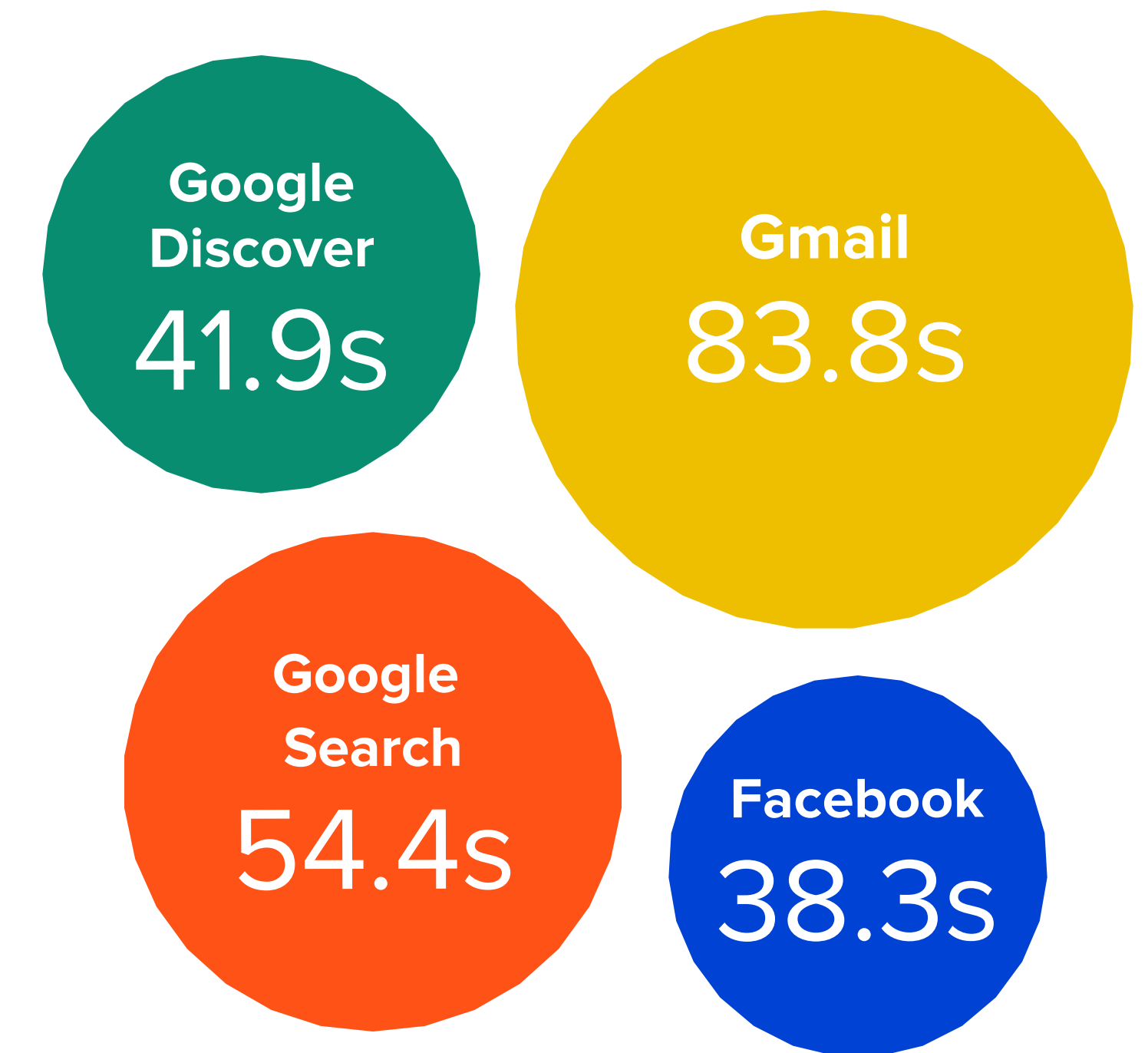
While it's helpful to see the behaviors of visitors coming from larger categories like search and social, we know that visitors from Google Search can behave differently than visitors from Bing just as visitors from Facebook can behave differently than visitors from Reddit. After redistributing pageviews, here's what we learned about these individual referrers.

## Select Referrers by Pageviews per Session



After larger categories like direct and internal, the most pageviews come from Google Discover, Google Search, and Dark Social. As a reminder, Dark Social refers to visitors who arrived via emails, apps, IMs, or other platforms and webpages that do not permit the transfer of referrer data to your site. When we sort these referrers by average pageviews per session, Google Search and Deep Links/Push Alerts are on the higher side at about 2 while Google Discover trails behind at 1.2 pageviews per session.

## Select Referrers by Engaged Time per Session



When we sort these referrers by average engaged time per session, Gmail leads the way with 83.8 seconds while other Google products like Search and Discover are in the middle of the pack with 54.4 and 41.9 seconds, respectively. Facebook leads social referrers in terms of total pageviews, but it trails behind search surfaces with 1.2 pageviews per session and 38.3 seconds of average engaged time.



## What to Know for Your Website

While personalized content from Google Discover can reach a lot of people, these visitors don't go as deep or engage as long as those who come more directly either via bookmarking your website or responding to a push notification.

## How to Take Action

Optimize for intent, not just reach. Dark Social sources like email and messaging apps might be an afterthought because they're harder to track, but they drive serious engagement. Invest in making your content easy to share in these contexts with clean URLs, good preview text, and strong mobile rendering.



# Key Findings

Take advantage of what we've learned from tracking internal traffic to its source.

## What to Know

At the pageview level, internal traffic is your largest referrer, accounting for about 40% of traffic.

When we redistribute internal pageviews to the source of their original referrer, we observe the sharpest increase in direct traffic which surges from 13% to 25%.

Search accounts for more traffic than any other category, but leads to less pageviews per session than direct and external.

Google Discover also reaches a lot of people, but the visitors don't usually get past the first page they land on.

## How to take action

**Turn discovery into depth.** Match content to expectations, especially for search and social visitors, and recommend related content early in their journey.

**Capture fleeting attention.** Use low-friction loyalty hooks like newsletter prompts or push notifications to build touchpoints that can lead to future visits.

**Analyze what readers actually do.** Dig into sessions by looking at scroll depth, engaged time, and content type to understand the nuances of different kinds of visitors.

**Prioritize recirculation paths.** Surface next-click opportunities that keep visitors from all sources engaged.

# Know where your audience comes from – and where they'll go next.

[Request a Demo](#)

**Chartbeat, the leading content intelligence platform for media, delivers simple, reliable analytics and optimization tools that show your editorial team how people are engaging with content across your site and empower you to keep them engaged even longer.**

Tracking more than 50 billion monthly pageviews across more than 70 countries, our real-time and historical dashboards, in-page optimization tools, and robust reporting help the world's leading media organizations understand, measure, and build value from their content.

