

Branding in the age of AI

AI can be a powerful companion, but over-reliance can damage brand reputation. Leading marketers explain how to combine AI’s efficiency with human creativity. **Words: Anna Paul**

Building a strong brand identity is essential. It’s how you communicate your business to the world, differentiate yourself from competitors, build trust and loyalty, and generate leads. AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Canva and countless others, can help — but only if they’re used wisely.

“Most marketers find AI valuable for accelerating content production and transforming content into multiple formats,” explains Mark Barry, managing director and SVP of EMEA at HubSpot. “However, they still rely on human oversight to accurately ensure brand voice, authenticity and quality.”

The risk of creative sameness

Without human oversight, relying on out-of-the-box AI-generated content poses a risk of “creative convergence”, adds Barry. When companies use the same tools and similar prompts, all pulling from the same bank of data, their content will naturally feel more generic — and forgettable.

“Relying heavily on AI risks creating a sea of sameness,” agrees Carren O’Keefe, chief creative officer at Digitas UK. “The brands that will win in an AI-driven world are the ones

that combine the speed of AI with the taste, intuition and conviction of humans. AI can generate options, but only humans can decide what a brand stands for.”

Can AI alone tell your brand story?

AI can be a powerful tool, helping with brainstorming, efficiency and refining ideas, but it can’t authentically tell your unique brand story, nor draw on lived experience. “Brand building has always been about emotion, story and trust. AI can support the craft, but it can’t replace the feeling. Tools don’t create loyalty, people do,” explains Mariam French, brand and marketing director at Leon.

Using AI tools without human intervention risks flattening your brand identity. At best, it becomes invisible; at worst, you face alienating customers or even sparking controversy. It simply can’t understand cultural nuances.

“AI lacks cultural intuition and contextual awareness, which can lead to tone-deaf messaging that can damage carefully built brand associations,” explains Matt Johnson, professor of psychology

and marketing at Hult International Business School.

As people become savvier about AI, they also recognise when it’s being used, which undermines trust. “Whether for images or copy, when consumers sense AI-generated content, they often associate it with corner-cutting and indifference, the precise opposite of the human care that builds lasting brand loyalty. The irony is that pursuing efficiency through AI often sacrifices the very connection brands are trying to create,” continues Professor Johnson.

How to use AI without losing your brand’s voice

This human connection is vital for smaller businesses, where trust and differentiation matter the most. So, what’s the best way to utilise these tools? “Use AI as your research assistant, not your voice,” advises Professor Johnson. “Let it analyse data, identify patterns and handle operational tasks, but reserve the creative expression and strategic direction for humans. The most effective approach is ‘AI for insight, humans for emotional resonance.’”

This advice is echoed by Rhys Merrett, senior vice president,



BRANDS RELY ON HUMAN CREATIVITY/GETTY

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technology at The PHA Group. “People connect with stories, empathy and authenticity. Always keep your voice human. AI can draft, but you should refine,” he explains.

He adds that businesses should also actively train staff: “Teach your people to work with these tools and adopt AI for real business needs.”

For example, set clear usage guidelines and consider which areas

of the business can be supported by AI, and the ones that can’t.

Where AI can add value

“AI is brilliant for stress-testing ideas, checking whether language works across markets or spotting if a competitor has already used the concept. That kind of due diligence used to take days; now it takes minutes,” explains Emily Austen, founder and CEO of PR agency Emerge. “But the brand voice, the character, the emotion — that still needs to be human. People are craving the texture and nuance of actual human experience.”

AI is a divisive topic, but the experts all agreed on one core principle: that it’s not an either/or choice. AI can do a lot of heavy lifting, but only humans can create a brand that’s authentic, compelling and memorable.

Maybe the machines can’t replace us after all.



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Gifting revenue in 2026

Retailers growing ecommerce, and brands launching online for the first time, are seeing product personalisation and bundling as a way to convert more customers this year

By repurposing existing stock rather than spending on product development, activating gifting tactics can create new revenue streams for retailers, as well as more choice for shoppers. Cleverly packaging multiple products into bundles, or allowing customers to personalise their items, are simple ways of cashing in on gifting year-round.

IV Creative is an agency offering retailers and brands end-to-end ecommerce support — web-building, marketing, product creation and fulfilment operations. Working with household names such as Funky Pigeon and alcohol brands such as Wolfie’s Whisky, alongside gaming

and beauty brands, they use decades of printing and design expertise to support clients with ecommerce set-up, promotion, production and shipping. IV Creative activated gifting to sell out bottles and increase RRP’s for brands such as AU Vodka, and launched official merch stores for IPs such as Black Mirror in partnership with Banijay Rights.

For retailers and brands exploring clever ways to increase ecommerce revenue, gifting may be the gift that keeps on giving in 2026.

Find out more about IV Creative’s gifting and ecommerce audits by scanning the QR code

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