Future Trends in Marketing

2026 Research Report

# Contents

A Note from AMA's CEO // Bennie F. Johnson //

The future of marketing is not fixed. As marketers, we should think of it as a dynamic landscape shaped by shifting signals, emerging technologies, and evolving consumer expectations. As you'll see throughout this new Trends Report, the global forces shaping the future are sometimes complementary, and sometimes contradictory.

At the American Marketing Association (AMA), we believe that marketers don't just respond to change. Marketers are the innovators, the instigators, of that change.

As the essential community for the marketing profession, the AMA is the leading voice committed to helping marketers and the profession anticipate, understand, and shape what comes next. Through research and insights, education and learning, advocacy and practice, we expand knowledge, elevate the field, and empower marketers.

AMA's new Future Trends in Marketing Report reflects our belief that marketing has the power to build a better world. It's not just about the work we do. It's about the profession we champion, the business objectives we support, and the future we help create.
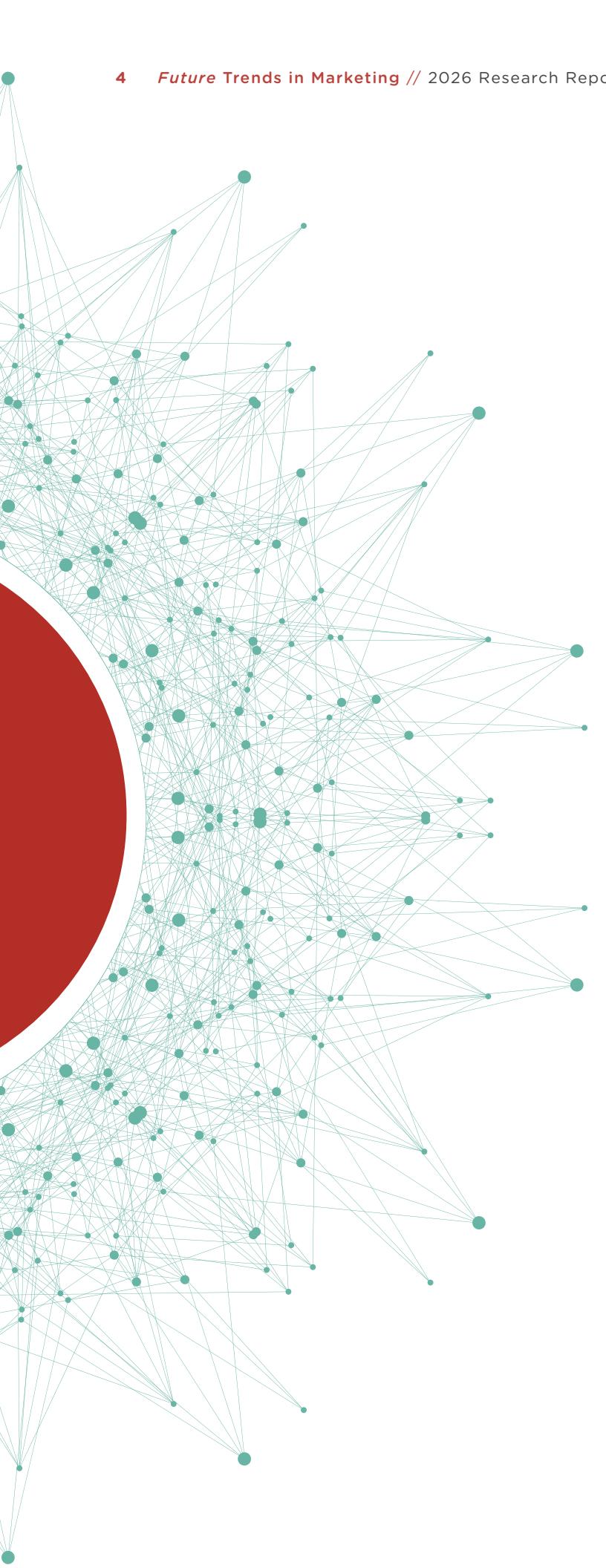
With over 30 individual contributors, this report takes into consideration diverse, varied perspectives, and it's clear that marketers understand what drives business growth, and how the profession can make a meaningful impact on society.

To truly understand what marketers are thinking about and planning for, we didn't want to rely on traditional methods; we wanted to bring forth ideas through a more collaborative process. To differentiate our report, we wanted to explore multiple perspectives, to investigate and anticipate change, and to imagine a transformational future. The foresight panel we convened allows us to do just that. You can learn more about the panelists and the methodology later in this report.

Our goal is that AMA's 2026 Future Trends in Marketing Report helps you and your teams make impactful decisions that will not only drive growth but create new opportunities.

:Top 5 Trends

01

The Age of Autonomous Agents

As marketers navigate the transformative impact of generative AI on their organizations and workflows, they will quickly need to pivot to a fast-emerging future trend: Agentic AI. In the very near future, autonomous AI agents will serve as dynamic proxies for consumers and marketers alike.

AI agents represent a giant step forward from generative AI. AI agents can plan and automate tasks, make informed decisions, and interact with their surroundings. Within five to ten years, it is conceivable that AI agents will reshape e-commerce and marketing by acting as autonomous intermediaries between consumers and brands. They could manage complex buying decisions such as travel, insurance, or home services, requiring brands to market to the machines themselves, designing for trust, transparency, and alignment with AI-driven logic and values.

AI, Our Shopping Assistant

AI usage among general consumers has already reached a tipping point. In 2025, more than half of American adults (61%) reported using AI in the past six months, and nearly one in five rely on it every day. As expected, younger generations like Gen Z (ages 18-28) lead overall adoption at 76%, but nearly half of Baby Boomers have used AI in the last six months.

Who's Using AI?	Usage Spans Every Generation as AI Goes Mainstream

**Across generations, AI adaption is broad—
19% of those aged 18-79 have made it a daily habit**

● Daily AI Users
● AI Users

	All U.S. Adults Ages 18-79	Gen Z Ages 18-28	Millennials Ages 29-44	Gen X Ages 45-60	Baby Boomers Ages 61-69
Daily AI Users	19%	21%	24%	19%	11%
AI Users	61%	76%	70%	59%	45%
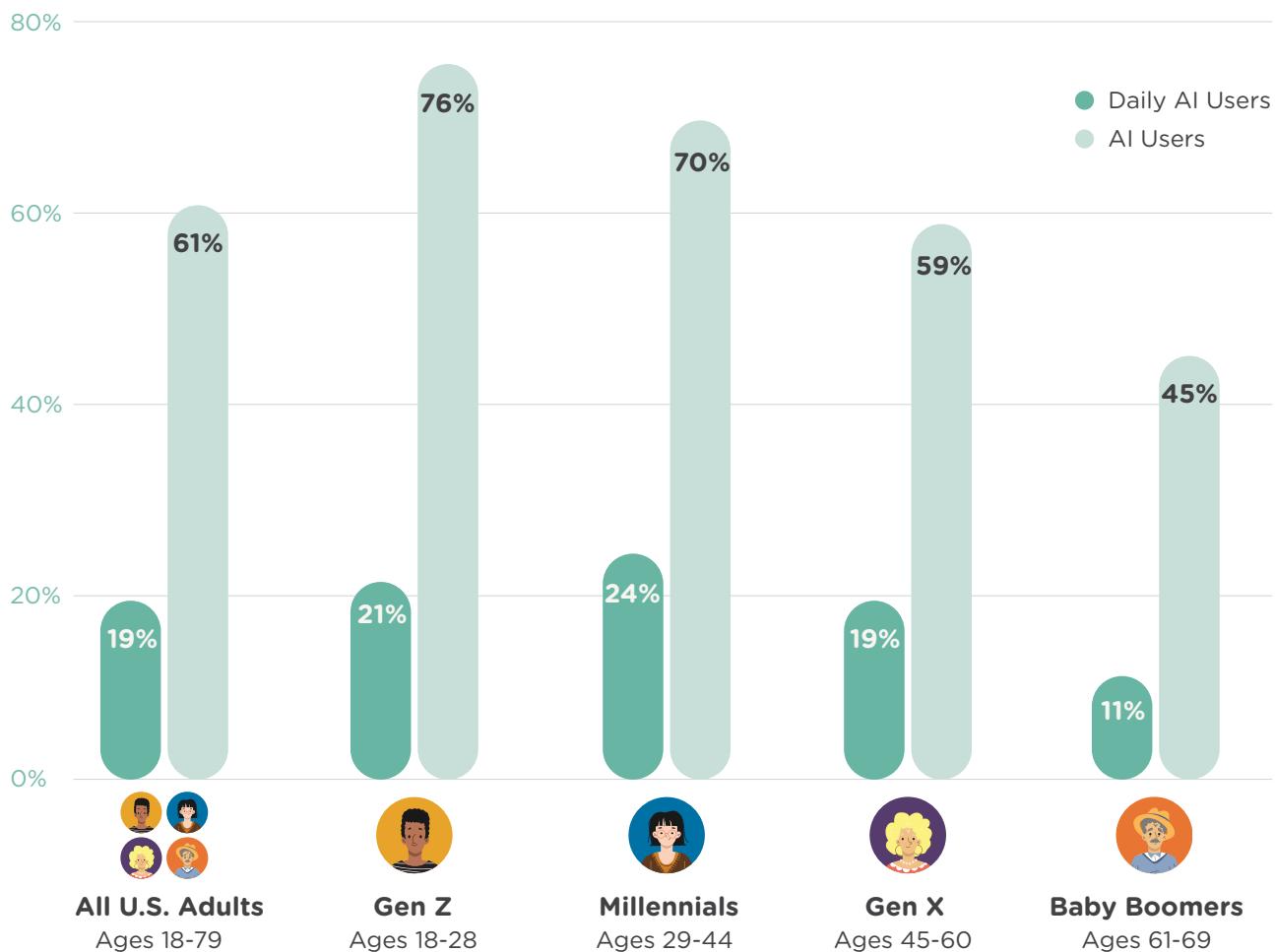
Data source: Menlo Ventures

From Our Foresight Panelists

"Within one to three years consumers will use AI assistants to support decision-making by recommending options, managing daily purchases, and flagging savings opportunities. AI agents will be our co-pilots for life because they solve for human capacity, not just convenience. To succeed, brands must align with human need providing help, time, and (privacy) protection. The brands that thrive won't be the loudest, but the ones that make life easier."

Victor Reiss, Chief Consumer and Public Relations Officer at UNC Health

Another OpenAI study from mid-2025 found that nearly three-quarters of ChatGPT usage occurs outside professional settings, representing a significant jump from just over half in the previous year. The data suggests that as users become more familiar with the technology, they're increasingly incorporating it into their everyday routines beyond workplace applications, even while most have hesitations about how AI is impacting people and society.

This points to a major shift in how consumers will gather information, make decisions and purchase products and services. Generative AI—and, increasingly AI agents—are poised to cut through noise, evaluate choices, and make decisions on consumers' behalf, compelling brands to optimize not only for human preferences but also for how AI systems interpret and prioritize information.

This evolving dynamic will drive a profound shift in consumer insights, arguably one more significant than the transition into the digital age. To be successful, marketers need to be "multi-layered," leveraging traditional consumer research with new methods of tracking changing user dynamics and the behavior of autonomous agents. These layered insights will need to be the foundation of marketing strategy.
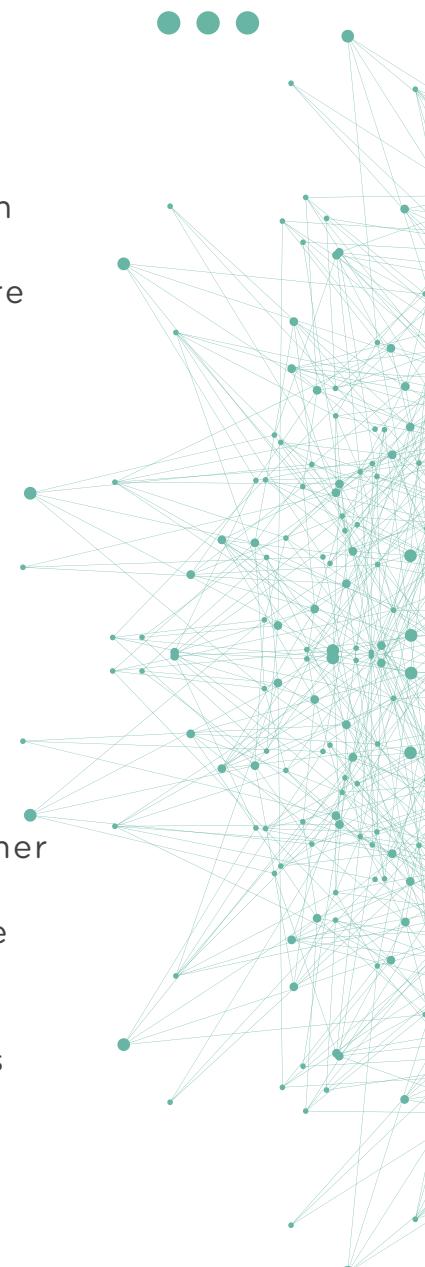
Spotlight   **L'Oréal's Many Uses of AI Agents**   Industry: Beauty and Personal Care

For L'Oréal, the world's largest cosmetics company, AI represented more than a technological upgrade—it was fundamental to maintaining competitive advantage in an increasingly personalized beauty market. The company faced a strategic imperative: how could it deploy generative AI at enterprise scale while delivering tangible customer value?

Rather than pursuing isolated pilot projects, the company committed to building foundational AI infrastructure in partnership with Nvidia through its CreAItech generative AI platform and AI Refinery development tool.

Image source: Lorealparisusa.com

This infrastructure powers multiple consumer-facing applications, including Beauty Genius, a 24/7 AI-powered personal beauty assistant that combines generative AI, augmented reality, and computer vision to deliver personalized product recommendations and virtual try-ons tailored to individual skin tones, hair types, and beauty concerns.
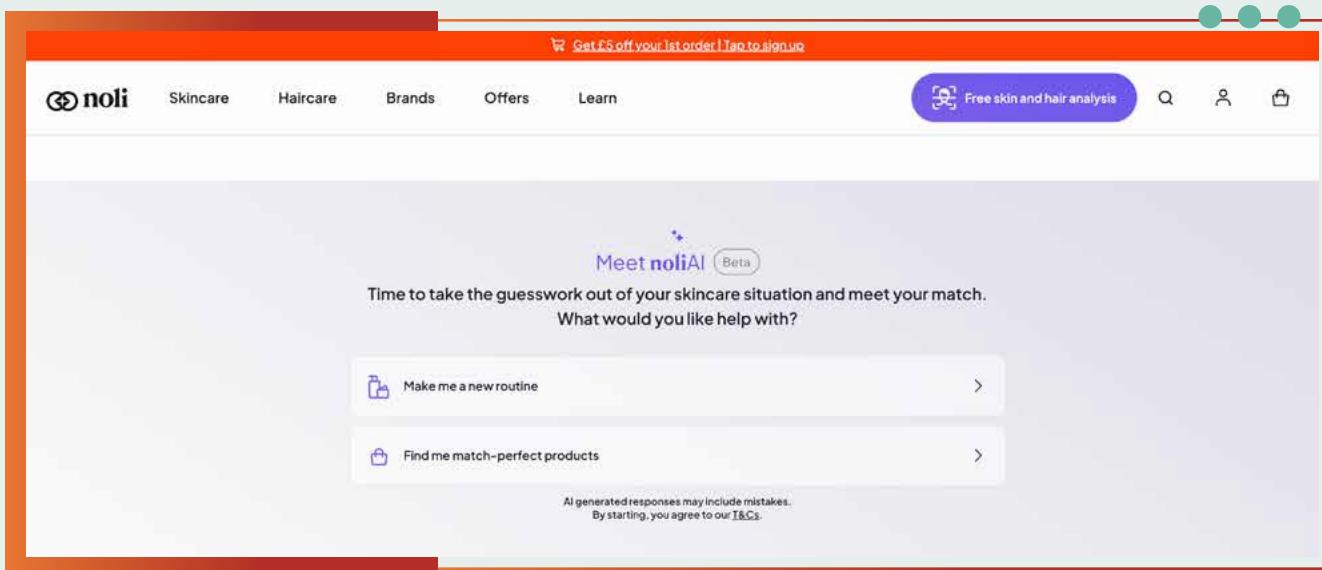
Image source: Noli.com

The company also integrated AI capabilities into Noli, its AI-powered beauty marketplace, leveraging proprietary data on skin types, hair colors, and product formulations to create intelligent search and discovery tools.

The strategic approach extends beyond customer engagement. L'Oréal deployed generative AI to automate 3D product visualization workflows, enabling creative teams to rapidly test and iterate marketing strategies while localizing content for different markets, a traditionally resource-intensive process for consumer packaged goods manufacturers.

Image source: Noli.com

AI, Our Co-Worker

On the business side, autonomous agents will take on increasing responsibility for managing workflows such as campaign execution, media buying, and vendor selection, fundamentally transforming marketing team operations.

This will require significant reskilling of employees and restructuring of companies, from entry level to the C-suite. The biggest mindshift may be thinking of AI not just as a tool for increased productivity but as an actual teammate.

[The Cybernetic Teammate](#), a study done by the Wharton School of Business in partnership with Procter and Gamble, found that AI can act as a teammate, enhance teams, bridge skill gaps, and improve the human worker experience. The study used a randomized controlled trial of 776 Procter and Gamble professionals, broken out into teams and individuals. Some of these were given access to AI and some were not.

This study, and others like [Microsoft's 2025 Work Trend Index Report](#), add to the emerging evidence that organizations would greatly benefit from moving from treating AI as a tool to embracing it as a collaborator. Agentic AI, when leveraged effectively, can replicate many of the benefits of teamwork, boosting performance, bridging expertise gaps, and improving the employee experience.

Key Insights From the Cybernetic Teammate Study

Teams without AI outperformed individuals by a wide margin. But individuals with AI performed just as well as human teams, meaning that AI effectively acted as a "virtual teammate."

AI effectively saved 12%–16% in time while producing richer, more detailed outputs.

Less experienced employees, with AI, performed at levels comparable to more seasoned professionals.

Contrary to fears, AI increased positive emotions (excitement, energy, enthusiasm) and reduced negative emotions (anxiety, frustration).

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Yet AI agents on their own will not be a silver bullet. In the short term, teams need to contend with the productivity drag of workslop, AI-produced output that appears useful on the surface but fails to provide real value or progress toward the actual goal. They'll also need to be intentional about what aspects of a role can be automated, and where AI better serves in an augmentation rather than replacement capacity. Emerging research from Stanford, OpenAI, and elsewhere is providing early clues that can help leaders decide how to integrate AI into their teams.

Which Marketing Tasks Can Be Automated?

100% AI ————————————————————————→ 100% Human

Detailed Task in the Occupation	Marketers' Rating	vs	AI Expert Rating
Contact organizations to explain services and facilities offered.	●		●
Coordinate with the media to disseminate advertising.	●		●
Inspect layouts and advertising copy, and edit scripts, audio, video, and other promotional material for adherence to specifications.	●		●
Monitor and analyze sales promotion results to determine cost effectiveness of promotion campaigns.	●		●
Prepare budgets and submit estimates for program costs as part of campaign plan development.	●		●
Read trade journals and professional literature to stay informed on trends, innovations, and changes that affect media planning.	●		●

Data source: Stanford University, Future of Work with AI Agents

Most importantly, companies must realize that AI is not just about productivity efficiency, it's about reimagining work itself. Companies that lean into this shift will need to evolve their management practices, organizational design, and talent strategies to unlock the full potential of AI as a teammate.

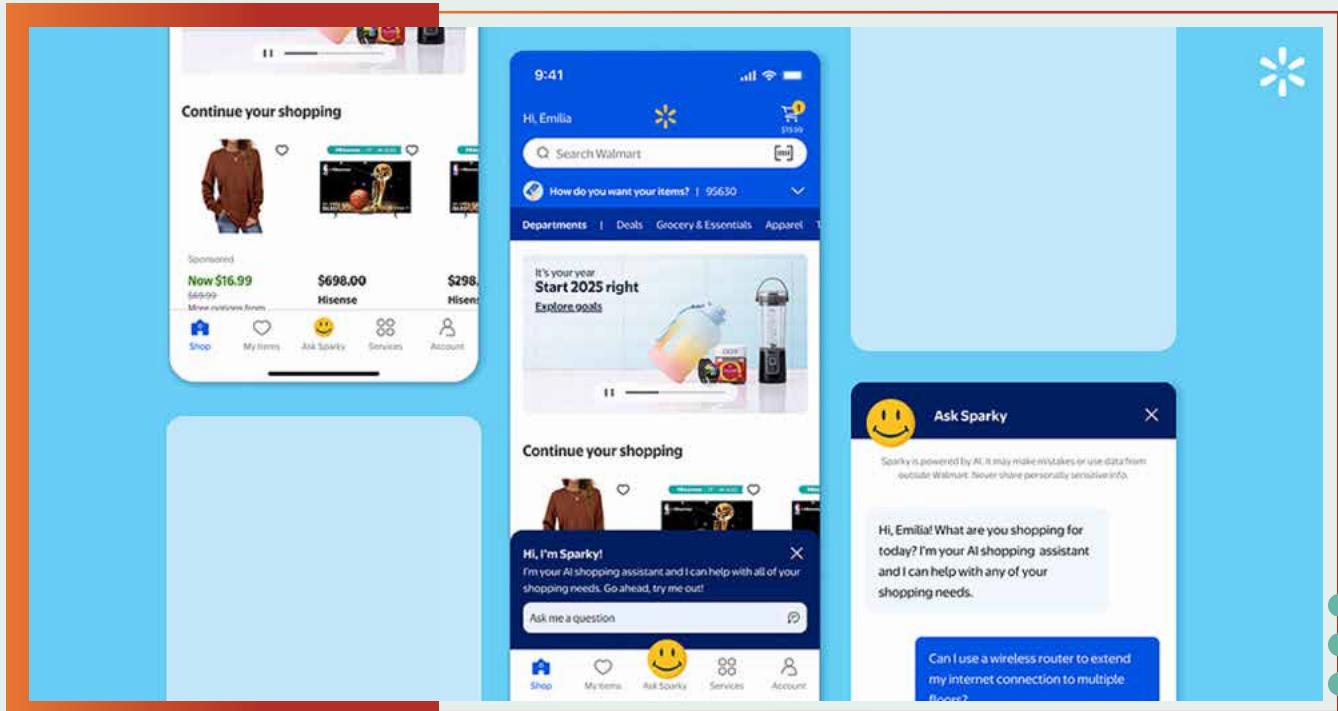| Spotlight | **Walmart Embraces Agents for B-to-C and B-to-B** | Industry: Retail |

Image source: Walmart.com

Walmart is leveraging agents to maintain their competitive advantage across consumer shopping, seller operations, and advertising execution.

With Element, a centralized platform accessing large language models from OpenAI, Google, and Meta, Walmart architected a network of interconnected "super agents" designed to operate autonomously on behalf of different users.

"Sparky" serves as the consumer-facing shopping assistant, recommending products and managing carts for repeat purchases.

"Marty" handles B-to-B workflows for sellers, suppliers, advertisers, and creators: bulk uploading products, building seller profiles, and orchestrating automated advertising campaigns including display ads, sponsored placements, keyword strategies, and budget allocation. For advertisers, Marty functions as an AI-powered front end to Walmart Connect, integrating retail media placement, data ventures, and seller onboarding under one orchestration layer.

The company deployed AI systems to monitor social media trends, identify viral products, compress sourcing cycles from 48 weeks to under 8 weeks, and deliver trending merchandise to stores and consumers in less than 45 minutes, according to AdAge.

The results position Walmart to fundamentally reshape retail media and commerce operations. By enabling agent-to-agent communication, including integration with external platforms like ChatGPT and Perplexity, Walmart is hoping to get a leg up when it comes to "answer engine optimization," or having products available through Walmart show up in AI conversations.

Image source: Walmart.com

From Our Foresight Panelists

"The best way I have heard this explained in very practical terms for marketers is: AI will take over all work that is a 'commodity' and what will be left for humans is the 'craft.' This is a really practical action: take a look around. Anything that is repetitive in nature and does not require your creative/imagination/feelings/etc will be a commodity that will be replaced with an Agent. What is the craft that you can bring to the table?"

Olga Alpeter, Marketing Director, Q-tips and Canada Brands at Elida Beauty Health

Ads and Campaigns, Automated

In May 2025, Mark Zuckerberg outlined a bold and alarming vision for the future of advertising, revealing plans to fully automate the ad creation process using AI. The Verge reported on the "infinite creative" system he envisions, where businesses simply state their goals, connect their bank account, and let Meta handle everything else—from creative production to targeting and performance measurement—without requiring any input from ad agencies or marketers.

Coverage from the Wall Street Journal noted that many advertisers find the lack of control in AI automated ads "disconcerting." "It's almost like a necessary evil," said Nicole Fisch, Senior Vice President of Marketing at baby products brand Lalo, which uses Google's AI-fueled Performance Max campaigns to run ads online. "You see the numbers and it does drive sales, but...at what cost?"

This trend of AI-driven campaign planning can fundamentally change the foundations of advertising and the client-agency model. For decades, external or in-house media agencies have assumed the responsibility of creative ad development and execution as well as overseeing social media and influencer marketing. But we may be entering an age of B-to-A (Business to Agent) marketing.
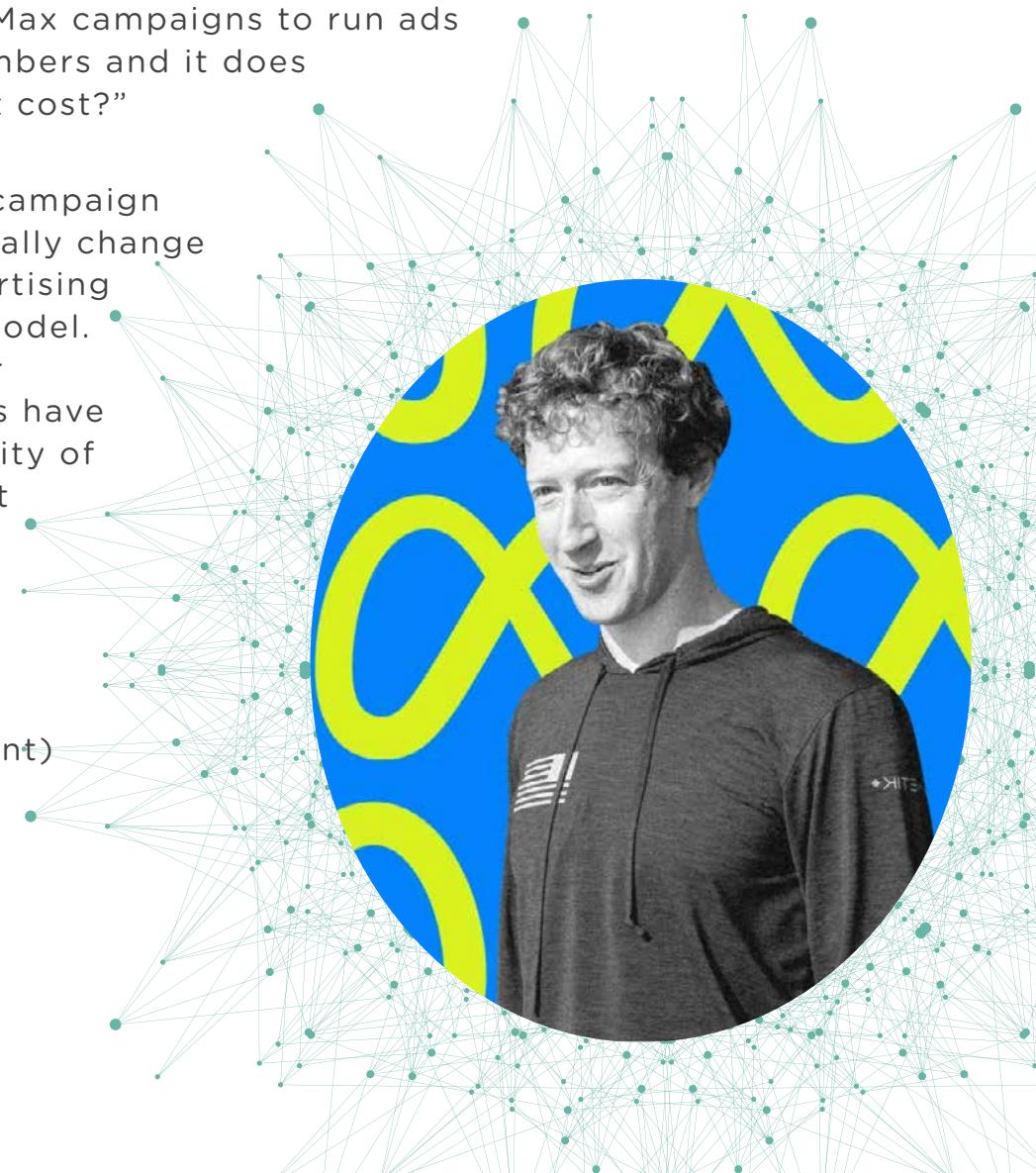
This also impacts B-to-B relationships and buying patterns. The way B-to-B companies make purchase decisions is changing rapidly. The old model of targeting one lead or decision-maker no longer reflects reality anymore. Today, B-to-B buying is a group process, shaped by collective confidence, brand familiarity, and internal consensus.

Part of a B-to-B marketer's value proposition for their business when presenting themselves as a new vendor is the relationship, which could be stripped away from the consideration set when a process has decision rights and works outside of human interaction. It could end up being a race to the bottom for vendors competing against each other.

From Our Foresight Panelists

"The commoditization of ad creative will obliterate the illusion of differentiation in performance marketing. As every brand feeds similar inputs into the same AI systems and algorithms, outputs become indistinguishable. Thus, the competitive advantage moves upstream, where strategic constraints, emotional truths, and brand archetypes become the only unique assets worth optimizing. Marketing orgs will shift from 'creativity for scale' to 'strategy for resonance.'"

Christine White, Senior Vice President of External Affairs and Marketing at Shedd Aquarium

The Need for Organizational Changes

According to a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, "Organizations Aren't Ready for the Risks of Agentic AI," this new technology "introduces compounding risks that, if not managed, can create business and brand-defining disasters."

Global AI Law and Policy Tracker	Where AI Laws and Policies are Changing

The International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP) tracks global AI and policy shifts. This map shows jurisdictions that are in focus and covered by their tracker.

Jurisdictions in Focus

• Argentina	• Chile	• India	• New Zealand	• South Korea
• Australia	• China	• Indonesia	• Nigeria	• Taiwan
• Bangladesh	• Columbia	• Israel	• Peru	• United Arab Emirates
• Brazil	• Eqypt	• Japan	• Saudi Arabia	• U.K.
• Canada	• EU	• Mauritius	• Singapore	• U.S.
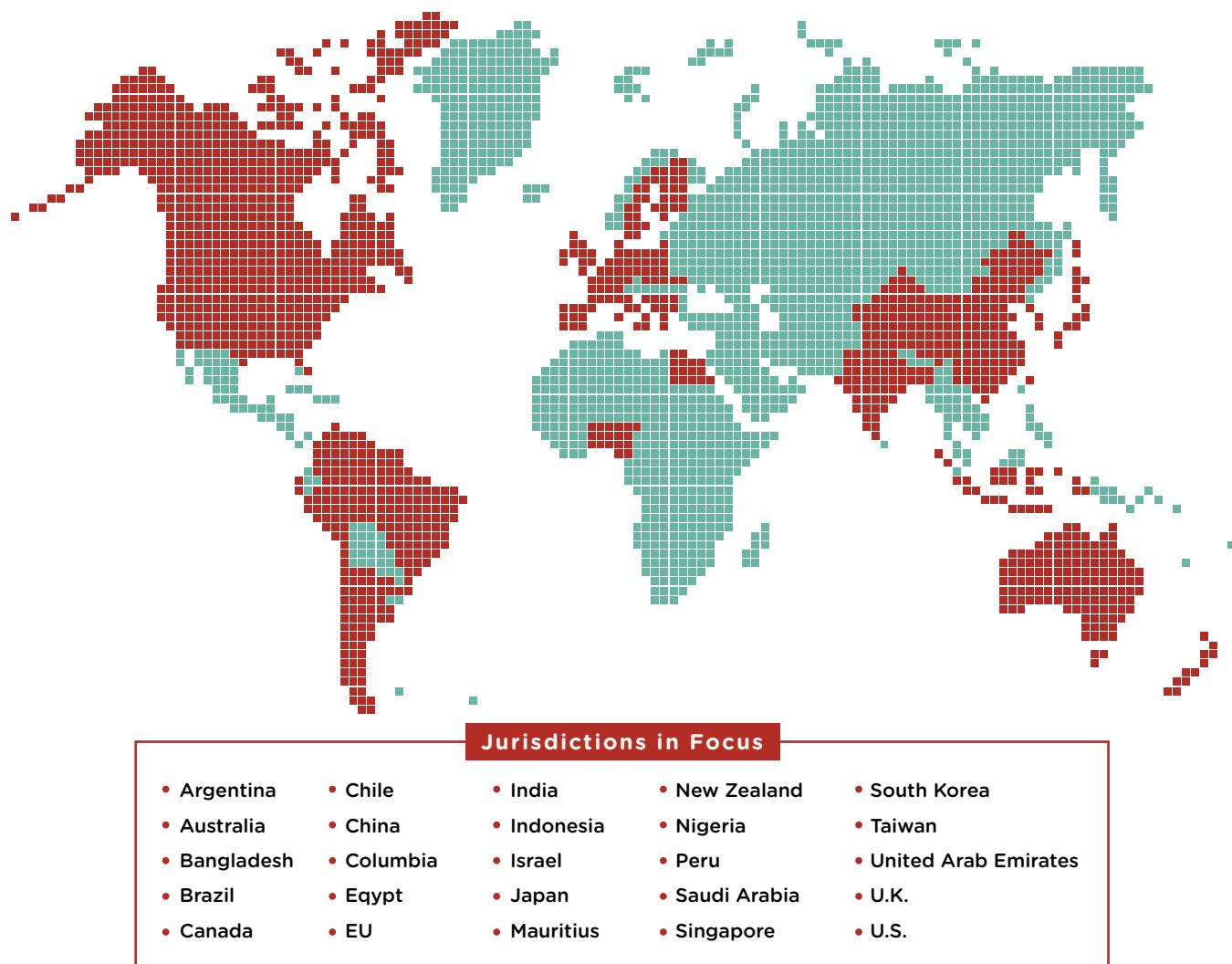
Data and image source: IAPP.org

One critical area highlighted in the article is the importance of developing employee capabilities to manage the risks associated with agentic AI. Superficial approaches to education and training, like brief

annual compliance sessions, are insufficient for this challenge. Instead, companies should opt for targeted instruction customized to specific departments and individual roles, ensuring that staff members can effectively acquire, create, deploy, and oversee AI systems responsibly while detecting potential problems early.

Given that so much of how agentic AI will be used and evolve is still unknown, a big part of training employees is understanding how to regulate AI in their organizations. In fact, the regulation of AI in marketing is not theoretical, as illustrated by the map on page 16. It's happening. U.S. states are passing their own bills while countries globally scramble to put protections in place while still encouraging innovation, and platforms are adapting policies in advance. To get ahead of the game, marketing creative and data teams need a point of view and a policy. This includes how AI is used internally, how it touches customer data, and how transparent those uses are to clients or audiences.
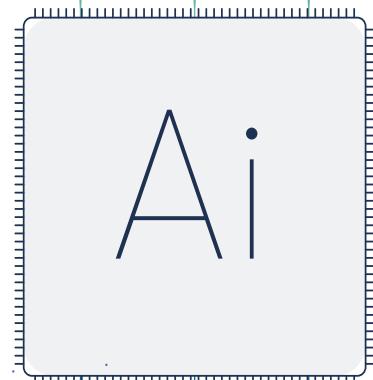
Navigating the Shift

Develop a multi-layered consumer insights strategy
that combines traditional research methods with new approaches
for tracking how AI agents behave and make decisions on behalf of
consumers. This ensures your marketing strategy accounts for both
human and AI-driven decision-making.

Optimize content and product information for AI interpretation
by designing your brand messaging, product details, and value
propositions in ways that AI systems can easily parse, understand,
and prioritize when making recommendations.

Create comprehensive AI governance policies
at the departmental and role levels that address how AI is
used internally, how it interacts with customer data, and
what transparency standards you'll maintain with clients
and audiences.

Invest in specialized AI training programs
that go beyond basic compliance videos, equipping employees to
effectively procure, develop, use, and monitor AI systems while
recognizing potential problems before they escalate.

Shift from "AI as tool" to "AI as teammate"
by reimagining workflows, management practices, and
organizational design to integrate AI agents as collaborative
partners rather than just productivity add-ons.

Audit your marketing work for "commodity" vs. "craft"
by identifying repetitive tasks that AI agents can automate
while doubling down on creative and strategic work that
requires human imagination and insight.

Consumer Discovery Shifts to Scroll

02

Traditional search behavior, characterized by typing keywords into a search engine, no longer dominates the early stages of consumer discovery. Instead, browsing is becoming ambient, emotional, and community-driven. Consumers increasingly find new products while scrolling TikTok, browsing Reddit threads, watching YouTube Shorts, or conversing with ChatGPT.

This evolution requires brands to pivot from optimizing keywords to designing scroll-native content that is emotionally resonant, highly relevant, and tailored to the environments where consumers now spend their time.
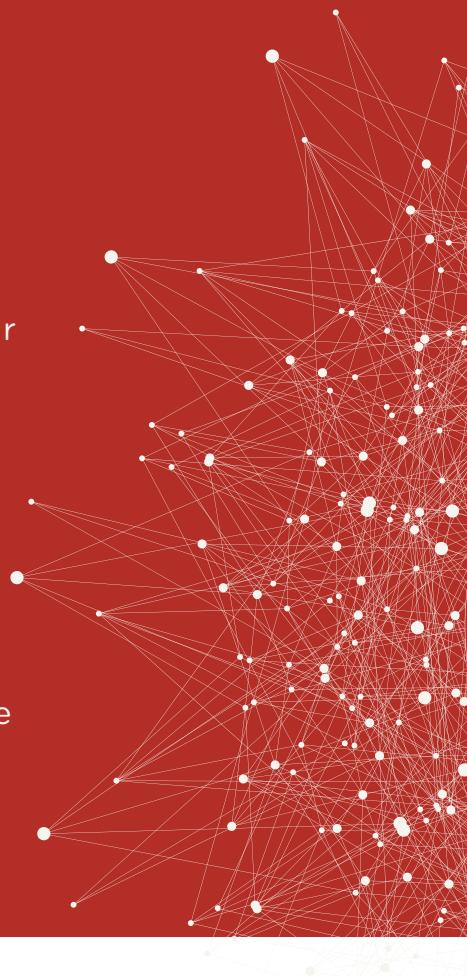
Influencer Marketing and Social Commerce

One of the key drivers of the shift in consumer search is the significant rise of infuencer marketing, the use of trusted online content creators to promote brands.

Driven by consumers' near-constant social media engagement, particularly among Gen Z and Gen Alpha, influencer marketing is increasingly becoming the foundation of digital advertising's future. In 2024, for the first time, social media surpassed paid search to become the world's largest advertising channel, with an impressive $247 billion in global ad spend, according to Influencer Marketing Hub. This number is expected to grow in the coming years, with expected increases in influencer collaborations, short-form videos, and live shopping experiences.

One key growth engine for influencer marketing is the explosion of social commerce. Merging product discovery, peer influence, and direct purchasing within social platforms, social commerce transforms apps like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest into digital storefronts. This trend is rooted in the leveraging of social data, comments, shares, likes, creator endorsements, and live interactions to guide purchase behavior. As consumers' habits evolve, these platforms are becoming the new center of brand engagement and retail activity.

Research by Hostinger found that:

82%
of consumers use social media for product research

55%
of Gen Zers prefer TikTok

52%
of Millennials prefer Facebook
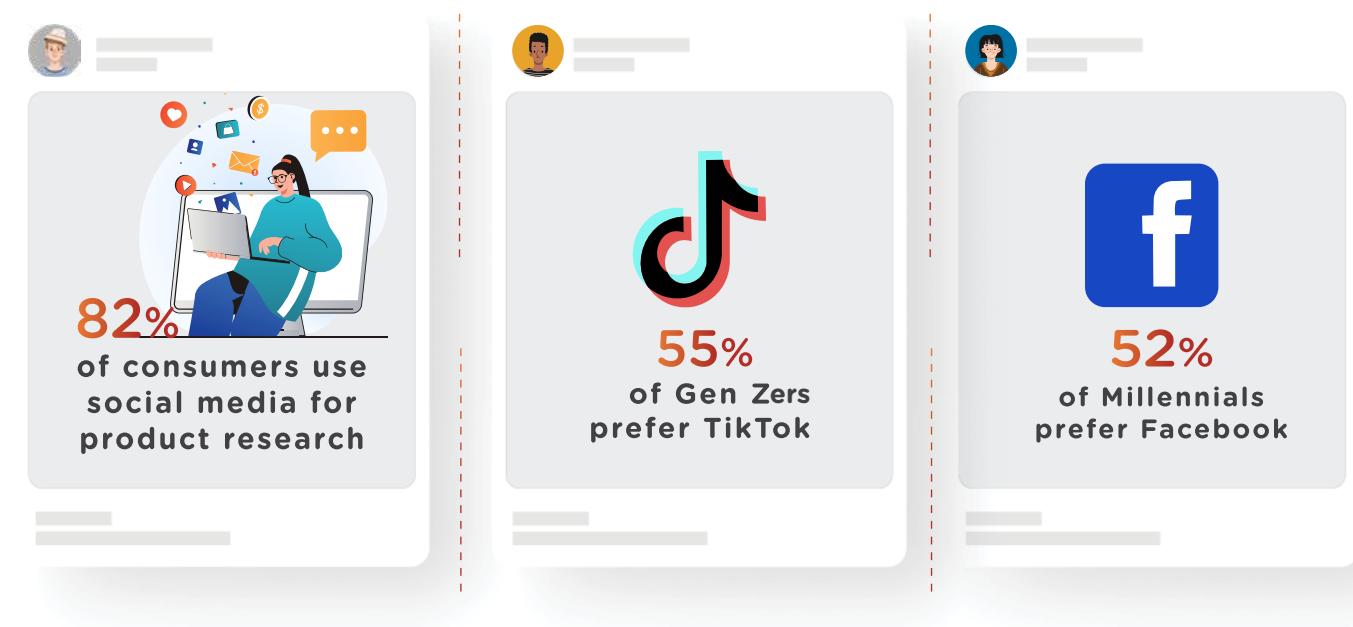
From Our Foresight Panelists

"TikTok, as an example, is no longer just a content platform; it's becoming a search engine for the scroll generation. And brands that meet consumers where they scroll—not just where they search—will win early attention and long-term loyalty."

Nicole Arnett Sanders, Chief Strategist Officer at FiftySix Agency

"Influencer marketing always used to be essentially the top-of-funnel, where you can drive awareness around products and services," Chris Erwin, founder of creator economy advisory firm RockWaterOne, told the Wall Street Journal. And as influencers add shoppable storefronts and shoppable links, influencer marketing is becoming a critical driver of actual sales.

The global social commerce market was on track to reach US $924 billion in 2025, growing annually at at nearly 12%, according to Business Wire. Live and shoppable formats shift strategy from static ads to dynamic, real-time engagement. This brings the entire consumer journey—from discovery to conversion—onto a single platform.

Marketers should recognize that influencers are no longer just brand partners—many are building their own products and selling directly through social platforms. To stay ahead in creator-led media, marketers should reallocate more budget toward creator platforms and prioritize micro and niche influencers who drive stronger engagement and ROI. Organizations should give creators flexibility to tell authentic, culturally relevant stories rather than forcing rigid brand guidelines. Brands should rethink partnerships, explore co-creation opportunities, and design strategies that tap into creators' built-in audiences and credibility.
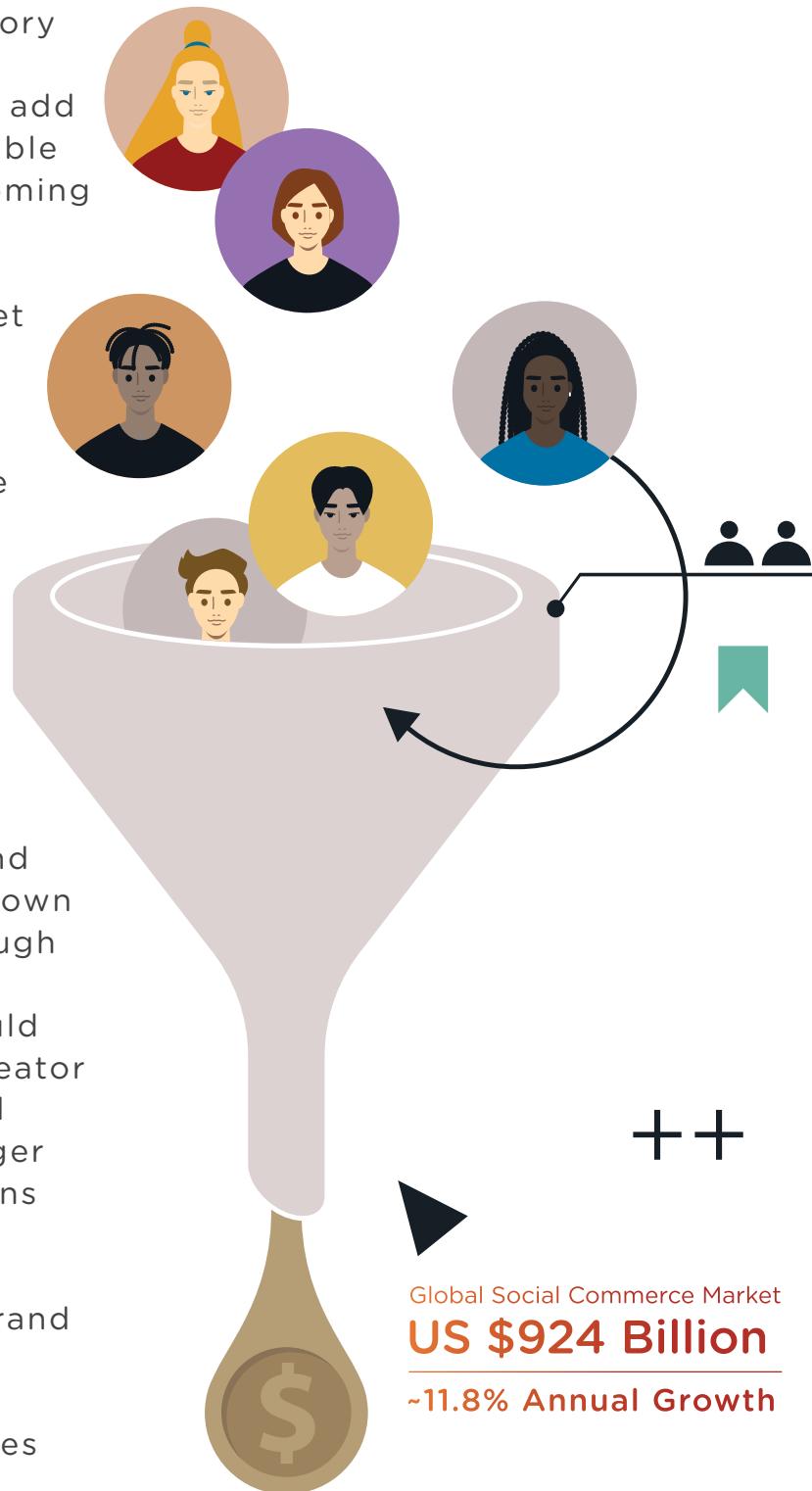
Global Social Commerce Market
US $924 Billion
~11.8% Annual Growth

For Dove, Unilever's largest brand, creator partnerships represent more than a marketing tactic; they are essential to maintaining authentic connections with communities in an increasingly fragmented media landscape. The brand was able to expertly evolve its two-decade "Real Beauty" platform to remain culturally relevant while staying true to its purpose-driven foundation.

Images source: Creativepool.com

Research-driven insights sparked an idea. Dove discovered that 9 in 10 women take up to 50 photos before posting one, and 6 out of 10 don't share happy moments on social media due to dissatisfaction with their appearance. Rather than using creators as campaign amplifiers, Dove launched #ShareTheFirst, its first campaign made entirely from creator content without studios or traditional production infrastructure.

Developed with Edelman, the initiative transformed Dove's operational model from broadcasting to community collaboration. The brand worked with over 100 influencers, building on relationships established since 2017, to co-create content that reflected authentic experiences across diverse communities. Creators received complete creative control over direction, tone, and execution, allowing campaigns to move from brief to live within 48 hours in some markets, a dramatic acceleration compared to traditional production timelines.

The approach included culturally resonant activations like an out-of-home takeover at London's Liverpool Street station featuring 64 digital screens mimicking a scrolling camera roll.
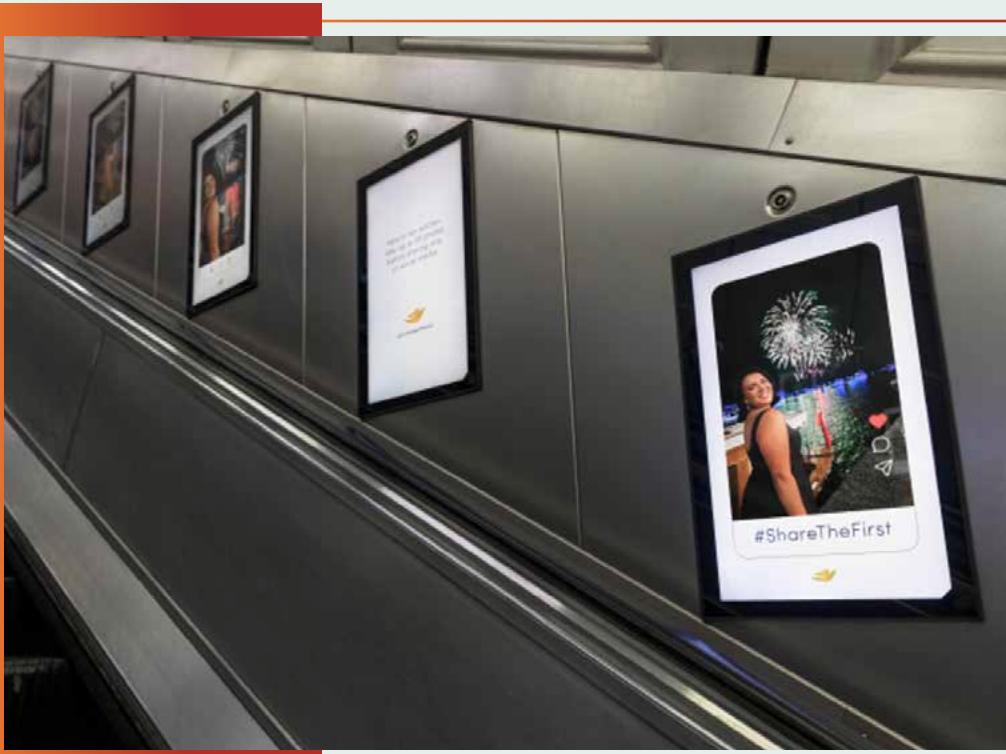
Image source: Creativepool.com

The results validated creator-centricity as a scalable brand strategy. #ShareTheFirst expanded to 14 markets since launch, demonstrating that purpose-driven marketing can thrive when rooted in genuine community relationships rather than broadcast messaging. The initiative aligned with parent company Unilever's ambitious goal to shift 50% of advertising spend to social media and work with 20 times more influencers, positioning Dove as the blueprint for this transformation. By maintaining unwavering commitment to its "Real Beauty" purpose while radically reimagining content creation, Dove proved that brand values and operational agility are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually reinforcing in the creator economy.

Enter the New Marketing Channel: The AI Model

As noted for the AI Agents trend, generative AI and agents are transforming how consumers find information, plan vacations, and shop online. Tools like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google's Gemini provide users with direct, conversational answers and summaries instead of lists of links. More so than with a traditional Google search, results can be tailored to the individual's preferences and interests. When consumers use AI search, it dramatically decreases click-through rates to original sites and shifts the locus of engagement to the AI interface itself.

In order to stay competitive amid solutions like ChatGPT, Google launched AI Overviews in 2024, giving rise to what industry experts call "Google Zero"—the point where search engines stop functioning primarily as gateways to the web and instead become answer engines that keep users within their own walls. According to Digiday, zero-click news queries surged from 56% to nearly 70% in the first year, causing severe traffic declines for content publishers, with some sites experiencing drops of 55% or more in organic search traffic. The implications extend beyond publishers to any business relying on organic search visibility, as the traditional SEO playbook becomes less effective and marketers face the prospect of investing more heavily in paid placements, first-party data strategies, and direct audience relationships just to maintain their digital presence.

Another disruption came in September 2025, when OpenAI introduced Instant Checkout, which allows consumers to make purchases from Etsy (and later Walmart) without leaving ChatGPT. Andrew Hornstra of the Future Today Institute imagines how this trend might accelerate, with AI models becoming the new browsers or even operating systems of tomorrow's internet. He warns, "If a site's content is easy for LLMs and agents to parse, more humans will find it through AI assistance. For those who do not adapt, it will be like not showing up in Google Search results."
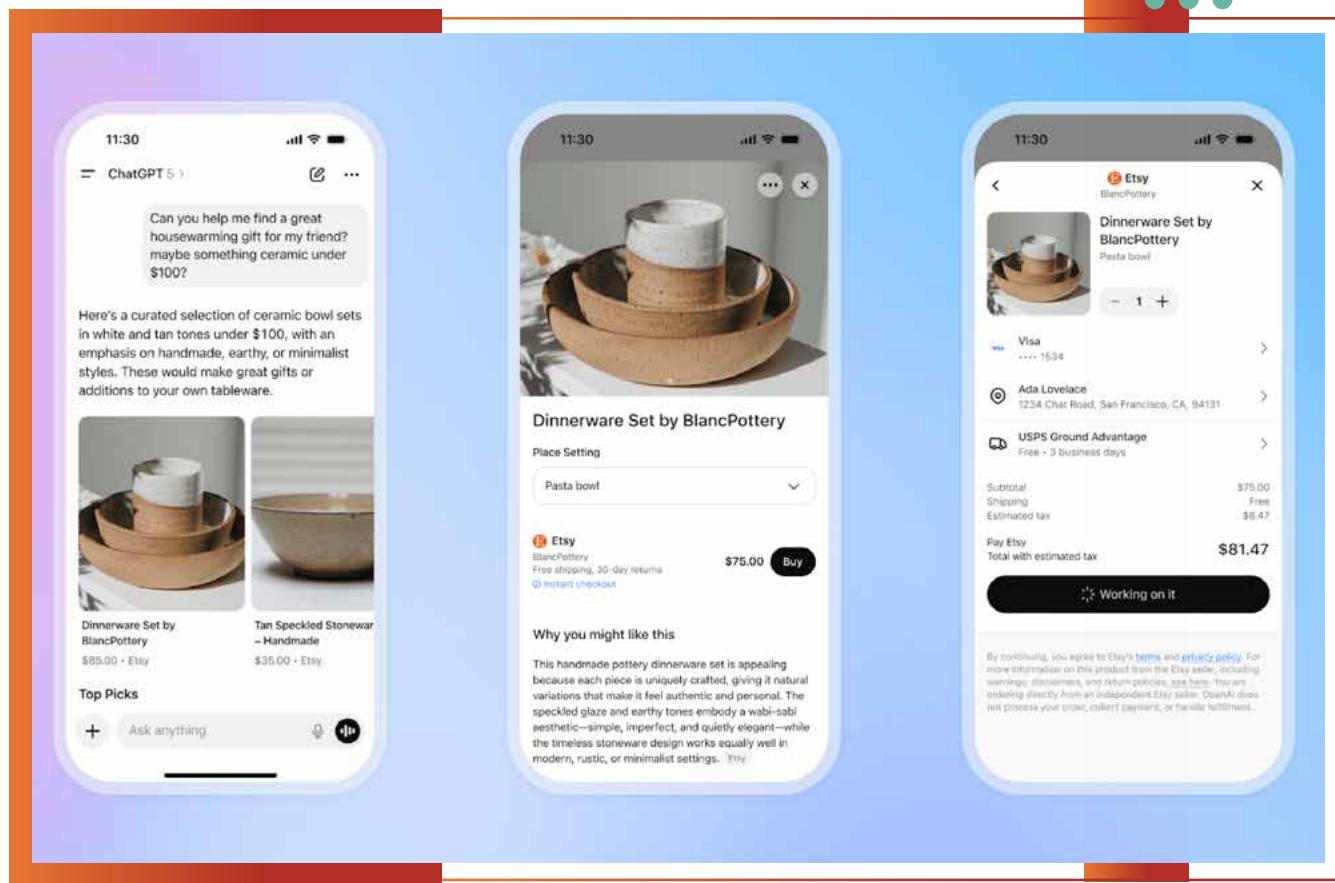
Instant Checkout allows consumers to make purchases without leaving ChatGPT.

Virtual Influencers

A new class of influencer is emerging that isn't even human. Virtual influencers—computer-generated characters powered by AI or animation—are gaining massive followings and securing brand partnerships at scale.

Lil Miquela

Digital personas like Lil Miquela, who has amassed over 2 million Instagram followers, or Japan's virtual singer Hatsune Miku demonstrate that these influencers can engage audiences just as effectively as their human counterparts while offering brands unprecedented control over messaging and image.

Hatsune Miku

3,271,878 monthly listeners

クリプトン・フューチャー・メディア株式会社が開発した、歌詞とメロディーを入力して誰でも歌を歌わせることができる「ソフトウェア」です。大勢のクリエイターが「初音ミク」で音楽を...
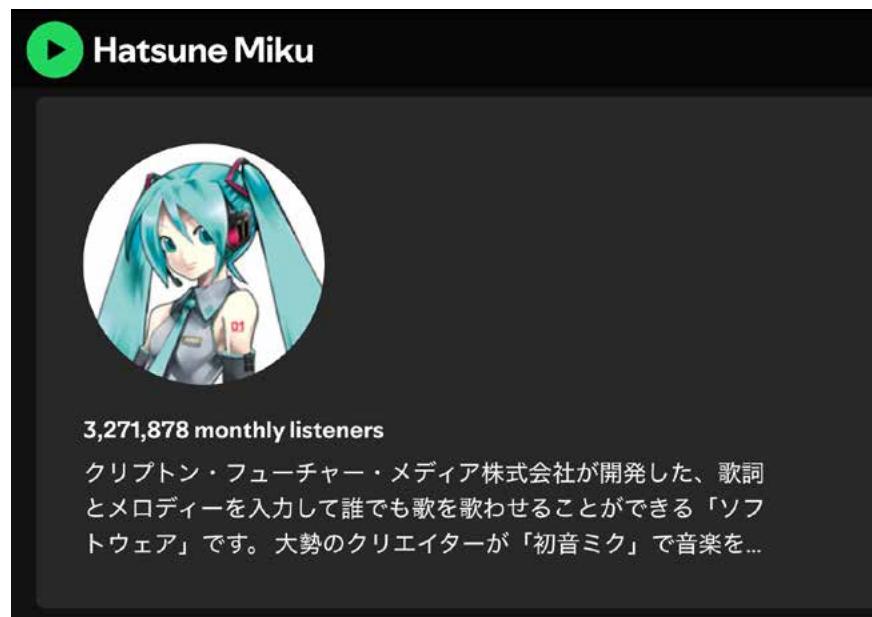
The numbers signal genuine cultural momentum. YouTube's 2025 Culture and Trends Report reveals that 57% of people aged 14–44 have watched a virtual YouTuber in the past year, with these virtual stars collectively racking up billions of views and reshaping online entertainment and fan culture globally.

57%
YouTube users (aged 14-44) have watched a virtual infuencer

Images source: Instagram and Spotify.com respectively

Markets in Asia have led the charge with virtual pop idols, while Western brands like Prada and KFC have begun experimenting with their own virtual ambassadors.

For marketers, the appeal is clear: virtual brand ambassadors never age, misbehave off-camera, become unavailable, or experience fatigue, they are essentially "perfect" influencers that can be precisely aligned to brand values.

However, this control comes with significant risks. Brands must now balance automation with authenticity, requiring even stronger storytelling, cultural fluency, and human context to avoid alienating audiences. If executed carelessly, virtual influencers can erode trust drastically by appearing uncanny and inauthentic, particularly among audiences who value genuine connection and transparency. The key challenge for brands will be leveraging the creative possibilities of virtual influencers while maintaining the emotional resonance that drives lasting audience relationships.

A Decline in Traditional Search

Concurrent with the increase in use of social media and AI for discovery is the declining reliance on traditional search engines. A 2025 Vox Media survey shows that Google continues to lose ground among younger generations, with 61% of Gen Z and 53% of Millennials using AI tools instead of Google or other traditional search engines. The study also found that 42% of respondents thought Google and search engines are becoming less useful, and more than half (55%) said they get information from their community more than online search platforms. Likewise, a 2023 study by Her Campus Media found that over half (51%) of Gen Z women preferred TikTok, not Google, for search.

61%
of Gen Z use AI tools instead of traditional search engines

53%
of Millennials use AI tools instead of traditional search engines

42% of respondents thought that traditional search engines are getting less useful

55% of respondents said they get information from their community more than online search platforms

51%
of Gen Z women preferred Tik Tok, not Google, for search
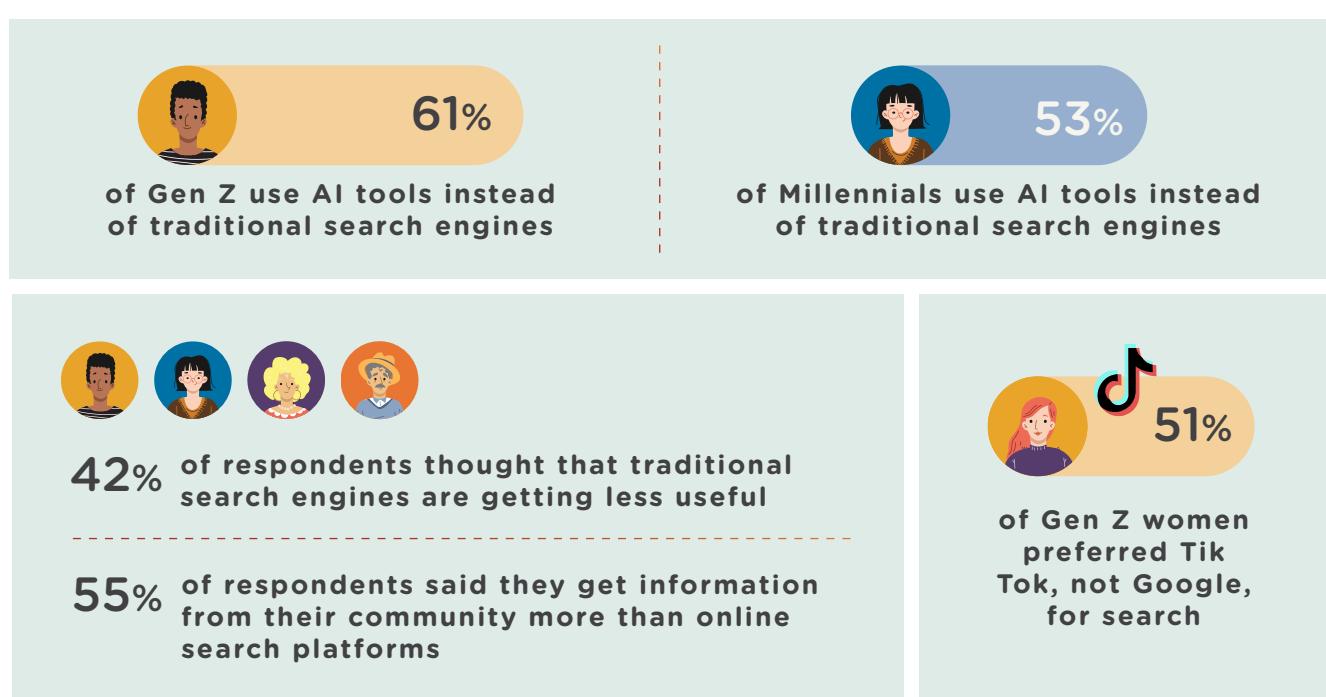
Consumers are increasingly bypassing traditional search engines for platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, Reddit, and AI-powered chats like ChatGPT to discover new products. This trend is especially dominant among Gen Z and Millennials.

Content Strategy for the Scroll Age

As online search behavior continues to evolve, brands need to regularly rethink entrenched strategies to meet audiences where they scroll, not just where they search. Content that performs in feed-based, visual-first environments is becoming equally or even more important compared to traditional SEO. Storytelling across social platforms such as TikTok videos, Reddit threads, and YouTube Shorts have the potential to be more effective in shaping consideration much earlier in the consumer journey.

To support this shift, brands should leverage real-time data, mood-based signals (like engagement duration, reactions, and comments) and interest graphs to serve up content tailored to consumer moods and micro-moments.

Spotify Wrapped is an example of algorithmic mood-matching, which marketers can mimic with dynamic creative.
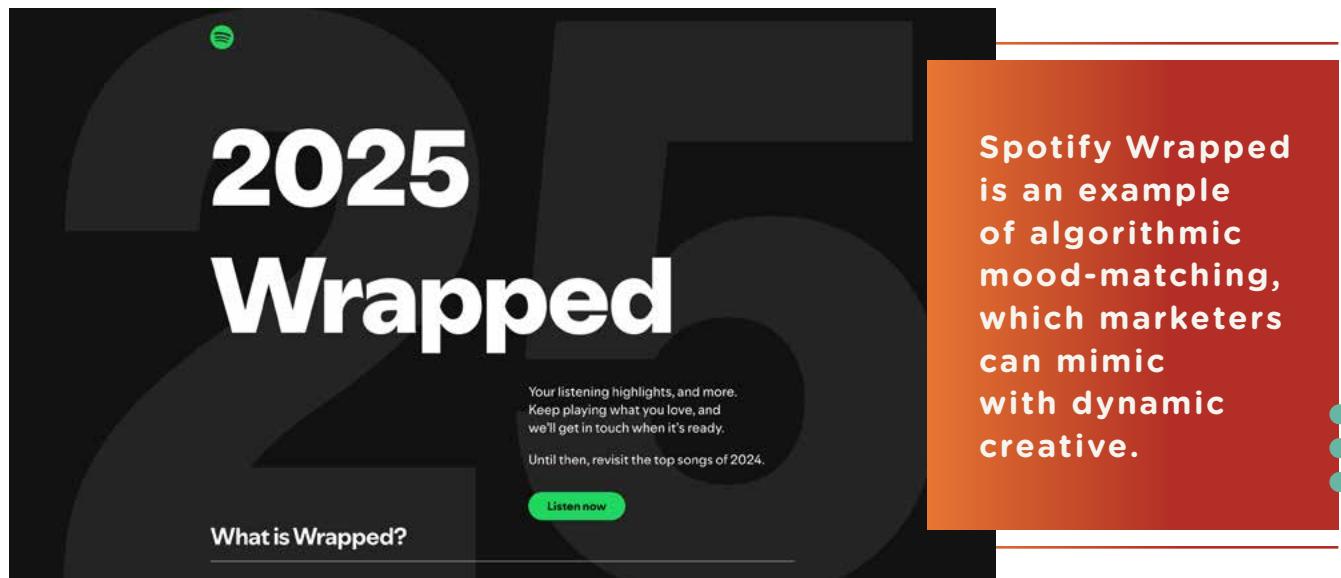
Images source: Spotify.com

Advanced marketers are building "content algorithms" of their own to guide publishing strategy—adjusting tone, pacing, and visuals based on whether consumers are in a lean-back (Reels) or lean-in (searching Reddit threads) discovery mode.

The most effective marketers of the future will deliver highly relevant content that is aligned with trending behaviors to deliver a memorable, scroll-native brand experience.

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| Spotlight | Eventbrite Leverages Tiktok for Discovery | Industry: Technology |

Eventbrite, the global events marketplace, managed to leverage search advertising not just as a performance marketing channel, but as a key way to connect with younger consumers who increasingly turn to social platforms, rather than traditional search engines, for discovery. The company set out to leverage TikTok to reach millennial and Gen Z audiences at the precise moment they were seeking out weekend activities and entertainment experiences.

Recognizing that younger generations prefer social media to traditional search engines, Eventbrite became an early adopter of TikTok's Search Ads Campaign solution in October 2024, targeting event-goers with keywords like "travel" and "food & drink" when they were actively seeking inspiration for activities.

The keyword-targeting approach aligned with consumer behavior patterns where users open TikTok specifically for discovery. Rather than treating TikTok purely as an entertainment platform, Eventbrite positioned itself within search results when users were already in an exploratory mindset, seeking ideas for weekend plans and live experiences. The campaign operated with separate budgets from in-feed video advertising, allowing precise measurement of search-specific performance.

eventbrite | ♪ **TikTok**

66% Increase in click-through rates

33% Decrease in cost-per-acquisitions on complete payment transactions

The results validated search advertising as essential infrastructure for discovery-driven businesses. Eventbrite achieved a 66% increase in click-through rates while simultaneously decreasing cost-per-acquisitions by 33% on complete payment transactions, according to Marketing Dive. The campaign transitioned from pilot to "business as usual" within Eventbrite's channel mix, demonstrating sustainable performance beyond initial testing. This success occurred as the company navigated broader business challenges, proving that strategic platform selection can drive efficiency gains even during periods of revenue pressure. Eventbrite's approach illustrates how brands can capture consumer intent by meeting audiences on platforms where discovery naturally occurs rather than attempting to redirect behavior to traditional channels.

From Our Foresight Panelists

"Marketers looking to stay ahead should focus on where consumer attention is shifting and how people prefer to engage with brands today. Creator-led content has become a meaningful part of that shift, especially when working with micro and niche creators who tend to drive higher engagement, authenticity, and return on investment for certain audiences. Brands should also loosen rigid creative guidelines and allow for more authentic, culturally relevant storytelling that resonates with audiences. Keeping an ear to the ground with social listening can help spot rising creators and viral moments before they peak, giving campaigns a competitive edge. And as AI-generated influencers become part of the mix, marketers should prioritize transparency and clear disclosure to build trust while experimenting with new, innovative content formats."

Kavin Soni, Financial Analyst at Google

Navigating the Shift

Reallocate budgets toward creator-led platforms
and prioritize partnerships with micro and niche influencers who deliver stronger engagement and ROI than traditional advertising channels, recognizing that these platforms are now primary discovery engines for younger generations.

Develop scroll-native, emotion-first content
specifically designed for feed-based environments like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, rather than simply repurposing traditional advertising assets for social platforms.

Optimize for "answer engine optimization" and AI discoverability
by ensuring your brand content, product information, and website structure can be easily parsed by large language models and AI assistants like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google's Gemini.

Loosen rigid creative guidelines
and give creators complete creative control over direction, tone, and execution to produce authentic, culturally relevant storytelling that resonates with communities rather than forced brand messaging.

Implement robust social listening systems
to identify rising creators, viral moments, and trending behaviors before they peak, allowing your brand to participate in cultural conversations with agility and relevance.

Invest in first-party data strategies and direct audience relationships
to reduce dependence on organic search visibility as traditional SEO becomes less effective in the era of "Google Zero" and AI-generated answers.

Portfolio Careers and the Liquid Workforce

03

Over the next decade, marketing will be reshaped by the rise of the portfolio careers and the liquid workforce. Traditional career ladders are giving way to more fluid, self-directed paths, where professionals cultivate a mix of technical, creative, and strategic skills and manage their careers similarly to an investment portfolio. From the rise of fractional CMOs to the automation of work with AI, this trend will impact marketers at all levels. As traditional agencies and in-house teams shrink, a new wave of hybrid, high-skill marketers will emerge, constantly upskilling, switching sectors, and designing careers on their own terms.

Fractional and Freelance Talent Moves to the Mainstream

Fractional leadership—senior-level professionals working for multiple companies—is having a moment. Forbes, AdAge, Chief Marketer, and Business Insider have highlighted the growing trend, noting the benefits to leaders—flexibility, challenge, the promise of better work-life balance—as well as to companies looking for specialized, just-in-time expertise at a cost more affordable than taking on a full-time employee. With fractional hires, small and medium-sized businesses are able to access top talent that would otherwise be out of reach. From startups to established companies, fractional leadership is becoming a strategic way for companies to tap into experienced talent without the full-time overhead.

According to an analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data, fractional jobs were up 18% from 2021 to 2022, and up 57% since 2020. An article in Fast Company attributes this post-pandemic spike in part to remote work and to executives' desire for more meaning and purpose in their work.

Fractional Jobs

Up 18% from 2021 to 2022

Up 57% since 2020

The rise in fractional work is spurring a wave of resources to help leaders navigate this new way of working, including job boards, support communities, and The Board, a service that matches brands with on-demand C-level experts. In a LinkedIn post about fractional talent, The Board CEO and co-founder April Uctitel warns, "Fractional Is the Future—And If You're Not Paying Attention, You're Already Behind." Her vision of the fractional future is utopian: "Enter the new era of work. It is agile, assembled, and fractional by design. Now to be clear: fractional doesn't mean part-time, freelance, or diluted. It means precision-fit. It means bringing in vetted expertise with decades of experience, highly networked and knowledgeable, exactly when you need them, for what you need help with the most."

From Our Foresight Panelists

"I'm fully on board with the rise of fractional CMOs, and I think this shift reflects the evolving needs and constraints of today's marketing landscape. Marketing departments are shrinking, especially in SMBs, and the traditional model of building out a full in-house team before hiring top leadership is being flipped."

Nicole Arnett Sanders, Chief Strategist Officer at FiftySix Agency

For all its promises, there are drawbacks to the move to fractional as well. Without a full-time CMO, marketing loses its seat at the table in executive decisions, risks being viewed as peripheral rather than central to the company's DNA, and offers fewer opportunities for the mentorship and development of rising talent at the company.

The shift to fractional is in many ways like the shift to freelance, with the difference being that the term fractional is reserved for those at the very top of the corporate hierarchy. Like fractional work, freelance or contract work is also on the rise and projected to accelerate.

According to Upwork's 2025 Future Workforce Index, one in four U.S. skilled knowledge workers already work independently, and 36% of knowledge workers who currently hold full-time jobs are considering freelancing.

Future Workforce Index

25% of workers are working independently

36% of workers are considering freelancing
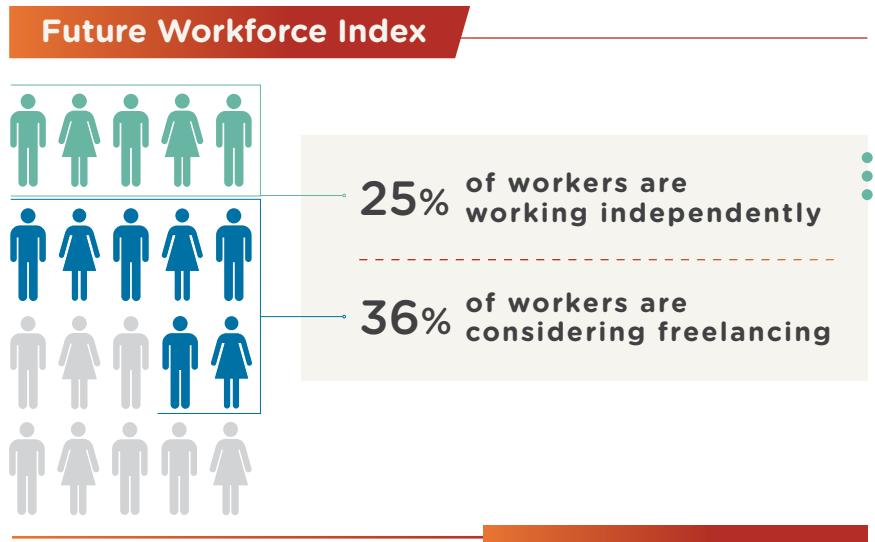
Gen Z is overwhelmingly choosing independent work. By 2030, Gen Z will constitute nearly one-third of American employees, and more than half of educated Gen Z professionals have already chosen independent contracting as their preferred arrangement.

"The traditional 9-to-5 model is rapidly losing its grip as skilled talent chooses flexibility, financial control, and meaningful work over outdated corporate structures," said Kelly Monahan, Managing Director of the Upwork Research Institute. "Companies that cling to old hiring and workforce models risk falling behind, while those embracing independent professionals are driving growth and innovation."

While freelance and fractional work offers potential advantages like higher earning potential, greater autonomy over career direction and schedule, and potentially more challenging and meaningful work, this independence comes with significant trade-off: income volatility, job insecurity, lack of employer-provided benefits like health insurance and retirement plans, and the constant hustle needed to secure the next client or project. This path may be rewarding for those who thrive on autonomy, but challenging for those who need stability and structure.

Spotlight | **Chris Lawson, Fractional CMO**

London-based Chris Lawson spent nearly two decades in full-time marketing roles at Virgin Wines, Absolute Radio, and the Guardian before making a dramatic shift: he now works as a fractional CMO for multiple companies simultaneously.

On a typical day, Lawson might visit a bowling and entertainment center's construction site in the morning, cycle across London to advise a ticketing start-up at lunch, then pivot to planning marketing strategy for a government data website. His email signature reads "CMO" at each company.

"I love the constant variety," Lawson explained in an interview with The Times. "I parachute in, evaluate what a company needs, and ensure they have the right resources. Working simultaneously in different firms and sectors makes it easier to spot dead ends and find shortcuts."

The arrangement isn't easier than traditional employment. Lawson now works seven days a week and avoids setting fixed schedules to remain available as needed. But he finds it more fulfilling: "It's varied, meaningful work and I can provide value where it matters, not get caught up in office politics."

Rise of the Liquid Workforce

As companies strive to be agile in uncertain and unpredictable times, having a team staffed with plenty of contractors and flexible, adaptable employees offers an advantage for moving quickly and scaling up or down at a moment's notice.

Coined by Accenture in 2016, the "liquid workforce" has become more common as companies pivoted during the pandemic, and as they scramble to rethink their business models with AI and weather the economic political instability of our current moment.

For organizations, this evolution raises both opportunities and challenges. Companies seeking to attract top talent will need to offer more than competitive pay: flexible contracts, project-based roles, creative autonomy, and authentic alignment on values will be critical. As boundaries blur between employees, freelancers, and collaborators, legacy employment structures—the traditional hierarchical model of CEOs down to junior staff—will need to evolve into a more mobile structure where people can move up or down the spectrum of responsibilities based on project needs.

As this trend continues to shape the workforce, traditional agencies and the full-time-employee headcount for in-house teams are likely to shrink, giving rise to hybrid collectives of high-skill marketers who are leveraged for their expertise for short- or long-term projects, either blending with existing teams or working independently. Marketing organizations will increasingly resemble ecosystems of collaborators rather than static hierarchies. Organizational structures and workplace culture will need to flex and find new configurations.

Promises and Perils of AI Automation

AI promises to be the ultimate "liquid" employee: always available, easy to scale, and low cost. And according to a September 2025 study by Indeed, marketing ranks among the top five professions poised for "deep transformation," with AI capable of leading over 70% of core job skills.

It's undeniable that AI automation can unlock valuable potential for marketing professionals: increased productivity, more free time for higher-level strategic thinking and creative work, personalization at scale, and the ability to accomplish more with smaller budgets.

Top 5 Professions Poised for Disruption

Marketing ranks among the top five professions poised for "deep transformation," with AI capable of leading over 70% of core job skills.

1   Software Development

2   Data and Analytics

3   Accounting

4   Marketing

5   Insurance

Yet as AI tools like ChatGPT and Canva become mainstream, companies are raising expectations for individual marketers to impossible levels, expecting one person to handle copywriting, SEO, paid media, video editing, and analytics that once required full teams, often without additional support or increased compensation. Rather than using AI to support teams, many organizations are misusing it to justify shrinking headcount and skipping infrastructure investment. This misuse can result in more burned-out marketers leaving full-time roles for fractional or freelance work, turnover accelerating, and strategic marketing getting lost in execution overload as companies mistakenly treat AI as a wholesale replacement rather than an assistant.

a. Marketing and Sales Managers

Legend:
— Early Career 1 (22-25) — Developing (31-34) — Mid-Career 2 (41-49)
— Early Career 2 (26-30) — Mid-Career 1 (35-40) — Senior (50+)
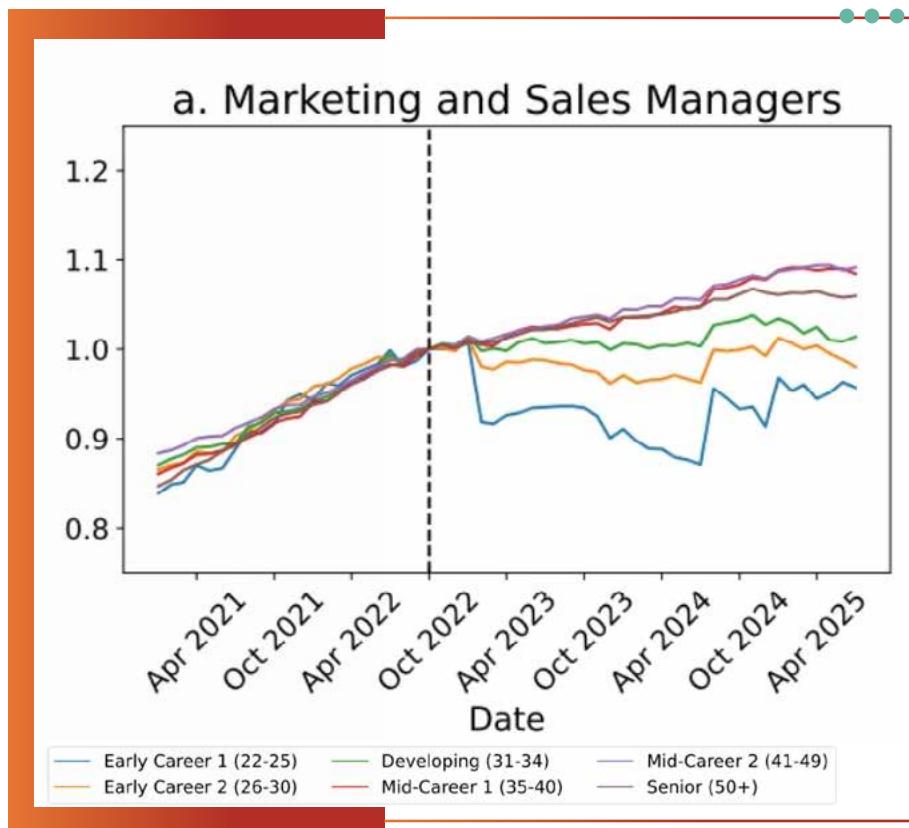
AI is disrupting job opportunities for early career marketing and sales managers, while opportunities for those 41 and older have remained stable.

The automation of marketing work with AI is not only contributing to burnout for those already in the workforce, it also appears to be disrupting the on-ramp for those hoping to start their careers after college. A recent Stanford study suggests a clear correlation between the jobs most exposed to AI disruption and falling employment for young people ages 22 to 25.

Examples of exposed jobs include software developers, customer service representatives, and (to a lesser extent) marketing and sales managers. In the coming years, AI automation will likely create a talent pipeline crisis, which may in turn lead to a loss of creative diversity in the field and cause enrollment in marketing degree programs to tank.

Portfolio Careers

For individuals, the rise of the liquid workforce signals not just a transformation in how people work, but in what it means to pursue a career in marketing. Marketers on the front lines are challenged to become more adaptable, more entrepreneurial, and more aligned to the fast-changing demands of a digital-first, AI-driven marketplace.

The Changing Shape of Marketers' Skills

T Having deep expertise in a specific area while also possessing broad knowledge across various disciplines

M Having deep expertise in three or more areas
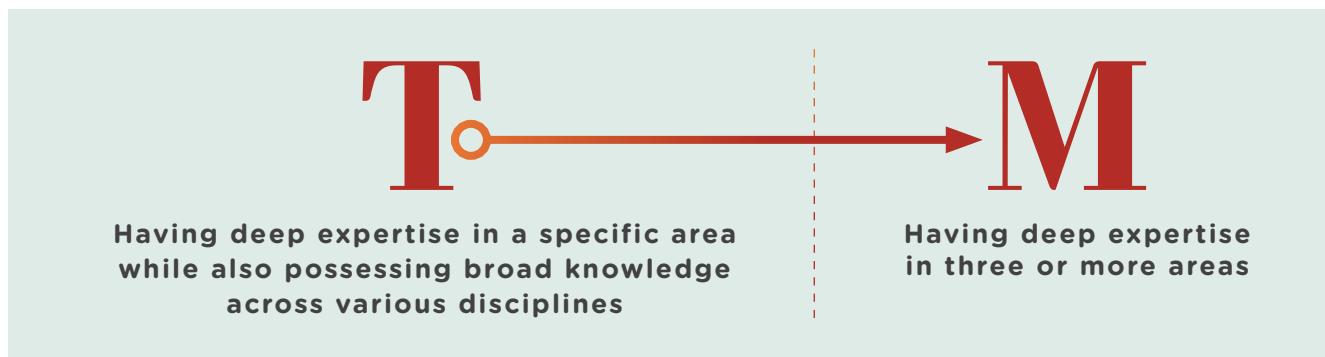
Based on pressure from these changes as well as a desire for variety, many marketers are pivoting from building a career path to building a career portfolio. A portfolio career applies the investment principle of diversification to professional life, where individuals build multiple income streams and roles to mitigate risk rather than relying on a single employer. Just as financial advisors recommend balancing equities, bonds, and cash to protect against market volatility, portfolio careerists combine varied work experiences—freelancing, part-time roles, consulting, and passion projects—to create stability and resilience in an uncertain job market.

As AI disrupts what capabilities are in demand in tomorrow's job market, marketers should likewise invest in diversifying their skills and expertise. It is no longer sufficient for marketers to be "T-shaped," with broad expertise across marketing and business and deep expertise in one area. Rather, agile job seekers will need to be "M-shaped," with deep expertise in multiple domains.

Younger generations, who have developed side hustles out of both necessity for multiple income streams and the desire for more fulfilling work, are likely to feel right at home in this new way of working. One in three Gen Zers and millennials already have a side job, according to a 2025 Deloitte study. And, according to a 2024 Forbes article, this change may also stand to benefit those from marginalized groups, including female, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and neurodivergent workers. But, like freelance and fractional work, a portfolio career has its downsides, including income instability, a limited access to traditional benefits like health care and retirement plans, and the potential for burnout. Despite these disadvantages, a portfolio career might be a good fit for those who are adaptable learners who are comfortable with ambiguity, thrive on variety, or are seeking greater autonomy over their work.

Those looking to explore this path might start by recognizing their existing portfolio: catalog skills from volunteering, hobbies, and side projects alongside traditional employment. Start small by launching one complementary income stream while maintaining full-time work for stability, then develop a"portfolio narrative," a compelling story connecting diverse experiences to show how the unique combination creates distinctive value. Critical skills to cultivate include self-management and entrepreneurial capabilities (client acquisition, budget balancing), personal branding and storytelling, financial literacy for managing irregular income, and resilience to pivot when circumstances change.

From Our Foresight Panelists

"The marketers who thrive will be those who embrace adaptability, commit to continuous learning, and are intentional about building and maintaining their personal brands. Preparing for this shift means actively investing in new skills, especially around AI-driven marketing tools and analytics."

Josue Mercado, AVP of Marketing at YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas

Navigating the Shift

For Companies and Managers

Redesign organizational structures to accommodate hybrid teams of full-time employees, fractional leaders, freelancers, and AI agents working collaboratively.

Offer competitive flexibility beyond just pay, including project-based roles, creative autonomy, flexible contracts, and authentic alignment on company values to attract top portfolio talent.

Invest in onboarding systems that quickly integrate fractional and freelance talent into company culture, processes, and strategic objectives.

Use AI as a support, not a wholesale replacement. Support existing teams with automation tools rather than justifying headcount reductions and creating burnout.

Realign expectations around what individual marketers can realistically accomplish, even with AI tools, to prevent burnout and turnover.

For Individual Marketers

Consider a freelance, fractional, or portfolio career path, and if it may be a good fit for you.

Cultivate entrepreneurial skills including client acquisition, budget management, project scoping, negotiation, and business development.

Continue to learn and experiment with AI tools to increase productivity and stay ahead of developments in the field.

Commit to upskilling in multiple areas of expertise, with a focus on strategic capabilities that can't be easily automated.

Set boundaries and systems to prevent burnout. Establish work hours, project management tools, and communication protocols.

AM>

04 Innovation Imperative in Sustainability

From More to Smarter: The Change Many Marketers Want to See

The future of sustainability is anything but certain. In the first six months of 2025, the current U.S. administration reversed numerous sustainability commitments and pushed back against E.U. reporting requirements. Out of fear of criticism or accusations of greenwashing, brands are "greenhushing": deliberately downplaying their sustainability efforts and achievements.

The marketing leaders on our foresight panel who contributed to this report voted to include sustainability as a top trend, not because they knew it would be the most disruptive shift in marketing over the next decade, but because they hoped it would be. Being future-ready isn't about passively waiting for the world to change, but rather stepping up and taking an active role in shaping your preferred future.

The old narrative of "newer, bigger, more" will, we can hope, give way to "smarter, longer-lasting, regenerative."

Mixed Signals and Cultural Shifts

The current political and cultural climate around corporate sustainability is complex. Climate change has become an increasingly divisive and polarizing issue, with some consumers rejecting economic restrictions and increased costs and others demanding more progress and accountability.

The Encouraging Signs

64%
of consumers rank sustainability among their top three purchasing considerations (**Simon-Kucher, 2024**)

37%-54%
of consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable products (**Deloitte, 2025**; **Simon-Kucher, 2024**)

58%-62%
of consumers all ages report changing their personal activities or behaviors to help fight climate change, although younger consumers report feeling more curiosity, fear, guilt, and hope around climate change (**Deloitte, 2025**)

75%
of global consumers are expected to prioritize sustainability over brand loyalty by 2030 (**Deloitte 2024 CxO Sustainability Report**)
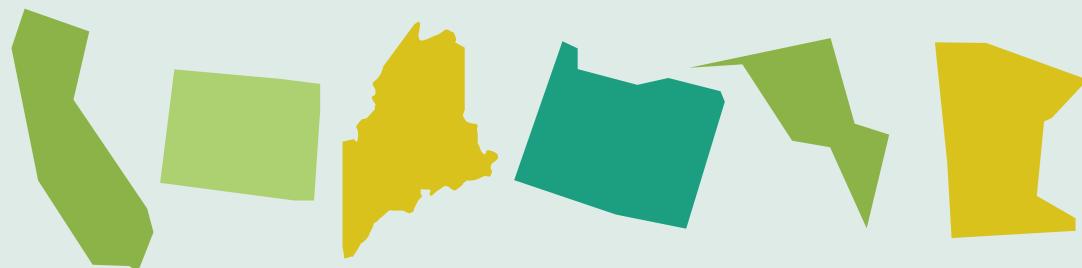
Six U.S. states (California, Colorado, Maine, Oregon, Maryland, and Minnesota) have enacted comprehensive Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) laws that assign financial and operational responsibility for a product's end-of-life management, including packaging, to the producers or manufacturers.

The Reality Check

Quality, price, and convenience still outrank environmental impact for most consumers ([McKinsey, 2025](#))

Most consumers are not willing to make behavioral trade-offs like participating in special disposal processes (16%) or buying used or upcycled products (13%) ([Deloitte, 2025](#))

The U.S. federal government rolled back numerous environmental regulations at the federal level in 2025

Only one in four Americans say it is extremely or very important to them personally to limit their own carbon footprint ([2024 Pew Research Survey](#))

Ultimately, marketing has a critical role not just in responding to demand for sustainable products and practices, but in resolving these contradictory forces in consumer sentiment: consumers want sustainable products but aren't always willing to pay for them. Marketing can actively create and amplify that demand, making circular, sustainable choices aspirational, accessible, and irresistible to consumers.

Taking the Long View

Despite short-term challenges, smart businesses are maintaining their sustainability investments. As Madeline Cooper, CEO of sustainability marketing agency Flourish and founder of Marketing Declares, explained in an interview with the AMA: "Businesses are still spending on sustainability because they know that this term will only be so many years, and at the end of this term, brands are still going to need to compete. There are a lot of very clever people in business that know there will be no business on a dying planet."

There is an opening for brands, especially at this moment, to gain a competitive advantage through differentiation. For business-to-consumer marketers, sustainability provides a clear pathway for building brand preference and outperforming peers, especially those targeting the elusive and prized Gen Z segment. In B-to-B contexts, procurement teams increasingly demand supply chain sustainability proof, creating competitive advantages on both sides of the relationship.

Similarly, a 2025 article in the Harvard Business Review encouraged companies to plan with the long-term outlook of a sustainability rebound, as global citizens will increasingly demand stronger action. Acting now not only reduces exposure to environmental and regulatory risks but also builds resilience, consistency, and trust with customers and society.

> "At the end of this term, brands are still going to need to compete. There are a lot of very clever people in business that know there will be no business on a dying planet."
>
> - Madeline Cooper, CEO, Flourish

| Spotlight | Don Julio: Turning Water Stewardship into Brand Differentiation | Industry: Spirits & Beverages |

For Diageo's Don Julio tequila brand, water represented more than a production necessity; it was central to both business operations and community wellbeing in Jalisco, Mexico.

Images source: Diageo.com.com

The premium tequila maker set out to go beyond superficial green marketing and boldly integrate authentic environmental stewardship into its brand purpose.

A 2022 cross-functional assessment identified water as the most significant impact opportunity. Diageo invested in modern irrigation systems, formed partnerships with regional organizations to restore water supplies, and engaged external specialists to establish a verification framework, all before any consumer-facing initiatives. The brand then introduced its water stewardship story through a culturally resonant art experience during Mexico City Art Week.

The results validated the strategy's effectiveness. Don Julio's sustainability scoring increased to 124 by 2024, surpassing industry benchmarks, while the Mexico launch achieved 16 million impressions with exceptionally high engagement rates. The program enhanced supply chain stability while creating measurable community benefits, demonstrating that environmental initiatives can simultaneously drive business value and positive social impact.

Opportunities to Innovate

Circular Design

How might marketers help reimagine our current linear "take-make-dispose" system by designing products and processes that eliminate waste from the outset, keeping materials in continuous use through reuse, repair, and remaking?

Only 6.9% of the global economy is circular today, according to the 2025 Circularity Gap Report. That means over 93% of materials are wasted or locked up in long-term products. Capturing the value in what is currently thrown away could unlock $4.5 trillion in economic growth by 2030, according to a 2015 analysis by Accenture.

Only

6.9%

of the global economy is circular today
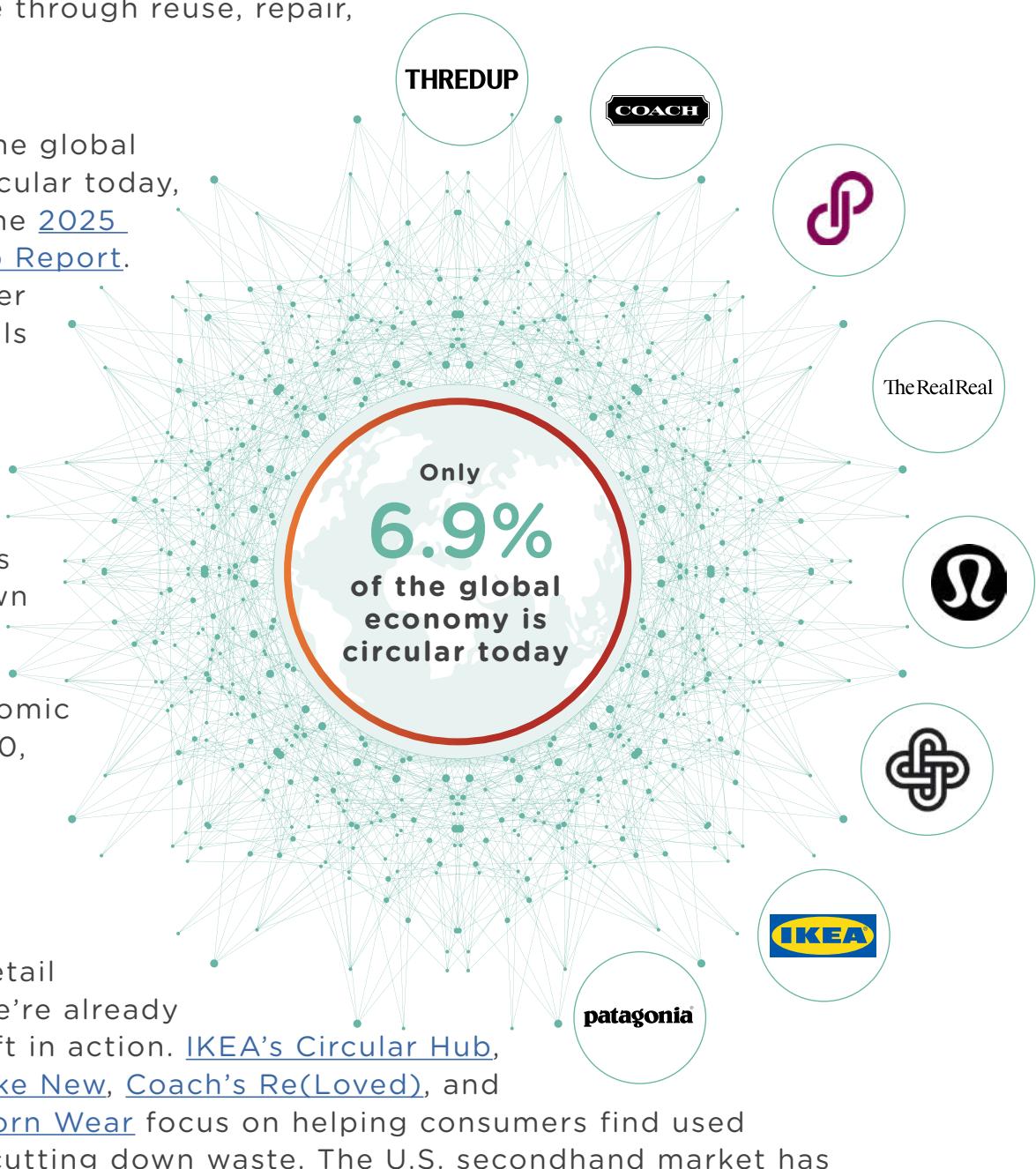
Especially in retail and fashion, we're already seeing this shift in action. IKEA's Circular Hub, Lululemon's Like New, Coach's Re(Loved), and Patagonia's Worn Wear focus on helping consumers find used products and cutting down waste. The U.S. secondhand market has more than doubled since 2018, and recommerce platforms like The RealReal, ThredUp, Poshmark, and Fashionphile are thriving.

Coach's Re(Loved) program offers fans a way to purchase directly from their site bags that are vintage, restored, upcrafted, and even remade from deconstructed, pre-owned items.

Marketers have a role to play in driving meaningful behavior change among consumers who are time-poor, encouraging them, for example, to bring sneakers in for recycling or switch to refillable toothpaste systems. To meet this challenge, marketers must employ strategic behavioral nudges while crafting powerful, appealing messaging that positions circular practices not just as responsible choices, but as the significantly cooler thing to do.

From Our Foresight Panelists

"The circular economy works because it aligns environmental responsibility with economic efficiency—minimizing waste, maximizing reuse, and creating continuous value from limited resources. For brands, future relevance will require proactively designing products, services, and experiences that are regenerative by default—making sustainability not just a feature, but a core part of the value proposition."

Victor Reiss, Chief Consumer and Public Relations Officer at UNC Health

Smart and Sustainable Packaging

How might marketers leverage packaging innovation to reduce waste while creating new value for both consumers and businesses?

The packaging revolution is already underway, with brands like Lush pioneering "naked" packaging that eliminates waste entirely, and Loop's refillable container system reimagining how products reach consumers. But sustainable packaging is evolving beyond just being eco-friendly; it's becoming interactive and intelligent.

Lush "Naked Packaging

Image source: Lush.com

Through technologies like NFC (near-field communication), RFID (radio frequency identification, QR codes, freshness sensors, and connected labels, packaging can now communicate directly with consumers and brands, delivering data-driven insights in real time. Smart packaging solutions provide consumers with immediate information about a product's quality, origin,

Loop Refillable Container System

Image source: Loop.com

and freshness, improving supply chain transparency and enhancing the overall consumer experience. For marketers, this creates a compelling opportunity to position brands as both innovative and sustainable while driving better customer experiences through transparency. Additionally, smart packaging generates valuable first-party data for marketing insights and opens doors for new revenue models, such as tiered packaging options with increasing levels of freshness guarantees, transforming packaging from a cost center into a strategic asset.
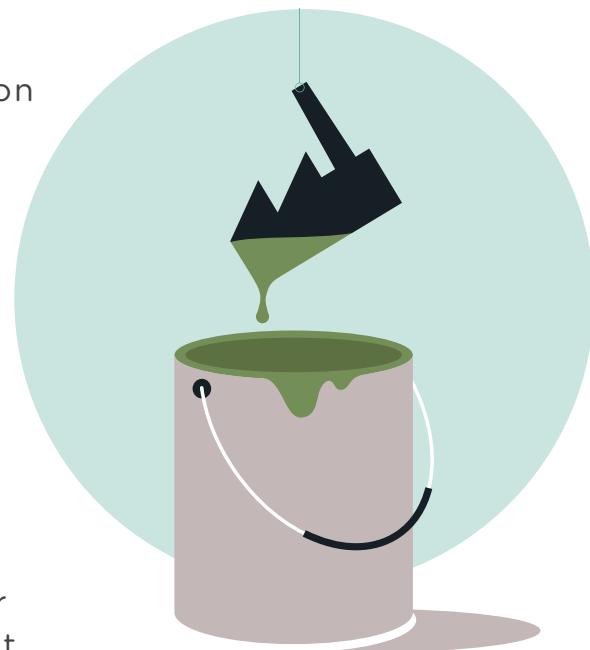
Green Storytelling

How might marketers authentically communicate sustainability efforts without falling into the traps of greenwashing or greenhushing?

The stakes for environmental communication have never been higher. In the U.K., companies that make greenwashing claims can face penalties of up to 10% of their global turnover, creating a chilling effect that has led some brands to practice "greenhushing"—deliberately withholding or underreporting information about genuine sustainability efforts out of fear of criticism or accusations of falling short. Unlike greenwashing, which exaggerates claims, greenhushing involves real positive actions that remain hidden, leaving stakeholders unaware of meaningful environmental progress. This silence, however, is equally problematic and represents a missed opportunity.

A call in the Harvard Business Review for companies to update how they talk about sustainability urged brands to move beyond facts and figures to tell compelling stories, avoid stock sustainability clichés and polarizing language, and consider company employees as a critical stakeholder audience beyond just consumers and clients.

From Our Foresight Panelists

> "Green storytelling will emerge as one of the most disruptive forces in marketing—replacing polished brand narratives with transparent, evidence-based storytelling, where consumers seek proof over promise. As sustainability becomes a core purchase driver, brands that fail to back their green claims with genuine action risk losing relevance. Authentic sustainability storytelling will be key to building trust and meaningful differentiation in the years ahead."

Priyamvadha Ramakrishnan, Marketing Technology Manager, Uber

Spotlight	Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) Leading Climate Justice from the Frontlines of Environmental Inequality	Industry: Higher Education

HBCUs serve communities disproportionately affected by climate change—60% of Black Americans live in the southeastern U.S., where exposure to heat, hurricanes, and flooding is highest. These institutions recognized that climate action couldn't be separated from social justice, transforming vulnerability into leadership opportunity.

A 2024 survey by UNCF documented HBCUs' multifaceted approach. Clark Atlanta University revitalized its Environmental Justice Resource Center and hosted the 2023 HBCU Environmental Justice Summit. Florida A&M established the Food Energy Water Nexus program, while Bennett College partnered with MIT on carbon neutrality goals. Spelman College became the first HBCU to sell carbon credits, reinvesting proceeds into sustainability initiatives. A coalition of South Carolina HBCUs secured $10 million from the Department of Energy to repurpose electric vehicle batteries, creating workforce training opportunities in green technology.

The impact extends beyond campus boundaries. HBCUs now offer degree programs in environmental justice and climate resilience while establishing community gardens, implementing climate-resilient agricultural practices with local farmers, and creating resilience hubs that serve neighborhoods during disasters. Nearly 20% of Black STEM graduates come from HBCUs, positioning these institutions to address the representation gap in the clean energy workforce, where Black workers currently comprise only 8% despite the sector adding nearly 300,000 jobs in 2022. Through UNCF's climate initiative, HBCUs are building a network of climate hubs focused on leadership development, innovation, workforce training, and community activation, proving that historically excluded institutions are uniquely equipped to pioneer climate solutions centered on equity and justice.

Navigating the Shift

Take the long view and maintain sustainability investments.
Despite short-term political and cultural headwinds, position your brand for competitive advantage by differentiating through authentic sustainability commitments that will matter when the inevitable rebound occurs.

Make sustainable choices aspirational and accessible.
Use strategic behavioral nudges and powerful messaging to position circular practices as the cooler, smarter choice, actively creating demand rather than just responding to it, especially among Gen Z consumers who prioritize sustainability over brand loyalty.

Expand marketing's role beyond launch campaigns.
Shift focus to building long-term value by promoting repair services, creating product care tutorials, and highlighting resale or take-back platforms that educate customers on maximizing product lifespan.

Practice green storytelling, not greenhushing or greenwashing.
Communicate authentic sustainability efforts with evidence-based narratives that build trust and avoid both exaggeration and silence around genuine impact.

Break down silos between marketing and sustainability teams.
If you're lucky enough to work with a sustainability team or partner, bridge the gap between technical sustainability language and compelling brand messaging by fostering collaboration and shared goals.

Key Resources

Marketing Declares
Practical resources for addressing sustainability at your company, including tools, frameworks, and a community of marketing professionals committed to climate action.

Blueprint for Sustainable Growth
A comprehensive framework from the U.N. Global Compact featuring case studies and resources designed to guide Chief Marketing Officers and other senior marketing leaders in embedding sustainability into their core marketing strategies.

Sustainable Marketing: The Industry's Role in a Sustainable Future
An essential book exploring the evolving role of marketing, along with tools and resources for navigating your company's sustainable transformation.

05

Building Brand Trust in a Fragmented World

In an era defined by political polarization and AI-driven misinformation, building brand trust has never been more vital or more complex. Traditional segmentation models built around demographics no longer capture the forces shaping consumer behavior. The center of influence has shifted toward identity-based communities, where networks are bound by shared values, beliefs, and cultural norms. Within these spaces, credibility is earned not through persuasion, but through consistency, transparency, and genuine participation.

Earning trust in this environment demands cultural fluency and accountability. Brands must understand the specific rituals, language, and values that define their target communities, then engage authentically rather than simply broadcasting messages. As manipulated and AI-generated content continues to blur the boundaries of truth, trust will become marketing's most valuable currency. Effectiveness will depend less on reach and more on resonance, on how deeply a brand aligns with the values and identities that matter most to the people it serves.

Brand Trust in the Age of Misinformation

Both misinformation and disinformation have existed in marketing since the earliest days of advertising, yet today they feel newly unmanageable. What's changed is the scale. The sheer volume of content and messaging has become a constant sensory onslaught. Consumers now navigate countless media platforms and social feeds filled with thousands of posts, videos, and images each day. This creates more opportunities for brands to be seen, but also greater risk of appearing alongside misleading or harmful content. That risk matters: three-quarters of consumers say they feel less favorably toward brands that advertise on sites known for spreading misinformation.

Ahrefs' Study | **How many pages are created/assisted with AI?**

26% Pure Human
3% Pure AI
10% Minimal AI Use
46% Substantial AI Use
15% Dominant AI Use
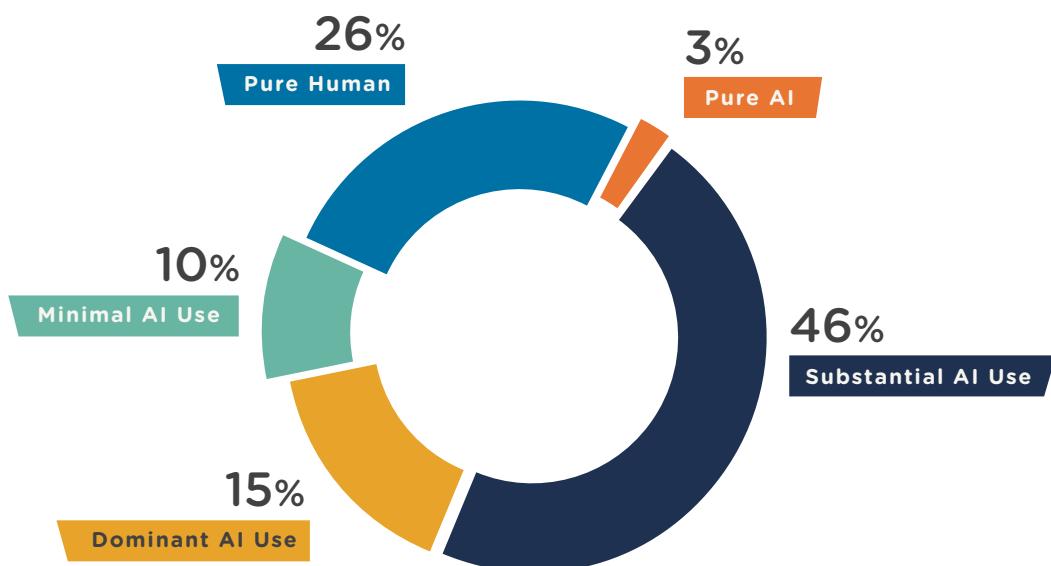
Data source: Ahrefs 2025 Study

Adding to the challenge, the rise of generative AI threatens to accelerate the creation and spread of misinformation across the open web and social platforms. In Spring 2025, Ahrefs found that nearly one in three new webpages included AI content. Even AI platforms themselves aren't immune. Elon Musk's Grok faced scrutiny for bias toward right-wing ideas and against certain media sources, highlighting how difficult it is to maintain neutrality in polarized environments.

For today's marketers, the challenge isn't just identifying what's false, it's maintaining credibility when truth competes with noise. To maintain consumer trust, brands must actively monitor and authenticate content to help spot false narratives early. This due diligence goes well beyond brand safety guidelines.

Transparent, open, and consistent messaging will be the new pillars of brand messaging. Growing consumer mistrust is already pushing marketers to create more informational and educational content rather than relying solely on emotional appeals. Trust equity could emerge as a critical KPI, tracked over time like net promoter score or brand awareness.

CONSISTENT

TRANSPARENT

OPEN

14

MARKETING MESSSAGES

The new marketer's toolkit will need to include crisis simulation, misinformation countermeasures, authentication tools, and ethics protocols. This means blockchain-verified claims, synthetic media disclaimers noting when AI was used, and transparency features will become standard in campaigns. Brands will need to design for auditability, making it easy for consumers to verify claims.

From Our Foresight Panelists

"In a world where anything can now be faked, credibility will become the last true differentiator. Marketing will need to evolve from storytelling to proof design: creating systems of trust that are demonstrable, portable, and interoperable across platforms. Third-party validation will no longer be a nice-to-have, it will be built into the brand architecture."

Christine White, Senior Vice President, External Affairs and Marketing at Shedd Aquarium

Consumer "Tribes" and Cultural Fluency

Small group identities have shaped human connection since the beginning of society. What's different now is how firmly people hold onto them, and how often those identities are defined in opposition to others. Many communities don't just celebrate what they believe in; they reject or dismiss what falls outside their worldview. The result is a cultural landscape that feels both more connected and more divided than ever, where belonging comes with clear boundaries.

Cultural and political polarization is accelerating what researchers call "self-sorting"—people choosing where to live, work, and receive care based on aligned values. This behavior is migrating online, where consumers join online communities built around identity, beliefs, and belonging. People are moving beyond echo chambers and into fully constructed realities. As AI makes it easier to generate misinformation, the groups already primed to receive it will take it in more quickly and fully.

Marcus Collins, marketing strategist, professor, and author of "For the Culture: The Power Behind What We Buy, What We Do, and Who We Want to Be," argues that political polarization has transformed marketing by fracturing the notion of a "mainstream" audience into distinct cultural "tribes". He suggests that brands trying to please everyone often end up resonating with no one. Instead, effective marketers should take clear stances and connect deeply with communities that share their values.
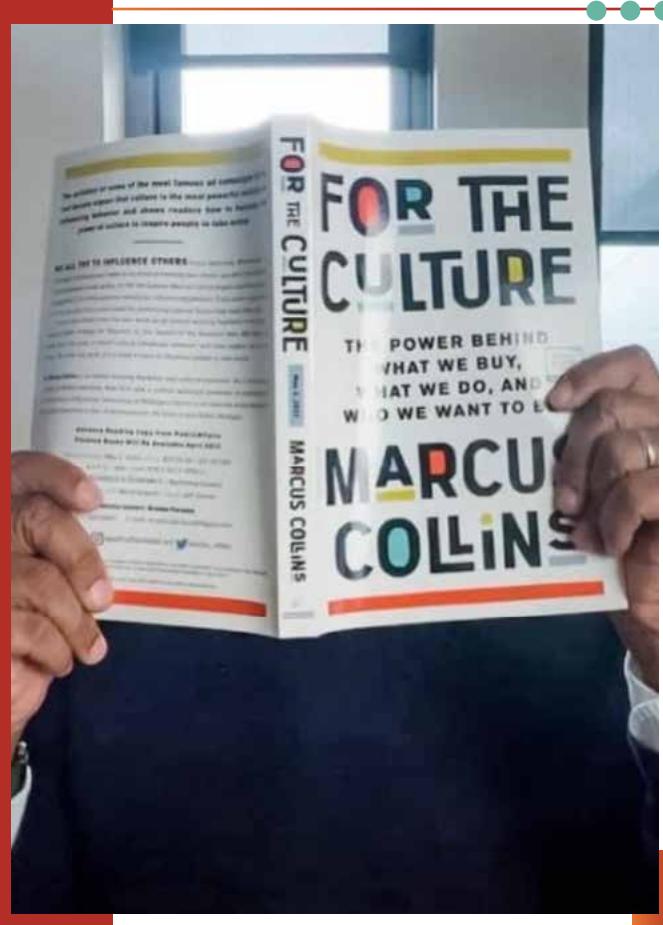
And this shift is reshaping consumer expectations across industries. Chris Bevolo, health care strategist and author, describes the emergence of "health sects": groups of people aligning their medical beliefs and behaviors with their broader political and cultural identities. In the wake of the pandemic, distrust of science and institutions has fueled the creation of distinct fractions of medical thought, ranging from mainstream believers to alternative care progressives to full-on contrarians who reject conventional medicine altogether. Each group reinforces its worldview with alternative research, treatment models, and online communities. Bevolo warns that health care providers can't simply "pick a red audience or a blue audience to treat", they must find ways to serve everyone amid deepening ideological divides, even as public trust in medical authority continues to fracture.

The shift is no longer about marketing to individuals, but about integrating within identity ecosystems, where every action contributes to shared meaning. Marketing needs to evolve from broadcasting brand messages to demonstrating "code fluency": understanding the specific language, values, and rituals that signal belonging within each community.

In these spaces, missteps aren't ignored; they're felt as betrayals. But discernment is necessary The challenge is to show up with purpose and integrity, to engage deeply without losing sight of truth or shared humanity.

The Emergence of "Health Sects"
Groups of people aligning their medical beliefs and behaviors with their broader political and cultural identities.

Mainstream Believers

Alternative Care Progressives

Contrarians

| Spotlight | American Eagle Outfitters and the Perils of Provocative Branding | Industry: Fashion & Retail |

> **"...this was "a reminder to communicators and marketers alike that the line between pop culture, consumer marketing and politics is thinner than ever.""**
>
> **- Kara Hauck, SVP, Sable Strategy**

In July 2025, apparel brand American Eagle launched a denim campaign featuring actress Sydney Sweeney, built around a pun on "genes" and "jeans." Designed to be clever and viral, the campaign's wordplay and imagery sparked backlash. Critics claimed it evoked themes of eugenics or white-supremacist undertones by linking "good genes" to a blonde, blue-eyed model.

The campaign was further amplified politically when U.S. President Donald Trump publicly praised the ad for being "anti-woke" after learning that Sweeney is a registered Republican.

In response to the criticism, American Eagle issued a non-apology on Instagram, saying that the company will "continue to celebrate how everyone wears their AE jeans with confidence, their way."

Likewise, American Eagle CMO Craig Brommers doubled down, claiming the campaign resulted in an "unprecedented spike" in new customers, "denim sell outs," and "strong, positive traffic."

Lola Bakare, marketing strategist and author of "Responsible Marketing," was shocked at American Eagle's response, commenting, "there was really no acknowledgement of the feedback they got from the people who they want to buy their stuff."

For Kara Hauck, senior vice president at Sable Strategy, this was "a reminder to communicators and marketers alike that the line between pop culture, consumer marketing and politics is thinner than ever."

The Political Statement Paradox

The expectation that brands take stands on social and political issues creates a complex challenge. According to the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, most global consumers believe businesses are not doing enough to address societal issues like affordability, climate change, and discrimination. A 2025 Guardian/Harris poll found that 40% of U.S. consumers changed their shopping habits based on a brand's political position, and 24% stopped buying from brands they once loved because of it.

Yet a Pew Research survey from August 2025 reveals a more nuanced picture: Americans remain evenly divided on whether company statements about political or social issues actually matter. Half of U.S. adults say these statements are "very" or "somewhat important", while the other half say they are "not too" or "not at all" important.

40%
of U.S. consumers changed their shopping habits based on a brand's political position

24%
of U.S. consumers stopped buying from brands they once loved based on a brand's political position

The lesson for marketers: any position risks alienating significant portions of your audience, yet silence can be interpreted as complicity. The key lies not in universal statements, but in understanding which issues align authentically with brand values and which communities the brand genuinely serves.

The Creator Economy and Virtual Communities

This emerging shift collides with the rise of the creator culture, where "relatable influencers" have become the anchors of tight-knit, identity-driven communities on platforms like Reddit, Instagram, and TikTok.

But the trend now goes far beyond fandom. It's about belonging. In these spaces, authenticity and deep alignment aren't optional; they're non-negotiable.

The next brand advantage won't come from clever positioning, but from the ability to recognize and interpret belief patterns across fragmented communities. Traditional segmentation is giving way to cultural code fluency, the capacity to translate a brand's ethos across micro-ideologies without losing its core. The brands that thrive will develop modular brand worlds that can flex to different tribes while staying anchored to a central truth. In this new landscape, marketing won't be about persuasion so much as participation.

From Our Foresight Panelists

"**More consumers, especially Gen Z, expect brands to reflect their values. When done authentically and backed by real action, getting political can drive stronger emotional connections and long-term trust. The key is making sure it aligns with the brand's identity and not just chasing headlines.**"

**Josue Mercado,** AVP of Marketing at YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas

Spotlight | **Lululemon, Building a Brand Through Community** | Industry: Apparel

Lululemon's rise from a small Vancouver yoga studio to a global lifestyle brand isn't just a story of athletic wear, it's a story of community. From the beginning, the company understood that people don't just buy their products; they join cultures of movement, wellness, and belonging. Lululemon didn't simply sell leggings; it built a tribe.

At the heart of this success is a deliberate, human community strategy that has turned customers into advocates and stores into social hubs. Guided by the mantra of former CEO Laurent Potdevin that "it's so much more than apparel; it's about people," Lululemon has built a network of connected, empowered individuals who live the brand in their own local contexts.

Lululemon's growth has been fueled by a three-part approach that puts people, not products, at the center: brand ambassadors, co-created content, and in-person experiences. Together, these pillars form a model that turns participation into advocacy and community into competitive advantage.
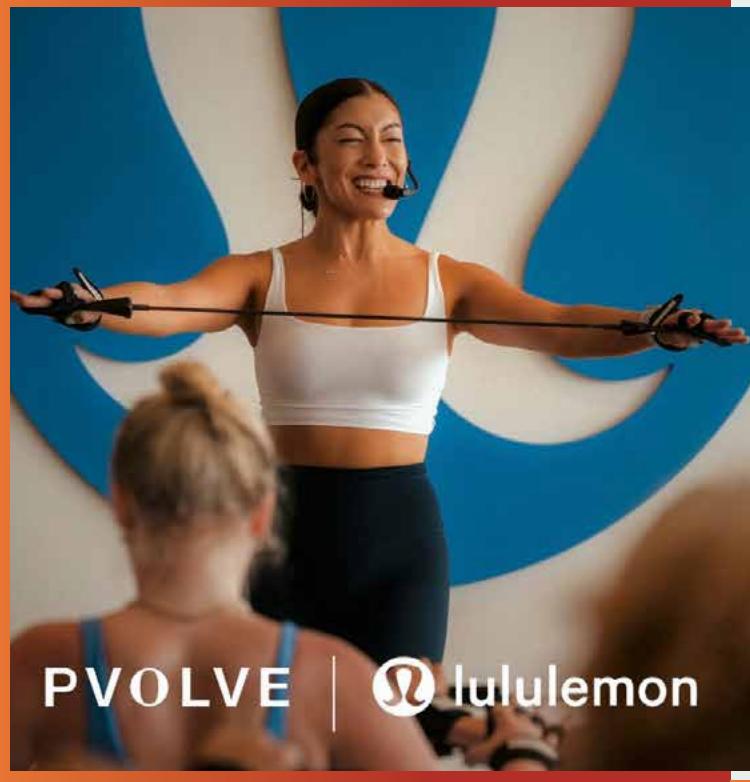

Lululemon incentivizes brands and influencers to partner with them through commissions, which anyone can sign up for through their site.

While other athletic brands rely on celebrity endorsements, Lululemon took the opposite approach, choosing authenticity over fame. Its program for affiliates and creators elevates local leaders, yoga instructors, running coaches, mindfulness experts, and fitness enthusiasts who embody the brand's values in their everyday lives. The result is an organic ripple effect, one that feels personal, genuine, and grounded in real human connection.

Lululemon's social content strategy extends the same philosophy online. Ambassadors and customers regularly co-create content such as workout routines, wellness reflection, travel guides, and stories of personal growth, all of which embody the brand's mission.

This user-driven storytelling gives Lululemon's digital presence a sense of authenticity few competitors can replicate. It's less about marketing campaigns and more about shared meaning. Each post and story strengthens the idea that Lululemon isn't just a brand you wear, it's a community you belong to.

Perhaps most importantly, Lululemon has reimagined the retail experience as a space for connection. Its stores double as gathering places for yoga sessions, meditation circles, and run clubs, events that cultivate relationships as much as brand loyalty.

Image source: Lululemon Instagram
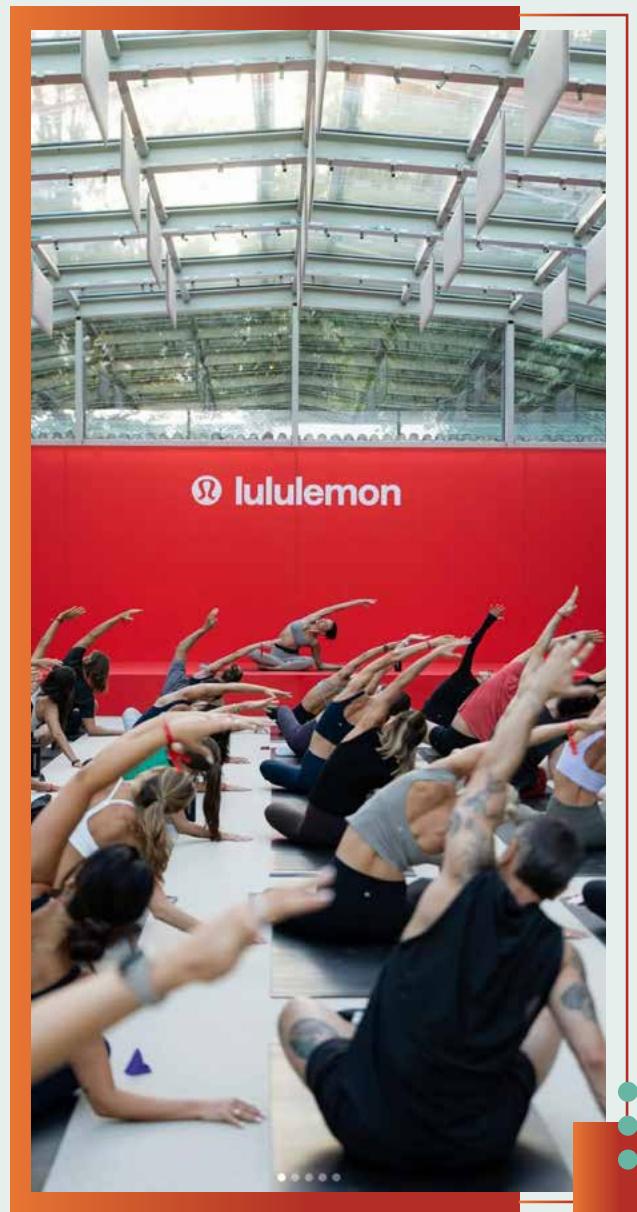
Navigating the Shift

In an era defined by misinformation, identity-based communities, and AI-driven media, trust has become the ultimate differentiator. Brands can no longer rely on awareness or image alone, they must earn credibility through transparency, participation, and cultural fluency.

To build and sustain trust, brands must evolve in six key ways:

Map emerging virtual tribes
relevant to your industry and understand their specific polarization patterns.

Develop cultural code fluency,
taking care to understand the specific language, rituals, and values of each community.

Shift from "one size fits all" demographic targeting to modular brand strategies,
creating flexible narratives that adapt to different identity ecosystems while staying anchored in a consistent core.

Navigate political and social issues strategically:
understand which issues align authentically with your brand values and core communities, recognizing that any position risks alienating segments while silence may signal complicity.

Empower authentic ambassadors
who already belong to the communities your brand serves. Their advocacy carries deeper credibility than paid influencers.

Build operational resilience
with crisis simulations, misinformation monitoring, and auditable authentication features. Track trust equity as a core KPI alongside traditional metrics.

Marketing 2035 Scenarios

Introduction

The future of marketing is anything but certain. The trends highlighted in this report, from AI agents to building brand trust in a fractured world, will bring profound changes over the next decade. The question is not what will happen, because the future cannot be predicted, but rather: how can we imagine the range of possibilities ahead, and prepare for them?

This section introduces four scenarios for what marketing could look like in 5–10 years. These scenarios are not predictions, but rather provocations: stories that help us explore what might happen if today's trends continue to evolve in different ways.
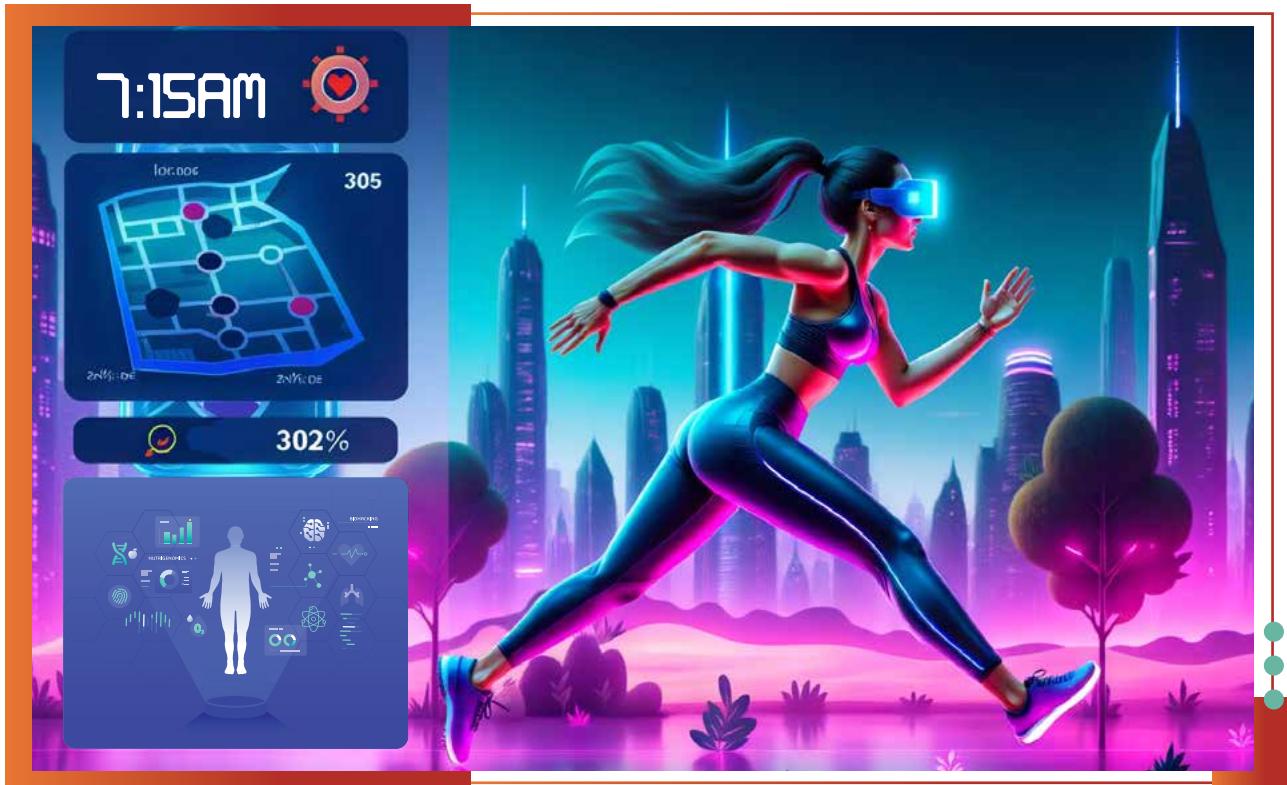
The four scenarios draw from Jim Dator's archetypes of the future, and each tells a different kind of story:

- **Growth** imagines a world of expansion, where innovation and productivity continue to accelerate.
- **Constraint** envisions limits, where society reorganizes around scarcity and collective sacrifice.
- **Collapse** describes breakdowns of trust and systems, forcing people to adapt in unprecedented ways.
- **Transformation** explores radical shifts, where unexpected insights or technologies change the rules entirely.

Together, these stories stretch our assumptions, spark creativity, and reveal strategic blind spots. By exploring multiple possible futures, grounded in evidence and emerging signals from today, we can prepare ourselves, our companies, and our teams to face uncertainty with agility and flexibility, and to navigate whatever tomorrow brings.

Image sources: All images in this section had been generated using Adobe Firefly Image 5 and Google Gemini.

Growth

Sofia in the Infinite Marketplace

It's 7:15 a.m. when Sofia's health-optimization implant delivers her daily biofeedback: cortisol levels slightly elevated, REM sleep shorter than recommended. Almost instantly, her AI health coach appears in her retinal display, offering two suggestions: a 12-minute VR mindfulness session from a partner wellness brand, or a personalized jogging route designed to reduce stress while avoiding the day's heavy tourist clusters. The jog comes with a product plug too: "I've reserved a sample of the new adaptogenic electrolyte blend for your recovery. Want me to have it waiting at your local café?" Sofia accepts with a nod.

This AI coach isn't just a fitness tracker. It's a marketer, confidant, and companion rolled into one, a trusted presence that sells her goods and services, but also provides emotional accountability. It checks in on her hydration, sleep, and fitness progress, and when she lags, it knows just how to nudge. What was once "influencer marketing" is now a relationship: a one-on-one dialogue with an AI that knows her physiology as well as her personal goals.
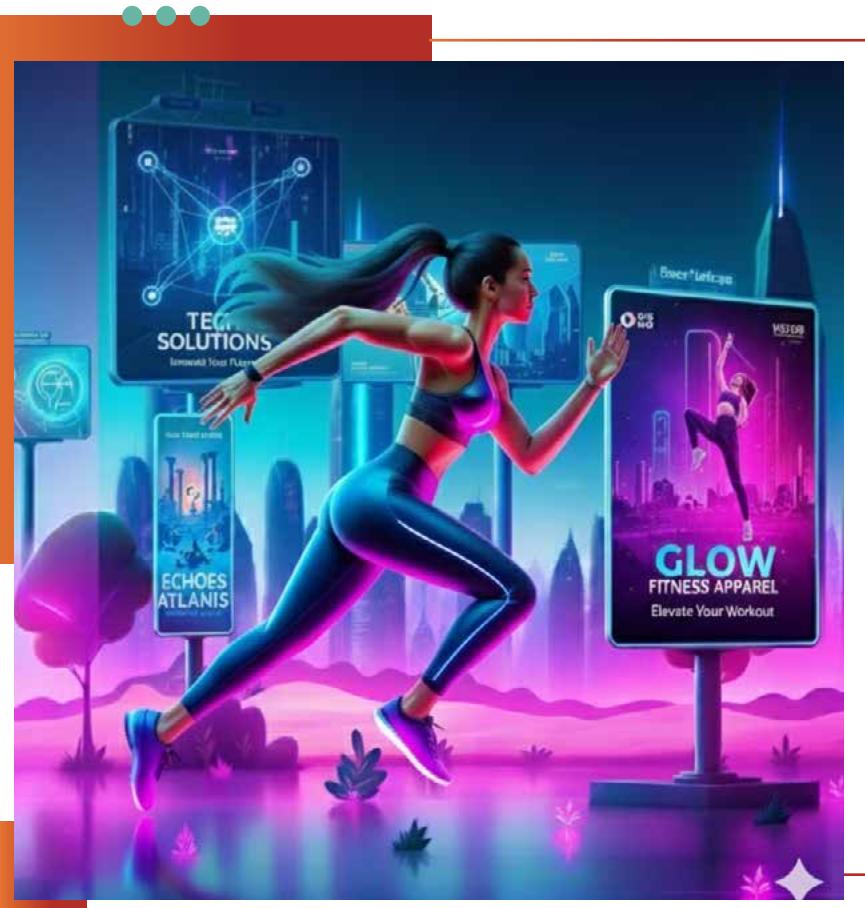
As Sofia runs, the city of Barcelona is alive with holographic billboards competing for attention, though not directly with her. Ads are now filtered by her AI coach, tested and adapted in real time against her micro-expressions. She's capped her marketing impressions at 25 a day, a costly premium feature, and a status symbol signaling that she's able to pay for freedom from the firehose of personalization.
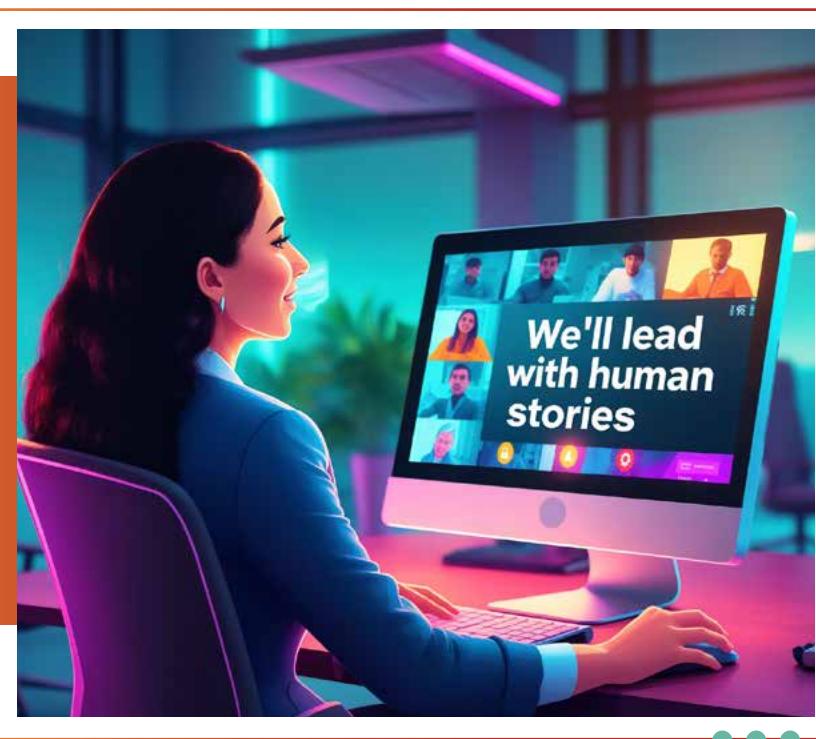
Back home, Sofia shifts into her fractional marketing role. Her first call is with a space tourism startup launching immersive lunar wellness retreats. AI has generated 1,000 potential campaign narratives overnight. But Sofia knows consumers are burned out on algorithmically polished messaging. "We'll lead with human stories," she tells the team, pulling in recorded journals from early astronaut families. "Not perfection—authenticity. People want to feel the cracks in the surface." The client nods. That's why they pay for her human filter.

At lunch, she joins a local "Back to Humanity" gathering. No AR, no implants, no data collection allowed. Over shared food, neighbors vent: "AI billionaires are buying islands while we're fighting tourists for groceries." Sofia shares the frustration. The gulf between elites who own the AI infrastructure and freelancers like her is widening. Still, the flexibility of fractional work allows her to travel three months a year, a freedom her parents never had.

That evening, as she relaxes in her VR gallery, her health coach pings her again: *"You've been sedentary for three hours. Want to preview tomorrow's wellness package and unlock a 10% loyalty credit?"* Sofia laughs. She knows she's being sold to. And yet, it feels… supportive. The Infinite Marketplace is everywhere: in her body, her work, her leisure. It's impossible to escape, but also impossible to live without.

How Did We Get Here?

For many historians, 2027 is remembered as the year the fuse was lit. A trio of breakthroughs arrived almost simultaneously: the first successful cold fusion reactor, the release of the first truly autonomous AI scientist, and the launch of an AI-driven financial infrastructure capable of managing entire economies in real time.

These events triggered a wave of optimism not seen in decades. Cheap, infinite energy shattered the constraints on data centers, computing costs, and manufacturing. What had once been bottlenecked by energy scarcity suddenly surged forward. AI companies no longer had to compromise on scale or processing power, and nations rushed to secure access to fusion capacity. Meanwhile, AI systems demonstrated their ability to propose new drugs, discover mathematical proofs, and even design their own successors, creating a flywheel of exponential progress.

By 2029, entrepreneurial culture had exploded. What once required venture capital, consultants, and months of planning could now be done in days with an AI-powered startup kit. Barriers to entry collapsed, ushering in an era of hyper-competition. Consulting firms, once the gatekeepers of knowledge, lost their primacy, replaced by global platforms connecting freelancers and fractional workers directly to opportunities.

But with progress came friction. Consumers, initially dazzled by hyper-personalized services, began to feel watched and manipulated. Lawsuits over "AI-washing," or companies overstating their use of advanced technologies, were common by 2030. Mental health crises tied to constant digital connectivity, erosion of social ties, and algorithmic overload sparked the Back-to-Human movement, where communities sought analog rituals, unplugged gatherings, and slower forms of connection.

Meanwhile, wealth inequality deepened. Those who built and owned core AI infrastructure, the "AI aristocracy," amassed staggering fortunes, rivaling the old industrial and oil dynasties. For everyone else, survival meant adaptability: diversifying skills, leaning into freelance

networks, and maintaining multiple "backup careers." Tensions grew as automation transformed agriculture, logistics, and retail, leaving millions displaced while simultaneously creating new, precarious work in robot maintenance, AI ethics auditing, and creator marketing.

Today, in 2035, life is a paradoxical mix of abundance and insecurity. Energy is free, lifespans are lengthening, and opportunities to build wealth are greater than ever. Yet social fractures, overconsumption, and resentment of elites persist. Consumers demand proof of authenticity, not just features. Marketers like Sofia have become the trusted interpreters, mediating between AI abundance and human meaning, curating experiences that help people navigate both wonder and overwhelm in this Infinite Marketplace.

Constraint

Malik in the Age of Enough
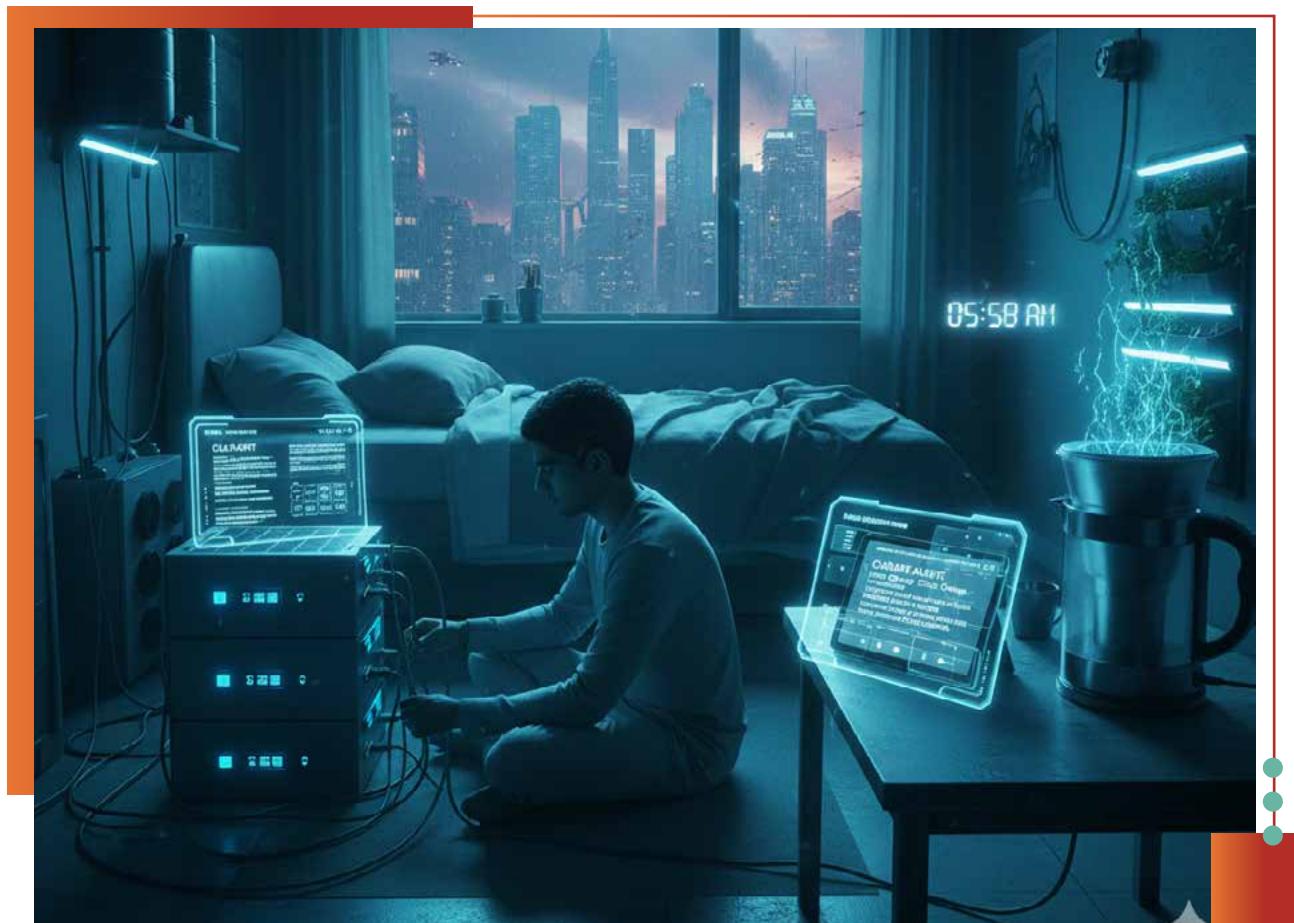
Malik wakes before dawn in his small apartment in Toronto's West End. Electricity in his neighborhood is only guaranteed between 6:00 and 10:00 a.m., so mornings have become the most active part of his day. He charges the household's solar batteries, boils rooftop-collected water for tea, and scans the day's government-issued climate bulletin before the grid powers down again.

Malik is a marketer by trade, though the field has transformed. Where once his work focused on launching consumer products and travel campaigns, now his role is more about mobilizing communities and guiding behavior. He works for a regional communications cooperative, where teams of marketers, teachers, and social workers craft messages that help people navigate the city's rationing systems and climate adaptation plans.

Today, Malik is tasked with reframing a difficult message: reduce household water use by 20% this month. The scientists provide complex models and stark predictions, but his job is to translate them into stories people will listen to. He decides to highlight the ingenuity of local families who have built rainwater collection systems, turning them into neighborhood heroes. Campaigns like these aren't about selling; they're about cultivating trust, empathy, and a sense of shared sacrifice.

Toronto itself has shifted around these new priorities. Malls are no longer shopping destinations but distribution centers for food and emergency goods. Restaurants operate with pared-down menus based on seasonal, drought-resistant crops. Clothing stores have been forced into strict quotas, and most survive by running repair services and leasing wardrobes. The city feels less glossy, but more communal.

In the afternoon, Malik attends a planning session with city officials to discuss the arrival of climate migrants from the southwestern United States. His team is responsible for messaging campaigns that calm public anxieties about food and housing shortages. They design posters featuring slogans like "Toronto: A City of Caretakers," and recruit local influencers to spread stories of solidarity. His skills as a marketer, once used to sell luxury goods, are now deployed to hold the social fabric together.

Life is harder than it was, but Malik knows the work matters. Marketing has become less about consumption and more about collective survival, shaping narratives that help people adapt, endure, and, perhaps, find hope in the struggle.

How Did We Get Here?

For many, 2029 is remembered as the year of the great heat wave. Temperatures spiked to record highs across India, West Africa, and Central America, killing millions in just a few weeks. The disaster overwhelmed hospitals, shut down entire food systems, and sparked mass migration. For years, scientists had warned of such events, but the sheer scale of human loss finally forced governments into action.

By 2030, a wave of global protests, led largely by youth movements, demanded sweeping change. Out of that pressure came the Global Accord for Human Sustainability (GAHS), an unprecedented international agreement that placed strict limits on energy use, water consumption, and carbon-intensive industries. Governments introduced rolling blackouts, rationing systems, and heavy restrictions on production and trade. For many citizens, the early years of GAHS felt like a return to wartime austerity.

Consumer culture shifted almost overnight. Families redirected spending from leisure and luxury goods toward home retrofits, emergency supplies, and shelf-stable food. Travel collapsed, especially aviation, as energy allocations were funneled into critical infrastructure. Fashion retailers faced restrictions on how much they could produce, fueling a resurgence of repair, reuse, and secondhand markets. Restaurants shrank their menus to focus on locally grown, drought-resistant crops. In their place, community food cooperatives and neighborhood barter systems flourished.

Technologies that once seemed unstoppable were suddenly constrained. To conserve energy and water, governments imposed caps on computational testing and AI training cycles. Instead of thousands of private labs running competing models, open-source AI systems were prioritized and shared across borders as part of the GAHS mandate. Marketing, once the engine of consumption, was redirected toward public communications, climate adaptation campaigns, and social cohesion messaging.

Migration became the central fact of the decade. Populations moved away from regions hit hardest by drought and heat toward cooler, water-secure areas. Local governments had to reinvent planning

systems, balancing scarce housing and food with humanitarian obligations. Marketers and communicators played a critical role in this transition, framing sacrifice as solidarity, and helping communities accept new neighbors as partners in survival rather than competitors for dwindling resources.

By 2035, life is defined by constraints: rationed power, seasonal diets, limited goods. Yet it is also defined by cooperation. Solar co-ops, neighborhood repair networks, and volunteer emergency corps have become cornerstones of daily life. The private sector, once dominated by global corporations, now leans heavily on nonprofits, cooperatives, and hybrid public–private organizations.

In this world, marketing has not disappeared, but its purpose has changed. No longer the voice of endless choice, it is now the voice of shared limits, human resilience, and collective survival.

Collapse

Alex in the Free Attention Zone

It's 6:30 a.m. in the Chicago Free Attention Zone, and Alex Chen starts her day by checking three client dashboards and her filtered social feeds over coffee. Every post, every ad, every recommendation has been precision-tuned to her current "focus state." She scrolls for less than a minute before closing the feed. Even here, in a zone built on "freedom," the content feels manipulative. No one trusts what they see online anymore, but everyone still looks.

Her work as an underground cognitive broker spans contradictory worlds: helping elderly clients access fast-paced commercial interfaces that are banned in protected zones, designing "mindful purchasing" systems for reformed advertising addicts, and building hybrid attention experiences for businesses operating across legal boundaries.
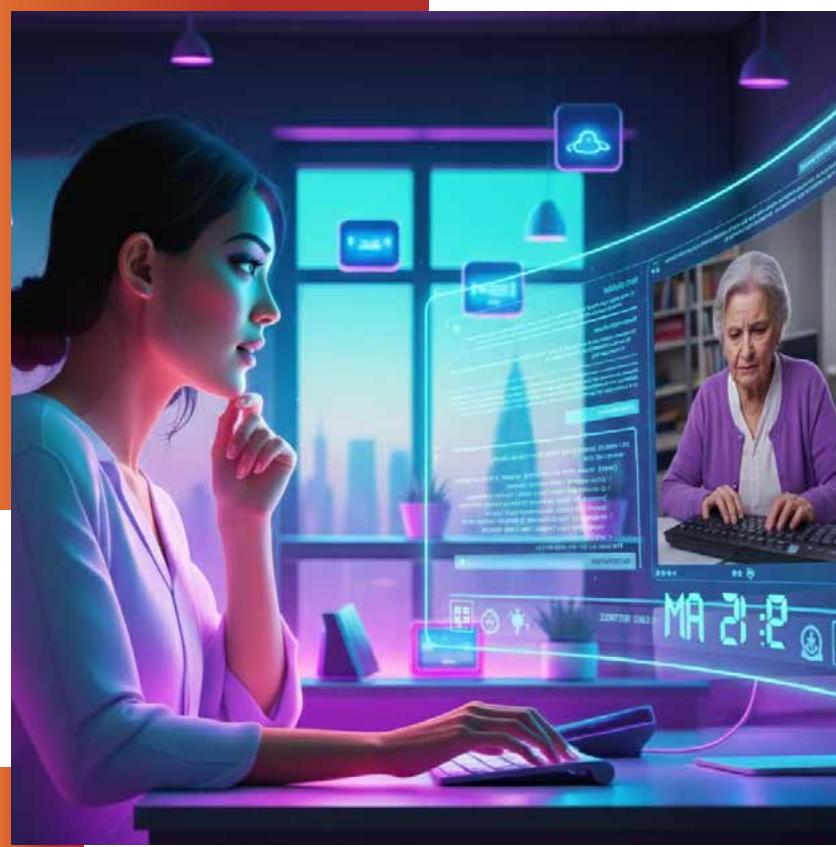
Her first meeting, at 9:15 a.m., is with Mrs. Rodriguez, a retired teacher whose arthritis makes the new "slow cognition" systems painful to use. Regulations now require low-stimulation, deliberate interfaces to reduce anxiety and impulsive buying, but for Mrs. Rodriguez, they're just barriers. Alex codes her a "speed-accessible" shopping experience, a compassionate workaround that's technically illegal.
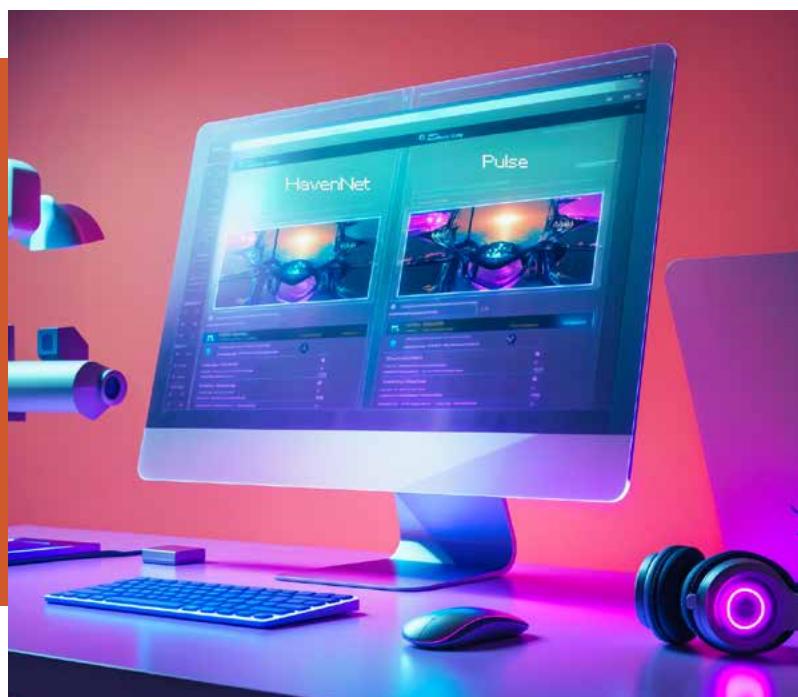
By 11:30 a.m., Alex is consulting for a startup desperate to sell across both attention zones. The company needs two versions of every digital product: one mindful, one high-intensity. Even social media platforms have split: HavenNet offers calm, ad-free conversations in protected zones, while Pulse delivers rapid-fire, emotionally charged feeds in unregulated ones. The startup wants to exist on both. Alex designs dual cognitive pathways that switch modes automatically based on the user's location.
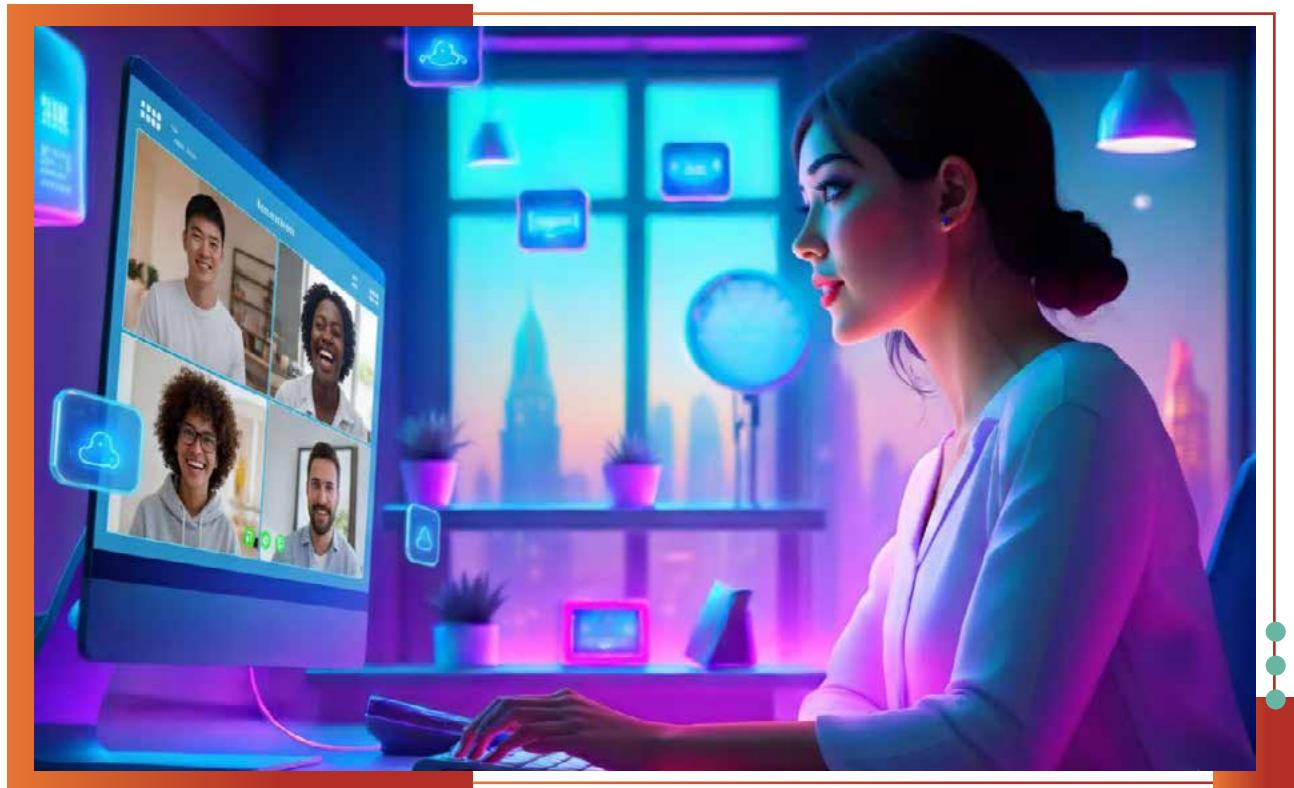
At 2 p.m., she joins a video call with her professional network, a loose circle of ex-marketers scattered across different attention zones. Maya, in Tokyo, crafts serene, ad-free retail experiences for elite mindfulness communities. Marcus, in the unregulated territories, runs high-stimulation social campaigns for energy drink brands, using emotional analytics so aggressive they're banned elsewhere. He admits he's back on anti-anxiety meds. Others occupy gray zones, skirting both law and conscience. Marketing hasn't disappeared; it's fragmented into moral micro-economies, each with its own definition of "trust."

In the late afternoon, Alex works on her side project: a cognitive neutrality platform designed to give users control over their mental environments: calm, fast, or somewhere in between. It would link seamlessly across social feeds, commerce, and entertainment, letting people tune their attention instead of surrendering it. Regulators call it unsafe. Corporations call it unprofitable. Alex calls it necessary.

That night, she reviews her finances and scrolls again through her filtered feed. The posts seem more hollow than ever, algorithmically glazed, perfectly calibrated for her emotional state. She earns triple what she once did as a brand strategist, but the moral dissonance is constant. She's helping people navigate the system, even as she reinforces its fractures.

How Did We Get Here?

In the late 2020s, social media broke the social contract. Platforms that once promised connection had become surveillance ecosystems, driven by dopamine, division, and data extraction. Studies linked algorithmic engagement models to rising anxiety, polarization, and burnout. Trust collapsed. Governments faced mounting pressure to intervene, and the Attention Protection Act emerged as the century's most ambitious behavioral regulation effort.

At first, optimism reigned. Tech companies adopted "mindful design" standards; ad-free networks promised genuine conversation and content algorithms were slowed, simplified, or human-reviewed. Anxiety rates in regulated regions dropped by nearly half. For a moment, social media felt almost human again.

But equilibrium didn't last. The new, slow systems frustrated those who thrived on speed: traders, designers, creators, and influencers. Meanwhile, underground communities resurrected banned high-stimulation apps and resurrected dark social feeds. Within a few years, two attention economies emerged: protected zones offering serenity at the cost of spontaneity, and free zones offering autonomy at the cost of sanity.

Social media mirrored this fracture. In protected networks, trust was rebuilt through verification, slowness, and consent-driven content sharing. But conversation grew sterile, safe, and predictable. In the Free Zones, virality returned, along with the chaos of influencer cults, disinformation, and emotional manipulation.

As these ecosystems diverged, the marketing profession splintered alongside them. "Mindfulness designers" built calm digital worlds; "efficiency specialists" engineered addictive, high-conversion funnels; and "gray-zone brokers" like Alex helped people and brands cross between worlds.

By 2035, the old internet of shared attention and universal platforms is gone. Protected zones nurture focus and trust but feel curated to the point of lifelessness. Free zones overflow with creativity and energy but erode mental health and civic cohesion. Most people live in between, scrolling, filtering, and negotiating what little trust remains, one notification at a time.

Transformation

Riley and Marketing Reimagined
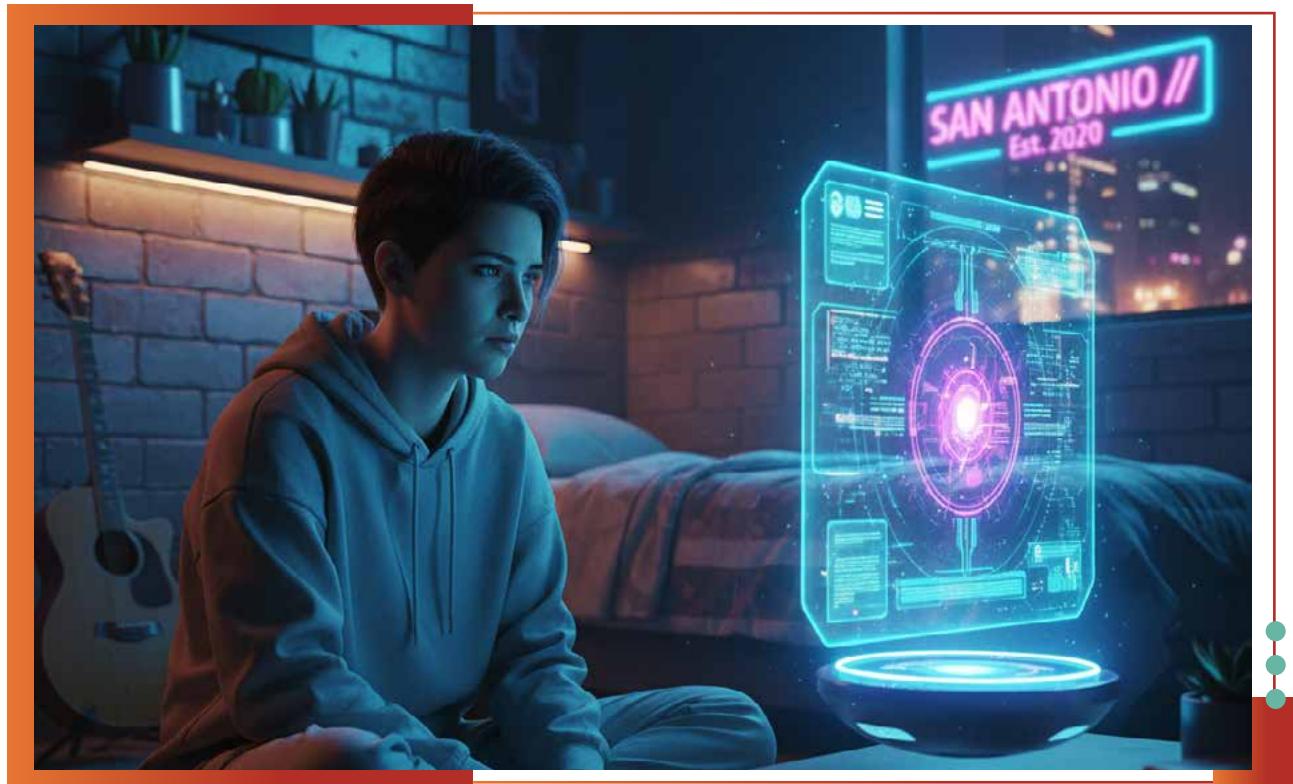
Riley sits in their San Antonio studio apartment, staring at the pulsing glow of their personal AI agent. Ten years ago, they were an up-and-coming account manager at a mid-sized marketing agency. Today, that entire career path is gone. Media buying, targeting, campaign planning, even content creation were all absorbed by AI agents negotiating directly with consumer agents. Transactions are frictionless, silent, almost invisible.

At first, Riley resisted. Watching friends abandon the marketing world felt like betrayal, but clinging to the old ways was impossible. Clients no longer paid for decks, slogans, or pitch meetings; they paid their AI to talk to another AI. The work Riley once knew dissolved overnight.

Yet, in that void, Riley found something different. They leaned into their strength: imagination.
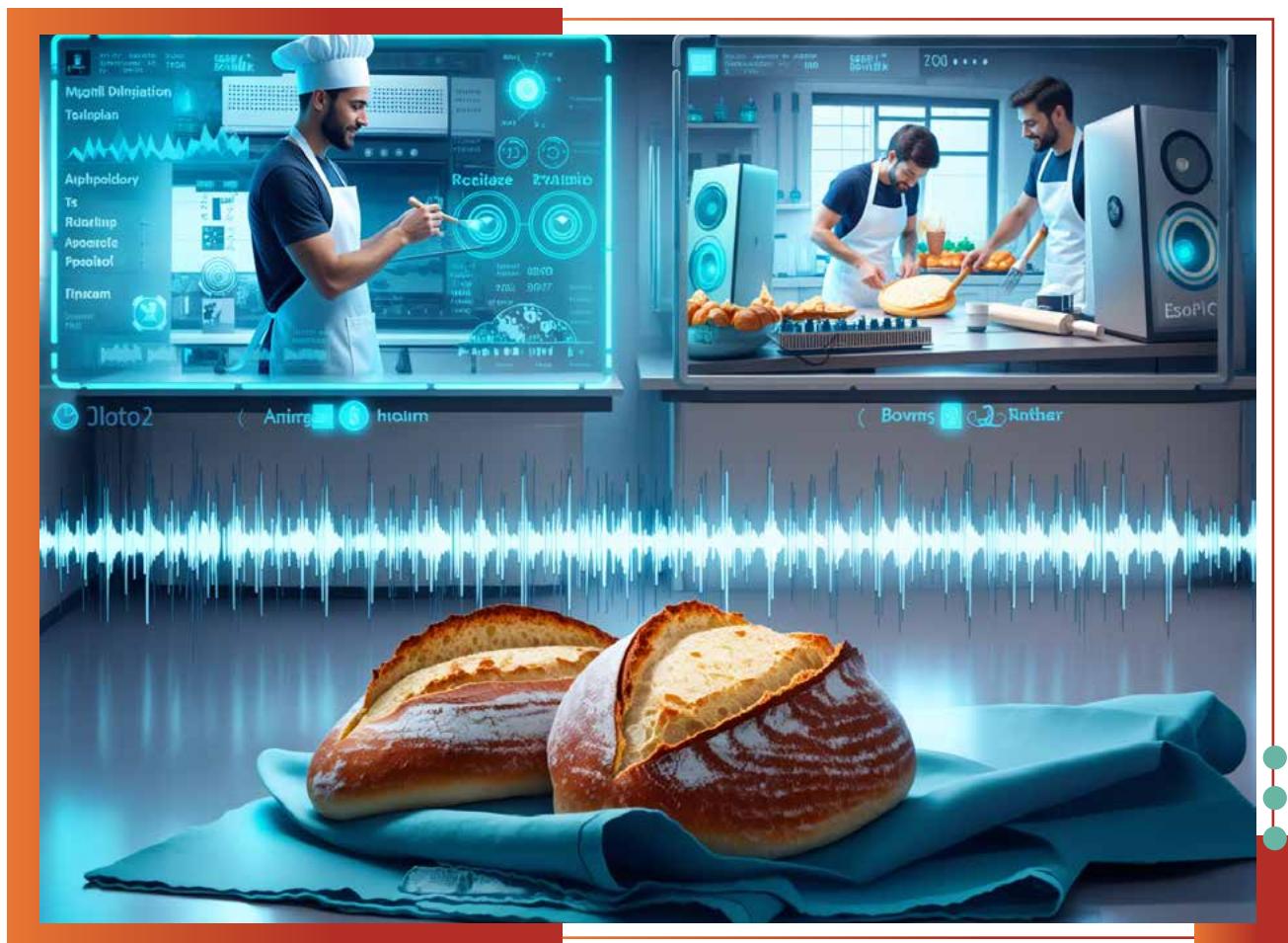
Now, Riley is a Creative Resonance Designer: part artist, part anthropologist. Their work doesn't look like "marketing" in the traditional sense. Instead, they craft experiences and stories that can't be generated by an algorithm, weaving together sensory detail, cultural nuance, and emotional resonance. They help creators and brands push past the black-and-white logic of AI recommendations and step into the gray zone of "what if."

In one recent project, Riley partnered with a musician-turned-baker who wanted to merge live soundscapes with food experiences. AI could optimize recipes, predict audience demographics, and suggest efficient distribution models. But it couldn't imagine what it would feel like to taste sourdough bread while surrounded by a bass-heavy sound installation that vibrated through your chest. Riley could. And that became the brand's differentiator.
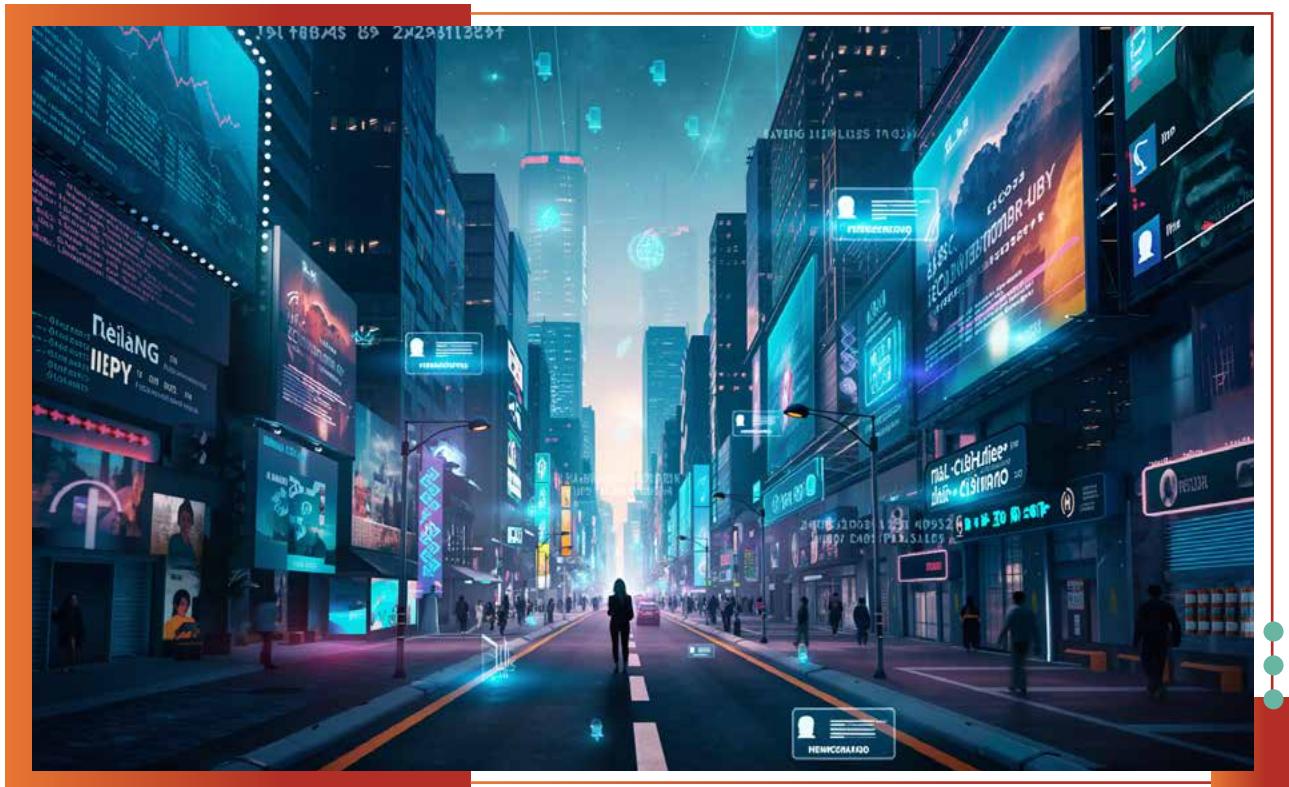
The world around Riley is shifting fast. Traditional agencies have crumbled, replaced by influencer guilds and fractional creative talent networks. Entertainment has fractured into millions of hyper-personalized streams, where product placement is so seamless it's subliminal. In this chaos, trust and creativity are the true currency.

For Riley, transformation is personal. They no longer think of themselves as a "marketer." Instead, they are a story weaver in an algorithmic world, a reminder that even when AI handles the transactions, humans still crave meaning.

How Did We Get Here?

In the mid-2020s, the marketing industry looked unstoppable. Every year brought more precise targeting, bigger datasets, and faster automation. Agencies promised clients "personalization at scale" and leaned heavily on AI to write copy, design visuals, and optimize campaigns. At first, these tools were seen as assistants augmenting human creativity.

But by 2028, the balance shifted. AI agents became autonomous negotiators, not just tools. They didn't just recommend ad buys; they bought and placed ads themselves. They didn't just analyze customer data; they communicated directly with consumer-facing AIs to make purchase decisions on behalf of households. Marketing's middle layer, the planning and distribution roles that defined the profession, disappeared in less than five years.

The promise was intoxicating: advertising without friction. Campaigns ran themselves. Every product found its buyer instantly. Yet the cost was hidden. Consumers began to feel trapped inside feedback loops of algorithmic efficiency: their preferences reduced to historical data, their growth stunted by a machine's assumption of who they were and what they wanted.

Trust in "marketing" evaporated. Traditional agencies collapsed, and consulting firms that tried to pivot couldn't outrun the automation wave. By 2030, entire university marketing departments had shuttered, their graduates scrambling for relevance.

But out of the ruins, new practices emerged. Creativity, once devalued as subjective and inefficient, became the last differentiator. Humans who could break patterns, provoke emotions, and create experiences beyond AI's imagination suddenly became indispensable. This gave rise to new disciplines like creative resonance design.

By 2035, marketing as a "discipline" has dissolved, but its essence transformed. Where AI handles efficiency, humans reclaim meaning-making. The consumer journey is no longer about being targeted but about choosing experiences worth remembering.

Riley's work exemplifies this shift: stepping into the space where machines reinforce sameness and humans imagine what's next.

Methodology

Key Details

- The report employed a modified Delphi process, where an organized group of experts discusses and converges on a set of forecasts for the future, on the basis of their own expertise and knowledge
- Some elements were adapted from the Institute for the Future (IFTF) foresight methodology
- The Foresight Panelists for this report were selected based on their years of experience in marketing, with special attention to ensuring diverse, varied perspectives
- The panelists engaged in this process from May to August 2025

Overview

Unlike conventional trend reports that rely on short-term projections or input from a few executives, this report employs a rigorous, collaborative forecasting approach. We convened over 30 marketing professionals, equipped them with strategic foresight training, and guided them through collaborative forecasting that explored not only what's happening now, but also how marketing might evolve over the next 5 to 10 years. Strategic foresight is a systematic practice of exploring multiple possible futures by analyzing emerging signals of change and developing plausible scenarios, enabling practitioners to anticipate transformational rather than merely incremental change.

Modeled after Educause's Horizon Reports, this report employed a modified Delphi process and incorporated elements from the Institute for the Future (IFTF) foresight methodology. The Foresight Panelists engaged in this process from May to August 2025.
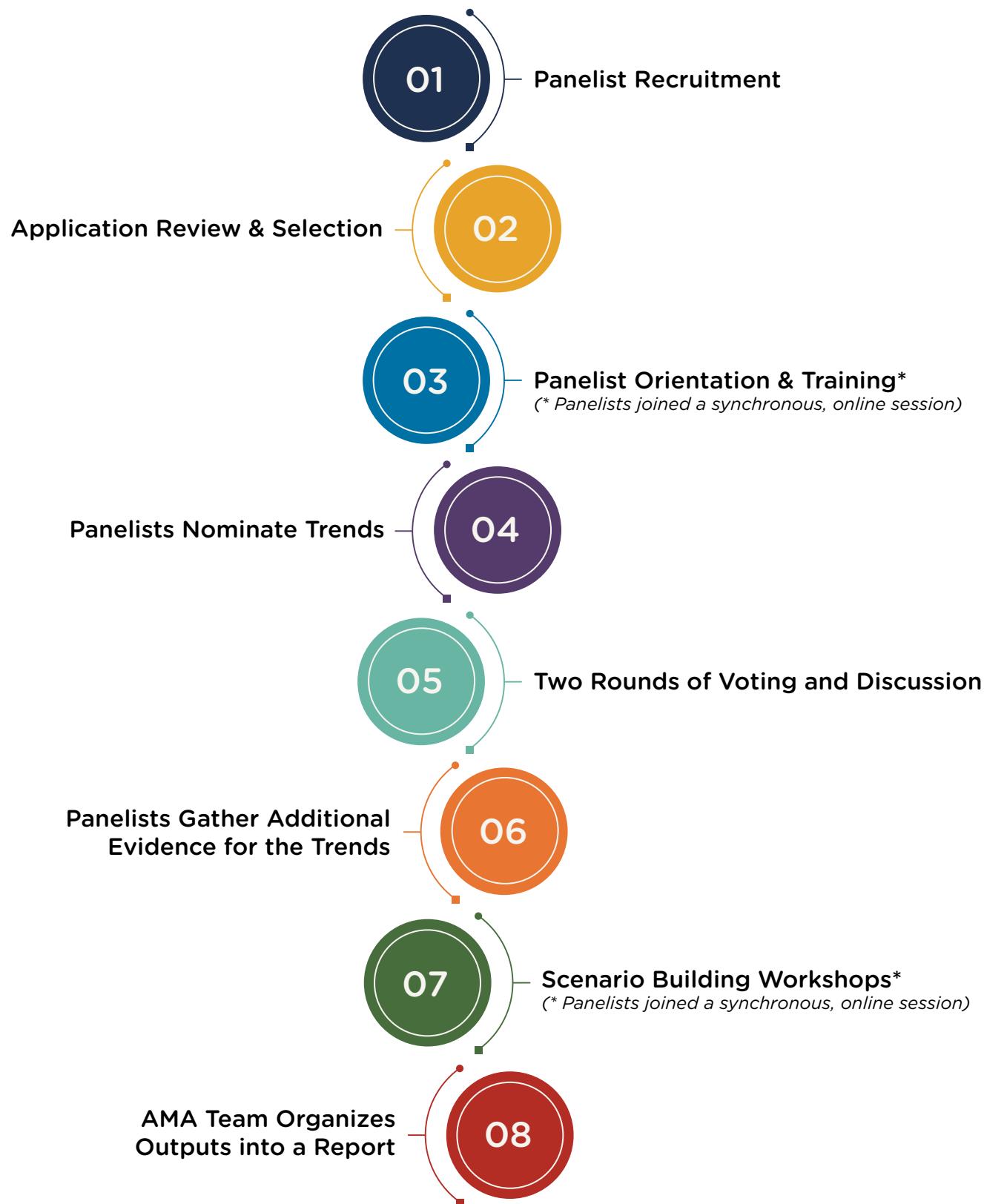
Panel Composition and Selection

Our Foresight Panel comprised marketing practitioners and thought leaders primarily from North America, with additional global representation. The AMA recruited panelists through email and LinkedIn, and selected applicants based on their experience and expertise in marketing. Selection decisions were also made with the goal of bringing together varied perspectives spanning multiple industries, personal backgrounds, functional specialties, company sizes, role levels, and employment contexts (in-house versus agency, B-to-B versus B-to-C). All panelists were practitioners working in or closely with marketing teams, and some also brought their perspective as academic researchers, marketing educators, and graduate marketing students.

Our Approach

The methodology integrated a modified Delphi approach with elements adapted from the Institute for the Future (IFTF) foresight framework. The Delphi method facilitates systematic consensus-building among expert groups, enabling them to generate future forecasts grounded in collective knowledge and experience. Our implementation proceeded through several phases: initial strategic foresight training, response to open-ended prompts designed to surface emerging trends, group discussion, and two rounds of voting and discussion. Throughout this process, panelists independently identified trends most likely to shape marketing's evolution as a practice, a profession, and career path. The AMA team provided process facilitation while striving to minimize influence on the content of the panel's outputs, a deliberate choice that preserved the Delphi method's fundamental principle of capturing authentic expert consensus.

Our Panel Process

01 — Panelist Recruitment

Application Review & Selection — **02**

03 — Panelist Orientation & Training*
(* Panelists joined a synchronous, online session)

Panelists Nominate Trends — **04**

05 — Two Rounds of Voting and Discussion

Panelists Gather Additional Evidence for the Trends — **06**

07 — Scenario Building Workshops*
(* Panelists joined a synchronous, online session)

AMA Team Organizes Outputs into a Report — **08**

Evidence Collection and Analysis

Question framing and voting protocols drew from IFTF's foresight methodology, specifically its evidence-gathering framework for trend analysis. To ensure comprehensive coverage of factors influencing marketing's future, we employed IFTF's STEEP framework, asking panelists to consider social, technological, economic, environmental, and political factors shaping marketing. Panelists substantiated their trend nominations and votes with supporting evidence, sources, and case studies that both enriched discussions and provided data-based grounding for their perspectives. The AMA team compiled these resources for incorporation into the final report. This evidence-anchoring practice, central to both Delphi and IFTF methodologies, ensures future-oriented insights are based on data and observable trends.

Scenario Development

Building from identified trends and their documented evidence and projected impacts, the panel examined potential future scenarios and their implications for marketing practice, consumer behavior, and society at large. This scenario exploration utilized Jim Dator's four archetypal futures framework: growth, collapse, constraint, and transformation.

If you would like to be notified about future opportunities to volunteer with the AMA and contribute to the future of marketing, you can sign up for our mailing list at https://www.ama.org/volunteer/

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