



SIGNALS FROM THE STAGE

**What the ANA Masters of Marketing Conference
Revealed About the Future of Brands**

NOVEMBER 2025

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BACKGROUND

About the Partnership

At the 2025 ANA Masters of Marketing Conference, The Harris Poll joined as the official Insights Partner to capture live audience sentiment throughout the event. Across multiple sessions, attendees were polled on the key issues shaping marketing today, from the return to physical brand experiences to the rise of AI and evolving workforce priorities.

Research Overview

Conference attendees participated in real-time polls via The Harris Poll's QuestDIY platform. Each question was paired with The Harris Poll's consumer data research, giving marketers a direct comparison between what they believe and what consumers actually feel.

This partnership allowed the ANA and The Harris Poll to compare “marketer perception” and “public reality” side by side, a unique dual-lens approach that reveals where industry intuition aligns (or diverges) from consumer truth.

Methodology

Polls were conducted from October 21–24, 2025, at the ANA Masters of Marketing Conference in Orlando, Fla. There were four polls and six questions. The questions averaged 96 responses with a range between 66 and 151. Respondents were a mix of client-side marketers and marketing solutions providers (e.g., agencies, media companies, industry consultants).

DETAILED INSIGHTS

1. Going Retro: Return to Touch

We live in an era where everything has gone digital — from our ads to our shopping carts. It turns out people, particularly young digital natives, are craving something a little more tangible. How should our industry respond? Should we be putting more emphasis back on physical touchpoints like catalogs, samples, or pop-up stores, or keep pushing digital?

At the 2025 ANA Masters of Marketing Conference, we asked:

- How should brand investments in physical touchpoints (e.g., catalogs, samples, mailers, in-store experiences, pop-up stores) change, if at all, over the next 12 months? It should:
 - Increase
 - Stay the same
 - Decrease
 - Don't know
- Which physical touchpoints, if any, should brands prioritize in the next 12 months?
 - Direct mail/catalogs
 - Sample/trial kits
 - Limited time pop-up stores
 - Experiential retail
 - Community/brand-hosted events
 - Other
 - None, marketers should not prioritize any physical touchpoints.

In response, 70 percent of ANA attendees said brand investment in physical touchpoints should increase in the next year. Their top priorities were community events (70 percent), experiential retail (66 percent), and pop-up stores (56 percent).

DETAILED INSIGHTS

1. Going Retro: Return to Touch

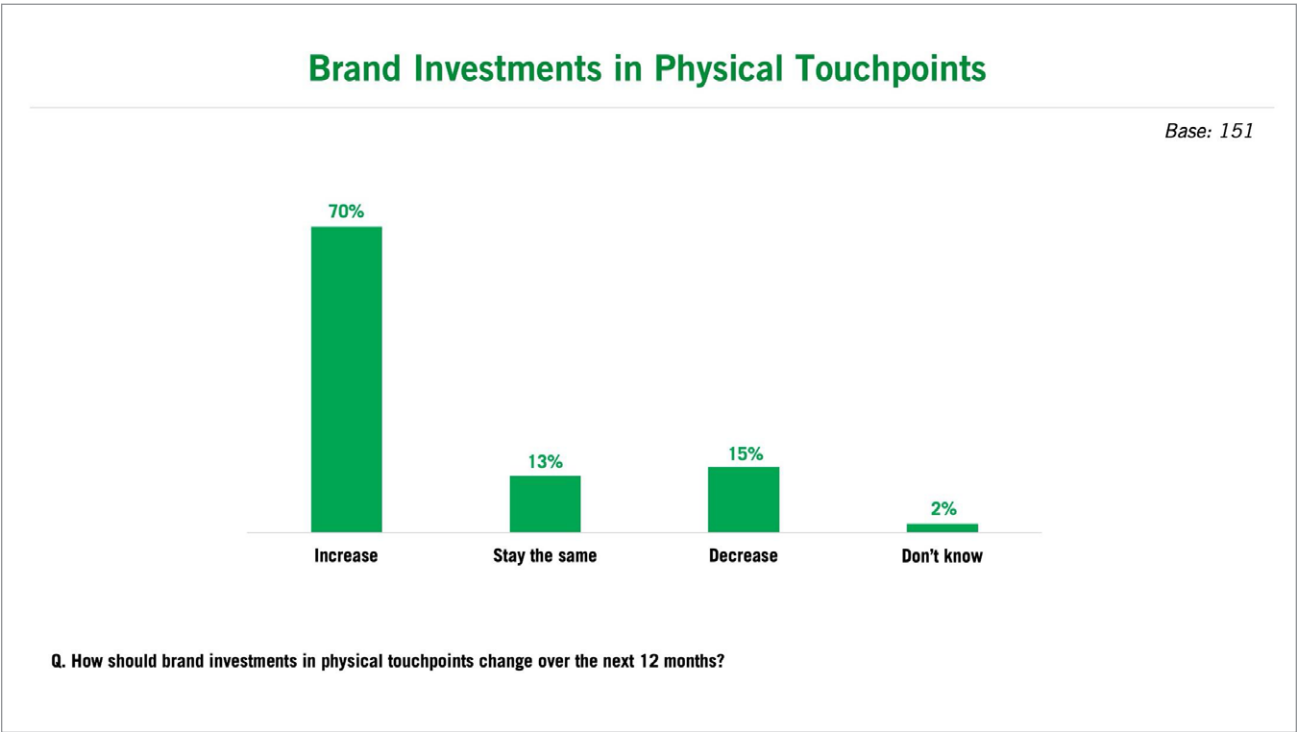


Figure 1: Investments by brands in physical touchpoints

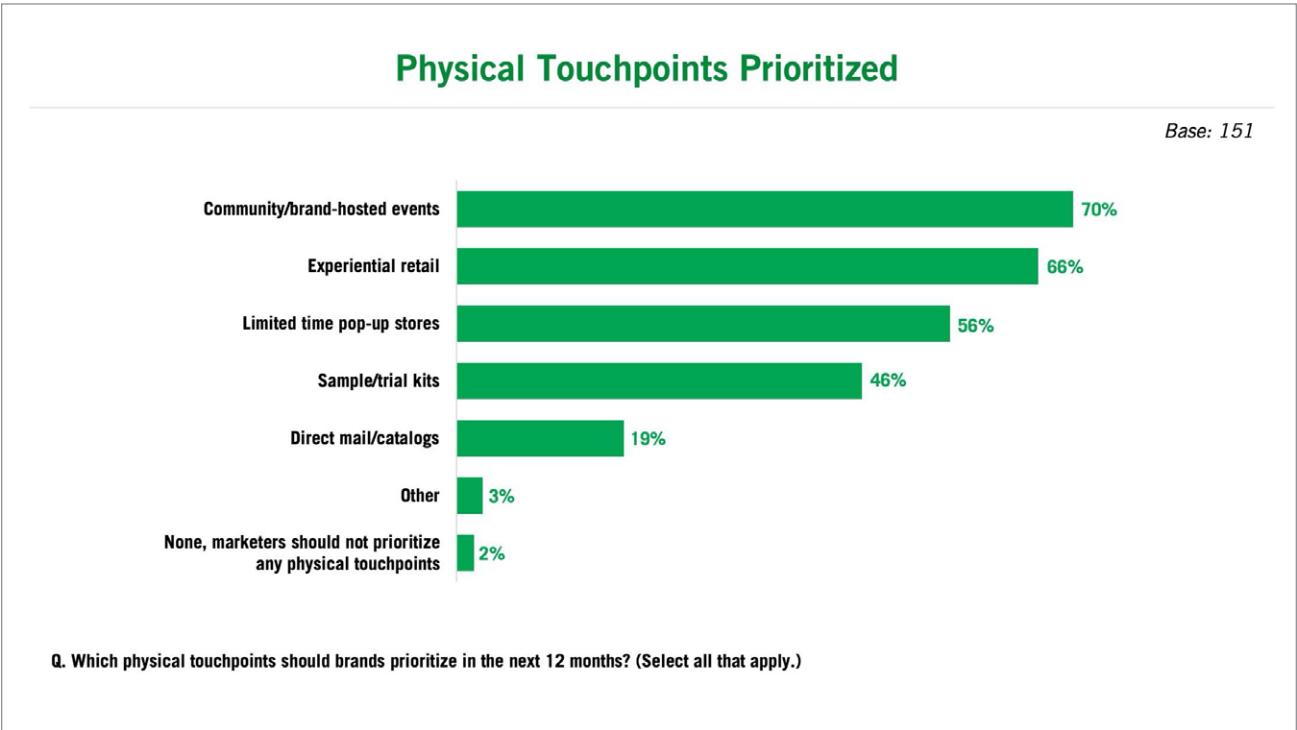


Figure 2: Physical touchpoints marketers plan to prioritize in 2026

DETAILED INSIGHTS

1. Going Retro: Return to Touch

Harris Consumer Context

Harris Poll consumer data¹ shows a similar desire for real-world experiences.

- 79 percent of Millennials look forward to brand catalogs.
- 64 percent of Gen Z even display them as décor.
- 77 percent of Gen Z/Millennials have planned trips around visiting a store or brand.
- 73 percent of Gen Z/Millennials say shopping at a hyped retailer/pop-up feels like being “part of a cultural moment.”

Why It Matters

Even as AI transforms digital marketing, real-world touchpoints remain essential for emotional connection and cultural relevance.

For marketers, the takeaway is clear: Physical experiences amplify digital storytelling. The most effective 2026 campaigns will link tactile experiences, from mailed samples to pop-ups, with digital amplification, turning moments of touch into measurable engagement.

¹[“Why Consumers Want More IRL and Tactile Brand Experiences,”](#) Quad, May 15, 2025

DETAILED INSIGHTS

2. Doers to Directors: Delegating to AI Agents

Consumers are shifting from doing everything themselves to directing intelligent agents to do it for them — evolving from task-doers into experience directors. And younger consumers increasingly expect AI to act on their behalf with some oversight: shopping, scheduling, and making recommendations. At the 2025 ANA Masters of Marketing Conference, we asked:

- What steps should the marketing industry take to prepare for a future where consumers delegate tasks to AI agents (e.g., clothing curation, travel planning, event booking)? Please select all that apply.
 - Standardize structured data and product feeds so agents can easily interpret brand offerings.
 - Develop APIs and integrations that connect brands directly to AI platforms and agents.
 - Invest in preference profiling to ensure personalization aligns with consumer needs.
 - Optimize content for conversational AI (Q&A formats, agent-friendly messaging).
 - Create transparent brand knowledge bases accessible to LLMs and AI assistants.
 - Reimagine the path to purchase when discovery and selection happen via agents instead of direct search.
 - Establish ethical and privacy standards for agent-led recommendations and purchases.

In response, 71 percent of respondents say the industry must establish ethical and privacy standards as AI begins making choices on consumers' behalf.

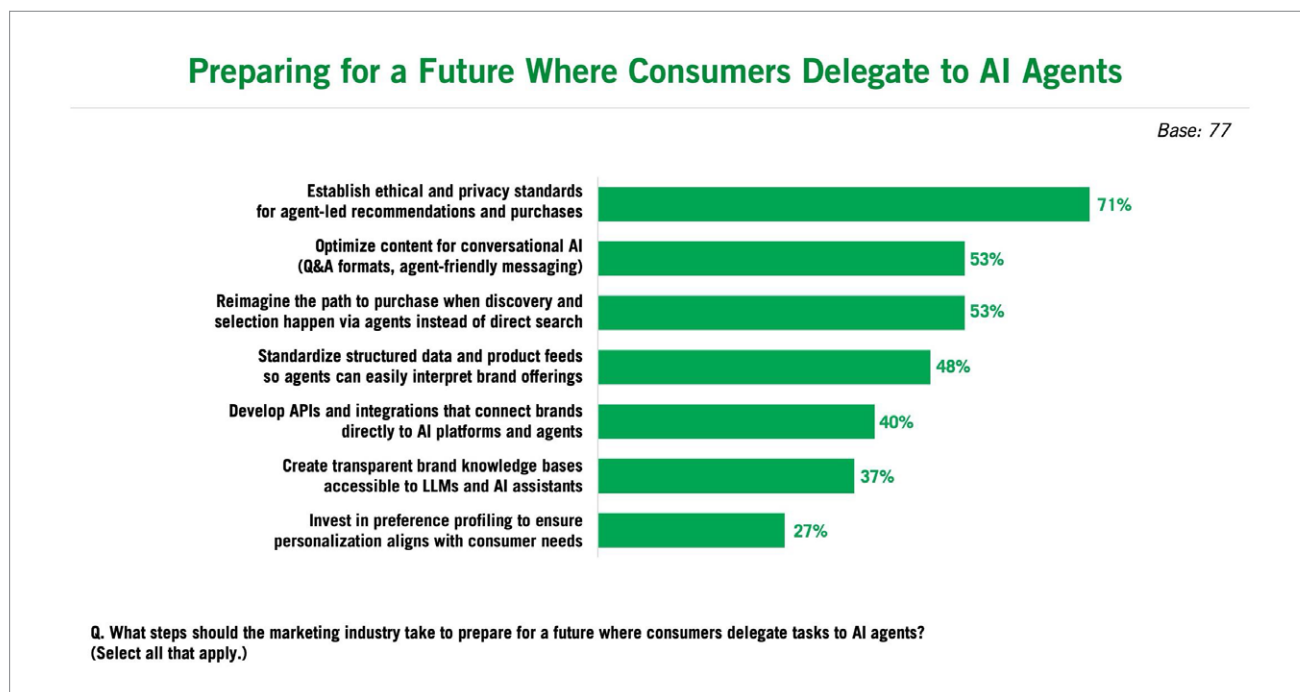


Figure 3: Industry steps to prepare for AI-assisted commerce

DETAILED INSIGHTS

2. Doers to Directors: Delegating to AI Agents

Harris Consumer Context

According to Harris data², 63 percent of Gen Z expect a future where people direct AI rather than compete with it. Many say they would let an AI agent handle tasks like clothing curation, travel planning, and household shopping, if it reflects their preferences and budgets.

The key steps that the marketing industry should take to prepare for a future where consumers delegate tasks to AI agents are:

- Establish ethical and privacy standards for agent-led recommendations and purchases.
- Optimize content for conversational AI.
- Reimagine the path to purchase when discovery and selection happen via agents instead of direct search.

Why It Matters

This isn't about replacing human creativity; it's about ensuring AI operates within frameworks that protect consumer trust while making discovery more intelligent and intuitive.

The next challenge for brands is to design AI systems that keep people in control of the process. In 2026, the winning strategies will use AI to enhance human intent, not automate it away.

²"[Meet America's Noisy Next Voters, Gen Z's AI Adoption Soars, & Honey The Mortgage Ate Our IRA](#)," The Harris Poll, October 23, 2025

DETAILED INSIGHTS

3. The Channel Shuffle: AI as the New Search

Just when marketers thought they'd mastered the channel mix, another one entered the chat. AI is quickly becoming the discovery engine of the modern marketplace. AI is being used to make decisions, discover brands, redefine search engine optimization, and more.

At the 2025 ANA Masters of Marketing Conference, we asked:

- How much do you agree or disagree that “AI is the new search”?
 - Strongly agree
 - Somewhat agree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Strongly disagree

In response, 79 percent of attendees agreed with this sentiment. This consensus signals a fundamental reframing of the media mix. Discovery is shifting from search queries to conversational prompts, and the algorithms behind those prompts are rewriting the rules of brand visibility.

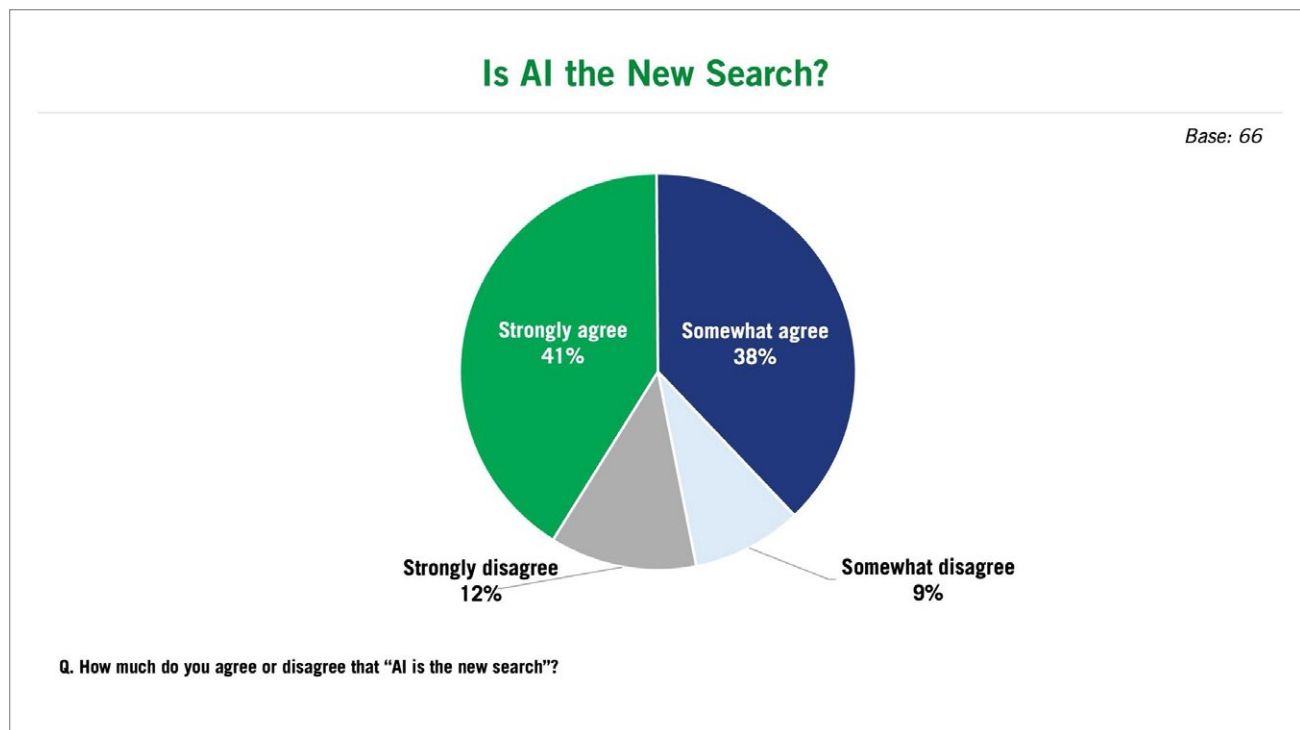


Figure 4: Reframing the media mix

DETAILED INSIGHTS

3. The Channel Shuffle: AI as the New Search

Harris Consumer Context

AI is already transforming discovery.³

- 44 percent of Gen Z and Millennials now use AI tools to learn about brands, nearly matching Instagram (47 percent) and TikTok (45 percent).
- 63 percent of Gen Z believe the future belongs to those who can direct AI, not compete with it.

Why It Matters

Search is no longer a box, it's a conversation. Consumers are discovering brands through conversational prompts, not keywords. Marketers must design for discovery in an agent-led ecosystem.

As AI tools guide more purchase paths, marketers will need to optimize not just for keywords, but for context. The brands that teach AI who they are through structured data, transparency, and credible content will surface first in this new search landscape.

³"[Gen Z and Millennial Entrepreneurs are Rapidly Integrating AI into their Businesses](#)," The Harris Poll, October 7, 2025

DETAILED INSIGHTS

4. Quiet Stability: Rethinking Career Priorities

Young professionals are rethinking career priorities. Stability, security, and work-life balance now outweigh the allure of high-tech roles.

At the 2025 ANA Masters of Marketing Conference, we asked:

- Which career would you encourage the next generation to enter?
 - AI
 - Electrician
 - Marketing
- How can the marketing industry demonstrate job stability for the next generation of marketing professionals? Please select all that apply.
 - Clear career paths
 - Access to ongoing education
 - Training on new technologies (AI, data, digital platforms)
 - Mentorship programs
 - Cross-functional mobility opportunities
 - Well-being and work-life balance initiatives
 - Transparent communication around long-term business strategy
 - Stable compensation structures (e.g., balance of fixed vs. variable pay)
 - Training/retraining programs
 - Other

In response, the marketers in the audience supported a career as an electrician (44 percent) over marketing (30 percent) or AI (26 percent). Almost 80 percent believe the key to industry job stability lies in training on new technologies, and 68 percent say learning new skills is critical.

In other words, marketers recognize that future growth depends on human continuity, nurturing specialists who can adapt to technology rather than burn out from it.

DETAILED INSIGHTS

4. Quiet Stability: Rethinking Career Priorities

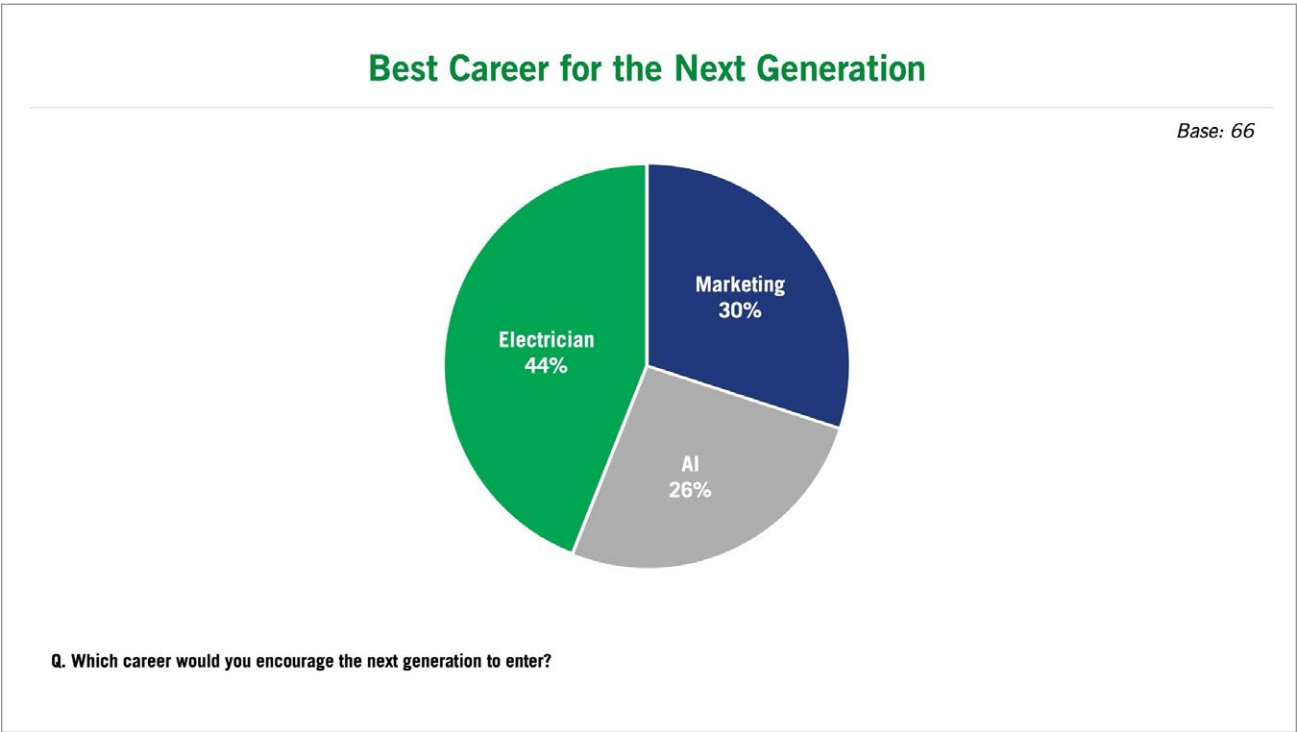


Figure 4: Best career for the next generation

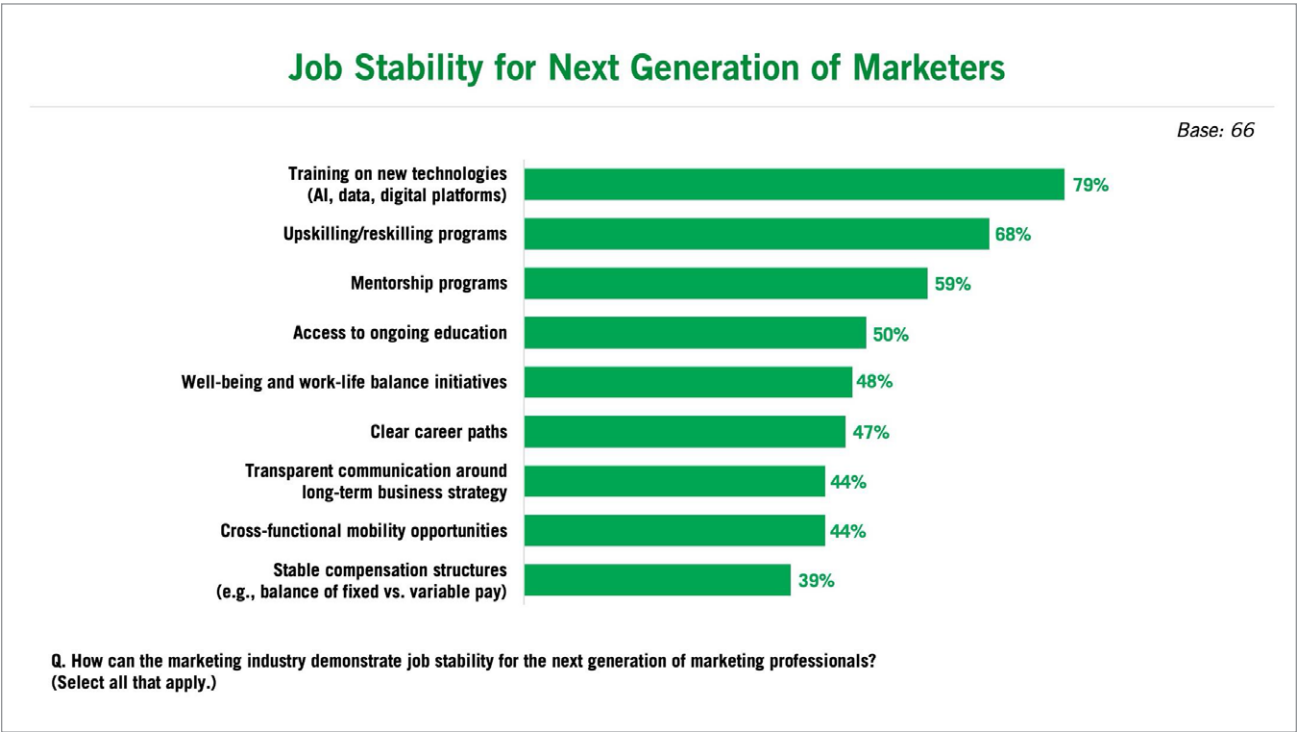


Figure 5: Key ways to demonstrate job stability to young professionals

DETAILED INSIGHTS

4. Quiet Stability: Rethinking Career Priorities

Harris Consumer Context

Broader Harris data shows young professionals redefining career priorities:

- 76 percent of young professionals are prioritizing stability over once-coveted tech jobs.⁴
- 77 percent of Americans agree “a plumber has better job security than a product manager.”⁵
- Financial stability is cited by 41 percent of those ages 18–25 as a priority for their future job, followed by work-life balance (36 percent).⁶

Why It Matters

In the face of disruption, talent stability is strategic. The marketing industry must invest in education, mentorship, and transparent career paths to remain attractive to the next generation.

The [ANA Growth Agenda](#) helps marketers set the industry’s priorities, solve its toughest challenges, and drive meaningful growth progress for their businesses and brands. The Growth Agenda is now organized around eight integrated Practice Areas, including the [Talent and Marketing Organization Practice](#), which empowers marketing talent enablement across the marketer career journey. The Talent and Marketing Organization Practice calls for exactly this kind of investment in people. Reframing marketing as a stable, future-proof career can strengthen both the pipeline of new talent and the credibility of the industry itself.

³["US Job Seekers Embrace Career Mobility: 56% Want New Industries, 52% Seek New Functions,"](#) Express Employment Professionals, January 22, 2025

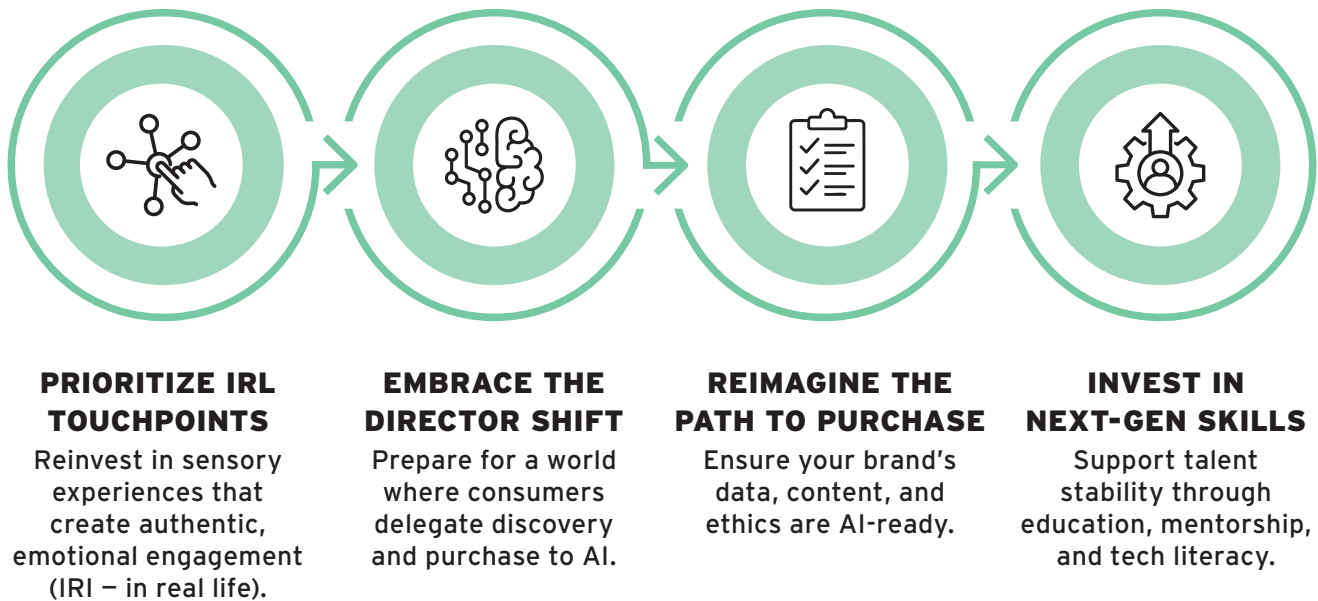
⁵["How Do Americans Think About the Skilled Trades?,"](#) The Harris Poll, July 31, 2025

⁶["Career Confidence in Crisis: New Report from Big Brothers Big Sisters Shows Gen Zers Lack Critical Mentorship,"](#) Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, September 9, 2025

THE MARKETER'S PLAYBOOK: FOUR IMPERATIVES FOR 2026

Across every poll, one theme emerged: Progress will depend on the balance between touch and technology, automation and authenticity, innovation and inclusion. The following four imperatives outline how to strike that balance.

FOUR IMPERATIVES FOR GROWTH



Together, these imperatives form a roadmap for the next year: practical where they must be, visionary where they should be.

CONCLUSION

As the ANA and The Harris Poll continue tracking these shifts, one truth stands out: progress isn't about chasing every new tool; it's about mastering the intersection of insight and empathy.

As 2026 approaches, marketers have a clear mandate:

Reclaim creativity. Redefine trust. Reinvest in people.

By aligning with the ANA Growth Agenda — emphasizing innovation, inclusivity, and talent development — the industry can turn insights from the Masters stage into action for the decade ahead.

And when you're ready to turn trends into strategy, The Harris Poll's Quest product suite empowers teams to make smarter decisions, faster — backed by trusted methodology and technology designed for today's pace of change. Quest meets you where you are with products tailored to every stage of the marketing life cycle from DIY polls to deep custom studies to always-on brand and reputation tracking.

Whatever your business question, Quest has a product built to answer it.

ABOUT THE ANA

The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) is the definitive voice of the marketing industry. Since 1910, we have set and advanced the agenda for marketing transformation, connecting over 1,600 member companies to an influential global network, insights, and resources that drive growth. Our members represent 20,000 brands and \$400 billion in annual marketing investment. Through industry-leading research, the CMO Growth Council, and our proprietary Growth Agenda and Practices, the ANA empowers marketers to shape the future of marketing and create lasting impact for their organizations and the industry.

ABOUT THE HARRIS POLL

The Harris Poll is a leading global market research and consulting firm, trusted since 1956 for its rigorous methodologies and credible, actionable insights. We equip leaders with the evidence and analysis they need to make confident, informed decisions in a rapidly evolving world.

Our team — comprised of researchers, consultants, social scientists, and journalists — delivers credible, data-driven intelligence that powers brand strategy, informs public discourse, and shapes organizational reputation.

Built on nearly seven decades of measuring public opinion, societal trends, and consumer behavior, The Harris Poll combines deep institutional knowledge with modern, advanced technologies. The result: high-quality, on-demand intelligence that our clients rely on to illuminate complex challenges and guide purposeful growth.

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