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THE STATE OF AI IN MARKETING

2026 benchmark study: Marketing's AI inflection point

How marketing leaders are moving forward as AI becomes table stakes

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has moved from a buzzword to a boardroom mandate over the past couple of years. *Adoption* is no longer the story—we found *100% of marketers* surveyed are using AI. What matters now is value, not usage.

Are marketers seeing real returns? And do they have the right foundation built to push their organization ahead as the technology evolves? Unsurprisingly, the answer isn't as straightforward as it seems.

This research explores the friction marketers are experiencing with AI today: Marketers say they find these tools extremely valuable, but their primary AI uses don't match how they're proving its value for their organization. They say their organizations are "extremely mature" when it comes to AI but cite data quality—the quintessential foundation of all AI tools—as their top challenge. There's also a significant gap between leadership's perception of how AI is used and its impact compared to the rest of the organization.

This all becomes even more important as agentic AI takes the throne as the "next big thing" in the industry, and the questions of human oversight, investment and results become even more pressing. If marketing organizations can't align on *why* they're using AI and how to accurately convey value, how can they keep up and continue to evolve?

This study, conducted with 250+ marketing decision-makers across five industries including retail, consumer packaged goods (CPG), financial services, travel and restaurants, finds marketers at an inflection point—one where early enthusiasm has been validated, but where confidence is beginning to outpace the foundations beneath it.

Let's begin.

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Key findings

"Adoption" is over; using AI is no longer a strategy, it's the starting line.

The last time we asked this question in 2025, AI adoption was at 94%—which is still impressively high. However, it's equally impressive that *everyone we asked today* is using AI in some way to prepare or execute their marketing.

If 100% of marketers surveyed use AI, is it really a differentiator? It's an interesting question to pose as we move towards a landscape where AI use is table stakes.

In 2026, the most popular AI tool among marketers is "AI-powered search/ Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)".

In last year's survey, marketers noted "data insights and analysis" as their most popular tool. One thing missing from this list? Content generation tools.

AI-generated content tools took the second spot behind data and insights in 2025—this year, it doesn't even make the list—which could signal a shift in focus from simply generating more content to actually making that content accessible and visible.

100%

of marketers have reported using AI to prepare or execute marketing, up from 94% in 2025.

The most popular AI tools and technologies include:

1. AI-powered search/Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) tools (54%)
2. Conversational AI or AI-powered chat (52%)
3. Data insights & analysis (51%)

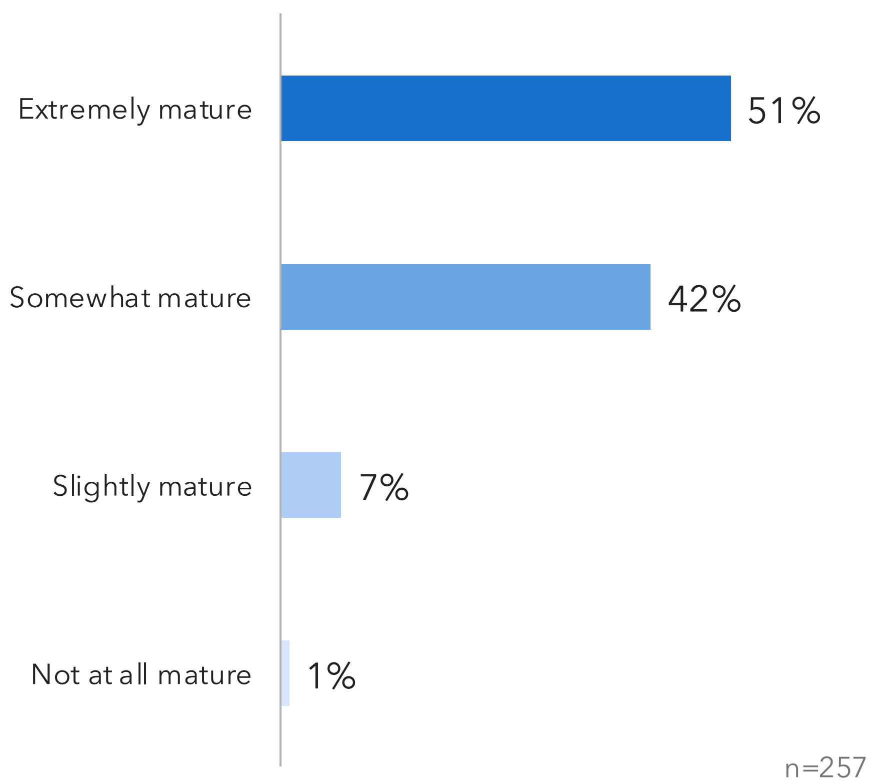
There's a lot of confidence in AI maturity and its perceived value.

Confidence in AI is extremely high in the industry right now. Half of marketers rated their organization as "extremely mature" in using AI, and almost no one said they were "not at all mature." This represents a pretty significant shift in how marketers view their AI skills: In 2025, only 35% of marketers said they were "extremely mature" in using AI.

And it appears investment trends are following suit: Half of respondents (49%) allocate 11–20% of their marketing budget to AI initiatives, while only 2% commit less than 5%. Investment is following confidence—AI has moved from experiment to fixed budget line. 91% of marketers said AI is "extremely" or "very" valuable to their organization, which continues to paint the picture that marketers are fully investing their time, effort and budgets into AI.

Self-assessed AI maturity

How would you rate your organization's maturity?



51% rate their organization **"extremely mature"** in using AI.

91% find their organization's implementation of AI **"extremely" or "very" valuable.**

Productivity is the overwhelming reason marketers use AI—but that's not the metric they're measuring it by.

The majority of marketers (71%) noted they are primarily using AI for "productivity and efficiency" gains, (i.e., it's helping them do their job faster) but only 9% said they are using AI for revenue generation.

However, when asked how marketers are primarily *measuring* the performance of their AI tools, 46% said they're looking at revenue gains. There's quite a discrepancy in what most marketers say they're using it for and how they're actually measuring success. As you break it down further, we found more than half (58%) of C-level marketers chose revenue generation as their primary means for measuring AI success. Leadership, unsurprisingly, is looking at the bottom line while most marketers are using AI to be more productive in their day-to-day.

Of course, those two things are connected, but if you're trying to prove outcome from a new initiative, it would be more effective to measure and report on it directly versus through a correlation.

71%

of marketers cited **"productivity and efficiency"** as the primary objective for using AI (only 9% chose "revenue generation").

46%

say they are primarily measuring the performance of your AI tools through **revenue generation.**

The hardest problem isn't the AI —it's the data feeding it.

Despite half of marketers feeling their organization is "extremely mature" when it comes to AI, the most popular technical challenge they're facing is data quality or incomplete data feeding the AI models.

Having quality data is the single most important thing when it comes to making the most out of your AI tools. A model can only be as good as the data behind it, so a "mature" AI program built on shaky data might not be so mature. It really is a matter of garbage in, garbage out.

The real edge won't come from adopting flashier tools; it'll come from getting the fundamentals—like data and identity—right, and doing that first.

45% cite data quality (incomplete data feeding AI models) as the top technical challenge.

Agentic AI is already mainstream —but humans stay firmly in the loop.

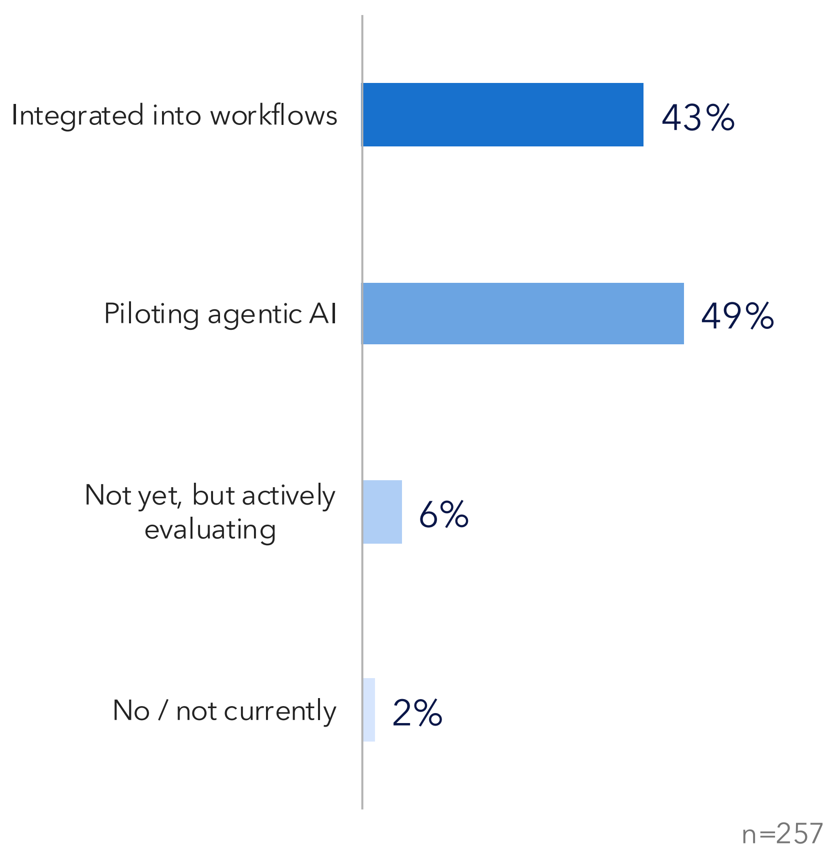
Fully autonomous agents remain rare (only 2% let agents run with no human intervention). Marketers are clearly embracing agentic capabilities while keeping human oversight at the key decisions that matter most.

Brand safety is the most popular concern among marketers when it comes to using AI agents—they're worried that the agent will act in a way that is not aligned with their brand. Despite the concerns, marketers appear to be fully embracing agentic AI.

Over the next year, keep an eye on the question of control—it's only going to become more important as organizations continue to embrace and adopt new forms of the tech.

Agentic AI adoption status

Have you started using or piloting agentic AI?



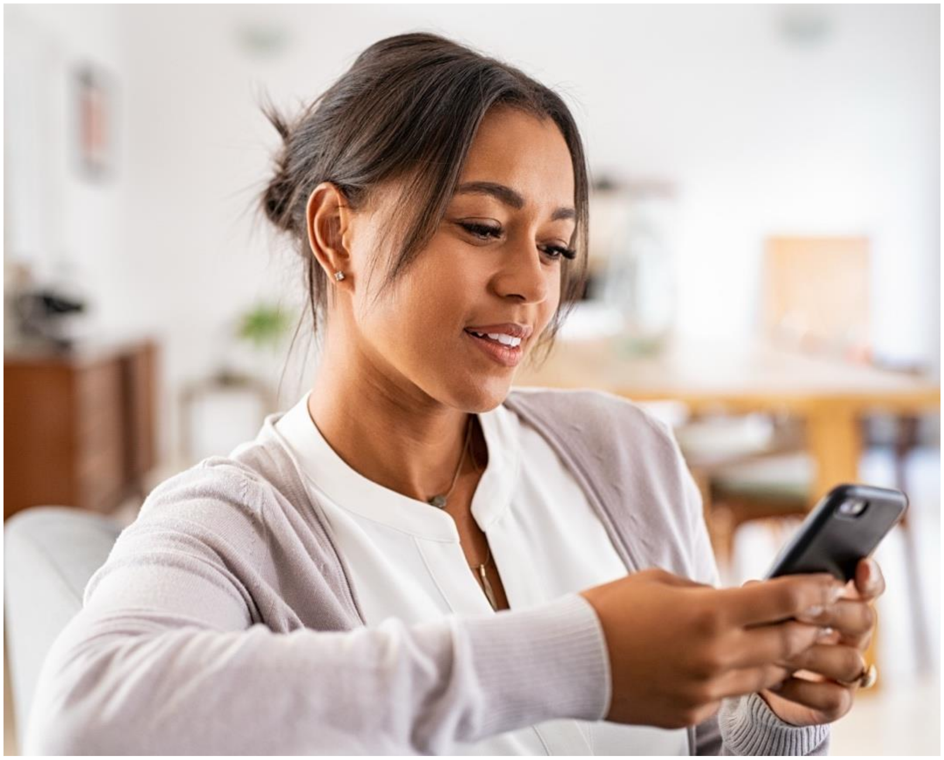
92%

have integrated or are piloting agentic AI**—only 8% have no plans.**

76%

require human sign-off before agents execute, and 29% require approval at every step.

Consumer agents are on marketers' minds —and the focus is visibility.



Brands are focused on getting their products in front of the right people—even if it's through AI.

More consumers are turning to Chat GPT and Claude to shop and find the best product recommendations, even having the tool make purchases on their behalf.

For marketers, this should ring some alarm bells, but it seems they're staying cool. The focus now is making content and products more accessible to LLMs while exploring how to advertise within these platforms.

When asked if they were concerned about consumer AI agents interfering with their ability to reach and connect with customers, more than half said they're optimistic that it will help people find their products and services even faster, as opposed to hindering their ability to connect with customers.

61%

are very familiar with AI-powered consumer agents and closely follow the trend.

52%

say they're optimistic that consumer agents will help customers find their products and services faster.

67%

of marketers are already structuring their content for AI agent discovery and 60% are exploring how to advertise within LLMs.

The C-level and the front lines might not see AI the same.

There are a couple of viable reasons for this perception gap. C-level marketers may be receiving pressure from *their* leaders to implement AI and make it more visible. Maybe they think AI is helping more than it really is. Or marketing leaders are genuinely more tuned-in to AI and how to maximize its value compared to the rest of the marketing organization.

Regardless of what is driving this gap in perception, it's worth noting that C-level marketers rate themselves much more mature with AI than senior managers, and an overwhelming majority of leaders say the AI tools they've implemented are "extremely valuable" versus only 25% of senior managers.

67%

of C-level marketers say their organization is "extremely mature" when it comes to AI use.

VS

33%

of senior managers would rate their organization as being "extremely mature."

73%

of C-level marketers say the AI tools they've implemented are "extremely valuable."

VS

25%

of senior managers say they find these tools "extremely valuable."

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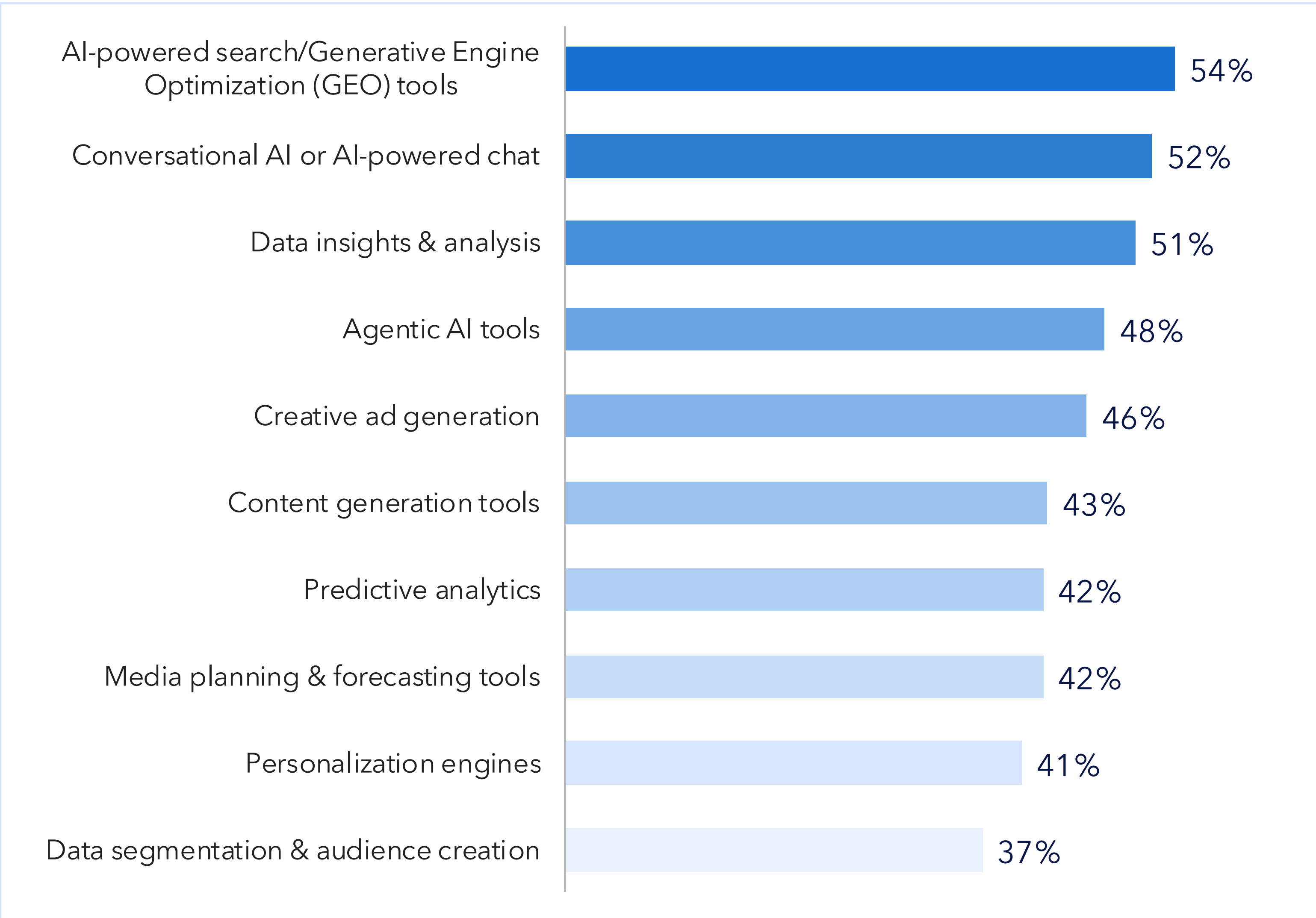
SECTION 1: AI USE & INVESTMENT

Universal adoption, matched by widespread confidence

Whether or not to adopt AI is settled: Every marketer now uses it, most back it with real budget and half describe their organizations as "extremely mature." In this section, we explore that commitment, looking at the tools in play, the dollars behind them, the vendors being relied on and what it's like to go "all in" on AI.

AI search tools (54%) and conversational AI (52%) lead in popularity among marketers, while data segmentation trails the set at 37%.

Which AI tools and technologies are you currently using?

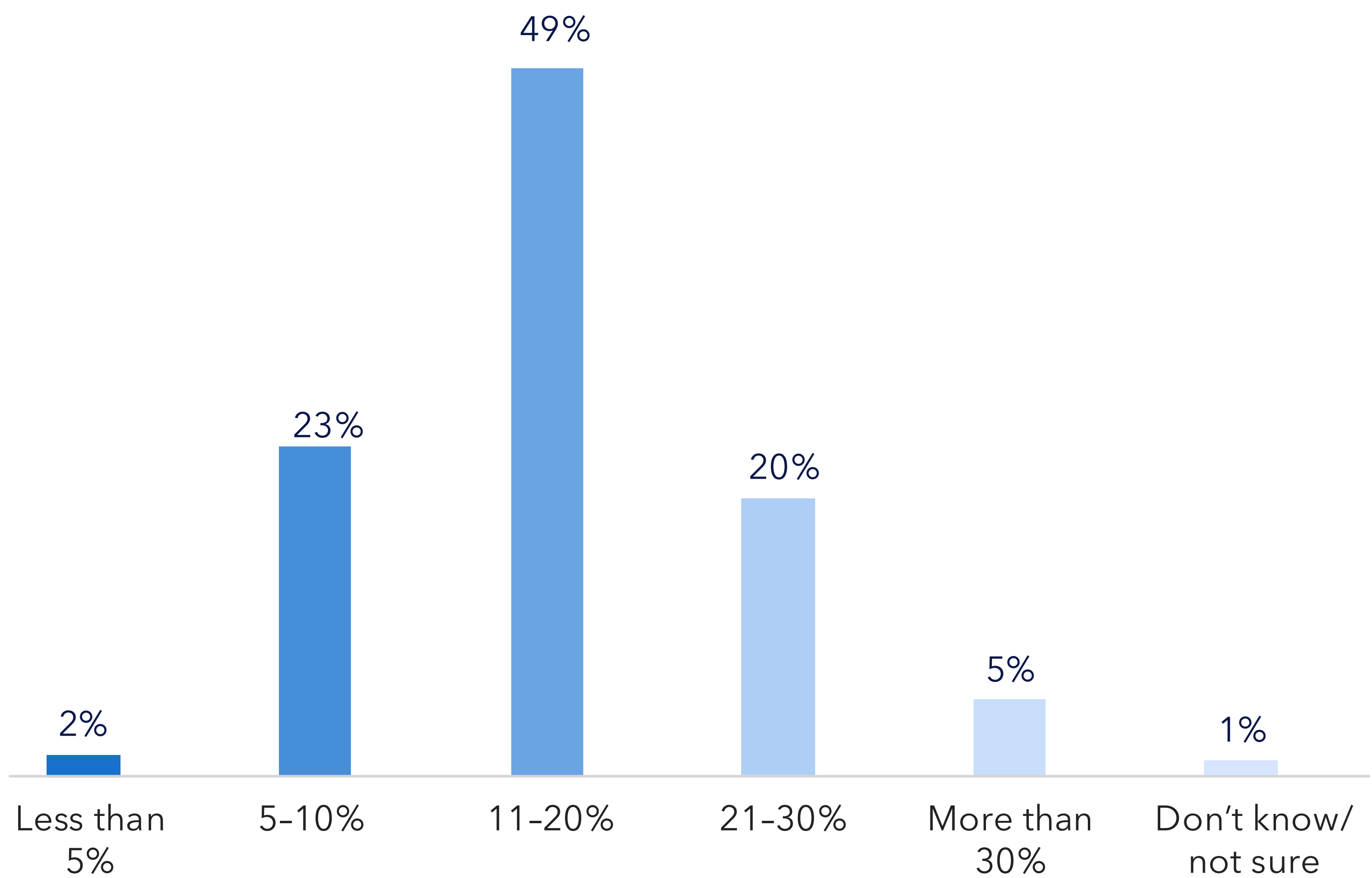


Adoption of AI tools and technologies is broad and even, with every listed tool used by 37% to 54% of respondents and no single one dominating—validating the point that marketers are using AI in almost every facet of marketing today.

C-level respondents highlighted that their organizations use AI tools heavily, with 79% using conversational AI, 76% AI-powered search/GEO and 73% creative ad generation.

Nearly half report their organizations earmark 11–20% of their marketing budget to AI initiatives, while only 2% commit less than 5%.

What percentage of your marketing budget is allocated to AI-related initiatives?

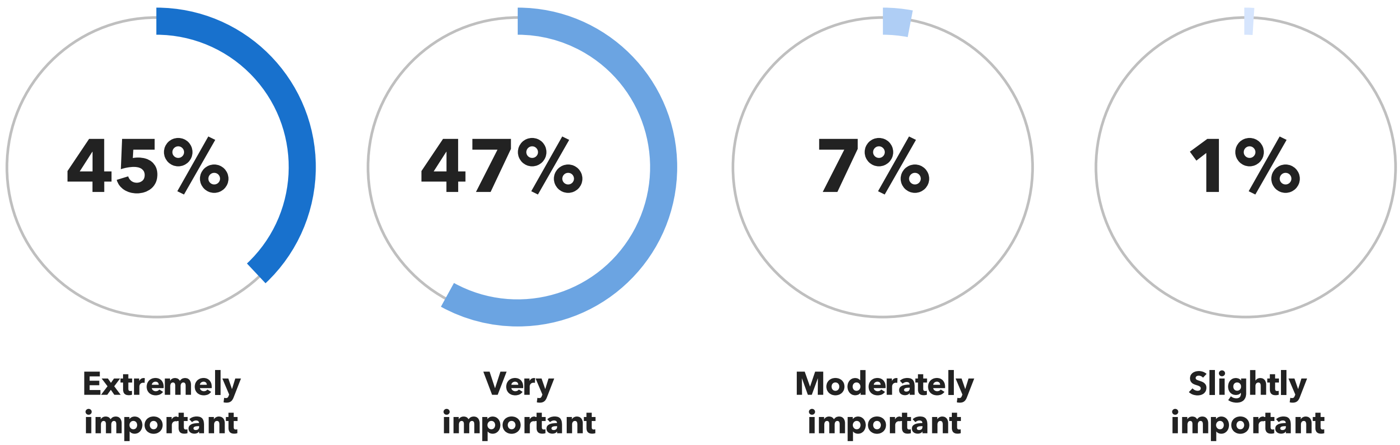


AI has moved from experiment to a need-to-have budget item as nearly half of marketers indicate their organizations allocate 11–20% of marketing spend for it (followed by 5–10% and 21–30%).

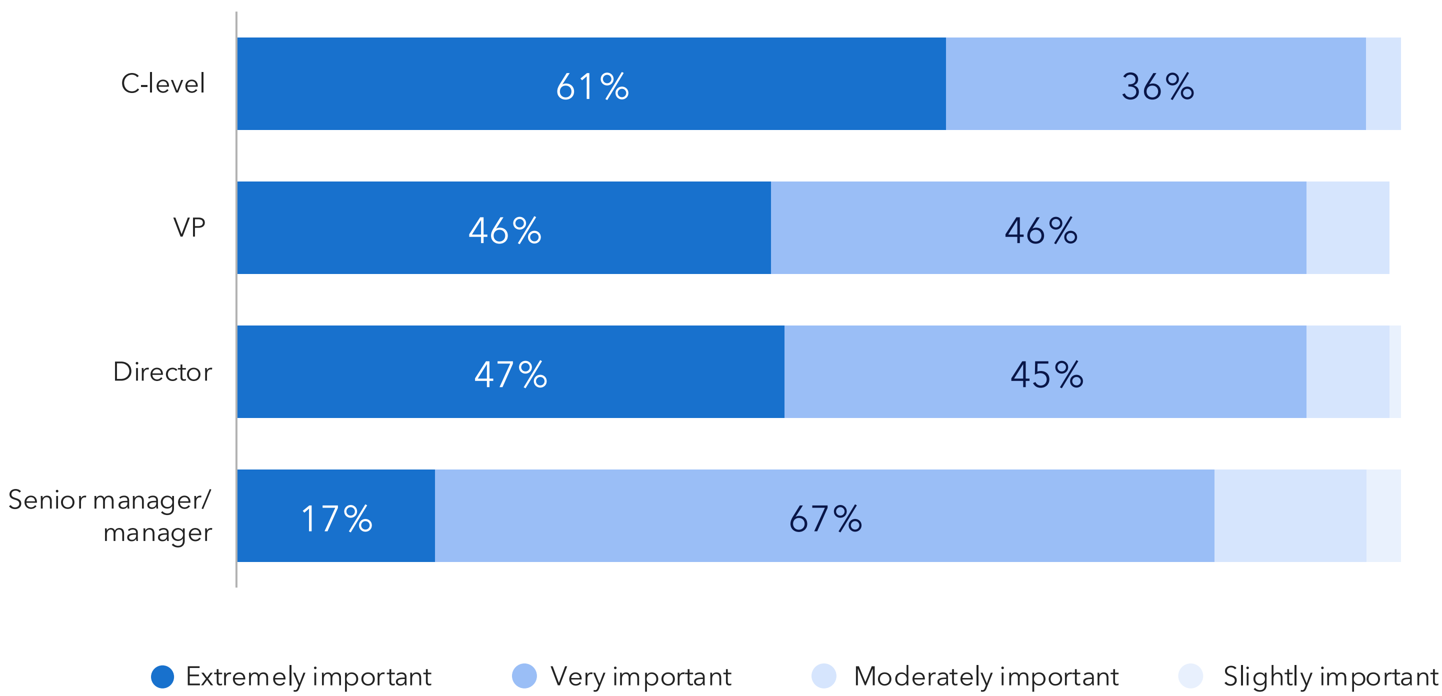
21% of respondents who are working at the C-level signal that their organizations allocate more than 30% of budget to AI, well above the 5% overall average.

AI capability has become a vendor pre-requisite with 92% of respondents considering it extremely or very important.

How important is AI capability when selecting a marketing vendor or partner?



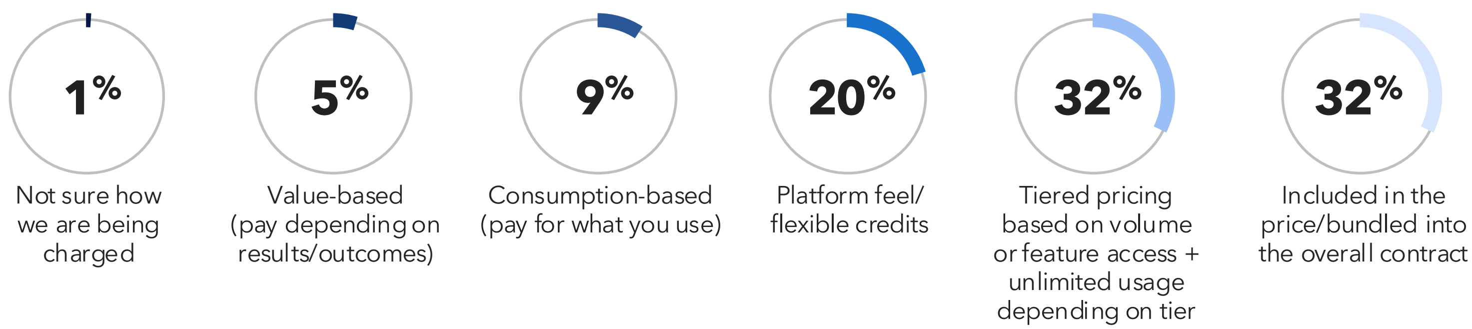
Breakdown by job designation



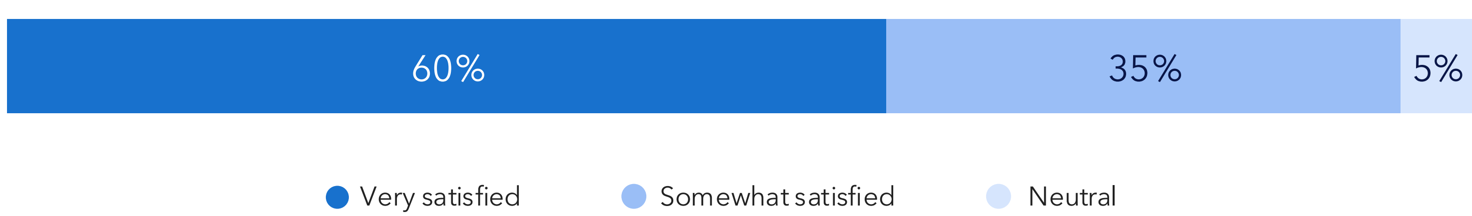
Base: total respondents (n=257). *Small base–interpret directionally. Senior manager (n=12) and manager (n=18) combined. "Not important" selected by 0% of respondents at every level.

Bundled and tiered pricing dominate AI contracts, whereas value-based pricing is rare; pricing satisfaction is near-universal with 60% respondents being very satisfied.

How is your organization primarily being charged for the AI capabilities included in your marketing vendor(s) or partner(s)?



How satisfied are you with how your AI vendor capabilities are priced?



Despite very different models and ways of packaging up AI tools and technologies, 60% are very satisfied overall—indicating **the model matters less than the perceived value.**

Although tiered and bundled pricing are equally common, organizations on bundled contracts are more satisfied (66% very satisfied vs. 55% for tiered), suggesting that predictable, **all-inclusive pricing resonates more than paying based on volume or tier.**

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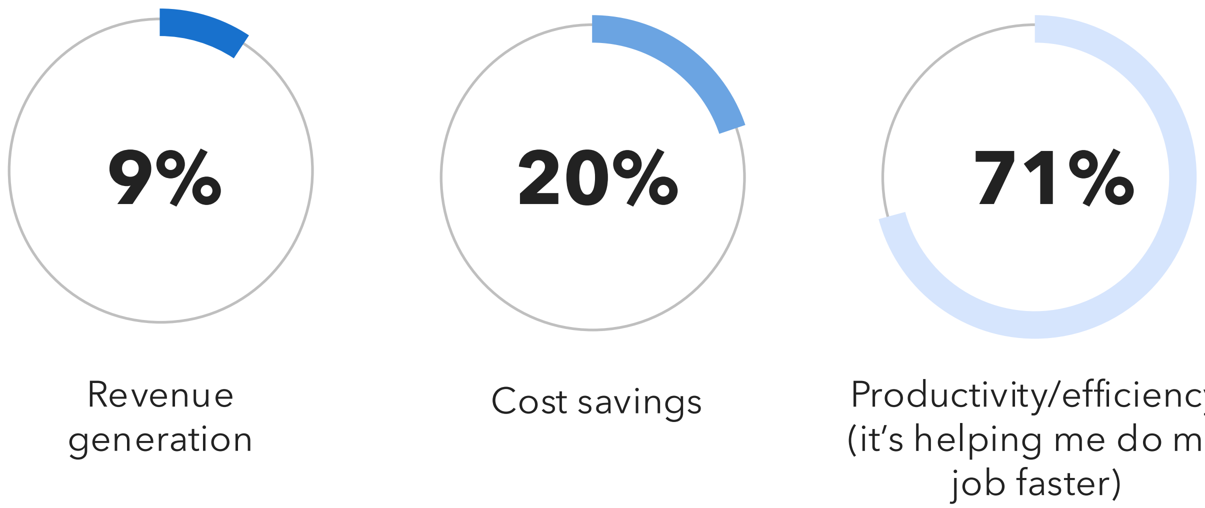
SECTION 2: VALUE DRIVERS

The returns are real—and they're mostly about speed

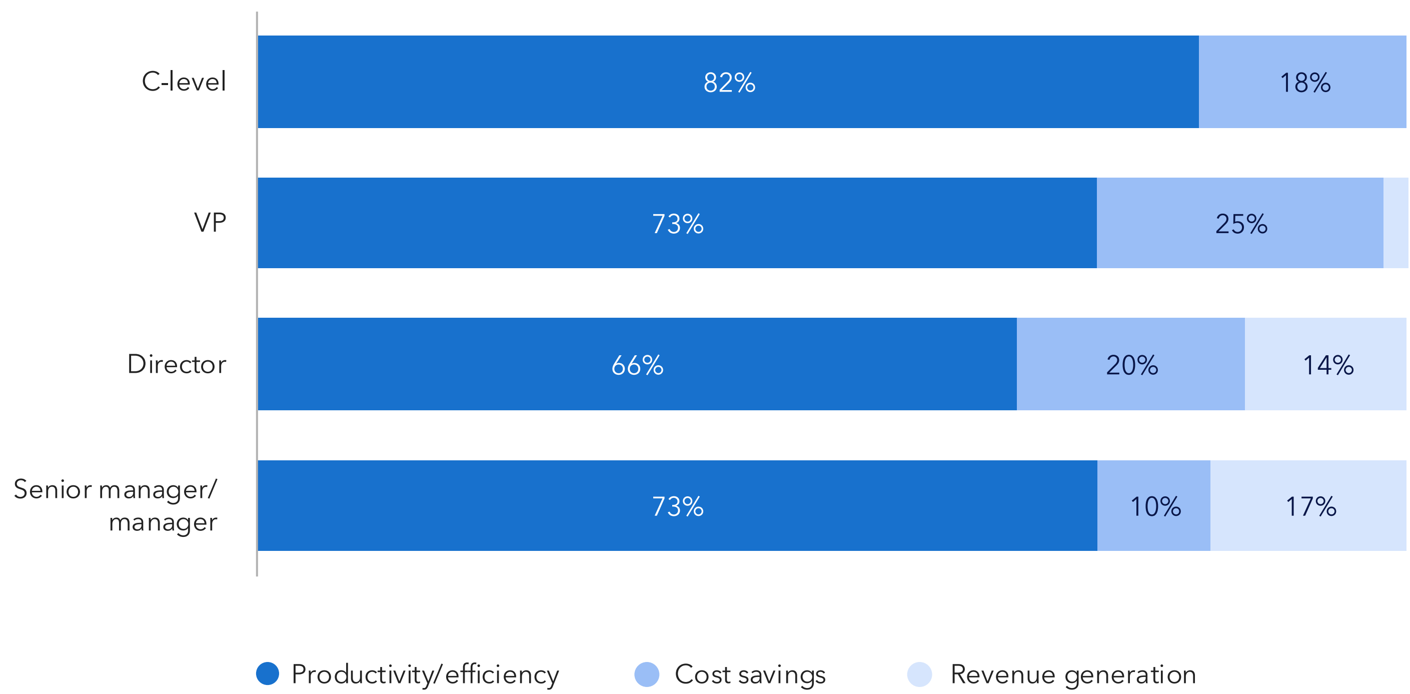
The value marketers draw from AI is tangible: quicker workflows, greater output and satisfaction is nearly universal. But if we take a closer look, efficiency stands out as the true source of that value. This section highlights perceived AI value—from productivity and efficiency to generative AI.

Productivity/efficiency is the overwhelming primary objective for using AI (71%); cost savings and revenue generation trail far behind.

What is your company's primary objective for using AI?



Breakdown by job designation



Base: total respondents (n=257). *Small base – interpret directionally. Senior manager (n=12) and manager (n=18) combined. "Other" selected by 0% of respondents at every level. Directors are significantly more likely than C-level and VP respondents to cite revenue generation.

AI's impact is distributed, not concentrated: personalization at scale (32%) and data insights & analysis (31%) lead a long tail.

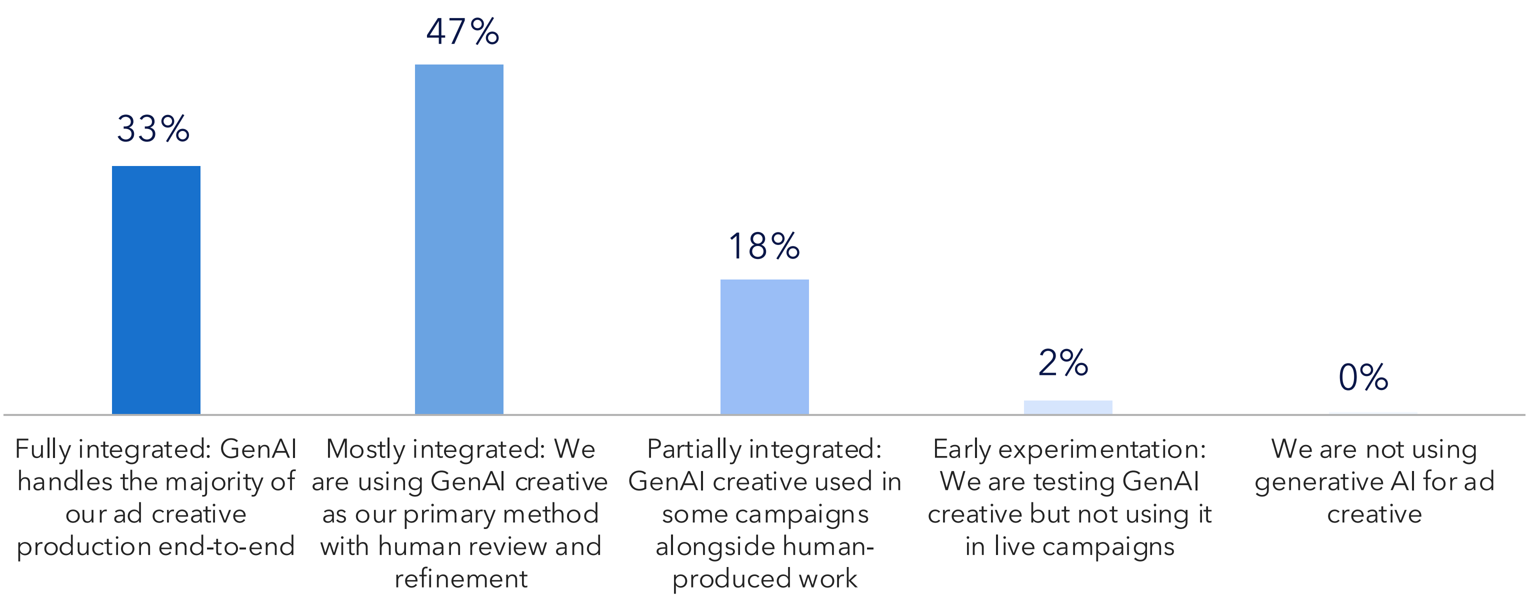
What marketing functions have you seen improve the most because of AI?

Top choices by industry

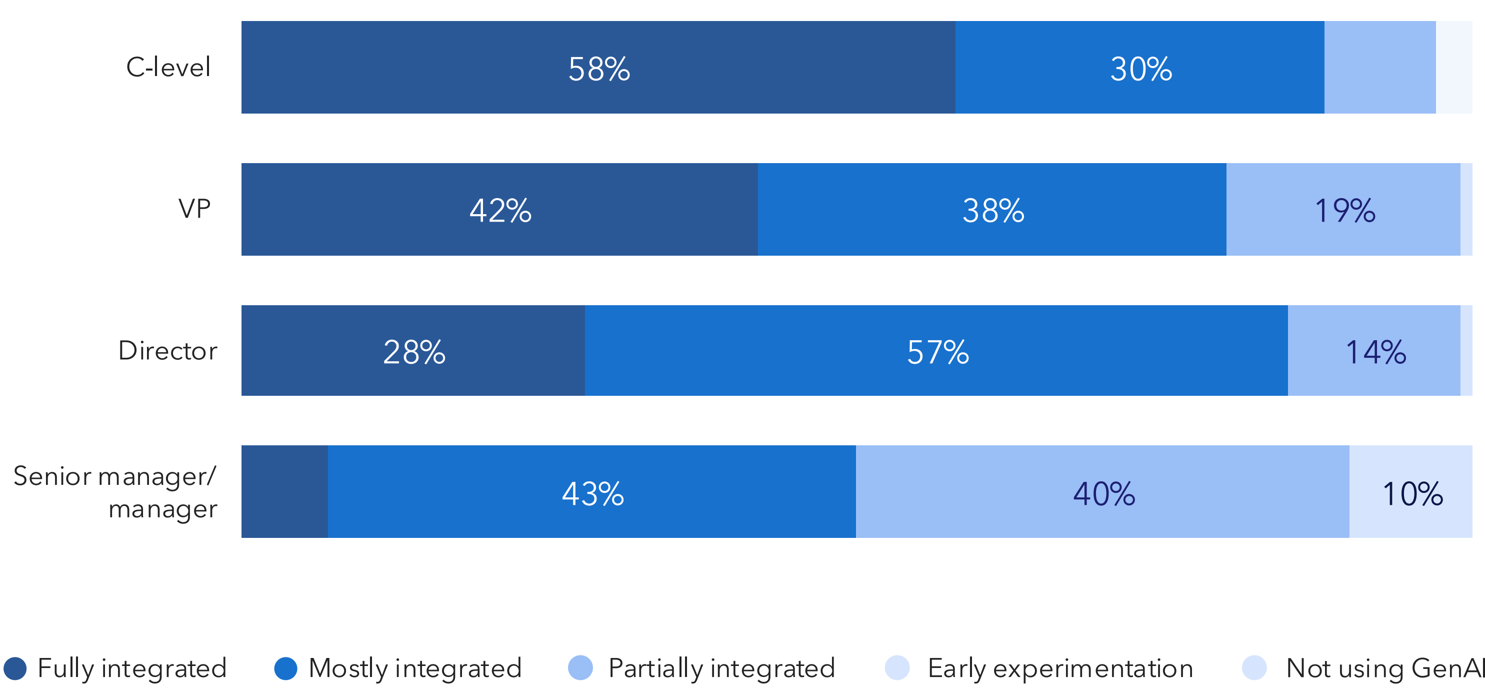
CPG	Retail	FSI	Travel	Restaurants
Personalization at scale	Data insights and analysis	Data insights and analysis	Personalization at scale	Social media management

98% are still using generative AI for creative purposes, with four in five using it in a fully or mostly integrated way.

Thinking about your use of generative AI for marketing creative (e.g., ad copy, images, social posts, video, emails, offers), which best describes your organization's current state?

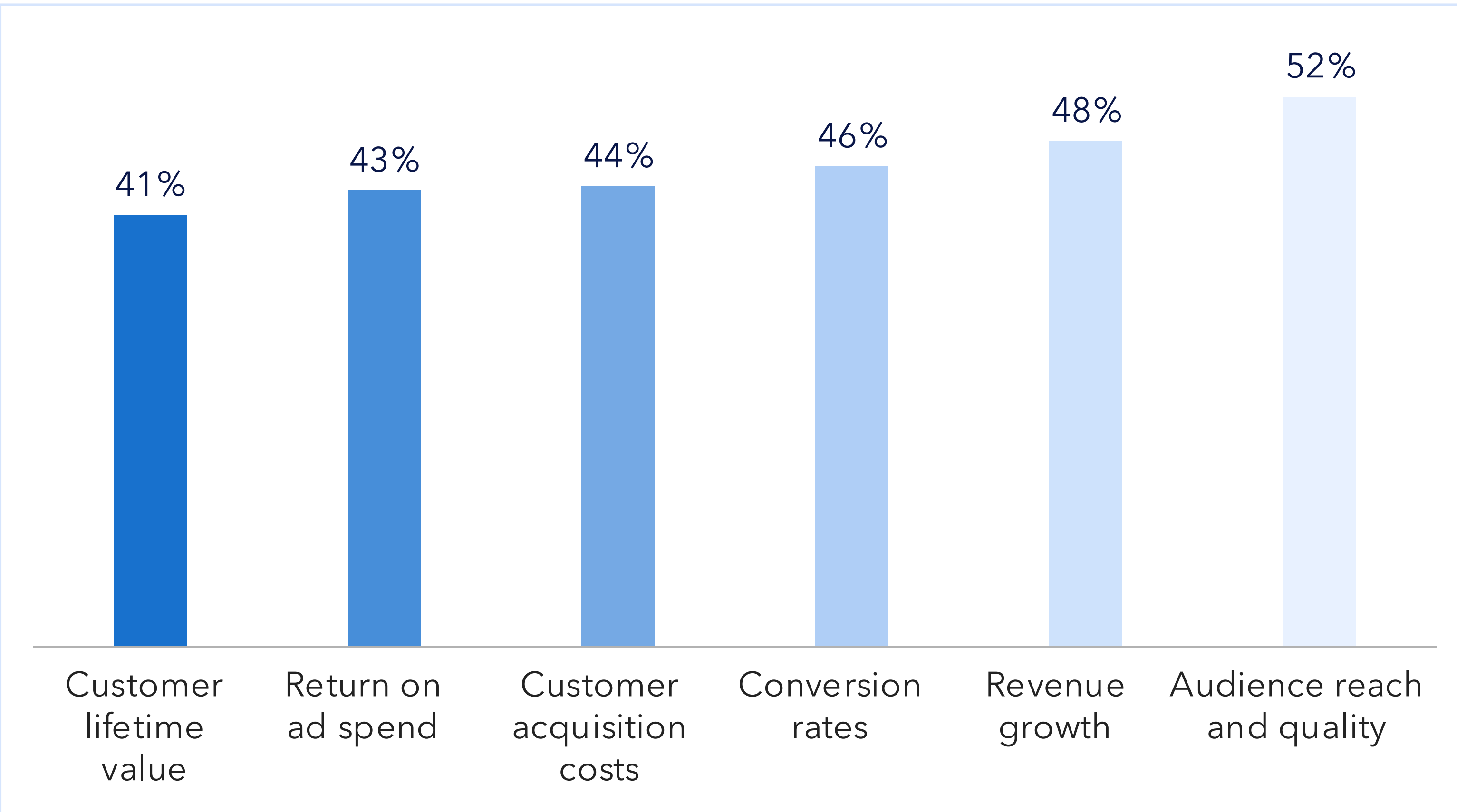


Breakdown by job designation

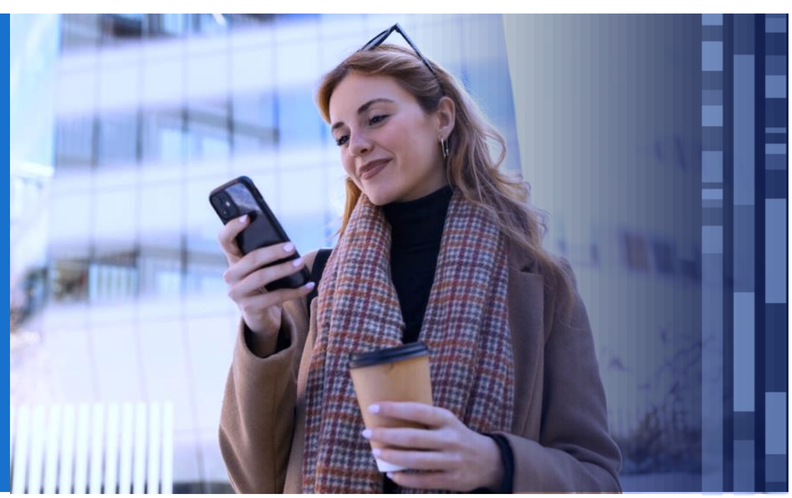


AI lifts the entire technical KPIs funnel: audience reach and quality (52%) lead six tightly clustered KPIs.

Which technical KPIs (KPIs that are related to marketing performance and driving business outcomes/revenue) have improved the most since utilizing AI?



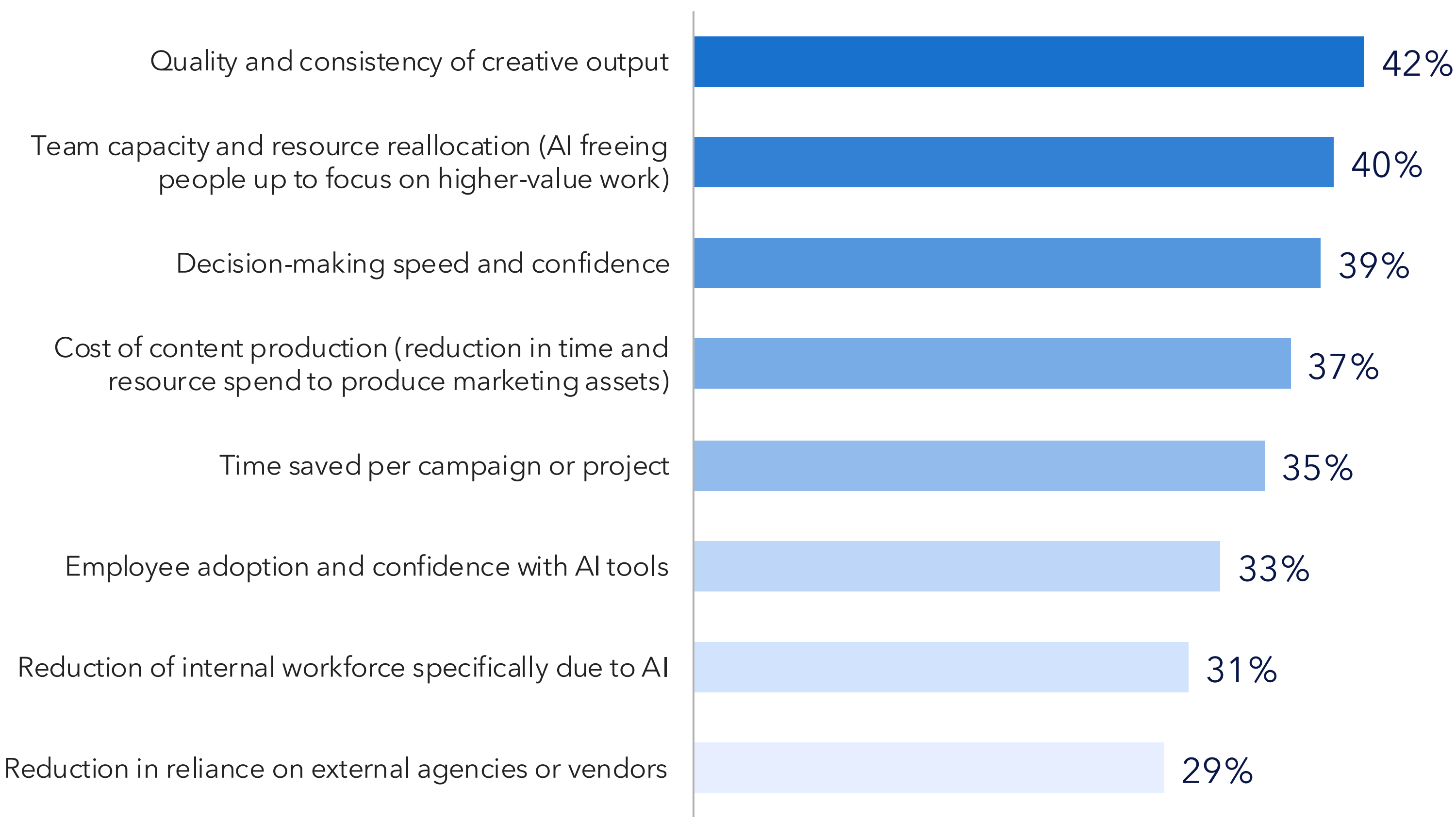
The most notable pattern is the consistency of improvement where all six KPIs improved for a similar 41–52%, indicating **AI is lifting the whole funnel from reach to revenue** rather than optimizing a single metric.



AI elevates output and frees up capacity: quality (42%) and team capacity (40%) lead; workforce reduction ranks near last.

Marketers note the quality and consistency of creative output have improved the most since utilizing AI. While the results are somewhat consistent across the board, the reduction of internal workforce or reliance on external agencies or vendors come in at the bottom of the pack, signaling **most marketers believe AI is improving the quality of their work rather than taking their work from them.**

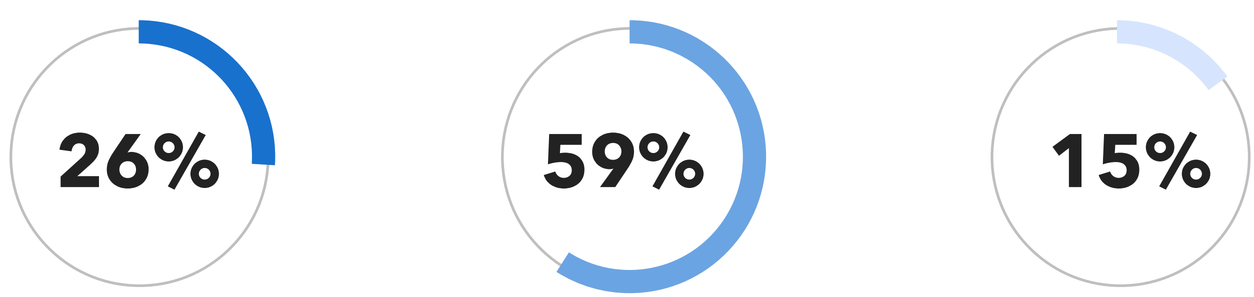
Which organizational KPIs (KPIs that are surrounding your personnel and team efficiencies) have improved the most since utilizing AI?



Early expectations for AI were strongly positive as 81% expected significant or transformational impact on their organizations—and those expectations were largely met.

When AI started to become part of marketing conversations (around 2022), how would you describe your initial expectations for its impact on your organization?

Compared to those initial expectations, how would you describe where your organization is at today?



AI has **exceeded my expectations** and delivered more than I anticipated

AI has **met my expectations** and is delivering what I roughly expected

AI has **partially met my expectations**—some areas are delivering, others are not

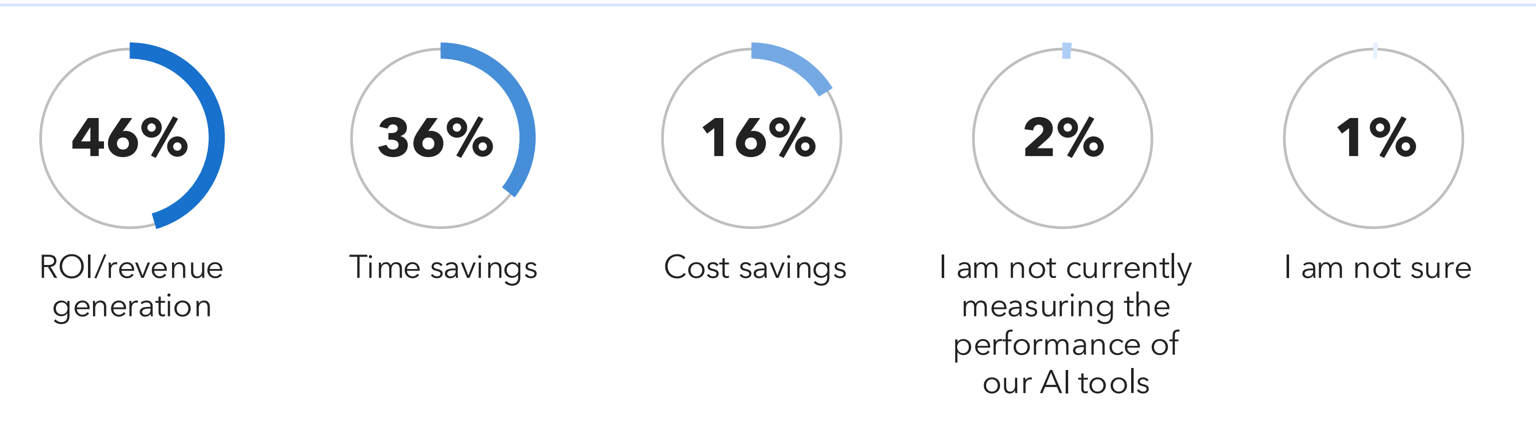
SECTION 3: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The gaps and opportunities that await marketers

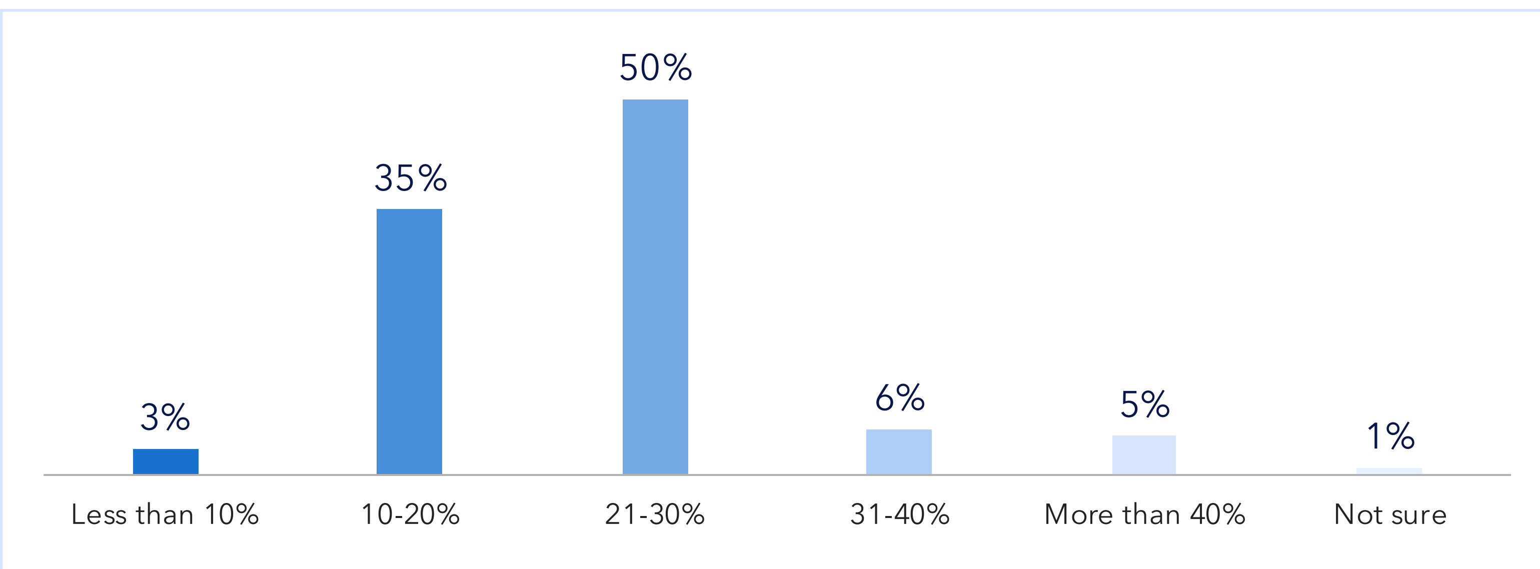
Adoption and satisfaction are settled—so what actually sets marketers apart? This section assesses how ready marketers *feel* and how ready they really are: revenue proof over assumed value, the confidence gap between the C-level and the front line, agentic AI that's adopted but still supervised, and consumer agents and the data foundation underneath it all.

Marketers indicate their organizations measure AI performance by hard outcomes (46% ROI), and half report a 21–30% ROI uplift.

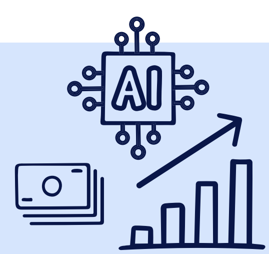
What is the primary way you are measuring the performance of your AI tools?



What is your estimated ROI performance increase due to AI?

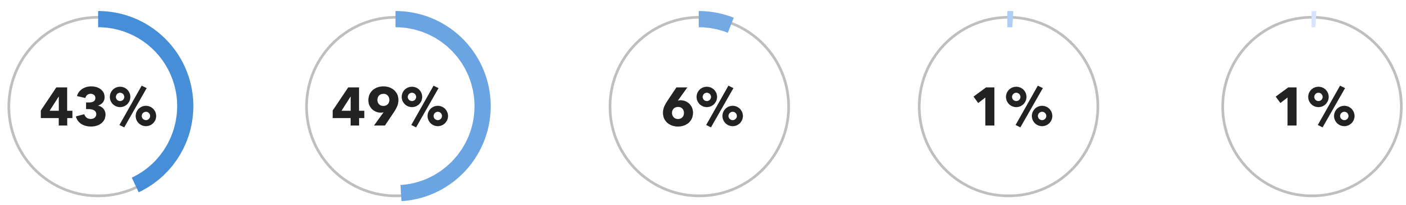


As organizations allocate from 5–10% to 30%+ of the marketing budget to AI, ROI climbs from mostly 10–20% to more than 40%+, **suggesting that bolder AI spending is closely tied to higher returns among organizations.**



Agentic AI is already mainstream: 92% of organizations have integrated or are piloting it, and only 2% have no plans or are unfamiliar.

Has your organization started using, piloting or evaluating any agentic AI tools for marketing purposes?



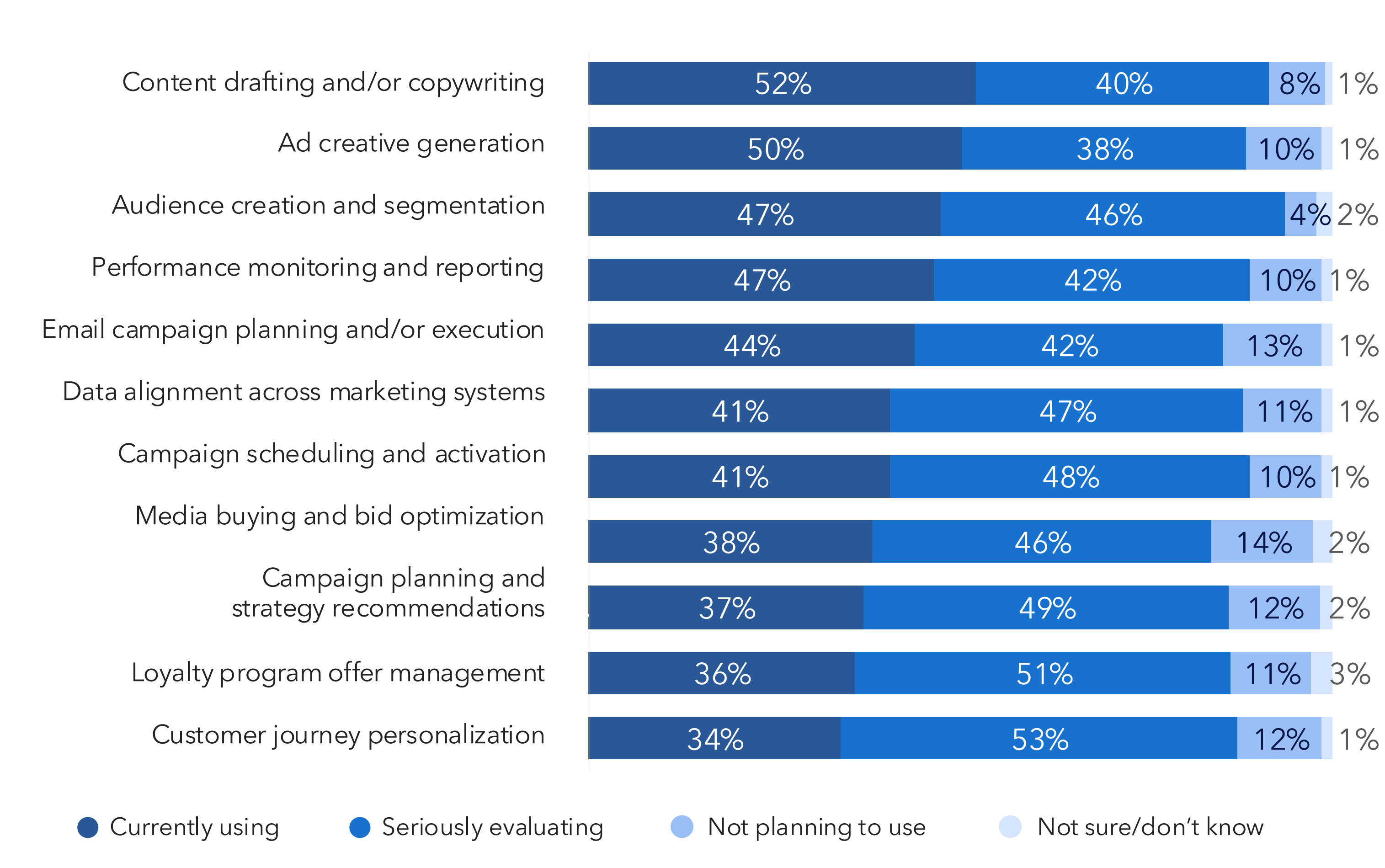
43%	49%	6%	1%	1%
Yes, agentic AI is integrated into our workflows	Yes, we are piloting agentic AI tools	No, we are not currently using agentic AI tools, but we are actively evaluating them	No, and we do not have plans to adopt agentic AI tools	I am not familiar with the concept of agentic AI

Agentic AI has evolved decisively from concept to practice, with 92% having already integrated agentic or are piloting it; the question for organizations is no longer whether to adopt, but how fast to scale.

Notably, 76% of respondents working at C-level state that agentic AI is integrated into their workflows compared to 43% of managers, senior managers and directors.

Over half are currently use agentic AI to perform content drafting (52%) and ad creative generation (50%).

Which of the following tasks are you currently using (or seriously evaluating) agentic AI to perform?

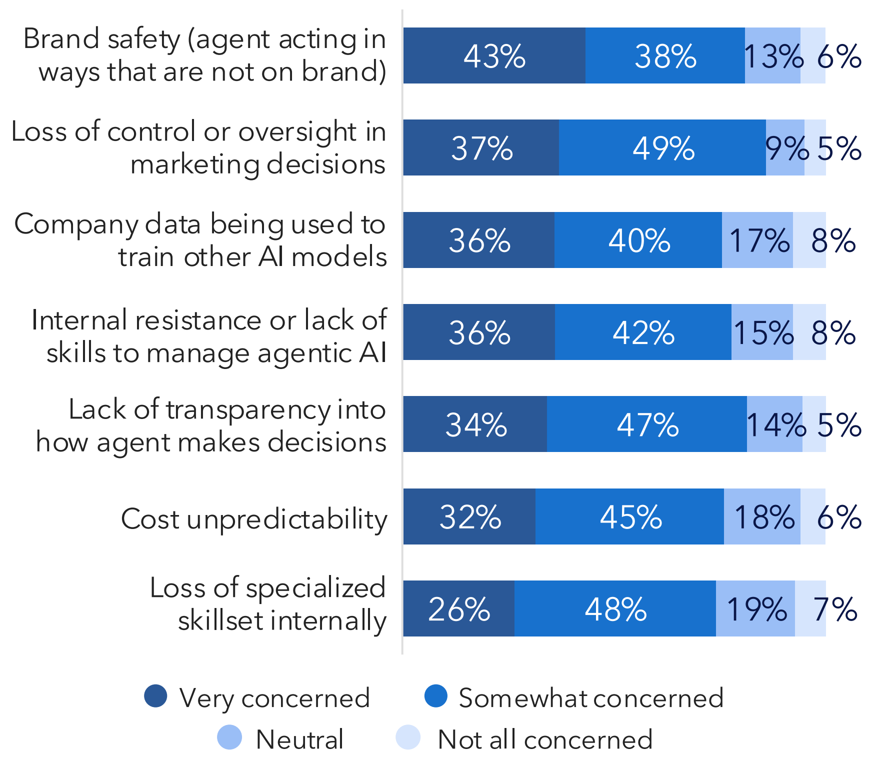


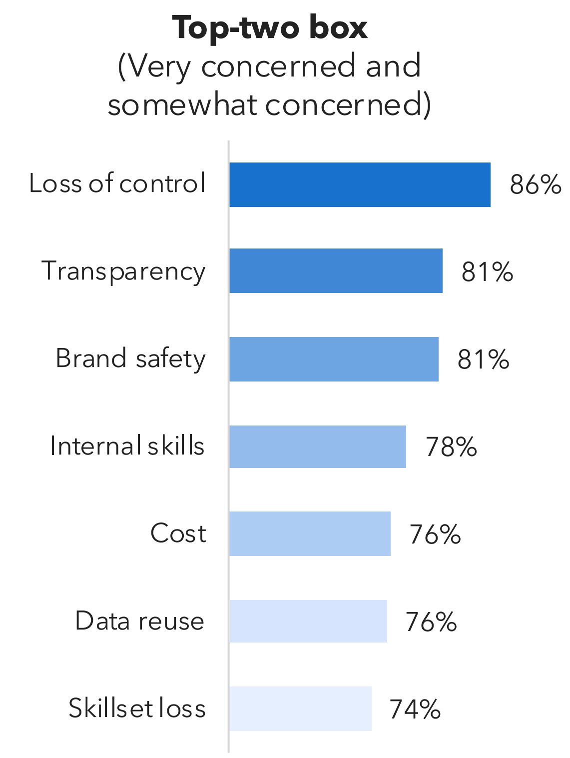
Creative dominates agentic AI use cases, with content drafting and ad creative generation leading—while more strategic applications like customer journey personalization (34%) remain largely in evaluation.

C-level and directors highlight that their organizations lead usage across nearly every task, most strikingly on ad creative generation (67% of C-level vs. 50% overall), email campaign execution (64%) and campaign scheduling (61%), indicating they're already operationalizing AI across core campaign activities.

Loss of control is the top agentic AI concern (86% are very or somewhat concerned), followed by lack of transparency and brand safety.

Please note how you feel about the following expressed concerns about using agentic AI to prepare or execute marketing?





Number of respondents (n) = 251
Note: Q13 base = respondents who answered Yes to "AI is integrated" or "Piloting AI" or "Not using but evaluating AI" in Q10. Only 1 respondent selected "Others" and 2 selected "No significant concerns"

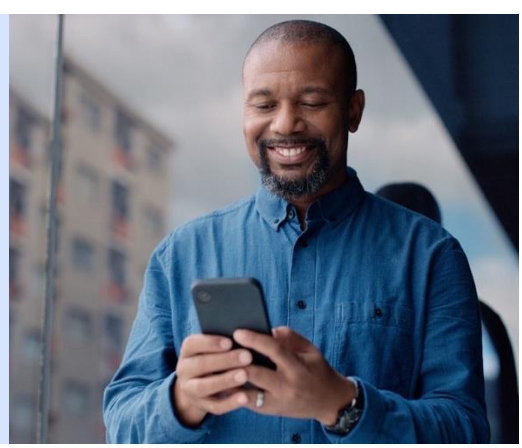
Every listed risk draws at least 74% concern (very concerned and somewhat concerned), with loss of control topping the list (86%), which helps explain why human oversight remains so tightly enforced.

For respondents who insist on full human approval of agentic AI, brand safety outweighs every other concern, with 55% very concerned about agent acting in ways that are not on brand, well above their concern for loss of control (37%) or transparency (38%). This indicates that hands-on oversight is motivated chiefly by protecting the brand rather than by broader governance worries.

Respondents are broadly optimistic about AI-powered consumer agents, with more than half (52%) seeing them as a way for customers to find them faster.

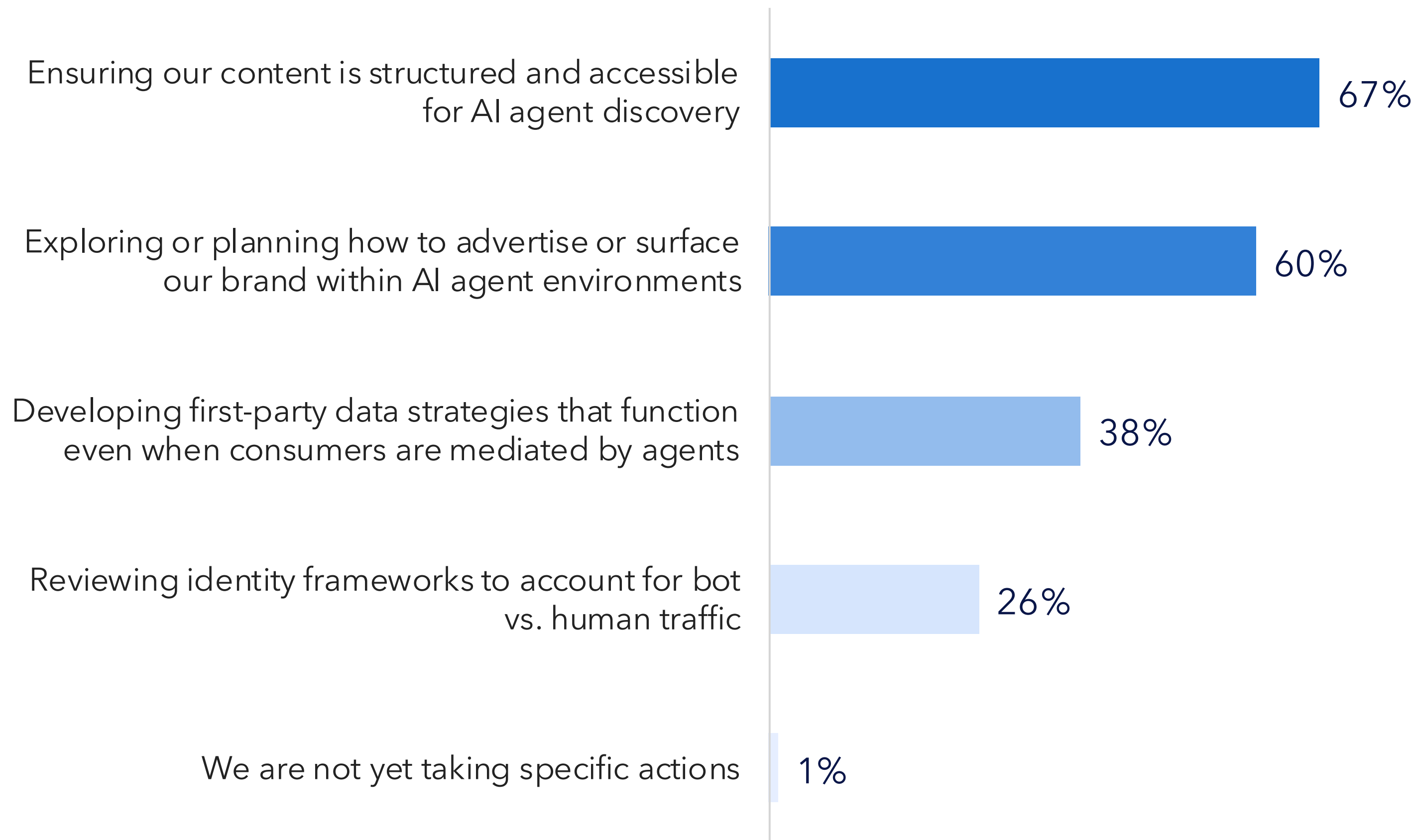
How do you feel about AI-powered consumer agents with regard to your ability to reach and engage real customers?

Familiarity with consumer agents breeds optimism rather than caution. Among organizations which are very familiar, 64% are optimistic that consumer agents will help customers find their products faster, well above 52% overall, suggesting that a deeper understanding of the technology eases rather than heightens concern about reaching customers.



Organizations prioritize visibility over infrastructure: 67% make content discoverable to AI agents, but only 26% are reviewing identity frameworks.

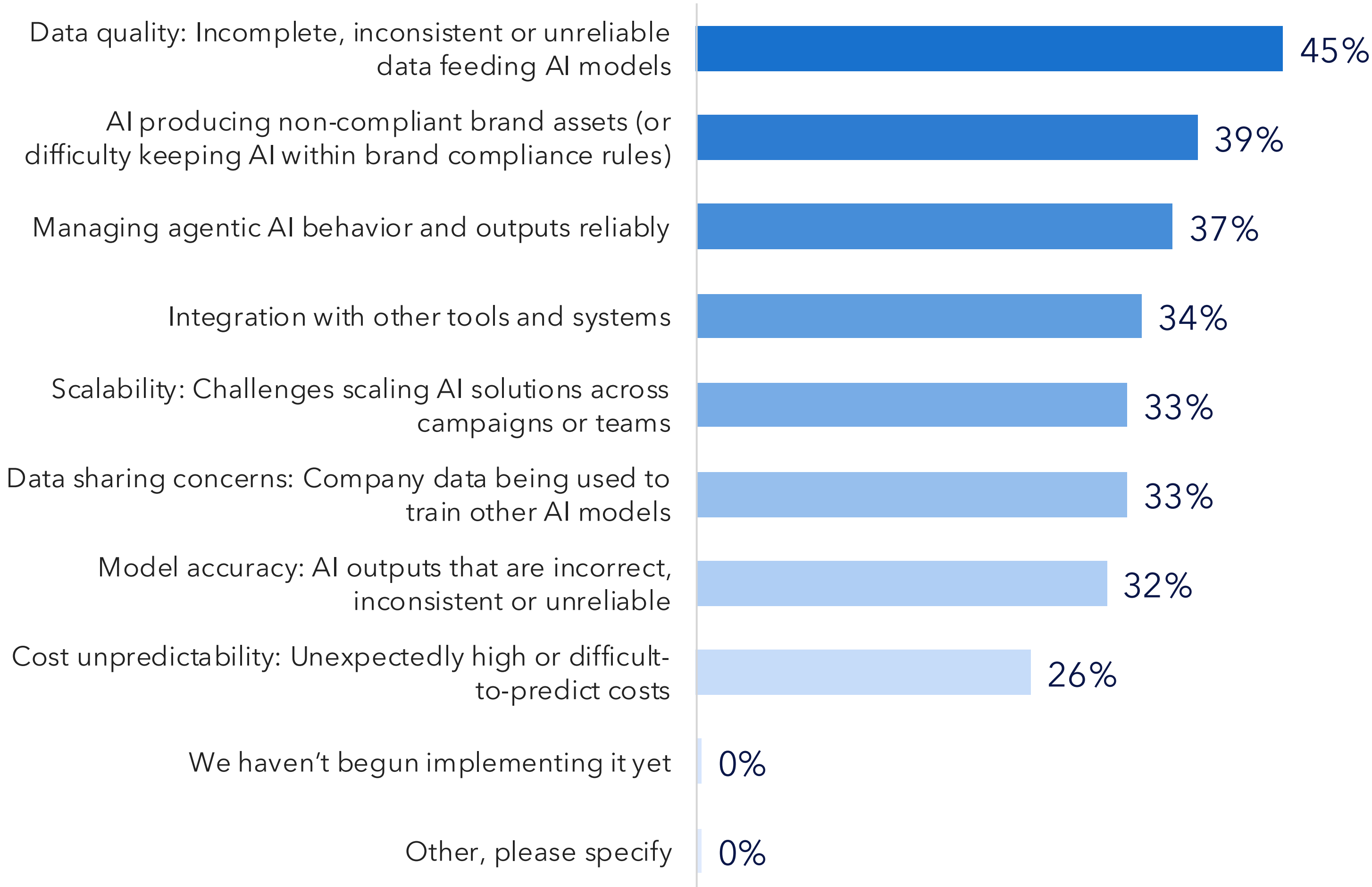
Which of the following actions is your organization taking (or may be planning to take) in response to AI-powered consumer agents?



Among organizations that are very familiar with AI consumer agents, 76% are making content discoverable to AI agents, but only 40% are building first-party data strategies and 25% are reviewing identity frameworks—levels close to the overall sample—indicating that **even the best-informed organizations are deferring the harder foundational work.**

Data quality is the leading technical challenge as reported by 45% of respondents; no single challenge dominates the rest.

What technical challenges have you faced while utilizing AI?

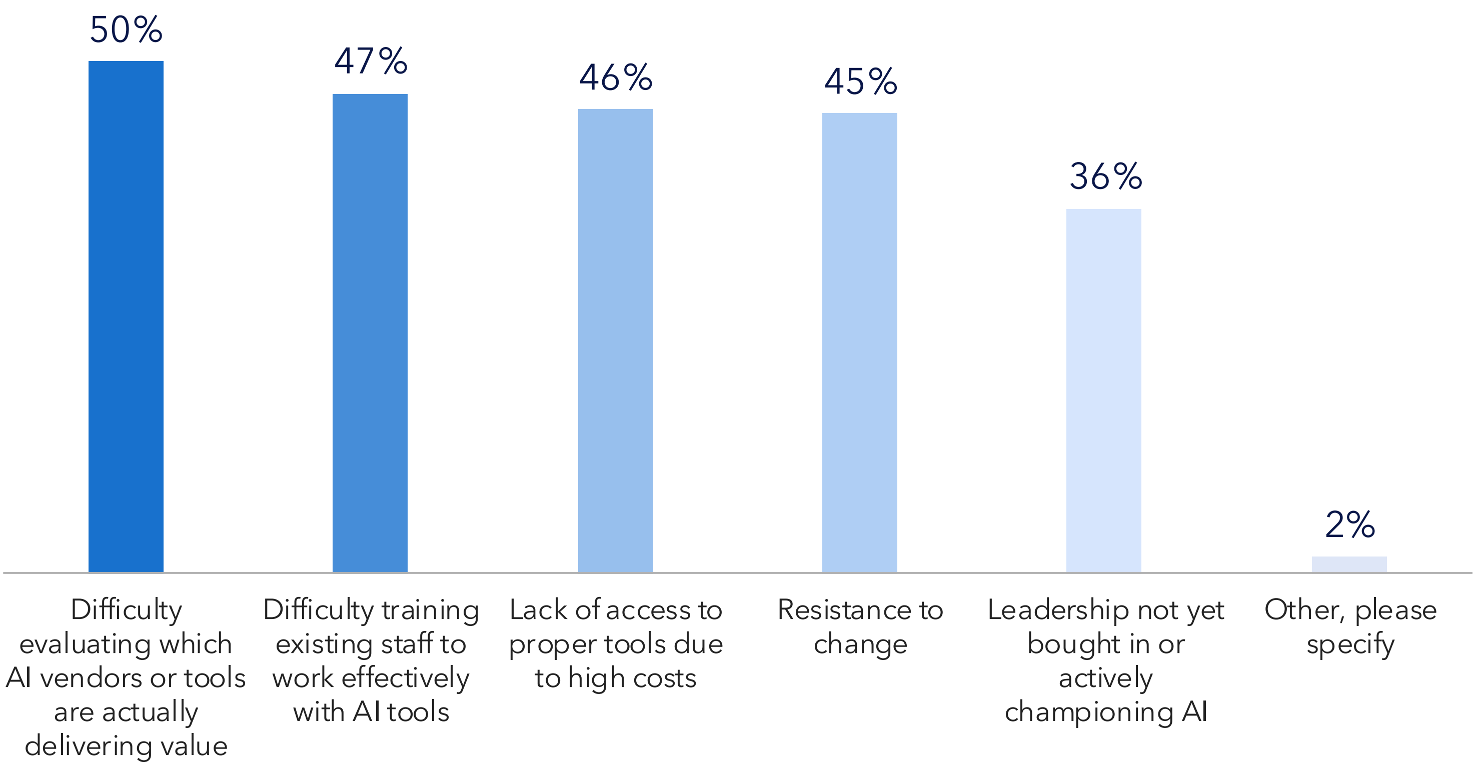


The leading obstacle is foundational, not technological. At 45%, data quality outranks every model or output-related issue, a reminder that AI is only as good as the data feeding it.

Beyond data, challenges sit evenly with most issues cited by roughly a third of respondents.

Half of the respondents cite difficulty evaluating AI vendors and tools that deliver value as an organizational challenge.

What organizational challenges have you faced while utilizing AI?



Top challenge by industry

CPG

Difficulty evaluating which AI tools are delivering value

Retail

Lack of access to proper tools due to high costs

FSI

Difficulty training existing staff to work effectively with AI tools

Travel

Lack of access to proper tools due to high costs

Restaurants

Resistance to change

Recommendations

Recommendations

1 Start with data and identity—everything else depends on it.

AI itself is no longer a differentiator. With 100% of marketers now using it, adoption is table stakes—everyone has the tools, so simply "using AI" doesn't earn you an advantage anymore. What separates the marketers who get real value from AI and the ones who just generate faster output is the foundation underneath: data and identity.

Quality data is the cornerstone of effective AI. Models can only produce valuable outcomes if it's fed valuable inputs—or as we like to say, "garbage in, garbage out."

So, before you scale AI further, strengthen and enrich your first-party data, then connect it to a people-based identity solution that gives you a complete view of customers across online and offline touchpoints.

This only gets more urgent as consumer agents enter the picture—when an AI mediates the path to purchase, the brands that can still identify and reach real people are the ones that stay visible. Practicing good data hygiene now is what makes your data "AI-ready," and the right partner can get you there faster.

2 Think about AI as a growth engine, not just a time saver.

Today most marketers use AI to work faster, but efficiency is expected at this point and won't necessarily set you apart. The advantage lies in pointing AI at growth: personalization engines that analyze customer data and deliver tailored content and offers in real time, deepening engagement and loyalty with your best customers.

Just as important, measure that impact against revenue and ROI rather than time saved, so value is proven rather than assumed the moment your leadership asks. Both the personalization and the proof run on the same thing: a solid, well-governed data foundation.

Recommendations, cont.

3 Get leadership to start looking at the same scoreboard.

One of the key findings throughout the whole report: C-level marketers are roughly twice as likely as their teams to call their organization "extremely mature" (67% vs. 33%) and their AI tools "extremely valuable" (73% vs. 25%). That gap is a risk. When leadership's optimism outpaces what practitioners see day to day, budgets and expectations get set against results the work can't yet deliver. Close it by agreeing on shared, measurable definitions of AI value and maturity, and by putting leaders and teams in front of the same metrics and the same honest view of your data and identity foundation.

4 Earn trust in agentic AI before you scale it.

Agentic AI is nearly universal on paper, but almost no one lets it act alone—control and brand safety are the real concerns. The bottleneck isn't how capable the agent is, it's trust, so build it deliberately. Plan for barriers through both an organizational lens (expertise, change management) and a technical one (model accuracy, integration, scalability), and put the governance, guardrails and human oversight in place that let you safely widen an agent's autonomy over time.

At Epsilon, we've been developing our AI capabilities for over 15 years. Moving into the new agentic future requires a solid, intentional strategy, and the winning formula is a combination of data, identity, agents and activation. Without it, marketers risk investing in ineffective systems that produce ineffective outcomes.

Methodology

Survey respondents (total n=257)

In partnership with **Fuld Inc.,** Epsilon conducted an online survey of 250 U.S. marketers who are key decision-makers or influencers for digital advertising and AI in their organizations across the retail, financial services, CPG, restaurant and travel industries. The survey ran in May of 2026.

Please note that in charts, percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

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- An industry-by-industry breakdown of how marketers are using AI to push their industry ahead.
- How marketers are using AI to improve customer acquisition, gather greater customer insights and solve industry-specific challenges.

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