



IPSOS VIEWS

FROM PIXELS TO PEOPLE

Combining human empathy and
artificial intelligence for brand growth

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At Ipsos, we champion the unique blend of Human Intelligence (HI) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to propel innovation and deliver impactful, human-centric insights for our clients.

Our Human Intelligence stems from our expertise in prompt engineering, data science, and our unique, high quality data sets – which embeds creativity, curiosity, ethics, and rigor into our AI solutions, powered by our Ipsos Facto Gen AI platform. Our clients benefit from insights that are safer, faster and grounded in the human context.

#IpsosHiAi

TL;DR



Win with “HI+AI”: Combine AI’s scale with human empathy to understand consumers and drive growth.



Master AI search: Your brand is now defined by AI chatbots. Use Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) to control your narrative where it matters most.



Empathy is your ROI: In a synthetic world, human connection is your most profitable asset, driving brand choice and higher spending.



Use AI for scale and humans for truth: Leverage AI tools for speed, but ground your strategy in real human insight to ensure accuracy and avoid bias.



Build trust through creativity: Be transparent about your AI use and invest in the bold, human-centric creativity that machines cannot replicate.

The new brand duality

We are at a pivotal moment in the history of brand management. The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence into the fabric of daily life has created a new, powerful, and often invisible touchpoint for every brand on the planet. Consumers now turn to Large Language Models (LLMs) not just for information, but for conversation, advice, and inspiration on products and services. This shift is reshaping the path to purchase, yet for most organizations, this new frontier remains a blind spot.

This technological change is met with a complex and divided consumer response. The Ipsos AI Monitor reveals a world caught between wonder and worry; globally, 52% of people are excited for products and services that use AI, while a near-identical 53% say AI makes them nervous¹. This ambivalence is particularly acute when it comes to brands. According to Ipsos’ CX Global Insights, a mere 14% of customers

believe they will benefit most from companies’ use of AI, while 41% believe the companies themselves will be the primary beneficiaries². This skepticism is a warning: if consumers perceive AI as a tool for corporate benefit at their expense, trust in the brand will erode. In fact, a significant 79% of people globally agree that companies using AI should be required to disclose it¹.

In this new landscape, brands face a fundamental duality. To succeed, they must master two seemingly opposing forces:

- 01 Artificial Intelligence (AI)** to understand and connect with consumers on an unprecedented scale.
- 02 Human Intelligence (HI)** – specifically empathy – to forge the deep, authentic connections that build lasting value.

Flying blind is no longer an option. The future belongs to brands that can intelligently synthesize the scale of machines with the soul of humanity.

This is the HI+AI imperative.



If consumers perceive AI as a tool for corporate benefit at their expense, trust in the brand will erode.

The AI imperative – scaling understanding in a new digital reality

The first part of the equation is confronting the scale and complexity of the modern consumer landscape. AI in its most recent iterations is not merely a new tool; it is a new environment where brand

perceptions are formed, contested, and solidified. For marketers, mastering this environment is a non-negotiable aspect of modern brand stewardship.

From search engines to answer engines: the rise of Generative Engine Optimization

For two decades, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) has been a cornerstone of marketing. That era is evolving. As consumers increasingly turn to AI chatbots for everything from casual queries to purchase recommendations, a new discipline has become critical: Generative Engine Optimization (GEO).

Unlike SEO, which focuses on ranking in a list of links, GEO is the practice of ensuring your brand's narrative, data, and values are accurately understood and represented within the synthesized answers of AI models. Every day, millions of consumers ask questions like, "What's the best car for a family of four?" or "Which skincare brand is most sustainable?" The answers they receive are shaping brand preference, and yet, most marketers have no visibility or strategy to influence these critical interactions.

Brand owners face three core challenges in this new paradigm:

01 Understanding exposure: What are consumers hearing about your brand, category, and competitors from AI assistants?

02 Assessing competitiveness: How does your brand feature in GenAI responses compared to your rivals? Are you a primary recommendation, a footnote, or absent entirely?

03 Identifying influence: Which sources are the LLMs prioritizing? What content is shaping their perception of your brand?

Answering these questions requires a systematic GEO strategy. At Ipsos, our work in this space has revealed a four-step approach to help brands navigate this black box and transform it into a strategic advantage:

01 Identify what consumers are searching for: We leverage deep expertise in search and social intelligence to map the universe of questions consumers are asking about your category, building robust proxies for AI-driven queries.

02 Collect AI responses at scale: By submitting thousands of these questions to leading LLM APIs, we gather an extensive dataset of the answers, advice, and

recommendations that consumers are actually receiving.

03 Categorize and organize responses: We organize these responses into strategic themes, assessing your brand's visibility, sentiment, and competitive positioning within the AI-generated narrative.

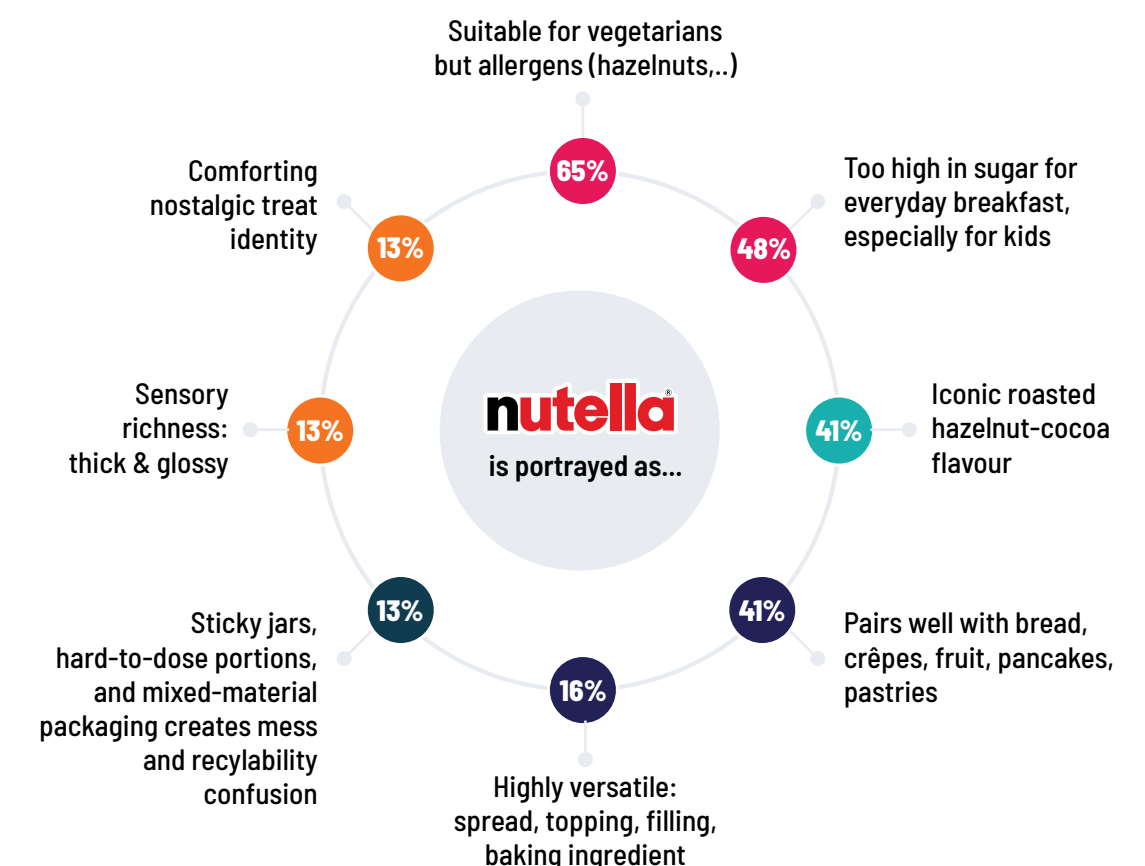
04 Optimize for influence: The final step is to identify the key sources the AI models are learning from. By understanding which articles, reviews, forums, and data sources are most influential, brands can create an "Answer Engine Optimization" strategy that ensures their content is authoritative, structured, and AI-friendly, making it recognized and trusted by these new gatekeepers.

RECOMMENDATION FOR BRANDS:



Conduct a GEO audit to understand your brand's current performance in generative AI. This is the first step to building a competitive advantage in the next era of digital discovery.

Figure 1: Sample output – key attributes for Nutella



Source: Ipsos

Unlocking predictive insights with synthetic data

Beyond understanding the current landscape, brands can benefit from synthetic data by using it to enhance and complete existing datasets or to create entirely new, simulated data for more comprehensive insights and to emulate consumer responses.

For brands, the benefits are clear:

- **Speed and agility:** Synthetic data can dramatically accelerate research timelines, enabling faster iteration and decision-making.
- **Data enhancement:** It can be used to augment existing datasets, fill in missing values, or fuse disparate data

sources to create a more holistic view of the consumer.

- **Scenario modeling:** Brands can simulate consumer responses to new concepts, campaigns, or market shifts, stress-testing strategies before they are launched.

However, the promise of synthetic data is matched by its peril. Poorly constructed models can produce inaccurate or biased representations of reality, codifying and amplifying existing prejudices. The data can lack the richness and creative nuance of real human responses, leading to insights that capture the obvious but miss the subtle, game-changing details.



RECOMMENDATION FOR BRANDS:



Approach synthetic data as a powerful supplement, not a replacement, for real-world consumer interaction. To mitigate the risks, it is crucial to partner with experts who are committed to rigorous validation.

At Ipsos, we are engaged in joint research with Stanford University to generate state-of-the-art synthetic respondents. The cornerstone of this work is establishing a proprietary ground-truth database, which allows us to validate the accuracy of AI-generated answers by comparing them against the responses of real people. This human-in-the-loop approach is essential for ensuring that the efficiency of AI does not come at the cost of truth.

Figure 2: Synthetic data use cases

Quantitative Data Augmentation	Synthetic Participant Research
 Data Boosting Enhancing datasets with synthetic data to create more simulated respondents	 PersonaBots Tailored digital assistants that mimic consumer segments
 Data Imputation Using synthetic data to fill in missing information	 Synthetic Panels (Digital Twins) Creating synthetic versions of real respondents to answer new questions
 Data Fusion Using machine learning to combine datasets to create a new dataset	

Source: Ipsos

The human imperative – forging connection through empathy

While AI provides the scale, empathy provides the soul. In a world becoming more automated and synthetic, the ability to forge genuine human connection is no longer a soft skill – it is a brand’s most potent competitive advantage. As technology handles the “what,” the “why” behind human behavior becomes the strategic high ground.

The prevailing sentiment at the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity in 2025 was not about the novelty of AI, but about its application in service of human connection. The consensus was clear: in a world saturated with AI-generated content, creativity that is deeply human,

real, and empathetic is the only way to break through. As Esi Eggleston, Chief Growth Officer at Unilever, powerfully stated:

“In a world where machines and agents will increasingly make choices for us, we face a fundamental question – will our brands matter to people or only to machines? In this dance between data and desire, we found what makes the difference. Our humanity. It is not our limitation; it is our superpower.”



Creative ideas grounded in empathy – those that demonstrated a true understanding of the audience’s identity, emotions, or values – were 79% more likely to drive brand choice.

Apple AirPods: The world’s first end-to-end hearing experience

The World Health Organization estimates that 1.5 billion people are living with hearing loss today, and 3 out of 4 people diagnosed go untreated. TBWA\\Media Arts Lab created Apple’s award-nominated 2024 holiday campaign, “Heartstrings,” which promotes the AirPods Pro 2’s clinical-grade Hearing Aid feature.

The film features a real-life father with hearing loss discovering his daughter’s voice, showcasing the feature’s ability to enhance connections and promote accessible hearing health. The campaign highlights Apple’s commitment to inclusive design and has driven record interest in hearing aids.

Figure 3: Apple – “Heartstrings”



Click the image to watch the advertisement

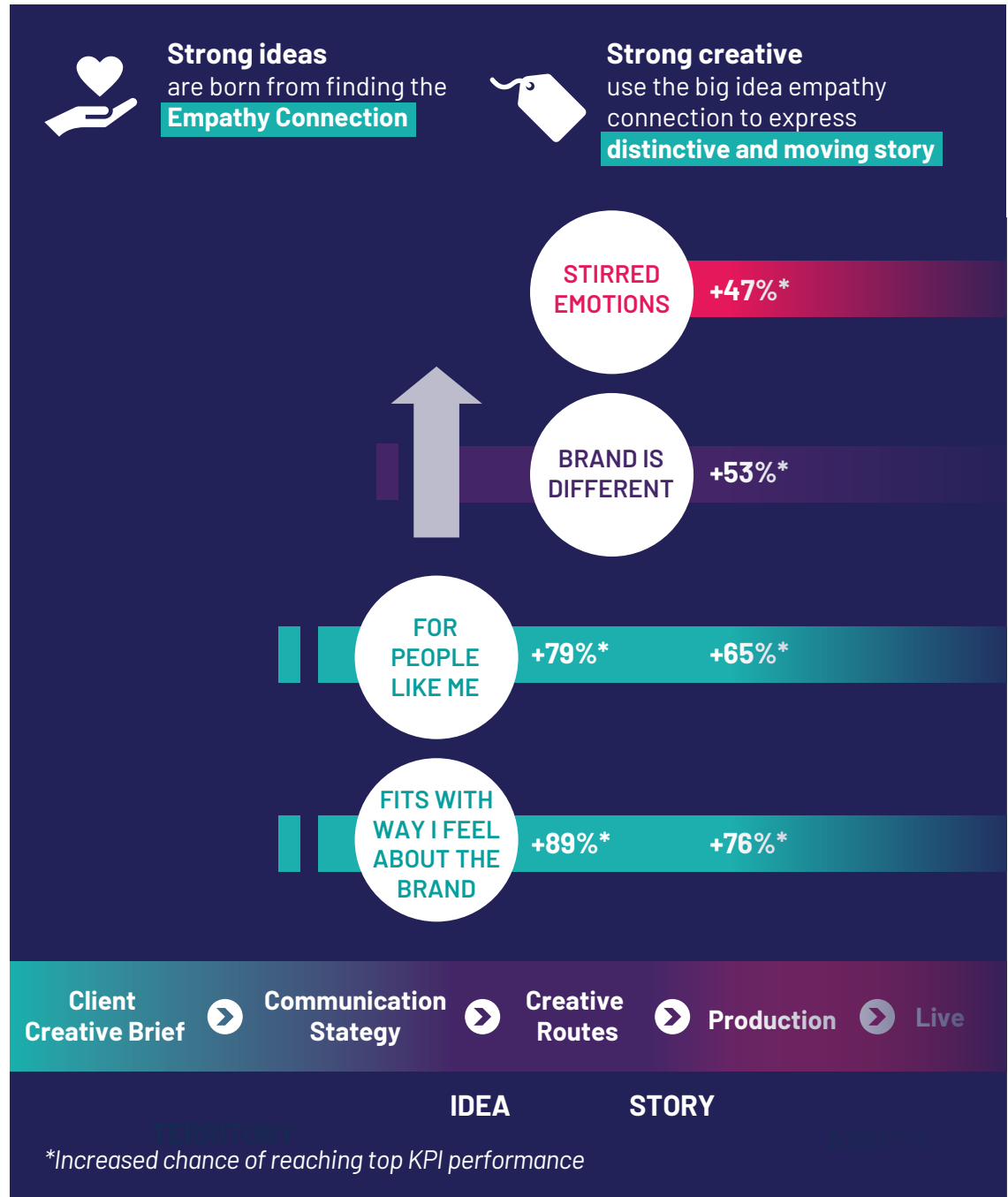
Source: Apple

The tangible ROI of empathy

Empathy is a strategic driver of business growth. Across a meta-analysis of over 1,700 ads tested by Ipsos, we found that creative ideas grounded in empathy

– those that demonstrated a true understanding of the audience’s identity, emotions, or values – were 79% more likely to drive brand choice³.

Figure 4: Make empathy the backbone of your creative



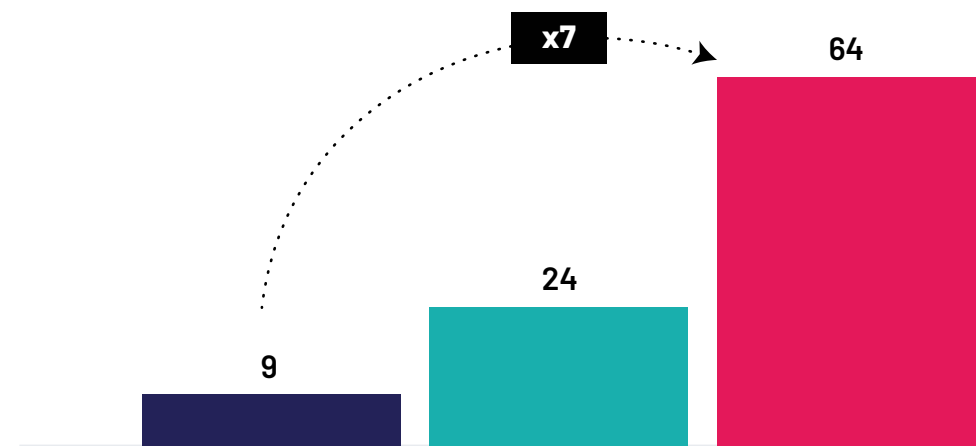
Source: Ipsos

This connection translates directly to the bottom line. Our global Brand Value Creator database, which tracks actual consumer spending, reveals a staggering

correlation between brand affinity and expenditure. People spend up to seven times more on brands they feel a strong sense of closeness to.

Figure 5: Share of wallet

■ Low ■ Medium ■ High brand desire



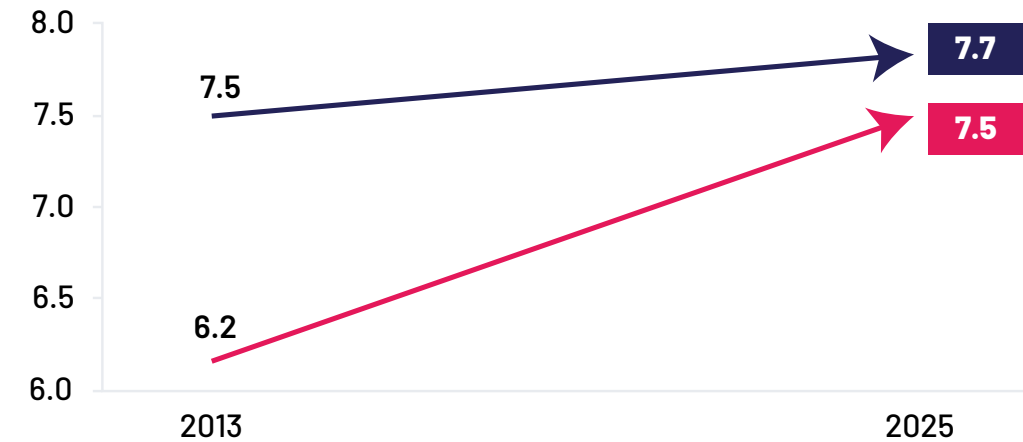
Source: Ipsos

Furthermore, a longitudinal analysis of 12 years of brand data reveals a seismic shift in the drivers of lasting consumer-brand relationships. While the importance of functional attributes like price and quality has remained relatively flat, brand

closeness – a measure fueled by emotional connection and empathy – has risen dramatically in importance. In an age of product parity, the emotional bond a brand forges is its most defensible moat.

Figure 6: Empathy builds brand closeness and long-term value

■ Brand performance - Functional ■ Brand closeness - Empathy



Source: Ipsos



Faced with economic uncertainty and social fractures, there is a growing sentiment, particularly among younger generations, to live for today because tomorrow feels uncertain or out of control.



Connecting with the consumer of now: the “Nouveau Nihilism”

To build empathy, brands must understand the cultural context of their audience. A key trend identified in the Ipsos Global Trends report is “Nouveau Nihilism”⁴. Faced with economic uncertainty and social fractures, there is a growing sentiment, particularly among younger generations, to live for today because tomorrow feels uncertain or out of control. This mindset manifests in behaviors like “doom spending” on small treats and a greater focus on immediate gratification over long-term planning.

This is not a call for brands to encourage irresponsibility. Rather, it is a critical insight into the consumer psyche. People are seeking moments of joy, relief, and connection in the here and now. Brands that can authentically provide these moments, that can offer a solution to the tensions people feel, will resonate deeply. The challenge is to find the right connection between the brand’s purpose and the consumer’s desire to live fully in the present.

RECOMMENDATION FOR BRANDS:



Invest in deep cultural understanding. Move beyond traditional demographics to explore the underlying tensions and values shaping consumer behavior. Use these insights to ensure your creative and brand messaging acts as a blueprint for empathy, expressing the right emotion and a point of difference that is genuinely relevant to people’s lives today.

The HI+AI brand roadmap

The path forward is not a choice between AI and empathy, but a synthesis of the two. It is about using AI to scale the reach and precision of human understanding. It is about feeding rich, empathetic insights back into AI systems to make them smarter, more relevant, and more human-centric. Here is a roadmap for senior marketers to build an HI+AI brand:



Audit your AI touchpoints:

Your brand is already being defined by AI, whether you are participating or not. Begin with a comprehensive GEO audit to understand how your brand is portrayed in LLMs. Identify gaps, correct inaccuracies, and develop a content strategy to ensure you are showing up where and how you want.



Invest in human intelligence:

While AI excels at analyzing “big data,” true empathy comes from the qualitative, ethnographic, and cultural insights that explain why people behave the way they do. Prioritize research that uncovers the human stories, tensions, and emotions behind the numbers. This is the fuel for both breakthrough creative and more nuanced AI models.



Bridge the gap between AI and HI:

Implement AI systems that are designed for collaboration, not just automation. Use AI to surface patterns, trends, and outliers from vast datasets, but empower human strategists to interpret these findings, ask deeper questions, and apply creative judgment. This combination of machine scale and human intuition is where the magic happens.



Communicate your AI value proposition transparently:

Consumers are wary of AI being used “on” them but are open to AI being used “for” them. If you use AI to create better recommendations, more seamless service, or more relevant products, communicate that benefit clearly and transparently. Remember, 79% of consumers want disclosure. Frame your use of AI around the customer benefit, turning a potential point of friction into a reason to believe.



Double down on human-centric brand distinctive assets:

As AI makes content creation more accessible, the market will be flooded with generic, machine-generated communications. In this environment, true creativity and distinctive brand assets become more valuable than ever. As Sir John Hegarty, co-founder of the advertising agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty (BBH), noted,

“Creativity is the only thing left to compete on.”

RECOMMENDATION FOR BRANDS:



Invest in the bold, emotional, and unmistakably human ideas that AI cannot replicate.

Conclusion: the future is human, scaled by AI

The challenge for brand leaders in 2026 and beyond is to hold two thoughts at once: that the world is becoming more technologically complex, and that human connection is becoming more valuable. Neglecting the first leads to irrelevance; neglecting the second leads to alienation.

For AI to be truly effective, it cannot operate in a vacuum. It needs to be guided by a deep and continuously refreshed understanding of human behavior, culture, and emotion. Likewise, for empathy to be a true driver of growth, it needs to be applied consistently and intelligently across a fragmented consumer journey, a task for which AI is uniquely suited.

The brands that will thrive will not be those that simply adopt AI, but those that adopt it with purpose and a profound respect for the human they are trying to serve. They will use it to listen more intently, understand more deeply, and connect more meaningfully.

Ipsos’ brand AI+HI toolkit includes:

Ipsos Synthesio GEO

Empowers you to monitor perceptions of your brand and ensure that it’s mentioned where you want, in the way you want.

PersonaBots

A breakthrough segmentation tool that brings segments to life through Ipsos’ generative AI platform.

Creative|Spark AI

Empowers marketers and managers to move faster in identifying opportunities, optimizing approaches, and unleashing powerful ads that build brand equity and spark lasting loyalty.

MyBVC AI

Ipsos’ online data analysis tool that provides access to all of your Brand Value Creator information in one place. It is designed to give you more ownership of your brand intelligence and allows you to explore data and search for insights at anytime, to fully understand your brand’s equity.

Contextual Brand Tracking

An occasion-based tracking solution that leverages the power of Brand Value Creator, uncovers spontaneous associations with Brand and Context Mental Networks, integrates survey and social data and drivers analysis – to get a deep understanding of how context influences people’s expectations and brand choices.

Ipsos Synthetic Participant Research

Synthetic panels represent the most sophisticated application of Ipsos’ synthetic data capabilities. They enable research at scales, speeds, and frequencies that were previously unimaginable, while still maintaining the highest standards of data quality and reliability.



For more information go to:
www.ipsos.com/en/ai

Endnotes

- 1 Ipsos. 2025. “Ipsos AI Monitor 2025.”
- 2 Ipsos. 2025 “Ipsos CX Global Insights.”
- 3 Ipsos Global meta-analysis from Early Ideas routes database tested with Instant|Labs (200+ cases). Early advertising routes database tested in Instant|Labs (1,465 cases). Ad test database (1,734 cases).
- 4 Ipsos. 2025. “Ipsos Global Trends: 9th edition.”

Further Reading



 Watch the webinar [here](#)



Report: [Nationwide: Reaping the rewards of demonstrating empathy](#)

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