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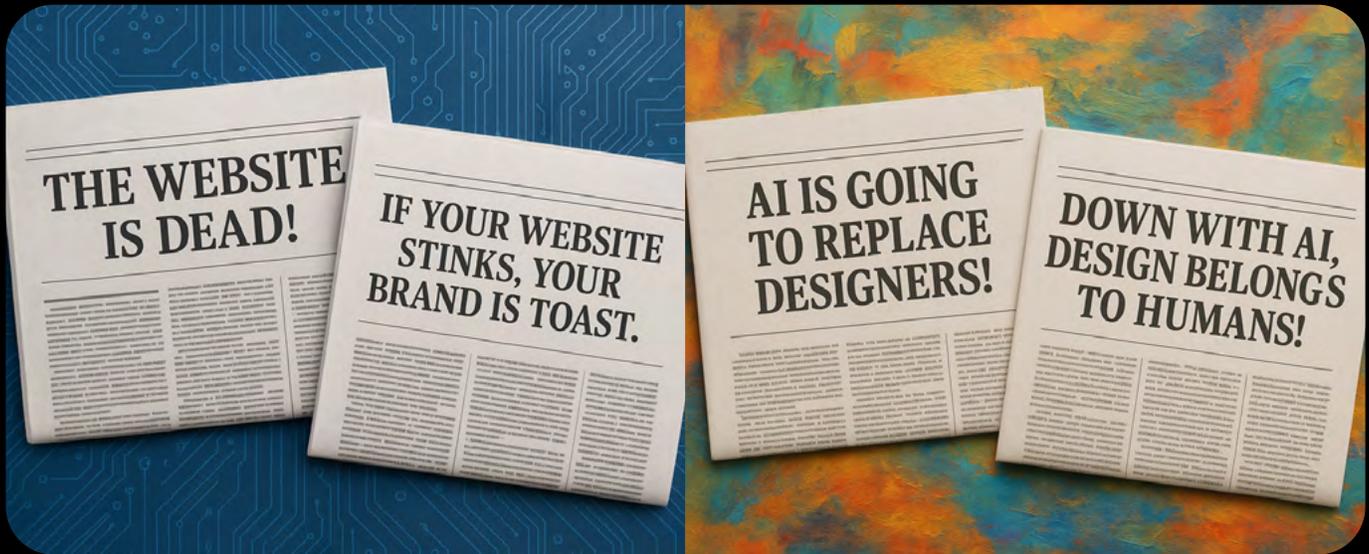
CONTRADICTORY BY DESIGN

Why Opposing Truths Rule Tomorrow's Experiences

a **dentsu** company

The Future of Experience Belongs to Those Who Embrace Contradictions

You may see contradictory, eye-catching headlines like these that make it feel like choosing a side is the only option for experience design leaders. But the landscape is too complex for binary choices, and companies that want to thrive need a different approach: **embracing contradictions**.

Here's what that means. Leaders see two ideas that seem at odds, such as "AI will replace humans" and "humans are irreplaceable," and recognize that both are true.

But recognition isn't enough.

The advantage comes from integration: using AI to scale human judgment and building websites that work with conversational agents instead of against them. It's about using every resource to create optimal experiences in a complex landscape.

It's true that some platforms, job roles, and capabilities aren't as dominant as they used to be. But they're still important, just in new ways. It's evolution, not death.

This ebook explores the paradoxes that define experience design today and tomorrow. From AI and data to personalization and brand-building, you'll learn how to strategically navigate competing priorities, integrate contradictory truths, and lead transformation even when the destination is unclear.

Contents

Technology Will Change Everything and Nothing About Design

01

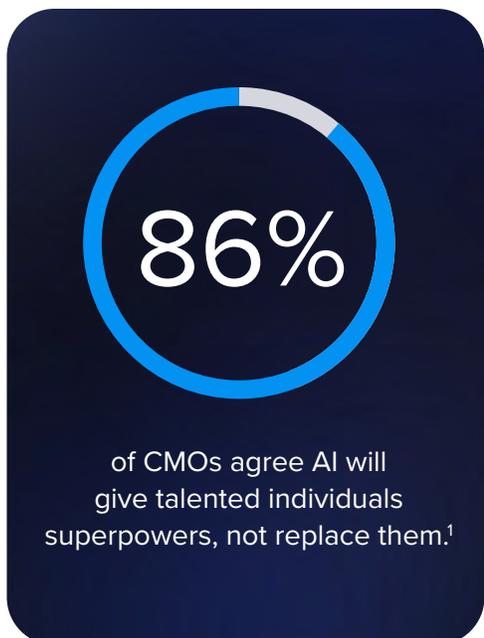# AI is Eliminating Design Jobs While Creating More Demand for Designers

Generative AI can now create images that are nearly indistinguishable from human work. Junior creative roles are vanishing. AI is literally replacing some designers' tasks.

And yet, the demand for strategic designers has never been higher. As AI takes on execution, it elevates the role of humans. **Designers are moving from execution to direction.** From making assets to establishing governance and making strategic decisions about which assets to use, when, and why.

Eighty-six percent of CMOs agree AI will give talented individuals superpowers, not replace them. As AI floods the market with fast, competent work, sameness becomes a real threat. **Human creativity and taste will matter more, because originality will be the only way to stand out.**

We've seen this throughout the creative industry's history: technology shifts don't eliminate creativity, they reshape it. Designers will need new fluencies to understand not just people, but also algorithms, data, and performance. But while the tools and skillsets change, design's real power—creating better human experiences—remains.

86%

of CMOs agree AI will give talented individuals superpowers, not replace them.[1]

CREATED USING GENERATIVE AI

[1] Dentsu Creative CMO Report 2025

The Evolution of Creative Teams Through Technology Waves

Early 1990s

THE TECHNOLOGY

Quark, a page layout software program, brought unprecedented speed and precision to publishers. **Photoshop** also emerged as a game-changer for image manipulation.

THE TEAM MANDATE

Make more and make it look better.

2010s–20s

THE TECHNOLOGY

Modern software powered by cloud technology and AI allowed seamless collaboration, real-time editing, and automation of repetitive tasks.

THE TEAM MANDATE

Ditch the mundane and create value faster by producing more.

1990   2000   2010   2020   2030

Early 2000s

THE TECHNOLOGY

Integrated suites enabled users to create content for multi-channel distribution, bringing together photo editing, graphic design, and web design tools.

THE TEAM MANDATE

Help the funnel sell harder, stay on brand, and nix the three-martini lunches.

2025 and beyond

THE TECHNOLOGY

Generative AI will execute a large portion of content creation and prototyping.

THE TEAM MANDATE

Serve as directors, tastemakers, and guides for AI.

New Creative Partnerships

The classic copywriter-art director duo has already evolved with digital, adding UX researchers and technologists to the design team. Now it's evolving again as creative designers partner with AI agents to accelerate their work.

AI can generate outputs in seconds. The designer guides the process by posing better questions, refining intent, and curating results.

Critical decisions in the creative process still require humans:

Taste:
AI can't yet recognize that a detail may confuse certain audiences or that an image may be tone-deaf.

Brand alignment:
[65% of CMOs](#) feel that AI-assisted creativity cannot yet capture the tone of voice, look, and feel of their brand. While AI can follow briefs, it can't understand whether an output fits a brand's overall aesthetic.

Distinctiveness:
AI may not understand whether a design actually cuts through the noise. A piece that AI deems "different" from existing creative may still follow overdone formulas or structures, especially as more brands use AI to create content.

Guidelines:
AI needs a comprehensive brief to understand who it's designing for, what it's designing, and why. It also needs strict governance to ensure responsible usage.

[2] Dentsu Creative CMO Report 2025

65%

of CMOs feel that AI-assisted creativity cannot yet capture the tone of voice, look, and feel of their brand.[2]

Empowering Designers to Adopt AI

Many organizations struggle with AI adoption because employees either resist it or use it without understanding the limitations. Design leaders must be prepared to demonstrate how AI augments, but does not replace, employee skills. That may mean showing teams how to write effective prompts, when to trust AI outputs and when to override them, and how to integrate AI into workflows without sacrificing quality or originality.

In an AI-driven world, the most valuable design skill will be direction: curating the best inspiration for these tools, writing better briefs, judging the originality, style, and taste of outputs, and teaching others how to do the same. Companies need design leaders who can not only use AI themselves, but help their organizations learn to use it strategically and responsibly. Those are things a machine can't yet fake.

> In an AI-driven world, the most valuable design skill will be direction.
>
> ""

Digital Destinations are Dying and Thriving

02

The Website is Dead.
Long Live the Website.

Agentic AI is changing how customers use the internet. Thanks to large language models (LLMs), **customers can get answers to their questions without ever visiting a website.** Google and other aggregators surface key information directly in search results. AI is replacing browsing with conversations.

At the same time, **shoppers are turning to new avenues to discover and research products.** Social media, influencers, and AI assistants have nearly caught up to search in their influence at the early stages of shopping journeys.

When **27% of searches** don't result in a click and users complete key parts of their journey elsewhere, it seems like websites should be obsolete. But instead, **their role is expanding to be a complementary digital destination, a brand's space to differentiate with data, and an AI training ground.**

Channel Usage Rates in the Customer Journey

INFLUENCERS

| 41% | 32% | 23% | 4% |

SOCIAL MEDIA

| 38% | 39% | 19% | 4% |

FRIENDS/FAMILY

| 33% | 38% | 22% | 7% |

SEARCH ENGINES

| 25% | 53% | 18% | 4% |

AI ASSISTANTS

| 23% | 49% | 25% | 3% |

MARKETPLACES

| 17% | 34% | 31% | 18% |

BRAND WEBSITES

| 13% | 40% | 23% | 24% |

Discovery   Research   Comparison   Purchase

Level of influence Across the Customer Journey (%)
From the Connected Experiences Research Report 2025*, Merkle*

Websites: The Connective Tissue of a Dynamic Ecosystem

Successful websites must be strategically positioned to complement, not compete with, external platforms. Great design is human-centered, creative problem-solving. If customers want to shop through social media or influencers, your goal shouldn't be to change that behavior. It should be to use your website to fill needs that other channels can't.

Your brand website serves as an anchor for a connected customer journey and amplifies your brand value. How that translates to experience depends on your brand's positioning.

If you have high brand recognition and offer a large assortment, then you may lean into lookalike merchandising and customer preference data to make your extensive catalog an advantage. If you have authority in your category and seek to balance your own brand story with brand-partner stories, then rich product content might be your differentiator.

The diagram below shows example site elements that support four potential website roles.

OFFER UTILITY & CONVENIENCE

ELEVATED BRAND & PRODUCT

DISCOVER NEW THINGS

ANCHOR COMPLEX JOURNEY

Intelligent Merchandising

Adaptive Checkout Formats

Personalized Search

Rich Product Content & Media

Rich, Multi-format Marketing Content

Preference & Profile Data

Lookalike Merchandising

Quote Building & Cart Completion

Physical Experience Activation

CREATED USING GENERATIVE AI

The Human and the AI Agent: Designing for Two Audiences

Today's websites must serve customers while also providing agents the information they need to surface brands during AI-based research.

As we saw earlier, consumers increasingly use tools like ChatGPT and Google's Generative AI Overview for discovery and research. Structured website data for automated discovery is nothing new—it's been necessary for SEO for decades.

With generative AI, there's a stronger focus on personalization, content depth, and trust. Fortunately, those same qualities are essential for human-centered design. Both require:

Customer understanding
Understand the variety of pain points, needs, and intents for your customers, including the detailed questions they may ask that your brand's product or service can address.

Natural language
Write in a way that mirrors how users ask questions, using synonyms and related terms to give generative AI more context.

Trust
Pursue brand mentions on trusted domains, like government sites, reputable news outlets, and industry publications, to boost brand authority.

Wide reach
Build an authentic presence on digital communities and user forums, as generative AI often turns to these properties for brand or product recommendations.

Brands don't need to choose between designing well for humans and designing well for generative AI. They may be entirely unique audiences, but many of their needs are the same.

Adaptive Experiences: Using Data and AI for Experience Design

As AI agents become more sophisticated, **static webpages will evolve into dynamic experiences** that respond to real-time signals and context. We call these *adaptive experiences*.

Traditional websites show the same content to every visitor, with occasional basic personalization based on historical data. Adaptive experiences go a step further, adjusting to real-time indicators like weather, inventory levels, sentiment signals, and more. This personalization and contextual relevance will set websites apart from other channels.

To design a system that morphs and responds, you'll need to think about web design differently. This means:

- **Designing for flexibility** rather than static, pixel-perfect layouts

- **Creating component systems** that can be assembled differently based on context

- **Defining the logic** that determines when and how experiences adapt

- **Building feedback loops** that help the system— and its designers—learn which adaptations resonate

- **Designing the design org** to adapt the team for new tools and capabilities as they come in

For more about adaptive experiences, read our ebook, **Don't Look Back: How Real-Time Analytics Keeps You a Step Ahead of Customer Expectations.**
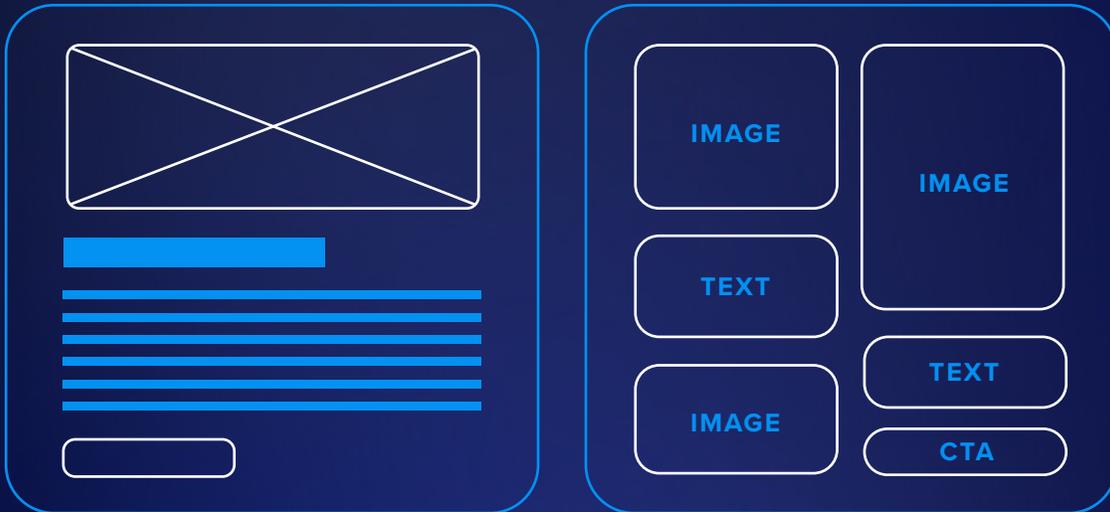

Designing for flexibility rather than static, pixel-perfect layouts

The AI Agent as Part of the Web Experience

AI agents won't just play a backend role. **Demand for user-facing AI agents on websites will grow as consumers become increasingly comfortable with the technology.** Designers can help shape how AI agents engage and build a path for human intervention at the right times. This includes:

- **A brand-specific understanding** of which touchpoints/customer needs can be improved by an agent, and which ones should continue to be handled by a human.

- **Clear rules or escalation triggers** for when and how an agent hands off support to a person.

- **New engagement opportunities,** possible only through AI agents, that address customer pain points.

In the same way that designers must watch out for creative sameness from AI catering to algorithms, they must also be intentional with AI-powered tools to ensure they're not a carbon copy of what every other company is doing. **Designers must thoughtfully personalize in ways that match the brand core and provide value for their unique audience.**

B2B's Future Customer: A Machine with a Wallet

AI's interactions with your website will continue to evolve. [We predict](#) that by 2030, at least one-third of B2B commerce will happen through machine-to-machine interactions, with no human involvement. Designing for large language models and generative AI tools is one thing; designing for a machine that makes purchasing decisions is another.

Most of these needs fall into the realm of data architecture and communication pathways, not experience design. We're mentioning it here because it will seep into the designer's world through areas like content strategy.

Machine-to-machine may start with B2B, but it won't end there. [Seventy-six percent of consumers](#) expect that by 2035, their devices, appliances, and vehicles will automatically reorder supplies and schedule services. Companies without a B2B arm should still plan for a future where AI and humans are both customers.

With agentic AI, websites aren't dead; they're as alive as ever. **The designers who understand how to create experiences that breathe and respond in real time will shape the future of the web.**

For more on the needs of agentic AI, read our ebook, [The Agentic AI Playbook: How to Build Smarter Automated Experiences](#).

EBOOK
The Agentic AI Playbook: How to Build Smarter Automated Experiences

LEARN MORE ▶

> With agentic AI, websites aren't dead; they're more alive than ever. The designers who understand how to create experiences that breathe and respond in real time will shape the future of the web. **"**

Building a Consistent Brand Requires Constant Change and Flexibility

03

Your Brand Must Be One Thing to Everyone and Everything to Each Person

Consumers have nearly endless options for any given product or service, and <u>just one bad experience</u> can drive someone into the arms of another brand. That's because customers aren't loyal to brands anymore—at least not in the traditional sense.

Today's consumers give their loyalty to great experiences. That means that brands need to be flexible in how they present themselves because each customer wants a slightly different flavor of their core brand. This flexibility also allows brands to show up on each platform with native content and to every cultural moment with authentic participation.

It's time to throw out the old Brand Management 101 playbook. Consistent logos, colors, and voice aren't the hallmarks of your brand anymore.

The new approach: *liquid brands* **that build equity through engaging, relevant interactions with their audiences instead of rigid rules and guidelines.** The customer experience becomes the most important driver of brand, delivering on a core promise in ways that may look and feel different across contexts, platforms, and audiences.

> It's time to throw out the old Brand Management 101 playbook. Consistent logos, colors, and voice aren't the hallmarks of your brand anymore.
>
> "

What Makes a Brand Liquid and How to Design for It

A liquid brand is flexible and adaptable, shifting its visual expression, messaging, and content based on who it's talking to and where it appears. The brand's purpose, values, and fundamental promise remain constant.

Define what never changes.
Articulate what the brand stands for and create guardrails that explain the "why" behind creative decisions instead of mandating specific colors, fonts, or layouts. When collaborators can understand the core purpose, they can interpret the brand authentically across different contexts without rigid templates.

Build systems that enable variation.
Create raw materials, such as visual elements, messaging frameworks, and tone guidelines, that can be combined, adapted, and reinterpreted while still feeling cohesive. An AI-powered content supply chain can support this at scale. Learn more about content supply chains by reading our ebook, **Scaling Content to Meet Demand**.

Design for cultural participation.
Liquid brands participate in cultural moments authentically because they're not locked into a rigid creative approach. Your brand system should make it easy to create platform-appropriate content and culturally resonant messaging that inspires customers to share it themselves. This means trusting creators to interpret the brand through their own lens and reach audiences in ways a central brand team never could.

Measure connection, not compliance.
The question isn't "Did everyone use the right logo?" It's "Do customers understand what we stand for? Do they feel connected to us?" When asked about the brand to which they felt most loyal, **66% of consumers agreed** that they felt proud to be associated with the brand. That pride comes from meaningful engagement, not aesthetic sameness.

EBOOK
Scaling Content to Meet Demand

LEARN MORE ▶

A liquid brand is flexible and adaptable, shifting its visual expression, messaging, and content based on who it's talking to and where it appears.

,,

Brand Liquidity as the Foundation for Personalization

Brand liquidity may feel like an abstract concept, but **at its core, it's simply a more aggressive approach to personalization.** With experience serving as the new brand, personalized product recommendations and "Welcome back, [first name]" aren't enough to stand apart.

Designers need to get comfortable crafting experiences that prioritize meeting each unique customer's needs over the right mix of certain fonts and colors. Instead of the brand being a mascot or logo, it becomes a feeling. "Brand A always makes my experiences so easy." "Brand B makes me feel like a better athlete." "Brand C provides safety and security."

The strongest brands feel the same everywhere, even when they look completely different. That's the paradox: the more your brand adapts, the more consistent it becomes in what truly matters— delivering on your core promise.

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> "

Cutting-Edge Technology Demands Old-Fashioned Empathy

04

The Most Advanced Technology Requires the Most Basic Human Instincts

The lines between digital and physical experiences are blurring. Retailers have interactive screens, QR codes that unlock exclusive content, sensors that track foot traffic, and augmented reality that lets you try products without touching them. There are more opportunities than ever to connect these worlds.

Some companies are overwhelmed by incorporating more technology into experiences. We see it as an opportunity to add value that digital and physical interactions can't deliver alone.

But here's the challenge: just because you can connect digital and physical experiences doesn't mean you *should*. And when you do, the question becomes how to design these connections in ways that feel helpful and memorable.

> But here's the challenge: just because you *can* connect digital and physical experiences doesn't mean you *should*.
> 99

The Delicate Dance with Customer Data

Striking the right balance with technology and personalization is perhaps most critical when brands use physical context data to connect physical and digital experiences. Building a clunky AR experience is annoying, but forgivable. Using data collected through a device or sensor to create personalization can be unsettling and alienating.

Consider the difference between:

- Spending 15 minutes in a store's bedding section, then getting ads across the internet for bedding, despite never searching for a relevant product on your device.

- Spending 15 minutes in a store's bedding section and getting a pop-up notification that says, "We see you're interested in bedding. Would you like to browse more options online?" or "Would you like to upload a picture to see how a set would look in your room?"

True customer value and transparency are paramount for these experiences.

Consider the difference between:

Spending 15 minutes in a store's bedding section, then getting ads across the internet for bedding, despite never searching for a relevant product on your device.

Spending 15 minutes in a store's bedding section and getting a pop-up notification that says, "We see you're interested in bedding. Would you like to browse more options online?" or "Would you like to upload a picture to see how a set would look in your room?"

Better Doesn't Always Mean "Faster"

When using technology, nearly every brand aspires to create "seamless" experiences that they often equate with efficiency. **But friction can make an experience more memorable and immersive when used intentionally.**

Consider a virtual, interactive showroom where customers explore a car's features at their own pace instead of an algorithm immediately telling them which vehicle to buy. Or a physical store where scanning a product unlocks behind-the-scenes stories of how it was created, building a deeper **emotional connection**.

The key to defining "better" is knowing your brand value and using technology to amplify it. For some brands and audiences, better does mean "faster" or "more convenient." For others, it means "being more informative" or "providing authoritative content," if customers rely on the brand for being tenured or expert-backed.

Brands that use the best technology to support their business and customers are the ones with the opportunity to own their brand story. Data and insights help illuminate the right path.

Old-Fashioned Empathy, Powered by Data

Most brands have abundant data they can combine with human intuition to identify customers' needs and determine how to address them. Customer clicks, purchase histories, behavioral patterns, demographic details, and sentiment signals pour in from digital touchpoints.

However, most organizations don't collect or organize data in a way that enables effective activation. [Modern architecture](#) with compliant data sourcing and usage is required to create robust customer profiles that reveal users' needs.

Even then, raw data only provides the "what," not the "why." To make decisions, humans need insights: context-aware, actionable opportunities that arise from analyzing the data.

A 90% bounce rate on a product page is a data point. Without understanding the "why" or the context, we can't improve the experience. Is the product backordered? Is the page loading slowly? Are variants out of stock? Is there an information mismatch between the ads users clicked and the actual product page? Even in an AI-enhanced world, designers still need insights to improve customer experiences.

Constant Evolution Requires Stable Strategy

05

Leading Transformation When the Destination is Unclear

Riding the waves of change starts with building an organization around stable principles to thrive under uncertainty. Here's how you can plant those seeds:

- **Celebrate the champions** who act on new ideas instead of just talking about them.

- **Create space and allocate funds** to make transformation its own core initiative instead of an afterthought. This is a common challenge for leaders who have not yet seen ROI on projects like technology platform purchases or Metaverse investments.

- **Partner with a platform or agency** that wants to establish itself as a transformation success story. Use that partnership to create proof-of-concept projects and case studies.

Then, when a disruptive trend or technology arises, answer these questions:

- **Is this change truly "replacing" something else? How can this new approach complement or enhance the way things have traditionally been done?** These questions immediately challenge binary thinking.

- **How could this disruption help us serve our customers better?** This cuts straight to the value question. No answer is too outrageous; the more creative the solution, the better!

- **Will this technology help my brand perception, market perception, or sales?** If you can't stand up in a boardroom and clearly explain the business impact, you're probably just following trends.

Embracing The In-Between: A Checklist

We've created a checklist to help you start thinking about how to operate within each paradox in this ebook. This is not meant to be a comprehensive guide, but merely a tool to spark conversations within your company.

The AI Paradox

01

☑ Choose a common customer journey for one of your personas and identify a pain point that could be helped by automation. Start with low-emotion moments; don't jump straight into high-stakes interactions for AI.

☑ Write down internal design processes that could benefit from speed or scale. This might include frequently repeated tasks, content iteration, etc. In other words, the to-dos your employees hate.

☑ Talk to your data and technology team(s) to get a full picture of your company's data architecture. Initiate conversations to explore agentic AI use cases, feasibility, and legal requirements.

The Website Paradox

02

☑ Understand what channels your audience prefers offsite and for what purposes, so you can identify unmet needs your website can address.

☑ Brainstorm value exchange opportunities that make sense for your audience and your brand. Think beyond loyalty points. Are there micro-journeys that could be served better?

☑ Map out your brand's existing customer data attributes to see whether any could be used to power real-time adaptive experiences.

The Brand Paradox   03

☑ Articulate your brand's creative core, including what it stands for and the "why" that should drive creative decisions.

☑ Audit your existing creative and content to derive a core set of raw, brand-aligned assets. What could AI then easily augment to serve more audiences while staying on brand?

☑ Create a list of potential creators who could collaborate with your company to reach new audiences with a unique (yet aligned) spin on your brand. Find your internal champions that can push this to the boundaries.

The Innovation Paradox   04

☑ Create a list of the customer experience technologies that your company already has and brainstorm how you could use them to add value in customer moments.

☑ Audit technologies you're already using to ensure that outputs align with your company's core purpose, improve the customer experience, and lead to increased sales, brand value, or brand perception.

☑ Review the data you use to make creative decisions and consider whether there are other insights those data points could reveal. Is there an alternative interpretation that you haven't considered?

The Change Paradox   05

☑ Make friends with your legal team to understand how to structure AI internally: from compliance to time-to-market.

☑ Plot out an employee training plan. If AI is creating more time for team members, do you need to retrain them to do new tasks to create value? What would that require and how long would it take?

☑ Set up AI governance for legal, privacy and security, ethics, and data quality. This foundation must be strong for the organization to use AI successfully.

Wrapping Up and Getting Started

The best brands won't pick sides. They'll play in the middle, where contradictions collide and good ideas get interesting. **Disruption isn't a roadblock. It's an opportunity to build something better for customers.**

We've shown how seemingly contradictory options don't need to compete. They can strengthen each other. Human designers *and* AI, websites *and* conversational browsing, brand stability *and* fluidity, innovation *and* time-tested approaches. The smartest brands find balance and, in doing so, find their edge.

We've weathered change before. Desktop publishing didn't eliminate designers. The internet didn't kill retail. Social media didn't replace websites. Every "end of an era" turned out to be the start of a new one.

This time is no different, except the possibilities are more exciting. AI that sketches alongside you. Physical spaces that respond in real-time. Brands that shapeshift while staying true to themselves. The tools are powerful and the potential is endless.

The gap between leaders and laggards is widening fast. **Brands that cling to either/or thinking will fade into the background and become frustratingly out of touch. But the brands brave enough to live in the "both/and" space will make the future feel human, connected, and a little more exciting.**

The middle isn't a compromise. It's where the magic happens.

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About Merkle

Merkle, a dentsu company, powers the experience economy. For more than 35 years, the company has put people at the heart of its approach to digital business transformation. As the only integrated experience consultancy in the world with a heritage in data science and business performance, Merkle delivers holistic, end-to-end experiences that drive growth, engagement, and loyalty. Merkle's expertise has earned recognition as a "Leader" by top industry analyst firms, in categories such as digital transformation and commerce, experience design, engineering and technology integration, digital marketing, data science, CRM and loyalty, and customer data management. With more than 16,000 employees, Merkle operates in 30+ countries throughout the Americas, EMEA, and APAC. For more information, visit www.merkle.com.

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