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Contributors

Francesca Cassidy
Raconteur's editor, responsible for its editorial strategy. She writes primarily on innovation, leadership and corporate culture.

Rosalyn Page
An award-winning writer and freelance journalist covering technology, innovation and digital lifestyle, among other topics.

Raconteur

Special projects editor
Ian Deering

Commercial content editors
Laura Bithell
James Lampard
Larnie Hur

Commercial content executive
Jessica Lynn

Commercial production managers
Alex Datcu
Ellen Newsome

Production executive
Sabrina Severino

Design and illustration
Kellie Jerrard
James Lampard
Celina Lucey
Samuele Motta

Design director
Tim Whitlock



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CREATIVITY

Is gut instinct dead in the age of AI?

Successful marketing campaigns have historically been the product of human creativity. But will the rise of AI and data analytics require marketers to relinquish some of their artistic freedom?

Rosalyn Page

Advertisers and marketers understand the value of original ideas. David Ogilvy, considered by many to be the father of advertising, once said, “If it doesn’t sell, it isn’t creative.”

Human creativity has long been the catalyst for the most powerful advertisements. But with the rise of performance data and brand metrics, marketers are increasingly relying on digital technologies to gauge and, in some instances, create marketing campaigns.

Data and AI tools can help marketers understand a campaign’s impact and predict performance. But how should marketers balance AI-generated insights with their gut instincts for what will resonate with their customers?

According to Mandy Alderson, head of global brand management at Intrepid Travel: “Following those gut instincts is how we create an emotional connection with the consumer. While data and AI are incredible, they’re mainly there to reaffirm our intuition.”

Alderson’s team uses Qualtrics, an experience-management platform, to guide its quarterly brand tracker and measure brand awareness as a key performance indicator, for instance.

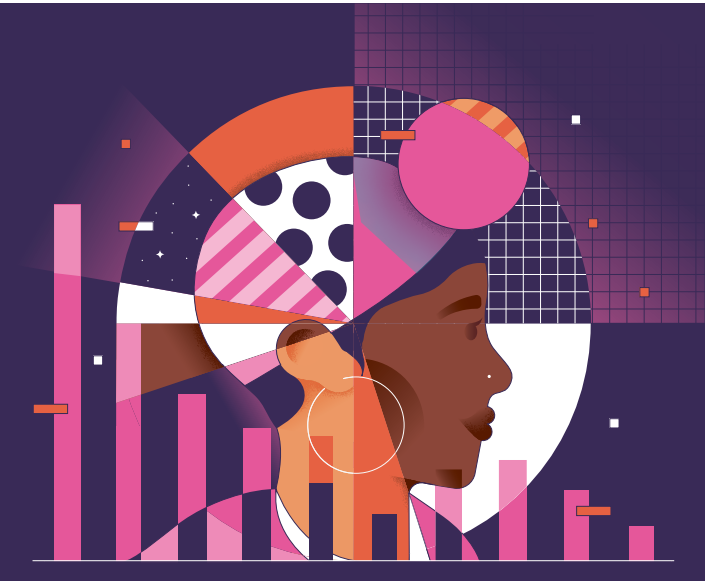
The data from this platform is instrumental in gauging the effectiveness of brand campaigns and informing brand spend. But while the data can provide valuable insights, human intuition is needed to connect the dots.

“Our gut instincts help us interpret those numbers and understand the emotional core of our brand’s connection with travellers,” Alderson says.

Measuring brand awareness is just the start. “The real challenge is translating those metrics to campaigns that genuinely resonate with our audience’s deeper desires and emotions,” she says.

While that task may require human input, creating an ad with emotional depth does not necessarily require human design.

System1, a brand insights firm, studied various qualitative components of marketing campaigns and found that some AI-generated ads are more effective at forging emotional connections than human-created ads. Coca-Cola’s AI-generated “Holidays are Coming” ad, for instance, rated 2.7 for emotional



intensity and ‘exceptional’ for strength of brand recognition based on System1’s measurement tool. By contrast, the classic 1976 campaign, “Coke Adds Life”, scored 1.56 for emotional intensity and ‘good’ for brand recognition.

So AI might help to optimise those emotional elements, but the magic happens by making abstract connections – something that requires human imagination and intuition, according to Jon Evans, chief customer officer at System1.

“Creative leaps into the unknown remains a distinctly human trait,” he says.

AI systems are developing quickly. “Unlike previous deterministic AI that simply completed tasks, agentic AI can, for instance, understand a brief and solve it independently,” Evans adds.

He continues: “The challenge now is human orchestration – coordinating these AI agents and ensuring they work together effectively.”

According to Alderson, the best brand campaigns succeed by exploiting culturally relevant moments – something AI cannot fully replicate.

“AI wouldn’t necessarily have the context and nuance to notice those moments and turn them into something meaningful,” she says.

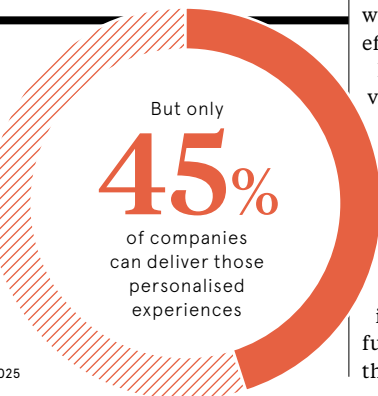
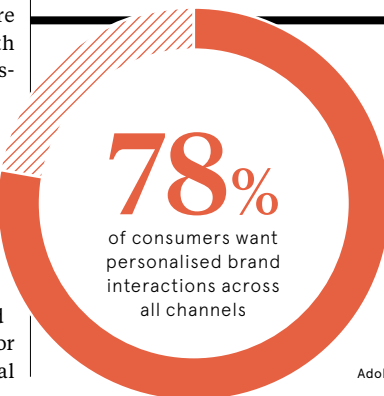
Kaitlyn Barclay, CEO and co-founder of Scout Lab, agrees, adding that human judgment about what the data means, and when to ignore it, is essential to creating brand campaigns that stand out and resonate with customers.

“The marketers who are winning right now are using AI systems as research assistants, not creative directors,” says Barclay.

She acknowledges, however, that the benefits of data-driven marketing are undeniable. Fuelled by data, AI tools can help marketers understand customer lifetime value, cross-channel attribution and behavioural triggers in ways that would have required armies of analysts just five years ago.

Still, marketers should not rely on AI systems for brand stewardship.

“Never let AI alone decide brand positioning, crisis response or cultural commentary. These require human judgment about values, risk tolerance and long-term brand equity,” she says.



Adobe, 2025

Data-driven predictions aside, some brand campaigns can only be decided by asking, ‘Does this feel right?’. Consider Liquid Death, the tinned-water brand, Barclay says.

“Selling water in tallboy cans shouldn’t work. The data probably said it was insane. But someone’s gut said ‘energy drink aesthetic for hydration’ would resonate with people who are tired of wellness culture bullshit. Now that brand is valued at \$1.4bn.”

AI is excellent at delivering the right message at the right time with precise targeting, thereby optimising for the 5% of customers who are buying right now. But marketers must build brand recognition for the 95% who aren’t currently buying, says Evans.

“AI can inform and refine ideas but that true creativity involves people making creative leaps and applying solutions to business problems,” he says.

Those brand-building efforts – the long-term strategies that create distinctive, memorable brand assets – are still ruled by human creativity. An AI may be incapable of achieving a *Mad Men* moment – a spark of creativity that leads to an entirely new idea for a brand campaign.

And, with the vast amount of content being churned out by AI, such unusual or uncommon leaps of imagination may be the only way to stand out in a crowded, noisy marketplace and create something that truly resonates with customers.

Marketers however must test and scrutinise their own instincts, which can be subject to in-built preferences and biases, with research and data, says Evans.

“Gut instinct is not dead, but it should be based on the customer’s gut instinct rather than the marketer’s,” he says.

For Alderson, the gut instinct and human emotions that go into Intrepid’s marketing campaigns are essential for preserving authenticity. “It’s part of what makes the way we connect with our customers so effective,” she says.

It’s proof that while AI can provide valuable insights, human judgment and emotional appeal remain crucial for brand campaigns that resonate with target customers.

“The world’s best brand campaigns succeed because they find a really key moment culturally in time. It’s not about leaning into the past or predicting the future but about what’s relevant at that moment,” she says.



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OPINION

Marketers must tackle their crisis of creative confidence

New research by Lions Advisory shows that marketers’ appetite for risk is decreasing. **Ophelia Taylor-Brennan**, a strategist at the consultancy, explains what brands can do about it

As told to Francesca Cassidy

The annual *State of Creativity* study is conducted by Lions Advisory, the consultancy arm of Cannes Lions, to help marketers understand the key challenges, trends and opportunities for creativity in the industry. It is informed by a global survey of 1,000 marketers and creatives, and augmented by one-on-one interviews with industry experts.

The general sentiment from this year’s study is that creative confidence is waning. Only 13% of companies are taking a risk-friendly approach to their marketing communications. But there’s actually more incentive to take creative risks today than ever before.

Deloitte found that risk-taking brands are 33% more likely to see long-term revenue growth, and risk-taking brands generate profit margins up to four times higher than non-risk takers, according to WARC, part of the Lions family. What’s more, research by the consultancy eatbigfish and the advertising company System1 has looked at the ‘cost of dull’ and found that, in the long run, it’s actually costing marketers more to be dull. Playing it safe is no longer the safe option.

The *State of Creativity* report found that two key trends are holding marketers back from taking risks. The first is what we have termed ‘the insight famine’, which means that weak insight development is limiting bold creativity among marketing teams. The other is what we’re calling ‘the culture lag’, meaning that a lack of cultural agility is holding brands back from taking part in key cultural moments. If brands can navigate these confidence killers, they can go on to produce more effective work.

So what can brands do to regain their confidence? If I were a CMO, there are three things I would focus on right now.

1 Invest in training to get better at insights

The first is upskilling teams on insight development. Creative marketing capabilities are a bit like a sport – if you don’t keep on top of the training, you’ll lose your form and that’s what we’re seeing here, particularly with the insight famine. This year’s study revealed that brands with better insight capabilities are more likely to prioritise creativity, embrace creative risks and respond to cultural trends effectively. This is interesting because it tells us that, if brands can get insight development right, they’re more likely to have the confidence to build on these other areas.

Currently, over half of respondents say that their ability to develop insights is either poor or very poor. We discovered three factors that are holding brands back: a lack of understanding of what constitutes a good insight in the first place, not prioritising insight development in the business and insufficient time allocated for deep insight exploration.

My advice to CMOs is to invest significantly in training to get everyone up to speed and aligned on what sorts of insights the brand is looking for. Ikea, for example, does this well. Every year, the retailer publishes a massive research report called Life at Home, which it uses to understand the needs and wants of its consumers better and provide the brand with insights on how consumers feel about its advertising. By backing ideas with insights, you’re able to take more calculated risks, so your team will feel more confident in executing the work

2 Get comfortable with the uncomfortable

Next, marketing teams must get comfortable with taking risks. There is a misconception that creative confidence is



“**Risk tolerance is a learned comfort zone – we can train ourselves out of risk aversion by pushing for ideas that scare us**

something you either have or you don’t, but that’s not the case at all. Risk tolerance is a learned comfort zone – we can train ourselves out of risk aversion. And we do this by pushing for ideas that scare us.

We need senior execs to lead these efforts and push their team’s creative thinking even when ideas fail. Mondelez is a brand that does this well. As part of their internal marketing awards programme they have what’s called the I’m Possible Award, which is centered around learning from failure. This has helped to shift this mindset and reappraise

behaviors like curiosity and courage in the organisation. The award highlights instances where things didn’t go exactly according to plan but valuable lessons were learned. The winners of this award get an invite to the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity as a celebration of their curiosity.

This kind of thinking is super important for the psychological safety of the team. If you keep shooting ideas down, people will stop telling you their ideas altogether. The dilution of ideas is another one of the main internal blockers for creative risk-taking, with 19% of marketers saying their ideas were routinely being shot down or diluted by those at the top level.

3 Buddy up

Finally, marketers should aim to build stronger partnerships. Having a strong agency relationship can help you develop better insights and get comfortable with risk a lot faster and more effectively. But these partnerships are not always fully utilised.

One of the main causes of tension according to last year’s study is that agency partners feel undervalued. There’s a great opportunity here to invite them in, open up the communication more honestly and set some goals together around what you want to achieve and how you’re each going to own that.

The longevity of a client-agency relationship is key. It can enable a strong bedrock of shared understanding, shared ambition and trust, which, ultimately, are necessary to get true creativity.

From what I’ve seen from recent Cannes Lions winners, the most successful brands aren’t just prioritising creativity, they’re obsessed with it. What keeps brands at the top of their game year after year is that they’re innately curious in everything they do. Curiosity is a great tool and, if you can encourage it, it can fuel continuous learning and innovation. Brand leaders should look to create an environment where ideas can flourish and failure is seen as a stepping stone rather than a loss. ●

Commercial feature

AI with intent: building a brighter tomorrow for digital advertising

AI is transforming media – **Rob Blake**, MD UK & DACH at Channel Factory, explains how the advertising-solutions provider is delivering smarter targeting, ethical placements and inclusive content that boosts performance without compromising brand values

In the rush to adopt AI across the media industry, it can be easy to forget that just because you can automate something, it doesn’t necessarily mean you should. AI enables us to move faster, but speed alone isn’t the only goal. We’re using AI to make media more contextual, more relevant and more inclusive for today’s fragmented attention economy.

Using AI to help brands get more out of their media budgets

At Channel Factory, we use AI across the full cycle, from classification to targeting to optimisation and reporting. One of the places it has had the biggest impact for us is in how we categorise and contextualise ad placements.

Traditional media planning has relied on blunt instruments like keyword targeting or broad demographic buckets. But AI has changed the game. We’re now able to feed huge swathes of data – language, audience signals, on-screen representation and content risk levels – into advanced models. In return, we get a deeper understanding of tone, sentiment, context and nuance.

This gives us the ability to decode content that brands stand for, so we can place their ads in environments that feel more relevant and aligned with their values. AI systems also monitor and optimise our campaigns continuously while they’re running. This means we can see which videos and channels are delivering the best performance and adjust them accordingly. Once the campaign is over, generative AI speeds up reporting and analytics. Doing this manually takes hours, but with AI we can generate the same insights in minutes.

We’re also embracing AI internally, using it to better develop sales narratives, create better client presentations and streamline branded-content generation across the organisation. This makes us more efficient and frees up our teams to focus on the higher-value strategic work that really helps our clients.

Relevance, efficiency and ethics are no longer trade-offs – they’re prerequisites

Brands are under increased pressure to deliver measurable outcomes without compromising their values. Unfortunately, balancing purpose with

performance isn’t always straightforward. Brands face trade-offs between reaching the largest possible audience and staying true to what they stand for. Channel Factory’s approach shows that, with the right tools and data, it’s possible to do both effectively.

Purpose-driven media dates back to traditional media planning in the 1960s, when media planners would review upcoming episodes of TV shows to ensure ads were placed in the right context. Today’s fragmented media ecosystems mean that kind of manual review isn’t feasible, but AI can help significantly, allowing us to evaluate digital content at scale and classify it accurately. Doing so means advertisers can then ensure their ads are not only safe but also contextually aligned.

By aligning ads with high-value content – and avoiding placements alongside fake or detrimental news, for instance – we incentivise creators to produce more high-quality content and help reduce the monetisation of harmful material.

AI is bridging the gap between awareness and performance

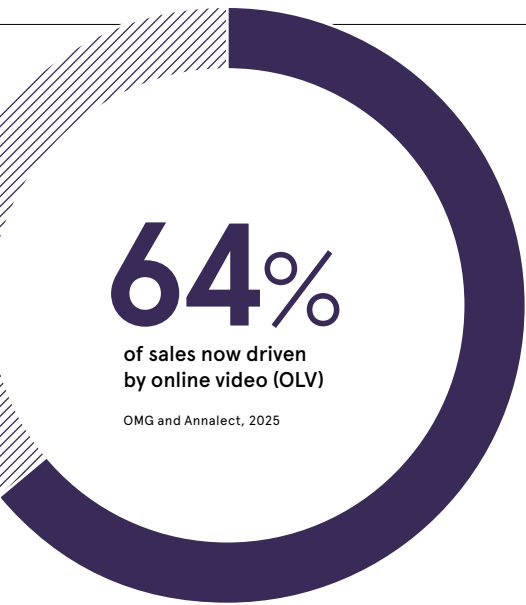
According to recent marketing industry research from OMG and Annalect, online video (OLV) now drives 64% of sales, underscoring just how crucial effective media placement has become for brand performance. Channel Factory has gained a reputation as the best performing OLV partner, outperforming competition by 80%. YouTube in particular is a high-intent platform that’s fantastic for brand-building and performance.

Because of its reach and scale, brands can use YouTube to reach large audiences and drive broad awareness at the beginning of the customer journey. This has given the platform a stellar reputation as a top-of-funnel awareness tool. However, by combining intent data from Google with contextual targeting AI from Channel Factory, we’re seeing more brands than ever effectively turning YouTube into a full-funnel engine. The proof is in the numbers: our research results show that Channel Factory delivered a six-fold return on ad spend on YouTube.

Contextual targeting doesn’t always need to align with a consumer’s intent.



“**Brands are under increased pressure to deliver measurable outcomes without compromising their values**



However, understanding that intent means we can go beyond just placing ads in relevant environments. Instead, we can target audiences based on the actual objectives of the campaign. When ads appear in places that are meaningful, relevant and aligned, you get better performance and better brand outcomes.

Value alignment in advertising

All too often, ethical media is positioned as a corporate-social-responsibility side note. We believe it should be a core driver of sustainable brand success. We should remember that AI has the power to exclude as easily as it includes, especially when it’s trained on biased inputs or narrow assumptions.

That’s why we take care when we build and train our models. We actively manage for bias and have built tools that re-surface diverse creators who may otherwise be unfairly filtered out by traditional brand-safety algorithms.

Here’s an example: a long-form YouTube interview with Barack Obama about racial prejudice was being excluded from ad inventory because the word “prejudice” triggered brand safety filters. But the content was actually thoughtful, constructive and well within the bounds of suitability. It’s typically the kind of content that brands who are engaged with fighting racism want to be associated with. We helped get that video monetised again.

Using AI to build more inclusive and trustworthy media environments

It’s vital to educate brands on where their audiences really are, not just where they assume they are. Fashion brands, for instance, often focus all their efforts on premium publishers, when their buyers may actually be engaging with very different content.

Our company culture prioritises inclusion, and Channel Factory’s Conscious Advertising Program aims to tackle bias head-on, enhancing brand trust by addressing the lack of inclusion in media. It helps brands re-evaluate blocklists to ensure diverse creators aren’t unjustly included. This means they can guide their budgets accordingly to champion diversity throughout their campaigns.

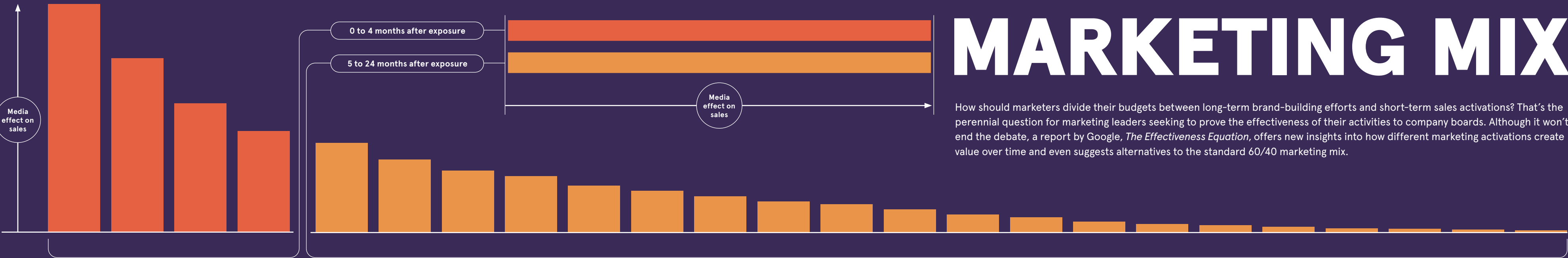
The truth is, when you combine AI with human intention, media gets smarter, safer and more interesting. Perhaps most important of all, it becomes more representative of society. Advertising shapes culture – and we have a big responsibility as an industry to build something better.

For more information please visit channelfactory.com



THE IMPACT OF A MARKETING INVESTMENT OVER THE FIRST FOUR MONTHS IS EQUAL TO THE IMPACT OVER THE FOLLOWING 20 MONTHS

Impact of media investment on sales over time

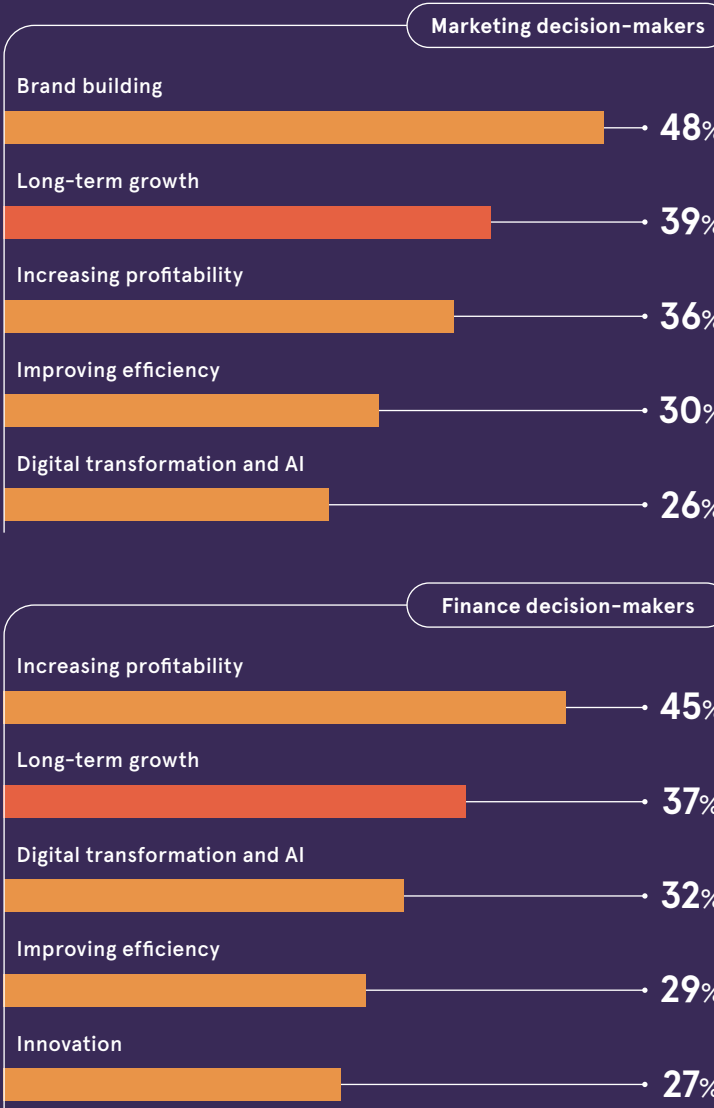


MASTERING THE MARKETING MIX

How should marketers divide their budgets between long-term brand-building efforts and short-term sales activations? That's the perennial question for marketing leaders seeking to prove the effectiveness of their activities to company boards. Although it won't end the debate, a report by Google, *The Effectiveness Equation*, offers new insights into how different marketing activations create value over time and even suggests alternatives to the standard 60/40 marketing mix.

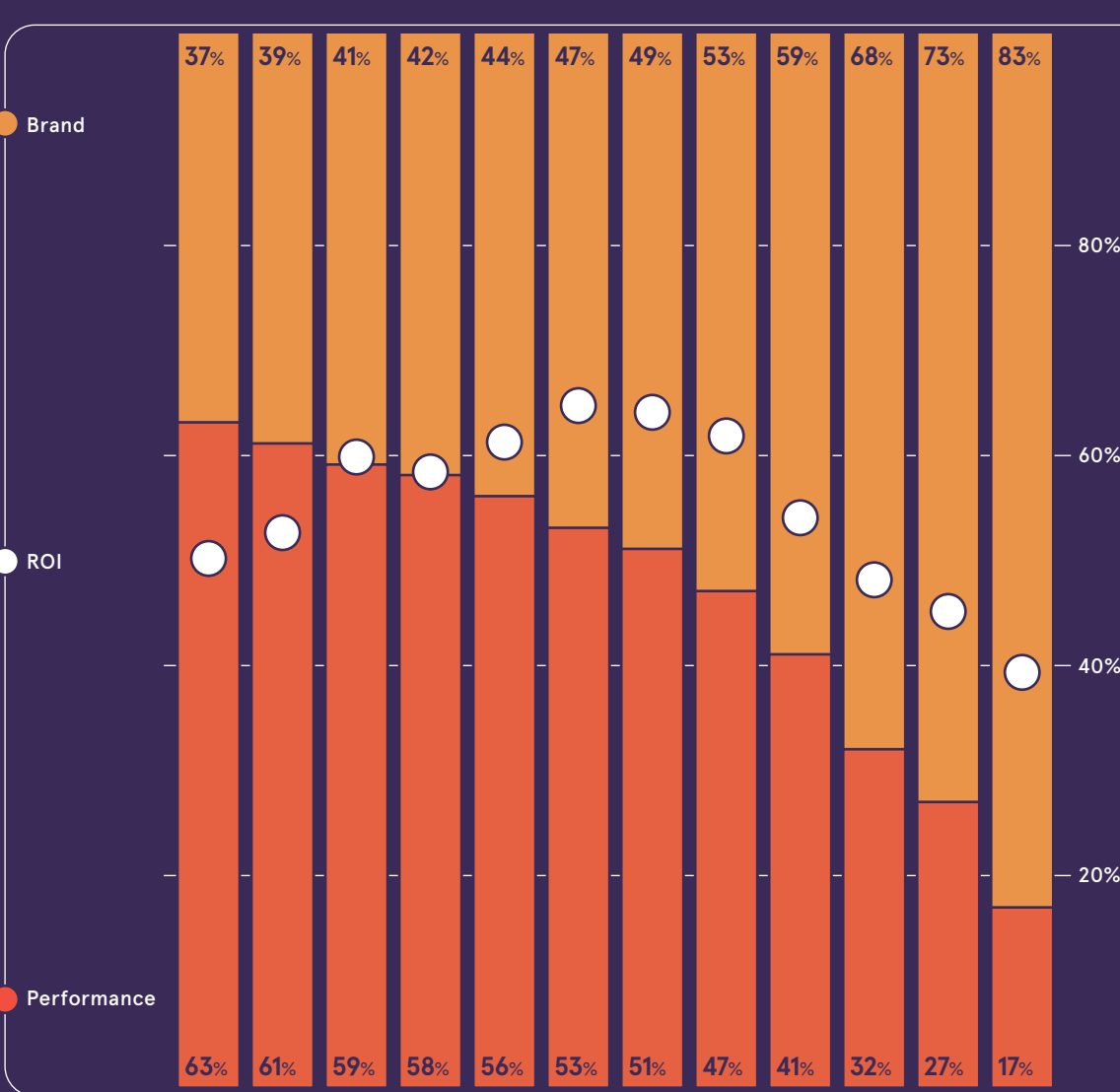
FINANCE AND MARKETING LEADERS RECOGNISE MARKETING'S ABILITY TO DRIVE LONG-TERM GROWTH

Share of marketing or finance leaders who believe the marketing function should prioritise the following goals or activities



SHOULD MARKETERS RETHINK THE TRADITIONAL 60/40 SPLIT?

Marketing ROI relative to proportion of investment in brand or performance marketing for European ecommerce brands 2020-23



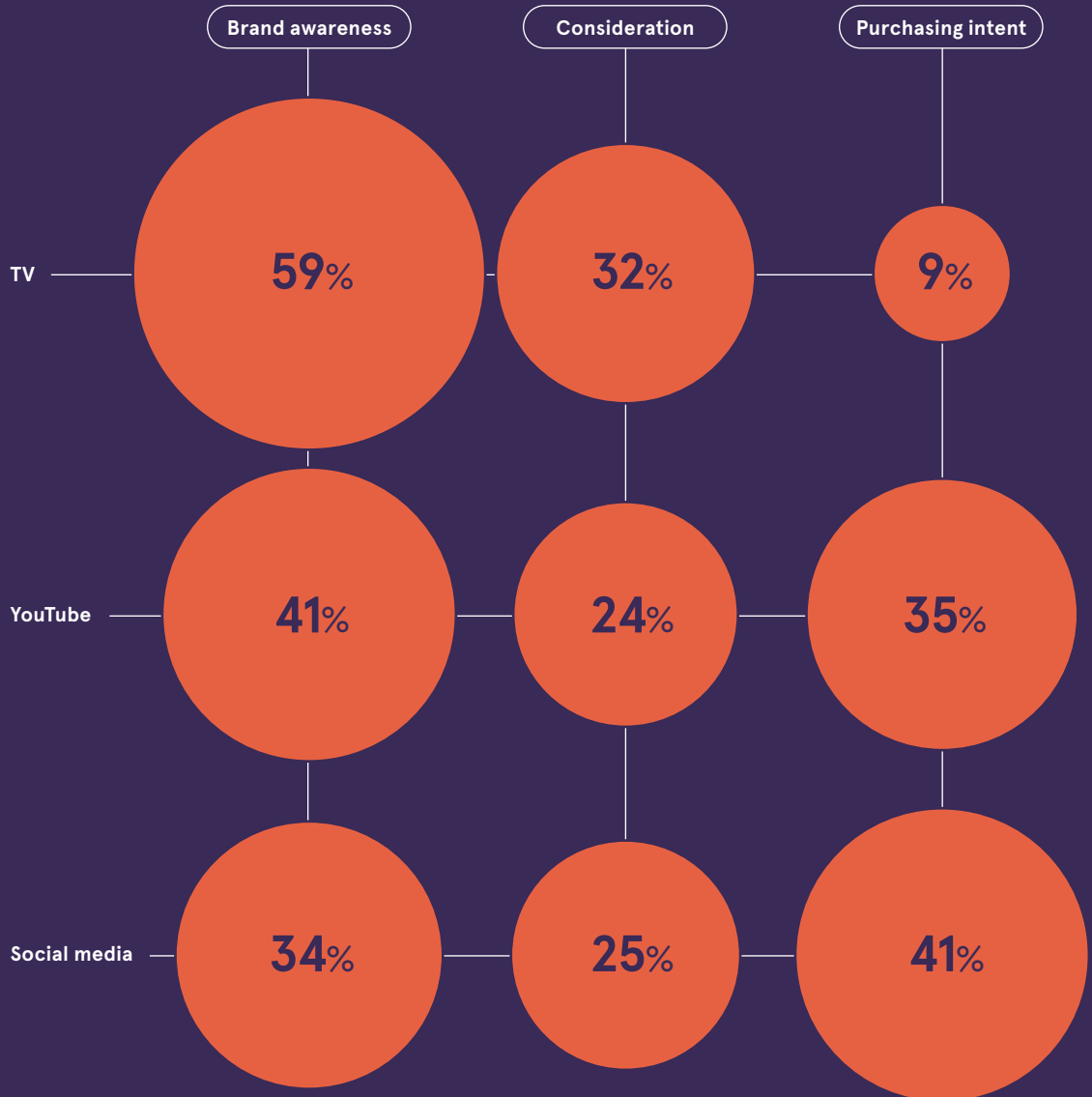
BRAND AWARENESS AND CONSIDERATION IMPACT LONG- AND SHORT-TERM SALES

Change in short- or long-term sales relative to change in brand awareness or consideration



WHICH CHANNELS ARE MOST APPROPRIATE FOR LONG- OR SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES?

Impact of marketing activity on different KPIs, by channel



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INTERVIEW

CEO on the spot: 8 questions with Omnicom's Laura Fenton

The UK chief executive of the global marketing agency discusses the changes buffeting the media landscape, the importance of foresight and why good leaders really care

Francesca Cassidy

When it comes to choosing where we want to work, only a lucky few of us get it right the first time. Laura Fenton is one of them. She joined Omnicom Media Group in 2004 on an agency graduate scheme and quickly worked her way up through the ranks. In 2020, she became CEO of one of the group's agencies, OMD. Three years later, she was promoted to UK CEO for the global conglomerate.

Here, she discusses the shift required when moving from the helm of an agency to country CEO, as well as the childhood ambitions that drove her and the lessons she has learned during her career.

Q Did you always want to be a CEO?

A No, but I have always been ambitious. I'm the third of four children and grew up in a busy household – if you wanted to be heard, you had to speak up. You had to do something really special or really noisy to get some attention. That really shaped my determination to stand out.

Also, my dad came from a working class background and has the most incredible work ethic. When we were growing up, nothing was ever handed to us on a plate.

“I always try to give a rod, not a fish. The very best leaders have a knack for helping people find the solution themselves

I always had this sense that I wanted to do something with my life, but I didn't know exactly what that would look like until I started working. The moment I landed my first graduate job I decided that I wanted to get to the top.

Q What do you think makes a good leader?

A Leaders need to be able to create a compelling vision for what the organisation is trying to achieve and then communicate it regularly. They need to have a clear mission and find ways to weave that through everything they do.

Good leaders really care; they should spend time understanding the people they work with. It is okay to show your vulnerability, but building really strong relationships with people can also enable you to be quite challenging with them. If you have built psychological safety in the workplace then you push and provoke because, ultimately, people know it's coming from the right place.

Finally, the best leaders will not simply give you the answer. I always try to give a rod, not a fish. It's so easy when you've got the answer to cut to the chase as quickly as possible. The very best leaders have a knack for helping people find the solution themselves. With the speed and pace of transformation in business today, one of the most important things a leader can do is build an empowered team. Funnelling every decision through a single person at the top of the pyramid is not sustainable because it's impossible to move at the pace required.

Q How would your co-workers describe you?

A People describe me as being calm in a crisis. Running an agency can be a rollercoaster – everything is service-based and contract-based, there are wins and



losses, ups and downs. So people do describe me as a bit of a swan. Everyone knows that under the surface there's a lot more going on.

I see my role as someone who can help with a challenge, reframe things when they're difficult and find a path through them. My colleagues generally say I'm open, honest and authentic – I try to create time for people – but I'm also decisive.

Q What are you looking for when you hire a leadership team?

A There are some things that are permanent and others that are important right now. We are definitely living through a lot of change and disruption.

One of the questions I find really important is, 'Does this person have a clear point of view on the future of our industry?' No one has a crystal ball, but we need a level of clear thinking on what's coming down the line and what we need to do about it.

I also look for people who can simplify complex issues. Our role as media agencies is to help clients make media a competitive advantage for their business. We can only do that if we can clearly and cleanly tell the story of what we do and what we add without getting lost in the depth and the detail. I will always try to stress-test someone's ability to boil things down.

And then, obviously, you're always wondering whether you'd want to be stuck in a room with them on week seven of a pitch on a Monday afternoon. We should ask ourselves those questions, because that's how teams really come to life.

Q What are some of the biggest challenges facing the media agencies at the moment?

A Behaviourally, there's been an awful lot of change. For example, the way people search for information has changed. One of the big waves of digital advertising was search marketing. This is now being completely disrupted by search agents and generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT.

We're seeing that younger audiences look for information on social media before traditional search engines. This has big implications for how we operate. Social media has transformed the way people consume content, as have streaming services, which have totally disrupted the audio-visual landscape.

Also, AI is changing the way we do things day in and day out, enabling us to do higher-order work far more efficiently and effectively.

So the biggest challenge facing our industry is finding a way to stay one step ahead when the speed and depth of change is so great. The agencies that win over the next few years will be those that take a step back and plan ahead.

Q What's been your proudest achievement in your current role?

A It's funny, I came up through outward agency roles, where achievements were pretty clearly signposted. I no longer have those big, single moments in my role. Instead, it's about helping power the success of the agencies.

We have lots of moments of pride, whether it's doing incredible work

that's recognised in the industry or winning a big new pitch, but now my role is one step behind, congratulating and celebrating the agencies, rather than the other way around. So it ends up being a collection of proud achievements, rather than one single moment.

Q What book do you think every business leader should read at least once?

A *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* by Daniel Coyle. It's about how creative and high-performing companies, such as Pixar, achieved their phenomenal success and how they build and motivate teams. It explores the cultural codes and practices they put in place to codify psychological safety, empower staff and inspire people to go off and do these incredible things repeatedly.

As an industry, we talk a lot about data and tools and technology – and those are fundamental – but we must never lose sight of the fact that what we do is fundamentally driven by our people.

Q What one piece of advice would you give to other agency CEOs?

A Progress over perfection. The media ecosystem is pretty live and it gives you plenty of feedback. You don't have to sweat every single detail. Just do good work and get it out there. Embrace an experimentation mindset, because there isn't always time to make everything perfect. Progress is fundamental – but I won't say any more, as I don't want to give too much advice to my competitors! ●



Q & A

Why B2B is stealing the show at Cannes Lions



Marian Brannelly
Global director of awards, Lions



Wendy Walker
Vice-president of marketing
ASEAN, Salesforce and Creative
B2B Lions jury president



Davang Shah
Vice-president of marketing,
Linkedin

Three industry leaders discuss the creative renaissance in B2B marketing, how AI is accelerating innovation and what it takes to win big at Cannes

For decades, the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity has been dominated by consumer-facing marketing campaigns from brands that wow audiences with emotional storytelling, viral videos and purpose-led messaging. B2B marketing, on the other hand, has traditionally been viewed as dry and unimaginative. But B2B is rapidly becoming one of the most exciting frontiers for marketing creativity.

Unlike at some B2C brands, marketing budgets at many B2B

businesses are growing. A recent study by eMarketer projected that B2B digital-ad spending will grow by 13.9% in 2025 and 10.4% in 2026. According to Brand Finance, the brand valuation consultancy, the world's top B2B brands saw a 10% year-on-year growth in brand value in 2024.

With B2B campaigns featuring more prominently at this year's Cannes festival, three experts explore the sector's meteoric rise and discuss how B2B brands are embracing emotional storytelling.

Q Cannes has traditionally focused on B2C marketing – why is B2B being featured more prominently in 2025?

MB It's worth taking a step back and thinking about the broader global macroeconomic environment. Some of the shifts we're tracking show that B2B marketing is on the rise. Brand Finance's Top 150 B2B Brands index for 2024 shows that the top 100 B2B brands grew their equity by 10% compared with 2023. Plus, B2B brands account for nearly half of the Fortune Global 500 list of companies.

This builds on a trend we saw at the 2024 Cannes Lions awards. Our Creative B2B jury observed that the overall quality of the work in the B2B Lions had dramatically improved, with the president of the jury, Andisa Ntsubane, declaring this to be the "decade of B2B".

Q Do you think the bar for B2B work has been raised?

WW The creative bar is absolutely being raised and it's inspiring to see. As global jury president for the Creative B2B Lions this year, I'll be looking for work that not only solves a business problem, but redefines what B2B creativity looks like.

A winning campaign must be brave; it must challenge category conventions and show us something we haven't seen before. I'll be drawn to work that has a strong strategic foundation, brings purpose and impact into focus and tells a story with emotional depth and authenticity. We'll be celebrating work that is executed with excellence, grounded in insight and delivered with bold, creative thinking.

That's the kind of work that doesn't just meet expectations, but elevates the entire industry.

MB At last year's Cannes Lions we saw a rise in B2B presence – and not just in the B2B Lion category. A staggering 50% of the winning work in the Titanium Lions – which is the top accolade for game-changing creativity – came from B2B or B2B2C brands. So the rise in B2B is definitely the untold story from the festival last year and I expect this momentum to continue into this year's awards.

Q How has B2B marketing changed over the past five years?

WW Five years ago, we were just starting to see emotional storytelling and brand-building emerge in the space. Since then, it's been a steep upward trajectory. What was once seen as dry or overly rational has become more dynamic, human and creatively ambitious. Today's B2B work embraces storytelling, taps into emotion and connects with people on a far deeper level.

Marketers have realised that even in complex buying cycles and technical categories, it's still people

making decisions – and people respond to stories, emotion and brands that stand for something more than just function. It's become an exciting space for creativity and impact, and it's driving growth in ways we weren't talking about five years ago.

DS B2B buying has evolved over the past decade – B2B purchasing decisions are typically longer, involving up to 20 stakeholders and requiring, on average, 17 meaningful interactions before a buyer completes a purchase. Success in B2B is not just down to one relationship or connection. Building collective confidence among a group of people influencing buying decisions is key.

B2B marketers therefore have changed the way they think about their marketing strategy and the content they build to influence purchase decisions. We found in recent research that nearly three-quarters (73%) of B2B marketers globally are seeking to develop bolder creative strategies and fresh marketing tactics.

To stand out from their competitors, they're engaging their audiences with more short-form social video and partnering with influential voices to educate audiences and build trust and credibility. Our research revealed that six in 10 leaders of B2B brands say they will increase spend on influencer marketing content in the near future.

Q What lessons could B2B marketers learn from their B2C counterparts?

DS Bet big on video. B2C brands have long invested in short-form social video to grab eyeballs and build a strong connection with their audiences. This is one of the smartest investments B2B marketers can make. Over half (55%) of the B2B marketers surveyed for LinkedIn's 2024 B2B Marketing Benchmark report said their short-form social videos produced the highest ROI of all video types, making them the most effective.

Lean into emotional messaging. Most B2C brands have successfully built a strong connection with their audiences through emotional messaging. B2B brands must remind themselves that even if they are selling to businesses, it's still humans who make the decisions. Using humour, for instance, is a great way for B2B brands to hold their audience's attention and stay top-of-mind when it's time to buy.

Partner with authentic, influential voices, such as social-media influencers. B2C brands have successfully created brand ambassadors across their audience community, who are telling their brand story in authentic and engaging ways, and B2B brands are finally jumping on that trend. In B2B, subject-matter

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B2B has historically focused on rational messaging and clarity. We now have an opportunity to bring more depth and resonance to our work

experts, company executives and employees can be great brand advocates to educate audiences about technical product know-how.

WW B2C marketers have long understood how to connect emotionally, tell culturally relevant stories and deliver consistently great brand experiences. In the B2B space, we've historically focused on rational messaging and clarity. That is important, but we now have an opportunity to bring more depth and resonance to our work.

You can see this shift in many B2B brands, including Workday, IBM and Salesforce. These campaigns are engaging, emotionally led and rooted in a clear understanding of the audience. They demonstrate that you can stay true to your business objectives while also telling stories that connect on a personal level.

Q How should marketers prepare for the next era of B2B marketing?

WW The next era of B2B marketing will be defined by how well we create space for depth, relevance and connection. We're seeing a shift away from transactional touchpoints toward formats that enable brands to slow down and build relationships over time, through long-form video, podcasts, editorial content and live experiences that invite participation and conversation.

The channels are also evolving. Webinars are becoming interactive environments, community platforms are growing in influence and co-created content, where customers and partners help shape the narrative, is growing in popularity. AI is absolutely adding momentum to this shift, giving marketers the ability to surface insights faster, use content intelligently and maintain quality across more channels.

To prepare, marketers must think beyond campaigns and start designing connected ecosystems. It's not about being everywhere. It's about being meaningful, memorable and ready when your audience is. ●

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Even in complex buying cycles and technical categories, it's still people making decisions



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and VCCP
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