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A PLAYBOOK FOR THE CMO ENTERING THE AI ERA:
ACHIEVING EQUILIBRIUM TO BUILD HUMAN-LED,
AI-ENABLED COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

THE CMO BALANCING ACT II

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This report offers a fresh perspective on the CMO's role, where the original balancing act between short and long-term growth has been elevated into a profound leadership mandate.

Success today requires not only mastering the enduring interplay between human creativity and AI, but also stepping up to lead the enterprise-wide growth agenda from the front.

We figured out what changed, so you can focus on what is next. Our report uses AI to track the real shifts in the marketing industry's conversation, year over year.

We then layered on the human element: the lived experiences of our own senior marketing experts. The result is not just theory; it is a practical guide not just for mastering the new balancing act between human creativity and machine intelligence but also to drive real, sustainable growth as a market shaper.

Let's dive in!

CMOS ARE NO LONGER BEING ASKED TO MARKET THE BUSINESS. THEY ARE INCREASINGLY BEING ASKED TO REDESIGN IT

It is undoubtedly an exciting time to be a CMO, yet the role stands at a pivotal crossroads. The classic tensions, balancing short-term demands with long-term growth, human ingenuity with agentic scale, are no longer just challenges to be managed; they are the context for a profound shift in expectation. The C-suite increasing looks to the CMO not just to run a function but to lead on corporate growth strategy and spearhead enterprise-wide transformation with AI at its core. A choice emerges: to rise to this challenge and architect the future of the business, or risk managing a function of diminishing influence.

The CMO Balancing Act provides a practical guide, delivering actionable insights and proven strategies to help CMOs and senior marketing leaders navigate this complexity.

What is clear from the analysis of this year's data, and its comparison to last year's, is that building long-term relationships with customers via emotionally-charged brands is essential. Achieving this loyalty acts as both a defence against agentic-driven customer journeys and as a deliberate growth strategy to build long-term, profitable customer relationships.
AI is both the catalyst of some these challenges and the antidote.

In this report, we break down the key challenges being observed in the market and pose practical solutions, to help CMOs and marketing leaders thrive within this complexity.

What the data tells us:

THE GREAT REBALANCING

BECOMING A DISRUPTIVE FORCE IN THE ORGANISATION TO BUILD COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

OUR HYBRID INTELLIGENCE METHODOLOGY

This year, we evolved our proven 'hybrid intelligence' research methodology. Building on last year's approach, we introduced a new quantitative dimension, conducting a large-scale comparative analysis of the industry literature to measure the precise shifts in the strategic discourse.

Our insights are grounded in a rigorous, hybrid methodology designed to capture the evolution of the strategic marketing landscape over time.

The quantitative foundation of this research is a direct comparative analysis of two distinct corpora of industry publications: a foundational set of 50 reports, the starting point of the 2025 CMO Balancing Act analysis, and a current set of over 65 reports published since.

This enables us to understand what has changed in the past year.

Using an AI-enabled approach to examine this total corpus of over 110 documents, we systematically mapped and measured the shifts in thematic frequency and language, allowing us to quantify the precise changes in the industry's strategic priorities.

We then enriched this data-driven analysis with deep qualitative context from over 30 in-depth interviews with senior Deloitte marketing leaders to validate our findings, ensuring our conclusions are not only robust but pragmatic and immediately actionable for leaders navigating this shape-shifting terrain.

WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Our hybrid intelligence research, combining generative AI analysis with expert insight, reveals a material change in the industry's vocabulary between our 2025 and 2026 report corpuses.

The language of direct performance and commerce has cooled significantly. Mentions of "Growth and Performance Measurement" as a thematic bucket have fallen by over half (from 21% to 9% of the discourse), while the focus on "Commerce and Industry" mechanics has collapsed (from 22% to just 4%). Words that once dominated the conversation, like sales, revenue, spending, industry, have lost their prominence.

In their place, three themes have surged forward:

CUSTOMER VALUE BECOMES THE UNDENIABLE GROWTH ENGINE

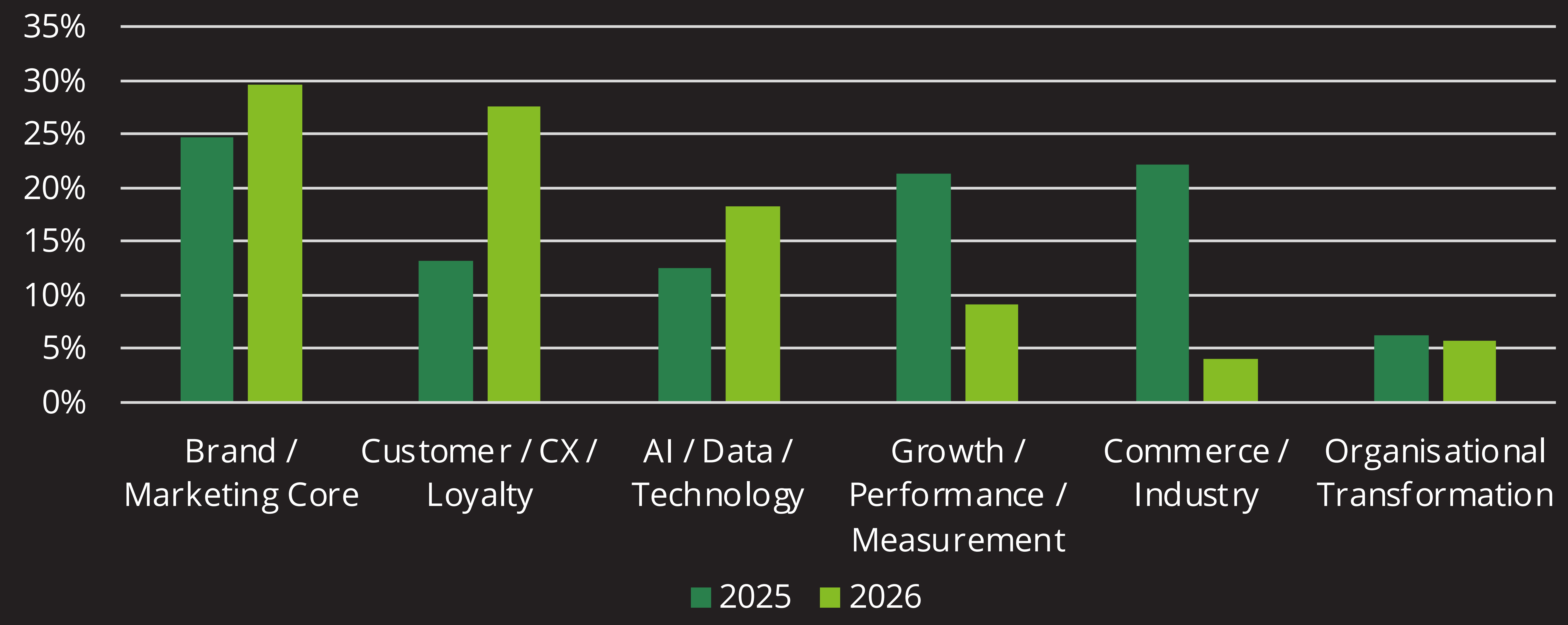
"Customer & CX" (+14 pts) was the single largest share gainer, more than doubling to become 28% of the entire discourse. The conversation has decisively moved from what we sell to how customers experience our brand, with terms like experience, value, trust, and loyalty rising to the top.

The vocabulary itself powerfully reinforces this narrative:

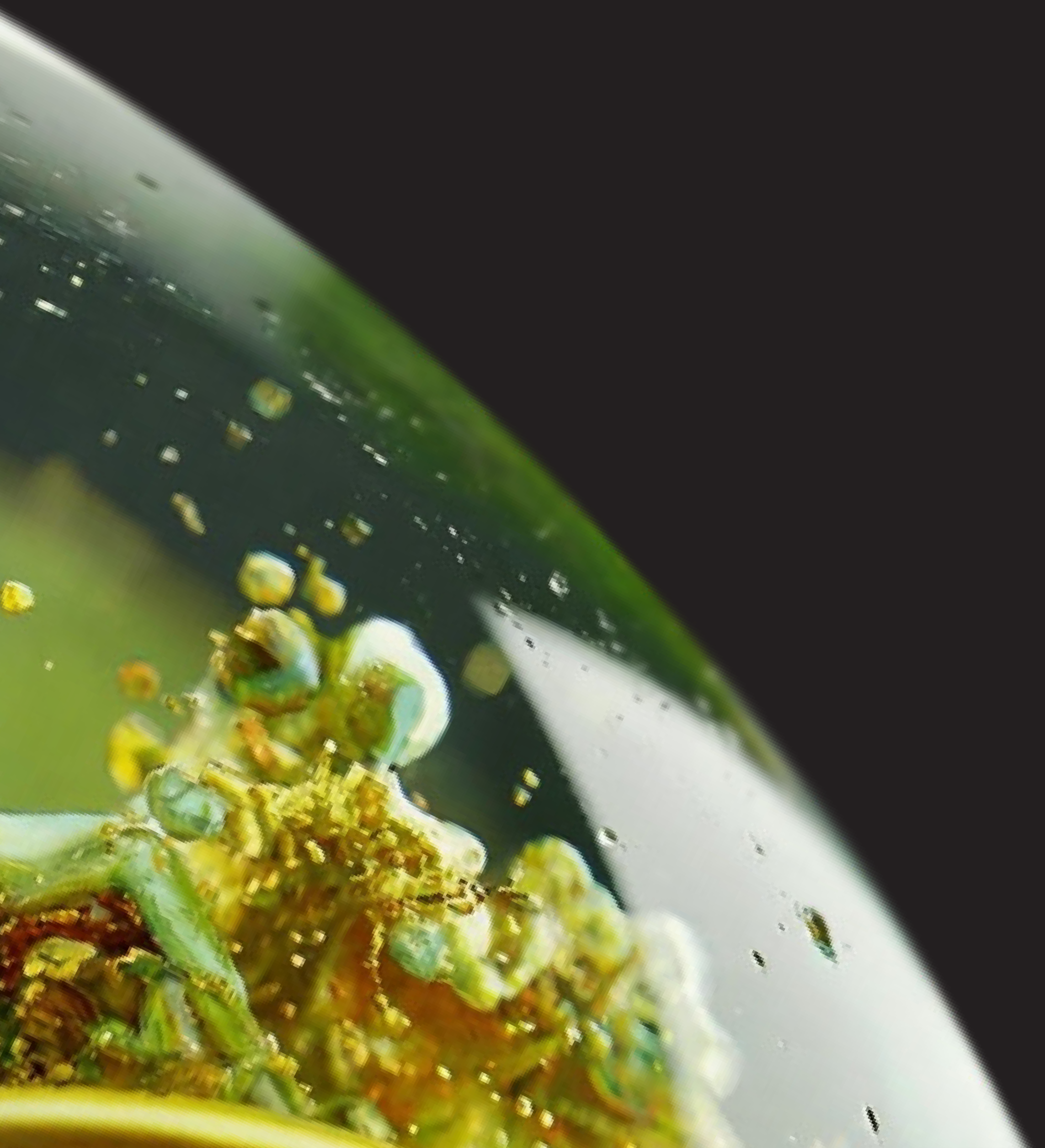
- 'Customer' climbs from a 4% share to 6%.
- 'Experience' more than doubles its prominence, rising from 2% to 4%.
- 'Loyalty' triples its share, from 0.4% to 1.2%.
- Crucially, new terms like 'trust' (1.2%), 'journey' (0.9%), and 'human' (0.9%) have entered the top tier of the discourse.

The message for marketing leaders is unequivocal: the conversation has pivoted from driving activity to creating value. Customer-centricity is no longer just a guiding principle; it is fast becoming the new centre of gravity for the entire marketing function.

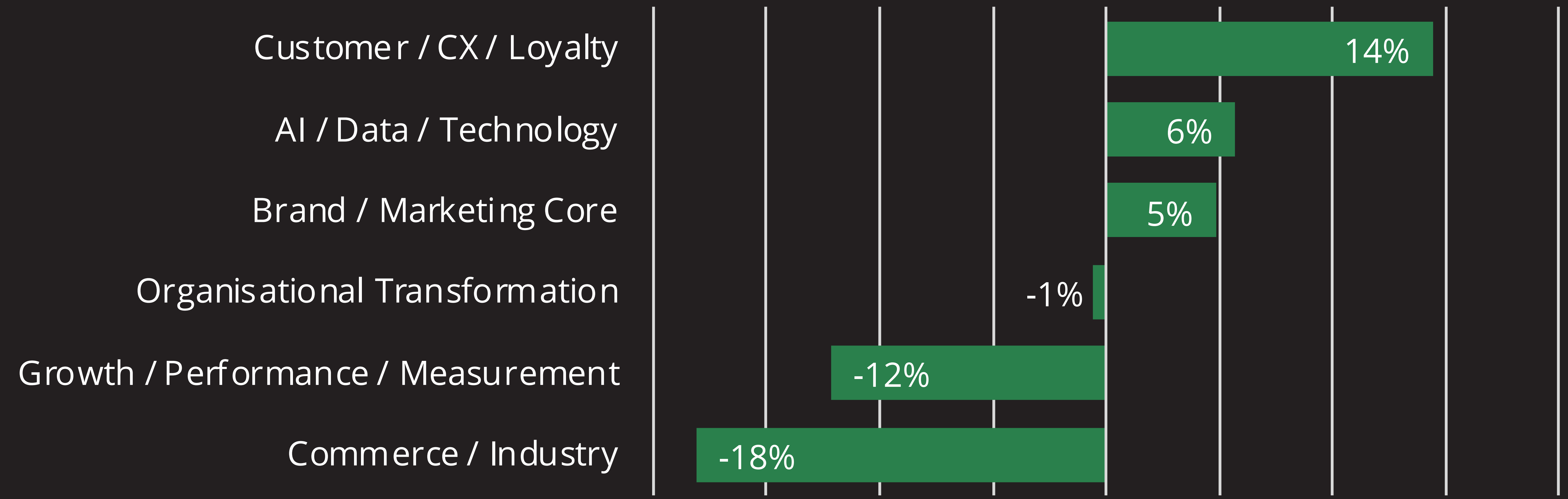
Share of mentions for thematic areas 2025 vs 2026



Thematic bucket analysis of top word frequencies highlights a move away from commerce and measurement-led discourse towards brand, customer and technology-led priorities.



Change in share of mentions for thematic areas 2026 vs 2026



AI TRANSITIONS FROM SPECIALIST TOOL TO MAINSTREAM STRATEGY

With "AI, Data & Technology" (+5.7 pts) now representing 18% of the conversation, AI is no longer a peripheral experiment but a core part of the marketing narrative.

The underlying terms illustrate this integration into the marketing fabric:

- 'AI' itself has surged from 3% to 7% share.
- 'Data' has grown in importance, moving from 2.5% to 4%.
- Terms like 'platform' (1.7%), 'tool' (1.3%), and the strategically vital 'agent' (1.2%) are now core to the conversation.

This signals that technology is no longer a separate workstream but is being woven into the very heart of brand and customer strategy. For CMOs, this elevates the importance of technology fluency from a desirable skill to a cornerstone of leadership credibility. The emergence of terms like "agent" signals a move from tools that support humans to autonomous systems that act for them.

BRAND STRATEGY TAKES CENTRE STAGE

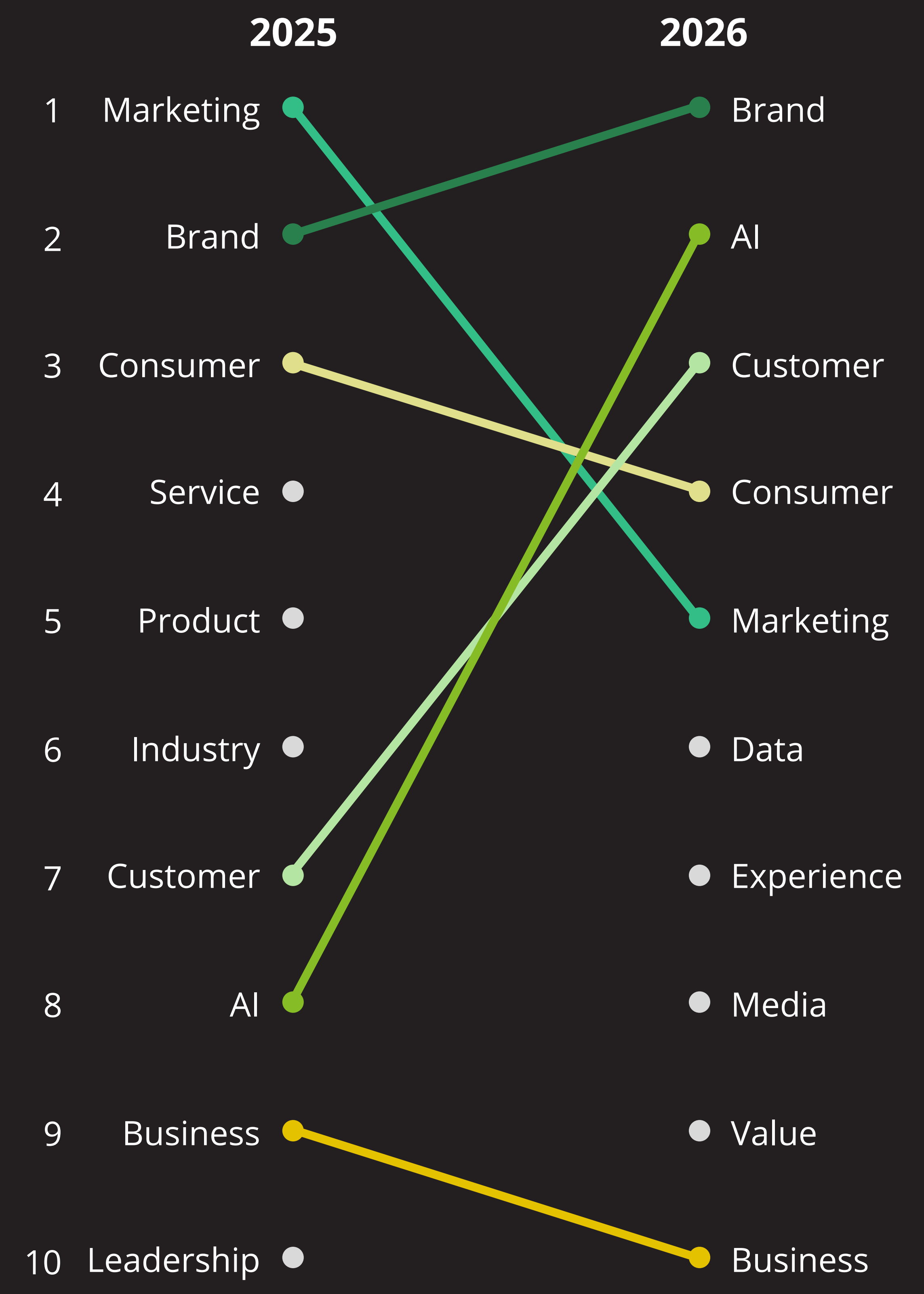
"Brand & Marketing" (+4.8 pts): "Brand & Marketing Core" not only remains the largest thematic area but has also strengthened its position, growing from 25% to 30% of the discourse (+4.8 percentage points).

Within this, we see a fascinating recalibration:

- 'Brand' as a concept grows significantly, from 8% to 11%.
- Discussions of 'content' (1.2% to 2.1%) and 'social' (1.4% to 2.1%) have also intensified.
- In contrast, the functional term 'marketing' has seen its share decline sharply from 11% to 5%.

This is a powerful indicator of maturation. The dialogue is becoming less about the marketing department's activities and more about the strategic, organising force of the brand itself, a force needed to bring coherence to customer experience, content and AI-powered execution. This indicates a more strategic, boardroom-level conversation focused on brand as a commercial asset, not just a set of tactical activities.

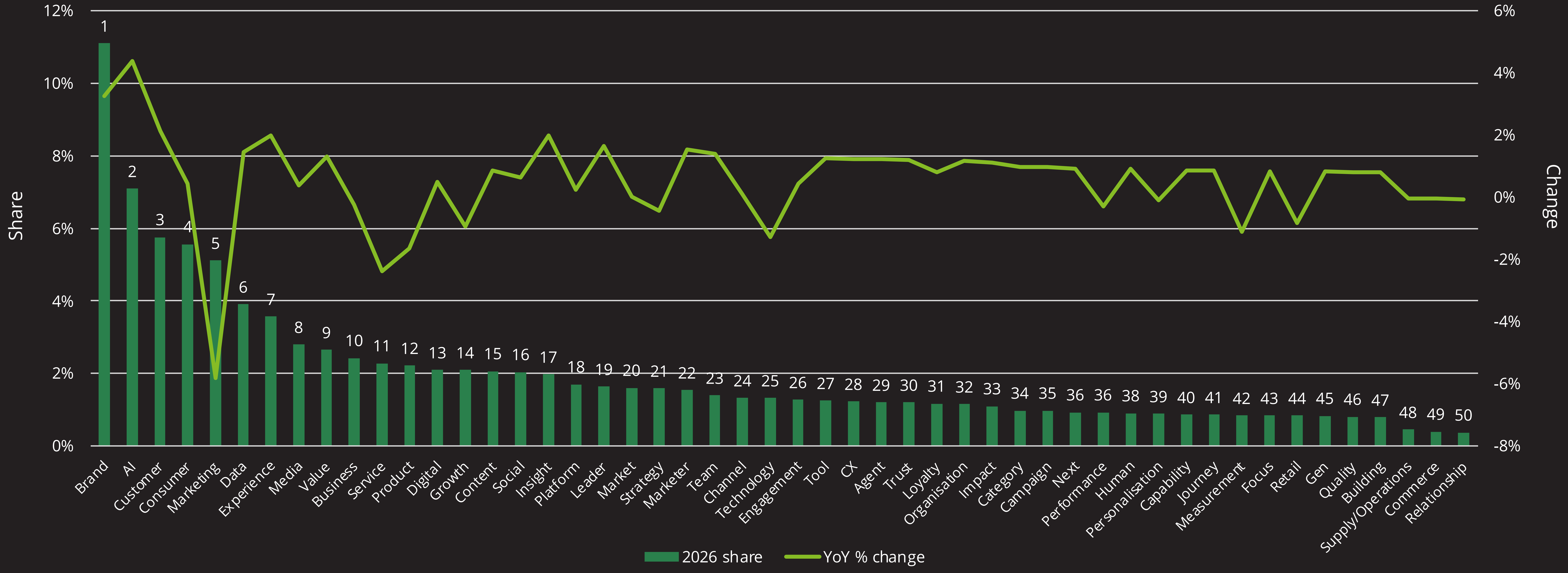
Key word frequency change



The chart above illustrates the top ten terms from the 2025 report corpus, ranked by their share of frequency, and contrasts their position with their corresponding rank from the 2026 analysis to highlight YoY changes.

As AI becomes more prominent, marketing refocuses itself as brand-led to spark growth

Top 50 most frequently used words by share and YoY share change



The discourse in marketing has moved from market mechanics to customer value creation. The corpus which informed last year's report was overwhelmingly centered on growth, financial accountability and AI enablement, followed closely by brand strength and customer experience. In the 2026 corpus, brand dominates by a wide margin, with AI, customer, marketing, consumer and data forming the next most prominent themes.

THE GREAT REBALANCING: THE CMO IS EVOLVING FROM CAMPAIGN LEADER TO ORCHESTRATOR-IN-CHIEF

This shift in language reveals a more profound evolution in the CMO's role. The balancing act is no longer a simple trade-off between today's ROI and tomorrow's brand equity. It is now a series of more complex, interdependent tensions:

FROM GROWTH METRICS TO CUSTOMER VALUE

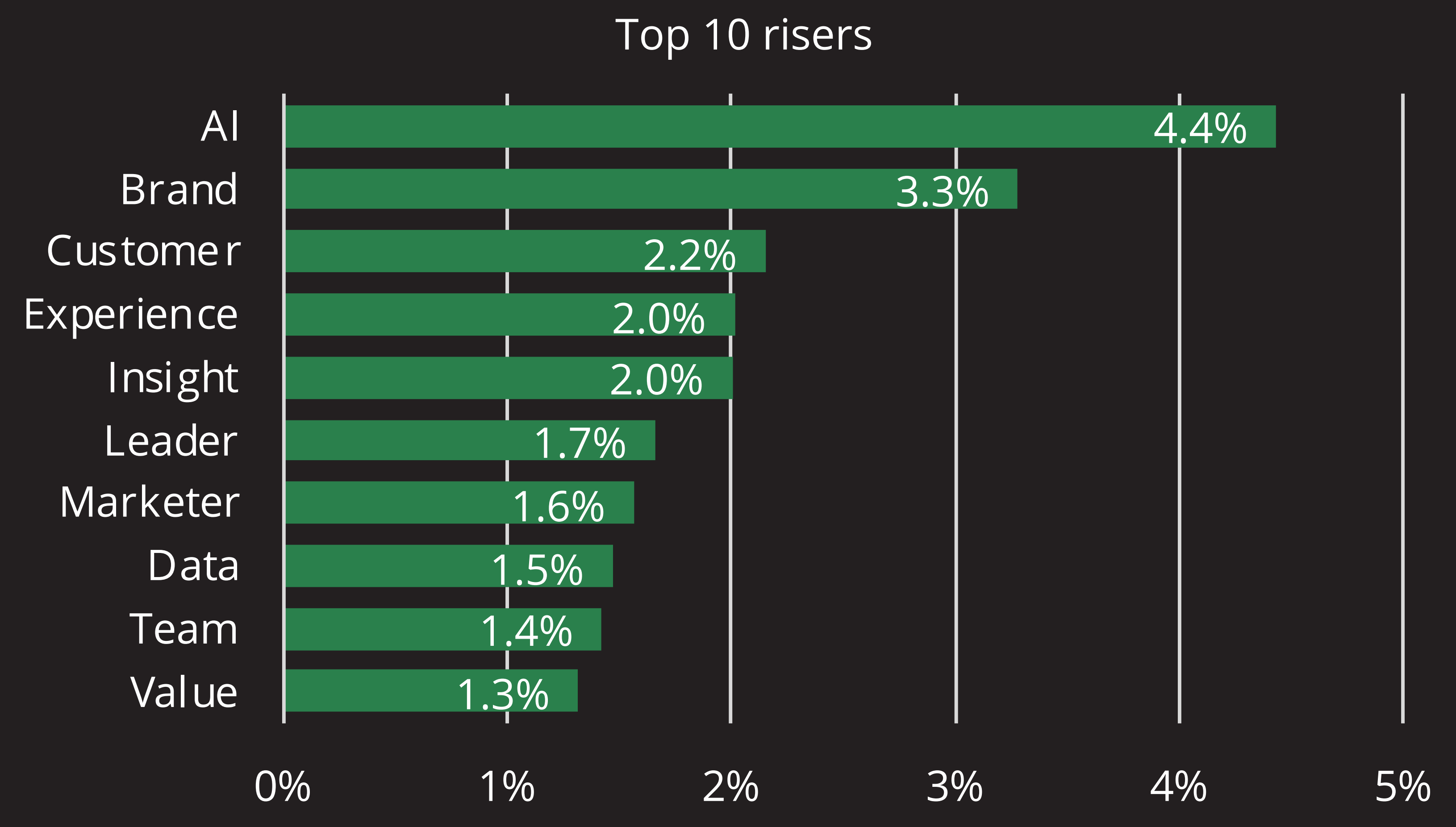
The primary balancing act has shifted from proving short-term financial returns to demonstrating how a superior customer experience, built on trust and relevance, creates sustained commercial value. The question is no longer "brand vs. performance" but how brand and experience drive performance.

FROM ADOPTING TECH TO RE-DESIGNING THE ORGANISATION

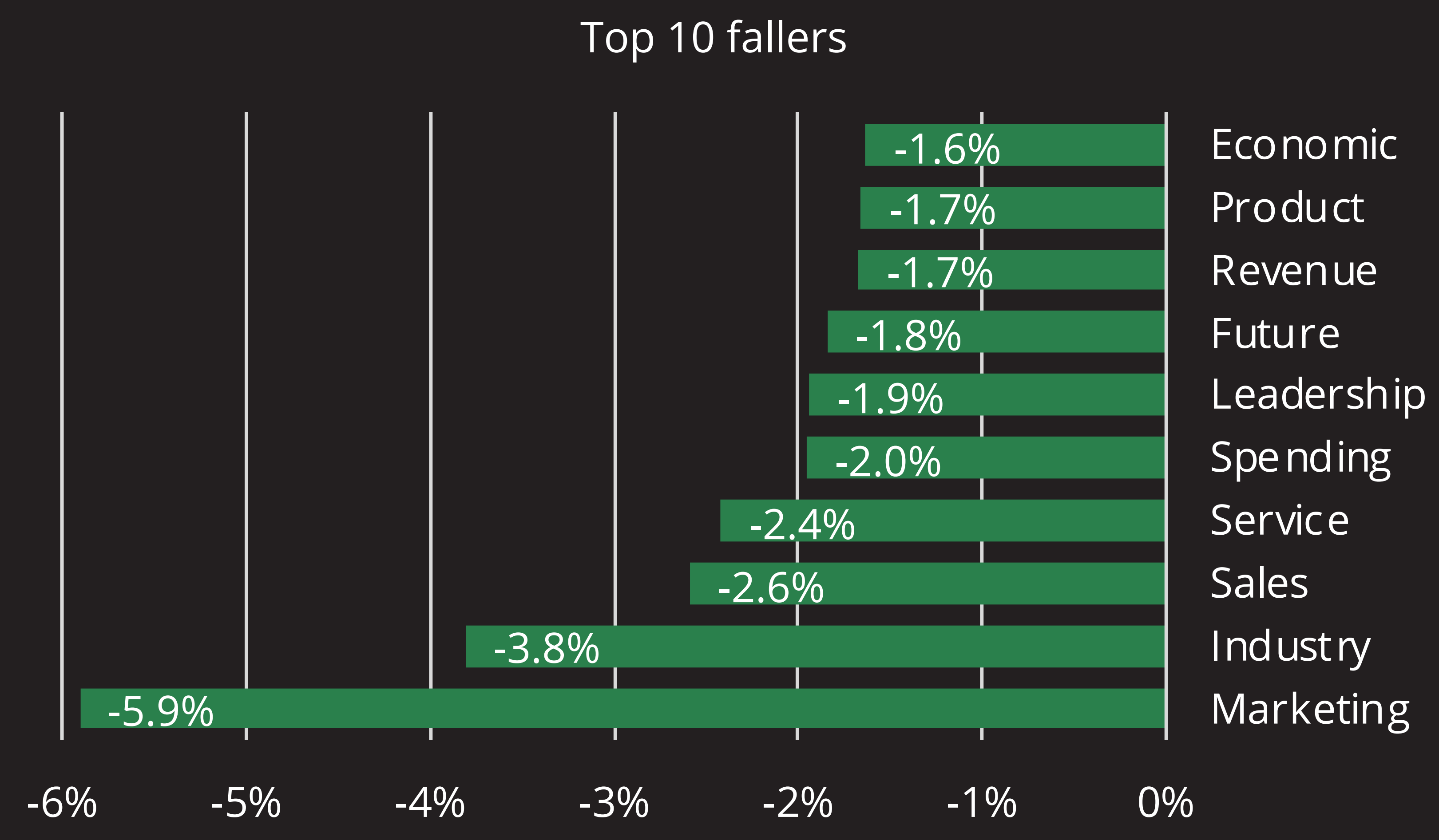
With AI becoming operational infrastructure, the challenge is no longer about buying new tools but about rewiring the organisation. CMOs must now balance the velocity of AI-driven automation against the complex human reality of change management, content creation, capability building and talent redesign.

FROM FUNCTIONAL LEADER TO ENTERPRISE INTEGRATOR

As the focus on customer experience intensifies, the CMO must evolve from a departmental head into the "great connector" of the enterprise. This requires balancing deep marketing expertise with the general management skills needed to orchestrate a unified customer strategy across sales, service, product and technology. While this complicates the rules of the game, the financial benefits are clear: companies with a single customer- or growth-oriented role on the executive committee can see up to 2.3x more growth than those where growth responsibility is fragmented across multiple roles.[1]



The above chart highlights the top 10 terms that have gained the most prominence in our 2026 corpus, ranked by their YoY increase in share of frequency. These 'risers' represent the key emerging themes shaping the current strategic marketing discourse.



Conversely, the above chart identifies the bottom 10 terms that have experienced the most significant decline in prominence, ranked by their YoY loss in share of frequency. These 'fallers' indicate the legacy concepts that are receding from the core industry conversation.

[1] The CMO's Comeback, McKinsey & Co, 2025

A CMO'S PLAYBOOK FOR ACHIEVING *EQUILIBRIUM*

The following five interconnected chapters provide a practical framework for mastering this new, more intricate balancing act, where there is a constant striving to create powerful brands which inspire loyalty, fully enabled by AI. These have been conceived for the leaders who recognise that unlocking the potential of their roles is about mastering the interplay between these tensions, transforming conflict into a dynamic engine for growth.

THE MODERN OPERATING MODEL

The evolving marketing landscape necessitates a repositioning of Marketing as a leading function, spearheading change to meet new market opportunities and disruptions, and orchestrating efforts beyond traditional boundaries to serve customers end-to-end. This requires unlocking operational efficiencies across customer experiences, AI adoption and talent strategies. In turn, CMOs can then reinvest in differentiating capabilities that drive competitive advantage.
Go to chapter

THE NEW ADVANTAGES IN TECH

Rather than simply adopting the latest tools, future marketing advantage will depend on building fundamentally agile and interoperable technology systems. As AI becomes more central to MarTech, leading CMOs must ensure this is being implemented selectively and strategically, with robust measurement frameworks in place. This will ensure that efficiency gains are unlocked, as well as increased value for both business and customer.
Go to chapter

RETHINKING THE AGENCY POWER PLAY

CMOs must be prepared to reshape agency partnerships to ensure they remain of value in the era of AI. By redefining responsibilities, renegotiating commercial models and strategically blending agency expertise with use of AI in-house, marketing leaders can unlock both creative excellence and operational impact. Success will rely on mastering these new hybrid models, ensuring that agency relationships continue to contribute towards tangible brand results.
Go to chapter

RECRAFTING CREATIVITY

Marketers are grappling with a content deluge, where AI-driven industrialisation often prioritises volume over quality, risking brand misalignment and consumer disconnection. While AI scales content production, human creativity and trust are paramount for authentic engagement. CMOs must strategically balance AI augmentation with human-led creative direction to reclaim creativity as a competitive advantage and become the force of brand distinctiveness.
Go to chapter

WINNING THE WAR ON TALENT

As AI commoditises the marketing stack, lasting advantage in the future will come from uniquely human talent, igniting a war for creative and strategic minds and making legacy talent models obsolete. Future CMOs must become talent architects, partnering with the CPO and CIO to align talent and tech, nurture internal potential and early talent, and channel elite people into proposition innovation, subscription models and communities that create an unassailable competitive moat.
Go to chapter

THE MODERN OPERATING MODEL

RECLAIMING INFLUENCE THROUGH MODERNISED OPERATIONS

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OPERATING MODELS TO UNLOCK COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

The marketing landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by advancements in artificial intelligence, automation and evolving customer expectations. This shift demands a repositioning of marketing as a leading function, one that spearheads change, meets new market opportunities and orchestrates efforts far beyond traditional boundaries to serve customers end-to-end.

BECOMING THE ARCHITECT OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

In a world where the customer journey no longer stops at the point of purchase, the CMO's mandate has expanded from managing marketing campaigns to architecting the entire customer value engine. With industry discourse showing a sharp rise in mentions of 'CX' and 'Loyalty' (+15%), it is clear that creating distinctive, seamless experiences is the strongest strategic imperative for retention and growth.

This requires a refreshed operating model where marketing orchestrates value across every touchpoint and workflow, collaborating with supply chain, customer service and product teams to ensure every interaction is a deliberate act of brand building.

SHAPING NEW VALUE

The conversation around performance is maturing. The decline in mentions of 'performance' (-12%) and the corresponding rise of 'value' into the top 10 most-used terms for this year signals a crucial shift. The strategic value of marketing is no longer just in optimising spend for the short-term but in its ability to identify and shape new pathways for growth while playing the long game.

To achieve this, the modern CMO must think like a portfolio manager, first simplifying the business to generate efficiencies and then strategically reinvesting those gains. This requires a powerful alliance with the CFO and CIO to make the case for funding the foundational enablers that will unlock future value, fostering new market spaces that meet untapped customer needs and differentiate the brand in the process.

A STRATEGIC REBALANCING OF CAPABILITIES

For too long, the approach to marketing technology and data has been reactive and fragmented. The new AI agenda demands a more deliberate and strategic approach, prompting leaders to critically re-evaluate which capabilities they own versus those they outsource.

To truly realise the promise of AI, organisations must first gain decisive control over their foundational enablers. This requires asking a crucial question: where does our most critical data reside and who should own the technology stack that drives our customer experience? By making conscious choices to bring certain strategic capabilities in-house, such as unifying the customer data model, organisations can begin to 'bank the AI savings,' unlocking profound operational efficiencies that are otherwise lost to fragmentation.

This disciplined act of strategic rebalancing is the prerequisite for liberating resources which can then be intentionally reinvested into building differentiating capabilities that directly drive the customer strategy and create a sustainable competitive advantage.

AMPLIFYING THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE

With mentions of 'AI' now occupying the #2 spot in the industry discourse and with the sharpest YoY share growth, its role as a core operational layer is undeniable. The strategic question is no longer if we use AI but how it serves to amplify our most valuable asset: our people.

Once the strategic rethinking of capabilities has taken place, the liberated resources, such as time, capital, and focus, must also be intentionally reinvested into the differentiating human capabilities that machines cannot replicate. This means doubling down on empathy, strategic judgment, and creativity, reskilling the workforce to orchestrate a complex system defined by continuous learning and where humans are the ultimate curators and guardians of brand authenticity.

In the emerging world of agentic commerce, where brands must appeal to both human customers and their AI proxies, the new frontier is mastering this dual-audience strategy and, in this light, human oversight becomes the definitive source of trust.

Actions for the **architect CMO:**

1. FOCUS ON ORCHESTRATING EXPERIENCES:

Operating model to empower the orchestration of complex customer experiences. Streamline operations, free cash and capacity to then reinvest in capabilities that bring differentiating competitive advantages across the consumer journey.

2. IDENTIFY NET NEW GROWTH:

Shift focus from short-term performance to long-term, customer-centric growth by aligning C-suite leaders (CFO, CIO) to invest in differentiating capabilities and strategically deploy AI solutions that enhance customer experience and brand differentiation.

3. RESHAPE THE AI AGENDA:

Look to bring MarTech and customer data capabilities in-house to establish foundational enablers for AI, unlock operational efficiencies and reinvest 'AI savings' into differentiating capabilities (e.g., talent, brand innovation) that drive sustainable competitive advantage.

4. INTEGRATE AI WITH HUMAN CAPABILITIES:

Reskill the workforce to develop critical human capabilities (e.g., empathy, critical thinking, bias identification, decision making) essential for effective human-AI collaboration.

THE NEW ADVANTAGES IN TECH

DRIVING MAXIMUM VALUE FROM NEW TECH INVESTMENTS

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EVOLVING TECH STACKS IN THE ERA OF AI

The 2026 literature makes clear that future marketing advantage will not be won by adopting the best individual tools but by developing the best overall systems. The focus has shifted towards cleaner data, interoperable platforms and robust measurement as the foundations for success.

Technological language continues to gain prominence, with ‘AI’ now only trailing behind ‘brand’ in terms of mentions within the 2026 analysis. Importantly, the emergence of agentic terms into the conversation signals a move beyond simply acknowledging the existence of generative AI to how autonomous and semi-autonomous systems can reshape operations and unlock new value. CMOs should be prepared to capitalise on these emerging trends, building future-fit technology stacks that harness the power of AI agents and embed trust at the core of their MarTech strategies.

THE FUTURE-FIT TECH STACK

The pace of AI-fuelled technological change in marketing shows no signs of slowing, presenting opportunities for bold organisations that want to remain at the top of the game. Whilst monolithic, legacy providers continue to dominate by offering convenient AI add-ons to their platforms, a new generation of AI-first entrants is rapidly challenging the status quo. These innovators are setting new benchmarks for speed, flexibility and integration, developing solutions that are fundamentally AI native and can evolve at a pace that traditional providers can struggle to match.

To remain competitive, marketing leaders must ensure they are not held back by existing vendor lock-in. Instead, they must pivot towards composable, modular technology architectures, as the ability to integrate best-in-class new solutions to existing tech stacks will become a critical differentiator. Investing in API-driven, interoperable ecosystems will enable organisations to respond dynamically to the ever-shifting market and capitalise on exciting emerging AI capabilities. This is a transformation that CMOs must champion, guiding teams through a transition which will future-proof their MarTech strategy by prioritising agility, scalability and continuous innovation.

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF AGENTIC

It is clear that AI has moved well beyond novelty status within the industry and is now a foundational pillar of any sophisticated MarTech stack. Marketing teams are increasingly skilled at flexing their AI muscle, integrating it into their daily workflows to power ideation and personalisation. Yet, the next wave of value lies in more advanced applications. Enter the agent: AI-powered autonomous systems that are emerging into the conversation with marketers. These intelligent assistants are capable of owning and optimising activities across the entire marketing lifecycle and their potential to augment human capability must be actively explored by marketing leaders. Agents can be used for an ever-increasing number of tasks, from insight generation to media planning.

Agents will also enable brands to begin providing a truly differentiated customer experience, predicting customer needs via predictive modelling and proactively addressing and resolving support requests along the journey.

For CMOs who are ready to unlock the next level of efficiency gains, the mandate is clear: review existing workflows and pinpoint the opportunities for agents to plug in and have impact, thus unlocking firepower elsewhere in the team. ‘Human’ failed to enter the top 50 most frequently used words in 2025 but has made its debut in 2026 at #40, demonstrating a growing awareness of how the role of the human-in-the-loop is being transformed by the era of AI. Employing agents means that human talent can then be redeployed towards higher-value initiatives which will further accelerate innovation, positioning marketing as a true growth engine for the organisation.

NAVIGATING THE AI INVESTMENT

While AI and agentic approaches offer undeniable growth potential, CMOs must also be prepared to confront the very real and often substantial cost associations. AI represents a significant investment, often more expensive than human labour in terms of both initial implementation and ongoing maintenance. The escalating cost of token consumption, in particular, is becoming a non-trivial and increasingly prohibitive factor that could limit widespread AI adoption within organisations. Therefore, a strategic approach is required. Too often, organisations are rushing to layer new solutions on top of underutilised existing platforms which are not yet delivering ROI, leading to escalating costs without achieving meaningful business impact. This is a pressing issue, as only 41% of marketers say they can confidently prove AI ROI, down from 49% last year.[1] CMOs must acknowledge this and ensure that investments are having tangible contributions to growth and customer experience, with clear and measurable links to business KPIs. This will be critical to justify an escalating cost base.

Resilience is also an increasingly essential trait for the modern CMO. The continued adoption of new tools introduces heightened operational risks, from price volatility of tokens to service disruption or discontinuation from individual providers. A sophisticated and robust approach to managing these risks is essential for teams becoming more reliant on agentic solutions, whilst reinforcing the importance of composable architectures and actively avoiding vendor lock-in.

[1] The State of AI in Marketing 2026, Jasper, 2026, pg. 4

How CMOs can win with their **technical capabilities:**

1. CHAMPION MODULAR TECH:

Lead the shift to a flexible, composable MarTech stack that lets your team plug in new tools and pivot fast as the market changes.

2. LEAD ON AGENTIC:

Identify prime opportunities for agentic solutions to assist with automation and orchestration, utilising marketing to pioneer the agentic agenda for the wider organisation.

3. BUILD ROBUST MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORKS:

Create systems that will track usage and performance of new AI tools, measuring improvements in throughput, quality and market impact that will justify investment.

4. DEFEND THE AI COST BASE:

Implement strategic cost management and ROI tracking to ensure that AI investments are continuously delivering demonstrable value.

RETHINKING THE AGENCY POWER PLAY

A NEW ERA OF AGENCY VALUE CONTRIBUTION

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DEMANDING MORE FROM PARTNER NETWORKS

As AI continues to drive seismic change across marketing operating models, there is a call to action for today's CMO to fundamentally rethink how agencies are engaged and where they add value. The traditional agency model, built upon volume and execution, is rapidly losing relevance as AI empowers marketing functions to bring more production and optimisation in-house. The pressure is on for CMOs to optimise agency spend and spot opportunities for new forms of collaboration.

A balancing act now arises: CMOs must prioritise efficiency and cost reduction whilst defending strategic spend on agencies to preserve third-party perspective and skillsets. CMOs must be prepared to disrupt legacy relationships, challenging agencies to elevate their role from executors toward becoming strategic intelligence partners, focusing on long-term strategy and value creation.

NEW AGENCY DYNAMICS

As AI increasingly does the heavy lifting with respect to ideation and content creation, brands should be empowered to demand more from their agency relationships. CMOs now have a unique opportunity to cultivate a new culture built on positive creative tension, a dynamic where both brands and agencies actively challenge each other to elevate creative output and innovation. This mutual provocation is essential to cut through an increasingly noisy market and unlock truly distinctive work that will power positive customer experience.

By automating execution and analysis, AI liberates human talent on both sides to concentrate on strategic challenges, deeper insights and truly human-led creative breakthroughs. CMOs should champion co-creation over mere commissioning, empowering partners to deliver bolder and more impactful solutions. Agencies, in turn, must continue to bring their distinctive 'magic,' complementing machine contributions by pushing creative boundaries and offering fresh human perspectives.

THE ENDURING VALUE OF AGENCIES

Despite the expansion of in-house capabilities driven by AI, this is an evolution rather than a replacement of the agency era. 62% of CMOs say that finding the right talent for their teams remains a challenge[1], and so agencies will continue to plug important gaps by offering access to a breadth of experience and the most elite creative minds. Access to this is essential for brands seeking true differentiation and impact in a world under threat of sameness.

There are many critical areas in which agencies will continue to be indispensable, where there remains a demand for human foresight, nuance and perspective. Agencies will own long-term brand vision and storytelling, innovative creative breakthroughs and complex campaign management. Certain marketing disciplines such as media planning and buying will also continue to require deep third-party expertise and established industry relationships that agency contacts can provide. Agencies will also lead the way in emerging specialisms, such as social commerce and advanced AI application, where the pace of change and complexity demand dedicated focus.

[1] Five Trends Shaping Marketing in 2026, Deloitte Digital, 2026, p26

NEW COMMERCIAL MODELS

A prime opportunity has arisen for CMOs to reshape commercial relationships with agency partners. Traditional models, often centred on retainers, asset volumes and project-based fees, are increasingly falling out of step with a marketing landscape transformed by AI automation and the growth of in-house capability. As agencies realise efficiency gains thanks to these new technologies however, there is often little incentive to pass these benefits on to their clients. CMOs are therefore increasingly left questioning why these benefits aren't reflected in the value that they receive. 'Value' has become the 9th most referenced term within this year's study, up from #36 last year, demonstrating that this has become a priority for marketing leaders.

To address this, CMOs must proactively scrutinise agency contracts and identify opportunities for renegotiation. The goal is to shift focus from output to impact, creating agreements that are flexible and measurable, that reward innovation, collaboration and contribution to brand equity and ROI. This will ultimately create true partnerships that are built upon shared goals, transparency and a focus on value creation. CMOs that lead on this shift will create teams that will thrive in an ecosystem reliant on both creative excellence and operational impact, with partner relationships that deliver meaningful impact for all parties.

Actions for CMOs that want to **establish the most effective partner ecosystems:**

1. CULTIVATE CREATIVE TENSION:

Drive agency partnerships built on mutual challenge and co-creation, leveraging AI to empower human-led breakthroughs and fresh, provocative creative.

2. SQUEEZE MORE FROM COMMERCIAL MODELS:

Proactively review and renegotiate agency contracts to move away from traditional retainer and volume-based models, building true partnerships with agencies, based on shared outcomes, transparency and value creation.

3. LEVERAGE AGENCIES WHERE THEY MATTER MOST:

Use in-house capabilities for speed and efficiency, but continue to rely on agencies for specialist expertise, creative excellence and access to elite talent.

4. MASTER HYBRIDISATION:

Assemble and manage hybrid teams that blend in-house talent and AI tools with agency expertise, ensuring creative firepower and operational efficiency across every touchpoint.

RECRAFTING CREATIVITY

ENABLING THE HUMAN CREATIVE TO SHINE IN AN OCEAN OF CONTENT

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CONTENT CREATION: THE RETURN OF CREATIVITY AND TRUST

We are drowning in content. The data paints a clear picture of marketers grappling with an overwhelming volume of content, often prioritising rapid output over strategic quality. The near doubling of references of 'content' (from 1.2% to 2.1%) starkly illustrates the sheer scale of material being produced and disseminated to consumers.

The current AI explosion (now dominating 18% of the conversation) offers us innumerable examples of industrialised content pipelines being hooked up to meet the voracious demand for content across all channels. However, focusing solely on speed often leads to lacklustre content that is misaligned with brand identity and, most damaging of all, does not cut through the noise and connect with consumers.

A pause for reflection is perhaps overdue, as two familiar but neglected words have re-entered the marketing dialogue: creativity and trust.

AI AS THE ENABLER FOR SCALING HUMAN CREATIVITY

No machine can truly replicate creativity, that most distinctly human of forces. CMOs face a difficult balancing act: ensuring next generation content technology leads to better creative outcomes, not just more content. The challenge lies in scaling creative strategies to match the exponential capacity for volume and velocity.

As marketing teams of every shape and size push ahead with their AI agendas, leaders in the field are recognising that the real challenge is in optimising the technology to underpin their teams' creative potential. An authentic, compelling, emotionally vibrant brand presence requires the right blend of human and machine. Placing content creation in human hands is the gateway to unleashing the power of creativity that scales.

INDUSTRIALISED CONTENT VS. THE 'HUMAN PREMIUM'

This drive for volume is significantly enabled by the rapid integration of AI into marketing strategies, as evidenced by the surge in 'AI' discussions from 3% to 7%. The rise of terms like 'platform', 'tool', and particularly 'agent' – which signals a shift towards "autonomous systems that act for them" – suggests that technology is being leveraged to facilitate an unprecedented, high-volume output of content.

It is evident we are building a future in which the repetitive, the regular and the regulated are automated to a point of optimum velocity. The clamour for new content and more content will not abate. In this complex marketing landscape, it is important to recognise that not all content should be industrialised; CMOs must distinguish between content that can be scaled and content requiring premium, human-led creativity to maintain brand authenticity.

When marketing efforts are too focused on the rapid output of content rather than the inputs required to create the content itself, creativity stifles - campaigns become unoriginal, key messages are lost, brand resonance diminishes and brand trust and loyalty erode.

HUMANS AS GUARDIANS FOR AUTHENTICITY AND TRUST

'Trust' enters the top 50 this year at #30, signalling its increased importance: recent reports claim that 30% of consumers are less likely to choose a brand if they know its ads are AI-generated;[1] 57% of marketers say they are prioritising the ability to scale content production with AI;[2] business leaders typically overestimate consumer trust by 38%.[3]

This represents a real calibration challenge to the CMO and their team: how do you automate and accelerate, without endangering brand authenticity and in turn, the trust of your customers?

Deloitte's HX Trust ID emphasises four key considerations in establishing a trustworthy brand - the first is 'humanity'. Customers who believe a brand acts in a relatable, human way are 88% more likely to buy from them again, 2.0x more likely to stick with the brand through a negative experience and 1.8x more likely to buy new products from that brand.[4] This means protecting customer trust by safeguarding brand voice and values from ill-judged AI utilisation. Keeping humans and human-like thinking at the core of content creation ensures that at all points in the creative cycle, humans remain the guardians of authenticity.

As 2026 is the year of scaled AI content capabilities, it is also the year of the inherently human content machine. Where new processes and operating models require mindful design, CMOs must remember to accommodate vastly scaled production pipelines around the most fundamental of assets: the human creative.

[1] Social Media Trends 2026, Hootsuite, 2026, pg. 7
[2] The State of AI in Marketing 2026, Jasper, 2026, pg. 10
[3], [4] Trust in Digital Identity Analysis, Deloitte, 2024

Helping the CMO **reclaim creativity**

1. PRIORITISE HUMAN-LED CREATIVITY AND STRATEGIC AI AUGMENTATION:

Have the confidence to structure your team in what should be a reassuringly familiar way: with creative leadership, visual and communication direction in the hands of experienced, skilled humans. Empower all teams to bring AI into the heart of the executional layer, to scale human creativity and enable it to benefit positively from the leap forward in volume and velocity.

2. GUARD AUTHENTICITY AND TRUST:

Position humans as the ultimate guardians of brand authenticity, values and consumer trust, actively safeguarding against AI misuse and ensuring all communications resonate emotionally.

3. RETHINK THE CONTENT STRATEGY:

You serve two audiences now. The LLM and the human. This requires a fresh appraisal of everything from your brand guardrails, your tone and voice guidelines, to your brand personality. Clearly distinguish between content that can be automated and scaled by AI while serving both masters. Dedicate resource to optimising the content that builds presence and authority with LLMs. Nurture and nourish the team that creates those singular moments for your brand that require human insight, human experience and human ingenuity.

4. CHALLENGE THE ECOSYSTEM:

It is time to capitalise on the agency landscape trending toward evolving specialisms that empower talent in specific ways across the AI augmented creative process. Invite your partners to play their full part in your creativity transformation.

WINNING THE WAR FOR TALENT

BUILDING A DURABLE COMPETITIVE MOAT BASED ON SUPERIOR, UNIQUELY HUMAN TALENT

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Digital transformation has reset the marketing landscape but the next frontier shifts the focus to the talent that is essential to create and optimise the brand and customer experience for clients. Our research reflects the rise of agentic to the forefront of the marketing conversation in the last 12 months. In doing so, artificial intelligence becomes a commoditised layer of the marketing stack, capable of automating the average and optimising the predictable. As a result, the source of true competitive advantage will undergo a seismic shift. Long-term, defensible differentiation will not be found in a better algorithm but in the uniquely human qualities of creativity, strategic judgment and authentic community engagement.

This presents CMOs with an **evolved balancing act** to face: mastering the **interplay between human and machine** and, in doing so, preparing for the **coming war for talent**.

YOUR FUTURE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE WILL BE YOUR PEOPLE

As AI and tech become table stakes, they will paradoxically at some point cease to be a source of durable competitive advantage. Ever more an operational necessity, the traditional differentiators of data processing and technical efficiency are beginning to erode. This commoditisation threatens to hollow out the strategic core of the marketing function, creating a mandate for leaders to pivot their focus from managing processes to mastering what only humans can truly deliver: building brands, fostering trust and innovating through original creativity and deep customer empathy. This is not a retreat from technology but a return to human-centred value as the ultimate driver of growth. Our discourse analysis mirrors this shift, with ‘human’ entering top 50 most used words this year, while it was absent in last year’s corpus. This signals that this is a topic the industry is increasingly focused on.

THE UPCOMING “WAR FOR TALENT”

This new reality will, in the future, ignite an impending “war for talent,” where the rules of engagement have fundamentally changed. As automation encroaches upon and devalues ordinary marketing skillsets, a fierce battle will be waged for a small, precious pool of differentiated thinkers, the creative, instinctive and strategic minds who will architect the future of customer relationships. Winning this war is about more than filling skills gaps; it is about building the ultimate competitive moat. An organisation that can successfully identify, attract and nurture this calibre of talent will create an unbeatable asset, generating value that neither competitors nor AI can ever hope to replicate.

A THREE-LAYERED WORKFORCE MODEL

Confronting this challenge reveals a critical vulnerability in most organisations: an obsolete talent model. Current recruitment and development processes are often misaligned with future needs, favouring legacy operational skills over the core creative and strategic qualities that are now paramount. Yet this defunct talent model presents a remarkable opportunity to redefine the modern marketer and redesign the marketing organisation itself. This means architecting a new workforce model composed of three symbiotic layers: intelligent AI agents to drive scale, AI-augmented professionals to manage, govern and optimise the system and, at the very core, a highly valued group of differentiating talent, the drivers of disproportionate value through uniquely human capabilities like creative instinct and strategic judgment to drive the business forward.

This necessitates a fundamental shift away from the old model of outsourcing all creative thinking; instead organisations must now cultivate a strong internal creative core to survive. In this new landscape, agencies evolve from simple outsourcers into crucial strategic partners, providing access to the elite, specialised creative firepower that complements and elevates the in-house team.

Actions to win on talent

To navigate this new reality, the future-fit CMO must become a vocal advocate in the organisation's talent strategy. This requires a return of talent to the top of the agenda, which should prompt leaders to urgently consider three critical actions:

1. FORGE THE C-SUITE TRIUMVIRATE (CMO, CPO, CIO):

The CMO must initiate a deeply strategic, ongoing partnership with the Chief People Officer and the Chief Information Officer.

WITH THE CPO: co-create a new talent playbook. This means rethinking recruitment to look beyond traditional marketing backgrounds for qualities like curiosity and empathy. It also means establishing new models for nurturing and retaining this high-value talent, making the business a magnet for the industry's best creative minds.

WITH THE CIO: ensure the technology stack serves the talent, not the other way around. The goal is to create a seamless "commodity layer" of AI that handles repetitive tasks, freeing up human capital to focus exclusively on high-value, creative and strategic work.

2. BECOME AN IN-HOUSE "TALENT SCOUT":

The next generation of marketing leaders may already be within your organisation. CMOs must actively identify employees who exhibit the raw potential for creative and instinctive thinking, even if it's outside their current role. These individuals should be plucked, protected and placed on a dedicated development track to nurture their unique capabilities. In this light, building a sustainable pipeline of the very capabilities you seek to nurture starts by cultivating talent from day one, through dedicated development tracks and new career pathways for promising early-careers professionals.

3. CHANNEL YOUR ELITE TALENT INTO PROPOSITION INNOVATION:

Ultimate purpose of winning the war for talent is to channel that creative capital into proposition innovation, the one area AI cannot replicate. CMOs must pivot their best minds from optimising yesterday's business to architecting tomorrow's customer value. Task your core team with designing unique, loyalty-building propositions, such as exclusive communities or next-generation subscription models, that build defensible moats around your brand. By doing so, you directly convert investment in talent into a durable, long-term growth engine that competitors cannot easily copy.

Ultimately, winning the future requires CMOs to recognise the paradox of AI: the more prevalent it becomes, the more valuable uniquely human talent will be. The leaders who act decisively to build their organisations around this principle will not only secure a competitive advantage but will define the next era of marketing.

CONCLUSION

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE INTEGRATOR CMO

The role of the Chief Marketing Officer has always been a balancing act, but the nature of that act has irrevocably changed.

As we have explored, the simplistic trade-off between short-term performance and long-term brand building has been superseded by a more profound and exciting set of challenges. The commoditisation of technology and the rise of artificial intelligence have not diminished the role of marketing, but rather elevated it, creating a remarkable opportunity for leaders to redefine their impact on the enterprise. The future of marketing is ever more a question of mastering the art of integration than about balancing competing priorities.

Mastery of this refreshed balancing act lies in moving beyond an 'either/ or' mindset to embrace the power of 'and'. It is about becoming the great Orchestrator-in-Chief who can seamlessly weave together seemingly disparate forces into a single, cohesive engine for growth. This means fusing the scale and analytical power of machine intelligence with the empathy and strategic judgment of uniquely human talent. It means recognising that an unforgettable customer experience is not in conflict with brand strategy, it is rather its ultimate expression. And it means building an operating model where the rigour of data science fuels, rather than fights, the spark of original creativity. The leader who can conduct this complex orchestra, by harmonising the C-Suite Triumvirate, the internal talent engine and the external partner ecosystem, will not just succeed but will set a new standard for value creation.

Ultimately, this new era calls for a new kind of leader: one defined not just by their functional expertise but by their courage, curiosity and capacity to integrate. The mandate for the modern CMO is to be the architect of this new model, the champion of the creative spirit and the primary driver of customer-centric growth in the C-suite. For those bold enough to step into this role, the opportunity is immense: to move beyond simply managing a function and to become the indispensable force that connects the brand to the customer and the entire organisation to its future. The balancing act has never been more demanding, but mastering it reveals the ultimate prize, because the brands that win the AI era will not be the ones that automate the fastest. They will be the ones that remain the most human.

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RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION

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