



A Thought Leadership Report

State of AI in Technology Marketing 2026

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Executive Summary

In December 2025/January 2026, Callan Consulting conducted conversations with 19 marketing leaders at predominantly B2B technology organizations with annual revenues ranging from under \$5 million to over \$8.9 billion to get a snapshot of how marketing organizations are using AI in their function. Over the past year, AI in general, and generative AI in particular, have continued to reshape the marketing landscape. The percentage of respondents who say that AI is having a “strong” or “very strong” impact on their marketing teams doubled, from one-third of respondents in 2024 to two-thirds today. Participants in our study described their ability to do more with less, with use cases expanding beyond the initial content and research use cases described in 2024 to touch nearly all aspects of marketing today. No longer is AI a shiny new object; it is, increasingly, simply how marketers get work done.

Two-thirds of respondents say that AI is having a “strong” or “very strong” impact on marketing, double the amount from last year.



Key findings from this year include:

- Use cases have proliferated significantly, with most marketing teams running multiple AI-enabled workflows in production.
- Marketing leaders increasingly view AI not only as a productivity enhancer, but as a potential strategic enabler.
- Measuring AI's impact remains challenging, with benefits most often described in terms of speed, output, and cost avoidance rather than hard ROI metrics.
- Despite lack of hard measurements, respondents credit AI with enabling them to do more with less, increasing team throughput without needing to grow headcount.
- New disciplines such as Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) are beginning to take hold as discovery shifts toward AI-driven interfaces.
- While awareness of agentic AI is high, adoption within marketing organizations remains early and cautious.

"We don't label it by an AI initiative, because we see all of it as being AI-driven. So, our entire demand is AI-driven."

Gabie Boko, CMO, NetApp

Looking forward, marketing leaders expect AI to continue reshaping their organizations over both the near and long term. In the next 12 months, the focus will be on deeper integration, better measurement, and consolidation of tools and workflows. Over a three- to five-year horizon, many anticipate more fundamental changes, including leaner teams, evolving skill requirements, and a growing need to market not just to humans but to AI agents themselves. Organizations that invest now—thoughtfully and deliberately—will be best positioned to navigate this next phase of change.

But respondents hinted at potential clouds on the horizon, and Callan Consulting sees real danger in the temptation to over-use AI. Overreliance on AI could potentially dull the marketer's skillset, limit career paths of entry-level marketers, and flood the internet with copies-of-copies, decreasing fidelity and quality of content throughout the system. Successfully using AI in marketing will require judicious use of the technology, hand-in-hand with knowledgeable human expertise.

Callan Consulting sees real danger in the temptation to overuse AI.

"There's a fundamental mindset shift underway in the AI era of marketing: it's about transitioning from AI-assisted to AI-augmented approaches, which changes traditional models and redefines how work gets done."

Sarah Hospelhorn, CMO, BigID

Key Changes from November 2024

This study is a follow-on study to Callan Consulting’s November 2024 State of AI in Marketing Study, and the changes from our findings that year are striking, with AI evolving from an emerging technology to one that commands a crucial place in the marketing toolkit. Table 1 demonstrates some of the major changes observed from the November 2024 report to today.

Table 1 – Key Changes from 2024

Dimension	November 2024	February 2026
Overall take	Early experimentation; AI as an emerging technology	AI normalized and widely adopted; “how work gets done”
Role of AI	“Bolt-on” to existing workflows	Baseline expectation for marketing functions
Adoption model	Bottoms-up early adopters and departmental tiger teams	Expectations-driven, built into individuals’ goals and OKRs
Key use cases	Content generation, research	Initial inroads into broad set of use cases across marketing
Tech stack	Stand-alone LLMs and some capabilities built into existing tools	Permeates tech stack, including AI-native, domain-specific tools
View of AI value	Primarily increased efficiency	Increasingly strategic, as well as operational
Data security concerns	High	Low (trusting in providers’ security procedures)
Agentic AI	Absent from the discussion	High awareness, early-stage experimentation
Discovery via LLMs	Awareness as future concept	Emerging as an active marketing discipline

"A year ago, if I found out a vendor was using AI to create something for us, it would have felt like cheating. Now, I'm annoyed if they aren't using it."

Michelle Jones, CMO, KarmaCheck

"Born in AI" Companies

Another key difference from the 2024 report is the fact that this year we had the privilege of speaking with several companies (Poggio, Exabits.ai, and Zapp) that were founded and whose marketing teams came of age during the last three years, and as such, generative AI was available to them from the outset. These Born in AI companies are more likely to take the use of AI tools as a given and claim even greater productivity gains than their legacy counterparts, although, interestingly, they are not ahead of legacy companies when it comes to things like agentic AI adoption, GEO/AEO, or their ability to measure AI's impact. Callan Consulting will be interested to continue to track how Born in AI companies compare to their peers as they continue to grow and mature, and this is a topic we will certainly be revisiting the next time we publish this report.

Born in AI companies are more likely to take the use of AI as a given and claim greater productivity gains than their counterparts.

"As an AI-native organization, we were built with AI from the start in our product and marketing. We use our own company's AI offerings to give our GTM teams deep intel and always-current account plans that guide their actions in every deal."

Greg Perotto, CMO, Poggio

Study Introduction and Methodology

In late 2025 and early 2026, Callan Consulting conducted an update to its State of AI in Marketing study to understand how marketing organizations are currently using AI in their own organizations. This study is an update to our original State of AI in Marketing Report, released in November 2024, and in addition to understanding marketing teams' current best practices in implementing AI to streamline and improve operations, we were very interested to see what has changed over the intervening 15 months.

To build our picture, this year we spoke with 19 marketing leaders, most of whom have a CMO title, at predominantly B2B technology companies ranging in size from under \$5 million per year to over \$8.9 billion. The companies we spoke with have an estimated median annual revenue of \$91 million. Some organizations and leaders made return appearances, providing some great longitudinal insights, while others were new to the study. For additional details on the study methodology, including interviewee and company profiles, see Appendix A.

And of course, AI played a role in developing this report (although we have our own thoughts on its uses, limitations, and best practices). Just like last year, we chronicled our use of AI in developing this study and provide our thoughts on how and where it was most—and least—useful in Appendix B.

Note: Given the number of interviews, both studies are considered qualitative in nature. While we did ask a number of closed-ended questions and plotted the results in bar chart format for ease of comparison, it should not be construed that either of these samples is quantitative in nature.

Findings: The State of AI in Marketing Organizations Today

From Experimentation to Embedded Use

At the highest level, one of the clearest things that stood out in this year's study is the significant degree to which AI plays a vital role as part of today's marketing toolkit. While last year many organizations seemed to treat their use of AI as a bolt-on to existing workflows or struggled with how to adapt existing processes to incorporate the new technology, in this year's study, marketing leaders were much more likely to consider AI simply to be the way work gets done. While last year's study felt very much like the Wild West, with a number of organizations experimenting with initial use cases and scrambling to keep up, this year felt very much like the year that organizations began to move toward wider-scale, systematic adoption of the technology.

Last year's study profiled the adoption trends of AI in marketing organizations, with a significant number of departments relying on early adopters who took it upon themselves to experiment with the technology, organically spreading its use throughout the department. We also heard from a significant number of companies with top-down, company-wide tiger teams whose mission was to manage AI adoption, with a marketing representative sitting on those teams and benefitting from their efforts. In contrast, for most of this year's interviewees, AI expectations are simply part of baseline performance expectations. Just as no company today needs to create tiger teams to introduce workers to the use of laptops, AI is now simply becoming the way work is done, and its use will soon be unremarkable in its own right.

At the same time, adoption does remain uneven. Most organizations, including the vast majority that were not Born in AI (see below), are in the early stages of retrofitting AI into long-standing workflows and are just now moving beyond initial use cases. Adoption remains uneven, and there is still work to be done; however, the rate that AI is becoming embedded in core marketing workflows is impressive.

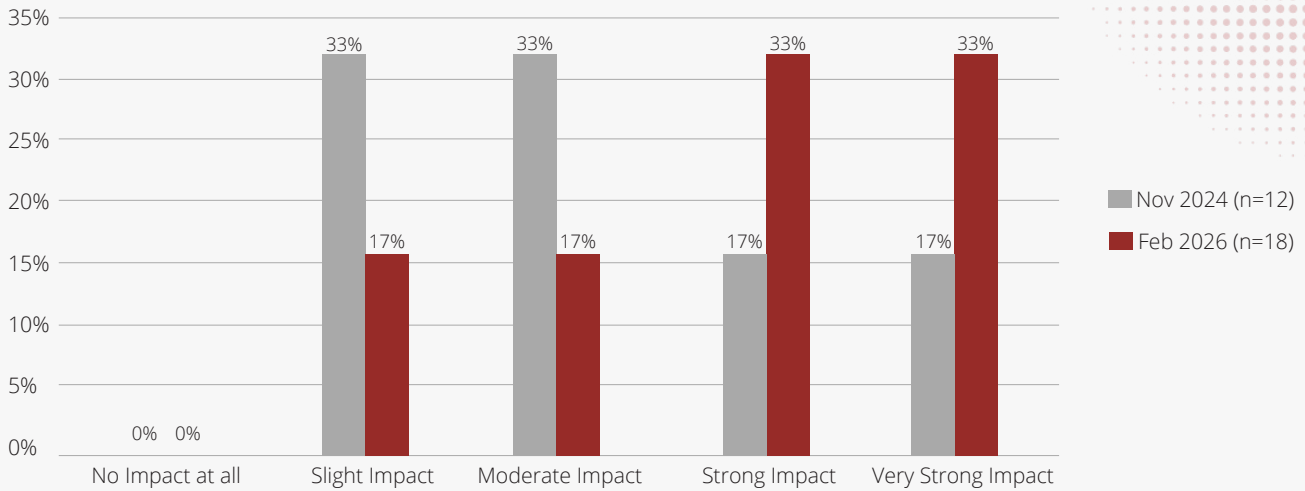
The shift in how quickly AI is becoming a fundamental tool in the marketing organization's toolkit—and how some organizations are still working to keep up—is demonstrated by how respondents see AI affecting their department. Last year, two-thirds of the respondents said it was having a "moderate" or "slight" impact, and only a third said it was having a "strong" or "very strong" impact. This year those figures are flipped, with two-thirds rating the impact as "strong" or "very strong" and one-third telling us its impact is still only "slight" or "moderate" (Figure 1). Not surprisingly, all three Born in AI companies fit into the "strong" or "very strong" camp.

"We set a goal at the beginning of the year for teams to achieve 10% improvement in efficiency with AI, and most of the teams blew through that immediately."

**Christine Royston,
CMO, Wrike**

Figure 1 – Departmental AI Impact

Impact AI Is Having on Department



Q: What impact is AI having on the tools and processes you currently employ in your department? (n = 12)

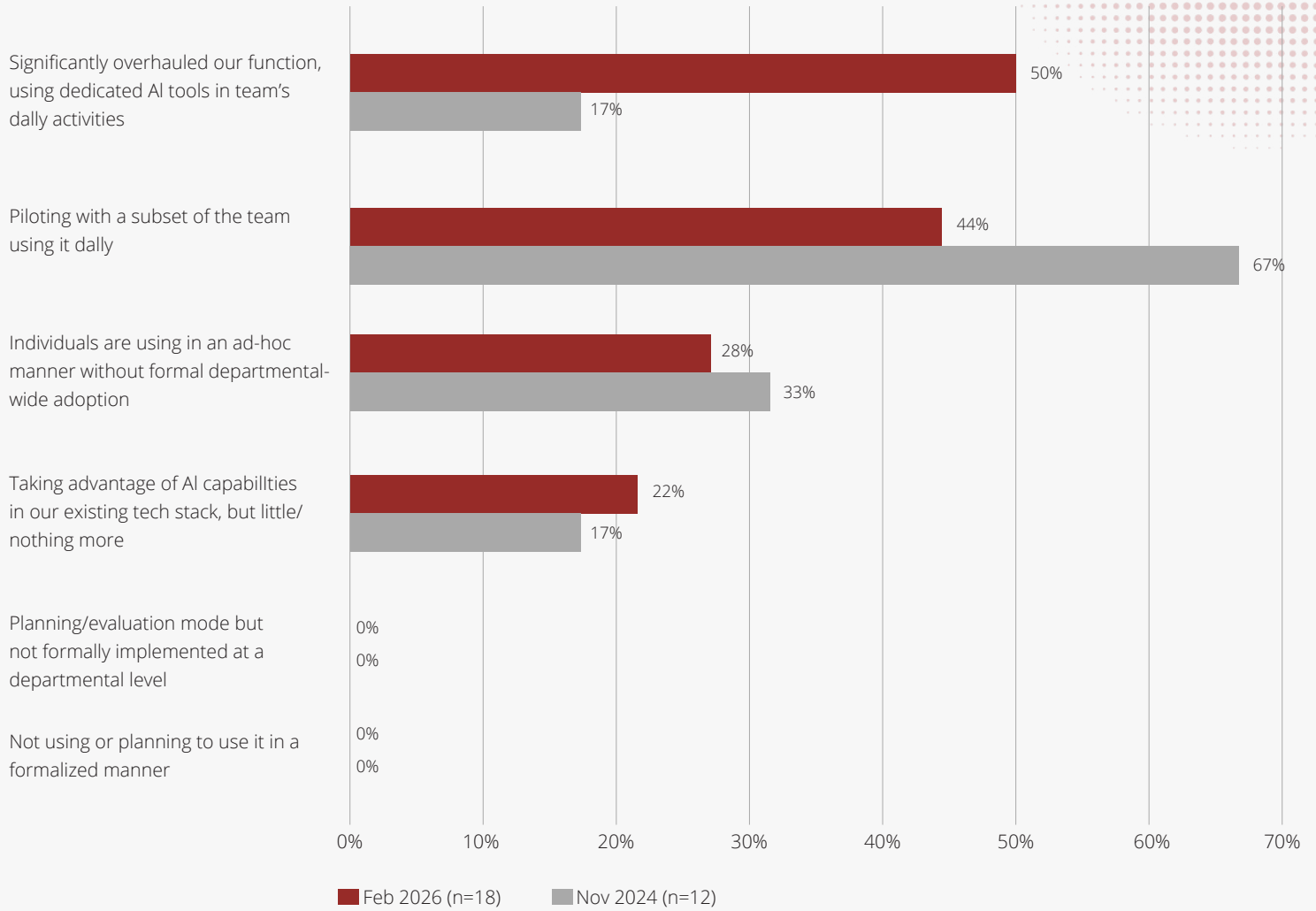
"AI's impact on our marketing operations is a 10 out of 5. I couldn't see a world without it now."

Mark Fidelman, CMO, Exabits.ai

Similarly, when asked to characterize their departments' use of AI using one of our six closed-ended descriptions, 50 percent of the organizations interviewed this year said they have significantly overhauled their function using AI, with teams using dedicated AI tools in their daily activities (including all three Born in AI companies), compared to only 17 percent in 2024. And the number of organizations who say they are piloting the technology was fewer than half of the companies we spoke with this year, compared to two-thirds of the companies in the last study's sample (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Current Approach to Implementing AI

Current Approach to Implementing AI



Q: Which of the following best describes your department's current approach to implementing AI?
 (multiple responses accepted)

"AI is quickly becoming more strategic for our marketing team, and we are focused on building muscle memory, proving value, and laying the groundwork to accelerate adoption across the organization in 2026."

Jenny Victor, CMO, Zywave

The Emergence of Born in AI Companies

One of the most notable insights to come out of this year’s study was the emergence of what Callan Consulting calls “Born in AI” companies. Much like the Born in the Cloud phenomena of the late 2000s, we are now seeing companies that have been founded and/or whose marketing organizations were formed since the emergence of generative AI. For these companies, the use of AI is simply a given. Unlike their counterparts with legacy, pre-AI businesses, these Born in AI companies just expect to use AI, and they leverage it in everything they do. Simply put, it’s a part of their DNA.

While the legacy companies we interviewed in both last year’s and this year’s report had to proactively take actions to integrate AI into their operations, adjusting or reengineering their workflows, Born in AI companies built their marketing methods around AI from the start. They don’t have training or change management around AI; it’s simply part of how they work. They are much more likely to deploy AI for customer-facing use cases, leverage AI for a broader variety of workflows, have greater trust and confidence in the technology, and operate significantly leaner departments than their counterparts who are still working to catch up (Table 2).

Table 2 – Born in AI Versus Legacy Company Comparison

Dimension	Born in AI	Legacy
Overall AI stance	Built in, part of the DNA	Strategic enabler
Productivity claims	100–200% increase	20–50% increase
Tech stack	More tools, more likely to use AI-native tools	Fewer tools, more likely to use horizontal LLMs and AI capabilities in existing tech stack
Percentage of AI use that’s customer-facing	72%	45%
Training/adoption strategy	No formal training; use of AI is expected	Little formal training, with AI use built into team goals

Why “Born in AI” and not “AI Native”?

The term “AI native” has become common in business and technology parlance, and Callan Consulting uses the term all the time. But there’s a subtle distinction between AI native and Born in AI, hence the new term. “AI native” is typically used, including by Callan Consulting, to denote a company whose primary value proposition is based on AI technology, whereas Born in AI refers simply to the era in which a company started, not (necessarily) the value proposition it brings to the market. A new food delivery service, then, could be Born in AI but is not necessarily AI native.

Productivity Enhancer or Strategic Enabler?

Another highly notable shift from last year’s study is the degree to which AI is now seen as much more than a productivity tool. Many of last year’s respondents predominantly saw AI as a way to help their teams do more with less, especially for use cases like content development or research. This theme came through again in this year’s study, with many of this year’s interviewees describing significant productivity gains achievable through AI. And while very few were able to point to headcount cuts or other hard ROI metrics due to their use of generative AI, most credit it as a significant productivity enhancer, enabling them to expand their team’s output while keeping headcount flat or nearly flat.

The big change this year, however, is the degree to which respondents were likely to see AI as a source of strategic advantage to their department, providing greater access to insights and enabling faster understanding and response to shifts in the market. AI also freed up teams from mundane tasks and allowed them to focus on more strategic activities—much like the marketing discipline of decades past.

Of course, these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and most respondents look at AI in both lights. It isn’t uncommon for AI to be adopted initially with productivity gains in mind and then gradually expand into more strategic domains as its adoption grows and trust in the tools expands.

“AI lets employees pick the things they are really good at and want to do, letting AI do the things people don’t have bandwidth or expertise for, like accessibility, data hygiene, brand governance, and compliance. It lets us do the fun parts of marketing again and bring creativity back into our brands.”

Christy Marble,
4X CMO, including
SAP Concur

"We use the customer journey as the primary construct for thinking about our use of AI."

Michael Londgren, CMO, Responsive

Use Cases Proliferate

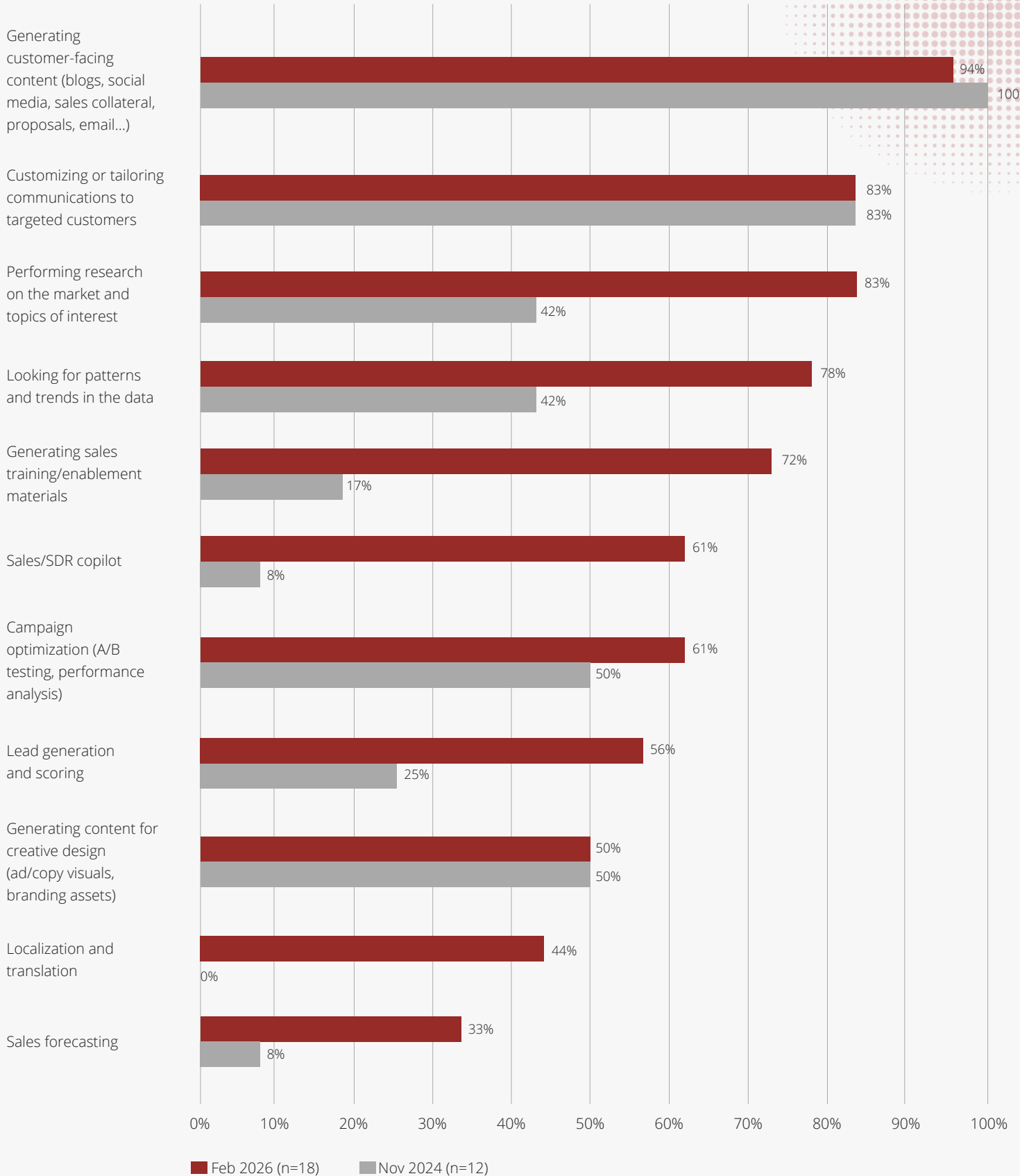
Last year, a handful of use cases dominated the marketing landscape—most notably content generation, insights, and research. While those use cases were once again prominent this year, our interviews reveal adoption expanding to a much broader set of use cases.

This shift is evident in the answers to our final closed-ended question, the use cases for AI. While the vast majority of teams in both studies use AI for content generation, this year other use cases leapt across the board, from market research to sales enablement, sales/SDR copilot, lead generation and scoring, localization, and sales forecasting (Figure 3).

But even this closed-ended view of use cases only scratches the surface of the long tail of ways marketing teams are using AI today, with respondents describing applications of AI across just about every stage of the marketing lifecycle. Callan Consulting counted 71 separate use cases mentioned during the interviews, ranging from internal productivity to messaging customization, predictive insights, ICP scoring and refinement, brainstorming, contact enrichment, and event experimentation. Born in AI companies volunteered an average of nine use cases, compared to seven for legacy companies. For a complete list of use cases identified in the study, see Appendix C.

Callan Consulting counted 71 separate use cases mentioned during the interviews.

Figure 3 – AI Use Cases in Marketing (Closed-Ended)



Q: To the extent you are using or planning to use AI in your department, which of the following use cases are you pursuing? (multiple responses accepted)

On average, respondents estimated that 50 percent of their use of AI was for customer-facing purposes such as customer content and campaigns, and the other 50 percent for internal-facing operations such as analysis, research, and productivity tools. Born in AI companies were much more likely to use AI in a customer-facing manner, with 70 percent of their use being customer-facing, compared to 45 percent for their legacy counterparts.

Importantly, a great many of these use cases are no longer being treated as experiments. Last year, most of the non-content generation use cases were in the very early stages of adoption; in contrast, this year's respondents have deployed AI in multiple "production" use cases and are expecting their team members to use it in their day-to-day activities.

AI Throughout the Marketing Tech Stack

Another strong finding from this year's study is the degree to which AI has permeated the marketing tech stack, including the use of AI-native tools as well as AI capabilities found in legacy marketing technology platforms. AI-enabled marketing tools typically fit into one of three categories:

- **General-purpose/horizontal LLMs such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini.** These tools are the foundation of tools used by the interviewees, with all organizations citing use of one or more of these tools for things like research and writing assistance, synthesis, and brainstorming. In a few cases, these were the only or primary tools cited, and all respondents are using at least one of the leading LLMs on a daily or near-daily basis.
- **AI features built into existing platforms like Demandbase, Gong, and Salesloft.** While these tools predate the AI wave, they have all moved rapidly to adopt AI, and it is now inseparable from their value proposition. All offer AI assistants designed to provide greater degrees of automation, usability, insights, and velocity in their platforms.
- **AI-native, domain-specific tools like Draup, 1Mind, and AirOps.** These tools represent a new category of tools whose entire existence depends on AI. They tend to cluster around specific use cases in marketing—like Draup for competitive intelligence, 1Mind for personalization, AirOps for content operations, or Higgsfield for video creation.

"I regularly ask my people, what have you done using AI in the last week?"

**Jorge Samayoa, CMO
North America,
HelloFresh**

With the proliferation of AI into the tools and platforms that marketers have used for years, AI adoption is occurring both through the adoption of net-new tools and by capabilities appearing “magically” inside the systems that marketers already know and trust. It is becoming difficult (and less meaningful) to separate “AI tools” from other tools used in the marketing tech stack. This is further evidence that AI is no longer a bolt-on to existing marketing operations, but is becoming part of the fabric of modern marketing organizations’ functions.

Table 3 provides a list of AI-enabled tools and technologies cited by respondents, broken out by category. Note that this is far from comprehensive; Callan Consulting is aware of hundreds of AI-enabled tools available to marketers today, and some counts put the number well into the thousands.

Table 3 – AI-Enabled Applications in the Marketing Tech Stack

General Purpose LLMs	AI-Enabled Existing Platforms	AI Native, Use Case-Specific
Claude	Adobe	1Mind (agentic personalization)
ChatGPT	Bloomfire	AirOps (content operations)
Copilot	BrightEdge	Apple Market (personalized outreach)
Gemini	Canva	Clay (data enrichment)
Perplexity	CapCut	Draup (competitive intelligence)
	Demandbase	Exa.ai (semantic retrieval)
	GA4	Higgsfield (video creation)
	Gong	Qualified Piper (lead qualification)
	Google properties	Vibe Analytics (data interpretation)
	Grammarly	Zeover (localization)
	HubSpot	zLeaf/zTree (decision orchestration)
	Salesloft	
	Zoominfo	

Q: What are the AI-enabled tools and technologies you are using? (open-ended, multiple responses accepted)

"I'd say we've tested or evaluated at least 50 AI tools relevant to marketing."

Mark Fidelman, CMO, Exabits.ai

The Challenge of Measuring Impact

Respondents consistently described significant benefits derived from their use of AI. These include time savings, improved quality, faster execution/time to market, increased output, cost avoidance, and better intelligence and insights; however, specific metrics that quantify these benefits remain inconsistent at best. While all interviewees are confident that AI is delivering significant value, none are able to point to standardized metrics that isolate its contribution. This is due in large part to the fact that since AI is simply integrated into the way they are doing their business, they are unable to isolate the effects of AI on operations.

Respondents do, of course, measure the results of a wide variety of marketing programs and processes, and many said they have seen significant improvements in areas like funnel metrics and time-to-market, which they attribute, to a significant extent, to AI. Some respondents do discuss the impact that AI is having in the reports they prepare for their CEO and boards.

That said, the largest tangible benefit for most interviewees is the reduction in time required to perform many marketing tasks, resulting in increased productivity among team members. When asked whether their organizations have been able to monetize this benefit (i.e., have they been able to reduce headcount or grow it more slowly than they might have otherwise) nearly all respondents struggled to put a specific figure against any achieved benefit. While none said they have actually let people go, most estimated that in functions like content development, campaign execution, and competitive analysis, they are now able to do the same work with anywhere from 20 to 50 percent less headcount. Born in AI companies claimed the most dramatic productivity improvements, estimating that they would need two to three times the size of their current marketing team to perform the equivalent amount of work without the use of AI tools.

See Table 4 for respondents' best estimates of the improvements AI has delivered to their marketing organizations. These represent anecdotal estimates provided by individual respondents and do not reflect an attempt to roll them up or provide an average across the sample.

While all interviewees are confident that AI is delivering significant value, none are able to point to standardized metrics that isolate its contribution.

"We've seen campaign performance increases ranging anywhere from 4x to 100x improvement, depending on audience and channel."

**Gabie Boko, CMO,
NetApp**

“The value of AI shows up in outcomes: We move faster to market, see clearer pipeline impact, and increase speed to launch; we have also seen a meaningful shift from manual effort to strategic thinking.”

Sarah Hospelhorn, CMO, BigID

Table 4 – Anecdotal Benefits Cited by Incorporating AI

Benefit	Estimated Improvement
Content development time	50–70% savings; doubled output per FTE
Cost avoidance	20–50% of departmental headcount; 2–5 FTE salaries
Customer acquisition timelines	Down to 3–9 months (from 6–12 months)
Program costs	Savings of 10–30%
Campaign performance	4x to 100x improvements
Brainstorming	60% efficiency gains
Per-marketer productivity	Up to 2–3x increase
Research and competitive intelligence	Comparative tasks reduced from full day to 1–2 hours
Customer response times	Faster prospect engagement; improved pipeline visibility
Customer satisfaction	Meaningful (qualitative) improvements from simpler, faster handoffs

Q: What benefits have you realized from incorporating AI into your marketing efforts?

“Without AI, I would have to double the size of my team. Or triple.”

**Valerie Angelkos,
CMO, Zapp**

Organizational Models and Governance

One of the most notable outcomes of the 2024 study was the scramble that marketing leaders experienced around AI governance models. It was common to hear of grounds-up adoption by self-appointed AI experts, whose experience using the tools percolated informally throughout the organization. Many companies interviewed did have companywide AI adoption initiatives, but while marketing sat on those teams, there was a lack of marketing departmental-wide initiatives.

What stood out in this year's study is the degree to which use of AI has been integrated into marketing's standing organizational and governance models. Some marketing leaders have appointed an AI lead within their organization, while others have taken it upon themselves to set expectations within the team and lead by example. A large number of interviewees have built using AI into their teams' overall goals and OKRs, and nearly all spoke of how it's now just an expectation that their employees use it in daily functions. Expectations, not mandates, are the primary driver of adoption. This is particularly true of Born in AI companies, none of whom saw the need for tiger teams or specific governance models.

Of course, marketing's use of AI has to work within the company's organizational-wide governance policies and standards. Interviewees pointed out that their larger organization, typically led by IT, sets overall governance policies around aspects like security, data usage, and vendor selection. Interviewees felt they benefitted from these guardrails and were happy to work within their organization's overall guidelines.

Agentic AI: The Next Wave

For a reminder of how quickly AI is evolving, look no further than agentic AI. Last year, agentic AI was not on respondents' radar screens and didn't even come up in interviews. This year, many leaders described how agentic AI is now playing a prominent role in their products' offerings; however, only four of the eighteen respondents have incorporated it into their marketing efforts, using agents for relatively simple use cases such as maintaining watch over competitors' activities, performing website chat, and querying internal brand guidelines and campaign information. In most cases where agents are being used, they tend to be ad hoc and exploratory rather than programmatic.

Yet while most respondents have yet to tap into agentic AI for their operations, they expect it to play an important role in the future, with about half the interviewees planning to make agentic AI a key push in 2026. Anticipated use cases for agentic AI cover a broad range, including agent-driven orchestration, customer profiling, GTM pattern analysis, first-call preparation, event targeting, audience recommendations, tailored messaging, competitive analysis, and opportunity assessments.

"When you educate your marketers, you're making them not afraid that their job is going to be replaced. You're teaching AI governance, AI responsibility. You're really helping them master the art of creating, not just using AI to create, which I think is the really important factor for AI."

**Gabie Boko, CMO,
NetApp**

About half the interviewees plan to make agentic AI a key push in 2026.

The Shift from SEM/SEO to GEO/AEO

The degree to which marketers are now adopting Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)/Answer Engine Optimization (AEO), i.e., working to get content surfaced via LLMs, is one of the most profound shifts from our 2024 report to today. In 2024, we discussed GEO/AEO as a future-state activity (which didn't even have a well-coined term yet) that marketers would need to incorporate into their activities. In this year's study, we found that while it's still early days, marketers are beginning to give GEO/AEO serious attention.

Roughly half of the leaders we spoke with have at least some sort of formalized GEO/AEO activities underway, most of which were initiated over the past six months. And most of the rest expected GEO/AEO to be a focus in 2026. Of those with current GEO/AEO initiatives, most are developing the off-site signals the discipline requires, including creating longer-form content surfaced in places like Reddit and YouTube, and building citations and reviews on third-party sites. They are beginning to track traffic coming from LLMs, with one leader citing a 260 percent increase in referral traffic (albeit from a low base) and others using measurement tools like Profound to understand how their content is being surfaced via the LLMs, although several mentioned that tracking and measurement remains difficult and transparency remains low.

Interestingly, the Born in AI companies were not ahead of their peers in GEO/AEO, with two of the three not yet initiating GEO/AEO efforts. Callan Consulting considers this to be in large part a reflection of the buying behavior of the customers of those companies, as one remains primarily outbound-focused and another notes that its target market still primarily uses traditional search.

Nevertheless, it is clear that moving forward GEO/AEO will become a strategic marketing focus, complementing and building on the discipline of SEM/SEO. As buyers increasingly rely on AI-driven interfaces to surface and evaluate solutions, marketers must move to keep up.

"Marketers will still need to be successful in traditional SEO, and AEO is the expanded discipline that moves beyond rankings and into answer engines."

Jen Jones, CMO, Siteimprove

Barriers and Challenges

One thing that stood out from the interviews is the degree to which AI-skepticism, by and large, has decreased among the marketers we spoke with. In 2024, interviewees expressed concern around two major areas, one being data security and governance, i.e., the danger of proprietary content loaded into AI systems finding its way into competitors' or others' hands, and the other being overreliance on AI tools yielding content that is undifferentiated and/or not entirely accurate.

Both of those concerns seem to have fallen away to a great extent this year, likely due to respondents simply having another year of the technology under their belts and therefore feeling more comfortable with it. On the data privacy issue, marketing teams are using enterprise versions of AI tools, and they place trust in the security protocols of their vendors. When asked, respondents were unable to cite any specific instances in which a company's sensitive data was leaked via an LLM. And on the undifferentiated content issue, respondents point to installing appropriate guardrails, such as making sure a human stays in the loop and that AI models are trained on the company's brand and messaging guidelines.

This isn't to say that respondents don't have issues. Simply keeping track of the plethora of new tools on the market, along with the new capabilities being deployed into tools they currently use, is a significant challenge. Also challenging are dealing with a large and potentially overlapping tool portfolio and discerning between the reality and the hype around new AI technologies. Leaders also mentioned challenges around accuracy of data and guarding against hallucinations.

Overreliance on AI-Generated Content

But when it comes to overreliance on AI-generated content, Callan Consulting does see a real problem. Reading between the lines in the interviews, and in Callan Consulting's own market observations, it was evident that marketing teams are taking advantage of AI-generated content and, to a very large degree, that content is making its way to the market with relatively few/cosmetic changes. Callan Consulting is all too familiar with the siren song of AI-generated content. Especially with good prompt engineering, AI-generated content is often "good enough"; or worse, it isn't *really* good enough but passes for it upon a cursory scan. And since it's so fast and simple to create, there's a large temptation to take AI-generated content, make a few tweaks, and send it out. Unfortunately, using AI as a content starting point rather than applying independent thought can overly guide the final content and stifle creative directions. In behavioral economics, we refer to this as the anchoring effect: people react and respond to what we see on the page, rather than creating (perhaps more insightful, more salient) original content.

Data security concerns are low this year, with respondents trusting in providers' security protocols.

"AI helps you when you're already running a good go-to-market engine; applying AI on top of broken processes can amplify problems rather than solve them."

Jam Khan, CMO,
Criteria

"AI content is getting to that point where we are seeing a proliferation of the copies of the copy, which is increasing the noise and obscuring some truths."

Dan Stradtman, CMO, Bloomfire

Zoom out a bit and the problem gets worse. It's well documented that AI content, trained on itself, loses fidelity with each generation; applied over many generations, it ends up yielding pure noise. We are already seeing a flood of AI-generated content hit the internet, and with minor/cosmetic human-generated tweaks, LLMs will feed on the content, and we'll begin to see the cycle repeating itself. A few respondents see this as a real issue, and something the marketing discipline will need to proactively address over the next several years.

"The biggest challenge is human discernment—knowing when AI output is helpful and not harmful."

Chris Bauserman, CMO, Conexiom

Skills and AI Enablement

As in our previous study, skills stood out as an important consideration for marketing teams looking to increase and improve their use of AI. Leaders spoke about the changing skills requirements around AI, including prompt engineering, analytical acumen, and ability to discern "AI slop." More advanced use cases like cross-system pattern analysis require levels of AI and data proficiency that interviewees don't believe their teams currently have.

Interestingly, as in last year's study, very few respondents spoke about formal training programs for their departments, with most continuing to rely on more organic methods, including learning by doing, experienced team members mentoring junior members, and good change management practices. Leaders took it upon themselves to understand the technology and model behaviors for their team, and many have built the use of AI

tools into their teams' goals and OKRs. Many make it a point to bring it up in their direct report meetings and work hard to provide the space for employee learning and experimentation. Born in AI companies in particular do not feel the need for formal training programs.

"One of the biggest benefits is rapid skill development across the team, with AI dramatically reducing learning curves and allowing designers and marketers to learn new tools in days rather than months."

Valerie Angelkos, CMO, Zapp

Also like last time, marketing leaders expressed concern over changes to marketing career paths that could be brought about by AI. They noted that senior, skilled individuals are in demand because they can tell "what's good" from what's not in terms of AI output, while more junior positions are being replaced by AI. But this can lead to obvious longer-term challenges if there are too few junior people coming up through the ranks to replace the senior ones when they leave the workforce.

"Effective AI requires a 'builder' mindset: people who can envision new workflows, not passive adopters."

Jorge Samayoa, CMO North America, HelloFresh

Looking Forward: Changing the Face of Marketing, Again

One of our favorite things about doing these studies is having the opportunity to speak with marketing leaders about what's to come, to learn about their upcoming plans, and to make some predictions of our own. This year's report didn't disappoint, as we unearthed a number of items that were expected (greater use of agents, deeper AI literacy across teams, consolidation and optimization of the tech stack portfolio) as well as surprising (marketing to machines).

The Next 12 Months

Most of the leaders interviewed intend to continue investing, in terms of both out-of-pocket budget and their team's time and energy, in AI tools and capabilities. Some of the leading areas of investment are greater use of agents, deeper AI literacy across teams, greater use of AI in analytics, and consolidation and optimization of the tech stack portfolio. They expect to see greater use of AI across all marketing areas, expanding beyond early-stage use cases including content and research into all areas of the marketing function, including branding, analytics, and revenue marketing. GEO/AEO will gain greater traction and investment, rivaling or even surpassing the importance of SEM/SEO.

An area marketing leaders are particularly excited about is the ability to make ABM successful, this time for real. Personalization at scale across demand generation, website, sales touchpoints, and onboarding is now within their grasp, unlike with previous flavors of ABM that required too much manual effort for the levels of personalization required. The next wave of ABM will require better persona intelligence, stronger signals, responsible design, and real-time content generation, all of which is in the realm of possibility with the correct AI-enabled tools.

"One of the biggest things over the next 12 months will be to use agents to industrialize our workflows."

Chris Bauserman, CMO, Conexiom

Leaders of smaller teams, and particularly those in Born in AI companies, are excited about AI's ability to act as a force multiplier, allowing them to punch above their weight. They expect to iterate rapidly, with aggressive tool testing and a low tolerance for offerings that do not quickly demonstrate value. They expect AI agents to begin handling complex workflows, enabling them to, say, perform true end-to-end orchestration, reporting, and optimization of campaigns and other marketing programs. They will increasingly look to AI to provide proactive alerts and take autonomous actions, rather than serving as a reactive tool. And they intend to invest in areas that humans are poor at, such as pattern recognition, large-scale synthesis, and sentiment analysis. A few respondents even anticipate entire job functions being handled by AI agents within the next year, and for agents to show up on their organizational chart.

"Over the next year, we'll have a number of AI agents on different teams, like our content team and competitive team. The agents may even be reflected in our org chart."

Michael Londgren, CMO, Responsive

Longer-Term Outlook: Going Back to Marketing's Roots and the Rise of Machine Engine Optimization (MEO)

Looking even further forward, there was large agreement among interviewees that significant changes to the marketing function are in store, and we are only at the very earliest wave. As AI-enabled tools gain greater abilities to act autonomously, marketing teams will continue to get leaner and will be able to do even more with less. The staffing mix is expected to get more senior, as AI replaces the role of entry-level marketers.

With AI automating the more mundane aspects of marketing, marketers will spend less of their time and energy turning the crank and will be able to refocus their efforts on more strategic activities. Respondents expect marketing to swing back to becoming a strategy-driven, storytelling function, powered by human-led creativity, experimentation, and human connection.

“Marketing is going to have a massive, massive shift from being an output-based function to being a storytelling-based function”

Brad Sivert, CMO, Tavant

At the same time, respondents cautioned against a world in which a plethora of AI-generated content will all sound the same, and brands will lose their emotional resonance with their customers. They warn of a coming shift in the skillsets required in marketing organizations, akin to the changes in manufacturing automation, with fewer specialists, more generalists, and greater leverage through automation.

Finally, one of the most tantalizing findings to come out of our research was the prediction that over the next three to five years, AI agents will themselves become the central player in many buying organizations' purchasing decisions, supplementing or even replacing the humans who currently make them. Marketing's role will shift toward ensuring that AI agents are aware of the company's offerings and can easily access the information they need, often through the use of agents themselves. Callan Consulting uses the term Machine Engine Optimization (MEO) to describe this discipline. Exactly what this will look like and what types of motions will appeal to these AI agents is yet to be fully clear, but marketers will need to ensure that their brands are understood by and appealing to AI agents and not just humans.

Marketing's role will shift toward ensuring buyers' AI agents are aware of companies' offerings and can access the information they need.

“In the future, AI agents will research, evaluate, demo, and negotiate with other AI agents, fundamentally changing how buying decisions are made. The focus will be more on appealing to AI agents.”

Mark Fidelman, Exabits.ai

Recommendations

As marketers navigate the next wave of AI in their organizations, and as AI transitions from an experimental, early-stage technology into a critical component of the marketing toolset, Callan Consulting has six primary recommendations.

- 1. Fully embrace AI across all areas of marketing.** Over the last three years, generative AI has evolved from a novelty to become the way work is done. Most marketing teams are at least using it to some extent, and if you are not, then it's a near-certainty that you are at a competitive disadvantage. But the industry is still rapidly evolving, and the landscape will look very different in 12 months than it does today. Continue to make AI a strategic focus, set goals and objectives for use within your team, and treat AI as a baseline expectation, not a special project.
- 2. Focus on AI-driven discovery: GEO/AEO and MEO.** Not only do AI now offer the ability for your teams to work more effectively and more efficiently (the focus of last year's report), it is now offering your customers the ability to find and interact with your brand differently. GEO/AEO made rapid strides from this point last year, and we expect it to continue to mature in the months and years to come. Customers will increasingly use LLMs to interact with your brand, and even further down the line, AI agents themselves will be the entities you will need to appeal to. Stay on top of these trends and invest in the tools and processes necessary to remain successful in the future.
- 3. Invest beyond productivity gains.** Increased efficiency is still an important part of the AI value proposition, but moving forward, its greatest value will be improving marketing effectiveness. Marketing teams should emphasize use cases that enable them to optimize strategy, including research, segmentation, analytical insights, and prioritization. This will enable step change, not merely incremental improvements in marketing outputs.
- 4. Prioritize skills and judgment over tools.** Merely having access to AI is no longer a differentiator, but the ability to recognize "what good looks like," apply context, and maintain brand integrity is. This places a premium on humans who can bring experience, critical thinking, and domain expertise to the table. Having this level of skills and talent will be particularly important—and increasingly hard to come by—as the number of junior roles continues to decline.
- 5. Don't overuse the technology.** As an industry, we are in a "Danger, Will Robinson" moment. Callan Consulting believes that as marketers, we are already overly dependent on the technology and are beginning to use it as a crutch, especially for content development. Resist the urge to use AI as a starting point. Instead, use it as a cross-check, at least for the most

“In an era of AI-driven content, marketers struggle to drive visibility and differentiation. Now with answer engines fast becoming the new way of search, it’s an opportunity to put content back in the strategic seat—content that is structured, accurate, trustworthy, and accessible for all.”

Jen Jones, CMO, Siteimprove

important stuff. Triage where “good enough” is fine and feel free to use AI, and where it isn’t, put human focus there. Use entirely human-generated content for foundational, strategic items such as messaging platforms and customer journey mapping, and use AI tools with human cross-check to develop or customize derivative content such as individual campaign emails or verticalized industry content.

- 6. Get help where you need it.** Marketers are busy people, with teams that seem to get leaner every year. Keeping up with the changes that AI promises can be difficult, especially when keeping up with their day jobs. Understanding how best to apply AI to your organization, selecting and training on the right tools, and ensuring teams have the right skills to optimize their use of AI is not always in their wheelhouse. Consider bringing in outside expert assistance to optimize your AI operations and enable you to maximize value.

More on the danger of overusing AI. The risk is two-fold: the first, and more obvious, is simply that we are now starting to produce AI slop. It’s easy to succumb to the siren’s call since developing content using AI is quick and easy (and cheap), and upon initial review it looks good, or at least good enough. This realization is already known within the marketing community. But the more insidious danger is that we are beginning to lose our edge. Just as we lost our ability to write neatly by hand when keyboard use became common, or to remember directions when we could use phones to navigate everywhere, we are now starting to lose our ability to generate or even recognize good content. We should resist the temptation to overuse the technology and instead stay in control of our tools.

We are already overly dependent on AI and are beginning to use it as a crutch. Overuse of the technology risks us losing the ability to generate or even recognize good content.

“AI is an unlock of human potential, not a substitute for it.”

**Alex Gay, VP Product and Corporate Marketing,
Superhuman**

Conclusion

AI continues to make significant inroads in marketing organizations, as the comparison to our November 2024 report makes clear. No longer is it something that departments are in early experimental stages on, but rather it's now simply the way work gets done. Use cases have expanded beyond initial content development and research, and AI-enabled tools now dominate the marketing technology stack.

But we stand at a critical juncture point. Companies are continuing to invest in the technology and must continuously evaluate new tools and capabilities coming down the line, identifying how to integrate them into their ongoing operations—all while continuing to do their day jobs. AI promises to change marketing in fundamental ways, not just over the next 12 months but in the years to come, and marketers need to be armed with the skills and information required to be successful during this transition.

The organizations that succeed will be those that are best able to integrate AI's speed and scale with human judgment, creativity, and discipline. Those with the skills and bandwidth to make this transition may be able to make the leap themselves, while others should seek experienced partners to help them realize the full value of AI in their marketing organizations.

"As marketing leaders, it's important for us to embrace these tools."

Jessica Bonham-Werling, Head of Marketing, IntusCare

Appendix A: Study Methodology

The findings in this study are based on interviews with 19 CMOs and marketing leaders, conducted in December 2025 and January 2026. Respondents were recruited from the broader Callan Consulting ecosystem and were promised a copy of the report. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. The breakdown of respondents can be found in Table 5.

Table 5 – Interviewee Breakdown

Company	Respondent Title	Company Focus
BigID	CMO	Data security platform
Bloomfire	CMO	Knowledge management platform
Conexiom	CMO	Sales order automation
Criteria	CMO	Pre-employment test and assessment tools
Esquire Deposition Solutions	Vice President, Marketing (retired)	Deposition solutions
Exabits.ai	CMO	Tokenized GPU computing infrastructure
HelloFresh	CMO, North America	Consumer meal kit delivery service
IntusCare	Head of Marketing	Healthcare technology solutions
KarmaCheck	CMO	Background checks and screening
NetApp	CMO	Unified data storage and management solutions
Poggio	VP, Global Marketing	Account intelligence
Responsive	CMO	Strategic response management software
Siteimprove	CMO	Content intelligence
Superhuman	VP Product and Corporate Marketing	Productivity platform
Tavant	CMO	Digital mortgage origination software
Wrike	CMO	Work management platform
Zapp	CMO	On-demand grocery and essentials delivery
Zywave	CMO	Insurance and data analytics software

Appendix B: Lessons and Observations from Using AI to Develop This Report

Last year we had a lot of fun writing up our experience using AI assistance when developing the report, and we provided letter grades on various aspects of the report generation. We found it interesting and instructive, and we hope our readers got some value out of it as well.

We did it again this year, although it's not lost on us that the use of AI in some way, shape, or form is now very much par for the course in projects of this nature, and we expect that many readers won't find much in our experience that is surprising. Nevertheless, we did find some noteworthy takeaways, including (further) validation of one of our core themes, the danger of overuse of AI.

Our LLM of choice for tasks like this is Claude, but we also leveraged ChatGPT and Gemini for comparison purposes. Not surprisingly (to us), Claude did the best job of the three, but even it wasn't perfect. In the spirit of providing a broader take on our experience, the grades provided below represent an average across the three tools. Ways we used AI and our letter grades for its performance include:

- **Capturing and summarizing interviews: B.** We used our LLMs to create interview transcripts and turn the transcripts into an interview matrix. While our experience was better than last year's, we still find the tools to do an only-acceptable job, with information washed out or even mischaracterized during summarization. We found ourselves on more than one occasion having to go back to the original raw transcripts to find comments that our interviewers recalled respondents having told us. We are once again reminded of the danger of overuse of the tools in this capacity as we do find that interview/data summarization is a highly used use case among our clients.
- **Initial outline/content draft: B+.** Before developing the report outline, we fed this year's interview matrix, interview transcripts, and last year's report (as a benchmark) into the tools, along with our interviewers' high-level synthesis of key takeaways. Like last year, we found the output to be generic and expected, and while it was somewhat useful as a starting point, our human author developed the final outline. Of note, the LLMs' outlines were flat, containing only top-level sections (about 15 of them), which we morphed to the first- and second-level headings found in this report. One example: we (humans) identified the point about marketers being overreliant upon AI; the AI's findings were much more expected and pedantic.

- **Content/report development: C.** Unlike last year, we let AI take a crack at writing the report itself, section by section. For each section we came up with our own list of bullet points of the key content independently, so as not to be influenced by the LLMs' outputs. We then let the LLMs generate a draft guided by generous prompt engineering with guidance of what we wanted to see in each section. While the output seemed to read well upon first glance, it was generic, rife with platitudes, and often missed key points. And once the AI hit upon what it considered a key point, that point was reflected in all subsequent sections. (Interestingly, each AI focused on different key points.) For most sections, the content was consistently just a little off, and in the end we wrote the entirety of the report ourselves, although we did use the AI-generated content as a cross-check.
- **Targeted research: A.** Once again, we find this is where the tools really shine. We used them for a variety of purposes, including identifying information about the AI tools and companies cited in this report (meta!), asking clarifying questions, and performing other targeted research. We found the tools' output to be credible, comprehensive, and helpful.
- **Rewriting/polishing final report: A-.** Like last year, we had our human editor perform our final edit/polish pass, and once again we found her input to be entirely helpful and constructive. Everything she changed she did for a reason, and every change improved the report. She had no changes for change's sake. Unlike last year, our AI tools actually did a very good job this time around. Perhaps because we're better at prompt engineering, perhaps because our tools have another year of learning our style under their belts, this time they maintained our tone and intent and provided targeted, valuable edits. Some of which made their way into the report. The main item holding them back from receiving a letter grade of A was their perhaps inevitable overuse of em dashes (we like to think that we use them an appropriate amount).
- **Overall experience with the tools: B.** On the one hand, there were certain tasks and activities for which the tools were helpful. Creating the interview matrix and performing targeted research helped us get started and saved us some mundane work. But we were reminded of the dangers of succumbing to the temptation of overusing the tools. Had we simply fed our inputs and desired outcome benchmarks into the tools, even with the assistance of thorough prompt engineering, we would have had a significantly diluted and, we suspect, far less insightful report. AI still has not replaced humans, we're happy to report. At least in instances where the highest levels of quality are important to achieve. At least not yet.

Appendix C: Use Cases Identified by Respondents

By our count, respondents mentioned 71 use cases they are currently using AI for. They are captured in Table 6.

Table 6 – AI Use Cases Mentioned in Report

ABM orchestration	email structuring	personalized outreach
ABM-style targeting	enforcing brand standards	sales/pipeline forecasting
account grading	event experimentation	PR development
ad creation	experiential marketing	predictive insights
AI-driven search	experimenting with AI video content	product marketing
analytics	generative engine optimization	prospect response times
brainstorming/idea generation	GTM execution and experimentation	qual/quant insights
brand communications	ICP scoring and refinement	research (general)
buyer's journey	improving company visibility in search	sales enablement
campaign creation	internal productivity	SDR enablement
campaign ideation	large-scale content creation-videos	search (general)
campaign optimization	lead generation	SEO
campaign support	lead scoring	SEO to AEO transition
competitive intelligence	light pattern recognition and analysis	social strategy and execution
contact enrichment	list building	strategy development
content adaptation/message tailoring	live website engagement	test email copy
content creation and optimization	localization and translation	website rebranding
content for LLM consumption	message customization	
conversational intelligence for sales calls	message testing	
creative and product concept ideation	message validation	
CSAT improvement	messaging/positioning	
customer and account research	onboarding optimization	
customer research design	outbound sequencing	
demand generation	partner research	
digital experience personalization	persona research	
early-stage copy creation	persona-based messaging	
early-stage personalization	personalized messaging	

About Callan Consulting and Our AI Enablement Service

Founded in 2000, Callan Consulting provides a wide range of marketing assistance services to B2B technology companies, with a particular emphasis on product marketing. With clients ranging from household names like Docusign, Seismic, IDC, and SAP to Born in AI startups, Callan Consulting has helped hundreds of technology companies over the course of thousands of engagements to maximize their success in the market.

Callan Consulting offerings range from marketing strategy to messaging and positioning, market research, customer-facing content, go-to-market and launch support, competitive assessments, value-based selling, and sales enablement. With our AI Enablement Service, we work with our clients to ensure they are making the best use of AI in their marketing organizations. AI Enablement Service offerings include:

- **Quick-Start Assessment and Plan.** Assessment of how and where your organization can best use AI and implementation plan including tasks, owners, and milestones.
- **AI Tool Market Scan and Selection.** Assessment of individual tools and capabilities relevant to your tech stack and identification of tool selection criteria and decision assistance.
- **Pilot Implementation and Support.** Pilot and integration of selected tools and adaptation of existing workflows; identification and establishment of early wins.
- **Skills Training.** Group and one-on-one coaching to teach best practices in prompt engineering and other ways to use tools.
- **Change Management: Adoption, Measurement, and Optimization.** Tracking of AI usage across the marketing organization, identification of gaps and opportunities, and supporting change management.

Callan Consulting's AI Enablement Service helps our clients jumpstart and optimize their use of AI. Its primary objective is to make organizations more effective by increasing scale and decreasing costs.