

Smarty Party

Guaranteed to Make
Your Head Explode



July 2026



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Letter from the Publisher

The Smarty Party is a monthly round-up of key opinion leaders in the advertising and marketing industry that is intended to make it a little easier, and a little more fun, to learn from each other in this new world of remote and independent work.

As I have been building Influence & Inspire Consulting over the last 7 years, I have relied on the smarts and generosity of my network to learn, grow and keep myself honest.

Being a consultant definitely takes a village.

I would love to build a bigger village for all of us and make remote work a little less solitary.

But most importantly, let's make it more of a party.

Kerry Perse



What's Inside?

- Meet this month's **Smarty Party**
- Cultivating the **next generation** of marketing talent amidst **shrinking demand**
- **Content considerations** for the evolving **AI-powered** consumer journey
- Brands and agencies double-down on **infrastructure** as a top priority in **creator marketing**
- **Party Snacks.** Bite-sized advice for **busy people.**



Meet This Month's *Smarty Party*



Kerry Perse
Founder & CEO
Influence & Inspire
NYC



Lucas Holt
Founder
Lucas Holt, LLC
LATAM/NYC



Max Cowan
Owner & SEO Consultant
Blue House Digital
Denver



Amir Eldar
Chief Anti Officer
Anti Agency Group
Los Angeles



Mordecai
Chief Innovation Officer
Day After / Silicon Foundry
London



Meet This Month's *Smarty Party*



Courtney Ray
Founder & CEO
Elevated Influence
Los Angeles



Anna Bleers
Strategic Growth Advisor
FEARLESS
Chicago



Jonathan Schwartz
COO
The Groundwork AI
NYC



Jason Press
President
Coaching for Growth
California



Bharad Ramesh
Founder & CEO
Aqxle AI
NYC





Cultivating the next generation of marketing
talent amidst shrinking demand

The Situation

- Entry-level jobs in the US have fallen by 35% in the last 18 months, in large part because of AI.
- Entry-level roles in copywriting, design, media buying, and administration are being replaced by generative AI, causing a decline in opportunities for workers aged 20–24
- This shift risks diluting expertise in core marketing disciplines and shrinking the pool of future strategists and leaders





IMHO

How do we cultivate the next generation of marketing talent amidst shrinking demand?

Amir Eldar, Chief Anti Officer, Anti Agency Group

"I actually think we're going back to the basics. As AI automates more of the execution, the differentiator becomes deeply human skills: negotiation, relationship building, curiosity, and judgment. We need to teach the next generation of marketers to form opinions, develop taste, and cultivate a broader perspective on how technology, content, culture, and human behavior intersect.

They'll need to understand the ins and outs of AI and emerging technology—but more importantly, they'll need to know when and how to apply the human touch. The marketers who thrive won't be the ones who can simply use the tools; they'll be the ones who can make the tools meaningful."





Bold Moves

Amir Eldar, Chief Anti Officer, Anti Agency Group

Adopt an Athlete's Mindset

Like an athlete, keep challenging yourself and practice your marketing skills every day. Never stop learning. If something feels easy, seek out work that pushes you beyond your comfort zone—growth happens when you're stretched, not when you're comfortable.

Read. Read. Read. Then Have an Opinion.

Keep educating yourself in an ever-changing world, but don't stop at consuming information. Develop a thoughtful point of view on what you read and see in marketing. Your perspective is what sets you apart and creates lasting value.

Master the Tools. Unlock Your Creativity.

AI and technology are evolving by the minute. The better you understand how these tools work, the better you'll be at using them to unlock new creative possibilities. We're still in the earliest stages of AI, giving marketers a rare opportunity to rethink how brands connect, engage, and build relationships with people.





IMHO

How do we cultivate the next generation of marketing talent amidst shrinking demand?

Lucas Holt, Founder, Lucas Holt, LLC

"This is one of the best times to get into marketing. Why? Because everyone's learning how to make content. But fewer people are learning how to make people care, feel something. That's the whole point. For years, we've chased the algorithm. Now the brands breaking through are doing the opposite. They're a little weirder. More opinionated. More human. Meet them where they are.

AI can make content. It can't replace taste or a critical, refreshing POV. In a world where everyone has the same tools, being unmistakably yourself is the most rebellious and refreshing move. If I were bringing young talent into an agency today, I'd tell them this:

AI can make everyone faster. But it can't make anyone more curious. Or more observant. Or funnier. Or weirder. Or more empathetic. Or, most importantly, more human. Those are still the ingredients behind every campaign people actually remember."



Bold Moves

Lucas Holt, Founder, Lucas Holt, LLC



The Wild Idea Might be the Good One

Our job can be so fun. Weird. Ridiculous. Don't kill an idea just because it makes the room laugh - that is a win. Half the job is having the guts to chase the thing AI would've never suggested. That usually won't get the greenlight. But if it got your client's attention, got them to chuckle. Well done.

Bless Your Heart... You Need Me

Your client loves you because you don't take it too seriously. AI can streamline a lot of our processes, but nothing replaces the client/agency relationship. We will gladly move mountains but we also don't always tell you your horrible ideas are great ... like AI. Own your expertise.

Make Your Client the Hero

I'll push all day for the weird idea. But if it doesn't help my client win, it's the wrong hill to die on. Creativity is the means. Their success is the mission. Get your client a promotion.





IMHO

How do we cultivate the next generation of marketing talent amidst shrinking demand?

Anna Bleers, Strategic Growth Advisor, FEARLESS Strategic Marketing

"We're about to lose the apprenticeship model that built generations of great marketers. That's not an AI problem, it's a leadership problem. For years, early-career marketers developed judgment through executional work, learning by doing alongside experienced leaders. AI is rapidly absorbing much of that work. If we replace the work without replacing the learning, we'll create a generation of efficient operators instead of strategic marketers. The answer is not to train young talent to out-produce AI. It is to help them out-think it.

Teach judgment, not just tools. The next generation of marketers needs to learn how to uncover a meaningful human insight, distinguish insight from a data point, and make strategic choices when the answer is not obvious. That is the real craft of marketing. Make AI fluency the baseline, not the differentiator. Prompting, directing, and auditing machine output should become as fundamental as writing a brief. The value lies in knowing what to ask, what to question, and what not to accept.

Create real apprenticeships. Give emerging talent access to consequential work, experienced leaders, and fast, honest feedback. Strategic instinct is built by watching decisions get made, making some themselves, and learning from the outcomes. The next generation already values substance over polish and authenticity over noise. Our responsibility is to give them the exposure, trust, and mentorship to turn those instincts into judgment. AI will transform how marketers work, but people are still what shape great marketers."





Bold Moves

Anna Bleers, Strategic Growth Advisor, FEARLESS Strategic Marketing

Teach Judgment First

AI will speed up execution, but it won't replace discernment. The marketers who create the most value will be those who can interpret human behavior and insight, challenge assumptions, and make sound strategic decisions when there isn't a perfect answer.

Protect Apprenticeship

If AI takes over entry-level tasks, leaders must replace those learning opportunities intentionally. Great marketers are developed through exposure to meaningful work, mentorship, and honest feedback, not observation alone.

Build Decision-Makers

The goal isn't to create marketers who can out-produce AI. It's to develop marketers who can out-think it. Judgment, curiosity, and strategic courage will remain the most valuable skills in the profession.





IMHO

How do we cultivate the next generation of marketing talent amidst shrinking demand?

Jason Press, President, Coaching for Growth

"I remember learning in school that advertising is a business where the inventory gets in the elevator and goes home every night. As an agency employee, this is what I did nightly for over 25 years. Sadly, agencies don't invest in keeping their inventory safe and fresh. In fact, they now spend less than ever on learning and development. And it shows through continued employee frustration, insecurity, attrition, and burn out.

Brands on the other hand, spend a fortune on their employees to grow and sharpen their skills. As an executive coach, I've seen firsthand how their L&D Departments invest in 1:1 coaching, team coaching, leadership skills training, technology and function-specific coursework that can quickly add up to tens of thousands of dollars per employee each year.

If you're in a leadership position, ask yourself what am I doing to support the growth of my team and myself? What am I willing to invest to make sure me and my team are getting the support that we need? If the organization isn't willing to invest in me, why am I investing so much in the company?

What small step can I take to move my education forward?"



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Bold Moves

Jason Press, President, Coaching for Growth



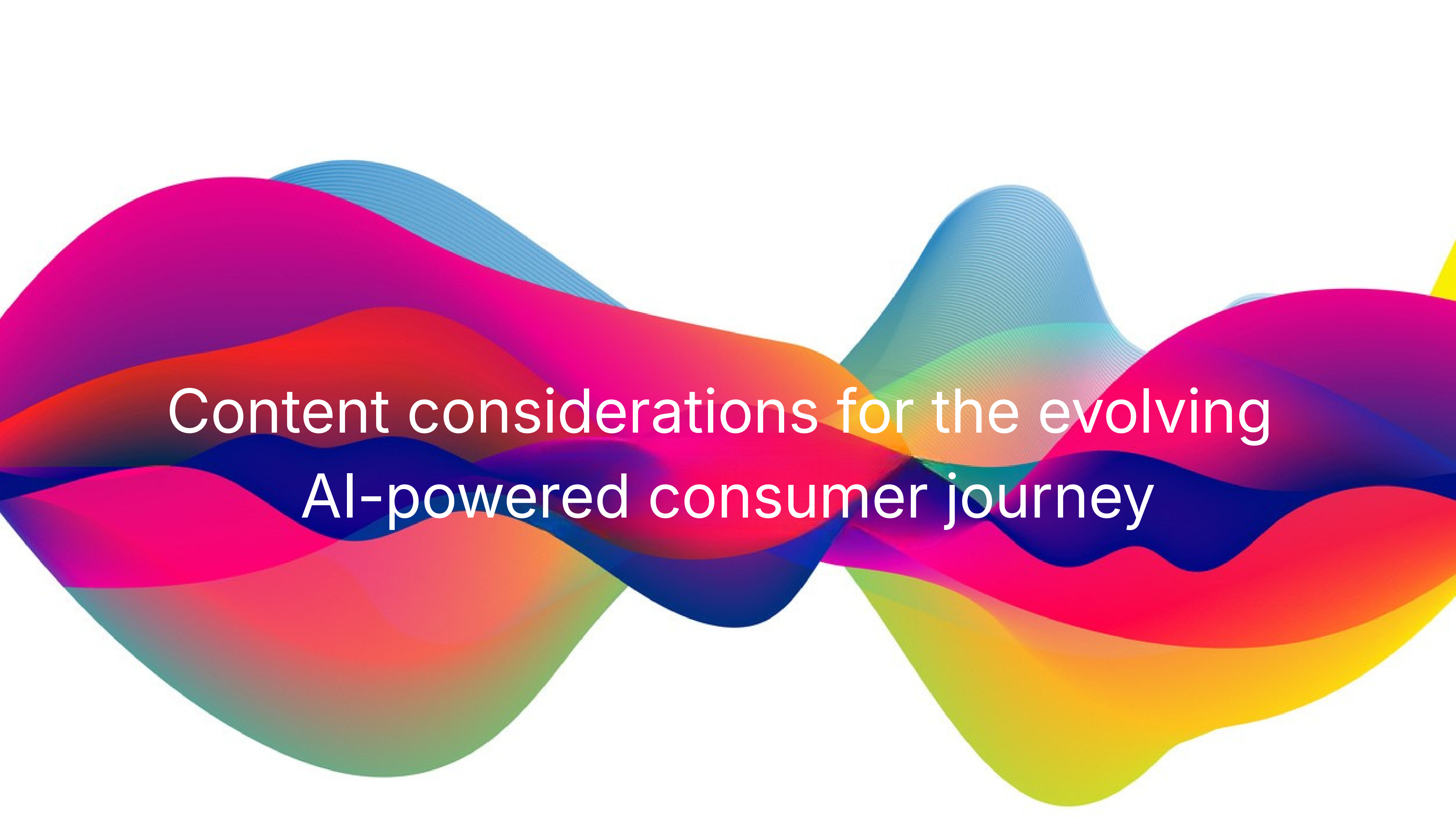
What Are You Spending on L&D?

If you're not spending money to invest in your own growth, then why should anyone else? You need to take your career as seriously as your day-to-day work. Your own development is key to getting ahead and staying ahead. Invest in a course, class or coach if you're really serious about staying competitive. Become a life-long learner.

Learn to Put Others First

Adopt a policy of "giver's gain" or servant leadership. Ask what you can do to help others along their journey before, or instead of, asking others for help on yours. You'll be surprised by how good it feels to mentor and support others along their chosen path.





Content considerations for the evolving AI-powered consumer journey

The Situation

- Nearly 60% of consumers say they've used AI to help them shop and more than half trust AI more than a friend when it comes to choosing what to wear
- About 50% of Google searches already have AI summaries, a figure expected to rise to more than 75% by 2028
- AI search most often directs traffic to brand websites instead of 3rd party retail sites and consumers are beginning to trust AI as their "category curator" instead of choosing a retailer with the best selection.
- According to Shopify's Q1 2026 commerce data, referral sessions from AI chatbots grew more than 8x year over year, and AI-referred orders grew nearly 13x year over year—making GEO one of the highest-leverage investments a merchant can make right now.

IMHO



What are the content considerations for the evolving AI-powered consumer journey?

Max Cowan, Owner & SEO Consultant, Blue House Digital

"The brands that will win in an AI-powered search landscape are the ones that prioritize quality over quantity. Everyone now has access to a magic "create content" button, but search engines, LLMs, and consumers are getting much more savvy sifting out the BS. Before you pump out content at scale just because you can, focus on creating content rooted in real customer insights. Audience interviews, sales conversations, support tickets, and on-site search behavior reveal the questions and pain points that actually matter. That specificity is what helps content stand out especially as searches become more specific and answers become more personalized to the user. Once you have that foundation, scale appropriately and with caution.

Another priority is keeping existing content current. LLMs frequently cite older pages, so outdated messaging, products, or positioning can influence how your brand is represented. Refreshing high-value pages often delivers more impact than publishing new ones while ensuring AI systems surface accurate information. Finally, measurement can't wait. AI search reporting is still evolving, but brands should already be tracking referral traffic from AI platforms, monitoring prompts relevant to their products and personas, and evaluating how LLMs describe their brand versus competitors. The technology will continue to change quickly, but you need to get started now on a measurement framework."



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Free Advice

Max Cowan, Owner & SEO Consultant, Blue House Digital



Prioritize Quality Over Content Volume

AI makes publishing easier than ever, but generic content is easier than ever to ignore. Focus on accurate, helpful content that reflects your expertise and addresses real customer needs instead of simply increasing output. Your customers and search engines will thank you!

Refresh Before You Create

Keep your most important pages current. LLMs often surface existing website content, so outdated messaging can shape how your brand is represented in AI search and negatively influence customer perception.

Start Measuring AI Visibility Now

Track AI referral traffic, monitor prompts related to your products, and compare how LLMs describe your brand versus competitors. Even simple measurement uncovers valuable opportunities and brand narrative gaps that you can easily address.



IMHO



What are the content considerations for the evolving AI-powered consumer journey?

Jonathan Schwartz, COO - AI Product & Strategy, The Groundwork AI

"The journey doesn't start on your website anymore. It starts inside an answer.

People discover, compare, and buy without ever landing on your pages. The brands the AI names are the brands that make the shortlist. Everyone else is invisible and doesn't even know it.

That changes what content is for. You're not writing pages for humans to browse. You're building a corpus for machines to retrieve, trust, and quote. Different job, different rules. The reason is retrieval. Content under three months old gets cited far more often, and a large share of AI answers never fetch a live page at all. If your claims aren't structured, current, and verifiable, the model doesn't argue with you. It skips you.

Treat content as infrastructure with intent built into it. The publishing-calendar crowd is optimizing for a storefront nobody walks past anymore."



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Free Advice

Jonathan Schwartz, COO - AI Product & Strategy, The Groundwork AI



Stop Optimizing for Clicks. Start Optimizing for Citations.

Publish a machine-readable description layer now. Clean schema, tight entities, answers that are current and impossible to misread. Don't fake an agent-checkout endpoint you can't actually serve. An agent that hits a dead endpoint doesn't forgive you, it drops you.

Authenticating Authenticity

You'll see more mandatory AI-labeling of gen AI content in the coming months [e.g. Amazon sellers in NY]. For those running a brand, authenticity just became a labeled attribute, like calories on a menu. You're likely going to be disclosing how synthetic your marketing is, whether you're ready to or not.
Learn. Experiment. Grow.

Stop Collecting Reviews for Humans

OpenAI just wired Yelp's reviews straight into ChatGPT. Answer engines are deciding in real-time which companies get named and which stay invisible, and 3rd proof is a big part of how they decide. Your reviews, citations, and mentions are no longer social nicety. They are the evidence the model reads before it recommends anyone.





IMHO

What are the content considerations for the evolving AI-powered consumer journey?

Bharad Ramesh, Founder & CEO, Aqxle AI

"Found by machines, felt by humans, and measured at checkout. In the evolving AI-powered consumer journey, there's a lot of generic advise on improving visibility & citation. That value is real but the real win is shifting from vanity visibility to measurable demand capture.

1. Plug Demand Leakage: Being cited by an AI agent is useless if it routes the consumer to a competitor or affiliate. Brands must engineer the path from AI recommendation to merchant checkout to ensure generated demand is captured demand.
2. Product Superiority as a Data Signal: A great product isn't just a brand ideal; it's a verifiable algorithmic input. Authentic reviews, positive sentiment, and earned media directly influence AI search outcomes.
3. Escape the Attribution Graveyard: Failed DTC brands relied on opaque, last-click social metrics. The modern approach uses real-time insights to track exactly where AI-driven demand converts, proving ROI beyond top-of-funnel hype.
4. Structured Trust: If AI is the new storefront, your product's value must be structured as clean, verifiable data that AI agents can confidently cite; not masked by paid campaigns. Smart campaigns cannot resurrect a mediocre offering. The ultimate goal is building a product that creates fans - formatted as undeniable data."



Free Advice

Bharad Ramesh, Founder & CEO, Aqxle AI



Understand & Optimize Content to Commerce link

Understand the Content-to-Commerce link between influencers, publishers, and retailers, then proactively influence it.

Remember: they optimize for their own metrics, not necessarily what's ideal for your brand. Don't just accept the ecosystem—engineer the handoffs.

Start with Measurement & All Else Follows

You can't fix demand leakage if you can't see it. Before funding influencers or pitching publishers, build a measurement stack that tracks the full path from AI discovery to checkout. Stop guessing which upstream content drives revenue. Map the journey first, then engineer your strategy backward from the conversion.

Retailers Can Be Influenced

Retailers like Walmart & Target are often cited by LLMs. Here's the way to influence them - Walmart relies on legacy publishers (Hearst, Condé Nast); Target leans on creator validation. Get featured there first. When retailers cite you, AI agents will follow.



IMHO



What are the content considerations for the evolving AI-powered consumer journey?

Mordecai, Chief Innovation Officer/Chief Strategy Officer, Day After & Silicon Foundry

"The brand is now the reactive participant.

Strategies that don't make the call but enable a spectrum of responses will be poised to lead the conversation. Creative as a reactive mechanism seizes the cultural moment. Impressions are not when you actually impress the consumer to put your brand into their conversation. How you reply is everything. (Because the agents will do the rest.)"



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Mordecai, Chief Innovation Officer/Chief Strategy Officer, Day After & Silicon Foundry



Your Boss is Now Reactive

With more Chief Communications Officers becoming the next CEOs (started in luxury fashion and now motorsports), leadership is in a reactive state, a constant comms strategy to decision making. How you strategize for business when your top leader is ready for defense may effect the bottom-line.

Work in Progress

Mistakes happen. Everything in AI is in progress, making definitive decisions is a fools errand. Malleability is key.



Brands and agencies double-down on
infrastructure as a top priority in creator marketing

The Situation

- Agency holding companies are bringing creator infrastructure into their centralized operating systems. Dentsu strikes Meta deal to build plumbing for mass influencer activation.
- Unilever has transitioned from treating influencers as a temporary media channel to building a foundational creator infrastructure, managing a network of 300,000 creators. This system combines AI-driven automation for tasks like vetting and content approval with human-led relationship management.
- Creator marketing spend is rising fast and most marketers expect their influencer budgets to grow in 2026 by 50% or more. However, measurement remains difficult and is cited as the top concern by marketers as a result of the highly fragmented data across platforms.





IMHO

How should brands and agencies invest in infrastructure to support creator marketing?

Kerry Perse, Founder & CEO, Influence & Inspire Consulting

"Before brands or agencies begin investing in a new tech stack - they should fix their governance issues. For many organizations, it is unclear who owns the capability and is therefore accountable for delivering its impact. Creating a centralized creator engagement model with consistent objective setting, brand guardrails, vetting criteria and measurement across media, social and communications functions should be the first order of business.

Because influencer marketing has reached a point on its maturity curve where there are literally thousands of different activation partners, data sets and tools to support its efficient activation at scale - creating a bespoke workflow, that is supported by the right combination of partners, is the smartest way to invest in infrastructure."



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Free Advice

Kerry Perse, Founder & CEO, Influence & Inspire Consulting

KPI Setting

No need to reinvent the wheel when setting KPIs for your influencer marketing efforts. Use direct or proxy metrics to establish your program's effectiveness against the same KPIs you use to evaluate your broader marketing and communications activities.

AI for Admin

Influencer identification and vetting can be very tedious. Use an AI agent that is trained on your brand standards and internal review process to automate the admin work while the humans focus on relationships and creative outputs.

Take Control

Paid boosting of influencer content has virtually become a non-negotiable. Rather than relinquish control of your campaign to the various platform algorithms, take control of the performance by augmenting the organic distribution with paid support against key growth audiences.





IMHO

How should brands and agencies invest in infrastructure to support creator marketing?

Courtney Ray, Founder & CEO, Elevated Influence

"The most successful influencer marketing programs combine a centralized team of experienced marketers with the right technology to streamline execution. While platforms can improve efficiency, they are most effective when paired with a clear strategy and dedicated ownership.

The first step is building a department designed to operate efficiently. Determine where influencer marketing will live within the organization. Whether that's Social, Digital, PR, Brand Marketing, or a cross-functional team, establish clear ownership. Influencer marketing should also be viewed as a core component of your broader marketing ecosystem rather than a standalone tactic. Consider how creator partnerships can complement paid media, support sponsorships, strengthen PR initiatives, fuel social channels, generate creative assets, and enhance integrated campaigns. When creators are incorporated into the overall marketing strategy, brands maximize both performance and content value.

Once the strategic foundation is in place, invest in the tools that help scale your program. Creator discovery platforms, relationship management systems, campaign management software, reporting dashboards, and social listening tools can significantly reduce manual work, improve collaboration, and provide the insights needed to optimize future campaigns. Technology should enhance your team's capabilities, not replace the strategic thinking and relationship management that drive successful creator partnerships.."





Free Advice

Courtney Ray, Founder & CEO, Elevated Influence

Determine What Success Will Look Like

Success goes beyond likes and shares. By pairing creator content with paid media amplification, identify the metrics that matter most, whether that's sentiment, website traffic, conversions, or another business objective, and build campaigns designed to deliver those measurable results.

Set Realistic Expectations

Influencer marketing has unique pricing, timelines, and creative considerations. Working with experienced specialists helps set realistic budgets, align expectations, and ensure campaign deliverables and timelines are achievable from the start.

Connect Your Media Mix

Creator marketing shouldn't operate in a silo. Maximize your investment by integrating creator content across digital campaigns, sports sponsorships, paid media, and even TV commercials to extend reach and drive greater business impact.





Party Snacks

Bite-sized Advice for
Busy People

Party Snacks

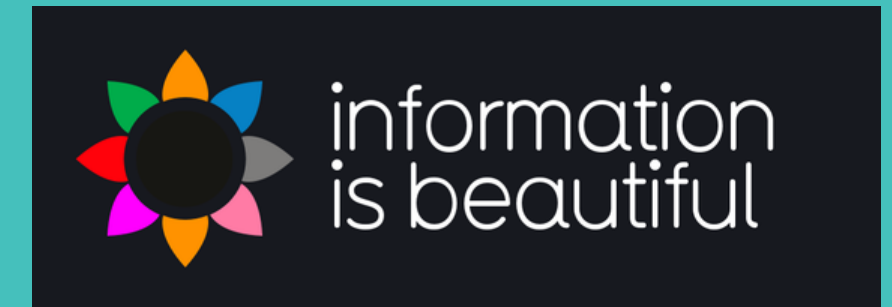
Tools & Technology We Can't Live Without



Glystn is an AI-powered social intelligence platform that analyzes billions of creator conversations across social video to surface cultural insights that can drive brand strategy, creative development, and competitive intelligence.



Granola is the best AI note-taking app. It captures conversations effortlessly, organizes your notes, surfaces action items, and fits naturally into your workflow. What sets it apart is how customizable the summaries are. You can tailor the format, refine it over time, and shape it to match how you think. The result is notes that feel remarkably human—clear, actionable, and organized—without spending time writing them yourself.



You're in for a treat. It turns complicated data into visuals that are actually fun to explore. Instead of walls of statistics, they create beautiful charts and infographics that make you stop and think.



Party Snacks

Tools & Technology We Can't Live Without



Claude + All of the cool Model Context Protocols (MCPs) being rolled out. It's really an exciting time to be working in this space with the new technology being rolled out on a daily basis.



An automated email assistant that coordinates meetings, proposes times, and handles calendar syncs for Google, Outlook, Zoom, and Teams.





You Jealous?

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Kerry Perse

Kerry@influenceandinspire.com

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