

THE FUTURE OF MARKETING IN 2026



The Marketing Cloud



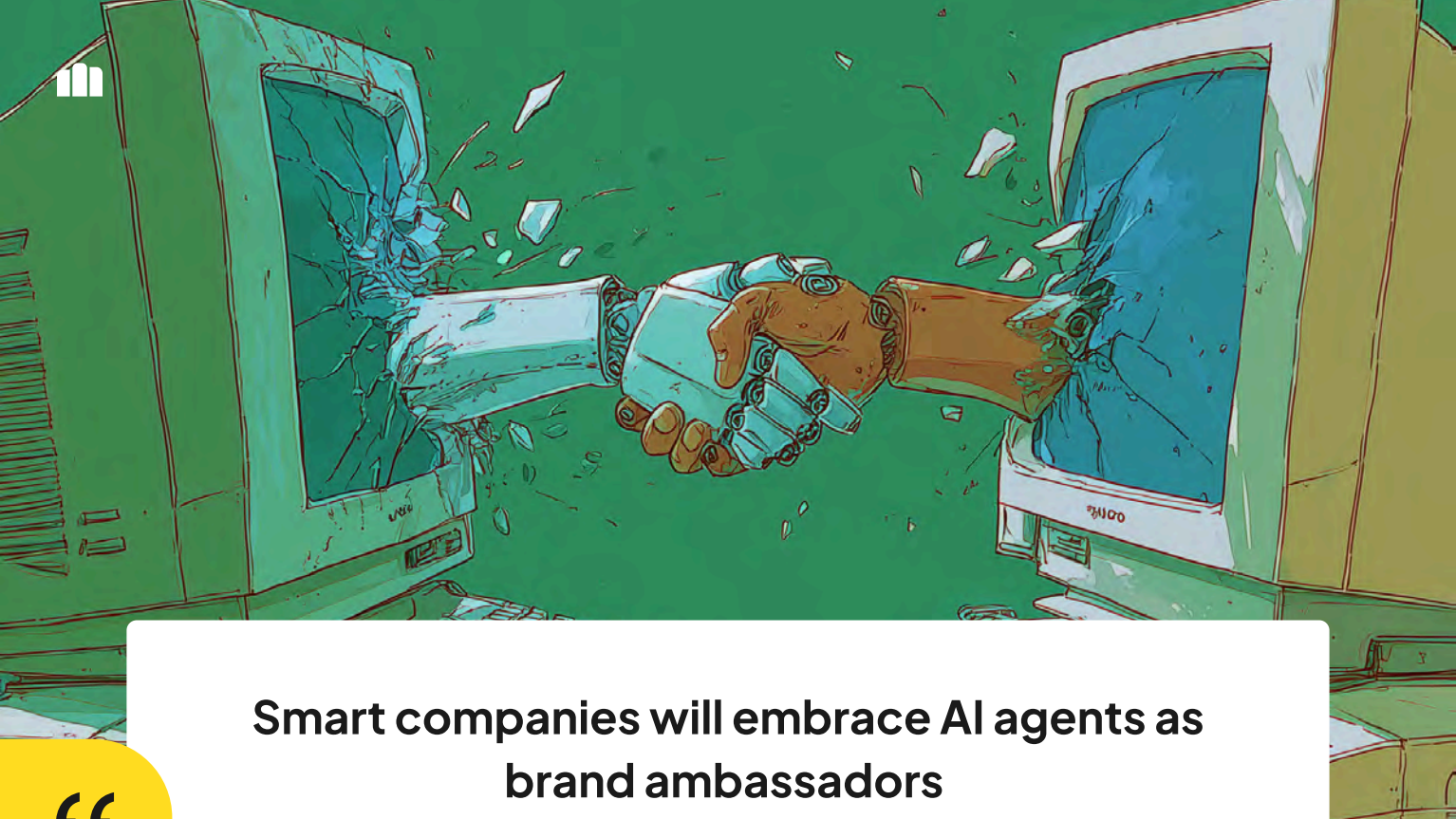
Don't get left behind

Here's what to expect in 2026.

If 2025 was the year marketers dabbled and experimented with AI, 2026 is when the industry starts mastering these new tools.

We asked 15 experts from The Marketing Cloud and the broader Stagwell network to expound on where their particular marketing field is headed in the coming year.

Buckle up, and start preparing for the monumental changes 2026 will bring to the marketing world.



Smart companies will embrace AI agents as brand ambassadors

Agentic AI is speeding up marketing processes at an unprecedented pace, changing everything from creative to media to targeting to optimization. Autonomous agents take action with minimal human intervention, make decisions, react to feedback, and plan sequences to complete tasks. Think of how many AI assistants you’ve encountered in the past year. That will only multiply in 2026.

As companies compete to incorporate AI into their business, those who come out as winners in 2026 and beyond will be those who embrace these agents as brand ambassadors. AI is already evolving SEO and will eventually overtake how consumers learn and hear about brands. No longer will companies be able to control their brand narratives and PR in the way they do today. Brands that actively shape agents

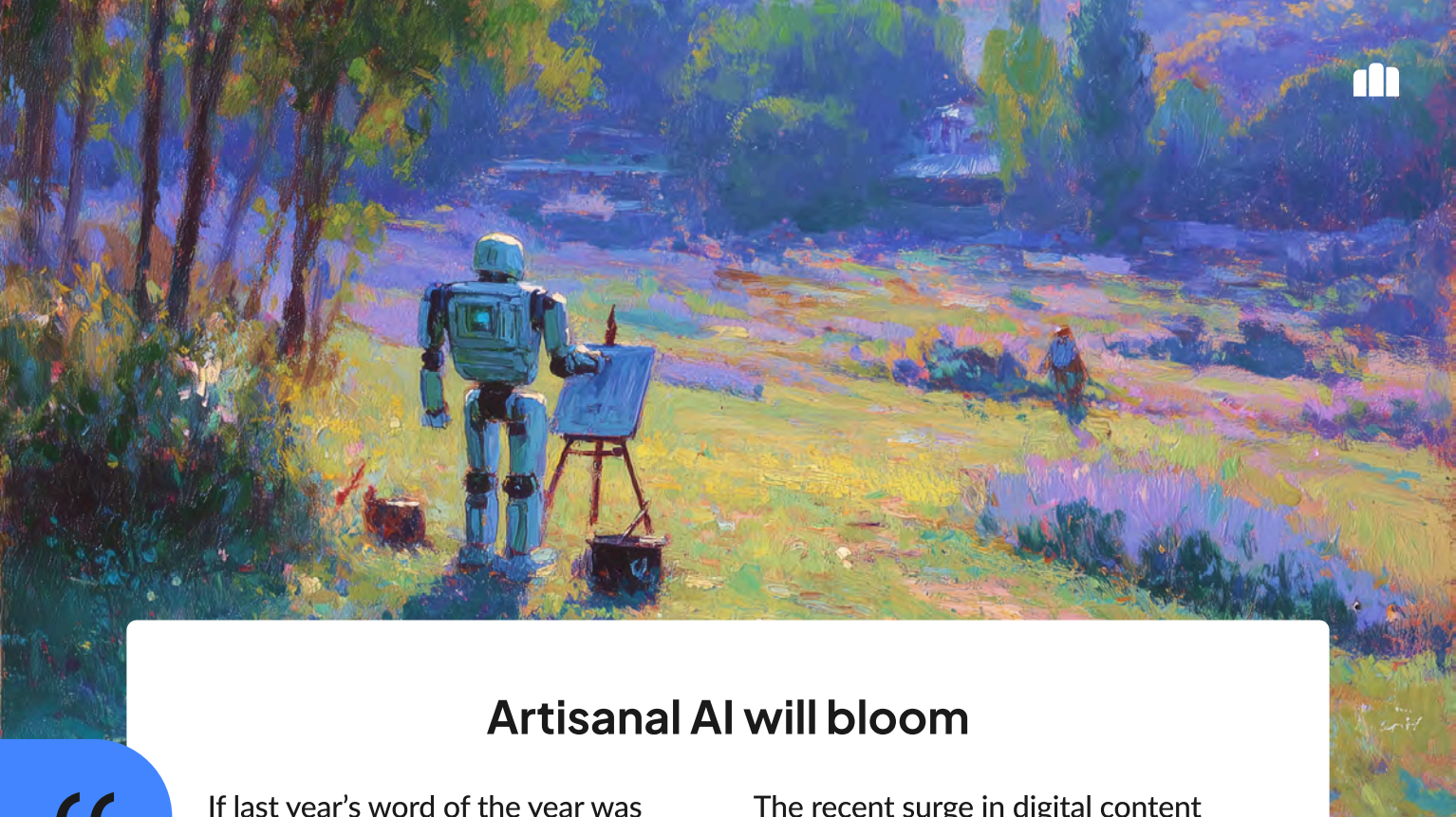
and innovate across every aspect of their business will be able to adapt to this wave of technology.

At the same time, as marketing grows more efficient, marketing budgets will begin to expand. Agentic AI will make everything from the consumer interface to content production significantly easier and less expensive.

This means clients will spend more because they get better returns on their investment. Just as brands needed digital transformation experts to build websites and apps, they now need them to build agentic AI. There will be a whole new round of agentic AI transformation work, ballooning marketing budgets in 2026.”



MARK PENN
CHAIRMAN AND CEO OF STAGWELL



Artisanal AI will bloom

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If last year's word of the year was 'brain rot,' surely 'AI slop' is a contender for 2025. But marketers can be a bit more optimistic about the jargon they'll be bringing to the boardroom in 2026.

The reality is that today's content deluge isn't just a trend, it's a monumental shift in how we produce content, and it's most likely here to stay. As more and more assets are produced over the course of the next year, the need to govern these assets will also grow. And in parallel to governance, compliance, and coherence solutions, brands will also be looking for ways to craft campaigns that actually work.

This is where the good news kicks in for the advertising world.

The recent surge in digital content has generated more data points and more consumer interactions, leading to more actionable insights that prevent brands from getting lost in all the noise.

While over-industrialized content production processes have allowed advertisers to quickly fill media placements, customers aren't satisfied. Right now, they're getting the cheap drive-thru experience, when what they really want is fine-dining. 2026 will be the year of a content renaissance, where brands begin to prioritize artisanal AI over industrialized slop.”



LINDSAY HONG
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO,
SMARTASSETS



Influencer marketing will be streamlined beyond recognition

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Real value will continue to appear when AI connects briefs to full campaigns. That includes intent-based creator matching, automated risk and fraud checks, assisted outreach, and ROI measurement.

Looking even beyond 2026, I can foresee that most executional work in the influencer marketing space (such as searching, vetting, contracting, and reporting) will be automated. Teams will shift effort into community management and long-term relationships, integrating influencers as part of the brand community.

By 2030, say, agentic planning with predictive ranges and built-in safety

will be standard in any language and any market. The mistake will be treating engagement rate as a universal KPI.

As AI blurs human and machine interactions, people will prefer video conversations, face-to-face meetings, and offline experiences that connect back to digital campaigns. Brands that merge online efficiency with offline community will lead and be successful.”



ERAN NIZRI
FOUNDER AND CEO, IMAI



We'll move closer to an 'agentic hive'

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We are moving from general buzz around agentic AI to actual agentic enablement. The business reasoning is clear: Enterprises need a reliable infrastructure with security, privacy, and enablement that allows internal users to build agents to solve specific use cases.

In 2026, what we want an agent to do and what it is capable of doing will continue evolving daily. There won't be one kind of agent, but rather an assortment. Slow and fast, simple and complex, this variety of agents will all 'live' and thrive in a sort of agentic hive.

Think of multiple marketing agents, for instance: creative agents, media

agents, optimization agents, and reporting agents all working in cohesion within an agentic framework.

That agentic framework itself is also in flux. Sure, everyone would like to see a fully autonomous agent. But much like a fully self-driving car, this tech will initially have drawbacks, limitations, and regulations to abide by at first. We should be cautiously optimistic as we enter this exciting new world of AI and marketing.”



MANSOOR BASHA
CTO, THE MARKETING CLOUD



GEO will compete with SEO as a marketing holy grail

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In 2026, Generative AI will continue to rise from backstage tool to powerful informational influencer. Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) will be as essential to communications as SEO once was to marketing.

Communicators will no longer measure success only through media coverage or social engagement, but by how accurately and consistently their brand is represented in AI-generated answers across ChatGPT, Perplexity, and other GenAI systems.

This marks a structural shift in the information ecosystem. GenAI is rapidly shaping how journalists research, how stakeholders form opinions, and how executives validate facts. PR and comms teams will adapt by treating AI as a stakeholder, ensuring clean data signals, aligning message architectures with how LLMs build context, and continuously monitoring

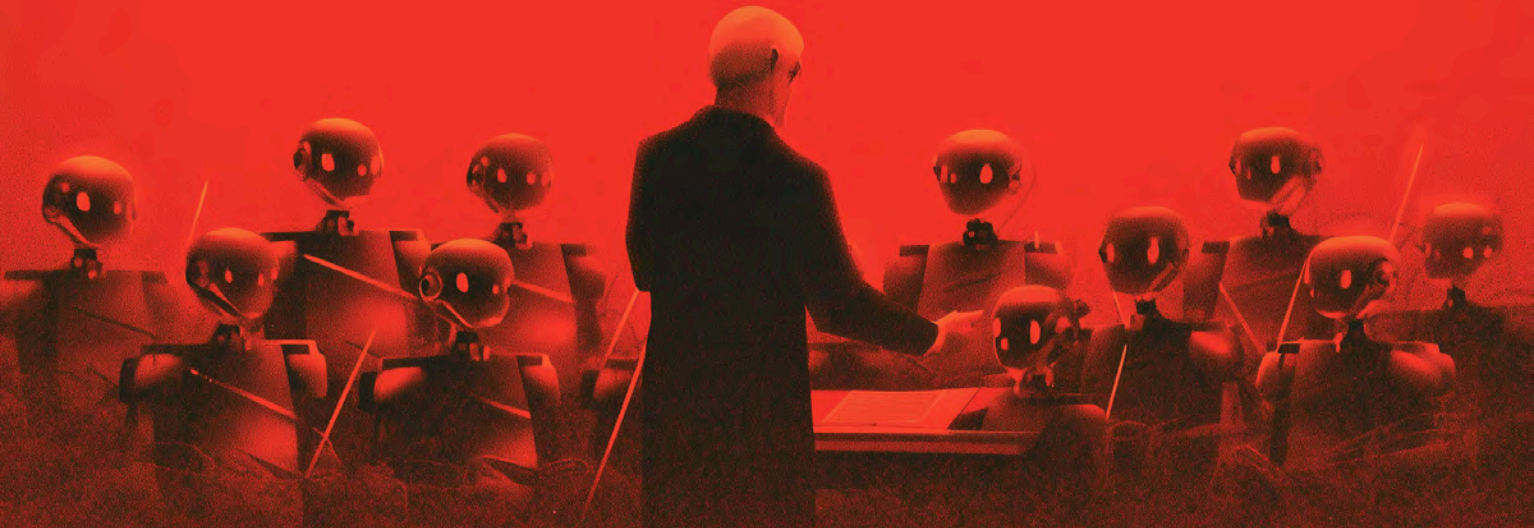
AI outputs for accuracy and bias. At the same time, communication intelligence will further evolve from reactive to predictive. LLM-driven analytics will anticipate sentiment shifts, emotional undercurrents, and narrative risks before they surface publicly.

Integrated technology ecosystems and agentic workflows will replace fragmented tools, enabling humans to focus on judgment, creativity, and strategy. AI agents will become proper AI colleagues who analyze data, summarize insights, and suggest actions.

The organizations that master this transition won't just show up in AI responses, they'll actively shape the narratives that LLMs learn to generate.”



MARTIN SCHULZE
HEAD OF PRODUCT, UNICEPTA



Humans will become the conductors leading bespoke AI

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In 2026, the narrative of AI in marketing will pivot from a single, powerful monolithic genius (LLM) to the intelligent orchestration of ‘AI specialist teams.’ Leading marketing platforms won’t be powered by a single LLM, but rather by a dynamic, heterogenous system of agents.

What might this look like in practice? A powerful LLM will act as the strategist, breaking down a task into smaller problems, where moment-to-moment execution will be handled by fleets of hyper-efficient Small Language Models (SLMs).

These discrete steps or problems—such as personalizing thousands of ad creatives, A/B testing subject lines or creatives in real time, or generating on-brand video clips—will be handled by these specialized models. This will transform the human marketer from a creator to a conductor of an ‘AI orchestra,’ fine-tuning individual SLMs for specific tasks to deliver campaigns that are not only adaptive and personalized but economically scalable.”



ERIC WALZTHÖNY KREUTZBERG
CO-FOUNDER AND CTO,
SMARTASSETS



Insight teams will get to really use their brains

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2025 has been the year of transformation. Automation, real-time data flows, and AI copilots changed how Consumer Insights teams work, but adoption isn't integration. The real leap comes in 2026, when technology moves from tool to teammate, built directly into how insights take shape.

For years, Insights teams have been the stewards of data: collecting, cleansing, and defending it. The next era gives them back their purpose.

Technology will manage the mechanics so marketers can spend less time gathering answers and more time asking better questions.

When that happens, companies that once merely looked at their data will finally listen to it, and act with the clarity that turns measurement into movement.”



JUSTIN PINCUS
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
PRODUCT, QUESTBRAND



Video ads will know exactly what you want

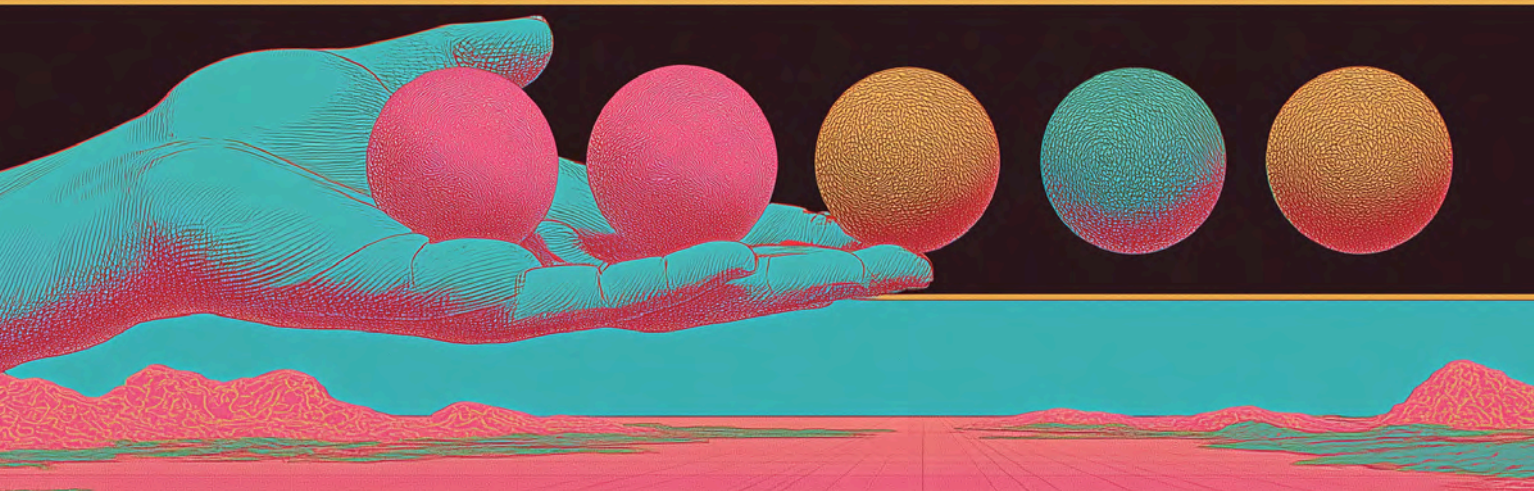
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By 2026, the majority of performance-oriented video ads will be generated on demand by highly capable multimodal AI models. Instead of shooting footage, marketers will feed AI a short creative brief (brand tone, product features, audience signals, and desired emotion), and the system will instantly produce dozens of high-quality video variations, complete with actors, environments, motion, dialogue, and brand elements. These videos won't look like "AI," they'll be on par with mid-tier production studios, but created in seconds rather than weeks.

The real shift happens when these systems couple with real-time analytics. As performance data comes in, the AI will automatically regenerate scenes, swap virtual actors, adjust pacing, change product placement, rewrite lines, or target new audience segments. Video ceases to be a finished asset and becomes a continuously evolving organism.”



LOUIS CRISO
DIRECTOR OF AI ENGINEERING,
THE MARKETING CLOUD



AI agents will thrive as specialists, not generalists

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General-purpose Language Learning Models (LLMs) have significantly empowered researchers: enhancing efficiency, accelerating insight delivery, and unearthing insights that may have otherwise gone undiscovered.

However, similar to human teams, a shift from generalists to specialists is necessary. Specialists enable deep focus, technical expertise, and the competency to tackle more intricate problems.

In 2026, I anticipate AI agents starting to emerge with specializations in methodologies,

quality assurance, analytics, and reporting. This evolution will further boost our ‘Insight Advocates,’ experienced researchers who link AI-derived insights with organizations to address business-related questions.

In practice, that means the AI agents will operate independently across the research process while maintaining a human ‘in-the-loop’ to ensure ethical standards, governance, and human oversight are upheld.”



GARY TOPIOL
MANAGING DIRECTOR, QUESTDIY



Brand tracking will become more intelligent

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Agentic AI will transform brand tracking from a tool for static reporting into a proactive decision-making partner. Rather than simply summarizing data, agents will continuously scan for shifts, surface what matters most to a brand, and deliver decision-ready insights in real time. The result: Clients move from data to action faster and with greater confidence.

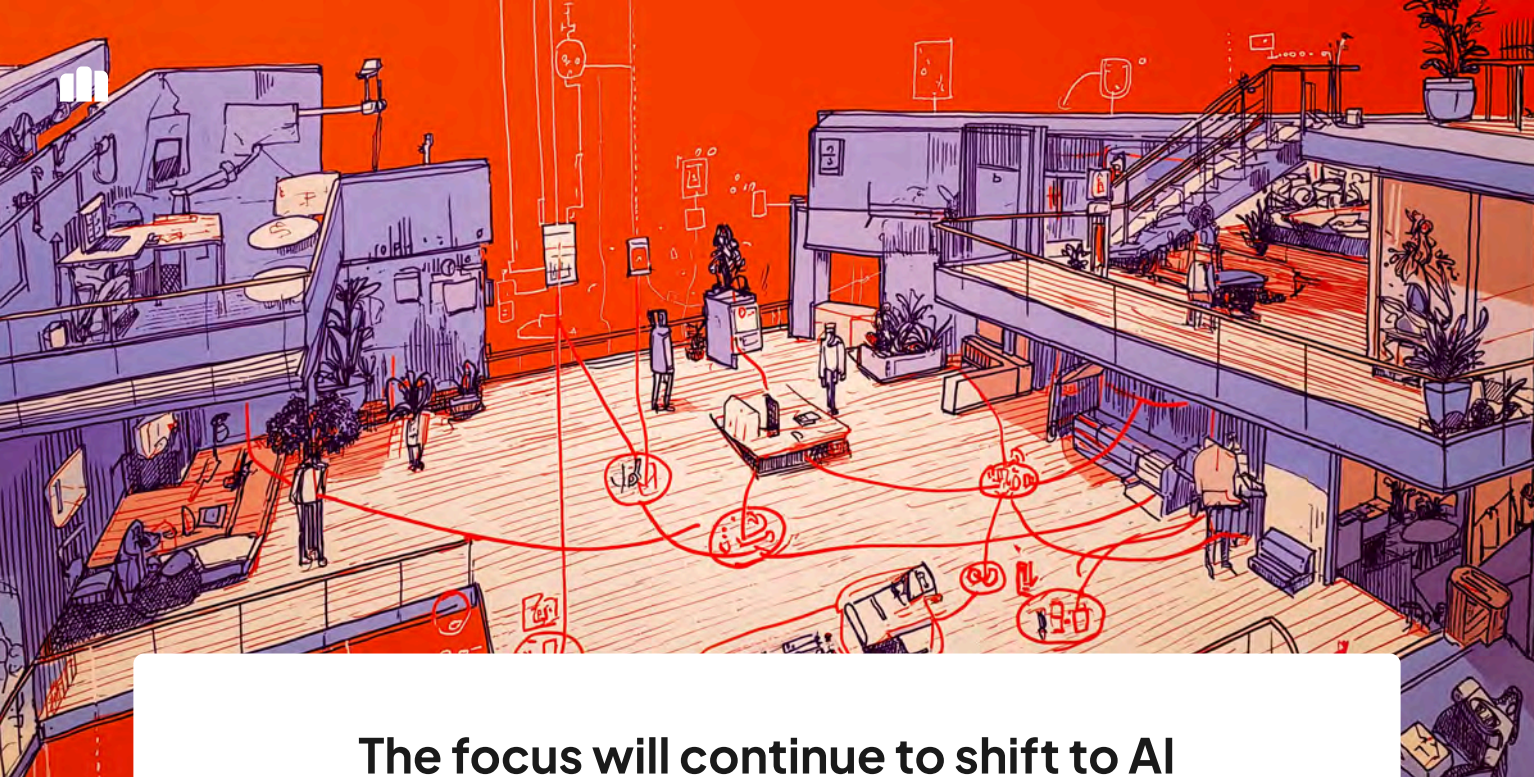
In 2026, this won't replace proven methods; it will amplify them. Agents will streamline how data is

connected, analyzed, and highlighted, giving Insights and Brand teams sharper, cleaner outputs on demand.

With QuestBrand, we are actively testing and building these capabilities to compound the value of traditional brand equity measures with agentic intelligence. The pace of the market demands nothing less.”



ZEKE HUGHES
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
QUESTBRAND



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The focus will continue to shift to AI ecosystems, not point solutions

The future of marketing lies in fully integrated, AI-powered ecosystems that unify analysis, audience creation, activation, measurement, and optimization.

By embedding generative AI, 24/7 intelligent agents, and predictive analytics across the marketing lifecycle, we can unlock significant improvements in performance metrics, drive significant impact,

and outpace less innovative competitors.

This isn't just about automation. It's about rearchitecting marketing as a dynamic, data-driven engine for strategic advantage.”



JOHN KAHAN
CHIEF AI OFFICER, STAGWELL



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The way products are sold online will evolve radically

Google announced its newly reimagined Chrome with AI in September, ushering browsers into the agentic era. By 2026, marketers should expect a new reality where browsers aren't just navigation tools, they're copilots attempting to mediate every brand interaction.

A very big problem for brands is that these AI browsers can function like sales reps from other companies stationed in your store. When a customer lands on your product page, agentic AI could instantly contextualize and present your competitors, side-by-side. The experience you painstakingly designed becomes a generic comparison feed.

This accelerates a dangerous trend: the erosion of brand ownership. As agentic systems mature, customer acquisition costs will rise, loyalty will decline, and brands without strong first-party data will find themselves

struggling for differentiation.

The good news: The technology isn't there, yet. Today's AI browsers excel at 'better thinking,' not 'better doing.' They summarize, reorganize and compare, but they don't execute complex, multi-step tasks.

That lag gives brands time to innovate where Google cannot: industry-specific, convergent user experiences that can anticipate customer needs before a copilot intervenes.

In 2026, marketers who seize this window will have the chance to create irreplaceable experiences. Those who don't will wake up to find Google, Perplexity and others have become the real point of contact with their customers.”



DAN GARDNER
FOUNDER AND CEO OF CODE AND
THEORY (PART OF THE STAGWELL
CHALLENGER NETWORK)



Measurement will get smarter, and broader

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As the out-of-home (OOH) and digital out-of-home (DOOH) sectors continue to converge, 2026 is poised to be a pivotal year marked by deeper integration, smarter measurement, and growing reliance on artificial intelligence.

The industry's move toward omni-channel strategies is redefining expectations for accountability and performance, with unified metrics becoming a top priority. This need for cross-platform measurement, backed by transparent and trusted data, will shape how brands evaluate impact and allocate spend.

In 2025, OOH grew by 3% overall while DOOH surged more than 9%, accounting for 34% of total spend. With robust measurement and confidence in data integrity, DOOH

could reach 40–50% of total OOH investment by 2026, cementing its role as a vital player in the media mix. Generative AI is also emerging as a transformative force, enabling more dynamic content delivery, predictive planning, and contextually relevant campaigns that follow consumers throughout their day.

As data and screens continue to converge, the focus will be on fostering trusted, collaborative ecosystems between agencies, networks, and technology providers, ensuring that innovation in DOOH is matched by credibility, transparency, and measurable outcomes."



GEORGE BRADY
CEO, THE PEOPLE PLATFORM



IRL brand interactions will strike a chord

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Amid the AI arms race, one of 2026’s most surprising marketing shifts is delightfully analog: the return of physical brand moments.

In a study The Harris Poll conducted on behalf of our client Quad, we found that even digital natives are craving tangible brand interactions. Nearly 8 in 10 (79%) of Millennials look forward to receiving brand catalogs and nearly two-thirds (64%) of Gen Z keep catalogs as décor.

People are longing to connect with one another and brands IRL and we’re seeing physical touch points becoming cultural events in themselves. Marketers are paying attention and preparing accordingly. At the Association of National

Advertisers (ANA) Masters of Marketing conference, a large majority of attendees we surveyed (70%) said they plan to increase their investment in physical touchpoints in the coming year, prioritizing community/brand hosted events (70%), experiential retail (66%), and limited time pop-up stores (56%).

The brands who thrive in 2026 will seamlessly blend digital and IRL experiences into a single journey, using digital to invite and extend the story, launching tactile experiences that create surprise and escape.”



ERICA PARKER
MANAGING DIRECTOR RESEARCH
PRODUCTS, HARRISQUEST



We'll rethink the customer journey through the lens of AI

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The promise of agentic AI ushers in new hope for modern organizations that are truly invested in optimizing the entire customer journey. But how do we unlock the force multiplier of agentic AI?

It'll happen once we can connect disparate consumer data sources—from purchase history and loyalty program behaviors to motivations, affinities, engagement, customer service history, and more—with AI agents that have the creative and content, rules-based logic and ability to activate channels and make decisions that increase a consumer's lifetime value in real-time.

This future enables brands to truly learn from and adapt to consumer behavior, while at the same time breaking down silos that can exist across various channel teams that want to control bits and pieces of the consumer journey.

Now the consumer—and their behaviors across every touchpoint—can drive the experience instead, and it's up to brands to continually optimize.”



ELSPETH ROLLERT
CEO, THE MARKETING CLOUD

The Marketing Cloud

The Marketing Cloud is a suite of AI-driven products across market research, comms, creative, and media. We're empowering modern marketers with the tech to drive real impact.

Market Research



QuestBrand
Monitor brand health over time.



QuestDIY
Create, target, and deploy surveys.



BERA.ai
Quantify brand investment impacts.



QuestIC
Launch insight communities with engaged customers.

Creative & Media

Agentic



SmartAssets
Score and optimize creative assets using AI.



TPP Insights
Unlock insights from audience location data.




SET
Manage complex marketing campaigns with AI.




Agent Cloud
Harness the latest LLMs and build custom AI assistants.

Communications



Influence
Discover influencers and manage campaigns.



Media Intelligence
Activate global media and market intelligence.



Discover a solution that's right for you.