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ENGAGING MARKETING MINDS

MAY / JUNE 2025

TRANSFORMATIONAL

REDEFINING MARKETING IN THE AGE OF AI



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CLIENTS FIRST

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arketing is probably not for the faint of heart right now. There is a palpable fear of AI, an overwhelming amount of data, and a growing challenge in connecting with target audiences live and in person. The fact is, standing out digitally is tough, and prospects can easily avoid your messaging. So, it's not a stretch to say that leading a marketing team today requires more than just a good attitude and a passion for creativity.

To truly lead a marketing team, you must be part strategist, part innovator, and probably, part counselor. You must balance the science of marketing—which includes analytics, automation, and metrics—with the lost art of human connection. At a time when people can easily cocoon themselves in digital noise, your team must figure out how to truly understand them—not just target them. And that's no easy task because consumers don't want to be targeted; they want to be understood.

Marketing departments today are not just places for creative ideas; they have to execute. For marketing to achieve results, leaders must foster a culture where creative minds thrive while ensuring real market connection. Leading a creative team requires trust. It means giving them room to experiment, to fail, and to learn. But it also means holding them accountable for real engagement through active listening. While this sounds obvious, it's more difficult than ever before.

A true leader leads by example. If they are solely focused on metrics, automation, or the latest tools, they might be in the wrong role. You see, managing is very different from leading. Refining processes, training, and providing feedback are all important managerial responsibilities. However, great marketing leaders have an unwavering commitment to those their company aims to serve. They never lose sight of the clients' needs, and they expect their teams to do the same.

This is the time to empower marketing teams, encourage curiosity, and embrace innovation—not just for the sake of being different, but to make a real impact on the community. We are privileged to work with so many great teams that understand that marketing is no longer about pushing messages; it's about creating meaningful connections in an increasingly antiseptic world.

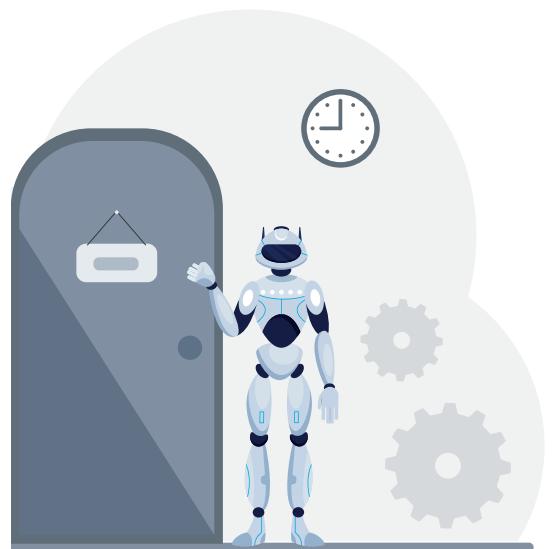
Enjoy our latest issue. Our cover story, "Transformational: Redefining Marketing in the Age of AI," explores the profound impact of artificial intelligence on modern marketing and provides insights on how brand owners can stay ahead. In our second feature, "In Session: Lessons in Building a Culture of Innovation," we dive into actionable strategies for fostering a culture of innovation within your marketing organization.

Now more than ever, we need marketing leaders who believe that our greatest success comes from inspiring others to always put the client first.

Warmest regards,



Gina M. Danner
CEO, NextPage



09

*Open the door
and let it in...*

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IN SESSION

LESSONS IN BUILDING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

START REASONABLY SMALL. That's one of the best approaches Beth LaGuardia Cooper recommends when setting out to build a culture of innovation in your company. The thing people on your team want more than anything else is a forum where they provide ideas, share feedback, and are a part of the conversation.

LaGuardia Cooper, CMO of Advantage Media, reserves a day each quarter designed for members of her team to stop what they're doing and either innovate together, or step outside the box to observe or participate in innovation in action. Maybe hold an internal innovation competition, where the winner receives funding for a proof-of-concept test. Each participant could provide a problem to solve, a solution to test, and an ROI analysis that includes resourcing and the process required to get to the proof-of-concept. The key is to embrace ideation, let team members independently run experiments within defined guardrails and publicly celebrate them. It doesn't matter whether or not the test is successful, as long as valuable learnings result.

Fostering a culture of innovation—an environment where creativity thrives and bold ideas take shape—creates a foundation for long-term success and fulfillment. By workshopping the value of continuous learning, you're helping your team stay ahead of the curve.

When LaGuardia Cooper maps out the ideal culture of

innovation, the platform includes a place where everyone's ideas are solicited and weighed equally. For example, innovative cultures hold ideation meetings where everyone can offer their ideas. There are no "sacred cows" or dismissive statements such as, "This is the way we've always done it."

Teams, spaces, and celebrations are intentionally designed to remind people that innovation is highly regarded. At Advantage Media, and in other workplaces she has been, LaGuardia Cooper has used public praise or awards for team members who showcase successful innovation, innovation labs physically located in the office or task forces that are assembled to test out viable ideas that come from anyone in the organization.

"I believe in starting vision and strategic planning cadences with an open ideation session, ideally incorporating the full team for live brainstorming," Cooper says. "The best ideas often come from those on the front lines. A test-and-learn culture has to permeate every area of the business. Your team should have a constant eye on technology best practices, including what forward-leaning organizations you follow are doing to stay ahead. Follow visionaries in your space and beyond who talk about shifting paradigms, not just best practices."



One of the main principles every leadership team should stress is that cultures not willing to embrace and test innovative foundations eventually will be the ones left behind. More than any other factor, creativity flourishes when people feel empowered to share their ideas without fear of criticism.

That's why when it comes to technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), Aaron Henry stresses to his team that cross-functional collaboration in areas like this enhance both ideation and workflow.

"I want my team to step outside marketing echo chambers and draw inspiration from global tech, entertainment, and cultural trends," says Henry, founder and Managing Director at Foundeast. "We are always bringing fresh perspectives to our work. Innovation stagnates without continuous learning. I push my team to stay ahead by investing in training, encouraging attendance at events across different industries and supporting a culture of knowledge-sharing."

Foundeast, an international marketing firm that supports Fortune 100 brands in the U.S. and Southeast Asia, has earned a reputation for dissecting real-world campaigns—what worked, what didn't—and applying those lessons to its own strategies. "We are always ensuring that we are learning from these real-world experiences and avoiding pitfalls," Henry says. "Remember, structure provides clarity, but too much of it can kill creativity. I leave room for experimentation by allowing our team to test bold ideas within a flexible framework. If an idea helps meet our goals, we integrate it into our playbook—if it doesn't, we pivot quickly."

For the past 15-plus years, Marie Hoffman served as an expert in translating complex technology concepts into actionable marketing strategies. Today, as the Head of Marketing at Reality Defender, she is helping the pioneering deepfake detection company innovate marketing efforts. One of the most successful strategies involves cross-functional ideation sessions, where bringing in varying perspectives from product, sales, and even customers has proved vital.

I WANT MY TEAM TO STEP OUTSIDE MARKETING ECHO CHAMBERS AND DRAW INSPIRATION FROM GLOBAL TECH, ENTERTAINMENT, AND CULTURAL TRENDS. WE ARE ALWAYS BRINGING FRESH PERSPECTIVES TO OUR WORK."

**— AARON HENRY,
FOUNDER/MANAGING DIRECTOR, FOUNDEAST**

"We use structured brainstorming techniques like, 'How might we,' exercises and reverse thinking," Hoffman says. "I've found that creativity flourishes when we step outside our marketing bubble and make time for inspiration through regular exposure to adjacent industries and technologies. Continuous learning is the foundation of innovation. We implement a peer-to-peer knowledge sharing program where team members present new trends, tools, or case studies monthly. I allocate a budget specifically for learning experiences beyond traditional training—this includes conference attendance, relevant subscriptions, and time for experimentation with new platforms."

One of the backbones of her process is enabling flexibility, not restricting it. "You can't manage what you don't measure. We establish clear frameworks for core marketing functions—campaign development, content creation, measurement and beyond—but build in deliberate space for iteration and creative exploration. Our processes include explicit 'innovation checkpoints' where we pause to question if we're approaching problems in the most creative way possible."

In the end, the process works when you start by modeling the behavior you want to see. Demonstrate vulnerability. Celebrate learning from failures. Champion bold thinking. "You have to create psychological safety so your team feels comfortable sharing unconventional ideas," Hoffman says. "Most importantly, connect innovation directly to business outcomes so it's viewed as strategic rather than superficial. Innovation thrives when it's recognized as essential to growth, not just a nice-to-have."

The journey toward a culture of innovation isn't about implementing grand initiatives, but by nurturing an environment where curiosity thrives, failure is embraced as learning, and diverse perspectives are actively sought out. By focusing on these fundamental elements, brands can transform how they approach challenges and unlock creative potential that delivers meaningful results. ■

CREATIVITY + PROCESS = INNOVATION

FROM IDEA TO IMPACT:

CREATING A CULTURE WHERE INNOVATION THRIVES

A culture of innovation encourages creative thinking, risk-taking, and continuous improvement across all levels of an organization. Let's take a look at five lessons for cultivating an innovative culture.

84%
of executives

believe innovation is important to growth strategy, **but only 6%** are satisfied with innovation performance.

– McKinsey & Co.



IN
FOCUS

Lesson 1

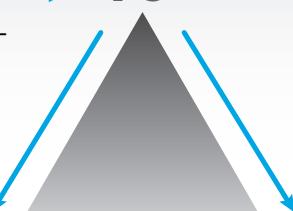
Innovation Starts at the Top

Leaders must champion innovation—not just support it passively.

70% of successful innovators say their CEO is directly involved in innovation strategy.

– BCG Innovation Survey

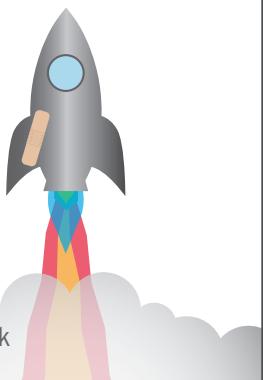
70%



Lesson 2

Embrace Risk and Failure

Fear of failure is the #1 barrier to innovation.



Only 20% of employees feel their company tolerates failure.

– PwC Innovation Benchmark



Lesson 3

Foster Cross-Functional Collaboration

Innovation thrives in diverse teams with varied perspectives.

Companies with **diverse teams** are **1.7x more likely** to be innovation leaders.

– Harvard Business Review

Lesson 4

Invest in Time and Tools

Innovation doesn't happen in spare time—it needs space and resources.



Top innovators spend **1.5x more** on innovation-enabling tech than average companies.

– BCG Innovation Survey



Lesson 5

Recognize and Reward Innovative Thinking

Recognition motivates repeat behavior.

Only 43% of employees say they are recognized for their innovative ideas.

– Gallup Workplace Report

Closing Thought

The ROI of Innovation Culture

Companies with a strong innovation culture are **2.4x more likely** to outperform on revenue growth.

TRANS FORM ATIONAL

REDEFINING MARKETING IN THE AGE OF AI

THERE'S JUST ONE STUDY, BUT the insights on the relationship between artificial intelligence (AI) and marketing couldn't speak any louder—depending on which side you stand. According to Ascend2's "The Evolution of AI in Marketing" survey, 85% of marketing professionals find AI to be at least somewhat successful in achieving their marketing objectives, with 25% considering it best-in-class. Still, 14% struggle to see any success, admitting that while AI adoption is high, optimizing its effectiveness remains

challenging for some brands.

Starting as an entrepreneur, Ben Ashworth began in design, coding, and website development before transitioning into digital marketing and paid advertising. Today, as the VP of Zeni, a company that utilizes AI to automate the reimbursement process, he is one of those marketers who has fully embraced the opportunities AI offers. He believes that the technology is transforming marketing by automating time-consuming tasks and analyzing massive datasets in real-time,



“BRAND OWNERS WHO
LEVERAGE AI CAN MAKE
DECISIONS BASED ON
REAL-TIME, DATA-BACKED
INSIGHTS RATHER
THAN GUESSWORK.”

— BEN ASHWORTH,
VP OF MARKETING, ZENI.AI

Critique and Enhance Your Design with AI

allowing more space to focus on creativity and strategy instead of being weighed down by the process of doing things manually.

"Doing this enables marketers to execute more personalized and impactful campaigns at a higher rate and a faster pace," Ashworth says. "Brand owners who leverage AI can make decisions based on real-time, data-backed insights rather than guesswork. AI can be used as a support tool, to help you identify trends, optimize campaigns, and predict customer behavior. This level of precision that AI operates on improves marketing performance and maximizes return on investment because it can ensure resources are being directed toward what truly works."

By leveraging AI-driven insights—and/or at least opening their minds to the possibilities—brands can make more informed, data-backed decisions, boost team productivity through automated processes, and unlock innovative approaches to customer engagement. "AI is a powerful tool, but it should enhance human creativity, not replace it," Ashworth says. "Brand owners should use AI to handle data-heavy tasks while keeping storytelling, emotional intelligence, and brand authenticity at the forefront. The key is to leverage AI for efficiency while ensuring that the customer experience remains personal, engaging, and aligned with the brand's core values."

Zeni continues to invest in AI tools that can reinforce Ashworth and his team's capabilities while providing ongoing training to ensure they stay ahead of the curve. By integrating AI strategically and keeping a human-centered approach, Zeni can future-proof its marketing efforts and continue driving meaningful engagement. Zeni is committed to fostering a culture of learning and adaptability so that AI is seen as an enabler rather than a disruptor.

Right now, AI is helping provide deep customer insights that help Ashworth and his team craft highly personalized experiences by enabling real-time customization, predictive recommendations, and dynamic content that adapts to individual preferences. "Rather than replacing creativity, AI enhances it by freeing marketers from repetitive tasks and giving them the data they need to develop compelling, emotionally resonant campaigns."

When he peeks into the future, Ashworth is even more interested in what he sees, as platforms like generative AI, real-time personalization, and AI-driven predictive analytics are set to redefine the marketing landscape. "As AI models become more advanced, it will allow more brands to create hyper-personalized customer experiences at scale. Additionally, AI's ability to analyze and act on data instantly will reshape how companies engage with their audiences in real time." ■

In this exercise, you'll partner with AI to take a fresh look at a marketing design—pinpointing what's effective, what could be better, and where small changes can make a big impact. Whether you're fine-tuning a display ad or rethinking a landing page, AI can help you move faster and make more confident creative decisions.

1

Upload your art to ChatGPT and prompt it to critique your design.

This is the prompt we used for this example: "Please, act as an Art Director with expertise in graphic design and marketing strategy. Offer a design critique of the attached PNG image of the non-mailing side of a direct mail postcard. (Thanks!)"



2

Review the AI-provided critique and apply effective changes to enhance the design.

For this example, ChatGPT's overall impression included:

"This postcard is visually engaging, emotionally resonant, and action-oriented. With a few small tweaks (especially around spatial layout, CTA clarity, and visual balance—it could be even more powerful in driving donations."



3

Thoughtfully review the AI-provided critique and apply effective changes to enhance the design.

Before:



After:



OPEN THE DOOR AND LET IT IN...

Dev Nag has had a strong brush with being on the forefront of technological advancements. As part of the founding team at GLMX, he helped develop one of the largest electronic securities trading platforms in the money markets, with more than \$3 trillion in daily balances. As founder and CTO at Wavefront and a senior engineer at Google, he helped develop the backend for all financial processing of Google ad revenue.

So, when the founder of and CEO of his latest venture, QueryPal, says marketers should open the door to the possibilities of AI, people take note. "Marketing teams have undergone an underappreciated, yet dramatic reconfiguration with AI adoption, evolving beyond just automating routine tasks. As apparent from social media, marketers who embrace AI often find themselves freed to pursue higher-level strategic thinking and customer relationship development."

Nag says the most successful teams have moved away from viewing AI as a direct competitor or threat and, instead foster collaborative workflows where humans set the creative vision and strategic direction while AI handles execution at scale. "This creates a



symbiotic relationship that delivers better results than either could achieve independently."

While opportunities abound, Nag is quick to point out that the integration of AI into marketing workflows presents both technical and cultural challenges. He recommends brand owners consider starting with limited, highly focused AI implementations rather than broad transformation initiatives. This strategy creates opportunities for quick wins while building organizational comfort with the technology.

Examples include using AI to optimize existing email subject lines, implementing small-scale A/B testing with AI-generated ad variations, and applying sentiment analysis to customer service interactions before attempting complex personalization. "Many marketers find that these targeted implementations not only deliver immediate ROI, but also organically spread throughout the organization as team members witness tangible results," Nag says. "By creating grassroots momentum for AI, you can overcome resistance far more effectively than top-down mandates without deep buy-in."

Looking ahead, Nag says the biggest revolutionary company to hit the AI marketing landscape will be agentic AI. The technology will evolve beyond being a tool that marketers use to become an active collaborator that proposes strategies, identifies opportunities, and even questions assumptions. "Agentic AI will create a true human-AI partnership where each contributes their unique strengths to achieve marketing outcomes neither could accomplish alone. Forward-thinking agencies are already experimenting with early versions of this approach, implementing autonomous AI agents that continuously monitor campaign performance, recommend optimizations without being prompted, and even debate strategic choices with human team members."

As AI continues to reshape the marketing landscape, the most successful brands will not view technology as a replacement for human creativity, but as a powerful collaborative tool that amplifies storytelling, emotional intelligence, and strategic thinking. The future lies not in choosing between AI and human insight, but in creating the best of both worlds. ■

BY CREATING GRASSROOTS MOMENTUM FOR AI, YOU CAN OVERCOME RESISTANCE FAR MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN TOP-DOWN MANDATES WITHOUT DEEP BUY-IN."

— DEV NAG,
FOUNDER/CEO, QUERYPAL

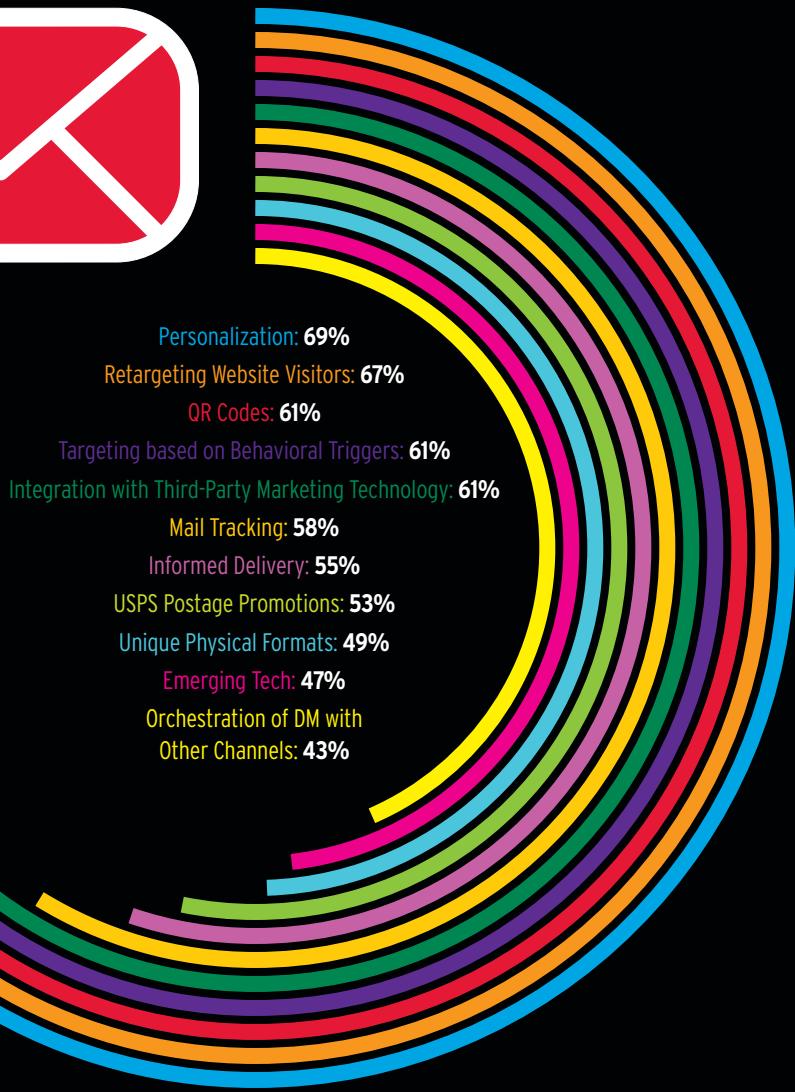
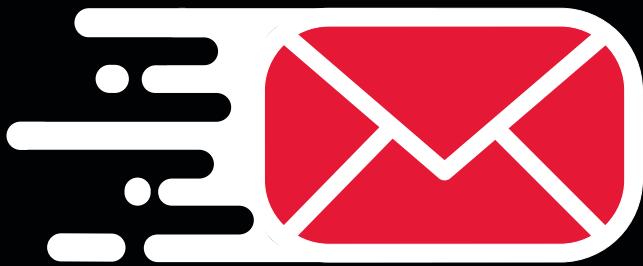
TACTICS

READY. PRINT. SEND.

WHY DIRECT MAIL CONTINUES TO BE A MARKETER'S BEST FRIEND

Digital here. Digital there. Digital everywhere. But if you ask today's marketers, direct mail continues to be the key to an omnichannel program. According to the Winterberry Group's paper "Delivering Performance: Direct, Digital and the Dynamics Shaping the Future of Omnichannel Marketing,"

81% of brands intend to grow their spending on direct mail in 2025, with 60% already deploying tools and methodologies like retargeting based on digital data and third-party integration. Following are the direct mail innovations and tactics marketers are using to derive value from:





CAUTIOUSLY CURIOUS

SURVEY SAYS MARKETERS ARE OPEN TO AI, BUT NOT READY TO HAND OVER REINS

When it comes to how generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) will look in the future, the numbers are not surprising. Research from International Data Corporation (IDC) shows that it will advance to the point where it will handle more than 40% of the work of specific marketing roles by 2029. But today, according to the "Unlocking AI for Creative Generation and Optimization" report by Yieldmo and Ascendant Network, while 72% say they are knowledgeable about AI, the numbers are not there yet. Here's a look at what marketers are saying:

- 62%** - I am comfortable letting machines test a limited number of pre-approved creative assets and optimizing for creative performance.
- 38%** - I am not all comfortable applying GenAI on any scaled marketing campaigns.
- 0%** - I am very uncomfortable letting machines create many creative and media variations, and test and optimize them in real time.

BREAKING THE ALGORITHM

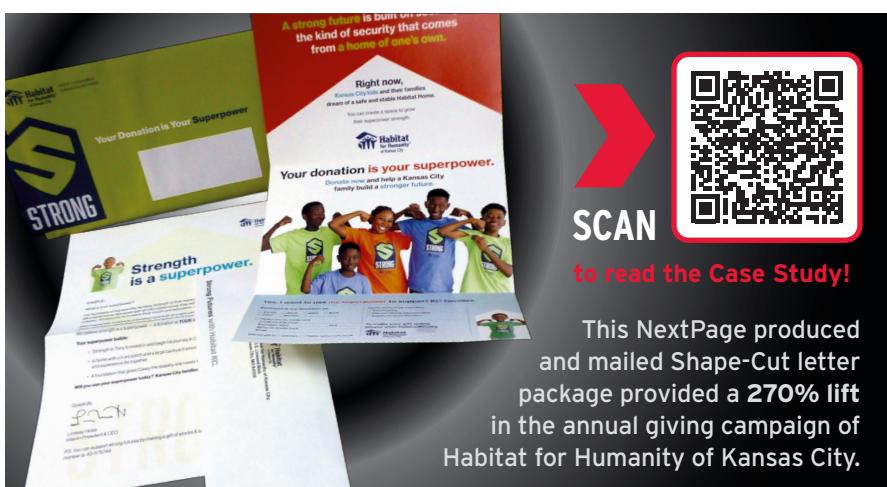
REPORT SHOWS HOW CONTENT MARKETING IS DRIVING SUCCESS

When done right, content isn't just a piece of the marketing puzzle; it's the spark that fuels engagement and drives results. That's why 63% of marketers have ramped up their content budgets this year, according to the Content Marketing Institute's "B2B Content Marketing Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends: Outlook for 2025," conducted with MarketingProfs. As a powerful top-of-funnel tool, here's where content is making the biggest impact:

- 87%** create brand awareness
- 74%** generate demand/leads
- 62%** nurture subscribers/audience/leads
- 52%** loyalty with existing clients/customers
- 49%** help generate sales/revenue
- 37%** grow a subscribed audience
- 9%** reduce customer support costs



A NextPage produced and mailed, 12" W x 8.5" H, EDDM postcard for Powell Gardens of Kansas City.



This NextPage produced and mailed Shape-Cut letter package provided a **270% lift** in the annual giving campaign of Habitat for Humanity of Kansas City.

“ You're going to see small businesses rally behind these tools because it's going to prop them up. It's going to help their bottom line; it's going to make them feel bigger.”

— CHRIS NEFF, GLOBAL HEAD OF EMERGING EXPERIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, ANOMALY, ON THE CONTINUED INTEREST OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (GENAI) BY SMALL- AND MID-SIZED MARKETERS

On the Record

Looking back over the past 12 months, what has surprised you most about AI's evolution and its impact on marketers?

The thing that has surprised me most is just how vocal and serious basically all the major AI labs are about the possibility of reaching artificial general intelligence (AGI)—and the fact most seem to believe it is a handful of years away.

Though there's no widely accepted definition of AGI, you can think of it broadly as AI that is better than humans at a wide range of tasks. The fact that the people building AI strongly believe that AGI is just a few years away, even if you don't agree

TRICKS OF THE TRAID

MARKETING AI LEADER, **MIKE KAPUT**, SHARES ADVICE



In this conversation with Mike Kaput, Chief Content Officer at the Marketing AI Institute, we catch up on the fast-moving world of artificial intelligence and its growing influence on modern marketing. With AI's capabilities evolving at breakneck speed, Kaput shares his latest insights on what's changed over the past year, what marketers should be paying attention to now, and how to build practical, responsible AI strategies that drive real results. He also gives us a look inside the Marketing AI Institute's upcoming MAICON 2025 (October 14-16 in Cleveland, Ohio), the premier event for marketers who want to turn AI from a buzzword into a competitive advantage. Whether you're experimenting with generative tools or rethinking your entire marketing workflow, Kaput's advice is a clear-eyed guide to making smarter decisions in the age of AI.

with their assessment, needs to be taken seriously. And marketers need to start thinking seriously about what that could mean for their careers and businesses.

What's the most important piece of advice you're giving marketers today when it comes to successfully integrating AI into their strategies?

The most important piece of advice I have when it comes to successfully integrating AI into strategies is this: Applying AI to a range of existing use cases is great and necessary. But once you've begun to do that consistently, you have to start rethinking what is possible in every area of marketing from first principles. If you were starting from scratch today, knowing what you know about AI's capabilities, what marketing would you do and at what scale? What human staff would you need to execute on that strategy?



“ YOU CAN BUY ALL THE AI TECHNOLOGY IN THE WORLD, BUT NONE OF IT WILL DO YOU ANY GOOD UNLESS YOU TEACH YOUR TEAM WHAT AI IS...”

In your view, what common mistakes are companies still making when it comes to adopting AI—and how can they avoid them?

A common mistake that most companies make is not providing enough training and education to staff. You can buy all the AI technology in the world, but none of it will do you any good unless you teach your team what AI is, what it can do for them, how to use it effectively in their role (basics of prompting, etc.), and how to find and pilot their own unique use cases for AI to increase productivity and performance.

What new or emerging AI tools, trends, or capabilities should businesses have on their radar in the next 6-12 months?

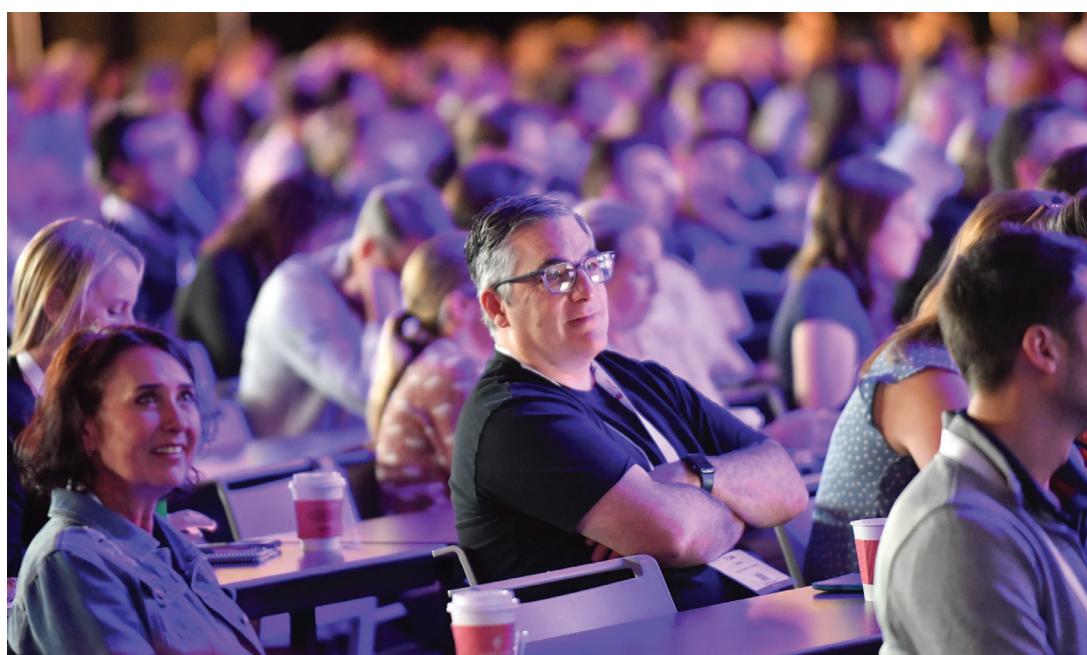
Two big trends, in my opinion, will be highly relevant in the next 6-12 months:

First, models are getting smarter and that progress is not slowing down, no matter what headlines you read. You have to assume that you will have access to much smarter, much cheaper AI when planning more than three months ahead.

Second, agents will start to mature and change what's possible in marketing. It's still very early. But I'd start to experiment with agents like OpenAI's Operator to understand what's coming. When we have relatively reliable agents, the whole game starts to change. So be the marketer who understands what they can do and how best to leverage them.

Tell us about MAICON—what makes the event so valuable for marketers, and what can attendees expect to learn from this year's conversations?

What makes the Marketing AI



Conference (MAICON) so valuable in a word is: Community.

We are bringing together 1,500+ marketing and business leaders who are actively learning about, experimenting with, and scaling AI in their own careers and businesses. You cannot find this caliber of group

anywhere else, virtually or in-person. And MAICON gives you the opportunity to spend three full days learning from them and networking with them, all of which can literally accelerate your AI journey by months or even years.

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