

Vision and Strategy for an AI-Driven World

The era of incremental change is over. CMOs who embrace AI's transformative opportunities will drive significant growth. In 2026, CMOs must lead the shift to agentic operating models, adopt a zero-based approach to channel strategy and use AI to rapidly enhance marketing's distinctive strengths.

The year ahead marks a turning point for CMOs. AI is no longer a peripheral tool; it is embedded in every facet of marketing. At the same time, proven engagement strategies are eroding amid AI-driven disruption, and the CMO role itself is undergoing a once-in-a-generation transformation.

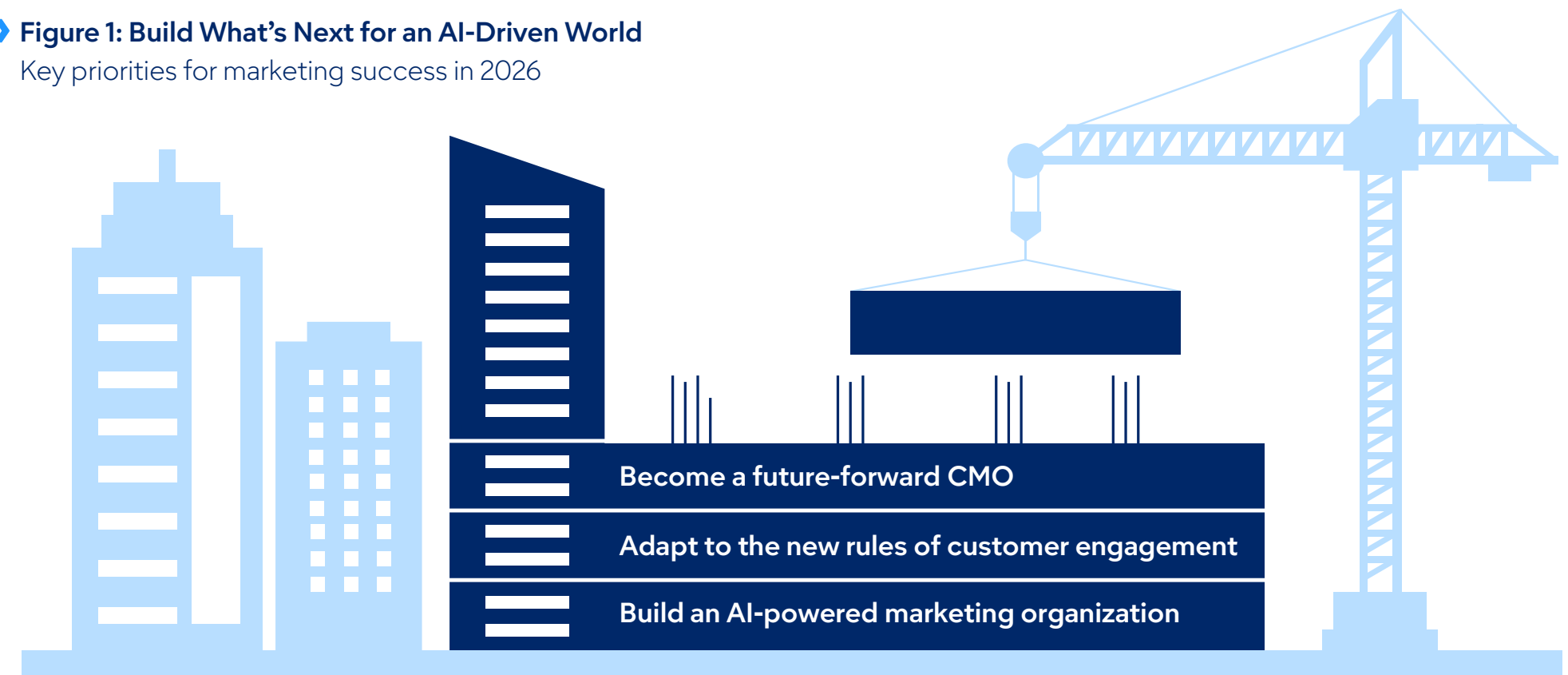
82% of business leaders believe their company's identity must evolve to keep pace with AI's impact on markets, and 65% of CMOs expect AI to dramatically change their role within two years.^{1,2}

These forces demand more than incremental change. They require CMOs to lead with clarity, adaptability and strategic vision. Three priorities will define success for CMOs in 2026 (see Figure 1):

- Build an AI-powered marketing organization.
- Adapt to the new rules of customer engagement.
- Become a future-forward CMO.

» **Figure 1: Build What's Next for an AI-Driven World**

Key priorities for marketing success in 2026



Source: Gartner

Priority 1: Build an AI-Powered Marketing Organization

CMOs who use AI to redesign operating models will lead and drive growth. However, those who simply bolt AI onto legacy systems will fall behind. The constant noise around AI has made it challenging for CMOs to navigate, but in reality, AI's impact follows a predictable trajectory:

- **AI as a tool:** Enhances productivity but rarely transforms outcomes
- **AI as an agent:** Orchestrates outcomes and makes semiautonomous decisions with human oversight
- **AI as an influencer:** Shapes decisions independently and exerts more influence over businesses and customers as AI becomes embedded in societal norms — expected within three to five years

Most marketing leaders are currently piloting AI agents, but even advanced adopters struggle to achieve meaningful business results.³ Why? Because they start with technology instead of process.

What to Do

Treat AI as the catalyst to transform marketing's operating model, rather than a simple technical upgrade. Build AI-native operating models where humans and AI agents collaborate seamlessly. Redesign workflows, decision points and strategic goals before deploying or upgrading technology.

AI agents are broadly capable, but not all processes are equally ready to be automated. Assess which marketing processes — such as journey orchestration, workflow automation, content creation and strategic planning — will extract the most value from agentic support.

- **Prioritize strategic direction:** Break down strategic objectives into focus areas and AI opportunities.
- **Map how AI fits into workflows:** Use existing process maps to identify where AI can reduce friction and where the organization is ready to use it. Layer new AI workflows onto process maps to ensure auditable, ethical and brand-aligned outcomes.
- **Invest in new talent needs:** Build composable teams and upskill marketers to manage hybrid human-agent systems.

Priority 2: Adapt to New Rules of Customer Engagement

GenAI is disrupting channels, while agentic buying promises to reshape purchase decision making in ways that reduce human involvement. Leading marketers are already restructuring their data, content and technology to keep their brands visible and relevant.

The last year saw unprecedented adoption of GenAI platforms, including a 608% year-over-year increase for ChatGPT.⁴ As chatbots and AI-driven discovery accelerate, traditional channels such as search advertising, display and social may no longer deliver the reach or ROI marketers expect — either because they are integrated into AI interfaces or no longer reaching the same audience.

At the same time, AI-powered personalization brings a new risk of scaling ineffective approaches. Consumers and B2B buyers who encountered personalized messages during a recent purchase decision were 1.7 times more likely to delay decisions and 3.2 times more likely to regret what they bought.⁵ If we simply turn up the gas on personalization, it could blow up the customer experience.

What to Do

Adopt a zero-based approach to channel strategy that discards legacy assumptions of impact and ROI. This means every channel investment must be reearned based on its forecast contribution to business impact in an AI-mediated world.

- **Reassess channel ROI:** Use marketing mix modeling or attribution analysis to evaluate the real value of each channel today.
- **Rebuild the portfolio:** Start with performance channels that directly support purchases, then proven brand-building channels and finally experimental bets based on emerging trends.
- **Review quarterly:** Ensure proven channels don't crowd out the innovation needed to stay competitive.

Resetting the channel plan is only the first step. For the channels you choose to invest in, consider how you can build meaningful engagement and connection during increasingly scarce human touchpoints. Focus explicitly on how your brand differentiation shows up in the context of new channel engagements.

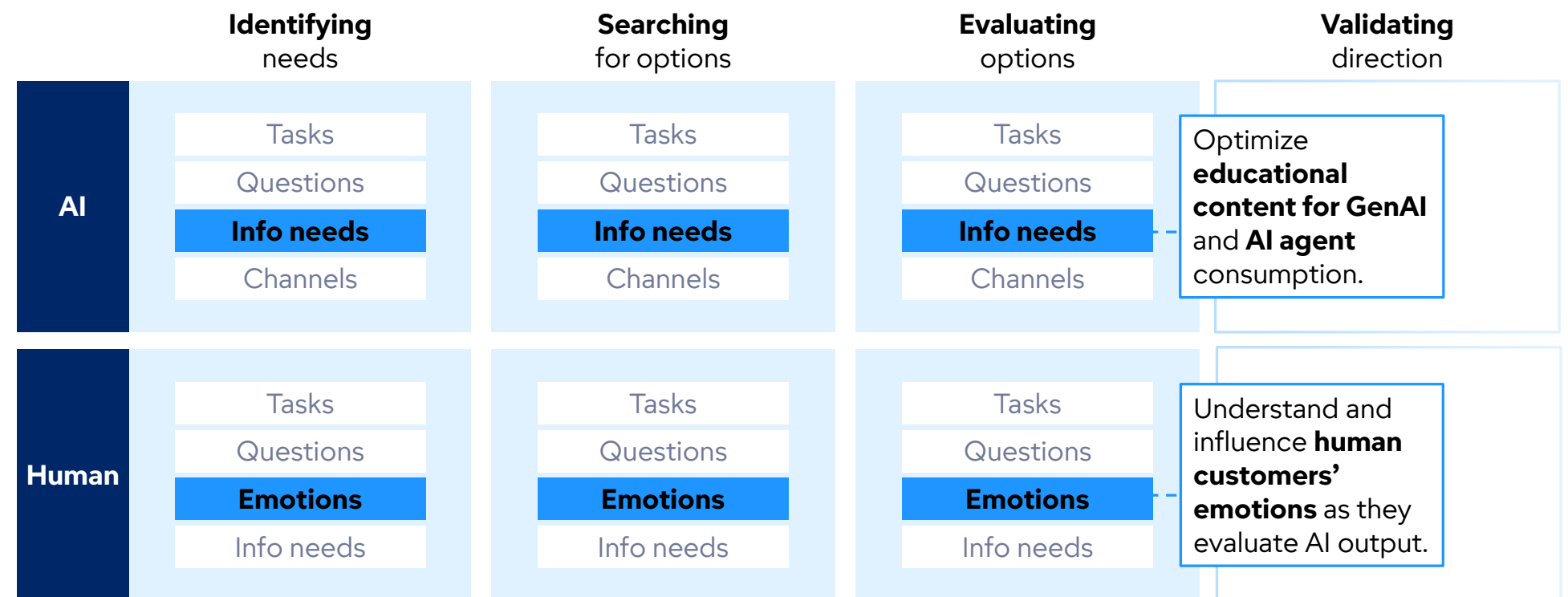
AI can fake closeness, but it cannot earn trust the way authentic human experiences do. Trust in machines will be based on confidence in the underlying data and models. Trust with humans will still involve emotion. CMOs will need the discipline to optimize for both.

Design for dual customer journeys: those of AI tools and agents on the one hand, and those of the humans evaluating their output on the other (see Figure 2).

- **Support AI information needs:** Optimize educational content for GenAI platforms to influence answers customers see first.
- **Reinforce your brand in human journeys:** Reinforce emotional connection at scarce human touchpoints. Use brand-aligned journey maps to help you dial up experiences that change customer beliefs and actions.

» Figure 2: Dual Customer Journey Maps for AI and Human Customer Personas

Illustrative example



Source: Gartner

Priority 3: Become a Future-Forward CMO

In addition to the transformations affecting marketing's operating model, channels and customer journeys, the CMO role is undergoing a fundamental shift. CEOs and CFOs say they plan to increase marketing's accountabilities from an average of five areas today to eight areas by 2029⁶ — most likely without a proportional increase in resources.

To avoid getting caught in the swirl of cross-functional competition for influence, CMOs will need clarity, vision and focus. And CEOs and CFOs have been clear: They value CMOs' strategic insight over operational effectiveness. CMOs who excel as market shapers are eight times more likely to exceed CEO and CFO expectations than "enterprise operators" who get things done in complex organizations.⁶

Market shapers: CMOs with deep customer and market insight along with strong positioning and innovation capabilities

What to Do

Use AI to accelerate your proficiency as a market shaper. This means leading with strategic insight into your customers and markets and building marketing team skills to reason with AI. Guide your enterprise to explore new AI-enabled business models and unique market moves.

- **Use AI to accelerate insight:** Leverage AI to sift data, simulate customer behavior and identify emerging needs, but avoid the competitive "sea of sameness" by applying human reasoning.
- **Build team skills in reasoning:** Develop capabilities in ethical, strategic, scientific and systems reasoning to interpret and apply AI-generated insights in unique ways.
- **Seize business advantage from AI strategic shifts:** Match your executive team's ambition to recalibrate digital strategies and harness tech capabilities for competitive advantage.

AI, shifting customer expectations and expanding executive accountabilities are rewriting the rules of marketing. Incremental change will not suffice; success requires bold, strategic action. CMOs who act decisively will not only navigate disruption but define the next era of enterprise leadership.

¹ **2026 Gartner Brand and Business Strategy Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand best practices related to brand strategy and its impact on business strategy development and performance. The survey was administered online from September through October 2025 and includes data from 426 senior marketing leaders responsible for brand strategy, and senior leader partners from other functions, including leaders from the U.S. (n = 228), U.K. (n = 87) and mainland Europe (n = 63). Leaders represent many industries, including banking and financial services (n = 65); IT products and services (70); manufacturing, energy, and natural resources (n = 42); healthcare (n = 39); retail (n = 32); pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and life sciences (n = 40); insurance (n = 43); travel and hospitality (n = 34); and others (n = 61). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

² **2025 Gartner Marketing Transformation Survey.** This survey was conducted to explore what CMOs are thinking about the near future (i.e., the next one to two years) of the marketing organization amid the disruption of AI and how they are approaching organizational structure changes and marketing operations management in 2025. The survey was administered online from August through October 2025 and includes data from 402 senior marketing leaders. These results represent marketers from North America (n = 189) and Europe (n = 213). Respondents were required to have decision-making authority over marketing budgets and strategy at an organization with at least \$100 million in annual revenue. Fifty-eight percent of respondents came from organizations with at least \$2 billion in annual revenue. Respondents came from a wide variety of industries, including technology products (n = 59); banking and financial services (n = 55); consumer products (n = 47); retail (n = 47); manufacturing and natural resources (n = 43); healthcare (n = 41); insurance (n = 33); pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and life sciences (n = 23); media (n = 22); IT and business services (n = 20); and travel and hospitality (n = 12). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

³ **2025 Gartner Marketing Technology Survey.** This survey aimed to explore the key aspects of marketing technology including utilization, composability, scalability, measurement and collaboration. It also examined the implications of AI and data strategies on marketing technology. Conducted online from June through July 2025, the research included 413 respondents from North America (n = 186), the United Kingdom (n = 91) and Europe (n = 136; including France, Germany, Luxembourg, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden). Qualifying organizations reported enterprisewide annual revenue for fiscal 2024 of at least \$100 million, with 77% of the respondents coming from organizations with \$1 billion or more in annual revenue. The respondents came from a diverse range of industries: IT and business services (n = 48), manufacturing (n = 48), insurance (n = 38), retail (n = 38), consumer products (n = 37), financial services (n = 36), travel and hospitality (n = 36), healthcare (n = 33), tech products (n = 33), media (n = 33) and pharmaceuticals (n = 33). All the respondents were required to be senior decision makers of their company's marketing technology strategy, where the majority of their daily responsibilities aligned with either business- or IT-focused marketing. Eighty percent of respondents were aligned to the marketing function, 10% to product marketing and management, 7% to IT and 2% to brand management or other business units. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

⁴ Gartner analysis of Similarweb data (n = 4 general-purpose AI chatbots, from September 2023 through August 2025). Similarweb is a third-party data source that captures website traffic and engagement, email referral traffic, and LinkedIn traffic. Similarweb gathers data from a panel of hundreds of millions of monitored desktop and mobile devices, local internet service providers and public data sources, as well as directly from sites' first-party analytics.

⁵ **2025 Gartner Marketing Personalization Survey.** This survey was conducted to explore which elements of marketers' personalization efforts most impact customers' journey experiences and commercial outcomes. The survey was administered online from November through December 2024. It includes data from 1,464 B2B buyers and consumers in the U.S. and Canada (n = 961), the U.K. (n = 265), and Australia and New Zealand (n = 238). B2B buyers (n = 556) came from a wide variety of industries, including manufacturing and natural resources (n = 152); technology products (n = 106); banking and financial services (n = 80); healthcare (n = 58); retail (n = 39); pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and life sciences (n = 28); and others (n = 93). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

⁶ **2024 Gartner Senior Executive Views of CMO Leadership Survey.** This survey was conducted to explore how CMOs are perceived by key C-suite leaders (i.e., CEOs and CFOs), and what distinguishes effective CMOs under different behavioral and company circumstances. The survey was administered online from August through September 2024 and includes data from 125 senior executives in North America (n = 84) and Europe (n = 41). Respondents were CEOs and CFOs at organizations with at least \$50 million in annual revenue, with 36% coming from organizations with at least \$1 billion in annual revenue. Respondents came from a wide variety of industries, including manufacturing and natural resources (n = 21); banking and financial services (n = 6); retail (n = 8); healthcare (n = 23); consumer products (n = 17); pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and life sciences (n = 6); insurance (n = 2); technology products (n = 14); travel and hospitality (n = 8); IT and business services (n = 16); and media (n = 4). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

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