

What winning CMOs do differently with AI



Introduction: the activity is real, the advantage is not

The marketing function has reached an awkward middle distance. Almost every Chief Marketing Officer has invested in AI over the past couple of years. Content tools, automation platforms, personalisation engines, agentic pilots, governance committees, the lot. Boards have signed off on the budgets. Vendors have been chosen. Pilots have been launched, paused, relaunched and rolled out. The activity is real and the intent is genuine. The competitive advantage that should follow from all of it, however, is nowhere yet visible from outside the marketing function.

The point of this paper is not to argue that the CMO must transform, learn AI or risk replacement. That case has been exhausted. The leading CMOs already grasp what is happening; they read the research, they watch consumer behaviour shifting and they know perfectly well that the operating model their function inherited was not built for what is now being asked of it.

The harder problem belongs to the organisation around them. Moving a marketing function with established agency partners, an entrenched measurement framework, awkward data dependencies, a talent base hired for the previous model and decades of accumulated process to operate differently is uneven, slow work, and almost none of it shows up in the dashboards the function is judged on.



The Chief Marketing Officers pulling ahead on AI made five operating-model decisions before they bought any of the technology. Answering the same questions now is harder, more boring and more consequential than the tool selection sitting on the CMO's desk.

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A smaller group of CMOs has done that work anyway, and a clear pattern emerges from how they did it. They did not invest in better AI than their competitors, nor hire smarter people, nor move faster in any obvious sense. What they did was answer five operating-model questions before they bought any technology, and respond to them in a particular order. The technology decisions followed. The compounding advantages came after those.

This paper sets out the five questions, looks at what the leaders answered and considers what the answers ask of the marketing functions still several quarters behind. The argument draws on Cognizant Moment's qualitative research with senior marketing leaders across financial services, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), telecoms, manufacturing and media; on the platform shifts Salesforce announced at its TDX 2026 conference in April; on the wider research base in the four earlier articles in this series; and on more than two decades of combined Cognizant Moment and Salesforce experience watching marketing operating models evolve – usually too late, occasionally just in time.

The five questions are not difficult to state. The answers, on the other hand, ask for organisational courage that most marketing functions have not yet had to find.

An evolving CX picture

This is the anchor piece in a five-part series. The four earlier articles establish the conditions that make the questions here urgent, and rather than re-argue them, the working assumption is that you have read those pieces, or will follow the links.

Two of the earlier pieces argued that the customer experience (CX) industry has been measuring the wrong things. The first reframed 20 years of friction reduction as a category error, arguing that what was actually exhausting customers was cognitive load – the mental effort of deciding what to buy in the first place – and proposing cognitive trust as the operational alternative.

The second pushed that observation further upstream, locating the most important CX moment at the point before any customer arrives, when an AI system evaluates the brand on the customer's behalf and decides whether it makes the shortlist. The customer never sees that moment; the system does. The brand's job in it is to be legible to a piece of software.

Two further pieces argued that the operating model behind CX is no longer fit for what AI now demands. One made the case that the campaign-based model which built the marketing industry is finished, because customers were never episodic and AI agents have made that point obvious on a timeline no media plan can reach.

The final article observed that the platforms that hold every brand's customer relationships are being rebuilt so that AI agents can read them, reason over them, and act on them without anyone clicking through a browser, making the institutional memory those platforms contain worth far more than the brands owning them have realised.

Read together, the four arguments describe a marketing environment in which almost every assumption from five years ago has been invalidated: how brands compete, what AI actually runs on, how marketing work is produced and whether human beings are still the operators of customer experience at all.

Marketing organisations that have done the structural work to absorb those shifts are now compounding their advantage. The rest are losing ground without always being able to say why. The leading CMOs see this clearly. Most of their organisations do not yet. Answering the handful of questions below will help bridge that gap.

Decision one

Is AI a project, or is it how you operate?

Most marketing organisations run AI as a workstream. There is a sponsor, a steering committee, and a roadmap that live in a separate document from the marketing plan. The people in charge of it are usually capable and well-intentioned, yet they operate with one hand tied behind their backs.

The CMOs ahead of this have collapsed that arrangement. AI does not sit in a separate stream in their organisations. It is built into the daily tools the team uses, the briefs they send to agency partners and the dashboards reviewed on Monday mornings. The entire function treats AI as a working tool, with no separate organisational layer dedicated to discussing it.

The shift looks incremental from the outside. Spend a week inside one of the leading functions and every learning curve is visibly bending. An AI workstream tends to develop its own internal language, report on its own progress and accumulate metrics that sound impressive without ever connecting to the outcomes the function is judged on.

Meanwhile, the rest of the team carries on running the older model alongside, and the membrane between the two becomes the problem.

Adobe and Oxford Economics' [AI and Digital Trends 2026](#) survey of 3,000 global executives, published earlier this year, found that nearly one in three respondents say their executives and day-to-day practitioners are misaligned on AI strategy. Another 47% report only partial alignment.

That gap describes the difference between organisations whose marketing functions have absorbed AI and those that are still observing it from a distance.



Decision two

Are you briefing for outputs, or for the system that produces them?

The traditional agency brief specifies a deliverable. A campaign, a set of assets, a content volume, a media buy. It includes a budget, a delivery date and success criteria that describe what the agency made, not what the work changed.

The CMOs ahead of this have rewritten that brief. Not because an agency relationship failed, or because procurement asked them to. They have done it because the standard brief carries assumptions about how marketing work happens and the assumptions are wrong for the model they are now running.

The rewritten brief describes a system: the data it operates on, the outcomes it is expected to produce, the measurement framework that will reveal whether it is producing them and the governance arrangements that split the work between the team and the platform. The agency's role is no longer to hand over outputs and walk away. It is to run the system, iterate on it and remain accountable for what it produces, month by month.


That is a different kind of relationship, and it changes which agencies survive the rewrite and which do not.

The conversation moves from “did you deliver the campaign” to “did the system produce the outcome”.

Most agencies are not yet equipped for the second question. The firms ahead of this have started moving their best partners closer to the operating model and leaving the others outside it.

[PwC's May 2025 Pulse Survey of US executives](#) found that 63% of CMOs say they are missing opportunities because their organisations cannot make decisions fast enough, with unclear ownership and limited access to data and tools named as the principal barriers. A brief that specifies a system addresses both directly: it assigns ownership, defines the data and connects accountability to outcomes, leaving the activities themselves secondary to the result they produce.

The CMOs who made this call early are several contracts deep into the new model. The ones who have not are still describing it in slides.



Decision three

Where does the line between machine execution and human judgment sit?

When AI becomes capable of performing a task someone on the team used to do, the default response in most organisations is to automate it and move on. The questions that surface afterwards – who is accountable for the output, how the automation is governed, what happens when it produces something embarrassing – tend to be deferred until something goes wrong publicly.

The leaders ahead of this answered them deliberately, encoded the answers in their operating model and used the responses to design exactly where the machine work ends and the human work begins.

The execution layer belongs to AI in their model: monitoring signals, generating content, personalising outreach, routing interactions and running the continuous rhythm of customer relationships no team could sustain manually at the same tempo.

The architectural shift this rests on is now visible at the platform level. Salesforce launched Headless 360 at its TDX 2026 developer conference in April. The change makes every capability built into the platform over a quarter of a century, from the workflows that close sales deals to the processes that resolve service cases, accessible directly to AI agents through APIs, MCP tools and command-line instructions. The browser, in other words, becomes optional. Agents can read enterprise data, reason over relationship history, trigger workflows and update records without anyone ever opening a screen. The customer-relationship platforms most enterprise marketing functions depend on are being rebuilt around the same principle, and the marketing organisations that have done the architectural work to take advantage of that shift are operating at a different tempo from the rest.

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Above the execution layer sits everything AI cannot yet be held accountable for: the strategy, the parameters the system is allowed to work within, the review points that matter, and the responsibility for the outputs. Threading through the whole arrangement is the creative work no model has been trained to do, because no model has ever sat in the room where that work begins.

This is also where “real-time orchestration” stops being a slide title and starts describing how the function actually runs. The marketing organisations doing this well have AI-driven conversations with customers running continuously, with no human in the loop, on content that has been pre-designed, dynamically assembled and governed at the brand level. The brand voice the system uses in those conversations is not improvised. It is built into the system in advance – through brand rules, approved content libraries and decision guardrails – so that no one has to approve each response for the brand to sound like itself.

The compounding benefit is that the CMO recovers the time of the most senior people on the team, which is the resource a marketing function usually wastes the most. The leaders in the smaller group are not approving social posts at 9pm. Their experienced people concentrate on judgment, strategy and creative direction, which is what they were hired to do in the first place.



Decision four

Are you measuring activity, or the outcome that activity was meant to produce?

The marketing measurement framework most organisations still operate was built around outputs: impressions, reach, engagement, content volume and share of voice. The framework belongs to a model in which marketers are judged by their ability to produce work and present it to audiences. The metrics are, by design, disconnected from the business outcomes the work was meant to create.

The CMOs ahead of this changed their measurement framework before they deployed AI, not after. That sequencing is the point. Their new metrics – conversion quality, customer lifetime value trajectory, retention by engagement pattern and attribution closing within the planning cycle – forced a rethink of how the function operates, which preceded any technology decision.

A system cannot be optimised for outcomes if it is being measured on activities.

The marketing leaders who deployed AI on top of an output-based measurement framework are now optimising for the wrong thing at a faster pace, producing more impressive dashboards without better decisions.

This is the call that most reliably reveals whether an AI transformation is genuine or decorative. Plenty of marketing leaders have deployed AI; far fewer have reworked what they measure. The ones who reworked the framework first now run AI deployments that can be evaluated honestly, improved iteratively and built to accumulate advantage.

[Gartner's 2026 CMO Spend Survey](#), based on interviews with 402 CMOs, found that only 30% of marketing organisations consider themselves ready to scale AI capabilities, even as marketing leaders are now allocating 15.3% of their budgets to AI. The distance between spending and readiness, in most cases at first glance, is a measurement gap. Until the outcome an AI system is meant to deliver can be measured, there is no honest way to know whether the spending is working.

The CMOs in the smaller group closed that gap first. The ones who didn't are now buying more AI than they can prove is producing anything.

Decision five

Are you building foundations, or buying tools?

The CMOs who answer this question well produce nothing that looks like marketing in the short term. There are no campaign launches, creative previews, awards entries or LinkedIn applause. The work is data quality, schema markup, review response architecture, consent framework design and the deliberate accumulation of small operational improvements across surfaces nobody at the senior table is paying attention to.

That work is the infrastructure on which cognitive trust depends, the operational expression of brand coherence that an AI agent assembles when it reads your data, your reviews, your response patterns and your published content on behalf of the customer it is trying to help. The firms that have done the foundational work are surfacing more consistently in AI-mediated discovery, often without knowing precisely why. Their rivals are watching their visibility erode and are unable to explain the cause.

The first four decisions converge here. Data integrity is the substrate; the brief rewrite turns the substrate into operational practice; the execution-and-judgment line governs how the system uses it; the measurement framework reveals whether the work is paying off. Cognitive trust is what the leading firms are accumulating while the rest of the market is accumulating tooling.

The architectural case for this work was put plainly by Google Cloud's Chief Executive Officer, Thomas Kurian, on the opening keynote stage at [Google Cloud Next '26](#) in Las Vegas in April. "Intelligence plus automation must deliver value," he said. "To make this work, you need context and action. Intelligence comes from your data, automation is driven by agents. To solve this equation at scale, you need a complete, integrated system." That argument lands hardest on the marketing organisations that have skipped the work of building the substrate the system is supposed to run on.



The pattern underneath

The five questions look like five different things on first reading. They are about data, agency relationships, the architecture of how the function runs, the measurement framework and the brand foundations. Read together, however, they are five expressions of a single commitment.

In each case, the marketing leaders ahead of this made a decision about how they would operate before deciding what to buy. They did not wait for the technology to force the call. They made the call first, encoded it in their operating model and let the technology serve a model already designed with intent.

That is the opposite of how AI adoption usually plays out. Most functions deploy a content generation tool and then work out how it fits the agency relationship. They roll out a personalisation engine and then ask who is accountable for what it produces. They invest in AI-mediated discovery optimisation and then find that the underlying data is too poor to make it work. The technology forces a series of awkward retrofits, the retrofits do not stack, and the function believes it is transforming when it is mostly just adding.

The CMOs who escaped that pattern made the five decisions, sequenced them in the order they needed to be made, and built the technology stack into the operating model rather than around it. They are now accruing advantages competitors cannot see, on a substrate competitors cannot quickly replicate.

The decisions themselves are not headline-worthy. They produce no launches, no previews, no awards. But they are the calls that, more than any other factor, will determine which marketing organisations lead the next decade.



What this asks of you

The marketing organisations that are now ahead of this have not done anything heroic. They made decisions in the right order. The five questions are available to any CMO willing to put them to their own function, and to defend the order in which they need to be answered, the first against pressure to skip ahead, the fifth against pressure to skip it altogether.

If you recognise your function in the description of the larger group, the work that compounds is not buying more capability. It is the work of deciding how you will operate before the next capability arrives.

The marketing organisations that decided this two years ago are now several quarters into the advantage. The ones still deferring those decisions are not standing still; they are losing ground to competitors building on a substrate they cannot yet see.

The five questions in this paper are how to start catching up. Putting them to your own function this quarter, rather than next year, is the call that matters.

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