

Fratzke

The 2026 Brand Playbook

*A Leader's Guide to the Brand Strategy Trends
and Investments That Drive Growth*

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Introduction

The 2026 Brand Playbook

Brand is the foundation that builds trust and human connection. And as we look ahead to 2026, it's clear: brand matters. Customers want to believe in what they buy, employees want to stand behind what they do, and organizations win when they lead with purpose.

We surveyed more than 100 business leaders to uncover the brand strategy initiatives and investments that are driving success today. The results reveal both confidence and complexity: while many leaders express strong satisfaction with their brand efforts, few feel their strategies are clear or actionable enough to drive consistent behavior across the organization.

The opportunity ahead is clear. Strong leadership, sharper clarity, and smarter use of resources will be the factors that turn confidence into long-term brand strength. Organizations that focus on evolving their brand with purpose, aligning teams, and applying emerging technology with care will be the ones that move from “good enough” to truly great.



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About the Research

Fratzke's 2026 Brand Playbook reflects insights from brand leaders across a wide range of industries, locations, and company types. The group includes a mix of mid-sized and enterprise businesses across B2B, B2C, and hybrid organizations. More about the respondents:

- 100+ brand leaders surveyed using a third-party panel provider
- Most work at companies with 51 to 1,000 employees (79%) and annual revenues between \$6M and \$500M (72%)
- Fairly split serving B2B (26%), B2C (23%), and both markets (50%)
- 61% "marketing executives" (director level and above), 39% marketing management (senior manager and manager level)



Executive Summary

Satisfaction Is Rising, but Clarity and Execution Still Lag

The 2026 Brand Playbook shows growing confidence in brand performance yet only half of organizations feel “very” satisfied. Many teams have defined strategies but lack the clarity needed to guide consistent action. Confidence is climbing, but the gap between “somewhat satisfied” and “very satisfied” remains wide. Closing it will require deeper alignment, clearer leadership direction, and stronger execution discipline.

Evolution over Revolution

Organizations are prioritizing brand strategy, brand research, and brand storytelling as the most effective ways to strengthen their brands. Large-scale brand overhauls, by contrast, are rated least effective, reflecting a climate where sweeping rebrands often backfire.

Leadership and Clarity Sustain Brand Confidence

Strong brand performance stems from strong leadership and clear communication. The data shows that brand satisfaction and execution are driven not just by having a strategy, but by how it is set and shared.

External Partners Play an Essential Role

Nearly 7 in 10 respondents said they rely on external partners for expertise, perspective, and higher-quality creative and strategy. More than half prefer boutique, mid-size, or specialized firms over large full-service agencies, underscoring a desire for agility and tailored support.

AI is Widespread But Also Needs Guardrails

81% of organizations now use AI in brand work with a focus on content, visuals, and workflow automation, delivering benefits like speed, efficiency, and cost savings. A bigger opportunity lies ahead: applying AI to brand governance, consistency, and tone of voice.

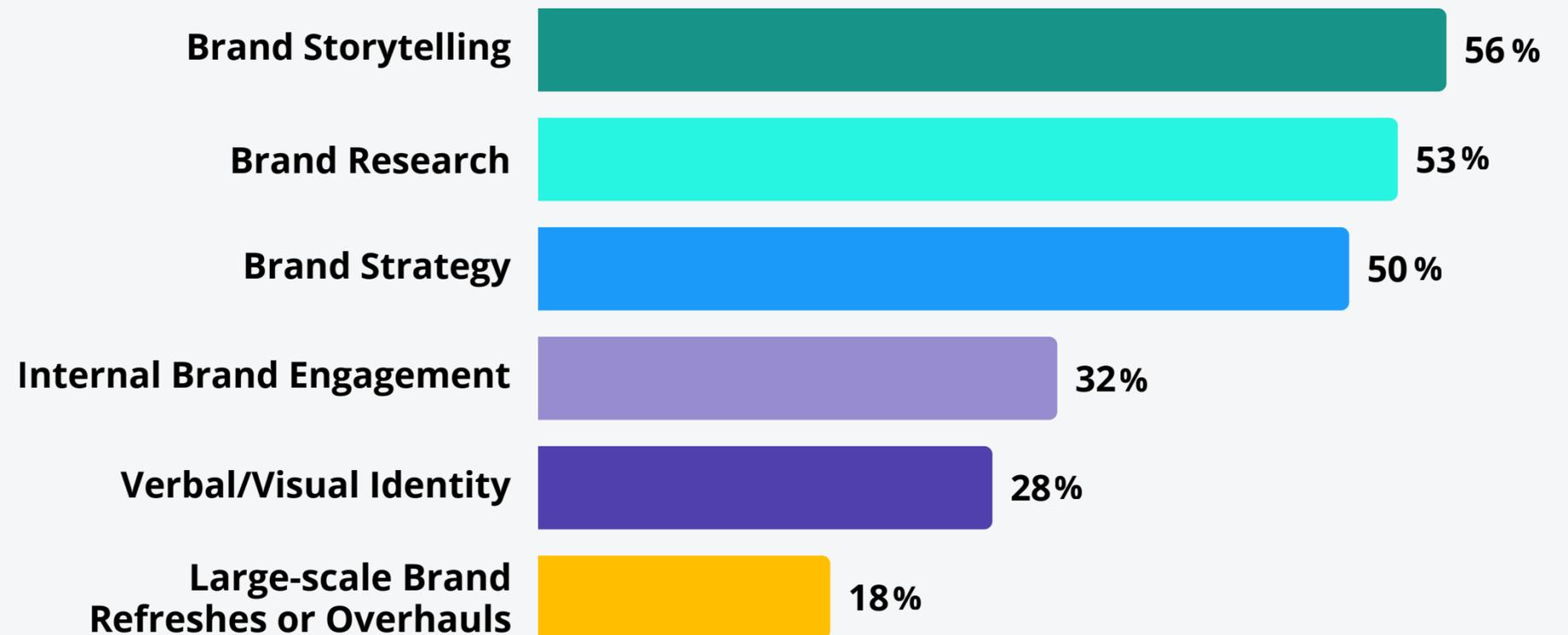
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Evolution Over Revolution: What Brand Effectiveness Patterns Reveal

Budgets are rising across nearly every brand function, but not all efforts deliver the same results. Brand Storytelling, Brand Research, and Brand Strategy are rated among the most effective drivers of brand strength, while large-scale Brand Overhauls lag far behind.

Effectiveness Varies Across Brand Functions

When asked to choose which three brand functions are most effective at reaching its goals, leaders highlighted those tied to foundational brand components and a steady evolution rather than reinvention. The data shows a clear preference for investing in the fundamentals that drive authenticity and alignment, while signaling caution around sweeping rebrands.



n = 101 Brand Leaders

Q: Which of the following Brand Strategy channels do you consider most effective in helping your organization reach its goals? Please select the top three.

Source: The 2026 Brand Playbook

1 Evolution Over Revolution: What Brand Effectiveness Patterns Reveal

Why this Matters:

Evolution Wins Over Reinvention

Rating brand refreshes and overhauls as least effective reflects a climate where sweeping changes often backfire.

Recent events underscore the risk. Cracker Barrel's \$700M rebrand removed a long-standing character from its logo, only to trigger a 12% stock dip, widespread criticism, and political backlash that forced a reversal within days. Jaguar faced similar criticism for abandoning a heritage mark in its pivot to electric vehicles, with critics accusing the brand of walking away from its legacy.

Rolling out a rebrand is no longer just a matter of new typefaces or taglines. In today's climate, rebrands are flashpoints for cultural and political debate. Even careful testing cannot fully insulate against backlash when high-profile voices seize on changes to inflame tensions.

5 tips when weighing how to evolve a brand:



Protect Existing Equity

If your brand has positive recognition or loyalty, build on it, don't erase it.



Know When Reinvention Makes Sense

For weaker, unknown or outdated brands, bigger changes may be warranted, but always proceed cautiously.



Use Research as a Guardrail

Ground changes in customer and competitive insights, not just internal opinions.



Tell a Consistent Story

Strong storytelling and alignment keep employees and customers moving with the same narrative.



Plan for Cultural Reactions

Rebrands can spark backlash. Test shifts with audiences and roll out thoughtfully.

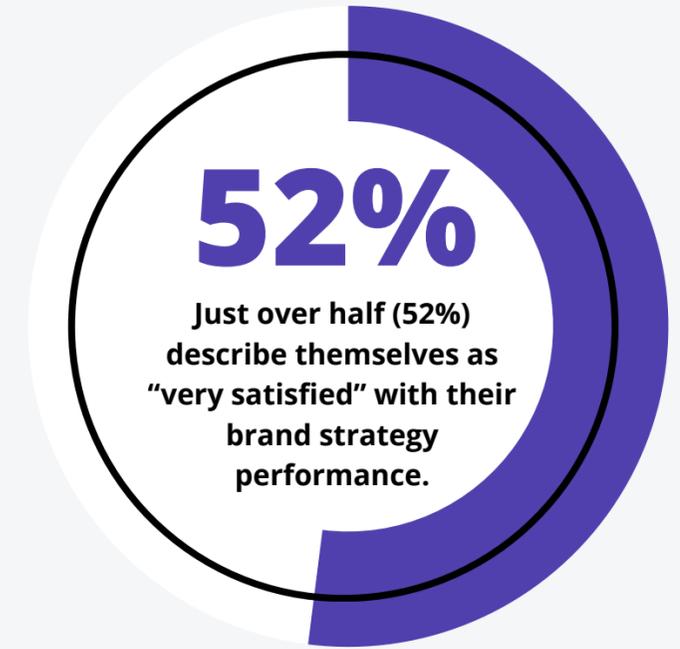
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Leadership Sets the Tone: A Successful Strategy Starts with Clear Leadership

Strong brand strategy starts with strong leadership. While most brand leaders report some level of satisfaction, only half say they're "very" satisfied in their approach. For many teams, a lack of strong leadership and vision and effective communication of the strategy may be influencing both execution and impact.

Brand Strategy Satisfaction is Mixed

Most marketing leaders say they are satisfied with their brand strategy performance, but satisfaction is not uniform. Just over half (52%) describe themselves as "very satisfied" while 43% are only "somewhat satisfied". This gap highlights a clear opportunity for improvement.



Respondents identified the factors that contribute most to successful strategies. These factors provide a pathway for organizations looking to move from "somewhat" satisfied to fully confident in their brand strategies.



n = 101 Brand Leaders

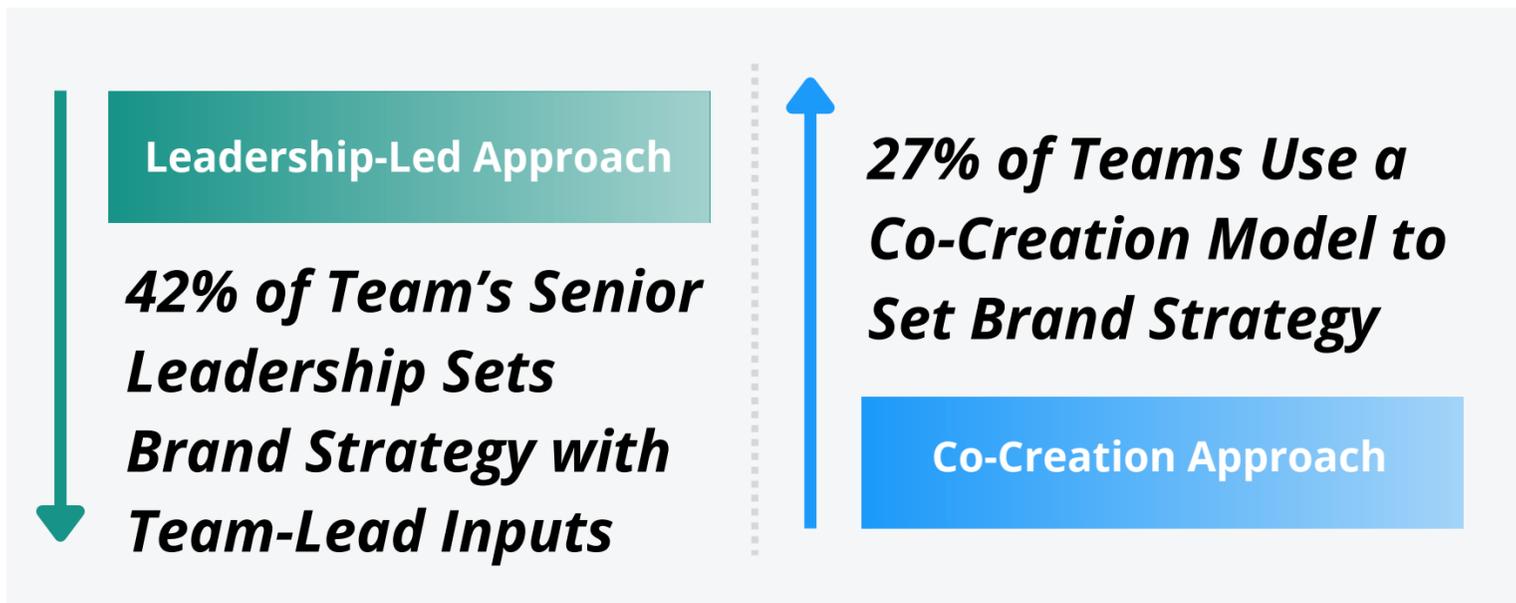
Q: In your opinion, what are the key factors that most contribute to making a strategy successful at your organization? Please select up to three.

Source: The 2026 Brand Playbook

2 Leadership Sets the Tone: Clear Strategy Starts with Clear Leadership

How Strategy is Set Influences Outcomes

Brand leaders shared that strategy is most often developed by senior leadership with team input (42%), while just over a quarter (27%) describe a co-created model. Leader and Advanced organizations lean more toward a leadership-led approach (49%), while less mature organizations are more likely to co-create strategies with teams (39%) (see appendix for maturity definitions).



2 Leadership Sets the Tone: Clear Strategy Starts with Clear Leadership

Clarity Translates Into Execution

Clarity is another defining factor. While 58% of survey respondents say their overall brand strategies are “very clear”, 28% describe them as only “somewhat” clear. The same pattern extends into specific brand areas:

Brand Areas Ranked By Number of Respondents with “Very Clear” Strategies:



It’s no surprise that visual identity tops the list. Managing how a brand looks and feels is often more straightforward than shaping its strategic direction or voice. Strategy and research demand long-term vision, while storytelling and verbal identity require nuance and consistency. Establishing both calls for strong leadership, internal alignment, and a commitment to consistency across cross-functional teams that produce content every day.

Why This Matters: Leadership and Clarity Build Confidence

The data shows that brand satisfaction and clarity do not come from having a strategy alone. Leadership provides the direction, and clear communication and guidelines ensures that direction is understood across the organization.

When these foundations are in place, teams not only feel more confident but also deliver consistently across campaigns, employee communications, and customer experience.

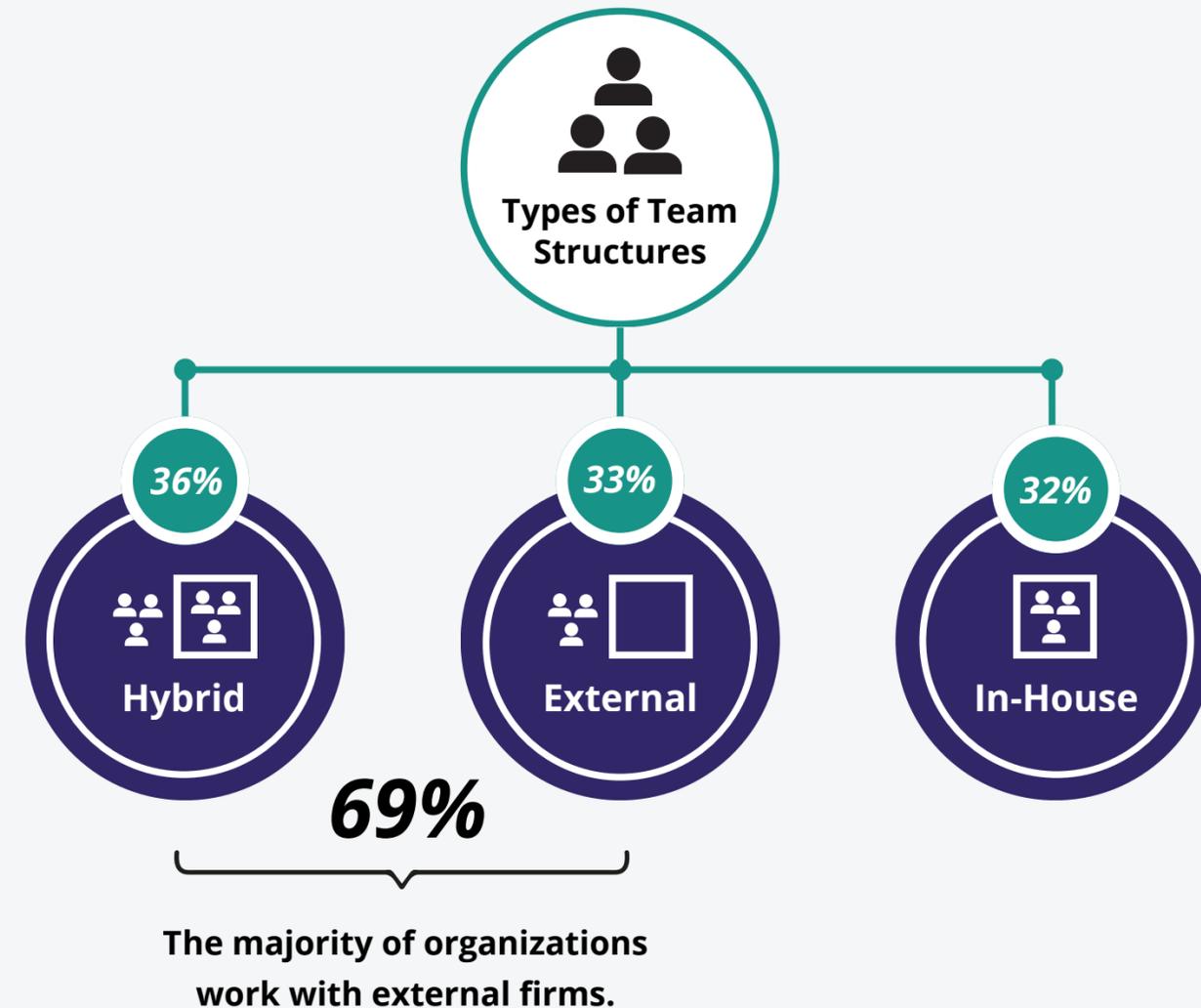
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External Partners Play a Central Role in Brand Work Outside Expertise Helps Teams Build Brand Strength

While team structures vary widely, the consistent throughline is that most organizations do not develop their brand strategy in a silo.

Team Structures Vary, But External Help is Common

Organizations are nearly evenly split in their overall team structures: 36% use a hybrid of in-house and external partners, 33% rely primarily on external partners and 32% depend mostly on in-house teams. Despite the variation, a majority of organizations (69%) work with external firms and over half (59%) prefer mid-size, boutique or small agencies.



n = 101 Brand Leaders
Q: How is your organization's Brand Strategy function currently structured?
Source: The 2026 Brand Playbook

3 External Partners Play a Central Role in Brand Work

Outside Expertise Helps Teams Build Brand Strength

Why Organizations Bring in Partners

Top reasons cited for working with outside experts:

Outside Perspective or Fresh Ideas
48%

Higher Quality Strategy or Creative
42%

Access to Specialized Expertise
38%

Only 14% of respondents said they use partners simply for extra hands. This suggests that external input is not just a backup for stretched teams, but a core part of how brand strategies are developed and executed.

In many cases, organizations are deliberately seeking out partners for their specialized expertise, strategic perspective, and creative quality - factors that elevate the work rather than just supplementing internal capacity.

Only 14% of teams say they use partners for extra hands.



Why This Matters: External Input Builds Brand Strength

The widespread use of external partners shows that most organizations see value in perspectives beyond their own walls. From brand research and strategy to brand storytelling and execution, external collaboration helps fill knowledge gaps, challenge internal assumptions, and bring brands to life with sharper, more distinctive strategies.

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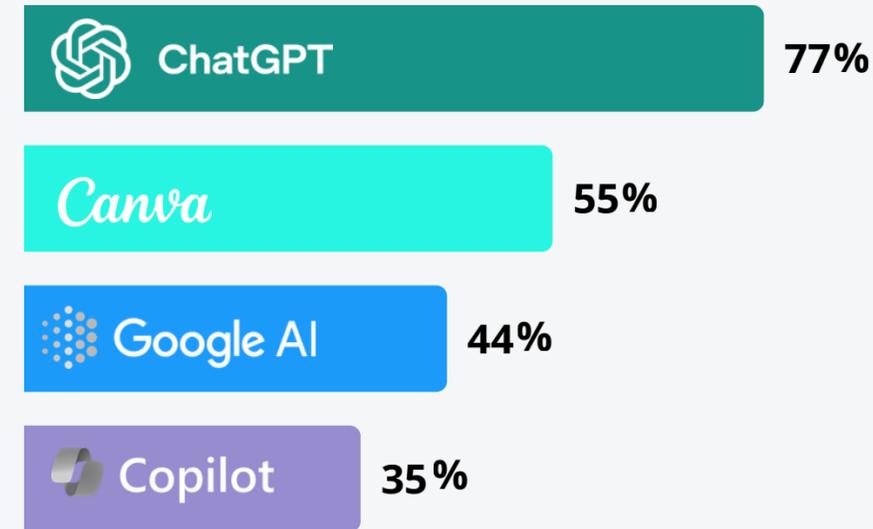
AI in Brand Strategy:

Widespread, Tactical Use.
Guardrails Required.

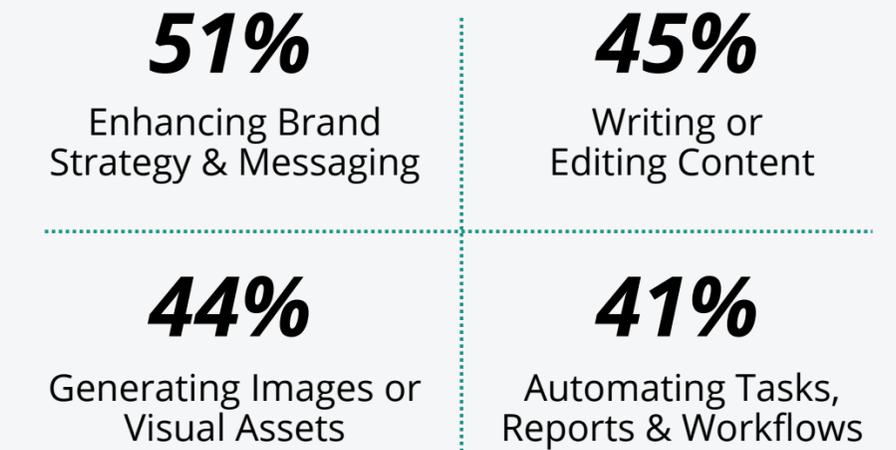
AI is now widespread in brand strategy work with 81% of leaders reporting using it. Adoption has been rapid, but applications remain primarily tactical, focused on content, visuals and workflows.

The untapped potential lies in applying AI to deeper brand challenges such as brand governance, consistency and voice.

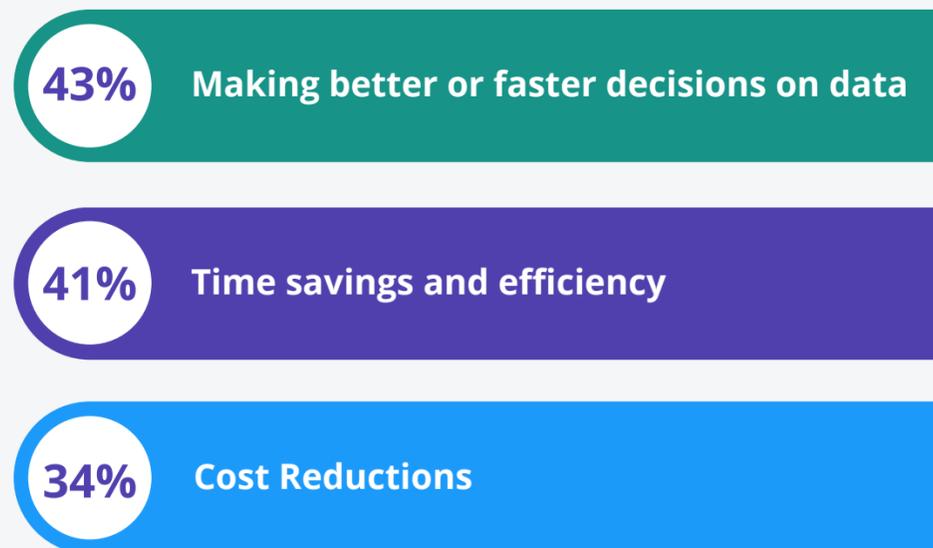
Top AI Tools Used:



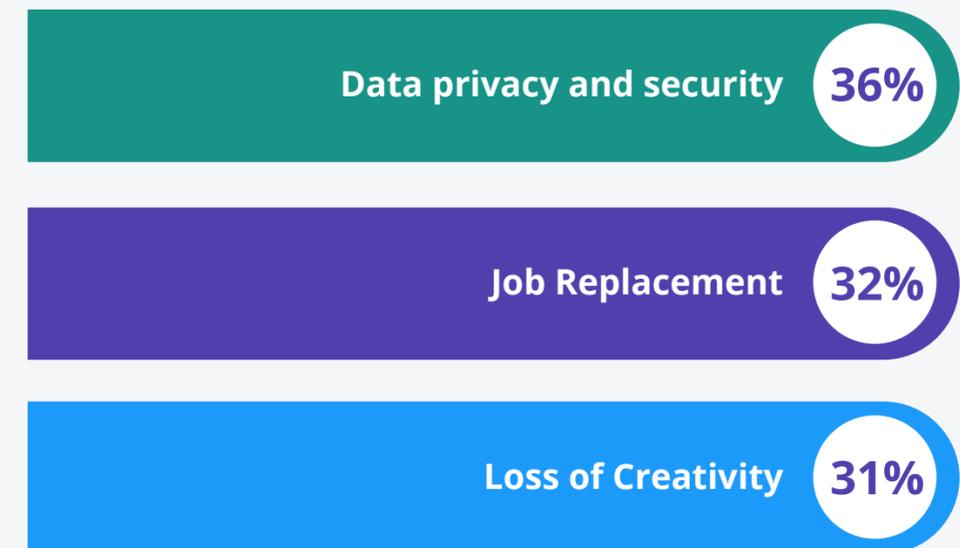
Most Common Uses for AI:



Benefits of Implementing AI:



Concerns of Implementing AI



n = 101 Brand Leaders
Q: Which AI tool(s) does your organization use most often, How does your organization use AI? Please select all that apply., What do you think are the biggest benefits of using AI at your organization? Please select up to three., What concerns do you have about the use of AI at your organization? Please select up to three.
Source: The 2026 Brand Playbook

4 AI in Brand Strategy: Widespread, Tactical Use. Guardrails Required.

Why This Matters:

AI Still Needs Guardrails to Strengthen Brand Strategy

AI has quickly become a staple in brand teams' workflows, but its role is primarily supportive. It helps teams move faster and make more efficient decisions, yet the risk is assuming speed equals strategy.

Where AI could add deeper value is in the areas where brand leaders struggle most: brand governance, consistency, and tone of voice.

However, AI limits remain. Authenticity and creativity still require human oversight. Without it, there is a risk of brands sounding generic, losing emotional resonance, or even misstepping in sensitive contexts. The opportunity is not to let AI "own" the brand voice but to use it as an amplifier of human creativity and a guardrail for brand alignment.

5 Tips for Integrating AI While Maintaining Your Brand

- Train AI on Brand-Approved Assets**
Feed it your guidelines, tone of voice, past campaigns and learnings.
- Use AI as a First Draft, Not the Final Word**
Keep humans in the loop for nuance, judgment and even fact-checking.
- Set Guardrails for Consistency**
Monitor outputs across channels to prevent tone or design drift.
- Personalize Responsibly**
Allow AI to tailor messages, but within boundaries that protect brand identity.
- Balance Efficiency with Authenticity**
Lean on AI for speed, but preserve the creative spark and emotional resonance that only people can deliver.

A Look Forward

From Satisfaction to Enduring Brand Strength

Brand strategy is evolving fast, driven by technology, expectations, and culture. The 2026 Brand Playbook shows rising confidence, but strength comes from more than confidence alone. Leading organizations invest in the right foundations: brand research, brand storytelling, leadership, and structure.

Help grow your brand by taking the following steps:



Invest in Research & Storytelling

The most effective brand functions are those that create distinctiveness and trust. Insight-driven brand storytelling drives authentic evolution more effectively than large-scale overhauls.



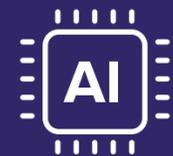
Find Partners Who Elevate Strategy

The best external partners provide more than bandwidth. They bring fresh ideas, quality, and specialized expertise that sharpen brand strategy and accelerate execution.



Lead with Clarity

Strong brands start with clear direction from leadership. Establish a defined strategy, communicate consistently, and ensure every team member understands the role they play in bringing the brand to life.



Unlock AI's Potential

AI adoption is widespread, but most use cases are still tactical. The opportunity is to apply AI to harder brand challenges such as governance, consistency, and voice while ensuring efficiency never comes at the cost of authenticity.

Work With Fratzke

Fratzke helps mid-sized and enterprise marketing and brand teams close the gap between ambition and execution. With deep experience across top brands and a flexible, human approach, we're built for the realities of in-house marketing.

Many teams have strong plans, solid budgets, and expanding tech stacks, but they're stretched thin. The pressure to perform keeps rising, while time, clarity, and support remain limited. That's where Fratzke comes in. We help teams accelerate brand growth by delivering actionable insights, clear strategies and consistent results.

Together, we can help you:

Turn Brand Insights Into Clarity

Use customer and competitive research to sharpen brand positioning and guide more confident brand decisions.

Build Distinctive Brand Strategies

Develop positioning, messaging, and storytelling that connect your purpose to customers and stand out in the market.

Strengthen Internal Alignment

Engage employees with brand narratives, tools, and training that drive adoption and consistency.

Evolve Brand Identity With Confidence

Refresh visual and verbal identity through research-led processes that ensure authenticity and minimize risk.

Balance AI with Authenticity

Harness AI to improve efficiency and scale, while safeguarding the creativity and authenticity that make your brand unique.

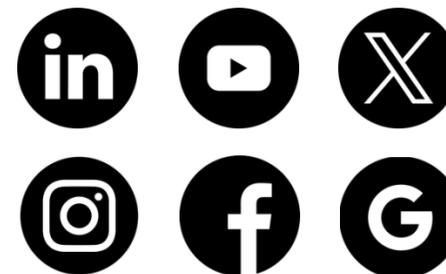
Get In Touch

Let's Close the Gap Between Strategy & Results

Fratzke is a strategic partner built for in-house marketing and brand teams. We help mid-sized and enterprise organizations get the insights, strategy, and support they need to move faster with more focus, clarity, and confidence.

Whether you're looking to clarify your brand strategy, improve execution, or better connect brand investments to business outcomes, our team can help.

Let's Talk



www.fratzkemedia.com

Tel: [\(714\) 614-2881](tel:(714)614-2881)

Appendix

Participants were asked to rate their organization's brand strategy approach using a five point scale defined as the following:

- **LAGGARD:** Brand is unclear and inconsistently expressed. No defined identity or messaging.
- **EMERGING:** Some visual and verbal identity exists, but application is uneven. Limited internal alignment.
- **COMPETENT:** Brand guidelines are followed. Messaging is consistent and somewhat differentiated.
- **ADVANCED:** Brand is clearly positioned, emotionally resonant, and reflected in culture and customer experience.
- **LEADER:** Brand is iconic and purpose-driven, with deep internal adoption and strong market recognition.

This scale provided a consistent framework to compare organizations across maturity levels, highlighting differences in capabilities, processes, resources, and priorities such as investment, strategy, execution, and AI adoption.

