



AI FOR GROWTH:

**HOW PROGRESSIVE MARKETERS
ARE MOVING BEYOND
JUST EFFICIENCY**

A PAPER BY RI | MARCH 2026 | MARGARET NGAI, CTO



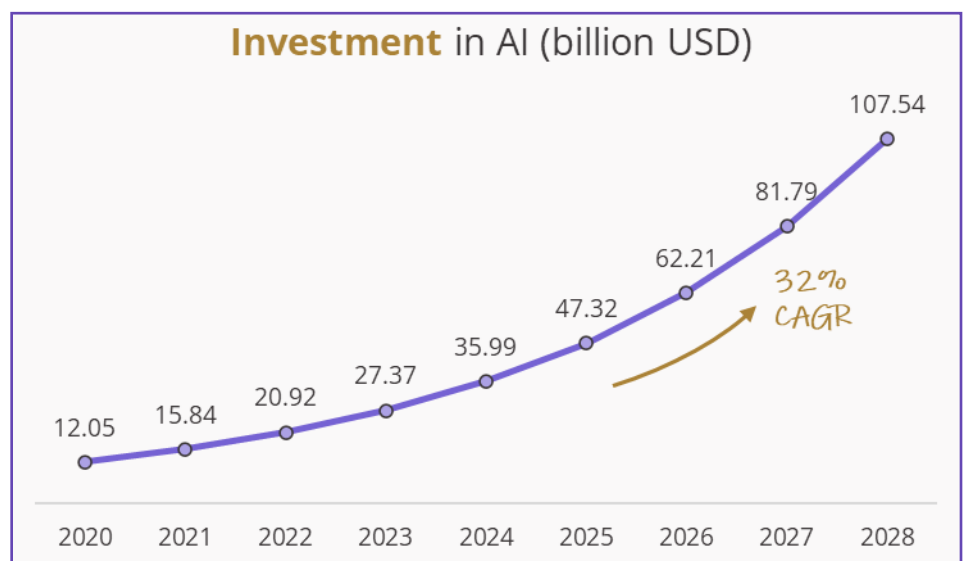
AI FOR GROWTH: HOW PROGRESSIVE MARKETERS ARE MOVING BEYOND JUST EFFICIENCY

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly become a board-level priority for marketers. Investment and experimentation are growing across markets and sectors. Yet, many of the discussions around AI center on productivity gains rather than measurable customer growth.

This whitepaper uses new research from RI, combined with prior studies and market benchmarks, to answer a simple question: Given all the hype, is AI actually helping marketers grow their business? And what separates the leaders from the laggards?

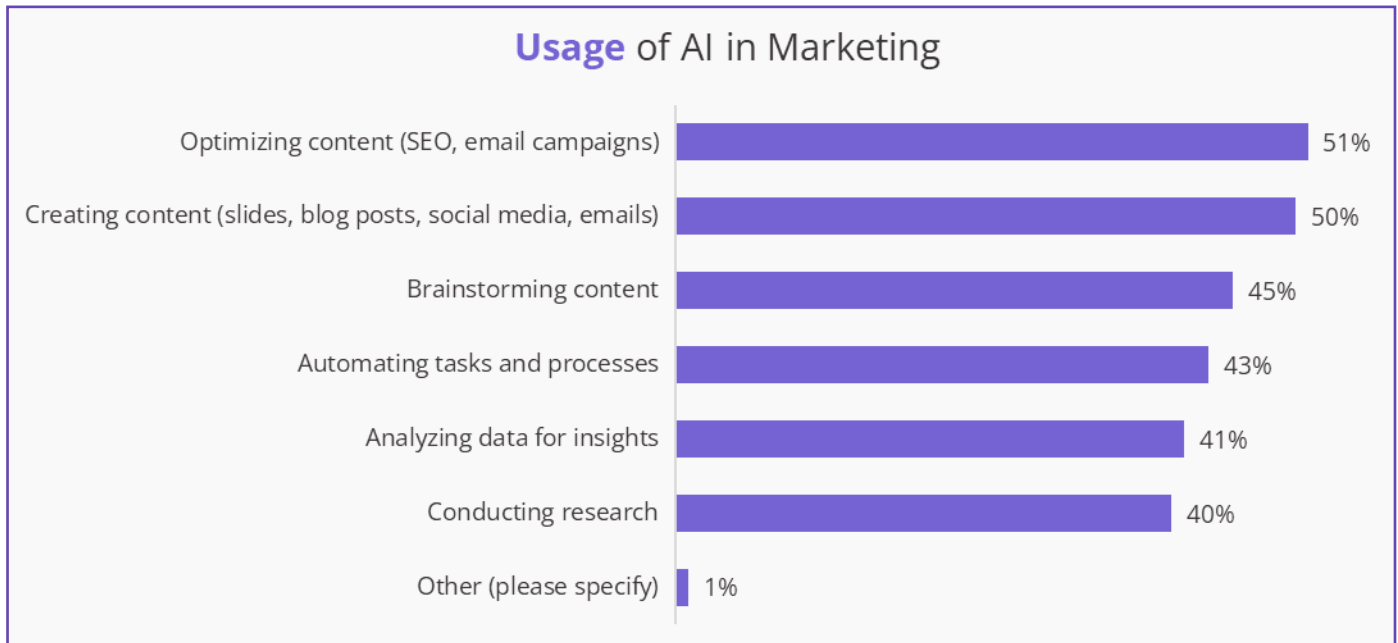
THE AI MARKETING MOMENT

Despite economic headwinds, AI investment is accelerating across organizations. Global AI investment in marketing is projected to grow from USD\$47B in 2025 to USD\$107B in 2028¹, with a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 32%. In a recent survey, 99% of CMOs said Generative AI investment is a priority for 2026 despite having a flat marketing budget², signalling a shift from experimentation to executive expectation.



Source: Statista

Both AI and Generative AI are playing a larger role each day for marketers. Early use cases when AI assistants first came on the scene at the end of 2023 included content generation, content optimization, content ideation, research, data analysis and process automation³. But the list of use cases keeps growing every day. Even at our own agency, we went from 2 specific use cases when we revamped our AI Policy about a year ago to now having 7 broad categories of functions with some form of approved AI usage.



Source: SurveyMonkey. This SurveyMonkey study was conducted on January 8-18, 2024, among a sample of 707 US workers, including 507 marketers and 200 market researchers.

AI has already delivered significant efficiency benefits across marketing teams. Based on 2025 research, across marketing teams, over 80% say AI has increased their productivity, and most report saving 5+ hours per week, with 93% agreeing it accelerates content creation⁴. However, efficiency alone does not guarantee better business results. Without a clear strategy and robust measurement, time and cost savings can mean an artificially better bottom line in the short run, or worse, a poorer customer experience that becomes detrimental to the long-term health of the brand.

HOW DO CONSUMERS VIEW AI IN MARKETING?

Before we dive into how marketers are using AI and what results they are seeing, we want to examine consumers' attitudes with the usage of AI in marketing.

Consumers are most encouraged to buy when marketing communications deliver consistent branding, engaging creative, brand trust and personalization, among a variety of other factors. Whether or not AI is being used, marketers should stick with these fundamentals.

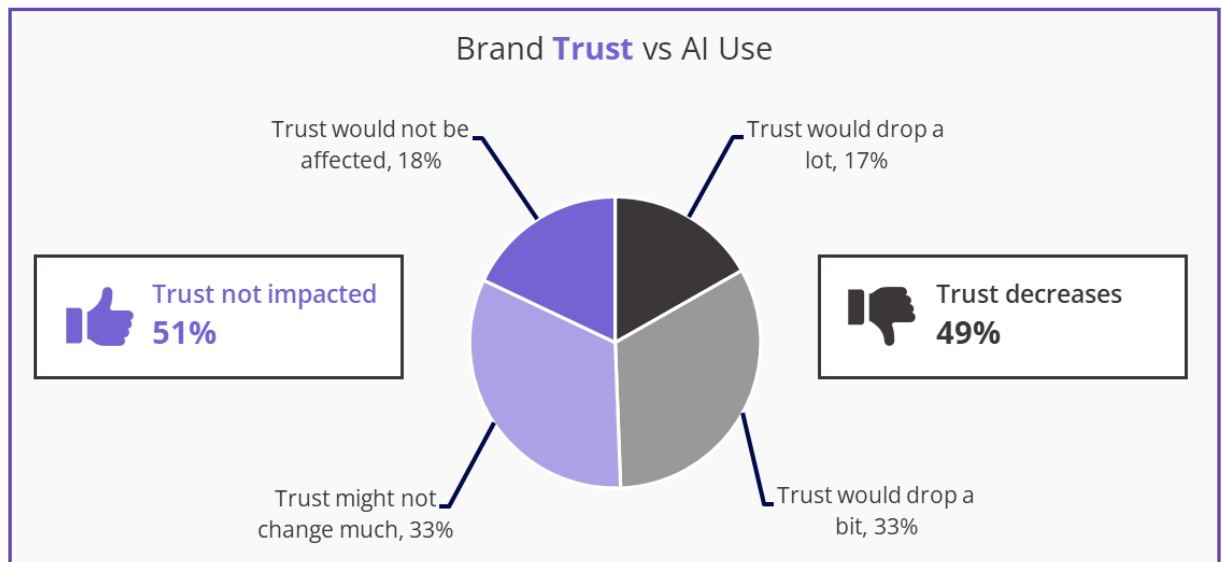
Consumers reward brands that use AI to enhance relevance and clarity rather than to simply increase volume or novelty.



Question asked was "What marketing communication aspects encourage you to buy more from a brand?" Polly received a response rate of 2,802,311 over January 1, 2023 to October 3, 2025 in Canada and USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 2% margin of error.

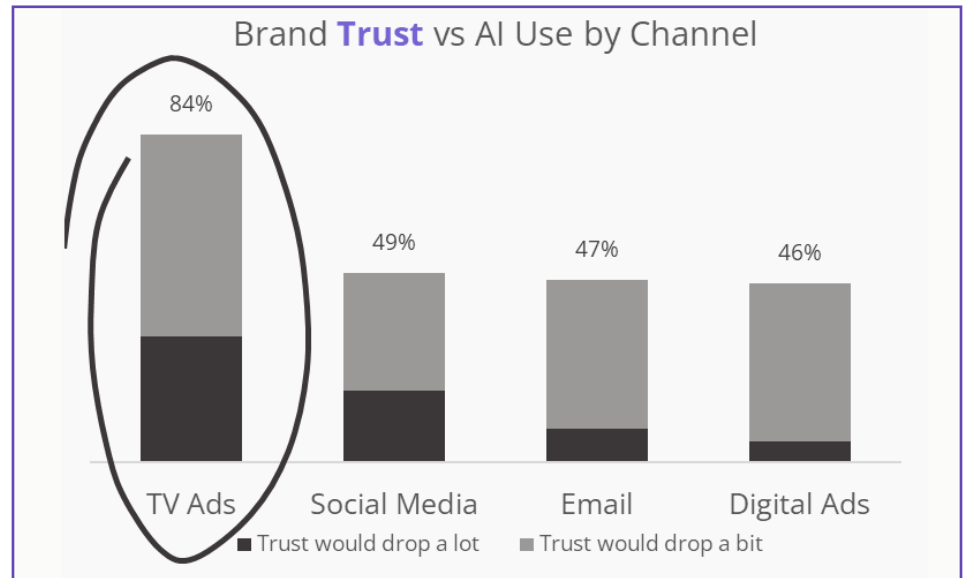
Anecdotally, brand trust is often discussed as one of the barriers preventing marketers from adopting AI on a broader scale because consumers have less trust in brands using AI in their communications.

In our study, consumers are almost evenly split between whether their trust of a brand would decrease or not if they knew the brand communications were generated by AI.



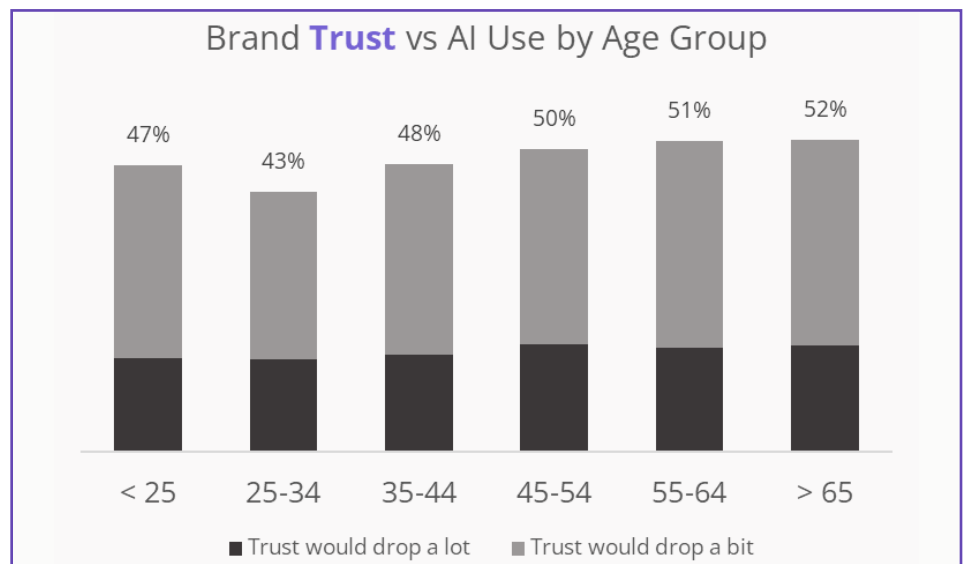
Question asked was "How would knowing a brand's marketing communications are written by AI affect your trust?" Polly received a response rate of 4,298,323 over January 1, 2023 to October 5, 2025 in USA and Canada from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 2% margin of error.

Of note is that the impact varies significantly by channel. Digital channels are more resilient, with only about half of the consumers expressing they would not trust the brand as much if AI were used. However, with TV ads, 88% of consumers said they would not trust the brand as much if they knew AI were used to create the ad. Perhaps this explains the backlash against high-profile AI-generated TV ads like the Coca-Cola Christmas campaign⁵.



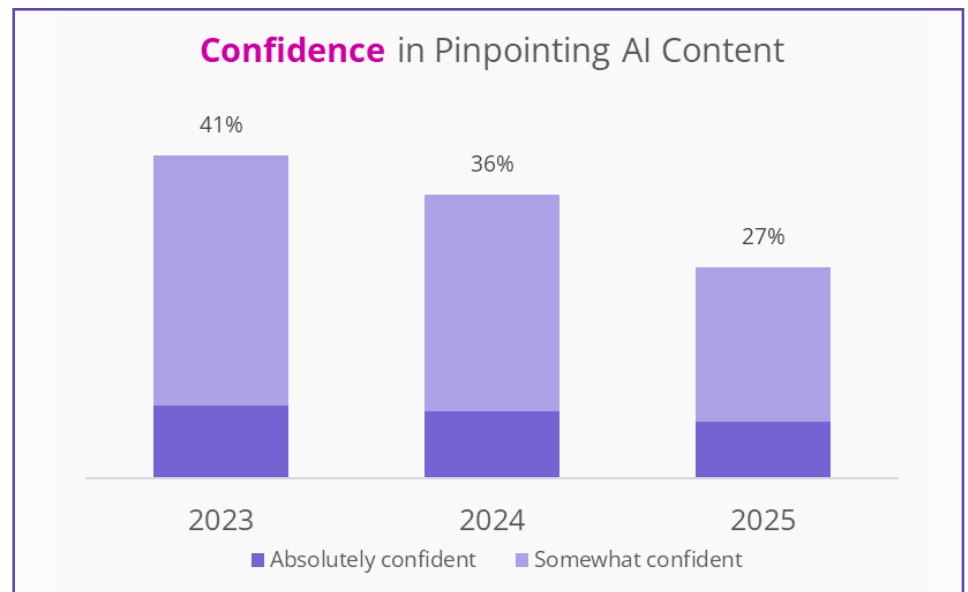
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There is a common conception that the mistrust of AI-generated content increases with age. Looking at the responses by age, there is indeed a slight increase in those whose trust would drop among those 45+ in age. However, the difference is not as significant as it is by channel.



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In an earlier study, knowing whether Generative AI or human wrote the content increased the participants' favoritism towards the human content⁶. But that did not decrease their enjoyment of the content produced by Generative AI. With the increased maturity of AI capabilities, the output from Generative AI has improved significantly in the past 3 years. Fewer people feel confident they can pinpoint AI-generated content, with self-reported confidence dropping from the low forties in 2023 to the mid-twenties by 2025. As the use of AI becomes more prevalent, marketers should not need to worry that much about incorporating AI tools in their process as long as they monitor the quality of the output.



Question asked was “Do you feel confident you can pinpoint when a brand uses AI in its marketing communications?” Polly received a response rate of 7,748,136 over January 1, 2023 to October 5, 2025 in USA and Canada from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 1% margin of error.

DOES AI MATURITY INFLUENCE PURCHASE INTENT?

Ultimately, brands need to sell to be viable. Now that we know what consumers are looking for, are brands meeting their expectations? More importantly, did brands that adopted AI more widely and quickly influence more people to buy? To gauge the impact of AI adoption and its impact on purchase intent, we studied the correlation between a brand’s adoption of AI and the purchase intent of their prospects and customers.

The MIT CISR Enterprise AI Maturity Model depicts four stages of enterprise AI maturity based on a 2022 MIT CISR survey of 721 companies.⁷ The model identifies capabilities an enterprise needs as it progresses through the four stages.

According to Stephanie Woerner, director of MIT CISR, the MIT CISR Enterprise AI Maturity Model was developed to help organizations assess their current capabilities, identify gaps, and create a road map for improvement across various dimensions, such as processes, technology, and organizational culture. It's a tool for guiding business growth, improving operational efficiency, and achieving strategic objectives through a clear, step-by-step approach.

Four Stages of Enterprise AI Maturity				
AI Stage	1. Experiment and prepare	2. Build pilots and capabilities	3. Develop AI ways of working	4. Become AI future-ready
Percentage of Firms	28%	34%	31%	7%
Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educating the workforce on AI • Setting up acceptable-use policies • Working on making data accessible • Ensuring that decision-making uses data • Identifying where humans need to be in the loop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning to simplify and automate processes • Creating use cases • Sharing data via APIs • Leveraging a coach-and-communicate management style • Using LLMs – both out-of-the-box traditional and generative AI models – to augment work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding process automation efforts • Changing to a more test-and-learn way of working • Architecting for reuse • Incorporating pretrained models into work and investigating the use of proprietary AI models • Exploring autonomous agents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedding AI into decision-making and processes • Creating and selling AI-augmented business services • Combining traditional, generative, agentic, and robotic AI
Focus	Exploration and education	Business cases and pillars	Scaling AI platforms and dashboards	Continuous innovation and new revenue streams

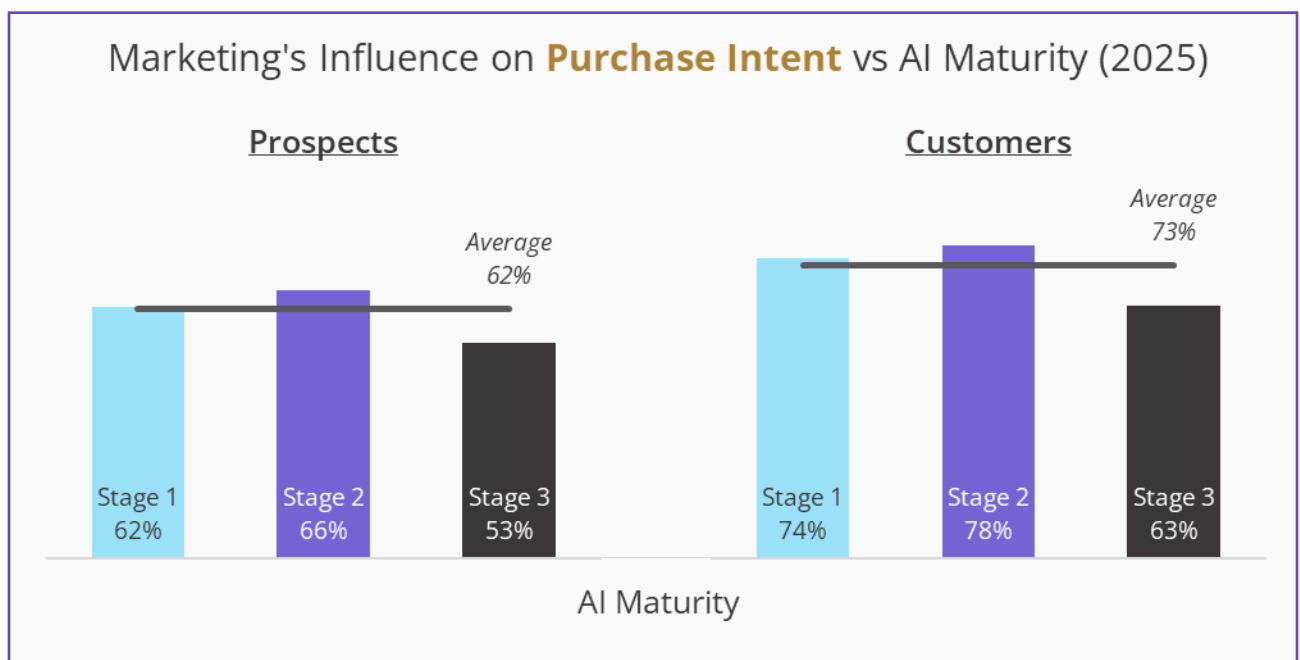
© MIT CISR 2024. Source: MIT CISR 2022 Future Ready Survey (N=721) and interviews in 2024 with 16 executives at nine enterprises. Respondents were grouped into four stages using a measure of Total AI Effectiveness, the equally weighted combination of three measures: effective of AI to (i) improve operations, (ii) improve customer experience, and (iii) support and develop the ecosystem. On a 0%-100% scale of Total AI Effectiveness, Stage 1 AI Capability = 0%-49%, Stage 2=50%-74%, Stage 3=75%-99%, Stage 4=100%.



...simply “more AI” does not linearly translate into better marketing impact.

Our research assessed how AI maturity relates to customers’ stated likelihood to purchase.

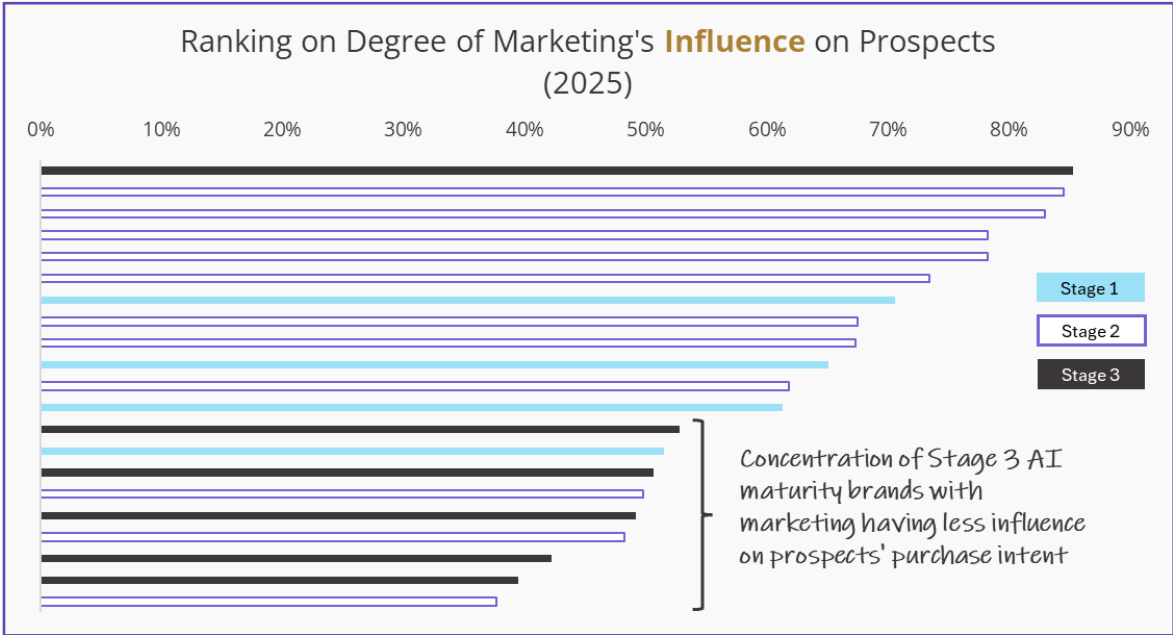
- Among prospects, the share who say a brand’s marketing makes them want to purchase is higher for brands at intermediate maturity (Stage 2) than for those at early or advanced stages, suggesting that simply “more AI” does not linearly translate into better marketing impact.
- When looking at current customers, results show a similar pattern: the strongest marketing influence on purchase appears in the mid-maturity cohort, while the most advanced AI organizations do not automatically outperform on this metric. Again, when it comes to growth, first movers in the AI space may not necessarily have the advantage.



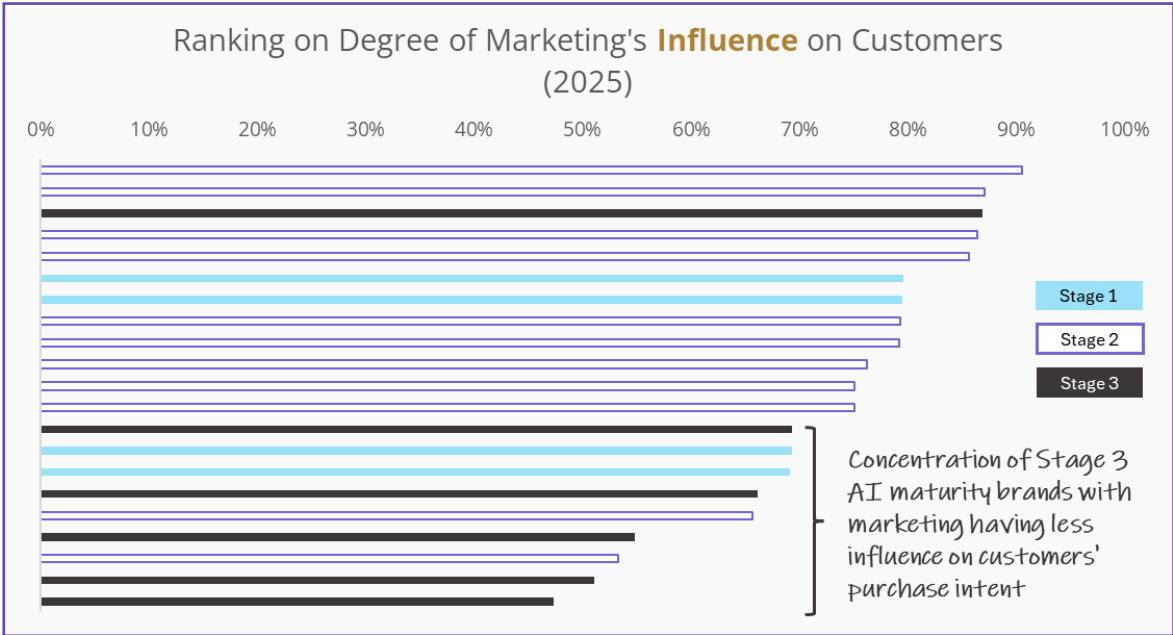
Question asked was “Has <brand>’s marketing made you want to purchase <brand>’s <product> more?” Response rate, confidence level and margin of error differ by brand. Refer to Appendix for more information.

Looking at individual brands tells us a similar story: brands that have higher AI maturity cluster towards the bottom of the list in how much their marketing influences purchase decisions in 2025. Marketers need to remember that there is more to marketing than how quickly they can adopt AI in their process.

Brands that are not at the high end of AI Maturity can better influence purchase intent with marketing. Advanced AI capabilities can scale mediocre marketing just as efficiently as great marketing, amplifying misaligned messaging or poor value propositions. When it comes to growth, there are diminishing returns when AI is not anchored in strong fundamentals.



Question asked was "Has <brand>'s marketing made you want to purchase <brand>'s <product> more?" Response rate, confidence level and margin of error differ by brand. Refer to Appendix for more information.



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HOW CAN BRANDS FLOURISH?

It may not be accidental that more organizations in the middle of the AI maturity rankings did better with influencing purchases.

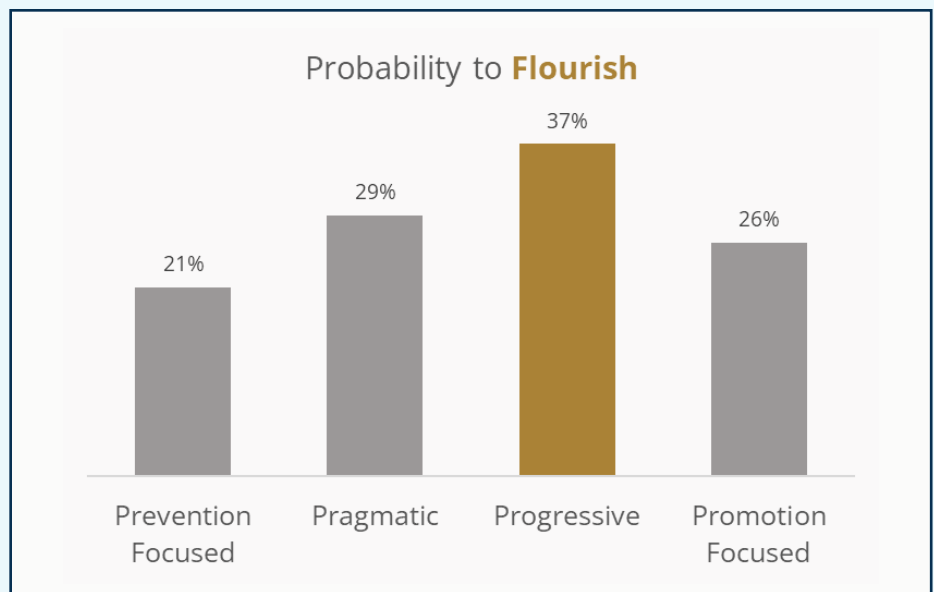
Marketers are preparing for continued macroeconomic pressure. In such environments, only a small share of firms typically flourish, and those that do tend to balance cost control with smart, sustained investment in customer-facing capabilities.

According to a Harvard Business Review study⁸ of 4,700 organizations through 3 global recessions (1980, 1990, 2000), organizations fall into four broad patterns during downturns: those that cut costs fastest, those that invest boldly, those that remain largely unchanged, and those that pursue a balanced, progressive strategy.



ARCHETYPE	TYPICAL APPROACH	IMPLICATIONS FOR AI MATURITY
Prevention Focused	Cut costs in all areas the same as or more than their competitors	Either low maturity to avoid investment, or adopt heavily in cost efficiency driven use cases for quick ROI
Promotion Focused	Invest in all areas the same as or more than their competitors	High maturity with quick and heavy adoption across multiple use cases
Pragmatic	Cut short-term direct costs such as cost of goods sold and employees more than their competitors, but increase longer-term investments more than their competitors	Likely mid to high maturity in adopting AI for efficiency-driven use cases that can deliver immediate impact to cost and headcount
Progressive	Cut direct cost of goods sold more than their competitors, but increase investment in people and longer-term items like research & development and capital expenditures	Likely mid maturity in a variety of use cases covering both efficiency and growth; possibly re-invest savings from efficiency use cases in new growth opportunities

Only 9% of companies flourished after downturns (i.e. outperforming rivals by at least 10% in sales and profits). The Progressive group has the highest probability of emerging stronger and landing in this elite group of 9%.



Marketers that take a progressive approach are best positioned to sustain the business through this economic climate.

This approach of combining disciplined cost management with targeted investment in capabilities likely landed these organizations in the middle of the pack when it comes to AI maturity. So for companies that are poised to succeed, AI has to be viewed as a strategic lever, enabling both efficiency and growth, and deployed with discipline, clear metrics, and a long-term view of customer value.

ADVICE FOR 2026 AND BEYOND

In 2026, marketers can't rely on more investment in AI tools to help them move the needle. What's needed is a bias towards using AI to drive business growth, rather than a focus on efficiency. The 3 main areas of growth opportunities are:

1. Grow the fundamentals

The research is clear: consumers are rewarding brands that excel in the fundamentals of marketing – consistency in their branding, engaging content, establishing trust, and providing a personalized journey for them. More AI does not automatically mean more growth. Many of the efficiency-driven use cases focus on scaling whatever marketing you already have, good or bad. Looking more broadly at AI's capability can definitely help brands get better in these fundamentals.

- **Use AI as a sounding board for ideas.** AI can be trained to provide different perspectives and become a proxy for your customers. Collaborating with AI through your marketing process can help you get out of your own echo chamber. For example, AI tools like askpolly that we used for this whitepaper gave our team almost instant access to public opinions specific to our plan so we can gauge if we are going down the right paths.
- **Prioritize channels where consumer trust is less fragile and experimentation costs are lower** (owned digital, email, social) before pushing AI-heavy creative into high-scrutiny formats like TV. Many digital channels support A/B tests, providing a relatively low-risk way of testing out Generative AI use cases.

2. Grow through a balanced, progressive approach

Low consumer confidence and economic uncertainties mean brands still need to work hard to win in the 2026 market. Marketers that take a progressive approach are best positioned to sustain the business through this economic climate. This means balancing a reduction in the direct cost of goods sold with investment in people and longer-term infrastructure.

- **Quantify benefits of AI use cases that drive efficiencies.** This can come in different forms of savings, like direct costs or staff time. Ensure similar level of investment is made on higher-value items. For example, if an AI use case is saving the team hours on a task, are they then spending those hours on higher-value tasks that they previously did not have capacity to handle?
- **Create use cases that matter for growth.** For example, identify moments in the customer journey where a performance lift would have a meaningful impact on business growth. Create AI-powered experiments focused on those moments early in the year to move the needle.

3. Grow from pilots to playbooks

AI experiments are only useful if they can be scaled to be part of day-to-day operations. Marketing teams need to have the structure to do so.

- **Have an evaluation go/no-go.** AI experiments should have some pre-defined goals for go-ahead evaluation. If it proves to be successful, someone such as the department head, team lead, or AI champion should be responsible for the rollout.
- **Create a forum for cross-team collaboration and learning.** For example, at RI, we have an AI Council with representatives from each functional area. This group meets regularly to discuss new opportunities for using AI and the status of ongoing AI experiments and rollout. This has sparked discussions on use cases that involved changes to processes in multiple teams.
- **Democratize AI knowledge.** It is important for everyone to be able to suggest AI use cases and to participate in AI experiments. People with intimate knowledge of the day-to-day are best positioned to come up with creative ways to use AI in their context.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

For marketers, the next wave of AI is not about chasing novelty or squeezing out a few more efficiency gains; it is about using AI to create more relevant, trusted and growth-driving customer experiences. By grounding AI programs in clear business outcomes, robust measurement and a thoughtful understanding of consumer expectations, progressive teams are already proving that AI can lift both productivity and purchase intent.

As this whitepaper has shown, the organizations that will win are those that pair disciplined data strategy and experimentation with a human-centred approach to creativity, ethics and brand stewardship, turning AI from a tactical helper into a durable engine for growth.





...many of our clients view us as an extension of their own team...

ABOUT RI

RI is a proudly independent marketing agency, specializing in the craft and execution of strategic, creative, and highly personalized marketing solutions. Our services are designed to unlock more value from your customer data and deliver innovation that is tightly aligned to your business goals. We collaborate with clients in a way that fits their needs, so relationships are built around the realities of their organization, not our processes. As a result, many of our clients view us as an extension of their own team rather than a traditional vendor, which is reflected in the fact that 100% say they are likely or very likely to recommend RI to a colleague.

Structurally, RI is built to operate as a genuine partner, not a layered agency. Our model is deliberately flat, which keeps senior leaders close to the work and actively involved from strategy through execution. This ensures that clients benefit from both deep expertise and direct access to the people who can make decisions, solve problems quickly, and maintain continuity across every stage of an engagement.

APPENDIX

PURCHASE INTENT STUDY METHODOLOGY AND DATA

For each category, we selected several top brands in the category. Using information obtained through public sources, we ranked these brands using MIT's Four Stages of Enterprise AI Maturity framework.


For the study, we picked four product categories with varying customer experience.


- **Carbonated soft drinks** – This category involves lower-value products that are purchased at a high frequency, with the majority of consumers drinking carbonated soft drinks at least once a week⁹.
- **Casual dining** – This category involves a slightly higher spend per order, with a little over 1 purchase per week on average¹⁰.
- **Cruise** – This category involves a much higher spend per order. Purchase frequency is lower, often annually, with some repeat cruisers going up to 5 times a year¹¹.
- **Electric vehicle** – This category involves a significant spend, and an infrequent purchase, generally with over 3 years in between¹².


Then we used the AI-powered market research platform askpolly to measure the purchase intent for these brands.


1. For each brand, we defined the audience who indicated they preferred the brand in the study period of Jan 1, 2025 to September 30, 2025 as their customers, and others who may purchase in the category as their prospects.
2. We asked the question “*Has <brand>'s marketing made you want to purchase <brand>'s <product> more?*” as a measure of how much marketing influenced purchase intent.
3. We looked at the answers for each brand, breaking down the answers by customers vs. prospects.

The following charts show the data for all the brands included in this study, along with the response rate, confidence level and margin of error.

INDUSTRY	BRAND	AI MATURITY	PROSPECT	CUSTOMER	ASKPOLLY CITATION
 Carbonated Soft Drinks	Brand 1	Stage 3: Develop AI ways of working	52.7%	66.1%	Polly received a response rate of 15,153,235 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 2% margin of error.
	Brand 2	Stage 3: Develop AI ways of working	50.6%	69.3%	Polly received a response rate of 9,791,311 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 2% margin of error.
	Brand 3	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	73.4%	79.3%	Polly received a response rate of 10,301,033 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 2% margin of error.
	Brand 4	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	67.3%	76.3%	Polly received a response rate of 4,803,610 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 3% margin of error.
	Brand 5	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	67.4%	79.2%	Polly received a response rate of 5,966,726 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 3% margin of error.

INDUSTRY	BRAND	AI MATURITY	PROSPECT	CUSTOMER	ASKPOLLY CITATION
 Casual Dining	Brand 1	Stage 1: Experiment & prepare	51.5%	69.3%	Polly received a response rate of 2,068,121 over January 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 3% margin of error.
	Brand 2	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	61.8%	75.1%	Polly received a response rate of 5,409,544 over January 1, 2024 to September 27, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 3% margin of error.
	Brand 3	Stage 1: Experiment & prepare	70.5%	79.6%	Polly received a response rate of 4,983,442 over January 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 3% margin of error.
	Brand 4	Stage 1: Experiment & prepare	61.3%	79.5%	Polly received a response rate of 4,678,023 over January 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 3% margin of error.
	Brand 5	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	48.2%	65.6%	Polly received a response rate of 1,014,307 over January 1, 2024 to September 28, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.

INDUSTRY	BRAND	AI MATURITY	PROSPECT	CUSTOMER	ASKPOLLY CITATION
 Cruise	Brand 1	Stage 3: Develop AI ways of working	39.5%	51.1%	Polly received a response rate of 697,137 over January 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 90% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.
	Brand 2	Stage 3: Develop AI ways of working	49.1%	54.8%	Polly received a response rate of 264,670 over January 1, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 70% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.
	Brand 3	Stage 3: Develop AI ways of working	42.2%	47.4%	Polly received a response rate of 618,230 over January 1, 2024 to September 27, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within an 85% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.
	Brand 4	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	37.6%	53.3%	Polly received a response rate of 1,142,181 over January 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.
	Brand 5	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	49.8%	75.1%	Polly received a response rate of 924,914 over January 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 90% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.

INDUSTRY	BRAND	AI MATURITY	PROSPECT	CUSTOMER	ASKPOLLY CITATION
 Electric Vehicle	Brand 1	Stage 1: Experiment & prepare	65.1%	69.1%	Polly received a response rate of 22,712,169 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 1% margin of error.
	Brand 2	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	78.2%	85.6%	Polly received a response rate of 2,694,523 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 4% margin of error.
	Brand 3	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	82.9%	86.3%	Polly received a response rate of 2,854,008 over December 30, 2024 to September 22, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 4% margin of error.
	Brand 4	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	78.2%	90.5%	Polly received a response rate of 1,250,668 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 90% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.
	Brand 5	Stage 3: Develop AI ways of working	85.3%	86.8%	Polly received a response rate of 1,984,860 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error.
	Brand 6	Stage 2: Build pilots & capabilities	84.5%	87.0%	Polly received a response rate of 2,335,312 over December 30, 2024 to September 29, 2025 in USA from X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Bluesky, TikTok and Mastodon (including Facebook Threads). Responses are collected within a 95% confidence interval and 4% margin of error.

ENDNOTES

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