



# The Future of Marketing

## About this research

The seventh edition of Econsultancy's Future of Marketing report brings together survey results from more than 1,000 marketing professionals and insight from Econsultancy's own internal experts to examine the trends shaping the industry. It examines marketers' plans, priorities and concerns for the coming two years.

## About Econsultancy, powered by Uptime

Econsultancy helps marketing and ecommerce teams develop and apply the skills they need to the business challenges they are facing today. We have now joined forces with Uptime, the world's first intelligent, proactive learning and wellbeing platform. This partnership brings together Econsultancy's trusted insight and industry leading learning programmes with Uptime's strength in premium content, smart technology and global scalability.

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# Introduction

## Three key stories

Each year that Econsultancy undertakes this research our analysis reveals a few key stories set to dominate the practice, experience and the future of marketing. Some of these are novel each edition; others build on the results and realities of past years.

This edition three stories emerged.

1

The first - the realities of marketing in an **AI-infused environment**: from the possibilities offered by new AI integrations and their reception from consumers through to the rise of 'workslop'. This is the year the promises – as well as the risks – of GenAI began to hit marketers' daily realities.

2

Our second key story focuses on the customer and on changing **experience expectations**. Dubbed the 'CX arms race', this year sees opportunities for brand new personalised experiences and rising customer expectations meeting with the perennial problem of data readiness.

3

Deeply interconnected with both of those themes is our third key story: that of the **human competitive advantage**.

Key to tapping into that advantage is an investment in your teams' skills and capabilities. This is something we deeply believe in at Econsultancy. It is also backed up by this year's research, as one of the standout findings this year is the increasingly clear relationship between training and capability building and organisational competitive performance.

This advantage comes from the refinement and strengthening of what makes us human – something that has become crucial for success amidst a wave of generative AI. Our research draws a clear line between those uniquely human attributes of creativity, curiosity and critical thinking and successful innovation.

# 2026 outlook

## Marketers' priorities

These themes are reflected in brand-side marketers' top five priorities for the coming two years.

### Top 5 priorities

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Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | How do you expect the importance of the following to change over the next two years (Increase only) | Sample: 531 (Brand marketers)

First is customer experience. The rising importance of CX has been the most consistent theme across Econsultancy's research for a decade. But as we will explore in *The CX Arms Race*, many marketers still lack the fundamental building blocks to deliver against their CX ambitions.

Skills, talent and creativity sit firmly within the human competitive advantage. The increasing focus here is reflected in the rise in priority for 'Having the right skills and talent in place', up from sixth in [the 2025 edition of this research](#) to second in 2026.

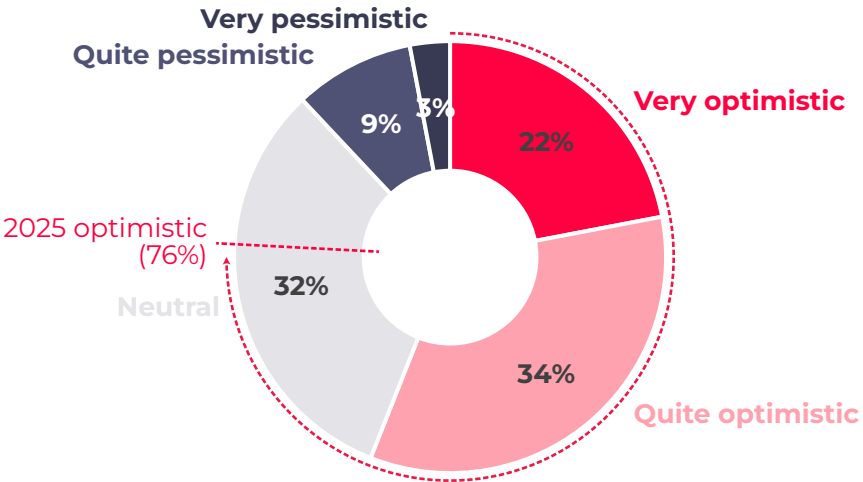
The placement of innovation and brand building within the top five priorities reveals both the opportunity and the challenge of marketing in the age of GenAI. When used in the right way, GenAI unlocks opportunities for new and innovative experiences and services.

At the same time, GenAI poses a risk to consumer confidence more broadly – as, faced with increasingly realistic AI generated content, audiences are no longer able to simply believe their eyes.

## Consumer confidence bites

Each year we ask marketers how optimistic they feel about the future of the industry. This year more than half described themselves as optimistic, with one in five describing themselves as very optimistic.

### Marketers' optimism



Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | How optimistic do you feel about the future of marketing? | Sample: 940

Though the majority of marketers have a positive view of the future, this does represent a marked fall from last year, down from 76% in 2025.

This drop in optimism can be primarily attributed to what is happening in the broader economy and the associated drop in consumer confidence to near-record lows.<sup>1,2</sup> Respondents identified both economic factors and confidence challenges as top obstacles when it comes to growth.

The fact that the quantity of respondents who described their mood as neutral saw the greatest gain highlights the uncertainty of the moment marketers find themselves in. Feeling both poised on the cusp of a potentially transformative technological revolution and all the opportunities that can provide - while also having to deal with current economic realities.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/47e081c2-49ef-48fe-9b30-02a020944138>

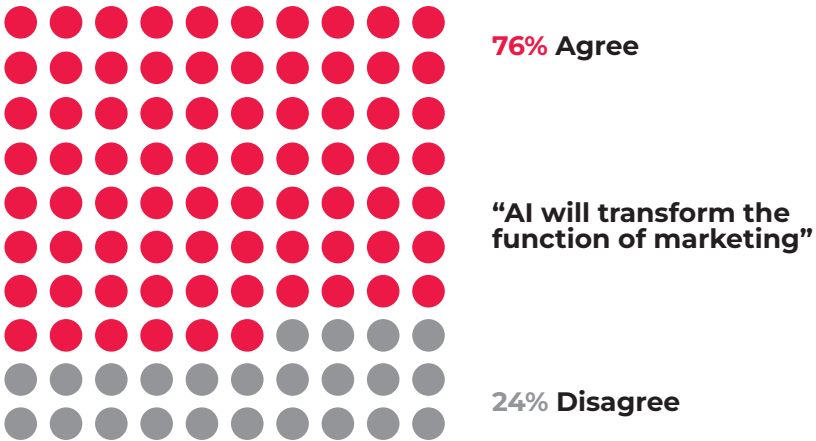
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/79a10385-3116-41ed-9efe-98c71f7e9853>

# AI meets marketing reality

The biggest story in marketing for the past few years has been the transformative potential of GenAI. However, this year we are seeing marketers start to grapple with the real-world effects of these technologies.

## Three quarters of marketers expect AI to reshape how marketing works

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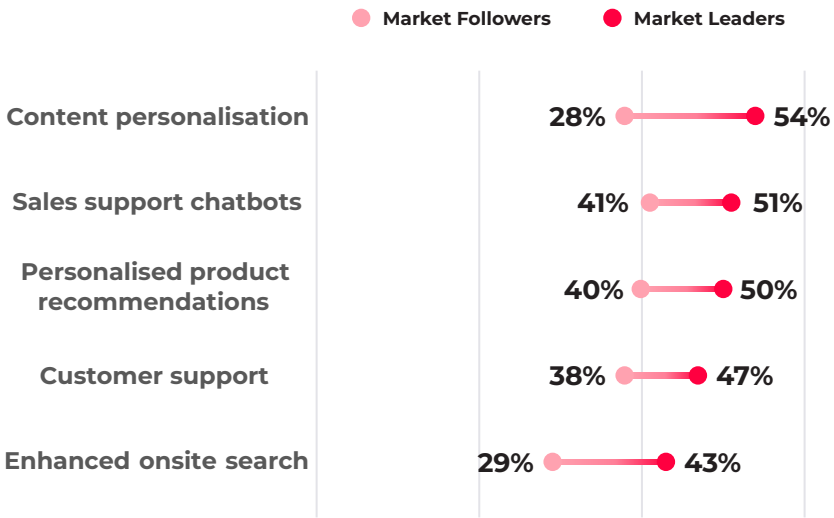
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Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | Sample: 829

## New experience opportunities

One of the key findings from Econsultancy's [Bridging the Gap Between AI Ambition and Execution](#) research last year was the link between competitive performance and AI maturity. One area this was particularly apparent was in how and where organisations were integrating GenAI into customer touchpoints.

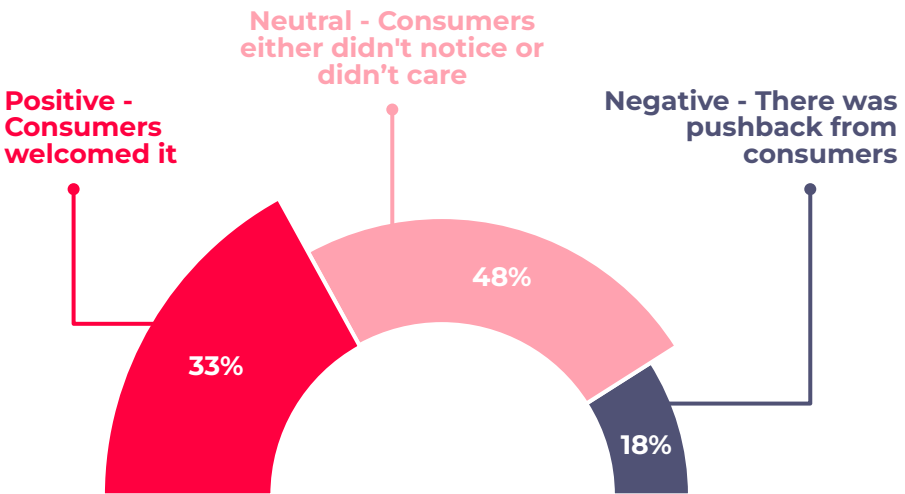
## How marketers are using GenAI to enhance the customer experience



Source: Econsultancy Future Proofing: Bridging the gap between AI ambition and execution | How is your organisation using GenAI to enhance the customer experience? | Sample: 415

Where GenAI has been integrated into a brand's marketing or customer experience, the vast majority of marketers report that the consumer response has been either positive or neutral.

## Consumers' response to GenAI integrations



Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | Where GenAI has been integrated into a brand's marketing or customer experience, what has been the consumer response? | Sample: 850

These results should offer reassurance to those organisations nervous about deploying customer-facing AI integrations. However, not all rollouts are created equal. Our research reveals that there is a gap emerging between market leaders (organisations that outperformed their sector) and market followers (organisations that kept pace with or underperformed against their sector) when it comes to consumer reception of these new experiences, with market leaders almost twice as likely to describe the consumer response as positive.

This reflects a pattern in terms of how well marketing GenAI rollouts and pilots perform more broadly, as market leaders are also more than twice as likely to report their organisation's GenAI solutions had exceeded expectations versus their market following rivals.

As most of these organisations will be drawing from the same pool of potential tools and suppliers, our research suggests that success with GenAI is less about choice of models – and is instead secured via strategic approach and, as is also shown in our research, an investment in skills.



## **GenAI and the communication landscape**

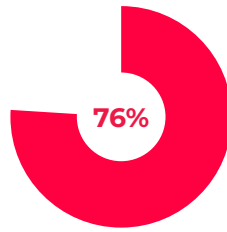
It's not just in marketing experiences where GenAI's impact is increasingly being felt, but the broader media landscape as well. Marketers find themselves increasingly communicating in a landscape permeated by AI-generated content.

For marketers this creates two key challenges – cut through and trust. Both of these are factors that were highlighted by survey respondents as key concerns for the coming two years.

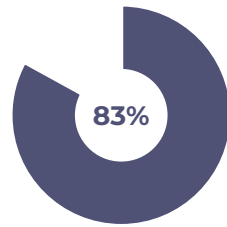
## The rising challenge of cut through and trust

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**Achieving cut through with marketing is increasingly a challenge**



**Building and maintaining brand trust is only becoming more important**



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Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | Sample: 937

Neither the challenge of capturing your audience's attention nor the value of building trust in your brand are new for marketers. However, the increased focus on these reflects a digital landscape where any individual can produce compelling, attention-grabbing or controversial content in seconds.

A communication landscape where audiences can no longer believe what they see will inevitably impact trust. These ramifications expand beyond marketing, but for brands, understanding how to create and maintain trust in this brave new world must be a key strategic focus.

### **The problem of 'workslop'**

For most organisations, the initial testbed for GenAI integrations has been internal processes. Potential gains in individual productivity, cost savings, and speed to insights are among the key promises of those first GenAI pilots.

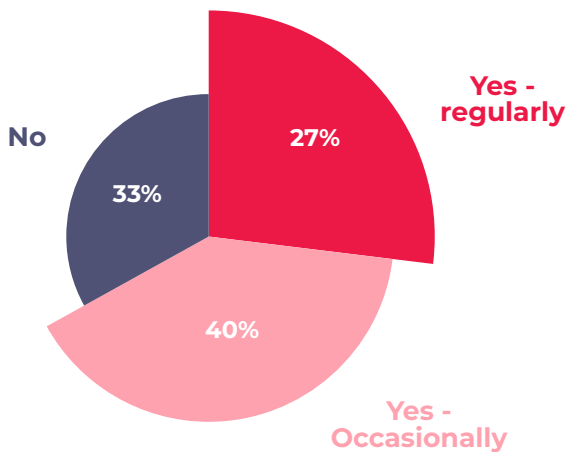
Those promises – and organisational FOMO – have led to speedy rollouts. However, introducing these technologies without appropriate guidance and support risks undermining any of those potential benefits in the form of 'workslop'.

'Workslop' is a term first coined by researchers at BetterUp Labs and Stanford Social Media Lab towards the end of 2025. It refers to AI-generated content in a work context that "masquerades as good work but lacks the substance to meaningfully advance a given task".<sup>3,4</sup>

Though the name may be new, the phenomenon is already widespread, with 7 out of 10 marketers reporting having received 'workslop' from someone they work with.

### How often marketers report receiving 'workslop'

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Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | Sample: 937

Workslop costs organisations efficiency as work needs to be redone. It also damages relationships within teams, with recipients of this false productivity typically thinking less of the sender.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of 'workslop' should not be seen as a deal-breaker in and of itself for implementing generative AI within organisations. What it does highlight, though, is the need for a thoughtful approach.

Organisations need to adopt clear directions as to the quality of work expected – and enforce policies for when work does not meet those standards. This should be coupled with an investment in the knowledge and skills of teams so that they are empowered to use these tools to create value – not problems.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.betterup.com/workslop>

<sup>4</sup> <https://hbr.org/2025/09/ai-generated-workslop-is-destroying-productivity>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.betterup.com/workslop>

## The CX arms race

The increasing recognition of the value of customer experience has been a consistent throughline of Econsultancy's research for a decade. Though its importance may be consistent, what is ever-changing is exactly what 'good CX' looks like.

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82%

**see CX as important  
to their  
organisation's  
future success**

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Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | How significant will customer experience (CX) be to your organisation's success over the next two years? (Significant and Very Significant) | Sample: 934

This is because every time we interact with a leading experience our expectations are raised. It is via this process that what were once experiential USPs can rapidly become table stakes.

Driven in part by the new experiences unlocked by GenAI (explored in theme one), the challenge of keeping up with changing customer experience expectations is particularly sharp this year. Keeping pace with what customers now expect was identified by marketers as the number one challenge facing their organisation in the course of meeting their CX ambitions.

### Customer centricity and data

Meeting customers' expectations requires marketers to know and understand those customers – and that understanding relies on quality, actionable data.

Data maturity and company performance appear to go hand in hand, with market-leading organisations more likely to report having access to real-time data and the ability to put that data to work through the personalisation of experiences across different channels. Market followers, by contrast, are more than twice as likely to be characterised by siloed data and limited or only partial visibility into customer behaviour.

Though data is one of the key foundations of delivering quality CX, there are other key components as well. Technology remains a challenge: despite the excitement around new tech solutions and the potential of AI specifically, 83% of marketers report shortcomings in their current martech stack.

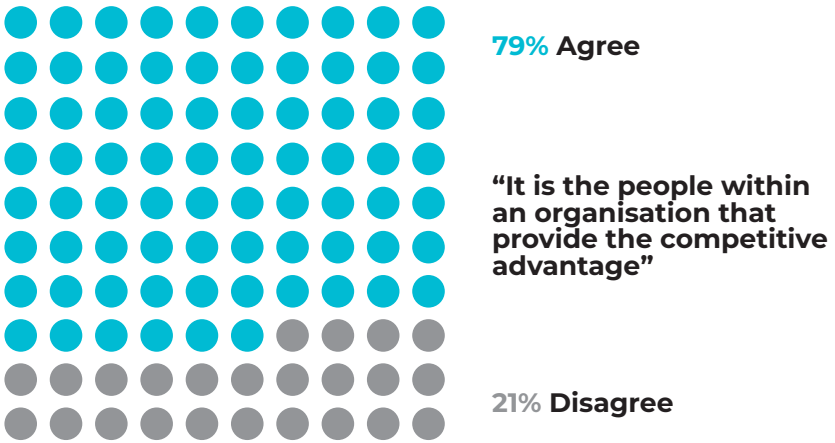
The other foundation is skills, with one fifth of marketers describing a lack of the right skills as being one of the chief barriers holding back their customer experience. This leads us neatly onto theme three - which is all about investing in capabilities.

# The human competitive advantage

Across all the themes and trends explored in this year's research, marketers were keen to highlight the one ingredient critical to success universal to all of them – people.

## Marketers recognise growth comes from people

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Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | Sample: 863

More so than other years, skills ranked as a key consideration or concern across a range of marketing areas. This focus on the humans behind the work could somewhat ironically be attributed to the rise of GenAI. When the barriers to basic marketing knowledge lift and access to tools becomes common among competitors, marketers increasingly recognise that it is how effectively you can use them that becomes the differentiator.

## Skills and competitive performance

This emphasis on skills is not misplaced. Our research revealed a clear relationship between investment in capability building for marketing teams and company performance.

The clearest distinguishing features of those organisations that outperformed their market were an emphasis on talent and teams and the quality of their training offer.

#1

differentiator...

... between market leaders and market followers is the importance placed on **people and skills**

However, for most organisations there is still a gap between their training offer and marketing teams' needs, with just 20% of marketers describing the skills development offer from their organisation as able to respond to current and emerging skills needs.

### **There is a skills development gap between what teams need and what organisations provide**



**“Our organisation's training offer meets current needs and is responsive when new skills emerge”**

Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | How would you rate the skills development and training available at your organisation? | Sample: 938

### **Upskilling for future needs**

Econsultancy's Learning for Growth model divides skills between the evergreen and the evolving.

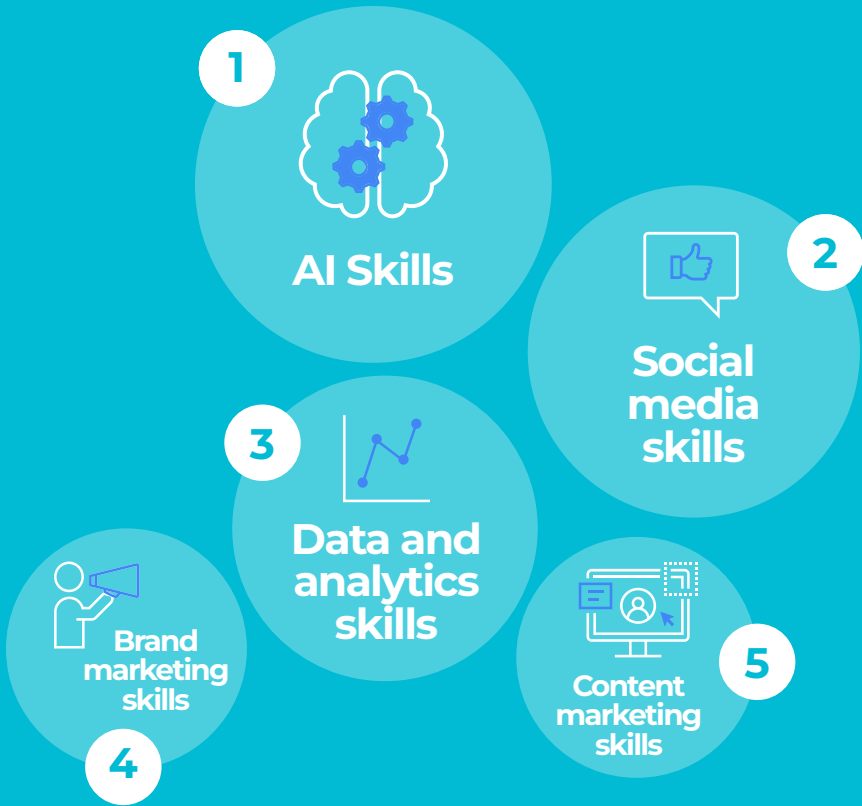
Evergreen marketing skills are those that are consistent across time, such as brand building and effective decision making. These are as relevant today as they were a decade ago and will be ten years from now.

Those foundational evergreen capabilities need to be supported with 'how to' skills rooted in the current communication and tech landscape. These are our

evolving skills that emerge in line with new technologies, platforms and consumer trends.

The skills seen as most important for marketers to develop are a mixture of the two.

### The skills set to increase most in importance for marketers



Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | Which skills areas do you think it is most important for marketers and marketing teams to develop? (Top five only) | Sample: 1001

Topping the priority list for marketers are AI skills. This replicates the results from 2025, which also placed AI at the top of the list as the most important skill area for individuals and teams to develop.

Econsultancy's dedicated AI research from late last year sheds light on what those specific AI skills should be.

The report revealed that the most pressing AI skills gaps were those most closely related to the day-to-day use of GenAI: prompting ranked first, followed closely by the ways that marketers can integrate these tools into their workflows. An understanding of how GenAI works and its strategic potential were also identified as lacking by more than a third of marketers.

## The most pressing GenAI skills gaps are a mix of practical and strategic



Source: Econsultancy Future Proofing: Bridging the gap between AI ambition and execution | In which areas do you see the greatest skills gaps relating to GenAI in your organisation | Sample: 428

Data is, as we have explored, key to understanding and meeting the needs of the customer. It is also essential for the effective use of AI technologies. There is a well-worn phrase when it comes to data: ‘garbage in, garbage out’. This is just as true, if not more so, in the world of GenAI, where tools can hallucinate and confidently deliver you the wrong answer.

Brand marketing, content, and social media skills’ increased importance can also be read as a reaction to the new AI-infused communication landscape and the resulting challenges of trust and cut through.

## Creativity's relationship with innovation

The human competitive advantage is not limited to what have traditionally been considered 'hard skills'. It also encompasses other key human capabilities - characteristics like critical thinking and curiosity.

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**82%** believe  
creativity is  
essential to  
innovation

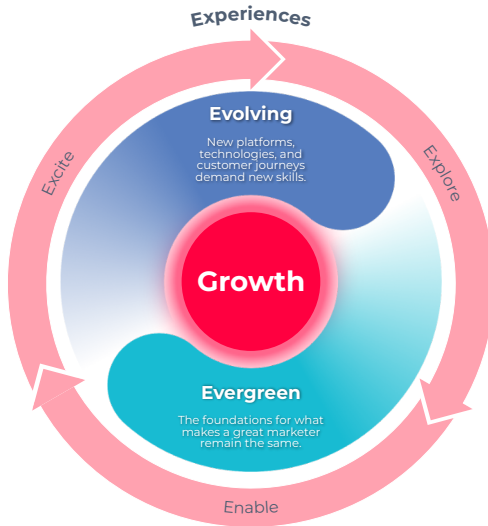
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Source: Econsultancy's Future of Marketing Survey 2026 | Sample: 872

This research specifically highlighted the importance of creativity for innovation - and by association future fitness. Marketers recognise that the ability for novel thought is still something that GenAI, with its bases in probability, cannot yet replicate.

Capabilities like creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking are just as important for the future success of an organisation as hard skills. And just like any other skill or capability, they are something that can be strengthened with the right support and training.

# How to future proof your marketing team in 2026: Learning for Growth



At Econsultancy we know that learning is essential to growth – something backed up by this research. However, we also know that many organisations' capability programmes fail to deliver behavioural change. The reasons for this are manifold – a lack of relevance, engagement, follow up, or simply that they are boring or ignored.

This is why within our learning for growth model you will find three, mutually reinforcing phases – Excite, Explore and Enable.

Excite is all about sparking curiosity and motivation by connecting learning to personal and business growth. This is about enhancing both the impact of the learning and the experience of the learner.

Explore takes us into the topic or skill area itself. This approach does away with the old-school 'broadcast' approach to upskilling and instead makes the learner an equal partner in building their capabilities.

Enable is about overcoming the hurdles to individuals applying what they have learned. Ultimately it's about moving skills and capabilities from something they learned, to something they do.

**To find out more about how Econsultancy can help you develop your team's human competitive advantage, get in touch with Christian Reid: [christian.reid@econsultancy.com](mailto:christian.reid@econsultancy.com).**

## Methodology

This research took place from December 2025–January 2026 and surveyed 1404 marketers and CX professionals across a range of sectors and regions. Future-focused questions only asked about the coming two years to increase reliability of predictions as this is a time frame marketers may be building into their plans already.

Figures are rounded to the nearest whole percentage and therefore may not always add up to 100%. Market leaders are marketers who describe their organisation as having outperformed their sector, while market followers are marketers who describe their organisation as having kept pace with or underperformed versus their sector as a whole.

For more details on the sample and methodology contact [rose.keen@econsultancy.com](mailto:rose.keen@econsultancy.com).

## About the author



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Rose Keen is the Content and Insight Director at Econsultancy. With over 15 years of media and business strategy experience, she has worked across a wide range of industries from automotive and advertising to food and fashion. She has a particular interest in the intersection between customer behaviour, cultural shifts and technology.

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