

MARKETING TRENDS

2026

1 Agents of change: from attention to intention

2026 will see the emergence of AI agents at scale. As consumers, we will brief our own agents, expressing our intent for mascara or an entertainment service. And these agents will become more autonomous as cryptocurrencies are built in. Kantar's Blueprint for Brand Growth proves that to grow, brands need to predispose more people. But now, they need to predispose agents, too.

OpenAI's announcement that their new browser will incorporate AI agents signals a shift in consumer behaviour. With 24% of AI users already using an AI shopping assistant (Kantar's Connecting with the AI consumer report), delegated purchase support is already the norm.

CMOs will need their brands (and their agents) to actively service these non-human consumers, while continuing to persuade and entertain humans through traditional attention-seeking channels. Product features, service details, guides, experiences and content will need to be widely findable. Marketers will need to understand the role that empathy and emotion can play in agentic transactions.

Brands that accelerate their AI visibility strategy in 2026 will be better placed to drive growth.

24%

of AI users are already using a voice assistant, a chatbot or an AI shopping assistant



Source: Kantar's Connecting with the AI consumer report 2025

2 Brand building with AI: human connection through machine selection

Next year, purchase decisions will be increasingly mediated by Generative AI and agents, who will recommend brands and their content. But (for now) technology doesn't buy things, people do. So, the CMO's job is to build brands that people love, and to be more present so that models prioritise their brands.

Salience alone won't make you algorithmically preferred. Three-quarters (74%) of those who use AI assistants (Kantar's Connecting with the AI consumer report) regularly seek out AI-driven recommendations.

Enter Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO), the new SEO. GEO gets your brand cited and trusted by LLMs. If the model doesn't know you, it won't choose you, so prepare to create clear, structured, machine-legible and relevant content. Models must be primed with the meaning of your brand and what you offer (e.g. recipes, how-to content).

The strongest brands will be those that shape the story AI is telling. Brands that fail to differentiate risk being lost in a sea of sameness – if you're not the default recommendation, you'll be optimised out.

3 in 4

AI users rely on AI-driven recommendations daily or weekly



Source: Kantar's Connecting with the AI consumer report 2025

3 Synthetic data, augmented audiences

Augmenting audiences with AI will deepen marketers' understanding so they can strategise more effectively. Use of synthetic data requires a balance of speed, scale, and accuracy. However, algorithms vary significantly depending on the dataset and the scenario. Our own synthetic data boosting delivers 94-95% accuracy versus the ground truth.

As technologies like digital twins (digital versions of real products or people) evolve, expect clearer guardrails and use cases, and the rapid integration of text, voice, image and VR. Generative AI will enhance how we visualise insights and integrate with LLM search.

Is the industry ready for this? Not fully. Responsible data, rigorous testing, new skills, and the technology and infrastructure to scale are musts.

Marketers are moving beyond synthetic hype to practical execution in 2026; brands will need to develop internal capabilities, make informed trade-offs and work with trusted data partners to get ahead.

Synthetic data can deliver

94-95%

accuracy versus the ground truth



Source: Kantar's Synthetic data research 2025

4 Transform creative optimisation into creative intelligence with AI

If you're one of the majority of marketers excited about Generative AI (Kantar's Media Reactions), the next step is using it where it counts. For creative content, that means systematically adopting AI-powered evaluation techniques to predict which ads will capture attention, stir emotions, and affect purchase intent and long-term brand equity.

As AI-assisted testing becomes faster, more accurate and widely used, marketers will be able to test ads in real time. In 2026, agentic optimisation recommendations will give marketers the power to fine-tune campaigns dynamically, based on what's worked before, what's trending now and audience responses. Human insight will be just as essential to tell your brand's story authentically.

In 2026, there will be a focus on the quality of training datasets for the AI-based tools that make automated decisions, to ensure that the insights are robust and trustworthy. CMOs need to test and learn now, to ensure that creative effectiveness drives brand growth.

75%

of global marketers are now excited about the possibilities of Generative AI



Source: Kantar's Media Reactions 2025

5 Treatonomics: enjoying every day

Treatonomics, aka 'little treat culture', has emerged as an antidote to economic volatility and a fundamental change in life's milestones. With marriage, parenthood and home ownership increasingly out of reach or undesirable, treatonomics is about injecting optimism and control through small pleasures. In fact, 36% of consumers are prepared to go into short-term debt to spend on things they enjoy (Kantar's Global MONITOR).

People are now marking 'inchstones' just to have something to celebrate. It's the lipstick effect on steroids.

Attended a divorce party? Bought yourself a diamond for a job rejection? You're on trend. Social media's pivot to commerce, where demand is created and fulfilled in seconds, is keeping treatonomics alive. With economic uncertainty still ongoing, the trend will likely persist into 2026. But trends are moving faster, and are fragmenting by geographical and cultural niches, so brands need to work hard to stay at the front of the race.

CMOs need to ask if their brands are meeting consumers where they are, by creating joy in the everyday.

36%

of consumers are prepared to go into short-term debt to spend on things they enjoy



Source: Kantar's Global MONITOR

6 Experiment to accelerate: innovation as an engine for growth

Innovation is a proven multiplier. Over the past 20 years, brands willing to disrupt themselves or their category (the Apples, Amazons and Googles) created **\$6.6 trillion in value** (Kantar's BrandZ).

Yet many businesses stumble when it's time to take a risk. With disruption all around us, playing safe can feel tempting – but it's at the expense of future growth.

In 2026, short-termism won't be enough. Brands that make experimentation their default will grow and shape the future. Smart risk-taking thrives in cultures where teams have permission to push boundaries, exploration is structured, and experimentation is rewarded.

Crucially, innovation must be brand-led, not tech-led, rooted in what a brand stands for and in consumer motivations and tensions. With the advent of widely used AI tools, CMOs face a new imperative: ensure innovation brings a brand's meaningful difference to life, rather than chasing technology.

Brands that make experimentation their default in 2026 will grow and shape the future. Does your culture reward risk-taking? After all, the biggest risk is still not taking one.

Brands that disrupted themselves or their category created

\$6.6 trillion

of the incremental value added to the world's most valuable brands over the last 20 years

Source: Kantar BrandZ 2025

7 Brands at the crossroads: authentic inclusion drives growth

Inclusive marketing is expansive marketing. It's how brands grow – by reaching out and meaningfully engaging high-growth populations who've long been underserved or under-represented.

Despite recent efforts to undermine DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), in 2026, future-forward brands will leave behind the performative messages of the past and strive for more effective solutions to consumer needs for access to products and services, as well as representation within businesses and in external messaging.

Nearly two-thirds of people (65%) value companies who promote diversity and inclusion, up from 59% in 2021 (Kantar's Global MONITOR). And predisposing more people pays off in growth. However, in a climate of backlash, brands must lead with certainty, being clear about the values they stand for, and showing action.

In 2026, marketers should double down on inclusive innovation, culturally fluent programmes, and authentic representation on both sides of the camera.

65%

of people value companies' promotion of diversity and inclusion



Source: Kantar's Global MONITOR 2021 - 2025, 28 markets, 36,000+ respondents aged 13+

8 Unlocking retail's media potential: growth through collaboration

With over 200 Retail Media Networks (RMNs) and counting, the channel is becoming central to reaching shoppers online and in-store. This networked approach has given media owners unprecedented control and influence on purchase decisions at multiple stages.

RMNs are high-performing: 1.8x better results than digital ads, and nearly 3x better results for purchase intent, according to Kantar LIFT data. No wonder a net 38% of marketers plan to increase RMN investment in 2026 (Kantar's Media Reactions), which should be a rallying cry for media owners to provide advertisers with greater transparency and more straightforward ROI measurement.

Look out for shoppable ads on CTV and streamers to go mainstream next year – a major moment in reshaping the way people discover, interact, and buy products.

Brands and retailers will need to collaborate closely in 2026 to create consumer-focused advertising, with success hinging on data integration from different retail touchpoints.

Retail Media Networks perform:

1.8x better than digital ads



3x better for purchase intent



Source: Kantar LIFT database

9 Creators need to earn their place at the marketing effectiveness table

A net 61% of marketers plan to increase their investment in creator content in 2026 (Kantar's Media Reactions), so the pressure to show it's impact grows. Engagement, likes, and views aren't meaningful outcomes; for brands to predispose more people through creators, the important benchmarks in 2026 will be ROI and brand-building metrics.

Coherent, cross-channel campaigns are 2.5x more important to campaign success than a decade ago (Kantar LIFT+ database). But only 27% of creator content ties strongly to the brand. The fix is structural: 2026 needs a shift from isolated creator executions to long-term creative platforms, or clustered themes, that align brand and creator-led content.

Creators are not actors – they do their own thing. The skill for brands will be learning to cede control and to co-create. Over-direct and the spark dies; under-bring and the brand risks disappearing.

CMOs must set clear guardrails for creator content, solidify and share success metrics, then let creators do what they do best – in ways that manifest the brand's meaningful difference.

A net

61%

of marketers plan to increase their content creator investment in 2026



Source: Kantar's Media Reactions 2025

10 Micro-communities become a major force in social media marketing

Algorithmic feeds reward generic, sales-heavy content. Organic reach for branded pages keeps sliding, making broad engagement less effective and more expensive. Faced with crowded and impersonal spaces, people are moving towards micro-communities where they talk and belong in more meaningful ways.

Here, authenticity and relevance drive more engagement than reach, and brands win by showing up with tangible value (not promotion), and consistently and authentically engaging with people's interests. It's about building with audiences, often by collaborating with credible creators.

In China, where many social trends originate, brands using knowledge-sharing micro-community platforms achieved a 25% higher marketing ROI (Kantar LIFT ROI database). And nearly 40% of consumers trust micro-community recommendations as much as personal ones, a strong sign of these networks' peer-to-peer credibility.

In 2026, marketers will need to pay close attention to ROI through authentic engagement and organic advocacy in micro-communities.

Brands using knowledge-sharing micro-community platforms achieved

25%

higher marketing ROI in China



Source: Kantar LIFT ROI database

About Kantar

Kantar is the world's leading marketing data and analytics business and an indispensable brand partner to the world's top companies. We combine the most meaningful attitudinal and behavioural data with deep expertise and advanced analytics to uncover how people think and act. We help clients understand what has happened, why and how to shape the marketing strategies that shape their future.

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