INSIGHT 2026

The state of digital today;
the trends of tomorrow.

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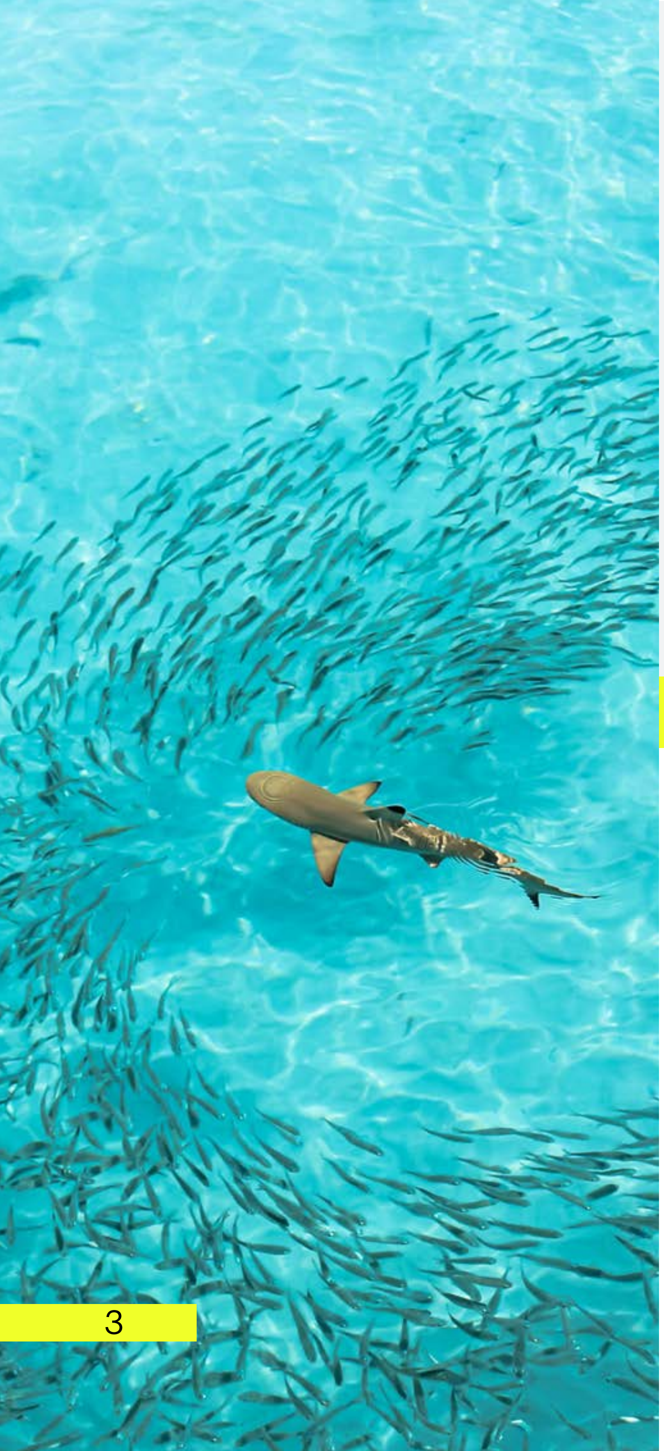

Executive Summary

As we enter our third year of the State of Digital Survey, one thing is clear: digital marketing has grown up. The conversation is no longer about keeping pace with technology — it's about how confidently we use it. This year's findings reveal an industry maturing from exploration to intention, learning that growth comes not from speed, but from focus.

Across markets, businesses are more selective, more data-aware, and increasingly confident in their choices. Social media remains the centre of gravity for most marketing teams, but how it's used is changing. Brands are less interested in being everywhere and more focused on being effective where it counts. TikTok's rapid audience growth continues to challenge this mindset — adoption is strong, but hesitation remains. It's a question not of willingness, but readiness.

The same story plays out with artificial intelligence. Almost half of organisations now use AI assistants or generative AI tools, yet only a small fraction have made them integral to strategy.

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AI is firmly in the marketing toolkit, but not yet in the marketing mindset. The opportunity is no longer adoption — it's integration.

Budget behaviour mirrors this maturity curve. The majority of organisations' increasing spend is also expanding their MarTech stacks, automation use, and confidence in decision-making. In contrast, those cutting budgets rely on fewer tools, fewer networks, and more manual processes — a reminder that when marketing shrinks to fit a budget, innovation tends to shrink with it.

Company size continues to shape sophistication, but not always as expected. Start-ups show remarkable data maturity, often outperforming larger SMEs through agility and experimentation. Medium-sized organisations are scaling fastest, while enterprises focus on consolidation and efficiency. The true differentiator isn't size — it's mindset.

Nowhere is that clearer than in the link between data and confidence. Data-driven marketers trust their experience, validate their direction, and invest decisively. Those without data rely on opinions, competitors, and budget limits — and their confidence suffers as a result. In short, when decisions follow data, confidence follows too.

"When data drives the decision, confidence follows — and budgets grow. When budgets lead, growth slows."

The 2025 survey tells a story of maturity: how marketers are learning to balance innovation with discipline, creativity with evidence, and technology with human judgment. As we look to the next phase of digital growth, success will belong to those who turn focus into a strategy and data into conviction.

Mike Saunders
CEO, Digitlab

Mike Saunders

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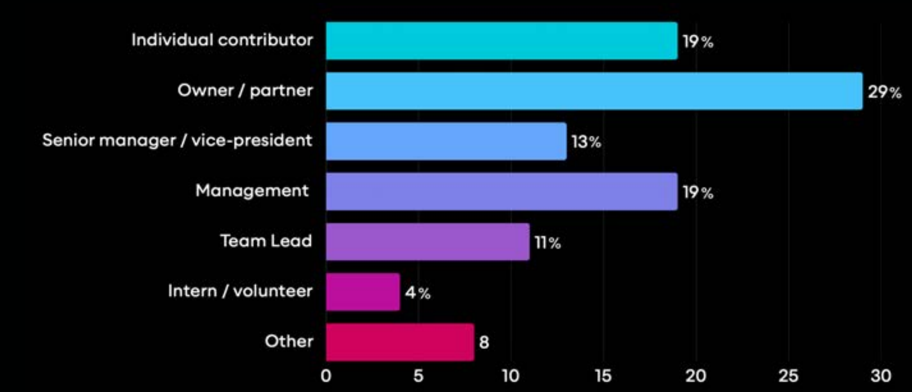
Introduction:
A Maturing Digital Market

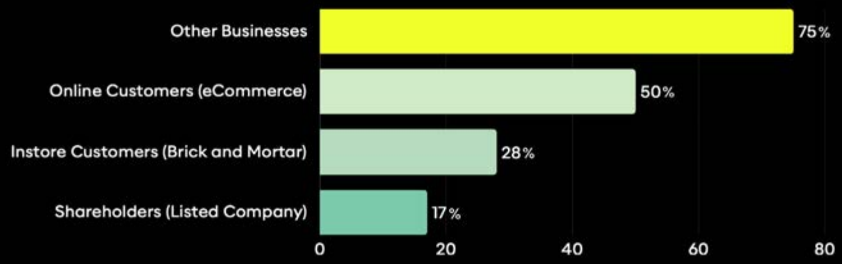
The 2025 State of Digital Survey marks the third year Digitlab has captured the evolving relationship between technology, marketing and business growth. This year's insights reveal a market that is increasingly mature, pragmatic, and focused. Rather than chasing every trend, businesses are learning to balance innovation with discipline — building marketing systems that are data-informed, AI-enabled, and human-centred.

Survey Demographic Profile

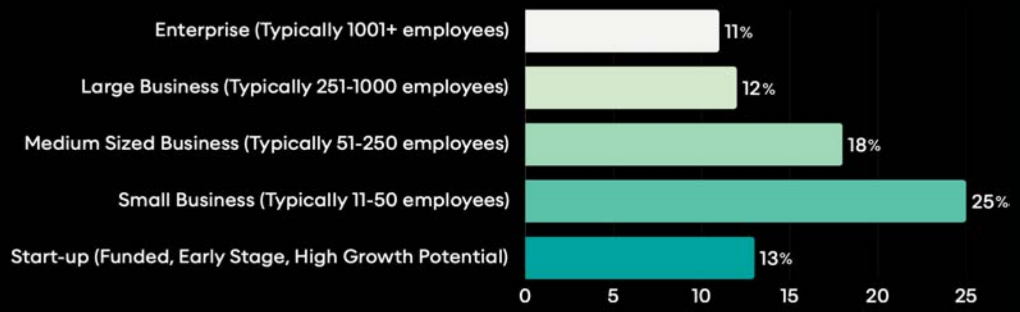
Job Role



Customer Focus



Organisation Size



Data-Driven Confidence Drives Growth

The data reveals a sharp divide between data-driven marketers and those still guided by instinct or budget constraints.

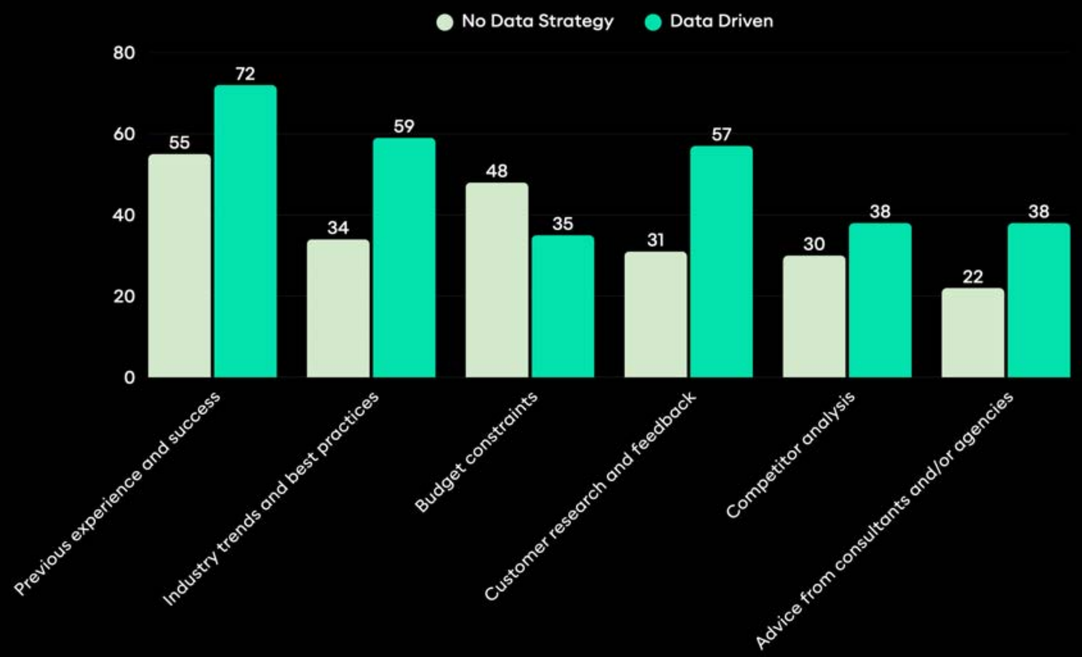
Data-driven organisations make investment and strategy decisions with greater clarity and conviction. They use customer feedback, campaign data, and performance insights to validate direction and measure success. This data fluency allows them to move beyond budget limitations — aligning marketing investment with business objectives rather than reacting to competitor behaviour or short-term financial pressures.

By contrast, non-data-driven organisations often rely on fragmented decision-making frameworks — multiple opinions, external advice, and internal politics — that dilute focus and slow progress. Without the confidence that comes from substantial evidence, marketing strategy becomes defensive, reactive, and over-reliant on cost control.

The danger is clear: when budgets – rather than data - drive decisions, organisations begin to lose confidence. Strategy becomes dictated by affordability rather than opportunity, and over time, these businesses are more likely to experience declining marketing budgets as performance stagnates.

How data-driven and non-data-driven organisations determine which digital marketing strategies to invest in.

Investment Guideline



Insight: Data Builds Confidence, Not Complexity

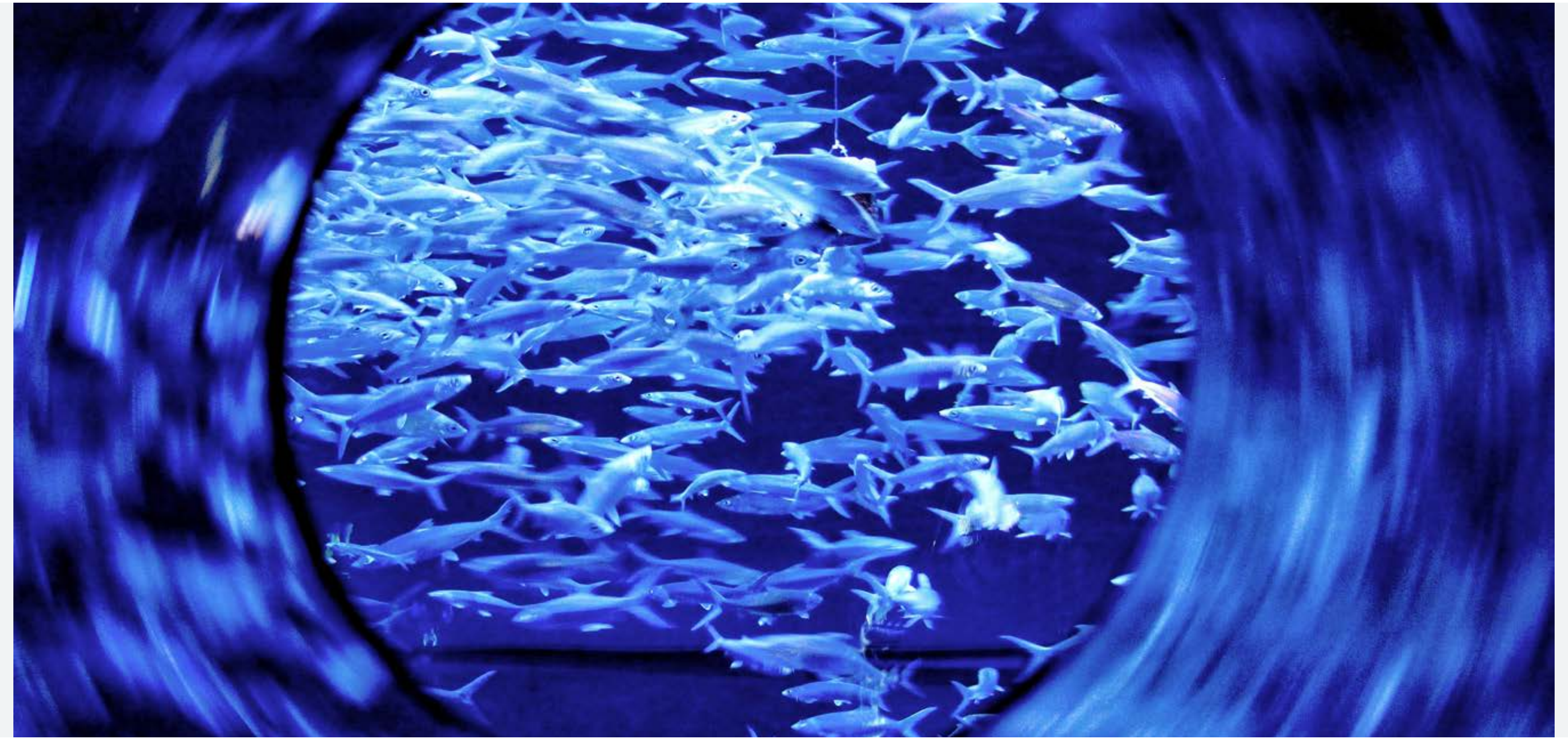
- 72% of data-driven organisations express confidence in their own previous experience and success — compared to just 55% of non–data-driven companies.
- They also prioritise customer data (57%) far more than their less mature peers (31%).

This demonstrates how data replaces hesitation with direction. When marketers have access to clear, validated insights, they can make instinctive yet evidence-backed decisions — confident that each move supports growth.

Without that foundation, businesses are left juggling too many tools and opinions, making decisions that protect budgets rather than advance strategy.

The lesson is clear: data doesn't just inform decisions — it empowers them.

In essence, data builds conviction. It enables marketers to act decisively, trust their instincts, and maintain focus on business goals rather than competitor movements or short-term trends.



AI and Automation: Adoption Rising, Integration Lagging

AI has crossed the threshold into mainstream adoption — but it hasn't yet crossed into mainstream impact. The data shows that while organisations are rolling out AI tools at a healthy rate, very few are integrating them deeply into their operations. In its current form, AI is present, helpful, and promising — but still sitting on the periphery.

Implementation Without Integration

Across the dataset, around half of organisations have implemented AI assistants or generative AI tools. But the raw numbers reveal something important:

AI Assistants:
- Integral to the business: 16%
- Showing value (but not integral): 57%

Generative AI:
- Integral to the business: 27%
- Showing value (but not integral): 70%+

Compared to CRM, CMS, analytics, and email — all of which score far higher on "integral to the business" — AI is still behaving like an add-on. It's being used to speed up tasks, not reshape systems. This is where the integration gap becomes impossible to ignore.

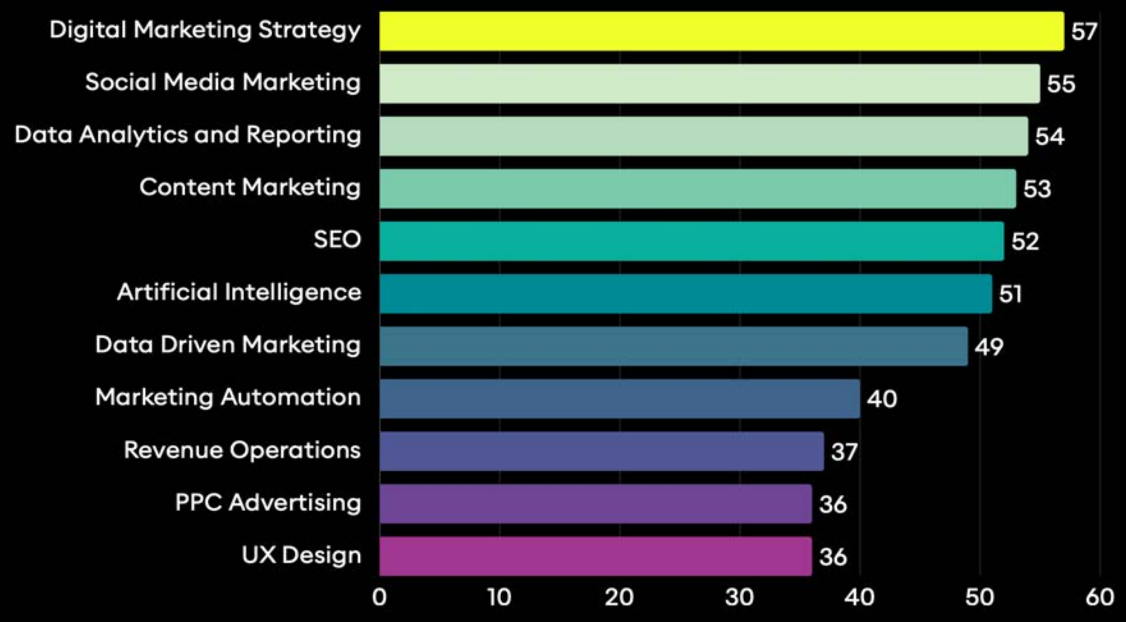
Training Priorities Reflect an Older Skill Mix

The training data strengthens the case. Although AI is the only skill that grew in priority since last year, it still ranks below established disciplines like:

- Digital strategy
- Data analytics
- Content marketing
- Search engine optimisation (SEO)

The implication is clear: teams are experimenting with AI, but they're still investing most of their capability-building in pre-AI disciplines. Without the upskilling required to operationalise AI, integration naturally lags.

Which marketing skills are currently being prioritised in your organisation's training initiatives?



AI Is Viewed as a Task-Level Tool, Not a System-Level Engine

The difference between "showing value" and "integral" is more than semantics — it's a signal of maturity.
In the raw data:

- AI overwhelmingly occupies the "showing value" category.
- Core systems (CRM, CMS, analytics, email marketing) dominate "integral to the business."

This pattern tells us exactly how organisations are using AI today:
As an assistant, not an engine.
Something that helps with content, summaries, and small efficiencies — not something that informs customer experience, automation flows, or strategic decision-making.

The Result: AI Adoption Is High, But AI Maturity Is Low

Across tools, training, and perceived value, the story is consistent:

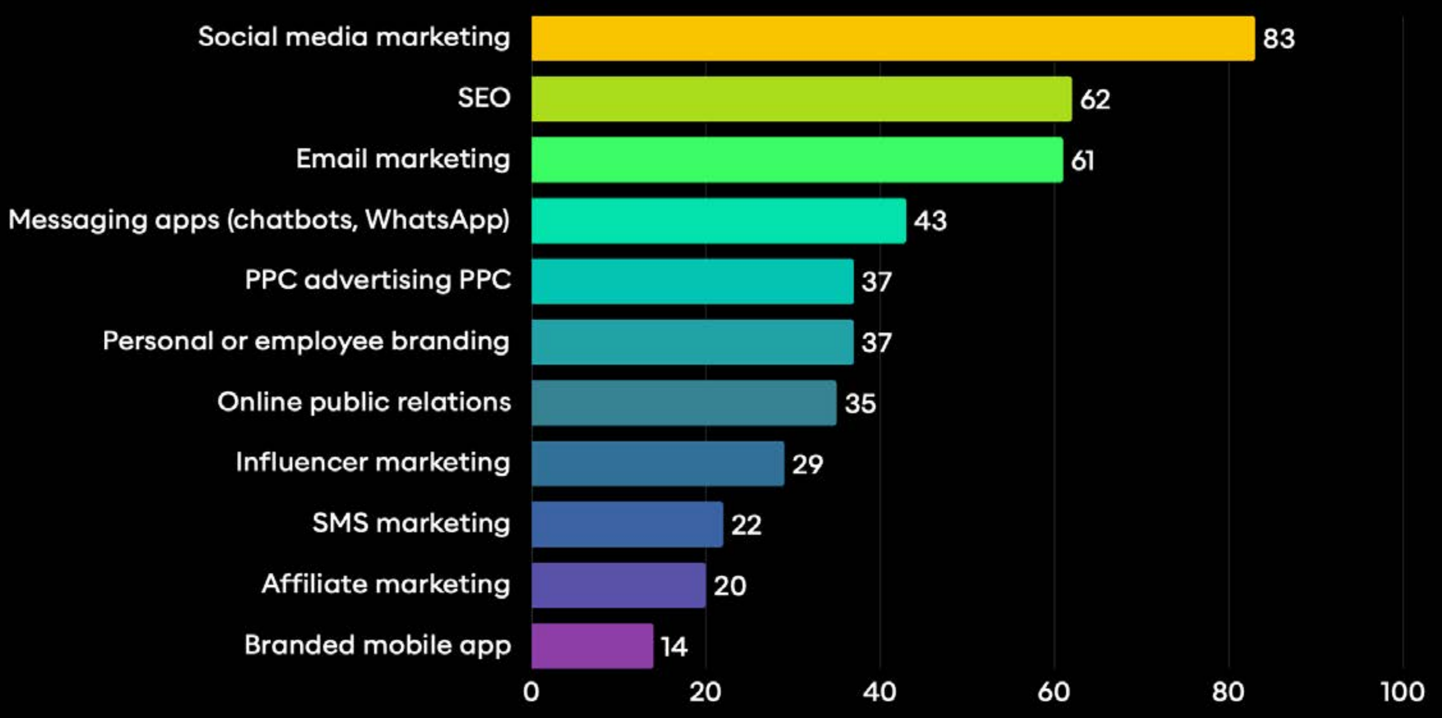
- Organisations have AI.
- They see value in AI.
- However, they haven't restructured their operations around AI.

Until AI becomes embedded into data systems, workflows, and decision frameworks, its impact will remain tactical, not transformative.
The next competitive gap won't be between companies that use AI and those that don't.

It will be between companies that integrate AI deeply — and those that keep it at the edges of their marketing operations.

Social Media:
Still the Beating Heart of Digital Marketing

Channels

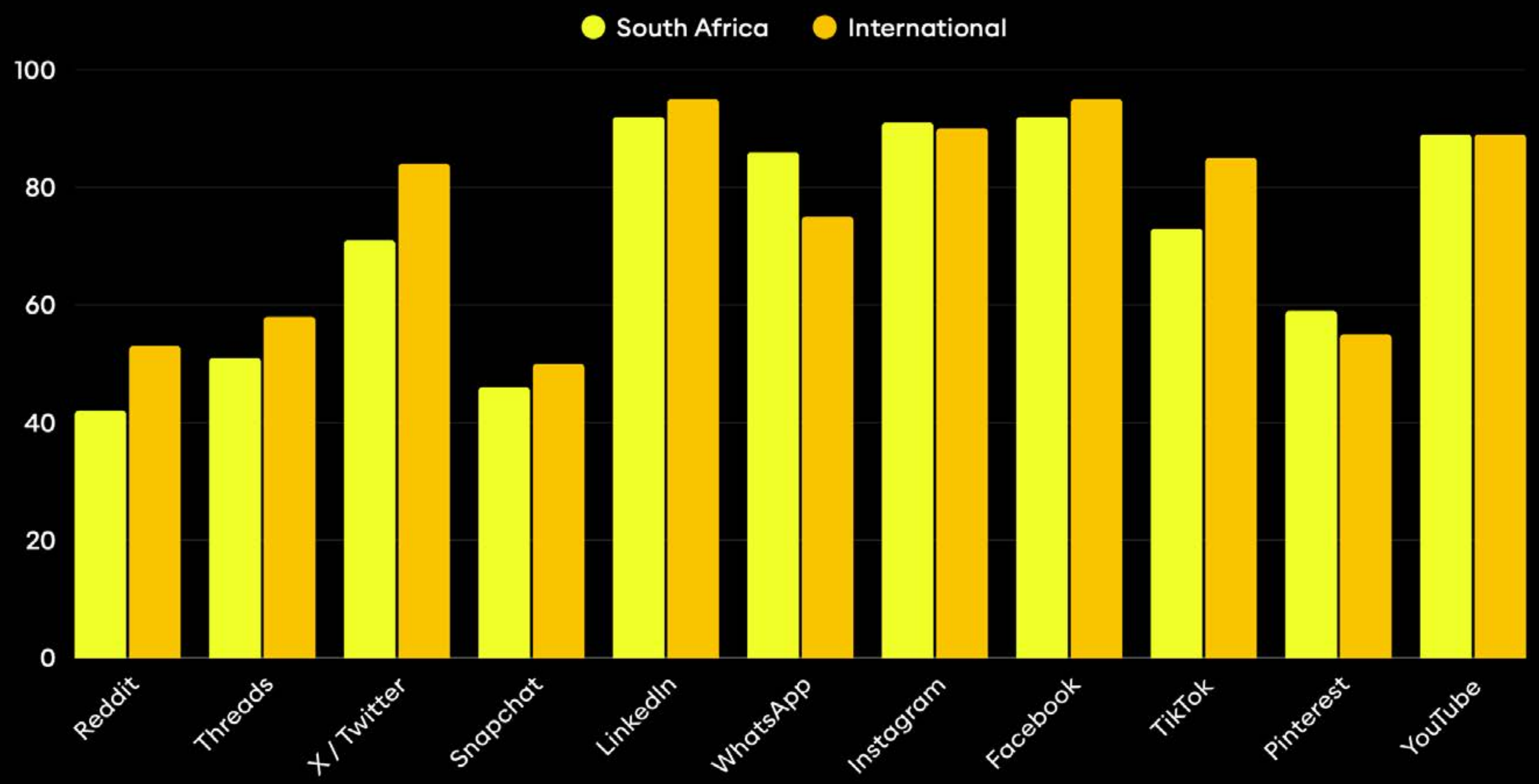


Despite ongoing debate about whether social media has reached its peak, the data shows it remains the most effective and widely used digital channel. Organisations are active across an average of 7.9 social media platforms, with Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram leading in both reach and perceived effectiveness.

TikTok presents a notable paradox. While South African audiences on the platform are growing rapidly, many businesses remain hesitant to invest heavily in it. This hesitation likely reflects a combination of strategic focus and practical accessibility barriers. On one hand, marketers are concentrating their efforts on proven, performance-driven platforms. On the other hand, TikTok's unique creative environment — centred on video production, unpolished and creator-led content, and influencer collaboration — sets a higher perceived entry bar. For many organisations, this represents both a creative and operational shift they're not yet prepared to make. In short, it's as much about readiness as it is about restraint.

Compared to global business, South African organisations push hard into major platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram, while the SA audience is very WhatsApp-centric.

Top Social Platform Usage by SA & Internationally



Platform Strategy Mirrors Business Identity

The data reveals more than just which platforms businesses prefer — it reflects how different business models express confidence, creativity, and audience proximity in the digital space. While some patterns follow expectations, the underlying motivations highlight a spectrum of readiness, risk tolerance, and creative accessibility.

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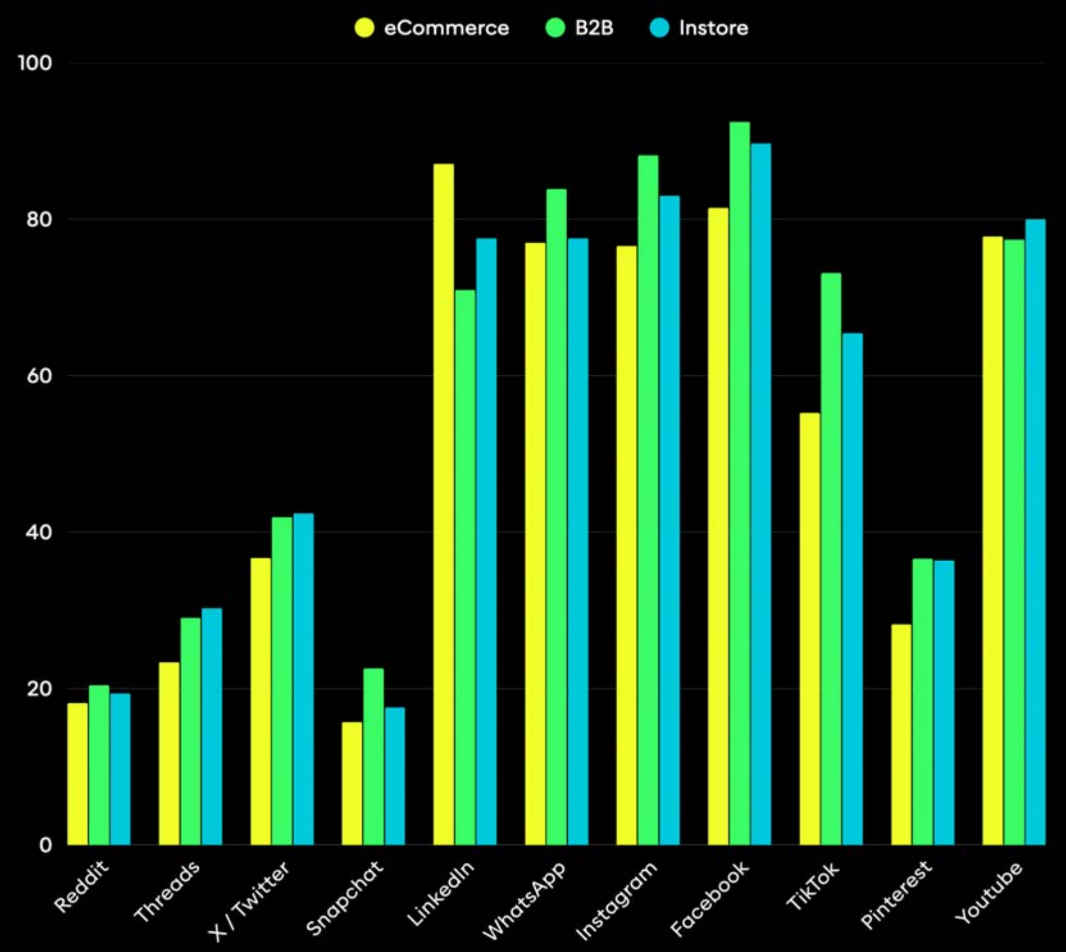
Top Social Platform Usage by Business Type



B2B: The Professional Core

B2B organisations remain anchored in professionalism and control.

- With LinkedIn (87%), Facebook (81%), YouTube (77.8%) and WhatsApp (77%) as their most effective channels, this segment prioritises trust, authority, and relationship-building.
- Visual-first platforms like Instagram (77%) and TikTok (55%) are gaining traction, suggesting a shift toward more human-centred communication, and B2B brands' effective use of these platforms — but transformation is gradual.

B2B marketers are evolving from formal to personable, adopting new platforms cautiously while preserving their reputation-driven approach.

In-store: The Social Performer

In-store businesses lead the pack in social fluency.

- Their dominance on Facebook (96%), Instagram (97%), and WhatsApp (88%) underscores a strong, preference effective use for of accessible, relationship-based platforms that foster visibility and local engagement.

- High effectiveness ratings on TikTok (73%) and YouTube (77.4%), and growing effectiveness of Pinterest (29%), reflect a growing comfort with visual storytelling and experiential marketing.

In-store brands are the most expressive digital marketers, turning social media into a stage for connection, culture, and commerce.

eCommerce: The Strategic Hybrid

eCommerce brands bridge the worlds of professionalism and performance.

- Their platform mix — Facebook (90%), Instagram (83%), Youtube (80%) and LinkedIn (78%) — demonstrates a calculated balance between customer acquisition and brand credibility.

- The adoption of TikTok (65%), Pinterest (30%) and X (42.42%), points to tactical diversification rather than a full creative embrace, suggesting experimentation guided by data and ROI.

eCommerce marketers are multi-lingual — fluent in both social storytelling and measurable performance.

The Confidence Curve: How Businesses Balance Focus and Accessibility

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Across business types, platform adoption reflects more than audience targeting — it reveals how **confident brands feel in expressing themselves publicly** and how prepared they are to engage in participatory, creator-led environments.

The data outlines a clear **confidence curve:** as brands move closer to their audiences, they become more comfortable with creative expression — but also more exposed, informal, and dynamic. Each business type occupies a distinct point along this curve.

- **In-store brands** operate with the most remarkable creative ease, thriving in visual, social-first spaces where authenticity and immediacy drive engagement. Their comfort with video, storytelling, and conversation makes platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok natural extensions of their physical customer experience.
- **eCommerce brands** view creativity through a strategic lens. They balance experimentation with data accountability, testing new platforms methodically and scaling what performs. Their approach demonstrates a growing confidence in blending brand expression with performance-driven execution.
- **B2B organisations** sit at the more cautious end of the curve. They are learning to translate expertise into authenticity—softening corporate tones and experimenting with storytelling—while remaining mindful of professionalism and control.

Taken together, these behaviours show that platform choice is as much about cultural readiness as it is about marketing strategy. TikTok's adoption pattern highlights this perfectly: its fast-paced, creator-driven environment challenges traditional production mindsets and demands unpolished, participatory content. For some brands, this is liberating; for others, it's a leap too far—at least for now.

The Confidence Curve underscores a defining truth in 2025's digital landscape: success no longer depends solely on where brands show up, but on how confidently they show up — balancing strategic focus with creative accessibility to connect more meaningfully in a world that rewards authenticity over perfection.

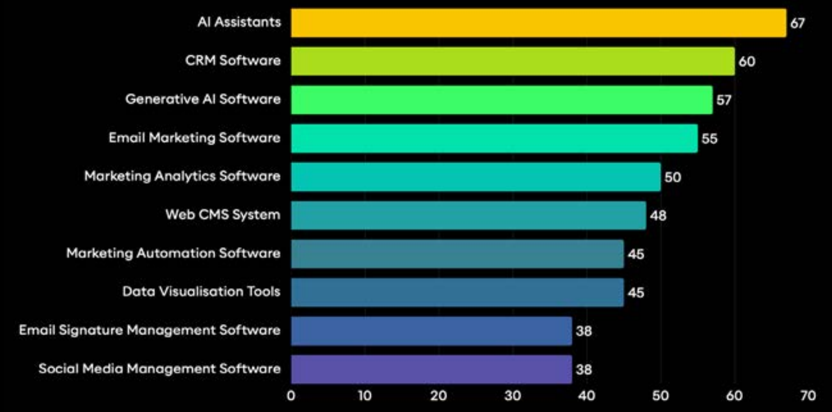
Company Size and Digital Sophistication

Company size remains one of the strongest predictors of digital capability. Larger firms dominate in analytics, CRM, and automation, while start-ups lead in AI experimentation and lean data practices. Medium firms sit in the middle—structured enough to scale, flexible enough to innovate.

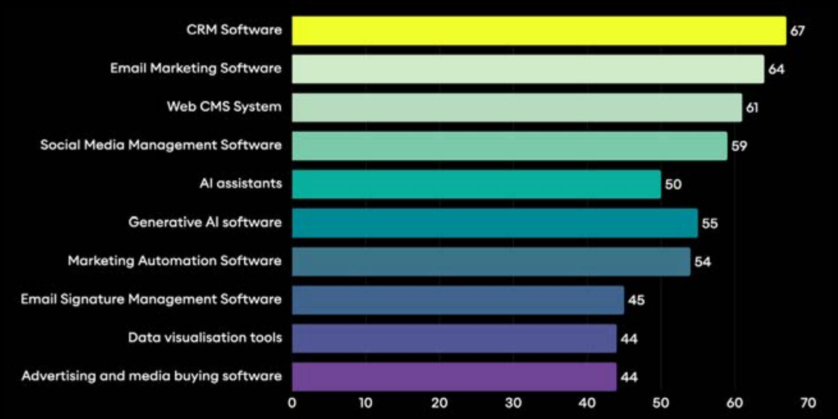
- **Large Enterprises:** 31% are fully data-driven; 5% lack a data strategy.
- **Medium Organisations:** 55% are data-proficient or higher; 63% increased budgets.
- **SMEs:** 57% data-proficient, often agile but resource-limited.
- **Start-ups:** 57% data-proficient, defining themselves by agility, experimentation, and embedded data use.

Which Marketing Technology (MarTech) Solutions have you implemented in your business?

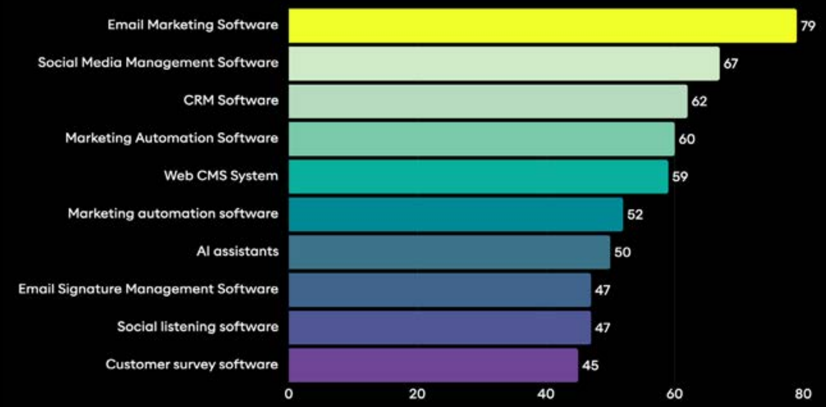
Start Ups



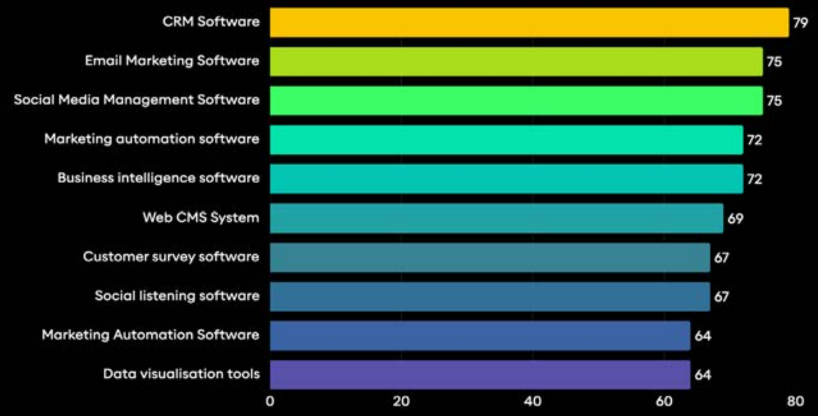
Small Organisations



Medium Organisations



Large Organisations

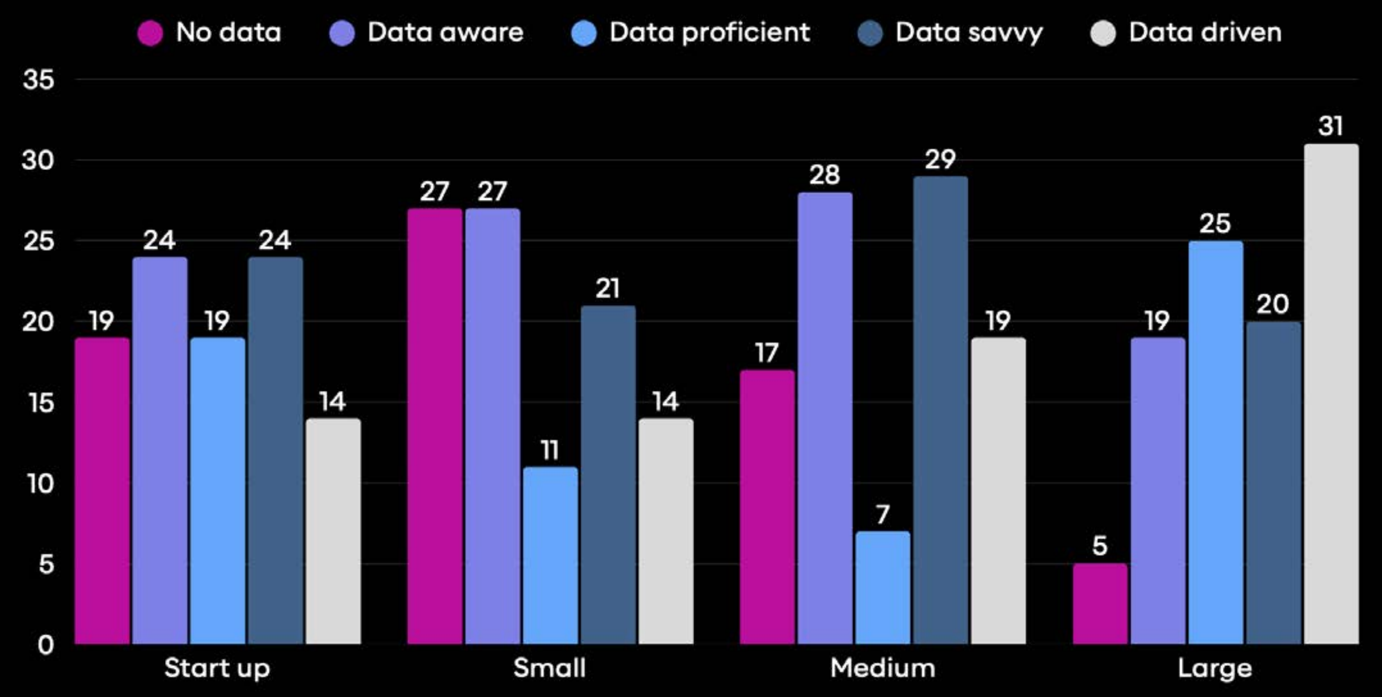


Data proficiency is no longer just a function of scale

Data maturity clearly increases with organisation size, but the progression is uneven. Start-ups stand out for their agility, with 67% identifying as data-proficient or higher — surpassing small and medium companies and nearly matching large organisations, where 31% are fully data-driven. The Start-Ups' advantage lies in flexibility and early adoption of cloud and AI tools.

Small businesses, however, face the widest maturity gap: 27% report having no data strategy, and most remain in early stages of adoption. In contrast, medium-sized firms mark the turning point, with more than half at or above data proficiency as they formalise systems and build analytic capability.

Level of data proficiency (self-described)



Technology Stacks Prioritised when Budgets are Reduced

Marketing budgets continue to tell a story of optimism and progress. 57% of organisations increased their budgets in 2025, and those that did reported broader MarTech adoption, higher automation levels, and activity across more social media networks.

However, 14% of organisations polled reported cutting back marketing budgets compared to the previous year. These budget reducers help us see which technologies are prioritised, even when resources are short, and identify high-value tools in business marketing.

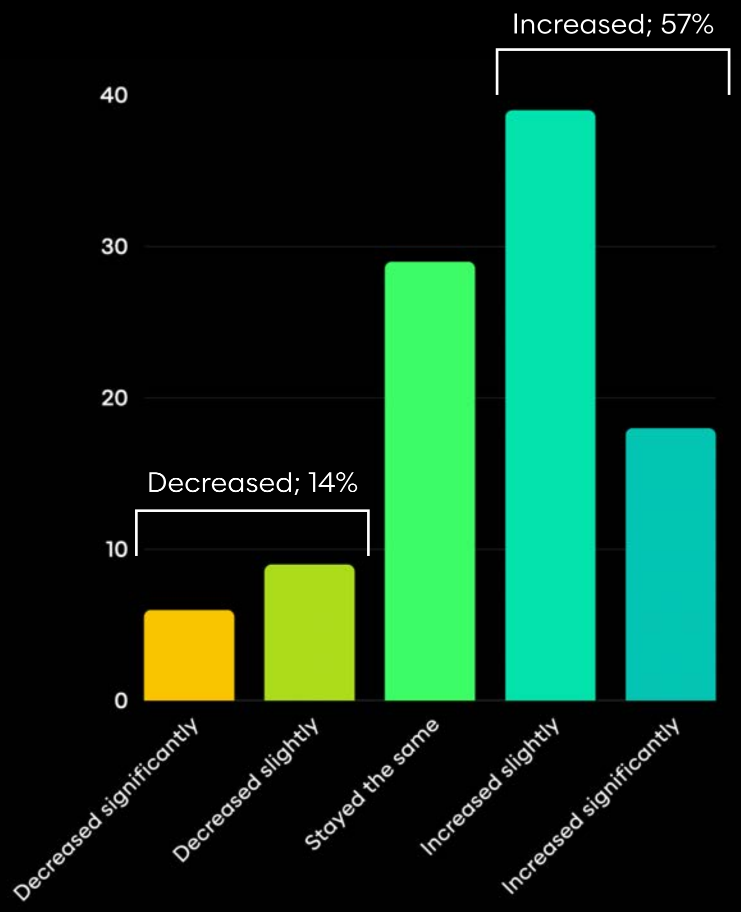
In terms of technology, this segment has adopted

- CRM systems (72%)
- Email marketing software (66%)
- 62% use social media management tools

Medium-sized companies lead the momentum overall, with 63% increasing budgets as they expand and formalise digital systems. Large enterprises, meanwhile, appear to be consolidating—optimising existing investments and focusing on integration, performance, and efficiency after years of aggressive spending.

Across the data, one message is consistent: marketing investment and sophistication rise together. As budgets grow, so does technological capability—expanding access to automation, analytics, and multi-channel engagement. Conversely, where budgets contract, so does digital breadth and confidence.

Change in Marketing Budget



The Listening and Learning Gap: From Instinct to Insight

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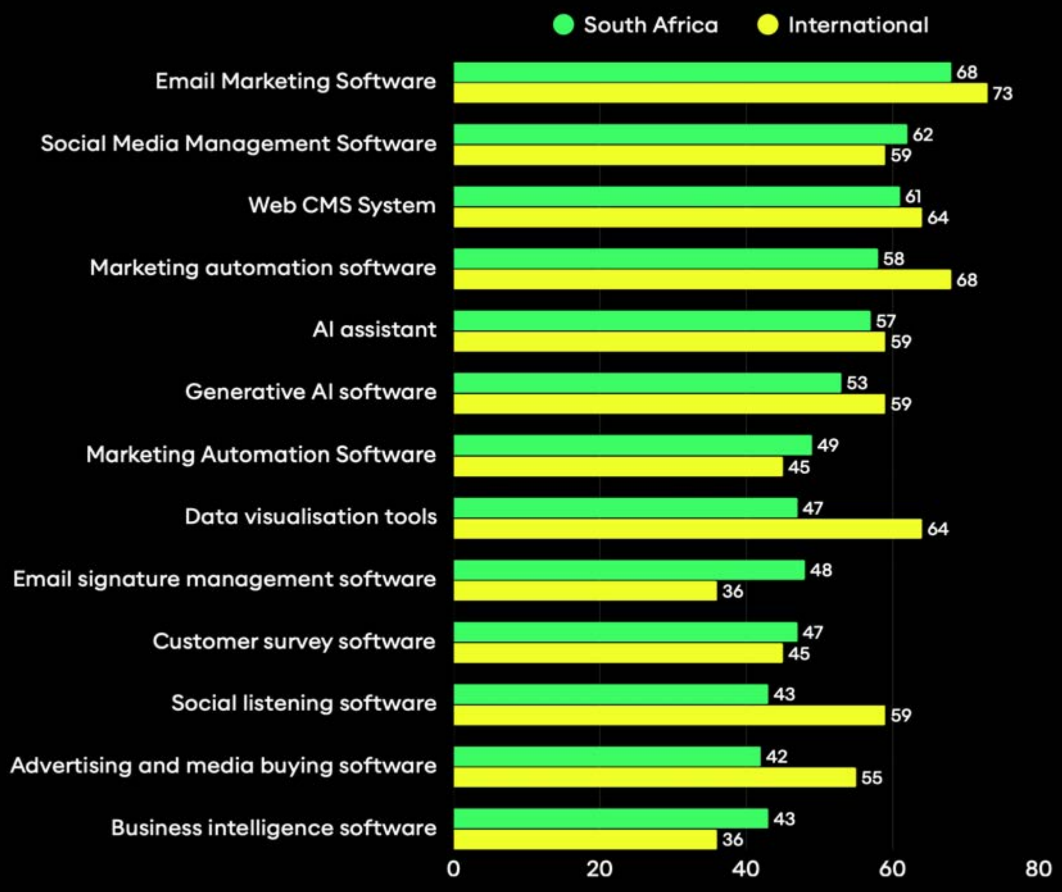
Half of South African organisations continue to make decisions based on experience and intuition, rather than real-time analytics or customer data. Globally, the trend is shifting toward active listening and adaptive iteration—but locally, instinct still guides strategy.

This "reaction lag" has implications for competitiveness. Businesses that invest in listening tools, analytics, and audience insight platforms will gain a measurable edge in agility and precision.

The data shows that size brings structure, but not always sophistication. Start-ups and large enterprises lead at opposite ends of the spectrum, proving that data maturity depends as much on mindset as on resources—a blend of agility, focus, and strategic investment.

MarTech Solutions Used



Conclusion: From Complexity to Clarity

The 2025–26 State of Digital Survey paints a picture of an industry evolving from complexity toward clarity. Marketers are learning that progress doesn't come from doing more, but from doing better—focusing investment, integrating data, and aligning technology with human insight.

South African marketers, in particular, are demonstrating that focus, restraint, and strategic clarity can be just as powerful as speed. As we look ahead to our fourth year of research, one thing is sure: digital maturity is no longer about technology—it's about confidence and intent.

What our Contributors Have to Say

Mike Saunders - CEO at Digitlab

Confidence Is the New Digital Currency

How Trust and Confidence Drive Business Growth in 2026

In the evolving digital landscape, businesses no longer compete on raw access to technology or data alone. As 2026 approaches, the defining frontier is confidence — confidence in your insights, in your systems, and in your ability to act swiftly and decisively. In effect, confidence becomes the new currency of digital competitiveness.

Trust Was the Foundation; Confidence Is the Differentiator

Over the past decade, businesses have built success by earning trust — demonstrating credibility, delivering superior, timely experiences, and engaging customers through authentic, personalised service. Trust remains essential. But in 2026, a deeper quality matters: confidence. Trust gets you in the game. Confidence lets you win it.

As your business accumulates data, automation, and systems, the key question becomes: Do you trust the data enough to move at speed? Because hesitation is the enemy of value.

Digitlab's State of Digital 2025/6 survey shows that while many organisations have invested in technology, only a subset feel truly confident in their decisions. In fact, 72% of data-driven businesses say they make decisions with confidence (Digitlab, 2025).

But many firms, particularly in South Africa, still resort to instinct over analysis — half admit to doing so (Digitlab, 2025).

Globally, Gartner echoes this gap. According to Gartner: Top Strategic Technology Trends for 2025, while AI and analytics adoption are rising, their true impact hinges on trust, observability, and governance (Gartner, 2025). The insights are plentiful; the challenge is believing — and acting.

What Confidence Means in Business

Confidence is not an abstract ideal — it is operational. It is the internal state that allows leaders and teams to act decisively, with clarity, and with speed. In practical terms, confidence enables:

- **Reliable interpretation of data** — accepting insight rather than doubting it.
- **Predictive understanding of customers** — anticipating next moves, not merely reacting.
- **Trust in systems and automation** — knowing tools will perform reliably.
- **Speed in execution** — turning insight into action before competitors can respond.

In short: confidence turns knowledge into momentum.

The Four Dimensions of Business Confidence

We can break confidence into four essential dimensions. Each is critical to converting trust into tangible business outcomes.

Dimension	What it Means	Why it Matters	Proof Points
1. Confidence in Data	Knowing your data is accurate, relevant, and observable.	Reduces hesitation and rework; decisions move faster.	Half of SA firms still make decisions by intuition (Digitlab
2. Confidence in Customers	Understanding customers deeply enough to predict needs.	Enables proactive service, not reactive marketing.	Data-driven orgs prioritise customer data 2× more often
3. Confidence in Systems	Trusting technology, automation, and AI to work	Frees human focus for strategy and creativity.	Gartner: AI TRiSM will reduce AI error rates by 80% by 2026.
4. Confidence in Action	Acting decisively with clarity and accountability.	Creates business velocity — faster delivery, faster sales.	Marketers in data-driven organisations make decisions with far greater confidence, enabling faster response and growth. (Digitlab 2025).

Gartner's Data & Analytics Trends to Watch argues that decision intelligence frameworks will reduce decision latency by up to 40 % (Gartner, 2025). Organisations willing to act decisively will be those that don't just see signals — they believe them.

This final dimension — action — is perhaps the most visible in business results. It is where confidence meets competition.

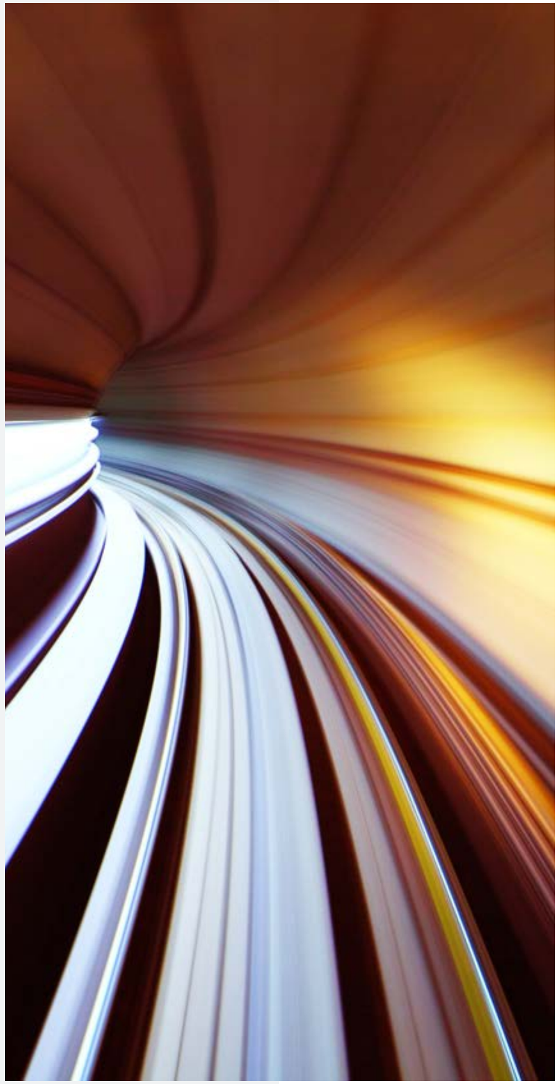
"Businesses that act on insight, not instinct, outperform because they remove hesitation. Confidence isn't about risk — it's about precision at speed."

How Confidence Fuels Business Speed

In a fast-moving digital environment, speed is a differentiator. But speed without precision is folly. Confidence is what ensures your speed is smart.

Key accelerators provided by confidence include:

- **Speed to market**: Launch new products or services quickly because you're backed by trusted insight.
- **Speed to adapt:** Pivot or tweak strategies rapidly in response to real-time signals.
- **Speed to reply:** Respond to customer needs or issues in near real-time, with relevant context.
- **Speed to sale:** Reduce sales cycle friction by following up automatically on high-intent signals.



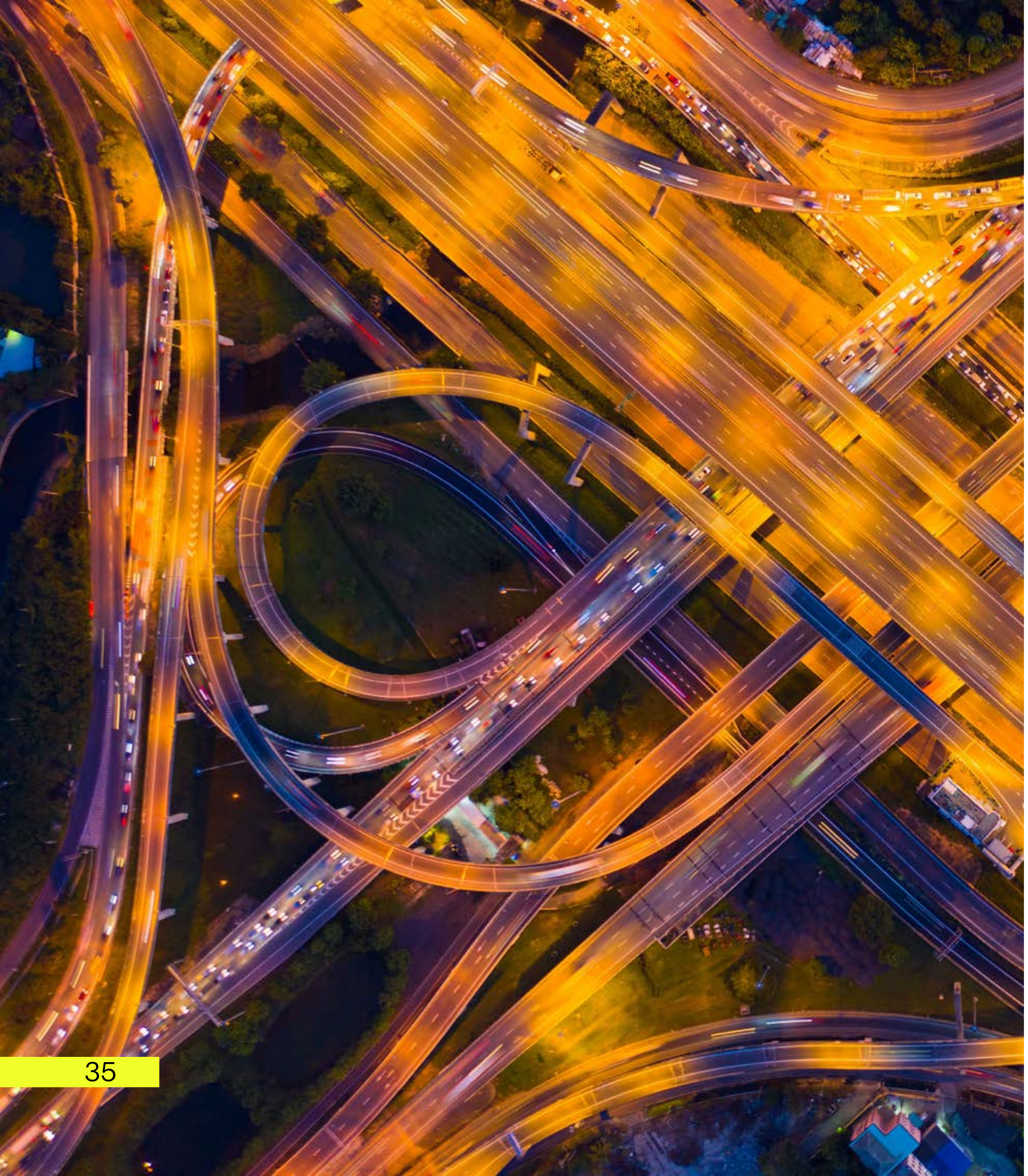
The Confidence Gap: Why Many Businesses Underperform

Despite investments in modern technologies, a confidence gap emerges — one that separates laggards from leaders.

Survey insights from Digitlab (2025):

- Half of South African organisations still rely on instinct over analytics.
- Only 13% of firms say AI is integral to operations, though 47% have adopted generative or assistant AI tools.
- Smaller businesses face the largest confidence deficits; 27% have no formal data strategy, compared to just 5% of large firms.
- These gaps matter because uncertainty kills velocity. When teams hesitate, opportunities pass. When decisions are delayed, initiatives lose momentum.

Gartner's forecasts underscore the risk: growth leaders in the digital era will be those that embed observability, trust models, and feedback systems into their data and AI infrastructure (Gartner, 2025). Without that, technology becomes ballast, not runway.



Building Confidence: A Practical Roadmap

Advancing from trust to confidence is not instantaneous — it's a deliberate organisational journey. Below is a practical roadmap:

1. Audit trust barriers: Map where decisions stall: data inconsistencies, unclear metrics, manual handovers.

2. Unify data and reporting: Create a single, validated "source of truth" for customer and performance data.

3. Implement governance and observability: Adopt frameworks like AI TRiSM (Trust, Risk & Security Management) to monitor model drift, bias, and error.

4. Automate transparently: Move key insights into automated triggers, flags, and workflows — while ensuring they remain explainable.

5. Develop team capability: Invest in data literacy and decision-intelligence training and encourage cross-functional ownership of insight-to-action.

6. Align incentives with speed and accountability: Monitor confidence as a performance metric. Reward fast decisions, not just perfect outcomes.

What 2026 Looks Like: Confidence as a Defining Trend

As we enter 2026, confidence separates capable businesses from differentiators. Those who master it will:

- Shift from lag to lead — they won't just respond, they'll anticipate.
- Operate cycles of iteration and innovation — executing fast, measuring, refining, repeating.
- Outpace competitors who stall in evaluation mode.
- Build resilience — confident systems rebound faster from disruption because the business trusts its own insights.

Trust + confidence is the formula. Trust builds earned permission; confidence powers ongoing growth.

Conclusion

Businesses invested in data, AI, and digital tools have laid the foundation. But the new frontier is confidence — a state of internal assurance that turns information into action, ideas into impact, and strategy into speed.

In 2026, confidence becomes the currency of digital leadership — the measure by which businesses win, adapt, and scale. Trust may earn you a seat at the table; confidence ensures you set the agenda.

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- Gartner (2025). *Top Strategic Technology Trends for 2025*. Gartner Research.
- Gartner (2025). *Data & Analytics Trends to Watch*. Gartner Research.

Eoin McGuinness - Head of Africa, CEE & Middle East - HubSpot for Startups

The AI Revolution Has Already Won: Why 2025 Is the Year Startups Leave Traditional GTM Behind

The numbers don't lie: startups using AI are growing faster, raising more capital, and dramatically outperforming their peers. HubSpot's latest research across 500 global startups reveals a stark reality - the AI revolution in go-to-market strategy isn't coming. It's already here, and the winners have been decided.

The Great Divide: AI-Powered vs. Traditional Startups

Here's what separates thriving startups from those barely surviving in 2025:

Performance Gap:

- 37% of AI-powered startups reduced customer acquisition costs
- 72% improved upsell and cross-sell performance
- Companies with dedicated AI teams are 6x more likely to reach $20M+ ARR

The Funding Reality: While overall deal counts dropped 50% since 2021, AI-powered startups are capturing larger rounds. OpenAI's $40B raise and Clay's $1.25B valuation aren't outliers - they're the new normal for AI-first companies.

The Three Pillars of AI-Powered GTM

Marketing at Scale
Gone are the days of generic campaigns. AI now delivers personalized messaging to every prospect based on behavior, intent, and timing. One founder told me they're generating 10x more qualified leads with half the team.

Sales Velocity
AI doesn't just prioritize leads - it writes personalized outreach, books meetings, and handles follow-ups. Sales reps now spend 80% of their time actually selling, not on administrative tasks.

Proactive Support
Instead of reacting to problems, AI predicts and prevents them. Support teams are resolving issues before customers even notice, driving retention rates through the roof.

Why Startups Win the AI Race

Mark Roberge from Stage 2 Capital nailed it: "Incumbents struggle with AI transformation because it means reorganizing everything. Startups have a clean slate - the chance of a lifetime."

This advantage shows in the data:

- 69% of venture-backed startups have dedicated AI resources
- 46% dedicate over 25% of their tech stack to AI tools
- Series C/D startups are 75% more likely than seed-stage to heavily invest in AI

The Brutal Truth About 2025

If you're not using AI in your GTM strategy, you're not just behind - you're becoming irrelevant. The gap between AI-powered and traditional startups isn't narrowing; it's accelerating.

The choice is simple:

- Embrace AI and join the companies growing 3-6x faster
- Stick with traditional methods and watch competitors eat your lunch

Your 30-Day AI Transformation

Stop reading reports. Start implementing:

Week 1: Audit your current GTM stack and identify AI opportunities

Week 2: Implement AI for content creation and lead scoring

Week 3: Deploy AI-powered sales sequences and chatbots

Week 4: Activate predictive analytics and automated workflows

The winners of 2025 won't be the companies with the biggest budgets or the most features. They'll be the ones who understood that AI isn't just another tool - it's the entire foundation of modern go-to-market strategy.

Ready to join them? The revolution doesn't wait.

Eoin McGuinness leads HubSpot for Startups across Africa, CEE & Middle East, helping 50+ VCs and accelerators build AI-powered growth engines. As a 3x founder with 2 successful exits, he's seen firsthand how AI transforms startup trajectories.

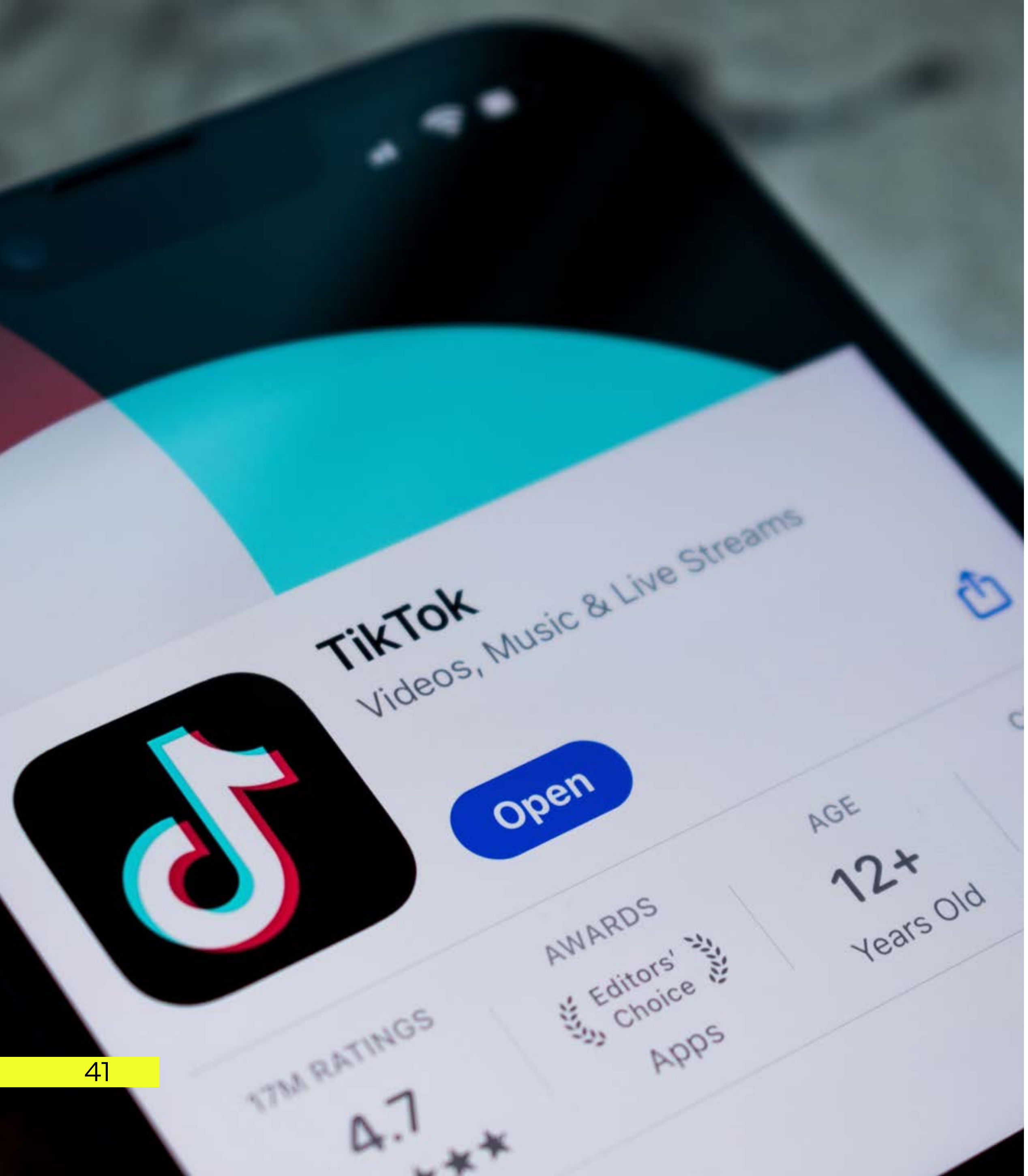
Jochen Bischoff, Head of Global Business Solutions, Africa - TikTok

Why Marketing Needs a New Measurement Mindset in an Age of Uncertainty

Uncertainty has become a defining feature of modern marketing. Across the Middle East, Africa, and Turkey, consumer behaviour is shifting rapidly, digital channels are multiplying, and economic pressures are intensifying. Yet many marketers continue to rely on outdated measurement models that were built for a simpler, more linear world.

According to research by TikTok and WARC, *The Certainty of Uncertainty: Why Marketing Needs a New Measurement Mindset*, this reliance is creating a paradox. The more marketers cling to easily measurable metrics such as clicks or last-touch attribution, the more disconnected they become from actual business outcomes.

With global digital advertising spend reaching $741 billion in 2024, the risks of misattribution and inefficient investment are significant.



Consumer discovery in South Africa: a new reality

South Africa illustrates the pace of change. As digital adoption accelerates, consumers are no longer following predictable paths to purchase. Instead, discovery and inspiration are driving decisions:

- 93% of South African consumers use video platforms to search for products before making a purchase.
- 88% say they discover new brands or products through video that they had not seen before.

These behaviours reflect a departure from linear, funnel-based models. Traditional lower-funnel tactics alone cannot capture the full picture of how people explore, evaluate, and choose brands.

The limits of traditional attribution

The TikTok–WARC study shows that outdated attribution models are not only incomplete but often misleading. Key findings include:

- 60% of underperforming marketers remain overly focused on lower-funnel conversion.
- 35% of last-click attribution spend generates zero incremental sales.
- In some cases, up to 79% of conversions are missed entirely by traditional models.

These gaps highlight how over-reliance on lower-funnel metrics leads to over-investment in performance marketing at the expense of long-term brand-building. This imbalance risks undermining growth, especially in markets undergoing rapid transformation.

The pressure to do more with less

Marketers in South Africa and across the region are being asked to deliver on two fronts simultaneously: to show immediate results while also building long-term brand equity. Budgets are often tight, and teams must demonstrate impact across both horizons.

In this environment, measurement systems need to be adaptable rather than absolute. Rigid models built for static conditions can't capture the fluid reality of modern marketing. To thrive, marketers must adopt approaches that balance short-term performance with long-term brand growth, frameworks that reflect the complexity of today's consumer journey rather than forcing it into oversimplified funnels.

Adaptability, not precision, is becoming the defining characteristic of effective measurement.

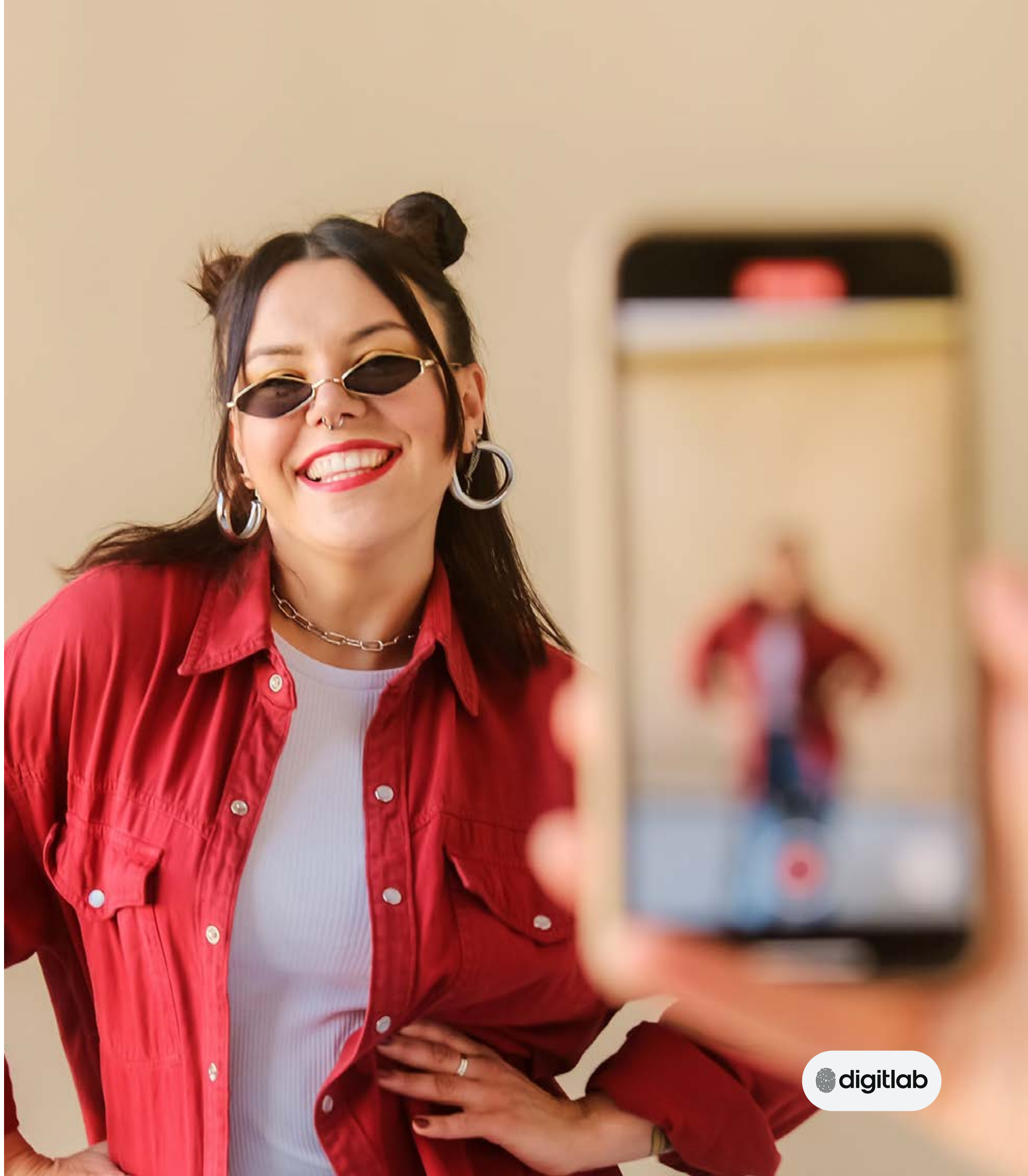
Shifting to a new measurement mindset

The research points to a clear need for a new approach: one that moves away from chasing the illusion of absolute precision and instead builds systems capable of responding to complexity. Three shifts are particularly important:

1. From rigid metrics to adaptable systems: Measurement must reflect the fluid reality of consumer behaviour rather than rely on narrow indicators of performance.

2. From short-term conversions to balanced outcomes: Lower-funnel performance remains important, but it should be complemented by investment in brand equity and discovery-driven growth.

3. From isolated signals to integrated insights: Consumers do not separate inspiration from purchase. Measurement must connect the dots between content, commerce and consumer intent.



The GRO framework: a practical response

To help marketers manage this transition, the TikTok–WARC research introduces the GRO framework, designed to provide structure without oversimplifying complexity. It is built on three stages:

- Goals: align teams around shared business outcomes, not just channel-specific KPIs.
- Readiness: assess internal tools, processes, and capabilities to ensure the organisation is prepared for change.
- Optimisation: continuously refine and adapt systems to reflect consumer behaviour, rather than treating measurement as a static process.

This framework equips marketers to make smarter, faster decisions without being overwhelmed by ambiguity.

Finding resilience in uncertainty

Uncertainty is not going away. Rapid technological change, economic volatility, and rising expectations from consumers mean the marketing environment will remain complex. But this does not have to be a disadvantage.

The TikTok–WARC findings highlight a sense of cautious optimism: for marketers willing to evolve, uncertainty can be an opportunity. By embracing adaptability, marketers can reconnect discovery with conversion, creativity with commerce, and short-term outcomes with long-term growth.

The way forward

The evidence is clear. Outdated attribution models no longer provide the clarity marketers need. In fact, they often obscure the signals that matter most. To succeed, marketers must adopt a new measurement mindset, one that is outcome-driven, adaptable, and reflective of real consumer behaviour.

As the study shows, certainty may be out of reach, but adaptability is not. And in today's environment, adaptability is what will separate those who merely survive from those who thrive.

Bronwyn Williams - Futurist | Trend Analyst | Economist | Consultant | Global Keynote Speaker at Flux Trends

Late stage hyperbrand.

The phrase "late stage hyper-capitalism", referring to our global economy that is characterized by increasing globalisation, the dominance of multinational corporations, mass consumerism, and a growing commodification of virtually every aspect of life, is hard to miss these days.

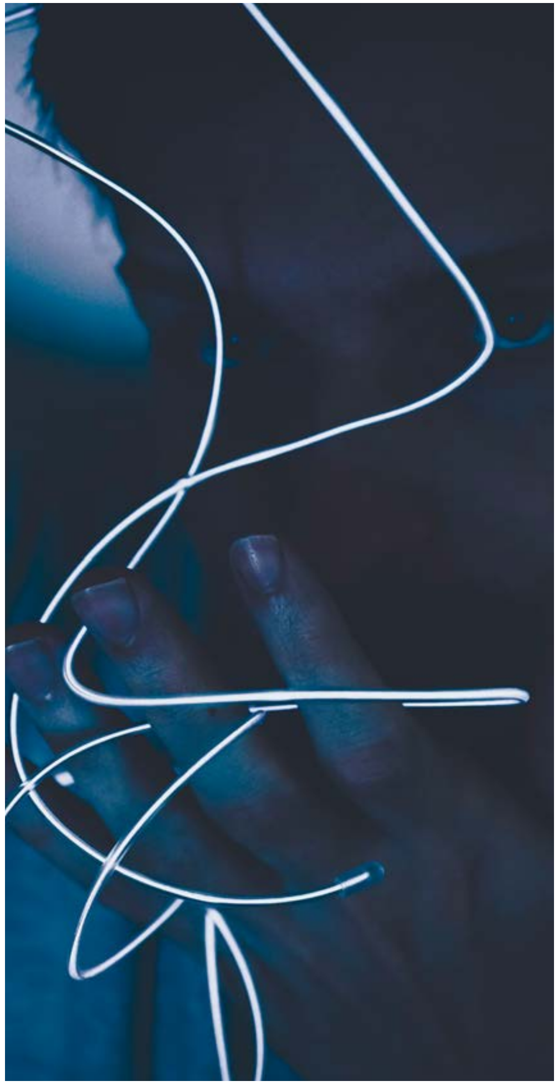
But while the casual observer may believe brands are big winners, natural survivors of our survival of the fittest world, a closer observation reveals many of today's biggest brands are actually more like collateral damage, or fodder for the ruthless hyper-capitalism machine.

When even "old money" luxury brand houses, like LVMH (down 9% from last year) are shedding shareholder value and market share the very idea of brand, by definition, "a type of product made by a particular company and sold under a particular name" as a competitive moat, is called into question.

The whole point of a brand is monopoly over some intellectual property - and the resulting ability to extract more value from the market than a generic alternative.

This is a wonderful game to be in, on the winners side of late stage capitalism, as long as you can persuade people to pay you more in exchange for the intangible "status" your brand confers. It was a playbook that worked very well in the not so late stages of late stage capitalism, where we saw brands extracting market power from suppliers and retailers who, without a strong brand of their own, could only sell cheaper generic products.

But now, with the twin horsemen of globalisation and automation now well in our midst, brand power is very much under threat.



The deadly combination of:

1. Free generative AI tools like Seedance (owned by ByteDance who also owns TikTok and the lion's share of the attention economy) that allows anyone (even those of us with zero artistic talent) to realise (or just copy-paste-edit-bastardise you brand IP) any consumer good their heart desires in high fidelity resolution

2. Big -no enormous - tech platforms that not only own attention and digital foot traffic at scale in a way even the world's biggest real world retail chains like Walmart could only dream of - and allow consumers to create, edit, share and remix generative products, creating, following and destroying trends in real time - the places where creators have more taste making and purchase power influence than kings and presidents,

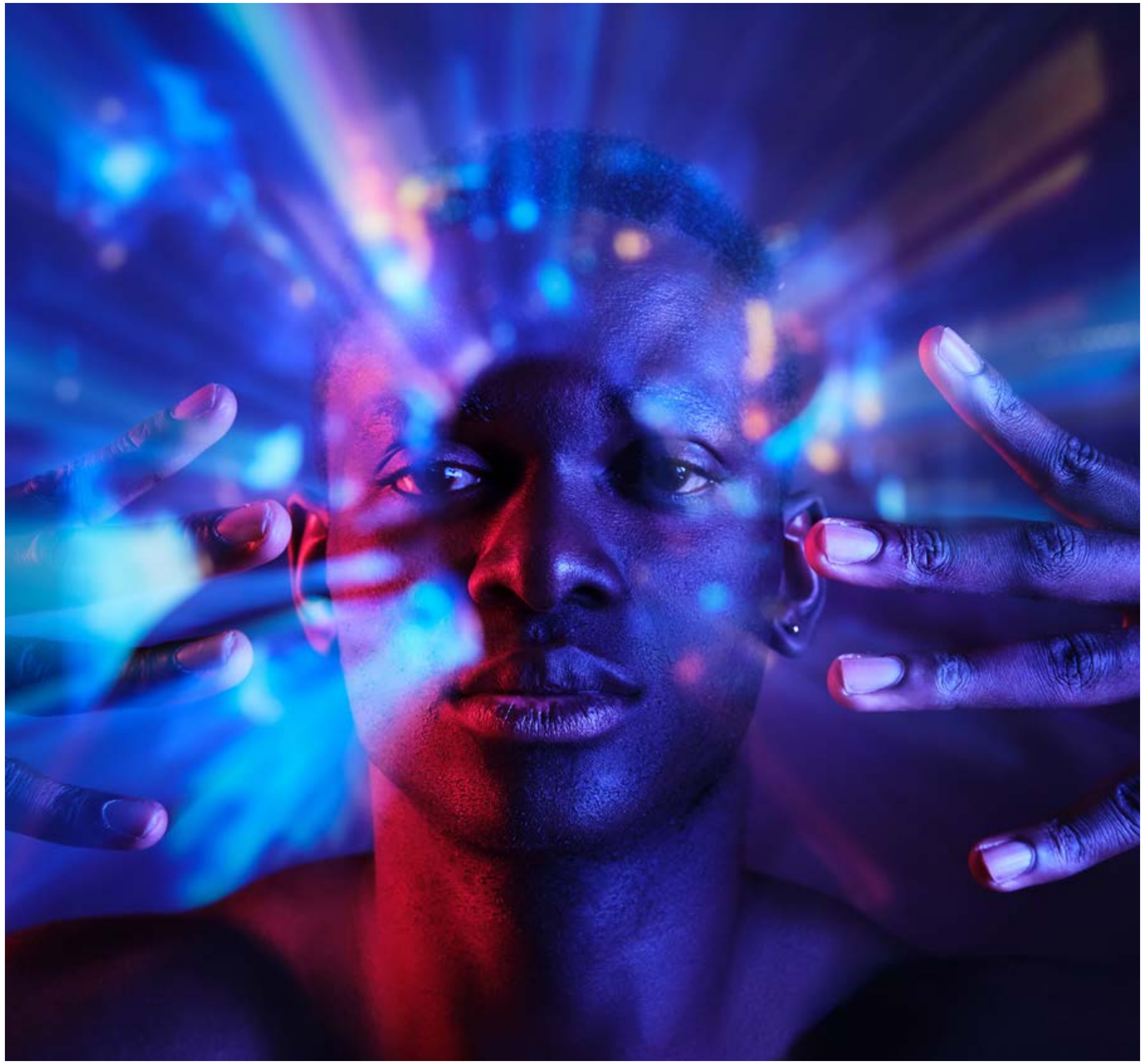
3. International, on-demand supply chains, already tested and perfected by SHEIN and Temu, that allow super-factories in the East to spot social trends in real time, copy paste generative AI vision boards into fully functional manufacturing and logistics systems that convert consumer hyper-realistic hallucinations into blueprints, and blueprints into goods, shipped right to that customers door faster than you can even arrange a board meeting to approve a production line.

Are all merging to squeeze the last drops of profits (and disaster loot the left overs of IP) from brands.

Welcome to "late stage hyperbrand" where even the world's biggest brands, like Disney, have NO CONTROL over consumer generated AI knock offs - or even direct from social platform idea - through factory - to consumer real life distorted, personalised dupes. Where every player in that supply chain -from the platform who takes a translation fee, to the tax men and tariffs that charge their tolls, to the factories who make the goods to the end consumers who cash in on ripping off your brand IP for their personal social credit - except for you, the brand owner make money off your IP.

What space is there for a brand in a world where no IP is globally defensible, a world where consumers wrest control from crafted brand IDs and foreign supply chains can make your own goods better, faster, cheaper than you can?

Can you compete on speed? Customisation? Price? No. Quality? Perhaps. But let's forget the viral videos of Chinese factory owners showing luxury goods shoppers the very factories where their idolised branded bags and shoes are made, and offering to sell those self-same goods off the back of the line direct-to-consumer for the ex-brand markup price.... Nor how loud and proud young shoppers are of finding and sharing dupes. Getting a deal, screwing over a big brand is nothing to be ashamed of - oh no - these days it's to your social credit to get one over The Man.



No. What brands need to accept is that both brand as monopoly, brand as control, and brand as homogeny are highly endangered business models. Instead, the future of brands will be brands who willingly share control with customers - think open source IRL. Brands who relinquish mass market - and the online visibility that comes with it - for smaller offline "secret societies" who value story over conspicuous consumption and keep "their" (for you will have to share here too) brand status secrets safe. Brands who give up the idea of brand altogether and focus on actual product invention and manufacture. Brands who cut out all the middle men and own and control their own hyper-fast, hyper flexible supply chains from start to finish.

In short - if you can't beat them, share with them. Or - play another game and give up scale for small and sustainable.

May the odds be in your favor.

Andrew Gillett – Commercial Director at AMA Digital Media

In the Right Place, At the Right Time: How Real-Time Context Supercharges Area-Based Advertising.

We live in an age where consumer attention is the scarcest resource and the most expensive one to buy. With fragmented media consumption, ad fatigue, and ever-rising costs, marketers are under pressure to make every impression count. The result? A relentless search for efficiency: not just reaching the right people but doing so at the most relevant time for maximum impact. That's where the power of real-life context comes in. Real-life context is redefining how we approach context in advertising. It goes beyond mere content adjacency to encompass a broader set of on and offline variables, such as mobility, purchase behaviour, social media engagement, all understood by time and place. When combined with Area-Based Marketing (ABM), real-life context can be the difference between wasted impressions and breakthrough performance.

Laying the Groundwork: Area-Based Marketing 101

Area-Based Marketing unifies disparate datasets and fragmented media channels with location. From purchases, movement patterns (mobility), online content consumption, social media engagement, home vs work, Points of Interest(POIs) to sociodemographics all can be understood by location. Location isn't just a dataset, it's the key to understanding and connecting all datasets and powering smarter integrated omnichannel strategies.

By aggregating data by area rather than to an individual, marketers can build rich audiences and discover where they are concentrated and focus their advertising in those areas.

It's simple, but powerful: everything happens somewhere. Every action or behaviour by a consumer that generates data commonly used in marketing can be understood by location, allowing marketers to identify different areas that match the characteristics of their target audience and business objectives. While similar locations often share a similar profile e.g. a a commuter hub or an area of restaurants and bars, it pays to think more deeply and understand where visitors to that area come from in terms of their home and work origins, this helps brands understand true catchment areas and indeed areas where they share visitors with competitors so they can begin to steal share.

By anchoring campaigns to real places, ABM offers a scalable way to build intent-rich audiences far beyond standard demographic profiles.

Enter Context: The Missing Layer That Changes Everything

If ABM solves the where, real-life context solves the when. And when you get both right, attention and performance soars.

Real-life context adds a dynamic layer to audience targeting. It incorporates environmental and behavioural signals such as:

- Mobility behaviour
- Online content consumption
- Social media engagement
- Time of day
- Day of week
- Weather conditions

Imagine a quick-service restaurant serving an ad when mobility is high, when social media engagement in fast-food related content is increasing, the weather is above 20 degrees at lunchtime during the working week and to an audience within a downtown office area, these contextual triggers would maximise the efficiency of the brand's advertising investment and maximise the impact of the ad at the moment that matters most. Now compare that to showing the same ad all the time irrelevant of the moment. This would not offer the same efficiencies or effectiveness. The context changes everything.

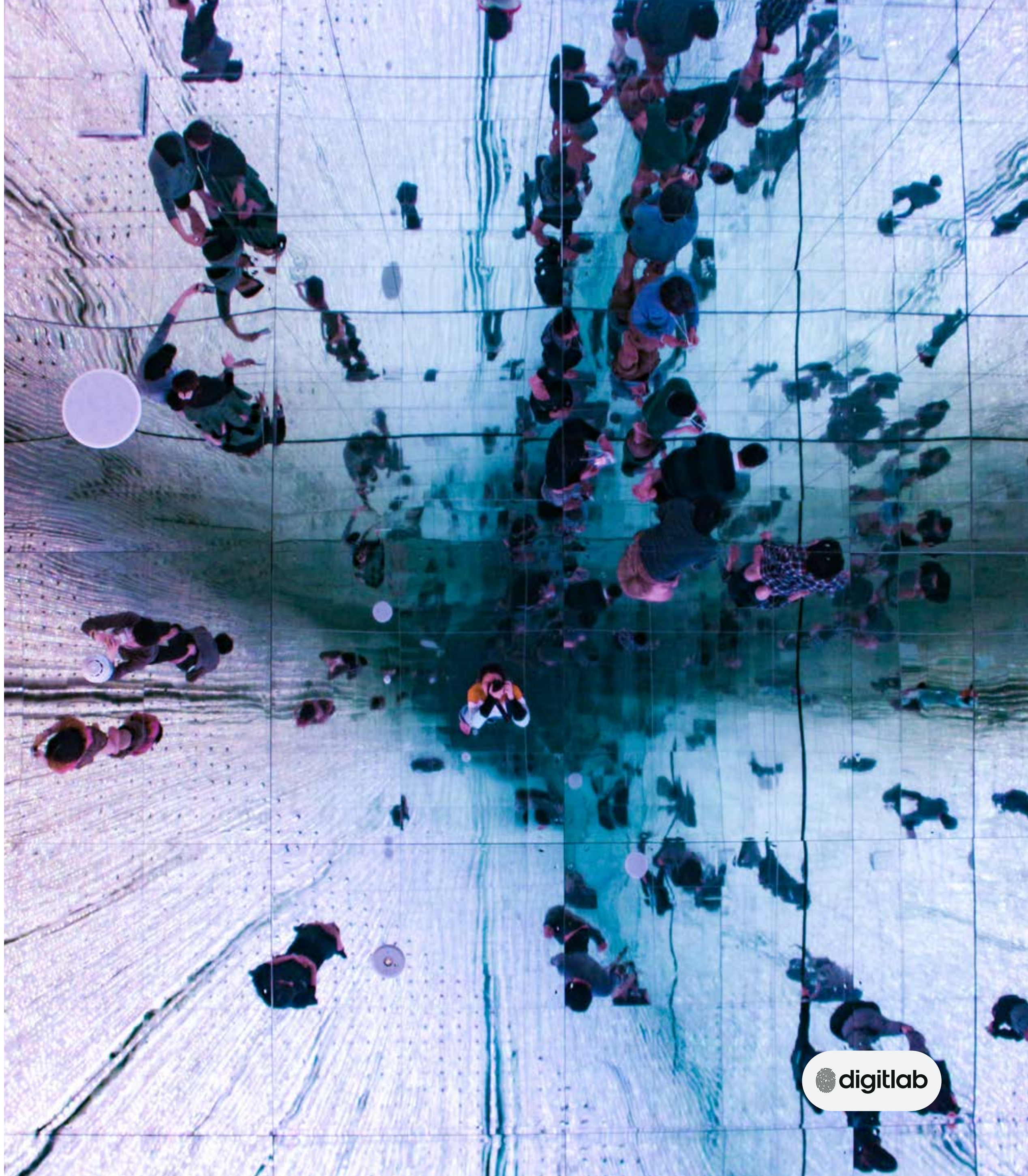
The Attention Dividend: Why Real-life Context Drives Performance

Multiple studies now point to a simple truth: attention is the new currency. Attention isn't just bought with media, it's earned through relevance.

Adding real-life context to geographically targeted campaigns results in:

- Higher attention scores (ads are more noticed and remembered)
- Better click-through rates (the message feels more timely and useful)
- Lower media wastage (fewer impressions served at irrelevant moments)
- Increased ROAS (Return on Ad Spend)

It's not just smart marketing. It's more efficient, more sustainable advertising.



How It Works: The 3-Layer Approach

1. **Audience Definition**
   Start by defining high-value audiences based on data unified by location. What age or gender are they? What do they consume online or engage with on social? What mobility behaviours are relevant?activation

2. **Location Intelligence**
   Identify the areas where this audience is concentrated. Rank them to find areas of low, medium and high affinity. Select the right media channels, budgets and creatives for each group of areas.

3. **Contextual Activation**
   Layer in contextual triggers mobility behaviours, online content consumption, social media engagement,dayparting, live weather feeds etc. to serve ads when they're most likely to be relevant and drive action.

It's targeting with surgical precision, not brute force.

From Insight to Impact: What This Means for Marketers

The path forward is clear: Real-life contextual, area-based marketing empowers advertisers to:

- Build smarter audiences
- Minimise ad wastage
- Maximise attention
- Improve media ROI

For brands, this means more than just hitting KPIs. It means being where your customers are, when they actually need you.

The Future Is Contextual

Advertising doesn't need to shout louder, it needs to whisper smarter. Real-time context gives us the tools to do exactly that.

As technology continues to evolve, we'll see even more sophisticated uses of contextual data. From live sentiment feeds to dynamic creative personalised by time, place, and behaviour.

But for now, even a simple shift, from broad targeting to context-driven, area-based strategy can deliver a significant edge.

In the battle for attention, being in the right place at the right time isn't just helpful. It's everything.

Shreya R Nambiar - Senior Content Writer at CookieYes

Why CMPs Are Critical for Ads & Privacy in 2026

Let’s be honest: most users don’t think twice before clicking “Accept All.” But for digital marketers and privacy teams, those few pixels of a cookie banner carry a lot of weight. And in 2026, it’s not just regulators who care. Google, Meta, and other ad engines are now pushing publishers to get their consent practices in order.

From certified consent solution requirements to granular consent APIs, the line between marketing tech and privacy tech is starting to blur. So, what’s changing, and what should businesses actually do about it?

Google, CMPs, and Why This Matters More in 2026

In 2026, using a Consent Management Platform (CMP) is no longer optional for digital advertisers in the EU, UK, or Switzerland.

If your website uses Google Ads, AdSense, or Ad Manager, you must implement a Google-certified CMP that supports the IAB's Transparency and

Consent Framework (TCF) v2.2. Without it, your ads simply won't run.

No certified CMP = No monetized ads.

But this change isn't just about legal compliance. It reflects a deeper shift in how ad platforms handle consent and data.

Google's Consent Mode v2 now treats the CMP as a signal hub. It passes consent choices directly into tools like

Google Analytics 4 (GA4) and Google Ads, helping them decide whether to track with cookies or switch to modeled conversions. This ensures some level of campaign measurement even when users opt out.

Google has also shifted Chrome to a user choice model for third-party cookies. Instead of removing third-party cookies entirely, Chrome will now let users opt in or out, while continuing to support Privacy Sandbox APIs like Topics and Protected Audiences.

Your CMP now feeds the entire ad tech stack, not just your privacy settings.

Other platforms are doing the same:

- Meta (Facebook, Instagram) reads TCF strings and adjusts audience reach based on consent.
- Amazon Ads is aligning its DSP with similar consent frameworks.
- Non-compliant sites risk lower ad fill, reduced performance, or being excluded altogether.

What This Means for Marketing and Privacy Teams?

- Consent signals are now used in ad delivery, attribution, and optimization.
- CMPs influence conversion tracking, audience targeting, and campaign spend efficiency.
- Managing consent is no longer just a legal task — it's part of your performance strategy.

Whether you're a publisher, brand, or agency, aligning your CMP with ad platform requirements is now essential for visibility, compliance, and performance.

Are Cookie Banners Actually Doing Their Job?

That depends.

There are websites that still allow trackers to load before the user makes a choice. In most cases, this is due to misconfigured tags or third-party scripts that ignore CMP logic. Either way, it creates risk for both compliance and trust.

Most cookie banners fall short in one or more areas:

- **Dark patterns are rampant:** Many banners are designed to nudge users into clicking "Accept All," burying the reject button or making it less visible.
- **Consent fatigue:** Users are overwhelmed and often blindly accept, just to access content quickly.
- **False sense of compliance:** Some banners collect consent without offering real choices (e.g. pre-ticked boxes, no "Reject" option).
- **Technical shortcomings:** Even after rejecting cookies, trackers may still load due to poor implementation.

Here's the real issue: users rarely read consent banners. They just want them gone. That's why marketers need to stop viewing banners as legal formalities and start treating them as part of the UX.

What About First-Party Cookies?

First-party cookies are gaining importance in a post-third-party world, but they're not exempt from consent requirements.

Modern CMPs, including CookieYes, allow users to control whether first-party analytics or marketing cookies can run, especially in regions under GDPR, CCPA, or similar laws.

Today's CMPs:

- Categorize cookies (necessary, analytics, marketing)
- Delay script execution until proper consent is received
- Store preferences across sessions and domains

This ensures cleaner data, better user experiences, and stronger protection against non-compliance.

What's Coming Next: Not Just More Banners

Here's where digital consent is heading:

1. Server-Side Consent Validation
Expect ad platforms to validate consent directly from backend systems in real time. This means CMPs won't just act as front-end wrappers, but they'll send consent signals server-side, reducing client-side delays and minimizing the risk of rogue script execution.

It's faster, more secure, and better aligned with performance-focused tracking models like Google's modeled conversions and Meta's Event Match Quality scoring.

2. Consent as a UX Advantage
UX isn't just a design preference; it's a compliance tool. Banners that clearly communicate choices are proven to reduce ambiguity and boost opt-out rates when intended.
In short, good banner design can be both ethical and effective.

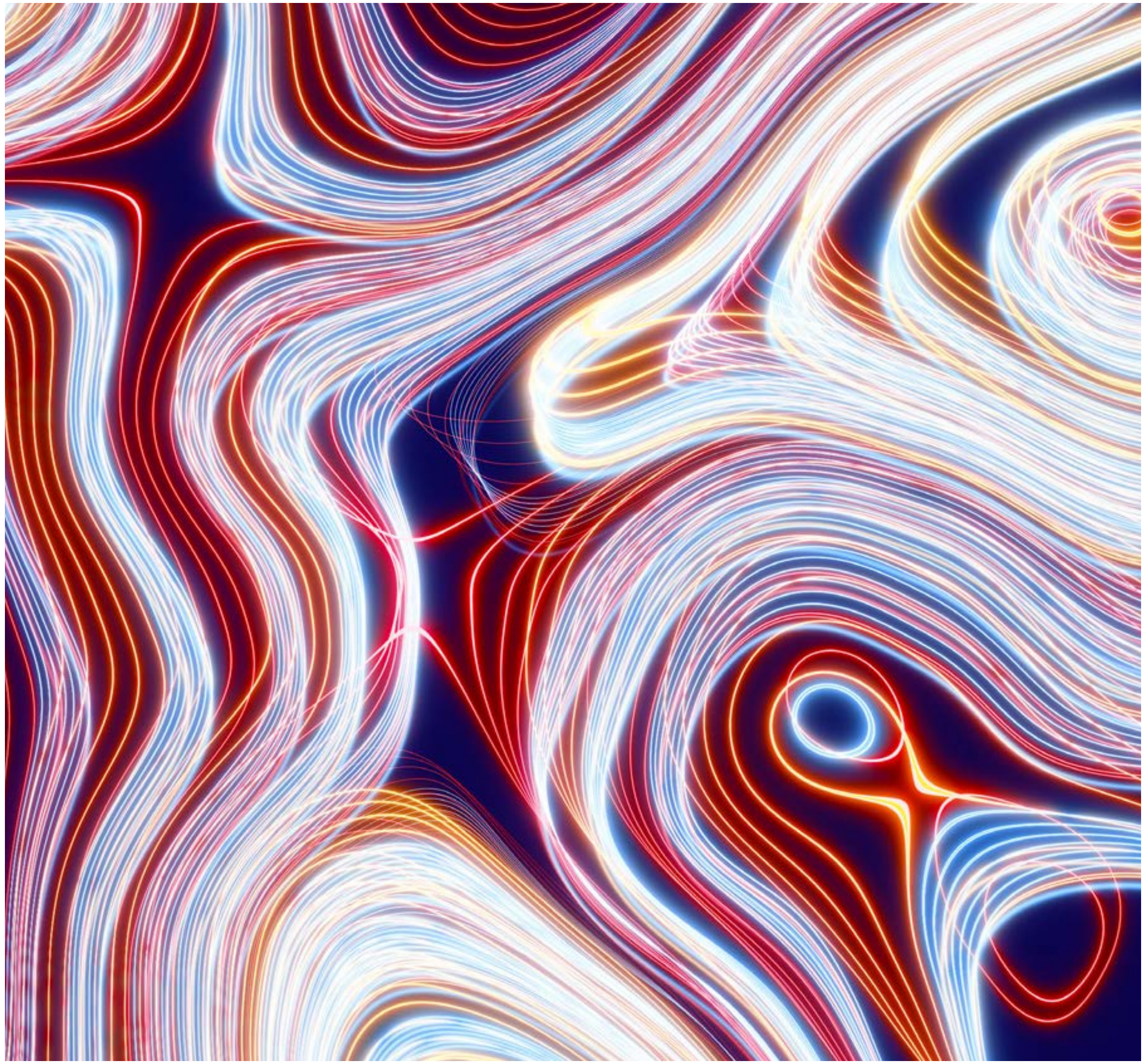
3. Consent Syncing Across Channels
With campaigns running across mobile apps, websites, and even smart TVs, consent isn't just a session-level variable anymore.

CMPs are beginning to support cross-device syncing using secure first-party IDs and browser fingerprinting (where allowed).

This helps brands maintain consistent privacy experiences while complying with region-specific regulations like GDPR and CCPA.

4. One-Time Consent Preferences via Browsers
The browser itself is becoming the next consent layer. Privacy-forward initiatives like Global Privacy Control (GPC) and Advanced Data Protection Control (ADPC) aim to let users set their privacy choices once, at the browser level, and have those preferences respected automatically across participating sites.

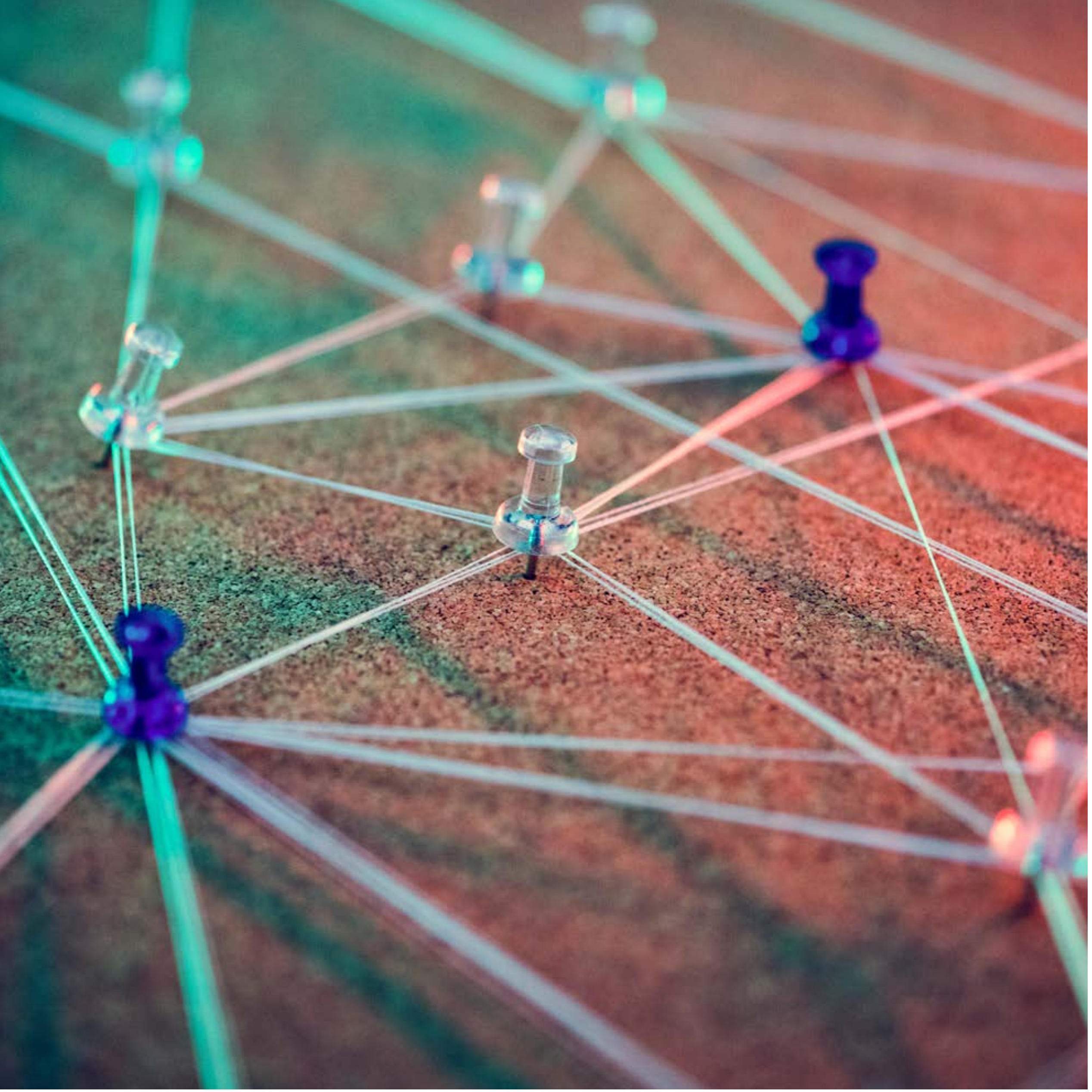
According to recent research, 62% of users said they would use such a



solution, while only 9% rejected the idea outright.

This points toward a future where browser-native controls could simplify privacy for users and reduce banner fatigue, especially in heavily regulated regions like the EU and California.

However, implementation remains uneven. Until more browsers and websites adopt these standards, and regulators clarify their legal standing, CMPs will continue to play a central role.



What Digital Teams Should Be Doing Right Now

Here's a checklist to get ahead:

Audit your tags and cookies
Check what fires before consent. Use tools like Tag Assistant, the Consent Mode debugger, or CookieYes's scanner.

Upgrade your CMP
Make sure it supports IAB TCF v2.2, Google Consent Mode v2, and your full ad stack. CookieYes covers all these areas.

Test your banner UX
Try different styles: modal vs. bar, instant reject vs. hidden toggles. Good UX leads to better opt-ins and less bounce.

Track consent metrics
Look beyond CTRs. Measure consent by region, bounce after the banner, and conversion drop-offs where data is restricted.

This Goes Beyond Cookies

This isn't just about cookie banners. It's about trust, transparency, and whether your stack is built for what's next.

If ad platforms are aligning with CMPs, marketers need to do the same. It's not just a compliance move, it's how you future-proof your funnel, your analytics, and your customer experience.

And if you're looking for a CMP that's made for this evolving consent landscape, CookieYes is built for exactly that.

Tiffany Markman - Award-winning copywriter, writing trainer & keynote speaker

Deliberate Wonk: How Strategic Imperfection Will Win the Internet in 2026

I'm not a shorts-wearer. (I have very, very short legs and very, very long arms, like a small orangutan.) I usually wear trousers. Or dresses. But I have one pair of denim shorts - and I would rescue them from a fire ahead of any handbag.

Twenty years ago, my denim shorts were jeans. They were grey. Now they're grey-er. With a blob of candlewax on one thigh and a wonky Sharpie smiley face on the other. The hems are, as you've probably anticipated, shredded.

And that's where I think digital writing is going in 2026: less handbag, more scruffy shorts. Forget poshness. The brands that will win the internet are those that show their frayed hems; that lead with quirks; that write like someone who's lived.

So, against the backdrop of a digital world that's drowning in same-same content, let's take a practical look at how to write with what I call 'deliberate wonk'.

1. Avoid the new invisible.

What happens when everyone uses AI to write everything? Well, just look at LinkedIn. A professionally neutered personality. Mediocrity at scale.

I'm not saying don't use LLMs. (I'm not a hypocrite.) But if you are going to use AI to help you write, you must learn to prompt like a grown-up. Stop feeding it vague nothings and expecting standout results. No more, "Write me a caption."

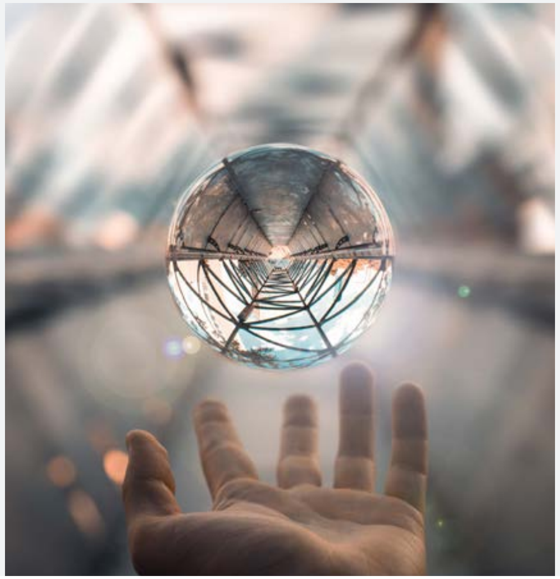
Instead, try:

"Write a caption for a protein bar that sounds like a professional padel coach who had three tequilas and feels very naughty about it."

"Make this post sound like that uncle who collects Krugerrands, wears Crocs to weddings and has strong opinions on mayonnaise (Hellmann's or nothing)."

"Give me 10 subject lines about getting older, written like a divorced Fourways 40-something who's seen some shit but can't afford La Mer."

TL;DR: When everyone produces beige mush, nothing resonates. And we all suffer.



2. Weave in strategic scruff.

Perfect polish is suspicious. Everyone's over-saturated with commercial messaging and most consumers learned to identify and mistrust the big announcer voice ("But wait! There's more!") back in 2005. By 2015, they were jaded as hell. And today?

Today (and tomorrow), what works is a bit of schmutz. Copy that's flawed but cool: emojis in headlines, ALL CAPS in places they don't belong, an extra full stop.

Deliberate dents in the surface of your writing can help you create more trust in a world where impeccability smells manufactured and we're increasingly drawn to what feels real - like this email subject line: "SALE. YES, WE'RE SHOUTING."

While the fact remains that good copy obeys the rules of grammar, rhythm and format, another universal truth is that great copy often toys with them.

Our brains notice rule-breakers because they feel real, like these examples:

- A headline that's one. word. at. a. time.
- A long sentence that refuses to end until it absolutely collapses under its own weight and you find that you're still reading.
- "Wait for it...wait...wait... OK, now."
- "Because. Just because."

3. Surprise, delight, add friction.

Good digital copy gets in, gets weird and gets remembered. Not because it shouts. Because it doesn't sound like it was piped through a brand safety filter and then squashed flat by a team of anxious middle managers.

I'm not advocating recklessness, but I am reminding you that most of your audience is scrolling like zombies through 74 near-identical Canva posts with the same five fonts and a caption that starts with, "Did you know...?".

If you want cut-through, use humour, irreverence and off-beat analogies. Be oddly human. Be slightly unhinged. Instead of: "Our moisturiser is deeply nourishing," try: "Like chicken soup for your face, but legal and dermatologist-approved" or "Melts in like gossip. Works harder than your therapist."

Say what people think, not what brands usually say: "We know our app sometimes crashes. So does your brain at 3pm." Or, "This copy has nothing to do with our product. It just wanted to say hi." Let readers recognise themselves in your copy.

4. Celebrate the weird wins.

Some of the ugliest copy I've ever seen performs beautifully - because algorithms reward engagement, attention and even chaos, not elegance. Meanwhile, metrics like click-through rates and scroll depth are suffocating your originality.

I'm seeing more smart brands begin to find joy in the scraps: the 404 page that makes you laugh, the call-to-action button that becomes a meme, the cookie banner that feels like a party trick. There's big opportunity in the tiny real estate.

Examples:

- CTA buttons: "YES, PLEASE" instead of "SUBMIT"; "Regret Nothing" instead of "Buy Now"; "Take My Rands" (I love this one)
- 404 page: "404. It's not you. It's us. Definitely us."
- Cookie banner: "Click accept. Or don't. We'll just sit here awkwardly."
- Checkout page: "You did the thing. Now we do the other thing. Magic incoming."

Sometimes the smallest, oddest line is remembered and the weird stuff wins.

A single caveat

Deliberate wonk is wonderful, yes. But it's not a free-for-all. You still need to know your audience. Because chaos without care is just noise and nothing kills credibility faster than trying to be edgy and landing between confused and cancelled.

So, if you are going to write a little more weirdly in 2026 – commit to it. Once-off weirdness can feel like a glitch. But consistent weirdness feels like a voice.

The bottom line

If you're still worried your copy isn't "working hard enough" because it doesn't end with a tidy call-to-action, a moral lesson or a pithy sign-off... Cool. That means you're (still) human. Not everything has to convert. Or educate. Or inspire.

Sometimes, it's enough to simply be interesting.

Chris Do expresses this beautifully:

"Write. From the heart. Not from marketing, legal, or a business development POV. Be willing to be vulnerable, transparent, and sometimes funny or profound. You don't always need to include a CTA, takeaway or lesson.

Write. Because you want to connect.

Write. Because you want to share.

Write. Because the world is better when we have a plurality of diverse voices.

Write. Because someone just like you is waiting for you to show them the way.

Write. Because you give permission to others. Make them feel seen, heard and understood.

Write for no other reason than because it gives you joy.

Don't do it because you have a gaping hole of insecurity and the constant, never-ending need for validation from strangers, whose opinions you don't even care about."

In other words? Not every piece of writing needs a job. Some things just get to exist. And when everyone sounds like ChatGPT in a beige jersey, writing like a real human, in ways that feel unfiltered, becomes a massive competitive advantage.

Paul Walker - Fractional CMO, CDO and eCommerce Director- Alpha9: A Digital Growth Consultancy

From Ads to Authenticity

Do you know who the happiest nation in the world is? I'll tell you, it's the Danish.

And do you know why they are the happiest?

Because they trust each other. They trust their neighbours, they trust their government, they trust in the laws and culture of their people. Trust makes you happy.

Trust also makes people buy more. As an eCommerce consultant, I have found low trust to be the single biggest hurdle to success in digital business. It is more pronounced in South Africa where we rank very low in trust. How can we fully trust our neighbours when we can't even trust that people will stop at traffic lights? How can we trust that what we buy online will actually arrive and meet our expectations?

Remember when people trusted what they saw on TV? Remember the days when a big-budget TV ad or a glossy magazine spread was the be-all and end-all of marketing? Well, those days are on their way out. Brands have realised they've been shouting at consumers for years, and now, people are just switching off.

We've become immune to the hard sell. I mean, my mom, who still calls TikTok 'TikkyTok,' instinctively scrolls past sponsored posts and trusts her favourite local food influencer's restaurant review over any big-name critique. And she's not alone.

This is the heart of what's happening in South Africa right now: a massive, irreversible shift from ***paid media to paid influence.***

Rather than paying a media house for a slot in their newspaper or a few seconds of airtime, brands are now investing in people—creators and influencers—who have already built trust with an audience.

This isn't just a trend; it's a fundamental change in how we connect with consumers.

In fact, a recent study found that **80% of South African consumers trust peer recommendations** more than any other form of advertising. It makes complete sense, doesn't it?

We're all looking for genuine connections and authentic stories, and a creator who shares their daily life, struggles, and triumphs with their followers feels a lot more real than a faceless corporation.

The local creator economy is booming

The South African creator economy is a force to be reckoned with. We're seeing more and more local businesses, from small artisanal coffee shops to big fashion retailers, recognising the power of creators. A great example of this is Zara's huge creator campaign in South Africa to launch its new e-commerce platform.

They worked with over 550 creators, and it wasn't just a flash in the pan; it was the first-ever African campaign to trend globally on X, driving thousands of new users to their site. This isn't just about reach, it's about relevance.

A big part of this shift is the move towards micro- and nano-influencers. While a few years ago everyone was chasing the big-name celebrities, brands now understand that a smaller, more engaged audience can be far more valuable. These creators, with their niche expertise and dedicated followers, offer a much higher return on investment (ROI). In fact, some South African brands are seeing an average of R6 back for every R1 they spend on micro-influencer campaigns.

Consumers are increasingly prioritising brands that show a commitment to social and environmental values. We saw this during the pandemic with the rise of "conscious consumption" and people supporting local.

Now, research indicates that **67% of South African consumers prefer brands with a genuine dedication to these values.** Creators who authentically live and breathe these principles are the perfect partners for brands looking to connect with a purpose-driven audience.

The next evolution: In-house influence

We're now seeing the smartest brands take this one step further. Instead of just working with external creators, they're starting to hire them in-house. It might sound odd, but it's a game-changer. Think of it like a new-age brand manager who's also a TikTok star.

I recently spoke to a friend who works at a large tech company in Sandton. She told me they've hired a small team of "brand storytellers." Their job isn't to run traditional ads; it's to create authentic, day-in-the-life content, showcasing the company culture, the people, and the products from an employee's perspective. It's user-generated content (UGC), but on a professional level.

This makes the brand feel more human, more relatable, and more trustworthy. More trust equals more sales
On top of that, research shows that a strong employer brand can attract 50% more qualified applicants and cut hiring costs by nearly half.

It's about turning your own people into your best advocates. Who knows your brand better than the people who work there every day?

Practical steps for brands in South Africa

So, how do you make this work for your brand in our local context?

Here are a few practical steps to get started:

1. Find your people, not just your influencers

Don't just look at follower counts. Look for creators who genuinely align with your brand's values and mission. Use local platforms and agencies that specialise in South African creators. Start small with a few long-term partnerships rather than one-off campaigns. This builds trust with both the creator and their audience.

A little pro-tip: the most important metric when assessing an influencer is Engagement Rate (Engagement Rate = (Total Engagements / Total Followers) x 100). This will weed out those that have dishonesty acquired followers.

Here are some loose benchmarks:

>1M, 1.97% ;
100K - 1M, 2.05% ;
20K - 100K, 2.15% ;
5K - 20K, 2.43%.

2. Shift your budget from ads to people

This is the big one. Re-evaluate your paid media spend. Instead of pumping all your money into generic social media ads, allocate a significant portion to creator collaborations. This isn't just about paying for a post; it's about paying for their creative vision and their audience's trust. Measure your ROI not just in clicks, but in engagement, brand sentiment, and direct sales driven by their unique promo codes or links.

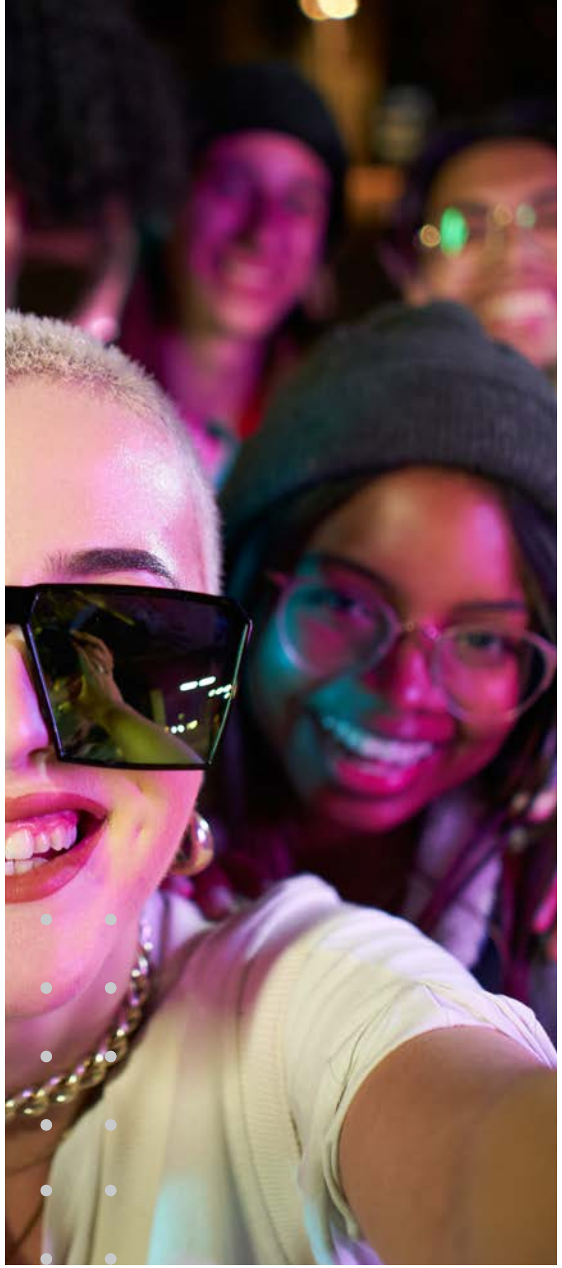
3. Embrace authentic, low-fi content

South African consumers are savvy; they can spot a fake a mile away. You don't need highly polished, expensive productions. Short-form video content, in particular, is dominating the market, with South African consumers spending 40% more time watching video content than they did two years ago. Encourage creators to use their own style, to be raw and real. A shaky phone video filmed in someone's kitchen often performs better than a perfectly lit studio shot.

4. Consider building an in-house creator team

This is the future. Start by identifying a few of your most enthusiastic, social-media-savvy employees. Give them the freedom and resources to create content that tells your brand's story from the inside out. This approach not only builds authenticity but also turns your employees into your biggest brand champions. It's a win-win.

In a landscape where trust is the new currency, creator-led e-commerce isn't just a marketing strategy—it's the only way forward.



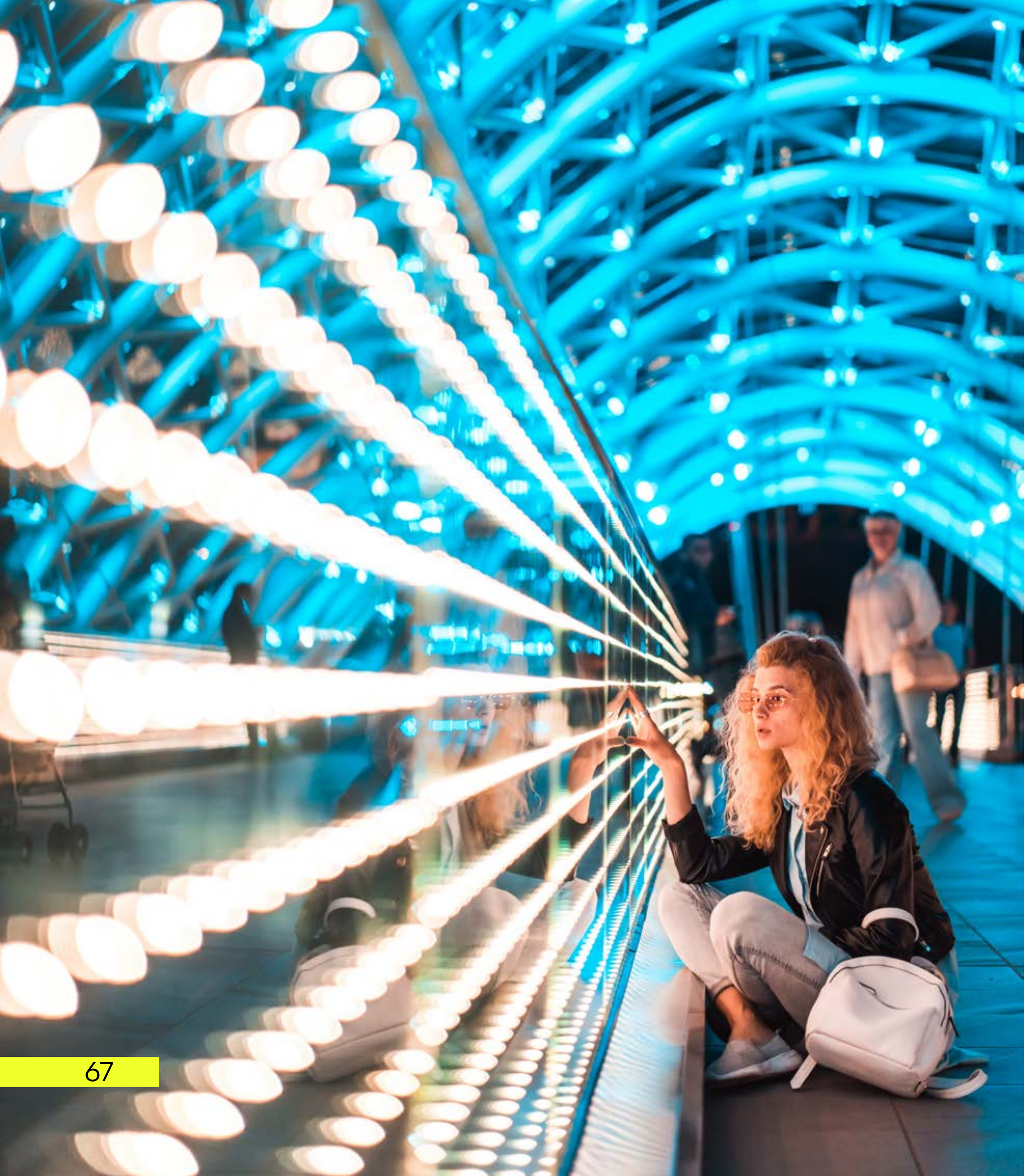
Eoin McGuinness - Head of Africa, CEE & Middle East - HubSpot for Startups

The AI-Powered GTM Revolution: 2025 Startup Performance Report

Your Competition Is Already Using AI

500 startups. 6 countries. One undeniable conclusion:
AI has created two distinct classes of startups - those scaling exponentially and those struggling to survive. This report reveals the strategies, metrics, and playbooks that separate the winners from everyone else.

digitlab



The State of AI in Startup GTM: Key Findings

The Performance Gap Is Massive

AI-Powered Startups:

- 37% lower customer acquisition costs
- 72% better at expansion revenue
- 3-6x higher growth rates
- 14% reach $20M+ ARR (vs. 2% for non-AI startups)

Traditional Startups:

- 71% stuck under $1M ARR
- Declining conversion rates
- Higher team burnout
- Losing market share rapidly

Investment Follows Intelligence

While overall venture funding dropped 50% since 2021, AI-powered startups command:

- Larger average deal sizes
- Higher valuations (Clay: $1.25B, OpenAI: $300B)
- Better terms and investor interest

The Three-Pillar AI GTM Framework

Pillar 1: Attract at Scale

Traditional Approach: Manual content creation, generic messaging, hoping for virality

AI-Powered Approach:

- Personalized content for every buyer persona
- Predictive topic selection based on intent data
- Automated A/B testing at massive scale
- Result: 29% cite content creation as highest ROI AI use case

Pillar 2: Engage with Intelligence

Traditional Approach: SDRs making 100 calls, 2% connect rate

AI-Powered Approach:

- AI identifies perfect timing for outreach
- Personalized messaging based on behavior
- Multi-channel orchestration
- Result: 25% improvement in sales performance

Pillar 3: Delight Proactively

Traditional Approach: React to support tickets, hope for renewals

AI-Powered Approach:

- Predict and prevent churn
- Automated expansion campaigns
- Proactive success interventions
- Result: 30% improvement in customer service

Global Implementation Patterns

North America: Governance-First

- 30% build dedicated AI frameworks
- Focus on lead conversion (25% improvement)
- Heavy chatbot adoption

EMEA: Collaboration-Led

- 37% use leadership-team collaboration
- Prioritize personalization (30% focus)
- Customer feedback analysis

APAC: Research-Driven

- 27% rely on internal testing
- Sales efficiency gains
- 70% increased AI investment

Industry-Specific Insights

SaaS/Tech: Leading adoption with dedicated AI teams (49% at Series C/D)

Financial Services: AI consulting as #2 investment priority

Manufacturing: Focus on talent acquisition and training

Professional Services: Workflow automation delivering highest returns

The Resource Reality

Team Structure Winners:

- 34% with AI teams reach $5-20M ARR
- 33% with AI leads reach $5-20M ARR
- 71% with no AI resources stuck under $1M

Budget Allocation:

- Top performers: 25%+ of tech stack is AI
- Average startup: 11-25%
- Laggards: Under 10%

Implementation Roadmap: 0 to AI in 30 Days

Week 1: Foundation

- Audit current tools and processes
- Identify quick AI wins
- Set up measurement framework

Week 2: Content & Lead Generation

- Deploy AI content creation
- Implement lead scoring
- Launch personalization

Week 3: Sales Acceleration

- Activate AI sequences
- Enable predictive analytics
- Optimize response times

Week 4: Customer Success

- Build health scoring
- Automate expansion plays
- Create feedback loops

Critical Success Factors

What Separates Winners:

Speed of Implementation

- Winners launch in weeks, not months
- 80% good enough beats perfect

Dedicated Resources

- 69% of successful startups have AI specialists
- Clear ownership drives results

Measurement Obsession

- Track AI impact on revenue metrics
- Iterate based on data, not opinions

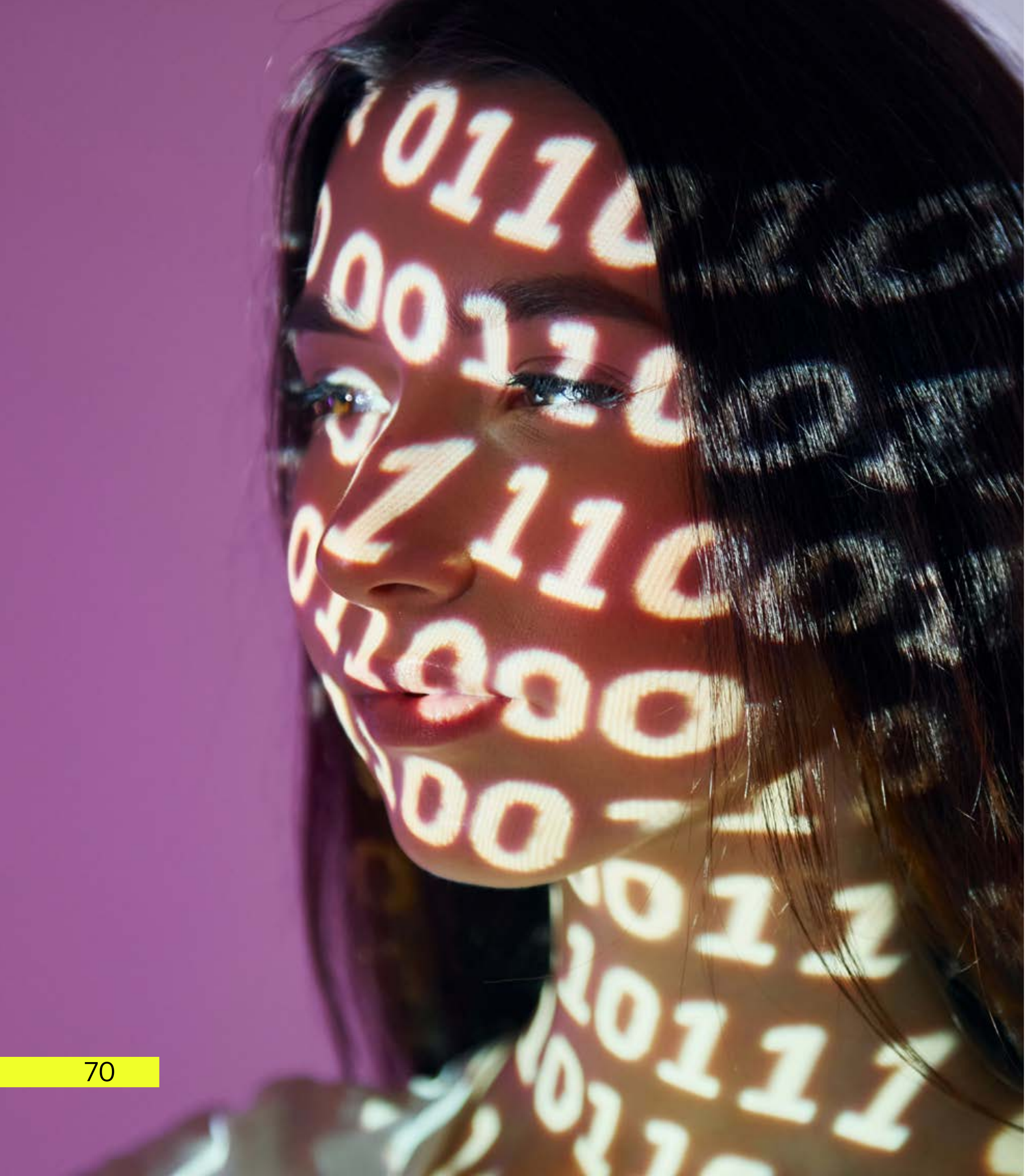
The Uncomfortable Truth

If you're reading this report and thinking "we'll implement AI next year," you're already too late. Your competitors are:

Responding to leads in 5 minutes (not 48 hours)

- Personalizing every touchpoint
- Predicting customer needs
- Scaling without adding headcount

The gap between AI-powered and traditional startups isn't just widening - it's becoming insurmountable.



Your Next Steps

1. **Today:** Share this report with your leadership team
2. **This Week:** Audit your current GTM stack
3. **This Month:** Implement at least one AI use case
4. **This Quarter:** Build your AI-powered growth engine

The choice is binary: Transform your GTM with AI or watch competitors who did.

About This Report

Based on survey data from 500 venture-backed startups across US, UK, France, Germany, Singapore, and India. Conducted by HubSpot for Startups in collaboration with Datalily, April 2025.

About the Author

Eoin McGuinness leads HubSpot for Startups across Africa, CEE & Middle East. As a 3x founder with 2x successful exits and former Head of Sales who scaled a startup from $1.2M to $4.8M in 14 months, he brings both operator and investor perspectives to GTM transformation.

Jean-Pierre Murray-Kline - Future Thinker | Business and Environmental Technologist| Published Author

Living 'reality' costs less than 'make-believe'. And you better believe it!

Obviously, I was flattered (and honoured) to be asked by the digitlab.co.za crew to contribute towards 'Insight 2026'!

My work is literally all about our futures, and I shared several topic titles with them for their consideration. In their reply email, they wrote: "...how about the metaverse, AR, VR, and MR. No-one else is tackling that...". The irony of that suggestion I hope becomes clear soon. Now, while this article is about AR, VR, MR, and the metaverse, it also really isn't. One could say it's a fantasy.

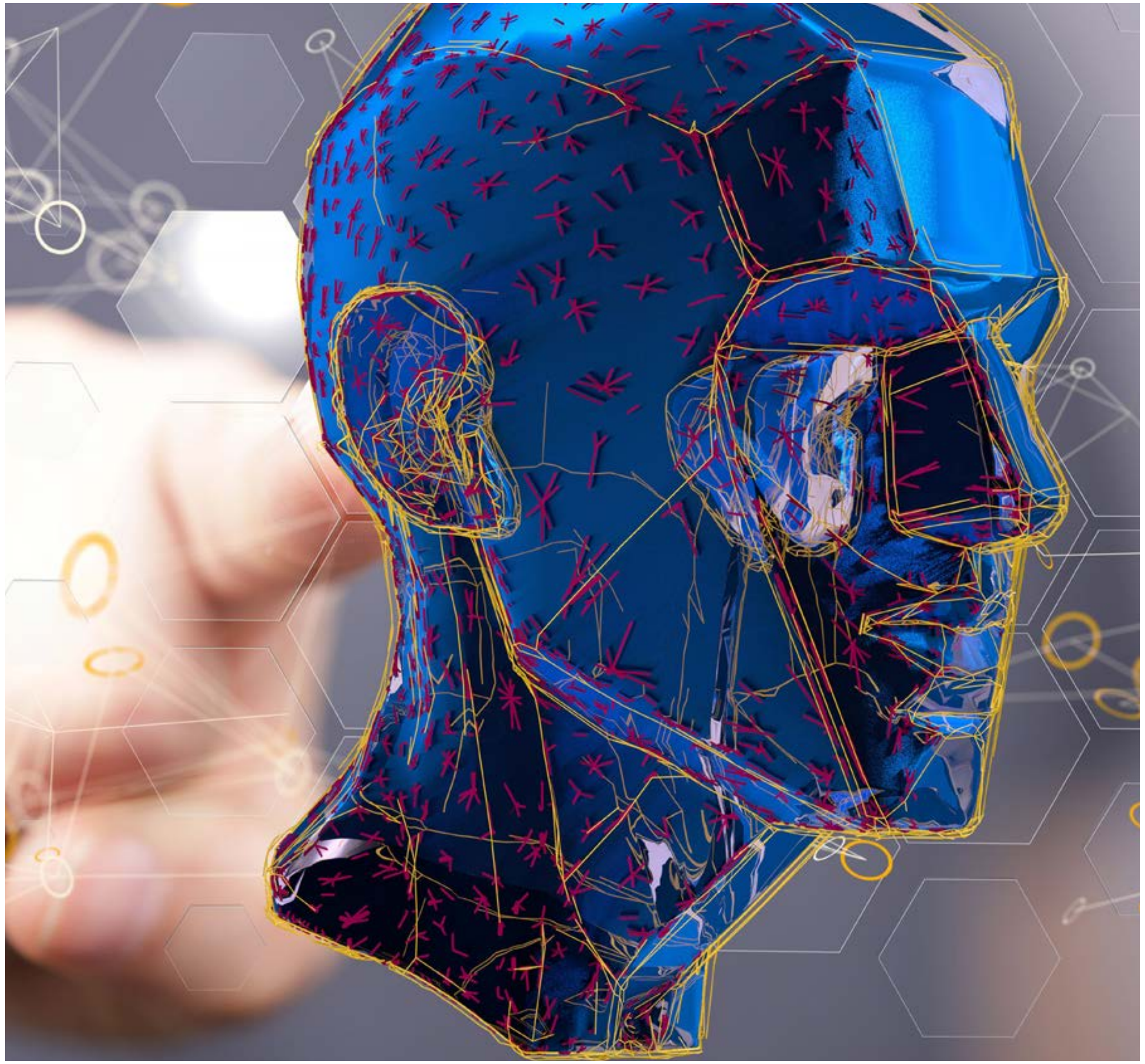
You see, dear reader, you are probably someone living in South Africa, and therefore already know that we do things very differently here in beautiful Mzansi — certainly compared to our relatives elsewhere in the world.

Yes, we are all related, genetically, and a good reference for those facts is my article called Africa Colonized the World — you can find it on my website.

Back on topic. Our way of working and playing has its pros and cons. One constant throughout is that our relationship with anything, everything, and everyone is absolutely complicated — sort of like Tiffany Markman's relationship with LinkedIn.

Before I get my hands dirty with the subject matter and what it actually means to us, let me quickly— for the unaware (polite way of saying ignorant)— offer an elevator pitch on what these things are. But don't panic, this won't be too technical or boring!

AR (Augmented Reality) adds digital information to our real world, e.g., like with Pokémon Go or what happened with those fancy glasses in Avengers Age of Ultron. VR (Virtual Reality) is about a fully immersive digital environment, e.g., Oculus Rift or those computer games that teenagers (and adults who act like teenagers) use to kill monsters or each other. MR (Mixed Reality) combines our real world with a digital one and offers interactivity.



The Metaverse is a collective virtual space where people can interact, work, play, (and even love - virtual intimacy and stimulation), supported by software and gadgets that come with AR, VR, and MR. The backbone of this is the internet. Not to be unpacked in this article, but these virtual worlds are not perfect by any means, and virtual assault is a real problem and worth a google if you want to learn more. One day, expect SARS to find a way to tax our e-monies, NFTs and Digital Wallets, and SABC will probably also insist we have a TV licence there too.

Now you are basically an expert. Well, almost...

Let me quickly name-drop some gadgets involved. Again, don't worry, this will be another quick elevator ride.

For AR, you might use Microsoft HoloLens 2 (very helpful for architecture, training, and maintenance) or Magic Leap (for visualization and collaboration). Very common are smartphones with AR apps (often used for inventory in retail).

For VR, you might use an Oculus Quest / Meta Quest (for virtual meetings or training), or HTC Vive (for design & simulation), or perhaps even Varjo (for enterprise training and simulation).

For MR, you may buy a Microsoft HoloLens 2 (used for remote collaboration or prototyping) or Varjo XR-3 (for design review and training).

The Metaverse doesn't have its own exclusive physical gadgets but does have software and app platforms. For example, Meta Facebook Horizon Worlds is a VR platform for building and exploring virtual worlds. Another often mentioned platform is Decentraland, which uses a blockchain-based virtual world for buying, selling, and building on virtual land. You might have also heard of Fortnite, which is much more than a game — it hosts virtual events, concerts, and social gatherings.

Now you are an expert. Well done!

At the time I prepared this article (September 2025), the market value for VR/AR/MR in South Africa was, or was expected to be, around US$114.5 million (according to Statista.com). Of this, software took the biggest slice, with industries related to education and tourism driving most of the usage.

A few examples of businesses actively using this technology in South Africa include Siemens South Africa (using VR for industrial training and maintenance simulations), Discovery Health (using AR/VR for medical training and patient education), and one that might surprise you is Johannesburg Zoo (using AR for educational tours).

The global market value for the metaverse in 2024 was approximately $737.73 billion, and it's projected to reach around $7.6 trillion by 2032.

Of course, these numbers can vary depending on the source, but one thing is certain: it's worth a pretty penny! Why this 'family of technologies' isn't as much of a buzz or trend as it once was or as it was proposed it would be. I'll try to be creative in my answer, out of respect to the many clever professionals involved in this technology.

The fat fact uncle in the room, and what no one wants to talk about, is that 70-80% of AR, VR & MR (and the metaverse by extension) usage is for entertainment — gaming, media, and social interactions — while only a teeny tiny 20-30% is used for business and industrial applications. In short, this tech is mainly for playing around! It's for games, fun, and the only people generating revenue or trading within this space are the creators like Unity Technologies, Nvidia (NVDA), and Qualcomm (QCOM), just to name a few,

along with brands benefitting from marketing on these platforms, such as Coca-Cola, Nike, Gucci, and Samsung.

The elephant in the room (sitting on that uncle's head) is that this technology is the literal definition (taking some writers' creative license here) of privileged technology.

As you probably know, the word 'privileged' in South Africa is a highly charged term, and to add salt to the gushing wound I've just opened, on the day I wrote this draft, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) revealed that African businesses are paying up to 35% more for technology than elsewhere in the world.

So, one could say that those who can afford these technologies are not only privileged but are also extra special.

Oculus Rift can be bought for a few thousand Rand, HoloLens prices run into tens of thousands of Rand, and AR glasses like the one I found on Takealot called the XREAL One - AR Smart Glasses cost almost fourteen thousand South African Moola. If you Google some prices, you'll see it gets much worse. I double dare you to Google the price of a VR Mecha ZY-VR-1JJC! My point is, these 'things' are luxuries and priced as such.

As a business and environmental technologist, my purpose each day is to study and consult on our relationship with technology and nature. I often do this from business, social, and political perspectives. We must remember that South Africa has two economies (formal and informal), and the economy that houses most of our population would have to stop eating and walk to work for about six years to pay for that VR Mecha contraption I just mentioned.

To Mr. Ivan Sutherland — and perhaps Neal Stephenson, if you're reading this — stop now because you will not like what I'm about to say: "None of these technologies solve any real South African problems and for now remain an elite luxury toy or digital playground." It's also a fact that only the wealthiest industries in South Africa can dabble with these innovations.

I've shared the salt, so here's the sugar: there are indeed businesses in South Africa that are working in this 'space' and making a positive impact. Perhaps worth googling are Augmented-Reality.co.za, Fuzzy Logic, or VirtualRealities.co.za to name just a few — and there are many more. However, don't forget the word 'privileged' and who can actually trade or benefit from what these businesses offer.

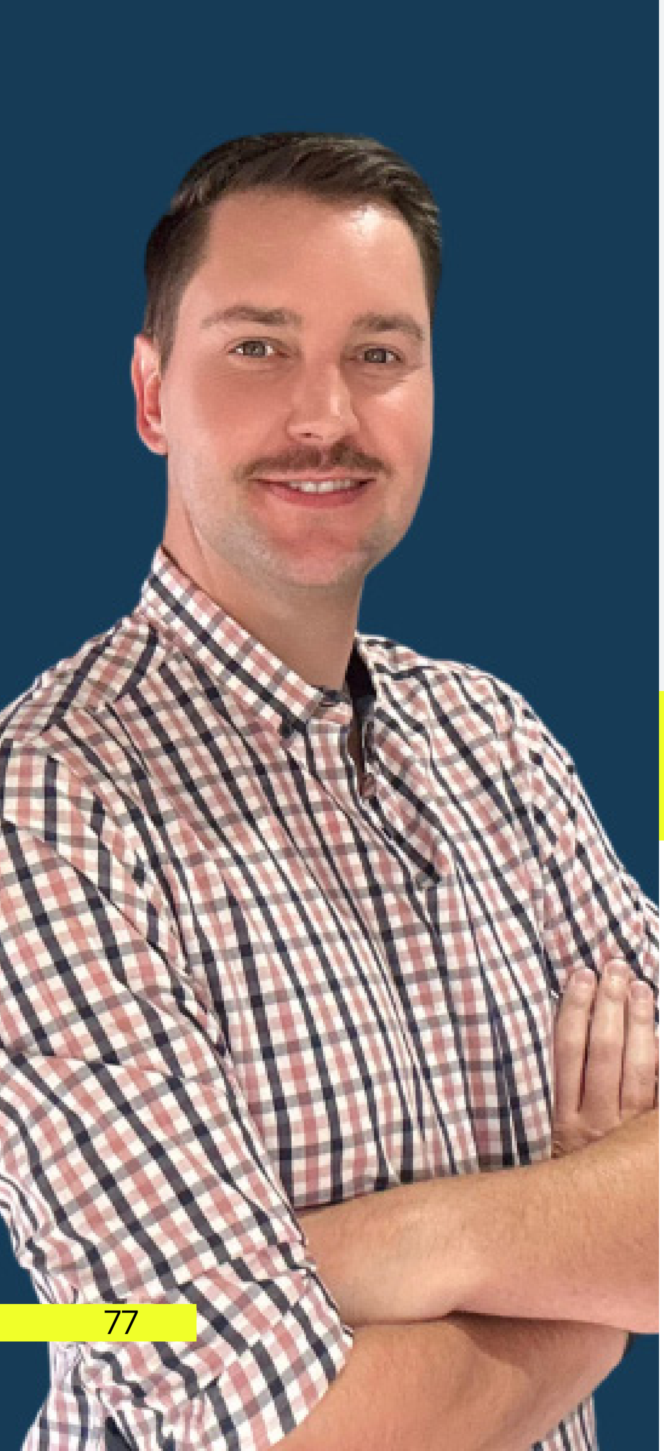
To conclude: my opinion on whether AR, VR, MR, and the Metaverse have a place in South Africa's near future.

South Africa, and Africa as a whole, must embrace technological innovation with both hands and feet, and if necessary, hold on with our teeth. If we don't engage — with the passion of a teenage boy on a third date — and with the resilience of the African National Congress, we risk falling further behind globally, both economically and geopolitically. The effects of that will be devastating for us all. It's not a matter of whether this technology has a place — it's about making space for it!

The first time I used a VR headset was at a Mining Indaba, I got to see, walk around, and play with a digital twin of a multimillion-rand machine. Not everyone gets to attend such events or has access at a school or, bless them, a machine in their own lounge. We must find a way to reduce the cost of these gadgets and share access to our entire population.

The future of these technologies must address real needs in South Africa — and they can. Bridging the educational divide is an immediate opportunity, as is immersive STEM training. Medical training and mental health treatment can also take advantage of these technologies.

These e-solutions are still in their infancy, and in pursuit of virtual realities and new frontiers, we must become change champions and future thinkers, because if done right, we can make our actual reality better with them, and that would be something to talk about.



By Dan Brocklebank - Head of Strategy at Second Rodeo

The Organic Social Trap: Why Brands Keep Measuring Community Management Like Performance Marketing

Opening: The Category Error

Every month, the same ritual plays out in marketing departments across South Africa. The organic social report lands. Page one shows engagement rate up 3.2%. Reach increased 8%. Video completion rates hit 65%! The community manager breathes a sigh of relief. The metrics are green.

Then someone asks: "But are we selling more?"

Silence.

The question reveals a fundamental misunderstanding about what organic social media actually does. It's not a performance marketing channel. It never was.

Yet we keep measuring it like one, then acting surprised when the numbers don't correlate with revenue.

According to PwC's 2024 Entertainment and Media Outlook, South African brands are spending R23.5 billion on digital advertising. A significant chunk goes to social media, split between paid and organic efforts. But whilst paid social has clear performance metrics (cost per acquisition, ROAS, conversion rates), organic social exists in a measurement no-man's-land, borrowing KPIs from performance marketing that were never designed for brand building.

The result?

Organic social teams optimise for the wrong outcomes, brands undervalue the channel's actual contribution, and everyone ends up frustrated.

What Organic Social Actually Does

Les Binet and Peter Field's research in The Long and the Short of It distinguished between two types of marketing activity:

Brand building creates mental availability. It makes your brand come to mind in buying situations. It builds distinctive assets people recognise. It earns a disproportionate share of attention in your category. Effects accumulate slowly over 6-24 months.

Sales activation converts existing demand into immediate purchases. It targets people already in-market. It uses rational triggers like offers, features, urgency. Effects happen within days or weeks.

Organic social media is brand building.

Full stop.

It reaches people who aren't currently buying. It builds familiarity through repeated exposure. It creates emotional associations with your brand. It makes your brand feel omnipresent in cultural conversations. These effects compound over time but rarely drive this week's sales.

Yet we measure organic social with activation metrics: clicks, conversions immediate engagement. We're using a thermometer to measure distance.

The Engagement Rate Delusion

Let's talk about the most misleading metric in organic social: engagement rate.

Engagement rate (likes, comments, shares divided by reach) tells you what percentage of people who saw your content interacted with it. On the surface, this seems useful. Higher engagement must mean better content, right?

Not necessarily.

Research from the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute shows that brand growth comes primarily from penetration (reaching more category buyers), not from deepening relationships with existing fans. Brands grow by being thought of by more people, not by being loved more intensely by fewer people.

High engagement rate often means you're preaching to the converted. Your most engaged followers are typically your existing customers, your employees, your brand advocates. Getting them to engage more doesn't grow your business. It just makes your metrics look good.

The brands winning on organic social aren't those with 8% engagement rates. They're those with massive reach, consistent distinctive assets, and disproportionate share of conversation in their categories, even if their engagement rate is a modest 2%.

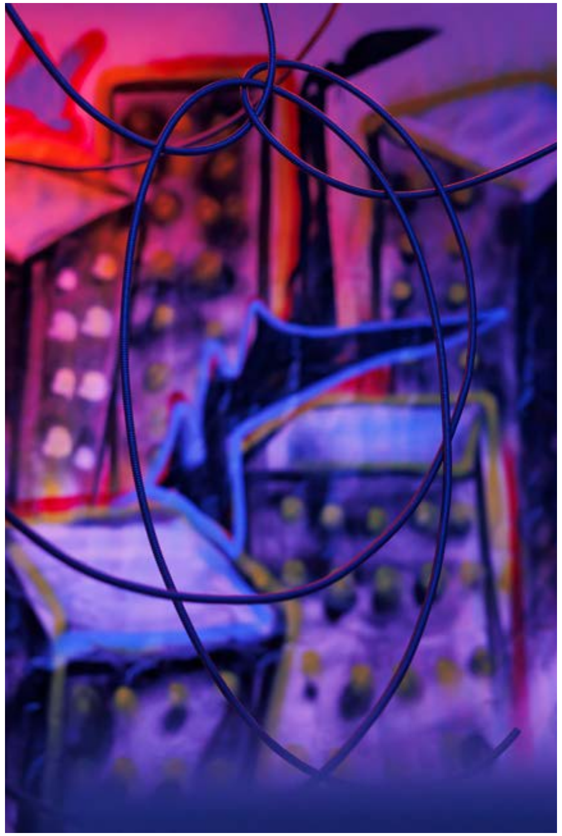
Consider two scenarios:

Brand A: 100,000 reach, 8% engagement rate = 8,000 interactions Audience: 80% existing customers, 20% prospects

Brand B: 2,000,000 reach, 2% engagement rate = 40,000 interactions Audience: 20% existing customers, 80% prospects

Brand B is building five times more mental availability among people who don't currently buy them. But Brand A's social manager gets praised for their engagement rate.

This is the organic social trap.



What We Should Actually Measure

If engagement rate is a distraction, what should organic social be measured against? Here's a framework based on what the channel actually delivers:

1. Reach Among Non-Buyers

Your job isn't to make existing customers engage more. It's to reach people who don't currently buy your brand. Track what percentage of your reach goes to:

- People outside your follower base
- Audiences in your category who don't currently choose you
- Prospect segments versus existing customer segments

If 70% of your reach goes to people already following you, you're not building mental availability. You're running a loyalty programme.

2. Share of Conversation
Social listening tools can tell you what percentage of category conversations mention your brand versus competitors. This is your organic share of voice, the mental availability metric that matters.

Binet and Field demonstrated that share of voice predicts share of market. In organic social, share of conversation is your version of this. Are you earning disproportionate attention relative to your market share?

If you've got 15% market share but only 8% share of conversation, you're losing ground. If you've got 15% market share and 22% share of conversation, you're building momentum.

3. Distinctive Asset Consistency
Do people recognise your content as yours before they see your logo? Ehrenberg-Bass research shows distinctive assets (colours, fonts, characters, sounds, taglines) can drive up to 90% of a campaign's mental availability impact.

Track:

- Percentage of content featuring your distinctive assets
- Recognition rates of your assets (via occasional testing)
- Consistency of asset usage across content

If your content could be any brand in your category, you're wasting reach.

4. Content Attention Signals
Not all engagement is equal. Someone saving your post for later shows higher intent than someone double-tapping whilst scrolling. Someone sharing your content is building your reach. Someone commenting might just be complaining. Rank engagement by value:

- Saves (highest intent)
- Shares (reach multiplication)
- Comments (nuanced, depends on sentiment)
- Likes (lowest signal)

Stop reporting blended engagement rate. Report attention quality.

5. Organic Brand Search Trends
Are more people searching for your brand name over time?

This is unprompted demand, the clearest signal that mental availability is growing. Google Trends and Search Console (if you have access) provide this data.

If your organic social is working, brand search should trend upward even during periods with no paid activity or promotions.

The South African Context

South African organic social faces specific challenges. Brands often operate across multiple languages and cultural contexts. Reach costs are low compared to Western markets, but so is purchasing power, making immediate ROI harder to demonstrate. Many brands still treat social as "free marketing" rather than a strategic channel requiring investment and patience.

Research from Demographica shows that South African consumers are highly social-media-engaged, with platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok showing higher penetration than in many developed markets. This creates opportunity for organic reach, but also means competition for attention is fierce.

The brands succeeding in South Africa are those playing the long game: consistent presence, culturally relevant content, distinctive assets that work across languages, and broad reach rather than narrow engagement farming.

What This Means for Agencies and Brands

For agencies:
Stop selling engagement rate. Start selling mental availability.
Your pitch shouldn't be "we'll get you 5% engagement." It should be "we'll reach 500,000 category buyers per month, build recognition of your distinctive assets, and earn you 18% share of conversation in your category."
Be honest about what you can and cannot measure. You can't track market share or immediate sales impact. You shouldn't try. But you can track reach breadth, distinctive asset usage, share of conversation, and attention quality.
Build reporting that reflects brand-building timeframes. Monthly reports should show trends over 6-12 months, not just last month versus this month. Mental availability compounds slowly.

For brands:
Stop asking your organic social team why sales are flat. That's not what the channel does.

Organic social builds the mental availability that makes every other channel work better. Your paid ads get higher click-through rates because organic built familiarity. Your sales team gets warmer leads because prospects already know who you are. Your PR efforts get more pick-up because you're part of cultural conversations.

But you can't see this in your organic social dashboard. You see it in brand tracking studies, in declining customer acquisition costs across all channels, in reduced price sensitivity over time.
Give your organic social team brand-building KPIs and brand-building timeframes. Then give your performance marketing team activation KPIs and short timeframes.

Stop conflating the two.

For both:
Read Binet and Field. Understand that 60% of marketing investment should go to brand building (including organic social) and 40% to activation (including paid performance). The optimal split exists because the two types of activity do different jobs on different timescales.

Stop borrowing performance marketing metrics for brand-building channels.

Conclusion: Measure What the Channel Actually Does

The organic social trap is measuring a brand-building channel with performance marketing metrics, then wondering why the numbers don't show business impact.

Engagement rate doesn't predict market share. Follower growth doesn't predict revenue. Click-through rate on organic posts doesn't predict anything except that you posted something clickable.

What predicts business impact from organic social:

- Reaching people who don't currently buy you
- Building consistent, recognisable brand assets
- Earning disproportionate share of conversation
- Creating mental availability that compounds over time

These things are harder to measure than engagement rate. They don't fit neatly in monthly dashboards. They require patience, category context, and honest conversations about timeframes.

But they're what organic social actually delivers.

Stop judging community management like performance marketing. Start measuring mental availability. Give the channel the KPIs it deserves, not the ones borrowed from paid media.

Your organic social team will thank you. And in 18 months, when your brand tracking shows spontaneous awareness up 12 points and your market share has grown, you'll understand why.

Your organic social team will thank you. And in 18 months, when your brand tracking shows spontaneous awareness up 12 points and your market share has grown, you'll understand why.

Dan Brocklebank is Head of Strategy at Second Rodeo, where he helps brands understand what their marketing channels actually do (rather than what they wish they did). Previously Head of Brand Strategy at Aleph Group, he's spent 15 years explaining that not everything needs to drive sales this quarter.

From us at Digitlab

Thank You

As we close this year's Insight 2026 report, I want to extend my sincere thanks to everyone who helped bring it to life. Producing a study like this requires more than just data collection — it demands shared curiosity, clear thinking, and a conviction in the value of understanding where digital marketing is headed. This report reflects that collaboration at every level.

A special thank you goes to our contributors, whose perspectives brought depth and variety to the trends shaping our industry.

Andrew Gillett showed how real-time context is redefining area-based advertising.

Bronwyn Williams challenged convention with her bold take on "Late Stage Hyperbrand" and what it means for the future of brands.

Dan Brocklebank called out the organic social trap and reminded us to measure what truly matters.

Eoin McGuinness revealed how AI has already transformed startup performance and go-to-market strategy.

Jean-Pierre Murray-Kline provided us with a grounded, distinctly South African perspective on AR, VR, and the metaverse — and what "reality" truly costs.

Jochen Bischoff explored why marketing needs a new measurement mindset in an age of uncertainty.

Paul Walker reframed digital strategy through the lens of authenticity and trust.

Shreya R Nambiar clarified the growing importance of consent management in digital advertising.

And Tiffany Markman reminded us that imperfection, honesty, and humanity are the qualities that will win the internet in 2026.

To the Digitlab team — thank you for your insight, strategy, design, and long hours spent turning ideas into something remarkable. Your attention to detail and shared vision gave this report its voice and substance.

Finally, to everyone who participated in the State of Digital Survey, thank you for your time, openness, and contribution. Your input grounds this report in reality and ensures that what we share here accurately represents the current state of digital marketing.

Together, we've created more than a snapshot of the moment — we've built a resource that helps businesses move forward with focus and confidence.

Mike Saunders
CEO, Digitlab

About Digitlab

Digitlab is your digital marketing partner with expertise in lead generation, Hubspot CRM, online advertising, search engine optimisation, social media and WordPress website design and development.

Today's marketing professionals face significant challenges in a fast-paced, digital world. Their roles are becoming more demanding and complex, with changing workforce patterns, evolving consumer preferences, and advancing technology.

In this environment, it is crucial to find a digital partner who is agile and capable of helping you enhance internal and external sales and marketing capabilities.

Our Agile Delivery Framework

Our delivery framework brings the best output to businesses of various sizes and allows all our clients to benefit from internal and external growth.
We work with top marketing and sales technology to help clients grow their business.

We offer outsourced agency services to accelerate business goals, and our fractional consultants provide valuable experience to your team.

Fractional Consulting: Part-time, expert guidance tailored to your specific needs. Our fractional consulting team is matched specifically to your needs.

Software Partner: Software partnerships with HubSpot, SEMrush, Mailchimp, Kinsta WordPress Hosting, and Lemlist LinkedIn Automation help you build robust sales & marketing tech stacks.

Digital Agency: The digital agency specialises in brand development, lead generation, SEO, CRM, and WordPress web design.

Build a Brighter Business with Digitlab today

We understand that every business is unique. We tailor our solutions to your goals, challenges and vision. By leveraging data-driven insights and industry expertise, we confidently help you navigate the evolving digital landscape.

INSIGHT 2026

The state of digital today;
the trends of tomorrow.