AI in marketing: Don’t overlook the fundamentals



Artificial intelligence has become the hottest topic in marketing. Since the launch of ChatGPT, discussions have centred on generative AI, AI agents and marketing automation. It is easy to believe that every business should be rushing to adopt the latest tools.

For SMEs, however, the priority should be different.

AI is not a magic solution – it is an amplifier. It enhances what already exists. If your brand, data and processes are weak, AI will simply produce more content, more quickly, without delivering greater value.

A recent McKinsey study, *State of Marketing Europe 2026*, reinforces this point. Branding remains the top marketing priority, while generative AI and AI agents rank much lower. The reason is simple: a strong brand builds trust, creates differentiation and supports long-term growth. AI can help communicate your message, but it cannot define what your business stands for.

Many SMEs are already using AI successfully for practical tasks such as drafting social media posts, creating newsletters and supporting customer service. These applications improve efficiency and save valuable time. However, they only deliver meaningful results when built on a clear marketing strategy.

The next major development is Agentic AI – systems that can manage campaigns, optimise customer journeys and make routine decisions with minimal human intervention. While the potential is significant, these technologies depend on reliable data, integrated systems and clearly defined business processes.

The reality is that most organisations are not yet ready. According to McKinsey, only 6% of European marketing leaders consider their AI capabilities to be highly mature, while the majority are still experimenting with pilot projects. In other words, although AI dominates the conversation, relatively few companies are using it strategically and at scale.

Successful AI adoption is therefore less about buying the latest software and more about organisational readiness. Businesses that invest in strong marketing foundations will gain far greater value from AI than those chasing the latest trend.

Before making AI a core part of your marketing strategy, consider these five priorities:

- Strengthen your brand. Be clear about your positioning, values and messaging.
- Improve data quality. Reliable customer data and well-managed CRM systems are essential.
- Document your processes. AI can only automate activities that are clearly understood.
- Build an integrated MarTech ecosystem. A small number of well-connected tools is more effective than a large collection of disconnected platforms.
- Develop your team's skills. Technology alone is not enough; people remain central to successful AI adoption.

AI will continue to reshape marketing over the coming years. The businesses that benefit most will not necessarily be those that adopt it first, but those that build the right foundations before scaling its use.

The message for SMEs is clear: get the basics right, and AI will become a powerful competitive advantage rather than just another technology trend.



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