

AI & Agentic Marketing

Separating Signal from Story

Koen Pauwels

Distinguished Professor, Northeastern University and Editor-in-Chief, IJRM

For UPA in Milano, July 8, 2026

Two Questions for You

1

How many of you have heard that AI will transform marketing?

2

How many have actually transformed marketing because of AI?

That gap is the subject of this talk.

Most Are Running Experiments, Not Operations

88%

of organizations use AI
in at least one function

McKinsey State of AI, 2025

23%

have begun scaling
agentic AI anywhere

McKinsey State of AI, 2025

27%

of marketers call AI agents
top trend, but don't deploy them

Marketing AI Institute, 2025

The gap between those first two numbers is where the hype lives.

Three Narratives Already Proven Wrong



AI replaces the marketer



"Too many brands treat tech like theater, chasing attention rather than solving real needs." Raja Rajamannar, ex-CMO Mastercard. "I hope you no longer fear for your job but do for AI errors at next audit" Shenan Reed, Global CCO, GM



More content = more relevance



"Speed and volume help only when the creative has a strong point of view. If any brand could have done it, it won't stand out." Duolingo CMO. "AI provides the floor, humans give the ceiling" Teresa Barriera, CMO Publicis-Sapient, CMOTalk USA



AI-generated content performs on par



Labeling ad as AI-generated lowers authenticity, attitudes, and purchase intent (Nuremberg Institute, 2025). Word of mouth had 20x the long-run elasticity of paid media (Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, JM 2009) Authenticity was the mechanism then and still is.

The AI Authenticity Paradox: as AI improves, authentic human judgment becomes scarcer and more valuable. Self-journalers lose engagement when content feels engineered (Peggiani, Lamberti and Pauwels, MSI 2026).

AI Delivers Where the Goal Is Optimization, Not Origination

Proven Use Cases

- Media buying & bid optimization
- Audience segmentation at scale
- Campaign reporting and summaries
- Message timing and personalization

Case in Point: Foodora

Agentic message timing workflow:

41% conversion rate

26% drop in unsubscribes

Not by replacing strategy — by executing it precisely.



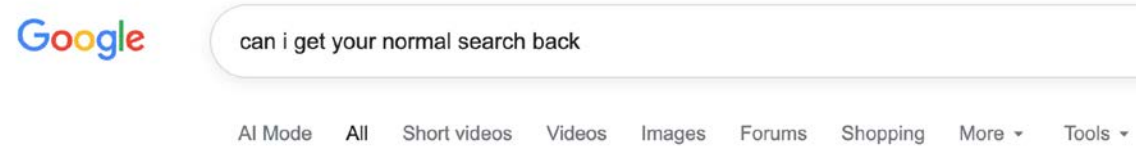
Data still rules: 80% of the full technical exercise, as before. Poor data + AI = confident errors at scale. Your KPIs should be CRISP (converting, responsive, impactful, sticky, potential) now play out inside LLM-generated responses: measure them also there

LLM Brand Visibility: The New Share-of-Voice

–25%

expected drop in traditional search volume by 2026 as users shift to AI chatbots

**Brands are no longer competing for a click.
They are competing to be the answer, even on Google!**



What this means for your brand:

New potential KPIs should be C.R.I.S.P. (Hanssens et al., Marketing Science 2013) and now play out inside model-generated responses. ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Claude get much of their information from Reddit, LinkedIn, and your brand pages

Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) is the emerging discipline.

Most Italian brands have not started measuring this yet.



First movers in this market have a temporary window of competitive advantage (Pauwels and Hanssens 2009)

Areas that influence LLM visibility

- Brand Mentions Across Trusted Sources
- Structured, Clear, Machine-Readable Content
- Topical Authority and Semantic Depth
- Retrieval Optimization (The New SEO Layer)
- Engagement and Human Utility
- Distribution Across Ecosystems

LLMs compress the distance between:

- Reputation
- Discoverability
- Authority
- Recommendation

Which means brand, content, PR, product experience, and community strategy are starting to merge into one discoverability system.

How LLMs Consume Information: Two Inputs

On-Site: Your Foundation

Structured, owned, and within your direct control. This is where you define the authoritative version of your brand story – product details, service coverage, pricing clarity, and FAQ depth.

- Website pages and blog content
- FAQ and support documentation
- Product and service descriptions
- Structured data and schema markup

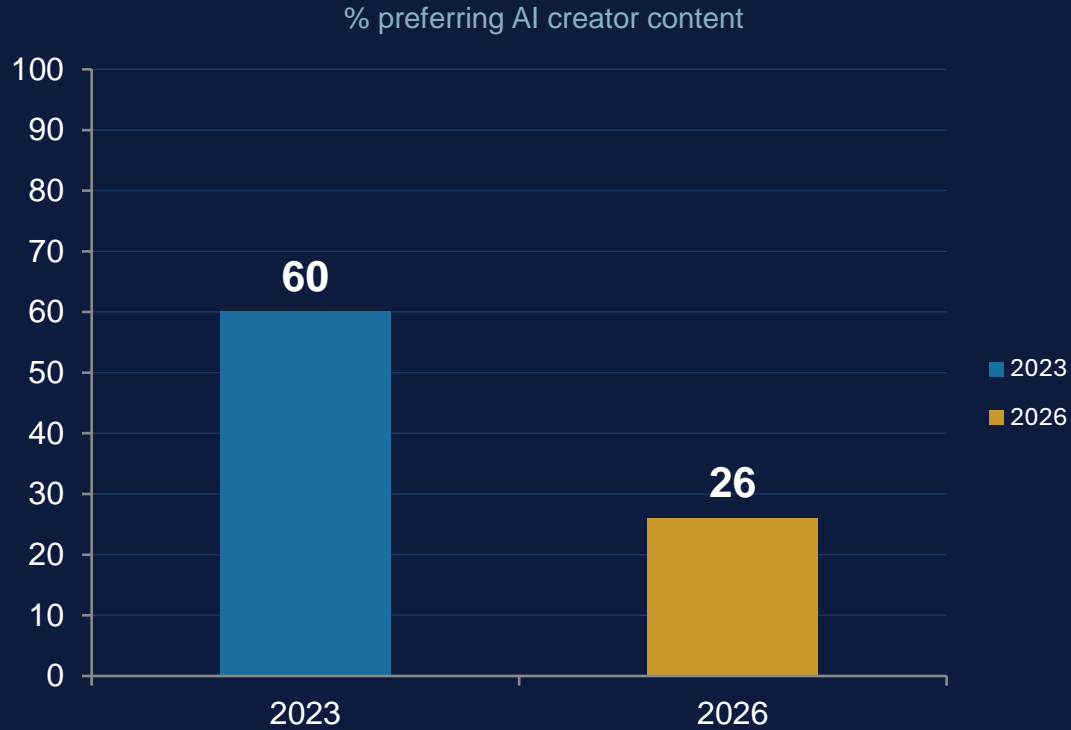
Off-Site: Your Amplifier

Third-party credibility signals that reinforce – or contradict – what your site says. These sources carry independent authority that LLMs weigh heavily during training.

- LinkedIn, Wikipedia, Reddit
- Press releases and media (earned + paid)
- Affiliate, native and editorial coverage
- Community and social sentiment

Alignment between these two layers is what builds the consistency LLMs reward. Contradiction between them creates ambiguity - and AI systems default to the most widely corroborated version.

Authenticity Is Now a Competitive Advantage



Source: Billion Dollar Boy / Digiday, 2026

Research Insight: Influencer Typology (Peggiani, Lamberti & Pauwels, MSI 2026)

Content Creators — *Professional, brand-facing*
AI role: Can leverage AI tools without authenticity cost

Self-Journalers — *Personal, community-anchored*
AI role: Lose core value the moment content feels engineered

Most brands are not yet applying this distinction.

Three Companies That Get It Right — And Why

Spotify: Wrapped

What AI does:

Surfaces patterns users did not know about themselves from 600M+ streams

What humans do:

The creative concept, the emotional frame, the cultural timing

Result: 60M+ organic social shares in 2023

Nike: Never Done Evolving

What AI does:

AI simulates Serena Williams across eras from match data; ML personalizes product recommendations across 500M+ data points

What humans do:

Athletes shape the creative concept; brand strategists set what Nike stands for

Result: Nike By You drives higher conversion; “Never Done Evolving” viral without paid

Zalando: Segmentation

What AI does:

ML models segment 50M+ customers for offer timing and message personalization

What humans do:

Brand voice, campaign concepts, creative strategy — entirely human-led

Documented conversion uplift in investor materials

AI executes at scale. Humans decide what matters.

Other companies went in too fast, too furious



BUILD YOUR BUSINESS START A SIDE HUSTLE BUY A FRANCHISE BUSINESS NEWS

🏠 / BUSINESS NEWS

[Launch Your Business in 5 Steps](#)

Klarna Is Hiring Customer Service Agents After AI Couldn't Cut It on Calls, According to the Company's CEO

Klarna released an AI chatbot and implemented an AI-induced hiring freeze last year.

Air Canada found liable for chatbot's bad advice on plane tickets

Airline's claim that online helper was responsible for its own actions was 'remarkable': small claims court

JPMorgan Chase cuts off Anthropic access for its Hong Kong staff

Bank follows Goldman Sachs in preventing use of Claude in Asian financial hub






JPMorgan's employees in Hong Kong are now unable to access Claude models from a 'drop-down' list of approved large language models © Bob Henry/UCG/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Where to Invest When, and What to Ignore

FOCUS ON

- 1 Data infrastructure first** AI amplifies what you have. *It's not the Size of the Data, It's what You do with it!* Clean data matters. GIGO
- 2 LLM brand presence** Measure how your brand appears in AI-generated answers. Owned and earned media are key: consistency, social proof
- 3 Agentic AI for execution** Measurable gains in campaign management, timing, reporting. Human judgment stays at the strategy level.

SET ASIDE

-  **The full-automation fantasy** Without governance and data maturity, autonomous agents introduce risk as much as their autonomy.
-  **Platform-chasing** Adopting every AI tool as a badge of innovation is theater, not strategy.
-  **The ROI-less pilot** In 2026, the conversation shifts from technology to measurable business impact. Demos are not strategies.

Summing it up

AI has transformed the cost structure of marketing execution.

It has not yet transformed what makes brands matter.

That second transformation is coming.

Winning brands know the difference, and act on it now.

Grazie Mille! Want to learn more?

- Contact me at kpauwels@northeastern.edu
- LinkedIn handle: [koenhpauwels](#)
- Newsletter *Pauwels on Marketing*
- My Substack Amazon Days
- Publications: marketingandmetrics.com
- Podcast: *CMO Talk USA*
- And check out my practical book:

*It's not the Size of the Data, it is How You Use it:
Smarter Marketing with Analytics & Dashboards*

