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CONVERSATIONS in Growth

What marketing leaders told us about trust, data, and AI

Insights from The Marketing Rapport podcast about brand growth and the customer experience



11 LEADERS. 5 BEHAVIORAL SHIFTS.

the marketing rapport
PODCAST

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A note from your host

In publishing our third eBook based on conversations from The Marketing Rapport podcast, I'm reminded of just how much the marketing landscape continues to evolve and how valuable it is to learn directly from the leaders navigating that change every day.

Over the past several years as host of the podcast, I've had the opportunity to sit down with some of the brightest minds in marketing, data, technology, and customer experience. While every conversation has been unique, a clear pattern has emerged: the challenges facing marketing leaders today are remarkably consistent, regardless of industry.

This eBook brings together the most compelling insights from those conversations. What stood out to me wasn't just what these executives are doing differently, it's how often they returned to the same foundational principles: putting customers first, treating trust as a business asset, building disciplined data strategies, and using AI to enhance human decision-making rather than replace it.

I hope the perspectives shared here spark new ideas for your own organization. If there's one lesson I've taken away from these conversations, it's that while technology continues to transform marketing, sustainable growth still begins and ends with earning the customer's trust.



Tim Finnigan
Host of The Marketing Rapport

Introduction

Marketing leaders are under increasing pressure. Consumers want relevance without intrusion. Regulators demand compliance without compromise. Executives want measurable growth from every dollar spent.

At the center of all of it is the customer relationship itself, and whether it's built on trust. This eBook draws on conversations with marketing and data leaders from The Marketing Rapport podcast, spanning verticals like insurance, financial services, retail, media measurement, higher education, martech and adtech, and lead generation. Their perspectives point to five connected ideas:

- Trust has become a measurable driver of business performance.
- Demographics alone can't explain how a customer will behave in the market.
- Data strategy only creates value when it's disciplined enough to drive decisions.
- AI should positively impact how work gets done.
- Brand, performance, and commerce are converging around a single measure: outcomes.

Throughout this eBook, you'll see how these leaders are building successful strategies equipped for fostering customer relationships that look different than they did five years ago.

70% of CMOs say becoming an AI leader is a critical goal for 2026, only 30% report mature or fully developed AI readiness capabilities.

Gartner, Insights From The 2026 CMO Spend Survey

Trust as a competitive advantage

Trust used to live in the brand team's column, tracked alongside market sentiment and awareness, separate from the revenue conversation. That separation is disappearing.

As Michelle Barbeau, Chief Revenue Officer at eHealth, puts it, solving a real problem for a customer is what drives growth:

> "When you unlock and solve the problems of the consumer, that drives business growth every single time."
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> **Michelle Barbeau**
> Chief Revenue Officer, eHealth

Barbeau's team put that belief to the test while rebuilding eHealth's brand from scratch. After 25 years without a defined identity, the company listened to consumers: the industry's fear-based advertising, aging celebrity spokespeople, and urgency-driven scare copy weren't helping anyone make a real purchase decision.

> "Our brand strategy became about doing the exact opposite of what had been out there, about being your remarkably transparent advisor."
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> **Michelle Barbeau**
> Chief Revenue Officer, eHealth

Jeff Piotrowski of Customer Solutions Group locates trust at an even more foundational level than brand positioning: compliance itself.

> “I really believe, to my core, that compliance is actually the foundation of trust building, which is foundational for any relationship that you're building, regardless of whether that's with a customer, with a partner, or a friend.”



Jeff Piotrowski
Chief Customer Officer, Customer Solutions Group

That foundation is under new pressure, according to Dr. Quentin André, a professor of marketing and analytics at the University of Colorado Boulder. AI is quietly dismantling the signals consumers have always relied on to judge whether a brand is legitimate.

> “When we shop, we don't have perfect information about what we buy, and so we use what I call signals, signals of quality, signals of trustworthiness.”



Dr. Quentin André
Professor of Marketing and Analytics, University of Colorado Boulder

28%

of consumers have stopped purchasing from a brand entirely due to its use of AI, proving that human-led, transparent advising is the new primary engine for brand trust.

HubSpot, The 2026 State of Marketing Report

A polished logo or professional-looking website once implied a real, accountable company behind it. Generative AI has made those signals nearly free to fake, which means the brands that *are* legitimate now have to work harder to prove it.

André also points to a structural shift already underway: increasingly, an AI system sits between the brand and the buyer, deciding what gets surfaced and recommended.

> "When a large language model answers a consumer's question, it sits between the brand and the buyer. It's influencer marketing, except the influencer is AI."



Dr. Quentin André
Professor of Marketing and Analytics, University of Colorado Boulder

Brands now have to train their AI to be trustworthy, in order to earn consumer trust.

Key takeaways

Trust is foundational to the mechanism that drives revenue for businesses.

01 **Trust drives growth, not just perception:** Solving a real customer problem is itself a growth strategy.

02 **Transparency beats polish:** Consumers reward brands that show their work, not just their promises.

03 **Compliance is a relationship foundation:** Responsible behavior builds the trust every other tactic depends on.

04 **AI is a new trust intermediary:** Brands must earn credibility with the systems now standing between them and their customers.

Understanding people requires more than demographics

Age, income, and marital status still matter, but on their own they miss most of what actually drives a person's shopping behavior. Few people have tested that harder than Lÿden Foust, founder of Spatial.ai, whose platform segments consumer households in the United States into one of 80 behavioral profiles.

Foust layers in credit card spend, social media affinity, and mobile location data alongside demographics, because demographics alone routinely do not give marketers what they need to reach the right consumers consistently.

> “If you don't know your customer, really know your customer beyond demographics, you're gonna make mistakes. But if you do know your customer, you can make some huge headway with some very minimal effort comparatively.”



Lÿden Foust
Founder, Spatial.ai

Amie Owen, Chief Client Officer at Flywheel, describes a parallel shift happening inside the brands she works with: replacing the language of audience buckets with the language of individual people.

> "It's not just 'we're targeting this audience.' For example, there are women, 25 to 54, and they like movies. Instead we say 'this is the persona:' Jack actually does this throughout the day, and we understand a day in the life of Jack and all of what he's doing."



Amie Owen
Chief Client Officer, Flywheel

Nola Solomon, co-founder of Culture Hive Media Group, frames the same shift in terms of cultural authenticity rather than individual signal.

> "It's really about whether you're actually meeting the moment authentically for the community you're trying to reach, and creating that long-term brand affinity as well as short-term performance against your KPIs."



Nola Solomon
Co-founder, Culture Hive Media Group

40%

Brands that have transitioned from static demographic segmentation to real-time behavioral and predictive signals generate 40% more revenue from their personalization efforts. Yet, remarkably, over 60% of organizations admit they still rely primarily on basic demographic buckets.

McKinsey, 2026 Next in Personalization Report

None of this works, though, if the behavioral signal isn't tied to a real, verified person. Gina Ive, Senior Director of Partnerships at VideoAmp, raises exactly that caution.

> "If you don't have a strong and true foundation of identity coming in, as well as the resolution to make sure that it's true and that it all gets matched to the viewership data, then all you have is an assumption. You have a nice story. You don't have a true measurement report."



Gina Ive
Senior Director of Partnerships, VideoAmp

And Dr. Quentin André adds a caution from the opposite direction: the more precise personalization becomes, the more consumers seem to distrust it.

Key takeaways

Demographics describe a population. Behavior describes a person.

01 **Behavior outpredicts demographics:** What someone does reveals more than who they are on paper.

02 **Cultural relevance builds affinity:** Meeting a community authentically matters as much as targeting it precisely.

03 **Personalization has a trust ceiling:** The more accurately brands predict consumer needs, the more consumers may resist it.

04 **Identity has to be verified, not assumed:** Behavioral insight is only as strong as the identity resolution behind it.

Data strategy is the business strategy

The competitive advantage comes from building the systems, and the discipline, to turn data into better business decisions. Kelly Barrett, SVP of Product Management at Samba, puts the standard simply.

> "We're looking at consumers, not just under one screen, one lens, but across everything that they touch."



Kelly Barrett
SVP of Product Management, Samba

Gina Ive of VideoAmp puts data quality in concrete terms: fidelity, not volume, determines whether a report reflects reality.

> "We're looking for quality, accuracy, scale, and fidelity."



Gina Ive
Senior Director of Partnerships, VideoAmp

80%

Through 2027, organizations that prioritize data semantics and active metadata, focusing on high-fidelity, actionable data over pure volume, will increase their AI model accuracy by up to 80% while reducing costs by up to 60%.

Gartner

Ive also draws a hard line between insight and noise.

> "We don't want to just throw big data at you, we want to surface the insights that tell the story."



Gina Ive
Senior Director of Partnerships, VideoAmp

Key takeaways

Better data is the driver for smarter decision-making.

01 **Quality beats quantity, every time:** Fidelity and accuracy matter more than the size of the dataset.

02 **Fidelity over noise:** The goal is surfacing the insight that tells the story.

03 **See the whole consumer:** Data has to connect across every channel a consumer touches.

04 **Data has to serve the customer relationship:** Insights only create value once they make it easier to understand and talk to the customer.

46%

of businesses remain stuck in "reactive modes," failing to achieve meaningful ROI because they treat AI purely as a plug-and-play productivity tool.

Brandon Hall Group

AI is impacting the operating model

Most organizations are using AI the way they'd use any new productivity tool: to draft, summarize, and analyze faster. Dr. Quentin André argues the more interesting shift is relational, not operational. Looking ahead, he sees AI becoming an active party in the transaction itself.

> "The most exciting thing that I see for the future is how can you create these hyper-personalized interactions with your consumers? How can you create an interface where your model is working for you, representing your own interest as a business, can interact with the agents of consumers, representing the best interest of consumers, and try to find alignments and connections."



Dr. Quentin André
Professor of Marketing and Analytics, University of Colorado Boulder

Gregg Johnson, CEO of Invoca, sees the operational shift already happening, and names the themes that keep surfacing alongside it.

> "Two words that I'm hearing more and more together are AI and trust. And I think trust is a really interesting word because it has implications for the consumer."
>
> 
> **Gregg Johnson**
> CEO, Invoca

Johnson believes the biggest gains aren't coming from individual AI features, but from organizations willing to redesign the work itself.

> "What I think people are seeing more is the dramatic impact of AI on business process redesign. How do you take AI and redefine the nature of how work gets done?"
>
> 
> **Gregg Johnson**
> CEO, Invoca

Nola Solomon of Culture Hive Media Group sees a countercurrent building alongside all this automation: a growing hunger for the opposite of polish.

> "With AI and technology and culture converging, nobody wants to see these picture-perfect things. They want to see the raw human connectivity that we have and the human connection."



Nola Solomon
Co-founder, Culture Hive Media Group

Kelly Barrett of Samba sees the same redesign as an opportunity to redirect human effort toward higher-value work.

> "Let's put people's brain power back to work towards that innovation and clean up the things that are work that we don't want to do anymore."



Kelly Barrett
SVP of Product Management, Samba

Key takeaways

AI asks organizations to rethink how work moves between people.

01 **Trust and AI are now linked concepts:** Consumers and brands alike are asking whether AI systems can be relied upon.

02 **The real gain is process redesign:** Layering AI onto old workflows is less effective than building AI into a new system.

03 **Human connection isn't going away:** As AI-generated content scales, audiences are gravitating toward what feels unmistakably real.

04 **Redesign with AI frees people, not just processes:** The goal is handing busywork to AI so people can focus on judgment and innovation.

65%

of marketing leaders report that they are now held directly accountable to bottom-line business performance benchmarks.

HubSpot, The 2026 State of Marketing Report

Marketing is converging around outcomes

The old boundaries between brand and performance marketing are dissolving as organizations converge around a single measure of success: whether the work drove a real business outcome. Gina Ive of VideoAmp describes the shift directly from what clients are now asking for.

> "What they really want is to be able to match up actual real-world outcomes to their media spend."



Gina Ive
Senior Director of Partnerships, VideoAmp

This shift applies to every corner of the marketing funnel, proving that brand building and performance can no longer operate in silos.

> "I believe all marketing, whether that is long-term brand building or short term, has a number to hit. It needs to drive performance and needs to drive outcomes."



Kalli Chapman
VP, Head of Global Media and Sponsorships, Prudential Financial

Connecting media spend to real-world impact requires redefining how organizations measure value and articulate progress. Michelle Barbeau highlights that true performance begins with the customer.

> "I really think the hardest part is just doing the discovery work to figure out what those right metrics are and how you're then going to use them to tell your story."



Michelle Barbeau
Chief Revenue Officer, eHealth

Ultimately, driving these business outcomes requires deeper alignment not just across internal teams, but across external agency partnerships as well. Amie Owen notes that clients are looking for collaborative alignment on goals rather than simple execution.

> "It wasn't just, 'You have the right capabilities and the right deliverables.' It's, 'You have the right people, you have the right attitude, you have the right mentality, and it matches what we're doing on our side. We really want you to be an extension of our team versus saying it's a business transaction.'"



Amie Owen
Chief Client Officer, Flywheel

Fueling these outcome-driven strategies requires a fundamentally new approach to audience intelligence.

> “We believe humans are incredible, and we're living in the first era where we can mathematically understand people beyond their demographics so that we can actually action on that.”



Lÿden Foust
Founder, Spatial.ai

Key takeaways

Every discipline in marketing is being measured the same way now: did it move the business?

01 **Brand and performance are converging around a shared standard of proof,** not separate scorecards.

02 **Media spend is expected to connect to real-world outcomes,** not just reach or impressions.

03 **Marketing leaders are being held accountable for what the business achieved,** not just what was activated.

From insight to action

These conversations reveal a profession in active transition. Modern marketing leaders aren't discarding core principles; they are refining foundational strategies to meet a moment defined by rapid technological shift and rising consumer expectations.

Trust has evolved from a brand sentiment into a growth lever, behavior and verified identity have superseded basic demographics, and data discipline now outweighs sheer volume. As AI restructures work itself, the boundaries between brand, performance, and commerce are dissolving into a single mandate: keep the consumer at the center while driving measurable business outcomes.

Start by asking four questions of your own team:

01 Are we building trust as a growth strategy, or still treating it as a brand-only concern?

02 Do we understand what our customers actually do, or are we still relying on who they are on paper?

03 Are we redesigning how work gets done around AI, or just layering it onto what we already had?

04 Are we consistently driving business growth by improving the customer experience?

If the answer to any of these is “not yet,” the opportunity is already in front of you. The organizations that combine **trust, behavioral understanding, disciplined data systems, and AI enhanced workflows** will be the ones that turn this moment of transition into sustained growth.

Know the person behind the data.

InfutorData resolves identity across every channel, so your teams can recognize the person behind the record and act based on who they actually are.

Start a conversation →