

AI Trends I Need To Know As I Hire Marketing Leaders



4 trend results

(Not) An AI Overview

We talk to a lot of marketing leaders. Not in a "we surveyed 1,000 respondents" way. In a "we're on the phone with your future VP of Marketing right now" and she just told us something you'd want to hear" way.

This is what we've been hearing from the ground floor of executive search — and increasingly, advising to our clients — as we watch an entire function reinvent itself in real time.

DID YOU MEAN? ON SEARCH & DISCOVERY

01 Consumers aren't searching the way they used to, and marketing has to catch up.

What GEO Actually Is

Generative Engine Optimization (getting your brand cited in ChatGPT, Perplexity, Google's AI Overviews, and other platforms) doesn't necessarily rank pages. They cite authority.

A Princeton study asserted AI engines strongly favor earned, third-party-validated signals over brand-owned content. AI's rewarding authority first, optimization after.

Food for thought: Since the rise in GEO, studies found nearly 60% of searches now end without a click to any website.

Why Most Teams Get It Wrong

The instinct is to treat GEO like SEO with different keywords, but that's not exactly the case. Winning AI-driven discovery requires coordinating content strategy, digital PR, product marketing, and technical infrastructure simultaneously — under one AI-forward leader who understands all four.

What We're Seeing In Searches

The companies pulling ahead are hiring for the full discovery layer. They're looking for leaders with a unified mandate across organic, paid, and AI visibility. That's a fundamentally different role than what existed 12–24 months ago and the candidates who can own all three simultaneously are increasingly hard to find without the right approach.

DON'T CALL IT A ROUNDING ERROR

Reports found a 527% YoY growth in AI-referred web sessions (Jan–May 2025). This is evidence of a channel forming right in front of our eyes that we shouldn't ignore.

DID YOU MEAN? PAY-PER-CLICK CHANGES

02 AI ate the clicks, but what's left over converts better.

What Happened in 2025:

- Google's AI Max launched globally, seeing an average conversion lift at 14%. Some beta accounts saw 60%+.
- Over 1 million advertisers now run Performance Max globally.
- Paid CTR on AI Overview queries dropped 68% between mid-2024 and late 2025.
- And yet: 65% of industries saw improved conversion rates because AI filters out low-intent users before they ever click — leaving a smaller but more motivated audience downstream.

What's Actually Changing

OLD SKILL	NEW SKILL
Keyword match type mastery	Signal architecture & audience intent mapping
Manual bid management	Creative input quality
Search term report analysis	First-party data structuring
Platform control	Knowing when to override automation

THE HONEST TAKE

The skillset that wins in PPC has shifted from controlling the platform to feeding it well. The managers who make that transition fastest will define what great looks like in this channel.

03

DID YOU MEAN? JOB DESCRIPTION EVOLUTION

Everyone wants a technical marketer... but what exactly does that mean?

3 Profiles Hiding in 1 Job Title

We often hear three very different definitions of technical marketers:

1. “Someone who can read an analytics dashboard” — common, available, likely not what’s truly needed
2. “Someone who can own marketing infrastructure decisions” — rarer, requires real scope
3. “Someone who can design and manage AI-native workflows end to end” — rarest, competed for, the one companies actually need now

Hiring for #1 when you need #3 is an expensive mistake that takes months to fully reveal itself.

The Role Shift(s) Underway

- 65% of CMOs believe AI will dramatically transform their role within two years (Gartner, 2025).
- Approximately 2/3 of marketing teams now have some designated AI operations roles (Jasper, 2026).
- Deloitte's 2025 CMO survey revealed three top priorities: accelerate AI adoption, expand markets, implement personalization systems, pointing to an infrastructure agenda, not a campaigns agenda.

The mandate has changed. Has the hire?

04

DID YOU MEAN? TOOLS & REALITY

Where the time actually goes... And what nobody warned us about.

Where the Time Savings Actually Are

→ Content Creation & Ideation

Drafting, repurposing, variant generation at scale

→ Data Analysis & Reporting

Surfacing insights from campaigns in minutes, not days

→ Email Personalization

Segmentation logic and copy variation

→ Social Scheduling & Community

The volume work nobody wants to do

The Tools Actually in Rotation

ROLE	TOOLS IN ROTATION
Content & SEO	ChatGPT, Jasper, Perplexity, Semrush AI
Paid Search	Google AI Max, Performance Max, Optmyzr
Creative	Adobe Firefly, Midjourney, Synthesia
Analytics	Hubspot AI, Google Analytics 4 + Gemini
Strategy	Claude, Perplexity, Notebook LM

The Unforeseen Challenges Nobody Puts in the Trend Reports

Brand Drift

AI-generated content at scale, without a strong creative director, quietly dilutes voice — which companies might not notice until their customers do.

The Prompt Gap

There's now a measurable skill divide between marketers who prompt well and those who don't, producing wildly uneven output from the same team.

Measurement Chaos

AI-referred traffic behaves differently. Most teams are measuring a 2026 channel with 2022 attribution models.

Keep in mind: These challenges above aren't inherently a bad thing in candidates. AI implementation failure and growth is now a genuine positive signal in marketing leadership candidates. In fact, leaders who've hit walls with AI implementation — and course-corrected — might be exactly who you want in the room.

People Also Ask...

How do I hire for AI fluency?

Don't ask about AI in the abstract or ask for hot takes. Make candidates use it in the room. Give them a real, messy business problem and ask them to walk you through how they'd approach it using whatever tools they actually use. The ones with fluency give you a tactical framework. They might even show you their work.

Everyone we interview says they're "AI-forward" now. How do we actually tell who is?

Ask them where an AI implementation they led went wrong. The best candidates have a specific, detailed story. Maybe a campaign drifted off-brand, an attribution model broke, or an automation moved too fast and jeopardized the team's workflow. The ones who don't have a material failure story either haven't tried hard enough or aren't being honest. Remember: Scar tissue is the signal.

What's the right next move?

Start with the problem, not the title. AI has split what used to be one marketing leadership profile into several genuinely different ones, and hiring the wrong version is an expensive months-, sometimes years-long lesson. If you're not sure which hire you actually need right now, that's exactly the conversation we're built for.