

THE VOICE OF THE US CMO

EXPLORING ATTITUDES TOWARDS
TODAY'S MARKETING LANDSCAPE

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INTRODUCTION

THE MARKETING INDUSTRY IS EVOLVING FASTER THAN EVER.

CMOs today face a rapidly growing AI landscape, an explosion of digital channels, changing consumer expectations and the ongoing need to prove marketing's value to stakeholders. In 2025, the role of a marketer is arguably more complex than ever before.

As marketing leaders work to navigate this shifting landscape and drive brand success, we recognized the importance of taking a temperature check on their challenges, concerns, and changing attitudes.

To uncover these insights, we surveyed 500 CMOs from organizations of all sizes across the U.S., as well as carrying out complementary consumer research to identify areas of alignment – and disconnect – between what CMOs think and what consumers want from brand marketing.

Even as AI promises to revolutionize brand-building and marketing campaigns, one truth remains: the customer is still king. CMOs are already hands-on with AI, yet many consumers express concerns about its use.

Another balancing act for CMOs is toeing the line between brand activism and corporate washing. Many consumers want brands to take a public stand on social/political issues and CMOs seem comfortable to do so, depending on the subject matter.

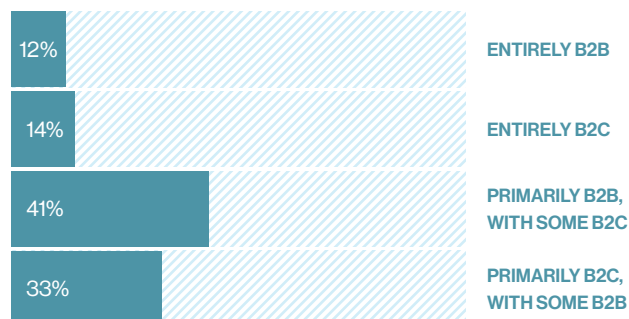
Another critical challenge CMOs face is implementing the right measurement systems to prove marketing effectiveness. Only when campaign ROI is clear can marketing leaders secure full stakeholder buy-in. Notably, CMOs who use market research techniques to measure performance experience a significant boost in boardroom support for their strategies.

We hope this report serves as a valuable benchmarking tool, as well as providing insight from consumers and B2B buyers. We want to help CMOs stay ahead in a rapidly evolving marketing landscape.

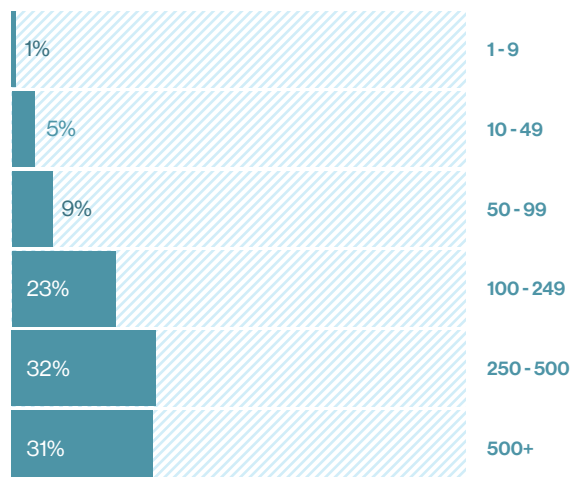
METHODOLOGY

CENSUSWIDE SURVEYED 500 CMOS AGED 25+ BETWEEN 26.02.25 - 10.03.25. (SAMPLE BREAKDOWN)

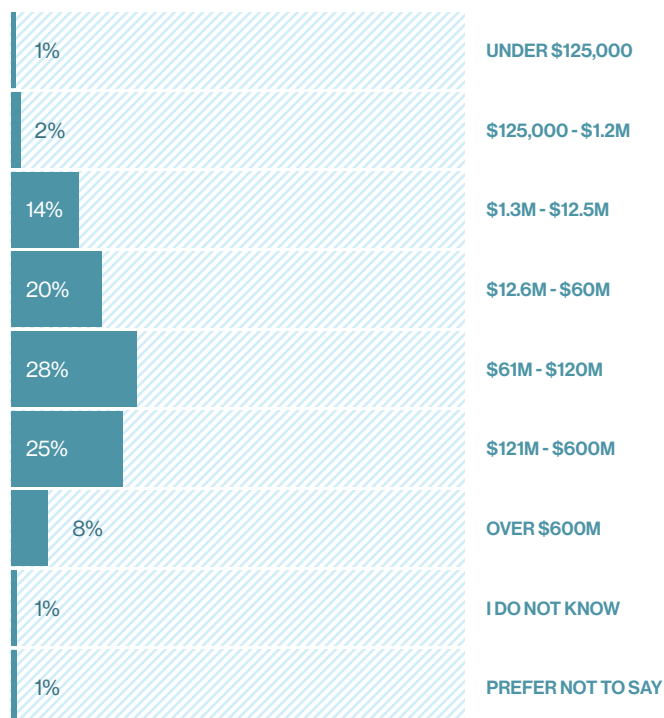
Marketing Focus



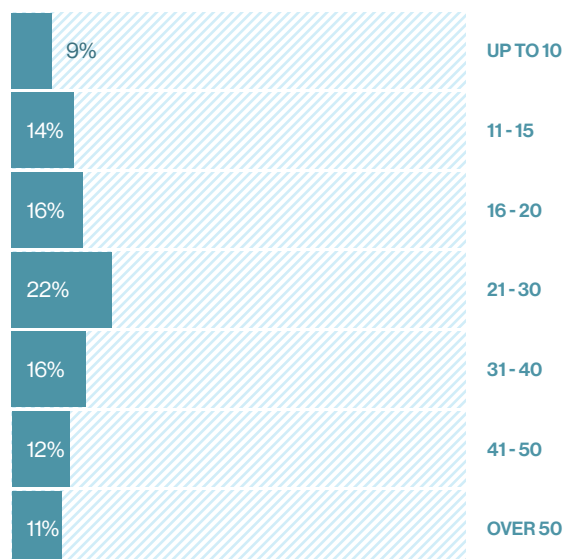
Company Size (no. of employees)



Company Turnover



Marketing Department Size



Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society, follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles.

VOICE OF THE US CMO: A SUMMARY

AI



94% of CMOs are already using generative AI tools and 79% are already using traditional AI. However, the AI adoption in marketing seems to be outpacing how comfortable consumers feel about brands using AI.

82%¹ of CMOs have specific concerns about using AI, chiefly security/data issues (54%) and its potential to provide unoriginal content (45%). Despite concerns, CMOs are already seeing benefits from using it. These include higher quality content (75%) and improved analysis (70%).

Brand Discovery and Brand Activism



79%² of US consumers engage with brands on social media and the most lucrative platforms, according to CMOs, are Instagram (26%), Facebook (23%), YouTube (18%) and TikTok (12%). Almost half (48%)³ of US consumers want or expect brands to take a public stand on social/political issues.

Almost all CMOs see environment / sustainability (fighting climate change) (96%) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (94%) as important⁴ components of their brand's identity.

Measurement and Market Research



70% of CMOs claim their stakeholders in their organization fully understand and are bought into marketing, while 28% state they only have partial buy-in. CMOs who use market research as a measurement tool are much more likely than those who do not to have stakeholders that are fully invested in marketing (73% vs 57%)

100%⁵ of CMOs currently measure the effectiveness of their marketing activity. Most (66%) measure brand awareness.

Notes:

¹Reverse of 'No concerns'.

²Reverse of 'I do not engage with brands at all'.

³Yes, I want them to do so' and 'Yes, I expect them to do so' responses combined.

⁴'Very important' and 'Somewhat important' responses combined.

⁵Reverse of 'Not applicable/ Do not measure this'.

THE ROLE OF AI IN MARKETING IN 2025

It's fair to say parts of the marketing industry were caught out by the sudden burst of AI-driven creativity tools in spring 2023. Even some tech experts raised their eyebrows - not least 'Godfather of AI' Geoffrey Hinton, who was so concerned about the power of the new tools that he quit his role at Google.

Two years on, the initial fears of sweeping job losses have evolved into a more nuanced conversation about AI's role in marketing—centered around the 'ABC' of AI: Adoption, Benefits, and Consequences.

Overall, 100% of respondents' organizations¹ have already adopted AI. But they are more likely to already be using Generative AI (94%) than traditional AI (79%).

94%

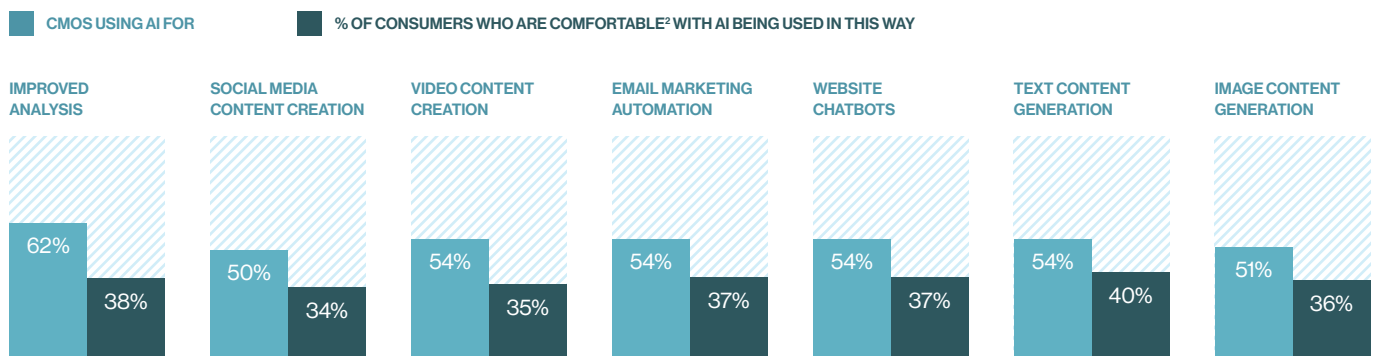
of organizations surveyed are already using Generative AI

79%

of organizations surveyed are using traditional AI

HANDLE WITH CARE

There's an overwhelming industry consensus that AI cannot be ignored, yet consumers remain cautious. In fact, US consumers are more likely to have mixed feelings about AI (31%), be cautiously optimistic (18%) or concerned about privacy (17%) than they are to be excited and optimistic (13%). Furthermore, there is a clear disconnect between how CMOs use Generative AI and how comfortable² consumers are with it:



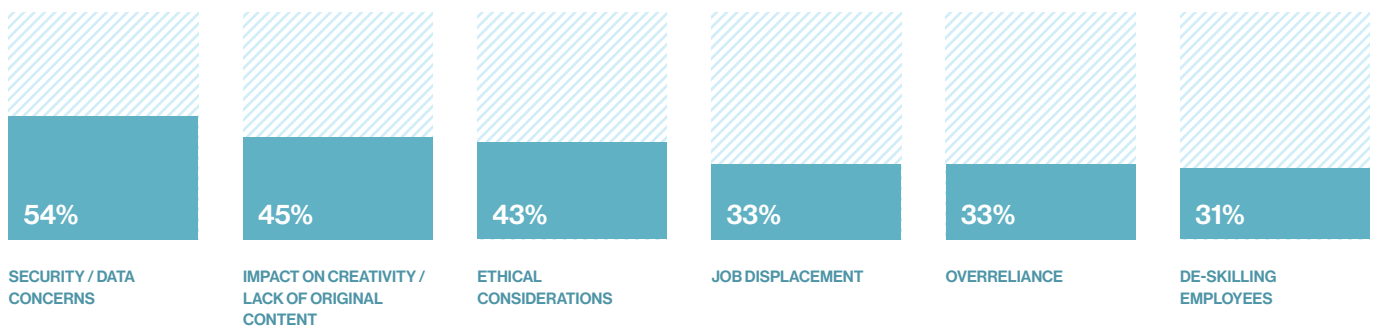
These figures suggest that while CMOs are embracing AI, many consumers remain skeptical - especially when AI is used for customer-facing content.



That said, the findings do indicate that even though there is an overall willingness to integrate AI into marketing operations, some CMOs are hesitant to do so. In fact, although 95% of CMOs are embracing³ AI, 66% are doing so with open arms, but 18% are cautious about adopting the technology and 11% are doing so reluctantly.

Meanwhile, despite their general enthusiasm towards AI marketing tools, **80%⁴ of CMOs harbor one or more concerns specific to AI** - including how the technology will affect team members.

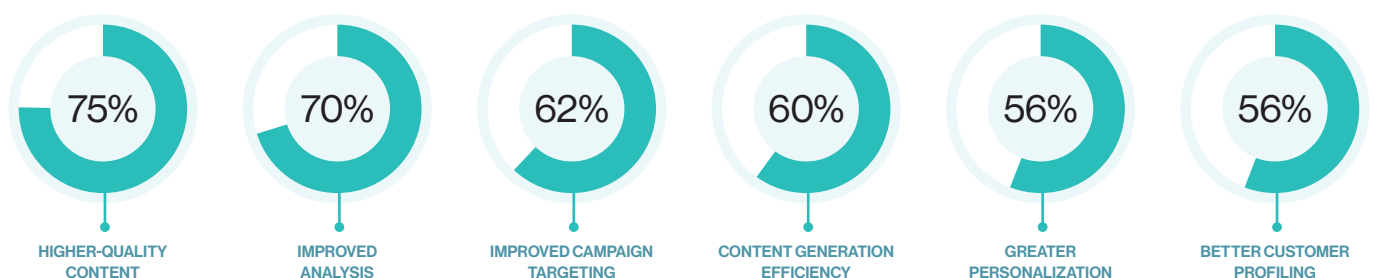
CMO CONCERNS AROUND AI



AI'S NUMEROUS ADVANTAGES

Potential pitfalls are constant considerations for many CMOs. But they've also been quick to grasp AI's value. In fact, over 3 in 5 (63%) CMOs surveyed feel AI has exceeded expectations, a far higher percentage than those who feel it only met their expectations (37%). Strikingly, less than 1% feel it's failed to meet expectations so far.

Meanwhile, better marketing outcomes since adopting AI include:



AI is firmly embedded in marketing strategies in 2025. While CMOs are largely enthusiastic, their concerns about creativity, ethics, and data security remain valid.

Despite consumer skepticism, AI is already delivering measurable benefits in content quality, personalization, and campaign effectiveness. However, as AI continues to evolve, brands must balance automation with authenticity to ensure consumer trust and long-term success.

B2B vs. B2C AI Adoption

An almost equal share of B2B-only CMOs (75%) and B2C-only respondents (76%) are already using traditional AI. However, B2B-only CMOs are more likely than their B2C counterparts to already be using GenAI (95% versus 88%).

CMOs who are both B2B and B2C (74%, 67%) are more likely than CMOs who are entirely B2B (54%) or entirely B2C (54%) to be embracing AI with open arms. This might suggest more open-mindedness amongst those operating in both B2B and B2C environments as they may be more accustomed to adapting to diverse market dynamics and leveraging a wider range of tools and technologies.

Since adopting AI, CMOs at purely B2C businesses cite benefits such as higher quality content (69%), greater efficiencies for content generation (63%) and improved analysis (57%), while at entirely B2B organizations respondents most often highlight improved analysis (77%), higher quality content (72%) and better understanding of customer profiles (59%) as the key benefits.

Notes:

¹Reverse of 'Not using any'.

²'Very comfortable' and 'Somewhat comfortable' responses combined.

³'Embracing it with open arms', 'Embracing it with caution' and 'Embracing it reluctantly' responses combined.

⁴Reverse of 'No concerns'.

BRAND DISCOVERY AND CONNECTION

Word of mouth is still key for brand discovery, but only just.

US consumers most commonly discover new brands via recommendations from friends and family (40%), closely followed by advertisements (39%) and social media (38%).

While friends and family is the top discovery method overall, preferences shift across generations:

- Gen Z (59%) and Millennials (47%) primarily discover brands through social media
- Gen X (41%), Baby Boomers (51%), and the Silent Generation (62%) are most likely to discover brands through advertising

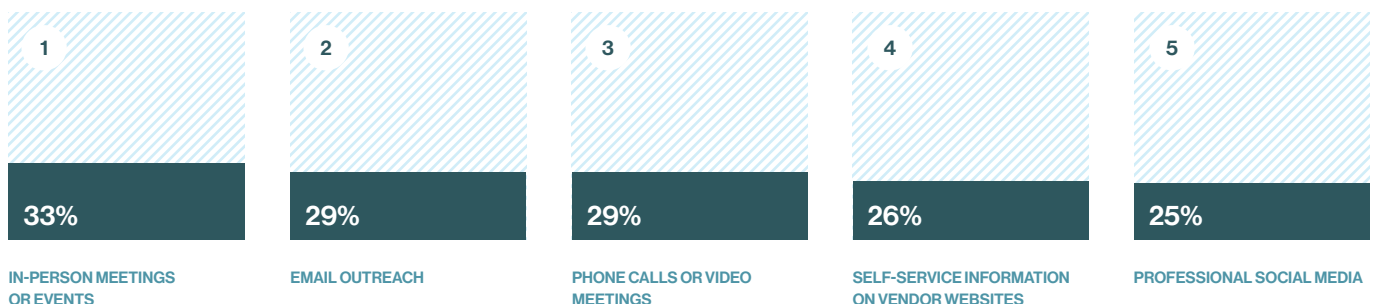
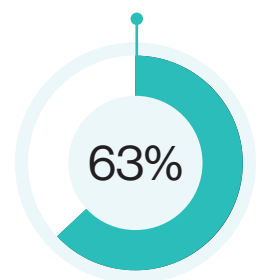
BRAND ENGAGEMENT, MORE THAN JUST DISCOVERY

Beyond discovery, a majority (63%) of US consumers¹ actively engage with brands.

Most often this is done by following them on social media and engaging with content (31%), leaving reviews (29%) and participating in contests promotions or giveaways (22%).

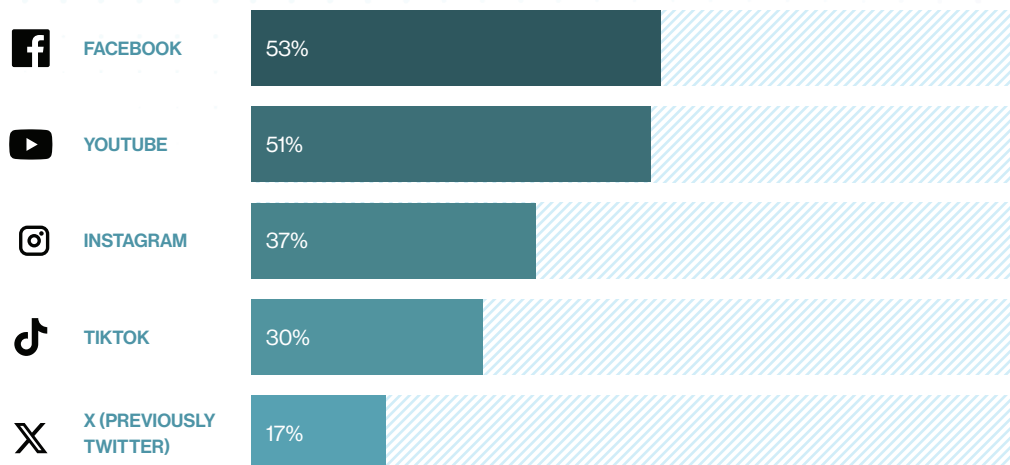
For B2B decision-makers, the most preferred ways to engage with brands differ.

63% OF US CONSUMERS¹
ENGAGE WITH BRANDS IN
SOME WAY

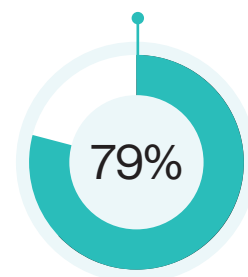


SOCIAL MEDIA: FRIEND, NOT FOE

Whether B2B or B2C, brands must have a presence on social media. With so many platforms available, we asked US consumers which ones they are most likely to engage with brands on:



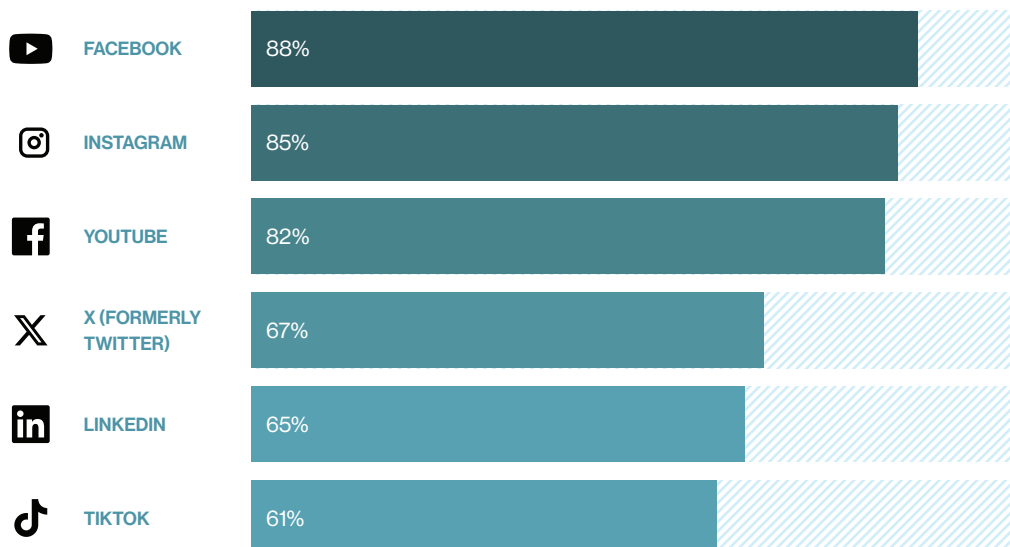
79%² OF US CONSUMERS
ENGAGE WITH BRANDS ON
SOCIAL MEDIA



It's not just B2C brands who need a presence on social media, however, as it's also the second primary source of information for B2B decision makers when researching potential B2B service providers (36%), second only to online reviews (37%).

CMOS RECOGNIZE THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Encouragingly, CMOs are aligned with consumer preferences, with a majority maintaining a brand presence on these platforms:



That being said, Facebook (34%) and X (formerly Twitter) (31%) are the social media platforms CMOs are most likely to feel are losing relevance raising questions about their role in brand marketing in the years to come.

Meanwhile, the most lucrative platforms, according to CMOs are Instagram (26%), Facebook (23%), YouTube (18%) and TikTok (12%).

Consumers are engaging with brands more than ever, particularly through social media. However, preferences vary by generation, meaning brands must tailor their approach accordingly.

For B2B decision-makers, digital and in-person interactions remain equally important, reinforcing the need for a multi-channel engagement strategy.

Notes:

¹Reverse of 'I do not engage with brands at all'.

²Reverse of 'N/A Do not use social media to engage with brands'.

THE ROLE OF BRAND ACTIVISM

The world feels more polarized than ever. For brands, deciding whether to take a stand on social or political issues can mean alienating segments of their customer base. However, consumer expectations are clear — many want brands to use their voice.

CONSUMERS AND BRAND ACTIVISM

Almost half (48%)¹ of US consumers want or expect brands to take a public stand on social/political issues. This expectation is even higher among younger generations such as Gen Z (67%) and Millennials (64%).

The issues consumers think brands should have a voice on are:

48%

48% of US consumers want or expect brands to take a public stand on social/political issues.

Human rights / ethical supply chain

48%

Mental health awareness

45%

Economic inequality / fair wages

44%

Environment / sustainability (fighting climate change)

41%

Race equality

41%

Support for small / local businesses

40%

Gun violence prevention

40%

Gender equality

38%

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

38%

Reproductive rights / healthcare access

37%

Disability equality

36%

Human rights / ethical supply chain

31%

Veteran support

30%

It's not just consumers expecting brands to take a stand - 78%² of B2B decision-makers say they have chosen a provider based on their stance on social or environmental issues, with over 2 in 5 (42%) saying it often influences their decisions.

CMOS AND BRAND ACTIVISM

CMOs seem quite comfortable with brand activism and are more likely to say their brand is highly active and vocal on social media (44%), than say they are selective and strategic (29%) or supportive but subtle (11%).

That being said, although CMOs are open to activism, certain issues are more publicly addressed than others. Despite recent amendments to DEI and sustainability policies, these remain the top areas where CMOs feel comfortable taking a public stance:

Human rights / ethical supply chain

50%

Environment / sustainability (fighting climate change)

47%

Gender equality

35%

Veteran support

27%

Reproductive rights / healthcare access

25%

LGBTQ+ equality

22%

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

49%

Economic inequality / fair wages

39%

Race equality

34%

Disability equality

26%

Gun violence prevention

25%

THE ROLE OF ACTIVISM IN BRAND IDENTITY

Almost all CMOs see environment / sustainability (fighting climate change) (96%) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (94%) as important³ components of their brand's identity.

Activism doesn't appear to be something brands can shy away from. Consumers, particularly younger generations, expect brands to take a stand on key social issues, while B2B decision-makers also consider a company's values when making purchasing decisions.

CMOs recognize this, aligning their public stances with consumer priorities, particularly around human rights, sustainability, and DEI. However, the challenge remains in balancing activism with business strategy, ensuring that brands remain authentic, credible, and aligned with stakeholder expectations.

B2B v B2C - Key Differences

A quarter (25%) of B2B decision makers said sustainability policies influence them when it comes to buying B2B services and over a fifth (22%) said the same of diversity, equity and inclusion policies. Meanwhile, over 2 in 5 (42%) say they have⁴ chosen a B2B provider because of their stance on social or environmental issues.

Notes:

¹'Yes, I want them to do so' and 'Yes, I expect them to do so' responses combined.

²'Yes, this often influences my decisions' and 'Yes, sometimes, depending on the issue' and 'Yes, rarely, but it can help choose between similar options' responses combined.

³'Very important' and 'Somewhat important' responses combined.

MEASURING MARKETING'S IMPACT

Even the most innovative marketing strategies can fail to impress stakeholders if they don't drive measurable results. CMOs today face a dual challenge: winning over customers in a highly competitive landscape while securing internal stakeholder buy-in.

STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN: A WORK IN PROGRESS

High percentages of CMOs recognize it is challenging¹ to attract new clients or customers (72%) and retain existing clients or customers (69%).

Of course, customers aren't the only cohort that CMOs need to satisfy. Demonstrating campaign impact and ROI remain critical to boardroom buy-in.

Some CMOs still have some way to go to win the backing of business leaders. 7 in 10 (70%) say stakeholders fully understand marketing's importance, so they have full buy-in.

But 28% say their stakeholders only somewhat understand the value of marketing, resulting in partial or no buy-in.

Additionally, 1 in 5 (19%) CMOs reveal that leadership is only somewhat or not at all invested in their role

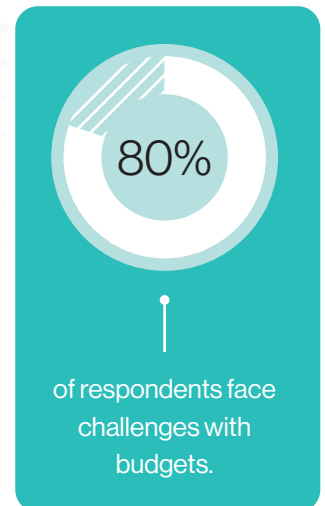
So, around a third of the CMOs surveyed cannot confidently go full steam ahead with their plans. And that doubtless has an effect on budgetary decisions.

THE BUDGET CHALLENGE: DOING MORE WITH LESS

80%² of respondents face challenges with budgets. This is leaving less room for maneuver and, could result in marketing strategies that are delayed or even scrapped.

- 42% of CMOs say budget is already 'saturated' with planned activity
- 38% bemoan constant decision-making to allocate a limited budget
- 38% state marketing budgets are not relative to forecast
- 38% state they do not have enough flexibility within the agreed budget

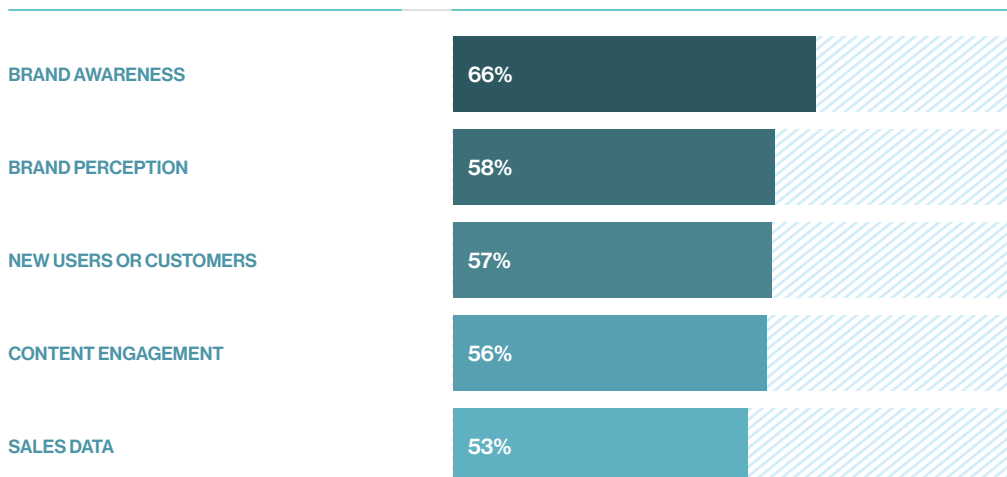
In addition, around 1 in 3 (31%) respondents are having to do more with less. This is frustrating - but could it be a problem with the measurement method?



PROVING CAMPAIGN SUCCESS

Despite budget pressures, CMOs remain focused on key performance indicators (KPIs) to demonstrate impact.

Top 5 marketing metrics measured by CMO % of CMOs tracking it



MARKET RESEARCH: THE KEY TO STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN

The way CMOs measure the effectiveness of their marketing activity are as follows:

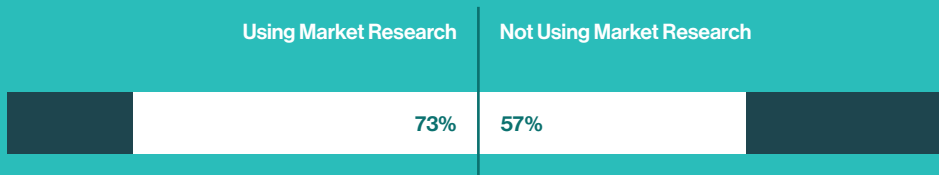
- 90% use software (e.g. Google Analytics, Meltwater)
- 80% use market research

CMOs who integrate market research into their measurement strategy are far more likely to secure full stakeholder support:

- 73% of CMOs who use market research report that their stakeholders are fully invested in marketing strategies.
- In contrast, only 57% of CMOs who do not use market research enjoy complete boardroom backing

This highlights the power of research-backed insights in shaping marketing strategy and securing internal buy-in.

CMOs who use market research as a measurement tool are much more likely than those who do not to have stakeholders that are fully invested in marketing (73% vs 57%)



B2B v B2C - Measurement

B2C marketers are the least likely to say their stakeholders completely understand the importance of marketing and have full buy-in (63%); this increases to 74% at entirely-B2B organizations.

51% of B2B-only CMOs compared to 35% of respondents at purely B2C businesses cite marketing budgets not being relative to forecasts as a budget challenge. At B2B organizations, CMOs are much more likely to measure sales (56%), than at B2C organizations (44%).

Notes:

¹Very challenging' and 'Somewhat challenging' responses combined.

²Reverse of 'None'.

TEN ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

- 1 Keep your AI-powered content grounded in creativity and ensure transparency with audiences on how it's being used.
- 2 Prioritize AI literacy by upskilling marketing teams.
- 3 Start small - test AI in low-risk areas before scaling up.
- 4 Make brand activism credible. Have proof.
- 5 Ensure brand activism aligns with company values.
- 6 Invest in transparent storytelling and data-driven evidence to prove impact.
- 7 Use research-backed insights to strengthen your case when presenting success to leadership.
- 8 Regularly share ROI reports with stakeholders to reinforce marketing's strategic role.
- 9 Use market research as an ongoing feedback loop, not a one-off exercise.
- 10 Monitor platform trends, but don't chase them blindly - align content with strategy.

GET IN TOUCH

The research consultants at Censuswide are here to help you uncover the insight you need to shape powerful marketing strategies and measure the impact of your campaigns. We'd love to hear more about your business and future marketing plans.

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