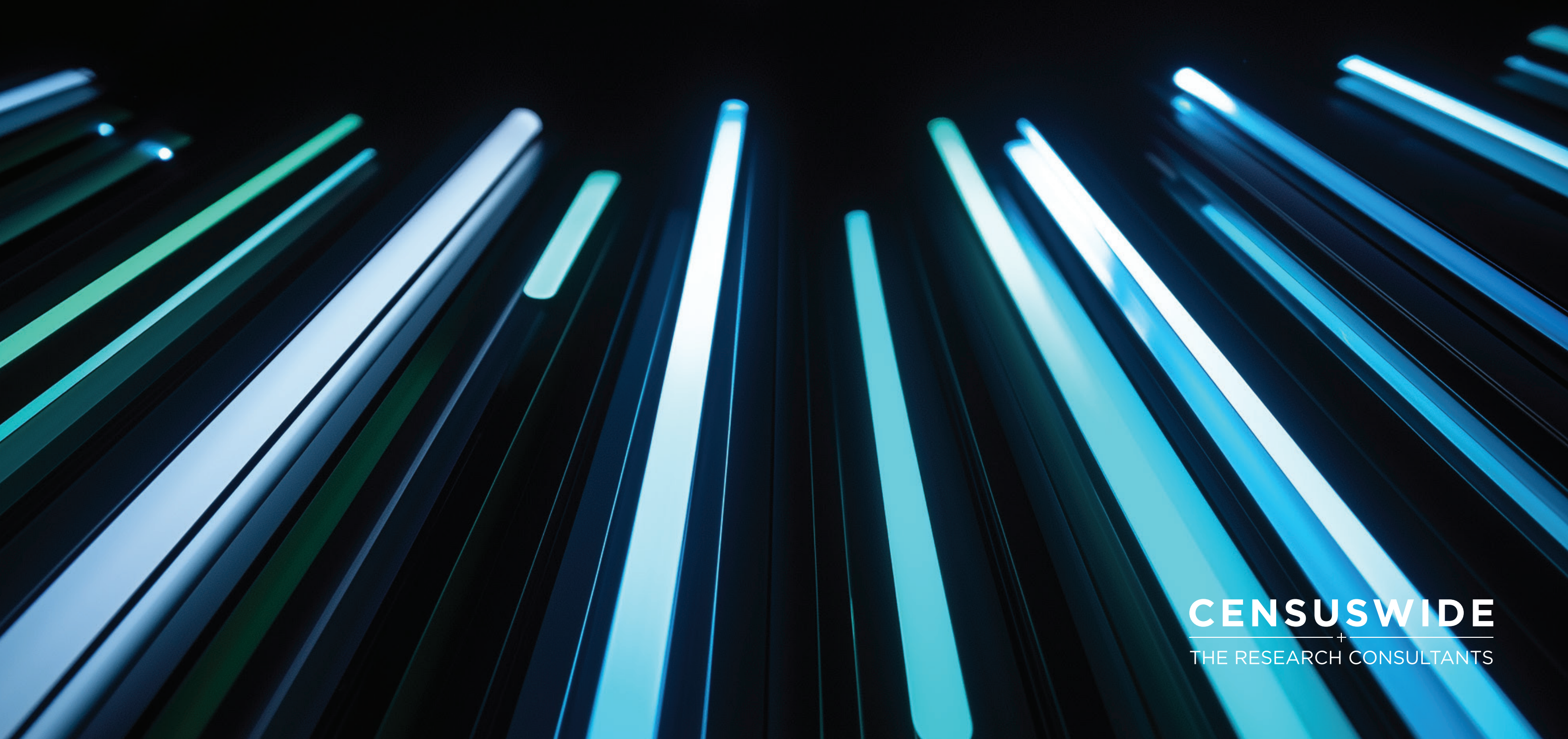
THE VOICE OF THE UK CMO 2025

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE STATE OF MODERN MARKETING



CENSUSWIDE
THE RESEARCH CONSULTANTS

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INTRODUCTION
THE MARKETING WORLD CONTINUES TO TRANSFORM AT UNPRECEDENTED SPEED.

Last year, our inaugural report revealed an industry navigating new technologies, evolving consumer expectations, and early AI adoption. CMOs were cautiously optimistic, experimenting with emerging tools while balancing creativity, and laying the foundations for a more data-driven, agile future.

In 2025, AI is no longer just in pilot but a core part of marketing operations, delivering measurable benefits. Yet, consumers still remain cautious, meaning CMOs must tread with care and transparency.

CMOs are also having to navigate brand activism in a polarised climate and keep customers happy, all while striving to prove marketing's value to stakeholders.

Budget pressures persist, but there's a notable shift towards prioritising long-term brand equity over short-term wins.

We've undertaken this research to capture a clear, data-backed snapshot of where UK marketing leaders stand today.

By comparing year-on-year trends, we aim to help CMOs benchmark their strategies, share some key consumer insights, and show that no leader is facing these challenges in isolation.

This report is designed not just as an analysis of the current landscape, but as a guide to inform strategic marketing decisions.

METHODOLOGY

Last year, Censuswide surveyed 500 CMOs aged 25+ between 25.06.2024 – 08.07.2024
This year, Censuswide surveyed 500 CMOs aged 25+ between 25.06.2025 – 08.07.2025
This year, Censuswide also surveyed 2,001 nationally representative adults in the UK between 18.06.2025 - 20.06.2025.

SAMPLE BREAKDOWN FOR 2025

MARKETING FOCUS

ENTIRELY B2B	14%
ENTIRELY B2C	15%
PRIMARILY B2B, WITH SOME B2C	50%
PRIMARILY B2C, WITH SOME B2B	20%

COMPANY SIZE

(NO. OF EMPLOYEES)

1-9	1%
10-49	4%
50-99	15%
100-249	31%
250-500	34%
501+	15%

COMPANY TURNOVER

£100,000 - £999,999	4%
£1 MILLION - £9.99 MILLION	14%
£10 MILLION - £49.99 MILLION	28%
£50 MILLION - £99.99 MILLION	20%
£100 MILLION - £499.99 MILLION	21%
£500 MILLION OR OVER	12%

MARKETING DEPARTMENT SIZE

(NO. OF EMPLOYEES)

UP TO 10	9%
11-15	11%
16-20	15%
21-30	19%
31-40	15%
41-50	15%
OVER 50	16%

Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society, follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles, and is a member of the British Polling Council.

CMO PRIORITIES: A SUMMARY

AI

- Almost 9 in 10 (89%) CMOs are using Generative AI, while almost 4 in 5 (78%) are leveraging traditional AI
- Nearly 3 in 5 (58%) CMOs who have adopted AI say it has exceeded expectations and been a gamechanger
- However, consumers are less enthusiastic: they are almost twice as likely to have mixed feelings about AI (31%) than they are to be excited and optimistic (16%)
- There is also a clear disconnect between the extent to which CMOs use Generative AI and how comfortable consumers are with it

BRAND DISCOVERY, ACTIVISM AND BACKLASH

- UK consumers most commonly discover new brands via social media (40%)
- Half (50%) of UK 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) (95%) as important components of their brand's identity
- However, almost a quarter (24%) of CMOs say the prospect of brand backlash is always on their mind when planning campaigns

BUDGETS AND MEASUREMENT

- High percentages of CMOs surveyed expect PR (72%), marketing (85%), brand awareness (79%) and market research (75%) budgets to increase in the next year
- However, 89% still face budget challenges CMOs are most likely to be measuring brand awareness (62%), over content engagement (59%) and sales data (54%)
- Almost 7 in 10 (69%) CMOs who measure effectiveness using market research also state stakeholders at their business are fully invested in the marketing strategy; whereas significantly fewer (45%) CMOs who don't employ market research say the same

AI: FRIEND OR FOE?

CURRENT USAGE

The findings highlight an overall willingness to integrate AI into marketing operations. Not only are two thirds (66%) of CMOs surveyed embracing AI with open arms, but almost all (>99%)[1] respondents state that they are using either Generative AI or traditional AI in their department.

According to the research, almost 4 in 5 (78%) CMOs surveyed are leveraging traditional AI. These respondents are most likely to report that they are using this for workflow automation (56%), predictive analytics and forecasting (52%) and social media listening and sentiment analysis (51%), underscoring traditional AI's role in streamlining workflows and enhancing the operational efficiency of marketing departments.

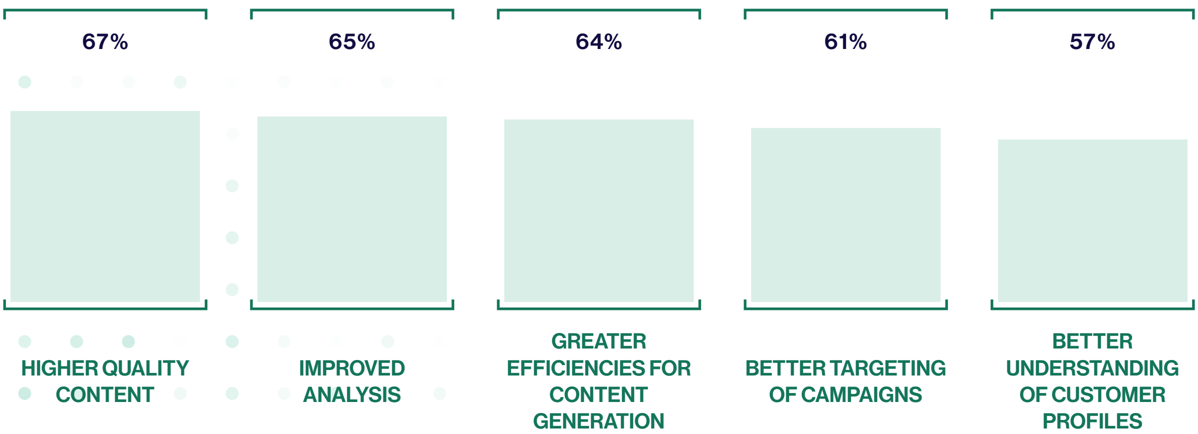
However, AI is proving even more influential when it comes to content creation. Almost 9 in 10 (89%) CMOs are using Generative AI, with such widespread adoption likely driven by the technology's ability to help marketers rapidly create personalised, high-quality content at scale, without requiring extensive technical expertise. Indeed, CMOs surveyed who are already using Gen AI are most likely to be taking advantage of it for social media content creation (58%), ad/marketing campaign creative generation (56%) and image content generation (54%).

A CREATIVE ENABLER

The data shows that AI is delivering strong returns for marketing leaders overall: nearly 3 in 5 (58%) CMOs who have adopted AI say it has exceeded expectations and been a gamechanger, while the remaining 42% report that it has met expectations.

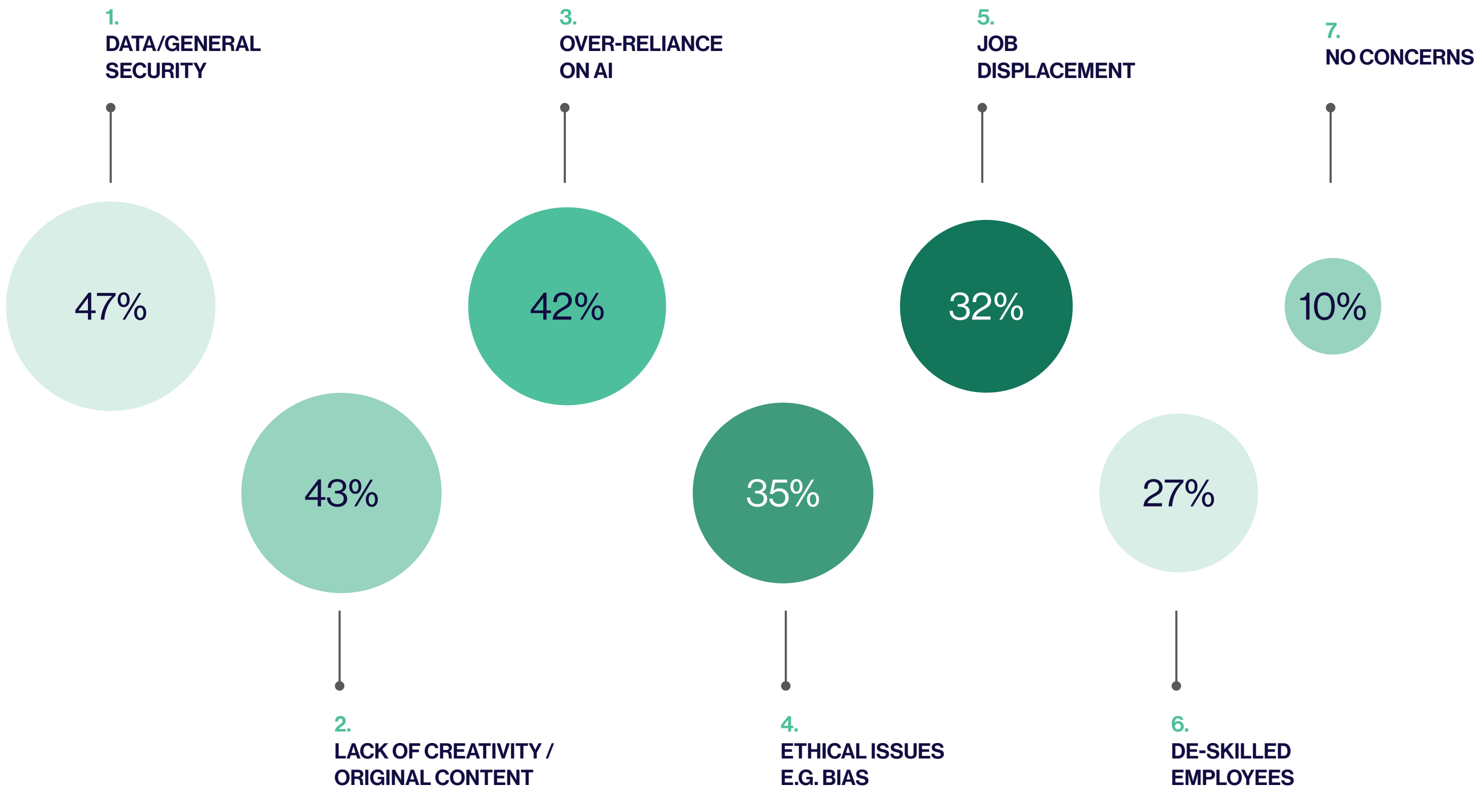
In particular, CMOs praise Gen AI's impact on content creation citing higher quality content (67%) and greater efficiencies for content generation (64%) among their top benefits of adopting AI.

TOP FIVE BENEFITS OF ADOPTING AI



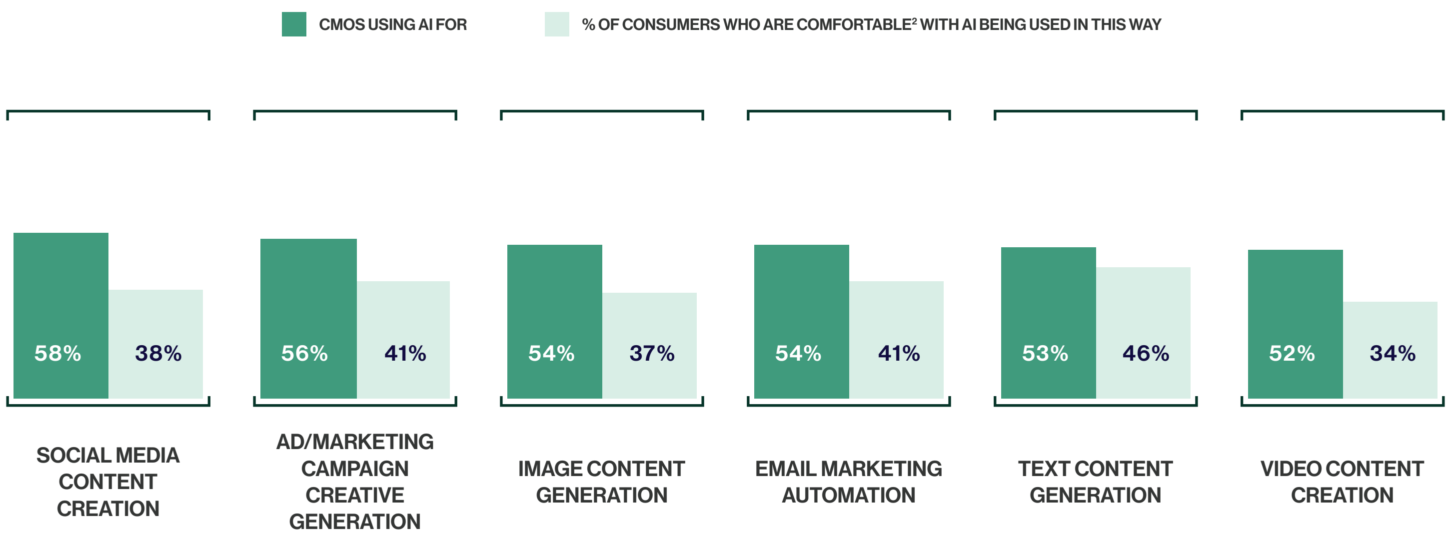
The findings also show that when put into practice, CMOs hold a positive view of AI's impact on creative work. In fact, nearly two thirds (64%) say it fully or mostly enables creativity, while only 13% believe it fully or mostly hinders it. That said, CMOs do still have some reservations over AI, with a lack of creativity/original content (43%) and over-reliance on AI (42%) featuring in their top three concerns.

WHAT CONCERNS DO YOU HAVE SPECIFIC TO AI, IF ANY?



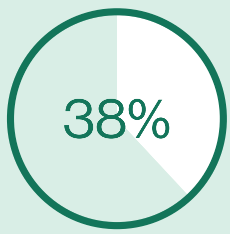
HANDLE WITH CARE

The research reveals that while there is an overwhelming industry consensus that AI cannot be ignored, consumers don't necessarily share CMOs enthusiasm. Not only are UK consumers almost twice as likely to have mixed feelings about AI (31%) than they are to be excited and optimistic (16%), there is also a clear disconnect between the extent to which CMOs use Generative AI and how comfortable[2] consumers are with it:



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

of CMOs use GenAI for social media content creation



of consumers feel comfortable with brands using AI for this

Marketing adoption outpacing consumer comfort: 58% of CMOs use GenAI for social media content creation, but just 38% of consumers feel comfortable[2] with brands using AI for this

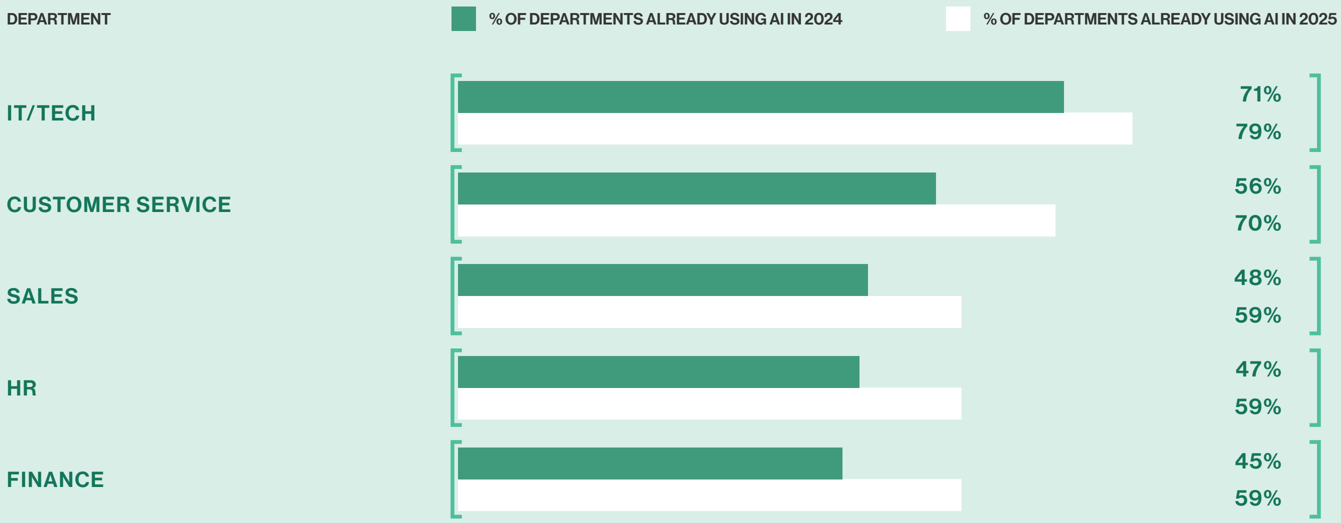
2024 VS 2025 - KEY DIFFERENCES

Overall, there seems to be more positivity towards AI this year than last. For example, there has been a notable increase in marketing teams (45% in 2024 to 59% in 2025) and the board / stakeholders (50% to 55%) embracing AI with open arms.

Across the board, more respondents are reporting they've seen benefits since adopting AI this year compared to last year. This includes everything from higher quality content (67% vs 52%) and improved analysis (65% vs 53%), through to better understanding of customer profiles (57% vs 44%) and greater personalisation (55% vs 45%).

Additionally, CMOs this year are more likely than CMOs last year to feel AI fully or mostly enables more creativity (64% vs 43%).

It's also clear that adoption has increased across numerous departments:



2024 to 2025 shows an upturn in both the perception and adoption of AI across marketing and broader business functions.

CMOs are increasingly viewing AI as a creative enabler rather than a constraint, and adoption has surged across departments, embedding AI more firmly into the fabric of the business.

The data points to 2025 as a maturing phase where AI is no longer just a promising tool, but a proven driver of value across the business.

NOTES:
[1]Reverse of 'Not using any'.
[2]'Very comfortable' and 'Somewhat comfortable' responses combined.

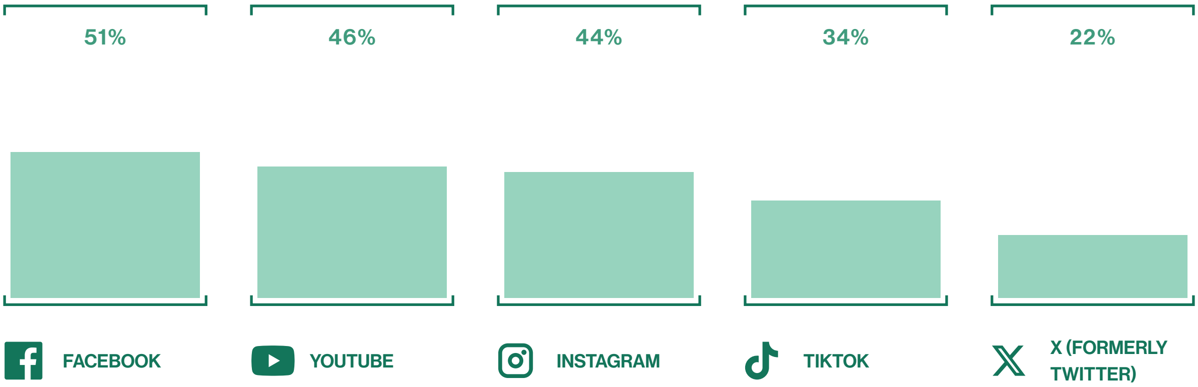
BRAND DISCOVERY, ACTIVISM AND BACKLASH

BRAND DISCOVERY

For years, word of mouth has been the king brand discovery, but social media now reigns supreme.

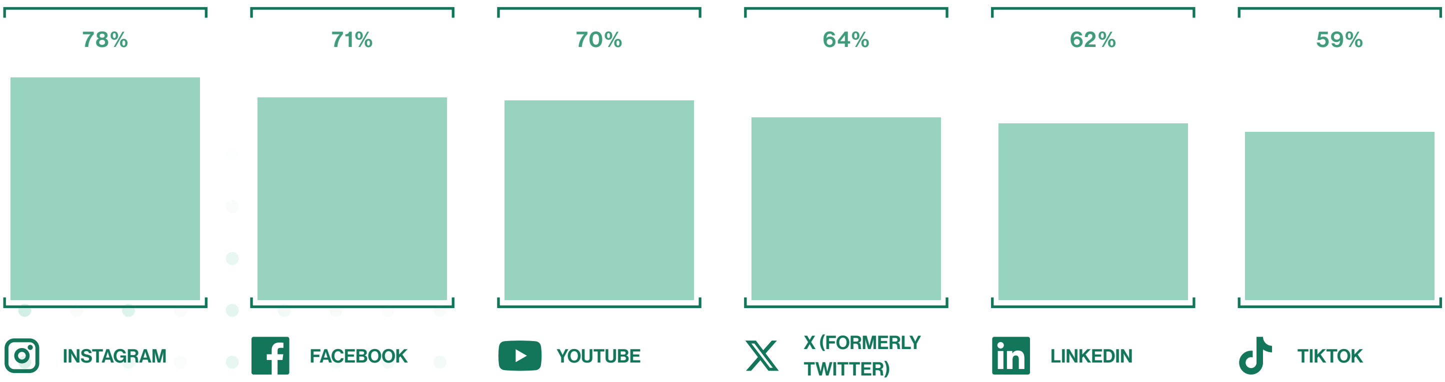
UK consumers most commonly discover new brands via social media (40%), followed by recommendations from friends and/or family (37%) and online searches (37%).

Looking into the specifics of this, the main social media platforms that UK consumers use to engage with brands on are:



Naturally, this is much higher amongst younger generations such as Gen Z and Millennials. In fact, only 2% of Gen Z do not use social media to engage with brands and just 5% of Millennials said the same.

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



CONSUMERS AND BRAND ACTIVISM

The UK is divided when it comes to social activism from brands. Half (50%)[1] of UK consumers want (32%) or expect (21%) brands to take a public stand on social/political issues and half (50%) do not.

Half (50%)[1] of UK consumers want or expect brands to take a public stand on social/political issues.

For those wanting brands to take a stand, the issues consumers think they should have a voice on are:

HUMAN RIGHTS / ETHICAL SUPPLY CHAIN	53%
MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS	50%
ENVIRONMENT / SUSTAINABILITY (FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE)	46%
ECONOMIC INEQUALITY / FAIR WAGES	45%
GENDER EQUALITY	43%
RACE EQUALITY	41%
DISABILITY EQUALITY	39%
DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI)	38%
SUPPORT FOR SMALL / LOCAL BUSINESSES	38%
LGBTQ+ EQUALITY	26%

It's not just consumers expecting brands to take a stand - 82%[2] of B2B decision-makers say they have chosen a provider based on their stance on social or environmental issues.

CMOS AND BRAND ACTIVISM

CMOs appear quite comfortable with brand activism and are more likely to say their brand is highly active and vocal on social media (37%), 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. The areas where CMOs feel comfortable taking a public stance are:

HUMAN RIGHTS / ETHICAL SUPPLY CHAIN	55%
MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS	51%
ENVIRONMENT / SUSTAINABILITY (FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE)	49%
ECONOMIC INEQUALITY / FAIR WAGES	41%
GENDER EQUALITY	40%
RACE EQUALITY	34%
DISABILITY EQUALITY	29%
DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI)	24%

THE ROLE OF ACTIVISM IN BRAND IDENTITY

of CMOs see environment and sustainability (fighting climate change) as important components of their brand's identity

of CMOs view diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as important components of their brand's identity

Almost all CMOs see environment / sustainability (fighting climate change) (96%) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (95%) as important[3] components of their brand's identity.

Activism doesn't appear to be something brands can shy away from, without potentially alienating half of UK consumers. Younger generations, in particular, 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 recognise this, aligning their public stances with consumer priorities, particularly around human rights, sustainability, and DEI. However, the challenge remains in balancing activism with brand backlash.

BRAND BACKLASH

High percentages of CMOs are already finding attracting (71%) and retaining (61%) clients/customers challenging[4] and in a world where one misstep can cost cohorts of customers, CMOs need to do more than listen. CMOs are acutely aware of brand backlash when planning campaigns. Almost a quarter (24%) state it's always on their mind, and 2 in 5 (40%) worry about brand backlash most of the time. Just 7% of CMOs never feel concerned about this issue.

In fact, many CMOs claim the threat of brand backlash harms creativity. A third (33%) of respondents who worry about the issue sometimes, most, or all of the time believe it has a negative[5] impact on creative marketing initiatives.

ACCORDING TO CMOS, THE BIGGEST THREATS LIE IN:

- 24% – A CAMPAIGN CAUSING OFFENCE / MISSING THE MARK
- 22% – FAILING TO MEET MODERN STANDARDS / INSENSITIVE STEREOTYPES
- 17% – BEING ASSOCIATED WITH SOMETHING POLITICAL (E.G. INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS OR POLITICAL ISSUES)
- 14% – A CONTENT CREATOR / ASSOCIATED AMBASSADOR DOING SOMETHING THAT CAUSES OFFENCE
- 10% – FAILING TO TAKE A STANCE ON INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS OR POLITICAL ISSUES
- 7% – A ROGUE POST FROM A SENIOR STAKEHOLDER / BOARD MEMBER
- 5% – NOWHERE IN PARTICULAR

2024 VS 2025 - KEY DIFFERENCES

The frequency at which CMOs feel concern over brand backlash when planning marketing activities has increased year-on-year. In 2024, a fifth (20%) of CMOs reported worrying about this during every campaign; in 2025, this has risen to nearly a quarter (24%).

However, despite the rise in concern, fewer CMOs now feel that this negatively[4] impacts creativity, dropping from 39% in 2024 to 33% in 2025. This may suggest that CMOs are learning to channel caution into more thoughtful, well-executed campaigns rather than letting it stifle innovation.

Interestingly, the biggest perceived threat in relation to brand backlash has also shifted year-on-year. In 2024, failing to meet modern standards / insensitive stereotypes was deemed the biggest threat (24%), whereas in 2025, it's a campaign causing offence / missing the mark (24%).

There are also notable shifts in specific threat areas: significantly more respondents now see association with political issues, such as international conflicts, as a top risk (up from 11% to 17%), reflecting a tense geopolitical climate. In contrast, fewer are worried about rogue posts from senior leaders or board members (down from 11% to 7%).

The data seems to point to the fact that although anxiety about backlash is on the rise, marketers are increasingly adept at navigating sensitive terrain without compromising on bold or impactful messaging.

NOTES:

[1]Combines 'Yes, I want them to do so' and 'Yes, I expect them to do so'

[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.

[4]'Very challenging' and 'somewhat challenging' responses combined.

[5]'Significant negative impact' and 'Slight negative impact' responses combined.

BUDGETS AND MEASUREMENT

BUDGETS

Marketing teams are grappling with budget constraints. In fact, 89%[1] CMOs face budget challenges. The most common challenge reported is deciding what the best decision for the brand is with limited budget (46%).

SAY BUDGET IS ALREADY 'SATURATED' WITH PLANNED ACTIVITY	39%
STATE THEY DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH FLEXIBILITY WITHIN THE AGREED BUDGET	36%
BEMOAN HAVING TO DO MORE WITH LESS	35%
SAY BUDGETS ARE NOT RELATIVE TO FORECASTS	33%

However, the future outlook is optimistic. High percentages of CMOs surveyed expect PR (72%), marketing (85%), brand awareness (79%) and market research (75%) budgets to increase in the next year.

89%

of CMOs face budget challenges

85%

still expect their marketing budget to increase next year

MEASUREMENT

CMOs today face a dual challenge: winning over customers in a highly competitive landscape while securing internal stakeholder buy-in. Measurable results are key to impressing stakeholders.

In terms of what they are measuring, a majority are evaluating:

BRAND AWARENESS	62%
CONTENT ENGAGEMENT	59%
SALES DATA	54%
NEW USERS OR CUSTOMERS	54%

Less commonly, CMOs measure customer lifetime value (44%), email open rates (37%) and share of voice (30%).

These metrics are being measured using software (e.g., Google Analytics, Meltwater, etc) (83%) or using market research (70%).

STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN

Some CMOs still have a way to go to win the backing of business leaders. 62% say stakeholders fully understand marketing's importance, so they have full buy-in. But 33% say their stakeholders only somewhat understand the value of marketing, resulting in partial buy-in. This partial buy-in indicates a level of scepticism from stakeholders and doubtless has an effect on budgetary decisions. However, it's clear that market research is key in securing stakeholder backing.

Notably, almost 7 in 10 (69%) CMOs who measure effectiveness using market research also state stakeholders at their business are fully invested in the marketing strategy; whereas significantly fewer (45%) CMOs who don't employ market research enjoy complete boardroom backing.

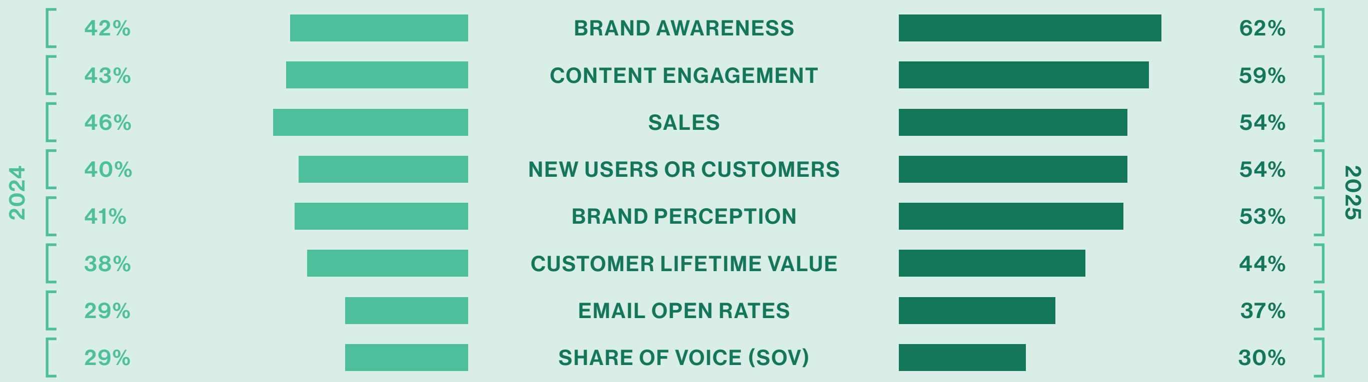
In a time of constant change and financial pressure, the ability to deliver clear, compelling metrics that demonstrate campaign ROI and effectiveness is more critical than ever. It can be the deciding factor between unlocking fully funded, dynamic marketing strategies, or being forced to stand still.

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 (69% vs 45%)

2024 VS 2025 - KEY DIFFERENCES

When it comes to budgets, 2025 saw an increase in the percentage of CMOs who reported that deciding what is best for the brand with limited budget was a challenge, rising from 38% in 2024 to 46% in 2025. In fact, this became the top budget-related challenge among CMOs surveyed in 2025, overtaking last year's most common concern: marketing budgets already saturated with planned activities (40%).

On the measurement front, CMOs are placing greater emphasis on tracking the success of their efforts across numerous areas compared to this time last year.



Notably, the primary metric CMOs track has shifted from sales in 2024 (46%) to brand awareness in 2025 (62%), perhaps indicating a broader, more brand-building mindset. The findings suggest that CMOs in 2025 are operating with a sharper strategic focus. While financial pressures remain high, there's a clear pivot towards prioritising long-term brand equity over short-term sales metrics, and a more comprehensive approach to measuring marketing effectiveness across the board.

NOTES:
'Excludes 'none'

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FIVE ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS

1. Keep your AI-powered content grounded in creativity and ensure transparency with audiences on how it's being used.
2. Start small - test AI in low-risk areas before scaling up.
3. Make brand activism credible and aligned with company values. Have proof.
4. Use research-backed insights to strengthen your case when presenting success to leadership.
5. Regularly share ROI reports with stakeholders to reinforce marketing's strategic role and use market research as an ongoing feedback loop, not a one-off exercise.

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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