

Australian Marketers Benchmarking Report

2025

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Introduction

Why

The Australian Marketers' Benchmarking Report was developed to shine a light on the unique challenges and opportunities facing marketing leaders in Australia. While there's no shortage of data on global marketing trends, much of it skews towards the US or broader international markets – often missing the nuances, unique behaviours and expectations of the Australian market.

Sonar Group, a leading digital marketing consultancy, created this report to help fill that gap. In our day-to-day work and conversations with clients we saw a need for consistent, local insight into how marketers are operating – where they're focusing their attention, what's holding them back and how they're evolving in response to some seismic industry shifts.

This report zeroes in on a few critical themes: Objectives, Opportunities & Challenges, Marketing Budgets and Ways of Working. This is the third edition of this report, so we can not only reflect where marketing is now, but track how it's changing.

The need for Australian-specific marketing intelligence is more relevant than ever with local regulations around data and privacy being updated, affecting how every company can do business in the digital economy.

Our ultimate goal with this report is to provide marketers and business leaders with a trusted and measured reference point to make smarter, more confident decisions.

How

The findings in this report are based on responses to an online survey conducted between April and May 2025. Participants were sourced through Sonar Group's professional network and partner ecosystem.

Who

Sonar Group is a national digital marketing consultancy that works with growth-minded organisations across strategy, digital, UX/UI and media. This report reflects our continued commitment to the industry and our clients by providing clear, contextual and actionable insight into what's really happening in marketing today.

Thank you

Thank you to our respondents who contributed valuable time in completing this year's survey. Your time, insights and candour help illuminate the path forward for the industry.

Executive Summary

Overall Summary

After several years of uncertainty, 2025 is shaping up to be a more confident and forward-leaning one for Australian marketers. While budgetary pressures haven't disappeared, there is a clear shift in mood, with 71% of marketers feeling optimistic about the year ahead.

This renewed optimism is not without complexity. AI continues to dominate industry conversation – yet the narrative has evolved. Rather than a disruptive threat, AI is now largely seen as a tool for improving efficiency, accelerating content creation and informing smarter decision-making across the customer journey.

1. Objectives

Customer acquisition remains the top priority for marketers, closely followed by improving customer experience and demonstrating return on investment. This indicates that marketers are thinking holistically – pursuing growth while also focusing on how efficiently they get there.

2. Opportunities

AI continues to lead the opportunity landscape for the second year in a row. However, the conversation has shifted from “AI itself” to “AI for what?” – with marketers now exploring how it can power personalisation, content workflows and deeper customer insight. AI is now showing up as the enabler within other strategic priorities.

3. Challenges

Marketers are grappling with three core challenges:

1. Generating high-quality leads
2. Standing out in saturated channels
3. Working within tighter budget constraints.

These speak to a return to marketing fundamentals – but with higher stakes.

Key takeaways:

- Optimism is up: 71% of marketers are positive about the year ahead.
- AI is foundational, not fringe: It's been baked into strategy, and is not bolted on.
- Budgets are improving but efficiency is key: Inflation means smart spend is the new growth lever.
- Marketing teams are growing and reskilling: AI isn't replacing teams; it's reshaping them.
- Execution is everything: Partners are valued for delivery first, strategy second.

4. Marketing Budgets

The majority of marketers expect their budgets to stay the same or increase, continuing the cautious optimism trend from 2024. However, flat budgets still represent a reduction in real terms given inflation, meaning marketers are still being asked to deliver more without a proportional increase in spend.

5. Ways of Working

Teams are growing or holding steady, even as automation tools increase – suggesting marketers see AI as an enabler, not a replacement. Upskilling is a key focus area, especially in AI, personalisation, automation, and analytics.

How Marketing Has Evolved Since 2023

Each year, the Sonar Group Benchmarking Report builds on a consistent set of core questions. That consistency allows us to spot not just emerging trends but lasting change. Below are the three biggest shifts we have seen across the last three years.

1. Marketers reclaim their confidence

After a sharp dip in 2024, optimism has rebounded from 70% in 2023, 56% in 2024 and back up to 71% this year. Marketers are more confident heading into 2025 than they have been in three years.

The dip reflected economic uncertainty, inflation pressure and tighter budgets – but marketers adapted. Now, with teams stabilising and tech investments bedding in, confidence is returning.

2. Marketing automation takes the lead in investment

In 2023, marketing automation was a back-seat consideration, with only 17% saying it was an investment priority. It

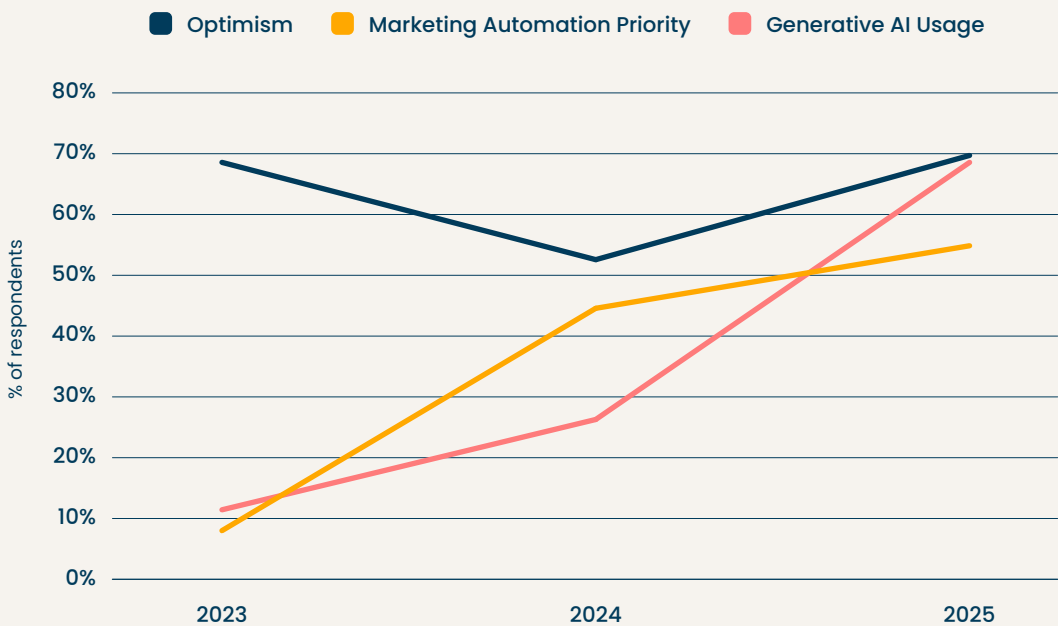
skyrocketed to 49% in 2024 and 58% this year. Investment has more than tripled over three years, overtaking CRM and continuing to grow. This signals a shift in operational mindset: marketers aren't just experimenting with tools, they are scaling systems to drive efficiency, consistency and better performance.

3. Generative AI goes from theory to practice

Just two years ago, Generative AI was largely theoretical – only 20% of marketers had even started exploring it. In 2024, adoption doubled to 33%, as teams began applying AI to content creation, ideation and workflow support. By 2025, it surged to 70%, with the majority of marketers now using Generative AI tools in their day-to-day execution. This is one of the fastest behavioural shifts seen in this report's history.

Generative AI has gone from a speculative edge-case to a practical enabler reshaping marketing creativity, productivity and capability.

Three Years Of Change: What's Grown, What's Recovered, What's Arrived



About the Respondents

Industry Breakdown

Retail	21%
Financial Services	14%
Technology / Software	8%
Automotive	8%
Not for Profit	8%
Building and Construction	7%
Other	7%
Manufacturing	6%
Utilities / Public Service	5%
Professional Services (Law, Accounting)	4%
Education	4%
Travel and Tourism	2%
Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	2%
Healthcare	1%
Government	1%

A significant majority of respondents (over 82%) hold senior leadership roles – either as CMOs, CXOs, Marketing Directors (38%) or Heads of Brand, Digital, or Marketing (45%). This weighting towards senior decision-makers ensures that the data captured reflects both a high-level strategic view and the operational realities facing today's marketing teams.

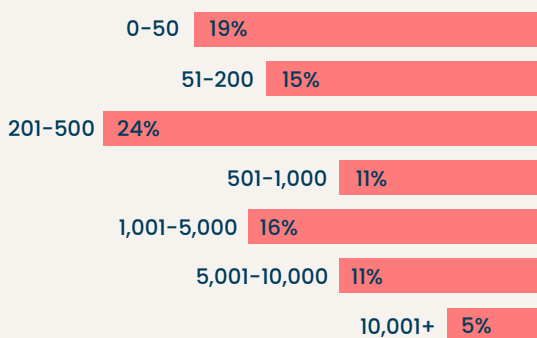
The majority of respondents (24%) also worked in businesses of 201 – 500 employees.

Mid-level marketers made up a smaller portion of respondents, with 15% identifying as Marketing Managers and just 2% as Marketing Executives. This provides a clear lens on where marketing priorities are being set and how the industry is evolving at the leadership level.

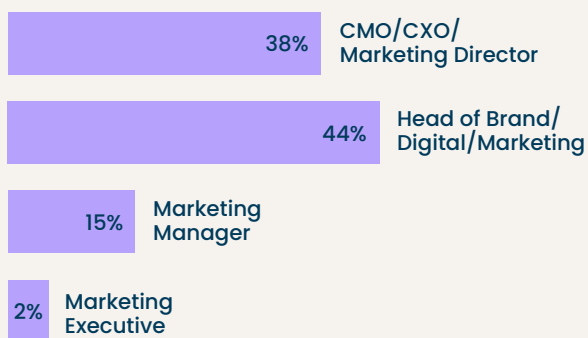
Across industries, participation was strongest in Retail (21%) and Financial Services (14%), followed by Technology/Software, Automotive and Not-for-Profit (all at 8%). This mix reflects a cross-section of sectors that are navigating very different market conditions.

B2B and B2C marketers were both well represented, along with a strong cohort who manage hybrid business models. This balance ensures that insights are not skewed to any single type of customer journey, giving a more holistic view of how marketing is evolving in Australia.

Organisation size



Job title



Companies Surveyed



A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several tall skyscrapers against a cloudy sky. An airplane is visible in the center of the frame, flying between the buildings. The image has a dark, moody aesthetic with a blue-grey color palette.

01

Objectives, Opportunities & Challenges

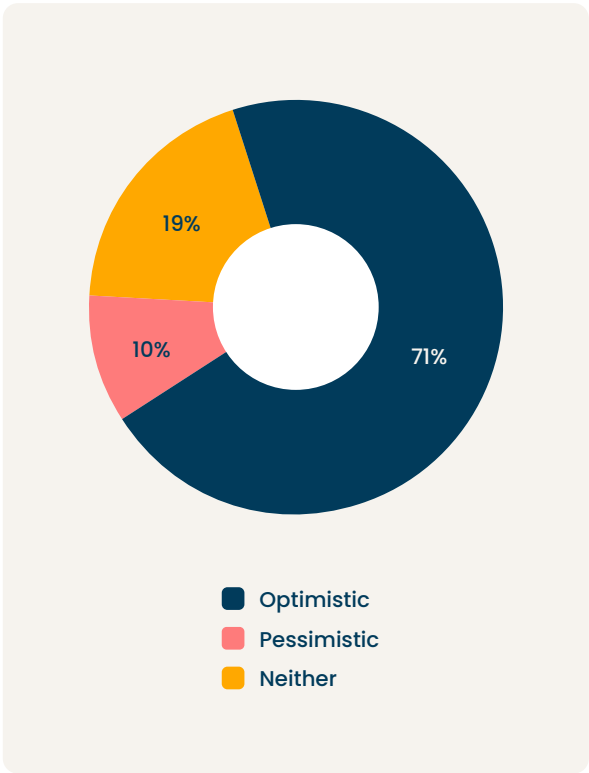
Industry sentiment turns a corner in 2025, with optimism returning

Question: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the next 12 months?

This year, 71% of marketers reported feeling optimistic – a significant increase from 56% in 2024 and a sharp contrast to the uncertainty of the past few years.

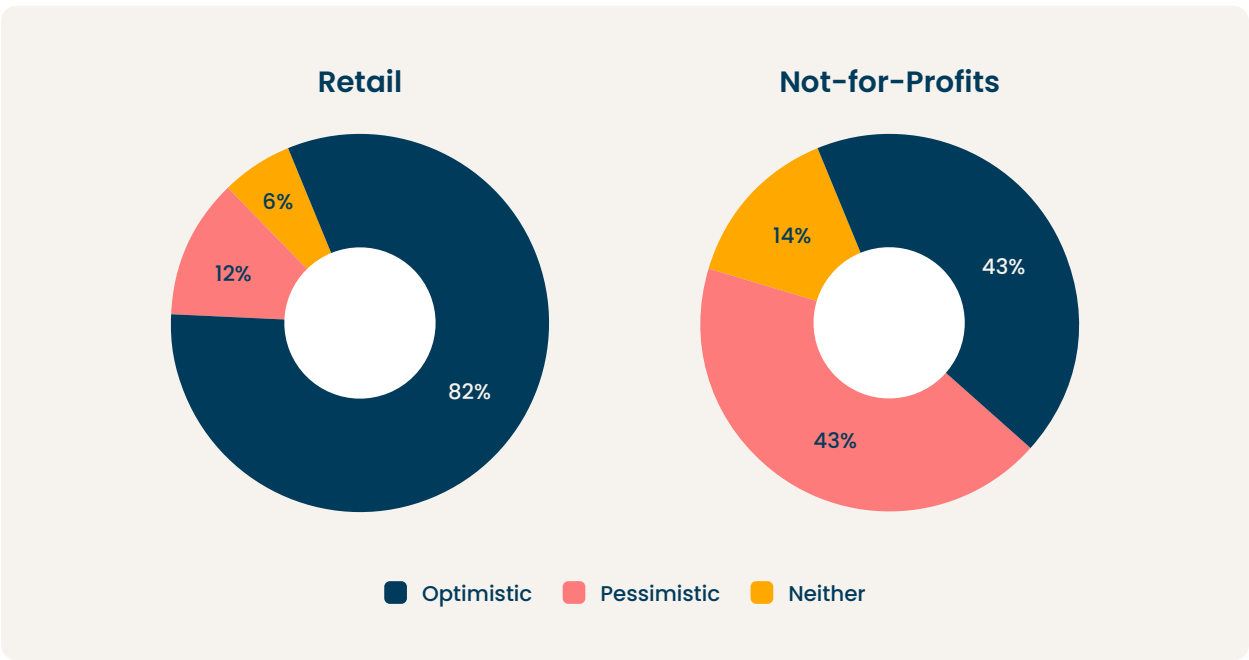
This rebound in confidence may be due to a number of reasons. Inflation has stabilised somewhat, with much-welcomed rate cuts over recent months, as well as market correction. A decisive Federal Election result also signals greater stability which is something consumers and the markets appreciate.

Marketers may be feeling more positive due to stabilised budgets, redefined expectations and the normalisation and greater understanding of emerging tech like AI. Where last year's sentiment was cautious, this year's is quietly hopeful.



Deep Dive: Retail and Not-for-Profits

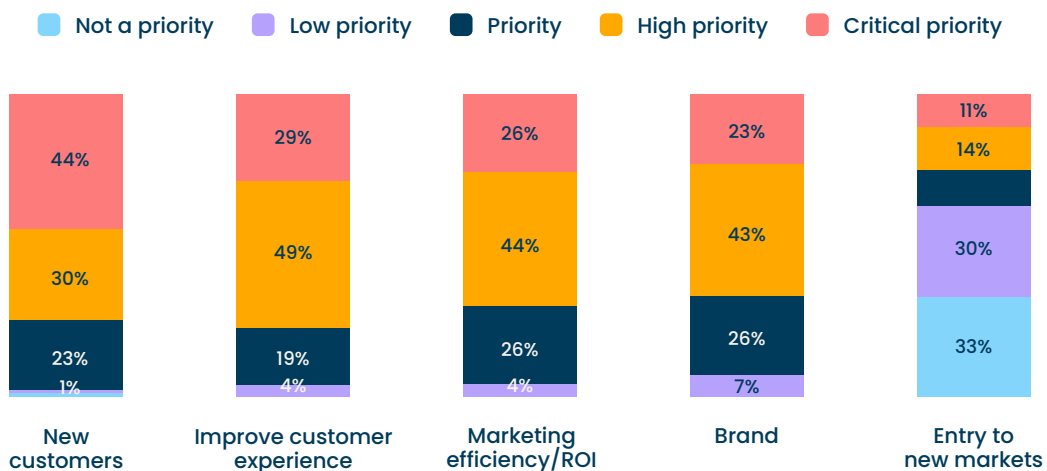
Confidence and optimism has returned in force for sectors such as retail, where optimism sits at 82% (compared to just 45% last year). However, there are exceptions to this trend, as marketers from non-profits had sentiment evenly split across optimism and pessimism (43% each).



Customer acquisition remains a priority – but it's being matched by customer experience and efficiency

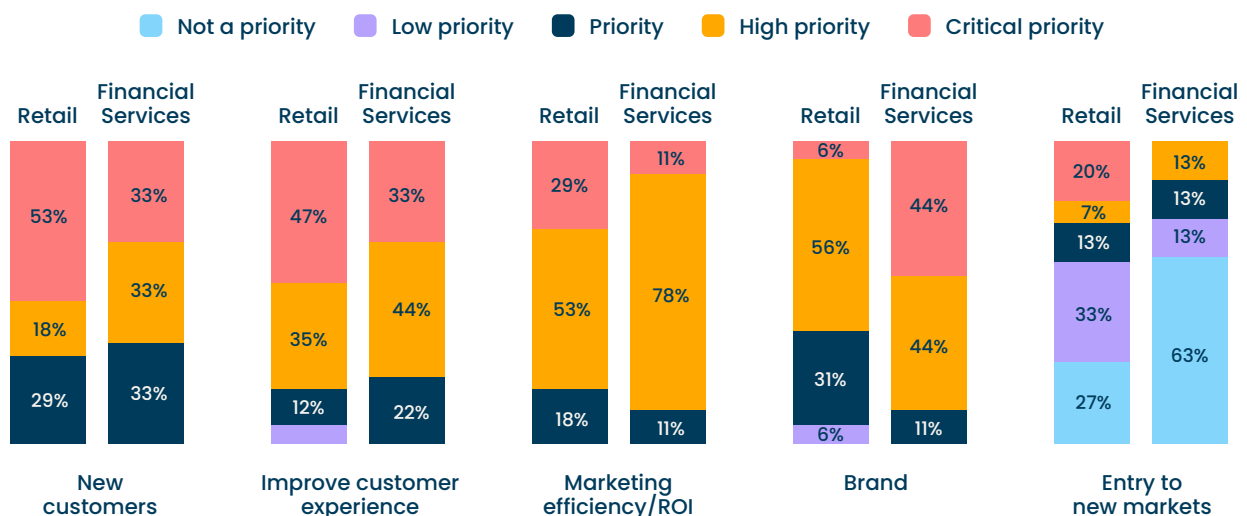
Question: What are your key objectives over the next 12 months?

Customer acquisition remains the most common objective – but it's now accompanied by deeper focus on customer experience and marketing efficiency. This marks a shift from urgency to strategy: marketers are still pursuing growth, but doing so with a tighter lens on ROI and retention.



Deep Dive: Retail and Financial Services

Industry splits reveal clear nuances in objectives. For retail, new customer acquisition is the top priority (53%), while financial services focus more on customer experience and marketing efficiency/ROI. This balance of acquisition and efficiency reflects the different characteristics of these two industries, with retail focusing on typically shorter timeframes and significantly lower customer lifetime values.



AI is still the biggest opportunity – but the conversation has evolved considerably

AI still leads in terms of opportunity – but its framing has changed. Marketers now see AI not as a standalone fix but as an enabler for personalisation, product innovation and CX.

Marketers have a deeper understanding of AI and its applications. The question has evolved from "What is our AI strategy?" to a broader understanding that AI plays multiple roles ranging from enabler to source of competitive differentiation.

AI is no longer an isolated trend but a foundational tool for unlocking broader strategic goals. The question becomes "How can AI support what matters most?" with a range of applications – from CX to new market entry.

Marketers are now embedding AI across their workflows, from content generation and journey orchestration to analytics and decisioning. It's no longer about adopting AI for the sake of innovation – it's about solving real problems and creating competitive advantage.

What's also notable is that the 'opportunity' conversation has become more broad. While AI remains top of mind, many marketers are equally focused on areas like automation, brand building and leveraging customer data more effectively.

This diversification of opportunity signals that the marketing function is no longer chasing the next big thing – it's building a longer-term roadmap rooted in integration, intelligence and impact.

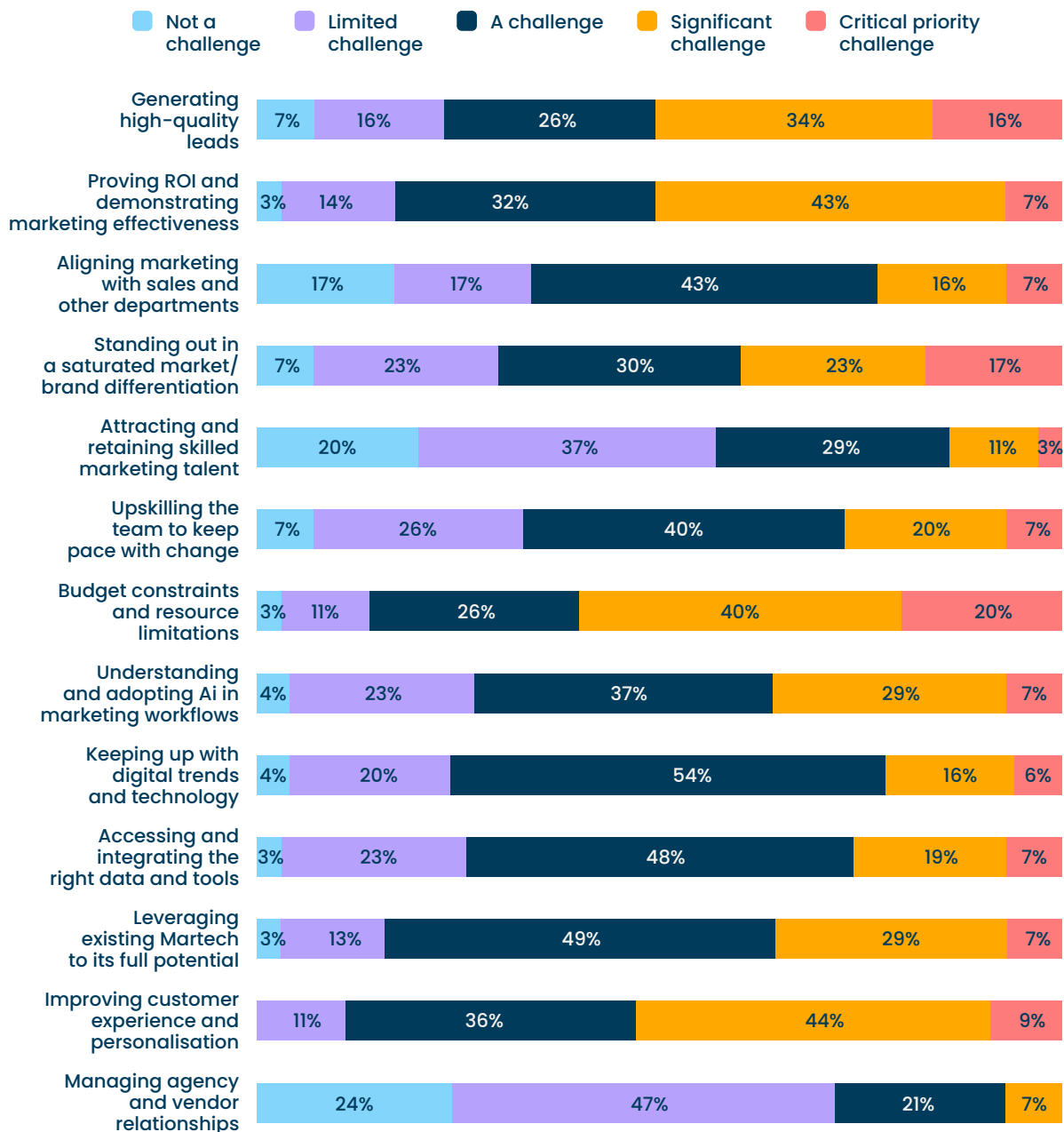


Marketers consider generating leads and standing out as primary challenges

Question: What are the biggest challenges facing the marketing team?

Generating high-quality leads, improving the customer experience, proving ROI and managing budgets effectively are the top challenges this year – signalling marketing's link to business performance and outcomes.

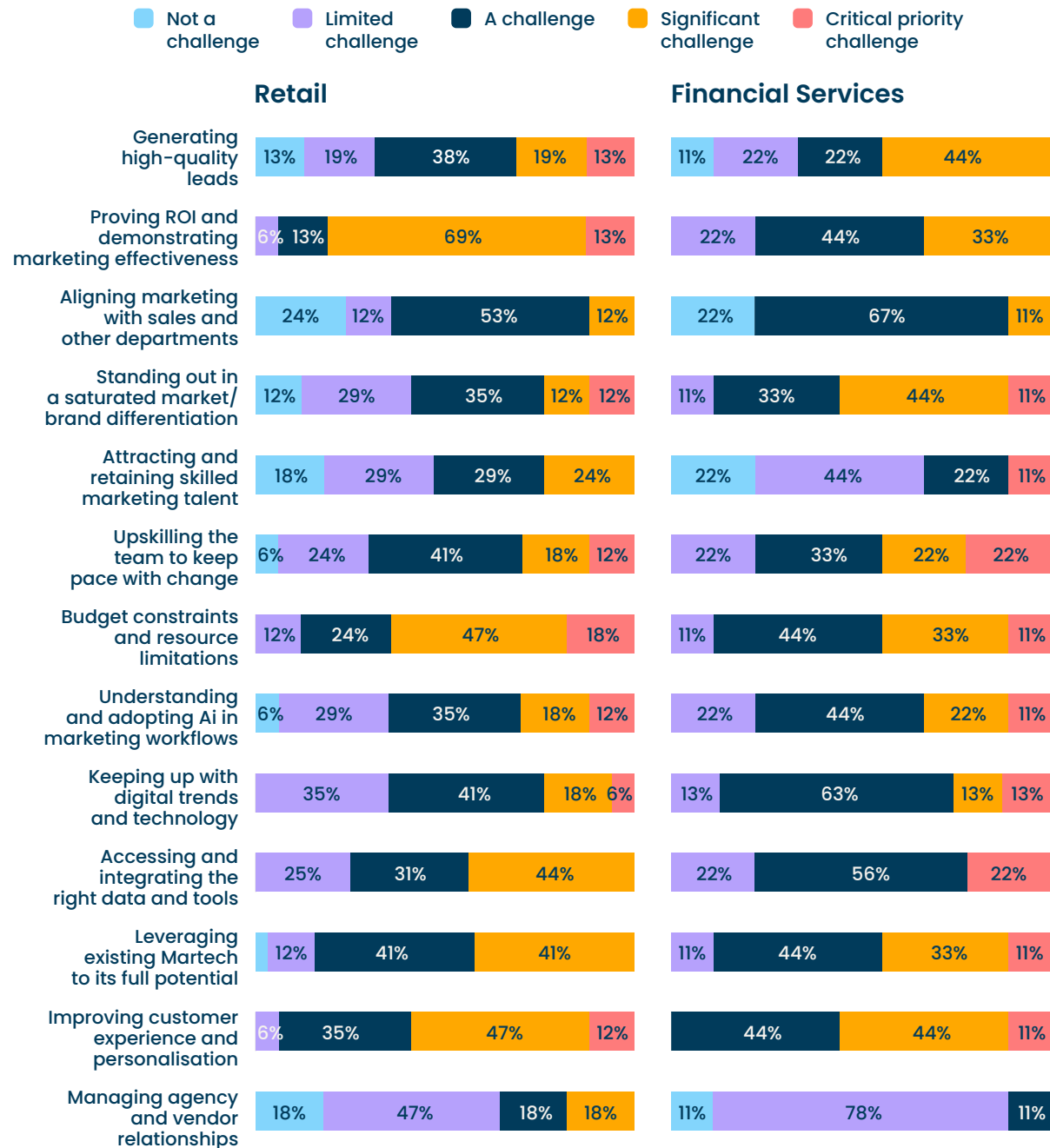
Marketing teams continue to grapple with balancing brand and performance – recognising that both are essential and interdependent. Marketers face the dual challenge of building standout brands in crowded markets while also delivering high-quality leads through performance channels.



Deep Dive: Retail and Financial Services

There are interesting niches within the retail and financial services sectors. For example, a much higher percentage of marketers from retail businesses (69%) are focused on proving ROI compared to the average (43%).

Marketers from financial services companies also seem slightly more confident when it comes to generating high quality leads compared to the average, with no financial services marketers considering it a critical priority.



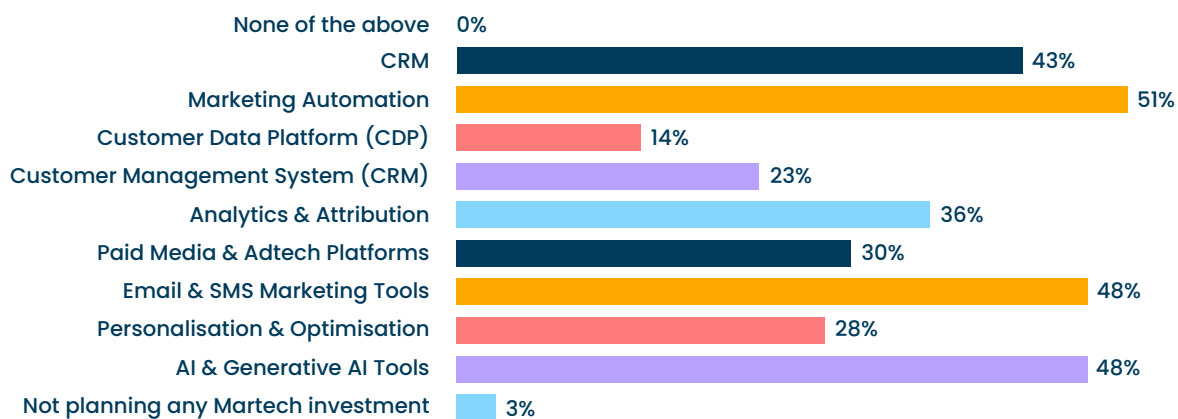
Marketing automation is a clear priority for investment, followed by AI

Question: When it comes to Martech, which platforms are your priorities for investment in the next 12 months?

Marketing automation has overtaken CRM as the top Martech investment priority – highlighting a focus on scalable, efficient delivery. AI follows closely, confirming its dual role as both platform and enabler.

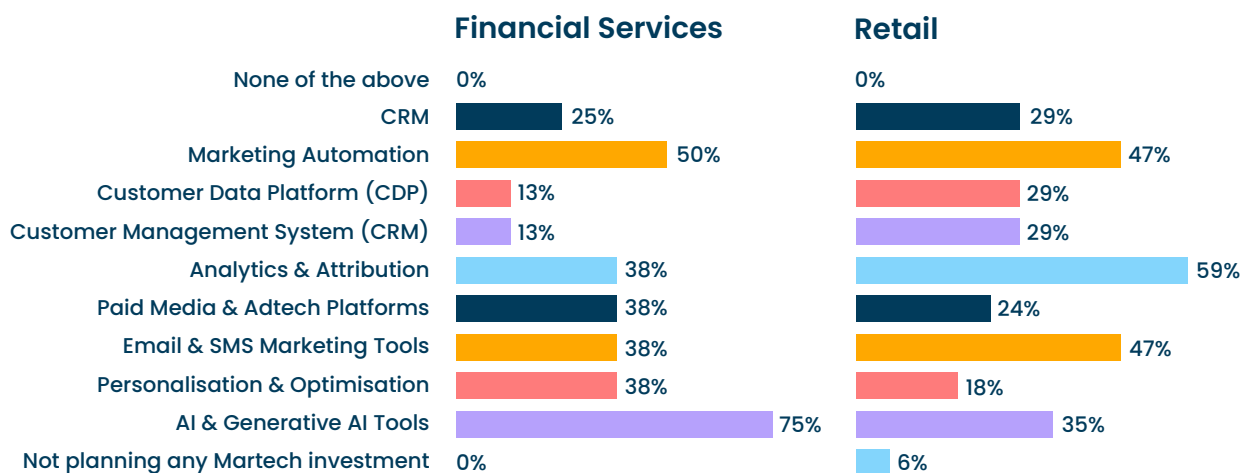
The growing prominence of marketing automation may also be driven by AI itself, with more marketing tools being promoted for their AI capabilities – therefore intertwining the two platforms.

Fewer marketers selected “none of the above” this year, suggesting growing confidence in tech’s strategic value.



Deep Dive: Financial Services and Retail

Sector differences are telling. Financial services are heavily focused on AI (75% vs. 48% on average), which may be due to this industry being more heavily regulated than others and therefore lagging behind the norm. Retail leads in analytics and attribution (59%), likely driven by pressure to validate retail media spend.





02

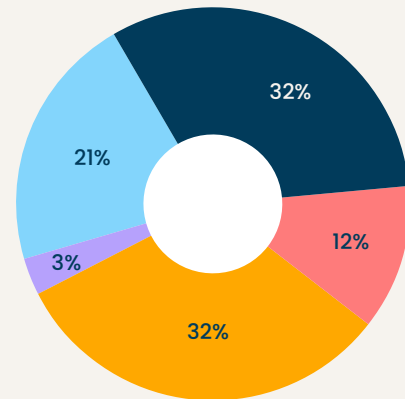
Marketing Budgets

Marketers buck the trend to predict budget growth in 2025

Question: How do you expect your marketing budget to change in the next 12 months?

Marketers are more bullish on budgets in 2025. The majority expect budgets to increase or remain steady. While inflation may neutralise some of those gains in real terms, the overall mood is a step up from last year's uncertainty.

Notably, the proportion of marketers expecting budgets to stay the same has dropped from 41% to 32%, suggesting that the era of flat spend may be tapering off. However, with more marketers anticipating small cuts (21%, up from 18%), efficiency remains crucial.



- Increase from 1% to 20%
- Increase by 21%+
- Remain the same
- Reduce by 21%+
- Reduce by 1% to 20%



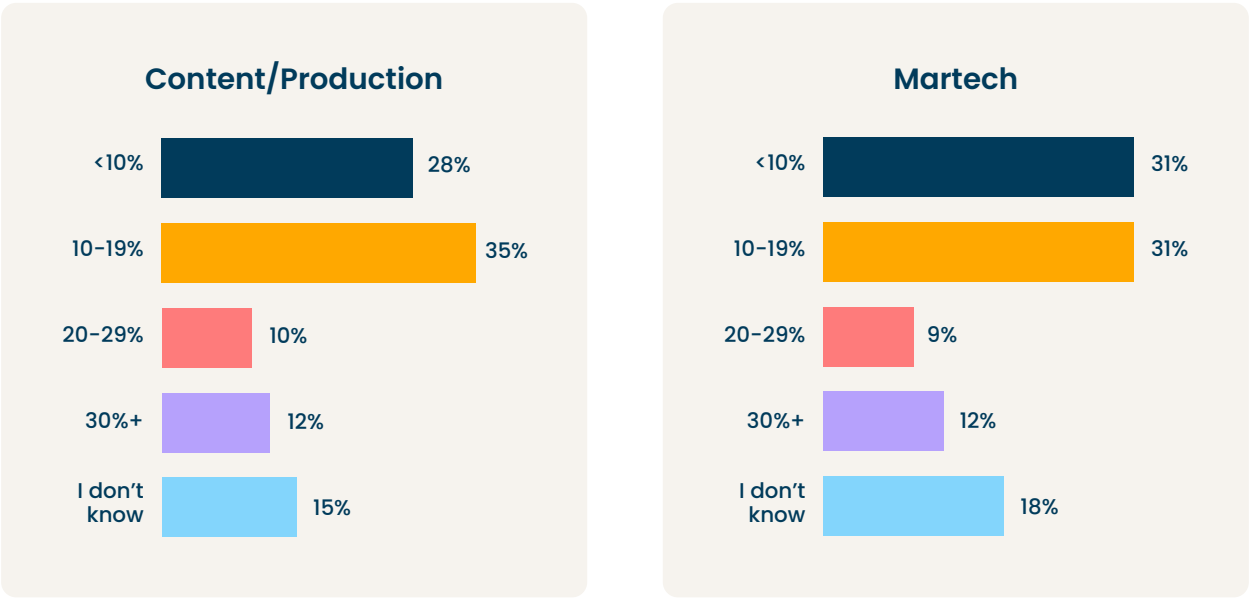
Content and Martech continue to reign marketing budgets

Question: How much of your marketing budget do you currently invest in Martech or content/production?

Budgets remain relatively balanced, with about 20% allocated to content and Martech each. But this surface balance belies deeper shifts.

AI is likely helping marketers create more content with less spend, decreasing production costs while maintaining a strong level of outputs. At the same time, Martech investment has remained steady from 2024 - indicating a continued focus on infrastructure, measurement and automation for marketers.

Still, a sizeable portion of marketers (18%) aren't sure how much they spend on Martech - highlighting continued ambiguity even amongst senior decision makers.

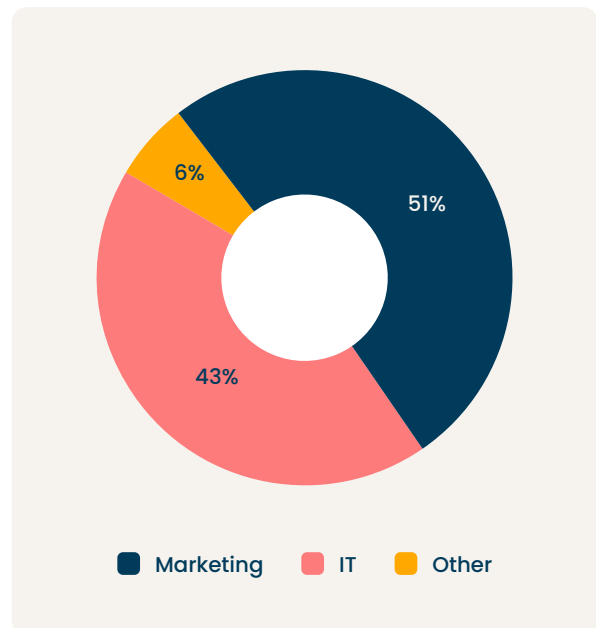


Digital software management hints at greater need for cross-collaboration

Question: For the most part, are digital marketing software licenses (eg. CMS, Marketing Automation) covered by marketing or another department budget?

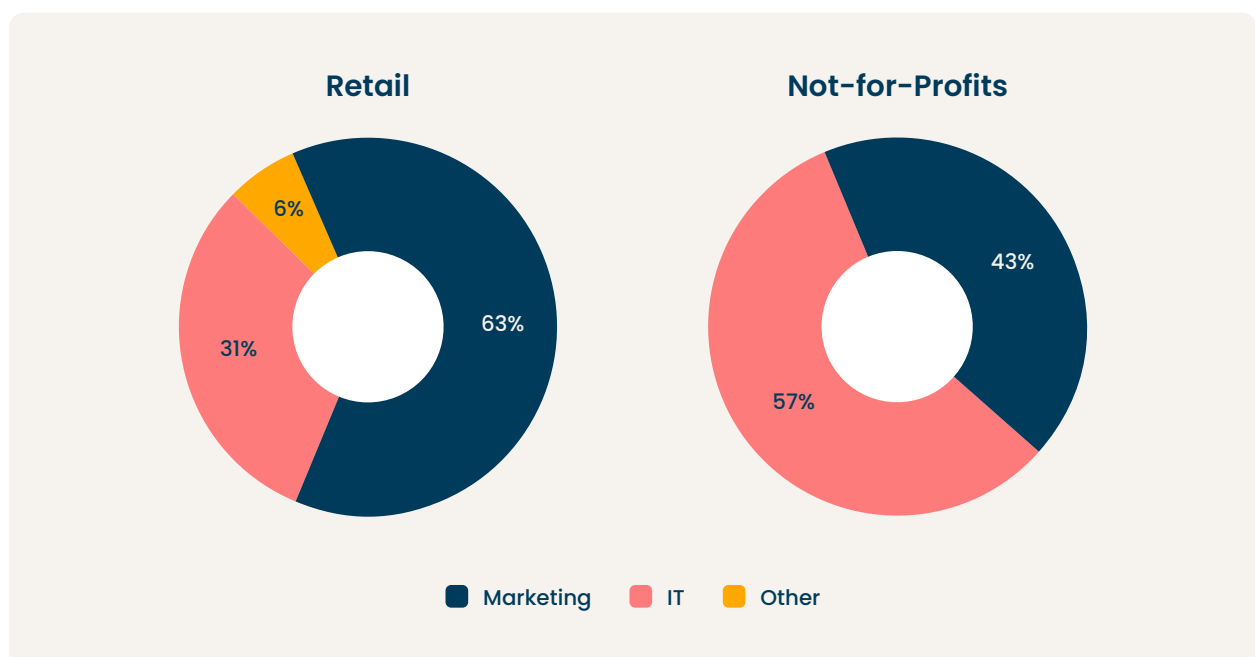
Marketing still covers the majority of martech software licenses, but the “shared” category remains stubbornly present – especially for tools that straddle IT and marketing. This highlights the blurry ownership lines between marketing, IT and digital teams, which in turn may generate complexities around accountability and reporting.

This data suggests collaboration is increasing, but so too will the need for clearer governance.



Deep Dive: Non-profits and Retail

Retail marketers are more self-contained than the average, with 63% funding Martech from marketing budgets alone. Not-for-Profits report no use of shared department budgets, but IT manages more licenses – which goes against the grain of other industry sectors.



A person in silhouette stands in a modern hallway, looking out a large window. The floor is highly reflective, showing the person and the window. The wall on the left is dark and textured. The hallway extends into the distance with a series of windows on the right side.

03

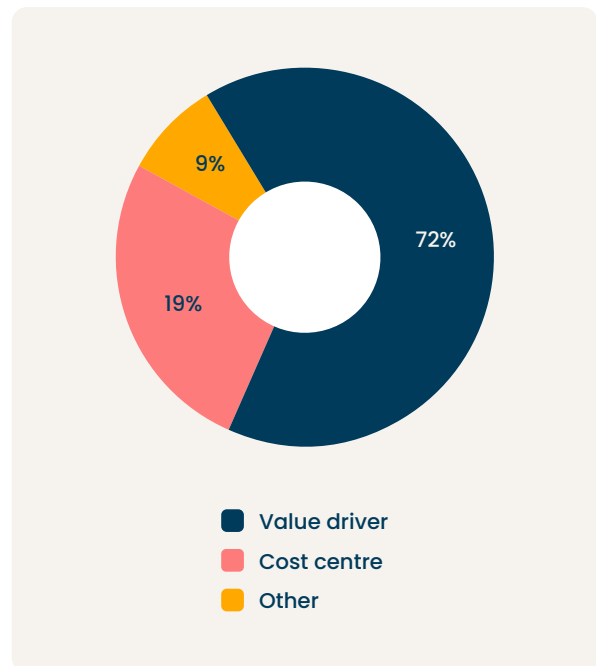
Ways of Working

Marketers make significant headway in proving their commercial impact

Question: Is Marketing viewed in your organisation as a value driver or cost centre?

Yes – and increasingly so. A significant majority (72%) of marketers say their department is seen as a value driver, which is a jump from 64% last year. By contrast, only 19% now say it's viewed as a cost centre.

This shift suggests a growing recognition of marketing's commercial role with marketers making undeniable progress in proving their impact to wider businesses. The remaining scepticism points to the need for better internal storytelling – especially around metrics that translate marketing outcomes into business impact.



Question: How is your marketing team showcasing value back to the organisation?

This year, marketers have continued to rely on a blend of performance and brand metrics to prove their value. ROAS, CPL and sales contribution remain common, alongside brand health and customer engagement scores.

However, there's a noticeable push toward aligning with business outcomes. Metrics like customer lifetime value, retention and acquisition cost are gaining traction – signalling a desire to move beyond campaign performance and into commercial impact.

What's emerging is a tiered approach to value measurement. Many teams are still anchoring performance reporting in platform-level metrics – such as website visits, social engagement and EDM performance – while gradually layering on more strategic indicators like revenue contribution, customer acquisition efficiency and overall brand perception.

There's also an increasing interest in measuring marketing's role in pipeline development and lead quality – particularly in B2B and hybrid models.

The word cloud reflects this growing diversity in language: terms like “acquisition,” “growth,” “conversion,” “revenue” and “business perception” show that marketers are thinking more commercially, and are working harder to connect their efforts to core business goals.

The aspiration is clear: to reposition marketing not just as a communications function but as a true commercial driver.

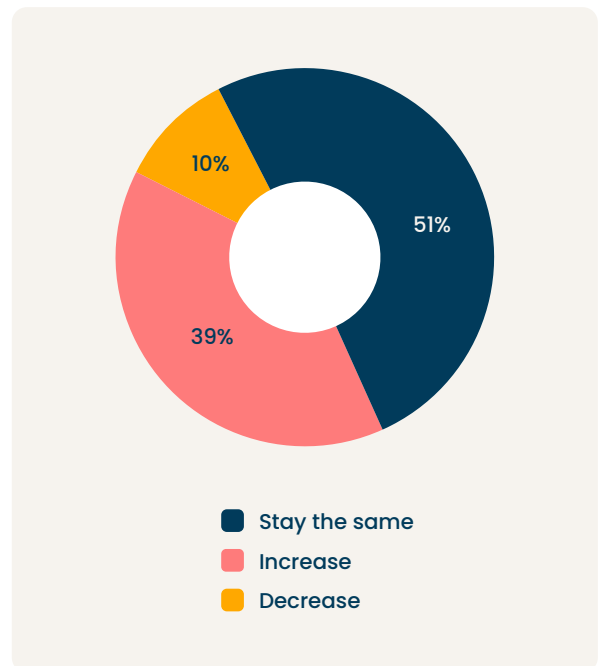


Marketing teams set to either hold their ground or grow over then next year

Question: Do you expect your marketing team size to increase or decrease in the next 12 months?

Reports of an AI-related decimation of marketing jobs may be overstated, with 70% of respondents reporting they expect their team size to remain the same or increase. These growth plans also align with earlier findings around rising optimism and expected budget increases.

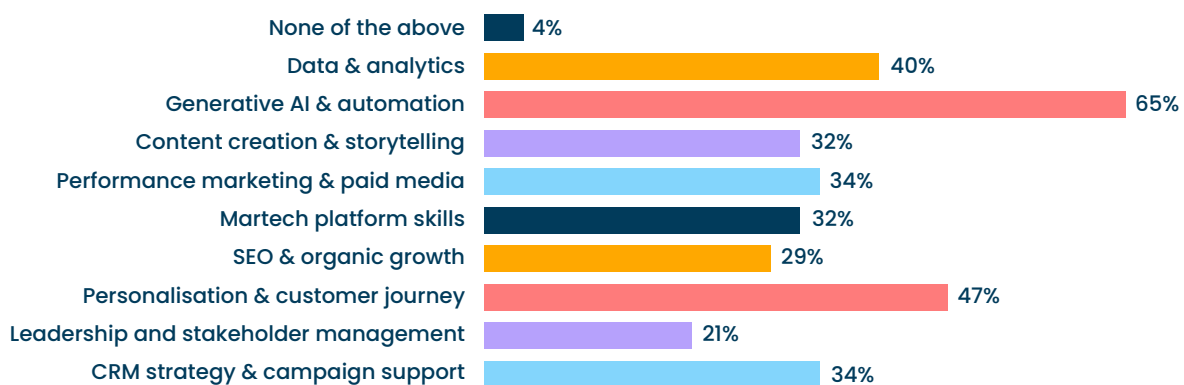
After several years of cuts and caution, this growth suggests that lean teams may have hit their limit – and leaders are now reinvesting in talent. Future headcount decisions may also see a shift towards hybrid skills (such as tech, creative and data), particularly as AI becomes embedded in daily operations.



Generative AI is expectedly high on the upskilling list – but so is personalisation and analytics

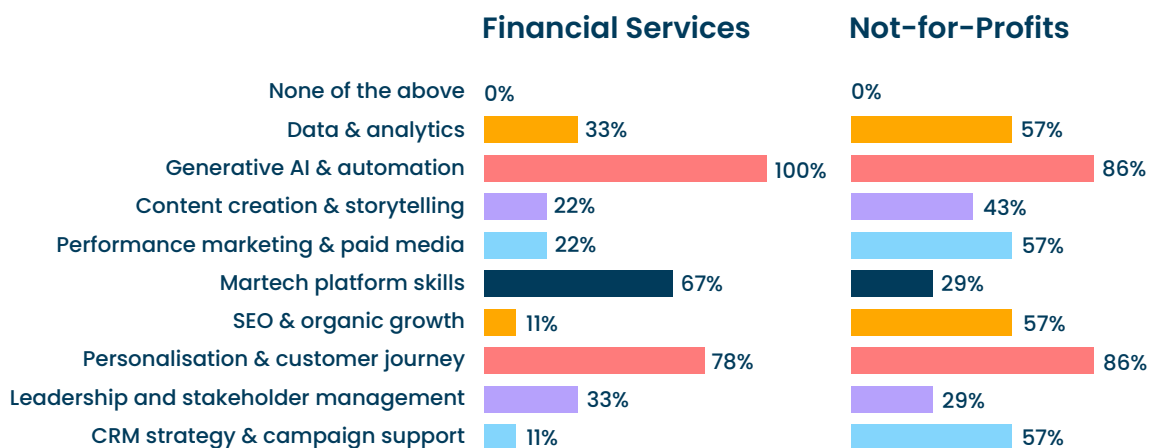
Question: In the next 12 months – where are you looking to upskill your marketing team?

Generative AI has topped the upskilling agenda at 65%, followed by personalisation and customer journey mapping (47%) and data analytics (40%). This aligns closely with the results of our question around where marketers are looking to make investments over the next year.



Deep Dive: Financial Services and Not-for-Profits

Trends vary by sector. In financial services, 100% of respondents are focused on AI and automation – far outpacing the average. Marketers in the not-for-profit sector are also far more interested in upskilling their team in generative AI (86%), personalisation (86%) and data and analytics (57%) than the average.

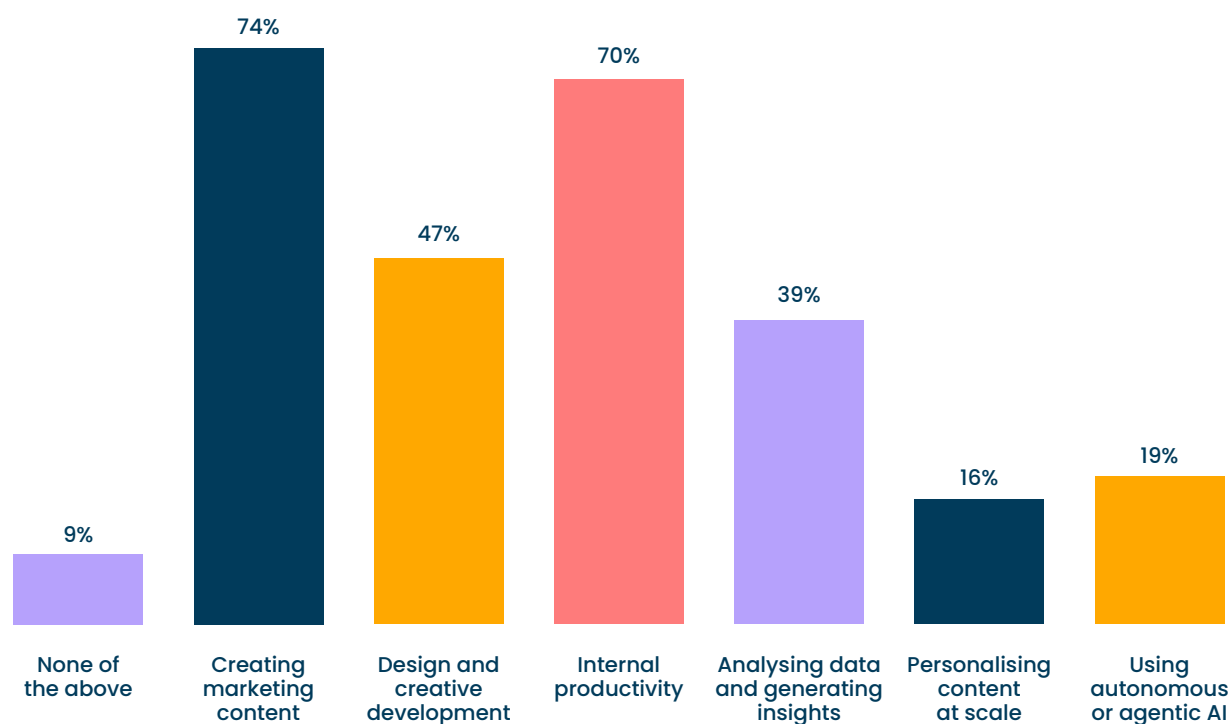


Marketers still in experimentation mode when it comes to Generative AI

Question: When and how are you using Generative AI in your organisation?

The top uses for Generative AI are content generation, ideation and internal process support. It seems marketers are applying AI to tactical tasks first – copywriting, email creation, basic analysis – before moving toward more strategic applications.

This reflects a “crawl before you run” approach, with most marketers still in experimentation mode with this new technology. As comfort with the tools grows, we expect broader integration into CX, personalisation and planning.

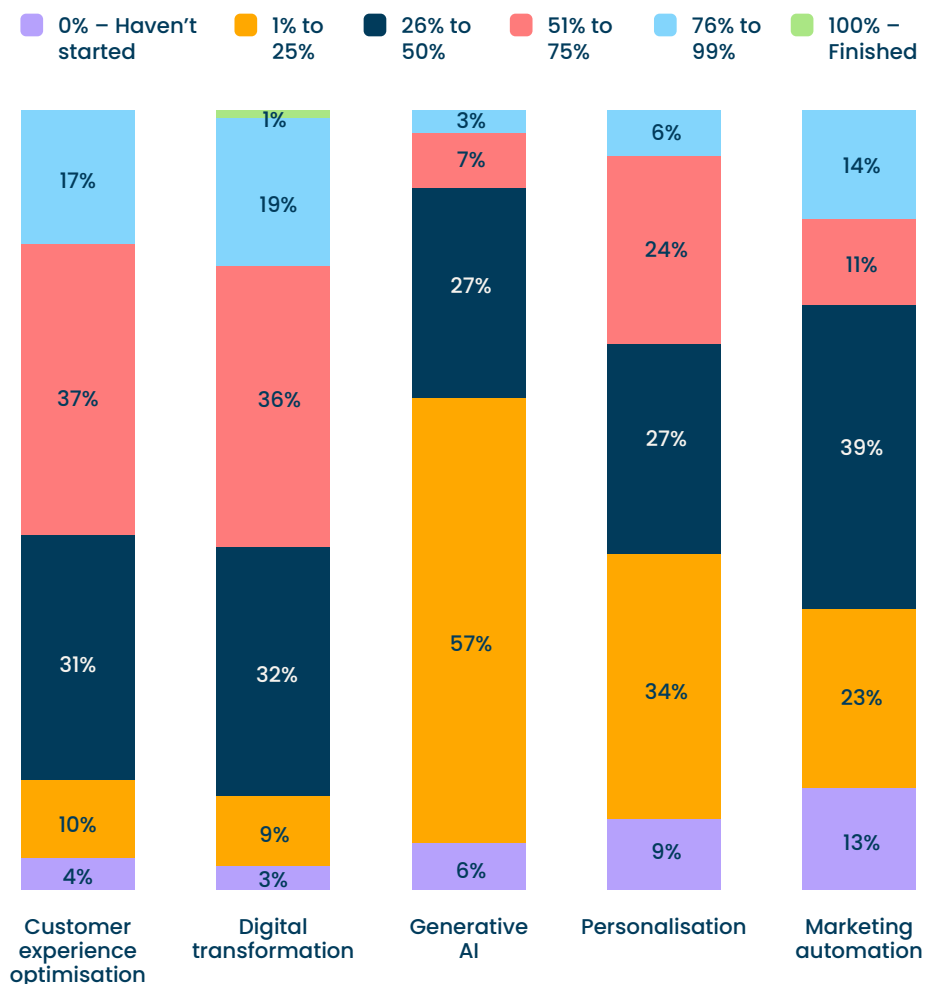


Digital foundations are set – but there's still a way to go for emerging technology

Question: Where is your organisation currently in its adoption of the following?

It is clear there are different speeds when it comes to adoption of these different tools. It would appear that digital transformation and customer experience are well underway, while Generative AI remains in its early phases, with most respondents less than halfway through implementation.

Marketing automation falls in the middle – there is widespread adoption, but still plenty of marketers looking for external support. This split maturity curve shows that while marketers have laid strong foundations, newer tools still require guidance and experimentation.



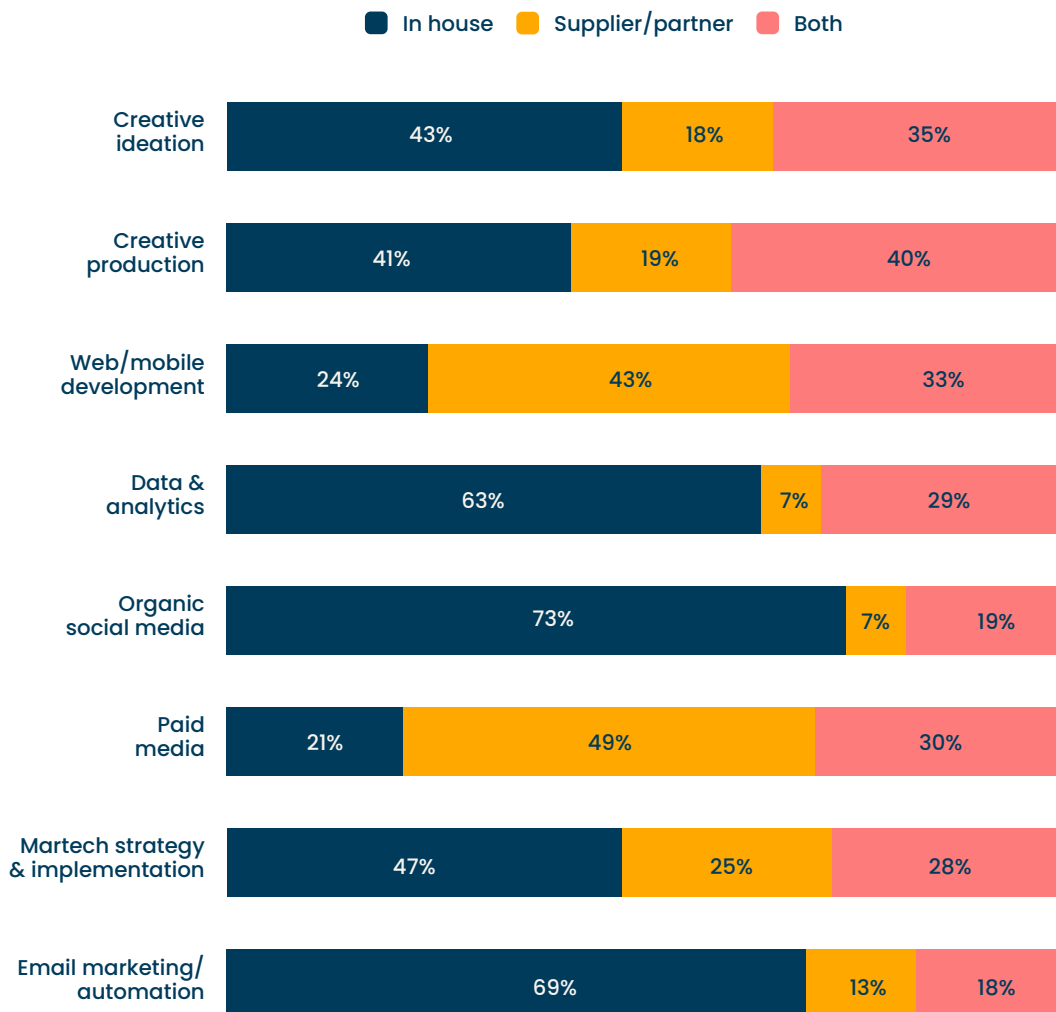
Marketers largely avoid relying on suppliers, with two key exceptions

Question: What digital marketing capabilities do you have in-house and where are you using a supplier / partner?

It's clear that most marketers tend to bring most of their capabilities in-house – which is likely a measure to mitigate the tough economic environment they have been operating in for several years.

As to where they are still looking for external support, paid media (49%) and web / mobile development (43%) are most prominent.

The data also reflects a shift in the role of partners. Rather than outsourcing whole functions, marketers appear to be seeking targeted support – augmenting internal teams with specialised capabilities when needed. This approach allows marketing leaders to retain ownership over strategy and execution, while tapping external support for spikes in workload, gaps in expertise or platform-specific tasks.



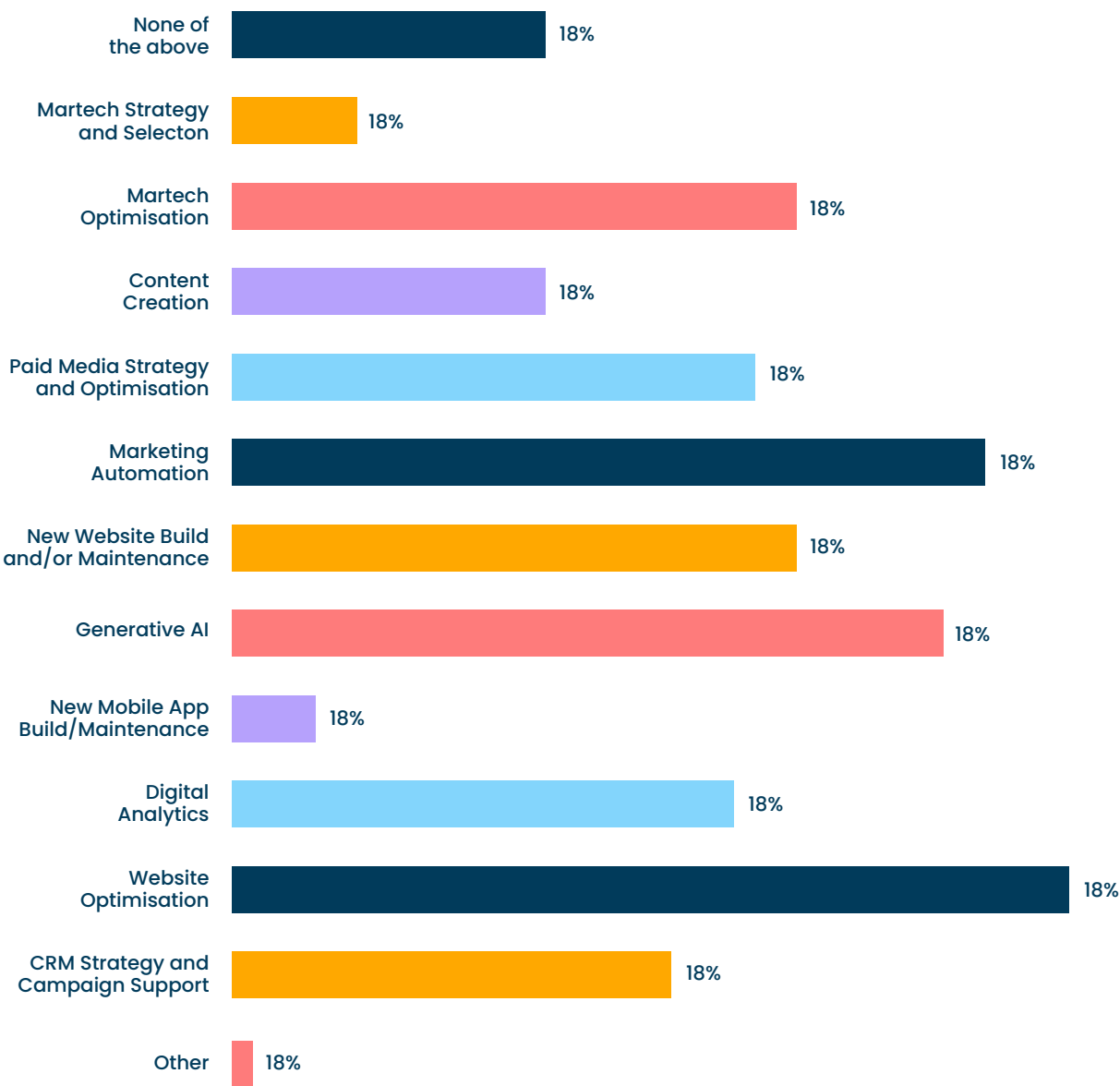
Website optimisation tops the help list, narrowly outpacing marketing automation

Question: In the next 12 months – are you looking for help in any of the following?

Marketers are still seeking support for Generative AI – but website and mobile optimisation have emerged as top areas for external help.

This likely reflects two things. First, a recognition that AI-generated content still needs strong distribution platforms, and second, an opportunity to get more from existing web platform investments through enhanced UX and CRO.

Across most areas, support demand has dipped slightly from 2024 – suggesting that marketers are investing more in internal capability and seeking partners who can augment rather than outsource.



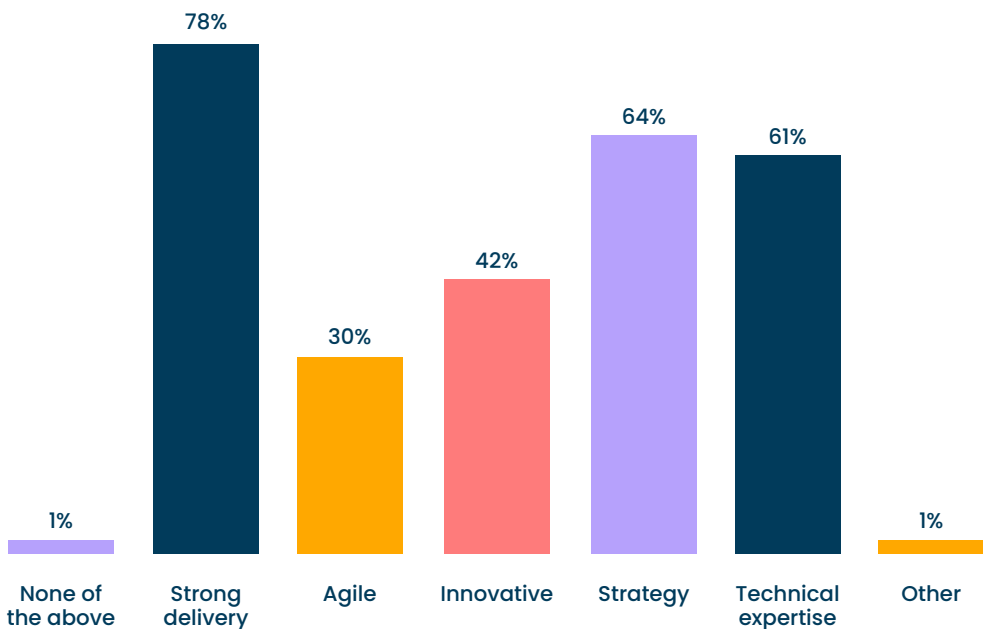
Execution still reigns with good marketing partners, but strategic support is gaining ground

Question: What makes a good marketing partner in 2025?

“Strong delivery” has remained the most valued trait in a marketing partner in 2025, coming out ahead of strategy, innovation or technical expertise. This echoes last year’s message: execution still matters most.

That said, strategy has grown in importance – from 59% last year to 64% this year. This suggests marketers recognise they don’t just need help doing the work – they need support framing the problem, too.

Agility and innovation have continued to grow in relevance, but are not enough on their own for most marketers.



Conclusion

2025 paints a picture of cautious optimism. Marketers are not only recovering from years of constraint – they’re recalibrating for a new phase of growth.

Budgets are trending upward, teams are stabilising or expanding and investment in both technology and capability is on the rise. But this optimism is measured. Inflationary pressure, increased expectations and the complexity of proving value mean marketers are still operating with a high level of scrutiny.

We’ve also seen the establishment of two key priorities for investment: Marketing automation and AI. Automation has risen sharply in importance and is now seen as the backbone for operational consistency and scale. Generative AI, meanwhile,

is helping marketers unlock creativity, efficiency and insight.

These tools are not in conflict – they are complementary forces. Together, they’re redefining what modern marketing execution looks like.

Most marketers are not forecasting dramatic change – they are planning for measured, sustainable growth. They are thinking longer-term, investing with intention and adapting with agility.

The signal is clear: the foundations have been laid and now it’s time to build more intelligent operations to fuel the next phase of growth in a much-changed marketing landscape.

The signal is clear, the foundations have been laid. Now it’s time to build smarter.





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