

MARKETING

Is gut instinct dead in the age of AI?

Successful marketing campaigns have historically been the product of human creativity. But will the rise of AI and data analytics require marketers to relinquish some of their artistic freedom?

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Advertisers and marketers understand the value of original ideas. David Ogilvy, considered by many to be the father of advertising, once said, “If it doesn’t sell, it isn’t creative.”

Human creativity has long been the catalyst for the most powerful advertisements. But with the rise of performance data and brand metrics, marketers are increasingly relying on digital technologies to gauge and, in some instances, create marketing campaigns.

Data and AI tools can help marketers understand a campaign’s impact and predict performance. But how should marketers balance AI-generated insights with their gut instincts for what will resonate with their customers?

According to Mandy Alderson, head of global brand management at Intrepid Travel: “Following those gut instincts is how we create an emotional connection with the consumer. While data and AI are incredible, they’re mainly there to reaffirm our intuition.”

Alderson’s team uses Qualtrics, an experience-management platform, to guide its quarterly brand tracker and measure brand awareness as a key performance indicator, for instance.

The data from this platform is instrumental in gauging the effectiveness of brand campaigns and informing brand spend. But while the data can provide valuable insights, human intuition is needed to connect the dots.

“Our gut instincts help us interpret the numbers and understand the emotional core of our brand’s connection with travellers,” Alderson says.

But measuring brand awareness is just the start. “The real challenge is translating those metrics to campaigns that genuinely resonate with our audience’s deeper desires and emotions,” she says.

Can AI agents create effective campaigns?

While AI might help optimise or analyse, the magic happens by making connections between different things – something that requires human imagination and intuition, according to Jon Evans, chief customer officer at System1, a brand insights firm.

“Creative leaps into the unknown remains a distinctly human trait,” Evans says.

But AI systems are developing quickly. In addition to data cleansing, summarisation and reporting, market research professionals are now using AI-generated personas to test products and messaging, according to a report by Qualtrics.

The marketers who are winning right now are using AI systems as research assistants, not creative directors

Plus, Google, Adobe and Meta are developing AI agents that can automate website adjustments, serve as more responsive chatbots and personalise ad variations.

“Unlike previous deterministic AI that simply completed tasks, agentic AI can, for instance, understand a brief and solve it independently,” says Evans.

Although these tools may enable greater efficiency, they may also take marketers further away from the creative instincts and unique ideas that help to build strong brands.

“The challenge is human orchestration – coordinating these AI agents and ensuring they work together effectively,” Evans adds.

Balancing data and gut instincts

According to Alderson, the best brand campaigns succeed by exploiting culturally relevant moments – something AI cannot fully replicate.

“AI wouldn’t necessarily have the context and nuance to notice those moments and turn them into something meaningful,” she says.

Kaitlyn Barclay, CEO and co-founder of Scout Lab, agrees, adding that human judgment about what the data means, and when to ignore it, is essential to creating brand campaigns that stand out and resonate with customers.

“The marketers who are winning right now are using AI systems as research assistants, not creative directors,” says Barclay.

She acknowledges, however, that the benefits of data-driven marketing are undeniable. Fuelled by data, AI tools can help marketers understand customer lifetime value, cross-channel attribution and behavioural triggers in ways that would have required armies of analysts just five years ago.

Even so, marketers should not rely on AI systems for brand stewardship.

“Never let AI alone decide brand positioning, crisis response or cultural commentary. These require human judgment about values, risk tolerance and long-term brand equity,” she says.

Data-driven predictions aside, some brand campaigns can only be decided by asking, ‘Does this feel right?’. Consider Liquid Death, the tinned-water brand, Barclay says.

“Selling water in tallboy cans shouldn’t work. The data probably said it was insane. But someone’s gut said ‘energy drink aesthetic for hydration’ would resonate with people tired of wellness culture bullshit. Now they’re valued at \$1.4bn.”

The ‘Mad Men’ moment in the age of AI

AI is excellent at delivering the right message at the right time with precise targeting, thereby optimising for the 5% of customers who are buying right now. But marketers must build brand recognition for the 95% who aren’t currently buying, says Evans.

“AI can inform and refine ideas but that true creativity involves making creative leaps and applying solutions to business problems,” he says.

Those brand-building efforts – the long-term strategies that create distinctive, memorable brand assets – are still ruled by human creativity. An AI may be incapable of achieving a ‘Mad Men’ moment – a spark of creativity that leads to an entirely new idea for a brand campaign.

And, with the vast amount of content being churned out by AI, such unusual or uncommon leaps of imagination may be the only way to stand out in a crowded, noisy marketplace and create something that truly resonates with customers.

Creative leaps into the unknown remains a distinctly human trait

Marketers however must test and scrutinise their own instincts, which can be subject to in-built preferences and biases, with research and data, says Evans,

“Gut instinct is not dead, but it should be based on the customer’s gut instinct rather than the marketer’s,” he says.

For Alderson, the gut instinct and human emotions that go into Intrepid’s marketing campaigns are essential for preserving authenticity. “It’s part of what makes the way we connect with our customers so effective,” she says.

It’s proof that while AI can provide valuable insights, human judgment and emotional appeal remain crucial for brand campaigns that resonate with target customers.

“The world’s best brand campaigns succeed because they find a really key moment culturally in time. It’s not about leaning into the past or predicting the future but about what’s relevant in that moment,” she says.