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Why marketing has changed for good

B2B Marketing Leaders Roundtable, New York
Hosted by **Propolis** and Dentsu B2B

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On a bright morning in late April, a group of senior B2B marketers gathered at Dentsu B2B's Grand Central offices in New York for a half-day of honest conversation. The brief was deliberately provocative: marketing has changed for good, and the leaders who haven't adjusted to that fact are quietly being replaced. The job of the morning was to work out what the shift actually is, and what to do about it on Monday.

What followed was a panel discussion with Michael Barber (CMO, StarTech) and Georgia Bradley (SVP Strategy, Dentsu Creative), and two facilitated roundtables under Chatham House rules. Across both, the same themes kept surfacing sometimes from very different angles. This is what we heard.

The brand conversation is back and driven, ironically, by AI

For more than a decade, the centre of gravity in B2B marketing has been performance: trackable, attributable, defensible to the CFO. The room agreed that pendulum is swinging, and the unlikely catalyst is AI.

Michael's argument was the cleanest version of this. Most sophisticated organisations have already optimised every channel, every dashboard, every attribution model they can; there is little incremental performance left to squeeze. What has changed is that CEOs, CFOs and CROs are now using LLMs every day, watching how brands surface (or don't) inside ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini and Perplexity. For the first time in years, the C-suite is asking, unprompted, how much the business should be investing in brand. That is a structural shift, not a fashion.

> *"More than ever, we are having real conversations about how much we're spending on brand, and less so on how much we're spending on performance."*
>
> Michael Barber, *CMO,* **StarTech**

Georgia reinforced the point from the agency side. With buyers now doing the majority of their decision-making before they ever speak to sales, and with AI-driven discovery accelerating that behaviour, the brands that show up consistently in the places where buyers are forming opinions are the ones that win the shortlist. Marketing's job is no longer to generate the leads. It is to make sure the brand is already trusted by the time the buyer self-identifies.

The roundtables echoed this almost word for word. Several leaders described the new measurement frontier as "first-party brand research plus LLM share of voice." One participant noted that a year ago they would never have included LLM presence in a brand tracker; now it is one of the first things they look at. Tools to listen to how a brand is being represented inside LLMs (and how competitor content is shaping those representations) are quickly becoming standard kit.

The CMO is squeezed in the middle, and the squeeze is real

The invite framed it bluntly: buyers don't want to talk to sales until they've already decided, sales want more leads, and the CMO is caught between the two. Both the panel and the tables agreed this is the central tension of the moment, but they reframed it usefully.

Georgia described the dynamic as a collision: sales wanting certainty and named accounts, buyers wanting confidence and reassurance long before any sales conversation, and marketing trying to deliver both at once. When budgets get tight, the brand investment goes first…which serves as the very mechanism that builds the buyer the trust sales is begging for. The cycle then repeats.

Michael's said, "The way out is not louder dashboards. It is earning a seat in the rooms where commercial decisions actually get made, pricing, product fit, the shape of the offer, and contributing a marketer's perspective on what the market is telling you." He described pulling apart every closed-won and closed-lost deal with his CFO, in detail, and using those stories to explain what marketing, sales and customer success had each contributed. "Don't make it about what marketing did," was the takeaway one of the tables wrote down. "Make it about what the organisation did, together."

> ***When the pressure converges on pipeline, the brand budget often goes first. And so off we go, using all the tactics we can to build that pipeline. But are we actually building anything? And then the cycle begins again."***
>
> Georgia Bradley, *SVP Strategy*, **Dentsu Creative**

On the tables, this translated into a recurring frustration: the unrealistic expectation, especially from PE-backed and founder-led businesses, that high growth doesn't require high investment. Several leaders said the most useful thing they had done in the last year was simply to stop softening that conversation to be honest with their boards about what the targets actually cost to deliver, and to refuse to absorb the gap by pretending.

AI: Transformer or trap

AI dominated both halves of the morning, but in a more textured way than the usual hype/doom narrative.

On the panel, Georgia made the case for AI as a thinking partner rather than a content factory. Her teams use it to accelerate research, stress-test hypotheses, and push strategic ideas further than the timeline would otherwise allow, but the originating thought, the creative leap, still has to come from a human. Michael was even sharper: don't draft anything important inside an LLM first. The models are tuned to pattern-match toward the middle, and if you let them write the first version, you end up in a sea of vanilla sameness with everyone else who did the same.

> *Origination of content should be done by humans. Then you can improve with AI. Otherwise everything is vanilla and generic."*
> *— a senior marketing leader at the Propolis/Dentsu B2B roundtable*

The roundtables surfaced the messier reality of trying to operationalise this. Several themes appeared:

Volume is the wrong metric. Multiple leaders said they had quietly pivoted from "more content, faster" to "less content, but the right content, optimised for both humans and LLMs." One described the shift as moving from a content velocity play to a visibility play making sure the brand and a small number of hero products show up in the conversations buyers are now having with AI.

Orchestration is the new craft. Both Michael on the panel and several voices on the tables landed on the same word: orchestration. The work that has been democratised is execution. The work that has not is the decision making as to which tools, agents, signals and people to bring together to deliver a coherent commercial outcome. One organisation described building a network of agents (a brand agent, an email agent, a delegate-management agent, a social agent) all cross-referencing each other through Co-Pilot. Whatever you make of the specifics, the direction of travel is clear.

Slow down to speed up. The most counter-cultural advice of the morning, repeated in different forms by panel and tables alike: when everything is accelerating, the marketing leaders who pause long enough to set the blueprint are asking: What are we actually trying to achieve? What's the real problem? What does good look like? It is those who are asking these questions that will outrun the ones sprinting in the wrong direction.

Everyone is now a marketing expert. A frustration that came up at more than one table: colleagues are using AI to generate marketing plans and then handing them to the marketing team as instructions. The job of the marketing leader is increasingly to push back and again, to ask questions like 'what problem is actually being solved' and to refuse to be the gatekeeper-to-social-media that the rest of the business assumes them to be.

What good looks like, and why it matters more than ever

Georgia closed her contribution to the panel with the word that, in retrospect, threaded the whole morning together: Taste. In an environment where it is trivial to generate competent, on-brief, on-brand content at near-zero marginal cost, the differentiator is the ability to recognise, and demand, what is genuinely good. Not just adequate. Not just on-brand. Good.

That is a leadership skill, not a tooling skill. It does not get easier with a better LLM. It is the thing the room agreed that B2B marketing most needs to defend right now.

Five things to take back to the office

- Have the brand conversation while the C-suite is still asking. The window where AI has made brand a boardroom topic without you having to fight for it will not stay open forever.
- Add LLM presence to your brand tracking. If it isn't in your brand health dashboard yet, it should be by the end of the quarter, both your own surface area and your competitors'.
- Audit your content for volume vs. visibility. Ask honestly whether you are producing more, or producing the right things in the places that now matter (including inside LLMs).
- Originate with humans, refine with AI. Make this an explicit team principle, not an implicit habit. The middle-of-the-road default is an organisational risk, not just a stylistic one.
- Earn the rooms, not just the dashboards. Pricing, product fit, and customer experience. The marketing leader who has a credible perspective in those conversations is the one who keeps their seat at the commercial table.

With special thanks to Sarah Casswell and Sarah Lovelock, the teams at Propolis and Dentsu B2B, and the senior marketing leaders who shared their experience under Chatham House rules. The conversation continues inside Propolis.

What are B2B marketers doing to succeed in 2026?

Our findings from this year's Elevation Awards

This year's Elevation Awards entries have been incredibly impressive. One of the most valuable things they offer is a clear view of what great B2B marketing looks like right now. So, how are the best B2B marketers in the US staying ahead of the curve and driving growth in a business landscape that looks very different from last year? We've had our heads deep in this year's entries, and now you can see what we uncovered.

1. Building "Operating Systems," Not Campaigns

The most successful entries don't describe a start-and-stop campaign; they describe the implementation of a permanent operating system (OS). This involves building a repeatable infrastructure, whether through AI-powered search or an automated performance engine, that continues to deliver value long after the initial launch phase.

> One entrant's AI-powered operating system **reduced setup timelines by 40% and improved targeting precision by 25%.**

2. Radical Trust in the Audience (The "Unscripted" Approach)

High-performing content programs are moving away from polished, corporate messaging in favor of "radical transparency." They succeed by trusting their audience's intelligence, often through long-form, unscripted formats that prioritize intellectual rigor over shallow marketing soundbites.

> Our entrants proved that removing promotional framing can **drive deeper engagement** than any traditional marketing asset could.

3. The Pivot to "Service-Led" Marketing

Winning entries often solve a real-time problem for the customer before asking for a sale. Instead of "promoting," these brands "serve" by providing tools, clarity, or solutions that help the customer navigate their own business crises (such as economic shifts or supply chain issues).

> One team's pivot to service-led marketing led to a **95% utilization rate** by the sales team - ultimately resulting in a **37.5% increase in account wins** from previous programs

4. Leading with emotional, story-driven creative.

The top creative entries are aggressively breaking the "spec-sheet" habit. They succeed by leading with creative that tells a story in traditionally dry or technical categories (like piping or MRO supplies) to drive unaided awareness and top-of-mind recall.

> Leading with emotional, human-centric approach led to a **10-point increase in unaided awareness and a 13-point jump in product familiarity** within one year for one of our entrants.

5. Precision ABM at Scale (The "99% Engagement" Rule)

Successful ABM is no longer just "personalized email." It is now a high-tech, high-touch orchestration that reaches nearly every priority decision-maker within a target account simultaneously, using intent data to shape the narrative in real-time.

> One entry used ABM with precision to reach **45,000 priority decision-makers within 3 weeks, achieving a 99% engagement rate** among target accounts.

6. Closing the Loop with Sales Enablement Integration

A common thread in winning entries is the "handshake" between marketing and sales. Success is defined not by MQLs, but by sales team adoption of marketing materials and the direct impact on the pipeline.

> One brand delivered measurable impact across the whole funnel by using emotional creative alongside effective enablement tools: their paid search traffic **increased by 450%**, while **MQL-to-SQL conversion reached 59%**

7. Lean Budget, High ROI (The "Precision Strike" Mentality)

You don't need the biggest budget to win; you need the most precise data. Several successful entries highlight how lean budgets can outperform massive global brand campaigns by using data and AI to identify and convert high-value "hero" products.

> One brand drove a **60x ROI** on a lean budget by using precise data and AI to identify and focus on a single "hero product".

8. Gamified Engagement for Ecosystem Loyalty

In channel marketing, "best practice" has moved from simple incentives to gamified digital experiences. Successful brands create a sense of progression and achievement ("climbing the mountain") to keep partners engaged in ongoing education.

> One brand saw a **93% increase in training completion and a 76% redemption rate** by turning partner training into a gamified learning journey.



9. From AI Generation to AI Navigation

While 2025 focused on AI for content production and basic personalization, 2026 sees AI re-engineering the entire discovery process through intent-based navigation. There has been a shift towards using AI to interpret nuanced user intent, enabling intuitive personalized journeys.

> By integrating generative AI into their public website, one entrant delivered context-aware responses that saw a 2.5x increase in engagement for long-tail search queries

10. Reclaiming the "Owned" Performance Engine

In 2025, omnichannel was about being everywhere the customer is; in 2026, leaders are reclaiming the funnel from third-party partners to build proprietary, high-performance engines that drive durable, long-term growth.

> Earning expectations were exceeded by 12% by a brand that reclaimed their funnel from third-party partners and built a standalone, internal performance engine.

11. The "News-Desk" Agility Pivot

Last year's thought leadership was about building authority through pre-planned research; this year, high-performing brands are adopting a "news-desk" mentality to address global economic and geopolitical shocks in real-time.

> By pivoting away from thought leadership and towards a 'news-desk style' of content, one brand transformed their marketing into a critical, real-time business utility for their clients.

12. Immersive Ecosystem Maturity

Channel marketing has evolved from providing tactical support and assets (2025) to driving deep partner competency through immersive, gamified experiences that prioritize "maturity" over simple awareness.

> One team's pivot to service-led marketing led to a 95% utilization rate by the sales team - ultimately resulting in a 37.5% increase in account wins from previous programs.

About B2B MARKETING

B2B Marketing is the world-renowned provider of insight, professional development, events and training for marketers and leaders in B2B.

Since our launch in 2004, we've amassed the largest global network of B2B marketers, giving us the unique ability to place your brand in the centre of the B2B buzz.

At the core of our business are the 85,000+ members of our website worldwide and five of the biggest and most influential annual events in the B2B calendar, alongside a host of webinars, podcasts, roundtables and training.

What can we do for you?

Our dedicated marketing and media solutions team can help you:

Build powerful brand recognition at the heart of the B2B industry.

Deliver your marketing content and proposition to the right audience at the right time through our weekly content emails.

Create compelling stories around your brand with headline-grabbing research and analysis through our reports.

Get face to face and engage with some of the industry's most influential decision-makers and buyers at our events.

Share your brand stories and content with our 160k+ subscribers, 80k+ monthly website users and 260k+ social media following.

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