Lightricks

Leading from the Top: How Marketing Execs are Driving AI Adoption

HOW EXECUTIVES ARE SETTING THE PACE FOR AI
ADOPTION AND WHY IT MATTERS

Contents

The State of Generative AI in Marketing: Executive Leadership in the AI Revolution

The marketing landscape is experiencing a seismic shift, led by the accelerating adoption of generative AI. Lightricks conducted a collaborative research project with the American Marketing Association surveying over 1,000 marketing professionals. The results were revealing: while our research found AI adoption in marketing has surged to 90% (from 73% in 2023, according to Statista), the transformation is distinctly driven from the top down. Unlike previous technological transformations in marketing, where adoption typically originated at the entry level and permeated upward, AI integration today is being led by executive leadership.

The marketing industry stands at a crucial juncture where generative AI has moved beyond experimentation to become an essential tool for competitive advantage. Our research reveals a notable divide in how different organizational levels approach and utilize this technology.

Marketing executives are emerging as key drivers of AI adoption, demonstrating both higher usage rates and greater confidence in AI's capabilities. This top-down approach presents both opportunities and challenges. While executive buy-in accelerates organizational adoption and resource allocation, the hesitancy among entry-level staff highlights the need for more robust training and support systems.

Our research unveils a paradigm shift in technological adoption within marketing organizations: The real distinction lies in the nature of the applications: executives are using AI more for organizational and planning purposes (collaboration, targeting) alongside creative work (design), while entry-level marketers focus more on production and iteration tasks (brainstorming, editing).

This trend represents more than a mere technological upgrade; it signals a fundamental transformation in how strategic marketing decisions are conceptualized and executed. For organizations navigating this evolving landscape, recognizing and responding to this executive-led shift is imperative, as leadership engagement is proving to be the critical catalyst for comprehensive AI adoption and innovation.

This report delves into this distinctive pattern of AI adoption, exploring its implications for marketing teams, creative processes, and the future of the industry.

"OUR RESEARCH SHOWS THAT AI IS MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER MARKETING TOOL — IT'S CHANGING HOW LEADERS RUN THEIR BUSINESS. BY EMBRACING AI FOR STRATEGIC AND CREATIVE PURPOSES, EXECUTIVES ARE DEMONSTRATING HOW GENERATIVE AI CAN DRIVE TRANSFORMATIVE RESULTS. AT LIGHTRICKS, WE ARE COMMITTED TO EMPOWERING MARKETERS AT EVERY LEVEL TO UNLOCK THE FULL POTENTIAL OF THIS TECHNOLOGY."

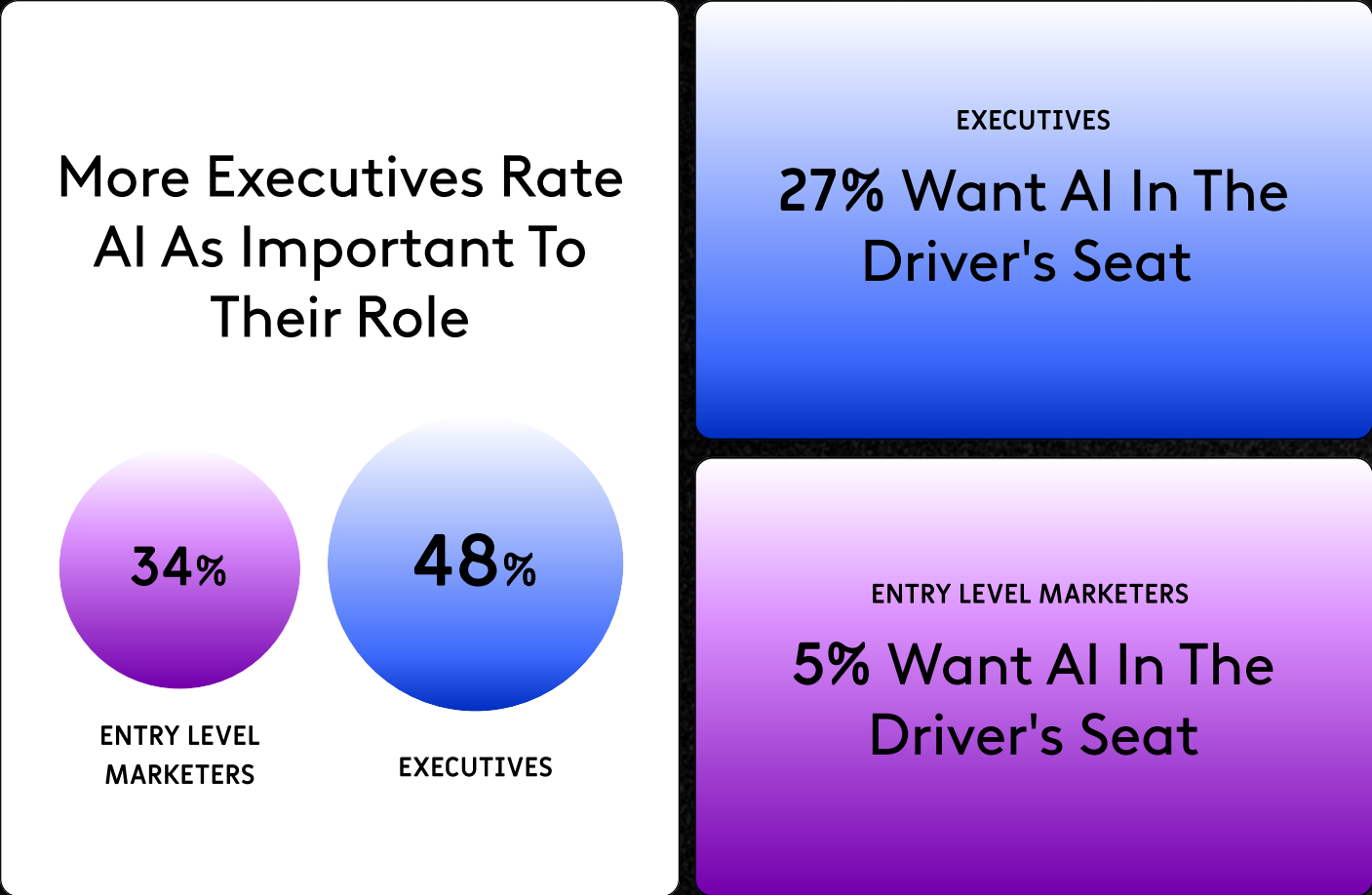**ZEEV FARBMAN | LIGHTRICKS CEO & CO-FOUNDER**

Adoption: The Power Paradox

Our research reveals a compelling pattern: 61% of executives are using AI weekly or more, compared to 42% of entry-level staff, indicating that AI is reshaping not only operations but strategic leadership in marketing.

This disparity highlights a fundamental shift in how marketing decisions are being made. Executives are not merely endorsing AI; they're actively using it to reshape their strategic thinking. According to our survey, 48% of executives rate generative AI as crucial to their current role, compared to 34% of entry-level marketers. This difference suggests that AI isn't just another digital tool—it's becoming a core component of high-level decision making.

"WE KNOW THAT AI INTEGRATION IS BEING LED BY EXECUTIVE LEADERS. AI IS A TOOL THAT CAN HELP SHAPE STRATEGY AND OPERATIONS AND WE KNOW IT CAN HAVE THE ABILITY TO TRANSFORM OUR WORK AND INDUSTRY. I'M GLAD WE'RE HAVING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ADOPTION AND ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT ETHICAL CONCERNS. MARKETING IS A DYNAMIC PROFESSION AND I'M PLEASED TO BE ABLE TO SHARE THE WAYS IN WHICH MARKETING IS LEADING THE WAY WITH NEW TECHNOLOGY."

BENNIE F. JOHNSON | AMA CEO

More Executives Rate AI As Important To Their Role

34%
ENTRY LEVEL MARKETERS

48%
EXECUTIVES

EXECUTIVES
27% Want AI In The Driver's Seat

ENTRY LEVEL MARKETERS
5% Want AI In The Driver's Seat

Perhaps most concerning is that more than a quarter (27%) of entry-level marketers want training but haven't received it, compared to just 13% of executives. This unmet demand for training among entry-level staff represents a missed opportunity for organizations to build stronger AI capabilities from the ground up. The training gap doesn't just reflect current disparities—it risks amplifying them.

The implications of this pattern are far-reaching. Unlike previous technological adoptions that bubbled up from younger workers, AI's top-down integration means it's being embedded directly into strategic planning and decision-making processes. This has created a unique situation where those with the most industry experience are also becoming the most versed in cutting-edge AI applications.

This disparity in use cases suggests that AI adoption isn't just about frequency—it's about depth of integration into core business processes. Executives are using AI not just as a tool, but as a strategic partner in decision-making.

AI'S WEEKLY USAGE

61%
EXECUTIVES

42%
ENTRY LEVEL MARKETERS

+ 61%

+ 42%
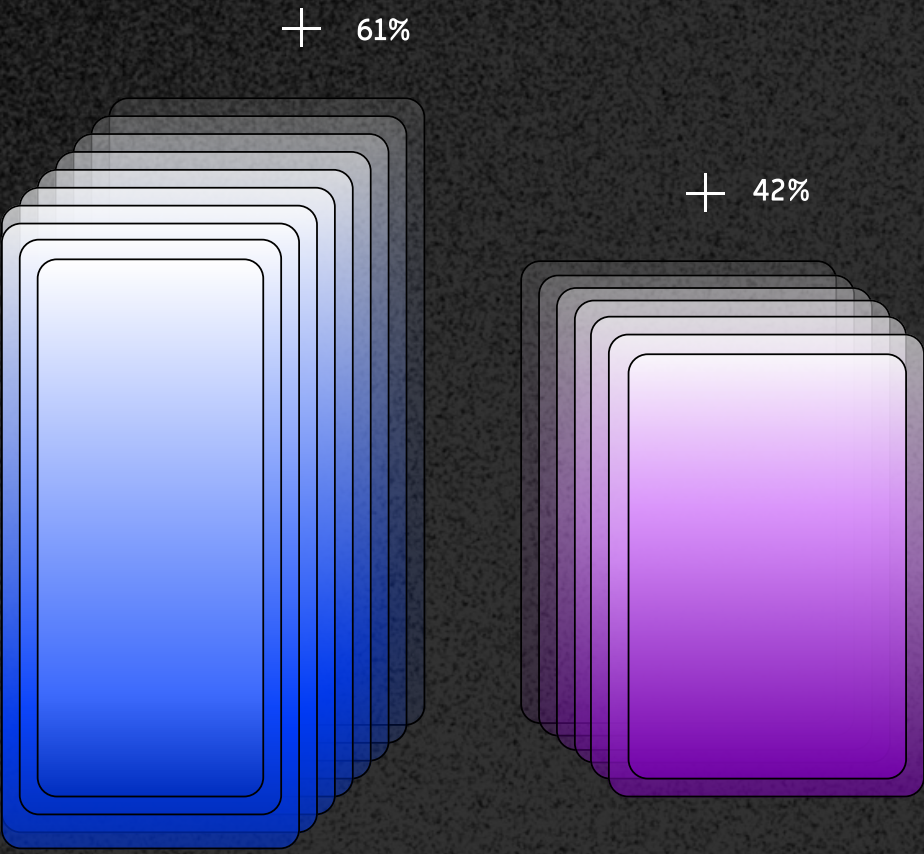
The Confidence Gap: Experience Drives Innovation & Strategy

Traditional technology adoption patterns would suggest younger, digitally native marketers would lead the charge in embracing new tools. Contrary to conventional expectations, executive-level marketers display a higher confidence in AI's creative potential than entry-level counterparts:

- Executive level: 55% are very confident in AI's ability to improve creative marketing outputs, with only 7% expressing no confidence
- Entry-level marketers: Only 33% are very confident, while 48% are somewhat confident and 19% express no confidence

This confidence gap presents both challenges and opportunities for organizations. While executive confidence can drive organizational adoption and innovation, the lower confidence levels among entry-level marketers often stem from valid concerns about creative authenticity and the integration of AI into established marketing practices.

As organizations navigate this confidence gap, finding ways to leverage both the strategic vision of confident executives and the practical insights of entry-level marketers will be crucial for developing AI implementation strategies that are both ambitious and grounded in practical reality.

What makes this confidence disparity particularly intriguing is how it challenges conventional wisdom about technology adoption in the workplace. While entry-level marketers, often viewed as digital natives, might be expected to embrace new technologies more readily, the data suggests that broader business experience and strategic perspective may be more significant factors in driving AI adoption and confidence.

This insight could reshape how organizations approach AI training and implementation, suggesting that technical familiarity alone may not be sufficient for building confidence in AI tools – strategic understanding and business context may be equally, if not more, important.

+ 55%

+ 33%

- CONFIDENCE IN AI'S CREATIVE POTENTIAL

55%
EXECUTIVES

33%
ENTRY LEVEL MARKETERS
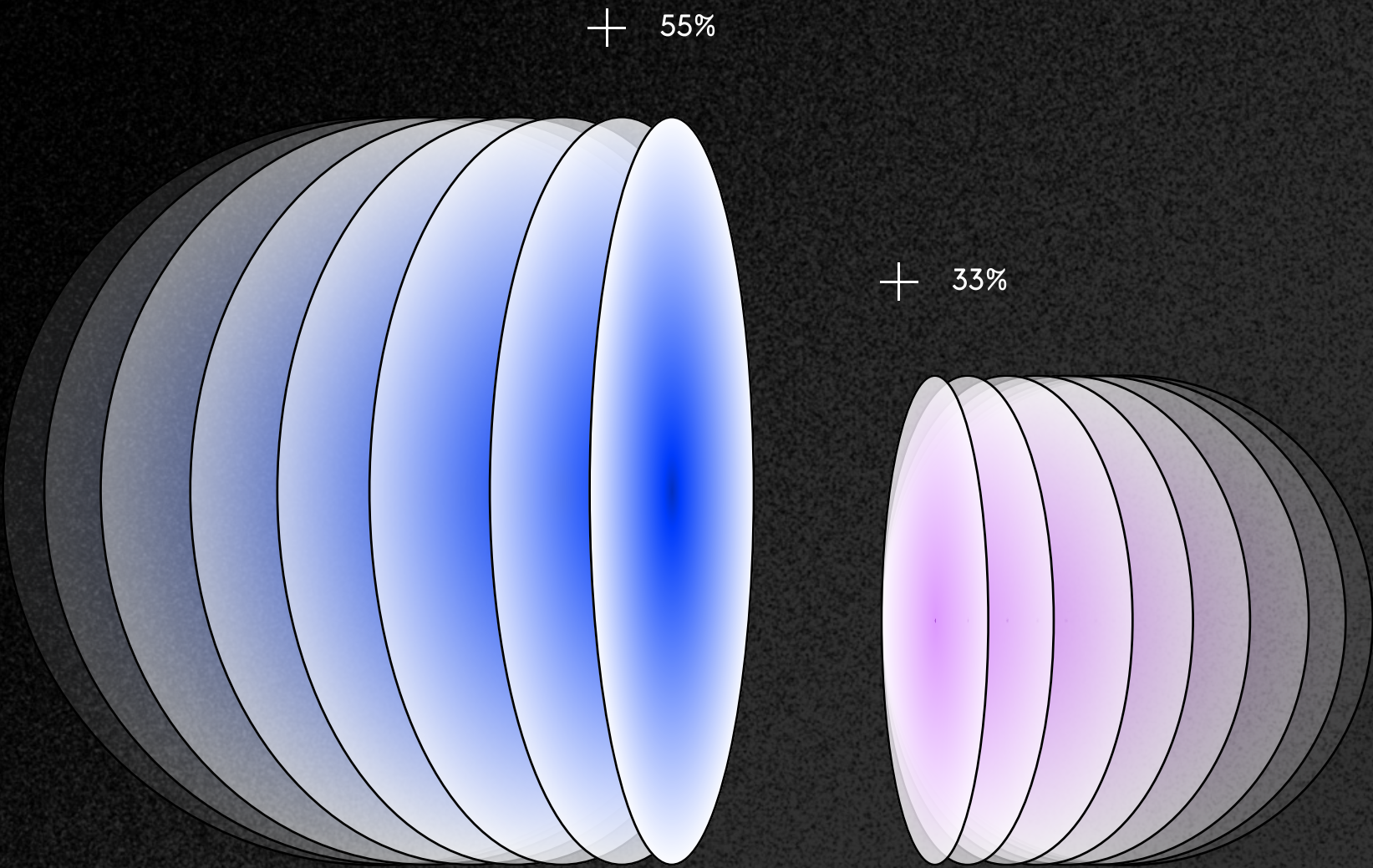
Training
Inequity
Shapes
AI Adoption

The confidence gap appears to have a clear contributing factor: access to formal training. Our research reveals a significant training gap that mirrors the confidence divide.

Our survey, which allowed respondents to indicate all types of AI training they've received, reveals a multi-faceted training landscape:

- Executives are receiving training through multiple channels:
  - 65% received company-provided training
  - 56% pursued formal training outside the company
  - 33% supplemented with self-directed learning
  - Only 13% report wanting training but not receiving it

- Entry-level marketers show a different pattern:
  - 41% rely on self-directed learning
  - 34% received company-provided training
  - 27% want training but haven't received it

This disparity in formal training access has significant implications. While executive-level marketers are receiving structured, company-supported education in AI tools and implementation, entry-level marketers are largely left to figure it out on their own through self-guided learning. The fact that self-directed learning is the primary method for entry-level marketers (41%) suggests a systemic gap in organizational support for AI education at entry levels.

Perhaps most concerning is that more than a quarter (27%) of entry-level marketers want training but haven't received it, compared to just 13% of executives. This unmet demand for training among entry-level staff represents a missed opportunity for organizations to build stronger AI capabilities from the ground up. The training gap doesn't just reflect current disparities—it risks amplifying them.

As AI tools become increasingly central to marketing operations, this imbalance in formal training could create lasting disparities in skill sets and career advancement opportunities. Organizations that fail to address this training gap may find themselves with a growing divide between AI-savvy leadership and a workforce struggling to keep pace with technological advancement.

This data strongly suggests that closing the AI confidence gap will require more than just making tools available—it demands a systematic approach to AI education that reaches all levels of the organization, with particular attention to entry-level marketers who currently lack access to formal training resources.

65%

34%
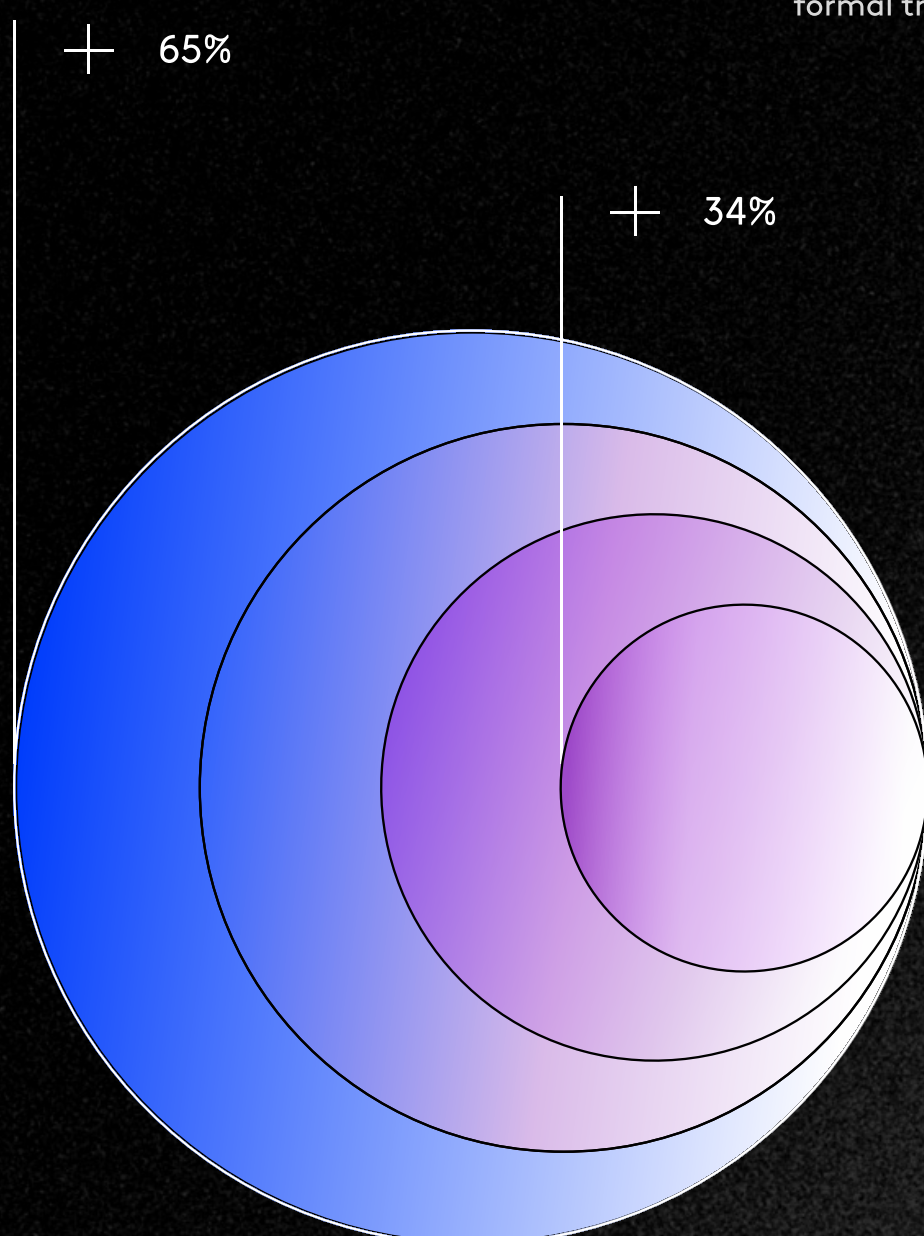
● RECEIVED FORMAL AI TRAINING

65%
EXECUTIVES

34%
ENTRY LEVEL MARKETERS

- CONCERNS ACROSS
  ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHIES

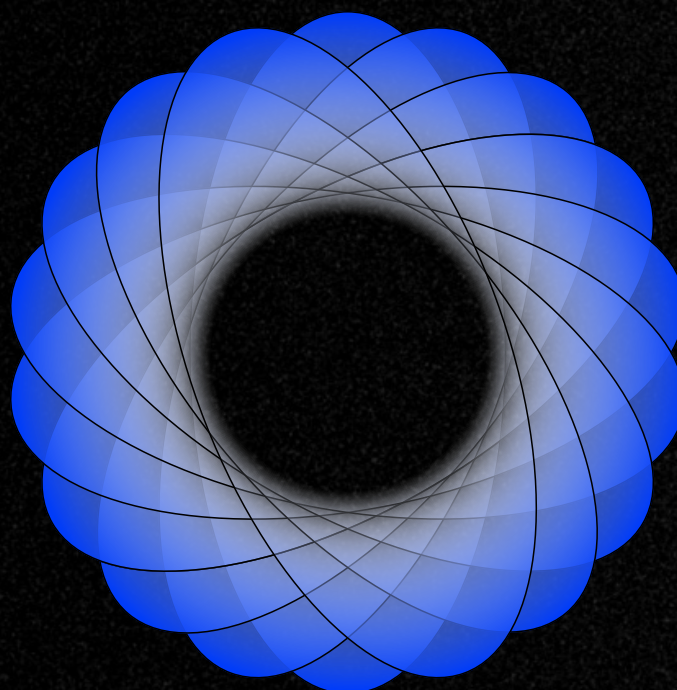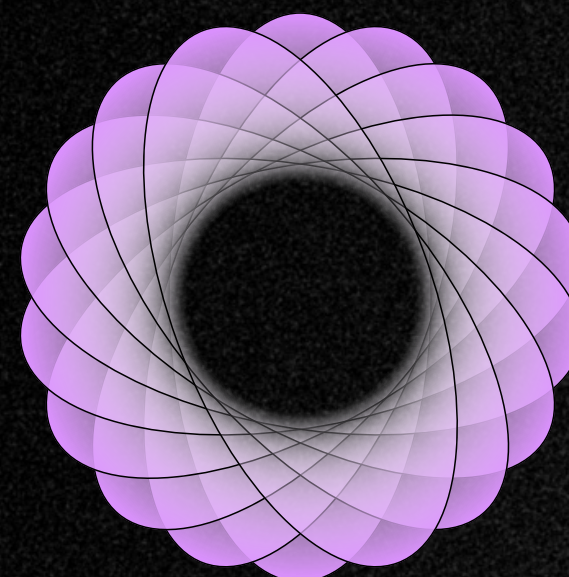meeting client standards

46%
EXECUTIVES

bias, copyright

39%
ENTRY LEVEL MARKETERS

+ 46%

+ 39%

Ethical Concerns: Diverging Priorities Across Levels

Our research highlights how ethical concerns differ across organizational hierarchies. Organizations that actively cultivate these different perspectives are better positioned to develop AI practices that are both commercially successful and ethically sustainable. Our research uncovered distinct patterns in what concerns marketing professionals most about AI implementation, showing how this generational diversity in thinking can create a more robust approach to AI adoption.

For entry-level marketers, ethical considerations take center stage:
- 43% express concerns about the quality or accuracy of AI-generated content
- 39% worry about ethical issues such as bias and copyright infringement
- These concerns reflect a deep engagement with the foundational aspects of AI implementation and its societal implications

In contrast, executive-level concerns center on business implications:
- 46% are primarily concerned about whether AI-generated work will be acceptable to their company and clients
- 38% worry that generative AI might diminish human creativity
- Their focus tends toward maintaining client relationships and protecting brand standards

This divergence in priorities creates a powerful framework for responsible AI adoption. Entry-level marketers' ethical focus serves as a crucial counterbalance to executive priorities in several concrete ways:
- Their attention to bias helps ensure AI implementations don't perpetuate harmful stereotypes in marketing content
- Their focus on copyright protection helps organizations navigate the complex legal landscape of AI-generated content
- Their concern for creative integrity helps maintain authenticity in AI-assisted marketing efforts
- Their emphasis on ethical considerations helps organizations build trust with increasingly conscious consumers

While executives ensure AI implementations meet business objectives and client standards, entry-level marketers' ethical focus helps organizations future-proof their AI strategies against emerging societal concerns and regulatory changes. This complementary dynamic between business acumen and ethical awareness positions organizations to build AI practices that are both commercially viable and socially responsible.

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Design Processes
37%
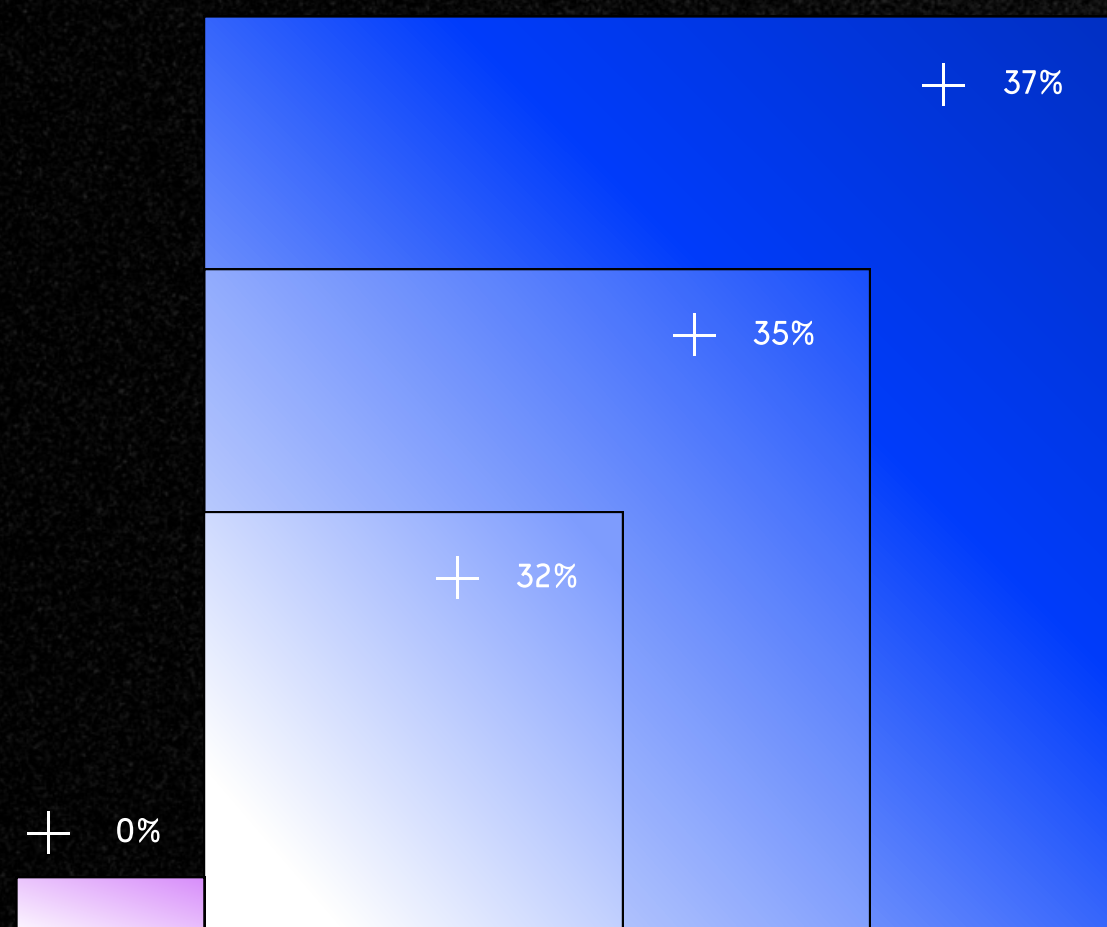EXECUTIVES

Team Collaboration
35%
EXECUTIVES

Advanced AI Tools
0%
ENTRY LEVEL
MARKETERS

Audience Targeting
32%
EXECUTIVES

37%

35%

32%

0%

Executive Edge in Advanced AI Adoption

Beyond the expected AI applications in content creation and writing, where usage patterns are similar across levels, our survey reveals an interesting contrast. When examining the top reported AI uses among executives, we see them pioneering unexpected applications: 37% incorporating AI into design processes, 35% leveraging it for team collaboration, and 32% applying it to audience targeting.

In contrast, these specific applications are absent from entry-level marketers' most reported uses, who focus primarily on content-centric tasks like writing (43%), brainstorming (37%), content creation (31%), and editing (28%).

While both groups show robust engagement with writing (executives at 40%, entry-level at 43%), executives are expanding AI's role into more strategic areas of marketing operations.

This disparity in advanced tool adoption suggests a significant opportunity for organizational growth. As executives pioneer these sophisticated applications, they're not just enhancing their own capabilities—they're mapping out the future landscape of marketing technology. Organizations that can effectively transfer this advanced knowledge and experience to their entry-level teams will be better positioned to scale their AI capabilities and maintain their competitive edge in an increasingly AI-driven market.

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What's Next?

Just like digital marketing revolutionized the way we all work, it is becoming evidently clear that generative AI will have a similar, if not more significant impact on marketing. The integration of AI tools across all levels of marketing organizations isn't just changing how we work—it's transforming what's possible in the field.

When experience meets innovation, and executive confidence combines with entry-level ethical awareness, the result will be a more robust and responsible approach to AI adoption in marketing.

Perhaps most intriguingly, this technological shift is redefining traditional organizational hierarchies. As our data shows, while executives may lead in tool adoption, entry-level marketers are pioneering new ethical frameworks and creative applications. This inversed dynamic—where leadership and fresh perspective each bring distinct critical elements to AI adoption—suggests a future where successful marketing organizations will be built on collaborative innovation rather than top-down implementation.

We predict that the marketing landscape will undergo an even bigger and more widespread transformation as more marketers across all levels embrace the full potential of generative AI.

Together, these concepts complement one another, making what was once only in our imaginations, a reality. The future of marketing lies not just in the technology itself, but in how organizations bridge the gaps between different levels of experience and perspective.

Methodology

In September 2024, Lightricks engaged the American Marketing Association to survey more than 1,000 marketing professionals. Each participant is employed in a marketing role across various organizational levels, from entry-level to C-suite executives. For this analysis, "Executives" encompasses those identifying as Owner, Partner, President, C-Level, or VP positions (representing 15.26% of respondents), while "Entry-level marketers" refers to those in Senior Non-Supervisor, Specialist, Coordinator, Professor/Academic, or Student roles (21.39% of respondents). The survey focused on understanding AI adoption patterns, confidence levels, ethical concerns, and future outlook across different experience levels in marketing organizations.

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