



2026 Digital Advertising Trends Report

Rise of fluid journeys,
connected channels,
predictive intelligence,
and AI



The Marketer's Reality Is Changing, Fast

2026 isn't just another year on the marketing calendar, it's a turning point. The smartest marketers aren't reacting to change anymore, they're driving it. In the AI era, marketers are reinventing how marketing works from the ground up.

Consumers want brands who are relevant, creative, and make a personal connection to them. In response, savvy marketers are building faster, smarter systems blending AI, data, and creativity to deliver personalized content at scale.

Smartly surveyed 450 marketers to understand how they see advertising changing. Their insights reveal where AI is already delivering real value, how cross-channel orchestration defines today's leaders, and why efficiency has become the ultimate performance metric.

Now in its seventh year, Smartly's **Digital Advertising Trends Report** once again captures the shifting realities of modern advertising. This is your inside look at how the industry's best are reinventing marketing for 2026, and how you can, too.



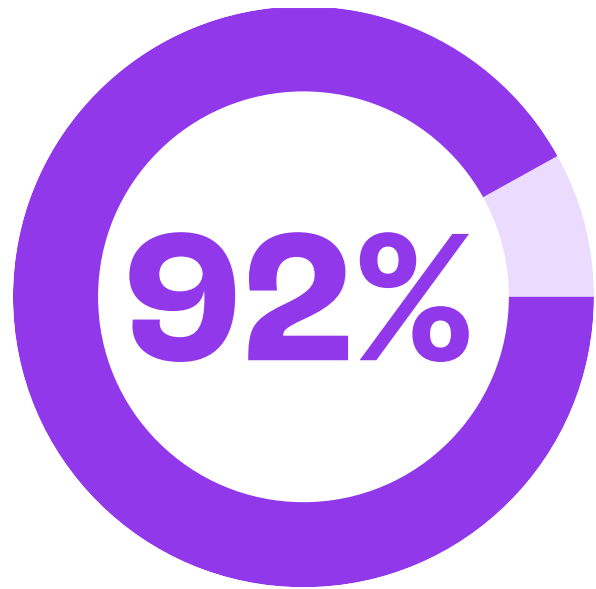


Digital Trends 2026: What You Need to Know

1

AI is Rewiring the Customer Journey

AI enables marketers to rethink the traditional funnel. With the ability to personalize from the outset and optimize in real time, marketers move from awareness to conversion with increased efficiency.



of marketers agree AI is redefining how they think about the customer journey

2

Cross-Channel Expansion Becomes Essential

All marketers want more platform reach than they have today. Precision-first marketers, those who diversify across more platforms and heavily embed AI in their workflows, are investing across 6+ platforms. They also apply AI pre- and mid- campaign to cut waste, learn faster, and build incremental reach.

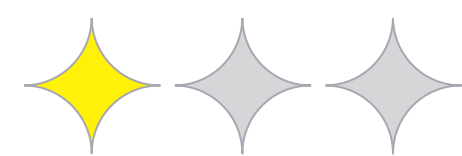
Precision-first marketers advertise on **2x** as many platforms as the average marketer and are

22% more likely to apply AI to their campaign planning and creative process

3

Intelligence Powers Predictive Advertising

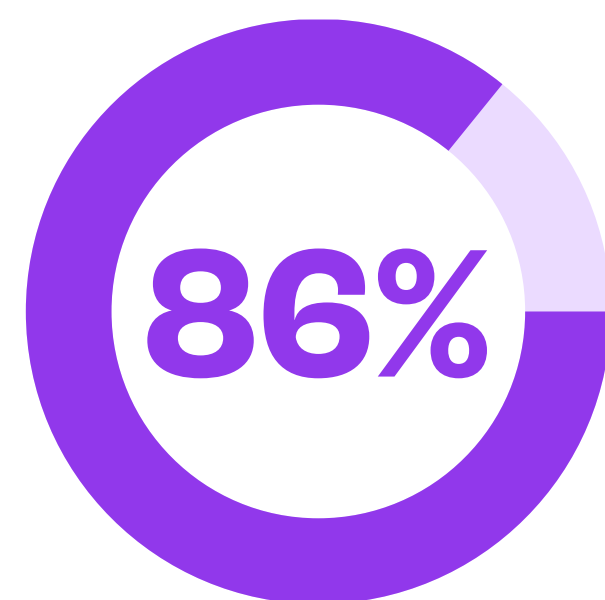
Advanced marketing teams aren't waiting for results, they're predicting them. Predictive AI now powers creative scoring, budget allocation, and campaign validation before launch, turning efficiency into foresight.



1 in 3

already use AI for predictive modeling, creative validation, or creative AI

&



would like to expand these capabilities in 2026





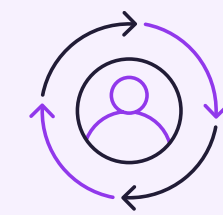
**The 2026 marketer
isn't just efficient.
They're video-first,
cross-channel fluent,
and orchestrating
with AI.**

From Funnel to Flow:

How AI redefines the customer journey

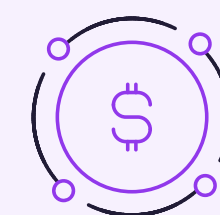
AI is reshaping the funnel with personalization and prediction, and redefining what efficiency means for marketers. No longer are consumers moving linearly through different phases, they are bouncing back and forth before making a purchase decision, or sometimes going right from awareness to customer in a single click.





Personalization Starts Sooner

AI has moved marketing from 1:many to 1:1 from the outset of a campaign, giving brands the power to personalize like never before.



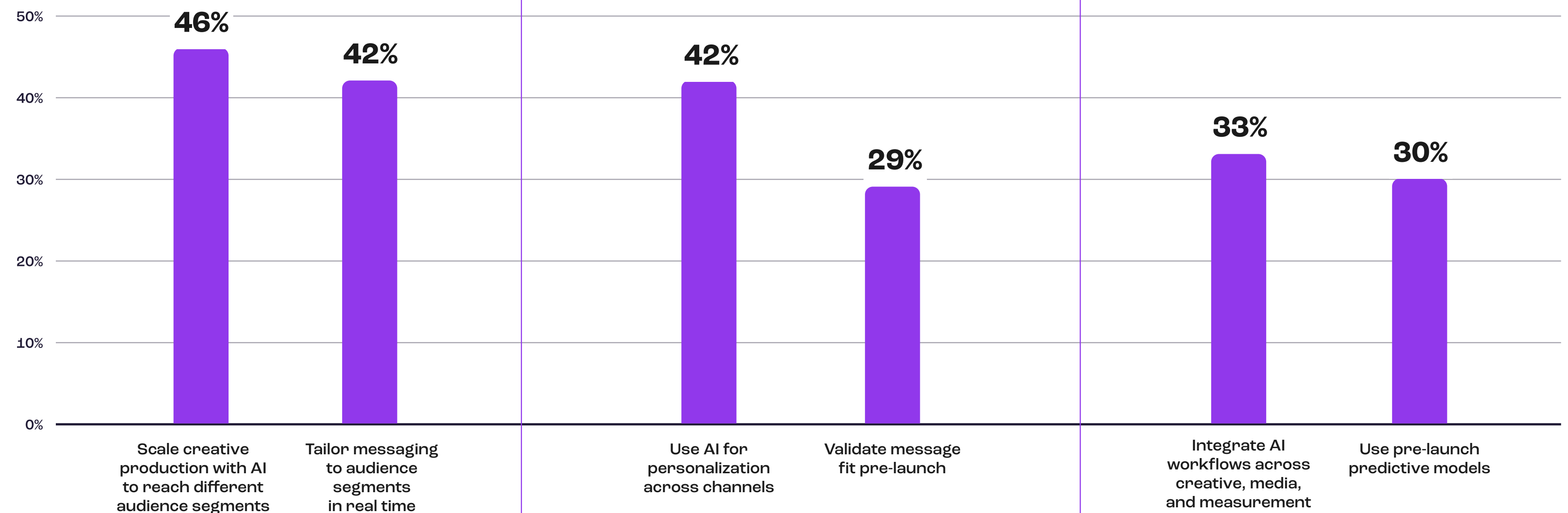
Consistency is the New Currency

It is imperative for marketers to share the right message in the right context. AI enables stronger brand continuity and more coherent storytelling across every screen.



Prediction Replaces Reaction

Marketers now forecast success instead of retrofitting it.



Changing Dynamics:

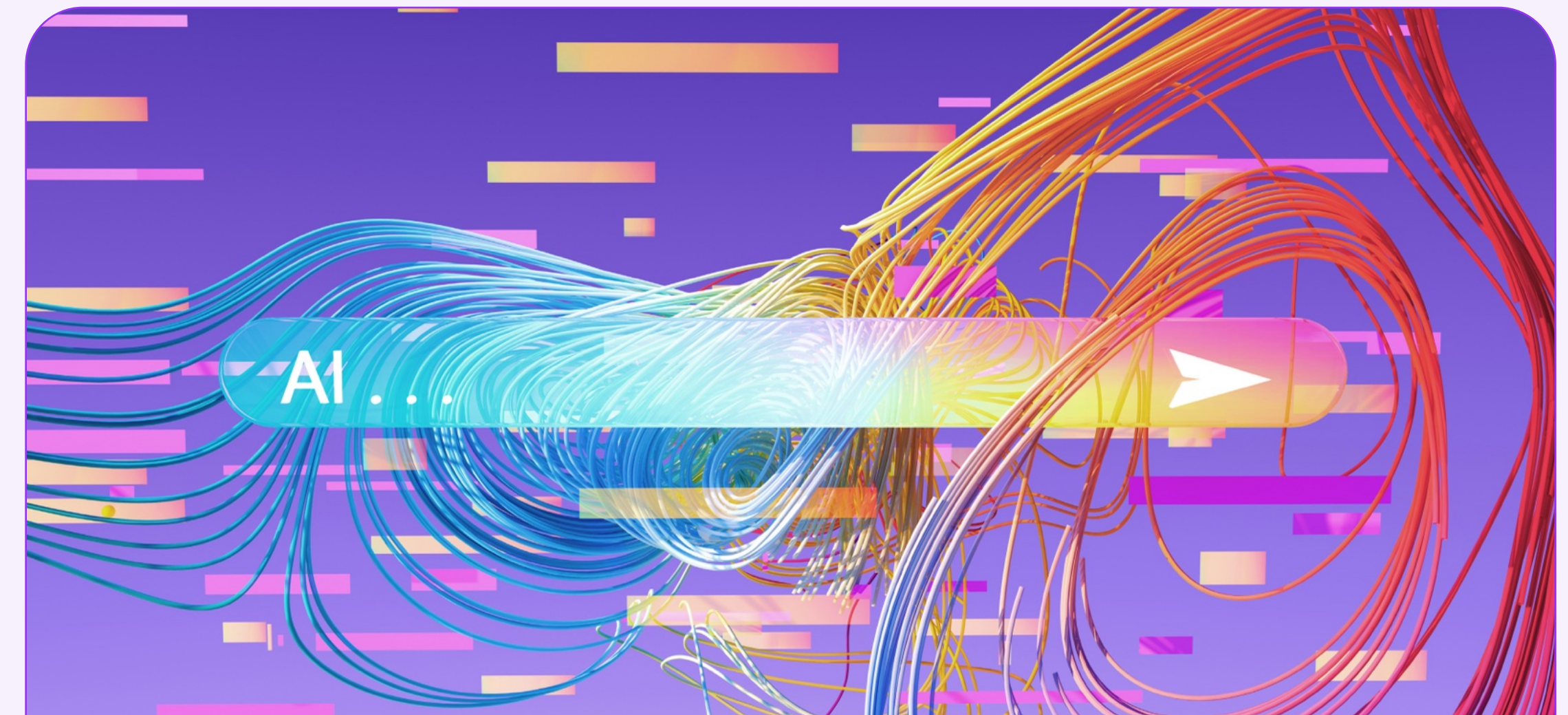
AI foresight eliminates waste before it happens

Waste isn't just budget lost. It's momentum lost.

In 2026, efficiency will become a signal of AI maturity. The most advanced teams use predictive intelligence to anticipate performance, optimize spend in real time, and eliminate waste before it happens.

Marketers with the lowest media waste report stronger results across every stage of the funnel. They launch faster, personalize more effectively, and measure impact with greater confidence.

What sets them apart isn't luck. It's **foresight**. These teams use **AI-powered optimization and pre-launch intelligence** to anticipate results before spend is lost.



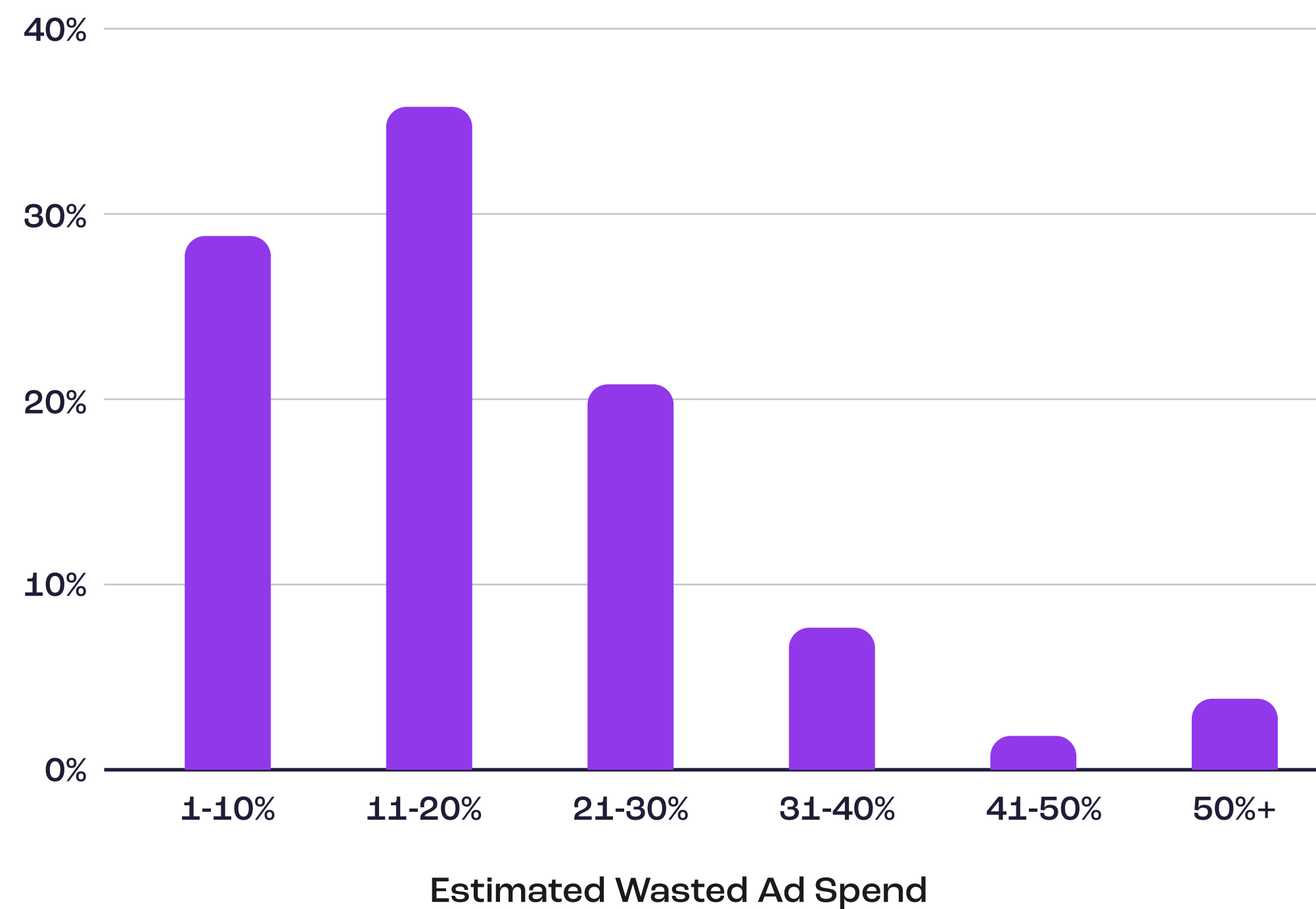
AI ...

FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION



Smartly's AI-powered Predictive Budget Allocation uses predictive intelligence to forecast performance and automatically reallocate spend across channels in real time, reducing media waste and improving efficiency at scale.

(%) of Marketers That Noted Campaign Waste



Precision-first marketers are **27% more likely to waste less than 10% of their media budget** vs. the average marketer.



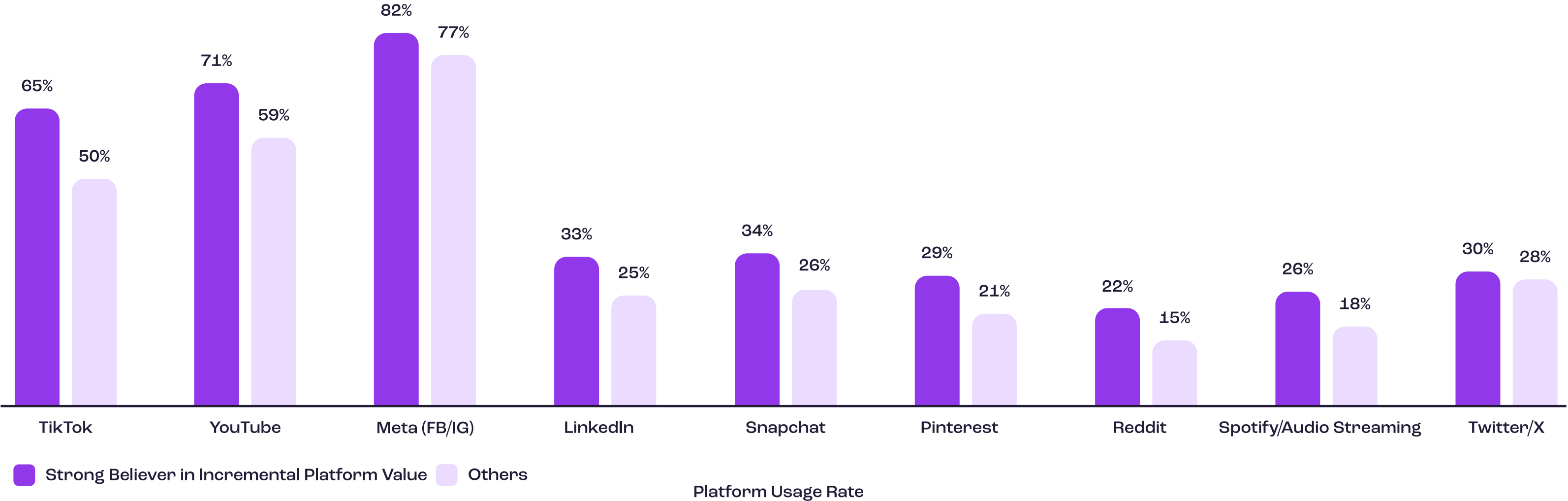
Brands like Western Union have already streamlined 4,300+ real-time creative updates to improve local relevance and efficiency across markets. Proof that predictive and adaptive creative is more than a trend; it's a competitive advantage.

Shifting Channels:

How cross-channel strategies unlock incremental reach

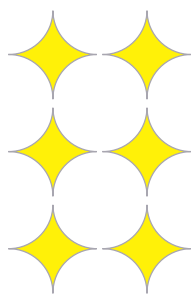
In 2026, cross-channel orchestration and video-first strategies will define growth, helping brands capture incremental reach and build full-funnel impact.

Marketers Who Strongly Believe in Incrementality Use More Platforms and at Higher Rates

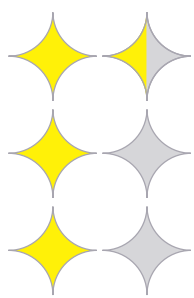


Emerging **video-first channels like TikTok and Snapchat** continue to grow in importance, giving brands access to younger and **more engaged audiences**.

Marketers who embrace a cross-channel mindset use 6 platforms on average



Compared to 3–4 among those who don't see the same value



Zenith increased video reach and efficiency through AI-powered cross-channel optimization, showing how automation unlocks incremental reach without adding complexity.

Shifting Channels:

The rise of the precision-first marketer

All marketers want more platform reach than they have today.

In fact, **50% of marketers believe diverse, challenger platforms**, like CTV and Reddit, offer significant value in reaching incremental audiences. We call these marketers **precision-first marketers**. These precision-first marketers apply markedly different strategies than those who don't feel as strongly.

They're advertising on nearly 2x more platforms (6+ vs. 3-4), are 20% more likely to go all-in when testing new platforms, and are 20% more likely to use AI for campaign optimization. Whether that means experimenting with emerging environments like Spotify or LinkedIn, or simply adding platforms outside their core mix, the result is clear: **diversification amplifies both reach and relevance.**



2x
more
platforms
used
(precision-first
marketers
use 6+ vs. 3-4)

20%
more likely
to test new
platforms with
bigger budgets

20%
more likely
to use
AI for
optimization

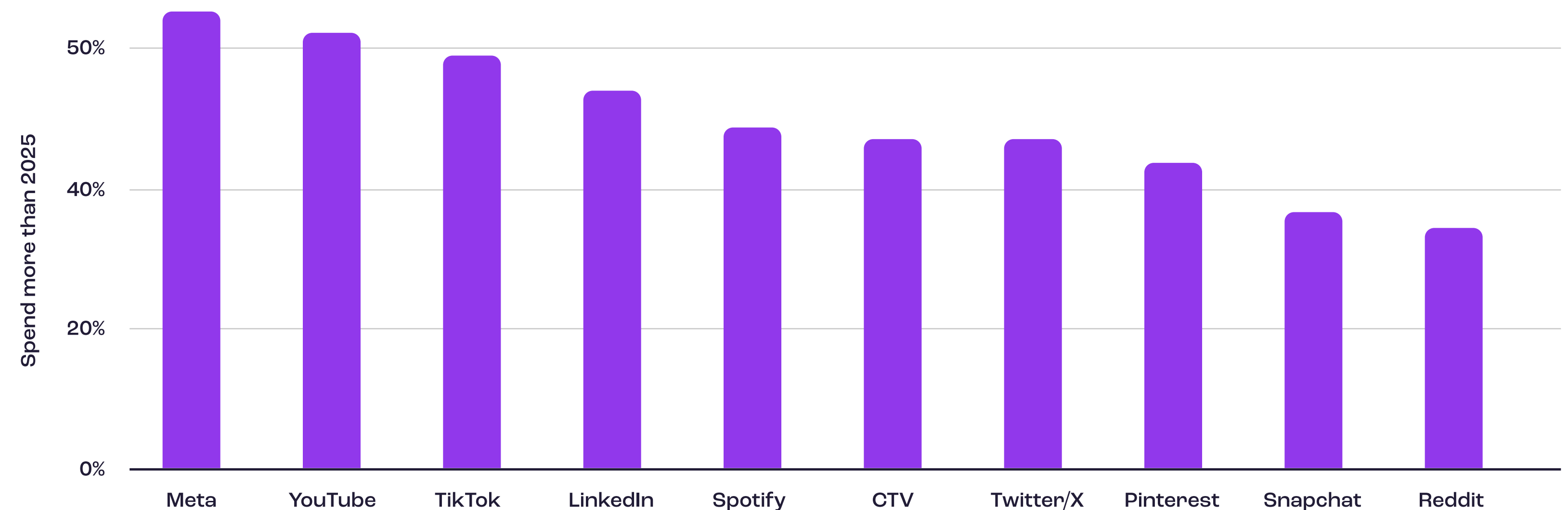
Shifting Channels:

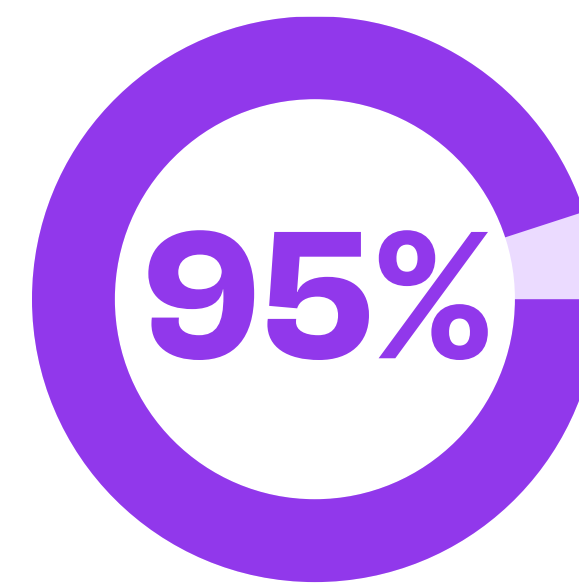
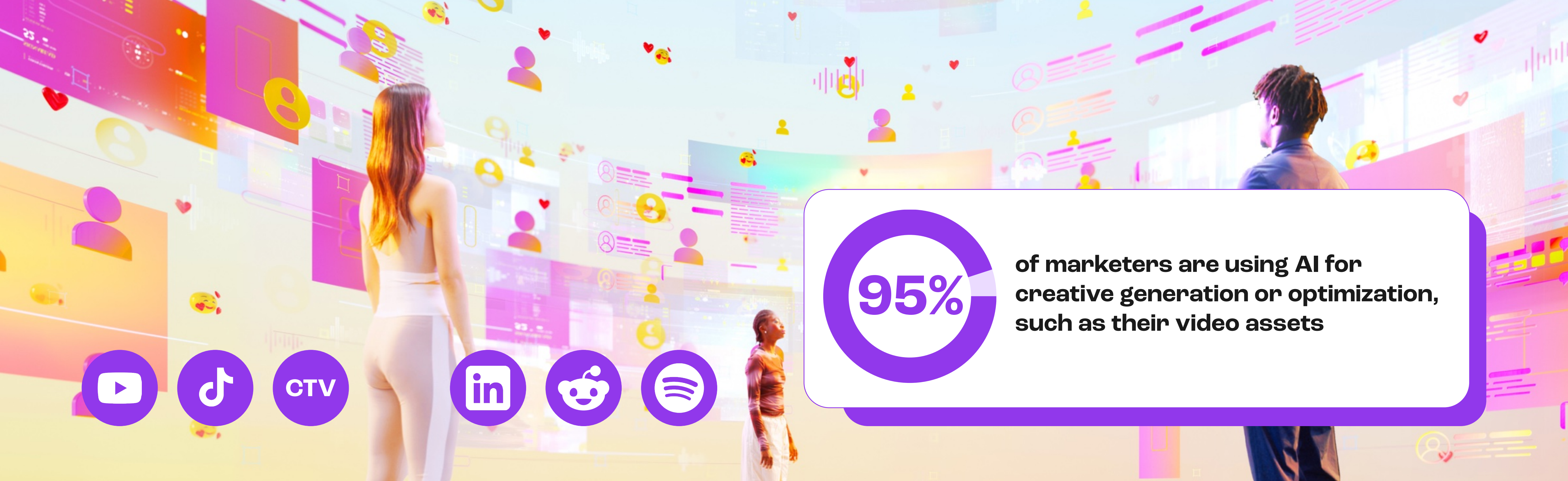
Video has moved from advantage to expectation

Video is officially the backbone of modern advertising. Marketers are moving beyond static creative and investing where attention, engagement, and outcomes converge.

Across the Smartly platform, the shift is clear: Nearly all Smartly customers have run video ads in 2025.

% of Marketers Who Will Spend More on the Platform in 2026





95% of marketers are using AI for creative generation or optimization, such as their video assets

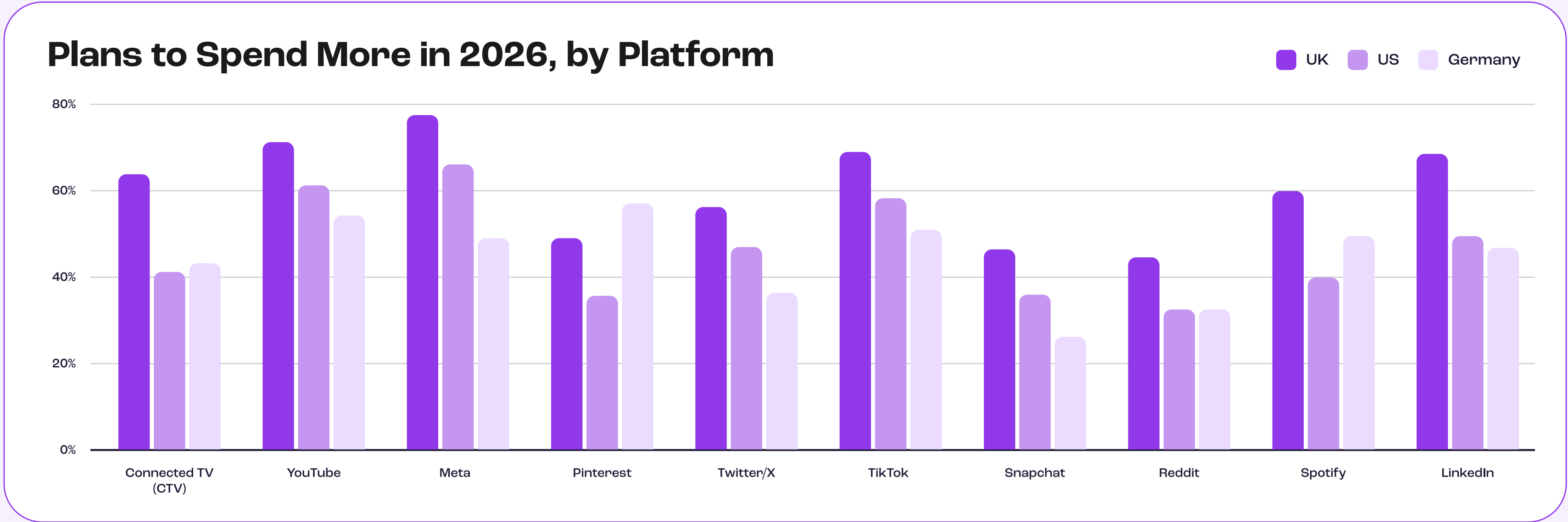
While YouTube, TikTok, and CTV continue to anchor video-first strategies, other platforms are quickly following suit.

Channels like LinkedIn, Reddit, and Spotify are expanding video formats, from in-feed storytelling to immersive audio-visual placements, giving advertisers new ways to build full-funnel performance.

Video is no longer confined to “video platforms.” It’s now the connective tissue of every channel, powering storytelling, personalization, and conversion.

Shifting Channels:

How video investment differs across markets



UK

Leads in video growth across CTV and YouTube, signaling maturity in multi-channel video strategy.

Strong investment in LinkedIn and Spotify shows appetite for brand storytelling across multiple platforms.



US

Meta and TikTok continue to dominate spend, reflecting performance-driven habits. Broader interest in emerging formats like Pinterest and Reddit suggest advertisers are diversifying beyond traditional social platforms.



Germany

Catching up fast on CTV adoption, and a big believer in Pinterest. Balanced investment across YouTube, Spotify, and LinkedIn signals a more holistic, awareness-to-action focus.

FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION



Smartly's video templates and automation tools help brands produce, localize, and optimize video ads at scale, maintaining brand consistency while adapting to every platform's format and audience.

Even as new marketing tools proliferate, creative and operational bottlenecks persist. Marketers cite personalization, production speed, and creative consistency as the biggest barriers to performance.



A horizontal bar chart with a white background and light gray vertical grid lines at 10% intervals. The x-axis is labeled from 0% to 40% at the top. The y-axis lists 10 challenges on the left. Each challenge is represented by a blue bar with its percentage value displayed in white at the end of the bar.

Challenge	Percentage
Difficulty personalizing creative for target audiences	38%
Time-consuming creative production	37%
Inconsistent creative quality across platforms	35%
Ads not optimized for platform specifications	34%
Limited tools or automation to support campaign delivery	33%
Compliance issues related to legal or regulatory standards	30%
Communication breakdown between creative, media, and analytics teams	30%
Overspending or budget inefficiencies as campaign scale increases	29%
Managing a higher volume of campaign assets and versions	28%
Limited real-time visibility into campaign performance	24%



As brands expand across channels and formats, complexity compounds, and scaling high-quality creative without sacrificing speed remains the central obstacle.

Personalization, production, quality, and tooling are among the top operational bottlenecks marketers experience.

Teams that can turn data into consistent, high-quality creative at speed are poised to *get ahead* and *lead in the industry*.

AI Adoption:

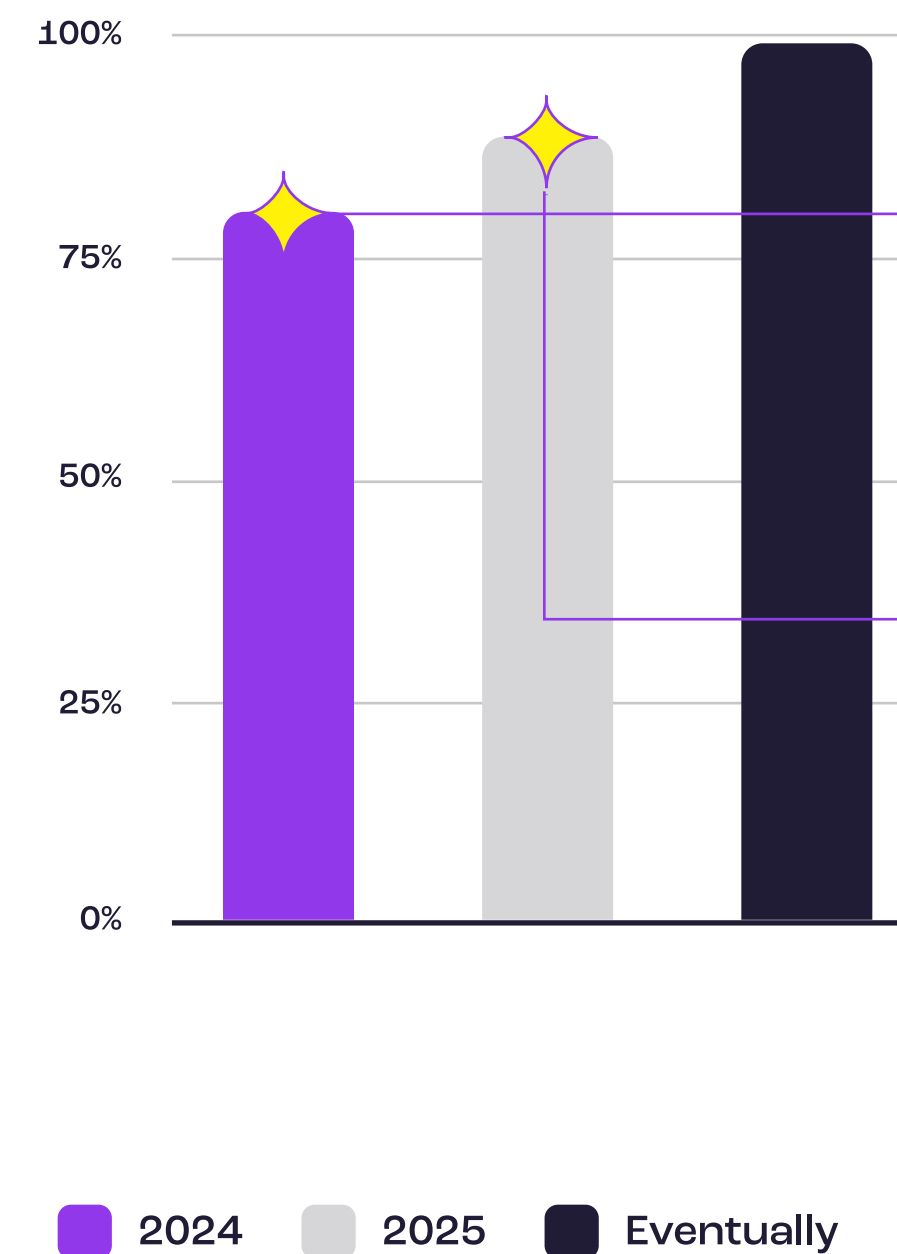
From hype to everyday intelligence

Marketers have moved beyond the AI hype cycle. What began as experimentation has evolved into everyday practice, fueling creative, media, and measurement workflows alike.

In 2026, AI isn't just optimizing campaigns after launch. It's shaping them before they begin, powering creative intelligence, predictive insights, and smarter decisions across every channel.



“AI is living up to the Hype” (% agree)



Last year,
80%
of marketers felt
that AI was living up
to the hype

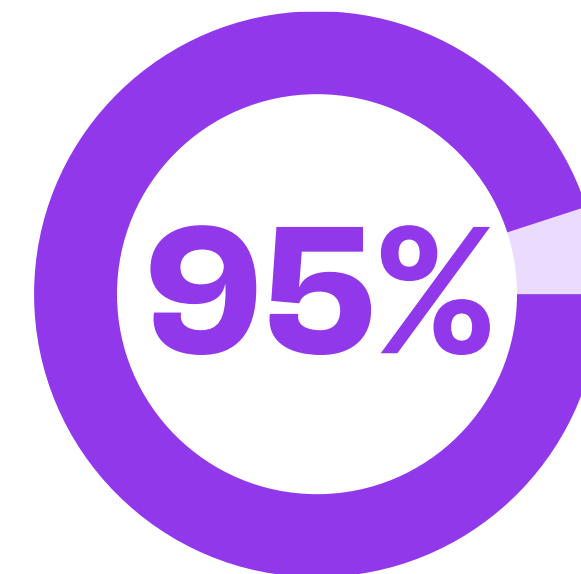
Now in 2025
88%
feel that way, a
nearly **10% increase**
in just one year



AI Adoption:

Surging and expanding across the workflow

AI has officially moved beyond skepticism. What began as experimentation is now everyday practice, fueling creative, media, and measurement workflows alike.



now use generative
AI for asset creation
or optimization

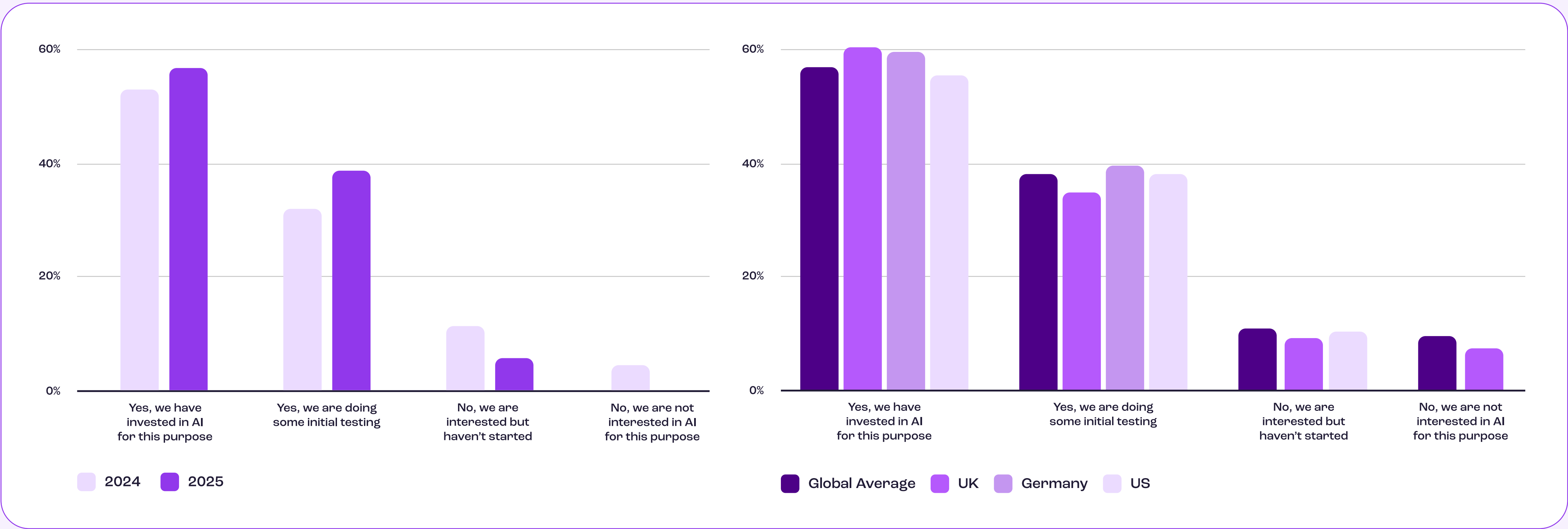


integrate AI
across both setup
and creative

AI Adoption:

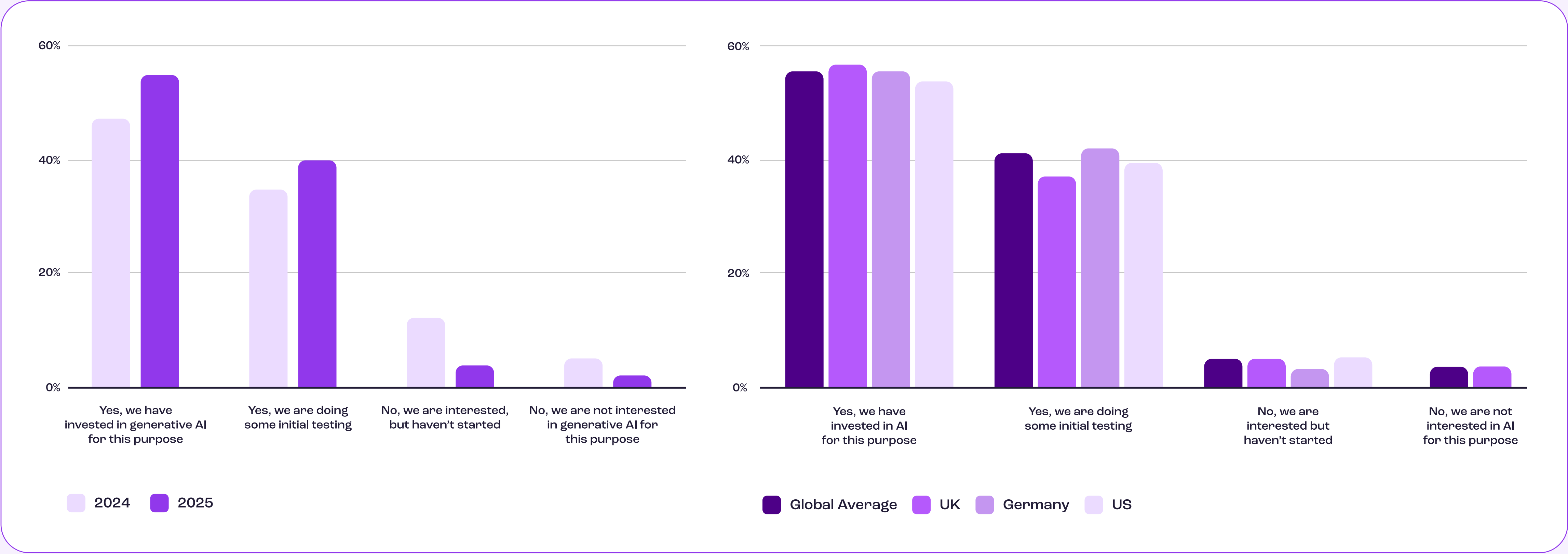
Using AI for Optimization

As adoption rises, AI's role is expanding. Once focused on creative production, it now powers data analysis, validation, and personalization, driving smarter decisions, faster alignment, and new creative efficiency.



AI Adoption:

Using AI for Visual Asset Generation



AI Adoption:

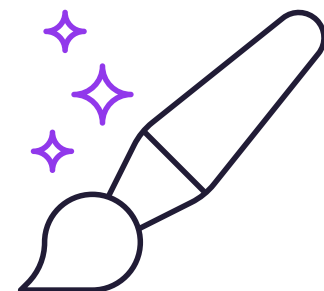
Creative intelligence starts before the campaign

Pre-launch intelligence lets marketers move from reacting to results to anticipating success.

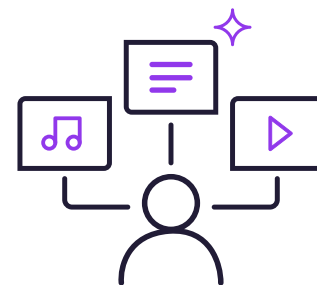
What used to live in post-launch analytics now happens pre-launch:



Predictive modeling powered by AI helps marketers plan smarter budgets



Creative scoring identifies strong concepts before spend



Integrated AI workflows unite creative and media teams in one ecosystem

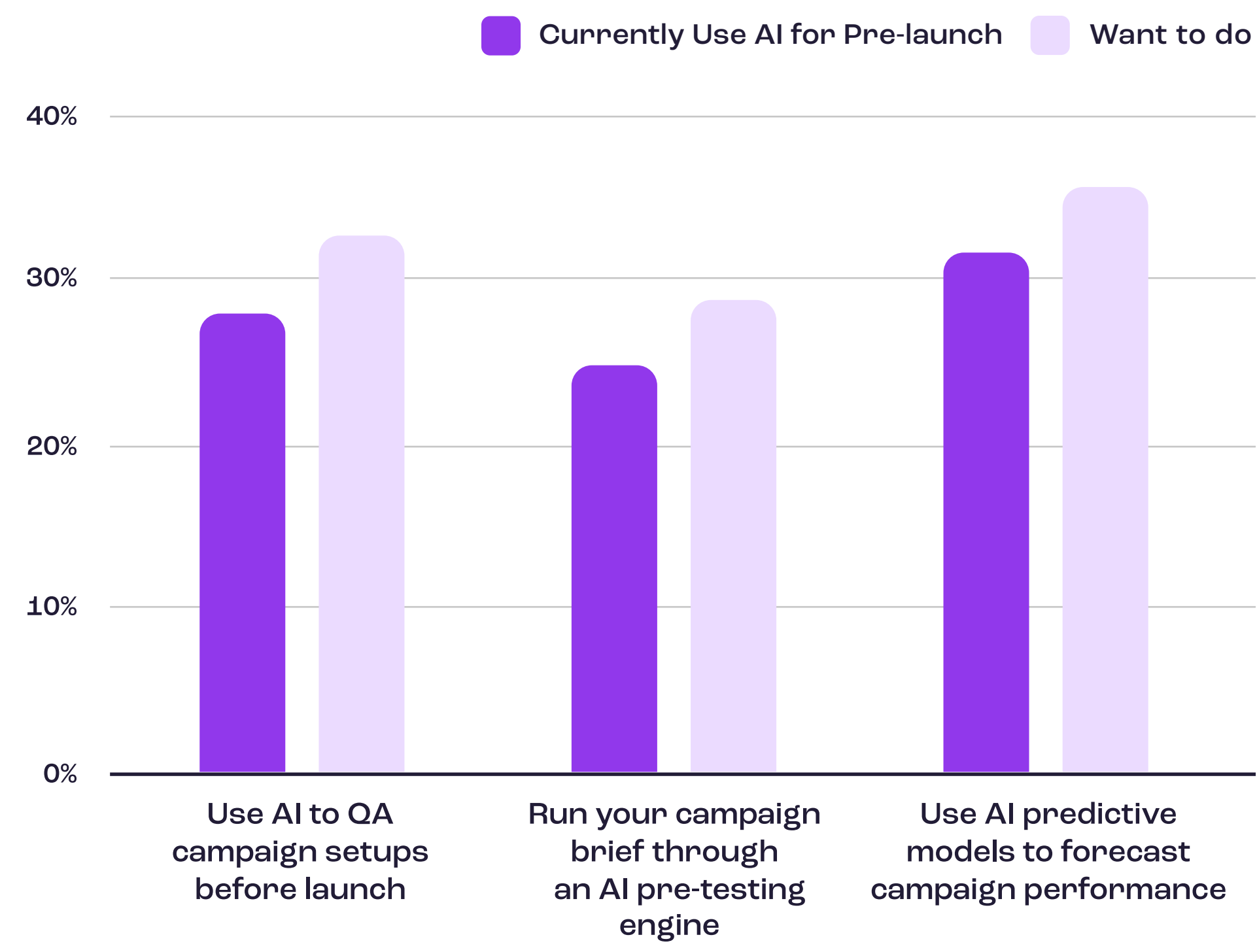
These preemptive steps allow marketers to reduce campaign errors and creative revisions, **gaining measurable time savings before launch.**

Precision-first marketers consistently engage in more pre-campaign activities than others, such as:

~40%
more likely to use AI to QA campaign setup

35%
more likely to use AI to develop creative

Prelaunch Intelligence: Marketers Who Use AI as Compared to Those Who Want to Use AI



FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION



Smartly’s Predictive Performance for Creative, powered by AI, forecasts campaign results before launch, enabling data-driven creative decisions and reducing post-launch uncertainty.

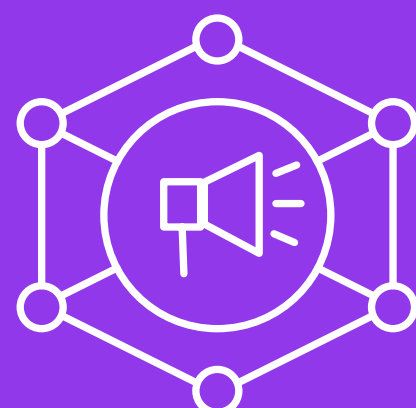
Marketing leaders in 2026 don't just respond faster, they plan smarter, by leveraging AI to anticipate performance before spend. These teams transform complexity into clarity, adapting AI for a seamless, cross-channel approach.

Smartly helps them turn every challenge into an advantage:



A Smarter Funnel

Smartly unites creative, media, and insights, personalizing earlier in the journey and predicting performance before launch.



Cross-Channel Confidence

One platform connects Meta, YouTube, TikTok, and beyond, helping marketers launch faster and measure true incremental reach.



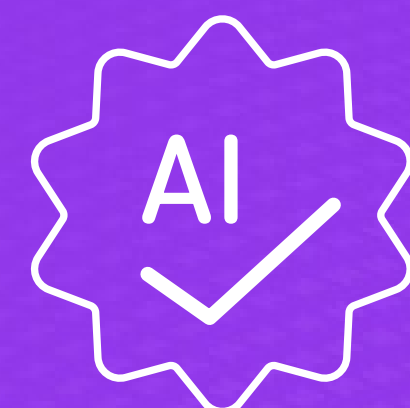
Efficiency Without Compromise

Smartly's Predictive Budget Allocation and pre-launch intelligence eliminate waste and optimize spend in real time.



Creative at Scale

AI-powered creative automation helps teams adapt assets across platforms and audiences while staying perfectly on brand.



AI That Delivers

Smartly turns AI from a buzzword into a daily advantage, powering decisions that are faster, clearer, and more consistent.

What It Takes to Lead in 2026

The most forward-thinking marketers don't just follow trends. They set them.

This year's insights show a clear mandate for 2026: move faster, connect channels, and make AI work harder for your brand.

To turn those opportunities into outcomes, you need the right partner and technology. Smartly's AI-powered platform unites creative, media, and intelligence across every major channel—social, CTV, and video—for faster execution, smarter decisions, and stronger results.

Methodology

Reach3 Insights research commissioned by Smartly, August 2025. N=450 marketers and marketing budget decision makers across the US, UK and Germany at organizations that spend at least \$5 million in paid media annually. Respondents work in any of the following industries: Agency, Automotive, Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG), Electronics, Entertainment and/or Gaming, Media, Financial Services including Fintech, Food and/or beverage, Insurance, Media, Retail, Telecommunications, Technology, and Travel.

2025 Reach3 research commissioned by Smartly



2025 Reach3 Insights research commissioned by Smartly



Smartly is the AI-powered advertising platform helping brands launch with confidence and control. By uniting media, creative, and intelligence in one workflow, Smartly gives marketers the power to see what will work, before campaigns go live, and make in-flight adjustments.

We are the only company managing creative and media for 700+ brands worldwide and \$5B in ad spend across the largest media platforms, including Google, Instagram, Meta, Pinterest, Reddit, Snap, Spotify, and TikTok.

Built for speed and scale, Smartly's end-to-end technology combines automation, analytics, and creative optimization, helping the world's leading advertisers eliminate chaos, reduce waste, and power better ads.