Brandwatch Report Finds Only 25% of Marketers Truly Understand Their Audiences

Despite unprecedented access to data, most marketers still struggle to translate signals into insight

BRIGHTON, United Kingdom, March 17, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- Brandwatch, a Cision company and a global leader in social intelligence and social media management, today released *The Marketer of 2026*, a new report revealing a growing insight gap in modern marketing.

"Marketing's competitive edge won't come from more data, but from translating fragmented signals into insight and action," said Amy Jones, Chief Marketing Officer at Cision.

Despite unprecedented access to data, only 25% of marketers say they understand their audiences "very well," highlighting the growing challenge of translating fragmented signals into meaningful insight.

Based on a survey of 1,028 marketing professionals and an analysis of 750,000 online industry conversations, the report explores how the role of the marketer is evolving, shifting from campaign execution toward decoding audience behavior and informing strategic decisions.

As customer journeys fragment across social platforms, search engines, and AI-driven discovery tools, marketers face mounting pressure to move beyond collecting data and instead turn signals into clear insight and action.

"The Marketer of 2026 shows a profession shifting from campaign execution to signal interpretation," said Amy Jones, Chief Marketing Officer at Cision. "The real competitive edge won't come from collecting more data, it will come from how marketers translate fragmented signals into insight and action."

Marketers' biggest challenge: Understanding audiences

Despite the volume of data available across channels, predicting behavior, interpreting cultural shifts, and uncovering the "why" behind audience decisions remain the hardest problems to solve. Among the top challenges marketers cite:

- Predicting future needs or behaviors (60%)
- Understanding changing behaviors (48%)
- Turning data into actionable insights (46%)
- Understanding the "why" behind audience decisions (40%)
- Integrating data from multiple sources (40%)

The result is a widening insight gap: Brands know more about what people do than ever before, but still struggle to explain why they do it – and how to act on that knowledge at speed.

Platforms that unify consumer conversations and audience signals are increasingly critical for marketing teams looking to close this insight gap and move from reactive reporting to proactive strategy.

AI raises the bar, but doesn't replace judgment

AI and automation are now central to the marketer's toolkit. The report found:

- 84% of marketers said AI and automation are the most important skills to master
- 81% said AI tools are the most essential technology in the marketing stack.
- 79% said they're spending more time on managing AI and automation workflows

While AI is helping teams move faster and automate repetitive tasks, marketers are acutely aware of the need to balance efficiency with human judgment, creativity, and cultural awareness.

As AI-generated content becomes more common, marketers increasingly recognize that technology alone won't differentiate brands.

"AI won't replace marketers, it will expose the ones who don't lead with strategy," Jones said. "The winners will use AI to accelerate execution and then double down on what humans do best: judgement, creativity, and direction."

Fragmented journeys demand integrated insight

The report also highlights just how splintered the customer journey has become. Audiences now move fluidly across touchpoints and have become increasingly fluent in marketing tactics.

This fragmentation puts added pressure on marketers to connect data across channels and eliminate reporting silos.

Integrated consumer intelligence platforms are emerging as a key lever for helping teams unify audience data, identify patterns across touchpoints (including search, social, and traditional media), and transform fragmented signals into strategic insight.

Traditional marketing activities take a back seat

Across the findings, one theme is clear: the marketer of 2026 is defined less by how many campaigns they ship and more by how well they can connect outputs to outcomes.

Many respondents report spending less time on traditional activities like advertising and email marketing in order to prioritize managing AI workflows (79%) and data analysis (51%).

Rather than abandoning traditional channels, marketers are reallocating their time toward understanding audiences more deeply, and proving the business impact of their work.

A roadmap for 2026

In addition to an in-depth analysis of the findings, including a spotlight on the skills and tools critical to success in the coming year, the report also clearly outlines how marketers can apply these findings to their own strategies. The report breaks guidance down by career stage:

- Encouraging junior marketers to build "audience literacy;"
- Mid-level marketers to focus on interpretation and cross-channel fluency; and
- Leaders to prioritize time, tools, and training that support insight generation rather than more activity for its own sake.

"In 2026, the strongest marketers are combining technical fluency with cultural and customer awareness," Jones said. "The teams that succeed will be the ones who can connect fragmented signals, surface real audience insight, and act on it with confidence."

Methodology

Brandwatch surveyed 1,028 marketing professionals regarding the social and professional landscape of 2026. This primary research was combined with an analysis of 750,000 online conversations about marketing between January 1, 2025, and January 31, 2026, using Brandwatch Consumer Research.

Download the full "Marketer of 2026" report

About Brandwatch

Brandwatch is the leading social media management and consumer intelligence suite, empowering brands to see and be seen, understand and be understood, by the audiences that matter most. Trusted by half of the Forbes 100, Brandwatch equips the world's most innovative companies with AI-powered insights and tools to seize opportunities, strengthen engagement and accelerate growth.

Our comprehensive suite spans consumer intelligence, influencer marketing, and social media management, enabling brands and agencies to execute data-driven strategies at scale.

Brandwatch is part of the Cision family of brands, alongside CisionOne, Trajaan, and PR Newswire

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