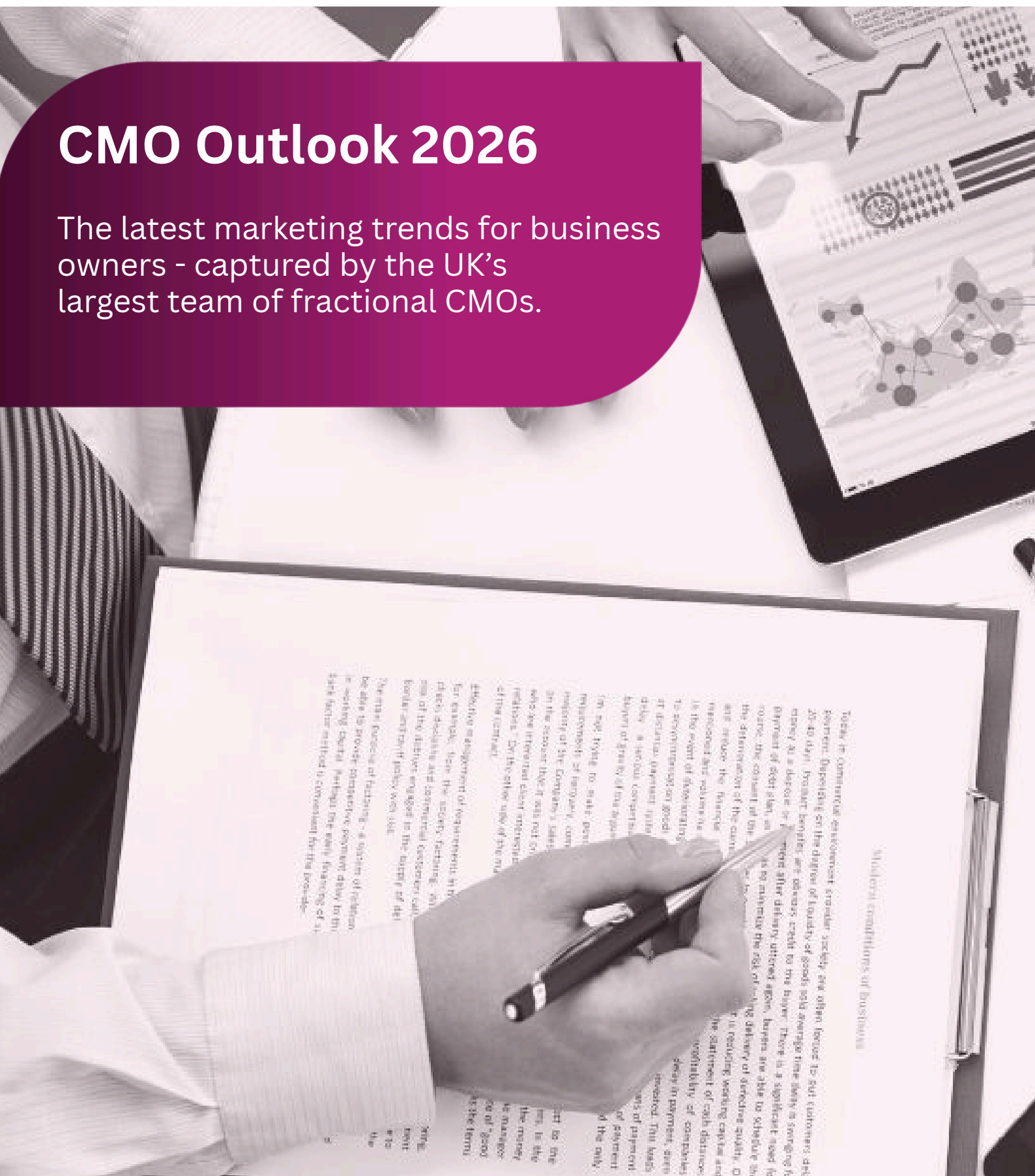


CMO Outlook 2026

The latest marketing trends for business owners - captured by the UK's largest team of fractional CMOs.



Introduction

Growing a business today is more complex than ever. Markets are shifting, customer expectations are rising, and the pressure on leaders to make the right commercial decisions is only increasing. At The Marketing Centre, our team of fractional CMOs work inside SMEs across the UK every day. We see first-hand what is driving growth, what is holding businesses back, and what is changing faster than many realise.

This report brings together insights from those CMOs. It is not theory, trend-watching or opinion. It reflects what is actually happening in businesses like yours, across sectors, regions and stages of growth. The findings are grounded in real conversations, real decisions and real commercial outcomes.

Business owners can use this report in three ways:

1. To benchmark your business against what our CMOs are seeing elsewhere
2. To identify where your own foundations or processes may need attention
3. To focus your energy and investment on the areas most likely to deliver results in 2026

If you want clarity on what will matter in the year ahead, this report is for you.

Overview

The report is structured around the themes our CMOs see most frequently inside the businesses they support. Each section explores a critical area that influences SME growth: the strength of marketing foundations, the role of AI and automation, the importance of consistency, the impact of leadership alignment and the permanent shifts in customer behaviour. For each theme, we highlight what is happening inside UK SMEs, what our CMOs are saying based on their frontline experience and what this means for your business in practical terms.

Taken together, the insights reveal a clear pattern. SMEs that build strong foundations, maintain consistent execution and make better use of data and technology outperform those that rely on sporadic activity or reactive decision-making. The recommendations in this report are designed to help business owners focus their time, energy and investment where it will make the biggest difference in the year ahead.

Marketing Foundations

The foundations of marketing determine how efficiently a business can grow. Without clear messaging, reliable data and joined systems, progress becomes slow and expensive.



What we are seeing

The most consistent issue across the businesses our CMOs work with is weak or incomplete marketing foundations. Many SMEs still operate without a clear value proposition or a coherent customer journey, which makes it difficult for teams to prioritise activity or measure success. Data sits in multiple places, making reporting slow, inconsistent and often unreliable.

We also see a heavy reliance on spreadsheets, manual processes and disconnected tools that were never designed to scale. This leads to duplicated effort, slow decision-making and frequent breakdowns in handover between marketing and sales. In many cases, businesses are investing in campaigns or new technology before establishing the basic systems and processes needed to support them.

In short, the foundations are not strong enough to sustain the level of growth many businesses are aiming for. Without clarity, joined-up systems and a single source of truth, even the best marketing activity struggles to deliver predictable results.



What our CMOs are saying

- "The foundations determine how fast and how far you can scale."
- "Most SMEs still don't have a single source of truth. Reporting takes too long and no one fully trusts the numbers."
- "There is often no clear value proposition. Businesses think they have one, but customers would struggle to repeat it."
- "Leaders underestimate how much clarity matters. Without it, marketing is guesswork."



What this means for you

Strengthening your infrastructure must come before increasing marketing spend.

A strong value proposition, unified data and a trusted CRM reduce waste and creates predictability.

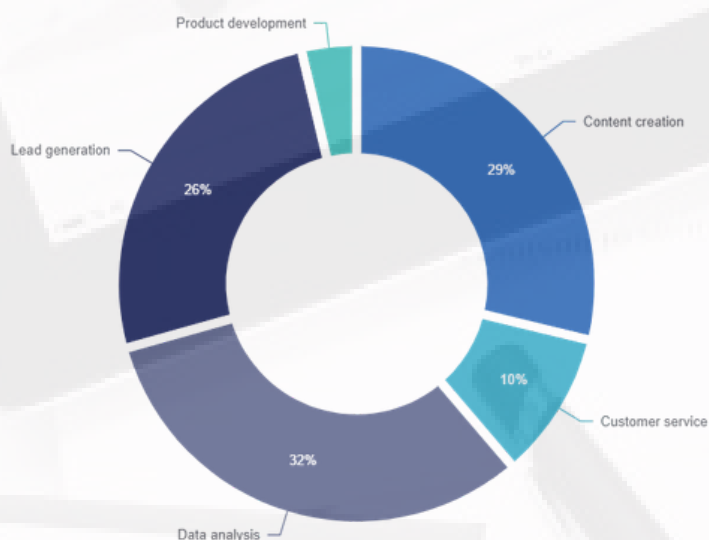
AI and Automation

AI is transforming how marketing teams operate. For SMEs, it offers speed, efficiency and cost improvements when adopted intentionally.



What we are seeing

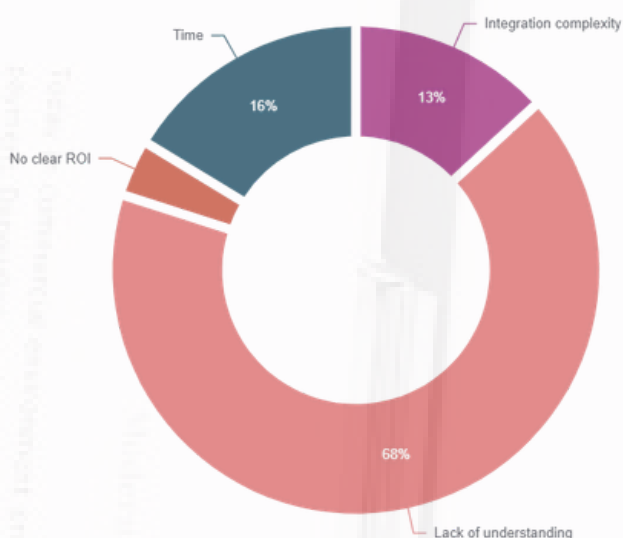
Which areas will see the biggest transformation from AI by 2026?



This reflects how AI is already being used inside UK SMEs and where it is delivering tangible benefits.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest areas of impact are data analysis and content creation: two capabilities that have traditionally been time-consuming and resource-heavy for small teams.

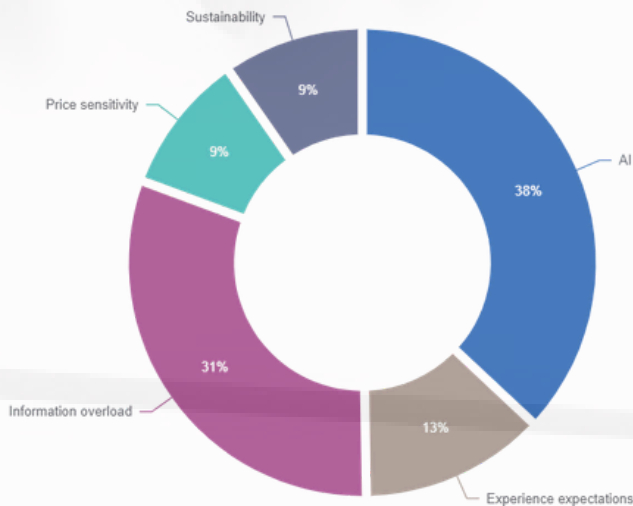
What's the biggest barrier to AI adoption among your businesses?



This highlights the reality our CMOs see every day: the biggest barrier to AI adoption in SMEs is not cost or technology, but understanding.

Most businesses simply do not yet know where AI fits, what it can do, or how to get started safely. As a result, adoption stalls long before meaningful progress can be made.

What's driving the biggest change in customer behaviour?



This chart shows a major shift: AI is now the single biggest driver of changing customer behaviour. It is reshaping how buyers research, compare options, assess value and make decisions. Right behind it is information overload, which is increasing the pressure on brands to be clearer, more relevant and more distinctive.

Across all three charts, a clear pattern emerges. SMEs are held back more by uncertainty about AI than by cost or complexity, yet those who have already begun using it are seeing real gains in the areas that matter most: understanding their data, creating content efficiently and generating better-quality leads.

At the same time, customer behaviour is shifting rapidly. AI is raising expectations, information overload is making clarity more critical and buyers are becoming more selective. SMEs must respond by improving their foundations, strengthening their data and adopting AI in practical ways that support both efficiency and customer experience.

For business owners, the takeaway is simple: AI is already shaping your market and your customers. Those who take small, purposeful steps now will gain an advantage that grows over time. Those who wait will find it increasingly difficult to catch up.



What our CMOs are saying

- “AI is the biggest shift in capability I’ve seen in my career. SMEs that ignore it will fall behind.”
- “Start with the tasks that drain time. AI can remove so much friction if you apply it properly.”
- “The real opportunity is in decision-making. AI helps you see what’s really happening faster.”



What this means for you

AI advantage compounds. Early adoption improves efficiency and competitiveness.

Create a simple AI roadmap and integrate tools into everyday workflows.

Marketing Consistency

Start-stop marketing remains widespread. Pipeline volatility increases. Acquisition costs rise when momentum is lost.



What we are seeing

One of the most persistent patterns our CMOs encounter is inconsistent marketing activity. Many SMEs still rely on short bursts of marketing when they need leads, followed by long periods where activity slows or stops entirely. This is usually driven by internal capacity, shifting priorities or a belief that marketing can be switched on and off without consequence.

The impact is predictable. Pipelines become volatile, demand dries up unexpectedly and teams are left scrambling to fill gaps that were entirely avoidable. Inconsistent activity also makes it far harder to learn what works, because the business never builds enough momentum or data to draw meaningful conclusions. Visibility becomes patchy, forecasting becomes guesswork and both sales and marketing operate in a reactive mode.



What our CMOs are saying

- “A stop–start approach destroys pipeline health. Consistency is what builds growth.”
- “Marketing cannot be switched on when you need leads and off when you are busy. It doesn’t work like that.”
- “You cannot optimise what you only do occasionally.”
- “Momentum matters. Most SMEs never let marketing run long enough to learn anything.”
- “Stop starting and stopping. It costs more in the long run.”



What this means for you

Growth becomes predictable when activity is sustained.

A structured quarterly rhythm strengthens visibility, trust and demand.

Permanent Market Shifts

Customer behaviour has changed permanently. SMEs must adapt their marketing models to stay relevant and competitive.



What we are seeing

Our CMOs are seeing clear evidence that recent changes in customer behaviour are now permanent. Buyers are taking longer to make decisions, involving more stakeholders and expecting seamless digital experiences as standard. They want communication that speaks directly to their needs, and they quickly filter out businesses that cannot explain who they help and why they matter.

At the same time, acquisition costs are rising, and competition for attention is increasing. Customers expect faster responses, more relevant information and a clearer demonstration of value. These shifts mean older marketing models are becoming less effective. The SMEs performing best are those adapting their messaging, customer journey and processes to match this new landscape.



What our CMOs are saying

- “Customer expectations have risen faster than most SMEs realise.”
- “Buyers do more research, ask more questions, and expect more relevance than ever before.”
- “The old playbook doesn’t work. Customer journeys are more complex and more digital.”
- “People expect personalised experiences even from smaller businesses now.”
- “What looked cyclical is now structural.”



What this means for you

Older models are less effective.

Businesses must modernise messaging, targeting and customer experience to match new behaviours.

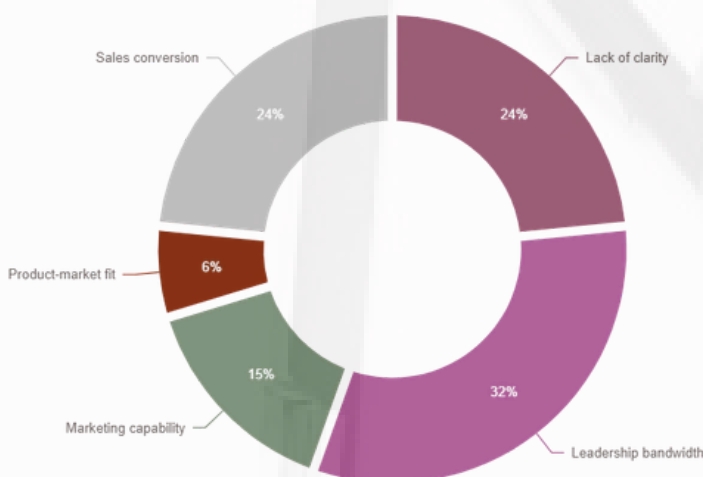
Leadership Alignment

Marketing succeeds when the leadership team is aligned around one commercial direction. Misalignment slows decision making and weakens messaging.



What we are seeing

What is the single biggest internal constraint on growth?



The biggest obstacles to effective marketing sit at leadership level. Limited bandwidth and a lack of clarity make it difficult for teams to execute confidently.

Conversion challenges and capability gaps add further pressure, showing that without strong direction and the right skills, marketing struggles to deliver its full impact.



What our CMOs are saying

- “Transformation requires alignment at the top.”
- “Marketing cannot succeed in a fragmented leadership environment.”
- “Leadership teams often think they’re aligned, but scratch the surface and everyone has a different view of the strategy.”
- “Too many SMEs chase short-term wins at the expense of long-term growth.”
- “The biggest blind spot is assuming marketing can succeed without cross-functional support.”



What this means for you

Alignment directly impacts commercial performance. A shared vision and message accelerates execution and improves marketing outcomes.

Key Guidance for Business Leaders

2026 will be a year that rewards SMEs who are disciplined, data-driven and ready to adapt. Based on what our CMOs are seeing across UK businesses, here is the direction that will have the greatest impact on your commercial performance:

1. Strengthen your foundations before increasing spend.

Revisit your value proposition, tighten your customer journey and invest in systems that provide a single source of truth. This is where efficiency and clarity begin.

2. Get closer to your data.

Businesses that understand their numbers make better decisions. Put structure around your reporting so you can see what works, what doesn't and where to focus investment.

3. Treat AI as a practical tool, not a long-term project.

Identify two or three areas where AI can save time or improve quality, and start there. Small, deliberate steps compound into meaningful advantage.

4. Commit to consistent marketing.

Build a steady rhythm of activity across each quarter. Consistency drives demand, builds trust and creates a more predictable pipeline.

5. Ensure leadership alignment.

Agree your commercial priorities and the role marketing plays in achieving them. Alignment at the top dramatically improves execution across the business.

6. Modernise your approach to the customer journey.

Buyers are researching earlier, comparing more options and expecting greater clarity. Make it easier for them to understand your value quickly and to take the next step.

The most successful SMEs in 2026 will be those that operate with clarity, discipline and a willingness to use data and technology to their advantage. You do not need to transform your business overnight, but you do need to move with intent. The companies that take action now will be the ones competing most effectively in the years ahead.

Conclusion

The strongest message emerging from our CMOs is that sustainable growth in 2026 will not come from doing more marketing, but from building the right foundations for marketing to work. Businesses that grow confidently are those that understand their customers clearly, have systems that provide reliable data, and run marketing as a continuous function rather than a sporadic activity. These businesses make better decisions, spot opportunities earlier and avoid the costly peaks and troughs that come from reactive action.

For many SMEs, the real challenge is not generating interest but creating the structure that allows marketing, sales and operations to work together effectively. When data is fragmented, when the value proposition is unclear or when leadership teams are not aligned, the best campaigns still struggle to deliver meaningful results. The businesses performing strongest today are those that have invested in clarity, process and consistency. They know what they stand for, they know how they generate demand and they have the systems to track and improve performance over time.

If you take one message from this research, it is this: **growth becomes far more predictable when your marketing foundations are strong.** With the right systems and alignment in place, your activity becomes easier to manage, easier to measure and far more capable of delivering the results you want.

Every SME faces different challenges, but no business can grow consistently without clarity, structure and the right expertise. Our CMOs work inside UK businesses every day, helping leaders build the systems, strategy and discipline needed for long-term success.

If you want to strengthen your marketing foundations, let's start a conversation - call us on 020 8012 8281 or visit <https://www.themarketingcentre.com>

Need help growing your business?

Our proven team of fractional CMOs
help businesses align marketing
investment with measurable
growth.

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