

gds CMO
Summit

transforming
complex
processes



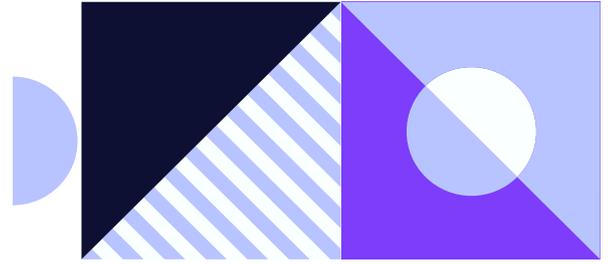
CMO Insights Summit

Boston, 24 - 25 Feb 2025

Insight Report from the Main Stage

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CMO Insights 2025

Steady Leadership in Uncharted Waters

This year's CMO Insights Summit in Boston brought together marketing leaders from across the spectrum of industries to tackle the most pressing challenges facing CMOs today.

We heard insightful discussions, bold strategies, and industry-shaping ideas on everything from mastering AI to navigating the increasingly tricky politics of marketing. If you missed out, or maybe just wanted a refresher, here is a wrap up of all the key takeaways from the main stage.



Equity Under Fire

Why Your Brand Can't Afford to Step Back

Summary

Aba Blankson from the NAACP opened the show with her electric keynote presentation. She spoke on the power that marketing leaders have to shape the world and advance equity, particularly now when equity is under fire. Blankson addressed the importance of brands standing firm in their values, even amidst increasing polarization.

Key Takeaways

Marketing Shapes Culture

Leaders should use their influence to drive equity and inclusion.

Values Must Be Non-Negotiable

Brands should stay true to their mission despite external pressures.

Actions Speak Louder

Consumers expect proof of impact, not just good intentions.

Be Prepared

A strong crisis communication plan ensures clear, consistent messaging.



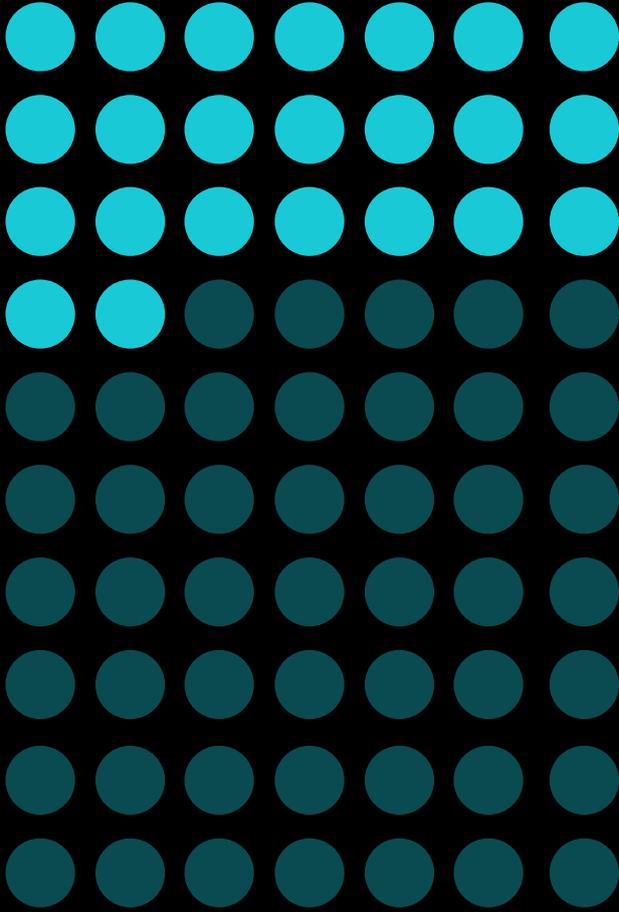
History will remember which brands stood firm when it mattered most, and which leaders chose courage over fear.



Aba Blankson

Chief Marketing and Communications Officer, NAACP

Is your company downsizing its DEI initiatives?



yes

32% ↗

no

68% ↘

From Data Chaos to AI-Ready

A CMO's Guide for Connected Marketing

Summary

Despite all the buzz, AI is still a bit of an unknown quantity for marketers. Fortunately, Zappi's CMO, Nataly Kelly, took to the main stage to discuss how marketers can leverage data and AI to better understand consumers and improve marketing campaigns. Nataly covered everything from the importance of data integration and the systematic handling of insights projects, to securing internal buy-in for AI initiatives.

Key Takeaways

AI Integration is Inevitable

Marketers are already expected to incorporate AI into their workflows.

Data Centralization is Key

Consolidating data sources enhances AI's effectiveness.

Strategy & Buy-In Matter

Successful AI adoption requires internal support and clear business value.

Focus on Consumer Insights

Use aggregated data trends to anticipate and meet customer needs.



AI is as good as whatever you put in. If you put in bad info and bad data, you're going to get bad results.



Nataly Kelly

Chief Marketing Officer, Zappi



From Startup to Wipeout

How Dude Wipes Conquered a Category with Bold Marketing

Summary

In this session, Ryan Meegan, CMO of Dude Products, charted the brand's journey from a small Chicago apartment startup to a \$200 million disruptor in the \$11 billion toilet paper industry. Exploring his brand's creative and scrappy approach to marketing, Meegan spoke on leveraging humor, risk-taking, and viral strategies to stand out in a competitive market.

Key Takeaways

Humor & Risk-Taking

Bold, irreverent marketing helped break taboos and engage audiences.

E-commerce as a Launchpad

Early investment in e-commerce built a loyal customer base before retail expansion.

Cultural Relevance

Real-time marketing (e.g. sports sponsorships, viral moments) drove visibility.

Partnerships Drive Retail Growth

A deal with Mark Cuban and a Kroger partnership provided credibility and scale.



Authenticity is the cornerstone of our brand. People appreciate that. What we see from top to bottom is that people appreciate humor.



Ryan Meegan

Chief Marketing Officer, Dude Products



Hims & Hers

A Design-Led Approach to Building Brand Trust

Summary

Dan Kenger, Chief Design Officer at Hims & Hers, joined us to explain how they used thoughtful design, humor, and transparency to build trust with consumers in the telemedicine space. Operating across often stigmatized health verticals like sexual health and hair loss, Dan shared his best practices for building a brand in even the trickiest of spaces.

Key Takeaways

Destigmatization Drives Engagement

Humor and storytelling make sensitive health topics approachable.

Cohesive Brand Experience

Every touchpoint, from packaging to ads, reinforces trust and credibility.

Personalized Messaging Works

Content is tailored to different demographics to maximize relevance.

Transparency is Essential

Real user stories and clear medical credibility strengthen consumer confidence.



The more of a point of view you have and the more, dare I say, polarizing you can be, the more you will win trust and authenticity with your audience.



Dan Kenger

Chief Design Officer, Hims & Hers



Marketers Harnessing AI to Lead the Pack

Summary

In this panel, David Malloy (VP of Enterprise Marketing at Estée Lauder) and Jessica Murphy (VP of Global Marketing at Hasbro) explored how AI is revolutionizing marketing, from process automation to creative enhancement. The pair focused on how marketers can effectively use AI and emphasized the importance of fixing process problems before jumping into AI solutions.



David Malloy
Vice President,
Enterprise Marketing
and Creative
Technology, The Estée
Lauder Companies

Key Takeaways

AI Enhances, Not Replaces

It should support human creativity rather than take over decision-making.

Define the Problem First

Successful AI adoption starts with identifying clear business goals.

Process Readiness is Critical

AI won't fix inefficient workflows—companies must have strong foundations first.

Test & Scale Gradually

Small AI-driven improvements (e.g. content automation, translations) pave the way for larger initiatives.



Challenge each department to find the AI efficiencies that work for them.



Jessica Murphy
Vice President, Global Marketing Strategy & Operations, Hasbro



Marketing Leadership

A Comedy of Human Trials, Errors, and Triumphs

Summary

Luke Wyckoff, Chief Growth Officer at the University of Michigan, shared lessons on marketing leadership. Focusing on the importance of the people surrounding you, covering recruiting top talent and assessing candidates for critical skills—Wyckoff gave the blueprints for how to build the team you need to drive marketing success.

Key Takeaways

Prioritize Resilience

Look for candidates with tenacity, resilience, energy, and the ability to learn.

Structure is Key

Use the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) method to assess candidates.

Value the Journey

Focus on the journey a candidate has taken, not just the finished story.

Ensure Alignment

Hiring criteria should connect with long-term performance expectations.



Hire slow and you're going to fire fast. Look for the traits that are non-trainable and then worry about the technical pieces later.



Luke Wyckoff

Chief Growth Officer, University of Michigan

Mastering the Attention Economy

Summary

In their popular panel, Tulani André (VP of Social at National Geographic), Angela Gruszka (VP of Marketing at Charity Buzz), and Seraj Bharwani (Chief Strategy Officer at illumin) discussed how brands can capture and maintain consumer attention in a fast-scrolling digital world. How? Let's just say that understanding your audience is now more important than ever.



Seraj Bharwani

Chief Strategy Officer,
illumin



Tulani André

Vice President, Social
Media, National
Geographic

Key Takeaways

Bite-Sized Content Wins

Short, engaging formats capture and maintain consumer attention.

Relevance is Key

Context-aware messaging (e.g. location-based ads) increases engagement.

Community & UGC Matter

Direct interactions and user-generated content build brand trust.

AI-Powered Personalization

Machine learning predicts consumer needs and optimizes messaging.



It's the authentic content that really works. Ask yourself, how do you really pull on the heart strings? How do you really show consumers that they're real people?



Angela Gruszka

Vice President, Marketing, Charitybuzz



Polarization, Politics & Brand Risk

In Conversation with Axios Publisher Nick Johnston

Summary

In this session our host was joined by Nicholas Johnston from Axios to provide frameworks for how brands can maintain integrity, address controversial topics, and build long-term loyalty amidst social and political challenges. With politics and polarization taking centre stage, Nick highlighted the importance of knowing what you stand for and understanding your audience.

Key Takeaways

Be Clear & Authentic

Define your values, audience, and prioritize authenticity over virality.

Adapt to a Fragmented Media Landscape

Tailor content for different platforms and keep it concise.

Balance Messaging & Action

Engage in political topics deliberately and back up words with actions.

Stay Prepared & Trustworthy

Have a crisis plan, embrace AI thoughtfully, and foster brand trust.



Be sure about what you stand for and who you're saying it to.



Nicholas Johnston

Publisher, Axios



Surfing The Black Wave

Brand Leadership in a Digital Age

Summary

In their workshop, Dan and Matt, of Daniel Brian Advertising, explored how CMOs can navigate disruption and lead in the era of AI by following principles, not pathways. When it comes to “surfing the black wave,” they emphasized the importance of training leaders, embracing change, and leveraging AI to enhance customer relationships.



Matt Bunk
Chief Creative Officer,
Daniel Brian Advertising

Key Takeaways

Lead with Principles

Train leaders to adapt to change while staying grounded in core values.

Embrace the AI Shift

Past strategies won't work—CMOs must evolve into AI managers.

Leverage AI for Insights

Use AI to analyze data, personalize messaging, and refine valuable moments.

Stay Customer-Centric

Prioritize delivering real value and meaningful connections.



Train leaders to follow principles not pathways. What got you through the internet revolution won't get you through the AI revolution.



Dan Cobb
CEO, Daniel Brian Advertising



The Climate Emergency and Glass Half Full

Summary

Boaz Paldi, Chief Creative Officer at the United Nations Development Programme, led a masterclass session on how marketers can address the climate emergency in a way that resonates with people and inspires action. For experts looking to deliver a message with impact, Paldi's action plan was translating complexity into understandable language and using humor and creativity to sell hope.

Key Takeaways

Translate Complexity into Understanding

To resonate with a broader audience, communicate complex issues in a way that is easy to understand.

Creativity and Humor to Sell

Sell hope and opportunity rather than doom and gloom.

Encourage Action on all Levels

Encourage your communities to take action and back it up with action of your own.

There Are Opportunities in Difficult Situations

Align with consumer values to drive business in a socially conscious world.



Use any media you can to sell the product. And the product here is hope within the climate emergency.



Boaz Paldi

Chief Creative Officer, United Nations Development Programme



Two Brands, One Strategy

Launching New Players and Reinventing Icons

Summary

Head of Brand, Michael Kaye, joined us to share case studies from Archer and OkCupid to illustrate how it's data and insights that drive marketing and business impact. Michael walked the audience through his experience launching a new dating app all while addressing safety and consent and using data to inform social and brand campaigns.

Key Takeaways

Leverage Data for Impact

Use insights to shape marketing, product strategy, and trend-driven narratives.

Engage Through Community & Creators

Partner with influencers and create ownable events for user-generated content.

Prioritize Safety & Consent

Ensure mental and physical well-being in user experiences.

Embrace AI & Progressive Topics

Use AI for matching and recognize that bold, value-driven marketing can drive growth.



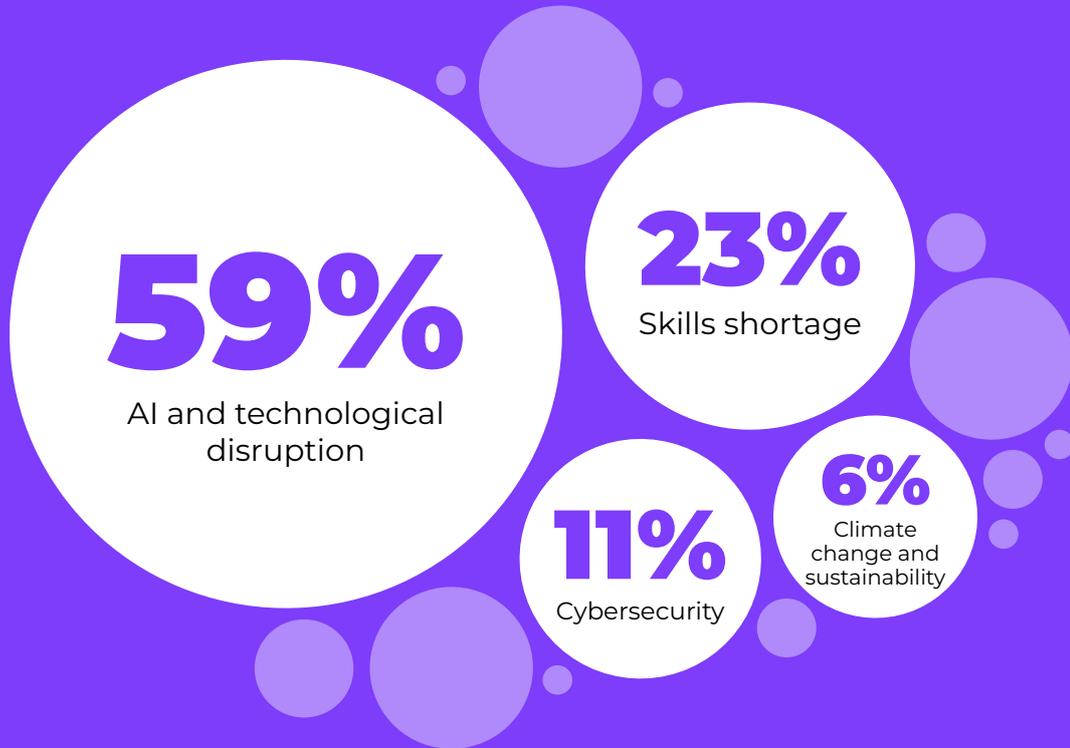
We have to be as loud and provocative as we possibly can. We are leaning into what our users are already telling us is top of mind for them.



Michael Kaye

Head of Brand, ARCHER & OkCupid

What wider challenge do you expect to have the biggest impact on your business this year?



The CMO Insight Summit has set the stage for an exciting year in marketing.

Our community underscored marketing's role in shaping culture and navigating societal shifts. They emphasized unwavering brand values, strategic AI adoption, and the power of humor and authenticity in building trust as the new gold standard. Sessions highlighted the need for adaptability, audience awareness, and ethical leadership in an era of polarization and disruption. The most important takeaway? Marketing is not

just a business tool but a force for social impact and innovation.

These insights don't end here—stay tuned for more blogs, interviews, footage from the summit, and be sure to check out our calendar of upcoming events.

We look forward to seeing how you apply these insights to push your organization forward and lead your brand through uncharted waters.

See you next time!