



CMO Insight Summit

Dallas, Texas, 4-5 August 2025

Insight Report From The Main Stage

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CMO Insights 2025

Human, Bold, Strategic.

At the CMO Insights Summit in Dallas, the world's top marketing minds gathered to explore how brand leaders are navigating today's cultural, economic, and technological currents. From AI disruption and consumer trust to ROI pressure and emotional storytelling, this year's event was a study in modern marketing leadership.

The sessions reflected a unifying thread: CMOs are being asked to do more than ever – not only to inspire and drive revenue but to operate as strategic architects of growth. Human-centered storytelling, authentic cultural alignment, and cross-functional impact dominated the conversations.

If you missed out or wanted a refresher, this report unpacks the core insights from each session to help you realign your marketing strategies with what matters most now.



Turning Physical Spaces into Magnetic Brand Moments.

Speaker



Alicia Parker
Chief Marketing Officer,
Tishman Speyer

Summary

Alicia Parker explored how real-world experiences in iconic spaces like Rockefeller Center and Mission Rock can create lasting emotional brand connections. She showed how physical space, paired with digital tech, becomes a platform for immersive storytelling and shared joy.

Key Takeaways

Physical space is a brand asset

Locations like Rockefeller Center were transformed into storytelling canvases through live-streamed fashion shows, pop-ups, and seasonal experiences.

Community and emotion matter most

Whether it's surprise tennis games or pop-up swim shops, emotional moments drive repeat engagement.

Physical-digital fusion

Tools like Zoho allowed seamless integration between digital data and in-person experiences, extending reach and relevance.

Brand heritage meets modern culture

Classic locations became sites of new expression, from CFDA shows to fragrance launches and skating rinks.



Standing shoulder to shoulder with your customer and having a shared emotional experience in a physical space... I hope that's something that never goes away.

Alicia Parker

Chief Marketing Officer, Tishman Speyer

ROI or Bust – Marketing Despite the Headwinds.

Speaker



Seraj Bharwani

Chief Strategy Officer,
illumin



Aparna Sharma

Vice President, Product
Marketing, GreenSky



Derek Hubbard

Former Branded Content
& Entertainment Leader,
Southwest Airlines

Summary

Our dynamic trio tackled the pressing need for marketing effectiveness amid economic and organizational pressures. From retail media to AI-driven decisioning, the panel emphasized that data must not outpace creative connection – and that brand salience still hinges on emotional engagement and context.

Key Takeaways

Brand love drives long-term ROI

Strong emotional connections still power long-term value, even as short-term metrics dominate.

Retail media needs refinement

Retail media is booming, but inconsistent formats and unclear impact metrics need industry-wide alignment.

Context beats volume in targeting

Ads that consider emotional and behavioral context consistently outperform those that don't.

AI is a co-pilot, not a replacement

AI should support human creativity and strategic decision-making, not replace it.



AI isn't creative. It can guide or help, but the magic still comes from people.

Aparna Sharma

Vice President, Product Marketing, GreenSky



From Performance Roots to Cultural Relevance: How Saucony Is Running As One.

Speaker



Joy Allen-Altmare

Chief Marketing Officer,
Global, Saucony

Summary

Joy Allen-Altmare offered a powerful look at Saucony's transformation from a technical running brand to a cultural symbol of unity and authenticity. Her focus: rebuilding trust through storytelling, partnerships, and internal cohesion in a brand now centered on community.

Key Takeaways

Performance credibility remains vital

The brand honors its roots through product innovation and athletic credibility.

Culture is the new competitive edge

Saucony partners with artists, designers, and communities to represent real stories and identity.

Trust starts from within

Marketing leaders must build internal trust and understanding across functions to reflect genuine values externally.

Emotional leadership wins

Empathy and inclusivity drive not only campaigns but also organizational unity.



We've stopped being transactional. We're in a transformational mode.

Joy Allen-Altmare

Chief Marketing Officer, Global, Saucony



When the Unthinkable Happens – Marketing in a Moment of Crisis.

Speaker



Michele Ehrhart
SVP, Chief Marketing and
Communications Officer,
The University of Memphis

Summary

Michele Ehrhart shared the deeply personal and strategic story of guiding a university's brand through a high-profile campus tragedy. With transparency, speed, and empathy, she illustrated how marketing and communications leaders must be prepared for crisis – not just with plans, but with courage.

Key Takeaways

Speed matters, but so does tone

Acting fast is critical in a crisis, but so is communicating with humanity and care.

Plan for emotional intelligence

Crisis responses must be more than tactical; they require emotional leadership.

Keep the internal team aligned

Clear, consistent internal communication builds confidence across departments.

Honor the brand's voice

In moments of crisis, the brand must still sound like itself – even when shaken.



It's not about saying the perfect thing. It's about showing up authentically, with empathy and strength.

Michele Ehrhart

SVP, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer, The University of Memphis

The Emotional ROI of Branding.

Speaker



Vincent Mazza
Managing Partner,
eDesign Interactive

Summary

Vincent Mazza reframed ROI by spotlighting emotional returns as the core value of branding. He argued that emotional response – not just clicks or conversions – is what fuels brand affinity, and that every creative decision must aim to resonate deeply with the human experience.

Key Takeaways

Emotions are metrics too

The most memorable brands are those that consistently evoke strong feelings.

Design must be purpose-driven

Creativity is powerful only when aligned with real emotional insight.

Stories outperform specs

People remember how brands made them feel, not what features they promoted.

Authenticity outlasts trends

Human truth and brand sincerity build lasting loyalty.



Marketing should be beautiful. Because beauty inspires emotion – and emotion builds brands.

Vincent Mazza

Managing Partner, eDesign Interactive



Culture Shock – Why Responsible Marketing Wins.

Speaker



Lola Bakare

Author of Responsible Marketing and Forbes CMO Network Contributor

Summary

Lola Bakare delivered a rousing case for courageous, values-led marketing in a divided world. She challenged CMOs to lead with inclusion, clarity, and moral conviction – not just because it's right, but because it works. Marketing, she said, must be responsible, or risk irrelevance.

Key Takeaways

Responsibility drives results

Consumers reward brands that take principled, authentic stances.

CMOs are moral leaders

Marketing leaders must model integrity across their teams and campaigns.

Inclusion builds influence

Brands that reflect real communities build broader, deeper relationships.

Silence is risky

Not speaking out on cultural issues can be more damaging than a misstep.



There's no such thing as apolitical marketing. You're either intentional, or you're complicit.

Lola Bakare

Author of Responsible Marketing and Forbes CMO Network Contributor



Narrative Intelligence: The Human Advantage in an AI, Data-Driven World.

Speakers



Henry Wong

Chief Marketing Officer,
Borealis Foods

Summary

Henry Wong unpacked the emerging concept of narrative intelligence as a vital leadership skill for marketers navigating a world overloaded with data and AI-driven tools. Sharing real-world examples – including how a compelling founder story won over Gordon Ramsay – Wong argued that great leadership is rooted not just in storytelling, but in the ability to sense, shape, and align narratives in real time.

Key Takeaways

Narrative intelligence is more than storytelling

It's a mindset focused on timing, perception, and alignment that helps leaders guide meaning, not just messaging.

Human advantage over AI

AI can replicate tone, but only humans can sense context, inspire belief, and create authentic connections.

Leaders must shape-shift roles

CMOs should flex between mentor, hero, and provocateur depending on the brand's moment and market need.

Cultural sensing beats campaign volume

Tuning into cultural undercurrents allows brands to create movements rather than noise.



**Storytelling is expressive,
but narrative intelligence is
interpretive. It's about knowing
what needs to be said, and when.**

Henry Wong

Chief Marketing Officer, Borealis Foods

Why CMOs Must Think Like CEOs (or Be Replaced by One).

Speaker



Venky Shankar

Academic Director, Brierley Institute for Customer Engagement

Key Takeaways

CMOs must master the business

To earn influence, marketers must demonstrate bottom-line impact and business literacy.

From storytelling to story-doing

Vision is vital, but execution is what builds credibility.

Metrics that matter

Marketers should prioritize metrics tied to enterprise value, not just campaign success.

Internal partnerships matter

CMOs must be connectors between teams, especially finance, IT, and operations.

Summary

Venky Shankar urged marketing leaders to adopt a CEO mindset – combining creativity with strategic, financial, and operational acumen. He challenged CMOs to own growth, data fluency, and customer lifetime value while contributing meaningfully to board-level discussions.



CMOs who think like CEOs don't just tell great brand stories – they deliver business outcomes.

Venky Shankar

Academic Director, Brierley Institute for Customer Engagement



Resilience in Action.

Speakers



Todd Blyleven

Chief Marketing Officer,
USA Softball

Summary

Todd Blyleven shared a personal and professional journey that fused marketing with emotional resilience. Reflecting on surviving the Las Vegas shooting and supporting athletes through adversity, he illustrated how brands can lead by embodying human strength and grace.

Key Takeaways

Resilience is brand currency

In a crisis or challenge, how a brand shows up matters more than what it says.

Leaders must model vulnerability

Transparent leadership creates loyalty and emotional alignment.

Sports as storytelling

Athletic experiences offer rich narratives for brand identity and community.

Purpose beats polish

Audiences respond to realness over perfection in high-stakes moments.



Whether you're an entrepreneur or an established corporate executive, you've made it to this point. So why is it so hard for us to ask for help?

Todd Blyleven

Chief Marketing Officer, USA Softball



The Choice Is Yours: The Red Pill, the Blue Pill, and the Truth About Social.

Speakers



Ian Baer
Founder & CEO, Sooth

Summary

Ian Baer peeled back the curtain on social media influence, challenging marketers to confront the algorithmic distortion and echo chambers shaping today's consumer reality. His session highlighted the power of clarity, truth, and ethical storytelling.

Key Takeaways

Social is a trust battleground

Brand trust is earned when content reflects truth, not trends.

AI manipulation is real

Understanding how algorithms affect visibility is crucial to responsible marketing.

Clear values drive clarity

Authentic values help brands stand out amid noise and contradiction.

CMOs as ethical guides

Marketing leaders have a duty to resist manipulation and lead with integrity.



**People want the truth.
And if we don't give it to
them, someone or something
else will.**

Ian Baer
Founder & CEO, Sooth



Progress Is Human.

The CMO Insight Summit spotlighted a pivotal truth: marketing has outgrown the comfort zone of pure performance metrics. Today's CMOs are not just storytellers – they're strategists, culture carriers, and trust-builders.

Across every session, one idea resonated clearly: human connection is the real metric that matters. Whether it's narrative intelligence, real-time crisis response, or emotionally charged branding, the power to move people lies in authenticity.

Three enduring lessons emerged:

Your teams are your edge.

The best CMOs champion emotional intelligence, cross-functional trust, and personal resilience. Are your people empowered to speak up, show up, and lead?

True collaboration is a process.

Alignment across marketing, finance, tech, and leadership teams isn't just functional, it's non-negotiable. Do your systems reward cooperation or reinforce silos?

Smart tools still need smarter humans.

From AI to social algorithms, tech only amplifies what already exists. Are your digital tools enhancing clarity and purpose, or adding noise?

Let this be your reminder: progress isn't about being louder or faster. It's about being braver, bolder, and more human.

Stay tuned.

Our content doesn't end here – look out for more blogs, interviews, and footage from the summit, and be sure to check out our calendar of upcoming events.

We look forward to seeing how you use these insights to grow your organization and explore new challenges.

CMO Insight is a GDS Summit. GDS Group is the data-driven executive engagement company. Our mission is to empower our executive and partner communities. Accelerating their growth through transformative relationships and actionable insight.

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See you next time!