

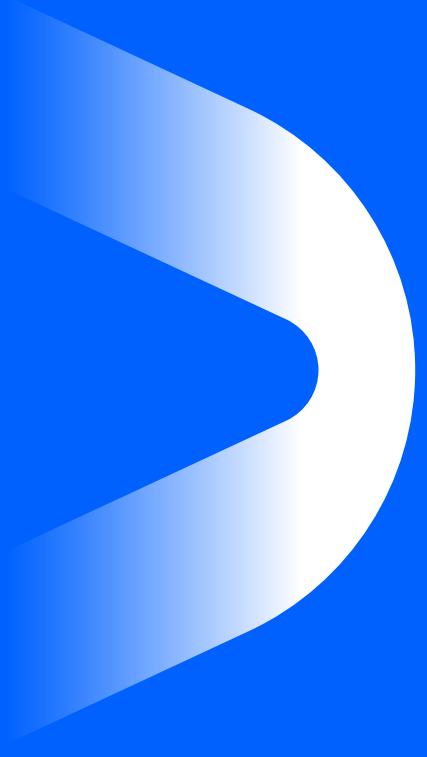


Cracking the Code of Conversions

How Marketers Win the Battle for Attention

Custom Research Report by StackAdapt and Ascend2

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In today's fragmented digital landscape, capturing and maintaining audience attention is more challenging than ever.

With budgets under pressure, tech stacks expanding, and AI reshaping workflows in real time, agency leaders are being forced to reevaluate what truly drives conversions.

To uncover what's working (and what's not), StackAdapt partnered with Ascend2 to survey 267 senior marketing professionals across the US.

This report shows how modern agencies are reallocating their budgets, measuring performance, integrating technology, and leveraging AI, highlighting the strategies that distinguish high-performing marketers from the rest. If you're looking to future-proof your marketing approach, this is your new playbook.



Executive Summary

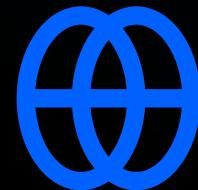
Marketing is shifting—not incrementally, but fundamentally.

The survey results show that today's top-performing agencies are redesigning how they approach brand and performance marketing, use AI, structure multi-channel campaigns, and measure success. They are focusing on building smarter, more integrated systems that turn fragmentation into growth.

Here's what you need to know.



5 Big Shifts You Can't Ignore



Brand budgets are back, but integration with performance is key.

Agencies are investing more in brand equity, but the leaders are ensuring brand and performance operate as one unified strategy, not two competing forces.



Campaign success is tied to broader, deeper measurement.

Top agencies are tracking more KPIs across both brand and performance, prioritizing lifetime value, brand sentiment, and incrementality alongside traditional metrics.



AI is moving from pilot projects to core infrastructure.

Top performers use AI across creative, targeting, measurement, and media buying—giving them a clear edge in multi-channel campaigns.



Multi-channel strategies must be wider and more connected.

Running across five or more channels is now a baseline for success, but channel orchestration—tying messaging and goals together—is the real differentiator.



Data integration is becoming a competitive requirement.

Agencies that unify their martech and adtech stacks are better equipped to drive precision, personalization, and faster optimization across campaigns.

3 Must-Do Actions for the Next 12 Months

1

Align brand and performance teams to shared KPIs and unified messaging.

Tear down the silos now. Sustainable growth depends on a connected, end-to-end strategy across the full funnel.

2

Integrate your email and programmatic campaigns through a unified platform.

Agencies are gaining a control and measurement advantage by consolidating upper- and lower-funnel tactics within a single system.

3

Expand your 1st-party data capabilities from targeting to predictive modelling.

The next frontier is not just owning the data—it's dynamically applying it to optimize messaging, creative, and channel strategy in real time.

The Modern Marketing Mandate

What's Changing in 2025

Marketers aren't just fighting for attention—they're fighting against exhaustion.

With audiences bombarded across channels, the rules of engagement are shifting. Throw in AI-driven disruption, tighter budgets, and rising pressure to prove ROI, and it's clear: the old playbook doesn't work anymore.

Today's senior marketers are navigating a new tension between long-term brand-building and the relentless demands of short-term performance. AI promises scale, but its role in creativity, ethics, and strategic oversight is still being debated. Meanwhile, campaign complexity is surging, and tech stacks are bloated—but not always integrated.

State of the Market Pulse



Attention spans are shorter, but expectations are higher.



Multi-channel campaigns are the norm, but not always effective.



Most agencies are still figuring out how to make brand and performance work *together*.

Brand and Performance Marketing

Blurring the Lines

The balance is tipping, with agencies leaning towards brand-building over performance.

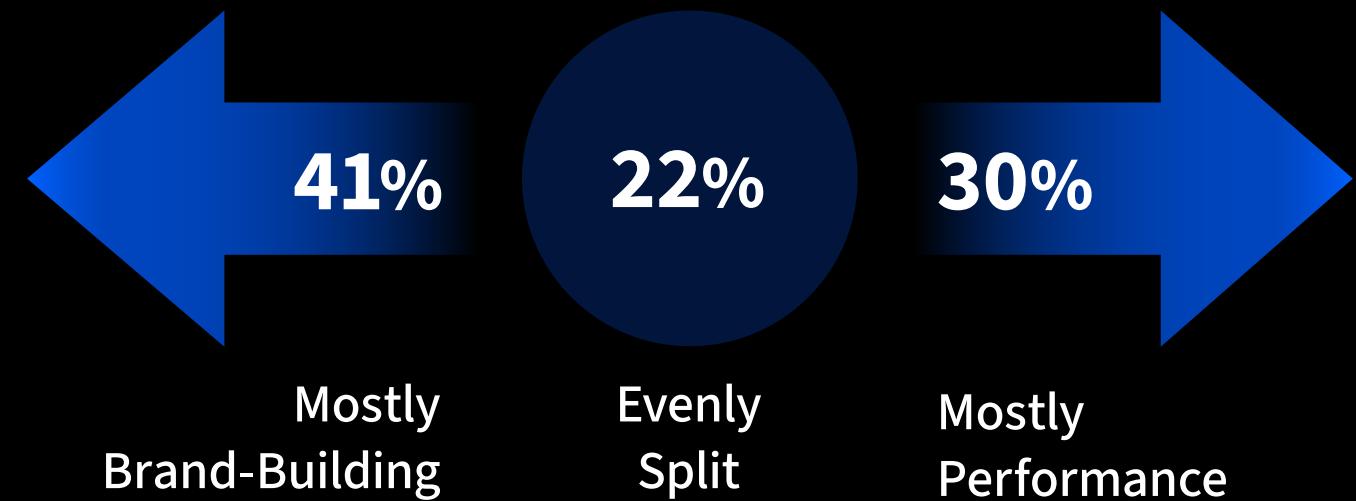


Executives (31%) are more likely to prioritize brand than non-executives (19%).



58% of agencies have shifted toward brand over the past five years.

Where Budget Is Going



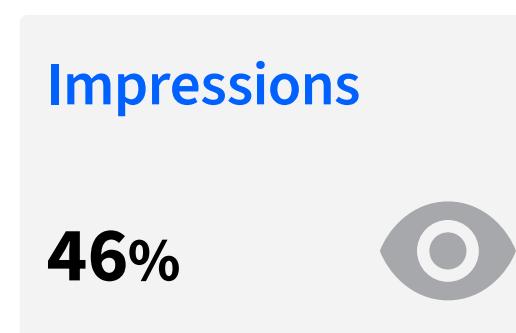
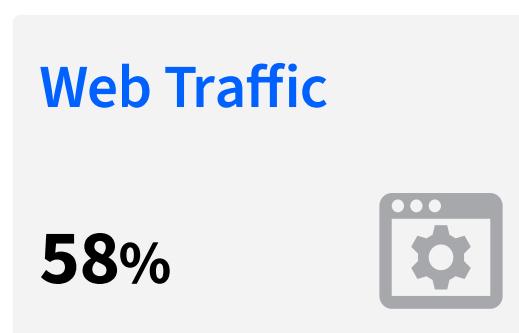
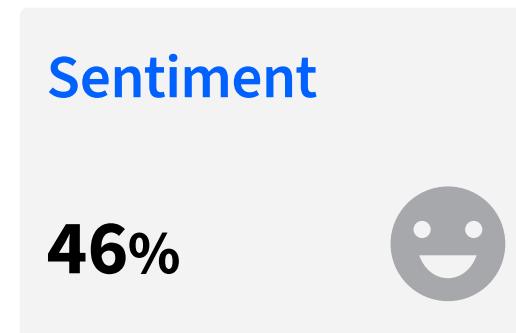
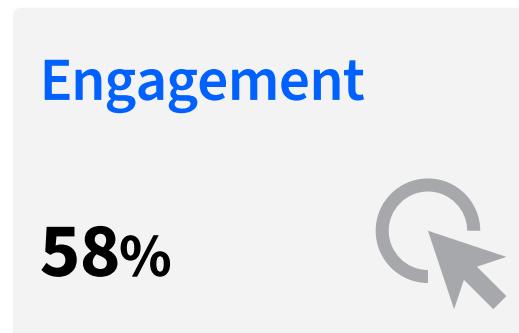
For marketers, this shift signals a need to rethink how resources are allocated across the funnel. Building brand equity no longer comes at the expense of short-term performance.

Instead, gradual reallocation of budgets, paired with sharper measurement, can create a more sustainable pipeline of leads and revenue over time.

Measuring Success

The KPIs That Really Matter

Top-performing agencies aren't just measuring more—they're measuring *smarter*. Most agencies track common brand KPIs like:



On the performance side, what sets leading agencies apart is their emphasis on **long-term value**. Metrics like customer lifetime value and SQLs take precedence, showing a shift away from surface-level engagement toward indicators of sustainable growth.

	Top Performers	Others
CLV	Customer Lifetime Value	54%
SQL	Sales Qualified Leads	56%
CPA	Cost Per Acquisition	58%

KEY TAKEAWAY

Success today is measured beyond immediate clicks or conversions. Agencies that track CLV, sentiment, and SQLs are better positioned to justify brand investments, demonstrate impact, and defend budgets during tighter economic conditions.



Brand and Performance

Better Together

Agencies have led the shift toward brand-building over the past five years, with 31% reporting it's more of a focus (compared to 25% of digital marketing firms).

Top performers aren't separating brand and performance anymore. Here's how they're making it work:

45%
integrate
martech and
adtech data.

44%
align
strategies to
shared goals.

43%
unify
full-funnel
messaging.

BRAND AND PERFORMANCE MARKETING: BLURRING THE LINES

The most effective multi-channel strategies are more likely to have undergone major shifts in brand-building over the last five years.

About 41% of agencies with the most effective multi-channel conversion strategies have significantly shifted their budgets toward brand-building in recent years. In contrast, only 12% of less effective agencies have made a similar shift.

Marketers who align brand and performance strategies around shared objectives and unified messaging are avoiding silos and driving long-term growth.

When every touchpoint reinforces both brand trust and immediate action, agencies create systems that are easier to optimize and harder for competitors to replicate.



Multi-channel leaders are significantly more likely to:

Align on
shared goals

55%



Create unified
messaging

51%



Use cross-channel
tracking tools

45%

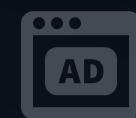


Campaign Performance Drivers

What Moves the Needle

Top Conversion Drivers	% of Agencies
1 Audience Targeting	39%
2 Brand Awareness / Trust	39%
3 Advertising Channel	32%
4 Ad Creative	31%
5 Personalization	31%
6 Market Trends	31%
7 Budget Allocation / Bidding	27%
8 Retargeting Tactics	19%
9 Type of Inventory	14%

A conversion isn't the result of a single tactic—it comes from layered strategies, precise targeting, and strong creative.



Advertising Agency Top Drivers

Audience Targeting	50%
Creative Quality	35%



Marketing Agency Top Drivers

Brand Awareness	44%
Budget Strategy	35%

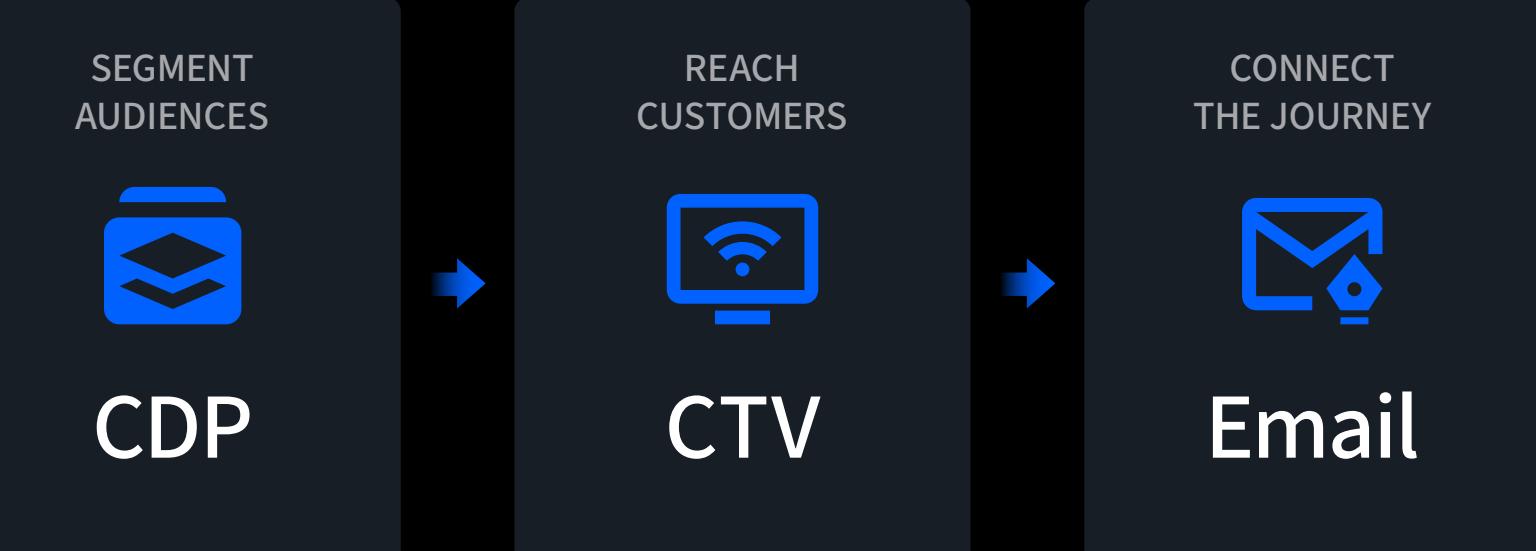
vs

According to agency marketers, precision targeting and brand awareness are the top drivers of marketing performance today.

These aren't separate levers—they reinforce each other. High-performing campaigns find the right audiences and build emotional connections early, aligning targeting and storytelling to accelerate results.

How to Balance Brand and Performance for Long-Term Growth

For example, marketers can use 1st-party data to segment high-value audiences, deliver awareness-driven creative, then follow up with personalized outreach to deliver a seamless journey that builds brand equity and drives action.



Shifting budget toward brand-building doesn't mean sacrificing short-term results. Agencies are adopting phased strategies that reallocate resources gradually, track brand lift, and scale efforts based on performance.

With tools like StackAdapt that now unite programmatic advertising and martech functions like CDPs and email campaigns under one platform, it's possible to connect upper-funnel storytelling with bottom-funnel activation.

Channels That Deliver the Highest ROI

Top Conversion Drivers	% of Agencies
Social Media Ads	42%
Video Ads	33%
Influencer or Affiliate Marketing	28%
Paid Search, Display, and Email	22%
CTV Ads	21%
Audio, DOOH, In-Game, and Native	14–16%
Direct Mail	13%

Not all channels are created equal—some are clearly delivering stronger returns than others. Ultimately, the channels that deliver the highest ROI depend on the campaign's goals.



Brand-building agencies see more ROI from DOOH, native, and audio.



Performance-focused agencies report stronger ROI from in-game, social media, and influencers.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Marketers should avoid treating channel selection as a one-size-fits-all decision. Ultimately, improving ROI depends on aligning channel strategy with campaign objectives. While brand-building efforts thrive in broader, storytelling-driven media, direct response tactics succeed with more interactive formats.

Top Challenges

Doing More With Less

Agencies are under pressure to balance results with efficiency. The top challenge—rising acquisition costs—is followed closely by resource allocation and platform complexity.

Executives

Data
Compliance
32%

CAC
38%

vs

Non-Execs

Messaging
28%

Platform
Management
34%

Top Challenges

% of Agencies

High Acquisition Costs	36%
Budget Constraints	33%
Managing Multiple Platforms	33%
Data Privacy and Tracking Limitations	30%
Ad Fatigue and Audience Saturation	29%
Creating Targeted Messaging	25%
Proving ROI	24%
Attribution Across Touchpoints	22%

KEY TAKEAWAY

Cost pressures and tech complexity are forcing marketers to prioritize agility. Agencies that streamline tools, unify data, and double down on the most effective channels will have a significant operational advantage in an environment where doing more with less is the norm.

Connecting the Dots

Marketers are increasingly focused on linking brand-building efforts to bottom-funnel results.

As a result, agencies are turning to analytics, sentiment tracking, and retargeting to close the gap between awareness and action, with top-performing agencies especially focused on using AI and data-driven strategies to unify their brand and performance objectives.

What sets high-performers apart:



51%

More likely to use AI



47%

More likely to use 1st-party data



43%

More likely to unify KPIs

KEY TAKEAWAY

Brand investment needs to come with a clear measurement plan. Agencies that track brand impact early and retarget engaged audiences are building smarter conversion pipelines that get stronger over time.



Top Strategies for Doubling Conversions

Marketers say budget shift is the fix—but are they overlooking higher-impact levers? When marketers were asked how they'd double conversions without extra budget, many favoured reallocating spend to top channels. Yet external studies consistently highlight personalization and AI-driven optimization as key performance drivers—strategies marketers continue to underutilize, revealing a gap between effectiveness and actual prioritization.

Top Tactics Marketers Use to Boost Conversions Without Increasing Budget



30%

Shift ad spend to the top-performing channel.



27%

Improve creative and messaging.



25%

Rely more on AI-driven optimization.



15%

Retargeting and personalization.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Budget agility may be the go-to tactic, but it's not the most transformational. Agencies that lean into personalization and AI, despite lower adoption today, are more likely to unlock scalable conversion gains. The real opportunity isn't just shifting spend. It's evolving how that spend works harder.

Multi- Channel Strategies

Diversification
is the Advantage

The strongest campaigns today are not just multi-channel—they're strategically integrated. Most agencies lean on a mix of social, video, and email to form the core of their multi-channel strategies.

Top performers stand out by integrating more channels across the board versus low performers:



65% Social Media Ads



54% Video Ads



40% CTV Ads



31% Native Ads

Leading agencies are curating channel mixes with purpose. Marketers who think beyond reach to consider how each channel builds on the next will unlock greater campaign momentum and customer engagement.

Brand vs. Performance Preferences

While social media leads for both groups, performance marketers are heavier users (65% vs. 51%). Brand-focused agencies often turn to video and CTV for their storytelling potential and trackability when paired with robust measurement tools. Meanwhile, performance teams continue to rely on channels like display and email for direct response and cost-effective conversions.



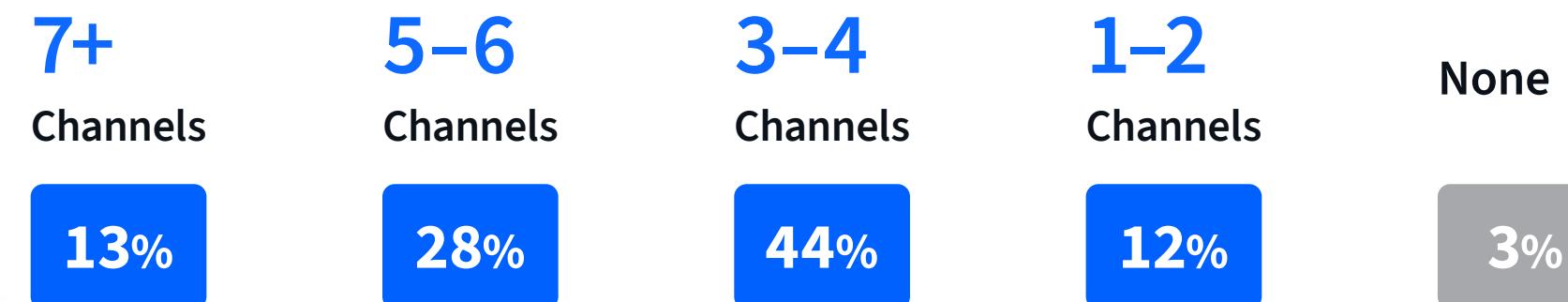
Channel strategy should match intent. Brand-led campaigns benefit from immersive, story-driven media, while performance-driven efforts demand precision and measurable impact, though the lines are blurring as both sides optimize for impact and efficiency.

How Many Channels Is Enough?

Most agencies run campaigns across three to six programmatic channels, but those achieving the best outcomes are spreading wider.

Forty-eight percent of top-performing agencies use five or more channels, compared to just 33% of peers.

Agencies focused on brand-building (48%) are also more likely to embrace wider channel mixes than performance-first teams (39%).



KEY TAKEAWAY

Expanding channel diversity increases exposure and builds resilience. Campaigns anchored across multiple touchpoints are better equipped to adapt to platform shifts, algorithm changes, and evolving consumer behaviour.

What's Getting in the Way?

Executing a true multi-channel strategy isn't easy. Agencies report struggling to align brand and performance goals, manage budgets, and maintain consistent messaging across platforms. Technical complexity—like integrating data and tracking performance across touchpoints—remains a major pain point.

Executives are more concerned with strategic alignment (41% cite brand vs. performance tension), while non-executives feel the strain of daily execution, especially around budgeting (34%) and platform updates (28%).



The biggest threat to multi-channel success is operational friction. Teams that build seamless workflows for budgeting, measurement, and creative adaptation will turn complexity into a competitive advantage.

What's Getting in the Way of Multi-Channel Success

Balancing Brand and Performance

36%

Budget and Resource Management

32%

Consistent Messaging Across Platforms

31%

Attribution and Tracking

30%

Measuring Campaign Effectiveness

28%

Data Integration

25%

Content Creation for Multiple Formats

25%

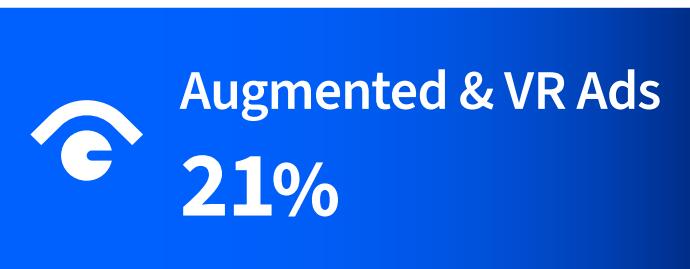
Adapting to Platform Changes

25%

Scaling Campaigns

23%

Where Are Agencies Looking Next?



Looking ahead, many agencies are eyeing emerging formats that offer novelty, engagement, and interactivity, especially as audience attention becomes harder to capture. Channels like AR/VR, podcasting, and digital audio, as well as shoppable ads, lead in interest.

As campaign complexity grows, senior marketers will need to prioritize tools and processes that make cross-channel orchestration feel seamless, turning complexity into a competitive advantage.

Adtech and Martech Stacks

The Infrastructure of High Performance

How Top Teams Leverage Martech and Adtech Together

Building a strong tech stack isn't just about individual tools—it's about how well they work together.

Top-performing teams are far more likely to be using data management platforms, demand-side platforms, attribution tools, social and search platforms, and creative platforms in combination.

Most Commonly Used Tools (% of Agencies)

55%

CRM

47%

CDP

43%

DMP

38%

Identity and Targeting Solutions

35%

DSP

34%

Attribution and Analytics Tools

32%

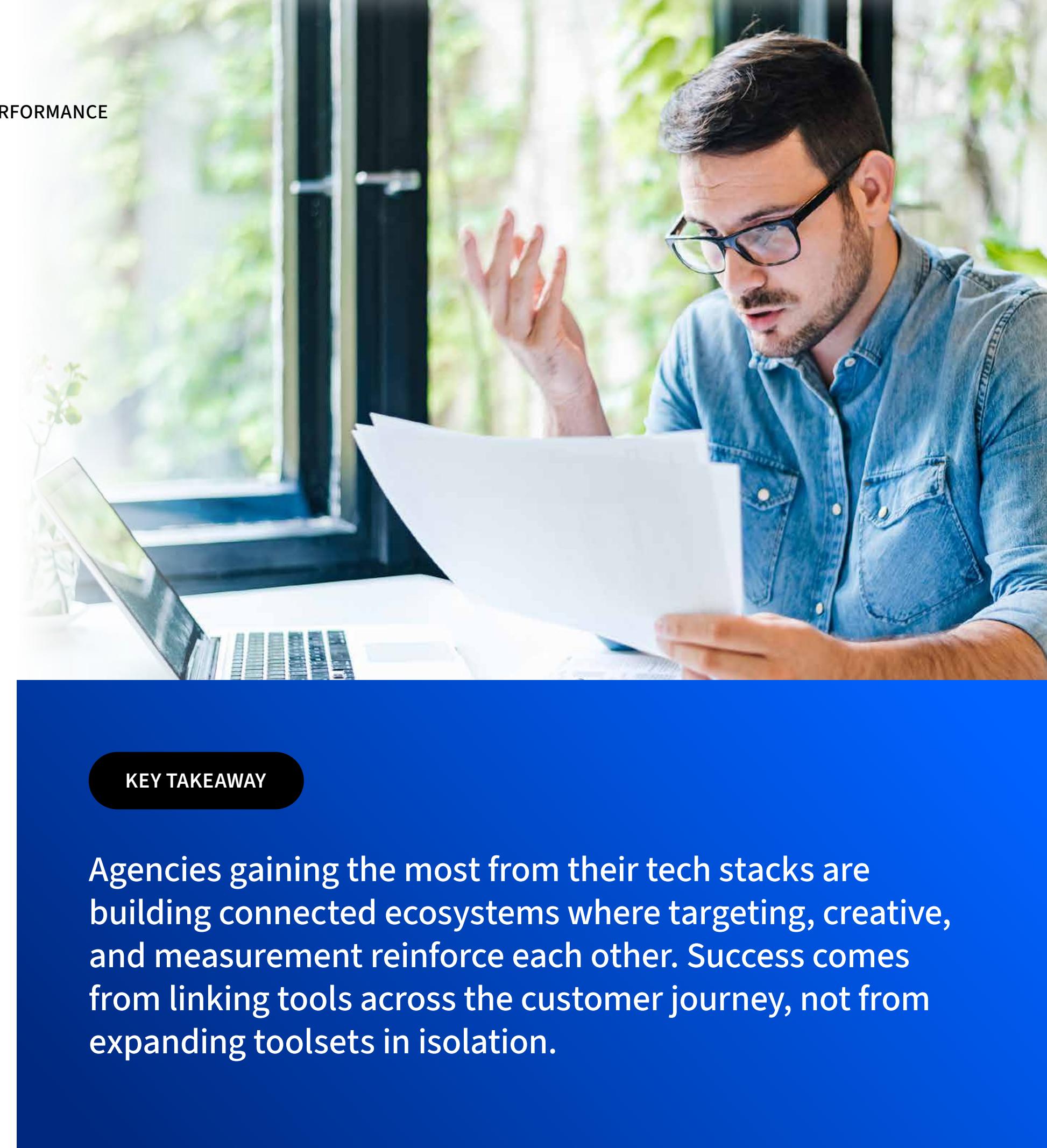
Social and Search Ad Platforms

29%

CMP

Marketers Are Split on Tech Stack Satisfaction

While 46% of agencies report being very satisfied with their tech stacks, this satisfaction is closely tied to the level of advancement and integration of their tools. Satisfaction also tracks closely with the adoption of tools that support measurement, targeting, and creative execution.



KEY TAKEAWAY

Agencies gaining the most from their tech stacks are building connected ecosystems where targeting, creative, and measurement reinforce each other. Success comes from linking tools across the customer journey, not from expanding toolsets in isolation.

Where Agencies Plan to Invest Next

CRM and CDP tools are the most likely areas for expansion in the year ahead, signalling a continued shift toward audience-centric marketing strategies rooted in owned customer data.



Expanding CRM, CDP, and DMP usage reflects a clear move toward marketing strategies rooted in owned customer data.

Future growth will hinge on how effectively agencies structure their systems to surface insights and activate audiences across the funnel—especially when working with platforms that include built-in data infrastructure to unify targeting, measurement, and optimization.

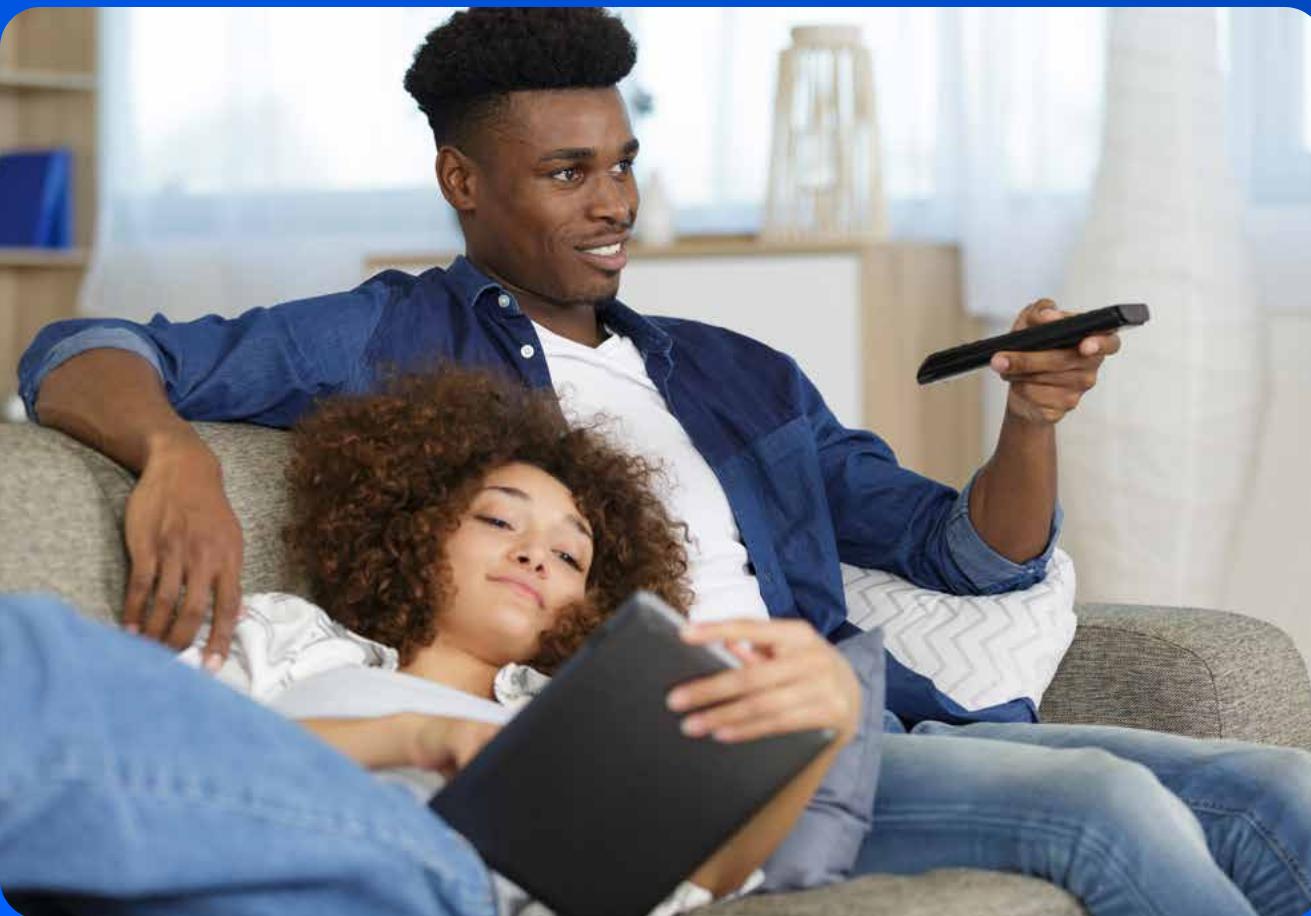
Tools Agencies Plan to Invest in Next	% of Agencies
CRM	51%
CDP	48%
DMP	43%
Attribution and Analytics Tools	36%
DSP	35%
Identity and Targeting Solutions	34%
CMP	31%
Social and Search Ad Platforms	24%



STACKADAPT POV

Unified Channel Strategies Matter

As marketing becomes more complex, agencies gaining ground are streamlining how channels work together.



A well-orchestrated mix—executed across social, video, CTV, and display—delivers stronger results when backed by consistent messaging and connected data. Unifying programmatic and martech within a single platform reduces friction between strategy and execution, allowing teams to optimize faster, align creative across the funnel, and make smarter decisions with shared insights.

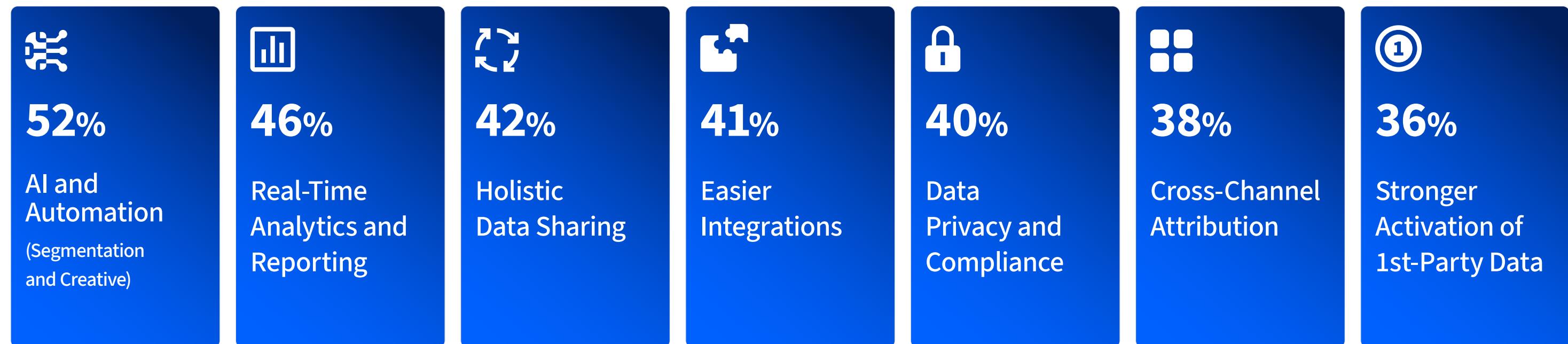
What's Missing?

Agencies Want
More Intelligence
and Integration

Most agencies see the next wave of value coming from better intelligence and ease of use. AI and automation top the wishlist, followed by improved analytics and cleaner data flow between platforms. Integration pain points and siloed reporting remain a common barrier.

As tech stacks grow more complex, agencies are focusing on removing silos and accelerating access to insights. Streamlining data flow between platforms will be critical to adapting faster, optimizing smarter, and scaling results without adding operational drag.

Where Agencies See Greater Value Ahead (% of Agencies)



1st-Party Data

The Strategic Engine

Agencies are applying 1st-party data in increasingly sophisticated ways, using it not only to target and personalize but also to drive predictive analytics and creative decision-making.

Performance-focused agencies tend to utilize 1st-party data more aggressively for bottom-funnel outcomes, such as retargeting and attribution, while brand-led teams demonstrate a broader application across audience insights and ad creative.

Advertising agencies lead in personalization and targeting, while marketing agencies report more use of lookalike and predictive models. Top-performing agencies consistently report higher usage across all data applications.

Most Valuable Data for Optimization

% of Agencies

Personalization

52%

Targeting and Segmentation

49%

Predictive Analytics

40%

Dynamic Content Optimization

38%

Retargeting

37%

Attribution Modelling

34%

Lookalike Modelling

31%

KEY TAKEAWAY

First-party data is becoming central to personalization, targeting, and predictive modelling. Agencies using this data across creative, media buying, and measurement can anticipate customer needs and adjust campaigns with greater precision.

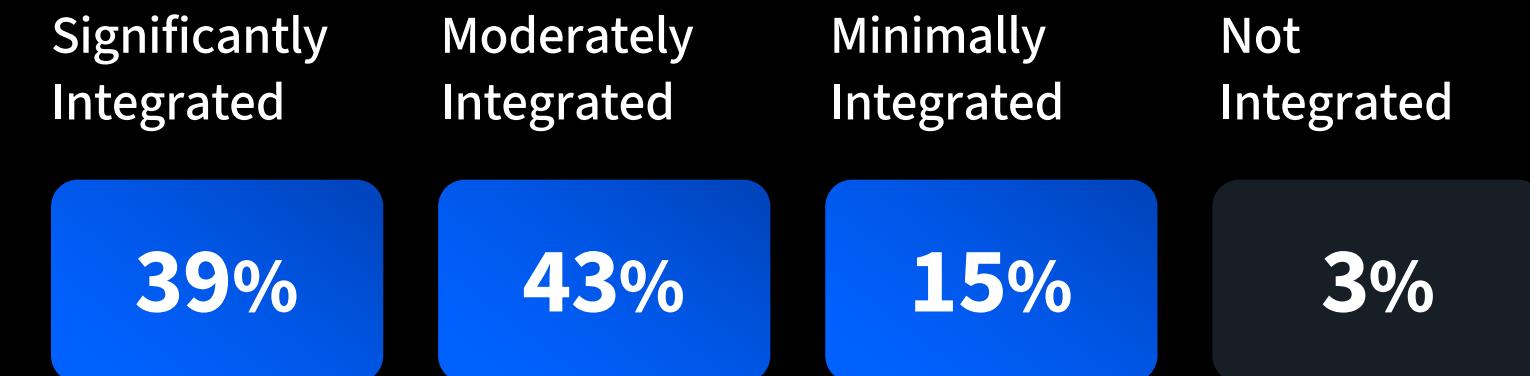
The Use of AI

Emerging Essential, Not Optional

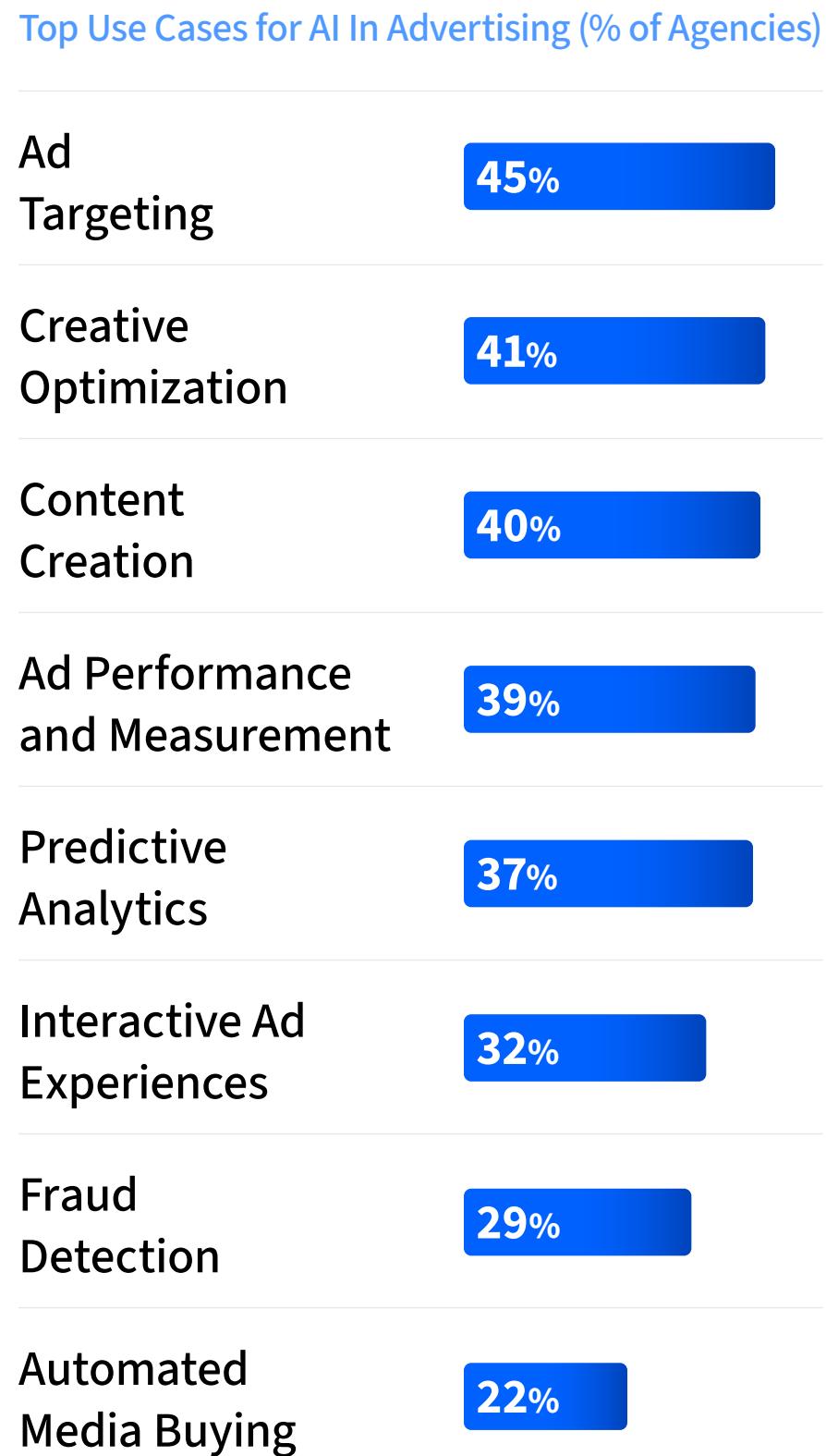
Agencies are at different stages of AI adoption, but the momentum is clear. Eighty-two percent report AI is either significantly or moderately integrated in their workflows, while 18% of agencies still have little or no integration.

Agencies with more robust AI integration are also more likely to run highly effective multi-channel campaigns (76% compared to 30% of others) and report far higher satisfaction with their tech stacks (74% versus 29%).

AI Integration in Workflows (% of Agencies)



AI maturity is becoming a clear predictor of broader marketing success. Agencies that operationalize AI across workflows gain not only efficiency but also faster insights, smarter channel management, and tighter feedback loops that sharpen campaign performance over time.



Where AI Is Being Used

AI is playing a growing role across nearly all areas of advertising operations. The majority of agencies are using it for ad targeting, creative optimization, and content creation, while more advanced uses, such as interactive ad experiences and automated media buying, are gaining traction.

Among top-performing multi-channel marketers, AI is being applied more broadly, especially for performance measurement, predictive analytics, interactive experiences, and automation. These agencies are also more likely to use AI in ad targeting and fraud prevention.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Using AI for measurement, optimization, and interactive experiences marks a shift from AI as a support tool to a strategic engine. Teams that embed AI across creative and analytics will move faster and gain an edge in competitive markets.

The Risks

Confidence Grows, But Concerns Remain

Despite growing adoption, agencies still have clear reservations. Data privacy and compliance are the top concerns (32%), followed by issues related to human oversight (28%), brand safety, AI bias, and ad fraud (27%). A quarter or more of agencies also mention ethical concerns (18%) and the challenge of balancing automation with personalization (27%).

Executives are more focused on governance-related risks like compliance, oversight, and fraud, whereas non-executives express concern around execution, ethics, and audience experience. This split reflects the different responsibilities and pressure points of each group.



KEY TAKEAWAY

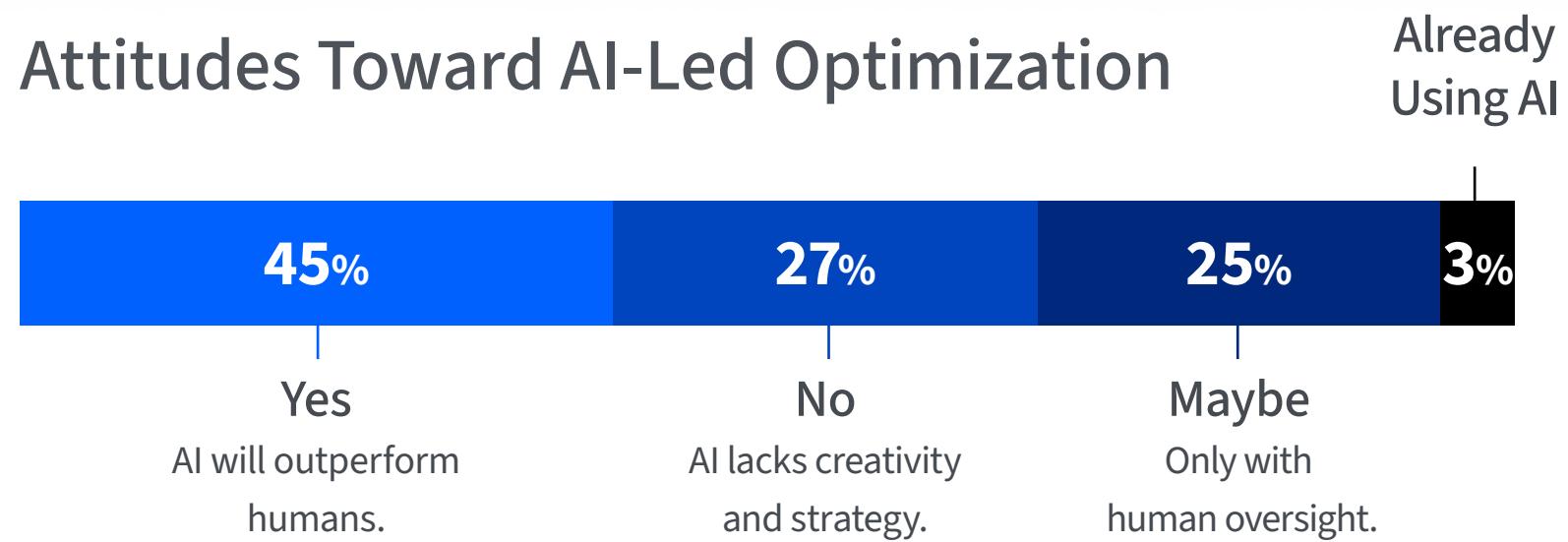
Confidence in AI adoption will grow as marketers establish clearer governance, measurement, and brand safety frameworks. Agencies that build in safeguards and develop a deliberate oversight model will be positioned to scale AI without exposing themselves to compliance or reputational risks.

AI vs. Human Optimization

Where Marketers Stand

Nearly half of agencies (45%) say they would fully adopt AI for campaign optimization if it consistently delivered better performance, even if it meant removing human decision-making. Still, 27% are not convinced, citing AI's limitations in creativity and strategic thinking. Another 25% would adopt it, but only under human supervision.

Attitudes Toward AI-Led Optimization



STACKADAPT POV

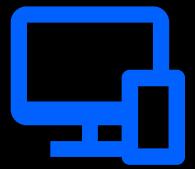
AI Integration Matters in Digital Marketing

Integrating AI into digital marketing gives marketers a serious edge. Predictive analytics improve decision-making, hyper-personalization boosts audience engagement, and precise targeting drives greater efficiency.

At StackAdapt, we see AI as a catalyst for building smarter, faster, more adaptable, and creative campaigns—helping agencies move beyond basic automation toward true competitive advantage.

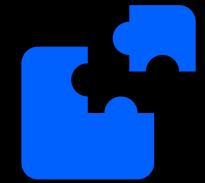
CHEAT SHEET

10 Plays That Drive Success For High- Performing Agencies



Run Campaigns Across Multiple Channels

Agencies using five or more channels are more likely to report better results.



Integrate CRMs, CDPs, and DSPs

A connected tech stack is proven to improve targeting, measurement, and performance.



Use Social, Video, and CTV Together

Top performers consistently pair social ads with high-impact visual channels to maximize reach and engagement.



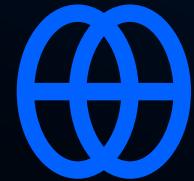
Invest in AI, but Don't Remove Human Oversight

Agencies using AI report better results, but human input for messaging and strategy is still essential.



Apply 1st-Party Data Throughout the Funnel

Use 1st-party data to improve personalization, segmentation, and bottom-funnel performance.



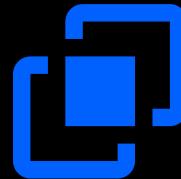
Align Brand and Performance Goals

High-performing teams create shared KPIs and unified messaging to break down silos and deliver consistent results.



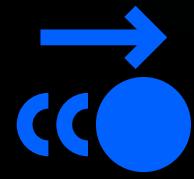
Expand KPI Measurement Beyond the Basics

Track metrics like brand sentiment, reach, and recall alongside performance indicators such as CPA and CLV.



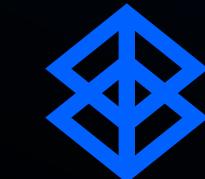
Run Incrementality Testing

Top agencies measure campaign lift and impact beyond surface-level metrics to justify investment and improve ROI.



Automate Repetitive Tasks

Top agencies automate manual tasks like ad buying and personalization to increase efficiency and performance.



Evolve Your Tech Stack

The most successful agencies are expanding capabilities each year with tools for real-time analytics, data integration, and AI.

WHAT'S NEXT?

From Playbooks to Practice

The findings in this report reveal that high-performing agencies aren't just reacting to change—they're designing systems, strategies, and tech stacks that anticipate it.

Whether it's tighter integration between brand and performance, more advanced use of 1st-party data, or adopting AI across creative and measurement workflows, the most successful marketers are moving from siloed tactics to connected ecosystems.

What separates leaders from laggards isn't access to tools—it's how the tools are deployed in service of clear, shared goals.

Looking ahead, expect continued growth in AI-assisted personalization, more nuanced measurement frameworks that bridge brand equity and conversion, and greater reliance on predictive analytics to drive channel selection.



The opportunity now lies in turning insight into action—building strategies that are agile, data-rich, and aligned from the first impression to the final conversion.



StackAdapt is the leading technology company that empowers marketers to reach, engage, and convert audiences with precision. With 465 billion automated optimizations per second, the AI-powered **StackAdapt Marketing Platform** seamlessly connects brand and performance marketing to drive measurable results across the entire customer journey.

The most forward-thinking marketers choose StackAdapt to orchestrate high-impact campaigns across programmatic advertising and marketing channels.

www.stackadapt.com