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Hype Cycle for Digital Advertising, 2026

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Initiatives: Technologies and Markets

Despite macro uncertainty, advertising expenditures keep growing. The 2026 Hype Cycle reflects this growth, as well as generative AI shockwaves, media disruptions, antitrust developments and measurement challenges. Use this Hype Cycle to assess advertising innovations and help guide your organization's adaptation strategies.

Analysis

What You Need to Know

CMOs must track, assess, and harness a myriad of changes and innovations that shape advertising (paid media) strategy. These decisions carry significant weight. According to Gartner's 2026 CMO Spend Survey, paid media and agency fees together account for 50.6% of overall marketing budgets. [1] The substantial portion of the budget allocated to advertising underscores how heavily organizations rely on paid media to drive growth, and the importance of effective planning, execution, and measurement.

As AI accelerates media industry transformation, it has become a foundational force shaping how advertising innovations and trends evolve. The use of media, creative, data, and algorithms is advancing rapidly across ad platforms, agencies, and technology providers, with increasing emphasis on data collaboration and privacy-centric approaches. At the same time, CMOs confront strategic questions about the future role of search, social, answer engines, apps, agents, and assistants.

The Hype Cycle

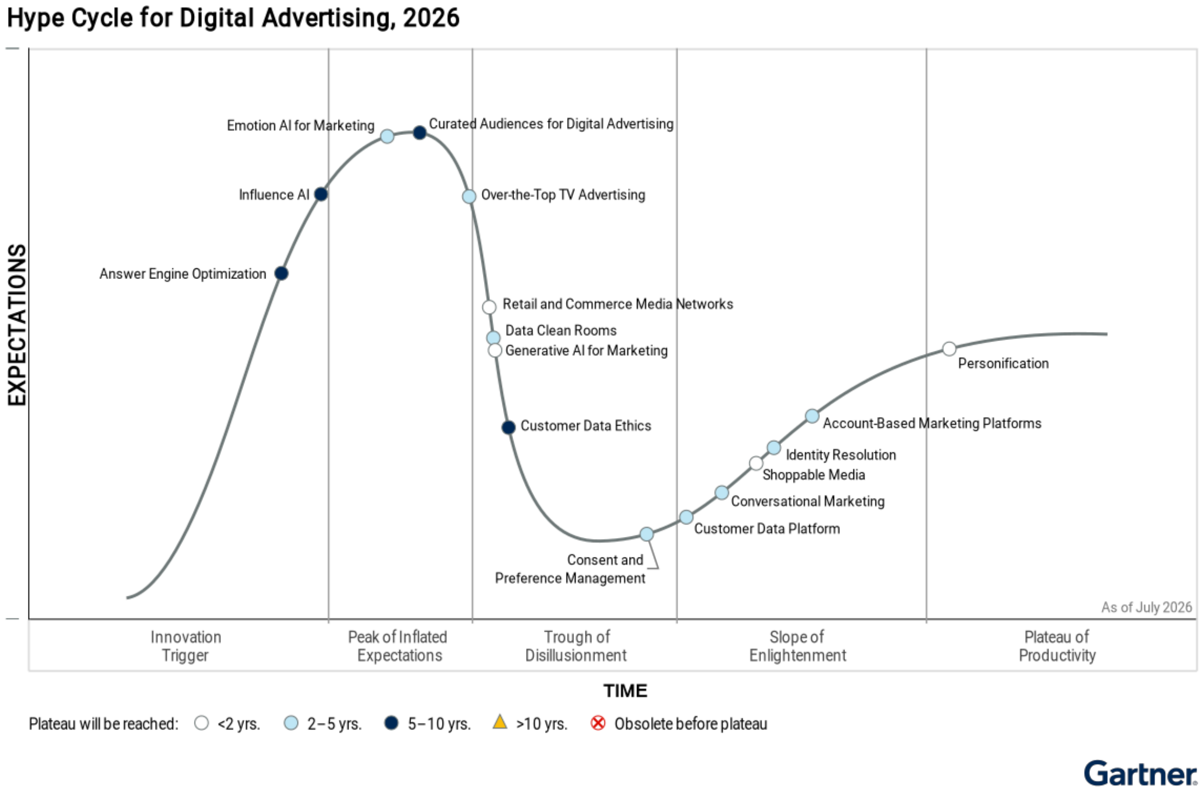
The AI disruption to advertising manifests directly across multiple Hype Cycle entries, with generative and agentic AI now driving both rapid experimentation and uneven maturation. Answer engine optimization, now in its second year on the curve, continues its steady advance, propelled by conversational interfaces built on large language models (LLMs). Generative AI for marketing is beginning to tip beyond peak expectations, while influence AI and curated audiences for digital advertising progress toward the top of the curve as use cases expand.

Several innovation profiles are moving especially fast. Personification has made an outsized leap forward, rapidly progressing as marketers adopt privacy-resilient approaches to audience activation. Similarly, shoppable media continues to gain momentum, reflecting strong demand for formats that more seamlessly connect content, media, and commerce. Emotion AI for marketing is seeing more measured progress, maintaining its position as organizations continue to evaluate its practical scalability and impact.

In contrast, the outlook for other innovation profiles is mixed. Retail and commerce media networks continue their descent as expectations reset, while over-the-top TV advertising shows slower progression as fragmentation and measurement complexity persist. Data clean rooms have advanced sharply into the Trough of Disillusionment as organizations contend with integration complexity, operational overhead and unclear return on investment. Customer data ethics, along with consent and preference management, are also moving deeper into more complex stages of adoption amid evolving global privacy requirements.

Meanwhile, a set of foundational innovation profiles is progressing with more measured, consistent advancement. Account-based marketing platforms, conversational marketing, customer data platforms, and identity resolution continue to mature steadily as organizations refine execution and scale adoption. Across the Hype Cycle, these patterns reflect a market characterized by rapid forward movement, increasing divergence between breakthrough innovation and operational reality, and a growing emphasis on building resilient, privacy-centric data foundations.

Figure 1: Hype Cycle for Digital Advertising, 2026



The Priority Matrix

Generative AI for marketing stands out as the most transformative innovation with a time to maturity of less than two years. It is already reshaping creative production, media optimization, and campaign execution. CMOs should accelerate adoption by scaling proven use cases across workflows, embedding AI into operating models, and upskilling teams to drive measurable efficiency and performance gains (see AI Use-Case Assessment for Advertising).

Personification is also approaching mainstream adoption within two years as it integrates into curated audiences and data clean room environments. By enabling privacy-resilient targeting at a persona level, it allows marketing, media, and data teams to maintain relevance without reliance on individual identifiers. Early adopters are gaining advantage through more scalable and compliant audience strategies.

Beyond the near term, answer engine optimization (AEO) and influence AI represent high-impact opportunities with longer time horizons. CMOs should begin preparing for AEO by monitoring brand visibility within conversational, LLM-based environments and testing content strategies optimized for answer-driven discovery.

The continued maturation of customer data platforms, identity resolution, and data clean rooms reinforces their role as critical components of a modern marketing data foundation. CMOs should prioritize interoperability and activation of these capabilities to support both immediate AI-driven gains and longer-term transformation.

Table 1: Priority Matrix for Digital Advertising, 2026

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Benefit	*Years to Mainstream Adoption*			
↓	*Less Than 2 Years* ↓	*2 to 5 Years* ↓	*5 to 10 Years* ↓	*More Than 10 Years* ↓
Transformational	Generative AI for Marketing		Answer Engine Optimization Influence AI	
High	Retail and Commerce Media Networks	Account-Based Marketing Platforms Conversational Marketing Customer Data Platform Identity Resolution Over-the-Top TV Advertising	Customer Data Ethics	
Moderate	Personification Shoppable Media	Consent and Preference Management Data Clean Rooms Emotion AI for Marketing	Curated Audiences for Digital Advertising	
Low				

Source: Gartner (July 2026)

Off the Hype Cycle

The following innovation has left the Hype Cycle for Digital Advertising, 2026:

- **Visual Intelligence:** This Hype Cycle entry has been removed as a stand-alone innovation, as its core capabilities are increasingly embedded across adjacent areas. Image-, video-, and text-based product discovery are now integrated into broader search, content and commerce ecosystems — including answer engine optimization (AEO) and retail and commerce media ecosystems — rather than evolving independently. Leaders should evaluate these capabilities within wider discovery and activation strategies, rather than as a distinct investment area.

On the Rise

Answer Engine Optimization

Analysis By: Noam Dorros

Benefit Rating: Transformational

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Emerging

Definition:

Answer engine optimization (AEO) refers to optimizing content to appear in direct answers provided by public search and large language model (LLM) answer engines. AEO tactics and technology promise to help marketers measure and manage the disruptive impact of GenAI on search.

Why This Is Important

Answer engines and LLM algorithms continue to profoundly disrupt human behavior and communications patterns. As information discovery and retrieval habits are upended, marketing must adapt. CMOs must rethink how to build brands, drive traffic, generate leads and acquire customers. The balance of paid, earned and owned media investments must be reevaluated. AEO refers to the nascent but essential process of maximizing marketing outcomes in this new world.

Business Impact

AEO aims to help marketers harness answer engine disruption by creating and measuring content that is readily discovered and featured by answer engines and AI chatbots. AEO focuses on providing clear, concise answers to specific user queries. It aims to structure content for readability and extraction by LLMs, thereby boosting visibility and increasing brand trust. By using AEO to quickly meet user intent, businesses may gain an edge, despite reductions in site traffic due to answer engine zero-click search dynamics. AEO can be reasonably viewed as an incremental update to search engine optimization (SEO), but its continued evolution is likely to be convoluted as competition for Google heats up and users establish new behavior patterns.

Drivers

The adoption of AEO is driven by several key factors that reflect changes in technology, user behavior and the digital landscape:

- **Growth of AI and conversational search:** Advanced AI models and chatbots (such as ChatGPT) can interpret and respond to complex queries. Users now expect immediate, accurate answers rather than sifting through multiple webpages, pushing businesses to optimize for these answer engines.
- **Rise of voice search and virtual assistants:** The increasing use of voice-activated devices, such as smartphones, smart speakers and virtual assistants, has shifted how users search for information. Voice queries are more conversational and specific, making concise, direct answers more valuable.
- **Increased competition for visibility:** As organic search becomes more competitive, securing placement as a featured answer or snippet can significantly boost visibility and traffic. AEO provides a strategic advantage by positioning content where users are most likely to see it.
- **Enhanced search engine capabilities:** Search engines are increasingly capable of parsing structured data, understanding context and extracting answers from well-optimized content. Businesses must adapt their content to these evolving algorithms.
- **Motivational targeting:** In contrast with traditional keyword-based search queries, which marketers interpret as signals of basic intent, conversations with extended context are more likely to reveal the "why" behind a request. This ability offers marketers opportunities to produce content aligned to more specific user concerns, collapsing purchase cycles and enabling more tailored solutions.
- **Extended content strategy:** Traditional website content is constrained by information architecture design and site-search limitations. Websites designed with AEO in mind have few limitations on the breadth and depth of content exposed to indexers.

Obstacles

AEO presents several obstacles and challenges:

- **Lack of algorithm transparency:** Search engines and AI assistants do not disclose how they select and rank content.
- **Content strategy inertia:** The rise of conversational AI means queries are more nuanced, requiring a more agile content strategy that goes beyond keyword focus to deeper search intent and consumer preferences.

- **Limited data and measurement tools:** It's difficult to track and measure the impact of AEO compared to traditional SEO.
- **Zero-click searches:** When direct answers are provided, users may not click through to your site, limiting traffic, conversion and measurement opportunities.
- **Frequent algorithm updates:** Answer engines frequently update how they craft answers.
- **Localization challenges:** Optimizing for multiple languages or regions adds complexity.
- **Intense competition:** Many brands are targeting the same questions, making it difficult to win and retain answer-box positions.
- **Brand and content ownership:** When answer engines use your content, there is a risk of losing brand visibility.

User Recommendations

Achieving success with AEO requires ongoing adaptation, investment in structured content development and distribution, and acceptance that not all benefits will be directly measurable or controllable. Given this, Gartner recommends that marketing leaders:

- Continue building domain authority through traditional SEO practices, such as ensuring mobile-friendliness and adding appropriate alt text.
- Monitor your brand's presence on answer engines, either manually or with third-party tools.
- Create concise, authoritative answers to common user questions, and distribute them multimodally across the web and social media — in text, visual, and video formats.
- Use structured data (schema markup) to help engines extract answers.
- Develop use-case-specific landing pages that target key queries.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Integrating AEO and SEO: Tactics for Improving Online Search Visibility

Market Guide for Enterprise SEO Platforms

Quick Answer: How Should CMOs Prepare for the Impact of AI Summaries on Organic Search?

Influence AI

Analysis By: Andrew Frank

Benefit Rating: Transformational

Market Penetration: 1% to 5% of target audience

Maturity: Emerging

Definition:

Influence AI is the creation and deployment of models and algorithms designed to automate elements of digital experience that guide people's choices at scale by learning and aligning with their intents and motivations. For instance, an AI agent may achieve a desired outcome for its organization by framing a set of recommendations based on a user's inferred motives and predicted behaviors, or inducing an external agent to do so.

Why This Is Important

AI already influences customer choices through answer engines and AI sales agents; marketers who fall behind risk losing control of brands and reputations as competitors and AI platforms seek the upper hand in AI-led influence operations. As more buyers entrust agents to act as marketplace advisors and commerce proxies, established trust factors destabilize and new patterns of persuasion emerge.

Business Impact

Pressure is mounting on marketers to turn AI adoption into topline growth, pushing them to look beyond operational efficiency toward AI uses that increase sales and loyalty. As LLM providers amass pervasive power over consumer choices, marketers need to adopt new disciplines of data, content and creativity to forge new trust relationships both directly and through these mediated channels by using AI and scaled personalization to align offers and dialogs with people's values, mindsets and circumstances.

Drivers

- **Rising pressure on AI to deliver growth.** AI is under pressure to deliver more tangible benefits. Executive leaders expect marketing to use AI to meet growth goals for revenue and profit. Influencing customer choices offers the clearest path toward meeting these expectations.

- **Evolving user expectations.** Consumers and business buyers increasingly expect digital experiences tailored to their preferences and needs. Influence AI enables hyperpersonalization by dynamically adapting recommendations, content, and interactions to context and history.

- **Advancements in AI and data analytics.** Improved modeling techniques, natural language processing and behavioral analytics provide the technical foundation to infer user intent and motivations at scale.

- **Marketing's head start in AI.** Marketing's dependence on communication and content to influence behavior made it an early adopter of machine learning and GenAI for segmentation and creative optimization. This builds confidence in the possibilities of AI agents for influence.

- **Omnichannel engagement.** Influence AI can operate across multiple channels (web, mobile, voice, etc.), ensuring consistent and context-aware guidance throughout the customer journey.

- **New intermediaries.** AI answer engines and sales agents will amplify Influence AI's impact on consumer choices with more personalized, persistent and persuasive guidance. This raises the stakes for marketers to understand and engage these intermediaries by targeting and measuring influence effects.

- **Competitive imperative.** AI's rapidly growing digital market presence is reaching a tipping point where the gap between leaders and laggards produces clear wins and losses. Companies that fail to adapt to AI's influence face strategic peril.

- **Governance adoption.** Gartner surveys and inquiries show AI governance is a top enterprise action and priority, building tolerance for potentially risky experiments with safety policies and oversight.

Obstacles

- **Ethical and privacy concerns and backlash.** Influence AI operates by inferring and acting on user motives, raising significant questions about manipulation, consent, and transparency. Regulatory scrutiny is likely to increase as techniques improve. Models may inadvertently reinforce biases, make unfair recommendations or over-personalize, exposing brands to significant backlash.
- **Explainability and trust.** Users and regulators demand transparency in how AI-driven recommendations are made, especially in regulated industries. Black-box models can undermine trust and hinder adoption. Reports of backlash against excessive personalization may reinforce hesitation.
- **Data quality and concentration.** Influence AI relies on large volumes of high-quality behavioral data. Fragmented or poor-quality data limits effectiveness. Hyperscalers with massive volumes of behavioral data need to be cautious of regulatory crackdowns.
- **Complexity and risk.** Deploying, monitoring, and continuously improving influence models requires significant resources, specialized talent, and a robust operational infrastructure. While agentic AI promises to democratize creation of autonomous agents, they can backfire in complex or adversarial situations.
- **Machine customers.** Buyers' use of agent proxies may block AI's psychological influence, favoring differentiation through product innovation and operational efficiency over persuasive interactions.

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User Recommendations

- Establish or locate a Trust Council within your organization (see Every Enterprise Needs a Trust Council to Combat the Deluge of AI Disinformation) and add Influence AI governance to its agenda. Articulate how to distinguish beneficial nudges from those that exploit vulnerabilities. Document potential use cases and subject them to neutral, non-commercial ombuds review.
- Recruit user test and focus groups from within and outside your organization for AI influence-related market research, or seek providers for such projects. Be transparent about goals and technologies. Apply strict privacy controls and use synthetic data or digital twins to supplement findings. Devise extensive, adversarial test cases for experimental designs.
- Probe partners, vendors and martech applications for signs of unapproved AI Influence techniques emergent in customer interactions. They may produce strong, but ethically or legally compromised, marketing results. Require compliance with influence policies in service agreements and respond quickly and decisively to perceived violations. Assess competitors' and platform providers' activities.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Top Marketing Trends for 2024: AI for Privacy, Personalization and Influence

CMO's Guide to Protecting Trust in Content With TrustOps

At the Peak

Emotion AI for Marketing

Analysis By: Nicole Greene, Suzanne Schwartz

Benefit Rating: Moderate

Market Penetration: 5% to 20% of target audience

Maturity: Adolescent

Definition:

Emotion AI, also known as affective computing, covers a broad spectrum of techniques that analyze a customer's emotional state using computer vision, voice, sensors and software logic. It not only infers emotion from cues such as body language, tone and other inputs but also initiates context-specific actions by building and executing emotionally relevant interactions and journeys that open new paths to value exchange.

Why This Is Important

Emotion AI transforms the customer experience by turning human expression and behavior into insights and responses. As machines grow more human-like through advanced sentiment detection, autonomous agents will help marketers scale by tailoring content, recommending next best actions, and delivering adaptive interactions along the customer journey. Leveraging computer vision, deep learning and audio analytics, this approach could help continually personalize experiences.

Business Impact

Emotion AI tailors engagement between humans and chatbots or digital media/humans based on body language, voice analysis and natural language processing (NLP) when users allow for access to these inputs through cameras and other receptors. It improves marketing by making brand interactions more compelling for customers, and can be used to test reactions to brands, products and ads. It amplifies the effectiveness of personalization and builds scalable loyalty, while emphasizing a brand's unique personality and voice.

Drivers

- Gartner predicts that by 2030, emotion AI will be present in 75% of conversational AI customer-facing business applications, up from less than 15% in 2026.

- Emotions are a key factor across the customer journey. Emotion AI provides an essential tool for optimizing experiences at each stage by grouping target audiences and applying empathy while encouraging desired commercial responses. The irresistible tendency to anthropomorphize (i.e., project human attributes onto) generative AI (GenAI) agents will lead customers to expect humanlike behavior and performance.
- This technology follows a three-step process: identification, interpretation and response adoption, which allows emotion AI to support discerning customer experience (CX) and drive consumer decisions across purchase, ownership and loyalty.
- Multimodal systems utilizing facial, vocal, physiological and contextual signals significantly outperform unimodal systems in these real-world interactions, expanding use cases.
- In an increasingly competitive market, brands that can connect on an emotional level differentiate themselves from those that rely solely on transactional interactions. Emotion AI allows marketers to create brand experiences that feel more human and intuitive, current customer receptivity is mixed, but there is the potential to drive connections that enhance brand recall and equity.
- Market research and neuromarketing tools leverage emotion detection in various user scenarios, including focus groups and product testing. These capabilities are then leveraged in consumer-facing applications, where mobile phones and wearable devices supply inputs from consenting panelists to broaden the impact of emotion AI.
- Marketers can use emotion AI to generate synthetic data to mimic human reactions to content and experiences, replicating field tests and focus groups. Emotion AI will augment traditional marketing personalization by responding to both informational and emotional cues in two-way communication channels (texting, WhatsApp, chat) to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.
- Increasing availability of emotion AI features in martech platforms will drive demand as buyers gain awareness of ways to leverage it for automated, real-time adjustments. This will help marketers experiment with the capability in existing marketing strategies and engagement tactics, potentially accelerating its advancement.

- The convergence of computer vision (CV) and robotology is accelerating adoption, enabling machines to interpret nonverbal cues and act as sophisticated, context-aware partners across industries like neuromarketing and retail.

Obstacles

- **Consent:** Emotion AI needs consent to predict responses at scale, supporting model-based targeting/measuring of media investment. Privacy legislation and the EU AI Act's classification of emotion AI as "high-risk" in contexts like education or the workplace shrink the potential market and increase compliance burdens, leading to paused projects and regulatory friction.
- **Privacy:** Emotion AI will affect people's decisions, requiring transparency across both employee- and customer-facing situations. Adoption of emotion AI in targeting and personalization may spur increased regulator attention.
- **Lack of trust:** There's risk of AI backlash from customers who will find emotion AI more invasive or creepy, even beyond the effect of current personalization efforts.
- **Varying performance and explainability:** Performance varies across modalities and providing transparent, explainable results for complex deep learning models remains a significant challenge. Some emotions are better detected by one sensory technology than another — for example, "irony" can be detected by voice-based analysis, but is challenging in facial analysis.
- **Governance:** As emotion AI is integrated into martech, ownership and control issues will require frameworks and cross-functional teams to manage corporate policies to govern use cases.

User Recommendations

- Develop ethical guidelines for the use of emotion AI before deploying it. Partner with legal to measure the risks of emotion AI. Tracking and processing human emotion, even with consent, is a gray area.
- Work with the chief data privacy or ethics officer to oversee data collection and use. Cross-functional applications should be scrutinized for risk and transparency. Control bias and improve accuracy by incorporating multimodal signals (facial, voice, text, sensor data) and training models on diverse, representative datasets.
- Protect user privacy by utilizing privacy-preserving ML methods like federated learning, on-device processing and explicit opt-in consent.

- Use proofs of concept (POCs) to apply emotion AI to your customer analytics and behavioral profiling. Focus immediate deployments on safe, clear-value applications with high ROI, such as ad testing, entertainment UX and customer service contact centers.
- As the market matures, most vendors will offer narrow capabilities experience in customer insights or testing and fine-tuning. Look to vendors that focus on the entire CX.

Sample Vendors

Amazon; Behavioral Signals; Cogito; Intelligent Voice; kama.ai; MorphCast; Soul Machines; Stern Tech; Symanto; Uniphore

Gartner Recommended Reading

Elevate Your Influence Goals With Emotion AI

Anthropomorphize AI to Make It Safe and Successful

Predicts 2024: How AI Will Reshape Marketing

Podcast: It's Game On for AI Implementation

Video: AI-Driven Customers — When Machines Purchase Products

Curated Audiences for Digital Advertising

Analysis By: Eric Schmitt

Benefit Rating: Moderate

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Curated audiences allow advertisers to target and measure digital ad campaigns using IDs that represent predefined or algorithmically derived clusters of users — curated audiences — rather than individuals. Curated audiences aim to improve the accuracy and accountability of data-constrained environments, while preserving privacy and maintaining consistency with current programmatic practices.

Why This Is Important

As advertiser reliance on opaque walled-garden optimization grows, curated audiences offer advertisers and publishers more control and transparency over targeting strategies and performance metrics. Curated audience targeting strategies allow advertisers to pursue long-term goals, such as brand value associations and reputation building, beyond the scope of short-term performance algorithms.

Business Impact

Curated segmentation tactics aim to enhance the digital media market by:

- Empowering advertisers and publishers to execute optimization strategies untethered from walled-garden commercial priorities.
- Distributing the monetization of data assets more equitably across the publisher ecosystem and eliminating intermediaries.
- Enabling privacy-preserving tactics that respect consumers while delivering relevant marketing communications and ad-supported content.

Drivers

- **Concerns over walled-garden control:** The largest ad platforms are aggressively integrating automated and opaque targeting capabilities. These depend on feeds of engagement signal data that ad buyers are compelled to provide to inform the seller algorithms that govern media performance.
- **Traffic loss to zero-click answer engines:** As answer engines compress the consideration phase of purchase decisions, pressure grows on ad-supported entertainment and retail media placements.
- **Competitive pressure:** Publishers, technology vendors and data companies face challenges to their digital advertising businesses and are eager to find ways of preserving their mutually beneficial revenue/value exchange.
- **Data collaboration:** First-party data collection and data clean rooms are enabling advertisers, retailers and publishers to collaborate on privacy-compliant custom audience specifications.
- **Advanced analytics:** Developments in AI are improving the predictive accuracy of segmentation and contextual analysis, raising hopes that segment-based targeting can deliver results as good as, or better than, user-level targeting.

Obstacles

- **Lack of regulatory transparency:** There is no straightforward way to prevent the formation of segments based on sensitive data or assure that such data won't be used to the detriment of segment members.
- **Limited protection:** Although segment IDs are not personal data on their own, they can become personally attached when combined with other data. Thus, they are neither fully free from privacy scrutiny nor immune to potential abuse.
- **Complexity:** The benefits and risks of segment ID traffic in open bidstreams are poorly understood. Benefits depend on private implementation details. These will vary among providers, whose incentives to maximize ad yields may bias concealed algorithms. Beyond a potential failure to protect privacy, risks include new forms of fraud and dynamics that further advantage platforms and walled gardens.
- **Fragmentation:** Widespread adoption of alternative identifiers faces a collective action problem that disincentivizes participation ahead of critical mass.

User Recommendations

- Use great care if you are making walled-garden investments in curated audiences. The double-edged sword nature of these offerings warrants careful testing and constant monitoring.
- Support Prebid and related open-source standards as a hedge against market concentration.
- Work with agencies and internal data science groups to model the potential impact of curated audience techniques specifically, and segmentation-level optimization in general. Document and test key assumptions and economic scenarios.
- Examine the role of data collaboration technologies, such as data clean rooms, in enabling custom strategies on the buy and sell side. Look beyond basic ad targeting and measurement applications to modeling and discovery of audience insights that can inform broader marketing strategies.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Don't Let Cookies' Reprieve Stop Your Ad Strategy Evolution

How to Adapt Your Advertising Strategy to Uncertain Conditions

Use AI to Increase Digital Advertising Efficiency and Impact

5 Steps for CMOs Exploring First-Party Data for Advertising and Targeting

Digital IQ: Digital Advertising Benchmarks for 2023

Over-the-Top TV Advertising

Analysis By: Jessica Dervyn

Benefit Rating: High

Market Penetration: More than 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Over-the-top (OTT) TV advertising is the delivery of video advertising within internet-streamed television and long-form video content. Connected TV (CTV) advertising is the subset of OTT advertising delivered via smart TVs or CTV devices through streaming apps or TV operating systems, enabling addressable buying, dynamic ad insertion and digital-style measurement while extending television-scale reach.

Why This Is Important

Sight, sound and motion make video one of the most effective formats to capture human attention, which is why TV and digital video command a significant share of advertising budgets. As OTT streaming increasingly displaces linear TV, it has become a critical channel for reaching audiences with greater precision and measurability. Despite increased fragmentation and operational complexity, OTT advertising is essential for sustaining scale and effectiveness in a streaming-first media landscape.

Business Impact

Ad-supported OTT streaming has achieved scale and is now a core component of TV and video advertising strategies, commanding the attention of national brands and sophisticated digital performance buyers. It helps offset declining reach from cable and broadcast, complements paid social media spend and supports full-funnel objectives. For advertising strategy and budget owners, the key challenge is determining how to allocate budgets effectively and assess the ROI of OTT advertising.

Drivers

- **Growth in OTT reach and time spent viewing:** According to the 2025 Gartner Consumer Values and Lifestyle Survey, 72% of U.S. consumers (aged over 15) said they regularly use streaming video services. Streaming adoption continues to rise, and increasingly includes large-scale live events. Major platforms are attracting millions of concurrent viewers for sports, news and cultural moments, giving advertisers access to shared, real-time audiences that were once largely exclusive to broadcast television.

- **Expanding ad-supported supply and easing price pressure:** The proliferation of free ad-supported streaming TV (FAST) services (e.g., Tubi, Pluto TV) and the expansion of ad-supported tiers from major streaming platforms have significantly increased available CTV inventory. In some market segments, supply is growing faster than advertising demand, tempering CPM inflation and improving buying efficiency.

- **Multiple distribution channels and evolving ad capabilities:** Direct buys are likely to continue dominating the market for the foreseeable future, while demand-side platforms contribute a growing share of impressions. Ad capabilities continue to evolve, including audience targeting, dynamic ad insertion, adaptive ad loads, premium bundling via private marketplaces, interactive and commerce-enabled formats, and access to measurement data.

- **Fragmented media landscape and bundled sales approaches:** Broadcast and cable networks continue to bundle OTT impressions with linear TV buys to counter audience fragmentation. Industry efforts to unify linear and streaming measurement may help normalize buying and reporting, although adoption and consistency remains uneven.

Obstacles

- **Fragmented market and measurement:** The television and video ecosystem is split across linear TV, numerous streaming services, social platforms and publishers, each with distinct buying paths, identity systems and measurement standards. This fragmentation limits unified reach, creates frequency inefficiencies, increases strategy and operational complexity, and makes it difficult to assess incremental impact and scale budgets confidently.
- **Limited buying flexibility and inventory quality:** Premium inventory remains concentrated with a few major publishers, often requiring direct deals or closed marketplaces. Programmatic workflows are expanding, but inconsistent quality, fraud risk and limited transparency persist.
- **Incumbent economic and sales models:** Carriage fees, legacy upfront commitments and bundled sales practices continue to shape inventory access and buying behavior, slowing the shift toward more open and interoperable OTT advertising.

User Recommendations

- **Adopt an integrated planning philosophy:** Orchestrate OTT and CTV advertising alongside linear cable, broadcast and social media spend to mitigate audience fragmentation and improve overall reach efficiency.
- **Treat OTT as a full-funnel channel, not just for brand awareness:** Test performance and commerce-adjacent use cases such as sequential messaging, retargeting, interactive or shoppable formats where data access allows.
- **Expect imperfect measurement:** Use in-market tests, incrementality analysis, geo-holdout studies and marketing mix measurement to guide learning agendas instead of relying on precision attribution.
- **Use caution when buying via programmatic resellers:** Prioritize direct publisher deals, curated marketplaces and recognizable content brands to minimize fraud risk and ensure access to premium inventory.
- **Target large, concurrent live-streaming events selectively:** Recreate the shared reach and cultural impact historically associated with prime-time television.

Sample Vendors

Amazon; Comcast; FOX; Google; Netflix; Paramount; Roku; The Walt Disney Company; Warner Bros. Discovery

Gartner Recommended Reading

Digital IQ Index: Digital Advertising Best Practices

The Media Strategy Playbook for Marketers

Build a High-Impact Paid Media Plan

Sliding into the Trough

Retail and Commerce Media Networks

Analysis By: Greg Carlucci

Benefit Rating: High

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Retail and commerce media networks aggregate audiences across commerce-owned sites, apps and digital assets to create advertising opportunities on search, display, video and off-site channels. They use first-party behavioral and transaction data to package audience segments for advertisers through direct or programmatic buying models, enabling targeted activation and commerce-linked performance measurement.

Why This Is Important

Retail and commerce media networks allow advertisers to activate first-party shopper and customer data across both on-site and off-site channels, at a time when signal loss and rising performance media costs are increasing pressure on digital advertising efficiency. As more networks launch across industries, fragmentation and rising CPMs increase the need for standardized measurement, incrementality insights and data collaboration capabilities.

Business Impact

Retail and commerce media networks offer advertisers the ability to reach users via first-party data, providing more direct links between media exposure and commerce outcomes than most digital advertising channels. As budgets shift toward performance-accountable media, identity resolution technologies and programmatic access enable deeper audience insights, advanced incrementality analysis and unified activation across channels.

Drivers

Several factors are accelerating the evolution of commerce media, driven by changes in technology, measurement needs and media buying behavior:

- **Expansion beyond retail:** Commerce networks are moving into industries such as banking, travel and delivery services, increasing advertiser options and competition among networks.
- **AI-driven planning access:** Generative AI planning capabilities are democratizing access to commerce media networks, enabling more advertisers to activate and optimize campaigns.
- **Measurement beyond ROAS**: Rising media costs and cross-network orchestration are driving demand for improved measurement frameworks focused on new customers, retention and long-term category growth.
- **Performance-led investment:** Brands that sell through retailers are investing heavily in performance marketing tactics like retail media to drive online and in-store sales.
- **Signal loss pressures:** Cookieless environments and consumer-driven signal loss are pushing indirect-to-consumer brands toward new targeting and measurement data sources closer to the point of sale across digital and physical touchpoints.
- **Programmatic enablement:** Ad technology platforms are building supply relationships with commerce networks and their SSPs, allowing advertisers to access select networks programmatically through third-party DSPs.
- **Off-site media expansion:** Retail and commerce media networks are extending into streaming, social and walled-garden environments such as Meta and Google, creating new off-site advertising opportunities.

Obstacles

- **Lack of standardization and cost pressures:** Proliferation of networks has created inconsistent attribution measurement standards, and rising CPMs make it difficult for advertisers to manage frequency, compare performance and scale investment efficiently.
- **Network effects concentration:** Advertisers must select from larger networks with scale at a higher price point, or diversify in multiple networks that may be less costly but lack efficiency and scale.
- **Scale and profitability challenges:** While digital marketing leaders value the targeting accuracy of commerce media, reaching audiences at scale and driving profitable growth remain difficult outside of the largest network partners.

- **Budget and data constraints:** The rapid growth of retail and commerce media is straining brand media budgets, while evolving privacy regulations and cookieless environments limit data availability for targeting and measurement.

User Recommendations

- **Select scalable, integrated ecosystems:** Prioritize networks with strong off-site capabilities, standardized reporting and mature programmatic features that also integrate seamlessly into the shopper journey for optimal ad visibility, competitive separation and contextual relevance.
- **Unify targeting and planning:** Invest in clean rooms and generative AI planning tools to improve targeting consistency, reduce duplicate reach and align commerce media with national strategies through collaboration with media agencies and sales teams.
- **Measure holistic performance:** Choose media networks that provide insights beyond ROAS, including incremental revenue, new customer acquisition and category growth.
- **Expand internal capabilities:** Leverage third-party support such as agencies or managed services to enhance internal bandwidth, expertise and execution.

Sample Vendors

Amazon Ads; Chase Media Solutions; DoorDash Ads; Instacart Ads; Kroger Precision Marketing; Orange Apron Media; Target (Roundel); Uber Advertising; Walmart Connect

Gartner Recommended Reading

Market Guide for Retail Media Networks

CMOs: Maximize Media Spend with Google, Meta, and Amazon's GenAI Tools

How to Establish a Clear Retail Media Advertising Strategy

Data Clean Rooms

Analysis By: Eric Schmitt

Benefit Rating: Moderate

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Adolescent

Definition:

A data clean room is a secure, isolated platform that links anonymized marketing and advertising data from multiple parties. For advertisers, data clean rooms are distinguished from other data-sharing methods by the inclusion of detailed advertising impression data, with privacy-safe restrictions on outputting user-level results.

Why This Is Important

Data clean rooms offer a privacy upgrade to advertising capabilities by allowing marketers to rebalance privacy with new data access and utilization policies that are fit for a consent-driven advertising world.

Business Impact

At scale, the opportunity to access ad impression and interaction data presents digital marketing leaders with the potential to get more from advertising spend and to enable insights and AI use cases. Examples include data governance, audience segmentation for advertising activation, campaign measurement, data enrichment and forecasting.

Drivers

- **Demand for data access:** Shifts in end-user behavior across apps and platforms, and the siloed nature of data collection create an opportunity for new approaches to data-driven advertising and marketing.
- **Data appending and enrichment:** Clean rooms can enrich first-party customer and prospect profiles with additional data attributes or elements. These attributes may be sourced from the clean-room provider or second- and third-party data sources, or developed/derived via statistical modeling and processing.
- **Advertising execution enablement:** Clean rooms offer a pathway for addressable and look-alike targeting in the data-rich retailer and publisher environments, without the need for those parties to expose any data.
- **Ad measurement:** On an anonymized basis, clean rooms can measure how many and which people were contacted, and how many times over the duration of the campaign. This sets the stage for target audience penetration analysis, unique unduplicated reach, and refined campaign activation.
- **Campaign performance measurement:** Clean rooms enable marketers to link ad impressions data to sales and engagement data. This can feed campaign performance analysis and attribution, and measurement reports and dashboards. Clean rooms can also inform media planning, financial and management reporting, and business forecasting.
- **Projections and forecasts:** The ability to stack data for ongoing, time-series analysis has strong appeal for many marketing leaders. This can create data views for use in advertising, sales projections and forecasts.

Obstacles

- **Lack of standards:** The absence of data standards for audience targeting and ad measurement force marketers to incur greater cost and complexity related to multiple, platform-specific implementations. The pool of big data processing and analytics talent available to advertisers is limited. Talent shortages combined with procurement inexperience can add costs and delays.
- **Privacy risks:** As with any sensitive data processing, breaches or circumvention of privacy controls could result in reidentification, and therefore liability.
- **Disruption distractions:** Although privacy-related data gaps may boost clean rooms in the long run, in the near term, many advertisers are likely to focus on tactical operational adjustments to media plans, and not speculative and resource-intensive data infrastructure investments.
- **Cost, resourcing and relationship requirements:** Complex database investments like clean rooms incur substantial costs related to technology, staff or services partner time to deploy, configure and maintain. In addition, clean rooms typically require business and legal agreements that span two or more parties.

User Recommendations

- Define clean-room goals. The menu includes reach/frequency measurement, campaign performance analysis, projections and forecasts, governance, and campaign segmentation.
- Explore the landscape of clean-room providers. Brands with heavy-paid media investments in Google or Amazon should start by looking at these vendors' clean-room offerings. Independent and agency solutions are a better fit for cross-media applications.
- Embrace agile principles during clean-room development. Staging, ingesting and linking data — especially from new, high-volume sources — often takes longer than planned and requires multiple iterations.
- Apply good governance and privacy by design. Despite technical safeguards such as aggregate reporting outputs with minimum cell sizes, risks like reidentification exist. Mitigate risks with documented use cases and detailed data flow diagrams that cover processing and storage, and by building up internal data skills like SQL and BigQuery.

Sample Vendors

Omnicom (Acxiom); Amazon; AppsFlyer; Decentriq; Dentsu (Merkle); Google; LiveRamp; Publicis (Epsilon); Snowflake; WPP (InfoSum)

Gartner Recommended Reading

Navigate the Marketing Data Collaboration Landscape

Don't Let Cookies' Reprieve Stop Your Ad Strategy Evolution

The CMO's Key to First-Party Data's Triple Lock

Quick Answer: Estimate the Costs of a First-Party Data Strategy

5 Steps for CMOs Exploring First-Party Data for Advertising and Targeting

Generative AI for Marketing

Analysis By: Nicole Greene, Chad Storlie

Benefit Rating: Transformational

Market Penetration: More than 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) technologies generate new, derived versions of content, data, designs and methods by learning from large repositories of original source content. GenAI has profound business impacts on content creation, authenticity and regulations; synthetic data; automation of human work; and customer and employee experiences.

Why This Is Important

- Over 75% of marketing leaders anticipate a positive transformation in their organizations through GenAI adoption, according to the 2025 Gartner CMO Spend Survey.
- GenAI supports marketing use cases that demand efficiency and scale, including content development, dynamic personalization, advertising optimization, multichannel campaign optimization and customer experience enhancement.
- Early success is supported by rapid development of GenAI applications and features from hyperscalers, martech vendors and point solutions.

Business Impact

GenAI supports the creation of content, data and experiences at scale. Many pilots and implementations are low-risk and easy to evaluate, like translation, augmented writing and analytics accelerators. With the rapid progress of productivity tools and AI governance, CMOs will shift focus toward differentiated and customer-facing use cases. Responsible AI and security will be necessary for the safe implementation of GenAI, as CMOs bridge the AI trust gap with consumers.

Drivers

- Over a three-year period, GenAI applied to creating and editing video (including avatar), image, voice and music content has accrued more than $1.5 billion in venture capital (VC) investment, according to a Gartner analysis.
- As GenAI capabilities proliferate and evolve, marketers seeking new and higher-value use cases will find marketing a fertile area for new implementations. Respondents to the 2025 Gartner Marketing Transformation Survey reported an average of four areas where they are piloting or using AI solutions. Some of the common areas include content development/management at 61%, creative development/production at 58%, workflow and project management at 49%, campaign planning and execution at 44%, customer journey and personalization management at 39%, and demand generation and lead management at 37%.
- GenAI continues as a competitive area among major technology vendors, largely because it underpins AI agents. Vendors compete on foundation model offerings, enterprise readiness, usability, quality, pricing, infrastructure, safety and indemnification.
- Multimodal models, such as Google's Nano Banana or Google's Veo 3, are rapidly improving. Models can combine concepts, attributes and styles to create original images, video and art, or translate audio to different voices and languages. Text-to-image/video generation has advanced, with the ability to create detailed, realistic visuals from natural language prompts.
- Organizations are learning to use their own data and assets to improve GenAI outputs through context engineering and deep tuning. AI-ready data and associated metadata have become central to executing GenAI marketing strategies.
- Improvements in synthetic media (i.e., deepfake technology), include audio cloning and facial mapping, digital humans and virtual influencers. They are becoming commercially accessible and allow customers to engage in their native language and with cultural relevance.

Obstacles

- Democratization of GenAI brings new ethical and societal concerns. Government regulations vary, and may hinder GenAI adoption, requiring new risk mitigation technologies and guardrails.
- According to the 2024 Gartner Marketing Analytics and Technology Survey, the largest hindrance to GenAI use-case adoption in marketing is the gaps in marketers' skills and roles as well as data and technology.
- In this already untrustworthy environment, concerns surrounding AI's ability to generate, propagate and amplify false information may further strain the relationship between brands and consumers.
- Unintended, biased, defective or offensive artifacts require human oversight for review to reduce risk and ensure accuracy.
- GenAI is embedded in enterprise applications and point solutions, which can result in duplicative capabilities and integration complexity. Accountability for training and outputs, licensing, and consumption-based pricing is inconsistent, which may cause buyer confusion and result in unplanned costs.

User Recommendations

- Identify low-risk use cases in partnership with governance teams that enhance marketing's operational capabilities or improve customer experiences with GenAI. Look to a mix of vendors, point solutions and agency partners. Consult vendor capabilities and roadmaps to avoid overlap.
- Examine and quantify GenAI's advantages and limitations based on your specific use cases. Finding value in using GenAI for marketing requires reasoning skills, budget allocations and effective risk management. Conduct pilots to avoid subpar offerings that exploit the current hype without returns.
- Explore synthetic data as a key enabler to accelerate the development cycle and lessen regulatory concerns surrounding the handling of personally identifiable information (PII) and other sensitive data.
- Adopt "narrative intelligence," tools that track influence operations propagating misinformation, to detect and debunk false content as GenAI continues to increase the volume and velocity of content.
- Invest in people to sample and review GenAI output to detect and minimize dissemination of inevitable mishaps.
- Use composite AI approaches to combine GenAI with other AI techniques.

Sample Vendors

Adobe; Anthropic; Canva; Google; IBM; Jasper; Meta; OpenAI; Salesforce; WRITER

Gartner Recommended Reading

AI Use-Case Assessment for Marketing

Pilot and Implement Generative AI to Support Marketing Strategy

Develop an AI Strategic Roadmap for Marketing

Tool: Checklist to Verify Generative AI Marketing Outputs to Manage Risk

Quick Answer: What Are the Capabilities of a Digital Twin of a Customer?

Customer Data Ethics

Analysis By: Andrew Frank

Benefit Rating: High

Market Penetration: 1% to 5% of target audience

Maturity: Adolescent

Definition:

Customer data ethics describes corporate policies that align business practices with fundamental principles that reflect a company's avowed values, as distinguished from a reliance on legal compliance to set boundaries on customer data usage. Customer data ethics seeks a consistent foundation for decision making to counteract the paralyzing effects of rapidly shifting and fragmenting data privacy and AI usage standards.

Why This Is Important

As marketers race to adopt data-driven AI solutions for personalization, journey orchestration, advertising and customer analytics, progress on the foundations of customer data privacy has stalled. Fragmentation of laws and platform policies puts the onus on organizations to confront complex trade-offs in a rapidly changing technical environment where brand and legal risks are high.

Business Impact

Personalization is one of the top value propositions for AI in marketing. The 2025 Gartner Marketing Personalization Survey shows personalization delivers significant commercial benefits, but only 4% of CIOs and tech leaders say their data is AI ready. Recent reversals in the trend toward tightening privacy restrictions are leading some organizations to deprioritize ethical data constraints, potentially accelerating AI marketing initiatives while also raising risks of legal hazards and consumer backlash.

Drivers

- **Growing regulatory complexity and fragmentation**. The legal landscape of privacy an AI laws remains highly volatile and inconsistent. As policies continue to fragment across regions, organizations face challenges maintaining consistent standards for CDE. This creates uncertainty and risks, especially for organizations operating globally. Lack of standards pushes organizations to adopt their own that can be consistently applied, regardless of local variations.

- **Evolving and conflicting consumer expectations**. Public awareness of data rights and misuse has created anxiety among consumers about how brands may use their data in AI, and raised consumer expectations for companies to go beyond legal compliance to provide transparency and accountability in data practices. Failure to meet these expectations can damage reputations even when technically compliant. Meanwhile, consumer expectations of personalized relationships between customers and brands are also mounting.

- **Technological advancements outpacing regulation**. Rapid technological progress, especially in AI, is outstripping existing legal frameworks and creating ethical gray areas where the law is silent or ambiguous. This forces organizations to proactively address ethical implications of emerging data uses rather than rely on regulations.

- **AI-driven personalization.** Advancement in the use of AI for personalized sales and service dialogs has dramatically lowered costs of personalization, exposing data as a primary impediment to personalization goals and raising the need for consistent privacy guardrails.

- **Investments in first-party data (FPD) for ad optimization**. With reliance on third-party cookies fading, organizations have prioritized collection and use of FPD to fill gaps in ad targeting and measurement needed for ad efficiency. Increasing pressure on rising paid media expenses drives the need for clearer data governance to balance ad accountability with privacy.

- **Weaponization of ambiguous statutes**. Numerous decades-old privacy laws are being cited in thousands of lawsuits targeting standard website technologies like tracking pixels, chatbots, on-site search bars and session replay software. Laws include California's 1967 Invasion of Privacy Act (CIPA), the U.S. 1988 Video Privacy Protection Act (VPPA), and many others. Avoiding liability claims elevates the need to revisit the principles behind many standard web practices.

Obstacles

- **Lack of skills.** Data and AI ethics disciplines lack educational pipelines and career paths to satisfy a rapidly growing need. Consulting providers are scarce.
- **Distributed accountability.** Hazards arise from the data's collective use among agencies, vendors and affiliates. Lines of responsibility for infractions are blurry and systemic effects opaque. Vendor compliance validation and monitoring is lacking.
- **Governance and cost.** Business units seek to keep indirect costs and vague accountabilities off their balance sheets. The perceived potential cost of losing market share to less ethical competitors may also impede adoption under economic pressure.
- **Discord on fairness.** Laws and norms of fairness vary greatly among regions, communities and within organizations, hampering agreement on principles and practices. Cultural polarization amplifies discord.
- **Paradoxical exclusions.** Privacy restrictions often hide the precise data needed to detect biases and prevent disparate impacts of policies on protected classes, undermining bias-related ethical commitments.

User Recommendations

- **Ground CDE in a Trust Council framework.** Embed Trust Council subcommittees in AI Council charters to establish a stable basis for governance.
- **Put CDE at the core of AI adoption.** Ensure AI projects that use customer data have ethical governance and workstreams attached. Never forget that AI agents lack natural ethical sensibilities. Find opportunities to embed ethical initiatives in funded projects.
- **Go beyond compliance.** Share customer data ethics principles with customers, employees and other stakeholders in outbound communications. The public should know your priorities.
- **Tune out the noise.** Don't allow escalating geopolitical discord or technology and economic volatility to become distractions. A sound ethical policy needs to be grounded in principles that are resilient against disruptive events.
- **Focus on the customer view.** Craft transparent policies that align with customer expectations. Ask if data practices would disturb people if they knew all about them.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Top Marketing Trends for 2024: AI for Privacy, Personalization and Influence

Avoid Ethical Pitfalls Caused by Unscrupulous Digital Commerce Practices

Consent and Preference Management

Analysis By: Tia Zervas

Benefit Rating: Moderate

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Consent and preference management platforms consolidate end users' choices on how their personal data should be handled. The intent is to enhance transparency by extending control to users to determine what data about them is processed, by whom, and for what purpose. These choices are synchronized across systems — old and new, with on-premises and cloud-based repositories. Organizations can target engaged customers and respect their choices with minimum manual overhead.

Why This Is Important

The EU's General Data Protection Regulation, the California Consumer Privacy Act, and Brazil's General Data Protection Law are the standard for organizations to follow to adhere to privacy protections for personal data collected. Consent and preference management (CPM) platforms empower organizations to comply with new laws, preserve and extend essential capabilities, and demonstrate to customers and stakeholders that they care about privacy.

Business Impact

- CPM platforms help address the technical and operational challenges of protecting organizations from compliance violations, while maintaining the ability to use customer data for business purposes.
- CPM platforms can show end users that organizations value their privacy. Compliance is essential for meeting regulatory requirements and is a fundamental expectation of end users. A lack of compliance can be more detrimental than the advantages gained from adhering to it.

Drivers

- **Regulatory oversight:** Regulators scrutinize organizations' use of personal data for marketing and advertising. CPM platforms serve as the hub in marketing and advertising technology stacks to process the appropriate consents and maintain audit trails for compliance.
- **Evolving laws and variations in legislation:** The proliferation of consumer privacy laws across countries and regions makes tracking and complying with local requirements a complex but essential task. CPM platforms address specific requirements, such as auditing websites for compliance, enforcing consent choices, and supporting data subject requests.
- **Safety regulations for minors:** New child safety regulations now require both age verification and explicit parental consent before processing minors' data. CPM platforms are adapting to facilitate dual-verification workflows to support these heightened requirements.
- **Demand for personalization:** As organizations prioritize one-to-one personalized experiences, challenges arise from a lack of a unified data strategy. The absence of a unified customer data strategy presents significant challenges to achieving this at scale. CPM platforms address these hurdles by enhancing preference centers, enabling progressive consent, and supporting advanced profiling capabilities.
- **Disparate data across technology**: Managing consent and preferences across multiple platforms is resource-intensive, especially with overlapping CPM solutions. Some CPM platforms address this challenge by serving as the primary source of truth of digital users' consent and preference selections. This function is critical in jurisdictions like the U.S., where implicit consent is still prevalent.
- **Consumer expectations:** Consumers are increasingly aware of their data rights and demand transparency, control over, and expect a consistent experience across channels. Poorly designed consent flow banners and dialogues degrade the user experience, underscoring the need for improved design enabled by certain CPM platforms.

Obstacles

- **Evolving global laws and best practices:** Organizations must adapt to region- and country-specific privacy and compliance legislations. CPM platforms tend to oversell their ability to simplify managing consent options, often downplaying the complexity of managing an organization's internal and external databases.

- **Lack of UX design support:** Forcing too many privacy choices on consumers degrades UX and leads to high opt-out and abandonment rates. Yet, having too few choices limits the ability to tailor experiences. To strike the right balance requires cross-functional, collaborative activities throughout the organization.

- **Complex technology architectures and the rise of AI:** Accelerated digital transformation efforts have propelled organizations to rethink how technology solutions work together and how data flows throughout the ecosystem. AI adoption has further complicated the subject of consent since removing data from a model is practically unfeasible if consent is revoked. Adopters need to factor in the number and type of connections — both native and customized (such as APIs and extraction, transformation, and loading) — that are needed to effectively use a CPM platform.

User Recommendations

- Prioritize consent management policies and initiatives as critical for all functions. Establish consent as the foreground to maintain a consistent privacy UX initiative throughout the enterprise.

- Avoid "dark patterns" or deceptive language for consent dialogues that attempt to influence users' choices.

- Use a "telescoping" approach to disclosures and preference dialogues that allow users to go as deep as they choose into specific details. Offer consistent, easy access to preference settings that users can view and change on demand to ensure a privacy-by-default approach.

- Compare and assess CPM offerings against your organization's highest-priority privacy protection and integration requirements and internal costs.

- Build your own CPM platform wherein the current CPM market cannot effectively connect and integrate with legacy internal tools.

- Take a modular approach to adoption and avoid excessively broad project scopes. Anticipate sufficient time to resolve unforeseen complications in these projects.

Sample Vendors

BigID; Didomi; Ketch; OneTrust; Osano; PossibleNOW; Syrenis; Transcend.io

Gartner Recommended Reading

Market Guide for Consent and Preference Management

Climbing the Slope

Customer Data Platform

Analysis By: Rachel Dooley

Benefit Rating: High

Market Penetration: More than 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

A customer data platform (CDP) is a software application that supports customer experience (CX) use cases by unifying a company's customer data from marketing, sales, service, commerce and other sources. CDPs unify customer data to facilitate its output to coordinate profiles between systems, create segments, optimize offers and decisions, and inform analysis while distributing insights that create triggers for other experiences.

Why This Is Important

The CDP market is undergoing a fundamental restructuring. CDPs are evolving from customer data unification and activation tools into intelligent customer context engines to power agentic work. Long central to how customer-facing functions manage profile data, transactional events and analytic attributes to coordinate interactions, CDPs now aim to provide the memory and grounding required for AI agents to reason, decide and execute customer data-related tasks across the enterprise.

Business Impact

CDPs increasingly dictate enterprisewide customer data strategy. They are a hub for managing common data objects, from customer profiles and audiences to purchase history and personalized offers. This enables downstream use cases in marketing like segmentation and predictive modeling, and use cases across sales, service, commerce and product. In 2026, CDPs also serve as customer context engines for emerging agentic use cases, optimizing decision quality to maximize customer value.

Drivers

- The **market bifurcation between platformization and agentification** forces critical architectural decisions. Buyers must choose between consolidating into integrated enterprise application platforms (EAPs) or adopting a modular agentification model. Agentification positions the CDP as a minimum viable platform for profile and orchestration infrastructure, relying on specialized agents to then operate on that foundation for marketing execution. This paradigm shift accelerates market hype as buyers weigh the stability of suite lock-in against the agility of an enterprisewide data fabric where agentic AI serves as the operational layer.

- With **CDPs setting the standard for how enterprises manage customer data,** more C-suite stakeholders see the importance of a CDP to function-specific (e.g., marketing, sales, service) and enterprisewide (e.g., analytics, enterprise architecture) needs. Buying groups are expanding, with an average of five functional groups providing funding for CDP purchase and two to three groups contributing to requirements and objectives.

- **Agentic AI** has eclipsed generative AI as the primary competitive frontier in the vendor landscape. CDPs can now feed governed, real-time data to semiautonomous agents executing complex workflows (e.g., identity resolution agent, data quality agent) with limited human intervention.

- The value proposition of **composable architectures** has taken root as innovations in data sharing enable CDPs to use customer data centralized in a cloud data warehouse, as opposed to ingesting or copying all data to a CDP. This reduces data management complexity and increases CDP appeal and relevancy to data and analytics and IT functions.

- Organizations are embarking on complex **customer journey orchestration** initiatives that benefit from the automated workflows and unified customer data provided by a CDP. As customer interactions become increasingly distributed across channels, platforms and AI-mediated touchpoints, automation is required to scale CX processes.

Obstacles

- **Cost-to-value:** Marketing budgets are being squeezed, while CDP and agentic AI pricing models remain opaque and expensive. Marketers find it challenging to forecast the relationship between use cases, compute and storage costs, which poses risk of profile overages.

- **Operational friction:** Buyers experience operational friction in implementing such a highly cross-functional tool with enterprisewide implications. It is challenging to assign clear roles and responsibilities, and to maintain communication across teams.
- **CDP ubiquity:** While CDPs are stand-alone technology solutions, vendors in adjacent categories (e.g., MMH, MAP) have incorporated CDP-like functionality into their offerings, raising cost and redundancy concerns.
- **Long-term decision, fast-moving market:** Given the complex implementation process, buyers seek long-term partnerships with vendors. However, the stand-alone CDP market is in a period of significant M&A activity that forces buyers to question the future stability of providers.

User Recommendations

- Review the effectiveness of your existing **data and analytics model** at supporting cross-functional customer data use cases. Start documenting AI use cases that will require unified customer data.
- Use **unit cost analysis** to comprehensively forecast the total cost of ownership of your CDP approach. Request a measurement tool from CDP vendors to forecast and track consumption and cost.
- Set a plan to determine a clear path forward, deciding between **platformization** or **agentification**. Prioritize **platformized CDPs embedded** within broader enterprise application ecosystems if seeking integrated, end-to-end orchestration across marketing, sales and service alongside robust governance. Opt for agentified CDPs if your organization values agility, modularity and the ability to leverage AI-driven automation with minimal application overhead, especially if you have mature data infrastructure and high marketing velocity.
- Use proofs of concept to validate measurable value creation on promised capabilities.

Sample Vendors

Adobe; Hightouch; Salesforce; Tealium; Twilio; Uniphore

Gartner Recommended Reading

Magic Quadrant for Customer Data Platforms

Critical Capabilities for Customer Data Platforms

Predicts 2026: CMOs Prepare AI to Carry Them Across the Martech Finish Line

Capture the Unit Cost of Multichannel Marketing

Toolkit: Use Case Library — Customer Data Platform, Personalization Engine and Multichannel Marketing Hub

Conversational Marketing

Analysis By: Audrey Brosnan

Benefit Rating: High

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Conversational marketing is the use of two-way, AI-enabled dialogue in digital messaging channels to identify intent, answer questions, qualify demand and guide customers through marketing and buying journeys. In 2026, it increasingly relies on AI agents that can coordinate next-best actions across channels with limited human intervention.

Why This Is Important

Conversational engagement has moved well beyond chatbot widgets, becoming a durable interaction strategy that can influence revenue and customer experience. The shift toward agentic engagement increases upside but also raises trust, disclosure and governance constraints that can hinder adoption. CMOs must decide when to treat conversational marketing as a distinct program versus an embedded feature within existing marketing functions, like multichannel marketing.

Business Impact

- Improves pipeline conversion by turning high-intent sessions into qualified opportunities through faster response and guided decision making
- Lowers cost to serve by automating routine inquiries and routing complex cases with better context
- Expands mobile conversion opportunities as RCS and WhatsApp make richer messaging more consistent across devices
- Raises governance and brand risk stakes, requiring clear consent, disclosure and auditability for autonomous dialogue

Drivers

- AI agents can conduct multiturn dialogue that can qualify demand, schedule meetings and execute follow-up across channels. Vendors ship orchestration layers (Salesforce AXL, Agent Fabric) that let one agent definition run across web, email, SMS and messaging, collapsing build-and-deploy cost and widening the use cases a single team can operate.
- RCS reached mainstream standardization in 2025 through iOS 18 support and GSMA Universal Profile 4.0, producing a unified rich-messaging surface across iOS and Android. Verified sender identity, read receipts and interactive cards approach app-level engagement economics, making conversational programs viable at SMS scale.
- Major engagement platforms are embedding conversational agents as first-class capabilities: Agentforce in Salesforce, Merlin in MoEngage, Brand Concierge in Adobe and Athena in Zeta. Productization is shifting conversational marketing from point-tool procurement to platform-native activation.
- Marketing and CX leaders face flat headcount against rising interaction volume, driving demand for tactics that scale without proportional cost. Agentic conversational engagement can offer a clearer unit-economics story than other AI investments, if priced in sessions, rather than messages.
- Customer data platforms now harmonize chat, messaging and transcript data alongside structured profiles, closing the loop between conversational interactions and downstream personalization. Real-time profile capabilities let agents act on prior dialogue context within milliseconds, making proactive conversational engagement a viable investment for more CMOs.

Obstacles

- Consumer wariness of AI and the service-oriented nature of early chatbots cap how far marketers can push autonomy. Customers, legal teams and brand leaders may resist fully autonomous dialogue, so many programs may exist as assistive and supervised experiences for the next 18 to 24 months. Plan for a staged autonomy rather than full automation.
- Near-term uplift proof will largely come from vendor-sponsored case studies, making it hard to defend aggressive adoption claims in a budget review. Insist on methodology, sample size and time window before accepting any benchmark, and hedge forecasts until independent proof points land.
- In this early stage, conversational marketing may be best realized either as a distinct technology investment or as a feature in tools marketers already own. Many martech providers ship agent capabilities that can mimic conversations through journey orchestration or through native conversational agents, potentially creating duplicate spend and ownership disputes.

User Recommendations

- Run conversational marketing as a governed program: define approved use cases, escalation rules, disclosure expectations and measurement standards before scaling to larger or higher-visibility customer touchpoints.
- Use a staged autonomy model: Start assistive, move to supervised autonomy, then allow limited unsupervised actions only for narrow scenarios with stable safety signals.
- Require evidence for performance claims from vendors: demand methodology, sample context and time window for any uplift metrics and treat benchmarks as vendor-reported unless independently replicated.
- Conversational marketing can be realized in multiple tools, from point solutions to existing tools, such as marketing automation. Conduct a martech audit before prioritizing new vendor selection.
- Use AI for scalable interactions while reserving human engagement for moments that require emotional connection and trust-building.

Sample Vendors

Attentive; Conversica; Genesys; Gupshup; HubSpot; Intercom Fin AI Agent; Meta; Podium; Qualified; Salesforce

Gartner Recommended Reading

Generative AI Use-Case Assessment for Marketing

How to Minimize Brand Risks When Implementing AI Chatbots

Website AI Chatbots Lead to Improved Demand Generation

CMOs Must Prepare for Conversational Messaging to Transform Multichannel Journeys

Shoppable Media

Analysis By: Sandy Shen, Jason Daigler

Benefit Rating: Moderate

Market Penetration: More than 50% of target audience

Maturity: Mature mainstream

Definition:

Shoppable media refers to interactive images, videos and other media formats that let shoppers click on the content or a call-to-action object to move shoppers further along the purchase journey. Call-to-action examples include shop, chat, book an appointment and find a product. Organizations can use shoppable media across any channel, including direct-to-customer (D2C) commerce platforms, social media, messaging and email communications.

Why This Is Important

Shoppable media links product inspiration directly to purchase by reducing buying friction with calls to action and useful content such as how-to videos and instructions. The goal is to increase conversions and online revenue. Organizations can use shoppable media across D2C platforms, social media, ads, messaging and email communications to enable the path to purchase.

Business Impact

Shoppable media bridges inspirational content and commerce by giving customers the information they need for product discovery and purchase decisions. By streamlining purchase journeys, shoppable media increases customer awareness, drives revenue growth and gives brands insight into content performance.

Drivers

- Shoppable media inspires shoppers and strengthens brand perception when quality content supports purchase decisions.
- Organizations can reuse shoppable media content across multiple channels, including digital commerce sites, marketplaces, ads, social media, video streaming and TV, increasing the ROI of media spending.
- Sales attribution is straightforward because shoppable media creates a clear link between clicks, add-to-cart actions and conversions, addressing a long-standing challenge in measuring ROI and demonstrating the business impact of traditional marketing spend.
- Major social platforms, including Google, Meta and Pinterest, continue to lead in developing new shoppable ad formats and technologies. For example, in March 2026, Google enhanced its Performance Max video ads with AI voice-over that adds audio generated from an advertiser's headlines and descriptions.
- AI reduces content creation effort with capabilities such as drafting mock-ups and automating workflows, and improves ROI through better targeting, predictive analysis and overall campaign management.

Obstacles

- Shoppable media is less suited for B2B products because buyers rely more on fact-based product specifications and documents than on inspirational content when making purchase decisions.
- Most shoppable media does not offer personalized experiences that dynamically surface content and calls to action based on user behavior, which limits its ability to improve conversion rates.
- Organizations often rely on multiple shoppable media platforms, each with different publishing technologies and content guidelines, which increases the cost and effort required for content management and adaptation.
- The cost of shoppable media and cost-per-click (CPC) on social media and ad platforms continues to rise, reducing the return on advertising spend. In 2025, Google Ads CPC increased by more than 12% year over year across industries (LocaliQ). Facebook CPC rose by more than 8% between March 2025 and March 2026 (Birch).

User Recommendations

- Assess the impact of different shopper engagement media content and formats on conversion and sales. Work with marketing and sales leaders to define content guidance for selecting the right engagement formats for each use case.
- Select platforms for shoppable media based on target audience, technical capabilities and purchase experience, and curate the content and products for each platform.
- Evaluate vendor solutions for shoppable media based on capabilities for content management, channel publishing and analytics insights.
- Test new shoppable media innovations from vendors and platforms when they align strongly with audience segments and show potential to improve revenue performance.

Sample Vendors

Bambuser; Bazaarvoice; ChannelSight; Firework; PriceSpider; Shoppable; SmartCommerce; Videowise

Gartner Recommended Reading

How to Navigate Social Commerce Opportunities

Tool: Digital Commerce Technology Vendor Guide, 2025

Identity Resolution

Analysis By: Tia Zervas

Benefit Rating: High

Market Penetration: More than 50% of target audience

Maturity: Mature mainstream

Definition:

Identity resolution (IDR) is the process of locating and matching customer records across multiple datasets derived from customer interactions across multiple touchpoints. IDR providers use match keys — and deterministic or probabilistic logic — to match records that refer to the same individual or household. Marketers use IDR to analyze and deduplicate multisource datasets; to target, run and measure marketing and advertising campaigns; and to discover audience insights.

Why This Is Important

Marketers strive for consistent, personalized interactions, but linking fragmented customer records creates challenges across online and offline channels and touchpoints. This causes disconnected customer experiences across marketing, sales and service. IDR solutions unify customer data across contexts, enabling better communication, targeting and personalization across touchpoints.

Business Impact

IDR is present in both marketing technology (martech) and advertising technology (adtech) solutions, impacting critical customer-facing operations by connecting and consolidating customer identities across touchpoints, marketing, sales and service can improve customer acquisition, lifetime value, retention and satisfaction. IDR applications depend on accurate data values and relationships to extend and enrich customer profiles with external data; without this accuracy, critical data management, customer insight, ad targeting, campaign execution and measurement use cases would fail.

Drivers

- **Unified experience:** Consumers engage with brands through multiple digital devices and physical locations. This expectation drives the importance of delivering personalized interactions across online and offline touchpoints and channels.

- **Data collaboration opportunities:** Organizations acknowledge that customer data privacy protection is costly and risky — both in terms of reputation and legal damages. For some large advertisers, privacy risk has increased the appeal of data clean rooms that provide a secure way to match multiparty datasets without exposing personal data. Additionally, there are data collaboration opportunities among channel partners that are enabled by IDR.

- **Improved compliance with privacy regulations:** Organizations must adhere to data subject rights requests and opt-outs by ensuring users have access to complete information and that their preferences are propagated across data stores and applications.

- **Customer analytics and insights:** IDR supports clean, deduplicated datasets to generate more accurate customer data and analytics. By resolving identities across channels and eliminating duplicate records, IDR enhances data quality, providing a holistic view of the customer journey.

Obstacles

- **Regulatory barriers:** GDPR imposes strict limits on personal data processing; while in California, CCPA restricts the sale of personal data. As global laws increase scrutiny of IDR, legislation updates are often broadly interpreted, impacting many IDR practices.

- **Big- tech hegemony:** Major tech companies restrict IDR by limiting data usage across their platforms and via their browsers and operating systems. They join privacy advocates in opposing multisite identity tracking, further complicating IDR strategies.

- **Cost and complexity:** Effective IDR requires significant investment and expertise. Not all universal IDs are interoperable. It takes skilled resources to properly target customers, enrich first-party data, maintain identity graphs and ensure they are connected to the proper tools for activation.

- **Fragmented tech:** IDR exists in many martech tools (e.g., CDP, ESPs, MMH), but these are limited and siloed. Marketers face pressure to streamline their tech stacks and reduce costs amid overlapping capabilities.

User Recommendations

- Separate your use case evaluations by first-, second-, and third-party IDR scenarios and prioritize martech and adtech investments accordingly. As vendors add IDR capabilities to existing solutions, assess how current technology investments (e.g., CDPs, enterprise data warehouses) link customer data, and use that assessment to identify gaps and build a roadmap.
- Review your first-, second- and third-party data sources. Align marketing objectives with the customer data needed to meet them to inform IDR provider evaluation.
- Collaborate closely with IT, data analytics and legal teams when investing in IDR technologies. These partners are critical to meeting marketing objectives while complying with privacy expectations and relevant regulations.
- Conduct scenario planning to determine the technology and data investments needed to limit reliance on third-party cookies for digital advertising and customer engagement. Advertising and cross-channel marketing personalization will increase marketing spend due to third-party cookie deprecation.

Sample Vendors

dentsu (Merkle); Experian; LiveRamp; Omnicom (Acxiom); Publicis Groupe (Epsilon); The Trade Desk; TransUnion

Gartner Recommended Reading

Navigate the Marketing Data Collaboration Landscape

Measure Marketing's Value Without Third-Party Cookies

Maverick Research: Weaponizing Privacy

Account-Based Marketing Platforms

Analysis By: Jenifer Silverstein, Ray Pun, Chris Chandler, Upasna Chandna

Benefit Rating: High

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Account-based marketing (ABM) platforms allow B2B marketing and sales teams to run ABM programs at scale, including features enabling account selection, planning, engagement and reporting. Platforms enable the creation of target account lists by unifying first- and third-party data. In addition, platforms may engage audiences by activating channels, such as display advertising, social advertising, email and sales engagement, using a mix of native capabilities and integrations.

Why This Is Important

As B2B companies scale and optimize their ABM programs, ABM platforms become essential. Data enrichment, including first-party and third-party intent, and predictive modeling capabilities, improves account selection, while campaign orchestration and activation across multiple channels help broaden reach and engagement. Account-level or buying group reporting on engagement saves time and improves visibility, and sales alerts increase seller activation and collaboration.

Business Impact

ABM remains a key go-to-market (GTM) model for many B2B companies, enabling them to reach net-new customers and expand existing customers in a personalized, yet scalable manner. Originating with the technology sector, adoption expanded to other industries. This is partly due to ABM platforms' ability to provide contact-to-account or buying group insights that enable better decisions on target audiences, improve engagement across accounts and more easily demonstrate ROI, among other factors.

Drivers

- Many ABM platforms have long leveraged AI-powered features, such as predictive analytics and propensity-to-buy modeling, to help marketers identify and engage potential buyers. Over the past year, innovation has accelerated, with platforms introducing AI agents and expanded GenAI capabilities to support the scaling and personalization of programs for more microtargeted audiences. This evolution began with AI-generated asset creation — including advertising copy, personalized email copy and account summaries for sales — and progressed into optimization of execution within individual channels, such as display advertising and email. As these AI capabilities mature, some ABM platforms offer, or are planning to offer, the optimization and orchestration of audience engagement across multiple channels, further enhancing ABM program effectiveness and reach.

- As part of the broader trend of microtargeted campaigns grows due to AI-enabled personalization, Gartner anticipates that ABM programs will play an increasingly vital role in B2B GTM strategies. Consequently, the interest in ABM technology is expected to remain high. The 2026 Gartner Tech Marketing Benchmarks Survey finds that 76% of all technology marketers with $100 million or more in annual revenue have actively used ABM tech in the past twelve months.

- Gartner observes a fair amount of switching between ABM platform vendors during subscription renewal periods. This is expected for a market that is on the Slope of Enlightenment and the growing maturity of buyers who make purchase decisions based on past experience with ABM platform providers. However, the market continues to remain on track for a steady progression through the Hype Cycle.

Obstacles

- As ABM platforms expand the range of data sources they provide or ingest and broaden the channels available for activation, the boundaries between traditional data providers and marketing and sales technologies are becoming less distinct. At the same time, ABM platforms are enhancing their ability to connect marketing and sales functions, further increasing overlap with the capabilities of adjacent GTM tools and data providers. Specifically, overlapping functionality is observed across ABM platforms and B2B marketing automation platforms, sales engagement platforms, GTM data applications and customer intelligence applications.

- The market size and Hype Cycle progression depend on adoption in geographies beyond North America and in industries beyond high tech. Some vendors continue limited investments in GTM programs and features for specific geographies or verticals. However, most platforms only offer a user experience in English.

User Recommendations

- Identify overlapping functionality and determine which capabilities should be performed by your ABM platforms versus other technologies. Specifically, examine and compare ABM platforms and the audience management, multichannel orchestration and analytics capabilities within B2B marketing automation platforms; the audience management, orchestration of channels such as email, sales insights and alerts capabilities within sales engagement applications; the audience management, intent data and multichannel orchestration capabilities within customer intelligence applications; and audience management and intent data capabilities within GTM data applications.
- Request a proof of concept to assess the relevance and accuracy of vendors' third-party intent data and enrichment capabilities. Pay special attention to your target markets, including specific geographical regions and industries. Compare vendor intent data samples with your own sales history to confirm its validity.

Sample Vendors

6sense; Demandbase; Expandi Group; Madison Logic; N.Rich; NextRoll; Propensity; ZoomInfo

Gartner Recommended Reading

Magic Quadrant for Account-Based Marketing Platforms

Critical Capabilities for Account-Based Marketing Platforms

2025 Tech Marketing Benchmarks Survey: Account-Based Marketing Insights

Entering the Plateau

Personification

Analysis By: Andrew Frank

Benefit Rating: Moderate

Market Penetration: 20% to 50% of target audience

Maturity: Early mainstream

Definition:

Personification allows marketers to deliver targeted digital ads and experiences to individuals based on their inferred membership in a characteristic customer segment without collecting or processing personal data.

Why This Is Important

Personification is a key strategy for reconciling consumer privacy concerns with the benefits of personalized experiences. Ads and experiences based on inferred characteristics and behaviors, rather than explicit personal data, can lead to more relevant and engaging interactions. This improves customer satisfaction and conversion rates while offering superior scalability and optimization potential.

Business Impact

Marketers continue to resist an absolute dependency on hyperscalers' walled gardens for ad targeting and measurement, and are seeking alternatives to explicit user consent for site personalization. Persona modeling approaches provide the keys to reducing these dependencies while staying within the bounds of privacy requirements and expectations.

Drivers

- **Technical advances:** Breakthroughs in AI are boosting the effectiveness of customer segment inferences and optimization without personal data (often with synthetic data). Content productivity gains from GenAI are driving vendors and marketers toward personalized content strategies that require effective segmentation to scale.
- **Data restrictions:** Ongoing challenges to collecting and acting on first-party data are driving marketers to seek relevant connections with customers that don't require personal data, login and tracking consent.

- **Compliance barriers:** The cost of compliance with an expanding patchwork of inconsistent regional privacy laws escalates the urgency for a global privacy-safe solution to ad targeting and measurement.
- **Cost-efficiency:** Personification can reduce the costs associated with AI computation, data storage, processing and security. The cost of rendering user-level personalized content and dialogs can quickly become prohibitive for mass-market brands.
- **Monetization opportunities:** Businesses with extensive first-party data, such as retail, travel, publishing and telecommunications, face pressure to find ways to monetize their data while staying within the bounds of privacy regulations and consumer expectations. Persona-level offerings address this need.

Obstacles

- **Data quality and availability:** Although personification reduces the need for personal data, it still relies on accurate behavioral and contextual data to reliably infer and target segments. Incomplete or inaccurate data hinders adoption efforts. Gaps can be amplified by AI overfitting when a model treats noise, outliers or incomplete records as genuine, actionable patterns.
- **Walled garden supremacy:** The scale and concentration of behavioral data and compute power at Google, Meta and Amazon far outweigh the potential effectiveness of any brand or publisher's personification efforts. Many will opt to simply rely on these platforms for ad optimization.
- **Hidden bias and manipulation:** Biases may emerge as unintended side effects of segmentation schemes. Consumers may suspect unauthorized use of personal data. Machine customers acting as proxies for buyers may defy or manipulate personification efforts.
- **AI-induced obsolescence:** Dynamically inferred, context-based relevance and presentation may obviate the need for personification.

User Recommendations

- Experiment with different personification strategies across platforms to continuously evolve and refine your ad targeting and measurement approach.

- Focus data and analytics resources on customer segmentation strategies to continuously refine and optimize persona definitions based on observed behavioral, contextual and synthetic data.
- Incorporate established clustering approaches using geography and demographics, supplemented by public and commercial data sources.
- Reevaluate personalization strategies and designs to minimize personal data requirements while maximizing opportunities for needs discovery, contextual relevance and creative impact.
- Make privacy-first data collaboration and federated learning with partners a core element of your strategy to use AI for marketing and customer insights.

Sample Vendors

Adobe; Amazon; Google; LiveRamp; Publicis Groupe; The Trade Desk; WPP

Gartner Recommended Reading

Top Marketing Trends for 2024: AI for Privacy, Personalization and Influence

Appendixes

See the previous Hype Cycle: Hype Cycle for Digital Advertising, 2025.

Hype Cycle Phases, Benefit Ratings and Maturity Levels

Table 2: Hype Cycle Phases

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Phase	Definition
Innovation Trigger	A breakthrough, public demonstration, product launch or other event generates significant media and industry interest.
Peak of Inflated Expectations	During this phase of overenthusiasm and unrealistic projections, a flurry of well-publicized activity by technology leaders results in some successes, but more failures, as the innovation is pushed to its limits. The only enterprises making money are conference organizers and content publishers.
Trough of Disillusionment	Because the innovation does not live up to its overinflated expectations, it rapidly becomes unfashionable. Media interest wanes, except for a few cautionary tales.
Slope of Enlightenment	Focused experimentation and solid hard work by an increasingly diverse range of organizations lead to a true understanding of the innovation's applicability, risks and benefits. Commercial off-the-shelf methodologies and tools ease the development process.
Plateau of Productivity	The real-world benefits of the innovation are demonstrated and accepted. Tools and methodologies are increasingly stable as they enter their second and third generations. Growing numbers of organizations feel comfortable with the reduced level of risk; the rapid growth phase of adoption begins. Approximately 20% of the technology's target audience has adopted or is adopting the technology as it enters this phase.

Table 3: Benefit Ratings

Benefit Rating	Definition
Transformational	Enables new ways of doing business across industries that will result in major shifts in industry dynamics
High	Enables new ways of performing horizontal or vertical processes that will result in significantly increased revenue or cost savings for an enterprise
Moderate	Provides incremental improvements to established processes that will result in increased revenue or cost savings for an enterprise
Low	Slightly improves processes (for example, improved user experience) that will be difficult to translate into increased revenue or cost savings

Source: Gartner

Table 4: Maturity Levels

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Maturity Levels	Status	Products/Vendors
Embryonic	In labs	None
Emerging	Commercialization by vendors Pilots and deployments by industry leaders	First generation High price Much customization
Adolescent	Maturing technology capabilities and process understanding Uptake beyond early adopters	Second generation Less customization
Early mainstream	Proven technology Vendors, technology and adoption rapidly evolving	Third generation More out-of-box methodologies
Mature mainstream	Robust technology Not much evolution in vendors or technology	Several dominant vendors
Legacy	Not appropriate for new developments Cost of migration constraints replacement	Maintenance revenue focus
Obsolete	Rarely used	Used/resale market only

Source: Gartner

Acronym Key and Glossary Terms

AI	artificial intelligence
API	application programming interface
ATT	App Tracking Transparency (Apple)
CAPI	Conversions API (Meta)
CMO	chief marketing officer
GenAI	generative artificial intelligence
GPT	generative pretrained transformer
LLM	large language model
MMA	mobile marketing analytics
PPC	pay-per-click

Evidence

[1] 2026 Gartner CMO Spend Survey. The purpose of this survey is to look at top-line marketing budgets, and identify how evolving customer journeys, C-suite pressures and cost challenges impact marketing's strategies and spending priorities. This year's survey will help us understand how the most successful CMOs are balancing innovation with efficiency and accountability. Conducted online from January to March 2026, the research included 401 respondents from North America (n = 190), the United Kingdom (n = 88), and the rest of Europe (n = 123), which included France, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Participants were required to be involved in decisions related to setting or influencing marketing strategies/planning, aligning marketing budgets/resources, or leading cross-functional programs and strategies with marketing. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents represented organizations with annual revenue of $1 billion or more. The respondents came from a diverse range of industries: manufacturing (n = 51), financial services (n = 47), insurance (n = 34), consumer products (n = 42), healthcare (n = 48), travel and hospitality (n = 30), IT and business services (n = 40), retail (n = 40), pharmaceutical (n = 36), and media (n = 33). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

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Recommended by the Author

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Understanding Gartner's Hype Cycles

Tool: Create Your Own Hype Cycle With Gartner's Hype Cycle Builder

AI Use-Case Assessment for Advertising

Table 1: Priority Matrix for Digital Advertising, 2026

Benefit	*Years to Mainstream Adoption*			
↓	***Less Than 2 Years*** ↓	***2 to 5 Years*** ↓	***5 to 10 Years*** ↓	***More Than 10 Years*** ↓
Transformational	Generative AI for Marketing		Answer Engine Optimization Influence AI	
High	Retail and Commerce Media Networks	Account-Based Marketing Platforms Conversational Marketing Customer Data Platform Identity Resolution Over-the-Top TV Advertising	Customer Data Ethics	
Moderate	Personification Shoppable Media	Consent and Preference Management Data Clean Rooms Emotion AI for Marketing	Curated Audiences for Digital Advertising	
Low				

Source: Gartner (July 2026)

Table 2: Hype Cycle Phases

Phase	Definition
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Years to Mainstream Adoption	The time required for the innovation to reach the Plateau of Productivity.

Source: Gartner

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