Report from the Digital Marketing Conference 2025

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IORMA brings the latest in digital marketing thinking fresh from London's recent Digital Marketing World Forum. IORMA Luxury Director Pandora Mather-Lees attended the forum to collect insights into the future of digital marketing as it impacts consumer commerce. With two days of packed educational sessions across four key streams of marketing activity there was a lot of knowledge and networking shared between delegates. We have selected some of the best insights from panels and presentations at the event with a focus on new technology.

Whilst the show brought together thought leaders, marketers, engineers and innovators to explore the future of all digital communications, one theme stood out: Artificial Intelligence and how it can transform current practice. While AI is not replacing marketers, it is rapidly reshaping how we understand, target and engage audiences. Brands must adapt and reframe their approaches by adopting emerging technologies without losing sight of strategy, nuance and trust. The following reveals some key players and their experiences.

AI and the Future of Branding – a panel focused on

Marcus Foley of creative agency TOMMY stressed that while AI can rapidly scan competitor propositions and conduct lightning-fast market research, it cannot yet judge the emotional impact or memorability of a brand's message. "AI won't take our jobs, but it will make them different," was a recurring sentiment. The role of the marketer will shift from creator to orchestrator blending human judgement with machine-driven insights.

Foley emphasised the importance of clarity and speed, your core proposition needs to land with the audience within 1.5 seconds. AI can support classic A/B testing and will become increasingly capable of analysing campaign data, but marketers still need to own the creative strategy.

Candyce Costa, a social media consultant highlighted that AI is more than a passive tool. Marketers can prompt AI to ask questions and challenge assumptions. She urged the industry to stop chasing algorithms and instead focus on doing fewer things well. Platforms like Leonardo.Ai offer advanced image generation, though visual content produced this way may still lack the depth of designer-created assets - especially in high-end or luxury contexts.

Optimising Digital Experience

Pavel Agol, software engineer with Progress Software Development, shared insights into AI's influence on user journeys:

- 15% of buying decisions are now happening within AI-driven chat interfaces like ChatGPT.
- Visitors arriving via AI search interfaces stay 8% longer.
- 43% of search answers link directly to Google results, reinforcing the "walled garden" challenge for marketers.

Agol stressed that AI is excellent at condensing content and handling task-based queries, but this must be grounded in *expertise, authority and trust* — especially across channels. AI-powered translation tools can start the process, but human review and intelligent oversight remains essential.

Content automation emerged as a critical theme. As marketers grapple with multi-channel, multi-region strategies, AI can identify knowledge gaps, capture intent, and assist with targeting. However, outputs must be transparent, compliant and continuously measured for performance.

The debate around **Large Language Models (LLMs)** versus **Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG)** also gained attention. RAG models, trained on internal documentation, deliver higher relevance and are better suited for real-time, personalised brand interactions. But clarity is needed around what constitutes a "conversion" is it a sale, lead or behavioural change?

Email Marketing in an AI World

Email marketing is evolving fast, particularly as open rates become less reliable due to bots and new filtering technologies. Click-through rates and real actions are the new metrics to watch.

Key takeaways:

- 70% of customers you lose were already disengaged 3 months prior.
- Google and Microsoft now track engagement patterns to flag potential spam, including the placement of unsubscribe buttons.
- AI can help create more relevant content and segment audiences by identifying hidden behavioural patterns.
- Subject line optimisation remains vital, adding a recipient's name can lift engagement by 30%.

Best practices now include:

- Frequent list cleaning and validation at point-of-collection.
- Clear consent mechanisms, particularly for cross-border data compliance.
- Leveraging all digital channels for subscriber acquisition.
- Experimenting with incentives, QR codes and even integrating subscription calls-to-action into broadcast content.

The Role of SEO and Content Strategy

SEO is no longer just technical, it's a mindset. Businesses must demystify SEO across departments, making it understandable and actionable for non-specialists. Tools like ChatGPT can help map out content strategy and identify schema opportunities, but strategic management is still key.

Marketers were encouraged to look beyond vanity metrics and interrogate audience behaviour shifts, particularly when campaigns underperform. AI's ability to sift data can support this, but the insight still needs to be interpreted and applied with care.

AI and the Future of Marketing

There was a strong focus on how AI is shaping the future of marketing. A big theme was the emergence of AI Agents. These are tools that go beyond simple automation. David Zhang from Aomni, a platform where market intelligence and data is gathered in one simple software portal, explained the difference between a chatbot, a co-pilot and a full AI agent. While chatbots require

human input and co-pilots can perform specific tasks, AI agents can orchestrate multiple tools to execute complex functions independently. This has huge implications for productivity. Indeed, Zhang's team of five operates at the level of a 50-person company.

One company used an AI agent to completely overhaul their RFP response process, enabling them to open a new business channel in just one week. The takeaway: companies that adopt AI agents not only automate existing tasks but discover entirely new capabilities.

Positioning was another major focus. With over 15,000 marketing tech products now available (up from 150 in 2011), standing out requires sharp differentiation. AI agents can help monitor competitor positioning in real time using dashboards, scraping data from websites, news, PR and product launches. This is work that would normally take weeks.

When it comes to personas, there's a shift from generic segmentation to data-driven profiles. One company analysed 10,000 sales calls per week, combining that with Reddit and community data. AI now allows marketers to answer four core questions: who are they, what do they feel, why do they buy and how do they buy, thereby moving from assumptions about one's audience to real insights.

Content creation is also undergoing change. 71% of images used in marketing are already AI edited. The panel argued that AI hasn't made content less authentic, instead it has accelerated trends that were already in motion. Personalised marketing is becoming the norm. For example, the show *Stranger Things* uses AI to display different cover images based on the viewer's preferences (horror or romance or comedy etc).

Storytelling, however, remains the most valuable skill. Referencing literature by Yuval Noah Harari, one speaker suggested AI is just the latest evolution in information networks and that human storytelling remains central. Marketers need to become skilled storytellers who know how to use AI tools for amplification.

A voice researcher, Ciaran Harris, demonstrated how CogniStream AI can now detect emotions in speech. This opens new doors for understanding customer sentiment in real time. Rather than relying on A/B testing or traditional surveys, brands can hear emotional nuance through trained AI interviewers. This could be useful in anything from academic research to brand strategy for hotels. Equally, in training agents to perform tasks such as answering the phone and engaging with callers, Harris believes the technology is a game changer.

Data, CRM & Insights – using the example of Banking, Travel and Grocery Industry (Marketing strategies)

One panel explored how data, CRM tools, and consumer insights shape marketing strategies in different industries, with a focus on banking, travel, and grocery retail.

Banking: Traditional vs. Neobanks

The session began with an analysis of the UK banking sector, comparing traditional banks with neobanks-digital-only financial institutions. While neobanks initially held a greater share of daily transactions, traditional banks have started to catch up, especially since early 2025.

The speaker compared Revolut, a neobank, with Lloyds, a traditional bank. Lloyds primarily uses Meta-owned platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to reach older demographics, particularly those aged between 60 and 75. In contrast, Revolut relies heavily on YouTube, with 97% of its digital marketing focused there, targeting younger, mobile-first users. Both Revolut and another neobank, Monzo, advertise exclusively on social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Snapchat which reflects their digital natives focus on marketing.

Travel Industry: Shifts in Digital Behavior

The travel sector is also experiencing a transformation in how customers interact with digital platforms:

Mobile Engagement in Hotel Bookings

Hotels are increasingly capturing mobile traffic from Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) such as Agoda, booking.com etc. While OTAs remain dominant, more users are booking directly through hotels and airline websites. These companies worry about losing customers unless they offer features like "price freezing," which are currently more common on OTA platforms. Interestingly, platforms such as Trip.com, Expedia and Airbnb have recently outpaced market leader Booking.com in terms of growth in Monthly Active Users (MAUs).

Social Media Marketing Strategies

Expedia leverages YouTube to promote its competitive pricing while Booking.com uses Meta platforms and TikTok to market hassle-free, flexible travel options. Each company tailors its strategy to different user behaviors and content consumption patterns.

Shift from Desktop to Mobile

Mobile usage has surpassed desktop browsing in the travel industry, demonstrating a preference for apps and mobile websites. The mobile web, in particular, offers users a seamless booking experience without requiring them to download an app-while also being more cost-effective for companies. British Airways and EasyJet were highlighted as successful examples, offering smooth booking journeys on both their apps and mobile websites.

Grocery Retail: Platform Preference and Customer Engagement

The discussion also touched on how grocery chains in the UK are managing the balance between website and app engagement:

Morrisons and Lidl have adopted an "App-First" strategy, with 71-78% of their digital customers using their apps exclusively.

Asda remains heavily web-based, with nearly 80% of customers accessing its services via the website-making it a "Web-Dominant" outlier.

Tesco is more balanced: 68% of its users access services via the app, 20% use the website, and 12% switch between both platforms.

Managing Customer Expectations Online

Another panel focused on how businesses can improve customer satisfaction by responding promptly and meaningfully to feedback.

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and customer relationship intelligence (CRI) tools was highlighted as crucial for delivering timely, relevant responses especially during peak periods when customer queries rise. The panel emphasized that every customer is important and that businesses must be proactive in addressing a range of different challenges. Responsive service, underpinned by real-time data and AI, was seen as essential to maintaining customer loyalty and satisfaction.

How to Analyse Social Media Trends

Insights on another digital marketing session revealed techniques for identifying and capitalizing on social media trends, this being an increasingly important driver of brand engagement and growth.

There are over 5 billion daily social media users globally, each spending an average of 2 hours and 24 minutes per day on these platforms. During this time, users not only consume content but also express their desires, fears, and opinions about brands and products. To harness this, companies must develop a strong understanding of what the speaker called the “three dimensions of social intelligence”. These are:

1. **Viral Trends and Memes (Short-Term, High Engagement)**
   These trends are shaped by platform algorithms, hashtags, and viral moments. While they can lead to rapid spikes in visibility and even short-term sales, they are often difficult to sustain.
   - **Strategic Actions:** Brands should map cultural relevance, ensure that their product categories align with cultural trends and set up social monitoring alerts to act quickly on emerging content. These activities can help generate “earned reach”, publicity gained through organic sharing rather than paid advertising.
2. **Niche Communities and Subcultures (Passion-Driven Audiences)**
   These are online groups that form around shared interests and values, often found on platforms like Reddit and TikTok. While smaller in size, these communities are highly influential and often set the stage for broader consumer trends.

- **Strategic Actions**: Brands should identify and collaborate with micro-influencers within these communities and test their effectiveness compared to more traditional digital campaigns. Listening and engaging genuinely with these audiences can lead to long-term loyalty and advocacy.

3. **Macro-Level Shifts in Consumer Behavior**
   These refer to widespread changes in how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products.

   - **Strategic Actions**: Businesses should establish early trend detection systems to forecast demand and adjust pricing, inventory as well as product development strategies accordingly. Cross-departmental collaboration, particularly between marketing, PR, and product teams is essential to building a unified consumer intelligence model.

Influencer Marketing Insights

Influencer marketing has now become a mainstream part of a company's marketing strategy but one that is relatively hard to control. Panellists at the conference shared different aspects of their experience in handling influencers.

Harley Illot, Head of Marketing at Snapchat, emphasized the importance of working closely with influencers to drive retention, growth and revenue. Snapchat's influencers, known as "Snapstars," are highly engaged, some even post up to 80 to 90 stories a day. These creators often share raw, behind-the-scenes content exclusive to the platform, offering a unique way for brands to build authenticity and trust. Illot advised brands to collaborate with agencies and approach Snapchat directly to tap into this talent pool of influencers ready to work with brands.

Abigail Taverner from BBC Sounds explained that, while they don't sell physical products, they offer unique access to events. Their approach is to feature influencers through interviews or experiences, prioritising in-person, offline engagements that resonate deeply with audiences. A notable example was when scientist Brian Cox recreated the clouds on Venus at his own home, resulting in 3 million TikTok views - with the BBC's support.

Across the board, panellists agreed that influencers need clear, concise briefs with good examples, but that they should not be overly scripted. The emphasis is on giving creators the freedom to communicate authentically. Influencers know their audiences best, so letting them tailor content within KPIs helps avoid disappointment.

Emerging trends include using semantic search tools like Sprout Social to find creators based on topics rather than traditional categories. One humorous example was identifying niche influencers like a “cucumber influencer.” This shift reflects the growing demand for hyper-relevant and topical content.

Tika O’Leary from fashion brand Saint + Sofia highlighted that staying on trend requires experimentation. Her team tests regularly and involves influencers early, sharing performance results and making them part of the process. Dolce & Gabbana was cited as another example of a brand giving creators creative freedom, provided there is alignment in values.

Conclusion

This conference made it clear: digital marketing is in transition. AI is enabling exceptional speed, insight and personalisation.
Yet the marketers who will thrive are those who combine technical fluency with creative judgement and human-centric thinking.
Whether enhancing email journeys, rethinking brand messaging or experimenting with AI-powered agents and content tools, the key lies in orchestration and sensitive oversight, not automation alone.
