

2026 RESEARCH REPORT

The 2026 AI and Marketing Performance Index

A data-driven study on how best-in-class marketing teams drive growth with AI-powered insights.

Research conducted in partnership with Ascend2



GrowthLoop

Table of contents

Key findings	p. 03
Special segments	p. 04
Introduction	p. 05
01 The problem	p. 06
02 The foundation	p. 11
03 The breakthrough	p. 16
04 The amplifier	p. 20
05 The future	p. 26
Participants & methodology	p. 29

AT A GLANCE

Key findings

- 01 Personalization is held back by data issues**

Marketers are being held back by problems with measuring real impact, data latency, and fragmented tools. These issues extend into experimentation, where data quality (42%), technology limitations (37%), and resource constraints (37%) prevent teams from accurately measuring outcomes or linking them to revenue (36%).
- 02 Measurement & experimentation are ineffective**

58% of marketers spend a moderate or significant amount of time on experimentation, yet only 20% report high impact from those efforts. In fact, 77% say "winning" tests fail at scale at least sometimes.
- 03 A unified SSOT drives revenue**

Organizations with a fully centralized source of truth are more likely to report significant increases in revenue compared to those without (44% vs 8%). A unified SSOT is also strongly correlated with faster marketing cycles, improved use of data, and greater impact from testing and iteration.
- 04 Where you store data matters**

Organizations using data clouds or lakes are less likely to struggle with challenges like measuring impact (42% vs 54%) and managing manual work (31% vs 38%) compared to those relying on marketing suites for their source of truth.

- 05 Real-time data accelerates winning tests**

Teams using real-time customer context and behavioral signals are more than 2x as likely to see high-impact experimentation results (43% vs 18%) and significantly less likely to see "winning" tests fail at scale (8% vs 22%).
- 06 AI is becoming a strategic layer**

There is a growing shift toward using AI to enhance experimentation and optimization, with 36% of marketers now identifying A/B testing and real-time optimization as the biggest opportunity for AI, up from 27% last year.
- 07 High-growth teams prioritize differently**

Organizations seeing the strongest revenue growth are significantly more likely to prioritize speeding up campaign execution (43% vs 26%), balancing brand and performance (35% vs 19%), and scaling personalized experiences (34% vs 24%).

Special segments

Throughout this report, we highlight specific segments of marketers to gain insight into what sets high-performing teams apart. Look for these icons to get a closer look at how different groups approach their marketing strategy, and what separates the leaders from the laggards.



Executive Perspective

19%

Executive-level marketing and data professionals account for 19% of respondents. Insights from this segment illuminate the strategic perspective of executives and how it differs from the often more operational lens of non-executives.



Growth Leaders

25%

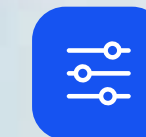
25% of marketers surveyed reported experiencing significant revenue growth at their company in the last year. This group's responses provide insight into what high-growth companies are doing differently.



Data Unification Champions

46%

46% of organizations surveyed have fully centralized customer data that is actively used to power most campaigns. This cohort helps us understand how this single source of truth impacts personalization and overall revenue.



Elite Personalizers

12%

When it comes to informing personalization, just 12% of marketers rely on real-time customer context and observed customer response to prior touchpoints. This group gives us insight into how real-time data can drive growth.



Super Testers

20%

20% of marketers report having measurable experimentation that consistently guides better marketing decision-making. This segment gives us insight into best practices around testing and iteration that are critical to optimization.

Introduction

Marketers continue to be kept on their toes as needs and expectations of customers fluctuate. As rapidly as these shifts occur, the volume of available customer data points grows. As that data expands, so does the need for technology that can apply it effectively.

At the same time, pressure to prove marketing ROI continues to intensify. **In response, marketing priorities are shifting toward three essential capabilities: simplified data, intelligent use of AI, and the ability to move faster than the market.** Marketers are already signaling this change. In the year ahead, their top priorities include **integrating AI into team processes (35%), using real-time data to adjust campaigns (33%), and speeding up execution (31%).** Notably, **real-time data has jumped from the sixth to the second most important priority year-over-year.**

Yet most organizations are not fully equipped to operate this way. Data remains disjointed, personalization is difficult to scale, and measurement challenges persist. While 58% of teams use a mix of historical and real-time signals to inform personalization, **only 12% rely primarily on real-time customer context and interactions.** The result is slower learning, weaker optimization, and reduced confidence in performance. **Only 30% of marketers say their strategy is very effective at accelerating growth,** and campaign cycles remain stubbornly slow: **54% of teams take between 7 and 30 days to move from ideation to execution, while 41% take more than 30 days** - virtually unchanged from last year.

AVERAGE MARKETING CAMPAIGN CYCLE FROM IDEATION TO EXECUTION



AI represents a major opportunity, especially for improving ROI and driving revenue. But AI is only as effective as the data it learns from and the systems it operates within. To deliver meaningful impact, it must be powered by complete, unified customer data and learn continuously from customer interactions in real time. This is where leading teams are pulling ahead.

For the second year, GrowthLoop, in partnership with Ascend2, surveyed 318 marketing and data professionals to better understand their approach to data and technology alongside the rise of AI and the data cloud. In the last year alone, we have seen significant changes in how marketers prioritize and execute their efforts. We learn more about the growing pressure to prove ROI, the role of technology and AI in improving performance, and how teams plan to hit that moving target.

This report explores what sets high-performing teams apart and what is holding marketers back. It demonstrates how critical unified data is to unlocking growth opportunities across marketing organizations. And it examines the ever-growing importance of AI as marketing teams refocus their lens from generalizations to individual personalization, and apply these insights at scale.

We hope you enjoy the report!



Teams with shorter campaign cycles are more likely to be using AI across their marketing efforts.

SECTION ONE

The problem

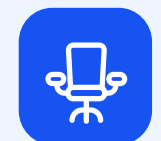
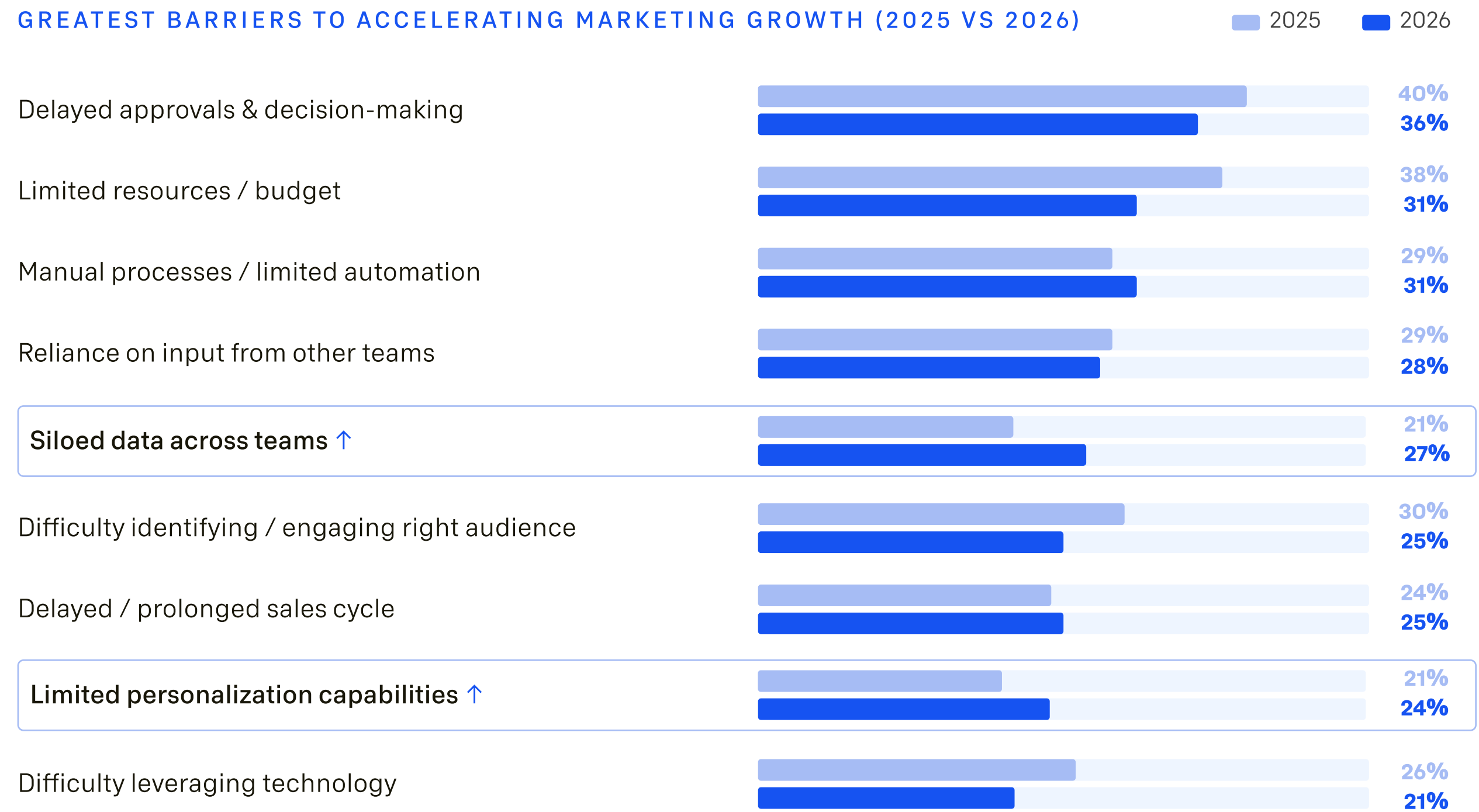


Data-related challenges are on the rise

As marketers work to improve campaign efforts, they feel stronger burdens stemming from data and personalization limitations than they did last year. **Siloed data across teams** increased significantly from 21% to 27%, while **limited personalization capabilities** rose from 21% in 2025 to 24% this year.

Meanwhile, more operational constraints take a backseat: **delayed approvals and decision-making** (40% to 36%) and **limited resources or budget** (38% to 31%) have declined slightly since last year.

GREATEST BARRIERS TO ACCELERATING MARKETING GROWTH (2025 VS 2026)



EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

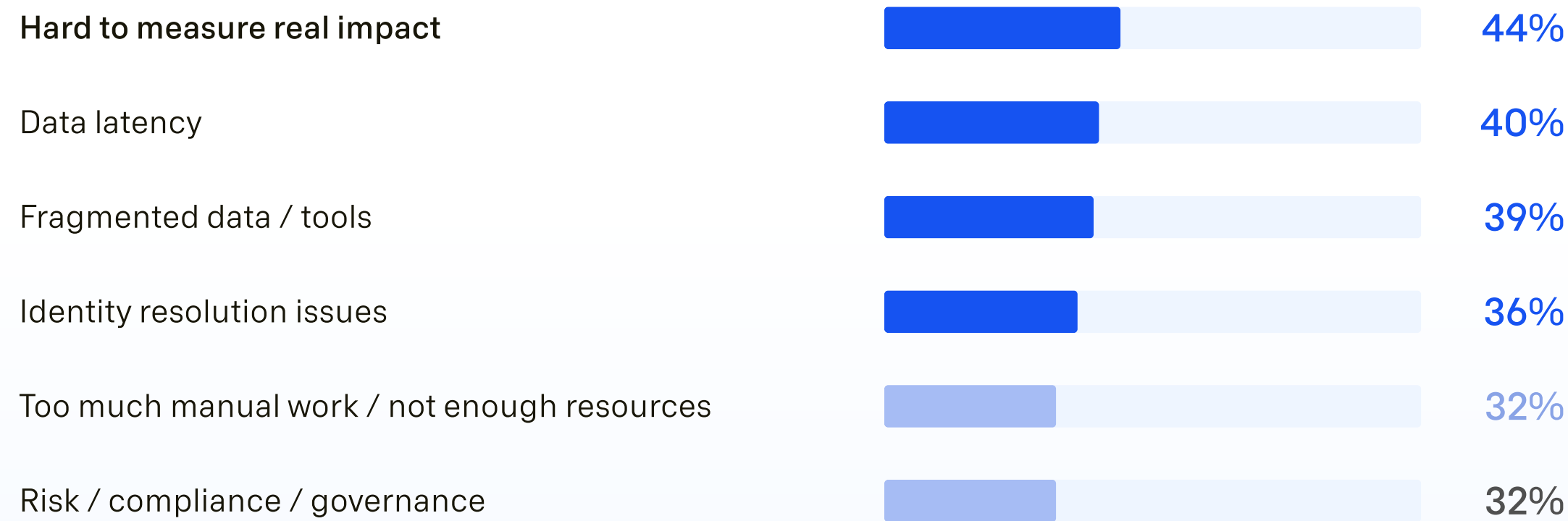
Executives are significantly more likely to cite **manual processes and limited automation** as a barrier to success than non-executives (**44% vs 28%**). They are also more likely to report difficulty identifying the right audience (**31% vs 24%**) and limited personalization capabilities (**33% vs 22%**). As expectations around proving marketing ROI — and increasingly the ROI of AI — continue to rise, leadership teams are pushing for greater efficiency, better targeting, and more scalable personalization.

MEASUREMENT LATENCY

Data issues are slowing down optimization

The data required to power personalization is often incomplete, delayed, or fragmented, limiting marketers' ability to measure impact. In fact, **measuring the real impact of personalization (44%)** is the most pervasive challenge among marketers, followed closely by data latency (40%) and fragmented data or tools (39%).

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON CHALLENGES YOUR TEAM FACES WITH CAMPAIGN PERSONALIZATION?



Without timely access to complete and unified customer data, organizations struggle to connect personalization efforts to real outcomes and adapt campaigns quickly enough to keep up with customer behavior. Over one-third (35%) of those surveyed need one to two months to see the impact of a lifecycle marketing change or a campaign. Another one-quarter (25%) need more than three months. Just 8% can see results in days and 27% in weeks.

HOW LONG DOES IT TYPICALLY TAKE TO SEE WHETHER A CAMPAIGN OR LIFECYCLE MARKETING CHANGE IMPROVED A KEY BUSINESS METRIC



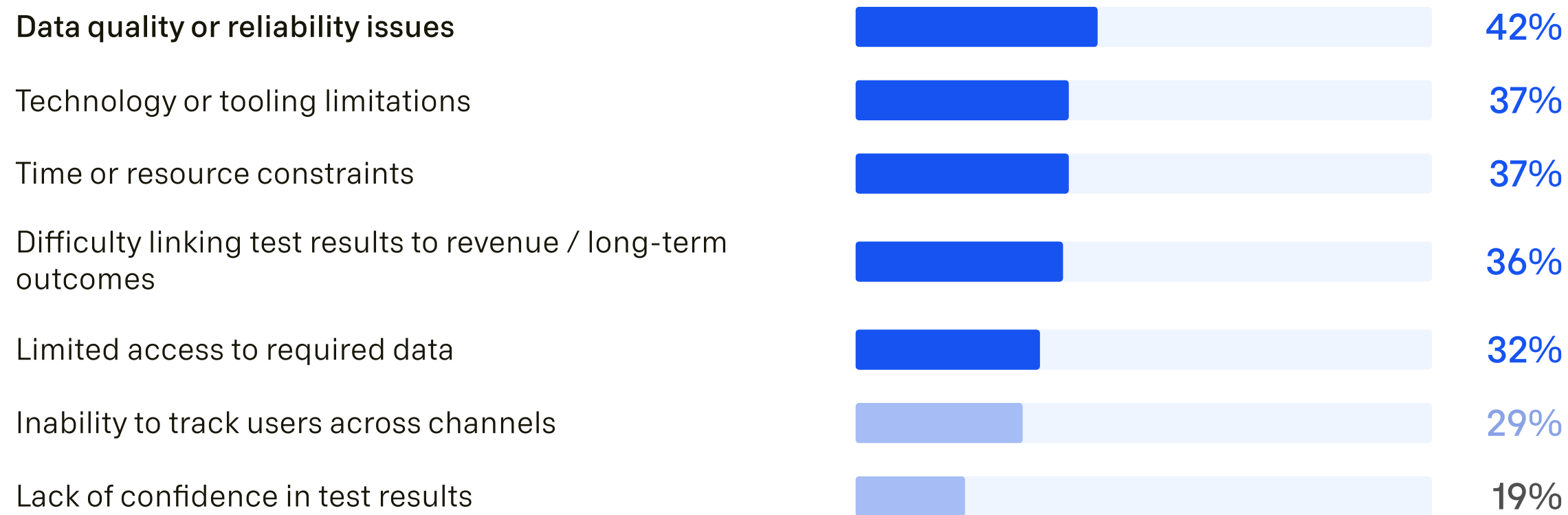
EXPERIMENTATION BARRIERS

Measurement becomes more challenging when data is unreliable

The same underlying data issues also impact marketing experimentation. **Data quality and reliability (42%)** is the most significant barrier to measuring campaign test outcomes, followed by technology or tooling limitations and time or resource constraints (37% each).

Limited access to data (32%) and the inability to track users across channels (29%) further complicate measurement, making it difficult to evaluate the full impact of experiments. As a result, many organizations run experiments but lack the confidence or visibility needed to fully understand what drove the results. This disconnect between experimentation and measurement slows learning cycles and limits the ability to optimize campaigns effectively.

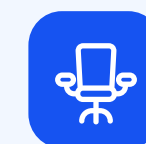
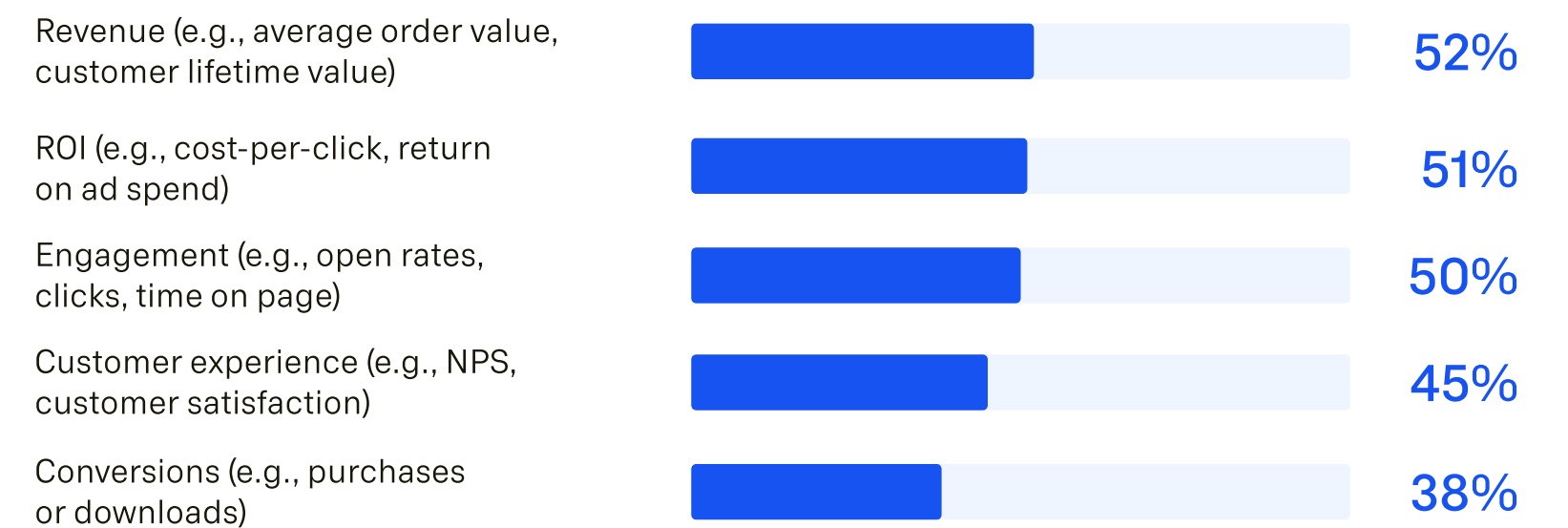
WHAT PREVENTS YOUR TEAM FROM MEASURING ALL OF THE OUTCOMES YOU WANT TO WHEN RUNNING A/B TESTS?



What are marketers measuring?

Revenue and ROI are the most common success metrics that A/B tests are measured against, with over half of teams using these metrics. Engagement (e.g. opens, clicks, time on page) is used by 50% of those surveyed. Customer experience and conversions are used by fewer, but still a meaningful portion of marketers (45% and 38% of teams, respectively).

SUCCESS METRICS MEASURED WHEN RUNNING AN A/B TEST.



EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

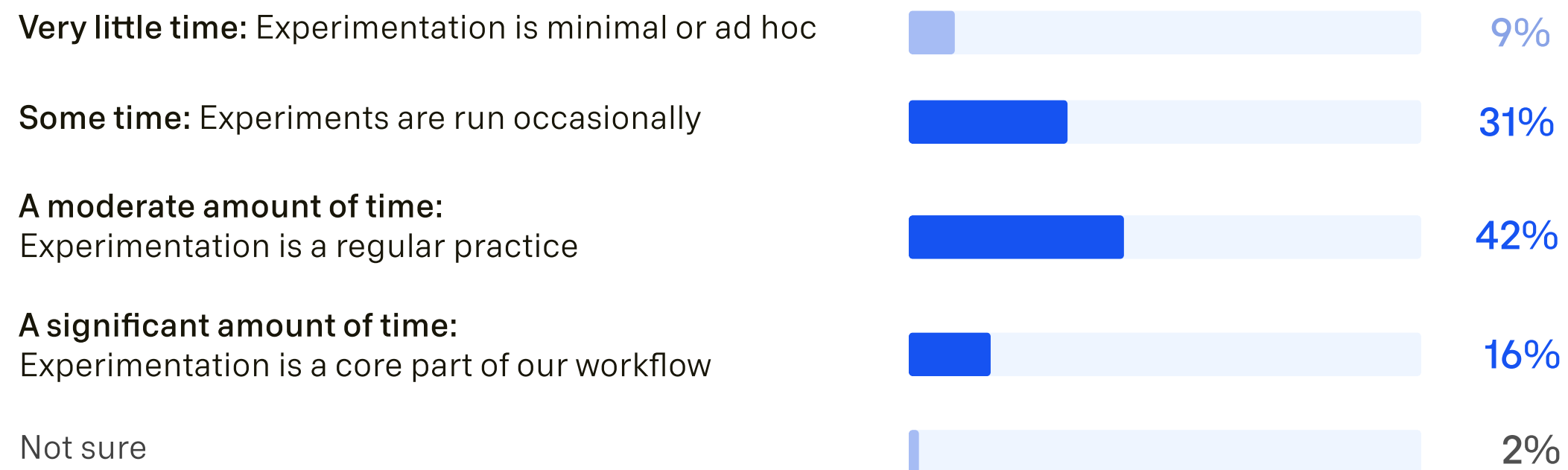
Executives are twice as likely as non-executives to report low confidence in test results (33% vs 16%).

IMPACT OF TESTING

Testing and iteration aren't working

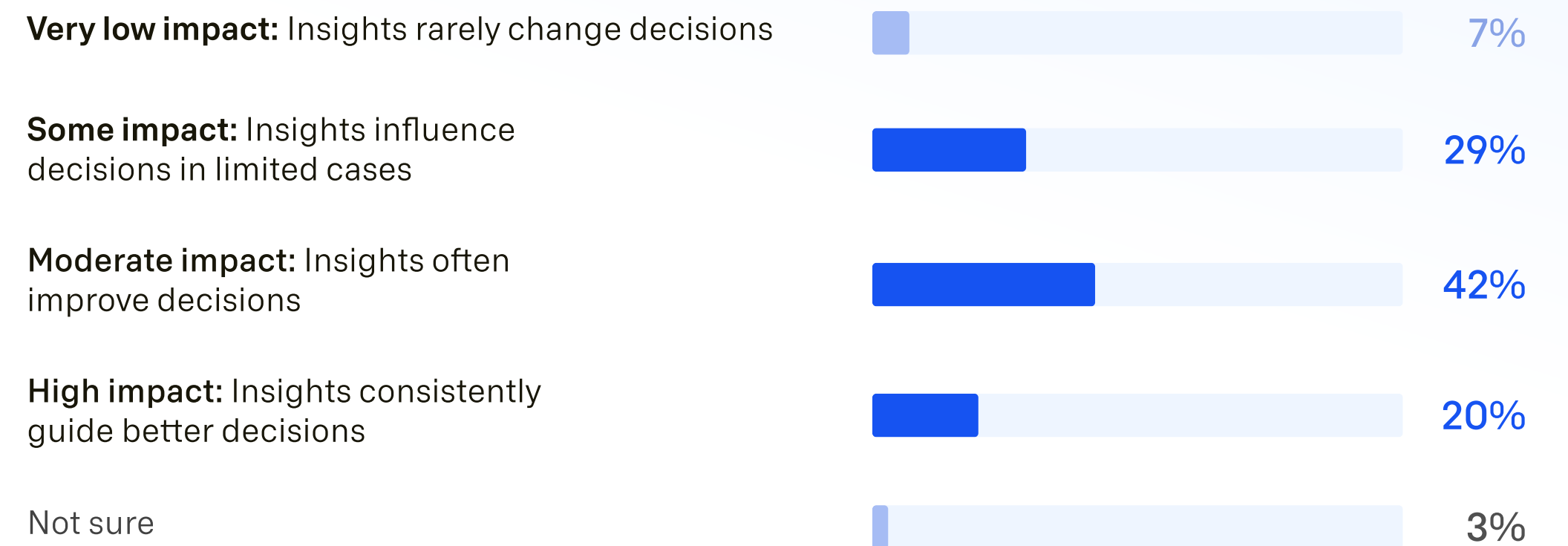
Most marketing teams are investing meaningful time on experimentation; well over half (58%) of marketers report spending a moderate or significant amount of time designing, running, and analyzing marketing experiments. Only a small minority (9%) say experimentation is minimal or ad hoc.

HOW MUCH EFFORT DOES YOUR TEAM TYPICALLY SPEND DESIGNING, RUNNING, AND ANALYZING MARKETING EXPERIMENTS



Despite this time investment, just 20% of marketers say their experimentation efforts consistently produce high-impact insights that guide better decisions, while the majority report only moderate impact (42%) or limited influence on decision-making (36%).

HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE IMPACT OF THOSE EXPERIMENTATION EFFORTS ON IMPROVING MARKETING DECISIONS AND OUTCOMES?



DATA UNIFICATION CHAMPIONS

Respondents with fully centralized SSOTs see more impact from their testing and optimization efforts. Our Data Unification Champions cohort is **nearly 3x more likely** than others to see high impact results from their experimentation, where insights consistently guide better decisions (31% vs 11%).

SECTION TWO

The foundation



SINGLE SOURCE OF TRUTH

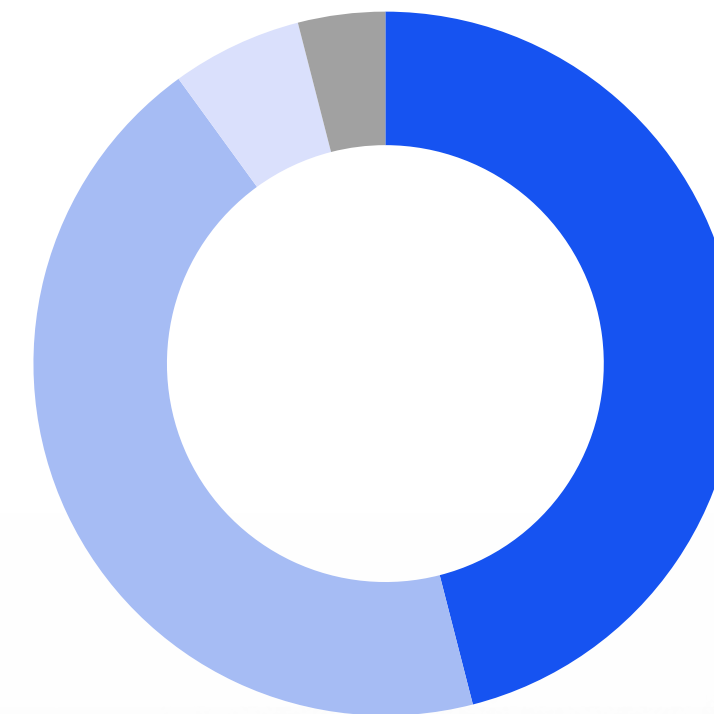
Fragmented data is the root cause of marketing inefficiency

Establishing a robust, centralized customer data foundation is becoming a prerequisite for more effective measurement, personalization, and AI-driven optimization.

While nearly half of organizations (46%) say they have a fully centralized source of truth for customer data, an almost equal portion (44%) report only partial centralization, where key data sets or channels still live in separate systems. As a result, many teams are operating with incomplete customer context, making it harder to measure campaign impact, personalize experiences, or confidently connect marketing activity to outcomes.

Most organizations with centralized data rely on a data cloud (75%), while about one-quarter use a marketing suite. Interestingly, the type of system used as the single source of truth matters. Those using a marketing suite, rather than a data cloud/lake, are more likely to cite difficulty measuring real impact (54% vs 42%) and too much manual work (38% vs 31%) as barriers to effective personalization.

DO YOU HAVE ONE SYSTEM YOU TRUST AS THE "SOURCE OF TRUTH" FOR CUSTOMER DATA TO USE IN MARKETING CAMPAIGNS?



- Yes:** Fully centralized and actively used (single source of truth powers most campaigns) **46%**
- Partially:** Some data is centralized, but key data or channels still live elsewhere **44%**
- No:** Customer data is spread across systems with no clear source of truth **6%**
- Unsure** **3%**



KEY INSIGHT

Turn data into a key driver for revenue growth

Unified customer data is strongly correlated with revenue growth. 44% of marketers operating with a fully centralized SSOT report seeing significant revenue increases in the last year, compared to just 8% of those with partial or no centralization.



DATA UNIFICATION CHAMPIONS

A unified data layer helps reduce operational friction and improves cross-team visibility. Those with fully centralized customer data are significantly less likely to report siloed data across teams as a barrier to marketing growth (20% vs 34%).

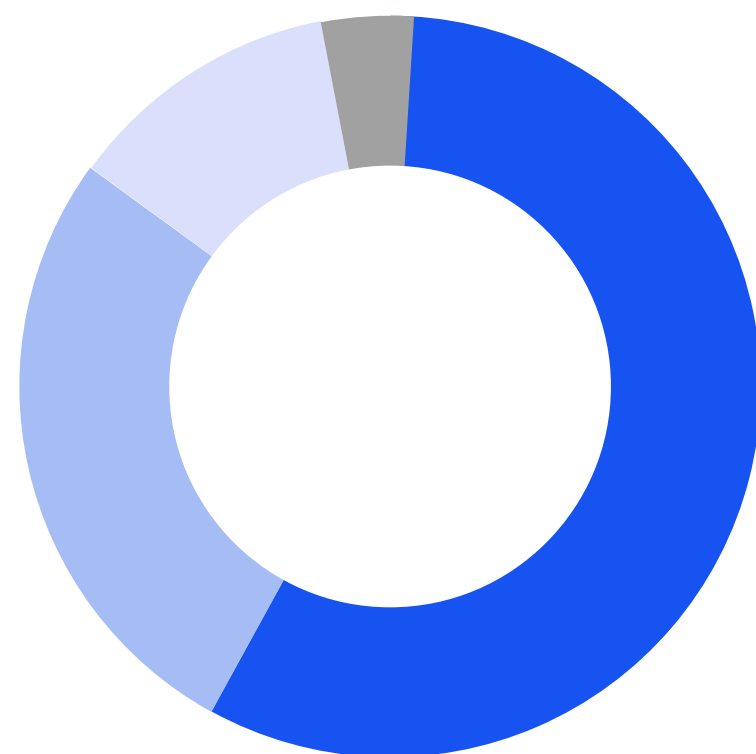
REAL-TIME CUSTOMER CONTEXT

Centralized data enables real-time customer context

Despite growing interest in real-time marketing, relatively few organizations have fully adopted it. Just 12% of marketers say their personalization efforts are primarily driven by real-time customer context and observed responses to prior touchpoints. The majority of those surveyed still rely on historical behaviors or a mix of historical and delayed signals.

Centralized customer data appears to be a key enabler of this capability. Marketers with a fully centralized source of truth are more than twice as likely to personalize campaigns using real-time customer context, with 16% doing so compared to just 7% of those without centralized data.

WHICH STATEMENT BEST DESCRIBES THE INPUTS YOU USE TO PERSONALIZE YOUR MARKETING TODAY?



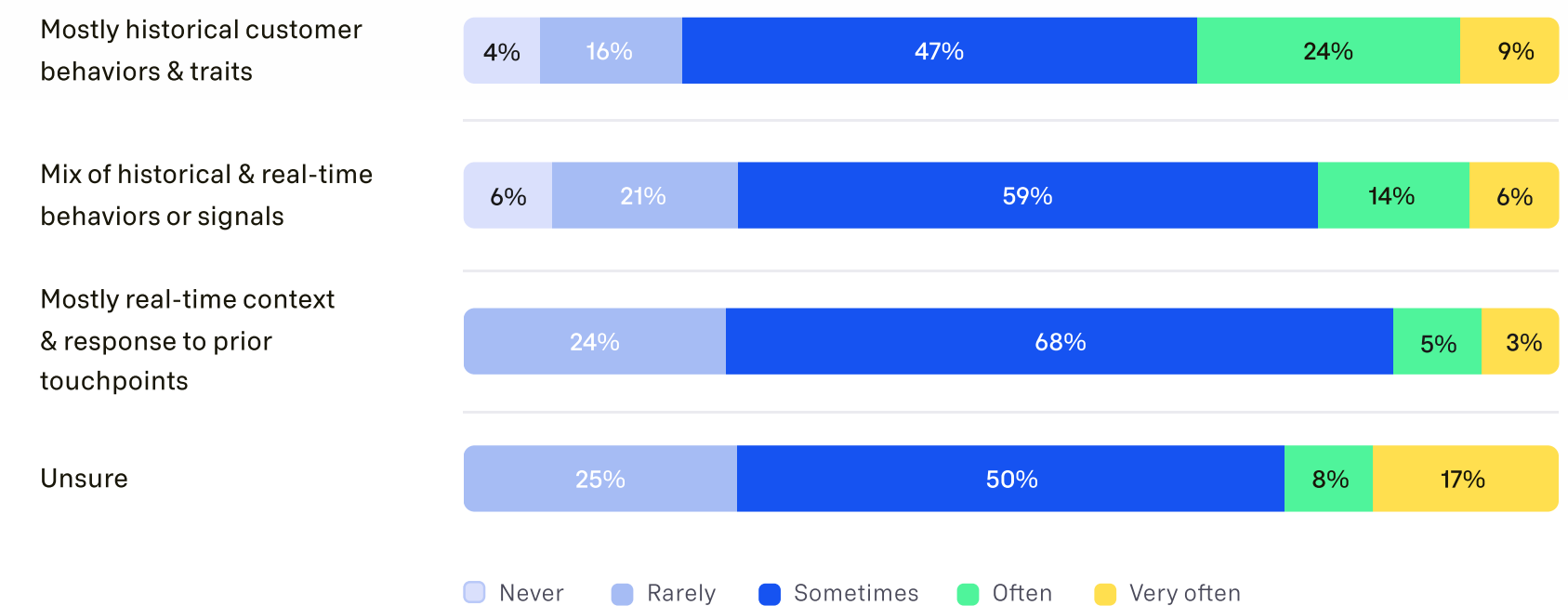
- **58%**
Mix of historical + real-time customer behaviors or signals
- **27%**
Mostly based on historical customer behaviors and traits
- **12%**
Mostly based on real-time customer context and observed customer response to prior touchpoints
- **4%**
Unsure

ELITE PERSONALIZERS

Real-time context strengthens scalability of experimentation results

A whopping 77% of marketers say their “winning” tests fail once implemented at scale at least sometimes. But those using mostly real-time, contextual feedback to inform personalization have significantly lower failure rates than others. Just 8% of our Elite Personalizers group see “winners” fail often when scaled, compared to 22% of all others.

HOW OFTEN DOES A “WINNING” CAMPAIGN TEST FAIL TO IMPROVE THE BUSINESS METRIC YOU CARE ABOUT ACROSS YOUR CUSTOMER BASE?



This is because enabling real-time customer insight can improve relevance while also strengthening the ability to test, learn, and optimize marketing strategies more effectively.

In fact, organizations using primarily real-time contextual inputs in their personalization efforts report seeing greater impact from their experimentation. Those using mostly real-time data are over 2x more likely to see high-impact payoffs, where their insights consistently guide better decisions (43% vs 18%).

SHIFTING PRIORITIES

Real-time data is becoming a competitive requirement

In 2025, using real-time data ranked as the **sixth** priority for improving marketing performance. In 2026, it jumps to the **number two** spot at **33%**. This marks a clear re-prioritization toward faster, more responsive decision-making. Marketers increasingly recognize the need for clean, connected, and accessible data to respond to shifting customer behavior in real time, as well as other top priorities like scaling personalization and improving ROI visibility.

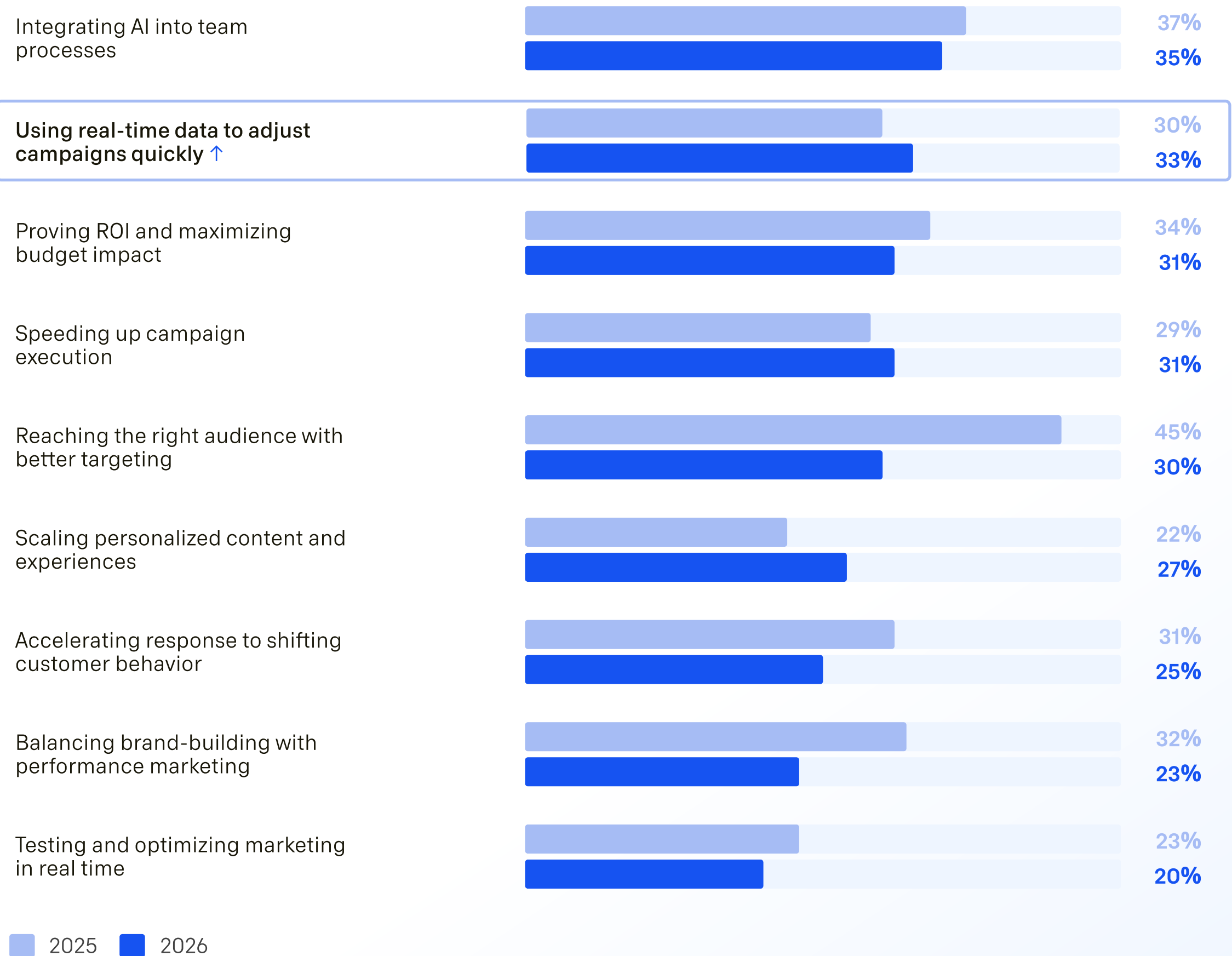
Marketers also note that investing in AI (**35%**) and trying to move faster (**31%**) are top-of-mind. These priorities are interconnected, with one relying on the other to ultimately drive performance. **Simplified data fuels AI. AI enables faster execution. Speed drives growth.**



GROWTH LEADERS

Marketing teams that have seen the most revenue growth are significantly more likely than all others to be focused on **speeding up campaign execution (43% vs 26%)**, balancing brand-building and performance marketing (**35% vs 19%**), and scaling personalized content and experiences (**34% vs 24%**).

IN THE YEAR AHEAD, WHAT ARE YOUR TOP PRIORITIES TO IMPROVE MARKETING PERFORMANCE?



The ripple effect of a single source of truth

Centralizing customer data opens doors across the entire marketing ecosystem. As you'll see throughout this report, those operating from a fully centralized SSOT launch campaigns faster, measure results sooner, run more impactful experiments, and better understand which actions drive outcomes. These all play an important role in compounding marketing impact and accelerating revenue growth.

Real-time personalization

16%

of marketers with a fully centralized SSOT are personalizing using real-time customer context vs 7% of those without centralization.

Centralized customer data gives marketers the ability to personalize based on real-time customer behavior and responses to prior interactions.

Faster campaign execution

31%

launch campaigns in 15 days or less compared to 21% of organizations without full centralization.

Teams with centralized customer data are more likely to move quickly from campaign ideation to execution. Faster cycles mean more opportunities to test, iterate, and optimize marketing performance.

Faster feedback loops

46%

see campaign results in days or weeks vs 26% without full centralization.

Unified customer data significantly shortens the time it takes to evaluate campaign performance. Faster measurement allows teams to learn and adjust marketing strategies in near real time.

Greater experimentation impact

31%

of teams with full centralization report high experimentation impact vs 11% of those without centralized data.

When customer data is unified, marketing experiments deliver stronger insights. Better data enables more confident decisions and stronger optimization outcomes.

Clearer marketing attribution

39%

of fully centralized teams can reliably identify causal marketing impact vs 10% without a true SSOT.

Centralized data improves visibility into which marketing actions influence customer behavior. This clarity allows teams to optimize campaigns based on proven outcomes rather than correlations.

Stronger revenue growth

44%

of organizations with a fully centralized SSOT report significant revenue increases compared to 8% without full centralization.

The most significant advantage of centralized customer data may be its connection to business performance.

In an environment where marketing performance increasingly depends on speed, personalization, and real-time decision-making, a unified customer data foundation is becoming a competitive advantage.

SECTION THREE

The breakthrough

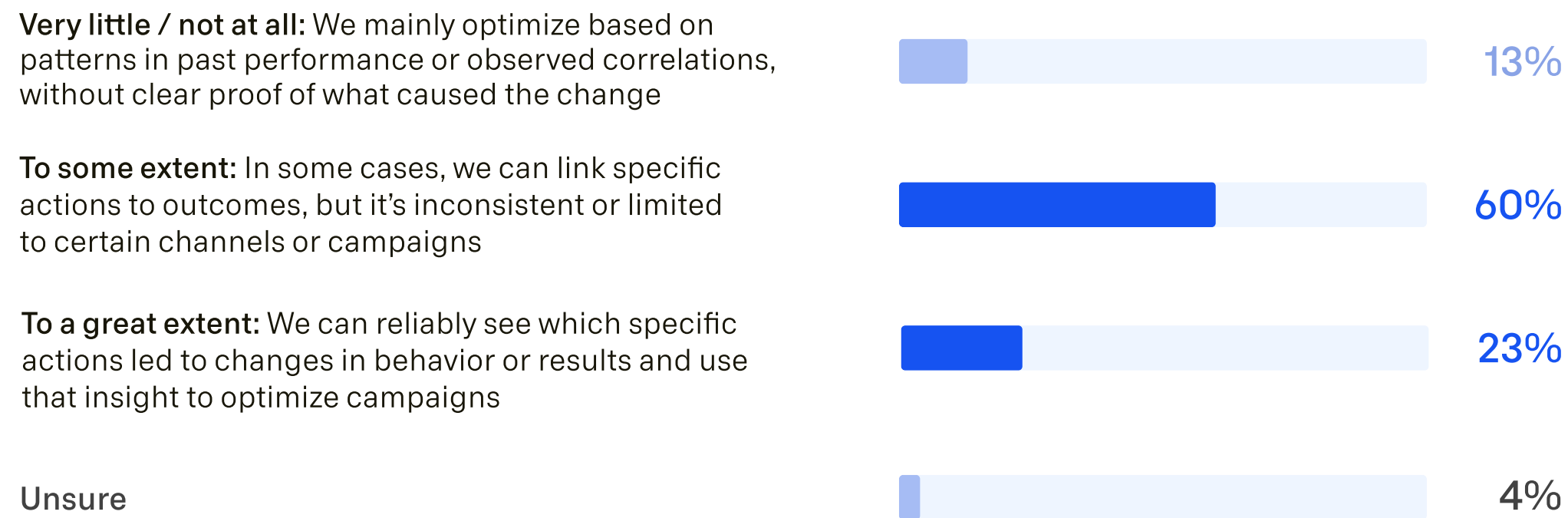


CORRELATION VS CAUSATION

Marketers are still optimizing on correlation, not causation

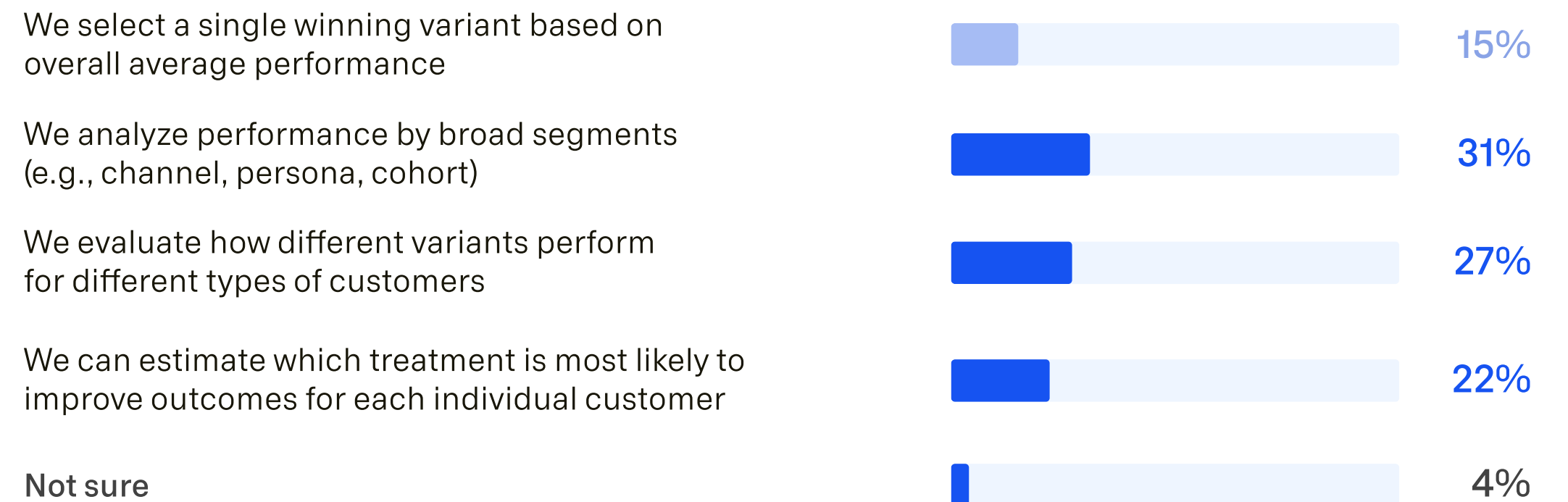
Most marketing optimization today is still based on patterns in past performance (correlation), not true causation. Only **23%** of marketers report having strong clarity on what actions lead to changes in their customer's behavior, and they can reliably use that insight to optimize campaigns. While the majority, **60%**, can sometimes link actions to outcomes, but inconsistently or in limited scope.

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU ABLE TO IDENTIFY WHICH SPECIFIC MARKETING ACTIONS DIRECTLY INFLUENCED CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR OR OUTCOMES?



This lack of causal data plays out in decision-making, as most marketing teams are only able to optimize for **averages**, rather than individual insight. These averages are shown in the survey results as marketers selecting "winning" variants (**15%**) or broad segment analysis (**31%**). Only **22%** say they can estimate which treatment can improve outcomes for each individual customer.

WHEN EVALUATING THE RESULTS OF A CAMPAIGN TEST, WHICH BEST REFLECTS HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE?



GROWTH LEADERS

Teams with the most revenue growth last year are more likely to be optimizing at the individual level than all groups. **28%** of this group say they can estimate which treatment is most likely to improve outcomes for each individual customer, compared to just **20%** of those with less revenue growth.

CAUSAL CLARITY

When teams can see causation, everything accelerates.

When marketers can clearly identify what actions drive customer behavior, performance improves across the board. Causal clarity removes the guesswork and broad generalizations that slow down feedback loops and campaign cycles.

01

When teams rely on correlation, they need more time and more data to feel confident. They wait for patterns to stabilize — second-guessing results and validating across segments.

WITH CAUSAL INSIGHT

Marketers have clarity on why something worked, not just that it worked, so they can act on smaller signals with more confidence.

46% of those with causal insight can see whether a campaign or lifecycle marketing change improved a key business metric in days or weeks, compared to 33% of others.

02

Optimization happens after testing, analyzing, adjusting, and trying again. But having causal insight means fewer test-and-learn cycles.

WITH CAUSAL INSIGHT

Marketers identify the drivers of behavior upfront, so each test is more intentional and higher quality.

30% of those with causal insight say they can estimate which treatment is most likely to improve outcomes for each individual customer, compared to 20% of others.

03

Correlation creates ambiguity and often causes internal friction and debate around what is really working, why, and if it is worth scaling or not.

WITH CAUSAL INSIGHT

There is clearer evidence behind decisions so teams can align faster.

Those with causal insights are less likely to list siloed data (22% vs 29%) and reliance on input from other teams (27% vs 30%) as top barriers to improving performance.

04

When marketers know what drives their desired outcomes, they can invest in the right channels, audiences, and tactics from the start.

WITH CAUSAL INSIGHT

Marketing leaders can better allocate resources upfront and avoid wasting time and budget on low-impact efforts.

Those with causal insights are significantly less likely to list limited budget and resources as a barrier (22% vs 32%).

Also less likely to list too much manual work as a personalization challenge (28% vs 35%).

05

Causal data allows teams to move faster in optimizing on an individual level and applying that insight at scale, rather than one treatment at a time.

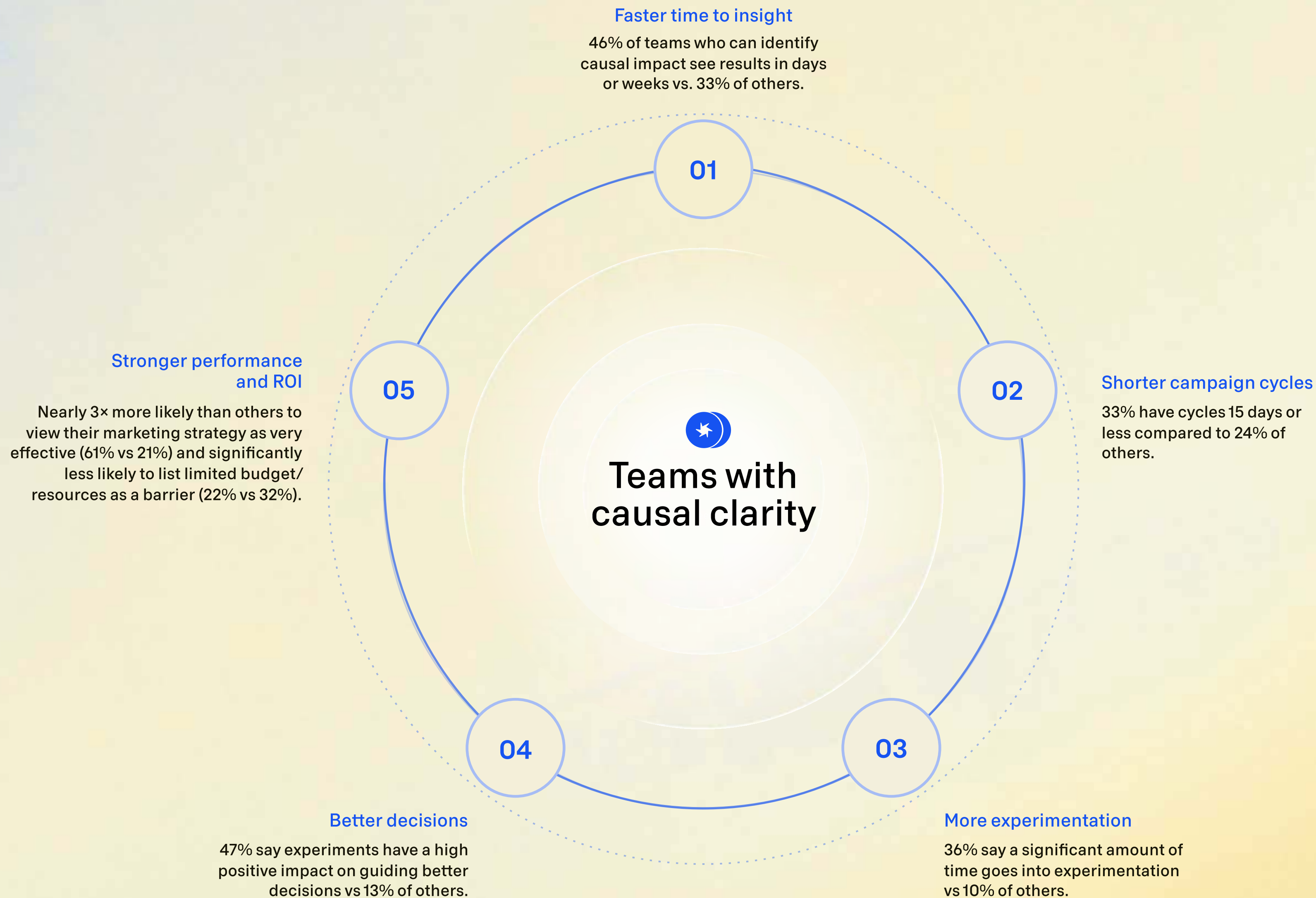
WITH CAUSAL INSIGHT

Each campaign builds on validated impact, proven treatments, and known behaviors.

Those with causal insights are nearly 3x more likely than others to view their marketing strategy as very effective at accelerating growth (61% vs 21%).

The compounding effect

The impact of causal clarity compounds across the entire marketing system. When teams can clearly identify what drives customer behavior, they gain better insights, move faster, test more effectively, and make more confident decisions. Each improvement builds on the last, creating a flywheel where speed, learning, and performance continuously reinforce one another.



SECTION FOUR

The amplifier

When powered by centralized customer data, AI becomes the connection between insights and execution.

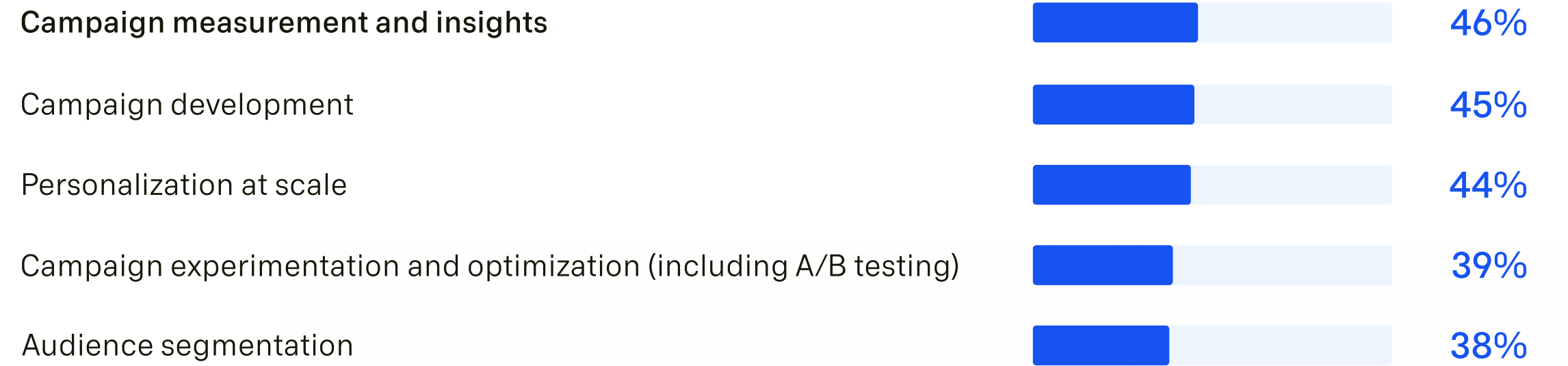


BOTTLENECKS

Bottlenecks across the marketing cycle slow execution and optimization

Nearly half of marketing and data professionals cite **campaign measurement and insights (46%)**, **campaign development (45%)**, and **personalization at scale (44%)** as the most significant sources of delays in their marketing cycles. Challenges in experimentation and optimization (**39%**) and audience segmentation (**38%**) further compound the problem. As the volume of customer data increases, turning that data into timely insights and actions remains difficult. Testing cycles slow, personalization becomes harder to scale, and marketers struggle to quickly identify what is actually driving performance.

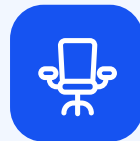
WHICH AREAS CAUSE THE MOST DELAYS/BOTTLENECKS IN YOUR MARKETING CYCLE?



KEY INSIGHT



When powered by centralized customer data, AI becomes the connection between insights and execution.



EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

Executives are more likely than non-executives to cite each of these areas as causing significant delays or bottlenecks with the biggest gaps in campaign development (54% vs 42%), campaign experimentation (48% vs 37%) and campaign measurement (54% vs 44%). Executives likely have broader visibility into how delays across development, experimentation, and measurement impact overall marketing performance, revenue outcomes, and the speed at which teams can execute strategy.

AI APPLICATIONS

AI can compound marketing growth

The most common applications of AI today include **generating insights and recommendations (38%)**, **content generation or ideation (35%)**, and **predicting customer behavior (34%)**. Roughly one-third of organizations are also using AI to automate audience segmentation (32%) and personalize content at scale (31%), while 30% report applying AI to SEO or content optimization and 29% to optimizing campaign journeys.



Those reporting greater revenue increases last year are significantly more likely to be using AI for automating audience segmentation (43% vs 28%), optimizing campaign journeys (42% vs 25%), generating insights and recommendations (52% vs 34%), and SEO/content optimization (47% vs 24%).

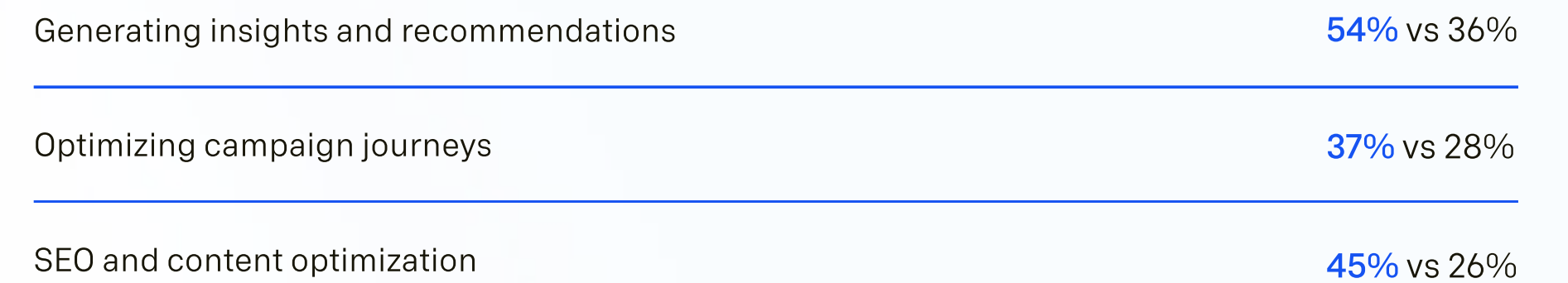
IN WHAT AREAS IS YOUR ORGANIZATION CURRENTLY USING AI IN ITS MARKETING PROCESSES?



SUPER TESTERS

Compound marketing growth with AI.

Organizations seeing the greatest impact from their campaign optimization efforts are significantly more likely to be using AI across their marketing workflows, particularly for:



By helping teams analyze performance data faster and surface patterns that might otherwise be missed, AI enables marketers to test, learn, and iterate more quickly. Over time, these faster learning cycles create a **compounding effect**, where each experiment builds on the last and insights accumulate to drive stronger campaign performance.



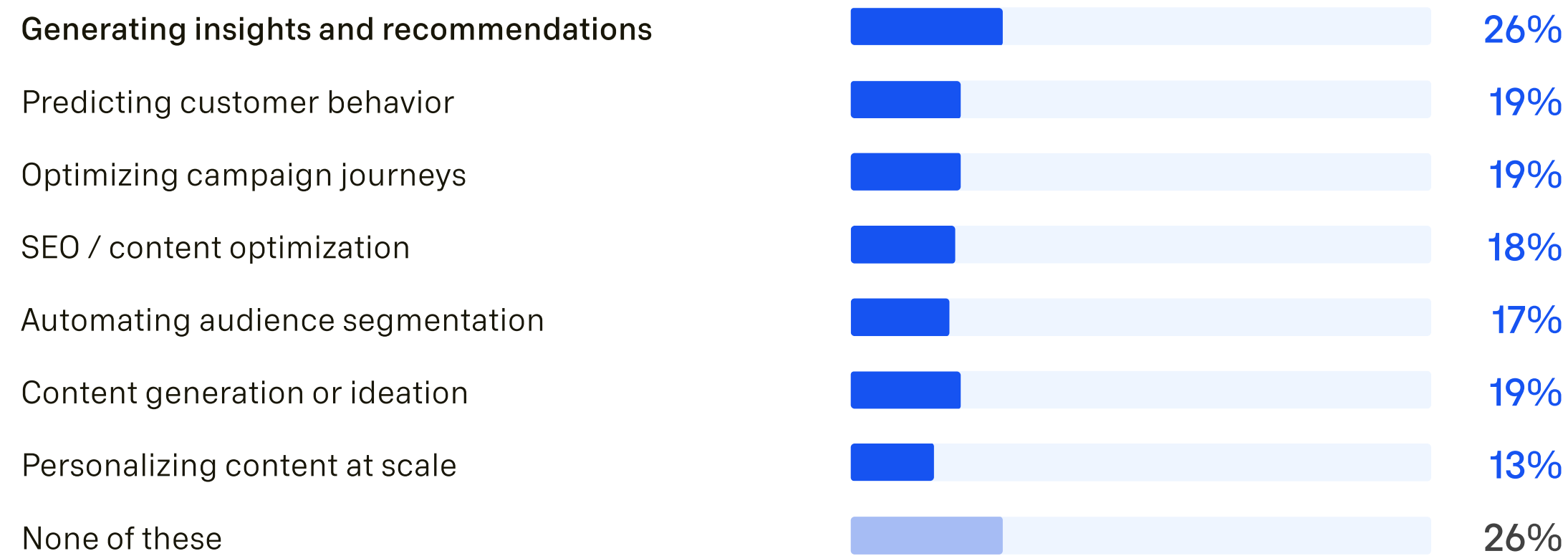
AI adoption in marketing continues to expand year-over-year in areas like generating insights, automating audience segmentation, and SEO/content optimization, each up in use from last year's reporting.

AUTONOMOUS AI

AI is still largely supporting decisions, rather than taking autonomous action

Despite the growing application of AI and its promising relationship to revenue impact, few marketing teams are allowing AI to execute actions independently. The most common autonomous capability reported is **generating insights and recommendations (26%)**, followed by predicting customer behavior (19%) and optimizing campaign journeys (19%). Autonomous applications in areas like SEO optimization (18%), audience segmentation (17%), and content generation (17%) are even less common, while just 13% report autonomous personalization at scale.

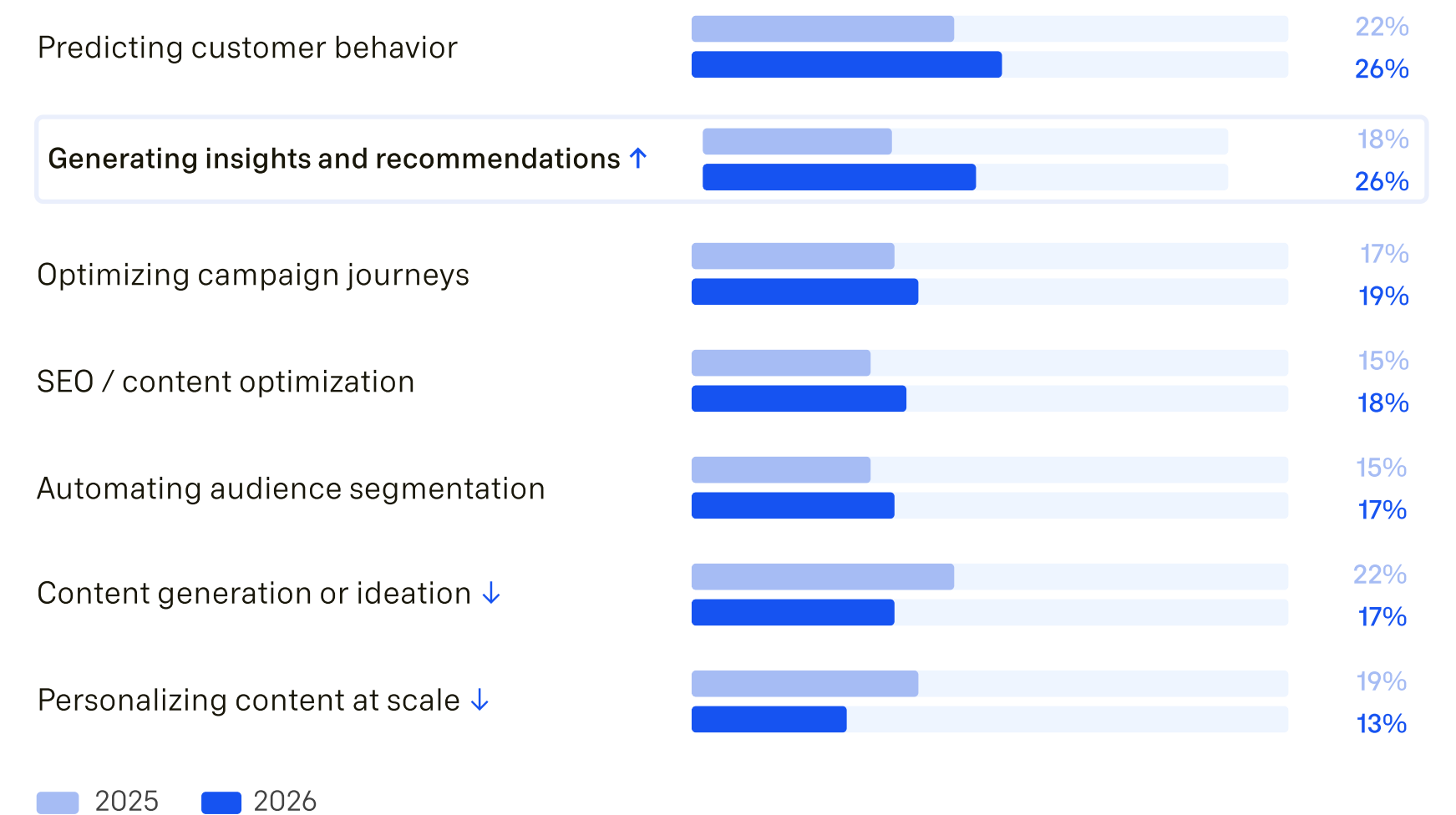
IN WHICH OF THESE AREAS IS YOUR AI SOLUTION EXECUTING MARKETING ACTIONS AUTONOMOUSLY/WITHOUT HUMAN INTERVENTION?



THE SHIFT TOWARD ANALYTICAL AI

AI is now being leveraged to drive analytical insights more often than content generation

The biggest gains year-over-year are in areas where AI interprets data and generates insights. Generating insights and recommendations is up to 26% compared to 18% last year, and 26% of marketers are using autonomous AI to predict customer behavior (up from 22%). Meanwhile, autonomy is declining in areas like content generation (22% vs 17%) and personalizing content at scale (19% vs 13%).



ADOPTION BARRIERS

Evaluating AI benefits alongside challenges

Many organizations are carefully balancing the potential benefits of AI with risks related to governance, cost, and operational complexity. **Data security concerns (36%)** top the list, followed by uncertainty about AI effectiveness (31%), lack of internal expertise (30%), and high implementation costs (30%). Integration challenges also remain a hurdle, with 26% reporting difficulty integrating AI with existing systems. Notably, **one in five (20%)** marketers surveyed recognize that AI delivers the greatest value when it is powered by unified customer data.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO ADOPTING OR EXPANDING AI-DRIVEN MARKETING IN YOUR ORGANIZATION?



EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

Executives are focused on the strategic risk and investment implications of AI and are significantly more likely than non-execs to report high implementation costs as a top barrier (44% vs 26%). They are also more likely to cite a lack of confidence in current AI offerings (30% vs 22%) and resistance to change (23% vs 15%). Meanwhile, non-executives face the day-to-day challenges of implementing and managing AI and are more likely to point to internal expertise gaps (25% vs 31%) as a top barrier.

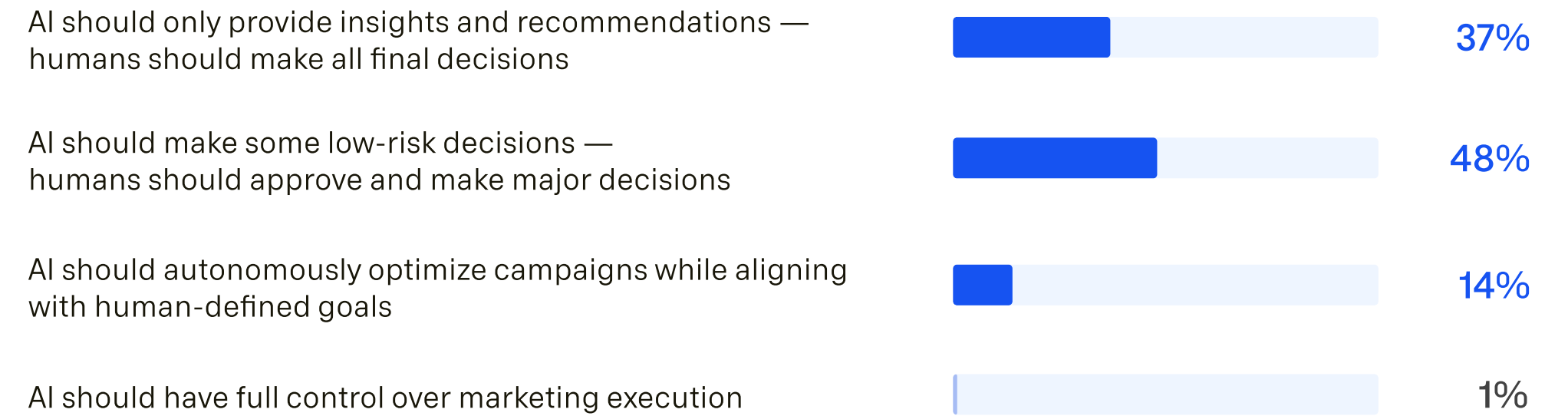
HUMAN-IN-THE-LOOP

Marketers still favor a human-in-the-loop approach to AI

A full 95% of marketers agree that efficiency alone is not enough to drive better marketing outcomes. Improving outcomes requires more than just doing things faster or cheaper, and this is reflected in how teams are approaching AI: **not as a replacement for human decision-making, but as a mechanism for compounding efforts.**

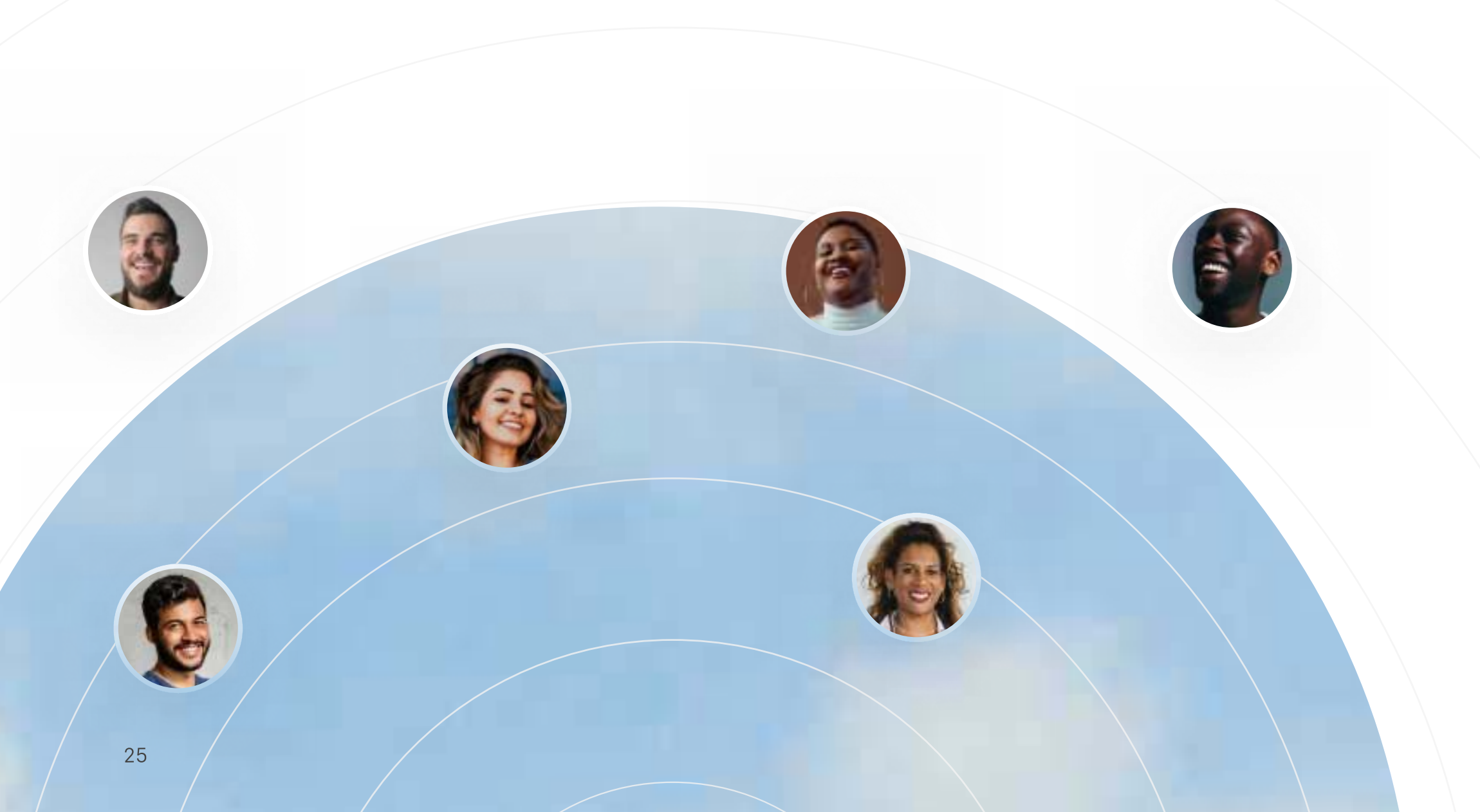
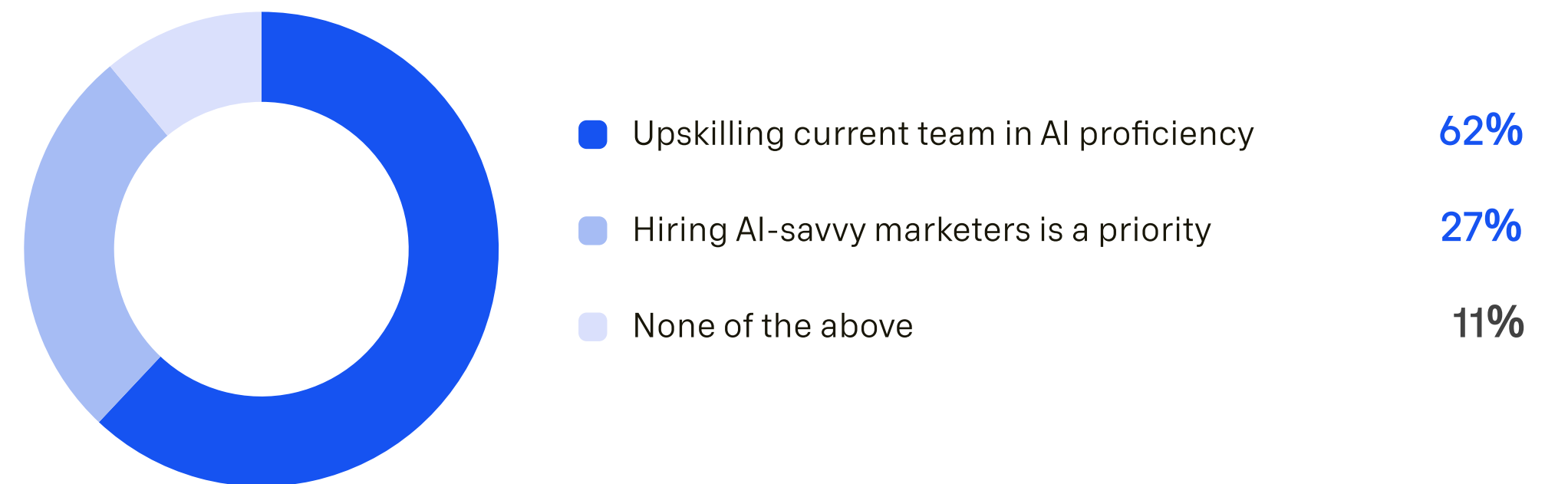
A strong majority of marketers favor a human-in-the-loop model. **81%** of those surveyed say AI-driven marketing efforts are more effective with human intervention. Only **15%** are comfortable with AI having meaningful autonomy. The majority believe AI should make some low-risk decisions but humans should approve all major decisions, and **37%** believe AI should only provide insights and recommendations, leaving humans to make all final decisions.

WHAT ROLE SHOULD AI HAVE IN MARKETING STRATEGY AND EXECUTION?



This mindset is shaping how organizations invest in talent. Rather than rebuilding teams from scratch, **62%** are prioritizing upskilling existing employees in AI proficiency, compared to just **27%** focused primarily on hiring AI-savvy talent. A competitive advantage won't come from AI alone, but from how effectively teams integrate it into existing workflows, decision-making, and expertise.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS TRUE OF YOUR APPROACH TO AI KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN TALENT ACQUISITION AND MANAGEMENT?



SECTION FIVE

The future



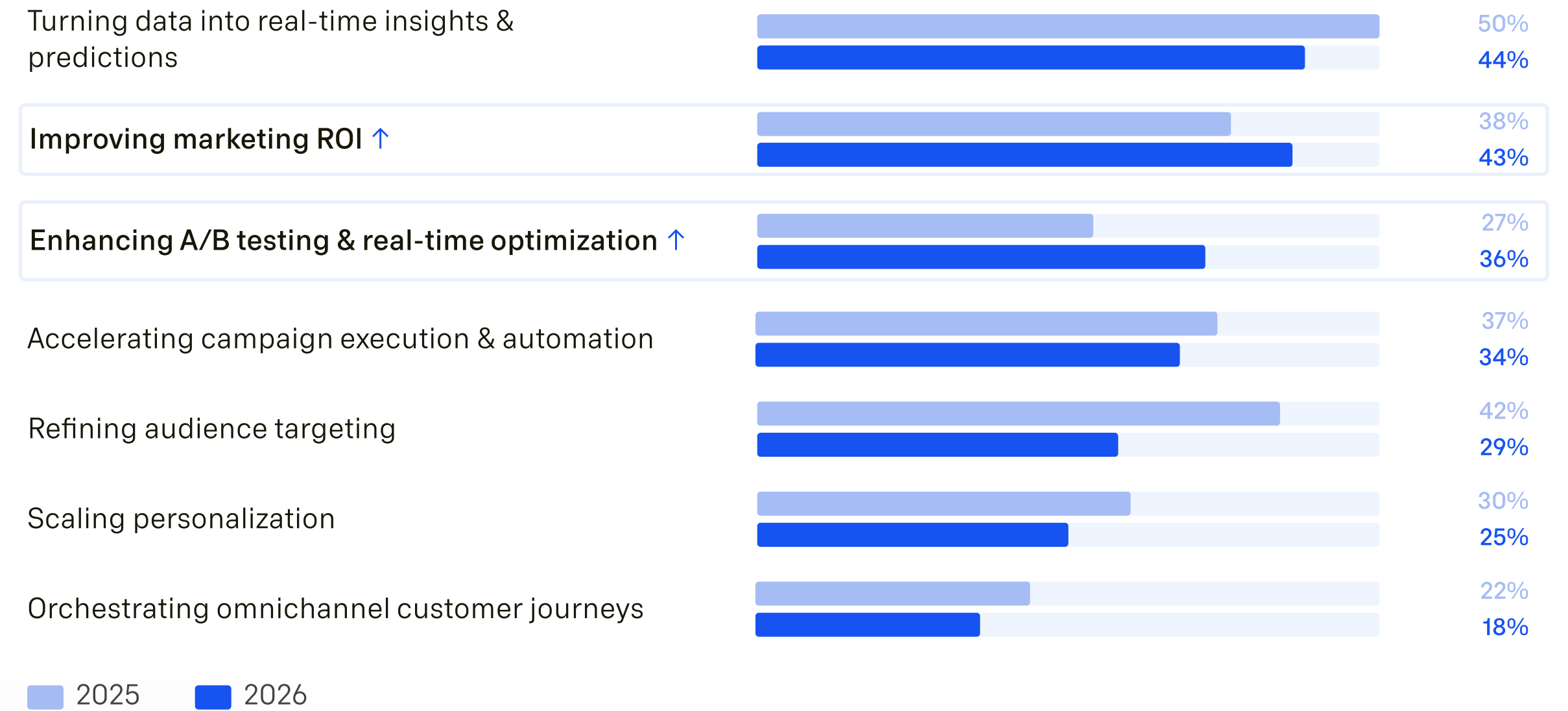
AI EXPERTISE

AI can help marketers make smarter decisions, faster.

There is a strong appetite for AI to optimize decision-making using **real-time context and testing**. Marketers feel that AI would make the greatest impact in turning data into real-time insights and predictions (44%), improving ROI (43%), and enhancing A/B testing and real-time optimization (36%).

Year-over-year trends solidify this story. The most notable increases year-over-year are in enhancing A/B testing and real-time optimization (27% to 36%) and improving ROI (38% to 43%). Teams are increasingly seeing AI as a strategic layer that **connects data to decisions in real time**, rather than just a tool for scaling output.

WHERE TEAMS WOULD BENEFIT MOST FROM AI EXPERTISE IN NEXT 12 MONTHS



KEY INSIGHT

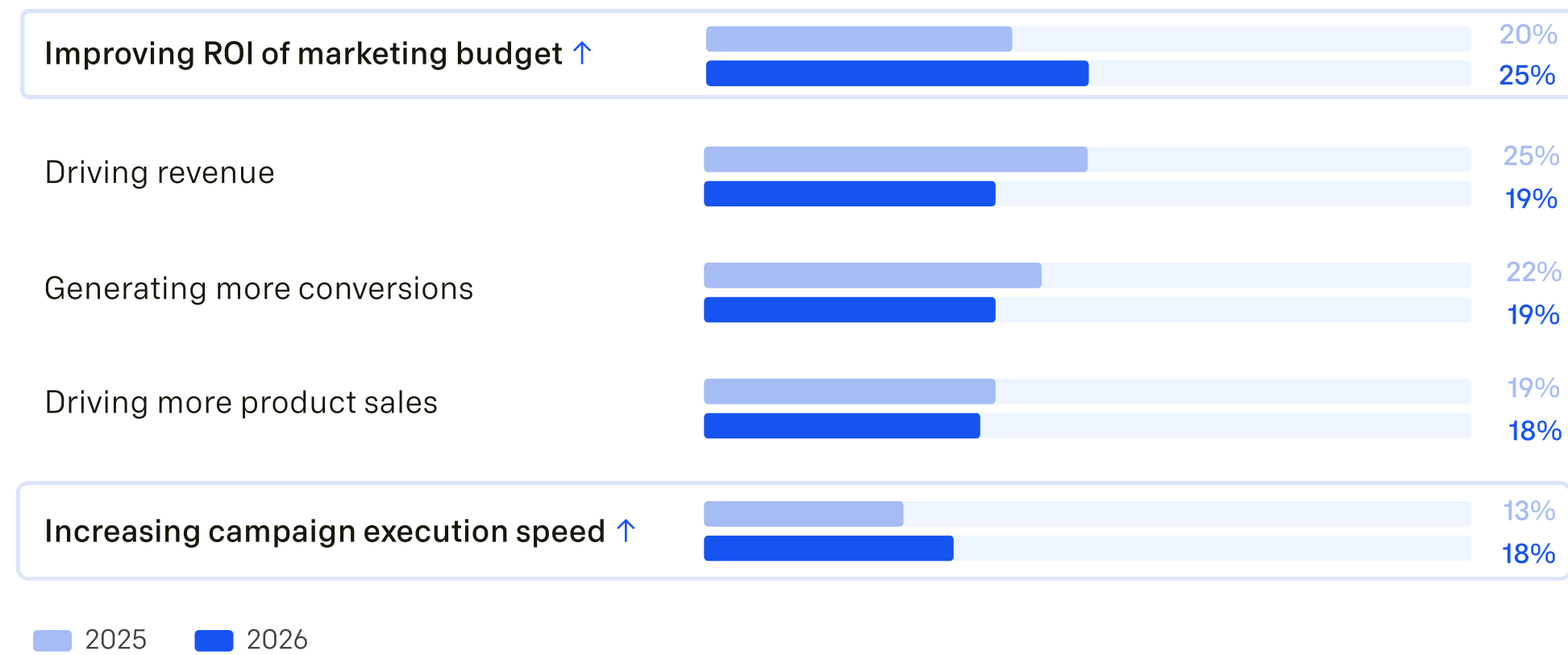
The future of marketing will be defined by how much teams can learn and adapt. As AI becomes more embedded in marketing workflows, its value will be measured by its ability to **connect data to decisions in real time, improve ROI, and accelerate execution**. The teams that win will be those that unify their customer data, apply AI with intention, and exercise continuous testing, learning, and improvement as their audiences evolve.

PRESSURE TO PROVE ROI

The pressure to prove ROI continues to weigh on marketers

The role of AI in marketing is shifting to a focus on **performance efficiency and speed**. Improving ROI has emerged as the top opportunity, rising from **20% to 25% YoY**, while increasing campaign execution speed also saw growth (**13% to 18%**). Marketers are no longer looking to AI just to generate more output, they're looking to **optimize what already exists, maximize return, and move faster**.

BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY FOR AI TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES IN NEXT 12 MONTHS



AI EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

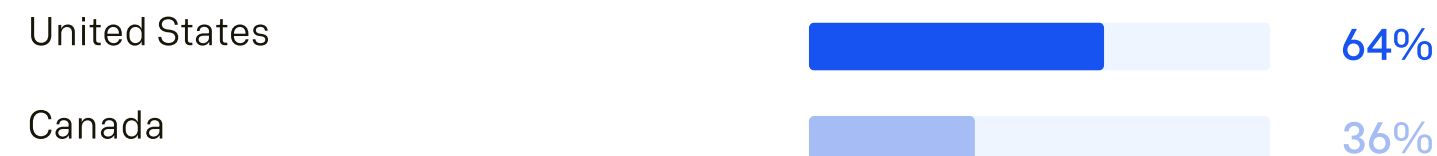
As pressure to prove ROI increases, marketers are shifting from expecting AI to generate more output toward expecting it to drive **smarter, faster, and more efficient decisions**.

<p>EXPECTATION</p> <p>AI will drive growth on its own</p>	<p>REALITY</p> <p>Growth comes from using AI to test new approaches, measure impact, and double down on what truly drives results. AI scales what already exists. AI is most effective when applied to optimize existing campaigns, not replace strategy.</p>
<p>EXPECTATION</p> <p>More data = better results</p>	<p>REALITY</p> <p>Actionable, real-time data is what matters. AI is only as effective as the data it can access and act on.</p>
<p>EXPECTATION</p> <p>AI is a plug-and-play solution</p>	<p>REALITY</p> <p>AI needs to be purpose-built for marketing workflows. Generic AI tools create outputs. Purpose-built solutions enable testing, optimization, and execution within real marketing environments.</p>
<p>EXPECTATION</p> <p>AI replaces human decision-making</p>	<p>REALITY</p> <p>AI accelerates human decision-making. The most effective teams use AI to guide testing and inform decisions, while humans provide context, strategy, and oversight.</p>

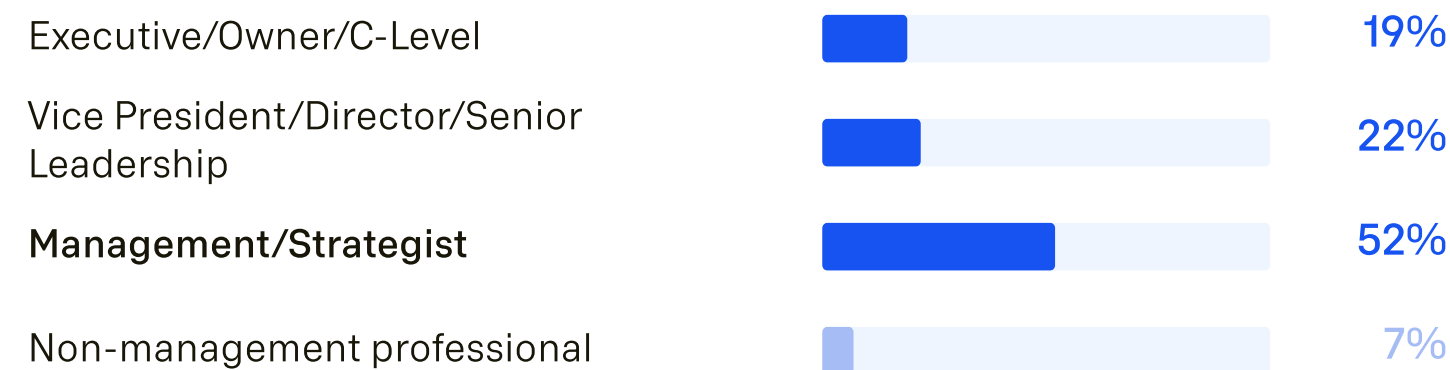
WHO WE TALKED TO

Participants and methodology

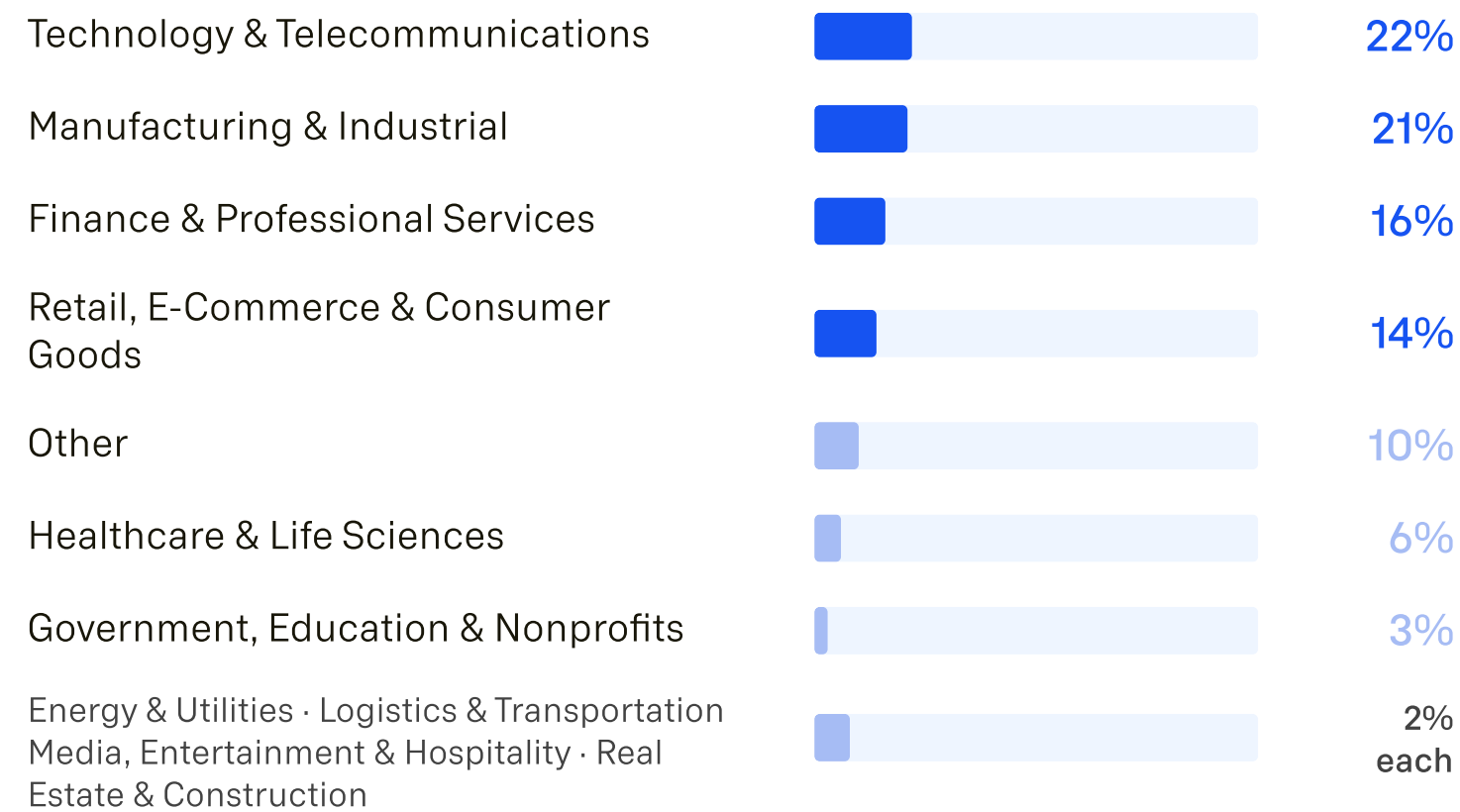
REGION



JOB LEVEL



INDUSTRY



METHODOLOGY

A custom online questionnaire of 318 professionals

GrowthLoop, in partnership with **Ascend2 Research**, developed a custom online questionnaire to survey **318 marketing and data professionals** in managerial roles and above. These individuals represent organizations in the **United States and Canada** generating **\$100M or more in revenue**. The survey was conducted during the month of **February 2026**.

All findings are reported at a **95% confidence level**.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH PARTNERS

Built by GrowthLoop & Ascend2



GrowthLoop is a pioneer in composable, AI-powered marketing on the data cloud, featured on G2 by its customers as a momentum leader with the best ROI for enterprise.

The GrowthLoop agentic, composable CDP drives compound growth by accelerating the marketing cycle, using agentic AI powered by your enterprise cloud data. Working alongside AI agents, teams use GrowthLoop to translate customer data into precise audiences and activate those audiences across real-time customer journeys, measuring and improving performance through always-on analysis — all with zero data movement.

Thousands of marketers at enterprises like Costco, Albertsons, and Ford rely on GrowthLoop to bring their AI strategy to life, grow faster with each experiment, personalize every customer touchpoint, and drive rapidly compounding results.

Learn more at GrowthLoop.com.



Ascend2 delivers high-quality, custom research that helps B2B brands make smarter decisions, strengthen thought leadership, and drive measurable growth. Each study is built with methodological rigor, from survey design and audience targeting to expert analysis, ensuring insights that are both credible and actionable.

Our end-to-end programs include survey development, data analysis, report creation, webinars, and media outreach, giving partners everything they need to turn original data into impactful content and high-quality demand. Leading companies work with Ascend2 to build trust, elevate visibility, and engage audiences with research-backed insights that matter.

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