The insights advantage in 2026

Seven trends driving insight-based decision-making

Stravito

Executive summary

CMOs have more data and less certainty than ever. Budgets are tighter. Expectations are higher. And every major marketing decision is scrutinized for its **impact on growth, risk, and return.**

PROBLEM

How to make marketing investment decisions quickly and consistently based on insights.

Budget and resource constraints are the top challenge for

63%

of CMOs in 2026.[1]

Only

37%

of CMOs say they have a centralized data repository accessible to all stakeholders.[2]

54%

say connecting data from different sources is a major barrier to insight generation.[3]

This CMO report covers **seven top trends** impacting decision-making in 2026 along with practical moves that will help you and your teams make insight-based marketing decisions faster.

Why is it so hard to make insight-based decisions quickly?

It's not a lack of insight. Most CMOs are swimming in research, but when pressure hits, using those insights with confidence can feel out of reach.

Over time, critical context — **who, where, when, and why** — fades, leaving disconnected "facts" without defensible evidence. When a campaign, launch, or forecast moment arrives, it's unclear which findings still apply — or whether last year's insight answers today's question. And when the board asks you to explain a decision, or whether a problem could have been anticipated, **instinct isn't enough.**

The real challenge is turning existing market intelligence into relevant evidence that answers today's question. You make better decisions when you can apply insight in context — and when you are challenged, you can **stand behind those decisions with confidence.**

In this report, we look at what's really at stake for CMOs in 2026, how you can **simplify insight management**, and how to **start making better-informed decisions** based on the rich insights your company already owns.

DEFINING THE INSIGHTS ADVANTAGE

The insights advantage is your organization's ability to turn market intelligence into customer-focused, evidence-based decisions in real time.

Seven top CMO trends for 2026

AI search rewards trusted sources

01

AI-powered search is reshaping visibility. **How can your brand remain visible?**

THE OPPORTUNITY

A study of 8,000 AI citations shows systems spotlight sources that are specific and clearly verifiable.4 To show up in searches, content has to go beyond traditional SEO and show depth on topics your customers care about.

Focus on building real, provable authority in your field to stand out against competitors who rely on generic content. Digital PR is also increasingly important, as trusted third-party coverage **strengthens your brand's credibility.**

WHAT TO DO NOW?

- **Define the content topics your brand must credibly "own."**

- **Build topical authority and back claims with trusted sources.**

- **Prioritize third-party validation.**

4.Search Engine Land

AI ads target people before they even search

THE SITUATION

Search ads respond to what someone types. Social ads respond to who someone is.

AI-driven ads combine both. They use history to predict what a person wants. That means **relevant ads can reach people earlier**, but they can also reach the wrong people more often if targeting is based on flawed customer data.

THE OPPORTUNITY

This is another reason for your teams to start **managing consumer insights more consistently in 2026.**

One way is to **create a shared view** of what customers value and what they reject, backed by solid, verifiable research. Tools like AI personas can help too, as long as they're built on real research and make it easy to trace where each insight comes from.

WHAT TO DO NOW?

- **Validate targeting with current research.**
- **Align teams on one shared customer truth.**
- **Make AI decisions explainable.**

Scenario A

AI-driven targeting and predictive systems promise precision — but they also raise expectations. Decisions must happen faster, and the assumption is that the data is there to support them. But in the moment, that's not always the case.

The Real-Time Tradeoff

You're in a leadership call, asked to greenlight a major campaign — or respond to a competitor's move. The window to act is closing. Everyone wants action. Delay risks losing momentum.

But the evidence in front of you is imperfect. Market signals are mixed. The latest insight deck lacks current context. No one has fully validated the most recent consumer data.

Your team is split. Some argue to move fast and optimize later. Others push for one more study to reduce uncertainty.

Either way, the risk is yours. Move quickly and miss, and accountability lands squarely on you. Wait too long, and hesitation looks like weak leadership.

This is the real tradeoff: speed or certainty — knowing there's risk on both sides, and no perfect answer in the moment.

REALITY CHECK

Are your current tools and team set up to break this deadlock, or will history repeat itself?

Platforms control customer journeys

03

Social media apps, browsers, and AI tools are doing everything they can to **keep users inside their platforms.** Some now limit the reach of posts with external links. Facebook has even tested charging users to share links with others.[5] The goal is to **stop sending traffic away from their own platform (to your website).**

That means buying decisions are often influenced before a customer ever visits your site. In some cases, **the purchase happens entirely within the platform.** By the time someone lands on your website, they may already have an opinion — or a preferred option.

THE OPPORTUNITY

This shifts your website's role from discovery to confirmation and action. To succeed, your teams need to **understand where customers were influenced** — and what they already know — before they arrive. Traffic may decline, but conversion can improve if your content seamlessly continues **the journey the platform began.**

WHAT TO DO NOW?

- **Map the customer journey + influence points before conversion.**

- **Personalize the website experience based on traffic source.**

- **Align messaging to the expectations customers already formed.**

Scenario B

When platforms shape decisions earlier in the journey, the signals that matter may not appear in your dashboards until it's too late. That's when the realization sets in.

Forecast Failure Autopsy

Quarterly numbers just came in, and market share took a sudden hit. In the aftermath, the team digs backward—scrambling through old studies, market reviews, dashboards—to figure out what was missed. Were there early signals in social listening, regional trends, or competitor moves that got overlooked? Was there buried research or legacy learning that, if surfaced earlier, could have changed the call?

Moment: The board or CEO asks, "Could we have seen this coming?" All you can do is piece together threads after the fact, aware that a gap somewhere upstream set up this loss—and next quarter's plan is now defined by hindsight regret rather than foresight. Still unresolved; wishing for a "replay" button that doesn't exist.

REALITY CHECK

Who (or what) is connecting the dots across your insight streams—before the damage is done?

People want human content, not AI slop

04

Generative AI speeds up content creation, but lacks the authenticity customers crave. People lose trust when brands publish generic or unreliable content.

They reward brands that keep things human. Platforms are reacting too. **YouTube now favors creator-led videos over bland,** repetitive clickbait known as AI slop.[6]

THE OPPORTUNITY

The answer is to **handle AI content with care.** Set clear guidelines for your teams to verify all your content's factual claims and use your company's own trusted data sources when prompting genAI tools.

WHAT TO DO NOW?

- **Set clear AI content governance.**
- **Anchor AI outputs in trusted insight.**
- **Elevate real expertise over generic content.**

Zero-party data is the new key to personalization

THE SITUATION

With **more privacy laws and tighter tracking rules**, third-party data alone is no longer enough to fully understand your audience.

Leading brands will need to **ask customers directly.**

THE OPPORTUNITY

That direct input is 'zero-party data': information people choose to share –preferences, needs or intent gathered through surveys, quizzes or opt-ins. And people expect something useful back. When you use it to **deliver something valuable in return** — better recommendations, smoother experiences, fewer irrelevant messages — **you build trust and improve conversion.**

To make the most impact, many teams use zero-party data and research data to create AI personas: searchable, evidence-backed profiles that clarify what different customer types value, reject, and respond to. Used in briefs and pre-launch reviews, they help teams pressure-test messaging and targeting — **making campaigns more insight-driven and effective.**

WHAT TO DO NOW?

- **Exchange value for declared preferences.**
- **Combine zero-party and historical insight.**
- **Make personas evidence-backed and testable.**

Micro-communities are reshaping social marketing

THE SITUATION

Broad social media reach is getting harder to earn in 2026. Algorithms push people toward content from creators, friends and niche groups over brand posts aimed at everyone. As a result, customer journeys often start in small communities built around shared interests, from skincare to small business finance. **People turn to these micro-communities to ask real questions and trade recommendations.**

THE OPPORTUNITY

For CMOs, this changes how influence works. Instead of one message across every channel, you'll need **content that matches what the community actually cares** about and how they talk.

This is another area where customer insight should guide **decision-making.** Again, AI personas can help by giving your teams richer understanding of customers' needs, language and deal-breakers. Use them to **shape content and strengthen your messaging.**

WHAT TO DO NOW?

- **Focus on priority communities.**
- **Match their language and realities.**
- **Validate before scaling broadly.**

Scenario C

As scrutiny increases, decisions aren't judged only by outcomes — but by the evidence behind them. That's when leadership exposure becomes real.

Budget Justification Under Fire

A CMO is in the quarterly leadership review, asked to defend a substantial spend on a new brand campaign. The CEO and CFO push for evidence that this investment will drive growth this quarter—not next year. The CMO has marketing agency presentations, some secondary category data, and a pile of pre-launch metrics, but lacks a convincing link to predictive outcomes. Moment: The slide goes up. All eyes are on you. Someone asks, "What makes you so sure?" You realize much of your rationale is stitched together from anecdote, old benchmarks, and gut feel. That knot in your stomach— knowing you'll be held accountable if the gamble doesn't work—is all too familiar.

The impact is personal; owning the decision means owning the risk, without a watertight, insight-driven answer to back it up. Still unresolved.

REALITY CHECK

What would it take for you to walk into the boardroom knowing your rationale will stand up to scrutiny?

Faster insight management means better marketing choices

THE SITUATION

To keep ahead of all the trends we've discussed so far, CMOs and marketing teams will need to **make better decisions faster in 2026.** Customer journeys are now shaped by AI search, predictive ads, platforms and niche communities. By the time someone reaches your site, they're at a late stage in the purchase decision.

Your team has less time to see which messages drive responses. There's also a higher risk of **spending on ineffective messaging.**

THE OPPORTUNITY

Integrate insights directly into workflows, and make insight part of how marketing work gets approved. Require major briefs and launches to reference the key customer insight they rely on, including source and timing.

Use AI to synthesize relevant research quickly — but keep it linked to original evidence so leaders can verify claims before committing budget.

WHAT TO DO NOW?

- **Treat insight as decision infrastructure.**
- **Link major decisions to source-visible evidence.**
- **Reduce duplicate research spend.**

Turning Consumer Insight Into Confident Marketing Decisions

In 2026, as CMOs face faster cycles, higher scrutiny, and zero tolerance for guesswork, we have officially left the "more is more" era of insights. Instead, success this year will be determined by **how easily you can access the precise insights you need and trust when the pressure is on.**

When insights are accessible, dynamic and always connected to evidence, teams move quicker and stay aligned, and leaders stand behind their choices—without second guessing.

Moving from "having" intelligence to integrating it into daily workflows is more than an improvement; it's the way **insight becomes your competitive advantage.**

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Explore the Insights Advantage

Download our practical checklist for decision-ready teams.

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