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MARKETING in 2026

The Battle Between AI and Authenticity

As we enter another year, it's no surprise that artificial intelligence (AI) is top of mind for many marketing and public relations professionals. Companies are getting more comfortable with AI, but maintaining brand trust and authenticity is paramount to efficiency. To learn more about what the year may bring, Commerce asked New Jersey's top marketing and public relations leaders the following:

AS WE ENTER 2026, WHAT MARKETING TREND OR SHIFT DO YOU BELIEVE WILL HAVE THE GREATEST IMPACT ON HOW COMPANIES CONNECT WITH CUSTOMERS—AND HOW SHOULD BUSINESSES PREPARE?

Amy Delman Public Relations, LLC
Amy Delman
Owner

In 2026 and beyond, I see a major shift in the use of AI. Not just using it but understanding the value it will bring. AI opens a new tool for public relations and marketing practitioners to embrace and partner with. AI is not going to replace the 'human voice,' but it will allow us to become more effective and innovative communicators. AI understands algorithms and patterns. This is of tremendous use when pitching the media, researching client trends and enhancing creativity. Successful practitioners are never going to be 'machines' but we must learn how to coexist and use this newest technology to its fullest potential. AI will lead us to our shared goal—enriching the client experience.

Barnett Design

Debbie Barnett Sagurton
Founder and Creative Director

As we enter 2026, one of the most significant marketing shifts will be the growing tension between AI-enabled convenience and authentic brand differentiation. The rapid expansion of AI and DIY marketing tools has made it easier than ever for businesses to create content—but also easier for brands to start looking and sounding alike.

Smart marketers will "combat sameness" through thoughtful strategy, creativity, and consistency. While DIY tools have value, relying on them without a clear plan can dilute messaging, weaken branding, and make companies blend in with their competitors, who are likely using the same tools. Businesses can prepare by revisiting their strategic foundations: Who, What, Why, and How. Define your audience, understand what your audience values, and where they spend their time (and resources). Clarify what problem you solve or desire you fulfill. Identify what sets your brand apart and why your audience cares about what you promise. Then, collaborate with professional creative partners who can translate that strategy into unique, authentic, consistent communications.

By balancing technology with strategic creativity, brands can ensure their marketing remains distinctive, engaging, and powerfully human.

Bergen New Bridge Medical Center

DonnaLee Corrieri, MHA

Chief Communications and Marketing Officer

As we look ahead to 2026, marketing in healthcare is undergoing a major shift—one that balances technology with a renewed emphasis on human connection. AI is revolutionizing how we understand and engage with patients, enabling predictive outreach, smarter segmentation, and real-time personalization at scale. But while AI enhances efficiency, our success hinges on using it to deepen, not replace, the personal touch that builds trust.

Patients today expect more than clinical excellence—they want convenience, clarity, and compassion. That's why concierge-style services and hyper-personalized care journeys will be key differentiators in 2026. From appointment reminders tailored to lifestyle, to digital front doors that guide patients seamlessly from search to care, marketing must champion a barrier-free, patient-first experience.

At the core, our mission remains un-changed: to serve our communities with empathy and excellence. As marketers, we must prepare by investing in smarter data tools, stronger community listening, and cross-functional collaboration that ensures every touchpoint reflects our values. The future of healthcare marketing isn't just about being seen—it's about being trusted, being helpful, and being there in the moments that matter most.

CMA

Kelsey Tweedly

Vice President

As we move into 2026, I believe the most powerful marketing shift will be the rise of **authentic, human-centered video**. In an environment saturated with polished ads and AI-generated content everywhere, audiences are craving real connection. They want to see the people behind the brand be authentic, relatable, and real.

Short-form video continues to dominate platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts—and we're now seeing this trend take off on LinkedIn as well. Professionals are engaging more with raw, personal video content that offers insight, storytelling, and authenticity over perfection.

As attention spans shrink and AI tools become more prevalent, the human touch is what will truly differentiate brands. Businesses should empower their teams and customers to tell their stories on camera, showing behind-the-scenes moments, and prioritizing real connection over production polish.

The companies that embrace transparency, personality, and authenticity in their video strategy will not only stand out but also build stronger, lasting relationships with their audiences in the years ahead.

The Communications Optic, LLC

Kathleen R. McMorrow

Principal & Chief Strategy Officer

As we enter 2026, the most transformative marketing shift will be the integration of AI with brand governance.

AI is changing not only how companies create content, but how they sustain customer trust. The next competitive edge will come from organizations that leverage AI responsibly—using it to enhance precision, customization, and consistency across every client touch-point—while maintaining the authenticity and differentiators that define their brand.

A great reputation risk lies in the ungoverned use of AI. When employees across departments experiment with different AI tools, the brand voice inevitably fractures, work product becomes inconsistent, and reputation suffers. For this reason, every organization should prepare an AI policy manual that defines approved tools, establishes workflow standards, and ensures quality control. A policy manual provides a framework for ensuring consistency in client communications and work product, aligned with company values while leveraging the efficiencies and insights AI delivers.

AI will continue to expand creative and analytical possibilities in marketing. Successful organizations will be those that integrate task automation with judgment. The future belongs to enterprises that view AI not as a shortcut, but as a disciplined framework for amplifying human creativity, building client trust, and protecting reputation.

The DAK Group

Joan McGeough

Chief Marketing Officer

As we head into 2026, it's clear that AI has already transformed how we all connect with customers. The next phase isn't about adopting AI—it's about using it more thoughtfully and strategically. In my work, I'm seeing that the companies getting ahead are the ones actively exploring different AI tools—testing what truly fits their business, their team, and their clients—rather than assuming one solution will do it all. Success depends on combining the right technology with genuine human connection, and your authentic brand voice.

Search and discovery are also changing fast. More

customers are turning to AI tools and voice assistants for direct answers, so companies need to create clear, useful, and trustworthy content that earns its way into those conversations.

At the same time, privacy and trust are becoming even more critical. Businesses that build direct, permission-based relationships—where clients choose to share information because they see real value in return—will stand out.

As 2026 unfolds, I encourage companies to stay curious: explore new AI platforms, experiment with content formats, and keep refining what works. The strongest brands will be those that combine smart experimentation with authentic, human connection.

Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey

Debra Rutt

Marketing & Communications Director

As we move into 2026, I see the greatest shift coming from how audiences demand authenticity and purposeful storytelling. Customers aren't just evaluating products or services anymore—they're aligning themselves with organizations whose values match their own. For nonprofits like Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey, this isn't a new concept, but it's becoming the expectation across every sector.

The rise of AI-driven personalization will amplify this shift. It's no longer about broadcasting one message to many—it's about curating experiences that feel relevant, inclusive, and human at scale. At the same time, consumers will be quick to call out content that feels inauthentic or performative.

To prepare, businesses need to double down on transparency and ensure that the stories they tell are rooted in real people, real impact, and measurable outcomes. Invest in understanding your audience deeply, leverage data responsibly, and bring your mission to life with clarity and consistency.

At Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey, we've seen firsthand how centering real girls from our council in our campaigns drives connection and trust. That's our blueprint for 2026 and beyond: authentic voices, meaningful purpose, and a commitment to building relationships that last beyond the transaction.

MikeWorldWide (MWW)

Steve Sandberg

Senior Vice President

The most transformative shift in how companies connect with customers in 2026 will be the fusion of AI-driven

insights with an increasingly fragmented information ecosystem. Traditional media's decline as the primary news source has left consumers turning to a patchwork of social platforms where truth is often contested and algorithms reward emotion over accuracy. This environment presents both a challenge and an opportunity for communicators.

The challenge lies in navigating a landscape where misinformation spreads quickly and brand narratives can be hijacked in minutes. The opportunity lies in the strategic use of AI tools to measure real-time market and consumer sentiment, uncover emerging concerns before they become crises, and use predictive analytics to anticipate behavioral shifts. AI-driven message testing will also enable companies to refine tone, language, and content before entering the market, ensuring messages resonate authentically across diverse audiences.

To prepare, businesses must invest in data intelligence capabilities that combine AI precision with human judgment. Successful brands will not only track and shape sentiment but also interpret it with empathy and transparency, building trust in an era where connection depends as much on credibility as on creativity.

Netwave Interactive Marketing Inc.

Adam McIndoe

President

As 2026 approaches, marketing success will hinge on how effectively brands combine human insight with AI-driven research to deliver personalized, meaningful customer experiences. The goal isn't to let technology make decisions for us—it's to use it as a research tool that deepens our understanding of audiences and informs smarter, more strategic choices.

At Netwave, we view AI as an incredible resource for discovery: identifying trends, analyzing engagement patterns, and presenting insights that might otherwise be missed. But the real value still lies in what humans do with that information—how we interpret it, apply creativity, and communicate with authenticity.

Personalization will continue to drive performance, but consumers are becoming more aware of how their data is used. Success in 2026 will come from earning trust through transparency—leveraging AI to enhance relevance without crossing into intrusion.

Ultimately, the future of marketing isn't man or machine—it's both. The most successful marketing will come from agencies that are quick to adopt, adapt, and implement—those that embrace new technologies while maintaining the human insight and creativity that turn information into inspiration.

Katie Sword

VP Marketing

As we enter 2026, I believe the biggest shift will be toward hyper-personalized, experience-driven marketing. In concerts and live events, people don't just want to attend anymore—they want to feel like they're part of the experience. With AI, first-party data, and immersive tools like AR and VR, we now have the ability to tailor experiences that truly connect with fans—before, during, and long after the show.

For me, it comes down to building real relationships with audiences. Instead of just promoting an event, businesses should focus on creating moments that feel personal, authentic, and shareable. Whether that's personalized content, unique fan activations, or community-driven experiences, the goal is to make each person feel seen and valued.

The companies that prepare now by investing in audience insights and leaning into storytelling will be the ones who stand out. At the end of the day, it's not just about filling seats—it's about designing experiences that spark connection and keep people coming back.

Contributors



Amy
Delman



Debbie Barnett
Sagurton



Donnalee
Corrieri



Kelsey
Tweedly



Kathleen R.
McMorrow



Joan
McGeough



Debra
Rutt



Steve
Sandberg



Adam
McIndoe



Katie
Sword