PULSE SURVEY

Optimizing the Use of Marketing Technology to Build Customer Trust

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Jenn Chase
CMO
SAS

Upscale Your Martech Stack, Upskill Your Marketing Team

The modern marketer plays a bigger role than ever before in a company's growth. As the executive vice president and CMO of SAS, I've seen firsthand the importance—and benefits—of making technology accessible to marketers so that they can ask deeper questions and make more confident, data-driven decisions.

And that's why it's incredibly exciting to see what marketing teams can do with these new technologies. From orchestrating seamless customer journeys to fostering customer trust to measuring results, (the right!) marketing technology (martech) stack in a skilled marketing team's hands is a powerful tool.

Gone are the days when a marketer could be creative and not technical. But that's a good thing. Because today's marketers who embrace that new reality will be poised to succeed.

So, let's dive deeper into this reality. Although there is a myriad of technological options in a martech stack, I believe there are three key components: artificial intelligence (AI), customer identity and recognition technology, and data governance.

Let's start with the topic on everyone's minds: AI. SAS has been using AI for years to model and predict customer behavior. And now, with the latest developments in generative AI (gen AI), marketers have newfound abilities to create personalized messaging and content in real time, as well as a more user-friendly experience for customers. I think of gen AI as a teammate for human creativity, which no technology will ever replace. But a marketer who can use gen AI will certainly replace one who can't.

The second crucial piece of a martech stack is customer identity and recognition technology. This enables marketing organizations to authenticate and organize customer data, build effective loyalty programs and create unique profiles—all critical pieces of a customer experience strategy—and essential to building emotional connections with your customers while continuing to scale.

Third—and definitely not least—data governance. I'm talking about data integration, data quality and real-time access to data. Today's marketers have a key role in managing customer data to measure the results of their efforts and act with greater speed and confidence. Data governance is also essential to maintaining customer privacy and meeting data regulations. Not only is protecting customer data ethical, but it's also profitable: Customers are much more likely to purchase from brands they trust.

At SAS, we've worked hard to build up our gen AI Center of Excellence, adopt the Association of National Advertisers' marketing capabilities as a framework for marketers and implement companywide AI training. We've also provided our marketers with a suite of technologies that enable them to make faster, more informed decisions. I'm fully confident in our ability to lead the way with the latest developments in AI, including gen AI.

If you're a marketing leader, I encourage you to seriously consider not just the technology and capabilities of your martech stack but your educational pipeline for upskilling your marketing teams.

These technologies aren't just changing marketing; they're changing the world. Learning how to use them is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for marketers, companies and customers alike.

Optimizing the Use of Marketing Technology to Build Customer Trust

There are many features that define a successful brand, but in the words of famed investor Warren Buffett, "A truly great business must have an enduring 'moat,'" referring to a company's ability to maintain profitability and ward off competition. For many companies, this "moat" is customer trust. By building lasting relationships and impenetrable bonds with customers, companies of all sizes can sustain a competitive advantage, withstand market fluctuations, and keep pace with ever-evolving customer preferences.

But customer trust is not a self-sustaining organism. Rather, it must be continuously nurtured to have lasting power. Enter marketing technology (martech)—a unique set of marketing tools used to optimize marketing efforts, including customer data platforms, analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, journey orchestration, marketing measurement, content management, digital advertising, and digital ad serving. Together, these tools can help organizations analyze customer data for personalized experiences, deliver clear and consistent messaging across multiple channels, and tailor content to specific customer needs for greater relevance—capabilities that are critical to fostering customer trust.

In fact, 81% of the 388 members of the *Harvard Business Review* audience responding to a June 2024 survey by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services say martech has a significant or moderate impact on an organization's ability to foster customer trust. Ninety-one percent of the respondents, all of whom are involved in decisions made by the marketing department at their organization and are familiar with the department's use of martech, consider customer trust to be very important to the success of their organization.

FIGURE 1

Threats to Customer Trust

Slow response times and inconsistent messaging are most likely to erode trust

Which of the following factors pose the greatest threat to enabling customer trust for your organization? *Select up to three.*

36%
Delays in responding to changing customer needs

31
Inconsistent messaging across channels

30
Marketing messaging and content not aligned with customer needs

30
Inadequate customer service

27
Silos of customer data

24
Data breaches and other security threats

22
Compromised brand reputation

21
Poor quality products

17
Lack of transparency for customers about how their data is being used

16
Integrating generative AI tools

11
Lack of policies around use of personal data (i.e., privacy practices)

Base: 388 respondents. Not shown: 2% none, 2% don't know, 1% other.

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2024

"Companies that are seen as highly trustworthy have a much longer and more valuable brand life," says Paul Magill, managing director of Cohesive LLC, a consultancy based in New York City.

Indeed, many are seeing tangible proof of customer trust's positive impact on a business at a time when a competitive leg up is needed most. As it is, organizations are facing challenges, including an inability to measure a return on marketing efforts (53%), limited budgets (45%), misalignment between marketing and other departments (38%), and a complex marketing technology stack (26%). However, by enabling customer trust, respondents say they are realizing top benefits, including enhanced brand reputation (57%), increased customer engagement (53%), improved customer loyalty (50%), increased competitive advantage (40%), and increased profitability (30%).

Yet difficulties measuring the value of investment in marketing initiatives and challenges integrating technologies can hinder efforts to foster customer trust, preventing organizations from achieving the customer loyalty, brand recognition, and profitability needed to thrive in a challenging economy. In other words, martech can help build customer trust if there is a proper foundation and vision for its use. "Half the time marketers don't even know what tools they have, how they measure success, or whether or not they're achieving the right yield from their tech stack," says Jeff Pedowitz, president and CEO of The Pedowitz Group, a marketing consultancy based in Milton, Ga.

This paper explores the interplay between martech and customer trust, the challenges facing marketers that rely on martech to better understand and interact with customers, and the foundation and strategies required to maximize martech's impact on building or reinforcing customer trust.

The Marketing Technology–Trust Connection

Real-time, relevant, and contextualized customer interactions are the mom-and-pop shop experiences of yesteryear. They make customers feel understood and that their demands are known and their preferences accounted for. Yet delivering these personalized experiences requires understanding the variables that can erode customer trust.

Chief among the factors posing the greatest threat to customer trust are delays in responding to changing customer needs, which 36% of respondents cite. **FIGURE 1** For iGA Istanbul Airport, keeping pace with shifting demands and emerging trends is a major challenge. Nearly 54 million passengers traveled through the Turkish airport in 2024. It operates flights to 316 destinations around the world, making it one of the world's most well-connected global travel hubs. But iGA's global reach also makes for a broad customer base with diverse and ever-evolving expectations.

"It's very tough to keep up with shifting customer behaviors nowadays, because we have immense numbers of target groups with different desires and requirements," says Server Aydin, chief digital services and commercial officer at iGA Instanbul Airport. "Analyzing them, following them, gathering their feedback—it's hard."

Other factors that can pose a threat to customer trust include inconsistent messaging across channels (31%),

marketing messaging and content not aligned with customer needs (30%), inadequate customer service (30%), and silos of customer data (27%).

Eager to maintain customer trust, organizations such as iGA Istanbul Airport are embracing martech solutions with the power to create seamless customer interactions and offer deep insights into customer behavior. "Our technology stack is robust, multifaceted, and designed to enhance customer engagement," says Aydin.

For instance, by leveraging data analytics and automation capabilities, iGA Istanbul Airport ensures that members of its mobile application can receive relevant offers and personalized communication at precise moments throughout their customer journey. For example, passengers traveling internationally can receive a reminder to receive the international departure fee stamp when they approach the security checkpoint. Similarly, while visiting the airport's retail locations, customers can receive support from virtual assistants for a more personalized shopping experience. At key locations like terminal gates, beacon technology—which uses wireless transmitters to detect human presence within a certain proximity—sends real-time notifications to passengers' mobile devices to ease the onboarding process and deliver important reminders. "We have almost 75 tips and suggestions that are actively triggered according to the behavior of our passengers," says Aydin. Even robots are being tested to guide passengers to their appropriate gate.

Together, Aydin says, these martech solutions not only help identify the needs of passengers but instill confidence in them at a time when the aviation industry is under enormous pressure to create a better overall experience. "Trust is important for all brands," he says, "but if you're an airport, trust is vital."

The good news is that there is no shortage of martech solutions for organizations to choose from, regardless of industry. Among the tools most commonly used by respondents' marketing departments are customer relationship management (64%), content management (61%), campaign management (59%), and web experience management (43%). Many organizations are also using marketing automation (39%), customer data platforms (38%), marketing performance (38%), generative AI (36%), journey optimization and personalization (32%), and display and programmatic advertising (31%).

Although these tools vary in form and function, they share one common trait: the power to enhance a customer's belief in a brand or product. In fact, 81% of respondents say martech has a significant or moderate impact on an organization's ability to foster customer trust.

A key way that martech elevates customer trust is by enabling companies to respond faster to changing customer needs and demands. This task is accomplished by helping organizations analyze customer data for personalized experiences, according
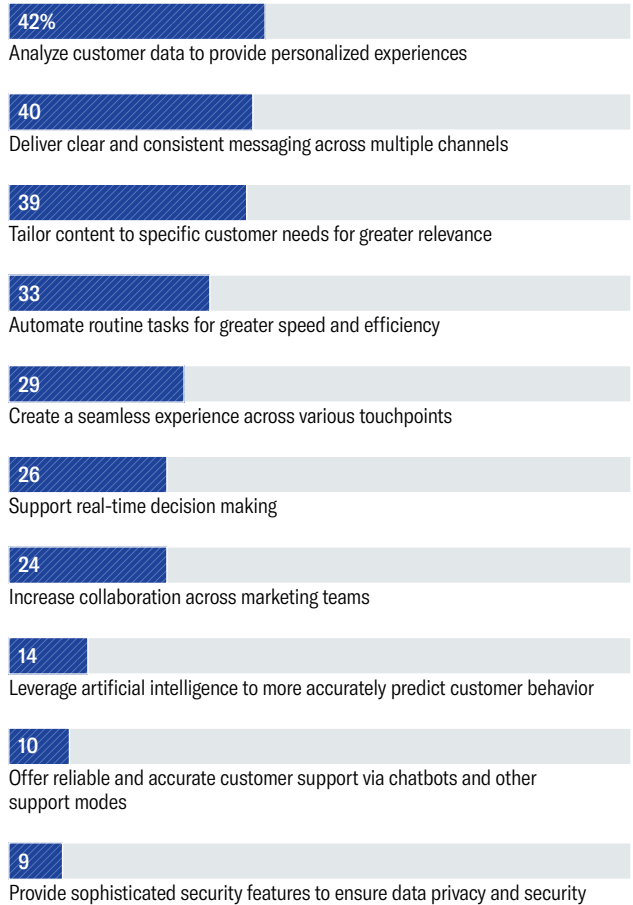
FIGURE 2

The Power of Marketing Technology

Responding fastest to customer needs rests with analyzing data for personalized experiences

What are the key ways martech enables your organization to respond faster to changing customer needs and demands? *Select up to three.*

Martech enables my organization to…

42%
Analyze customer data to provide personalized experiences

40
Deliver clear and consistent messaging across multiple channels

39
Tailor content to specific customer needs for greater relevance

33
Automate routine tasks for greater speed and efficiency

29
Create a seamless experience across various touchpoints

26
Support real-time decision making

24
Increase collaboration across marketing teams

14
Leverage artificial intelligence to more accurately predict customer behavior

10
Offer reliable and accurate customer support via chatbots and other support modes

9
Provide sophisticated security features to ensure data privacy and security

Base: 369 respondents, who say martech has impacted their organization's ability to foster customer trust. Not shown: 2% none, 2% don't know, 1% other.

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2024

to 42% of respondents, who say martech has impacted their organization's ability to foster customer trust. **FIGURE 2** Consider, for example, how a retailer might send product promotions via email based on a customer's detailed purchase history. Or how a coffee shop's mobile app might remember a customer's favorite drinks and reward them with perks based on these unique preferences.
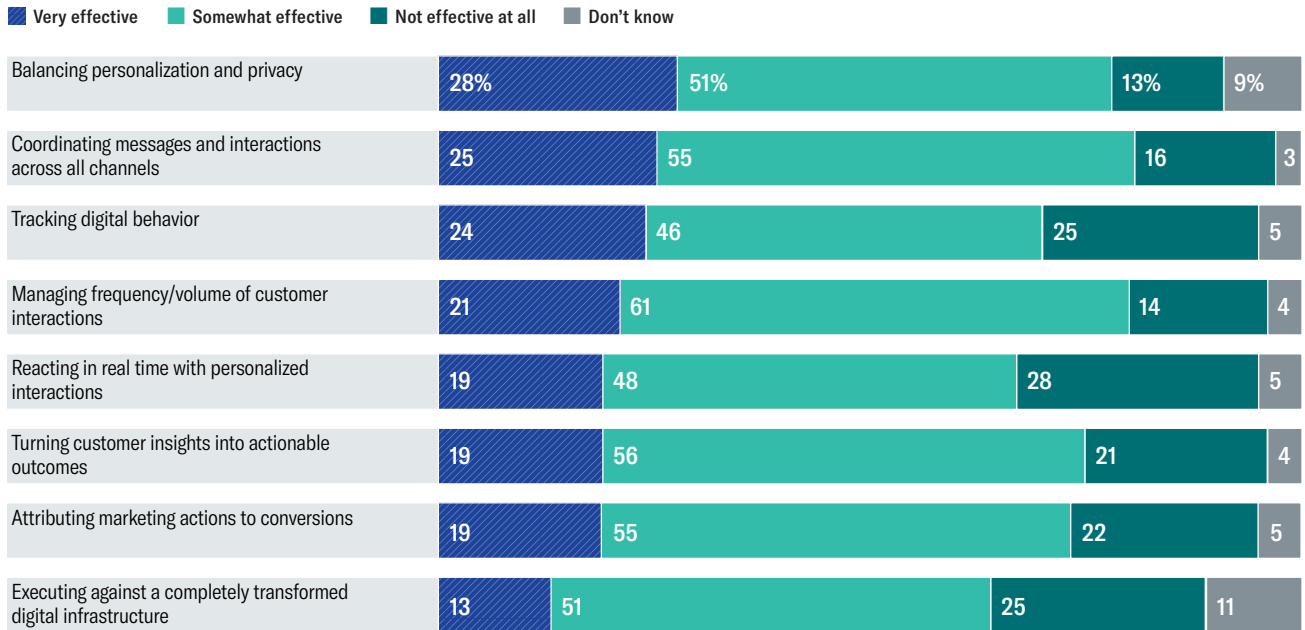
Another way martech facilitates swift responses to changing needs is by helping organizations deliver clear and consistent

FIGURE 3

Strategic Use of Martech

Tools balancing personalization and privacy are most effective in fostering customer trust

How effective is your organization in the following capabilities used to foster customer trust?

■ Very effective ■ Somewhat effective ■ Not effective at all ■ Don't know

Capability	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective at all	Don't know
Balancing personalization and privacy	28%	51%	13%	9%
Coordinating messages and interactions across all channels	25	55	16	3
Tracking digital behavior	24	46	25	5
Managing frequency/volume of customer interactions	21	61	14	4
Reacting in real time with personalized interactions	19	48	28	5
Turning customer insights into actionable outcomes	19	56	21	4
Attributing marketing actions to conversions	19	55	22	5
Executing against a completely transformed digital infrastructure	13	51	25	11

Base: 388 respondents.

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2024

messaging across multiple channels, according to 40% of respondents. Just ask Bennett Fox-Glassman, senior vice president of customer journey for Macy's Inc. The New York City-based department store chain has been exploring new ways to personalize interactions with its customers for nearly 100 years. "Customers know how quickly technology is advancing and they expect their experiences with a brand to get better at an equally fast pace," he says. For this reason, he notes, Macy's relies on martech to engage its customers in "connected conversations"—interactions that meet customers' individual needs using customized content, real-time recommendations, and relevant messaging across all channels, from physical stores to social media platforms.

A Challenging Landscape

Like any valuable commodity, customer trust must be rigorously guarded. "Trust can be earned and maintained, but you obviously have to be careful not to lose it as well," says Fox-Glassman. "That can happen quite quickly if you don't maintain customer relationships."

Yet not all organizations are doing an excellent job of reaching customers in ways that make strategic use of their marketing technologies. For instance, only 28% of respondents say their organization is very effective at balancing personalization and privacy, while 51% say their organization is somewhat effective at it. **FIGURE 3** Thirteen percent say they are not at all effective. In fact, for the most part, organizations are only "somewhat effective" across capabilities. Such results come at a time when respecting, prioritizing, and protecting customers' individual privacy rights are not only relationship-strengthening exercises but also regulatory requirements.

Organizations also appear to be operating less than optimally when it comes to reaching customers. Today's customer journeys traverse multiple channels, platforms, and touchpoints. Yet only one quarter (25%) of respondents say their organization is very effective at coordinating messages and interactions across all channels, with 55% being somewhat effective at it and 16% not at all effective at it. When points of interaction with customers are poorly integrated, organizations risk creating "a series of discombobulated,

disjointed messages [that] are disconnected from the brand and can lead to a disenchanting customer experience," says The Pedowitz Group's Pedowitz.

The disconnect between having martech tools and effectively using them—thus jeopardizing the ability to boost customer trust—owes itself to several factors. For starters, most martech stacks are comprised of dozens of solutions, many of them deployed within siloed systems, making it challenging for organizations to attribute financial gains, such as increased revenue or reduced customer churn, to a single tool. In fact, the 2024 Marketing Technology Landscape supergraphic, published by chiefmartec.com, a marketing blog, lists more than 14,000 martech applications.[1]

Indeed, 43% of respondents say one of the greatest barriers preventing martech from having a positive impact on customer trust is an inability to measure the ROI of their marketing efforts.

The steady emergence of new and innovative martech tools can also prove problematic, with 38% of respondents citing difficulty integrating new technologies into an existing marketing stack as a barrier preventing martech from having a positive impact on customer trust for their organization.

Then there's the delicate matter of data—the fuel powering most modern marketing tools. Today's martech solutions rely on data, from web activity and beacon data to buying history and demographic information to predicting customer behavior, devising campaigns, and generating content. Data must be accurate, integrated, and easily accessible for marketers to gather insights into customer behavior and design initiatives that address their needs and foster trust. Yet respondents cite a variety of data-related barriers that prevent martech from having a positive impact on customer trust for their organization, including poor quality data (37%), silos of customer data (36%), and a lack of real-time data access (29%). Other non-data-related barriers include an inability to track online customer behavior (21%), the integration of generative AI (20%), and duplicate capabilities across the martech stack (14%).

New Tools, Stronger Rules

Fortunately, there are steps organizations can take to glean greater value from martech and harness its power to enhance customer trust. For a legacy company such as Macy's, a reputation built on consistency, reliability, and personalized service is critical to maintaining customer loyalty.

"We have been there for so many customers for so long that it's the biggest foundation of trust that Macy's has with its customers," says Fox-Glassman. "We're where you got your prom dress [and] where you registered for your wedding, and we're there when you sit around the TV with your family on Thanksgiving morning and watch the parade."

> "It's very hard to meet customers' expectations if you don't have the data in one place where you can serve it synchronously to many systems," says Bennett Fox-Glassman, senior vice president of customer journey for Macy's Inc.

Indeed, 48% of respondents say their marketing team has promoted (or protected) brand reputation over the past year to improve customer trust. While building a brand reputation is important, the majority of strategies employed to foster greater customer trust deal directly with customers. For example, 43% of respondents say their marketing team has developed consistent messaging across channels to improve customer trust over the past year. Martech tools such as customer data platforms, journey orchestration, and customer relationship management systems allow for centralized management of customer data. By integrating these systems and the data contained with them, marketers can create consistent messaging across email, mobile, social media, web, and other channels.

Similarly, 41% of respondents say that in the past year their marketing team used data and analytics to tailor marketing messaging and content for customers to improve customer trust. Yet only 15% have eliminated silos of customer data, despite the risks inherent in fragmented data.

"It's very hard to meet customers' expectations if you don't have the data in one place where you can serve it synchronously to many systems," says Fox-Glassman. For this reason, he says, Macy's has invested in creating a strong data foundation to ensure "data is clean, organized, and in one place. It sounds simple, but it's a big effort."
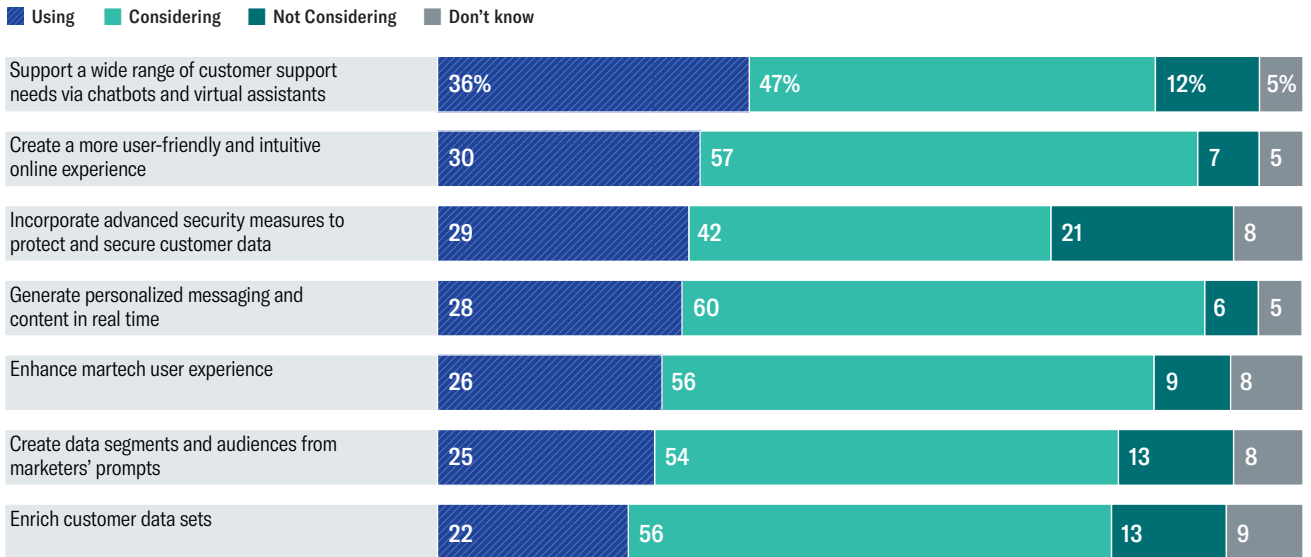
Growing Interest in Gen AI

Generative AI (gen AI) also promises to enhance the value organizations expect to derive from martech. Gen AI works by learning from large amounts of data to create content such as text, images, music, videos, and code based on inputs or prompts. By integrating these capabilities into marketing solutions, gen AI has the potential to help organizations identify relevant audience segments, create marketing plans,

FIGURE 4

Gen AI in Action

Customer support and a user-friendly online experience top the use cases for gen AI

Is your organization currently using or considering gen AI for the following marketing purposes?

■ **Using**　■ **Considering**　■ **Not Considering**　■ **Don't know**

	Using	Considering	Not Considering	Don't know
Support a wide range of customer support needs via chatbots and virtual assistants	36%	47%	12%	5%
Create a more user-friendly and intuitive online experience	30	57	7	5
Incorporate advanced security measures to protect and secure customer data	29	42	21	8
Generate personalized messaging and content in real time	28	60	6	5
Enhance martech user experience	26	56	9	8
Create data segments and audiences from marketers' prompts	25	54	13	8
Enrich customer data sets	22	56	13	9

Base: 388 respondents. Not shown: 2% none, 2% don't know, 1% other.

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2024

and even generate personalized content. In fact, 74% of respondents agree that integrating gen AI can enhance their organization's martech stack.

"There is huge potential for AI tools to deliver personalization at scale—personalizing every aspect of the customer experience, including communications and how customers interact with a brand on a very granular level," says Mike Kaput, chief content officer at the Marketing Artificial Intelligence Institute, a Cleveland-based company that educates marketers on the potential of AI.

For example, Fox-Glassman says Macy's has been experimenting with gen AI to create personalized email subject lines based on customer segments as well as improve the quality of product attribution on its website.

For now, most gen AI initiatives are designed to cater specifically to the personalized needs of customers. Among those whose organization is currently using gen AI for marketing purposes, 36% are using gen AI to support a wide range of customer support needs via chatbots and virtual assistants, 30% are creating a more user-friendly and intuitive online experience, and 29% are incorporating advanced security measures to protect and secure customer data. But more granular use cases for gen AI are also emerging,

raising the bar on what's possible in terms of personalized experiences.

For instance, respondents from organizations that are using gen AI say additional uses are being considered, including the use of it to generate personalized messaging and content in real time (60%), to create a more user-friendly and intuitive online experience (57%), to enhance martech user experience (56%), and to enrich customer data sets (56%). **FIGURE 4**

By taking over time-consuming tasks such as segmenting audiences, gen AI also promises to deliver organizational advantages, like enabling marketing teams to shift focus to business-critical initiatives. "From a marketing technology lens, we're looking at how gen AI can help our teams take work off their plates and spend more time understanding and listening to customer feedback and deciding the experience they want to create for customers," says Fox-Glassman.

Despite growing recognition of its value as a marketing tool, adoption of gen AI has been gradual. In terms of maturity, only 13% of respondents have implemented gen AI for marketing purposes at their organization, while the majority of respondents—45%—are currently piloting or exploring gen AI for marketing purposes. Twenty-five percent say their organization has considered using gen AI

for marketing but are not moving forward with it at this time. Only a small percentage (13%) are not considering using gen AI for marketing purposes.

One possible explanation for organizations' measured approach to gen AI adoption is that the output of gen AI models can be problematic. Due to their inherent predictive nature, gen AI models are prone to hallucinations—a phenomenon where an AI model provides responses based on fabricated data or creates patterns that are nonexistent in the large data sets used to train it. The result: nonsensical or outright inaccurate outcomes that can rattle customer confidence.

"Gen AI is essential. You can't not have it," says Cohesive's Magill. "But it does raise concerns about customer trust."

To reduce such risks, Magill recommends a multipronged approach to using gen AI that begins with establishing policies around "disclosure, transparency, privacy statements, and ethics." Next, he says, "marketers need to work with IT, legal, and compliance teams to ensure that data privacy is actually embedded in the use of technologies such as AI." Lastly, he adds, the C-suite must see to it that marketers obtain the necessary skills and expertise to determine appropriate use cases for gen AI.

"Marketers need to learn not necessarily exactly how chips are used to create a large language model but rather the fundamental constraints or limitations of gen AI," says Magill. "Then they should make sure that they're solidifying how they use gen AI with checks on those limitations, such as AI's dependence on the quality of the input data and its inability to explain its decision making." Those limitations may range from restricted access to valuable customer data to integration issues with existing marketing systems and workflows.

Spend on the Upswing

Although these are still early days for gen AI, 37% of respondents intend to increase their martech expenditure in gen AI in the next year—more than any other solution. As marketers find their footing in gen AI, investments in other martech solutions are increasing. Respondents say their organization is going to increase their martech expenditure on other technologies as well. Martech investments would be for journey optimization and personalization (24%), customer relationship management (22%), campaign management (20%), marketing automation (19%), and content management (19%). **FIGURE 5**

As these martech stacks grow, marketers will be under increasing pressure to select solutions that are most likely to amplify customer trust. "Marketing technology has become such a complex arena," says Fox-Glassman. "One of the challenges is staying really focused on what you fundamentally need and how you choose to prioritize investment."

FIGURE 5

Top Marketing Expenditures

Gen AI carves out a larger slice of marketing technology spend

For which of the following is your organization going to increase their martech expenditure the most in the next year? *Select up to three.*

37%	Generative AI (gen AI)
24	Journey optimization and personalization
22	Customer relationship management
20	Campaign management
19	Marketing automation
19	Content management
18	Web experience management
17	Customer data platform
17	Marketing performance
14	Sales automation
12	Other types of artificial intelligence (not including gen AI)
9	Display and programmatic advertising
8	Marketing resource management
4	First-party ad server

Base: 388 respondents. Not shown: 6% my organization is not planning to increase its martech expenditure, 7% don't know.

Source: Harvard Business Review Analytic Services survey, June 2024

"People jump in and start using tools without thinking about how they should be using them and what they're trying to accomplish. What are our use cases? What are our ethics? What are our policies?," says Jeff Pedowitz, president and CEO of The Pedowitz Group.

Looking Forward

Analytics might help marketers gain a deeper understanding of customer needs and content management systems can design customizable digital assets, but the ultimate goal of martech is to make customers feel as if they're being listened to and understood as human beings, not a target audience.

For many marketers, a more purposeful approach to using martech requires organizations to "look at their technology stack through the eyes of the customer and what they need versus what you need as a company," says Pedowitz.

"People jump in and start using tools without thinking about how they should be using them and what they're trying to accomplish. What are our use cases? What are our ethics? What are our policies?"

By answering these questions and using martech to create consistent messaging, personalized experiences, and tailored content, organizations will be more likely to see tangible proof of martech's positive impact on their business while, at the same time, fostering customer trust. All of which, says Magill, can make it "much harder for competitors to cross that moat into your territory."

Endnotes

1   Brinker, Scott, "2024 Marketing Technology Landscape Supergraphic—14,106 martech products (27.8% growth YoY)," chiefmartec. https://chiefmartec.com/2024/05/2024-marketing-technology-landscape-supergraphic-14106-martech-products-27-8-growth-yoy/.

Harvard Business Review Analytic Services surveyed 388 members of the *Harvard Business Review* audience via an online survey fielded in June 2024. Respondents qualified to complete the survey if they were involved in marketing decisions and familiar with the use of martech by the marketing department at their organization.

Size of Organization	Seniority	Key Industry Sectors	Job Function	Regions
35% 10,000 or more employees	**32%** Executive management/ board members	**19%** Technology	**15%** Marketing/PR/ communications	**38%** North America
28% 1,000–9,999 employees	**37%** Senior management	**11%** Financial services	**13%** General/executive management	**22%** Europe
7% 500–999 employees	**21%** Middle management	**10%** Education	**10%** Sales/business development/ customer service	**20%** Asia Pacific
20% 100–499 employees	**11%** Other grades	**10%** Manufacturing	All other functions less than 9% each.	**13%** Middle East/Africa
10% 50–99 employees		All other sectors less than 9% each.		**7%** Latin America

Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.