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Marketers must get ready for AI-powered marketing

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Joe Stanhope is vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Research

By Joe Stanhope

As a longstanding staple of science fiction and academic research, artificial intelligence (AI) is not new. What is different today is its shift into practical, consumer-facing applications.

AI does real things for real people. AI quietly makes many of our daily, if mundane, tasks possible such as shopping on Amazon, listening to music on Spotify and requesting driving directions from an iPhone.

AI is big business, and tech firms, enterprises, investors and the media all want in on the action.

Aye aye
It is no surprise that the excitement of AI has leapt into marketing technology.

Marketing is an ideal environment for AI to strut its stuff. After all, marketers utilize massive technology stacks to leverage prodigious amounts of data to make billions of decisions daily that drive trillions of dollars in consumer spending.

And the timing is perfect, because the demands of modern marketing have exceeded human cognitive capacity. That is not a slight on marketers' skills, motivation or smarts in any way.

The truth is that there is literally no way for traditional marketing technologies, processes and organizations to keep pace with volume, velocity and complexity of cross-channel, personalized customer engagement in 2017.

Marketers are bombarded daily with bold statements that AI will make them faster, smarter, better and more attractive.

While it is highly likely that AI is leading us to autonomous marketing, marketers are neither prepared or willing to turn customer engagement over to HAL 9000, or any other AI system.

We are in the very early stages of transforming marketing with AI.

Marketers need time to develop trust in the technology.

We need to validate the long-term results. And AI represents a very different operating model for marketers that will require revised processes, skills, and organizational design. This takes time.

AI adoption is a process that will play out in phases over the next five or more years, as the technology improves and it gains credibility with marketers:

Phase 1 Find patterns using more data, more quickly

Phase 2 Make suggestions that marketers review and choose to act on

Phase 3 Make and execute decisions within guardrails and thresholds

Phase 4 Fully autonomous marketing across the marketing mix with control of spending

Power play

Given this trajectory, the question becomes: what is possible today? How can marketers safely adopt AI, and how can they hold the technology accountable?

These are precisely the matters addressed in Forrester's new report "AI Must Learn The Basics Before It Can Transform Marketing."

What did we discover?

AI-powered marketing tech is initially an efficiency play. AI offers many benefits in the long term, but initially it will improve firms' capacity to handle resource intensive tasks such as data integration, segment and rule creation, and experiment design.

AI-powered marketing tech is turnkey. To encourage adoption and ensure seamless execution, AI must be productized within marketing technology systems rather than forcing marketers to develop or integrate AI into existing solutions on their own.

AI-powered marketing tech adoption starts with basic applications. AI's initial foray into marketing focuses on enhancing mainstay use cases such as buying ads, personalization, surfacing insights and optimizing message send times.

AI-powered marketing tech does not have to be a black box. AI is incredibly complex, but marketers can still demystify the technology and define their requirements if they ask the right questions.

AI IS NOT simply another buzzword. It absolutely has a place in marketing technology and will yield substantial benefits.

And we have arrived at the inflection point where legitimate AI-powered marketing solutions align with marketers' readiness.

To prepare for the future of marketing, brands need to advance their understanding of AI and start testing solutions today.

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