CANNES LIONS FESTIVAL OF CREATIVITY 2026

The AI Advantage Isn't AI. It's Judgment.

Key takeaways from Cannes on creativity, measurement, AI, and growth — and what they mean for the decisions leaders need to make next.

INTRODUCTION

More Noise Than Ever. A Few Things Cut Through.

Cannes produces a thousand hot takes every year, and most don't survive the flight home. A handful did: they showed up repeatedly, across different stages and different brands, until they stopped sounding like opinions and started sounding like consensus. One of them cut deeper than the rest: AI stopped being a tools decision and became an org chart decision, and that shift is reshaping how marketing and technology work together. The value wasn't in any single keynote — it emerged from the patterns across hundreds of conversations. This recap connects those dots and explores what they mean.

WHAT'S WORTH REMEMBERING

Creativity is human.

AI looks backward. Creativity and imagination look ahead.

Measurement moves to the front.

Creative effectiveness can't be an afterthought anymore.

AI takes the volume. Humans keep the value.

Prompt engineering is table stakes, not a career.

The advantage moved into the org chart.

Marketing and technology are now one decision, not two.

Growth means trust.

Customer optimization only works if the promise is real.

CREATIVITY

AI Looks Backward. Creativity Looks Ahead.

What we heard. Across nearly every stage at Cannes this year, one idea cut through: creativity is human-led and human-made, and no model changes that. AI is fundamentally retrospective: trained on what already exists, it can remix, accelerate, and pattern-match against the past. Creativity and imagination look forward to something that doesn't exist yet. That showed up everywhere this year: work that clearly "skipped the thinking step."

What it means. The organizations getting this right aren't asking AI to imagine on their behalf. They're using it to clear the runway (production, versioning, testing), so human creative and strategic imagination have more room to work, not less.

What to do.

- The idea, the insight, the point of view: keep it a human deliverable, always.
- Use AI to compress the distance between idea and execution, not to generate the idea itself.
- Make "whose idea is this" a standing question in creative review, not just "does this work."

MEASUREMENT

Creative Measurement Is No Longer Optional

What we heard. Leaders were direct about where measurement must go: creative effectiveness can't sit downstream of the campaign as an afterthought. It must be built in from the start, on the same footing as media measurement. Marketing mix modeling is useful, but it's backward-looking by design: it tells you what already happened. The shift the room kept returning to was moving from wanting insights to wanting intelligence: the same market mix ROI math, made continuous and forward-looking with AI instead of a periodic report, shown in one dashboard so a brand sees the whole picture instead of arguing over which report is right. Newer testing approaches, synthetic controls, came up as a way to more efficiently validate without waiting on a full in-market test cycle.

One finding surprised the room. Personalization's biggest lift wasn't from steeper discounts: it was from customers simply feeling seen. Offers built to reinforce long-term value moved the models read on lifetime value more than transactional targeting did. That reinforced a balance several speakers pushed: rich, look-alike-audience-grade data unlocks personalization, but only if it's spent on both acquisition and loyalty, and on reach and mental availability, not conversion alone.

The definition of the win is shifting too. The goal isn't the next customer. Retained customers are growing in value, loyalty drives household penetration, and a repeatable, credible measurement framework is what makes it possible to have a longitudinal, long-term conversation instead of relitigating results every quarter. CLV-rooted thinking, including gamification tied to sales events, was framed as a more durable growth lever than one-time conversion, and a genuine raving fan was treated as worth more, and worth measuring differently, than an ordinary loyalist. None of it works, though, unless measurement is democratized: marketing, finance, and leadership optimizing for the same objective, not competing definitions of success.

What to do.

- Design the measurement plan alongside the creative, before it goes into production, not after it launches.

- Build one shared, repeatable framework so marketing, finance, and leadership are arguing about strategy, not about whose numbers are right.
- Protect the brand-equity side of the ledger: a framework that only rewards short-term conversion will quietly erode the long-term marketing that built the demand in the first place.
- Root loyalty and retention plays in customer lifetime value, not just the immediate conversion they drive.

AI IN PRACTICE

AI Takes the Volume. Humans Keep the Value.

What we heard. A full panel featuring Spotify, Walmart, and Marriott landed on the same conclusion from three different businesses: prompt engineering as a stand-alone career is overrated. It's table stakes now: a basic literacy, not a competitive edge. Where these brands are actually pointing, AI is at volume, not value. Walmart was candid that delivery complexity at their scale is real, and part of managing it has been using AI as a creative ideation tool, while deliberately spending human effort on high-value work and letting AI carry high-volume, lower-funnel asset creation. Spotify's framing was about discovery: getting the right message to the right person at the right time, at a volume no human team could produce by hand, but the judgment about what that message should actually say stayed human.

What it means. The AI conversation matured this year. It's no longer about whether to use it. It's about being disciplined about where. The winning pattern across every brand on that panel: AI absorbs the volume; humans protect the value.

What to do.

- Map your content and campaign work into "volume" and "value" buckets before deciding where AI goes.
- Stop hiring or training for prompt engineering as a specialist skill; build it as a baseline capability across the whole team instead.
- Reinvest the time AI saves on lower-funnel production directly into upper-funnel craft and strategic thinking, rather than simply banking it as efficiency.

ORG CHART

AI Changed the Org Chart

What we heard. Every CMO at Cannes this year has access to the same AI everyone else does. The tools stopped being the variable. What's different across the organizations pulling ahead is the structure built around those tools, not the tools themselves. Marketing has ended up owning much of the AI conversation inside most companies, for two reasons: marketing carries the visible output, the campaigns, the content, the customer-facing work where AI's presence shows up first, and LLMs themselves are quickly becoming a new channel where customers discover and evaluate brands, landing squarely in marketing's existing remit. But the CMOs actually ahead of the curve aren't holding that ownership alone. They're partnering closely with their technology counterparts, building toward a shared vision and shared goals instead of running AI as a marketing initiative bolted onto the tech stack.

What it means. If AI capability itself is commoditized, the organizational model wrapped around it is one of the only places left to compete. A CMO who owns AI in isolation from technology leadership is optimizing half the system. A technology leader who owns it in isolation from marketing risks building infrastructure the business never quite uses well. The advantage moved into the org chart.

What to do.

- Map who actually owns AI decisions across marketing and technology today, and check whether that ownership is shared or sitting in a silo.
- Build a standing forum between marketing and technology leadership focused on shared AI goals, not just shared AI tools.
- Treat the org chart as a competitive asset worth redesigning, not a fixed constraint to work around.

GROWTH

Growth Now Means Customer Optimization and Trust

What we heard. One of the sharper data conversations this year opened with a blunt admission: organizations have more customer data than ever and are genuinely struggling with what to do with it. Data is the lifeblood of the work, with metadata increasingly sitting at the forefront of it, but volume alone isn't a plan. The velocity of new signals is what actually lets an organization read them into a purposeful pattern, not just a bigger dataset. The room's answer was to define the outcome and the level of data needed end-to-end before chasing more of it, and to connect that data explicitly to what the business is trying to achieve, with KPIs and alignment doing the real work.

The clearest framing on where growth comes from next. The future of growth is customer optimization, in a way that can actually change customer behavior, not just measure it. One session on personalization at scale, featuring Marriott, offered the sharpest language for this: there's a real difference between being recognized by a brand and being understood by one. The ambition described was creative accuracy carried all the way through to the moment of delivery, anticipating needs before the customer states them, so the brand's promise isn't just realized in the marketing but actualized in the experience itself: accurate, authentic, and genuine, wherever that experience happens to take place.

That same alignment logic applies at the category level. Understanding the whole market and the whole customer, not just a channel-level view, was described as the precondition for personalization at all: organizations that solve for relevance first are the ones that go on to solve for real personalization, and to build the kind of loyalty that compounds.

What's getting in the way was named plainly. Performance marketing and brand marketing still run in silos that shared incentives could fix. Most teams can measure their own house but have no visibility into the competitor's. And budgets are still mapped to how the business worked last cycle, not this one.

What it means. Optimization without trust is manipulation, and customers can tell the difference. As LLMs increasingly mediate how customers discover and evaluate brands, trust becomes a design requirement, not a marketing message: brands are no longer the sole owners of their own story, which makes earning and keeping that trust an ethical responsibility, not just a KPI.

What to do.

- Define the outcome and the end-to-end data you actually need before adding another source: alignment on KPIs beats more signal.
- Build for “understood,” not just “recognized”: personalization should compound across the journey, not reset at every touchpoint.
- Treat the brand’s promise as an operational commitment that has to be actualized at every touchpoint, not just a message that has to land in the campaign.
- Fix the performance-vs-brand silo with shared incentives before investing in more measurement tooling.

THE THROUGHLINE _

The Technology Isn’t the Differentiator Anymore

Different conversations, on different stages, with different brands, arrived at a version of the same idea. AI is now assumed. What separates the organizations pulling ahead is what they choose to protect: the human idea, the measurement discipline, the judgment about where AI belongs, the organization built to make that judgment well, and the promise the brand actually keeps once the customer shows up. That’s what’s worth carrying home from Cannes this year.

This is a starting point, not a finish line. We help organizations turn it into practice: the measurement discipline, the AI operating model, and the customer experience it takes to get ahead.

Schedule a call with MSQ DX at msqdx.com/us/contact

SOURCING NOTE

Session insights drawn from first-hand notes taken at Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity 2026, across Le Club MSQ, Adweek House, Female Quotient, Canva Cabana, Microsoft Gardens, and the LinkedIn B2B Summit, including panel discussions and remarks featuring Spotify, Walmart, Marriott, CVS Media Exchange, Georgia Pacific, Keurig Dr Pepper, Sephora, Babylist, Coca-Cola, Mars, Paramount, and Circana.