



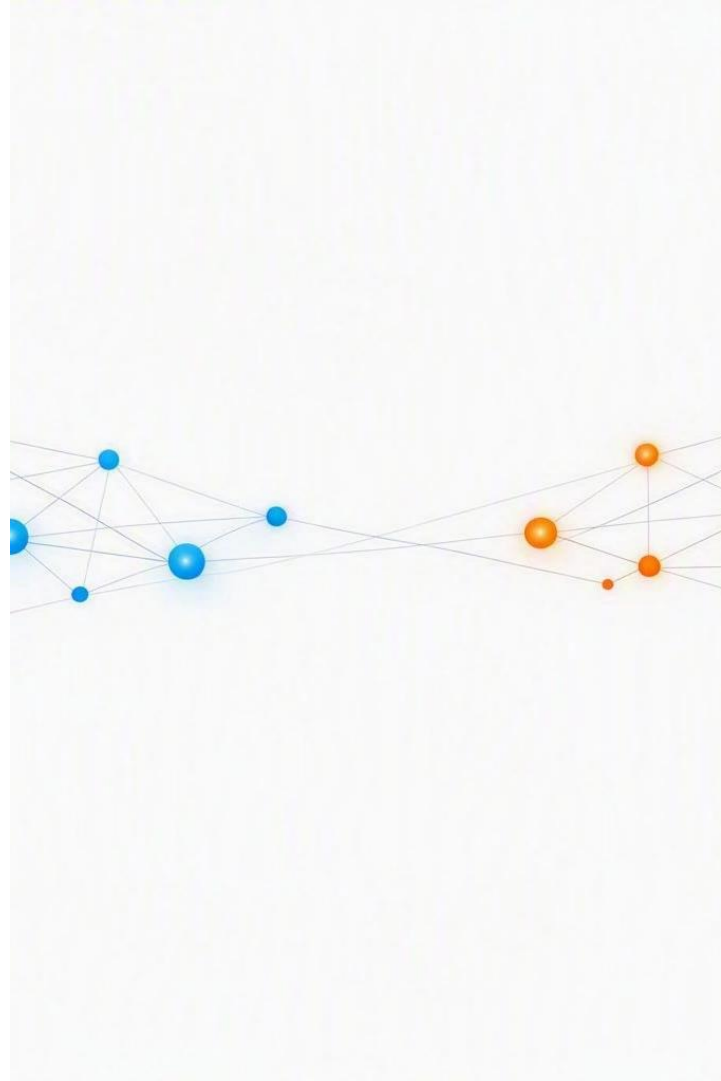
A STRATEGY BRIEFING FOR RETAIL & CONSUMER BRAND
LEADERSHIP

The Preference Economy

Emerging marketing frameworks for a world where AI,
communities, and algorithms decide before consumers do

Prepared for the C-Suite | 2026

THE GRAYSON COMPANY



Marketing is shifting from managing attention to managing preference

01

The old models assume search

The 4Ps, STP, and the funnel presume consumers actively compare and choose. Increasingly, they do not.

02

Decisions form off-stage

Communities, creators, reviews, retailers, and AI assistants shape choice before a brand knows a buyer exists.

03

Preference is the new asset

Advantage accrues to brands consistently recommended by people, platforms, and machines at the moment of decision.

Bottom line: competitive advantage will depend less on who delivers the most impressions, and more on who is consistently recommended.

From optimizing communications to optimizing decision systems

YESTERDAY

- Frameworks built to optimize communications
- Consumers search, compare, and choose
- Brands control the message
- Success measured in reach and impressions

TODAY AND NEXT

- Frameworks built to optimize decision systems
- AI, algorithms, communities, and creators pre-shape choice
- Brands influence the systems that recommend
- Success measured in preference and recommendation

Classic models remain useful — they are simply no longer sufficient on their own.

DIAGNOSIS

The inherited toolkit assumes a consumer who no longer exists

Framework	What it assumes	Where it breaks down
The 4Ps	The brand controls product, price, place, and promotion	Retail media, marketplaces, and agents mediate all four
STP	Segments can be defined, targeted, and held still	Personalization operates at the level of the individual, continuously
Purchase funnel	A linear path from awareness to purchase	Most research happens invisibly, outside measured channels
Journey mapping	Consumers consciously evaluate a set of brands	AI narrows the set before evaluation begins

Each model still has a job to do — none of them, on their own, describes how choice is formed today.

Fourteen emerging frameworks, four strategic shifts

**From campaigns
to preference**

*How do we create
enduring customer
preference?*

Preference Marketing ·
Predictive CLV · Zero-Party
Relationships

**From channels
to ecosystems**

*Where are buying
decisions actually being
shaped?*

Dark Funnel · Community-Led
Growth · Ecosystem Marketing
· Retail Media

**From search to
AI-mediated decisions**

*How do we become the
brand that AI
recommends?*

AI-Mediated Journey · Share of
Model · Knowledge Graph ·
Digital Consensus

**From transactions
to outcomes**

*How do we help
customers achieve their
goals?*

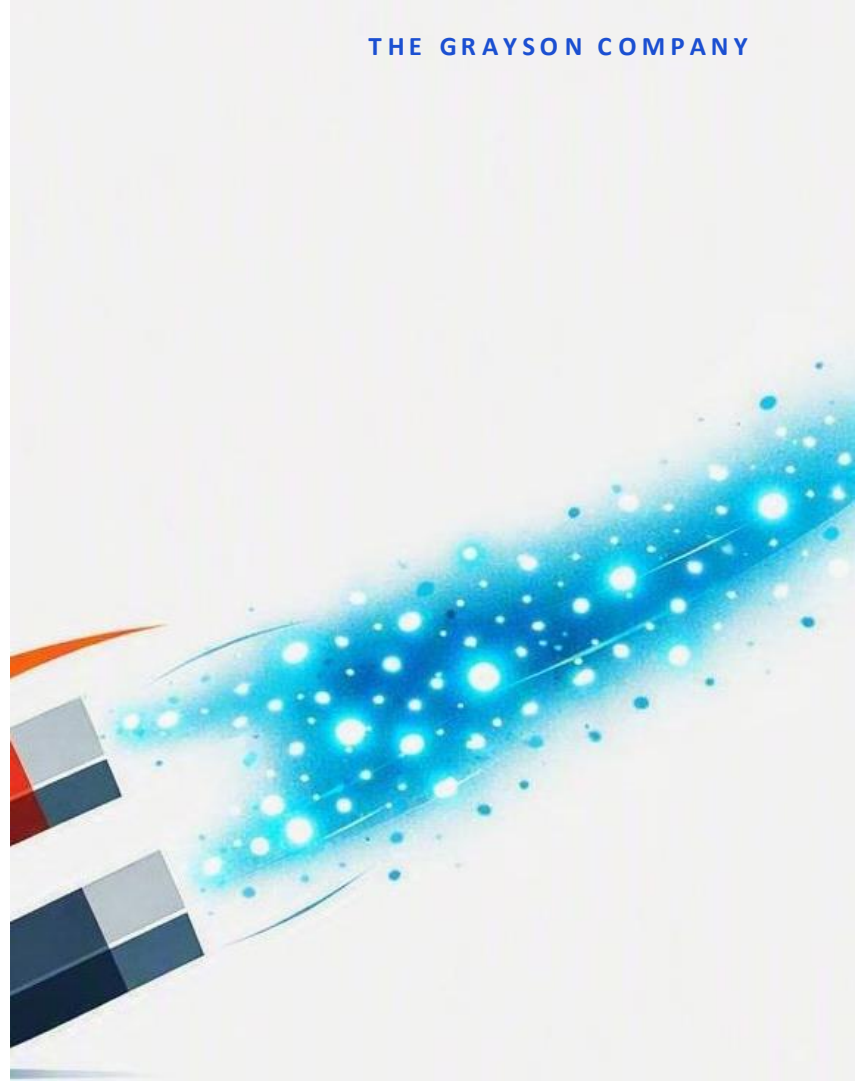
Mission-Based Marketing ·
Consumer Optimization ·
Agentic Commerce

Each shift changes the core question leadership must be able to answer.

STRATEGIC SHIFT 01

From campaigns to preference

How do we create enduring customer preference rather than a sequence of well-optimized campaigns?



FRAMEWORK 01

Preference Marketing: winning before intent fully forms

Not *“How do we generate awareness?”*
But “How do we become the preferred option before purchase intent fully develops?”

CAPABILITIES REQUIRED

- First-party customer intelligence
- Continuous personalization
- AI-driven recommendations
- Loyalty ecosystems
- Customer experience optimization
- Community building
- Trust creation
- Long-term value optimization

Preference becomes a measurable enterprise asset rather than a marketing outcome — durable, compounding, and defensible.

It shifts the marketing mandate from optimizing campaigns to building the conditions in which a brand is chosen by default.

FRAMEWORK 02

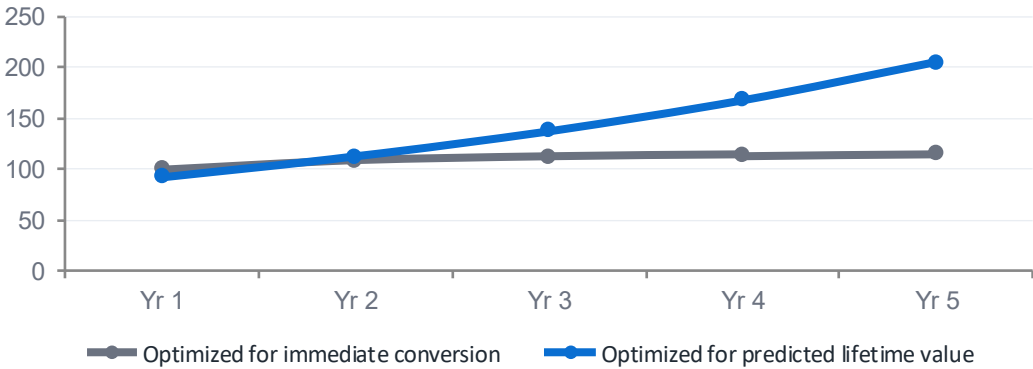
Predictive CLV: optimize for future value, not today's conversion

THE OLD QUESTION

Which customer is most likely to buy today?

THE NEW QUESTION

Which customer is most valuable over the next five years?



Where the money moves

Investment shifts toward retention, loyalty, and long-term profitability rather than immediate acquisition efficiency.

Chart is illustrative, not a forecast.

Zero-Party Relationships: personalization consumers consent to

Consumers voluntarily provide preferences in exchange for personalization. Unlike third-party cookies, the data is given, not inferred — which aligns personalization with rising privacy expectations.

Style preferences

Goals

Sizing

Dietary preferences

Interests

Shopping intentions

The exchange is explicit: give us your intent, and we will make the experience worth it.

STRATEGIC SHIFT 02

From channels to ecosystems

Where are buying decisions actually being shaped — and who owns the surfaces where they happen?



The Dark Funnel: the research you cannot see

Consumers ask friends, watch TikTok and YouTube, read Reddit, consult ChatGPT and AI shopping assistants, and scan reviews — all before a brand knows they exist.

Traditional funnel: Awareness → Consideration → Purchase

Reality: invisible research across communities, creators, reviews, and AI assistants → a short list arrives pre-formed

WHAT IT IMPLIES

- Share of voice matters less than share of recommendation
- Reviews become media
- Communities become advertising
- AI citations become distribution

FRAMEWORK 05

Community-Led Growth: trusted peers outperform paid media

Customer communities	Owned spaces where members answer each other's questions
Creators	Independent voices with earned authority in a category
Ambassadors	Recognized customers who represent the brand publicly
Advocates	High-value customers who refer organically
Experts	Practitioners whose judgement shapes category standards

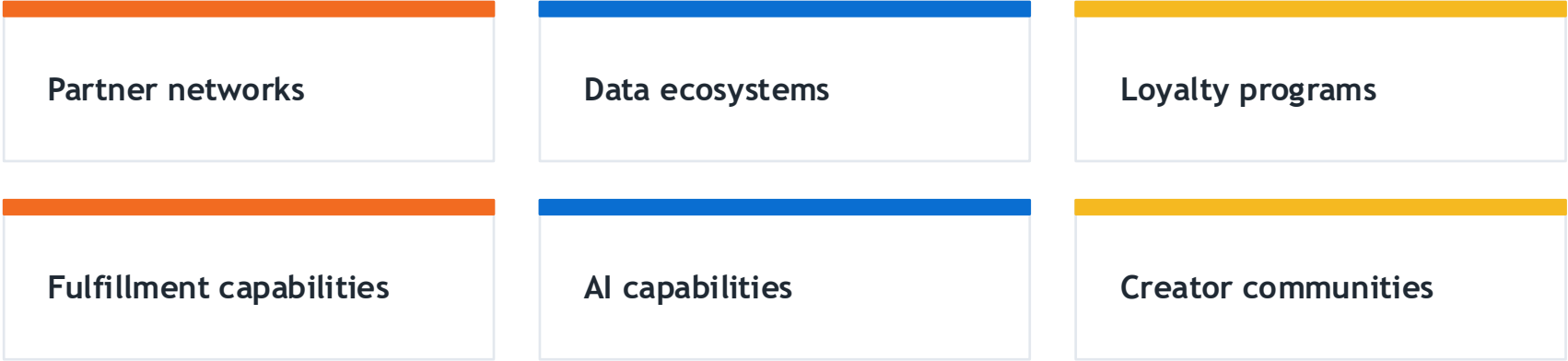
Community becomes the primary acquisition engine — not a support function of the media plan.

The implication for the P&L is structural: budget migrates from renting attention to building assets the company owns.

FRAMEWORK 06

Ecosystem Marketing: the unit of competition changes

Competition increasingly occurs between ecosystems rather than individual brands. Apple, Amazon, Walmart, Shopify, and TikTok compete as systems — and brands must decide which systems they build on.



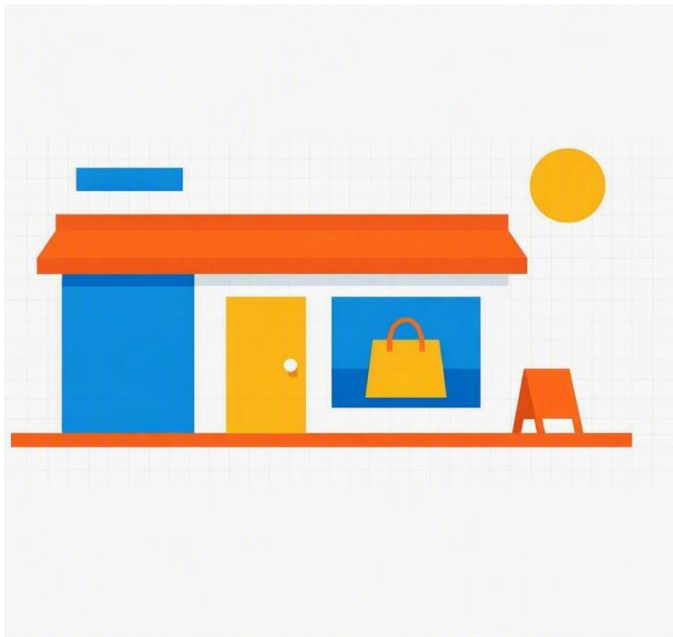
The strategic question is no longer only “what do we sell?” but “whose ecosystem makes us stronger, and where must we own our own?”

FRAMEWORK 07

Retail Media Networks: retailers are becoming media companies

Retail media networks let brands advertise using retailer first-party data at the point of purchase — blurring the line between advertising and commerce.

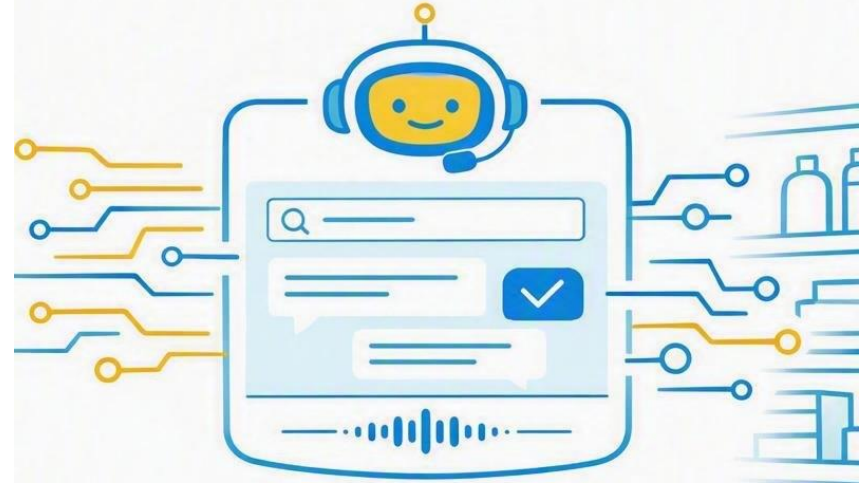
- Merchandising data becomes a core marketing asset
- Shopper insight moves from reporting to targeting
- Media, trade, and shopper budgets converge
- Retail partners become both channel and platform



STRATEGIC SHIFT 03

From search to AI-mediated decisions

How do we become the brand that AI recommends — accurately, consistently, and at the moment of decision?



The AI-Mediated Customer Journey

Yesterday: Consumer → Brand

Today: Consumer → AI → Brand

Consumers increasingly ask **“Find me the best running shoes under \$150”** rather than **“Show me Nike.”** The challenge shifts from influencing consumers to influencing recommendation systems.

NEW DISCIPLINES

- Answer Engine Optimization (AEO)
- Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)
- Large Language Model Optimization (LLMO)
- Entity optimization
- Structured knowledge management

FRAMEWORK 09

Share of Model: the KPI of the next decade

Marketers measured share of voice, share of search, and share of market. The emerging measure is how frequently an AI recommends the brand.

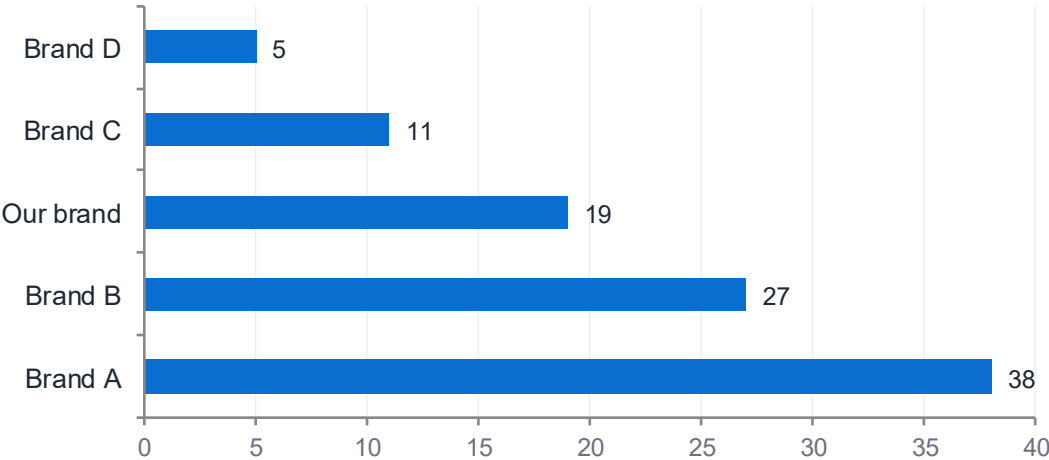


Chart is illustrative, not measured data.

WHAT GETS MEASURED

- AI recommendation rate
- Citation frequency
- Preferred recommendation ranking
- Brand mention accuracy
- Recommendation consistency

FRAMEWORK 10

Brand as Knowledge Graph: becoming machine-readable

Brands increasingly need to exist as structured entities that AI systems can parse and trust. The objective is not only to rank in search, but to be represented accurately inside AI-generated answers.



If a machine cannot describe your product accurately, it will not recommend it confidently.

Digital Consensus: AI synthesizes the crowd

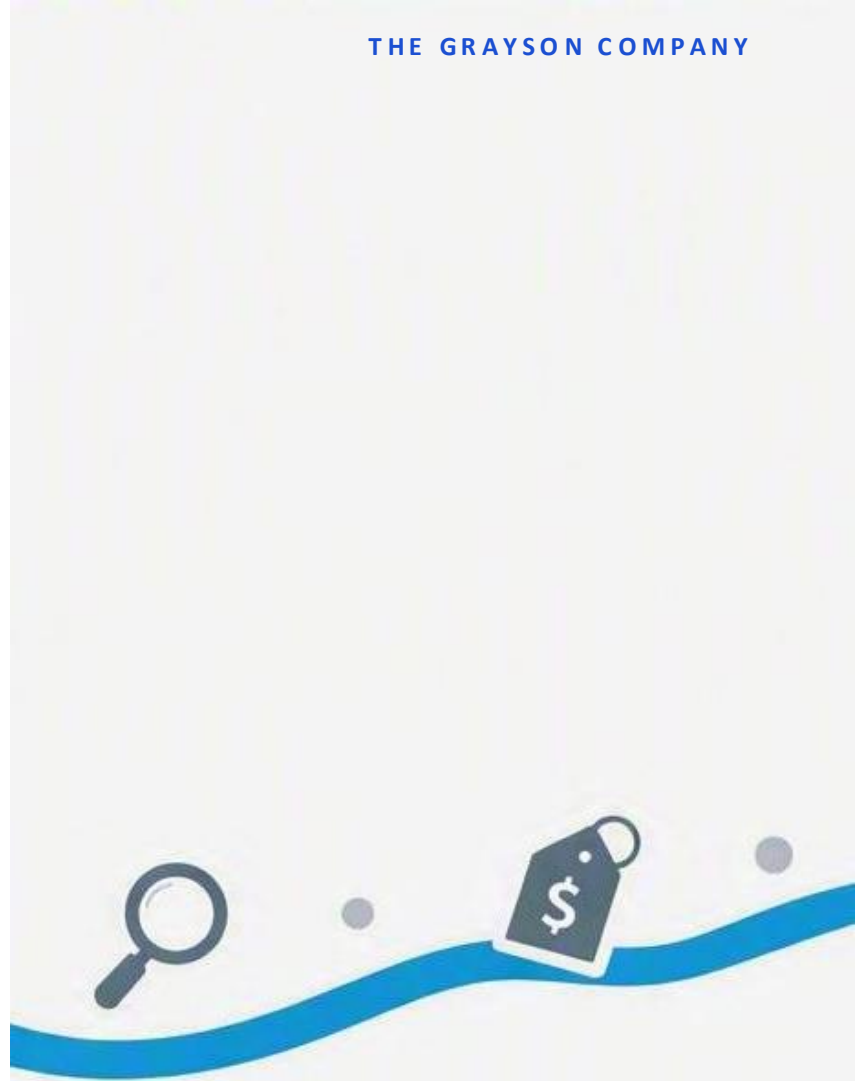
Rather than a single review influencing a single consumer, AI systems aggregate thousands of sources into a synthesized verdict.



STRATEGIC SHIFT 04

From transactions to outcomes

How do we help customers — and increasingly their AI agents — achieve the outcome they are actually pursuing?



Mission-Based Marketing: customers shop missions, not products

“I need outfits for Italy.”

“I need healthy lunches.”

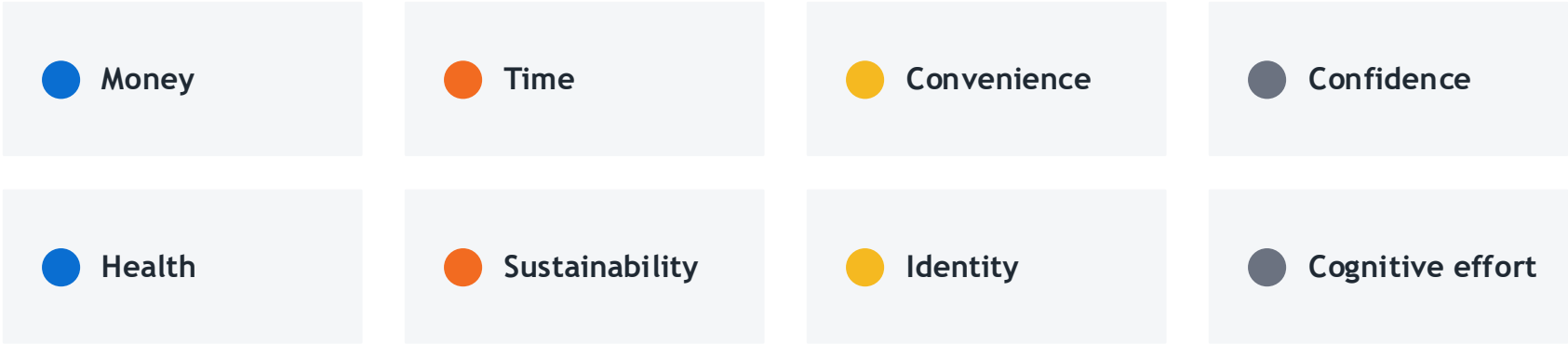
“I need to furnish a small apartment.”

“I need birthday gifts.”

Marketing shifts from selling products to helping complete missions. Retailers such as Amazon, IKEA, and Sephora increasingly organize experiences around solving customer problems rather than showcasing catalogs.

The Consumer Optimization Framework

Consumers do not maximize value alone — they optimize competing resources simultaneously. AI accelerates this because it collapses the cost of search.



The winning offer is rarely the cheapest — it is the one that resolves the most tensions at once.

Agentic Commerce: when the buyer is a machine

The largest long-term disruption. Instead of consumers shopping, AI agents increasingly shop on their behalf.

Autonomous replenishment

Travel booking

Insurance selection

Grocery planning

Subscription optimization

Marketing shifts from persuasion toward machine-readable trust signals.

Brands will compete to become the preferred choice of autonomous agents — on price integrity, data quality, availability, and verifiable reliability.

The synthesis: four shifts, one conclusion

Strategic shift	Emerging frameworks	Core question
From campaigns to preference	Preference Marketing · Predictive CLV · Zero-Party Relationships	How do we create enduring customer preference?
From channels to ecosystems	Dark Funnel · Community-Led Growth · Ecosystem Marketing · Retail Media Networks	Where are buying decisions actually being shaped?
From search to AI-mediated decisions	AI-Mediated Journey · Share of Model · Brand as Knowledge Graph · Digital Consensus	How do we become the brand that AI recommends?
From transactions to outcomes	Mission-Based Marketing · Consumer Optimization · Agentic Commerce	How do we help customers — and their agents — achieve their goals?

Marketing is evolving from the management of attention to the management of preference within intelligent decision ecosystems.

What this means for the C-suite



Treat preference as an asset

Define it, measure it, and report it alongside share and margin.



Instrument the invisible

Track share of recommendation across communities, retailers, and assistants.



Make the brand machine-readable

Structure product truth so AI systems describe you accurately.



Fund outcomes, not impressions

Shift investment toward retention, community, and lifetime value.

The brands that win will be the ones people, communities, retailers, and machines recommend without being asked.