

TRUST THE (GENERATIVE) PROCESS

**A trend report and playbook for creative
excellence in the AI Era**

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WELCOME FROM THE WEBBYS

We're completely bombarded with AI. It's in our feeds, it's in the news, it's everywhere, and it's exhausting. And yet, on what seems like a weekly basis, we get a new glimpse into more stupendous possibilities. It is both exciting and daunting to our community in ways that are impossible to ignore.

The Webby Awards turns 30 this year, and the milestone means we're looking back as we look forward. We've recognized the best of the Internet through multiple eras of creative disruption, celebrating the ideas that push culture forward alongside the work that reminds us of our shared creative values. Across those eras, one truth resurfaces: great work earns and leverages trust.

Trust is the link between innovation and adoption. It's why people buy in, and it's how the Internet, once considered untrustworthy and unserious, became the backbone of modern life. Trust is earned in stages, and it follows a process that both expects skepticism and requires it. AI will follow the same pattern if we treat it with integrity.

This report, **Trust the (Generative) Process**, asks what it takes to build trust now, when the ground keeps shifting. We asked our jurors and community when AI works at its best, and why. This is a gut check for anyone grappling with the paradox we're in: AI adoption is exploding, yet everyone is skeptical of anyone else using it.

And, in the spirit of transparency, yes, we used AI as a partner to refine this report. But the emdashes? Those are entirely—and enthusiastically—ours.



Jesse Feister

Executive Director, Webby Group

Making Great Work on the Internet?

Enter it in The Webby Awards. This season features dedicated categories for AI Experiences & Applications and AI Features and Innovation. Learn more about our honors and criteria.

The Final Entry Deadline is Friday, December 19, 2025.

REPORT OBJECTIVES

Take a Pulse

With so much information floating around—hype, hate, and everything in between—it’s hard to know how the industry is **really** feeling about AI. We’ve tapped creative leaders to learn how they’re navigating trust with this technology.

Share a Framework

Skepticism isn’t just resistance; it’s how trust gets built. Just as trust in the Internet was earned in stages, AI’s value will be built on the same core principles. We’re sharing a trust rubric you can use when experimenting to check your approach.

Inspire Innovation

The best innovations in technology happen when communities demand better of them. With this report, we’re sharing the most successful work we’ve encountered, as well as what we’ve heard creative leaders want most from AI.

INDUSTRY GUT CHECK

This report is informed by research gathered for our Webby Talks thought leadership series, and powered by deep dives with our community through:

- ✦ A survey of **190** creative professionals across the world, who are facing AI's paradox in real time. We gathered the thoughts, concerns, and processes of Technologists, Creative Directors, Marketers, Producers, Creators, and more.
- ✦ Direct conversations with **Webby Judges** and other leading Executives who are at the forefront of the AI shift across their respective industries.
- ✦ Social listening, conducted in partnership with **Meltwater**, to learn and synthesize how conversations around AI and trust are playing out online.

CHAPTER 1

THE TRUST PARADOX

**Today's AI discourse shifts
between hype and skepticism,
incredible potential and real risks.**

Trust sits at the center.

1.1

WE TRUST AI WHEN WE USE IT

But not when others do. That's the paradox when it comes to generative AI.

We trust the technology and its outputs when we operate it. When others—brands, agencies, or individuals—use AI, our skepticism kicks in.

For anyone who creates work online, that paradox is a major challenge, and it's playing out in real-time across the Internet.

The Paradox by the Numbers

We asked our community: 'When you use AI tools, how much do you trust the quality of their outputs?'

16%

**TRUST IN BRANDS'
AI OUTPUTS**

77%

**TRUST IN THEIR
OWN AI OUTPUTS**

“When I see AI-assisted creative work in the wild and can tell that AI was used, I immediately lose trust in the company/person who published it.”

Shara Maurer

Head of Corporate Marketing, Krisp



1.2

EVERYONE HAS TRUST ISSUES

The AI era is unfolding within a larger challenge: audience trust is at an all-time low online. **Only 37%** of Americans trust information from social media ([Pew Research](#)).

Audiences are also fatigued with the tech industry; according to Meltwater's social listening data, only **1 in 5 conversations about the tech sector and trust** this year are positive.

AI's surge is only compounding that distrust, from AI propaganda to bots co-opting [youth protests](#) (Cyabra).

The distrust runs deep enough that the [UN Global Risk Report 2024](#) named misinformation as the top global threat.

“Broadly, we’re seeing audience trust decline in historically trusted institutions, but increase within a smaller range of voices and groups. People are effectively shifting their confidence from traditional, broad-based sources to a handful of communities or personalities they deeply identify with. For brands, that makes navigating trust incredibly complex. A single post or misaligned partnership can undo years of equity.”

Antony Cousins

Vice President of Product Management - Global Applications & Architecture, Meltwater



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How Do Audiences Feel About the Tech Sector?

Last year, only one in five online conversations about technology companies online have been positive.

19.6%
POSITIVE

1.3

GOOD AI USE IS ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

Most broadly, we heard that creative professionals want to use AI responsibly, but that **‘responsible’ means different things to different audiences**. Some want full disclosure, while others just want experiences that resonate.

So, when and why is it acceptable to your audience for you to use AI in your process? For our jurors and community, it boils down to **context**. Context is about meeting your audience where they are.

If you compromise audience trust, it won't matter how creative or efficient your AI-assisted work is.

“Know your audience. Some communities are fine with fully AI-generated creative. Some are skeptical, especially where livelihoods feel directly affected. Also, be honest about cost and benefit over time. Saving money up front does not help if it erodes trust or performance later.”

Tracy Chan

CEO, Splash Music (Former CCO at Soundcloud and VP of Music at Twitch)



Use the Right Tools

“In reality, different AI tools are good at different things—some are great at coding, others at writing, others at reasoning. Let people use what's best for the job.”

Alex Shultz

CMO & VP of Analytics, Meta



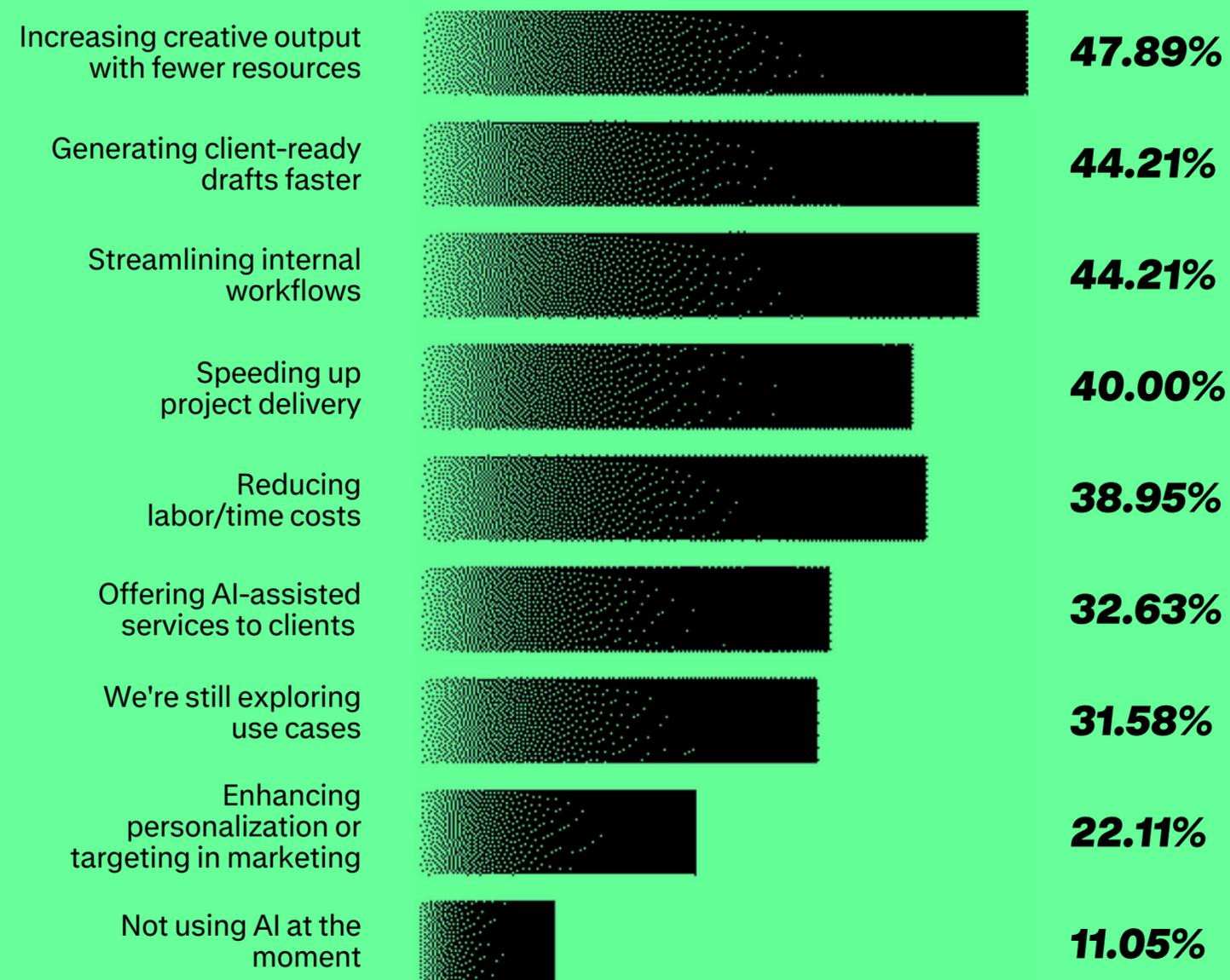
1.4

AI IS ALREADY EMBEDDED EVERYWHERE

Despite skepticism, AI is now embedded in everyone's workflows.

It is amplifying output, with nearly half of respondents using AI to increase creative production with fewer resources, and expedite client-ready drafts.

'In your organization or team, which of the following ways are you using AI?'



CHAPTER 2

THE TRUST FRAMEWORK

For three decades of The Webby Awards, we've had front-row seats to the evolution of technology and creativity. One truth holds through every big shift: great work earns and keeps trust.

After analyzing **more than 100,000 pieces of work** submitted to the Webbys over the past decades, we've identified four universal themes that earn trust and shape success with any new technology.

These are pillars, a framework to evaluate where, why, and how AI can be utilized in ways audiences will believe in.

2.1 Leverage Credibility.

2.2 Be Transparent

2.3 Create Utility.

2.4 Give Users Autonomy.

2.1

LEVERAGE CREDIBILITY

Lean into your expertise and what audiences already know to expect from you. Are you using AI to extend the value you already provide?



PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

When you do, your audience is more likely to see experiments with new technology as an extension of the credibility you've already built—this extends to creators, established brands, and beyond.

Industry leaders agree that when judging AI usage, **they judge whether they trust the creator using it.** Consider your track record and brand equity when looking for an entry point.

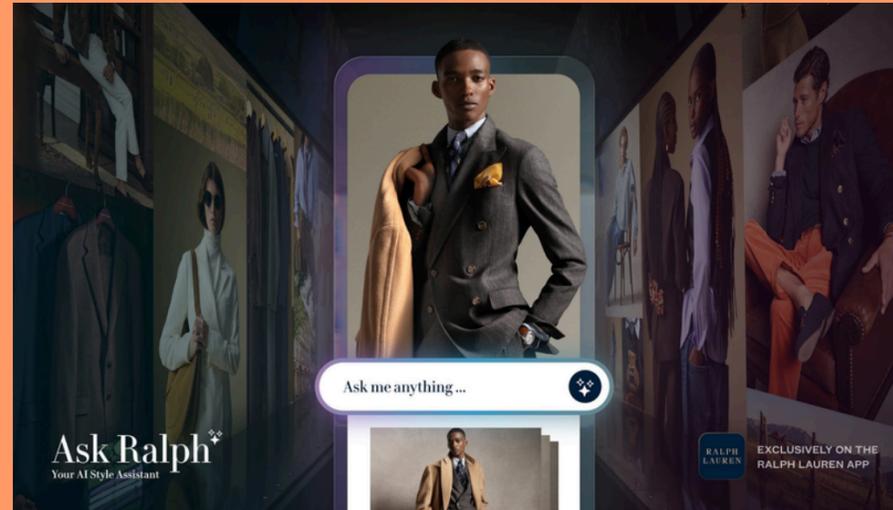
“Evaluating the source tells me if their content and messaging are consistent...If I trust the source, I trust they are not a bad actor out to manipulate.”

Marisa Lather

Marketing Consultant & Brand Partner,
Marketer Marisa



Case Study: Ask Ralph: Virtual Shopping & Styling Assistant



[**Read More**](#)

Fashion label Ralph Lauren launched **Ask Ralph**, an AI shopping assistant trained on decades of brand archives. The tool offers personalized styling guidance as an extension of Ralph Lauren's offerings.

This approach played to existing strengths and paid off. According to Meltwater's social listening data, Ask Ralph's September 9, 2025, release generated **1.4 billion in reach this year** for the heritage brand.

LEAN INTO YOUR EXPERTISE

Case Study: Norman Teague Jam Sessions

Industrial designer and educator Norman Teague demonstrated this principle through Jam Sessions, his MoMA exhibit.

Teague and his studio used Adobe Firefly's tools for AI-assisted production, which is trained on permissioned works, to reinterpret 15 iconic design objects from MoMA's collection. The exercise reimagined the modern design movement through a Black lens, earning him the 2025 Webby Special Achievement in Creative AI Award.



[Learn More](#)



Photo credit: Jonathan Dorado/The Museum of Modern Art

OR JOIN THE BACKLASH

Not all brands are embracing AI. For some, rejecting it is their own form of credibility.

Some companies are aligning their brands to capitalize on consumers' AI hate. **Heineken** joined the hot takes on AI wearable Friend with a tongue-in-cheek campaign reminding consumers that the “best way to make a friend is over a beer.”



Heineken's Social Off Socials Campaign

Case Study: Aerie Says No to AI

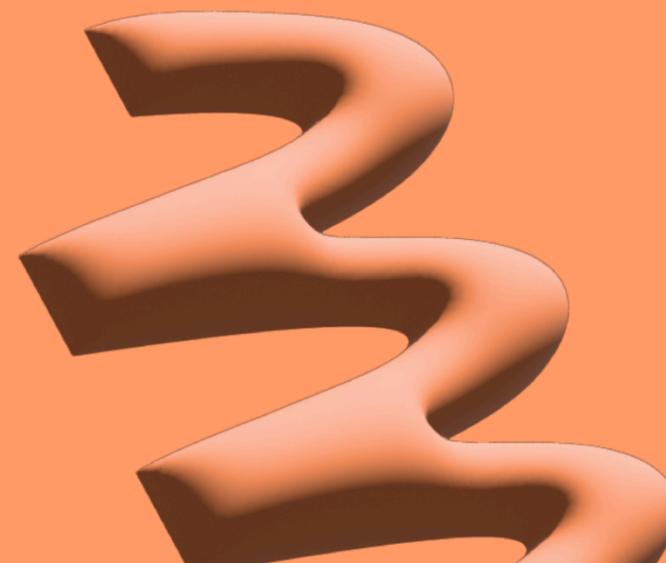
Since 2014, loungewear brand **Aerie** has refused to retouch photo campaigns, centering authentic representation. They applied this stance to AI by pledging not to use synthetic people or images in their work—“No retouching. No AI. 100% Aerie real.”



[Read More](#)

“Trust isn't something you can automate. It's built through consistency, through showing up in ways that align with your values and your audience's expectations. And it's lost in a second if you're caught pandering to opposing views.”

Antony Cousins



2.2

BE TRANSPARENT

There's no universal rule for transparency, but it's essential with a disruptive technology like AI. Clear principles should guide what and how you disclose.

BE UPFRONT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Transparency is trending for a reason.

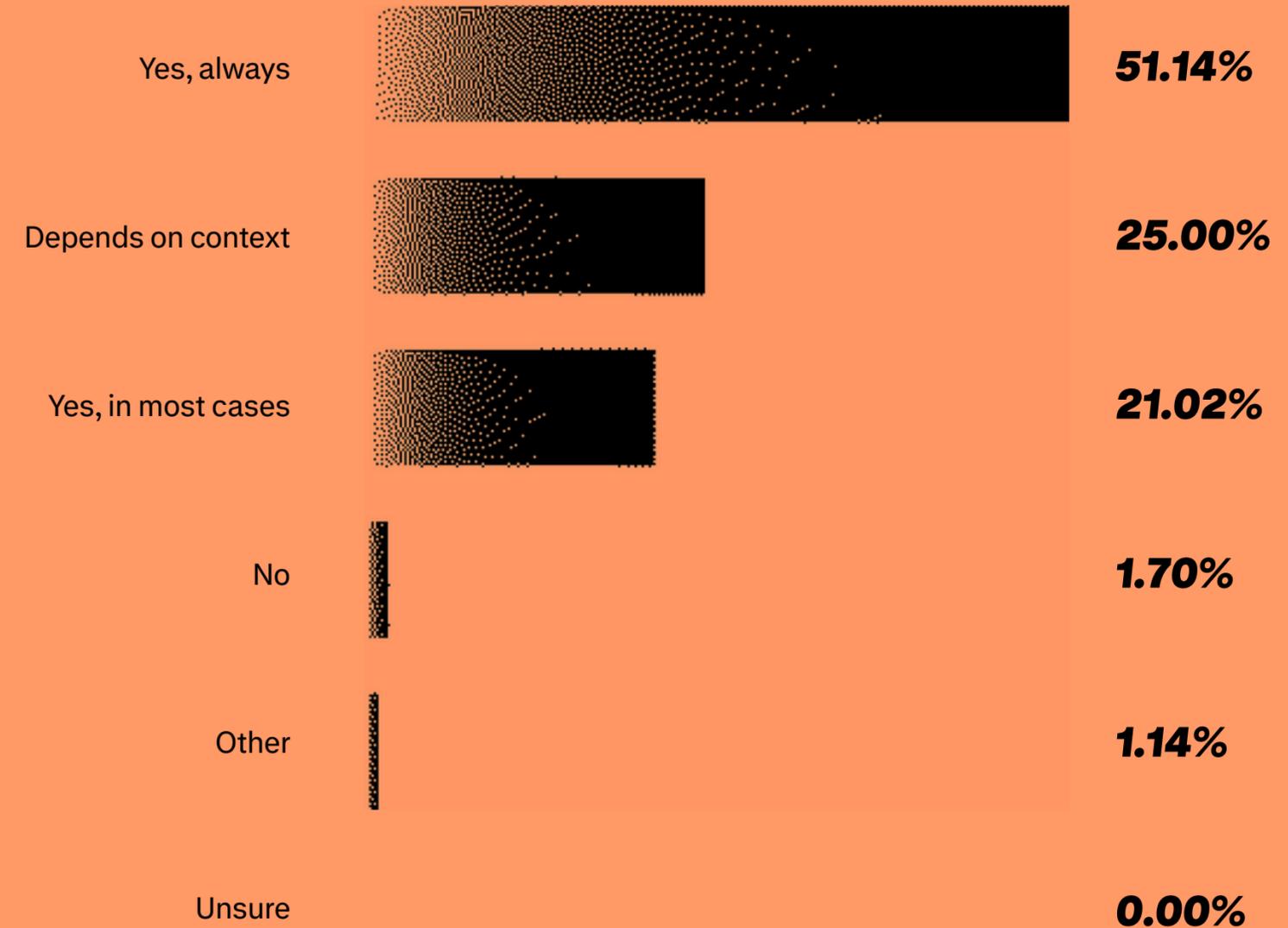
94% of consumers want AI-generated content to be disclosed ([Sprout Pulse Survey 2024](#)).

Curiosity and skepticism are at their peak when technology is new or disruptive. From industry to audience, everyone is looking for more honesty around AI.

Expectations evolve, but in the early stages, openness sets the tone for lasting trust.

72% of our community believes AI-generated content should be clearly labeled in most cases.

‘Do you believe AI-generated content should be clearly labeled?’



CONSUMERS DON'T LIKE FEELING TRICKED

Especially not by synthetic media.

As a result, brands perceived as suspicious have seen their social accounts flooded with one comment: “Is This AI?”

According to social listening data, that comment has exploded online — an **857% increase**.

“If something is AI-assisted, say so. People can smell a synthetic voice a mile away, not because it sounds robotic, but because it lacks intent.”

Robert Slot

Chief Innovation Officer, TBWA/Neboko



A Rise in ‘Is This AI?’ Comments

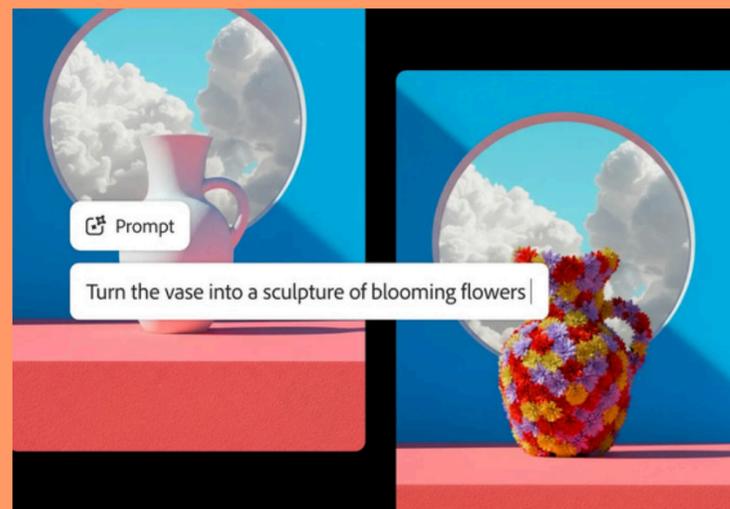
Comments asking “Is
This AI?” have increased
857%
year-over-year.

BUILD TRANSPARENT TOOLS

Case Study: Adobe Firefly's Transparency Model

Adobe earned trust in the digital era by giving creators reliable, industry-defining tools. Now, it's applying that same philosophy to Firefly, its generative AI platform.

Aware of the tension and commercial risks around attribution and creative ownership, Adobe has prioritized transparency in training its models on licensed, responsibly sourced data to maintain trust with the creative community.



[**Learn More**](#)

Spotify's AI Disclosures in Music Credits

Platforms and tools are playing a role in helping make AI disclosures more nuanced and normalized.

In September 2025, Spotify announced AI disclosures in music credits to give artists and rights holders the flexibility to indicate different roles AI can play in the creative process.

“AI use is increasingly not a binary. Creators’ use of AI exists on a wide spectrum ...The best way to build trust is to give creators a clear, industry-standard framework for AI disclosure that recognizes the different ways the technology is being used. When artists feel safe being transparent, the whole ecosystem gets stronger.”

Sam Duboff

Global Head of Marketing & Policy, Music Business, Spotify



EXPLAIN YOUR PROCESS

For our community, trust isn't simply about if AI was used.

It's about how it was used—65% of respondents want AI-assisted work to be labeled or explained.

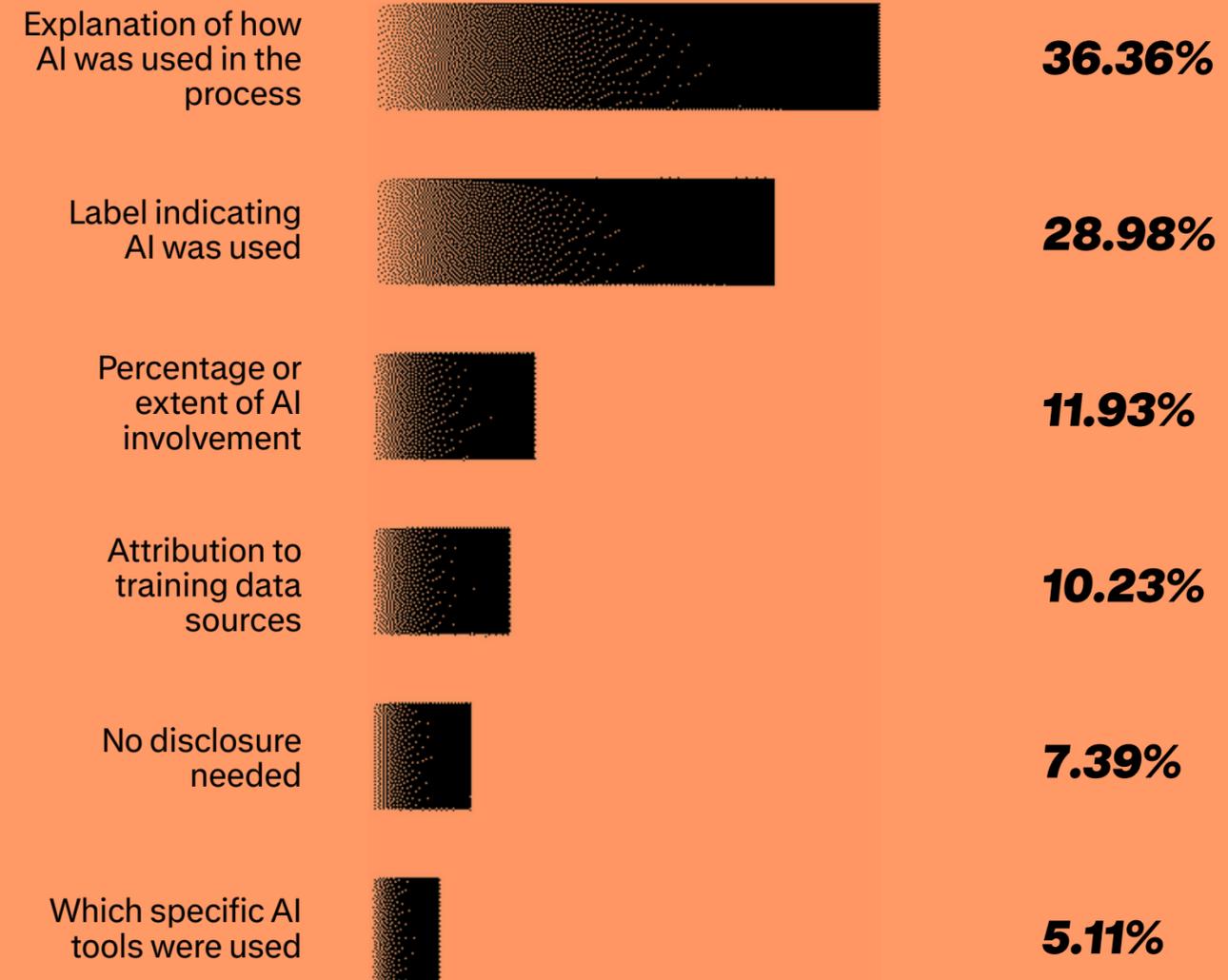
“While using Firefly, Content Credentials are automatically applied to the generated content. They provide a durable ‘nutrition label’ that shows how the content was made and what models were used. These credentials remain attached to the content, enabling others to view the information on supported platforms.”



Patricia Buffa

Principal Product Marketing Manager, Firefly GenAI, Adobe

‘Which type of AI disclosure would make you trust creative work the most?’



EXPERIMENT IN PUBLIC

More than half of industry leaders and creatives say AI use should always be disclosed. Many want more than a disclaimer; they want to understand how it shaped the work.

Brands that are open about how they're using AI build trust by experimenting publicly, in the open.

Case Study: Valentino Labels Its AI-Generated Ad

For its collaboration with Vans, luxury brand Valentino partnered with AI studio EDGLRD and Runway to create a surreal film. They disclosed upfront—and across all media—that all visuals were AI-generated based on real runway footage and that all models provided consent.

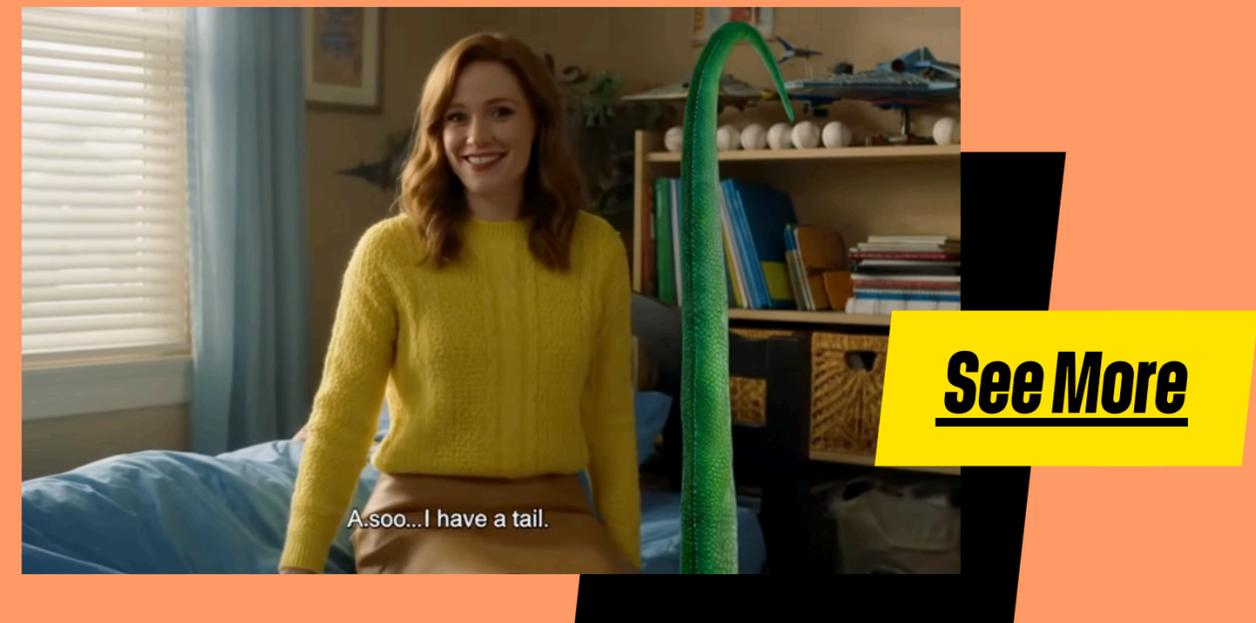


[See More](#)

Case Study: In a World Full of Fakes, Ritual Gets Real with AI

Supplement company **Ritual**, known for disclosing where its ingredients are sourced, made radical honesty the center of a campaign.

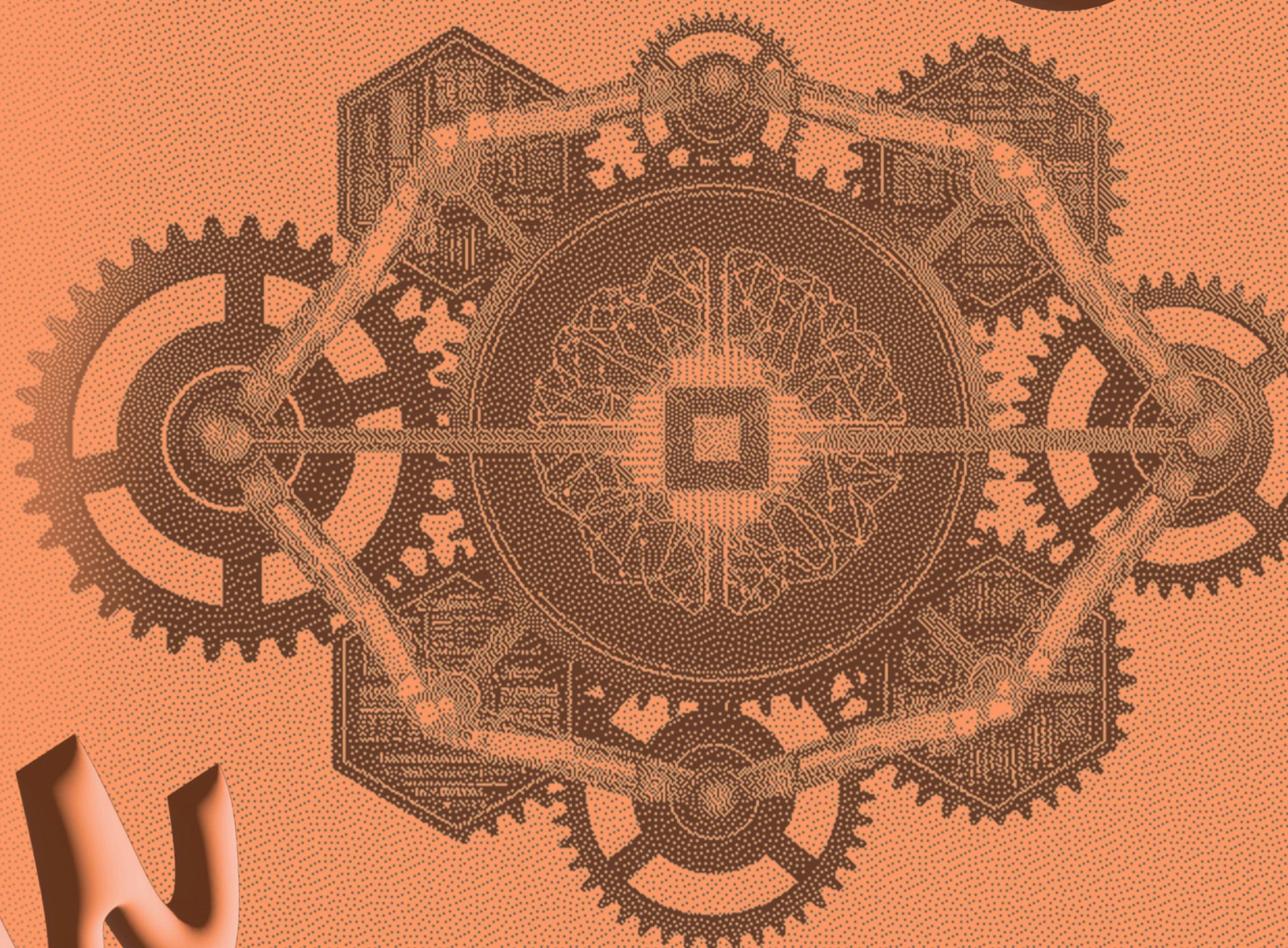
Their spot “In a World Full of Fakes, Ritual Gets Real with AI” announces its use of synthetic humans upfront, inviting audiences into the joke and reinforcing Ritual’s commitment to sharing the truth with consumers.



2.3

CREATE UTILITY

People trust technology that works for them. Whether it saves time, simplifies life, or solves a real problem, usefulness builds trust faster than hype.



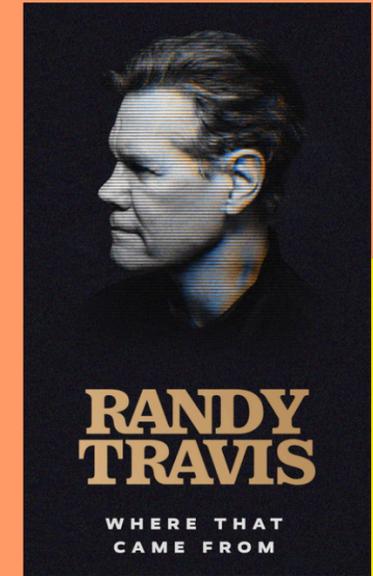
SOLVE REAL PROBLEMS

Industry professionals and consumers are not in search of AI for AI's sake. When AI is being applied, they want it to solve real challenges or create new opportunities.

Case Study: Randy Travis and Warner Music Nashville

In collaboration with **Warner Music Nashville**, country legend Randy Travis used AI to restore his voice after a stroke left him unable to sing, a project that earned the team a 2025 Webby Award.

Engineers trained models on decades of his vocal recordings to recreate his signature tone for the single “**Where That Came From**,” a project guided step-by-step by the artist himself. The result shows how AI earns trust when it helps accomplish what was once impossible.



[Learn More](#)

Case Study: SIGNS

In partnership with the American Society for Deaf Children, DEPT® and NVIDIA created **SIGNS**, a Webby Award-winning AI platform that helps the deaf and hard-of-hearing community learn American Sign Language. SIGNS uses generative AI to translate spoken language into ASL in real time, expanding access and communication for millions.



[Learn More](#)

MAKE LIFE EASIER

Technology earns trust when it does something simple and powerful: it makes life easier. In a landscape crowded with AI features and noise, people gravitate toward what saves them time or removes friction.

Utility has become a form of creativity, and the products that resonate are the ones that respect people's time and attention.

Case Study: Notion AI Assistant

AI workflow services like **Notion AI Assistant**, a 2025 Webby Award Winner, leverage this principle. Despite potential tensions around robot note-taking, the app has become a fixture in virtual meetings by automating tedious tasks like taking and summarizing meeting notes. Utility can turn skepticism into everyday behavior.



2.4

GIVE USERS AUTONOMY

***Utility builds trust by solving problems.
Autonomy takes it further by placing
people in control of the outcome.***

EMPOWER THE PEOPLE

The best applications of AI provide autonomy end-to-end, from collaborators and creatives to consumers. Give your audience the access, knowledge, and choice to control the final output.

“Autonomy is the difference between empowerment and dependency. When we don't give humans control in AI experiences, we cripple humans from making their own decisions...The moment an experience feels like something being done to users rather than for them, trust collapses.”

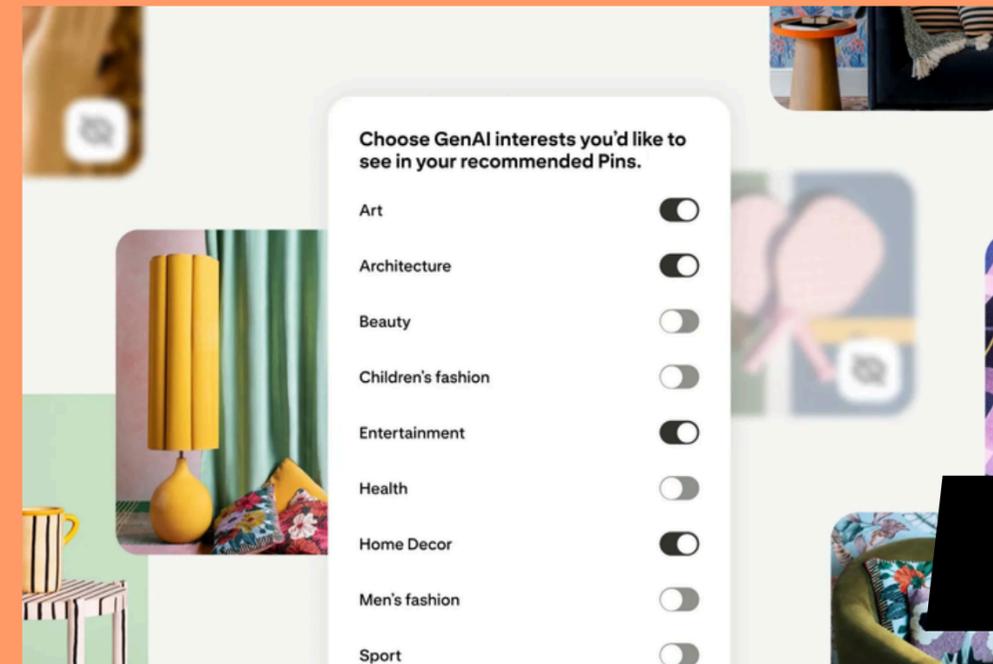
Antara Dave

Senior Product Designer (AI, Data, and Enterprise Systems)



Case Study: Pinterest Introduces Its 'AI Tuner'

Pinterest introduced a new 'tuner' to let users dial down AI-generated content in their feeds. Consumers can now choose how much Gen AI they see across categories like beauty, fashion, and home decor. The feature builds trust by enabling users to build a feed that reflects their own taste and preferences.



[**Learn More**](#)

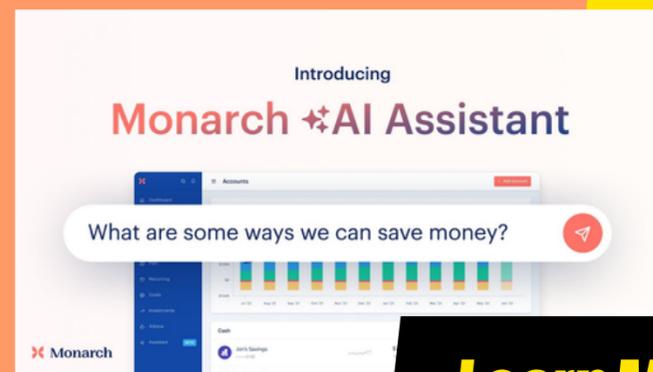
HELP THEM HELP THEMSELVES

Consider how the power of AI can be put into the hands of your audience.

It comes down to giving people agency over what matters to them. When audiences have the knowledge they need to make informed decisions, they trust in both the technology and the brand.

Case Study: Monarch AI Money Assistant

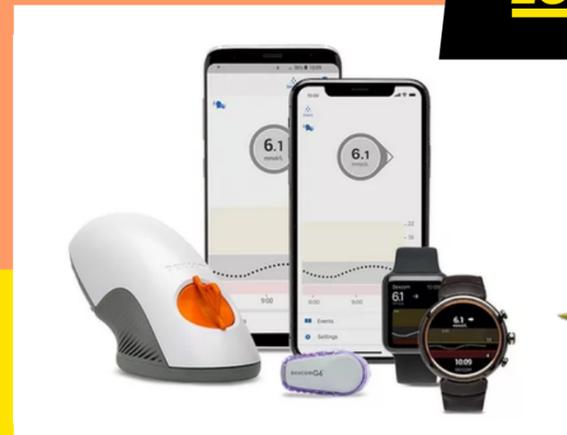
Monarch Money is a personal finance platform that recently launched an AI agent, letting users dig deeper by asking questions about their budgets and spending in plain language. It gives people more control over their financial lives.



[**Learn More**](#)

Case Study: Dexcom's Stelo Glucose Monitor

Dexcom, a glucose monitoring system manufacturer, launched Stelo in 2024 to give users real-time, personalized insights to connect lifestyle choices to their metabolic health. That level of visibility pays off.



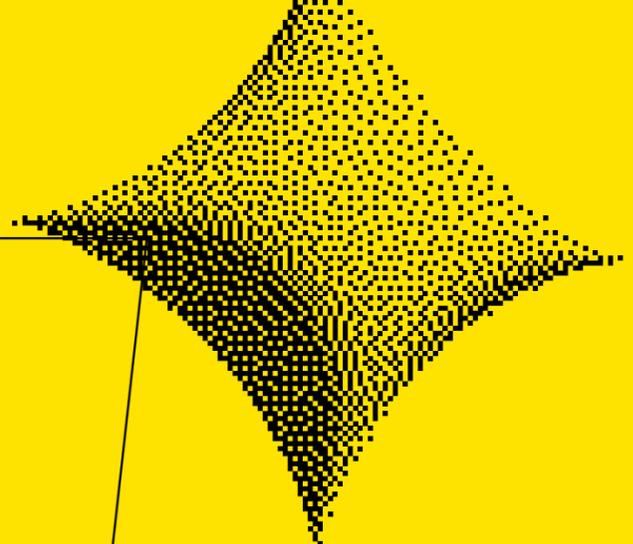
[**Learn More**](#)

CHAPTER 3

WHAT WE WANT MORE OF

Trust is the foundation of creative innovation, but it isn't the peak. What makes an execution with AI truly stand out?

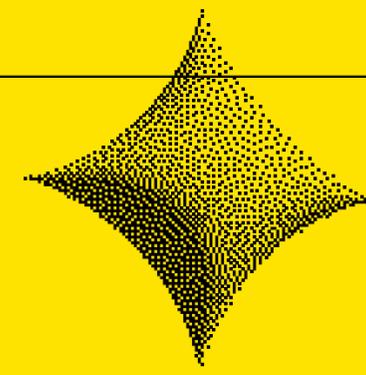
Here's what our community wants to see more of.



“An open collaboration and community-driven quality of work.”

“Fewer people pretending to be AI experts.”

“Safeguards on intellectual property, ethical usage.”



“Less model show-and-tell; more products, utilities, and participatory stories people actually use.”

MORE NET-NEW. FEWER COPIES OF A COPY

Creatives and industry leaders want AI to function as a tool, but one for realizing new possibilities—not just remixing what is already in the zeitgeist.

With many of the market’s biggest tools normalizing based on similar inputs, the creative output can suffer from sameness.

Are you experimenting or taking shortcuts to mimic what already exists? Are you cutting through or adding noise?

“The filter I use is simple: does it deepen the human signal or create more noise? The most powerful uses are when AI serves as a collaborator in meaning rather than as a substitute for it. I steer clear when it flattens nuance, erases authorship, or optimizes for engagement over understanding.”

Dr. Helen Papagiannis

Emerging Tech Pioneer and Author at Immersive Luxury



On Finding New Possibilities

“**Explorations to new creative borders.**”

“**Things we never could have done before.**”

“**To enhance strategy, analyze, interpret, or prototype ideas.**”

MORE INTENTIONALITY OVER OPTIMIZATION

Amidst an economy prioritizing scale and efficiency, creative excellence with AI looks like being more deliberate. Leaders are growing tired of AI being positioned as a reflex to improve every task, which has been linked to cognitive decline.

Instead, leaders want explorations that feel emotionally resonant and amplify the human condition.

“In the future, I think we’ll see two creative worlds: one that’s automated and optimized, and one that’s crafted and emotional. Both will exist, but only one will make people feel something, and that’s still the most important point.”

Robert Slot

Chief Innovation Officer, TBWA/Neboko

On Making Audiences Feel

“Less model show-and-tell; more products, utilities, and participatory stories people actually use.”

“I want to see creators use AI with intention and curiosity, not just efficiency.”

“I wish it were more precious. Held closer and only used thoughtfully, not as a shortcut.”

MORE PARTICIPATION

Many leaders see AI as a chance to bring participation back to the Internet. **Early social platforms felt magical because most people created and contributed.** Today, a small group makes content while many simply watch, which has drained some of the joy from being online.

AI offers a path back. Its playful and accessible tools lower the barrier to creating, inviting more people to experiment and express themselves. Leaders are looking for experiments that spark curiosity, invite more people to create, and make the Internet feel fun again.

“The medium is the message again. Playing with the medium is exciting. It feels like when we were first creating for social and mobile: new, playful, full of energy. That’s what’s next”

Jonah Peretti

Founder & CEO, BuzzFeed Inc.



On Creativity as Connection

“People create to connect. If we use these tools to strengthen connection, we will be okay.”

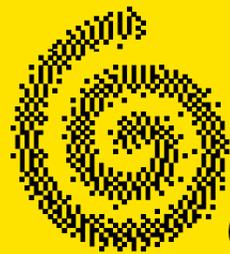
“An open collaboration and community-driven quality of work.”

“More trust in the technology, less fear towards the future, and new forms of art rising.”

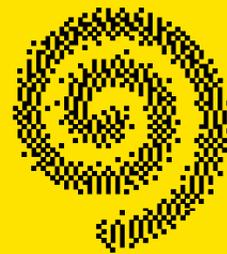
MORE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A great deal has been written about the role of regulation in AI. Still, there are no concrete answers.

For many leaders, AI innovations without ethical guardrails aren't worth using. They crave more safeguards on copyright protections, algorithmic bias, and tools that prioritize long-term impact over short-term profits.



63% of respondents cited ethical and responsible use as their top concern with AI.



On Centering Societal Impact

Paying dues to artists; there should be a receipt of all references from AI"

"Safeguards on Intellectual property, ethical usage."

"Investment in proper training for all departments, not just creative."

"More usage for showing diverse and accurate imagery."

"Easy ability to opt-out of AI content coming to you or right to be ignored by AI."

AND MORE RESISTANCE

Not everyone wants AI to be fixed. Nearly 15% of our community wants to see a **complete abandonment of it**. Attribution issues. Looming threats of job loss. The environmental and human cost. AI tools are riddled with inaccuracies. These are just a few challenges that AI has ushered in.

Some industry leaders can't see a path to building trust with AI. They are meeting the moment with healthy skepticism.

On Jumping Ship

“I hope the bubble bursts and it is abandoned.”

“Fewer people pretending to be AI experts.”

“I want to see less of it being used.”

“I hope to see AI used less in my industry.”

CONCLUSIONS: A GENERAL RUBRIC

The Trust Paradox

- We trust AI only when we use it, not when others do. Know that audiences are skeptical before tapping in.
- The AI era is unfolding when audience trust online is already at an all-time low.
- Context is key to knowing when and why it is acceptable for you to use AI.

Leverage Credibility

- Play to your strengths. Make sure your AI use extends the value you provide to your audience.

Be Transparent

- Have clear principles on what to share. Audiences dislike being tricked; disclose if it matters to them.

Create Utility

- Invest in solving real problems over hyper efficiency. Make life easier for your audience.

Give Users Autonomy

- Let your audience shape their experiences with AI through more knowledge or user controls.

The Industry Wants More

- Take it further. Listen to industry leaders on what makes for creative excellence with AI and apply it.

CONTRIBUTORS LIST

Patricia Buffa

Principal Product Marketing
Manager, Firefly GenAI,
Adobe

Antony Cousins

Vice President of Product
Management - Global Applications
& Architecture, Meltwater

Sam Duboff

Global Head of Marketing & Policy,
Music Business, Spotify

Marisa Lather

Marketing Consultant & Brand
Partner, Marketer Marisa

Dr. Helen Papagiannis

Emerging Tech Pioneer and Author,
Immersive Luxury

Robert Slot

Chief Innovation Officer,
TBWA/Neboko

Tracy Chan

CEO,
Splash Music

Antara Dave

Senior Product Designer
(AI, Data, and Enterprise Systems)

Craig Elimeliah

Chief Creative Officer,
Code and Theory

Shara Maurer

Head of Corporate Marketing,
Krisp

Jonah Peretti

Founder and CEO,
BuzzFeed Inc.

Alex Shultz

CMO & VP of Analytics, Meta

CREDITS

Jordana Jarrett

Head of Brand Strategy
The Webby Group

Nix Shizheng Ni

Lead Designer

Jesse Feister

Executive Director
The Webby Group

Nick Borenstein

General Manager
The Webby Awards

Emma Larson

Production & Experience Director

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNER

About Meltwater

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Learn more at meltwater.com.



ABOUT THE WEBBYS

The Webby Awards Is the Leading International Award Honoring Excellence on the Internet.

Established in 1996 during the Web's infancy, The Webby Awards is presented by the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences (IADAS)—a 3000+ member judging body. The Academy is comprised of Executive Members—leading Web experts, business figures, luminaries, visionaries, and creative celebrities—and Associate Members who are former Webby Winners, Nominees, and other Internet professionals.

**If You're Making Great
Work, Enter It Today**

**FINAL ENTRY DEADLINE
FRIDAY, DEC 19, 2025**

