

Agencies Are Done Only Dabbling in AI. Now Comes the Hard Part.

Agencies are racing to keep pace with the rapid evolution of generative AI, while also helping their clients do the same.

At Advertising Week New York on Wednesday, senior leaders from WPP and Assembly Global described how AI is transforming everything from workflows and media planning to creative development and team structure, ushering in what one panelist called “the most transformative technology of our lifetime.”

The session, dubbed “How Agencies Can Thrive in the Age of Generative AI,” featured Elav Horwitz, executive vice president, global head of strategic partnerships and AI solutions at WPP, and Kate Nible, vice president, client experience at Assembly Global, in conversation with Bianca Bradford, director, head of agency, North America at Meta.

To start, panelists shared their own day-to-day AI hacks, from using ChatGPT to organize personal notes to streamlining household questions. But the heart of the conversation was the agency opportunity.

“A single word answer is obviously efficiency,” said Nible. “The management of media is so time-consuming. There are so many tiny tasks from front to back. AI gives you time back ... It gives you the opportunity to think about what this data is actually saying.”

For Horwitz, the technology is both a disruption and a creative catalyst.

“Let’s be honest. I think we needed a little bit of this fire, this energy back. We all got super comfortable with traditional ways of working,” Horwitz said. “Now, the hardest part is to come up with the right idea and stand out in culture, in terms of craft and taste, because there’s so much content out there.”

From transformation to operations

The panelists emphasized that agencies are moving beyond experimentation toward operationalizing AI at scale. Nible pointed to Assembly’s Stage platform, which powers reporting and analysis across channels, helping teams identify cross-channel insights in real time.

“The biggest difference is that our larger clients are able to more naturally identify cross-channel connections and do something about them because of the wealth and breadth of information at our fingertips,” Nible said.

Horwitz noted that WPP has 70,000 employees using AI daily, with 50,000 custom agents built internally.

“The idea was: How can we actually democratize that across the organization—not only keep it to the creative or production teams?” Horwitz explained. “Suddenly, strategists can play their own AI videos and present that as a client presentation. That completely changed the way we work.”

Both agreed that technology is not the bottleneck; however, change management is.

“I don’t think technology is the problem,” Horwitz said. “It’s the change management around it—bringing people along for the ride, making them trust the process and get excited about it.”

Beyond efficiency: creativity and scale

The conversation then turned to creativity.

A case study for Make Up For Ever demonstrated how using Meta's AI background tool to swap a plain white background for a more vibrant one improved both engagement and return on ad spend, all within brand guardrails. The ease and speed of the test reflected how AI can make low-risk creative optimization both fast and meaningful.

Horwitz added that the conversation has shifted: Brands are no longer asking how to use AI for low-funnel efficiencies—they want big ideas.

"Finally, we're getting questions like: we want to use AI for big creatives as well," Horwitz said. "How do we amplify AI at scale to be part of culture?"

As agencies and clients adapt, panelists predicted major changes in team structures, workflows, and the creative process.

"The creative process hasn't changed probably since the Mad Men days," Horwitz said. "This is the first time we can finally start changing it, questioning it, making production more upstream, more agile."

Nible added that AI is creating new client expectations around digital experiences that are both emotionally resonant and algorithmically optimized, a "delicate dance" that will require close agency partnership.

And despite fears that AI will displace creativity, Horwitz argued the opposite: "Tech companies are actually hiring more designers than ever," she said. "It's the humans behind the machines. If the idea is good, if the story is good, if the craft is excellent, that's what matters."

Agencies aren't only experimenting with generative AI—they're restructuring around it. Efficiency gains are real, but the panel made clear that the real unlock lies in creativity, team design, and client collaboration.

The challenge now? Bringing clients along fast enough to keep pace.

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