2026 Predictions: Search Takes a Backseat as Brands Battle Inside AI’s Black Box

Predictions are hard, especially now: inevitably some things will look obvious or outlandish in hindsight.

I ask that you only remember the predictions I got right.

The internet will split between humans and agents, and humans will be wildly outnumbered

Two-thirds of your global website or app traffic will be bots. We’re used to marketing to humans, but increasingly agents will be making the decisions.

Brands have invested billions learning how to get great at persuading humans. But what does our industry really know about persuading LLM models? There’s a lot we need to learn. Next year we will be talking about this a lot.

Brands will start competing in AI’s black box

Once, marketers cared where algorithms ranked them on a SERP (Search Engine Results Page).

But search will be redefined in 2026, and reputation – what real people say about you on recommendation sites – will matter more than ever.

This is because the battle for online presence will shift decisively to the LLM’s latent space.

Latent space is like a map inside an AI that arranges similar ideas so they sit closer together. The AI uses those

relationships to understand patterns and generate language.

If you sell backpacks, you might believe your messaging shows that your product is among the “best backpacks for kids.” But what if the LLM doesn’t think about your brand’s messaging the way you do? What if buyers don’t see your website because the LLM decides there’s no reason for them to go there?

One or more LLMs will start an advertising business, and travel will be the first big category to advertise

ChatGPT’s Sam Altman has gone from “I kind of hate ads” in 2024 to “Okay, maybe ads don’t always suck” and “It’s something we’ll try” this year.

Why will travel be first? Because the connection between what the LLM recommends you buy and what you actually buy is very, very strong.

One of the remaining agency holding companies will be acquired or merge

We already know dentsu has lined up M&A partners to identify potential buyers for their international business. As Jay Pattisall, vp and principal analyst at Forrester put it: “Automation and AI are accelerating workforce reductions across agencies. This shift is not just about efficiency — it’s about transformation [agencies] will hasten the shift from service providers to solution purveyors.”

The top buyer KPI for creative services will shift to business outcomes

In the second half of our 2024 IAB Digital Video Ad Spend & Strategy Report, we found that business outcomes are now the top buyer KPI for media.

I predict that the same shift will happen with creative

services, too. Where once marketers bought media impressions and staff time to generate (hopefully) big ideas, they will now be buying outcomes across the board.

A long time ago, David Ogilvy wrote, “We sell — or else.” He was correct then. He will be far more correct in 2026.

A Big 5 TV network will be acquired

We are seeing this play out in real life right before our eyes. There are unmistakable market signals that giants in the Hollywood economy might be for sale if the buyer’s checkbook is big enough. If the FCC ends the merger ban among US broadcast networks, the odds of a Big 5 TV network getting acquired soars.

But in any case, you can bet that private equity firms are running the numbers right now. Valuations will be tricky: what will they do if a network’s streaming assets are now worth more than their legacy assets, including their studio? But I predict this is coming no matter what.

The most important AI advances get more invisible

Effective AI agents can accelerate business processes by as much as 50%. AI-enhanced workflows will be everywhere, with AI agents learning, adapting, and running enterprise processes in real time. Legacy tech with siloed databases will become the enemy, because you can’t run smart workflows without access to all the data.

Stricter kid’s online safety legislation will pass

In 2026 Congress will pass an updated Children’s Privacy Bill. You heard it here first.

Advertising will transform from a business of persuasion to a business of prediction

What will buyers want, when will they want it, and when is the

optimal time to present it so we shrink the gap between awareness and purchase?

That’s the big question ahead of us in 2026 and beyond.

It will be interesting to start seeing how the industry rises to the occasion.

We’ve done it before.

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The 7 Media Trends That Defined 2025

If 2024 was the year AI arrived, then 2025 was the year the media industry reorganized itself around the consequences.

Across interviews with senior executives at 10 premium publishers, the same themes surfaced repeatedly: artificial intelligence restructured workflows and revenue models, search traffic declined, events surged, creators professionalized, and commerce media continued its expansion.

While each trend touched different companies in different ways, the picture they collectively paint is a sector actively reinventing its foundation.

1. AI redefined workflows, business models, and platform relationships

AI dominated the year, not only in terms of its utility but also in how profoundly it reshaped distribution, partnerships, and strategy.

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Call for Nominations: ADWEEK Architects of Culture

ADWEEK has launched Architects of Culture, an award celebrating senior leadership across the marketing, advertising, and technology landscape who actively create environments where emerging talent can learn, thrive, and make an impact from day one.

Whether working in their company’s human resources, culture, and people departments or supporting their cultures through ERGs and in other voluntary ways, these leaders make it their mission to foster a resourceful, thoughtful workplace that serves as a launchpad for a long and successful career in advertising.

All nominees must have been in their current position for at least 12 months.

The winners will appear in ADWEEK’s March issue in print and

online.

There is no entry fee and the final deadline to submit is January 16, 2026.

Please submit your nominee using the entry form below.

If you have any questions, please contact pj.bernacki@adweek.com.

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EXCLUSIVE: Inside Fortune CEO Anastasia Nyrkovskaya’s Brief and Turbulent Reign

Last week, the financial news publisher Fortune abruptly parted ways with chief executive Anastasia Nyrkovskaya.

The departure ended a turbulent 20-month tenure marked by deepening internal strain and a governance structure that left her with limited authority, according to interviews with five people directly familiar with the company’s finances and leadership. They spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal matters.

Nyrkovskaya’s exit also came after months of mounting pressure inside the organization, as the publisher missed revenue

targets, shed staff, and struggled to regain momentum after a period of initial post-spinout stability, these people said.

Central to the turmoil was a clash with Victor Pang, a lawyer representing the company’s owner, Thai billionaire Chatchaval Jiaravanon.

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Disney Invests $1B in OpenAI, Will Bring Its Characters to Sora

Disney is bringing storytelling to uncharted territory.

The media giant announced Thursday that it will acquire a $1 billion stake in OpenAI and license its characters for Sora, OpenAI’s short-form video platform launched in September.

As part of the three-year deal, some videos made with Sora will appear on the Disney+ platform, the companies said. Sora and ChatGPT Images are set to start producing fan-inspired videos featuring Disney’s licensed characters in early 2026, the companies said. Disney said it will also team up with OpenAI to create “new products, tools, and experiences” and “deploy” ChatGPT into its workforce.

Recommended videos

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These Are The Skills Agencies Say Will Define 2026

AI is reshaping agencies at unprecedented speed, but leaders say the most important skills in 2026 and beyond will have little to do with technical mastery.

As AI adoption grows and transforms organizational needs, agencies have shed thousands of roles in 2025. Employment in advertising, PR, and related services fell for seven straight months up to July, and additional job cuts at the end of the year, from the 10,000 total jobs lost in Omnicom’s acquisition of IPG to Dentsu’s planned 3,400 layoffs in December, leaves a flood of talent competing for a reduced number of open roles.

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Five Memorable Logo Revamps of 2025 and Why They Worked (or Didn’t)

There was a time when most people wouldn’t even notice that a brand had updated its logo. Over the summer, it became clear that those days are now over.

On August 19, Cracker Barrel revealed it had revamped its logo for the first time since 1977—and America lost its mind.

There’s a lesson for all companies in Cracker Barrel’s story: Consumers not only have strong feelings about brands, but logos are where those feelings coalesce.

Brand managers are well aware of the public’s increased scrutiny, according to Daniel Andersson, chief creative officer of FutureBrand, which has helped shape the visual identities of American Airlines, Bentley, and Sanpellegrino, among others.

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Stic Raises $10 Million to

Put OOH Advertising in the Driver’s Seat

Stic, the startup that pays gig drivers to turn their cars into mobile billboards, has raised $10 million in a bridge round led by Accretion Capital and entrepreneurs including Phil Hellmuth, Adam Waheed, and Chris Detert. The funding brings Stic’s valuation to $200 million and will fuel expansion across 30 U.S. states and Canada over the next year.

Founded in 2023, Stic lets drivers download the app for free, upload a photo of their car and license, and receive a branded “smart sticker” that activates once applied. Drivers earn 14 cents per mile for every mile driven, with extra bonuses for high-mileage activity, the company’s 22-year-old founder and CEO, Adam Cohen, told ADWEEK.

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Ammunition Taps Radish Cofounder To Lead Overseas Expansion

Atlanta-based independent agency Ammunition is launching its first international office in London as it grows its client roster on both sides of the Atlantic.

The new outpost will be led by former Radish cofounder Renaye Edwards as global COO and managing director, Europe. Edwards spent more than a decade as managing director of the London agency she launched in 2013 and has led creative and account-based marketing programs across Europe for years.

Ammunition CEO Jeremy Heilpern said the decision to open doors in London was driven by rising demand from multinational brands seeking support across markets.

In January, the agency was approached by its client Georgia-Pacific about supporting the company's building products division across Europe.

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Napster's AI Reboot Aims to Transform Paint Buying

This post was created in partnership with Napster

Did anyone have a former music company partnering with a paint

company as part of the AI revolution on their 2026 bingo cards?

To be fair, this isn't exactly the Napster that was synonymous with digital music in the early 2000s. Napster was acquired by AI company Infinite Reality in March 2025, which assumed the Napster name.

The new Napster has teamed with Comex (PPG) Group, the second largest paint manufacturer and distributor in North America, to revamp the way customers buy paint with the introduction of an AI companion named "Sofia" to its websites and brick-and-mortar stores.

Sofia interacts like any human representative would, offering suggestions and feedback on creative paint ideas and color theory. She can also "look" at a photo of a space and, depending on the light and furniture, recommend ideal colors.

"This technology represents a big leap beyond traditional chatbots," said Ati Serpoushan, svp of partnerships at Napster. "These agents remember you, adapting to your preferences, intent, and mood over time."

Because of this personalization, Comex saw an opportunity to help customers. Gone are the days of taping swatches to a wall or painting a few strokes to get a vibe.

"Our omnichannel strategy is based on the customer experience being fluid," said Comex's head of omnichannel Danielle Rios. "The paint decision is kind of overwhelming because they don't know about surface, they don't know about materials."

Using AI to compliment the human experience

Rios made it clear that Sofia isn't meant to replace a customer's interaction with Comex's in-store human representatives. At home, a customer can use the app to zero in on paint choices, but once they go to the store, a Comex

specialist with lived experience can offer that personal touch. In fact, Sofia has been trained in all the technical details of Comex's materials and Rios wants the store employees to feel supported by Sofia.

"Our store managers can feel backed up [by Sofia]," Rios said. "She will be helping everyone 24/7 and if the managers need extra help, they can count on it."

Marketing Sofia to a diverse customer base

Comex CMO Claudia Contreras noted the challenge of marketing new technology to Comex's diverse customer base, which includes people of all ages as well as careers, like professional painters, DIYers, and hobbyists. She had a guiding light when developing Sofia with Napster. "We're looking for ways to reach our consumers in a better way and it's all about inspiring. If you cannot inspire people, they won't want to touch paint," Contreras said. "So, we're switching the brand to be more sentiment-oriented, much more inspirational."

Working with Napster

As tech companies pair up with traditionally analog companies, aligned values and communication are important and Napster and Comex have found success. "From the beginning I noticed it would be a successful partnership because great people work at Napster and they are very human and very understanding," Rios added. "They thought about the consumer from the beginning. I said this has to be customer-centric, it can't be business-centric."

At Napster, Serpoushan recalls taking the time to understand Comex's unique customer base and extensive product catalog. "Comex provided Napster with their company vision and aspiration guidebook to inform the Napster platform," she said. "This enabled Napster to replicate these values in an

AI-blended setting, making for a seamless transition for Comex customers using AI and those interacting with human sales associates in-store.”

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