

# The Future of Marketing Still Requires The Human Touch



*Michelle Thomas, Director of Insight Strategy and Application, [Elicit](#)*

It's that time of year again. A time where we declare 2017 as "the year of" whatever big idea dominated the [marketing](#) airwaves over the past 12 months. While that's subject to debate, I would suggest this: what we witnessed in 2017 was the actualization of "people-based marketing," that is, using data and technology to reach real people.

As we forecast out, it's clear to me that this strategy will continue to influence the direction of some of the year's most significant marketing trends, such as personalization, marketing automation, and artificial intelligence.

2018 will be the year that people-based marketing transforms, where Marketing is replaced by Experience, providing a more holistic view into the relationships created between brands and consumers. The focus will shift from simply using data to inform action to using the combination of insight and brand purpose to drive meaningful relationships, value, and utility for the consumer.

Technology will play a critical role in this transformation, underpinning any effort to innovate the consumer experience and ultimately acting as a source of competitive differentiation. What can we expect?

## **AI Becomes an Art**

Artificial intelligence (AI) today is what “big data” was five years ago: the industry is talking about it but most companies don’t really understand what it means yet or how it pertains to their businesses. While AI seems destined to make our world more efficient and provide increased utility in our everyday lives, it is also widely viewed as a threat to workers and jobs. But, as the big data revolution produced new roles (e.g., data scientist) and demanded new skillsets, so too will the AI movement. As the technology and algorithms continue to advance, the focus will shift to the people side of AI to provide more clarity around its meaning and practical applications. The results and insights coming out of AI will need to be interpreted, and integrating the human element is what will set apart the companies that successfully merge the art and science of AI.

## **Personalization Grows Up**

Personalization isn’t going away; it’s growing up and entering the next stage of evolution: “humanization.” More sophisticated marketers will move beyond calling out customers’ names in emails and relying on automated birthday reminders and shift to building real human connections through more immersive experiences that truly focus on delivering a brand’s value proposition. Truly understanding and executing on a customer’s need state (e.g., a combination of behavioral data and attitudinal drivers) is the ultimate application of “big data.” What does this look like? Here’s a personal example: my husband and I share a love of Shakeology, a drinkable nutritional supplement. I drink Shakeology as a meal replacement while my husband primarily drinks it post-workout to refuel his body (two different usage occasions). Our usage and needs are different but attitudinally we share a desire for healthy food alternative. Imagine if the communications that I received from Shakeology actually tailored content to how I used the product? That would certainly feel more

meaningful than just seeing my first name in an email.

## **Hybrid Roles Are Increasingly In Demand**

We'll see a growing need for interpreters, the people who can translate between business, technology, and analytics. Marketers will need to be strategists, but they'll also need to understand technology infrastructure as the enabler of customer engagement, as well as interpret various data sets like an analyst. The most successful data scientists will understand technology, programming, and be able to apply insight to business strategy. And technologists will evolve beyond engineering and programming to become more strategic, with roles emerging in the form of AI strategists and data strategists. In fact, a machine won't steal your job; it's the hybrid performer that will.

## **MarTech Reaches A Tipping Point?**

Every year, the MarTech landscape sees continued growth in the types of solutions and number of providers. There were over 5,000 vendors jostling for space in the crowded MarTech landscape in 2017. Quite frankly, there are too many solutions with very little competitive differentiation to even have this make sense! Every marketer seeks better customer engagement, and thousands of providers now claim that their technology is the key to achieving just that. As a former client-side marketer who bought solutions and now in a position of recommending solutions to clients, I believe it's our duty to consolidate the landscape to make it less overwhelming for CMOs and CMTOs. This may not qualify as a prediction, but it's most certainly a holiday wish!