CMOTALK - WHITEPAPER 2025

DNA DRIVEN INNOVATION

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PREFACE

We did not start this project with the intention of writing a paper. We started from a sense of curiosity: everyone recognizes that innovation is a critically important part of marketing. Yet, at the same time, we see how CMOs and their teams struggle to truly get innovation off the ground to find the space, funding and resources to take the necessary steps forward.

In the world of digital applications and AI, progress continues at a reasonable pace. But in the realm of physical products and services, innovation at times seems to stall with all the negative consequences that follow. Somewhat puzzled by this observation, we decided to speak with six CMOs from leading companies about this topic. Without a fixed or overly formal agenda, our aim was to gain a clearer picture of how their organizations - and they themselves - approach innovation. Already in our first conversation, the subject began to take shape through the realization that innovation does not always require large, disruptive moves. A series of smaller, well-aligned steps, consistent with the DNA of the brand, can lead to significant improvements in customer experience. "DNA-Driven Innovation" turned out to be a common thread throughout all our discussions, and in this paper, we chose to explore that theme in greater depth.

The second major insight that emerged from our conversations was that CMOs should play a leading role in innovation. They are the "owners" of the customer, and our discipline is grounded in the principle of putting the customer at the center of everything we create and renew. Starting from the customer perspective uniquely positions the CMO to lead innovation, while the ability to collaborate, both within and beyond the organization, is an indispensable skill. We have enriched the conversations with a more structured framework: a way of working that can help organize and strengthen the innovation process. Evidently, we also reflected on how people and technology can work together to become stronger drivers of innovation across products, services, and digital applications. We are fully aware that without the input of the CMOs from our community, this paper would not have achieved the same level of depth and relevance. We are therefore sincerely grateful to Fiona Vanderbroeck, Jack van de Vliert, Bas Komen, Rozemarijn Koppenaal, Fleur Osté, and Bob Timmerman for their valuable and rich contributions during the conversations. Your input made clear to us that we had to write this paper. And we truly hope that we reflected your opinions well. Thank you!

Alfred Levi & Tim van der Galiën

November 2025

THE STATE OF MARKETING INNOVATION

INTRODUCTION
MARKETING IN TODAY'S WORLD

We live in an era where the world presents CMOs with new applications and challenges at an accelerating pace each year. This goes beyond incremental innovation; it fundamentally affects the very essence of the marketing profession. The internet, digitalization, social media, and more recently AI have profoundly changed the way businesses and brands relate to their audiences. Maintaining meaningful contact, winning customers' hearts in a more lasting way, and giving genuine meaning to one's brand and propositions have increasingly become challenges that many marketers struggle to master.

Only a few years ago, it felt that we were entering a new chapter in marketing,
one where success is not only measured by what is sold, but by the meaning created by brands. Experiences becoming a true currency, shaping how people connect with brands and how brands live within culture.
Only a year later, this key development has been overshadowed by all that AI can change in the role and content of marketing.
With huge impact on the contents of our marketing profession. We call out five worrisome developments.

Loyalty is at a lower level than ever

Marketers over-emphasize the short-term gains and availability of their brands/ products. They tend to shift budgets from longer term brand building programs to short-term revenue drivers. There are only a limited number of examples where marketers successfully apply the rules of "the long and the short of it".[1]

Brands lose impact and are becoming less powerful

Companies increasingly choose to exploit the existing brand equity at the expense of brand relevance, innovation and customer bonding. We see the quality gap between A-brands and private label brands getting smaller, whilst pricing is exceeding value limits.
As a result, premium brands lose market share rapidly, bringing them in a negative vicious circle. Clearly, the latest years of high inflation do not help.

The core meaning of marketing gets lost

We believe the purpose of marketing is to generate demand, build loyalty through brands and create an emotional bonding between customer and brand. In an effort to deal with almost unlimited competition, marketers see short-term interventions as the leading approach to stay alive. Opening the way for others who can do the same, often at lower cost.

Marketing budgets are very much restricted

Short-term focus and profit pressure are key reasons why this is happening throughout the year. However, far more is happening. Long-term brand building and growth require marketing investments at the front end with all uncertainties related to it. CEOs and CFOs often seek for more immediate pay out and don't accept the historical years for pay out anymore. As a result, marketers struggle to prove the value of long-term brand equity.

Innovation spending appears at the bottom of the list

Driven by a comparable lack of investment certainty, fundamental forms of innovation disappear easily from the marketing long list. On top, AI is absorbing so much of the remaining innovation budget, that straight-forward product and services innovation can only happen on a very incremental basis. As a result, truly innovative products hardly hit the market and – if it happens – get ample time from external (retail) and internal (CFO, CEO) stakeholders to prove their value.
In this paper, we will focus on the last-mentioned topic: innovation. We propose a structural shift in how brands can create value with innovation and connect better with customers and consumers. They do expect brands to respond and anticipate to their needs. And even more important, they expect brands to be clear in what they offer. Meeting that standard requires more than refining campaigns. It calls for a fundamental redesign of how innovation, as a crucial part of marketing, operates.

So, innovation is the focus. Positioned at the convergence of customer insight, brand ambition, and technological possibility, marketing sees what people want, what the brand stands for, and what the business can build. We will cover it all. To stay ahead, brands must innovate, not occasionally, but continuously. As CMO it is key not to see innovation as a side project, but the engine that keeps brands meaningful in a world where expectations move faster than ever. The question for marketing leaders no longer is when or if your organization needs change, but how fast you can adapt and are able to build capability to turn insight into impact, again and again. In this paper, we invite you to rethink the role of innovation in marketing and explore what it takes to make it happen sustainably. We also invite you to rethink what marketing would be without strong innovation and explore what it takes to make this happen in a sustainable way.

SOME KEY PRINCIPLES OF INNOVATION

WHY SHOULD WE INNOVATE?

In our view, innovation is not optional - it is existential. In a marketplace defined by hyper-competition, rapid technological change, and shifting consumer expectations, brands that fail to innovate risk business loss. According to Clayton Christensen's **Theory of Disruptive Innovation**[2], brands are most vulnerable when they rely solely on existing models and neglect emerging customer needs or technologies. For marketers, innovation is not only about developing new products or campaigns; it is about continually redefining relevance.

From a strategic perspective, innovation serves three essential purposes: sustaining growth, deepening customer relationships, and future-proofing the brand. Growth emerges from finding new value propositions, other markets, or unknown, relevant experiences. Customer relationships develop as brands leverage innovation to create greater emotional and functional bonding. And future-proofing stems from embedding adaptability and experimentation into the brand's DNA (to be explored extensively in the next chapter).

In our qualitative research with leading CMOs we often heard "It's not whether you have to innovate, it's about how fast you can do it". It's not only about finding new relevancy between brand and customer anymore. You need to go back to your roots and find authenticity in how you do it as well.

Perspective from the receiving party

For customers or consumers, innovation represents progress, empowerment, and emotional connection. In a world full of choice, consumers tend to build preference for brands that help them achieve goals more easily, express identity more authentically, or experience life more meaningfully. From a marketing perspective, innovation satisfies not only functional needs but also psychological and symbolic ones; what Abraham Maslow described as the higher tiers of self-expression and fulfillment. Customers embrace innovations that make them feel competent, connected, and valued. Thus, innovation becomes a mechanism for building deeper emotional equity.

Moreover, innovation signals that a brand listens and responds to its audience. Each new product, service, or experience is a promise - a proof that the brand understands changing expectations. When executed with passion and authenticity, innovation strengthens trust and loyalty at the receiver's end, transforming (trans)actions into relationships. In this sense, innovation is not merely a driver of market differentiation; it is a form of ongoing dialogue with the customer. An invitation to co-create the future together.

SIX KEY EFFECTIVITY PRINCIPLES TO FOLLOW

What makes innovation a potentially effective process?

Without trying to be complete, we provide **six key effectivity principles** to follow. In Chapter 4 we will extend the "how to innovate" approach further, though for completeness below a short list of "must do" steps as a foundation of effective marketing-led innovation.

Why and how should CMOs lead innovation?

CMOs and their marketing teams operate at the intersection of business strategy, consumer insight, and cultural change. Being responsible for business growth through providing customers what they want, need and value. While R&D or product teams may create innovations in technology or functionality, marketers translate them into human relevance. Marketers, more than any other discipline, understand the why behind consumer behavior. The latent desires, emotional triggers, and social signals that drive adoption. CMOs need to make sure they act this way and be fundamental in their approach to innovation.

By leading innovation, marketers ensure that the process begins with empathy rather than engineering. They bring an outward-facing focus that connects the organization to beyond market and customer expectation. This role is increasingly critical in the age of data-driven personalization and AI, where the ability to truly understand and interpret human context is a competitive advantage. In practice, this means that marketers are architects of innovation, shaping where to play, how to win, and how to sustain differentiation over time. They guide the innovation process according to these principles.

DNA-DRIVEN INNOVATION

Every strong brand is built on a distinctive DNA; the enduring set of values, purpose, and personality traits that define its essence. Often, this essence goes back to the true history of the brand and its founders. The DNA serves as the strategic compass that guides how a brand evolves while remaining authentic. In this chapter we will explore how DNA can guide the CMO during the innovation process and guarantee an outcome that will find a strong foundation in the full organization.

In the context of innovation, it provides both **freedom and focus**: freedom to explore new territories and focus to ensure that every new idea reinforces the brand's core meaning. Without such an anchor, innovation risks becoming fragmented or opportunistic. When brand DNA is clearly articulated and embedded in the innovation process, it develops into a guiding aid and even decision filter. Helping marketers to determine which innovations enhance the brand's promise and which dilute it.

> *Our conversations with leading CMOs revealed a clear pattern: the innovations that endure and have the biggest chance of success are those that grow from the brand's DNA; its identity, values, and reason for being.*

When innovation is grounded in DNA, it does more than create new products. It strengthens customer trust, deepens loyalty, and builds competitive advantage that competitors cannot easily copy. A key quote: "The most impactful innovations are rooted in a company's brand DNA - not just in the outcome, but also in the path to them."

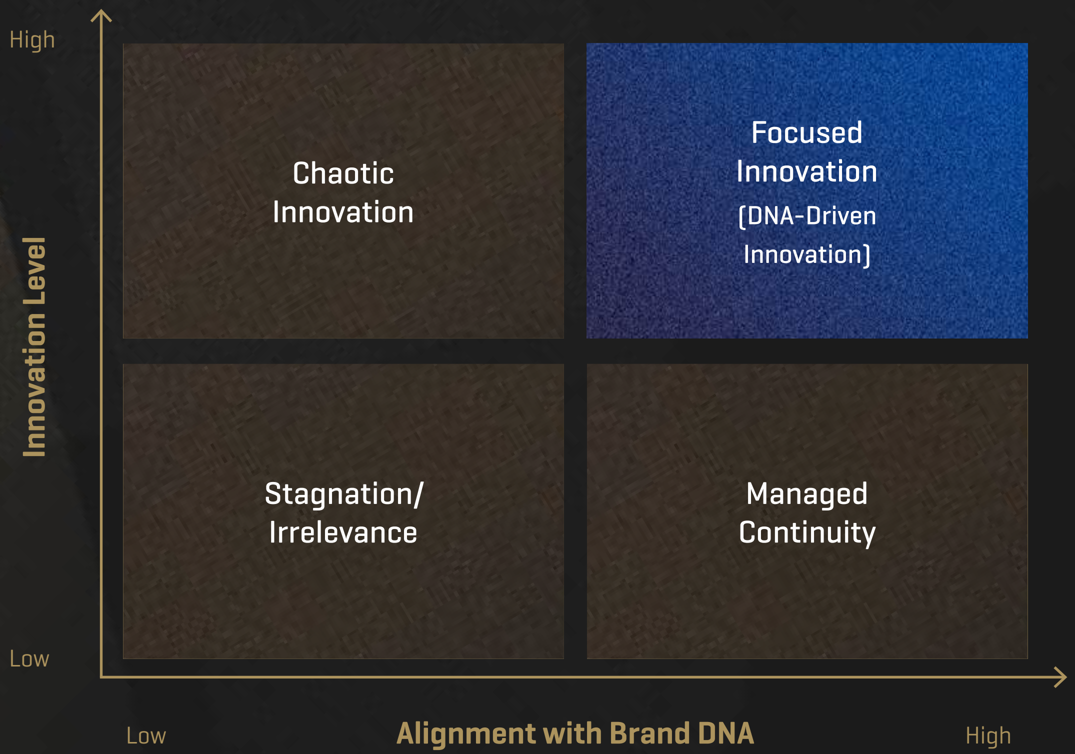
This is supported by work of the Danish professor Nicky Nedergaard[3]. He states that the (corporate) brand is treated as a strategic logic and resource that helps structure innovation processes. Although not giving a single percentage, the study argues that brand identity helps coordinate resources, guide decision heuristics, and embed innovation in a brand-compatible manner, thereby improving implementation success rates. We have assumed that DNA is an even stronger identity representation of the company and will guide the innovation work even better.

Another study by Crass et al.[4] examined how using a (strong) brand (versus launching new products without leveraging a brand) affects innovation performance. They found that product innovations introduced under established and well-defined brands yield about 24 % higher sales compared to ones without brand leverage. In the same study, they also demonstrate that companies with a strong brand (DNA) are more likely to continue introducing subsequent innovations (i.e. a strong brand strategy correlates with sustained innovation).

Finally, a Malaysian empirical investigation by Sinha[5] shows that product innovation is significantly and positively associated with brand equity, including dimensions such as brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand image, and brand leadership. Similarly, another paper on innovation strategy in product categories (in the International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology) finds that innovation has a positive effect on brand resonance and thus indirectly on overall brand strength.

So, there is ample proof that innovation led by (brand) DNA is a strong concept to pursue. We have taken it as the core of our 'DNA-Driven

Figure 1:
Boxing innovation in an effectiveness model



Innovation Model', where all modes of innovation are infused by the brand DNA, serving as guide and direction.

Rozemarijn Koppenaal, Executive Director Marketing at Rituals, explains how innovation is truly rooted in the company: "In the heart of our Brand DNA, we give back 10% of our net profits to the well-being of people and planet. That drives innovation to a large extent. The DNA is in the core of our innovation. It's not just in the product, but in the business model – it is one big innovation."

Closing this section, we would like to share a simple model to summarize the above. Along the axes of 'innovation level' and 'alignment with brand DNA', we have created four boxes to help define where innovation is placed in your company **(see figure 1)**.

Stagnation/Irrelevance

Lack of brand innovation, no connection with customer and/or market expectation. Relates to a low level of innovation intensity and low level of DNA alignment. Not the place to be.

Managed Continuity

DNA and brand are a consistent and guiding part of innovation, though the intrinsic level of innovation is at the low side. Make more resources available to innovate to avoid a risk of brand "wear out" or commoditization in the market.

Chaotic Innovation

Sufficient and often creative innovation, but not DNA related. We see many new ideas hit the market, but at a low degree of success. Recommendation is to make innovation a mere extension of the brand DNA.

Focused Innovation

The place to be. Innovation strengthens brand essence, relevance and distinctiveness. Leads to higher adoption of new products/ services and encourages further innovation. Companies acting in this upper right corner of the model have found their holy grail of innovation and stay there.

“EVERY SIX MONTHS, IT FEELS LIKE WE WORK IN A NEW COMPANY”

That’s how Rozemarijn Koppenaal, Executive Director Marketing of Rituals, describes the brand’s rhythm of constant renewal. “About 25% of our assortment renews every year. That’s enormous. And we still open roughly one new store each working day.”

For Rituals, innovation is not just about products, but about how the brand creates well-being. “We divide innovation into three areas: product, content, and service. Service is especially important, it’s how we go a bit further than customers expect.” One example is the Mind Oasis, an immersive relaxation experience that mirrors the brand’s philosophy of slowing down and living mindfully.

That same mindset led to one of Rituals’ most distinctive innovations: the car fragrance. “No customer ever asked us for it", Rozemarijn recalls, “but we saw the car as one of the everyday places where you can truly be yourself. That insight became the starting point for a completely new category.”

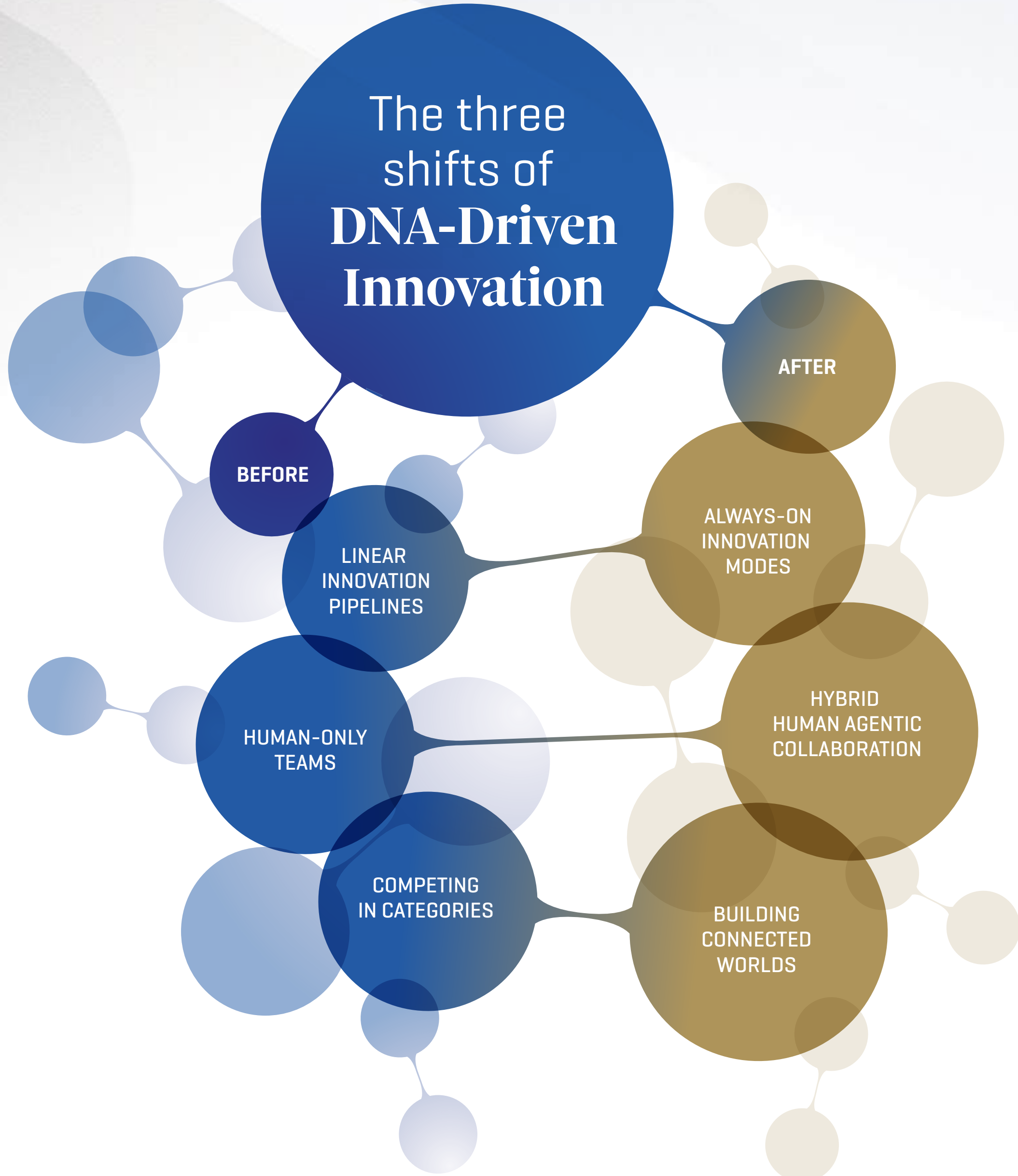
Behind that mindset also lies a disciplined process. “We start small and scale what works", she explains. “We try many things that you’ll never see. Little experiments that teach us what resonates.” And with so much growth and ambition, focus becomes crucial: “Making choices always comes with pain. If it doesn’t hurt, it’s probably not a real choice.” Innovation is always-on at Rituals.

HOW TO DRIVE DNA-DRIVEN INNOVATION

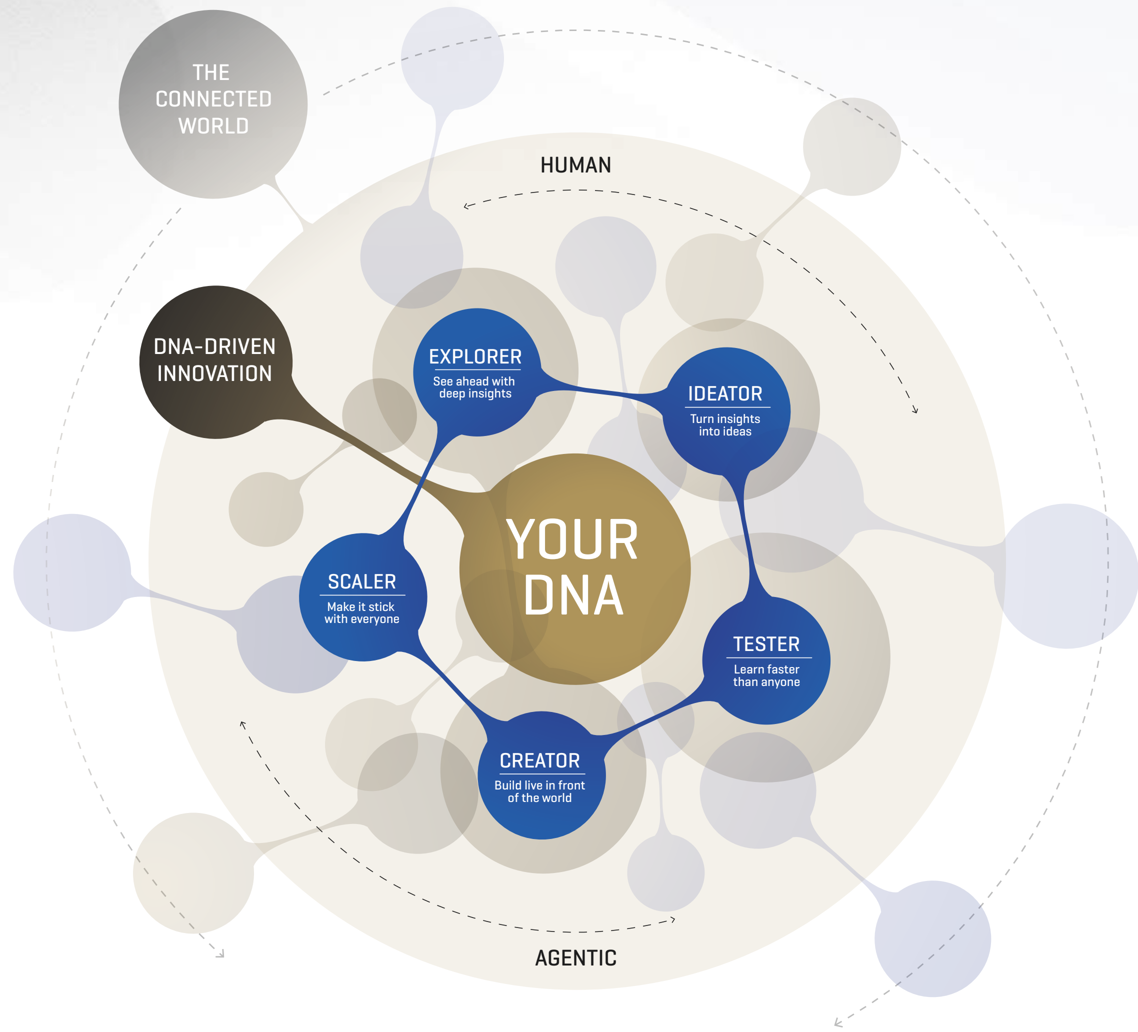
In this chapter we will move from the why to the how to drive DNA-Driven Innovation. We recognized and learned from the interviewed CMOs that each company has its own methods. Therefore, we present a solid approach and valuable guidance. However, driving DNA-based innovation begins with a mindset shift, not a process. It requires viewing innovation as an expression of the brand's essence, not a departure from it. Mentally, marketers must start by deeply reconnecting with the brand's core DNA - its purpose, values, and personality - and reframe innovation as a means of keeping that DNA alive in new contexts.

This demands strategic empathy:

Understanding both what the brand stands for and how consumers' evolving needs match with that identity. The right mental posture combines curiosity with constraint, embracing exploration while filtering ideas through the brand's authentic voice. CMOs should cultivate a culture where teams ask, "Does this idea amplify who we are?" rather than "What's new?". With that in mind, we now introduce three shifts that guide us in practice of DNA-Driven Innovation: **[1] From linear to always-on innovation modes; [2] From human-based working to the hybrid innovation organization; and [3] From category to world building.**



INTRODUCING OUR MODEL FOR DNA-DRIVEN INNOVATION



FROM LINEAR TO ALWAYS-ON INNOVATION MODES

We are leaving behind a period of pilots and innovation labs that were born by the linearity of bringing new ideas to market. Operated in isolation and with many staged gates before go-live. Yet now we see leading CMOs take a different tour: they don't wait for ideas to be tested before they think about creation. They turn linearity into always-on innovation, making it almost part of the daily marketing job. The result may be more incremental and less breakthrough, but it is a proven successful route to come to a range of relevant improvements bringing these in far more speed to market at a lower risk and costs:
"In the past, we could take four years to bring an ice cream innovation to market. Today we do it in four months", Fleur Osté, CMO at The Magnum Ice Cream Company mentioned. "If we don't, someone else will. So, we better move fast, take some smaller risks and measure success as we go." We identify five different always-on modes:

1. Explorer Mode

See ahead with deep insights and foresight

In this mode, marketing teams need to constantly innovate to sense weak signals and connect the dots in such a way that they get foresight before competition does. In the age of AI, the availability of deep and undiscovered insights and foresight is a true competitive advantage. To get ahead in Explorer mode you need to learn to look through three different lenses:

Analytical lens – Proactively generate and detect signals that form patterns or possible trajectories. AI and big data analysis is a "must do", but don't stop gathering the facts and discuss what they mean for innovation.

Speculative lens – Empower marketing teams to push themselves to ask the right "what if" questions and future cast the next. In the form of regular team brainstorming, external inspiration and competitive analysis.

Systems lens – Set up your technology to reveal interdependencies, feedback loops, and emergent behaviors that connects with your innovation ecosystem. Get connected across the globe, understand the vital dependencies and see how consumers react to ideas in a broader context. Try to collectively understand how your brand operates in a bigger scheme and where innovation may strengthen its position.

A good question to ask is how to organize the Explorer mode. You don't want the full marketing team to look through lenses all the time, but at the same time you don't want to leave this alone to your market and consumer research team only. Find a proper balance, where specialists gather the information, but at the same time regularly connect their key insights and learnings with the full team and discuss what you see.

Being strong in the explorer mode means being ahead with insights and foresight that is relevant for your customers and unknown or not acted upon by your competition. Yet being excellent in Explorer mode, is when DNA is fully infused in how you do it. Jack van de Vliert, CMO at Efteling shares: "At Efteling, it's about turning very ordinary moments into something special. Even a simple gesture- like offering an umbrella when it rains - is part of our innovation: noticing small signals and turning them into incredible moments."

> "OUR INNOVATION IS IN THE ART OF GIVING A SENSE OF WONDER TO OUR GUESTS. THIS IS FULLY AND TRULY EMBEDDED IN THE EFTELING DNA ..."

...says Jack van de Vliert, CMO of Efteling, the leading theme park resort in the Netherlands. For him and the organization, innovation is a kind of self-evidence. Since the launch of Efteling in 1952, innovation has been embedded in the organization's DNA, not as a separate function but as a guiding principle across all departments: "Innovation is not solely the responsibility of marketing, you need the entire organization from A to Z for your customer journey."

The art of giving a sense of wonder is truly embedded in Efteling's innovation DNA. For all the different Innovation modes - from exploration to scaling - the full team of Efteling and the customers are involved in the process. A nice example is 'Danse Macabre'. "We closed the beloved Spookslot, which saddened many of our fans seeing such an iconic ride go", says Jack. It prompted the team to rethink how to communicate with this huge fan base.

"We ran a campaign for two years around a single attraction", he continues. "This time, marketing started from the story. It became a serialized narrative told across touchpoints: behind-the-scenes videos, character teasers, influencer content, even live coverage of the demolition and rebuild. When Danse Macabre finally opened, people queued for five hours just to be part of the story."

Jack van de Vliert

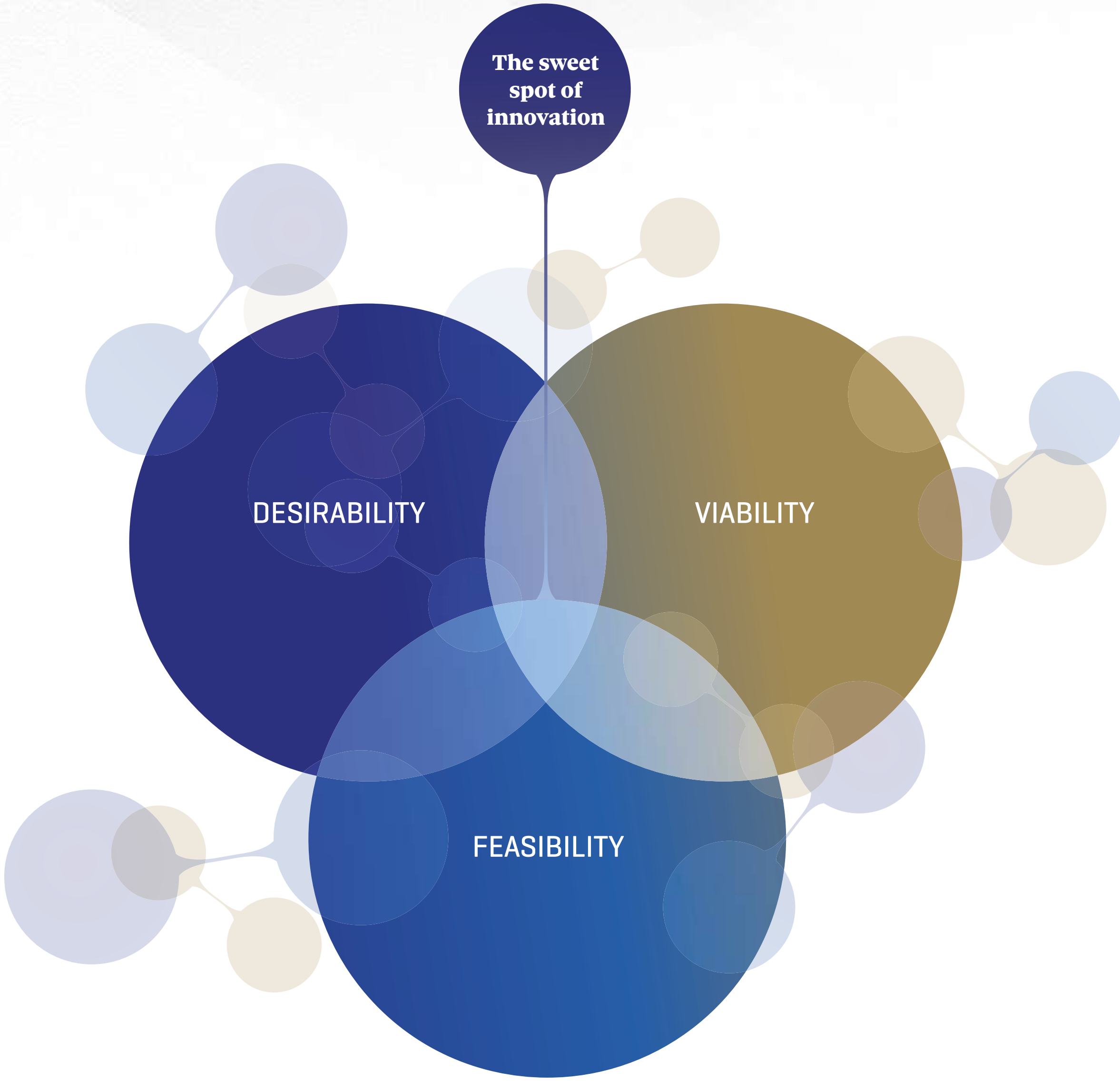
Efteling

2. Ideator Mode
Turn your insights into ideas

After collecting breakthrough consumer insights in an innovation trajectory, the challenge lies in translating these findings into actionable ideas. Insights represent deep, often latent human needs or tensions that reveal "why" people behave as they do. To move from insight to ideation, we must first reframe the insights into opportunity areas. This involves turning the underlying human truth into a creative springboard; articulating it as a "How Might We" question that invites divergent thinking. For example, an insight about consumers seeking control in an uncertain world can be reframed as: "How might we empower consumers to feel more in control of their choices?" This translation ensures ideation remains grounded in real human motivation rather than abstract trends or assumptions.

In the ideation phase itself, structured creativity techniques help teams explore the full potential of the insight. Methods such as design thinking workshops, guided brainstorming, or picturing tools may be used. Cross-functional teams - including marketers, designers, and engineers - should co-create concepts, combining emotional resonance (from insights) with technical feasibility.

Finally, the translation of insights into ideas benefits from an iterative process. Early concepts should be evaluated against three innovation criteria: **desirability (consumer value), feasibility (technical viability), and viability (business potential).** This evidence-based process ensures that ideation not only produces creative concepts but also meaningful innovation pathways.



> "IF WE TAKE ICE-CREAM TO GO INTO COMPETITION WITH ANY OTHER REGULAR SNACK, WE DEMAND FROM OURSELVES TO INNOVATE EVERYTHING FROM PRODUCT TO EVEN WHERE YOU CAN FIND IT IN THE GROCERY STORE"

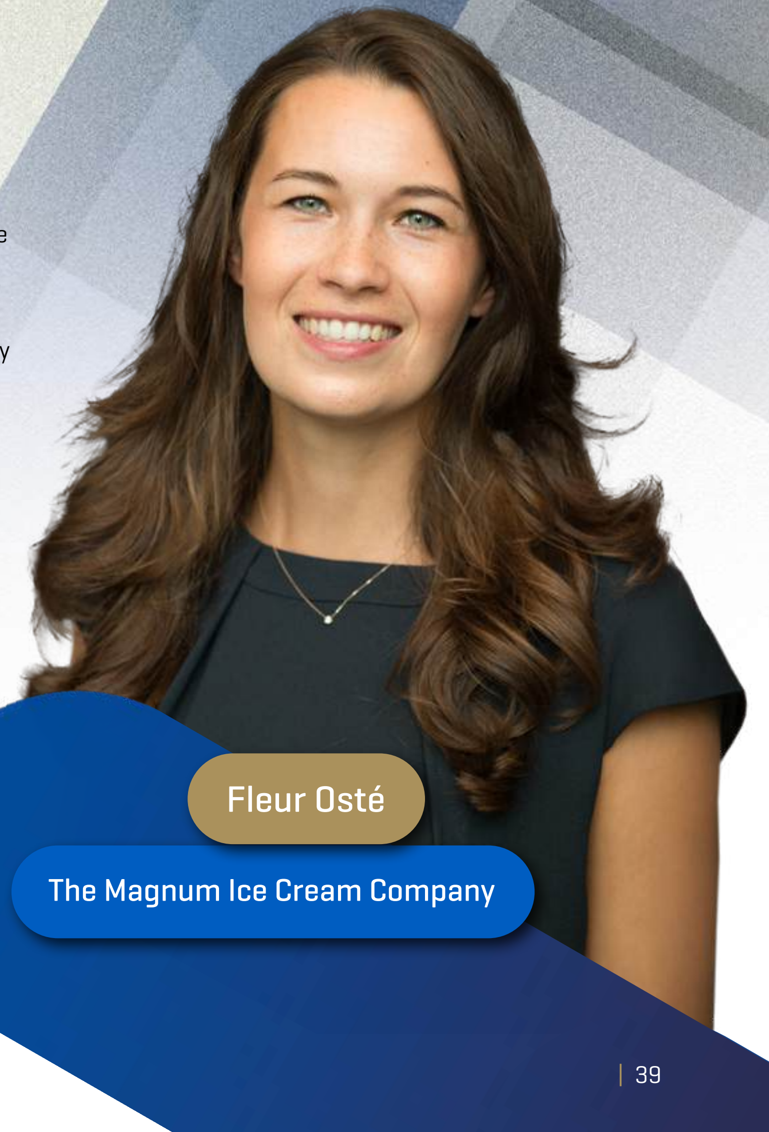
"What kind of brand are you?" is the first question asked before any new idea takes shape. The innovation approach does not start in the lab; it is rooted in co-creation, cultural relevance, and above all: speed. "Fast, fast, fast", says Fleur Osté, CMO of The Magnum Ice Cream Company (TMICC). Pioneer and innovate like an entrepreneur.

Where product cycles once took four years, TMICC now launches in just four months. This shift reflects a broader change: "ice cream is no longer just a dessert; it is part of snacking culture. TikTok taste tests and influencer buzz drive instant demand, making fast innovation more essential than ever. While speed is a key factor at play, we do stay focused with our strategy and stay in control of what we do", according to this entrepreneurial CMO.

To stay ahead, TMICC's innovation model is global and agile. Chefs scout flavor trends worldwide and translate them into concepts that R&D rapidly prototypes. Upgraded factory capabilities now support these fast iterations. Yet, there will always be production limitations, forcing to find a balance between creative ambition and operational reality. Not surprisingly,

TMICC's innovation strategy is fast, social first, and globally inspired, but always built for cultural relevance and anchored in its brand identity.

Beyond the product itself, community plays a central role. TMICC engages fans as co-creators and balances "others say" (influencer buzz) with "brand say" (global brand assets across Meta, YouTube, and VOD). Local activations, like a city-inspired ice cream for Amsterdam's 750th anniversary, reinforce this emotional connection with the community.



Fleur Osté

The Magnum Ice Cream Company

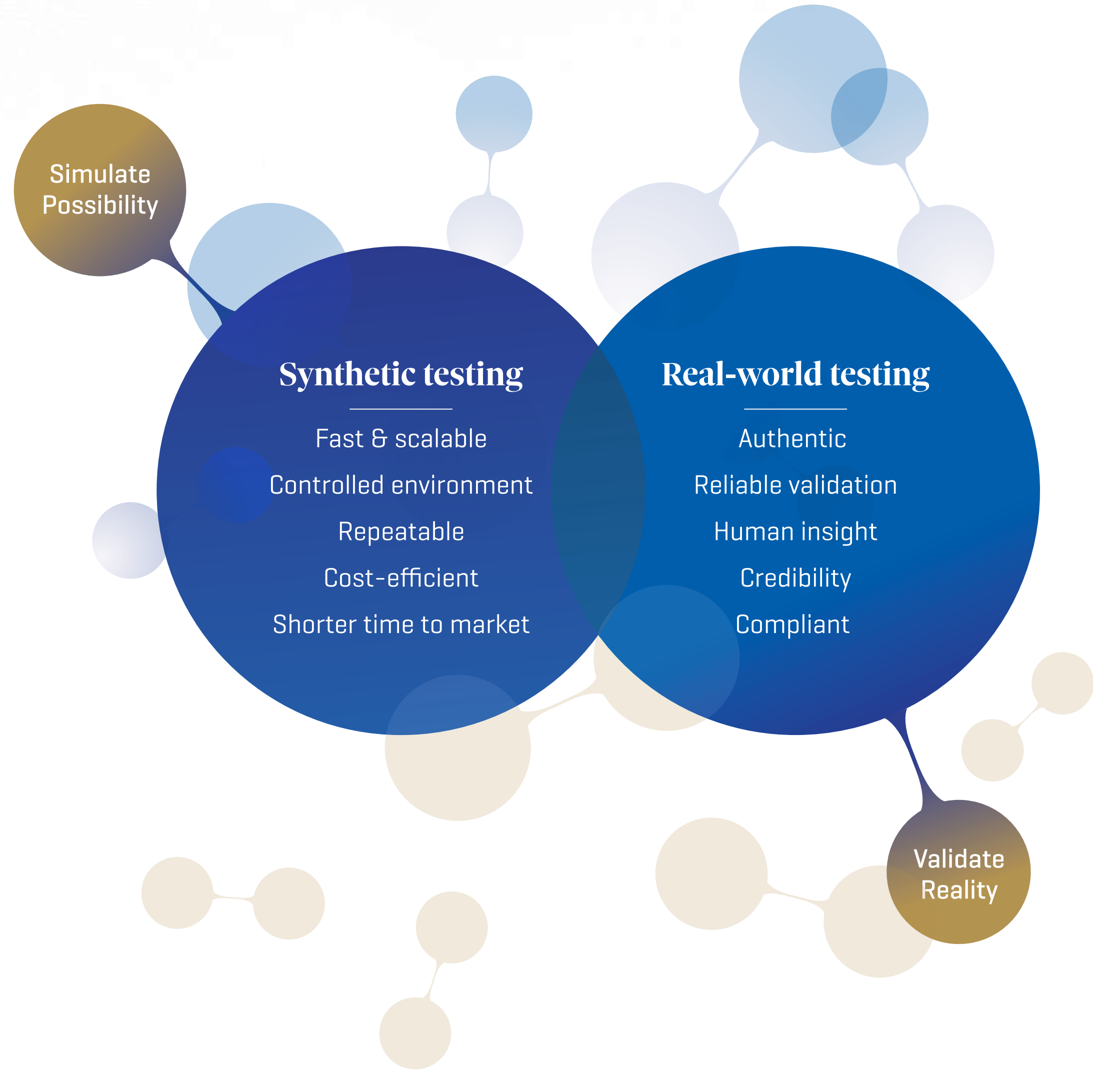
3. Tester Mode

Learn faster than everyone

The Tester mode is embodied by the characteristics of a stand-up comedian. They test jokes early in live setting, adjust timing as they get feedback and cut the comments that fall flat. For innovation, it is not much different. Tester mode is about running fast, low-cost trials in the real world.

In practice, we see leading brands shift their attention again from primarily doing tactical experiments to synthetic and more strategic testing in early stages (running behaviour simulation, generating synthetic datasets) as well as getting prototypes or campaigns into live setting as fast as possible. In the testing phase of creative innovation concepts, a company's DNA serves as a compass for authenticity and consistency. It ensures that new ideas align not only with consumer insights but also with the organization's core values, mission, and brand promise. In this way, brand DNA prevents innovation from becoming opportunistic; it filters out concepts that may be novel, but lack credibility from the brand's perspective. The result: DNA-Driven Innovations with strong concept and execution potential.

ING's channel teams nicely illustrate this. As Bob Timmerman, Head of Digital, Assisted and Customer Interactions at ING explains: "We pick the high-impact use case, move from a paper concept to a working prototype fast, and measure behavior in the app rather than stated intent. It's how features like app-to-app enrollment emerged to remove friction, and how a fraud-prevention idea became the 'check the caller' pattern that customers can self-verify."



"DON'T INNOVATE BASED ON WHAT CUSTOMERS SAY. INNOVATE BASED ON WHAT THEY DO"

Bob Timmerman

ING

Or in other words real behavior beats opinion. Bob Timmerman, Head of ING Digital, Assisted and Customer Interactions, explains that the banking app, with over 6 million daily active users, is their living innovation lab. "There are always customers up for getting involved in making their banking experience better", he says. "The app is our most important channel, but also our test platform. It can perfectly be both."

Whether its fraud prevention or simplifying mobile onboarding, the focus of innovation is always on removing friction and adding value. When fraud calls surged, ING developed a solution: Check Het Gesprek (Check The Call in English), a feature that lets customers instantly verify if a call really comes from the bank. Another is App-to-App Enrollment, which removes friction when switching phones, transforming a common hassle into a seamless experience.

Since 2015, ING has embraced agile at scale. For Bob, it is not just a methodology but a mindset. Bob says, "If you don't build multidisciplinary teams from the start, you'll spend 12 months doing what could've taken 3." By bringing tech, UX, risk and business together in one team, ING accelerates the time-to-market and avoids costly rework, especially in the highly regulated environment of financial services. His teams work in use case loops: identify the problem - build hypotheses - test with customers - iterate fast.

AI plays a growing role, but always with purpose: empowering employees, not replacing them. Bots scan spelling errors or generate marketing content, while customer data remains protected. AI is applied where it adds real value, efficiency and open-data insights. Beyond problem-solving, ING's next ambition is anticipation: helping customers to stay a step ahead in life and business. "Why shouldn't there be a button that says: ING, make me a suggestion based on my spending pattern?" Bob says. This vision blends intelligence and empathy, the heart of ING's innovation DNA.

4. Creator Mode
Build live in front of the world

Almost in pure symbiosis with Tester mode, the Creator mode is about making innovation come to life in ways people can touch, see, and feel. This is not just about bringing it live, but about building it in the open as well. What is unique about the Creator mode these days, is that the storytelling and experience around innovation is more prominent than ever.

Rozemarijn Koppenaal, Executive Director Marketing at Rituals shares: "What we always try, is to go one step beyond what the customer expects, whether in product, content, or service. We build the unexpected." That unexpected is truly in the DNA of Rituals and is essential to create and tell.

The role of AI is prominent through the creation of content and experiences. Yet more than in any other mode, authenticity and human connection are truly important here. Capgemini Research Institute states that 'building human connections with customers in a technology-driven world is more important than ever'. A great example is the collaboration with IKEA on the new Family loyalty program, where the human-centered moments like decorating a new home, the drive back home, and assembling the closet are at the core of the innovation. Also here, the DNA of IKEA (Swedish values, democratic design and functional simplicity) are the guardrails for innovation.

This is truly about being brave enough to build live in front of the world, supported by a system that lets you listen, adapt and scale without losing authenticity. Your brand DNA must infuse the co-creation and connection with those that want to be a part of what you are building. Then, you create to build fans rather than customers.

Fiona Vanderbroeck, CMO at bol provides another great example for this: "In the last 26 years, bol's personal connection with the consumer is infused in everything we do. From starting the week with customer and partner quotes, to our personal tone of voice across generations, tongue-in-cheek humor on our socials, and of course the extra mile we go with our customer care."

CMO Short

“WE WENT FROM ONLINE BOOKSTORE TO ECOMMERCE PLAYER TO PLATFORM TO ADVERTISING PARTNER. WE ARE CONSTANTLY REINVENTING OURSELVES FOR THE EASE OF THE CONSUMER, STAYING TRUE TO OUR CORE...”

...says Fiona Vanderbroeck, CMO of bol. As the leading e-commerce platform, bol has built its reputation not just on technology or its assortment but on a deeply embedded cultural value: being Customer Crazy. “Everything starts with a customer challenge: what problem are we solving? Without that, there is no innovation.”

This principle runs deep in the organization. Bol does not just solve customer problems, but it reinvents itself around them. Bol has a habit of reinventing itself every five years, from online bookstore to retailer, to open platform, and now into advertising. While Fiona highlights that "innovation is bol’s middle name", she does see a tension between monetization and customer experience with their newest playing field: advertising. "My biggest challenge is ensuring we don't lose sight of the end customer while scaling media", she says.

Looking ahead, Fiona sees two priorities: embracing AI at speed. “It’s not if, but how fast you act, while keeping the human connection. In a world of algorithms, bol’s differentiator remains clear: a trusted, local brand that solves real problems for real people.”

5. Scaler Mode
Make it stick with everyone

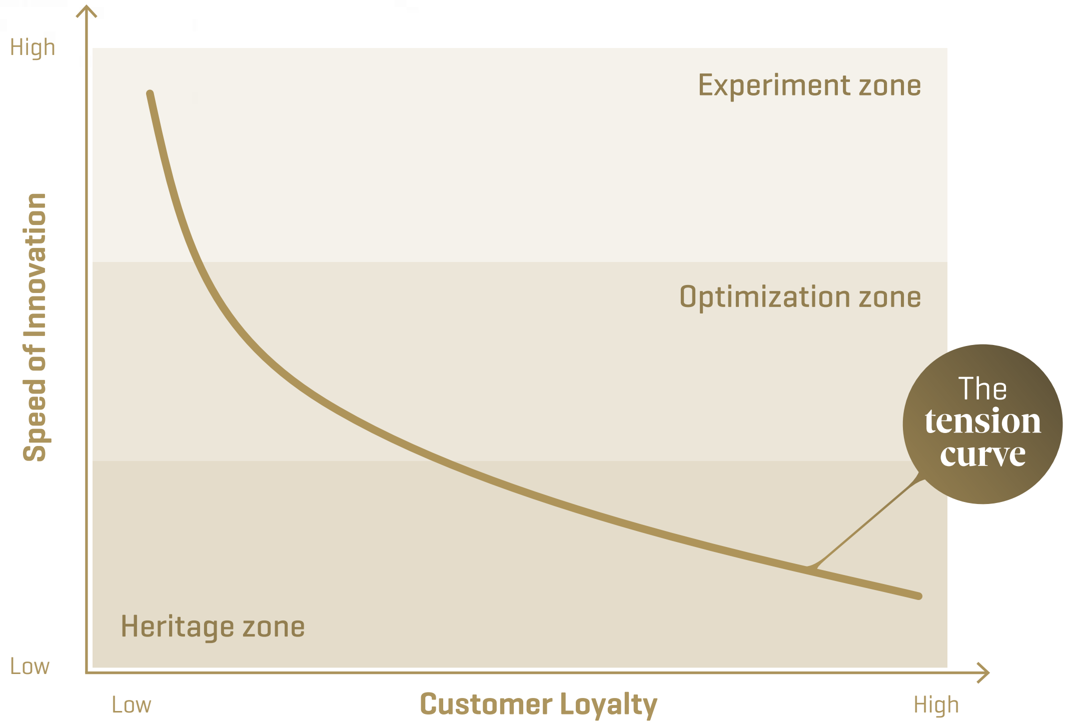
Scaling in innovation projects within companies is often misinterpreted as the last step of the innovation process. That is not correct, it should be on our mind during the full innovation cycle, as there is no business case without scaling opportunity.

As we found in our CMO conversations, scaling is not about replication at any cost but about preserving authenticity and coherence as ideas move from prototype to market reality. With brand lovers, influencers and partners, there is a road of scaling intimacy depth first as well, making the road to broad audience scaling not as smooth and fast as sometimes liked.

As Bas Komen, Director Marketing & Sales at Albert Heijn Retail Media Services, describes: "Sometimes you just need to dare to reach out. Initiating a partnership with an ad-tech company and then building our own self-service platform. We knew scaling would take time: first onboarding the few bigger and more experienced advertisers and getting them acquainted with the advanced technology."

Importantly, the brand and cultural DNA ensures that scaling efforts remain aligned with the organization's purpose and values. Companies such as Patagonia, Tesla, or IKEA (see earlier example) scale innovations that reinforce their core beliefs - sustainability, technological disruption, or democratic design - rather than dilute them. Scaling may take longer, but it should significantly contribute to the brand equity and remains true to the DNA.

A strong DNA provides behavioral and decision-making consistency during scaling. As innovation moves from test mode to system-wide deployment, ambiguity increases: diverse teams, markets, and partners become involved. The company's DNA acts as a shared language, enabling teams to make decentralized yet coherent choices.



Tension between loyalty and speed innovation

The Loyalty-Innovation Tension Curve shows how brands calibrate innovation intensity based on audience commitment, accelerating bold experimentation when loyalty is low and moving more deliberately as loyalty deepens. As customers become more invested, innovation progresses from the Experimentation zone, where ideas can move fast and free, to the Optimization zone, where promising concepts are refined and scaled, and ultimately to the Heritage zone, where evolution must stay tightly aligned to brand DNA to protect trust and identity.

Bas Komen

Albert Heijn Retail Media Services

"OUR STORE IS OUR CONTENT. WE MONETIZE THAT TRAFFIC WITHOUT LOSING THE BRAND PROMISE OF ALBERT HEIJN..."

...says Bas Komen, leading marketing of the Retail Media Services at Albert Heijn. As clear-cut market leader in food retail, Albert Heijn started ten years ago with an integrated offering of its assets as European pioneer in the world of retail media, with year-on-year innovations. Bas states: "Permanent innovation and improvement of our assets is the core of our existence. It helped us grow into a market-leading and mature publisher."

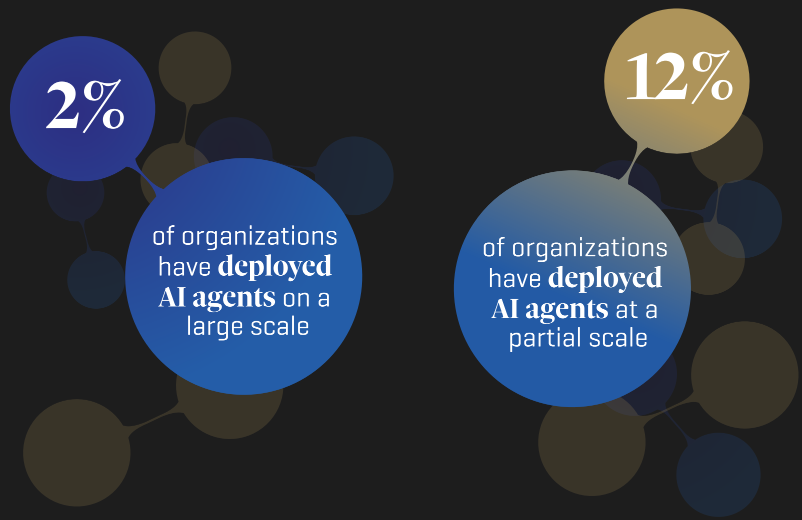
At first glance, Albert Heijn Retail Media Services might feel a little removed from the supermarket's core promise: making better food accessible for everyone. But the conversation with Bas Komen reveals a different story. The store experience and customer trust are central and Retail Media builds on this by monetizing traffic.

As the first retailer in the media market, Albert Heijn sets industry standards and now runs over 120 studies annually to validate impact on sales and brand, creating benchmarks for the entire sector.

"As a market leader, you're almost obliged to build those benchmarks", says Komen. They even built their own self-service ad platform, similar to Amazon or Meta. All great examples of innovation in a, for the retailer, new field of expertise.

By combining bold innovation and strict guardrails, Albert Heijn Retail Media Services proves that growth and brand integrity go hand in hand, turning a supermarket into a media pioneer without losing sight of its promise.

FROM HUMAN INNOVATION TEAMS TO THE HYBRID INNOVATION ORGANIZATION



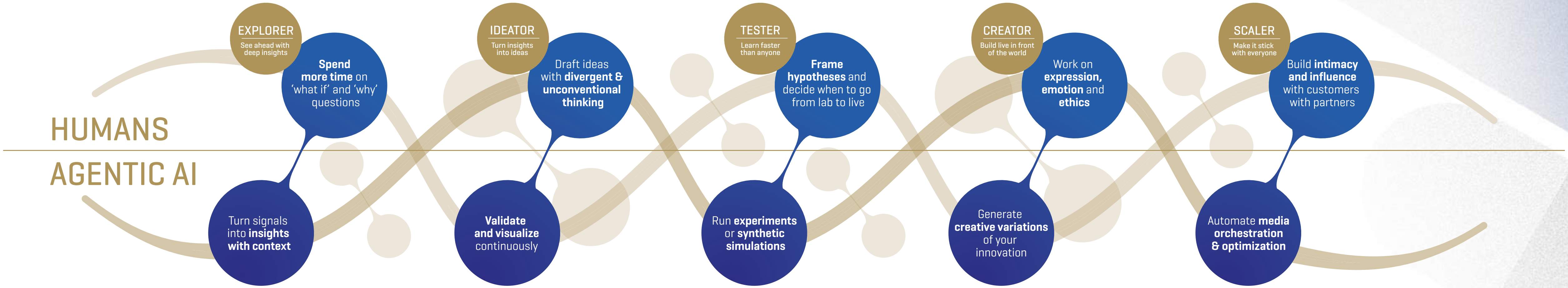
For most of modern marketing, innovation capacity has been defined by human limits: how many people you can hire, how many campaigns your team can manage, how many hours are in the day. Even the most creative teams were bottlenecked by bandwidth. With the introduction of the agentic workforce, this is about to shift. The ability and autonomy of agents initiating new activities to optimize for a specific goal is increasing at such a rapid pace that it becomes a serious counterpart in all five innovation modes – from Explorer to Scaler.

Let us first define agentic workforce in the context of innovation. It refers to autonomous, intelligent systems capable of perceiving, reasoning, and acting with a degree of self-direction to create or enhance value. Unlike traditional automation, AI agents possess adaptive decision-making and can collaborate with humans to identify opportunities, generate ideas, and optimize innovation processes. This workforce operates through continuous learning and contextual awareness, enabling dynamic problem-solving beyond pre-programmed rules. To say it in simple text: an AI agentic workforce uses smart, self-learning systems that work with humans to find ideas, solve problems, and drive innovation.

Today **only 2% of organizations** have deployed AI agents at full scale and **just 12% at** partial scale[6]. The rest is in pilot mode or adoption, but it is moving fast. Because agents now can optimize for goals instead of executing tasks, they have become more useful in acting as co-worker in the dynamics of marketing innovation. The potential is not just in doing more with less (efficiency), but also in doing it better (effectiveness). When Rozemarijn Koppenaal from Rituals discusses the use of AI in innovation, she mentions: "We use AI to help us learn faster, but it's never only about efficiency. It's about learning what really moves people."

The next wave of marketing innovation is steered by humans and augmented by AI. Yet there's no single "right" ratio. The innovation DNA determines the blend. A brand might lean on AI to run thousands of simulations but based on its core DNA there is significant value in involving humans and taking it slow. This is very well visible at how bol makes decisions. Fiona Vanderbroeck describes: "At bol, we leverage AI

Figure 2: Interaction between Humans and Agentic AI at different stages



to simulate thousands of scenarios, but ultimately, it's the human touch that guides us through the complexity. With over 48 million products, 47.000 partners, and millions of visitors daily, scale is essential. Yet, it's the deliberate moments where humans step in - to connect, to decide, to inspire - that define our success." They choose for human deliberately at moments that matter to them. The innovation model changes from human-led to human-by-design.

This calls for a new way to organize technology and humans in a hybrid innovation organization. This has two key implications for CMOs that adopt DNA-Driven Innovation. Bringing DNA into your agentic workforce AI is only as meaningful as the quality of its input. The most successful applications so far have been when the desired outcome was crystal clear. Not just in terms of output, but also in terms of the DNA you want agents to carry out into the field. Do you prioritize slow and certain, or fast and first? Are you optimizing for a click or a feeling? A good example comes from ING. As Bob Timmerman describes their approach to AI: "We're moving from execution to intelligence. The question is no longer what campaign we'll launch, but what behavior or emotion we want to inspire." This shift calls for more than just feeding a brand guide into the machine. It demands continuous optimization of DNA-Driven Innovation through AI.

Organize human and agentic capacity differently across the five modes of DNA-Driven Innovation. As organizations evolve toward hybrid human–machine collaboration, the structure of innovation itself begins to shift. The five modes of DNA-Driven Innovation - Explorer, Ideator, Tester, Creator, and Scaler - no longer have to operate through purely human workflows. Each mode could blend human imagination with agentic intelligence, redistributing what we once called "capacity" into a shared, adaptive system. The challenge lies in balancing these modes: starting from an agentic AI foundation and adding the human touch where required to bring your brand's DNA to life. Admittedly, the blend of both may change over time, in both directions. On one hand, machines will learn to take over from humans when DNA is understood by the agent. On the other, the distinction between competitive innovations may become less over time and require pure human creativity.

This 'balancing act' requires proper governance and planning. Just as you would when adding 10 new FTEs to your department, you now add workflows, checkpoints and feedback cycles that you still need to organize for.

Hybrid organizations also require new guardrails: involve risk and compliance from Day 0 (design within the risk frame to avoid shipping a diluted, over-controlled experience later), set red-lines for data usage (e.g., avoid "too intrusive" in-store targeting until trust signals are ready) and define when to escalate to humans.

As every company races to integrate AI into its go-to-market strategy, the role of the CMO is evolving. Marketing leaders are now tasked with balancing automation and augmentation. They are uniquely positioned to do so, given their deep understanding of what the brand stands for and how it can be reinforced through ways of working and innovation cycles. The real challenge lies in how effectively they can embed the brand's DNA into this new hybrid workforce.

FROM CATEGORY TO WORLD BUILDING

For decades, marketing has been organized around categories. You were a retailer, a bank, a travel company. So, your playground was defined by a group of competitors with alike products and a defined addressable market to fight for. From a customer perspective we neglected their need for integrated solutions as if they were shopping for a recipe and pick the products one by one. Anno 2025, life is organized differently and doesn't happen in verticals; it happens in worlds. Also called ecosystems.

Buying a home is not just about mortgages; it's about real estate, moving services, insurance, energy, and family planning. Well-being is not just about beauty or fitness; it's about sleep, nutrition, digital coaching, community, and mental health. This is why forward-looking CMOs are shifting from category to world-building. Another example is Booking, which has started integrating related travel services like rental cars, taxis, and insurances that go beyond the standard 'book a hotel' experience.

Retailers lead the way, with companies like Amazon in the US, Alibaba or JD.com in China and Bol and Booking in the Benelux as good examples. Not limited by offering a broad range of products (with estimates of hundreds of millions of unique SKU's and over a billion product references) but also operating in a broad range of industries like banking, media, health and mail services. Creating worlds, connecting worlds, where millions of (global) companies like to sell their products amidst a huge number of competitors. Clearly, everyone would like to have its own connected world, but only a few can create one as all the others participate in them.

Acting in this connected world sets different requirements to innovate. Unlike internal innovation, where control and governance are centralized, ecosystem innovation requires navigating interdependencies, shared value creation, and often unequal power dynamics. The host organization (world owner) typically defines the rules, platforms, and data infrastructures, which can constrain agility and creative freedom. Partners must align their innovation goals with the broader ecosystem's strategic intent; balancing cooperation with competition. This tension, often referred to as co-opetition[6], demands strong relational governance and trust.

Moreover, cultural misalignment can hinder collaboration: differences in decision speed, risk tolerance, or innovation philosophy may lead to friction and slow execution. Data ownership and intellectual property rights add further complexity, as transparency and protection often pull in opposite directions. Finally, sustaining innovation requires adaptive learning: the ability to integrate external signals, adjust business models, and continuously renegotiate roles within the ecosystem.

Successful innovators therefore act as context shapers rather than passive participants, co-evolving their capabilities with the ecosystem itself. This approach transforms dependency into synergy, enabling both resilience and relevance in shared innovation environments. Though it does require a very different mindset from the innovation team, broadening its focus from own product to the host environment. In all five modes of our DNA-Driven Innovation model this plays a key role and should be integrated in the team skills.

The new playground for innovation does happen in the connected world: shaping strategies that cut across sectors, channels, and partnerships to create richer, more resilient customer experiences. Research amongst innovating companies supports this: over 70% of executives believe ecosystems will be the primary source of competitive advantage by 2030, yet only a fraction are building them with intention.

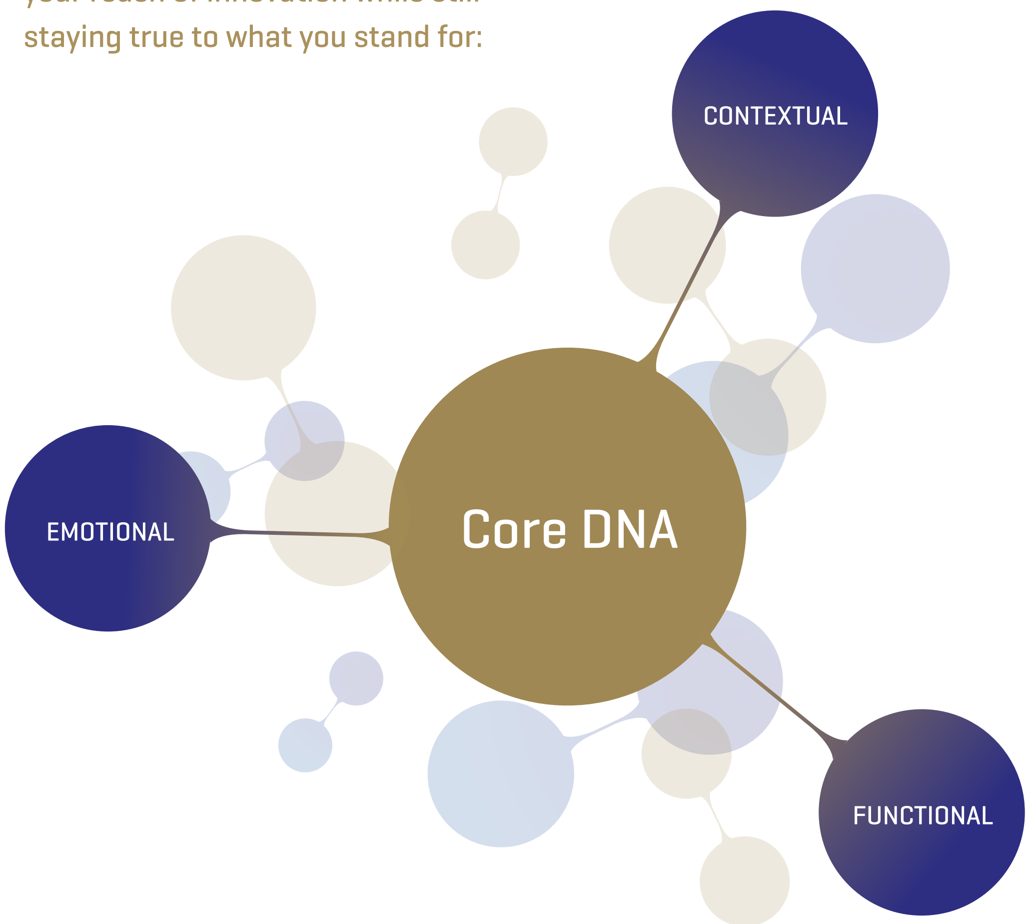
This requires companies to go beyond being customer centric and trying to sell a product that fits their needs or lifestyle. Having a world view means building integrated relevance together with the other actors in that world.

For example, think about a coffee machine seller that collaborates with the provider of beans, integrates customer behavioral understanding of ‘coffee moments’, works with other kitchen appliances to optimize the cooking or lifestyle experience, even partnering with local sustainability or society initiatives. The challenge is: where are the boundaries?

To guide this, the Brand Extension model of the French economist Jean-Noël Kapferer’s explains how brands can successfully leverage their existing equity to launch new products.
The model emphasizes the importance of fit between the parent brand and the extension in terms of product category, brand values, and consumer expectations. A strong perceived fit enhances credibility and reduces consumer risk. Kapferer also highlights the role of brand identity coherence: extensions should reinforce, not dilute, the brand’s core meaning. Successful extensions strengthen the parent brand, while poor ones can erode trust and equity. Thus, strategic alignment and consistent symbolism are essential for sustainable brand growth.

So, in other words, how far can you stretch DNA without losing yourself? Every brand has a certain DNA elasticity.

We recognize three ways in which CMOs can stretch this to expand your reach of innovation while still staying true to what you stand for:



1. You can stretch on **emotionally** loaded experiences; like Efteling, whose sense of "wonder" naturally travels into theater, hospitality, and even digital storytelling. Emotional stretching has to do with perception and feeling being felt through new innovations. As Jack states it: "Whether it's a new attraction or a theater show, it has to carry that same spark of amazement that makes people feel like children again."

2. Others, like bol, stretch more **functionally**, evolving from retailer to platform to advertising network, yet always staying true to the mission of making life a little easier for shoppers in Netherlands & Belgium. As Fiona from bol explains: "We went from physical books to online bookstore, from retailer to platform to advertising partner - ecosystem. We are constantly reinventing ourselves for the ease of the consumer, staying true to our core." Functional stretching has to do with the role changing through new innovation.

3. Finally, companies can stretch **contextually**. Like The Magnum Ice Cream Company shifting from placing their products in an ice cream context towards a 'snack' context. As Fleur Osté describes: "We are exploring what ice cream looks and feels like when we go into competition with a regular snack, but this also requires us to innovate everything from product to even where you can find it in the grocery store." This is likely to be the most difficult form but has obviously significant uplift potential when done right.

That balance - between expansion and essence - defines whether a brand's evolution feels authentic or opportunistic. CMOs must actively shape that boundary. Too little stretch, and you become irrelevant in a changing world. Too much, and you lose the trust that made your brand meaningful in the first place. Like Kapferer is saying: "If you create too many accessible extensions, you risk lowering the brand's creativity and diluting its distinction."

The second key question to answer is: where do you integrate or collaborate with others in your world? In connected worlds, no brand can act alone. Success depends on identifying where your brand adds unique value and where you can create more by collaborating with others.

The strongest brands are beginning to see themselves not as a brand that just partners with others to increase transactions, but as a true network of players around lifestyles, jobs-to-be-done or big world problems. ING, for instance, is extending its role from financial service provider to enabler of life decisions; from buying a home to managing energy or mobility choices. As Bob Timmerman puts it: "We reinvented the home buying journey. Yet we didn't innovate from the bank alone, but together with the customer and our partners to really make it easier for first-time home buyers."

The same shift is visible in Rituals' approach to well-being. Their products are only one expression of a larger system of experiences: from sleep coaching and sustainability partnerships to the "Mind Oasis" concept. As Rozemarijn Koppenaal said: "When you start thinking about wellness, the world opens up with all kinds of possibilities." Probably, the most difficult challenge is to find the balance between your own brand and the bigger ecosystem. The paradox between staying true to a brand's DNA and extending it to become an ecosystem lies in balancing focus and expansion. A strong brand DNA provides identity, trust, and coherence; the essence that makes the brand authentic and recognizable. Yet, building an ecosystem requires openness, collaboration, and diversification across categories or platforms. The tension arises because too much fidelity to core values can limit growth, while excessive stretching risks dilution or confusion. Successful ecosystem brands, such as Apple or Nike, resolve this paradox by translating, not abandoning, their DNA. They express the same purpose and emotional meaning through new touchpoints. In doing so, coherence replaces rigidity, and evolution becomes continuity. The ecosystem thrives precisely because the DNA remains its connective tissue.

To operate in these worlds, CMOs need to know where their brand truly adds value and to have the humility to step aside where others can do it better. Across these examples, a pattern emerges: in world-building, DNA is not a boundary but a compass. It tells you where to lean in, where to collaborate, and when to step aside. It turns partnerships from opportunistic ventures into coherent extensions of your DNA and brand.

HOW TO ACT

HOW TO BRING DNA INTO EVERY **INNOVATION MODE**

Ideas multiply faster than true meaning. Under pressure for growth, we see marketing teams chase “what’s possible” and less “what feels like us". Creative concepts get approved because they look fresh, not because they strengthen the brand identity. Over time, the risk is that your marketing innovations are stagnating or chaotic, as previously described in the innovation effectiveness model.

Leaders who win, use DNA as a working tool in their innovation process: the DNA defines the process, and is not a poster on the wall. Rituals starts small and only scales what clearly carries well-being at its core. Efteling uses technology only where it serves the story, never the other way around.

The practical approach forward is therefore to decode what DNA means for how you apply innovation that travel across Explorer, Ideation, Tester, Creator and Scaler. Make it tangible and organize for it – not just in rules but in actual decision-making, KPIs, team dynamics and also in use of technology. Ultimately, bringing DNA into every mode means designing innovation around your essence, not around your org chart. A good exercise may be to brainstorm a few hours with your total marketing team on innovative ideas (just for the exercise) and rank them on “good fit for our brand DNA”.

HOW TO MOVE FROM LINEAR PROJECTS TO **ALWAYS-ON INNOVATION**

Many marketers still treat innovation as a straight line: plan, launch, stop. To keep up, innovation must be always-on; a continuous loop of imagining, testing, and scaling that runs in parallel. It's not about doing everything at once; it's about building a system that keeps generating and testing new ideas.

Start by looking at your workflow. Are you relying on big annual launches, or do you have smaller experiments happening all the time? Bol is a master at this. The company constantly reinvents itself - from ways of working to organizational structures and adapting new technologies - with the goal to solve for consumer problems and always keeps a garage of new ideas in play. Some will take off, others won't, but the engine never stops.

We also see that leading CMOs, in pursuit for breakthrough ideas, are moving away from departments handing off projects in sequence. Instead, they set up squads that own ideas from start to finish, iterate fast, and aren't afraid to fail early. These squads operate not outside the organization like incubators, but within it, equipped with dedicated objectives, technology, access to customers, and budget.

Funding has always been a challenge. The way to do it depends heavily on the portfolio you control as marketing leader. And leadership is what you need if you aim for a true "innovation fund" that will not be hit if short-term sales goals are not achieved. As argued, DNA-Driven Innovation reduces the risk, but innovation investments are not without it. In many cases, it helps to divide innovation projects and their corresponding funding into several phases. You should only move on to the next phase once the objectives of the previous one have been achieved. This approach provides the organization with greater control over costs.

Another tip: update your KPIs and mix in forward-looking measures such as the percentage of revenue from new products or customer engagement with beta features, alongside your quick wins. Make it clear how funding and success are connected.

Finally, always-on doesn't mean aimless. Steering speed with strategy is crucial. Anchor your continuous innovation to a clear vision, your North Star. As CMO, communicate this vision often so teams know which ideas move the brand forward. This is what was frequently discussed in the CMOtalk innovation roundtables and events and should not be overlooked.

HOW TO BUILD HYBRID TEAMS OF PEOPLE AND AI

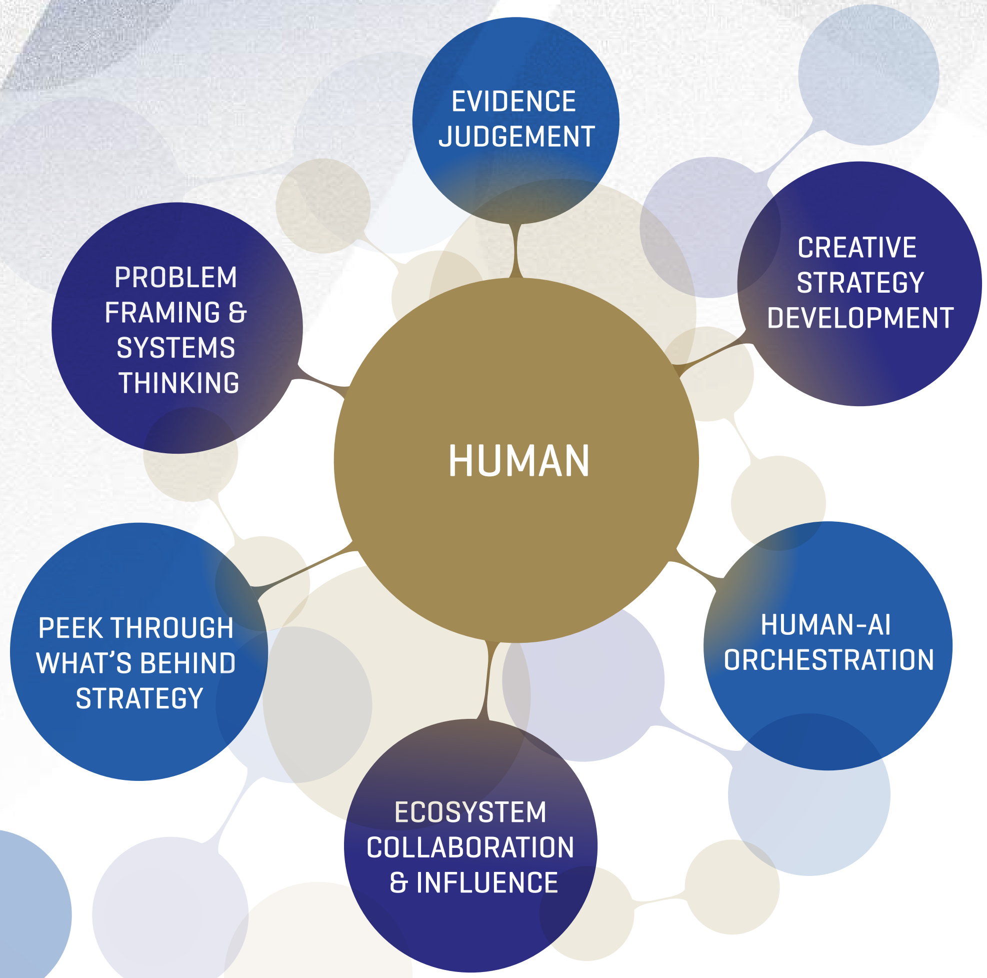
By now, every marketing team needs to blend human creativity with the power of AI in some way. It's not people versus machines; it's about bringing out the best of both. In DNA-Driven Innovation, it is your DNA that can help you decide how to create the perfect blend.

First, embrace AI as a priority, not an afterthought. In conversations with ING and others we found a clear red thread: focus on how fast you can integrate AI, not whether you should. AI can uncover trends, draft content, personalize journeys, and handle the heavy data work. This frees up people to focus on the (for now) still truly human traits of finding unconventional insights, ideating truly authentic experiences and building relationships with colleagues and partners to make it come to life. Be serious about the changing role that still needs to be performed. It is too easy to give up staffing, because AI does the work. Not true! AI provides far more support to build innovations that can deliver significantly better results. Simultaneously, the CMO must make sure that the quality of the team is aligned with this new approach.

This means more focus on true strategy/creation and people that do understand operations (how to execute and scale). And less people that just run the process. The skill framework in next section may be of guidance.

If you are new to this, we recognize that mistrust in the outcomes of AI is often the leading cause of pilots being stopped. So, if there is any starting point as CMO, start where you can trust AI easily with what it produces and scale from there. It is cliché but this is easier when you really understand what you are looking for.

Hybrid teams also require a new skill framework.
We see 6 domains that become increasingly important for the human workforce in innovation:



1. Problem framing & systems thinking
The ability to ask deep 'why' or 'what if' questions in the context of customers, your brand, the world around it.

2. Evidence judgement
The ability to form strong hypotheses and think of what 'good' looks like and then intrinsically evaluate whether a concept fits your DNA.

3. Creative strategy development
The ability to craft unique and authentic strategies that are unconventional and create a story around it.

4. Human-AI orchestration
The ability to brief, understand, govern and steer AI and learn how to be influenced by it.

5. Ecosystem collaboration & influence
The ability to structure collaborations with the world around you, including departments, partners and society.

6. Peek behind the strategy
The ability to peak through strategic innovative plans and think how to operate and scale them. For this you need experience on both sides.

Start small where trust is highest, then codify what works into clear guardrails so humans and AI can learn, create, and scale together with confidence. Above all, let your brand DNA set the terms of the collaboration, so technology accelerates what makes you distinctive rather than diluting it.

HOW TO BECOME A WORLD INNOVATOR

Innovation doesn't happen in a bubble. To truly lead, CMOs must connect their teams with partners, creators, customers, and the wider world.

As we described earlier, you can evolve with innovations by stretching your DNA emotionally, functionally, or contextually. Here, we explore a few ways to do that. One powerful way to do this is by opening your innovation process. Bol turns creators, brands, and customers into collaborators through its creator program, meeting consumers where they spend their time and growing trust organically with their content. Either on social platforms or on festivals like Lowlands, partnerships with organizers and brands create fresh, cultural experiences that extend the brand into new worlds.

Taking part in 'world building' also requires you to adopt a big-picture perspective as CMO. Beyond the connection with products and people, your DNA should also align with what you do for society. Customers increasingly expect certain brands to do good. BCorp certified Rituals pledged 10% of profits to well-being causes; not as a PR move, but as an innovation aligned with their purpose. For CMOs, that means making social impact and sustainability a core part of your innovation portfolio, not an afterthought.

Finally, break down internal silos and make innovation everyone's job. From sales and product to customer service and marketing. Set up cross-functional councils focused on top priorities such as moving towards ice cream in the world of snacks, like The Magnum Ice Cream Company does. Such a shift requires a lot of gears (R&D, shop floor, operations, supply chain, product, service, and more).

Being a connected-world innovator means seeing your brand as part of a bigger network. Customers are no longer just at the end of a funnel; they sit at the center of a web of communities, movements, and digital conversations. To find your next big opportunity, step outside the marketing bubble and connect with the world around you. As the CMO, continue to own the customer throughout the full innovation journey.

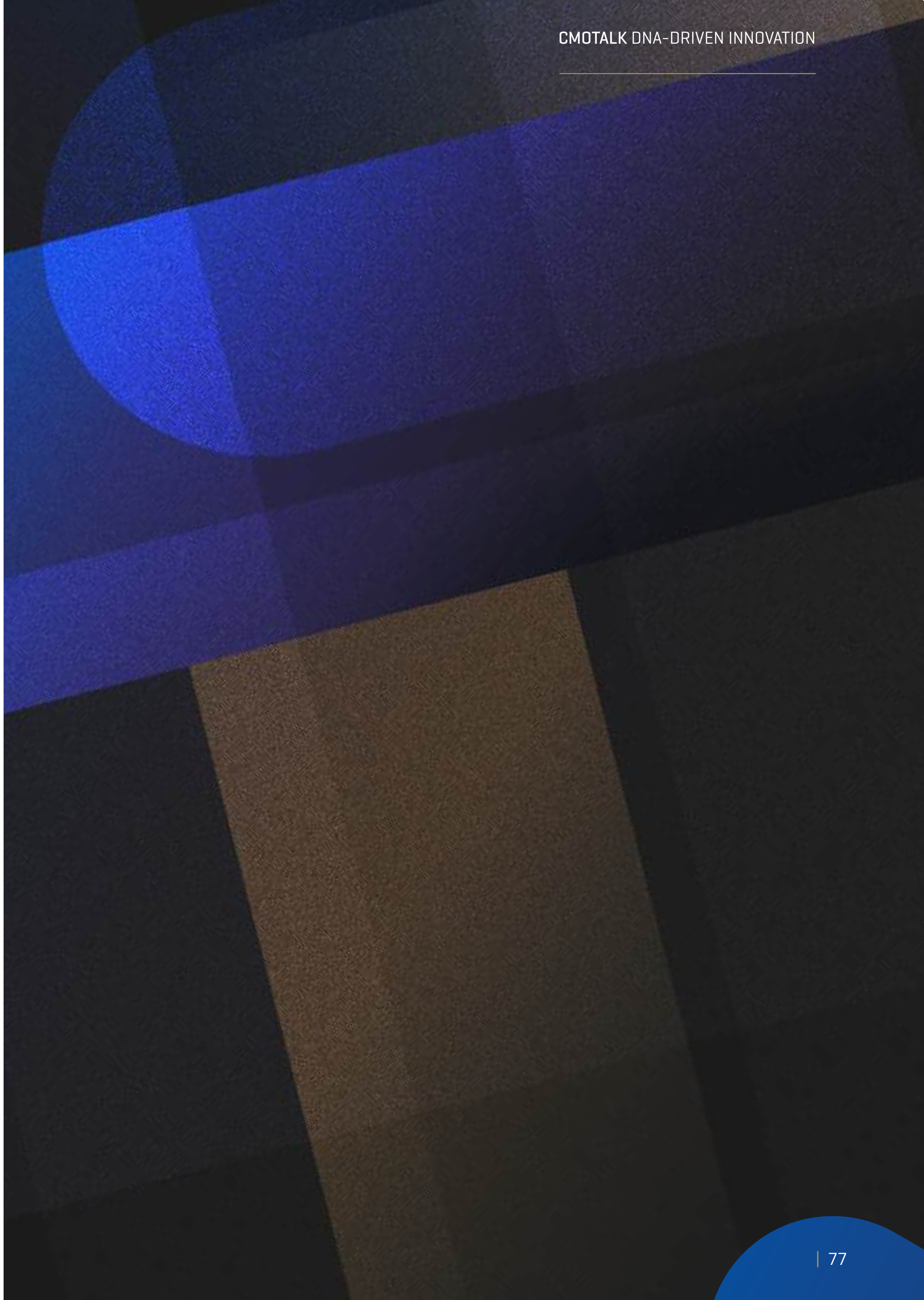
THE CMO AS INNOVATION CATALYST

Innovation moves fast, but real impact comes from staying grounded. As a CMO, foster a culture that seizes opportunities quickly, while consistently checking whether new ideas align with the brand's long-term strategy and DNA.

Whenever you pivot or accelerate, ask yourself: does this fit who we are? Sometimes you need to slow down or say no to keep the brand authentic. Albert Heijn Retail Media Services embraced retail media because it fits their platform strategy, but made sure it never hurts the customer experience. As we stated in the beginning of this paper: when brand DNA is clearly articulated and embedded in the innovation process, it helps marketers determine which innovations enhance the brand's promise and which dilute it.

Lead by example. Share stories of fast wins that fit the strategy, as well as cautionary tales of moving too fast and losing trust. Be the Chief Clarity Officer: cut through the noise, remind people why their work matters, and set a clear and inspiring direction. And as stated earlier, use AI where it can support the efficiency and effectiveness of the project. In the end, leading innovation is about more than creativity; it's about making it real. Use the DNA-Driven Innovation model (Explorer, Ideator, Tester, Creator, Scaler) together with the strategies of always-on culture, human-tech collaboration, and connected-world thinking to get started.

CMOs should embrace this exciting role. This is about investing in technologies and people that fit your DNA and making decisions with purpose. As an executive, you should inspire, and be inspired by how the world constantly evolves, revealing new opportunities and challenges. Make innovation a shared adventure for your company, your customers, and your partners. You are not just there to react, but to steer towards it. That is your privilege as a CMO: to be the innovation catalyst for what comes next.



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