
A PAPER FOR MARKETING AND CREATIVE LEADERS

When everyone sounds the same.

How leaders protect distinctive thinking while using AI to improve execution.

The Incremental Pathway + KHWS

Incremental change. Transformational results.

01 / THE OBSERVABLE SYMPTOM

The campaigns feel familiar before you have seen them.

Something is happening in marketing and communications that most senior leaders have noticed but few have named precisely. The work is polished. The copy is technically correct. The creative rationale holds together. And yet nothing is distinctive. Read three competitors' websites and you find the same structure, the same tone, the same four value propositions in a slightly different order. This is not a quality problem. The quality is good. That is precisely the issue.

AI raises the floor of what any team can produce. First drafts in minutes. Design at scale. Research synthesised before a brief is written. These gains are real and only a fool would argue against them. But AI is trained on what has already been done. It produces what is statistically probable given the inputs. When every organisation uses the same tools, prompted with the same brief frameworks, referencing the same competitive context, the outputs converge. Not by intention, but by design.

The floor rises. The ceiling drops. The gap between them, where brand differentiation used to live, quietly closes.

How this paper was made

This paper was drafted with AI assistance and reviewed by human practitioners. Human first. AI second. Human last.

This paper followed three stages, and the sequence is the argument.

1. Human origination. The observation that everyone sounds the same came from practitioners, not prompts. The thesis was set before AI touched a word.
2. AI execution. Once we knew what to say, AI drafted, structured, and pressure-tested at speed. Weeks of work in an afternoon.
3. Human challenge. Every section reviewed by practitioners with domain expertise. Not for grammar. For truth.

02 / THE MECHANISM

AI amplifies what you bring to it. Including the blind spots.

“AI is just an amplification tool. If you have a blind spot, it will amplify that blind spot. You can only see in the room you are in. Humans can see and connect different rooms together. AI is stuck in the box.”

Nopadon Wongpakdee, Co-founder, SYSTM

Apply this to brand strategy and the implication is uncomfortable. Underdeveloped positioning, run through AI, produces underdeveloped positioning faster and at greater volume. A generic brief produces generic output with impressive production values. The blind spot does not shrink. It gets industrialised.

A CEO of a communications agency has been watching this happen for two years. He describes seeing younger consultants reach for AI the moment a brief lands, asking it to find the whitespace, generate the positioning, identify the opportunity. What comes back is polished, plausible, and indistinguishable from what every competitor's team produces with the same prompt.

“Our job is to help businesses find the white space. If all we're doing is getting lazy and thinking ChatGPT will tell us where it is, forget it. That's the key thing. Where do I sharpen the human pencil, and what does AI do for the rest?”

CEO, PR Agency

His question is the right question. Not 'how do we use AI more?', but 'where do we protect the capacity AI cannot replicate, and then use AI to execute what that capacity produces?'

03 / WHAT IS CHANGING

What is collapsing, and what is becoming more valuable?

Precision matters here. Not everything is at risk.

Some capabilities are being absorbed by AI. Others are becoming more valuable because of it. Confusing the two is a strategic error.

What is being absorbed

Templated production and first-draft copy

Design execution at volume

Research aggregation and monitoring

Personalisation at scale

Briefing, scheduling and reporting

SEO as a standalone discipline, optimising for an algorithm that is already being replaced by AI-generated answers

Channel-level performance marketing, including bid management, A/B variants and retargeting loops

What is becoming scarcer

Original strategic insight

Category-defining positioning

The instinct that precedes the brief

The judgement for what to test next, and the nerve to act before the data is conclusive

Leadership voice that is recognisably a person

Customer understanding built from genuine proximity

The operating discipline to run growth as sprints, not campaigns, assumption testing, rapid iteration, and learning velocity as the core metric

The professionals who stay relevant are those who move up from execution to origination. The ones who do not make that shift will find themselves reviewing AI output rather than creating anything worth reviewing.

04 / THE NO-PRIOR-ART ARGUMENT

The moves that will define the next category have not been made yet.

In 1977, the Allen Brady Marsh agency pitched for British Rail. They were a small agency competing against Ogilvy and Saatchi for one of the biggest advertising accounts in the country. On paper they had no right to win.

When the British Rail board arrived at ABM's offices on the morning of the pitch, they were met by a receptionist filing her nails, talking loudly to a friend on the phone. They waited. Nobody came. Coffee arrived, spilled, in polystyrene cups with a half-open milk carton. Still they waited. When the chairman finally stood up to leave, Peter Marsh burst through the doors: Gentlemen, you have just seen what the public think of the way British Rail treats them. Now let us show you what we can do to put that right.

ABM won the largest account in UK advertising history. Within five years they were the fastest-growing agency in Europe. Not because they executed better than Ogilvy, but because someone had spent enough time with British Rail's actual customers to understand precisely what they felt, and had the courage to make the client feel it before a single slide appeared.

That insight was not in any brief. It could not have been generated from prior art because nothing like it had been done. It required a human being to be genuinely close to the customer and willing to make a move that had no benchmark.

AI can optimise what exists. It cannot invent what does not. The whitespace is always a human decision.

Elena Verna, Head of Growth at Lovable, an AI-native company that helps non-technical users build websites and working products and reached \$200M ARR in under a year, found that 60 to 70 per cent of everything she knew about growth was no longer applicable. The moves that drove their growth had no prior art. AI could not have suggested them, because they had never been done. The fastest-growing AI company in recent history grew by doing things AI could not have suggested.

The positioning moves that will define category leaders over the next five years have not been made. They cannot be generated from a prompt. They require someone to be close enough to a customer to hear what they are not saying, and willing to act on it before anyone else does.

05 / FOUR SHIFTS FOR CREATIVE LEADERS

Protect the thinking that makes the work yours.

01 Redefine what a brief is for

A brief that could have been written without a human being in the room with a customer is not yet a brief. It is a task description. The brief's job is to originate an insight that is not visible in the competitive landscape or the existing data. If your briefing process does not require that kind of proximity, the process is a template.

02 Protect original thinking as capacity, not aspiration

Original thinking does not happen in the margins of a full schedule. It requires slack, customer proximity, and the mental space that AI-assisted productivity can easily eliminate if every saved hour is immediately refilled. Build the protection of that capacity into your operating model. If it lives only in your values document, it does not exist.

03 Name your brand voice as a person, not a style guide

The test: could this have been written by someone who had never met your customers? If yes, it is not yet a brand voice. The organisations with genuine brand voices in the AI era will be those where a named leader's perspective is visible in the work. Opinionated and specific; impossible to replicate with a prompt, because it came from someone with something to say.

04 Measure distinctiveness, not just performance

Click rates measure reach. They do not measure whether anyone remembered you, associated something specific with you, or chose you because of something only you could say. If you cannot measure distinctiveness, you will not protect it.

06 / CRAFT AND TRUST

The cost of looking like you didn't try

Conspicuous human effort engenders audience trust.

Rory Sutherland makes an observation about television advertising that applies directly here. Audiences trust TV ads more than digital ads, not because the message is better, but because the audience can see how expensive the ad was to make. The production values, the media spend, the sheer commitment of resource - all of it signals confidence. Why would a company spend that much money on a product that was not worth buying? Sutherland calls it conspicuous expenditure, and it works because trust is not built by what you say. It is built by what you are visibly willing to invest.

Apply this to the AI era. When a website, a pitch deck, or a brand campaign is visibly generated without human thought or craft, the audience registers the absence of effort - and draws the obvious conclusion. If you did not invest in how you present yourself, why should I trust what you are selling? The lean startup instinct to test fast and ship cheap is right in the experimental phase. But once you know what works, conspicuous human craft becomes the credibility signal that separates serious players from the noise.

AI raises the floor. The ceiling is yours. Use the time AI creates to imagine what only you can imagine, then let AI execute it at the scale and speed that was not previously possible. That sequence is the whole argument.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE PAPER

The Incremental Pathway + KHWS

About The Incremental Pathway

TIP is an AI capability partner for leadership teams. We help people build capability through real work, starting by creating time for change and then applying that capacity to better decisions, customer outcomes and ways of working.

Incremental change. Transformational results.

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About KHWS

KHWS is a London-based independent team of around 50 marketers, strategists, creatives, designers, project managers and technologists. We share a passion for influencing human behaviour, connecting brands with their audiences in meaningful ways. Over 95% of everything we produce is created in-house, allowing us to maintain quality, consistency and speed. Our work is delivered across more than 20 markets and in 12 languages, helping brands communicate effectively on a global scale.

Creativity that resonates

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Edition note: this joint paper is based on the April 2026 TIP/KHWS version. The October 2026 edition refreshes the visual design and TIP company introduction. Examples and partner information reflect the original paper. The comparison table has been reset for readability and an incomplete line repaired.