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Man, Machines and Marine Marketing

Here are 10 artificial-intelligence strategies that move the sales needle

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The interaction between humans and machines has long been a relationship that captures our imagination, from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* in 1927 to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968 to *I, Robot* in 2004. Today, those once-futuristic scripts have morphed into living reality. Artificial intelligence, or AI, is entering virtually all walks of life, including marketing applications.

Today's machines can understand human speech and respond to it. (Alexa, anyone?) Ever wondered how Facebook identifies friends in posted photos before you tag them? Or how Pandora knows which musical artists to recommend? Or how LinkedIn delivers profiles of professionals with whom you may wish to engage?

Machine learning now contributes to everything from military intelligence gathering to the autonomous operation of automobiles. Marketers in the automotive sphere also are using the technology.

"The most common use case of AI in automotive marketing is personalized marketing," says J.D. Power Chief Data Officer Seongjoon Koo. "AI systems can analyze comprehensive customer information and predict crucial information at the consumer level, such as the likelihood of vehicle purchase, purchase time frame, make-model preference, and preferred price band."

Another common application is forecasting, he says: "AI systems can analyze a vast amount of historical data and predict future trends, such as sales volume and purchase patterns. These forecasts can be further leveraged for cross-channel budget planning and allocation."

As a computer science, AI's implications are far-reaching, including everything from machine learning to deep learning, natural language processing and generation, neural networks, robotics, computer vision, facial recognition and more. However, I prefer PR 20/20 CEO Paul Roetzer's simple AI definition: "The algorithms, technologies and techniques that make machines smarter, and give them superhuman capabilities."

The founder of the Marketing Artificial Intelligence Institute, Roetzer recently hosted an AI conference that attracted more than 300 marketers and thought leaders from 12 countries. His team identified the following key conference takeaways, which I have abbreviated:

- AI as a technology is here to stay;
- AI marketing-based technology is in its infancy and is narrow in scope, with the ability for individual applications to do one function well;
- There is no one-stop AI marketing package in a plug-and-play process;
- The average company uses 90 tools for marketing across social, analytics, customer relationship management, e-commerce and more, meaning AI adoption is up against a fractured business system;

- AI capable of cognitive functioning and understanding environments as humans would, known as general AI, is years away, especially for marketing;
- When systems have been integrated correctly, AI can help marketers improve their craft faster and cheaper;
- AI's data-based predictions can help marketers make more informed decisions;
- AI can create personalization at scale for newsletters, website content and e-mails, including send times and subject lines;
- AI allows for real-time adjustment of ad spending while identifying top-performing media channels and aligning ad messaging with creative teams;
- AI can generate analytics reports and examine content for thoroughness;
- AI can write press releases.

Two conference presenters included powerful recommendations. To start working with AI, Trust Insights co-founder Christopher S. Penn recommends that marketers begin by asking questions such as, "What kind of machine learning do you use?" or "What kind of data is required to make use of this technology?"

Karen Hao, who reports on artificial intelligence for *MIT Technology Review*, suggests questions such as, "Can it see?" (it's AI technology if it can identify what it sees using computer vision and image processing), "Can it hear?" (it's AI, and specifically natural language processing, if it can hear, process, transcribe and respond in a useful, sensible way), "Can it read?" (it's AI if it can read what you type, analyze text for patterns, and respond in a useful way), "Can it move?" (it's AI if it can move without help based on what it hears and sees, without a programmed path) and "Can it reason?" (it's AI, specifically machine learning, if it is looking for patterns in massive amounts of data, and then using those patterns to make decisions and get smarter).

At least a few marine marketers are already asking these types of questions and using AI. Raphael Rabe, marketing automation specialist for MarineMax, says his organization uses HubSpot and Conversica's two-way conversational AI platform for customer engagement, pre- and post-event follow-up, and business development. Core duties revolve around lead qualification, messaging contacts and sales team lead distribution.

"There has been a great deal of ramping up and increased AI usage since we began using HubSpot in 2016 and Conversica in late 2017," Rabe says. "Employing our virtual AI assistant has resulted in 91,000 leads messaged and over 3,000 positive lead responses passed along to our sales team."

AI also plays an integral role in MarineMax's digital marketing environment and marketing automation process. Key processes that employ AI include workflow logic for managing leads, and lead scoring metrics.

All of this can seem wildly futuristic to legacy companies, Rabe says, as well as expensive. Most AI companies operate on a software as a service model, which means a third-party provider makes applications available to users over the internet. Before investing and adding the technology to any company, he says, communicating about it is key.

"Integrating AI technology into your current sales and marketing process can be a cumbersome task," he says. "Since implementing AI marketing automation tends to be an intimidating undertaking for most companies, it's best to start by speaking with your sales and marketing teams to determine their level of open-mindedness before attempting to implement large-scale operational changes."

Rabe sees a strong future for AI in marine marketing once the technology becomes more commonplace and accepted.

“The impact can potentially be huge, especially with consumer electronics products that pertain to the recreational boating space, including new machine-learned processes for determining and optimizing the best areas for fishing—ever-changing with Mother Nature—sonar mapping and much more,” he says. “Additionally, AI will eventually become a standard part of all boating navigation and vessel operating safety processes, similar to auto lane correct technology, which now comes standard in many new automobiles.”

Matt Sellhorst of Boat Dealer Profits, who trains and consults with OEMs and dealers on sales and marketing strategies, has integrated AI technology through Facebook’s Campaign Budget Optimization, DoubleClick Dynamic Creative, Facebook Pixel and Google Tag Manager. Together, they let the advertising platform determine which creative or targeting combinations are working best, based on the engagement type that is selected.

“Instead of having to guess which creative works best or which selects are the best, the AI does it for you,” Sellhorst says.

In his experience, using a lookalike audience—one whose demographics and interests match those of your current followers—in conjunction with Facebook Pixel and Google Tag Manager helps find new audience members. This strategy has outperformed other digital advertising efforts by up to 20 percent, he says.

In his work with hundreds of clients, however, he found that fewer than 80 percent had installed basic (free) pixel and tracking codes on their websites. Those codes are a prerequisite for AI functionality.

Sellhorst says marketers must understand the target market and ensure that messaging is spot-on. Otherwise, he warns, “you can train the AI to go after the wrong type of people that will engage with your ad but not buy your products. ... Understand the goal of your campaign is to sell stuff, not to just get clicks on your ads. AI will do exactly what you ask it to do, so be sure to train your pixel/tag based on the appropriate outcome.”

Like Rabe, Sellhorst says the marine marketing future is promising for AI. He envisions manufacturers taking a larger role in digital marketing, and partnering with dealers to create larger data sets. He says more organizations are likely to invest in improved management automation systems to segment and deliver higher-qualified leads.

At the same time, some marine marketers are either uninformed about or lukewarm to the idea of AI, while others fear its potential to eliminate jobs. Pacesetters in this field, however, suggest that since the AI revolution is upon us, smart marketers should embrace change, become educated and then strategically review what AI technologies can best improve marketing performance, efficiency and capabilities.

Sounds like a plan to me. Here’s a great resource to get started: Marketing AI Institute’s Ultimate Beginner’s Guide to AI in Marketing at [MarketingAIInstitute.com](https://www.marketingaiinstitute.com).

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