

Deloitte.

CMO Insights: **Trend 1**

Navigating uncertainty:

How CMOs are steering marketing strategy

Marketing leaders are tasked with shaping and communicating their vision to internal stakeholders across the breadth of their organisation and then reflecting that externally through brand and marketing. Senior marketers view soft and strategic skills as the key to the execution of this task.

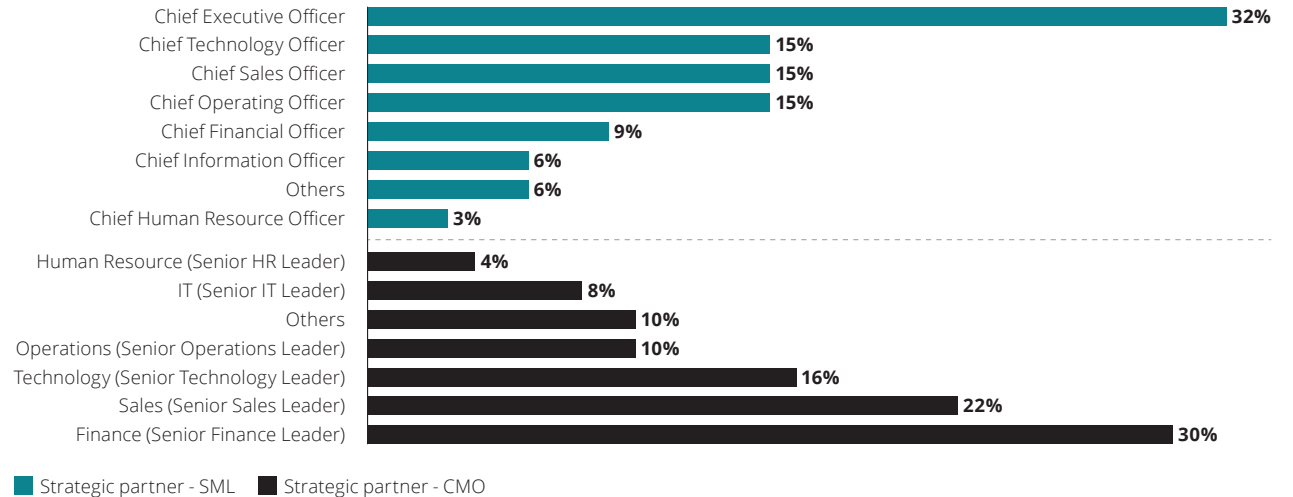
For the second year in a row, the economic environment is the most pressing concern, with uncertain market conditions influencing senior marketers' thinking and how they flex their strategies and optimise their teams in order to stay relevant. However, despite economic headwinds and shrinking marketing budgets, Chief Marketing Officers are increasingly confident that their budgets are being allocated optimally.

Marketing leaders wide-ranging influence

To deliver effective and integrated customer experiences, the role of Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) or Senior Marketing Leader (SML) relies heavily on effective cross-departmental collaboration. Yet, how does the level of seniority affect who marketers work most with and who do they view as their most important collaborator?

As CMO, your strategic partner will most likely be the CEO. In fact, for around one third of CMOs, their most important partner is the CEO. This reflects the need for the CMOs to connect the marketing vision of the firm to broader leadership objectives – to be working with, not just for, the CEO. Chief Technology

Figure 1: Who is your most important strategic partner in the organisation outside marketing?



Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N (CMO) = 34, N (SML) = 50

Officer (CTO) (15%), Chief Sales Officer (CSO) (15%) and Chief Operating Officer (COO) (15%), are the second most frequently selected by CMOs as their most important partner.

It is likely that over time a CMO's most important strategic partners will change given business conditions. For example, when innovation is the focus, the CTO may become more likely to be their key partner. Or when launching a new product, there might be an increased focus on synchronisation between marketing and sales, making the CSO their most important partner. As a CMO, it is important to be adaptable, recognising that your most important strategic partner can change over time as a reflection of internal and external conditions. The most successful CMOs place the business first, and marketing second, earning the trust of the CEO, CFO and the entire leadership team.¹

SMLs work more with finance and sales than any other function

SMLs show greater diversity in who they work with and who their strategic partners are than CMOs. Together, finance (30%) and sales (22%) make up just over half of SML's most important partners in marketing. The selection of finance and sales as keys partners underscores the pressure on senior marketers to demonstrate the financial impact of marketing initiatives on the organisation, moving beyond simply reporting costs, and focusing on the return on investment and growth they create for the organisation.

For SMLs, their most important partners are also the ones who they spend the most time with – 28 per cent work with sales most frequently while 24 per cent work with finance most frequently. This might reflect the more operational role of SMLs in ensuring that marketing initiatives are financially viable and tied to sales targets compared to CMOs' more strategic role. SMLs collaborating directly with finance and sales suggests that they are making use of financial metrics and sales performance insights to inform the wider marketing strategy.

CEOs are the most important partner for CMOs, but not their closest collaborator

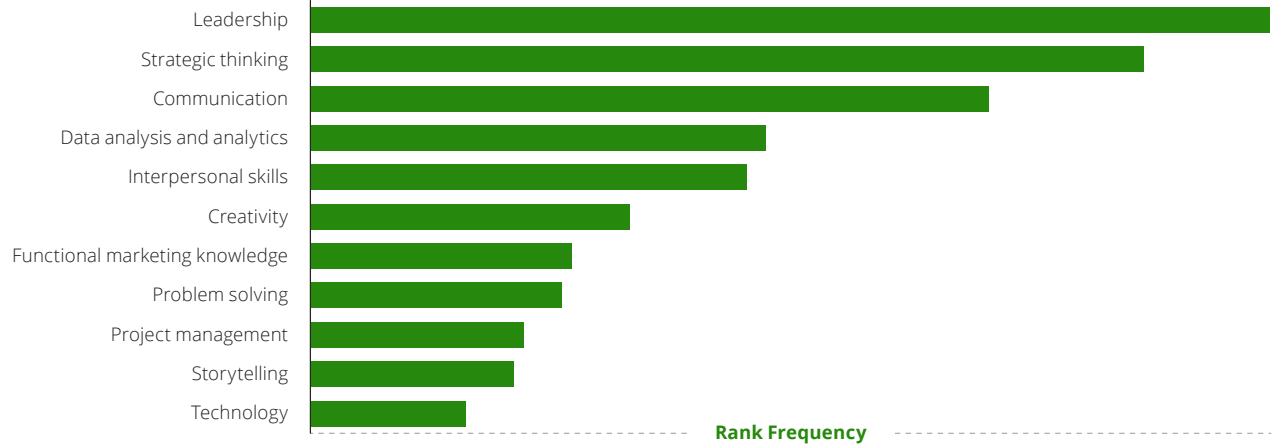
There is a notable difference between who CMOs report as their most important strategic partner and who they work with the most. For CMOs, the CEO is most commonly selected as their most important strategic partner (33%). Despite the prioritisation of the CEO as their most important strategic partner, both CSO (29%) and CTO (24%), rank above the CEO (21%) in terms of who they work the most with. For 15 per cent of CMOs, they work with the CEO less than any other C-suite executive. This highlights the disparity between who CMOs view as most important and who they collaborate most with. It is important that CMOs carve out adequate time with the CEO to ensure they are able to influence and help shape organisation-wide priorities like market positioning and growth planning.

Soft and strategic skills outrank technical know-how

CMOs and SMLs are aligned in choosing the same top three skills useful for their current role as leadership, strategic thinking and communication. This is the second year running where these have been found as the three most important skills. While leadership drives the overall vision, strategic thinking enables a roadmap to get there with communication acting as the pathway to make it clear to others. The mutually reinforcing relationship between these skills makes having all three essential for CMOs and SMLs and ensures that internal teams are aligned, stakeholders are adequately informed and the brand's voice resonates authentically with its audience.²

On the other hand, technology ranks as the least important skill. The marketers within our sample have likely reached a level of seniority where others are carrying out operational activities using marketing technologies, enabling them to prioritise higher level more strategic activities.

Figure 2: What skills are most useful for your current role?



Note: The rank frequency was determined by summing the total ranks for each option. Higher frequencies indicate higher ranking.

Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N = 84 (CMO+SML)

Economic conditions remain the central concern for marketers

For the second year in a row, economic conditions are viewed as the most pressing issues facing marketers. CMOs and SMLs are used to adapting in an economic downturn, where price sensitivity and reduced discretionary spend become a real factor in shifting consumer behaviours. Understanding customer behaviours and needs here is key.³

Current economic conditions are not just affecting consumers - many organisations have reduced their marketing budgets as a proportion of overall spend.^{4,5} Where marketing budgets are reduced, CMOs and SMLs are handed the unenviable task of trying to do more with fewer resources. Pressure on senior marketers is further intensified because when revenue is not growing or profit margins are becoming thinner, there is often an increased expectation for greater return on investment on marketing spend.⁶

Figure 3: What do you think are the most pressing issues you're facing in your role today?



Note: The rank frequency was determined by summing the total ranks for each option. Higher frequencies indicate higher ranking.

Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N = 84 (CMO+SML)

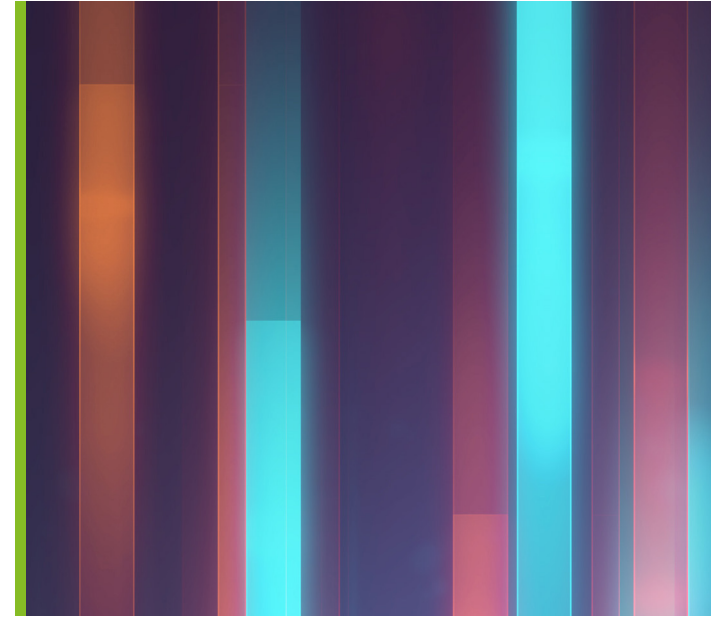
Digital transformation remains steadfast as the second most pressing issue and leveraging AI has risen two percentage points from last year, making it the joint third most pressing issue. The pressure to engage in digital transformation, and utilise technologies like AI, are likely because they enable marketers to tackle the other issues which marketers face more effectively. Digital transformation and

leveraging AI can allow marketers to collect and analyse data more effectively – enabling a more comprehensive understanding of what customers want, greater personalisation of experiences and better customer targeting and retention. More efficient data collection and analysis liberates time for marketers and allows them to dedicate more effort to more value-adding tasks.

Talent, societal and environmental concerns rank last for senior marketers

Availability of talent was ranked lowest in the list of pressing issues for marketers. Moreover, when it comes to identifying their most important strategic partner – both SMLs and CMOs ranked the human resource function as their least important partner. Economic conditions and the pressure felt most by marketers is likely a key contributor to these outcomes. As organisations have become more cost conscious and pressures have increased on marketers to demonstrate value for money, one consequence of this is likely lowering their cost base by reducing the number of new hires into the function.⁷ One report found that the number of people working in advertising and marketing in the UK fell by 14 per cent between 2019 – 2022.⁸

Societal and environmental concerns were ranked the second least pressing issues for CMOs. This is likely also driven by economic conditions as organisations focus on key growth areas. The issues which are most pressing for marketers are a reflection of consumer concerns. In the UK, the cost-of-living crisis has made most consumers more cost conscious and reduce discretionary spend – around 6 in 10 adults in Great Britain said they were spending less on non-essentials due to the cost of living.⁹ Economic hardship has meant that for many people, cost is increasingly the driving force behind purchase decisions and thus diminishing the role of social and environmental concerns on spending behaviours.¹⁰

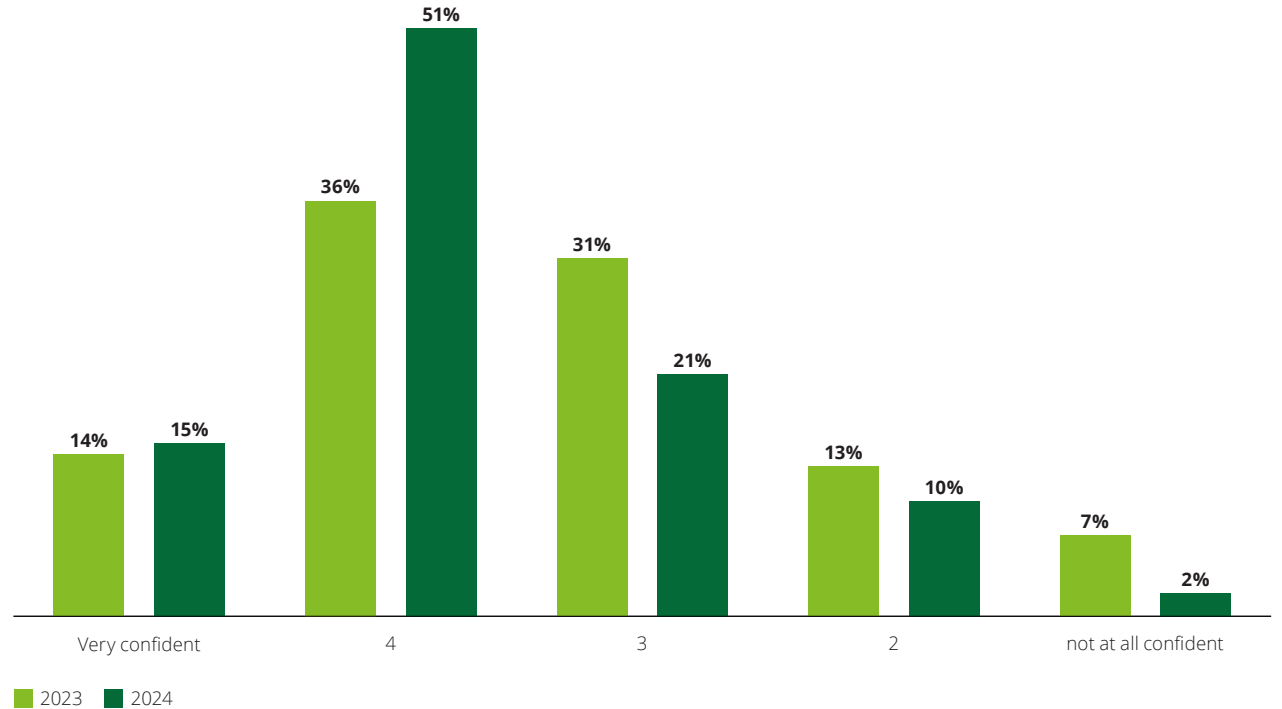


Marketers are growing increasingly confident their budget allocation is being used optimally

From 2023 to 2024, the number of senior marketers who are confident or very confident that their marketing budget allocation is being optimised has grown by 16 percentage points to 66 per cent. CMOs also tend to be more confident than their less senior counterparts, with 74 per cent of CMOs at least confident that their budgets are optimised compared with 62 per cent of SMLs.

An increasing emphasis on return on investment may be partially responsible for this growth in confidence. A 2024 study from Gartner found that marketing budgets as a proportion of company revenue declined from 9.1 per cent in 2023 to 7.7 per cent in 2024.¹¹ As marketing budgets fall, it is likely there has been increased focus on demonstrating measurable results. Given these pressures, senior marketers have likely become more focused on budget optimisation, effective resource allocation and spend monitoring.

Figure 4: On a scale where 1 means "not at all confident" and 5 means "very confident", how confident are you that your marketing budget allocation is optimised?



Source: Deloitte analysis, 2025

N (2023 CMO+SML) = 72, N (2024 CMO+SML) = 84

Key recommendations

- **Choose who you spend time with wisely**

While CMOs ranked the CEO as their number one most important strategic partner, this is not reflective of who they spend the most time with. For some CMOs, they spend less time with the CEO than any other member of the C-suite. To bridge this gap, CMOs should meet with the CEO and their other most important partners regularly. This can help to ensure CMOs can appropriately exert influence across the organisation and align the marketing function with organisation-wide objectives.

- **Leverage digital transformation and AI**

CMOs and SMLs should utilise data analytics and AI-powered solutions to gain deeper insights into customer behaviour, predict market trends and personalise customer experiences at scale. By leveraging data and AI, marketers can best position themselves to deal with many of their most pressing issues like the current economic conditions, changing consumer preferences and the need for efficient resource allocation.

- **Use data to demonstrate ROI on marketing spend**

As marketing budgets in organisations tighten, it is important that both CMOs and SMLs are able to measure and track the impact of marketing initiatives effectively. Collaboration with other departments, like finance and sales, can help marketers gather data on the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. While CMOs are increasingly confident that their budgets are being spent optimally, it is crucial that they have the data to substantiate this.

Endnotes

1. **What's Happening With the Role of the CMO?** | Wall Street Journal, 2024.
2. **15 Things You Need To Create A Highly Successful Career As A CMO** | TheCMO, 2024.
3. **REDI-Updates: How are Consumer Trends Changing in the Cost-Of-Living Crisis?** | City-REDI, University of Birmingham, 2023.
4. **Gartner CMO Survey Reveals Marketing Budgets Have Dropped to 7.7% of Overall Company Revenue in 2024** | Gartner, 2024.
5. **Don't Cut Your Marketing Budget in a Recession** | Harvard Business Review, 2020.
6. **CMOs Are Under Pressure Again: Tips For Navigating Through Turbulent Times** | Forbes, 2024.
7. **CMOs are under intense pressure to get more bang for their buck** | Deloitte Africa, 2024.
8. **Ad Association puts Investment in Talent at Heart of 3-year strategy** | Creative Salon, 2023.
9. **Cost of living latest insights** | Office for National Statistics, 2024.
10. **The Sustainable Consumer** | Deloitte UK, 2024.
11. **Gartner CMO Survey Reveals Marketing Budgets Have Dropped to 7.7% of Overall Company Revenue in 2024** | Gartner, 2024.

Recognition and appreciation

Special thanks to the Deloitte CMO Programme team for their insight and supporting the research.



William Grobel

Director
Technology & Transformation
wgrobel@deloitte.co.uk



Fiona Elkins

Senior Manager
Brand & Marketing
felkins@deloitte.co.uk



Jennifer Holland

Insight Manager
Technology & Transformation
jd holland@deloitte.co.uk



Douglas Gunn

Assistant Insight Manager
Technology & Transformation
dgunn@deloitte.co.uk



Shubham Gupta

Research Analyst
Technology & Transformation
shubhgupta@deloitte.co.uk

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Mark Beavers



This publication has been written in general terms and we recommend that you obtain professional advice before acting or refraining from action on any of the contents of this publication. Deloitte LLP accepts no liability for any loss occasioned to any person acting or refraining from action as a result of any material in this publication.

Deloitte LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England and Wales with registered number OC303675 and its registered office at 1 New Street Square, London EC4A 3HQ, United Kingdom.

In this publication, references to Deloitte are references to Deloitte LLP. Deloitte LLP is the United Kingdom affiliate of Deloitte NSE LLP, a member firm of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee ("DTTL"). DTTL and each of its member firms are legally separate and independent entities. DTTL and Deloitte NSE LLP do not provide services to clients. Please see www.deloitte.com/about to learn more about our global network of member firms.

© 2025 Deloitte LLP. All rights reserved.

Designed by CoRe Creative Services. RITM1892592