
Balancing investment into new technology with rewired leadership, measurement, talent and operating models

*Adtech isn't broken.
The operating model
around it is.
And 2026 is the year to fix it.*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rafael Schwarz

is a senior board advisor and commercial strategist with 20+ year track record in developing teams and driving business growth for leading brands, agencies and platforms across consumer goods, media and digital sectors.

› RAFAEL SCHWARZ



After exploding onto the scene in 2011 through large marketing platforms, marketing and advertising technology (martech & adtech) promised to revolutionise marketing by enabling real-time personalisation, automating complex workflows and providing marketers with unprecedented visibility into customer behaviour. The adtech market was worth USD 131 billion in 2023 and was projected to increase at a CAGR of 13.3 percent, reaching a value of more than USD 215 billion by 2027—almost doubling in size in just five years. The result has been an explosion of vendors, tools and potential functionality.

However, despite the billions invested in adtech over the past decade, most organisations are still stuck in automation mode — using new tools to digitise old processes instead of unlocking new growth. Even leading organisations still largely cling to outdated practices like batch-and-blast email campaigns, simple A/B testing, rules-based personalisation, lead scoring and scheduled social media posting. Most still struggle to clearly articulate or measure ROI, barely scratching the surface of what's possible and often failing to deliver meaningful business results at scale.

In my experience as an advisor to many leading CMOs, I have seen the following key issues:

- C-suite leaders believe best in class adtech can drive growth and loyalty – yet most companies haven't moved beyond basic tactics like batch-and-blast emails and simple A/B tests;
- The adtech market has exploded from 350 tools in 2012 to nearly 15,000 today – creating complexity that prevents CMOs from fully determining and capturing value; and
- Not a single CMO that I have spoken to over the past year could clearly quantify adtech ROI – because measurement frameworks rarely tie to strategic KPIs such as CLV, margin impact or speed to market.

5 recommendations for CMOs to upgrade their adtech game in 2026

After largely failing to realise the potential of the first generation of adtech, AI presents an opportunity to fundamentally redefine the space. But that will require business, marketing and tech leaders to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. To capture this promise, marketing leaders need to focus on the following five critical areas:

1. Elevate martech to the C suite: Martech underperforms when it sits in a silo. Growth only happens when executive sponsorship, governance and cross-functional alignment are in place;
2. Stop adding tools. Simplify your stack. Complexity is now the silent killer of marketing performance;
3. Align adtech measurement with business outcomes. I have advocated for years that vanity metrics won't save marketing leaders. CMOs must tie martech to revenue, margin and customer lifetime value. More insights in attached Forbes article;
4. Close the capability gap. One-third of organisations cite under-skilled talent as a primary barrier. Tools only become engines when teams know how to drive them. According to Deloitte Digital, companies should hence invest 10% of their budget on tools, 20% on UI/UX and 70% on employee trainings and upskilling; and
5. Use AI as an operating system – not a feature. The future isn't more tools – it's intelligent systems powering real-time personalisation, predictive journeys and unified customer graphs (dashboards).

The bottom line for CMOs: This is the moment to transform adtech from a disconnected tech stack into a true growth engine. Not by spending more – but by rewiring leadership, measurement, talent, and operating models around customer-centric growth.