UNIVERSITÀ POLITECNICA DELLE MARCHE

FACOLTÀ DI ECONOMIA "GIORGIO FUÀ"

Bachelor's degree in Digital Economics and Business

Artificial Intelligence in Digital Marketing for SMEs

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Academic Year 2025/2026

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technologies has profoundly changed the way companies operate, communicate with customers, and compete in the market. In this context, digital marketing has become increasingly important for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), providing new opportunities to reach customers, strengthening their online presence, and monitoring marketing performance through data and analytics. At the same time, the growing adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming several marketing activities, from content creation and digital advertising to data analysis and strategic decision-making. AI can offer SMEs opportunities to improve the efficiency of their marketing processes and make better use of available resources, although its adoption also involves challenges related to skills, data, privacy, and the integration of new technologies into existing business processes.

Against this background, this thesis explores the role of Artificial Intelligence in digital marketing, with particular attention to its applications in SMEs. The theoretical analysis is complemented by the case of M.C. Marketing e Comunicazione, an Ancona-based company providing marketing and communication services. The case examines how AI is being integrated into activities such as content creation, advertising, and AI Business Advisory, with the aim of understanding the opportunities that these technologies can offer to SMEs and their marketing activities.

CHAPTER 1

DIGITAL MARKETING AS A COMPETITIVE TOOL FOR SMES

1.1 The role of SMEs in the digital economy

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) account for more than 99% of all businesses in the European Union, making them the backbone of the European economy (European Commission, 2020). According to the European Commission, enterprises are classified as micro, small, or medium-sized based on the number of employees, annual turnover, and balance sheet total. SMEs are defined as firms employing fewer than 250 people while meeting specific financial thresholds (European Commission, 2020). Today, approximately 23 million SMEs operate within the European Union, highlighting their significant contribution to employment, economic growth, and innovation (European Commission, 2020).

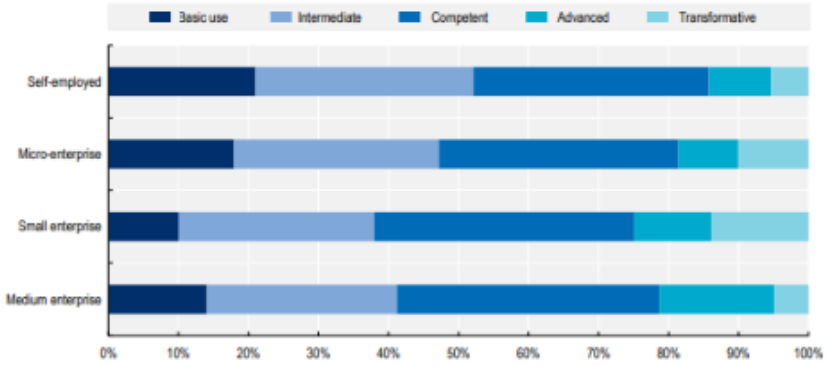
Beyond their numerical importance, SMEs make a substantial contribution to entrepreneurship, regional development, and economic competitiveness, but on the other hand, they face greater constraints, particularly in terms of financial resources, technological investment, and access to specialized skills (European Commission, 2023).

In recent years, the growing emphasis placed on innovation and digitalization within European policies highlights the need for SMEs to adapt to an increasingly dynamic and technology-driven marketplace (European Commission, 2023). To remain competitive, organizations must adopt digital tools capable of improving operational efficiency, strengthening customer relationships, and expanding their market reach.

At the same time, digital transformation has significantly reshaped consumer behaviors. Customers increasingly rely on online channels to search for information, compare products and services, interact with brands, and make purchasing decisions (Chaffey &

Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). According to the OECD (2025), digital technologies enable firms to access new markets, improve operational efficiency, and respond more effectively to changing market conditions. However, the level of digital maturity among SMEs remains highly heterogeneous (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. Digital maturity among SMEs



Source: 2025 OECD D4SME Survey

According to the OECD (2025), only a limited proportion of businesses can be classified as digitally advanced or transformative, while the majority remain concentrated in the intermediate and competent stages of digital adoption. 25% of small enterprises and 21% of medium-sized enterprises report adopting advanced or transformative digital tools, compared with 19% of micro-enterprises and 14% of self-employed businesses.

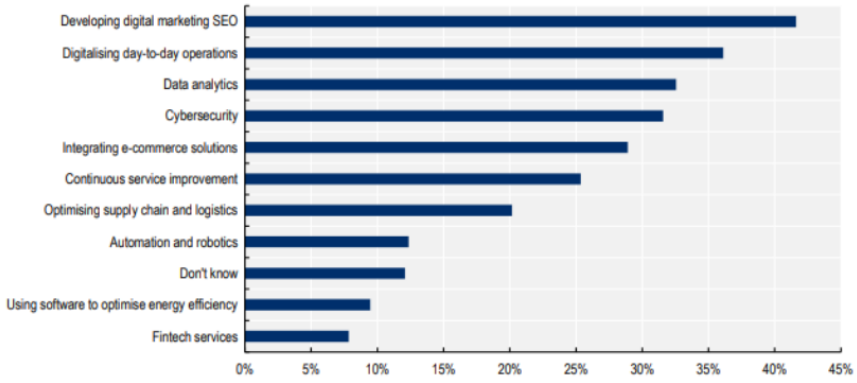
These findings suggest that the adoption of digital technologies is closely linked to the availability of financial resources, digital skills, and organizational capabilities. According to the OECD (2025), the most significant challenges include maintenance costs, hardware investment, and the lack of time available for employee training. These constraints are particularly relevant for smaller firms, which often operate with limited financial and human resources.

Alongside technological investment, the development of digital skills has become increasingly important. The OECD survey identifies Digital Marketing and Search

Engine Optimization (SEO) as the most requested areas of training. According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022), digital marketing supports the core objectives of marketing by enabling organizations to identify customer needs, anticipate customer demand by analyzing online behaviors and interactions, and satisfy customer requirements through more personalized, accessible, and efficient digital channels.

Furthermore, when integrated into an organization's overall business strategy, digital marketing creates opportunities that extend beyond customer communication. It enables firms to increase market penetration, enter new geographical markets, develop new digital products and services diversifying their business activities (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022). As illustrated in Figure 1.2, Digital Marketing and SEO account for the largest share of training demand among SMEs (42%), followed by the digitalization of day-to-day operations (36%) and data analytics (33%), strengthening their ability to compete in an increasingly digital marketplace.

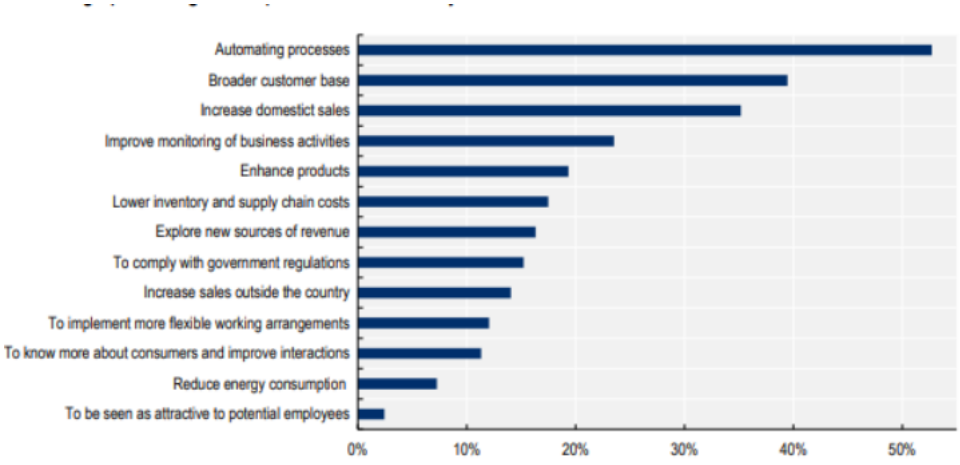
Figure 1.2. Most Requested Digital Skills Training Areas among SMEs



Source: 2025 OECD D4SME Survey

Beyond the development of digital skills, SMEs also recognize the tangible benefits generated by digital transformation. As illustrated in Figure 1.3, the OECD (2025) identifies process automation (53%), customer base expansion (39%), and increased domestic sales (35%) as the most frequently reported advantages of digital adoption.

Figure 1.3. Benefits of Digital Adoption among SMEs



Source: 2025 OECD D4SME Survey.

Overall, these findings suggest that the adoption of digital technologies can generate tangible benefits for SMEs. Among the various digital technologies available to SMEs, digital marketing has emerged as one of the most important tools for exploiting these opportunities. Understanding how SMEs can effectively leverage digital marketing strategies is therefore essential in today's digital economy.

1.2 Digital Marketing Communications

Communication is the business function that has undergone the most profound transformation following the advent of the Internet. One of the main changes concerns the loss of control over content.

The widespread adoption of Web 2.0 platforms, such as social networks and blogs, has enabled consumers and users to create content related to companies and brands, giving rise to what is commonly referred to as user-generated content (UGC).

Another significant transformation is the decline in consumers' attention span in the last few years, falling from 12 seconds to 8.25 seconds, challenging brands communication (Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

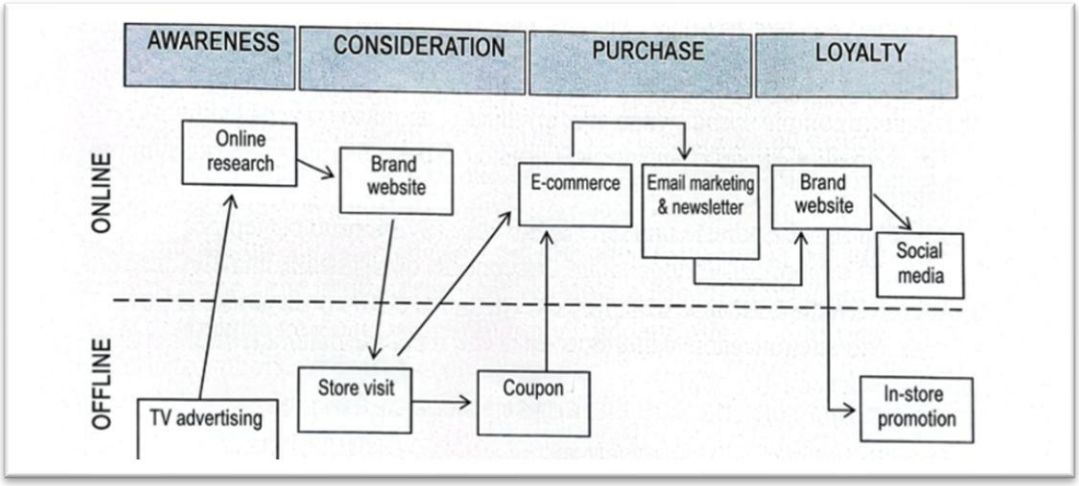
At the same time, technological advancements have enabled the development of personalized communication channels, storing customer-based data and feedback, delivering highly targeted and personalized messages to specific audiences through techniques such as behavioral advertising (Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022) identify several digital communication channels that support different marketing objectives. These include Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which improves a company’s visibility in organic search results; Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising, where advertisers pay only when users click on sponsored advertisements; Display Advertising, aimed at increasing brand awareness through visual advertisements; Affiliate Marketing, where external partners promote products or services in exchange for a commission; and Email Marketing, that is a direct marketing tool that uses electronic mail to deliver different types of messages related to a company's activities.

Here organizations can employ various categories including newsletters, promotional emails, welcome messages, but the effectiveness depends on the quality of the mailing list and in the ability to cluster customers according to shared characteristics (Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

Rather than operating independently, these channels are most effective when integrated into a coherent digital marketing strategy (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4 Example of customer journey



Source: Bartoloni, Marinelli and Pascucci (2019).

It is important to examine the Customer Journey, a conceptual model used to represent the overall customer experience through the sequence of interactions that individuals have with a company across multiple touchpoints before, during, and after a purchase (Bartoloni et al., 2019).

One of the most common practices is showrooming, whereby consumers visit a physical store to examine a product before purchasing it online, where it is often available at a lower price ("try offline, purchase online").

Conversely, webrooming refers to the practice of gathering information about a product online—through comparison websites, customer reviews, and other digital sources—before completing the purchase in a physical store ("research online, purchase offline").

Another increasingly widespread practice is Click & Collect, in which customers order products online and collect them in a physical store, where payment may also be completed if necessary. Modern purchasing journeys have become even more complex, as consumers frequently alternate between online and offline channels not only across

different stages of the buying process but also within the same stage, using them interchangeably and continuously (Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

To ensure an effective customer experience, several guiding principles should be considered. First, thematic consistency across touchpoints is necessary to ensure that all communication channels are connected through coherent content and storytelling. Second, consistency of brand messages is essential so that communications across different touchpoints accurately reflects the company's identity and brand image. Finally, context sensitivity requires touchpoints to adapt to customers' specific situations (e.g., at home, at work, or while travelling) as well as to their individual preferences, characteristics, and behaviors.

Integration between online and offline touchpoints enables the delivery of a seamless customer experience across all channels (Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

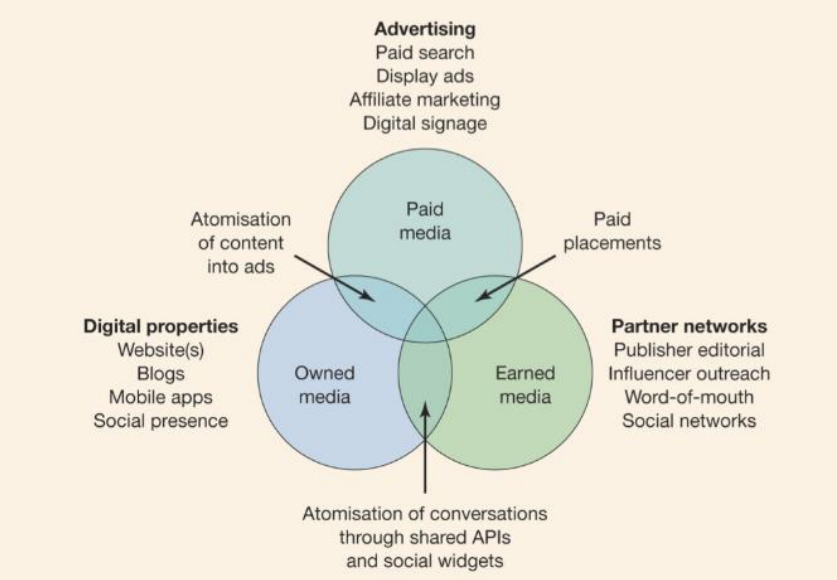
Building on this perspective, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022) propose the RACE framework, which structures the digital customer journey into four interconnected stages: Reach, Act, Convert, and Engage. Reach focuses on increasing brand awareness and attracting potential customers. Act refers to the stage in which customers interact with the organization's digital content by visiting websites, exploring products or services. Convert represents the stage at which they complete a purchase or another desired action, such as registering for a service or submitting an enquiry. Finally, Engage aims to build long-term customer relationships by fostering satisfaction, loyalty and repeat purchases.

Consequently, organizations need to integrate different types of media to deliver the right message through the most appropriate channel at each stage of customer experience.

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2022) classify digital communication channels into three complementary categories (see Figure 1.5):

- Paid Media refers to promotional activities financed by the organization, particularly important during the “Reach” stage
- Owned Media consists of digital assets directly controlled by the organization, such as websites, blogs, mobile applications, playing a central role during the “Act and Convert” stages
- Earned Media refers to exposure generated by customers and external stakeholders through online reviews, recommendations, social sharing, valuable during the Engage stage (Pascucci & Cioli, 2025).

Figure 1.5 The Intersection of Paid, Owned and Earned Media



Source: adapted from Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2022

The increasing integration of digital communication channels has also led to a substantial growth in the volume of data generated through marketing activities. The following section therefore examines the main performance indicators and analytical tools that enable organizations to evaluate marketing effectiveness and support data-driven decision-making.

1.3 Measuring Marketing Performance through Data and Analytics

Digital marketing analytics refers to the process of collecting, measuring, analyzing, and interpreting behavioral data, such as the pages users visit, the actions they perform, such as clicks or purchases, the duration of their sessions, that enables organizations to evaluate digital marketing performance, understand user behaviors, and support more informed marketing decisions (Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

Before undertaking any digital analytics activity, it is essential to design a measurement framework based on clearly defined marketing objectives for the online activity under analysis (Pascucci, 2013). For example, when monitoring a website's performance, organizations must first identify their strategic marketing goals. In the case of an e-commerce website, the primary objective is generally to increase online sales, whereas a branding website mainly aims to enhance brand awareness. Once these objectives have been established, they must be translated into measurable metrics capable of assessing their achievement. A metric is a quantitative measure used to describe a phenomenon or trend related to an online activity, while the metrics that are most relevant to business performance are commonly referred to as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). For an e-commerce website, a typical KPI is the conversion rate, defined as the ratio between the number of completed orders and the total number of website visits. In digital advertising campaigns, commonly used KPIs include impressions and click-through rate (CTR) (Bartoloni et al., 2025).

The importance of establishing clear measurement objectives is particularly relevant in digital environments, where organizations can collect large volumes of data across multiple channels and stages of the customer journey.

Today, Google Analytics 4 (GA4) represents one of the most widely used digital analytics platforms. The platform enables organizations to analyze interactions occurring across websites and mobile applications. Unlike previous versions of Google Analytics, GA4 is based on an event-driven data model, in which user interactions are recorded as events. These may include page views, clicks, scrolling activity, video engagement, purchases, and other predefined or customized actions (Google Analytics, n.d.).

Although analytics platforms provide a wide range of indicators, companies typically rely on a set of fundamental metrics to evaluate marketing performance. Among the most relevant are reach, engagement, and mentions, particularly in social media environments. Reach represents the number of users who have been exposed to a company's content and therefore provides an indication of the potential size of its audience. Engagement refers to the voluntary interactions users perform in relation to a company's digital activities, including likes, comments, shares, and other forms of participation. Mentions represent another important indicator, as users may discuss a brand or product outside the company's official communication channels by explicitly mentioning the brand's social media account or page. Monitoring such activity enables organizations to assess online brand visibility and identify conversations occurring beyond their owned channels (Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

Online advertising campaigns generate an additional set of measurable performance indicators that allow organizations to evaluate and optimize campaign effectiveness. Platforms such as Google Ads and Meta Ads enable advertisers to monitor campaign performance and adjust different campaign parameters, including audiences, budgets, bidding strategies, and targeting criteria.

Advertising performance metrics can be grouped into three main categories: exposure, interaction, and conversion metrics.

Exposure metrics measure the visibility of advertising content. Another relevant indicator is frequency, which measures the average number of times an individual user has been exposed to an advertisement (Google Ads, n.d.; Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

Interaction metrics evaluate users' responses to advertising content. The most common indicator is the number of clicks, which represents the number of times users interact with an advertisement by clicking on it. More specific indicators include link clicks, which measure clicks on a particular link or call to action, and landing page views, which indicate that users successfully reached the destination webpage after interacting with the advertisement. Another widely used pricing metric is Cost per Click (CPC), representing the average cost associated with each click generated by an advertisement. The Click-Through Rate (CTR) is calculated as the ratio between clicks and impressions and provides an indication of an advertisement's ability to attract users and generate traffic toward the intended digital channel (Google Ads, n.d.; Bartoloni et al., 2025).

Another fundamental indicator of performance is the Return on Advertising Spend (ROAS), which measures the revenue generated in relation to the amount invested in advertising. ROAS is calculated by comparing the conversion value attributed to an advertising campaign with the advertising expenditure required to generate those results (Google Ads, n.d.; Gregori and Pascucci, 2025).

The effective use of marketing analytics therefore requires organizations to move beyond the simple collection of data and focus on the interpretation and application of insights. Systematic analysis of marketing data allows organizations to evaluate the effectiveness

of current campaigns, identify areas for improvement, refine future strategies, and support overall business performance (HubSpot, 2025).

However, as the volume and complexity of digital data continue to increase, manual analysis alone is becoming increasingly difficult. Organizations are therefore adopting Artificial Intelligence to process large datasets, identify behavioral patterns, generate predictive insights, and support faster and more accurate decision-making (McKinsey & Company, 2025). The next chapter examines how Artificial Intelligence is reshaping digital marketing by enhancing content creation, advertising, customer engagement, and marketing analytics.

CHAPTER 2

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR DIGITAL MARKETING OPTIMIZATION

2.1 Fundamentals of Artificial Intelligence and Its Business Applications

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be broadly defined as the ability of machines to perform cognitive functions typically associated with human intelligence, including learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, language understanding, and decision-making (McKinsey & Company, 2025). Unlike traditional computer systems, which operate according to predefined instructions, AI systems can process large volumes of data, identify patterns, learn from previous information, and generate output without being explicitly programmed for every possible situation (McKinsey & Company, 2025).

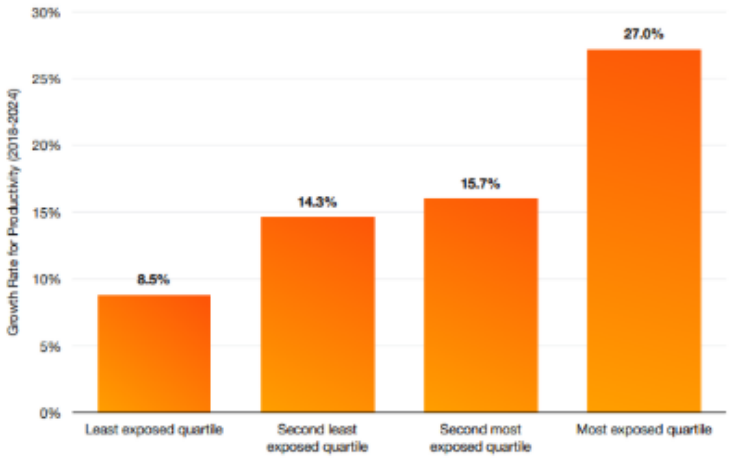
The relevance of AI in business can therefore be understood not only in terms of technological innovation, but also in relation to the broader objective of creating value for customers and improving firms' competitiveness. From a marketing perspective, AI can increasingly support several processes by improving the analysis of information, facilitating decision-making, and enabling more personalized interactions. McKinsey & Company (2025) similarly emphasizes that the value of AI does not derive simply from adopting the technology, but from integrating it into organizational processes in ways that enhance human capabilities and generate measurable business outcomes. AI should therefore be considered not as an isolated technological solution, but as a capability that can contribute to broader organizational and marketing objectives.

This perspective is particularly relevant when considering the evolution from traditional analytical applications of AI towards Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI).

While both approaches rely on data and machine learning, their primary purposes differ. Analytical AI is mainly oriented towards identifying patterns, supporting predictions, and extracting insights from existing information, whereas Generative AI is designed to produce new outputs based on the patterns learned from training data (Gregori & Pascucci, 2025). The two approaches can consequently complement one another within the same business process: analytical systems can support the interpretation of customer and market data, while generative systems can transform information and instructions into new forms of content and communication. From a marketing perspective, this combination is particularly relevant because effective decision-making increasingly depends both on understanding available data and on translating these insights into customer-facing activities. Among the most significant developments in Generative AI are Large Language Models (LLMs), which can process and generate human language. Their training on large amounts of textual data enables them to predict linguistic sequences and produce coherent outputs in response to specific instructions. In digital marketing, this capability can support activities such as advertising copywriting, blog writing, social media content, email campaigns, SEO-related tasks, and customer service (Gregori & Pascucci, 2025). These applications illustrate how AI can increasingly participate in activities that were traditionally performed directly by marketing and customer service personnel. However, the expansion of AI capabilities also introduces limitations that need to be considered alongside its potential benefits. The ability of AI systems to generate apparently convincing outputs does not necessarily guarantee that these outputs are accurate, neutral, or appropriate. The need to combine technological capabilities with organizational and human resources becomes evident when considering the current level of AI adoption. The McKinsey Global Survey on the State of AI reports

that 88% of organizations use AI in at least one business function, compared with 78% in the previous year. At the same time, however, approximately two-thirds of organizations remain in the experimentation or piloting stages, while only around one-third report having started to scale AI across the organization (McKinsey & Company, 2025). These figures reveal an important distinction between AI adoption and AI integration: the fact that an organization uses AI does not necessarily mean that the technology has been fully incorporated into its business model or organizational processes. This distinction is particularly significant when adoption data is considered alongside evidence concerning the economic effects of AI. PwC (2025) reports that industries with the highest exposure to AI experienced a substantial increase in revenue per employee compared with industries with lower exposure. As shown in Figure 2.1, revenue per employee increased by 27.0% in the most AI-exposed industries, compared with 8.5% in the least exposed industries.

Figure 2.1. Industries growth rate

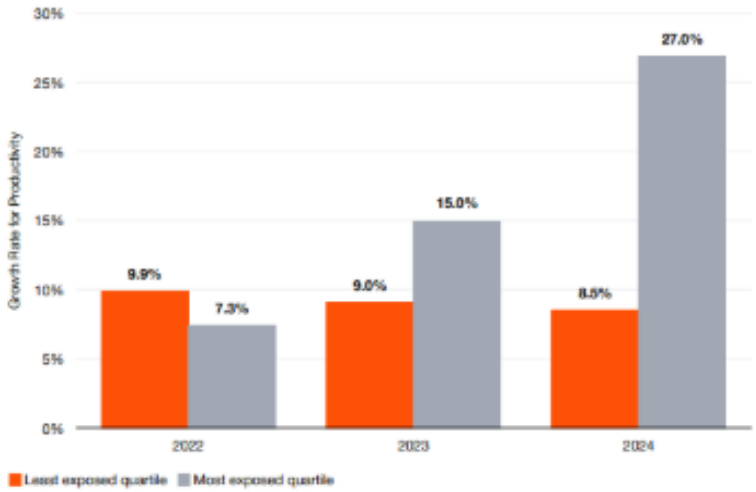


Source: PwC (2025),

The relationship between AI exposure and productivity has also strengthened over time. PwC (2025) reports that productivity growth in the most AI-exposed industries increased

from 7.3% in 2022 to 27.0% in 2024, while the least exposed industries recorded considerably more limited changes over the same period (Figure 2.2). Although these data do not by themselves establish a direct causal relationship between AI adoption and productivity, they indicate a growing association between AI exposure and economic performance.

Figure 2.2. Year's growth rate



Source: PwC (2025)

Effective implementation also has an important human dimension. PwC (2025) highlights the growing demand for AI-related skills and the wage premiums associated with these capabilities, indicating that the diffusion of AI is simultaneously transforming the skills required in the labor market. This reinforces the idea that AI adoption cannot be reduced to investment in technological infrastructure alone. Organizations need employees capable of interpreting AI-generated outputs, integrating these technologies into existing workflows, and applying human judgment where technological systems remain limited. In this respect, the creation of business value through AI depends on the interaction between technology, organizational processes, and human capabilities (McKinsey & Company, 2025; PwC, 2025).

The following section focuses specifically on the application of these technologies to digital marketing, examining their impact on content creation, advertising, customer engagement, and marketing analytics.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence for Digital Marketing Optimization

Artificial Intelligence has become increasingly integrated into digital marketing, supporting activities that range from content production and customer communication to advertising, search engine optimization, and marketing analytics. Recent evidence shows that content generation represents the most widespread application of AI in marketing (44%), followed by email marketing (38%), social media management (36%), digital advertising and audience targeting (34%), customer experience and chatbots (29%), and search engine optimization (28%) (Marinelli et al., 2025). The breadth of these applications suggests that AI is not limited to the automation of individual tasks but can support different stages of the marketing process.

One of the main areas in which this evolution can be observed is the collection and interpretation of customer information. AI can support customer segmentation, insight generation, and customer experience management by processing large volumes of data and identifying patterns that may be difficult to detect through traditional methods. Web listening is a relevant example, as AI-based systems can monitor online conversations about brands, products, and services and analyze both the semantic and emotional dimensions of user-generated content (Marinelli et al., 2025). These capabilities can provide marketers with a more detailed understanding of customer perceptions and preferences, which can then be used to inform communication and personalization strategies. The growing role of AI in marketing analytics reflects the same shift: according

to HubSpot (2025), 36% of AI-using marketers employ AI for data analysis and reporting, indicating that these technologies are increasingly used not only to create content but also to support the interpretation of marketing information.

AI is also changing the way marketing content is produced and adapted to different audiences. Generative AI can reduce the time required for content ideation and drafting while facilitating the adaptation of messages across different formats, channels, and customer segments (McKinsey & Company, 2025). However, the increasing use of AI for content production does not eliminate the role of marketing professionals. HubSpot (2025) reports that only a small proportion of marketers publish AI-generated content without modifications, suggesting that human intervention remains important for reviewing outputs, maintaining quality, and ensuring consistency with the brand's identity and communication objectives. AI can therefore increase the efficiency and scalability of content production without replacing the strategic and creative contribution of human professionals.

Beyond content and analytics, AI can also influence decisions concerning how products and services are promoted and offered to customers. In programmatic advertising, predictive algorithms can use information about users and their online behavior to select appropriate advertising channels, formats, and messages for different audience segments (Marinelli et al., 2025).

The integration of AI into digital marketing is also affecting the way consumers search for and discover information. Search behavior is increasingly based on natural-language interactions, requiring technologies to move beyond simple keyword matching a more comprehensive interpretation of user intent. According to Think with Google (2025), developments in AI-powered Search are contributing to this shift by enabling a better

understanding of users' intent and making search results and advertising more relevant to their queries.

For marketers, this development has implications for both SEO and customer experience, as visibility increasingly depends not only on the presence of specific keywords but also on the relevance of content to the underlying needs and intentions of users.

The effective use of AI therefore requires marketers to combine technological capabilities with strategic judgement, creativity, and critical evaluation. Rather than replacing human expertise, AI can be understood as a tool that expands the ability of marketing professionals to process information, personalize activities, and make decisions, provided that its outputs remain subject to appropriate human control.

2.3 Opportunities and Challenges of AI Adoption in SMEs

The adoption of Artificial Intelligence can offer SMEs significant opportunities to improve their operations, decision-making processes, and customer relationships, while also presenting challenges related to the resources and capabilities required for its effective implementation. For SMEs, AI can be particularly valuable because it can support the automation of repetitive activities, the analysis of large volumes of data, and the improvement of business processes, helping firms increase efficiency and make more informed decisions (Mittal et al., 2024). These opportunities, however, do not depend solely on the availability of AI technologies but on identifying where it can generate a concrete contribution to business activities and aligning its use with the firm's strategic priorities.

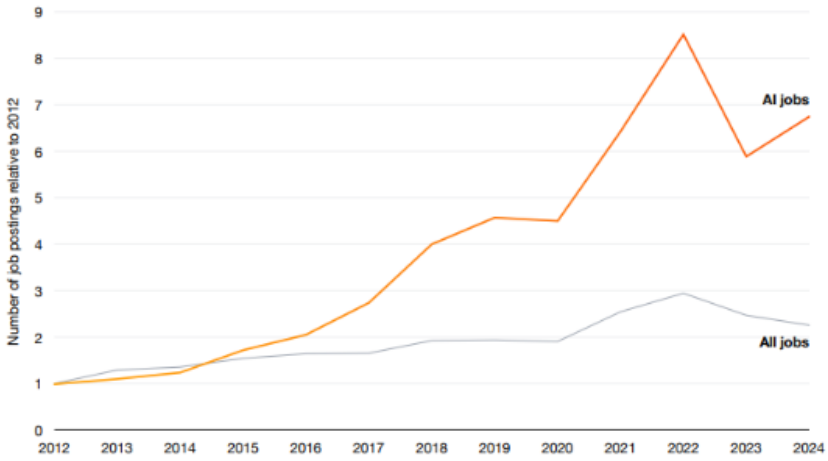
The benefits of AI adoption are also closely connected to the organizational conditions in which the technology is introduced. Mittal et al. (2024) highlights the importance of

factors such as digital capabilities, organizational innovativeness, and strategic vision in supporting successful AI adoption.

PwC (2025) highlights the positive impact of AI on workforce development. Rather than replacing employees, AI is reshaping job roles by increasing the importance of unique human skills such as creativity, critical thinking, empathy, and strategic decision-making. By automating repetitive and routine activities, employees can focus on higher-value tasks that require judgement, problem-solving, and interpersonal capabilities.

Figure 2.3 further supports this trend by showing that the demand for AI-related jobs has grown considerably faster than overall job postings since 2012. This evidence suggests that organizations are investing not only in AI technologies but also in developing the skills required to effectively integrate and manage these technologies within business processes.

Figure 2.3. Growth of AI-related jobs

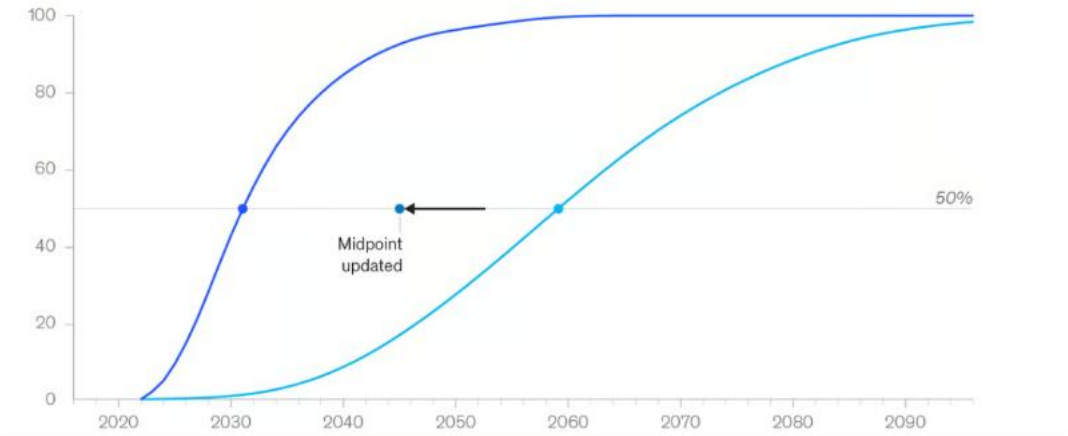


Source: PwC analysis, 2025

The rapid advancement of generative AI has significantly expanded the technical potential for automation, accelerating expected adoption trajectories.

Figure 2.4 illustrates this projected acceleration in AI adoption. Compared with previous forecasts, the emergence of generative AI has shifted the adoption curve forward, indicating that the midpoint of AI diffusion is expected to be reached considerably earlier than initially anticipated.

Figure 2.4. Projected AI adoption over time: acceleration driven by Generative AI.



Source: McKinsey Global Institute Analysis (2023)

Despite its considerable potential, AI adoption remains particularly challenging. According to *Harvard Business Review*, SMEs require access to specialized training, expert guidance, and collaborative networks that enable managers to better understand how AI can enhance overall business performance. At the same time, organizations must address issues related to data privacy, cybersecurity, ethical AI use, and the continuous development of employees' digital capabilities. Successfully navigating these constraints requires a clear digital strategy that integrates technological innovation with organizational learning and effective leadership.

Overall, the literature suggests that AI should be viewed not merely as a technological innovation but as a strategic resource capable of supporting sustainable growth and long-term competitive advantage (Mittal et al., 2024).

CHAPTER 3

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF M.C. MARKETING E COMUNICAZIONE

3.1 Company Profile and Business Activities

MC Marketing e Comunicazione is a digital marketing and communication agency based in Ancona, Italy, founded in 1979. Since 1997, the company has specialized in web development, digital marketing, and inbound marketing solutions, supporting both Business-to-Business (B2B) and Business-to-Consumer (B2C) organizations in enhancing their online visibility, attracting new customers, and increasing business performance (MC Marketing e Comunicazione, n.d.).

The agency consists of a multidisciplinary team of approximately ten professionals, including digital, inbound and SEO strategists, web developers, social media managers, and management control specialists. This combination of technical and marketing expertise enables the company to provide integrated digital solutions tailored to the specific needs of each client.

MC offers a comprehensive portfolio of services covering the entire digital marketing process (MC Marketing e Comunicazione, n.d.). These include website and e-commerce development, domain registration and hosting management, search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), social media management, branding, online reputation management, digital training and coaching, lead generation, and inbound marketing strategies. In addition, the agency supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in their internationalization processes through digital export strategies, including marketing activities targeting the Chinese market.

Rather than providing isolated digital services, MC follows clients throughout their entire digital journey, from the design and development of websites to the definition and implementation of marketing strategies aimed at improving brand visibility, generating qualified leads, and achieving business objectives (MC Marketing e Comunicazione, n.d.).

The agency adopts a customer-oriented approach, summarized by its motto, *"Listening to solve"*, which reflects its commitment to understanding each client's specific needs and building long-term partnerships. In the following section, we examine how MC helps businesses to strengthen their online presence and achieve sustainable growth in increasingly competitive digital markets by combining strategic consulting, digital technologies, and personalized support (MC Marketing e Comunicazione, n.d.).

3.2 AI Applications in Marketing and Communication Services:

An essential component of MC's marketing strategy is the implementation of customer acquisition activities aimed at generating qualified business opportunities. These activities combine outbound communication, lead generation techniques, digital advertising, and inbound marketing initiatives to support the acquisition and development of long-term customer relationships (M.C. Marketing e Comunicazione, n.d.; Magistrelli, 2025). An essential component of MC's customer acquisition activities is telemarketing, which involves direct communication with potential customers by telephone. Its primary objective is to generate and qualify leads by establishing direct contact with potential clients and identifying those who may be interested in the company's products or services (Archimedia, 2024). In B2B contexts, telephone-based activities can also be used to establish initial contact with potential customers and schedule meetings between

decision-makers and members of the sales team, thereby creating new business opportunities (Archimedia, 2020). When potential customers express an interest in the products or services offered, the telephone interaction can facilitate the subsequent stages of the sales process, such as lead qualification, follow-up activities, and the scheduling of a meeting with the sales team (Archimedia, 2020; Magistrelli, 2025). Furthermore, it can contribute to customer segmentation, the identification of relevant buyer profiles, and the development of more targeted commercial approaches (Archimedia, 2020).

Lead generation is another fundamental strategic process in contemporary digital marketing. It consists of identifying and attracting potential customers who have expressed a genuine interest in a company's products or services. These potential customers, commonly referred to as “leads”, represent individuals or organizations that may develop into future clients (MC Marketing e Comunicazione, 2025).

More specifically, lead generation encompasses all the activities aimed at converting anonymous website visitors or online users into qualified contacts who are willing to receive promotional communications, informative content, or commercial offers. A lead can be generated through several actions, such as completing a contact form on a landing page, subscribing to a newsletter or webinar, or downloading premium content, such as an e-book or a white paper (Magistrelli, 2025). Each acquired lead therefore represents a potential sales opportunity and constitutes the starting point of the customer acquisition process. The primary objective of lead generation is to build a database of qualified contacts that can be nurtured through targeted marketing and sales activities. In highly competitive markets, the availability of high-quality leads provides companies with a significant strategic advantage, increasing the likelihood of generating new business opportunities, strengthening customer relationships, and ultimately improving sales

performance. One of the most effective methods for generating leads is the use of paid digital advertising campaigns. In digital marketing, advertising campaigns consist of a series of targeted advertisements designed to promote a company's products, services, or events to users who match specific audience characteristics (Magistrelli, 2025).

Among the most widely used online advertising platforms are “Google Ads” and “Meta Ads”, which includes advertising on Facebook and Instagram. Both platforms increasingly rely on AI-powered algorithms to optimize audience targeting, bidding strategies, and campaign performance (Olivieri, 2024). Despite these similarities, the main distinction lies in where advertisements are displayed. Google Ads campaigns primarily appear within Google's Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs), making them particularly effective for intercepting users who are actively searching for information, products, or services. Consequently, this platform is especially suitable for promoting offerings that respond to an explicit search intent (Olivieri, 2024). Conversely, Meta Ads campaigns are mainly distributed across Facebook and Instagram, where advertisements are integrated into users' feeds, stories, reels, and other placements (Olivieri, 2024). The integration of Google Ads and Meta Ads enables businesses to increase brand visibility, attract qualified prospects, and create multiple touchpoints with potential customers. Lead forms are particularly valuable because they enable companies to collect customer information in real time. Once a user submits the form, the company immediately receives the necessary contact details to initiate a follow-up while the prospect of interest is still high, significantly increasing the probability of conversion (Fanesi, 2024). In addition to paid advertising, lead generation can also be achieved through inbound marketing strategies. Unlike outbound marketing, which actively reaches potential customers,

inbound marketing focuses on attracting users by providing valuable and relevant content that addresses their needs and interests.

At M.C. inbound marketing primarily relies on the creation of “blog articles” and “webinars”, both of which are designed to attract qualified audiences and gradually guide them through the customer journey (Figure 3.1). This approach allows the agency to highlight business challenges that potential customers may not yet have fully recognized. By presenting practical solutions and professional insights, the articles contribute to positioning M.C. as a potential partner for companies seeking support in their digital activities (M.C. Marketing e Comunicazione, n.d.). For this reason, Calls-to-action (CTAs) can be used to encourage users to take a specific action and support the conversion process (Nicolini, 2018).

Figure 3.1 Mc blogs



Source: Blog section of the M.C. Marketing e Comunicazione website.

Alongside blog articles, webinars constitute another inbound marketing activity used by M.C. to provide more direct and interactive content for potential customers. Compared with written content, webinars require greater preparation and organizational effort, but

they can also create opportunities for direct interaction with participants and allow the agency to present its expertise in greater depth (Figure 3.2)

The organization of a webinar involves several stages, including identifying a topic relevant to B2B and/or B2C audiences, conducting in-depth research to ensure accurate and valuable content, planning promotional campaigns to maximize participation, preparing presentation materials, and delivering the live event.

Compared with blog articles, webinars offer a more direct and interactive communication channel. They enable M.C. to engage with entrepreneurs and prospective clients in real time, fostering dialogue and encouraging participants to discuss the challenges faced by their businesses. Since webinar participants voluntarily register to attend, they generally demonstrate a genuine interest in the proposed topic. This creates an ideal opportunity for the agency to present practical digital marketing strategies and demonstrate how its services can help organizations address the issues discussed during the event.

Figure 3.2 MC webinar



Source: Webinar section of the M.C. Marketing e Comunicazione website.

Lead generation is also particularly important in the business-to-business (B2B) environment, where companies typically operate in niche markets, target highly

specialized audiences, and manage long and complex purchasing processes (Magistrelli, 2025).

The main benefits of an effective lead generation strategy include the acquisition of qualified prospects through highly targeted marketing campaigns, enabling companies to attract decision-makers and organizations that are genuinely interested in their products or services and significantly increasing the likelihood of conversion.

Despite these advantages, one of the most common weaknesses of lead generation strategies is the management of the “follow-up process”.

Generating a lead alone does not guarantee commercial success. If a qualified prospect is not contacted promptly after expressing interest, there is a significant risk that the opportunity will be lost. Many organizations invest substantial resources in attracting potential customers but fail to engage them quickly enough once their contact information has been collected. As a result, the initial interest gradually declines, leading to the loss of what marketers commonly refer to as a "hot lead” (Magistrelli, 2025).

For this reason, successful lead generation should not be viewed simply as the acquisition of new contacts but as a comprehensive process that combines targeted customer acquisition with effective lead nurturing and timely follow-up activities, ultimately transforming potential customers into long-term business relationships.

3.3 Artificial Intelligence in Practice: The Case of MC Marketing e Comunicazione

During the internship, I had the opportunity to participate in several branded content production activities organized for the agency's clients.

These initiatives represented an important component of the agency's content marketing strategy, combining visual storytelling with social media communication to enhance

brand visibility, strengthen customer engagement, and support the clients' digital presence.

One of the projects involved “Si Con Te Chef”, an initiative promoted by the “Si Con Te” supermarket chain.

The activity consisted of producing high-quality photo and video content featuring recipes prepared by us using only fresh-homemade pasta made by them, with the celebration of local culinary tradition and conviviality.

The resulting content was published across the client's digital channels with the aim of showcasing product quality, increasing brand awareness, stimulating audience engagement, and encouraging interactions such as views, shares, comments, and other social media insights.

A second project was carried out for “Marina Dorica”, where the agency produced photographic and video content highlighting the marina, its restaurants, and the overall waterfront experience.

The objective was to communicate the destination's identity and lifestyle, promoting its services through visually engaging content designed for social media platforms.

In addition to these projects, I have also contributed to branded content production for Tecnodent and ISP Engineering, recording short promotional sketches to increase audience engagement, strengthen brand awareness, and improve the companies' digital visibility through creative and entertaining content.

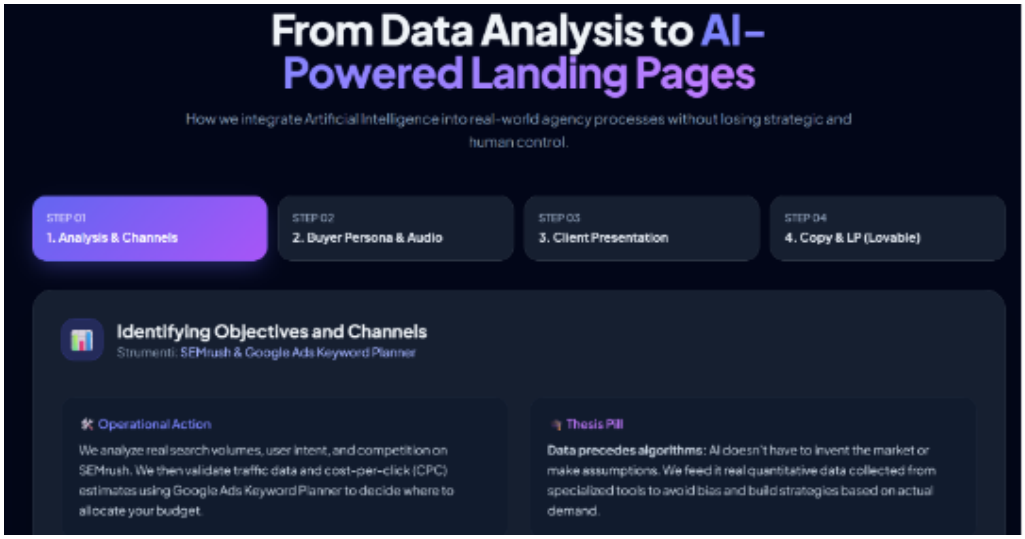
Within the operational framework of MC Marketing e Comunicazione, the adoption of Artificial Intelligence is not framed as a mere replacement for human labor, but rather as an integrated Human-in-the-Loop model.

The agency applies this approach to support client SMEs in developing advertising campaigns and high-performance digital strategies.

The workflow unfolds in four sequential phases, where AI tools act as efficiency accelerators while strategic and creative supervision remains firmly in the hands of human professionals.

The first phase focuses on the identification of objectives and channels through quantitative analysis, operating on the fundamental premise that data precedes the algorithm: Artificial Intelligence must not invent the market or make abstract assumptions, but rather process real, quantitative search volumes.

Figure 3.3 – ***AI Workflow Lab: Phase 1 – Identification of Objectives and Channels***



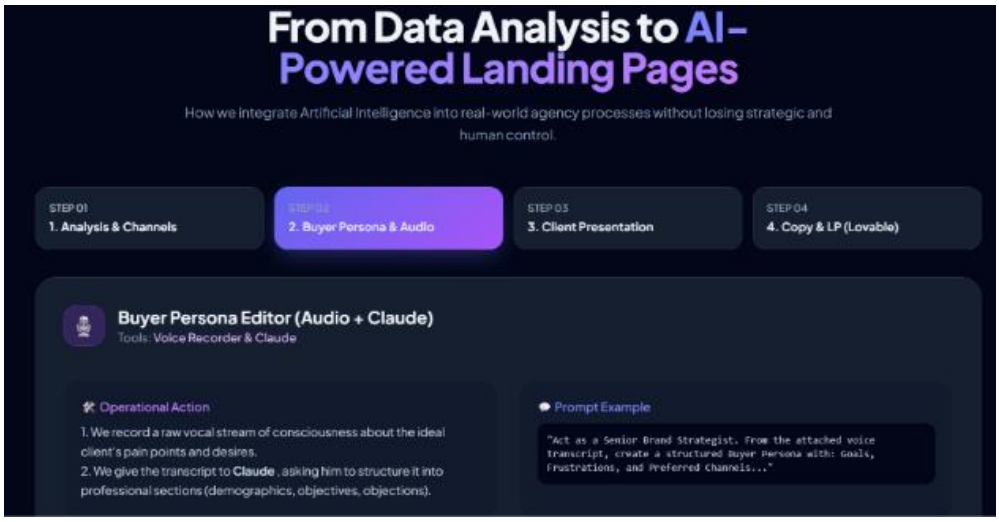
Source: internal documentation

To achieve this, the agency utilizes specialized tools such as SEMrush and the Google Ads Keyword Planner to analyze actual search volumes and user search intent, evaluate the level of competition on search engines, and determine estimated Cost-Per-Click alongside optimal budget allocation for SMEs.

This approach based on concrete quantitative data reduces initial biases and ensures that advertising campaigns are grounded in actual market demand.

The second phase involves defining Buyer Personas via audio streams and conversational AI.

Figure 3.4 – ***AI Workflow Lab: Phase 2 – Defining Buyer Personas via Audio Streams and Conversational AI***



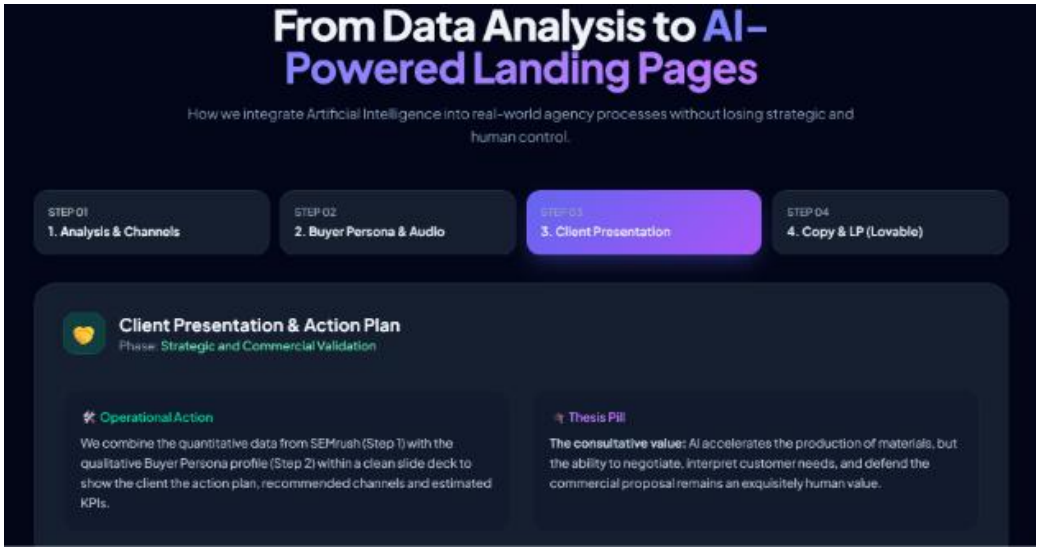
Source: Internal elaboration

To outline the profile of the ideal customer, the agency adopts an innovative method combining raw voice inputs with advanced language models through audio transcription and AI tools such as advanced voice recorders and Claude.

During this phase, strategists record raw voice streams focusing on the pain points, desires, and typical objections of the SME's target audience, after which the recordings are transcribed and fed into Claude, properly instructed through targeted prompts such as acting as a senior brand strategist to create a structured Buyer Persona complete with objectives, frustrations, and preferred channels.

The third phase caters for client presentation and strategic validation.

Figure 3.5 – ***AI Workflow Lab: Phase 3 – Client Presentation and Strategic Validation***



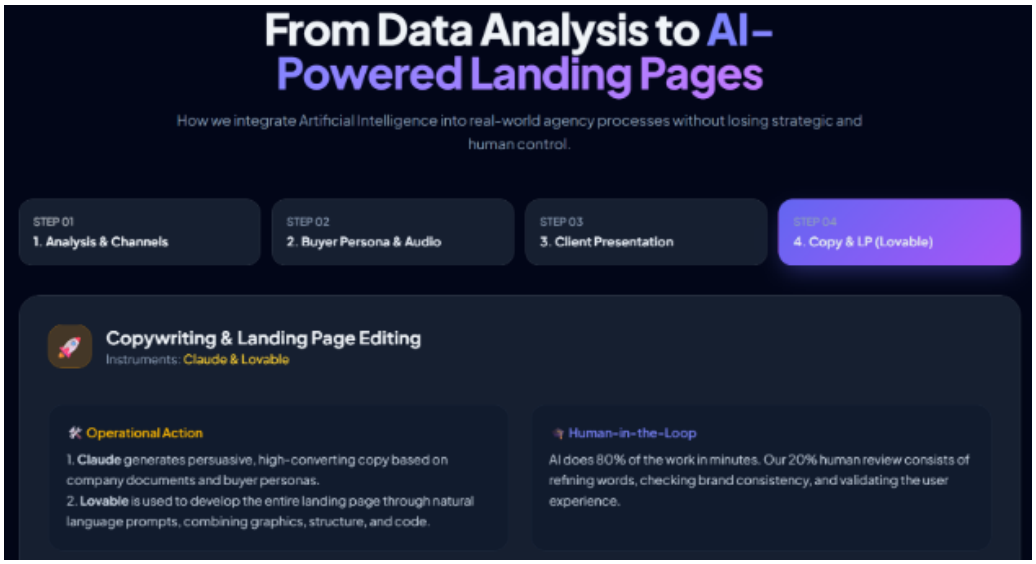
Source: internal documentation

Once the quantitative data from SEMrush is combined with the qualitative profile of the Buyer Personas, the agency compiles a slide deck to share with the SME client.

Although AI drastically accelerates the production of presentation materials and action plans, the negotiation phase, the tailored interpretation of the client's corporate needs, and the definitions of the commercial proposal remain exquisitely human competencies, with the agency's added value lying in its ability to translate technological output into a shared business strategy.

The final operational phase involves persuasive copywriting and landing page development via Lovable.

Figure 3.6 – ***AI Workflow Lab: Phase 4 – Persuasive Copywriting and Landing Page Development***

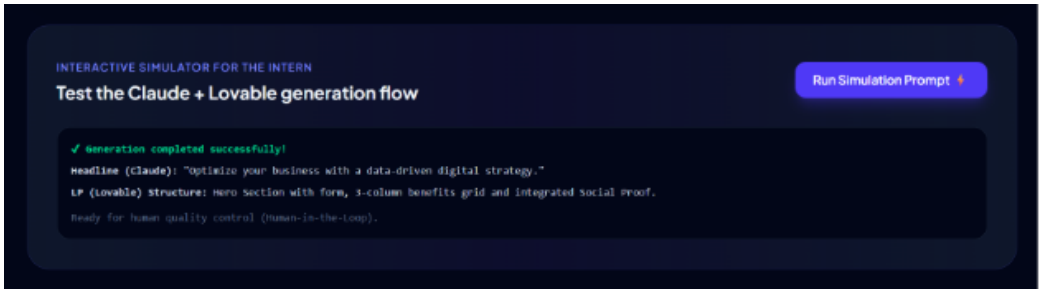


Source: internal documentation

This phase grounds the advertising campaign through the production of textual and visual content, where Claude is employed to draft high-conversion advertising texts and headlines tailored based on corporate documents and the previously outlined Buyer Persona, while Lovable is utilized as a natural language-based tool that enables the rapid development of the entire landing page structure by seamlessly combining graphics, UI, and code.

Operating under the Human-in-the-Loop principle, Artificial Intelligence handles about eighty percent of the routine generation work in minutes, while the remaining twenty percent is entrusted to human quality control aimed at refining the copy, verifying brand value consistency, and validating the actual User Experience.

Figure 3.7 – *Interactive Prompt Engineering Sandbox and Simulation Interface*



Source: Internal documentation

Finally, this operational workflow is continuously tested and refined through internal sandbox environments and prompt engineering labs, acting as part of the agency's methodology also used for training and aligning interns to ensure that interactions with language models adhere to rigorous and repeatable guidelines before being deployed on real client projects.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary economic and competitive landscape demonstrates that digital transformation is no longer an option, but a vital necessity for small and medium-sized enterprises. Operating as the backbone of the economy, SMEs frequently face structural hurdles such as limited financial resources, time constraints, and a shortage of specialized internal skills. To bridge these gaps, modern digital marketing and communication agencies play a pivotal role, acting as strategic enablers that translate complex data analytics, performance metrics, and multi-channel strategies into concrete business growth. Within this evolving scenario, the integration of Artificial Intelligence and advanced technological tools, ranging from conversational models and generative AI to algorithmic frameworks and predictive data analysis, offer unprecedented opportunities to scale operations. However, technology alone cannot succeed without proper strategic direction. The practical experience gained at MC Marketing e Comunicazione highlights that artificial intelligence does not replace human expertise; rather, it acts as a powerful efficiency accelerator within an integrated Human-in-the-Loop model. Whether through quantitative market analysis, audio-driven buyer persona development, automated copywriting, or hands-on branded content production for diverse clients across various industries, the true value emerges when technological automation is steered by professional supervision. Ultimately, this thesis concludes that the successful fusion of human strategic insight and artificial intelligence empowers small and medium-sized enterprises to overcome traditional resource constraints, maximize return on investment, and secure long-term, sustainable value creation in the digital economy.

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