15 advertising executives leading the industry's charge into generative AI

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Generative AI has exploded in popularity, and advertisers are figuring out how to use it.

Insider profiled 15 ad execs leading generative AI projects for their own agencies and major brands.

They're using AI tools to build creative assets quickly, kickstart ideas, and automate boring tasks.

Generative AI has taken the world by storm, but many in the advertising industry were experimenting with it well before OpenAI's ChatGPT catapulted the technology into the zeitgeist last November.

Not only has the technology ignited the search wars between Microsoft and Google, and threatened to upend search advertising, it's also providing new ways to generate art and ad copy and make tedious work like cataloging ad invoices way less time consuming.

At the same time, there's tremendous risk in over-relying on the technology. For instance, advertisers worry that using generative AI to create client-ready assets would create copyright issues, since it's unclear what sources these tools are using to generate art. There's also the question of what data the AI is using to generate its responses, and whether people should have confidence in those answers.

"What I would say to definitely not do is take it at face value," said Erik Hamilton, VP of search and social at the media agency Good Apple. "It's very
Hamilton, VP of search and social at the media agency Good Apple. "It's very good, but you can't fully trust it yet. So if there's something you're not sure about, it's worth validating."

There's no denying that the technology shows tremendous promise for those who use it properly. Hamilton, for instance, has used it to generate code to easily automate certain tasks. Others have used it to build lots of creative assets in a short amount of time, or to do research in preparation for a big pitch.

Insider has identified 15 ad industry experts who are leading the charge around generative AI by figuring out what it can and can't do, and teaching their colleagues and clients how to get the best results. They are listed in alphabetical order.

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**Avery Akkineni, president at Vayner3**
Akkineni leads Vayner3, VaynerX's Web3 consultancy that focuses on new technology like virtual reality, blockchain, crypto, and advanced computing.

Akkineni's team is working to help companies integrate AI into their marketing through educational series and AI pilots. To this end, Vayner 3 recently produced a whitepaper that outlined how marketers can use AI to "drive productivity and supercharge creativity."

Last year, Vayner3 began using tools like Midjourney and DALL-E-2 to quickly whip up images, mock ups, and storyboards. More recently, Akkineni's team has guided clients through the legal concerns they have around AI and copyright, or using AI to automate workflows in sectors that have sensitive data or are highly regulated, such as financial services and automotive.

"The biggest question we get is, 'Where is the data set coming from?'" Akkineni said.

Now that tools like ChatGPT are in the hands of hundreds of millions of users, Akkineni said all companies need to get up to speed with how AI can be applied to their businesses and how their consumers are using it.

"It's a digital Darwinian moment. You cannot put your head in the sand on ChatGPT." she said.
Dan Gardner, cofounder and executive chairman at Code and Theory

Code and Theory cofounder and CEO Dan Gardner — who previously helped rebrand the NFL team Washington Commanders and has worked with brands like Maybelline NY and Burger King — has been messing around with generative AI for years.
"The early generative visual stuff was so abstract, it was just conceptually cool," he said. "Now, it's giving output that can be used — that's the turning point."

Code and Theory uses generative AI to aid internal work — like building storyboards, conceptual mood boards, or writing drafts that are never meant to be seen by consumers. It's helped open up Code and Theory to a greater range of ideas.

"For instance someone who can't draw might have a great concept, and they can now participate," said Gardner. "That's pretty incredible in terms of opening perspectives of creative people so they aren't limited by a specific skillset."

The Stagwell-owned agency is also applying the tech to help businesses rethink how they interact with consumers. A lot of online interactions, like booking travel or trying to get service from a cable company's chatbot, are constrained. Users have to provide a specific piece of information in a specific way to move the interaction forward. The emergence of generative AI means that this "traditional information architecture is becoming obsolete," said Gardner.

He's working with clients to use generative AI to develop automated interactions that feel natural. "We've been talking about service-oriented bots for years," Gardner said. "That's not new. Now, we can deal with it as if it were an actual human."

He believes it will take 10 to 24 months before companies start to deploy these new interfaces widely.
As CTO at Accenture Song, Garrison has to be familiar with new tech before it hits the mainstream, and that includes generative AI. He's played around with early iterations of the technology, including Google's language understanding model Transformer, introduced in 2017.

Garrison is currently working with clients to figure out how generative AI can fit into their broader strategies, and what sort of people and skills they might need if they want to use it in their businesses. He's also helping them figure out how
Garrison is focused on how generative AI can impact four disciplines in particular: sales, commerce, marketing, and customer service.

He thinks generative AI can make the sales process more efficient, and provide more information to consumers to make the commerce experience better. For marketers, generative AI can be used as an assistant to help them complete their tasks faster. And within customer service, Garrison envisions supercharging automated customer support, so people aren't being routed to the wrong business department when they call in for help.

"Generative AI will reinvent a lot of an enterprise," he said. "You can't just bolt it on. There's a lot of rethinking that needs to be done."

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**James Glover, general manager of AI at Movable Ink**
Glover is a tech entrepreneur whose work with AI goes back to 2007, when he and his business partner Greg Leibon cofounded a company called Memento that helped big financial institutions use AI to identify fraud. The duo then built a company called Coherent Path, which used AI to help retailers better understand how shoppers buy products. Coherent Path was acquired by email marketing firm Movable Ink in 2022.

At Movable Ink, Glover works with retailers including L.L. Bean and Bloomingdale's on email campaigns that use generative AI with the goal of increasing open and conversion rates.

For example, generative AI can switch out thousands of variations of emails that subtly change the images, color, and text. Glover also helps retailers crank out multiple email subject lines that can be tailored to specific customers.

One of the challenges with email marketing is jamming too many emails into someone's inbox. Glover said this year, his team is working on ways to help retailers figure out the right cadence for sending emails so that shoppers don't get annoyed.
"It's not necessarily true that more emails is better — there is a limit at which you say, 'I'm unsubscribing,'" he said.

Erik Hamilton, VP of search and social, Good Apple

While generative AI promises to transform search advertising, Hamilton is more focused on how these tools can be used internally.

"My focus is how we are teaching everyone at the agency, and on my team, to really leverage it." he said. "How will it make lives easier?" His idea is that if he
really leverage it,” he said. “How will it make lives easier?” The idea is that if he can get generative AI tools to make things easier for his team, they'll do better work for clients.

For instance, Hamilton recently went on GPT-4, the latest generation of OpenAI's model, and asked it to write Python code that could grab Google Ads invoices, download it, and section those invoices into the appropriate folders.

"It was a very basic prompt," he said. "I just told it specifically what I needed and listed out in a certain way, what the folders were, and how it should build those file paths. I tried to be as prescriptive as possible and let the AI do the rest." While Hamilton still needed to implement and test the code, he said it saved him hours of time.

Hamilton is now taking his knowledge on how to use these tools to his development team. He advises those first starting out to ask a basic question, like 10 ways generative AI can help digital marketers. The next important step is to ask it to elaborate on each of those things.

While Hamilton is enthusiastic about the possibility of using these tools to improve workflow, he's also cautious. "I still have some concerns about what data to put in there," he said. "We think about the guardrails we need to put in place when using this."

He's teaching his teams how to structure questions to get the best answers, and how to verify information that's put into generative AI tools so it doesn't start to "hallucinate," or come up with answers not rooted in fact.
MacDonald started experimenting with ChatGPT in November as he was coming back to work from paternity leave.

He created an educational deck for Mekanism to help staffers understand key terms used with AI and think about the technology's long-term implications. McDonald has also created presentations on how to write AI prompts. He's worked with the agency's strategy, creative, and copywriting teams to show how AI can help develop research, art, and scripts for ad campaigns. And for new business niches. AI can pull together an audit of all of the potential client's
business pitches, AI can pull together an audit of all of the potential client's competitors.

For McDonald's own social campaigns, he uses generative AI to supercharge social listening. He uses it to identify products that people talk about on TikTok, and that insight can be used to come up with new product ideas.

"I wanted it to be actually impactful to our business, and I saw the power in an advertising agency where every single person on the team at least knew of an AI tool that could help them with their job versus being an ad agency that used it as just a one-off trend," he said.

He also started a Discord channel about AI and advertising where 20 to 30 marketers talk about how to incorporate AI into their jobs.

"The goal is that this is going to be a learning community as new tools come together," he said.

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Louise Martens, executive vice president of global operations at Media.Monks
Martens spearheads the Media.Monks' AI efforts in two ways: streamlining the agency's operations, and helping clients build campaigns that use AI.

She is responsible for rolling out AI-driven tools and processes across all parts of the agency, specifically looking for ways to shave off time from every part of the agency — from creative to legal and finance departments — to make them more efficient. For example, she makes sure that the animators, writers, and editors making ads can access AI tools. Concepts for projects like 3D illustrations and storyboards are now made using AI. The technology is also used for the agency's performance marketing teams to create multiple iterations of ads quickly.

"It's much more experimental — the level of craft that comes from programs like Midjourney and Stable Diffusion is insanely high," she said.

Martens also helps pair clients with Media.Monk's AI specialists.

"There's tremendous interest coming from the client, and I would say most of it falls into the bucket of 'how can we do more with less.'" she said.
Ikechi Okoronkwo, executive director, head of business intelligence and advanced analytics at Mindshare

Okoronkwo oversees Mindshare's efforts with generative AI tools like ChatGPT.

He said that privacy, security, governance, and ethics are important to Mindshare's work with AI.
"We want to create cool and innovative use cases but we want to do so with high standards," he said.

Okoronkwo's background with AI is using it to prove to advertisers that their ads are working.

He leads Mindshare's group of 150 data and analytics staffers in North America who are using data for AI, machine learning, and predictive analytics.

Okoronkwo created an internal tool called Synapse that helps advertisers plan, measure, and forecast sales from ads. The tool can estimate a brand's sales based on ad spend. The module pulls in a slew of factors like the size of an ad budget, weather, and seasonality to determine sales.

The tool has since evolved to include 20 modules. For example, a consumer packaged goods brand can see how much they need to spend on ads to reach a certain audience. Mindshare's clients can also see how many people went to a store, website, or bought a product after an ad campaign ran.

A key part of his role is educating Mindshare staffers on how AI can be used for advertising and marketing.

"Data can be an incredible source of creativity," he said.

Isabel Perry, VP of emerging technology at Dept
Perry joined Dept in 2021 through the acquisition of the martech agency Byte, where she was director of technology and grew its offering in areas like chatbots and creative automation. Perry and her team were responsible for building Lightspeed, Byte's platform that helped it automate the creation of more than 10,000 advertising assets a month for clients like Ralph Lauren, Spotify, and Ebay.

Now she's responsible for leading the AI, Web3, and metaverse offering at Dept. In 2022 she launched the 300-person Web3/Dept team, which already drives around 5% of its revenue across more than 60 projects to date.

Perry is also drawing up Dept's AI strategy, working with lawyers and ethicists to ensure it is done in a responsible way.
Dept has already been using GPT-3 to write Amazon product description listings for more than three years. Dept uses a proprietary martech platform called Ada that offers 60 tools that help with things like search engine optimization and using automation to create content — 20% of which are AI-enabled.

Perry said one of the biggest challenges with AI is that it's not as powerful as people think, yet it's set to be powerful "in ways we don't even know yet."

Dept recently conducted a human versus human-plus-AI test to respond to three pages of bullet points of exhaustive client feedback on an illustration. Dept ran the feedback through the Midjourney AI program.

"There was absolutely no way AI was near anything we would show to a client," Perry said. "There's definitely a lot of unnecessary fear of AI replacing jobs right now."

But since generative AI has permeated broader mainstream culture, Perry and her team are launching what they're calling The Transformer Factory where 10 full time engineers will work on models to allow Dept to build proof of concepts and then work as implementation partners for clients so they can quickly adopt the tech.

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**Nathan Shipley, director of AI at Goodby Silverstein & Partners**
Shipley wants creatives to embrace AI, not be scared of it.

He first got interested in AI through his background in animation and visual effects, and is working on ways to use AI to create images for advertisers at volumes that humans can't.

He worked on a recent campaign for the Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida that used OpenAI's DALL-E technology. The campaign asked museum visitors to type out their dreams, which DALL-E turned into art pieces displayed on the gallery walls. And for BMW, he worked on a campaign that uses AI to create art similar to work from artists that BMW had worked with for the past 50 years.
Shipley is also interested in how generative AI can create text for ads and help the agency with processes like researching projects for clients. Goodby Silverstein & Partners has an internal tool that creates custom chatbots that make certain tasks easier for its own employees. An agency strategist, for example, can use the tool to search for Reddit sentiment to start a research project for a brand. Or copywriters can use the tool to help write ads based on the agency's extensive library or previously-written ads.

Shipley has also formed an internal group called the Agency AI Club where more than 100 staffers talk about the latest advancements in AI and how the technology can be applied for clients. He's also working on creating ethical guidelines for how the agency uses AI. Those ethical standards include making sure that images and data are licensed properly from artists and sources, similar to stock images, and making sure that the data pulled from AI represents diversity and inclusive sources.

"I want to be able to look back in five or 10 years and say, 'hey, we were thoughtful about what we did, and we made the right choices,'" he said. "We didn't just grab a tool and start using it because we could."

Vincent Spruyt, global chief AI officer at Reprise Digital
After completing his PhD in AI, Spruyt was leading the data and strategy team at the deep-tech AI company Sentiance when he was approached by the then-CEO of Reprise Digital. Spruyt didn't have a media or marketing background, but Reprise wanted him to apply his vast AI knowledge to the advertising space.

Reprise had "pockets in each market of strong analytics and engineering talent but not a more overarching vision of where to go," Spruyt said. "That's what I try to do."

Not long after he joined the agency in 2021, Spruyt and his team launched a GPT-3 search-ad copy generation bot called Transcribe. Using a few keywords or a company description, Transcribe automates the creation of engaging ad headlines and ad copy at scale.

The tool has since been enhanced with topic extraction and opinion mining features, which automates the creation of ad copy based on topics that users are
features, which automates the creation of ad copy based on topics that users are actively talking about online. More recently, Spruyt's team added image generation capabilities to the tool using the Stable Diffusion and DALL-E models.

Some of Reprise's biggest clients, including Amazon, Johnson & Johnson, and Bupa, are now using the AI tools built by Spruyt's team.

Aside from Transcribe, Spruyt has also introduced Reprise's creative teams to AI products like Dream, which can quickly spin up an image with a prompt like. "Generate a new type of Nike sneaker and put it on a marble pedestal with studio lighting." While the images these prompts produce are nowhere near an end product, Spruyt describes them as like a "creative assistant" or "sparring partner" that gives those teams inspiration.

Spruyt's team is also applying AI to the marketing measurement practice of multi-touch attribution to help model the sequence a user might take between seeing an ad and buying a product. It's become a particularly important tool as Google prepares to kill off third-party cookies and Apple has tightened its tracking identifier.

"There's a huge signal loss with multi-touch attribution and so there's a bigger focus on AI tools to be able to get the results you get from multi-touch attribution but without needing the data an MTA model does," Spruyt said. "It's something you couldn't do without the recent advances in machine learning."

Rebecca Sykes, associate partner at The Brandtech Group
Sykes became The Brandtech Group’s youngest global CEO in 2018 when, at 32-years-old, she assumed global leadership of Mofilm. Sykes was promoted again to become an associate partner at the wider holding company in 2021.

She now leads the development and growth of The Brandtech Group’s generative AI and Web3 practices, which the company says has converted more than $5 million in net new assignments. Vodka brand Absolut is one of the agency’s beta AI clients.

While much of the hype around AI in recent months has focused on content creation. Sykes says that runs the risk of all the work starting to look the same.
Instead, Sykes and her team are looking to apply AI more strategically. For example, they are working with some clients to use the imagery the brand already has to understand how the AI model sees the brand. They’re also using AI for the process of rapid prototyping, with the intention of helping clients "put their hands in the clay" and accelerating the launch of their own projects in-house, Sykes said.

Sykes is also helping clients apply AI across the wider marketing organization, impacting areas like sales and customer relationship management.

"I'm so excited to see the proliferation of natural language interfaces to interact with data — it's game changing," Sykes said.

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**Akira Thompson, creative director, R/GA**
Akira Thompson has been a creative director at R/GA for about five years, directing animation projects for its content studio and internal production department.

Thompson first got into generative AI when he explored a closed-access version of Midjourney around eight months ago, and has been thinking up ways to incorporate generative AI tools into the agency's workflow.

Recently, Thompson and his team used generative AI for a 60-second Verizon commercial that debuted during the 2023 Oscars telecast. The spots repeats the phrase "all together now" by recombining snippets of dialog from different TV shows, movies, and music videos. R/GA greatly sped up production by loading hours of content into an Adobe editing tool and using AI to find the words needed to build the phrase.

"Prior to this, you'd either be searching through scripts or actually watching hours of film trying to locate these keywords," Thompson said. "In minutes you're getting what would've taken a human assistant editor hours and possibly days to locate those pieces."

Thompson recently used generative AI to source images for a pitch deck. A client wanted close-up shots of people between 35-50, representing different
client wanted close-up shots of people between 35-50, representing different ethnicities and genders. The agency had trouble finding the right images, so Thompson dialed up different prompts on Midjourney and, within an hour, created around 200 photorealistic images of people who didn't exist.

This process also saved R/GA money. It cost about $30 a month for a Midjourney subscription, Thompson said, and he estimated pulling the same number of images from a stock photo company would have cost about $300.

"It's not full-on production, but there are little tools you can use that will fit into the production pipeline," Thompson said.

Emily Wengert, managing director and executive creative director of experience innovation at Huge
Wengert leads Huge's emerging experience group for the agency's creative department and identified generative AI as a key focus for Huge and clients last year.

She helps implement AI and education about the technology internally and with the agency's clients. For example, she recently hosted a workshop helping senior marketers sign up and use ChatGPT. And Huge is also experimenting with AI to speed up how work is done — like pulling together visuals and coming up with ideas for clients. Huge also has an internal booklet for staffers to reference how to use visual generative AI tools.

"It helps you see what's not right just as much as it helps you get to the right answers," she said.

For Pantone, Huge created an AI-powered campaign around a magenta color for the brand's color of the year.

She's also interested in exploring how AI can crank out an infinite number of visuals and art for clients.

"We're becoming bionic with these tools — you just gain strengths you never would have imagined," she said.

However, she stressed that AI cannot replace human creatives.
Yamada has had a hand in the agency's more basic AI and machine learning work for years, including developing a neural network for Tennessee Tourism that shows different music artists' connections to the state.

But advancements in AI modules like chat-based tools have sped up the agency's push to use generative AI for advertisers. For example, Yamada is figuring out how to use generative AI to create many versions of product detail
figuring out how to use generative AI to create many versions of product detail pages on e-commerce sites, and how AI tools can replicate images created at photo shoots.

Yamada is also interested in using video-based generative AI to create custom content from spokespeople. Instead of asking a spokesperson to say many prompts, AI can tweak what the spokesperson says and make custom video and social ads using voice and video synthesis, he said.

"We're getting closer to being able to modify the person and use talent with their permission and the proper workflow and approvals," he said.

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