

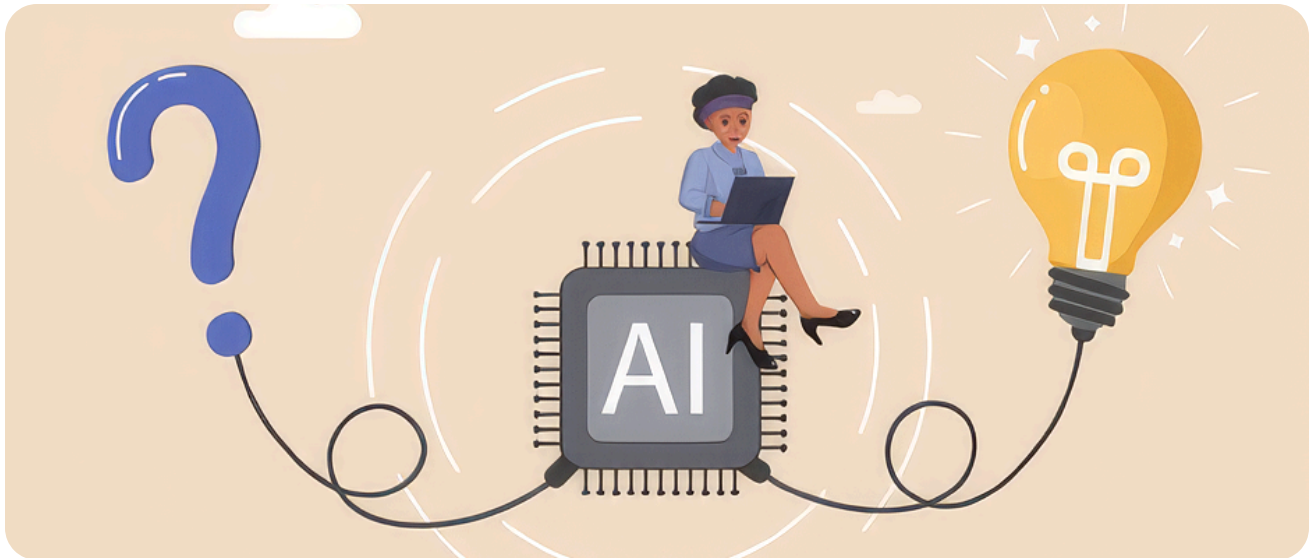


HOW TO BE A HIGHLY VALUED MARKETER IN THE AGE OF AI

*The Skill Set of an **AI-** **Powered** Shopper Marketer.*

PART 1 OF 3 · THE UPSTREAM SKILL SET

By **Aperture** · The omni-commerce growth advisory · aperture.biz



HOW TO BE A HIGHLY VALUED MARKETER IN THE AGE OF AI

Part 1: The Upstream Skill Set

In the last edition, I shared that many companies now expect or encourage the use of AI, even though clear guidance remains uneven. That creates pressure on individual marketers to decide what to use AI for, what data to give it, how much to trust it, and when an output is good enough to act on.

I also proposed that AI is changing what makes a commerce marketer valuable.

Not because AI can replace the marketer, but because AI can now produce many of the outputs marketers used to be valued for: retail media plans, shopper data summaries, creative tactics, briefs, measurement, and internal communication. And it can do it almost instantly.

That is why I believe the most valuable commerce, shopper, and trade marketers will build strength in two areas:

UPSTREAM · BEFORE THE
PROMPT

What question to ask.

DOWNSTREAM · AFTER THE
PROMPT

Which answer to trust.

This edition is about the upstream skill set.

THE VALUE SHIFT

The AI-powered marketer value shift

THE OLD VALUE WAS

"I can create the comm plan, media strategy, or promotion plan."

THE NEW VALUE IS

"I can diagnose the problem, frame the right question, guide AI with context, and turn outputs into commercial performance. And then use AI to create the plan, media strategy, etc."

That shift matters because AI makes it easier to produce answers. But faster answers are not always better answers. AI will confidently generate tactics that seem correct, but can steer the marketer in the wrong direction if the marketer doesn't get off to the right start.

The upstream skill set starts before the prompt.

It changes how marketers use AI: not as an answer machine, but as a thinking partner. One that can help generate options, pressure-test assumptions, organize information, and reveal better paths forward when guided by strong human judgment.

The Upstream Skill Set

01

Using curiosity to ask better questions

02

Giving AI the right context

03

Problem Framing

SKILL 1

Using curiosity to ask better questions

Curiosity is using the power of "why?" It pushes the marketer to ask why the issue is happening, what else might be true, and what evidence would help reveal the real challenge.

One simple way to practice this is the **Five Whys method**: repeatedly asking "why?" to move from the surface symptom to the underlying cause. Innovative companies such as Tesla, Toyota, and Atlassian use this approach.

WHY IT MATTERS IN AI

AI is only as useful as the question it is answering.

If you ask AI to solve the surface issue, it will often give you a surface-level response. If you ask it to explore the underlying commercial, shopper, or retailer dynamics, it can become a much more valuable thinking partner.

Curiosity turns AI from a shortcut into a collaborative diagnostic tool.

SKILL 1 · EXAMPLE

Five Whys in practice

Scenario: Retail media performance is down at a key retailer.

WEAK PROMPT

"Is sponsored search underperforming?"

The curious team asks:

WHY?	POSSIBLE ANSWER
Why are sales at the retailer underperforming?	Conversion is down on supported SKUs.
Why is conversion down?	Shoppers are clicking but not buying.
Why are they not buying?	Price/value perception is weak versus competitors.
Why is value perception weak?	The PDP does not clearly communicate pack size, benefit, or use case.
Why does that matter?	The shopper does not see enough reason to choose us at the moment of transaction.

The issue may not be a media problem. It may be a value communication problem showing up inside the media results.

BETTER PROMPT

"Analyze this situation as a shopper purchase barrier problem, not just a media performance problem. Retail media performance is down, conversion is declining, and shoppers are clicking but not buying. Explore whether the issue is awareness, conversion, availability, value perception, search visibility, content clarity, ratings and reviews, or household penetration. For each possibility, explain what evidence would support or disprove it. And always cite the source."

SKILL 2

Giving AI the right context

Context is the ability to give AI the right commercial ingredients.

AI cannot know the business situation, retailer priorities, shopper behavior, competitive pressure, or constraints unless you provide them. If not, this is what people mean when they say, *"garbage in, garbage out."*

A highly valued marketer knows what information AI needs in order to produce a useful, commercially viable strategic answer.

WHY IT MATTERS IN AI

Without context, AI defaults to generic best practices based on what has happened before.

It may produce a polished retail media plan, but that plan may not reflect the retailer's priorities, shopper barriers, or the real growth objective.

Sometimes the answer may look like an AI hallucination, when the real issue is that the marketer did not provide enough commercial context.

The better the input, the better the strategic output and the better performance.

Before asking AI for a recommendation, the marketer should frame the situation across the most important context areas.

SKILL 2 · CONTEXT FRAMEWORK

The context areas to frame

CONTEXT AREA	QUESTION
Business objective	<i>Are we driving penetration, conversion, repeat, trade-up, basket size, or retailer support?</i>
Current challenge	<i>What is the business situation that is keeping the brand from success?</i>
Retailer priority	<i>What does the retailer care about right now?</i>
Shopper behavior	<i>What is the shopper doing or not doing?</i>
Shopper insight / Purchase barrier	<i>Why is the shopper doing or not doing? What is preventing growth?</i>
Category dynamics	<i>Is the category growing, declining, premiumizing, trading down, or shifting channels?</i>
Competitive pressure	<i>Who are we losing to and why?</i>
Channel reality	<i>Is this digital shelf, retail media, in-store, omnichannel, or sell-in?</i>
Constraints	<i>Budget, timing, claims, inventory, promo calendar, retailer requirements.</i>
Measurement	<i>What would success look like?</i>

EXAMPLE

WEAK PROMPT

"Create a retail media plan for Target for back-to-school season."

BETTER PROMPT

"We need to grow household penetration at Target for Brand X. Back-to-school season is a critical period for the brand and the category. The category is growing, but our brand is losing share among value-seeking shoppers. Our suspected barriers are weak search visibility and unclear value messaging. Recommend three retail media approaches to use during back-to-school season, explain the assumptions behind each, and identify what data we need before acting."

SKILL 3

Problem Framing

Problem framing is the ability to define the right problem before generating answers.

In commerce or shopper marketing, that often means diagnosing the real purchase barrier. The purchase barrier is what is stopping the shopper from buying your product along the path to purchase.

A DE-SELECTION BARRIER

Your brand is not in the shopper's consideration set.

A SELECTION BARRIER

The shopper is aware of your brand but chooses something else.

When you understand what the shopper currently thinks, does, or avoids — and what needs to change — you can better define the strategy required to influence behavior.

WHY IT MATTERS IN AI

If you ask for a plan without defining the purchase barrier, AI may produce a list of plausible tactics that sound reasonable but do not address the real reason shoppers are not buying.

Problem framing helps the marketer guide AI toward the behavior that needs to change, not just the output that needs to be created.

SKILL 3 · EXAMPLE

Imagine a brand is losing share at a key retailer.

WEAK PROMPT

"What kind of offer and marketing plan do we need to boost sales?"

But that does not take into account the underlying current shopper mindset. The better question is: "What is stopping shoppers from choosing us?"

The answer could be any number of barriers:

Lack of awareness

Low relevance

Not available or easy to buy

Current habit works, no reason to switch

Unconvincing proposition

Confusion about which version to buy

Not knowing how to use the product

Poor value proposition

Each barrier would lead to a different strategy.

If awareness

The answer may be reach and visibility before they get to the store.

If confusion

The answer may be education on how to use our product.

If value perception

The answer may be clearer benefit communication, pack-price framing, or stronger proof. It might have nothing to do with the price.

If habit

The answer may be disruption, trial, or a switching trigger.

The marketer's value is in framing the problem clearly enough that AI can help generate better strategic options.

BETTER PROMPT

"Help me frame the right shopper marketing problem before recommending tactics. Our brand is losing share at a key retailer, but we do not yet know whether the issue is awareness, relevance, availability, habit, value perception, product confusion, usage understanding, or an unconvincing proposition. For each possible purchase barrier, explain what shopper behavior we would expect to see, what data would help confirm or disprove it, and what type of strategy would be most appropriate if that barrier is true."

The real promise of the upstream skill set

The promise of mastering the upstream skill set is not that you know how to write clever prompts.

The promise is that you will be better able to:

- Ask sharper commercial questions
- Give AI better context
- Diagnose the real purchase barrier
- Identify the strategy that will change shopper behavior
- Turn AI outputs into better commercial action.

That is the higher-value marketer role that will make you invaluable.

NEXT TIME

Part 2: *The Downstream Skill Set.*

After the prompt: knowing which answer to trust.

A WORKSHOP FROM APERTURE

At Aperture, we have developed a workshop to help commerce, shopper, and trade marketers build these upstream and downstream AI skills. The goal is not just to use AI to be faster, but to use it to generate better performance.

If your team is trying to figure out how to get more value from AI without losing the commercial thinking that drives growth, I'd be happy to share more.



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