KANTAR

From AI noise to innovation clarity

Getting AI to work for you



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Traditional GenAI models tend towards sameness – but blending the newest forms of the technology with human insight allows brands to quickly locate the best opportunity spaces.





Introduction: The AI paradox

From generating concepts to analysing trends, AI now dominates conversations about innovation. But is it actually leading to better outcomes?

The way the technology is currently being used, increasing numbers of marketers are realising that this isn't the case. There's no doubt that AI can rapidly increase the speed and volume of some key processes. But on its own, it often leads to uninspired output: tired narratives, generic ideas.

When innovation becomes formulaic, it falls flat. Creating meaningful, differentiated products requires genuine originality. It's equally important that innovations have real connections to a brand's unique identity.

That doesn't mean abandoning AI. The challenge marketers face is not whether to use AI, but how to harness its power effectively – combining its scale and analytical capability with human judgement, cultural understanding and brand expertise. In this booklet, we set out how brands can take a more disciplined, insight-led approach to AI-enabled innovation.



Dr. Nicki Morley
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DISRUPTION
at a category level creates

71%
of incremental brand value growth

CONSISTENCY
at a brand level delivers

111%
growth advantage

Source: Kantar BrandZ

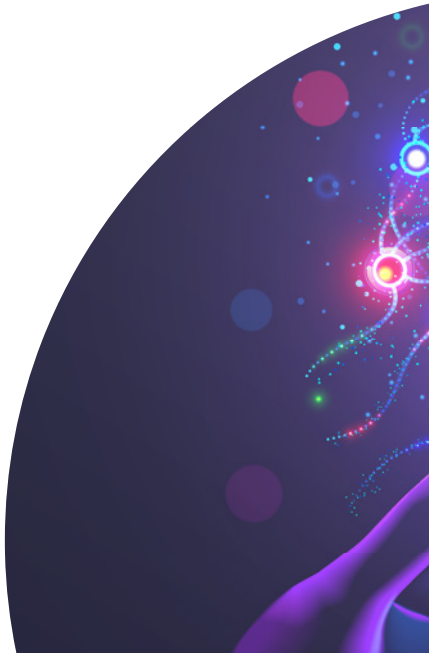


The innovator's real problem: signals without direction

Today's brands are facing an increasingly complex innovation environment. Digitally-driven disruption, accelerating development cycles and shortening attention spans are reshaping how quickly ideas must move from insight to execution. At the same time, the volume of available consumer data has expanded dramatically, spanning behavioural data, digital signals, social activity, and media content.

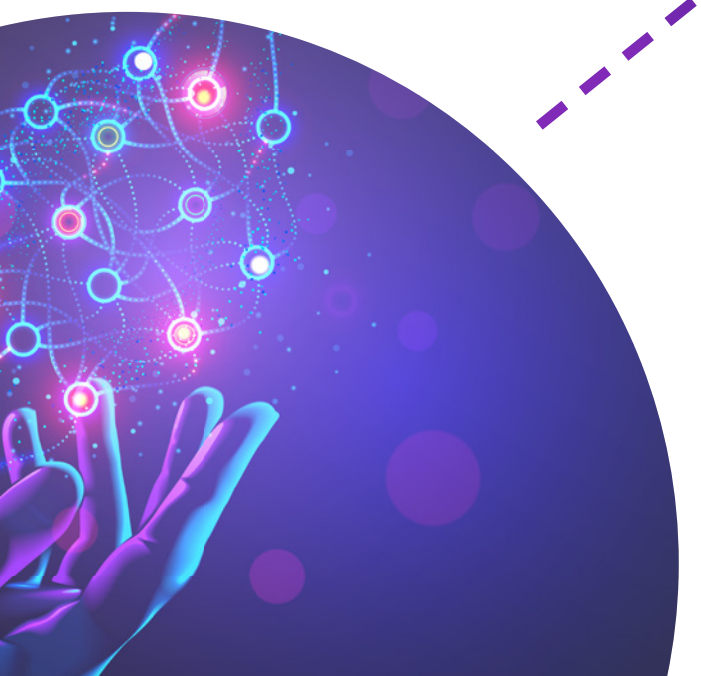
This environment creates powerful pressure. Teams are incentivised to move fast, respond quickly, and prioritise novelty. Strategy risks giving way to reaction. AI initially appeared to offer a solution – with the capacity to generate more ideas, faster.

More, though, does not automatically mean better. In fact, innovators are telling us they feel overwhelmed with AI output, while quality and distinctiveness are declining. Many businesses are investing in in-house AI systems that rely heavily on narrow or historical datasets, reinforcing existing thinking, when the goal of the innovation team is to challenge it. These investments also increase the pressure on marketers to experiment with AI, encouraging tech-led innovation that fails to connect to genuine consumer needs or long-term brand strategy.



The result is an innovation environment that's generating more heat than light. Innovators are getting lots of signals, but they're unsure where to focus. Teams are moving fast, but without direction. Conversations are creating confusion rather than clarity. What's missing isn't data – it's the confidence in which signals matter, and which decisions to make next.

A long-term decline in brand difference highlights the risk that businesses get trapped in a loop of old thinking: responding to the same visible trends in similar ways, rather than finding new space and leading change.



In this context, the real problem facing innovation isn't a lack of ideas. It is a lack of informed direction.



BRAND DIFFERENCE IS DECLINING

2014:

17.9%

2025:

14.5%

Source: Kantar BrandZ

AI helped us scan trends early on, but it created an overwhelming amount of data to analyse. You still need human judgment and creativity to get to the good stuff. AI is a powerful tool to bring us closer to trends, but it shouldn't be the decision maker: creativity and true leaps forward still come from human judgment.

Ross Farquhar
Marketing, Innovation and Sustainability Director,
Little Moons



Why LLMs encourage ‘average’ innovation

Large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT are trained on huge amounts of data, enabling them to generate human-like output with impressive speed and capacity. However, LLMs work by smoothing away the unusual or provocative, producing the average of everything they’ve consumed.

As a result, predictability and sameness are inherent features of their design. They also prioritise recency and frequency, amplifying hype-driven signals over slower, more meaningful changes that can be harder to recognize.

This poses particular challenges for innovators. An LLM can throw out a thousand new product suggestions in a matter of seconds. However, it doesn’t have the sophistication to come up with the truly original ideas needed to meet these challenges. Real innovation emerges when brands understand how stories, behaviours and experiences are colliding in new ways.



LLMs ARE MIRRORS – NOT ENGINES

According to Dr. Angad Chowdhry, Co-Founder & CPO at Quilt.
AI, if you ask an LLM for protein bar innovation ideas, you'll get recombinations of what's already in its training data – cleaner labels, more protein, better taste. Prompt it to be creative, and it might suggest ideas like 'injectable protein' or 'protein patches'.

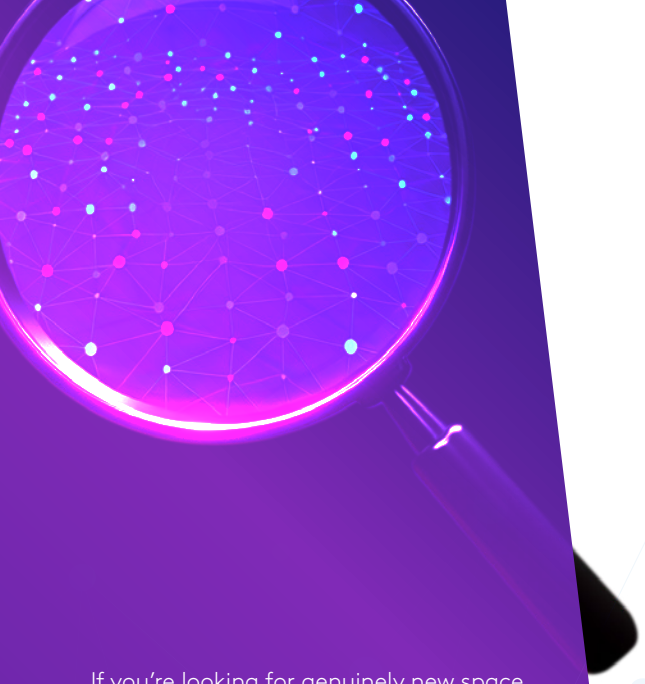
These are interesting, but they're ultimately language games. They're missing the fuel that drives real breakthroughs: understanding structural tensions. Brands identify space for growth when they spot how stories are colliding in a new way. An LLM can come up with plenty of ideas once you've found that space – but it can't find it itself.

But it doesn't have to be this way. What if AI:

— surfaced genuine insights instead of generic ideas?
— gave brands a reliable roadmap through diverse data?
— helped eliminate the bottlenecks where innovation stalls?
— sifted real meaning from digital noise?
— enhanced creativity instead of flattening it?



Innovating from strong foundations



If you're looking for genuinely new space, you don't need more ideas; you need the right ideas. Ideas that emerge from a clear understanding of real needs, cultural dynamics and brand meaning are far more likely to succeed.

Doing this requires solid, insight-led foundations that include these key considerations:



Behaviours

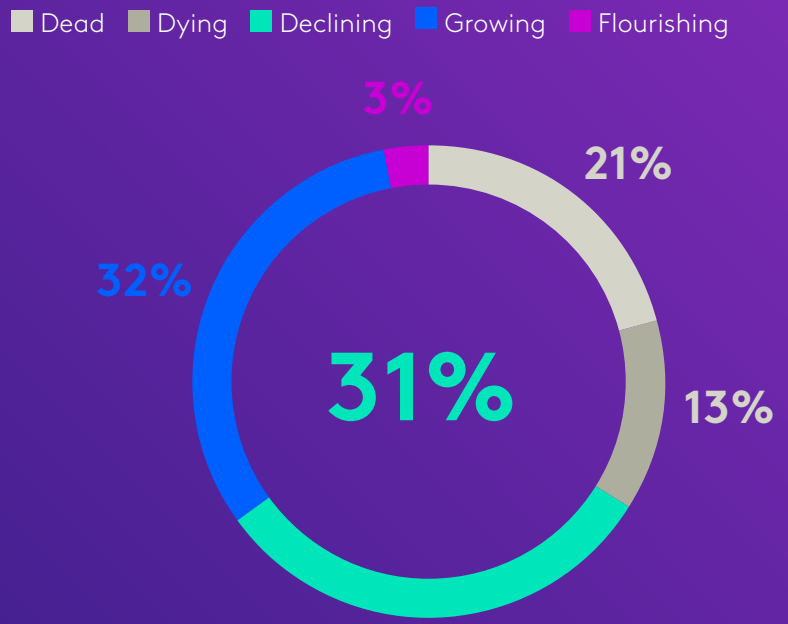
Effective innovation starts with an understanding of the way people live: from how they get to work, to what they eat for dinner, to where they like to socialise with friends and family.



Motivations

It's equally crucial to grasp why people behave in the way they do. What's important to them – and how is that affected by changing economic, psychological and technological factors?

2 in 3 launches are dead or dying by year 2



Source: Kantar Worldpanel data



Culture

Culture is the shared language of everyday life, and it is evolving faster than ever. To launch innovations that land, you need to grasp today's diversity of cultural influences – from mainstream media, niche forums, emerging platforms and fast-moving online conversations.



Brand meaning

The most innovative brands understand themselves as deeply as their audiences do. How do consumers perceive them? Do they make a meaningful difference to people's lives?



Without this understanding, innovations risk becoming disconnected from the real factors driving growth. When these foundations are missing or weak, innovation becomes fragile. This helps explain why such a large proportion of new launches struggle to survive beyond their first two years.

From ideation to intelligence

This doesn't mean that AI is not of use to innovators. More simply, it must be applied in the right way. With its ability to mine huge volumes of behavioural, cultural and commercial data, AI offers impressive scale, speed, and pattern recognition. Its potential is increasing, too, through the emergence of AI agents, capable of reasoning, testing hypotheses and acting autonomously.

Humans also bring irreplaceable strengths: intuition, cultural sensitivity, and strategic judgement. The biggest opportunity lies at the intersection of these capabilities. But getting there is by no means straightforward. Research co-authored by Dr Yeun Joon Kim of Cambridge University's Judge Business School found that simply combining generative AI with human input "does not automatically enhance creativity". Reaping the benefits requires carefully structured collaboration, "focusing on feedback and refinement rather than endlessly generating new ideas".

If you want meaningful results, marketers need to bring together deep brand expertise, the right signals, and cutting-edge AI – using a robust framework to keep all three working in harmony. Doing so requires more than a tool. It requires a system. A system that creates confidence because it replaces isolated decisions with a connected flow of decision intelligence, so teams know not just what looks interesting, but what is strategically right.



By embedding AI into their operations, firms can accelerate innovation, improve research quality, and optimise resource allocation, ultimately gaining a competitive edge. However, to fully realise these benefits, a balanced approach that combines AI automation with human expertise and a trustworthy use of the technology appear essential.

OECD evidence review, 2025



Turning intelligence into advantage

When brands take the time to understand their territory, they gain clarity, confidence and focus. Instead of reacting to every new trend or signal, teams can prioritise the opportunities that matter most, while moving faster without increasing risk.

What this looks like in practice

EvaluateExplorer is a new early-stage innovation solution, developed through a partnership between Kantar and Quilt.AI. It brings together cultural intelligence, global real-time digital signals, behavioural insight and proven brand growth frameworks to help brands identify and develop innovation opportunities with greater confidence, grounded in evidence, brand-fit and real consumer dynamics.

It integrates multi-source intelligence – combining cultural, behavioural, competitive and other signals – to build a detailed picture of emerging consumer needs. Multiple AI agents analyse this data, challenging each other to identify meaningful patterns and trends. Layered with Kantar's brand expertise and validated innovation frameworks, with humans in the loop, this supports robust recommendations on the most promising innovation opportunities.

EvaluateExplorer enables you to reliably identify emerging spaces that fit their brands and quickly develop and refine concepts to move into those spaces. By reducing complexity and strengthening early-stage decisions, it helps brands turn signals into strategy.



Brands used to wait for culture to arrive and then react. With this system, you can see the displacement sequence in motion and position yourself in the gap before anyone else names it.

Dr. Angad Chowdhry, Co-Founder & CPO, Quilt.AI



Inside the brains of EvaluateExplorer

EvaluateExplorer is designed to model culture as a live, constantly evolving ecosystem. It brings together multi-source signal intelligence into a single, coherent view. Here's how it works:

The brief
Every project begins with a clear strategic brief that sets objectives, context, and constraints. Kantar's proven frameworks ensure the work is grounded in brand identity from the outset.

The research
EvaluateExplorer integrates multi-signal intelligence sources, combining category history with data from various media sources, social networks, search engines, and more. This reveals 'collision zones' – areas where consumer needs and cultural narratives intersect to create potential for new growth. AI agents analyse the data, challenging one another to refine and stress-test findings to reduce bias.

The opportunity
Now it's time to sharpen the understanding of the opportunity spaces. Using AI alongside our frameworks, each opportunity is assessed for scale, commercial viability, and strategic alignment, resulting in robust, differentiated recommendations for where brands have the strongest right to play.

The concept
Only once the space is clearly defined, do LLMs enter the process, helping structure and articulate early concepts. Used at this stage, generative AI enhances creativity rather than flattening it.

The hardest part of innovation isn't generating ideas – it's killing the ones that feel good but won't survive contact with the market.

Dr. Angad Chowdhry, Co-Founder & CPO, Quilt.AI

HOW EVALUATEEXPLORER WORKS: WHAT'S HOT IN HOME COOKING

To illustrate how EvaluateExplorer can help brands spot new opportunities, let's imagine a scenario where it helped an established UK hot sauce brand move into a new space.

Challenge

In the UK, hot sauce usage is often habitual and situational – applied to a narrow set of meals. Consumers are increasingly comfortable mixing global cuisines in casual dining and street food – but for everyday home cooking, they still rely on a small range of familiar condiments.

Analysis

EvaluateExplorer found that in everyday cooking, expanding choice is creating tension rather than confidence. As artisan options multiply, familiar staples can feel outdated – but newer alternatives create uncertainty about how to use flavour 'properly'.

Across nine opportunity spaces, the analysis surfaced tensions around familiarity versus credibility, and whether flavour belongs in the act of cooking or as a final addition. Twenty-seven early-stage concepts explored ways to reposition flavour condiments as an accessible cooking ingredient, helping people feel capable rather than self-conscious.

Impact

By shifting the frame of flavour from finishing touch to cooking asset, the analysis offered a clear perspective on where there was most potential for the brand to play. Comparing opportunity spaces helped clarify which aligned most closely with its strengths, and how distinct pathways could address different tensions.

This sharpened the focus of early-stage innovation and indicated where future investment would be best directed.

Right now, most innovation processes have a gap. The strategy team identifies an opportunity. The creative team generates concepts. The research team validates them. But those three steps happen in different rooms, with different tools, and the handoffs lose signal. What we're building makes the system continuous.

Dr. Angad Chowdhry, Co-Founder & CPO, Quilt.AI



A connected innovation ecosystem

EvaluateExplorer is one part of Kantar's connected suite of tools that combine AI capabilities with human expertise to drive effective innovation. Combined with other tools, it supports a continuous flow of intelligence rather than fragmented handovers.

Kantar Live – bringing together the depth of qualitative research with the scale of quantitative in a live session with expert moderators. Combine open-ended questions, real-time voting and AI-powered analysis for fast, flexible insights.

Kantar Converser – connecting brands directly to their audiences through AI-moderated, one-to-one conversations. Capture authentic emotions, behaviours and motivations in people's own words.

ConceptEvaluate AI – for the rapid early testing and refinement of innovation ideas. A powerful AI model, trained on real consumer data, screens up to 100 concepts simultaneously to drive more confident decisions.

EvaluateExplorer is not an idea generator. It's a disciplined intelligence system that helps brands move quickly from a very complex landscape to strategically sound opportunities and concepts.

Jennifer Matsui
Global Innovation Product and Solutions Director, Kantar

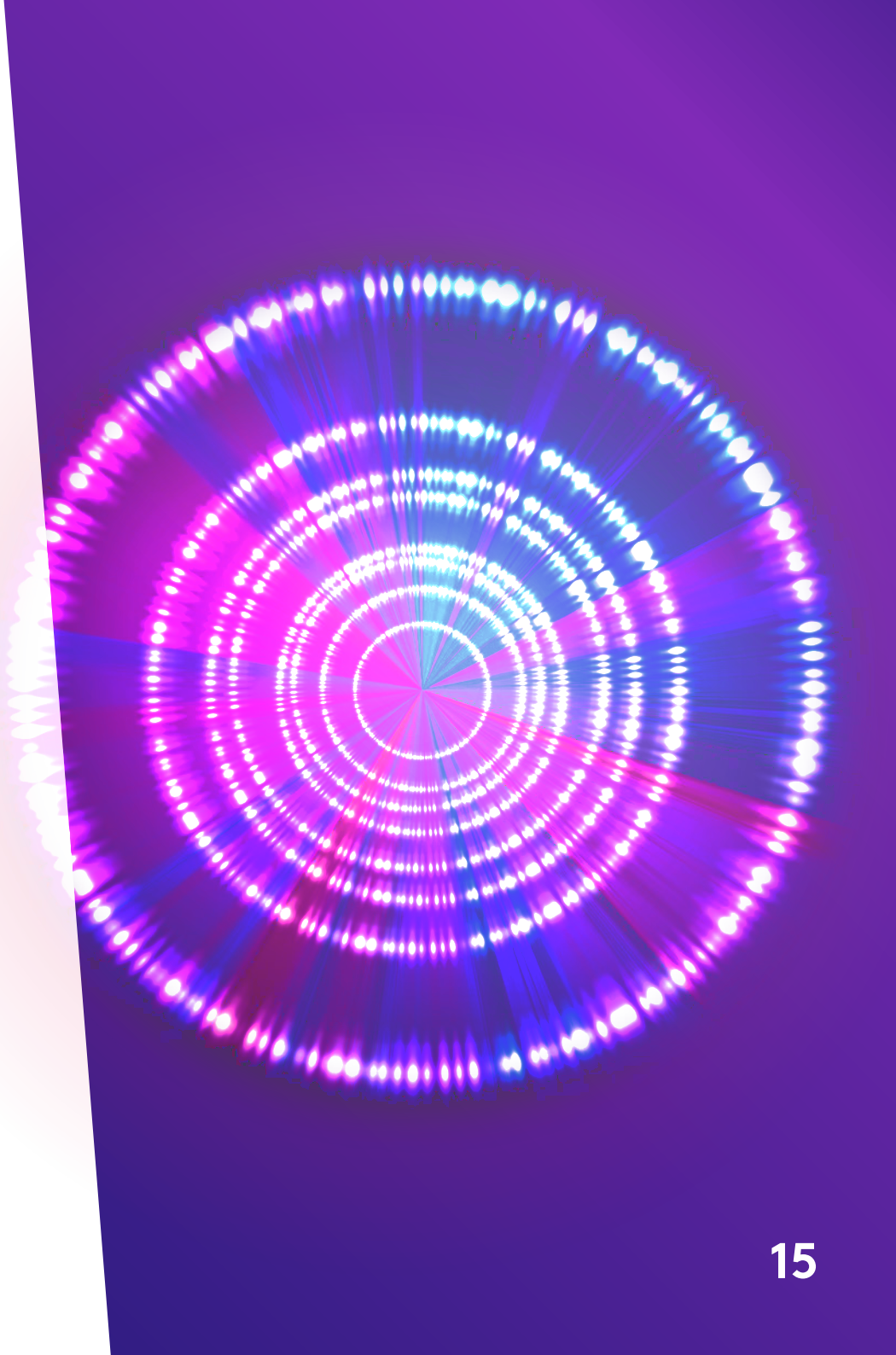


Conclusion

In a world overloaded with signals, data and AI-generated possibilities, the real advantage lies in knowing what matters and acting on it with clarity and confidence. AI can accelerate the process, but it can't decide what should come next. That still depends on judgment: understanding people, culture and brand meaning deeply enough to choose the right space to play.

That's where EvaluateExplorer changes the dynamic. By shifting innovation upstream – from idea generation to decision intelligence – it helps you cut through the noise, focus on the opportunities that truly fit your brand, and move faster without losing rigour. Not because there's less information, but because there's more clarity.

The brands that win won't be the ones chasing everything that AI surfaces. They'll be the ones using AI to think better, see earlier and act with intent. That's how noise becomes clarity – and intelligence becomes advantage.



To discover more about how Kantar can support your AI journey, get in touch today.

Find out more