



Brand moats in a marketing wind tunnel

Cannes Wrapped – Lions 2026

Deft

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Ian Crocombe

From tools to moats

A year ago, AI swept into Cannes and the room was overwhelmed. This year, the panic was gone, replaced by something more useful: Control.

The smartest marketers stopped asking what AI would do to them and started deciding what they would do with it. Brand fundamentals, great ideas, sharp insight, plus AI as the enabler that changes how the work gets made.

There's no denying AI is changing how the work gets made, but human taste and judgement will build the brand moat.

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The Deft POV

Brand moats in a marketing wind tunnel

THE AI WIND TUNNEL

AI as turbocharger: volume, velocity, more-with-less

Agentic commerce & LLMs as the new front door

“AI converges everything toward sameness”

Performance, efficiency, the infinite content treadmill

THE HUMAN BRAND MOAT

Taste is a skill and the moat in the AI era

Earned over paid; trust is local; craft has soul

Distinctive assets, mental availability, fewer-bigger-longer

“Robots can’t build brands.” the human stays central

AI your people own

Deft partners with marketing leaders to make AI part of how their people work across strategy, adoption and operations.

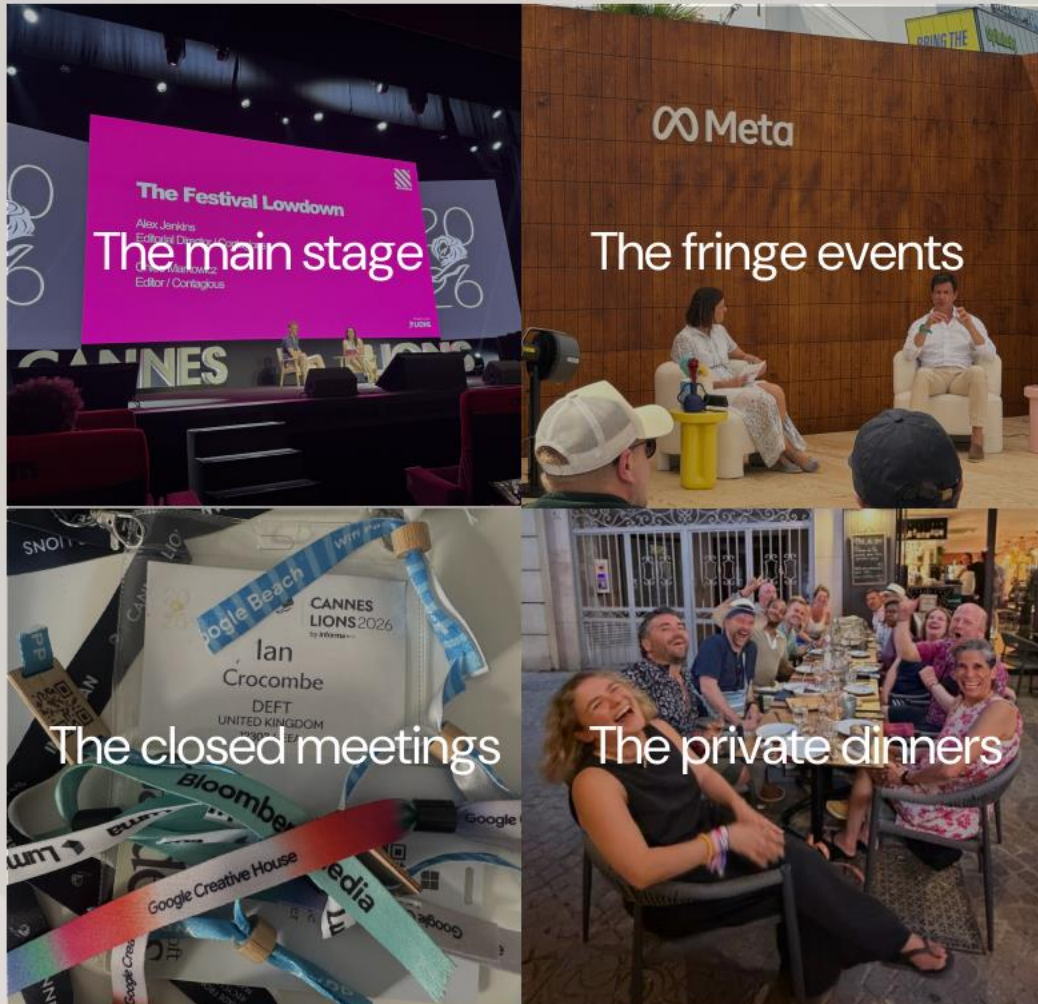
email Helen Jones helen@deft.be to find out more



Deft friends and family dinner, Cannes old town, 24th June 2026

Five dominant discussions from brands using AI at Cannes Lions 2026

The conversations we took part in



What makes our view valuable

Ten years coming to Cannes



We read it year on year. Our extensive background in marketing and tech has made us part of the Cannes furniture

Marketing experts first, AI experts second



We know the craft, not just the tools

In the game day-to-day



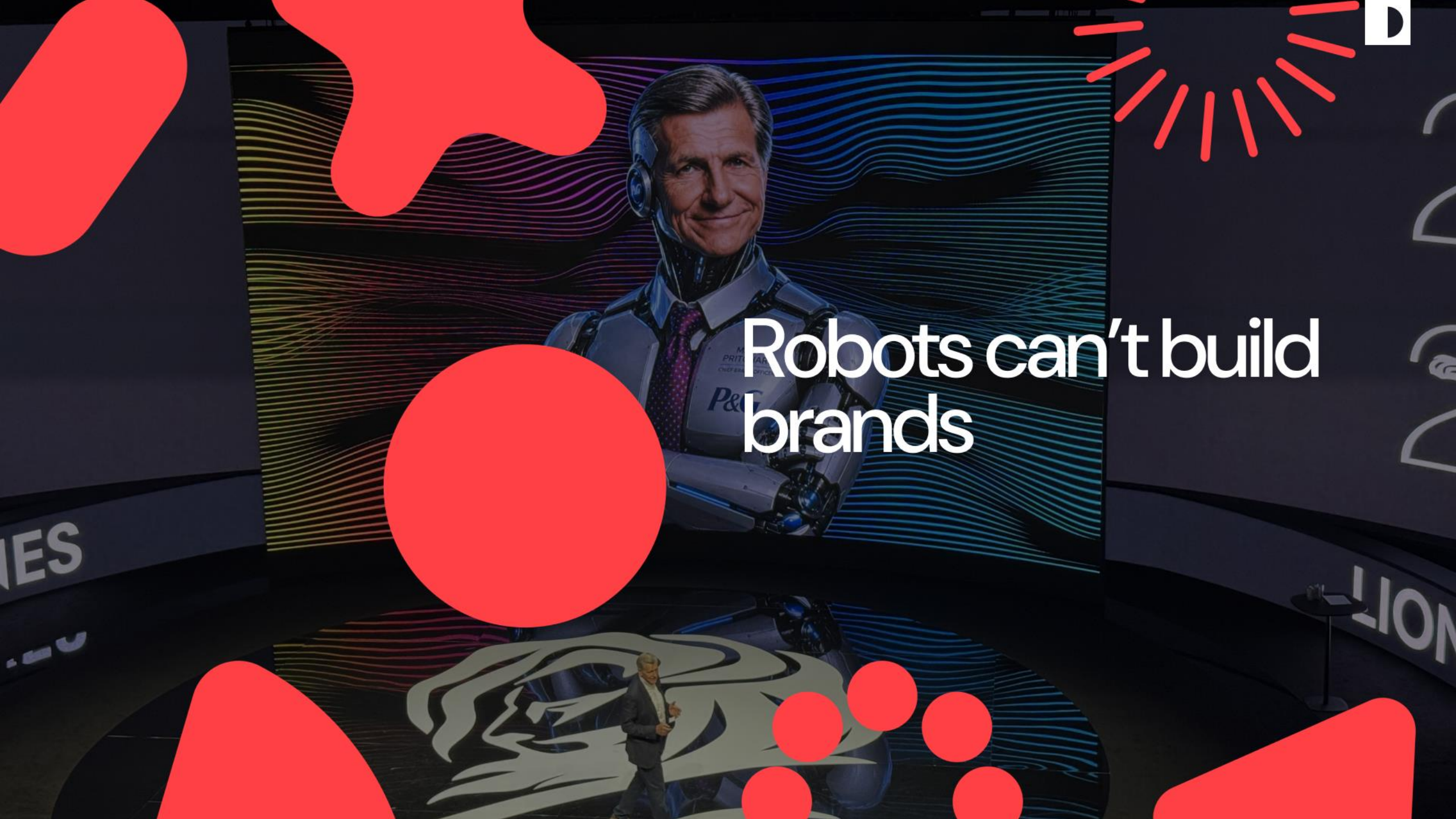
We work inside large enterprise marketing teams. We know the real challenges and can spot the opportunities

AI your people own



We advocate for excellence through AI, not your people replaced by it

Robots can't build brands



IES

LION

Robots can't build brands



AI is changing how we communicate.

Making work in Sprints
An abundance of assets to test
Continuous communication
Living brand intelligence.

Brand-building sticks to the fundamentals

- Strong insights
- Differentiated ideas
- Creative coherence
- Evidence based effectiveness

What we saw

P&G (PRITCHARD)

The fundamentals stay human. The dish-soaking ritual. A heritage brand that rejected the AI hype and grew double digits.

"every brand owner a DTC founder with their hands on the keyboard."

"What changes is how we work to deliver the volume, velocity and variety of brand assets needed to build brands. What stays the same are the fundamentals of brand building."

GOOGLE DEEPMIND (HASSABIS)

The person building the models concedes the ceiling. "The craft and the soul of the created piece comes from the human creator."

DENTSU (SANO)

"AI can generate thousands of ideas, but people are the ones who decide which ideas matter."

The burning question

How can you balance an operating function that runs on AI, with building a strongly differentiated brand?

Good AI vs Bad AI



Good AI vs Bad AI

Good AI makes what couldn't exist before. Bad AI just makes it cheaper.

The line between them is not the tool. It is the human intent pointing it.

So the question is not how much you can save. It is what you would build with a machine this powerful.

What we saw

GOOGLE CREATIVE HOUSE (TAIT)

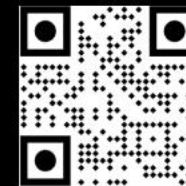
"Bad AI is focused on doing it easier and cheaper and with less. It's really good when people are trying to do things that are harder and more valuable... than they could ever make before."

PRIVATE ISLAND (BOYLE)

This mixed media production house see AI as part of their palette, allowing them to create things at the speed of their imagination – their moat is their creative talent and 4 months a year of in house protected development time.

CONTAGIOUS (ALTMAN, VIA JENKINS)

"If your CEO is using AI to cut headcount, they have no imagination."



The burning question

Are you using AI to cut costs or do things that couldn't be done before?



AI is a wind tunnel

AI is a wind tunnel

Every car maker optimised in the same wind tunnel, so every car converged on the same shape.

The brand that ignored it, the boxy Mini, won.

Lean on AI the way everyone else does and it does the same to your brand. Same tools, same prompts, same answers.

Abundance makes sameness. Distinctiveness is the only moat that survives it.

What we saw

CHIPOTLE (MACHADO)

Wind tunnels optimise the design of cars but make them all look the same"...without the human touch, AI is just another wind tunnel.

Nike wanted stand out on the pitch so they made their football boots hot pink, then that became the colour for distinction "I don't think that Nike, Adidas,.. use(d) ChatGPT to define the colour... But had they done that, they would all converge to hot pink."

ALL FOUR SPACES

Sano (Dentsu): "AI tends to make sameness, so we need more distinctiveness." Levy (Publicis): rely only on AI and "you will always get the same result." Plus "tsunami of the mediocre," and "generic mediocrity."

THE AWARDS MOVED TOO

The new Creative Brand Lion judges the system that makes the work, not the work.

The tension worth noting

Byron Sharp pushes back: most brands aren't differentiated, and that's fine. The resolution: stop chasing difference, build distinctiveness, what the wind tunnel can't flatten.



HUMAN INPUTS
BECOME EVEN
MORE VALUABLE.

Machines that
make things

Machines that make things

Leading brands have embedded agents into their operations across two areas

1. briefing, insights and concept development
2. prototypes, variants, atomization and optimization

Big coherent creative platforms and master shoots are still human led to ensure differentiation.



What we saw

REIMAGINE YOUR BUSINESS

The companies pulling ahead have stopped treating AI as a technology project in silos and have started rebuilding how work gets made from the ground up.

MAKING THINGS THAT MAKE THINGS (R/GA)

"Intelligent Brand Systems"

"We are moving from being manufacturers of outputs to architects of systems."

VALUE, NOT VOLUME

An anonymous advertiser went from "400 assets a month to 400 a day," their big learning was to focus on quality first, not quantity.

Unilever stated: "value has been replaced by volume." 70% of blue-chip ads have under \$1,000 behind them.

GOODBYE SILOS

Once AI powers a business, it ignores functional silos and focuses entirely on outcomes, meaning leaders must design end-to-end systems.

The burning question

When you agentify your marketing operations, do you need to rethink your org structure and roles?



Brands for humans and agents



Brands for humans and agents

The brand context layer is legible to machines, without losing its texture.

From living brand brains that codify behaviours for quick action, to how your brand shows up in generative engines – the new SEO.

What we saw

MICROSOFT

"Almost all of the funnel is going to these agents." Structured product data is "your most important marketing asset."

Agent-shoppers convert roughly 3x. It is "GEO over SEO, not just SEO with a G."

KRAFT HEINZ (KAPLAN)

"If you're invisible on ChatGPT, you're invisible."

L'OREAL (DUBE)

LLMs are "the new front door to beauty discovery." Win the "answer layer."

UBER (KISHORE)

"Brand is going to be more important in an AI era, not less, because AI surfaces the most culturally prominent pieces, not random results."

OPENAI (DRESSER)

"20% of ChatGPT sessions have commercial intent".

The burning question

Is your brand legible & powerful enough to be chosen by a machine that will never see your homepage?



Closing the gap

The work now is not more tools.

It's the harder, human work: taste, capability, operating model, and bringing people with you.

11% of the world's largest advertisers have an agreed vision for AI in creative. **39%** are still writing one. One word for the rest, from inside the room: "pilotitis."

81% of companies can generate ideas. Only **16%** turn them into growth, and that **16%** wins on growth, margin, retention and NPS.

In a room of roughly **200** senior marketers, only about half had used ChatGPT.



Working with Deft

Deft turns AI overwhelm into working systems your people own.

From global marketing functions to in house agencies, we partner with leadership teams ready to make AI part of how their people work

Strategy



Build the evidence base before you build the programme.

Adoption

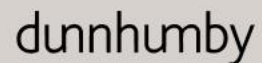


Close the gap between training and daily work.

Operations



Turn the programme into an operating model.



The burning questions

What will you build that no one else could?

Are your people ready to take ownership?

Will AI know your brand exists?

The Deft **Compass Session** is the ideal starting point.

Contact helen@deft.be to find out more

