

AI Won't Replace Marketers

But It Will Replace Marketing-as-Usual

By Gemma Calvert



Background

If you work in marketing, the ground under your feet is moving—fast. In a live panel at NTU, three industry leaders cut through the hype: **Krishnan Menon** (Managing Director, R/GA), **James Breeze** (CEO, Research Network), and **Melvyn Tan** (Entrepreneur & Co-founder, Befinity AI). Their verdict? Generative AI is rewriting the playbook—from research and production to capability building and legal risk. The marketers who thrive will be those who go **upstream**: inventing the brief, shaping the strategy, and designing the future—while machines accelerate the rest.

1. Use AI as a co-pilot, not a crutch

For **James Breeze**, AI has become an “always-on companion” that collapses the time from question to insight.

“I use it **ten times an hour**,” he said. “For ideas, quick research, and faster workflows. The change to my business management is **insane**.”

But he drew a critical line: if you’ve never done the thing in the real world—written a brief, built a website, run a user test—you can’t judge if the AI’s output is good or garbage.

“If people haven’t done the task before, they **can’t tell** if the recommendations are right or wrong,” he warned. “That’s why great marketers will keep winning: they know what ‘good’ looks like—and use AI to get there **faster**.”

Takeaway: AI multiplies **judgment**. If you lack foundations, you’ll multiply confusion. Make your base craft non-negotiable.

2. Prompt engineering is hot—and short-lived

Melvyn Tan calls prompt engineering “the most important communication skill to learn right now”—with a twist.

“We’re in the **MS-DOS** era of AI,” he said. “You need to know how to ask, frame and scaffold to avoid generic output. But this skill has the **shortest lifespan** ever.”

Why? Because **custom assistants and agentic systems** will soon absorb the hard parts of prompting.

“You’ll configure a Custom GPT or Intelligent Assistant with deep system prompts and chains,” Melvyn explained. “End users will simply say, ‘Give me a video script for this product,’ and get **nuanced** output. The complexity gets **abstracted away**.”

Takeaway: Learn prompting to think clearly and communicate constraints. But invest more in **problem framing, domain expertise, and workflow design**—they endure.

3. Personalisation at scale beats boxing people in

Both Melvyn and James challenged the old model of slotting humans into fixed “types.”

“Boxes helped when we couldn’t **scale** personalisation,” said Melvyn. “Now we can design **highly personalised** strategies—learning plans for kids, interventions for consumers—and let systems **recalibrate** as new data arrives.”

James has already re-architected research:

“We’re running **qual at scale** with AI interviewing—participants respond on video or voice, without filters. You train the model how to synthesise, and you get **richer, faster** insight than forcing people into survey boxes.”

Takeaway: AI lets us meet people as **people**. Move from segments to **signals**, from averages to **adaptive** experiences.

4. Legality and trust: the elephant in the (creative) room

Krishnan Menon drew a bright red line through the industry’s current behaviour.

“We keep saying ‘AI,’ but we usually mean **generative AI**,” he began. “And much of how it’s used in marketing today is **legally unusable**. If the output borrows from **rights-controlled** content or data you don’t own, brands **can’t** deploy it.”

He shared a hard truth from the front lines: agencies are building exciting pilots clients **won’t ship**—not because the work isn’t good, but because the **rights and perception risks** are too high.

“A global food brand refused to use stunning gen-AI imagery,” Krishnan said. “Food photography already faces claims of **misleading**. Add ‘AI-generated’ to that and you create a **trust problem**.”

Takeaway: Move AI **upstream**: design systems that start from **owned data, owned assets, and clear consent**. If you can’t ship it, it’s a demo—not a strategy.

5. Go upstream: strategy, invention, and design thinking

Krishnan’s career advice for students and practitioners was blunt:

“AI will replace the **downstream**. It won’t replace the **upstream**. Pursue **thinking jobs**—creating, designing, deciding. Humanity brings the **vision of the future**; generative AI brings signals from the **past**.”

That means shaping the problems worth solving, defining “better,” and architecting workflows where humans and machines **compound** one another.

Takeaway: If your work is easily specified after the brief is set, it’s vulnerable. If your value is **setting** the brief—and translating vision into repeatable systems—it’s about to scale.

6. Stay current—or get blindsided

James offered a war-story with a sting. He quoted ~AUD 50k for a UX research project to prove a clunky purchase flow was hurting conversion. Then he tested a new **Gemini** capability on a sandbox.

“In **20 seconds** I had evidence backing the Australian team’s position,” he said. “The lesson: you have to be across **what’s new**—every single day.”

Takeaway: Build a **discovery habit**—scan weekly updates, maintain a peer network, and pressure-test old processes against new tools. The cost of ignorance is now **immediate**.

7. What to do on Monday

- **Audit legality:** inventory where your AI outputs come from. Shift to **owned/cleared** datasets and assets.
- **Move upstream:** carve out time for **brief invention**, not just content production.
- **Design assistants, not prompts:** capture your best prompts as **reusable assistants** tied to your workflow and guardrails.
- **Upgrade judgment:** pair juniors with veterans—let novices learn the craft so AI doesn't lead them astray.
- **Measure speed-to-signal:** track how fast teams move from question → insight → decision using AI. Reward **cycle time**, not slide counts.
- **Institutionalise learning:** set up a shared **AI changelog** and fortnightly show-and-tell. If it's not in the workflow, it's **lost**.

Final word

The marketers who win won't be those who fight the machines. They'll be the ones who **design how work is done**, where **human judgment** and **machine acceleration** meet. As Krishnan put it: the past is data; **the future is ours to imagine**.

Panel

- **Krishnan Menon**, Managing Director, **R/GA**
- **James Breeze**, CEO, **Research Network**
- **Melvyn Tan**, Co-founder, **Befinity AI**
- **Moderator: Prof. Gemma Calvert**, Nanyang Technological University (NTU)