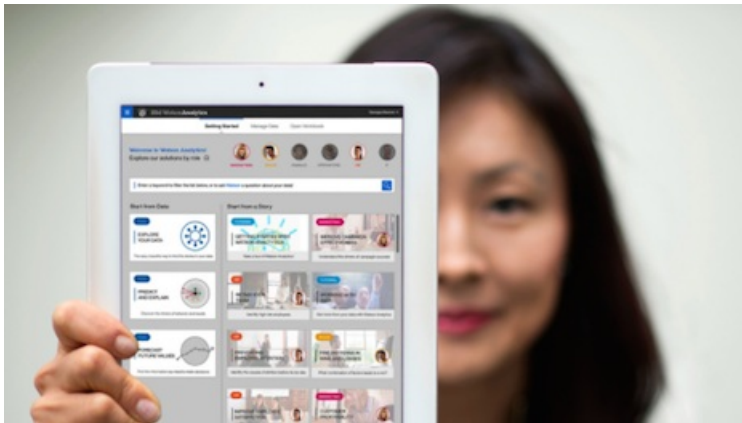MARKETING

AI will supplement, not supplant, human marketers: IBM exec

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IBM Watson's marketing cloud

By DANNY PARISI

NEW YORK With reams of information pouring into a brand's servers thank to new data-collecting technologies, cognitive marketing systems can help marketers sift through the noise and find the vital information buried within.

Speaking at Forrester's Consumer Marketing event in New York last week, the head of IBM Watson's marketing team spoke about the ways that cognitive systems will revolutionize the marketing process. In IBM's view, cognitive technology will act as a trusted advisor to marketers, helping them navigate the marketing world without supplanting them fully.

"I find that most marketers aspire to the same things," said Jay Henderson, director of Watson Marketing at IBM. "You want amazing experiences that customers love, you want to win their wallets and hearts, you want to be able to recognize the customers in each and every interaction and you want to know them as an individual, as a person.

"So if most brands want the same things, why are there such wide gaps in how they do it? It's a lot harder than you might think.

"Customers expect more and business demands more. Customers need to be catered to in seamless experiences across all channels and they expect relevant content while your business is demanding you acquire annual customers, you grow revenue, you build brand loyalty."

Artificial intelligence
One of the most buzzed-about buzzwords in the marketing world right now is "machine learning." It seems that at every marketing conference, artificial intelligence is on everyone's minds, but how many truly understand the nuances of AI marketing?

One of the companies that can speak about machine learning with some authority is IBM, whose Watson team has been steadily pumping out AI-enhanced marketing tools for a few years now.

Mr. Henderson spoke about the ways that cognitive systemsany system that utilizes artificial intelligence and machine learningcan change the way marketers do their jobs.
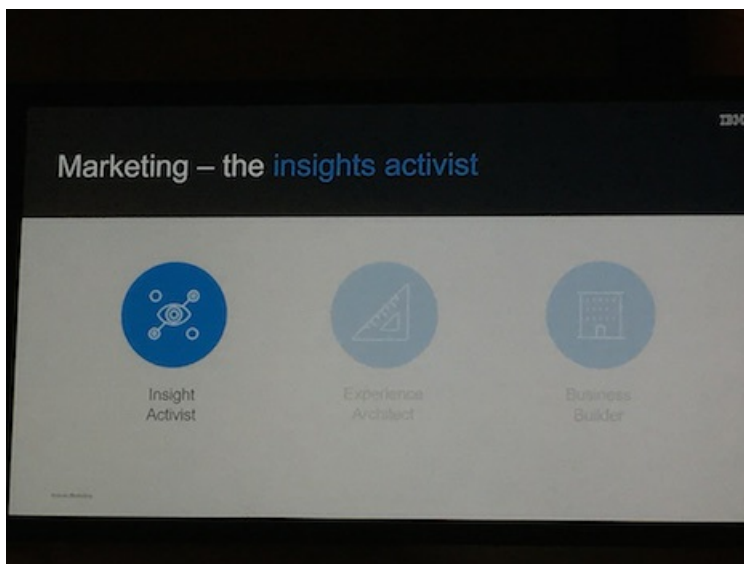
Cognitive systems can work as an "insight activist" for human marketers

Above all, Mr. Henderson emphasized that machines will not supplant humans in the marketing process. The industry is people-based and will always require a human mind to guide the process.

Rather, cognitive systems can act as a trusted advisor to the marketer, running tests, learning and recommending next steps using the vast amount of data that brands can now collect.

This last point is one of the key appeals of cognitive systems. With modern technology, marketers can now collect mountains of digital data based on their customers' behaviors.

Because of this, marketers are often sitting on massive piles of data with no ability to sift through it and find the most meaningful parts. This is where cognitive systems really shine, as they can help marketers decide which data is the most viable and how to act on it.

"Digital marketing means you can collect more information than ever," Mr. Henderson said. "But this can make you a data hoarder.

"Instead of piles of newspapers, you have petabytes of data piling up with little thought as to how to use it. But when you're guided where to look, it becomes really easy to understand."

Man and machine
The power of artificial intelligence will be especially powerful for luxury brands, who rely on providing the absolute best customer experience they can manage given the amount their customers are paying.

IBM has anticipated this and has already done partnerships with luxury groups such as Yoox Net-A-Porter.

The goals of their collaboration include planning a single technology platform to power all multi-brand and mono-brand stores in the Yoox Net-A-Porter stable and furthering in-group efforts to reinvent and improve the consumer experience. This strategic move is also intended to help speed the process as Yoox and Net-A-Porter merge their previously independent systems into one (see story).
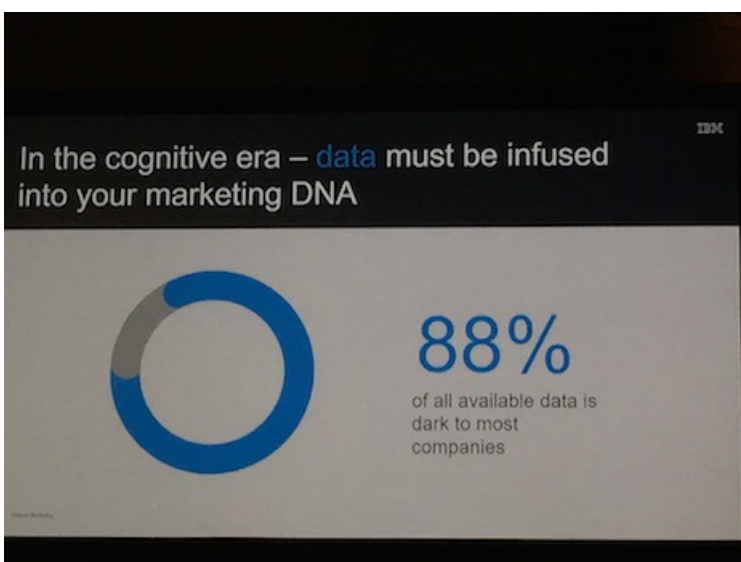
Only 12 percent of data is immediately usable without the help of AI systems

The company has also worked with Panasonic to provide customers with an AI-enhanced hotel concierge mobile application.

Panasonic and IBM Watson are working on a new way to improve the traveling experience for consumers with a digital concierge service that lets them access all hotel services from a unique cloud-based service (see story).

Mr. Henderson believes that these partnerships show how AI can work as a powerful teammate on a marketing team, giving guidance and suggestions to supplement the human intelligence at the core of marketing.

"The cognitive era means that marketers are not alone in rising to these challenges," Mr. Henderson said. "Machines should be nothing more than tools for extending the power of the human beings who use them."