

The Cookieless Revolution:



Exclusive Data on How Businesses
and Consumers are Adapting

An original research report from Apply Digital



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Methodology

For this research report, we set out to discover how leaders and consumers are adapting to changes around data collection practices and the use of third-party cookies. To accomplish this, we engaged Censuswide to conduct a survey of 100 UK C-suite Executives, Directors, and senior decision-makers, and over 2,000 web users (consumers).

Business leaders were asked detailed questions about data collection activities at their organisations, how they used the data they collected, and investment priorities for the year to come. Consumer survey respondents were asked detailed questions about how they felt about data collection and privacy, personalised online experiences, and brand trust.

Answers to the survey questions reflect respondents' positions on issues relating to third and first-party data collection. They are presented in this report as both stand-alone data points and contextually in charts and/or graphs.

Fieldwork was undertaken in August 2024.



Matt Gould

CHIEF COMMERCE OFFICER, APPLY DIGITAL

The Future of Cookies

When the ability to track users around the web was pioneered by adtech firm DoubleClick in the late '90s, an entirely new industry — ad targeting — was born. Ever since, the third-party cookie has underpinned the digital advertising economy. Now that era is coming to an end, regardless of Google's recent u-turn.

Prompted by rising concerns over user privacy and stricter regulations, Google announced in 2020 its plan to phase out cookies in its Chrome browser. Although Google has since adjusted its timeline and, as of July 2024, shifted to offering users more control and an option to opt-out, rather than removing cookies entirely, the industry has already begun to adapt. Other major browsers are already curtailing cookie usage, and many businesses have been testing alternative solutions. It's a period of significant change — and we wanted to know more about it.

To gauge how businesses and consumers are adapting to this fundamental shift, Apply Digital conducted an in-depth survey with over 100 UK senior decision makers and more than 2000 web users. The responses show that despite Google's current position of allowing cookies — which a majority of marketers surveyed are happy about — companies are already looking at and implementing alternatives to third-party cookies (3PC). A majority of respondents are confident in the quality of data they're collecting from users, and express confidence in being able to generate valuable user insights from first-party data (1PD). But despite this confidence, only 8% of businesses we surveyed feel ready to build strategies that leverage their 1PD.

On the consumer side, concerns about privacy on the web remain strong, yet so does the desire for personalised experiences. Many consumers surveyed said if given the choice, they would opt out of all data tracking — while an equally significant number said they had no concerns about being tracked by websites. This raises questions: How can companies track user behaviour while maintaining trust? What degree of tracking is the average consumer willing to accept?

While many insights are found in this report, it's clear that how businesses choose to address data collection, personalisation, and privacy in the years to come will determine their fortunes in the era of Web 3.0 where trust is an ever-increasing commodity — and will shape how we experience the web of the future.

The paradox of positivity:

Are businesses as ready
as they think they are?

With 99% of businesses still using third party tracking cookies to automatically buy ads online, it's no surprise that 70% of senior marketers approved Google's decision to extend the lifespan of third-party cookies (3PC). But when marketers were asked how prepared they feel for digital marketing in 2025, 69% have put a strategy in place that is less reliant on third party cookies, with 25% feeling fully prepared to move away from 3PC.

The data suggests businesses are culturally prepared to shift to 1PD-focused marketing strategies, with a focus on boosting customer engagement (24%), enhancing customer retention (20%), and aligning sales and marketing (20%).

But even with this willingness to change, only 8% of senior leaders replied that they face no obstacles and are actually ready to build 1PD strategies. That means a staggering 92% of businesses still have concerns in their ability to fully execute on 1PD strategies.

99%

of businesses are still using third party tracking cookies to automatically buy ads online

70%

of senior marketers approved Google's decision to extend the lifespan of 3PC

25%

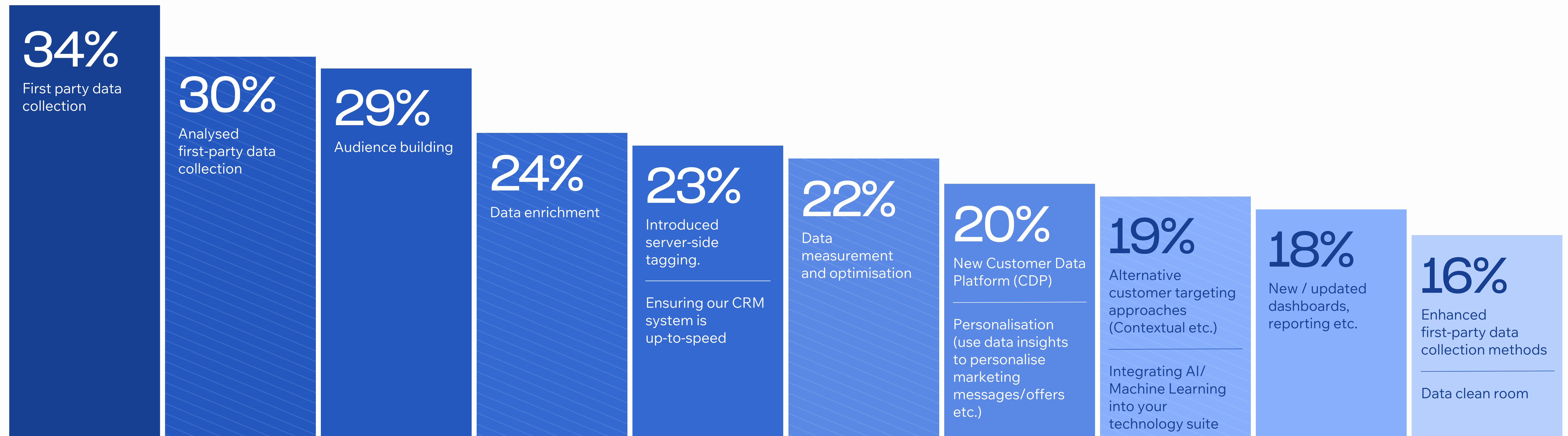
of marketers feel fully prepared to move away from 3PC

92%

of businesses still have concerns in their ability to fully execute on 1PD strategies

There's a difference between feeling optimistic, and actually being prepared.

Despite businesses already investing in implementing 1PD collection methods and tools (34%), analysing their 1PD collection provision to uncover areas of improvement, and building audience segments (29%), our data shows businesses still have more to do before they're ready to roll out 1PD strategies — including building trust with the customers they rely on for data.



What areas have senior leaders invested in to date?

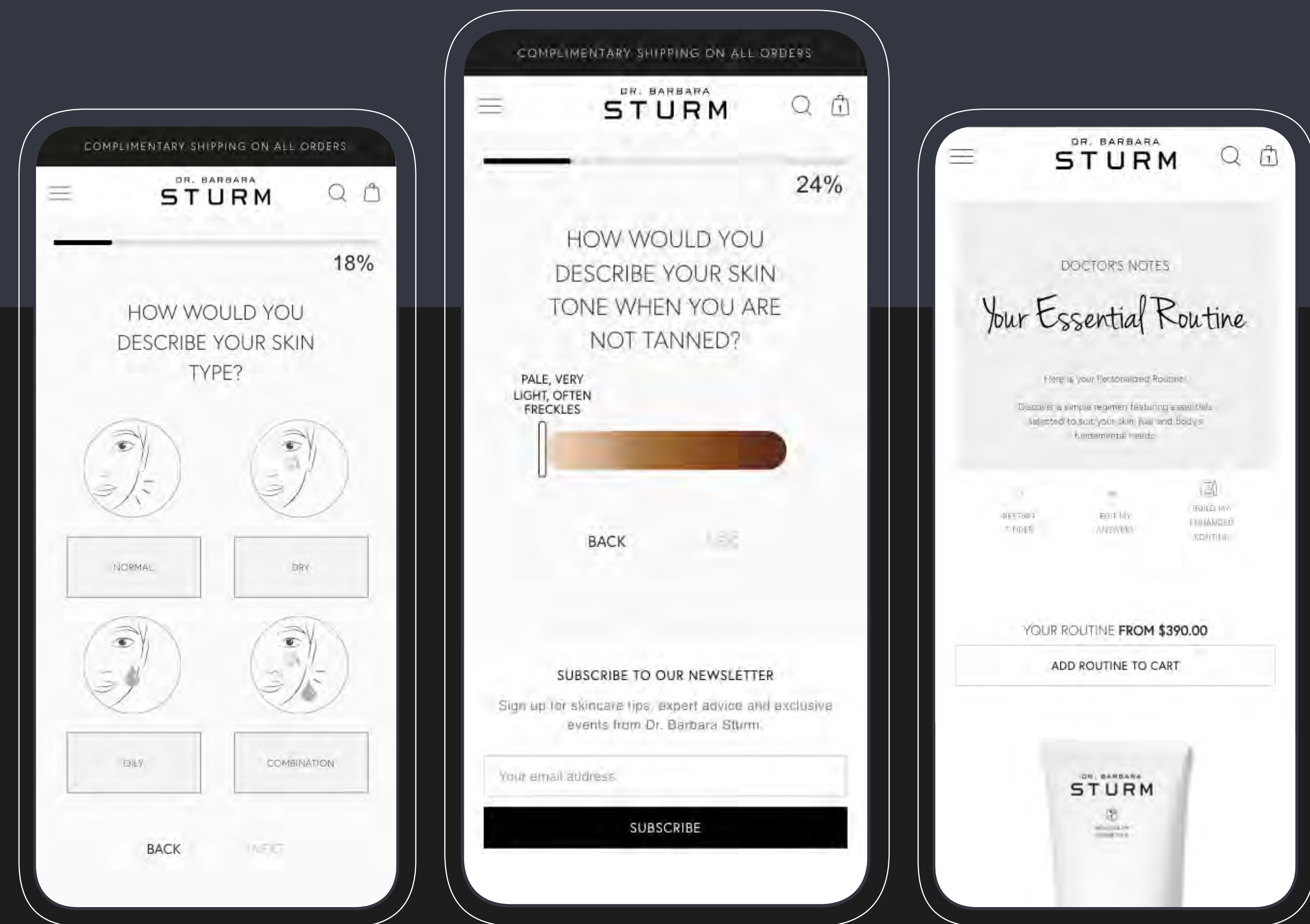
What this means for businesses



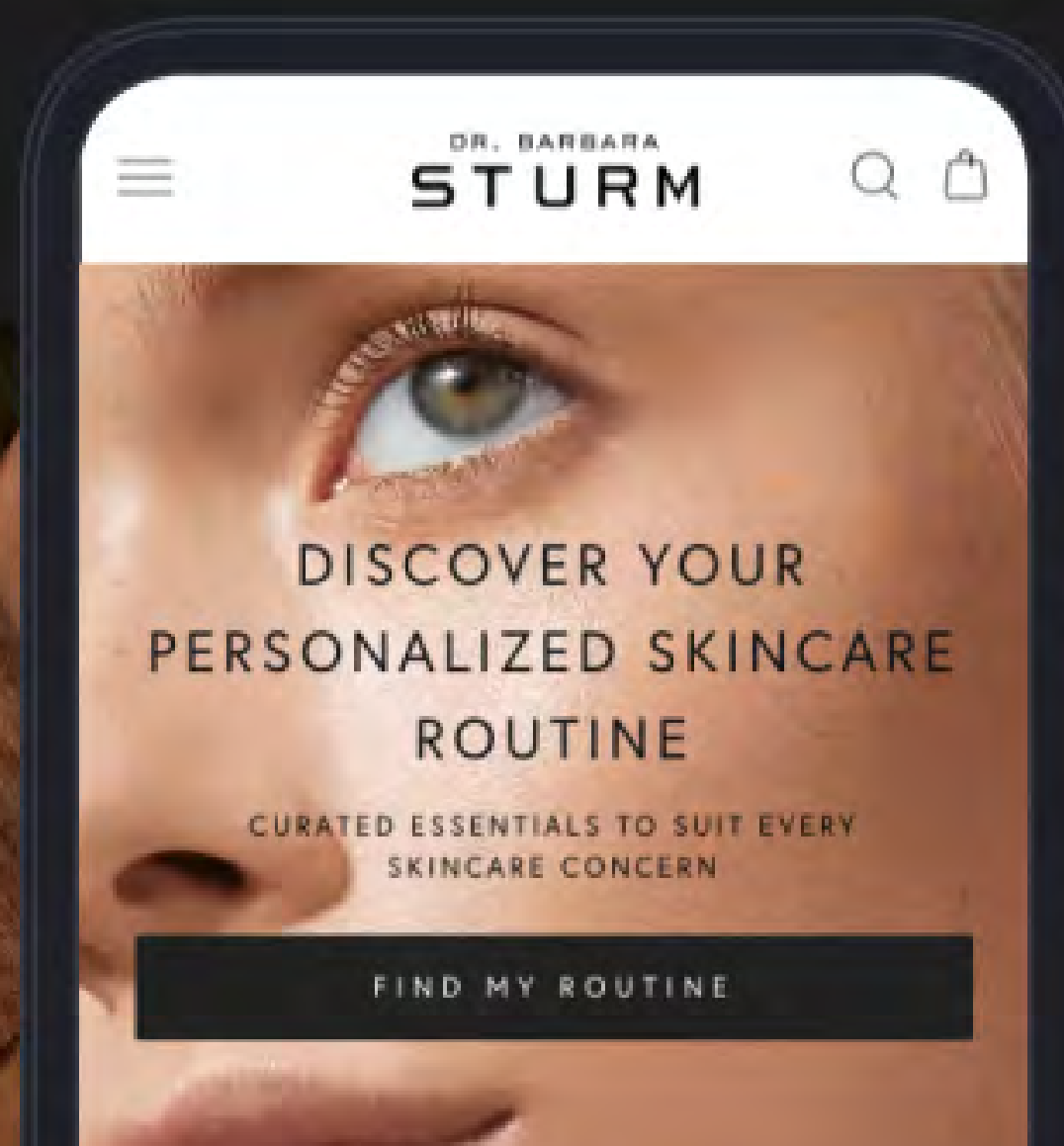
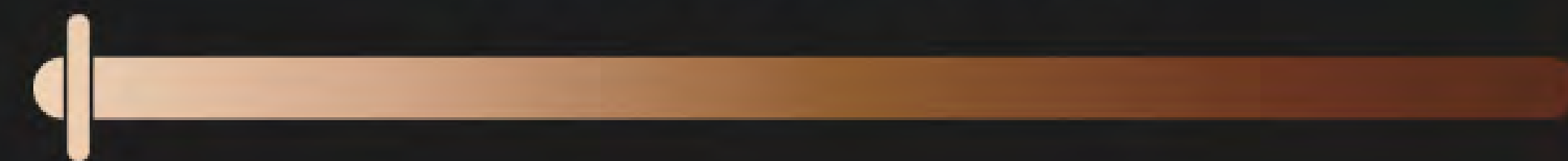
As you transition away from third-party cookies (3PC), keep in mind where opportunities to build trust with your consumers lie. Businesses can achieve this by:

- + Being clear about what the value exchange is in regard to encouraging 1PD sharing
 - + Focusing on how and when in the UX flow you ask customers to sign up
 - + Exploring alternative ways to speak to your customers
 - + Providing a way to opt out of tracking entirely
 - + Offering personalised experiences that stand out from competitors
-

DR. BARBARA STURM



DESCRIBE YOUR SKIN TONE



C is for cookie — and for customer

When our client, [Dr. Barbara Sturm](#), sought to improve their customer experience for their global clientele, we knew personalisation was the way to go. That meant designing and building custom skincare routines for the luxury beauty brand, offering unique product recommendations, and implementing a subscription tool. And behind all these improvements was a new data platform that provides the Dr. Barbara Sturm team with valuable insights into customer behaviour.

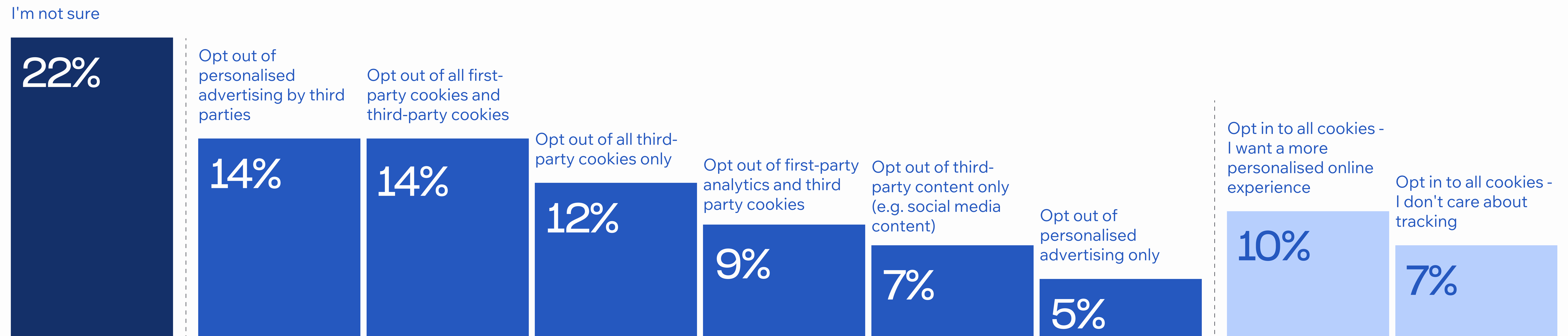
These new changes led to a 61% click-to-conversion rate from category pages, and 8.5x more search per session value.

Transparency and trust:

The keys to unlocking
consumer data

Consumers have a tight grip on their data, with some 60% indicating they would consider opting out of cookies if Chrome introduced a universal ‘opt-out’ feature. With data collection laws changing, Google’s back-and-forth on third-party cookies, and evolving user attitudes on privacy, 35% of marketers are finding it challenging to encourage web users to share their data. Businesses need to get smart about how they market to consumers.

Marketers should focus on building strong strategies that empower them to take the right path forward, drive business outcomes, and keep the customer top of mind. There may always be people who are adamant about rejecting all cookies (13% of respondents would opt out entirely of all cookies and 32% feel negatively about third parties tracking their web activity). But don’t count them out. There are opportunities to meet your consumers — the positive, the unsure, and the selective — where they are.



If Google were to provide different tiers of opt-in cookie tracking across all websites, what option would you most likely pick?

Keeping the customer at the forefront is a clear focus for marketers. The challenge? Businesses are struggling to encourage users to share their data.

When senior leaders were asked why they haven't yet started using alternatives to third-party cookies, the most common reason given was the challenge of encouraging customers to share their data (35%).

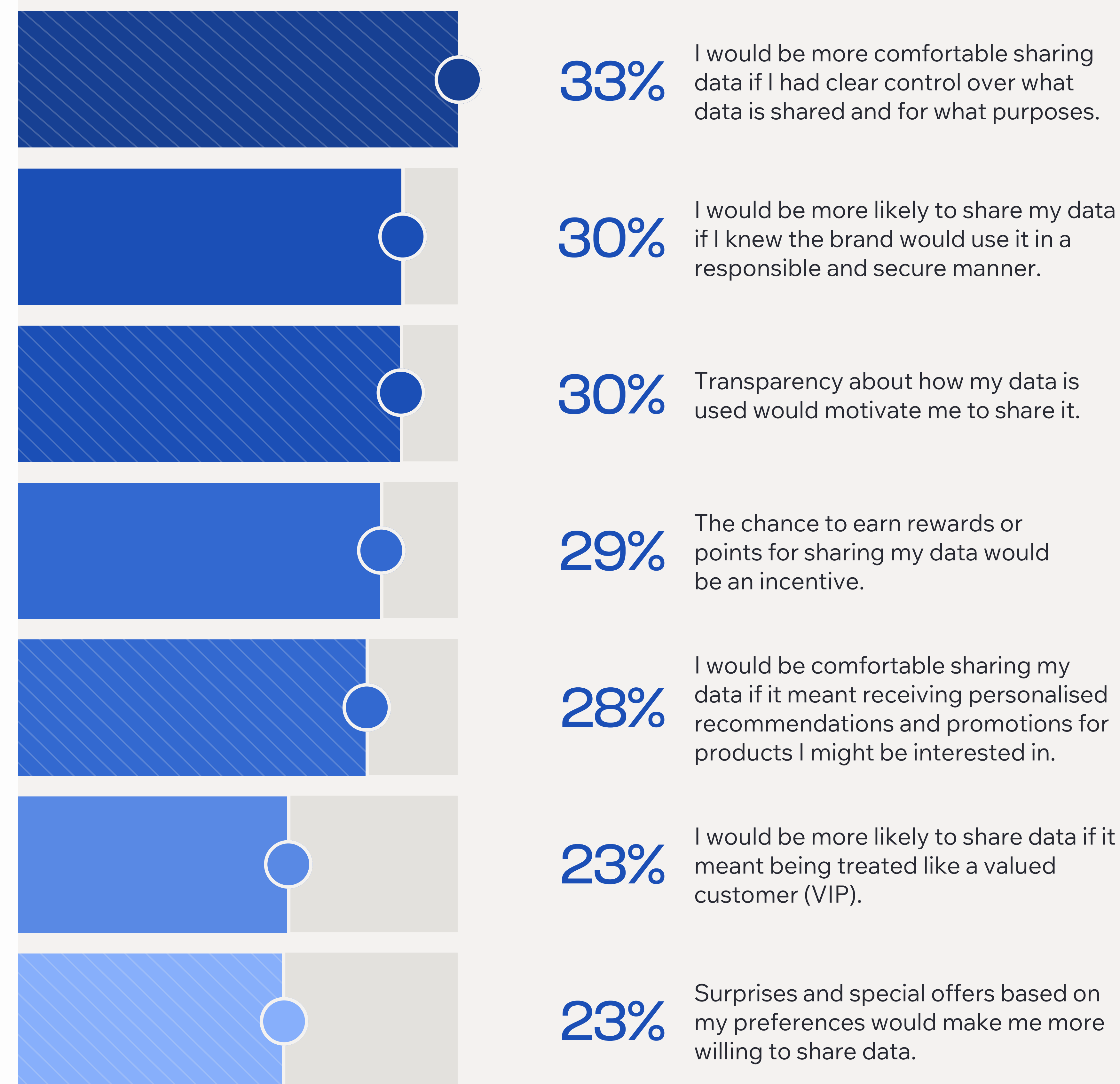
When consumers were asked what would make them comfortable to share their data with businesses, respondents clearly prioritised control, assurance, and transparency:

- 33% want clear control over what data is shared and for what purposes
- 30% want assurance that their data will be used responsibly
- 30% want transparency around how their data is used

To build trust, businesses must be clear and communicative about their intentions and provide real value to consumers who offer up their data.

The data also shows consumers are open to sharing if there's something in it for them: rewards or points (29%), personalised recommendations (28%), or special offers (23%). It'll be imperative that businesses keep both segments in mind: offer transparency and control, build trust, and ensure beneficial experiences for customers.

Which of the following would most likely convince you to share your data with a brand for personalisation purposes?



What this means for businesses

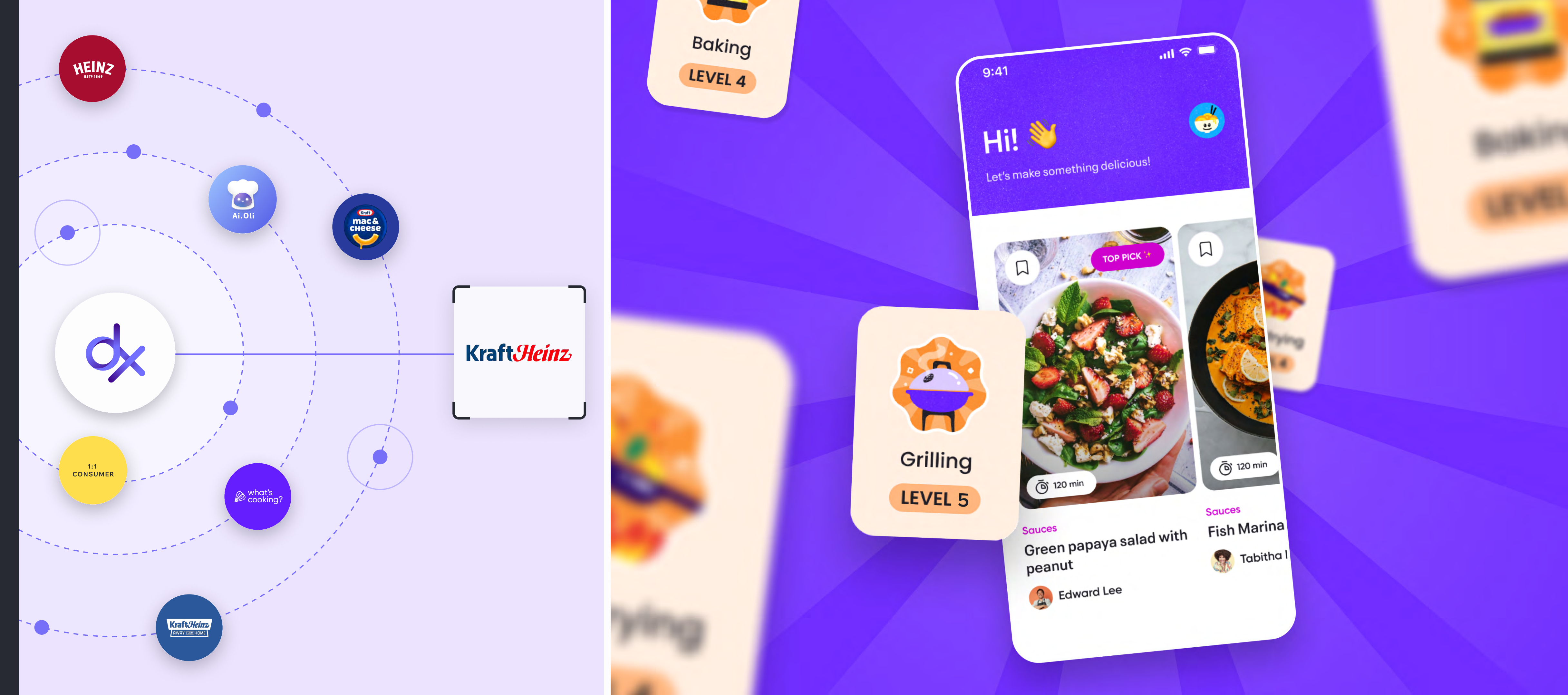


Building trust and ensuring benefits to customers means businesses must develop ways to:

- + Build trust by fostering long-term relationships with customers
 - + Prioritise data privacy by leveraging robust protection measures
 - + Be transparent about data collection and use
 - + Provide options for users to manage their data preferences
 - + Develop loyalty and reward programmes that deliver value to consumers
 - + Create a VIP experience to empower users
-

Breaking free from the cookie-cutter mould

Kraft Heinz took an innovative approach to building strong connections with their consumers and the brands they love. Their cutting-edge digital experience platform (DXP) was built to reveal key behaviour insights, streamline content and product management, and personalise the brand experience. This work led to a 30% increase in engagement and a 28% increase in customer satisfaction.



KraftHeinz

“It’s exciting to be able to address consumers and communities individually. With the right content, design, and technology, we have the capability to connect with and learn from our consumers like never before — and that makes for a really powerful bond.”

Justin Thomas
HEAD OF DIGITAL AT KRAFT HEINZ

Data-driven decision-making:

Accurate data fuels
better decisions

As collection of 1PD increases, marketers are developing strategies and tactics to reward consumers for sharing their data. But getting 1PD is just the first step: marketers need to ensure data is accurate and that they have the tools needed to interpret it.

What's holding senior leaders back from developing successful engagement and retention strategies around first-party data?

34%

Inaccurate data

33%

Inconsistent data

32%

Outdated data

27%

Siloed data

25%

Lack of access to in-house or external expertise to analyse data

22%

Lack of technology to analyse data

8%

Are ready to build strategies using their first-party data



Making data-driven decisions means being data-smart.

14%

14% of businesses don't believe their CRM system is set up to make the most of their data.

30%

And 30% of businesses believe they don't have the tools in place (e.g. CDP/marketing automation) to extract sufficient value from first-party customer data or behaviours.

41%

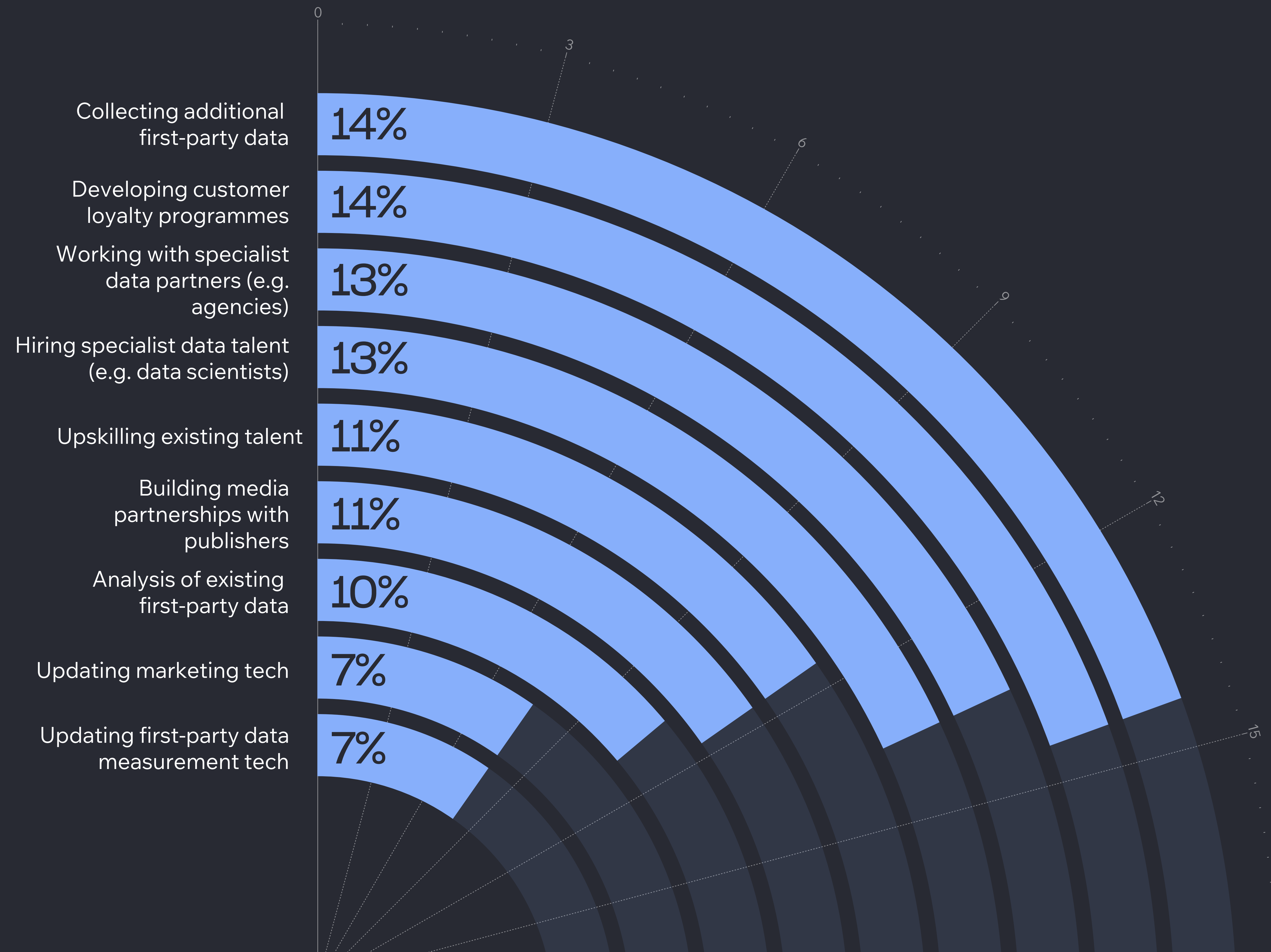
However, our data shows that 41% of consumers are more likely to buy from a business after a personalised experience, so there's a clear need to maintain robust data analytics to assess the impact of customer engagement efforts.

So what are the top three strategic priorities that marketers are focusing on in 2025 when it comes to data?

It will come down to collecting additional first-party data (14%), developing customer loyalty programmes (14%), and working with specialist data partners (13%).

Because without effective data and analytics, businesses will be hard-pressed to uncover the valuable insights hidden within the numbers.

What will be your primary strategic focus for data in 2025?



What this means for businesses



So what can businesses do?

- + Ensure the right analytic tools are in place to support 1PD collection
- + Implement best-of-fit personalisation, CDP, and CRM technologies
- + Invest in in-house expertise to upskill your existing talent
- + Partner with agencies and specialists to make the most of your data

By breaking down information silos, businesses can create more engaging and meaningful customer experiences. Because when your data is disconnected, your decisions are, too.

One smart cookie

The Very Group (TVG) engaged Apply Digital to upgrade their eCommerce platform. The company's transition from a single, all-in-one system to a flexible tech setup was more than just adding new tools; it was about crafting a long-term digital strategy to enhance customer experiences. This multi-year plan focuses on faster website updates, improved product pages, and training the team on new ways of working.

This work led to 81% of TVG's online sales being completed on mobile devices and helped boost traffic to over 2.2M website visits per day.



“When we finish this piece of work, the legacy Apply Digital will leave with us is more than technology because they will have helped evolve our ways of working, and how we solve problems and deliver value to our customers at speed.”

Paul Hornby
DIGITAL CX DIRECTOR AT THE VERY GROUP

Business priorities

in the year to come

For businesses, the rising cost of customer acquisition is a major concern going into 2025. Almost a third (29%) of senior marketers fear higher acquisition costs following Google’s single-opt out decision on Chrome. Perhaps to mitigate these worries, senior marketers are doubling down on serving the customers they already have.

When asked about their investment priorities for 2025,

more than 47% of respondents who are investing in 1PD strategies — such as personalisation and enhancing digital experiences — said this would remain their top focus next year.

47%

Similarly, over 45% of those prioritising customer loyalty indicated it would continue to be their main focus in 2025,

45%

while more than 41% currently investing in first-party targeting plan to keep it at the top of their priority list.

41%

What will be your specific investment priorities for data in 2025? |



The Last Word

It's clear that as the era of third-party cookies winds down, businesses have learned valuable lessons, and are applying those learnings in their investments. They are focused on keeping the customers they have by offering more-personalised experiences; rewarding those customers through expanded loyalty programmes; and pursuing growth with first-party targeting strategies to turn website visitors into paying customers. The most successful companies are truly listening and creating intelligent, personalised experiences — and to do that, you need a robust 1PD strategy.

Let's not overlook the significant insight that 79% of senior marketers surveyed have already begun adopting alternatives to third-party cookies. These forward-thinking leaders understand that achieving success, both now and in the future, requires a careful balance: using customer data to create excellent experiences, being transparent about data use, and respecting customers' choices regarding their privacy.

For companies looking to take action based on the insights in this report, partnering with a leading consultancy like Apply Digital is key to success. Delivering world-class digital experiences that delight — and convert — customers requires a strategic approach that ensures technology decisions ladder up to business objectives. Our work with top global brands has given us the experience and expertise needed to position our clients to succeed in 2025 and beyond.

WHITE STUFF

Disney

Andertons
MUSIC CO.

NOBLE PANACEA

Nuffield
Health

Kraft Heinz

BROMPTON



THE VERY GROUP

PINK
THOMAS PINK
SHIRTMAKER. LONDON

Credits

Censuswide Research Agency

Velvet PR Agency

Joanne Doherty Marketing Director, EMEA

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About Apply Digital

We are a global digital transformation partner for change agents. Leveraging expertise that spans Business Transformation Strategy, Product Design & Development, Commerce, Platform Engineering, Data Intelligence, Change Management, and beyond, we enable our clients to modernise their organisations and deliver meaningful impact to their business and to their customers. Our 650+ team members have helped transform global companies like Kraft Heinz, NFL, Moderna, Lululemon, Games Workshop, Atlassian, and The Very Group.

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