

# A deep dive into ISBA's strategy for 2026 and beyond

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## Presented by:

- Simon Michaelides, Director General
- Rob Newman, Director of Public Affairs
- Stephen Chester, Director of Media
- Bobi Carley, Director of Industry Relations

## Executive summary

Marketing is entering a period of profound and irreversible change. Economic uncertainty, technological disruption and regulatory pressure are converging with long-standing internal challenges: constrained budgets, fragmented measurement, declining trust and a growing skills gap. In response, ISBA's strategy for 2026 and beyond sets out a clear, long-term plan to help members navigate, shape and succeed in this complexity.

**Our focus is on three strategic pillars.** We will enable effectiveness and rebuild trust in advertising, drive transparency across increasingly opaque digital supply chains, and help members navigate the future - particularly the impact of AI on operating models, talent and value creation.

Through a small number of decisive 'big bets', supported by a consistent drumbeat of activity for BAU workstreams, ISBA is committed to delivering to member the evidence, influence and capability they need to thrive in an uncertain and fast-changing landscape.

## The strategic context

Marketers are entering a time of transformation more dynamic, profound and rapid than anything the industry has experienced since ISBA was formed in 1900. Brands must negotiate a landscape defined by complexity, rather than simplicity, volatility, rather than predictability and disruption, rather than continuity.

The key external forces driving this are economic uncertainty, technological disruption, market mergers and acquisitions activity and the possibility of further regulation in certain areas.

The industry must also confront significant internal challenges, most notably flat, or shrinking budgets, a gap in boardroom understanding of marketing, growth strategies which swing between the short and the long term, and the churn of CMOs often linked to the declining influence of marketing at a C-Suite level.

**Finally there are challenges within the marketing and advertising process itself:**

1. Measuring marketing effectiveness is more complex than ever.
2. There is a misunderstanding of how the marketing 'funnel' has evolved. The linear advertising process no longer exists but the way human beings make decisions remains the same.
3. Creativity is in decline as the business model shifts from producing advertising assets that are high value, low volume to low value, high volume.
4. A skills gap exists at both a junior and senior level. There is a growing dilution of knowledge of marketing fundamentals amongst junior marketers. At the other end of the spectrum are senior leaders who have developed specialised knowledge within particular marketing functions but lack the broad marketing experience to equip them in more senior marketing roles.

**All this poses two systemic questions for CMOs:**

- 1) What are the implications for marketing operational models?
- 2) What talent and skills are required to compete in this new era – and what skills and roles will become obsolete?

## **The ISBA Strategy**

The themes emerging are clear, consistent and unlikely to change in the mid to long term. Therefore, ISBA has, for the first time set out a 3-5 year strategic plan.

Our mission is clear, to help our members navigate, shape, and succeed in the most complex and fast-changing advertising landscape in living memory.

This consists of three strategic pillars:

- 1. Enabling effectiveness and trust in advertising.**
- 2. Ensuring transparency of digital supply chains.**
- 3. Helping members navigate the future.**

For each pillar we have called out a 'big bet', initiatives that will be transformative for members and the wider industry. Alongside these 'big bets' ISBA will also support other strategically important workstreams with a regular drumbeat of activity.

## Enabling effectiveness and trust in advertising

The case for marketing rests, fundamentally, on its ability to ensure that its advertising is effective and that the business, most importantly the C-Suite, can trust that money is being spent in the right places and that marketers have accurate data to prove this. Although public trust in advertising has risen recently, it is still relatively low. Trust goes hand in hand with effectiveness to reassure the Boardroom, regulators and consumers of the value of advertising.

### The key concerns here are:

- The lack of a common currency across media channels, with which to evaluate marketing effectiveness at a total campaign / activity level.
- Growing fragmentation driven by both the number of measurement tools & availability of data, and the expansion of the marketing toolkit (Retail Media, Influencer, GEO).
- The redacted debate between brand vs performance and long term vs short term.

### The 'big bet'

The industry needs to move beyond this debate to create a definitive business case for a balanced, cross-media, approach to growth marketing. ISBA in collaboration with other industry stakeholders is committed to redressing that narrative and equipping our members with curated evidence to support their decision making.

## Ensuring transparency of digital supply chains

The long-held concern about transparency among CMOs has become more crucial, and difficult, as AI-driven optimisation, emerging media channels, mergers and acquisitions (among agencies and media owners) gather momentum.

### The key concerns here are:

- Guaranteeing online safety and ensuring appropriate protections for the brand and user.
- AI-driven automated processes, and their potential impact on creativity, media, research, social media and strategy.
- Managing advertising agency contracts and remuneration.
- Building better relationships and deepening the dialogue with proprietary media.

### The 'big bet'

Since 2017 ISBA has advocated for government regulation of the tech platforms. With society increasingly demanding change, a second Online Safety Act remains a clear possibility, one which no CMO can ignore. ISBA is committed to contributing to shaping the future of a brand safe environment online.

## Helping members navigate the future

The challenge facing marketers – as in many other professions – is AI. The fear is that, implemented bluntly and blindly, AI could marginalise the function, which makes it even more imperative that leaders prove they can generate tailored strategic insights to create a significant, sustainable competitive advantage. It might seem counter

intuitive but ISBA is convinced that the integration of AI will only transform the industry's performance if brands obtain the right talent and skills.

### **The key concerns here are:**

- Adopting and scaling AI, particularly the use of 'Gen AI' in creative.
- Agency operating models, especially in terms of AI, talent and value chains.
- Advertiser operating models, specifically how the industry weighs in-housing vs outsourcing and finds the right talent and skills

### **The 'big bet'**

ISBA will be focused on working with members in defining the best operating models of the future and bridging the gap between theoretical and practical. This includes a critical piece around skills, identifying what skills will be needed and where these skills will come from. To do this, different disciplines within the marketing function need to come together so their insights can be shared and leveraged. ISBA is already making progress on ensuring these conversations are happening.

*The next three to five years will transform the way brands do business – often in unexpected ways. By focusing on Effectiveness & Trust, Transparency and the Future ISBA believes the industry can thrive in uncertainty and work with our members to shape the future of marketing as they navigate the stormy seas ahead.*