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CONSUMER SURVEY | SUMMER 2026

Audience Perceptions *of AI*

SUMMER 2026

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Introduction

AI is no longer something happening behind the scenes in marketing departments—consumers now experience it every time they open their inboxes.

AI summarizes emails before they're opened, filters what gets attention, and influences purchase decisions in real time.

The question is no longer *if* consumers are interacting with AI in their inboxes. They are. The question is how AI is changing the way they engage with and buy from brands.

Validity's survey of 1,000 consumers examines how people are experiencing AI-powered email features, how much they trust them, and how AI is reshaping their path from awareness to purchase.

The findings point to a consumer base that's moving faster than most marketers realize, adopting AI features for shopping and inbox management even when trust in those features is low.

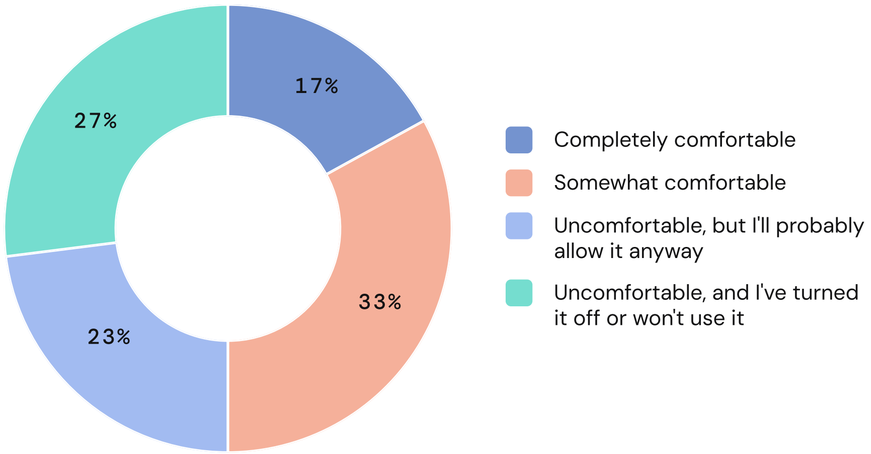


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Comfort with AI in the inbox is *evenly split*

How comfortable are you with an AI tool reading all your emails to surface deals and recommendations?

FIGURE 1



When asked if they are comfortable with AI tools reading their messages to surface deals and recommendations, consumers are divided almost exactly down the middle: 50 percent say they are comfortable to some degree, 50 percent say they are not (Figure 1).

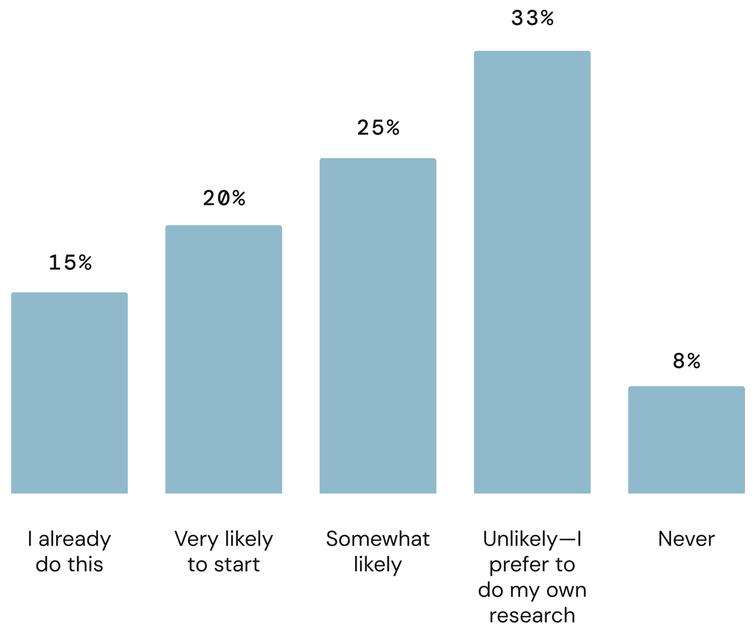
> *Only 17 percent describe themselves as completely comfortable.*

Among those who say they are uncomfortable, 23 percent say they will probably allow AI inbox access anyway. The remaining 27 percent say they have turned off AI features or won't use them.

This divide creates a complicated picture for marketers. A meaningful share of consumers is granting AI access to their inboxes not because they are confident in the technology, but because the convenience outweighs their concerns.

FIGURE 2

Email platforms like Gmail have introduced AI tools that search your inbox on command. Instead of manually browsing emails, how likely are you to use an AI assistant to analyze emails to find the best deal or offer?



AI in email isn’t inherently a trust problem, but lack of transparency, inaccuracy, and over-automation will make it one fast.

However, marketers shouldn’t overlook the group who will use AI despite having some reservations. This is an audience that's made peace with AI as a tool, provided the content still delivers value. They're not asking brands to hide AI use—they're asking brands to make sure the output is frictionless and worth their time.

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AI summaries are *reshaping* how consumers interact with email

When consumers see AI-generated email summaries in their inbox, 50 percent use this snippet to decide whether to open the email (Figure 3). Fourteen percent said they've decided to purchase items based on this summary alone (Figure 4)

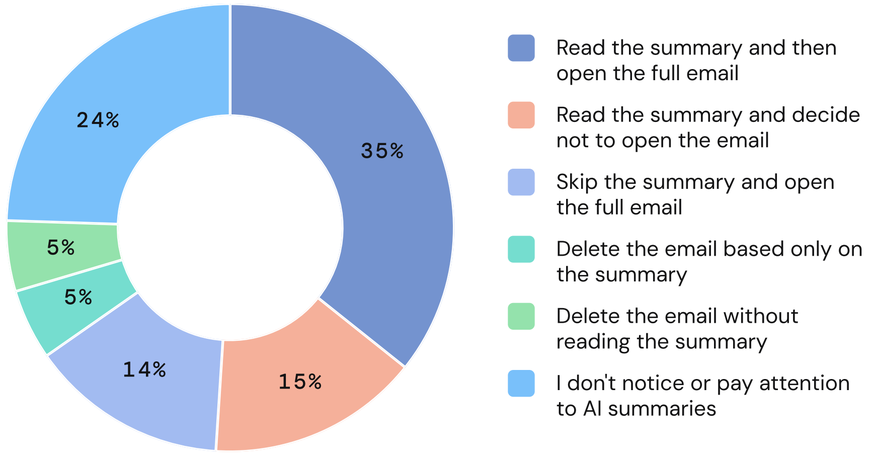
> *For a growing share of your audience, AI summaries aren't just a preview of your email—they are your email.*

But reception to these summaries varies dramatically by generation. Millennials are most likely to say they'll read an AI summary before they open the full email, outpacing Baby Boomers by 24 percentage points.

The generational gap extends beyond reading behavior. Twenty-two percent of millennials say they've made a purchase based solely on an AI email summary without ever opening the full message—with Gen Z close behind. For Boomers, that number drops to just one percent.

When an AI summary appears in your inbox, what do you typically do?

FIGURE 3



For younger consumers, AI summaries are already functioning as a primary filter for email engagement. As younger generations gain purchasing power, the 24 percent of consumers who “don’t notice or pay attention to AI summaries” is expected to decrease dramatically.

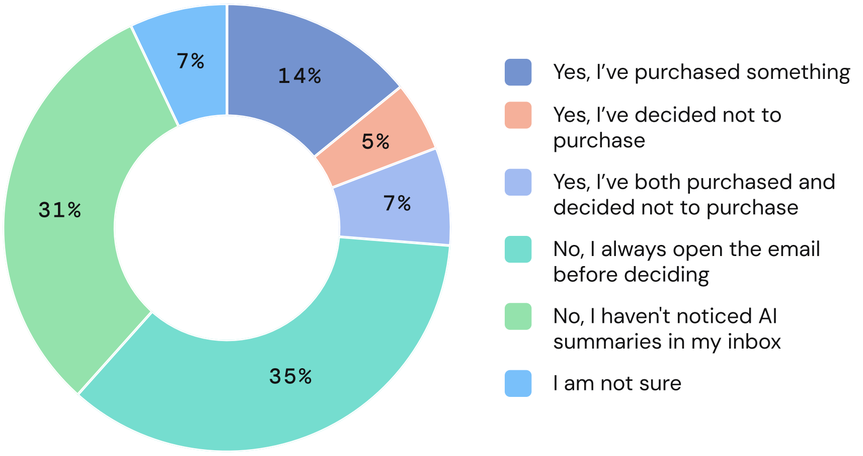
That means email copy now needs to work on two levels: for the human reading the full email, and for the AI rendering a three-line version. The good news is that writing for AI summaries and writing quality emails aren't that different—they both reward clarity, front-loaded value, and specificity.

Of course, the AI features described here and later throughout this report aren't universally accessible. As of early 2026, Gmail's AI features are disabled by default in regions with strict data privacy regulations—like the European Union and United Kingdom—requiring users to actively opt in. Apple Intelligence is also unavailable by default in the EU, and entirely inaccessible on devices bought in specific regions, like mainland China.

Depending on a sender’s list composition, a meaningful portion of their audience may never see an AI-generated email summary.

FIGURE 4

Have you ever made a purchase decision based only on an AI email summary (without opening the full email)?



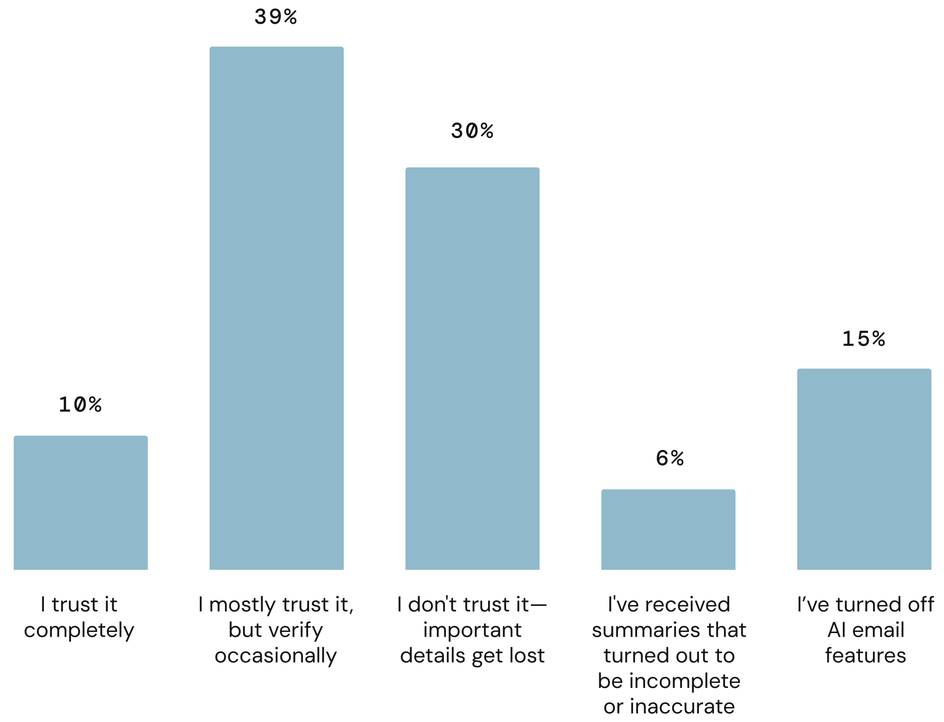
Trust in AI summaries is low, and consumers know when something feels off

Despite the growing presence of AI summaries, only 10 percent of consumers trust them completely (Figure 5). That number alone should give marketers pause—but the full picture is more complicated.

The largest group, 39 percent, mostly trusts AI summaries but verifies occasionally. That sounds reasonable until you consider what "verifying occasionally" actually means: a consumer fact-checking a summary that was designed to save them time.

FIGURE 5

Do you trust AI to represent an email's content fairly, or do you worry it might miss something important?



When digging deeper into this mistrust, 30 percent say important details get lost in summaries, six percent have received inaccurate summaries, and 15 percent have turned off AI features entirely. Add those groups together and a majority of consumers approach AI summaries with some degree of skepticism, if not active resistance.

The generational split reinforces this sentiment. Boomers are the most skeptical of AI summaries—43 percent say important details get lost. Millennials are the most trusting, but even so, "mostly trust but verify" is the dominant response.

> *For marketers, this is a reminder that optimizing for AI-comfortable younger audiences can alienate older ones with purchasing power.*

However, the most striking finding in the data is the gap between trust and behavior. The majority of consumers—55 percent—are making inbox decisions based on AI summaries alone (Figure 3). That includes those who read the summary and decide not to open the full email, those who delete the email after reading only the summary, etc.

This will have a major impact on traditional email attribution—those who read the summary and choose to purchase without opening the email will drive revenue, but it won't be attributable to the email's opens or clicks.

This also means that copy accuracy is more important than ever. If your email contains conditional offers, expiry dates, or product-specific details, assume an AI summary may flatten or misrepresent them.

Write so your most critical details are impossible to overlook or misinterpret.

Focus on short sections and clear headers over image-heavy emails to help machines (and humans!) extract key points quickly. Repeat important details like pricing and deadlines and be date-specific when possible—fresh content is king. (E.g., Best April 2026 Running Sneakers" is likely to outperform "Best 2026 Running Sneakers.")

Consumers *remain skeptical* about AI-produced email content

When told an email was AI-written, 40 percent said they'd be less likely to trust the brand as a result (Figure 6).

But the reality is that less than half of consumers (43 percent) are confident they could even detect AI-written emails (Figure 7). That gap leaves marketers facing a tough tradeoff: move faster and scale content with AI, or risk chipping away at the trust that makes those messages work in the first place.

Consumer discomfort with AI doesn't all come from one place. Privacy and data misuse top the list of concerns at 25 percent (Figure 8). Most consumers have no clear picture of what "AI reading my inbox" actually means—what's stored, what's inferred, what's shared, and with whom.

FIGURE 6

Would you be more or less likely to trust a retailer's marketing emails if you knew they were written by AI?

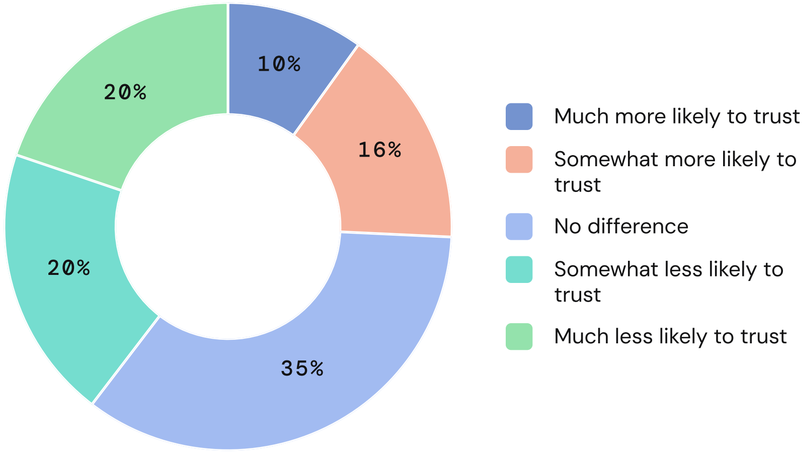
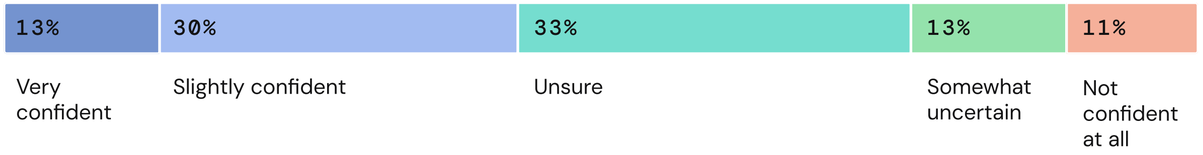


FIGURE 7

Do you feel confident you can pinpoint when a retail brand uses AI in its marketing emails?



In the absence of clear answers, distrust fills the void—and the regulatory environment is responding fast. The EU's AI Act is already in force, and U.S. state-level legislation is accelerating.

For marketers, compliance with evolving AI regulation isn't just a legal checkbox—it's a program-wide exercise. That means reviewing the legal basis for how you process personal data, updating privacy policies to include AI-specific language, and practicing data minimization: only collecting what you actually need.

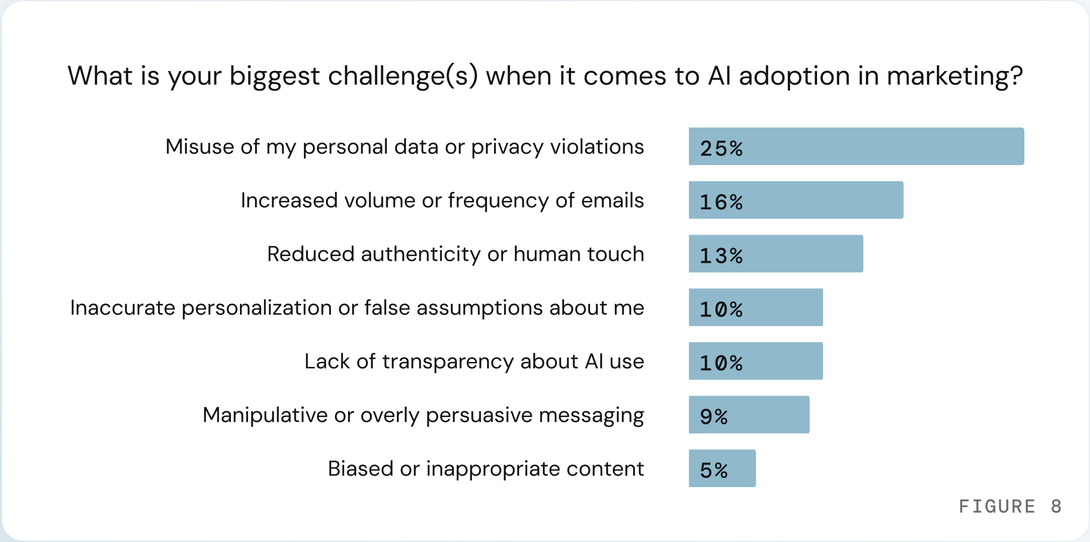


FIGURE 8

It also means conducting a formal AI risk assessment for your use cases. AI applications are increasingly being graded by risk level—Minimal, Limited, High, and Unacceptable—and use cases that fall into higher tiers will likely face tight regulation or outright bans. Marketers who proactively assess where their AI practices land on that spectrum will be ready to adapt as rules tighten, rather than scrambling to catch up.

After privacy concerns, it’s not mail volume or marketing manipulation that worries people most about AI—it's authenticity. Thirteen percent of consumers say they fear losing the human touch in brand communications, outpacing concerns about misleading messaging and inaccurate personalization. They aren't just worried about what AI does with their data—they're worried about what it does to the relationships they enjoy with brands.

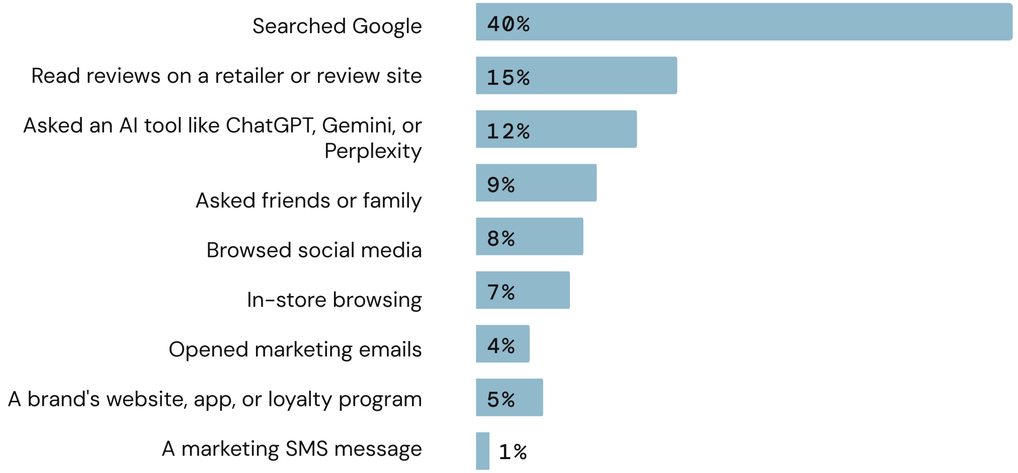
What does this mean for marketers? Now’s the time to get ahead of AI detection. The brands that win won’t be the ones using the least AI—they'll be the ones being the most honest about how they use it. Light-touch disclosure ("We use AI to personalize recommendations, but our team reviews every email") can defuse skepticism before it turns into mistrust.

AI is now a *top research channel*—and is reshaping product discovery

AI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity have quickly become a mainstream part of product discovery. Today, 12 percent of consumers use an AI tool as their primary research channel—third overall behind Google Search and retailer or review sites (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9

When you're looking for a product to buy, which do you most frequently use to help you decide?



Adoption is accelerating: 31 percent of consumers are using AI for shopping more than a year ago, 54 percent have tried it, and another 17 percent are open to it (Figure 10). This isn't a new or emerging trend—it's becoming default shopping behavior.

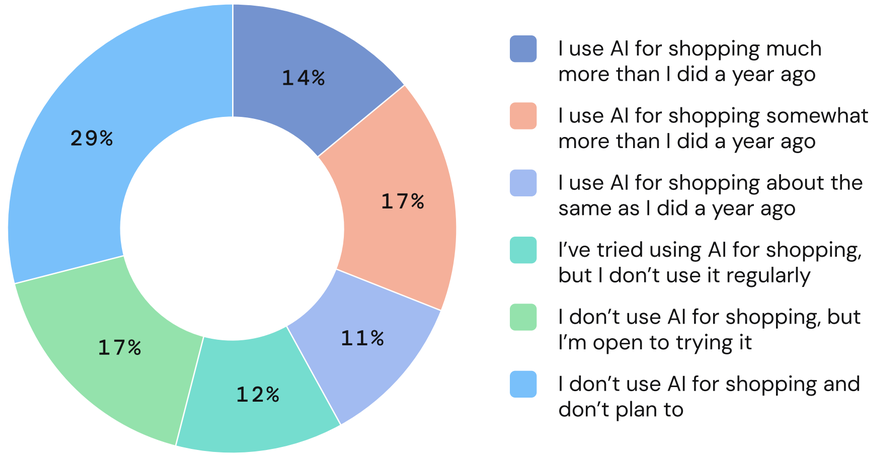
The bigger shift is how AI changes the journey. It compresses research, replacing multiple touchpoints—search, reviews, and brand sites—with a single answer. That means fewer chances for marketers to influence decisions through traditional channels.

It also redefines visibility. If your brand isn't showing up in AI-generated answers, you're effectively missing from consideration altogether.

The takeaway: consumers aren't just searching anymore—they're asking AI tools to do the legwork for them. Test your "AI-ready" messaging by prompting tools like ChatGPT with your product category and see if (and how) your brand appears. Refine messaging where it's missing or misrepresented.

FIGURE 10

Which of the following best describes how AI has changed the way you discover and evaluate products compared to a year ago?



What this means *for marketers*

Consumers aren't waiting for brands to figure out their AI strategies. They're already using AI to decide which emails to open, which to skip, and which products to research. They're making these decisions quickly and with incomplete trust in the tools guiding them.

The biggest risk now for marketers is not that AI is changing consumer behavior, but that the change is already well underway—and most teams haven't adjusted.

Brands that act now—using tools like Validity Engage to continuously learn and optimize their email programs—will be best positioned to reach consumers on both sides of the AI divide before the gap becomes too wide to bridge.

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Ready to close the gap?

Talk to our team about Validity Engage and see how you can turn AI-driven performance insights into real email ROI gains.

TALK TO OUR TEAM →

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METHODOLOGY: VALIDITY'S SUMMER 2026 CONSUMER SURVEY FEATURES RESPONSES FROM OVER 1000 INDIVIDUALS IN THE UNITED STATES WHO ARE 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER. THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED IN MAY 2026.