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by Semrush Spotlight



Spotlight 2025 Top Takeaways

1,200+

Attendees
joined

100+

Industry-leading
speakers

150+

Masterminds
sessions

25+

Keynote
presentations

Top 5 Takeaways from Spotlight

Marketers from around the globe gathered at Semrush Spotlight 2025 in Amsterdam, not just for the latest tips, but to confront the industry's next great evolution: **the disruptive and definitive rise of AI**. The day's sessions moved beyond simple tactics, offering a profound look at a new marketing landscape. Leaders from OpenAI, Duolingo, Semrush, and more provided a forward-looking playbook, revealing that the future isn't just about adopting new tools, but about fundamentally re-engineering our approach to influence, trust, and human connection.

Here are the top five takeaways from the day:

1 Search is No Longer a Destination, It's an Expansive Landscape. AI doesn't kill SEO; it shatters the limitations of the search box. The marketer's role is expanding from a single channel to optimizing for a "highly reactive" and all-encompassing search landscape—and marketers need an all-in-one solution to stay ahead. Learn more on page 12.

2 The AI-Trust Paradox: More AI Requires More Humanity. The future isn't AI replacing humans, but AI as a "force multiplier" to scale trust. The most advanced brand campaigns will be "collaborative and decentralised," enabling customers to distribute your brand for you by making them the hero. Hear more on page 16.

3 The New SEO: From Traffic Acquisition to Influence Engineering. As "growing impressions and shrinking clicks" become the norm, traditional SEO is over. The new battleground is "Share of Voice" within AI, requiring marketers to manage brand probability in LLMs and reverse-engineer "authoritativeness" for generative search. Head over to pages 6 and 15 for more.

4 Humanizing B2B: Selling to People, Not Organizations. B2B marketing must evolve to sell the "benefit of the benefit"—tapping into the personal incentives of the individual decision-maker (e.g., "less time crunching numbers"), not just the organizational goals (e.g., "save time"). Dig in on page 4.

5 Resonance Trumps Reach: Rejecting Norms for Cultural Connection. Growth is just an outcome; the real goal is "cultural resonance." In a world of generic trends, brands like Duolingo win by taking "creative risks" and rejecting industry norms to build a unique, authentic connection with their community. Check out more on page 3.

Creative Risk to Cultural Resonance

Speaker: Zaria Parvez



Zaria Parvez opened the Main Stage of Spotlight 2025 by sharing how rejecting what was the 'done thing' in social media marketing was the golden ticket to Duolingo's success. Parvez went on to caveat: "nothing that I have said or done is revolutionary, and nor should it be".

Parvez warned against brands jumping on trends for a trend's sake, and invited the listeners (who were, of course, hanging off every word) to go back to basics:

- Find what works for your brand
- Speak to your community
- Focus on bringing a spark in a way that makes sense for your audience.

"Creative risk is about dreaming big, and iterating small"

Parvez went on to share her 'cupcake' methodology: start small, try different recipes and see what works for your brand. If it works, you can go on to make a wedding cake in that flavour.

Parvez explained that creativity is not found behind a desk or by playing it safe - she goes on to say:

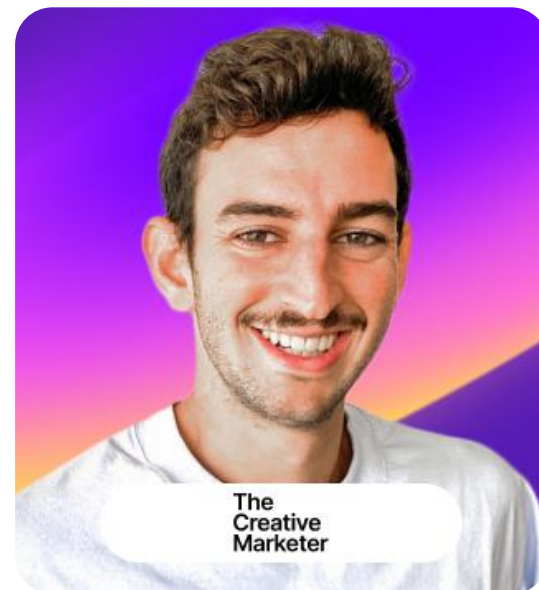
"Walking the line [for your brand's messaging] actually means allowing for a controlled crossing the line and course correcting"

You cannot spark meaningful connection with your audience generically. Try new things, take risks. Not every risk will pay off, but those that nail creative risk through consistent testing have the most to gain.



Boring Products, Fun Ads: Simple Recipes for Making B2B Products Get Noticed

Speaker: Shlomo Genchin



One man, a menu of AI tools and a boat load of actionable tips on marketing boring products using fun.

Shlomo Genchin's talk felt illegal. The amount of gems he managed to fit into his 20 minute break-neck-speed talk was genuinely astounding. He started by breaking down his key formulas for making fun ads that resonate with professional audiences:

"Most B2B ads are a complete waste of money. Fun ads outperform boring ads every single time."

Genchin explained that for B2B products, marketers should escalate the issue that your B2B product fixes to the point of a visual hook.



We've all heard before about selling the feeling of a product over the product itself, but Genchin went one step further – focus less on the benefits of your product, instead sell the benefit of the benefit.

Genchin worked through a live example, using Zapier's benefit - eliminating manual data entry - and turning it into a compelling visual showing how employees of businesses using zapier can go home earlier than their competitors (with winter approaching fast, this one certainly piqued attention!)

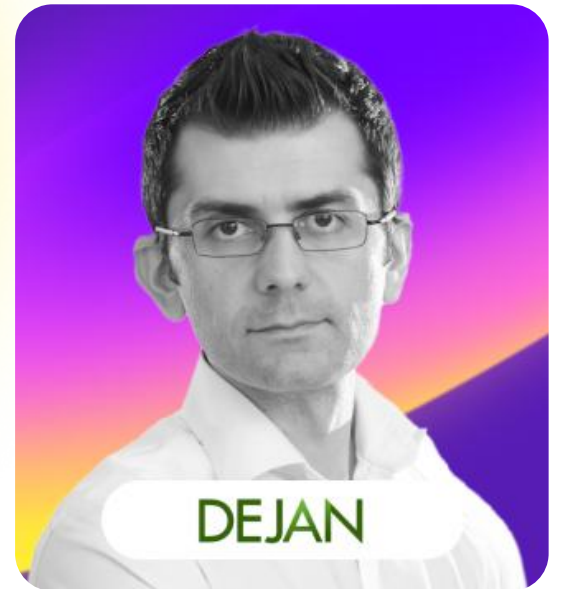


By articulating the tangible impact of a B2B product on the everyday life of an employee, B2B marketers unlock a level of interest that goes far beyond organisational goals and speaks to personal incentives of decision-makers.

Genchin kindly shared his full playbook of making boring ads fun, if you like the sound of his talk, take a deeper look [here](#).

SEO + AI = SEO

Speaker: Dan Petrovic



This talk was one for the tech-ies. We're talking a level of attention to detail that would excite your CTO and make everyone else in the boardroom scratch their heads.

Dan Petrovic is essentially the Dr Frankenstein for AI - he built an LLM from scratch to understand exactly what makes it tick. Petrovic explained that LLMs, at their core, produce content based on the probability of the next word shown in a specific response to a query.

This is based on almost infinite pieces of information on the internet, including content, backlinks and are generated on a loosely definable 'authoritiveness' on the topic. In exactly the same way we've approached SEO for years.



Petrovic exhibited a host of tools that he has created to enable marketers to analyse the probabilities that their brand will be associated with certain keywords in generative search.

Using this data, we can reverse engineer campaigns to boost our authoritativeness associated with the keywords we want to be associated with, boosting the amount of times we're shown in AI search, and building that all-important authority.



How to Run Marketing When You're the Only Marketer

Speaker: Sara Lattanzio



Speaking like an SEO's job hunt bestie, Sara Lattanzio rolled out the red carpet for solo-marketers and walked them through sanity-saving shortcuts for making an impact without a team.

Lattanzio shared that of those surveyed, 21% of marketers are solo marketers and 40% of marketers say that they are constantly overworked. She went on to explain that the top 3 pains facing marketers today are: unclear leadership decisions, constant task switching, and gaps in specialisation.

But the issues facing solo marketers aren't inevitable, they're identifiable and avoidable given the right structure. Lattanzio advises that many of these issues can be highlighted in the interview process with a few simple questions like: 'Why does this role exist?' 'what's the purpose of marketing for your business?' - save yourself the hassle and unearth red flags where you can.

Once you're in a solo-marketing position, Lattanzio recommends to:

"Build trust, allies and standing. Don't go off and write your marketing strategy in a vacuum."

After you're settled in, Lattanzio recommends creating a 'do or delegate' context vs. impact matrix to prioritise your workload. Workout the following categories:

- Delegate to AI or agencies
- Outsource or automate
- Review
- 'Guard with your life'!

Just because you're the only one in the department, doesn't mean you're the only one with skin in the game.



How To Launch & Scale Cross-Platform Content Strategy That Works In Every Channel

Speaker: Brandon Smithwick

In the age of insatiable social & content algorithms, creators & brands imitating each other, and Gen-Z social managers making every brand sound the same, Brandon Smithwick cut through the noise with simple, actionable insights for marketers to build a cross-platform content strategy that actually delivers growth. Founder of Content to Commas, and ex-Kickstarter, Smithwick was quick to clarify:

"Growth is not a goal, growth is an outcome"



Smithwick advises to replace vanity metrics with behavior metrics that signal intent: replays, saves, replies, clicks, follows— noting that these behaviors tell you if the content did its job. If your content did its job, your account will grow.

Platform > Surface > Behaviour

- 1 Platform is the brand environment
- 2 Surface is the container that determines the attention patterns you want to achieve — is the content tappable, swipeable, replayable.
- 3 Behavior is the nudge the user interaction makes easy (save on Carousels, replay on Reels, reply on Stories)

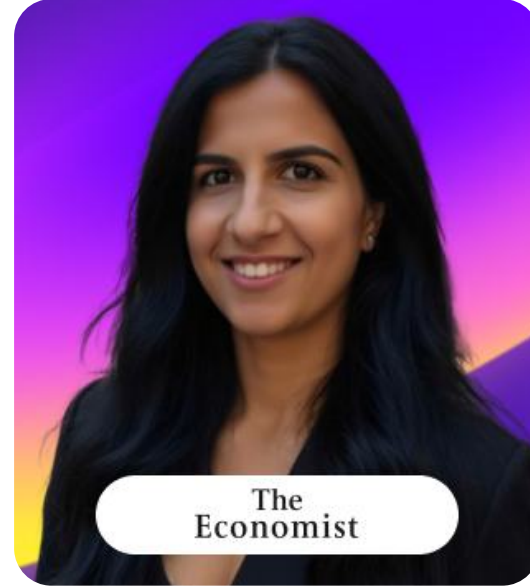
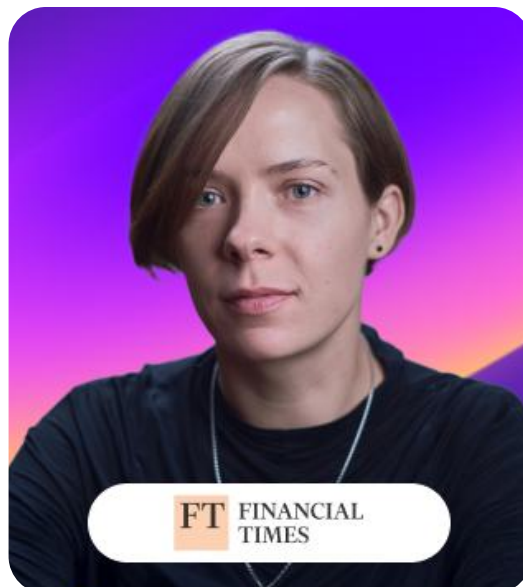
"Your job is to align the creative with the surface so it naturally triggers the behavior you want."

Smithwick stressed that each channel serves a specific focus, and marketers that focus their intent for each channel win out.

Publishers vs AI: Panel with The Economist & Financial Times

Moderator: Michelle Robbins

Speakers: Katerina Clark & Liz Lohn



The Main Stage was set for the powerhouse panel of traditional publishing: Michelle Robbins interviews Katerina Clark, Head of Optimisation at The Economist, and Liz Lohn of Financial Times. Discussing the impact of AI on their respective publications, Clark responds:

"AI hasn't been as catastrophic for us as people would think"

The two publications have taken opposite approaches to AI adoption: where The Economist is being very restrictive with AI adoption and actively blocking LLM crawlers. Clark noted:



"We don't want LLMs so take our original content and using it in their answers. We feel like it's stealing from our journalists"



Financial Times welcomes AI adoption, partnering with OpenAI to ensure accuracy in their LLM generated information. Lohn added:

Lohn's team at Financial Times are taking the opposite approach:

"We want to keep our enemies close - [it's] likely they're getting our content already... we also have more control by working directly with them... we're not afraid, we're being smart with it"

"We want to be seen in LLMs because we need to speak to that younger audience. Our main churn rate reason is because our readers are old, and they're dying"

Digging into the impact of AI on conversions for traditional publishers, both Clark and Lohn appeared unperturbed. Clark mentioned that LLMs have actually benefitted The Economist by removing unqualified traffic due to their target audience's age, "as our audience is older, and AI users tend to be younger, we haven't seen a negative impact on our subscriptions."

By taking opposite approaches, The Economist and Financial Times are very much riding the wave of AI and LLM search, whether through resistance or the embrace of AI, each publication is adapting in real-time to a changing media landscape.

The Reality and Future of AI SEO: The Next Big Bet

Speakers: Pavel Fabrikantov & Andrew Warden



Bringing all of Spotlight's attendees together for the most highly anticipated talk of the day, Semrush's CMO, Andrew Warden, and SVP of Product, Pavel Fabrikantov took to the stage to discuss the future of AI SEO, and a groundbreaking new product from Semrush to help marketers capitalise on the changes in search.

"AI poses the biggest opportunity for marketers of our generation"

Introducing: **Semrush One**. The Unified Solution for Every Search.

Pavel Fabrikantov walked us through how Semrush tested the AI visibility capabilities of their new platform on themselves before launch to test if it actually worked.

Semrush One, didn't just deliver. Within just one month, the company nearly tripled its AI share of voice – from 13% in July 2025 to 32% in August – and improved non-branded queries from 40% to 50%.

And it doesn't just show how impressive the new software is, but it reveals the reactivity of LLM Search to targeted optimisations and implications this poses on businesses that embrace it. As Warden noted:

"SEO is not dead, your job scope just expanded".

How To Get Millions Of Visits with SEO Products

Speaker: Fabrizio Ballarini



Fabrizio Ballarini's talk was an anecdotal walk down Wise's memory lane. Tracing his own growth from a traffic-obsessed SEO Manager to a value-dedicated Head of Organic Growth, Ballarini emphasised the importance of providing value to non-customers to establish loyalty and trust in your brand.

"I love it when people say 'I didn't use Wise to send money this time but I still trust your exchange rates comparison product above all'"

Ballarini reflected on the constant innovation in the Wise team, with one key focus: ensuring customer loyalty and uniqueness in a contested market. After all, if there's nothing different about your offering, why would customers come to you?

Over the past decade, Ballarini has honed in on creating a 'best in class comparison experience', and increasingly focused on maintaining Wise's loyal customer base, rather than chasing vanity traffic metrics.

And in our changing search world with AI seemingly looming around every corner, Ballarini and the Wise team have perhaps outsmarted us all by future-proofing their market position by making advocates from their customers. Certainly a sentiment that was echoed by other speakers into the afternoon.



How To Identify Market Growth Opportunities With AI

Speaker: Kevin Indig



In the old world of SEO, more ranks = more traffic. The new world of SEO pays in growing impressions and shrinking clicks.

Kevin Indig, an independent growth consultant, shared actionable tips on how to navigate

shifting user behaviour in a changing search landscape. And user behaviour is shifting with it at a speed we have not seen before. Indig envisions the following KPIs of the future:



Impact: Conversions

- The business impact of your campaigns, aka: the foundation of success.



Influence: Share of Voice, search & LLM visibility & impressions in position 1

- Understanding the reach of your brand's positioning.



Intent: Customer surveys, Bot Hits on your site, LLM sentiment.

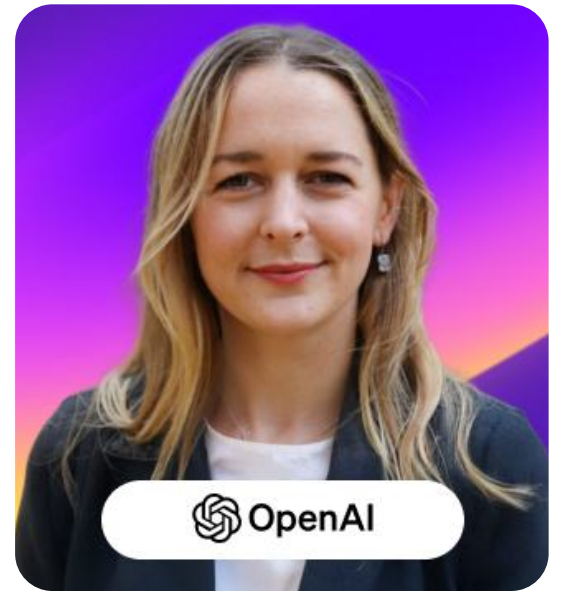
- Utilising qualitative data to better understand your audience's intent.



Indig left the audience with a sentiment of cautious optimism: by focusing on your customer's intent, we can control your brand's influence, ultimately impacting conversions for the better.

The Multiplier Effect: How AI Unlocks Ecosystem-led Growth

Speaker: Hillary Bush



As OpenAI's Go to Market Leader, Hilary Bush, took to the stage to close out an epic day of talks, she threw us a curveball: **as AI advances, human trust becomes more and more invaluable for brands.**

But doubling down on human trust doesn't mean abandoning AI, it means utilising AI to bolster your community's capabilities. Bush broke this down into her non-negotiables for a strong brand ecosystem: People, Incentives, Product, Enablement, Measurement.

- **People:** put simply - talk to your customers! Know their goals, study their behaviour, and use their wants and needs to inform your product.
- **Incentives:** next, align your brand's incentives to their goals. Whether it's leads, rev-share, exposure, credibility, make participation self-serving and your users will do the hard work for you.
- **Product:** your product needs to stand up to scrutiny. If your product doesn't live up to the hype, it will burn out quickly.
- **Enablement:** Let AI act as a force multiplier: scale coordination, content, collaboration, without scaling headcount.

Bush left us with a line that nailed the shift:

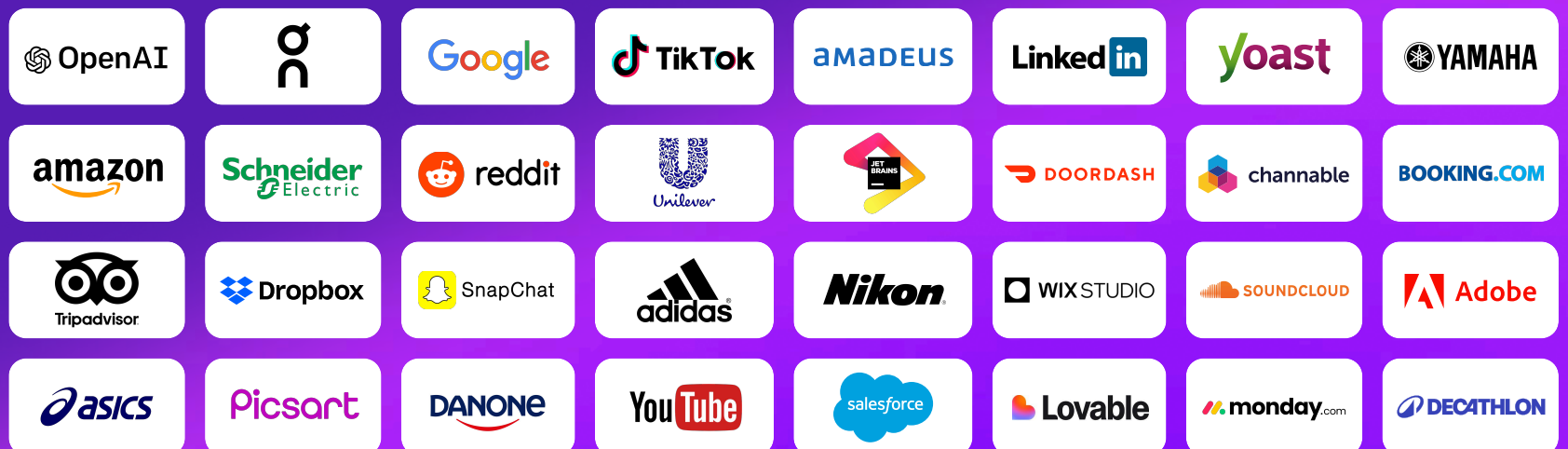
"Campaigns of the future will be collaborative, personalised and decentralised. Brand managers may fret - but enabling customers to distribute your brand for you starts by making them the hero in the story, not yourself."



Join the Spotlight waitlist for 2026!

Get first dibs on Spotlight 2026 tickets!

Next year, we're coming back with deeper insights, new voices from leading brands, and the same festival energy and career-defining breakthroughs you can't afford to miss.



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It's one day that makes
the next 365 work smarter.