

Introduction to Marketing in the AI Era

Introduction to Marketing in the AI Era

*Co-Intelligence as an
Operating Discipline*

Paul S. Richardson

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About this book: This book was created the way it teaches. It was drafted in collaboration with artificial intelligence (Anthropic's Claude); every element was directed, verified, edited, and approved by the author, who — per the contract taught in Chapter 1 (the machine can do the work; someone still signs it) — signs it. Every company, person, dataset, and market event in the Fernway Cycle Works universe is fictional.

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Preface

The premise of this book fits in two sentences, and the course it accompanies is an apprenticeship in what they cost and what they buy: *The machine can do the work. Someone still signs it.*

Something genuinely new has happened to marketing. A machine collaborator now sits at every desk, and it drafts in eleven seconds what a junior hire once produced in a week — fluent, structured, warm, confident. What it cannot do is notice the edge of what it knows. In the opening pages of Chapter 1 you will watch it invent a repair count and a neighborhood award for a small bike shop, in exactly the voice it uses for everything true. That pairing — extraordinary capability and structural unreliability arriving in the same sentence — is the single most important fact of your professional era. The marketers who thrive in it are not the ones who avoid the machine, and not the ones who trust it. They are the ones who run the loop this book teaches — brief, commission, verify, sign — until a signature under their name means what it says.

This is the first course of a program, and it is built as a tour of the building. The first four weeks install the foundations every desk shares: the contract, the machine as it actually is, the briefing, and the record. The middle eight weeks visit the four desks where marketing is practiced — the communicator's, the publisher's, the analyst's, the strategist's — two weeks in each chair, long enough to learn its central question and its signature discipline, and honestly marked wherever a later course in the program does the full training. The last three weeks are yours. A shock arrives unscheduled. You assemble your own Marketing AI Operating System from everything the semester taught you. And then you defend it, out loud, to a reviewer who has read every catch, commitment, and correction on your record.

You will spend the whole semester with one client: Fernway Cycle Works, a neighborhood bike shop with one owner, one approved quote on file, an eight-page brand brief, and no marketing history at all. The shop is fictional — every company, person, dataset, and market event in this book's worked examples is — but its smallness is deliberate. A twelve-year-old shop that has never compiled its own repair counts cannot absorb a careless claim; every invented number is findable by anyone willing to read eight pages. That is the scale at which the disciplines of this era are best learned: where checking is always possible,

mistakes are always survivable, and the only thing standing between a confident invention and a published falsehood is you.

Each chapter pairs with a lab in the Studio, the course's working environment, where a machine collaborator — considerably less housebroken than the chapter's worked examples — will test whether the week's discipline actually took. Read the chapter before the lab. The order matters more than it looks: this book teaches judgment, and judgment, unlike information, only installs through use.

Four doors lead out of this building — one for each chair, each with its own full course. Whichever you choose, the contract travels with you.

This volume is the gateway to the *Marketing in the AI Era* series — four companion courses, each with its own studio. The complete series is at <https://www.marketingintheaiera.ai>.

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Marketing in the AI Era

The Question You Are Actually Asking

Every introductory marketing course begins with a definition. This one has to begin with a question, because it is the question sitting, spoken or not, in nearly every seat of the room: *is marketing still a career, or did the machines just take it?*

You have reasons to ask. In the time it took you to finish high school, machine collaborators went from a curiosity to a fixture on every professional desk. They write advertising copy, design social posts, summarize research, analyze spreadsheets, and answer customers — fluently, instantly, and at almost no cost. The entry-level tasks that marketing careers were traditionally built on — write the product description, draft the press release, assemble the report — are now performed in seconds by systems that never sleep and never send an invoice. If you are wondering what, exactly, is left for you to be paid for, you are not being cynical. You are paying attention.

Here is this book's answer, stated up front so you can hold the whole course against it: **marketing is still a career, but the career moved.** The part of the work that produced *output* — text, images, drafts, decks — has been largely absorbed by the machine, the way spreadsheets absorbed manual arithmetic and word processors absorbed the typing pool. What remains, and what has become dramatically more valuable, is the part of the work the machine structurally cannot do: knowing what the work is *for*, deciding what is true enough and right enough to publish, understanding actual human customers well enough to make them a promise, and being the accountable person who stands behind what goes out the door. The production layer collapsed. The judgment layer is hiring.

But you cannot exercise judgment about marketing without knowing what marketing *is* — and here the machines have, if anything, made the introductory course more necessary, not less. When output was expensive, a new marketer had years of low-stakes production work in which to absorb the field's ideas by osmosis. You will not get those years. You will be asked for judgment almost immediately, because judgment is the job now. So this Introduction does what the era demands: it gives you the field — what marketing actually is, what its

work actually consists of — and then an honest account of what the machine changed and what it could not touch. Chapter 1 begins the course proper. This is the ground it stands on.

What Marketing Actually Is

Start by clearing away the popular picture, because it is not just incomplete — it is upside down. Ask people what marketing is and most will say something like *advertising*: the art of getting attention, the science of persuasion, possibly the dark craft of getting people to buy things they don't need. Ads are the part of marketing that is visible from the outside, so the mistake is understandable — like concluding that medicine is the art of writing prescriptions, because prescriptions are the part patients take home.

Marketing, properly understood, is **the discipline of making and keeping a promise to a customer**. Everything else in the field — the ads, the brands, the campaigns, the analytics — is machinery in service of that one arc. A business notices, or decides, that some group of people has a need it can serve better than the alternatives can. It shapes an offer around that need. It makes the offer known, in words the customer recognizes as being about *their* life. It delivers what it said it would deliver. And it watches, honestly, to learn whether the promise landed, whether it was kept, and what should change. That loop — understand, promise, deliver, learn — is the entire field. When it runs honestly, marketing is among the most useful things a business does: it is the function that represents the customer inside the building. When it runs dishonestly — when the promise outruns the delivery — marketing becomes what its critics say it is, and the business begins converting its own reputation into short-term revenue, which is the corporate version of burning the furniture for heat.

You will spend this semester at a business small enough to see the whole loop at once: Fernway Cycle Works, a neighborhood bike shop. Fernway's promise is painted over the workbench — *we keep your bike rolling* — and every marketing question you will face there is a version of the loop. Who is the shop actually for? (The ordinary rider who just wants their bike to work — a customer nobody else in the market is speaking to.) What should it say, and where? What content is worth making? What do the shop's numbers actually prove? And what should it stop doing? A multinational asks the same questions with more zeros. The discipline is the same discipline.

Now look closer at the work itself, because “marketing” as a job is really four jobs — four desks, each with its own central question, each of which you will sit at this semester.

The communicator's desk owns the question *what do we say?* This is the classic territory: audiences, messages, campaigns, voice. Its core discipline is a kind of principled narrowing — of everything that could be said, choosing the

one thing that will actually move this audience, and saying it in a voice the brand can sustain. Communication fails by addition: the announcement that mentions everything persuades no one. You will feel this desk's discipline the first time you try to say one thing well.

The publisher's chair owns the question *what do we make?* Modern customers meet businesses through content — guides, articles, videos, answers to questions — long before they meet a salesperson, and somebody must decide what content is worth a customer's time and worthy of the company's name. This chair is an editorial job: it lives or dies on the judgment call between *what would get clicks* and *what is true and useful*, and its defining act — you will perform it in Week 8 — is declining to publish something fluent because it cannot be verified.

The analyst's desk owns the question *what actually happened?* Marketing generates numbers the way engines generate heat, and most of those numbers flatter whoever chose them. The analyst's job is to read instruments honestly: to know what each number counts, what it leaves out, and what it can and cannot prove. This desk's discipline is a habit of three questions — what exactly was counted, out of what, over what period — and its besetting temptation is the impressive number that answers none of them.

The strategist's chair owns the question *what do we do next?* Strategy is choice under uncertainty: where to spend the limited money, which opportunities to decline, and — hardest of all, the decision you will practice in Week 12 — what to stop doing. The strategist works where the facts run out, which in the AI era makes this chair's discipline special: it is the desk where a confident invented fact is most dangerous, because it arrives exactly when a hard choice wants settling.

Four desks, one loop, one promise. That is the field. Notice something about all four before we bring the machine on stage: every one of them is, at its center, a *judgment* job wrapped in a *production* job. The communicator judges what to say and then produces copy. The publisher judges what is worth making and then produces content. The analyst judges what the numbers mean and then produces reports. The strategist judges what to do and then produces plans. For the whole history of the profession, the production half was so laborious that it dominated the working day and the org chart. Keep that in mind. It is about to matter.

What the Machine Changed

In the early 2020s, systems trained on vast amounts of human text crossed a threshold: their output stopped reading like a machine's. Give one a competent instruction and it returns competent professional prose — marketing prose very much included, since the internet the machines learned from is substantially

made of it. The capability is real, it is spectacular, and this book will not waste your time pretending otherwise. Chapter 2 opens the machine properly; for now, three consequences frame your career.

First: the production half of every marketing desk collapsed in cost. The draft that took a junior copywriter a morning now takes eleven seconds. The report that took an analyst's afternoon assembles itself. The forty social posts, the five subject lines, the localized versions in three registers — free, instant, unlimited. This is not a modest productivity gain; it is the disappearance of scarcity from an entire layer of the profession, and economics is blunt about what happens next: what becomes free stops commanding a wage. The marketer whose value was *production* — who was paid because writing competent copy is hard — is in the position of the human calculator in 1980. This is the honest, uncomfortable fact underneath your question about whether marketing is still a career.

Second: the judgment half of every desk became the job description. Work does not vanish when its production gets cheap; it migrates to what stayed scarce. Field research on generative AI in real workplaces keeps finding the same shape: the machine lifts the floor — the least experienced workers gain the most, and competent output becomes nearly universal. When competent output is universal, it is an entry fee, not a differentiator. What still differentiates is everything the four desks always secretly ran on: knowing which message, whether the claim is true, what the number proves, what to do next. The judgment layer was always the senior layer. The era's real disruption is that it is now the *entry* layer too — which is precisely why a first-year course like this one spends fifteen weeks on judgment and none on production tricks.

Third — and this is the fact the enthusiasm always omits: the machine's output is not reliable, and its unreliability is invisible. The same system that writes beautifully also, routinely, states things that are not true — confidently, fluently, with no change in tone to warn you. It will invent a statistic, an award, a source, a policy, and dress each one in the same professional prose as the facts around it. This is not an occasional glitch being patched out; as Chapter 2 will show you, it is a structural property of how these systems work. For most casual uses it hardly matters. For marketing it is close to the whole game, because marketing's output is *public claims* — and a public claim that turns out to be invented is not a typo. It is a broken promise with your company's name on it, in an era when a screenshot lives forever. The machine changed marketing by making claims free to produce. It also made false claims free to produce, at the same speed, in the same voice. Someone at every one of the four desks has to be able to tell the difference, and no model release is going to volunteer for the job.

Put the three consequences together and you get the shape of the modern marketing career — and of this course. The machine handles production. The market pays for judgment. And the specific, learnable, daily form that judgment takes is *verification and accountability*: the discipline of knowing which claims

are true, which numbers mean what they seem to, and which work is fit to carry a signature. That discipline has a two-sentence statement, and it is the motto of this book: **the machine can do the work; someone still signs it.** Chapter 1 will unpack those sentences properly. Every week after will make you live them.

What the Machine Did Not Change

It is easy, mid-revolution, to overcount the revolution. So stand for a moment on what is exactly where it has always been — because this stable ground is where careers get built.

The customer is still human. Every technique in this book ultimately faces a person deciding how to spend limited money and more limited attention. That person is not impressed by fluency — they are now *swimming* in fluency, most of it machine-made, and they can increasingly smell it. What moves them is what always moved them: being genuinely understood, being told the truth, being offered something that actually helps. Understanding customers — real ones, in their particularity — was never a production task, and the machine that has read everything about customers-in-general has met none of yours. That work is still yours, and it is the foundation the whole field rests on.

Trust is still the asset. A brand is, at bottom, a promise the market has learned to believe — learned, slowly, through kept promises, and unlearned quickly through broken ones. Nothing about machine fluency changes this arithmetic; the flood of cheap content makes it *steeper*, because when every business can sound trustworthy, sounding trustworthy is worthless, and being trustworthy is the whole margin. Fernway's neighbors do not trust the shop because its website is well written. They trust it because the repairs come back right. The website's only real job is to never write a check the repair benches can't cash — which is why this course treats an invented claim, however small, as the professional emergency it is.

Accountability still cannot be delegated. When the invented statistic ships, when the promise breaks, when the regulator or the customer or the boss asks *who said this?* — the answer is a person. It was a person before the machines and it is a person now, for the deep reason Chapter 1 will give you: accountability requires having something to lose, and the machine has nothing at stake. Every profession that survived its own industrialization did so by deciding what its practitioners personally stood behind. Marketing is having that founding moment now. This course is, among other things, an invitation to be early to it.

And the fundamentals still decide. Segmentation, positioning, the difference between a feature and a benefit, the loop of promise and delivery — the field's accumulated ideas are not scenery the machine drove past. They are the criteria by which you will *judge* the machine's abundant output, which makes them more operational than they have ever been. A student who cannot tell a

strong positioning from a weak one can now generate forty weak ones an hour. The ideas in this book are how you tell. That is what a fundamental is for.

How This Program Is Built

This course is the doorway to a five-course program, and the program has an architecture worth seeing from above, because the architecture is itself a claim about the era.

This course — the one in your hands — is the **tour of the building**. Weeks 1 through 4 lay foundations that every marketing job now requires: the contract between you and the machine (Chapter 1), the machine's actual nature and failure modes (Chapter 2), briefing — delegation as a management skill (Chapter 3), and the record — tags, verification gates, and the professional paper trail (Chapter 4). Weeks 5 through 12 are the tour proper: two weeks at each of the four desks, doing each profession's actual entry-level work at Fernway, with an honest marker wherever a later course does the full training. Weeks 13 through 15 are the capstone: a surprise event, the assembly of your personal Marketing AI Operating System, and a live defense of it before a reviewer who has read your entire semester. You leave knowing the field's shape, holding a working system, and — not incidentally — knowing which of the four rooms felt like yours.

Beyond the four doors stand the four advanced courses, one per chair: the communicator's, the publisher's, the analyst's, and the strategist's. Each is a full semester in one room, at a different company, with the same contract on the wall.

Two features of the course's design deserve honest explanation, because you will meet both in your first week.

The Studio. Your coursework happens on a working platform — the Studio — where your machine collaborator, called the Coach, shares your desk. The Studio keeps every conversation you have with the Coach as a permanent, append-only record. This is not surveillance; it is the profession. In this era, *how* you worked with the machine — what you asked, what you checked, what you caught — is work product, evidence, and increasingly the thing an employer most wants to see. The course grades your transcripts accordingly, and Chapter 4 will teach you to be proud of that rather than nervous.

The Coach is scripted to be wrong. On a schedule, in calibrated ways, your collaborator will confidently hand you invented facts, upgraded claims, and mis-attributed quotes — and it will never confess unprompted. The course tells you this on day one because the design only works if it is honest: the plants are not tricks, they are a training range. Out in your career, the real machines will do exactly this, uncalibrated, unannounced, and ungraded. In here, the errors are findable, the brief always contains the truth, and every catch you make builds the one reflex this era pays a premium for. By the end of the semester you will

have caught a machine inventing things a dozen times, on the record. Very few graduates anywhere can say that. It will show.

How to Read This Book

A few practical notes, offered in the spirit of the briefing discipline you are about to learn.

Read the chapter before its lab. Each chapter ends with a Studio Lab Briefing, and each week's lab assumes the chapter's ideas are installed. The order is load-bearing: this book teaches judgment, and judgment — unlike information — only installs through use. The chapter gives you the idea; the lab makes you use it against a collaborator scripted to test it; the record keeps the evidence. Students who reverse the order end up performing the labs by imitation, which the rubrics are specifically built to catch.

Work the worked sessions. Every chapter contains a “Desk in Action” section — a real task walked end to end, minute by minute. They are the closest thing this book has to a master demonstrating at the bench. Read them slowly, and notice what the professional in them actually spends time on: it is almost never the drafting.

Use the apparatus. The review questions at each chapter's end are calibrated to the Week 8 foundations exam and the Week 15 defense — several of them are early, gentler versions of questions a reviewer will eventually ask you out loud. The key terms are the program's shared vocabulary; the four advanced courses use them without re-introduction. Appendix A holds the Fernway brand brief, which you should read this week and will consult constantly — it is the source of truth this whole semester audits against. Appendices B through D hold the working tools — the briefing templates, the tag manual, and the Operating System template — in reference form, built to be used during labs and kept after the course ends. Appendix E is the foundations review; it exists so that exam week holds no mysteries.

And carry the question with you. You arrived at this Introduction asking whether marketing is still a career. Fifteen weeks from now, in the review room, you will answer a version of that question with your own record: a semester of machine collaboration in which every published claim was verified, every invention was caught, and everything that shipped carried a signature that meant something. That is what the career looks like now. It is a good career — arguably better than the one it replaced, because the tedious layer went to the machine and the human layer got the whole paycheck. The rest of this book is how you claim it.

The machine can do the work. Someone still signs it. Turn the page and meet both halves.

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The Contract

Opening Scenario: Eleven Seconds

It is your first afternoon as the first marketing hire in the twelve-year history of Fernway Cycle Works, and the owner has given you your first assignment on his way to the repair benches: “Write something for the website. You know — who we are. I’ve been meaning to do it since 2013.”

You have a machine collaborator now — every desk does — so you do the natural thing. You type: “Write a warm, welcoming ‘About Us’ page for Fernway Cycle Works, a neighborhood bike shop.” Eleven seconds later, you have it. And you should sit with what those eleven seconds produce, because it is genuinely impressive. The structure is clean. The warmth is calibrated — friendly without being cloying. It opens on the smell of tire rubber and fresh coffee, walks the reader from the sales floor to the repair benches, and lands on a closing line about community that you would swear a human wrote on their third careful draft. It mentions that the shop has completed **over 2,300 repairs in the past year alone**, and that Fernway was **voted the neighborhood’s best bike shop**. It reads like the work of someone who has known the shop for years. It cost nothing and took less time than it takes Sam to true a wheel.

Now do the one thing this course exists to teach you, the thing that separates the professionals of this era from its casualties. Open the brand brief — the actual document describing the actual shop — and check the machine’s most persuasive details against it. Look for the repair count. The brief says a repair log exists for every job since 2013, and then it says something you should read twice: *no aggregate counts have ever been compiled or published*. Nobody knows how many repairs Fernway did last year. Not Sam, not Rosa, not the spiral notebook by the register. The machine didn’t find that number anywhere, because it exists nowhere. It made it up. Now look for the award. Read the brief again, all eight pages. There is no award. There has never been an award. “Voted the neighborhood’s best bike shop” is not an exaggeration or a rounding-up of something true. It is an invention, wearing the same confident tone as every true sentence around it.

Understand what just happened, because the rest of your degree stands on it. The machine did not malfunction, and it did not lie — lying requires knowing the truth and choosing against it. The machine did exactly what it is built to do: it produced the most *plausible* About Us page for a beloved neighborhood bike shop, and plausible About Us pages contain repair counts and local awards. So it supplied them — at the same temperature as the truth, in the same fluent voice, with no flag, no hedge, and no way for you to tell from the text alone which sentences are real. The page is excellent. Two of its most convincing details are fiction. And the only thing standing between that fiction and Fernway’s website — the website of a shop whose entire value is that its neighbors trust it — is you.

This is the moment the course is named for. The machine can do the work. Someone still signs it.

The Contract

Every era of work has a bargain at its center. This era’s bargain can be written in two sentences, and this book will hold you to both of them:

The machine can do the work. Someone still signs it.

The first sentence is the good news, and it is very good. The machine at your desk drafts faster than any writer you will ever hire, never tires, never sulks, holds more general knowledge than any colleague you will ever have, and costs approximately nothing per attempt. It will write your copy, summarize your data, brainstorm your campaigns, and roleplay your most difficult customer, all before lunch. Refusing to use it is not a virtue; it is malpractice in slow motion, like refusing the spreadsheet in 1990. Everyone you will compete with for jobs is using it. The interesting question was never *whether* — it is *how well*, and “how well” turns out to be a learnable discipline, which is what this program teaches.

The second sentence is the part the enthusiasm always forgets. Work does not become true, safe, legal, or wise because it became easy. Somebody specific is accountable for every claim that reaches a customer, every number that reaches a decision, every promise that reaches the public — and that somebody cannot be the machine, for a reason worth stating precisely: **accountability requires having something to lose**. The machine cannot be embarrassed. It cannot lose the neighborhood’s trust, because the neighborhood never trusted it — the neighborhood trusts *Fernway*, which is to say it trusts Sam, and Rosa, and now you. When the About Us page ships with an invented award and a customer who voted in no such contest raises an eyebrow, the machine will not feel the temperature drop in the shop. You will. Trust is a relationship between parties who have something at stake, and in every human-machine collaboration, the human is the only party who qualifies.

So the contract assigns the work of this era cleanly. The machine's side: drafting, production, variation, summary, speed — everything where volume and fluency are the point. Your side: the brief, the judgment, the verification, and the signature — everything where *being right* and *being answerable* are the point. Neither side can do the other's job. A human who insists on drafting everything by hand will be outproduced a hundred to one. A machine whose output ships unsigned — unverified, unowned, un-answered-for — is a liability generator running at machine speed. The professional of this era is the person who runs both sides of the contract on purpose. This course is fifteen weeks of learning to do that, and the four courses that follow it are four professional rooms in which to master it.

One more term of the contract, and it is the one this book's title page carries: **the signature rule**. Nothing goes out under your name — to a customer, a boss, a public, a professor — until you have verified every claim in it that you can check and honestly marked every claim you cannot. Signing is not a formality at the bottom of the page. It is the professional act itself: the moment the work stops being the machine's output and becomes your word. You will sign something in Week 1 of this course, and you will still be signing things the week you retire. The machine changed everything about how the work gets made. It changed nothing about whose word the work is.

Why the Machine Invents

You do not need to understand engines to drive, but you do need to know that cars cannot stop instantly in the rain — the failure modes, not the mechanisms, are the driver's required knowledge. Chapter 2 will open the machine properly. Here is the one preview the contract requires, because without it the opening scenario reads like a scandal instead of a specification.

A large language model is, at its core, a system trained on an enormous amount of text to do one thing: continue text plausibly. When you asked for an About Us page, it did not *look up* Fernway — there is nothing to look up; the shop exists in a brief the machine may summarize beautifully but holds no ledger of. It generated, word by word, the page that a bike shop's About Us page *most plausibly says*. And here is the property that defines your working life: **for this kind of system, a plausible invention and a retrieved fact are the same kind of act**. Producing “founded in 2013” (true, it's in the brief) and producing “over 2,300 repairs last year” (invented, it's in nothing) are not different operations that a warning light could distinguish. Both are just plausible continuations. The machine is not a database with a creativity problem. It is a plausibility engine with no internal concept of the difference between remembering and imagining — which is why its inventions arrive with perfect confidence, in perfect grammar, at the exact spots where a fact would be most persuasive.

Professionals in this era hold three consequences of that in mind at all times. First, **fluency is not evidence**. The machine's prose quality is constant whether its content is true or invented, so the polish of a sentence tells you exactly nothing about its accuracy — an inversion of a lifetime of intuition, because among humans, careful writing usually did signal careful thinking. Second, **confidence is not evidence either**. The machine does not hedge more when inventing; if anything, invention reads *smoother* than truth, because the truth has awkward edges (“most repairs,” “some rentals”) and inventions are generated to fit. Third — and this is the professional's advantage, the reason the contract works at all — **inventions can be caught, mechanically, by anyone with a source of truth**. You caught the repair count in ninety seconds, not because you are cleverer than the machine, but because you had the brief and the discipline to check the draft against it. Verification does not require genius. It requires a source of truth, a habit, and the refusal to let fluency stand in for either. That habit has a name in this program — you will meet its full apparatus in Week 4 — and by Thanksgiving it will be so automatic you will do it to news articles at the dinner table.

What This Makes of You

Here is the sentence to carry out of Week 1, because it will organize your career: **fluency became free, so judgment became the job**.

For your entire life until roughly now, producing competent professional text was expensive. It took years to learn and hours to do, so organizations paid people substantially to do it, and “good at producing the work” was a career. That production layer now costs eleven seconds. When something becomes free, the market stops paying for it — but the work around it does not disappear; it *migrates* to whatever stayed scarce. What stayed scarce is everything the machine structurally cannot supply: knowing what the work is *for*; briefing it into existence with the right context and constraints; telling the true sentences from the invented ones; knowing the audience, the line, the moment; and signing — being the person whose word the work is. Research on generative AI in real workplaces keeps finding the same shape: the machine lifts the floor dramatically — the least experienced gain the most, competent output becomes universal (Brynjolfsson, Li, and Raymond 2025) — which means competent output is now the *entry fee*, not the differentiator. The differentiator moved up the stack, to judgment. The floor rose. So did the bar.

This is why the course in your hands looks the way it does. A course in “how to prompt” would be teaching you the part that got easy — and the part that changes with every model release. This course teaches the part that got valuable: the briefing (Week 3), the verification and the record (Week 4), the judgment-in-context of four different marketing professions (Weeks 5 through 12), and the assembly of it all into a working system that is yours (Weeks 13 through 15). The

researchers who study human-AI collaboration call the terrain a **jagged frontier** — the machine is astonishing at some tasks and quietly unreliable at neighboring ones, with no visible border between (Dell’Acqua et al. 2023). The popular name for working that frontier well is **co-intelligence** (Mollick 2024): not human *versus* machine, not human *replaced by* machine, but a working partnership in which each party does what it is actually good at — and the human, holding the judgment and the signature, runs the desk. That partnership is not a metaphor in this course. It is your literal daily condition, starting in Lab 1, at a bike shop on Fernway Avenue.

Your Desk: Fernway Cycle Works

For the next fifteen weeks you are the first marketing hire in the history of Fernway Cycle Works — part-time, reporting to Sam Kowalczyk, the former bike courier who opened the shop in 2013 and has been meaning to get to the marketing ever since. Everything you need to know about the shop lives in an eight-page brand brief in the Studio, and you should read it this week the way you’d read a contract you were about to sign — because in every way that matters, you are. A tour of the desk:

The shop. One storefront on Fernway Avenue: sales floor in front (commuter, hybrid, and kids’ bikes, and — new this past year — a small selection of e-bikes), repair benches in back, and a chalkboard by the door listing the week’s rides. The repair shop is the real engine of the business, run for nine years by head mechanic Rosa Delgado, whose one approved on-record quote is the best sentence anyone has ever said about the place: “*A bike that fits gets ridden.*” Saturday mornings, April through October, the shop leads the Fernway Loop, a free all-comers ride that leaves from the front door. Attendance is recorded in a spiral notebook by the register. This is not a company that has been waiting for a growth hacker. It is a company that keeps its promise — *we keep your bike rolling* — and has never once written that promise down anywhere but the wall over the workbench.

The records — read the hedges. The brief’s language is careful in places, and the care is the point. *Most* repairs are completed within three business days — most, not all, and no guarantee exists anywhere on file. *Some* rental bikes are e-bikes — some; the seasonal fleet is mostly conventional. The kids’ trade-up program covers *kids’ bikes only*. Those hedges are where the truth lives, and — as you will discover repeatedly this semester — they are exactly what fluent drafting loves to sand off. “Most repairs in three days” wants to become “three-day turnaround, guaranteed.” It reads better. It is also a promise the shop has never made, put in the shop’s mouth by a machine that will never have to honor it. Learning to feel a hedge being sanded off — to catch “some” becoming “all” in an otherwise perfect paragraph — is one of the specific skills this course will drill until it is reflex.

The constraints. Your budget is a few hundred dollars a month, total, which is the best creative constraint you will ever be given. And two rules bind everything, straight from §6 of the brief: nothing is claimed that the records can't support, and **safety-related claims are sacred** — an invented statistic about helmets, kids, or accident risk is not a marketing error at a neighborhood bike shop; it is a betrayal of what the place is *for*. There are things a professional never lets the machine improvise. This semester you will learn where that line is by standing on it.

The Studio and the Coach. Your machine collaborator lives in the course platform — the Studio — and is called the Coach. Now read this paragraph twice, because this course tells you its design honestly: **the Coach is scripted, on schedule, to be helpfully and confidently wrong**. Roughly once a week, somewhere in its excellent work, it will plant the kind of error the real machines of your career produce daily — an invented statistic, an upgraded claim, a misattributed quote — and it will never volunteer the confession. Your job is to catch it, on the record, the way you'll catch the real thing for the next forty years. This is not a trick being played on you; it is the course being honest about the world. Out there, nobody scripts the errors, nobody calibrates them to be findable, and nobody grades you gently for missing one. In here, the errors are designed, the brief always contains the truth, and every catch builds the reflex. The Studio also keeps every conversation you have with the Coach as a permanent, unerasable record — because in this program, *how* you worked with the machine is graded work product, exactly as it will someday be legal discovery.

The rivals, briefly, because even Week 1 marketing happens somewhere: Cyclemart, the big-box chain two miles away with deep discounts and no service department worth the name; Veloce, the superb and intimidating racing boutique across town; and the internet's direct-to-consumer bike brands, beautiful websites with no one to fix what they ship. Nobody in this market is speaking to the ordinary rider who just wants their bike to work. Hold that thought until Week 11.

The Desk in Action: Signing Your First Page

Watch the whole contract execute once, end to end, on the opening scenario's About Us page — because this fifty-minute sequence, in miniature, is the working method of your entire degree.

Minute 0 — the commission. “Write a warm ‘About Us’ page for Fernway Cycle Works, a neighborhood bike shop.” (A weak brief, deliberately — Week 3 will teach you to be embarrassed by it. Weak briefs don't just get worse drafts; they get *more invention*, because every gap you leave, the machine fills with plausibility.)

Minute 1 — the draft. Excellent, warm, structurally clean. Contains, among its truths: a repair count of 2,300 and a “best bike shop” award.

Minutes 2–20 — the check. Draft in one window, brief in the other. Every checkable claim gets checked. Founded 2013 — brief, \$1, confirmed. Former courier — \$1, confirmed. Repairs “over 2,300 last year” — \$2 says the log exists but *no aggregate has ever been compiled*: **invented, struck**. “Voted the neighborhood’s best” — nowhere in the brief: **invented, struck**. The closing community line — beautiful, and unverifiable as fact, but it makes no factual claim; it stays, because judgment distinguishes claims from craft. Note what the check did *not* require: talent, seniority, or suspicion of any particular sentence. It required the brief, twenty minutes, and the discipline to check the flattering details *hardest* — because flattering details are what plausibility engines are best at inventing.

Minutes 20–45 — the edit. The invented specifics come out; what replaces them is better, because it is real: twelve years of repair logs kept since the first job in 2013; Rosa’s nine years at the benches; her actual quote, verbatim, credited to her — not paraphrased, not improved, and not reassigned to Sam because the owner’s name would read better. (Misattribution is invention’s politer cousin. You will meet it in Lab 4.) The machine’s structure and half its sentences survive — they were good, and the contract does not require you to pretend otherwise. This is collaboration, not correction: the machine’s fluency, your facts.

Minutes 45–50 — the signature. A last read as the person answerable for every sentence. Then it ships, and here is the accounting that justifies the whole method: the machine’s eleven seconds plus your fifty minutes produced a page that is *fluent and true* — something neither party could have produced alone at that combined speed and standard. The fifty minutes were not overhead on the machine’s work. They were the job. The eleven seconds were the overhead.

The Tour Ahead

This course is built as a tour of a building — the building being the marketing profession as this program teaches it, and the tour being fifteen weeks long. Weeks 1 through 4 are the foundations you are standing in now: the contract (this chapter), the machine itself and why it behaves as it does (Chapter 2), the briefing — delegation as a management skill (Chapter 3), and the record — tags, verification gates, and the professional paper trail (Chapter 4). Then the tour proper: two weeks in each of four chairs, at the same bike shop, with the same collaborator, doing four different professions’ actual entry-level work. The **communicator’s desk** (Weeks 5–6): campaigns, voice, and the discipline of saying one thing well — the subject of Integrated Marketing Communications in the AI Era. The **publisher’s chair** (Weeks 7–8): content the shop owns, edited to publishable and signed — the subject of Content Marketing in the AI Era. The **analyst’s desk** (Weeks 9–10): the shop’s numbers, what they can and cannot prove — the sub-

ject of Marketing Analytics in the AI Era. The **strategist’s chair** (Weeks 11–12): choices under uncertainty, including the one every strategy course fears and every strategist faces — what to *stop* doing. That is the subject of Marketing Strategy in the AI Era. You will leave each visit with a real artifact and an honest sense of whether that room felt like yours; by registration week you will know, from the inside, which doors you want to walk back through.

The last three weeks assemble everything into the course’s capstone, and the program’s namesake idea: your **Marketing AI Operating System** — not an essay about human-AI collaboration but a documented, working, personal system: which tasks you delegate and which you never will, your briefing templates, your verification gates, your record, the numbers you actually watch, and the rule for when the machine’s output stops being a drafting problem and becomes a conversation with a human. In Week 15 you will demonstrate it live and defend it before a skeptical senior marketer who has read your whole record — your first professional review, in the gentlest room it will ever happen in. The rooms get less gentle from here. That is what the next four courses are for.

Ethics Sidebar: The Name Is the Asset

Strip this chapter to one idea and it is older than marketing: your name has to mean something, or nothing you produce does. Every profession that survived its own industrial revolution did so by deciding what its practitioners’ signatures guaranteed — the engineer’s stamp, the auditor’s opinion, the byline. Marketing in the AI era is having that founding moment *now*, and you are conveniently present for it. The temptation of this era is real and daily: the machine’s work is good enough to ship unread, and most days shipping it unread would be fine. But “most days fine” is precisely how names stop meaning things — because the day it isn’t fine, what ships under your name is an invented safety statistic on a kids’ bike page, and no one will ask the machine how that happened. They will ask you. The professionals who thrive in the next decade will not be the ones who used AI most or least. They will be the ones whose signature stayed worth something while the flood of unsigned fluency made everyone else’s worthless. That is not a compliance topic bolted onto this course. It is the business model of your career.

Studio Lab Briefing — Lab 1: First Contact

This week’s lab is the opening scenario, performed by you, for real, in the Studio. You will meet the Coach, commission your first piece of work for Fernway — a short welcome article for the shop’s website — and then do what the head-of-content in every one of this series’ opening chapters does: check the lovely

details against the brief before anything ships. Somewhere in the Coach's excellent draft, something is not real. The brief contains everything you need to catch it. The graded event of Week 1 is not the draft — drafts are free now, and the rubric prices them accordingly. The graded event is the catch: found, named, and dispositioned on the record, with the corrected piece signed. Budget honest time to *read the brief first*; students who skim it produce beautiful audits of the wrong facts. And a warning offered in the spirit of the course's honesty: the easiest week to trust the machine unread is Week 1, because you have not caught it at anything yet. That is exactly why the first plant lives here.

Review Questions

1. The chapter claims the machine “did not malfunction, and it did not lie” when it invented the repair count. Explain the distinction, and why it matters professionally that invention is a *structural property* rather than a defect.
2. State the contract's two sentences, and explain why *accountability requires having something to lose* rules the machine out of the second sentence — permanently, regardless of how capable models become.
3. “Fluency is not evidence. Confidence is not evidence either.” What is evidence, per this chapter, and what two things does verification actually require?
4. Find the three hedged claims in the Fernway brief discussed in §1.5, and for each, write the “sanded-off” version a fluent draft would produce. Why do drafts drift in that direction rather than the reverse?
5. Why does the course script the Coach's errors instead of using an unmodified assistant? Give the pedagogical argument — and one way the scripted version is *easier* than what your career will serve you.
6. The worked session calls the editor's fifty minutes “the job” and the machine's eleven seconds “the overhead.” Defend that accounting to a skeptic who says the machine did most of the work.
7. Which of the four chairs described in §1.7 do you *expect* to feel most like yours, and what would count as evidence — from your own lab work this semester — that you were wrong?

Key Terms

The contract — this era's division of professional labor: the machine does the work; someone still signs it.

Signature rule — nothing ships under your name until every checkable claim is verified and every unverifiable one is honestly marked.

Plausibility engine — a language model understood correctly: a system that continues text plausibly, with no internal distinction between retrieving a fact and inventing one.

Confabulation — the machine’s confident production of plausible invention; a structural property, not a malfunction.

Source of truth — the document or record against which claims are verified; in this course, the Fernway brand brief.

Hedge — the careful scoping word (“most,” “some,” “only”) where a record’s honesty lives, and the first casualty of fluent drafting.

Jagged frontier — the uneven, invisible boundary between tasks the machine does brilliantly and tasks it quietly fails (Dell’Acqua et al. 2023).

Co-intelligence — the working partnership in which human and machine each do what they are actually good at, with the human holding judgment and signature (Mollick 2024).

The catch — finding, naming, and dispositioning a machine invention on the record; this course’s fundamental graded act.

References and Further Reading

Brynjolfsson, E., Li, D., and Raymond, L. (2025). Generative AI at work. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 140(2), 889–942.

Dell’Acqua, F., McFowland, E., Mollick, E., et al. (2023). Navigating the jagged technological frontier: Field experimental evidence of the effects of AI on knowledge worker productivity and quality. Harvard Business School Working Paper 24-013.

Mollick, E. (2024). *Co-Intelligence: Living and Working with AI*. Portfolio/Penguin.

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Series note: this volume is the gateway to four companions — *Integrated Marketing Communications in the AI Era* (the communicator’s desk), *Content Marketing in the AI Era* (the publisher’s chair), *Marketing Analytics in the AI Era* (the analyst’s desk), and *Marketing Strategy in the AI Era* (the strategist’s chair). Each chair you visit in Weeks 5–12 is a full semester there.