FIELD GUIDE · 2026 EDITION

The AI Marketing Stack

The tools I actually use across retainers — what they cost, what they replace, and what to ignore. A practical field guide for marketing teams building with AI.

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> **How to use this guide:** Print it. Pin it. Each section has a one-line summary and a "skip if" note so you can jump to what matters for your team.

01

Why most AI stacks fail

The risk in 2026 isn't missing the latest model — it's drowning under fourteen subscriptions that each automate 5% of your job.

The three failure modes

Tool hoarding

Teams subscribe to every new AI tool, hoping one sticks. Result: ₹80K+/month in SaaS, 5% adoption.

The ChatGPT fallback

After hoarding fails, teams retreat to ChatGPT for everything. Better than 14 tools — but leaves 60% of AI's value on the table.

The integrated stack (what this guide builds)

3–5 tools, deeply integrated. Each tool has a clear job. Total cost under ₹25K/month for a team of 3. This is what we're building in the next nine sections.

The rule of three

Before adding any tool, it must pass three tests:

1. **Time saved:** Does it save >2 hours/week?
2. **Quality delta:** Is the output ≥ manual quality?
3. **3x ROI in 90 days:** Total cost (seat + API + setup time) must return 3x in value within one quarter.

02

The core LLM layer

Pick one model family. Default to it. Build muscle memory. Switching between five models is slower than mastering one.

USE CASE	MODEL	WHY	MONTHLY COST
Strategy & analysis	Claude Opus	Best reasoning, lowest hallucination on factual claims	$20/seat
High-volume content	Claude Sonnet	Fast, cost-effective, good voice	~$15–50 API
Quick lookups	Claude Haiku	Near-instant, cheapest per token	~$5 API
Image generation	Midjourney / DALL-E	Blog headers, social assets	$10–30/seat

> **Skip if:** Your team already has a model they're productive with. The best model is the one your team actually uses daily.

Why not use multiple LLM providers?

Switching costs are real — context windows, prompt patterns, and error modes all differ. Pick the model whose *failure mode* you can spot fastest. For me, that's Claude: it hallucinates less on factual claims and writes closer to how real people talk.

API vs. Pro subscription

Use the Pro subscription for interactive work (strategy, brainstorming, editing). Use the API for automated pipelines (batch content, reporting summaries). Most teams need both.

03

Content operations pipeline

The exact pipeline from brief to published post. Which steps benefit from AI and which ones don't.

STEP	AI ROLE	HUMAN ROLE	TIME SAVED
1. Research	Summarise competitor content, extract SERP patterns	Validate claims, add first-hand insight	60%
2. Brief	Generate outline, suggest keywords, internal links	Set angle, tone, unique value prop	70%
3. Draft	First draft from brief	Rewrite opening, add stories, cut fluff	40%
4. Edit	Grammar, consistency, readability score	Voice check, fact check, final call	50%
5. SEO review	Schema markup, meta tags, internal link suggestions	Strategic keyword decisions	80%
6. Distribution	Social copy variants, email subject lines	Platform-specific adjustments, scheduling	65%

> **Key insight:** AI is best at steps 1, 2, 5, and 6. Humans are irreplaceable at step 3 (voice and story) and step 4 (judgment). Don't automate the parts that make content worth reading.

Tools for this pipeline

- **Claude Sonnet** — drafting, editing, SEO review
- **Ahrefs / SEMrush** — keyword data, competitor analysis
- **Surfer SEO** — content optimisation scoring
- **n8n** — orchestrating the pipeline between tools

04

Automation & orchestration

Three automations that save 6+ hours per week across every retainer.

Automation 1: Weekly SEO Report

Trigger: Every Monday at 8am
Flow: Pull GSC data → Pull GA4 data → Claude summarises trends → Format as email → Send to client
Time saved: 90 min/week per retainer

Automation 2: Content Brief Generator

Trigger: New keyword approved in Airtable
Flow: Scrape top 10 SERP results → Extract headings/word count → Claude generates brief → Save to Notion
Time saved: 45 min per brief

Automation 3: Competitor Alert

Trigger: Daily at 6am
Flow: Check competitor blog RSS → Check their new pages in Ahrefs → Claude summarises changes → Slack notification
Time saved: 30 min/day

Why n8n over Zapier

Self-hosted, no per-execution pricing, supports complex branching. For marketing automation at scale, Zapier's per-zap pricing becomes untenable. n8n costs ₹0 (self-hosted) or €20/month (cloud).

05

Analytics & reporting

How to wire AI summaries into your reporting stack so clients get insights, not spreadsheets.

The reporting stack

LAYER	TOOL	PURPOSE	COST
Data	GA4 + GSC	Raw traffic, keyword, conversion data	Free
Visualisation	Looker Studio	Charts and dashboards clients can access	Free
Narrative	Claude API	Written insights from raw data	~$10/mo
Delivery	n8n + Email	Automated report delivery	~$5/mo

What AI-powered reporting looks like

Instead of: "Organic traffic: 12,450 sessions (+8.3% MoM)"
You deliver: "Organic traffic grew 8.3% this month, driven primarily by the new blog cluster on [topic]. Three posts published in week 2 now account for 22% of new organic entries. Recommendation: double down on [subtopic] — it's converting at 3.2x the site average."

> **The prompt template:** "You are a senior marketing analyst. Given this GA4 and GSC data for [client], write a 3-paragraph executive summary. Lead with the most important change. Include one specific recommendation. Be direct — no filler."

Dashboard vs. narrative

Dashboards answer "what happened." Narratives answer "what does it mean and what should we do." Clients need both, but they read the narrative first. AI makes the narrative free to produce.

06

SEO tools that earn their keep

The tools worth paying for, the ones that aren't, and what AI replaces entirely.

TOOL	WHAT IT DOES	VERDICT	COST
Ahrefs	Backlink analysis, keyword research, rank tracking	Keep	$99/mo
Google Search Console	Indexation, performance, Core Web Vitals	Essential (free)	Free
Screaming Frog	Technical crawl audits	Keep	£199/yr
Surfer SEO	Content optimisation scoring	Optional	$89/mo
Clearscope	Content optimisation	Skip — Surfer or AI	$170/mo
Rank Math / Yoast	On-page SEO for WordPress	Keep (free tier)	Free
AI SEO platforms	Various "AI-powered SEO"	Skip — API wrappers	$100–500/mo

> **Skip if:** You're spending >$300/mo on SEO tools beyond Ahrefs/Semrush + Screaming Frog. Most "AI SEO platforms" are thin wrappers around the same API you can call directly.

What AI replaces

- Content optimisation tools (Claude can score content against SERP data)
- Meta description generators (any LLM does this)
- Schema markup generators (Claude generates better JSON-LD than most plugins)
- Keyword clustering (feed keyword lists to Claude, get clusters in seconds)

07

Ad copy & creative

Where AI genuinely accelerates paid media — and where it doesn't.

What AI does well

Google Ads RSAs

Generate 15 headlines + 4 descriptions per ad group in minutes. Claude respects character limits when instructed.

Social ad copy

20 variants of the same message for A/B testing. Different hooks, CTAs, lengths. Saves 2+ hours per campaign.

Landing page copy

Hero, social proof, features, objection handling — structured frameworks that AI fills in fast.

Email subject lines

Batch-generate 30 subject lines with reasoning for predicted open rates. Test the top 3.

What AI does poorly

- **Brand voice on first try** — requires detailed style guides and examples in the prompt
- **Emotional storytelling** — AI can structure a story but can't manufacture authentic emotion
- **Visual creative direction** — can write briefs for designers but shouldn't replace them
- **Budget allocation** — use data, not AI hunches, for spend decisions

Recommended creative stack

TOOL	PURPOSE	COST
Claude / GPT	Copy generation, variant testing	$20–50/mo
Midjourney	Blog headers, social imagery	$10/mo
Canva	Design execution, templates	$13/mo

08

What to skip

Tools I tested and dropped. Save yourself the evaluation time.

CATEGORY	WHAT I TESTED	WHY I DROPPED IT
AI writing platforms	Jasper, Copy.ai, Writesonic	No better than Claude/GPT direct. Extra subscription for a UI wrapper.
AI SEO suites	MarketMuse, Frase, NeuronWriter	Thin API wrappers. Ahrefs + Claude covers everything they do.
AI social managers	Publer AI, Predis.ai	Scheduling is solved (Buffer/Hootsuite). AI copy is better from Claude.
AI email writers	Smartwriter, Lavender	Prompt templates in Claude produce equal or better results.
AI chatbots	Drift, Intercom AI	Rarely convert better than a well-placed form. High cost, low signal.

The pattern

Most "AI marketing tools" launched in 2023–2024 are wrappers around OpenAI's API with a UI on top. The underlying model is the same one you can access directly for a fraction of the cost. The value they add is prompting — and you can build better prompts yourself.

> **The evaluation rule:** Before subscribing to any AI tool, ask: "Can I do this with Claude/GPT + a good prompt?" If yes, skip the tool. If no, trial it for 14 days with a specific use case — not a vague exploration.

09

The evaluation framework

Score every tool across four dimensions before committing.

DIMENSION	QUESTION	SCORING
Time saved	How many hours/week does this replace?	<1hr = 1pt · 1–3hr = 2pt · 3–5hr = 3pt · 5+hr = 4pt
Quality delta	Is output better, worse, or equal to manual?	Worse = 0pt · Equal = 2pt · Better = 4pt
Switching cost	How painful to move away later?	Easy = 4pt · Moderate = 2pt · Locked in = 0pt
True cost	Seat + API + setup time over 12 months?	<₹5K/mo = 4pt · ₹5–15K = 3pt · ₹15–30K = 2pt · 30K+ = 1pt

Minimum score to adopt: 10/16. Below 10, the tool doesn't clear the bar. Above 12, it's a strong addition.

Example: Evaluating an AI SEO platform

DIMENSION	SCORE	REASONING
Time saved	2	Saves ~2 hrs/week on content scoring
Quality delta	2	Equal to Claude + Ahrefs manual workflow
Switching cost	2	Data exports exist but workflows don't transfer
True cost	2	₹15K/month including setup amortised
Total	**8/16**	**Below threshold — skip**

10

Monthly cost summary

The complete stack for a lean marketing team (2–3 people).

TOOL	PURPOSE	MONTHLY COST
Claude Pro (2 seats)	Core LLM for strategy + content	$40
Claude API	Automated pipelines	~$30
Ahrefs Lite	SEO research + tracking	$99
Screaming Frog	Technical audits	~$17 (annual)
n8n Cloud	Automation orchestration	€20
Midjourney	Image generation	$10
Canva Pro	Design execution	$13
Total		**~$229/mo (~₹19K)**

Compare to: Most agencies spend ₹50K–₹1.5L/month on marketing tools. This stack delivers more capability at a fraction of the cost because AI replaces 4–6 dedicated tools.

What this replaces

Tools you no longer need

- Jasper / Copy.ai ($49–99/mo)
- MarketMuse / Clearscope ($170–300/mo)
- Drift / AI chatbot ($150+/mo)
- AI email writer ($30–50/mo)

Savings: ₹35K–₹50K/mo

What you get instead

- Better quality (direct model access)
- More flexibility (custom prompts)
- Less vendor lock-in
- Team that understands AI deeply

Net: ₹19K/mo total