



RETAIL & CONSUMER

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

A primary-research-backed perspective on how AI is shaping retail, consumer goods, distribution, and travel & hospitality — built from a survey of director-level and above decision-makers and practitioner input from Perficient's Retail and Consumer team.

01

THE MOMENT

WHERE RETAIL & CONSUMER STANDS RIGHT NOW

IHL Group estimates \$1.7 trillion in inventory-distortion losses for retailers in 2026, or 6.2% of global retail sales, even as U.S. retail sales are projected to grow 4.4% to \$5.6 trillion. Growth and waste rising together breaks from prior cycles, when slowdowns forced cleanup. Tariffs raised core-goods PCE prices 3.1% through February 2026, while store-brand unit share hit a record 23.8%. Margin depends on inventory accuracy, pricing discipline, assortment, and whether customers still see enough value to choose the brand.

Pressure lands differently across the value chain, compounded by energy and operating costs that EIA data shows are rising faster than inflation through 2026. Retailers balance traffic and growth against inventory economics and a more selective customer base. Consumer goods

companies face cost pressure as private label gains credibility, forcing brands to earn their premium. Distributors are digitizing product data while B2B buyers expect digital self-service and AI-assisted research without giving up expert validation. Travel and Hospitality is facing similar pressure as organizations look to pricing and operational efficiency to sustain growth in a more selective demand environment.

What changed in the last 12 months is the convergence: a measurable cost reset, persistent inventory distortion, continued private-label gains, and AI increasingly agentic, moving from experimentation into decisions that shape demand, pricing, service, and discovery. The 2027 starting point is tighter and more demanding than 2026, companies must improve decision quality while moving faster.



4.4%

**NRF FORECAST FOR
2026 U.S. RETAIL
SALES GROWTH,
TO \$5.6 TRILLION**

\$1.7T

**IHL GROUP ESTIMATE OF
2026 GLOBAL INVENTORY
DISTORTION FROM OUT-OF-
STOCKS AND OVERSTOCKS,
EQUAL TO 6.2% OF
GLOBAL RETAIL SALES**

23.8%

**RECORD U.S.
STORE-BRAND UNIT
MARKET SHARE IN THE
FIRST HALF OF 2026**

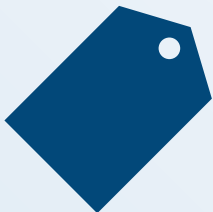
3.1%

**ESTIMATED INCREASE IN
CORE-GOODS PCE PRICES
FROM TARIFFS
FROM NOV 2025—FEB 2026**

Sources:

[NRF 2026 forecast](#) | [Gartner B2B Buyer Survey](#) | [IHL Group inventory distortion research](#) | [Federal Reserve tariff analysis](#) | [PLMA/Circana midyear private-label data](#) | [EIA Retail Energy Analysis](#)

SUBSEGMENT SNAPSHOTS



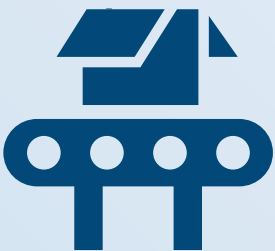
RETAIL

The consumer is still spending, but the growth is K-shaped: NRF reports higher-income households driving most of 2026’s growth while lower-income shoppers pull back. Inventory distortion compounds as discovery shifts: Adobe found AI-referred retail traffic **up 393%**. Retailers must fix operational basics and earn visibility beyond the storefront.



CONSUMER GOODS

Private label is now a structural competitor, not a recession trade-down. NIQ reports it **grew 3.6% globally** in 2026. National brands must defend differentiation with demand and supply-chain intelligence, a decision-system problem before it’s a marketing one.



DISTRIBUTION

Distribution has an ambition-to-production gap: **93%** call AI a strategic priority, yet only **16%** have progressed beyond pilots. Buyer behavior is shifting too: **45%** of B2B buyers used GenAI in a recent purchase, while **69%** wanted a rep to validate it.



TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY

Travel & Hospitality is growing through pricing gains on flat demand. With travel spending up just 1%, hotels rely on rate growth and rental car firms on fleet efficiency. Expedia’s AI-powered handling of **30%+ of 250M** annual interactions highlights the sector’s lead in scaled AI adoption.

“
**The platform era is over!
The intelligence era is here,
and it has no map.**

RUPA AMIN

Director, Retail & Consumer Services, Perficient



AI IS REAL. SCALING IT ISN'T.

AI is not experimental in Retail & Consumer today; it is already routing transactions. Adobe found AI-referred traffic to retail sites up 393% year over year, and Expedia now routes more than 30% of its 250 million annual service interactions through AI. In distribution, 45% of B2B buyers used GenAI to research a recent purchase, though 69% still want a rep to validate what it surfaces. In mobility, AI-driven staffing tools are aligning labor with rental

demand by location and hour. GS1 US's Sunrise 2027 initiative is already pushing retailers and consumer brands toward richer, machine-readable product data across the supply chain. These are live, revenue-touching systems, not pilots.

The capital is following Gartner forecasts worldwide AI spending will reach \$2.59 trillion in 2026, up 47% year over year, and organizations

reporting successful AI initiatives invest up to four times more in data, governance, people, and change foundations, though only 39% of technology leaders are confident current AI investments will improve financial performance. Forrester found only 13% of AI decision-makers report positive EBITDA impact, and fewer than one-third can connect AI initiatives directly to profit-and-loss outcomes at all. Investment and return are moving in opposite directions.

The gap is not ambition. Distribution Strategy Group found that 93% of distributors call AI a strategic priority, yet only 16% have moved beyond pilots into production. About half either lack formal AI governance or are uncertain whether one exists, and one in five has no formal process for measuring AI's ROI. The blockers are consistent across the vertical: data too fragmented to support the outputs AI is asked to produce, governance too thin to scale it safely, and trust too low, among both employees and customers, for outputs to be acted on without a human checking the work first.

\$2.59T
IN WORLDWIDE AI SPENDING
IN 2026 WITH
+47%
YOY GROWTH IN AI SPENDING

COMPANIES WITH
SUCCESSFUL
AI INITIATIVES INVEST

**4X
MORE**

IN DATA, GOVERNANCE,
PEOPLE, AND CHANGE
MANAGEMENT

“

Executives are saying, we're willing to make the investment in AI. But we want to see quantitative returns.

TIMM HENDERLIGHT

Senior Lead Strategy Consultant, Commerce, Perficient

PERFICIENT'S VIEW

**The differentiator is not the model.
It is the decision system around it.**

Companies with clean, connected data accelerate adoption because they spend less time validating outputs. The advantage is not better AI, it is a decision system that enables action.

Additional public sources: Adobe | Gartner B2B buyer survey | GS1 US Sunrise 2027 | Gartner AI spending forecast
Expedia Q1 2026 Earnings Call | Gartner AI foundations research | Forrester State of AI findings | Distribution Strategy
Group AI Top 25

WHAT RETAIL & CONSUMER LEADERS TOLD US

Leaders are moving on AI faster than they can measure, govern, or react to it. In Perficient's research, half of surveyed leaders have not committed to a position on AI-mediated buying, even as it's already reshaping how their customers discover and purchase. The finding is one version of a wider pattern: a gap between commitment and control that repeats across pricing, risk, and channel strategy alike.

METHODOLOGY

Perficient surveyed 50 director-level and above retail & consumer decision-makers in August 2026 through 1Q, a mobile research platform. Findings were supplemented by insights from Perficient's retail & consumer practitioners.

64%

OF RESPONDENTS DO NOT HAVE RELIABLE DATA REGARDING THEIR OWN AI ROI AND FINANCIAL IMPACT

01 AI ACTIVITY IS EASY TO COUNT. ECONOMIC VALUE ISN'T.

The standard of proof is moving from adoption to economics, and most leaders aren't there yet. Only 8% of surveyed decision-makers can quantify AI's P&L impact across most initiatives, and another 28% can do so for a few initiatives. The rest are flying without instruments: 12% track activity rather than financial outcomes, and 52% don't formally measure AI's financial impact at all. That is not a rounding error. It is the widest gap in this survey. It means most Retail & Consumer organizations cannot currently tell their board whether AI spending is paying for itself, only that the spending is happening.

34%

OF RESPONDENTS HAVE NOT ALIGNED INTERNALLY ON THE TRADEOFF BETWEEN AI SPEED AND CONTROL

02 SPEED AND CONTROL ARE COLLIDING.

Leaders are split on which failure mode to fear more, and a third haven't decided at all. 38% say their leadership team is more concerned about moving too fast and putting AI errors in front of customers; 28% worry more about moving too carefully and losing ground to competitors. The remaining 34% admit their organization hasn't aligned internally on which risk matters more. That indecision is itself a risk, and a familiar one: without a shared answer to the speed-versus-control tradeoff, individual teams will default to whichever instinct is loudest in the room, not the one leadership intended.

46%

OF RESPONDENTS FUND VISIBLE AI PROJECTS BEFORE DATA AND GOVERNANCE FOUNDATION

03 FOUNDATIONS AND USE CASES COMPETE FOR FUNDING.

Nearly half of surveyed leaders are funding AI backward relative to what the evidence supports. 46% are prioritizing visible use cases first to prove value, funding data and governance foundations second; only 24% are funding foundations first, the sequence the evidence favors. Another 30% are trying to do both at once and underfunding each. That sequencing matters: organizations with successful AI initiatives invest up to four times more in foundational capabilities, which suggests the majority funding order here is optimized for visible momentum over the return that momentum is ultimately supposed to produce.

50%

OF RESPONDENTS
HAVE NO COMMITTED
STRATEGY FOR
AI-MEDIATED BUYING

40%

OF RESPONDENTS CAN'T
TELL WHETHER MARGIN
COMPRESSION OR
CUSTOMER LOSS IS CAUSING
MORE DAMAGE

04 THE BUYING JOURNEY IS MOVING BEYOND BRAND CONTROL.

Half of surveyed leaders have not yet committed to a position on AI-mediated buying. 44% say they are integrating selectively, participating where AI agents operate while protecting checkout, customer data, and loyalty; just 6% are integrating wherever agents operate without restriction. But 30% are still monitoring without acting, and 20% have no defined position at all. That means half the leaders surveyed, an even split, are entering 2027 with the buying journey already shifting around them, with no stated plan for how their brand shows up once an Agentic AI system is the one deciding.

05 PROTECT THE MARGIN OR PROTECT THE CUSTOMER?

Tariff and input-cost pressure is forcing a tradeoff most leaders can't yet score. 42% say absorbing rising costs and compressing margin is the bigger risk to their 2026 plan; 18% say passing costs through and losing value-seeking customers is riskier. The remaining 40%, almost as many as either side alone, say they are doing both and don't know which is hurting them more. That uncertainty is itself the finding: four in ten leaders are making pricing decisions today without a clear read on which side of the tradeoff costs them more.

Source: Perficient 1Q 2026 decision-maker survey

“

Almost none of the leaders we talk to have the governance structure, data quality, or change management capacity to do it safely and at scale and most of them know it. The real conversation happening behind closed doors is: do we want to move fast and accept that we will make mistakes in front of our customers? Or do we slow down and watch competitors take share? There's no clean answer. The honest leaders will tell you they're **genuinely uncertain** about where they're making the right call.

RUPA AMIN

Director, Retail & Consumer Services, Perficient

WHAT LEADERS GETTING IT RIGHT ARE DOING DIFFERENTLY

The organizations making real progress are not moving faster. They are moving differently. Across Perficient's work with retail, consumer goods, distribution, and travel & hospitality clients, four patterns distinguish leaders from the field, and none of them are about which AI platform a company chose. They are a sequence, where each element is the precondition for the next, and their absence shows up directly in the 13% EBITDA-impact figure from Section 02.

SIGNAL 1

They Define The Decision Before They Choose The AI

Practitioners describe clients arriving with a broad mandate to “do something with AI.” The stronger conversations start with what decision needs to improve, and what business outcomes would prove it, keeping AI from becoming the objective. That gap explains distribution's low conversion rate: Distribution Strategy Group found only 26 of 300-plus distributors evaluated have moved AI beyond pilots, Fastenal, Grainger, and Wesco among them, each built around a single named owner accountable for the result, not a committee. The same pattern holds inside a single company. In mobility, AI applied to staffing and fleet utilization, a decision with bounded data and a clear baseline, is already producing measurable value, while AI applied to customer acquisition isn't. The technology is identical; what differs is whether the decision was defined.

Additional public sources: [GS1 US's Sunrise 2027](#) | [DSG AI Distribution Gap](#)

SIGNAL 2

They Make The Data Trustworthy Enough To Move

Perficient practitioners see a widening gap between organizations that invested early in clean, connected data and those that layered new AI tools over fragmented information. The advantage is not cleanliness for its own sake, it is confidence. Particularly, when leaders trust the underlying data, they spend less time validating outputs and move decisions faster. In commerce, the same logic extends to product specifications, reviews,

availability, and pricing, the details AI agents now weigh when searching, ranking, and transacting on the customer's behalf, information a machine must interpret without a human filling the gaps. GS1 US's Sunrise 2027 initiative is already pushing the industry to close that gap, and the same discipline is what makes mobility's labor-planning tools measurable rather than anecdotal.

“

That pair of jeans I bought in your store three weeks ago: I'm still seeing ads for it on my social feeds three weeks later. That's because there's disparate, disconnected data that isn't feeding back to say we already know this customer bought this. That retailer could be showing them a different styles, colors, or ancillary products that are more likely to drive engagement and conversion.

TIMM HENDERLIGHT

Senior Lead Strategy Consultant, Commerce, Perficient





AI LEADERS ARE TREATING AI AS AN OPERATING DISCIPLINE, NOT A TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE.

SIGNAL 3

They Baseline Before They Accelerate

The organizations that can prove value know where performance started. That discipline turns AI from a portfolio of capabilities into an economic management problem, focusing on conversion, cycle time, cost-to-serve, forecast accuracy, margin, or revenue serving as the evidence, not the existence of the tool. Without that baseline, every optimization claim is unverifiable, since an improvement means little if no one recorded what came before it. The discipline is unglamorous, but it separates a defensible ROI and measurable business outcomes-based claim from a marketing statistic leadership can't act on.

“

Audit and anchor where you sit today so that you can effectively show your work as you go through the process. A lot of times we get into an optimization stage and haven't rightfully anchored at the beginning. So it's really hard to show that value or that curve of how we're improving. Make sure you're starting from a place of focus: this is where we are today, show your work along the path, then optimize where you're going.

JOSH WARD

Vice President, Retail Sales & Customer Success, Perficient

SIGNAL 4

They Extend Their Core Assets While Creating Optionality

Rather than rip-and-replace or bet on AI-native tools that aren't yet enterprise-ready, advancing organizations evaluate what embedded AI in the platforms they already own can do and treat AI as the connective layer across best-in-class systems. Practitioners are seeing the conversation shift from “which platform should we buy” toward “how do we get more value from what we already own.” Travel supplies the clearest current-market evidence of this logic: when OpenAI retreated from owning bookings inside ChatGPT in March 2026, the platforms that retained leverage were the ones with existing customer trust and service infrastructure, not the AI-native challenger trying to own the transaction from scratch.

Additional public sources: [DSG AI Execution Gap Report](#) | [NRF 2026 forecast](#) | [Adobe AI retail traffic research](#) | [NIQ 2026 Consumer Outlook](#) | [Distribution Strategy Group AI Top 25](#) | [Gartner B2B buyer AI survey](#) | [U.S. Travel Association](#) | [Expedia earnings transcript](#) | [OpenAI Bookings Report](#)

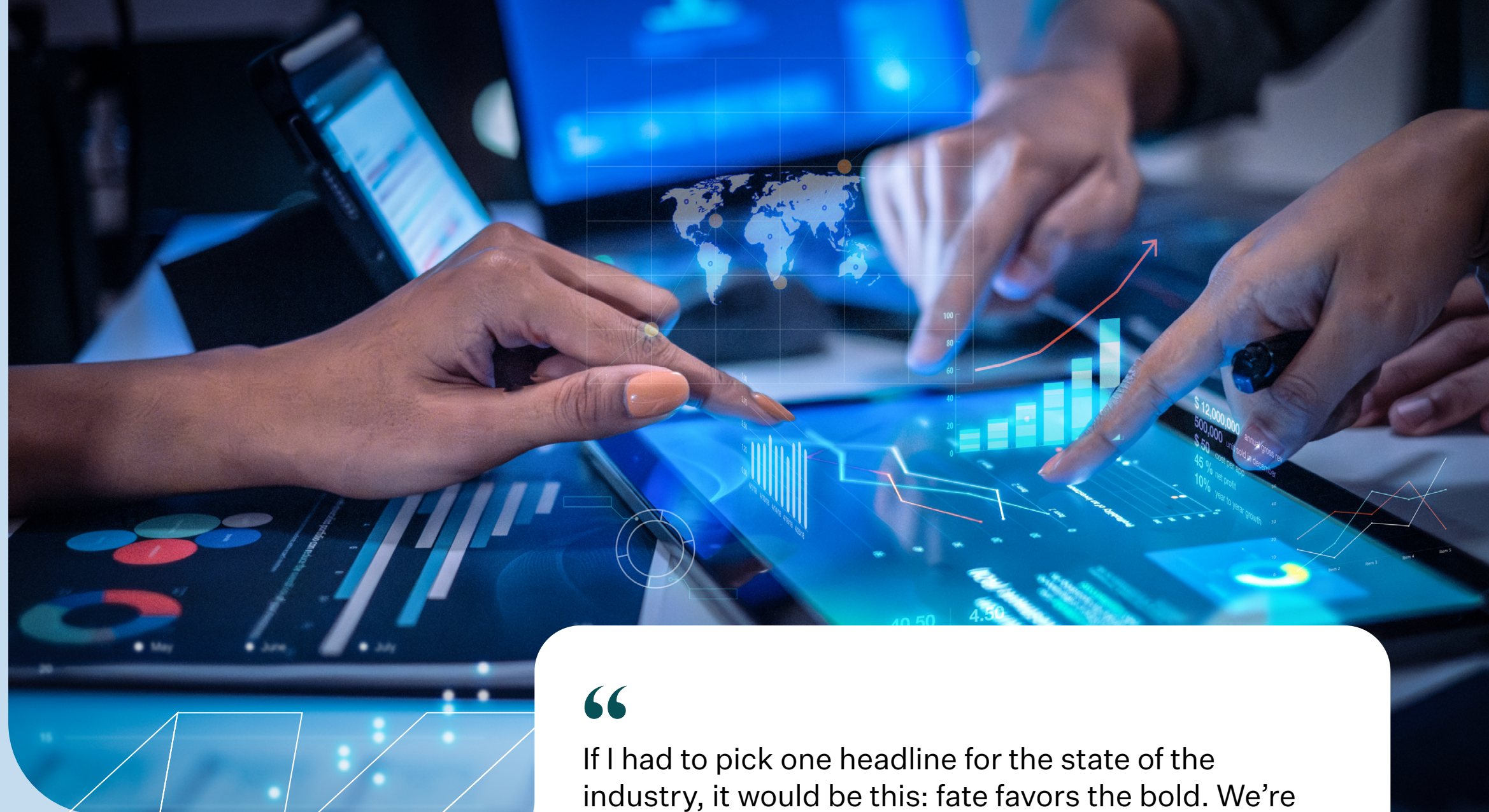
05

THE QUESTION

Twelve months from now, when your board asks what your AI investments changed and what business outcomes they delivered, will you have an answer, or an activity report?

That is the question leaders should be preparing to answer before the market forces them to.

Across Retail & Consumer, AI activity is quickly becoming table stakes, not a differentiator. What separates the leaders is whether they turn that activity into decisions faster, prove the return before they scale, accelerate measurable business outcomes, and keep the trust that makes a customer choose them when an algorithm is doing the comparison. None of that can be bought in a single AI investment, and none of it can be manufactured after the fact.



“

If I had to pick one headline for the state of the industry, it would be this: fate favors the bold. We're in a time where the fastest movers, the ones who can make a decision, move in a direction, and execute quickly, are going to win, even if they fail fast. The inability to commit, pick a direction, and move will leave organizations behind and trying to catch up, regardless of the sector they're in.

BRIAN CONWAY

Vice President, Head of Retail & Consumer, Perficient



Perficient is the global AI and technology consulting firm disrupting the traditional consulting model. Powered by our 7,000+ advisors, engineers, and designers, Perficient implements AI-first solutions that break conventions and deliver outcomes that matter. Proudly serving clients that represent the world's most innovative brands, and in collaboration with our powerful technology partner ecosystem, we bring deep industry expertise and data-driven design to redefine how businesses run and succeed.

Learn more at www.perficient.com.

DIFFERENT. FOR REAL.