

CTRL+SHIFT

BRAND, MARKETING & DIGITAL

STRATEGIC PLAYBOOK 2026

A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair and eyes, looking directly at the camera. The image has a motion blur effect, with horizontal streaks across the background and her face. A bright blue wavy line, resembling a stylized 'S' or a digital signal, curves across the left side of the image. A horizontal streak of orange light is visible near her mouth.

It's time to shift –
from where you are today
to where your customers
expect you to be

There's always been a gap between what customers expect and what companies deliver. In our daily work at iO, we see this gap getting wider. Not because companies are doing less. But because customer expectations are rising faster than most organisations can keep up.

In 2026, every positive experience customers have with any brand becomes the **new baseline they expect from every brand**. If your customer feels like a number when your competitor knows their preferences, you lose. What felt innovative last year is table stakes today.

This isn't about **digital transformation** anymore. That battle was fought and won years ago. This is about **customer expectation management**: staying ahead of needs that haven't been articulated yet.

The most successful brands we work with at iO aren't trying to predict what customers will want in 2026. They're building processes, systems and cultures that can adapt to **whatever customers want, whenever they want it**.

That's what we mean by CTRL+SHIFT.

It's the mindset of taking CTRL rather than reacting. It's about making strategic SHIFTS in how you implement AI, design experiences, drive growth, and build technology before you're forced to by the market.

This playbook shows you how, based on 20+ years helping 1,500+ brands across Europe. Practical advice, reality checks, and actionable insights we use with clients every day, from global enterprises to innovative companies scaling new markets.

Ready to CTRL+SHIFT?



Pieter Janssens
CEO, iO

SHIFT 01

AI SOLUTIONS

From AI exploration to AI implementation

SHIFT 02

DIGITAL EXPERIENCES

From scattered touchpoints to streamlined journeys

SHIFT 03

GROWTH

From maintenance mode to market leadership

SHIFT 04

TECHNOLOGY

From technological friction to technological flow



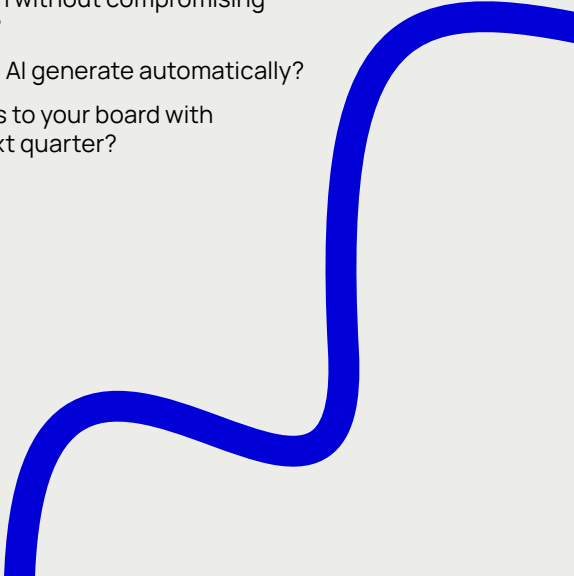
SHIFT 01

AI SOLUTIONS



From AI exploration to AI implementation

Reality check:

- ☐ When you say 'AI strategy', do you mean a specific plan or a collection of ideas?
 - ☐ Is your customer data clean enough that AI can actually learn meaningful patterns from it?
 - ☐ Can you scale your content creation without compromising quality or overwhelming your team?
 - ☐ Which of your manual reports could AI generate automatically?
 - ☐ Can you explain your AI investments to your board with success metrics they can verify next quarter?
- 

CTRL

your
AI toolkit

You've read endless AI success stories, breakthrough announcements, and promises of transformation. The pressure builds. Everyone seems ahead. You understand the basics and have some experiments running, but connecting AI to your specific business challenges feels like solving a puzzle with missing pieces. One of the problems is that AI is 'everything' and 'everywhere'. And that can be overwhelming.

Here's the reality:

AI isn't one 'big thing' you need to deploy across your entire organisation. It's a versatile toolkit that enhances different aspects of what you do.

“Successful AI adoption has less to do with having the latest technology and more to do with starting with the right business challenge.”



Raymond Mulwijk
Group AI Director, iO

SHIFT

from an abstract
concept to
a practical tool

Which product, process or service do you want to start improving, step by step, starting tomorrow?

Start where AI can solve real problems: reports that take hours to create, customer questions that need instant answers, or content that requires constant updates across multiple channels.

AI integration opportunities

01 Marketing

Predict behaviour, optimise for AI-search (GEO), hyper-personalise interactions.

02 Sales

Identify new market trends, sales forecasting, automated lead qualification.

03 Content

Create first drafts, suggest content improvements, scale content production and adapt content for every audience.

04 Operations

Automate predictable tasks, streamline processes.

05 Innovation

Simulate market reactions, predict trends, test product ideas (without investing in prototypes).

06 HR

Personalise employee onboarding and training, analyse employee sentiment.

Your 2026 action plan

THIS MONTH

Audit your current AI experiments.
Which ones show measurable business impact?
Stop the rest.

Map your most time-consuming tasks.
These are prime candidates for AI assistance.

Identify current problems or challenges.
What's slowing down your employee onboarding?
Where does customer support fall short? Are you struggling to create consistent content across different markets and search engines?

NEXT QUARTER

Turn one of your ideas into a working prototype.
Start with a simple proof of concept that addresses one specific pain point.

Our [AI Proof of Concept Builder](#) workshop helps you to co-create a clickable prototype tested with real users within 4 weeks.

THIS YEAR

Gather data and insights for future development.
The next step is AI MVP development: building a working solution that gives your customers

something real to use. This gives you real usage data and proves business value at scale.

DECEMBER 2026

You haven't become a fully AI-driven company. In December 2026 you've become a better version of your current company: one that uses AI strategically to solve real problems.

Ready to CTRL+SHIFT to AI implementation?

Find out more about the possibilities of AI for your organisation in a practical workshop.

[Book an AI workshop](#)

Let's get started

While others experiment with AI, we put it to work. From first tests to full solutions, we make AI deliver real results for your business.

Put AI to work



Content scaling

Enexis accelerated their video creation by AI-modeling one of their employees.



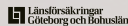
Digital interfaces

Port of Antwerp-Bruges built a human-like interface for their digital system managing port operations.



Campaign innovation

AI-teenager Laika simulates a child who gets 100% screen time exposure to raise mental health awareness.



Smart search

Worldline enhanced their developer portal with AI-personalised answers and action plans.



Visitor experience

Museum M Leuven transforms visitors into Bouts-style portraits of the famous 15th-century artist, making them part of the museum experience.



SHIFT 02

DIGITAL EXPERIENCES



From scattered touchpoints to streamlined journeys

Reality check:

- ☐ Do you understand why customers choose you?
 - ☐ Are your touchpoints designed around customer needs or internal department structures?
 - ☐ Can you measure the complete customer experience, not just individual touchpoints?
 - ☐ Do you know where customers experience the most friction in their journey with your brand?
 - ☐ Are your customer journeys accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities?
- 

CTRL

the experience
of your brand

Ads, notifications, emails, conversations: people are exposed to countless stimuli from morning until night, all competing for attention. This means your experience must truly stand out, especially since 95% of customer behaviour is driven by emotional, non-rational systems. And 86% of consumers leave previously trusted brands after only two poor experiences.

Here's the reality:

Customer experience touches nearly every aspect of your organisation, but most companies approach it backwards: they focus on fixing individual touchpoints instead of understanding the customer.

“Most companies focus on improving touchpoints. But a better experience does not start with the booking button. A better experience starts with understanding your customer – their drivers, dreams and desires.”



Aukje Wielens
Experience Strategist, iO

SHIFT

from fragmented interactions to connected experiences

Are you designing touchpoints or designing experiences?

In 2026, true customer-focused organisations understand that every touchpoint is part of a larger story. They dig deeper into the underlying factors that shape an experience. For example, when someone clicks 'Book now' for a trip to Iceland, it's not just completing an interaction. There are deeper motivations driving that action. Understanding the drivers of your audience allows you to create richer experiences. Experience design is about making things functional AND meaningful.

5 levels of experience: booking a trip to Iceland

01 The customer

Who are they, and what drives them? What are their desires, dreams and ambitions?

02 Customer lifecycle

How do specific purchases, like a trip to Iceland, fit into the broader context of someone's life? Why do they choose this purchase right now?

03 Customer journey

What does someone need to fulfil a need? How did someone come to this specific travel choice, and what steps follow?

04 User journey

How does the customer navigate the booking process? What steps do they take to achieve the goal?

05 Touchpoints

At this level, it's about the actual interaction and the experience of these moments. The mobile booking flow, email confirmations, customer service calls. Which aspects meet expectations, and how does the experience fit the need someone has?

Your 2026 action plan

THIS MONTH

Map one customer journey from a customer's perspective. Start with customer motivations, not your internal processes!

Find the top 3 friction points where customers get stuck or frustrated. Then brainstorm simple fixes that remove barriers (rather than adding features).

NEXT QUARTER

Prioritise improvements based on customer impact, not internal convenience.

Start a project to connect your data systems so you can see the full customer story across all

experience layers, not just isolated touchpoint metrics. This won't be ready in one month, but every month you wait, you lose insights (and customers).

THIS YEAR

Test journey elements before launching with real customers, not your team. Think interviews, surveys, and observation sessions.

Leverage technology. Use AI and your historical customer or marketing data to anticipate customer needs and offer hyper-personalised experiences. For example, train your chatbots

with historical customer data for more accurate and empathetic responses.

Train your teams. Help employees understand how their work impacts the complete customer experience, from deep motivational alignment to interaction quality, not just their departmental metrics.

DECEMBER 2026

You have started the shift from touchpoint management to experience design. Your teams will have deeper insights into customer motivations, and you'll have established a systematic approach for continuous improvement and better experiences.

Ready to CTRL+SHIFT to streamlined journeys?

Discover how to improve your customer experiences with our Experience Model. This model places customer experience at the heart of your strategy, is optimised for sustainable growth, and adds real value.

[Explore the Experience Model](#)

Let's get started

Every organisation has untapped opportunities to create better experiences. Whether you need quick wins or a strategic transformation, we offer the expertise to achieve your goals.

Unlock better experiences



Landal

Personal service often seems most important for customer experience, until you join the Friday afternoon queue at Landal's reception.

We worked with Landal to transform their arrival process through an app and digital key system. Now guests bypass reception entirely, driving straight to their cottage where they can enter immediately.

This freed staff from routine check-in tasks, allowing them to focus on what matters most: personal attention and solving unique guest requests. The result shows in improved review scores for both digital and traditional service touchpoints, proving technology can enhance rather than replace the human element.

[Read more](#)



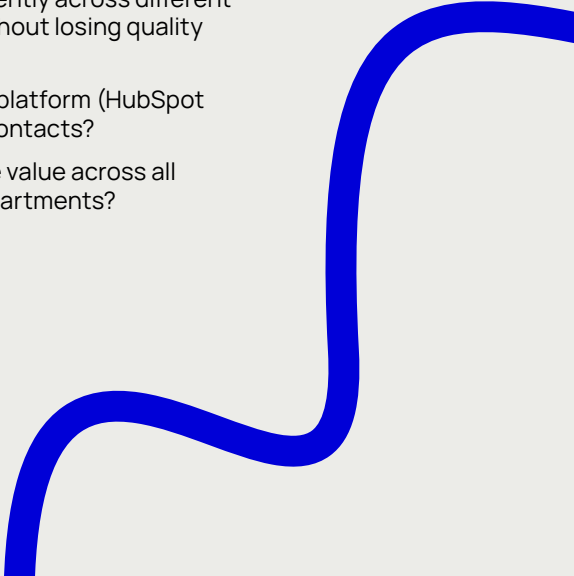
SHIFT 03

GROWTH



From maintenance mode to market leadership

Reality check:

- ☐ Are your marketing teams spending more time on operational tasks than strategic thinking?
 - ☐ Can you launch new campaigns quickly, or does everything require ages of setup and coordination?
 - ☐ Can you launch campaigns consistently across different markets and different countries without losing quality or brand integrity?
 - ☐ Are you getting full value from your platform (HubSpot or others), or just using it to store contacts?
 - ☐ Can you measure customer lifetime value across all touchpoints, not just individual departments?
- 

CTRL

your growth engine

Marketing launches campaigns, but do they really drive revenue? Sales spends hours hunting for context before each client conversation. Customer service may resolve issues, but can't see the full customer story.

Every year, business gets more complex: new channels, higher personalisation standards, and customers who don't want to wait for business hours. And as marketing needs grow, different teams create their own versions of the same processes, working in silos. Today, more than 40% of employees spend 10+ hours weekly on repetitive tasks, like administration or Excel sheets.

Stuck in maintenance mode?

Everyone works hard, but growth feels out of reach. You're busy maintaining what already exists, not building what's next.

Here's the reality:

Leading companies by 2026 focus on streamlining their marketing operations and automating their business processes. Instead of managing complexity, they minimise it.

“Processes should repeat wins, not delay the start. Begin, learn, then streamline. Otherwise, growth becomes organised chaos and scaling won't stick.”



Steven Van Duyse
Strategy Director Automation &
HubSpot Domain Lead, iO

SHIFT

from scattered efforts to operational excellence

Which operational issues constantly disrupt your strategic focus?

Modern business growth depends on two forces:

- Marketing operations takes care of campaign execution, marketing technology management, and process standardisation.
- Business automation streamlines cross-departmental processes between sales, marketing, service, and finance teams.

Based on our experience working with brands like Signify, AkzoNobel, and Carglass, we have identified 6 principles for better marketing and business operations:

6 principles for optimising and automating processes

01 Transformation, not a quick fix

Operational improvement is a deep transformational process that begins with clear vision and strategy. It requires thorough analysis of existing processes, standardisation of workflows, and creating stakeholder buy-in.

02 The right platform

The selection of a suitable platform for your organisation should be based on business requirements, not technology preferences.

03 Holistic approach

Process optimisation touches all aspects of your organisation: sales, customer service, product management, and operations across departments.

04 The human factor

You've selected a platform? Great technology only works if all employees can use it, if your processes are set up for it and if you have all your information in order. Platform adoption is ultimately a people challenge, not just a technical one.

05 Think big, start small, scale fast

Begin with clear objectives and quick wins. Start with one process that has clear value, then systematically expand across departments and touchpoints.

06 'Set and forget?'

Ok. So your workflows run well and leads come in. But after three months, results drop. Customers ignore messages, lead scoring fails, new products break flows. Why? You treated automation as a one-time project instead of an ongoing system needing regular updates.

Your 2026 action plan

THIS MONTH

Think big, start small, scale fast.

What does growth look like for your organisation? Revenue? New markets? Customer retention? Set clear objectives and identify quick wins.

Map your biggest bottlenecks. Which processes consume the most energy but add no value to customers or business outcomes?

Audit platform ROI. So you can stop using tools that don't show measurable business impact.

NEXT QUARTER

Process mapping. Translate key processes for marketing, sales, and service into clear functional and technical requirements.

Improve request clarity. Create simple templates so teams know exactly what information to provide upfront, reducing back-and-forth.

Identify integration points. Which systems need to connect for a seamless customer experience?

Evaluate and choose your automation stack. Compare platforms like Adobe, HubSpot, Salesforce and Microsoft Dynamics 365 based on your requirements, integration capabilities, scalability, and ROI potential.

THIS YEAR

Simplify complex processes. Remove unnecessary complexity in processes that create team miscommunication (campaign launches, lead handovers, customer onboarding).

Standardise workflows. Focus on consistency in

how you launch campaigns, handle leads, and serve customers across different markets.

Automate efficiently. Lead scoring, email workflows, follow-ups, pipeline reporting, data processing, ticket routing, etc.

DECEMBER 2026

You'll have improved key processes, clearer workflows, and learned what works (and what doesn't). Most importantly, your teams spend much less time on manual or repetitive work and more time on strategy that actually grows the business.

Ready to CTRL+SHIFT to market leadership?

Discover insights and practical tips for effectively organising your marketing in our whitepaper "How to unburden your business with 'first time right' marketing execution".

Download the whitepaper

Let's get started

Want to discover how your organisation can transform its processes into a continuous growth engine? Contact us for an assessment of your current operational landscape and find ways to improve.

[Build your growth engine](#)



Martine Koppens
Global Head of Marketing
Excellence & Operations,
Signify

“I can now focus on the future. We’re working on strategic initiatives around AI and digital maturity – and we simply didn’t have the time for that before.”

Martine works with iO's dedicated Digital Marketing Support team covering website management, email marketing, in-app messaging, analytics and content governance across more than 70 countries.

[Read more](#)

 **signify**

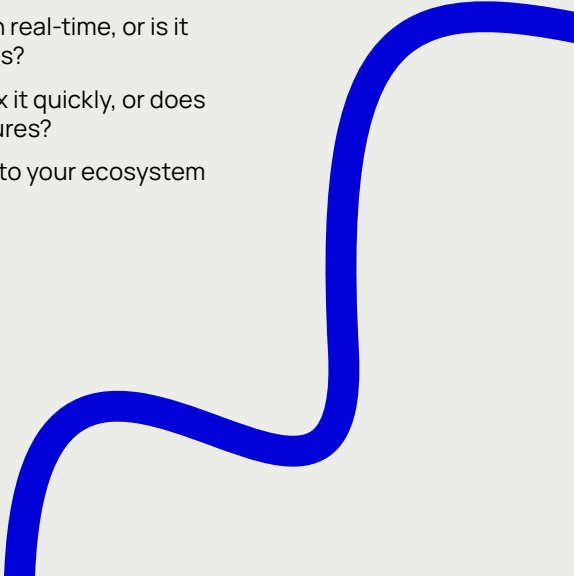
SHIFT 04

TECHNOLOGY



From technological friction to technological flow

Reality check:

- Can you launch new features and integrations quickly, or does every change require weeks of planning, coordination and/or development?
 - Can you scale your technology infrastructure without exponentially increasing complexity and costs?
 - Can you access all customer data in real-time, or is it scattered across multiple databases?
 - When something breaks, can you fix it quickly, or does it cascade into multiple system failures?
 - Can you integrate AI applications into your ecosystem without rebuilding everything?
- 

CTRL your technology

Businesses today compete on experience, and experience depends on how fast your technology can adapt and respond.

While everyone discusses AI and customer experience, companies still wrestle with 'basic' architectural challenges:

- Adding new features to your Digital Experience Platform (DXP) means rebuilding entire systems.
- Simple changes require developer sprints.
- Your marketing team still needs to export data from one system to import into another.
- Your customer service team can't see what marketing promised to prospects.

A lot of organisations find themselves trapped in technological friction.

Successful organisations focus in 2026 on integrating systems (CRM, marketing automation, e-commerce, customer service, etc.) in their Digital Experience Platform, so data flows automatically. And they build their architecture with modular components so they can choose the best software and connect them, instead of being locked into one monolithic platform vendor.

Here's the reality:

The shift to a strong digital platform and a composable architecture is an evolution, not a revolution, and will take time. But it's a path you need to start walking in 2026 if you want to have significant competitive advantages by 2027 and beyond.

“Every day your technology slows down decision-making is a day your competitors get closer to your customers.”



Maarten De Schepper
Commercial Director Belgium, iO

SHIFT

from “make it work”
to “make it flow”

Is your technology accelerating business innovation, or complicating it?

When your technology works together smoothly, your teams can focus on what matters: creating seamless experiences instead of wrestling with integrations or explaining “why the system won’t allow it”.

Technological flow means:

01 Digital Experience Platform

Provide a unified customer experience from a single platform.

02 Seamless integration

Data flows automatically between departments.

03 Composable architecture

Add new capabilities without rebuilding your entire stack.

04 API-first thinking

Every system designed to integrate seamlessly.

05 Cloud-native mindset

Scale up or down based on actual demand.

06 Developer self-service

Teams can innovate without waiting for IT approvals.

Your 2026 action plan

THIS MONTH

Map your current technology stack. Which systems don't communicate?

Assess deployment speed. How long does it take to launch a simple feature or campaign change?

Track patterns in technical issues. Which recurring problems directly impact customer experience or slow down your teams?

Ask your team. "What would we build differently if we started today?"

NEXT QUARTER

Audit your platform architecture. Is your current Digital Experience Platform really integrated, or is it a collection of separate single point solutions?

Choose your first integration opportunity. Pick one data flow (for example your CRM to email platform) that currently requires manual work.

Choose one software component to modernise first. Start with a component that has a lot of

impact on customer experience. Your data sources and front-ends are excellent places to begin a composable approach.

Involve stakeholders to reduce internal resistance and create support.

Set realistic expectations. Platform and technology modernisation is the beginning of a multi-year journey, not a quick fix.

THIS YEAR

Design your target architecture and plan how to get there. What does seamless integration look like for your business?

Invest in developer experience. Make it easier for teams to build and deploy.

Build internal expertise. Train teams on composable principles and API-first thinking.

Modernise component by component. Replace rigid platform elements with flexible, integrated alternatives that enhance customer experience.

DECEMBER 2026

You'll have completed your first modernisation, learned valuable lessons about what works for your organisation, and built a realistic roadmap for future phases. True technological flow is a multi-year journey, but you'll have started walking the path while your competitors are still planning.

Ready to CTRL+SHIFT to technological flow?

If you are responsible for your organisation's digital architecture and considering a more flexible and scalable IT structure, our 'CTO Guide to a Composable Architecture' is a good read.

[Read the CTO Guide](#)

Let's get started

Struggling with technological friction?
We specialise in creating unified digital
experiences built on flexible foundations.

Solve your tech friction



The choice is simple

You can spend 2026 catching up to changes happening around you, or you can CTRL+SHIFT and make those changes happen.

Move from where you are today to where your customers expect you to be.

Partner with us to make it reality.

iodigital.com | business@iodigital.com



iO is one of Europe's leading digital agencies and home of ambitious people, organisations and brands. Since 2005, we deliver marketing that performs, content that connects, and platforms that scale – all seamlessly integrated across data, media, AI, infrastructure and digital operations. With more than 2,000 experts across 12 campuses in Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and Bulgaria, we help brands such as Audi, Brussels Airport, Efteling, Philips, and AkzoNobel to transform their digital experiences.