
INCISIV RESEARCH

SHOPTALK EUROPE 2026

Key Themes & Strategic Insights

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Three days, one consistent pressure point: the gap between knowing what to do and having the discipline to do it.

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Key Themes & Strategic Insights

This report captures the main themes from Shoptalk Europe 2026.

THEME 1

Consumer Behavior Has Outpaced Channel Strategy

Both Estée Lauder and John Lewis pushed back on channel-led thinking. Consumers move between TikTok, in-store, and online without distinguishing between them, and they're impatient with brands that still do. John Lewis called their response "radical relevance": launching on TikTok, tracking LLM-driven search traffic (now at 2%, targeting 5% within nine months), and treating stores as a reason to visit rather than just a place to transact.

Estée Lauder's focus was speed. The benchmark is no longer other beauty brands. It's Zalando, TikTok, and Netflix. Specific examples:

- Killian's viral moment at Cannes: a real-time signal the company moved to amplify across markets instantly
- MAC India: local insights that fed a global innovation pipeline
- John Lewis on TikTok Shop: the platform treated as a media and discovery ecosystem, not just another channel
- John Lewis's LLM search traffic growing to 2% — with a target of 5% within nine months

Key Takeaways

01

Channel strategy is a brand problem.
Consumer behavior is the actual map.

02

The window between a viral moment and brand amplification is now measured in hours. Most organizations aren't built for that.

03

Local market insights can seed global innovation, but only if there's a system to capture and act on them.

THEME 2

Retail Media Grows Up — From Bottom-Funnel to Full-Funnel

Retail media was the dominant topic on Day 1. Tesco, Amazon, Philips, and Diageo all pushed in the same direction: retail media needs to do more than close sales. Tesco's data showed most purchase decisions happen during the shopping journey, not before — so the value of retail media sits in the moment of consideration, not just at checkout.

TikTok Shop came up repeatedly, less as a channel decision and more as a media platform that feeds the full funnel. Voice AI (Alexa) was flagged as the next discovery layer, with brands advised to start optimizing for recommendation now rather than waiting for the behavior to become mainstream.

- Tesco's research: a majority of purchase decisions happen during the shopping journey, not before it. Retail media must meet customers in the moment, not just before they arrive.
- Philips x Tesco: a full-funnel collaboration that attracted net-new shoppers and increased conversion across both digital and in-store.
- Diageo: orchestrating social, retail media, and in-store into a single brand narrative, not parallel programs.
- Amazon: the customer-first framework as the constant; data and media decisions always traced back to customer experience impact.

Key Takeaways

01

Retail media confined to the bottom of the funnel is leaving most of its value on the table.

02

Social and retail media are being managed as one program by the brands seeing the best results.

03

Most brands aren't optimizing for voice AI recommendation yet. That's a problem that compounds the longer it's ignored.

THEME 3

AI Delivers Real Results — But Quietly and Operationally

Europe is 6–12 months behind the US on agentic commerce, but operational wins are already real: one brand cut ad campaign management from weeks to seconds using gen AI. The longer-term numbers are significant — 10–25% of global e-commerce could be fully automated by 2030.

Boots was held up as the right model: AI handling routine tasks so store associates spend more time with customers. The retailers seeing results aren't using AI to reduce headcount. They're using it to change what their people do.

- Zalando: 90% of online content is now AI-generated. The question this raises isn't about efficiency. It's about differentiation.
- GLP-1 medication is shifting category demand curves. Most retailers aren't modeling it yet.
- Geo SEO and agentic discovery are live issues for European retail, not future-state planning.

Key Takeaways

01

Near-term AI ROI is operational: faster workflows, better forecasting, routine tasks off the frontline.

02

The in-store human interaction is still the hard part to replicate. The retailers winning with AI are protecting that, not automating it.

03

AI adoption isn't the question anymore. Whether your infrastructure can support it is.

THEME 4

Innovation Without Discipline Is Theater

Most innovation programs produce decks, not results. The panel's diagnosis: they start with a solution — or a buzzword — instead of a problem. The session introduced a "polygonal" model built around the opposite: start with a sharp problem statement, draw from the venture economy, and measure against business value rather than innovation activity.

OBI embedded innovation into core group strategy. ICA actively kills projects that aren't performing — what they called "zombie projects." Toast distributed ownership across the organization rather than concentrating it in a dedicated team, arguing that treating innovation as a privileged function disconnects it from the business.

- A healthy portfolio mixes quick wins, transformational programs, and longer-horizon bets, not just the first category.
- Strategic alignment and cross-functional ownership are the filters. Novelty isn't.
- The panelists called out "API readiness" as a prerequisite. Knowing your core assets and being able to connect with external partners quickly.

Key Takeaways

01

The problem statement matters more than the program. A poorly framed question produces well-executed work that doesn't move the business.

02

Innovation teams need autonomy and a mandate. The budget alone doesn't produce results.

03

When innovation sits in one team, the rest of the organization opts out of ownership.

THEME 5

Localization Is the Hidden Variable in Global Growth

75% of international expansions fail, and it's rarely a bad strategy. It's a localization problem. The Gloacal panel, led by Gaurav Pant, Co-Founder and Chief Insights Officer at Incisiv, argued that global ambition without local execution is the most common mistake in retail expansion. What used to be a real-estate challenge (finding locations) is now a capability challenge: building the right local team, customer understanding, and operational infrastructure before opening stores.

The practical framework offered: define your non-negotiables: brand identity, core experience, key differentiators, and hold them firm. Adapt everything else. Local execution has to be in place before you scale store count, not after.

- The "halo effect" of global brand recognition is weakening. Local challenger brands are gaining ground on cultural relevance.
- AI can handle operational complexity, but the emotional and cultural texture of an in-store experience in a new market still requires local humans.
- Four failure modes named: acting like a tourist, mimicking local brands, over-promising capability, and under-preparing execution.
- Operating models that combine global brand standards with local team authority hold up better when markets shift.

Key Takeaways

01

Know what you won't compromise on.
Everything else is fair game to adapt.

02

Local execution capability needs to be in place before you scale store count, not built in parallel with it.

03

Density before breadth. Build real presence in a market before expanding to the next one.



CLOSING PERSPECTIVE

Closing Perspective

What stood out across three days wasn't any single idea. It was how often the same pressure appeared in different rooms. Consumer behavior is moving faster than most organizations. AI is delivering real ROI for the teams that aren't waiting for a perfect strategy. International expansion keeps failing at the execution layer, not the ambition layer. And innovation programs keep producing activity instead of results because no one asked the right question first.

The common thread: the gap between a good plan and a good outcome is almost always operational.