



Scaling Authentic Content

A Retail Hive Mind Guide

How AI can support, not detract from creative content

A Retail Hive member perspective



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Hive Members: Where They're at...

Where do you stand on using AI to scale content?

At the Retail Hive, there are three camps:

1

AI is the only way to generate the creative content we need for our brand

2

AI is not part of our DNA, and it's a risk to how customers see our brand

3

We see the potential, and want to start to use it, but are looking for the best mix

Your brand's DNA is its most valuable asset. That means the combination of visual identity, tone, storytelling, and emotional resonance; all of which defines how your customers perceive and remember you. That DNA is built over time through consistent creative choices, distinctive experiences, and a clear sense of purpose, so it's not surprising that there's hesitation for those in camp 3 of the above groups.

Your brand can be expressed and exemplified through carefully crafted photography, real locations, and an authentic sense of place. These elements create a tangible connection with customers and help you stand out in the current crowded digital marketplace.

The challenge facing retailers today is not simply **whether** to adopt AI, but **how** to do so without eroding these defining characteristics.

The opportunity lies in using AI to enhance and scale what already exists, rather than replacing it.



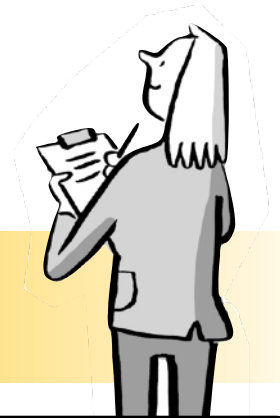
Start Here

“It comes back to the DNA of the brand: how much of that do you need to protect? For Cox & Cox, the way we look and the way we feel is absolutely imperative so that we stand out in this marketplace. The photography, the location - all that will never go away, because it's so authentic. But what we can do is take some of that, eg the location shots, the background flats, and use AI produced content. We can merge the two, including product shots if needed, thereby protecting how our brand looks and feels.”

Jan Duckworth, **Cox & Cox**

Ensure you've a clear definition of your brand DNA.

Pinpoint the elements that are essential to how your brand looks, feels, and communicates. These are the aspects that customers recognise instantly and that competitors struggle to replicate. They may include a signature photography style, a particular use of colour and light, a consistent tone of voice, or a strong connection to physical environments and locations.



Next...

Once these core elements are defined, you can begin to explore how AI can support. The key is to treat AI as an extension of the creative process rather than a replacement for it. For example, a brand that relies heavily on location-based photography does not need to abandon this approach. Instead, it can use AI to enhance it. Backgrounds can be adapted, additional scenes can be generated, and existing assets can be extended to create more content without losing the original authenticity.

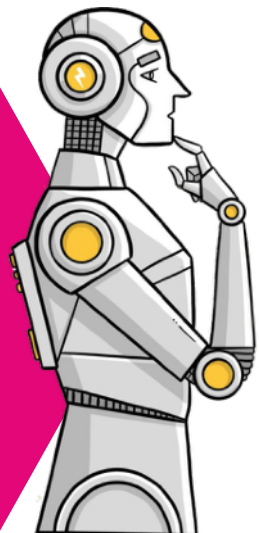
There's still an essential human in the loop of our AI journey into rapid range expansion - using AI to generate content, particularly the PDP content. Nowadays they're even more essential, because they've got the brand knowledge, they understand the tone of voice, they've got the product knowledge.”

Hive Member, Major Retailer

The best of both worlds

This 'hybrid' model allows you to scale your creative output while maintaining consistency. It also ensures that the brand's visual identity remains grounded in reality, even as it evolves.

Collaboration across teams is essential. Creative, marketing, and technology teams must work closely together to ensure that AI-generated outputs align with brand standards. Without this alignment, there's a risk of inconsistency and dilution. **Clear guidelines should be established to define how AI can be used, what is acceptable, and where human oversight is required.**



Tricky Decisions?



Replace or Support?

Decide how much of your creative process you are willing to automate. Should AI-generated imagery replace traditional photography entirely, or should it be used selectively to support existing methods?

The role of human creativity

While AI can generate content, it does not possess the cultural awareness, intuition, or emotional intelligence that human creators bring.



Trust

As AI becomes more visible in retail, customers may become more aware of how content is created. You must consider how transparent you want to be about your use of AI and how this transparency will affect trust.

Investment

Traditional creative approaches such as location shoots can be expensive and time-consuming. AI offers a more cost-effective alternative.

Originality

AI offers significant advantages in terms of speed and cost, enabling retailers to produce large volumes of content quickly. However, there is a risk that this efficiency comes at the expense of originality and emotional connection



Originality, Creativity and Business Pressures

Personalisation

You can create multiple versions of campaigns tailored to different audiences, regions, or channels. This level of personalisation is difficult to achieve using traditional methods alone.

Becoming bland?

If AI-generated content is not carefully controlled, it can result in visuals and messaging that feel generic or inconsistent.



Pros & Cons

AI enables **speed and efficiency**. Right now, demand to generate content is greater than ever. So speed and cost are massive pressures.

Experimenting

AI allows you to test different creative approaches quickly and at relatively low cost.



Potential loss of human creativity

While AI can generate content, it cannot replace the insight and originality that human creators bring.



“There is certainly a tension for our customers between AI and the need to scaling content, but I think the tension is less around the tools that we're using. It's probably more around how we're using the tools.”

Richard Aldiss, **THG Studios**



“Authenticity is the watchword for our content program, and always has been. Our question is, how do we make sure that we are actually giving customers that authenticity and authentic content that they need to make a decision?”

Tom Cusack, **Sainsbury's**



A Real Life Example

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“Recently, we worked with a garden retailer that provided us with around 150 SKUs, many of which came as images taken on phones, not professionally. We transformed all of them into AI twins and then generated 150 corresponding lifestyle images. In total, that meant producing 300 unique images in just a day and a half.

To put that into perspective, each lifestyle image placed the product in a distinct setting, such as a modern British garden on a summer’s day, perhaps with a dog in the background, creating a fully realised scene. Achieving that level of variety through traditional photography would likely have taken weeks of planning, shooting, and post-production.

This is a clear example of where AI delivers real value. It dramatically reduces both time and cost while still enabling high-quality, scalable creative output that would otherwise be impractical to produce.

Using AI to drive efficiencies, cost savings etc. is all very valuable. **But only if that content is useful, relevant, trustworthy and engaging for consumers.”**

Richard Aldiss, SVP, **THG Studios**

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"We're using AI for image generation and for copy generation features and benefits across the board now. It's enabled us to scale without losing quality, and actually A-B tests that we've run have shown that there's an increase in engagement and conversion metrics. Not huge, but our baseline for success was that we had no negative impact from using AI to generate content. We've seen a positive impact."

Hive Member, Major Retailer

Differing Perspectives



Scale vs. Craft



AI enables:

- Faster production
- Greater consistency
- Improved performance (conversion, engagement)

Confidence comes from:

- Prompt engineering
- Controlled systems

AI can preserve tone with the right controls

- Tone of voice can be trained
- Prompts + internal models = brand alignment

AI is a tool to reinforce brand consistency when AI is deployed within a well-governed framework, that includes human QC.

“We’re making it work”

Teams actively:

- Refining prompts
- Testing outputs
- Scaling use cases

Pragmatic, execution-focused mindset

Members are concerned that:

- High-volume AI content = generic output
- Brand distinctiveness gets lost

Creative teams are more skeptical

“Authenticity can’t be engineered”

Scepticism that:

- True brand voice is cultural, not technical
- AI may imitate but not originate authenticity

“We’re still figuring it out”

Others feel:

- Early in the journey
- Unsure about best practices

More cautious, exploratory stance

“

“The goal of AI isn’t to create more content. The goal is to create more useful content. As content production becomes faster and more scalable, relevance, trust, brand distinctiveness and consistency become even more important”

Richard Aldiss, THG Studios

Setting the Direction

1

Conduct a Brand Audit. The first step is to conduct a thorough brand audit. This involves identifying the elements that define the brand and must be protected. These elements should form the foundation of any AI strategy.

2

Develop a hybrid creative model. Rather than choosing between traditional methods and AI, retailers should look for ways to combine them. For example, real-world photography can be used as the basis for campaigns, with AI applied to extend and adapt these assets. This approach preserves authenticity while enabling greater flexibility.

3

Firm up governance. Retailers should establish clear policies around how AI is used within the organisation. This includes defining roles and responsibilities, setting quality standards, and ensuring alignment with brand values. Strong governance helps maintain consistency and reduces the risk of misuse.

4

Build your training and capability. Employees need to understand how to use AI tools effectively and how to integrate them into existing workflows. This requires investment in skills development and ongoing learning.

5

Monitor. Retailers should focus on measurement and continuous improvement. The impact of AI should be evaluated not only in terms of efficiency but also in terms of brand perception and customer engagement. Feedback from customers can provide valuable insights into how AI-generated content is received.

By taking a considered and strategic approach, retailers can harness the benefits of AI while protecting the elements that make their brand unique. The goal is not to replace human creativity, but to enhance it. When used thoughtfully, AI can help retailers scale their identity, maintain authenticity, and remain competitive in a rapidly changing landscape.

“We use AI to generate product descriptions, product copy... we use that based on what a lot of our what our SEO agency is saying.

There are mixed views on what we should use AI for: the concern is whether AI will represent the brand in the right way, that it won't have the right tone of voice. We know that the likes of Meta are moving to a place where creative will decide out your ROAS and your metrics.”

Fashion Retailer



The logo features the word "Hive" in a black, handwritten-style font, centered within a yellow hexagon. This hexagon is part of a larger graphic of interconnected hexagons in yellow, orange, and pink, some of which are outlined in grey.

Hive



The Retail Hive brings senior retailers together to soundboard, ask questions, benchmark and collaborate as a collective. We do this by providing safe, co-owned and curated environments for retailers and partners to build meaningful relationships, give one another value, identify solutions, and promote best practice.



THG Studios is an award-winning creative marketing agency and one of the UK's most innovative creative content hubs, specialising in brand strategy, creative services and production. Set in over 200,000 square feet of creative space, THG Studios provides innovative, high-quality creative solutions for brands across the globe.

