

C O V E R S T O R Y

Leading the AI Evolution: How

TOM EDWARDS

is Shaping the Future of Intelligent, Ethical
and Human-Centered Innovation

Tom Edwards

Americas Consumer AI Leader | [EY](#)





The Most Prominent Business Leaders To Follow in Artificial Intelligence

Living life to its fullest means enjoying experiences by immersing yourself in the constantly changing stream of reality. Today, technology has become the constant of that change. “Especially, artificial intelligence,” believes **Tom Edwards, Americas Consumer AI Leader at EY**.

However, as someone deeply involved in AI strategy, Tom personally remains cautious about the pace of AI development, with the need for human-centered design and ethics. “AI is evolving at breakneck speed, but progress without principles is a risk,” he warns.

A Divine Constant: Embracing AI with Purpose and Caution

For him, reconciling the pace of development with human-centered design starts with **intent**. Every solution, every agent, every insight needs to serve a purpose that enhances human capability, not replaces it.

“At EY, we embed Responsible AI **frameworks** across everything we do,” he informs. That means considering explainability, transparency, fairness, and governance from the start, not as an afterthought. And it’s not just about compliance—it’s about trust. Whether you’re a consumer interacting with a personalized AI agent or an employee using generative tools, trust is the currency that determines adoption.

Designing with, Not for: The Core of Human-Centered AI

Human-centered design means designing **with** people, not just **for** them. It’s about creating adaptive experiences rooted in empathy—experiences that respect privacy, elevate creativity, and empower decision-making.



AI isn’t just code – it’s culture. The future belongs to those who can connect intelligent systems with intelligent intent – and do it with heart.”



The real opportunity lies in balance: building systems that are both fast and fair, scalable and secure, powerful and principled. “That’s how we drive transformation that lasts.”

From Campaigns to Ecosystems: A Career of Evolution and Orchestration

Tom’s journey has always centered around the intersection of emerging technology, data, and consumer behavior. He began his career in the agency world, then transitioned into executive leadership roles, including Chief Digital Officer, Chief Data Officer, Chief Marketing Officer, and Chief Innovation Officer. Each of those roles sharpened his ability to align technology with business outcomes, especially within the consumer landscape.

Since 2016, Tom’s has had the opportunity to lead AI practices and work hands-on with enterprise-grade AI platforms. That early work gave him a front-row seat to how AI can evolve from automation to augmentation—and now, with Agentic AI, into orchestration.

Joining EY as the Americas Consumer AI Leader was a natural evolution. It gave Tom the opportunity to scale everything he had learned, partnering with some of the



world's most recognized brands to not only implement AI but reimagine how organizations operate. Today, he focuses on driving growth through AI while ensuring that governance, transparency, and human-centricity are foundational.

Whether it's speaking on global stages like SXSW or Cannes Lions or working directly with clients, Tom's mission remains the same: *to help organizations harness intelligent systems to create adaptive, personalized, and meaningful experiences.*

Beyond Automation: The Rise of Agentic AI

Looking back, several pivotal moments shaped the way he leads through technology and transformation. One of the earliest transitions was from digital marketing to innovation leadership. That move forced Tom to think beyond campaigns and focus on connected ecosystems—how data, platforms, and behavioral insights come together to create real-time, adaptive experiences.

Another major turning point was leading enterprise AI programs starting in 2016. At that time, most viewed AI as automation. But he saw the potential for augmentation and orchestration—how AI could become a collaborative force across every function. That fundamentally shifted how Tom approached transformation: not as a linear journey, but as an adaptive cycle powered by intelligent systems.

Stepping into executive roles across digital, data, marketing, and innovation gave him a 360-degree perspective of the



Progress without principles is risk. At EY, we build fast – but never without fairness, transparency, and trust at the core.”

business. It helped him understand that true transformation doesn't come from deploying technology alone—it's about empowering people, redesigning processes, and aligning incentives.

Scaling with Soul: Driving Growth Through Trust, Governance, and Insight

And now at EY, working with some of the largest consumer brands, Tom sees AI not just as a tool, but as a growth driver that enhances creativity, optimizes operations, and reshapes the value chain. *“These experiences reinforced my belief: when you connect human behavior, intelligent systems, and a clear vision, you can lead meaningful change.”*

According to Tom, translating long-term AI vision into tangible results starts by anchoring everything to business value and consumer relevance.

In the consumer sector, the path from vision to action begins with deep alignment across data, technology, and experience. He works closely with clients to identify where AI can create impact—whether that's personalization at scale, intelligent supply chains, or agent-led customer service. *“But we don't start with the tech—we start with the why.”*

“From there, we follow a few guiding principles:”





1. Prioritize Value Creation

Innovation is only meaningful if it drives growth, efficiency, or enhanced experience. Every initiative must be tied back to measurable KPIs—whether it's revenue lift, cost reduction, or NPS improvement.

2. Make Data AI-Ready

Vision is nothing without clean, contextual, and connected data. AI is only as powerful as the knowledge and expertise that fuels it. *"We help clients modernize their data fabric to fuel intelligence that is both accurate and adaptive."*

3. Start Modular, Scale Fast

"We begin with use-case-driven pilots that solve specific problems. Once value is proven, we scale through repeatable frameworks—governed by Responsible AI principles."

4. Embed Human + Machine Collaboration

It's not AI vs the workforce—it's AI with the workforce. Tom adds they focus on augmenting decision-making, upskilling teams, and creating confidence in intelligent systems.

AI strategy isn't about chasing hype—it's about building a durable edge through trust, insight, and execution. That's how they turn vision into momentum.



Innovation isn't about being first – it's about being right. Right for the people, the business, and the future we're shaping together."



Through it all, what drives Tom is simple: **impact at scale.**

The consumer sector sits at the crossroads of technology, emotion, and behavior. It's where innovation becomes tangible—*"Where we can improve lives in real time, whether through hyper-personalized experiences, seamless commerce, or predictive services that anticipate needs before they're voiced."*

Making the Invisible Visible: How AI is Personalizing the Everyday

At EY, Tom is incredibly proud of the work they've done helping brands move from experimentation to orchestration. One standout moment was leading a multi-agent, AI deployment across marketing, commerce, and care for a Fortune 500 consumer company. What started as pilots evolved into an enterprise-wide capability that not only increased speed to market but also redefined how teams collaborate with intelligent systems.

But it's not just the tech—it's seeing how these innovations empower people. Whether it's reducing manual load for marketers or delivering real-time personalization that respects the consumer's values, the human impact is what fuels Tom.

Innovation isn't just about being first. It's about being **right** for the brand, the business, and the people they serve. That's what keeps him focused and inspired every day.



Tempo, Trust & Empathy: The Real Art of Leading Through Disruption

Leading through AI-led disruption has taught Tom that transformation is never just about the tech—it's about **trust**, **tempo**, and **tenacity**.

First, trust is foundational. Whether it's with clients or internal teams, people need to feel confident that the change you're leading is not only strategic but also responsible. Transparency around AI's role, its limitations, and its ethical use builds that trust.

Second, tempo matters. AI moves fast, but organizations often don't. As a leader, you have to balance urgency with reality, creating a pace that inspires without overwhelming. That means setting a clear north star, breaking it down into quick wins, and building momentum through the delivery of value.

Third, empathy and clarity are non-negotiable. Disruption brings uncertainty, and uncertainty can paralyze. Tom has learned to lead with empathy, making space for concerns while staying clear and consistent about the vision and path forward.

One of his biggest lessons? **Don't wait for perfection.** Progress beats perfection—especially in a space where the landscape evolves weekly. The key is to learn quickly, adapt rapidly, and always stay focused on business outcomes and human impact while mitigating risk.



In a world of disruption, empathy is your edge. Technology may scale solutions, but trust scales impact.”

That's how you guide teams—and clients—through not just change, but meaningful reinvention, *he claims*.

From Data to Differentiation: Elevating Brands with Purpose and Precision

From Tom's perspective, consumer expectations have shifted fundamentally from *personalised* to *predictive*, and are now rapidly moving toward *proactive* and *purpose-driven*.

In today's data-driven landscape, consumers expect brands to **know them, respect them, and add value in real time**. That means no more one-size-fits-all experiences. They want hyper-relevant engagement across every touchpoint—delivered with empathy, transparency, and trust.

This evolution influences how Tom approaches his role in three core ways:

1. **Data with Intention**
2. It's not just about capturing data—it's about using it to deliver meaningful outcomes. Every strategy must be rooted in actionable insights that respect consent and context.
3. **Orchestration Over Optimization**
4. It's no longer enough to optimize a channel or a campaign. The focus has shifted to orchestrating holistic, intelligent experiences, where AI agents, human teams, and platforms work together seamlessly.



5. **Purpose as a Differentiator**

6. Consumers align with brands that reflect their values. *"So our strategies increasingly consider ethics, sustainability, and inclusivity—not as add-ons, but as competitive advantages powered by intelligent systems."*

Ultimately, AI is the enabler, but trust is the differentiator. Tom's role is to help clients design systems and experiences that deliver both value and impact.

Mentoring the Next Wave: Empathy, Fluency, and the Courage to Build

What makes EY's culture unique, according to Tom, is that they're not just experimenting with AI—they're operationalizing it across industries, guided by clear ethical frameworks and cross-functional expertise. The collaborative environment at EY brings together domain leaders, technologists, and strategists to solve real-world challenges at speed and scale.

That culture has profoundly shaped Tom's work.

It empowers him to lead with **vision and velocity**—to go beyond theory and build future-ready capabilities that are grounded in business impact. Whether they're standing up agentic platforms, reimagining consumer experiences, or modernizing AI governance, the ecosystem here encourages bold thinking and responsible execution.

EY's culture fosters **co-creation** with clients and among its employees. That's how it moves from use cases to scaled solutions, from pilots to performance.

In short: EY gives Tom the platform to not just talk about the future, but to build it, responsibly and at scale.

One of the most rewarding parts of Tom's role is mentoring and influencing many rising professionals. He shares, *"When I speak with young professionals who want to sit at the intersection of AI, strategy, and consumer behavior, I offer three pieces of advice:"*

1. **Stay Technically Curious, Strategically Grounded**
2. Understand the capabilities of AI—not just how models work, but what they enable. Then zoom out: ask how those capabilities tie back to consumer expectations, operational levers, and business growth.
3. **Learn to Translate**
4. The real value isn't just in building models—it's in translating complexity into clarity. Great AI leaders are fluent in both **technology** and **outcomes**. Be the bridge between data science, design, and decision-makers.
5. **Lead with Empathy and Ethics**
6. AI isn't just code—it's culture-shaping. Always think about the human impact of what you're creating. Responsible innovation isn't optional; it's your competitive edge.

Bonus tip? **Get comfortable being uncomfortable.** This space evolves fast. The best leaders embrace ambiguity and keep learning.

The future belongs to those who can connect intelligent systems with intelligent intent—and do it with heart.

The Legacy Lens: Making Tomorrow Better with Intelligent Intent

Staying future-focused in the age of AI isn't about predicting what's next—it's about preparing to adapt, **at speed and with purpose.**



Tom's mindset is guided by a simple philosophy: **"Anticipate, don't just react."** That means constantly scanning the horizon for signals—emerging models, behavioral shifts, regulatory moves—and asking how they connect to the deeper needs of people, brands, and systems.

To stay anchored, Tom leans into a few core frameworks:

1. **Human + Machine Symbiosis**
2. He evaluates everything through the lens of augmentation. How will this innovation empower people? How do we scale intelligence without sacrificing empathy?
3. **Adaptive Strategy**
4. Long-term success doesn't come from fixed plans—it comes from flexible frameworks. He works with modular, use-case-driven approaches that allow for fast pivots without losing sight of the broader mission.
5. **Responsible Acceleration**
6. *"Just because we can move fast, doesn't mean we always should. I apply governance and ethics not as constraints, but as enablers of trust, adoption, and lasting impact."*

In essence, Tom stays grounded by asking one question every day: **"Is what we're building today making tomorrow better—for the business and for the people it serves?"**

What excites Tom most about the future of AI in the consumer industry is its potential to transform everyday moments into intelligent, meaningful experiences.

He believes we're moving into an era where agents don't just automate—they anticipate. Where brand interactions are no longer just reactive but proactively aligned with individual needs, values, and context. And it's not science fiction—it's happening now.

The future of AI isn't just about smarter algorithms. It's about **smarter relationships**—between brands and people, between humans and machines, and across entire value chains.

As for legacy, Tom's hope is simple:

He helped **demystify** AI.

He made it **accessible, ethical, and actionable.**

And that he played a role in **building trust** between innovation and intention.

"If the work I've done inspires others to lead boldly, think responsibly, and create value that truly matters, then I've done what I set out to do." 



AI Keynote Speakers
to Watch in the U.S. for 2024

  **Tom Edwards** 