



CONTAGIOUS

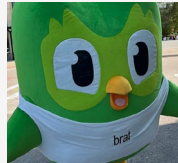
THE CONTAGIOUS IQ DOWNLOAD

Breakthrough ideas of 2024



04 Most Contagious Campaigns of the Year

Our pick of 2024's most captivating, memorable and impactful campaigns



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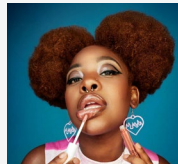
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WELCOME

Welcome to the 2024 Contagious IQ Download – a round-up of some of the best campaigns, trends, interviews and articles that made it through our filter and onto Contagious IQ this year.

I won't spoil the surprise but congratulations to all the brands and agencies that earned themselves a place in our coveted 'Most Contagious Campaigns' section for their standout work. It's a compelling collection of creativity that covers everything from misophonia to meat, biscuits to Brat, and Doordash to dank.

Elsewhere in the Download, we've shone our editorial spotlight onto the cosmetic brand E.l.f. and how it's managed to reach \$1bn in annual sales by democratising beauty and harnessing its community. And with social playing a dominant role not only in E.l.f.'s success but also accounting for a large chunk of all ad spend, we're also taking a look at which brands were winning on social media this year and how they did it (beyond doing it demurely and mindfully, obviously).

When we looked back at the year, you didn't need to be a professional trend-spotter to see the increasing impact AI is having on our industry and the world in general this year. So although we can happily bang on about generative AI as much as the next LinkedIn influencer, we thought it would be more interesting in this report to highlight some of the brands that have pushed back on the technology, as well as the ones that are championing humanity by telling the stories of real people in their ads.

After all, I'm pretty sure it's still humans and not machines that actually buy the stuff we're marketing, right?

Alex Jenkins / Editorial Director / Contagious

2024's best campaigns

We've made a list, and it's got nothing to do with being naughty or nice. These are the 15 most innovative, breakthrough campaigns of the year, according to the Contagious team

▼ CHOOSE UBER

Heetch / BETC Paris

Contagious has a soft spot for campaigns that rely on bold ideas to make up for a meagre media spend, and one of our favourite low-budget bangers of 2024 came from French taxi app Heetch, which made OOH ads telling tourists visiting Paris for the Olympic Games to take an Uber – leaving Heetch for the locals. Gutsy stuff.



▲ NOTHING SATISFIES LIKE POT NOODLE

Pot Noodle / Adam&eveDDB

Rather than tug on heartstrings or tickle funny bones, Pot Noodle disgusted its way into people's repertoires with a spot in which a woman obnoxiously slurps her snack. The brand then handled the many complaints it received with passive-aggressive aplomb, replacing the slurps with nom nom sounds and baby giggles as part of an 'apology' campaign. We've no choice but to applaud the swagger... and the 25% sales increase.

MOST CONTAGIOUS CAMPAIGNS

► DOORDASH ALL THE ADS

Doordash / Wieden+Kennedy, Portland

If we were appraising these campaigns like an Olympic diving judge and giving points for the degree of difficulty, Doordash would be sitting pretty. Its Super Bowl campaign, offering a prize from every brand that advertised during this year's big game to the first person who figured out its ridiculously long promo code, took a lot of legal wrangling and constant revisions. Alas, that's not how we make this list. Fortunately, Doordash All the Ads has plenty of other merits, such as being big and fun, and serving as an effective product demo of the brand's promise to now deliver anything and everything, and not just food.



◀ NEXT TO STOK'D

Stok'd / Angry Butterfly, Toronto

The Canadians have a reputation for being goodnatured and neighbourly, and Ontarian cannabis chain Stok'd is no exception. Prohibited from showing weed products, paraphernalia and store interiors in its marketing, the weed brand cheekily bypassed restrictions by promoting the neighbouring businesses of its four stores instead. The humorous ads feature next-door business owners covertly promoting Stok'd and cannabis in general, packed with humorous dope-based puns, alongside sneaky shots of Stok'd shopfronts. The Next to Stok'd campaign is a masterclass in brand personality as a point of differentiation, and, according to Angry Butterfly, Toronto, the company saw a year-on-year rise in new online customers (29%), in-store customers (26%) and revenue (12%).

MOST CONTAGIOUS CAMPAIGNS



◀ **ALCARAZ SIGNS**

Netflix / In-house

The Last Dance, Drive to Survive, Welcome to Wrexham, Beckham. What does that say to you about bingeable sports docuseries? There's too many of them? That's one way of looking at it. Another way of looking at it is – people like them, let's make some more of them. Ahead of Netflix's launch of its new behind-the-scenes series with tennis star Carlos Alcaraz, the streaming giant had to find a way to cut through the crowd of competing sports docs. Sure it could have run some creative OOH and ramped its output on socials, but that's costly. And where's the fun in that when you could get competitor media to promote your series for you instead? Hijacking the ritual of tennis pros signing courtside cameras after a win, Netflix created an intriguing treasure hunt that had fans, influencers and broadcast media speculating what Alcaraz's cryptic post-game teasers could mean. Not only did the messages make for a live exercise in consolidating distinctive assets but when Netflix revealed all they already had the attention of the very fans they wanted to reach the most. Next up on Netflix: *Monkey Tennis*.



▲ **THE BANK OF SMALL WINS**

Britannia Good Day / Talented.Agency, Bangalore

What do biscuits, banknotes and clothes have in common? Nothing – except that they all feature in a creative campaign by Britannia Good Day. The Indian cookie brand turned pockets into an advertising medium by hiding its own branded currency in clothing from a fashion e-tailer, a laundry chain, and a thrift store. Denominations ranged from INR10 (\$0.12) to INR2,000 (\$24), bringing a nice monetary surprise to lucky finders. We're not saying that all brands should hand out wads of cash, but Britannia reminds us that when your brand stands for happiness, sometimes you need to put your money where your mouth is.

▶ **THE DESK BREAK**

Asics / Golin, London

With caustic one-liners such as 'You are a fucking nobody', Brian Cox's Logan Roy is hardly the right frontman for a World Mental Health Day ad campaign. That is unless you're Asics. The sportswear brand has a healthy distinctive positioning around the benefits of exercise on mental wellbeing, but instead of a po-faced call to arms to get people to take a regular desk break at work, it unleashed the world's most toxic boss to remind people he wasn't the most dangerous thing in the office (more than two hours sitting at a desk is!). The ad was culturally resonant and highly shareable. All together now, 'Happy Christmas you clock-watching fucks.'



IDEAS WORTH STEALING



Stealing great ideas isn't a crime — it's a strategy

[Contagious IQ](#) gives you access to over 12,000 best-in-class advertising case studies from global campaigns, constantly updated and all searchable by category, region, or business challenge.

It's the fastest way to boost inspiration, sharpen your pitch and crack any brief with confidence.





◀ THE MISHEARD VERSION

Specsavers / Golin, London

We're not advertising snobs at Contagious. We don't just fawn over clever guerilla marketing campaigns for esoteric startups; we have just as much respect for high street brands that put out ads with mass appeal. And perhaps no brand in 2024 – in the UK, anyway – captured such wide attention like Specsavers.

To promote its audiology services, the retail chain got Rick Astley to re-record his hit single, 'Never Gonna Give You Up', with amusing malapropisms (replacing 'never gonna run around and desert you' with 'never gonna run around with dessert spoons', for example) to draw attention to the signs of hearing loss.

Not only did the campaign deftly use humour to make hearing loss a trending topic on UK social media, and a talking point on TV chat shows and in newspapers, it drove people towards Specsavers' audiology services, with hearing test bookings up 66% year-on-year during the week of launch.

And while this is a bit of an 'inside-baseball' point to make about a campaign, The Misheard Version showed that the brand was not just a one-note joke, and that there was life beyond 'Should've gone to Specsavers'.

MOST CONTAGIOUS CAMPAIGNS

▼ DUOLINGO SWEAT TOUR

Duolingo / In-house

You're at the opening night of Charli XCX's Sweat Tour in Detroit, surrounded by Brats dancing the viral 'Apple' routine. Suddenly you see a flock of giant green owls in the crowd, and Charli is giving Duolingo a shoutout – no, it's not a fever dream about losing your Spanish streak, it's just another unhinged marketing stunt by the language learning app. Impossible to miss in their Brat-green Duo owl masks, Duolingo's marketing team had a hoot crashing the concert, tapping into one of the biggest cultural trends of the year and earning a cool 20 million impressions in the process (most of which were generated by concertgoers, rather than Duolingo's social channels).



▲ PIZZA & POKER CALL

Poker / DDB Colombia, Bogotá

It might be a little route one hijacking late-night takeaway calls to reassert a brand connection with fun times, food and friends, but it's also devilishly smart and in this case built on a particularly inspired insight. To wit, in Colombia, a lot of neighbourhood pizzerias close at 11pm, just as parties are getting started. So Colombian beer brand Poker created a call centre to redirect orders, which it prepared in a hidden kitchen and delivered along with cold Poker beers. According to the agency, the campaign reached 20,000 people and achieved an 18% increase in the 'goes well with food' attribute and a 15% rise in 'the beer that sets trends' attribute. It's all in the delivery.

MOST CONTAGIOUS CAMPAIGNS

► IS IT EVEN A CITY?

Visit Oslo / NewsLab AS, Oslo

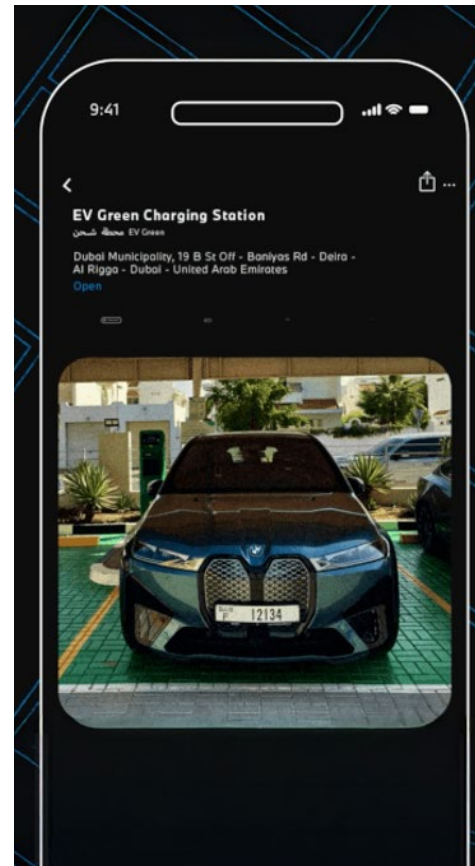
This ad for a Norwegian tourism board, in which a disenchanted resident wonders whether Oslo is even a real city because it's so quaint – ‘You walk around the corner, and it's like, “Oh, there's the Prime Minister”’ – presented the capital's charms as flaws, using a character who was the exact opposite of the target audience, in much the same way that Audi's Yuppie ad did in 1994. It worked great then and it seems like it worked great for Visit Oslo, too.



▲ WCDONALD'S

McDonald's / Wieden & Kennedy New York

This campaign, in which McDonald's adopted the branding of its fictional counterpart from manga, demonstrated the fast food chain's deft understanding of culture, fans and its own assets. More proof, if you needed it, that McDonald's is one of the most sophisticated marketers on the planet.



◀ IJACK

BMW / Serviceplan Middle East, Dubai

When Bill Bernbach said that creativity might be the 'last unfair advantage we're legally allowed to take over our competitors', he probably wasn't thinking of stunts like iJack – mostly because the internet wasn't big in his day – but we suspect he would approve of the work.

The campaign to promote BMW's new electric vehicle (EV) in the Middle East began with the insight that few people in the region have their own charging station, and so the first thing that they do when they're in the market for an EV is go online to search for their nearest power point. Knowing this, BMW took pictures of its car at over 300 vehicle charging stations across Dubai, and then posted those photos as reviews on Google Maps. When prospective EV buyers looked for their nearest charge point, they saw a picture of a nice, shiny BMW – along with a QR code that took them to a website where they could book a test drive.

BMW received 400% more bookings for test drives, and two out of five of those could be directly traced back to the QR codes. Devious? A little. Creative? Definitely.

MOST CONTAGIOUS CAMPAIGNS



▲ MENDED MURALS

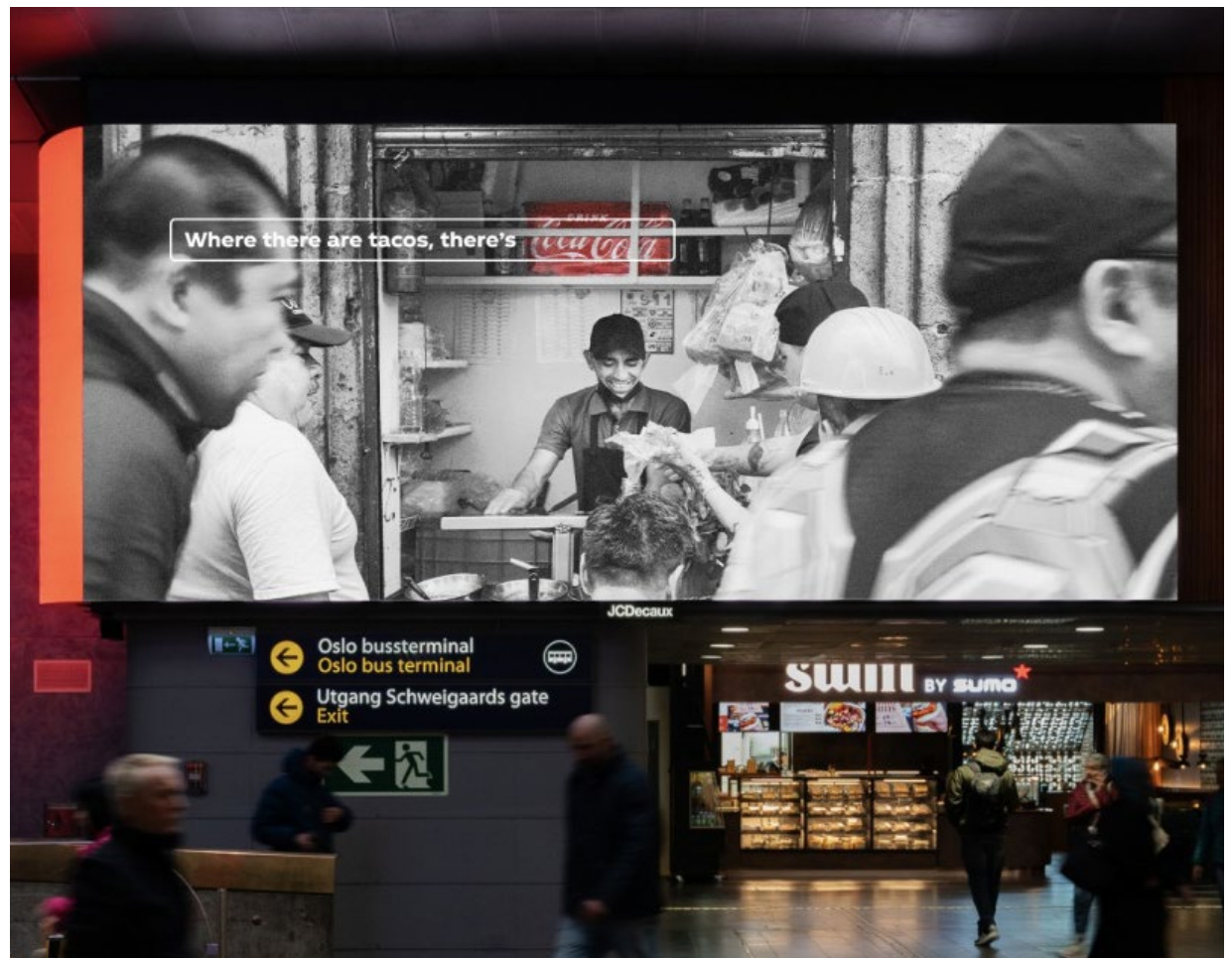
Vaseline / VML, New York

Ever noticed that reference photos of skin conditions are primarily of white skin? Vaseline's See My Skin platform allows people of colour to view what skin conditions look like on their own skin tone. To raise awareness of the platform and shed light on the importance of caring for darker skin, the Unilever-owned skincare brand partnered with artists across the US to restore faded murals featuring underrepresented communities. By showcasing how, without proper resources, murals that were once vibrant reflections of the culture and people in their communities can fade over time, Vaseline directed people to skin health care resources on SeeMySkin.com via QR codes on the restored murals. Site visits increased 320% and the campaign put some meaningful action behind Vaseline's commitment to inclusive skin health care (made all the more meaningful by a series of \$250,000 donations to local health clinics).

▼ WHERE THERE ARE TACOS, THERE'S COCA-COLA /

Coca-Cola / Uncommon, Stockholm

They love tacos in Norway – who knew? Clearly someone at Coke, if this lush OOH campaign (launched on 29 September) is any evidence. The fizzy drink brand highlighted its authentic connection to the street food scene in Mexico with a series of striking black-and-white photographs that show tacos being served up by street vendors. Each greyscale scene features the line 'Where there are tacos' leading into the only splash of colour: the distinctive red of Coca-Cola – be it crates, cans or bottles of the soda piled up at each vendor's spot. It's a subtle salience builder and a picture-perfect example of the power of outdoor.



‘The most successful brands are the ones that are generous and allow people to experiment with their equity. Everybody’s a content creator nowadays. That’s the environment that we have embraced’

Stephen O’Kelly / global brand director / Guinness

[IQ Expert Interview / March 2024](#)

Not on my 2024 bingo card!



THE YEAR WHEN WEIRD WON

By Rachel Hughes, senior vice president, strategic planning; and Morag MacDonald, creative at Weber Shandwick

We're sure you've noticed that this year has been a bit weird. So much so that it's been dubbed the 'unhinged chronically online marketing era' (we are where we are guys.)

We've been treated to strange brand choices and surprising cultural hits aplenty. But unlike bingo, it's not just luck – there's method in the mayhem. So, let's get the balls rolling – what have brands been up to?



Ball number one / Courting confusion

Pre-2024, brands tried to avoid confusion. Now they're courting it. Why? Because when we're confused, we want to talk to others. It's the 'is it just me?! effect'. Take Nutter Butter's trippy social media, Daniel Craig (or is it Andy Warhol?!), for Loewe, and 'trad wife' influencer Nara Smith making a Marc Jacobs handbag from scratch. It's absurd, in the best way.



Ball number two / Genre bending

Is that tampons or ice cream? Whipped cream or sunscreen? These questions are brought to you by 2024's Chaos Packaging trend, where brands adopt the packaging norms of other categories. Brands are looking outside their categories to stand out in other ways too. Jellycat opened a 'fish and chip shop', VW launched a ketchup, and a Chevrolet dealership made *The Office*-style content. We're hooked!



Lucky number three / Culture collision

High and low, old and new... anime and religion?! It's been a year for unexpected collisions. From Lidl x Nikolas Bentel's sell out Croissant Handbag to Greggs' Champagne bar, there's been a real appetite for high/low collabs. We've seen old/new collisions, too with Amazon's catalogue and the Barbie flip phone, for example. And in 2025, Luce, the Vatican's mascot, is an anime character. This definitely wasn't on the bingo card.

As 2024 draws to a close and the marketing world debates the latest in unexpected brand moves (from a certain car brand) we ponder whether we have reached peak weird. The brands winning now are those with strong cultural meaning, who can afford to let their freak flag fly. The goal is to leave the world confused, but not about your brand's identity. 🌈



For more information visit: [The Weber Forecast](#)





Breakthrough Social /

The three winning strategies (and the right attitude) to win on social

By Chloe Markowicz

The average person spends 2 hours and 23 minutes of each day on social media, according to Global WebIndex. If this is where people are spending their time, then it's where brands need to be spending their money. And they are.

This year, social media became the largest channel worldwide by ad invest-

ment, eclipsing the spend on paid search. Social media ad spend is predicted to hit \$286.3bn in 2025, according to Warc Media, a 13.3% annual increase.

The brands that have made the most of their money on social realise that the best social content needs to do at least one of three things: provide an escape, be built for engagement and let the creators lead.

Provide an escape

To understand what content will resonate best on social media you need to know why people are on there in the first place.

The team behind Nutter Butter's social posts recognises that, for many people, social media is a welcome distraction from everyday life. The Mondelez cookie brand has racked up millions of views for its fever dream-inspired TikTok videos, proving that effective social content doesn't need to be linear or logical. As Tony Wood, VP, head of social marketing and strategy at Nutter Butter's agency Dentsu Creative, told Contagious, 'Spoon-feeding the audience an overly curated, perfect message looks really great in a PowerPoint deck. But in the real world it's the quickest way to be ignored.'

While Nutter Butter is often referred to as 'unhinged' there is smart strategic thinking behind its surreal content. Though the brand has been around since the 60s and has high awareness, it wasn't top of mind. So the social content is designed to draw attention and increase salience. Crucially, the brand ensures that its social posts always feature its distinctive assets (like the cookie's peanut butter shape).

Language learning app Duolingo is another brand that is often called 'unhinged'. But as with Nutter Butter, the brand's social posts are inextricably linked to its business objectives. In Duolingo's case, everything is designed to drive users back to the app to do their lessons.



Nutter Butter's nutty TikTok content



James Blunt engaged like a marketer

Build for engagement

The second key attribute of the best social content is that it is engineered to encourage conversation.

Charli XCX put the 'social' back in social media this past summer with her brat campaign. Ahead of the album release, the singer drip fed teasers to maintain interest, with brat-themed walls and cryptic social posts designed to intrigue fans. The album's artwork — the words 'brat' printed in low-res, lower-case, sans serif type on a neon green backdrop — is instantly recognisable. But it's also meme ready. Anything in the same font and shade of green can become 'brat', and Charli XCX's team even launched an online 'brat generator' to help fans turn any text 'brat'.

While you can't get further away from Charli XCX than James Blunt, there are actually quite a few similarities between how both pop stars launched their albums this year.

To promote the re-release of his debut album in October, Blunt announced on X that he would legally change his name if his album made it to number 1 in the charts. He invited fans to suggest names and said he would change his name to whatever got the most Likes on social media.

Like with Charli XCX's brat launch, this campaign was built around fan participation and the barriers for engagement were extremely low. Blunt fueled the conversation by creating funny videos of him announcing each stage of the campaign (for example, a TikTok skit to reveal that fans had chosen Blunty McBluntyface as the top name).

You might think that it's easy enough to generate engagement when you're a pop star. But this is the re-release of a 20-year-old album. It's an old product, and there was no new story to drum up PR interest. Blunt's team created excitement by putting fan engagement at the heart of the campaign.

‘Marc Jacobs demonstrates how brands can collaborate with influencers while letting their unique voices shine through’

Let the creators lead

The final attribute of the best social content is that it hands the reins over to the creators. Influencers know best about how to connect with their audience, so you need to allow them enough control, otherwise you’re completely defeating the purpose of working with them.

Marc Jacobs demonstrates how brands can collaborate with influencers while letting their unique voices shine through. The fashion brand’s TikTok channel features dozens of influencer posts and though each video prominently features Marc Jacobs products it’s obvious that the storytelling is led by the creator themselves. By teaming up with these TikTok influencers, Marc Jacobs is able to align itself with the zeitgeist.

Gap achieved similar credibility and cultural relevance by partnering with Julia Hyunh, a social creator and lover of hoodies, earlier this year. When Gap came across Hyunh’s TikTok reviews of ‘hoodies that hoodie’ it resisted sending her Gap merchandise and instead invited her to partner on a new product. Hyunh then filmed herself trying on the co-created design, sharing how it fits her criteria of the perfect hoodie. The social content felt authentic to Hyunh, with Gap noticeably leaning out of the frame.

Marc Jacobs collaborated with Nara Smith on TikTok



Key learnings

Beyond the key attributes of great social media content, brands need to have the right attitude to creating social media content. Firstly, they should be intentional so that their posts clearly link back to the brand and its business objectives, without overtly selling. Secondly, they should commit to the bit. It’s not always clear what content will resonate so brands need to experiment and play the long game. And,

finally, brands should take creative risks on social. Marketing guru and author Seth Godin argued this point, in an interview with the newsletter [Link in Bio](#): ‘Brands can’t say, “We want to be really popular with all the cool kids, BUT, we don’t want to do anything at all that will make the big bosses uncomfortable. That’s like saying you want to run a marathon without getting tired.” When it comes to social, it’s crucial to embrace the medium. ❧



‘If you produce a dull campaign in the UK it costs you roughly £10m more in media spend to have the same commercial impact as an interesting campaign’

Adam Morgan / founder / Eatbigfish

[IQ Expert Interview / September 2024](#)

Fragmented Forward: Dentsu Creative Trends Report 2025 /

Our trends report for 2025 is shaped by a powerful sense that we can no longer think in orderly terms about eras, generations, or movements. In a world where we have fewer shared experiences, and all human content is available at the click of a button, we see new and old jostling for position, overlapping and repeating

An 'Everything, Everywhere, All at Once' world means trends ebb and flow at the speed of the algorithm, communities are dynamic and fast flowing and culture is embraced, adopted and adapted across continents. Meanwhile, as older audiences resist the ageing process and Gen Alpha races into adulthood, age is no longer any predictor of consistency or affinity.

As technology advances, quality of living is not keeping pace, with many millions resigned to having less than previous generations; the paths to progress that served their parents no longer available to them.

Many are choosing to focus on the now, the moment, the vibes. Prioritising a good (enough) life that values personal wellbeing and financial freedom over striving for success on others' terms. Meanwhile others crave a return to simpler times and more traditional values, longing for connection in a fragmented world.

Overall, we see old certainties crumbling; the certainties of life's milestones, of generational norms, of the societal ties and spaces that connect us. New possibilities are emerging – from virtual communities to AI companions – but may be imperfect substitutes for a sense of our shared humanity – and responsibility.

Our annual trends briefing, authored by our global strategy teams, unpacks five key themes and associated sub-trends impacting brands and businesses in 2025 and beyond.



The ‘Good Enough’ Life

Inspired perhaps by Avram Alpert’s book of the same name, consumers are redefining what success looks like in an uncertain economy and a volatile climate. Younger generations prioritise financial freedom and work-life balance over longer term goals, ‘saving for now’ to fund their next trip or treat. The Underconsumption trend celebrates making do, but has created its own pressure to ostentatiously enjoy the #smalljoys. Meanwhile simply resting has emerged as a radical action in a world of burnout; the FIRE (Financial Independence, Retire Early) movement continues to gain traction while Chinese retailer Pang Dong Lai offers staff 10 no-questions-asked ‘unhappiness days’.

The Togetherness Deficit

Fragmented media, long periods of lockdown, and a cultural shift towards remote working have contributed to a ‘togetherness deficit’ around the world. 43% of those who lack access to shared spaces claim to have no close friends, while 40% of Gen Z feel at risk of loneliness. Innovators are striving to satisfy our craving for community through online communities, inventive wearables such as the ‘Friend’ AI necklace and new experiences such as The Offline Club. Meanwhile, with fewer shared experiences to connect us, the pull of nostalgia sees us find comfort in the shared memory of more collective and confident eras.

Generation Blur

In 2025, attitudes and behaviours will be less predictable and more fluid across generations. Middle age is being reimaged, with 50-somethings unveiling ‘silver startups’ at extraordinary levels and seeking ways to halt the ageing process. Meanwhile Gen Alpha is emerging as the world’s largest generation, impatient to enter the workforce, sceptical of traditional education and with next generation digital savvy and shopping skills. Intergenerational living is becoming the new normal in Western markets as young audiences are priced out of independent living, creating new household dynamics.

Curiouser and Curiouser

An increasing global communications landscape means a meeting and melding of cultures, feeding our hunger for the unexpected in what can feel like a sea of algorithmic sameness.

Global entertainment properties and the communities that surround them – from anime to K-pop – are transcending geographical borders, while streaming platforms are responding to consumer demand for compelling content by diverse creators.

Meanwhile, our hunger to explore new cultures has triggered a backlash against over-tourism in many markets, prompting new codes of conduct and sustainable tourism strategies.

Algorithms and Blues

We live in a world where every piece of content we see and every product we buy has reached us via a complex combination of algorithmic signals. The challenge is, of course, that optimising for the algorithm can create more – and more – of the same. Confirming our biases and reinforcing our bubbles. In 2025 brands must wrestle with a media landscape where vibe-checking beats fact-checking and where all content,

from movies to TV shows to sports, is atomised into bite-sized chunks primed for the feed. Meanwhile AI-generated content scales from a gimmick to a ubiquitous part of the fabric of the web, with significant implications for SEO, content creation and brand distinctiveness. ❄️

To find out more, download the full report, *Fragment Forward: Five Trends for 2025 and Beyond* at dentsucreative.com

‘Time present and time past
are both perhaps present in
time future, and time future
contained in time past’

TS Eliot, *Four Quartets*



Elf on every shelf /

How Gen Z's favourite cosmetics brand reached \$1bn in annual sales by democratising beauty and harnessing its community

By Phoebe O'Connell

E.l.f. is anything but conventional. Launched in 2004 by entrepreneur father-and-son duo Joey and Alan Shamah, the cosmetics company was one of the first digitally native beauty brands. Initially sold online direct-to-consumer to cut out middleman costs, it became renowned for unfathomably low prices – its original 13 products were priced at just \$1. E.l.f.'s products are also vegan and cruelty-free, and the company eliminates 3,000 ingredients from its production line (by comparison, the US Food and Drug Administration only rules out 11).

Its brightly coloured products stand out from the competition, and its irrever-

ent, tongue-in-cheek marketing sets it apart from the polish of the beauty world. And while E.l.f.'s quirky tone of voice has earned it internet fame, 'Viral is not our goal post; our mission is being disruptive,' said Laurie Lam, E.l.f. Beauty's chief brand officer, during an Advertising Week New York panel in October 2024.

Today E.l.f. makes more than 800 products comprising makeup and skin-care, with an average price point of \$6.50 – compared to \$9.50 for other mass cosmetics brands and more than \$20 for luxury brands. In this deep dive into E.l.f.'s 20-year success story, we identify five key learnings from how the brand went from selling \$1 lipsticks to a \$20bn valuation.

Cultivate your community

Community is at the heart of E.l.f.'s success – fan engagement drives buzz around its launches, feedback informs product innovation, and its 4.5 million Beauty Squad loyalty programme members (growing 30% year over year) account for approximately 80% of sales on elfcosmetics.com. 'Building a community [is] the most important KPI,' CMO Kory Marchisotto told *Business of Fashion*. 'What is our relationship with them?

How do we foster a two-way dialogue?'

The brand primarily communicates with its customers via social where it leverages user-generated content. But being close to its customers isn't just a market research tool, it helps E.l.f. build brand loyalty and keeps the brand relevant. With an army of young, trend-defining beauty fans advocating for its products, E.l.f. doesn't have to crowbar its way into culture, thanks to its own built-in word-of-mouth marketing machine.

'Building a community [is] the most important KPI. What is our relationship with them? How do we foster a two-way dialogue'

Kory Marchisotto, E.l.f.

Jameela Jamil promoted Elf Bronzing Drops in the brand's Peculiar Behavior ad (2024)



Be where your audience is

E.l.f. is rightfully praised for its adept use and early adoption of TikTok, but the lesson here isn't 'be good at TikTok'. The platform only plays such a prominent role in E.l.f.'s marketing because that's exactly where its core audience is spending time and TikTok is where today's beauty and skincare trends are defined and circulated.

'We're not relying on any one platform,' E.l.f. CEO Tarang Amin told business publication *Barron's*. 'While we're strong on TikTok, we are also quite strong on Instagram... We have our own channel on Twitch, we're the number-one branded experience on Roblox. If something happens to TikTok, it's not like the consumers are going away. They will shift to something else and we'll be there for them.'

In fact, going where its customers are has seen E.l.f. move into more traditional media formats. Inspired by the fact that women make up half of the Super Bowl's audience, E.l.f. aired its first national TV spot on the biggest stage in advertising, with the biggest name in TV at the time – *White Lotus* star Jennifer Coolidge.

80%

of sales on
Elfcosmetics.com
come from
the 4.5 million
loyalty programme
members

IF YOU ONLY READ ONE BRAND SPOTLIGHT THIS YEAR

Upend category norms

E.l.f.'s low prices and viral 'dupes' for premium products disrupted the beauty industry, and the brand continues to reject category norms by creating playful content that other beauty brands might shy away from and teaming with unexpected brands – E.l.f. has surprised and delighted fans with unorthodox collabs with coffee chain Dunkin' Donuts, dating app Tinder and burrito behemoth Chipotle. As well as distinguishing E.l.f.'s cheeky entrepreneurial brand identity in a cluttered category, each limited-edition kit sells out in minutes and racks up millions of impressions, helping E.l.f. convert new fans.

'We're not relying on any one platform... If something happens to TikTok, it's not like the consumers are going away. They will shift to something else and we'll be there for them'

Tarang Amin, E.l.f.



E.l.f.'s unorthodox collabs include one with Chipotle

Innovate at speed

E.l.f. started with just 13 core products but quickly expanded into makeup tools and skincare. Today it makes more than 800 products, with new items dropping every few weeks to meet insatiable customer demand – E.l.f. is able to take products from concept to launch in an average of 20 weeks. The comment sections of E.l.f.'s social channels are flooded with pleas for new features or dupes for high-end products, and the speed with which E.l.f. responds to and anticipates

requests makes customers feel seen.

E.l.f. has also grouped its products into collections, such as the Camo collection (comprising a concealer, foundation, sponge and more) and the Halo Glow products (blusher, contour, powder, etc), which it is constantly adding to. And each time E.l.f. launches a product in these collections, the rest of its products experience a lift, too, E.l.f. CEO Amin told *Forbes*. This sales device encourages sales of new products as well as pushing existing ones.

Make values your USP

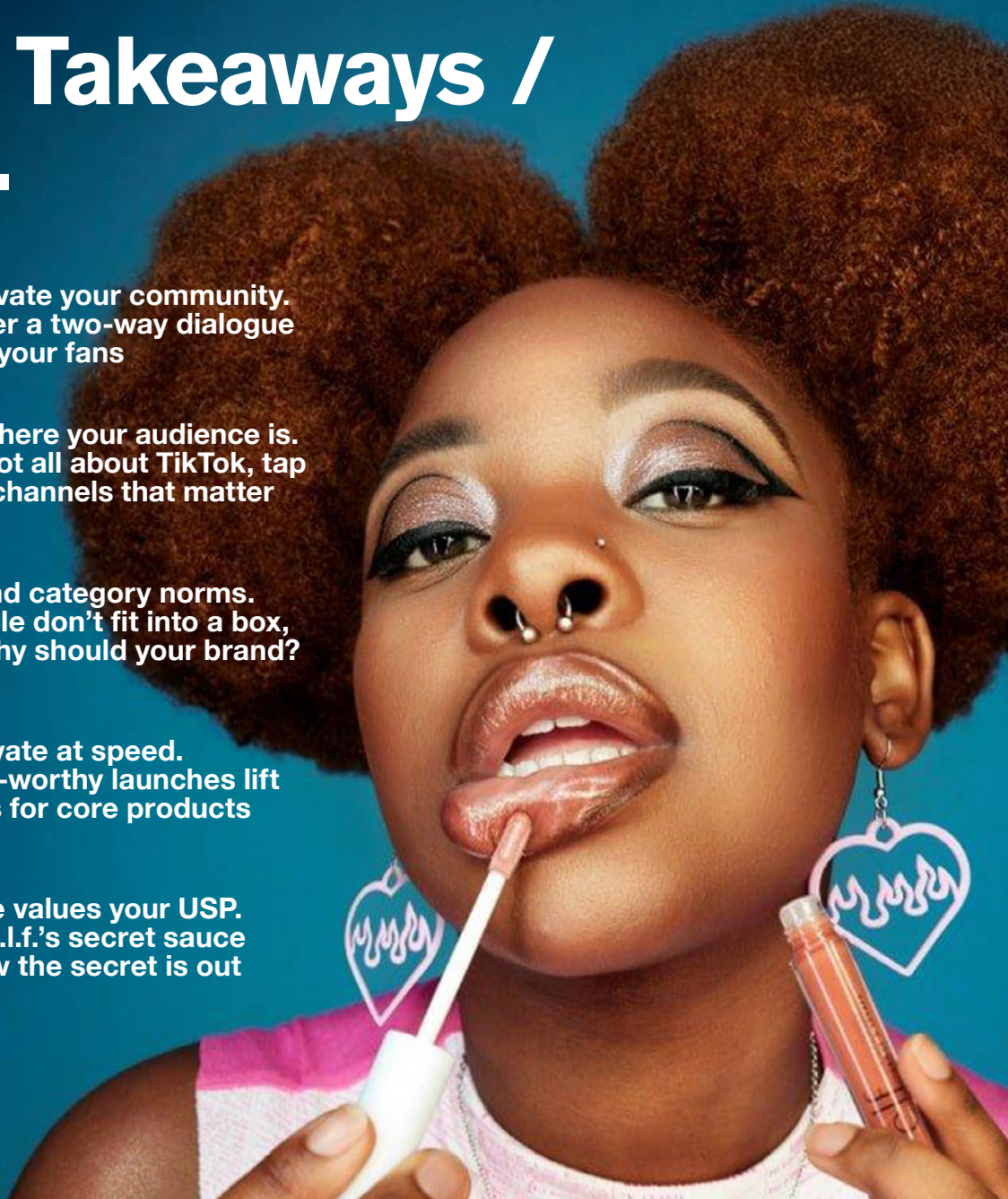
E.l.f. made a name for itself as a brand of clean, vegan, cruelty-free products at a time when wellness culture was a burgeoning trend. But its values go much deeper than product standards. E.l.f. is a pioneer of affordable beauty (its taglines include 'own your beauty' and 'be extra without paying extra'). It is also vocal about its support of individual expression, empowerment and human rights, donating product proceeds to charities and causes that span animal conservation, LGBTQ+ rights, Black Lives Matter, and female higher education.

In its 2024 So Many Dicks campaign, E.l.f. called for greater diversity in corporate leadership and highlighted the fact that it is one of only four US publicly traded companies with a board that is two-thirds women and one-third diverse. So Many Dicks was created with purpose-driven agency Oberland to demonstrate 'the ROI of DEI' in E.l.f.'s typical tongue-in-cheek tone of voice with a punchy, dick-laden out-of-home campaign.

E.l.f.'s company structure is also designed to serve its 'for the people, by the people' outlook. E.l.f. is the only public consumer goods company that grants equity to every single employee; since it went public in 2016, it has granted \$179m worth of equity to 500 employees (minus its C-suite), creating a team of passionate shareholders with ownership over their work. 'I would say that is the true secret sauce of E.l.f. Beauty,' CEO Amin told *Forbes*. 'We have a young diverse team with outstanding ability and true ownership in the business. That fuels everything else that we do.' 🌈

Key Takeaways / E.I.f.

- 1 Cultivate your community.
Foster a two-way dialogue
with your fans
- 2 Be where your audience is.
It's not all about TikTok, tap
into channels that matter
- 3 Upend category norms.
People don't fit into a box,
so why should your brand?
- 4 Innovate at speed.
Buzz-worthy launches lift
sales for core products
- 5 Make values your USP.
It's E.I.f.'s secret sauce
- now the secret is out



Anti-AI

How brands can use generative AI responsibly to navigate public concern, avoid backlash and protect their future

By Manon Royet



As generative AI becomes increasingly sophisticated, brands and advertising agencies are leveraging its capabilities for content creation, idea generation and marketing personalisation. OpenAI, the \$157bn company (as of October 2024) behind ChatGPT and DALL-E, [reported](#) at the end of 2023 that 92% of Fortune 500 firms had adopted its products.

But despite its creative possibilities, there are business risks to using a technology that people distrust. According to a Dentsu [survey](#), one-third of Americans have expressed concern about its implications for issues ranging from discerning what's fake to losing their jobs, while one-quarter are opposed to the use of gen AI to create ads or content.

AI can also perpetuate biases, generate misinformation, be used as a tool for

fraud, devalue human-made creativity and upend jobs.

In this context, brands that adopt generative AI indiscriminately expose themselves to backlash, risk reputational damage, and endanger consumer trust. The reverse is pleasingly true, and advertising products and services as AI-free is increasingly being used as a token of digital integrity. Not By AI's downloadable badge has been added

to over 277,000 web pages according to the organisation.

'It's a bit like the organic-food labels that rose to prominence years ago, but for digital labour,' writes Brian Merchant in [The Atlantic](#). 'Certified 100 percent AI-free.'

The burgeoning anti-AI movement represents creative opportunities for brands to convey their values, reinforce their identity and champion human creativity.

‘The time looks ripe for brands to push back against gen AI and highlight the advantages of analogue over AI-generated content’

Brand identity

Generative AI comes with serious issues and causes for concern. When these conflict with your brand values or positioning, the technology should be approached with caution and transparency.

To tap into the technology’s headline-grabbing nature (risk-free), some brands are taking a more responsible, sometimes critical, approach to how it’s used.

Ensuring consistency / To ensure consistency with a long-standing communication strategy and reaffirm a brand’s identity, discarding AI-powered tools is sometimes the safest route.

Dove marked the 20th birthday of its Real Beauty platform in spring this year with a pledge to never use AI to alter women in its ads. It announced the commitment with a film called *The Code*, which shows how an AI image-generating tool creates homogenous depictions of beautiful women, while adding the prompt ‘Real Beauty Ad’ produces more diverse results.

For the past 20 years, the brand has

fought unrealistic beauty expectations in its communications. Using AI would have been inconsistent with the brand’s image of authenticity, exposing it to potential backlash. The Code allowed Dove to reaffirm its brand identity while remaining relevant.

Educating the public / Another approach is to educate consumers about some of the dangers of the tech. That’s exactly what Deutsche Telekom did – and in the process, it carved out a distinctive personality for the the German telco brand. In July 2023, it launched a deepfake stunt to raise awareness of the risks of sharing children’s personal data online. The stunt shows parents reacting to a deepfake video of their nine-year-old daughter, Ella, as an adult, highlighting the harmful consequences of posting innocent photos online, emphasising that a single photo can expose children to identity fraud, wrongful imprisonment, and sexual exploitation. This warning about AI-generated deepfakes positions the brand as socially responsible, helping it stand out in a crowded category.



Asics / Training AI

Addressing bias / Large Language Models (LLMs), the algorithms underpinning generative AI tools, are trained on huge amounts of unfiltered data mined directly from the internet. As a result, AI tools replicate existing prejudices and inaccuracies.

Instead of turning their backs on AI or warning against it, some brands are actively working to address its biases.

Take sportswear brand Asics, which built a bank of positive, more realistic images of health and exercise to train AI image generators. Its Training AI campaign countered unrealistic and demotivating representations of health and fitness depicted by AI tools. The campaign highlighted a shortcoming of AI while promoting Asics' identity as a brand that champions wellness and mental health.

French ride-hailing app Heetch similarly challenged AI bias. In protest of the negative representations of the Paris suburbs created by AI tool Midjourney, the app sent photographers to these areas to capture more positive, accurate imagery of the areas. Then, to encourage Midjourney to update its databank, Heetch sent the tech company postcards, featuring appealing images of the real *banlieue*.

By correcting negative stereotypes, Heetch displayed its commitment to its customers, the vast majority of whom live in the Paris suburbs. And leveraging the PR interest around tools like Midjourney, saw the brand generate €4.5m (\$4.85m) in media and increase brand preference by 22%.

Promising pushback

In the face of growing consumer backlash, adopting an anti-AI stance is sometimes the most fruitful way of reaping its PR potential while reinforcing your brand identity and staying relevant.

Whether you embrace these undeniably powerful tools or not, think critically and ask yourself: is it consistent with your brand's values? ❗



Heetch, Greetings From La Banlieue

Heetch generated

€4.5m

(\$4.85m) in media and increased brand preference by 22% for the the Greetings From La Banlieue campaign

IF YOU ONLY READ ONE STRATEGY INTERVIEW THIS YEAR...

How Monzo went mainstream without losing its cool /

Monzo needed to reach a wider audience to sustain its growth. Here's how the UK digital bank broadened its horizons without sacrificing its challenger-brand charm

By Alex Poultney



After becoming the UK's largest digital bank largely through word of mouth, Monzo ran a TV campaign in May 2024 – its first in five years – to reach a broader audience.

The Money Never Felt Like Monzo ad, created by Uncommon London, uses bizarre visual metaphors to contrast the joy of banking with Monzo with the dread of dealing with money in general.

In one scene, money is framed as the sound of nails scratching across a blackboard, and Monzo is presented as the harmonic plucking of a harp. In another, money is a tarantula crawling over someone's head, and Monzo is a blissful head scratch. The ad ran across a number of key UK TV moments, including the first slot during half-time of England's third group game at Uefa Euro 2024 (25 June).

To find out more about the insights behind the campaign, Contagious spoke to Monzo VP of consumer marketing AJ Coyne and Uncommon founder Nils Leonard.



‘We’ve got a bit of a consideration job to do, which is “We’re Monzo, but why should you use us?”’

AJ Coyne, Monzo

Give us an overview of Monzo’s position in the market? How has this evolved over the past few years?

AJ Coyne: Monzo is the UK’s largest digital bank. We are nine years old – we turned nine in February. We have 9 million personal banks and customers today, depending on when you publish this we might be at 10. We’re not far off.

We have, and always have [had], this mission to make money work for everyone, we have been known since the start for creating these consumer-first products. When we first launched, we opened the doors to our first users and invited them to co-create our prod-

ucts. That’s been something that has guided us since, making sure that we’re completely consumer centric.

What has been the typical target audience for Monzo? Has this changed now the brand has moved back into TV advertising?

Coyne: The cheesy answer is that everybody is our target audience, if we want to make money work for everyone and change their relationship [with money], then we want everyone to have a bit of Monzo.

Our current average age customer is 34. That has changed slightly in the last few years, [it has] increased in age. That comes

along with some of the diversified products that we’ve launched, like investments that we launched at the end of last year. We started to see a slight change in that age range and our fastest-growing demographic is 35- to 54-year-olds. We have, I believe, four customers that are aged over 100, 700 in their 90s and I think nearly 12,000 in their 80s. So while that’s a small number there’s definitely some interest when you start to get to the older generations as well.

We are looking to expand predominantly beyond London. We have a really strong foothold in London, so we want to appeal more nationwide [with] that 34- to 59-year-old audience where we’re looking for that growth.

‘When you ask people about money, despite the fact this category advertises as if it’s an incredibly rational place, money is the most emotional subject matter in the world’

Nils Leonard, Uncommon

What are the brand's key challenges right now? Are they different to those the brand has faced previously?

Coyne: Monzo is incredibly well recognised, that hot coral card means a lot to a lot of people, and it’s loved. We’ve grown a lot through word of mouth, people telling their friends and family because they love it and share their experience, and we still see that word of mouth organic trend, but that’s not enough to really deliver on that mission of making money work for everyone. Hence why we’re looking to broaden our awareness and consideration to more people.

On the flip side, when you start to talk to those new audiences, they might have heard of us, they might recognise us, but they might not know exactly what we do. So we’ve got a bit of a consideration job to do, which is ‘We’re Monzo, but why should you use us?’ That’s a key focus as we move forward from a brand marketing perspective.

Monzo has upped its marketing spend by 167% in the last year and the brand is looking to expand internationally. What prompted this?

Coyne: Last year, 66% of our growth came through organic. That’s great, but we do need to increase that number in terms of growth. The best way to do that is to invest in brand. There’s this element of growth versus brand marketing, they need to work in harmony. We hadn’t invested in brand in a substantial amount of time and the only way to drive that scale moving forward, and also to increase that word of mouth referral, is for more people to know the brand and be introduced to us. That’s been a key focus of why we’re doing that.

Was there a brief for this campaign? What was the key challenge?

Coyne: Part one was [take] all the things that make Monzo ‘Monzo’, and codify that and bring it to life in a really important way. In doing

that, help us paint the UK hot coral. Really be distinctive in that approach. Part three was [about] all the emotions that people feel when it comes to their relationship with money. It’s not easy for anybody, whether you are financially well off or you are struggling, money is still a really difficult thing. Given we know that it’s better with Monzo, how can we bring that to life in a really impactful way?

Nils Leonard: I’d go one step further and say that we had an unofficial brief at Uncommon, which is very rare, which was ‘how do you not essentially ruin what has been a brilliant modern brand with really conventional advertising?’

The truth is, most brands, particularly in this category, say too much. They wang on, they’re unemotional, it’s about interest rates or whatever. Monzo developed nine years of incredulous cool. You see advertising a lot that turns up and completely misrepresents a brand. I saw an ad the other day for The Standard Hotels. I thought ‘God, they’re really cool’ and this ad almost repelled me from the brand that I thought I knew.

I have a long running fear as partners to [Monzo], that Uncommon would do that with anybody. So honestly, there was an unofficial brief, which is, if this isn’t cool, if we’re saying too much, if we’re going on too much, if it’s remotely familiar, you have to just bin it.

Coyne: Nils and I spent a lot of time talking about redefining the financial services category. Monzo, from a product and tech perspective and from a branding perspective, when it launched did just that. It hadn’t ever done that with its marketing. So how can we hold ourselves accountable to create something that really does redefine the category and bring something so fresh and so new?





What was the key insight behind the idea that money feels different on Monzo?

Leonard: There's a few things we hit on along the way that it's very easy for a brilliant bunch like Monzo to maybe take for granted. One is the idea that there are only two states: there's money, and then there's Monzo. Everybody else in these categories is trying to undercut each other with interest rate hikes or sort of weird unspoken responses to each other's comparative advantages. Monzo just leapt right to the top of that. If you look at everything this brand has built, its desire is really to move you in a different way. It's for your relationship with money to have a very different feeling.

Now, that's a massive, higher order task to

go after. We hit upon this idea that actually all of our relationships with money, particularly in the UK, but even in the world, are kind of broken. When you ask people about money, despite the fact this category advertises as if it's an incredibly rational place, money is the most emotional subject matter in the world. It's attached to our love, it's attached to our lives, our families and all that other stuff. [We had] people drawing how they felt about money, people pulling their own fucking eyes out. So if we said that money had never felt like Monzo, it was just such a simple idea.

Did you conduct any research to land on the insight behind the campaign?

Coyne: We engage with the community regularly on our end, and not just through product development, but through sentiment, how they're feeling. [We] conducted some conversations with them about their relationship with money. One of the things we found in one of our studies, less of our community, but more gen pop [general population], was that one in four people prefer to deep clean their bathroom than check their bank account or their savings account.

There are lots of little nuggets like that that started to bring to life this picture that we already knew. It's clear in every press headline you see about money and about financial institutions and relationships with money. But the research allowed us to

show that this wasn't just a small number of people. The emotion and the avoidance was incredibly real.

Leonard: I've always loved this Daniel Ek quote and it was in the deck actually. The founder of Spotify said, 'The value of the company is the sum of the problems it solves.' I've always thought that that was an amazing approach, and Monzo absolutely lives that. But you've also got to tell people, or even better than that, make them feel that those problems are solvable. I think the relief that you get on the right hand side of this work hopefully eulogises that feeling.

One thing that was very apparent in the ad was the presence of the distinctive Monzo hot coral. What does this colour communicate about Monzo?

Coyne: It's distinctive, it's memorable, it's instantly recognisable. It really does set us apart from the sea of blue, occasional red, maybe sometimes black. It is that cut-through colour, that badge of honour and that first invitation to the club that's still true today. It's a Pantone, which I can get very geeky on with you, but it means it's incredibly hard to print. It's incredibly hard to replicate.

Leonard: Everyone talks about branded assets and your iconic trees of a brand. But what a brilliant one to have, is you actually own a colour. That colour has stood for difference in originality and new creative thinking since day one. What a beautiful thing to celebrate.

Most people haven't spotted this, much to my annoyance, but if you look at all the work, particularly posters, all the edges are rounded on the right which mirrors the card. There's

little things like that that we obsessed with. Even in meeting one, we weren't really sure what it meant, but I remember showing a load of things on hot coral, and said, 'Basically, we have to do this.' It wasn't even clever then, it didn't even make any sense. But we [thought] that has to stay and then we have to infuse that with some sort of meaning. It was critical for all of us.

We talk a lot about body language, and if you think about Monzo and its success, even in the platform and with its product, it's all body language. It's all how they speak and how they talk and the nature of your relationship with it. That's a critical part of any brand, but particularly this one.

'Trust your gut. Trust your agency partner in doing that. That's the biggest signal of doing the right thing'

AJ Coyne, Monzo

The ad uses a diverse range of references to anchor people's usual experience with money as being the complete opposite experience to using Monzo. What motivated this category-busting approach?

Coyne: I'm thinking about these bubbles of emotions that we would look at on the wall with anxiety, stress, avoidance, relief. There was even joy, there's fear, there's all these different things. It would feel disingenuous as an authentic brand that people trust, to ignore that, to ignore that all of these things exist. It was incredibly important to be real and incredibly important to lean into that. This is a reality for most people.

Leonard: When we looked at those emotions, we realised that Monzo don't play a part in a category, they play a part in the world. We [thought], the worst thing in the world we could do is feel bound by these tropes and go, 'Well, we can do emotion but as long as it's at the end of a supermarket queue where you're paying and there's a relevant payment moment.' No, money features in every aspect of your life. When you unpick how it feels in life, that's what we should dramatise.

I think that Monzo are unique enough a company to be able to have the same higher order conversation. It was more about, how powerfully can we evoke those feelings? How simply can we land this idea that there's this world over here of money and this world over here of Monzo, and they're radically different.



IF YOU ONLY READ ONE STRATEGY INTERVIEW THIS YEAR...

Why do you think the industry as a whole has tended to commit to advertising that is rather dull, cliched and overly rational?

Coyne: I don't know if it's just easier that way, that lack of engagement in the category – it helps. If you're not engaged and you're just taking things as they are then you don't really need to disrupt. For us though, it's always been the opposite. We care about our consumers and want them to improve their financial life. All the emotions they feel when it comes to the product needed to come through in the work. That's why the Monzo world – that Uncommon so beautifully built and really well crafted – was

so important to bring not just joy, but all these different emotions to life.

Leonard: There's been very little disruption. If nothing's disrupted then the game is how long can we just keep this going? How long can we just put our hands over our eyes and hope that this works. What you're seeing [here] is a realisation. You talk about moments of success without advertising. Pots are a great example. We save. What do you really save for? What do you really need money for? Everyone's like save up for a rainy day, or save up for your house. People don't save for that, they save for fucking botox, and they save for love. That realisation that there is a story of all of us inside the money that we have and the money we spend, is huge.

The whole category has presumed, because of that 'T' word trust, that they have to behave like their parents. I don't think anybody's ever stopped and questioned it. I think they're like, 'Well, look, this is about trust, so we can't possibly be emotional. We can't possibly move people, we can't possibly view the world the way it is.' There's a bit of that restraint there that you've seen from banks, where they're scared of being emotional with people because their whole makeup in these old school values has been built on trust, 'so we'll just talk about the grown up stuff, and hopefully people come with us'. The clear air there was for somebody to turn up and do it and speak to things as they are, or as they

could be. Everything from the UX, to the card freezing when you decide to freeze it, people enjoy that. It's pleasurable. That's the real difference in the category, and at Uncommon, we adore playing in terrible categories.

What has been your biggest learning from this campaign?

Coyne: Trust your gut. There's all the marketing science and insight and intelligence, but ultimately, there were moments in time where we just had to trust our gut and something didn't look or work right, and we just had to go with it. Trust your agency partner in doing that. That's the biggest signal of doing the right thing. 🍷

'If nothing's disrupted then the game is how long can we just keep this going? How long can we just put our hands over our eyes and hope that this works'

Nils Leonard, Uncommon



Key Takeaways / Monzo

1 Growth and brand marketing need to work in harmony

2 Monzo upped its marketing spend by 167% in the last year

3 Finding the emotion in a seemingly rational category unlocked the campaign

4 The unofficial brief: bin anything that isn't cool or that says too much

5 Make people feel that their problems are solvable

6 Never mind the category, speak to things as they are, or as they could be



‘We’ve just got to earn permission to spend time with people. To do that we can’t sell them things, we’ve got to entertain them, move them or give them something instead

Mollie Partesotti / chief strategy officer / FCB Chicago
[IQ Insight & Strategy / The Last Barf Bag / Dramamine / June 2024](#)

Keeping it Real

How marketing centred around real people and their stories can help brands build trust

By Melanie Valenzia



NotCo, Mayo Haters

Cast^Casting real people in ads isn't a novel idea; beauty brand Dove has been featuring real women in its communications since 2004 when it launched the Campaign for Real Beauty. The strategy led to a 700% increase in sales for Dove creams, and the brand's share of the

firming lotion market in the UK rose from 1% to 6%. The approach resonated with audiences because it reflected customers' real lives and circumstances, and stood out from the artifice of most advertising. Today there is an even greater appetite for brands to share stories of real people to counter the deception of our increasingly

digital world and social media rife with carefully crafted personas that promote products and lifestyles that don't reflect their true selves.

A factor in this is the importance of trust. The Advertising Association's think tank, Credo, identified trust as the second strongest driver of brand profitability and

effectiveness in its 2024 Value of Trust Report, while a decade of data from the [IPA Effectiveness Awards](#) shows that trust is linked to better business outcomes. Between 2012 and 2022, the percentage of IPA entries citing trust as a key communication objective more than doubled, from 11% to 25%.

Embracing authentic reactions

Brands can build trust by dialling up authenticity and giving real people a platform to share their feelings and experiences with the brand.

In October 2024, Burger King and BBH London created a campaign capturing real mothers enjoying a Whopper after giving birth. Based on a relatable insight backed by Mumsnet research, the outdoor ads feature real, unvarnished photos of newly postpartum mothers enjoying

their much-anticipated meal. When we spoke with BBH's head of strategy and partner Saskia Jones about the work, she highlighted how the brand achieved the requisite reality and emotion: 'Those images are shot by the partners, we were nowhere near it.' Burger King spotted the place it has in people's lives, but importantly it identified where to hang back and let real life take care of and express itself. The result: one of the most talked about ad campaigns of the year.

Depicting real reactions to your brand can also be a way to appear more authentic. For its 2023 campaign, A Second of Happiness, McDonald's in Colombia got its delivery crew to surreptitiously take photos of customers using cameras installed in their caps when handing them their McDonald's orders. These pictures were then displayed in eye-catchingly honest out-of-home ads (after all the suitable releases had been signed, of course). By capturing actual

moments when real McDonald's customers received their orders, the brand removed the veneer of advertising and triggered a 20% growth in delivery service through McDonald's own channels during the campaign activation days. The campaign was created by DDB Colombia.

Featuring genuine customer feedback – good or bad – can be a powerful strategy to build trust with your audience. Plant-based food company NotCo, leveraged honest customer feedback by flipping the traditional taste test on its head with the Mayo Haters campaign in 2024. To prove how similar its NotMayo product tastes to traditional mayonnaise, the brand invited a group of self-proclaimed mayo haters to taste test the product in sandwiches, burgers and fries, while assuring them there was no real mayo in the food. Some testers reacted with such disgust that they spat out the food, with a few even retching.

While it's unorthodox to feature people grimacing at the taste of your product in your ads, 'The key to this was authenticity and to show that the hate for NotMayo was real and unscripted,' Danielle Watts, associate director of plant-based meats and condiments at The Kraft Heinz Not Company, told Contagious.

The campaign generated a 14% increase in purchase intent and a 96% increase in brand trust. Working with genuine mayo haters and employing a light-hearted approach produced an honest product campaign and added a sense of authenticity to the brand's declaration that its mayo is as good as the real deal.

Burger King, Bundle of Joy



Powerful personal storytelling

Brands can stand out and show empathy by shining a light on personal stories. As Stanford marketing professor Jennifer Aaker notes, 'Stories are remembered up to 22 times more than facts alone.'

It is much easier for individuals to form emotional connections with personal stories rather than broad themes, as these narratives can resonate on a deeper level. Richard Huntington, chair and CSO of Saatchi & Saatchi, commented in the Contagious Radar Report 2024, 'Telling stories about individuals – not groups of people, not segments, not cohorts, not personas, not made-up stuff, but real people – that's how you touch reality.' He added, 'It's about getting your nose pressed close up to the glass, so you can see inside people's lives.'

A brand that has its nose pressed to the glass is JD Sports, exemplified by its recent Christmas ad The Family Portrait, created by Uncommon London. The ad seamlessly weaves famous faces like Maya Jama and Trent Alexander-Arnold (who appear alongside members of their families) into scenes with regular people. All are shown taking part in their own personal rituals and get together at Christmas. It's a continuation of JD's authentic portrayals of young people, which kicked off in last year's Christmas spot, A Bag for Life.

Speaking about that campaign and JD's strategy to connect with youth audiences, Rosie Cross, planning director at Uncommon, said: 'These ads are really difficult to create because when the inten-

tion is authenticity, any deviation from a real representation of people will be instantly picked up by the audience who you're trying to speak to, and trying to serve. You need to be so closely connected to the culture, not just from the offset but all the way throughout production through to launch.'

'Telling stories about individuals – not groups of people, not segments, not cohorts, not personas, not made-up stuff, but real people – that's how you touch reality'

Richard Huntington, Saatchi & Saatchi



JD Sports, The Family Portrait



Dove, Cost of Beauty

Dove's recent run of campaigns highlight people's personal stories and experiences around beauty and self-image. In April 2023, the brand released a campaign with Ogilvy called Cost of Beauty, which featured found footage of a young girl called Mary, as she navigated adolescence and battled with the negative impact of social media on her self-image.

By tying the campaign to a real story

and spotlighting the issues of body image and eating disorders, Dove reinforced its positioning as an empathetic brand that understands and reflects its audience's realities. This approach not only resonated deeply with viewers but also resulted in 28 million organic views on Dove's channels, indicating the powerful connection that genuine, emotionally driven storytelling can create.

In October 2024, dating app Hinge published an 80-page zine that spotlighted six couples who met on its platform. The writers spent significant time with their 'muse' couple to fully capture the idiosyncratic and unpolished early days of romance, highlighting the awkward beginning stages of courtship.

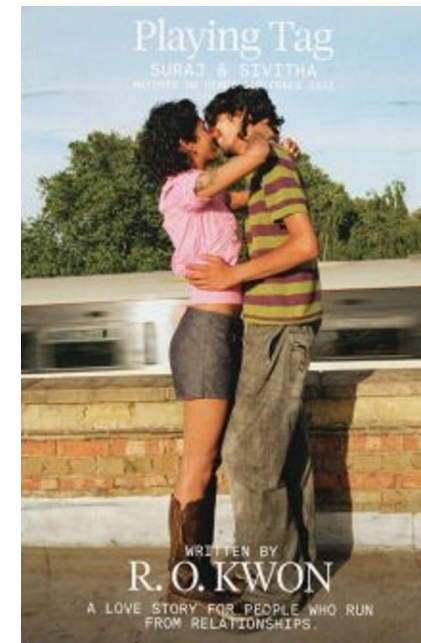
The campaign counterbalances the 'perfect' lifestyles and love stories that dominate Gen Z's social media feeds. Hinge recognised the challenges of dating in the 21st century and the struggle to push past initial textual chemistry for fear of rejection. The brand showed people that it gets them by shining a light on real people's stories, not polished,

manufactured love novels, to help people emotionally connect with the brand.

The personal touch

In a world where advertising feels more artificial and alienating than ever, ads that feature real people's personal stories stand out because they land as more authentic and genuine. Think about how you can connect your brand's messaging to relatable, real-life experiences as it can foster deeper, more meaningful connections with your audience. Dig deep and tell individual stories rather than deal in broad themes – if you do, you'll connect with audiences like never before. 🌸

Hinge, No One Else



22x

factor by which stories are remembered more than facts, according to Stanford marketing professor Jennifer Aaker

MISFITS vs Machines /

How to be creative with AI without eroding trust,
by Eleanor Thornton-Firkin and Samira Brophy

It's the best of tech, it's the worst of tech. AI is a co-pilot, AI is an inevitable fireworks display to which Elon wants front row seats.

As with most technologies, we've been talking about AI for an age, with the idea of intelligent robots appearing as far back as Greek mythology. These cultural representations affect our emotional reactions in a visceral way as technology develops. So, it's perhaps not surprising that [one in five of us still believe AI will lead to the extinction of the human race](#).

Even for those of us who picture Data from *Star Trek*, rather than the Terminator, when we think of AI, we're still conflicted. For some it's a tool for empowerment, with applications in directing traffic flow or providing early

warnings of disease. For others [it's a form of manipulation](#), distorting the creative process for art, music or social media content.

AI's a tool. And when we make roughly 10 times more assets than we did 10 years ago, a useful tool for marketers looking to keep up. But, when the trustworthiness of ads is declining ([51% of Americans think that trust in advertising will get worse in the next few years](#)), it's important we don't allow the tools we use to add fuel to that fire.

So, what do you need to know as you experiment and aim to go beyond AI assisted creative that people will tolerate to what they truly appreciate? Ipsos offers three guiding principles:

1. Don't fully outsource your creativity
2. Don't fully insource your judgement
3. Continue to be beautiful and useful



Don't fully outsource your creativity

Just because AI can think for you, doesn't mean it should. In [R&D done by Ipsos](#), we learned that an 'AI twin' will as a default skew to a central tendency, solve for the pain point not the person, and is more empty than empathetic as it struggles to replicate human emotional states. All of which is problematic for effective advertising and, [as we know from MISFITs](#), the combination of [creativity and empathy is what drives outsized business effects](#).

Think of AI as your brilliant editor or production assistant. AI's design makes it a great mimic or interpreter, but human intelligence is needed to ideate and drive creativity. In our testing of AI generated ads, we see that generally ads with higher degrees of human intelligence do better. Augmenting human creativity with AI can boost ad effectiveness by 38%, where AI led ads fall below our norm and so might pose a risk to short-term ad effectiveness ([source](#): Ipsos Creative|Spark, 2024. Base: 10 ads, n=1500 respondents).

Judgement matters for AI assistance in the creative development process. Without it, you risk lowering effectiveness standards for your brand and losing the trust of your audience.

But don't rely on internal judgment alone

How people react to AI generated ads will evolve as the technology develops and matures, so it's important to continue to check reactions and gauge the potential of your creative as relevant. How you do this will depend

on the specific case and Ipsos have a brilliant suite of tools to help. An easy decision tree:

- Great production and hyperbolic storytelling? You'll need real people to help judge your success using a full pre-testing tool like Creative|Spark to understand whether it is effective at breaking through the clutter and delivering for your brand. Even high-quality AI ad models like ours, with market leading Gen AI features added to better understand context are no substitute for true audience understanding with high value or high-risk campaigns.
- Thousands of iterations or batches of digital assets? An AI tool like Creative|Spark AI

trained on the responses of real people is ideal to give you a sanity check. You can now easily learn and upskills all corners of your campaign ecosystem beyond just the lead creative.

A reminder on what to look for in an AI testing model. It can sound like the holy grail, but like any copilot tools training data and quality matters. Ipsos' Creative|Spark AI is trained on millions of human responses against industry validated KPIs. State of the art Gen AI integration to understand context and reward empathy and not automatically down grade creative bravery.

Continue to be beautiful and useful

Ultimately, it's still advertising stupid! The enduring qualities of creative development remain the same and we should continue to aim for beauty and utility and a brilliant audience experience to be effective. Never lose sight of that in the face of a new fad. AI, like all technologies before it, should empower you to make the most effective advertising you can. Only you have the power to dream up that perfect blend of fresh and familiar, but why not get a hand remixing your core idea or with versioning so you can free up time to think. 🎨



Eleanor Thornton-Firkin (left)
UK Head of Creative Excellence / Ipsos
Eleanor.Thornton-Firkin@ipsos.com

Samira Brophy (right)
Senior Creative Excellence Director / Ipsos
Samira.brophy@ipsos.com

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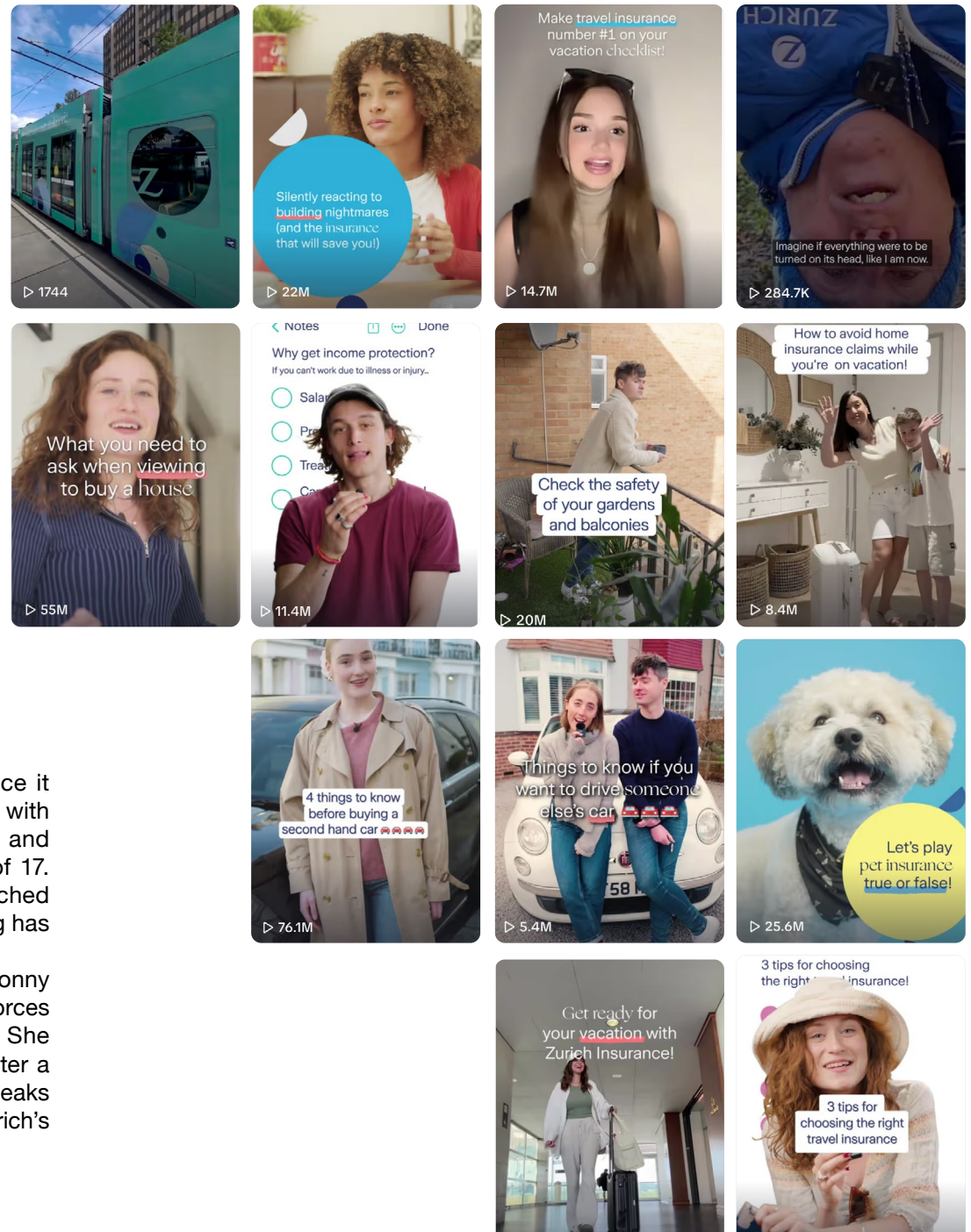
Zurich's social glow up /

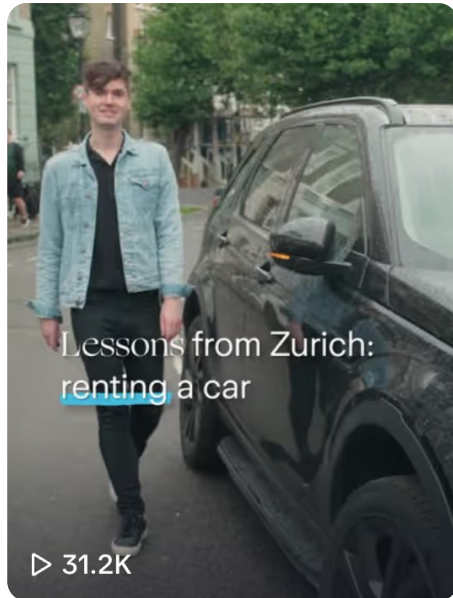
Conny Kalcher, Zurich Insurance's group chief customer officer, explains how she brought the 150-year-old financial services institution into the TikTok age

Zurich Insurance has become an unexpected social media sensation, with videos that show young people talking about finance in an informal, engaging way, offering tips, like what to ask when buying your first home or a secondhand car (that last one achieved a whopping 76 million views). The content, made to resonate with local and global audiences alike, speaks to broad topics of interest as well as country-specific nuances. As reported by the brand, its following

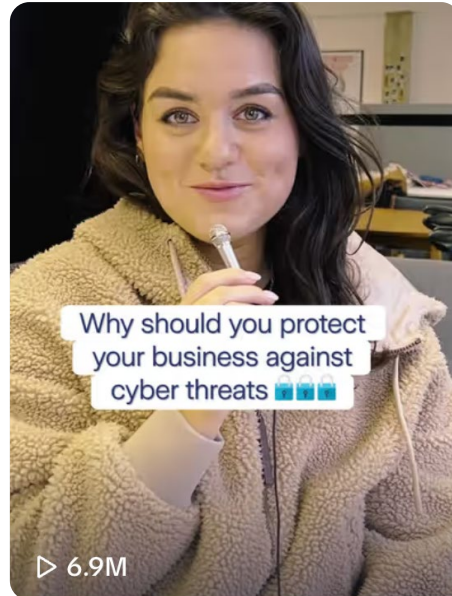
on Instagram has grown 96% since it started out on the platform in 2021, with impressions increasing 12.5 times and engagement soaring by a factor of 17. On its TikTok account, which launched the following year, Zurich's following has increased by 430%.

Group chief customer officer Conny Kalcher has been one of the driving forces of Zurich's social media success. She joined the insurer five years ago after a 33-year career at Lego. Here, she speaks to Contagious about transforming Zurich's





‘You can’t communicate the same way you did 20 years ago. You have to adapt to where our customers are getting the information from and think about how you engage with them, rather than selling’



comms away from impersonal corporate messaging to make insurance relatable to younger generations, and how even the stuffiest of brands can turn up on TikTok.

Tell us about Zurich as a business and its place in the insurance sector.

Zurich has been around for 150 years. We have two sides to our business: we have commercial insurance, so we insure the biggest companies around the world, and within that business, we are among the top three in the world. And then we have retail insurance, which is more directly with individual customers and SMEs. And within that business, we have various positions depending on which market.

What are the challenges facing Zurich, and also the wider insurance category?

The biggest challenge facing the industry is what happens in society with climate change, wars and risks going up for everyone everywhere. Zurich absolutely has those same challenges, so our job is to adapt to the situation as it is for our customers so we can be a good partner for them as industries transform, as the climate [crisis] changes the challenges of disasters around the world. That’s our goal.

Why is insurance marketing usually so dull?

In general, insurance has a challenge with narrative and communicating the benefits we deliver the customers. What is our role? Why are we here? That’s what we’re trying to do, we’re trying to say that

we play an important role in society and that we’re here to help progress.

So, it has to do with how we see ourselves as an industry and how we communicate to customers, but we strongly believe that to be relevant to customers today you can’t communicate the same way you did 20 years ago. You have to adapt to where our customers are getting the information from and think about how you engage with them, rather than selling.

That’s what we have been working on and I guess all insurance companies are working on the same challenge, which is to not only think about how we push out messaging, but how we engage with our customers in a way that is relevant for them, and give them advice, services and products that are relevant for them in a way that makes it so that they will engage with our messaging.

Is that why Zurich has such a vibrant social media presence?

For sure. If you look back five years, it was a lot about communicating the same message to various customer groups, and very much about what we would like to talk about. We are flipping that around and looking at what it is that interests customers and how we can then engage in that. For example, we know that younger people don’t really understand finances that well, or it’s a big issue for them to really understand financial topics. So then, how can we help with that? How can we engage with them in a snackable way, not like ‘here’s a compendium’.

It’s about adjusting our understanding of what the consumer is and how to

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address them in the channel where they want to be addressed with topics that are relevant for them, rather than just having a megaphone and talking about what we think is important.

How does an insurer make itself appealing to Gen Z on social media?

By actually understanding the format and tapping into the conversation that's going on and being relevant with a subject that's relevant for a TikTok user. TikTok is the fastest growing channel for us, and sometimes you think you don't have permission to talk in those channels. But you do, you just need to speak the language of that channel.

So it's about adjusting to the media, and then you see the growth, you see the engagement, and we are seeing enormous growth on TikTok. And it's also about believing that you can be relevant. There's also test and learn. You look and see: okay, this was too corporate, this was less corporate.

You've racked up millions of views on TikTok. What unites your most popular content?

It can be culturally relevant because of the time of the year. For example in February, for Valentine's Day, we can talk about how we can help you plant a tree instead of buying flowers. It's about being relevant in context. And sometimes it's about financial education, or it's tips and tricks. For example, when storms are coming our way, we say 'here's how you protect yourself'.

It's not big corporate talking to little me, it's more like trying to add value to you.

We've worked on our tone of voice – we used to be very corporate, very formalistic. Now, we have a tone of voice strategy which is much more about being easy to understand, engaging and relevant.

How will Zurich ensure this human touch stays a point of differentiation?

By constantly refining what we do. We refined our visual identity and how the brand presents itself. Customers were telling us we were a bit cold and distant. We would have advertising with men with ties, and they were looking into the camera sternly, and then we would have something blue. Nobody wants to look at anything like that anymore.

The communication we have today, it's colourful, it's inclusive, it's people like you and me. It's not businessmen in suits. We changed that whole way of communicating also in the way we write. We have a tone of voice program, which is changing all the documents we are writing or emails we are sending, which is AI supported. The way we talk is much more direct and more like conversations.

When we defined the brand, we had to move from being a very product-focused company to become a customer-focused one. And with that, you need to deliver functional benefits and emotional benefits to your customers.

If I want to make an emotional connection to customers, I need to talk to their hearts. And you can talk to the heart in insurance because you're doing an emotional thing. But we just always have stayed in that factual space, so then it

becomes a transaction, a policy number.

We're [now] much more into thinking about: what can I help you with? What are the problems I can solve for you? So, we also trained our frontline staff in empathy, based on professional actors acting out scenarios. We've done it in the UK. We've done it in Malaysia. We were doing it in the US as well.

It's about teaching people to start with the other side, not with what I want to talk about, but tuning into the person on the other side of the phone or the table, and then teaching them techniques for how to engage and relate.



'Don't focus on the risk, focus on the opportunity and let go of that polished thing, because that polish doesn't work'

‘The big danger of insurance is that we fulfil our own prophecy. We think we’re boring, [so] we will be boring’

430%

Increase in Zurich's
TikTok followers
since its account
went live in 2022

What lessons from Lego have you brought over to Zurich?

People want to do the right thing; you just have to help them. At Lego, I did many different jobs, and I also was part of it when it was not successful, when it was seen as a dusty old toy that you didn't want to play with. I was selling licenses, and it was hard to sell licenses. Nobody wanted them. We had a crisis, and we had to change and go back and focus on the customer rather than products, rather than engineering, in order to become relevant.

So I've been through that change process, and I also did a lot of new business areas for Lego: film, TV, theme parks, licensing, publishing, so I understand how to do different businesses. I was also head of HR, so I understand how you can make HR and KPIs help people change.

And even though the industries are very different, and they are, customers are not different. They want you to understand them and deliver what they need, and a lot

of that is the same, so you can't cut and paste everything, but there are [common] elements that you need to have. You need to have a good understanding of what your brand is about. Why are you here? What's the value to customers?

And then you need to have a clear vision of what good looks like, which we defined in our CX standards. We were saying, 'Customers are telling us we're not good at this, this, this and this, so here are 33 standards that we need to live up to.'

Helping the organisation [see that], although this is not exactly what you want to do, this is what good looks like for a customer, so where's your plan to discover that?

We didn't have CX standards at Lego, but we did have a very strong brand. So there's of course different things you need to put in place. But where I come from is, I understand doing strategy and setting direction, but also implementing. Because strategy is all well and good, but if you don't do it, it just disappears.

You said you wanted to make Zurich the 'Apple of Insurance'. What do you mean by that?

[Apple] also doesn't copy everybody else. They do their own thing. It's just about thinking that you can lead in many ways. You just need to be bold. The big danger of insurance is that we fulfil our own prophecy. We think we're boring, [so] we will be boring. What I learned from being at Lego is you can dream big, no matter what brand you are, and if the market thinks you're dusty, you better find out how you will not be dusty anymore. And that's the perspective I come with.

I believe insurance has a role to play. I believe we have a strong value proposition. We are a good company. We deliver good things for our customers. And we just need to reinvent and do big things. And when we bring out a campaign, it needs to look sharp, it needs to have clear messaging, and it needs to be attractive.

I think we are the worst at talking ourselves down. We think: nobody's interested and nobody will love insurance. You need to start with loving yourself and giving the people in the company something to love. That's why we changed the brand. The brand is everywhere and people are proud of a brand that's fresh, that's not stale. You build it inside out, but at the end, we want customers to think that we are bold in what we do, that we take chances.

IF YOU ONLY READ ONE **EXPERT** INTERVIEW THIS YEAR...

Why is Gen Z such an important target market for Zurich?

Because they are setting the future out. What will the customer need in the future? As an insurance company, you need to be relevant also to young people. It drives innovation, because they want different things. It's easy: if you stay within the more mature families or people who have known insurance in its current forms, then you don't evolve, you service more of the same.

The new generation are disrupting, and we need to embrace that, because they're the most critical, they're the most demanding. They don't want the same old, same old. And if we can crack them, we can crack anyone.

What lessons do you have for other brands trying to create TikTok content?

The lessons will be about hooking up to some of the known formats, whether it's a sound, a dance, a saying, or whatever,

and tracking what's going on TikTok. What are people engaging with? And then be relevant in that context and experiment.

We didn't get it right from day one. But who says you have to? This is a media where you test and learn, rather than work three months on something and then launch it. It's much more fluid. I'm very proud that we actually are growing that medium. We said to the team, forget about Facebook.

We stay very close to TikTok as a channel and get advice from them. If you try

to do content that's aimed at Facebook and Instagram, and then you put it on TikTok, that's clearly not going to work. You need to adjust to the channel and learn from what works and what doesn't work, because we definitely don't want to be the old man at a disco.

Don't focus on the risk, focus on the opportunity and let go of that polished thing, because that polish doesn't work. Instead of overproducing things, make it rough and feel good about it being rough, because that works with the audience. 🌊

'The brand is everywhere and people are proud of a brand that's fresh, that's not stale. You build it inside out, but at the end, we want customers to think that we are bold in what we do, that we take chances'



Key Takeaways / Zurich Insurance

- 1 Turn up where people are with topics that are relevant to them
- 2 Engage with people, don't deliver a sales pitch
- 3 You can talk on any channel you want – just speak the right 'language'
- 4 Strategy is all well and good – but if you don't do it, it just disappears
- 5 On TikTok, testing and learning is a strength. Forget being polished



STRATEGIES WORTH STEALING



Great strategies aren't invented — they're borrowed and improved

[Contagious IQ](#) gives you exclusive access to over 12,000 case studies of best-in-class commercial creativity, plus insights straight from the agencies and brands behind them.

Dive into Brand Spotlights, strategy deep-dives, and research summaries to find proven tactics you can steal and make your own.



‘If you want to break into a new sector as an established brand, look for everything that is unique about the brand that people love already

Will Hooker / marketing lead / Uber UK

[IQ Insight & Strategy / Trains, Now On Uber / Uber / September 2024](#)

The World Ahead /

Tom Standage, deputy editor of *The Economist*, lays out the global issues to consider next year

For most of 2024 one question overshadowed discussion of global politics and business: would Donald Trump return to the White House? The knife-edge nature of America's election made it difficult to plan ahead. Mr Trump's surprisingly decisive victory resolved that uncertainty. But it has raised a host of new questions about where things will go in 2025. Here are 10 themes to watch in the coming year.

1. Underlying everything is the question of Trumpian uncertainty. The repercussions of Mr Trump's victory will affect everything from geopolitics to economics, not just in America, but globally. He has made all kinds of promises, from ending the war in Ukraine in a single day to deporting millions of unauthorised immigrants to starting a trade war.

But what will he actually do? Which policies will he prioritise, and how far will he go? Nobody knows – yet. But there is scope for dramatic change.

2. And change was what voters around the world called for in 2024's numerous elections. Incumbent parties did badly, regardless of their political orientation. Some were chucked out (as in America and Britain); others were forced into coalition (as in India and South Africa); others were pushed into cohabitation (as in Taiwan and France).

So 2025 will be a year of expectations. Can new leaders deliver the change they promised? Will humbled leaders change their ways? And nobody promised more change than Donald Trump.

3. The most immediate impact will be upheaval in American foreign policy. Mr Trump may push Ukraine to do a deal with Russia, and give Israel a free hand in its conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon. His 'America First' policy will have friends and foes alike questioning the solidity of America's alliances. Mr Trump's more transactional stance and scepticism of foreign entanglements will encourage troublemaking by China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. It is unclear whether America would stand up to China in a conflict over Taiwan or in the South China Sea.

4. For now, America's rivalry with China will manifest itself as a trade war, as Mr Trump imposes restrictions and ramps up tariffs – including on America's allies. He has promised 60% tariffs on imports from China, and 10-25% on those from other countries. But is this just a negotiating plot to win concessions in other areas?

Implementing tariffs on this scale would harm American growth, and that of its main trading partners. If other countries retaliated with their own tariffs, the impact would be even worse.





5. China's government has encouraged exports of electric cars, solar panels and batteries to offset a domestic economic slowdown. That has boosted uptake, with adoption of solar panels and grid storage repeatedly outstripping forecasts. Adoption of clean-tech is booming as a result.

6. In economic policy, the focus will shift from defeating inflation to dealing with deficits. Many countries increased spending during the pandemic, and have not ratcheted it down again. They must now balance the books by increasing taxes, cutting spending or boosting growth. Many also want to increase defence budgets, because they worry they can no longer rely on America. Painful economic choices loom.

7. Age is on the political agenda. America has just picked its oldest-ever president-elect. World leaders are greying, along with their populations. Expect more discussion of age limits for political leaders. Japan will pass a milestone in 2025 as the last of its baby-boom generation reach the

age of 75, presaging an increase in the cost of care. China, meanwhile, is looking for economic opportunities in an greying world by encouraging investment in the 'silver economy' – products, services and tech aimed at the elderly.

8. Speaking of tech, 2025 is shaping up to be a crunch year for artificial intelligence. Huge sums are being invested in the technology – more than \$1trn between 2024 and 2027 just on data centres – but adoption rates are low. Only 5% of American companies say they are using AI (though many workers may simply be using it in secret). Will investors lose their nerve, or will AI prove its worth, as 'agentic' systems become more capable?

9. Conflict is disrupting global aviation, as airlines reroute flights to avoid hostile countries and war zones. Europe is adding new border checks. Travellers face more friction. Many cities have introduced measures (such as banning Airbnb) in response to protests against 'overtour-

ism'. Tourist numbers have grown by more than 50% a year since 2022 as arrivals rebounded from their pandemic slump. In 2025 growth should return to its pre-pandemic rate of 5-10%, but restrictions introduced by many cities will remain.

10. With assassination attempts, exploding walkie-talkies and giant rockets being captured by chopsticks, one lesson of

2024 was to expect the unbelievable. What implausible-sounding things could happen in 2025? A devastating solar storm could knock out satellites and power grids. Lost ancient texts could be recovered from carbonised papyrus scrolls using AI. There could even be another pandemic (a new strain of bird flu is causing concern). Good luck navigating the coming year, whatever surprises await. ❧



A Blueprint for the Future of Brand Experience /

PHD's Global Chief Experience Officer Rohan Tambyrajah explores how CMOs can lead marketing transformation by uniting data, creativity, and technology for future brand success

The rules of marketing have been rewritten, and today's game is defined by abundance (an overwhelming array of choices for consumers); speed (rapid adoption cycles and fleeting moments of relevance); and connectivity (shorter feedback loops and an ever-present world of influence). Persistent digital connections mean brands must show up consistently across every touchpoint, all while navigating the rise of creator-led content and the demand for more authentic, relevant engagement.

For CMOs, the challenge is not just keeping

pace but leading in this new paradigm. The future calls for marketing departments that are not just reactive but anticipatory, driven by data, powered by AI, and aligned around a single, transformative vision for growth.

At this year's Most Contagious event, I presented 'A Blueprint for the Future of Brand Experience', a strategic framework designed to help marketers navigate this complexity. By embracing innovation, fostering integration and harnessing intelligence, marketers can do more than adapt – they can seize the opportunity to redefine the rules, creating lasting competitive advantages and setting the stage for transformative growth.

One of the most pressing challenges is the cost of inefficiency. Fragmented processes, siloed departments, and short-term thinking have collectively cost the marketing industry an estimated \$120bn¹ annually in lost effectiveness. Disjointed strategies hinder brands' ability to deliver seamless, personalised experiences consumers increasingly demand.

At the same time, rapid changes in the competitive landscape add to the urgency. Professor Rita McGrath from Columbia Business School describes today's market as one of constant flux, where competitive advantages evaporate in mere years, not decades. Adaptability and agility, not

durability, are now the keys to success.

These shifting dynamics are mirrored in the evolution of consumer expectations. Today's consumers no longer settle for fragmented brand interactions; they expect every touchpoint – online, in-store, or social media – to feel consistent and connected. Research shows that 86%² of consumers prioritise a unified experience, placing immense pressure on brands to align their narratives across platforms. Meeting this expectation requires more than surface-level adjustments. It demands structural changes to dismantle silos and create a truly integrated approach to marketing.

The Five Pillars for Future-Ready Brand Experiences

Within 'A Blueprint for the Future of Brand Experience', five interconnected principles form the foundation for future-ready brand experiences designed to redefine how brands engage their audiences.

1. Intelligent Infrastructure

By unifying transactional, behavioural, and cultural data streams, brands can unlock actionable insights that drive personalised experiences. Leveraging intelligent infrastructures like large language models (LLMs) and synthetic data will enable personalised interactions with precision and forecast trends to ensure adaptability in a volatile market.

2. Platformed Capabilities

Equally important is the integration of creative, content, commerce and media through platformed capabilities. Omni, Omnicom's marketing orchestration plat-

form, exemplifies how a centralised framework can streamline campaigns, foster collaboration, and eliminate redundancy.

3. AI Agents

AI agents are poised to augment human creativity and productivity by enabling marketers to explore innovative concepts, streamline workflows and enhance their capacity to deliver impactful brand experiences.

4. Elevated Experiences

AI unlocks unprecedented opportunities to enhance consumer engagement. Emerging AI-powered tools, like text-to-image and interactive video generators, enable brands to craft immersive, tailored experiences.

5. Return on Experience (ROX)


Unified measurement models are critical. Marketers can prioritise meaningful engagements that drive sustainable growth by linking short-term activation metrics with long-term brand-building KPIs.

One of the most transformative elements of this blueprint is the role of generative AI. Expected to revolutionise marketing between 2026 and 2028, AI technologies will enhance every aspect of the consumer journey. The integration of generative AI will help marketers overcome fragmentation by making data-driven decisions and personalising consumer experiences in ways that were previously impossible. From enhancing customer service with chatbots to delivering personalised shopping experiences, generative AI will underpin all aspects of the consumer journey, ultimately leading to richer and more impactful, personalised and intuitive brand interactions.

Despite the promise of these innovations, significant barriers remain. Many organisations are held back by entrenched silos that prevent collaboration and dilute their messaging. Breaking down these barriers is essential to creating the unified, impactful experiences that modern consumers demand. Marketing

leaders must champion cross-departmental integration, fostering a culture where creativity, data and strategy coexist seamlessly.

The ultimate goal of 'A Blueprint for the Future of Brand Experience' is transformative growth to deliver consistent, meaningful consumer experiences. By aligning resources, embracing AI, and focusing on connection, marketers can anticipate market shifts, respond to evolving consumer needs, and build lasting brand value. This is not just about keeping up with change; it's about leading it.

We're on the brink of a new era, the stakes have never been higher. But for those ready to take the lead, the opportunities are extraordinary. By adopting a unified vision and leveraging the principles outlined in this blueprint, CMOs can create brands that not only survive the AI revolution but thrive within it. The future belongs to those who embrace integration, innovation and intelligence – and who are bold enough to shape what comes next. 

‘Putting the consumer first has to be the number one priority. Uncovering the reasons they reach for our brand on the shelf and the places they consume us has only helped lead us to stronger work’

Stephanie Vance / brand manager / Velveeta

[IQ Insight & Strategy / La Dolce Velveeta / Velveeta / September 2024](#)

The year in marketing research /

Contagious regularly scours academic journals for research into how marketing works and consumers behave. Here are some of our favourite insights from the past 12 months

Consistency is king

Ad testing platform System1 analysed people's responses to thousands of video ads from 56 brands over a five-year period, and then checked it against performance data from YouGov and the IPA, and found that keeping creative assets consistent has all kinds of benefits – as long as the work is good.

Brands that were the most creatively consistent across 13 measures (such as positioning, distinctive assets, etc) were more likely to produce better ads, which generated more very large brand and business effects, like profit gain.

There were limits to the benefits of consistency. The results showed creative

consistency couldn't help brands defend market share or arrest decline, nor could it revitalise existing markets. Largely, consistency proved to be an amplifier of good creativity as opposed to a weapon in its own right.

But the study lends support to the idea that adverts – and brand positions – rarely become less effective over time because audiences grow tired of them.

It's not just creative assets that brands should keep consistent, either. The results suggest that sticking with the same creative agency was linked with a superior annual fluency rating change (a measure of brand recognisability).

Why people reject creative ideas

People tend to disagree more about the value of truly novel ideas, and they interpret this disagreement as a bad thing, which is why creativity is often rejected.

Researchers Wayne Johnson and Devon Proudfoot conducted five experiments, in which they asked participants to rate the novelty and value of business ideas in various scenarios. These experiments showed that people tend to disagree more about the value of novel ideas, possibly because they have fewer common templates against which to evaluate them. They also found that when people are aware that an idea is divisive, they are less likely to back it.

It's not news that people struggle with new ideas. Another study from 2011 found that even people who claimed to want creative ideas still associated them with words like 'poison', 'vomit' and 'agony'. But this new research adds some new knowledge to the subject, including a possible explanation for the behaviour.

The researchers also found a way to mitigate people's aversion to creativity: by first explaining to people why original ideas had value.

Big and small brands need different kinds of attention

Ads that inspire active attention – deliberate and focused mental engagement – in audiences is the best predictor of positive performance for brands with a small market share. But passive attention – less deliberate and unfocused engagement where the brain processes information subconsciously – seems to do the trick for bigger brands.

These are the conclusions of attention expert Karen Nelson-Field after analysing 59,000 ads from 40 brands.

Nelson-Field argues that passive attention is ideal for big brands because it is better suited to reinforcing – as opposed to growing – its presence, and helps to encourage repeat purchases from existing buyers. On the other hand active attention works better for small brands because it allows them to engage new buyers through sustained mental engagement while being better suited to educating consumers about its brand and products.

People tend to disagree more about the value of truly novel ideas, and they interpret this disagreement as a bad thing, which is why creativity is often rejected'


Age is just a number...

Older people aren't as good at remembering brand associations – but it might have nothing to do with cognitive abilities. Researchers Philip Mecredy, Lara Stocchi and Pamela Feetham surveyed people in the US and New Zealand to ascertain their knowledge of brands and learn about their buying habits, and then analysed the results by dividing the respondents into age groups.

They found that only one specific aspect of mental availability – associative penetration – declined with age. This meant that as cohorts grew older, the number of people within that group who could name at least

one association between a brand and a list of attributes fell.

But among those participants who could name at least one association for a brand, age had no effect on the number of associations they were able to rattle off for that particular product.

In fact, there was no indication of a decline in any other aspect of mental availability (ie, mental market share and network size), which suggests that diminishing associative penetration among older people is the result of brands more often targeting younger consumers. 

INSIGHTS WORTH STEALING



Why dig for diamonds when you can just open a vault?

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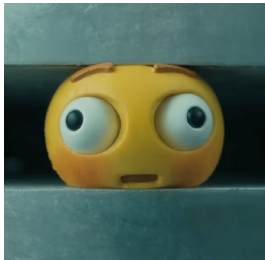
‘There’s nothing worse than making ads that are just fine and wallpaper. It’s a waste of everyone’s time and money’

Mark Shanley / creative director / Adam&eveDDB

[IQ Insight & Strategy / Nothing Satisfies Like Pot Noodle / Pot Noodle / April 2024](#)

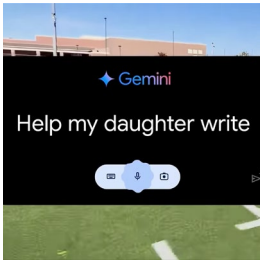
What marketers can learn from 2024

Every day is a school day in marketing. Here's what the big news stories and cultural events of 2024 can teach us about the business of brand building



Apple pulling its iPad Pro 'Crush' ad after complaints that it was soulless and dystopian:

You really need to understand your customers.



Google pulling its Gemini chatbot 'Dear Sydney' ad after complaints that it was soulless and dystopian:

You also need to understand your product. If the best use-case that Google could present for its AI tool was helping a child write a fan letter, then it might have a problem upstream of advertising.



Nike: The sportswear company is a machine of many parts, and it would be simplistic to blame its faltering performance on marketing alone. That said, abandoning its retail partners and obsessing over direct channels seems like it was a mistake. Big brands need wide-spread availability and lots of fame-building advertising.



Gen Z: It's two generations, not one, according to research. In countries on every continent, women born between 1997 and 2012 are becoming more progressive, while men are becoming more conservative.



LinkedIn: Everything. At least that's what all the marketing influencers who have moved on from X (formerly Twitter) would have you believe.



Geoffrey Hinton: The so-called 'Godfather of AI', who left his job at Google last year so that he could speak out against the technology, thinks there's a 10% chance that AI could wipe out all of humanity... including marketers.



Skibidi Toilet: Kids like weird stuff? We don't know. We're just mentioning it because we want you to think we're plugged into youth culture.

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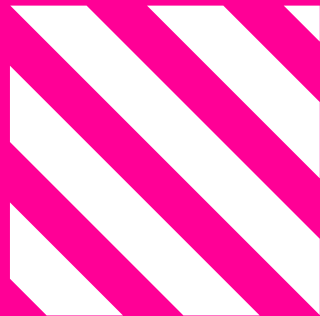
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