



Beyond Trends

Four Major Ways Culture Is Recalibrating in 2026

Betty™ × **Rise**
a Quad agency a Quad agency

Introduction

At Betty, we pay attention to the factors that actually move people. Not the micro-trends that dominate feeds for a week and disappear the next.

Our strategy teams are focused on bigger shifts shaping how people think, choose, buy and connect. The signals with staying power. The ones that create real implications for brands.

“Beyond Trends: Four Major Ways Culture Is Recalibrating in 2026” is the result of collaboration between Betty and the connections strategy team at Rise. We’ve been sharing these ideas with clients and colleagues for months. Now we’re excited to bring them to a broader audience.

Inside, you’ll find four cultural shifts we’re watching closely: Optimization Illusion, Algorithms Renegotiated, The Era of Enough and Humanity Revived. Together, they paint a picture of a culture that’s recalibrating its relationship with technology, consumption, convenience and connection.

Consider this a snapshot of where culture is headed. More importantly, consider it a conversation starter.

If any of these shifts spark questions, challenge assumptions or connect to something you’re seeing in your category, we’d love to talk. The trends are interesting. But what they mean for your brand could help you stay ahead.

Betty™

Betty is a full-service strategy and creative agency that believes in work that works and delivers creative scale without sacrifice.

Drawing on deep expertise in consumer and cultural strategy, Betty created this trends report to explore the shifts currently shaping how people think, feel and behave — and to share what those changes mean for our clients and their brands.

Rise®

Rise is a full-service digital marketing and media agency that helps brands drive better business outcomes with a proven approach to cross-channel media management and customer experience.

Rise partnered on this trends report to connect how current cultural shifts are changing the moments and channels that drive meaningful engagement. So brands can understand not just how, but when and where to best reach their audiences.

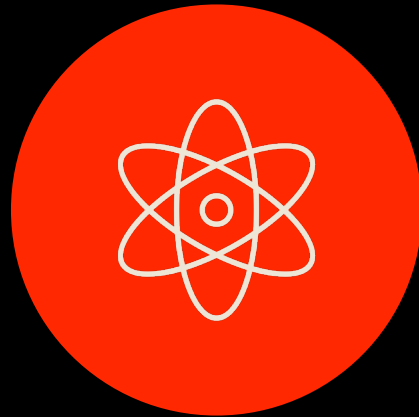
Let's break down
a few shifts we're
seeing for 2026.

The culture is
recalibrating,
and we have the
trends to prove it.

Four Macro Forces of 2026



Optimization
Illusion



Algorithms
Renegotiated



The Era of
Enough



Humanity
Revived



Optimization Illusion

Recalibrating what it means to have better experiences

People are recognizing the hidden costs of seamless and automated



Optimization Illusion

FROM:

Automated

TO:

Approachable

Retailers are pulling back from tech-heavy, large-format grocery experiments in favor of smaller, more accessible stores built around convenience and daily needs.

DIVE BRIEF

Amazon to shutter all Amazon Fresh and Go stores

The company will focus its brick-and-mortar strategy on Whole Foods Market, with plans to open more than 100 new stores under the banner over the next few years.

Published Jan. 27, 2026 • Updated 3 hours ago



Whole Foods readies to open more Daily Shops

The specialty grocer announced opening dates for two more of its small-format stores, including the first in New Jersey.



How Brands Can Adapt

Make big categories feel small again

As retail environments become more human-scaled and proximity-driven, brands must do the same. The opportunity isn't just to be accessible. It's to feel neighborly, tactile and emotionally present.



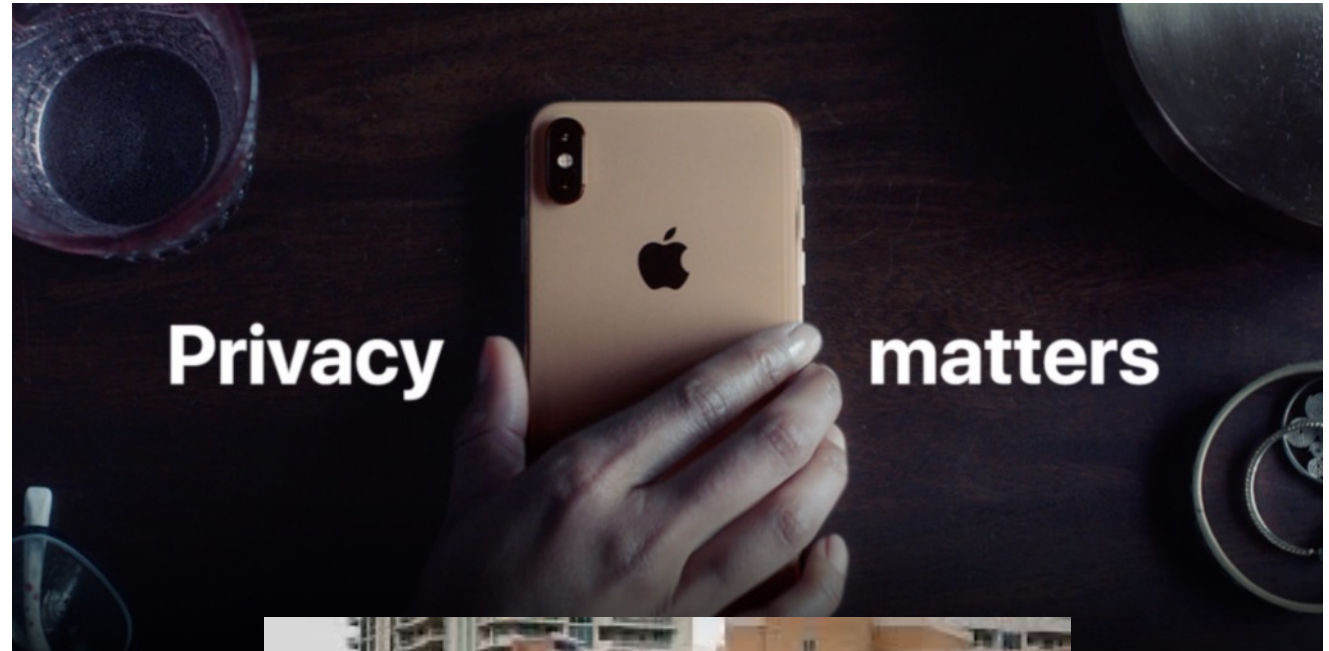
Optimization Illusion

FROM:
Aspirational

TO:
Reassuring

After years of brands pushing better, faster, optimized lives, consumers are emotionally exhausted. In 2026, people are gravitating toward brands that calm rather than motivate.

Betty × Rise





How Brands Can Adapt

Focus on building trust, not ambition

Jeep's 2026 Super Bowl spot "We Will Find You" was built on a narrative about reliability and presence rather than performance. This exemplified how even large, category-defining brands are leaning into reassurance over spectacle.



Optimization Illusion

FROM:

Fast

TO:

Frictionless

As everyday life accelerates, consumers are no longer impressed by brands that simply save time. They expect brands to remove friction altogether.



JUST POP OPEN & ENJOY!

No need to carry around a corkscrew or extra glasses.



Splash Cap

Keep your wine from spilling with the splash proof cap. Enjoy the whole glass or place the cap back on to have later.



Ergonomic

Designed to feel like a wine glass, the hourglass shape is easy to hold.



Freshness

We've added a tight seal underneath the lid to keep your premium wine fresh for more than a year - like you really need that long.



Recyclable

Once you're done drinking your Copa di Vino, please recycle the glass and lid so we can all do our part in preserving the environment.

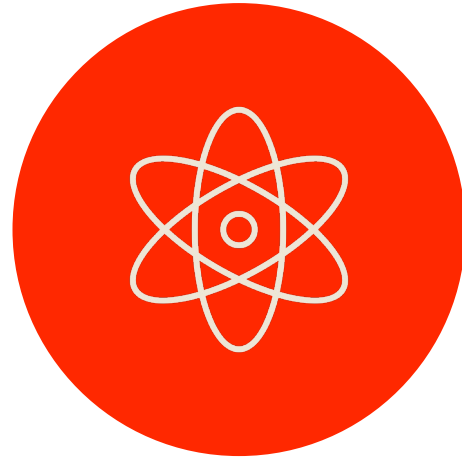


AREAS OF FOCUS: CPG, GROCERY, HEALTHCARE

How Brands Can Adapt

Remove steps, not just time

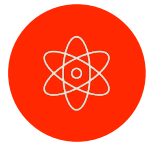
In an era of effortlessness, brands must earn relevance by reducing cognitive, physical and emotional effort — especially in smaller formats and faster shopping moments. The brands that will win are the ones that don't ask consumers to adapt but adapt to consumers' lives.



Algorithms Renegotiated

Recalibrating the agency we exercise over digital worlds

People are moving from passive, curated content toward more deliberate engagements



Algorithms Renegotiated

FROM:
Curated feeds

TO:
Couch chaos

Consumers are realizing that the strongest connection happens in small, trusted spaces and not public feeds.

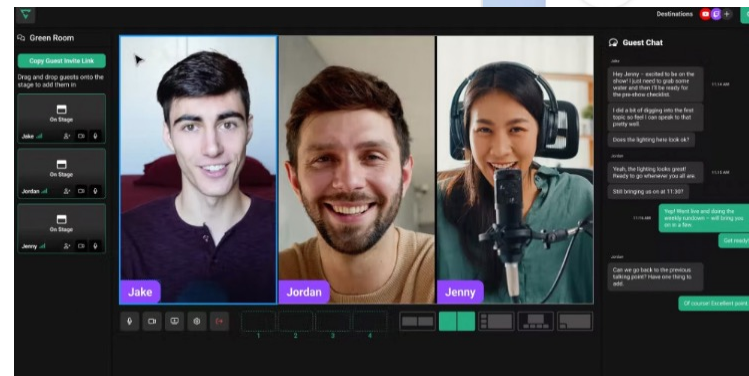
As social media feels more curated and performative, people are moving meaningful conversations into private, unfiltered environments like group chats, Discords and live moments.

Betty × Rise

Introducing group chats in ChatGPT

Collaborate with others, and ChatGPT, in the same conversation.

Try in ChatGPT ↗



Die joined the group chat
vid joined the group chat
rea joined the group chat

Hey ChatGPT we need some ideas for our house party!

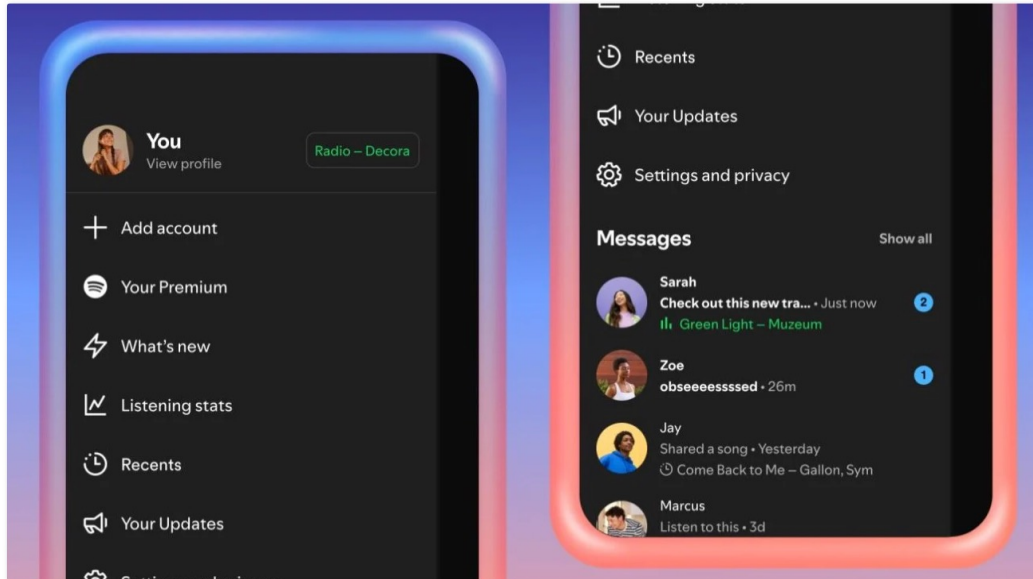
ChatGPT is w... Ask ChatGPT

SPOTIFY EXPANDS MESSAGING FEATURE WITH LIVE FRIEND ACTIVITY AND 'REQUEST TO JAM'

30
SHARES

JANUARY 8, 2026

BY MANDY DALUGDUG



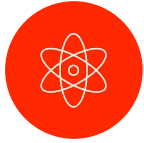
Spotify Messages

AREAS OF FOCUS: CPG

How Brands Can Adapt

Create moments together, not messages alone

Brands that create environments where people can gather, react together and participate in unscripted moments will feel more human, more trusted and more culturally relevant. Winning now means designing experiences that feel like being “on the couch with friends,” not scrolling past perfection.



Algorithms Renegotiated

FROM:

Always-on, all-in-one consumption

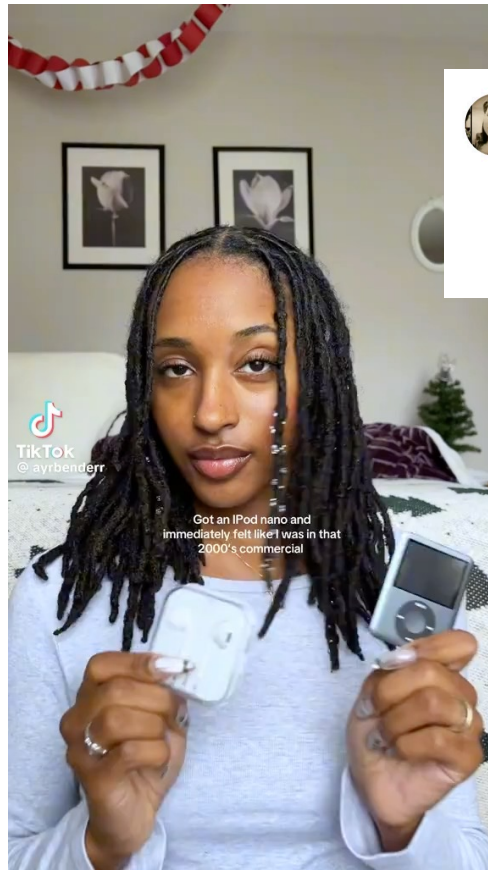
TO:

Purposeful, pared-back engagement

Instead of rejecting tech outright, people are using it more deliberately — turning to analog, tangible experiences and purpose-built devices that reduce distraction and encourage mindfulness.

Is 2026 the year of analogue?

Videos extolling the virtues of 'going analogue' are going viral on TikTok. Is this just another fad – or the start of a generational movement?



Mariah

i miss having different devices for specific functions and purposes. I don't like having everything on my phone

2025-11-20 Reply

48.5K

81% of Gen Z adults and 78% of Millennial adults often wish they could disconnect from digital devices more easily



AREAS OF FOCUS: CONTENT + EXPERIENTIAL

How Brands Can Adapt

Relevance is no longer optional — it's required

As consumers set firmer boundaries around what deserves their time and attention, brands must shift from maximizing reach to maximizing the value of each interaction — showing up with higher-quality experiences that allow consumers to be fully present.



The Era of Enough

Recalibrating views on status, consumption and satisfaction

People are celebrating values that promote restraint and sufficiency



The Era of Enough

FROM:

Money dysmorphia

TO:

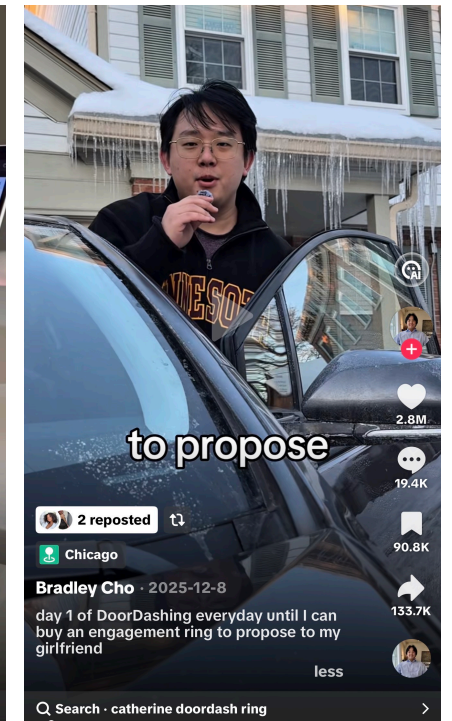
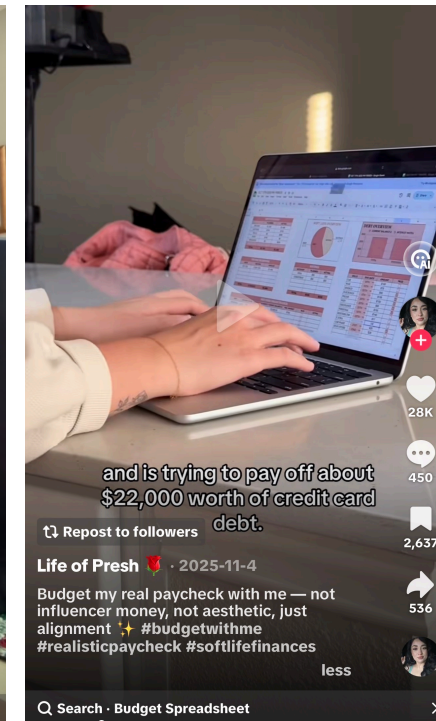
Money on my terms

After years of being influenced by curated lifestyles, opaque success and aestheticized spending online, many consumers are combating their money dysmorphia by being more open and vulnerable about their finances. It's led to a deeper sense of accountability and community online.

Are You the Only One Who's Broke? Or Is It 'Money Dysmorphia'?

The 'boom boom' aesthetic meets the gloom and doom of market turmoil.

Nearly a third of all Americans reported feeling money dysmorphia, including 43% of Gen Z and 41% of Millennials





AREAS OF FOCUS: FINANCES

How Brands Can Adapt

Guide with simplicity and care

Brands that help consumers understand, plan and feel in control — without judgment or glamorization — will earn trust in a high-anxiety financial climate.



The Era of Enough

FROM:

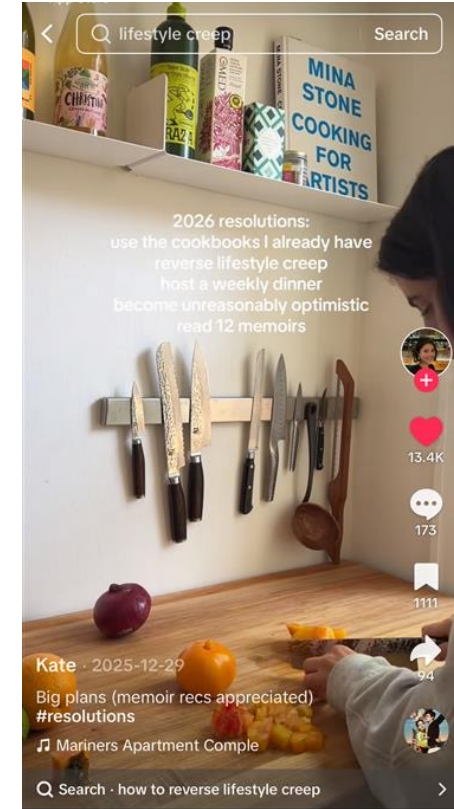
Quiet luxury

TO:

Loud frugality

Reducing consumption to the utmost basics has become a point of pride. Young consumers aren't just quietly cutting back — they're openly celebrating it. Using what you already have all the way to the end is the new flex.

Betty × Rise



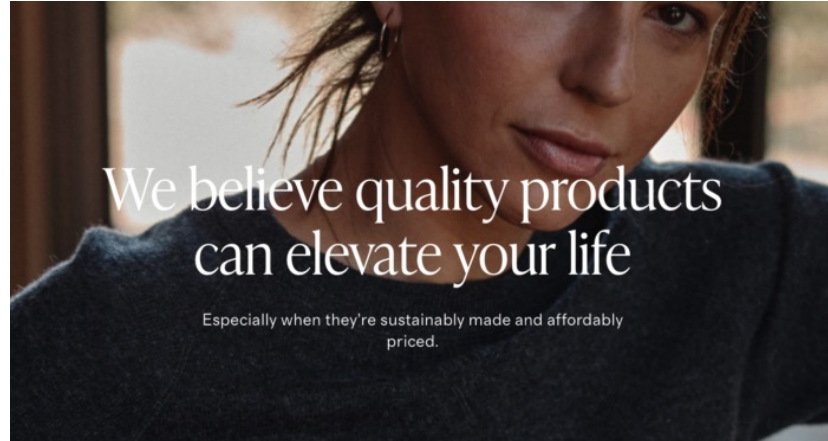
More 'True,' Less Aspirational Luxury Is The Next Priority For Luxury Brands

The Rise of Frugal Luxe

Money with Katie

A "Lifestyle Creep Reversal" Success Story

Quince



HI THERE
THANKS FOR JOINING
THE QUINCE FAM.

We're glad you're here. For many, investing in luxury clothing, jewelry, and home goods is a rare treat. Too rare.

We built Quince because we don't think quality should be a luxury. We make exceptionally high-quality essentials accessibly priced.

Your offer of **\$20 off your order of \$200+** expires soon. Activate by clicking below (discount applies automatically at checkout).

How Brands Can Adapt

Partner in intentionality and rise to the occasion

Quince aligns with loud frugality by promoting high-quality, lasting essentials over excess. Their focus on value and transparency supports underconsumption, making intentional, fewer-but-better purchases feel aspirational.



The Era of Enough

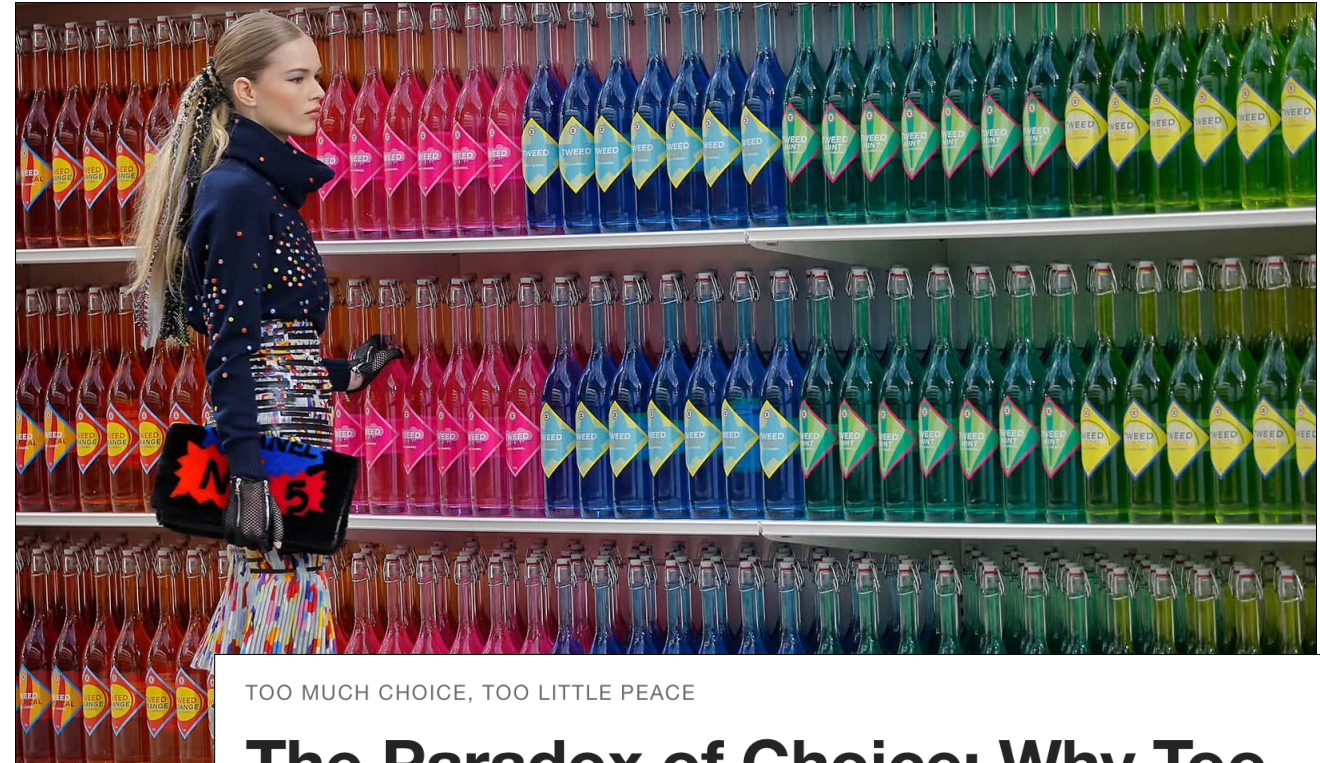
FROM:

Endless choice

TO:

Curated confidence

Choice overload is giving way to curated clarity. As grocery footprints shrink and shopping trips speed up, consumers increasingly trust brands and retailers to edit on their behalf.



TOO MUCH CHOICE, TOO LITTLE PEACE

The Paradox of Choice: Why Too Many Options Are Making You Miserable

You think more choices equal more freedom — but science says otherwise; they're quietly exhausting your brain and stealing your peace.



Betty × Rise

AREAS OF FOCUS: CPG + GROCERY

How Brands Can Adapt

Make versatility your superpower

In the world of curated retail, brands need to start acting less like a catalog of options and more like a trusted default that holds many use cases.



The Era of Enough

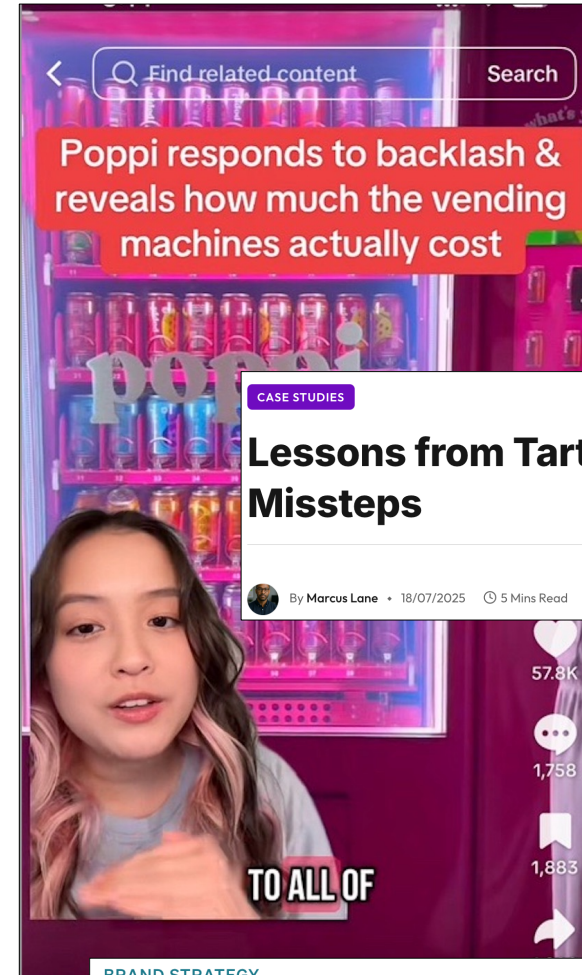
FROM:

Financially dismissed

TO:

Visibly valued

People feel overlooked as brands continue to spend loudly while everyday life feels more expensive and constrained. There's a growing sense that brand priorities are misaligned with consumer reality. People are gravitating toward brands that acknowledge their circumstances and make them feel seen.



BRAND STRATEGY

Influencer trips are out. Customer trips are in

After extravagant influencer outings prompted backlash, some companies are opting to give consumers gifts and getaways.



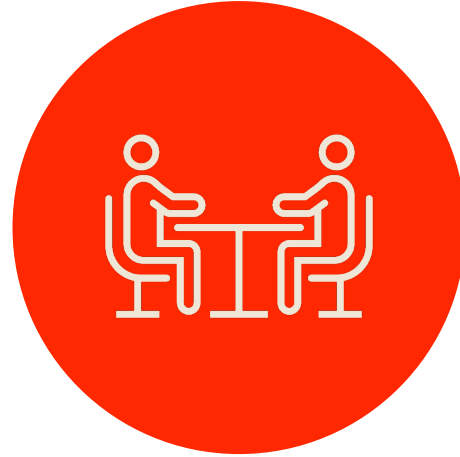
Betty × Rise

AREAS OF FOCUS: CPG

How Brands Can Adapt

Prove your respect

Brands can shift from symbolic gestures to signals that feel tangible and grounded in everyday reality. Value needs to be obvious, immediate and hard to misinterpret. When brands demonstrate restraint, transparency or fairness, it reads as respect.



Humanity Revived

Recalibrating the importance of people and presence

People are gravitating toward meaningful connections instead of preferring the performative



Humanity Revived

FROM:

Machine-generated

TO:

Human-crafted

Amid a surge of AI-generated content often labeled “AI slop,” audiences and brands like Polaroid are pushing back, prioritizing human authorship, intentional storytelling and transparency as signals of value and trust.

The rise of AI slop in marketing

AI can lead to a campaign’s disaster or accomplish goals.

AI In Branding: Why Authenticity Still Beats Algorithms

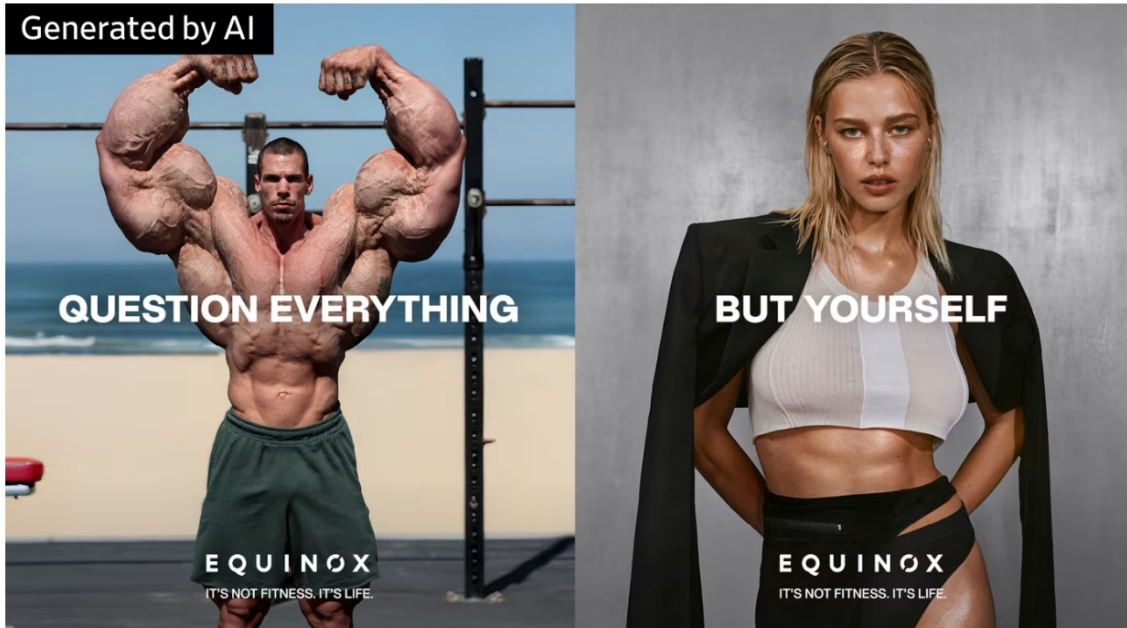
Polaroid just dropped the most iconic anti-AI ad of the year



CMO TODAY

Why Equinox Leaned on AI Slop in Its New Year's Ad Campaign

The fitness chain's new marketing push features strange AI imagery juxtaposed with real-life fit people in a campaign called 'Question Everything But Yourself'



AREAS OF FOCUS: HEALTH + CPG

How Brands Can Adapt

Push creative boundaries with AI; anchor the narrative in real people

As seen in Equinox's blend of surreal AI imagery and real bodies, the technology expands the visual language, but the narrative remains human-led and grounded in lived experience.



Humanity Revived

FROM:

Faceless brands

TO:

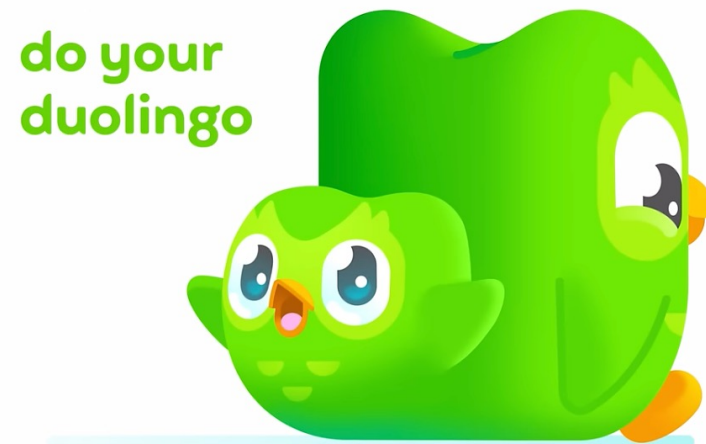
Character interfaces

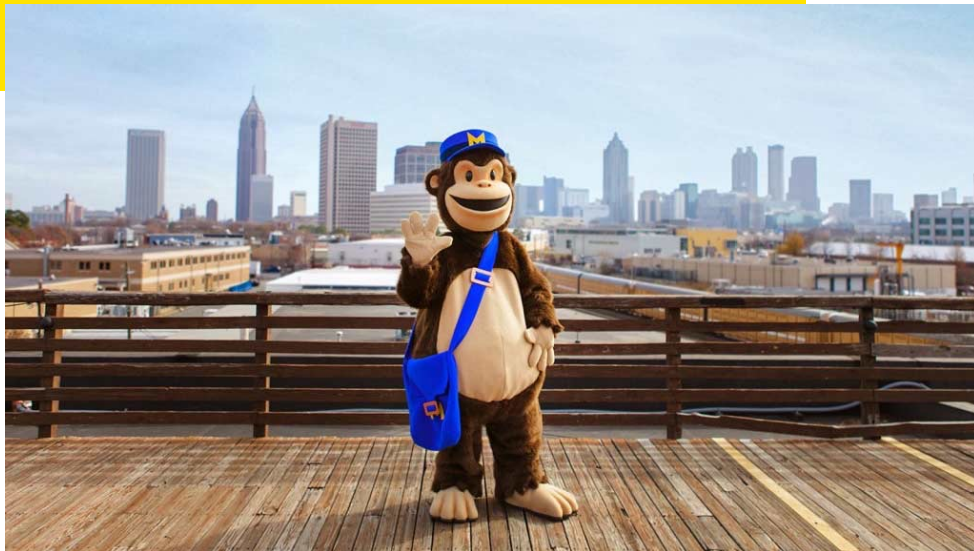
In 2026, characters offer a middle ground: more relatable than systems, less deceptive than fake humans. Mascots give AI a personality without pretending to be a person.

Duolingo's Marketing Strategy: How Humor, Memes & Chaos Built a Global Brand

How Duolingo turned unhinged marketing, memes, and viral stunts into global brand success. A deep look at their strategy, user engagement, and key takeaways.

Super Bowl 2025: The 5-Second Ad That
Outsmarted \$8 Million Budgets





AREAS OF FOCUS: HEALTH, FINANCE, AUTO, CPG

How Brands Can Adapt

Use characters as emotional infrastructure

Characters feel honest. Fake humans feel manipulative. In a world shaped by AI, mascots aren't just brand assets. They're interfaces, setting expectations for how a brand thinks, speaks and behaves. They set the tone, but the brand still needs to be transparent.



Humanity Revived

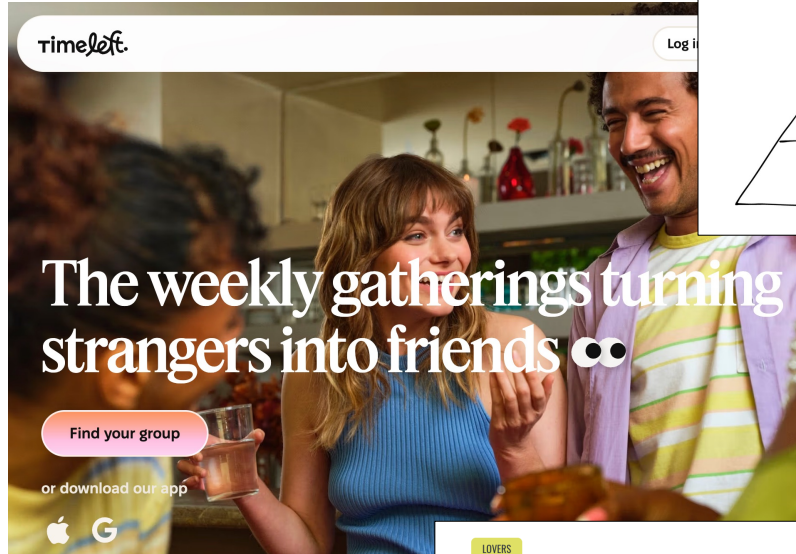
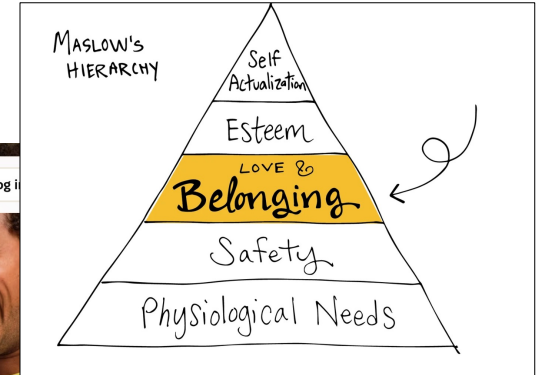
FROM:
Digital connection

TO:
IRL-maxxing

In this world of mental overload, emotional fatigue, chronic stress and social comparisons, people are seeking belonging and something that *feels* real.

As energy depletes across society and life slips into autopilot, IRL connection shifts from a “nice to have” to a survival-level need.

Betty × Rise



LOVERS

More Than a Running Club: Why Running Crews Have Become the New Center of Social Life

Group running is the new language of sociality. An analysis of the running crew phenomenon, which is transforming the way we experience the city, replacing bars and happy hours as the epicenters of human relationships



Gen Z daters want deeper connections



J. Cole Plays New Album for Fans in His Honda Civic

AREAS OF FOCUS: CPG + EXPERIENTIAL

How Brands Can Adapt

Design for presence

As digital fatigue deepens, brands must shift from maximizing impressions to maximizing presence and experiences that are physical, local and more human. Collapse the distance between the brand and audience and turn distribution into connection. In the era of IRL-maxxing, brands will win by rewarding those who show up and participate.

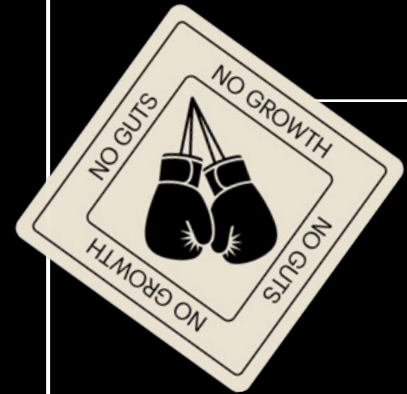
The Culture Is Correcting

Speed, scale
and performative
are out

Control, sufficiency
and humanity
are in

Optimization Illusion | Algorithms Renegotiated | The Era of Enough | Humanity Revived

Want to continue the conversation?



Meryl Burman

VP, Business Development
mburman@bettyagency.com

bettyagency.com

Aaron Horowitz

VP, Business Development
ahorowitz@meetrise.com

meetrise.com



THANKS,

Betty