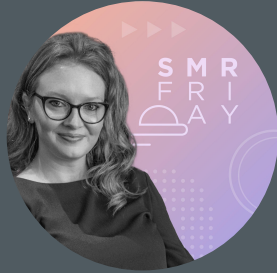


# March Lunch & Learn

# meet the team



**Alicia Wiedemann**

Partner, Head of Client Strategy



**Patricia Masi**

Director, Client Strategy



**Kelsey Connors**

Strategist



in the know

# social first product development

PepsiCo's first creator-led product launch brings influencers directly into product development, designed to make snack innovation social-first and culturally relevant for Gen Z.\*

**Early signals:** PepsiCo launched the chips through TikTok Shop to convert social buzz directly into sales, tapping into the **68% of Gen Z who already buy through social platforms.\*\***

## Why it matters for marketers:

- Creators are moving upstream influencing product design, not just promotion
- Social platforms are becoming **innovation labs**, not just marketing channels
- Culture-driven products can travel faster through creator audiences and social commerce



## Takeaway

Product innovation is shifting from internal R&D to co-creation with creators who move culture, meeting Gen Z where they shop, scroll, and discover.

# as creator spend grows, transparency gaps remain

U.S. creator economy ad spend is projected to reach **\$43.9B in 2026**, up 18% YoY. But transparency still lags behind investment.

**Only 51% of marketers say they have full visibility into creator compensation.**



## Takeaway

As creator marketing becomes a major media channel, brands will need clearer compensation models, transparency, and stronger measurement frameworks.

**Read our latest piece on the state of influencer marketing in 2026!**

# turning everyday moments into content

McDonald's transformed ordering kiosks into reality-TV style “confessional booths,” inviting customers to share stories about their first jobs.

**Relatable cultural insight**



**Interactive brand experience**

The most powerful content isn't produced, it's **experienced and shared**.  
**Across industries, everyday customer moments can become content moments.**

## Other industry examples:

- Financial services → financial milestones
- Healthcare → patient journeys
- Insurance → life-event moments

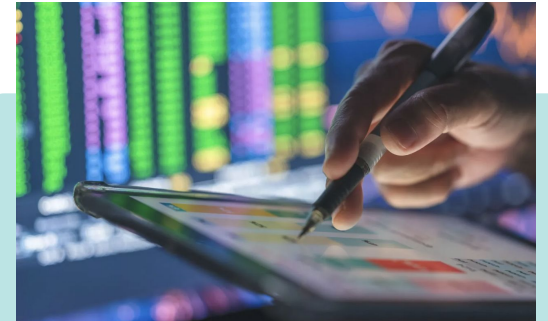


# campaigns becoming adaptive

Marketers are testing an AI-powered solution designed to detect cultural shifts and audience sentiment in real time, helping brands adjust campaigns while they are still live.

## Why it matters for marketers:

- Cultural signals move faster than traditional campaign timelines
- AI enables real-time monitoring of audience sentiment and cultural context
- Brands can adjust messaging mid-campaign before misalignment becomes reputational risk



## Takeaway

Marketing continues to shift from static campaigns to adaptive systems that respond to cultural signals and audience sentiment in real time.

# strategic rule-breaking

When playing it safe stops working, the rule-breakers start winning.

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"I expect a rise in defiant, we-do-it-our-way branding:

'Don't like us? Don't buy it.'

There is a hungry audience ready for nonapologetic, stick-it-to-them brands."



**Ashley Winter,**  
Content Marketer @ CEL Marketing PR Design

Some brands are responding to skepticism by breaking category norms, but not all rule-breaking builds trust.

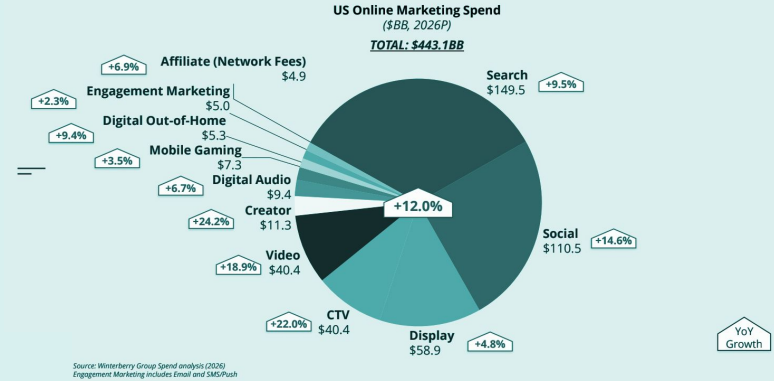
# media trends informing 2026 outlook



## Outlook 2026: Offline Spend Returns to Growth, Led by Linear TV and Experiential Formats



## Outlook 2026: In a Year of Tentpole Events (Olympics, World Cup, Elections) Video- and Social-Led Channels Drive Online Growth



Media investment is shifting back toward channels that create real-world presence and shared experiences.

today's focus:

# marketing under pressure

# a generational context shift

**Trust isn't just declining, it's been shaped by generational instability.**

Millennials experienced formative shocks:

- Columbine
- 9/11
- Forever Wars
- Hurricane Katrina
- The Great Recession

Gen Z grew up with ongoing systemic instability:

- Student debt expansion
- COVID-19 pandemic
- Inflation & economic volatility
- Climate anxiety
- Rapid AI acceleration

Plus, algorithm-driven media now exposes all generations to similar risk narratives.

**State of mind:**

*From sudden crisis → to constant instability*

**Result:** Risk sensitivity

Consumers shaped by instability evaluate brands through a **risk lens**, asking:

- Is this safe?
- Is this real?
- Who benefits?

**Key question**

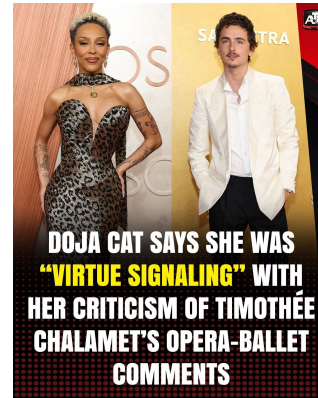
Is digital media reducing pressure or amplifying it?

# risk vs. perceived risk

## Perception is the real battleground

Risk today is socially and algorithmically amplified.

- Algorithms reward fear, urgency, and outrage
- Vulnerability drives engagement
- Rise narratives surface through broader cultural conversations
- Every scroll surfaces a new problem to solve



The attention economy profits from fear.  
**Brands don't always have to.**

# marketing is no longer only competing with competitors

It's competing with **anxiety feeds**.

Consumers today navigate constant signals of risk:

- Personal health risk
- Financial instability
- Data & identity exposure
- Algorithm-amplified fear
- Uncertainty around tech security

## **Identity risk**

AI & consumer technology

## **Emotional risk**

Health & wellness

## **Financial risk**

Financial services



# when technological risk becomes personal



# what does this emote? *who's watching?*

Apple Privacy → device data control

Ring → safety vs. surveillance



DuckDuckGo → tracking surveillance

AI co-pilot messaging → human agency

Apple → sensitive personal data privacy

**Key question**

What makes technology feel  
empowering vs. intrusive?

# when risk becomes personal

## What's at stake

- Personal data, privacy, and identity
- Control over decisions and outcomes
- Trust in what's real

## Pressure signals

- AI-driven decisions and job uncertainty
- Deep Fakes, misinformation, and data use
- Always-on, "listening" technology
- Rapid platform and regulatory change

## The new reality

Innovation is exciting but increasingly intimidating.

**Consumers aren't just asking *what AI can do*.  
They're asking who stays in control.**

# the path to confidence is control

As AI becomes embedded in everyday tools, risk is no longer abstract, it's personal. Consumers aren't just evaluating what technology can do—they're asking who controls it, how decisions are made, and how their data is used.

## Where this shows up most



Financial services i.e. fraud, identity theft, algorithmic decision-making



Media & technology platforms i.e. misinformation, deep fakes, and data use



Healthcare i.e. patient data privacy and AI-assisted diagnosis



Retail & consumer platforms i.e. surveillance, personalization, and data tracking

# the path to confidence is control

## The tension

Consumers feel increasing uncertainty around how their data is used, how decisions are made, and what's real vs. manipulated.

**Control isn't a feature, it's the foundation of trust.**

## Where marketing and brands can win

- **Make the invisible visible**
  - Show how data is used and how decisions are made
  - (e.g., "Why you're seeing this" in Spotify, Google ad transparency tools)
- **Give people control, not just consent**
  - Let users shape preferences, privacy, and experiences
  - (e.g., Apple privacy settings, app tracking controls)
- **Reduce complexity in high-stakes moments**
  - Simplify choices, language, and interfaces
  - Make it easy to understand and act
- **Prove trust through experience**
  - Consistency and predictability build confidence over time
  - Trust comes from feeling in control, not just being told



# fear fatigue in health & wellness



# the inflation of health issues

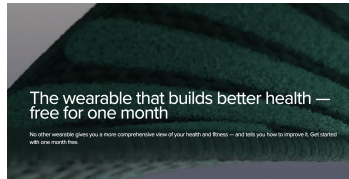
## Everything is framed as a concern

Health content increasingly frames everyday experiences as medical issues often amplified by **creators, influencers, and wellness brands.**

- Average fatigue → hormone imbalance
- Average sadness → diagnosis
- Average aging → inflammation crisis

### Key question:

Are brands unintentionally shaping medical beliefs without medical professionals?



WebMD<sup>®</sup>

# the inflation of health issues

## System tension

At the same time, consumers are navigating growing frustration with the **healthcare system itself**:

- Billing complexity and hidden costs
- Coverage denials and insurance friction
- Difficulty accessing clear care pathways

More health information exists than ever but **trust in the system delivering care is more fragile**.

## Marketing risk:

When everything is framed as urgent or a problem, it becomes harder to know **who to trust: brands, creators, or institutions.**

# fear fatigue is real

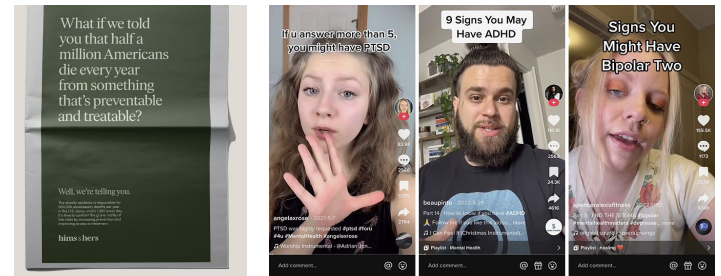
## Signals in the market

- Fear-based wellness language
- Social self-diagnosis culture
- Skepticism toward “clean” and functional, and longevity claims
- Privacy anxiety around reproductive and health data
- Rapid wellness trend cycles
- Growing interest in preventative health and self-tracking as healthcare costs rise
- Affordability of care concerns
- The role of hormones

## What we’re seeing

- Health decisions feel increasingly high-stakes and personal
- Consumers feel constant pressure to optimize their bodies
- Rising healthcare costs are making prevention and self-management feel more urgent and a decrease in quality care
- Mental health conversations continue to remain top of mind

In a research study of 100 ADHD tik tok videos, **55%** of the ADHD traits mentioned in the videos *did not match* official diagnostic criteria.



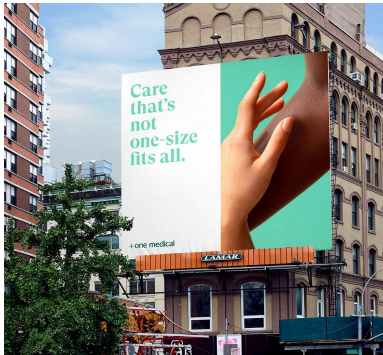
# what does this emote? *cortisol culture*



# fear converts. *trust retains.*

## The tension

Anxiety-driven health messaging performs in the short term, but erodes credibility and trust over time.



**Reducing health anxiety**



**Scaling health anxiety**

## Where marketing can make a difference

- Move from anxiety → agency in patient decision-making
- Transparency as a competitive advantage in complex health choices
- Education without alarmism around symptoms, risks, and treatments
- Help consumers feel informed and supported, not pressured to optimize every health outcome.



# financial stability anxiety



# financial stability anxiety

Consumers are navigating increasing uncertainty around money.

## What's at stake

Savings, debt, investing, and long-term security.

## Market pressures

- Economic volatility
- Institutional distrust
- Post-crypto market skepticism
- Data security concerns
- Younger consumers questioning traditional finance institutions

## Observation

Trust language is everywhere but often vague  
“Bank-grade security” has become background noise.

## Signal



**80%** of Gen Z and millennials say they use AI for financial advice but more than half say it has led to mistakes or poor decisions. **Source**

# what does this emote?

## Responses in a post-speculation market

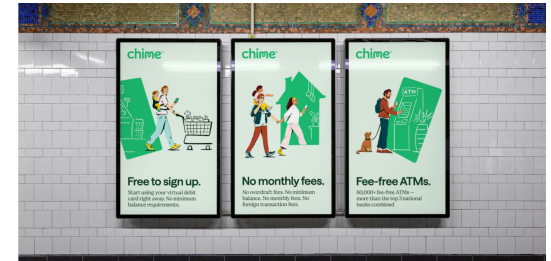
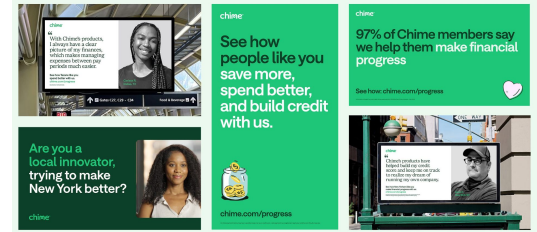
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**Coinbase** - Reassurance after speculation



**Robinhood** - "We're all investors" / rebuilding trust



**Chime** - Radical transparency

**Key question**

How do you market security  
without amplifying panic?

# selling confidence, not fear

Security messaging can easily become panic messaging.

For established financial institutions, credibility is expected, the opportunity is how confidence is communicated.



## Where brands win

- Calm brands in chaotic markets
- Radical transparency around fees & risk, and trade-offs
- Translate complexity into clear, actionable guidance
- Design experiences that give consumers a sense of control

### The opportunity:

Move from protecting assets → building financial confidence



# the bottom line: marketing under pressure



# marketing's role

In a high-pressure world, the brands that win don't amplify anxiety, they create *clarity, control, and confidence, and comfort.*

# cross-industry shifts

## 1. Fear fatigue is real

Consumers are tired of being told they're broken, behind, or at risk.

## 3. Transparency builds trust

Clear, honest communication is a competitive advantage.

## 2. Control creates confidence

Consumers want to feel in control of outcomes, not just optimize them.

## 4. Calm is the new luxury

Brands that reduce consumer anxiety and create clarity *win*.

# thank you!

## **Upcoming Lunch and Learn:**

*May 6 @ 12:30pm EST / Topic: Coming soon!*

## **Upcoming Content:**

Influencer Marketing Piece (B2B & B2C)

