

MARKETING



TRENDS



2026



THE YEAR OF

RELEVANCE
RELEVANCE
RELEVANCE
RELEVANCE



S L M Y

The 4th Edition



The 4th Edition



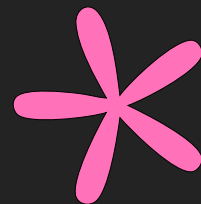
Our most acclaimed annual report, Marketing Trends, returns for its fourth edition, featuring record participation from CMOs across 22 countries in Europe, the United States, and Latin America. This year, more than 100 marketing leaders contributed to our survey, shaping the narrative of social-first marketing for the year ahead.

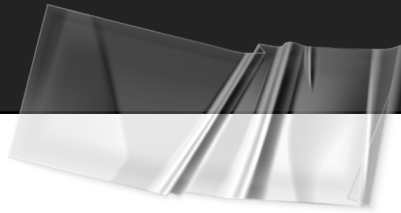
We drew insights from marketing leaders at **L'Oréal, Miravia, Leroy Merlin, AliExpress, Diageo, Unilever, Microsoft, INEOS Automotive**, and many more. We also tapped SAMY's top experts in social media, social commerce, influencer marketing, creativity, and innovation for their perspectives on the industry's key priorities and challenges.

What should social-first brands prioritize to stay relevant?

The race has just started.

Keep pace with us and sprint ahead!





A Note from the Founder

Dear readers,

As we approach 2026 (crazy, right? It's that time of year again!), the world of marketing is evolving faster than ever. The ever-shifting dynamics of consumer behavior are reshaping how brands connect with their audiences, with AI seemingly taking over everything and social media getting, well, even more social. As always, our mission is to help you navigate this exciting landscape, and to do that, we've gathered insights from over 100 CMOs across 22 countries—marketers at the forefront of this battle.

This report is not just another forecast; it's a reflection of the current moment and a look ahead at what will matter most for brands in the months to come. Central to our findings is the belief that, moving forward, **relevance is the new ROI**. The days of simply measuring transactions are behind us; we now have to measure connection, influence, and cultural alignment. As the lines between technology, creativity, and community continue to blur, marketers need to create experiences that are not only innovative but also deeply authentic and rooted in cultural context.

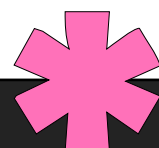
In this paper, you'll find a closer look at how brands can thrive in this new environment—how we can tap into the power of social media, work hand-in-hand with influencers, and use AI to enhance creativity rather than replace it. The future of marketing will be built on **community, transparency, and a deeper understanding of the human side of technology**.

We're excited to share these findings with you with the hope that they'll inspire fresh ideas and play a key role in shaping the strategies that will define the future... or at least spark some meaningful conversations.

Thank you for taking the time to explore this journey with us.

And if you want to chat, you know where to find us ;)

Marta Nicolás,
Co-Founder at SAMY





The Future of Marketing Is a Playlist!



Hear the Future Here!

How will social marketing sound in 2026? Our SAMYs around the world have added their favorite tracks to **this playlist**, reflecting some of the trends in the report.

Most notably, the growing demand for authenticity. And the music going viral today mirrors this shift perfectly. Sure, quick-hit, viral tracks still create those shared cultural moments. But there's also a growing appetite for songs that take their time – sounds that feel intentional, sincere, and meaningful.

This is about connecting with genuine art – where audiences reward creativity that takes risks and steps outside the obvious path.

This playlist isn't just background music. It's a guide to where the culture is headed, mixing global icons that always resonate (like Taylor Swift) with boundary-pushing tracks (like Rosalía's non-commercial experimentation) that unexpectedly capture the world's attention.

This is the **Main Character Energy** that successful brands will need to harness in 2026.





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**All the underlined texts in the document are clickable links.*

01. Intro

CMOs: Cultural Architects in the AI Era

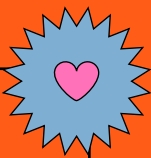
What do we cover?

- + Marketer's core qualities in 2026.
- + Critical marketing KPIs.
- + Marketing budgets.
- + Forecast from industry leaders.

Across the industry, balancing **AI automation with human authenticity** is emerging as a top challenge for 2026. As AI continues to dominate marketing technology, the tension between automated efficiency and genuine customer connection is intensifying.

Marketers will need to leverage AI tools strategically while preserving the human touch that builds trust and engagement. That means finding the right balance between powerful algorithms and authentic interactions in today's culture, beyond trends and into behaviours, while delivering results.

Experts need a global understanding, but also know what cultural nuances shape each community. By uncovering the attitudes, emotions, and patterns behind universal themes – across different geographies and languages – and doing so with creativity rooted in audience truths CMOs can create more meaningful connections.



“THE CMO OF 2026 IS A GROWTH STRATEGIST, CONNECTING CREATIVITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN INSIGHT TO DRIVE IMPACT.”

Belén Pardo, Growth Managing Director at SAMY Iberia

An Expert in Multi-Channel Storytelling

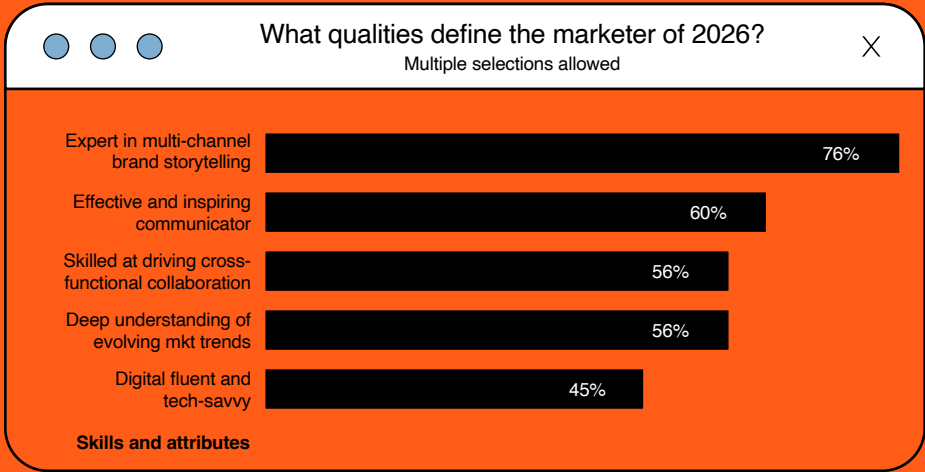
YoY, Leadership Visibility Climbs

This year’s SAMY survey of global CMOs reveals the qualities that will define the marketer of 2026. Respondents ranked **multi-channel brand storytelling first** (76%), referring to the ability to connect a brand’s message and values with culture and

people through creative narratives that drive commercial impact across every channel.

The next most important capabilities are effective communication (60%) and cross-functional collaboration (56%).

These traits mirror 2025’s findings, but with subtle evolution: **“Strong public speaker”** – a proxy for visibility and influence – has grown from the last position to the second place in 2026.



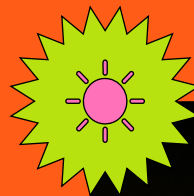
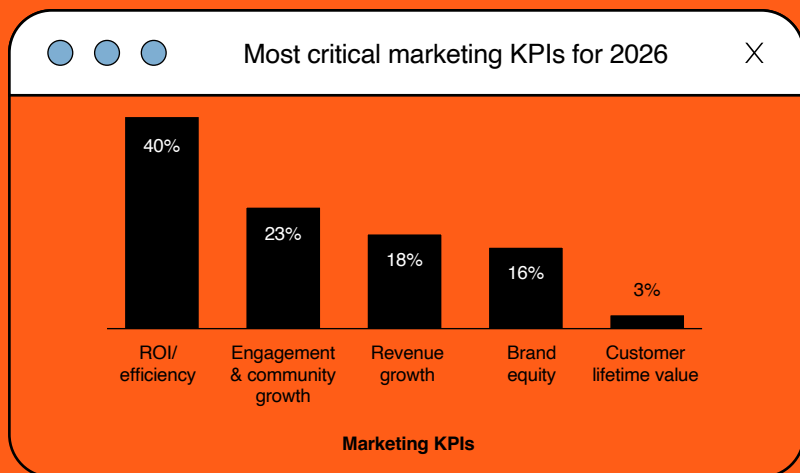
Storytelling remains (YoY) the top skill for modern marketers, followed by communication and collaboration. Multiple Choice Allowed | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026

YoY Comparison: Leadership Needs Visibility		WHY EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY MATTERS? A HubSpot Guide
Last year, only 17% cited public speaking as a key capability. By 2026, that percentage rises to 60% for identifying inspiring communicators, signaling a renewed emphasis on leadership visibility and human connection.	CMOs need to share their insights and expertise, with value and authenticity at the core, especially on platforms like LinkedIn , where employee-shared content generates 7x more engagement than company pages.	

ROI Remains the Top Marketing Priority

Community Growth Is Gaining Momentum

ROI continues to dominate boardroom conversations, with 40% naming it their top KPI for 2026 – ahead of engagement and community growth (23%) and revenue (19%).



ROI remains the dominant metric year over year, but engagement and community growth are increasingly recognized as strategic KPIs. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026

Yet the priorities behind those numbers are shifting. **ROI is no longer just financial; it's cultural.** CMOs are measuring value not only in conversions but in connection: how brands influence conversation, foster trust, and sustain loyalty.

The best-performing channels are those where **creativity meets conversion**, and where culture, community, and commerce overlap.

ROI Isn't the Only Marketing Challenge

Growing In-House Data Expertise

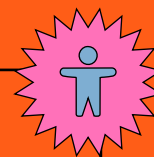
Beyond ROI, marketers face growing data challenges: limited in-house expertise, slow and costly internal processes, and a lack of proprietary technology — all of which hinder their ability to generate timely, actionable insights.

+ **Lack of in-house expertise and data skills** – 42% report this as a key gap in their social listening and research capabilities, making it the top challenge in gathering actionable insights.

+ **High costs and time-consuming internal processes** – 40% cite this as a major barrier, preventing teams from conducting effective research and analysis at the pace and scale needed.

+ Another challenge for marketers is the absence of **proprietary technology**.

Turning insight into intelligence requires both human and technological alignment, connecting analysts, strategists, and creatives.



“COMBINING HUMAN DATA ANALYSIS
WITH CREATIVE THINKING KEEPS
MARKETING STRATEGIES IN SYNC
WITH FAST-CHANGING CONSUMER
EXPECTATIONS AND CULTURAL TRENDS”

Paula Irigaray, Global Head of Research & Insights at SAMY

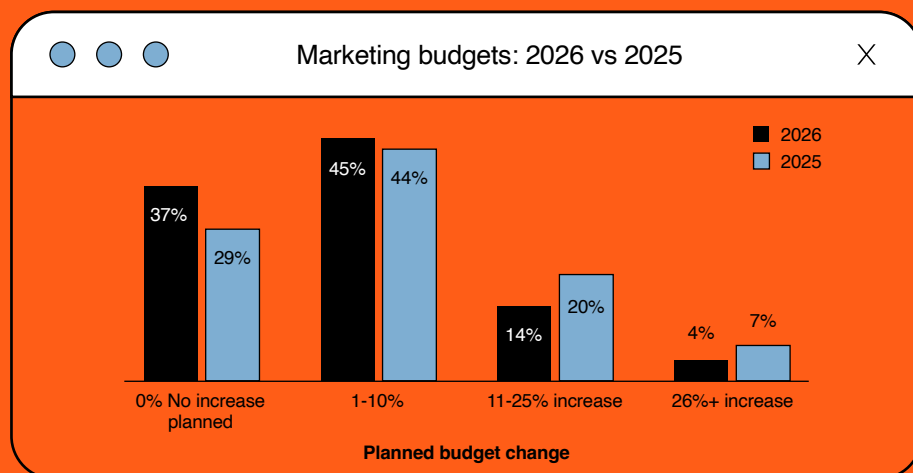
Marketing Budgets

Where Will the Money Go
in 2026?



The challenge isn't budget size; it's efficiency. CMOs are under pressure to stretch resources across fragmented channels, integrate AI tools, and maintain consistent creativity. The modern CMO's success lies in balancing productivity with purpose – ensuring that technology amplifies creative and cultural impact not just output.

From 2025 to 2026, marketing budgets show a shift toward caution. The share of respondents planning “no increase” rises from 29% to 37%, while those expecting modest 1-10% growth remain stable at around 45%. Overall, companies appear more conservative in 2026, with fewer planning significant increases and more maintaining current budgets.



The share of respondents planning “no increase” rises from 29% to 37% in 2026. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026

AI Implementation Will See the Highest Increase in Investment

Creativity Follows Closely

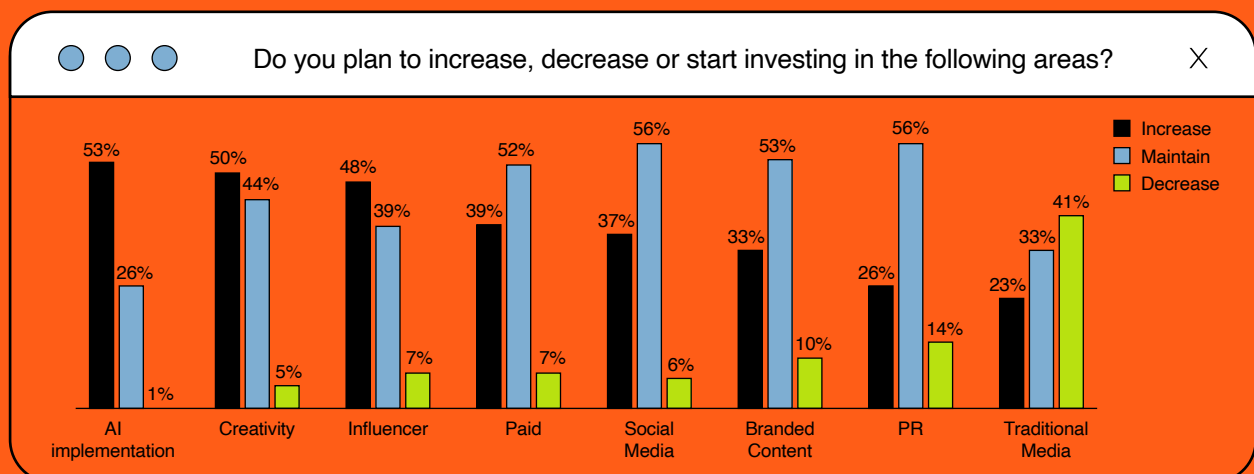
Marketers are doubling down on AI implementation in 2026. More than half name it their top investment area, while more than 50% are adopting AI for the first time. Creativity follows closely at 50% – a reminder that **AI and creativity now go hand in hand**.

Influencer marketing continues to grow, with 48% of marketers planning to increase their budgets. The industry is projected to **reach \$250 billion** by 2027, though challenges remain, as we will explore in the influencer marketing section.

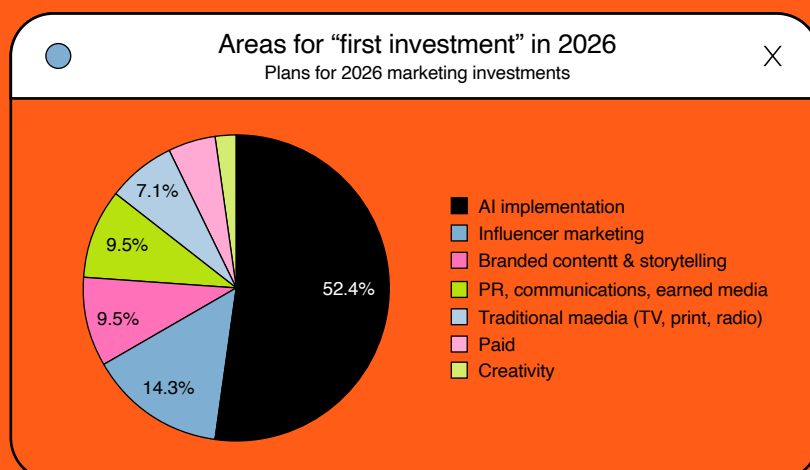
Social and earned media remain essential for reputation and connection, with 56% maintaining spend in 2026. Meanwhile, traditional media faces the biggest cuts (41%) as budgets shift to digital channels with stronger targeting, measurement, and ROI. Paid media investment is also trending downward compared to last year.

As consumers shift away from traditional search and browsing to AI-powered answer engines, marketers find fewer opportunities to reach audiences through conventional paid channels.

Many are redirecting budgets toward more cost-effective tactics like organic search, email, and content marketing, or moving away from saturated platforms altogether.



The top investment areas in 2026 will be AI, Creativity, and Influencer Marketing, with Paid Media, Social, and Branded Content also remaining key priorities for CMOs. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026



Over 50% of CMOs plan to invest in AI “for the first time”, followed by influencer marketing at 14% | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.



“AI-DRIVEN PRODUCTION NOW GIVES EVERY BRAND ACCESS TO THE KIND OF HIGH-LEVEL CONTENT THAT WAS ONCE OUT OF REACH. THEY CAN CREATE MORE ASSETS, FASTER, AND EXPERIMENT FREELY, BUT WITHOUT A STRATEGIC AND CREATIVE FRAMEWORK THAT BUILDS THE BRAND AND TRULY RESONATES WITH PEOPLE, IT ALL BECOMES MEANINGLESS.”

Santiago Lucero, Global Chief Creative Officer at SAMY

Top Industry Voices

At SAMY, we love learning from the industry. For the first time, we've gathered voices from brands across sectors to share their bold predictions for 2026, from the evolution of trust to the pursuit of meaningful ROI.

"WHEN ASKED WHAT A CEO EXPECTS FROM MARKETING PROFESSIONALS, THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE: MASTERY OF EFFICIENCY AND OPTIMIZATION, A DEEP AND AUTHENTIC CONNECTION WITH CONSUMERS, AND AN UNWAVERING FOCUS ON DELIVERING MEANINGFUL ROI."

L'Oréal Spain & Portugal

Amaia Iraundegui, Head of Advocacy & Influencer Marketing

"OUR MISSION WILL BE TO DRIVE MEANINGFUL IMPACT IN PEOPLE'S LIVES WHILE ENSURING SUSTAINABLE RELEVANCE, DEEPENING LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES AND CREATORS, AND EMBRACING MICRO-INFLUENCERS WHO AMPLIFY AUTHENTICITY AND TRUST."

Coca-Cola Europe

Marta Carreras, Creative Brand Director

"I BELIEVE THAT COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ENTERTAINMENT WILL BE CORE FOR MARKETING AND COMMS IN 2026. PEOPLE ARE SEARCHING FOR REAL-LIFE STORIES, LESS FAKERY."

INEOS Automotive

Nikolai Attard, Global Senior Brand Manager

"MARKETING WILL BE LESS ABOUT SENDING MESSAGES AND MORE ABOUT CREATING AUTHENTIC, PERSONALIZED EXPERIENCES. SOCIAL MEDIA WILL BE KEY, HELPING ATTRACT NEW CUSTOMERS WHILE DEEPENING LOYALTY AND TRUST WITH EXISTING ONES."

Telefónica Germany

Nadine Zich, Senior Manager Social Media & Marketing

"THE USE OF AI AGENTS WILL ELEVATE MARKETERS' WORK, TRANSFORMING EVERYTHING FROM UNCOVERING INSIGHTS TO CREATING CONTENT, MAKING THE PROCESS FASTER, SMARTER, AND MORE EFFICIENT."

Unilever

Javier Kolliker, Marketing Director B&W

"RESPONSIBLE USE OF AI TOOLS WILL BE ESSENTIAL FOR CREATIVELY CONNECTING WITH AUDIENCES, WHILE BUILDING GENUINE COMMUNITIES OF CUSTOMERS, AS BRAND VALIDATORS WILL BE KEY TO STRENGTHENING MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES."

Mazda Colombia

Andrés Paredes, Communications Manager

"AI AND HUMAN CREATIVITY WILL MERGE TO DELIVER HYPER-PERSONALIZED CONTENT, WHILE BRANDS INVEST IN SOCIAL-FIRST, PURPOSE-DRIVEN STORYTELLING, EMPOWERING INFLUENCERS AND BUILDING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY TRUST."

AliExpress Spain & Italy

Luis Martin, Social Media & KOL Manager

"SOCIAL WILL SHIFT FROM AWARENESS TO CONVERSION, POWERED BY CONTENT THAT DRIVES RELEVANCE AND PURCHASE. DATA-LED RETAIL MEDIA WILL BRIDGE INTEREST AND ACTION, AND THE WINNERS WILL TURN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION INTO REAL GROWTH."

Saputo UK

Al Edgar-Flynn, Global Senior Brand Manager

"SOCIAL TEAMS MUST DRIVE INNOVATION AND DELIVER MEASURABLE IMPACT, PROVING THAT SOCIAL GOES BEYOND ENGAGEMENT, WHILE BUILDING TRUST THROUGH TRANSPARENCY AND PURPOSE-LED STORYTELLING."

Miravia

Itziar Llano, Head of Social Media

"IN LUXURY HOSPITALITY, STANDING OUT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING BECAUSE WE ALL SAY THE SAME THINGS. HAVING BRAND AMBASSADORS LIKE RAFA NADAL HELPS US BUILD OUR UNIQUE BRAND, AND WHEN RAFA DINES AT OUR RESTAURANT, IT'S PACKED THE NEXT DAY. IT'S BOTH BRAND AND PERFORMANCE."

Meliá, Luxury Brands

Emma Cerdà Salom, Sr. Brand Marketing Manager

"SOCIAL COMMERCE PLATFORMS LIKE TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM WILL SEE SIGNIFICANT GROWTH IN 2026, WITH PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLING USERS TO PURCHASE PRODUCTS DIRECTLY WITHIN FEEDS OR VIDEOS, WITHOUT EVER LEAVING THE PLATFORM."

Leroy Merlin

Sergio Vicente, Brand & Comms Director

"SEEING SOCIAL MEDIA AS JUST ANOTHER PLACE TO RUN ADS IS A MISTAKE. WHAT REALLY NURTURES A COMMUNITY (AND GETS AMPLIFIED) IS RELEVANT, VALUABLE CONTENT THAT STAYS CONSISTENT AND MAKES SENSE IN AN INCREASINGLY FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE."

Grefusa Spain

Rafael Gandía, Head of Marketing and Communications

"JACK DANIEL'S IS SHIFTING TOWARDS A COMMUNITY-DRIVEN STRATEGY, MOVING BEYOND ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION TO SPEAK ABOUT WHAT TRULY MATTERS TO CONSUMERS, CREATING CONTINUITY AND MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS INSTEAD OF ONE-OFF CAMPAIGNS. THAT'S GOING TO BE KEY FOR BRAND STRATEGIES NEXT YEAR."

Jack Daniel's Iberia

Irene Company, Brand Manager

"DIGITAL TEAMS SHOULD BE RELENTLESS IN ANALYZING WEBSITE AND APP DATA TO OPTIMIZE THE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE AND PERSONALIZE COMMUNICATION THROUGH CHANNELS LIKE NEWSLETTERS AND PUSH NOTIFICATIONS. AT THE SAME TIME, WE MUST NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE VALUE OF CONSUMER FEEDBACK AND SOCIAL LISTENING TO DEVELOP BETTER PRODUCTS, CONTENT, AND EXPERIENCES THAT TRULY RESONATE."

Papa John's Iberia

María Estrela, Marketing Director

"INFLUENCERS WILL INCREASINGLY ACT AS STRATEGIC PARTNERS. WHILE THEY CAN AMPLIFY SPECIFIC CAMPAIGNS, THE REAL LONG-TERM IMPACT COMES FROM BRAND AMBASSADORS. WHEN YOU LAYER IN EXCLUSIVE COLLABORATIONS WITH TOP-TIER CREATORS, YOU UNLOCK LARGE-SCALE PARTNERSHIPS THAT GENERATE AUTHENTIC AND ORGANIC REACH."

MediaMarkt Spain

Marta Dominguez, Head of Marketing

02. Social Media + Social Commerce

The Discovery Ecosystem

What do we cover?

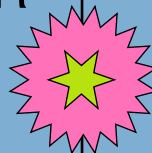
- + Social Media Section: Relevance as the new ROI, integration, Social & AI SEO, organic growth, community building, trends, and best-in-class social-first strategies.
- + Social Commerce (SoCom) Section: The infinite loop, the conversion challenge, discovery commerce, and leading formats.

Social Media Relevance Becomes the ROI

Audiences don't reward content volume; they reward **context**. The strongest brands next year will prove they understand cultural moments and speak the language of their communities rather than just chasing trends.

This shift toward **social-first thinking** isn't just tactical; it's strategic, requiring brands to reimagine how they connect with audiences from the ground up. Social media stays at the heart of brand strategy – a space where brands, creators, and communities intersect to shape culture and perception in real time.

“IN A CLIMATE OF CONSUMER SKEPTICISM TOWARD CORPORATE MESSAGES, INFLUENCERS, CELEBRITIES, AND TIKTOKERS ARE THE VOICES THAT TRULY MATTER.”



Fernando Fernández, Unilever CEO

Social-First Marketing

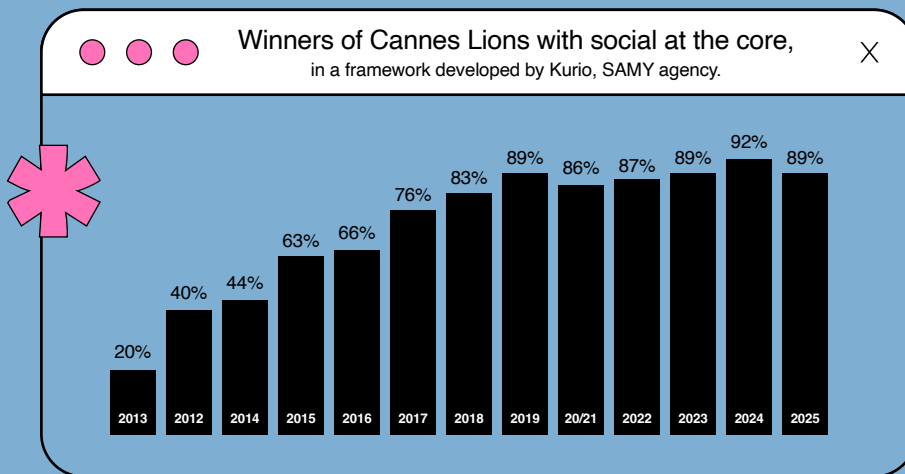
When Social is the Primary Engine

Our Cannes Lions 2025

analysis, based on more than 320 award-winning campaigns, shows that social-first strategies powered 89%. Influencer-led ideas, real-time activations, user-generated content (UGC), and purpose-driven storytelling stood

out as key drivers of success.

In 2026, the brands that leaned into **authenticity and community participation** will deliver the highest levels of engagement and cultural impact.



Verified Vaseline (Unilever)

The Power of Community Listening

The campaign highlighted user-shared Vaseline hacks (3.5M of posts), with scientists endorsing the best tips as #VaselineVerified. A true gem of social-first thinking and doing!

Burberry

TikTok-First Thinking

Their collaboration with creators like Bus Auntie Beml shows how brands can lean into familiarity, letting creators position themselves as those online 'aunties' or 'uncles' we all trust.

The North Face and Transgrancanaria

At the Speed of Culture

SAMY UK conceptualized multiple social-first content series, combining live activations and real-time race-day storytelling that brought the event to life for global audiences.

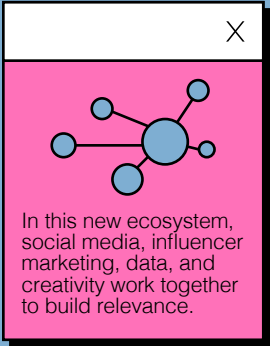
“SOCIAL MEDIA LIVES AND BREATHES REAL TIME. THE WINNERS DON'T CHASE SPONTANEITY; THEY PLAN SMART, EMBRACE REAL-TIME RELEVANCE, AND USE IT TO AMPLIFY EVERY CAMPAIGN MOMENT.”

Jari Lähdevuori, Executive Creative Director at SAMY

Surpassing the Idea of the Funnel

To build real relationships, brands must shift from advertising-first to human-first thinking; from the funnel to the **social media ecosystem**. Traditional marketing relies on siloed, one-size-fits-all campaigns designed only for awareness or performance.

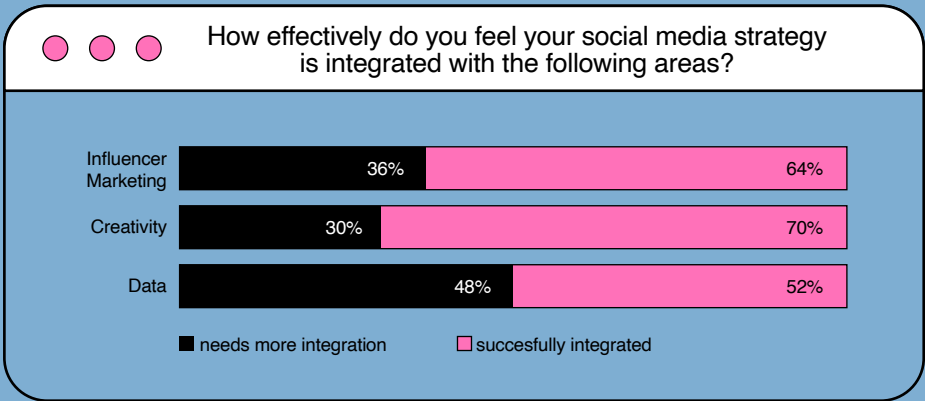
Modern marketing creates connected, adaptable experiences across the entire journey. Because people and culture move fast, marketing must keep pace, forming a continuous loop of engagement where audiences discover, interact, purchase, and ultimately become long-term advocates.



Fixing the Social-Data Gap

In the social universe, integration is key—and the SAMY survey shows signs of progress. Creativity (70%) and influencer marketing (64%) are already well-aligned with the overall social strategy. However, half of marketers still see room for **improvement in data integration**.

This points to a growing tension within marketing organizations. While creativity and community engagement are thriving on social platforms, measurement, reporting, and cross-team collaboration continue to lag.

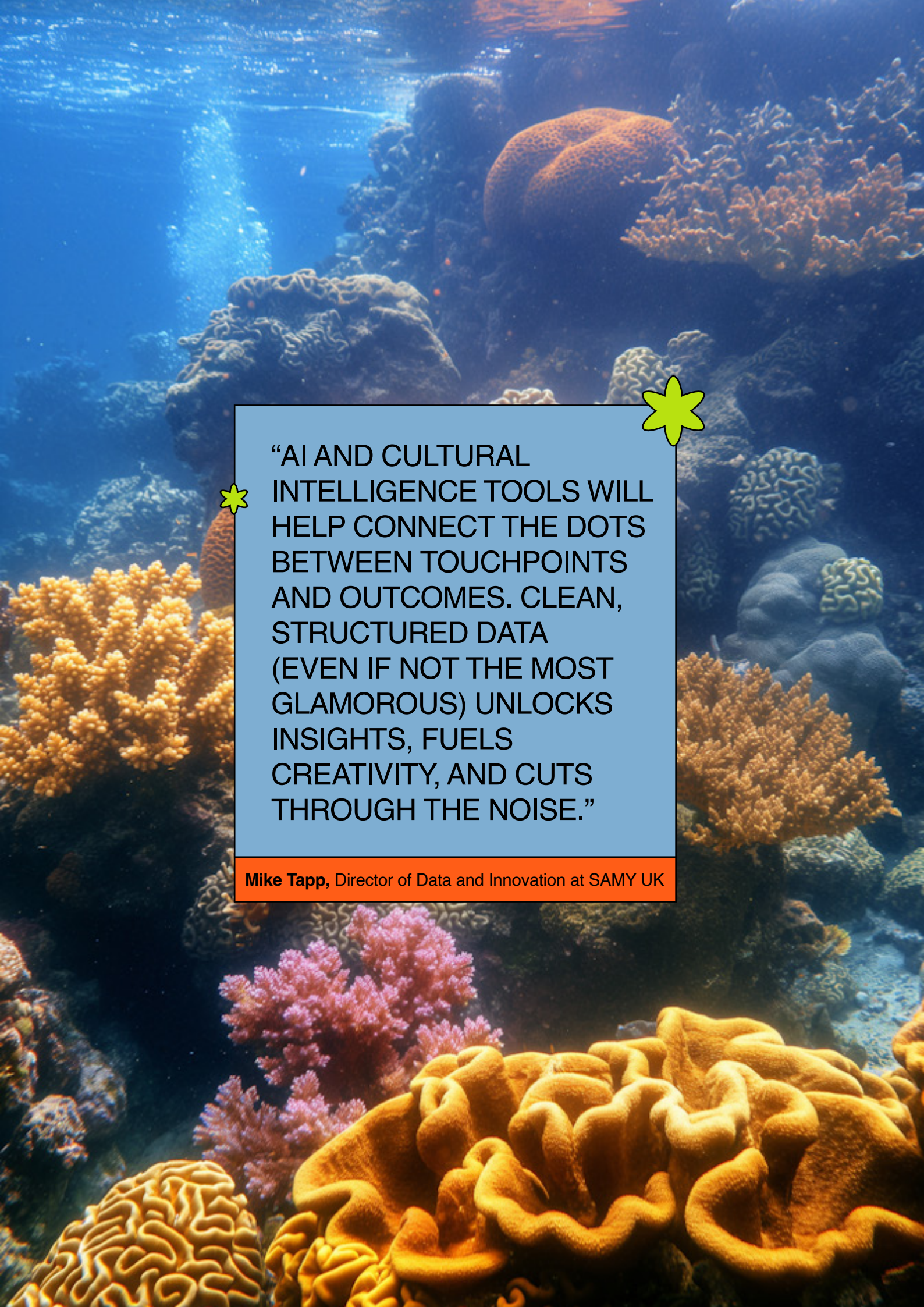


Survey results show that data and social media are the pillars that require greater integration: Half of marketers still see room for improvement | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.

Also, four in ten CMOs cite inconsistent data and unclear ROI as the top barriers to making that integration happen, followed by organizational silos (26%) and technology or AI limitations (20%).

According to Forbes, progress will depend on **data-fluent teams** and senior marketers who can connect social insights with wider company KPIs.



A vibrant underwater scene featuring a diverse coral reef. In the foreground, there are large, yellowish-orange brain corals and a cluster of pinkish-purple branching corals. The background shows more varied coral structures in shades of orange, brown, and blue, with sunlight filtering down from the surface, creating a blue gradient and some light rays.

“AI AND CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE TOOLS WILL HELP CONNECT THE DOTS BETWEEN TOUCHPOINTS AND OUTCOMES. CLEAN, STRUCTURED DATA (EVEN IF NOT THE MOST GLAMOROUS) UNLOCKS INSIGHTS, FUELS CREATIVITY, AND CUTS THROUGH THE NOISE.”

Mike Tapp, Director of Data and Innovation at SAMY UK

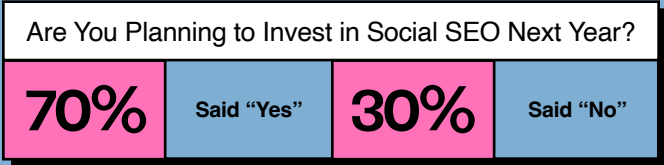
Social SEO:

70% of CMOs Will Invest

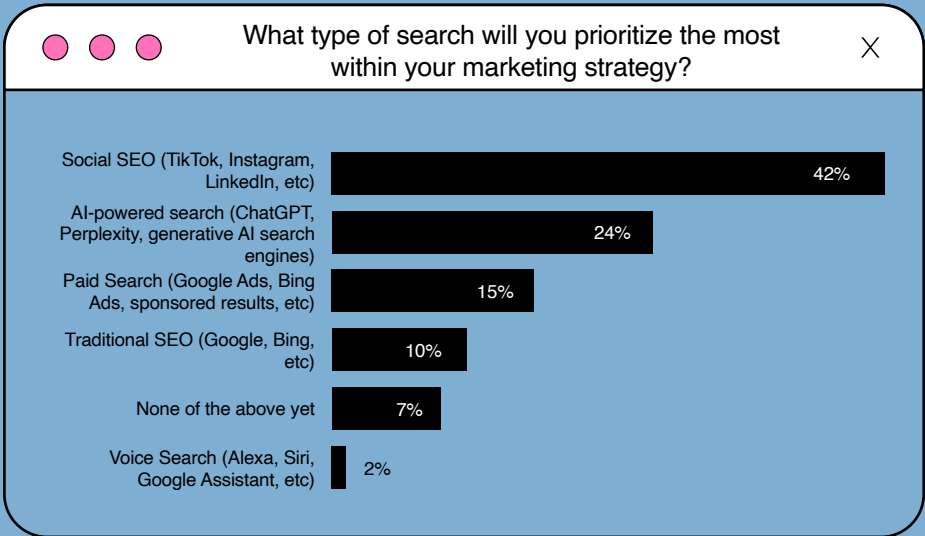
Media platforms are redefining the rules of engagement in the algorithmic age, prioritizing content that resonates in an **environment of constant exploration**. They have shifted from enabling peer-to-peer socializing and consumption to fueling global interaction and discovery.

When we need answers, where do we really go and search first? Exactly: Social and AI discovery will be critical for brands to show up at the exact moment consumers are searching.

CMOs increasingly see Social and AI as hidden growth engines behind brand performance — and 70% plan to invest in social SEO initiatives next year.



Regarding **brand search priorities**, 42% of marketers plan to focus on Social SEO on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn, followed by AI-powered search engines such as ChatGPT or Perplexity.



Social SEO rises to the top of search priorities for marketers (42%), ahead of AI-powered and paid search (24%). | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.

How TikTok is redefining discovery

Read the article



The New Rules of Discovery:



Discovery power shift:

Audiences no longer start with Google; they're finding brands through TikTok search, Instagram explore, and other feed-first environments.



Efficiency erosion:

When users turn to ChatGPT or Gemini for answers, they bypass websites entirely, eroding the efficiency of traditional marketing funnels.



High-stakes funnel:

AI is moving toward embedded buy buttons inside answers, making discoverability not just important, but critical for revenue.

The Good News

Organic is no longer guesswork.

With professional community management, social listening, platform-native analytics, and AI-driven optimization models, discoverability can be engineered, measured, and scaled.

Organic Brands Are Rewarded

Algorithms reward what is relevant and fresh, which means **organic content must be sharp**. Only well-structured, credible content gets surfaced. Brands must be highly intentional with everything they publish because visibility is earned, not given.

Their challenge in 2026 will be to create memorable moments that are culturally shaped, creatively executed, entertaining, and in many cases, shoppable.

And please, don't get us wrong: paid media with influencer marketing is still a perfect instant boom for CMOs: trackable, addictive, and fast results delivered. But here's the reality:

"WHEN PAID, INFLUENCER, AND ORGANIC DON'T WORK TOGETHER, VISIBILITY COLLAPSES THE MOMENT THE SPEND STOPS."

Camila Tribin, Global Head of Social Media at SAMY



Gymshark

When Organic Beats Paid

Before

Grew through influencers and paid bursts.
Rising CPMs risked stagnation.

Shift

Pivoted to organic-first challenges like #Gymshark66, with paid used only to amplify winning content.

The outcome

Millions of organic views. Paid became a multiplier, not the engine.

Pro Tip

Audit where your brand actually shows up, speak your audience's language by matching captions and headlines to the exact terms they're already searching for ('how to style X jacket' rather than 'winter outerwear guide'), design every post for interaction, make your content easy to discover, and fuel your engine with creators who drive real engagement.

gymshark

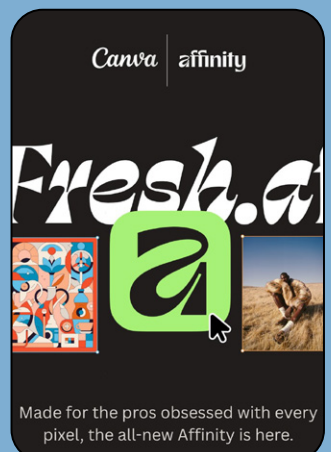
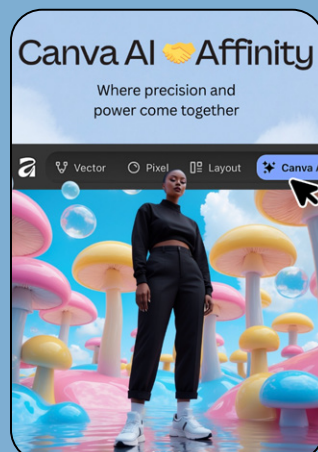


#gymshark66



Canva frequently shares concise, educational design tips in a conversational tone, matching how users naturally search for information on the platform. Canva's Instagram uses SEO-driven captions and relevant hashtags to improve discoverability, reflecting the trend of social media acting as a search engine.

canva



Want to know more about
Social & AI SEO?

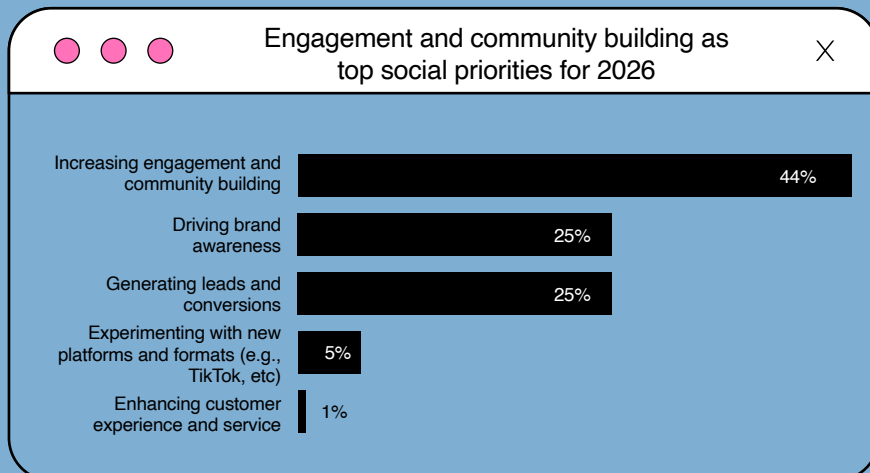
Download our best report on the topic

Social Media Priorities

Connecting with the Community

What's the single biggest social media priority for 2026?

Community and engagement now outrank lead generation and brand awareness – proof that social strategy is maturing beyond surface metrics. Nearly half of CMOs (44%) say their top priority for 2026 is building and nurturing online communities, marking a shift from transactional communication to emotional belonging.



For nearly half of marketers, increasing engagement and building community is their top priority for social media next year. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.

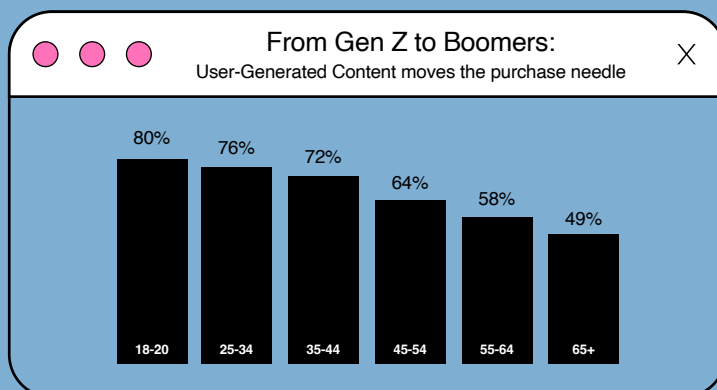
Priority #1 Community Building

Across industries, In Real Life (IRL) communities are rising — hybrid spaces where digital fandom meets real-world experience. Brands are merging online energy with offline connection through pop-ups, creator meetups, gaming collabs, and social-led loyalty. Here, participation becomes the product: value comes from how people show up and co-create.

Championing **community-led content** will be crucial for brands. Consumers want connections that go beyond likes. They ask for real moments where products, hobbies,

passions, lifestyles, and crazy ideas intersect. Communities aren't just engaging; they're **building culture**, shaping narratives, and turning everyday people into micro media machines.

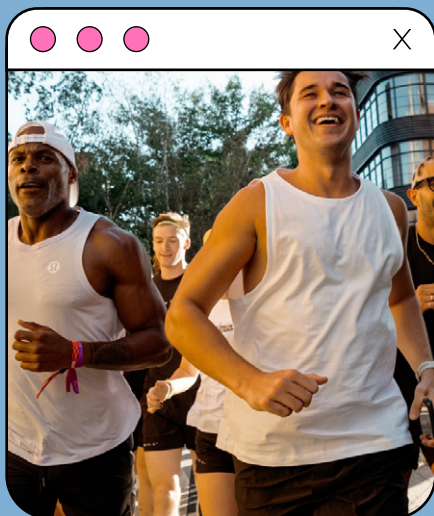
According to our latest **Cannes Lions analysis**, 37% of social category winners tapped into **user-generated content**. Activating communities at scale is never simple, but the momentum is clearly building — a promising sign for brands aiming to stay authentic in a rapidly evolving landscape.



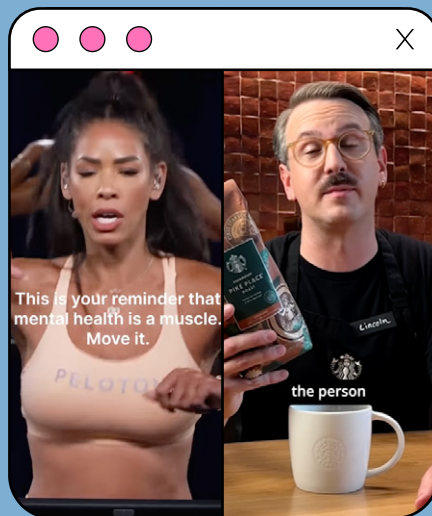
Share of shoppers considering user-generated content (UGC), by age group. | Source: Statista



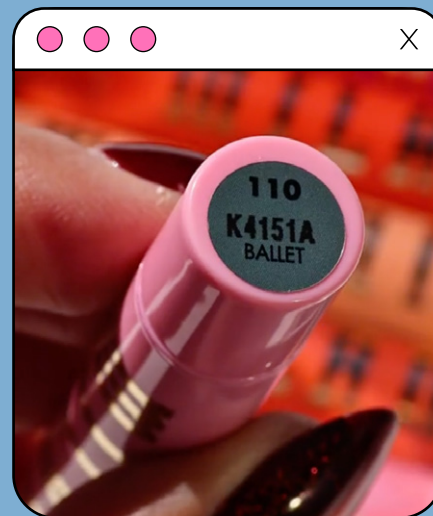
Fan-Driven Storytelling in Action



Lululemon organizes local events to turn stores into community hubs. And, of course, it all plays out on social media.



Empowering employees: **Peloton instructors** embody the brand, while **Starbucks** turns staff into passionate brand advocates.



Milani has built a strong reputation around creator-led campaigns and value-first access.

“COMMUNITY ISN’T JUST AN AUDIENCE. IT’S A TWO-WAY STREET. THE BRANDS THAT WIN ARE THE ONES DELIVERING REAL VALUE, SUPPORTING THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE THEIR COMMUNITIES THRIVE, AND AVOIDING ANYTHING THAT FEELS PERFORMATIVE.”

Paul Hickey, Managing Director at SAMY.

“BY 2026, RELEVANCE WILL BE THE NEW ROI. SUCCESS WON’T BE MEASURED BY REACH OR FREQUENCY, BUT BY HOW DEEPLY A BRAND UNDERSTANDS ITS AUDIENCE, WHAT MOVES THEM, CONNECTS WITH THEM, AND EARNS A PLACE IN THEIR EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS.”

Sara Davies, Social Media Manager at SAMY UK

Five More Social Media Trends

To Connect with Communities in 2026

Jumping on social media trends is a smart (but not the only) way to build cultural relevance. We asked our Social Media teams in Spain, the UK,

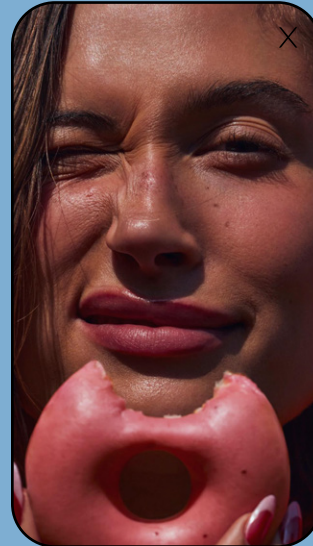
Finland, US and Mexico which other trends best connect with cultural codes on each platform, and this is what came up:

Trend #1

Familiarity isn't just comfort; it's currency on TikTok. On short-form video, standing out starts with being instantly recognizable. The smartest brands own a format, a feeling, or a sound that's unmistakably theirs.

Rhode owns the feeling of 'Glazed Donut Skin' and a clean, neutral-toned aesthetic.

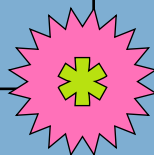
Red Bull is immediately identifiable by evoking the feeling of extreme adrenaline and awe-inducing action.



Trend #2

The era of **copy-and-paste content** is over. Brands need to think of each platform as a different social setting: the story stays the same, but the tone shifts. Instagram is your portfolio; Threads is your group chat. The key is designing stories that flex naturally across platforms.

Loewe maintains a consistent core story of art and craftsmanship while successfully using a polished, high-aesthetic tone on **Instagram** and an unscripted, humorous 'low-fi' tone on **TikTok** to suit each platform's unique social setting.



Trend #3

Purpose-driven entertainment.

Laughter is universal, so lean into it. Game-show-style formats are thriving, like the **Big Silly Trivia Game**: prize-filled, pop-culture-driven, and more like a group chat with stakes than a marketing ploy.



Trend #4

Have fun with design. Instagram is becoming a playground for creativity again. Creators and brands are experimenting with design and turning familiar interfaces into something unexpected. Remember that visuals are everything. Capture the “aha” moment of products with the most eye-catching before/after footage.

Jacquemus: Its success is not based on following current trends, but on executing their own unique visual blueprint: high-quality, emotionally resonant surrealism. They turn Instagram into a playful design lab, blending fashion, humor, and surrealism through CGI and AI-driven content.



Trend #5

Tone doesn't always need to be the “loudest”. Global Pinterest searches for neutral dressing, quiet interiors, and soft minimalism have grown by 58%. On TikTok, trends like #plaincore, #cleanlook, and #normalpeopleaesthetic are gaining momentum. Spotify reflects the same mood with playlists like “music for doing nothing”.

Museo del Prado's Instagram embodies a calm, unhurried tone through softly lit visuals, thoughtful captions, and educational storytelling that invite slow contemplation rather than quick consumption.



Priority#2 Conversion and Brand Awareness

As community strategies mature, CMOs are also looking for ways to translate engagement into tangible business results. In 2026, conversion and brand awareness each capture one in four votes as a top priority in social media.

This dual focus reflects the convergence of two forces – social commerce and creator-led discovery. Conversations are the new storefronts. Purchase decisions are increasingly shaped within social environments where awareness, validation, and transaction must coexist.

The best-performing channels are those where creativity meets conversion, and where culture, community, and commerce overlap.



Social Platforms Driving ROI and Creativity

Meta Leads, but TikTok is the Engagement Champion

With over 5.4 billion active users across social platforms (**Sprout Social**), marketing success now depends on how well brands adapt to each network's unique behavior, format, and role in the consumer journey.



Meta still leads with **65.8% of global ad spend**, proving that scale and smart automation continue to pay off. Its AI-powered placements **deliver 4% more clicks and 3.8%** more conversions.



YouTube Shorts and Pinterest are gaining ground too, turning discovery into purchase moments. Pinterest users are now 1.4 times more likely to shop after seeing product content.



LinkedIn remains the B2B connection hub. Multi-image posts on LinkedIn pull **6.6%** engagement, native documents **5.85%**, and videos 5.6%.



TikTok remains the engagement champion. Creators can reach engagement rates up to 7.5%, and ads perform about **2.4 times better** than traditional display campaigns.

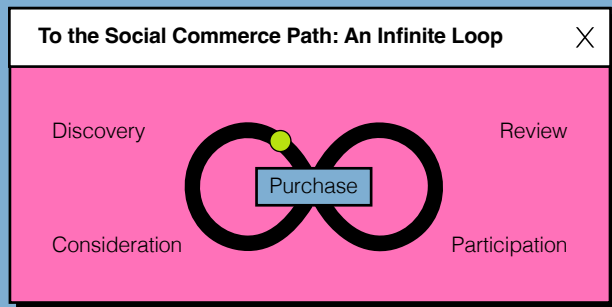
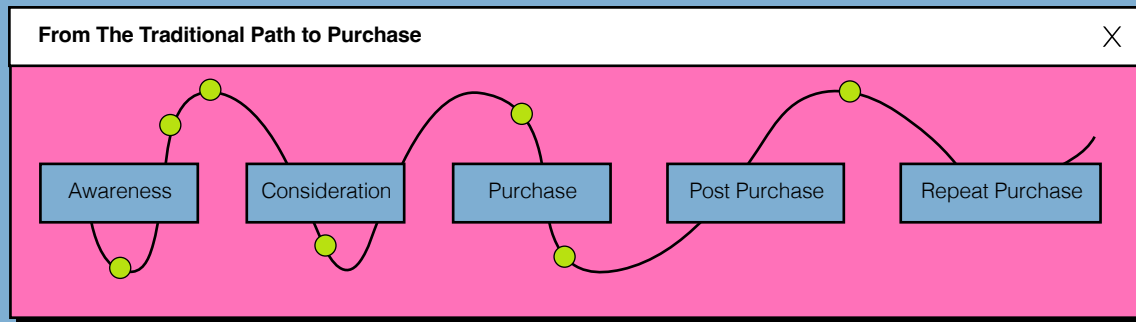
Combining this focus on conversion with your CEO's likely expectations for social media ROI, it's time to talk social commerce.

Social Commerce

The Need for Acceleration

Today, social media isn't just about attention; it's about action. This is the essence of the social-first customer journey: connection drives discovery, creators drive trust, and communities drive conversion. Whether through live shopping

streams, creator recommendations, or frictionless in-app checkout, social platforms have evolved into full-funnel ecosystems that merge storytelling and sales.

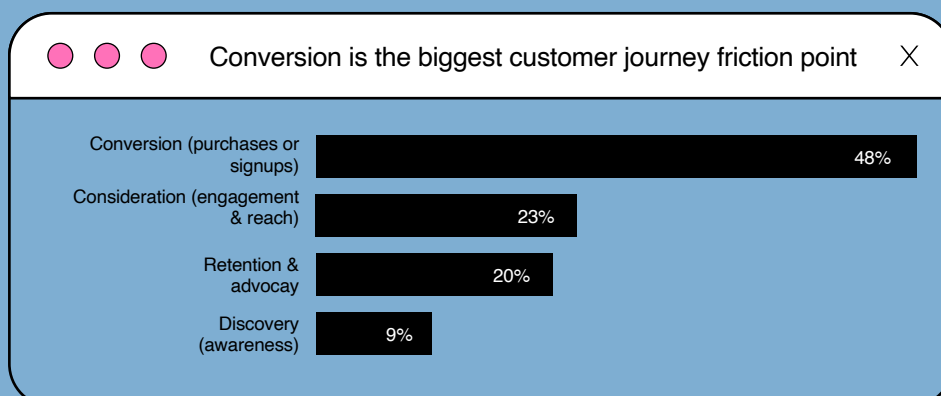


The Conversion Challenge

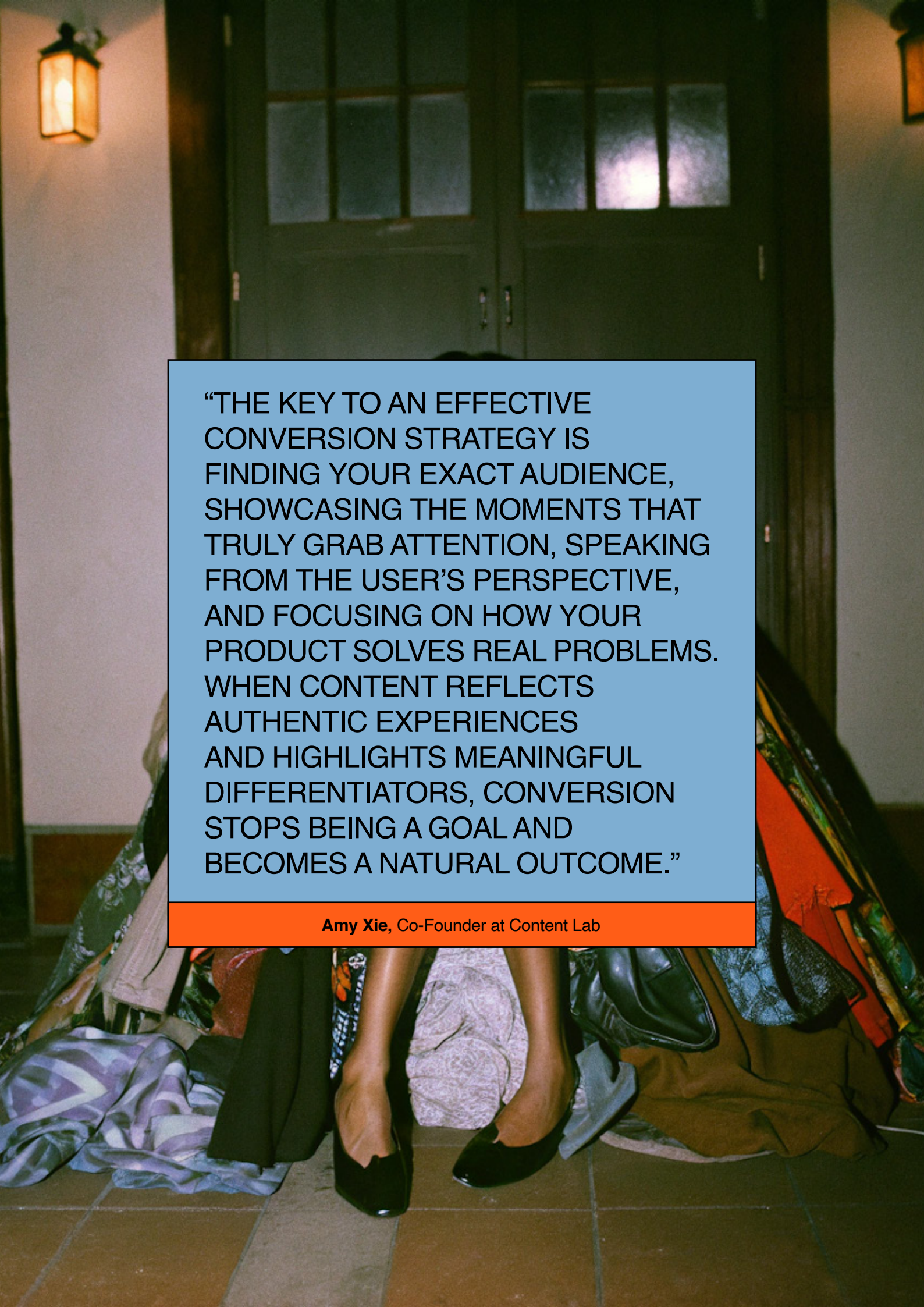
Or the Big Opportunity?

Even with new formats and investments, **conversion remains the toughest stage** in the social media customer journey. Nearly half (48%) of marketers in our survey say conversion – whether purchases or sign-ups – is their biggest friction point, far ahead of consideration (23%) or retention (20%).

Conversion remains the make-or-break metric for social commerce success, but also the biggest opportunity for brands to evolve from awareness campaigns to **commerce-driven storytelling**.



Final purchases or sign-ups remain the biggest points of friction in the social media customer journey. Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.



“THE KEY TO AN EFFECTIVE
CONVERSION STRATEGY IS
FINDING YOUR EXACT AUDIENCE,
SHOWCASING THE MOMENTS THAT
TRULY GRAB ATTENTION, SPEAKING
FROM THE USER’S PERSPECTIVE,
AND FOCUSING ON HOW YOUR
PRODUCT SOLVES REAL PROBLEMS.
WHEN CONTENT REFLECTS
AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES
AND HIGHLIGHTS MEANINGFUL
DIFFERENTIATORS, CONVERSION
STOPS BEING A GOAL AND
BECOMES A NATURAL OUTCOME.”

Amy Xie, Co-Founder at Content Lab

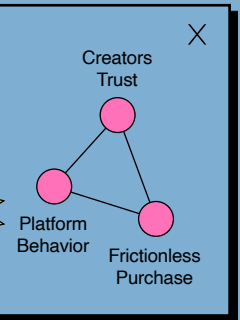
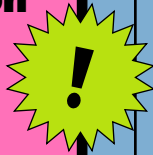
For CMOs, the top 3 barriers to conversion are:

- + Difficulty tracking ROI (47%).
- + Poor integration between social and e-commerce platforms (31%).
- + Low brand trust or credibility (14%).

So, what is the formula behind magic?

Trust + Behavior + Seamless Checkout = Conversion

Trust drives intent.
Behavior creates opportunity.
Seamless checkout removes friction.



Brands still have room to grow and unlock the full potential of this channel. From our survey, 33% of marketers confessed they are not doing social commerce yet, the same figure as last year.

Among the brands that have already integrated social commerce into their marketing strategy, these are the **formats** they find most successful:

01. Influence to commerce (affiliate programs).

02. Shoppable videos.

03. Conversational commerce.

04. Social platforms shopping (e.g., TikTok Shop).

05. Live shopping.



How do affiliate programs work?

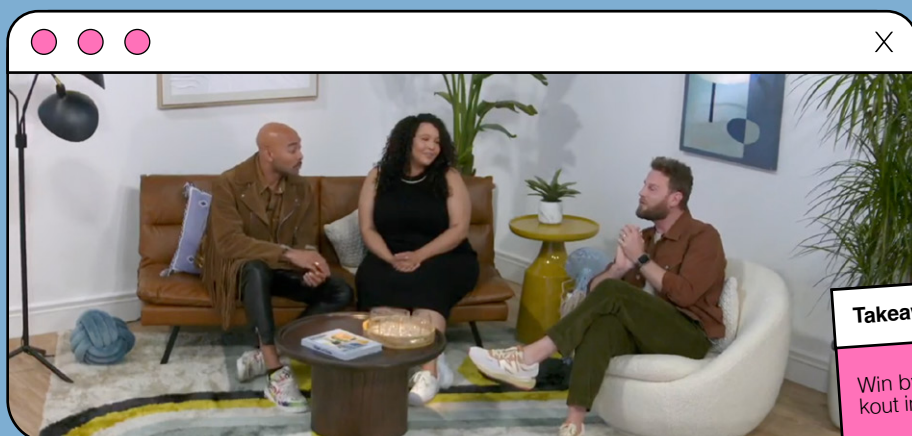
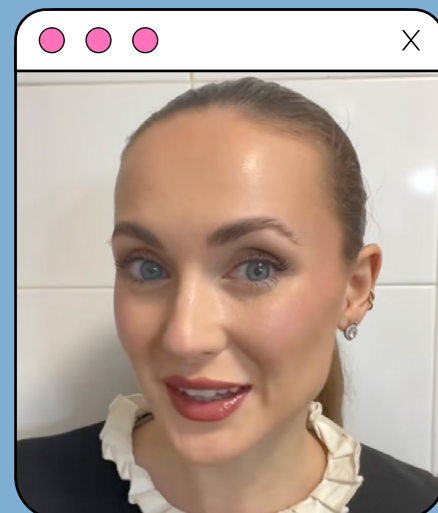
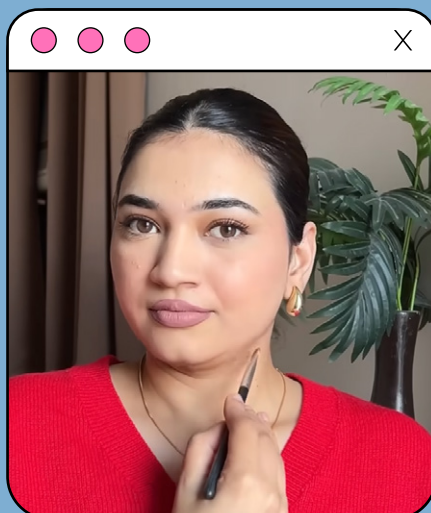
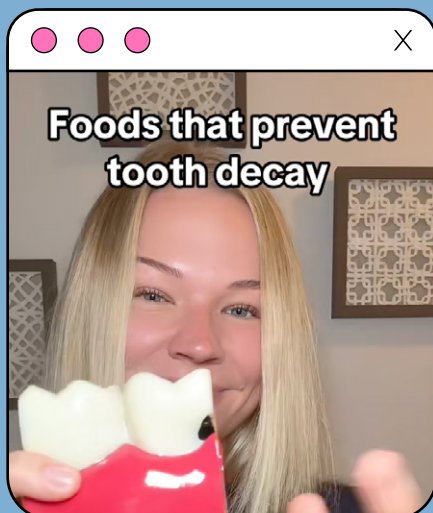
Watch this 20-minute mAD podcast episode

“SOCIAL COMMERCE ISN'T JUST SELLING; IT'S A SINGLE MOMENT WHERE AWARENESS, VALIDATION, AND PURCHASE COLLIDE. THE SCROLL HAS BECOME THE SHELF, AND CREATORS ARE THE CONNECTORS. SHOW UP WITH THE RIGHT PRODUCT, AT THE RIGHT TIME, AND IN THE RIGHT CONTEXT. THEN, INSPIRATION TURNS INTO INSTANT ACTION.”

Patricia Aragón, Global Director of Social Commerce at SAMY

Guru Nanda on TikTok is a perfect example of how to use short-form content to give oral health tips with in-app purchase options. Another great example of content that solves real problems while driving attention and conversions is **Sugar Cosmetics on YouTube Shorts**.

L'Oréal Paris has led TikTok Shop in Spain through standout Live shoppings, where instant conversion is only the entry point to building a thriving community.



Shopping Live with Walmart, where creators share recommendations, affiliate links, earn commissions, and build storefronts.

Takeaway

Win by fusing culture + creators + checkout into one frictionless experience.

Commerce Is Also Discovery

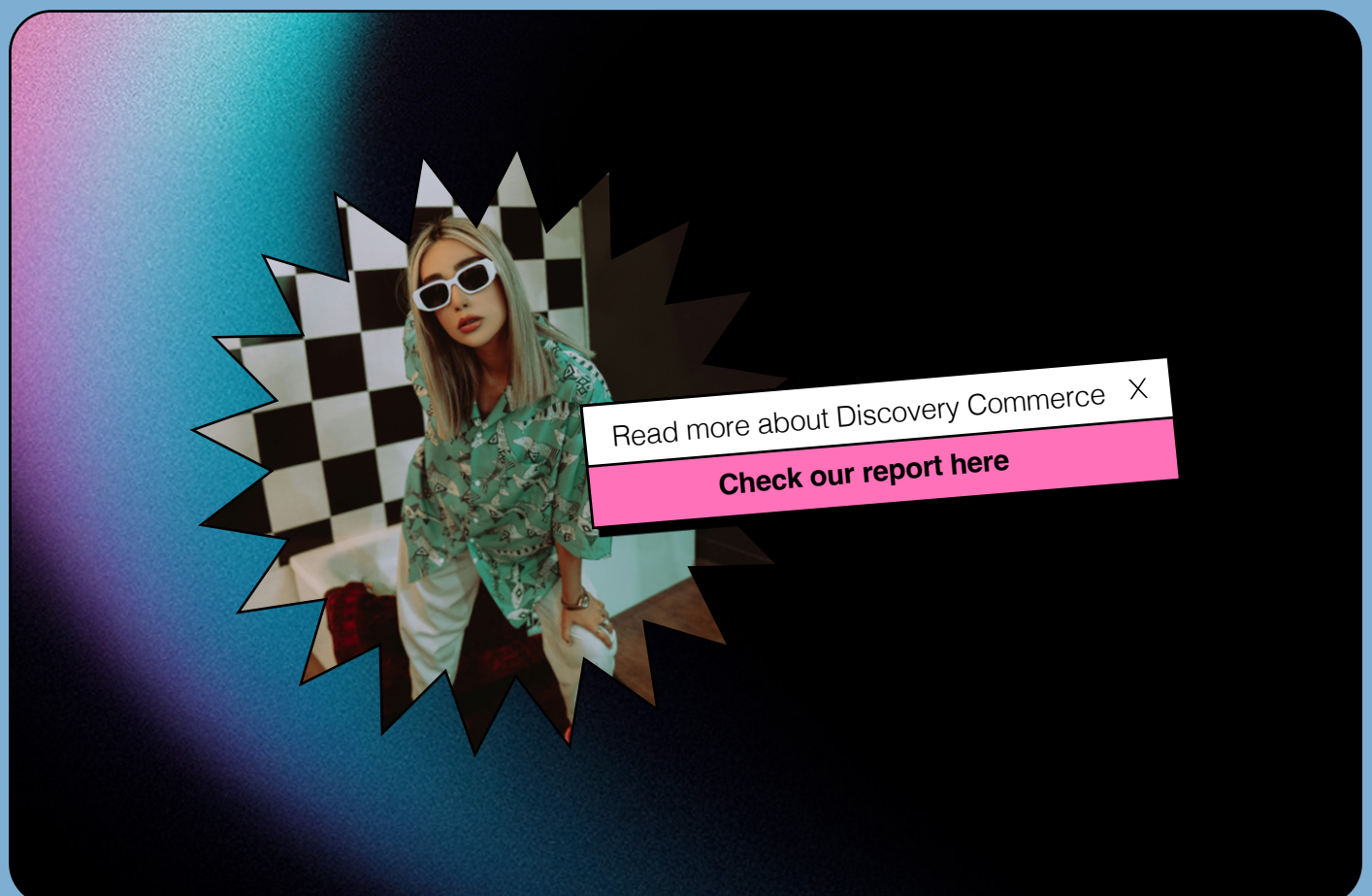
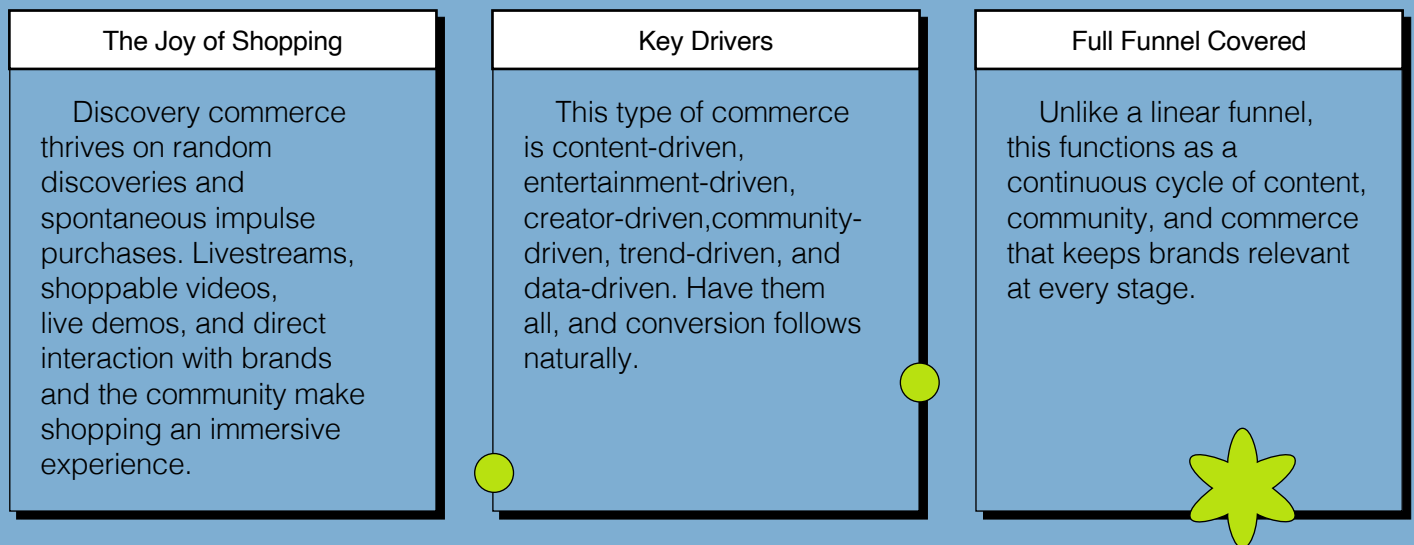
From Storytelling to Storyselling

Shopping is, especially, exploratory.

Discovery commerce (introduced by TikTok in 2021) turns curiosity into conversion by meeting consumers at the moment of inspiration. When

powered by AI and social insight, discovery-driven campaigns guide users from scroll to sale through relevant creators, shoppable content, and real-time recommendations.

The Advantages of Discovery Commerce, at a Glance:





“DISCOVERY COMMERCE
BRINGS SHOPPING BACK TO
WHAT IT WAS ORIGINALLY: A
COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE.”

Philip Papendieck, CEO & Co-Founder at Intermate

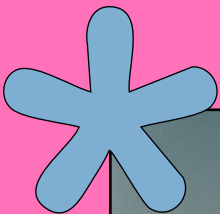
03. Influencer Marketing 4.0

Building on Authentic Voices



What do we cover?

- + Priorities in influencer marketing.
- + Key areas for greater maturity.
- + From macro to micro profiles.
- + Creators as true brand partners.
- + The power of strategic thinking.



The Influencer Marketing

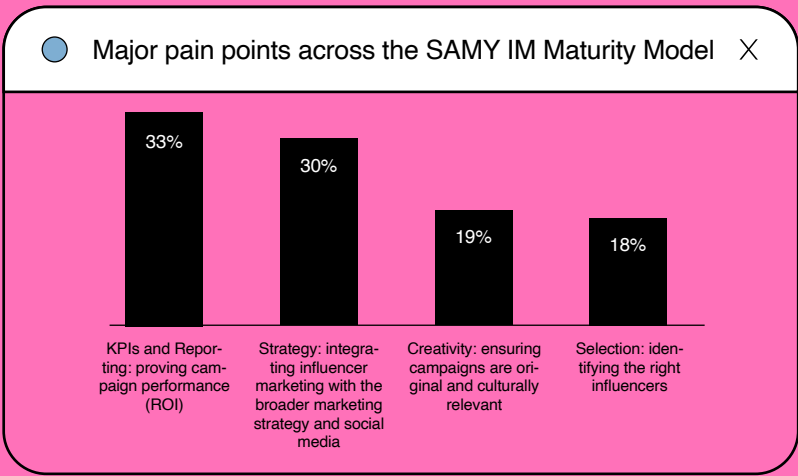
Hub's report reveals that most U.S. organizations now invest up to \$50,000 annually in influencer programs, while nearly 15% spend over \$500,000; Nearly four times the 2022 figure. According to this year's SAMY survey, **48% of global marketers plan to increase their influencer marketing budgets** in 2026, while 39% intend to maintain current levels. It is definitely a proven driver of awareness, engagement, and conversions.

At SAMY, we've popularized a new era in the industry we lead: **Influencer Marketing 4.0**, where creators are partners, shops become platforms, and culture is the currency.

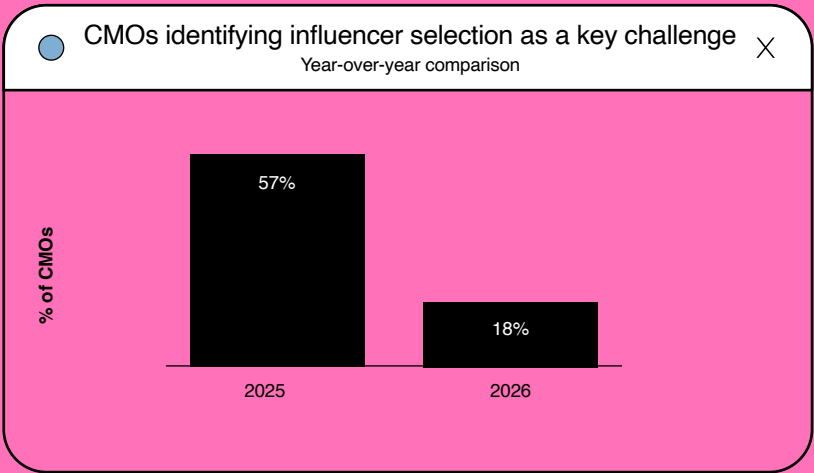
Challenges in the Influencer Marketing Maturity Model

From Finding the Right Influencers (2025)
to Reporting (2026)

Bigger budgets mean higher expectations. In 2026, marketers' biggest challenges have evolved – KPIs & reporting (proving ROI) and a more integrated strategy (especially with social media) now outrank last year's focus on simply finding the right influencers.



Reporting emerges as the main source of friction, practically tied with planning and integrating IM into the broader brand strategy. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026



In 2025, profile selection was a key concern for 57% of marketers, while in 2026 only 18% reported this friction. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026

Most Important Categories to Level Up

Selection, Strategy, Creativity, and Reporting

In 2026, Pro brands will treat influencer marketing as a seamless part of their digital ecosystem—starting with smart **selection** based on authentic alignment and performance insights rather than reach alone.

Guided by **data-driven strategy**, they'll collaborate with creators from the start, blending **creativity** and brand purpose to produce content that feels genuine and drives results. Success will be measured through **advanced KPIs** that connect performance, perception, and sustained brand growth.

It's important to note that the biggest barrier in influencer marketing isn't just execution—it's mindset. Brands that shift from campaign-based influencer marketing to relationship-driven creator strategies are the ones that unlock true influence and long-term brand equity.

DISCOVER THE
SAMY INFLUENCER
MARKETING
MATURITY MODEL

[View the model](#)



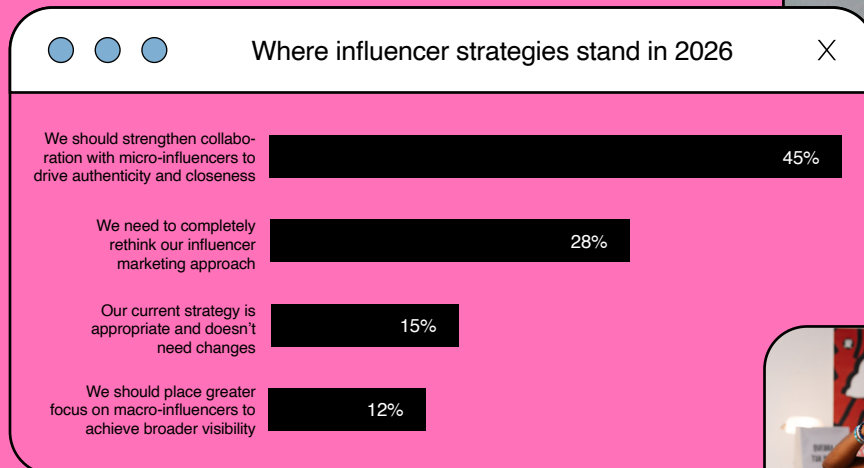
“THE FUTURE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING LIES IN BUILDING STRATEGIC ECOSYSTEMS, NOT TRANSACTIONAL COLLABORATIONS. BRANDS MUST EMPOWER CREATORS, CO-CREATE CONTENT, AND BLEND CREATIVITY, CULTURE, AND COMMERCE TO UNLOCK SCALABLE GROWTH”

Ainoa Brenes, Global Head of Influencer Marketing at SAMY

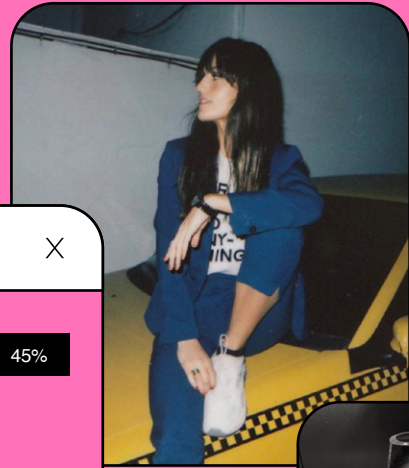
From Macro to Micro

The Rise of Niche Expertise

Our survey shows a clear direction: 45% of marketers plan to increase collaborations with **micro-influencers in 2026** to boost authenticity and community fit over mass reach.



A significant share of respondents need to rethink their influencer marketing strategy, while the trend toward micro-influencers is clear, with 45% of marketers investing in it.
Source: SAMY Survey, 2026



Statistics on Micro-Influencers

+ 10,000 and 100,000 followers.

+ Micro-influencers consistently **deliver higher engagement rates** compared to macro-influencers. Typical engagement rates fall between 3-6%, compared to 1-2% for macro-influencers.

+ **30% of consumers** trust influencers more than they did six months ago.

+ Niche communities on social media see strong engagement rates, too. For example, on TikTok alone, fashion content has a **2.26% average engagement rate**.

Niche creators are perceived as authentic, sharing unfiltered stories or expert insights on topics like food, fitness, or fashion. This authenticity naturally drives higher engagement and trust, while also offering greater cost efficiency.



Authenticity as a Brand Priority

Glossier leans into authentic creator content instead of polished ad campaigns. Their **“Get Ready With Me”** series works because it feels like getting ready with a friend, not watching a commercial.



Soylent Nutrition sends their products to creators who actually use them – gamers, hikers, outdoor enthusiasts. Instead of generic ads, they let micro-influencers show how Soylent fits into their real lives. This makes their marketing feel genuine, not forced.



Micro-influencers own TikTok Shop

The New Monetization Goldmine

According to TikTok’s official Creator Marketplace documentation, the platform has reported significant conversion growth among creators with 10K–50K followers who use TikTok Shop features—particularly through **live shopping formats**. For micro-influencers, these events leverage their strong community engagement, often driving higher per-viewer conversion rates than those achieved by larger creators.

This phenomenon has created what industry experts call the “microinfluencer sweet spot” for TikTok Shop success—large enough to generate meaningful sales volume but small enough to maintain the authenticity that drives conversions.

Still, micro-influencers aren't a standalone solution. To truly scale impact, influencer strategies must be tailored to every stage of the funnel and seamlessly integrated into the overall digital and brand ecosystem.

+ Micro-influencers show up to **30.1% engagement rates** for TikTok Shop, especially for those with under 50,000 followers, according to Root Digital.

+ **78% of TikTok shoppers** discover products through influencers, demonstrating the substantial impact of influencer marketing on purchasing decisions.

“MICRO AND NANO INFLUENCER COMMUNITIES AND PLATFORMS WILL PLAY A BIGGER ROLE, DRIVING AUTHENTICITY AND NICHE COMMUNITY TRUST. SHORT-FORM VERTICAL VIDEO, LIVE SHOPPING, AND INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING FORMATS WILL DOMINATE CAMPAIGNS, WHILE AI-DRIVEN PERSONALIZATION AND UGC-BASED STRATEGIES WILL SHAPE THE NEXT PHASE OF BRAND–INFLUENCER COLLABORATION.”

Ainoa Brenes, Global Head of Influencer Marketing at SAMY

The key will be radical authenticity. Brands will need to build trust by revealing the “behind the scenes,” embracing imperfections, and leading with transparency, shifting away from overly polished, corporate content (the kind of **Rosalía’s “marketing that doesn’t look like marketing”**).

Creators Need to be Strategic Partners

Multiple Profiles Serve Different Goals

The most successful brands give creators a real seat at the table — co-developing stories that blend creativity, culture, and commerce. As Ainoa Brenes puts it: *“Brands that treat influencers as one-off campaigns miss the point. True influence comes from long-term relationships, strategic alignment, and creators who genuinely resonate with the audience.”*

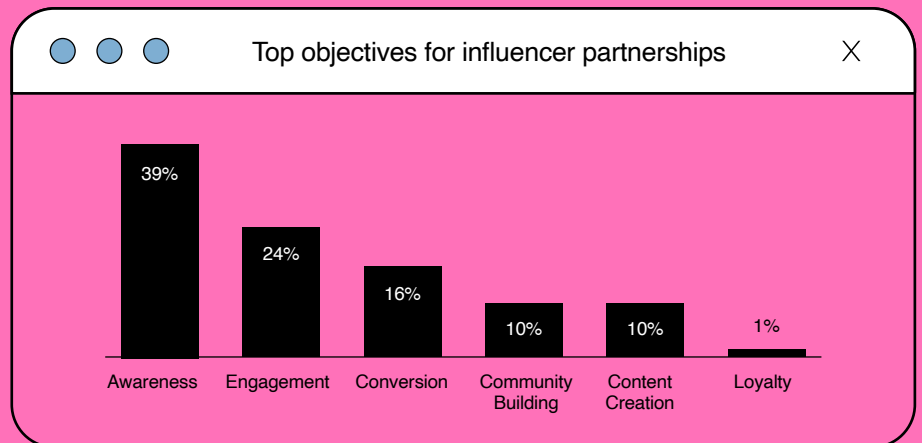
With influencer-driven winners doubling **this year at Cannes**, one thing is clear: When brands

treat creators as strategic partners (not just another media placement), the work becomes more authentic and the results significantly stronger.

While awareness (39%) and engagement (24%) remain **top priorities** for CMOs globally when partnering with creators, conversion is climbing fast. With platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and even WhatsApp integrating more shopping features, influencers will naturally evolve to be key players in guiding audiences from discovery to purchase.

What is true is that awareness and conversion require different creators. Some inspire, others drive action. Follower count isn't enough: cultural resonance, engagement, and trust are what truly move the needle. The smartest brands are balancing both sides by pairing storytellers who drive with creators who can drive measurable results through community-based content and social commerce.

What works, at the end? Emotion and empathy, not polished ads. The best creators turn cultural insight into human stories that make brands relatable.



In their collaborations with influencers, brands continue to prioritize awareness and engagement. Conversion (in third place) is becoming an increasingly decisive factor. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026



“Vecino, ¿tienes salseo?”

Turning skincare into a TikTok sitcom. Quirky neighbors, funny gossip, and serialized episodes blended entertainment with subtle Garnier product moments, creating native, shareable content.



“Live Life in the Blacklane”

Diverse influencers shared their journeys through authentic everyday experiences, amplified across paid and organic media. Through their lenses, we showcased not just the service but a lifestyle.



Veggie Hits

Entertainment beats food. Self-irony and fun content perform better than pure food posts on TikTok.

How an Agency Turns Influencer Marketing into Real, Long-Term Results

Agencies that understand influencer marketing as part of a broader brand and social media strategy provide the expertise, relationships, and processes needed to make influencer campaigns strategic, efficient,

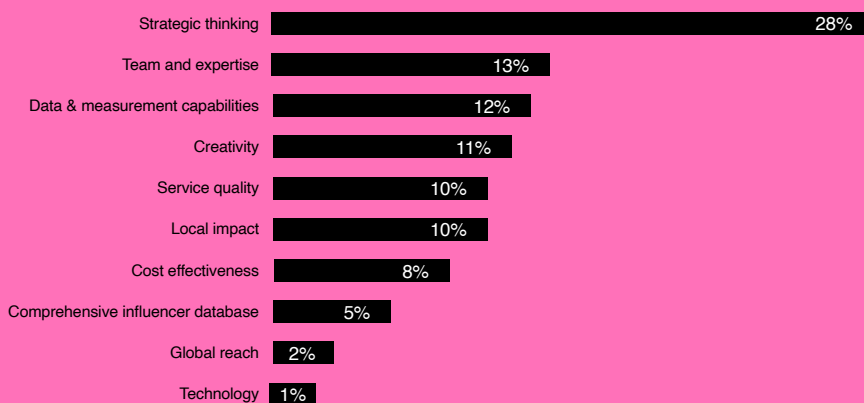
and effective, enabling brands to focus on their core business.

CMOs value strategic thinking most when working with influencer marketing agencies (28%), the same figure as last year, followed by team expertise

(13%), data and measurement capabilities (12%), and creativity (11%). This highlights that brands prioritize agencies that can provide strong strategy, skilled teams, measurable results, and innovative campaign ideas.

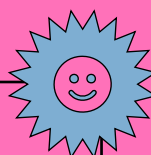


Key factors valued when working with a social-first agency



Strategic thinking and team expertise are the most important qualities brands see in a social-first agency when it comes to influencer marketing strategies.

Source: SAMY Survey, 2026



“WHAT OUR CLIENTS VALUE MOST IS THE LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS WE’VE BUILT WITH CREATORS THIS GIVES US HIDDEN BENEFITS: THE FLEXIBILITY TO ADAPT WHEN UNEXPECTED THINGS HAPPEN, AUTHENTIC CONTENT, SUPPORT DURING KEY MOMENTS, COST SAVINGS, AND DEEPER AUDIENCE INSIGHTS.”

Ricky Pombo, Head of Influencer Marketing at SAMY Iberia

In 2026, it will be essential for brands to have **the right technology, a diverse team**—from social commerce experts to creatives and senior influencer marketers—**supported by an effective** methodology to ensure influencer marketing delivers tangible impact. In many cases, the solution lies in partnering with an agency that can bring all these elements together to elevate the influencer marketing strategy

04. Cultural Relevance

When Intelligence Meets Creativity

What do we cover?

- + The meaning of cultural intelligence.
- + Connecting through culture.
- + Social Listening and trend detection.
- + GenAI, slop, and the power of human creativity.
- + And more!

Cultural intelligence —the ability to understand, navigate, and adapt to different cultural contexts— turns data into empathy and empathy into strategy. Winner brands will master **connected creativity**: linking insights and culture in one continuous feedback loop that evolves as fast as the world does. It's precisely this combination of intelligence and creativity that drives **brand relevance in a social-first world**.

In 2026, marketers aren't using data to measure performance; they're using it to read the world around them. The combination of AI-enhanced social listening, cultural research, and creative insight is transforming how brands uncover meaning, detect trends, and connect with audiences in real-time.



Culture Is the Currency

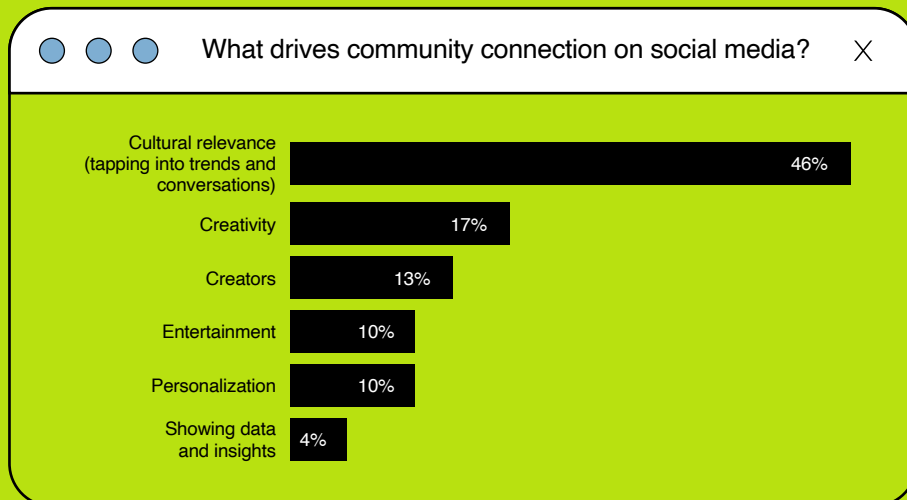
The current social mantra is clear: relevance over reach. **Nearly half of CMOs (46%) say cultural relevance** is the most powerful way to connect with social communities. Creativity (17%) and creators (13%) follow, showing that while content and partnerships still matter, audiences value how brands participate in culture.

Brands that show real understanding, joining conversations with context, empathy, and purpose, build credibility faster than any campaign.



Key takeaway

Next year, success will depend on how well brands interpret what culture is telling them. The combination of AI, social listening, and human interpretation transforms research from static reports into a dynamic, creative driver.



According to CMOs, cultural relevance is far and away the most effective way to connect brands with social media communities | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026

Major **cultural events** like the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Cannes Film Festival, Tour de France, and even Dry January will act as live laboratories for testing **brand relevance** in social media.

These moments blend global and local conversations, from fandom and sport to wellness and lifestyle, giving marketers opportunities to analyze sentiment, predict trends, and design culturally resonant activations in real time.



“THE POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT IS RESHAPING OUR CULTURAL, EMOTIONAL, CONSUMER, AND AESTHETIC RESPONSES. THE CHALLENGE FOR BRANDS IS TO UNDERSTAND THESE CONTRADICTIONS AND FIND WAYS TO BE GENUINELY USEFUL.”

Gustavo Reséndiz, Strategy Director at SAMY Mexico

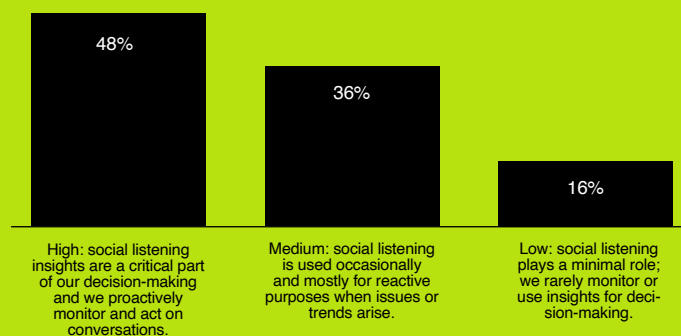
Listening to Culture, Not Just Data

48% of CMOs Consider Social Listening Vital
(+9% YoY)

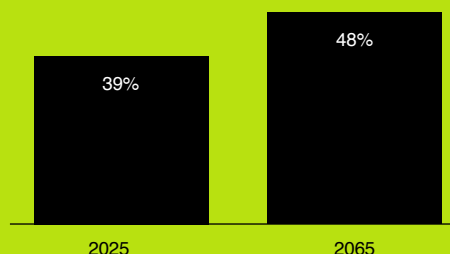
Social listening boosts ideas generation and allows brands to track cultural shifts in real time, providing insights that inform strategy. 48% of CMOs consider social listening “a critical part of their decision-making process” (+9% YoY).

For nearly half of marketers (48%), social listening insights are crucial for decision-making, while only 16% see them as minimally important. YoY, its importance has grown (+9%).
Source: SAMY Survey, 2026

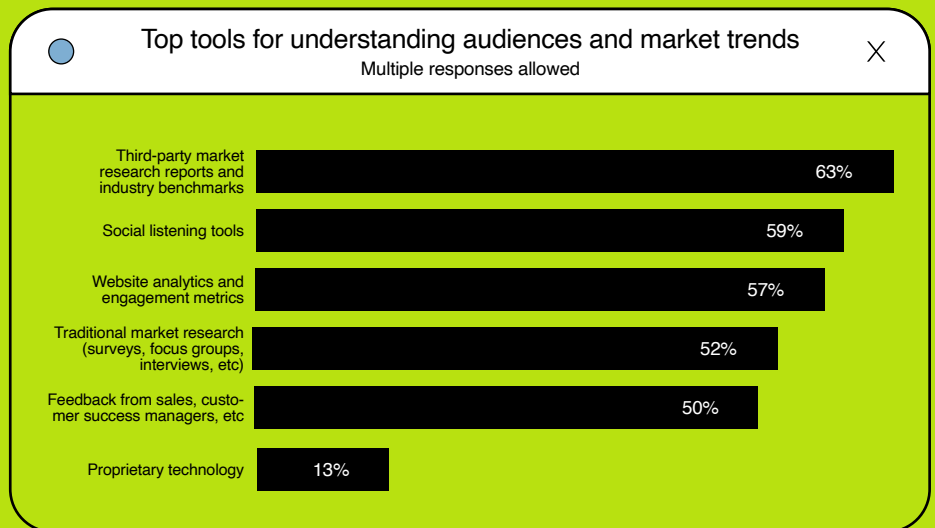
Importance of social listening in marketing decision-making



CMOs increasingly view social listening as essential Year-over-year



Brands rank social listening second (59%) as a way to **understand audiences and market trends**, just behind third-party research and industry benchmarks (63%). Web analytics, engagement metrics, traditional research, and sales team feedback also matter. A lack of in-house technology is a reality for many brands, so may explain the low adoption rate (13%).



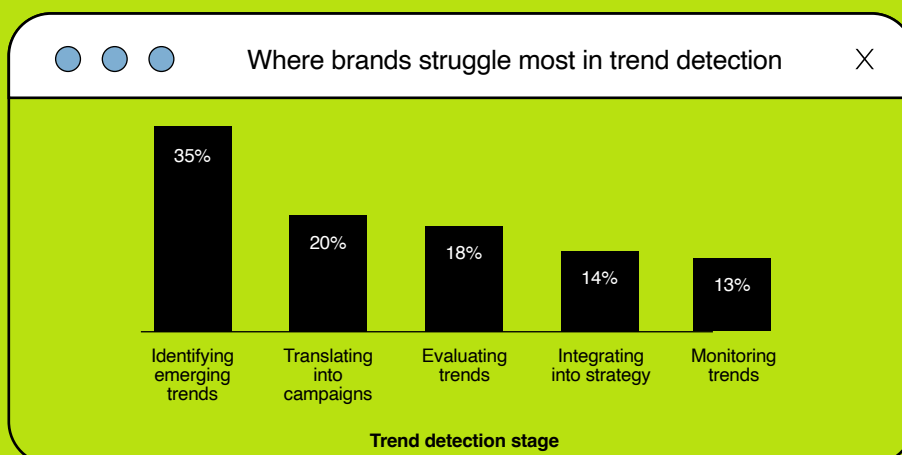
According to the SAMY survey, third-party reports and industry benchmarks, social listening, and web analytics are the top three ways to understand audiences and market trends. Multiple responses allowed. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026

Marketers Struggle to Identify Trends

For SAMY Experts, Shaping Them Should Be the Priority

Trend spotting is inevitably linked to the process of building relevance. By identifying emerging patterns and cultural moments, brands can create content that resonates deeply with their audience. This proactive approach ensures campaigns feel timely, authentic, and aligned with what truly matters to consumers.

The top struggle remains **identifying emerging trends** (35%), followed by translating insights into campaigns and integrating them into wider strategy (20%). Year over year, we've observed that the challenge isn't merely identifying insights, but translating them into actionable and meaningful relevance.



Identifying emerging trends is marketers' biggest challenge, followed by translating insights into campaign ideas. | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.



While early detection of trends remains challenging, our experts recommend not getting too caught up in spotting trends (with technology and constant monitoring, detection can be straightforward), but focusing on **shaping trends**, not just observing them. As our Head of Creative at SAMY US puts it:

“MAPPING CULTURE AND TRENDS IS MORE THAN RESEARCH; IT’S STRATEGY. BY DECODING WHAT AUDIENCES CARE ABOUT AND CREATING RELEVANT CONTENT, BRANDS OUTPERFORM THEIR CATEGORIES BY OVER 50%.”

Jayson Fittipaldi, Head of Creative at SAMY US

To shift from trend-spotting to trend-shaping, brands need living intelligence systems, combining real-time data, social context, and cultural foresight. The goal isn’t just to describe what’s happening, but to shape how your brand participates in it.

Campaigns Rooted in Culture



La Colombe

American Coffee Culture

Local creators amplified the brand’s bold energy across the city’s feed.



Dove & Crumbl Cookies



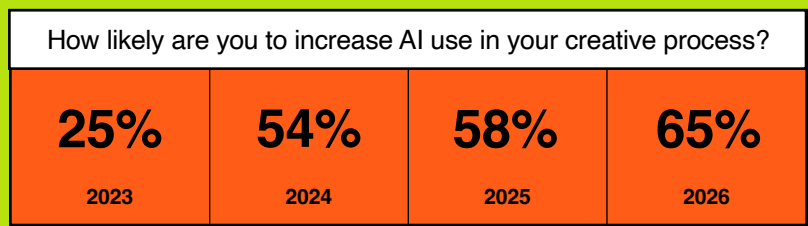
How to Sweeten Gen Z

Surprise scent drops and TikTok superfans turned a traditional brand into a cultural moment.

GenAI Is Redefining Creativity

65% of CMOs Plan to Increase Its Use

Generative AI is redefining how creativity happens; in just a few years, it has transitioned from a niche technology into a mainstream tool, and this is having a huge effect on the content we consume. It's clear that CMOs' commitment to integrating **AI into creative processes** continues **to grow—up 40% over the past four years.**



Survey, 2026



Quality and Human-First

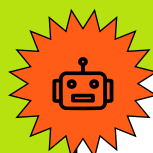
Creativity to Beat the Slop

The explosion of content has created a critical challenge: the rise of low-quality, automated output – or '**AI Slop**.' The internet is flooded with this content, which may look polished but lacks depth, highlighting the danger of mistaking scale for creativity.



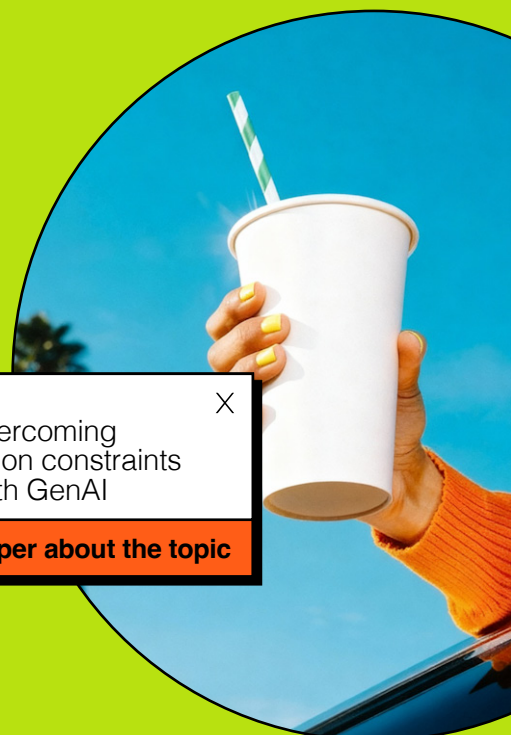
MIT research shows 95% of large AI implementations fail to deliver ROI when systems are rigid and disconnected from outcomes. **The fix?** Flexible, focused tools aligned to business goals, not tech for tech's sake. **Epsilon's study** backs this up: 41% of marketers report better ROI with AI, but half admit they lack confidence, citing data and privacy challenges.

In this context, standing out depends on **quality and distinction**. **Insight-driven marketing and human-first creativity** must work together, not just to spot cultural shifts and changing consumer behavior, but to truly connect with people's problems, attitudes, and needs.



Overcoming
production constraints
with GenAI

[Read our paper about the topic](#)



AI as a Creative Accelerator

But People Give Meaning

AI is transforming creativity from the inside out. More than half of CMOs (57%) say **AI helps generate ideas and concepts faster**, while 51% believe humans still define the narrative. This balance reflects SAMY's POV: AI accelerates ideas, but people give them meaning.

Automation and predictive analytics are now core to creative work, faster iteration, and smarter audience targeting.

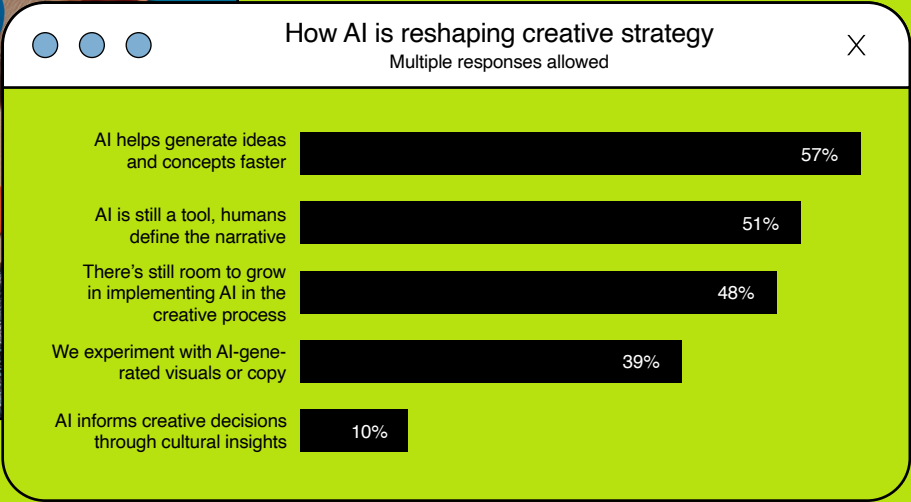
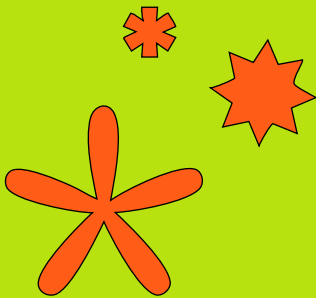
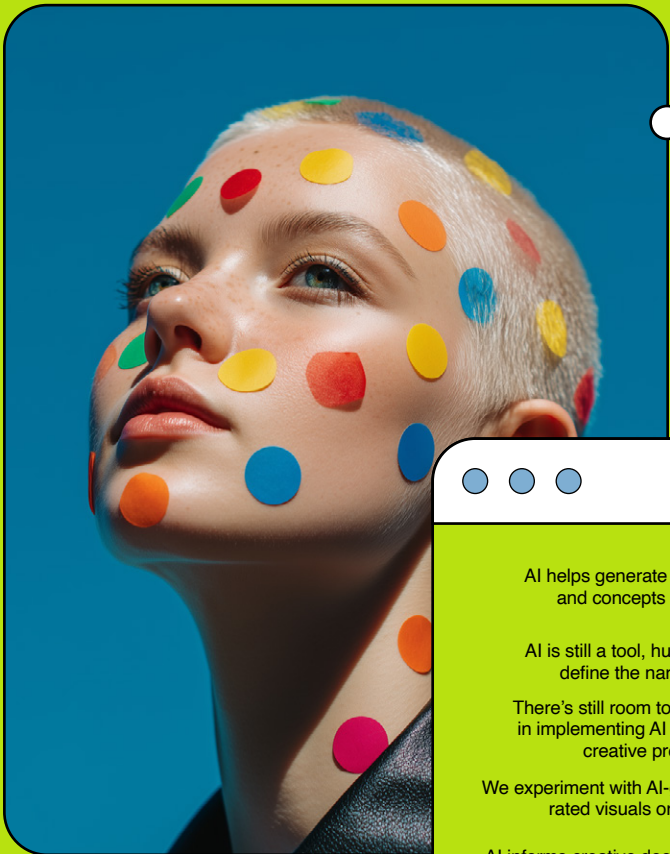
Gartner calls this “combinatorial disruption” – the fusion of AI, design, and data.

AI is also reshaping what productivity means for marketers. At the **CX Circle conference** in New York, Matt Yanchyshyn, VP of AWS Marketplace & Partner Services, explained it perfectly:

“A few years ago, AI was about doing more with less. What’s happening today is we’re

getting asked to do more, and we’re able to deliver more. We’re not doing more with less – we’re doing more with more.”

That’s how marketers use AI today – to connect insights, ideas, and outcomes at scale – not to cut corners, but to connect the dots in ways humans alone cannot.



AI helps generate concepts and ideas faster, but humans are the ones who define the narratives. Implementing AI into the creative process remains another significant challenge. Multiple choices allowed | Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.



“AI ISN’T REPLACING CREATIVITY; IT IS AMPLIFYING IT. MASTERING NEW TOOLS ENABLES SHARPER, FASTER, MORE ENGAGING CONTENT. BUT WE CANNOT FORGET WHAT TRULY DRIVES RELEVANCE AND SURPRISE, THE REAL ENGINES OF ENGAGEMENT: HUMAN CREATIVITY.”

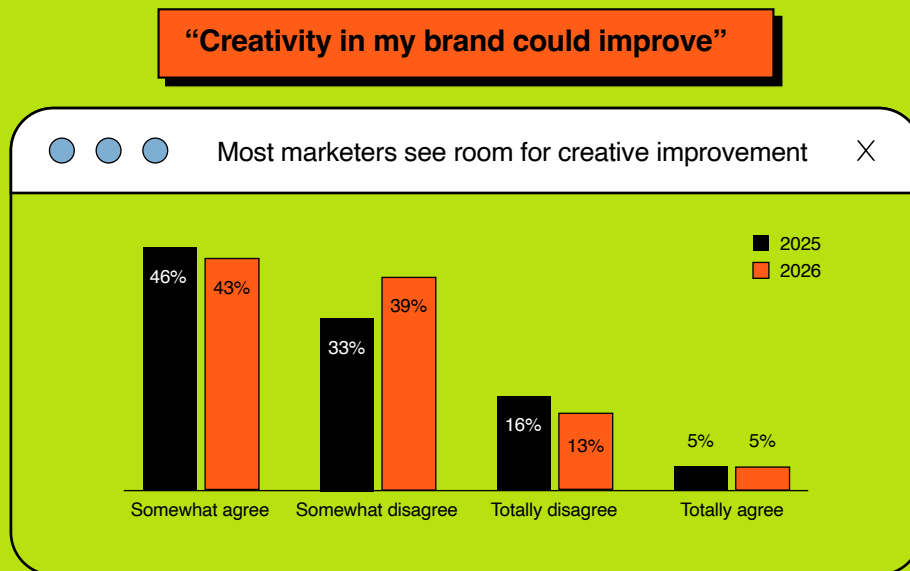


Santiago Lucero, Global Chief Creative Officer at SAMY

Creativity Excellence?

Not Yet

Marketers admit they're not where they want to be. The figure is similar year over year: over 40% of marketers (46% this year vs. 43% last year) say they "more or less agree" with the idea that creativity in their brands "can be improved."



Source: SAMY Survey, 2026.

Santiago Lucero, SAMY's Global Chief Creative Officer, mentions the **creativity paradox** in this context: "Creativity isn't a one-off campaign. It's a mindset – a way of thinking that must live in every decision, not just in what a brand posts or produces."

Culture Before Product in Briefs

While AI enhances efficiency, **concerns exist about it limiting creative diversity** if teams over-rely on similar prompts or tools. The challenge, then, is to use AI as a partner, not a replacement, for human imagination.

SAMY survey reveals a shift in how the people behind brands create.

When asked about their **creative briefs**:

- **36%** said they co-create with influencers and agencies (creator-driven).
- **34%** align with cultural trends (culture-driven).
- **30%** focus on product features (product-centric).

Culture and creator-driven briefs are gradually replacing product-centric thinking. However, it's not about choosing just one of these three elements. Leading brands engage with the latest consumer and cultural trends, co-create with influencers, and integrate their products into storytelling to generate **emotional resonance** with their audience.

Emotional Connections

A Must in a Social-First World

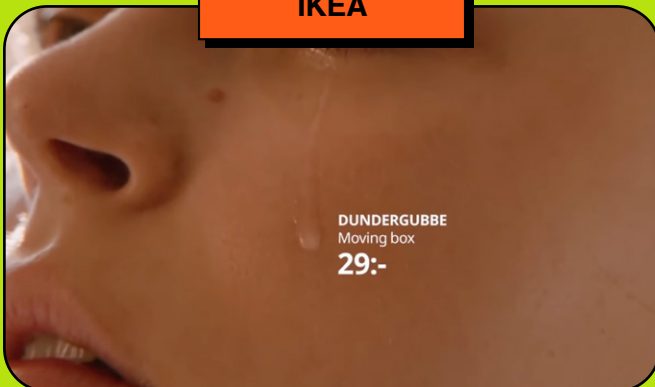
In the **social-first universe**, where consumers are inundated with content, emotional connection is the differentiator. It's not about being the loudest voice but the most resonant one. For brands, CMOs and agencies, the challenge is to shift from just chasing awareness to cultivating affinity. Because in the end, it's not just about being seen, it's about being felt.

**Human FIRST
Thinking**

“WE LIVE IN THE ERA OF HIGHLY SOCIAL ‘HUMANS’, PEOPLE WHO BUY BASED ON VALUES, ACTIONS, AND INTERACTIONS. THEY EXPECT BRANDS TO KNOW THEM, SUPPORT THEM, AND BE TRULY USEFUL. THAT’S WHY COMMUNICATION MUST FEEL PERSONAL, RELATABLE, TRUSTWORTHY, AUTHENTIC, AND RELEVANT.”

Alex Hill, Chief Strategy Officer at SAMY

IKEA



Feelings Over Products
Wherever Life Goes

PETA



Humour Is a Powerful Emotion
Good Sh*t

Old Jamaica



Scaring the Fandom Works
Farewell Old Jamaica

Section Takeaways:

The data is clear: AI is an accelerator, not an author. It speeds up insight, ideation, and production, but the narrative remains human.

The most advanced brands will merge creativity, culture, and computation into one connected system where AI enhances agility and humans provide meaning.

The brands that thrive won't chase every shiny new tool; they'll build systems that combine empathy, insight, and imagination.



In a nutshell

From Interruption to Integration

In an increasingly fragmented world, where attention is scarce and audiences move fast, the power of a clear, resonant, and authentic brand story is stronger than ever. Brands that lead with purpose and consistency are the ones that truly connect.

Embracing a social-first approach means designing the content and media funnel with social as the primary engine—not an afterthought—and maximizing reach, relevance, and speed. This must be fueled by content that serves the user, delivering real value that inspires, educates, entertains, or supports decision-making, earning engagement rather than demanding it.

At the same time, continuous innovation in formats, experiences, and platforms is no longer optional; it is a strategic imperative. Experimentation, iteration, and fast learning allow brands to spot and seize opportunities before others do.

Competitive advantage now belongs to those who move early and move fast, but sustainable success goes to those who scale, optimize, and improve continuously.

Brands that combine these pillars — a powerful story, a social-first strategy, user-centric content, and agile innovation — will lead the next wave of digital growth.



“HISTORICALLY, ADVERTISING
WAS THE PAID INTERRUPTION OF
SOMEONE’S VIEWING. TODAY, THE
MOST POWERFUL MARKETING ISN’T
INTERRUPTION, IT’S INVITATION.
A NATIVE INTEGRATION WHERE
MESSAGES ARE DELIVERED BY THE
PEOPLE AUDIENCES ALREADY TRUST,
IN FORMATS THEY ALREADY ENJOY.”

George Gallate, SAMY Board Advisor

**Let's
continue
this story
together.**

Let's make your brand matter.

S Λ M Y



Scan & Feel the SAMY Energy

Special thanks to everyone who helped us shape the story of social media marketing in 2026:

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Ana Molarinho, General Manager at Quantum Park
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Carlos Ross, Brand Manager at Krispy Kreme
Cristina Quintana, PR & Influence Manager Iberia at Pandora
Carlota Lamiel, Brand Manager at The Magnum Ice Cream Company
Carlota De Sousa, Brand Manager at Pascual
Carlos Serrano, Marketing Director at Nissan Colombia
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Florian Fellner, Head of Advertising at Kia Motors Iberia

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Elvira Fernandez, PR & Influencers Responsible at LVMH
Victoria Torres, Jefa de Marketing Estratégico at PF Alimentos
Andrea Robles Gonzalez, PR Specialist at Shiseido
Jose Capellin, PR and Influencer Marketing Manager at Springfield
Sandra Novoa, Dealer Marketing Manager at BYD
Daniela Casale, Influencer Marketing Manager at Holafly
Rocío Martín, B2B & Partnership Marketing Manager at Holafly
Gemma Tossal, Sr. Brand Manager at Campari
Pedro Fernandez, Strategy Manager at AB InBev
David Calvo, Digital Manager at Revlon
Sara Sanz, PR Manager at LVMH Iberia
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Juliana Longo, Supervisora de Influência at ID/TBWA
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Nuria Robleño, Owner at Apetito
Juan Antonio Corrales, CMO at Billin
Benjamin Wüstenhagen, MD at The Key Academy
Alejandra Perez, Brand Manager at Farmacias Peruanas
Beatriz Duarte, Digital Product Manager at NAOS Portugal
Catherine Torres, Brand Manager Cetaphil at Galderma
José Usandizaga, General Manager at Facundo
Ines Brodheim, Head of Strategic Development at EDP
Mariem Kaddouri, Sponsoring Manager at Lidl ES

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Mayra Arias, Senior Marketing Manager at Western Union
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Erika Baños, Brand Manager at The Campbells Company
Luis Mora, Franchise Manager at Wallace
Paula Novo, Directora Marketing at Acciona
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Kim-lin Capes, Community & Loyalty Manager at L'Oréal
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Maybeth Acevedo, Ejecutiva de Marketing at Athos Publicidad
Enrique Moreno, Marketing Director at Vithas
Tulio Netto, Sales Manager at V3A
Genevieve L'Olivier, Global Marketing Director at Revlon
Barbara Puyol, Brand Manager at Fotocasa
Marcos de la Torre Munoz, CMO at Gonzalez Byass
Esther Morell, Marketing & Communication Director at ILUNION

S L M Y

We Make Brands Matter.