

Social-First Trends 2026

The Global Indie Insights

SAMY



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Foreword

“Products sell out because they’re discovered on TikTok, and creators often have a more active reach than a passive TV audience. So, if you want relevance, response, and real impact, social-first is the only strategy that keeps you in a conversation, not a monologue.” –
Jam Session, Oana Oprea, Head of International Strategy & Digital Lead

This report has its roots back in 2012. For more than a decade, we've been trying to help marketers make the most of social media.

Each year we've asked a group of experts we admire to share their vision of the near future. Hundreds of bright minds have given their insights over the years, helping the creative community do better. We're very grateful for that. Especially, since our interviews are always taking place during the busiest time of the year.

In 2021, we took it global – with the help of thenetworkone agencies all across the world. Pulling together thoughts from east to west, from north to south, we truly get a 360 point of view.

Speaking of 360, our reports over the years have shown how social media has evolved from few specific channels and a couple of formats into an ecosystem. A 24/7 living, all-encompassing, ubiquitous entity that is the birthplace of culture and the last click for commerce.

That is why it was time to change our title, too.

We're no longer talking about social media trends. We are talking about social-first trends.

Because we believe social is first and foremost.

Every second of the day.

Jari Lähdevuori
Executive Creative Director & Partner
SAMY Nordics

Erika Danielsson
Strategist
SAMY Nordics

Juijan Boulding
President
thenetworkone



Executive Summary



7 Trends for Social-First Marketing 2026

We interviewed experts from 22 of the world's leading independent agencies. Their insights can be summarized in the following seven points.

- Authenticity Paradox
- From Authority to Affinity
- Niche, Nicher, Nichest
- Scrollers Become Contributors
- The Post-Trend Era
- The Death of The Funnel
- Social As The Big Bang

Methodology

The insights were gathered by interviewing 27 social media marketing experts from 22 award-winning independent agencies, chosen from the 12000+ strong list of agencies in thenetworkone. The respondents are all part of the world's leading independent network, thenetworkone, hailing from countries as diverse as USA, India, UK, UAE, France, Mexico, Japan, Australia and South Korea. The interviews were done in November/December 2025.

All the respondents are using social media to help their clients do better communications, marketing, and eventually, business. They don't work with any particular social media platform or service-provider, thus their insights come from an objective point-of-view. Coming from not only different countries, but also different types of agencies, their answers offer a 360 view of social media marketing for the upcoming year.



01.

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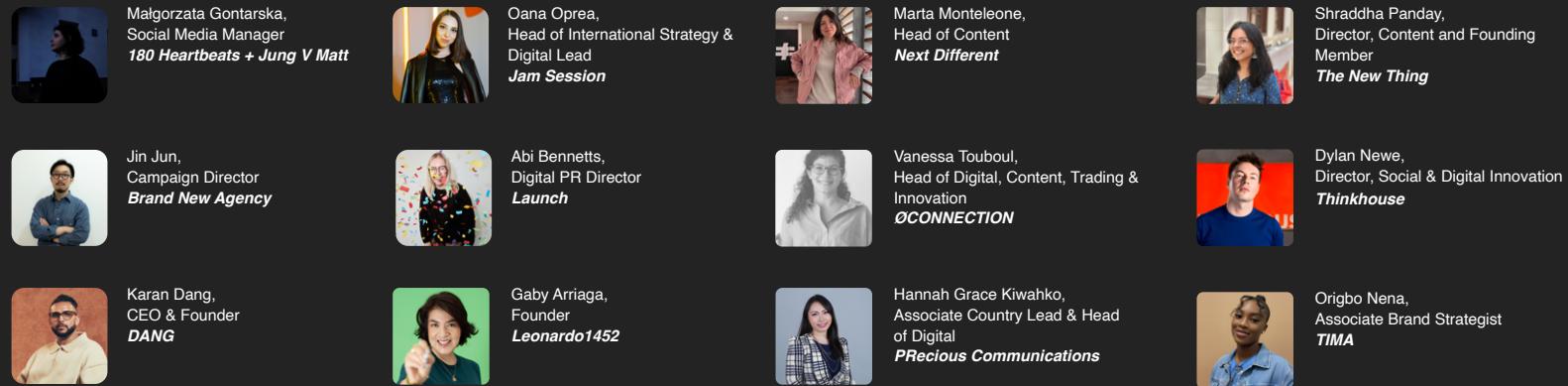
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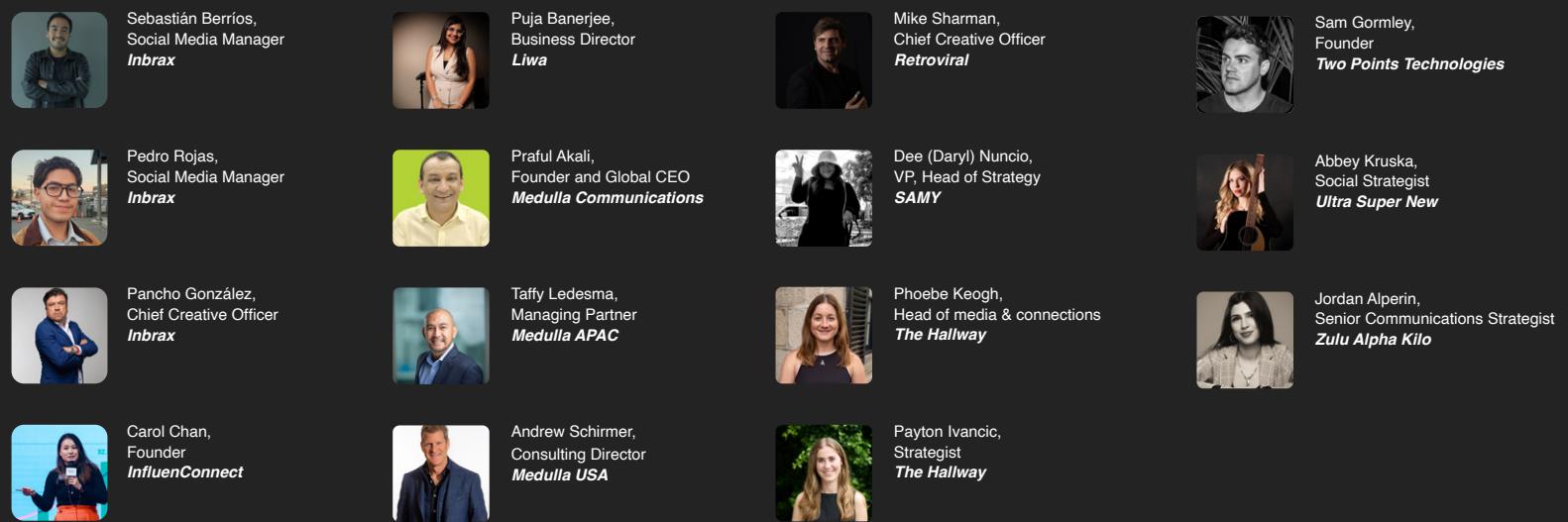
thenetworkone

The world's leading independent agencies network. With over 1,200 agencies in 115 countries, thenetworkone is uniquely suited to find you the right agency partner in whichever market you need. Our best-in-class agencies can provide advertising, PR, media, digital, events, branding and design, B2B and B2C solutions, plus anything else you might require.



SAMY

SAMY is a global leader in social-first marketing, making brands matter. With over 1000+ social natives in 20+ offices worldwide, we serve brands such as L'Oréal, Unilever, The North Face, Diageo, Microsoft, and Samsung in 50+ markets.



02.



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Social-First
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Top Trends

Authenticity Paradox

TREND #1

As AI-generated content floods social, authenticity becomes harder to fake—and more powerful than ever. Audiences are growing skeptical of anything too polished, craving human-made stories, real faces, and emotionally grounded perspectives they can trust. AI isn't disappearing, but it's moving behind the scenes: scaling creativity, enabling personalization, and fueling speed—without stealing the spotlight. The paradox? The more automated marketing becomes, the more brands must prove they're human. In a world of virtual voices and perfect outputs, trust has become the only real differentiator.

"In an AI-driven, hyper-competitive landscape where new brands are launching every day, people are increasingly looking for businesses they can trust, invest in, and feel aligned with. They want to understand the humans behind a brand and feel part of a community." – **Launch, Abi Bennetts, Digital PR Director**

"The critical trend is 'Authenticity at Scale'—the convergence of AI-enhanced personalization, verified human storytelling, and using authentic experts as influencers at scale. The creative challenge is making scientific truth feel instantly viral." – **Medulla, Praful Akali, Founder and Global CEO**

"While last year centered on exploring the potential of AI, this year AI has become a fully activated marketing engine—used not only to deliver information but to spark attention, shape brand narratives, and even create virtual personalities that build emotional bonds with audiences. AI is no longer an experimental tool; it is now a core creative force that enhances brand presence with speed, scale, and imagination." – **Brand New Agency, Jin Jun, Campaign Director**

"And ironically, the more AI content floods the internet, the more audiences will crave human-made, emotionally grounded stories. This is where trust becomes a strategy;

brands will openly say, 'This is human-made.' 'This is authentic.' 'This is not AI.' Transparency becomes a differentiator." – **DANG, Karan Dang, CEO & Founder**

"[Part of the winning formula will be] Using AI-generated content as a driver of novelty and disruption, to create something surprisingly new, disruptive, and bold. But not misleading, deceptive, or intended to imitate reality: we don't want users to believe something is true when it isn't. Users will feel more uncertain about what is credible and what is not, so AI-generated content will win on social media only if it is fun, creative, and clearly recognizable as such." – **Next Different, Marta Monteleone, Head of Content**

"Audiences are already growing fatigued and hyper-skeptical of anything too smooth and perfect. The work that wins now will have human-ness – be it scrappy, honest, practically-shot content or even copy with intentional errors. AI won't disappear, but it'll move underground. I find that it's best used when it's undetectable." – **The New Thing, Shraddha Panday, Director, Content and Founding Member**

"The point is to find a way to make your brand feel like a living, breathing creature, not just another logo. In a world overtaken by fake news and AI, the only way to stand out is to be realer than ever." – **Ultra Super New, Abbey Kruska, Social Strategist**

"The strongest reason for a social-first strategy in 2026 is simple: trust drives every commercial outcome. As AI-generated content floods feeds, audiences gravitate toward what feels human and relatable." - **InfluenConnect™ x Comms8, Carol Chan, Founder**

From Authority to Affinity

TREND

#2

Influence is no longer borrowed from institutions or big names. It's built through people who feel familiar, honest, and human. As trust in traditional authority erodes, audiences gravitate toward creators, experts, and communities that look and sound like them. Flaws beat polish, real environments beat sets, and shared identity beats reach. Brands that decentralize their voice and let many humans speak won't lose control—they'll gain relevance, trust, and cultural gravity.

"As trust in traditional authority figures (institutions, celebrities) erodes, brands must stop 'renting authority' and start 'renting affinity'. - - In this climate, consumers retreat to 'people like me.' - - Australian research from The Growth Distillery reinforces this shift, identifying 'trusted,' 'authentic' and 'created by someone like me' as the strongest drivers of influence today." – **The Hallway, Phoebe Keogh, Head of media & connections; Payton Ivancic, Strategist**

"That genuine honesty is what keeps us hooked online, whether we see it in our campaigns, on our social feeds, or just on our screens. It's how we build trust with our favorite brands, and that's the vibe we need to chase when looking for fresh ways to reach users or find new faces for a campaign. Authenticity is the ultimate cheat code and the real MVP today." – **180heartbeats + JUNG v MATT, Małgorzata Gontarska, Social Media Manager**

"I believe 2026 is when brand accounts finally take a backseat to human-led storytelling. Algorithms prefer people. Users trust people. And culture spreads through people. - - Brands that decentralize their voice will centralize their influence. By empowering multiple humans to speak, create, react, and show behind-the-scenes truths, brands will feel more alive. More trustworthy. More culturally relevant." – **DANG, Karan Dang, CEO & Founder**

"Consumers want to see creators, influencers, and even celebrities forgetting their lines, reacting honestly, showing flaws, and laughing at mistakes. They want environments that look like real places, not simulated sets. They want to believe it because they can feel the human behind it." – **Leonardo1452, Gaby Arriaga, Founder of Leonardo1452®**

"We must position the doctor or the expert as the face of the content, turning compliance into a growth engine. Non-healthcare brands must pivot from celebrity endorsements to subject matter experts (SMEs)." – **Medulla, Praful Akali, Founder and Global CEO**

"The other biggest winners in social-first marketing are the brands and creators who understand that influence now flows through networks, not individuals. The creators thriving today are the ones who anchor real conversations inside digital communities. Their strength comes from something no algorithm can manufacture: a sense of trust, shared identity, and belonging." – **TIMA, Origbo Nena, Associate Brand Strategist**

"Publishers and brands are committing to a perspective rather than chasing trends. Netflix's finsta account and The Celebrity Institute series demonstrate how creating a recurring world feels more human, as if a real person with a point of view is running the channel." – **Zulu Alpha Kilo, Jordan Alperin, Senior Communications Strategist**

Niche, Nicher, Nichest

TREND #3

As platform fatigue sets in, attention is splintering into smaller, more intentional spaces. Culture no longer forms in one dominant feed but across dozens of micro-worlds—private communities, niche servers, and tightly defined subcultures where credibility runs deep. Influence now favors specificity over scale: experts over celebrities, relevance over reach. The real impact won't come from broadcasting louder, but from showing up consistently in the rooms where a few hundred people truly care.

"In my opinion, 2026 is the year attention completely reshapes itself. The old idea of one feed dominating culture is gone. Younger users now distribute their attention across five, six, sometimes seven micro-environments: TikTok for entertainment, Instagram for identity, YouTube for depth, Discord for community, Reddit for honesty, LinkedIn for opportunity, and private messaging for real connection. I think one of the most overlooked shifts is the migration away from massive public platforms toward micro-worlds... private communities, niche servers, curated groups, and invite-only hubs. In 2026, the real influence won't happen on the big stage. It will happen in rooms with 500 people who care, not 500,000 people who scroll." – **DANG, Karan Dang, CEO & Founder**

"As consumers experience 'platform fatigue' and distrust of broad, algorithmic feeds, marketers will prioritize investing in creating or engaging with smaller, highly focused groups (e.g., via Discord, private subreddits, or even niche WhatsApp groups). This means winning requires not just hiring Gen Z talent, but developing AI-assisted creative processes that can generate dozens of hyper-specific, lo-fi video assets targeted to micro-segments, ensuring the content feels organic and user-generated rather than polished and branded." – **Inbrax, Pancho González, Chief Creative Officer**

"Speaking about Influence Marketing: experts are more effective for niche topics than 1-million-follower influencers, who are perceived as less credible on specific matters." – **Next Different, Marta Monteleone, Head of Content**

"One of the most defining shifts in 2026 is how influence has quietly drifted away from individual creators and settled into the hands of online communities that function like their own living, breathing ecosystems. We're seeing this everywhere: TikTok micro-cultures that shape aesthetics and language, Telegram fandoms that mobilise faster than any formal campaign planning session, Reddit communities that dissect ideas with forensic energy, and global fashion and music micro-genres that exist almost entirely online. These aren't just audiences; they're co-authors of culture." – **TIMA, Origbo Nena, Associate Brand Strategist**

"As social algorithms push for nicheness and consistency, individual creators are becoming more and more 'branded.' Through niche content topics, consistent theming, aesthetic alignment, and characterizations that connect with specific subcultures and audiences, even without the development of merchandise or a tangible product, successful influencers are becoming brands themselves. These creator/brand fusions are selling more than a product — they're selling ideas: lifestyles, philosophies, and community." – **Ultra Super New, Abbey Kruska, Social Strategist**

TREND

#3

"Because our audiences are social-first. The average person moves across almost 7 platforms every month. They adopt new spaces instantly, shift between communities, and engage with content wherever it feels most natural. They no longer live in one channel, so brands cannot either." – **Leonardo1452, Gaby Arriaga, Founder of Leonardo1452®**

"Newer spaces like WhatsApp Channels, Lemon8, and niche community platforms continue to fragment where and how people discover information. -- Within this fragmentation, I see a clear divide emerging: public platforms drive discovery and culture, while private channels—WeChat groups, Line, Telegram—drive trust, conversion, and long-term loyalty. Increasingly, the most valuable commercial decisions happen inside these semi-private ecosystems, shaped by creator recommendations rather than traditional paid media" - **InfluenConnect™ x Comms8, Carol Chan, Founder**



Scrollers Become Contributors

TREND

#4

Audiences aren't just watching—they're shaping the story. Social-first lets brands listen, respond, and co-create in real time, turning viewers into active collaborators. The winners experiment openly, iterate on what resonates, and use audience insight as a launchpad for culture and creativity. In this new model, the smartest brands don't just speak—they build alongside the people who matter most.

"Today, audiences have unprecedented creative tools and cultural influence, allowing them to shape brand narratives in real time. Social-first embraces that dynamic and turns users from passive observers into active co-creators who amplify reach and deepen loyalty. Social-first is the only channel where this relationship is built openly, daily, and at scale. That's why social-first: because the users aren't just an audience anymore—they're part of the team." – **Inbrax, Pedro Rojas, Social Media Manager**

"The second set of winners will be brands that understand that they're not the primary source of truth about their business anymore. With the rise of decentralised discovery, what people say about your brand will matter more than what you say about it." - **The New Thing, Shraddha Panday, Director, Content and Founding Member**

"Because organic social rewards experimentation, winners try new formats, launch limited episodic series, or bring viewers behind-the-scenes into the journey as they build their presence in real-time. From there, success comes from paying attention to audiences and building on what resonates. More experimentation and new ideas spark once you're tapped into the world of the viewer behind the screen, putting yourself in their shoes, and responding to what's working (or not). And once a piece of content begins to take off, smart brands iterate beyond the moment or social signal." – **Zulu Alpha Kilo, Jordan Alperin, Senior Communications Strategist**

"Social is now the lightest, most natural form of dialogue between a brand and its consumer. Social-first is not just a media tactic but the opening line of the relationship—a way to spark curiosity and open the door before delivering the core message." – **Brand New Agency, Jin Jun, Campaign Director**

"We are social-first because that is where we get the most immediate feedback, the most current cultural context, and the fastest read on what the customer actually cares about." – **Inbrax, Pancho González, Chief Creative Officer**

"Social data helps you understand trends, sentiment, and unmet needs in real time, allowing you to iterate quickly and make smarter marketing decisions. This kind of learning loop is nearly impossible with traditional media; try getting that kind of real-time feedback from a billboard. You can't. Traditional media just pushes things out; social pushes things forward." – **PRecious Communications, Hannah Grace Kiwahko, Associate Country Lead & Head of Digital**

The Post-Trend Era

TREND

#5

Virality is losing its shine. In an oversaturated feed culture, chasing every meme now signals short-term thinking, not relevance. The brands that win are building ownable worlds—repeating ideas, recognizable voices, and coherent content systems that feel familiar rather than opportunistic. Social-first no longer means posting more; it means standing for something and showing up consistently. In a post-trend era, confidence beats speed.

"One of the most interesting trends in 2026 is actually the rise of non-trends. We are in a post-trend era where audiences are oversaturated with short-term relevant formats, so brands that create ownable concepts can stand out by creating something that feels more real. Repetitive content series built around a big idea, together with strong hooks, will gain traction because they create familiarity without feeling opportunistic." – **Jam Session, Oana Oprea, Head of International Strategy & Digital Lead**

"The biggest winners will be those brands that aren't chasing every viral meme that drops – they're the ones who are shaping a voice that people instantly recognise. – In a landscape where everyone is scrambling to 'do a Duolingo,' the brands that cut through are those that are confident enough to build their own language and repeat it over and over again, until it becomes familiar." – **Launch, Abi Bennetts, Digital PR Director**

"For marketers, this means 2026 will reward brands that build insight-driven content ecosystems, not volume-driven content calendars. Brands must understand their cohorts with precision, map real behaviour patterns, and craft narratives that hold emotional and practical value. 'Social-first' no longer means 'post more'; it means creating stories worth stopping for. – The brands that will lead are the ones that anchor their social presence in a strong 'why', a clear reason to exist, a strong cultural or functional value, and a narrative that extends beyond the feed." – **Liwa, Puja Banerjee, Business Director**

"The most important trend in 2026 is that the industry is finally realizing that going viral is not a big deal anymore. Social-first marketers are shifting from chasing spikes to building systems: consistent engagement, longer attention, and repeatable brand moments." – **The New Thing, Shraddha Panday, Director, Content and Founding Member**

"In 2026, the most successful creators and brands will stop chasing viral moments and start designing connected ones. They will blend commerce, culture, and community into the same experience. The real advantage will belong to those who think in systems rather than posts — people who can see how social, retail, and storytelling connect. The best work will not scream for attention, it will sit confidently inside the everyday flow of how people live and buy." – **Two Points Technologies, Sam Gormley, Founder**

The Death of the Funnel

TREND

#6

The funnel didn't just shrink—it collapsed. Social is no longer awareness at the top and conversion at the bottom; it's where discovery, validation, and purchase happen in one continuous scroll. Platforms now answer intent, create demand, and close the sale without ever sending users elsewhere. Brand and performance have merged, and influence happens in real time. If you're not present when curiosity sparks, you're not in the journey at all.

"With TikTok, Social is no longer top-of-funnel — it is the funnel. We should design content for search intent — not just scroll appeal. Make videos that answer "How do I...?" "Which one should I buy?" "Does it work?" — **Next Different, Marta Monteleone, Head of Content**

"Social is the entire ecosystem and the engine of trust and transaction. The old funnel is dead." — **Medulla, Praful Akali, Founder and Global CEO**

"The biggest shift for 2026 is that social has become the real decision-making engine of the customer journey. It's where people discover, compare, validate, and choose brands—often without ever leaving the platform." — **ØCONNECTION, Vanessa Touboul, Head of Digital, Content, Trading & Innovation**

"With GenAI tools like Gemini, GEO (generative engine optimisation) becomes a key driver for the sales funnel. Brands should look at the funnel as a network of micro-journeys (not a linear path) and build positive sentiment across multiple social media touchpoints so that AI recommends them." — **The New Thing, Shraddha Panday, Director, Content and Founding Member**

"Social isn't just awareness anymore; it's a hub for conversion, entertainment, and connection. Platforms like TikTok let users act instantly: a video can inspire sign-ups, app downloads, or course enrollments in just a few clicks, collapsing the gap between discovery and action." — **TIMA, Origbo Nena, Associate Brand Strategist**

"The most important shift is the realisation that brand building and selling no longer live in separate worlds. The lines have completely disappeared. For years, marketers have been told to choose between long-term storytelling and short-term performance, between brand campaigns and conversion campaigns, but that distinction has collapsed. The question now is how you build a brand right at the point of sale. How do you create emotion, trust, and identity in a space designed for transactions?" — **Two Points Technologies, Sam Gormley, Founder**

"If a brand isn't social-first, it's invisible at the exact moment that curiosity is sparked. In addition, algorithms are no longer waiting for intent like search does — they're actively creating intent by putting products and services in front of the right people before they even know they want them." — **Launch, Abi Bennetts, Digital PR Director**

Social as the Big Bang

TREND

#7

Social is no longer the destination—it's the ignition. What starts in the feed now spills into events, retail, OOH, culture, and real-world experiences. The strongest brands design for social first, then let what resonates travel everywhere else. Social-first doesn't mean just social; it means using the feed as the trigger for worlds people can step into and keep coming back to.

"Social has simply evolved past being a place where people spend time to being the nucleus around how we all live. Look at where Timothee Chamalet is solely promoting his new movie. Look at who the new rock stars in 2026 are; they're creators on social. Look at where sports clips are first seen around the world. In 2026, social doesn't just mean the big platforms; it's everything. Spotify. Strava. Vinted. You name it." - **THINKHOUSE, Dylan Newe, Director, Social & Digital Innovation**

"Because social is where the world actually happens now. Billions of people spend their days inside digital spaces that feel as real as anything offline. It is where we share experiences, opinions, and frustrations. It is where news breaks, where culture evolves, and where most decisions are made long before a brand enters the picture. Every conversation, every comment thread, every shared post is an opportunity for connection. Social platforms have become the infrastructure of modern life. If you are not part of that flow, you are not part of the culture." - **Two Points Technologies, Sam Gormley, Founder**

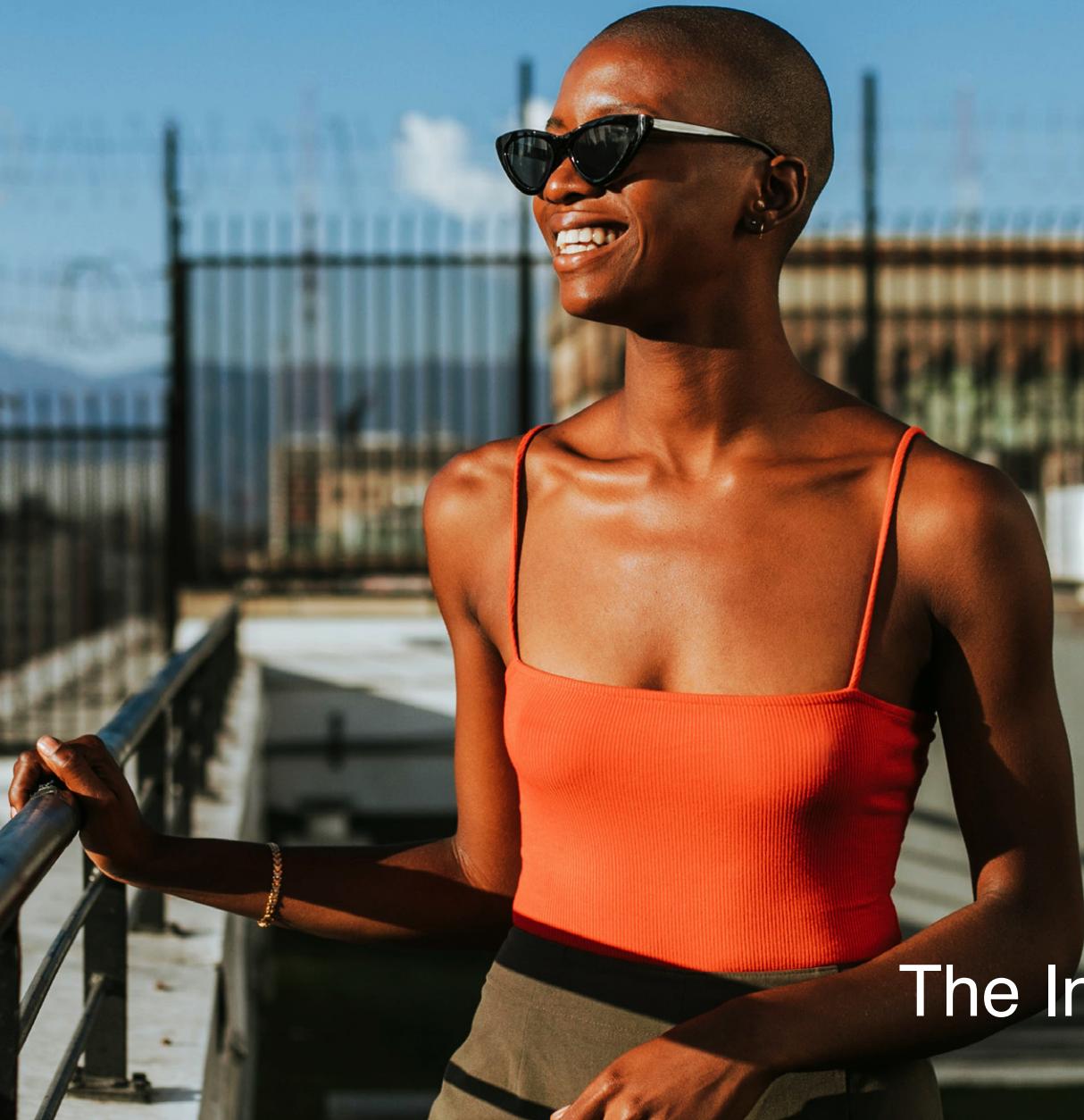
"Social-first doesn't mean 'social only.' It means designing for the most demanding environment — the feed — and then extending what resonates into podcasts, TV, OOH, retail, events, and experiences. This approach consistently leads [us] to stronger storytelling, faster learning, and better business results." – **ØCONNECTION, Vanessa Touboul, Head of Digital, Content, Trading & Innovation**

"If brands treat social as the whole ecosystem, they will end up with short-term bursts instead of long-term communities. But if they treat social as the trigger for the door that opens into meaningful experiences (in-store, in-app, on-ground, or in-culture), then social becomes a powerful multiplier. In 2026, social-first doesn't mean 'more content.' It means 'start the experience on social, and let it extend everywhere.'" – **Liwa, Puja Banerjee, Business Director**

"The Holy Trinity of Marketing is the delivery of an experience or activation that is physical and emotionally tangible – this can take the shape of an ambient tactic, but can show up via OOH or digital OOH – coupled with digital integration in the form of storytelling or social media scalability. Finally, it must be PR-able." – **Retroviral, Mike Sharman, Chief Creative Officer**

"Social media is where people are – plain and simple. It's your billboard, your shop window, your customer service counter, your entertainment channel – basically every touchpoint mashed into one screen." – **PRecious Communications, Hannah Grace Kiwahko, Associate Country Lead & Head of Digital**

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The Interviews

180 Heartbeats + Jung V Matt



Malgorzata Gontarska,

Social Media Manager

"We're low-key entering an era where TikTok is your daily scroll, YouTube is the new TV, and Netflix is basically just the movie theater now."

180heartbeats + JUNG v MATT (PL)

180heartbeats + JUNG v MATT is an independent creative agency established in Warsaw in 2007. Our mission is to create brand excitement and partner with brands that want to make a change.

180 Heartbeats + Jung V Matt

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

For me, as a Gen Z representative, the absolute biggest thing in communication is always authenticity. I recently heard this quote about TikTok winning and non-stop gaining its popularity because it's an app for the weirdos - people who aren't afraid to show their messy everyday lives and totally own their uniqueness. And yeah, I'm 100% on board with that - long live the weirdos! That genuine honesty is what keeps us hooked online, whether we see it in our campaigns, on our social feeds, or just on our screens. It's how we build trust with our favorite brands, and that's the vibe we need to chase when looking for fresh ways to reach users or find new faces for a campaign. Authenticity is the ultimate cheat code and the real MVP today.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners in the coming months will be the brands, users, and creators who understand that marketing stopped being about just advertising a long time ago. Now, it's all about authentic conversations that center on emotions - making people laugh, cry together, reflect on our problems, and build that sense of connectivity.

180 Heartbeats + Jung V Matt

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

My favorite social-first campaign this year? Hands down, it's the iconic "Duo is dead" stunt that Duolingo pulled off globally to bring back people who stopped using the app. It was basically a bunch of carefully planned, viral moves on social media, intentionally cooking up some major drama around Duo.

The videos themselves often looked kind of unpolished with cheesy effects or filmed super quickly, like they were shot on the spot. But honestly, that didn't matter - it actually made them way funnier and guaranteed they'd go viral. The whole point was to get maximum buzz, engagement, and a ton of memes going on platforms like TikTok and X (aka old Twitter). This blew up their organic reach and brand awareness, obviously leading to more people actually using the app.

The big lesson for us here? Weird, brave ideas are the secret sauce for winning users over. They want campaigns that are a total escape - something that hits them right in the feelings and is 100% authentic in its vibe, but isn't just trying to sell them something straight up.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

First of all, I have to ask: Are you even using anything besides social media anymore? We're low-key entering an era where TikTok is your daily scroll, YouTube is the new TV, and Netflix is basically just the movie theater now. And honestly, that's not a bad thing. It just means we got to level up, keep up with what our users want, meet them where they are AND be smart about it. I mean, what else gives you that much creative freedom besides social media?

Brand New Agency



Jin Jun,

Campaign Director

"The biggest winners will be creators and influencers who fluidly move between the worlds of content and brand."

Brand New Agency (KR)

Brand New Agency is a creative agency built on the mission of keeping brands culturally fresh and always “new.” We partner with clients across digital, TV, and offline channels, solving brand challenges through sharp strategic thinking, strong creative storytelling, and meticulous execution to drive meaningful growth.

Brand New Agency

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

2026 marks the true rise of “AI-native content.” While last year centered on exploring the potential of AI, this year, AI has become a fully activated marketing engine—used not only to deliver information but to spark attention, shape brand narratives, and even create virtual personalities that build emotional bonds with audiences. AI is no longer an experimental tool; it is now a core creative force that enhances brand presence with speed, scale, and imagination.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners will be creators and influencers who fluidly move between the worlds of content and brand. They possess both sharp consumer intuition and genuine brand affinity, allowing them to influence audiences while simultaneously elevating the brands they collaborate with. Their ability to translate cultural signals into relevant storytelling—and to do so authentically—gives them unmatched strategic value for brands in 2026.

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

A standout case in Korea is the AI-driven content series from the online English learning brand “YanaDu.” By creating memorable AI characters—a Korean grandmother and a young Black man—they delivered English-learning tips through storytelling that felt fresh, unexpected, and culturally resonant. The content quickly went viral and even inspired widespread parody.

This example shows that in 2026, social-first success is not defined by technical polish but by participation, reinterpretation, and narrative elasticity. When audiences can play with a brand’s message, the message spreads further and embeds deeper.

It’s 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client’s boss) asks, “Why social-first?” What do you say? GO!

Social is now the lightest, most natural form of dialogue between a brand and its consumer. It is where people first discover, evaluate, and emotionally connect with brands. Social-first is not just a media tactic but the opening line of the relationship—a way to spark curiosity and open the door before delivering the core message. In 2026, social is where brand relevance begins.

DANG



Karan Dang,

CEO & Founder

"In 2026, the real influence won't happen on the big stage. It will happen in rooms with 500 people who care, not 500,000 people who scroll."

Dang (US)

DANG is a social studio, lifestyle brand, and futurist think tank helping iconic brands stay relevant by unlocking the power of social, creativity, and community. Built for the next generation, DANG blends strategy, content, and storytelling to transform brands into living cultural forces. Through proprietary frameworks and a Gen Z-powered creative network, DANG builds systems that don't just follow culture, they shape it.

DANG

The attention realignment

In my opinion, 2026 is the year attention completely reshapes itself. The old idea of one feed dominating culture is gone. Younger users now distribute their attention across five, six, sometimes seven micro-environments: TikTok for entertainment, Instagram for identity, YouTube for depth, Discord for community, Reddit for honesty, LinkedIn for opportunity, and private messaging for real connection.

What's fascinating is that attention isn't shrinking, it's splintering. People want hyper-fast discovery and slow, immersive content. They want algorithmic serendipity and niche community depth. And instead of resisting this duality, they're embracing it.

By 2026, brands that still publish "feed-first content" will lose relevance fast. The new rule is simple:

Match the energy of the environment you enter. That means TikTok-native editing, Discord-native intimacy, Reddit-native transparency, and LinkedIn-native value. Users no longer adapt to brands. Brands must adapt to users.

The era of instant commerce

For me, the biggest behavioral shift is the normalization of instant, social purchasing. U.S. consumers are no longer willing to click away, enter card details, or go through clunky checkouts. If it doesn't happen within the platform, it might as well not happen at all. In 2026, the journey from "I like this" to "I own this" collapses into five seconds.

You'll watch a cooking video - tap the pan - buy it instantly. You'll see a creator wearing a dress - drag to try it on in AR - check out with your saved profile. You'll join a livestream - pin a product - purchase while interacting in real time.

It's not "social commerce" anymore. It's commerce with a social wrapper.

This will fundamentally reshape the economics of consumer attention. Brands will need to build content as storefronts. Every post becomes a point-of-sale. Every creator becomes a distribution channel. Every scroll becomes a shoppable moment.

The human frontline

I believe 2026 is when brand accounts finally take a backseat to human-led storytelling. Algorithms prefer people. Users trust people. And culture spreads through people.

The face of the brand will no longer be the logo, it'll be the founder, the head of design, the community manager, the R&D engineer, the micro-creators who genuinely love the product, the superfans who built their identity around the brand.

Audiences don't want corporate messaging. They want front-row access to the humans behind the decisions. This is where I see the biggest cultural unlock:

Brands that decentralize their voice will centralize their influence. By empowering multiple humans to speak, create, react, and show behind-the-scenes truths, brands will feel more alive. More trustworthy. More culturally relevant.

DANG

The AI creative flywheel

To me, the most transformative force in 2026 is the shift from AI as a “tool” to AI as a creative operating system. We’re entering a world where brands build entire content engines powered by AI: ideation - production - optimization - analytics - all in a continuous loop.

AI will write the first draft. AI will generate the mood film. AI will suggest the hook. AI will tailor versions for different platforms. AI will A/B test in real time. AI will recommend shifts based on performance patterns.

But the real unlock is this: AI takes over the grunt work so humans can elevate the creative world-building. The smartest brands will treat AI as a co-creator, not a replacement.

And ironically, the more AI content floods the internet, the more audiences will crave human-made, emotionally grounded stories.

This is where trust becomes a strategy; brands will openly say, “This is human-made.” “This is authentic.” “This is not AI.”

Transparency becomes a differentiator.

The rise of micro-worlds

I think one of the most overlooked shifts is the migration away from massive public platforms toward micro-worlds... private communities, niche servers, curated groups, and invite-only hubs. Discord servers, Telegram channels, Reddit threads, Facebook Groups, Instagram Close Friends, and Creator-led community apps.

In 2026, the real influence won’t happen on the big stage. It will happen in rooms with 500 people who care, not 500,000 people who scroll.

These micro-worlds become research labs, focus groups, culture accelerators, brand loyalty engines, and co-creation hubs. This is where product insights emerge before they become trends. This is where superfans form. This is where the future is whispered before it becomes loud. Brands that participate respectfully, not intrusively, will unlock a new dimension of loyalty and insight.

Inbrax



Sebastián Berrios,

Social Media Manager



Pedro Rojas,

Social Media Manager



Pancho González,

Chief Creative Officer

“That’s why social-first: because the users aren’t just an audience anymore—they’re part of the team.”

Inbrax (CL)

Inbrax is an ad agency full of creative services with digital marketing at heart.

Inbrax

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

Pedro Rojas: AI-powered UGC will surge in 2026, enabling users to create brand-related content with unprecedented ease and quality. The combination of highly engaged communities and generative AI will allow brands to incorporate more authentic, community-driven narratives into their content strategies—making users feel seen, heard, and genuinely involved in shaping the brand's identity.

While major brands often face creative constraints, everyday people do not. This asymmetry means that empowering audiences with AI tools opens the door for brands to explore new creative territories—especially in real-time marketing, where agility and rapid, culturally relevant responses are essential.

The key difference between social-first marketing and traditional digital marketing is that users can actively take a stand, react, and publicly shape the narrative around the content brands publish. By giving audiences new AI-driven tools to join this multi-layered, multimedia conversation, brands can deepen participation and strengthen the desire to engage within their expanded digital ecosystem.

Pancho González: The most important trend will be the shift towards Authenticated, Micro-Niche Communities powered by private and closed social platforms. As consumers experience 'platform fatigue' and distrust of broad, algorithmic feeds, marketers will prioritize investing in creating or engaging with smaller, highly focused groups (e.g., via Discord, private subreddits, or even niche WhatsApp groups). This trend is critical because it moves the focus from chasing massive reach to cultivating deep loyalty and obtaining genuine, unmediated consumer insights, which are increasingly scarce on large, public platforms.



Inbrax



Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

Pedro Rojas: The biggest winners in social-first marketing in 2026 will be the social-media-native users who, thanks to increasingly accessible AI tools, will see their individual capacity to influence brand behavior grow exponentially. Those who truly understand how digital conversations evolve—how trends are born, how communities mobilize, and how cultural moments can be amplified—will discover new and more meaningful ways to participate in a brand's ecosystem.

But the advantage won't only be about influence; it will also be about agency. These users will become active co-creators of brand narratives, not just reactors. With generative AI lowering the barrier to high-quality content creation, community members will be able to produce brand-aligned stories, parodies, remixes, product reviews, or trend-hijacking formats with a level of polish that used to require professional teams. As a result, their voices will hold more weight in shaping how brands present themselves and respond to culture.

At the same time, niche creators—especially those embedded in micro-communities—will become increasingly valuable. As social-first strategies shift toward personalization, authenticity, and conversational marketing, brands will rely on these creators not just for reach but for cultural legitimacy. The power dynamic flips: communities and creators gain influence, while brands gain alignment.

Pancho González: The biggest winners will be Brands that Master Hyper-Personalized Vertical Video and UGC-Style Content at Scale. This means winning requires not just hiring Gen Z talent, but developing AI-assisted creative processes that can generate dozens of hyper-specific, lo-fi video assets targeted to micro-segments, ensuring the content feels organic and user-generated rather than polished and branded. The platforms themselves (like TikTok and Instagram Reels) reward this velocity, authenticity, and volume, making brands that adapt their internal production models the most successful.

Inbrax

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

Pedro Rojas: A recent statistic shows that around 65% of people now use AI tools in their daily lives, and new platforms keep integrating generative AI features at a fast pace. This signals a major behavioral shift: audiences are becoming increasingly fluent in AI-assisted creation. They're no longer passive consumers—AI is empowering them to generate, remix, and reinterpret content in ways that redefine how brands should design social-first campaigns.

One powerful example is the Barbenheimer phenomenon. Two unrelated movie releases became a global co-branded moment entirely driven by social media users—who merged narratives, created memes, and gave both films a level of cultural reach that official marketing could never have planned. It shows how audiences can expand a brand universe far beyond its initial intent.

A local case is Becker's campaign in Chile, where the brand invited people to generate AI images using Meta AI. Thousands of playful, user-made visuals flooded social media, proving that when brands give audiences simple tools and permission to create, participation grows organically and authentically.

The learning is clear for 2026: People are creative, willing to create, and now fully equipped to do so. Brands that open the door to collaborative storytelling will lead; those that don't will be left behind.

Pancho González: I would point to the statistic showing the continued high engagement rates for long-form video (10+ minutes) on YouTube among Gen Z, contradicting the popular notion that short-form video has killed attention spans. This shows the way forward by highlighting that attention hasn't been destroyed; it has simply become more selective. Marketers must learn that short-form is excellent for discovery and signaling, but long-form, deep-dive content remains essential for building authority, brand equity, and true product understanding. The lesson is to use a strategic mix: short-form hooks to drive traffic to high-value, long-form content.

Inbrax



It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

Pedro Rojas: Social-first marketing isn't new—its core spirit has always been the same: to build genuine, two-way connections between brands and people. What changes in 2026 isn't the purpose, but the power and speed with which those connections can grow. Today, audiences have unprecedented creative tools and cultural influence, allowing them to shape brand narratives in real time. Social-first embraces that dynamic and turns users from passive observers into active co-creators who amplify reach and deepen loyalty.

Think about it: even the best offer or product loses impact if people don't trust the brand behind it. In an ecosystem saturated with commercial messages, trust, familiarity, and emotional resonance are the true competitive advantages. Social-first is the only channel where this relationship is built openly, daily, and at scale.

And ultimately, every ambitious project needs a community behind it. In social-first marketing, that community isn't just listening—they're co-creating, validating, and expanding the brand's presence. That's why social-first: because the users aren't just an audience anymore—they're part of the team.

Pancho González: "Social-first" means we are prioritizing Relevance, Agility, and Direct Consumer Relationship over traditional mass media push. We are social-first because that is where we get the most immediate feedback, the most current cultural context, and the fastest read on what the customer actually cares about. It's not just an advertising channel; it's our real-time R&D lab and the only place where we can truly become part of the current conversation, ensuring our brand narrative stays dynamic and immediately connected to consumer behavior.

InfluenConnect



Carol Chan,

Founder

“But the deepest advantage comes from understanding the flow between public and private influence. Public platforms generate awareness; private ecosystems create conviction. Brands that use creators to bridge both environments—while maintaining transparency and genuine community participation—will outperform those relying on reach alone.”

InfluenConnect (UK) (HK)

InfluenConnect® is a subscription-based SaaS platform revolutionising influencer marketing by bridging Eastern and Western social platforms. We connect global brands with 120,000+ verified influencers across 25 platforms, including Xiaohongshu, WeChat, Douyin, Instagram, and TikTok. Designed for scalability and global expansion, InfluenConnect® helps brands unlock the power of diverse and data-driven influencer marketing, ensuring measurable impact and high ROI.

InfluenConnect

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

The most defining shift in 2026 is the fragmentation of social ecosystems, especially across Asia. China already shows what this future looks like: Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Bilibili, Kuaishou, and WeChat each cultivate completely different cultural codes and user behaviours. Douyin's RMB 3.5 trillion ecommerce GMV in 2024, and Xiaohongshu influencing over 70 percent of purchase decisions, demonstrate how each platform has evolved into its own behavioural economy.

This pattern is now global. TikTok has become a search engine for two in five Americans, with Gen Z already moving away from Google for certain categories. Newer spaces like WhatsApp Channels, Lemon8, and niche community platforms continue to fragment where and how people discover information.

Within this fragmentation, I see a clear divide emerging: public platforms drive discovery and culture, while private channels—WeChat groups, Line, Telegram—drive trust, conversion, and long-term loyalty. Increasingly, the most valuable commercial decisions happen inside these semi-private ecosystems, shaped by creator recommendations rather than traditional paid media.

As creator investment exceeded USD 30 billion in 2025, marketers need visibility across these siloed environments. Tools like InfluenConnect, designed for East-West complexity, help decode cross-platform behaviour—but real advantage comes from mastering the cultural nuance of each platform, not simply increasing spend.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

In 2026, the brands that win will be the ones that recognise that every platform sits at a different point in the consumer journey. In China, Xiaohongshu drives credibility—around 70 percent of users say content there shapes their purchases. Douyin drives high-volume discovery, supported by its multi-hundred-billion-dollar ecommerce engine. WeChat functions as the private-domain conversion layer, where loyalty and repeat purchase decisions solidify.

Platforms like Bilibili and Kuaishou also show that subcultures and lower-tier markets can deliver outsized impact when approached with cultural precision. These aren't auxiliary channels; they are strategically distinct entry points.

But the deepest advantage comes from understanding the flow between public and private influence. Public platforms generate awareness; private ecosystems create conviction. Brands that use creators to bridge both environments—while maintaining transparency and genuine community participation—will outperform those relying on reach alone.

Ultimately, it's not the brands with the biggest budgets that win. It's the ones that understand where influence truly happens, and how trust is built across diverse platform behaviours.

InfluenConnect

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

One statistic captures where the future is heading: creator-led sales are growing at roughly 45 percent annually. On Xiaohongshu, up to 70 percent of users say creator content drives their purchase decisions. In other markets, similar patterns are emerging—TikTok Shop GMV is now on par with some global ecommerce marketplaces, and creator ad spend in the US is growing four times faster than traditional digital.

This reinforces what I see every day: creators have become the new search engine. Consumers don't start with keywords; they start with people—trusted individuals, familiar formats, and micro-communities that reflect their identity.

This is why a diversified creator portfolio is now essential. Mega-creators set culture, mid-tier creators build credibility, and KOCs drive authentic advocacy and conversion. Influence today is distributed, not concentrated.

Platforms like InfluenConnect help marketers navigate fragmented creator landscapes and assess brand fit, but the real transformation lies in building systems that combine cultural insight, operational rigour and creator-led storytelling.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

The strongest reason for a social-first strategy in 2026 is simple: trust drives every commercial outcome. As AI-generated content floods feeds, audiences gravitate toward what feels human and relatable. On Xiaohongshu and Douyin, the highest-performing content is consistently rooted in realness—unfiltered moments, spontaneous commentary, creators speaking as peers rather than presenters.

Globally, consumers increasingly rely on creators as their primary source of validation. TikTok's role in search—used this way by two in five Americans—illustrates how people are shifting from brand-led narratives to human-led discovery.

This is why influencer marketing has moved to the centre of the media mix. A social-first approach acknowledges the reality that modern influence is peer-driven, culture-specific, and mediated through individuals rather than institutions.

In a world where content is infinite but trust is scarce, working with vetted human creators allows brands to scale authenticity and relevance in ways traditional advertising no longer can.

Jam Session Agency



Oana Oprea,

*Head of International
Strategy & Digital Lead*

“Long-form content is making a real comeback. Users are becoming more aware of the endless, empty scrolling and want something that actually starts a thought and finishes it.”

Jam Session Agency (RO)

Jam Session Agency combines progressive business thinking with creativity to build brands that resonate today and for generations to come. It is the most awarded local independent agency, collaborating with partners who challenge traditional communication and aim for authentic emotional impact.

Jam Session Agency

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

One of the most interesting trends in 2026 is actually the rise of non-trends. We are in a post-trend era where audiences are oversaturated with short-term relevant formats, so brands that create ownable concepts can stand out by creating something that feels more real. Repetitive content series built around a big idea, together with strong hooks, will gain traction because they create familiarity without feeling opportunistic.

For example, original concepts like "[Subway Takes](#)" with Kareem Rahma use a simple host-and-guest setup to explore "hot takes" during a subway ride in NYC, while "[A View from the Bridge](#)" invites passersby to pick up an iconic red phone placed across a bridge and have a deep, fresh conversation about life twists. These distinctive formats perform increasingly well organically and are becoming a cultural phenomenon on social media. Which sounds like a brand's dream, right?

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners in social-first marketing will be brands that treat social not as a channel, but as a core brick of their brand platform. As we saw at Cannes Lions this summer, coherent and consistent brand platforms achieve more business results and brand effects than short-termism (The Creative Dividend, System 1 x Effie).

This means that long-term thinking can win the game, even in a space known for speed and ephemerality. Brands that build coherent, long-term narratives across social will gain stronger equity and higher ROI. The winners are the companies that can't imagine brand building without social and use it as their most dynamic owned channel for engagement, consistency, and growth.

Jam Session Agency

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. **What can (and should) we all learn from that?**

Long-form content is making a real comeback. Users are becoming more aware of the endless, empty scrolling and want something that actually starts a thought and finishes it. Platforms are rewarding depth again, and marketers have a real opportunity to meet this need. From YouTube deep dives to extended podcasts and even longer TikToks, the shift is clear: more quality over noise, and meaningful content over micro-moments.

We felt this shift ourselves in the agency. For the launch of Squid Game Season 2 on Netflix, we created an intentionally heavy, slow-burning content that blended the series' elimination games with the fierce Christmas traditions of Eastern Europe, all under the watchful eye of the "toughest guardian": the Balkan granny.

The long-form approach turned out to be a real win. It didn't go viral in a millions-of-views way, but it created a powerful brand and cultural moment, with high-quality engagement. So, the lesson is simple: feed your communities depth, and they'll reward you big.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

By 2026, "why social-first?" should practically answer itself. The data already tells the story: people spend most of their screen time here, and social drives both consideration and, in many categories, direct conversion. Products sell out because they're discovered on TikTok, and creators often have a more active reach than a passive TV audience.

The real differentiator is engagement. Social is one of the few places where people actually interact with brands: comment, react, share, challenge, and co-create. So, if you want relevance, response, and real impact, social-first is the only strategy that keeps you in a conversation, not a monologue.

Launch



Abi Bennetts,

Digital PR Director

"In a landscape where everyone is scrambling to 'do a Duolingo,' the brands that cut through are those that are confident enough to build their own language and repeat it over and over again, until it becomes familiar."

Launch (UK)

Launch is a creative brand PR agency that helps brands 'Own It' - creating PR, social, and digital campaigns that cut through noise and ignite culture.

Launch

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

One of the most important trends in social-first marketing in 2026 will be humanisation. In an AI-driven, hyper-competitive landscape where new brands are launching every day, people are increasingly looking for businesses they can trust, invest in, and feel aligned with. They want to understand the humans behind a brand and feel part of a community.

This is why founder-led storytelling, building in public, and employee-generated content are so effective: they all tap into the truth that people buy from people. Showing real wins, failures, and day-to-day moments builds a level of authenticity that polished branding can't replicate.

But humanisation isn't just about consistency - it's also about agility. New creators can appear and grow communities in weeks, and brands that stay on the pulse and react quickly can unlock fast, genuine reach. Balancing a strong human-first narrative with the ability to jump on cultural shifts or rising influencers makes a brand feel alive rather than corporate - and that's exactly what audiences will respond to as we enter a new year.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners will be those brands that aren't chasing every viral meme that drops - they're the ones who are shaping a voice that people instantly recognise. Brands like Itsu do this brilliantly - they tap into cultural moments that resonate with their audience, while keeping a tone that is unmistakably theirs. Their collaboration with [The Wealdstone Raider](#) is a perfect example of this, and it landed exceptionally well with audiences as a result.

In a landscape where everyone is scrambling to 'do a Duolingo,' the brands that cut through are those that are confident enough to build their own language and repeat it over and over again, until it becomes familiar. Consistency matters because it builds that familiarity - and this is what turns passive viewers into returning followers. When your audience can instantly identify your style - whether it's a distinct sense of humour, a particular reference, or a reaction - you stop being interchangeable and start becoming a standout brand that people are actively searching for content from. It's inevitable that with a clear tone of voice, you will exclude some audience segments. A distinctive sense of humour or point of view won't resonate with everyone, and that can feel risky when brands are chasing widespread reach or virality. But reach isn't the same as resonance, so even if your content reaches fewer people, the ones it does reach are often far more likely to stay, engage, and grow into a loyal community - and that is how real social fame is built.

Launch

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

The fact that [77%](#) of B2B marketers now have a dedicated influencer budget (and over half expect that budget to grow in 2025) is a clear signal of where social-first marketing is heading in 2026. Creator marketing is no longer a nice-to-have or a strategy reserved only for B2C.

What I think this really shows is a shift in trust. Audiences believe creators more than they believe brands, ads, or even traditional reviews, which means creators are now credible spokespeople, not just amplification tools. Their ability to translate complex messages into human, culturally fluent content is exactly why B2B marketers are leaning in.

It also highlights the need for deeper, longer-term creator relationships. The brands pulling ahead aren't chasing one-off shout-outs - they're investing in and building ongoing collaborations that create familiarity and authenticity over time.

Together, these trends make the path forward clear: in 2026, social-first marketing will be defined by creator-led storytelling, sustained partnerships, and the recognition that influence now shapes every corner of the buying journey, not just consumer brands, but the entire business ecosystem.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

Social media has become the new discovery engine: it's where everyone is hanging out, and it's where a lot of purchase decisions now start. People are no longer beginning their customer journeys on traditional search platforms - they're starting on TikTok, Instagram, or whatever other platform is shaping culture that week.

If a brand isn't social-first, it's invisible at the exact moment that curiosity is sparked. In addition, algorithms are no longer waiting for intent like search does - they're actively creating intent by putting products and services in front of the right people before they even know they want them.

For this reason, social media is no longer 'top of funnel'. With native shops, one-click checkouts, and creators linking directly to products, the entire funnel can unravel in one feed scroll. This is even more pertinent when you consider that many consumers trust their favourite creators more than brands, ads, or even traditional reviews.

And with PR moments now born, amplified, and retired entirely on social media, the message is clear: if you're not leading with social, you're not leading at all.

Leonardo1452



Gaby Arriaga,

Founder

"The average person moves across almost 7 platforms every month. They adopt new spaces instantly, shift between communities, and engage with content wherever it feels most natural. They no longer live in one channel, so brands cannot either."

Leonardo1452 (MX)

Leonardo1452 is a consulting company specializing in consumer trends across Latin America and the creator of the tool Near Future Thinking®. As trend hunters, we look for signals that point to nascent market dynamics in the early stages of development that are not yet on companies' radar. We help organizations make effective business decisions by identifying what must be adapted to remain ahead and relevant in the years to come.

Leonardo1452

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

In 2026, one of the most important trends for marketing teams is the shift toward verifiable human authenticity. Yes, AI continues to expand, but audiences have developed a sharper critical sense. Especially among heavy content consumers, there's now a distinct cringe response to content that feels overly polished, overly scripted, or obviously AI-generated.

As a result, they reward content that shows visible signs of humanity: spontaneity, imperfection, emotional nuance, and genuine context. Consumers want to see creators, influencers, and even celebrities forgetting their lines, reacting honestly, showing flaws, and laughing at mistakes. They want environments that look like real places, not simulated sets. They want to believe it because they can feel the human behind it.

For marketing teams, this means moving away from overproduced storytelling and toward human-first creative systems where AI may assist with scale and structure, but the final layer remains unmistakably human. Brands that master this balance will earn trust, attention, and cultural relevance in 2026.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

In 2026, the biggest winners in social first marketing will be the teams that fully adopt AI-driven marketing automation. Automation now handles repetitive tasks such as audience segmentation, copywriting, scheduling, lead scoring, message personalization, creative optimization, and even programmatic ad buying, which frees social teams to focus on strategy and creativity. What once required weeks to ideate, produce, and launch can now be done in days or even hours, with higher targeting accuracy and stronger conversion, retention, and customer value. On social media, the impact is especially significant. AI can read real-time trends, conversations, tone, and sentiment, and create context-relevant content at scale. The result is a genuine competitive advantage for any brand: lower cost per asset, faster reactions to cultural signals, precise audience targeting, personalization at scale, and a more sustainable content operation.

Leonardo1452

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

One of the most impressive recent statistics is that the average user now moves across about 6.8 social platforms every month. This level of platform fluidity shows how quickly people adopt new spaces, learn new behaviors, and engage with content wherever it appears. Users are no longer loyal to one channel. They are social-first in every sense, shifting effortlessly between communities, formats, and cultures. Strategies built around a single platform or a single format might not survive. The opportunity is to think in ecosystems, to design adaptable stories that travel naturally across platforms, and to meet audiences in the environments they choose. The winners in 2026 will be the brands that understand this new social fluency and create for movement, not for static channels.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

Because our audiences are social-first. The average person moves across almost 7 platforms every month. They adopt new spaces instantly, shift between communities, and engage with content wherever it feels most natural. They no longer live in one channel, so brands cannot either.

At the same time, people have developed a sharper critical sense. They reject content that feels too polished or artificial and reward what feels unmistakably human. This is why verifiable human authenticity has become the new creative currency. Spontaneous moments, real reactions, genuine environments, and emotional nuance now build more trust than any perfectly sculpted campaign.

Social platforms are where culture happens, where attention flows, and where trust is earned. They are where human authenticity meets AI. They are where brands can stay relevant in a world defined by movement, not static channels.

Liwa



Puja Banerjee,

Business Director

"The brands that will lead are the ones that anchor their social presence in a strong 'why', a clear reason to exist, a strong cultural or functional value, and a narrative that extends beyond the feed."

Liwa (UAE)

Everything Content. Driven by Context. Content is how brands speak. Context is how they're heard. We turn strategy into stories – told where they matter most.

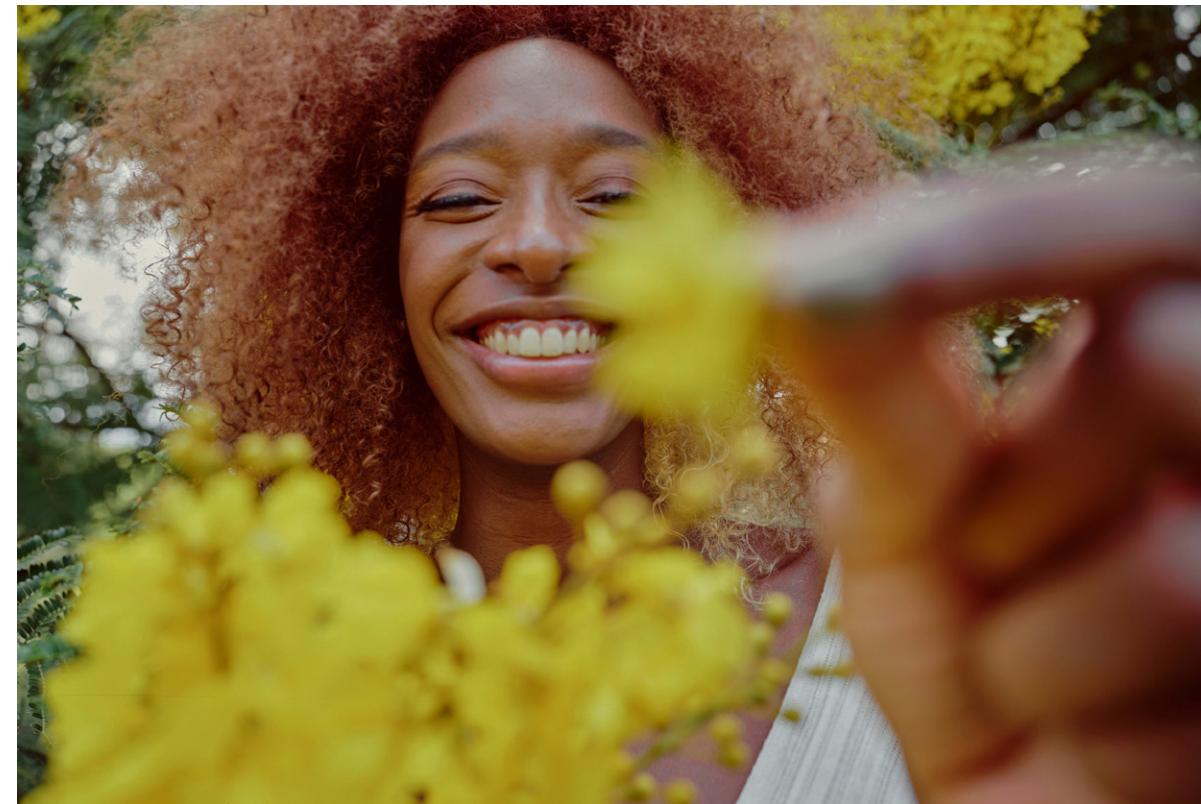
Liwa

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

One of the most important shifts in social-first marketing in 2026 is the movement from mindless to mindful consumption. Social is no longer a place for passive scrolling; it has become a space where people actively look for value, meaning, and cultural resonance. Consumers today follow brands whose stories align with their personal ethics, lifestyle aspirations, and identity.

This shift is visible across categories. Even in something as simple as purchasing a handbag, the decision journey has evolved from impulsive buying driven by ads to a deeper evaluation of craftsmanship, cultural meaning, sustainability narratives, and the social impact behind the product.

For marketers, this means 2026 will reward brands that build insight-driven content ecosystems, not volume-driven content calendars. Brands must understand their cohorts with precision, map real behaviour patterns, and craft narratives that hold emotional and practical value. “Social-first” no longer means “post more”; it means creating stories worth stopping for. The most successful marketers will be those who treat social as a place for context-rich storytelling, not wallpaper content.



Liwa

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners in 2026 will be brands that treat social not as a standalone platform but as part of an integrated ecosystem. Social cannot compensate for a weak product, unclear brand philosophy, or a lack of meaningful narrative. The brands that will lead are the ones that anchor their social presence in a strong “why”, a clear reason to exist, a strong cultural or functional value, and a narrative that extends beyond the feed.

This shift is reinforced by global behavioural changes:

- Doom-scrolling is reducing.
- Parental controls and digital regulation are increasing.
- In markets like Australia, social platforms are being restricted for users under 16.

With audiences becoming more intentional about where they spend time, brands that bring genuine value, education, inspiration, cultural insight, community, or utility will outperform those that rely on frequency and retargeting alone.

The long-term winners will be those who build communities, not impressions. They will use social strategically: as a bridge between experiences, platforms, and behaviours. Social-first brands win only when the brand itself is strong and when social amplifies the story, not replaces it.

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

Some of the strongest social-first work in recent years has actually begun as experiential-first work. Consider Humantra's now-iconic billboard in the UAE or McDonald's minimalist “arches-only” outdoor executions. These campaigns were not crafted for social, but their cultural simplicity, boldness, and experiential nature made them irresistibly shareable on social media.

This illustrates a crucial truth for 2026: social-first success increasingly comes from offline moments engineered for online amplification. Marketers are leveraging AI, interactive tech, and real-world installations to create experiences that people want to document, share, and talk about.

The biggest learning here is that social should not be treated as a dumping ground for endless content outputs. Instead, brands should create sparks, signature moments, immersive experiences, and brave creative decisions that naturally travel across platforms. Experience-led storytelling, powered by tech and insight, will outperform feed-first content every time.

Liwa

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

The phrase "social-first" itself is outdated. In 2026, no brand can afford to think of social as the centre of its universe. Instead, social is the starting point, the gateway to experiences, commerce, community, and culture. It is the place where attention begins, but not where it ends.

So the answer isn't "social-first," it's "experience-first, amplified through social." Social provides reach, discovery, and narrative scale, but the real value comes when it connects people to something deeper: a product worth buying, a story worth sharing, an experience worth joining.

If brands treat social as the whole ecosystem, they will end up with short-term bursts instead of long-term communities. But if they treat social as the trigger for the door that opens into meaningful experiences (in-store, in-app, on-ground, or in-culture), then social becomes a powerful multiplier. In 2026, social-first doesn't mean "more content." It means "start the experience on social, and let it extend everywhere."



Medulla



Praful Akali,

*Founder and Global CEO -
Medulla Communications*



Taffy Ledesma,

*Managing Partner -
Medulla APAC*



Andrew Schirmer,

*Consulting Director -
Medulla US*

"We must position the doctor or the expert as the face of the content, turning compliance into a growth engine. Non-healthcare brands must pivot from celebrity endorsements to subject matter experts (SMEs)."

Medulla (IN)

Medulla is a specialist healthcare advertising agency that firmly believes that digital and advertising go hand in hand. That any advertising agency that cannot create for the social and digital world has no right to exist, even in any remote corner of the world. That human impact is the best measure of advertising – digital or otherwise. That social media is the only true peer-to-peer medium at scale and is the only way to drive word-of-mouth, but the only way to power it for your brand is through authenticity. That no influencers are better than mercenary influencers. That all communication has a social context whether it uses social media or not.

Medulla



What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

Praful Akali: The critical trend is “Authenticity at Scale”—the convergence of AI-enhanced personalization, verified human storytelling, and using authentic experts as influencers at scale. The creative challenge is making scientific truth feel instantly viral. This is necessary, as 75% of professional marketers find UGC a more authentic content type. We saw this succeed with the CeraVe “Michael CeraVe” campaign, which used dermatologists for verification, proving that expert validation must be the creative core.

Taffy Ledesma: The critical trend is defining the roles in the open-to-closed funnel. Open social media is strictly for discovery and education, where the doctor builds trust. The conversion and patient support, however, must move immediately to a secure, closed environment. In markets like India, we leverage social media (FB/Insta) reach to push users to a compliant Click-to-WhatsApp (CTWA) chat for instant bookings/education. This trend is a direct response to regulatory demands but also to marketing needs of supporting the consumer journey end-to-end. The key is that the closed channel is mandatory for maintaining data integrity and patient safety in complex care pathways. We use the closed group channels not just for privacy, but for retention and supportive CRM—sending personalized nudges and refill reminders to drive lifetime-value.

Andrew Schirmer: The most impactful trend is the rise of Ethical AI and Privacy-First Personalization, which is the engine for building long-term customer value. Consumers demand hyper-relevance delivered transparently by trusted resources. Our approach is to adopt the high standards and data rigor of the Pharma sector to validate spokespersons or health influencers. Data shows brands that incorporate UGC see conversion increases up to 30%, but the stakes are higher with regard to authenticity in health and health care.

Medulla

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

Andrew Schirmer: The biggest winners will be the “Frictionless Funnel Architects”—especially Health-tech Innovators—merging healthcare’s trust with D2C’s agility. The core insight is that compliant convenience is the new global currency. The winner uses social to build credibility (often via an authoritative voice, patient testimonial, or doctor) and uses that trust to power an immediate, one-click experience. We can apply the D2C playbook to services, moving quickly from social messaging to action (62% of US patients prefer online scheduling). The creative victory is converting trust into frictionless transaction—a cross-sector principle essential for growth.

Taffy Ledesma: The biggest winners will be Specialized Provider Networks that master the Local Digital Front Door through meticulous compliance and localization. My observation is that integrating Local SEO with hyper-local social content is non-negotiable for finding high-intent patients. In markets like India, Providers must learn from local businesses, ensuring online search leads directly to a smooth digital booking funnel. In Singapore, where 85% of citizens are concerned about data usage, winners prioritizing privacy-first data governance set the regional standard. This rigor in compliance becomes the core differentiator for trust.

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

Praful Akali: The most telling statistic is 77% of consumers look for clinician-reviewed content. This means Verified Credibility is the new creative currency. We must position the doctor or the expert as the face of the content, turning compliance into a growth engine. Non-healthcare brands must pivot from celebrity endorsements to subject matter experts (SMEs). We saw this win with the Vaseline Verified campaign, a Cannes winner, where in-house R&D experts verified viral hacks, feeding that trust back into the social feed. The lesson for 2026 is clear: brands that can scale verified, expert-led content will dominate the customer journey.

Andrew Schirmer: This statistic proves that validated expertise is the most critical health care marketing asset; trusted, authentic, and verified value-first education is in. We must always demand a human expert oversight layer for new technology. Across channels and audiences, a commitment to transparency is key – so much so that trusted providers and opinion leaders now use social media to share clear, actionable information about costs and access. Relevance, authenticity, clarity, and trust are the foundations for building any successful health influence communications program.

Taffy Ledesma: There is a strong shift toward social trust. This dictates that the physician must be the face of the content, especially for localization strategies in high-growth markets.

Medulla

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks, "Why social-first?" What do you say? GO!

Praful Akali: Social is the entire ecosystem and the engine of trust and transaction. The old funnel is dead. Credibility has migrated here. Other brands must learn from healthcare: 77% of consumers look for clinician-reviewed content. This forces all sectors to elevate content by positioning genuine experts as the verified voice. The same category messaging that comes from experts, influencers, and peers has a multiplier impact on change in consumer behaviour as compared to brand communication.

Taffy Ledesma: Traditional marketing operates around the journey; social-first operates inside it, driving measurable impact from symptom discovery (Gen Z on TikTok) straight through to retention.

Andrew Schirmer: We are social-first because the entire consumer-patient, influencer, and prescriber journey unfolds across these platforms, and 75% of U.S. healthcare professionals actively use social media for professional purposes. We need to operate within a new reality in which all players are all online all of the time, and we have to earn the right to be in this conversation by providing value, support, and inspiration.



Next Different



Marta Monteleone,

Head of Content

"TikTok may have indirectly saved Meta; recent reports state that, under US law, Meta does not hold a monopoly despite its acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp, because of the massive popularity gained by TikTok. The statements note that 'TikTok and YouTube have shaken up the social media landscape.'"

Next Different (IT)

Next Different is the leading Italian communication company, integrated and independent. From the union of Different, a leading national player in creativity, events, research, and PR, and Next14, a leader in data-driven media strategy and planning services with a strong technological approach, comes Next Different.

Next Different

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

Social media use for brands will split into two parallel and compatible models:

1. "One-shot" broadcasting model: brands can use non-native content to reach a broader audience and capture attention during scroll time; useful for upper-funnel objectives and one-shot campaigns.

2. On the other hand, engaging people will rely on niche models and granular content, for several reasons:

User-Controlled Feeds: for years you could rely on Instagram's algorithm to push your content based on engagement; now users can actively exclude entire categories of content, and this tool is becoming more sophisticated. In addition, Meta is facing backlash for not using a chronological feed distribution.

Social Platforms are becoming Search Engines: recipes, skincare, travel options — writing the right text matters.

Plus, Search Engine Optimization is becoming GEO (Generative Engine Optimization): we will start writing content that is interpreted as reliable by ChatGPT, Gemini, and similar systems.

Speaking about Influence Marketing: experts are more effective for niche topics than 1-million-follower influencers, who are perceived as less credible on specific matters.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The winner will be the one who can leverage content creation between:

1. Using AI-generated content as a driver of novelty and disruption, to create something surprisingly new, disruptive, and bold. But not misleading, deceptive, or intended to imitate reality: we don't want users to believe something is true when it isn't. Users will feel more uncertain about what is credible and what is not, so AI-generated content will win on social media only if it is fun, creative, and clearly recognizable as such.

2. Prioritize authentic creator-made content: identity, authorship, and content ownership. This dual thrust will transform brands into relational platforms capable of co-creating in real time, bridging the gap between communities and brands, and shifting communication toward a truly participatory and seamless model.

An evolution that will redefine creativity, trust, and engagement for everyone.

Next Different



A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

More than a statistic, it's recent news: TikTok may have indirectly saved Meta; recent reports state that, under US law, Meta does not hold a monopoly despite its acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp, because of the massive popularity gained by TikTok. The statements note that 'TikTok and YouTube have shaken up the social media landscape.'

What would the verdict have been if TikTok hadn't risen to such prominence in recent years? Back in 2020, people thought that TikTok was a platform only for teenagers and choreos. By then, the platform had approximately 465.7 million global users; in five years, TikTok is estimated to have between 1.6 and 2.14 billion global users (depending on the metric—total registered users or monthly active users), and it's achieving goals that Meta have been set for a long time: becoming a (real) competitor for long-form videos against YouTube (Netflix, TikTok is coming for you too), becoming a search engine, being able to sell directly within the app (TikTok shop) and paying creators to attract and keep them on the platform.

With TikTok, Social is no longer top-of-funnel — it is the funnel.

We should:

- Design content for search intent — not just scroll appeal, make videos that answer "How do I...?" "Which one should I buy?" "Does it work?"
- Invest in creator networks, not one-off influencer posts (Creators shape trust and trust shapes conversion.)
- Make sure your TikTok or Reels feed, teach, compare, show, or solve something.
- Build brand relevance through utility and culture.

Next Different

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

When people discuss social media marketing, performance is acceptable on huge numbers only; they expect millions of followers or views to feel satisfied with each of the post published; sometimes people seeing social media results tend to forget how many people we are actually talking about with limited costs.



ØCONNECTION



Vanessa Touboul,

*Head of Digital, Content,
Trading & Innovation*

“Because social is where brands earn the right to be chosen. It’s the only space where visibility, credibility, desirability, and conversion all coexist in a single environment.”

ØCONNECTION (FR)

ØCONNECTION is an independent communications agency founded and chaired by Arnaud Baudry d'Asson. With nearly 150 talented employees, it offers a unique model based on four areas of expertise: Media, Events, PR-Influence, and Sports Marketing. These four departments are supported by cross-functional teams in digital, creation, special operations, data, and analysis.

ØCONNECTION

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026 from the point of view of marketers and the industry? And why?

The biggest shift for 2026 is that social has become the real decision-making engine of the customer journey. It's where people discover, compare, validate, and choose brands—often without ever leaving the platform. At Øconnection, the campaigns that perform best are those designed natively for feeds: vertical formats, fast storytelling, and creator-led narratives.

But another defining evolution is the growing bridge between digital culture and real-life experiences. Social no longer lives only on screens. Digital-first formats now generate massive physical attendance: creators' events, live formats born on platforms, community-driven shows, or hybrid experiences where social ignites, and IRL amplifies.

Finally, the rise of video podcasts is reshaping influence and brand storytelling. Long-form, conversational, personality-driven content has become a premium space for attention, credibility, and emotional connection. In 2026, the winning brands will be those able to master both short-form impact and long-form engagement.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners will be brands that behave like creators rather than advertisers. Brands with a clear editorial voice, recurring formats, and agile teams able to publish at the speed of culture.

Creators themselves will continue to gain power. Their role is no longer just to amplify messages—it's to co-create meaning, shape narratives, and turn communities into real-world movements. We saw this clearly with Playmobil Skytrails at Øconnection, where Michou and family creators didn't just bring reach—they created the cultural entry point for a brand-new universe.

Another category of winners will be organisations able to connect social, influence, media, and physical experiences into one coherent ecosystem. This is what we achieved with APF France handicap, France TV, and Théo Curin: a social-first narrative amplified through long-form content, digital media, and institutional visibility. Orchestration will be the real competitive advantage.

ØCONNECTION

A case in point: share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

Two formats illustrate perfectly where social-first is heading.

First, our collaboration with APF France handicap, France TV Publicité, and Théo Curin. We built a fully social-first content ecosystem: a long-form dinner conversation, short emotional capsules, and creator-led storytelling. The project proved that social can carry sensitive societal topics with scale, credibility, and deep emotional impact.

Second, the Playmobil Skytrails launch. Michou's challenge content created the initial cultural spark on TikTok and YouTube, which then expanded into local creators and a national roadshow in shopping malls. Social ignited, IRL amplified, and media scaled what truly worked.

These examples show the 2026 blueprint: start in social, activate creators, expand into real life, then scale through media.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

Because social is where brands earn the right to be chosen. It's the only space where visibility, credibility, desirability, and conversion all coexist in a single environment. If you don't start there, you're absent at the exact moment decisions are being made.

Social-first doesn't mean "social only." It means designing for the most demanding environment — the feed — and then extending what resonates into podcasts, TV, OOH, retail, events, and experiences. At Øconnection, this approach consistently leads to stronger storytelling, faster learning, and better business results.

In 2026, "Why social-first?" has one simple answer: because culture is built on social, and brands that want to matter must start there.

PRecious Communications



Hannah Grace Kiwahko,

*Associate Country Lead & Head of
Digital*

"Creativity without strategy is like having a great joke with no setup. Too often, brands assume that if they just post consistently, people will magically see and buy their products. But the reality is, you have to consider the entire consumer journey."

PRecious Communications (PH)

Established in 2012, PRecious Communications has evolved from being a traditional public relations consultancy to an award-winning integrated marketing and communications agency that is working with leading brands to drive business outcomes. Our agency is rooted in Southeast Asia with a strong understanding of the local markets, giving you direct access to in-market teams that can help you navigate through local nuances.

PRecious Communications

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

One of the trends that's been popping up recently is the rise of bite-sized, mini-series content brands are putting out. It's not the usual "here's our product, please buy it" stuff, but actual episodic content. The kind you accidentally binge because you were doom scrolling or just trying to kill two minutes before a meeting...and suddenly you're six episodes deep, wondering why you're emotionally invested in someone reviewing moisturizer.

Social media marketing has evolved through the years. Brands used to push out polished, branded content, then "influencers" rolled in and suddenly brands tapped these personalities to push products in a more relatable way. Then came TikTok and cracked the whole user-generated content, where everyday people show products in real-life situations. That worked wonders for pushing consumers down the funnel because, for a while, it felt fresh and authentic. But if we're being honest, the digital space is so crowded that nothing feels new anymore. People are constantly bombarded with ads, whether from brands, creators, or random content. You even have to pay just so you don't get disrupted by ads. I mean, honestly, when's the last time you didn't scroll past or skipped an ad? Everything now is a blur. Even user-generated content, which used to feel fresh, is now part of the noise.

That's why this shift toward mini-series formats is so interesting. They're sneaky in a clever way. Instead of relying on a one-off ad or a single influencer video, brands are starting to build episodic content—little narrative fragments dropped over time. It's basically branded content disguised as entertainment. And what makes it work is that it doesn't scream "ad." It feels more like something you actually want to watch.

What's clever is that these mini-series content blends the creativity of traditional storytelling with the rawness and relatability of user-generated content. They don't hammer you with logos or taglines every three seconds. Instead, it gives audiences something to be curious about. It makes them think, "Okay... so what happens next?" You get hooked on the story first, the brand second. That kind of engagement is something ads haven't achieved in a long time.

This format also naturally encourages repeat viewership and interaction. When people follow a storyline, they come back willingly. They comment, and share—not because they're being targeted, but because they're actually invested. That's the kind of unpaid, self-driven engagement marketers used to dream about in brainstorms while pretending not to refresh campaign dashboards. It's the difference between buying attention and earning it—through creativity, and understanding what genuinely entertains people.

Considering how brutal the digital space is right now, it's a smart workaround in an environment where algorithms keep tightening. Paid reach gets more expensive, and consumer attention keeps shrinking. Mini-series are bite-sized, fast-paced, and easy to follow, which fits perfectly with how people browse content now. Plus, they give brands the chance to build long-term affinity instead of relying on one-hit-wonder content.

Overall, it signals a bigger shift. People don't actually hate brand content; they just hate being interrupted by it. People want stories, and something that feels worth their time. Give them a story, a feeling, a reason to stay, and suddenly the brand becomes welcome again. Mini-series/episodic content gives brands a way to show up without forcing themselves into the feed. It's subtle, creative, and actually fun for audiences, which is something we've been missing for a while. After years of chasing clicks and praying for engagement spikes, it's refreshing to see marketing drift back toward something that feels, well... fun.

PRecious Communications

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

From what I've seen in social campaigns, the brands that will dominate in 2026 are the ones that can consistently blend these three pillars: creativity, strategy, and paid. Get these three right, and that's when you start seeing real results. It stops being about empty likes and those sad little view spikes, and starts becoming real movement through the funnel. Actual interest. Actual conversions. Actual humans responding.

Creativity comes first because, well... everything starts with "Did this even make someone stop scrolling?" And most things don't. Social media is a noisy, crowded space, and people are scrolling constantly—often mindlessly. So if your content looks like every other polished, overly-branded, or built around what you think your audience wants rather than what they actually care about, it won't land. Creativity is what stops people mid-scroll. It's the hook, the "aha moment," the content that makes someone pause, engage, or even share. And it doesn't even have to be loud or sparkly. Sometimes the magic is in something that feels oddly relatable, or just crafted with actual intention instead of the usual "We needed to post something today, so here's this." The point is, it has to feel different from everything else in the feed.

Next, strategy. Creativity without strategy is like having a great joke with no setup. Too often, brands assume that if they just post consistently, people will magically see and buy their products. But the reality is, you have to consider the entire consumer journey. What content do people need to see to become aware? How do you engage them during consideration? How do



you nudge them to take action? Brands that plan their posts around these touchpoints, instead of posting randomly, will naturally outperform those who don't. Strategy also includes knowing your audience segments, posting cadence, timing, and which platform fits which kind of content. When you treat social media like a map instead of a mood board, things change. Finally, paid ads. Social media platforms are businesses—they make money from advertising. They won't show your masterpiece of a post just because it's good. If you're relying on organic reach in 2026, you might as well post into a private group with only yourself in it. Organic reach alone won't get you anywhere. If you're not willing to invest in paid amplification, even the most creative and strategic content might never be seen. Paid content ensures your posts reach the right audience at the right time, driving awareness, engagement, and ultimately conversion.

To sum it all up, brands that nail all three: creativity that hooks, strategy that guides, and paid that amplifies in a seamless way, will naturally be the biggest winners in social-first marketing. The ones that treat social media as a full ecosystem, not just a marketing channel, will stay relevant in the crowded digital space.

PRecious Communications

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

A recent campaign I really like is Tower 28. They recently ran a casting-call for a mini-series and specifically asked people with acne, eczema, or rosacea to audition to be part of their next campaign. Instead of doing the usual “audition here” post, they turned their casting call into this comedic little mini-series. Weirdly enough, it worked. People weren’t just watching, they were engaging. Commenting and sharing clips before the main storyline even launched. It’s like they created hype before the actual campaign existed, which is honestly kind of genius when you think about how short people’s attention spans are these days.

This perfectly ties back to what I highlighted in Question 1 about mini-series content becoming the new secret weapon. Instead of single, logo-bombarded ads, brands are creating episodic stories that blend relatable, UGC-style moments with crafted storytelling. They did not push their product, but rather, they gave their audiences something to look forward to. Tower 28’s campaign shows that when you do this well, engagement starts even before the main content drops.

It also echoes my answer to Question 2 about the holy trinity—creativity, strategy, and paid. Tower 28 hit all three. They nailed creativity with entertaining sketches that feel authentic, strategy by building a clear consumer journey from awareness to participation, and paid by amplifying these posts so they reach the right audiences. What happened next? Thousands of applications and high engagement, proving that social-first campaigns can succeed when all three pillars align.

From a broader perspective, the numbers back it up: according to Pretty Little Marketer, social media and short-form video are now capturing more attention than TV, with users spending roughly 13 hours 48 minutes per week on social versus 10 hours 15 minutes watching television. This reinforces why investing in social-first storytelling isn’t optional—it’s where audiences are, and mini-series content is a format that keeps them coming back.

So, what can we learn from this? A few things, at least from where I’m sitting:

- Episodic or serialized storytelling works because it builds anticipation and repeat engagement. People love cliffhangers.
- You can’t rely on creativity alone; strategy and paid amplification matter. Otherwise great content just... sits there.
- Social-first campaigns should aim to be part of the cultural conversation--not just another ad. This is how brands earn attention rather than paying for it.

Tower 28 basically offered a sneak peek into the future of social-first marketing: mini-series content that is strategic, creatively executed, and amplified. Content that feels less like advertising and more like something you just enjoy watching. It validates everything I’ve highlighted in Questions 1 and 2: the brands that win in 2026 belong to the brands that know how to mix creativity with strategy and paid amplification without losing that human touch.

PRecious Communications

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

You know, whenever someone asks me "Why social-first?", I always have this urge to laugh a little because... where else would you even start in 2026? Social media is where people are—plain and simple. It's your billboard, your shop window, your customer service counter, your entertainment channel—basically every touchpoint mashed into one screen. But it's also so much more fluid than any of the old-school push channels we used to rely on. A single post, story, or mini-series can spark curiosity, engage an audience, and even drive purchases, especially when you combine creativity, strategy, and paid amplification.

Beyond funnel efficiency, social-first marketing is a rich source of consumer insights. It's a never-ending focus group. Every like, comment, share, and view tells you something about what your audience actually wants—not just what you think they want. Social data helps you understand trends, sentiment, and unmet needs in real time, allowing you to iterate quickly and make smarter marketing decisions. This kind of learning loop is nearly impossible with traditional media; try getting that kind of real-time feedback from a billboard. You can't. Traditional media just pushes things out; social pushes things forward.

Finally, social media isn't just a marketing channel—it's where culture happens. Mini-series, episodic content, user-generated trends, and even memes give brands a way to participate in conversations that matter to people. If your brand isn't social-first, you risk being invisible in the moments people actually care about. In 2026, social-first is where attention lives and engagement actually happens—it's how you stay relevant, visible, and connected to your audience. And it's the fastest route to figuring out what your customers truly care about. Everything else is just... slower.



Retroviral



Mike Sharman,

Chief Creative Officer

"Viral' for us isn't just about awareness, it's about cutting through, in order for your customer to be so inspired by the creative that he/she takes action."

Retroviral (RSA)

Retroviral is an independent, award-winning communications agency. We offer an alternative way of thinking, challenge the status quo, and use innovative business models that disrupt to deliver impact and value. We pride ourselves on being more than just an advertising agency. We are a hub of creative energy, a results-driven impact agency that brings a catalyst for earned media success. We are committed to delivering unparalleled results through our bespoke offering of earned media and virality-driven, bottom-line, high-impact campaigns and projects.

Retroviral

The Holy Trinity of Marketing

Marketing comms - like history - is cyclical.

In 2010, when we launched Retroviral, any twit who could tweet, with a few hundred followers, and any cliche combination of the words 'rockstar', 'ninja', or 'guru' accompanying 'executive officer' was pitching themselves as an expert in the jargon-fuelled, digi-verse.

We believed that the more digitally savvy consumers became, the more they would crave human interaction.

Fast forward to 2025, hybrid-work-life-(un)balance; this hypothesis has had a glow up. With the advent of the hockey stick, global adoption of artificial (un)intelligence. Noise has never been noisier.

It is imperative that brands apply The Holy Trinity of Marketing thinking to at least one execution per quarter, in order to drive both relevance and resonance. The HTM is the delivery of an experience or activation that is physical and emotionally tangible - this can take the shape of an ambient tactic, but can show up via OOH or digital OOH - coupled with digital integration in the form of storytelling or social media scalability. Finally, it must be PR-able.

To make your campaign newsworthy, it has to be worthy of the news. It sounds incredibly simple, but most brands have neglected their strategic platform for the sexiness of creative immediacy, and it's the strategy that will unlock the smarts to make your idea's legs have longevity.

Most recently, Castle Lager partnered with Big Save to host the world's biggest braai. Bizarrely, that official record was held by Japan, of all places. This, however, offered us a newsworthy point of differentiation. We also considered the social aspect of the humble braai, or shisanyama, and - when developing our media plan - asked what space we could turn on its head to lean into 'socialising'. If you consider the average South African's commute times and public transport challenges, we believe there was a strategic sweet spot for Castle Lager to show up at a bus shelter. With a built-in braai. This is the Grillboard.

Grillboard

[Link](#)

It doubled as an invite to the Big Braai, and as per the communication that we distributed in the press release, we infused some messaging that spoke directly to the patriotic sentiment of 'no DNA, just RSA.'

South Africa is on a run of victories - from favourites to underdogs, we continue to achieve at the highest level, globally. The record for the World's Biggest Braai currently eludes Mzansi, and that's why Castle Lager and Big Save have combined to invite you to join in on the Heritage Day celebrations.

Millions reached, close to a million rand in earned media generated from all of the coverage about the stunt, and a couple of primetime news and radio interviews to flame the fire of talkability. Retroviral's secret sauce - branded content x news headlines - is why we've made more brands go viral, globally, than any other agency in Africa.

'Viral' for us isn't just about awareness, it's about cutting through, in order for your customer to be so inspired by the creative that he/she takes action. After the Vilakazi execution and the resulting PR, more than 50% of the tickets to the Big Braai were sold out. By the time the event occurred on September 24th, it was sold out, and we should know within the coming days whether or not we're the recipients of the World's (official) Biggest Braai, Ever.

Retroviral



Say 'Cheese' for a Cheese Burger!

Globally, people smile for photos by saying all kinds of quirky words. From “qiézi” (eggplant) in China to “kimchi” in Korea, cultures have their own ways to show their best smile.

But in Mzansi, and other English-speaking markets, we say “cheese”.

This was the research that we uncovered when trying to find a new and unique way to promote the Steers Cheese Burger Meal.

We took this opportunity to use facial recognition software and created a selfie booth with a difference ...

[Link](#)

Activation - at spaces where customers are rarely spoiled with the surprise and delight tech factor - Thembisa Mall and Wonderpark were perfect choices of location.

Digital - the story was remarkable, and the simplicity of “The Cheesier the Smile, the Cheesier the Reward” resonated with both those who experienced the stunt and those who consumed the content across social media.

PR - a highly contagious news piece, 15-20 pieces of coverage, R560K worth of PR, and 7.8m South Africans reached.

We really do have the best job in the world. Take a drive around your city, scout the canvases available to you, in order to bring your wildest ideas to life, and reach out to the owners of this site to book the space or support you with your strategy.

Life is short, play naked!

SAMY



Dee (Daryl) Nuncio,

VP, Head of Strategy

"Brands should invite the audience in to play in their universe - bridging the physical and the digital in meaningful ways to provide value."

SAMY (US)

SAMY was born with a desire to go further. To defy the status quo. To reshape our world. From three employees to close to 1000. One office to over fifteen. Eight independent agencies to one global powerhouse. We're proud to work without borders, servicing over 55 markets. We are here to lead the evolution of brand communication.

SAMY



What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

Scripted, narrative driven content has been a big part of 2025 and it looks like it's only going to get bigger in 2026. Internet fatigue is a global thing - we're tired of the nearly same content from brands and creators, largely dictated by what the algorithm is "serving." Humans want an interesting story to connect to and characters they can relate with. It's no surprise that what's breaking through is highly human in nature. Look at "[Roomies](#)" - a narrative social series documenting the lives and stories of roommates, sharing episodic content about moving, living together, and adulting. This is developed by the brand Bilt, whose whole value proposition is tied to earning rewards for paying your rent on time.

Another example, [BK Coffee Shop](#) - a satirical, character-driven social series about an artisanal Brooklyn cafe. Not developed by a brand, the scripted skits and episodes are developed by a creator duo that play the two main quirky baristas with rotating guests played by both celebrities and well-known creators. They've also partnered with brands like Hulu, American Express, Frida, Square, CashApp, and Netflix.

Investing in these entertainment-forward content programs creates a brand universe with a distinct visual look and memorable personalities. It pulls the audience in the same way a compelling TV show or movie can do. Need more proof? Check out these mini films Burberry made for their new outerwear campaign - [Postcards](#) from London, starring none other than the iconic Olivia Colman.

One more "trend" worth noting as it's become more and more common is the investment in community development outside of traditional social channels. Sites like [Roster](#) and [Try Your Best](#) are making it easier for brands to build more direct relationships with consumers through an incentive-based model.

This gives brands access to consumers (or "ambassadors") who are willing to share content by rewarding them in the currency that matters most - monetary discount, exclusive access, and more of the products they already love. See cases like [Poppi](#), [Rare Beauty](#), or [RoC Skincare](#).

SAMY

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

Brands who actually experiment with content themes and formats that aren't 100% dictated by the algorithm. This will require a deeper understanding not only of audience preferences but broader societal shifts in behavior and media consumption. Research and strategy teams will need to get creative in how they source these inputs to really find "golden nuggets" to build on.

To help with that, I'd also recommend on-the-ground research with personas from the target group. This helps us understand what's actually emerging within a community or sub-culture. Ultimately this helps to identify things that aren't being talked about on mainstream channels, so they're not going to show up in social listening.

In the US, we do this regularly for our beauty and wellness clients since those categories have such high volatility when it comes to what's in, out, or coming soon.

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

Instagram and Facebook feeds now surface more "suggested" posts from accounts you don't follow, meaning a significant portion of what appears in users' feeds is recommendation-driven rather than from followed accounts. ([source](#)).

As algorithms strive to blend discovery into the main feed experience, it becomes increasingly harder to stand out. Bolder content and community experimentation should be shaped by audience insight and cultural nuance in an effort to make the audience "feel something."

Social-first marketers need to examine the role their content or activations fit into the audience's life and online behaviors. What do they really need from the brand? For most, it's a bit of escape and entertainment in a way that brings the brand's universe closer. It can't be too serious right now because, well, read the room.

It's not "Will they buy this?" - it's "Will they play with us?" Levity and play need to be leveraged in the right way, both online and IRL.

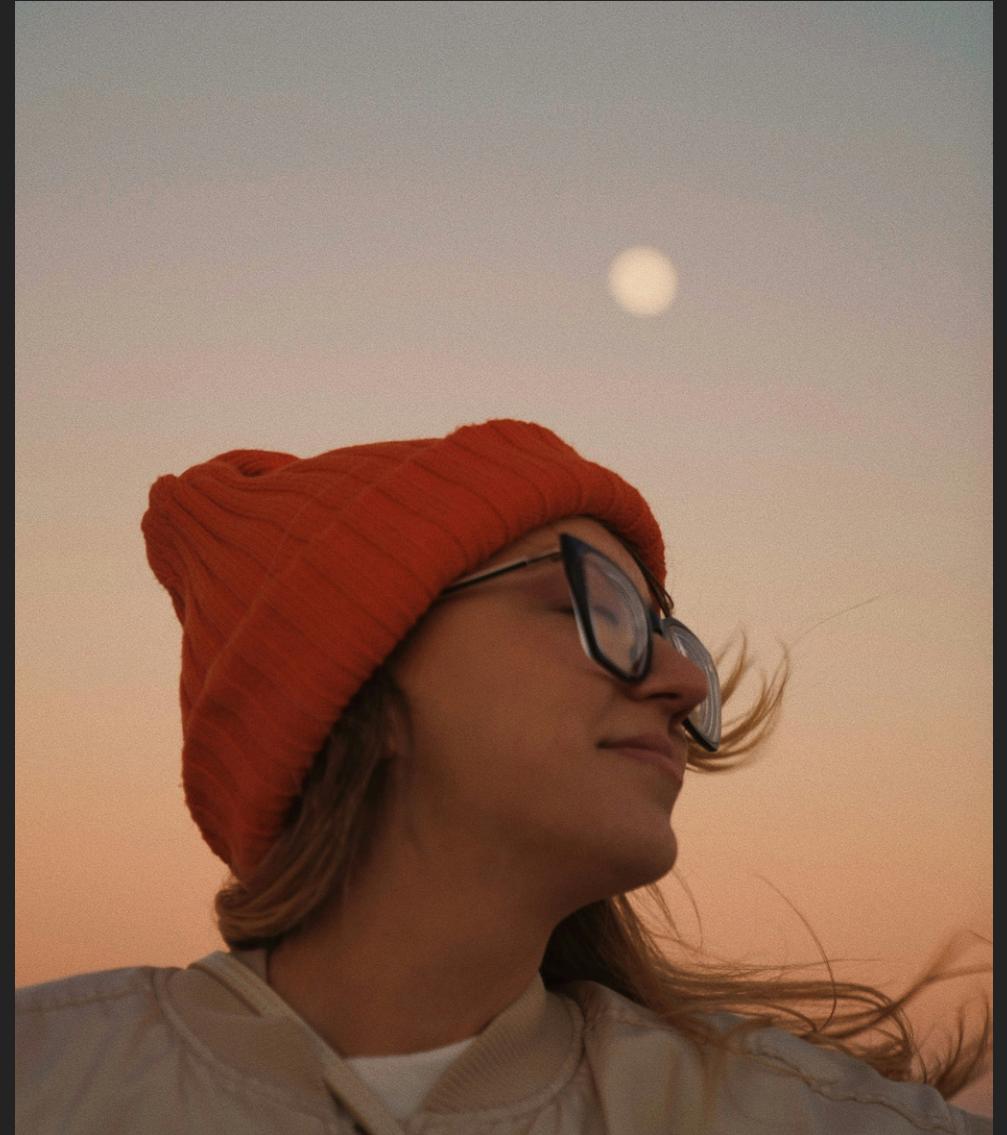
SAMY

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

Short answer: retention. In today's landscape, social-first is brand-first. That is the expectation of consumers and how the most buzzed about" brands are staying ahead.

Being social-first is key to building a universe to expand consumer perception about a brand, its products or services, and what it stands for. As marketers, we should strive to create universes for and with the audience. This builds long-term loyalty that can be tied to larger AOV (average order value) and higher share-ability. A brand universe can be made up of always-on short-form content, longer form mini films, offline experiences, fresher influencer marketing, and mutually beneficial online community tactics.

Brands should invite the audience in to play in their universe - bridging the physical and the digital in meaningful ways to provide value.



The Hallway



Phoebe Keogh,

*Head of media & connections
Payton Ivancic*



Payton Ivancic,

Strategist

"To scale social-first marketing, brands must control the 'hero' executions while releasing some control of the mid to lower funnel executions. The winning model is providing creators with distinctive brand assets (DBAs) and playbooks, then letting them interpret the story for their niche."

The Hallway (AUS)

The Hallway is a creative, media, and measurement agency - widely awarded and recognised for creating and growing some of Australia's most famous brands. The Hallway's unique Calculated Creativity promise gives brand and business decision makers the certainty of where and how to invest in content and media to achieve commercial goals. Calculated Creativity - where imagination meets intelligence.

The Hallway

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

The Shift from “Authority” to “Affinity” (and the ROI that proves it).

As trust in traditional authority figures (institutions, celebrities) erodes, brands must stop “renting authority” and start “renting affinity”.

The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that “fear that leaders lie” is at an all-time high, with 60% of global respondents agreeing. In this climate, consumers retreat to “people like me.” Cue, social media creators.

Australian research from The Growth Distillery reinforces this shift, identifying “trusted,” “authentic,” and “created by someone like me” as the strongest drivers of influence today.

It's not just appealing; it's profitable. Influencer Marketing Hub data confirms that for every \$1 spent on affinity-based influencer marketing, businesses see an average return of \$5.78. A compelling figure as CPAs inflate across platforms. Use this “modern word of mouth” content to improve the performance of performance media.

Currently, this is on the tip of our tongue, that is, when writing creative briefs and putting forward communications plans to our clients. The shift is real and there to be leveraged - responsibly, of course.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

Strength of Mid-Tier Creators (and the brands that build ecosystems around them).

The biggest winners in 2026 will be the brands that understand content leverage, which, to continue on the social media creator train, is best realised in the “Middle Tier” of creators (10k–200k followers). They sit in the sweet spot between reach and resonance.

While larger figures offer reach, their engagement metrics are diluted. It is widely accepted that micro-influencers consistently generate higher engagement rates than their macro-influencer counterparts. In fact, Upfluence & Sociallyin benchmarks show micro-influencers (10k–50k) average engagement rates of ~6%, whereas macro-influencers (1M+) drop to ~1%.

What's the “why” behind this? There needs to be truth in these tie-ups.

Closer to home, we worked with Webjet (online travel agency) on its rebrand and identified podcasting as an effective channel to leverage reputable creators with engaged audiences. This led the way for Webjet's collaboration with the Toni & Ryan podcast showed how powerful this mid-tier can be when the fit is real. Their audience already relates to them like friends, so the recommendation landed as truth, not a paid script. As Ryan said on stage at SXSW Sydney 2025, “before you get too deep into strategy or messaging, it's like... what's true to us?” That authenticity is exactly why the content worked.

In the same category, Contiki has been successfully leveraging this tier for some time. The social media creator squads it pulls together have seen engagement and conversion rates rise significantly across ad platforms like Meta and Pinterest as a part of a full funnel execution.

In an ecosystem approach, use your middle funnel/consideration driving media investment to amplify this content. You will effectively get 4x the engagement per dollar than the celebrity route. The brands that win will be the ones who treat creators as collaborators in the story, not accessories to the media plan.

The Hallway

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

Freedom, where it makes sense, that is - in a framework!

The stat - Unilever will spend half of its ad budget on social media and work with 20 times more influencers as part of its new “influencer-first” strategy, per CEO Fernando Fernandez. Big budgets are going to influencer marketing. Keep reading, and we urge you to proceed with caution. But there’s tension here - how do you continue to architect a brand?

As strategists, we love a framework. And in the context of this stat, we believe in the power of creator freedom within a framework (think, a purpose-made brand/executional playbook made for the creator(s) you are working with).

To scale social-first marketing, brands must control the “hero” executions while releasing some control of the mid to lower funnel executions. The winning model is providing creators with distinctive brand assets (DBAs) and playbooks, then letting them interpret the story for their niche.

Dove’s “Real Beauty Prompt Playbook” is a case in point. Dove didn’t just run an ad about AI bias; they created a tool that gave creators the specific prompts needed to generate inclusive images in Midjourney and Dall-E.

Dove controlled the values (Real Beauty) but gave creators the freedom to generate the visuals. This “co-creation” approach ensures brand safety while maximising relevance.

Brand custodians should always be in the driver’s seat of its reason for being, its story. In social-first marketing, give creators the “rules of the road” (fonts, tones, values) and let them navigate your brand to the authentic route that generates new customers.

It’s 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client’s boss) asks “why social-first?”. What do you say? GO!

The Rise of Machine-to-Machine (M2M) Discoverability.

“Social-First” is no longer just about human attention; it is a technical requirement for AI Engine Optimisation (AEO). Social platforms are now the primary data source for the AI agents that curate for audiences, shortcircuiting the path to purchase.

We know that behaviour shifted when we saw that 46% of Gen Z prefer social media over Google for discovery (Marketing LTB). But the next frontier is machines talking to machines.

Data from Cyber Week showed that AI shopping agents drove unprecedented purchase intent, out-converting social traffic by 8x.

“Machine to machine” = AI-generated content + algorithmic distribution + AI/agent consumers. Which could = Ad generated by Nano Banana + served by Meta + picked up by Gemini as a new trending restaurant to recommend.

The takeaway? You aren’t just optimising for a feed; you are optimising for the AI that feeds the user. Treat your social feed as a structured database that feeds the AI models your customers trust. In essence, AI is now the consumer or at least, an important target audience to consider.

At The Hallway, we are discussing this new frontier of marketing day in, day out.

The New Thing



Shraddha Panday,

*Director, Content and
Founding Member*

"We're in an opinion economy: what people see on social shapes what they think, what they buy, and even who they elect as president. If your brand isn't part of someone's daily content diet, you're not part of their consideration set at all."

The New Thing (IN)

The New Thing, part of the Talented Grid of Companies, is a creator collective that believes brands should work for the internet, not the other way around. Staffed entirely by creators, TNT exists to help brands thrive through content. Founded by Viren Sean Noronha, TNT's mission is clear: to solve content problems that unlock marketing outcomes. TNT's recent content hits include Wakefit's 'Gaddagiri Series', Amazon Prime Video's 'Premi Video' and 'Woh Wala Feature', viral successes like Tinder's Garbage Truck and Axe Your Ex Pt. 2, to name a few.

The New Thing

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

The most important trend in 2026 is that the industry is finally realizing that going viral is not a big deal anymore.

Social-first marketers are shifting from chasing spikes to building systems: consistent engagement, longer attention, and repeatable brand moments. Long formats are officially back from the dead, be it snacky, social-first episodics or 2-hour-long podcasts. And the real magic is that they keep the audience with you long after the video ends.

The second big shift: brands becoming lifestyle. In 2026, consumers don't just buy products, but also the brand story. We have phone cases for lip gloss and collectible popcorn buckets for new films. They're little cultural "treats" that become part of people's daily life, and even identity. In fact, adults are becoming the primary buyers of toys; it's treatonomics.

Both trends point to the same truth: discoverability is easy; endurance is rare. Social-first marketing has to move beyond the double-tap and create worlds people want to keep returning to.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners in 2026 will be the brands and creators who know what to automate and what to protect.

2025 was obsessed with testing the extremes of AI: 'Can it do voiceovers?' 'Can it make my posting calendar?' 'Can it produce my next ad film?' In 2026, social will pull back.

Audiences are already growing fatigued and hyper-skeptical of anything too smooth and perfect. The work that wins now will have human-ness - be it scrappy, honest, practically-shot content or even copy with intentional errors. AI won't disappear, but it'll move underground. I find that it's best used when it's undetectable.

The second set of winners will be brands that understand that they're not the primary source of truth about their business anymore. With the rise of decentralised discovery, what people say about your brand will matter more than what you say about it. Native checkouts on Instagram and TikTok are becoming the backbone of D2C, and the baseline is that people trust people. That's why in-house brand content is plateauing, and micro-communities are taking the spotlight.

2025 was about the shift from search engines to social, but 2026 is driving queries back to search - only this time, it's AI-driven. With GenAI tools like Gemini, GEO (generative engine optimisation) becomes a key driver for the sales funnel. Brands should look at the funnel as a network of micro-journeys (not a linear path) and build positive sentiment across multiple social media touchpoints so that AI recommends them.

The New Thing

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

Our breakout of 2025 was Tinder's Ex-press Disposal Truck. It proves that people trust organic conversations about the category far more than branded conversations about their products. Instead of forcing a message about the app, the campaign picked up an insight that already thrives on the internet. That's why it travelled across 41 countries, earning over 9 million organic impressions without a single rupee spent on media.

Instead of trying to own the conversation, Tinder became the facilitator. They gave people a big, visual, talkable moment (literally a truck for dumping your exes' things), so that users could continue a conversation they were already having. And the touchpoints felt native: meme pages riffed on it, creators built their own bits around it, publications picked it up, and people shared it because it felt like culture. The learning is clear: social-first ideas join existing conversations and meet people where they're at. If the category truth already has cultural power, the brand's job is not to redirect it. It's to amplify it with a format people actually enjoy engaging with. If your team can instantly imagine the jokes, reactions, stitches, and comment-section debates - you've got a winner.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

Because in 2026, entire consumer journeys live and die on social, often within one tap. It's the place where they're the most available, the most impressionable, and often the most emotionally open.

Being social-first is about occupying mental real estate long before someone decides to buy. We're in an opinion economy: what people see on social shapes what they think, what they buy, and even who they elect as president. If your brand isn't part of someone's daily content diet, you're not part of their consideration set at all.

Search is decentralised, discovery is social-led, and conversion is moving on-platform. Every scroll is a brand touchpoint. So why social-first? Because social isn't playing second fiddle to mainline advertising anymore. It's the headliner.

Thinkhouse



Dylan Newe,

*Director, Social & Digital
Innovation*

"The social landscape is 24/7, 365 days a year now, in a constant social news cycle; there are no safe "quiet months." If something is good, funny, clever, emotionally resonant, culturally relevant, or timely, it can break through on any day of the year. If not, it likely fades into the noise."

Thinkhouse (IRE)

THINKHOUSE is one of the world's leading independent agencies. Powered by youth culture, our insight-led, full-service creative, innovative, and purpose-led marketing is for progressive brands that care about people and planet.

Thinkhouse

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

The most important social trend in 2026 will actually be about how consumers are making decisions and what that means, in turn, for how people's usage of social will change. You've got more people every day turning to AI tools like ChatGPT and Gemini to help with decision-making, consumer searches, conversational queries, etc., so you're looking at a totally new social search landscape. Social platforms are going to function more like search engines. The content that brands are planning across their social will need to be discoverable, and that visibility inside social platforms through 'social SEO' is going to be highly valuable. At the moment, ChatGPT sources its influence from conversational, trusted platforms such as Reddit, while the majority of social discourse is happening on dark social, so it's just not as important or as influential for these LLMs.

Aside from that decision-making aspect, you've also got how much LLMs being embedded in people's daily routines is going to affect their social scrolling experience as well. When users are chatting naturally with AI agents all day, they're going to want the same level of conversational interface within social platforms. You've also got the hyper-personalised discovery of your ChatGPT history, which knows you in a more profound way than any algorithm could, giving you highly specific interests and cultural pockets. Can social's broad, generalised feeds compete with that? These are all questions we're asking ourselves, and the most significant shifts in 2026 for social will actually come from how consumers are adapting their own habits and norms.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

There's an interesting conversation being had right now (led by people like Rachel Karten) around the bifurcation of social media, how to navigate 'old social' and 'new social'. So you've got different surfaces, awareness being driven through formats like Reels, and then community being cultivated using stories and broadcast channels. The biggest winners in 2026 will be brands that can take advantage of 'new social', treat social like the entertainment platform it is, and brands that can make the news, not react to it. The social landscape is 24/7, 365 days a year now, in a constant social news cycle; there are no safe "quiet months." If something is good, funny, clever, emotionally resonant, culturally relevant, or timely, it can break through on any day of the year. If not, it likely fades into the noise. In this world, consistency, creativity, and willingness to experiment matter more than ever.

Thinkhouse

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

System 1's statistic that "Dull ads are 27% less effective at driving conversion" from their recent study, "The Long and the Short of it," which gets to the point about consumer mental ability. It's not bad ads or dislikes that we should fear; it's indifference. You have to leave consumers feeling something, whether it lives in positive or negative sentiment.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

Social has simply evolved past being a place where people spend time to being the nucleus around how we all live. Look at where Timothee Chamalet is solely promoting his new movie. Look at who the new rock stars in 2026 are; they're creators on social. Look at where sports clips are first seen around the world. In 2026, social doesn't just mean the big platforms; it's everything. Spotify. Strava. Vinted. You name it.

To think anything beyond social-first in 2026 is to seriously ignore how people (your audience) actually live their lives.



TIMA



Origbo Nena,

Associate Brand Strategist

"Influence in 2026 is collective, not individual. Communities remix, reinterpret, and validate what they choose to amplify. Their co-signs carry a credibility no traditional ad can manufacture."

TIMA (NG)

TIMA Influencer Marketing Agency (TIMA) is a next-generation influencer marketing agency built on one belief: brands grow faster when real people tell their stories. We specialise in connecting brands to the right communities through authentic voices, creators who don't just influence, but inspire trust and build lasting cultural connections. We are a data-driven agency at our core. Every campaign is designed with clear performance metrics, smart audience insights, and measurable outcomes, ensuring brands don't just reach people, they move them. From strategy to creator selection to reporting, we align creativity with analytics to deliver impact you can see.

TIMA

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

One of the most defining shifts in 2026 is how influence has quietly drifted away from individual creators and settled into the hands of online communities that function like their own living, breathing ecosystems.

We're seeing this everywhere: TikTok micro-cultures that shape aesthetics and language, Telegram fandoms that mobilise faster than any formal campaign planning session, Reddit communities that dissect ideas with forensic energy, and global fashion and music micro-genres that exist almost entirely online. These aren't just audiences; they're co-authors of culture. The expectation now is simple but demanding: brands need to enter these spaces with humility and intention. Communities can sense when something is built for them versus when it is built around a brand's agenda. This calls for collaborations that feel natural and ideas that reflect an understanding of the cultural codes within each community. A single piece of content that resonates deeply inside the right niche can shift brand perception more powerfully than an entire polished campaign.

Influence in 2026 is collective, not individual. Communities remix, reinterpret, and validate what they choose to amplify. Their co-signs carry a credibility no traditional ad can manufacture. Social-first marketers today need to listen closely, contribute thoughtfully, and recognise that relevance is built inside these digital tribes, on their terms, not ours.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

In 2026, AI's expansion is accelerating within the creative industry. The major winners are the creators who have learned to blend AI with genuine human creativity. These are the people using AI to scale their ideas, editing faster, prototyping concepts, generating visuals, but still grounding everything in their own voice and lived experience. They're producing high-volume, high-quality content without losing the authenticity their audiences expect. And brands love them because they deliver speed and soul.

The other biggest winners in social-first marketing are the brands and creators who understand that influence now flows through networks, not individuals. The creators thriving today are the ones who anchor real conversations inside digital communities. Their strength comes from something no algorithm can manufacture: a sense of trust, shared identity, and belonging.

Brands that succeed in 2026 are the ones collaborating with these communities instead of talking at them. They build campaigns that feel native to the culture of each platform; whether that's TikTok's remix-friendly formats, or the deeply conversational nature of Telegram and Discord groups. They don't chase virality; they co-create it.

The final category of winners is those who operate at cultural speed. Creators and brands that can notice a growing micro-trend, react in real time, and join the conversation with context and respect are the ones shaping what audiences pay attention to.

TIMA

A case in point: Share your favourite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

My favourite recent statistic is about Nigeria's social media usage and behaviour, that Nigerians now spend about 3 hours 23 minutes per day on social media, one of the highest usage rates globally (We Are Social, 2024). Notably, a Visa analysis shows 87% of Nigerian consumers rely on social networks to discover products (Visa, 2025). These Nigeria-specific figures underscore how central social platforms are to Nigerians' daily routines and shopping journeys.

For 2026, social-first marketers in Nigeria should lean into this reality by building genuine online communities and partnering with trusted local creators. Community-led marketing means embedding brands into the conversations and culture on social media, precisely where Nigerians spend hours searching for new brands and deals. In Nigeria's youth-driven, mobile-first market, consumers often follow and trust creators more than traditional ads, so authentic community engagement will be key. Because Nigerians are so highly engaged on social media and use it to discover products, community-driven social strategies will be essential to resonate with Nigerian audiences.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

By 2026, the opportunity lies in being social-first. Social-first isn't just a channel strategy; it's how culture and commerce move today. Two core, irreversible forces drive this:

Trust and attention have flipped. People trust creators and peers far more than brands, and with over three hours a day spent online, social spaces are the new source of truth. Algorithms reward real, native content, not polished ads.

Action happens at discovery. Social isn't just awareness anymore; it's a hub for conversion, entertainment, and connection. Platforms like TikTok let users act instantly: a video can inspire sign-ups, app downloads, or course enrollments in just a few clicks, collapsing the gap between discovery and action. Even Telegram and Discord communities drive meaningful engagement through personalised recommendations and group interactions. Brands that integrate naturally into these experiences, letting content, community, and conversion flow together, build trust, drive commitment, and capture market share in 2026.

Social-first is agile, authentic, and actionable. It's the only way to truly connect, belong, and make an impact in 2026.

Two Points Technologies



Sam Gormley,

Founder

“Every conversation, every comment thread, every shared post is an opportunity for connection. Social platforms have become the infrastructure of modern life. If you are not part of that flow, you are not part of the culture.”

Two Points Technologies (UK)

Two Point Technologies is a strategic consultancy that helps people do things online. We combine consultancy, technology, and execution to make digital progress feel simple and human again. We work with global brands that want intelligent, collaborative partnerships built on real strategic thinking. At the same time, we are building products for the next generation of entrepreneurs who want independence without the complexity. We believe the future of marketing sits between two worlds — premium, high-touch partnerships for ambitious brands, and low-cost, hands-off automation for emerging ones. At Two Point Technologies, we care about getting people to act online. Not in a controlling or dystopian way, but in a way that makes the internet feel human again.

Two Points Technologies

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

The most important shift is the realisation that brand building and selling no longer live in separate worlds. The lines have completely disappeared. For years, marketers have been told to choose between long-term storytelling and short-term performance, between brand campaigns and conversion campaigns, but that distinction has collapsed. The question now is how you build a brand right at the point of sale. How do you create emotion, trust, and identity in a space designed for transactions? Retail platforms used to be seen as functional checkout zones, but they have become stages for creativity and brand behaviour. The best marketers will treat retail media as the new frontier for brand building. Every detail matters — from the way a product is presented on Amazon, to how a recommendation engine positions you, to how your tone of voice carries through into the moment someone hits “buy.” The most forward-thinking brands will bring their storytelling right into those moments. What this means is that the future of marketing is not about brand awareness or performance in isolation. It is about emotional utility — being useful, memorable, and present where the purchase happens. When someone clicks, that click should feel like the next chapter of your story, not the end of it.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The winners are the people and brands that see social as a living, breathing part of commerce. Social is not a separate thing anymore. It is not an awareness channel, it is not a funnel stage, it is not a category. It is the connective tissue between attention and transaction. The people who thrive will understand that audiences do not think in platforms. They move fluidly between entertainment, conversation, and shopping. The idea of “social-first” used to mean making content that fits a feed. Now it means being part of a person’s digital rhythm. It means showing up where conversations are happening, adding value, and helping someone make a decision without feeling sold to. In 2026, the most successful creators and brands will stop chasing viral moments and start designing connected ones. They will blend commerce, culture, and community into the same experience. The real advantage will belong to those who think in systems rather than posts — people who can see how social, retail, and storytelling connect. The best work will not scream for attention; it will sit confidently inside the everyday flow of how people live and buy.

Two Points Technologies

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

One of my favourite observations right now is the rise of self-employment. More people are starting businesses than ever before. Many of them have never spoken to an agency, never seen a strategy deck, and never even considered the idea of paying someone to manage their marketing. They are building brands from their kitchens, garages, and laptops, armed with intuition, a phone camera, and a few good tools. That changes everything. We are watching the decentralisation of marketing in real time. The new generation of business owners expects simplicity, immediacy, and clarity. They want platforms that get things done, not meetings about them. The traditional agency model, with layers of process and presentation, will not survive that world unless it evolves. This shift is going to bring huge amounts of creativity and innovation. When people do not need permission to start, they experiment more. They test, fail, learn, and succeed faster. The people entering this space do not carry the baggage of "how marketing is supposed to be done." They are teaching us that creativity is no longer reserved for those with big budgets or brand guidelines. It belongs to anyone with an idea and access to an audience. And that is why the next era of marketing will be defined by accessibility and empowerment, not exclusivity.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

Because social is where the world actually happens now. Billions of people spend their days inside digital spaces that feel as real as anything offline. It is where we share experiences, opinions, and frustrations. It is where news breaks, where culture evolves, and where most decisions are made long before a brand enters the picture. Every conversation, every comment thread, every shared post is an opportunity for connection. Social platforms have become the infrastructure of modern life. If you are not part of that flow, you are not part of the culture. To say "social first" in 2026 is really to say "human first." It means understanding that attention is earned through contribution, not intrusion. Every campaign now has the power to do everything — it can sell, build trust, entertain, and create belonging all at once. The smartest brands will use that power to build communities, not just customer bases. The question is no longer "why social." The question is "how do you become part of the conversation people already care about?"

Ultra Super New



Abbey Kruska,

Social Strategist

"That's right — those lengthy ideation sessions, client approval rounds, prep periods, and deep discussions about camera angles, sound quality, and key visuals will cost you. Social success in 2025 is defined by the ability to turn an idea into postable content in the shortest turnaround time possible."

Ultra Super New (JP)

We're an independent creative agency, born and raised in Harajuku, young and hungry in Singapore, Colombo & Amsterdam. Our team represents over 20 nationalities, speaks 11 languages, and includes at least two dogs — all fueling a culture that thrives on diversity, curiosity, and fearless creativity.

We chase the biggest, boldest ideas, guided by cultural and social insights that turn inspiration into impact. Whether it's crafting campaigns that resonate across continents or creating moments that spark conversations online, we bring strategy and creativity together in equal measure. Simply put, we're here to challenge conventions, embrace risk, and make work that people remember.

Ultra Super New

What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

The line between brands and creators is nearly transparent. As social algorithms push for nicheness and consistency, individual creators are becoming more and more “branded.” Through niche content topics, consistent theming, aesthetic alignment, and characterizations that connect with specific subcultures and audiences, even without the development of merchandise or a tangible product, successful influencers are becoming brands themselves. These creator/brand fusions are selling more than a product — they’re selling ideas: lifestyles, philosophies, and community. And as individual creators lean further into brandhood, brands in turn lean deeper into creator-hood.

We’re seeing an influx in the usage of employees as marketing, regardless of the individual’s position. Not on the marketing team? No problem! From a quirky introduction of a Korean blush set by testing the blush colors on “work boyfriends” in a fluorescent office (talk about wholesome!) to flight attendants and aerospace engineers dancing to Justin Bieber (so unexpected!), the high-performing brands on social in 2025 have found success by turning everyday employees into the faces of the brand.

The point is to find a way to make your brand feel like a living, breathing creature, not just another logo. In a world overtaken by fake news and AI, the only way to stand out is to be realer than ever.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners, as always, will be those with the ability to adapt quickly to new changes. In an online climate that has democratized publication and flattened the media hierarchy, platform know-how is more important than ever. No matter how great the content you’re making is, if you’re not utilizing the right hashtag combo, trending audio, AI-algorithm-friendly captions, and peak posting times, that post is going straight under the limitless pile of better-made, better-delivered content. Brands are no longer just competing with each other for attention — they’re now competing against a wave of millions of new and emerging creators. In 2020, the influencer market value stood at around 10 billion U.S. dollars. By the end of this year, it’s projected to reach over 30 billion U.S. dollars — a 33% increase — and content creators have one key opportunity brands and agencies do not: the ability to make content freely and quickly.

That’s right — those lengthy ideation sessions, client approval rounds, prep periods, and deep discussions about camera angles, sound quality, and key visuals will cost you. Social success in 2025 is defined by the ability to turn an idea into postable content in the shortest turnaround time possible. Consumers are constantly engaging with new trends, and if your brand is too busy thinking about how to approach a new, hot trend, that trend will be over before you’ve even hit the “record” button on your iPhone.

Ultra Super New

A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

The algorithms are changing! In particular, Medium reported that Head of Instagram Adam Mosseri has shared how Instagram discovery now leans on content quality – with metrics such as watch time, shares/saves, and social SEO leading the way. Say goodbye to the days of mining for likes or comments, because shareability, deep engagement, and keyword-rich captions will now determine what posts see the light of day and what gets buried beneath the endless churn of new content.

So why do saves matter? They reflect genuine interest and intention — a deeper form of interaction. Posts that offer users lasting value, whether it's a recipe to look back on later, a how-to guide, or a must-visit café, add long-term usefulness and create an opportunity for more meaningful connection. Content with a higher save rate is more likely to appear in users' feeds, offering a much-needed boost in visibility and engagement.

From this, we need to first look at our content from a value perspective. What value does this content deliver to the viewer? Can they learn something? Feel entertained? Relate to it? In Japan, we have the concept of “cos-pa,” which is short for “cost-performance” — in short, it means “what offers me the highest value within the least amount of time?” This is the stance we should be taking on all social content moving into 2026. How much value can we offer consumers in a tiny, prepackaged piece of content, and how can we make it resonate enough that they'll want to come back to it?



It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks “why social-first?”. What do you say? GO!

Maybe it's the Gen-Z in me talking (late 90s baby here), but put simply: social media should be first because it is first. In fact, it's the only media most young people consume. Surveys put Gen Z TV consumption at less than one hour a day, and even that seems like an overestimate, while time spent on socials has skyrocketed. Even millennials have moved away from television and onto streaming, and they also have the highest podcast consumption rate of any generation. Just ask yourself — when was the last time you actually bought a physical magazine? Okay, and when was the last time you opened Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube? Exactly.

People, for better or worse, are more plugged in than ever before. The conversation starts on and propagates through social, and we build meaningful, long-term relationships with consumers through real-world value delivery — sharing real stories of UGC creators, introducing our “work boyfriends” in a TikTok, or interviewing employees for a YouTube social experiment. It's how we choose to capture our authentic, real lives and integrate them into social media that will define success on social in 2026.

Zulu Alpha Kilo



Jordan Alperin,

*Senior Communications
Strategist*

“Because organic social rewards experimentation, winners try new formats, launch limited episodic series, or bring viewers behind-the-scenes into the journey as they build their presence in real-time. From there, success comes from paying attention to audiences and building on what resonates.”

Zulu Alpha Kilo (CA)

At Zulu Alpha Kilo (Z.A.K.), fighting sameness is not just our creative mission. It's why we exist. With offices in Toronto, New York, and Vancouver, we're a full-service agency with 200 full-time people. Our agency's unique culture is passionate, entrepreneurial, and fearless in the pursuit of groundbreaking ideas. Launched in 2008, Z.A.K. has built a reputation as an industry outlier and one of the most respected independent agencies in the world, creating innovative ideas for our clients that include: Booking.com, Dove, The New York Times, Harry's, Destination BC, Subaru Canada, President's Choice, Stonefire, and more.

Zulu Alpha Kilo

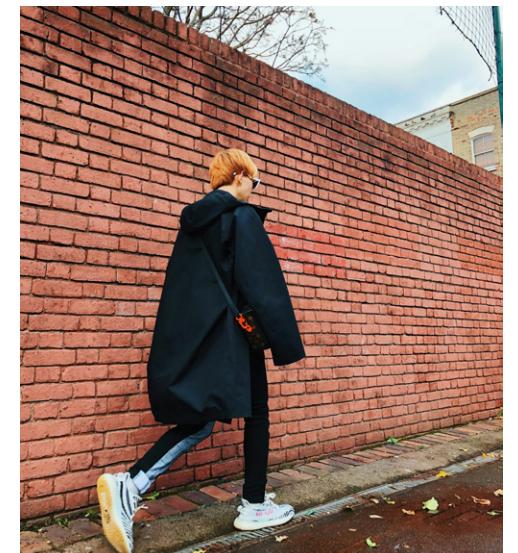
What is the most interesting and/or important trend in social-first marketing in 2026, from the point-of-view of marketing people/industry? And why.

Trend reports and industry anthems declare that everything is broken. The trend cycle is broken. The shopping funnel is broken. Even “social” media being social is broken. And with Oxford’s 2024 and 2025 Words of the Year being “rage bait” and “brain rot,” it’s clear we’ve entered a post-enshittification era of social media. Hyper-personalized algorithms have erased the thrill of discovery, and opening an app to check in on friends becomes an hour lost to doomscrolling. People aren’t quitting social, but they’re craving something more intentional and human. The most important trend for social media in 2026 is the return of social intimacy. In a landscape flooded with AI-generated sameness, audiences gravitate toward platforms, creators, and brands that foster real connection. This takes several forms.

1. Publishers and brands are committing to a perspective rather than chasing trends. Netflix’s finsta account and The Celebrity Institute series demonstrate how creating a recurring world feels more human, as if a real person with a point of view is running the channel.
2. The comment section is resurfacing as a more genuine social space, where conversations and picture-based reactions become richer than the post itself. Platforms are also launching intimacy-focused features; Spotify’s new messaging tools invite people to chat with friends about the content and music they’re consuming.
3. Creators are embracing sincerity. Charli XCX’s recent Substack posts are creatively transparent and reflect a broader desire for posting to feel like a conversation exchange, closer to what social media used to be.

Who will be the biggest winner(s) in social-first marketing in 2026? And why.

The biggest winners in social will take risks and actually listen to their audience. These are brands and creators who act like publishers and treat their channels like a creative lab rather than a rigid content calendar or limiting social playbook. Because organic social rewards experimentation, winners try new formats, launch limited episodic series, or bring viewers behind-the-scenes into the journey as they build their presence in real-time. From there, success comes from paying attention to audiences and building on what resonates. More experimentation and new ideas spark once you’re tapped into the world of the viewer behind the screen, putting yourself in their shoes, and responding to what’s working (or not). And once a piece of content begins to take off, smart brands iterate beyond the moment or social signal. This continuation and evolution of a content idea creates a ripple effect, where casual viewers keep seeing and engaging with the content, turning into fans.



Zulu Alpha Kilo



A case in point: Share your favorite recent statistic (related to social media) OR campaign (that is social-first), and briefly explain how that shows the way forward for social-first marketers in 2026. What can (and should) we all learn from that?

The comment section is flooded with brands that all speak the same, trying to sound like a Gen Z bestie. Viral videos reveal comment sections filled with brands racing to make their mark, but because everyone is behaving the same way, it creates a sea of sameness and no connection. A best-in-class counter example is Barbie's Match Day commenting strategy. They took the risk of treating the comment section like its own marketing moment, commenting congratulations and messages on doctors' TikTok videos for Match Day. Instead of chasing trends, they acted like a publisher, showing up in a specific moment for a specific audience. It was personal and all rooted in their brand values.

Barbie showed up meaningfully for the right people at the right time. As the comment section becomes a space for community and content creation—users now post photos and spark discussion threads—Barbie leaned directly into that platform behavior. It's a perfect example of how brands win when they take risks, dial into a unique moment, and listen to their audience.

It's 2026. Your boss (or client, or the client's boss) asks "why social-first?". What do you say? GO!

The way brands build relevance has flipped. It used to be primarily top-down, launching a big seasonal campaign and paying to reach an audience. Today, relevance can be built bottom-up with a clear cultural point of view, and collaboration with the creators and tastemakers who shape conversations. Social is the only place where all of this happens in real time and at scale. Because of this shift, modern brand-building is inherently collaborative. Social-first brands build stories with communities, rather than broadcasting promotional messages to them.

SAMY

We make brands matter.

Thank you for reading!