iDHL

The year of truth marketing

The trends that will define marketing in 2026: Brand plus performance, AI era engagement, and building trust that converts



2025 was a year of transformation. We were constantly kept on our toes by big marketing moves: AI Mode for Search, the rise of social commerce, privacy changes, SEO outside SERPs, and countless Google updates, from expanding AIOs to AI in advertising. To name just a few.

But if you thought the pace would ease up, think again. Movements are already being made at the start of 2026: global ad spend is set to surpass $1 trillion for the first time, while Google is teasing its next big plays with Search Live upgrades, and GenTabs. It won't just be another year of marketing evolution – it's the year brands must prove they matter.

The universal truth emerging for 2026? There has never been a more critical time for doing more with your brand and creating genuine meaning with audiences.

AI might be the tech on everyone's lips, but there is a deeper domino effect happening beneath the technical noise. The hyper-efficiency on offer has led to 'slop life' - where outcomes are a little less satisfying, less human. Economic uncertainty and inflationary pressures mean people crave more than convenience. They want pay-off, depth, and more intentional interaction.

Meaning? *Trust* has become the ultimate differentiator.

Change is clearly on the horizon for 2026, but going in blind could put you on the wrong foot before the year begins in earnest. We've gathered our industry experts to drop their key growth predictions, from baking authenticity into your brand to mastering product-level SEO.

Their informed insight becomes your informed strategy – you're welcome.

Trends

1. Brand and performance are pairing up for accelerated growth
2. AI will distance brands from consumers—forcing a return to direct engagement
3. Authenticity will become the ultimate differentiator in eCommerce
4. Product-level SEO becomes mandatory
5. Organic search as a strategic growth engine – not an afterthought

Brand and performance are pairing up for accelerated growth

Richard Broughton, Brand & Strategy Director



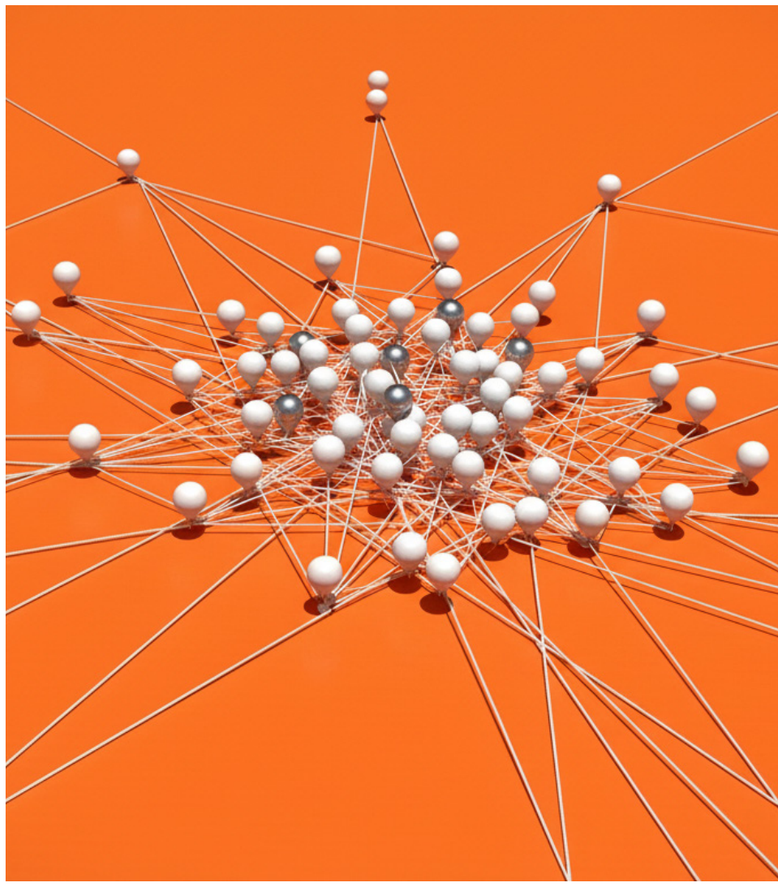
In a market where customer acquisition costs continue to climb and competition intensifies across every channel, brand building is becoming a powerful economic lever. As choice expands and attention fragments, strong brands aren't shouting louder to stand out – they're building connections that lower the cost of being chosen.

That's why brand investment is accelerating in 2026. The latest **IBSA Media Budget** survey shows that 65% of marketers plan to increase spend this year, with a clear shift toward long-term brand activity, designed to boost consumer trust and improve performance efficiency.

This marks a decisive shift in the age-old Brand vs. Performance debate. Historically, brand marketing built emotional connection and brand recall while performance marketing captured demand. It used to be one or the other.

But in today's saturated landscape, where CPCs are rising and conversions are more expensive, the real question isn't how to balance the two. **It's how can brand strength increase the yield of performance channels, reduce costs, and remove barriers to engagement?**

The headline for 2026:
brands that invest in brand building could see higher click-through rates and lower cost per acquisition. When consumers recognise.



Why?

Authenticity is a new conversion driver

Consumers are spoiled for choice when it comes to ads, offers, and algorithmic content. Attention is no longer a scarce resource – authenticity is. People don't just want to know what a brand sells; they want confidence in who they're buying from. Authenticity becomes a performance driver, directly influencing conversion intent and acquisition costs.

A strong brand feels credible and low risk. When consumers recognise and trust these brands, performance activity doesn't have to work as hard or spend as much to convert.

Discovery is longer and costing more

The path to purchase is no longer linear – it's a loop, a pause, a scroll, a comparison, and then a second opinion. **Nearly 23% of customers are researching products five or more times** ahead of purchase and performance alone can't carry this weight.

What's changed isn't the number of touchpoints but the level of scrutiny. Today's buyers are more selective: they're checking credentials, scanning reviews, comparing values, and asking one key question before they buy: *Do I trust this brand?*

Without strong brand cues, every moment of hesitation becomes another paid impression. Brand equity shortens the journey and lowers the cost of conversion, reducing the number of paid nudges required.



Industry spotlight: **Travel**

Despite geopolitical uncertainty and financial pressure, travel demand remains resilient. But in 2026, it's how and why they are holidaying that is changing. Price still matters, but modern travellers are weighing up far more than cost. Responsible tourism, cultural integration, and authentic experiences are now top of mind.

This is where brand building tips the scales. Travelers are no longer just choosing a destination; they are choosing brands that reflect their own values. Overtourism concerns are reshaping behaviour, with consumers favouring operators who demonstrate ethical practices, community-first experiences, and cultural sensitivity.

Brands winning market share are those who meet consumer demands through local partnerships, invest in experience-led itineraries, and demonstrate genuine care in their messaging.

Those that communicate value beyond price are better positioned to build trust and long-term loyalty.

The plan

Make your values loud and clear

Consumers buy into brands before they buy into products. **82% of shoppers want brand values to align with their own**, so make them visible across available touchpoints - website, ads, social, email. Strong messaging on brand identity and mission drive trust and reduce hesitation. This translates to improved conversion intent and ad engagement.

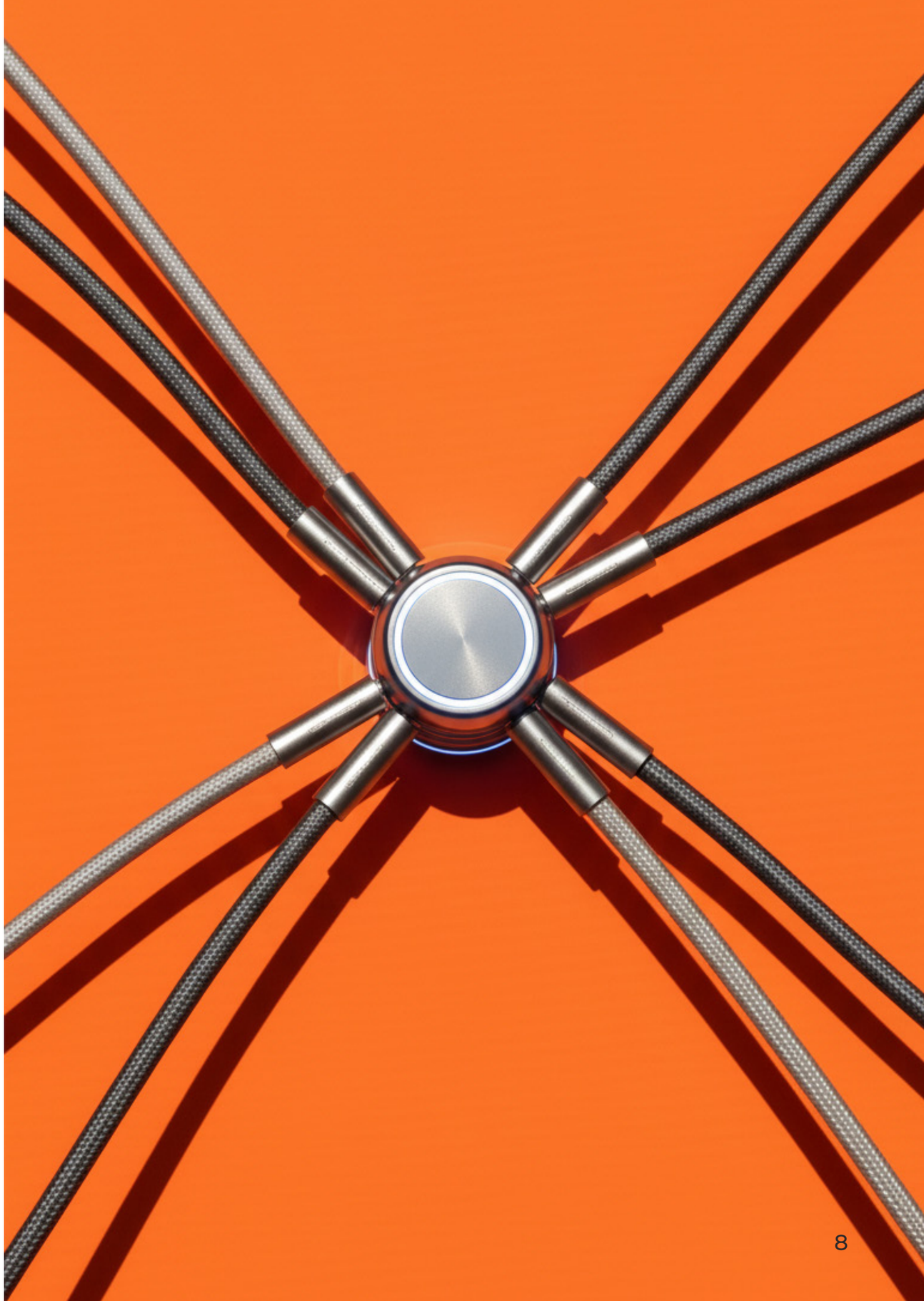
Integrate brand storytelling into performance channels

Don’t silo brand and performance - merge them. Narrative-driven performance ads outperform the purely functional because they build context, credibility, and emotional relevance at the moment of decision. Weave brand cues into paid search ad copy, eCommerce optimisation, paid social creative, and product page content.

Impactful measurement and reporting

Setting clear measurement goals and selecting the right reporting tools are key to gaining a holistic view of brand growth. Driving both accountability and strategic clarity, the resulting insights allow you to assess short and long-term outcomes together and make more informed investment decisions.

While attribution remains complex, advertisers now have access to richer, more actionable data than ever before. The opportunity lies in using that data to understand how brand investment influences metrics such as CPA, ROAS, and incremental value.



AI will distance brands from consumers—forcing a return to direct engagement

Jonathan Healey, Group Technology Director



2025 was the year AI rewrote the marketing playbook, challenging the assumptions marketers have long relied on and redefined what success looks like in this new age of AI Search.

Before its arrival, consumers engaged with businesses directly, giving brands full control over the digital experience. Today, that dynamic is evolving. The majority of discovery and decision-making is now happening inside AI Overviews and chat interfaces, with AIO triggered searches tending to have **higher zero-click rates thanks to answers provided upfront**.

The trade-off for hyper convenience is the growing distance between brands and consumers. This means less visits to websites, less immersion into what makes your brand unique, less loyalty.

The challenge for 2026: *How do brands bridge this gap and re-establish a direct connection?*

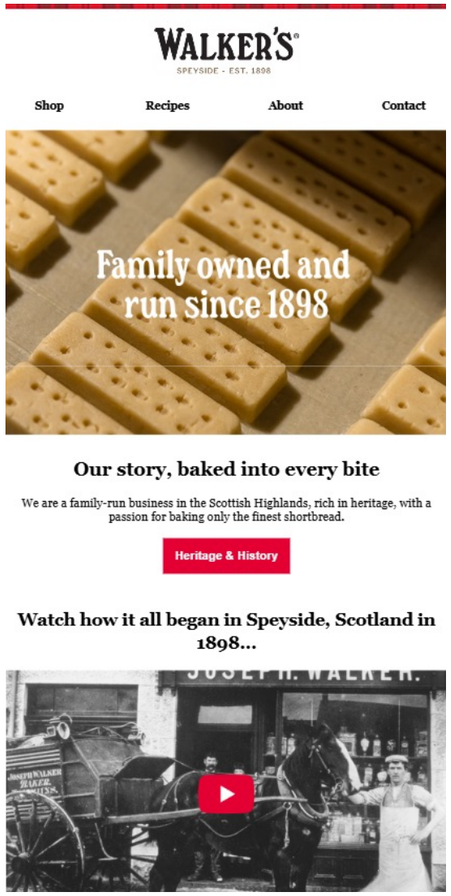
Industry spotlight: **Luxury**

AI has unlocked exciting opportunities that have revolutionised the buying experience, **driving up to 40% revenue growth** and personalised recommendations responsible for **31% of online sales**. But AI intermediaries prioritise answers, not brand stories. For commoditised products, this is just another channel. For sectors built on identity like luxury, brands need to redefine connection and intimacy.

The rise of 'emotional luxury' reflects a shift in consumer priorities. Amid political and economic uncertainty, buyers are seeking something more. They don't want cost to be front of mind – they want exclusivity, quality, and originality that justify the price tag. **55% of luxury executives** have concerns that widespread AI threatens these core brand signals.

It's up to luxury brands to curate meaning with their consumers, balancing efficiency with intimacy. Technology should support rather than overshadow brand storytelling that emphasizes craft, history, and value.

+51% engagement with a personalised email campaign



Iconic brand Walker's Shortbread partnered with IDHL to build a robust email infrastructure from the ground up. What began as a bare-bones setup was transformed into a personalised, brand-led channel that deepened brand affinity and direct connections with consumers. By embedding Walker's heritage and storytelling, we created a performance channel that was high impact as well as personal.

> "For Walker's Shortbread, email is the purest expression of brand experience, personal, intentional, and human. Even within automated journeys like abandoned cart, where conversions average 5.26%, success comes from resonant, curated content. With open rates reaching 51% and click-through as high as 10.67%, these results prove that quality and relevance outperform quantity every time. Every metric signals trust and connection, because behind every email is a human team, not just an algorithm
>
> **Jordan Emmett-Connelly,** Head of Email Marketing and Onsite Acquisition

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Taking action

AI isn't killing brand connection, but it is forcing us to reinvent it. The winners this year will be those who combine tech-driven insight with authentic engagement, going the extra mile to connect with their consumers directly. Those that master this balance could see up to **2.5x higher lifetime value**.

Email as a strategic channel

Email marketing will become a central channel for direct, personalised engagement. We anticipate a move away from quantity over quality automation toward intent-driven, curated content.

AI tools will take the heavy lifting out of segmentation and timing optimisation but it's the resonant content that will give audiences what they are looking for – human connection. A HubSpot & SurveyMonkey report found that **70% of consumers recognise AI being used** in marketing emails, **43% of which disliked AI being applied** to such targeted messaging.

Email is a direct gateway to brand experience. It's sincere, it's personal, and a prime channel for collecting first-party data. Done right, email can curate valuable relationships, not just campaigns.

Reevaluate the usual metrics

AIOs have changed the game - **clicks have reduced by 34%** and traffic is no longer the ultimate success marker. In 2026, it's time to reevaluate what performance looks like.

Forward-thinking brands will shift focus to engagement-driven KPIs: brand interaction, loyalty, email engagement, and AIO trigger rates. These metrics provide a broader picture of influence and connection, how and when users are interacting with a brand.

Of course, traditional sales metrics still matter, but they're only one part of the story. AI-enhanced KPIs give brands a competitive edge by measuring depth of relationship, not just reach.

Product level SEO becomes mandatory

Stuart McGregor, Commercial Director



AI-driven discovery has reshaped what we know about Search, transforming how brands approach visibility and relevance. AI has become ingrained into SEO practices and performance: in fact, AI Overviews jumped from *7% of Google searches in Jan 2025 to 16% of queries by year-end.*

As we move away from purely informational based queries triggering AIOs, the biggest growth next year won't come from category pages – it will come from **depth, relevance, and optimisation at product level.**

AIOs and Large Language Models (LLMs) are the new front door for eCommerce discovery. Modern consumers aren't using generic search terms like 'running shoes' - they're searching 'where to buy Nike Pegasus in size 8 blue' or 'who offers the best organic cotton baby sleepsuit 0–3 months'. These hyper specific queries are now bringing up relevant product recommendations without even leaving SERPs.

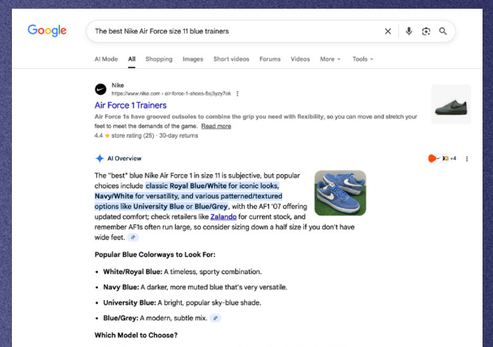
With Google's algorithms rewarding specificity and AI engines answering nuanced commercial queries quickly, there is a new strategic focus on product level optimisation. Product-led SEO takes a customer-centric approach to Search, addressing real consumer needs and targeting keywords that may have low search volume but higher purchase intent.

Industry spotlight: eCommerce

The high transactional intent and fierce competition (**over 28 million eCommerce stores globally**) in the eCommerce sector is why it's particularly affected by AI-driven Search.

AIOs pull answers from an **average of five sources per query** to formulate detailed, highly specific responses, typically drawn from Google's top 10 results. If your products aren't optimized for this new reality, you risk being invisible.

Category pages are often too generic for these specific AI searches, so product-level SEO gives eCommerce brands an edge. It directly targets point of purchase intent, matching long-tail queries, championing specificity, and complying with E-E-A-T guidelines – this all gets a thumbs up from Google and are signals AI engines look for when citing content.



HMV: Securing +200% growth in the era of AI Search





HMV has been Britian's most beloved music retailer since 1921, solidifying itself as our go-to for CDs, technology, and media. To meet the needs of the modern consumer and stand out in a competitive marketplace, HMV joined forces with IDHL and used a product-level SEO strategy to achieve significant gains in targeted product categories. Our SEO campaign successfully delivered three major wins: +200% organic activity on-site, top 5 ranking positions for product keywords, and +56% citations in AIOs.

> "Optimising product level pages is likely to become increasingly important for eCommerce sites due to the highly specific, longer form searches made by users in LLMs (like Chat GPT) and Google's AI Mode. These are more likely to surface more specific "product level" results tailored to the user's specific needs, versus "traditional" Google searches which can be higher up the search funnel, and as such, more likely surface category level content.
>
> **Chris Shelbourne,** Head of SEO

Optimising for AIOs and LLMs

With AI-driven search continuing to grow, no-click browsing is a reality for many consumers. The secret to top-ranking SEO performance next year? Ensuring your products are surfaced in AIOs and LLMs by prioritizing user experience, relevance, and content quality.

Utilise structured data

Make your product pages easily digestible for search engines, particularly AIOs and LLMs. Use structured content formats like tables, short paragraphs, FAQs, and surface key product features such as price, size, colour, material, and specifications.

Include customer-centric content

Ensure product pages feature valuable content that directly answers customer queries and signals trust. This includes customer reviews, user-generated content, expert advice, and product demonstrations.



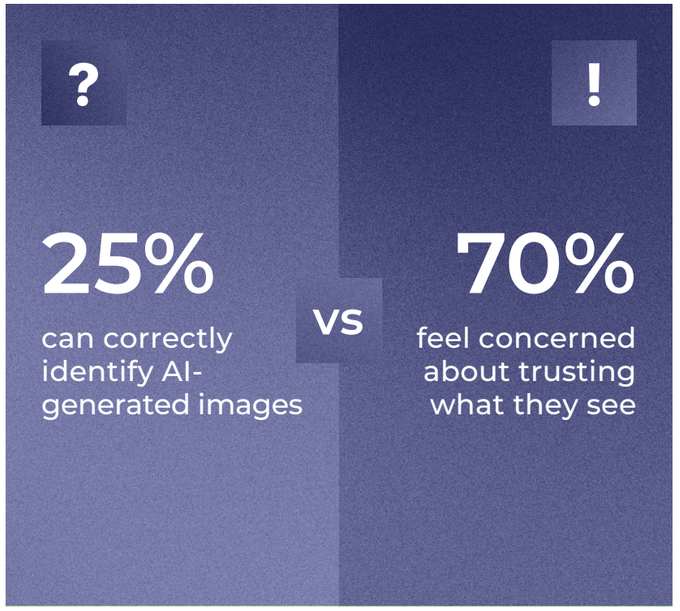
Authenticity will become the ultimate differentiator in eCommerce

Eleanor Papadimos, Director of Web Division



As AI-generated content floods feeds with flawless imagery and polished narratives, consumers are growing skeptical. A recent study found that *only 25% of people can correctly identify AI-generated images*, yet over 70% express concern about trusting what they see. This tension creates a golden opportunity: brands that embrace imperfection and vulnerability will win hearts and build authority that drives conversions.

Expect to see a surge in *"perfectly imperfect"* marketing; unedited visuals, behind-the-scenes stories, and candid admissions of challenges. These human touches bring honesty and relatability, building emotional connections that glossy AI campaigns simply can't replicate. But it's not just about sentiment, it's about establishing credibility. Consumers will feel safer buying... and buying again.



In a world now dominated by algorithmic sameness, authenticity isn't just a feel-good principle - it's a strategic advantage. Brands that lead with transparency and real stories will stand out, foster loyalty, and create a truly significant user experience. Meanwhile, those who cling to sterile perfection risk alienating an audience hungry for something real and reliable.

From showcasing the quirks in your product design to sharing the messy reality of innovation, imperfection is going to become a trust signal. One that directly influences conversion confidence and repeat behaviour. And when trust compounds, brands gain the authority to monetise across every channel.

Industry spotlight: **Beauty**

This shift is especially pronounced in the health & beauty sectors, where trust and personalisation directly shape purchasing decisions. As consumers grow fatigued by AI-driven perfection, filters, and hyper-polished campaigns, authenticity is emerging as the defining value in beauty eCommerce.

With **70% of under-45s finding more value in human-made cosmetics**, imperfection has become the new luxury. Handcrafted products, visible flaws, and behind-the-scenes storytelling will signal trust and desirability. These purposeful shoppers gravitate toward brands that champion realness and originality with services that make them feel good inside, as well as out.

This in turn accelerates conversions as well as affinity. When customers trust the maker, the process, and the product, they buy with confidence and return with intention across every channel, be it social commerce or subscriptions.

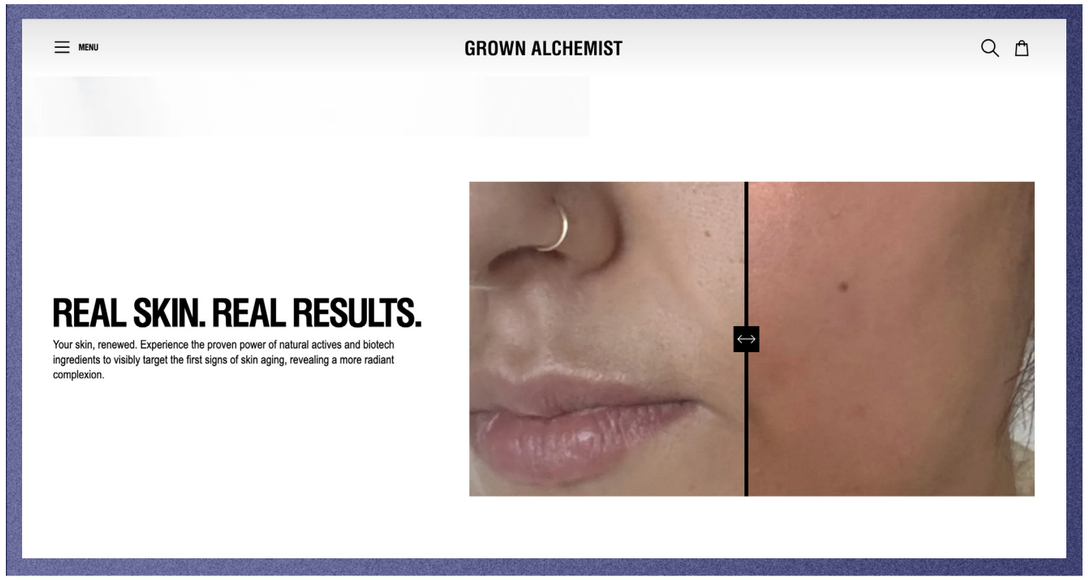
The new frontier of premium value lies in the uniquely human algorithm: balancing AI and technology with emotion, serendipity, human creativity, and genuine connection.



Grown Alchemist: Enhancing human connection with real imagery



Grown Alchemist is a cutting-edge wellness brand, renowned for showcasing rituals, routines, and tools that support skin and self-care in urban environments. IDHL supported Grown Alchemist with a website replatform to a modern Shopify Plus solution, and helped build authority around the brand's plant-powered science-boosted formulas. To demonstrate the true benefits of Grown Alchemists products, we used a 'before and after' photo feature on product category pages, complete with unedited visuals that showcase direct cause and effect between healthier, dewier skin and Grown Alchemist's skincare offering.



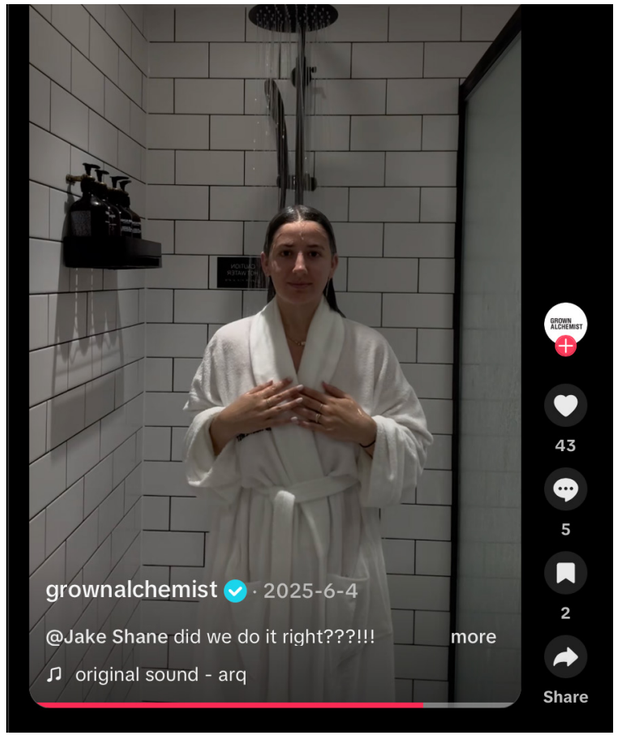
Actionable strategies

Unedited visuals

Your website is more than just a sales tool; it's the front door to your brand's identity and proof point of expertise. Your eCommerce storefront should feel human, real, and relatable, complete with thoughtful design and visuals that align with your values and are instantly brand recognisable.

Unedited visuals are a unique brand fingerprint, humanising your business and showcasing passion for the people buying the products. This honesty and transparency resonates with consumers, demonstrating value that goes beyond a single purchase.

Whether you're using candid moment shots or real customer photos, a personal connection is made with your audience, proving there is a real team behind the sales pitch.



Surface real people and experiences

In a post-AI world, we're enjoying the convenience automation brings us – but it still lacks experience. AI doesn't know how to match skin tone to find the perfect shade of foundation or evaluate the real application of a lip gloss. Ultimately, you can't really be an 'expert' in something without ever experiencing it.

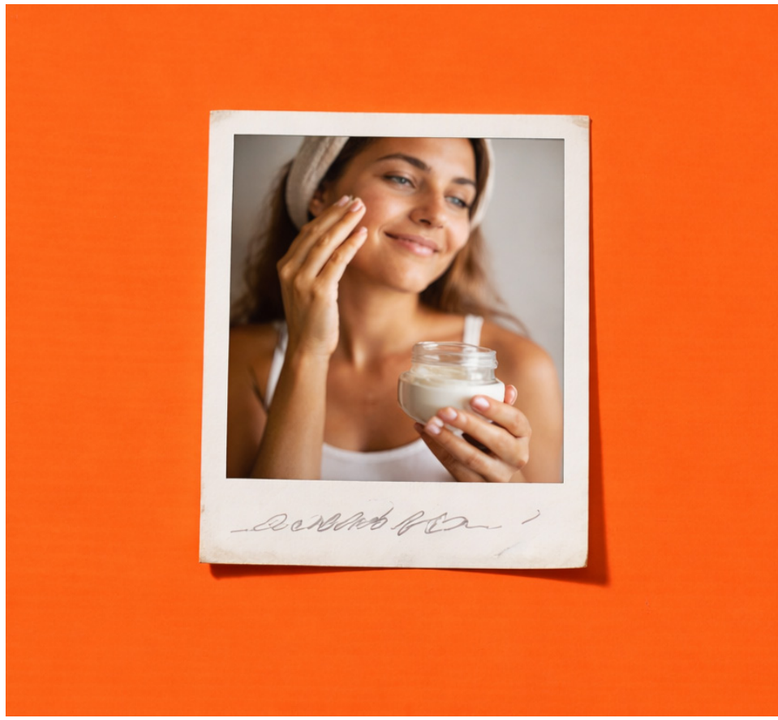
Combining AI recommendations with user-generated content means your brand creates a powerful conversion loop. Tutorials, podcasts, interactive Q&As – all formats that provide consumers with real expectations about brand offering, helping them imagine themselves using products and strengthen repeat behaviour.

User-generated content

UGC is a valuable trust-building mechanism, earning **28% higher engagement** compared to branded content. Customer reviews, social media posts, testimonials, photos all have one thing in common – the opinions are real voices from real people free from commercial influence with nothing to gain by giving a positive review. That's why **92% of shoppers trust peer recommendations over brand messages** and are frequently consuming various UGC formats before making a purchase.

Surfacing reviews on your website, interacting with user videos on TikTok, or posting real stories on your platforms provides social proof that is a genuine endorsement and boosts purchasing confidence. No staged campaigns, no polished unrelatable messaging.

You create an authentic emotional connection, strengthen loyalty by turning customers into advocates, and amplify brand reach through your audiences' own networks.





US: Organic search as a strategic growth engine – not an afterthought

Sam Ogrizovic, Director of International



For years, the US market has been powered by paid media. It's one of the most ad-heavy economies in the world, leading globally with *ad spend projected to hit $466 billion in 2025*. Organic has often played second fiddle – a useful supporting activity rather than a growth engine all of its own.

However, the emergence of LLMs and AI-led discovery is quickly rewriting this hierarchy. As search shifts from 'ten blue links' to AI-generated answers, the value of earned authority is skyrocketing. You can buy placements, but you can't buy citations. Ignoring organic now means missing one of the most efficient drivers in ROAS.

In 2026, the brands on top will be those leveraging organic search as strongly as paid activity. Businesses that overlook the pivotal role of off-page strategy will continue to feel the squeeze as budgets stagnate and CPCs climb (**+13% in 2025**).



Unlocking more channels, more opportunities

Most brands now understand the need for structured, semantically rich content. But the real hack in 2026 is understanding that organic is more than just Search in the AI answer era.

We've covered how AI systems increasingly reference trusted sources, making off-page authority and citations the new currency of visibility. This has given rise to a growth stack: earned + owned + paid.

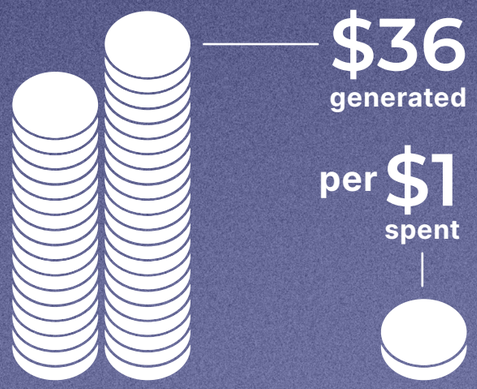
Instead of treating SEO, PR, email, and paid as disconnected tactics, brands need to be building an integrated stack where authority flows across every touchpoint.

Earned: Off-page Authority & Citations

Digital PR, content, and high-quality link acquisition are central in AI visibility, but this isn't about vanity coverage – it's about becoming a cited source. Who is linking to your website, SERP rankings, influencer partnerships are all authority signals that AI loves and will generate more citations and more eyes on your brand.

Owned: Email

Email has become an effective retention engine — a reliable, high-intent channel that isn't subject to algorithmic volatility. On average, **email campaigns generate $36 for every $1 spent** leading to enhanced ROI.



Paid: Precision, Not Dependence

That's not to say one is better than the other – paid remains vital for immediate visibility and competitive positioning. But it works harder when authority is already established, and paid efforts are targeted. Strong organic presence increases CTR, reduces CPA, and improves overall ROAS, positioning paid as a growth accelerator, not the foundation.

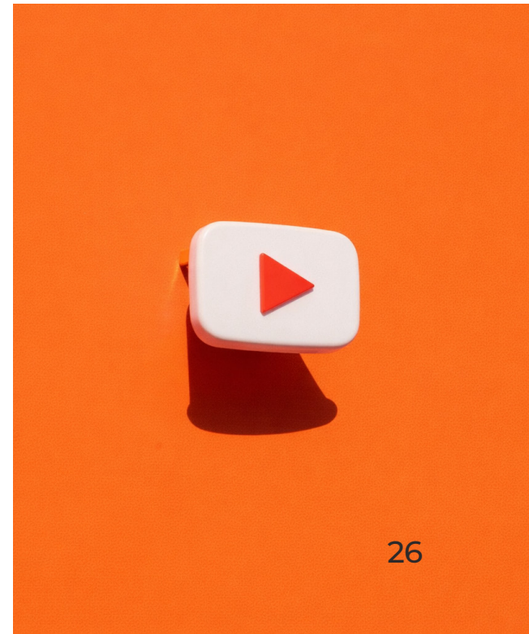
> As discovery becomes increasingly AI-led, growth is no longer about choosing between paid or organic. It is about how they work together intelligently. Precision targeting, audience-led planning, and an omni-channel approach allow brands to compound authority and performance without becoming overly dependent on any single platform.
>
> **Tom Walkden**, Media & Strategy Director

The YouTube Effect

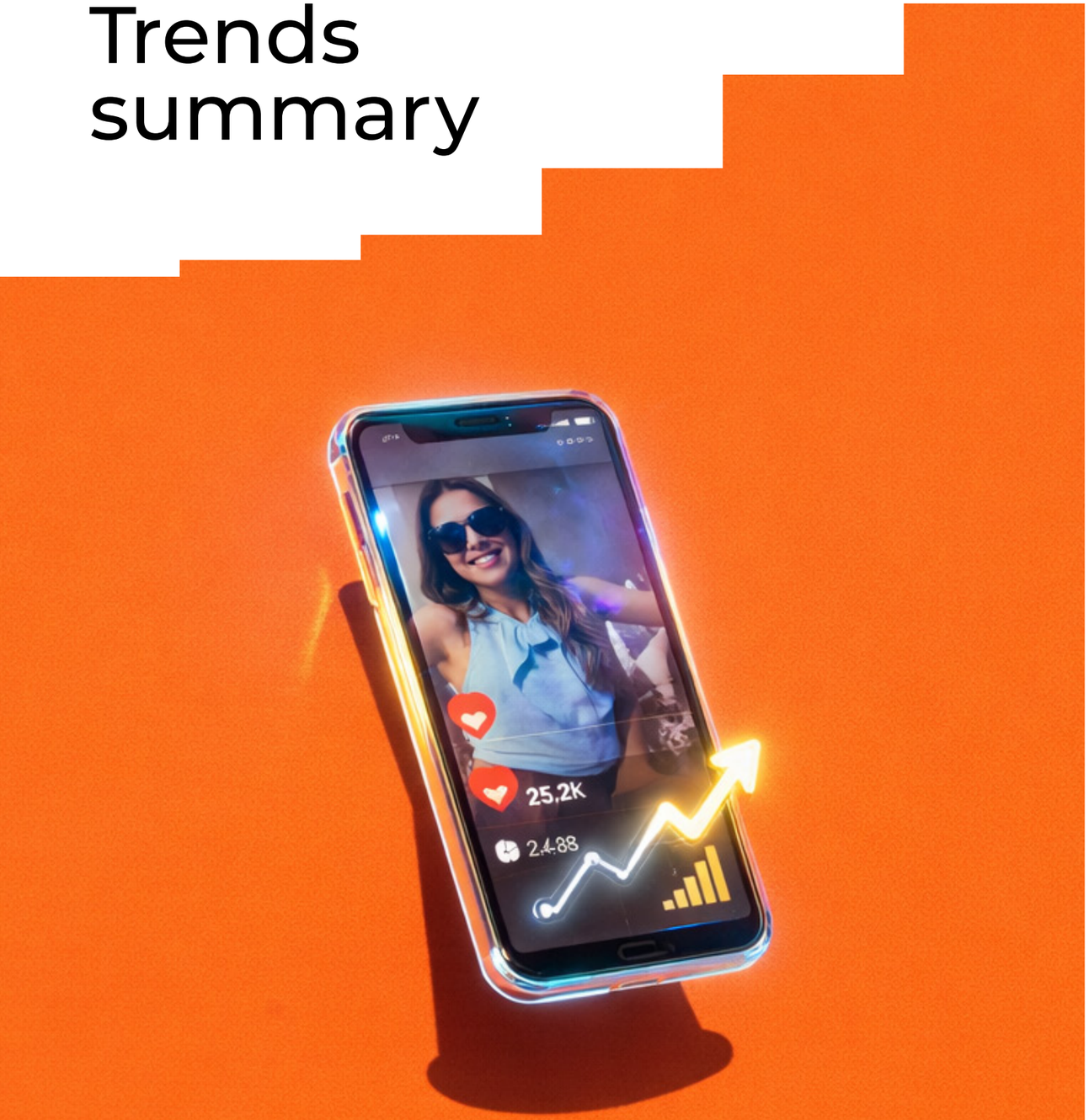
YouTube will continue to dominate attention this year, already accounting for **12.4% of total TV viewership**. But it's not just about scale and reach, the platform's real power in 2026 is as a discovery and validation engine.

As consumers turn to video to explore and compare what they learn through AI-driven search, YouTube becomes a critical layer of proof. Strong organic visibility on the platform, paired with paid formats, allows brands to surface in moments of curiosity and then demonstrate authority at depth.

And as a CTV leader, YouTube uniquely connects upper-funnel discovery with lower-funnel performance, delivering measurable ROI while amplifying the signals that feed modern search.



Trends summary



1

Brand and Performance are pairing up for accelerated growth

Brand and performance are no longer separate – they're a power duo. Brand building is now a performance multiplier, reducing acquisition costs and improving conversion efficiency.

AI will distance brands from consumers - forcing a return to direct engagement

2

It's time to blend automation with human creativity. Smart brands are rethinking brand immersion, doubling down on direct engagement channels like email to bridge the widening gap between brand and consumer.

3

Product-level SEO becomes mandatory

AI Overviews and LLM-driven search reward specificity, making product-level SEO the entryway to eCommerce discovery. Structured data and customer-centric content will ensure your products surface in high-intent queries.

Authenticity will become the ultimate differentiator in eCommerce

4

In a world of algorithmic sameness, authenticity offers a competitive edge. Transparency and imperfection are powerful trust signals, and integrating them into your digital storefront will drive conversions and loyalty.

5

US market - organic search as a strategic growth engine

You can buy placements, but you can't buy authority—organic is now a growth engine, not a support act as CPCs climb. Combining earned, owned, and paid channels will deliver enhanced ROI.

Ready to navigate 2026?

Marketers are in for a ride this year, but the complexity of 2026 demands clarity. Markets are more competitive, the rules of growth are changing, and your channels can't work in silos anymore. That was so 2025.

Now is the time to understand where your brand stands – and where it's losing ground. If you're interested in any of our predictions, request your no-click impact audit today. Gain clarity on where your brand stands and how to adapt for 2026, making this year your best yet.



We're ready to help you **stand out** in the digital world.

Get in touch with one of our experts at **info@idhl.co.uk**

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