The Holding Companies Have Lost Their High Ground—Here Are Some Reasons Why

Social Media Week is headed to NYC this May 12–14! Register before December 16 to save 50% on your pass.

As much as the story has generated a lot of buzz, I find the news of Omnicom's acquisition of IPG to be unsurprising and part of the natural order.

I am sad for the great agency legacies that will be mothballed. I am sad for the jobs that will be cut. I am sad that the holding companies do "innovation light" relative to digital and technology companies. I am sad that the holding companies have become, in finance terms, "cash flow plays"—like laundromats, car washes, and apartment buildings.

This cynicism toward holding companies has been earned. I started in this industry back in 1989 and have worked across five eras of the agency business, serving clients across TV, digital, performance, data, and now the AI era. Earlier in my career, I worked at IPG and reported to then-CEO Phil Geier, an experience that gave me a front-row seat to the inner workings of a holding company at its relevancy peak. At that time, the holding companies had grown for years by increasing their traditional media billings. It was an arms race, and it was all about rolling up agencies and media dollars globally.

Then the game changed, and the music slowly started to stop. In 1998, Google decided to bypass the agencies, and Meta followed their lead. Since then, the holding companies have been forced to milk the existing model.

Unfortunately, they did not have the market cap or the margins of the digital or software companies, so they have never been able to compete for the best technology people in the world. They never really had a shot at true innovation.

AI and the accelerating shift to in-housing

Adding to this problem, two other forces have accelerated their decline.

First, as we all know, clients today are increasingly bringing capabilities inside to save money, improve speed, and increase quality. The fact is that most large clients have internal agencies that proudly believe they can execute as well, if not better. Competition no longer comes from other agencies; an agency’s biggest competitor is its own client. These trends around client in-housing have hit the fee structure hard and made these big agencies more project-based—further weakening their once powerful stocks.

Second, the multiplier effect on in-housing is artificial intelligence: AI is accelerating the in-housing trend as clients want to own and understand AI for their own survival. It is a strategic asset, not a capability to be outsourced.

For decades, the holding companies held the high ground in the advertising world. They were seen as essential partners, offering high-value, high-margin, and high-growth solutions to global brands. Clients turned to them for creative vision, strategic insight, and media expertise. That high ground, however, has now fully eroded. Today the holding companies mostly focus on serving the biggest companies in the world. They are doing everything possible to stay relevant with the top 100 spenders.

What’s next for independent agencies?

But my views are not all negative. For the first time in generations, the grass is greener on the independent agency front.

There is innovation, freedom, and margin outside of those top 100 spenders. The holding companies need the top 100 to impact earnings—the rest of us do not. We can live very well by serving everyone else.

The top 100 accounts for between 20-30% of global GDP. That leaves 70-80% of the global economy for the rest of us to chase. The other good news is that these companies need good partners because they can’t afford to build everything in-house like the top 100 can.

The independent world is about quality, not scale. There is always a market for quality. We can offer what the giants cannot: personalized service, genuine partnership, and the ability to adapt quickly to client needs. We can take pride in good strategy, creativity, digital, social. We can break new ground with AI. We can continue to build strong relationships.

Our industry is at another natural crossroads as the old models are replaced with new models. There is no place I’d rather be than at an independent firm.

Recommended articles
https://www.adweek.com/agencies/holding-companies-lost-high-ground-heres-why/

The Q5 Advantage: How Smart Marketers Are Turning Post-Holiday Silence Into Revenue

While the marketing world fixates on Q4's holiday rush, a golden opportunity lurks in plain sight: Q5, the "invisible quarter."

Forget the myth that consumers hibernate after the holidays. With 45% of consumers actively hunting for post-holiday deals, this overlooked period isn't just a marketing lull—it's your launchpad into Q1. While competitors wind down their holiday campaigns, these engaged consumers arrive armed with gift cards, returns, and fresh spending intentions.

This creates a perfect storm of opportunity: lower advertising costs, reduced competition, and an audience ready to convert. For brands willing to seize this window of opportunity while competitors recover, Q5 offers a strategic advantage that can transform end-of-year momentum into first-quarter success.

The cost-efficiency advantage

Post-holiday advertising costs can plummet by up to 30% as competitors pull back their spending. This isn't just about saving money—it's about maximizing reach when consumer attention is still high. While other brands deplete their budgets on expensive Q4 inventory, smart marketers reserve firepower for this cost-efficient period. This cost advantage creates three prime opportunities:

- **Dramatic CPM reduction:** Reduced competition and increased ad inventory make this the perfect time to maintain visibility at a lower cost.
- **Testing and experimentation:** Q5 is ideal for A/B testing and exploring new platforms without the premium of Q4 rates, allowing for fine-tuning strategies for the year ahead.
- **Budget maximization:** Leverage remaining budgets efficiently, showcasing ROI to secure future funding while investing in long-term customer acquisition.

The psychology of post-holiday consumers

The post-holiday consumer mindset undergoes a fascinating transformation. Gift-giving gives way to self-investment, with shoppers transitioning from “What would others like?” to “What do I want?” This creates multiple opportunities:

- **Self-investment mindset:** Many consumers shift to “New Year, New Me” goals, seeking products and services that enhance their lives. Brands focused on wellness, beauty, and personal development can thrive.
- **Gift card redemptions:** Holiday gift cards lead to increased average order values as consumers “top up” purchases, creating upselling and cross-selling opportunities.
- **Resolution-driven purchases:** With heightened interest in health, organization, and self-care, brands can capitalize on strong intent within these sectors.
- **Returns as opportunities:** Post-holiday returns can become touch points for customer engagement, exchanges, and upsells, transforming potential losses into gains.

The market share opportunity

As competitors recover from holiday campaigns, they create a visibility vacuum. Bath & Body Works capitalized on this opportunity, driving $2.91 billion in Q4 sales (ending

February 2024), with their post-holiday strategy contributing approximately $80 million in additional revenue. Their success illuminates Q5’s potential for:

- Enhanced brand visibility in a less crowded space.
- Strategic timing of sales.
- Customer acquisition at lower costs.
- Building momentum for Q1 leadership.

Maximizing your Q5 impact

Now that you’re armed with the knowledge of Q5, let’s talk about how to make the most of it.

- **Launch your semiannual sale:** When others are quiet, seize the opportunity to launch that semiannual sale. This is your chance to capture attention and drive sales when competition is low.
- **Spend smartly:** As the fiscal year-end approaches, many brands face pressure to use up their remaining budgets. Invest strategically during Q5 to avoid budget cuts in the following year, ensuring your marketing remains impactful.
- **Experiment and innovate:** This is your time to shine. Test new marketing channels while costs are low. Explore creative campaigns and promotional strategies to see what resonates with your audience. The insights you gain now will be invaluable for future campaigns.
- **Target self-purchasers:** Focus your messaging on consumers ready to treat themselves. Use transformation-focused messaging that aligns with their New Year’s resolutions and encourages them to indulge in your offerings.
- **Build recurring revenue and loyalty:** Tap into the self-investment movement by promoting subscription services focused on wellness, personal growth, and self-care. A subscription model offers an ongoing touch point for nurturing customer loyalty while generating predictable

revenue, keeping your business strong long after Q5 ends.

- **Engage, engage, engage:** Keep those conversations going! Use personalized communication to deepen relationships and encourage repeat purchases. Whether it's through email, SMS, or social media, maintaining engagement will keep your audience excited.

The bottom line: from Q5 momentum to year-round impact

Success in Q5 isn't just about capturing post-holiday sales—it's about building momentum that defines your entire year. Forward-thinking marketers recognize this "invisible quarter" as a strategic imperative, where consumer relationships, data insights, and channel optimization create compounding advantages. The question isn't whether to invest in Q5, but how quickly you can capitalize on this opportunity while competitors may be focusing on recovery.

Recommended articles
https://www.adweek.com/commerce/q5-advantage-post-holiday-revenue/

My Journey Through Recovery Took Me From Jail to Cannes

ADWEEK House is headed to Las Vegas on January 8! Our

> house is your house to unwind, recharge and network during the industry's largest consumer tech moment. RSVP.

Let me begin by stating that I'm not from the advertising or marketing world. So you can imagine my surprise when I was invited to attend the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity to present a project to the Titanium Lions jury. I had no idea what to expect. I hadn't even met the team I was working with in person. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

How it all began

My expertise lies in the addiction and recovery realm. As an opioid survivor who struggled with addiction for years, this topic is near and dear to my heart.

About six months prior to Cannes, I received an email from a team at Serviceplan Munich inviting me to join a project they were working on. The team had been researching people who managed to quit opioids—people who shared their stories with thousands of others and were happy to do so.

After weeks of research, they found my Soberdogs videos on TikTok and YouTube and contacted me. Connections like this cemented in me the marketing power and reach of social media—it's absolutely incredible that a team in Germany found a TikTok I shared and were able to reach out.

The project was about a recovery helpline called 855-HOW-TO-QUIT. Callers who were struggling to quit opioids were able to dial the extension of the unique imprint code from their opioid pills, which led to a story from someone who quit that same pill.

The concept blew me away. I had never seen a campaign about opioids in such a precise way, and with pills as the main element. It reminded me of an experience during my time in

jail: A speaker resonated with me because I could relate to his story. And now I could be that someone for somebody else. I immediately got on board.

I'll admit, I initially had some doubts about how seriously a team based in Germany—none of whom were in recovery themselves—would take this project. But that doubt disappeared after our very first video call. They were genuinely interested and had a great idea. And we had the option of reaching even more people. That's the power of advertising and marketing: You can make a real impact on those in need.

En route to Cannes

As I prepared for the trip to France and researched the festival, I began to grasp the magnitude of this event. It's often described as the "Super Bowl" of the marketing industry.

My journey to France had a bit of a rough start. Just as I landed in Europe—for the first time ever—the airline lost my luggage. Along with several others.

But you see, there's always a silver lining. The three-hour wait to retrieve my bag led to an unexpected dinner with three fellow festival attendees, including ADWEEK's chief of staff, Mike Beyman. That dinner sparked the creation of a group chat we called "Lost Luggage," and it's what led to me writing this piece. We've stayed connected ever since.

A brand's thoughtfulness can go a long way

Once I settled in Cannes and met the team in person, it became clear that everyone involved in this project was deeply passionate about the cause. This wasn't just another assignment—it was a mission to make a difference.

The team welcomed me warmly, with the utmost respect and kindness, going out of their way to make sure I felt comfortable. Before I landed in Nice, they called me to ask if

I wanted anything removed from the hotel—specifically alcohol—knowing that many people indulge at the festival. Although I don't drink, I assured them it didn't bother me if others did. Their thoughtfulness and willingness to accommodate my needs left a lasting impression on me.

These experiences help make the meld of industries and people from various walks of life work seamlessly together. And that's what I got to experience in Cannes. Down-to-earth people, full of talent, from different disciplines, ages, and countries, connected because of who we are as human beings.

And thankfully, my experience culminated in being on stage, holding a gold Lion. It wasn't until I returned to New York that I truly realized the significance of what we had accomplished. People spend their entire careers striving to win a Lion, and we won one for "855-HOW-TO-QUIT-(OPIOIDS)."

The real success

Although the awards and recognition are rewarding, the real success lies in the over 30,000 people who have called the helpline, and the more than 5,000 individuals who have been successfully referred to treatment centers.

To everyone in the advertising and marketing world, I hope 855-HOW-TO-QUIT serves as a powerful example of what you can achieve. With people from various companies, nonprofits, and industries coming together, we channeled our collective passion and expertise in design, audio, visual, and creativity to make this Titanium-shortlisted recovery helpline a reality. By shedding a positive light on a heavy subject, with a unique approach after months of research, we stopped looking at who to blame and started looking at who to seek for support and

collaboration.

Recommended articles
https://www.adweek.com/creativity/my-journey-through-recovery-took-me-from-jail-to-cannes/

How Wicked Avoided Consumer Fatigue To Create Box Office Magic

> Your favorite social media marketing event is headed to NYC this May 12–14! Register for Social Media Week before December 16 to lock in early-bird rates and save 50% on your pass.

In recent years, the marketing landscape has been dominated by large-scale, expensive campaigns designed to capture consumer attention. From the ubiquitous pink of the Barbie movie to the pervasive green of Wicked, these mega-marketing efforts raise a critical question: When does a campaign cross the line from excitement to exhaustion?

Since debuting in theaters last Thursday, Wicked has grossed $114 domestically and $164.2 million globally for Universal Pictures, making it the studio's third biggest opening weekend for a movie in 2024. This shows that there was a method behind the madness in the gargantuan marketing strategy, and that at least for now, there is no green fatigue.

Understanding consumer fatigue

Consumer fatigue occurs when audiences become overwhelmed or annoyed by too frequent or too forceful marketing messages. This can lead to decreased brand perception, reduced engagement, and ultimately, a negative impact on sales. While overexposure is a common culprit, a lack of diversity in messaging can also contribute to fatigue. Generic or cliche content can quickly bore consumers, leading them to tune out even the most creative campaigns.

The competition for consumers' attention is intense in a world where hundreds of ads are displayed daily through traditional media, streaming services, and social media feeds, which presents a massive challenge for marketers who must simultaneously maintain consumer interest and consistency.

Wicked promo has been unavoidable this fall, but the opening weekend box office numbers show that the ads mostly added to the excitement that people had to see the film.

In a Barbie world

The Barbie movie serves as a prime example of a successful, spare-no-expense mega-marketing campaign. With a whopping $150 million budget, the campaign included a variety of tactics including strategic partnerships with 100+ brands and immersive experiences like "Barbie's Dreamhouse," quickly establishing itself as a cultural phenomenon. Barbie became more than a movie, but also a significant cultural event. However, the relentless barrage of pink-themed promotions and constant media attention also raised concerns about fatigue.

Conversely, while Charli XCX's "Brat" album was not funded by heavy pockets, the album color, featuring a popping neon green, became a mega-viral sensation after a "Brat generator" tool became available online. The word Brat was turned into an adjective as well, most notably by the Kamala Harris campaign. The Collins English Dictionary even chose it as its word of

the year. Organic marketing is so Brat!

Consumers eventually became tired of Barbie pink and companies that hopped on the Brat trend too late appeared to be trying too hard. Their overexposure emphasizes the significance of pace, authenticity, and consumer-focused techniques in large-scale ads, even if they achieved amazing reach.

Balancing quantity and quality

The lessons learned from Barbie and Brat highlight how crucial it is to strike a balance between the scope of marketing initiatives and the caliber of the material produced. How effectively a brand connects with its target audience is more important than how much marketing it can provide. To mitigate consumer fatigue, brands should consider the following strategies.

They should mix their broader brand messages with personalized marketing messages to target consumers, which can reduce consumer fatigue and increase engagement. For example, Xfinity has a commercial that depicts the stars of *Wicked,* Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande, as girls dreaming to play Elphaba and Glinda, and then eventually winning the roles. The sentimentality of the ad is effective, especially for preexisting fans of the two leads.

They should also make sure to include some authentic components, like showcasing behind-the-scenes operations, which can help brands avoid being seen as transactional. Wicked has done a good job of this, and many of the actors have done interviews discussing what is was like making the film, bringing the public into the world of Oz. Brands should also involve consumers in the brand’s narrative, creating engagement by encouraging customer participation through interactive content like surveys, quizzes, or user-generated content.

Oversaturation can be avoided by distributing marketing messages by spacing out communications to prolong campaigns and maintain engagement without wearing consumers out. For example, Wicked's first teaser trailer premiered in February during the Super Bowl which made some on social media groan that "it feels like Wicked has been promoted for the past eight years."

While the surging box office shows the hype for the film matched the audience's anticipation, brand promoters have to remember that Barbie and Wicked are anomalies, and to make sure that their marketing strategies do not grow on the nerves of their coveted consumers by doing too much.

Recommended articles
https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/how-wicked-avoided-consumer-fatigue-to-create-box-office-magic/

Generational Marketing Is Dead and Rather Irrelevant

Generational marketing is dead and rather irrelevant in modern marketing. Clinging to these outdated segments is not just lazy—it's inefficient, inaccurate, and can be dangerous.

Simple logic led to these labels: People born within a certain timeframe would share common experiences and, therefore, behaviors and preferences. However, this approach is increasingly problematic and oversimplifies the complexities of humans. Even Pew Research has distanced itself from these labels, recognizing that they do more harm than good by perpetuating stereotypes that simply don't hold up under

scrutiny.

The reality is that generational labels have never been scientific because they are actually a socially constructed shorthand used for convenience. In an era where an algorithm delivers a piece of content to a 20-year-old and a 52-year-old with equal ease, the assumptions made about underlying generational divides are obsolete.

The problem with generation-based marketing

Reliance on generational labels can perpetuate stereotypes that do more harm than good. By assuming that all Gen Zers are digital natives who prefer short, snappy content, or that all baby boomers are technophobes who need everything explained in detail with large fonts, marketers risk oversimplifying their audience and missing the nuances that drive true engagement.

Targeting millennials with a campaign focused solely on their supposed love for pumpkin spice everything is not only reductive but also risks alienating the very audience you're trying to engage. The reality is that people of all ages are engaging with a diverse range of content, interests, and behaviors that do not fit neatly into generational categories.

The algorithms are flattening age divides

Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube place little weight on your age; they prioritize content based on your behaviors and interactions. This algorithmic focus on behavior over age is flattening the generational divide, creating shared experiences across age groups, which in my professional opinion is incredibly dope.

TikTok's For You Page and Instagram's Explore are prime

examples of how content can transcend traditional demographic boundaries. A video about a nostalgic ’90s trend might go viral among both Gen Xers who lived through it and Gen Zers who are discovering it for the first time. This convergence of content consumption is breaking down the walls that once separated generational segments.

This also leads to further blurred lines: A teenager posts a video using a bratty sound, and suddenly, their parents are using it too. What starts with “Gen Alpha” quickly moves up the age chain, driving trends that wouldn’t be possible if generational lines were as rigid as marketers have long assumed.

Younger consumers are no longer just one segment; they’re the trendsetters influencing everyone else, including older audiences. They’re not just driving what’s popular; they’re shaping what’s seen, shared, and celebrated in a cyclical algorithm-driven machine.

Ditch the labels

So, if generational segments are no longer effective, what should marketers rely on? The answer lies in leveraging actual data with real insights to understand audiences on a deeper level. Here are a few alternative approaches.

Influence mapping

Younger consumers are cultural gatekeepers, and they don’t just influence each other—they influence everyone. Mapping how trends spread from preteens and teens to young adults to middle-agers can help you identify the key influencers within your target market. By focusing on these trendsetters, you ensure your brand is part of the conversation from the ground up.

Cultural segmentation

Focus on cultural touch points—and to be clear, cultural touch points are not just what's popular on TikTok. Whether it's treating your pet like a birthed child or the global obsession with K-pop, cultural trends are ageless. They tap into shared experiences and interests that bring people together, regardless of their birth year. Aligning your brand with these cultural phenomena will create a connection that transcends generalized generations.

Cross-aged moments

Rather than segmenting your audience by age, look for moments that resonate across age ranges. The rise of multigenerational households, the universal appeal of nostalgia, the resurgence of astrology, or the collective experience of a global event—these moments create opportunities for brands to connect with a wide range of consumers in a way that feels authentic and inclusive.

Embrace the collapse

The time for generational marketing has passed. We know today's consumers demand more—more relevance, more authenticity, and more connection. The brands that understand this shift, and embrace the collapsing of generational divides, will be the ones that thrive in an increasingly fragmented and algorithmically driven world.

Recommended articles
https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/generational-marketing-dead-irrelevant/

Build a Strong Attribution Strategy to Fight Fragmentation

Today’s average path to purchase involves 56 touch points across various platforms. This proliferation of channels introduces a new layer of complexity and complicates creative alignment, as disjointed campaigns lead to consumer distrust and frustration.

If marketers can’t identify which combinations of channels are working or, more importantly, which ones aren’t, effectively prioritizing ad spend becomes nearly impossible. With the right attribution model, marketers can centralize metrics to visualize the entire customer journey, prioritize budgets to maximize ad spend, and make data-backed recommendations to leadership. These tools help centralize and normalize data and ensure that it is clean, deduplicated, and ready for deeper analysis.

Choosing the right attribution model can be complicated. Here are the most common types, along with their pros and cons.

Full-path model

This model is the most extensive and technical since it provides the most comprehensive tracking of a customer’s journey, recording every marketing interaction they encounter

from the first touch point to the final conversion. It accounts for all marketing efforts, such as display ads, social media interactions, email campaigns, and even post-purchase engagements, making it highly effective for in-depth analysis of what works and what doesn’t.

It provides a detailed, end-to-end view of the customer journey, allowing marketers to accurately attribute revenue to specific marketing efforts. It also helps optimize budget allocation by highlighting the most influential touch points in the customer journey and supports strategic decision-making by revealing how different channels work together to influence conversions.

However, it requires significant resources, including advanced analytics tools and skilled personnel to manage and interpret the data, and can be time-consuming to set up and maintain.

Linear attribution

This model assigns equal value to all touch points in a customer’s journey. For example, if a customer finds you on Facebook, then signs up for your newsletter, and finally clicks an email link before making a purchase, each touch point would receive equal credit for the conversion.

It’s relatively easy to implement and understand, making it a practical option for teams with limited resources or those just beginning to explore multi-touch attribution. Assigning equal credit to all touch points in the customer journey emphasizes the value of every interaction. A downside, though, is that it lacks nuanced insights because it doesn’t account for the varying influence that different interactions may have on the final conversion.

Time decay model

Unlike the linear model, where each interaction gets equal credit, the time decay model assigns varying credit to all

marketing touch points in a customer’s journey. It weighs them based on their proximity to the final conversion.

For example, if a customer first encounters your brand through an email but later clicks a button on your website, the email would receive minimal credit, while the website click would receive the most, reflecting its more significant influence on the point of purchase.

Giving more credit to later touch points emphasizes nurturing leads and building relationships over time. This model is more useful for businesses with extended sales processes, where multiple touch points are needed to guide the customer toward a decision.

The cons of this model are that it’s less effective for short sales cycles, as it undervalues critical early touch points. It may also provide limited insights into the effectiveness of upper-funnel activities, which are essential for initial brand awareness and interest.

W-shaped model

The W-shaped model follows a very set pattern: 90% of the credit is evenly split between the first, third, and last marketing touch points. These three stages—visit, lead, and sale—are considered the most critical in the customer journey. The last 10% is divided between the second and fourth touch points, hence the W shape.

Highlighting the visit, lead, and sale stages showcases the most influential moments that drive conversions. This model is well-suited for businesses with multistep sales processes, where specific interactions are crucial for progressing customers through the funnel. It benefits marketers who want to highlight the critical stages in the customer journey without completely disregarding the value of intermediate interactions. While its biggest flaw is that it overlooks touch points outside of these stages, it highlights key

interactions in the funnel.

However, by adhering to a set pattern, it can overlook various influences for other touch points that contribute to the overall customer experience. Its rigid structure may only fit some customer journeys, particularly those with nonlinear or more complex paths.

U-shaped model

Like the W-shaped model, a U-shaped model gives 80% of the credit to the first and last interactions—typically the initial visit and the final conversion. The remaining 20% is distributed among the middle touch points, reflecting their supportive role in moving the customer along the path to purchase.

This model is great for businesses that want to focus on the most influential touch points—attracting customers and driving conversions—without entirely ignoring the value of the middle touch points. It simplifies attribution by focusing on the most critical stages, making it easier to understand and implement, and prioritizes initial engagement and final conversion, making it ideal for strategies heavily focused on these areas.

But giving less credit to middle touch points may undervalue the role of nurturing activities between the first and last stages. This model is less effective for businesses with longer or complex sales cycles where middle touch points significantly impact the final conversion.

Custom models

Attribution models can be tailored to a company’s specific needs, incorporating elements from standard models rather than creating something entirely new, which allows for precise control over credit distribution for conversions and across touch points. However, developing and maintaining custom

models can be time-consuming and expensive. A more practical approach is to use pre-built attribution models and adjust them as needed.

Turning insights into action

As privacy regulations tighten and third-party cookies slowly fade, understanding customer behavior at every touch point becomes more critical than ever. But multi-touch attribution is not a one-size-fits-all solution; it’s a dynamic process that requires ongoing analysis and adjustments. Marketers should be prepared to toggle between different models and ask critical questions to ensure their strategies remain effective.

Marketers who regularly adjust their attribution models and ask the right questions will be better equipped to turn insights into actionable strategies. By doing so, they can optimize their campaigns, make data-driven decisions, and ultimately drive meaningful outcomes in an ever-evolving advertising ecosystem.

Recommended articles
https://www.adweek.com/performance-marketing/build-a-strong-attribution-strategy-to-fight-fragmentation/

Robin Arzón Talks Sports,

Swagger and the Importance of Speaking Spanish

Before she was a New York Times bestselling author, a top-ranked Peloton instructor, and one of Time magazine's 2023 Latino Leaders, Robin Arzón was very much in a different part of the job market, specifically in the world of law.

The successful multi-hyphenate left her role as a corporate litigator at a New York City law firm in the midst of the subprime mortgage crisis and right into another fast-paced environment: running marathons. Her passion for running became more than a hobby—it became a career. After publishing her first book, Shut Up and Run, which landed on the New York Times Best Seller list, Arzón took another bet on herself and cold-pitched Peloton.

The rest is herstory.

These days, the founder of the community-focused Swagger Society can be found making an impact everywhere, from Capitol Hill to Athlos to guiding her kids toward become fluent Spanish speakers. Arzón sat down with ADWEEK to discuss her journey and the lessons she's learned along the way to build her resilient personal brand.

Her words have been edited for length and clarity.

Respect for la historia

I'm first gen, born in the States. My dad is from Puerto Rico and grew up in the Bronx with really nothing. And my mom is a

Cuban refugee. They've got lots of stories of serious struggle and triumph, but a lot of struggle. And I carry their stories with me. They did such a great job instilling in myself, my sister, my primas and primos that they climb mountains and we're starting at their mountaintop.

I want to pass on the values that I grew up with. I want [my kids] to be super proud of their heritage and understand the stories. I was just recently in at a meeting on Capitol Hill advocating for the National Museum of the American Latino, which they are hoping to build in D.C. in the National Mall, pending site approval from Congress. Those stories are important, and I want them to understand the resiliency, the grit, the triumph. But I also want to them to know where they came from.

[My daughter] is coming home [from school] speaking Spanish. So I have to speak, I have to respond. It's creating that point of emphasis. Canticos is really great. We don't do a ton of screen time but our whole Disney Channel is only in Spanish. Anything that is entertainment is only in Spanish and those little things that move the needle. My kids being fluent has made me work on my own fluency. I'm "intermediate plus."

Of course, it's [about brands] meeting consumers and communities where they are. But I also think it's different in the Latino community. Specifically, how would the Dominicans say it? How would the Puerto Ricans say it? What kind of music is it—a bachata beat or a salsa beat?

If you're trying to dive deep into a community, meet them where they are with the music, the terminology, the colors, and the experiences. Brands are missing out on in-person experiences, but in the Latino community, there is still such an emphasis put on how we're connecting in real life. It's very community-centric, even though many of us are digitally engaged.

Women are slaying

We know now [women's sports is] not a moment; it's a movement. Events like Athlos are really exciting because it was the largest purse prize for a women-only track event in history. And it's like, let's start paying these athletes. Let's start having real conversations about what the ad dollars mean and how we can get within striking distance, if not equality, to the male athletes. There's an appetite there. Showcase these athletes, and give them the respect that they deserve.

For women's sports, especially, there's a dearth of storytelling around these female athletes. Let's create the lore because it exists. Frankly, it's more interesting to me than the men's [stories]. Show me a mama warrior who has rebuilt herself and come back to slay a championship. She's doing that with babies on her back so don't tell me that's not interesting.

What's so cool [is] we're having a conversation not only about women's sports but female leaders in general. We're raising the bar and it's important. It's about time.

Show up to stand out

Consistently show up and [your personal] brand is going to build itself. Sometimes we get caught up in the brand deck, or what the KPIs are, or what the client wants. Are you individually showing up in the world? Your reputation is a form of wealth, and where you can capitalize on that wealth is consistently show up in a way that makes sense [for you], and then make that into dollars.

We're sometimes starting at the finish line without understanding that you just have to start running the first mile. What would your closest 20 associates say about you? What would they say your strengths are? What's the story they've heard you tell 10 times? That's who you are, because that's how you're showing up in the world. And [the personal

brand] builds itself by showing up consistently in that way.

Again, it goes back to that “both/and” [concept]. Let’s explore who we are in the world. If I told myself I was only a legal brief writer, where would I be? If I was only a runner, I would have never picked up a weight. If I was only an athlete, I would have never had kids. If I was only a wife, I wouldn’t be out here slaying a whole bunch of entrepreneurial endeavors. So, let’s explore the edges of who we are.

We aren’t just one thing, and I’m not just interested in one thing. And then I have life stages that I’ve lived through. It’s been amazing for my audience to come along [for the ride], the OG audience. I have different entry points for new folks who are like, “I want to see Robin’s vegan food content,” or, “I want to see her point of view on motherhood,” or, “I just want to see what she’s wearing this week at Fashion Week.” I’m down for all of it.

As long as we’re making the story make sense, personalizing it [and] coming from a point of view, it works. I use movement as an expression, but I also use lots of other tools in my toolkit and I’ll continue to share that with the world as long as folks are listening.

Recommended articles
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What Unilever’s Agreement With X Could Mean for the Remaining Advertisers in the Lawsuit

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In a dramatic turn of events within the X versus advertisers lawsuit, Unilever has been removed from the lawsuit after coming to an agreement with X.

For context, earlier this year, Elon Musk’s X (previously Twitter) filed a lawsuit against several former advertisers, claiming they coordinated an illegal advertising boycott against the platform. This legal action comes on the heels of a significant advertiser exodus, driven largely by concerns over their ads appearing next to harmful or inappropriate content.

For a platform that benefits from brand accounts as revenue and reputation markers, X needs to figure out how to get brands back on board to hit revenue needs and shift the lingering negative brand sentiment as a social media platform and advertising channel.

Brand safety on X remains a big issue

Since Musk took over X, the platform has struggled with brand safety issues, prompting many advertisers to withdraw. A pointed reaction from Musk in December to the advertisers involved in the boycott failed to win them back. Instead, X's recent lawsuit further alienates these brands and raises critical questions about the intent behind involving the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM) and other advertiser groups in its legal strategy.

GARM, a not-for-profit coalition aimed at setting standards for brand safety, was accused of inciting an "advertiser boycott." The lawsuit appears to be part of X's broader drive to recover lost revenue, yet many experts doubt it will lure advertisers back. Instead, X's legal actions suggest an unwillingness to address the underlying issues of brand safety and content moderation that have hindered the platform. GARM has since disbanded, citing that the recent allegations have significantly drained its resources and finances.

The ripple effect of Unilever's agreement

So what does the latest news of Unilever's agreement with X mean for the lawsuit and the future of X's advertising relationships?

Unilever, a Fortune Global 500 brand, carries weight and could influence other brands to follow suit. Following this news, there could reasonably be calls to engage with the X legal team to negotiate and find out what the agreement was, since "if it's good enough for Unilever, it's good enough for us" could easily be put in a Slack message right now as others in the lawsuit figure out how to proceed.

It may also signal that X is working to get agreements for the largest and most influential brands in the lawsuit, knowing they will return the most revenue and also be able to sway

small defendants to settle without a fight. If X wants to do a more widespread trust push here, it would benefit them and all companies impacted to share the agreement terms and the steps X is making to ensure brand safety and regain advertisers' trust. Without this, it's easy to believe it is a focus on the big and the small will just follow strategy.

For advertisers, transparent communication is crucial to rebuilding trust in a platform marred by controversy. The lack of such communication raises concerns that brands may need to settle with X to be removed from the lawsuit, potentially agreeing to terms just to resume advertising. If Unilever doesn't want to move forward and fight the lawsuit, many smaller players will follow suit to prevent the litigation and thus minimize financial risks. Brands have to choose between litigation and the larger fear that associating with X could pose ongoing reputational risks.

What about the users?

One key audience usually forgotten during all this is the (casual or power) X user.

Depending on your level of account, you may encounter ads. With many large brands boycotting, the ads that are left tend to either be from smaller companies that shoot for mass awareness regardless of their relevance to the user, or from those who do not have concerns about brand safety or frankly are major Musk fans. The advertisers who choose to promote content on the platform impact the user experience, having the ability to clog up the feed with noise or crafting experiences that align with and convert users. It also can garner user safety if users see ads from brands they like. They are not just more likely to click on them and convert, but they are also more likely to feel like X is the place for them.

Amid these challenges, advertisers who do make agreements and return may not necessarily come back with the same or

increased advertising spend. Many advertisers have diversified advertising strategies as is and have probably been testing other channels during the boycott. Depending on what they have learned from their advertising channel A/B testing, this could add another obstacle to heavy ad spending through X alone.

The situation also prompts a broader reevaluation within X. Revenue challenges persist, and while subscription models have been introduced, it’s not enough to replace lost advertising income. X might need a significant rethink of its business model, potentially shifting toward new approaches in international advertising or revamped subscription services.

At the root of it all is trust (or lack thereof)

The unfolding narrative between X and its advertisers underscores the pivotal role of trust and transparent communication in healthy brand–platform relationships. Without addressing these foundational issues, X’s efforts might be perceived as adversarial and counterproductive, potentially costing it more than just advertising dollars.

Recommended articles
https://www.adweek.com/media/what-unilevers-agreement-with-x-could-mean-for-the-remaining-advertisers-in-the-lawsuit/

The Current State of TV

Streaming: Great Stories vs. Instant Virality

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You've found a new show. It feels made for you. It's well written, the cast is phenomenal, and you can't wait to see where Season 2 goes. The show's only been out for about two months, but you see news that it's been cancelled already. Another bites the dust. You realize something that felt made for you simply didn't have the appeal or virality to make it worth saving. Another great story was lost to a war of numbers.

The ongoing cycle of show cancellations on streaming platforms is creating an unsettling atmosphere for viewers, eroding trust and weakening the connection these platforms strive to build with their audiences. Shows are often discontinued after a single season or even midseason, stalling the growth of fan communities and leaving audiences questioning the value of investing in new series. Netflix's Kaos and Amazon's My Lady Jane were both canceled within months of release, with My Lady Jane competing against the likes of the Summer Olympics coverage during half of that time. Was it ever positioned to be successful?

Quantity over quality

Do these shows need more marketing? The broad mass appeal? Was it crap?

For shows like Kaos and My Lady Jane, critics and audiences agreed they were fantastic, with Kaos receiving 76% and 83% Rotten Tomato critic and audience scores and My Lady Jane receiving 95% and 91% on Rotten Tomatoes, respectively. This isn't a decision of quality but rather of numbers, and virality, in a short amount of time. While movie releases are seen as flops or successes by whether they cross the billion-dollar mark, it seems streaming has adopted the same myopic view of success. If it doesn't have blockbuster appeal, it isn't worth saving and building up an audience.

This fosters a lack of trust in viewers who don't want to invest their time and energy into a new show when the unlikelihood of closure and future seasons is precarious at best. Because of this growing apprehension among viewers, they now choose to wait until a show is confirmed for additional seasons before they start watching.

https://twitter.com/Chelsea_Stickle/status/1843858688228090338
This wait-and-see approach diminishes the excitement of discovering fresh narratives, replacing it with a cautious approach focused on avoiding disappointment. This in turn lowers viewer counts and perpetuates the cancellation of future shows. They don't want to watch it because they don't want to be disappointed, and streaming services cancel regardless of acclaim and sentiment. It's a vicious cycle where art goes to die.

Risk aversion leads to monotony

Streaming platforms seem to be in a state of trial and error, heavily relying on quick viral success to decide a show's fate. This scattergun strategy reveals an industry still

grappling to understand what audiences want. By cluttering their catalogs with volume in hopes of finding hits, they tend to overlook high-quality productions for broader, more immediately gratifying content, streamlining their focus toward mass appeal.

This fear of not capturing what works means that we see the same IP and story tropes told over and over again. There is a lot of talk about “superhero fatigue,” but we don’t talk enough about “procedural fatigue,” where the same show with different settings and casts are made over and over again as long as there is a market for them.

Innovation and newness denote risk. It means as streaming service customers we see the same shows and movies over and over again, with little or nothing to watch or engage us. When searching for fantasy or newness we continue to scroll, hoping for something that will pop out with its eccentricity and differentiation. It’s the pop music-ification of visual entertainment. Art is not art, but a commodity that must be popular enough for the masses to endure.

This fixation on instant popularity stifles the potential of niche and unique genres, making it hard for thoughtful, original shows to shine. Reality TV and easily digestible programming often overshadow more complex storytelling, flooding the market with entertainment that values ease over engagement. As a result, quality art is replaced by content that requires minimal thought and effort from its viewers. These programs provide the viewership necessary to be deemed successful, even if those shows are hate-watched.

As Empire writer Ben Travis so profoundly stated, “Streaming services are over-feeding and starving their audiences at the same time.” We are at the entertainment equivalent of having too many clothes and yet nothing to wear, because nothing speaks to us. It’s all a commodified landscape of intellectual beige in the background so you don’t have to turn your brain

on while you watch.

The disparity in marketing efforts

Adding another layer to this issue is the obvious disparity in marketing support for different shows. Some series receive widespread promotional efforts, saturating media channels, while others are left in the shadows with minimal attention. This uneven marketing means that some shows get canceled before many potential viewers even heard of them, frustrating audiences who feel they never had a chance to discover new content that might have resonated with them.

This marketing imbalance leads to disappointment, as dedicated viewers often react with surprise or anger upon learning about the cancellation of a show they never even knew existed. The perceived randomness of marketing efforts undercuts the discoverability of shows and amplifies frustrations when only those heavily promoted manage to break through the surface.

The business model here reflects a broader issue where companies announce their intention to build communities but retreat when immediate success isn’t evident. This shortsightedness curtails the formation of fan bases and vibrant communities before they can even get started.

For those trying to keep updated on the current wave of cancellations, resources like Vulture’s list of 2024’s axed shows and Forbes’ report on Netflix’s recent cancellations highlight the uncertainty in the industry. The sudden ending of a promising series such as My Lady Jane further emphasizes the unpredictable nature of streaming decisions.

To break this cycle and rebuild viewer trust, streaming platforms must shift their approach to support diverse and

innovative stories more genuinely and stop relying on low-hanging fruit. Viewers deserve more and streamers need to do more than stuff content into platforms while upping the price every time you turn.

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4 Ways to Mitigate Bias in AI and Close the Diversity Deficit

Feed a prompt to an AI image generator and you're bound to encounter an insidious pattern: Do the people look … too stunning? Perhaps even wanton?

Gender, race, body type, nationality, religion—you're almost guaranteed to get prejudiced and outdated stereotypes when using these descriptors in prompts. And "wanton" is a deliberate adjective; it's mostly used pejoratively toward women, and AI tends to oversexualize female images. These glaring imbalances showcase a recurring problem with AI outputs: the replication of societal biases, which can be harmful to actual people and communities.

I wrestled with this firsthand while helping develop Sir Martian, one of our key AI demos featured at Cannes earlier this year. Sir Martian, playfully named after Sir Martin Sorrell, is an AI-powered robot in the form of an alien caricaturist. Throughout the festival, he invited attendees to

sit down for a quick chat and a sketched portrait, based on their appearance and tastes.

I’m proud that the demo was a success, because as you can imagine, this interaction was more than a simple conversation. And it taught me a lot about the privileges and responsibilities of shaping a new technology. Here’s what I learned.

Words matter—your data sets the tone

Most AI tools available for the general public are trained on datasets that aren’t accessible or visible to users, so I feel particularly fortunate to work at a company that creates and trains its own models. It really is a “great power, great responsibility” scenario.

The foundation of any generative AI model should be diverse and comprehensive. By expanding the range of base images and training materials, developers can create AI systems that represent a broader spectrum of human experiences. This enriches outputs and helps combat entrenched biases.

With Sir Martian, specificity was essential for aligning user inputs with desired outputs. After some trial and error, we found that we had to train the model combining visual input with very precise text prompts in order to get it to represent people accurately.

When given a picture of a Black woman and the prompt “woman with braids,” the AI model automatically defaulted to a woman with German-style braids. We had to train and fine-tune it using specific terms like “cornrows” and “box braids” to get it to create accurate drawings. Giving the system a wider variety of terms to connect to visual references was crucial

to getting more diverse depictions.

This step was humbling because I encountered my own limitations in the process. For example, we don't have a large Muslim population where I'm based in Brazil, yet a global audience traveling to Cannes would likely include women in hijabs or chadors. This prompted me to research the nuances between different articles of dress that, to an untrained eye, may have been seen as interchangeable. The experience highlighted the importance of stepping outside of our bubbles to recognize what we don't know, in order to learn and incorporate diverse cultural elements that better serve global users.

Diversity is (and isn't) everyone's responsibility

As the only woman on the team building Sir Martian, the problematic depiction of women raised alarm bells for me early on but didn't faze my male colleagues until I brought it to their attention. We need more diverse teams who can authentically lead AI in the right direction. But at the same time, the onus shouldn't be on minorities alone to fix biases that have affected them for generations.

Overcoming these biases demands collective effort. After I discovered flaws in Sir Martian's AI model, I partnered closely with a developer on the project who was dedicated to addressing these issues. I reached out to a Black co-worker and Muslim women in our global community for their feedback on whether Sir Martian's drawings were respectfully reflecting their identities. These are just some examples of the cross-disciplinary collaboration that needs to happen in order to make a change; once you flip the switch and understand what needs to be done, the rate of progress is astounding.

The industry has a ways to go, but we're seeing positive change. Since Sir Martian launched, we've instated a global AI

policy to help staff become more conscious of common biases that occur in AI systems, such as data bias, algorithmic bias, and confirmation bias. Perhaps more importantly, fostering an inclusive environment encourages a shared responsibility in creating AI systems that accurately and fairly reflect diverse experiences, ultimately benefiting everyone.

Know where to draw the line, and back up your decisions

Our industry celebrates how AI will unlock personalization for everyone, but there are limits. The unfortunate reality is that, when it comes to accurately depicting everyone, we can't perfectly address every difference on every project. But we can try to be as thorough as possible given the limits of technology, time, and budgets.

When it comes to being more diverse and inclusive, for example, people naturally focus on accounting for a variety of skin tones. That's great, but it's often as far as we go. What about different body types and sizes? How might a generated portrait differ when someone is sitting in a wheelchair instead of standing up?

We should not only address these questions, but also begin asking them at a project's inception. Those of us developing consumer-facing generative AI activations must be conscious of where our parameters fall, as well as able to justify the decisions we make.

When working on Sir Martian for the demo in Cannes, we decided to leave children out of the training data, knowing that they were not our target audience. This was a conscious decision rather than a blind spot in our process, as representation and inclusion so often are in AI projects.

It’s time to do better

We all know that AI is an amazing tool that has progressed by leaps and bounds over the last few years, but one thing it can’t do is correct our own blind spots. That’s on us to identify and address.

AI serves as a mirror to our society, reflecting both its progress and its persistent challenges. If left unchecked, biases can become even more ingrained through AI. Tackling this issue isn’t a task for minorities alone—it’s something we all need to work on together. This shared commitment can help genuinely turn AI into a force for positive change.

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