Commerce Can No Longer Be Where Creative Goes to Die

Last year, global ecommerce sales totaled nearly $6 trillion and are expected to grow 10% this year. People expect nothing but the best shopping experience every time, and expectations increase every time they experience something better.

This represents a sharp departure from how commerce has traditionally been approached—as a mere transaction after all the creative brand-building and consumer engagement. Now, commerce is often the sole or most pivotal moment where brands interact with consumers, making creativity and commerce work hand in hand. Necessity created by pandemic lockdowns fast-forwarded the world of commerce, creating a world where speed, value and frictionless convenience are the victors and the loyalty that brands have fought so hard and paid so handsomely for are the first casualties.

We have matured immensely beyond the days of short-term commerce tactics like “add to cart” or “buy now.” Modern creative commerce is about far more than getting people to buy something; it’s about getting them to buy into the brand experience before purchasing your product. But how?

Here are four examples of how creative commerce has recently been brought to life to great effect.

When it doesn’t feel like shopping

Durex “Down to Duck” was a 24-hour response to Apple’s announcement to stop autocorrecting “F***” to “Duck.” It is a testament to our belief that people don’t “go” shopping; they

always shop.

And aren’t we all delightfully guilty? Be it passive scrolling that turns into Air Jordans shipped overnight, TikTok cooking livestream binges that lead to family-sized Doordash grocery deliveries and shopping during those endless virtual calls. Or our kids on Roblox, spending our hard-earned Robux on their avatars.

When it doesn’t feel like you’re shopping, that’s creative commerce; it’s the hinge between a one-time purchase and a long-term brand-consumer relationship.

The dots between the data points

Online grocery and food delivery services have rapidly grown in the last few years. Voilá, a Canadian challenger brand in the grocery delivery category, targeted millennials by being where they are: Social media. When Dalgona Coffee, Pasta Chips and Kit Kat Cheesecake were trending on TikTok, the ingredients sold out quickly.

[embedded content]
By predicting upcoming viral recipe trends and partnering with foodie content creators, Voilá’s “Trending 2 Table” intercepted cultural trends before their competitors, acquiring new customers first and accelerating sell-through on the digital shelf to parent company Sobeys. A custom-built Trend Index collected data from TikTok and Pinterest trends, Google insights, social listening, Voilá’s first-party search, and sales data. Connecting the dots between data points turned into delicious dollars for Voilá.

Commerce interceptions

LATAM Airlines “Fly over Cyber Monday” where the brand had a unique proposition to sell affordable flight tickets to people who were shopping for electronics. This ‘commerce interception’ was inspired by the strategic cultural insight

that it’s more affordable to buy electronics overseas, flight tickets included. Clever shopper targeting and redirecting led to $30 mil in ticket sales, lots of brand love on social and inclusion in Forrester’s Best Practice Report.

The ‘adaptive retail’ approach

The future of commerce is frictionless, secure, tech-forward and human-centric. At CES this year, Walmart was already ahead of the game with their ‘adaptive retail’ approach, a dynamic, unified retail experience that’s integrated across all channels people engage with. Another stand-out example was its gen AI-powered “occasion” search experience where people can key in searches like “football watch party” instead of “chips, wings or 90-inch TV.”

What’s important is how Walmart puts people’s experiences at the center. Sure, they want to sell you everything, but it’s on the customer’s terms. And while we’re at it, let’s throw in some cross-category ideas like that dream 90-inch TV, which pairs nicely with football and chips.

In a world where any relationship can forever end with just a swipe or click, brands cannot afford to *not* make every experience count. It is no longer just about short-term tactics like discounts, freebies or sales spamming.

Creative commerce is a business multiplier, a strategic mission for building enduring and profitable relationships between brands and people. To simultaneously supercharge growth and love for your brand, commerce must be where creativity thrives, not where it ends.

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Sustainability Is More Than a Big Leafy Green Picture

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As businesses attempt to navigate the incredibly complex, fragmented and increasingly regulated sustainability landscape, they all too often opt for a “leave no trace” approach. This is because the issue is all at once highly prioritized and also highly scrutinized, from consumers to C-suites. As a result, organizations often delegate it to the responsibility of sustainability silos, failing to meaningfully tie major efforts to the mainstays of their brands and ultimately leaving no impression and no impact.

Simply put, brands aren’t showing up to get attribution for their action.

With brands cowering behind sustainability tropes (i.e.: the babbling brook, leafy green forest) or in the shadow of their logos, the message gets lost. When deploying those obvious green tropes, we’re inadvertently saying that this product is “for” people who deeply care about sustainability. In doing so, we risk alienating a bigger group of people who often believe that a product being sustainable also means that there is a negative trade-off on another element such as taste,

price or quality.

When we integrate sustainability into the brand story, we open ourselves up to more interesting design opportunities that feel intrinsic to the brand and don’t risk alienating broader audiences.

Businesses still need to show and tell in equal measure

Consider these facts: 92% of CEOs remain in support of their ESG programs with nearly three-in-four (72%) saying they have modified their approach to talk less and listen more closely to stakeholders to decide when and where to engage.

What’s more, 9-in-10 marketers agree that sustainability agendas must be more ambitious and 94% say marketers need to act more bravely and experiment to drive transformative change. This is reflected in more brands now having sustainability as a KPI in their marketing dashboards, up from 26% in 2021 to 43% in 2023.

But in the race to get something out there, amidst this baton drop, we forget our expertise as marketers in translating our credentials into compelling stories.

We do ourselves a disservice if we don’t think about how our brand might distinctively communicate sustainability (i.e. taking into consideration the channel, the category, our brand’s unique positioning and our audiences).

Sustainability at the heart of the business

The sustainability story can be carefully set as part of a narrative and values that are already known amongst a brand’s audience.

Nespresso needed a new identity to tell the story of its future as well as its commitment to responsible sourcing. It avoids all the typical ‘tropes’ of sustainability, i.e. green leaves and Earth motifs. Instead, it uses a confident monogram as a seal of quality and reassurance of responsibility, set against a natural canvas, further elevating the brand’s role in delivering a high-quality brand experience that is imbued with sustainability credentials, including B-Corp certification that it is working hard to maintain and evolve.

Guinness Clear uses the brand’s unique tone of voice and place in culture to bring warmth and connectivity to an otherwise wagging finger “drink responsibly” mandatory CSR message, It successfully showed up during the Six Nations rugby fixtures and again over Christmas, without dampening the mood.

Lego uses the same authentic human language of its “Together we can rebuild the world” brand campaign to convey its corporate sustainability commitments. As a result, it stays true to the optimism of the product and category while communicating to a broader audience.

Another solid example is AWA by Magnum, which serves as a way for the brand to bring the cocoa-sourcing story closer to people via an engaging platform. It is born from the insight that outside of the farming season, women in cocoa communities must seek alternative ways to create income. Local community programs that promote creativity, craft and financial independence are funded and their work is showcased via the AWA platform, which uses the rich visual and verbal brand world of Magnum as the basis for expression.

Find the point of maximum impact

To evolve a sustainability journey, brands need to bring together data-led materiality and brand-building principles to create a holistic assessment of a business and its brands’ role in society against a commercial backdrop. In short,

leveraging how you add value as a business to add value beyond it.

A targeted approach that tackles the above unlocks the sustainability opportunity for all brands committed to the journey. It maintains relevance in peoples' lives and broader business culture now and in the future.

This is all to say that brand and sustainability are not only intrinsic to each other's success; they have the answers the other is looking for. Brands can potentially be epic storytellers thanks to evidence and data backing sustainability efforts. But no one can listen if they don't have access to the most compelling aspects of the narrative across audiences.

However, when these two disciplines are brought together, they can simultaneously drive value for each other and deliver sustainability stories that are all at once clear, connected and credible.

So, suppose the biggest challenge facing sustainability today is a brand challenge. In that case, that may also be the perfect rallying cry for marketers to leverage the brilliant minds of sustainability peers and overlay with consumer and cultural needs to fuel creative problem-solving. This will help create an emotional connection with stakeholders and ultimately, build confidence in where a brand concentrates.

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Temu’s Advertising Avalanche Is Impossible to Ignore

> Sports marketing leaders from State Farm, the Golden State Warriors, the NBA and more will join ADWEEK Brand Play on May 9 to unpack the trends, techniques and tools you need to break into the space. Register for your virtual pass.

We live in an attention economy. The ecommerce space is filled with companies not only competing for revenue but also consumer awareness.

And ecommerce giant Temu is giving competitors a run for its advertising budget.

Temu’s strategic takeover of advertising space on Meta, Google and other platforms is impossible to ignore. Reports and industry pros suggest an almost audacious investment from the Chinese ecommerce newcomer, with figures rumored around the $2 billion mark in 2023 alone.

This colossal spend aims at carving a substantial footprint in the U.S. retail space, but the implications, challenges and outcomes of such a move truly impact media buyers every day.

Temu is anything but subtle. If you’ve been scrolling advertising or DTC Twitter, you’ll have seen specific callouts of this sweeping uptick in Temu campaigns. I spoke to marketers in the space who called out the potential damage of the Temu ad avalanche as it continues down the mountainside.

Advertising like a billionaire

Attributed to the umbrella of PDD Holdings from China, Temu surged onto the U.S. scene with a vision of dominating the market, employing a mix of aggressive marketing and low-price allure to draw consumers. This seemingly budgetless ad spend on Meta has propelled Temu to one of its top revenue advertisers in 2023.

What if you could find items you normally purchase at Amazon and other retailers for shockingly low prices? Consumers are ready to throw their credit cards at them, with a reported $3 billion in revenue in the first half of 2023 alone and an expected $6 billion this year.

This aggressive push not only impacts the revenue of any potential competitors but also impacts the efficacy of competitive advertising budgets.

Viral Marketing Stars CEO Katya Varbanova has seen this strategy before. “On my team, we have a phrase that says, ‘Outspend your competition, and you’ll have no competition.’ And it seems like Temu is taking that same approach to their advertising.

“As a result, this increases everyone’s CPA (cost per acquisition) on platforms like Meta and Google because large advertisers like Temu are monopolizing ad inventory and heightening the costs of the advertisers targeting the same audiences.”

The strategy behind the spend

Temu’s campaign is not just about ubiquity; it’s a calculated strike at the heart of consumer desires, merging its “Shop

Like a Billionaire” tagline with an inventory that promises bottom-dollar prices. It’s interesting to see an approach where items can be purchased for a few dollars, while over 9,000 active Temu ads are running across platforms.

This approach, which peaked with high-profile campaigns including a Super Bowl ad, has garnered the desired attention. However, it has stirred debate regarding the enterprise’s labor practices and sustainability, as well as fears about data privacy.

After all, these ads are not just an opportunity to influence consumer purchasing habits, but also to gain the data that comes with those interactions.

Mike Ryan, head of insights at Smarter Ecommerce, has been watching Temu’s advertising patterns this year and found that “Temu took a notable step back in their marketing activity across Q1. At first, it seemed related to the Super Bowl, and they ramped back a bit, but then they were very soft again in March.” Ryan observed this in both the EU and U.S., and across both Google and Meta.

“This potentially deserves a mention in the earnings statements of those platforms, because Temu spends so much money. I wouldn’t expect this to hurt in year-over-year terms, but Q/Q could be softer than you would expect from normal seasonality.”

Ecommerce impact

So, what does Temu hope to accomplish?

Ryan believes that Temu’s approach could convert as many consumers as it alienates. “This whole thing is a Trojan horse strategy. Temu’s goal is to poach consumers from these platforms and bring them into its ecosystem. It’s hard for these platforms to stop Temu from doing this and, on a short-term basis, it is very attractive for platform revenue. But in

the long term, this [tactic] can alienate both users and advertisers, so I view it as unhealthy for all parties."

Varbanova worries how this will impact small businesses that will never have a similar ad budget. "How will [Google and Meta] ensure small businesses can remain competitive and reach their goals?'

Future impact

As the conversation around Temu's marketing push unfolds, the industry is keyed into the ongoing narrative of market adaptation, customer retention and the balancing act of aggressive advertising. The trajectory for Temu, amid scrutiny and speculation, is a subject of interest and debate among consumers and professionals alike.

David Hermann, media buyer and president of Hermann Digital, has advice for other advertising pros experiencing the effects of Temu outspending them. "Be prepared for shifts. These systems (Meta's auction) are volatile, and businesses should always be prepared to pull back when need be, and have a toolkit of options for where to place their online ad dollars."

Hermann pointed out other critical factors that could further impact ad inventory. "For 2024, on top of Temu and Shein, we have a presidential election coming. If we think things are high now, it may go even higher."

In regards to whether or not this type of media saturation is a trend to be concerned about, Hermann doesn't think so. "Platforms like Temu come along every so often. Wish was the first. Temu is the first company, to my knowledge, to be spending this aggressively. However, is Meta still able to

work for the majority of advertisers as a profitable choice of traffic? I still believe so, but it’s not easy and I feel for those in direct competition with a site like Temu.”

With such lofty ad spend, it’s easy to see why companies might be concerned that Meta will play favorites and continue to ensure that Temu spends with them.

Only time will tell as media buyers start work each day ready to fight the tough fight.

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Here’s My Beef With Ad Agencies

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If you caught my LinkedIn post, you know I’ve got some serious beef with the current ad agency model.

I mean, let’s call a spade a spade—it’s broken. Outdated. And in desperate need of a shake-up.

Apparently, I struck a nerve because that post blew up. We’re talking over 800,000 impressions, 5,000 reactions and a flood of comments and DMs. I knew my hot take would ruffle some

feathers, but I didn’t expect it to go viral.

It was equal parts validating and frustrating to see the response.

On one hand, plenty of my fellow CMOs were nodding along in agreement. But on the other, there was no shortage of agency defenders telling me I hadn’t found “the one” yet.

Newsflash: I’ve given enough agencies a shot to know it’s not a “me” problem.

So, why am I so over the traditional agency model? Let me break it down.

When I joined Taylor Morrison nearly a decade ago, we outsourced pretty much everything. But after dealing with the headaches and underwhelming results that came with that approach, one of my first moves as CMO was to start building our in-house team.

Fast forward to today, and I’ve got a marketing and communications department nearly 50 strong. And you know what? It was hands down one of the best decisions I could’ve made.

Since bringing things in-house, we’ve built a brand that means something in an industry where “brand” is usually an afterthought. People seek us out. They choose us. And that’s not by accident.

Now, I’m not saying I’m anti-agency across the board. There are times when I still need to tap outside talent. But when I do, I’m looking for something very specific and it’s not just about production capabilities.

What I need from an agency is creativity. Fresh ideas. Out-of-the-box thinking. I need them to bring a new perspective to

the challenges I already know we're facing.

But here's the beef. So many agencies are convinced that they need to do these deep, months-long dives into the brand before they can even think about being creative. They want to run focus groups, conduct surveys and spend countless billable hours trying to "immerse" themselves.

Meanwhile, my team and I are already living and breathing this stuff every single day. We know our customers inside and out. We've done the research. We've got the insights. So, in a way, what I'm really paying an agency for is to not be immersed; it's to bring an outsider's perspective to the table.

But inevitably, no matter how detailed our brief is, agencies always seem to insist on this drawn-out "strategy" phase before any real work gets done.

And I get it—it's part of their process, their revenue model. But as a CMO, it feels like I'm being held hostage. It's the price of entry, and it's a steep one. Because here's the hard truth: I don't want to outsource strategy. That's not what I need from an agency.

If I'm coming to you, it's because I'm looking for killer creative, not a regurgitation of the consumer insights I already have coming out of my ears.

The irony is, with so many tactical services like media buying, production and yes, even strategy being brought in-house, the one thing agencies have left to offer is their creativity. Their ability to concept big, bold ideas that move the needle. It's their secret weapon. Or, at least, it should be.

But instead, amid all this talk about "integration" and "full-service offerings," agencies seem to be losing sight of what makes them valuable in the first place. They're getting bogged

down in the weeds of data and analytics and, in the process, they're letting their creative muscles atrophy.

Case in point?

When times get tough, the first thing many agencies do is cut their senior creatives to save on costs. But those are the people I'm actually hiring you for—the experienced visionaries and problem-solvers. The folks who know how to take all those data points and transform them into campaigns that make people feel something.

What the ad industry is doing today is backward. And it's a shame.

But here's the thing. As much as it pains me to see talented creatives getting the short end of the stick, I also think this moment presents a huge opportunity. It's a chance for those senior leaders to strike out on their own, to build something new, better and more resilient.

To not just claim to be "partners," but show up as true collaborators and co-conspirators. And to create the kind of work that many of my fellow CMOs, including myself, are desperately seeking. Work that is nimble, adaptable and unafraid to challenge the status quo.

Notice how I didn't say I hope they create an agency. Because the truth is, I'm not sure they need to.

I know these creatives are out there. I've worked with a few of them and, because they are not an agency, they are more interested in making great work than chasing revenue or headlines. And when you find them, it's magic.

But until going directly to creatives becomes easier, or the norm rather than the exception, I'll be here continuing to invest in my in-house team. Because at the end of the day, I can't afford to keep throwing good money after bad.

I’ve been burned too many times. And as much as I hate to say it, I’m not alone. CMOs talk. We compare notes. And the consensus is clear: The traditional agency model isn’t broken. The whole idea of an agency is broken.

So, consider this my plea. To agency leaders, creatives and everyone who still believes in the power of a big idea: It’s time to be bold. It’s time to take risks. It’s time to burn the old playbooks and write a new one.

Because the creative people that figure this out? The ones that aren’t afraid to put creativity first, be true partners to their clients and adapt to the way brands operate today? Those will be the creatives that don’t just survive this shift, but thrive in it.

And you can bet I’ll be first in line to work with them. Whatever they call themselves.

Even if it’s an agency.

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Finally, the Ad Industry Can Deliver on Purpose-Driven Media Investment

Sports marketing leaders from State Farm, the Golden

> State Warriors, the NBA and more will join ADWEEK Brand Play on May 9 to unpack the trends, techniques and tools you need to break into the space. Register for your virtual pass.

Several brands have made public commitments to shift their budgets to purpose-driven advertising and allocate spend to companies owned by and reaching underrepresented populations or focusing on industry causes.

However, given the complexity of the digital media ecosystem, the actual shifting of dollars to purpose-owned or led organizations has proven elusive. The fact remains that despite best intentions, it's been hard to scale purpose-led programmatic media investments.

Display advertising accounts for over a third of all U.S. media spending, and 90% of display dollars go through programmatic. In 2022, that represented more than $115 billion. Almost every digital budget allocation, therefore, includes a heavy programmatic component, but programmatic was designed to deliver efficiency and efficacy, not "purpose." That foundational tenet of how programmatic was designed has resulted in challenges for brands and agencies interested in purpose-led investment at scale.

Many have tried. Historically, however, when brands and agencies attempt to spend programmatic dollars with specific supply partners, the algorithms optimize those same specific partners out of the plan, shifting buys toward performance. As such, the spend is often reallocated to larger players that may meet core KPIs, even though those changes may run counter to the desired goal of scaling purpose-led investment.

As this is happening, there are still basic questions regarding what qualifies as a "purpose-driven" investment. Before we define that term, buyers need a bridge between

purpose-led media investment and programmatic scale. The solution may lie in one of the biggest trends in programmatic: curation.

A solution within reach

Curation is the process of activating data and inventory packages on the supply side through PMPs. This provides buyers complete control over the inventory considered, the data applied and each option in the digital supply path. Buyers can assemble curated private marketplaces that include hundreds, even thousands, of inventory providers and audience segments around specific parameters and KPIs ranging from audience characteristics to inventory characteristics. Importantly, these curated PMPs can be optimized with real-time performance data.

Curation gives brands the ability to assemble inventory partners that match their criteria, at scale, finally making exciting and ambitious purpose-driven pledges a reality.

An additional benefit of curation is that most large agencies and holding companies are already using or have started embracing it in some capacity. This is evident in the number of companies announcing curation capabilities and the simple fact that the ubiquitous LUMAscape has added “data curators” to several of its maps. Curation has become increasingly utilized by SSPs and DSPs to create new options to identify more efficient solutions, making it a popular tactic for performance marketers. It is also a foundation for the growth of off-platform retail media solutions.

Defining ambition-driven

With a solution to reallocate investment at scale now a

reality, the industry needs a clear definition of “purpose-driven” to inform how curated marketplaces can be developed.

Possibly the simplest way to define purpose-driven is around two key terms: underrepresented and recognized.

“Underrepresented” refers to a marginalized group in at least one part of the advertising supply chain. How the concept of underrepresented is applied can be determined by the buyer, brand, company or holding company that has specific purpose-driven media investment goals. This can include race, gender, disability status or other criteria, similar to how we’ve seen brands like GM commit to spending with Black-owned media.

“Recognized” speaks to the need for external validation through auditing or third party validation of the specific purpose-led criteria. Media opportunities need to meet clear and confirmable criteria such as reach or audience composition. Organizations like the National Minority Supplier Development Council certify that businesses are at least 51% owned by an ethnic minority, while Media Framework’s Maven operates as a diversity discovery and reporting platform.

The key steps here are first, for the buyer to set the criteria, and second, for a way to validate if a company meets that criteria. If that sounds basic, that is because this is the same approach utilized by nearly every media buy to provide the confidence to unlock scale.

More than an afterthought

With a solution and definition in place, brands will need their purpose-led initiatives to demonstrate results to ensure the longevity and impact of purpose-led investments and strategies. For the long term, measurement is key to proving

that purpose-led investment is good for society and the bottom line.

Brands and agencies have long recognized the importance of purpose-led investment and for supporting purpose-driven, -led and -owned companies, but could not achieve the scale pledged. Curation, the approach powering many core sectors (retail media, financial services, pharma, tech), represents an effective way of shifting investment to specific companies at scale.

This is an exciting moment in the advertising industry when the desire, ideas and capabilities required to move the industry forward are aligned. With the solution now within reach, the next step is to bring the opportunity to life, work on fulfilling these promises and drive meaningful positive change.

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The Questionable Hiring Practice Catching Marketers Unaware

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challenges, develop solutions and create new pathways for growth. Register early to save.

You've aced the interview process and made the final shortlist. But there's one more step: Write a comprehensive test assignment (entirely for free) and hope you get the role.

It requires days of work with no guarantee—and often, the job isn't even available. Employment scams vary, and there are times when companies seek your ideas without paying the cost.

Donating some time to showcase your skills is a customary part of the recruitment process, but these tips can help job seekers set their limits and avoid falling victim to creativity theft.

Clarify the company's intentions

Before investing too much time and effort into developing, for example, a marketing strategy, clarify what the company intends to do with your work. Question the hiring manager on how they will use your ideas, the specific aspects they intend to evaluate, and whether this is a real project they plan to implement.

If it is, this isn't a trial brief to judge your abilities; it's unpaid work with no guarantee of a job offer.

Negotiate payment for test assignments

An hour or two spent on a mock task designed to test you is one thing, but if the company insists on a detailed strategy that would require multiple calls and days of productivity, they should be willing to negotiate fair compensation for your time and effort.

Often, hiring managers with unreasonable requests hope to catch you off guard. Come prepared, know your worth, and don’t be afraid to walk away.

Confirm the position exists

Before diving into the assignment, inquire about the current team structure and scour LinkedIn to determine whether the role you’re applying for is open.

You can also search for the job title and company name on Google to check whether the company has a history of opening and closing the same position, which may indicate a pattern of exploiting candidates rather than hiring them. Likewise, check the position’s list date: If it’s been up for an eternity without attracting a suitable candidate, chances are the company has no desire to fill the role.

Seek feedback from industry peers

Reach out to your professional network, particularly those with similar experience who might have recently applied for a role with the company, to get their thoughts. An early warning about unreasonable requests will stop you from wasting more time than you already have on a hiring process that will ultimately lead nowhere. If it’s bad news, cut your losses and spend that time applying elsewhere.

Consider the company’s reputation

Evaluate the company’s reputation by checking employee reviews on platforms such as Glassdoor and LinkedIn. Don’t let one person’s bad experience put you off if there are plenty of positives, but a pattern of exploitative and unethical practices is a major red flag.

A job might await you at the end of the process after all. But is it really a company you want to work for?

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What We Lose When Influencers Only Post Paid Content

No one appreciates an influencer more than I do. I've been a believer in real people sharing their points of view and building platforms long before Instagram existed—I touted the power of message forums, bloggers and YouTube haul videos (remember those?) back in the early days of social media.

In 2010, I co-founded the first talent management agency to represent social media personalities—and it was a long slog to convince brands of their power.

By 2017, my influencer clients earned massive incomes, starred in television commercials, manufactured their own products, wrote bestsellers and collaborated with global brand behemoths. I have been at the helm of thousands—literally thousands—of influencer campaigns, and I helped create the monstrous price tags attached to influencer posts that brands face today. Guilty as charged.

My hot take? Not every influencer and brand interaction should come with a price tag. I've stood by this belief from the beginning; there was and still is a world where things need to be fully organic, without a dollar sign or contract attached.

For the first time in over a decade, I’m on the brand side. Like other brand leaders and marketers, I find myself scrolling through the social media labyrinth of #ad and #partner on the daily; the quest for authenticity isn’t easy. Influencers, like artists, deserve fair compensation for their craft—their ability to sway public opinion and shape trends is real, something I wholeheartedly believe in.

But as the co-owner of a brand in a bit of a startup phase, I don’t have unlimited dollars, and am discerning with how they’re spent.

My first filter of the search: What’s the ratio of sponsored vs. unsponsored posts? When influencers are paid for every visit, post and shout-out, the magic of genuine recommendation gets lost.

This isn’t a petition to abandon paid partnerships—far from it. This is a conversation, a plea even, about much-needed middle ground where not every moment is a transaction, especially if it’s an invitation without a list of deliverables. It happens a lot in fashion: Gifted shoes, bags or clothes lead to posts when brands may not have budgets but the talent loves the item. Same in sports (free tickets), automobiles (driving experiences) and so on.

Our brand, like many, also has inherent value to offer influencers—you can’t put a price tag on strong reach, behind-the-scenes tours and meetup space.

This exploration is about finding the sweet spot where influencers can be both brand ambassadors and genuine advocates. We see it as true symbiosis.

When I directly represented talent, I always suggested that

they RSVP “yes” to things that got them excited, even without a paycheck. I championed them when they believed in something enough to promote it (which, by the way, Naomi Campbell is doing right now for emerging fashion designers). I wish more influencer managers and agents had this mentality today.

At Sloomoo Institute, we approach influencer partnerships with a dual lens: We understand the need for fair compensation, especially if someone is making content on a level that goes beyond the snap of an iPhone, but we also crave the authenticity that comes from genuine enjoyment and voluntary engagement, which can happen on any given day. It’s a dance of sorts, one where the rhythm of what’s genuine shouldn’t be lost to a contract.

Trends are pendulums. Today, there’s a hunger for more relatable perspectives. The space will evolve again and again, along with the zeitgeist of cultural movements. New platforms will emerge (remember when TikTok was Musical.ly?) and fresh faces will become the coveted ones of tomorrow. In this ever-changing milieu, my hope is that we—brands, influencers, agencies—embrace the core value that started it all: authenticity. Doing some things just because they’re fun.

In the end, it’s not just about brands or influencers; it’s about the people who follow both, who trust both, who believe in the stories they tell and the reasons they share them. As my brand grows, I will always want to have an organic relationship that doesn’t come with a wire transfer.

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The Social Playbook Is Dead. Long Live the Social Philosophy

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It’s the summer of 2023 and our team is putting the final touches on a 100-page social playbook for a client.

Boom, another social platform launches.

It’s not the first (or last) time this has happened. But at the time, this thought occurred: Why are we spending hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on something that can’t possibly keep up?

Playbooks can’t keep up with the platforms, but more importantly, they can’t keep up with consumers and culture. It made me want to ditch playbooks altogether. A clearly defined philosophy is the path forward toward building a successful brand online.

A playbook inhibits speed

Social media is our most democratic creative medium. It’s

where we have the freedom to take the most chances and by giving ourselves a rigid playbook, we're eliminating the space to play.

Eliminating the space to play means eliminating the potential for making something truly memorable, impactful and scroll-stopping. The best ads from Apple, Nike and Volkswagen broke from tradition; they had a reason for being and they were not born out of a playbook.

The same is true of the social content that breaks through, from brands like Jacquemus, Heaven and Ssense. They ignore what "works" on social in favor of what defines their brand. Social platforms are not a place to chase engagement, but a new world in which to represent our brands.

Build a philosophy instead

The thing that will truly champion creative freedom is a vision statement; a philosophy or a living document to guide the spirit and purpose of brand work across platforms old and new. Create a framework that allows doing more, trying more and saying no to trends that do not align with a brand's core values. It also enables a brand to move fast and adapt, the only way to be in the center of culture.

A philosophy allows for change without losing sight of the North Star; it's how we confidently operate in ambiguity while staying firmly rooted in our purpose. The most successful philosophies will be concise and inspiring, edited down to the rules that give us what is needed most: Space to play.

The foundation of a genuinely successful social philosophy depends on the following five elements:

- **Intention**: The cornerstone of every brand's philosophy

is defining *the why* for social. The best ones link closely to the mission and vision of the brand. Where should your brand be present, and why? And where should your brand not show up?

- **Value:** Too often we ask what social media is doing for us. The right question is: What are we offering our fans? The fans determine success; if they're responsive, engaged and taking action, you've earned a place in culture.
- **Creative fuel**: Are we open to every source of story? How do our fans talk about us? Which voices are rising? Inspiring? We must use the broader cultural conversation to create impact.
- **Creative development**: The game here is speed and constant adaptation. It is also essential to match the development of creative assets to the places, spaces and purpose of where it will live. How immersed is your creative team in culture? Where are they experts? Where can they keep growing?
- **Reflection**: Revisit often and consider the creative lift versus the impact. Does the work still feel fresh? This is the place for KPIs and benchmarks; it's also the place to take stock of the world around you and ensure you've struck the right tone. Are you listening to your community?

Impactful brand moments are fueled by a thoughtful and rigorous social philosophy. Build one and ditch your playbook.

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The Rise and Remit of the Chief Brand Officer

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There’s a new chief in town: the chief brand officer (CBO).

Does this mean the CMO role is becoming obsolete? Not at all. It simply means many companies are recognizing the shifting landscape of customer engagement and the implications and opportunities for better brand-building.

In most organizations, the CBO role complements the CMO, where both leaders have distinct swim lanes and collaboration spheres. If well-integrated, the desired outcome is the win-win of a stronger, more cohesive brand, enhanced customer engagement and a thriving business.

But before we get to the classic 1 + 1 = 3, let’s take a step back to better understand the “why” behind the recent rise of the CBO.

Why a CBO, and why now?

Technological acceleration is transforming how people connect with brands, and thus how brand relationships are built. One casualty of technology acceleration, however, is the

deceleration of a mass market—an environment that enabled a communications-led approach to brand-building.

Remember when tens of millions seeing a spectacular 30-second ad more than three times could generate brand awareness and persuasion? That is not happening today. More than 50% of U.S. households have cut the cord, which also cuts off a vast swath of traditional mass advertising.

Today, we humans skim past thousands of ad-bits daily as we surf, scroll and swipe. Yet beyond the world of scrolling ads and influencers, our everyday lives intersect with major brands through routine, always-on customer engagement channels. These experiences can engage or repel us and, in so doing, impact how we feel about the brand, our net brand impression and our willingness to recommend and even buy.

Customer-experience channels as brand-builders

In many companies, some of the aforementioned customer-experience channels can make or break a customer relationship, and many companies are investing heavily in AI and net promoter score (NPS) to optimize these touch points.

Unfortunately, across industries, AI engines often pull from the same deep data pools, and NPS measures generic industry outcomes. On their own, these strategies can reduce friction and improve the customer’s experience, but absent a differentiating brand strategy, they can also accelerate a sea of sameness. Factoring out convenience, what’s the reason to choose one company?

That’s where brand comes in—more specifically, brand strategy and its application not simply to marketing and advertising but also to the customer experience writ large.

The world’s greatest companies offer a unique, branded experience that invites the customer into a “brand dance”—an

inviting, multisensory experience that is purposefully designed to engage customers emotionally, to deliver feelings of delight, accomplishment and appreciation, on a one-to-one basis.

Think Nike House of Innovation stores blending physical and digital worlds, offering personalized services like Nike By You; think Apple retail Specialists empowered to assist selection and complete checkout where you stand; think Tesla Rangers who will service your vehicle at your home; think Spotify's preference-empowered app complete with a member's Discover Weekly playlist. Each represents an experience that embodies brand personality traits and behavioral characteristics, bringing each brand to life with its own brand dance.

Prescient, brand-savvy companies are recognizing every customer touch point as both a customer engagement and a brand-building opportunity. And many are creating the CBO role to sit outside of marketing. After all, marketing isn't branding; today, branding is a much bigger umbrella. And as the system of experiences that defines the brand expands and extends well beyond the limits of the typical marketing organization, so too must caring for the brand extend beyond marketing.

The CBO-CMO relationship, or making 1 + 1 = 3

Think of the CBO as a company's brand-driven change agent. Through both inspiration and influence, the CBO works across the enterprise to build and deliver the brand from the inside out.

The CBO role requires both brand and organizational savvy: An effective CBO defines the brand, its personality and signature behavioral characteristics, and uses this brand strategy to engage all functions touching the customer. It may start with marketing and advertising, but it extends to legal,

technology, product development and innovation teams—even HR and customer service. After all, in many service industries, the people are the brand.

Marketing and advertising continue to be crucial for generating initial brand interest, while day-to-day contact and experience channels create additional opportunity to enhance customer engagement, shape brand impression and build loyalty.

And how well CBOs and CMOs respect each other's swim lanes while collaborating is a key driver of success. Balancing the CBO's on-brand customer experience focus with the CMO's storytelling abilities and budgets can reap brand benefits. When the CMO and CBO are aligned, the breadth of on-brand customer touch points expands dramatically, enhancing brand and business value in an increasingly fragmented, omnichannel world.

Think about the potential of owned customer experience channels as always-on, experiential, 3D, surround-sound brand billboards, and quantify the potential value by multiplying total channel interactions with analogous ratings and CPMs. Start by applying familiar media terms, like reach, frequency and total impressions, to quantify the always-on media value of different channels. Then take it further: What's the time spent? What's the overall experience quality, and how does it contribute to the customer's sense of accomplishment? Moreover, what does a customer recognize as unique to your brand that leaves them with a lasting feeling of delight and affiliation?

It's often eye-popping to see the media value of every interaction—it makes the case that a media plan is lying dormant in each experience channel. And it begs the question:

How does a company apply as much brand insight and creativity to every channel as it does to marketing?

Does your company need a CBO?

Take a holistic view of your customers across your marketing, media and customer experience touch points. What's the frequency, duration and brand value of each individually? Of customer experience versus marketing touch points?

If you find that the moments that matter most to your customers aren't limited to your marketing and advertising but also live in your owned channels, then you've also identified some brand-building potential and an opportunity to differentiate your experience from your competitors. And that's when a CBO may be just what your company, your brand and your business really need.

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9 Arguments Against Timesheets and for Modern Compensation Models

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I’m no Gary Vee, but a recent LinkedIn post about my aversion to timesheets garnered over half a million impressions and sparked a surprisingly spicy debate about client-agency finances.

I was curious about the volume of pushback from folks defending the hours-based billing systems that I believe may result in the death of our industry.

The moment our business says yes to comparing the value of work based on rates instead of outputs, clients and agencies risk industrywide burnout, talent drainage, poorer relationships and even poorer work product.

So for the sake of our business, let’s tackle some of the common arguments around these outdated models and a possible better way forward.

Timesheets are the only way to measure value.

Time and value are not the same.

What if one campaign got cracked quickly because the team had a “lightning bolt” moment? What if another campaign requires double the time because the team is slow to find inspiration? In the end, both clients got great ideas; should one pay less and the other pay more?

This also assumes creativity is a punch-clock scenario. What about time spent thinking on the subway, watching Netflix or having beers with friends?

Value isn’t about time; it’s about great quality in the work relative to overall price. No one walks into a restaurant and asks for the hourly rates of a line cook on a $21 bowl of pasta. They only worry about whether the Bolognese tastes

delicious.

How do you manage pricing? Timesheets help us cost things out.

A lot of factors should go into agency pricing, including services, timing and deliverables. Also difficulty. Is this client familiar or new? A simple brief or a complicated one? Streamlined or multistakeholder? Finally, what are your competitors charging? Pricing is as much an art as it is a science.

How do you manage scope creep or change? What about benchmarking?

It’s easier to manage scope change, up or down, on deliverables than hours. You either gave it to a client or didn’t. It’s more quantitative than burn. And in my experience, clients prefer quantitative.

Plus, a good project manager or account manager can tell you quickly if a client is over- or under-indexing (and needs re-costing next time) without checking a single timesheet.

How do you forecast and recognize revenue without measuring effort?

The first step here is a scope broken down by phase or service with further breakdown by deliverables or assets. With this set against a hardcore timeline (yeah, our account crüe is metal like that), you can forecast and recognize as deliverables are completed. And if timing shifts, so does revenue.

Bonus points: Ideally, invoicing also follows scope cadence so that cash flow is *chef’s kiss.*

How do you prevent passionate teams from going too ‘all out?‘

Some proactivity is great. I love giving my fave clients bonus work. But if you’re over-delivering on one client, you’re likely under-delivering on another.

That ain’t right.

For fairness to clients, you need account and ops to stay close to your people and their resourcing. No timesheets are needed, just a conversation.

How do you know if you’re going to be profitable?

Staffing, overhead and profit all need to be budgeted against signed and forecasted revenue. But 36 hours for this client or 47 for that client shouldn’t matter as much as overall profitability. And if resources are over-extended or profit is low, then figure out the gaps and rebalance: price higher, get average salaries down, better manage scopes or a mix of the above.

But timesheets are a way to stay honest about lift.

Even if we assume time equals value, a timesheet is almost always an inaccurate quantification of time spent.

Some culprits:

- The dumper: “Throw your hours on the biggest accounts! They can afford it!”
- The book balancer: “Just match the scope! We need to ‘justify’ scope, so just put 50% of your time against it!”
- The fuzzy memory: “Hmm, it was about a month ago … I am sure I put 40 hours against it. I mean, I am kind of sure …”
- The justifier: “There are a lot of cuts in the industry

these days. I better put lots of hours on these jobs to ensure I’m ‘safe.’”

In summary, timesheets are not a reliable witness.

How do you show transparency to clients?

You can break out the cost of a job by phase, deliverable and asset to quite a granular level and then show under-delivery, delivery or over-delivery against this breakdown.

And then, again, the value is in the quality of those deliverables. Clients get a pretty rigorous scope with transparency in tracking, over or under.

How can clients compare one agency with another if they don’t have a rate card or breakdown of hours?

If two agencies each quote the same approximate price for the same remit, do rates or FTEs matter?

Scoping based on hours and rate cards guarantees only one thing—that you’ll be working to the lowest possible rate and/or the fewest hours. Which, in turn, means a race to the bottom. More junior talent. Artificially inflating hours to compensate for low rates. More frustrated clients.

It also means having convos about burn rates instead of the work itself. And I don’t know a single client keen on burn rate chats.

The bottom line is agencies and clients all got into this business for the same reason: to make great work that works.

The moment our business equates value with rates and hours vs. value as output, clients and agencies risk a much greater price including industrywide burnout, talent drains and ever-

shortening and more tumultuous client-agency relationships.

So let’s focus on what matters: the work on the page. Not the work reduced to a spreadsheet.

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