Why the Inbox Is the New Algorithm

The inbox, once dismissed as a digital graveyard, is having a moment.

At ADWEEK's Social Media Week 2026, a panel of brand and media executives argued that the newsletter renaissance is less a nostalgia play than a direct response to the broken state of social platforms.

Speaking to an audience of social media practitioners in a discussion moderated by content strategist Lauren Finney Harden; Rare Beauty chief marketing officer Ashley Murphy; Betches co-founder and chief brand officer Sami Sage; and Gen Z expert and UTA executive Shaina Zafar discussed the merits of email and why this relic of the early internet has come to dominate tastemaking.

"Something that we were always given as advice, as we were growing Betches over the past decade and a half, was that having your own owned-and-operated audience was the gold standard," said Sage, whose media brand Betches now operates three newsletters with roughly 667,000 subscribers. "That's really what you want."

All three marketers extolled the virtues of traditional social media, but the conversation kept returning to a recent rupture in its utility. Now that feeds are largely governed by an omnipotent algorithm, followers mean little and content delivery is unpredictable. As a result, most social platforms are still valuable for discovery, but they offer little in the way of reliable distribution or depth of connection.

The panelists also shared their thoughts on newsletter content strategy, which, in a departure from the more manicured presentations of most social media marketing, rewards stripped-down, behind-the-scenes content.

For instance, Rare Beauty's newsletter, Rare Beauty Secrets, is a vehicle for unpolished storytelling that audiences cannot get on Instagram or TikTok; recent editions have explored niche topics like accessible packaging design and the engineering behind a foundation's pump mechanism.

The brand learned a valuable lesson early, according to Finney Harden: Tutorial-style content flopped, while raw iPhone footage generated outsized engagement.

"Do not treat newsletters as a sales channel," Murphy said. "It's really about relationships."

Zafar, who oversees UTA's Gen Z practice and writes her own newsletter, framed the shift in broader cultural terms: Audiences are actively seeking spaces that feel chosen rather than algorithmically assigned.

"Mini viral," Zafar said, "is just sharing an article you love with your friends in a group chat. That's where culture is."

The panelists broadly agreed that the durability of newsletters as a channel comes down to consistency, point of view, and resisting the urge to repurpose social content from other platforms wholesale.

In an automated media environment, the human voice is the moat.

Recommended videos
https://www.adweek.com/social-marketing/inbox-new-algorithm-social-media-week/