

# 10 Trends Shaping Marketing in 2026



**AI will accelerate.**  
**Culture x Creativity will differentiate.**

*For CMOs, brand leaders, and marketing teams navigating AI, culture, and commerce in a rapidly changing landscape.*

## At a Glance:

# Our Top 10 Trends for 2026 Trends

### 1. The Workforce Evolution

Automation reshapes roles; human value moves to judgment and creativity.

### 2. Brand Building in the Age of AI Discovery

Brands must be built for both machines and humans.

### 3. The Power of Culture x Creativity

Originality, emotional resonance and cultural relevance becomes a competitive advantage in an AI saturated world.

### 4. The Creator Economy Matures

Creators evolve from reach drivers to meaning-makers and cultural co-architects tied to real business outcomes.

### 5. Audience Design Becomes a Strategic Advantage

First-party, intent-driven and privacy-safe audience systems replace rented segments and blunt targeting.

### 6. Prioritisation of 'The Movable Middles'

Performance is maximised by focusing investment on audiences most likely to change behaviour—not maximum reach.

### 7. Chat, Messaging & Conversational Commerce

Messaging becomes a core brand channel—blending service, discovery, commerce and loyalty in one experience.

### 8. Retail & Marketplace Media at Scale

Media and commerce converge into one planning system.

### 9. The Rise of Alternative Media Networks

Telcos, fintechs, and platforms unlock new intent signals.

### 10. Outcomes-Based Measurement as the Standard

Incrementality and impact replace vanity metrics

## TREND 1

# The Workforce Evolution

Automation reshapes roles; human value moves to judgment and creativity.

Studies estimate that at least 65% of media and operational tasks can already be automated using existing tools. Forrester forecasts consecutive years of workforce contraction—8% in 2025 and 15% in 2026—mostly across ad ops, buying, trafficking, and reporting.



Tasks Automatable

Media and operational functions ready for AI



Workforce Shift

Projected contraction in 2026

The question isn't whether automation will reshape the workforce, but how we'll redefine value creation in its wake.

AI handles volume and routine work. Humans handle meaning.

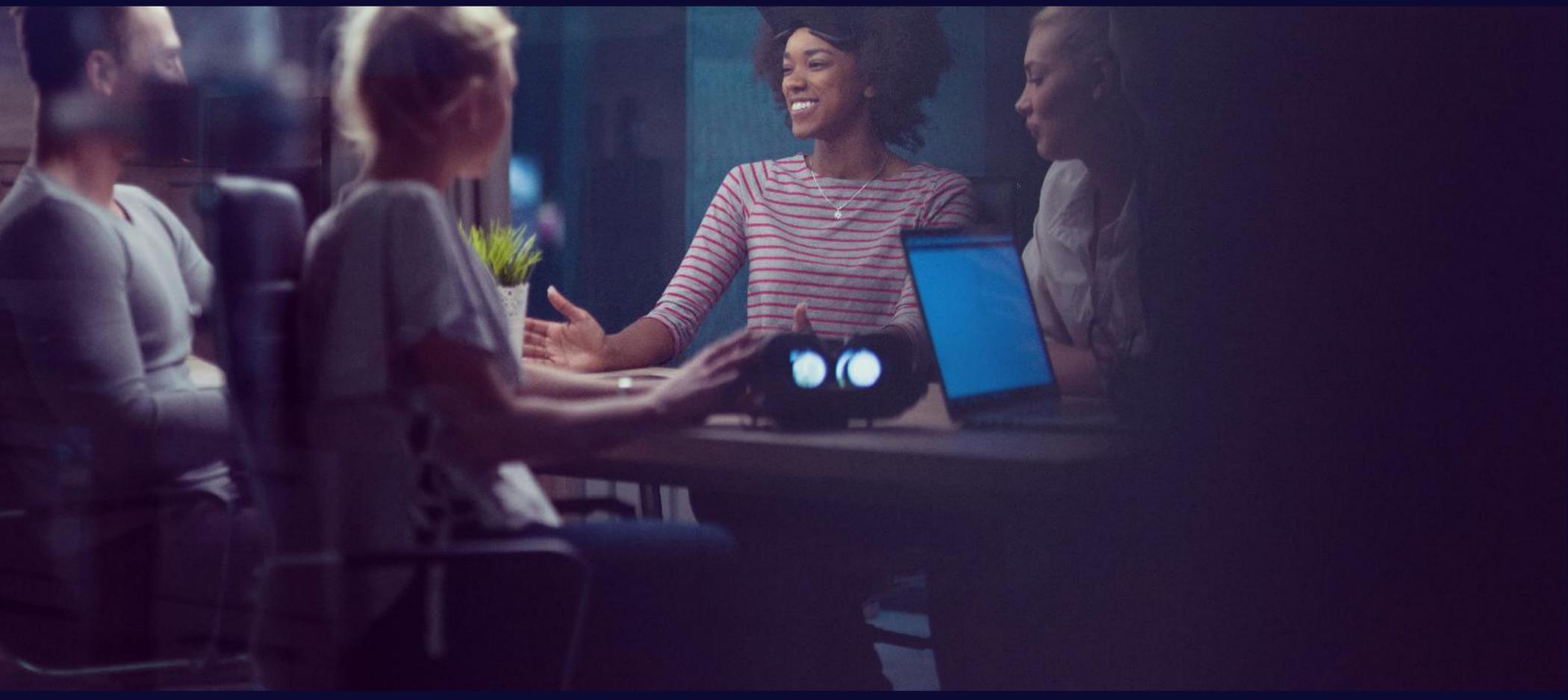
**"When AI gives us the data, it is instinct that gives us direction."**

### What Good Looks Like

Value creation shifts from task execution to creative and strategic system design, novel insights, problem-solving, and cultural interpretation.

The most valuable talent in 2026 will be able to interpret signals, contextualize data, forecast behaviour, understand culture, and make judgment calls that algorithms cannot.

We let the machines do the heavy lifting. We keep ownership with people.





## TREND 2

# Brand Building in the age of AI

Brands must be built for both machines and humans.



### Machine-Facing Visibility Engine

Built on GEO, structured data, metadata integrity and consistent product information across all environments



### Human-Facing Brand Engine

Built on storytelling, cultural resonance, creative distinctiveness and emotional relevance

AI engines like GPT-5, Gemini and Claude are reshaping discovery as consumers increasingly use AI to compare, filter and evaluate products — long before they land on a brand's website or store.

In 2026 and beyond, AI will guide discovery, but humans will still make the final choice.

This means that the core responsibility of Marketers remains the same: to build brands that resonate with people and ensure that these brands are clear and consistent enough for AI to recognize and recommend.

***"Technology determines scale, but culture determines desire."***

While real-time creative testing will accelerate, giving marketers faster feedback and optimisation, even the smartest optimisation cannot replace human intuition, cultural understanding or authentic storytelling.

### What Good Looks Like

In 2026—Generative Engine Optimisation becomes essential. LLMs require structured information, clear factual content, consistent language, trustworthy claims, and high-quality signals. However, the winning brands will balance their efforts with cultural insights and brand building to win with both man and machine

## TREND 3

# The Power of Culture x Creativity

Originality and cultural relevance become competitive advantages.



As AI floods the world with synthetic, optimised content, sameness will start to become the norm. Attention gets harder to earn. Emotional richness, cultural specificity and originality become more valuable — because AI cannot fully replicate them.

For the first time in modern marketing history, human-centred content will not be common—it will be rare. The most successful brands will be those that embrace culture and creativity as a competitive advantage.

*"Culture is the new oil,  
and creativity is its energy."*

## What Good Looks Like

### Novel Ideas Rooted in Insight

Emotion, culture and human behaviour drive conceptual development, not optimization algorithms

### AI-Assisted Production

Human-led creative direction with machine-powered execution and efficiency

### Balanced Effectiveness Testing

Validating emotional and brand impact alongside commercial performance

## TREND 4

# The Creator Economy Matures

Creators shift from reach drivers to meaning-makers

The creator era is maturing. Younger audiences trust people far more than brands and increasingly more than AI-generated content. Creators are becoming cultural co-architects — not just content suppliers. While creator content is increasingly tied to real outcomes: retail lift, footfall, attention quality and loyalty. The risk is treating creators as reach-extenders rather than meaning-makers.

## What Good Looks Like

Best-practice brands build creator ecosystems, not one-off campaigns. Creators are chosen for worldview and cultural fit, not follower count.

Measurement practices will expand to outcomes and impacts:

- commerce impact
- brand contribution
- uplift
- attention quality
- long-term community value

# Audience Design Becomes a Strategic Advantage

With third-party cookies near gone and privacy tightening globally, brands must build their own audience capabilities. Winning organisations are shifting from rented segments to **designed audiences** grounded in motivations, declared intent, contextual relevance and behavioural signals.



## Predictive AI

Predictive AI and Contextual 2.0 enable accuracy without identifiers



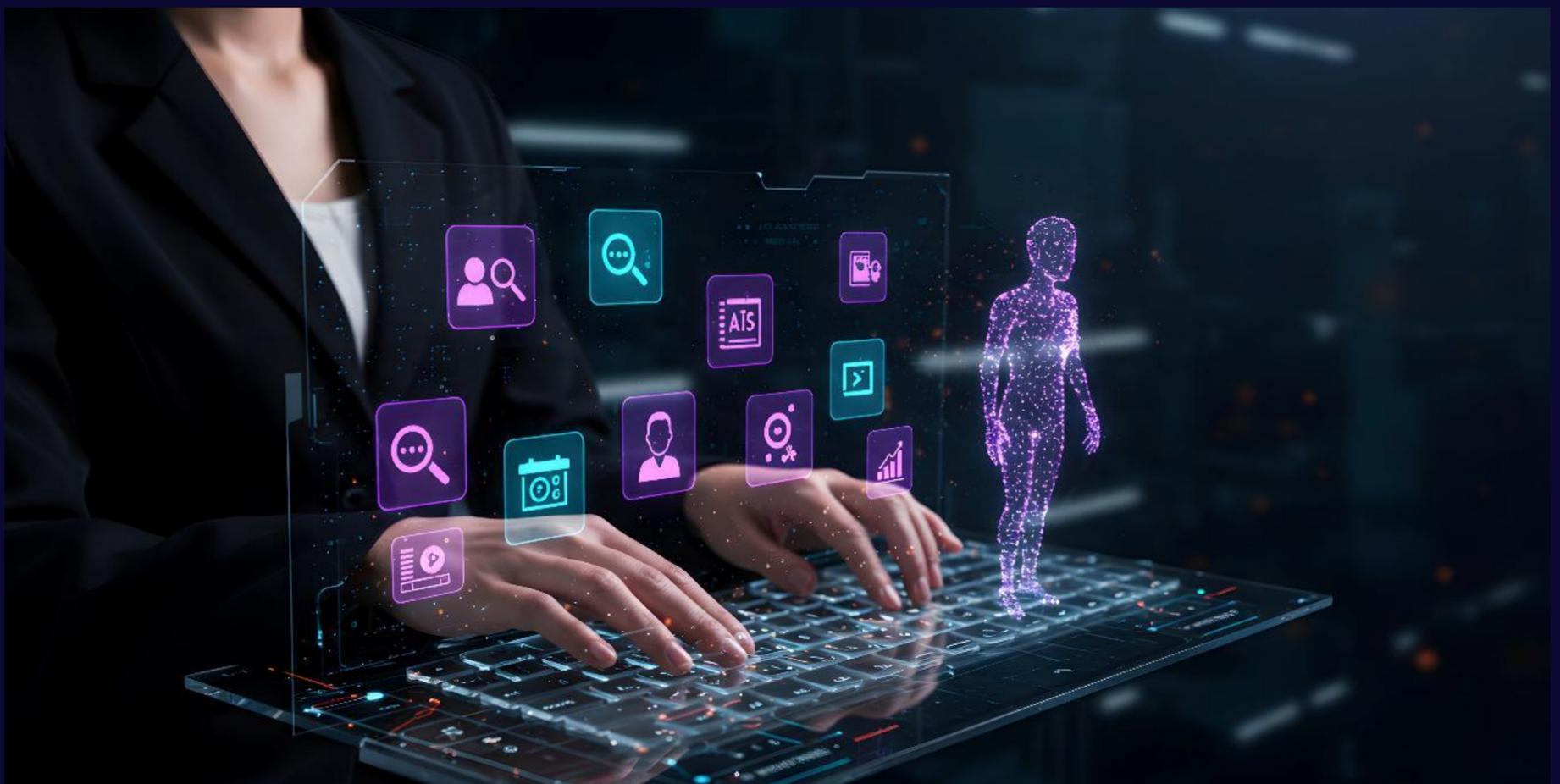
## Retail Media Networks

Retail Media and Alternative Media Networks offer closed-loop, high-quality outcome data



## Self-Serve Platforms

Self-Serve Audience Platforms allow brands to create, validate and scale audiences based on real respondent signals



## What Good Looks Like

The "Movable Middle" approach—targeting audiences with a 20–80% probability of conversion—can drive **5x higher response** and materially improve ROAS.

**The imperative:** Audience quality becomes the biggest performance lever in a privacy-first world.

## TREND 6

# Prioritisation of 'The Movable Middles'

**Strategic Value:** This approach redirects budget away from 'hopeful reach' and concentrates it entirely on the 'Movable Middles'—the 20-30% of the audience statistically likely to change their purchasing decision, thereby maximising Return on Ad Spend (ROAS).



## What Good Looks Like

01

### Micro-Surveying

While the ad is running, the system autonomously surveys small control and exposed groups (e.g., 'Are you considering buying a new SUV?').

0

### Lookalike Modelling

The AI immediately analyses the digital footprint of respondents who expressed intent—examining thousands of non-obvious data points including time of day, device battery level, app usage context, and more.

0

### Signal Capture

It captures 'Yes' responses, identifying genuine intent.

0

### Autonomous Bidding

The system automatically instructs the DSP to acquire more inventory for users with a high-intent profile.

## TREND 7

# Chat, Messaging & Conversational Commerce

Messaging platforms now operate as hybrid service, discovery, commerce and loyalty channels. Millions of consumers move fluidly from conversation to transaction. For many of us, messaging applications have become the epicentre of our social lives, and of our conversations with friends, families, and colleagues.

This means for brands, messaging must become part of the brand's identity, not an afterthought.

The tension is real: too much automation creates frustration, too little automation creates inefficiency. Tone-deaf messaging breaks trust. Poorly sequenced flows kill conversion.

## What Good Looks Like

01

### Human x Tech

Balancing automation with human escalation for seamless customer experience

02

### Culturally Aware Tone

Voice that reflects brand personality while respecting conversational context

03

### Sequential Flows

Clear pathways aligned to customer intent and journey stage

04

### Integrated Commerce

Click-to-chat-to-conversion journeys that remove friction

05

### Evolved KPIs

Measurement beyond clicks: intent, AOV, lifetime value, sentiment



## TREND 8

# Retail & Marketplace Media at Scale

Media and commerce are converging into one connected system, driven by first-party data richness, measurable outcomes and proximity to purchase.

Retail media continues to outpace all other digital channels, with brands investing more in these high-performing channels. Simultaneously, commerce is integrating directly into media environments—CTV shoppable formats, TikTok Shop, marketplace ads and delivery apps.

Increasingly, consumers no longer move through linear funnels. Commerce happens everywhere. This drives new competition for share of wallet and share of media investment. Success depends on the fusion of brand, creative, media, product data and attribution—not on any one of these alone.

## What Good Looks Like

### Retail Media Integration

Sits inside the main media mix, not trade silos, with strategic planning across all touchpoints

### Creative & Data Fusion

Media and product data integrated across campaigns for maximum relevance

### Full-Funnel Planning

Rooted in commerce outcomes: ROAS, incremental sales, customer lifetime value

### Unified Reporting

Linking media channels to conversion outcomes with clear attribution

### Incrementality Measurement

Governs budget allocation based on true incremental contribution

## FTM Solutions:

## TrueCommerce X Henkel Case Study

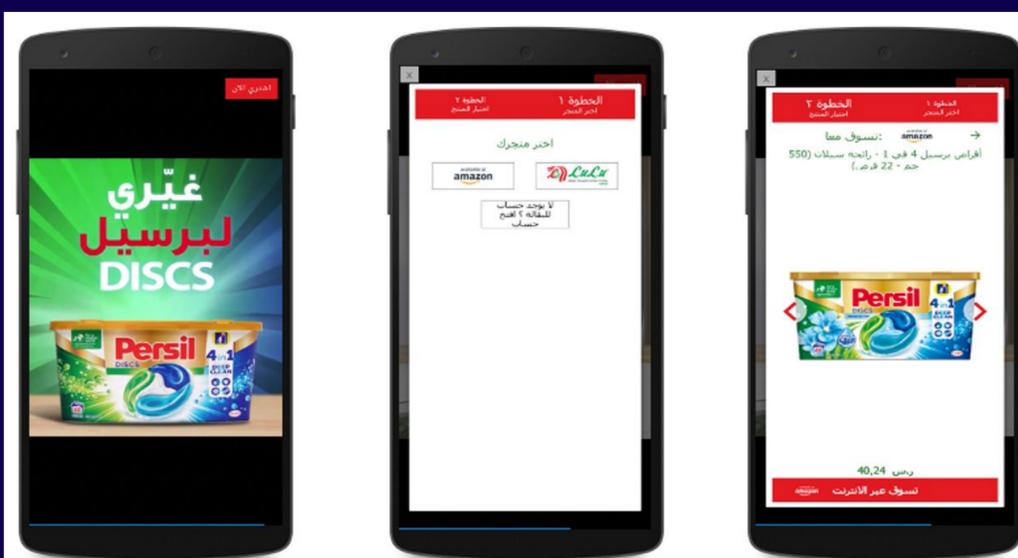


**Market:** KSA & UAE

**CTR:** 2.12%

**Conversion Rate:** 4.52%

**Flight:** 2 Months



Delivered Impressions	1.5M+
Unique Engagements	30k+
Purchase Intent	1.3k+
Reach	622k+

TrueCommerce connects media directly to live retail environments, enabling consumers to move seamlessly from ad exposure to product availability and purchase across multiple retailers and marketplaces.

### The Value Delivered

By shortening the path to purchase, TrueCommerce improves conversion efficiency, captures demand at peak intent and ensures media investment translates into measurable commerce outcomes.

### Why It Matters

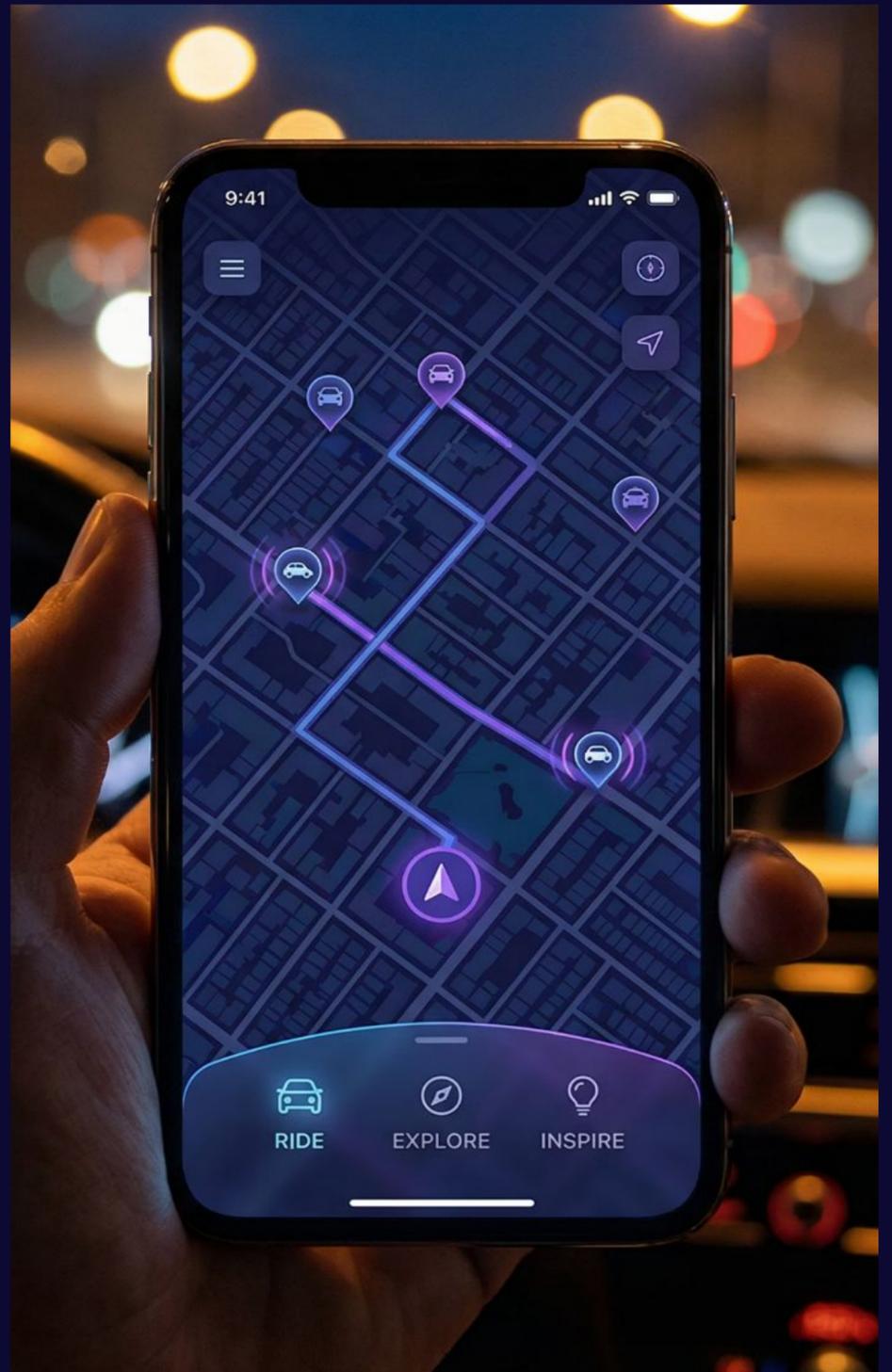
TrueCommerce turns media into a commerce enabler — aligning brand investment with real retail action in a world where purchase can happen anywhere.

# The Rise of Alternative Media Networks

Telcos, fintechs, and platforms unlock new intent signals.

Beyond retailers, we are seeing the rise of Alternative Media Networks—Telcos, Rideshare apps, and Fintechs selling their data signals. They offer context that retailers miss, such as location intent or financial capacity. These are powerful but complex to navigate without deep technical expertise or partnerships.

Brands often treat AMNs as experimental or niche, despite their proven power. Poorly adapted creative or targeting undermines effectiveness. Without integration into broader planning, AMNs become disconnected efforts. The opportunity lies in treating these networks as primary planning environments that unlock contextual triggers traditional media cannot access.



## What Good Looks Like

**Innovation X Action:** Test these networks for "life-stage" triggers (e.g., moving house, travelling).

**Contextual Triggers:** Use AMNs for "moment-based" marketing (e.g., advertising travel insurance *during* the flight booking transaction, or advertising coffee *during* the morning ride-share).

Treat AMN's as **primary planning environments**, with:

- creative tailored to context (commute, bill payment, transactions)
- comparative incrementality insights across RMNs, AMNs and digital media
- culturally grounded triggers and communications
- AMNs become part of the omnichannel identity system, not a side experiment.

# Outcomes-Based Measurement: The New Standard

Incrementality and impact replace vanity metrics

Finally, measurement undergoes a total reset. Marketers are increasingly shifting away from impressions, clicks and CTRs toward closed-loop, outcome-oriented metrics: sales uplift, footfall, incremental revenue, brand lift and lifetime value. This is not just a technical shift—it is a philosophical one. It's a move from reporting activity to proving impact where outcomes and incrementality becomes the "gold standard" of effectiveness.

The most advanced organisations make decisions based on evidence and leading indicators, not proxies and lagging metrics. They build continuous test-and-learn programs with planned experiments, control groups, and insights loops. They integrate brand and performance measurement, recognizing that both drive long-term business value.

<p><b>Incrementality as Default</b></p> <p>Uplift becomes the standard metric, not an optional add-on to campaign reporting</p>	<p><b>Continuous Testing</b></p> <p>Test-and-learn programs with planned experiments, control groups, and insights loops</p>	<p><b>Integrated Metrics</b></p> <p>Brand and performance measured together, not in isolation</p>
<p><b>Attention and Equity</b></p> <p>Measured alongside sales to understand full marketing contribution</p>	<p><b>Cultural Resonance</b></p> <p>Becomes a contributor to brand strength and long-term value</p>	

## What Good Looks Like

Brands adopt a measurement operating system where incrementality is the default metric, test-and-learn programs are continuous, brand and performance are integrated, attention and equity are measured alongside sales, and cultural resonance becomes a contributor to brand strength.

## FTM Solutions:

**Objective**  
Brand lift Study

**Industry**  
Travel

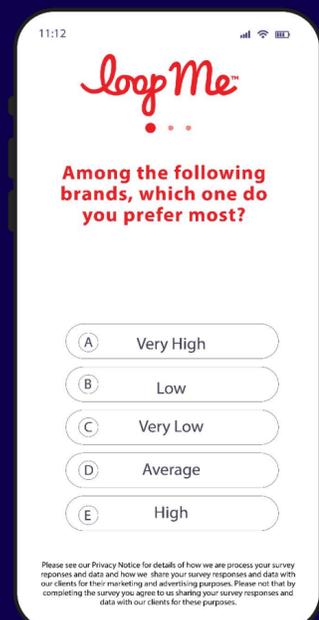
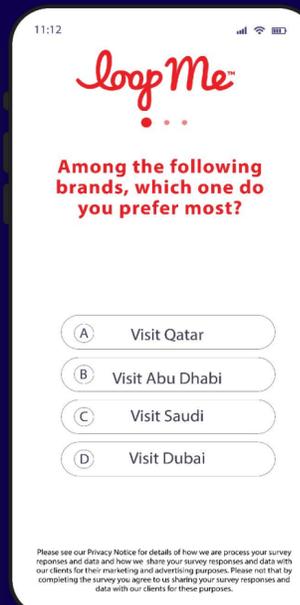
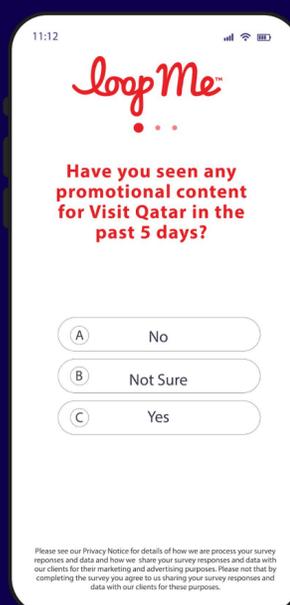
**36,001**  
Surveys served

Our PurchaseLoop solution embeds incrementality measurement into live media, comparing exposed and control audiences to isolate causal uplift across brand outcomes.

**The Value Delivered**  
By surfacing these leading indicators, PurchaseLoop provides early evidence of impact

**Why It Matters**  
PurchaseLoop bridges the gap between brand and performance, turning brand outcomes into actionable intelligence rather than retrospective reporting.

### Visit Qatar Brand Lift Case Study



This brand lift study measured the impact of Visit Qatar's digital campaign on brand awareness and preference by comparing responses from exposed and control audiences. The results provide context on how media exposure shifted brand perception, not just raw media performance outcomes.

# The Future Belongs to Those Who Turn Talk into Action

Technology will scale brands. Culture will differentiate them.

The brands that win will be those that find partners who can bridge both worlds — who understand the algorithm, the audience and the culture.

## We are FutureTech

As new-age consultancy and media business that blends strategy, creativity and technology to help brands grow through culture and connection. We operate at the intersection where technological capability meets cultural intelligence, where data-driven insights fuel human creativity, and where scale serves meaning.

Our team combines the technical expertise to navigate AI, automation, and advanced measurement with the cultural fluency to create work that moves people. We don't just follow trends—we help define them, working with forward-thinking brands to turn strategic vision into measurable impact.



## Futuretech

**The Practice** is our strategy, intelligence and innovation consultancy. It helps brands make sense of complexity, integrate technology, and build modern marketing systems rooted in culture, creativity and commercial impact.

**FutureTech Media** is our outcomes-led media business, built for a world where retail media, alternative networks, data, measurement and optimisation must work together as one.

Together, they create a connected model:  
The Practice designs the strategic and technical architecture.  
The Media business activates, measures and optimizes it in-market.

## Connect with us

Let's build that future together.

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