

2026 Predictions

Consumer trends shaping
the marketing landscape



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Introduction

2026 is shaping up to be a year of higher stakes and sharper expectations. Consumers know their value, crave authentic experiences, and expect smart, seamless interactions. But are you ready to deliver?

Inspired by the insights featured in our [recent webinar with TrendWatching](#), let's explore the consumer trends defining 2026, diving into key findings and offering actionable advice tailored for marketers.

This isn't just a look at what's coming—it's your roadmap to **staying ahead.**



TREND·WATCHING

Check out more consumer insights and trends on trendwatching.com



Top consumer trends defining 2026



1. Worthwise

Engagement becomes currency.

2. Spontainment

Engineering moments of unplanned joy.

3. Absurddities

Going big to break through the noise.

4. Buy:Because

Alleviating consumer purchase anxiety.

TREND ONE

Worthwise

Engagement becomes currency.

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Trend overview

Economic uncertainty is pushing consumers to redefine value and what they're willing to exchange for it. But many brands are stuck in a transactional mindset, overlooking the diverse ways customers contribute to loyalty even without incentives to do so.

The importance of customer loyalty can't be overstated. [Researchers](#) found that loyal customers are a company's most profitable, spending more, paying premium prices for products and services, and generating additional business through referrals. In 2026, loyalty is evolving beyond spending to include creative, social, and experiential contributions.

Forward-thinking brands are reshaping loyalty frameworks to reward different forms of customer contributions—content creation, referrals, data sharing, and community participation. For example, rewarding non-engagement, recognizing when customers don't burden support teams or return products, highlighting a broader understanding of customer value.

By using data to identify which non-transactional behaviors actually drive business outcomes, like user-generated content that converts or event attendance that boosts lifetime value, brands can create loyalty programs that are transparent and genuinely rewarding.



Younger consumers increasingly seek rewards that are experiential or align with their values. This has shifted loyalty programs from being purely transactional to something with an emotional or ethical appeal.



Victoria Loomes

Head of Trends, TrendWatching

Solution: Embrace a more holistic formula for customer loyalty

Winning hearts and wallets is easy....with the right growth philosophy.

Brands that get loyalty right deliver seamless, personalized experiences in line with individual customer behavior and expectations that provide clear value for customers. These companies don't just offer basic rewards and perks; they prioritize forging emotional connections with their customers and creating truly memorable, engaging experiences.

Here's how you can do the same.

1. Earn loyalty

Creating a connection and showing value is crucial to long-term engagement with your loyalty program. In the U.S. alone, consumers, on average, belong to **16.6 loyalty programs** but use less than half. Reduce the time to value of your loyalty program or exclusive offers by reminding users of the benefits, any rewards pending, and with **personalized recommendations** for rewards to redeem.

2. Deepen loyalty

Next, make users feel valued and recognized, turning every interaction into progress. Users often seek a sense of accomplishment and progression in their interactions with loyalty programs, but may lose interest if these psychological needs are not met. Incorporating interactive strategies like **gamification** into the loyalty program creates a structure that rewards progress and garners a sense of achievement.

3. Spread loyalty

Finally, it's key to celebrate and reward users for loyalty, transforming users into advocates. A huge **92% of consumers** trust recommendations from friends and family over any other form of advertising, making **referrals** lucrative for brands looking to foster engagement and drive community growth. When users invite a member of their community, reward them with points, discounts, exclusive benefits, or other incentives that align with your loyalty program.

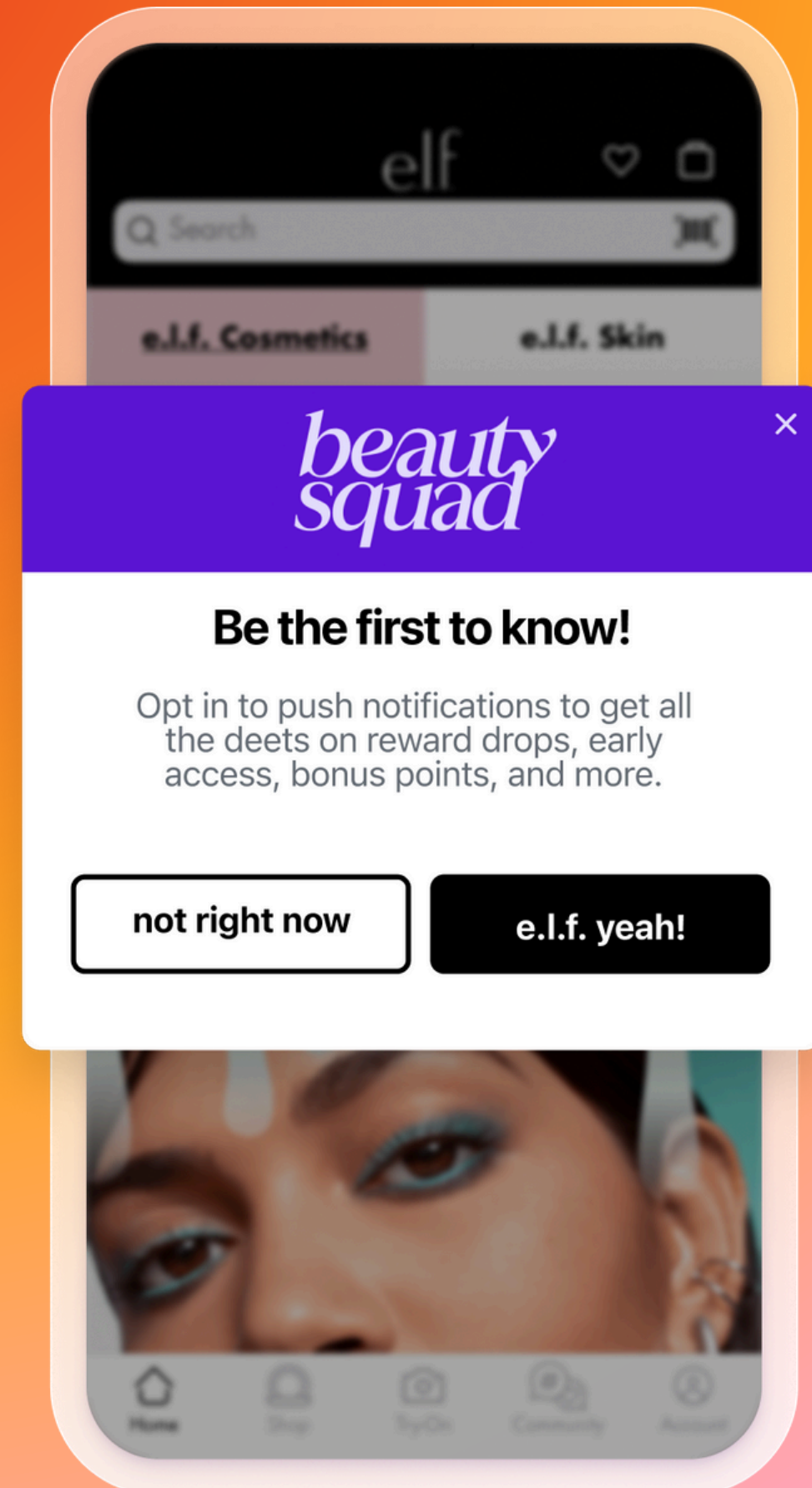
e.l.f.'s strategic evolution of the Beauty Squad

Global beauty brand [e.l.f. Cosmetics](#) wanted to improve its digital customer experience and drive higher adoption of its loyalty program, Beauty Squad, utilizing a mobile app to engage consumers wherever they are and reward them accordingly. This strategy is crucial, as Beauty Squad members comprise 95% of app transactions and have a 166% higher lifetime value than non-members.

To achieve this, e.l.f. worked with Braze and Braze Alloys solutions partner [Stitch](#) to implement changes to their Beauty Squad strategy. Using Braze, they increased first-party data collection and expanded their communication channels beyond email, introducing additional touchpoints like push notifications. They also began to incorporate loyalty milestones, such as birthdays and available rewards, into their app, website, and soon SMS and Braze Content Cards. To further engage their loyal customers, they introduced gamification elements like badging and scavenger hunts, as well as AR/VR and other innovative features into their campaigns.

- **76%** Increase in average monthly loyalty engagement YoY*
- **77%** Average uplift in conversion rates across automated communications
- **125%** Increase in monthly active app users YoY*

*From March 2023 to October 2023, versus the same period the year prior



TREND TWO

Spontainment

Engineering moments of unplanned joy.

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Trend overview

In today's world, where we obsessively track every detail—from delivery times to daily schedules—we've cultivated a craving for information, control, and predictability. This constant need for certainty has left an emotional gap, as the unexpected becomes increasingly rare.

The [hippocampus](#), however, thrives on surprise, with unexpected events enhancing neural activity and creating stickier memories that can lead to higher brand affinity. This presents a unique opportunity for brands to fill the emotional void by engineering moments of unplanned joy within the customer journey.

A compelling example of controlled surprise is Pop Mart's Labubu "blind boxes." These are collectible toys packaged in a way that conceals their contents, creating an element of mystery and anticipation for consumers. The blind box concept has resonated deeply, generating [\\$1.8BN in 2024](#), and demonstrating that consumers still crave uncertainty—albeit within safe and enjoyable parameters.



54% of global consumers want joy from online shopping, but 76% say the experience lacks surprise or delight. This clearly shows a gap that brands need to fill.



Victoria Loomes

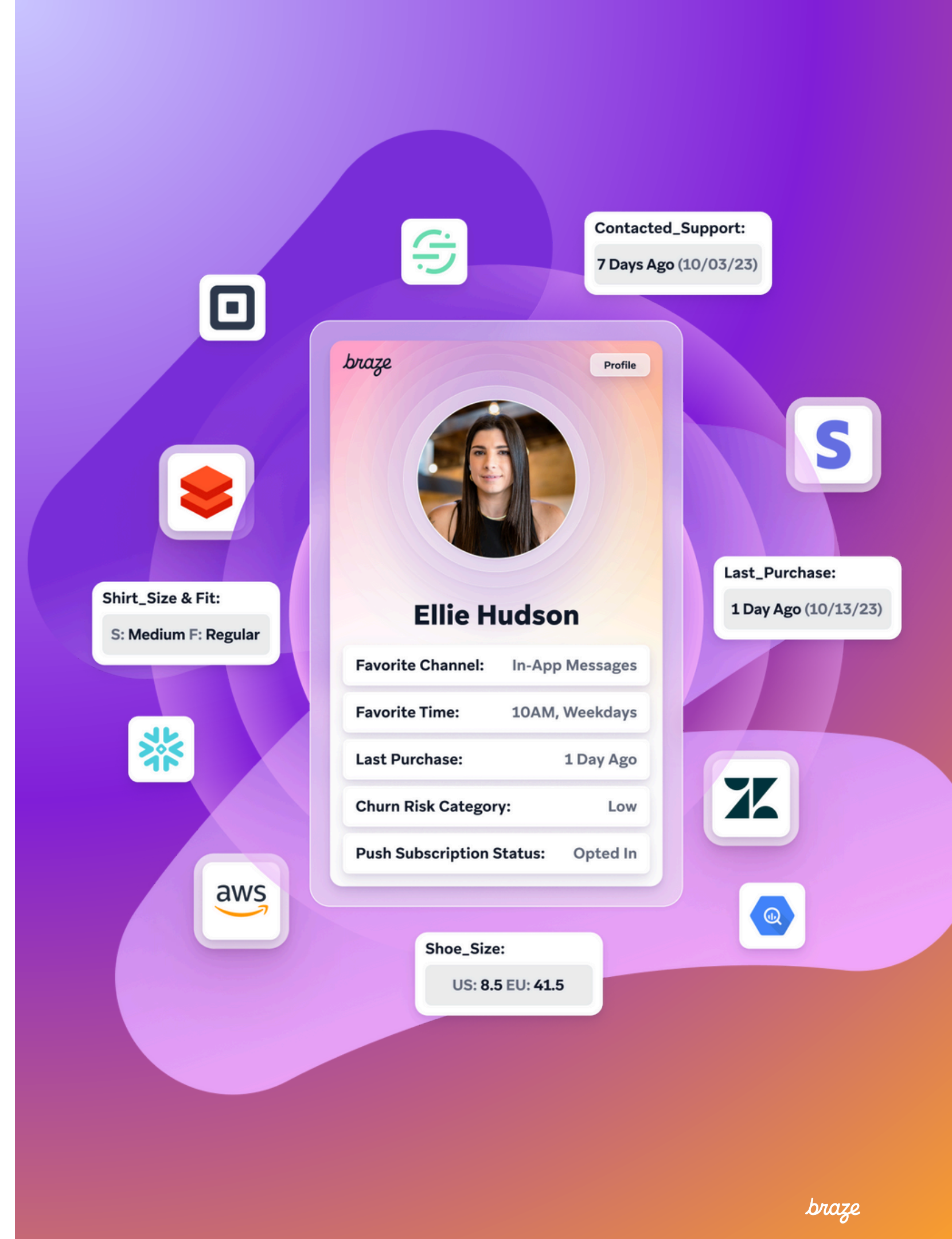
Head of Trends, TrendWatching

Solution: Lean into 1:1 personalization to deliver more moments that resonate—and stand out

Ready to craft experiences that truly resonate with your customers? Dive deep into understanding each individual by leveraging AI and streaming data for genuine 1:1 personalization. Tailor every aspect of the customer journey—from singular messages to personalized flows—based on who your customers are and what they crave right now, or even anticipate their future desires.

- **Orchestrate and automate:** Create sophisticated, individually tailored journeys to deliver a personalized experience that feels spontaneous and delightful.
- **Surprise and delight with AI:** Infuse your interactions with spontaneity and creativity using AI-driven decisioning. Let AI do the grunt work of discovering what is likely to resonate with each customer, serving your customers with individually relevant, valuable messages that boost brand loyalty and engagement at scale.
- **Activate data seamlessly:** Collect, unify, and activate data from anywhere—your website, app, point of sale, data warehouse, and more—to support customized experiences.

This enables you to design uniquely authentic experiences that resonate with your brand identity and personalize them for each user. For example, celebrating a milestone like birthdays with personalized treats can help strengthen relationships and ensure every interaction is memorable and meaningful.



KFC Spain's bold customer engagement strategy

KFC Spain has built its reputation on innovation, tongue-in-cheek messaging, and exceptional fried chicken. The brand has consistently pushed creative boundaries, from partnering with Forza to develop race tracks based around drive-throughs (which earned a Cannes nomination), to maintaining a playful yet authentic voice that resonates with Spanish customers. However, even the most innovative brands can face product challenges, and for KFC Spain, their french fries were a serious liability that threatened to undermine their market leadership.

To address this challenge, KFC Spain decided to face the problem head-on. They reformulated their fries, then used historical purchase data to identify every customer who had ever ordered the old version. Through Braze, they launched the "Fries Compensation" program, sending each of those customers a personalized message and compensating them with the exact amount of fries they'd previously purchased, on the house.

- **20X** Increase in daily orders on launch day
- **95%** Email open rate
- **679%** Increase in app downloads



TREND THREE

Absurddities

Going big to break through the noise.

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Trend overview

With internet users spending roughly **29%** of their waking lives consuming online media, the blend of real-life experiences with a touch of virality offers the perfect detox. Brands are responding by embracing unapologetically absurd and immersive experiences to cut through the digital noise. For example, events like the **Timothée Chalamet lookalike contest** exemplify how brands create shared cultural moments that resonate in a fragmented world.

While consumerism often fragments society, these shared experiences can paradoxically bring people together, fostering cultural connection and consensus. In an algorithmically fragmented world, maximalist absurdity where the gap between expectation and reality becomes the story itself, has become a reliable way to capture attention and bridge the digital-physical divide.

But not all customers seek chaos, so it's vital to use engagement data to target segments that respond best to maximalist campaigns. Successful brands focus on audiences that reward absurdity with attention, and in the fast-paced fadscape economy, tracking share rates and social mentions is essential for cultural relevance.



People are increasingly impressed by the way brands can blend local cultural aspects and internet memes to create activations that stand out in an authentic way.

Is your brand willing to look ridiculous to the right people? The absurdity of some activations is what makes them memorable to audiences.



Victoria Loomes

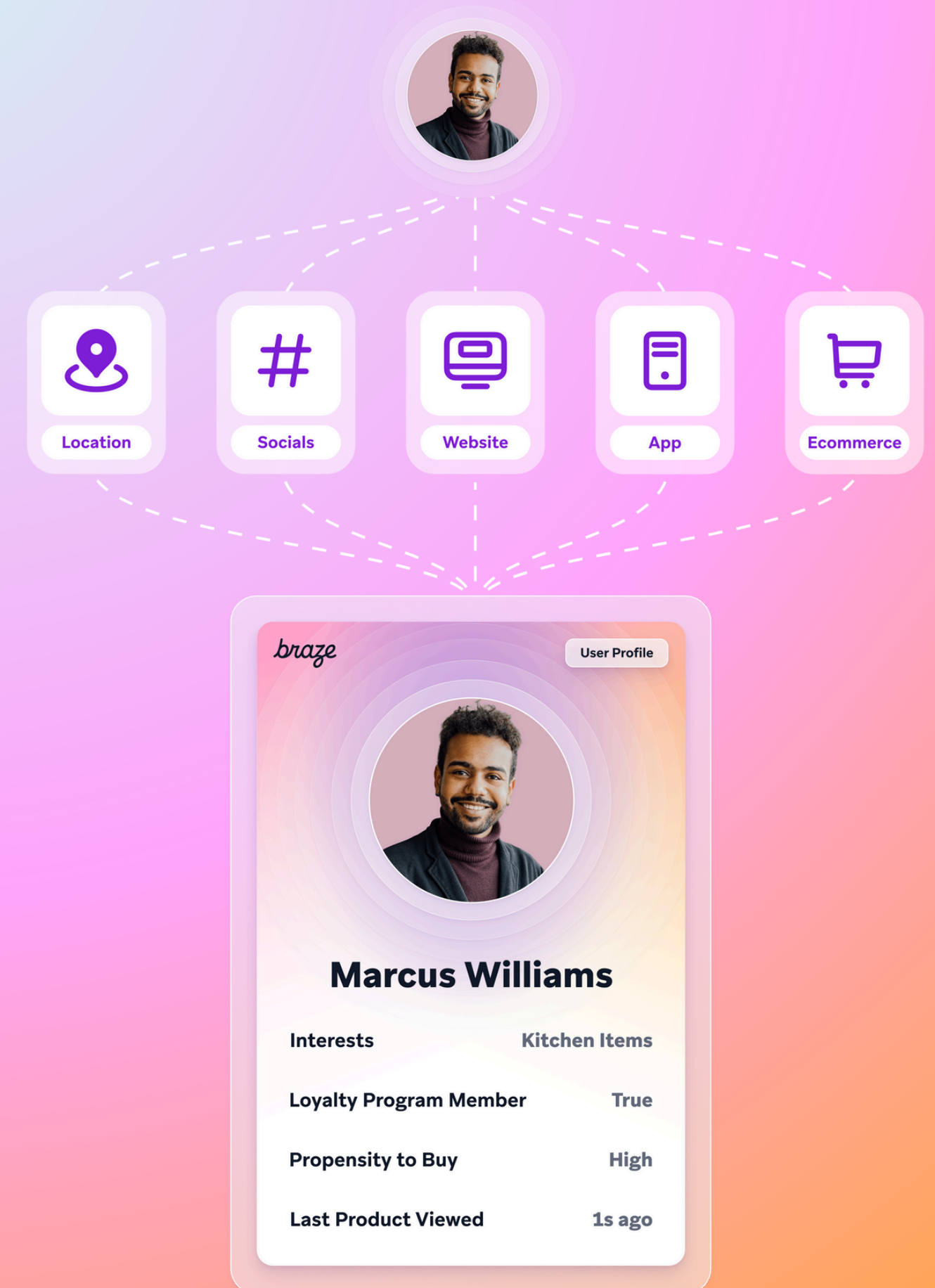
Head of Trends, TrendWatching

Solution: Zoom out on your bigger brand presence—and dial in your customer engagement strategy to support

Technology is your gateway to personal connections, but it's the killer content that makes your brand unforgettable.

Stand out and go viral by syncing your customer engagement strategy with your overall marketing game plan. Amp up your reach and generate buzz with savvy social media and geolocation tactics. Infuse your messaging with humor, pop culture, and timely memes to strike a chord with your audience. Build trust and authenticity with social proof from reviews and user-generated content. Make your messages pop with vibrant visuals—think images, videos, and GIFs that grab attention and don't let go.

Focus on these content-driven tactics to craft a brand presence that's not just dynamic and engaging, but one that leaves a lasting impression and forges deep connections with your audience.



Panera Bread's historic menu transformation

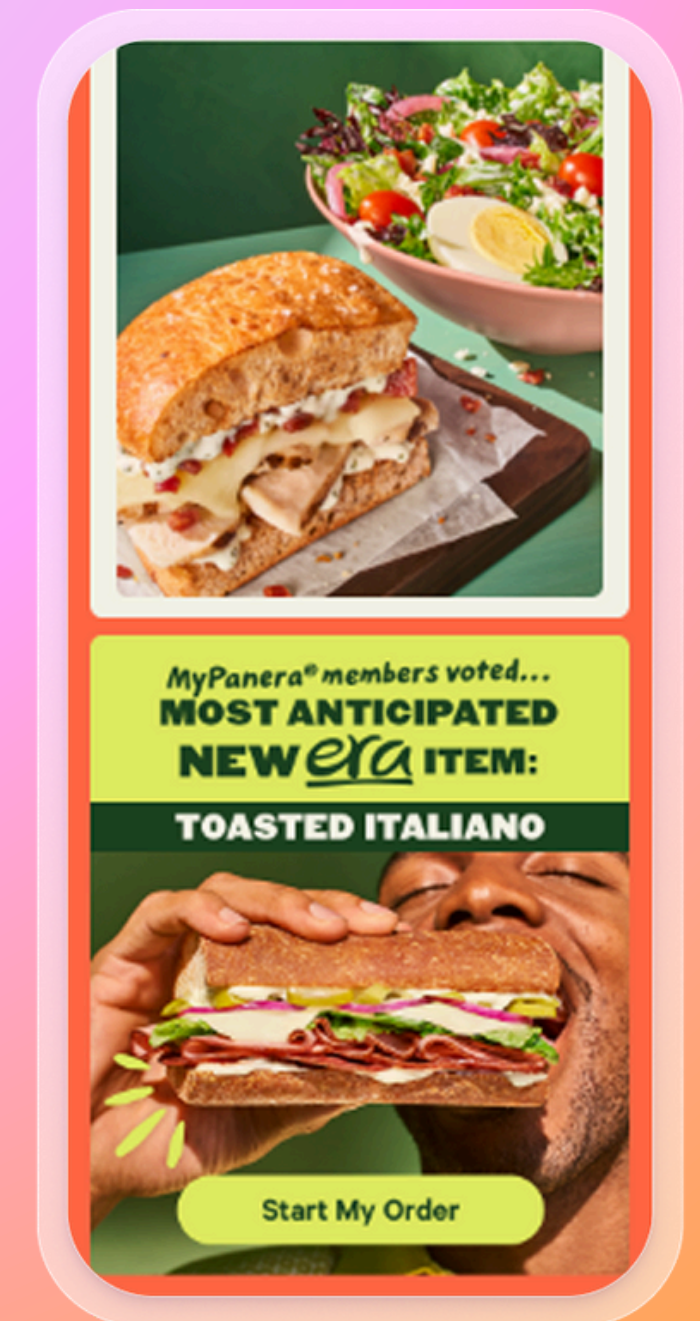
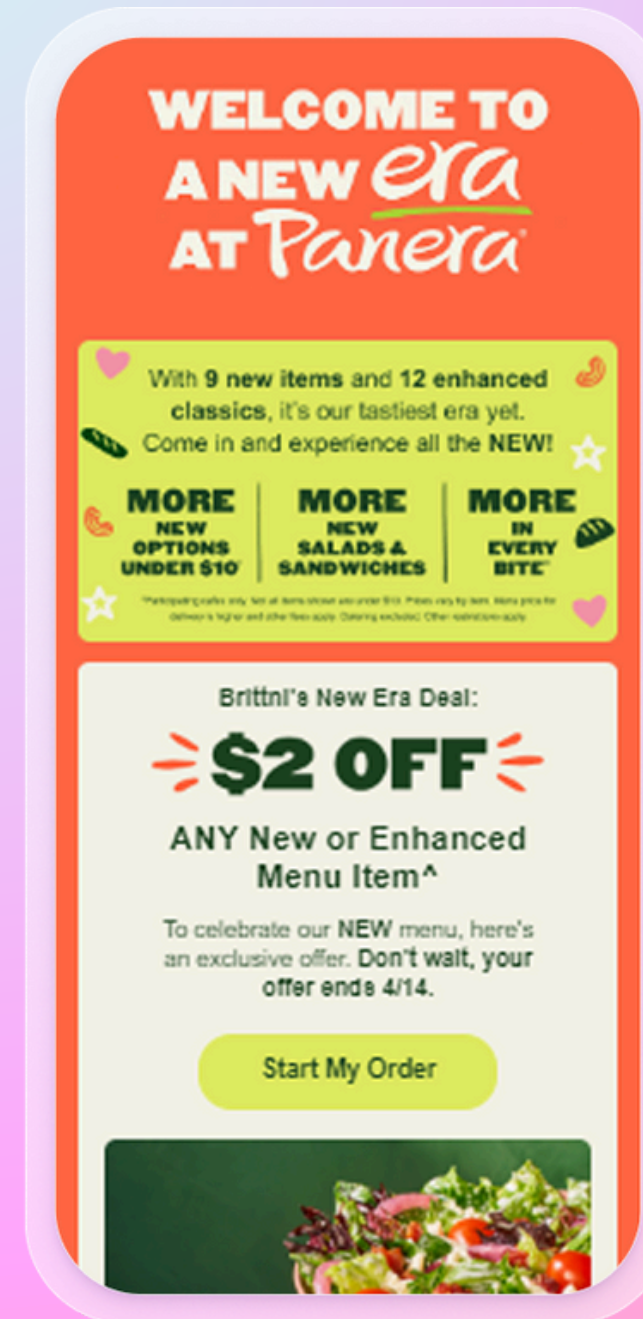
Panera Bread, a leading fast casual restaurant, faced a critical challenge during its largest menu transformation: How to engage and retain guests while evolving its menu.

To achieve these goals, Panera Bread integrated its AI-powered decision engine with Braze capabilities, creating a cross-channel, personalized campaign strategy to guide guests through their menu transformation. In the lead up to the menu launch, MyPanera members were invited to vote for their most-anticipated new item. The campaign collected over 400,000 votes, with the Toasted Italiano sandwich emerging as the favorite. The data from this initiative was then used to inform personalized reward offers for participants and nonparticipants, alike, all delivered seamlessly via Braze Canvas.

Panera's "In Your Era" messaging further enhanced the campaign's success, reaching meme-level virality. This clever play on words captured the cultural zeitgeist and featured prominently in TV commercials and across social media, ensuring customer engagement efforts were part of a larger coordinated strategy.



- **5%** Lift in retention
- **2X** Increase in loyalty offer redemptions
- **2X** Increase in purchase conversions



TREND FOUR

Buy:Because

Alleviating consumer purchase anxiety.

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Trend overview

Economic pressure driven by tariffs and inflation, particularly in the U.S., is straining consumer purchasing power. This has heightened the stakes of purchase decisions, as consumers are more cautious about their spending, leading to increased choice anxiety. In fact, 76% of consumers feel overwhelmed by too many choices, and 85% abandon carts due to indecision.

In response, brands are evolving from curators to advocates by leveraging AI tools to better meet consumer needs in this challenging environment. These tools go beyond merely presenting options; they offer enhanced personalization by narrowing down choices, providing explanations for recommendations, and previewing potential outcomes. This approach helps reduce the emotional burden of making the wrong decision, allowing consumers to spend less time deliberating and feel more confident in their choices.

The shift? From simply facilitating choice to actively selling certainty. Brands aren't just offering products; they're providing the confidence consumers need to overcome decision paralysis and make informed purchases.



Too many shoppers feel like they have too much choice, and that can actually be quite overwhelming. And one consequence of that is that more people are abandoning or quitting their carts, particularly Gen X and Boomers.

Shoppers are getting savvy... using the tools that are available to them to cut through the overwhelm. And what am I referring to? AI, of course.



Victoria Loomes

Head of Trends, TrendWatching

Solution: Use AI decisioning to take the guesswork out of "adding to cart"—for brands and consumers

Savvy marketers can supercharge customer engagement by harnessing AI to unlock deep insights into behaviors and preferences. [AI decisioning](#) and personalized recommendations don't just transform interactions—they make them pop with relevance and impact.

Forget blanket discounts and manual A/B tests! Picture using AI to predict and deliver the perfect product recommendation at the perfect moment—with the perfect incentive, if need be. This strategy not only elevates the customer experience by reducing consumer paralysis, it can also increase conversions and loyalty.

The matrix on the following page shows how AI capabilities can anticipate needs, optimize strategies, and revolutionize brand-customer connections. By embracing these AI-driven solutions, marketers can craft every touchpoint to perfection, maximizing satisfaction and driving stellar results.



Use AI to gain context, apply intelligence, and transform interactions

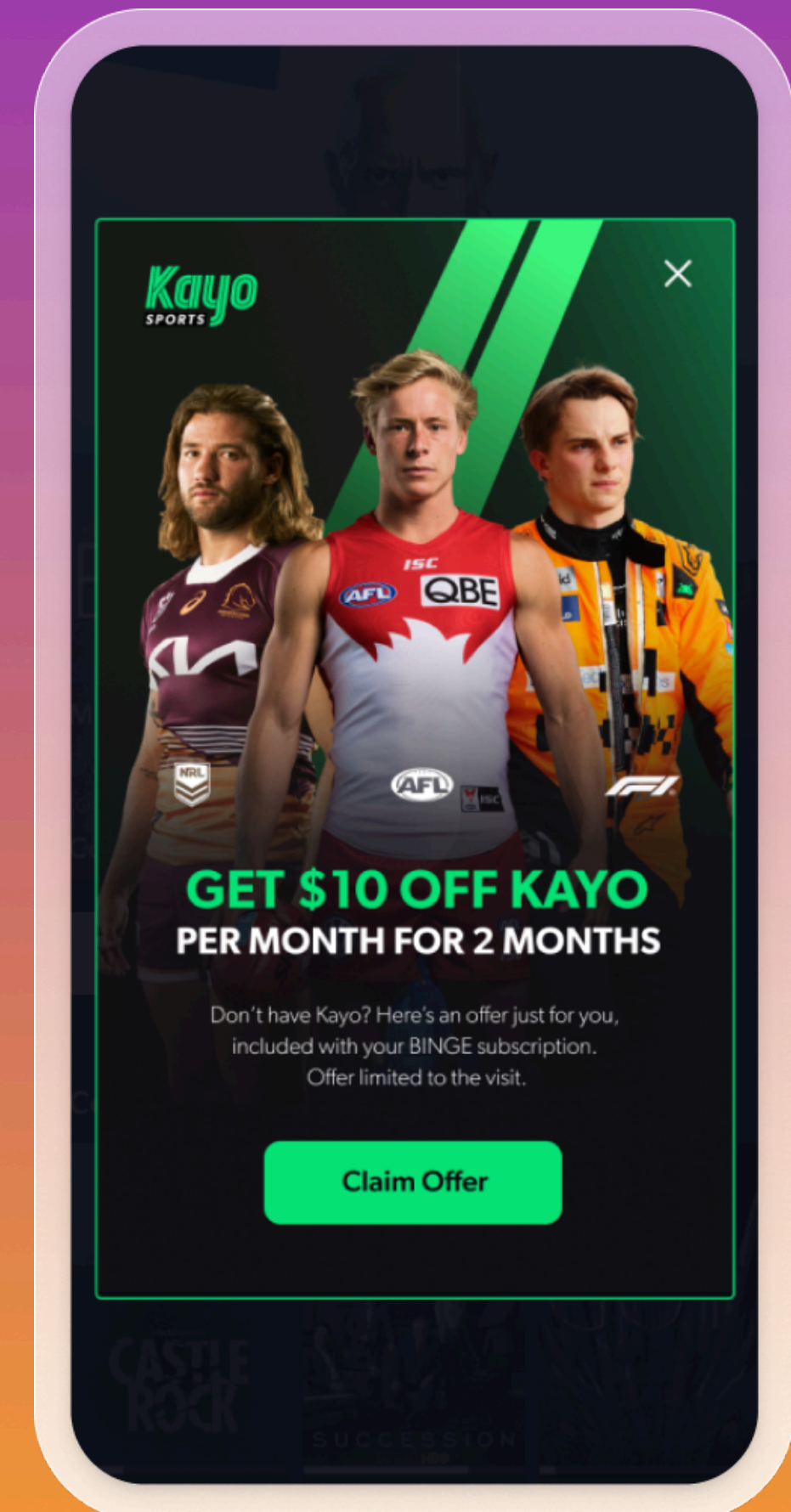
GAIN CONTEXT		APPLY INTELLIGENCE		TRANSFORM INTERACTIONS	
CAPABILITY: Predictive analytics OUTCOME: Anticipate customer behaviors before they happen and use them to shape future engagement.		CAPABILITY: AI-powered content generation and testing OUTCOME: Describe your vision and let creative assistants and agents craft new campaigns.		CAPABILITY: AI decisioning OUTCOME: Deploy the optimal offers, incentives, and campaigns for each individual recipient, allowing you to drive profit, revenue, costs, and customer lifetime value.	
CAPABILITY: Intelligent optimization OUTCOME: Learn more about customers to engage them on the channels they prefer, at times that work for them, with messaging that is individually relevant.		CAPABILITY: Generative AI insights OUTCOME: Get actionable recommendations, interpret data insights, optimize your customer engagement platform, and drive smarter actions.		CAPABILITY: AI decisioning and generative AI OUTCOME: Produce content variants more rapidly than you could on your own, and let decisioning agents double down on the variants that drive the highest engagement rates.	
CAPABILITY: AI recommendations OUTCOME: Suggest products or contents designed to resonate with each customer based on their past behaviors.		CAPABILITY: Generative AI-supported technical work OUTCOME: Tackle complex tasks with simple prompts (e.g. write code, build segments, transform data, generate reports) and free up technical resources to focus on more strategic priorities.		CAPABILITY: AI decisioning OUTCOME: Optimize every dimension of a sophisticated, cross-channel journey, from personalizing subject lines to dynamically adjusting in-product experiences in response to in-the-moment user actions.	

Kayo Sports' 1:1 messaging at scale

Kayo Sports, Australia's largest and fastest-growing sports streaming service, needed to engage a diverse audience of sports fans with personalized content and recommendations across multiple devices and channels. Their existing systems limited personalization options and didn't fully leverage their rich data to drive customer engagement and lifetime value, leading to more generic customer experiences.

To achieve these goals, Kayo Sports leveraged Braze and BrazeAI Decisioning Studio™ to create their "Customer Cortex" to deliver unique, personalized experiences through a 1:1 approach. They used AI to determine the optimal message, creative, channel, timing, frequency, and promotions for each individual subscriber—**increasing the number of potential actions from 300 to 1.2M.**

- **8%** Increase in average annual occupancy
- **14%** Increase in subscriptions in FY24
- **105%** Increase in cross-sells



Conclusion

As we look towards 2026, it's clear that consumer expectations are evolving rapidly, driven by a desire for authenticity, meaningful engagement, and seamless experiences.

The trends outlined highlight the need for marketers to adapt by fostering emotional connections, engineering moments of joy, breaking through digital noise with unapologetically absurd experiences, and simplifying decision-making through AI.

By embracing these trends, brands can not only meet but exceed consumer expectations, ensuring they remain relevant and competitive in a dynamic market landscape.

Want to learn more? Watch the full webinar recording of [**Consumer trends defining 2026: what marketers need to know**](#), featuring Vicki Loomes, Head of Trends at TrendWatching.



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Get in touch to learn more.

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Braze is a leading comprehensive customer engagement platform that powers interactions between consumers and brands they love. With Braze, global brands can ingest and process customer data in real time, orchestrate and optimize contextually relevant, cross-channel marketing campaigns and continuously evolve their customer engagement strategies. Braze has been recognized as one of Fortune's 2023 Best Workplaces in New York, 2023 UK Best Workplaces for Women by Great Place to Work, and Fortune's 2022 Best US Workplaces in Technology. The company is headquartered in New York with 10+ offices across North America, Europe, and APAC. Learn more at braze.com.