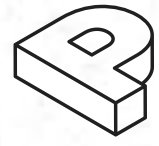


trends report



punch

**social
type**



The new attention economy

20 years on, the battleground is about to get real. Are you ready?

In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg launched TheFacebook. Social media as we know it was in its infancy, the mailing lists and messageboards of the previous decade gradually being usurped by social networking sites. Zuckerberg's became Facebook, a behemoth app that counts near enough half of the world's population as active users, and absorbed another giant in the form of Instagram.

Add in Twitter and YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok, and what's emerged in the first quarter of this century is a handful of colossal social apps and a planet in thrall to them. Twenty years on from Facebook's ignoble genesis at Harvard University, social media is all grown up. Its days as a marketing bolt-on are long gone. For many brands it's the most powerful communication channel of all.

With maturity comes change. Marketers are embroiled in a battle for attention. For years, we've understood that success in social media involves cutting through the noise of the feed, buying reach, or both.

The infrastructure of social media is evolving. In 2023 alone we saw enormous volatility as Twitter became X, Instagram launched Threads and federated social networks began to attract disillusioned users. But what's shifting beneath the surface is the nature of attention online. User expectations and algorithms are changing. Success – true, meaningful success – is harder to achieve than ever before.

Brands spend money on capturing attention. Two decades and more into the social media age, it's time they invested in keeping it. To win minds, not just buy eyeballs. To achieve genuine engagement, not just shout loudest.

Our research into the social media presence of some of the world's biggest businesses highlighted the issues that need to be addressed in the early years of the industry's adulthood.

Even now, leading businesses post for the sake of posting and fail to bring their brands to life in social, often struggling to adhere to their own brand guidelines. They chase engagement but don't really achieve it. Their ecosystems have grown up organically and unchecked over fifteen years – without a strategic approach, the sum of their output is tangled at best.

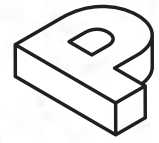
As social matures and evolves, the biggest brands are among those that should take a step back and configure their place in the attention economy by understanding what attention really means and what it takes to win it, keep it and turn it into something meaningful.

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#1 **the brand**

control exchange



“Likes mean less than ever.”

#1

Quality engagement doesn't come for free.

Social media made a promise. Humanity would be more connected than ever before. One-to-one communication would remove the barriers between brands, celebrities and the public for the mutual benefit of them all.

This utopian notion unravelled fast. Social exploded and took on a life of its own – controlled by a handful of the hyper-rich, built around addictive behaviours and as problematic as it is powerful.

For brands, the challenge posed by this runaway train changes from one day to the next. But, at its heart, the conundrum of social media comes down to a matter of hegemony of substance. What is social for? What is it made of? What does it do?

The development arc of social is entering a new phase. The original promise of social gave way to advertising and brand content. Legendary BBH co-founder John Hegarty says that ninety percent of content is – in his words – rubbish.

Brand marketers have their own business priorities but we also have a responsibility to reduce that percentage. Adding to the noise isn't good enough and, with algorithm changes and a shift in focus on the part of Meta, it won't cut it in terms of performance either.

So what's next? According to Meta, less focus on specific formats and more algorithmic demand for “authentic, original and high-quality” content.

The social media marketing industry has been talking about storytelling forever. It's both a creative motivator and a meaningless buzzword. It's the essence of what we do, yet the core of everything we should do but don't. Depth, value and insight are now mandatory.

When it comes to translating the value of content into a potent tactic in the battle for meaningful attention, catching the eye of users is just part of the job. Generating engagement is another, and in 2024 that means more than a passive like on a post that says nothing.

Likes mean less than ever. Users like less and the ones who do have been shown to be less engaged in what they're liking than we might like to assume. With the option to make them invisible now well established on Instagram, the value of a like is in decline.

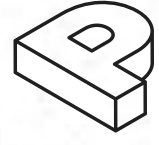
For brands, real depth of engagement comes at the cost of control. This is the Brand Control Exchange. Brands loosen their grip on their social comms and messaging. It couldn't be further from the early days of social content.

Creative campaigns that lean into community remixing are in vogue and can drive up the quality of attention but they can only work for businesses that are comfortable putting their brands – brand assets, content, raw materials and all – into the hands of others.

In return, they can create opportunities to drive genuine, relevant, durable engagement and foster community among their audiences.

IKEA talks about the “wisdom of the crowd” in democratised product development. Its Co-Create platform sets out a creative process and provides resources for groups of colleagues to join forces in the name of innovation. Lego Ideas has delivered crowdsourced creativity for years.

Coca-Cola brought new technology and fresh execution to a simple idea for its Create Real Magic campaign, which generated engagement through the co-creation of holiday cards using AI.



the brand control exchange

But it isn't just the domain of giant consumer brands. Liebherr's customer co-creation programme provides a space for B2B development. In 2023, Gothenburg's Municipal Executive Board launched the "world's largest workshop" to invite people to suggest creative ways to make the city a great place for people to live.

Co-creation is a great way to build true engagement. Involving consumers in product development has long been known by psychologists to inspire and strengthen their connection, not to mention increasing their subsequent preference for the product in question.

Social media and digital content are now so immersive that some brands will be able to embrace co-creation to make that connection in online communications too. We expect to see more brands open up their social content to be remixed and to work with their social communities to create moments and develop products.

Whether it's using AI to make Christmas cards, collaboratively designing interactive worlds in Roblox or shaping IRL experiences, social will be both a mechanism for collaboration and a medium for the storytelling and outputs that come from it.

But for brands seeking true engagement through co-creation in social it means relinquishing some control to their customers and consumers. It means a relaxed grip on messaging and style, and an openness to the unfiltered reality of authentic interaction.

Brands who've invested time and commitment into building consumer connections are primed for the Brand Control Exchange. It's not for everyone but the potential benefits are massive.

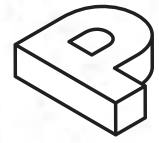
“embrace co-creation”

“Brand managers are understandably protective over their communications but it can lead to a tendency to shout into the void. Likes will follow but research shows that so many of those come from passive likers that they're essentially pointless.

“Brands that loosen the reins and bring culture and consumers into their creative processes can establish real and lasting connections. That makes brands stick and sticky brands perform.”

Chris Nee
Strategist

#2 **time** *limit*



time limit

#2

"It's a matter of renting

In the attention economy, content is competitive.

The battle for attention rages on. The in-feed arms race for eyeballs stands up a massive global industry but we don't always think of attention as a finite goal. Time is scarce. People are busy and reaching them in a meaningful way isn't just about grabbing their attention. It's a matter of renting their bandwidth.

As behaviours evolve and new platforms emerge, the attention bandwidth is under more and more demand. It's not just brands battling it out with each other in the feed but those feeds going at it too. There are enough social platforms – not to mention other draws on our time and focus – that the choice is in the hands of the users.

Research shows that the average social media user bumps and bounces between six or seven platforms. But none of us has the bandwidth to fully participate in all of them all of the time. We naturally have preferences and habits, apportioning our time accordingly.

To an extent we're seeing convergence towards specific formats that can be adapted across the key platforms in order to reach people whatever their platform mix. Create for 9:16 now and a quick nip and tuck will ready your content for TikTok, Reels, Stories, Shorts and more.

The increasingly competitive social platform landscape is in the midst of accelerated change. After years of feature-level development, we're in a period of existential, almost philosophical reckoning.

Twitter is X now; you might have heard. Its technological, cultural and political choices – among other reasons – have led to a haemorrhage of advertisers and provoked lots of users to shift their attention elsewhere. Reports of its imminent demise might have been exaggerated but there's certainly a new volatility that's affecting the dynamics of the social media mix.

Facebook and Instagram continue to evolve apace, their societal footprint undeniable but acquiescence to their algorithms perhaps more informed and reluctant than ever. YouTube stands its ground as an undervalued opportunity for brands, primed to serve up substantial video content in a future of "authentic, original and high-quality" storytelling.

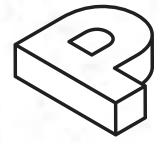
TikTok is a titan in its own right and goes from strength to strength, influencing the culture around it. Its day of doubts will come but for now it sits at the pointy end of a group of emerging or growing platforms set to benefit from any migration away from the older apps with which it competes for users' time.

In the TikTok age, the content you want is supposed to find you. Other platform algorithms have followed suit and the implication for brands is the need to create content their target audiences want, not what they think their audiences want or what the brands themselves want to publish. The battle for attention is primarily creative.

In the wake of a particularly damaging episode for X, Mark Zuckerberg and Adam Mosseri rolled out Threads, Instagram's text conversation app. Smashing app download records and roaring past 100 million users, Threads was unsurprisingly seen by many as an alternative to X – an alternative that many see as necessary.

Its early progress was slowed by geographically limited availability and the initial lack of a following-only feed, leaving the timeline to be filled by algorithms and therefore vulnerable to the same user frustrations as any other platform that chooses to show users content they didn't ask to be shown.

their bandwidth"



time limit

“The growth of TikTok interrupted what felt like an established order of big platforms. With each of those big platforms giving users reasons to reconsider their participation, the ability of users to opt out in favour of less intrusive, more controllable or more specific social apps is a threat.

“It’s important to remember that nobody will select their platforms of choice based on which brands are doing what. As social edges back towards a preference for meaningful and personal connections, brand content must clear an ever higher bar.”

Hatti Haughton
Account Director

“unhook their online selves from the big beasts”

Threads isn’t too big to fail but it is certainly too big to write off at this early juncture. Its features are improving all the time and some common interest communities have found their new social home within its walls. In terms of mass active user adoption, though, it seems it’s yet to convince even its own users to give it most of their attention bandwidth.

For some, the priority is to unhook their online selves from the big beasts and reconfigure their interaction with social. Decentralised social apps like Bluesky and Mastodon get a boost every time Elon Musk opens his mouth but their progress indicates a deeper rooted desire among early movers to take control of their profiles, content and audiences instead of being beholden to central platforms.

Bluesky, which feels a lot like Twitter once did but is built on a tech platform that will allow users to move between Bluesky and other networks freely, passed 3 million active users in January 2024. Steady growth is the name of the game for the invite-only platform and it’s becoming a compelling option for users in search of somewhere new to give their time.

Decentralised social provides the foundations for the development of niche platforms and upstarts too. Bluesky isn’t built on a blockchain but one X alternative, Spill – a Black-owned and visually-led platform that’s currently invite-only – uses blockchain technology to keep a record of who created what in order to enable monetisation of viral posts.

But while all this is going on, brands face a more elemental challenge when it comes to connecting with audiences. The often divisive nature of discussing basically anything in public is driving some conversations back into the underground of DMs, Messenger and WhatsApp.

The rise of WhatsApp, Messenger and Discord, among others, has long shifted engagement away from public social media. More and more conversations are happening in the dark, meaning it’s more important than ever for brands to re-evaluate community management.

Whether it’s chatter between friends or the spirit of Web3 seeping into mainstream behaviour, these spaces aren’t to be overlooked. To win the battle for attention, investment in the subtler environs of closed socials is a must.

Users’ time is limited so their attention is in high demand. Brands need to win a piece of it with their content but the overall direction of travel for the future of social media itself isn’t set. It’s platform versus platform as well as brand versus brand, and the platforms in play are by no means all brand-friendly.

#3 **paywalled** *social*



paywalled social

“the subscription economy is a nice fit for social”

#3

Platforms rise and monetise or they die.

When social platforms catch on they can acquire a massive number of active users without ever being viable financially in the longer term. Tempting though it is to believe in a corinthian vision of social for the social, the bottom line for new platforms is – sooner or later – the bottom line.

Social media can be a complicated space but the options for the people who need to turn social apps into profitable businesses are few. They can charge users. They can charge advertisers to reach users. They can work towards an IPO or a billionaire buyout, each as much of a gamble as the other.

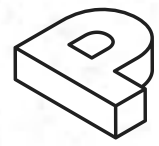
Up to this point the prevailing wind of social has blown at hurricane strength in the way of advertising, resulting in an uneasy compromise between platforms, users and brands. We’ve come to expect content and connection for free on the internet but the deluge of advertising – not to mention privacy concerns around adtech – is a price many users are no longer willing to pay.

Platforms see value in their disapproval and the subscription economy is a neat fit for social. People are increasingly familiar with the idea of paying to remove ads from streaming services, apps, games and websites.

Social is proving to be no exception. YouTube Premium straddles the gap between streaming and social media. Its Premium service has more than 25 million subscribers in the USA alone, each one benefiting from the absence of pre-roll, mid-roll and pop-up advertising when they watch videos.

Among the other platforms fighting it out for a slice of users’ monthly subscription budgets is X. Its own Premium offering has included features like verification of accounts and prioritisation in the algorithmic feed as the new management looks to craft a compelling product. Ad-free is the latest attempt and, for many, the most persuasive yet.

X is also making moves to tighten up its paid offering for brands. Elon Musk is a divisive owner but he’s looking for ways to persuade brands to stay with their X, most recently a more reasonably priced verified layer aimed at smaller businesses. The pay-to-play principle has expanded beyond media spend.



“If big social pushes advertisers into a corner it’s unquestionable that brand perception will play a big role in their decision-making. Association with unsavoury content or practices is plenty of justification to pull away, leaving platforms with a shortfall – not to mention potential regulatory oversight changing the game.

“Platforms might be forced to innovate as a result, finding ways to offer enough value to attract subscribers in a hugely competitive arena.”

Alex Smith
Senior Account Director

“Some users are willing to pay”

Premium users aren't just for platforms. Third-party developers are paywalling their apps, too, and the Web3 ethos of building in public is especially strong with the likes of Deck Blue and Graysky, Bluesky clients enabled by the backing of users on Patreon.

Some users are willing to pay for the obvious benefits of removing ads but others aren't – they're not active enough, engaged enough, irritated enough or affluent enough to fork out a fee each month to declutter a little corner of their lives. The traditional model doesn't really work but it works enough.

The battle for those subscription pounds and dollars is a big deal. If users who pay are too short in supply it won't be financially viable for the platforms. But if those who don't pay are just too disengaged or passive to want to subscribe, advertisers might come to question the value of those users. If that happens then the platforms will be left with no choice.

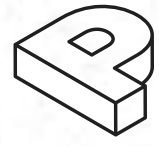
There are even more compelling reasons for social platforms of all stripes to ramp up their efforts to put some parts of their experience behind a paywall. Advertisers being selective politically is one – brand safety and association matter.

Adtech firms and the platforms themselves could be regulated in any number of ways. The compromise between apps, users and advertisers is an uneasy one and changes in law, even just enough to upset that balance, will bring unintended consequences. Advertisers walking away from adtech and social altogether is unlikely but choosing between platforms by effectiveness would be a sensible outcome for any brands asking new questions.

Paywalled social is a competitive space by definition and its growth would have a fundamental impact on the fabric of social media. The established Goliaths could cede ground to a phalanx of Davids – smaller, niche platforms that accentuate the fragmentation of online culture.

“others aren't”

#4 **faking** *it*



#4

Does real really matter?

Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year in 2023?

Authentic.

It's the buzziest of buzzwords, abused and overused, yet essential for creating effective brand content that can stick the landing in social media. Authenticity unlocks emotion and meaning. In many ways, we've come to think of it as the lifeblood of online communications.

Is that all about to change? Well, not entirely. Real still appeals. There will always be a need for content people can relate to and for brands to anchor themselves in reality.

Social media and influencer marketing weathered the covid lockdowns relatively well. We adapted and evolved, comfortably leaving behind the expense and inaccessibility of online moments tied to offline geographies.

In spite of the chaos of internet culture in the twenties, social media came through and did what it does best. We found new ways to stay connected and brands stayed close to their audiences because they're adept at reaching them online anyway.

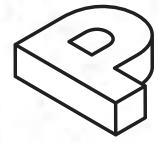
But IRL is back. Online culture atomises and reforms around niche interests and fandoms thanks to the ability to commune across borders, but the impulse to meet in the real world remains. Small community meet-ups are a tactical alternative to bigger but less focused brand events around moments like industry conventions.

Big events with specific focuses are enjoying an uplift in the aftermath of lockdowns too. Whether it's MAD//Fest being oversubscribed to the point that people queued into the street outside the Truman Brewery or influencer breakouts at major events, the meet-up is a revived manifestation of the drive for the real.

But we're also at the edge of the age of fake. Real is now a choice. Fake is a creative option rather than a deception. The door's been flung wide open for fake to rush through, for better and worse, in 2024 and beyond.

“IRL is back”





“SocialFX is our take on social CGI and mixed reality. While the moments we create are fake and exaggerated, we think they’re most powerful when they have the feel of reality too. These moments aren’t really happening because they’re not physically possible, but if they were, this is what they’d look like.

“That’s a contradiction and it’s in that grey area that we like to play. One of the first SocialFX pieces we created, for Lloyds Banking Group, came from those origins and we also managed to push the social CGI forward by making the fakery part of the message in a way that really fitted the green message behind the post.”

Tom Sulley
Creative Director

“A great idea is rooted in truth and insight”

What does fake bring into battle in this existential tussle between real and not? For one thing, its creativity is unshackled from the practical constraints of the physical world. That’s a whole new plane with which to play and that’s exactly what brands have begun to do with more freedom than ever.

Social CGI content puts three-dimensional renders into unlikely physical spaces, realities interacting to bring an idea to life. It burst into life with a Maybelline mascara applicator on the London Underground, three giant Jacquemus handbags on wheels and an unboxed Barbie colossus, and the brilliant ideas just keep on coming.

The London Essence Co. poured its mixers from a billboard into a glass on top of a taxi. JD Sport put the Houses of Parliament in a North Face jacket. These are simple ideas, beautifully executed in a social-first way in a realm previously unavailable. Social media has a new toy.

It’s not all smooth sailing on the seas of idyllic creative freedom. The dominant emerging technology, AI, has enormous implications for content creation. There’s a positive angle to that, certainly. Enterprising creatives will hack the tech and produce genius. But the commoditisation and automation of ideas are threats to be overcome. Artificially generated social media content is here to stay.

If smashing the ceiling between what’s real and what’s fake is a creative opportunity, we can be sure that it comes with big risks too. Sometimes an idea will straddle good and evil. AI-generated influencers are thirst-trapping their way into Instagram and TikTok feeds. The questions for fashion, beauty and retail brands are enough to twist the brain.

Deepfakes are everywhere and they’re as scary as we expected them to be. Predictably, they’re being used for silly entertainment purposes like populating a mundane influencer-style Tom Cruise TikTok account or putting Jim Carrey into The Shining, but there are also uses for good. Dove used the technology to manipulate motherly advice to teenage girls, highlighting the nefarious beauty guff on offer from influencers.

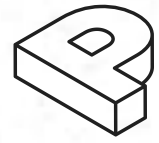
Naturally, deepfakes are being used to trick people by impersonating celebrities, politicians and “specialist entertainers”. Influencers are trying to cause a stir by pretending to have tattoos they obviously don’t have. The upshot is that it’s more or less impossible to know what’s real now apart. No wonder IRL is back.

In the battle for meaningful attention in social media, authenticity and fakery aren’t simply opposing forces. Authentic storytelling can be done with creative support from artificial intelligence just as lo-fi “real” content can be vacuous and facile.

Social CGI is a vibrant creative territory. It’s usually obvious, occasionally mischievous, and not intended to dupe in any serious way. AI is useful for creative triggers and springboards. In the right hands, it can be a part of an idea that leans into AI as a cultural phenomenon.

As ever, the story and the message are what matter. A great idea is rooted in truth and insight, and good content is everything good content has always been. What’s changing is that the fakery is easier, more effective and more dangerous than ever before. Reality mightn’t be strictly guarded anymore but truth is more important than ever.

#5 **full** *of it*



full of it

**“Consumers
are excellent
at sensing lip
service”**

#5

Sustainable social and sustainable brands go hand in hand.

The climate emergency is one of the biggest challenges facing civilisation. Year by year, decade by decade, it gets more and more urgent. Environmental issues are at the forefront of human innovation as we seek to reverse some of our negative impact on the planet.

Green issues are always near the top of the agenda for communications professionals. We talk about them constantly, not just because they're important in their own right but because they represent both a threat and an opportunity for all of our clients, all of the time. The environment is a subject that affects every brand, and that every brand affects. So we talk. But what about action?

Consumers are excellent at sensing lip service. They know when brands are saying one thing and doing another, or promising everything and delivering nothing. Hypocrisy – greenwashing – is easy to spot. Social media is the medium through which those criticisms play out. It's also a key battleground where brands and businesses must tackle their unnecessary emissions.

As social media continues to grow up, its professional community needs to turn big words into robust actions.

Like any other industry, social media and content production inflict some damage on the environment. The opportunities to improve or offset that are plentiful – reducing or changing how we shoot being

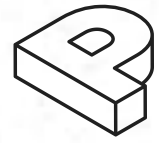
just one of them – but they will result in significant shifts in how we work and what we create. Tidying up social media's green credentials will alter the rules of engagement.

From an agency point of view it's not a moral matter but a simple commercial imperative. Clients and partners expect it and are being asked all the time about the green credentials of their supply chains and partnership ecosystems. It's not just the right thing to do to put our practices under scrutiny in 2024 and beyond; it's the smart business move.

When it comes to scrutiny, there's not much better than B Corp Certification. Businesses certified in this way have committed to a demonstrably positive social and environmental impact. Their green credentials and social conscience are weaved into their organisational fabric, proof point and selling point folded into one.

As well as its criteria being a checklist of the right things to do, B Corp Certification is a strategy that can bring real business benefits to agencies. Some are already certified and many others will follow, committing to sustainability in a way that will align them with both the shifting requirements of existing clients and the ambitions of future ones.

Blah!
Blah!
Blah!



full of it

“who they are, what they

“A big part of social media growing up as an industry is for clients and agencies to live up to the expectations we all talk about when it comes to sustainable business. B Corp is an option but what counts is to make a positive impact that’s felt in the world.

“We make business choices as an agency every day and one that we expect to happen even more often is how well our clients and partners fit with what we stand for.”

George Guildford
Managing Director

stand for

Agencies are going B Corp in order to fulfil client expectations but clients that don't fit the bill might be due some difficult conversations. B Corp positions agencies better for some opportunities but it also commits them to not working with partners who fall short. Agencies will, in the long-term, prioritise their B Corp status over clients who put it at risk.

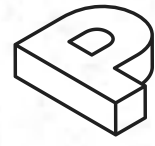
That dilemma has already happened in the marketing industry and it could be a regular occurrence in the next few years as agencies make a fundamental decision about who they are, what they stand for and who they'll work with as a result.

That spirit of sustainability isn't just a business issue. For marketers, agencies and creators whose business it is to generate content – especially social media content – it's also a viable guiding principle for their work.

Sustainable social is about execution and distribution as well as production. The movement away from single-use content and throwaway posts was included in our Trends Report for 2023 and the story remains the same. Efficiency of content is a valid metric and we should all be paying closer attention to it. Less is more is a useful guiding principle but we can evidence it too.

and who they'll work with as a result”

#6 **celebrity** *juice*



celebrity juice

“celebrity-brands” relationships



#6

Big names, big opportunities and big risks.

When it comes to arming a brand for a battle for attention, a little star power can go a long way. And if a little goes a long way, imagine how far a lot can go.

Our 2022 Trends Report hailed the Year of the Creator and progress continues apace. Big-name influencers have also been able to shift from endorsement to the more joined-up approach of creating a market and releasing products.

PRIME, the energy drink launched by KSI and Logan Paul and manufactured by Refresco, has successfully skirted the line between demand-driving scarcity and apparently absolute ubiquity in 2023. MrBeast’s branded confectionery products are popping up in point-of-sale features in stores. The potential market for these products is enormous but smaller influencers don’t have the same opportunity and there are risks even for the giants.

Without adequate advice, processes, protections and selectivity, the likes of MrBeast risk flooding their market with subpar products bearing their names.

PRIME is affiliated with Congo Brands, illustrating the importance of solid and reliable partners. MrBeast found that out the hard way in 2023, disavowing his MrBeast Burger partnership with Virtual Dining Concepts over quality concerns and what he considered to be damage to his brand. Virtual Dining Company accused him of greed and bullying as the legal dispute turned ugly. It won’t be the last.

Social platforms are battling for the attention of creators. They’re competing for creator content and one of the most important weapons is monetisation; it’s the creators’ living, after all. MrBeast opened up the discussion by telling Elon Musk that he makes significantly less on X than on YouTube.

What sounds like a simple complaint is in fact indicative of a fundamental question for platforms. Do they want to be a place that attracts creators, showcases their content and empowers them to thrive? What are they willing to invest to make it happen?

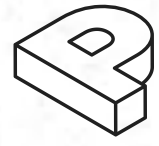
Celebrities and influencers and creators have long had some overlap but the maturity of social media means the boundaries are more blurred than ever, if there are any boundaries left at all. The biggest influencers are as big as the famous faces from more traditional origins. Traditional celebrities are also building their brands online.

The nature of their interaction with brands is changing too. While we still see celebrities in television, print and OOH advertising, the relationship between brands and celebrities is becoming more holistic. From paid appearances and arm’s length endorsements, we’re seeing some celebrity-brand relationships where it’s impossible to see the seams.

And so we nod approvingly in the direction of Ryan Reynolds, the workaholic master of all-in Hollywood brand marketing. Reynolds owns a production company that creates brand ads and has stakes in other businesses including Aviation American Gin, Mint Mobile and FuboTV.

These brands benefit from the Ryan Reynolds Effect. He’s no silent partner; Reynolds uses his celebrity status any which way he can. He’s involved in creative direction behind the scenes and appears in front of the camera in ads for the brands he owns.

Better still, he’s creating placement opportunities for both his brands and others. Aviation is as prominent in Welcome to Wrexham as Phil Parkinson or Paul Mullin. Wrexham sponsors including Ifor Williams Trailers, TikTok and United Airlines have benefited from Reynolds and partner Rob McElhenney appearing in ads and content.



celebrity juice

“The MrBeast Burger debacle is one of the most instructive personal brand lessons of the influencer era so far. The strength of the MrBeast brand is what gives Jimmy Donaldson the opportunity to launch products into the market (something we highlighted in our Trends Report in 2021) but the products can be a threat if they’re not up to snuff.

“Donaldson will have learned that lesson and others will follow. Being selective, protective and hands-on is going to be important as influencer brand products become more common.”

Ollie Catton
Senior Designer

Kim Kardashian is a longstanding internet favourite and a highly influential business owner. As the owner of SKIMS – a \$4 billion company – she became the official underwear partner of the NBA, WNBA and USA Basketball in 2023. This collision of titanic brands isn’t just amplified by Kardashian’s endorsement. It exists because of her seamless involvement.

When a brand and a popular celebrity combine the results can be amazing. Handled properly, relationships that extend beyond traditional endorsements can turn fame into profit in a big way.

But Ryan Reynolds and Aviation Gin are inseparable. Kim Kardashian is SKIMS. And MrBeast, to his apparent detriment, is the uncanny valley sort-of smiling face of MrBeast Burger. It’s their power and their kryptonite, and it must be handled with extreme care.

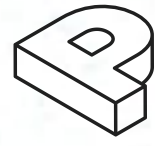
In a world where the celebrity is the brand, simply whacking a name and a face on a product is fraught with brand risk. If influencers are to follow in the footsteps of the likes of Reynolds and Kardashian as owner-endorsers, they need to match their care, brand guardianship and attention to detail too.

There’s one more option available to some brands: make a celebrity of your own. Creating a celebrated mascot isn’t something just any brand can do but investing in an owned character can reap benefits. As distinctive brand assets go, they’re the cutest choice by far. 2023 ended with the usual big-hitter Christmas ads and mascots with fame all of their own. John Lewis and Snapper the venus fly trap were the festive power couple of the season.

“Social platforms are battling for the attention of creators”



battle *ready*



Prepare for the unexpected.

A year on from our 2023 Trends Report, it's clear that the evolution of social media is itself in a fascinating place.

Platform tweaks come and go with regularity but they don't change the game like they used to. Instead, we're in the midst of fundamental macro-level shifts that will alter how platforms, communities, creators and brands will connect and overlap in the next online epoch.

Last year we spoke a lot about those new horizons and the form and function of Web3. It's become synonymous with the volatility of the non-fungibles tokens (NFTs) market. Our Force 1 on NIKE's .swoosh platform launch was an exercise in digital lootboxing and its build-in-public credentials were counter-intuitively boosted by a technically imperfect rollout.

In terms of value, OF1 was the tip of the NIKE iceberg. A reported NFT revenue thus far of more than \$200m – not to mention more than \$100m in royalties and a secondary volume value pushing \$1.4 billion – is serious business.

Creative collaborations continue to play a big part in brand NFTs. Whether it's NIKE and RTFKT, The Hundreds and Bored Ape Yacht Club or adidas and BAPE, partnerships enable brands to buy authenticity and access into the industry while using their own clout to legitimise their collections.

Luxury brands such as Dior embraced NFTs as a means not an end, using them as product authenticators. Starbucks and Fiat are among the brands working with NFTs as entry keys to loyalty programmes. These are use cases that start to kick blockchain authentication into mainstream use.

The Web3 community principles we saw value in at the start of the year continue to bleed into mass social media. Decentralisation of social and building in public are Web3 principles that transcend crypto, blockchains and NFTs, and will help to shape online culture as they grow.

Artificial intelligence (AI) dominated our attention in 2023 and we're going to hear a lot more about it in 2024. AI tools can be both a threat and an opportunity for businesses. Whatever your industry, it's essential to understand the potential impact AI could have on your product or your comms. It will build some brands and ruin others. All we know for sure is we don't know what we'll know about AI this time in 2025.

Our research into the social media activity of large global businesses confirmed something we've known for a long time. The social ecosystems of many multinational businesses have grown organically and left them with patchwork brands and networks of profiles doing too much, too little or nothing at all. As social reaches maturity, the world's biggest businesses can't ignore the need for a helicopter view as well as eyes on the street. Just like the metropolitan real world, if they built their social cities from the ground up tomorrow they would look very different.

The attention battleground is evolving and uncertain. Is your brand ready?

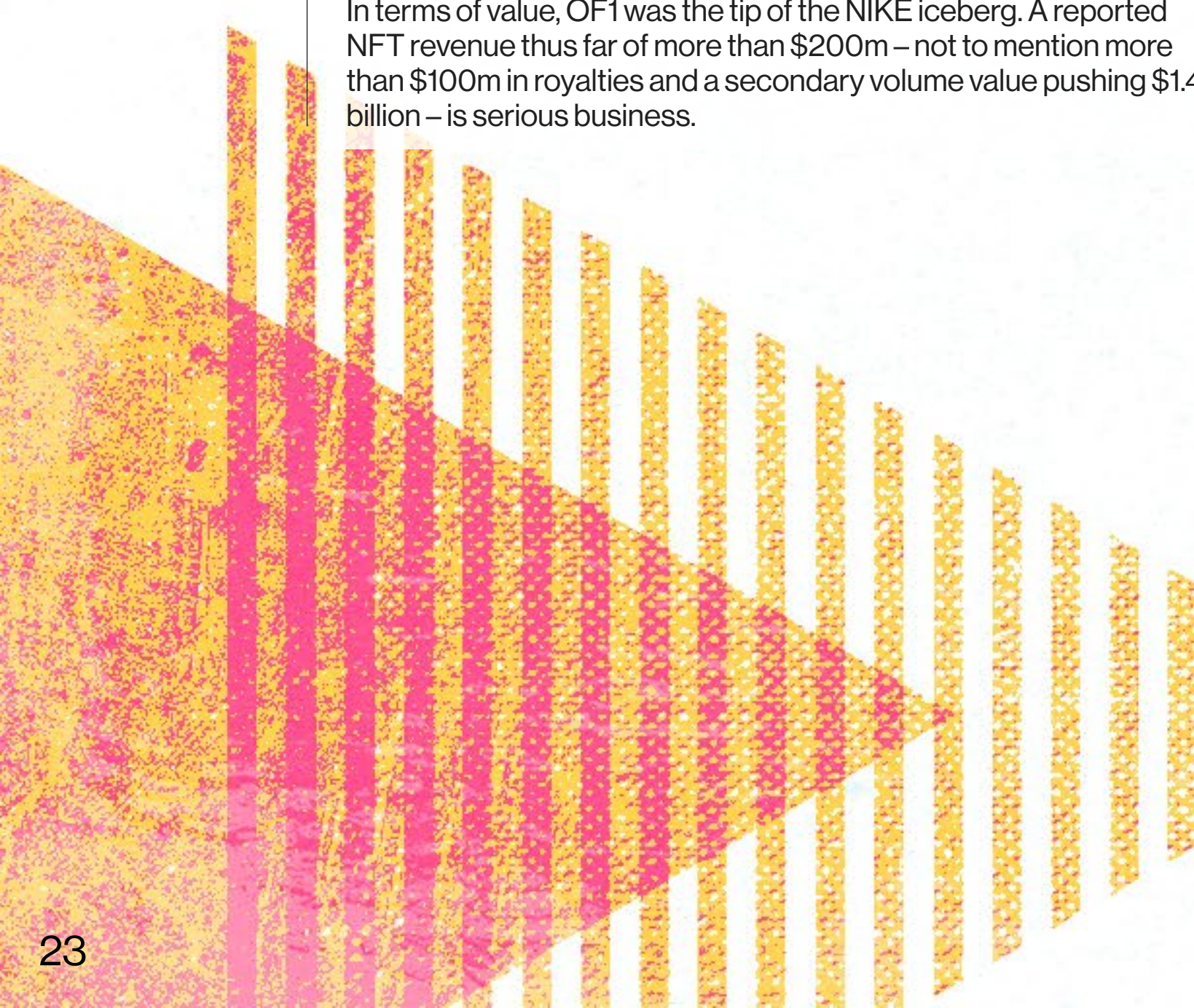
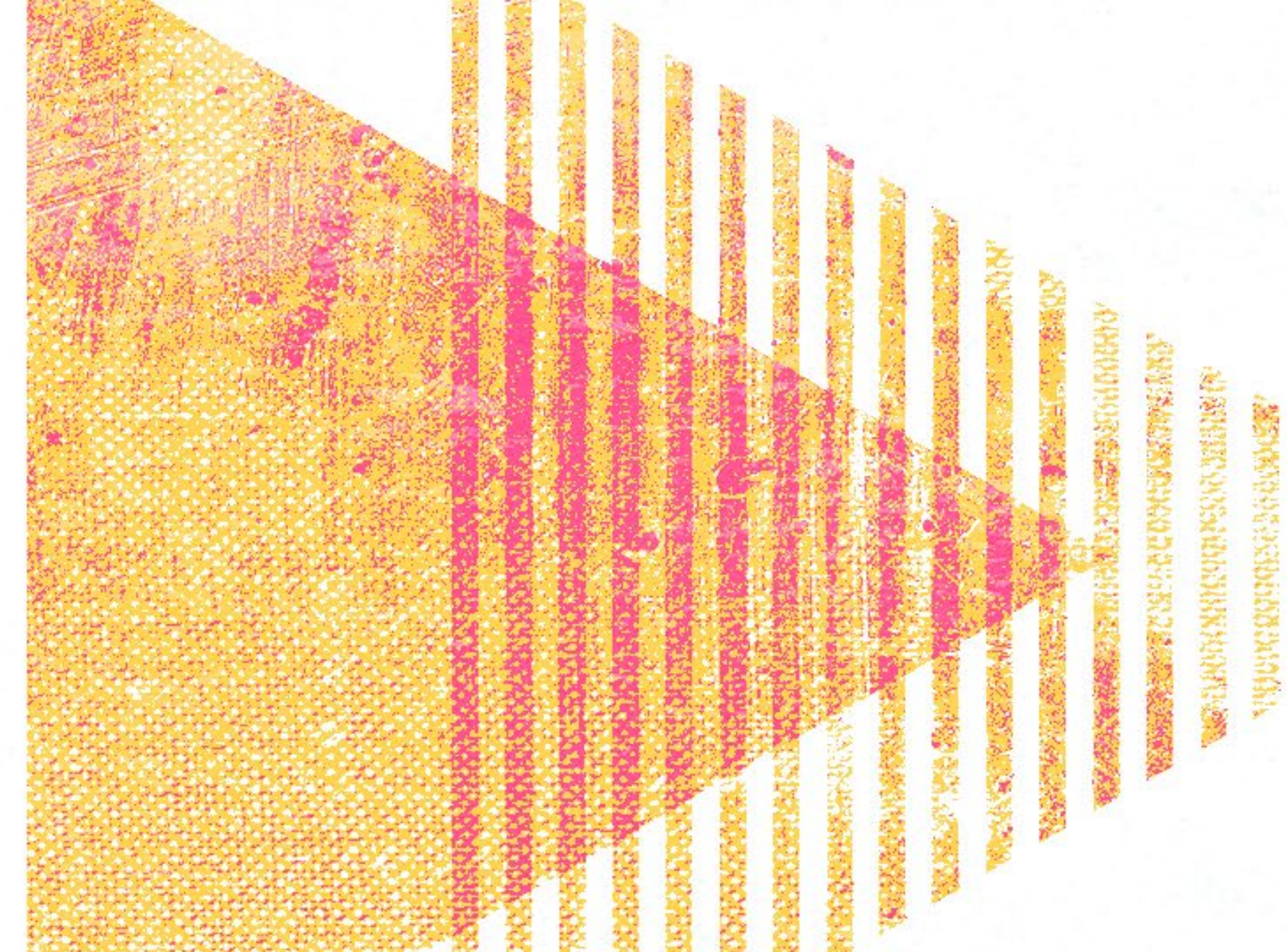
Are you prepared for what's to come and what your brand will need to do to survive and thrive in the new attention economy?

Do you have the right people with the right skills in the right roles, and the adaptability to upskill and reskill when the shifting landscape demands it?

Ensuring your business has the knowledge and skills to negotiate changes to the very fabric of social media is as important as ever.

At Punch, we're embracing the shifting sands of social. If you're fascinated by the future of online communities and brand communications, we'd love to chew the fat.

Bryn Foweather
Head of Social
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starting points

The New Attention Economy is a challenge. Brands need to publish content that delivers on quality, originality and authenticity. Here are some starting points for the year ahead.



#1

the brand *control exchange*

Learn about...

The psychology of brand/consumer co-creation. Sacrificing some control and offering substantial incentives such as money, discounts or fame can help brands unlock the rewards of deeper engagement. Involving consumers in product development, for example, strengthens their connection to a brand and bolsters preference.

Think about...

Your audience. What motivates them? How might your brand deepen engagement by enabling co-creation of products or content? A good way to test the water is to consider a problem or challenge you're facing and work an element of consumer or customer collaboration in the process of solving it.

Speak to us about...

Understanding, developing and utilising distinctive brand assets. In addition to being essential for brand growth, these are the foundations of a brand that can be hacked and remixed by an engaged audience.

#2

time *limit*

Learn about...

The ever-evolving social landscape. It's vital to be in a position to understand where the next platform is coming from, and how to test new formats as they emerge. Gain the first mover advantage.

Think about...

Using direct messages, Meta's new broadcast channels and messaging platforms like WhatsApp. Consider experimenting with different formats and more personalised DM strategies to take your message to where your audience is actually spending time.

Speak to us about...

Evolving from ads, to content, to storytelling, through an editorial approach to social. We can help you test different formats and lengths for both creative and performance and develop strategies for more meaningful content distributed more effectively.

#3

paywalled *social*

Learn about...

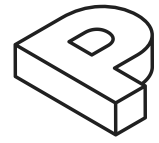
The challenges faced by social media platforms with ad-based business models. Ad blockers, privacy concerns and other factors are leading to declining revenue. But someone has to pay – expect to be pushed to a subscription model with tiered benefits for both brands and consumers.

Think about...

Social that works better for everyone. Paywall business models might be the future for consumers and it could begin to address some changing expectations. Communities can classify information and disinformation. Ideas can flow more freely. Data can be more private. In turn, platforms will develop features for brands that are worth paying for.

Speak to us about...

Social and Web3. Decentralised social platforms aim to give users more control over their data, content and communities. They're built on network technologies that provide greater transparency and user empowerment. Users control their data and decide how it's used, potentially teeing up a future in which some users are rewarded for their participation rather than paying for it.



#4

faking *it*

Learn about...

The potential and pitfalls of AI for your business and your brand. Operationally and creatively, ChatGPT and a whole host of other AI tools are changing the rules. You might not need to be actively using it for your brand but knowledge and understanding will give you an advantage in 2024.

Think about...

Why consumers are happy to be duped. Social content has become easy to ignore and there's a growing fascination between what's real, what's true, and what's flat-out fake. Faux OOH advertising hacks your distinctive brand assets and embraces sustainability. Capture the attention of consumers and keep it by being as environmentally conscious as they are.

The tricky but powerful balance between the technical ability to create something from nothing and the need to be real in the messaging behind your comms and content.

Speak to us about...

Social CGI as a fun and compelling way to capture attention with killer creative. Our SocialFX approach prioritises a layer of reality and ensures that the message – if not the production – is rooted in authenticity. SocialFX makes the impossible visually possible but your brand truth is still the key.

#5

full of *it*

Learn about...

The need to ensure that your partners and suppliers are contributing to, not hindering, your ability to communicate the green credentials of your business.

Think about...

Content wastage. Investing heavily in production for few outputs is environmentally expensive. The green cost per social post is high but can be reduced through efficient production as well as recycling and remixing your best-performing content.

Speak to us about...

Efficient, maximised social content and your options for offsetting its impact.

#6

celebrity *juice*

Learn about...

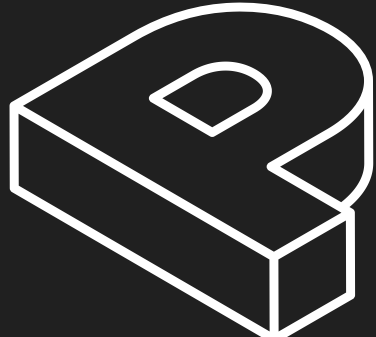
The changing motivations of creators and how they line up with the all-important revenue stream of brand partnerships. Where creators are bringing their own products to market, what do they want from brands? Endorsement is evolving into collaboration. How are brands keeping a different piece of the pie?

Think about...

The unique opportunities brands and creators have to build more sophisticated campaigns that can live simultaneously across several distribution touchpoints. Working with creators means buying a moment of their audience's attention – how will your product be seen by consumers who aren't being reached directly by your ads?

Speak to us about...

Identifying creators and influencers who are a fit for your brand. We can help you choose partners who are enthusiastic about their subject matter and knowledgeable about your product. Let's talk about a strategy that cuts through.



punch

