



MADFEST 2026

PRETTYGREEN'S KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM MADFEST 2026
THE IDEAS THAT MATTER FOR BRANDS



MADFest 2026 brought together thousands of marketers, brand leaders, creatives and innovators to explore the ideas shaping the future of marketing.

The three-day event which took place from July 7–9 at The Truman Brewery in Shoreditch centred around the theme "The Human Touch," exploring how brands can balance technological innovation with authentic, human-centric marketing.

From AI and algorithms to fandom, partnerships and purposeful creativity, MADFest 2026 highlighted one central question:

How do brands stay distinctive when everyone has access to the same technology?



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Rather than attempting to summarise everything discussed across the festival, this report captures the talks we attended and the ideas we believe will have the biggest impact on brands over the next 12 months.

THE FOLLOWING REPORT SHARES **OUR KEY TAKEAWAYS**

ACROSS THE SESSIONS WE ATTENDED, SEVERAL KEY THEMES EMERGED:

- AI should amplify human creativity, not replace it. Design for memory, not just reach or conversion. Ask “How will people remember this?” rather than only “How many did we reach?”
- Measure beyond efficiency metrics. Build qualitative feedback that capture emotional impact, memorability, and word-of-mouth, not only cost savings and speed.
- Building Brands at the Speed of Culture: Emphasizing "cultural fluency," where brands stay relevant by collaborating closely with their communities rather than just marketing to them.



SESSION No.1

THE HUMAN CONNECTION: WHY EFFICIENCY MIGHT BE KILLING YOUR BRAND

Sam Kelly, Chief Experience Officer, Virgin Group

WHAT WE LEARNT

Sam Kelly argued that, as AI and automation make customer experiences increasingly efficient, humanity is becoming a brand's greatest competitive advantage.

He encouraged brands to protect the unstructured moments that fuel creativity, invest in the human touchpoints that create lasting memories, and design experiences people will remember rather than simply optimise for reach or conversion.



Drawing on examples from Virgin, including the use of signature scents as powerful memory triggers, he demonstrated how multi-sensory experiences, employee engagement and moments of genuine surprise can strengthen emotional connection, advocacy and long-term brand loyalty.



KEY LEARNINGS:

HUMANITY IS YOUR GREATEST DIFFERENTIATOR

As AI and automation become commonplace, competitive advantage will come from the moments only people can create. Brands that prioritise warmth, empathy and human connection will stand apart.

DESIGN FOR MEMORY, NOT JUST EFFICIENCY

The most effective experiences aren't necessarily the fastest or most seamless. Deliberately creating standout moments and memorable endings builds stronger loyalty and advocacy.

CREATIVITY NEEDS SPACE TO FLOURISH

Innovation rarely happens in back-to-back meetings. Protecting unstructured thinking time gives people the freedom to generate better ideas and solve problems more creatively.

WHY IT MATTERS:

As brands race to become faster and more efficient, there's a risk of removing the very moments that make experiences memorable. The brands that succeed in the AI era won't simply automate more, they'll invest in the human interactions, emotional connections and sensory experiences that technology can't replicate. By balancing efficiency with empathy and measuring success through memorability, advocacy and emotional impact as well as traditional KPIs, brands can create lasting competitive advantage.



SESSION No.2

BRAND FANDOM – LOVE THAT DRIVES GROWTH: A NO-BS GUIDE TO GROWING THROUGH FANDOMS

Lynne Deason, Head of Creative Excellent, Kantar

Nadine Slyper, Global Marketing VP Home Cleaners, Unilever



WHAT WE **LEARNT**

Kantar and Unilever highlighted that the strongest brands build lasting fan communities by staying true to their core values while engaging with culture, rather than chasing trends.

Kantar introduced its "FAN-DOM" approach, demonstrating how social and digital channels, combined with consistent and coherent brand storytelling, create cultural momentum and long-term growth.

Unilever shared examples of using audience insights and fan feedback to shape campaigns that strengthen relevance and create meaningful consumer value.

Case studies included Absolut's long-standing support of the LGBTQI+ community and Persil's partnership with Arsenal to help close the gender play gap through the women's team and youth participation initiatives





KEY LEARNINGS:

PARTNERSHIPS SHOULD CREATE SHARED VALUE

The best collaborations solve real consumer problems or champion meaningful causes. Purpose-led partnerships, rooted in audience insight, generate stronger cultural impact than traditional sponsorships alone.

CONSISTENCY CREATES MAGNETISM

Brands grow by building a recognisable identity over time. Consistent messaging, creative assets and values create a 'magnetic field' that attracts consumers and strengthens memory.

FANDOM FUELS BRAND GROWTH

The strongest brands don't just build audiences, they build communities of passionate fans who actively advocate, participate and shape the brand's future.

WHY IT MATTERS:

As consumers become increasingly selective about the brands they engage with, building fandom is becoming a powerful driver of long-term growth. Rather than simply broadcasting campaigns, brands should cultivate communities, listen to their audiences and co-create ideas that people genuinely care about. The brands that win will be those that combine cultural relevance with consistency, empowering fans to become advocates while creating campaigns that deliver real value in people's lives.



SESSION No.3

HOW TO TURN THE PEOPLE-POWERED ILLUSION INTO A REALITY

Katie Jackson, Chief Audience and Marketing Officer, Channel 4



WHAT WE **LEARNT**

Channel 4's strategy is centred on its mission to "create change through entertainment," recognising that cultural impact requires both meaningful content and broad audience reach. The organisation emphasises that authentic representation goes beyond on-screen diversity by ensuring diverse voices shape ideas, decisions, and content creation.

As a public service broadcaster, Channel 4 balances playful cultural commentary with bold campaigns that reinforce its commitment to inclusion and representation. The broadcaster is redefining success by looking beyond traditional viewing figures to measure "talkability" through social engagement, word of mouth, and off-platform conversations.





KEY LEARNINGS:

MEASURE WHAT PEOPLE TALK ABOUT

Success isn't just about audience numbers. The brands and content that drive conversation, sharing and word-of-mouth create greater cultural impact and longer-lasting attention.

BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO TAKE A STAND

Brands build stronger connections when they're prepared to challenge culture with a clear point of view, whether through humour or bold values-led storytelling.

PURPOSE NEEDS SCALE TO CREATE CHANGE

Meaningful impact comes from reaching large audiences. The challenge isn't choosing between mass appeal and purpose, it's creating entertainment that delivers both.

WHY IT MATTERS:

In an increasingly fragmented media landscape, brands need to think beyond impressions and reach. Building culturally relevant campaigns means combining a clear purpose with broad appeal, creating authentic representation and giving people something worth talking about. By developing scalable creative platforms and measuring success through conversation as well as consumption, brands can generate lasting cultural impact rather than fleeting attention.



SESSION No.4

THE EFFECTIVENESS GENE: RALLY YOUR ORGANISATION BEHIND YOUR CREATIVE VISION FOR GROWTH

Laurence Green, Director of Effectiveness, Beyond

Ed Cox, Partner, Media, Data & Effectiveness, Beyond

Lorna Dawson, Head of Brand, Alzheimer's Research UK

WHAT WE **LEARNT**

The session explored how charities can use brand marketing more effectively by treating it as an investment rather than a short-term cost.

The speakers emphasised that strong strategic foundations, audience insight, and a clear brand purpose are essential for creating bold, effective campaigns that deliver lasting impact.

They highlighted the importance of educating leadership teams by framing brand activity in terms of ROI, growth. The discussion also reinforced that creativity can outperform larger budgets when it is rooted in strategy and supported by evidence.





KEY LEARNINGS:

TREAT BRAND AS A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT

The most effective organisations position brand marketing as an investment in future growth, not a discretionary cost. Long-term brand building creates the conditions for sustained commercial and organisational success.

SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF THE BUSINESS

Winning internal support requires translating marketing into business outcomes. Framing activity in terms of ROI, payback, growth and long-term value helps secure buy-in from senior leadership.

SMART IDEAS CAN OUTPERFORM BIG BUDGETS

Ingenuity and audience insight often deliver greater effectiveness than media spend alone. Well-researched, strategically grounded creativity can achieve outsized impact, even with limited budgets.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Many organisations still prioritise short-term performance over long-term brand growth, making it harder for bold creativity to thrive. Brands that establish a clear strategic direction, align stakeholders around long-term objectives and measure success beyond immediate results will be better positioned to justify investment and unlock more effective marketing. Ultimately, the strongest brands don't simply spend more, they invest smarter, build consistently and give creativity the foundations it needs to deliver lasting growth.



SESSION No.5

THE ALGORITHM IS EAVESDROPPING: WHY BRAVE BRANDS WIN IN THE ERA OF MACHINES

Sophie Williams, Head of Strategy, Digital Natives

Lizzie Dearsley, Senior Strategist, Digital Natives

Graham Wilkinson, Head of Agency Partnerships, Trustpilot



WHAT WE **LEARNT**

The session argued that the goal shouldn't be to position your brand as "*not AI*" but to focus on being genuinely different in an increasingly crowded market.

Many brands are already blending into the background because they rely on generic, interchangeable ideas rather than creating work with a clear point of difference. In an AI-powered world, creativity isn't just a brand asset, it's a commercial necessity.





KEY LEARNINGS:

DISTINCTIVENESS IS YOUR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

In a world where brands increasingly follow the same playbook, standing out matters more than ever. The brands that build from their own purpose, culture and community will outperform those that simply follow trends.

COMMUNITY SHAPES YOUR AI REPUTATION

AI doesn't rely on what brands say about themselves, it learns from what customers, creators and communities say online. Every review, conversation and piece of user-generated content contributes to your discoverability.

STOP FOLLOWING THE CROWD

Copycat marketing creates invisible brands. Brave, original ideas are more likely to spark conversation, earn attention and build the signals that both people and algorithms reward.

WHY IT MATTERS:

As AI-powered search and recommendations become increasingly influential, brand visibility is no longer determined solely by SEO or paid media. It's shaped by the conversations happening across reviews, social media, forums and creator content. Brands that encourage authentic advocacy and actively manage their reputation will generate the signals AI looks for when making recommendations. In the AI era, being talked about isn't just good for brand awareness - it's essential for being found at all. Discover how AI recommends brands with [PrettyGreen's AI Fame Tracker](#).



SESSION No.6

NOBODY ASKED FOR THIS. WHAT TO MAKE WHEN ANYONE CAN MAKE ANYTHING

Jordan Stone, Head of Social, Content and Creator Marketing, Vodafone UK

Mariam Ziada, Brand Partnerships Manager, FlightStory

Poppy Andrews, Global Partner Delivery Manager, FlightStory

WHAT WE **LEARNT**

Successful campaigns begin with an understanding of the audience rather than relying on insights gathered only when a brief is created. The speakers emphasised the importance of experimentation and using testing to identify what genuinely resonate with an audience.

Vodafone found that its messaging to small businesses was too corporate, and adapting its language to things like 'cash flow' made the brand more relatable. Testing also showed that even small changes in framing could improve campaign performance by up to 9%.



By treating experimentation as a strategic business investment rather than a creative luxury, Vodafone was able to drive an 8-point increase in brand consideration, achieving the #1 position as a trusted digital partner, and strong engagement across the campaign.



KEY LEARNINGS:

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE BEFORE THE BRIEF, NOT DURING IT

The strongest campaigns are built on a continuous understanding of audience behaviour, motivations and culture, rather than insights gathered only when a campaign begins.

REPLACE ASSUMPTIONS WITH EVIDENCE

Don't rely solely on what consumers say in surveys. Challenge assumptions through experimentation, pre-testing and real-world audience behaviour to understand what genuinely resonates.

TREAT EXPERIMENTATION AS A GROWTH STRATEGY

Testing should be viewed as a commercial advantage. Evidence-backed experimentation builds confidence to take bigger creative risks while delivering measurable improvements in brand performance.

WHY IT MATTERS:

As content becomes easier and cheaper to produce, competitive advantage comes from relevance rather than volume. Brands that invest in understanding their audiences, validate ideas through experimentation and communicate in language that reflects real customer needs will create work that is both more distinctive and more effective.



SESSION No.7

RAVE SNAILS & GLITTER KITTENS: WHY TOPCASHBACK TRADED DATA-POINTS FOR DOPAMINE

Laura Jordan Bambach, Chief Creative Officer, Uncharted

Chris Delahunty, Head of Marketing, Topcashback



WHAT WE **LEARNT**

Brands grow by creating emotional connections, not just communicating functional benefits of their service.

In a crowded market, creativity is what captures attention, builds memorability, and drives commercial results.

A strong, consistent brand platform provides the foundation for the brand while even the most functional products benefit from emotional storytelling which engages people.





KEY LEARNINGS:

MAKE PEOPLE FEEL SOMETHING BEFORE TELLING THEM SOMETHING

Consumers make emotional decisions first and rationalise them later. Brands must capture attention, so creating an emotional response before explaining the product is key to driving engagement and recall.

A STRONG BRAND CREATES CONSISTENCY

A clear platform should underpin every touchpoint, from advertising to AI search. Consistent messaging gives teams confidence, strengthens recognition, and ensures creative work feels cohesive.

DISTINCTIVENESS > "DIGITAL BEIGE"

Many brands play it safe, resulting in forgettable, interchangeable marketing. Creative confidence, bold ideas, and memorable brand assets help businesses stand out in crowded, performance-driven categories.

WHY IT MATTERS:

As AI transforms both creative production and media buying, competitive advantage is shifting from scale to strategic thinking. Brands should use AI to accelerate ideas while protecting the human creativity that makes them distinctive. At the same time, paid marketing is becoming increasingly creative-led, making experimentation, structured learning and audience insight more valuable than asset volume alone.



SESSION No.8

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT – HOW CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS HELPED DUREX UNLOCK BETTER CREATIVITY

Ellie Murauer, Area Brand Director at Reckitt (Durex)

Lucy Rennie, Connections Director, Outvertising

WHAT WE **LEARNT**

The session explored how challenging long-held assumptions about consumers can uncover new opportunities for growth and stronger audience connections. It highlighted the importance of using research to broaden understanding, challenge stereotypes, and build strategies based on real consumer behaviour rather than outdated narratives.

The speakers showed how more inclusive, human language can make brands feel relevant to a wider range of people and improve consumer engagement.

They also emphasised that authentic representation delivers both cultural impact and commercial value by increasing brand relevance.





KEY LEARNINGS:

CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS TO UNLOCK OPPORTUNITIES

Many marketing decisions are shaped by outdated assumptions about audiences, behaviours, and identities. The brands that grow are those willing to question what they think they know and use evidence to uncover new opportunities.

DATA SHOULD EXPAND UNDERSTANDING

Powerful research reveals changing behaviours and challenges stereotypes. By looking at real consumer experiences, brands can create more relevant strategies and stronger connections.

INCLUSION SHOULD BE BUILT INTO THE SYSTEM

Meaningful change requires more than inclusive campaigns, Creating diverse review groups, resources, and frameworks helps organisations identify blind spots and make better decisions consistently.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Consumer expectations are evolving faster than many brands' assumptions. Organisations that continually question their thinking, use insight to challenge bias and embed inclusion into both strategy and creative development will produce more relevant, effective work. Rather than treating inclusion as a campaign theme, brands should see it as a strategic advantage that unlocks better ideas, broader audiences and stronger commercial performance.



SESSION No.9

THE NEW RULES OF BRAND COLLABORATION: HOW TO CREATE PARTNERSHIPS PEOPLE ACTUALLY CARE ABOUT

Shona Campbell, Chief Marketing & Growth Officer, Ottolenghi

Imme Ermgassen, Co-Founder, Botivo



WHAT WE **LEARNT**

The session explored why the most successful brand collaborations begin with shared values rather than shared audiences. Partnerships create stronger commercial and cultural impact when both brands are united by a common belief or customer mindset, while still remaining authentic to their individual identities.

The speakers showed that meaningful collaboration requires time, trust and mutual investment. By carefully protecting what makes each brand distinctive, partnerships can create something genuinely new instead of feeling like a short-term promotional exercise.

They also highlighted the importance of human relationships in creating opportunities. Many successful collaborations begin through conversations, shared communities and real-world connections, reinforcing the value of being present where culture and ideas are being shaped.





KEY LEARNINGS:

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS START WITH SHARED VALUES

Successful collaborations are built around a common audience mindset or cultural belief, rather than simply combining two brands or products.

PROTECT THE BRANDS BUT CREATE SOMETHING NEW

Great partnerships require both brands to contribute authentically. Investing time in aligning creative ideas ensures the collaboration feels credible and creates longer-term value.

RELATIONSHIPS CREATE THE BEST OPPORTUNITIES

Many successful partnerships begin through genuine human connections. Being present in the right communities and conversations creates opportunities that cannot be planned through outreach alone.

WHY IT MATTERS:

Consumers are increasingly sceptical of collaborations that feel purely commercial. The strongest partnerships are those built around shared values, complementary audiences and a genuine cultural connection, rather than simply extending reach. Brands should prioritise finding partners that reinforce their purpose, create something neither brand could achieve alone, and invest in long-term relationships over one-off activations.



SESSION No.10

ALGORITHMS, ADVERTISERS, TOXIC CONTENT: STANDING UP FOR HUMANITY

Louis Theroux, Documentary Filmmaker & Founder, Mindhouse Productions

Katie Derham, Broadcaster & Presenter, BBC Radio 3 & BBC Proms

WHAT WE **LEARN**T

The session explored the responsibility that brands, creators and media organisations have in shaping culture as algorithms increasingly influence what audiences see and believe. Beyond driving attention, marketing should also consider the wider human impact of the stories it tells.

The speakers emphasised that curiosity remains one of the most valuable skills for communicators. Staying close to different communities, understanding emerging behaviours and continually learning from culture creates more relevant ideas and more meaningful storytelling.



Finally, the discussion showed that even complex or difficult subjects become more engaging when communicated through relatable language and cultural references. The brands and storytellers who connect most effectively are those who meet audiences where they are, rather than expecting audiences to come to them.



KEY LEARNINGS:

CURIOSITY IS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Staying close to culture requires continuous curiosity. Understanding how different communities think and behave leads to more relevant ideas and stronger storytelling.

LEAD WITH HUMANITY, NOT JUST ATTENTION

Brands and creators have a responsibility to consider the cultural impact of their work. Long-term relevance comes from building trust and meaningful connections, not simply maximising visibility.

SPEAK THE AUDIENCE'S LANGUAGE

Complex topics become more engaging when communicated through familiar cultural references and relatable language. Meeting audiences where they are makes ideas more accessible and memorable.

WHY IT MATTERS:

As algorithms increasingly shape culture and public opinion, brands have a growing responsibility for the content they create and amplify. Building long-term relevance requires more than chasing engagement metrics; it demands curiosity, empathy and an understanding of the communities' brands want to serve. Organisations that stay close to culture and communicate with authenticity will be better placed to build trust, earn attention and create work that resonates beyond the algorithm.