

Tactics & Takeaways

These trends are writing content marketing's next chapter.



A word from our partner

On behalf of WPP Media, we would like to welcome you to this year's essential trend report from Globe Content Studio. In 2026, content marketing transcends transient campaigns, focusing instead on establishing enduring relationships built on trust, driving tangible revenue and cultivating authentic brand identity. This evolving landscape positions content as a critical financial investment, embodying a comprehensive business strategy rather than ad hoc efforts.

This report delves into the currents transforming our industry, revealing fundamental shifts that redefine how brands build meaningful connections. It underscores content marketing as a powerful business strategy and a financial asset, emphasizing genuine relationships and earned trust over mere promotion. From the resurgence of immersive physical experiences countering digital fatigue to the undeniable "halo effect" of credible platforms in a misinformation-laden era, this report illustrates that long-term impact stems from strategic foresight and an unwavering commitment to integrity. It offers the clarity and vision needed to help marketing professionals refine proposals, map sustainable strategies and make lasting cultural imprints in 2026 and beyond.

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About the report's authors

Globe Content Studio is the content marketing division of The Globe and Mail, a Canadian media and technology company. Our mission is to elevate brands and drive business results through premium journalistic storytelling.

- **Note:** References in the report to "Globe Insiders" are The Globe's engaged community of about 3,500 readers who participate in targeted research initiatives.

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Keep calm and AI on

AI has turned the marketing world upside down. Tech evangelists are waxing poetic about hyper-efficiency and cost-savings, while some marketing strategists allude to fighting their way through waves of slop, performance declines and brand-safety traps. What's the best path forward?

Eye dreams
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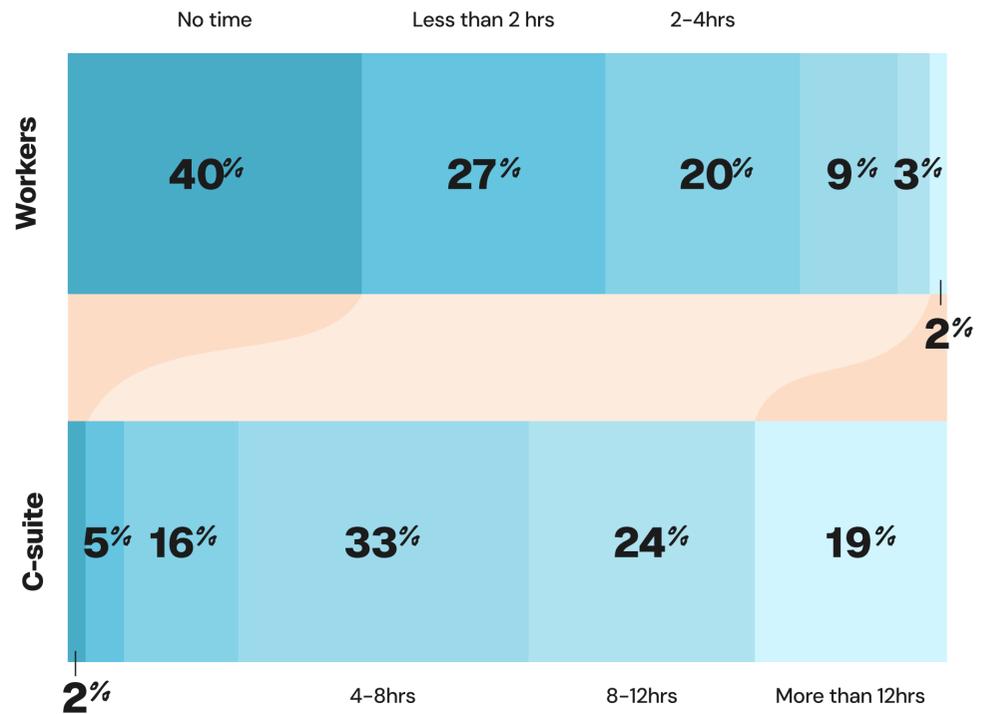
Think Global

the Prologue

Artificial intelligence is nothing new to marketers. Even if it didn't cross your mind, machine learning was quietly powering online ads in the 2010s, recommendation algorithms were fueling addictive apps back in the 90s, and there's a pretty compelling argument that it was boosting ye olde umbrella sales as far back as the 1860s. But ChatGPT hit differently: suddenly, machines can make surprisingly decent art, music, text, videos, websites, medical diagnoses – pretty much everything “knowledge workers” do for a living. Uh ... neat! (*Cue nervous laughter.*)

We're now caught in the crossfire of an AI arms race where tech giants hurl huge volumes of cash at each other and make vaguely troubling claims about the future of work. (Well, not always that vague: There have been signals related to automating the whole ad stack.) We all want to adapt, but how? A few points highlight deeper issues that could hold some companies back.

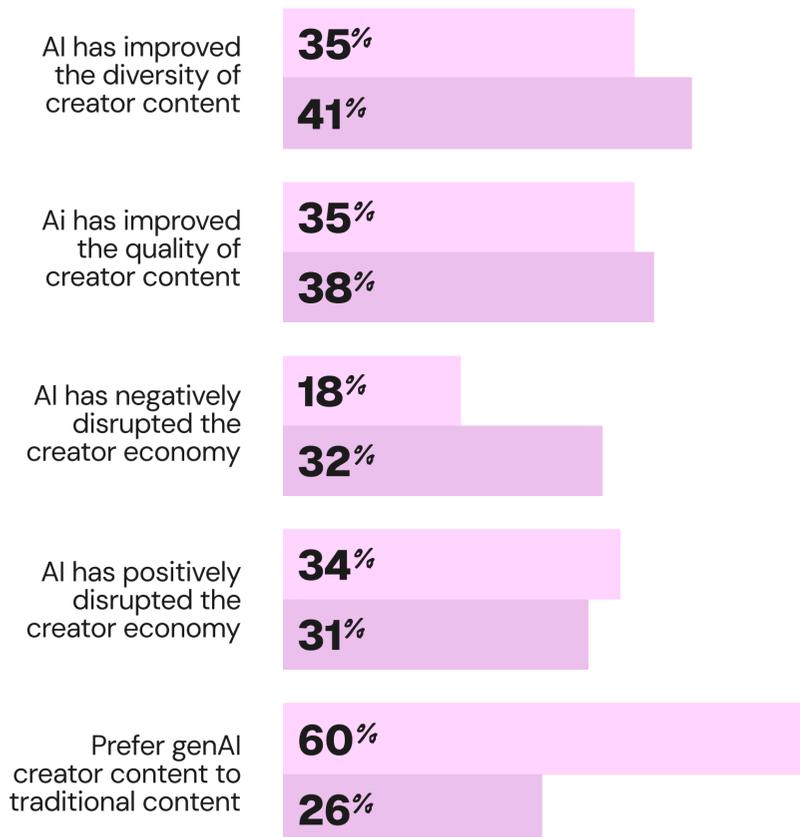
How much time do you think you are saving each week by using AI?



Source: [The Wall Street Journal](#)

AI slop is splintering consumer sentiment toward creator content

% of UK/US consumers who agree with the following statements concerning AI, Nov 2023 vs. July 2025



Note: ages 16+
 Source: Billion Dollar Boy, “Muse Two: The Real Impact of AI on the Creator Economy” conducted by Censuswide, Oct 8, 2025
 Source: [EMARKETER](#)

the Citations

AI (primarily machine learning and natural language processing) has been automating ad targeting, optimization, personalization and more for at least a decade – and yet, marketers who do these jobs still exist. Advertising employment has remained stable and it is actually projected to grow 6 per cent (faster than average) in the United States through 2034.

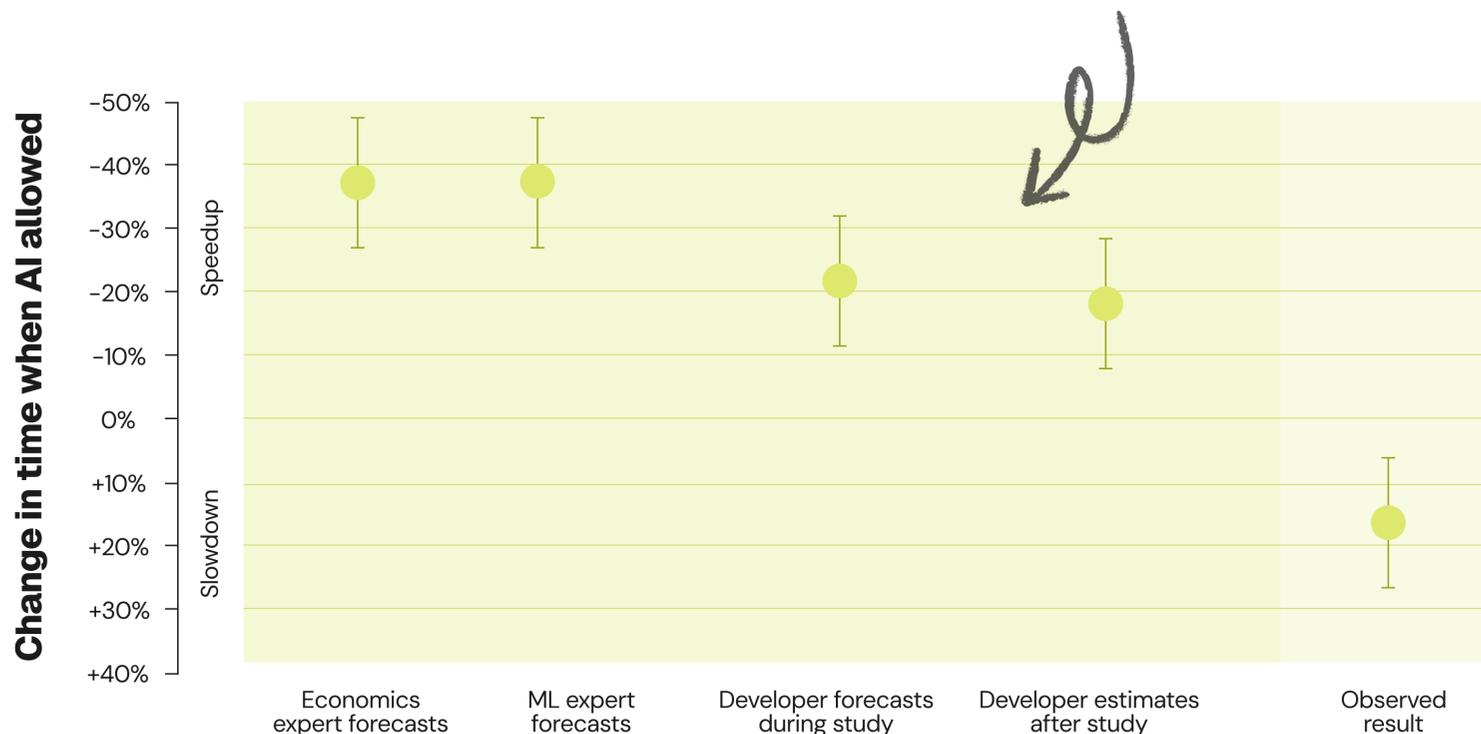
While AI has simplified some tasks, it's complicating a whole lot more of them, keeping us just as busy (if not busier). Platforms race to bolt on flashy, half-baked features that might break campaigns, spew AI slop and conjure legal and brand-safety challenges out of nowhere. “Move fast and break things” is back and some marketers are getting stuck with the fallout.

We're in our slop era: Generative AI makes headlines as much for its feats as for its fails. Big brands from Coca-Cola to Taylor Swift have already taken heat for the latter. But all press is good press, right? Maybe not.

The hallucinations are coming from inside the house: AI's big promise is productivity: more output, less effort. Most of us believe it – like the developers in [this METR study](#) who thought AI would help their coding tasks go 20-per-cent faster. Instead, it made them 19-per-cent slower. [Another pre-print study](#) indicated that even when managers saved time with AI, 36 per cent admitted to wasting at least half of it anyway. Who's hallucinating now?

Against expert forecast and developer self-reports, early 2025 AI slows down experienced open-source developers

In this RCT, 16 developers with moderate AI experience completed 246 tasks in a large and complex project on which they had an average of five years of prior experience.



Source: [METR](#)

Can you vibe code an ROI?: Many companies are encouraging adoption and experimentation, but so far only 2 per cent of Canadian organizations seem to be getting actual value. A lack of direction and effort is leading to what [Harvard Business Review](#) dubs 'workslop' – lackluster output that offloads labour to other co-workers.

Globe Content Studio experiments have yielded similar issues: we tested AI-generated copy against human copy in a handful of our recent social media ad campaigns to see if it could get similar results with less time and effort. We found that the human stuff still received higher click-through rates at lower cost – not accounting for the additional time and effort required to prompt, fix and troubleshoot errors with AI's output.

Copywriter	Ad's click-through rate	Ad's cost per result
MS Copilot AI	1.70%	\$0.42
META AI	2.14%	\$0.39
Human	3.03%	\$0.30

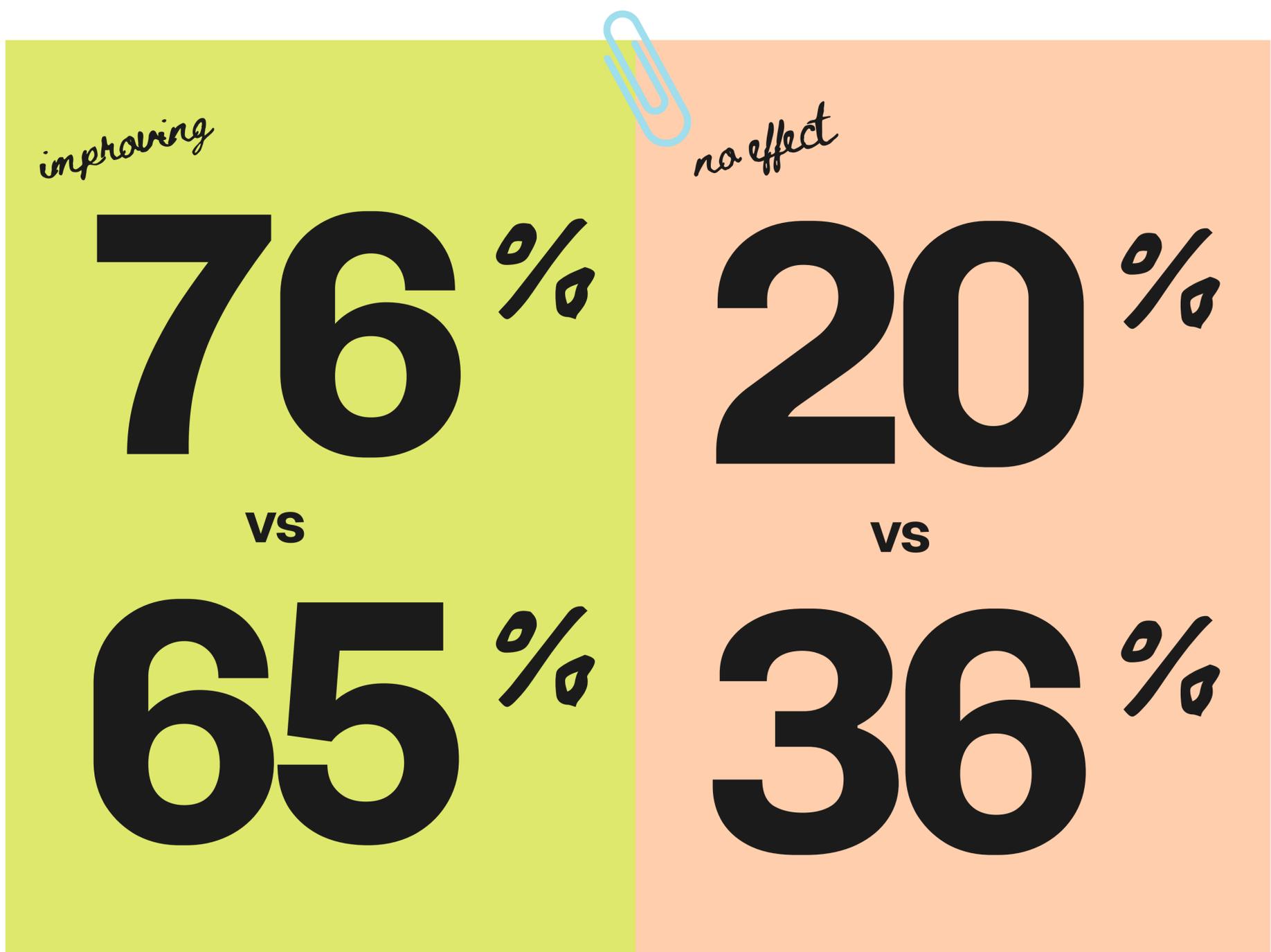
*Based on a randomized selection of Meta Ads that ran over a three-week period in late 2025

Source: [Globe Content Studio](#)

the Conclusion

Content marketers will battle epic new levels of scaled content and slop in 2026, especially as brands come under increasing pressure to chase the attention of bots over humans. You won't win by fighting fire with fire. As Ryan Law of Ahrefs puts it, "any part of content marketing that can be fully automated by AI is destined to become virtually worthless." What will have worth is stuff that's still truly original, trustworthy, unique and even a little messy.

There's a growing disconnect between what business leaders expect from AI and what teams actually experience on the ground. We need to remove institutional barriers and silos that prevent communication across departments. If we don't come together to separate hype from reality, define real use cases and effectively measure AI's impact, we could all end up behind in our efforts to move forward.



Source: Globe Insiders panel, Trends Reports, December 2 - December 5, 2025

We asked a sample of our Globe Insiders how AI is currently impacting their workplace. While most felt it was at least somewhat improving productivity, it differed depending on their level of seniority: more executives and owners felt it was having a positive effect, while more early-to-mid career employees believed it was having no effect.

Your Next Chapter

Workers

Become AI's overbearing captain. The optimistic take is that you won't be replaced – you'll be “promoted” to a manager of agentic helpers. If that's true, you'll need to become more of a micromanager: constantly hovering, reviewing and redoing their work when necessary. AI can (and already has) sped up lots of little stuff, but there are limits to its abilities, and it will continue to struggle with true “intelligent” work. Keep watch.

Push proof over vibes

The theory? AI will unlock hyper productivity. The evidence? Currently MIA. If you're already experimenting, start quantifying the actual costs/benefits of automation for your own goals: Do hundreds of AI-generated pages actually boost your search rank? Does “suggested” ad copy from platforms actually get more conversions with less overhead? Did prompting Midjourney for artwork really take less time than if you'd sourced it yourself? Track your numbers before going all in.

Leaders

Get in the trenches. AI usage has nearly doubled in the past two years, but many organizations still lack guidance and support. Develop clear policies, invest in training and empower junior staff to become AI power users – as IBM's Arvind Krishna argues, it's smarter to upskill staff than to replace them: “Wouldn't you rather have an entry-level person, and AI makes them more like a 10-year expert? Isn't that more useful to me than the other way around? Otherwise, where is the talent who's going to come up with the next great product?”

Be human AF

At the end of the day, marketing is still all about psychology – having the emotional intelligence to know what makes people happy, sad, afraid or hopeful and triggering action from that. AI can optimize, but it can't empathize. Stand out in the sea of slop by leaning further into uniquely human qualities: intuition, quirkiness, understanding of culture and context. That's what has always kept good marketers ahead of the pack, and it will only become more valuable from here.

02

EV dreams meet reality

Canada was on the road to an EV future – until it hit a speed bump in 2025. With incentives gone (for most of 2025, but now returned), mandates removed, prices high and infrastructure lagging, drivers are pulling away from making the full-electric leap. Now the future looks hybrid: automakers who bet on flexibility, multiple powertrain options and easing customer decision-making will ultimately pull ahead on the long haul to net-zero.

Long live the

Think global,

Into The

the Prologue

In 1908, Ford revolutionized the automotive and manufacturing landscape with the Model T, the first mass-produced car. A few years in, it made the vehicle available in only one colour – black – to increase production efficiency and cut costs. A little over a decade later, it introduced an array of colours to avoid losing ground to rivals.

The auto sector has changed a lot since then, but what has not gone away is the tightrope automakers must walk to offer choice (features, trims, colours and powertrains) while maximizing production. Drivers want options, but offering too many of them is challenging to produce (and it's confusing for customers).

One of a buyer's biggest decisions is about the powertrain – gas, mild hybrid, conventional hybrid, plug-in hybrid or fully electric. In our

Globe Insiders reader survey, 72 per cent said having multiple powertrain options is more important to them than not.

The push for EVs is stalling, partly owing to political rhetoric in the United States and the reduction of incentives in Canada. A new trade deal with China and the return of rebates could revive interest, but with so much uncertainty about how quickly infrastructure will advance, drivers are looking for some middle ground where they can save on fuel costs, help the environment and not be forced to change their lifestyles.

Automakers can't simply "stick to black" any more – to hold or increase market share, they'll need to diversify on the powertrain front.



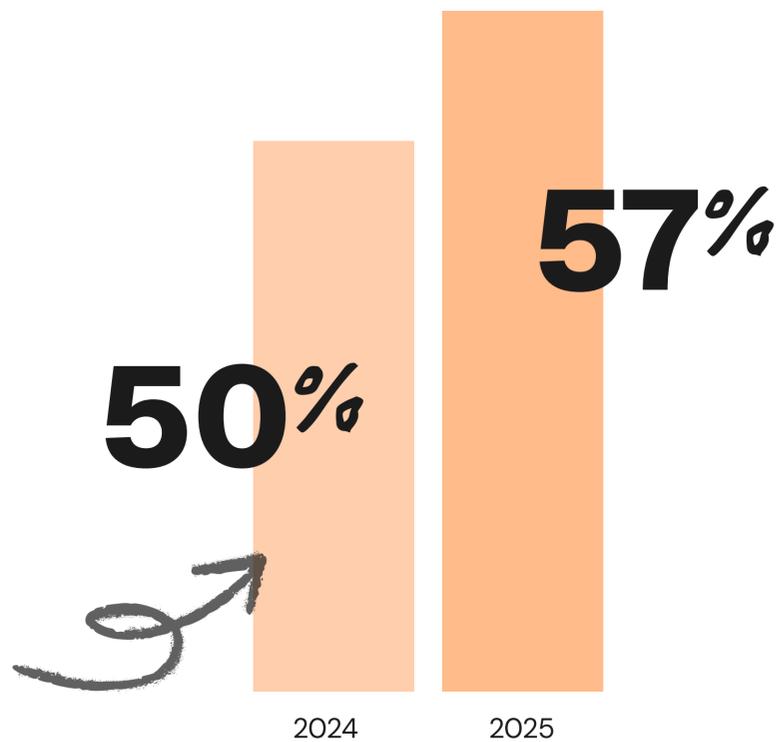
Source: [Ford](#)



the Citations

Hybrid hopes: According to data from both [S&P Global Mobility](#) and [Statistics Canada](#), full hybrids (HEVs) are ascendant, overtaking both fully electric (BEV) and plug-in hybrids (PHEVs) in sales. Policy changes are a big factor in the EV drop, but even with the rebates being removed and then coming back, consumer interest is shifting. In The Globe's annual auto survey, readers said they were increasingly considering a hybrid, 63 per cent in 2026, up from 57 per cent in 2025 and 50 per cent in 2024.

Globe readers said they were increasingly considering a hybrid



Source: Globe Insiders Auto Survey

Put the cart before the horse: Carmakers are moving toward more flexible production, where the gas engine, electric motor and battery (or a combination of the two) is installed late in the process. The [BMW X5](#) will be available in five powertrain options, for example, and the new [Toyota Corolla](#) will be available in four. These sorts of adaptations give buyers more freedom to pick their car first and their engine second.

What's in a name? The volume of vehicles with a hybrid option are expanding so quickly, it's surprising to see a new model launched today without one. Automakers are also rolling EVs into their main brands instead of keeping them in a separate category. [Mercedes-Benz](#) is sunsetting the EQ sub brand and [Audi](#) is moving away from the "E-Tron" naming convention on all of its EVs.



Source: BMW via Car and Driver

the Conclusion

We've come a long way since the Model T, but cars still take time to produce – approximately six or seven years from concept to launch. That means automakers always have to play fortune teller, anticipating what drivers will want well before the drivers themselves know.

After spending decades and billions of dollars investing in electrified tech and flexible assembly lines, they now have the opportunity to market cars in a way that doesn't force consumers into one narrow category.

Canada's 2035 mandate for 100-per-cent Zero-Emission Vehicle (ZEV) sales was admirable, but perhaps unrealistic. We now see a much more diversified picture in the decades ahead: gas, electric, hydrogen and other fuel types will all share the roads and the brands that win will be the ones that make the choice easy for the drivers.

Your Next Chapter

Inform without overwhelming

Options are always nice, but too many can paralyze buyers. There's a lot of terminology and tech out there that can freeze customers up – for example, most of our readers (63 per cent) have never heard of a "mild hybrid," and a [Deloitte study](#) found that the main reason many Canadians are not charging EVs at home is because they simply don't know enough about how to install a charger. Smart content marketing can demystify and guide these decisions.

Make variety your value prop

No two drivers are alike, and one-size-fits-all solutions no longer appeal to them. From engines to aesthetics, flexible options signal autonomy and lifestyle fit. Automakers that tout their options clearly – without overwhelming – will win trust and loyalty.

Address the elephant in the room

There's a misconception that tariffs will push new cars out of reach, but that's not completely true. EMC says many EVs sold in Canada are made by automakers offering both gas and electric cars that are not built in the United States, and therefore won't be affected by counter-tariffs. Dispelling rumours and transparency on pricing will keep buyers engaged.

03

Long live the halo effect

Brand safety in the news business has been a touchy topic lately, but as people battle an AI-drenched, misinformation-filled digital landscape, they're flocking to credible journalism – and the businesses that appear there can gain both attention and trust. This year, the real risk isn't advertising in news, it's staying away from it.

Think global,
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Into the

Let's Get

the Prologue

Advertising has always lived next to news – [Canada's first ad agency](#) was born for that reason – and consumers have long understood the distinction between the two worlds. The “church and state” code of journalism is simple: reporters report, advertisers advertise, and everyone stays in their lane. It’s a win-win relationship where brands get eyeballs while newsrooms get to keep the lights on.

Adjacency has remained a crucial marketing tool, from ‘traditional’ newspapers, television and radio, to today’s search, social and streaming platforms. Ad placement does not equal endorsement,

but lately, polarization and disinformation have been messing with the formula. The “[fake news](#)” phenomenon, coupled with the unrelenting pace of “real” news, have made marketers more afraid of where they’ll appear. [A recent cross-border study](#) found that confidence in news institutions is down to 37 per cent in the United States and 52 per cent in Canada – numbers that make some advertisers skittish. The [International News Media Association \(INMA\)](#) found brand-safety systems (such as “blocklists” that shield companies from being shown near controversial content) are overcorrecting, stopping ads from appearing next to high-quality journalism (and thus engaged audiences) simply because of an out-of-context keyword in a headline.

It’s now the myth that won’t die: “Brands shouldn’t advertise next to news.” It’s sticky, it’s scary – but it’s not supported by data. Busting the myth will require smarter tech, contextual nuance and brands that are willing to accept fact over fiction.

the Citations

Good news for people who love bad news:

In a groundbreaking study, [Future of News Canada 2025](#), researchers conducted a randomized experiment with more than 9,600 Canadians to see if ads adjacent to “hard” news (for example, a politics or a crime story) were perceived any differently than ads next to more neutral stories. The result? They were not. Purchase intent, favourability and other reputational brand metrics were nearly identical. This held true for both French and English speakers and regardless of age, income, education or political affiliation.



Ads adjacent to “not brand safe” stories perform on par with ads next to the “brand safe” articles

66.9%

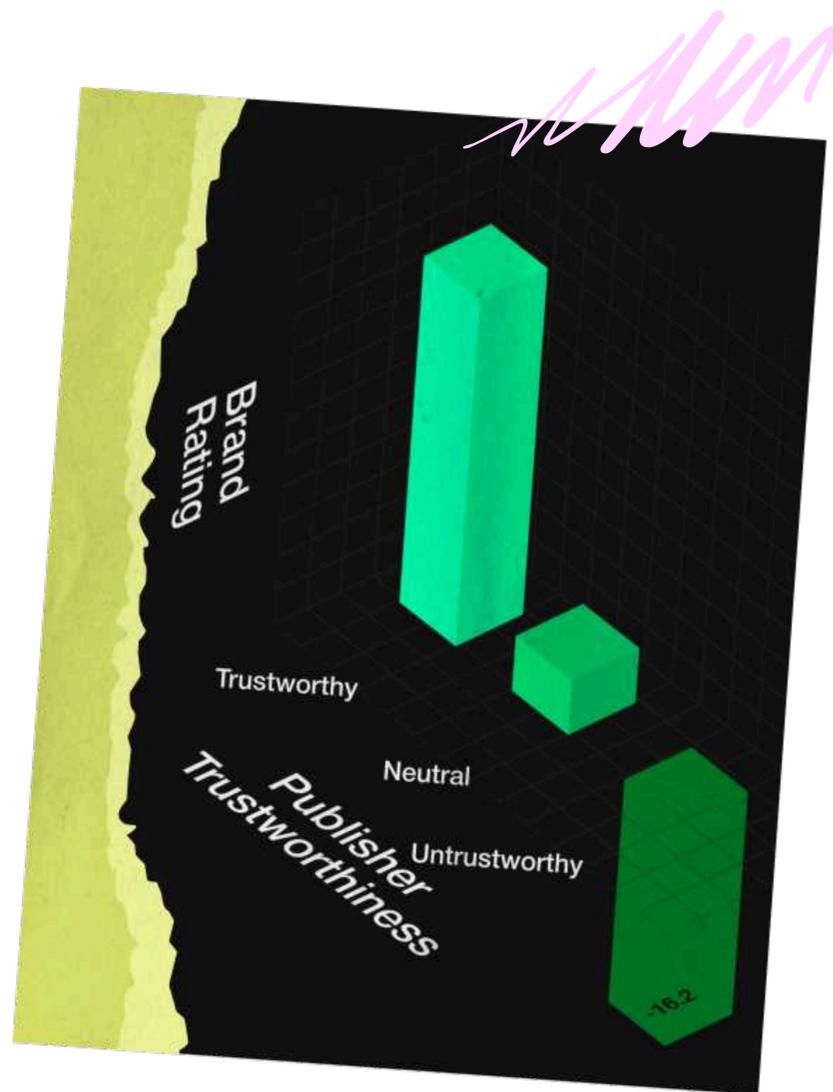
‘Not Brand Safe’ Content

67.9%

‘Brand Safe’ Content

Trust the presses: Big Tech and political shenanigans have made us all a lot more skeptical, but the 2024 [News Effectiveness Study](#) found that audiences still have faith in a few established institutions. News publications are generally seen as 35-per-cent more trustworthy than the baseline, and journalists continue to have much more credibility than influencers or AI, even with younger folks. Bonus for advertisers: trusted environments like these also led to a 25-per-cent lift in brand ratings.

AI learns to read the room: AI-driven contextual targeting is finally fixing the blunt-force blacklist problem that kept quality journalism off-limits. INMA's analysis mentions tools such as Mobian, Mantis and Illuma, which can analyze tone, sentiment and real risk – not just trigger words – to give advertisers broader, safer access to news environments. The Globe and Mail just announced its own [AI-powered targeting solution](#) that combines sentiment and thematic signals with first-party data, driving stronger engagement and relevance.



the Conclusion

As social media and AI make it harder to know what's real any more, it's no wonder brand-safety fears have pushed marketers into a corner. Unfortunately, it's costing them. Some advertisers tip-toe around news like it's radioactive, but audiences are doing the opposite – seeking credible journalism as one of the few things they can still believe in. Since nearly a quarter of Canadians are “[news junkies](#)” who check headlines multiple times a day, brands in these spaces not only get a trustworthy sheen, they tap into a large, locked-in crowd.

News publishers don't just offer legitimacy at the awareness level, they offer a full-stack bump. Globe Content Studio and other reputable content-marketing shops pair storytelling expertise and transparency with smart targeting, CTAs, extensions and referral tracking that can benefit partners all the way down the funnel: awareness, consideration, even a bit of conversion.

In an era defined by uncertainty and information overload, partnering with trusted platforms is strategic.

Your Next Chapter

Steal from the newsroom's playbook

Outlets such as The Globe and Mail may have more than a century of journalistic cred, but they don't have a monopoly on honesty – crib these principles to strengthen your own brand. Check out [The Trust Project](#), an international group of orgs, including [The Globe](#), that has built a framework of guidelines. Transparency around authors, sources and methods are all newsroom rules, but they can also be smart brand strategy.

Use AI to boost trust – not break it

Forget keyword blocklists, biased targeting and other outdated tactics; they're performance-draining overkill. Lean into tools and partners that leverage AI to better understand context, nuance and sentiment. You can have more control over where your ads do (and don't) appear, without missing out on high-attention, high-value environments.

Think beyond "hard" news

If fast-breaking political and crime stories really aren't a good fit, no problem – major publishers have huge topic diversity. Business, sports and entertainment are core pillars with similar reach, and yes, lifestyle content is expanding. Meet audiences wherever their interests take them.

Go deeper down the funnel

Publishers do a lot more than get "eyeballs" these days: They house full-fledged studios that produce newsletters, podcasts, videos, social extensions, live events and more, adapting to new content habits and moving audiences from awareness to consideration and action. Only buying display? You're leaving half the value on the table.

04

Think global, buy local

Who needs a poli-sci degree? Last year, we all got a crash course in Canada-U.S. relations. Tariffs, trade wars and a wild news cycle caused Canadians to rethink their loyalties – their brand loyalties, that is. For marketers at home, “Buy Canadian” is an opportunity as golden as maple syrup. For marketers abroad, it’s a stickier situation. Roll up your sleeves and read the room, eh?

Into the
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Let's get

Keep calm

the Prologue

Canada and the United States have historically been strong partners (aside from the occasional sports rivalry), but that all changed in 2025. What started as a seemingly flip “51st state” joke from a freshly re-elected U.S. President Donald Trump escalated into real policy: annexation threats backed by sweeping tariffs on Canadian steel, lumber and autos. We hit back with retaliatory levies and, just like that, decades of integrated supply chains were in shambles.

The political tension bled into the culture: Hockey crowds booed U.S. anthems, musicians rerouted tours, we lost the ability to make a proper Old Fashioned, and national pride became a real economic indicator. In our survey of Globe readers, 54 per cent said they avoid U.S. products when

possible, while 44 per cent actively seek out Canadian alternatives. According to recent CBC data, both flights and road trips to the United States have also fallen, while Canadian film and TV streaming seems to be on the upswing. (*Heated Rivalry* S2 when?!)

This raises big marketing questions: Will Canadians still buy what the U.S. is selling? If not, where will all their loonies go?



Source: The Globe Shop

the Citations

Strong and free: Multiple studies in 2025 confirmed that Canadians want to spend more domestically, but are they really doing it? Interac data says yes – between April and July, 2025, Canadian SMBs outpaced larger (typically American or multinational) ones in year-over-year volume growth, racking up 15-million incremental debit transactions. We’ve seen the demand firsthand: The Globe launched a pop-up shop last fall featuring patriotic, proudly made-in-Canada merch to strong response.

Yes we CanCon: Across media, Canadians appear to be tuning out the United States and turning up the volume at home. Nearly half (42 per cent) of those we asked in our annual Globe Insiders reader survey said they're trying to cut back on American media, while one in five have ditched U.S. TV altogether. Signal Hill's Podcast Listener 2025 survey found that Canadian-made shows are now edging out U.S. faves (with French-language content in particular leading that growth), and Globe Content Studio's recent partnership with [Indigo](#) revealed how book sales are shifting, too.

notes:

In March, 2025, Indigo updated the maple leaf sticker it uses to label Canadian authors so shoppers can more easily spot them at a glance. "Since then, we've seen more than a 20-per-cent increase in sales for books that are written by Canadian authors ... it's really nice to see."

The path less travelled: Nearly seven in 10 of our Globe Insiders say they reduced cross-border travel either fully or partly last year. Four out of five say they plan to vacation within our borders instead, but international spots – Europe, especially Britain – are also high on their list. Tariffs aren't the only reason: privacy and safety concerns, such as [new fingerprinting rules](#) for snowbirds, are having an effect. Canadian travellers want good value, low stress and experiences that feel worth the journey, and they're willing to overhaul their whole itinerary for it.

55%

actively avoided U.S. travel in 2025

13%

reduced travel where possible
(= 68% reduced in some way)

80%

planned to stay in Canada when travelling within next 12 months

the Conclusion

And U.S. marketers? We haven't forgotten you. Canadians indicate they'll still consider crossing the border for a good deal, a special incentive or at least some sign of a safe, welcoming experience. These tactics are your ticket back into the conversation.

It's no secret that homegrown is having a moment, and Canadians are all in. Expect them to keep scanning labels, asking for origins and choosing local wherever they can, despite inflation and cost-of-living worries. This is the time for Canadian brands to turn maple-leaf pride into market share: show off your roots and tell the real story behind your product to win attention, trust and loyalty.

This doesn't mean the rest of the world is shut out – Canadians are keeping their options open and increasingly feeling out the international scene. Local brands now need to compete on a global scale, while those from overseas will need to bring their A-game. Those who emphasize value, cultural connection, sustainability and uniqueness will win more hearts – and open more wallets.

Your Next Chapter

Get loud and proud

Make Canadiana core to your brand identity. Slapping a maple leaf on the package won't cut it – shoppers know the difference between real and performative patriotism. Instead, use content to clarify where your products are made, how they get to shelves and the vital part they play in the local economy. Follow the conversation in places like Reddit's [r/buycanadian](#) and in comments on The Globe's consumer coverage to understand what buyers really care about. Even non-local brands that still invest, employ and manufacture here can earn support.

Go beyond borders

This is more than a Canadian story, it's a global one. Local brands now have a huge opportunity to expand reach into other markets looking for U.S. alternatives, while international brands have a chance to tap into Canada's shifting sentiment. This means all marketers will need to rethink messaging for different languages and cultures (particularly *en français* for the impassioned Quebec crowd). Invest in localized market research and partnerships to engage new communities.

Mend the divide

American brands don't have to give up. Those that address local concerns head-on and offer special incentives to northern friends can hold their position. For example, we've partnered with U.S. brands to share how they're creating local jobs, manufacturing responsibly, and going the extra mile to welcome friends to the north – and our readers are responding. The truth is, many Canadians are still willing to support U.S. brands, as long as they're listening and adapting.

05

Into the game-iverse

Everything's a game – and we're the designers. Brands are using apps and technology to drive engagement in endlessly entertaining ways, making everything from banking to workouts as fun as a *Fortnite* match. For marketers, turning passive scrolling into active participation has tons of upside – but tread carefully, or you'll be playing with addiction, diminishing return and regulatory ire.

Let's get
p

Keep calm

EV dreams

the Prologue

Gamification was a thing long before we had a word for it, but in the social-media-fuelled attention economy, it's marketing's biggest cheat code. Companies in every category borrow tricks from game designers and behavioural scientists to keep users engaged: closing Apple fitness rings, growing Duolingo streaks and racking up Starbucks rewards have all become daily rituals. You can't even scroll through [Google](#) or [LinkedIn](#) without a little amusing diversion.

In finance, it's a real game-changer: Banking and investing have gone from chores to challenges. In our annual Globe Insiders survey, a third of our readers (34 per cent) say they check their investment apps daily and 28 per cent say these apps have made them feel at least somewhat more confident in their investing decisions. But, here in Canada, fintech progress has run parallel to legalized sports betting and the lines between gambling and investing are blurring.

The appeal is clear – studies show gamified elements drive longer usage and can improve learning outcomes, increase physical activity, boost financial literacy and so much more. But the pressure to maintain streaks and compete can lead to stress, addiction and risky financial decisions. For marketers, the question isn't whether gamification works, it's how to do it right without becoming the bad guy.



34%

Check their investment apps daily

28%

Say investment apps have made them feel more confident in their investing decisions.

Source: DUOLINGO via [The Wall Street Journal](#)



the Citations

More than a meme stock: By turning learning into a game, Duolingo has become the world's most-downloaded language app with more than 50-million daily active users. Streak rewards, badges and leaderboards are crucial to the hype – more than nine million now have a year-plus streak going. That dedication fuels a vibrant online community of memes and viral social content, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of engagement that drives both product revenue and cultural relevance.

All the news that's fit to play: The New York Times' games hub has exploded into one of its biggest money makers, drawing more than 10-million daily players and driving as much as half the time spent on the site. The Washington Post, The Atlantic, CNN and others got themselves in on the action. In recent partnerships with TurboTax, Desjardins and Baileys, Globe Content Studio integrated elements such as interactive quizzes and calendars, levelling up reader interest and engagement.

The ethics glitch: Gamification isn't all fun and games. These tactics, when taken to extremes, can have harmful consequences: one recent study found 23 per cent of social-media users expressed shame, disappointment and demotivation due to pressures from popular fitness and calorie-counting apps. There's also increasing proof that game-like features in trading apps (push notifications, prizes and rewards) nudge users into more frequent and riskier decisions. That's why regulators such as the Ontario Securities Commission are stepping in, warning that "gambling-style" tricks could be cause for a permaban.



Source: [Kainat Ahmad](#)

There is a behavioural continuum between gambling and speculative trading that's observable in human behaviour – and modern apps have made that line blurrier than ever.

the Conclusion

Now that tracking passive behaviour is harder than ever (hello ad blockers, privacy settings and consent opt-outs), active participation is gold. Gamified experiences turn scrollers into players, giving you measurable actions and stronger signals of intent.

But it isn't a magic wand: points, badges and streaks drive quick wins, but potentially shallow engagement. Remove the rewards and interest evaporates. Replacing genuine connection with dopamine-driven clicks isn't necessarily a long-term solution for any business. If you're in a stricter space such as finance, the stakes are even higher – Canadian regulators are already warning firms and "finfluencers" not to get too zippy with engagement hacks that cross compliance lines.

Marketers need to strike a balance, to design thoughtful experiences that feel rewarding without being manipulative, and to build strategies that prioritize long-term trust over short-term wins. It won't be easy, but brands that get it right won't just play the game, they'll win it.

Your Next Chapter

Plan for the long game

Once you know what your audience actually likes playing, level-up to bigger, continuing experiences. Think: weekly streaks, monthly badges and annual milestones. For bonus points, strategize to encourage user interaction and social sharing. Engagement is community, not clicks.

Rethink the 'high scores' leaderboard

As users interact in more hands-on ways, you'll need better tracking to understand what they actually do when they come to play. The typical KPIs for content (views, visits, plays) won't cut it in a gamified world, so partner with devs early to log the right actions, and get a legal assist to keep these methods privacy-centric, clean and compliant.

Strive for good gamification only

The end goal is to design content experiences that boost health bars, not drain them. Balance fun with fairness by giving your users special tools and knowledge to protect themselves from shady mechanics elsewhere. For sectors such as finance, that means developing content that helps them spot risky influencers, navigate predatory prediction markets and dodge high-volatility "YOLO" strategies. Be the trusted NPC they'll follow anywhere.

Start on easy mode

You don't need to go full LeetCode on day one. It can begin as simple as converting your next blog post into a quiz, adding a poll to your next IG post or sneaking in a small reward at the end of your next newsletter. Lightweight "mini-games" are your entry point to deeper content engagement.

06

Let's get physical

Do you feel like you've been "too online" lately? Join the club. Experiential branding is re-emerging as a powerful antidote to digital fatigue, pushing brands to build richer, more immersive worlds IRL – where algorithms can't prevent real cultural (and commercial) impact.

Keep calm

EV dreams

Long live the

the Prologue

Forget the digital age; 2025 felt more like the digital burnout age. Years of doomscrolling, social algorithms and content overload (now on hyperdrive, thanks to AI slop) are making audiences more skeptical, distracted and fatigued. The result? Traditional digital marketing – which tended to crush it – is now increasingly met with major “silence, brand” energy, forcing companies to rethink how attention and trust is earned.

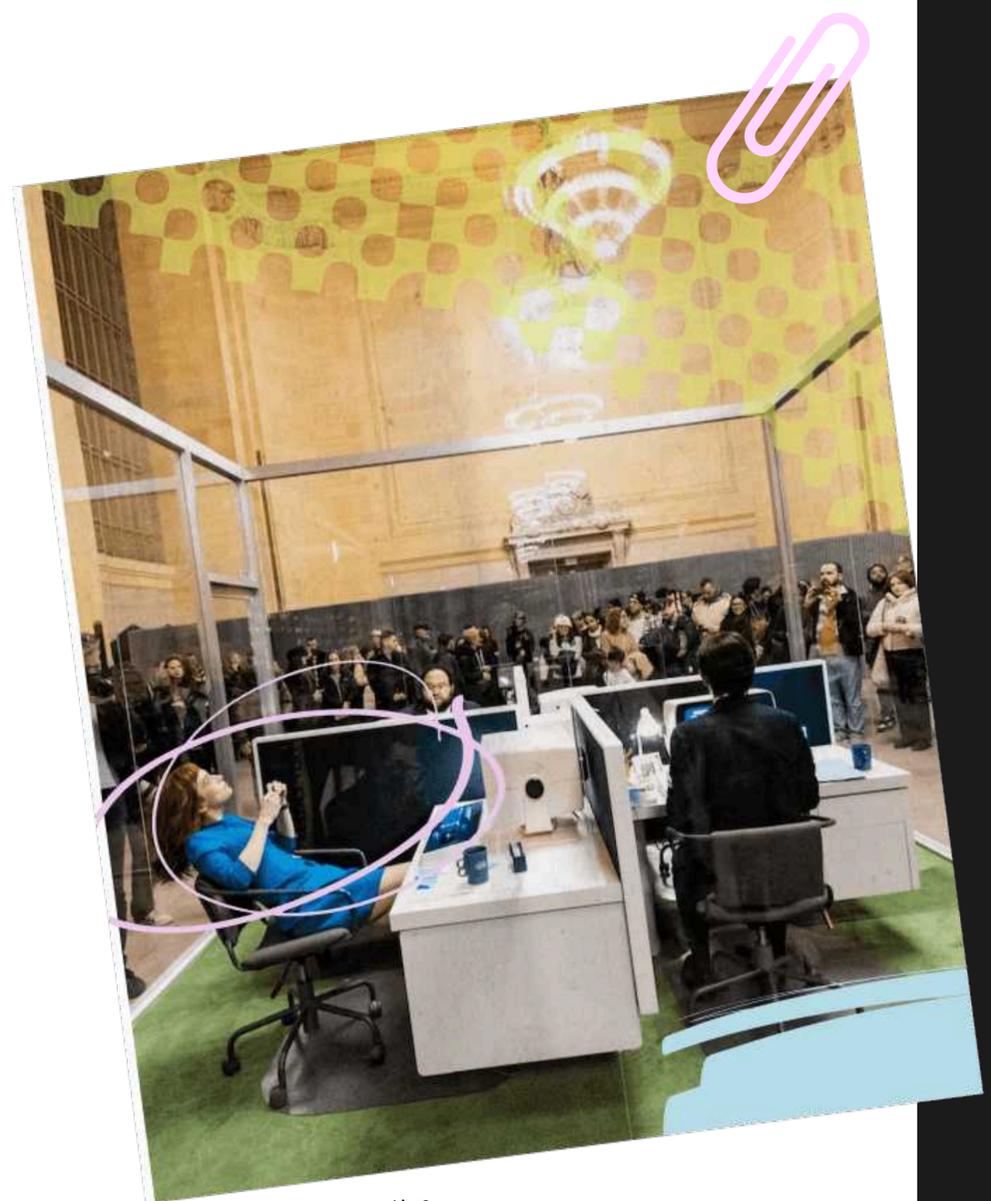
Welcome back, experiential marketing: Once the exclusive playground of flashy lifestyle brands with big budgets, physical activations are growing across tech, retail, food, health, B2B and other sectors that used to win handily on digital-first marketing. In major cities, stepping out for coffee, making the commute home or simply touching grass often means encountering a unique branded

moment somewhere along the way. With motion design and spatial storytelling at the wheel, these IRL experiences are cutting through short attention spans and rebuilding trust in ways the internet can’t replicate. No wonder we don’t talk about “The Metaverse” any more.

The rapid advance of tech will only increase cultural appetite for authenticity and connection. Ad Age predicts that experiential will be “the bedrock of every marketing plan by the end of the decade.” It’s hard to beat the cred of physical touchpoints. According to New Media Canada research, print newspaper ads are still far and away the most trusted – but experiential marketing can take things further by engaging all five senses.

the Citations

Try to enjoy each pop-up event equally: Severance is Apple TV+’s most-watched series and a cultural touchstone after just two seasons. How? Well, it doesn’t hurt that the parent company happens to run half of the digital universe, but what’s more interesting is how it has driven hype offline. A 2022 Comic-Con activation that gave fans the full Lumon Industries office tour generated early buzz and, for the second season, they upped the ante with a Grand Central Station pop-up featuring the real actors as their “innies” in a glass-enclosed cubicle. These stunts do more than go viral: the latter led to a 126-per-cent jump in new subscribers. Those are some scary (good) numbers.



Source: Kamp Grizzly via AdAge

Operation slop-drop: AI companies are getting a good chunk of blame for our digital decline, but Anthropic tackled those criticisms head-on with Claude Cafe, a pop-up that invited New Yorkers to log off, slow down and ponder over a cup of joe. By branding it a “zero-slop zone,” it wisely set itself apart from the competition, building on the sentiment by offering “thinking caps,” writing tools and other swag that define the platform as a human partner, not a human replacer. The knock-on effects were huge: The company told [Axios](#) that more than 5,000 people stopped by, while social posts about the project received 10-million impressions.

Spirited away: Last year, Globe Content Studio partnered with Indigenous Tourism Alberta and Initiative to create “[In Good Spirit](#),” a comic series illustrated by Indigenous artist Kyle Charles that told the stories of real tour operators with humour and warmth. We went beyond the normal distribution channels, sharing the comics digitally and physically across formats – in cafés, comic shops, our newspaper, even in the wild at Fan Expo and on billboards. The [award-winning](#) execution earned 10.2-million impressions, 37,000 engagements and more than 200 hours of reading.



Source: [Globe Content Studio](#)

the Conclusion

As the AI-generated content flood fills feeds, and algorithms increasingly control what everyone sees, real-life experiences offer something increasingly precious: unfiltered connection and community. With everyone yearning for the monoculture days of yore (aka why we’re all thinking about 2016 again), experiential marketing can help fill that void. Those lineups for limited drops, neighbourhood pop-ups and immersive installations are more than good viral fodder, they help people feel part of something bigger.

Physical activations are more complex, but the high effort pays off. Brands that invest in thoughtfully designed, real-world touchpoints have an advantage over those that rely solely on fleeting digital impressions. IRL events add to the media mix by creating the kind of relevance and brand affinity that digital alone can no longer guarantee.

Your Next Chapter

Define success first

Before you design an experience, determine the goal for it. Set clear objectives and measurable KPIs: Is it event attendance? Leads? Conversions? Social engagements? Establish how you'll track results on- and off-line to ensure it serves your ultimate business goals. Event-software company [Bizzabo](#) offers some ideas on how to do this.

Buddy up

You don't have to do it alone: co-ordinate with corporate events and external partners to share resources, align creative and build more cohesive, memorable brand worlds. We leveraged multiple partnerships for "In Good Spirit," amplifying the scale, impact and positive sentiment. A good collab can boost both reach and quality.

Blend physical and digital

You don't have to pick a side. Each channel strengthens the other. Create activations that live beyond the ephemeral moment by enabling social sharing (hashtags, UGC incentives) and send participants home with something they'll remember (product samples, swag, anything tangible). Physical drives deeper connection, but digital still amplifies the impact.

Know thyself

Stay true to your brand and your audience. What would genuinely delight them? What would they actually show up for? Ask tough questions to guide your concept. Every touchpoint should feel logical and invite active participation.

the end!

Tactics & Takeaways

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