

# Smarty Party

Guaranteed to Make  
Your Head Explode



August 2026



# Letter from the Publisher

The Smarty Party is a monthly round-up of key opinion leaders in the advertising and marketing industry that is intended to make it a little easier, and a little more fun, to learn from each other in this new world of remote and independent work.

As I have been building Influence & Inspire Consulting over the last 7 years, I have relied on the smarts and generosity of my network to learn, grow and keep myself honest.

Being a consultant definitely takes a village.

I would love to build a bigger village for all of us and make remote work a little less solitary.

But most importantly, let's make it more of a party.

Kerry Perse



# What's Inside?

- Meet this month's **Smarty Party**
- **Independent creative agencies** fill the void left by holding company consolidation
- **Influencers** are becoming increasingly important for **brand visibility** in AI search
- **Brand marketing** is reclaiming its moment in the sun as performance marketers grapple with **shrinking prospect pools**
- **Party Snacks.** Bite-sized advice for **busy people**.



# Meet This Month's *Smarty Party*



**Kerry Perse**  
Founder & CEO  
Influence & Inspire  
NYC



**Noriko Yokoi**  
Co-Founder  
3cubed.ai  
NYC



**Keith Bendes**  
Chief Strategy Officer  
Linqia  
San Francisco



**Michael Farmer**  
Chairman & CEO  
Farmer & Company  
Princeton



**Otis D. Gibson**  
Founder, CCO  
GERTRUDE, INC  
Chicago



# Meet This Month's *Smarty Party*



**Jordan Nasser**

Founder  
OK2Use  
Stockholm



**Talor Burns**

Manager, Brand Creative  
Harley-Davidson  
Brooklyn



**Amanda Mattera**

Brand Marketer  
Financial Services  
Philly



**Chris Inners**

SVP, Client Management  
Influential  
Temecula



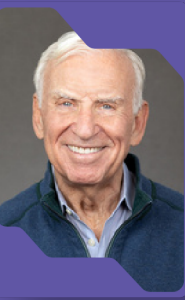
**Anna Lyn**

Fractional CMO  
Threadwell Consulting  
Fort Lauderdale





Independent creative agencies fill the void left  
by holding company consolidation



# IMHO

## How do independent creative agencies fill the void left by holding company consolidation?

Michael Farmer, Chairman & CEO, Farmer & Company

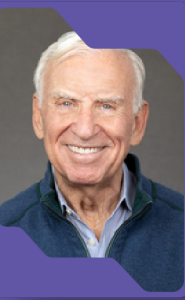
"The Independent Agency Advantage: Clients Come First, and Wall Street is Irrelevant

During the Golden Age of advertising, which ended when holding companies tightened their financial grip on the industry, creative agencies, large and small, were focused 100% on creating memorable ads that drove brand sales for their clients.

Advertisers and their agencies worked together in long-term intimate relationships: Ford with JWT, Coca-Cola with McCann, Pepsi with BBDO, United Airlines with Leo Burnett, Levis with BBH, Chevrolet with Campbell-Ewald. Independent agencies had to nibble around the edges of these relationships, but big clients stuck with big agencies, and small agencies had to work with smaller clients in smaller markets.

Today's situation could not be more different. Agency relationships barely last 3 years before being put up for review. The well-known agencies, acquired by holding companies after 1986, now work more for the benefit of their holding company owners than for their clients, laboring to meet holding company "stretch" budget targets to drive holding company share prices. When fees are tight, these agencies downsize to eliminate expensive senior executives, liquidating their talent pool.





# IMHO (CONT)

## How do independent creative agencies fill the void left by holding company consolidation?

Michael Farmer, Chairman & CEO, Farmer & Company

Major advertisers have seen brand growth rates disappear. Two-thirds of major advertisers have grown sales at only half of nominal GDP growth rates for the past 15 years. Holding companies once had a dominant advantage by being able to offer “integrated services” across linear, digital and social channels, but independent agencies have caught up and now have a full range of capabilities.

Advertisers, who desperately need to rekindle brand growth rates, are unlikely to get improved performance from their holding company agencies.

Increasingly, major clients are turning to independent agencies, whose client-focused leaders are better fit for the job.

The gap between holding company agencies and independent agencies is no longer a size or capability gap – it is a leadership gap, and independent agencies have the edge.

Holding companies will continue to milk their agencies to enhance their Wall Street performance, opening a path that can be best filled by independent agencies”.





# IMHO

## How do independent creative agencies fill the void left by holding company consolidation?

Otis D. Gibson, Founder, CCO, GERTRUDE, INC

“Craft: Independent agencies can definitely differentiate themselves through the craft of advertising which we can all admit has become a lost art. Over the years, less and less knowledge and practice of craft has been passed down in creative departments, leading to a general misunderstanding of how to actually craft a message and communication piece. By focusing on this, independents can more intentionally differentiate themselves and their agency’s work, while the much larger HoldCos have a very difficult time quality-controlling their product(s).

Be Agile: Independent agencies have a massive advantage by being 100% agile; not having to wait for layers of approvals from above since the owners and principals have more visibility into and/or are generally involved in the day-to-day activities of the business.

Be Flexible: One of the great joys of operating an independent shop is that you can be flexible in budget, timing, and approach and not be married to old ways of doing things”.



# Free Advice

Otis D. Gibson, Founder, CCO, GERTRUDE, INC



## Keep Your Eyes on the CRAFT

Especially in the current AI-fueled environment, it is imperative that an agency keeps its focus on what it has built its reputation on - THE CRAFT.

## Don't Take Any Shit

Remember the best relationships are built on mutual understanding and respect. While we recognize we are in the service business, we should still hold onto a fair balance in the Client / Agency relationship — one where trust can be built, understanding can be cultivated, and one goal can be achieved together.





# IMHO

## How do independent creative agencies fill the void left by holding company consolidation?

Kerry Perse, Founder & CEO, Influence & Inspire Consulting

"Holding company consolidation hemorrhaged top creative talent and independent agencies can give them a home where creativity and brand development are still top priorities.

There are fewer clear signs than listening to their quarterly earnings calls - HoldCos are no longer in the business of producing great advertising that changes peoples hearts and minds. They simply can't make the margins work. They are focused on media buying, reselling media and developing the technical infrastructure to do it more efficiently.

As a result, all of the incredible talent that spent their careers researching, concepting, writing and producing some of the world's most effective advertising campaigns find themselves in constant fear of losing their jobs or already out on their ass.

Independent agencies empower creatives to craft great work and do it without the layers of overhead that sunk the holding companies. Actually making content is more accessible than ever. The hard part is doing it well. There is an army of people out there trying to find their next home where they can shine".



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# Free Advice

Kerry Perse, Founder & CEO, Influence & Inspire Consulting

## The PTSD is Real

Remember what these folks just went through - likely years of job uncertainty and wondering if they will be able to send their kids to college, buy a home, care for an aging parent or if they should take that vacation. So let them ease back into it and don't take it personally if they seem hesitant to believe the indie life is as good as it can be.

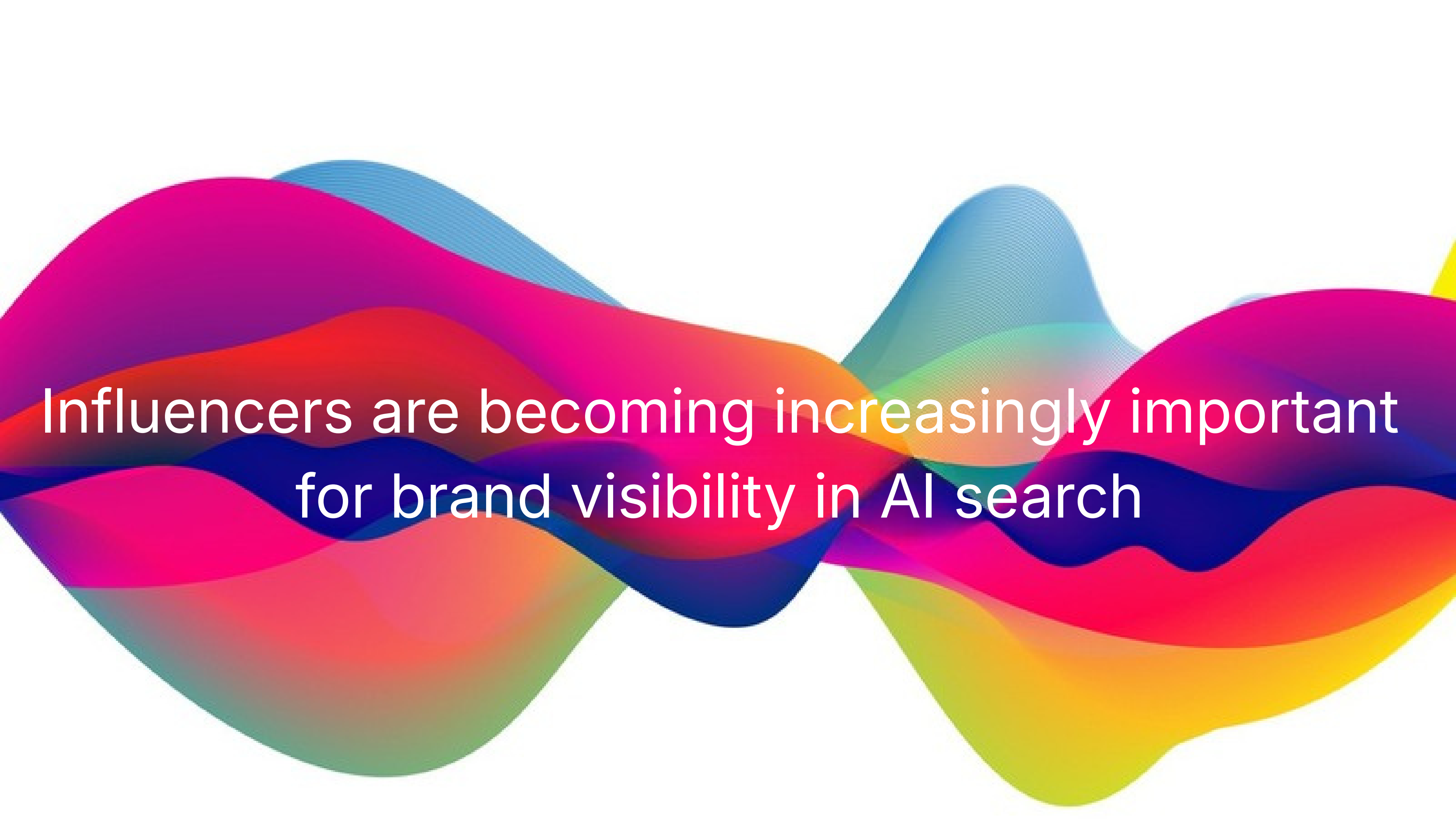
## Something Needs to Fill All That Space

With all the new media opportunities created by the holding companies and their aspiration to create infinite personalization at scale - something needs to fill all that space. Consumers don't need more noise. The creatives that can tell powerful stories in those environments will be the ones who come out on top.

## Emotional Safety is the Best Predictor of Performance

Anyone who has ever had a terrible boss knows that people are unable to deliver the caliber of work they are capable of under those circumstances. Creating an agency culture that makes people feel emotionally safe is the greatest way to build a high-performing team.





Influencers are becoming increasingly important  
for brand visibility in AI search

# The Situation

- YouTube long-form, niche expertise, third-party press—creators are figuring out what AI trusts and brands are rewriting their budgets accordingly.
- AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are reshaping how consumers discover and evaluate products, and 90 to 95% of what gets cited in those answers comes from third-party sources like creator content and community conversations, not from brand-owned pages.
- Platforms where AI tools most often identify content should be considered within marketing campaigns. YouTube and YouTube Shorts are the biggest opportunities to combine creator availability, creativity, and AI search optimization.





# IMHO

## How can brands use influencers to improve AI search visibility?

Keith Bendes, Chief Strategy Officer, Linqia

“There are two sides to this coin, improving AI search visibility and also using AI search data to improve social visibility. You could argue both are equally important as TikTok and Instagram are as much search engines these days as ChatGPT and Claude. In either case the playbook is very similar, and has two key steps.

The data: pulling AI search data provides brands with a treasure trove of interesting information, including what consumers are searching for across LLMs, where the brand is winning or losing against competitors (or where no one in the category is winning and thus is white space). And finally what creators and posts are being referenced most in that search data set. The last one being the most interesting in this conversation.

The action: From a creator perspective there are two approaches for brands. The first is using the list of top referenced creators as your prospective partner list because they have already proven their ability to show up in AI search. Brands can reach out to do custom content partnerships, or try to sponsor those existing posts that are already being referenced. The other option is to take the search data and partner with any influencer that's right for your brand to create content that directly addresses the questions consumers are asking. Both are valuable strategies. The result for brands is ideally improving their AI visibility, but also creating social content that will win when consumers search on the social platforms”.



# Free Advice

Keith Bendes, Chief Strategy Officer, Linqia



## Yes...Improve AI Visibility, but Also Win on Social Search

By understanding what questions consumers are asking in their AI searches, brands can create incredibly valuable social content that not just improves AI visibility, but also wins on social as consumers increasingly search on TikTok and Instagram.

## Triple Click into the Creators that have the Most AI Citations

AI search data can identify which posts and creators are the most indexed by LLM's for your brand/category. That information is absolute gold for identifying strong creator partners. It still requires determining if the creator is the right fit for the brand and is brand safe, but it hones in on creators that have a proven track record.



# IMHO

## How can brands use influencers to improve AI search visibility?

Noriko Yokoi, Co-Founder, 3cubed.ai

"Third party authority is one of the ways in which AI tools cite your brand. And influencers who have trust and authority can definitely help you become more visible. Definitely keep influencers in the marketing mix but do the research and make sure that they are authorities in the area of your expertise".

# Free Advice

Noriko Yokoi, Co-Founder, 3cubed.ai



## AI Search has Totally Changed the Game

Google is still important, but don't bet all your chips on it. Now is the time to experiment. See where your audience is searching, test different platforms, and learn what works. Search is no longer just about Google.

## The Answer Economy Starts With Your Customer

If you haven't shifted to thinking about what your customers actually want, now is the time. We're in the answer economy. It's less about what brands want customers to do and more about understanding what customers want, what they're asking, and how they're thinking.

## The Buyer Journey Still Matters in AI Search

The buyer journey is still a great framework in the answer economy. Think about when and where customers are asking questions, then look at where your brand is visible today and where it needs to be. It's about showing up at the right place, at the right time.





# IMHO

## How can brands use influencers to improve AI search visibility?

Chris Inners, SVP, Client Management, Influential

"It starts with choosing creators for real authenticity, not just reach. The right partner is a balance of who reaches your audience, who reaches them safely, and why that audience listens in the first place. The best creators don't just post. They relate. They can take your key messages, make them relevant, and say them in the same voice their community already uses.

Next, be clear on the specific question you're answering. In LLM (ChatGPT, Claude, Copilot, etc) searches, people want clean, simple recommendations, not a convoluted manifesto. Define your "reason you're the answer" in simple terms: the problem you solve, when you're the right choice, and the proof points. Don't brief creators based on how you wish people talked about the product. Pull language from reviews, comments, and search queries, then build the brief around the audience reality. For example, "best sunscreen for sensitive skin" is far more findable and useful than "clean beauty innovation." Give creators clear guardrails, then give them room to produce in their voice. When creator content matches the way consumers already talk, it becomes easier for LLMs to recognize and recommend.

Finally, creator marketing isn't a silver bullet for AI search visibility, at least not yet. Creators work best as part of a broader mix, alongside strong owned FAQs, product pages, and steady reviews, so your brand is described consistently wherever people and machines go looking".



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# Free Advice

Chris Inners, SVP, Client Management, Influential



## Repeat After Me

Use a simple and common structure: Problem, Who it's for, Why it works, How to use. If a friend can paraphrase it, an LLM can too. Your best "AI approach" is clarity with a little personality.

## Trade Slogans for Genuine Experience

"High quality" is forgettable. "Didn't sting my eyes, no harmful chemicals for my child, stayed on through a run" sticks. Give creators measurable, experience-based proof points and let them "run" with it.

## Don't Chase a Silver Bullet

Creator content helps, but it's not a magic wand for AI visibility, yet. Treat it like part of your media mix alongside owned content. Diversified signals beat one AI platform's algorithm mood.





# IMHO

## How can brands use influencers to improve AI search visibility?

Kerry Perse, Founder & CEO, Influence & Inspire Consulting

"So the honest answer is...Maybe? Probably? We need more data.

What is clear and largely well documented is that 3rd party sources are cited more than owned media within the LLMs and drive greater AI search visibility. It's also well documented that YouTube and Reddit (up until some reporting last week) are powerful platforms most frequently cited.

The verdict is definitely still out on Instagram and TikTok however.

It is during these nascent days that smart marketers can structure their own test and learn efforts to establish some brand specific learnings that they can begin to action. When the marketplace is trying to wrap their arms around a new opportunity with this much potential for creator marketing to further steepen its growth trajectory - it's time to take matters into your own hands.

But don't get crazy with it and start only partnering with influencers who post YouTube Shorts. Influencer marketing is still intended to influence a human audience on social media, and with or without a direct correlation to AI search visibility, they are still delivering impact".



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# Free Advice

Kerry Perse, Founder & CEO, Influence & Inspire Consulting



## Tread Lightly with Reddit

Reddit is not always welcoming to brands who try to force their way into a conversation or community. Brands just getting started on Reddit need to invest in a well-researched strategy and provide actual value in order to be invited in by the community. Value could be free product, exclusive access to events or community sponsorship.

## Negotiate Crossposting to YouTube

One way to dip your toe in the water without materially changing your existing influencer strategy would be to try and negotiate in crossposting to YouTube Shorts with content that was originally created for Instagram or TikTok. Do this with 5-7 creators and monitor its impact on AI search visibility.

## Include Influencer Partnerships in PR

More traditional earned media coverage definitely impacts AI search visibility. Try including links to, or mentions of, your influencer partnerships in your press releases. Ideally they will find their way into the press coverage you receive and therefore AI search results.





Brand marketing is reclaiming its moment in the sun as performance marketers grapple with shrinking prospect pools

# The Situation

- "CMOs are rediscovering that brand is not a relic but the bedrock of resilience and long-term growth. As tools get faster, the fundamentals matter more: trust and emotional connection become the anchor that gives customers clarity, consistency, and a sense of security".
- According to BCG, "the optimal marketing spend balance is roughly 60% on long-term brand building and 40% on short-term performance marketing. Cutting brand spend to chase immediate conversion causes severe long-term decay in market share, total shareholder return, and base sales".
- "In 2026, brand building really does matter now more than ever. Sure, AI can spin up content and campaigns in seconds, but that just means everyone's saying more of the same. The brands that actually cut through? They sound human — real voices, real stories and the kind of trust you can't fake with a prompt".



# IMHO

## What are some ways brand marketing can get its groove back?

Talor Burns, Manager, Brand Creative & Content, Harley-Davidson

"Leverage your real customer base for inspiration. Less "testimonial" and more "inspirational guidance." Your customers love your brand for a real reason - dig in and find out why (and it can be a lot of different reasons). Let those conversations guide your creative expression in brand marketing.

This kind of story-mining can fuel everything from major branding campaigns to social vignettes, and it always connects if the insight from the customer is expressed truthfully. In a world where we're getting overrun with half-built insights from untrustworthy data fueled by AI, trust what your customers are actually saying about you when you ask them -- then use it!"



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# Free Advice

Talor Burns, Manager, Brand Creative & Content, Harley-Davidson



## No One Else Knew What the Plan Was

Things go wrong, especially when you're creating content at live events or using real people. Just go with the flow and own it!

## If You Love Something, Let it Spend

If you know your project is killer, make sure it has the spend behind it to be seen, and make the impact it deserves. The long-term effect will be worth it.





# IMHO

## What are some ways brand marketing can get its groove back?

Jordan Nasser, Founder, OK2Use

"Plenty of the brands we work for started small, with a real purpose and a handful of people who all knew what it stood for. Then they exploded. Somewhere in the growth, the brand kept moving without maintaining a clear sense of direction.

There's usually no villain in this story. A market rewrote a tagline because it didn't translate. A campaign overperformed, so it stayed up for longer than it should have. A platform launched and nobody loved the content, but the feed had to be filled. Do that across forty markets for a decade and you end up with a brand that forgot why it started.

So go look at it yourself. When was the last time you surfed your own website, shopped in your own store, or approached your brand as a customer instead of an employee? Buy something from your phone on a crowded train. Stand in the queue. Try to unsubscribe from your own email newsletter. Search your brand name and read everything that comes up, except your own homepage. When you find things that don't feel right, then you know where to start. Those are your repairs. Brands tend to stop questioning themselves right around the time they get big enough to need to. Getting the groove back means being honest about what yours turned into while everyone was busy scaling it. Take the tour. Take notes. Then take it apart."



# Free Advice

Jordan Nasser, Founder, OK2Use



## Step Outside to See Inside

Are your customers who you think they are? Stand outside your store for an hour. Watch who walks out with your bags and who walks out with nothing. Then ask why the empty handed ones came in at all.

## Diversify Your Messaging

Your press release, your LinkedIn post, and your TikTok cannot be the same sentence in three fonts. Same truth underneath, different voice on top. If you can copy paste between channels, nobody needed you on all of them.

## Don't be Afraid to Kill Your Darlings

You know the one. The campaign, the tagline, the mascot you still defend in meetings. It stopped working a while ago and everyone can see it but you. Say bye bye bye. Take a photo, keep the memory, then make room for whatever comes next.



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# IMHO

## What are some ways brand marketing can get its groove back?

Amanda Mattera, Brand Marketer, Financial Services Company

"We are in a click-driven world, both in marketing and in our lives. In marketing, this shift to performance has placed a focus on short-term wins; the immediate click, the quick conversion, the metric that's easy to report up the chain. But brand marketing will need to reclaim a larger piece of the pie in order to get its groove back. Brand is needed to set the foundation for sustained performance. Behind the metrics, there needs to be a bigger story built with consumers; a relationship that builds loyalty over time, not just a transaction that closes. While data shows our attention spans are shortening, brand marketing needs to build upon the impression and not end the journey once the immediate action is taken.

Learning how to use those fleeting moments as entry points, building on them over time until they add up to real, long-term recognition; the kind that shows up not in a single campaign's numbers, but in whether someone chooses you without being sold to. This includes a shift in metrics that show that relationship and growth. This means going back to fundamentals: knowing the target audience deeply, knowing what the brand's point of view really is, and understanding how the two come together into something distinctive. It means moving away from marketing to everyone and toward marketing to someone, a shift that requires being willing to take some risk and to trust that resonance matters as much as reach".



# Free Advice

Amanda Mattera, Brand Marketer, Financial Services Company



## You Can't Build a Relationship with a Stranger

Brands know their audience's demographics, but real audience knowledge is understanding what they value, what they're afraid of, and what they wish someone would say to them. Knowing how this relates to the brand's point of view, that's where relevance starts.

## Attention Spans are Shrinking. Ambition Shouldn't.

There are only seconds to earn a click, but that's no reason to shrink long-term thinking too. Treat every moment as an entry point, not an endpoint, then build the story that keeps people coming back long after the action.

## Data Only Tells You What Happened

Dashboards show the click, they don't show the trust behind it. Alongside of the performance check ins, be sure to ask how this builds the story.



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# IMHO

## What are some ways brand marketing can get its groove back?

Anna Lyn, Fractional CMO/Brand Strategist, Threadwell Consulting

"Brand marketing lost its groove because too many marketers stopped talking to actual people and started talking to dashboards instead. Somewhere along the way, "data-driven" quietly became a synonym for "consumer-absent." You can't build a brand that means something to someone if you've never watched that someone actually shop the category, scroll the feed, or read the back of the bottle. Getting the groove back starts there: get out from behind the screen and back in front of real customers. Data tells you what happened. People tell you why, and why is where the ideas live.

But there's a second, newer reason brand needs its groove back, and it's more urgent than it was even two years ago: AI. Every brand is generating more content, faster, than ever before, but AI output is only as good as the brand input behind it. If you don't know exactly what your brand stands for, what it will and won't say, what consumer problem it's solving for, AI won't hide that gap. It will amplify it, at scale, across every channel, all at once. I built brand systems at P&G and Unilever long before AI entered the room, and the discipline was identical: define the brand precisely enough that anyone executing it (a junior brand manager, an agency, now an algorithm) still lets your consumer recognize you instantly and feel like they know exactly who they're buying from. Strip away the tools and it comes down to two old disciplines: know your consumer well enough to earn their attention, and know your brand well enough that they still recognize you, no matter who or what is doing the executing. The tools changed. The job didn't".



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# Free Advice

Anna Lyn, Fractional CMO/Brand Strategist, Threadwell Consulting

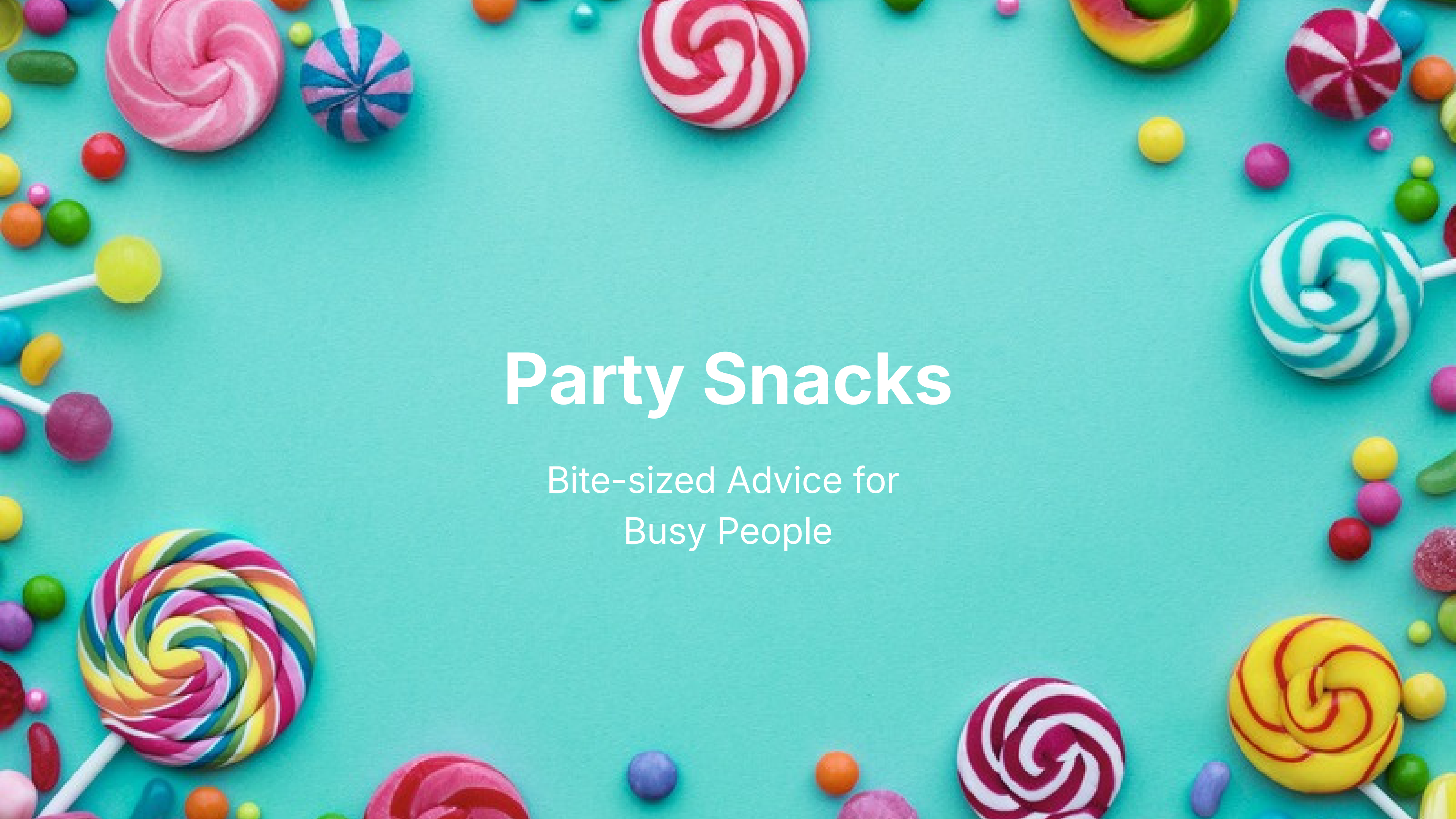
## **Skip the Deck. Go Stand in the Aisle**

The best insight I ever got wasn't in a report. It was watching a shopper compare two bottles before putting one back. No dashboard gives you that. Data tells you what happened; watching people shop tells you why. Get in front of real customers before you trust a screen.

## **Clarity Is the Prompt**

AI can help write your copy, run your media, and build your funnel, but it can't tell you who you are. That's still your job, and it matters more now, not less. The clearer your brand, the better everything AI touches gets. Fuzzy brand in, fuzzy brand out.





# Party Snacks

Bite-sized Advice for  
Busy People

# Party Snacks

## Tools & Technology We Can't Live Without



Findabl.app makes AI search visibility accessible to everyone. Built for small businesses, entrepreneurs, agencies, and marketers, it takes the complicated technology out of AI search so ordinary people can understand where they're visible, where they're missing, and what they can do about it.



Usage rights are where creator campaigns quietly fall apart. The contract lives in an email thread, a DM or a PDF nobody can find six months later, so licenses expire while the asset keeps running. OK2Use keeps the agreement out of the inbox. Brands, agencies and creators set usage up front, expiry gets tracked, and nothing goes missing. Scale creator work without scaling risk.



VwD.ai is a comprehensive creator vetting tool that can review 1 year of content or even as early as the beginning of the creator's posting history. They provide scores for key flags like violence, alcohol, religion, cyber bullying, hate and many others. You are able to customize your risk threshold for each of these factors by brand or campaign.





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# Smarty Party

Guaranteed to Make  
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