sweeney

2026 Trend Report

How public relations and marketing
are evolving in the new year.

STRATEGIC | CREATIVE | *Marketing*

OVERVIEW

In today's fragmented attention economy, audiences are overwhelmed, news is increasingly incidental and traditional gatekeepers, from search engines to legacy brands, are losing influence.

Success is no longer defined by message frequency or reach, but by the ability to create moments that feel personal, emotional and authentic.

Understanding these dynamics is critical for planning what comes next.

This report takes a closer look at the major trends and forecasts Sweeney predicts will have the biggest influence on marketing and communications efforts in 2026.

Current media landscape

Too much of the muchness

Today's media landscape is fast-moving, complex and fragmented, with content spreading across a variety of platforms and formats. And according to recent research, media consumption has hit its ceiling.

"Overwhelm" continues to trend as we head into 2026 with nearly three-quarters of consumers saying brands send so many messages that they tune them out.

In 2026, breaking through won't be about saying more, but about making people *feel* more.

30%
Experience connection

70%
Experience overload

100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
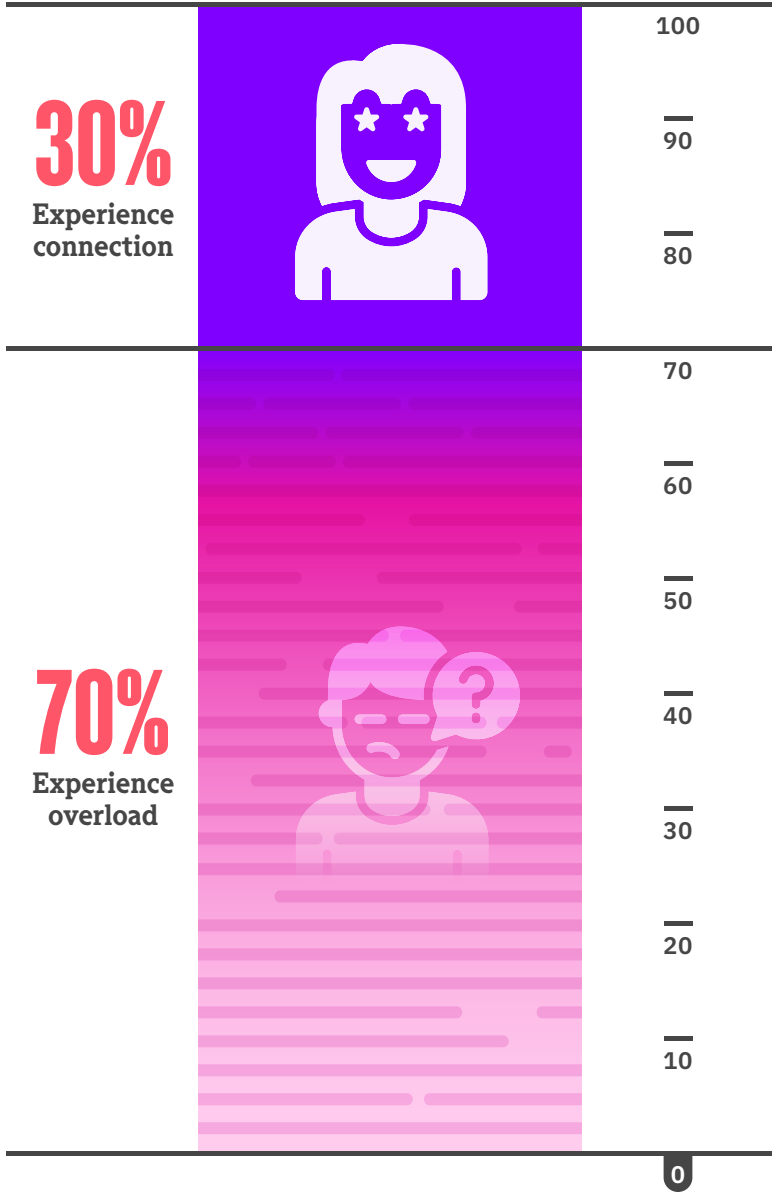
How Americans are consuming content

20% **One-in-five adults get news from influencers on social media**
Younger adults are especially likely, with 38% of those ages 18 to 29 saying they regularly do this, more than four times the share of those 65 and older (8%).

56% **Over half of Americans watch three-plus hours of TV per day**
Only 50% of 31-49-year-olds and 52% of under 30s hit that three-hour threshold, compared to 66% of 50-67-year-olds.

<6% **Less than 6% of smartphone time was spent on browsers or search engine apps**
Consumers are no longer "surfing the web" or actively searching for information through browsers and Google the way they once did.

How Americans are consuming content

584M+ **Over 584 million people listened to podcasts in 2025**
With numbers expected to reach 619 million by 2026. 34% of Americans listen to an average of 8.3 podcast episodes per week, and 83% spend over nine hours listening weekly.
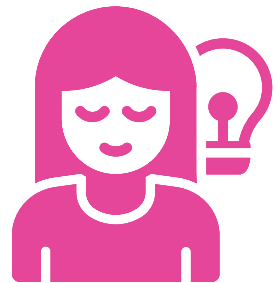
10% **1-in-10 adults report they get news from AI chatbots**
A growing share of Americans are using artificial intelligence chatbots like ChatGPT, but they have not become a regular source of news.
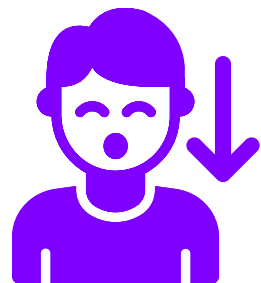
Key takeaways

Attention is maxed out
Consumers feel overloaded by messages, so breakthrough now depends on emotional impact rather than increased content volume.

Discovery is shifting to new channels
Younger audiences lean heavily on social influencers; podcast engagement is soaring; AI chatbot use is rising but not yet a major news source.

Traditional search is declining
Consumers are moving away from browsing and manual search, relying more on content discovered within apps and platforms.

The escape experience economy

Why it matters

In a world of nonstop notifications and economic anxiety, consumers don't want traditional marketing messages; they crave experiences that make them:

▶ feel transported (even for a few minutes).

▶ feel part of something hopeful or nostalgic.

▶ reclaim emotional space from the grind.

Brands offering joy, nostalgia or immersive escapism (via events, rituals or storytelling) will thrive.

Consumers are looking for uplifting experiences that act as "emotional vacations," not more noise.
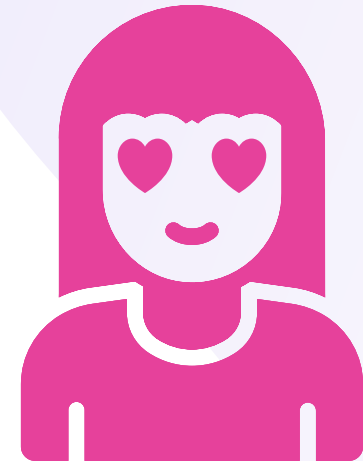
How to capitalize

Create immersive experiences:
Pop-ups or multi-sensory activations that transport audiences.

Leverage nostalgia and storytelling:
Evoke positive memories or immersive narratives that let people "escape."

Offer emotional resets:
Offer quiet zones for employees and wellness-focused experiences.

How to capitalize

Gamify and encourage play:
Interactive challenges, games or digital escapes to engage audiences.

Foster community and agency:
Initiatives that give people a sense of participation, control and shared emotion.

Design shareable moments:
Create visuals to celebrate milestones; encourage consumers to share photos when interacting with your brand.

Micro-communities over mass reach

Why it matters

Success now requires hyper personalization.

▸ Content, offers and interactions must feel tailored to the individual, not the demographic.

Founder-led and individual-driven branding is a powerful way to stand out in a crowded landscape.

▸ Putting a real person front and center makes a brand feel more genuine.

▸ Something as small as a CEO or company executive sharing updates or a personal experience with the brand can make consumers think "Okay, I trust this."

The brands that win in this new landscape are those that combine experience, emotion, personalization and trust, turning attention into long-term connection.

How to capitalize

Hyper-personalized media pitches:
Tailor stories and outreach to individuals or niche groups for stronger engagement.

Founder and thought leadership:
Leverage recognizable voices through bylined content, LinkedIn posts and direct engagement.

Build intentional communities:
Create spaces online or offline for like-minded audiences to connect around shared passions or values.

How to capitalize

Turn attention into connection:
Reward participation with exclusive content, early access or co-creation opportunities.

Activate emotion and community:
Center initiatives on shared experiences or causes that give members agency and strengthen bonds.

Creativity reclaims the spotlight

Why it matters

In an era where content feels increasingly automated and formulaic, creativity is reemerging as the defining differentiator.

Originality is becoming the new currency of professional value.

▶ Brands that embrace creativity not only break through the noise; they deepen trust, strengthen storytelling and expand influence.

▶ Conversely, those who rely solely on automation risk becoming invisible in an increasingly saturated landscape.

How to capitalize

Invest in original storytelling:

▶ Prioritize human-centered, emotionally resonant content that feels personal and distinctive.

▶ Amplify with testimonials, employee spotlights and case studies.

Showcase community and collaboration:

▶ Engage customers, partners or influencers in co-created content or campaigns.

▶ Celebrate micro-communities, user-generated stories or collaborative projects that bring people together.

How to capitalize

Fuse creativity with purpose:

▶ Tie imaginative campaigns to meaningful causes, cultural moments or social impact.

▶ Ensure creativity strengthens trust and builds authentic brand identity.

Amplify creative work for influence:

▶ Promote standout ideas through earned media, thought leadership and social amplification.

▶ Use visually striking campaigns and innovative storytelling formats to increase reach and credibility.

Omnichannel storytelling

Why it matters

Consumers no longer get their information from a single source.

▸ They jump between TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, podcasts, newsletters, news sites and virtual spaces.

Omnichannel storytelling allows brands to deliver a coherent narrative across platforms while adapting the format to each channel.

▸ Tailored content feels authentic rather than forced, increasing the likelihood of shares, comments and conversions.

▸ When audiences encounter a message repeatedly in different contexts, it amplifies the message and reinforces recall.
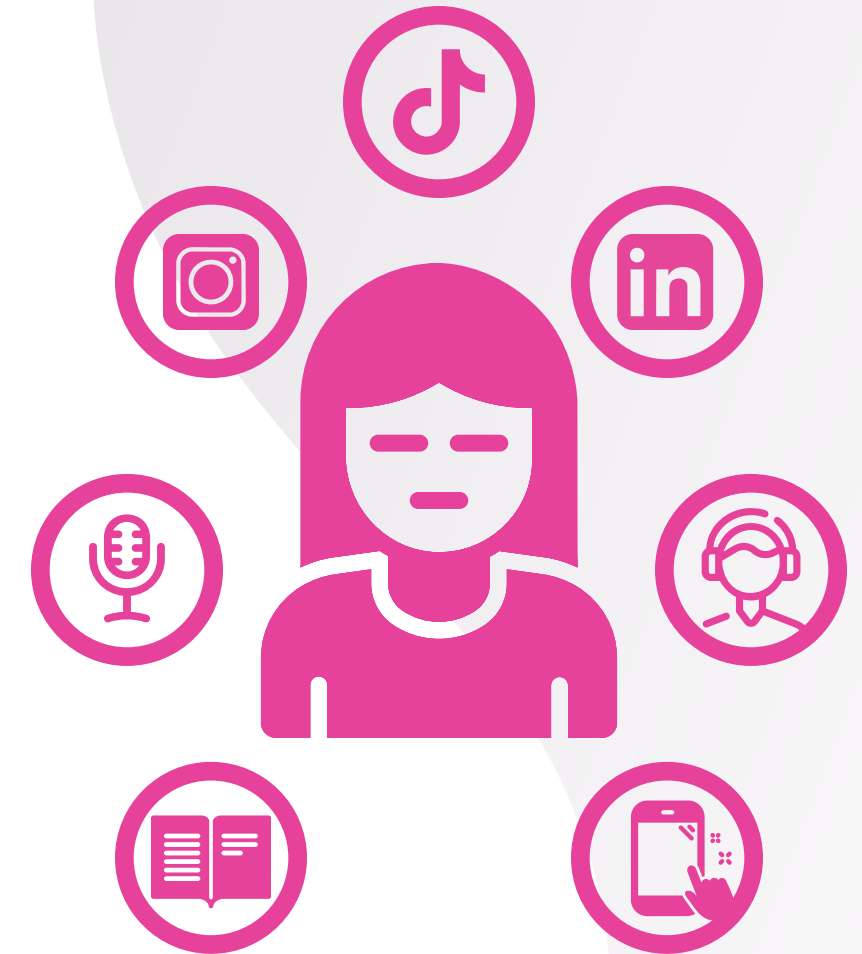
How to capitalize

Be where your audience is:
Share content across social media, podcasts, newsletters, webinars and online communities.

Tailor messaging to each platform:
Create platform-native content that feels authentic and engaging. Encourage thought leaders to share insights and expertise on LinkedIn to reach professional audiences.

How to capitalize

Maintain narrative consistency:
Ensure a coherent brand story while adapting tone and format for each channel.

Engage micro-communities and personalize:
Deliver content that resonates with niche audience segments and fosters interaction.

Measure, refine and amplify:
Track engagement across channels to optimize storytelling and strengthen emotional connections.

# Leveraging AI as an amplifier, not a replacement

Why it matters

AI is impossible to ignore in today's communications landscape, but it cannot replace the human creativity that truly drives connection.

As chatbots deliver instant, summarized answers without users clicking through, showing up in those responses becomes critical for authority, visibility and credibility.

▶ Brands need to keep Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) in mind when creating content, ensuring their media coverage, expert insights and authoritative information are structured to be recognized and cited by AI systems.

With deepfakes and synthetic content on the rise, AI can help detect manipulation and protect brand authenticity.
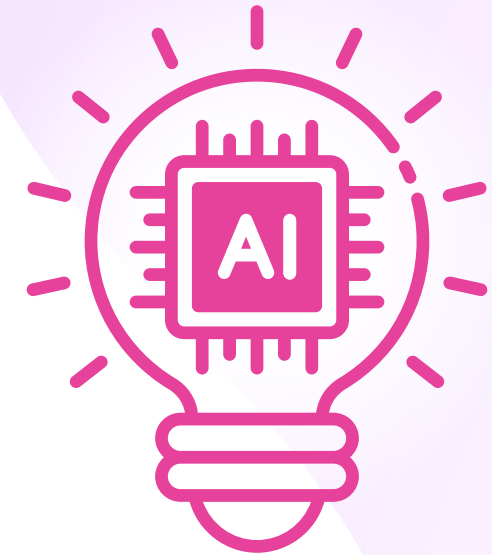
How to capitalize

Amplify human creativity:
Use AI to analyze data, suggest messaging or draft content frameworks, while recognizing that AI cannot replace the intuition, empathy and nuance of the human touch. Creative teams remain essential for emotionally resonant storytelling.

Optimize for AI visibility:
Structure content to be authoritative and easily parsed. FAQs, how-to guides, expert insights, case studies and glossaries increase the chance of being cited by chatbots and AI models.

How to capitalize

Curate trust and authenticity:
Combine AI personalization with human oversight to ensure accuracy and credibility; clearly label synthetic content when used.

Manage security and ethical risks:
Implement strong data protocols, access controls and ethical guidelines to protect sensitive information and reduce misuse.

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Thank You
Any questions? We're here for you!