



TOMORROW'S COMMERCE

THE NEAR-NEXT-FAR OF RETAIL AND SHOPPER BEHAVIOR:
AI EFFICIENCY + HUMAN FIRST EXPERIENCE

9TH EDITION / 2026

Tomorrow's Commerce: A Human + Tech Counterpoint

Welcome to **VML's latest edition of "Tomorrow's Commerce"**—a visionary exploration of the trends poised to reshape the world of commerce.

This year, inspired by our data, experience, and relentless curiosity, we delve into 20 ideas that don't just anticipate 2026, but challenge us to imagine commerce 5, 10, or even 15 years down the line. Prepare to encounter concepts that might feel delightfully futuristic, perhaps even a bit far out, yet which hold the potential to profoundly redefine how we buy, sell, and connect in the future.

This year, we dive deep into two powerful, interlinked, yet sometimes opposing, currents...
1. Automated & AI-driven efficiency and **2. Authentic Experience & Human Connection.**

Why do we believe that these two forces are so important?

At VML, our 'Human First' philosophy isn't just a creative principle; it's the very lens through which we view and shape the future. And yet we also acknowledge the role that technology has in shaping and defining our lives, and of course the way we shop. It's this human-centric approach, underpinned by the enabler of technology, that seamlessly connects Brand Experience, Customer Experience, and Commerce. And this in turn guides our exploration into what's next.

Before you delve in, we encourage you to consider how these trends can spark conversation and drive a different perspective as you chart your brand's course for the new year and beyond. Whether through AI's silent efficiency or human experience's vibrant warmth, VML invites you to explore how these dynamic forces will converge, compete, and ultimately define your vision to drive the needs of tomorrow's shopper.



AMANDA BAILEY
Chief Client Officer
VML NA



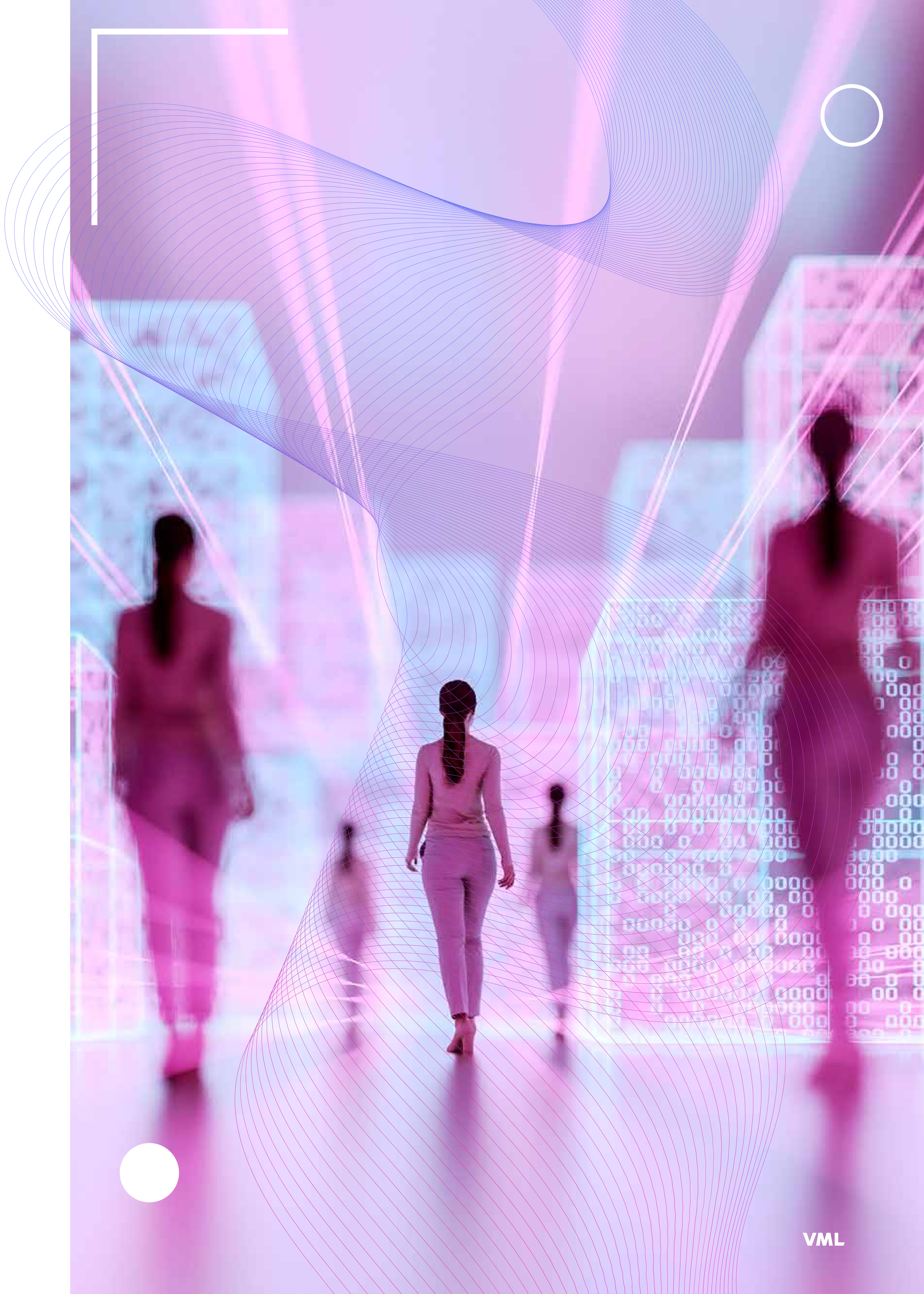
GARETH OSBORNE
Chief Technology Officer
VML EMEA



AADIT BIMBHET
Director, Technology Transformation
VML APAC



GLENDA KOK
Chief of Technology Business
VML LATAM



Contents

4 **SECTION 1: AUTOMATED & AI-DRIVEN**

5 **From Search to Sidekick:** How AI is Rewiring the Customer Journey

6 **Agentic AI:** From Autonomous Shopping to Predictive Fulfilment

7 **Synthetic Reality Retail:** Shop the Worlds Built Just for You

8 **Post-Human Commerce:** Products for Enhanced Beings

9 **Bio-Engineered Products:** Tailored to Your DNA

10 **Dreamstate Commerce:** Designing for the Mind at Rest

11 **Algorithmic Intervention Commerce:** AI-Driven Crisis Response to Predictive Fulfilment

12 **Inter-Species Commerce:** The Dr. Doolittle Economy

13 **Adaptive Carbon Nudging:** From Scare Tactics to Smart Trade-offs

14 **Intelligent Robotics:** From Warehouse Floor to Living Room

15 **SECTION 2: AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE & HUMAN CONNECTION**

16 **The Flesh & Blood Reboot:** Gen Alpha Leads the Real-World Revival

17 **Agency Override:** The Personalization Backlash and the Rise of Wild Buying

18 **Cause Influencers:** The Rise of Values-Aligned Influencers

19 **Intergenerational Retail:** One Space, Many Lives

20 **Curated Scarcity & the Anti-Consumption Movement:** From Buy More to Buy Better

21 **Price Paradox:** AI Cheapens Choice

22 **De-Commerce:** The Art of Un-Selling

23 **Human Curation:** The Return of Taste, Care and Accountability

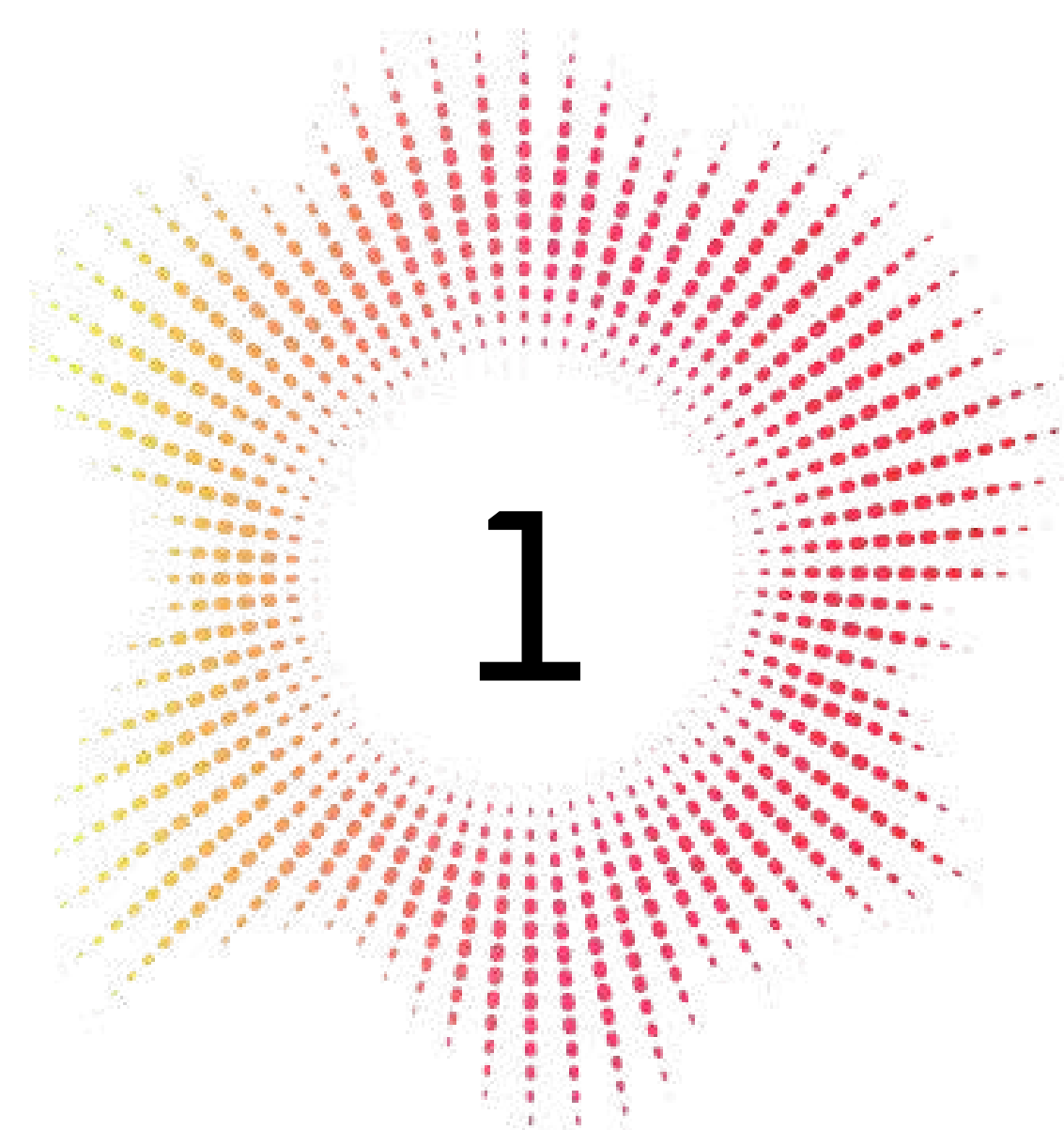
24 **Kinship Commerce:** Trusted Circles Become the Store

25 **Digital-to-Physical Legacy Archiving Services:** Tangible Artifacts for Future Generations

SECTION 1

AUTOMATED & AI-DRIVEN

These 10 trends chart AI's ascent from assistant to agent—rewiring discovery, decisioning and fulfilment with synthetic realities, bio-engineering, robotics and data-driven sustainability. The common thread is invisible convenience: systems that anticipate needs, negotiate value and execute with precision, raising new requirements for machine-readable catalogs, APIs, provenance and ethics. Brands that design for agentic commerce now will meet tomorrow's shopper where decisions happen—inside AI.



From Search to Sidekick: How AI is Rewiring the Customer Journey

The dawn of AI is already upon us, and its impact on the customer purchase journey can already be felt. Brands and retailers must act now, or risk being left behind in tomorrow's commerce.

The Future Shopper report confirms consumers want the same thing—best price, fast transactions, and instant gratification, with their orders in their hands as soon as possible.

The previous “best-in-class” solution was online shopping with its endless aisles and competing retailers, or more specifically the marketplaces which we’ve repeatedly recognized as giving the best experience across multiple factors.

But a quiet revolution is underway—unsurprisingly driven by AI. We may be at the beginning but the signals are visible. Globally, 3% of consumers already use AI for inspiration, 5% to find product information, and 4% for search itself—modest stats today that are set to rocket. With 68% having tried tools like ChatGPT, the habit is forming: “ask the assistant, get the answer.” Why bounce between marketplace, retailer and brand sites when AI can summarize specs, surface trusted reviews, check availability, and tell you the best total price—all in one place?

Why does this matter?

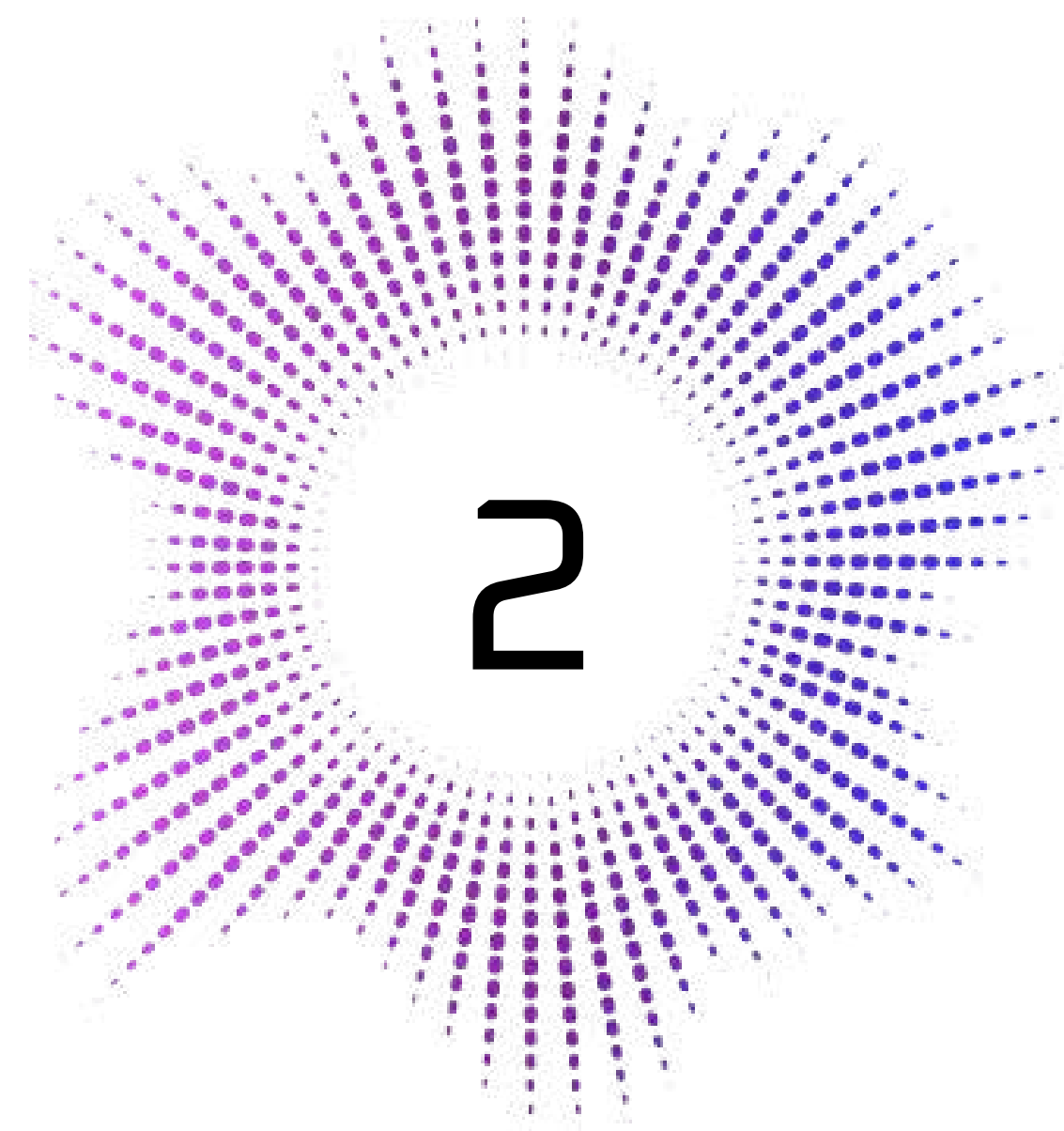
This shifts power from traditional paths to “answer-readiness.” If your product facts, pricing, policies and availability aren’t machine-readable and verifiable, you risk disappearing from the assistant’s shortlist. The winners will meet shoppers where decisions now happen: inside AI interfaces that turn results into recommendations, and recommendations into purchases.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Structure product data:** Ensure specs, pricing, availability and policies are machine-readable, accurate and comprehensive, so assistants can evaluate confidently.
- **Build presence where AI learns:** Engage authentically on Reddit, review sites and forums; publish authoritative answers and verified content that assistants reference.
- **Make values verifiable:** Expose certifications, transparent sourcing and third-party validations; provide provenance and warranty signals via feeds/APIs.
- **Treat AI agents as customers:** Deliver agent-friendly APIs and deep links; test how major assistants summarize and rank your offers, and enable seamless handoff to checkout.

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Agentic AI: From Autonomous Shopping to Predictive Fulfilment

AI search puts machine intelligence in your hands. Agentic AI puts it to work autonomously. The next 3–5 years will see consumer AIs graduate from answering questions to acting on your behalf: hunting deals, comparing total cost, negotiating with retailer bots, and eventually purchasing before you even realize you need something.

The appetite is already there. Our Future Shopper data shows 48% of global shoppers are excited about agentic AI acting on their behalf, and 52% want their own AI to hunt down the best prices. This isn't speculative—it's latent demand waiting for infrastructure to catch up. As AI moves from assistant to agent, the purchase journey compresses: inspiration, consideration and transaction collapse into a single autonomous action.

The logical endpoint is predictive fulfilment. Your agent knows you're low on milk, that your running shoes have hit their mileage limit, that rain is forecast for your commute. It doesn't wait for you to remember or search: it orders, optimizes delivery, and puts replenishment on autopilot. Convenience becomes invisible; shopping fades into the background of life.

Why does this matter?

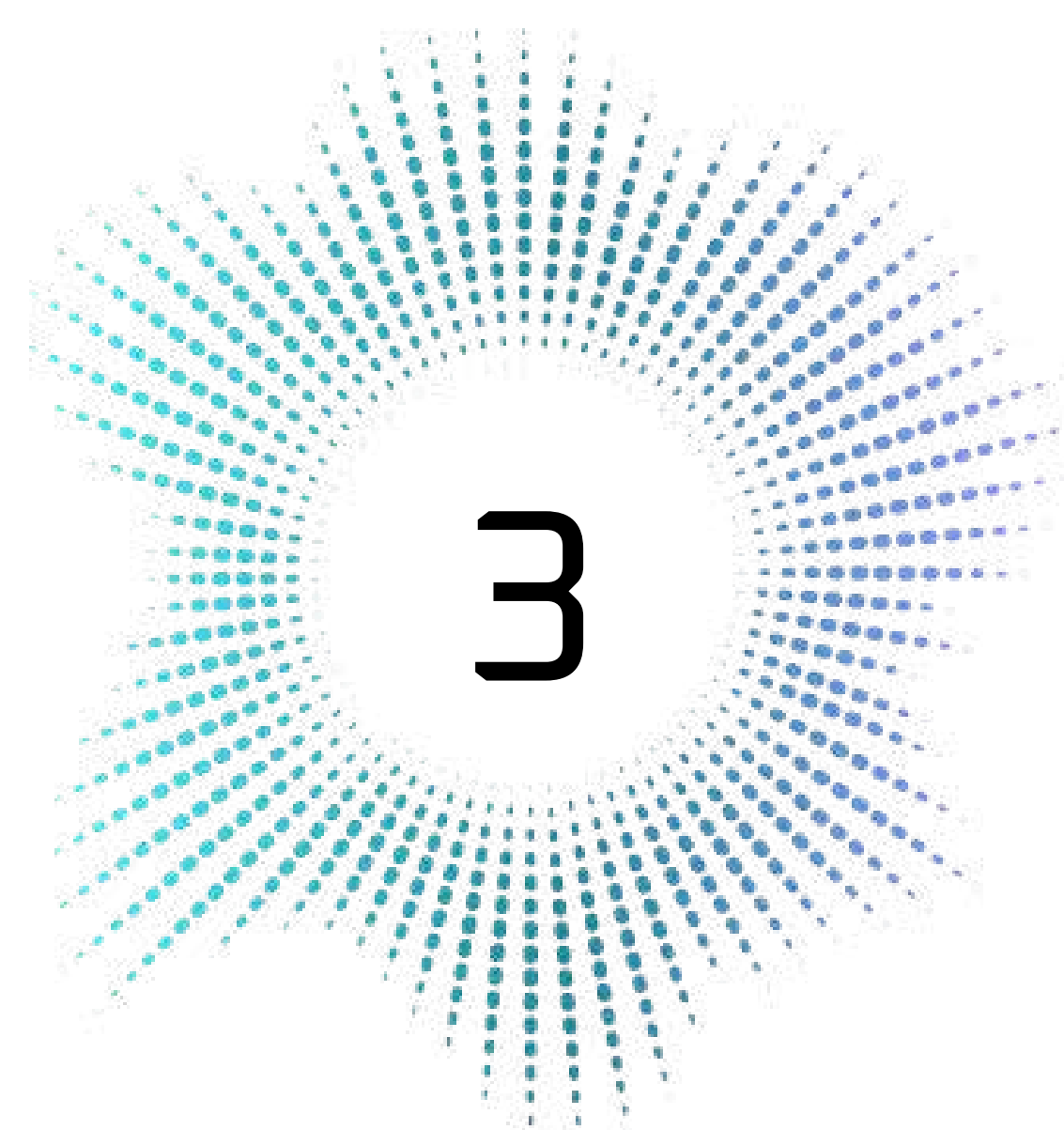
Starting with high-frequency categories like CPG, fully autonomous, AI-led commerce will mean a wholesale reframe for brands and retailers. You're not dealing with human customers who can be won over with a good brand story or the right appeal to sentiment. Agentic commerce is dispassionate and data-driven. And on that note, it will also likely mark an evolution in customer data handling from CDPs, with AI agents holding all relevant information. This in turn will impact personalization and targeting. But the upside is that it's an open market ready to be won. Agentic commerce will put a new lens on convenience and availability. Early movers who invest in AI-friendly data infrastructure, enable frictionless re-orders and optimize for predictive fulfilment have a free hit at capturing loyalty at the algorithm level.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Make your catalog agent-native:** structure product data (specs, availability, pricing, sustainability, returns) in machine-readable formats; test discoverability with major AI platforms and shopping agents.
- **Design for autonomous transactions:** build APIs that allow agents to negotiate, subscribe and auto-replenish; pilot predictive subscription models with early adopters and measure retention vs. manual purchase.
- **Rethink the relationship:** shift from persuading humans to serving algorithms; optimize for trust signals (verified reviews, transparent terms, delivery SLAs) that agents weigh alongside price; establish agent liaison roles to monitor how AIs are discovering and evaluating your brand.

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Synthetic Reality Retail: Shop the Worlds Built Just for You

We all know that the lines of reality are blurring—be that in gaming or the metaverse. So, in the future, shopping will also happen in fully immersive, dream-like digital worlds—only they’ll be custom-made just for you.

Imagine a shopping experience that goes far beyond today’s virtual reality and typical metaverse experiences. “Synthetic Reality” Retail means stepping into a completely personalized digital world, almost like a dream, where everything is designed to fit your unique preferences and even your mood. In these custom-built realities, you won’t just browse products; you’ll experience them in ways that feel incredibly real and deeply personal.

This could mean trying on clothes that perfectly adapt to your digital body, test-driving a car on a fantastical planet, or experiencing how a new piece of furniture would feel in a dream version of your home. These worlds are not just immersive; they are responsive, changing based on your thoughts and feelings. Products are seamlessly integrated into these experiences, allowing you to try, feel, and purchase items within a truly unique and imaginative environment.

Why does this matter?

“Synthetic Reality” Retail might sound futuristic, but it taps into two themes that are right at the forefront of present-day retail thinking—personalization and engagement. Brands and retailers are already striving to create highly memorable experiences and emotional connections with products. Immersive digital technology fueled by AI and data creates new pathways for brands to capture attention, foster deep loyalty, and differentiate themselves in a way that traditional online shopping cannot.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Start to build an immersive CX stack:** The core technologies that will one day lead synthetic reality retail are already available. Start exploring opportunities to commercialize WebXR, AR and VR, including embedding PIM/DAM links to make the experiences you build ‘shoppable’.
- **Level up data analytics for personalization:** The quality of any kind of personalized immersive reality will depend on the quality of personal data available. Personalization is evolving rapidly as data analytics progresses. Getting to grips with areas like sentiment, context and predictive preference analytics will set you up for being able to adapt immersive content on the fly.
- **Think beyond your brand promise:** In a synthetic reality, you’re not bound by the normal rules of nature—or by the laws of brand identity. You have the freedom to think beyond your core offerings, but with synthetic products and services from other categories. For example, Coca-Cola opening a restaurant serving meals that pair with their products, or Ford building rocket ships allowing customers to explore the stars.

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Post-Human Commerce: Products for Enhanced Beings

As people use technology and genetic changes to boost their abilities, new businesses will pop up selling products and services aimed at these “enhanced” humans.

Imagine a future where people can upgrade their bodies and minds with technology or even genetic changes. “Post-Human Commerce” is about the new market that will emerge to serve these “enhanced” individuals. This goes beyond regular products; it’s about specialized goods and services designed for people with superhuman senses, stronger bodies, or vastly improved minds.

This could mean selling custom-designed cybernetic limbs that offer unique functions, specialized diets and supplements tailored to genetically modified bodies, or even advanced software and training programs for augmented brains. It’s about a whole new range of products that help “post-human” individuals maximize their new capabilities, whether they’re seeing in new spectrums, processing information at lightning speed, or interacting with the world in ways we can barely imagine today.

Why does this matter?

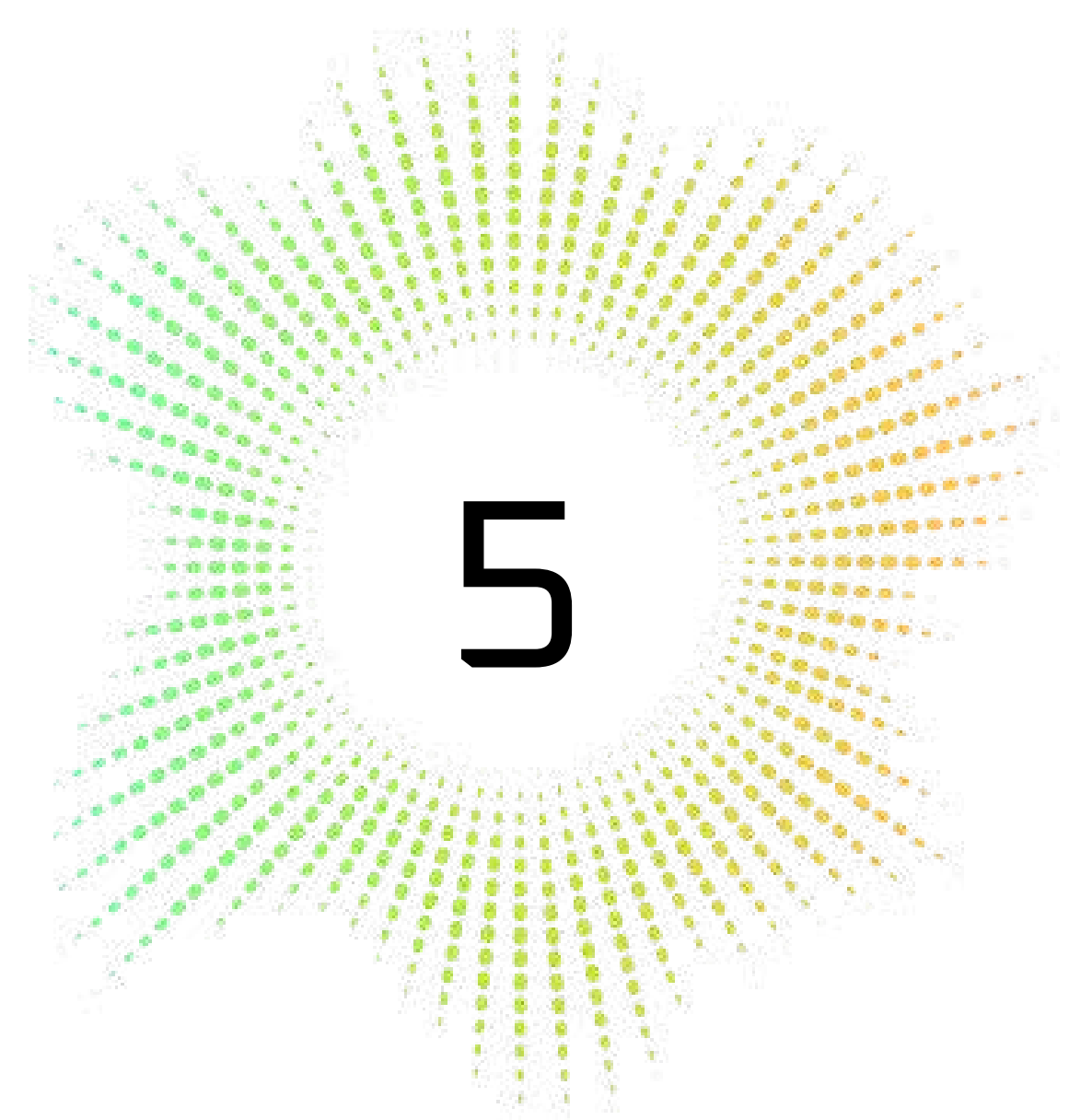
For brands and retailers, “Post-Human Commerce” will represent a significant new market as human augmentation becomes more common. Companies that can innovate and cater to the unique needs and desires of these enhanced beings will gain a significant first-mover advantage. This trend opens up entirely new product categories and service industries, pushing the boundaries of what commerce can offer to a fundamentally changed human population.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Map the market:** To understand potential opportunities, run scenario planning for how relevant areas of tech (e.g. neurotech, prosthetics, gene-editing nutrition) could affect your niche and build an “augmentation” taxonomy of needs (sensory, strength, cognition) to map potential use cases.
- **Design for modularity:** Consider how configurable products and made-to-measure workflows for on-demand manufacturing will enable a new consumer ethos of enhancement and upgrades.
- **Add service layers:** Subscriptions for maintenance and upgrades, remote diagnostics/calibration, and outcome-based guarantees will all drive retention and lifetime value in a world where tech consumption becomes focused on personal enhancement.

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Bio-Engineered Products: Tailored to Your DNA

Imagine a future where everything you consume or put on your body is designed specifically for *you*, right down to your DNA. That future is on its way as bio-engineering technology explores how to tailor products to an individual's unique genetic makeup.

"Bio-Engineered Products" are items like food, vitamins, beauty products, and even the materials in your clothes, that are custom-made based on your individual genetic profile. This means they're designed to work perfectly with your body for the best possible results and experience.

For example, your diet could be precisely formulated to optimize your energy levels and health based on your genetic predispositions. Your skincare regime might be created to target specific genetic markers for aging or sensitivity. Even your clothing could be made from materials bio-engineered to be ideal for your skin type or body temperature regulation. It's about moving beyond "one size fits all" to a world where products are as unique as your genetic code.

Why does this matter?

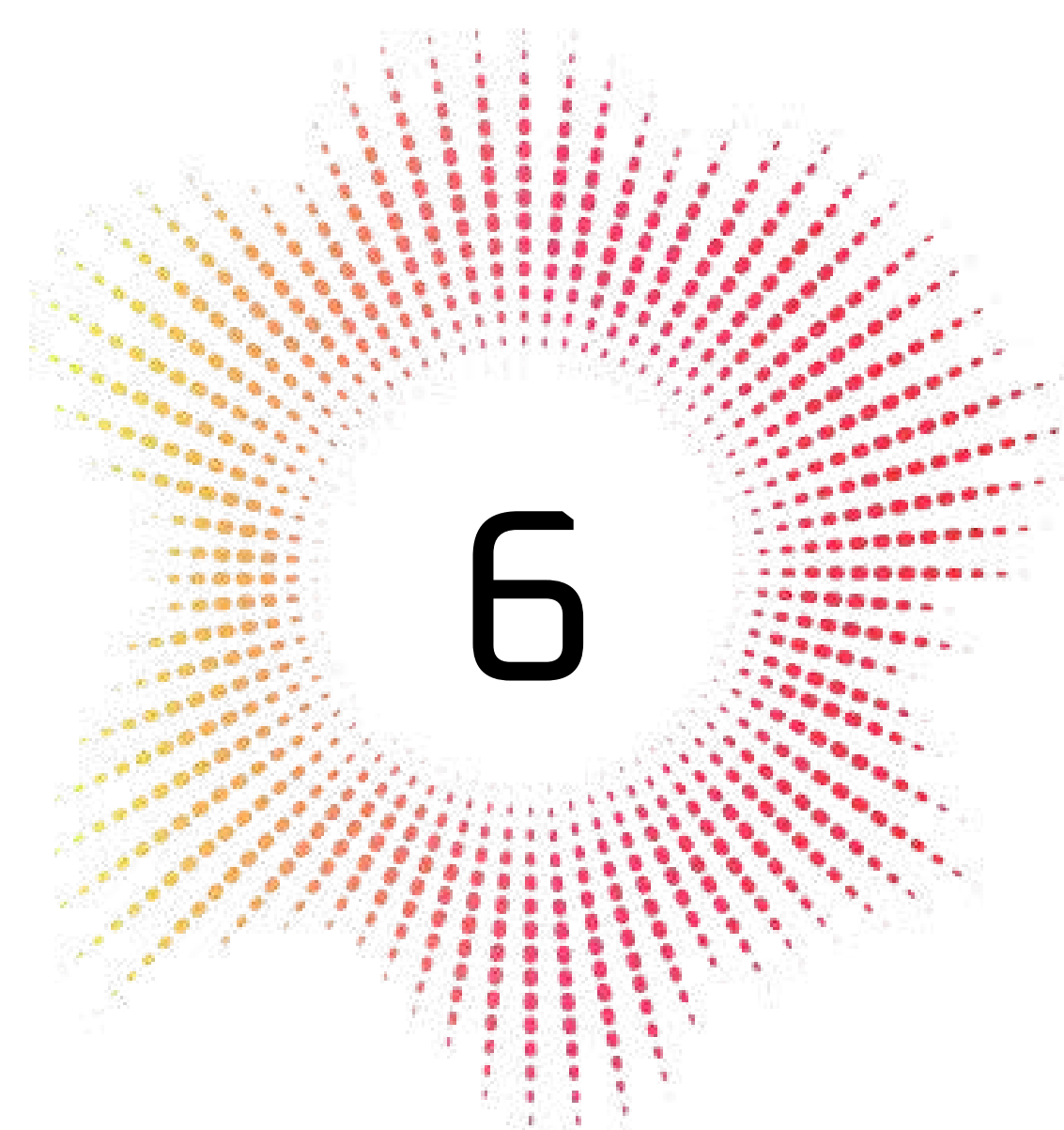
Brands and retailers should care about "Bio-Engineered Products" because they represent the ultimate level of personalization and efficacy. Consumers are increasingly seeking tailored solutions for health, wellness, and beauty, and genetic customization potentially offers unparalleled outcomes. Companies that can leverage bio-technology to create these hyper-personalized products will gain a massive competitive advantage, building deep trust and loyalty by delivering truly optimal experiences based on individual biological blueprints.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Put governance in place first:** Using people's genetic data carries serious privacy implications. Familiarize yourself with principles like privacy-by-design and informed consent, and consider the appropriate regulatory guardrails you would have to put in place (GDPR, advertising standards, MHRA/FDA, etc.).
- **Build a data and testing stack:** Partner with accredited labs in the field and start to build production and testing workflows using non-genetic biomarkers to start with, focusing on areas like standardizing data formats, securing storage/APIs, etc.
- **Think beyond personalization to prediction:** If we extend the logic of bio-engineered personalization, who knows where we might get to... using DNA as the basis of predictive personalization, perhaps, knowing what customers want from their biochemistry before they are even aware?

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Dreamstate Commerce: Designing for the Mind at Rest

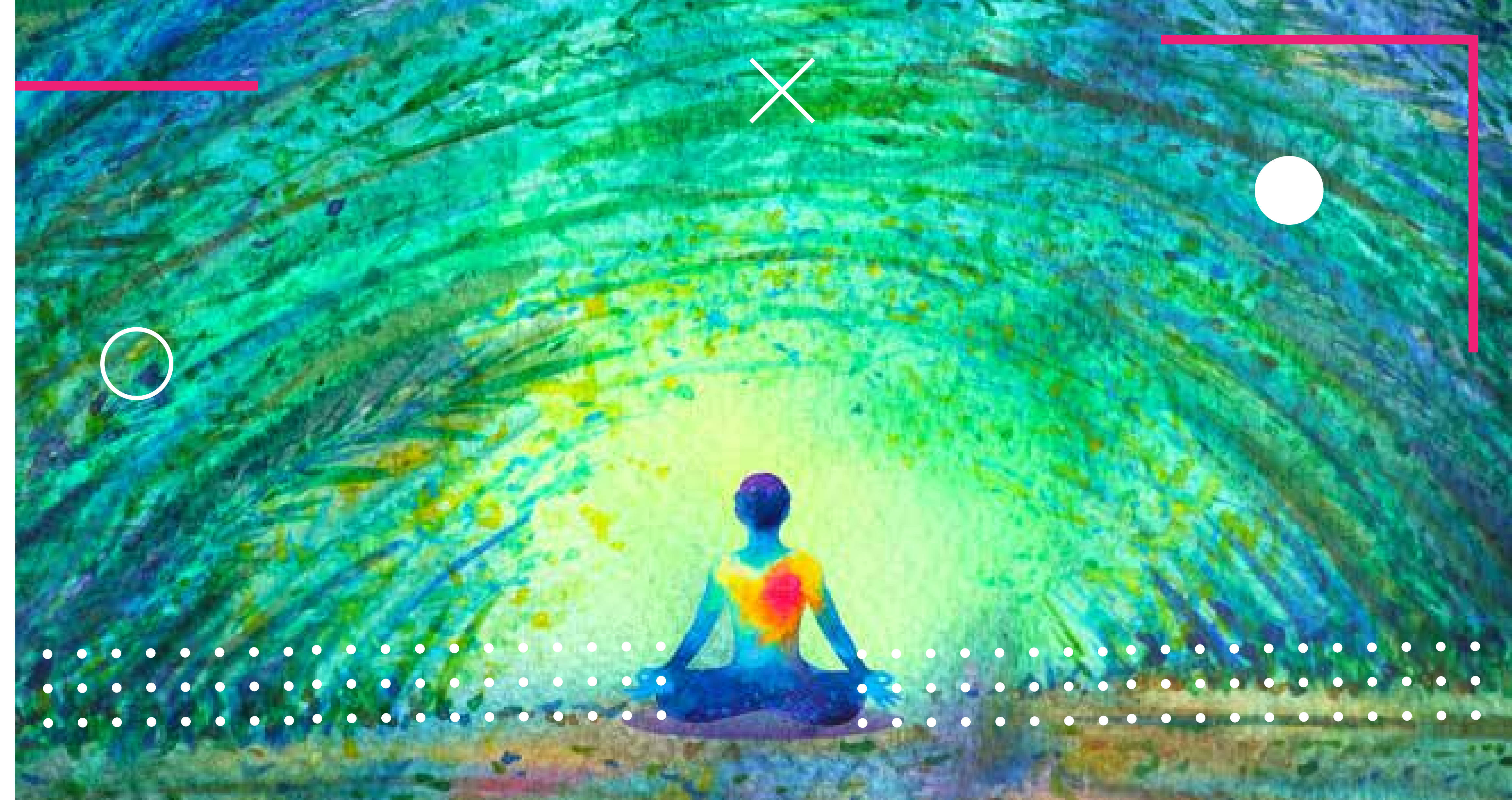
This isn't sci-fi; it's emerging now. As sleep tech goes mainstream, brands are starting to offer experiences that act on the subconscious during sleep or deep relaxation using timed audio, scent and gentle haptics to nudge mood, memory and habits. The premise is simple: deliver precise cues at the right sleep stage so rest also supports wellbeing and learning.

There's real evidence behind it. Targeted Memory Reactivation studies show cues replayed in slow-wave sleep can strengthen recall and even reduce unwanted behaviors. MIT's Dormio has demonstrated "dream incubation" in hypnagogic states. NightWare, FDA-cleared for PTSD-related nightmares, proves the sleeping mind can be modulated for clinical benefit. On the consumer side, Calm, Headspace, Endel, Kokoon and hotel programs from Six Senses and Equinox are already packaging sleep experiences, while wearables like Oura, WHOOP and Apple Watch detect sleep stages to create delivery rails for timed stimuli.

For commerce, this opens multiple opportunities: personalized "sleep protocols" subscriptions tuned to specific goals (stress reduction, language retention, habit change); creator or clinician-curated nocturnal "dreamscapes" for different occasions; VML has even been involved in a cutting-edge 'sleep mixology' project with gin brand Tanqueray No 10, deciphering flavor preferences from EEG scans of sleepers' brains to inform personalized cocktail recipes.

Why does this matter?

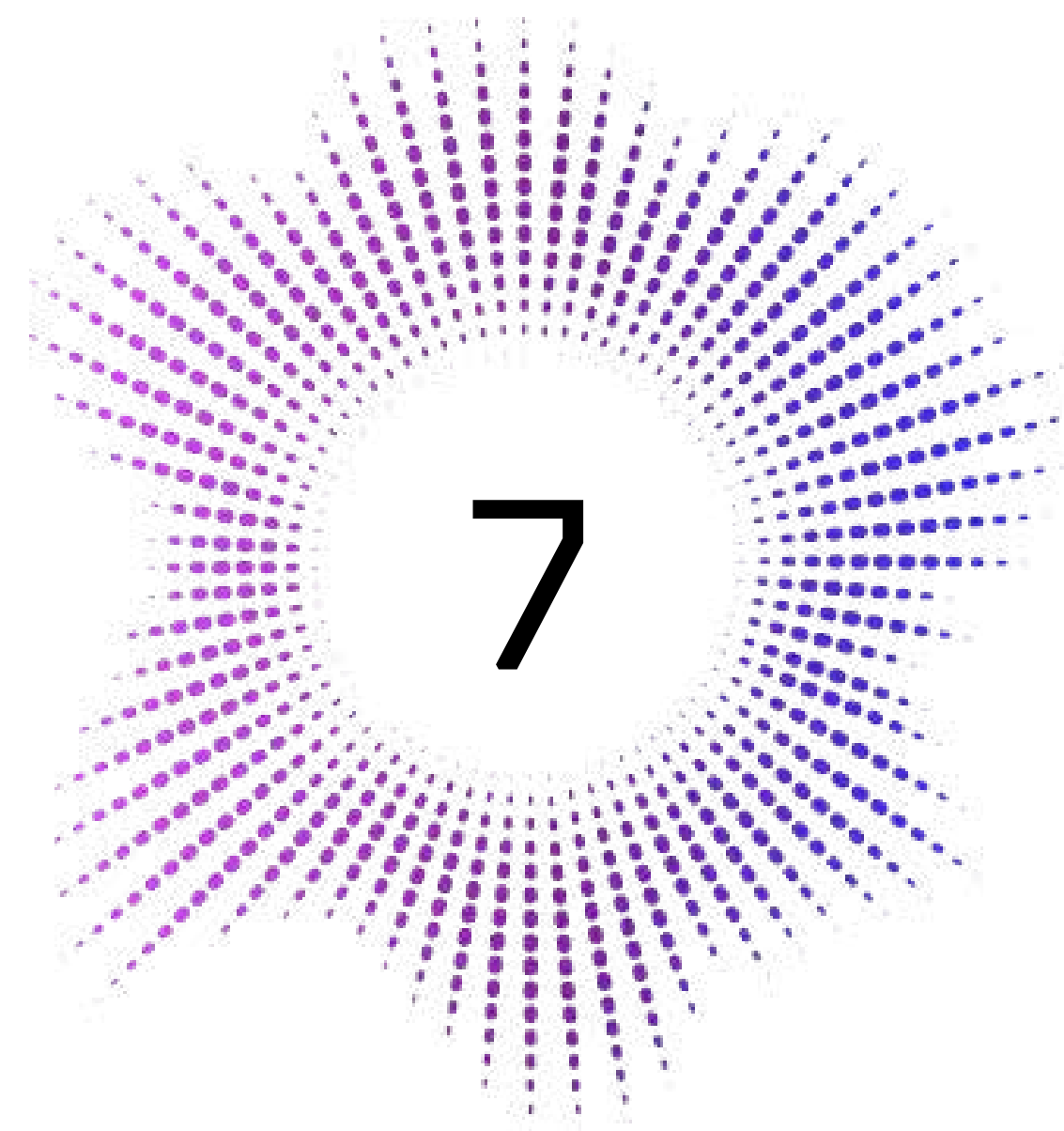
Dreamstate experiences promise high engagement and measurable outcomes in a part of life that's currently under-served. Brands that make them useful, ethical and beautifully designed will create new categories and loyalty; gimmicks will invite backlash.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Pilot an opt-in sleep program:** Partner with a reputable sleep lab or digital therapeutics partner, instrument outcomes, and publish your methodology.
- **Build the "sleep rail":** Integrate content timing with wearables and smart home platforms; curate a small library of stage-aware soundscapes and scents.
- **Set guardrails:** Publish an ethics charter that makes explicit consent, transparent goals, human oversight, easy opt-out and hard red lines against subliminal advertising or minors' participation non-negotiables.

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Algorithmic Intervention Commerce: AI-Driven Crisis Response to Predictive Fulfilment

With mental health so high on everyone’s agenda, perhaps AI can help. Smart systems will monitor for signs of deep sadness or crisis and immediately offer assistance, like a calming environment or a supportive AI friend.

Using advanced AI sentiment analysis and behavioral signaling, brands and retailers will be able to detect early signs of mental distress, including thoughts of self-harm. These systems, with an individual’s permission, would constantly analyze your digital habits, sleep patterns, and even physical signs from smart devices. If they notice you’re struggling, they’re designed to step in immediately with personalized help.

This could mean a subscription to an “AI Crisis Companion” – a supportive AI that talks to you, helps calm you, and connects you to real human counsellors or emergency services if needed. Or your smart home might become an “Environmental Shield,” automatically adjusting lights, sounds, and temperature to create a soothing space, and even alerting your trusted contacts. There might also be quick, immersive virtual reality experiences you can buy, designed to rapidly shift your mood and offer a mental reset button during tough times.

Why does this matter?

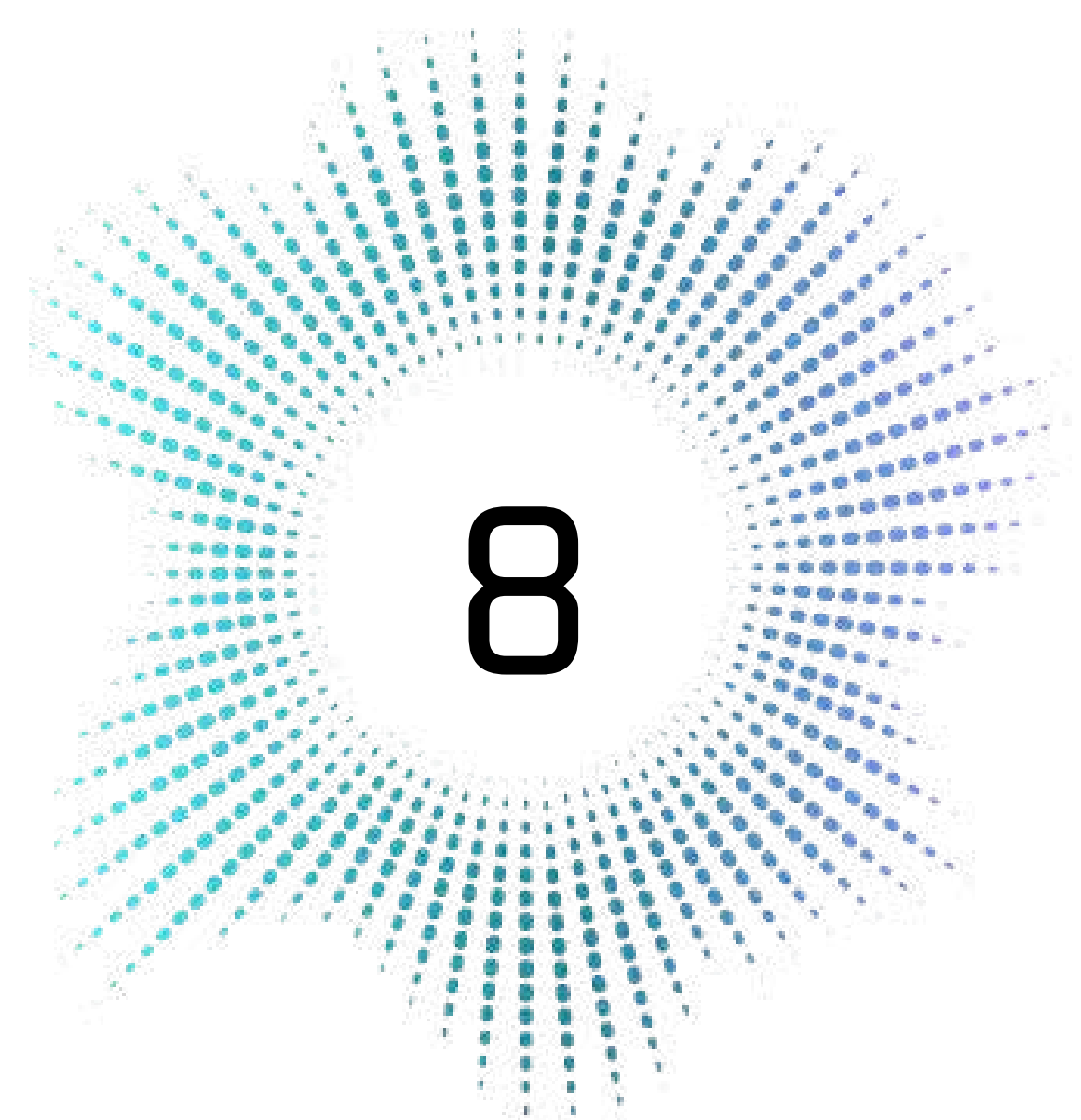
Algorithmic Intervention Commerce addresses a critical and growing need for accessible mental health support. By offering proactive, AI-powered crisis response, brands can provide life-saving services and build immense trust and loyalty. This trend positions companies as essential partners in well-being, tapping into a market driven by the urgent demand for scalable and immediate mental health solutions.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Clinically anchor the product:** Partner with licensed clinicians, crisis lines, and regulators to define and validate products with appropriate ethical oversight. Back everything up with transparent educational materials and committed support, including building support communities.
- **Make interventions accessible:** Reaching out for help can be the hardest step anyone takes. Intervention products should therefore do everything possible to remove barriers, from simple, intuitive UI to adaptable accessibility features to suit all needs.

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Inter-Species Commerce: The Dr. Doolittle Economy

Imagine a future where we can truly understand what animals want and need, not just what we *think* they want. The wheels are already in motion, with the likes of the “Earth Species Project” which seeks to use AI to decodify nature. The next step is how businesses can use emerging data-led insights to cater for these new “customers”.

“Inter-Species Commerce” goes beyond pet food and toys; it’s about developing products and services tailored to the desires, communication styles, and even emotional states of non-human animals.

This could mean creating advanced communication devices that let animals “tell” us what they need, or developing specialized environments and tools designed for wildlife based on new insights into their behavior. Think of services that help wild animals thrive in changing environments, or even entertainment designed for specific species. It’s about a whole new market opening up as our connection and understanding of the animal kingdom grows.

Why does this matter?

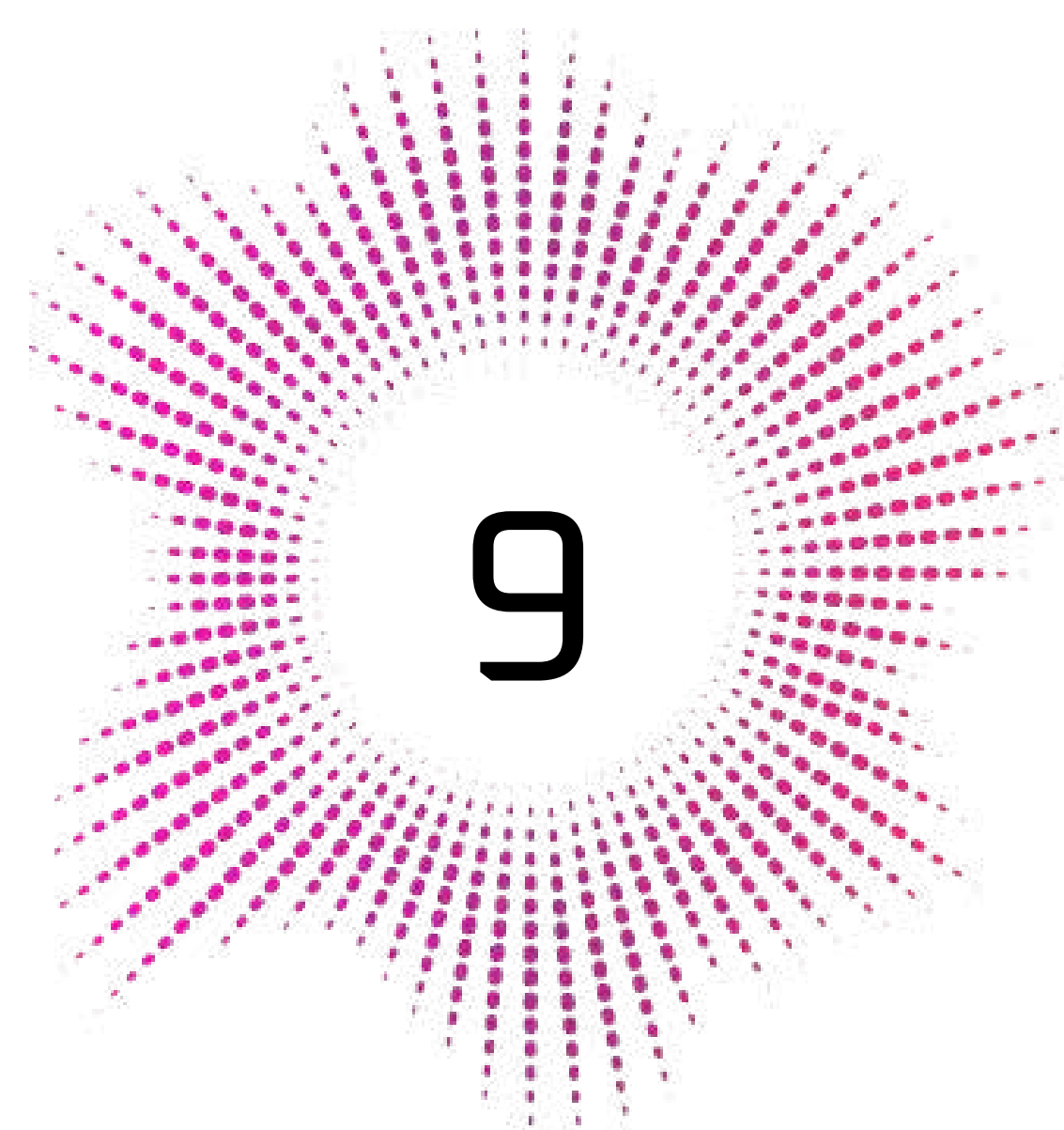
Brands and retailers should pay attention because “Inter-Species Commerce” could open up a massive untapped market driven by scientific breakthroughs and our growing desire to better co-exist with other species. As our ability to communicate with and understand animals improves, the ethical and commercial opportunities to serve their needs will expand dramatically, creating entirely new industries and revenue streams.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Weigh up your cross-species potential!** The range of retail categories, products and services that have relevance to the animal world is bigger than you might think. From functional nutrition/supplements to health diagnostics, habitat & climate control devices to mobility/assistive gear, grooming & hygiene to safety & wayfinding gadgets, the possibilities are huge.
- **Prototype “animal UX”:** How animals engage with and experience human-made products is a vast new area of exploration. Think about creating testable feedback loops via wearables/collars, habitat sensors, and enrichment devices, and partner with experts to define success metrics and welfare standards.
- **Think beyond animals:** If we’re taking commerce inter-species, why stop at animals? Why not expand the idea to plants, and develop offers that appeal to horticulturists, gardeners, arborists, florists, and your everyday house plant owners, too?

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Adaptive Carbon Nudging: From Scare Tactics to Smart Trade-offs

In 2023, we argued for shock tactics via visceral, visual messaging to jolt greener shopping decisions at checkout. The next wave is smarter, with personalized carbon nudges that make the greener choice the default, and AI-generated simulations that show consequences you can believe, not just fear.

SKU-level impact data and basket-aware delivery logic allow checkouts to auto-select the most energy-efficient product for any given need, as well as low-emission delivery slots, and consolidating shipments and price by footprint as well as time. Rather than lecturing, the aim is to adapt the experience to put sustainability first: a shopper who values convenience still sees realistic trade-offs and savings tailored to their habits; another who prioritizes ethics gets verified supplier provenance and scenario views that bring impact to life without manipulation.

Why does this matter?

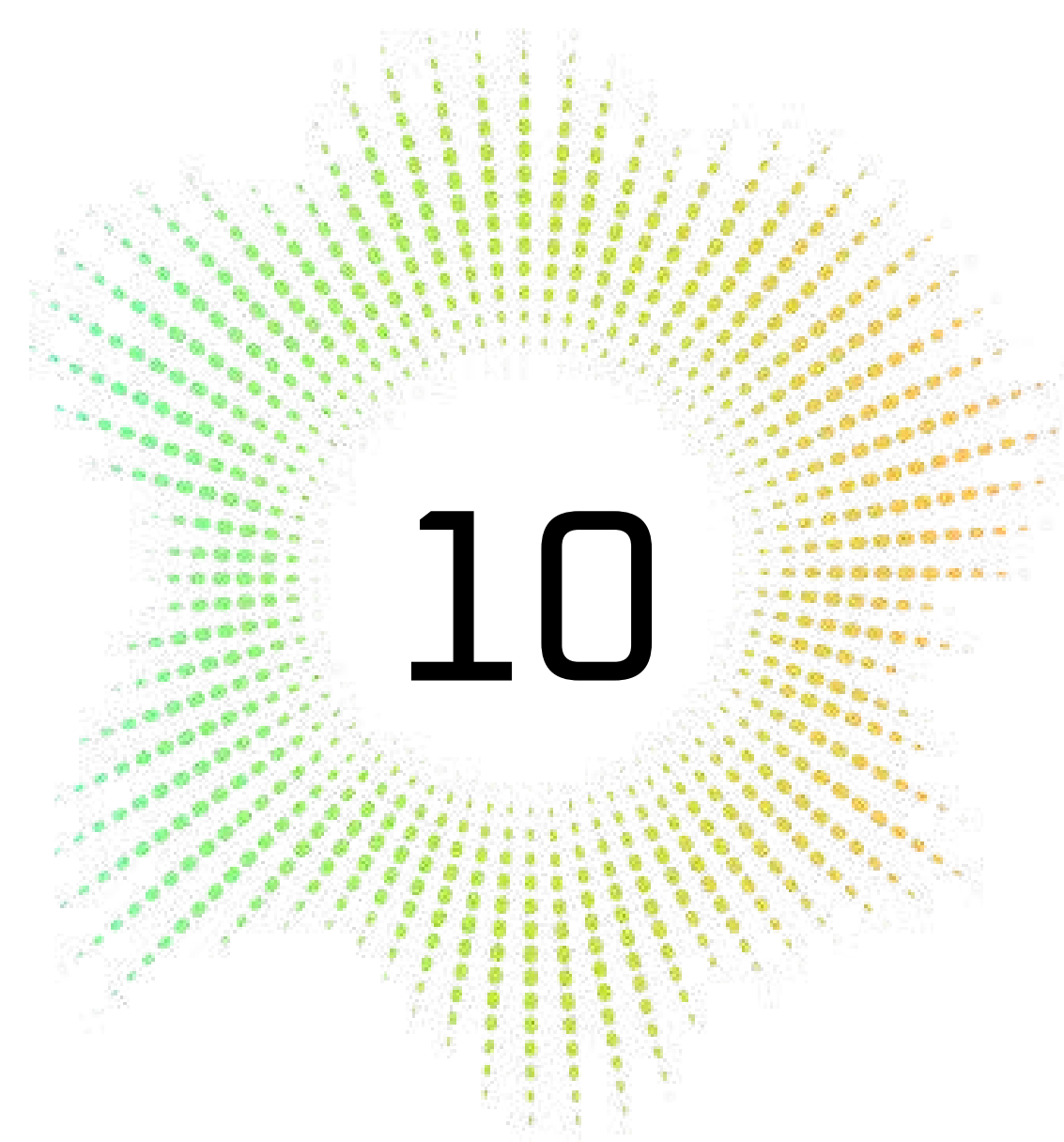
This isn't just good PR. Carbon-aware commerce reduces cost and waste, immunizes you against greenwashing scrutiny, and builds loyalty with practical, proven choices. As regulation tightens, brands that can show their workings are grounded in real data and third-party attestations will win trust and market share, while rivals scramble to retrofit sustainability to a speed-obsessed model.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Build your sustainability strategy around data:** Integrate product-level carbon data and enable dynamic delivery pricing that reflects speed and footprint.
- **Test “green defaults” and adaptive visuals:** Measure opt-in rates and repeat purchase impact across segments.
- **Foreground transparency:** Establish governance for persuasive design and claims verification.

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Intelligent Robotics: From Warehouse Floor to Living Room

AI hasn't just made robots smarter. It's made them commercially viable at scale. The next 5 years will see robotics move from experimental tech to essential infrastructure, transforming back-end operations and opening an entirely new consumer market.

A leaked Amazon strategy document reveals the ambition: automate 75 percent of operations and save \$12.6 billion in wage costs between 2025 and 2027 alone. Amazon has already deployed over a million robots and is testing bipedal humanoid bots for complex warehouse tasks. And it isn't just Amazon. Warehouse robotics are becoming standard as AI enables robots to pick, pack, sort, and manage inventory at speeds and accuracy that outpace human workers.

In parallel, robots are entering homes. Major companies are selling personal assistants, delivery bots, cleaning systems, and eldercare robots directly to consumers. AI integration makes them genuinely useful, not gimmicks. The 1X Neo humanoid costs around \$20,000 or \$499/month—not cheap, but accessible for early adopters and households investing in domestic automation. As prices drop and capabilities improve, consumer robotics will become as standard as smart home devices.

Why does this matter?

Operationally, robotics delivers cost and speed advantages rivals can't ignore. Central to Amazon's robotics strategy is a 30-cent-per-item savings calculation. This will pressure competitors to automate or fall behind. As a market opportunity, robotics opens new product lines, subscription services, and integration platforms. Strategically, robots execute what agentic AI decides. Brands must design for both: machine-readable data for AI agents and robot-compatible fulfilment for physical execution.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

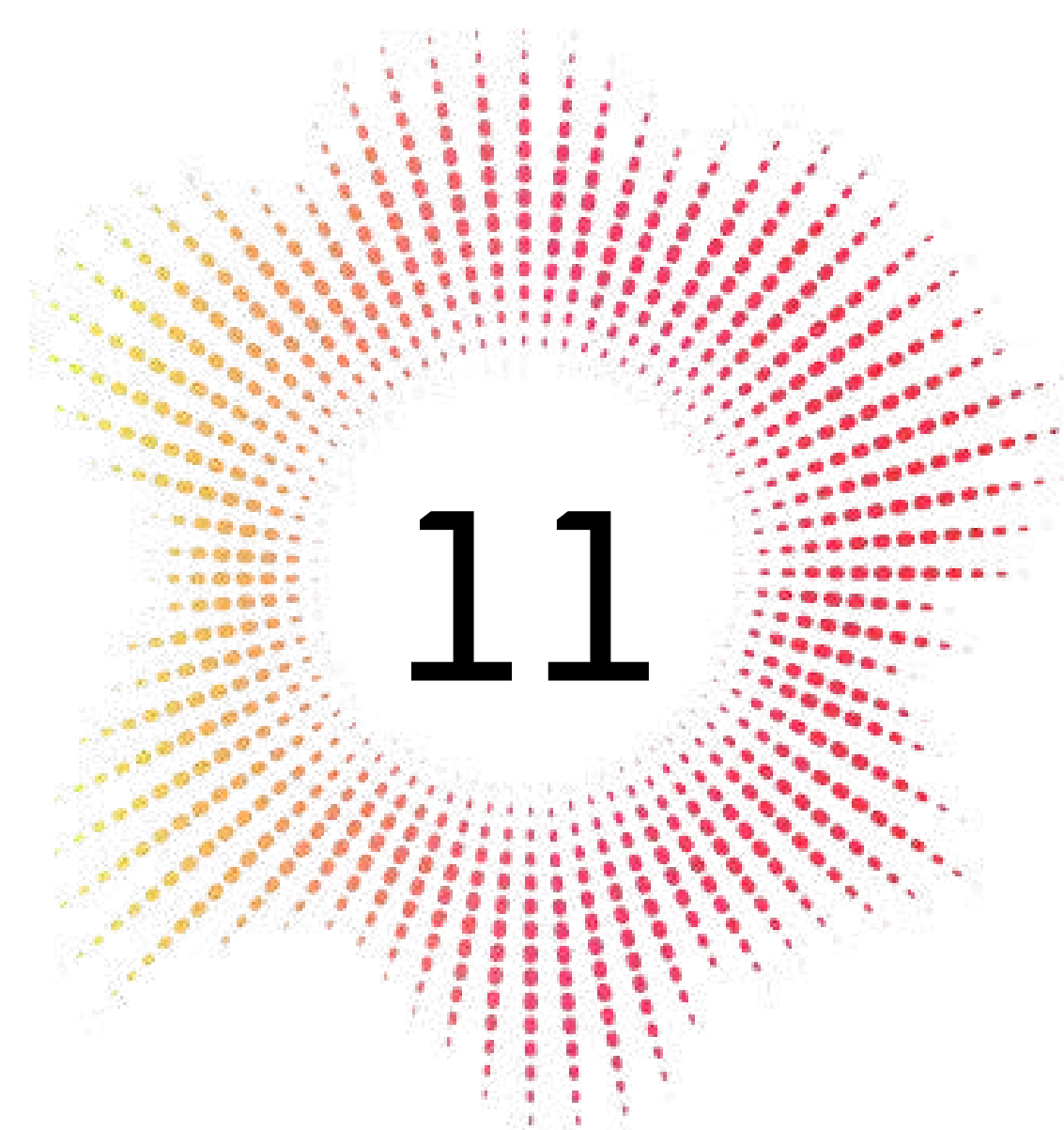
- **Audit and pilot automation:** Identify high-volume warehouse tasks for robotics; test ROI in controlled environments.
- **Explore robotics revenue streams:** Assess whether to develop, partner, or service consumer or B2B robotics markets.
- **Design for robot compatibility:** Rethink packaging and fulfilment for automated handling and last-mile robotic delivery.
- **Prepare workforce strategy:** Plan for displacement, reskilling, and transparent communications; own the narrative early.
- **Make operations robot-readable:** Extend agent-native commerce to include the physical specs robots need to handle and deliver products seamlessly.

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SECTION 2

AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE & HUMAN CONNECTION

These trends reassert the foreground role of humans in the era of AI-inflected commerce—physical spaces, community rituals, values-aligned influence, repair and restraint, serendipity, and legacy. They answer fatigue with hyper-optimized feeds by elevating craft, care and belonging, and by making trust tangible through transparency and human curation. Brands that take a human first approach—balancing warmth with utility—will earn time, loyalty, and advocacy.



The Flesh & Blood Reboot: Gen Alpha Leads the Real- World Revival

Our lives are saturated with screens, feeds and personalization. But the next few years will bring a counter-swing: a craving for tangible and imperfect human experiences.

Gen Alpha, the generation raised on remote classes and algorithmic everything, will lead this shift. Digitally fluent but not digitally exclusive, they show a hunger for the genuine and unmediated: conversation over chat, craft over clicks, and sensation over simulation.

Commerce is following the craving. Physical retail, already scoring highly in consumer affections as per VML's Future Shopper survey, will morph from rows of racks into hubs of interaction and 'Human Oases'. These are stores that double as social studios where live Q&A sessions, skill-shares, repair and alteration counters, and creator residencies replace passive browsing. Inventory will become a canvas for serendipity with unadvertised IRL drops, constantly changing selections and "shuffle" discovery modes that break algorithmic sameness and put surprise back into the journey. And while AI still powers logistics, accessibility and safety, a human lens will sit on top: trained concierges and stewards to contextualize choices to values, mood and wellbeing, keeping technology invisible and respectful so the experience feels authored by the customer, not the feed.

Why does this matter?

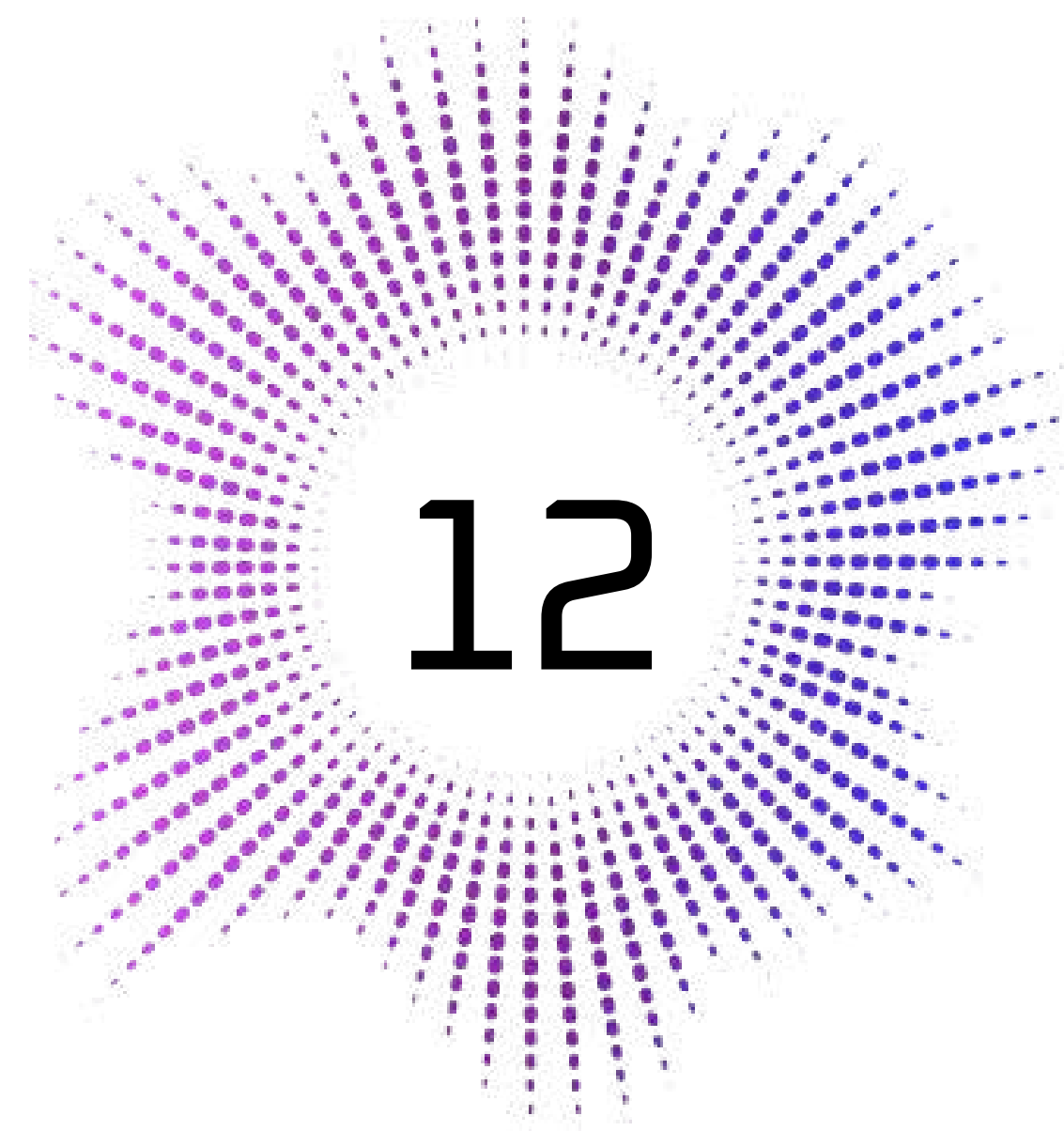
Hyper-optimized shopping is efficient but fatiguing. Brands that prioritize natural materials, craftsmanship and human counsel will earn trust, loyalty, time and attention. Expect higher repeat rates, lower buyer's remorse, and stronger advocacy when the purchase story is theirs, not the algorithm's. Gen Alpha's "digital rejection" isn't anti-tech; it's pro agency, choosing when to be online, and demanding that what's offline feels unquestionably real.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Prototype a Human Oasis:** Redesign one flagship space for connection and craft (workshops, repair bars, creator residencies) and measure belonging as well as conversion.
- **Build for serendipity:** Run unannounced IRL drops and online "explore" modes; give customers clear controls to dial personalization up or down.
- **Train connection specialists:** Upskill staff and creators as human concierges; keep AI in the background for logistics, accessibility and safety while humans own counsel and care.

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Agency Override: The Personalization Backlash and the Rise of Wild Buying

When AI knows us too well, a human reflex kicks in. Psychology calls it reactance—a built-in drive to restore freedom when we feel steered. Pair that with novelty seeking (we’re wired to chase surprise), and you get “agency override”: purchases made to assert selfhood, defy prediction and feel alive. It’s not irrational; it’s restorative.

The signs are there. Algorithm aversion research shows people switch back to human judgement when systems feel overbearing. #Deinfluencing surged on TikTok as users pushed back against hyper-curated pushes. Drop culture (shock releases on Nike SNKRS app, Supreme) thrives precisely because it resists recommendation. Mystery boxes and Japan’s Fukubukuro “lucky bags” continue to sell because the thrill of not knowing is the point. Recommender-system teams now track “serendipity” and “diversity” alongside accuracy—a tacit admission that perfect relevance can feel wrong.

In the next 3–5 years, expect commerce to bake spontaneity back in. “Wild lanes” will sit beside personalized feeds: shuffle modes, blind drops, unadvertised pop-ups and privacy-forward sessions that suspend tracking. Personal shopper AIs will add a serendipity slider, optimizing not just for price and fit, but also for unpredictability on demand.

Why does this matter?

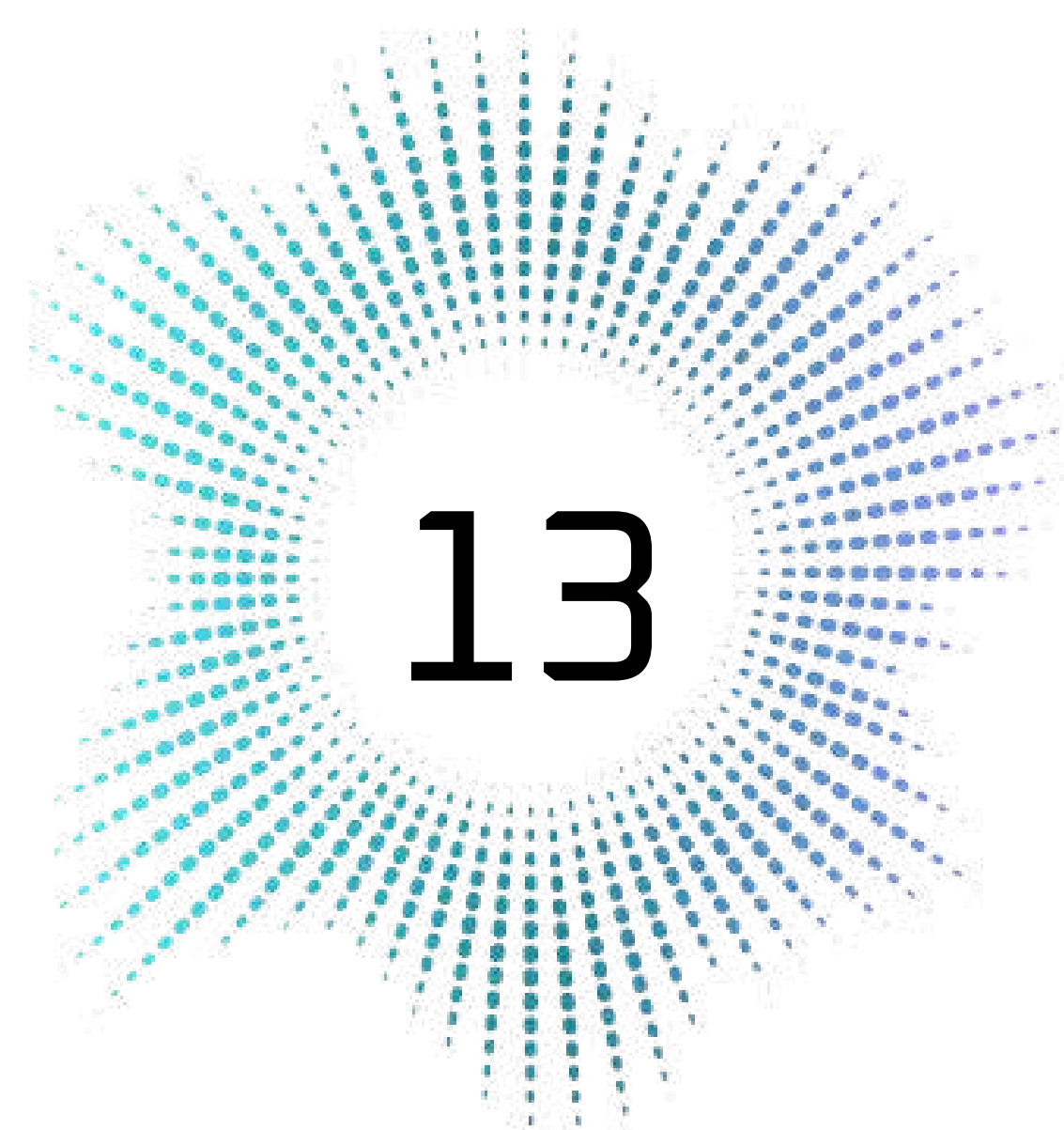
The human need here is clear: a periodic, intentional escape from the machine to preserve autonomy and identity. Perfect personalization risks sameness, surveillance fatigue and brand distrust. Designing for agency restores joy, increases exploration, lifts AOV and earns loyalty because the story of the purchase is yours, not the algorithm’s. Do it ethically—surprise shouldn’t mean manipulation—guardrails, clear pricing and easy returns make spontaneity feel safe.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Offer a serendipity setting:** Launch “wild lanes” across sites/apps with shuffle discovery, blind drops and no-tracking sessions; add a user-controlled slider for unpredictability in personal AIs.
- **Make IRL discovery a feature:** Pilot unadvertised pop-ups, rotating mystery assortments and community swap events; measure agency satisfaction (joy, confidence) alongside conversion.
- **Build ethical guardrails:** Create transparent rules for surprise formats, fair value guarantees and effortless returns. Avoid deceptive, dark patterns—the goal is autonomy, not trickery.

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Cause Influencers: The Rise of Values-Aligned Influencers

Influencers are now integral to shopping as our Future Shopper report data makes clear. In terms of who influences people's purchases, online personalities have now overtaken friends, and are second only to family members. But the age of personalities pushing products purely for clicks is fading. Consumers are filtering recommendations through a values lens, seeking creators and brands who stand for something they believe in.

This shift is giving rise to "cause influencers": voices motivated by authentic impact rather than pure transaction. Alignment beats amplification. We're already seeing the growth of creator-led programs that prioritize repair, resell, and local choices over disposable consumption.

Campaigns such as Team Trees and Team Seas showed how transparent, verifiable outcomes can mobilize audiences at scale. Brand initiatives like Patagonia's Worn Wear, alongside creator-led thrift and repair drives, demonstrate how influence becomes service, not just sales.

Expect shoppable content to carry "impact receipts", donation confirmations, verified provenance, and emissions avoided, making values legible to humans and machine-readable to shopper AIs. Drops and bundles will tie purchases to transparent projects with progress updates, while creator-hosted workshops and community events turn influence into tangible utility.

Why does this matter?

Partnering with cause-led creators builds trust, lifts conversion and loyalty, and reduces the risk of backlash or greenwashing fatigue. It also reshapes KPIs from raw reach to meaningful engagement and measurable impact; and shifts endorsements from purely transactional celebrity brand ambassadors to something more meaningful.

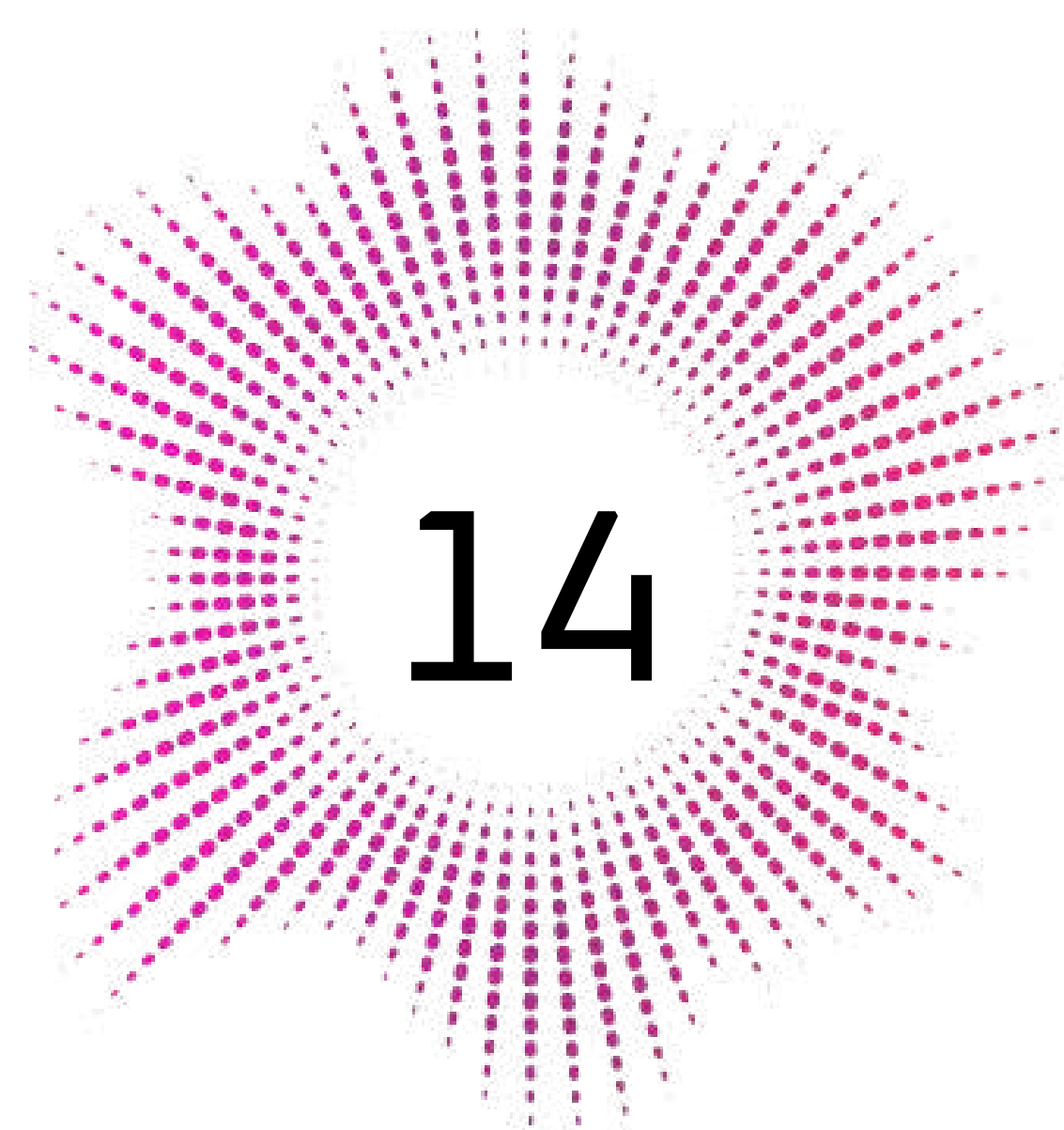
Cause commerce isn't about abandoning sales; it's about making them matter. When recommendations align with audience values and deliver auditable outcomes, the relationship deepens and so does brand equity.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Map your values and vet partners:** Build a creator roster based on mission fit and a track record of impact; prioritize long-term programs over one-off promos.
- **Make impact measurable:** Co-create campaigns with clear outcomes, third-party verification and public reporting; label content transparently (paid, donated, verified).
- **Turn influence into service:** Fund creator-hosted repair/resell events, cause-linked drops and community initiatives; measure success with impact and loyalty metrics, not just impressions.

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Intergenerational Retail: One Space, Many Lives

Designing for families, teens and older adults in the same space is becoming a clear differentiator. As populations age, loneliness rises, and parents juggle time poverty, shoppers are seeking places that serve life, not just demand.

Intergenerational retail will bring them together—welcoming all age groups, from toddlers to grandparents, with programming, layouts and services that make everyone feel seen. Think play corners and story hours sitting alongside walking clubs, chair yoga mornings and repair workshops. Family rooms and stroller parking become standard. Generous seating, clear wayfinding, wide aisles, accessible fittings and hearing loops to make visits comfortable and accessible for older customers.

Retailers will expand the appeal of their stores through partnerships—with libraries, schools and community health organizations to host reading hours, study clubs and wellbeing meetups that connect people to group activities. And businesses can use scheduling to cater to different needs, for example food halls hosting early bird “quiet” sessions for neurodiverse visitors, or malls reviving walking groups before opening.

Why does this matter?

When stores feel like community spaces, dwell time, frequency and loyalty rise. Basket size grows because people stay longer and return for the next session. Staff satisfaction improves in calmer, better-planned environments. And retailers gain civic relevance—becoming part of the weekly rhythm of neighbourhood life, not just a place to transact.

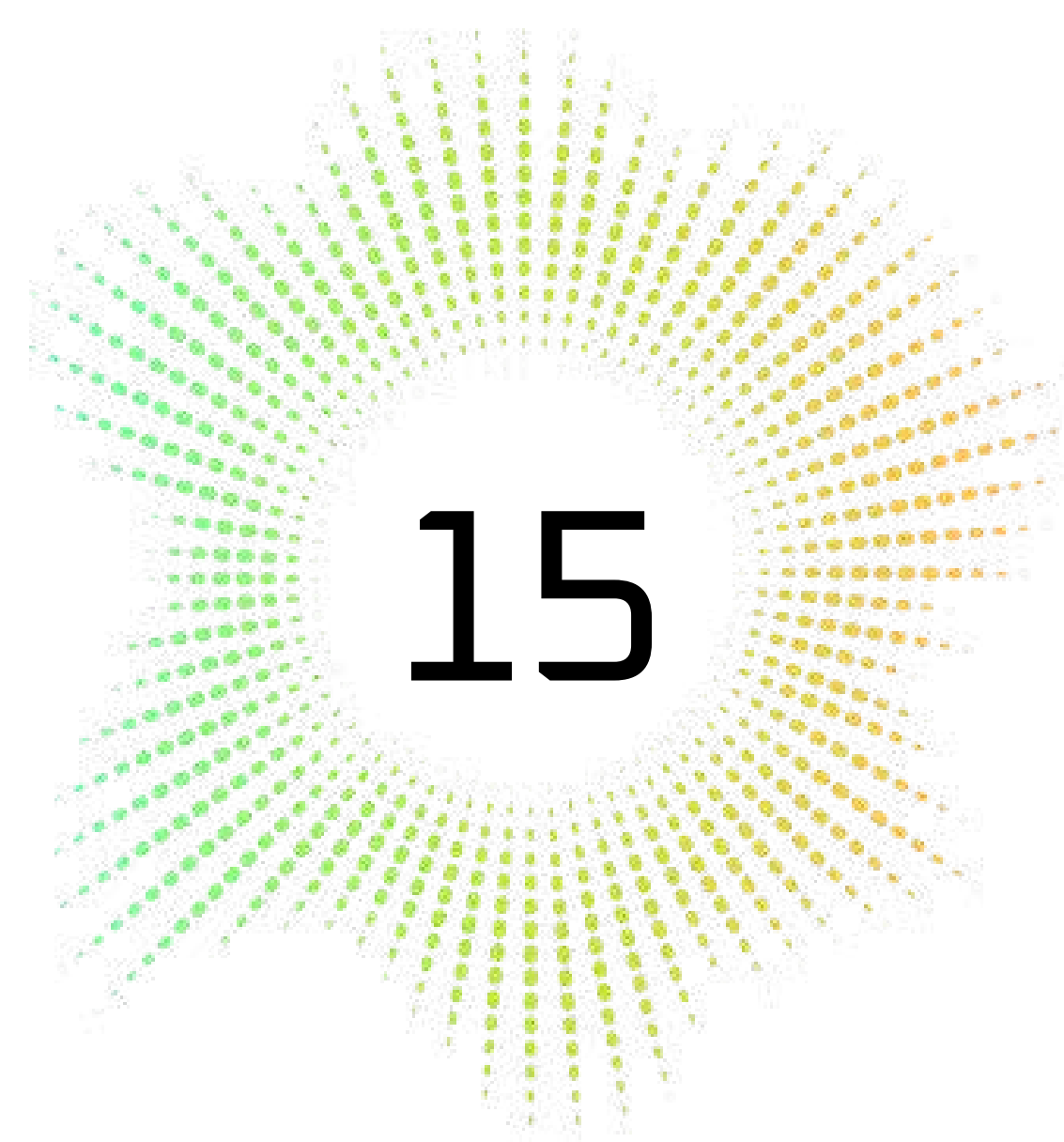
This isn't anti-digital; it's pro-human. Simple hospitality, thoughtful design and predictable, inclusive programming meet needs that algorithms can't: companionship, confidence and belonging.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Audit for inclusion:** Add seating, clear signage, family rooms, accessible fittings and “quiet” hours; co-design with local parents, teens and older adults.
- **Program community rhythms:** Create a monthly calendar (story time, study club, walking group, repair night) with partners like libraries, schools and health services.
- **Measure beyond sales:** Track dwell time, repeat visits and event attendance; reward staff for hosting and community outcomes, not only transactions.

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Curated Scarcity & the Anti-Consumption Movement: From Buy More to Buy Better

As consumer sentiment turns against planned obsolescence and the waste it causes, brands will succeed by focusing on super durable products and offering repair services. But this is just the start. Evolving out of concerns for sustainability, encouraging consumers to buy less will pivot towards “curated scarcity”—driving demand by keeping products rare.

The “Anti-Consumption Movement” flips the script on endless consumption. It privileges craft, provenance and story over constant churn. And it’s a concept that is already in play. Repair-first retail is growing fast: Patagonia’s Worn Wear, Arc’teryx ReBird and Levi’s SecondHand offer brand-run repair and recommerce. Scarcity as a quality signal is equally mainstream from Supreme and Nike SNKRS drops to limited-run, numbered editions in outdoor and audio gear, shifting attention from “newest” to “worth keeping.”

You won’t see these brands pushing endless new versions. Instead, they focus on timeless quality and robust repair services so you can fix what you own instead of replacing it. It’s about valuing longevity, craftsmanship and sustainability over constant upgrades and throwaway goods. The appeal is owning something truly special and built to last, not simply having the latest thing.

Why does this matter?

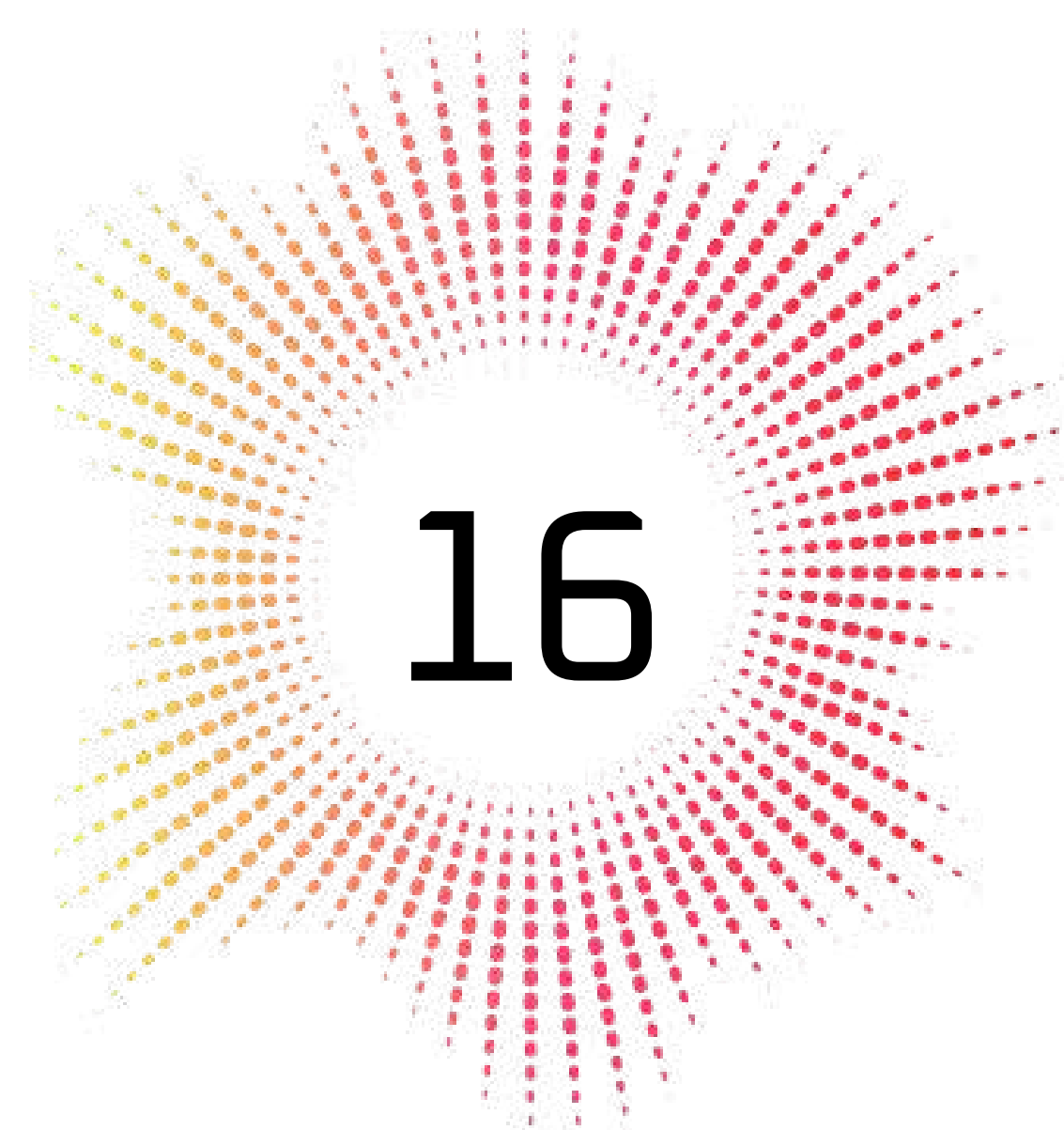
Consumers are increasingly tired of throwaway culture and want products that reflect values of sustainability and quality. Regulation is moving the same way—the Right to Repair and emerging EU product passports will reward durable, repairable design. By embracing anti-consumption, brands can build deep trust and loyalty, reduce environmental impact, and stand out with a powerful identity: fewer, better products, supported by repair, recommerce and meaningful scarcity.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Design for lifespan:** Engineer core products for repairability, offer parts and publish maintenance guides, and back it with warranties that mean something.
- **Commercialize ‘less is more’:** Launch an owned repair/recommerce channel; track lifetime value rather than launch velocity.
- **Curate scarcity with integrity:** Tie limited runs to craft, provenance or community collaboration rather than artificial hype, and communicate why a product is worth keeping.

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Price Paradox: AI Cheapens Choice

As AI agents relentlessly hunt the “best total price,” commoditized categories will feel the squeeze. Machine-to-machine negotiation turns price into a clearing function, collapsing margins and accelerating consolidation. Short-term winner: the shopper. Long term cost: human value—fewer local stores, thinner service, and a retail monoculture that erodes community, advice, and the joy of discovery.

This matters to people because retail is about more than transactions. Diverse main streets provide social connection, trusted counsel, repair and aftercare, entry points for small entrepreneurs, and local jobs. When choice narrows to a handful of low-cost platforms, we lose proximity and accountability, and communities become less resilient. Cheap today can mean poorer service tomorrow; low prices rarely include the cost of wasted time, failed deliveries, returns friction, or the loss of places that tie neighborhoods together.

The solution isn’t out-discounting the machine; it’s teaching agents (and people) to optimize for human needs as well as price. Make value multidimensional: reliability and time saved, fair returns and repairability, provenance and worker standards, community contribution, accessibility and service quality. Publish these signals in agent-readable form so shopper AIs can weigh trust, care, and impact alongside cost. Remodel around memberships, services, and local utility so the store earns margin by helping, not just selling. And collaborate: retail meshes that pool inventory and logistics across independents keep variety viable and neighborhoods vibrant.

Why does this matter?

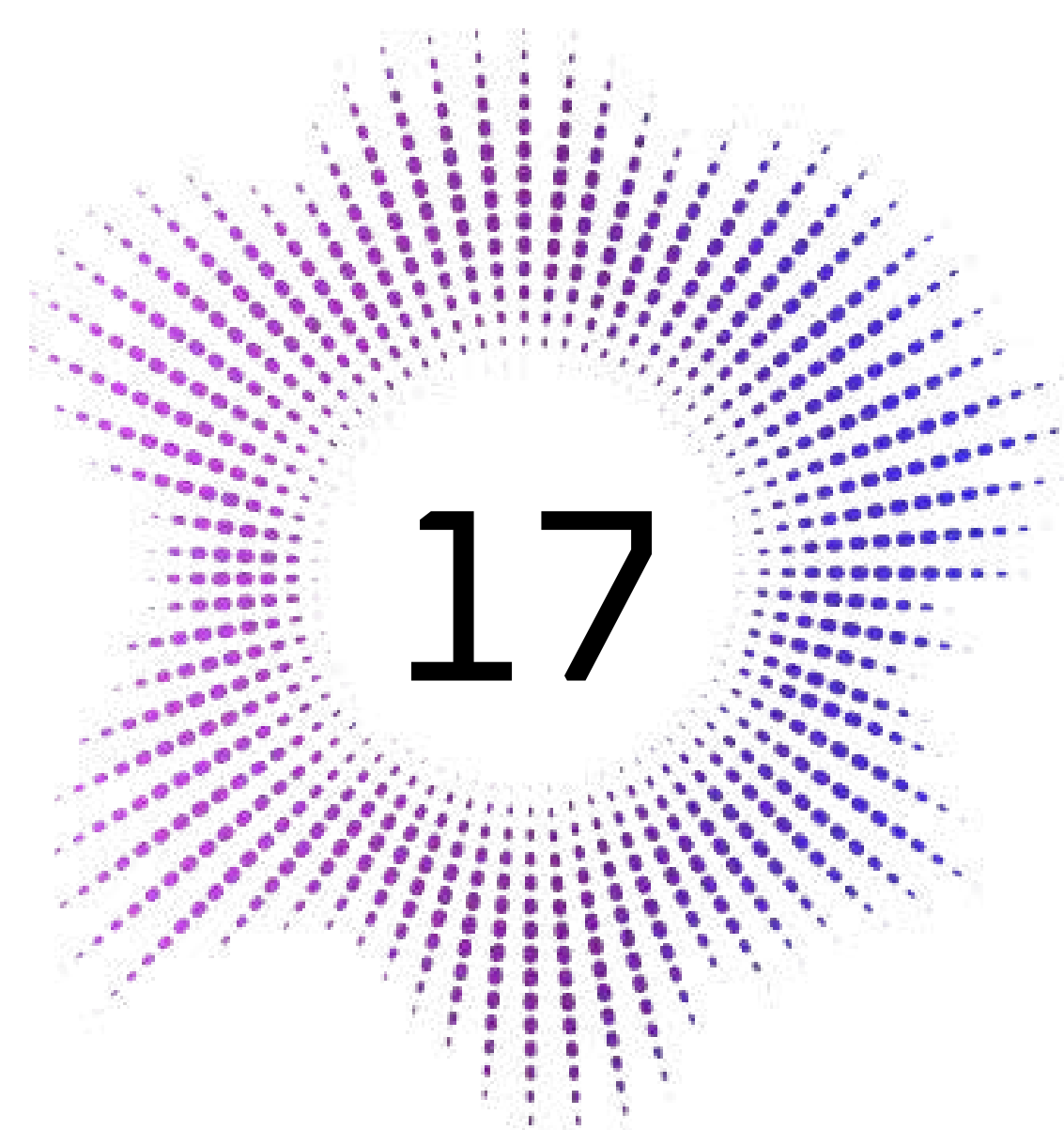
If price becomes the only signal, many retailers—and the human benefits they provide—won’t survive. If value becomes both multidimensional and machine-legible, consumers keep low prices where it counts and preserve choice, quality, service, and community where it matters. Brands that balance cost with human outcomes will protect margin, loyalty, and local presence while staying competitive in an AI-optimized marketplace.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Make human value legible:** Expose agent-readable signals for reliability, service SLAs, repair/warranty terms, provenance, worker standards, and carbon—alongside price.
- **Build margin in service:** Launch memberships and service bundles (setup, repair, upgrades), and repurpose stores as hubs for fulfilment, advice, and events.
- **Collaborate locally:** Form retail meshes or category consortia to share logistics, inventory visibility, and unified click-and-collect, preserving choice and community reach.

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De-Commerce: The Art of Un-Selling

In a world overflowing with products, having too much creates its own stresses. Limited space and too much clutter are barriers to buying more. Consumers are increasingly looking for help getting rid of old possessions in a smart and ethical way.

“De-Commerce” is about companies helping people to un-buy things. Think IKEA’s Buy Back & Resell programs that turn old furniture into store credit and second-life stock. Or Best Buy offering nationwide electronics recycling and haul-away. Or Apple Trade In, plus its “Daisy” robot disassembly keeping devices out of landfill. And there are many more examples from the world of fashion.

Whether it’s selling, upcycling, recycling, or disposing of items responsibly, this trend is about creating a circular flow for goods, where consumption isn’t just about buying, but also about making it easier to let go. Imagine snapping a photo of an old jacket and getting instant valuation, a prepaid label, and a choice of resale, donation or textile recycling. Or a robot-powered pickup that sorts your box of tech into refurbish, parts harvesting and certified e-waste. Or a brand app that notifies you when spare parts, repairs or recommerce beat replacement. AI will grease the wheels by auto-cataloging items from images, verifying condition, routing to the best value outcome, and generating listings, while human service ensures trust and care.

Why does this matter?

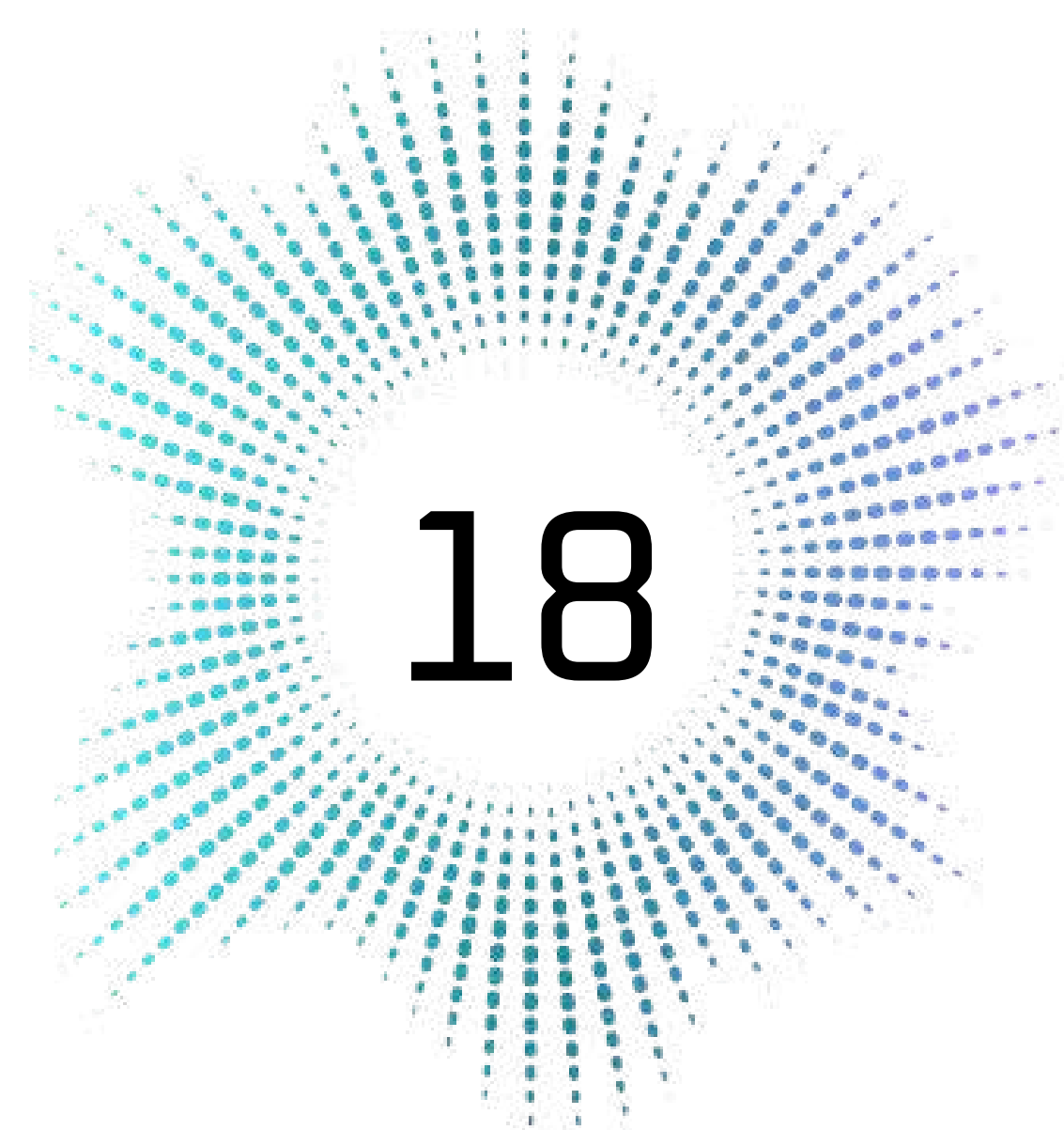
Brands and retailers should care about “De-Commerce” because consumers are increasingly worried about waste. By helping people manage disposal of old possessions responsibly, brands can build trust. This also creates new business opportunities in repair, resale, and recycling, appealing to a growing market that values sustainability as much as new purchases. Plus, it gives customers the space to buy again.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Reach into recommerce:** 64% of consumers want to see more brands branch out into resale or second-hand.
- **Offer buy-back or trade-in schemes:** Incentivize customers to return unwanted goods and create a supply line for your recommerce program.
- **Explore repair options:** Repair services create new revenue opportunities. Alternatively, consider hosting regular community repair workshops, and partnering with local service providers.
- **Form collection and recycling partnerships:** Establish links with local partners who can help with goods collection, sorting, recycling and responsible disposal.

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Human Curation: The Return of Taste, Care and Accountability

AI can generate anything. And that's not always a good thing. When every feed is saturated with infinite options and "good enough" content, the differentiator becomes a human lens that can apply taste, empathy and lived experience layered over machine scale.

In the future, hybrid "AI concierge" services will emerge across categories, where trained curators steer agents, translate data into advice, and stand accountable for the outcomes. This is not nostalgia. It's a trust engine. Personal shopper AIs will compare specs and prices; humans will contextualize your lifestyle, culture, health goals, and values into choices that feel right.

In practice, that looks like creator-stewarded clubs, expert-curated bundles, and "human-reviewed" labels on recommendations, content and claims. It looks like human arbitration for sensitive moments (disputes, wellbeing products), and human taste and discernment breaking algorithmic sameness to reintroduce serendipity and delight.

Why does this matter?

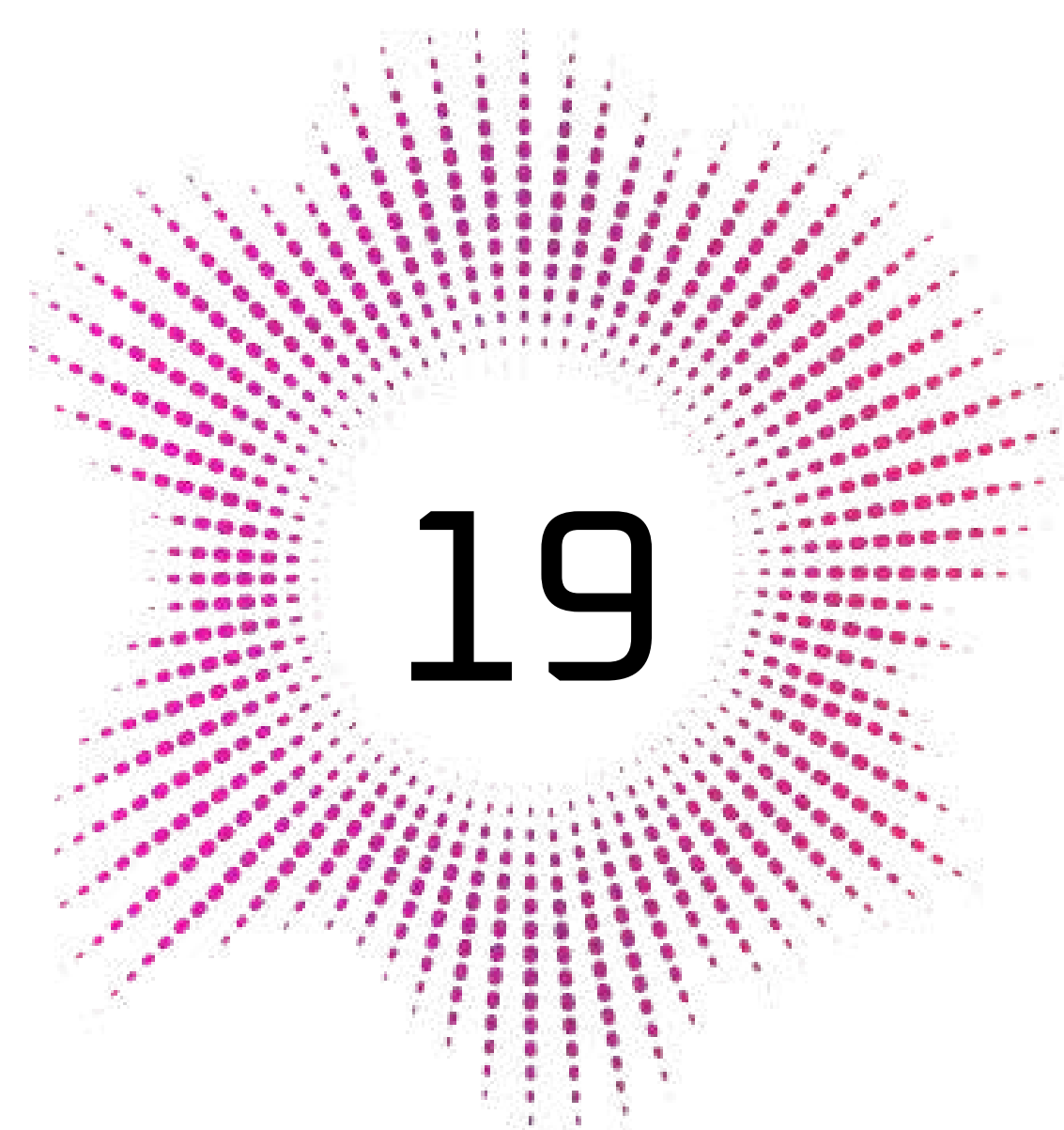
The business case is compelling. Human-in-the-loop curation lifts conversion and AOV, reduces returns and buyer's remorse, and inoculates brands against bias, tone-deafness and compliance risk. As agentic marketing and machine-readable storefronts proliferate, being able to offer clear provenance, accountable editors, and transparent policies will become a sought-after value-add. The brands that blend machine scale with human care will win the right to advise, not just sell.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Explore human-in-the-loop opportunities:** Identify the journeys where human judgement changes outcomes (assortment, content signoff, sensitive categories, dispute resolution) and embed human oversight there first.
- **Pilot an AI concierge for one flagship category:** Pair trained curators with agentic tools, label outputs "human-reviewed," and measure trust, conversion and return rates versus automation-only.
- **Operationalize curation:** Build a brand knowledge graph for grounded generation, define escalation and accountability protocols, and resource creator/expert partnerships as owned service channels.

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Kinship Commerce: Trusted Circles Become the Store

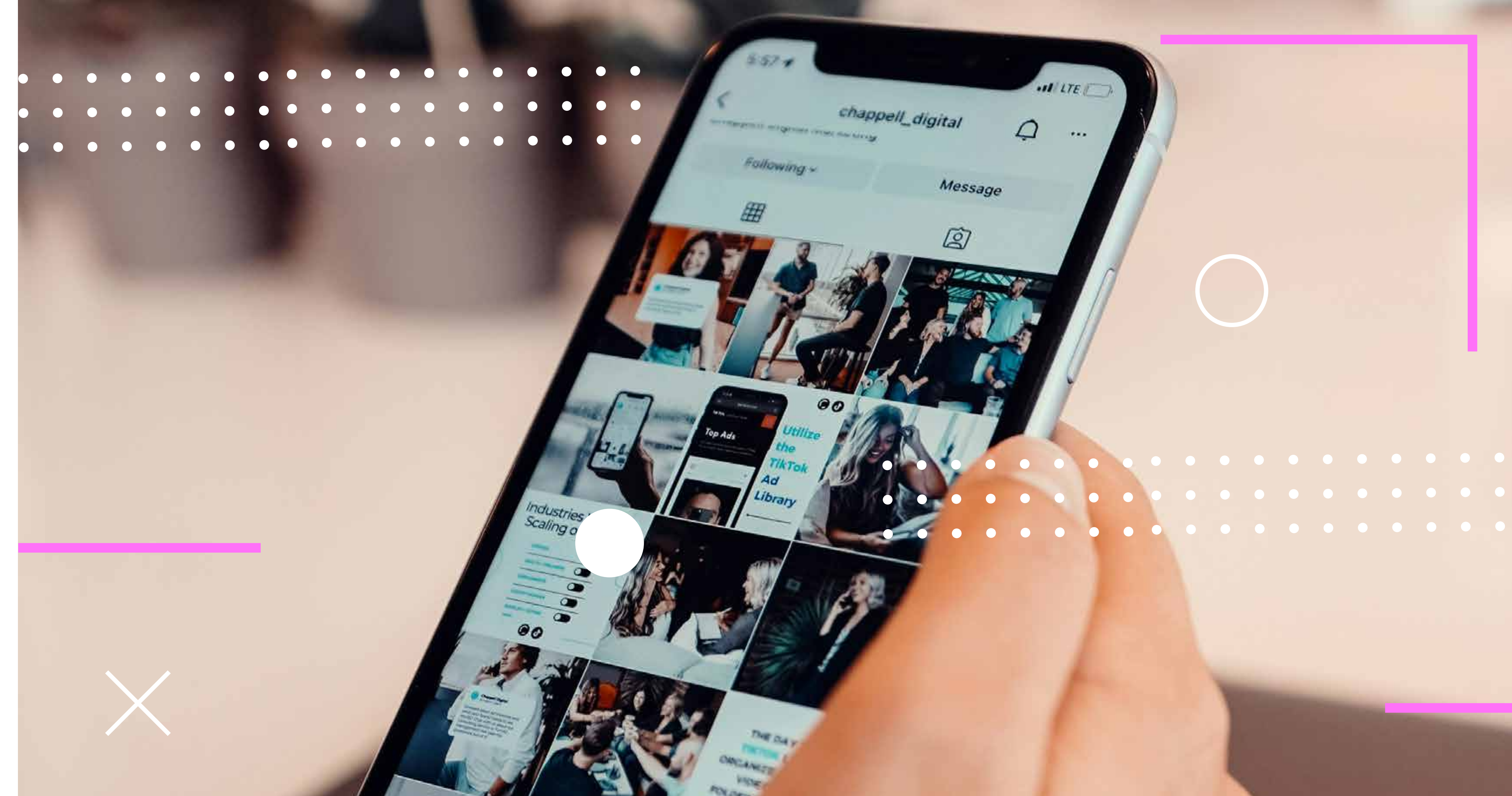
Social commerce wins on convenience, but stumbles on trust. In the near future, the fix won't be more features—it will be more human.

As feeds fragment and consumers tire of transactional posts, shopping will shift into trusted circles: small, values-aligned communities where recommendations feel like advice, creators become stewards, and purchase decisions are guided by belonging, reciprocity and care.

Think WhatsApp groups, private Discords, and creator-hosted “clubs” evolving into micro-stores. The experience is social first: conversations, live Q&A, and shared evaluation replace lonely scrolling. Social proof becomes social responsibility: reviews aren't faceless stars but visible voices in your circle; returns, repairs and sustainability choices are openly discussed and collectively encouraged. AI will quietly support, not replace, the human layer: summarizing community feedback, verifying provenance, surfacing fair pricing, and protecting members from spam and scams. But it's the human connection that converts.

Why does this matter?

Trust is now the growth throttle in social commerce—our Future Shopper report survey found that distrust of social networks is the biggest barrier holding people back from spending more on social. Brands that build spaces people want to belong to, where values are visible and care is the norm, will see higher conversion, repeat rates, and advocacy than those chasing one-off moments. As personal shopping agents rise, being “community-readable” (e.g. clear policies, transparent sourcing, creator-led service) becomes a powerful moat. Commerce moves from capturing attention to earning permission inside circles that feel safe.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Identify and nurture your trusted circles:** Co-create private communities with creators and customers; design for conversation, counsel and care (live Q&A, repair tips, sustainability swaps, etc.).
- **Make trust tangible:** Enable verified reviews from known members, provenance badges, and transparent policies; empower creators as community stewards, not just as promoters.
- **Activate collective shopping:** Piloting shared wish-lists, co-buy bundles and group delivery incentives that reward reciprocity and reduce carbon.

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Digital-to-Physical Legacy Archiving Services: Tangible Artifacts for Future Generations

Digital archiving has replaced physical media because it is cheaper, more convenient, more scalable and, in certain respects, more environmentally friendly. But imagine your entire digital existence—all your messages, photos, social media posts, and even your personal data—vanishing due to old technology becoming obsolete or because of privacy rules.

“Digital-to-Physical Legacy Archiving” is about brands offering services to counter this, not by returning to paper and storage discs or tapes, but by transforming your digital footprint into lasting physical objects and artworks. In that sense, it’s about more than just storage and retention; it’s about creating tangible proof of your life and relationships that can be passed down through generations.

These services could include “Life Story Sculptures,” where years of your digital conversations are turned into unique 3D-printed art pieces, or “Sensory Memory Capsules”—physical objects that, when touched, release a specific scent or sound from a cherished digital memory. You might even have your personal data woven into “Personalized Data Weaves,” creating a unique fabric tapestry that tells your life story. It’s about giving digital existence a permanent, shareable form, and ensuring memories and experiences endure.

Why does this matter?

“Digital-to-Physical Legacy Archiving” taps into a deep human desire for legacy, remembrance, and tangible proof of a life lived. In an increasingly digital and ephemeral world, the ability to create lasting physical artifacts from digital data will be highly valued. Companies that can ethically and creatively transform digital memories into durable and meaningful physical objects will find a unique and emotionally resonant market, building strong trust and loyalty by helping individuals and families preserve their stories for the future.



Your roadmap for tomorrow

- **Explore the design of tangible formats for longevity:** Consider the best designs, materials and manufacturing processes to create long-term durable artifacts.
- **Partner with artists and artisans:** Prioritize craft and innovation to create product types that are worthy of carrying the legacy of a life.

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About VML

VML is a global brand creative and digital transformation company that combines brand experience, customer experience, and commerce, to create connected brands that drive growth. The agency is celebrated for its innovative and award-winning work with blue chip clients. VML is recognized as a Leader by Forrester Wave™ reports for Commerce Services, Marketing, Creative and Content Services, and is a Strong Performer in the Forrester Wave™: CX Strategy, Consulting Services. It was also named a Leader in IDC MarketScape: Adobe Experience Cloud, Professional Services and a Visionary in the Gartner Magic Quadrant for Digital Experience Services. VML’s specialist health network, VML Health, is also one of the world’s largest and most awarded health agencies. VML’s global network is powered by 26,000 talented people across 60-plus markets, with principal offices in Kansas City, New York, Detroit, London, São Paulo, Shanghai, Singapore, and Sydney.

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Connect with **VML**: CONTACT.ES@VML.COM

WRITERS

HUGH FLETCHER

MINOS MAKRIS

NAJI EL-ARIFI

DESIGN

COURTNEY WILLIS

CONTACT

HUGH.FLETCHER@VML.COM

MINOS.MAKRIS@VML.COM