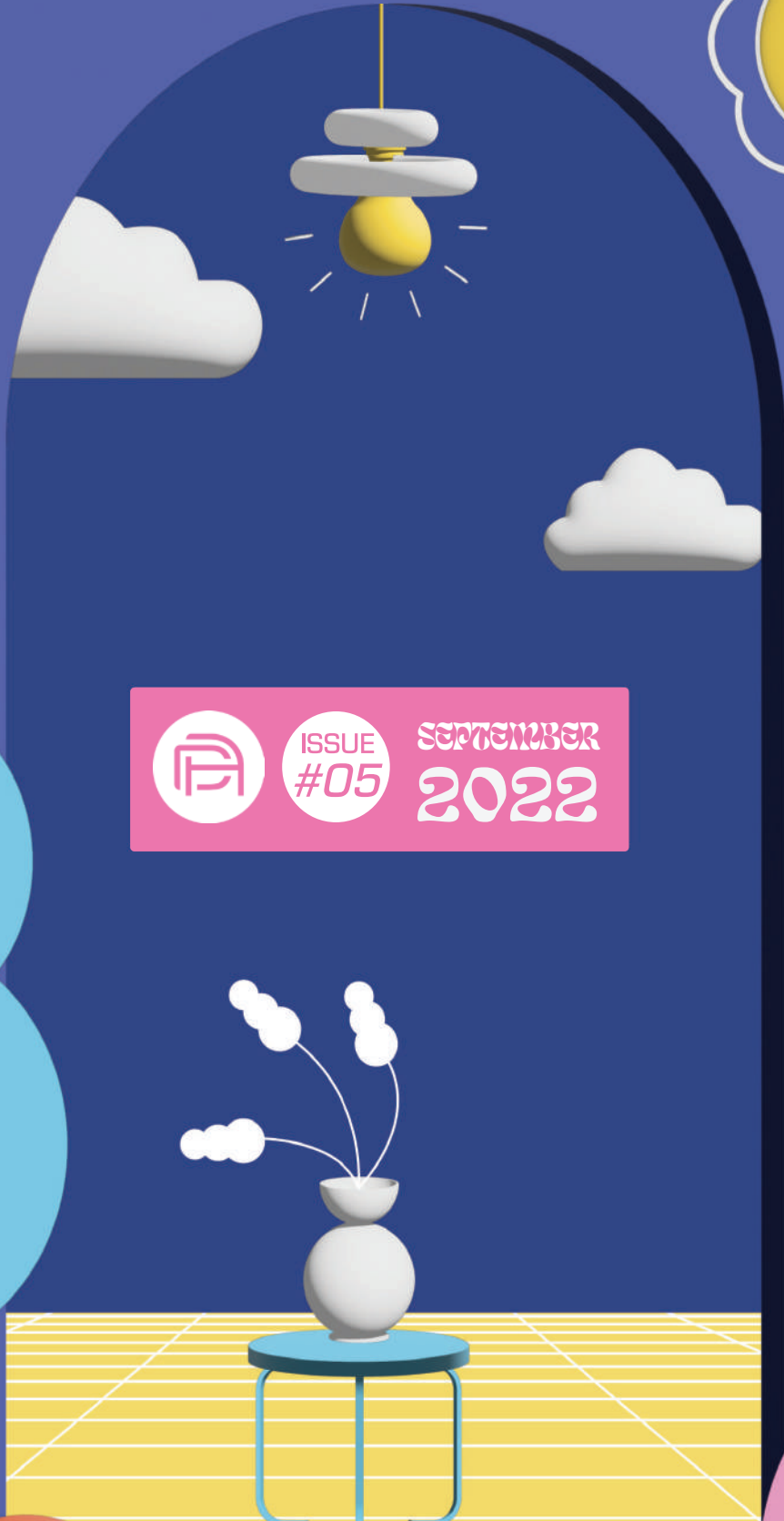


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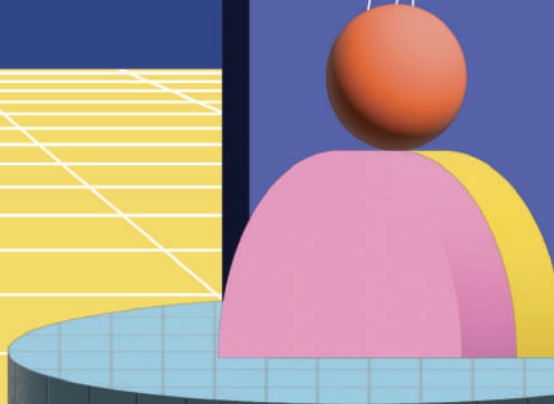
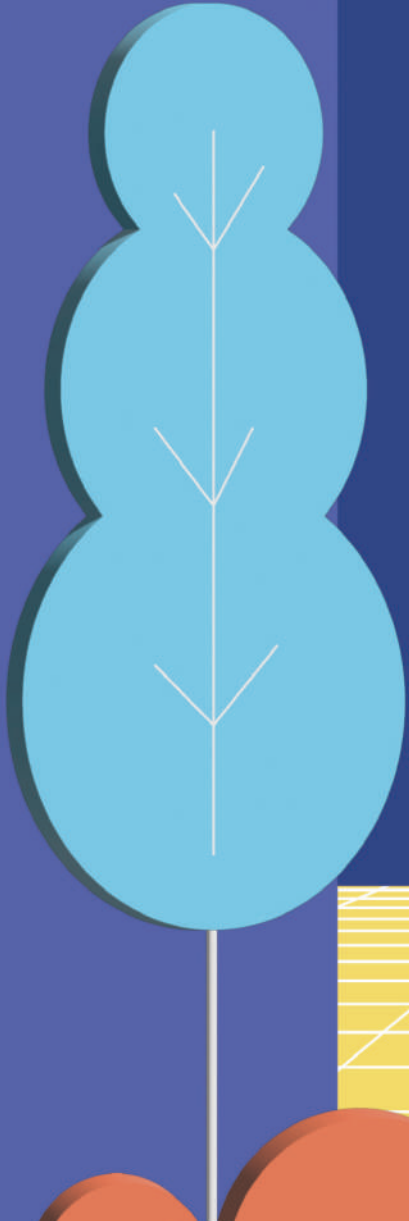
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COVER ART

Yiping Lui

Dear clients, partners, & friends,

We are excited to present our fifth edition of Illuminate, with the theme of **'Momentum,'** to set the tone for the rest of this year. With continued changes in privacy, the economy, and the world around us, we want to prepare for what's ahead and all the opportunities we can help create for our clients.

We're proud of our **growth as an agency** and have gathered a collection of our thought leadership and industry insights, with a special guest artist spotlight.

Thank you to our clients, friends, colleagues and partners who have grown alongside us over the past 19 years. We look forward to the second half of 2022, as we **celebrate both the past and the present of our people, projects and achievements.**

We hope you enjoy Illuminate.

Many thanks,
Dinesh and Josh Boaz

Dinesh Boaz



Josh Boaz



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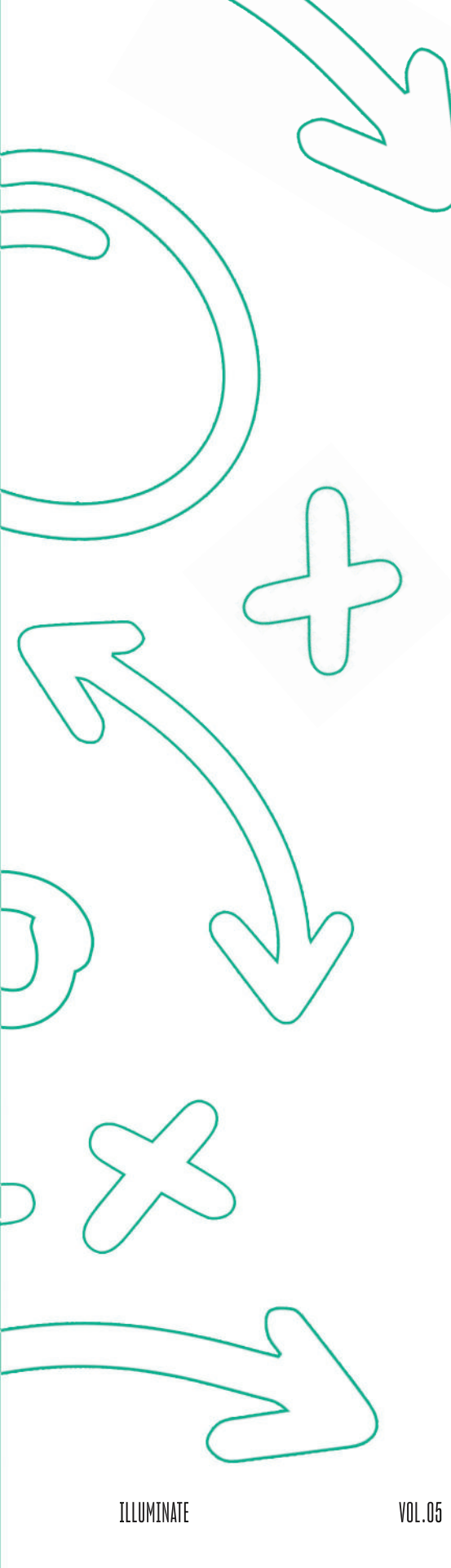


MODERN GROWTH
STRATEGIES



JACKSON RICHARDS

Vice President, Strategy
Direct Agents



The last 10 years were a golden age for growing digitally-native brands, but the next class of breakout brands and established businesses looking to scale further will need to deploy modern growth strategies that are distinct from those of the previous decade.

The growth playbook for brands in the previous era was largely based on cost-efficient customer acquisition through savvy, targeted paid social advertising. For many brands, **this approach became conflated with strategic branding and marketing**, and the economic models of most DTC brands during this period have depended on this social media advertising engine.

Candidly, many businesses could get away with a mediocre product, generic creative, and unrefined brand messaging, and still grow profitably under the halo of Facebook's almighty conversion algorithm.

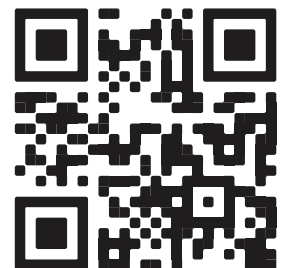
In the post-iOS 14 and ATT world we are now navigating, Facebook and Instagram are no longer the performance marketing golden tickets they were only a few years ago. This is largely due to increased user privacy controls introduced by Apple, along with the fact that people now spend their time

across more devices, mediums, and platforms than ever.

Growth can no longer be bought cost effectively. Today, brands must drive demand by **amplifying effective brand storytelling** to distinct customer segments and delivering on brand promise and customer experience across all touchpoints — paid, earned, and owned.

The landscape has changed, and the businesses that urgently adapt their marketing practices to fit today's distinct challenges and opportunities will be best positioned to scale effectively. •

SCAN TO READ OUR POV



SURVIVING

THE CONSUMER SPENDING PULLBACK



MEGAN CONAHAN

EVP
Direct Agents



After a few years of pandemic-fueled growth, most brands face a harsh new reality. Many consumers have pulled back on spending, and major brands warn that consumer tolerance for price increases is at the limit. Inflation, the War in Ukraine, gas prices, and a return to in-store have made it even more challenging for digital marketers to grow.

While every brand will approach its challenges uniquely, six major themes must be considered in the era of consumer spending pullback.

1. FOCUS ON RETENTION

A recent webinar by CRC along with Stackline noted that brands still have a long way to go with retention strategies, as average customer retention rates hover around 10%. Review your retention program to find ways to capture current consumer attention (and dollars).

2. OFFER VALUE - EITHER REAL OR PERCEIVED

Consumers are more likely to wait for a sale or coupon to make a purchase. Brands should consider lowering prices to steal market share or offering smaller package sizes at a higher cost per unit. If discounting or promotions are not possible, think outside the box.

Lululemon's *Like New* trade-in and resale program (below) allows shoppers to trade in Lululemon clothing for a gift card and offers previously owned Lulu attire at a lower cost.

3. RECONSIDER TOP OF FUNNEL & INVEST IN YOUR BRAND

As competitors pull back spending, there is opportunity to steal market share. Drive demand and differentiate through experience and offerings. With increasing media costs on the major social platforms, investigate if other platforms would make sense for the top-of-funnel initiatives. Research where consumers are spending time online to discover if there are more efficient ways to reach them.

4. BUT DON'T FORGET ABOUT INTENT

If brand building is out of budget, invest in every area where a consumer can display intent. Contextual targeting will be king with the signal loss we deal with across platforms. Review where complementary brands or your organization's first-party data can be leveraged.


5. FOCUS ON WHAT WORKS

Not all of a brand's products are the same. Margins, traffic received, conversion rate, and review counts are different for all products and product categories. Make sure to segment products or product lines

and create strategic priorities.

6. DOUBLE DOWN ON SEO & ON-SITE EXPERIENCE

When faced with limited resources and slowing paid media investment, hone in on SEO. When SEO stops, it can mean a drop in visibility, traffic, and conversions, which will be an uphill battle to regain. The on-site experience is another area where brands can't afford to cut back. While user experience has a hand in your SEO rankings, it should be something brands are taking a fresh look at, even if it stands alone. High bounce rates lead to inefficient media, low ROI, and slow sales. •

If you didn't wear it out, let someone else.
Meet  **lululemon Like New**

\$5 credit
Tanks, Tops, Shirts, Shorts

\$10 credit
Hoodies, Sweatshirts, Sweaters, Pants, Crops, Leggings, Dresses

\$10 credit
Bags

REFRAMING CONTEXTUAL TARGETING



COREY LEVINE

VP of Integrated Media
Direct Agents

With a majority of iOS consumers choosing to opt-out of tracking and Google's decision to phase out third-party cookies, many marketers are left looking for alternative targeting solutions. While platforms, like Google, will continue to allow marketers to tap into powerful 2P data, it's restricted to their O&O inventory - yet a whopping 82% of users' time is spent on the open web. With rising inventory costs and fragmented consumer journeys, brands and marketers should be looking to diversify their marketing mix. Behavioral Targeting has been a powerful tactic to build effective campaigns. While behavioral signals will become weaker, marketers should look towards the resurgence of a different targeting tactic - contextual targeting. With recent advancements in AI, contextual targeting is more powerful than ever.

WHAT IS CONTEXTUAL TARGETING?

Contextual targeting places relevant ads that align with website content, with factors such as keywords, topics, or categories. It doesn't rely on third-party cookies so it isn't affected by the data privacy changes. This is in stark contrast to behavioral targeting which requires third-party cookies to access historical information about a user or machine. Contextual targeting is one of our best tools to reach potential customers at the time that they are most open to considering our products & services; while they're consuming relevant or related content.

WHAT SHOULD ADVERTISERS LOOKING TO DIVERSIFY THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA MIX DO?

While there's a lot of buzz around TikTok (and rightfully so - consumers are spending ~25.7hrs a month on the platform), Reddit and Pinterest also deserve some attention. Based on your target audience and marketing objectives, both platforms take advantage of contextual targeting and can be viable alternatives in a crowded and expensive social landscape. Brands should start testing contextual solutions now to get baseline performance metrics that can influence their planning. While it's easy to get caught up in the buzz around cookieless solutions, it's important to ensure contextual targeting is top of mind and incorporated in test and learn strategies.



THREE BENEFITS OF CONTEXTUAL TARGETING

□ ENGAGE CONSUMERS THROUGH RELEVANT ADS

According to the IAB, consumers are more receptive to ads placed in a contextually relevant environment. Contextual targeting helps advertisers reach the right people in the right environment with the right mindset.

□ PROTECTS USER PRIVACY

Consumers care about online data privacy. Growing privacy regulations and consumer concerns are creating a shift in the digital landscape. Contextual targeting relies on website information, so consumers can be confident that their privacy is protected. As a result, there's an increase in trust and willingness to engage with ads.

□ INCREASED BRAND SAFETY

“Negative Reach” is a real thing. This occurs when an ad format is intrusive or an ad appears adjacent to specific content. The surrounding page content can impact a consumer’s perception of an ad. Natural Language Processing technology solutions consider semantics, sentiment, and emotion when analyzing and classifying a page.



THE RACE TO HOLIDAYS



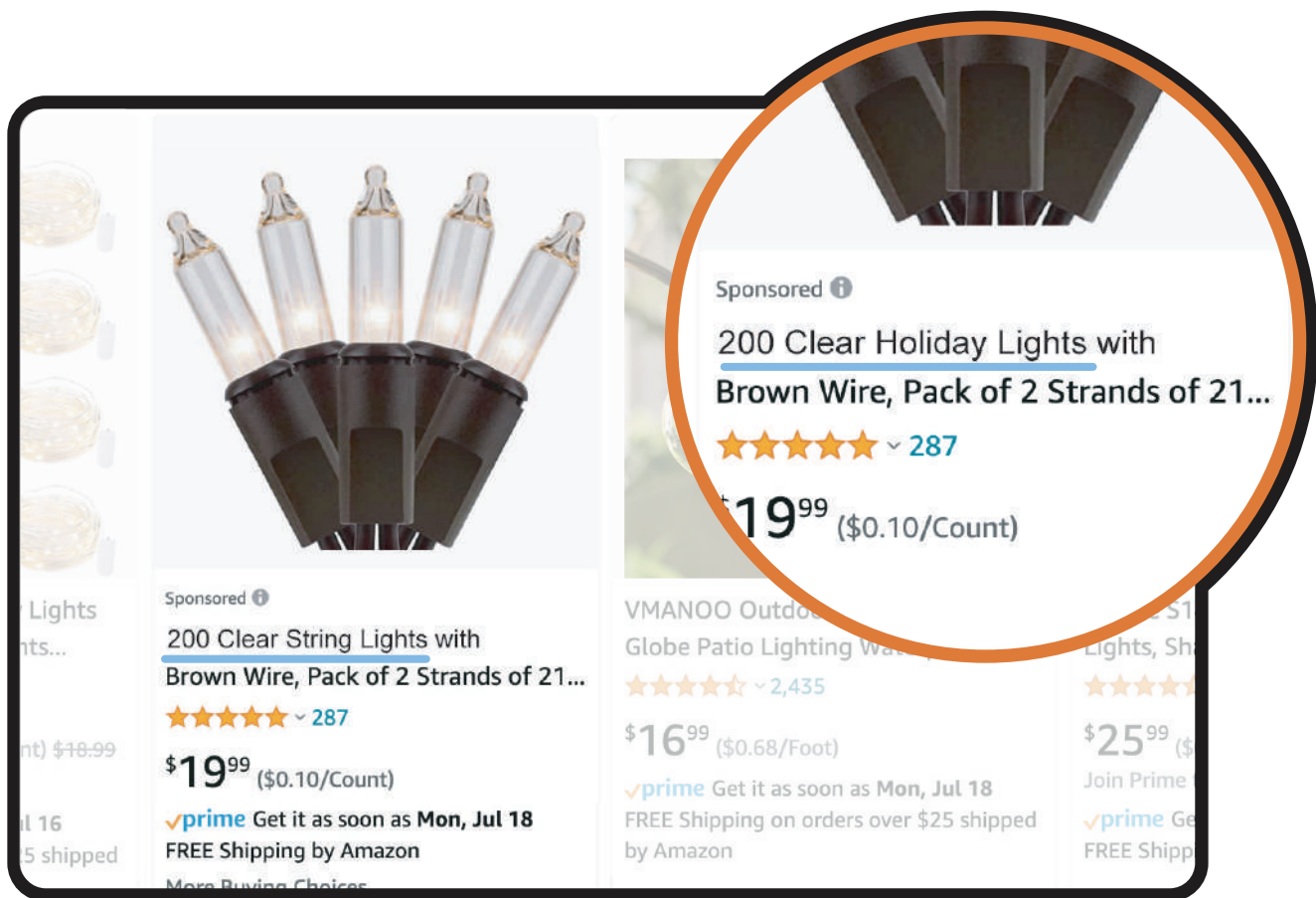
NICK GALANTE

VP of Growth, eCommerce
Direct Agents

When it comes to optimizing for the holidays, brands must take **advantage of seasonal peaks**, or they'll be leaving money on the table. Products that are not optimized seasonally miss the chance to get in front of new consumers who have a high likelihood to convert. When it comes to optimizing for holidays and seasonality, the key factors are **creating compelling content**, timing, and aligning your strategy with advertising dollars.

1. CREATE COMPELLING CONTENT

Utilize **creative messaging** to **correctly frame your product** within the season. Implement seasonal content to rank higher for mission critical keywords and help consumers connect to the brand with relevant imagery and copy (see example on following page). These tactics will **increase a brand's conversion** rate outside of the traditional holiday shopping spikes leading to higher sales.



2. TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Users scout products prior to the actual peak in holiday or promotional sales. **Optimize seasonally 2 or 3 months prior to the holiday peaks** to ensure your brand will be top of mind and have prime placement on the search results page for seasonal keywords.

3. UTILIZE YOUR D2C SITE

If you have a direct-to-consumer site and want to drive more off-Amazon traffic to your listings, **implement CTAs and links within website copy** to funnel users to your Amazon listing and increase visibility.

4. ALIGN YOUR STRATEGY WITH AMS

Align your organic strategy with AMS to help **capitalize on the growth that brand sees during seasonal peaks**. Leading up to the holiday or event, it's best to **utilize social traffic** to Amazon to drive awareness, then transition to a max Share of Voice strategy across the SERP.

5. GET CREATIVE WITH YOUR TARGETING

If exact terms are expensive, **try phrases or broad match modifiers**. Conquest your competitors product page descriptions, particularly those with strong organic placements, for your top terms.

6. LEADING IN

Try coupons and deals leading into your peak season to **build sales velocity**. Based on past tests, a product's price (whether on a coupon or not) has a direct impact on that product's Best Sellers Rank. Deals have much more impact on both traffic and sales than coupons when looking at a single day, especially during key holiday events.

Previously a Q4 crunch, many brands now start holiday planning as early as the summer. Keep these key factors in mind to **hit your goals and grow your sales** this holiday season. •

SUSTAIN - ABLE BRANDING



MONNICA FARAG
Director, Growth Strategy
Direct Agents

As the signs of an economic recession continue to multiply, the growth environment many brands were forecasting in the post-pandemic era is slipping away. Increasingly a battleground for the growing competition is **how brands are tackling environmental challenges.**

In a recent survey by First Insight and the Baker Retailing Center at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, 68% of consumers expressed a **willingness to spend more on sustainable products.** However, when retail executives were surveyed, only about half of them found it essential to the consumer. While this may seem like a relatively quick adjustment from a branding and advertising perspective, consumers in the post-pandemic era are fixated on authenticity. According to Edelman's recent trust index, they are increasingly skeptical as brand trust has begun to trend downward.

Pivots to sustainability from a branding perspective without action on the widespread business practice can prove to be disastrous. Take the brand Clipper, the UK's sixth-largest tea brand - In 2019, after declaring their bags "plastic-free," this was countered by a BBC investigation that showed that the tea bags were sealed with a bio-plastic. Misleading claims about environmentalism open a brand up to significant backlash. This phenomenon, known as **'greenwashing'** is a **misrepresentation of a company's environmental commitments** to increase brand favorability.

While only 74% of consumers surveyed by the environmental firm Green Print felt comfortable identifying 'greenwashed' products, searches for

the term saw a 94% increase in Google search interest when looking at the first five months of the year compared to the first five months of 2019. The pandemic has **accelerated consumers' interest in green products** and skepticism in brands.

For brands looking to improve their perception in the sustainability space, it is essential to **ensure that their claims pass muster.**

Consumers are increasingly savvy, and as regulation catches up to overall demand, greenwashing in the future may come with **legal implications beyond public judgment.**

The ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) movement in the financial space means **investment implications in authentic, verifiable, sustainable practices.** The "S" that has increasingly become associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion, has to be **rooted in authenticity.** In the long term, the same will be the case with the "E" and its association with authentic sustainability. These methodologies and playbooks will be **crucial to the long-term financial success of a business.** •

68%

of consumers expressed a willingness to spend more on sustainable products.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVE DESIGN **IN** B2B MARKETING



KELLY CZOCHANSKI

Creative Consultant Associate
Direct Agents

A B2B's visual presentation is an important factor in establishing brand presence and association. Research conducted by McKinsey & Company revealed that companies who prioritize design outperform their peers; delivering 32% more revenue and 56% higher total returns.

The term “design” can cover a variety of business areas, from logos and web page designs, to presentation decks and report layouts. We've highlighted the importance of great design in your overall business and product success.

DIFFERENTIATE FROM COMPETITORS

Innovative design is one of the key ways to stand out from the competition. Playful colors, interactive graphics, and engaging video content, are just a few ways that brands can implement exciting content to attract viewers and encourage engagement.

INVEST IN A STRONG VISUAL IDENTITY

Craft your digital identity through branded designs. Humans are visual creatures, and thoughtful visuals help attach a face to your brand. According to the Visual Teaching Alliance, 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual. Investing in a strong visual identity will help your audience absorb and familiarize your brand, building client trust over time.



DESIGN HELPS DRIVE EMOTION & BUILD CONNECTION

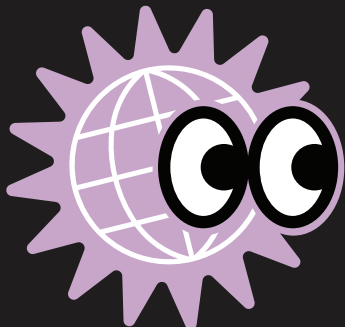
Appealing to emotions through creative content helps consumers build a sense of connection to your brand. Utilizing design that is always consistent, memorable, and authentic creates a brand image that resonates with your audience and builds consumer loyalty. One way to do this is to take advantage of social media to visually express your identity and develop creative ways to reach more people, while also building a community.

PRIORITIZE THE USER'S EXPERIENCE

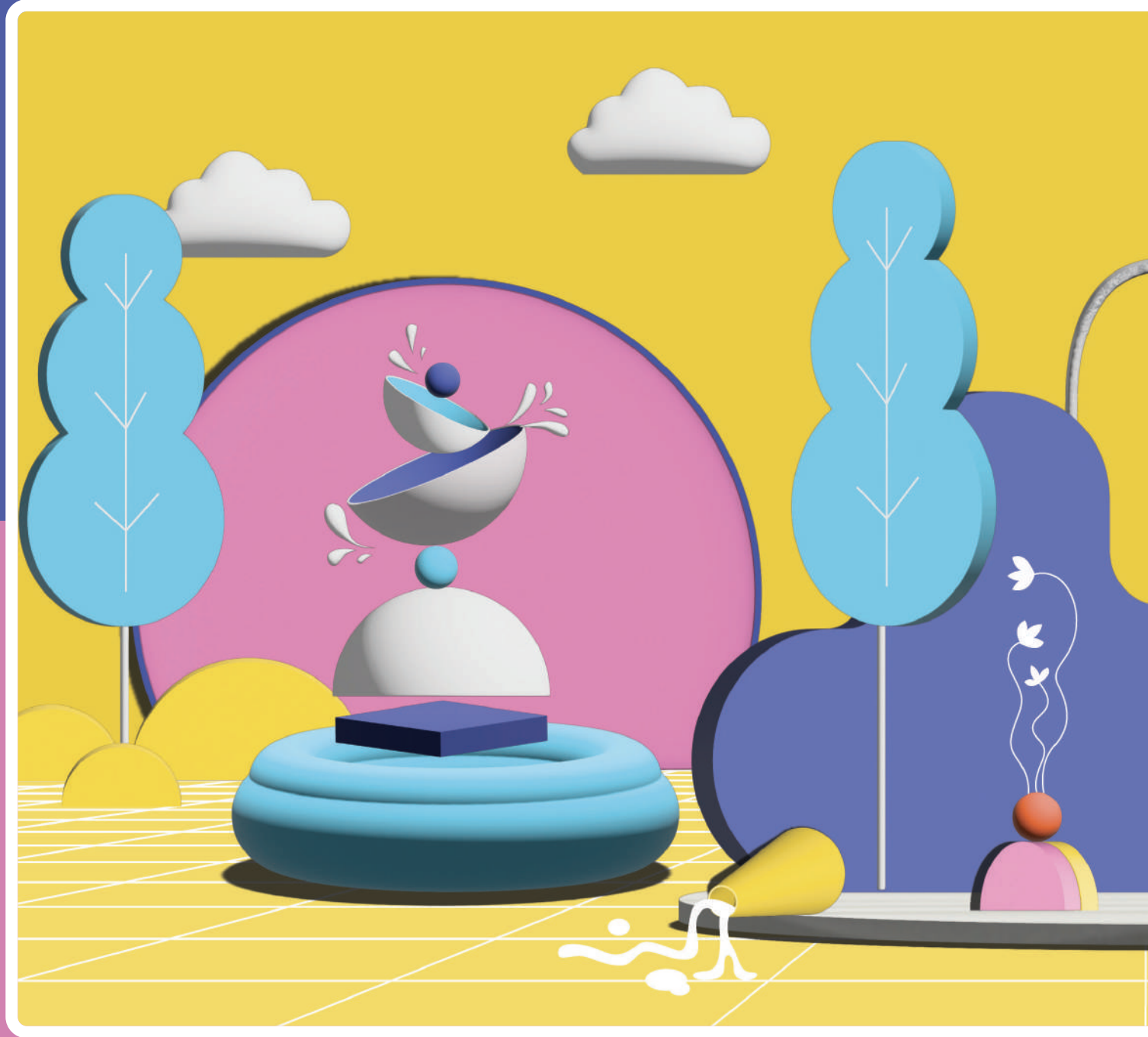
Your website or app can make or break a user's decision to purchase your product or service. According to Wix, nearly 33% of bad user web experiences lead to consumers abandoning the brand. The platform designs drive this digital experience. Designing purposefully and strategically can significantly improve the value of your brand.

VALUE YOUR EVERYDAY DESIGN NEEDS

B2B brands tend to undervalue creative for some of their more standardized deliverables, such as presentations, infographics, white papers, case studies and even social media posts. Prioritize powerful design in everyday deliverables to establish familiarity and trust among your customers.

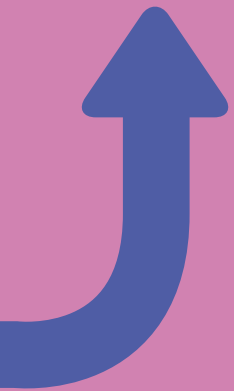


Although it is unrealistic to match the level of design that industry leaders such as Google, Apple, and Amazon reach, being able to keep up with trends and prioritize your brand's creativity is more than enough. Having a strong focus on design is critical to staying relevant and succeeding in today's market.



COVER TO COVER

BEHIND THE COVER ART OF ILLUMINATE WITH YIPING LIU



Issue 5 Illuminate cover highlights the freedom, connectedness and vibrance of 2022. Inspired by bright candy colors and our new surroundings, this cover design mixes the future and the past with 2D and 3D elements.

Play and exploration are keys to growing. As we look towards the future, we're motivated by the opportunity to go on creative journeys, take risks, and uncover new inspirations.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT:

PAUL BALMER



Paul Balmer was born and raised in South Africa. He studied Fine Art at the Drawing School in Sydney and Graphic Design at the Sydney Institute of Technology. After several years working in commercial art, Paul moved to Europe to pursue painting. His first galleries showcased large scale Neoclassical paintings. What started as a journey into traditional painting gave way to works of imagination after moving to New York in 1999. As his subject matter continues to evolve, the colors, shapes, and primitiveness of his work is influenced by his roots in South Africa and Australia.

Images top to bottom:

Dark Tropics 80"x80"

Eclipse 48" X 72"

Q: How would you describe your creative process?

A: I don't use traditional art materials - I use mostly what I find at the hardware store (wall compounds, marble dust, blades, drill sanders and rollers). My method of applying the paint is unconventional - after applying thick paint I then draw into that paint with a small drill which gives me an etched line. Then it's a combination of collaging and sanding the layers. This entire process makes for all kinds of unintentional marks and unexpected color combinations. Although I often start out with a sketch, the end result is usually very different. It's as though the painting comes together with less thinking and more intuition.



Q: What are your creative influences and how do you stay inspired?

A: I get inspired by all things visual - from city billboards with their layers of advertisements partially peeled away, to the color of a rusty piece of metal. I'll document all kinds of color combinations and textures to look over when I'm ready to paint. I have a well of artists that I turn to for inspiration. They usually include artists that have a more naive, abstract style like George Baselitz, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mark Bradford, Manolo Valdez and Joe Bradley.



When I look over their work I feel the need to do something creative. Music helps me get out of being too analytical. The right score at the right time can really elevate the experience and take a painting to unexpected places.

Q: What shifts have you seen in your own work?

A: The more experience I have with art, the “crazier” the work has become. When I was young I liked realism. Now, the more abstract and textured the better. The different cities I have lived in have influenced my work. The greatest shift would be from Cape Town, where I painted traditional landscapes, to New York City, where I focused on capturing energy and grit in abstract cityscapes. Now I'm playing around with characters, drawing on my formative years in South Africa, and incorporating them in my paintings.

Q: What future projects are you looking forward to?

A: I'm looking forward to tackling some very large canvases for a solo show with Caldwell Snyder Gallery in San Francisco in November. My work will also be displayed in their Monticeto and Napa Valley galleries at this time. I'm excited about exploring sculpture. I have always experimented with sculpting with a variety of materials. These pieces will compliment my other works as they carry the same textures and shapes.

View Paul Blamer's body of work at www.paulbalmer.com/ •



Image: *Riding High* 80"x144"





HIRING THE NEXT GENERATION



SARA MARTINEZ-NORIEGA

VP of Human Resources
Direct Agents



As Gen Z enters the workforce and entry level employees begin to step into leadership roles, it's important to consider how to attract the top Gen Z talent. Here are the top 4 things the incoming, and in some cases already present, Gen Z is looking for when searching for their ideal workplace:

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

As our most diverse and accepting generation, Gen Z-ers feel most comfortable with companies actively working to bring the same level of diversity that they see in the world to their work environments. And it doesn't stop with having visibly diverse teams, it's also about diversity of thought and how the company champions the visionaries and those willing to challenge long held norms.

SENSE OF BELONGING

After canceled graduation ceremonies and endless virtual classes on Zoom, the new generation places high value on in-person connections. That's not to say that they don't also champion the flexibility of remote work, but rather that they desire a workplace where they can have the best of both worlds. When looking at hybrid work setups, it's vital that companies assign purpose to their in-person gatherings. When planning these, it's helpful to think of how they might align with these 4 C's - Creation, Collaboration, Connection and Celebration.

MENTORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Having never experienced a life without technology at their fingertips, Gen Z-ers are our most tech savvy generation. This level of information overload has helped develop them into a curious and growth mindset oriented generation. That being said, they also recognize that there is only so much that they can learn from TikTok and Youtube tutorials. They crave

personal connections to people that they can grow and learn from. When onboarding this generation, it's key to align them with seasoned mentors and advisors who can help satisfy those cravings and provide growth paths to continue learning and developing their careers as professionals.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN

Gen Z is not satisfied with entering the workforce to merely earn a living. Much like the millennial generation, they want to do interesting work that connects them to a greater purpose, and not just be another cog in the wheel of a corporate machine. Beyond this, Gen Z-ers are setting high expectations for companies to have clearly defined, value-driven cultures, and to be aligned with a purpose to serve the greater good. While not all companies can focus their businesses around altruistic missions, we must rethink how we are connecting with and working to support our communities at large. •





DINESH BOAZ
**PROJECT
INNATE
FORM**

innate (adj)

in-nate | \ i-nāt\

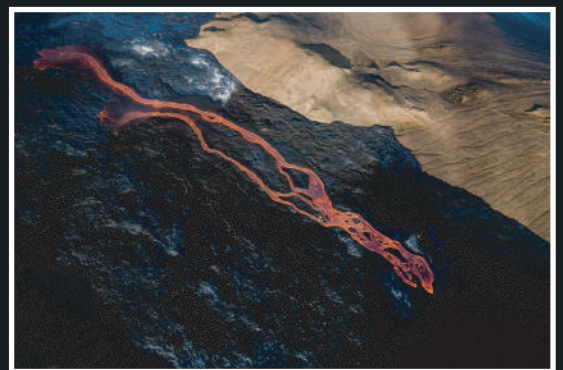
: existing in, belonging to, or determined by factors present in an individual from birth

The goal of the series was to capture interpretations of the earth's patterns, textures, space and power through human form. My initial series of aerial landscape photos were captured from an open door helicopter over the active volcano, Fagradalsfjal, in Iceland, and the glacial rivers that originate from the Hofsjökull glacier, on the south coast.

Images left to right:

'Seismic' New York City

'Seismic' Fagradalsfjal, Iceland



During the second phase of the project, I collaborated with my friend Jenna Sherman, a former dancer of the Alison Chase Performance group. Jenna selected the dancers and choreographed the movements in the studio, while I recreated the aerial perspective from the top of a staircase. The dancers worked through a series of movements over three different backdrops with colored fabrics, lights and music to invoke mood and drama to each interpretation. The images for me are a visualization of the interdependence of our environments and the natural connection we have to each other.



Despite all of the complexities of technology and modern life, we are still just as simple as formations of the earth's landscapes all around us.



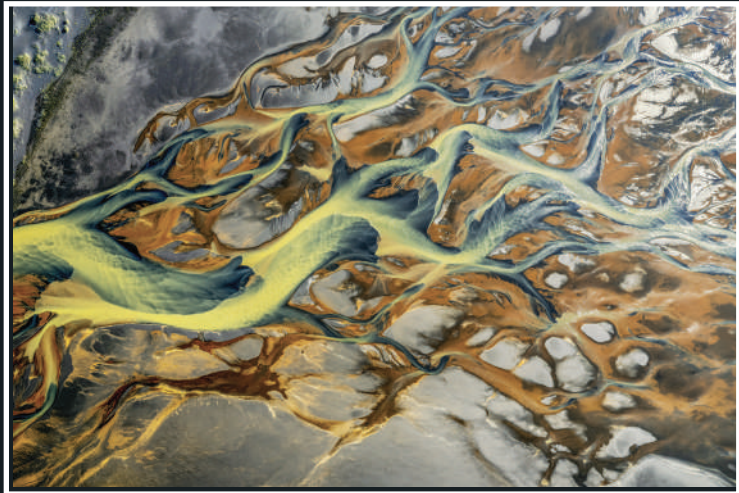


Images top to bottom, left to right:

- 'Joy Division' Reykjavik, Iceland
- 'Joy Division' New York City
- 'Mystical Turns' New York City
- 'Mystical Turns' Markarfljot River, Iceland

Special thanks to...

- Katherine Grabowsky
- Maria Corner
- Jenna Sherman
- David Allee
- Katerina Katehis
- Jenny Hegarty Freeman
- Elise King
- Ezra Goh



THE MAKING OF THE ACCELERATION HUB





“The Acceleration Hub,” our new office located in the heart of the Flatiron District, was created as a space to learn, grow, and excel.

THE INSPIRATION

The goal of the space is to be a catalyst for new connections and growing ones lost during the height of remote work. Situated in the center of art and culture in New York City, the office location inspired the contemporary design elements. With views of the Empire State Building, Hudson Yards, Union Square and Madison Square Park, the office is not only at the center of city activity, but it's also a central location for industry events and thought leadership.

THE PROCESS

The Acceleration Hub was a collaborative effort between BR Design and the Direct Agents team. Careful thought and planning was put into every square inch of the space.

Artwork was integral to the design process, as the team wanted to create a gallery of art around the office to inspire creativity, innovation, and imagination.

THE FINAL SPACE

The final space is located at the penthouse of 149 Fifth Ave, surrounded by coffee shops, incredible restaurants, and Madison Square Park right up the street. With 360-degree views and windows covering every wall, every seat has amazing city views.

No area of the office was left untouched, with details like tropical wallpaper in the bathroom hallway and LED lights and plants covering the ceiling to add life to less central locations.



VISION

FOR LA

NOTES FROM DIRECT AGENTS OFFICE IN CULVER CITY





CULTURE & COLLABORATION

The open office seating and wide range of personnel roles on the west coast allows for cross-team collaboration and face time opportunities across skill levels. The LA office also has extensive opportunities to interact with the New York team. The Direct Agents rotation program sends team members across the country to spend a week on the other coast. And when they're not traveling across the country, biweekly company meetings provide an opportunity for the whole company

to stay up-to-date on agency news or culture updates.

LOOKING AHEAD ON THE WEST COAST

The LA office is continuing to grow, both in office space and in team members. The west coast office is a hub of activity, after settling into their office space in summer 2021 and expanding with several new team members. The vision for the LA office is to continue growing so that team members from any department have enough support on the west coast to thrive.

THE WEST COAST TEAM

Several teams work from the LA office, including a majority of the Amazon team. The team has hosted multiple happy hours and presentations at their office space for a variety of clients. In addition, Lunch & Learns allow the team to meet with clients and discuss exciting opportunities. The team has also taken trips offsite, including a visit to the Google Office in Playa Vista to get facetime with our agency representatives, discuss pain points, and plan future opportunities for growth. •



**VISIT
DIRECTAGENTS.COM**



Gyong Liu

