

WALDO

PRESENTS

To Be in 2026

A Trends-Led Playbook for Brand Strategists, Advertising
Planners, and Everyone Working With the Future.

A WALDO x PSFK Collab

Foreword

I'm excited to welcome you to *To Be in 2026*. The way I would describe this report is that it's both a map of what's coming next for brands and a signal of how Waldo itself is evolving.

Waldo is now always on and proactive. Our latest version orchestrates over 2,000 AI agents to continuously listen, interprets signals, and push opportunities and actionable ideas directly into your inbox.

To create the new Waldo we've built a real-time data platform for AI agents, on top of a handful of proprietary new data feeds. One key data feed is a brand new in-house trends system. We've partnered with Piers Fawkes and his team at PSFK to imbue their differentiated foresight expertise into this system, giving you unique insights you can't get anywhere else. These insights will flow through our feeds, guide our workflows, and shape everything we release through 2026.

I think you're going to like what's ahead.



Justin Wohlstadter
Founder, Waldo

www.waldo.fyi

"By partnering with Waldo, we have connected PSFK's heritage in trends research and analysis with Waldo's expertise in AI knowledge management. Together we built a sophisticated, global trends-scanning platform which leverages the myriad of Waldo workflows to develop rich, substantiated insights and ideas. I've never been able to create a report with such depth and breadth like this before and I hope that the work inspires you to consider a broad range of possibilities for your brand or organization's future."

Piers Fawkes
Report editor & Founder of PSFK

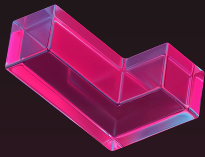
www.psfk.com

Introduction

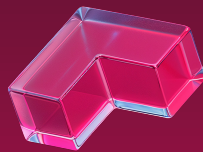
The year ahead will test how brands balance identity, accountability, resilience, and connection in an environment where cultural memory, technological acceleration, and social responsibility are deeply intertwined. *To Be in 2026* does not catalogue fleeting trends; it frames themes for brand behaviors in the new year. Each theme represents a way of acting, adapting, and communicating that responds to forces already reshaping markets and consumer expectations.

This playbook is not about prediction but about plays: choices brands can make to remain credible, resonant, and prepared for 2026.

The sequence of themes is deliberate. We begin with provenance and cultural memory (Be A Revival, Be Collectible), move through accountability and material renewal (Be Accountable, Be Regenerative, Be A Ritual), narrow to the individual experience (Be Restorative, Be A Guardian), and widen again to systemic layers (Be Driven, Be In Sync). The report closes with Be Strategic, a reflection on how active and dynamic foresight becomes a brand behavior.



How We Built *To Be* in 2026



Signals in, strategies out.

This report is powered by Waldo - an intelligent research and strategy agent that continuously scans culture, commerce, and technology - for brand executives and their agents.

Between June and October 2025, Waldo ingested tens of thousands of signals: product launches, patents, filings, social chatter, campaigns, and investment news. Using AI models trained on 20 years of PSFK's trend archives, our trends intelligence workflow clustered early signals into emerging patterns.

From there, we used Waldo workflows to enrich the data with social sentiment and other insights, ultimately shaping them into the ten themes featured in this report.

How Waldo's Trend Intelligence System Works:

- **Signals:** Waldo gathers new products, posts, filings, launches, campaigns.
- **Analysis:** Waldo's AI clusters and tags signals into patterns.
- **Insight:** Agents layer in sentiment and market data.
- **Action:** Waldo reframes insights into strategic moves for brands.

To Be in 2026 is more than a trends report. It's a live demonstration of Waldo in action - showing how foresight itself is evolving.

Learn how Waldo can power your foresight:
waldo.fyi



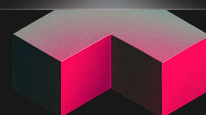
Be a Ritual

Be a Revival

Be Collectible

Be Regenerative

Be Restorative



To Be *in 2026*



Be Accountable

Be A Guardian

Be Driven

Be In Sync

Be Strategic



Be

a

Ritual



Be a () *Ritual*

From Nutrition to Intention

After years of optimization culture, consumers are replacing discipline with rhythm. Small, repeatable acts—morning tonics, mindful coffees, evening resets—are becoming tools for self-regulation. The functional-food movement sits at the center of this shift. Products that promise focus, calm, or recovery are turning everyday consumption into personal ceremony.

The functional-food and beverage market is projected to double from \$398.8 billion in 2025 to \$793.6 billion by 2032. But growth isn't just about new ingredients; it's about the desire for rituals that fit modern life—fast, sensory, and meaningful.

Zero-Proof Festival Puts Functional Living on Stage

Back in September 2025, New York City hosted its first alcohol-free festival, Drinks With Benefits, featuring more than 60 functional beverage brands. The event invited visitors to sample no-proof cocktails, adaptogenic sodas, and wellness tonics positioned for specific outcomes—from calming anxiety to boosting focus. By framing functional beverages as social and cultural experiences rather than just products, the festival showed how nourishment can become both a community ritual and a tool for better living.



IN 2026...

**Design repeatable moments that
help people feel balanced,
connected, and in control.**

People want proof, not promises.

Rituals as Innovation Drivers

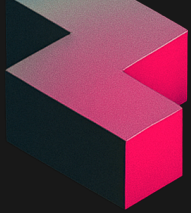
Across categories, brands are designing rituals—not just products—that help people connect health, mood, and meaning in daily life.

In Korea, Daesang WellLife has turned functional tea into a shared act of care. Its precision-blended teas, formulated for women before, during, and after pregnancy, are marketed not just for physical benefit but for the moments they create, tea shared with other mothers as part of daily connection and recovery.

In the U.S., Starbucks is transforming an existing ritual—morning coffee—into a moment of replenishment. Its protein cold foam, which adds up to 18 grams of protein per drink, re-defines caffeine as fuel for performance and balance. And at a community scale, PureGym's National Fitness Day re-frames wellness as participation, linking free exercise classes across 400+ sites with local food-bank donations to make recovery and generosity part of one motion.

Together, these examples illustrate how the next wave of brand innovation isn't about adding new functions, it's about creating meaningful repetition. Each ritual, whether shared over tea, practiced through exercise, or personalized in a coffee order, helps turn well-being into a rhythm rather than an aspiration.





Be a *Ritual*: Implications for brands

By 2026, rituals will move beyond product use into guided experiences, packaging that suggests timing, playlists that accompany drinks, wearables that prompt recharge moments. The future of engagement will look less like campaigns and more like shared habits that enhance daily life.

Create repeatable moments

Design products and cues that fit naturally into daily routines.

Keep it simple

Replace wellness jargon with sensory, outcome-based language.

Make it social

Turn private rituals into shared experiences - festivals, pop-ups, challenges.

Show results

Offer proof people can feel: calm, focus, connection.

Design for delight

Rituals last when they feel pleasurable, not dutiful.

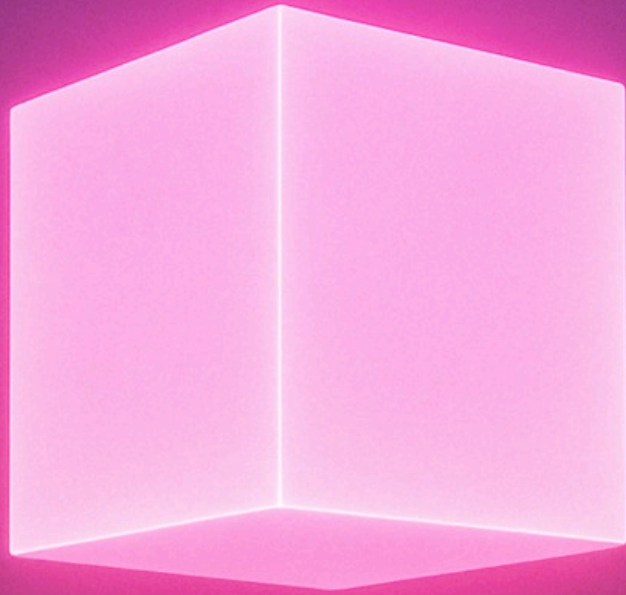
Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



“Brands are realizing there’s real growth in everyday rituals. Whether it’s Chick-fil-A launching a coffee concept or convenience stores turning the morning coffee run into an experience, these small, repeatable moments are where loyalty is built.”

Michael Abata,
Retail Consultant & Local Marketing Lead, Chewy

Be a



Revival



Be a () *Revival*

Heritage as a living asset for growth and identity

For years, brand origin stories sat quietly on About Us pages and in anniversary campaigns. But as consumers seek belonging and meaning, heritage has moved from myth to strategy. In 2026, we're moving beyond the recent wave of brand and cultural nostalgia toward something more deliberate: brands are reviving their heritage as proof of purpose and a source of competitive edge.

As automation and AI accelerate what's new, people are drawn to what feels enduring. Heritage offers authenticity in a world of replication—proof of origin, a link to craft, and a sense of continuity. Once treated as marketing texture, heritage is now being redeployed into product design, service formats, and community partnerships. The result is revival culture: brands using historic traditions and cultural narratives as assets that differentiate them in saturated markets.

The business case is clear. In hospitality, heritage is pulling premium travelers back to Europe through initiatives like Portugal's Revive program, which leases landmark properties for adaptive reuse. International arrivals to Southern Europe have returned to over 90% of pre-pandemic levels, with travelers ranking historical immersion above price. In fashion, designers are weaving regional identity into sustainable collections, such as Misci's Tieta line, which re-imagines Brazilian materials like pirarucu leather within circular production. These reinterpretations of heritage gain traction online, where social platforms amplify stories of craft and origin into global awareness and sales.

Volkswagen Revisits Its Past to Frame the Future

In car culture, restomod projects breathe new life into classic models, keeping the spirit of the original while upgrading them for modern roads. Volkswagen is a similar revival philosophy at scale. As part of its EV push, the automaker is reviving legacy names like the Polo and GTI, aligning them with its ID electric lineup. The ID. Polo and ID. GTI Concept are slated for launch by 2026, combining heritage recognition with future-ready technology. By carrying forward familiar badges, Volkswagen reassures fans while signaling continuity into the electric era.

IN 2026...

**Treat brand heritage as
something to be reclaimed,
reinterpreted, and redeployed.**



Nostalgia looks back. *Revival* moves culture forward.



Source: Shafaq News

Heritage as Cultural Foundation

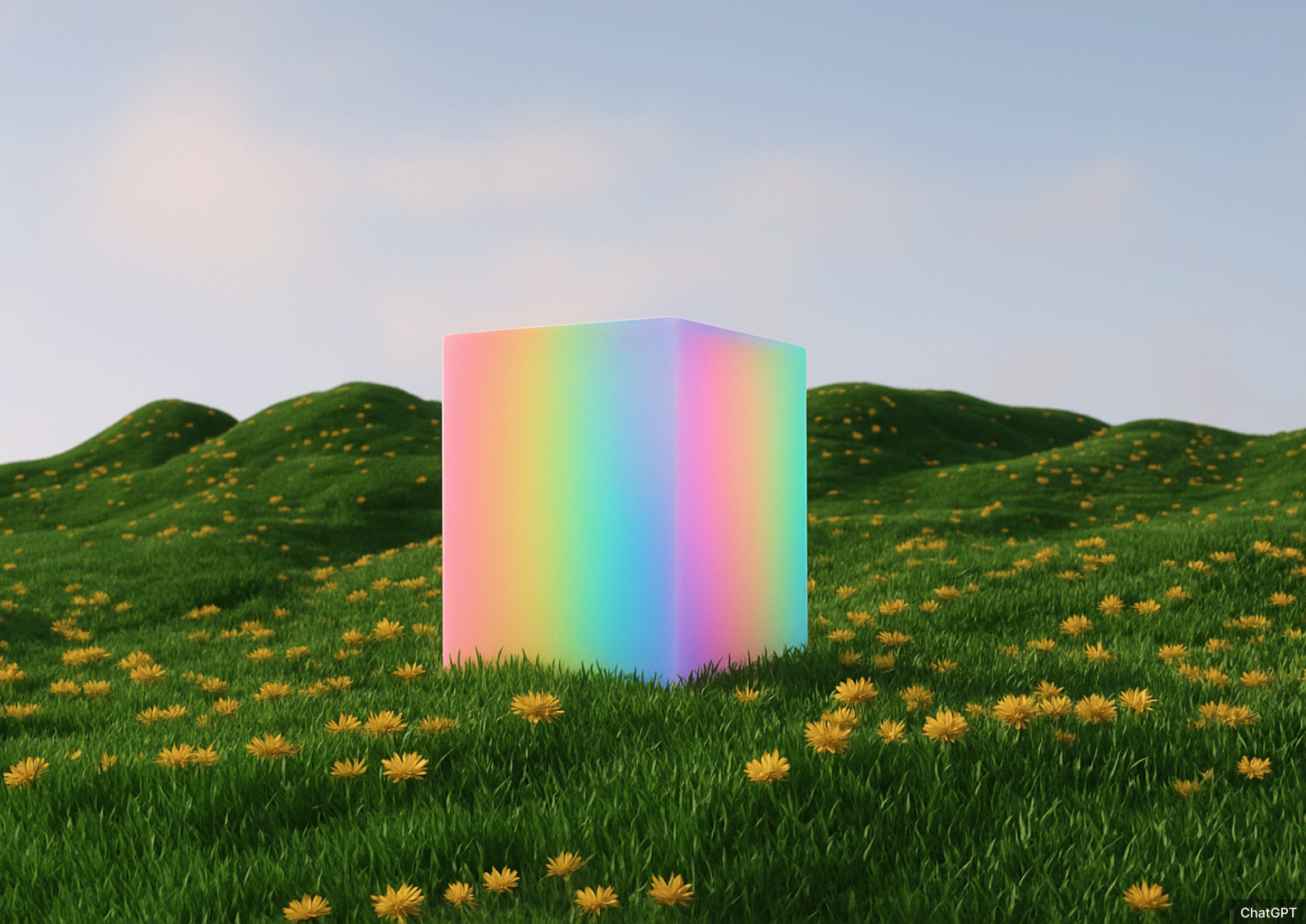
Waldo's Insight system surfaces examples of how revival strategies are becoming structural to brand building:

- In India, Tapovana Theertha Heritage Resort integrates traditional architecture within a modern hospitality experience.
- In Iraq, Sahra Resort combines Bedouin storytelling with contemporary tourism development, grounding post-conflict renewal in cultural continuity.
- In South Korea, Matinkim's Hangul collection transforms national script into a global design language.
- And in the U.S., TV series, *The Paper*, on Peacock leaned into nostalgia by activating a promotion with two historic newsstands at NYC's Rockefeller Center.

Across these cases, heritage isn't static; it's a flexible foundation that lets brands evolve without losing who they are.

Consumer Sentiment

TikToker Marpip says that craving for the past is infiltrating everything. "It speaks to the digital fatigue of Canva templates and AI slop." Watch enthusiast delraywatch says on TikTok that heritage timepieces speak softly but carry centuries of craftsmanship. "These aren't trends. They're legacies." Another TikToker Butter Cry agrees and says, "Trends come and go but craftsmanship and legacy don't fade." Audiences tend to reward heritage that feels authentic, evolving, and participatory. But consumers also call out when revival goes wrong: "dusty nostalgia" feels lifeless, and careless. Cultural borrowing risks appropriation. Other commentators raise concerns when brands borrow someone else's history without acknowledging its provenance. Costume design professor Isabela Marchi Tavares says that humans are "constantly consuming each other's cultures, whether through food, products, materials or fashion. It has been happening forever." But Tavares points out that it becomes problematic when cultural elements are removed from their original context.



ChatGPT

Rooted & Experimental

Authenticity is a key pillar of any heritage revival strategy but the notion is increasingly seen as fluid rather than fixed. Commenters describe it as a spectrum—"bold, loud, and radiant" at times, "quiet, tender, and uncertain" at others. Writing about the continued importance of Art Deco, design critic Adam Hyman says, "Just because a design is respectful of history and not defiant, it can nonetheless achieve a richness of invention." At a time when social progress no longer seems inevitable and technological evolutions do not always feel like improvements, there is something in the way Art Deco communicates fluid power, luxury, and refinement that makes it an irresistible reference.

Revival Trends

Heritage Hospitality

Historic buildings repurposed into premium hospitality with local cultural programming.

Heritage-Driven Fashion

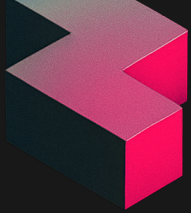
Fashion houses embedding regional identity and sustainable craft into collections.

Heritage Craft Modernization

Artisans and designers updating traditional crafts with IP protection and new methods.

Global Expansion of Regional Brands

Local heritage brands scaling into international markets.



Be a *Revival*:

Ideas for brands

For brands of any age, heritage offers identity, trust, and cultural depth, but it can also look backward or feel exclusionary. The opportunity is to move beyond nostalgia and use heritage as a strategic advantage: something to reinterpret and redeploy so it strengthens meaning, builds relevance, and connects with audiences who value provenance and authenticity.

Make heritage an active advantage

Bring it off the archive shelf and into today's products, services, and experiences.

Connect heritage with the future

Update classic ideas through modern design, innovation, or sustainable practice.

Balance roots and renewal

Refresh symbols and experiences without losing the essence people recognize.

Build with communities

Partner with local makers and cultural leaders to ensure heritage feels shared, not borrowed.

Let authenticity evolve

Show how tradition grows and adapts. Prove that legacy and innovation can coexist.

Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



"Revival is so much bigger than pulling something out of the vault. It's about bringing heritage forward - partnering with someone new or layering in modern technology so the past becomes part of what's next."

Mike Peck,
Vice President of Creative, Brooks Running





Be
Collectible

Be () *Collectible*

Collectibles as Programmable Brand Culture

In a world where anything can be shipped to your door in an hour, scarcity has become a signal of value. Collecting the hard to find items (physical and digital) is no longer a niche hobby, it's how people express identity, connect, and trade meaning in culture. What began as fan behavior has evolved into a shared economy of stories, symbols, and assets.

The global collectibles market was estimated to surpass \$496 billion in 2025, with retro gaming categories alone appreciating by more than 20 percent year-on-year on resale platforms. Brands are leaning in. From sneakers to spirits to video games, they're engineering limited drops, reviving heritage franchises, and co-creating capsules that blend emotion with economics. In doing so, they're turning products into cultural tokens—objects that carry not just price, but provenance, belonging, and status.

How Swarovski Creates Luxury Collectibles With Gaming Icons

Swarovski's Minecraft collection turns crystal craftsmanship into digital fandom. Each €300 figurine of characters like Steve or the Pig includes a QR code unlocking an exclusive in-game "Crystal Suit." This brand campaign merges physical luxury with online play, making the collectible both a display piece and a digital passport—proof of taste and tribe.

IN 2026...

**Build fandom-led economies,
using provenance, community,
and cultural storytelling.**

Make everyday products desirable and tradeable.

Collectibles as cultural events

Limited drops have become cultural events—moments that blur art, fashion, and fandom.

In Tokyo, street wear brand Kith partnered with NANZUKA Gallery to create a capsule collection featuring artists Hajime Sorayama and Keiichi Tanaami. The result was both art exhibition and product drop: wearable pieces that doubled as collectibles, driving buzz far beyond Kith's core audience.

Elsewhere, Paris Baguette collaborated with Netflix's animated film K-Pop Demon Hunters, turning themed pastries into short-lived fan memorabilia. What could have been a routine promotion became a fandom-driven ritual. Fans queued, shared, and revisited stores to collect the set.

Together, these cases show how collectibles now act as community experiences, not just objects. They create stories, gatherings, and emotional connection.

"The magic of collectibles goes beyond the item itself—it's about the memory, the moment, and the community that rallies around it. The most valuable thing brands can do is team up with fans, co-create with them, and support that sense of belonging."

Val Vacante
Innovation & Trends Expert



Kith



Netflix

Consumer Sentiment

Collectible strategies seem to work. Social media is full of collector fans, though some commentators complain about negative changes.

On LinkedIn, strategist Jason Yu says that when he first saw the Labubu craze, it gave him a sense of déjà vu from his time at Disney. “We didn’t see a trend, we saw a Disney-style playbook.” His team’s strategy for growing the Duffy the Bear IP included: Make Your Product a Platform, Make Them Earn It, and Say No to Protect Yes.



Concerns About Community

Instagrammer Higmer Sugoer complains that many brands have capitalized on the sneaker community without reinvesting in it: "Sustainable growth and community trust require close cooperation and alignment around shared objectives."

Shiny Vault1 warns of downsides: "Scalpers, shrinking stock, and rising costs are making it harder than ever for collectors, especially families and new fans to stay in the game."

But they also wonder if "it's not the end-and maybe collecting is just adjusting."

Elsewhere on TikTok, Age of Retrol admits, "Game collecting today can be a struggle but it can be fun too."

Scarcity works when it feels fair and participatory-when the hunt itself (sometimes literally in Target's aisles) becomes part of the pleasure. Managed well, it deepens community; handled poorly, it breeds resentment.



Be Collectible: Implications for brands

Collectibles have shifted from side projects to cultural brand strategy. They're tools for demand, storytelling, and loyalty—but they also test a brand's ethics of access.

Make scarcity meaningful

Tie drops to cultural rituals and shared moments, not gimmicks.

Protect authenticity

Use technology and transparency to prove provenance.

Turn the hunt into play

Design challenges or lotteries that make participation rewarding.

Support your fans

Build collector spaces—resale hubs, clubs, or events—that turn collectors into collaborators.

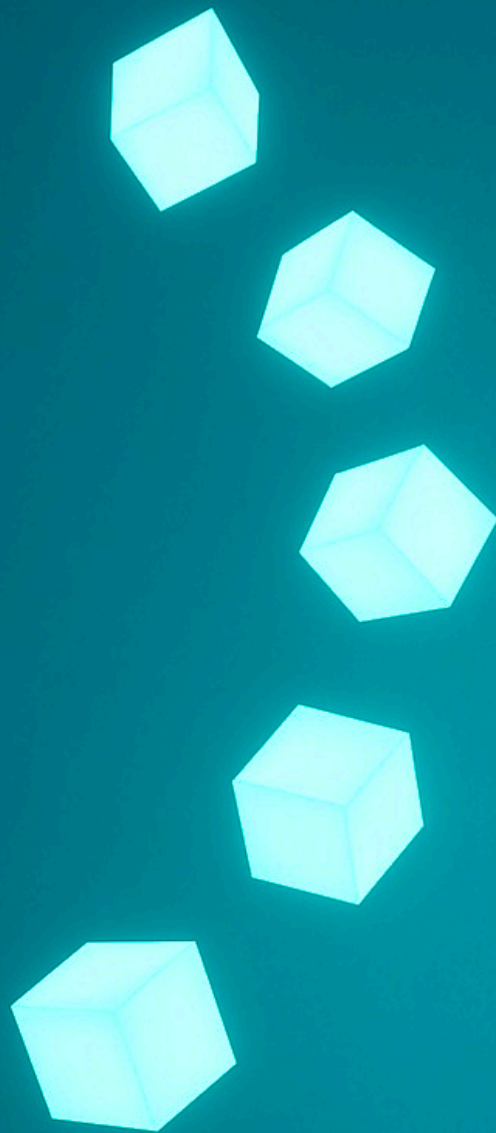
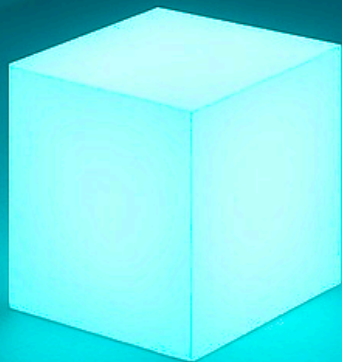
Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



Be



Regenerative





Be () *Regenerative*

From Recycling to Renewal

Regeneration goes beyond sustainability—it's about creating systems that give back more than they take, restoring value to the environment, people, and culture.

Sustainability used to mean doing less harm. In 2026, it's about creating more good. Material innovation is shifting from substitution to regeneration, designing products and processes that give back more to nature and people than they take. Circularity, biomimicry, and modular design are becoming creative foundations, not compliance checkboxes.

Investment is following fast. More than \$13B flowed into circular-materials startups in 2024, funding everything from fungi-based packaging to traceable recycling hubs. On the consumer side, launches of upcycled cosmetics and apparel have grown nearly 200 percent since 2020, making regeneration a mainstream expectation.

Under Armour × UNLESS: Performance Meets Renewal

Under Armour's collaboration with regenerative fashion label UNLESS shows how innovation and storytelling can share the same thread. The partnership created a capsule of plant-based, zero-plastic performance apparel designed to return safely to the soil at the end of its life. Each piece performs like high-tech gear but tells a different story, one of reversibility and respect for the materials that make performance possible.



IN 2026...

**Reframe the use of source materials—
biomimicry, recycling, and modular
design—as stories of brand renewal.**

Waste isn't an end— it's a beginning.

Regeneration as innovation

Across sectors, regeneration is becoming a creative driver, shaping how brands design, build, and tell their stories.

In travel, [Red Sea Global](#) is redefining luxury as a restorative act. Its 28,000-square-kilometre Red Sea Project integrates renewable energy, coral-reef protection, and sustainable construction across resorts from brands like SLS, Four Seasons, and Fairmont. The aim is to create a tourism model that replenishes ecosystems and communities alike, proving that high-end design can give back to its environment rather than draw from it.

In beauty, [McHan Organics](#) turns cocoa waste into premium skincare ingredients, pairing environmental benefits with income streams for women farmers. And in fashion resale, [Onceloved](#) reframes wedding dresses as circular assets, tapping into a resale market already worth \$37 billion globally.

Together, these examples show that regeneration is not just a technical process but a creative approach—a way to combine environmental renewal, social progress, and brand storytelling.



Consumer Sentiment

When we tracked topic sentiment via Waldo workflows, we found a lot of excitement around regenerative processes.

On LinkedIn, sustainability advisor [Michael McComb](#) mentioned that many business leaders still look at sustainability as a CSR program or a compliance exercise. But he argues that when brands lean into it as a strategic business driver—from product design to new models of ownership—real change happens.

[Paul Smith](#) on LinkedIn emphasized the core philosophy of "biosynergy"—the understanding that all living systems are interconnected. This isn't just about making "less harmful" materials; it's about creating solutions that actively regenerate the planet. "Mother Nature is a designer's greatest teacher," adds [Design Wanted](#) magazine on Instagram.

The team behind the [Alexandria 2050](#) convention argued on Facebook for an architecture of renewal—designs that actively restore natural systems while meeting human needs by treating nature as a partner in the design process.

The [Mind's Canvas](#)'s Facebook account highlighted the biodynamic BIQ house in Hamburg, Germany, as an example: "It's a closed-loop system, where waste becomes resource, and the walls themselves become engines of energy."

This shift in thinking is evident in how architect [Doris Lau](#) says on LinkedIn that designers should look at their work 'not just as an object or interface, but as part of the whole ecosystem—considering materials, production processes, distribution, and the product's afterlife.



Heritage and regeneration

Designers are weaving heritage into sustainable practice, with Indigenous craft and local techniques paired with eco-materials to create resonance.

In Portugal, Sensihemp positions hemp as both regenerative and tied to national identity. The clothing brand's founder Marta Vinhas describes her goal as staying "deeply connected to the land, to the people I work with, and to the purpose that drives this project."

Consumers are also challenging old stereotypes of 'green' products as dull and crusty.

When circular design delivers on aesthetics, sentiment shifts. Plant-powered fashion is described as 'the new luxury', reinforcing that sustainability must deliver beauty alongside impact.

Regenerative Trends

Open-Source Modular Furniture

Shared designs enabling local fabrication and circular use.

Cross-Sector Partnerships for Recycled & Traceable Materials

Industry collaborations turning waste streams into inputs.

Upcycled Ingredients in Cosmetics

Beauty reformulated with waste-stream ingredients and reduced plastics.

Modular & Customizable Accessories

Jewelry and accessories designed for modularity and circularity.

Collectible Everyday Objects

Everyday goods re-cast as artisanal limited editions.

Be *Regenerative*: Implications for brands



Regeneration is shifting from an experiment to an expectation. For brands, it's both a creative opportunity and a credibility test. The most forward brands will use renewal as their design signature—showing how progress can restore, not just consume. Those that rely on vague sustainability claims or hide complexity risk both consumer skepticism and regulatory scrutiny.

Turn breakthroughs into stories

Center new materials—from plant-based apparel to cocoa-waste skincare—in your brand storytelling.

Make renewal clear

Replace jargon with simple visuals and descriptors that show how products give back.

Build real loops

Partner with recyclers, startups, and communities to make reuse and recovery visible.

Blend heritage and innovation

Collaborate with local and Indigenous makers to connect circularity with culture.

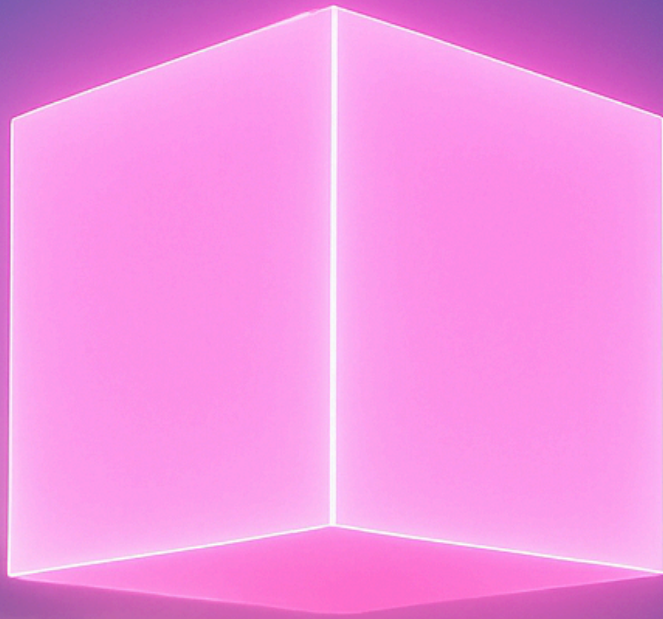
Lead with beauty

Show that regenerative design can be aspirational—not just responsible.

Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



Be



Restorative



Be () *Restorative*



Recovery as a critical component to wellness and brand connection unlock

Recovery has moved from sports clinics to daily culture. Once the domain of elite athletes, recovery tools like red light therapy, compression, and guided stretching now appear in gyms, retreats, workplaces, and even airports. The idea of “taking time to recover” has evolved into a mainstream wellness ritual—a way to recharge, prevent burnout, and sustain resilience.

And the science is catching up to the trend. In a recent study from the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), researchers found that combining whole-body heating (via infrared sauna) with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) produced remarkable results for patients with major depressive disorder (MDD). After the trial, 86.2% of participants no longer met the criteria for MDD—a striking indicator of how recovery-driven interventions can improve both physical and mental well-being.

Appellation and Deepak Chopra Build a \$180M Recovery Community

Hospitality brand Appellation, in partnership with Deepak Chopra, is building Ameyalli Park City, a \$180M wellness community in Utah. It combines AI-powered diagnostics, recovery tools, villas, and learning spaces to embed recovery in everyday living. The project reframes hospitality as a system for restoration and reflection, where guests recharge mind and body as part of the experience itself.



IN 2026...

Treat recovery as a cultural expectation, not a luxury.



Your customers' wellness requires recovery



Recovery as an ecosystem

Recovery is now embedded across sectors:

- In fitness, startups like Aescape introduce AI massage systems that blend accessibility with aspiration.
- In wellness tech, companies like HaloRed O2 bundle red light, oxygen, and halotherapy into compact multi-use systems.
- In hospitality, hotels such as the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park integrate recovery technologies directly into rooms.
- In consumer tech, the iPhone 17 elevates health tracking as part of lifestyle storytelling.

Together, these examples show recovery shifting from clinic to culture—a continuous feedback loop between performance, rest, and renewal.



Consumer Sentiment

Waldo's social analysis around the topic of recovery reflects both enthusiasm and caution.

On Instagram, Helen Leland reminds us that recovery should be accessible, "This isn't luxury. It's your health."

Consumers consistently emphasize the importance of recovery as community and mutual support.

On Instagram, Em Krzus says, "A big part of my job is giving my energy to others, so it's super important that I have a solid recovery routine to top up my own cup."

Others underscore the need for personalization: "You're not the same as the next person, and neither should your recovery be."

At the same time, skepticism persists toward "wellness as a trend." Massage therapists and coaches critique shallow recovery solutions packaged as fads, calling instead for evidence-based care.

As @prolificbodywork on Instagram notes, "Real recovery isn't trendy. Your pain isn't weakness. You deserve more than a supplement stack and good vibes." I

In a Substack newsletter, Tom Garland shares his view on wellness anarchists who are rejecting the industry's fitness rules, sometimes recovering from a long run with a beer and a cigarette. These comments point to the dual expectation for recovery: it must be authentic and effective, not performative. When recovery is framed as community, personalized, and evidence based, sentiment is positive. When it is delivered as a gimmick or trend, it attracts critique.



Restorative Trends

Tech-Enabled Fitness Recovery Centers

Gyms monetizing cryo, compression, and biometric recovery services.

Tech-Enhanced Wellness Retreats

Retreats combining diagnostics, wearables, and evidence-based therapies.

Recovery-Integrated Fitness Clubs

Clubs embedding recovery directly into training and memberships.

Community-Driven Fitness Networks

Fitness communities built around shared recovery and accountability.

AI-Driven Workout Coaching

Real-time AI feedback and form correction driving recovery and performance.

Be Restorative: Implications for brands



Gyms, retreats, and even employers are investing in evidence-backed recovery. For brands, recovery is a growth engine, unlocking new revenue and engagement. The challenge for brands is to build recovery as a visible, authentic, and cultural expectation. The opportunity is to normalize recovery as a necessity for sustained performance and wellbeing.

Turn recovery into community

Design group experiences where support and accountability drive participation.

Personalize the path

Offer modular recovery options that meet physical, emotional, and lifestyle needs.

Show results

Publish outcomes—sleep quality, stress scores, energy gains—as proof, not promotion.

Normalize recovery everywhere

Extend recovery into work, travel, and retail spaces to make it part of life.

Connect physical to digital

Sync spaces, wearables, and coaching to deliver continuous care.

Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



“Recovery has become a design challenge - not just in wellness, but in how we build brands and environments. The most relevant brands will be the ones that help people feel restored, more regulated, and in control - brands that can actually calm the noise.”

Donna Dei-Baning,
Insights & Analytics Lead, The Martin Agency



Be

Accountable

Be () Accountable

Accountability is the new sustainability

After years of corporate pledges and glossy ESG reports, people want evidence—actions they can see and outcomes they can measure. In 2026, the most trusted brands won't just talk about purpose; they'll make it tangible.

At the corporate level, more than half of S&P 500 companies now report net-zero or carbon-neutral goals, and the global ESG investing market is forecast to grow from \$30 trillion in 2024 to over \$160 trillion by 2034. But even as the money expands, the language is shifting: 52% of sustainability executives say they're moving away from the term "ESG" altogether, replacing it with something simpler—accountability.

The next phase of sustainability is visible and participatory.

Retailers, employers, and manufacturers are building systems where impact happens in public, not in PDFs. Transactions that fund community programs. Workforce initiatives that link learning with service. AI tools that track carbon use in real time. Accountability is becoming a performance metric, not a PR statement.

CAVA Expands With Accountability Built In

When CAVA opens a new restaurant, it doubles as a community event. Its first New Hampshire store raised funds for the state's food bank while creating 25-40 local jobs with competitive pay and benefits. Another launch in Michigan supported Gleaners Food Bank and donated meals to address food insecurity. Since 2019, CAVA's Community Day program has raised over \$600,000 for nonprofits—proof that growth and goodwill can scale together.

IN 2026...

**Turn ESG from paperwork into proof -
systems that people can see, measure,
and even trade in.**



Don't report impact. Show it



Participation Is the New Proof

Impact resonates most when it's local and shared.

PureGym offered free classes across 435 sites for National Fitness Day, linking wellness to food-bank donations.

In Michigan, Queer Beans Coffee and The Little Gay Bookstore built a café that doubles as a safe space.

In China, Taobao's City Knight Gear project combined courier benefits with a charity auction.

Consumer Sentiment

Waldo's sentiment analysis finds rising skepticism toward corporate sustainability.

Commentators complain about "box-ticking" initiatives and "value theater," but respond positively when companies act accountably and show direct results, like when emissions are reduced, jobs created, and communities supported.

Across social media, we find signals of support for transparent accountability. Thomas Fife-Schaw, Managing Director of Ipsos Corporate Reputation UK, believes corporate reputation will increasingly be won on behavior, not broadcast. He says, "We're seeing less talk, more doing. What matters is whether companies deliver on their promises, not how loudly they say they will."

The line between trust and cynicism is clear: metrics matter only when they're verifiable.





ChatGPT

Technology and efficiency

AI is turning enterprise sustainability from compliance into capability.

Automated reporting and data visualization tools are making ESG cheaper, faster, and more precise.

When impact is auditable and near real-time, it becomes a strategic asset—not a cost center.

“Accountability isn’t about paying for redemption—it’s about redefining success. The future belongs to brands that design products, services, and business models that create profit and positive impact at the same time.”

Giuseppe Stigliano,
Marketing Professor and Executive Advisor

Accountability Trends

Retail Models with Measurable Social Impact

Transactions wired to track and deliver community benefit.

Integrated Social-Impact Programs for Talent Development

Workforce programs embedding community engagement.

Embedded Charitable & Community Investment in Retail

Retail operations funding hyper-local impact.

Employee-Welfare & Diverse Talent Initiatives

Corporate programs linking welfare and community support.



Be *Accountable*: Implications for brands

The opportunity for brands is to make corporate sustainability and social impact visible, participatory, and valuable—something people can see and use, not just hear about.

Show outcomes before promises

Deliver measurable change, then report it.

Let outsiders verify

Independent audits build credibility faster than claims.

Build feedback loops

Use AI and data systems to make progress transparent.

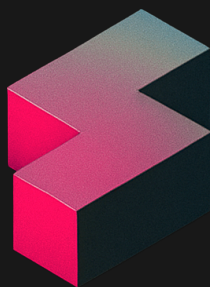
Localize responsibility

Support programs where communities can join and benefit.

Create an impact marketplace

Consumers might trade their own verified impact—volunteering hours, carbon offsets, or data - as tokens of participation.

Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



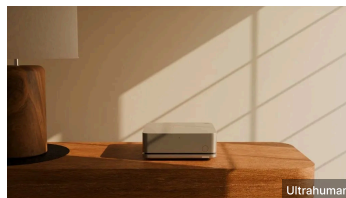


Be a

Guardian



Be a () *Guardian*



How brands can act as guardians

People are comfortable when protection feels invisible and under their control. They want devices and spaces that quietly keep them safe—alerting, adjusting, anticipating—without turning their lives into data feeds. That's the new design challenge for brands: to build systems of ambient reassurance, where intelligence fades into the background and confidence moves to the foreground.

Across homes, cars, and wearables, AI and sensors are beginning to cooperate rather than compete for attention. Your car talks to your house, your watch syncs with your mood, your environment adjusts before you ask. Together they form a protective layer that manages energy, comfort, and focus—an ecosystem that anticipates rather than interrupts. The tools we once operated are becoming environments that operate with us—guardians of time, wellbeing, and calm.

The enabling infrastructure is scaling fast. The smart-home automation market is projected to expand from about \$104 billion in 2024 to roughly \$1.15 trillion by 2034, driven by demand for convenience, security, and health optimization. Kitchen categories are part of the lift, smart kitchen appliances are forecast to grow from \$18.8 billion (2023) to \$60.2 billion by 2030, while the global smart kitchen appliances market, which includes AI devices, was valued at about \$18.75 billion in 2023 and expected to reach over \$60 billion by 2030. On the road, autonomous-driving software is projected to rise from \$1.8 billion in 2024 to \$7.0 billion by 2035, as automakers ship sensor-rich vehicles with upgradeable autonomy. Wearables remain the personal edge, smart health devices are expected to grow from \$27.8 billion (2025) to \$63.5 billion by 2032, reflecting continuous monitoring moving into eldercare, chronic disease, and mental health.

Ultrahuman Turns the Home Into a Guardian in Life's Background

Ultrahuman Home monitors air, light, sound, temperature, and humidity, integrating with wearables to improve sleep and cognition. It reframes the home as an active health guardian, one that works silently in the background to support wellbeing. The promise is subtle but powerful: protection without intrusion.



IN 2026...

Design technology that helps, not watches.





Frame guardianship as ambient reassurance, safety and wellbeing but don't add complexity.



Guardianship in Everyday Life

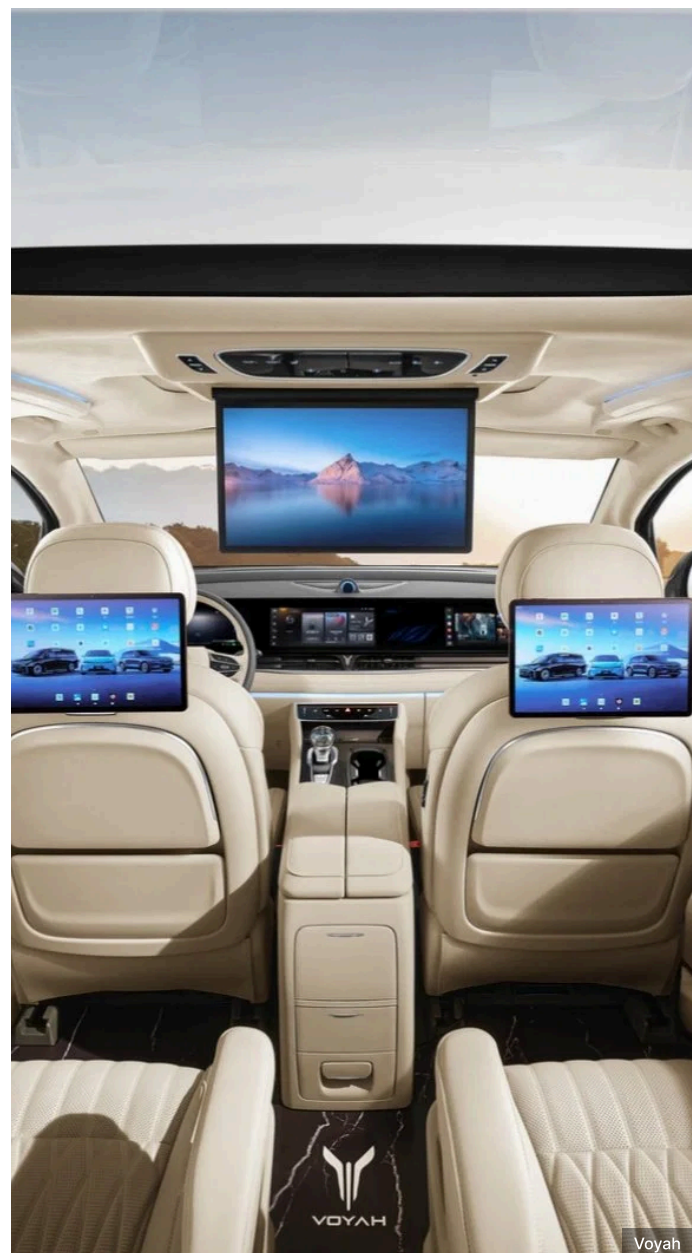
Across sectors, brands are embedding guardianship into ordinary routines.

- A.O. Smith's Smart Jing Kitchen automates cooking safety—detecting gas, adjusting airflow, and timing cycles autonomously.
- Voyah Dreamer MPV integrates Huawei's driver-assist stack, blending comfort and safety in a software-defined cabin.
- Aescape, backed by Tom Brady, brings AI-driven massage to gyms and hotels, showing how recovery becomes ambient care.

Together these examples show guardianship as quiet choreography-anticipating.

“Technology will become far more present but far less visible - embedded into everyday life. Brands as guardians will anticipate needs, protect privacy, and create reassurance, proving that the future isn't artificially intelligent, but intelligently artificial.”

Giuseppe Stigliano,
Marketing Professor and Executive Advisor



Help - yes! Surveillance - no!

Guardianship seems most valuable when it disappears into routines. Waldo's social analysis workflows surfaced that sentiment for supportive tech is enthusiastic when safety and prevention are clear. Fall-prediction for elders, real-time alerts for air quality, and early anomaly detection are widely praised. But there are consistent red lines.

Privacy sits first. Users worry about who sees health and household data, how it's used, and whether it can be linked back to identity.

Affordability and access: follow-excitement often fades when devices are priced out of reach, or when insurance and employers don't participate. Finally, agency matters. Some users express fatigue with constant prompts, or fear over-reliance on automation that dilutes human judgment. The pattern is stable, consumers want help that is ambient and intelligible, not intrusive or opaque.



From devices to operating layers

Guardianship is evolving from stand-alone gadgets to coordinated layers. Local AI allows home devices to talk to each other—an air-quality monitor starting a purifier when pollution spikes. Cars learn from shared data; wearables sync with home hubs; workplaces adopt sensors that flag fatigue or stress. The guardian era isn't about more devices, but about connected systems that quietly collaborate for wellbeing.

Be a Guardian: Implications for brands



Guardian thinking is as much about brand behavior as it is about technology. Marketers and innovators now have an opportunity to position brands as protective presences—quietly reducing friction, anticipating needs, and earning trust through calm competence. The challenge is to translate technical intelligence into emotional assurance.

Lead with reassurance, not reach

Position your brand as the calm voice that anticipates problems before they happen. Replace “innovation” language with care language.

Make privacy your promise

Treat transparency as a brand asset—communicate what’s collected, why, and how it benefits the user.

Turn trust into identity

Frame protection as part of belonging—membership, reliability, loyalty programs that reassure, not extract.

Design calm, restorative moments

Apply the guardian mindset to experiences: simpler interfaces, fewer alerts, brand rituals that renew confidence.

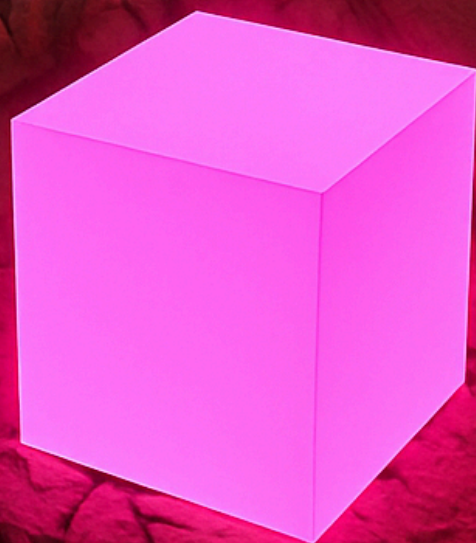
Humanize intelligence

Use storytelling, not specs, to show how tech quietly looks after people’s health, homes, and lives.

Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



Be
Driven





Be () *Driven*

From Machines to Media Spaces

Cars are no longer machines you operate; they're software environments that move with you. Across global markets, vehicles are evolving into rolling operating systems — adaptive platforms that host content, commerce, and wellbeing as easily as they once hosted horsepower.

Sensor-integrated driver-assist systems learn in the background; over-the-air updates unlock new features post-sale; and cabins are being redesigned for productivity, leisure, and even health. Differentiation is shifting from design and engine to interface and experience.

The opportunity for brands is enormous. As cars become updatable ecosystems, they open new terrain for storytelling, service, and partnership—a captive audience on the move.

The software layer is helping to grow this sector quickly. Autonomous driving software is projected to grow from roughly \$2.3B in 2025 to \$7.2B by 2034, reflecting city-by-city activations and modular stacks that step up as regulations allow. In parallel, connected vehicle clouds and technologies are forecast to pass \$100B this decade, as OEMs knit telematics, infotainment, payments, and safety telemetry into persistent data spines. Consumer expectations are advancing in lockstep, cabins are becoming productivity and wellness spaces; OTA roadmaps shape perceived value; and high-bandwidth connectivity carries work and entertainment into the vehicle and across journeys.

Huawei Turns the Car Into a Connected Living Space

Huawei's AITO M9, built on its HarmonyOS, reimagines the car as a living, adaptive environment. The cabin integrates multiple dynamic screens, voice agents, and a 75-inch AR windshield that overlays navigation and entertainment. Scenario modes adjust light, seating, and climate to mood and purpose, from focus to relaxation. With continuous updates, the M9 behaves more like a smartphone than a sedan—a device that improves over time.

IN 2026...

**Treat mobility as a connected
experience—a space for work,
play, and identity beyond the road.**



Mobility is becoming media—a moving platform for experience.



From hardware-first to OS-first

Across markets, brands are reframing the car interior as a programmable experience.

- In China, SAIC's Shangjie H5, built on HarmonyOS, features adaptive seating, AR displays, and wellness routines powered by software.
- In Europe and the U.S., automakers embed OTA personalization and biometric interfaces to build loyalty through comfort, not horsepower.
- In Japan, Sharp's LDK+ EV concept transforms the cabin into a "living room on wheels," with a swiveling cinema-style display, ambient lighting, and modular seating that shifts between work, rest, and entertainment modes—turning the car into a fully adaptive media space.

Together, these examples show mobility becoming an experiential network, not a product line—a place where safety, creativity, and continuity converge.



SAIC

Diffusion patterns: pilots to platforms

Autonomy is moving from experiments to ecosystems.

- In Singapore, Grab × WeRide launched Ai.R, the city's first commercial autonomous ride-hailing service.
- In the U.S., ADASTEC × Beep bring Level 4 driverless buses to public fleets.
- Infrastructure projects such as Electreon's wireless charging corridors show how cities are adapting to software-led mobility.

The story is no longer about test drives, it's about connected systems learning together.



Sharp



Consumer insights: enthusiasm with conditions

When we study consumer sentiment using Waldo's workflows, we find that enthusiasm for connected car technology centers on safety, convenience, and continuity.

Fewer incidents, easier parking, predictive maintenance, and cabins that adapt to context. The red lines are clear. Security and privacy loom large: consumers want explicit assurances on secure OTA, on-device processing where feasible, and transparent data logs.

Complexity also attracts skepticism when features feel like gimmicks (gesture-only door handles) or when integration raises failure points.

Social impact concerns persist around workforce displacement and equitable access. The pattern is consistent, people are receptive to "driver + AI teamwork" that improves everyday utility, but trust depends on credible cybersecurity, plain-language explanations, and visible benefits.

Driven Trends

Scaling Autonomous Passenger Services

Robotaxis and AV fleets moving from pilots to city-scale services.

Commercial Deployment of Level 4 AVs

Level 4 autonomy reaching revenue-generating deployments.

Premium Connected Cabin Systems

SUVs and MPVs using software-defined cabins for wellness and productivity.

Sensor-Integrated Driving Platforms

ADAS stacks with OTA-upgradable autonomy and modular sensors.

Seamless Digital Connectivity Across Travel

Continuous connectivity across air, rail, and ground mobility.

Be Driven: Implications for brands



The connected car is becoming a mobile experience hub—a space where entertainment, wellbeing, and commerce converge. The opportunity for brands isn't under the hood; it's in the cabin. Cars are turning into living, adaptive environments where people watch, learn, shop, relax, and create on the move.

Create value beyond the road

Extend mobility into wellness, culture, and commerce, making time in motion meaningful.

Design for presence

Treat the cabin as a new screen and soundscape where content, brand stories, and services come alive.

Collaborate across ecosystems

Build partnerships that connect automotive platforms with retail, hospitality, and media networks.

Humanize connection

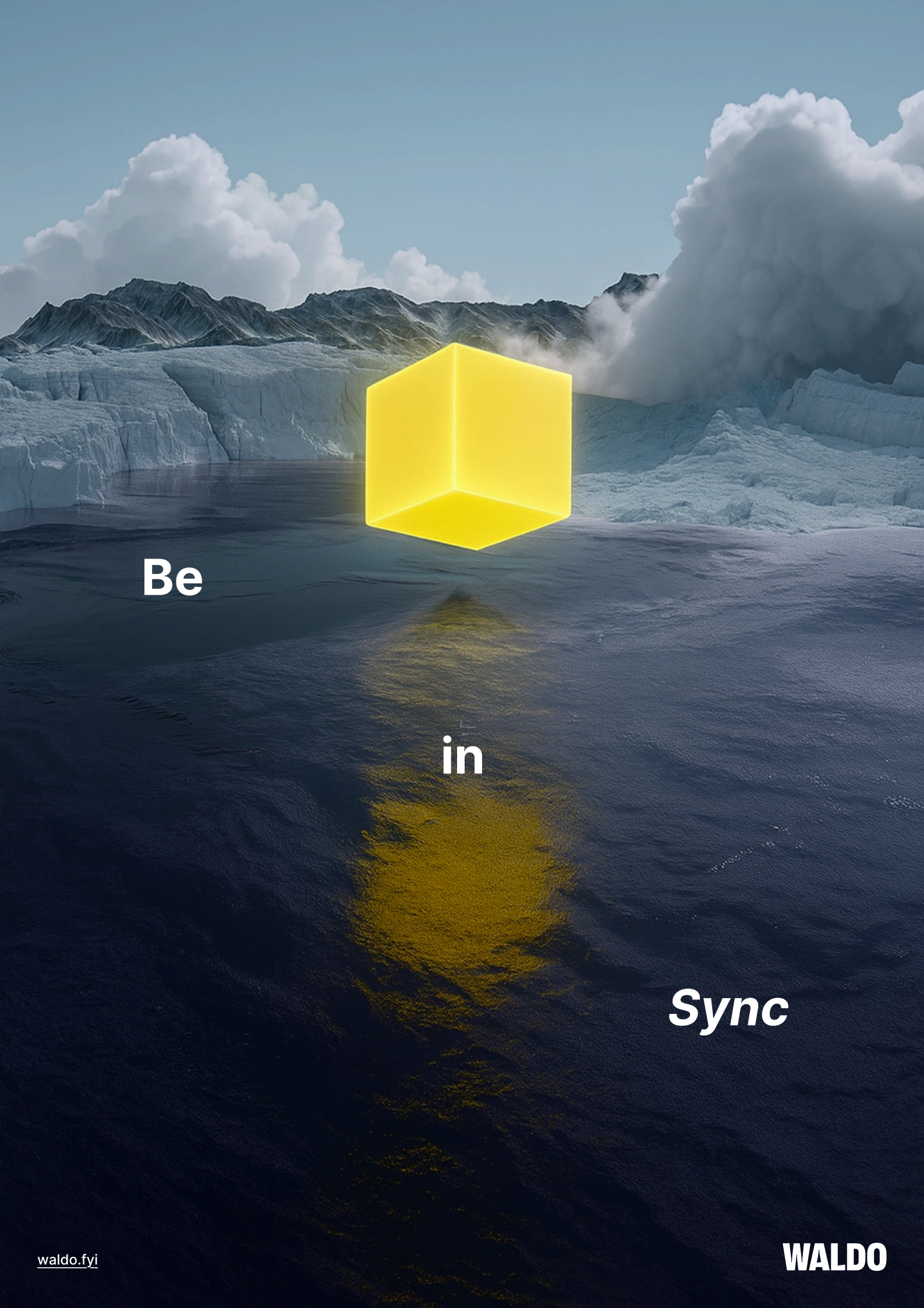
Make digital experiences in cars feel intuitive, emotional, and low-friction—not more noise on the dashboard.

Earn trust in motion

Use transparency and data sensitivity to make people feel safe sharing and engaging while they travel.

Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo





Be

in

Sync

Be () *in Sync*

In-step experiences that bridge digital and physical

People no longer separate “digital” and “physical.” They expect experiences to move effortlessly between screens, stores, and social feeds. The most resonant brands now design for continuity—each moment picking up where the last left off, each channel reinforcing the story.

This shift defines a fast-growing industry. The global immersive experience market is projected to reach \$144 billion by 2025, expanding at more than 23% CAGR. The immersive content creation market is forecast to grow nearly fourfold to \$56 billion by 2030. Even gamification, once niche, is projected to surpass \$89 billion by 2031—evidence that tools syncing behavior across contexts are scaling rapidly into the mainstream.

Netflix Turns Streaming Into a Living Narrative

Starting in late 2025, Netflix House will open in Philadelphia and Dallas (with Las Vegas following in 2027). These 100,000+ sq ft venues invite fans to physically enter worlds like *Stranger Things*, *Squid Game*, and *Wednesday*—walking through immersive AV environments, interacting with modular sets, dining via Netflix Bites, and buying exclusive merchandise.

What makes Netflix House stand out is not just the spectacle, it's the intention to sustain and evolve. Through immersive audio-visual orchestration, motion tracking, and content updates, Netflix aligns its physical spaces with its digital IP in real time. In doing so, it signals that branded spaces should be part of a living ecosystem, part of the story and not just a one-off show.

IN 2026...

**Orchestrate seamless experiences
across digital and physical channels,
where every touchpoint amplifies the next.**



Treat brand activations as multi-channel performances, where each touchpoint enhances the others and consumers feel part of a continuous, connected narrative.



When Every Touchpoint Plays Together

Across categories, brands are learning to choreograph rather than segment.

- Marc Jacobs and Nordstrom staged a fashion-art pop-up that extended instantly to TikTok and Instagram, turning a store into a broadcast.
- LEGO interactive store in Cardiff, UK links physical play directly to digital challenges, creating a single experience across store and screen.
- Artifex Lab in Paris merges tapas bar, gallery, and AI exhibition into one looped event—a new model for nightlife and culture.

Together, these examples show how brand spaces are evolving into connected stages, where discovery, participation, and sharing blur.

Sentiment: Consumers want moments, not just messages

Social sentiment analysis of immersive activations reveals enthusiasm when digital and physical are harmonized with purpose, and frustration when activations feel like spectacle without substance. Social media commentators highlight that consumers “want moments, not just messages”—i.e., launches that function as cultural events, not one-off stunts. Maybelline’s immersive pop-up mascara station or Vaseline’s experiential activations are cited as examples of brands shaping cultural moments, not simply promoting products. At the same time, commenters flag cost and scalability. Smaller brands struggle to compete, and consumers worry about exclusivity. Sentiment also shows that audiences prefer activations with clear narratives or guides, noting that otherwise immersive tech can feel overwhelming or “disorienting.”





CNN Indonesia

Continuity as the differentiator

The future of experience is measured in rhythm, not reach.

TikTok commentary shows that the most effective activations extend long after doors close: AR filters, loyalty rewards, and social challenges that keep audiences connected.

The advantage lies not in spectacle but in orchestration—stories that travel through time and channel.

Sync Trends

Multi-Sensory Public Art Hubs

Immersive public installations turning civic space into cultural destinations.

Coordinated Multi-Platform Global Launches

Entertainment launches timed across media and geography.

Multisensory Retail Installations

Retail environments using projection, scent, and audio for shareable moments.

Live-Service Cross-Platform Game Ecosystems

Games syncing in-game activity with physical events and perks.

Omnichannel Interactive Flagships

Stores as media hubs where digital and physical layers sync.

Be in Sync: Implications for brands



People no longer separate online and offline, they expect experiences to move seamlessly between them. For brands, the opportunity is to design for flow: moments that begin in one channel and continue naturally into another. The goal isn't presence everywhere; it's coherence everywhere.

Plan for continuity

Extend activations into digital content, filters, or challenges that keep audiences engaged long after the event.

Design for resonance, not reach

Give experiences cultural meaning, not just media value.

Stage cultural moments

Build activations people want to witness, join, and share.

Lower barriers to access

Use mobile or AR extensions so smaller markets can participate.

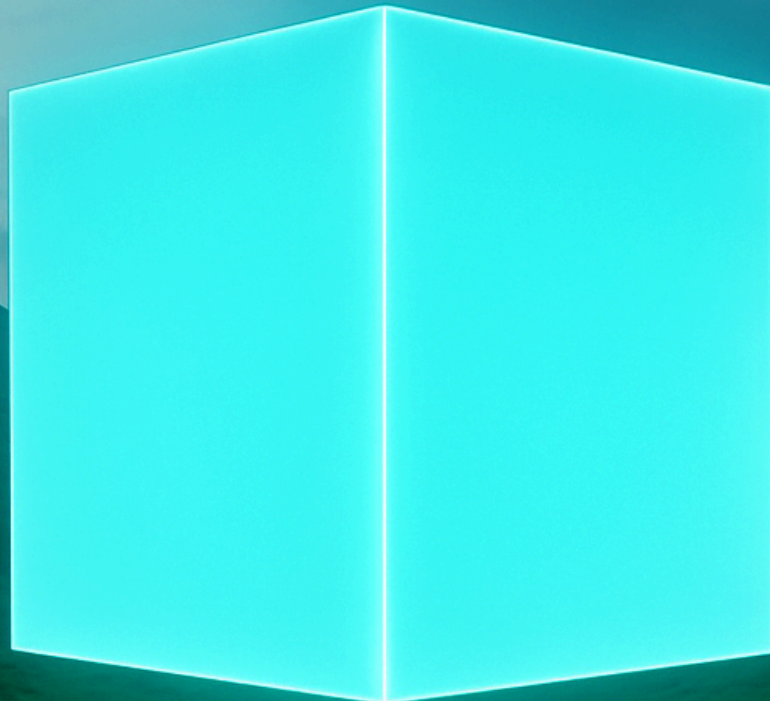
Ground tech in story

Characters, guides, and arcs make immersive formats intuitive and memorable.

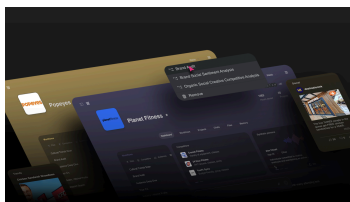
Ideate this trend with your brand on Waldo



Be



Strategic



Be () *Strategic*



Embedding foresight as a brand behavior

If the previous chapters describe how brands might act in the coming year—reflective, restorative, regenerative—this final theme describes the meta-behavior required to make any of it possible. To be strategic in 2026 means building the capacity to recognize weak signals, connect them into patterns, and translate them into timely, credible actions.

This report itself is a demonstration of that process. It was built using Waldo, a strategy system designed to help agencies and brands work with the future in real time. Waldo automates the collection of signals, structures them into themes, and supports analysis that is both broad and deep. The same system can underpin ongoing foresight work inside organizations, ensuring that planning does not happen in isolation but in continuous dialogue with the world outside.

To be strategic is therefore not a recommendation but a requirement, to treat foresight as infrastructure, not an annual exercise. Brands that adopt this meta-behavior will be better equipped to navigate volatility, sustain relevance, and design futures that feel both imaginative and credible.



IN 2026...

Treat strategy as a living discipline—powered by continuous signals, collaborative intelligence, and tools that move from reactive research to proactive insight.





Be Strategic With Waldo: **Implications for brands & agencies**

For teams embedding proactive insights into every client touchpoint, strategy compounds into trust, differentiation, and growth. The opportunity is to treat strategy not as a step in the process but as a system, one that listens, learns, and helps teams act with clarity in a fast-moving world.

Treat strategy as infrastructure

Continuous monitoring ensures teams are ready for both planned reviews and unexpected opportunities.

Elevate insights into action

One-click ideas turn signals into campaigns, positioning, or creative prompts that can be acted on immediately.

Build shared intelligence

Collaborative dashboards and integrated notifications let agencies and clients align in real time.

Reframe value as foresight

Differentiated data and trend signals allow teams to move beyond generic AI outputs into unique, ownable perspectives.

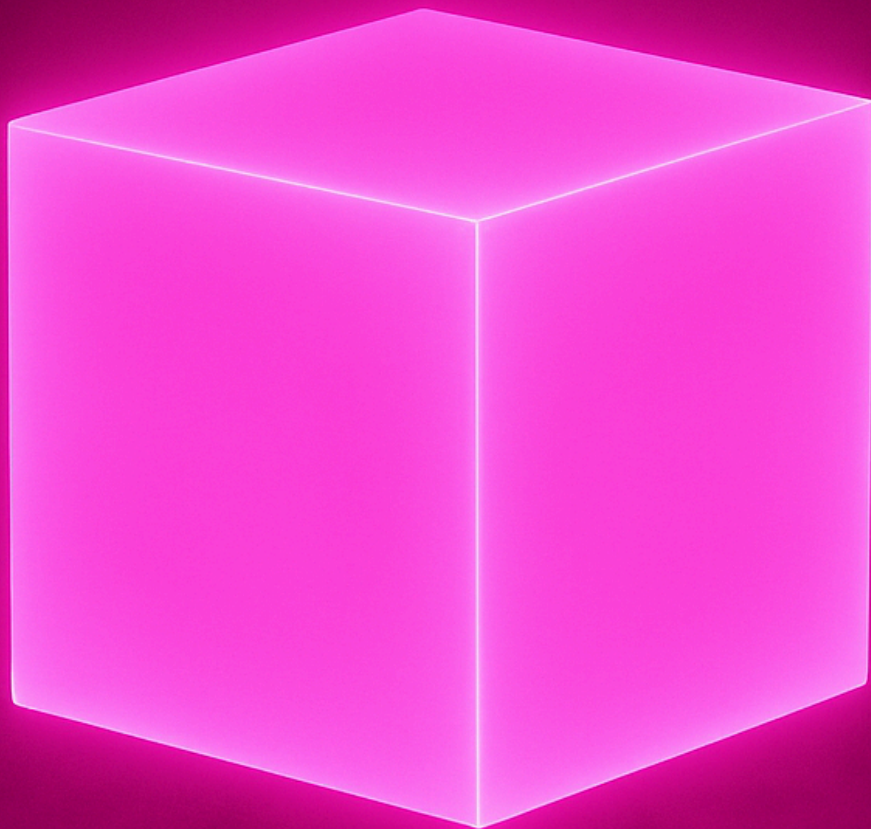
www.waldo.fyi



Want to see Waldo in action?

Let's chat: waldo.fyi/contact





Methodology



This report was built with the following steps:

- Pattern recognition across the last 120 days of innovation case studies in the PSFK-designed Waldo trends research platform
- Cultural Trends workflow on Waldo
- Datapoint Search workflow on Waldo
- Topic Social Sentiment Analysis workflow on Waldo
- Marketing Case Studies workflow on Waldo

About Waldo

Waldo is an AI-powered strategy engine built for agencies and brands. It continuously monitors cultural signals, competitor moves, and audience conversations to deliver proactive insights where teams already work. From pitch preparation to client growth, Waldo helps strategists move faster, uncover unique opportunities, and turn intelligence into action.

www.waldo.fyi

About PSFK

PSFK is a foresight and advisory firm that helps brands stay ahead of change. With deep expertise in cultural trends, market shifts, and emerging behaviors, PSFK builds trend intelligence systems that surface signals others miss. In collaboration with Waldo, PSFK contributed differentiated data and predictive frameworks used throughout this report, helping transform weak signals into actionable insights that power foresight workflows and strategy.

www.psfk.com

