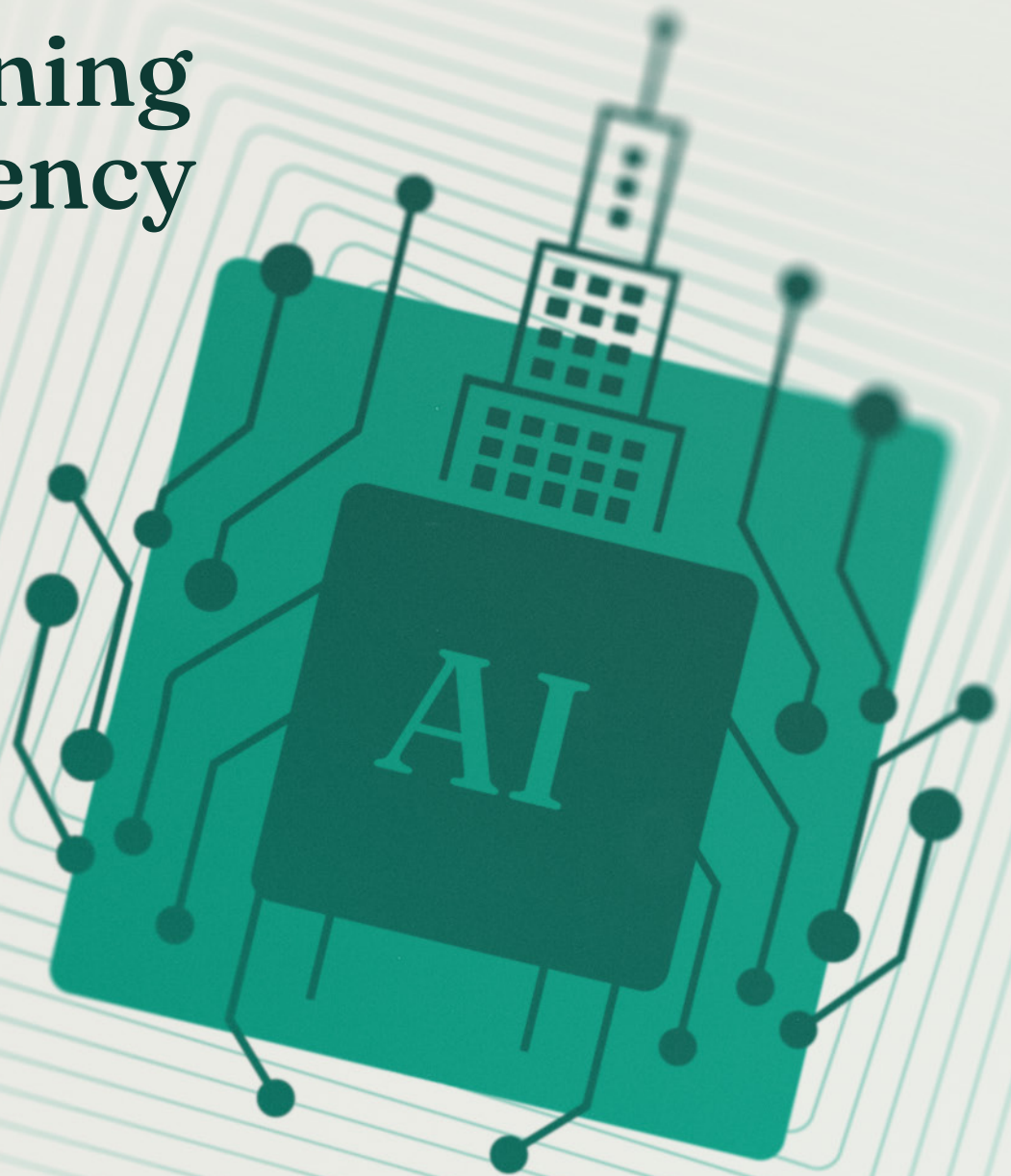


2026

Redefining the Agency



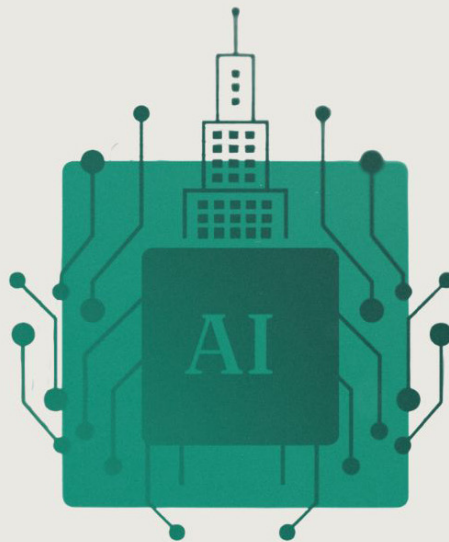
The agency model is at a tipping point, and traditional ways of working can't keep up in a world reshaped by AI. This series is our blueprint for what comes next, where the soul of human creativity meets the science of data and technology to build greater trust and clarity. We're testing these ideas where the stakes are highest, in health and life sciences, and sharing frameworks that redefine what an agency must be in this new era.

MERGE
BUILT DIFFERENT



Building the Agency™: A Blueprint for Human-AI Collaboration

We're testing ideas where the stakes are highest, in health and life sciences, and redefining what an agency must be in this new era.



As with every wave of technology disruption, there is an adoption pendulum that swings until we reach a balance of innovation and function—a paradigm shift. With AI, the pendulum is swinging at a speed we've never experienced before. So, as with any wild ride, the trick is to focus on the points of stability and not get disoriented by the motion.

While everyone's talking about AI, few have truly figured out what to do with it. To help our clients calm this chaos, we need to be more than another agency using AI in an attempt to outpace the speed of change; we need to literally evolve. At MERGE, being Built Different has always meant leaning into change. Now, we are expanding our uniquely holistic approach to become an Agency: a living blueprint for the future of marketing and technology where AI is built into our foundation.

Empowering healthier, happier lives with AI

We believe one of the most important places to start is where AI's potential is the greatest: empowering healthier and happier lives. With AI, we now have remarkable power to break down dense, jargon-heavy barriers that often exist in health.

We can translate complex medical information into accessible content that truly resonates. We can also synthesize a spectrum of lifestyle and wellness experiences with more formal, regulated clinical and medical practices, creating a more connected approach across health and life sciences. Imagine a proactive, all-encompassing health experience that feels more human, even as it becomes more digital.



That's the kind of trust and engagement we're already building for people— [consumers](#), [patients](#), members, customers, guests—and the brands who serve them. AI accelerates this work, helping us break barriers to deliver context-aware messages that genuinely respect individuals as whole people—and do it at scale.

In this new era, sustainable impact won't belong to agencies who sell the most AI, play with the most AI tools and features, or drive initiatives obsolete before they are rolled out. It belongs to those who drink their own champagne, acting as their own proof points to normalize AI into value, and guiding brands to bridge new emerging mental models.

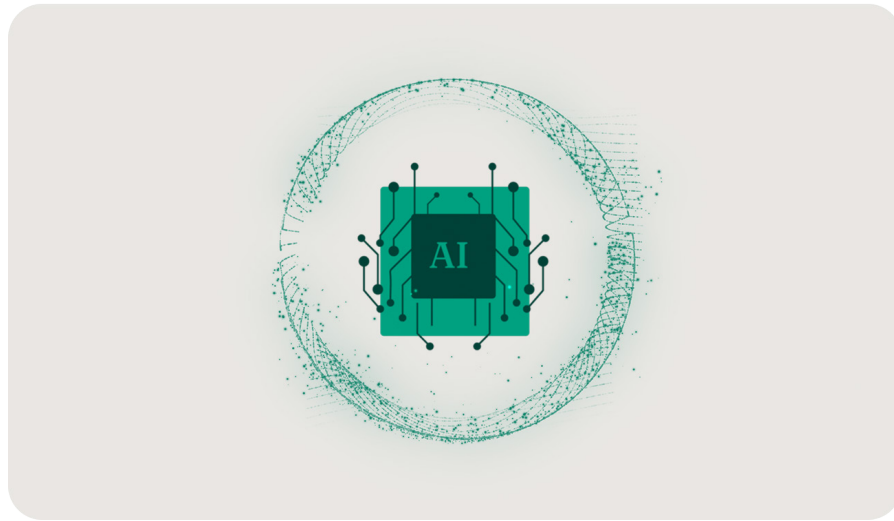
From agency to Algency

The agency world, AI aside, has long been ready for disruption. AI is just the newest force pushing agencies forward, but we're always in motion. We're constantly shifting and adapting to evolving client needs, a growing number of channels, and fragmented, distracted audiences.

And this is just the beginning. The AI we're using right now is the least mature it's ever going to be. It's only going to get better, faster, smarter, and more embedded in how we think and work. The speed and attention of AI adoption will keep compounding, reshaping our team structures and truly influencing cultural change.

At MERGE, AI isn't an add-on. It's our co-architect, a new interface for discovery and curiosity. Becoming an Agency means reimagining the construct of how we work. In this post, we're talking about AI at the workplace layer – how it rewires the way ideas are born, teams connect, and creativity scales across the entire organization.

Incorporating AI as a valuable team member means mastering human-agent collaboration. We're upskilling our teams to work seamlessly, side-by-side with integrated, intelligent systems. We're reinventing processes to make space for the uniquely human elements of work. AI elevates creativity and frees our people to focus on higher-level thinking, emotional nuance, and real empathy.

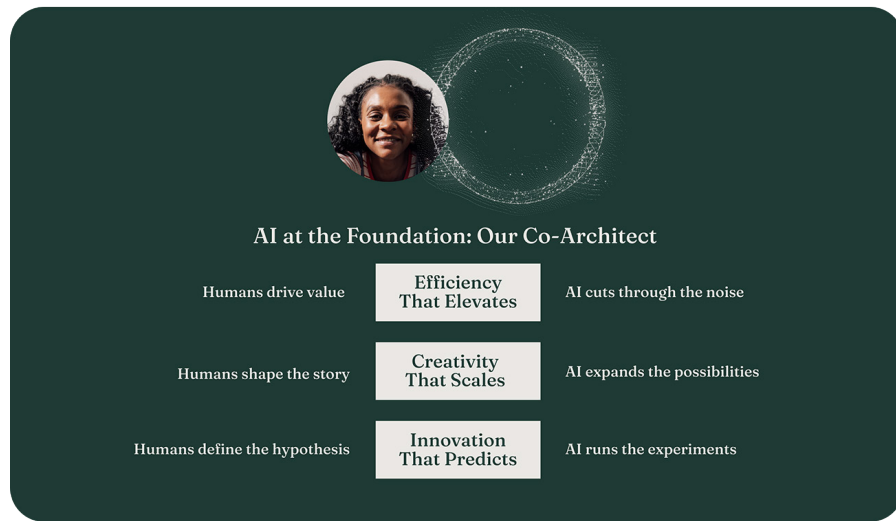


Mapping out the Agency blueprint

By using AI internally first, marketing agencies establish themselves as strategic partners, not just faster vendors. This approach builds real-world fluency, the confidence to question and refine prompts and responses, and cultural alignment across the business.

At MERGE, we're experimenting with prompts, tools, and models. We're training team members across disciplines including our creative, technology, business operations, marketing, and sales teams. We're stress-testing collaboration with AI to see where it breaks and, most importantly, where it soars. We're exploring new mental models that aren't about the tools themselves, but about reimagining how we think and work across every role and experience.

So, what does this look like in practice? Most critically, we're taking a system-led approach, where the goal is to raise the value of every part of the system: the humans, the technology, the processes, the context. We're building our Agency on three crucial pillars:



Pillar 1: Efficiency that Elevates

Humans drive value. AI cuts through the noise.

In a rapidly changing world, identifying low-risk and high-reward opportunities begins with optimization. Efficiencies often have immediate impact and minimal disruption, and they safely pave the way for more transformative, innovation-led work. This allows us to focus on pioneering solutions, game-changing go-to-market strategies, and evolving into the AI-forward agency of the future.

From smart quality assurance to campaign automation, our AI tools are operationalized to boost performance and scalability across all functions. We use AI to automate repetitive tasks like data analysis, report generation, content tagging, and media optimization. We move from information overload to actionable insight much faster. Our people spend less time collecting and aggregating data and more time interpreting what matters to deliver better client outcomes. Instead of 20 days, it takes demand teams only two to create campaigns that generate leads and awareness. With 10x the speed, the team knows what works and what doesn't more quickly and adjusts accordingly. They're seeing results 18 days sooner.

When things run smoothly, real breakthroughs happen.

Pillar 2: Creativity that Scales

Humans shape the story. AI expands the possibilities.

How much creativity is wasted, bottlenecked by research, alignment, and iteration? Or, often constrained by the physical capacity of our minds, energy, and even prior tech limitations? Imagine if we could free up the bandwidth of our brilliant creative minds by outsourcing mundane, repetitive tasks.

AI rapidly explores hundreds of content formats, voice tones, and visual styles to fine-tune what truly resonates. We're increasing the complexity of our expectations, using multi-step prompts and broader signal sets.

At MERGE, we use AI as a creative partner, building interactive storyboards to bring clients up-to-speed on the work being done. AI transforms days of effort into mere hours of clarity, enabling the team to gain alignment quickly on a project's creative direction. We deploy AI thoughtfully and strategically, embedding it directly into workflows to drive tangible results.

When creativity is unburdened, inspiration becomes exponential.

Pillar 3: Innovation that Predicts

Humans define the hypothesis. AI runs the experiments.

When AI delivers faster answers, humans iterate on strategy, nuance, and empathy. We also use AI to ask better questions because that's where meaning starts. We collapse the space between idea, testing, and learning to near-real-time.

We use AI to spot emerging market opportunities, try new channels, optimize campaigns in real time, and personalize with precision at scale. We sense shifts in consumer behavior and test ideas before the market catches on.

We are learning to think in terms of synthesized, complex outputs ("Analyze the top 5 options for the best next step for X audience and Y goal, formatted using our brand guidelines"), rather than in fractured progressive disclosure prompts (20x tasks across multiple-point tools).

The best experiences are predictive, not reactive. AI replaces lagging metrics with live learning loops—within systems of intelligence. The result is smarter marketing that moves as fast as the culture and the consumers it speaks to.

When the future becomes predictable, curiosity becomes currency.

If we see AI as only a faster human, bound by things we already understand, we'll miss the opportunity to **amplify our uniquely human value** through *new ways of working and thinking.*

Human-Assisted AI: Flip the Script

The future is a hybrid relationship between humans and AI—a novel notion even a few years ago, but commonly accepted now. If we see AI as only a faster human, bound by things we already understand, we'll miss the opportunity to amplify our uniquely human value through new ways of working and thinking.

The Agency blueprint goes beyond an operational model. We shouldn't confine ourselves to thinking only about technology augmenting humans. Instead, we should think about how humans assist AI, shaping it with virtue, ethics, context, and creativity—leaning into our unique contributions as humans.

This applied AI approach is what allows us to pursue the new frontier of personalization: reaching an audience of one, at the scale of the infinite.

All-in on AI for health and wellness

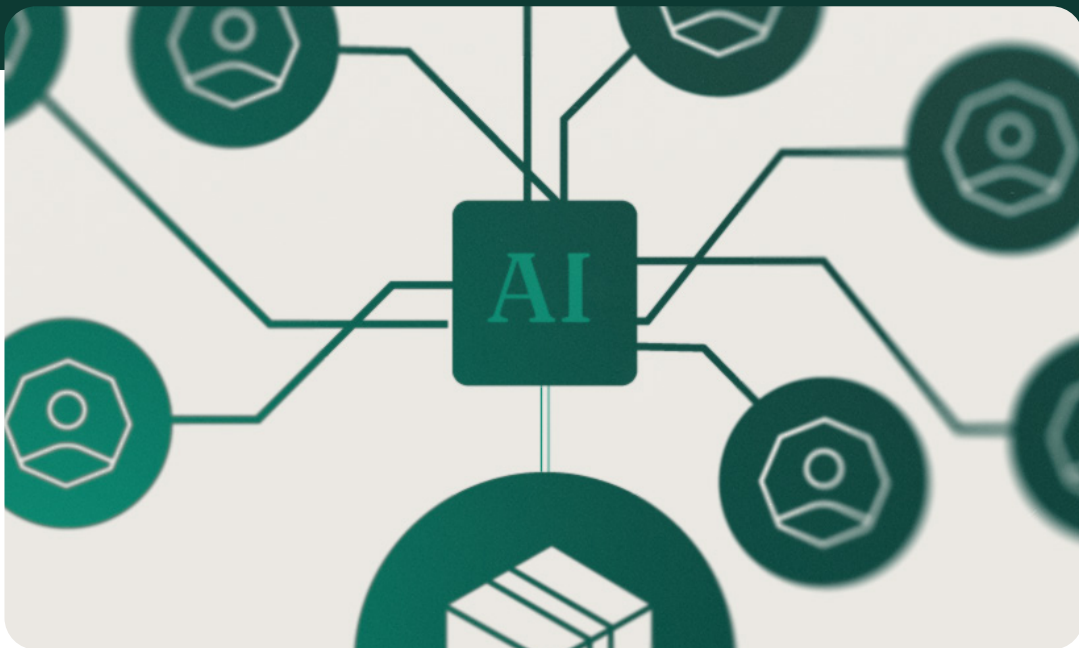
Marketing teams within regulated industries, like health and life sciences, are already facing the most unexplored questions about AI: What does compliance look like in a generative AI world? How do we preserve human trust while scaling insights and personalization? How can we empower consumers and patients who are using their own AI tools?

MERGE is tackling these questions now so that we can guide our clients on this journey. We know how fast and often AI is evolving, and we're committed to exploring the result from the inside out. We're all-in on AI, reshaping what it means to build trust, tell stories through technology, and help build a healthier, happier landscape of proactive wellness.

MERGE

Infinite Individualism: Your Next Customer is an Audience of One

Infinite individualism is the future of marketing. It's about moving beyond "good enough" personalization and broad demographic segments to create AI-powered, one-to-one experiences that reflect the complex, whole human and build meaningful trust.



Let's take a look at a typical marketing moment in context. A healthcare provider system launches a new digital campaign for its state-of-the-art wellness center, complete with a physical fitness facility. It cost quite a bit to build so the marketing team knows its efforts must attract members.

You and your neighbor each receive a personalized email from the provider about new cardio classes being offered. While the subject lines are different and your first names are included, both emails have the same stock photo of people on treadmills and elliptical machines. You both comment on how you were eager to look and then hit delete before finishing the email.

On the surface, it seems like the same content should appeal to each of you: you're roughly in the same demographic, live in the same neighborhood, and both self-report being into fitness. You also each have a history of engaging with the provider's online health resources.

But, the reality is you're in your 40s with a history of joint issues looking for physical therapy and specialized training. Your neighbor is mid-50s, an early retiree, wanting social activities and yoga classes. The provider delivers a one-size-fits-all solution, equating fitness with exercise machines no matter who the recipient actually is or what they care about.

Broad brushstrokes put you into the same audience; however, your nuances and differences define what resonates as meaning for you.

Just like the message, we have to also think about the nuance of channels. While in the past, a provider may have mailed a physical postcard to your home address, even this modern digital example is still fundamentally flawed. What we used to consider magic—our name in the greeting—we now recognize as inauthentic noise. The “good enough” personalization we're used to is no longer good enough.



From Broad Brushstrokes to One-to-One

Yesterday's demographic boxes and predefined audience segmentations are now lazy, built around averages and assumptions that cannot accurately reflect any single human. They don't capture the beautiful, messy reality of human life, or our distinct preferences and motivations.

Traditional segmentation boxes people into a predetermined journey. But, [hyper-personalization](#) hands them the map, empowering them with information that reflects their unique identity. Persona-based marketing assumes consumers all follow the same path in a linear fashion—that we make decisions in siloed, episodic ways.

Today's personalization must go beyond "good enough." A name in the subject line or a recycled stock photo isn't a relationship. True personalization is a conversation—seeing the whole human, understanding their unique context, and building trust one interaction at a time. That's the shift we need to go from one-to-many to one-to-one at scale



Empowering Consumers Through Infinite Individualism

In the age of AI and limitless data, personalization must evolve from static personas to adaptive, one-to-one experiences. This means marketing to one person with one specific message tailored to their preference.

We call this infinite individualism, and it's only possible when you operate like an Agency with AI built into your foundation. The beauty of infinite individualism is capitalizing on our data-rich world to truly understand a person's entire journey; and enabling brands to create as much content as they desire.

It's not simply that your neighbor wants yoga classes and you want physical therapy. Those two facts about each of you represent only a part of who you are. The core of infinite individualism is recognizing and honoring that we are whole and complex. We'll dive deeper into this concept of "whole human marketing" later in this series.

People are not infinitely fractured and only defined by the one attribute that may make a brand, product, or service appealing. For example, I'm Stephanie, and I care about yoga mats. I also make buying decisions as the CEO of a company, search for chronic disease information as a caregiver, and shop for groceries as a mom. I'm not four, five, or more different Stephanies. I am one, whole, complex person who plays many roles throughout my day.

If you're the company trying to sell me a yoga mat, you can't ignore the other facets of my life. Understanding what makes me wholly me, helps you deliver the right message in the right channel and the right context. Doing this infinitely for every individual is the real magic.

Here's how we make it happen:

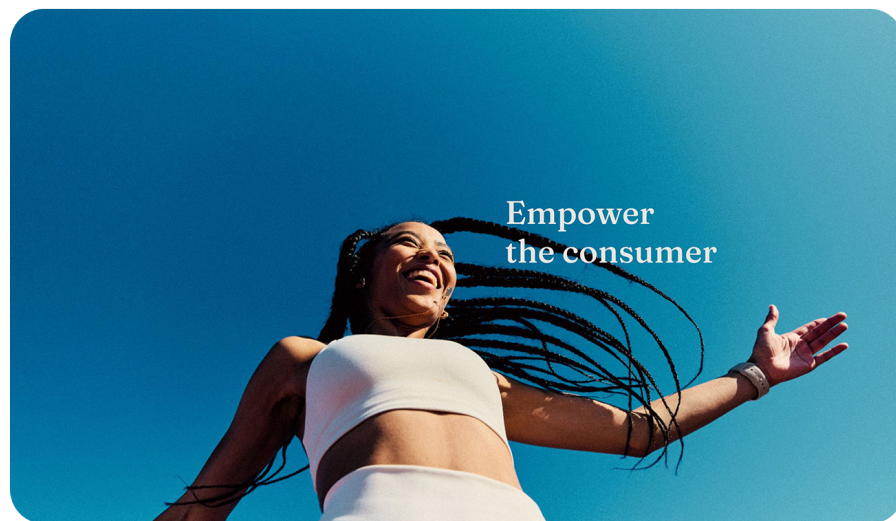
1. Data, Data, Data: The Foundation of Infinite Individualism

To make the shift to hyper-personalization, we need to make sense of and connect all the data we have available. We must plan our data structures effectively to ensure interoperability and that personalization travels with the individual.

Healthcare alone generates a staggering amount of data – more than [2.3 zettabytes](#) a year, over a tenth of global data creation. With the rise of wearables, connected devices, and AI, that number is only growing.

Imagine combining clinical records with attitudinal signals (how someone perceives their own health) and behavioral cues (how they actually engage). This blend gives us a more precise and complete view of a single person at a given moment. And, it reveals why they do what they do.

When we get to this level of granularity, results change. We're not talking just open or click rates. Brands earn retention, loyalty, and trust. In health, the payoff is greater: empowering people with better information, which ultimately drives better health outcomes.



2. AI: The Engine of Infinite Individualism

AI is the lens that helps marketing teams see consumers as whole people, adapting with them in real time. Through feedback loops, AI learns from each interaction and can predict consumer preferences and behaviors. More importantly, it also responds to how that consumer wants to feel, be treated, and be seen.

By rapidly processing, analyzing, and comparing large volumes of data, AI enables brands to deliver dynamic content from product recommendations to tailored offers; from customer service interactions to loyalty programs.

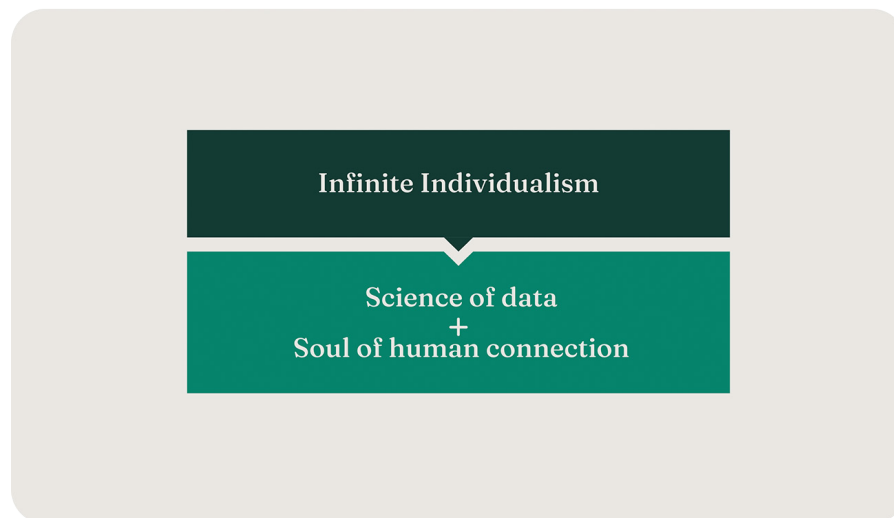
AI enables a company to scale one-to-one experiences for millions of consumers, supporting infinite individualism anywhere a person engages with a brand. But scale without purpose can backfire. That's why infinite individualism also demands a new kind of discipline.

3. Purpose: The Discipline of Infinite Individualism

While personalization is one of the most powerful tactics marketing can use, without a purpose, it's just noise. With a purpose, it becomes trust at scale.

At the highest level, our job is to truly empower consumers and honor them as whole beings. This requires a paradigm shift, breaking free from the tired B2B or B2C mindsets and expanding to an infinite growth mindset.

To be sure, deep personalization like this requires strict data privacy, transparency, and cybersecurity. Security must be just as foundational as the AI, built into the technology platforms from the start and intuitive enough to prevent workarounds.



The Way Forward

Now, let's revisit the opening and imagine that same healthcare provider through the lens of infinite individualism. Instead of a generic treadmill photo, you receive a message about strength classes tailored to protect your joints, plus an invitation to connect with a physical therapist who understands your recovery goals. Your neighbor gets a morning yoga series and a calendar of social wellness events that reflect what matters most to them.

This isn't just two versions of the same ad. No, it's two unique experiences, each reflecting the whole human on the other end. That is the promise of infinite individualism: moving from surface-level personalization to meaningful connection, from "good enough" to truly human-centered.

Infinite individualism is where the science of data meets the soul of human connection. The brands that embrace this shift will win loyalty and redefine what it means to connect in an AI-driven world. And frankly, I'm impatient to make it happen.

Forget Omnichannel: Context is the New Strategy

The future of marketing demands a shift to a contextual spectrum™, using AI to deliver dynamic, personalized content that meets the whole human at the exact moment they are ready to engage.



Every innovation becomes the next breakthrough's stepping stone. In technology, mastering one invention simply opens the door to new possibilities. When it comes to marketing, omnichannel once represented the new frontier of integrated consumer experiences. Just as creating strategies by and for each channel was at one point our go-to model.

Marketing teams used to build content for personas by channel—newspapers, TV, in-store signage, email, and so on. The purpose was to ensure their pre-defined groups of consumers received a brand message no matter what channel they used.

When we recognized that people use and cross multiple channels, we adopted omnichannel as our primary mental model. With this approach, we put the person at the center instead of the channel and focused on ensuring a consistent brand message and unified experience no matter where the consumer engaged.

And, here we are on another stepping stone in front of an open door. To truly put the whole human being at the center, we need to reorient our strategy from channels to context. Our goal becomes delivering brand value at the exact moment a consumer is ready to receive it—instead of being everywhere all at once.



From Personas & Channels to People & Context

Personas and channels are limiting, and they do not sufficiently empower consumers to make more informed decisions. The problem with our neat little persona boxes and meticulously defined purchase journeys is that real humans refuse to live in or follow them. They have messy, complicated, wonderful lives, changing roles throughout the day and moving through moments with different needs. Channels are no longer static.

It's time for brands to embrace the fluidity of the human experience and introduce dynamic, composable, constantly evolving content flows based on a person's need at a given moment. At MERGE, we call this future a contextual spectrum. We are reorienting from channels to context; from brand-owned journeys to organic brand moments; from personas to whole humans. Channels are no longer static and defined; instead, we have content flows that are dynamic, composable, and constantly evolving from device to device and experience to experience. This shift to a contextual spectrum enables organic brand moments, helps us achieve infinite individualism, and is the core philosophy that drives our Agency.

Today, we have the technology—AI, in particular—to make these contextual experiences come to life. We have data and signals to know what a person feels, how they're accessing content, what the weather is around them, and how they've interacted with our brand before.

A consumer's journey with your brand will no longer be a linear pathway designed by you for a curated persona. Instead, we have many complex and informed moments that are hyper-personalized, holistic, and powered by infinitely individualized data points.

Think of the consumer experience like the Marvel multiverse. There's one end goal, a single timeline, and infinite variations in how to get there. So how do brands navigate infinite possibilities without losing the plot?

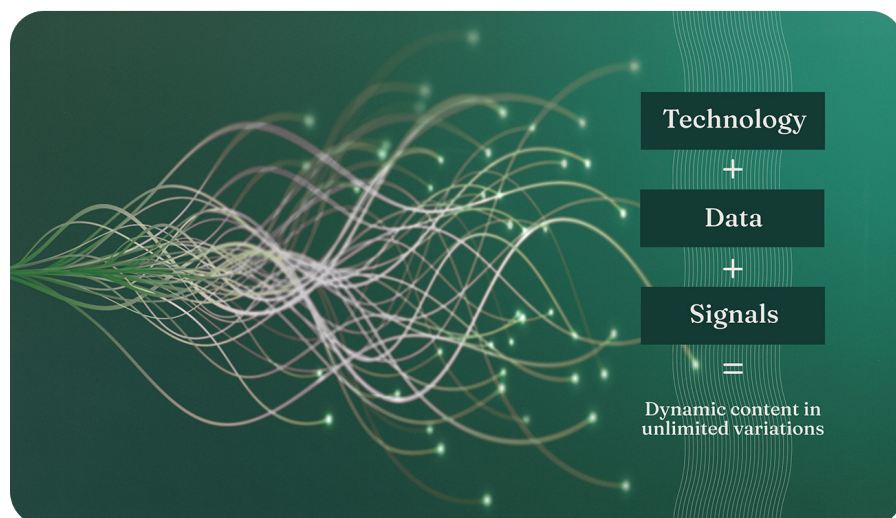
Three shifts stand out:

1. Storytelling through technology: Marketing becomes dynamic storytelling. We're telling the same brand story—backed by our deep understanding of the person, the jobs to be done, and our value propositions—and we're telling it in many different ways. Creative and data now move together. The old “left brain vs. right brain” divide no longer applies. Modular content systems let machines remix and reassemble messages in real time, adapting as consumers move between moments.

2. AI as enabler, not answer: To build people-first experiences that value what makes each of us human, we need AI. Let's be clear: AI isn't replacing creativity. No, it's elevating it, becoming the ultimate enabler to scale human empathy. In this post, we're talking about AI at the moment layer—how it listens, interprets signals, and adapts brand interactions to fit the situation in real time. That's how it can model and test countless variations of a journey concurrently, something no human team could do.

3. Have a conversation, not a monologue: Traditional channels push messages one way. With AI, interaction becomes a bidirectional conversation where brands listen, respond, and guide consumers in the moment. This back-and-forth builds contextual intelligence and thoughtfully informs a person's journey.

Brands do still design flows within specific touchpoints, but, in a true ecosystem there's no single, fixed journey. Instead, AI gives consumers the power of choice – and gives brands the ability to respond with relevance in every moment along a contextual spectrum. No matter how a consumer enters the conversation, brands respond and empower them with the information they need. The result: experiences that feel personal without flattening individuality.



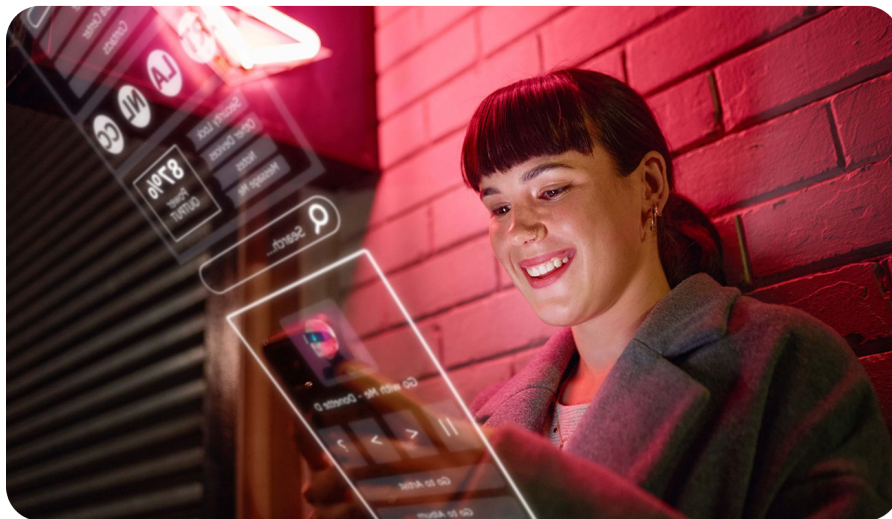
In this new, technology-first era, we must also reframe how we measure success. These shifts are only useful if they build trust between consumers and brands.

Trust: The Real KPI

We need metrics that reflect whether consumers feel understood in their moment. It's measuring if and how we met consumers along their path, no matter how winding. Here are specific key performance indicators to gauge your brand's trust level along the contextual spectrum:

- **Contextual responsiveness:** Are we listening? How quickly and accurately do we adjust to consumer signals, pivoting when their context changes?
- **Choice engagement:** Are we empowering, not pushing? How often are consumers choosing the paths that we offer, or are we just shouting into the void?
- **Trust proxies:** Are they coming back for more? This is the real loyalty metric—repeat trust, not just repeat purchases. Are they telling a friend? Are they sticking with their care plan?

I know when a brand I'm looking at online or on social media serves me with a personalized piece of content tailored to my role, emotion, and urgency, they earn my trust. They show they know me on a wholly different level than ever before. I'm not a data point, but a real human with unique qualities and needs.



How to Lead in the Contextual Era

In today's digital landscape, the concept of omnichannel is no longer sufficient. It's not about being on every channel hoping consumers follow a clearly laid out journey. Instead, it's about putting the person at the center of all we do—it's about context and meeting that consumer where they are in a hyper-personalized way.

In the near future, context will extend beyond device and location. Wearables will infer stress levels, cars will detect fatigue, and smart homes will anticipate needs. Marketing in this era will be about joining conversations consumers are already having with their environments.

The contextual spectrum is already expanding what brands can do. Is your brand expanding with it?

For marketing leaders, the takeaway is clear: stop investing in rigid journey maps and static personas as your north star. Instead, build modular creative systems that can flex with context, pair your creatives with data scientists, and measure success by how well you meet consumers in their moment—not how neatly they followed your funnel.

The leaders who embrace this shift will earn trust, loyalty, and outcomes that matter.

The Paradox of Technology and Whole Human Marketing

What if the key to more empathetic marketing isn't less technology, but more? Discover the powerful paradox of using AI to finally see the "whole human," building genuine trust by connecting with people in the moments that truly matter.

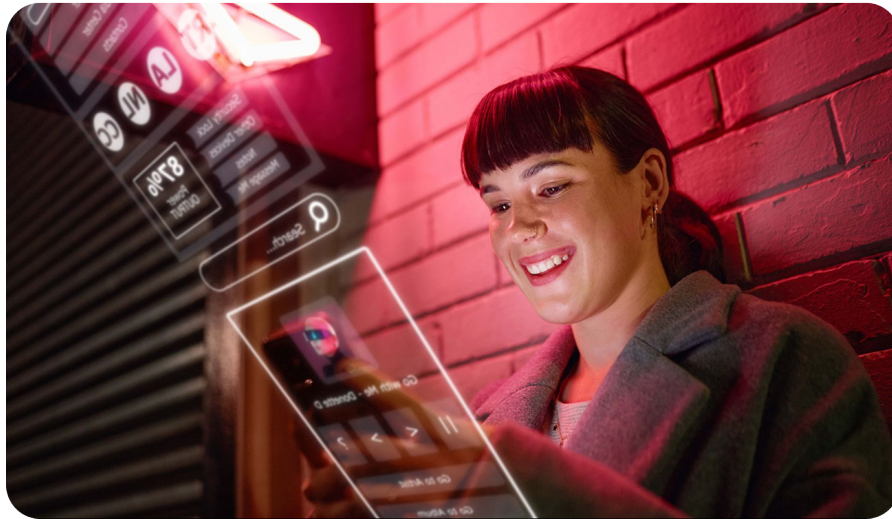


I love a good paradox; they create both tensions to validate and opportunities for unconventional thinking. One that's been rolling around in my mental rock tumbler lately: as marketing has become more digital, has it actually become more human? It's beautifully counterintuitive. The more we lean on technology, the more we deliver truly personal, highly relevant experiences.

The first three posts in this series dig into how we must evolve our ways of working, adopt new mental models, and broaden how we reach our target audiences. We now have the technology to deliver very specific messages, visuals, and even entire experiences to a single person based on where they are, how they feel, and what they're doing in a particular moment—all informed by their prior actions and augmented by a range of non-personal data like weather or traffic. That same technology enables us to replicate this hyper-personalization at scale, across thousands and millions of consumers.

If seeing this technology in action or chasing efficiency were the end goals, we'd already be living the marketing dream. Yet, that isn't why we do this work, and it's definitely not the desired outcome in health and wellness.

At MERGE, we're flipping the traditional agency model on its head to finally make "whole human marketing" a reality. As we evolve into an Agency, this paradox comes to life: efficiency, creativity, and innovation powered by AI are only meaningful when they elevate the whole human experience.



Beyond Personalization: Seeing the Person

People lead multi-dimensional, complex, messy, and wonderful lives. Every role that a consumer holds deserves respect and resonance. By making this shift to delivering personalized experiences on a contextual spectrum, we're signaling to the consumer that we care about them as a whole human.

While traditional marketing puts people in boxes—a patient, a shopper, a member, or a guest—our new marketing reality is adapting to people's dynamic, fluid lives. This is where infinite individualism becomes real. We're not flattening people into a single role but honoring them as an audience of one, especially as they move across roles and contexts throughout their day.

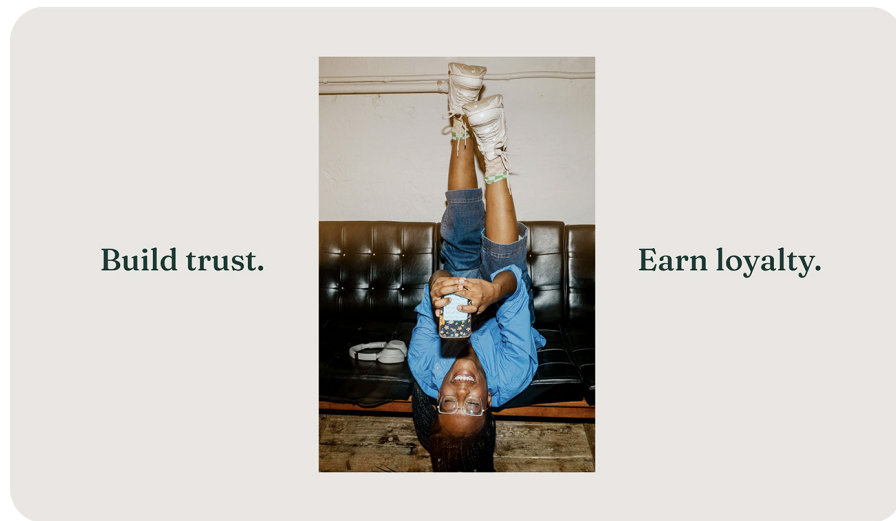
A parent may be a CEO, a caregiver, a gamer, and a citizen—all within the same day. We don't hit invisible walls as we move between these roles. We just live our lives, checking work emails before grabbing a phone call from the babysitter on the way to pick up a grocery order.

It's important to note, though, that different roles don't mean different people. Marketing must honor the whole person—hence, whole human marketing—and do so through empathy, nuance, and dynamic storytelling. When done effectively, a brand can demonstrate deep knowledge about a person and adapt in real time based on signals.

AI With a Human Touch

Just as they flow seamlessly through their roles and responsibilities, consumers also expect their interactions with brands to be frictionless. At MERGE, we call this a contextual spectrum: meeting people in their exact moment, capturing their mood, role, and environment, and responding in ways that feel natural and relevant.

It's easy to imagine this happening in a human-to-human interaction where a receptionist at an urgent care clinic expedites a patient's appointment after noticing their exhaustion and overhearing that their family member recently passed away. With AI and technology, it's critical to not overstep where your brand has a right to show up for someone in the context of a moment. AI recognizes signals, but it's humans who use empathy to interpret them in ways that build trust.



Build trust.

Earn loyalty.

Our digital world requires a nuanced understanding of how to allow whole human data to inform messages and services without showing up in unexpected or unwelcome ways—for example, recognizing when a patient arrives via city bus and adding that to their record so they receive information about public transportation in their post-visit summary.

In competitive markets, especially health and wellness, trust is the differentiator. Any brand can deliver speed or convenience; the brands that win are those that make consumers feel understood in the moments that matter without overstepping.

To make this real, and with her permission, I want to share a story about my friend [Shanna](#), a mom, friend, wife, daughter, athlete, and someone who loves cozy sweatpants as much as I do.

When Patient Is Just One Role

In January of 2018, Shanna flew to Chicago with her husband to undergo a 12-hour brain surgery to remove a benign tumor that sat on her brain stem and pushed against her hearing nerve. After successfully removing 98% of the tumor, the surgeons required Shanna to stay in Chicago—eight hours from home—for a week of observation. Then, when she made it back to Kansas City after a grueling, tiring, and painful car ride, she spent months in rehab.

The first morning she looked in the mirror, she hardly recognized the woman looking back at her—but she did know her. Shanna was adjusting to becoming permanently deaf on her right side. And, while she couldn't smile to show all her teeth, close one of her eyes completely, or chew on both sides of her mouth, she was determined to reach those milestones and more. Her exhausting work would lead her to regain her balance, walk straight, run, and dance again.



The Roles That Never Pause

Even with this intense health journey consuming so much of her life, Shanna was never just a patient. She was a mom, a friend, a wife, a daughter, an athlete—and, relatably, she probably needed some cozy sweats more than ever. Before her big surgery and even bigger outcome, Shanna led a full life, complete with shopping, coffee dates, vacations with her family, cheerleading, and hosting events.

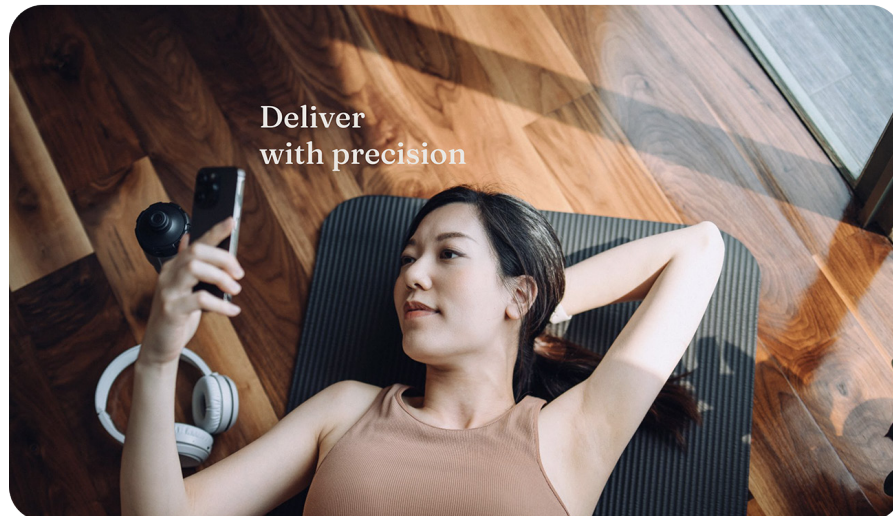
Even when she was going through a seemingly endless barrage of doctors' appointments, tests, scans, brain surgery, and recovery, it wasn't only her health that defined her.

Shanna was a mother, facetimeing her children, asking about their days, and telling them she missed them. She was a colleague, wondering how her team was managing an upcoming event and eager to hear about new case grant recipients. She was a Chiefs fan, cheering on her hometown football team and hoping they'd make another playoff push. She was a friend, worried about not returning phone calls or text messages.

Healthcare largely saw Shanna only through the lens of "patient." What they missed was the full spectrum of her identity. Whole human marketing exists to close that gap, ensuring brands recognize signals beyond the clinical role and honor people in the entirety of their lives.

The future of marketing is understanding all of this about Shanna and finding the places where your brand has a right to show up. Where your brand's understanding of a fuller context builds trust and drives better outcomes. Imagine how different that challenging time could have been if Shanna knew her hospital had dedicated Wi-Fi for family and work calls. Or that experts were available to advise on the best device settings for healing brains and vision, and that counselors could help her children understand their mom's recovery in age-appropriate ways.

Imagine an athletic wear brand that focused only on athletes in its personas and demographics and never marketed to someone in recovery—even though they knew their products were perfect for physical therapy. Shanna would have missed out. But the moment that brand saw Shanna, and others like her, as whole humans—interested in cozy sweats and needing them during PT—they could understand her as someone who would deeply appreciate knowing their products are ideal and would love a promo code at just the right time. Your audience is now a multitude of audiences of one.



The Payoff: Trust and Loyalty

It might seem frivolous, but I promise you it's not. Every single brand has something they believe will benefit a human being. And the ones that earn loyalty are those that responsibly and ethically recognize individuals in their full, multidimensional lives.

For leaders, the takeaway is clear. Whole human marketing is a strategic imperative that requires rethinking how you measure success (trust, not clicks), how you build teams (pairing data science with emotional fluency), and how you apply AI (as a co-architect of empathy).

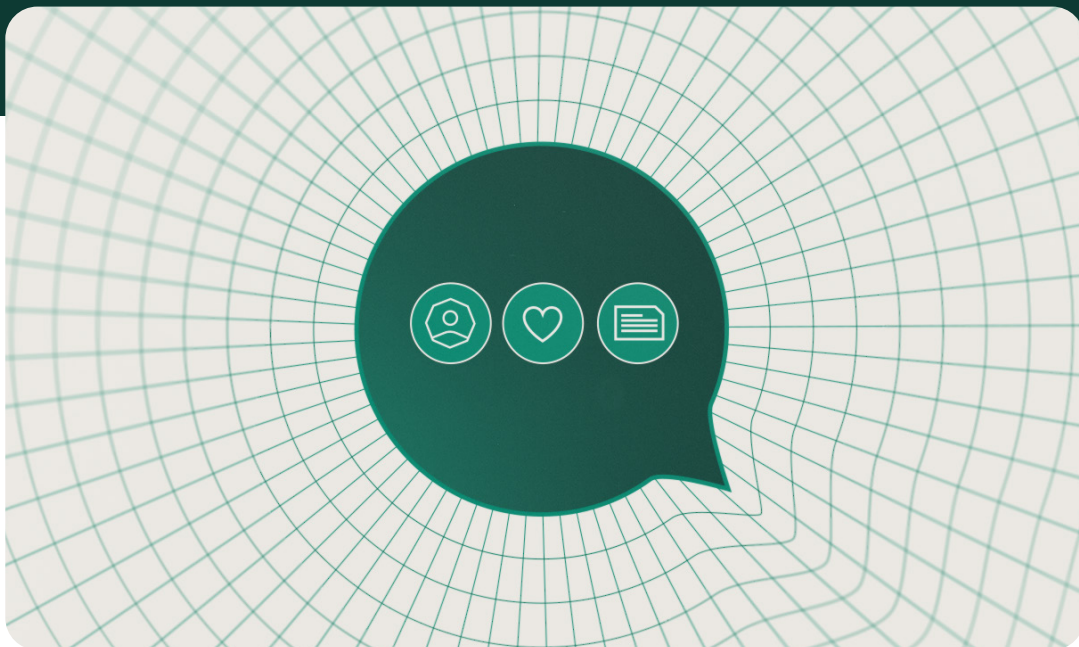
The return isn't only more engagement—it's meaningful relationships that endure. At MERGE, this is how we're moving from talking about AI to proving its value and building trust at scale, one whole human at a time. In the end, the paradox holds, with a caveat. The more we embrace AI and data, without abdicating our responsibility to shape meaningful and appropriate experiences, the more room we create for distinctly human value.

People don't pause their identities when they move from patient to parent or consumer to athlete, and brands can't afford to treat them as if they do. Whole human marketing means building systems that honor relationships and the multidimensional, complex people we serve.



Want Real Partnership? Rewrite the Agency Lexicon

Words have weight. The language we use with our kids, our partner, our teams—even ourselves—carries real power in the connotation beyond each word’s literal definition. The same is true in business, especially in healthcare and marketing, where the words we choose can deepen trust or create distance.



Let’s look at the word non-compliant in healthcare. What does non-compliant mean to you? It probably means willfully refusing to comply. Yet, that understanding paints the wrong picture and hides actual, solvable challenges such as: patients who can’t afford their medications, families who don’t have transportation to appointments, or people who don’t understand the instructions they’ve been given. This language blames rather than understands.

When we look at AI technology and the concept of Infinite Individualism™, there is an opportunity to translate away those connotations. Instead of labeling a patient as non-compliant, we can use technology and data to truly understand the whole human, their entire experience and context, and make a note about “lack of transportation.”

When connotations, though, are baked into the industry model, translation alone isn't enough. At one point in marketing history, manipulation meant skillful influence, and now it implies deceit. I doubt you'll ever see the word manipulation and equate it to skillful influence no matter how many times we translate that. The gap between intention and impact is where trust is built or broken.

**The words we choose can
deepen trust or
create distance.**

A shift to more human language, marketing, and partnerships

We need to apply that same care to the language of our client relationships. For decades, our industry has run on a lexicon—"pitch," "RFP," "winning a bid"—that feels more like a boxing match than a partnership. It's transactional, outdated, and pits us against each other from the start.

If our mission is to create more human marketing, let's also create more human partnerships. That begins with language. We need to reorient the agency lexicon to words that embody true partnership, shared problem-solving, and outcome-driven collaboration.

Why are we still using an adversarial lexicon?

Those same language traps that create distance in healthcare are all over our own industry. The first step in a company's search for a marketing agency is to send out a Request For Proposal (RFP) stating the problem and usually the assumed solution. Agencies respond hoping to be selected to then pitch, and, ultimately, hoping to win the business. Sounds just like how you build a trusted, sustainable, and innovative partnership, right?

Let's deconstruct what each of these terms signal and how they set a tone of competition over collaboration.

RFP: No matter how short or lengthy, traditional RFPs assume the problem and solution are already defined. Often these forms are either recycled from prior RFPs or they take a good deal of time to construct. Perhaps worse, those carefully thought-out criteria are often ignored when making a decision. Any effort put into initially structuring the RFP is not returned when that structure isn't used in the decision stage.

Pitch: Do you enjoy when someone is pitching you something? Feels similar to that word manipulation. A pitch automatically puts the agency and the client on opposite sides of the table. The agency constructs a one-sided presentation framed by the RFP. And, the approach is to “convince the client of our ‘right answer’ to their RFP.”

Win the business: An agency will win or be awarded the business after an RFP and pitch. What comes to mind first for you? When I hear this, I picture high fives and dollar signs—the hallmark of all great relationships! Or, it’s the language of transaction, where we celebrate a contract instead of impact or client success.

The way we speak about our work and relationships must evolve, allowing us to embrace opportunities to discover and explore together.

From adversary to ally: reframing the work

When asked about rival firms, a friend, former colleague, and former healthcare CEO said his only competitors were heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. He stressed the importance of partnership, collaboration, and a growth mindset. That perspective reoriented the energy to shared purpose, which is a model that marketing could learn from. The only competition we have is the one we share with our clients: the problem we’re trying to solve.

When it comes to the agency-client relationship, we want to embrace collaborative exploration and joint discovery. We want to be on the same side of the table with our clients, co-creating to solve for the challenges that we collectively face.

The problems and opportunities we face in our rapidly changing world are too complex to be reduced to a process that amounts to filling out a request with a list of capabilities. Instead, it’s about bringing powerful questions, insights, and knowledge to discussions. These conversations become framing sessions that develop shared understanding and novel solutions.

Pitch ▶ Problem-solving session
RFP ▶ Opportunity framing sessions
Win ▶ Delivering measurable value
Vendor ▶ Partner

Contract signing is not a success event; realizing milestones and outcomes are. Winning the work should be about choosing the problem together, beginning a journey.

We measure success by delivering value for our clients and their customers. In healthcare, we'd call this pay-for-performance instead of fee-for-service.

We've said it before: AI is a paradigm shift. In an era where machines can learn our language, draft headlines, and predict engagement, the human layer of partnership matters more than ever. As AI learns from us, it's critical that we use words that reflect our real meaning.

Shifting our language from combative to cooperative builds deeper trust, enables better solutions, and drives greater long-term success for both agency and client.

Whole Human Marketing starts within

We believe in meeting people where they are in context, understanding them as whole humans with fluid roles, responsibilities, needs, and wants. Language should not flatten nuance, empathy, or emotional intelligence. It should reflect and embolden it.

By rewriting our lexicon, we model the empathy and understanding we promise to deliver externally. Context shapes strategy, and the words we choose represent our first chance to show that we understand the real-world, high-stakes challenges brands are facing.

When we change our words, we change the work. And, that's how we change the world.