Playbook

Red Flags in Marketing
The lowdown from the world's biggest brands.

From the Building Brand Advocacy podcast.

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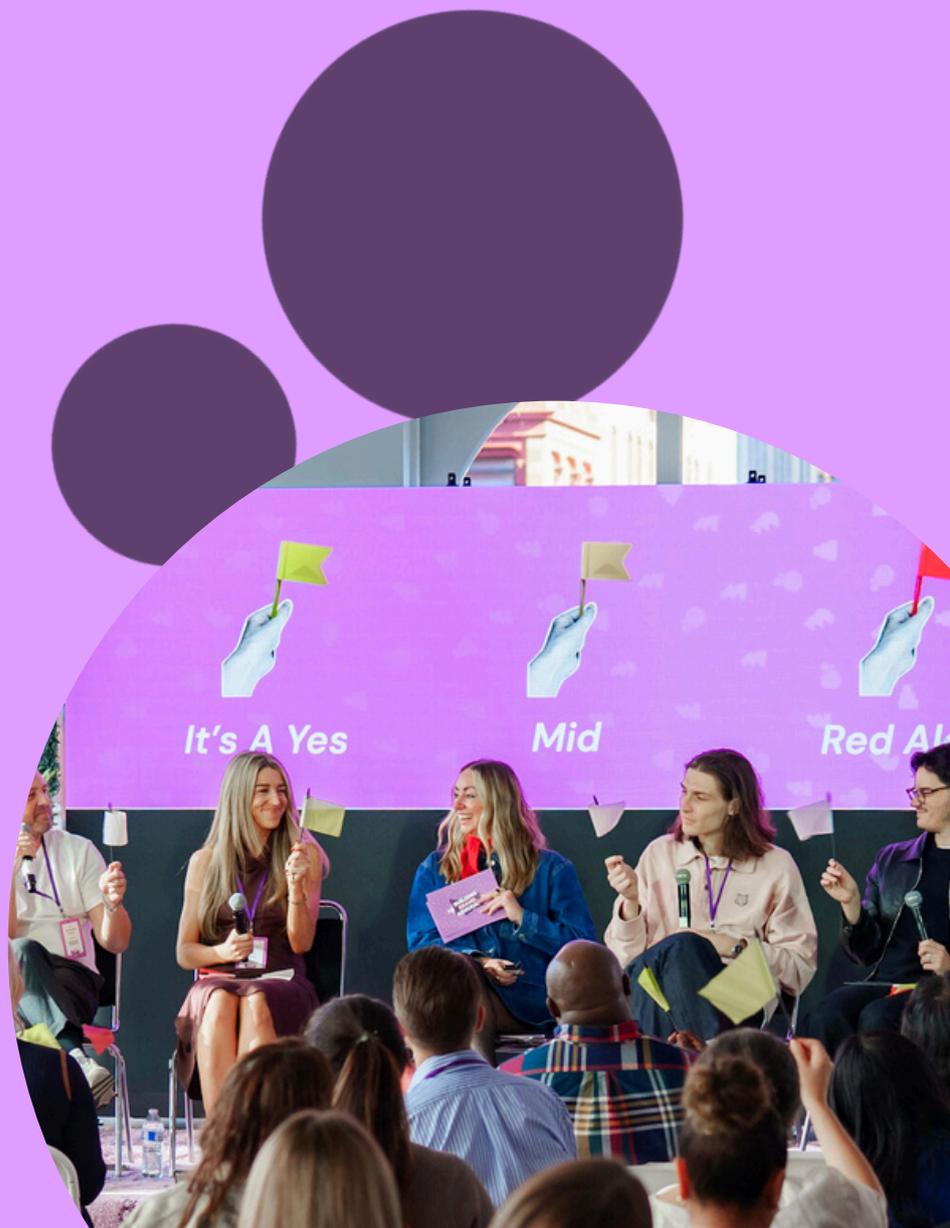
Introduction

Filmed live:
***@ The Brand Advocacy Summit:
New York 2025***

This Building Brand Advocacy Podcast session brought six of the sharpest voices in culture, creators, and social to the stage, and turned predictions into a contact sport.

We heard from:

🎉 **Madisen Theobald**
Global Director of Social Creative @ Mac Cosmetics

🎉 **Gabriel Gomez**
Head of Social Media @ MCoBeauty

🎉 **Maksim Tokarev**
Senior Social Media Manager @ Loop Earplugs

🎉 **McKinley Hart**
Director of Social Media @ SoulCycle

🎉 **James Denman**
Brand Strategist and Marketing Leader

🎉 **Brandon Smithwrick**
B2B Creator & Social Strategist

They joined Verity Hurd (co-host) for a lightning-fast debate on what's next for social, culture, and commerce.

No decks. No buzzwords. Just bold calls and real talk on how the marketing playbook is being rewritten in real time.

Each speaker brought one big prediction for 2026, a "hot take" on where attention, influence, and creativity are heading next.

The result?

A raw, revealing look at how quickly the rules of engagement are shifting — and which ones are about to break.

This Playbook captures the conversation as it happened: the boldest predictions, the sharpest debates, and the signals that matter most for 2026.

Contents

Round #1:
The bold predictions that will define 2026

Prediction #1 –
"Brands will become broadcasters"

> "We're shifting away from posting and leaving it alone, brands now have to stream, broadcast, and put on a real-time production instead of setting and forgetting."
>
> Gabriel Gomez
> Head of Social and Community @ MCoBeauty

The Shift.

The feed is no longer a gallery of assets; it's a live arena.

Gabriel predicts the next evolution of social will belong to brands that behave like media networks: streaming, reacting, and narrating culture as it happens.

"Brands will need to constantly show up "day in and day out" by using broadcast methods and allowing real consumers to lend their voice to the brand's channels"

1. Build a Real-Time Rhythm
Treat social like a live channel, not a content calendar. Set a rhythm your audience can anticipate, morning rituals, mid-day check-ins, evening debriefs.

2. Design for Participation, Not Perfection
Encourage interaction mid-broadcast - live polls, comment prompts, or duets - to turn viewers into co-creators.

3. Turn Engagement Into Programming Data
Track what people watch, skip, or comment on, and treat that feedback like live ratings. Use it to decide tomorrow's content "slot."

5. Replace 'Set and Forget' with 'Show Up and Stay'
The more your brand behaves like a living presence, the more likely it is to stay top of mind, and in conversation.

Prediction #2 –

"Reactive or Irrelevant"

The Shift.

The days of the six-week content plan are over. Maksim's point is simple but uncomfortable: reactivity is now a brand skill. For non-legacy brands, especially those without deep heritage or cultural equity, the only way to stay visible is to stay responsive.

Legacy players like Nike or Apple can afford patience. They've earned cultural inertia.

But challenger brands? They survive on speed. The real work is building systems that allow you to respond intelligently to what's happening right now without losing your brand's voice.

> **"If you're not reacting to culture in real time, you're already behind. Non-legacy brands that ignore pop culture are going to get left in the dust."**
>
> Maksim Tokarev
> Senior Social Media Manager @ Loop Earplugs

The Playbook:

The Loop team tracks trending sounds, formats, and cultural conversations every morning. They treat social listening as creative R&D, not customer service.

This approach turns Loop into a participant in the culture it serves — music, nightlife, fashion. "If it's trending in our world, it should be visible in our feed, today."

Tactically, that looks like:

- Rapid creative sprints. Empowering teams to ideate, shoot, and post within hours, not days.

- Cultural filters. Every reactive moment is tested against one question: "Would our audience expect us to join this?" If not, skip it.

- Layered approval systems. Creative guardrails allow content to go live fast without needing full exec sign-off.

Prediction #3 –
"Organic Social Isn't Dying-
It's evolving..."

The Shift.

Organic reach didn't disappear; it relocated. People no longer enter social through one front door, they slip through Reels, Stories, DMs, Threads, and Close Friends lists.

Madisen's take dismantles the myth that organic is "over."
"The key shift is that "consumers are now entering your app, not just staying on the main Instagram feed"

Therefore, success hinges on "trying to think about where your audience is and how you're reaching your audience".

The Playbook:

- **Build for the audience you want, not just the one you have.** MAC used Close Friends to create a community within a community, turning tastemakers, celebs, and loyalists into insiders. People commented "Close Friends" to be added, a viral, opt-in intimacy loop that created a sense of belonging.

- **Experiment without alienating.** MAC balanced modern formats with its founding ethos: "All ages, all races, all genders." Evolution didn't erase identity, it extended it.

Why It Matters

Organic isn't free anymore, it's earned through entertainment, access, and cultural fluency.

You can't treat social as one surface when users are living across many.

And the real metric of brand health isn't followers, it's how many touch points your story travels through.

The next era of organic isn't about visibility, it's about discoverability. Brands must recognize and utilize the actual entry points and habits of their audience, rather than relying solely on traditional methods like the main feed.

Madisen Theobald
Global Director of Social Creative

Prediction #4 –
"Social Is About to Get Nosy"

> "Social media is about to get nosy — think MySpace Top 8, but messier, smarter, and way more visible."
>
> McKinley Hart
> Director of Social Media @ Soul Cycle

McKinley predicts that platforms are moving toward full visibility, surfacing not just what people post, but what they do:

• who they like
• what they save
• who they follow
• what they watch

This turns silent lurkers into visible Advocates, and changes how brands identify influence.

The Shift

• **Influence becomes traceable.** Your strongest Advocates will show up through behaviour, not posting.

• **Advocacy becomes public.** Every like/save becomes a social signal.

• **Brands finally see their real community.** Not followers, but believers.

When engagement becomes visible, belonging becomes the metric, and the brands people signal publicly will own the next era of advocacy.

The playbook.

1. Build your "inner graph." Identify the people who save, share, DM, and consistently show up, they're your real community.

2. Turn engagement into invitation. Reward active behaviour with early access, insider drops, or Close Friends-level moments.

3. Create content people want to be seen engaging with. Shift from performance content → participation content.

4. Turn micro-signals into macro strategy. Track repeat engagers and warm loyalists, they're your future advocates, affiliates, and creators.

Prediction #5 –

"Brands Will Shut Up."

> "There's so much noise right now, brands chasing trends, chasing each other, chasing relevance. The smartest thing luxury can do next is shut the fuck up."
>
> James Denman
> Brand Strategist and Marketing Leader

The Shift

Luxury is about to make a strategic retreat from the algorithm. Not disappearing, withdrawing. Not absence, selective silence. In a world where every brand is shouting, mystery becomes the differentiator again.

As he puts it,

"Everyone's chasing something, a trend, a moment, a meme. But real luxury doesn't chase. It creates the space others move toward."

Scarcity shouldn't feel like a constraint. When a brand stops flooding the feed, every appearance becomes intentional, elevated, and worth leaning into. Constant posting erodes value; every trend-chasing moment chips away at the aura that makes luxury feel unattainable in the first place.

The Playbook

1. Speak less, mean more.
Cut content volume; increase intent. Every post should feel collectible.

2. Create strategic absence.
Purposeful gaps build intrigue. Luxury gains power by resisting immediacy.

3.Position your brand as a destination, not a participant. Let culture come to you, through products, partnerships, and earned relevance.

4. Build "gravity," not noise.
Focus on design, storytelling, and experiences that pull people in without chasing trends.

Prediction #6 –

"AI UGC Will Be Banned."

"There are so many fake AI UGC ads running right now. Someone's going to get sued like crazy, and that's when it ends."

Brandon Smithwick
B2B Creator & Strategist

The UGC gold rush has a deepfake problem.

AI-generated creators, avatars, synthetic voices, cloned faces, are flooding feeds with sponsored content that looks human, but isn't.

And according to Brandon, that bubble is about to burst.

The Playbook

- Audit your UGC inputs. Ensure every face, voice, and persona you use is real and verifiable.
- Use AI for ideation, not impersonation. AI can help you produce more, but not represent people.
- Disclose aggressively. Over-transparency builds trust in the era of deepfakes.
- Elevate human advocates. Employees, creators, customers. Authenticity now outperforms automation.

When audiences can't tell who's real, authenticity collapses, and with it, the trust that makes UGC valuable in the first place. As AI-generated faces, voices, and personas blur the line between human and synthetic, brands won't just be responsible for what is said, but who (or what) is saying it.

That ambiguity opens the door to legal, ethical, and reputational risk.

In 2026, success won't come from producing more content, it will come from content that is unmistakably human, accountable, and grounded in real identity.

Brandon Smithwrick
Creator, Advisor & Content Strategist

Content
to Commas.

Madisen Theobald
Global Director of Social Creative

M·A·C

Gabriel Gomez
Head of Social & Community (US)

MCoBeauty.

McKinley Hart
Director of Social Media

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Round #2:
The Vibe Check.
What's Really a
Red Flag in 2026

Every marketer talks about being "in culture."
The question is, are you part of the conversation, or
just adding to the noise?

At the Summit, we put the industry's biggest
behaviours under the microscope.

Here are the biggest vibe checks, decoded for
what's hype, what's healthy, and what's next.

Trend-Jacking Without Context — or the Art of Cultural Relevance

The move: Every brand jumps on Taylor Swift content the second she sneezes.
The myth: "We're joining the conversation."
The truth: You can't join culture if you've never earned your place in it.

The Counterpoint: *How MAC Got It Right*
When Taylor Swift's engagement hit the news, MAC didn't hesitate. Within 17 minutes, the team posted "Ruby Woo in her bridal era."
It wasn't opportunism, it was ownership.

💡 Why It Worked

- **Cultural credibility:** Taylor actually wears Ruby Woo. MAC didn't borrow culture, they built part of it.

- **Speed with substance:** That 17-minute response earned 40,000 likes and media coverage purely for how fast they showed up.

- **Trained audience:** As Madisen, put it, "We've trained our audience to weave culture in." MAC's followers expect them to react in real time, it's part of the brand's language.

What This Means for Marketers

Reactive content isn't about being loud; it's about being linked.
If your brand hasn't built the cultural equity to play in a moment, your post isn't participation, it's interruption.

Takeaway

- Don't trend-jack culture, contribute to it.
- Build cultural permission before you build reactive strategy.
- Speed matters, but only when the story makes sense.

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Red, Green or Beige flag #2 -

The Advocate Era. When Micro Becomes Macro

The move: A brand doubles down on everyday advocates, employees, loyalists, and nano creators, while leaving mega-influencers out of the big campaign mix.
The myth: "You can't scale authenticity."
The truth: You can, you just have to build it differently.

The Conversation:
The panel was split. Some warned against abandoning reach entirely, others argued this is the reach that matters now. What everyone agreed on: internal Advocacy is no longer a "nice-to-have." It's the new creative supply chain.

At SoulCycle, McKinley Hart called it their "built-in influencer network."
"Our instructors, writers, and studio crew, that's our community. That will never compare to outside creators."

At MAC Cosmetics, Madisen described a similar setup.
"We're fortunate to have over 12,000 artists in-store. They're our built-in creators. When a lipstick starts trending, her team can instantly activate those artists to "make it even more viral."

Meanwhile, Brandon broke it down simply:
"You can pay one creator $20,000 for a post... or you can pay nano-influencers across the internet and get more longevity for the same budget."

And on Reddit, now being crawled by AI for search, those smaller, consistent voices matter more than follower count.

Takeaway
- Authenticity scales when you design for depth, not reach.
- Treat employees and superfans as creative partners, but pay them fairly.
- Map your influence tiers: every brand should know who its internal, community, and external Advocates are, and how they work together.

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Red, Green or Beige flag #3 -
The Transparency Tension Trust vs. Proof in Creator Partnerships

The move: Brands asking creators for video screen recordings (not screenshots) to verify analytics.
The myth: "It's smart accountability."
The truth: It's a trust test, and both sides are still figuring out the rules.

The Conversation:
The panel split cleanly down the middle.

Brandon waved the Green Flag.
"I don't mind it. Screenshots could be from whenever. If I'm being paid, it's fair to prove it's for real."

James, speaking from a brand lens, agreed.
"It's completely legitimate. If you want the money, pony up for it."
To him, it's not distrust, it's due diligence. Brands are buying performance; they deserve proof.

But McKinley threw a firm Red Flag.
"You should have good faith in your creators. Start the relationship with trust — not suspicion."
Her take: once you start policing your partners, the relationship stops being creative.

What This Means for Brands
Brands that want to keep trust and transparency need to build new norms:
1. Set expectations early. Be explicit about what reporting looks like before contracts are signed.
2. Automate verification. Use trusted analytics dashboards (e.g., CreatorIQ, Fohr) instead of personal requests.
3. Protect creative flow. Don't let data collection interrupt the human side of the relationship.
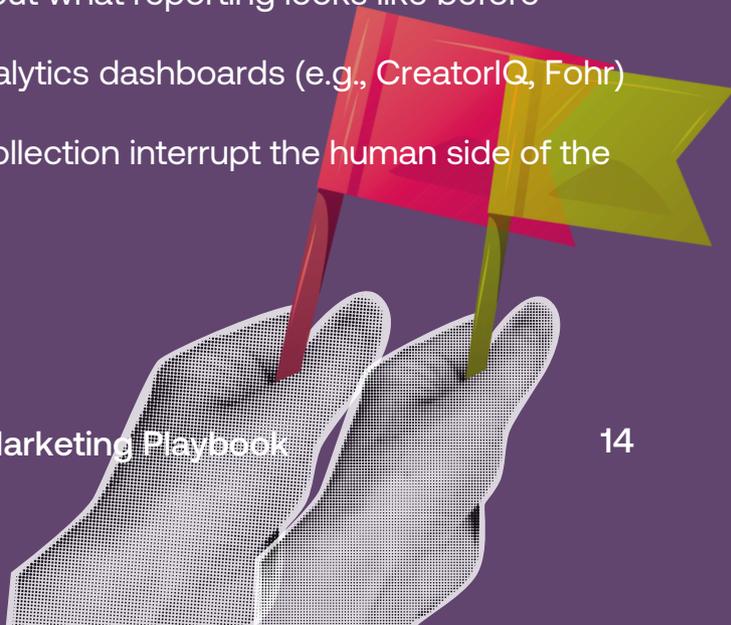
Round #3:
Watch, Wait, or Walk.
The Big Calls for 2026

In the final round, the panel turned futurist. Weighing in on the shifts likely to define brand strategy in 2026.

What's real? What's noise? And what deserves a place in next year's plan?

Watch, Wait, Walk #1 –
Employee Advocates. The Next Creators

The move: Every brand wants to turn employees into advocates.
The myth: "If you work here, you're a marketer."
The truth: Employee Advocacy only works when it's built into the brand's DNA, not bolted on as a tactic.
The Verdict: Watch and act now strategically.

The Conversation

The panel was divided, not on whether employee advocacy works, but on when it works.

James, was quick to caution against the "every-brand" mentality: "I'm not sure I want forklift drivers doing wheelies for TikTok." In other words: employee content isn't a universal solution, it's a strategic one.

Maksim agreed:
"It has to authentically fit your business model. For SoulCycle, its a "freaking gold model." But for Loop, it's used "more sparsely", tapping their audio engineers for AMA sessions or product explainers, not daily posting."

Where It Works Best

Some brands, however, were built for this era. MAC Cosmetics has over 12,000 artists, their "built-in creators." "If a lipstick shade starts trending," said Madisen, "I can reach out to those artists and make it even more viral."

SoulCycle's entire business is employee Advocacy.
"Our instructors and studio crew are our influencer network," explained McKinley, "That kind of authenticity just can't be bought."

Takeaway

- Employee Advocacy isn't a shortcut.
- Compensate creators inside your company the same way you respect those outside it.
- The best programs are engineered, not expected, built on clarity, incentives, and creative freedom.

Advocacy that isn't paid, supported, or celebrated isn't Advocacy, it's labor.

Watch, Wait, Walk #2 –

Social SEO + AI
The New Search Strategy

The move: Brands are hiring "Social SEO" specialists and AI content optimizers.
The myth: "It's too early."
The truth: Search has already left Google.
The Verdict: Watch. It's happening faster than you think, but the playbook is still being written.

The Conversation

The panel didn't debate if this shift is happening, only how fast.

"When you want to find something now, a tutorial, a product, a street, you go to TikTok or Instagram. Google's your last resort."

Madisen described how MAC's team has already re-trained for social-first SEO — dropping hashtags, embedding search terms directly into captions, and thinking about how people ask questions inside apps.

Discovery no longer happens in search bars. Social is now the front door to curiosity, and AI will soon become the concierge.

TikTok is the new tutorial tab.
Reddit is the new review site.
YouTube Shorts is the new "how-to."
And platforms like ChatGPT are the new homepage.

Takeaway
- SEO is no longer text-first; it's context-first.
- Treat every post like a micro-answer to a search query.
- Align your social, SEO, and AI teams into one discovery engine.

The future of search is social, and the brands that get it, won't just optimize for algorithms, they'll optimize for intent.

Gen Beta. The Next Cultural Generation

The move: Marketers are already chasing Gen Beta — kids born after 2016.
The myth: "If we study them now, we'll own the future."
The truth: You can't build for a generation that's still in homeroom.
The Verdict: Wait. Observe the signals, invest in understanding, but skip the generational gold rush.

The Conversation

When asked if brands should already be investing in understanding Gen Beta, the panel's answer was measured: watch, don't rush.

McKinley captured the sentiment perfectly:
"It's important to keep an eye on it, but to invest? No, no, no. No LinkedIn DMs about how to target six-year-olds, please."

Gabriel, started at "watch," then downgraded to "wait":
"We'll understand them naturally. They'll grow up, get jobs, and eventually work on our teams."

Still, there were hints about where this generation might go:
- Creator as Career: Madisen shared that every third-grader her mother teaches said they want to be a YouTuber. That's not a punchline, it's a preview of ambition shifting from professions to platforms.
- Natural Osmosis: Gabriel noted that Gen Z and early Alphas will bridge the gap for us, "they'll know Beta through siblings, schools, and friend circles."
- Get Ahead Without Getting Lost: Madisen countered that while it's early, brands can't afford to be asleep:

We need to get ahead of this, so we're not already behind when they grow up.

The future generation isn't waiting to be decoded; they're already shaping culture through their siblings, schools, and screens. The smartest brands won't chase them, they'll quietly design the systems those kids will one day inherit.

💬 Closing Note

The Hot Takes Live session wasn't just created for entertainment, it was a snapshot of where culture, creators, and social are heading.

Filmed live at The Brand Advocacy Summit: New York 2025, this conversation captured the shift every marketer needs to make: from chasing algorithms to building advocacy that lasts.

If this playbook gave you ideas, the full conversation dives even deeper.

🎧 Listen to Building Brand Advocacy: Red Flags in Marketing, the low down from the world's biggest brands.

A special thank you to Duel, our partner in turning conversation into action, and for proving that when brands put people at the centre, Advocacy becomes the most powerful growth system of all.