

MARKETING

ISSUE #471 AUGUST 2026

WEEKENDERTM



**STOP BUYING AUDIENCES.
START BUILDING
FANDOMS.**

WEEKENDER

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THIS FILM TODAY?**

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"I DON'T THINK THE WORLD NEEDS NECESSARILY A NEW AGENCY AS IN THE PAST, BUT I REALLY, REALLY BELIEVE THE BUSINESS MODEL OF THE INDUSTRY IS BROKEN OR CHANGED."

"I ALWAYS SAY CREATIVITY IS DOING MORE WITH WHAT YOU INHERIT. THAT'S WHAT CREATIVITY IS, YOU TAKE IT AND YOU TURN IT INTO SOMETHING BETTER."

"AI IS TRAINED TO AVOID ERROR. CREATIVITY IS BORN FROM IT."

"CREATIVITY IN THE AGE OF AI DOES NOT SEEK TO ANSWER A PROMPT. IT SEEKS TO PROVOKE THE QUESTION."

**DAVID DROGA,
VICE CHAIR OF
ACCENTURE.**

FLUX FATIGUE

Everything is moving.

Welcome to flux.

It is the defining condition of our industry today.

There was a time when change arrived politely.

That luxury has disappeared.

Change now arrives from every direction, all at once.

Creators are becoming media owners.

Retailers are becoming advertising platforms.

Audiences are becoming content producers.

Agencies are becoming technology consultants.

Technology companies are becoming creative partners.

And everybody is trying to work out who owns the customer.

Flux can be frightening because it removes the comfort of certainty.

The opportunity belongs to those who can move without losing their direction.

That distinction matters.

In uncertain times, clarity becomes a competitive advantage.

What does your brand stand for?

Who do you genuinely serve?

What problem are you solving?

Why should anybody care?



The tools may change, but those questions remain stubbornly relevant.

Because amid all this movement, some fundamentals endure.

Trust matters.

Ideas matter.

Craft matters.

People matter.

And brave decisions still beat safe presentations.

The industry is not waiting to settle down.

Neither should we.

Welcome to the age of flux.

Stay still, stay certain, stay keen.

Write me if you have an opinion to share: ham@adoimagazine.com



popculture

MARKETING EXPERTS' CHOICE MERDEKA TVC AWARDS 2026



**SUBMIT YOUR
ENTRY NOW**

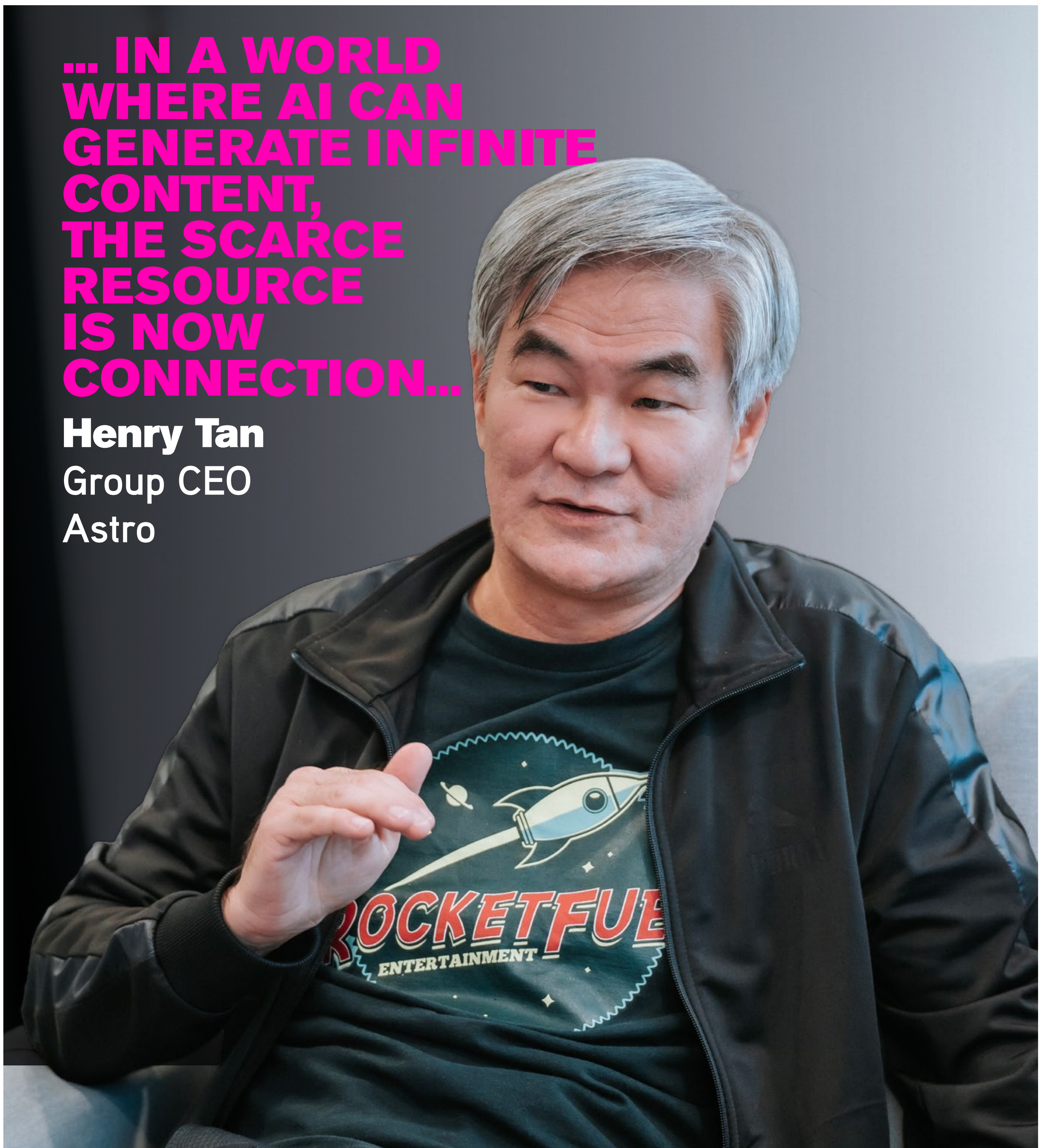


FROM AUDIENCE TO FANDOM: THE NEW CURRENCY OF GROWTH

*Why belonging matters
more than reach.*

... IN A WORLD
WHERE AI CAN
GENERATE INFINITE
CONTENT,
THE SCARCE
RESOURCE
IS NOW
CONNECTION...

Henry Tan
Group CEO
Astro



We live in an age of algorithms, automation and AI, and brands have become incredibly good at finding people, but not at making them care. Astro believes the answer lies in fandom.

While technology can optimise campaigns with remarkable precision, it cannot create the anticipation before a season finale, the debates that erupt after a controversial ending or the excitement of meeting the cast of a favourite series. Those are all deeply human responses.

Astro however seems to have an uncanny understanding of what

people want. Project High Council, a series about the questionable dynamics of a fictional boarding school, quickly evolved into something larger than life, spawning a sequel, a prequel and movies. In 2023, 10,000 fans thronged a KL mall for a chance to meet the cast. The response was fandom in action.

“Sometimes you create something and it takes on a life of its own,” says Henry Tan, Group CEO of Astro. “Suddenly there’s a huge online and offline community you didn’t build, with shared experiences and passion. This entire franchise, in a way, is being fuelled by its fan base.”

“Demand creation, we feel is much more important than demand capture. This obsession with performance marketing is a bit imbalanced...”

Tai Kam Leong
Chief Commercial Officer
Astro



For years, the company has been viewed through the lens of television ratings. How many people watched? How many impressions were delivered? But those metrics tell only part of the story.

A programme that attracts three million viewers on television often generates a vastly larger footprint once its content travels beyond the screen. Clips, reactions, conversations, memes and fan-created content can lead to hundreds of millions of social views. Far beyond what conventional broadcast numbers suggest.

Perhaps the clearest example is Good Boys Go to Heaven. Following its debut on Astro, the series became the No.1 title on

Netflix Malaysia for an entire month. In fact, every Astro Original released on Netflix has entered the platform's Top 10. A clear case for how far Astro content travels.

BUT SCALE ALONE DOESN'T EXPLAIN WHY THIS HAPPENS.

For Chief Marketing Officer Christinne Lim, that's the moment content crosses an invisible threshold. "When people do more than just watch your show, they start to become co-creators," she explains. "For Astro, co-creation isn't simply evidence of engagement; it's evidence that the relationship has deepened into something far more enduring."



LOOK BEYOND DATA TO BECOME EXTRAORDINARY

Media practitioners must look beyond data and bring something “extra” to their work if they want to succeed in a rapidly evolving industry, says Astro Group Chief Executive Officer Henry Tan.

Speaking at the MSA Festival & Awards in Petaling Jaya, Henry said technology, artificial intelligence and sophisticated media-planning systems may improve efficiency, but human emotion remains crucial to building meaningful relationships between brands and consumers.

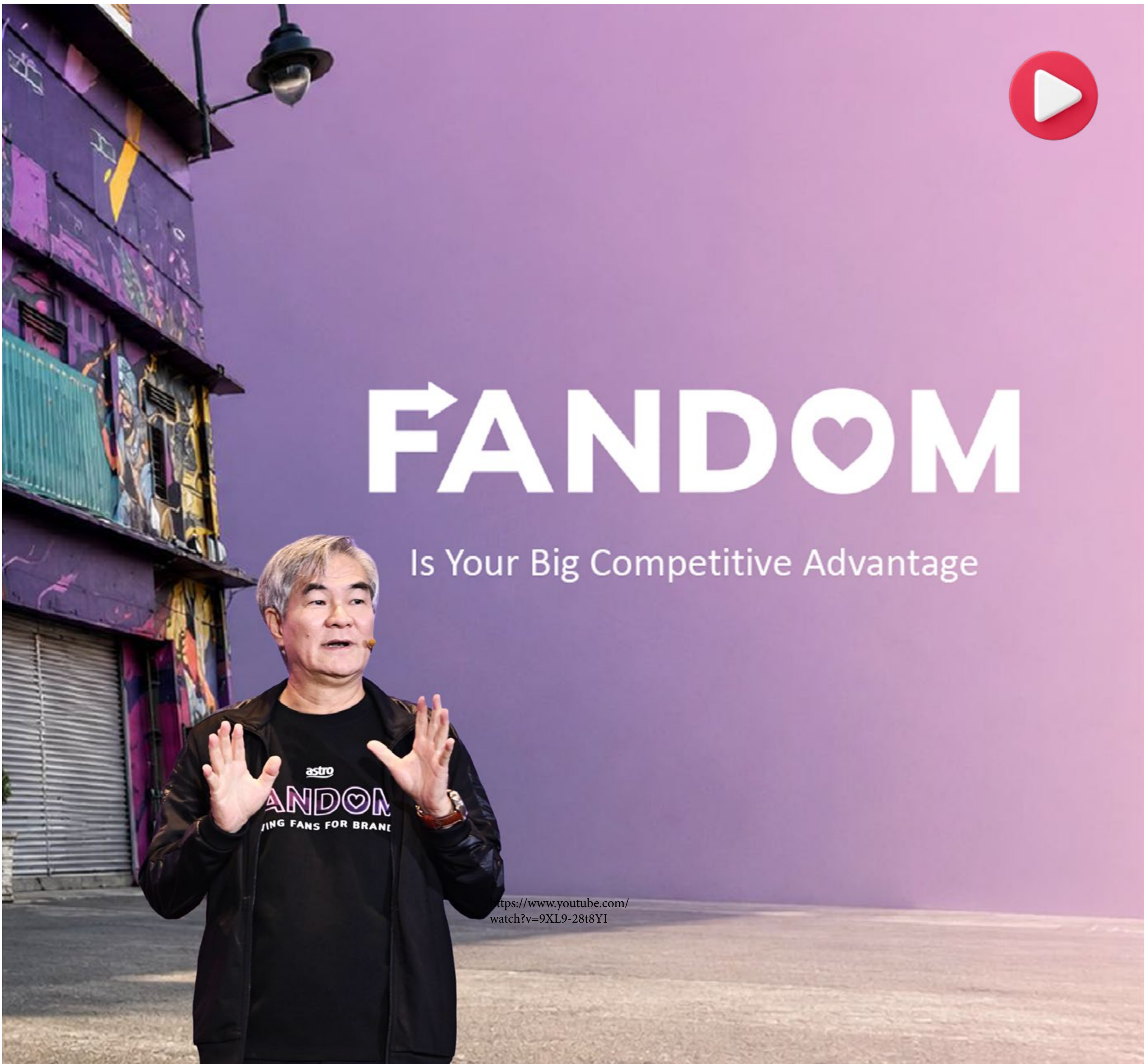
“The difference between ordinary and extraordinary is the word ‘extra’,” he said.

Henry urged media professionals, particularly younger planners, to go beyond their assigned responsibili-



ties and continuously evolve as individuals.

“Every challenge and unfair experience in your career is a stepping stone that makes you stronger. The main question is not how technology is changing, but how you are changing and evolving,” he said.



He cautioned that media could become a “sea of grey” if strategies focused entirely on numbers and metrics without emotional substance.

“Data, AI and programmatic sys-

tems are tools for efficiency. But to become embedded in consumers’ hearts and minds, brands must win their emotions. Colour will always triumph in a sea of grey.”



“Data tells you who. Fandom tells you why. People don’t become fans because an algorithm found them, they become fans because a story moved them.....”



This changes what brands should be chasing: not an audience to buy, but a group of fans to belong to. And that means moving from content marketing to culture marketing, finding authentic ways to participate in the moments and communities people already care about.

Chief Commercial Officer Tai Kam Leong sees this as the difference between demand capture and demand creation. “Demand creation, we feel, is much more important than demand capture,” he says. “This obsession with performance marketing is a bit imbalanced.”

What matters, he believes, is to find the fandom that fits a brand’s business objective rather than indiscriminately chasing the largest audience. “If brands have a business goal, a new product to launch or a new service offer, we would like to offer our expertise and access to our

content, to match you to the right fan base, to be able to deliver you a solution.”

That solution can take many forms: talent becoming ambassadors, original content built around a product, or live experiences that carry the idea into the real world.

What the brand gains is entry into an ecosystem with an existing emotional connection to its audience.

That same principle can be seen in Astro’s partnerships with Malaysian brands such as Etika. Following the success of its collaboration around Keluang Man - which pulled in millions of organic views without traditional media spend - Etika is working with Astro again on Terbang, a film inspired by Malaysian rally legend Karamjit Singh and scheduled for release around Malaysia Day. Rather than simply sponsoring content,



... talent becoming ambassadors, original content built around a product...

Etika becomes part of a distinctly Malaysian story and a cultural moment that has meaning beyond the product itself.

Behind every partnership like this sits a deeper capability: data. But that alone isn't the differentiator.

Technology still has an important role to play, yes. After all, Astro's ecosystem spans television, streaming, digital platforms, audio, social media and live experiences that generate extensive first-party data. But Chief Digital Growth Officer Rene Menezes argues that data is only truly useful when understood in context.

"Data tells you who. Fandom tells you why," he says. Two people may share the same demographic profile yet care about entirely different things. And that's the signal that tells brands where they might naturally belong.

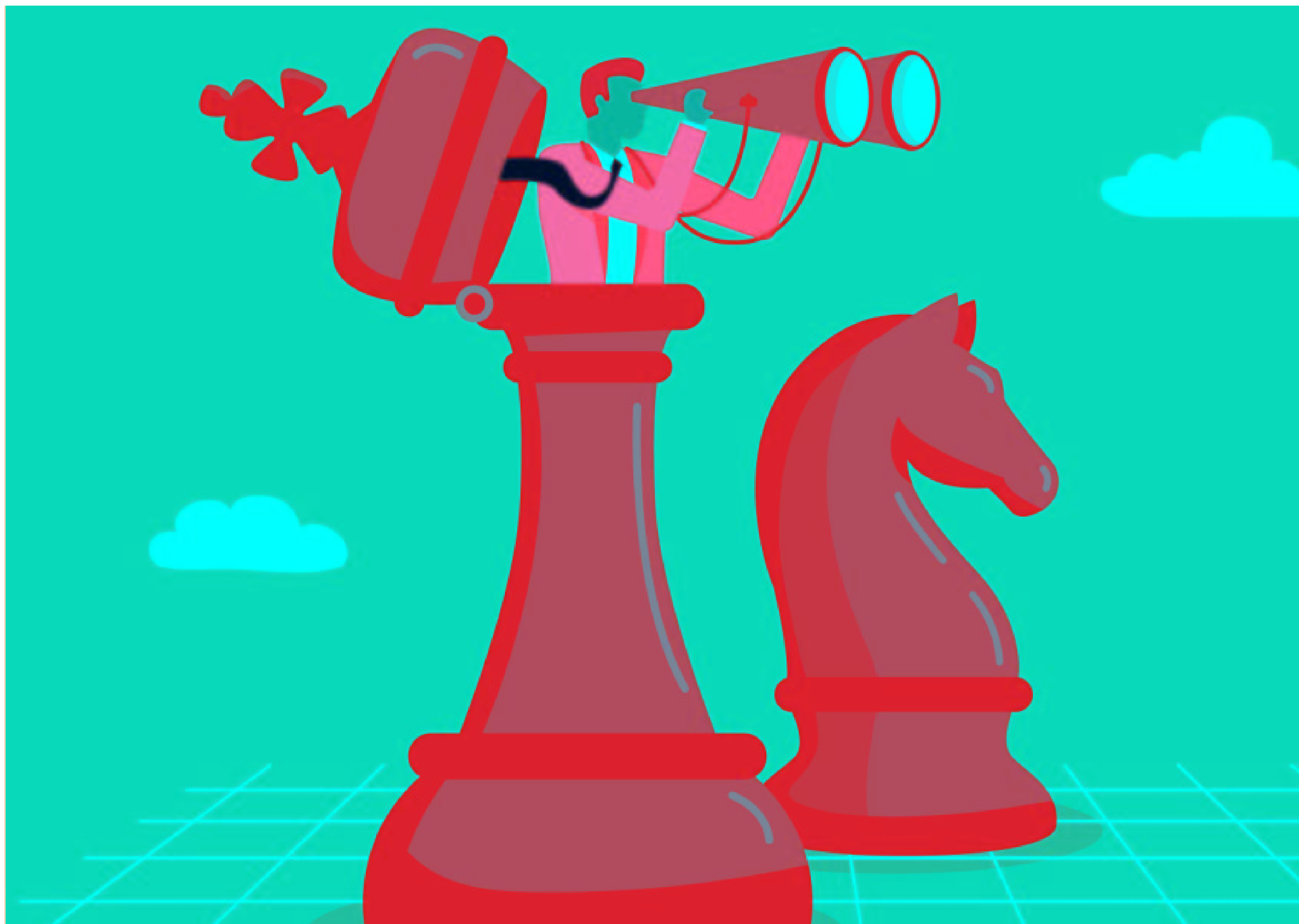
Technology will keep making marketing faster, smarter and more efficient. But people don't become



fans because an algorithm found them, they become fans because a story moved them, a shared experience brought them together, or a brand found an authentic way to participate.

THE ALGORITHMS GOT US HERE. WHAT COMES NEXT IS HARDER TO AUTOMATE.

This is the opportunity Astro is putting in front of marketers: not simply to reach people, but to give them a reason to engage, participate and belong. In the end, brands won't be remembered simply because they reached the right people. They'll be remembered because they gave people something worth caring about.



YOUR COMPETITOR'S AD ISN'T YOUR BIGGEST THREAT— NETFLIX IS

Drawing on two years of UK B2B Marketing Awards entries, B2B Marketing co-founder Joel Harrison's *Lights, Camera, Pipeline* report argues that brands are no longer competing only with other B2B campaigns. They are competing with everything audiences could watch instead.

B2B marketers have largely accepted that business buyers decide emotionally, not only rationally. Now a more demanding challenge is emerging: B2B content is no longer judged against a competitor's webinar, white paper or product demonstration. It is judged against a Netflix series, a friend's holiday reel and whatever is trending on someone's phone.

The question is no longer simply whether content looks professional, communicates the right message or feels appropriate for the brand. It is whether anyone would willingly choose to watch it.



... B2B messaging has broadly progressed through three eras...

For Joel, that shift has become increasingly urgent as artificial intelligence fills digital channels with more content, produced faster and often with little distinction.

“That’s where entertainment earns its place,” he wrote when introducing the report.

FROM RATIONAL SELLING TO ENTERTAINMENT

B2B messaging has broadly progressed through three eras. First came the rational pitch: list every feature, present the evidence and trust buyers to make a logical calculation. Then came the emotional pitch—the recognition that business buyers are still people, influenced by feelings, relationships, perceptions and personal risk.

The third era is the entertainment pitch. Rather than merely appealing to emotion, brands must create something audiences would actively

choose to experience, even when they are under no obligation to do so.

Buyers accustomed to curating their entertainment, skipping what bores them and bingeing what holds their attention carry those habits into work. A company logo no longer commands automatic attention.

There is also a trust dimension. As AI makes polished content easier to produce, visible human craft—a genuine idea, thoughtful production and a compelling story—becomes more valuable.

WHAT COUNTS AS ENTERTAINMENT?

The report identifies five characteristics. Content needs to deliver at least one convincingly:

- **A protagonist and story:** Real characters, tension and resolution.
- **Broadcast-grade craft:** Quality approaching what audiences choose to watch for pleasure.

- **Serialisation:** Content that builds familiarity over time, where the format and objective support it.

- **Emotion over information:** Work designed to move people before transferring facts.

- **Invited participation:** An experience audiences can enter, influence or interact with.

Six formats lead the field: cinematic film, documentary, serialised video, narrative audio, immersive experiences and gamification. Each serves a different objective.

Success depends less on choosing the most spectacular format than on finding the clearest way to make the audience care, remember the message and respond to it meaningfully afterwards.

The rule is simple: match the format to the objective, not to whatever happens to be fashionable.

The evidence behind the argument

Joel examined UK B2B Marketing Awards entries from 2024 and 2025. The proportion using entertainment techniques rose from 22.3% to 30.2% in one year, moving from fewer than one-quarter of entries to almost one-third.

Entertainment-led campaigns also reported stronger results. They were 21% more likely to exceed their stated objectives, doing so in 37% of cases compared with 31% among other campaigns. They were also two-and-a-half times more likely to claim a record-breaking or first-of-its-kind result.

... Entertainment-led campaigns also reported stronger results. They were 21% more likely to exceed their stated objectives, doing so in 37% of cases compared with 31% among other campaigns...

Crucially, stronger performance did not require larger budgets.

Median spending among entertainment-led campaigns was approximately £95,000, compared with £108,000 for the rest of the dataset. More than half spent below £100,000, while several notable video, audio and gamification projects cost less than £25,000.

Strong examples appeared across the customer journey, from awareness to retention and advocacy.

The findings require caution. They show association, not proof that entertainment caused the results, while awards recognition does not automatically equal commercial return. Nevertheless, the pattern merits attention.

... Nevertheless, the pattern merits attention...



THE CAMPAIGNS BRINGING IT TO LIFE

The report's examples show how widely the approach can be applied.

- **Esquire Bank** used a branded documentary series to become an emotional ally for trial lawyers. A Times Square screening reportedly generated US\$39 million in deposits. [View the case study.](#)

- **Travelport** sent an adventurer to seven modern wonders in seven days, reportedly moving the brand from third to first in tracking studies. [Watch the film.](#)

- **Capgemini** used LIDAR to transform invisible wind into live colour during America's Cup broadcasts, making an abstract data

capability visible to millions. [View the case study.](#)

- **KPMG** created 32 personalised cinematic films for priority clients and reported a 71.8% meeting-success rate. [View the case study.](#)

- **Ecologi** gamified carbon capture on a London street using real-time vehicle recognition. [Visit the project.](#)

- **Multiverse** used a talking fish mascot in an audio-led campaign aimed at finance executives who ignored conventional outreach. [View the case study.](#)

- **PMI** demonstrated the cumulative value of serialisation through an eight-year podcast with 2.5 million lifetime downloads. [Explore the podcast.](#)

... Entertainment cannot rescue an empty idea; it only makes the weakness more visible...

WHEN ENTERTAINMENT EARNS ITS PLACE

Entertainment is most useful when buyers have disengaged from a low-interest category; competitors are making identical rational claims; most of the market is not yet buying and memorability matters; or the subject is technical, abstract or difficult to make engaging.

Two conditions must be met. There must be a strong proposition underneath the execution, and the brand must commit to the craft. Entertainment cannot rescue an empty idea; it only makes the weakness more visible.

A blockbuster budget is not essential. Brands can begin with serialised audio, carefully produced smartphone footage, simple interactive tools or partnerships that share production costs. They can also test formats on owned channels before investing in paid distribution.

Whatever the budget, the story must come first.

The new standard for attention

As AI-generated material floods every channel, brands willing to invest in human craft, original ideas and stories people would choose to experience are more likely to stand apart.

Joel summarises the shift clearly: “Stop asking: ‘Is this good for my B2B brand?’ Start asking: ‘Would

someone actually choose to watch this?’”

That is now the standard—not only for entertainment-led B2B marketing, but for earning attention at all.

Hear Joel explore these ideas at THE ASEAN B2B CONFERENCE 2027, taking place on 12–13 January 2027, from 8.30am to 5.30pm, at KLGCC Convention Centre, Kuala Lumpur.

Registrations are now open. Group bookings confirmed before 30 September 2026 will enjoy a special early-bird price. The conference HRD Corp claimable.

Register at marketingmagazine.com.my/b2b or contact Ruby at +603-7726 2588 or ruby@adoimagazine.com. Reserve your place now and join the region’s B2B marketing community for two days of strategy, creativity and commercial insight.



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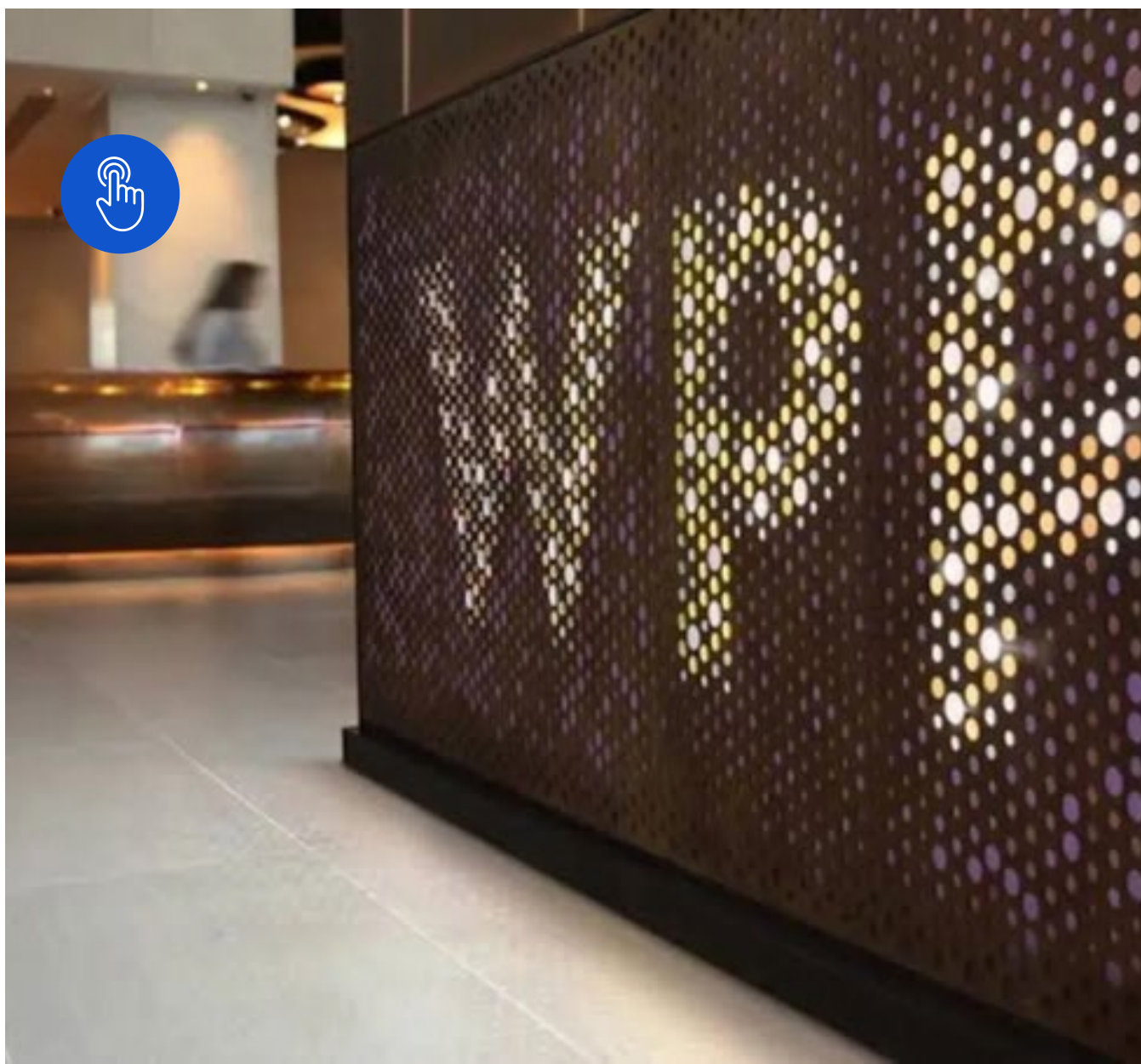
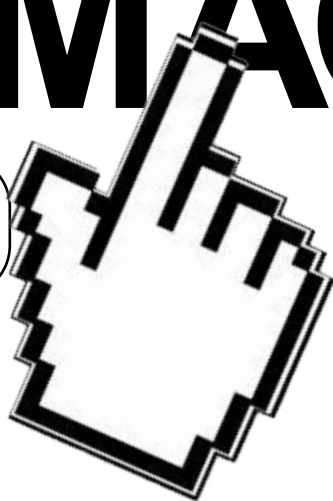
20 Easy To Swallow Caplets

SMILE (1999). Advertiser: GlaxoSmithKline, Brand: Panadol, Product: Panadol Menstrual, Agency: Ogilvy & Mather, Copywriter: Melanie Tong, Art Director: David Sin, Account Supervisor: Goh Suet Lan, Advertiser Supervisor: D. Thanasekaran, Creative Director: Sonal Dabral, Photographer: Ian Lloyd

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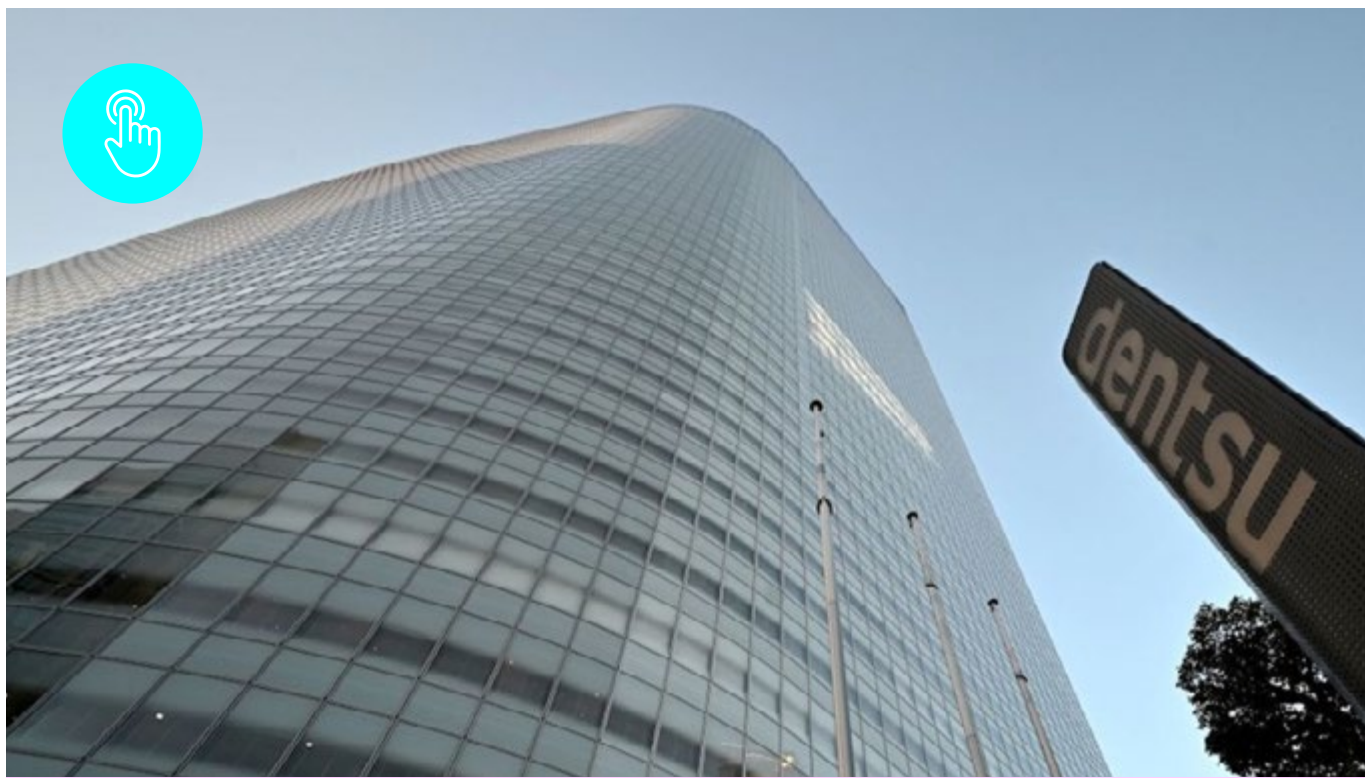
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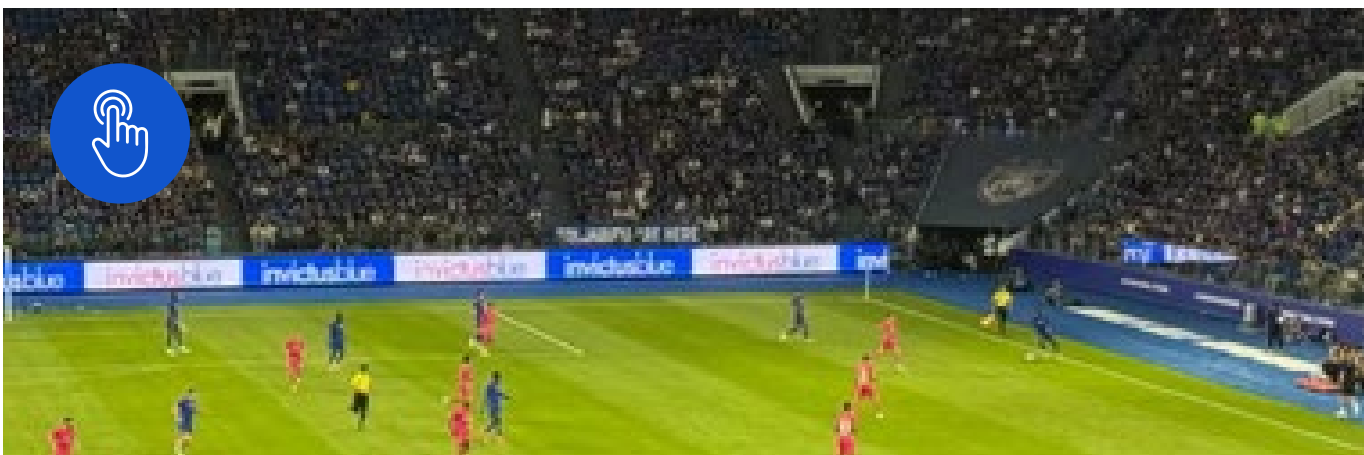
THE US\$350 MILLION QUESTION WPP CANNOT AFFORD TO IGNORE

Pageviews: 3,305



DENTSU'S GREAT SHRINK: UP TO 160 OVERSEAS ENTITIES COULD DISAPPEAR BY 2028

Pageviews: 3,102



INVICTUS BLUE STRENGTHENS ITS SPORTS MEDIA CAPABILITIES WITH CHELSEA F.C. AND JDT BROADCAST, ADDING TO A YEAR OF MAJOR SPORTS RIGHTS MANDATES

Pageviews: 3,011



THE NEXT BIG MALAYSIAN MEDIA CHANNEL MAY BE A RUNNING CLUB.

Pageviews: 2,972



WHEN AI MAKES THE WORK CHEAP, WHAT ARE AGENCIES REALLY SELLING?

Pageviews: 2,587

DID YOU KNOW?

Milestones, personalities and award stories from Malaysian advertising



Rishya Joseph

Jennifer Chan

Khairudin Rahim

No.	Name	Agency and Year
1	Rishya Joseph (now Dato)	DYR, 1990
2	Jennifer Chan	JWT, 1994
3	Khairudin Rahim	Lintas, 1995

First Malaysians to become Managing Directors of international ad agencies in Malaysia (see table).

HEADLINE. In 1989, 4As President Michael Tang (Ogilvy) launched a bi-monthly magazine called HEADLINE, which sold at RM2.50 per copy. Editorial consultants were Phil Fiebig (Leo Burnett) and

Khairudin Rahim (Lintas).

KHAIRUDIN. Lowe’s Khairudin was the initiator of the 4As mandatory pitching fee, applicable to all non-government pitches, and wrote the rules of its implementation. CIMB was the first advertiser to embrace the Pitch Fee.

INDUSTRY HISTORY



TOP BRAINS. Talent that left Malaysia, some came back.: Ted Lim (Leo Burnett Singapore), Edmund Choe (TBWA\Greater China), Ronald Ng (BBDO New York/Singapore), Kevin Lee (Leagas Delaney China) and Sean Sim (Ogilvy China).

KIM FERNANDO. The first Malaysian to become a Creative Director of an international agency in Malaysia (McCann Erickson).

YEW CHUAN. The first Malaysian to not only handle Bahasa Malaysia and Chinese copy translations, but also conceptualised advertising concepts in these languages. Yew Chuan also spoke and wrote many other languages apart from his first language, English.

TL YEAP. A pillar in the Malaysian ad industry in the 80s and 90s, he headed many agencies including O&M Meridien, Ball Partnership and Spider. He spent his retirement years in Penang developing, enriching and preserving the Dr Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Centre, which he inherited from his family's legacy. TL passed away at midnight on April 13, 2009.

AD ASIA CONGRESS. Malaysia has hosted the congress three times: 1968 (Mal/Sin), 1990 and 2011.



AWARD STORIES

1995 No Golden Kancil winner for the first time.

2002 The Kancil award was withdrawn for a Cancerlink campaign after judges uncovered anomalies with the entry.

2007 The 4As decided not to endorse the 4th Malaysian Creative Circle (MC2) Awards because it would not benefit the industry to have two local advertising award shows. MC2 Awards organiser Sledgehammer Communications (M) Sdn Bhd announced the show's cancellation, citing the 4As' decision as a factor. 4As President Datuk Vincent Lee, who presented the Chairman's Award to Sledgehammer Regional CEO Harmandar Singh at the 2004 Kancils, said Harmandar was "a great person who has helped the industry a lot."

2009 Malaysia's top award-winning agencies, BBDO and Saatchi & Saatchi, withdrew from the Kancil Awards after winning a whopping 22 Golds the year before. They allegedly were not happy with the jury selection process.



In 1998, we made a Petronas Merdeka commercial about an Indian family remembering 31 August 1957.

Twenty-eight years later, I find myself wondering whether we could make that same film today.

I should be careful not to romanticise the past. Even then, there were questions.

Why an Indian family for a Merdeka commercial? Why were Indians at the centre of a story about Malaysia's independence?

There were complaints after the film went on air too.

But Yasmin being Yasmin, she pushed it through.

And our response to the complaints was wonderfully simple.

We ran a print ad featuring a screen grab of the little Indian boy sitting on his father's shoulders.

The headline said:

"Do you see Indians?

We see Malaysians."

Looking back, that may have said

REMEMBER THIS COMMERCIAL?



more about Yasmin Ahmad than almost anything I could write about her.

She didn't pretend race didn't exist.

She challenged the idea that race should determine who was entitled to represent Malaysia.

There is a difference.

Twenty-eight years later, I wonder how that conversation would play out today.

Race has always been part of Malaysian politics. It was there in 1998 and long before that. But in 2026, racial identity seems to have moved even more forcefully back to the centre of our political conversation.

We hear increasingly about Malay unity. About protecting Malay interests. About defending race, religion and rulers. Politicians such as Akmal Saleh have built a powerful public profile around defending what

they see as Malay interests and sensitivities. PAS continues to argue for greater Malay-Muslim political unity.

They will say this does not mean excluding Chinese or Indian Malaysians.

Perhaps that is genuinely what they believe.

But words have consequences.

When our political conversation constantly asks Malays to think of themselves first as Malays, Chinese as Chinese, Indians as Indians, Muslims as Muslims and non-Muslims as non-Muslims, eventually it becomes harder to see the person underneath all those labels.

Which brings me back to that little Indian boy.

Imagine pitching the same idea today.

A national Merdeka film.

And at the emotional centre of it, an Indian father and his son.

REMEMBER THIS COMMERCIAL?

The questions would probably begin immediately.

Why Indians?

Why not a Malay family?

Does this properly represent the majority?

Will people complain?

Will it become an issue on social media?

Should we put the other races somewhere in the film to balance it?

And perhaps, after enough meetings, research, caution and fear, somebody would suggest the safest solution of all:

Put everybody in.

One Malay family. One Chinese family. One Indian family. Maybe someone from Sabah and Sarawak.

Everyone represented.

Nobody offended.

And quite possibly, nothing meaningful left to say.

Because the power of the original film came precisely from refusing to do that.

We weren't saying Indians were more important to Merdeka.

We were saying something much simpler.

An Indian family's Merdeka story is a Malaysian story.

Yasmin understood this instinctively.

She never needed to create a checklist of races to prove that Malaysia was multicultural. She

... we would still have the courage to make it. And if people complained, would anyone still have the courage to answer: "Do you see Indians? We see Malaysians."

simply told stories about Malaysians.

Sometimes they were Malay.

Sometimes Chinese.

Sometimes Indian.

Sometimes the relationships crossed all those lines.

And yes, people complained then too.

The difference is that Yasmin didn't respond by making the work safer.

She pushed harder.

"Do you see Indians? We see Malaysians."

Think about how provocative that sentence actually was.

It wasn't saying, don't see race.

It was saying, see something bigger than race.

REMEMBER THIS COMMERCIAL?



That distinction feels even more important in Malaysia today.

Because I worry that we are travelling in the opposite direction.

When political survival becomes tied to increasingly narrow definitions of community, everyone begins retreating into their own corner.

Malay interests.

Chinese interests.

Indian interests.

Muslim interests.

Non-Muslim interests.

Eventually we become very good at seeing what separates us and increasingly bad at seeing what connects us.

And this is why I wonder whether Yasmin would have an even harder time today.

Not because 1998 was some golden age of racial harmony. It wasn't.

She faced resistance then.

Perhaps what we had was something different: people like Yasmin who were willing to resist the resistance.

She had a client willing to trust her.

She had people around her willing to take the risk.

And ultimately, someone was

brave enough to put an Indian father and his little boy on national television at Merdeka and say:

They represent all of us.

Twenty-eight years later, technology has made filmmaking infinitely easier.

We have better cameras. Better visual effects. Better post-production. We can create almost anything we can imagine.

But I wonder whether we have become less brave about what we imagine.

Maybe that is the real question.

Not whether the commercial could run today.

It probably could.

The question is whether, somewhere between the first idea and the final approval, we would still have the courage to make it.

And if people complained, would anyone still have the courage to answer:

“Do you see Indians? We see Malaysians.”

An Anonymous Burnetter

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**MARKETING
EXPERTS'
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MERDEKA
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SO, WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF 2026?

The first half of 2026 has already delivered more disruption, uncertainty and reinvention than many industries experience in an entire year. AI is accelerating, consumer confidence remains fragile, media habits are fragmenting and every marketing dollar is under sharper scrutiny.

Yet half the year is still ahead of us. So, what about the rest of 2026?

We asked some of the industry's most experienced leaders what they see coming, what businesses should prepare for and where the real opportunities may lie....



FIONA LIAO - GROUP CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, POS MALAYSIA:

If one word will define the market for the remainder of 2026, it is adaptation.

Across industries, businesses face an environment in which customer expectations are evolving faster than ever. Consumers now regard convenience, speed, transparency and personalisation as basic requirements rather than differentiators. The companies most likely to succeed will be those that respond quickly while remaining focused on delivering genuine value.

The integration of digital and physical experiences will continue reshaping the market. Customers may discover a brand online, purchase through a mobile device and expect seamless fulfilment and service across every touchpoint. Organisations are therefore investing in data, technology and customer experience capabilities to strengthen relevance, engagement and loyalty.

Economic realities are also prompting businesses to move beyond growth at any cost. The conversation is shifting from driving

... Economic realities are also prompting businesses to move beyond growth at any cost...

Fiona Liao

volume to building sustainable, profitable growth. This demands greater productivity, sharper decision-making and investments that produce measurable outcomes.

Trust will remain equally important. Consumers have more choices than ever, but transparent, reliable brands that consistently fulfil their promises will stand out in increasingly crowded markets.

Sustainability, meanwhile, will move further into the mainstream. Stakeholders increasingly expect tangible action instead of broad commitments. Companies that embed sustainability within their products, operations and customer experiences will be better positioned for long-term relevance.

For marketers, success in the second half of 2026 will not come from being the loudest. It will come from understanding customers deeply, responding rapidly and creating meaningful experiences. Businesses that achieve all three will be best placed to thrive in a competitive, connected world.



BHARAT AVALANI - FOUNDER & CEO, CONNECTING THE DOTS CONSULTANCY:

You can probably feel it without looking at any consumer index.

A grocery trip costs a little more. Eating out feels a little more expensive. Bills seem to add up faster. And before buying something that used to be an easy “yes”, there is now a small pause: “Do I really need this?”

That is probably where the Malaysian consumer is heading into the second half of 2026.... not necessarily pessimistic, but definitely more careful.

The economy remains resilient and people are still spending. But there is a difference between being able to spend and feeling comfortable about spending. As living costs continue to weigh on household budgets, Malaysians are becoming more selective about where their ringgit goes.

And this is where things get interesting for brands.

Consumers have not stopped wanting nice things. They still want to eat out, travel, upgrade their

“Value” will be important, but value does not always mean being the cheapest...

Bharat Avalani

phones, treat the family and enjoy life. They are simply asking more questions before they open their wallets.

Is it worth it? Is there a better deal? Will this actually make my life better?

For marketers, I think this means H2 2026 is less about pushing people to spend more and more about giving them a good reason to spend.

“Value” will be important, but value does not always mean being the cheapest. It could mean better quality, greater convenience, a useful reward, or simply something that feels worth the money.

The brands that understand this mood will have an advantage.

Because right now, the Malaysian consumer is not saying, “I don’t want to spend.”

They are saying, “Convince me.”

And perhaps that is the most important brief for advertising in the second half of 2026: make every ringgit feel well spent.



**MOHAMED ADAM WEE
- CEO, EXPLORAR &
STRATEGIC ADVISOR,
INSIDER ONE:**

Honestly, the mood heading into the second half of 2026 is better than many expect. The economy grew 6% last quarter, exports remain strong and the fundamentals look healthy. But the story is not the macroeconomic data. It is how quickly the ground beneath marketers is shifting.

Two developments stand out.

First, orchestration is becoming the battleground. It is no longer enough for brands to maintain separate presences across WhatsApp, email, app notifications and social media. The brands moving ahead are connecting these channels into one system, where a customer’s behaviour in one place informs what they encounter next elsewhere.

Instead of marketers manually deciding who receives which message and when, technology is beginning to determine the next-best channel, time and offer using real-time signals rather than a monthly campaign calendar.

...The fundamentals are stronger than the mood suggests. Marketers should watch the transition...

Adam Wee

Brands operating channels as separate silos will increasingly fall behind—not because their creative work is weak, but because their infrastructure cannot keep pace with changing customer behaviour.

Second, synthesised and predictive data is becoming a differentiator. Rather than waiting for quarterly reports to explain what happened, tools can bring first-party data together and answer questions in plain language. They can identify which customer segments are worth pursuing before money is spent, rather than afterwards.

The fundamentals are stronger than the mood suggests. Marketers should watch the transition from manual, reactive marketing towards connected, automated and predictive decision-making. Companies that adapt their systems, teams and thinking will be best positioned to convert economic resilience into meaningful, sustainable growth.



DARREN YUEN - CEO, OMNICOM MEDIA MALAYSIA:

Malaysia enters the remainder of 2026 with momentum. First-quarter GDP grew 5.4%, while domestic demand, investment and technology exports provide resilience.

Yet geopolitical volatility, trade uncertainty and energy costs mean confidence should not be mistaken for certainty.

Consumers are spending selectively. Tax and subsidy reforms, alongside cost-of-living concerns, will create uneven demand. The same Malaysian may trade down on essentials, pay more for convenience and spend generously on experiences reflecting identity or belonging. Context, not demographics, will determine demand.

Three shifts stand out.

First, brands must distinguish signals from noise. Economic uncertainty will change sentiment, but not every movement represents a lasting shift. More data will not automatically produce clarity. Advantage will come from identifying what matters and shortening the

...brands must distinguish signals from noise...

Darren Yuen

distance between sensing change and acting.

Second, brand building and commercial performance must operate as one system.

As businesses scrutinise expenditure, marketing must protect demand while creating future growth. This is not an argument for short-termism. It requires strategies connecting brand meaning with action across entertainment, social influence, search, commerce and retail.

Third, brands must market to people and machines. Malaysia's investment in digitalisation, semiconductors and AI infrastructure will accelerate machine-mediated discovery.

Recommendation engines, retail algorithms and AI assistants influence consideration. Brands must be structured to be found, understood and recommended—not merely seen.

The winners will not have the largest budgets. They will connect intelligence, interpret change faster and act with conviction.

For agencies, the mandate is clear: simplify complexity, integrate media, creativity and commerce and transform signals into measurable growth.



NIZWANI SHAHAR – CEO, HAVAS MALAYSIA:

The remainder of 2026 will require businesses to stay agile while keeping a sharp focus on what has always mattered most: understanding people.

Economic uncertainty, changing consumer expectations and the rapid evolution of AI are already reshaping how brands connect with people.

For agencies, the opportunity isn't simply to adopt new technology, but to rethink how we use it to create better work and stronger outcomes for our clients.

At the heart of our business, though, are still great ideas. And that makes human creativity more important, not less. AI can help us work faster, uncover insights, and open new possibilities, but it can't replace empathy, cultural understanding or the instinct behind an idea that genuinely connects with people.

The agencies that get this balance right will be the ones that use AI to strengthen human creativity rather than replace it.

Clients are also looking for greater clarity in an increasingly

... AI can help us work faster, uncover insights, and open new possibilities, but it can't replace empathy, cultural understanding or the instinct behind an idea that genuinely connects with people...

Nizwani Shahar

complex landscape. They want partners who can connect the dots across data, strategy, creative and media, and turn that thinking into real business results.

That's where our Havas village model becomes particularly powerful, bringing together different capabilities and perspectives around a shared client challenge.

Ultimately, our role is to help brands navigate change with confidence and find new opportunities for growth along the way.



CLAUDIAN NAVIN STANISLAUS, BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIST:

The Economy Says 5%. Is AdEx (advertising expenditure) being asked the wrong question?

Malaysia's economy grew 6% in Q2, and the year looks likely to finish around 5%.

Normally, that should give advertisers confidence.

Yet AdEx remains subdued. The full-year AdEx forecast is RM4.24 billion, down 9.5%.

If Q4 represents last year's share, RM1.1 billion is a working number.

Working number; not receipt.

No single AdEx measure captures the market advertisers buy. Digital AdEx showed spending growing 24.8% in 2025, with social accounting for 46.3%. But money is also moving into platforms, commerce and environments not consistently reflected in reports.

Perhaps a declining AdEx no longer means what it once did. The money may not have disappeared; it may simply have moved out of sight.

That makes closing the loop essential.

... Election periods have historically lifted Malaysian AdEx. If politics adds another twist, spending may receive its expected boost...

Claudian Navin

Reach, impressions, views and clicks are useful. But if nothing changed, what did they prove?

Briefs are answered, KPIs met and accolades follow. Then another pitch is called, occasionally without the incumbent making the invitation list.

If the objectives were met, what was missing? Unless the objectives themselves did not matter.

Preference. Penetration. Sales. Repeat purchase. Margin. Growth.

These feel sacrilegious to mention, yet they are the outcomes businesses seek. Accountability need not mean immediacy, but eventually something should move.

Election periods have historically lifted Malaysian AdEx. If politics adds another twist, spending may receive its expected boost.

But does a shot in the arm mean the industry is healthier? Perhaps that is the question AdEx was never designed to answer.



AUDREY CHONG - CEO, DENTSU MALAYSIA:

Malaysia enters the second half of 2026 from a position of strength, supported by domestic demand, investment, technology and exports.

This gives us reason for cautious optimism. Yet, as an open economy, Malaysia remains exposed to volatility and geopolitical uncertainty, which can affect energy costs, supply chains, business confidence and consumer sentiment.

For our industry, the impact may be felt as much through confidence as economics. This is not necessarily a market in retreat, but one becoming more discerning.

Consumers may continue spending, while becoming more deliberate about what deserves their money.

Advertisers, too, may keep investing, but reassess priorities faster and demand accountability from every ringgit.

However, brands cannot optimise their way to lasting growth. They must create demand, relevance and preference.

Dentsu's Consumer Navigator for Q2 2026 found optimism in

... As AI makes optimisation and content production accessible, efficiency becomes less distinctive...

Audrey Chong

Malaysia early in the year, followed by significant moderation.

Spending capacity, however, remained resilient. Consumers will keep spending in H2, but brands must work harder to earn it.

Investment will move towards channels where impact is demonstrable.

Dentsu expects digital to capture 69% of advertising spend this year, led by retail media, CTV, video, social and digital OOH.

The danger is mistaking what is easiest to measure for what is most valuable to build.

As AI makes optimisation and content production accessible, efficiency becomes less distinctive. Creativity, cultural understanding and compelling ideas will command a premium.

The H2 opportunity is to invest with conviction, connecting creativity, media, data, technology and commerce around how Malaysians live, spend and engage.



JO YAU - GROUP CEO, INVICTUS BLUE:

The first half of 2026 challenged Malaysia's media industry, and I expect caution to continue into H2.

The impact is evident in agency billings. Advertisers are adopting a wait-and-see approach, while geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty add caution. Budgets are being tightened, delayed or released in phases as businesses become more selective about where they invest.

However, advertisers will not stop spending. They will expect every ringgit to work harder.

The biggest shift is from media outcomes to business outcomes. Reach, impressions, CPMs, engagement and views remain important, but they can no longer be the final KPI. Clients are asking tougher questions: Did it drive sales? Generate leads? Bring customers into the business?

Briefs are becoming more layered. What appears to be a media brief may represent a sales, conversion, customer acquisition or growth challenge.

During H2, I expect movement towards performance and

... This changes the agency's role. Clients do not need partners who respond to briefs or optimize media metrics. They need partners...

Jo Yau

conversion, alongside harder-working integrated ideas. Clients want ideas that build brands, generate engagement and move consumers closer to purchase.

There will be bright spots. Sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup and Formula 1 at Sepang can generate excitement and give brands reasons to invest. Yet purchasing visibility will not be enough. Brands must convert attention into consumer and commercial value.

This changes the agency's role. Clients do not need partners who respond to briefs or optimize media metrics. They need partners who understand business challenges and offer a differentiated perspective.

H2 may be a softer market, but it will distinguish media agencies from business partners.



LINDA HASSAN - FORMER GROUP CMO, DOMINO'S PIZZA MALAYSIA & SINGAPORE:

As Malaysia enters the second half of 2026, the narrative is one of resilient growth tempered by grassroots realities.

Media headlines highlight GDP resilience, sectoral expansion, and foreign investment inflows.

Yet, social media conversations reveal a more nuanced picture... concerns about cost of living, inclusivity, and the authenticity of brand engagement.

For marketing leaders, this duality is both a challenge and an opportunity.

Malaysia's economy grew 5.7% in the first half of 2026, outperforming expectations.

Analysts now forecast 4.1–4.6% growth for the second half, driven by Semiconductors & E&E exports riding the AI boom, Data Centres & ICT investments reshaping the investment landscape, tourism recovery, with Visit Malaysia 2026 targeting 47 million arrivals and domestic demand, supported by subsidies and aid packages.

... Analysts now forecast 4.1–4.6% growth for the second half, driven by Semiconductors & E&E exports riding the AI boom, Data Centres & ICT investments reshaping the investment landscape...

Linda Hassan

Risks remain... global uncertainties, inflationary pressures, and subsidy sustainability, but the fundamentals are strong.

While media celebrates growth, social media tells a different story. Budget 2026 reactions: Relief over STR/SARA aid and fuel subsidies, but anxiety about tax hikes and EPF restrictions. Cost of living, inclusivity, and cultural representation dominate conversations.

The success in Malaysia's second half of 2026 depends on bridging optimism with empathy.

Marketing leaders must leverage AI for personalisation while maintaining human authenticity, integrate cultural storytelling across Malaysia's diverse communities and balance growth narratives with cost-of-living sensitivity, positioning brands as allies of the rakyat.



KANESAN VELUPPILLAI, MANAGING DIRECTOR, MALAYSIA, WE. COMMUNICATIONS:

We are optimistic about the future. Momentum among our clients, in RFPs, strategic communications and advisory work, reflects organisations serious about transformation and seeking partners who understand its complexity.

Approaching our second anniversary, we see growth across technology, government, GLIC and consumer sectors. With Malaysia's push towards AI and digital infrastructure, we have evolved to meet demand. We no longer run traditional campaigns. We have become an AI-led consultancy combining communications thinking with practical solutions that create measurable impact.

Notable is the changing approach to discoverability. Generative Engine Optimisation is more than a new term; it is a business challenge. AI is reshaping how people find information, evaluate organisations and trust brands.

Our Future of Communications research found that seven in ten

... Trust makes this urgent. Fewer than 40% of Malaysians trust the news, meaning visibility alone is insufficient...

Kanesan Vellupillai

news searches end without a click, while 95% of AI citations originate from non-paid, earned sources. Clients want to understand how they can remain visible and credible.

Trust makes this urgent. Fewer than 40% of Malaysians trust the news, meaning visibility alone is insufficient. Brands must also be believed. That is the reputation economy, where strategic communications demonstrates its value.

Demand for training is growing. Boards want to understand AI, while teams need practical skills. Our AI Academy work across ASEAN and APAC shows organisations moving beyond curiosity towards implementation, translating ambition into measurable results.

Combining traditional communications with AI advisory services provides several avenues for growth. We expect this momentum to strengthen throughout the second half of 2026.



EILEEN OOI – PRESIDENT APAC, PHD:

Asia Pacific is moving beyond experimental technology adoption towards structural maturity. Marketers no longer ask agencies how to use emerging tools; they expect them to orchestrate capabilities and deliver measurable growth.

Despite global volatility, Asia remains resilient, with the Asian Development Bank forecasting 4–8% growth. Malaysia appears robust, with Bank Negara reporting 6% second-quarter GDP growth. This supports appetite for experimentation and digital innovation.

Three developments define H2...
AI as an Autonomous Planner: It is progressing beyond prompts to orchestrating workflows spanning insights, audience generation, media planning, predictive analytics, cross-channel optimisation and creative content. At PHD, we are building agentic capabilities extending beyond media plans, leveraging Omnicom's Omni intelligence platform and partnerships with more than 40 large language models.

MARKETING OPINIONS

Continuous shift to Authenticity:

As AI expands content volume and digital noise, consumer fatigue and signal loss will grow. Brands can build trust through first-party data practices and secure, governed Real IDs. Omnicom's Acxiom, with 2.6 billion Real ID datasets, helps clients strengthen insight and targeting. We have seen double-digit improvements in campaign effectiveness.

Rigorous ROI in a Cost-

Conscious Climate: The economic outlook remains positive, consumer sentiment is cautious and business leaders focused on bottom-line growth. Agencies must operate less like media buyers and more like strategic growth consultants, balancing brand building with precision marketing that generates results.

This will require agencies to redesign how teams, technology and data work together. Success will depend not merely on accessing more tools, but on connecting them through governance, objectives and accountable measurement.

Human judgement will remain essential for interpreting signals, challenging assumptions and ensuring automation serves meaningful commercial outcomes.

H2's outlook remains positive. The opportunity belongs to organisations replacing fragmentation with integration. The future combines agentic intelligence, data and technology as its spine, with human creativity at the centre.

... Human judgement will remain essential for interpreting signals, challenging assumptions and ensuring automation..

Eileen Ooi



PETER DE KRETSER – FOUNDER & CEO, GO COMMUNICATIONS:

When marketing wizard Ham, aka “The Reverend”, asks for commentary on the remaining months of 2026, one wonders whether he possesses a Max Verstappen-style inside track to a Malaysia Grand Prix podium finish.

Too often, we are sucked into the engines of a Qatari-built Air Force One and hurled towards the political, economic and mental negativity surrounding us.

... Has the world gone mad? We face global conflicts, local elections trembling on the horizon, and FIFA prepared to sell its governing soul...

Peter De Kretser

Like a World Cup match, the first half produced surprises. Brand confidence was weaker than in years, marketing trust was bamboozled by the AI revolution, and businesses adopted caution across budgets of every size.

Has the world gone mad? We face global conflicts, local elections trembling on the horizon, and FIFA prepared to sell its governing soul to the highest bidder.

Now comes the second half, when winners are decided by the final whistle. Can the team-oriented ethos and strategic skill of cup winners Spain show us the way?

Southeast Asia remains among the world's most attractive business destinations, with brands entering the market and marketing dollars to spend.

Meanwhile, AI integration is evolving from a battle cry into beneficial practice. Deployed, AI can handle the heavy lifting, giving humans more time to think creatively for brands—a luxury that has diminished.

Public relations and communications may be as old as farming, although dressed in countless modern guises. During uncertainty, brands can trust that an organic story remains powerful for building credibility cost-effectively.

Perhaps it is time to believe in fairy tales, champion positivity and hoist the trophy above our heads this Christmas.

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BABY 2 BOY
B2B IS BUSINESS
TO BUSINESS**





APPROVED HRD CORP
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AN AI WORKSHOP FOR LEADERS

DIFFERENTIATION IN THE



AGE OF AI

BY RAJIV LAL

27TH OCTOBER, 2026
KLGCC CONVENTION
CENTRE
ROOF GARDEN