



The Impact of Culture on Brand Building

NOVEMBER 2025

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INTRODUCTION

While the importance of brands engaging in culture is a topic that has been widely studied by academia and the marketing industry for many years, definitions can differ.

Our Definition of Culture... and a Common Misunderstanding

Most marketers are accustomed to thinking of “culture” as shorthand for multicultural marketing — that is, segmenting audiences by race, ethnicity, gender, or other demographic identifiers and then crafting targeted messaging. In this view, “culture” = a cohort box on the media plan.

But that’s not what we mean when we say culture.

In the spring of 2025, the ANA partnered with Dr. Marcus Collins, author of the book *For the Culture — The Power Behind What We Buy, What We Do, and Who We Want To Be*, to survey marketers and agency executives based upon his definition of culture as the operating system of human behavior: that is, the system of values, beliefs, traditions, and shared meanings that shape the way people see the world and behave within it. It’s not just “who” people are demographically; it’s what they believe, what they find sacred, what they reject, and what communities they embrace.

Think of sneakerheads, gamers, plant-based eaters, CrossFit devotees, K-pop fandoms, environmental activists, Swifties, Barbiecore fans, or even pickleball players. These are cultural communities bound not by race or gender, but by shared identity and meaning.

What This Means for You as a Marketer

If you adopt this definition, then what you do differently is shift from targeting cohorts based on what they are to engaging communities based on what they believe and do.

That requires:

- 1. Cultural Intelligence:** Go beyond surface demographics and immerse yourself in the values, artifacts, rituals, and language of the community. You can’t market to sneakerheads if you don’t understand drop culture, resell economics, and sneaker lore.
- 2. Signal Understanding Through Action:** Don’t just launch a campaign “for gen Z women” or “for Hispanics.” Instead, create work that participates in and contributes to the rituals, conversations, and artifacts of a culture. Nike doesn’t just advertise to runners; it builds tools, apps, and communities that help them run.
- 3. Build Resonance, Not Just Relevance:** Demographics may get you relevance (“This is for me”), but culture unlocks resonance (“This brand gets me and belongs to me”). Resonance is what drives identity formation and loyalty.
- 4. Reframe Segmentation:** Instead of slicing by race/gender/age, build segments around cultural meaning systems. What do your audiences care about? What values animate their behavior? How do they express membership in their cultural communities?

INTRODUCTION

A Practical Example

- **Traditional demographic targeting:** “We’re targeting Black women ages 18–34 with a haircare message.”
- **Cultural approach:** “We’re engaging with women who embrace natural hair as an expression of authenticity and resistance to Eurocentric beauty standards. That cultural belief spans race, geography, and even age cohorts. To serve them, we need to understand the rituals of protective styles, the language of curl patterns, and the values around self-expression.”

This paper provides the results of our survey and offers some practical advice as to how brands can successfully think about and embrace this expansive definition of culture.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative survey was fielded between April 16 and June 16, 2025, generating 160 qualified responses. About the respondents:

- 63 percent are client-side marketers.
- 71 percent are at job levels of director and higher.
- 35 percent are with companies which are primarily B2C, 27 percent are with companies which are primarily B2B, and 38 percent are with companies that are both B2C and B2B.
- 65 percent are with companies with a 2025 total annual U.S. media budget under \$100 million (includes only those respondents who identified a budget).

Details are in the appendix.

The full survey is [here](#).

Quantitative research was supplemented by in-depth qualitative interviews with 16 client-side marketers who took the survey.

Results of this research follow.

EMBRACING CULTURE IN BRAND STRATEGY

It can be hard work to blend business strategy with cultural commitment. For example, Patagonia is known for its environmentally friendly business practices. And rather than just saying its brand identity is about integrity, it goes further, ensuring its integrity drives the company's overall decision making. It's the brand's "why."

Once a company's "why" is articulated clearly and specifically, an organization must infuse that belief into all aspects of its business, not just marketing communications. It may be the driving force behind your marketing, but if your marketing and your customer experience aren't cohesive, that all-important authenticity erodes and consumers can become critical.

This is why there's a gap between knowing how important culture is in brand building and actually doing the work to embrace it: It requires rigorous consistency, and for all members of the organization to believe, understand, and act upon a company's brand principles in a singular way.

FINDING YOUR AUDIENCE

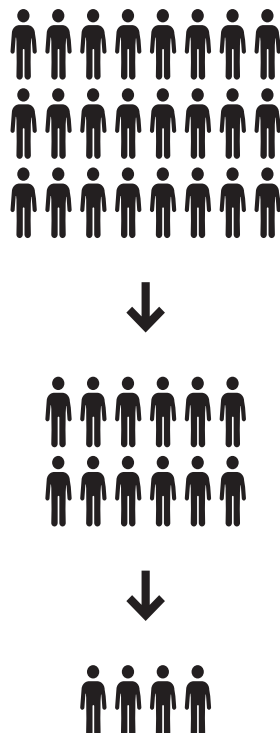
Traditional targeting, segmentation, and personas fall short in helping marketers understand consumers, because they ascribe monolithic qualities to individuals based on whatever status information is available. This does not allow for the impact of culture that draws seemingly disparate people together behind a brand. By reaching, engaging, and activating believers via shared culture instead, marketers can turn the traditional marketing funnel on its head.

Conventional marketing wisdom reinforces the importance of reach, proposing that we promote our message to the widest swath of potential customers possible, then sending them down the funnel with a variety of tactics and messages until a fraction of the upper funnel audience eventually converts.

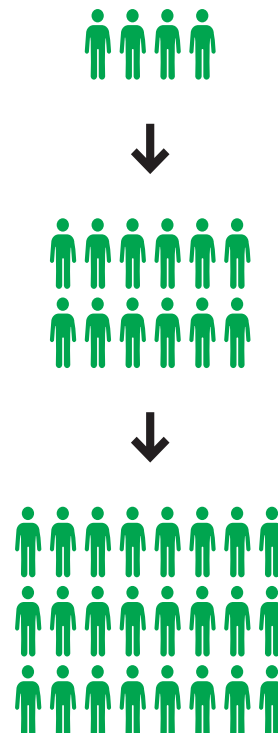
By understanding your brand's identity, and reaching the biggest brand believers, however, you can invert the funnel. Tapping into your brand's most aligned, fervent consumers reaches your direct connections, their connections, and so on, potentially generating exponential growth.

MARKETING FUNNEL VS. BRAND BELIEVERS (COLLINS, 2023)

TRADITIONAL FUNNEL



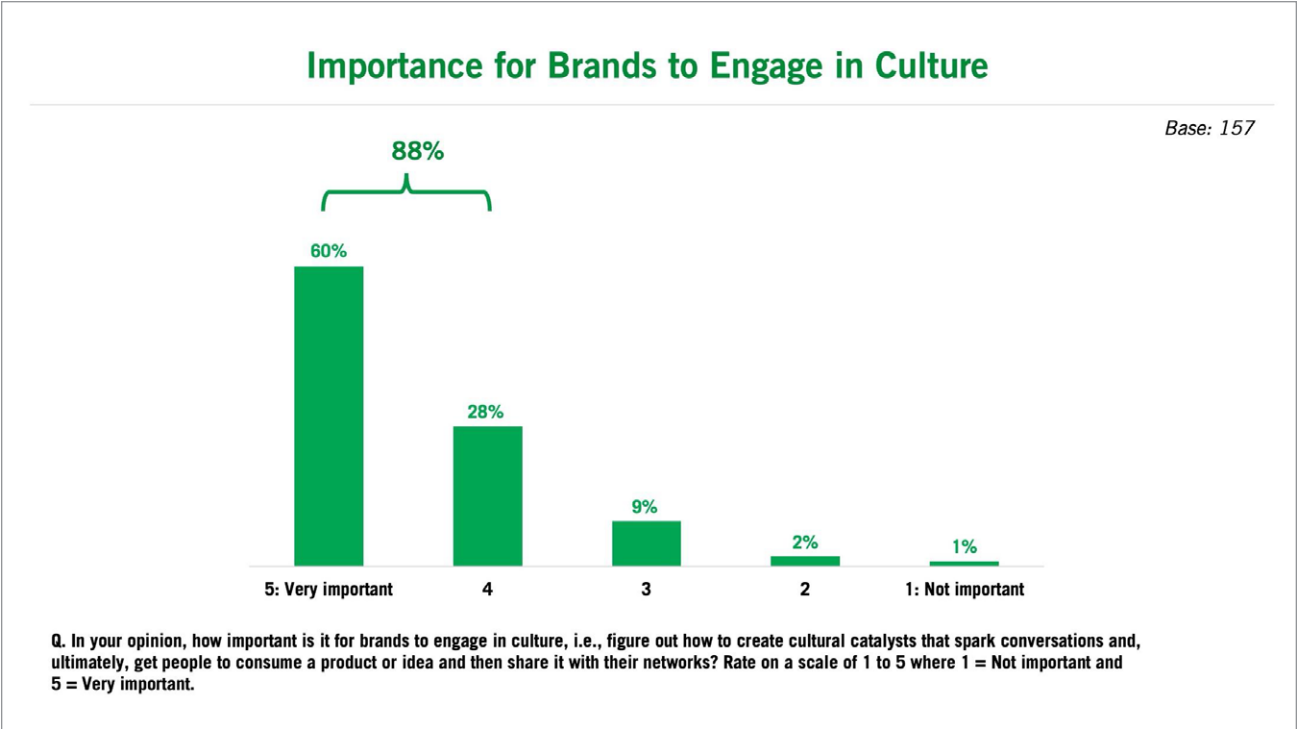
BRAND BELIEVERS



DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Importance of Brands Engaging in Culture

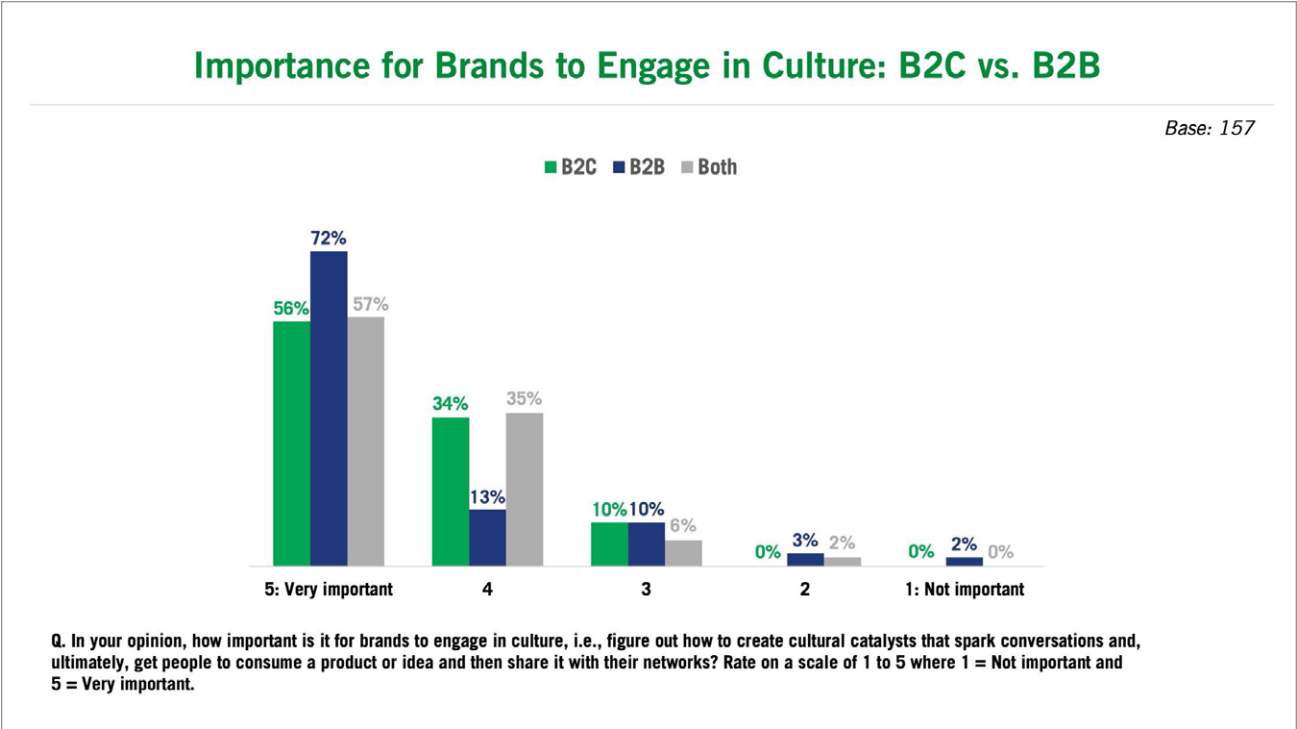
Eighty-eight percent of all survey respondents said that it is “very important” or “important” for brands to engage in culture.



DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Importance of Brands Engaging in Culture: B2C versus B2B

Respondents from both B2C and B2B companies believe that it’s important for brands to engage with culture.

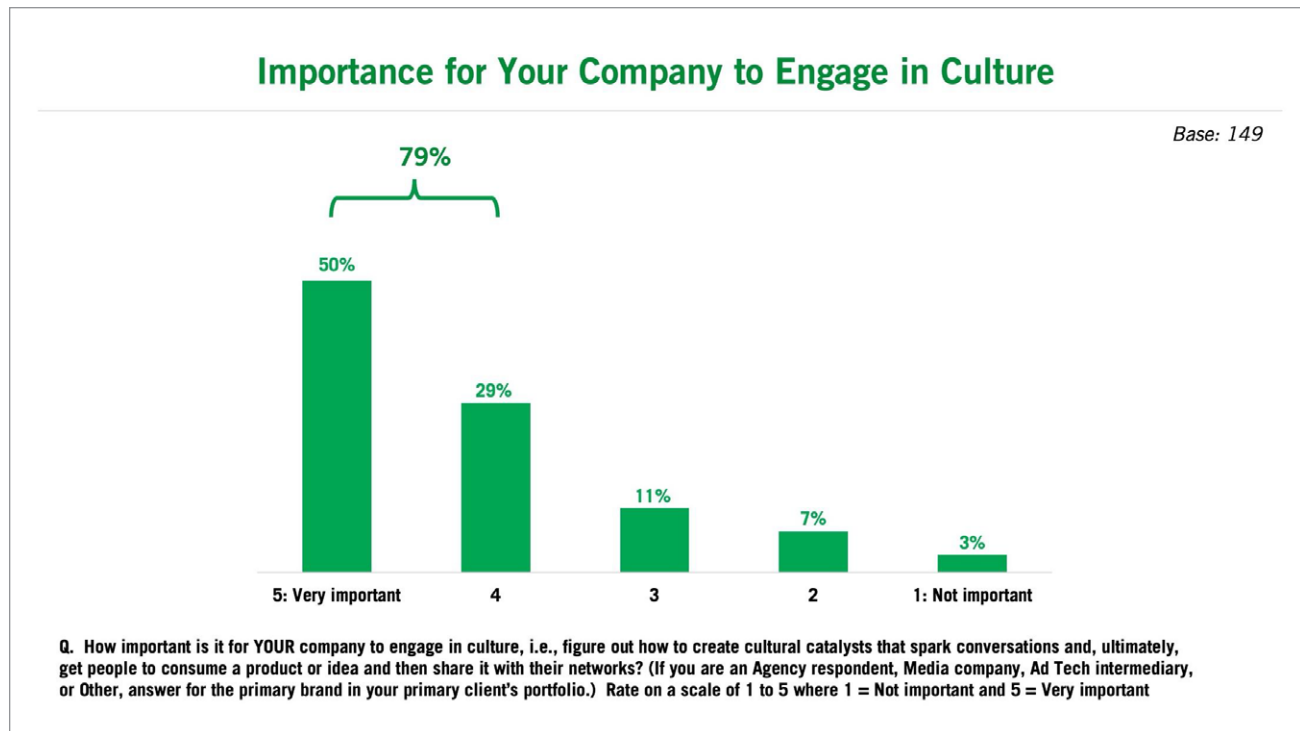


Ninety percent of B2C respondents, 85 percent of B2B respondents, and 92 percent of respondents with companies that are both B2C and B2B believe that engaging in culture is either “very important” or “important” for brands.

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Importance of “Your Company” Engaging in Culture

Likewise, 79 percent of all survey respondents rated it “very important” or “important” for their own brands to engage in culture.

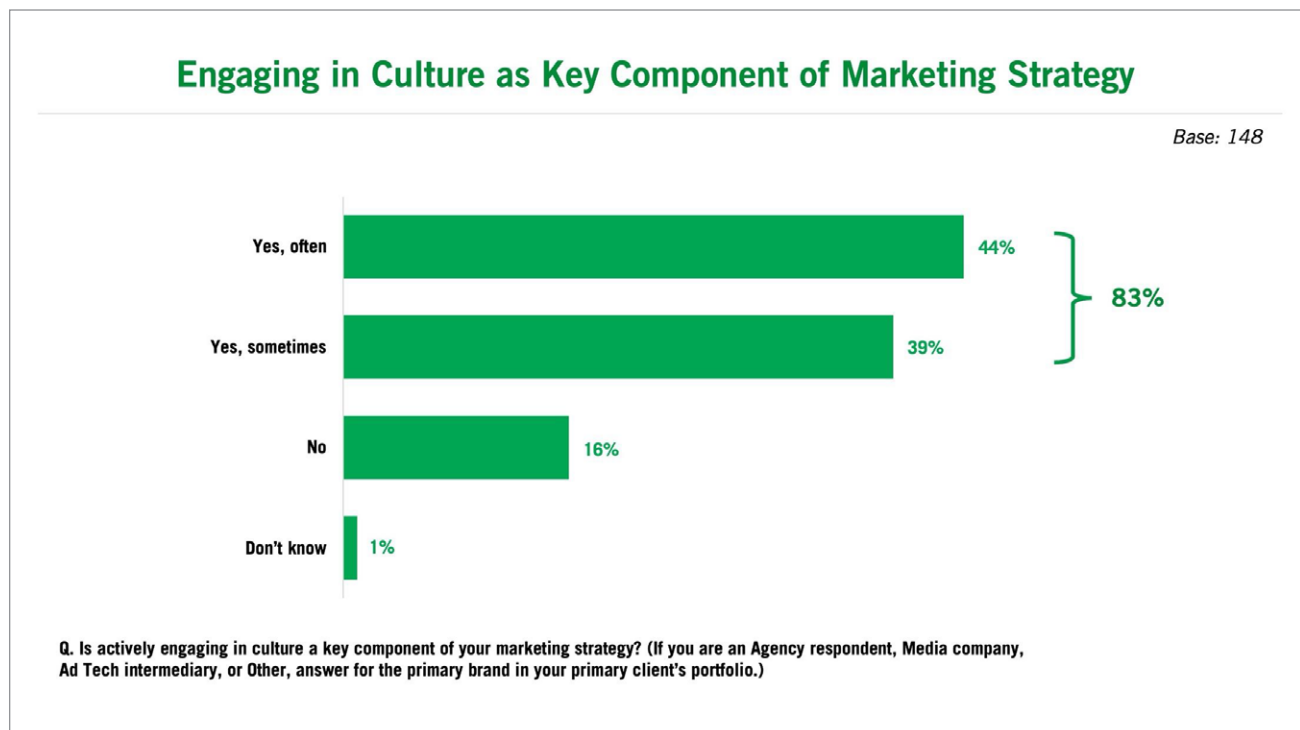


- 78 percent of B2C respondents believe that engaging in culture is important for their companies.
- 80 percent of B2B respondents believe that engaging in culture is important for their companies.
- 85 percent of respondents with companies that are both B2C and B2B believe likewise.

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Incidence of Respondents' Companies Actively Engaging In Culture

Next, we got into the execution and implementation of culture in a respondent's own company strategy. Eighty-three percent of respondents said that culture is "often" or "sometimes" a key part of their strategy.

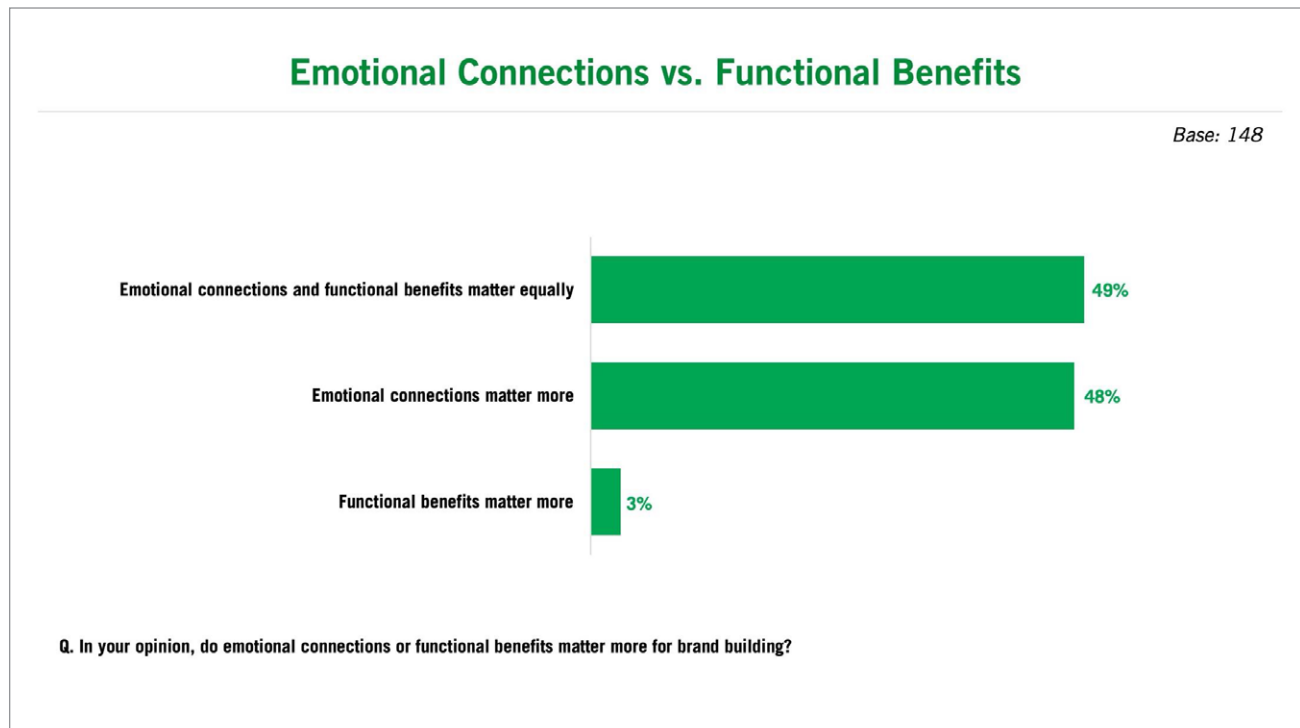


- 78 percent of B2C respondents state that culture is a key part of their strategy (42 percent "often" and 36 percent "sometimes").
- 90 percent of B2B respondents state that culture is a key part of their strategy (41 percent "often" and 49 percent "sometimes").
- 90 percent of respondents with companies that are both B2C and B2B state that culture is a key part of their strategy (49 percent "often" and 41 percent "sometimes").

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Which Is More Important: Emotional Connections or Functional Benefits?

Forty-eight percent of respondents said emotional connections matter more than functional benefits for brand building, 49 percent said they both matter equally, and only 3 percent rated functional benefits as more important than emotional connections.

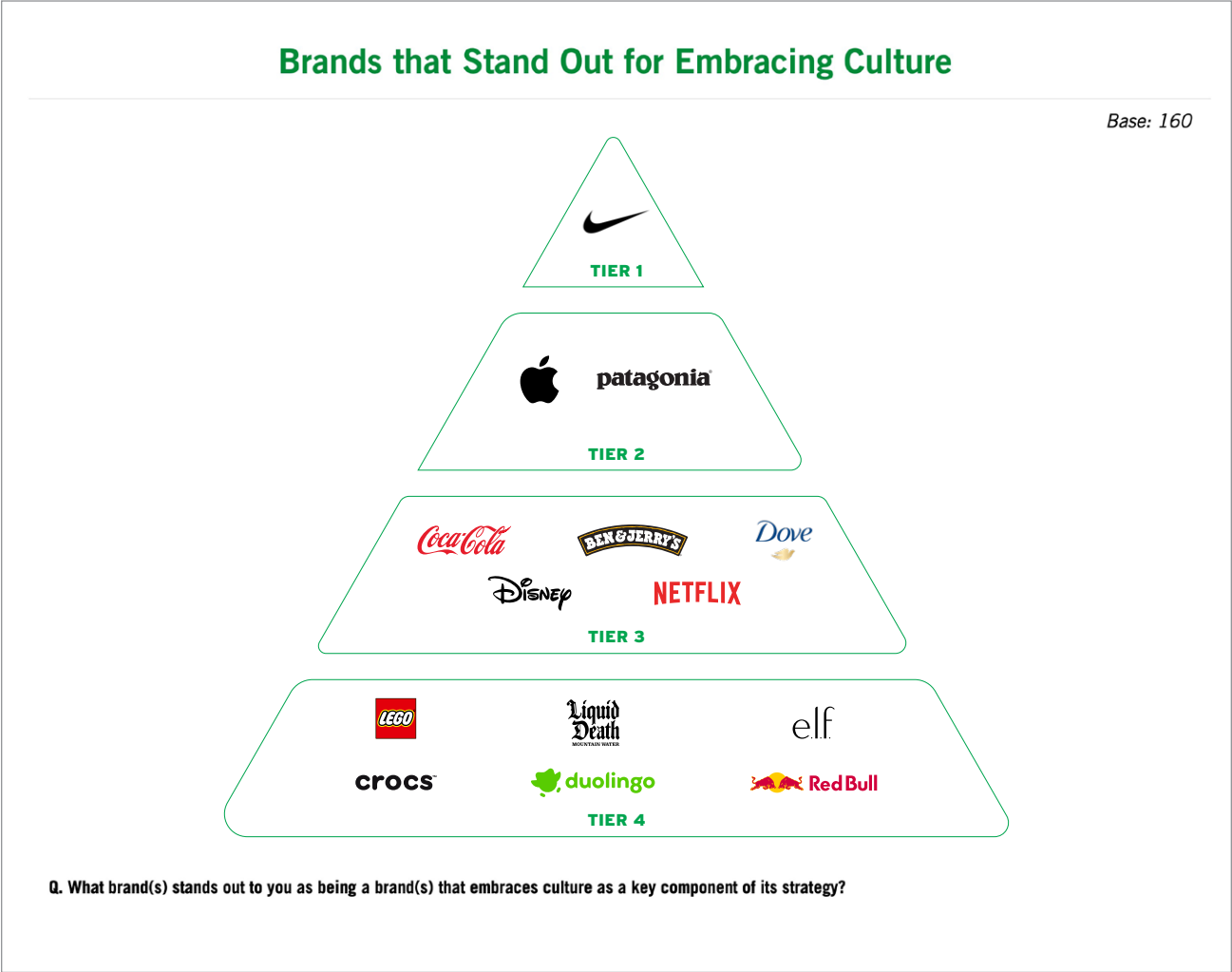


- 42 percent of B2C respondents reported that emotional connections and functional benefits matter equally, 54 percent said that emotional connections matter more, and 4 percent answered that functional benefits matter more.
- 56 percent of B2B respondents reported that emotional connections and functional benefits matter equally, 44 percent said emotional connections matter more, and no respondents answered that functional benefits matter more.
- No respondents said that emotional connections and functional benefits matter equally, 44 percent of respondents with companies that are both B2C and B2B reported that emotional connections matter more, and 56 percent answered that functional benefits matter more.

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Which Brands Do a Good Job Embracing Culture?

We also asked survey respondents to name brands that they feel “embrace culture as a key component of strategy” and explain why they chose those brands. Out of 160 responses to this open-ended question, certain brands emerged as clear frontrunners.



The brands most frequently mentioned have clear, prominent brand identities and deep emotional connections with their most loyal customers. Despite differing opinions from the survey respondents about what culture is and how much brands should embrace it, there is a prevailing sense of which brands get it right, suggesting that even though the industry has a hard time defining culture, we know it when we see it. It is interesting to note that all the above are predominantly B2C brands.

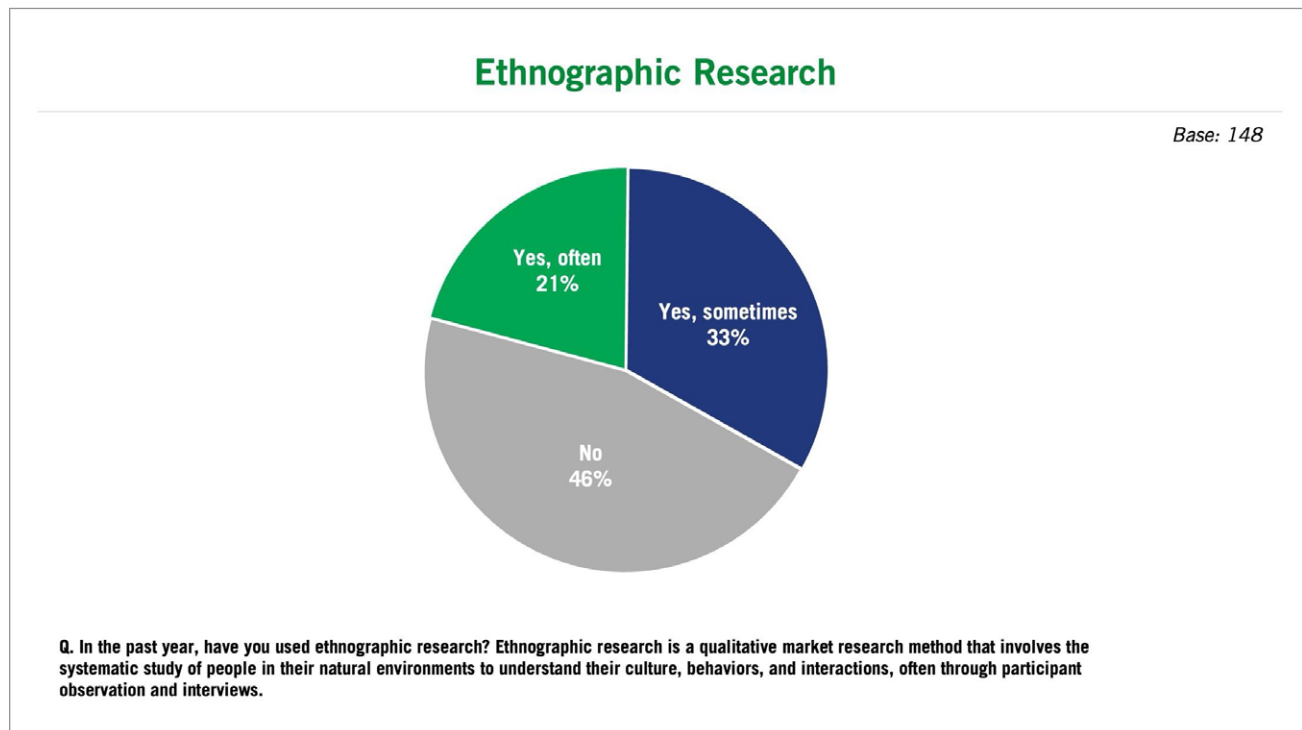
DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

According to Dr. Collins, the study of culture is an interpretive science, one that relies on qualitative research to explore the world through the lens of the community rather than your own. Research methods like ethnographies and netnographies provide ways in which we can systematically observe cultural happenings and understand these nuances to create the kind of cultural products that get people to act.

Use of Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research is a qualitative market research method that involves the systematic study of people in their natural environments to understand their culture, behaviors, and interactions, often through participant observation and interviews.

Fifty-four percent of respondents use ethnographic research — 33 percent “sometimes” and 21 percent “often.”

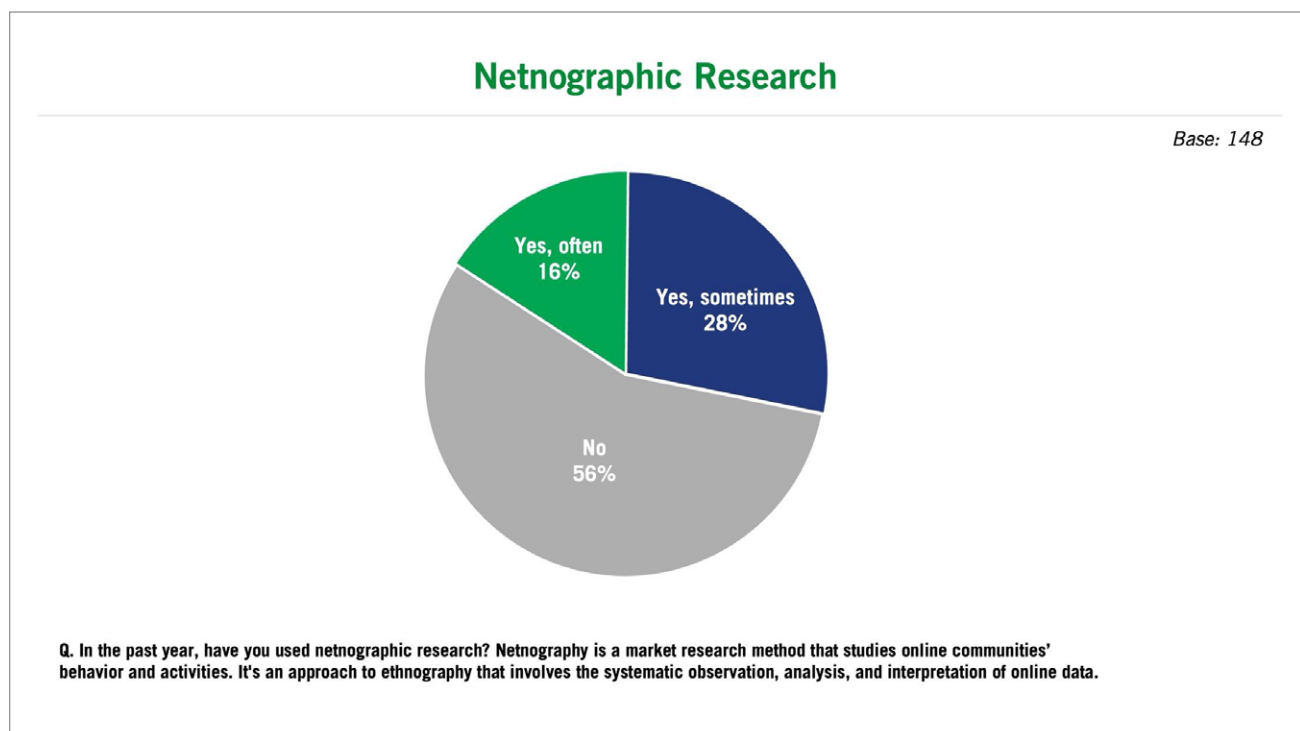


DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Use of Netnographic Research

Netnography is a market research method that studies online communities' behavior and activities. It's an approach to ethnography that involves the systematic observation, analysis, and interpretation of online data.

Forty-four percent of respondents use netnographic research — 28 percent “sometimes” and 16 percent “often.”



According to Dr. Collins, the growing prevalence of digital communication technologies like forums and social networking platforms has created new research sites. Netnographic studies use public information exchanged online via text, memes, videos, and other multimedia channels to observe how people “naturally behave” in their social environments. Generally, netnographies are unobtrusive in their ability to observe online communities and their subsequent exchanges as a means of understanding society.

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Select Respondent Verbatims from the Survey

The gap between knowing culture is important and actually embracing culture in brand strategy is where there's opportunity for marketers to apply Dr. Collins' teachings.

As covered in the previous sections, we asked:

“How important is it for brands to engage in culture?”

Eighty-eight percent of respondents said “important” or “very important.”

Some explanations from those who did not rate a 4 or 5 for this question (on a scale of 1–5, a 4 means “important” and a 5 is defined as “very important”):

“It depends on the brand and its goals; it's not necessary for every brand to embrace culture to be successful. I assume we are talking about pop culture.”

— Brand Manager, CPG (Rated a 3, neutral)

“I think it can be a differentiator, but it can also cut both ways. Sometimes being agnostic can benefit a company.”

— Associate Director, Creative Agency (Rated a 3, neutral)

“It depends on the industry and audience. It matters more in some than in others.”

— VP, Healthcare (Rated a 3, neutral)

“Brands can make a mistake when attempting to be culturally relevant, especially if it is inauthentic to the brand.”

— SVP, Marketing Technology (Rated a 2, less important)

“A brand should stay true to its core strengths. When companies pivot to engage with the latest social or cultural trends, especially those unrelated to their brand, they risk alienating segments of their customer base.”

— Marketing Consultant, Insurance (Rated a 1, not important)

DETAILED SURVEY FINDINGS

Select Respondent Verbatims from the Survey

A few patterns emerged in these open responses:

1. Culture was conflated with pop culture and trends.
 - **Our take:** Trends are not culture.
2. Brands can and should be able to opt out of engaging in culture.
 - **Our take:** No brand can opt out of engaging in culture. In several follow-up one-on-one interviews with survey respondents, when asked if any brands or categories of brand can choose not to engage with culture, all interviewees said no.
3. It's risky to engage in culture.
 - **Our take:** While this is a valid concern, brands can and do recover from cultural missteps all the time. Knowing when you've gotten it wrong and being honest with your customers about it goes a long way to rebuilding trust.

Even in the explanations from respondents who rated culture as important or very important for brands, the responses varied:

"I think connecting to culture is important as a secondary component of marketing. It is not more important than traditional advertising, which drives reach and builds memories. The brand can get lost in a cultural activation or can become polarizing."

— Senior Brand Marketing Manager, Pharmaceutical (Rated a 4, important)

"I think it is super important, but it is not the most important thing. A great product is still the most important thing, including packaging, consumption occasion, etc. It's the foundation. No amount of cultural relevance makes up for a subpar product or service."

— Senior Strategist, Creative Agency (Rated a 4, important)

"It is the only way to successfully and meaningfully connect with your audience."

— VP Multicultural Marketing, Telecommunications (Rated a 5, very important)

"As a digital marketer, we make the mistake of targeting the individual. I believe an individual does not exist outside of a cultural sphere, and that this hyper-targeting approach was an over-correction in response to mass marketing."

— Director, Entertainment and Media (Rated a 5, very important)

"In a sea of competition, culture is your core differentiator."

— SVP, Spirits and Alcohol (Rated a 5, very important)

FIVE TIPS FOR ENGAGING WITH CULTURE (THE RIGHT WAY)

1. Build for Curiosity and Fluency

It's one thing to be open to other cultural perspectives. It's quite another to actually understand them. Intimacy matters. Understanding how the culture you want to engage translates the world and makes meaning is critical to your ability to connect with them. If your team doesn't fully understand the codes, context, or emotional texture of the culture you're seeking to engage, you'll run the risk of potential communication incongruity in your marketing activity.

Bringing the voice of your target into the room to understand who they are and how they see the world will help you become a greater part of their lives.

2. To Thine Own Self Be True

Singer Lauryn Hill said it best: “How you gonna win if you ain’t right within?” A brand’s point of view — its conviction — is the vehicle by which it’s granted permission to engage in cultural moments.

Ask: Do we have something meaningful to contribute based on what we believe? If not, it’s probably best that we don’t weigh in on the conversation.

3. Co-Create, Don’t Just Co-Opt

Invite culture-makers to shape the work with you, early and meaningfully. Partner with artists, influencers, creators, and community leaders — not just as endorsers, but as co-authors. This ensures the work carries the emotional fingerprints of the culture it’s meant to reflect and helps avoid the trap of transactional tokenism.

Some of the most resonant brand work happens when you relinquish control and co-create with real people, not just personas.

4. Act First, Advertise Second

Back up any cultural message with action that proves you’re not just marketing — you’re meaning it. Whether that’s product innovation, investment in the community, or internal policy shifts, cultural engagement without substance is noise. Today’s audiences have too much fluency to fall for surface-level storytelling.

You can’t “campaign” your way to credibility. You have to live it.

5. Think Long-Term Impact, Not Short-Term Virality

Plan for sustained engagement, not one-and-done stunts. Culture moves fast, but true cultural resonance is earned slowly. Focus on building lasting presence, not just a flash of relevance. Create a roadmap of recurring moments that allow your brand to grow with a community over time.

It’s not about trending. It’s about mattering. And that takes time.

CONCLUSION

In his book, Dr. Collins refers to a Jay-Z lyric from 2001: “I do it for my culture.”

Whether or not we recognize it, all consumers do it for their culture, and every brand needs to determine how to tackle its place in it. What is true, says Dr. Collins, is that “as leaders and marketers, we have to deepen our concept of culture beyond the colloquial if we are to fully harness the power of culture and its influence” on the products consumers buy, the behaviors they adopt, and the brands they choose. Only then can brands be on the right side of culture.

CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

McDonald's x Shania Twain: Nostalgia Served Fresh

In 2024, McDonald's Canada found an unexpected cultural spark by teaming up with country icon Shania Twain. Rather than simply celebrating a celebrity partnership, the brand used Twain's return to her hometown of Timmins, Ontario to tap into a deep cultural truth: the joy of nostalgia and national pride in authentic, feel-good moments.

Challenge

McDonald's Canada faced a familiar brand challenge: how to maintain cultural relevance and emotional connection in a market where fast food is seen as transactional and impersonal. The brand needed to remind Canadians that McDonald's is not just a place to eat, but part of shared life experiences and memories.

Insight

Canadians have a soft spot for authentic hometown pride. Shania Twain represents not just celebrity, but a relatable Canadian success story — someone who became a big celebrity but still feels connected to her roots. McDonald's recognized the cultural opportunity to reframe its brand through the same emotional lens: global yet deeply local.

Strategy

The idea was simple but powerful: celebrate Twain's homecoming by transforming the Timmins McDonald's into a moment of national joy. The brand launched a limited-time "Shania Meal," hosted surprise appearances, and dropped nostalgic merchandise.

Execution

McDonald's leaned into content storytelling across social, local broadcast, and digital platforms. Videos showed real reactions from Timmins residents, fans lining up at the restaurant, and Twain herself sharing personal stories about growing up in Canada. The campaign tone was fun, humble, and heartwarming — a rare blend of celebrity and community storytelling.



CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

McDonald's x Shania Twain: Nostalgia Served Fresh

Results

The campaign generated over 50 million social impressions in its first week, with McDonald's Canada seeing a measurable lift in positive sentiment and brand love scores. The activation also drove a 14 percent spike in local sales during the campaign window and became one of the most talked-about brand moments on Canadian social media that quarter.

Cultural Learning

This case showed how a global brand can tap into culture by starting local — not through edgy social commentary or divisive causes, but by reminding people why the brand feels personal to them. Nostalgia, when done authentically, can be a powerful bridge between brand and community.

Note: This case study was created from publicly-available information and imagery.

CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

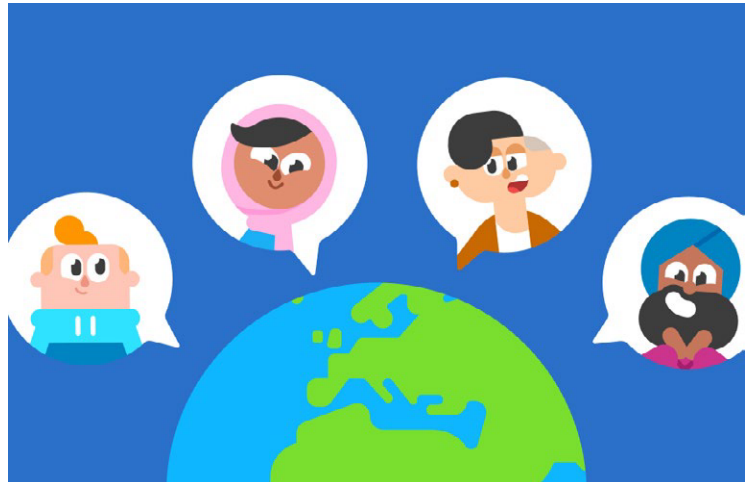
Duolingo: Speaking the Language of Culture

Background

Duolingo faced a challenge in 2021 shared by many tech-driven education brands: high awareness, but low emotional connection. The app was widely used but not loved. Traditional performance marketing wasn't enough. Duolingo needed to make language learning feel cultural, not instructional.

The Cultural Opportunity

Social media had become less about polished content and more about participation. Audiences rewarded brands that joined cultural conversations playfully and authentically. Duolingo saw that TikTok culture — fast-moving, irreverent, self-referential — mirrored the way people actually learn and joke about learning languages. Instead of trying to control the message, Duolingo decided to speak the language of the internet.



What Duolingo Did

- **Turned a Mascot into a Meme:** The brand's green owl, "Duo," evolved from a static logo into a mischievous cultural character who chases users for missed lessons, flirts with influencers, reacts to trending sounds, and parodies pop culture moments.
- **Prioritized Cultural Relevance Over Product Messaging:** Instead of explaining features, Duolingo's social team focused on entertainment and participation. Example: playful videos referencing "Dua Lipa" and humorous reminders about lesson streaks.
- **Acted Like a Creator, Not a Brand:** Duolingo's TikTok content was filmed on phones, not sets. Posts were spontaneous, low-production, and self-aware, matching the native tone of the platform.
- **Reacted in Real Time:** The social team monitored emerging memes, challenges, and sound trends daily, often producing reactive videos within hours. This kept Duolingo present in the conversation, not just commenting on it days later.

CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

Duolingo: Speaking the Language of Culture

The Results

- TikTok followers grew from under 100,000 to over 10 million in two years.
- Engagement rates were among the highest of any brand account on the platform.
- Earned media coverage from *Ad Age*, *The Drum*, and *Fast Company* framed Duolingo as a model for how to “act like a person, not a company.”
- Brand love scores and retention increased. Users reported that Duolingo felt “fun” and “approachable,” not academic or rigid.

Why It Worked

- **Cultural Fluency, Not Cultural Appropriation:** Rather than borrowing from identity or politics, Duolingo embraced internet culture itself: humor, irony, speed, and play.
- **Consistency of Character:** The brand’s owl persona provided continuity even as the content changed tone or topic.
- **Authenticity > Perfection:** By being intentionally unpolished, Duolingo made a billion-dollar platform feel like a friend in your feed.
- **Empathy for the Audience:** The brand understood its users’ humor and habits — procrastination, streak anxiety, pop fandom — and used them as shared jokes rather than selling points.

The Lesson for Marketers

Duolingo didn’t just “join culture.” It became part of it by aligning brand behavior with the rhythms of digital life. The takeaway: You don’t have to chase culture. You have to speak its language.

Note: This case study was created from publicly-available information and imagery.

CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

Gap: “Better in Denim” Campaign

Background

In 2025, Gap was seeking to reassert its cultural relevance after years of inconsistent brand identity and declining sales. The “Better in Denim” campaign was designed to reconnect the brand with culture through a powerful return to its roots in denim — a symbol of style, self-expression, and everyday authenticity.



The Cultural Opportunity/Insight

Denim occupies a timeless cultural space: universal, personal, and cross-generational. Gap identified that denim could once again serve as its cultural anchor. By combining nostalgia with reinvention, the brand saw an opportunity to reclaim its place in the fashion conversation. Rather than leaning on celebrity endorsement alone, the campaign sought to make denim itself the cultural hero.

What Gap Did

- **Bold, Visually Rich Creative:** The campaign featured girl group Katseye dancing in Gap denim to Kelis’s “Milkshake.” The execution mixed movement, music, and fashion to evoke a sense of playful confidence. The visual identity was colorful, kinetic, and unmistakably Gap.
- **Viral-First Distribution Strategy:** The brand focused on share-first content rather than polished traditional ads. It seeded edits, behind-the-scenes clips, and dance remixes on TikTok and YouTube, inviting participation from creators and fans.
- **Scaled Momentum and Messaging Consistency:** The campaign rolled out globally with regional adaptations. All activations, from influencer collaborations to in-store merchandising, reinforced denim as the centerpiece of Gap’s style.

Results and Impact

- **Viral Reach:** Over 20 million views in the first three days; over 400 million views and eight billion total impressions overall (source: Gap CEO, Q2 2025 earnings call).
- **Sales Lift:** Gap reported a 4 percent year-over-year increase in comparable sales following the campaign launch.
- **Cultural Perception Shift:** The campaign was described by Gap’s CEO as a “cultural takeover,” signaling renewed brand relevance.
- **Social Momentum:** The campaign became one of the top fashion-related searches on TikTok, extending its cultural footprint well beyond paid media.

CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

Gap: “Better in Denim” Campaign

Why It Worked

- **Anchored in Brand DNA:** Gap leaned into its authentic core (denim) rather than chasing unrelated trends.
- **Cultural Participation:** By connecting fashion with music and dance, the brand participated in, rather than interrupted, cultural conversations.
- **Visual Energy and Remixability:** The creative was bold, dynamic, and sharable, encouraging organic amplification.
- **Real Results:** Unlike many viral moments, Gap translated cultural heat into measurable sales and brand sentiment improvements.

The Lesson for Marketers

Gap’s “Better in Denim” demonstrates how brands can reclaim cultural relevance not by chasing trends, but by amplifying their authentic heritage through modern expression. The takeaway: Culture rewards brands that know who they are and express it boldly.

Note: This case study was created from publicly-available information and imagery.

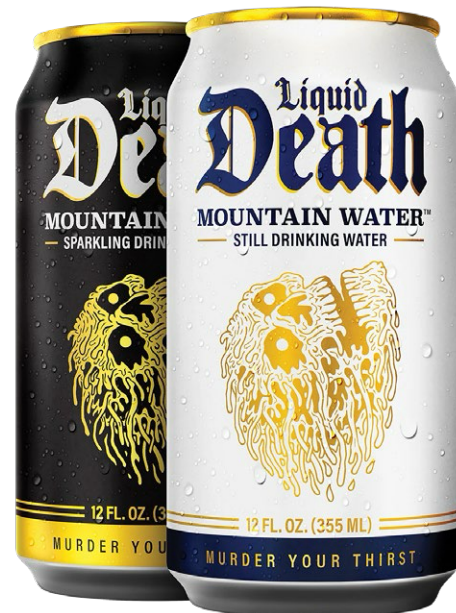
CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

Liquid Death: Turning Water Into a Cultural Phenomenon

Brand and Context

Liquid Death launched in 2019 as a canned water brand wrapped in the visual language of punk, skate, and heavy metal culture. Its premise was simple but subversive: take the most boring beverage imaginable — water — and market it like a band, not a brand.

In a market dominated by serene mountains and minimalist labels, Liquid Death's irreverent voice and dark humor made it feel fresh, rebellious, and unmistakably modern. In just five years, it has become a \$1.4 billion brand, selling millions of cans across the U.S. and abroad, with cultural relevance far beyond beverage aisles.



What They Did

- **Adopt the Aesthetic of Subculture, Not Corporate Culture**

From the skull logo to the gothic typography to the phrase “Murder Your Thirst,” Liquid Death was designed to look like it belonged at a metal show, not a yoga retreat. The brand built credibility by borrowing the language and iconography of underground culture — something no beverage brand had done at scale.

- **Treat the Brand Like an Entertainment Studio**

Liquid Death doesn't just sell water; it produces content experiences. The company has released fake horror movies, comedy sketches, and even a metal album of screaming celebrity voices. These projects position the brand as a cultural creator, not an advertiser — the kind of thing people choose to watch, share, and discuss.

- **Master Internet-Native Humor**

The brand's tone — absurd, darkly funny, self-aware — mirrors the irony-driven sensibility of online culture. Every tweet, video, and stunt feels designed for virality. Even their FAQ page reads like a stand-up set. This fluency in digital humor allows Liquid Death to move nimbly through meme cycles without feeling like a corporate interloper.

- **Use Merch and Collabs as Cultural Badges**

Beyond beverages, Liquid Death has built a thriving merchandise business: hoodies, skate decks, posters, collectible cans — even limited-edition drops with musicians and streetwear brands. Fans wear the merch as a symbol of shared humor and attitude, not hydration. In doing so, Liquid Death turned brand affinity into lifestyle affiliation.

- **Flip the Script on “Virtue” Marketing**

While many brands rely on wellness tropes or earnest sustainability messaging, Liquid Death winks at those conventions. It still supports sustainability — its cans are infinitely

CASE STUDIES FROM THE ANA

Liquid Death: Turning Water Into a Cultural Phenomenon

recyclable — but delivers the message through parody. (“Death to Plastic” is both advocacy and anti-advertising.) The tone earns attention precisely because it avoids sanctimony.

- **Stay Consistent While Scaling Up**

As the brand grew into grocery chains and convenience stores, its tone never softened. From Super Bowl ads to co-branded skate tours, Liquid Death continues to move through culture with the same irreverence that built its cult following. This consistency keeps early adopters loyal while attracting new fans who want to be part of the joke.

Outcomes and Signals of Success

- **Cultural Penetration**

Liquid Death is now shorthand for “brand with attitude.” It’s referenced in memes, late-night comedy, and fan content. It became one of the most talked-about beverage brands on social media, with hundreds of millions of impressions generated organically.

- **Business Growth**

The company surpassed \$263 million in retail sales in 2023 and secured new funding at a \$1.4 billion valuation in 2024. Its revenue growth outpaces nearly every other brand in the category.

- **Merchandise as Media**

Liquid Death’s merch sales and collabs generate both revenue and cultural reach, extending its brand presence into fashion, music, and art communities.

- **Audience Devotion**

The brand’s fans act like a community, not just consumers, spreading its content voluntarily, defending it online, and collecting its limited drops like souvenirs from a movement.

Why This Case “Got Culture Right”

- **It Built a Cultural World, Not a Campaign**

Liquid Death isn’t chasing trends: It created a universe that merges punk humor, meme culture, and irreverent commentary on marketing itself.

- **It Speaks in the Language of Its Audience**

Every touchpoint — from can copy to YouTube skits — feels fluent in internet culture’s tone and pace. It never tries to be funny; it is funny.

- **It Turned Product Into Participation**

Fans wear, share, and perform the brand — because Liquid Death lets them in on the joke. The audience feels like collaborators, not targets.

- **It Made Consistency the New Rebellion**

In an era when brands often sanitize their edge as they scale, Liquid Death stayed loud, weird, and unapologetic — proving that irreverence can be both distinctive and sustainable.

Note: This case study was created from publicly-available information and imagery.

POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE FIELD

We asked client-side and agency executives to provide their POVs on culture. In the following pages, you will find two narratives from the following executives:

- **Danielle Spikener**, Head of IMPACT at KraftHeinz, and **Aki Spicer**, Managing Director/Cashmere and EVP Strategy/Monks North America
- **Dave Perry**, Vice President of Digital and Social Marketing at Paramount+, and **Dani Mariano**, CEO at Razorfish US

POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Five Reasons Brands Miss the Mark on Culture

And how to build the systems that let you move with intention, not just react to trends

Too often, marketers confuse being “in culture” with being “on trend.” But there’s a distinct difference: trends are the waves, while culture is the ocean. You may catch a wave, but if you don’t understand the ocean you’re swimming in, you’re bound to drown. Here’s why and what to do about it.

1. Lack of Authentic Audience Insight

Even when teams have a clear sense of their audience, it’s often through the corporate gaze — one rooted in category consumption or product behavior. Rarely are audiences defined by their cultural behaviors, outlooks, or motivations. Too many of the tools we use today do not offer a culture-forward lens. Culture often drives behavior long before it’s even captured as “data” by traditional trackers. Marketers are trained for simplification, but culture lives in complexity, and until we embrace that, we’ll keep missing what actually matters to people.

The most resonant cultural work comes from deeply understanding the lived context behind behavior. And when we do that well, we unlock scale. Because scale without substance doesn’t stick.

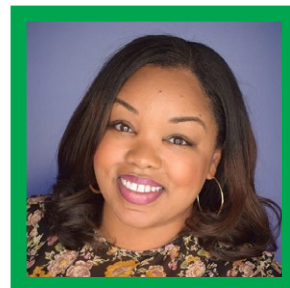
Push your data leads and strategists toward a more nuanced “culturegraphics” perspective, not just broad demographics and consumption patterns, so your team can identify meaningful cues that guide cultural opportunity.

2. Misaligned to Corporate Rhythms

Our business planning rhythms — from production calendars to briefs and messaging testing — often move too slowly for culture’s tempo. These cadences aren’t always wrong, but they’re rarely flexible enough to pivot when opportunity strikes.

We need to choreograph the necessary business rhythms with cultural currency.

But choreography only works when the brand knows who it is. That self-awareness — the brand’s purpose, positioning, and priorities — becomes the anchor. It’s what allows teams to move fast without losing alignment. You don’t have to find yourself in every moment when you’ve already done the work of defining yourself. That clarity is what earns you the right to step onto the cultural dance floor.



Danielle Spikener
Head of IMPACT
KraftHeinz



Aki Spicer
Managing Director at Cashmere and
EVP Strategy at Monks NA

POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Five Reasons Brands Miss the Mark on Culture

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3. Seeing vs. Knowing “What’s Goin’ On”

Many teams lack both the philosophical respect and the operational methods for simply staying connected.

Let’s be real: A lot of brand ideas start with “Wouldn’t this be cool?” in a conference room, not through intentional cultural listening. But when you’re trying to connect deeply with culture, surface-level trend spotting isn’t enough.

Even with the right staff casting or a loose strategy in place, real success in cultural engagement demands a culture of daily curiosity. That means looking up, glancing around, listening closely, and leaving space for cultural inputs to inspire every stage of the work.

From daily listening models and social conversations to quarterly forecasts and cultural pulse reports, brands need systems that allow them to interpret and act on what’s actually happening in people’s lives.

We have to marry awareness with context because true cultural fluency means understanding the why behind what we’re seeing. It’s what helps us know when to participate, when to listen, and when to respectfully mind our business. That discernment doesn’t come from a social feed. It comes from comprehension.

4. Miscasting vs. Rightcasting Teams

There is often a palpable staffing gap on many brand teams for accessing folks who live, breathe, and know culture.

Consider who on your team brings the Z/Alpha, multicultural, sub-cultural-community insights and lived experiences to bear on your briefs. Literally look around your room. Is your casting singular and fleeting (i.e., we’ve got “a culture person”) or multiple and varied? We all bring a cultural competency from different perspectives, almost like a magazine staff with journalists who cover different “beats.”

For example, if generation Z (the cohort we are often chasing) is “the most diverse ever” and predominantly consists of multicultural majorities, failing to staff teams with many of these experienced eyes and hands and deprioritizing lived experience will only set you back. Often, rightcasting for culture brings folks who hold nuance and fluency that isn’t found only in the “data.” Rightcasting puts the right eyes on the work. It puts folks with empathy for the culture in the room. It puts the right background experience in the negotiation, ensuring your ideas strike the right chords.

POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Five Reasons Brands Miss the Mark on Culture

And how to build the systems that let you move with intention, not just react to trends

Rightcasting isn't just about representation. It's about ensuring the cultural POV shaping the work is informed from the inside out. When lived experience has power, not just presence, the work hits differently. It carries that unmistakable “Okay braaand, we see youuu” energy that only happens when the output reflects deep, rooted fluency, not just a surface-level translation of cultural data.

5. One-Sided “Collaborations”

From hard lines of siloed responsibility across organizations and agencies to missed opportunities to build energy from fandoms, we still treat partnerships like endorsement reads.

Instead, we need to see influence as a craft, and culture as a collaborator.

True co-creation is rooted in reciprocity. When it's done right, the brand, the partner, and the culture all feel like something valuable was added, even if it's something they didn't know they needed. Everyone's better for it.

Transactional partnerships, on the other hand, are self-serving by design. The brand wants ROI, the partner wants a check, and the culture is left to decode what's real — or keep scrolling.

The [DJ Mustard x Heinz](#) collaboration worked because it was bigger than a pun. It wasn't just a gimmick — it was a meeting of shared values and craft between two tastemakers in their own right. It showed what's possible when culture isn't an audience to impress, but a community to be served.

Final Thought

Building a Cultural Operating System means embedding systems that center clarity and fluency into the everyday, and making it everyone's job. It's how we move from reacting to culture to actually showing up in alignment with it.

The future of marketing belongs to those willing to dive deeper into culture. That means changing how we behave so we stop chasing waves and start learning to swim with intention.

POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Gen Alpha Will Rewrite the Cultural Marketing Playbook

As new generations mature into economic powerhouses, every marketer or brand leader faces the same existential crisis: Stay plugged in or risk irrelevance. Never has this challenge been weightier than it is now, as generation Alpha (the demographic cohort born roughly between 2010 and 2024) is poised to flip the cultural table entirely.

Gen Alpha is the next frontier in marketing.

Alphas are growing up immersed in algorithmic entertainment, have full conversations with digital personas, and only know a world with same-day delivery. In short, the bar for innovation has been permanently raised. And with \$50 billion in spending power, Alphas aren't just watching trends happen. They're starting them.

Even more importantly, these new consumers are highly influential within their households: 49 percent of parents say their Alpha kids affect purchasing decisions.

And these kids don't just want toys and snacks; by age 13, they own as many devices as adults. They are hyper-aware of how brands behave, and expect maturity, purpose, and emotional resonance from the brands with which they engage.

Considering all this, it's time that everyone in the marketing flywheel reconsiders their approach to creating effective campaigns. Strategy, media buying, creative, production, events, lifecycle, and legal must all re-orient themselves based on how gen Alpha discovers, engages, and shares the products and services that enter their sphere. Marketers can't afford to wait until gen Alpha reaches adulthood; this cohort is already here, and they're already rewriting the rules.

It's easy to assume gen Alpha lives entirely online, but that's a dangerous oversimplification.

Yes, they're digital natives, but they're also deeply engaged in real life. In fact, studies show they prefer spending time with friends and family over passive screen time. They crave experiences and they're excited about offline activations that feel personal and social. Think less "traditional birthday party with cake and balloons" and more "birthday experience at Sephora with my closest friends." But don't expect these preteens to post about these experiences on their Instagram feeds; more likely than not, they're sharing the best moments solely with their friends on Snap.

This duality is key: Alphas want a digital experience that translates into real-world connection and vice versa. They aren't separating online and offline; they're blending them into one seamless experience. Campaigns that recognize this and build immersive, hybrid social and physical touchpoints will win.



Dani Mariano
CEO
Razorfish US



Dave Perry
VP of Digital and Social Marketing
Paramount+

POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Gen Alpha Will Rewrite the Cultural Marketing Playbook

Alphas are speaking a different language.

To connect with gen Alpha, marketers must first understand that these kids are, quite literally, speaking a different language. It's ironic, absurd, hyper-specific, and often deeply unserious on the surface. Terms like slay, rizz, mid, skibidi, and cap/no cap may seem like internet nonsense to adults. But to them, these words hold cultural weight. It's uniquely theirs and provides a sense of membership in a tribe that needs to be treated with respect.

Our advice? Know the language, but don't fake fluency. Gen Alpha can smell a tourist from a mile away, and nothing screams "brand cringe" like trying to co-opt a trend you don't understand or have the credibility to leverage. The dreaded Steve Buscemi "Hello, fellow kids" meme where he's a middle-aged man trying to disguise himself (poorly) as a "fellow kid" is still alive and well. If you see this image in your comments, it's a sign you're in a danger zone.

The most successful brands embed themselves into moments of daily joy, creativity, or expression; they don't interrupt or appropriate them. They partner with creators in ways that feel collaborative, not transactional.

Most importantly, they understand that Alphas themselves are creators. From memes to YouTube videos to TikToks, Alphas are producing content faster than you can — and in many cases, better than you can, too.

The antidote is not simply "to be authentic."

Authenticity is not a buzzword or a marketing tactic. It's the price of admission and a fundamental expectation from gen Alpha. They have finely-tuned radar for brands which are just "checking the box." And they can, and will, mobilize against inauthentic efforts in the blink of an eye. They live in a world governed by algorithms that reward friction, conflict, and novelty, and an effective take-down of a brand carries its own cachet.

But this generation doesn't file complaints. Whether it's a review, a meme, a takedown, or a remix, they know how to express themselves, and they know how to make content travel. Missteps don't get ignored; they get amplified.

Alphas are immersed in content 24/7.

Making content is second nature to Alphas, and more often than not, professional creators are their role models. They follow people who feel real, relatable, funny, or creatively inspiring. This means your brand's presence in their world needs to feel like part of a creator's universe, not a commercial break.

Which brings us to a final but crucial point: Your campaign can't be a one-way broadcast. It has to be a conversation — one that invites gen Alpha to participate and make it their own.

POINTS OF VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Gen Alpha Will Rewrite the Cultural Marketing Playbook

The millennial or gen Z playbooks won't work.

You need a different strategy for reaching gen Alpha than just dusting off an old playbook. This generation is different — not just because of the tools they use, but because of how they use them. They're not just digital natives; they're cultural architects, and they intuitively understand how to build. Thank you, Minecraft.

If what we've said here feels completely unfamiliar, or if you're not already deeply aware of the culture, the humor, or the values of your gen Alpha audience, don't just farm it out to those who do. Invite Alphas in to educate you and your entire organization on their ways and culture.

Because, in the end, gen Alpha is revolutionizing cultural marketing. Brands that want to succeed must stop trying to jump on the latest trend and start building relationships if they want to be a relevant part of culture. Recognize your cultural biases, and your limited knowledge of Alphas, and start listening to find out what you don't know. Your brand's success depends on it.

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- **Dani Mariano**, CEO at Razorfish US
- **Dave Perry**, Vice President of Digital and Social Marketing at Paramount+
- **Aki Spicer**, Managing Director at Cashmere and EVP Strategy at Monks North America
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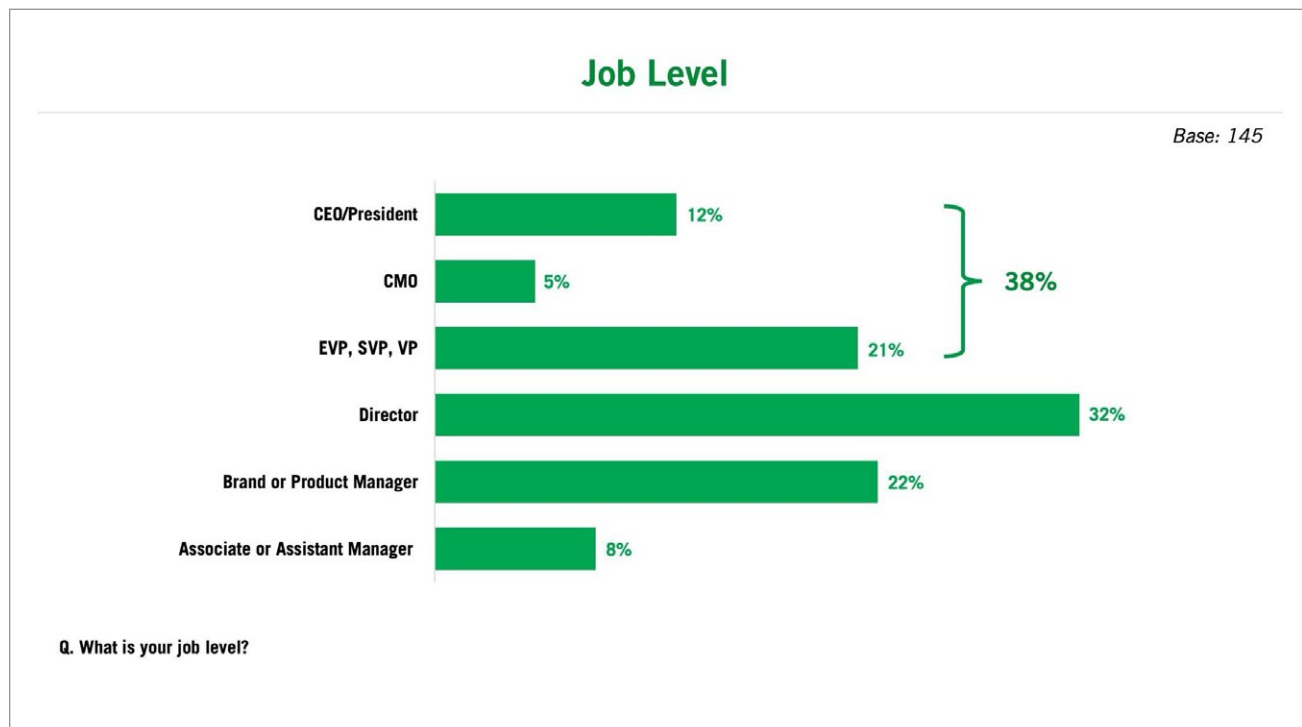
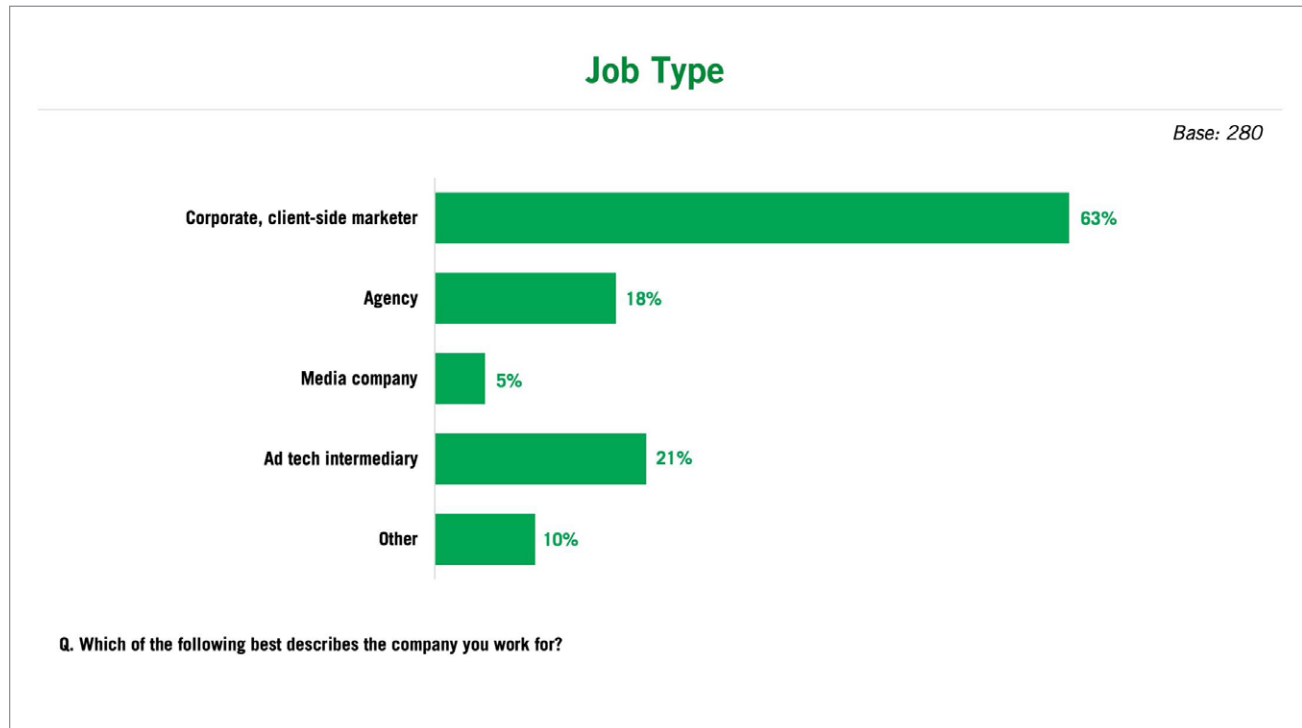
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The 2025 “The Impact of Culture on Brand-Building” study is published by the [ANA Brand Practice](#) in conjunction with **Dr. Marcus Collins**, professor of marketing, University of Michigan Ross School of Business and author of *For the Culture — The Power Behind What We Buy, What We Do, and Who We Want to Be*.

APPENDIX

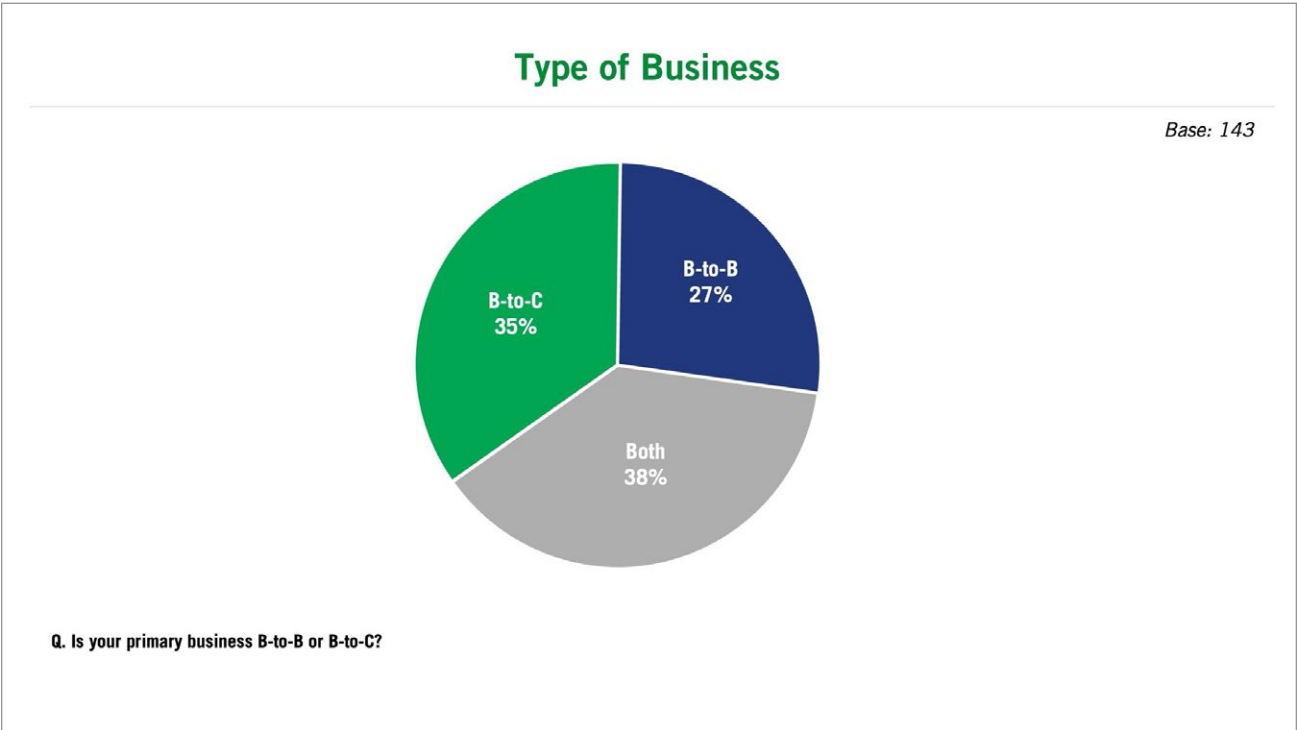
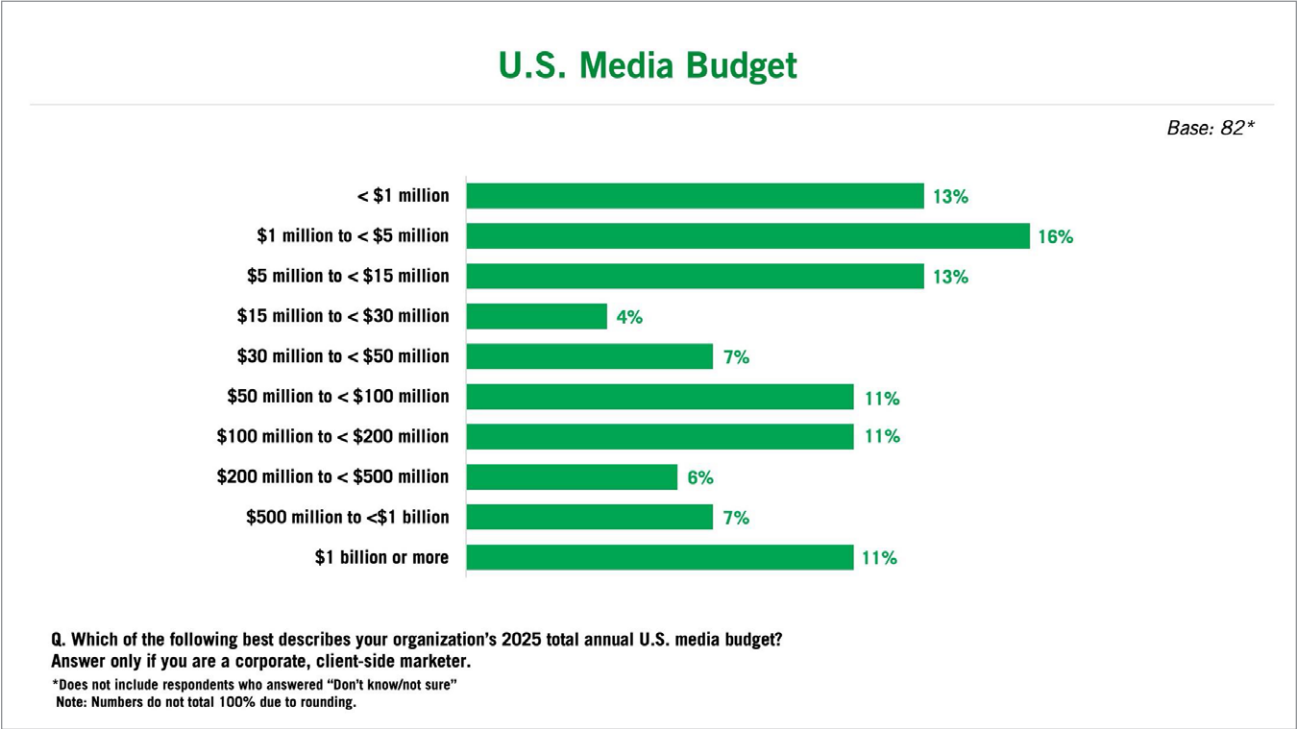
APPENDIX

Profile of respondents who participated in the study



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Profile of respondents who participated in the study



ABOUT THE ANA

The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) is the definitive voice of the marketing industry. Since 1910, we have set and advanced the agenda for marketing transformation, connecting over 1,600 member companies to an influential global network, insights, and resources that drive growth. Our members represent 20,000 brands and \$400 billion in annual marketing investment. Through industry-leading research, the CMO Growth Council, and our proprietary Growth Agenda and Practices, the ANA empowers marketers to shape the future of marketing and create lasting impact for their organizations and the industry.

ABOUT DR. MARCUS COLLINS

Dr. Marcus Collins is an award-winning marketer and cultural translator. He is a marketing professor at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan; the author of the best-selling book, *For The Culture: The Power Behind What We Buy, What We Do, and Who We Want To Be*; and the former chief strategy officer at Wieden+Kennedy, New York.

Dr. Collins is an inductee into the American Advertising Federation's Advertising Hall of Achievement and a recipient of the Thinkers50 Radar Distinguished Achievement Award for the idea most likely to shape the future of business management. His strategies and creative contributions have led to the launch and success of the cultural resurgence of McDonald's, Google's "Real Tone" technology, the "Made In America" music festival, and the Brooklyn Nets' move from New Jersey to New York, among other cultural moments.

Before his advertising tenure, Dr. Collins worked on iTunes + Nike sports music initiatives at Apple and ran digital strategy for Beyoncé. He writes a column for Forbes CMO Network and contributes to business scholarship.



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