When marketing faces its share of emerging variants

We call this the **Blackbox Run.**

Total reading time: Approx. 20 mins

Last year we **spoke** about how marketing had to chart new territories in the not-so-new normal. The plot thickens now. As we enter yet another year of disruption, the age-old theory will still apply: *survival of the fittest*. Customers are asking, rather demanding, newer, faster, bigger. As CMOs, marketers and brand guardians, how will we keep up? And keep up good?

The urgency is unmistakable. Organizations are shaping Chief Carbon Officers[1] or applauding the efforts of the Chief Diversity Officers.[2] In the past year, companies that scored high on transparency and credibility were the ones that brought fresh answers to the repeated questions. After all, in a post-truth world fatigued with uncertainty, customers expect nuance and care, even as they scrutinize how their favorite companies engage on the big questions of diversity, ecology, ethics, and wellness.

But the buck doesn't stop there. In a continuous effort to keep listening to customers, like a therapist to its patient, the onus of providing guiding answers and solutions falls on marketers. The role of a marketer, as we know, is a constantly evolving one. Only this time, it will do so with night vision goggles.

1. https://www.fastcompany.com/90701314/an-80-billion-real-estate-company-just-named-its-first-chief-carbon-officer-heres-what-hell-do
2. https://www.fairplaytalks.com/2020/11/06/revealed-2020s-top-50-chief-diversity-officers/

In a future stranger than fiction, marketers need to adapt to a new reality

Munch on this. Who would have thought in a 'world-wide-wait' year, NASA would make oxygen on Mars, a human mind would wirelessly connect to a computer, electric cars would outsell diesel, the world's first 3D-printed school would open its 3D-printed doors, China would eliminate Malaria, and for the first time in history, an airline would operate a flight on 100 percent sustainable aviation fuel.

Of course, all this tells us something we always knew: technology accelerates faster than companies adapt, governments allow, and consumers adopt. Moreover, the gap is not static; it grows, often exponentially. And it doesn't end there. In fact, the existential gap creates a catch-up dynamic that can work either way – create fertile fields for innovations or spring waterloos for those who wait too long. **The same rules apply beyond technology.**

Be it prioritizing post-pandemic digital engagements, adapting to technology leaps, transitioning to sustainable operations, empowering WFX employees, exclusively positioning for D2C, or backing causes and consumers, the next wave of marketing innovations will come from teams that make sense of the on-rushing future.

Rahul Koul,
Co-founder, Zensciences

For marketers then, it isn't enough to pick blips on the radar or even string them together to see the emerging threat or opportunity. Today's need is more daunting: make sense so that one writes rules of engagement for a game not yet completely formulated, or worse - *formulated, yet not completely understood*.

WE CALL THIS THE
BLACKBOX RUN

A Blackbox Run in an industry or function is in play when the rules of engagement – because of emerging technology ecosystems and nascent societal shifts – aren't clear.

As these inflection arcs pan out, often across years, pioneers and early converts seize the moment – actually, a series of moments – to write the rules of the game by which it comes to be played in the future.

Remember marketing in the mid-1990s? At a time when brands didn't know what to make of the new kid on the block – the Internet – executives spent vast sums to clamber on the marketing superhighway. For a decade, confusion reigned. No one quite knew how marketing dollars spent on the Internet moved the sales needle.

That was a Blackbox Run.
And we face it again today.

From a Traditional Flow
(Adapting everything to predefined 'goals')
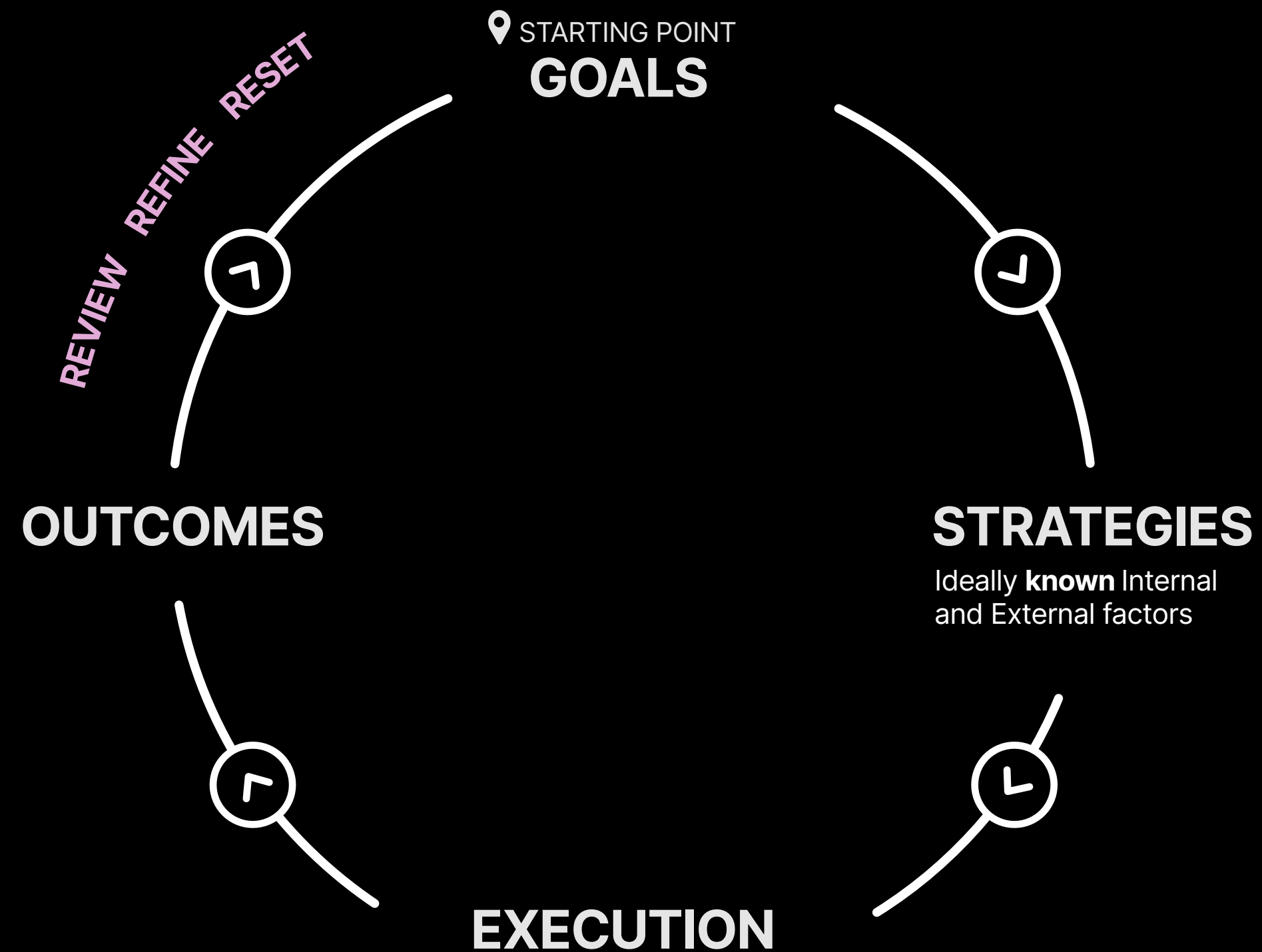
To a Blackbox Run of Constant Loops
(In this model you adapt constantly to the BLACKBOX, including redefining your goals)

STARTING POINT
GOALS

REVIEW REFINE RESET

OUTCOMES

STRATEGIES
Ideally **known** Internal
and External factors

EXECUTION

Technology & Platforms
Customer Dynamics
Trends

GOALS

OUTCOMES

STARTING POINT
THE BLACKBOX
(Unknown and
unexplored factors)

DISCOVERY LOOP

EXECUTION LOOP

IDEATION LOOP
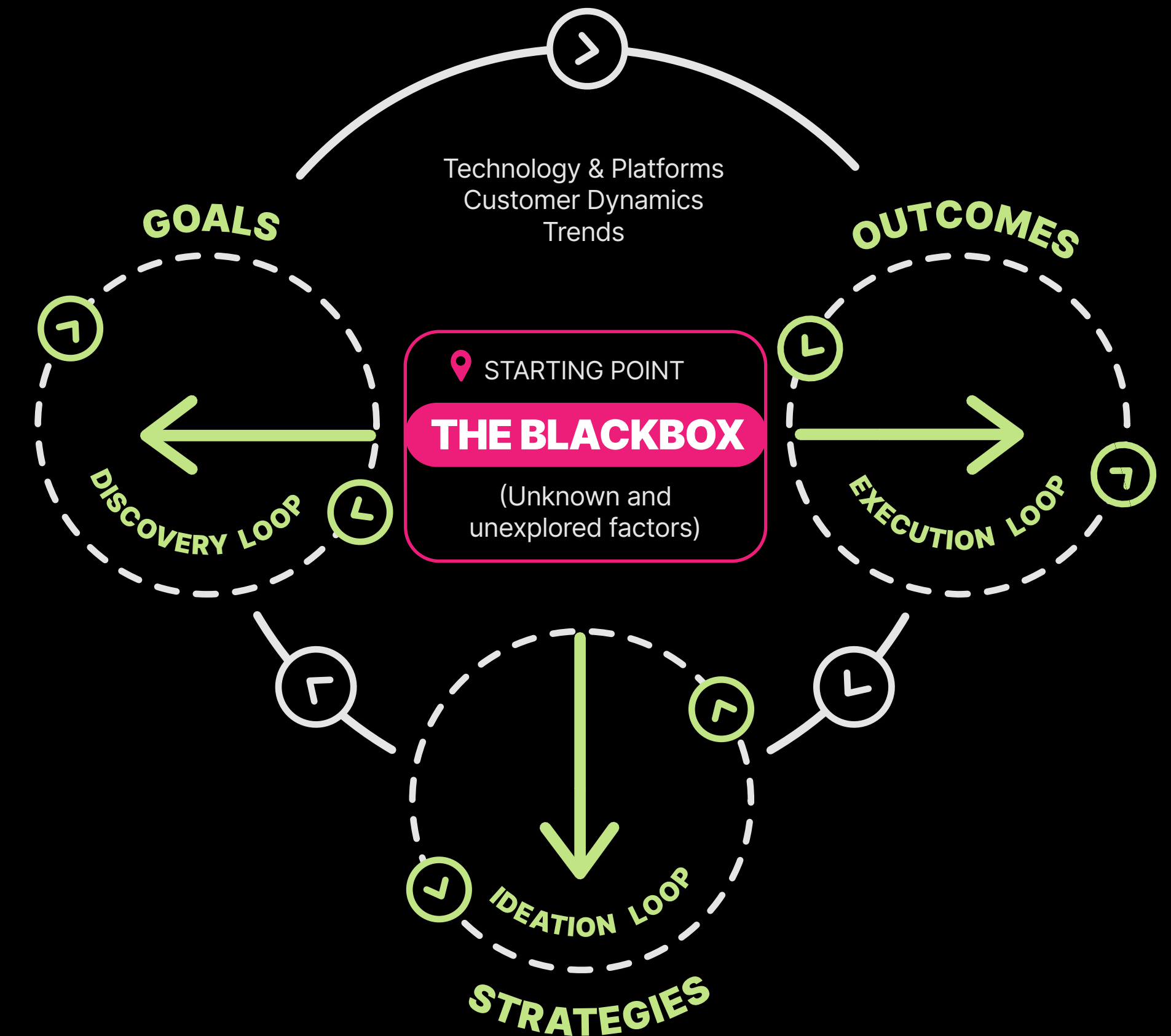
STRATEGIES

In a Blackbox Run, you must continue to build strategies and aim to provide customer satisfaction, even if you haven't learned the ropes yet. Like the phrase goes, you learn on the job. Here's the thing with this situation - you either enjoy a first-mover advantage or wow people with something radical (a little) later on. But doing nothing is not an option. Outside the Blackbox, you may have some guarantees with outcomes, but, as a marketer, it is important to understand and make your clients understand that with a Blackbox it is a constant loop of learning. The good part, however, is that at this point you will earn brownie points just for trying.

6

What does this mean in the marketing world today?

Firstly, leveraging Blackbox Runs is about establishing market primacy. But more importantly, it symbolizes a CMO's date with destiny. How?

Between the changing customer journeys and the ascendancy of digital influence (ergo, the dominance of the CIO-CDO-CXOs), CMOs (and marketers) find themselves extending beyond their traditionally defined roles. To mint new meaning, they must connect customers, channels, employees, brands and partners that raise a company's innovation mandate, in a game that doesn't have laws or rules. Think Squid Game. Only scarier. You must play the game. That ties us back to the report's initial premise: which is to respond precisely to the wide array of unknown questions customers pose, to which they expect brilliance in return.

Scripting the Blackbox Run trends

AND THE WAY FORWARD AS WE SEE IT

01

THE BUSINESS
OF EXPERIENCE

From CX to CX *plus*

80% of consumers who increased digital usage across channels during the pandemic expect to sustain these levels moving forward.[3]

CX is about optimizing customer touchpoints around products and services using CRM, front-end tech, marketing, services, and sales functions. This isn't something new to brands or marketers - what's new is the pace at which customer dynamics are changing. From #HeForShe to #CancelCulture, a single hashtag has the power to make brands change logos overnight.

Curating a great experience amidst all the mayhem and noise is where marketing finds itself in a Blackbox Run. While the strategy focus may differ for B2C and B2B brands, the line is becoming increasingly blurred with the common rule of thumb being - create a ***plus*** experience.

3. https://www.accenture.com/us-en/insights/retail/coronavirus-consumer-habits/

From products to purpose

Consider how fairness trumps food. Commission-free takeout apps and marketplaces for local restaurants now allow customers to wield their wallet-power in purpose-filled ways, in ways that define them.

Customer-obsessed organizations believe they can create hyper-relevant and real-time dynamic experiences when they solve human needs around a purpose.

From services to spirit

Airbnb didn't just create a disruptive business model, it owns the experience around informal tourism.

Netflix didn't just create or curate top-notch content, it owns experience around home entertainment.

Queen of Raw didn't just create a marketplace for reselling deadstock textiles, it owns the experience of circular fashion by reducing waste and carbon emissions.

### When you dress to NOT kill
A case study about Queen of Raw

85% of all textiles are dumped, and Britain alone bins **$17Bn** of clothes each year. Producing 10% of the planet's carbon emissions, and as the industry that consumes the second largest of the world's water supply, fashion is probably the most unsustainable industry that escapes our ire.

It is a vexing challenge. How then do companies come good on 'circular economy'? Taking on carbon-zero goals is one thing, but given the enormity of the challenge (waste is an issue across levels - design, production and delivery) - where and how do fashion enterprises start?

An ex-corporate Wall Street attorney, Stephanie Benedetto, co-founded 'Queen of Raw' as an online marketplace that matches buyers and sellers of unused fabric. Recently, she launched the platform's blockchain and ML-based tech engine for enterprise sellers to find and track excess material in their supply chain in real-time and match it to factories, retailers, designers, and other buyers.

The inventory now automatically moves to the Queen of Raw marketplace and is resold as profits. Plus, over time, with more data, the system intelligently analyzes where customers might find waste streams and report on the amount of water and toxins saved.

It just goes to show that a great experience is not about what products you offer but how uniquely they enable your customers to achieve outcomes essential to them.
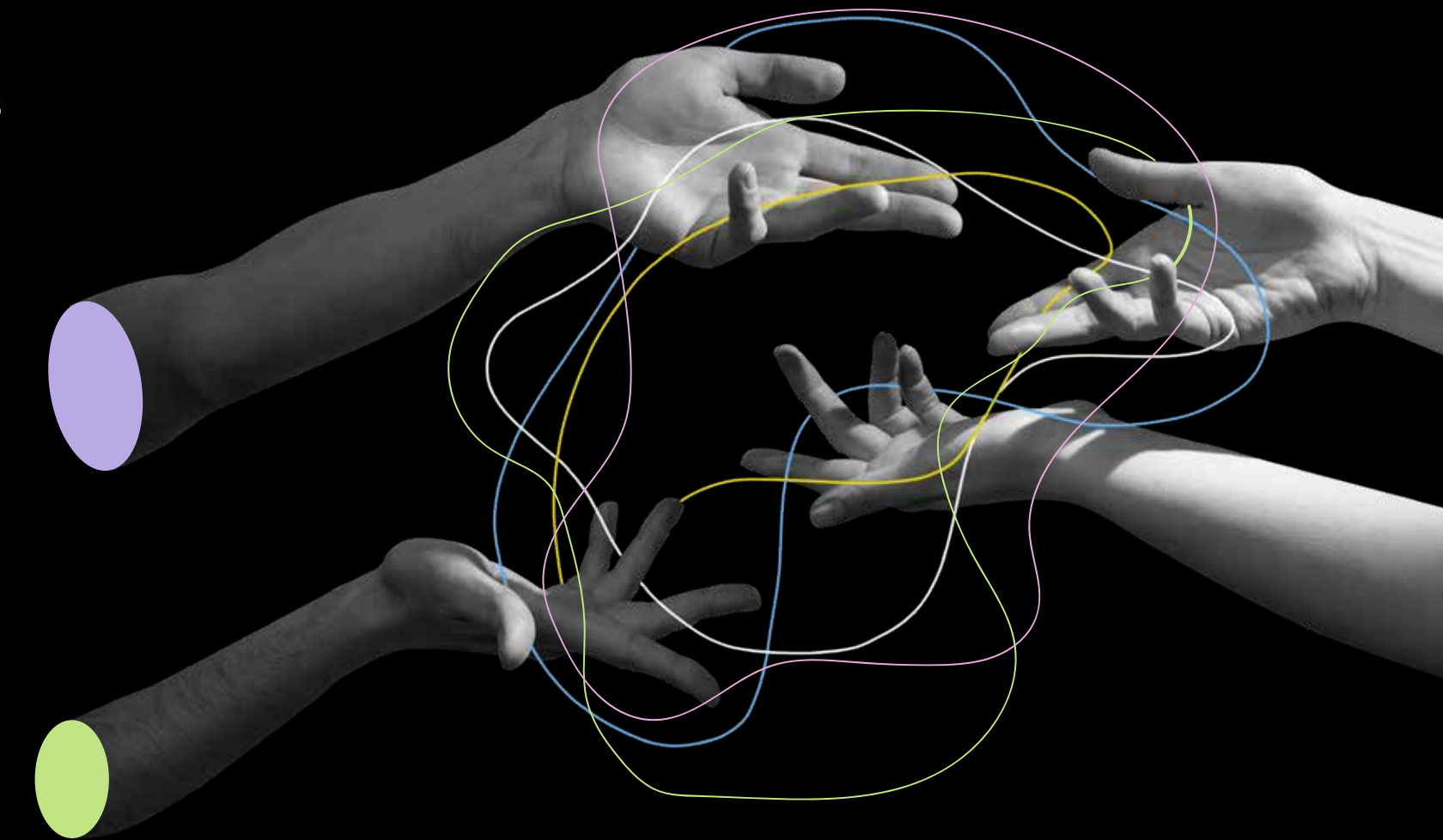
From self-promotion to storytelling

Content marketing, especially in the B2B scenario, has become one of the most important tools to reach out to customers.

GE went viral with its lettuce farming [4] and fighting-the-virus stories. While they told stories, people saw innovation - without GE having to promote itself.

Would you rather hear someone blowing their own horn (loudly at that) or simply listen to a story?

From care to convenience

51% of B2B buyers have moved online as a result of COVID. [5]

While the B2C sector has seen a huge jump in catering to their audience online, even in a pre-pandemic scenario, the B2B sector is still to catch up. Fact - Millennials and Gen-Z are also B2B buyers. This is the digital-hungry clique looking for ease in their buying experiences.

Moving the compass from profitability to purposeful experiences, if CMOs are to go beyond CX, they have to shift from making people want things to making things people want.
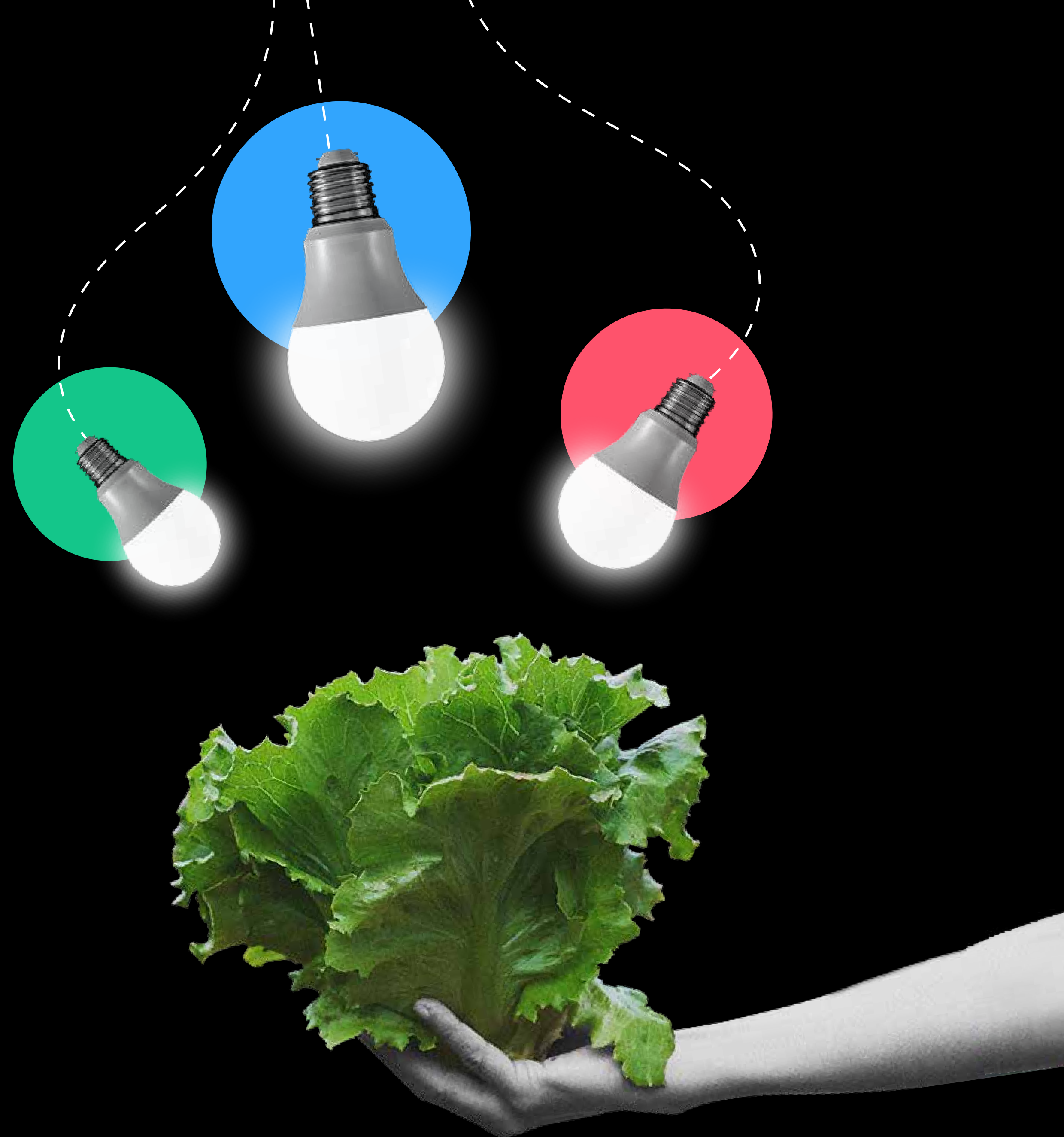
4. https://www.ge.com/news/reports/lettuce-see-the-future-led-lighting-helps-farming
5. https://visit.bloomreach.com/state-of-commerce-experience?_ga=2.81859990.1299145528.1641064185-1217936528.1641064185

02

THE PRIVACY PARADOX

Data and AI for the next-gen marketers

Earlier in 2021, Google, Apple, and others in the AdTech world promised that once third-party cookies are phased out, it will not build alternate identifiers to track individuals browsing across the web. Although, there is good news on the horizon.

Gartner predicts that by 2023, the **opt-out rate** for mobile app tracking will decline from 85% to 60%.[6] The bar is set high. On the one hand, post-pandemic consumers expect richer interconnected experiences even if they are more guarded in how their data is being used, and on the other hand, demand that their liquid behavior be accounted for (and accommodated). Marketers need to tread this paradox with great trepidation; all hinging on a very important factor - you guessed it - *trust*.

6. https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2021-12-02-gartner-predicts-the-opt-out-rate-for-mobile-app-trac

The new cookie-less web will favor the privacy-first, digitally sentient consumer.

This particular Blackbox Run is more of a concern for marketers desirous of creating differentiated and truly contextual customer experiences. Contextual experience, as we know, comes from data, but what do you do when that very gold mine becomes scarce? The short answer is aligning customer, category, and channel on insight-driven use-cases centered around what a customer defines as their purpose.

1. In a B2C scenario, you will need to show why and how data from customers is being used. Being transparent and giving them the option is a starting point.

2. In a B2B scenario, it gets a little easier (slightly). While the above rules still apply, having direct access to customers (in a pre and post-pandemic world) means that brands already have a trough of meaningful data.

After all, *data beats opinion.*

Numbers from a recent McKinsey study, anchored on B2Bs, highlighted the following.[7]

• 42% of outperformers generate more than half their revenues through digital channels (v/s 25% for the slow growers)

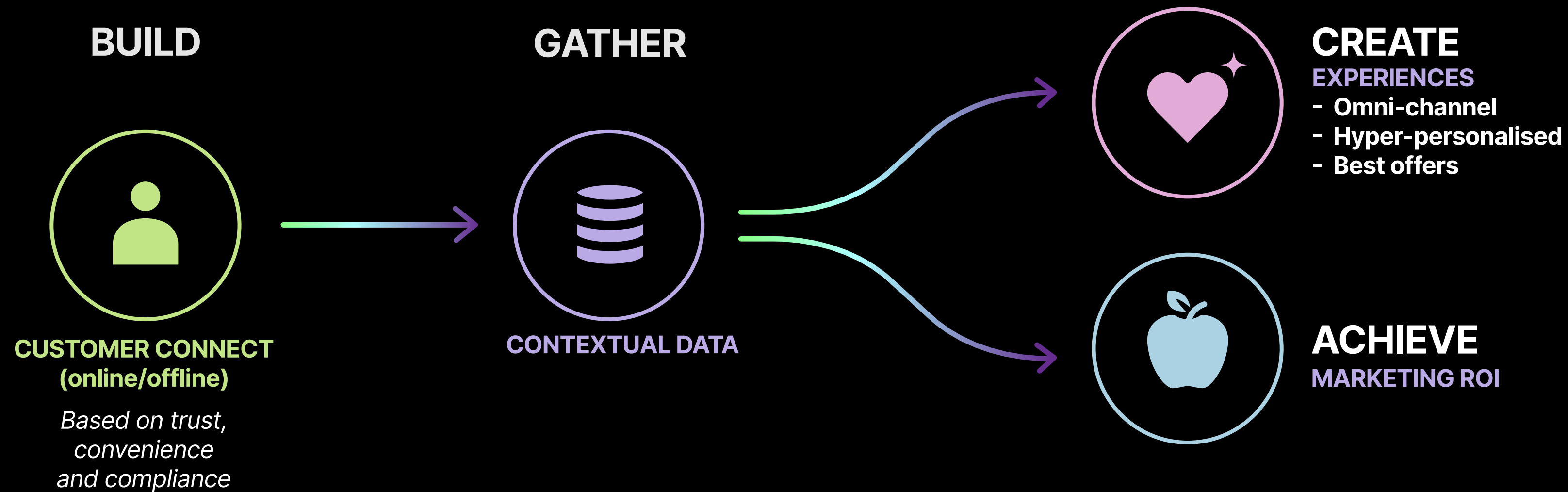• Companies with an analytics center of excellence are 1.4X more likely to be outperformers.

While AI brings speed and precision of multi-touch attribution to marketing mix modeling, it still has to contend with the demands of hybrid marketing.

Of the 1,000 global executives surveyed by Deloitte recently, 75% said they will invest more in delivering hybrid experiences over the next 12 months.[8]

6. https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2021-12-02-gartner-predicts-the-opt-out-rate-for-mobile-app-trac
7. https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/by-the-numbers-what-drives-sales-growth-outperformance
8. https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/marketing-and-sales-operations/global-marketing-trends/2022/hybrid-experiences-with-human-centered-design.html

FROM HYBRID DATA MINING TO HYBRID EXPERIENCES

BUILD

GATHER

CREATE
EXPERIENCES
- Omni-channel
- Hyper-personalised
- Best offers

CUSTOMER CONNECT
(online/offline)

Based on trust, convenience and compliance

CONTEXTUAL DATA

ACHIEVE
MARKETING ROI

Let's leave you with this

On the one hand, there is Netflix that gives you a seamless experience across devices - to the point that it even changes thumbnails according to what it predicts you will like! Then there are others with not-so-savvy experiences. Customers demanding such interfaces will willingly share their information. So, the biggest roadblock you face is curating such an experience and not mining data.

03

BACK TO THE FUTURE

With NFTs, Metaverse, Web3 and XR

This one is a classic Blackbox Run. It even thrives on FOMO, like all speculation markets do.

The way we value things is shifting because of how we view technology. 2021 was the year NFTs, Cryptos, Metaverse, Web3 – went full-blown mainstream.

From AR, VR and MR, we have now combined and evolved into XR (extended reality). When it comes to the 'new', we may be grappling with the concept, or we may intuitively know its workings.

The fact is, it is inevitably changing the world.

Same wine, different bottles?

Remember the boom of the internet in the '90s? Surging stock markets. Investments overflow. And all that hype? That was Web1 (read-only). Then came March 2000. **Bubble burst.** Contrary to the doomsayers, the internet didn't go away. Web2 came next, which allowed users to read and write.

The magic of the original web ('everybody could use it, no one owned it') did not include universal web protocol to say, share content with friends or send money to family or shop online. Ergo venture-backed tech companies stepped in. Offering services in exchange for our data, the few monoliths over time had a say across all our decisions – **eat, love, pray, *and vote*.**
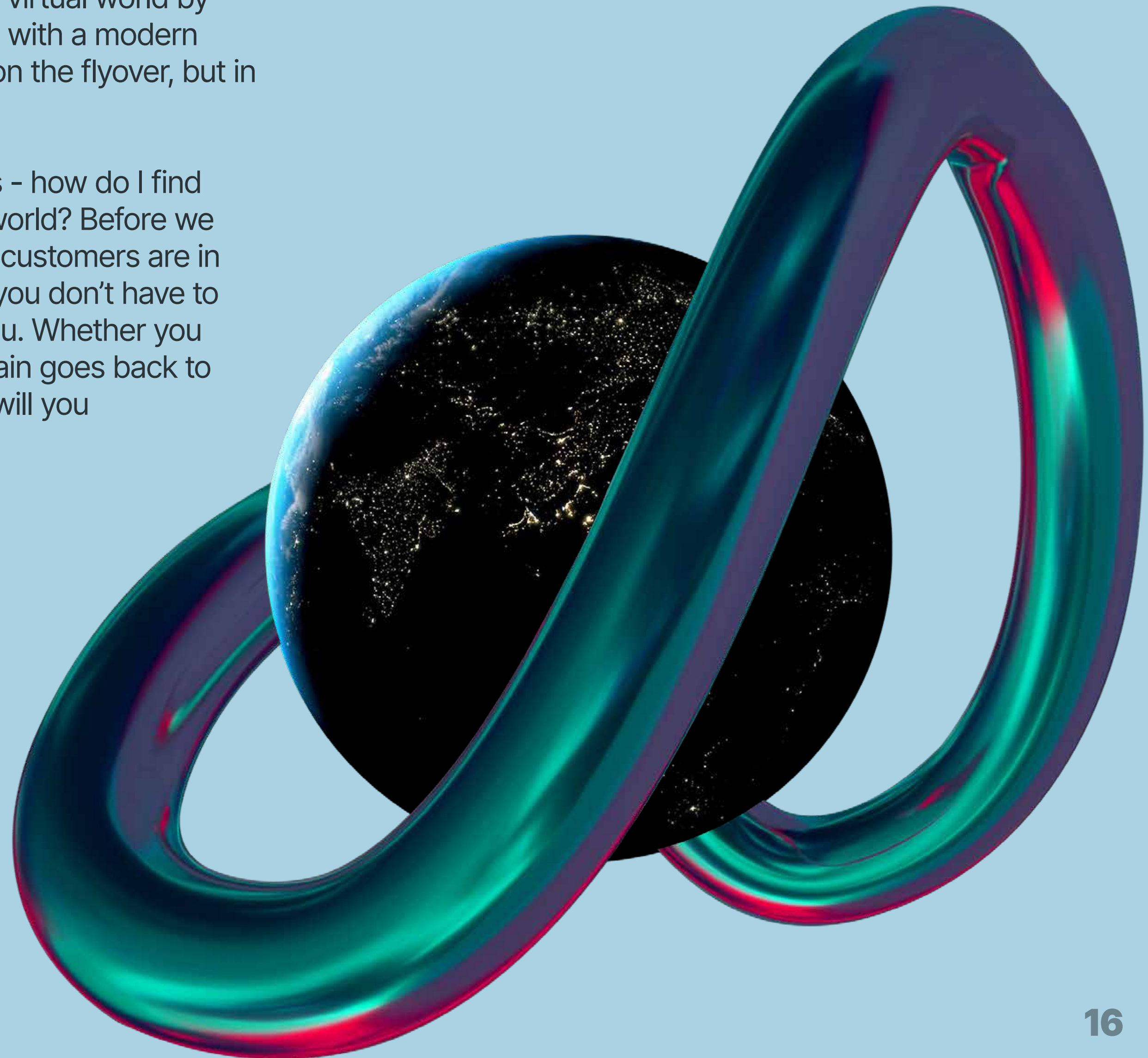
Enter Web3 – A token economy (Read/Write/Own/Execute), projected[9] at $1Tn, where users own the data and the economic rewards with the online value they create.

Web3 is also home to Metaverse.

OOH advertising in the online world

Keeping the irony aside, for brands, this is where things get interesting. *Real* interesting. You can reach out to customers in the virtual world by applying traditional strategies with a modern spin. Imagine a billboard not on the flyover, but in **Nikeland.**

The real question, however, is - how do I find real customers in the virtual world? Before we begin, here's a helpful tidbit - customers are in this space willingly, meaning you don't have to coerce them into following you. Whether you resonate with them or not again goes back to one thing - what experience will you give them?

9. https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/a-meta-market-opportunity-the-metaverse-could-soon-be-worth-1-trillion-52067

Metaverses are far from a business reality, but their virtual stakes are very real. Already.

Companies aiming for first-mover advantage, must call dibs on their customer's avatars' limited time, energy, and attention.

Coming back to our question - it's really a three-fold answer (for now).

- First is the simpler one - like you always did! We have been singing the digital tune for so long that the lyrics are etched in our memories. Think of this new world as an extension of what you already know.

- The second answer is simple to understand yet a bit difficult to execute - **creativity.** Digital-first brands are applying their native companies in the Metaverse, which is the idea of hyper-immersive and shared virtual 3D spaces that people can explore with a sense of their own presence.

- The third way for brands will be to learn from the next generation of consumers who are native to concepts like crypto and blockchain. Since they

do not distinguish between the real and virtual, brands, too, must adopt newer ways to express, form identities, and establish new connections. How? For one, smart contracts and unique transaction records can be used to reward ownership – through NFTs and other emergent ownership models. And two, in the democratized IP, brands will win by participating and creating alongside users. The virtual attention economy will force the shift from storytelling to story-making. Brands with ears close to the ground will ride the wave.

The m-platforms - where we belong

No matter how outlandish and expensive to build, this will only work when real-world brands step in. Coca-cola did it. So did Gucci, Sotheby's, and many others. Working with companies to create shared

experiences (products, events and worlds), m-platforms like Animal Crossing, Decentraland, Discord, Fortnite, Roblox, or Topia, only function when customers are engaged at a deep personalized level, and value is offered in a non-invasive way.

Global technology giants will intensify their stakes into this virtual future. For instance, Microsoft's recent buy of the 'Call of Duty' and 'Candy Crush' maker Activision Blizzard for $69 B. The biggest gaming industry deal (as well as Microsoft's) is a serious inroad into the Metaverse. Microsoft is hardly a pushover in the gaming sector, being one of the big three console makers, but the acquisition is its biggest bet into a future world where people will increasingly work, play, and socialize.

NFTs - exclusivity doesn't need to come at a cost

It is easy to think of NFTs as a bunch of rich people buying millions of dollars worth of art, cards, digital lands and even cat gifs. The Nyan Cat aside, marketers have the means to provide exclusivity to their customers.

Not every product/service needs to be tangible to be owned. Like the digital sneakers by RTFKT studios - cannot be touched or even worn, yet, was an instant NFT hit (read millions)! Of course, depending on offerings and target audience, marketers can aim for brand awareness and better interactions as opposed to earning money.

XR - bringing in the X factor to experiences

And then there is "XR" - the beauty of which lies in its letter 'X.' From A (Augmented), M (Mixed) or V(Virtual); X represents a variable across the continuum (current or future) of spatial computing technologies. From partially sensory inputs to immersive reality and everything in between, for Metaverse designers, XR is proving to be **imagination-on-steroids.** While today's mixed reality experiences are via expensive headsets (Magic Leap One, Microsoft's HoloLens, Valve, etc.) or smart glasses (Google Glass and Rokid glass), **innovators are finding ways to crash entry barriers.**

It may not be an exaggeration that some form of XR would soon replace the smartphone screen as our primary computing space. XR is turning a corner, away from the hype, and seeking solutions that solve real consumer and commercial problems. That's what Blackbox Runs do. They push us to the cusp of un-guessable innovations.

Rohit Kumar,
Co-founder, Zensciences

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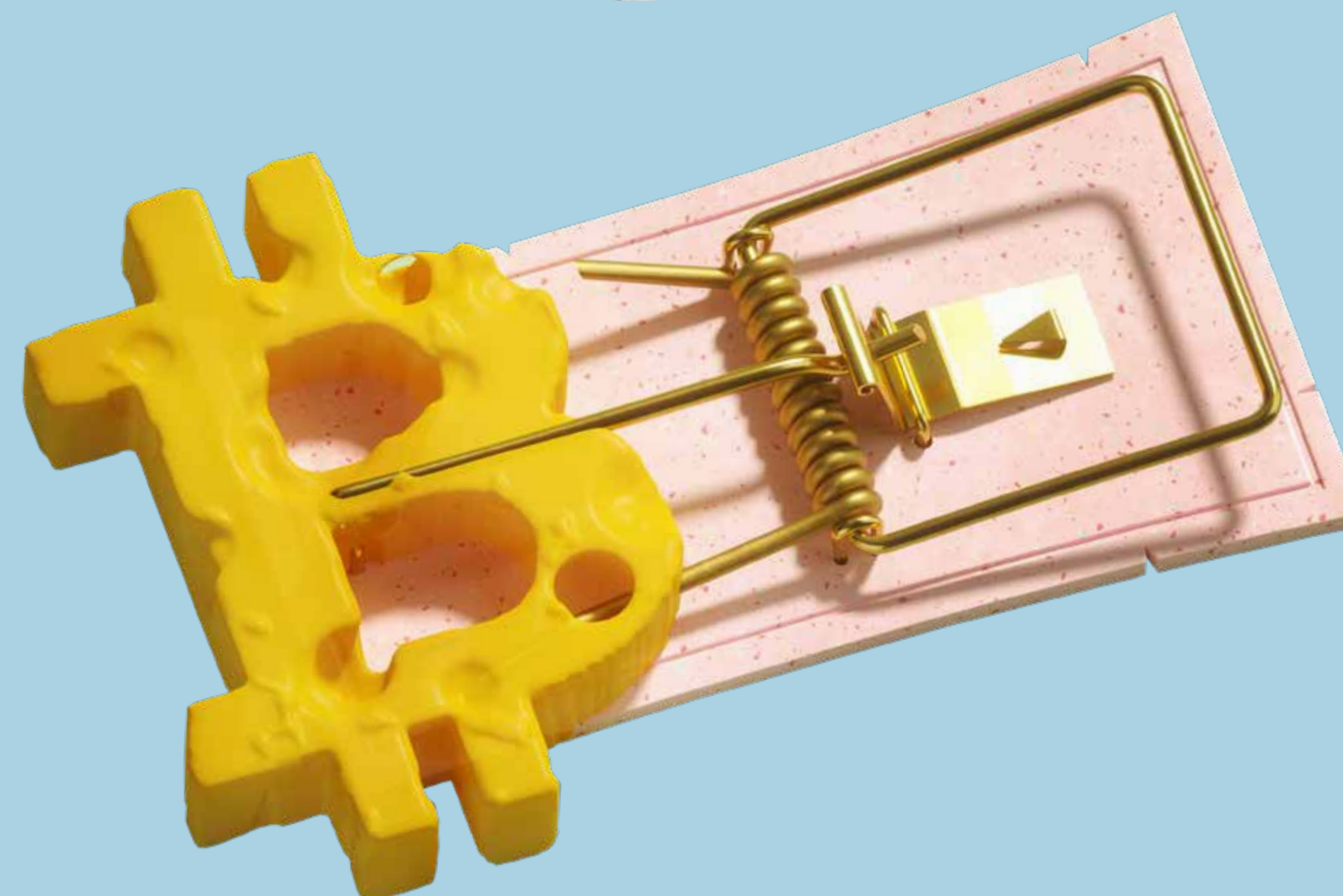
One more to think about.

Launching digital products that can be purchased in-game, creating branded worlds that foster community, sharing advanced ideas to a fan base, co-designing virtual prototypes, and receiving feedback from a diverse set of customers – all hold immense value for companies for their future innovations and accelerating product development cycles. Not to mention, by familiarizing young adults with products, businesses plant a seed of long-lasting relationships.

While consumer brands are already smitten, enterprise brands haven't really opened their doors. If you think about it, this is a great opportunity to shine. With partners, vendors, customers and even end customers. In the metaverse, you have the ability to reach out to end-customers and broaden your marketing horizons. Like Hyundai conducted virtual test drives, one can look at product demonstrations, meetings, roundtables, etc., in a new light.

We will leave you with the following possibilities for the metaverse:

- Explore community marketing with events, webinars, etc.
- Make customer touchpoints more interactive with avatar-led websites
- Enable convenience and ease of meetings while providing a real-world experience

Above all, bring out the #wanderlust in you and explore the unknown world to know it better.

04

STEWARDS OF PURPOSE

CMOs in Industry 5.0

The 1800s was when the Industrial Revolution moved many in the western world from fields to factories. WWII brought women into the workforce. The 1990s with PCs and emails, brought in the digital way of work. For the last two years, employees moved out of offices.

The pandemic didn't create the 'work-life merge.' It was coined in 2012[10]. But like our previous predictions (impact of AI on hybrid marketing, elevating experiences beyond CX or magic of the Metaverse), this Blackbox Run has had a revival-of-sorts lately.

10. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/davor-hebel/managing-the-worklife-merge_b_2454698.html

'Tis the year of the Great Attrition

McKinsey's Reimagine Work Employee Survey[11], from early 2021, reports that 40% of workers globally are considering leaving their current employers by the end of the year and 52% (vs. 30%) prefer hybrid working models.
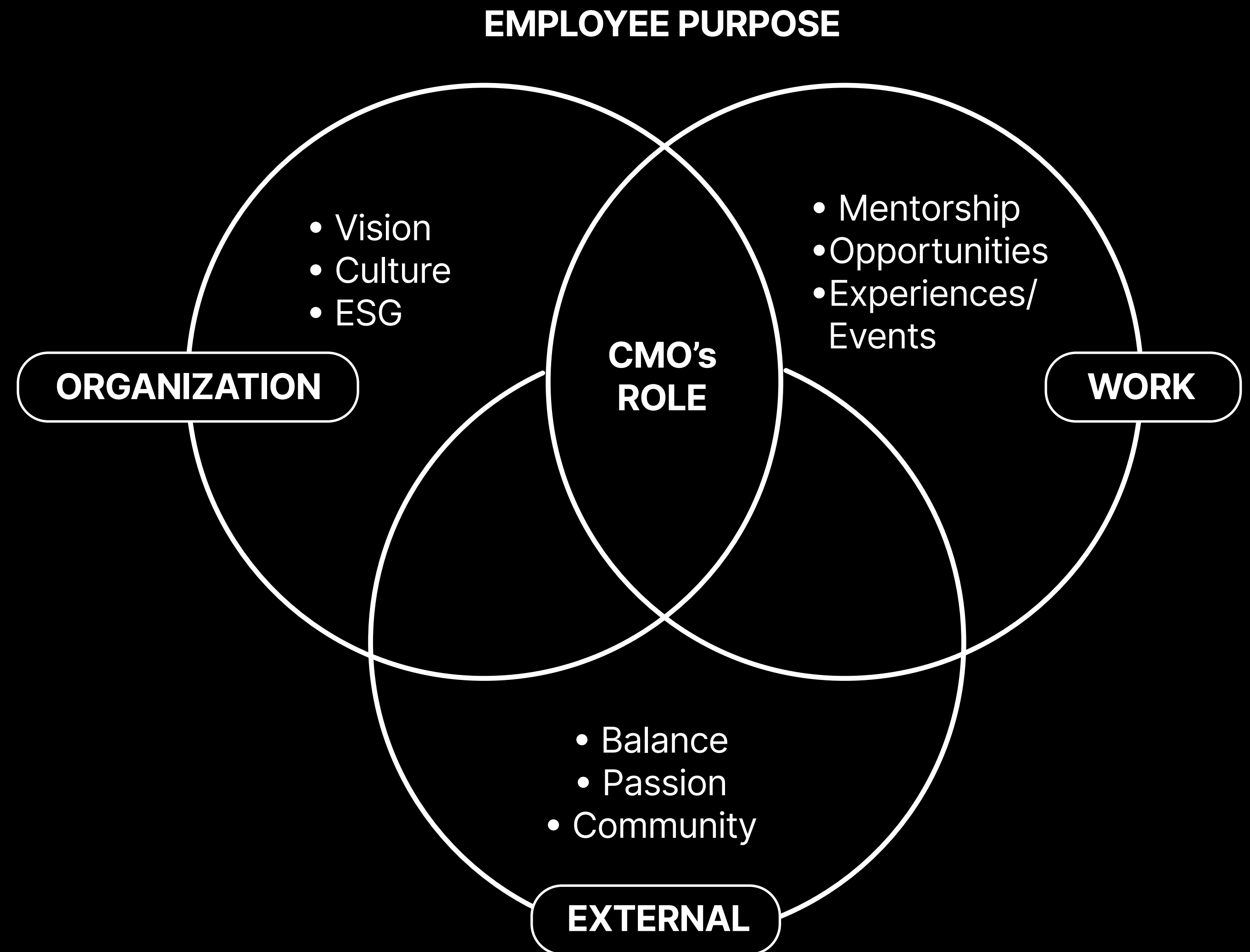
As organizations prepare for the great return, the right questions will not be the obvious ones like how many days in the office per week?

But better ones like - what work is done better in-person than virtually, or vice-versa? How to avoid meetings of the current excessive collaboration? What about the incentive structure? Will people working in the office be valued more than those working from home?

Add to it the constant confusion of WFH campaigns, then WFX announcements to B2W excitement - and the vicious circle we are witnessing. *Yet again*.

Primarily the role of people operations; CMOs step in as the supporting leads

When it came to employee-work introspection, 2021 proved to be the decisive year as the penny dropped on 'Purpose.' In fact, there are three circles that cover employee purposes.

EMPLOYEE PURPOSE

- Vision
- Culture
- ESG

- Mentorship
- Opportunities
- Experiences/ Events

ORGANIZATION

CMO's ROLE

WORK

- Balance
- Passion
- Community

EXTERNAL

Zen Quote - *"Knowing your purpose isn't difficult, finding it is."*

A.K.A Industry 5.0

The last two years have created a strong incentive to automate the work of human beings. In fact, more than serving validation for Industry 4.0 (the cyber-physical convergence, enabled by IoT, digitalization, automation, etc.), the pandemic has brought the spotlight on **Industry 5.0.** As opposed to 4.0's focus on efficiency and productivity, 5.0 governs worker well-being, universal life standards, human creativity and the environmental and social impact of the economy. Not new, not a revolution, Industry 5.0 *is a complement, a correction.*

CMOs in Industry 5.0 - seeking purpose beyond marketing

Beyond 'doing well by doing good,' CMO's work must address a growing conundrum. Surveys indicate that as people feel less connected to the meaning of work, they ask, "How do I find my purpose?". Actually, we don't find purpose, we build it. The other two myths CMOs must debunk within their teams and the larger organization are: that we have one purpose, and it stays the same throughout life.

More than the other C-leaders, CMOs are more likely to succeed at this task. Why? Simply because as part of the current Blackbox run, they are growing their expertise that fuses customer/human empathy with machine-led learning.

As the 'science-of-experiences' matures, the higher-end AI-led cognitive processes will coalesce with the fluid-new-future-of-work.

Armed with first-hand insights from Industry 4.0, leading CMOs will strategically integrate concepts of human creativity, well-being, and purpose with ethical business strategies. The game-changing days of Industry 5.0 are not far.
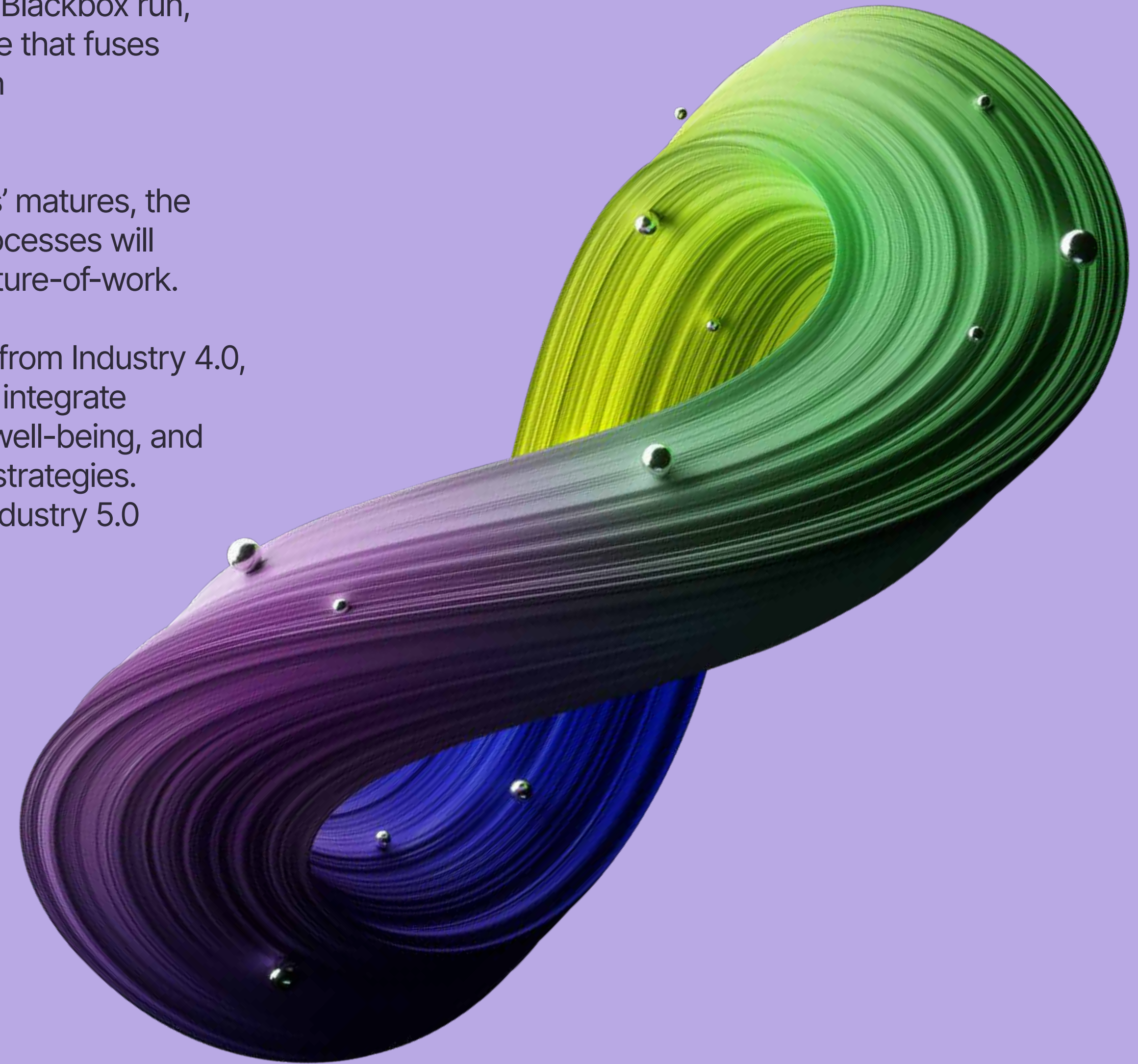
05

BUILDING MINI ENGINES FOR MEGA-CREATIVITY

CMOs have the organization's most enviable task

Leveraging radical talent strategies that can connect Blackbox marketing to the new consumer

Today's human-first data experience and purpose-led marketing only work when marketers uncover the most nuanced insights about their customers and aptly connect brand messages to their daily moments. The question for CMOs is not just *who does it*, but also, *how* to fuel people and teams who can generate game-changing strategies across markets?

Now, we aren't talking about hiring talent (well, that too), but mostly, looking for so-called external misfits as potential solutions.

Bending stereotypes – the sum has to be greater than the parts.

While a definitive shift of hiring more analytical skill sets in marketing roles is on, the paradigm is clearly shifting to maximum collaboration. 'Creatives are the ones who bring the ideas' is a notion not useful anymore. In fact, creativity as a term is no longer tied to the metaphorical desks of the 'content & design' team.

The emphasis is on lateral thinking, and it happens when data scientists, strategists, programmers, and designers – all – work out of the same crucible – physical or virtual. However, given the last two years, gathering and running agile team structures that rethink external relationships is a wish more than it's a reality.

Not centralized or decentralized strategies, but CMOs are increasing coherence across markets for flexible, last-minute executions.

Compared to celebrities, leading CMOs are investing more in virtual influencers. Bringing larger traction across manufacturing, consumer goods and fashion industries, the influencer campaigns are not only nimbler but are also deeply cultural to the market territories. The value enhances with a simple shift: move the relationship from "influencer" to "creator" by putting these individuals to work on bigger-picture

creative challenges. Leading marketers are cherry-picking influencers with specific interests (and followership) in their brands and hosting 'creator camps'[12], where they receive brand counsel. Besides being flexible and fast, it also gives brands the freedom to go local, be vernacular and be a cultural fit without trying too hard.

Isn't it about time B2B brands looked at this as a viable option?

The buzz boosters: celebrities are now entering the boardroom in greater numbers.

From Oprah to Shaq, to Serena Williams and more, celebrities are bringing native wisdom and insights into cultural trends and customer behaviors. The new celebrity directors unsurprisingly bring high digital marketing prowess, evident by their social media followers. Manish Chandra, the CEO of Poshmark (a social-commerce platform driven by fashionistas), spoke about Serena William, "She gives us advice ranging from how to think about winning, to global expansion, to current trends and even new inventory." Accounting for the eccentricity that celebrities usually bring, identifying a celeb, and aligning them to your marketing goals, is a nail-biting strategy in itself.

CMO's have to have new company ambassadors. The E-M-P-L-O-Y-E-E!

LinkedIn says when an employee shares content, it achieves a 200% higher click-through rate[13] than when a company shares it. By 2023, Gartner predicts 90% of B2B social media marketing strategies will incorporate scaled employee advocacy programs[14]. Not an unexplored territory, but with globally distributed teams, this one sure poses a challenge.

24

12. https://www.thedrum.com/news/2021/04/08/the-stage-set-brands-jump-tiktok-s-influencer-marketing-boom
13. https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/elevate/Resources/pdf/official-guide-to-employee-advocacy-ebook.pdf
**14.** https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2021-12-02-gartner-predicts-the-opt-out-rate-for-mobile-app-trac

Conclusion

Ultimately, writing rules of engagement for a game not yet formulated, or worse – formulated, yet not completely understood, is what a Blackbox Run is essentially about. And while their criticality is embedded in establishing market primacy, their urgency (as the five mentioned trends pan out) bears out to how marketers adapt and evolve.

Between the roles of marketers and stewards of organizational purpose and the orchestrators of mini-engines that bring maximal creativity, marketers & CMOs have their work cut out.

- Identify touchpoints and prepare for the 'new' experience strategy (from CX to CX plus)

- Win first-mover advantage in cookie-less ecosystems by crafting congruent connections, especially by experimenting in the brave new world of Web3 and the Metaverse

- Finally, extrapolate the role 'purpose' plays in a brand's perception and use it to metamorphose their marketing teams and assemble 'creativity boosters' in execution
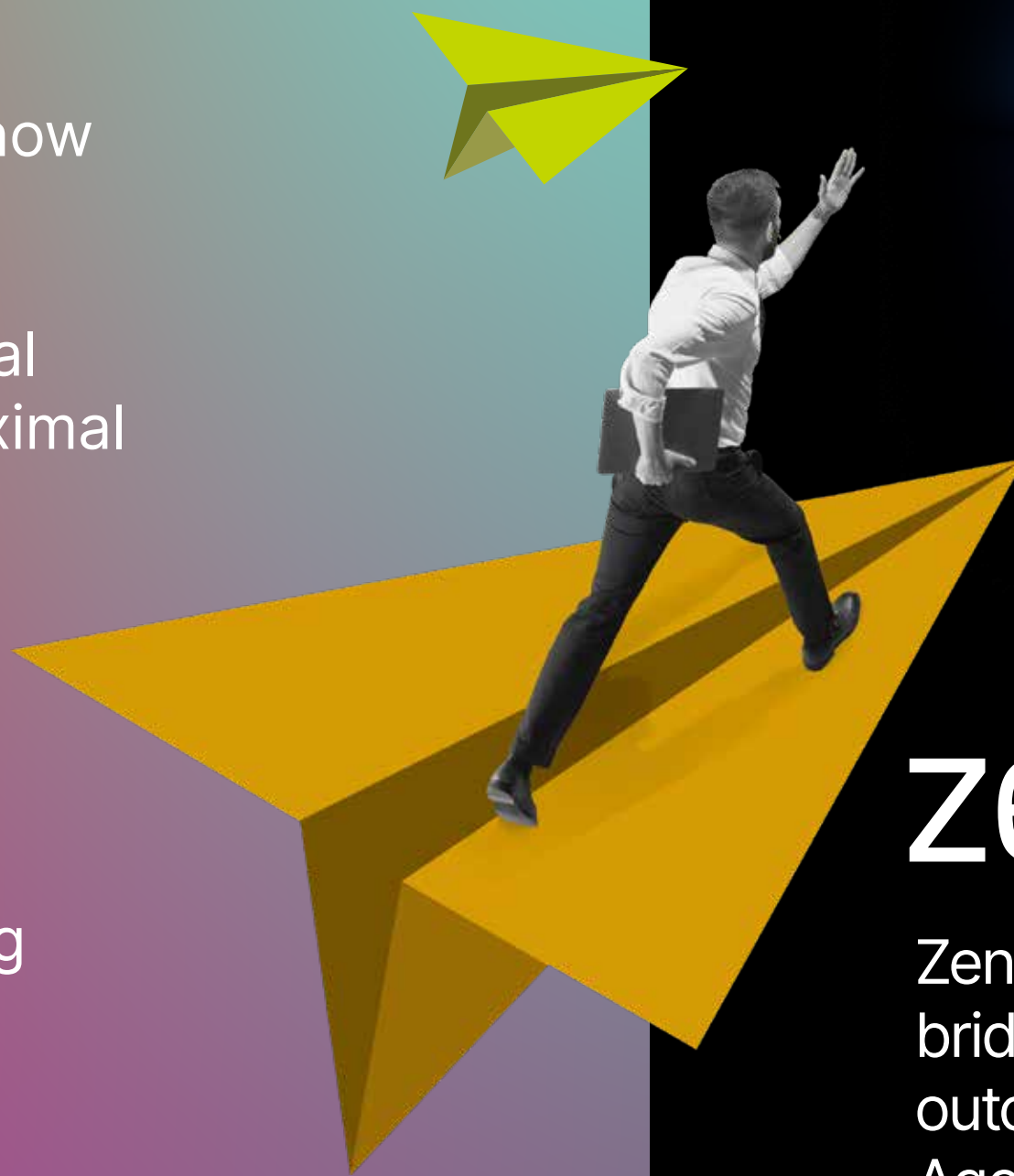
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