

6 Trends For 2026

Emerging shifts in consumer behavior, habits + preferences

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Our trend forecasters have identified shifts taking shape in 2026 that will require businesses to think differently about how they reach, engage + motivate customers for their brands to be successful in the future.

1 THE SLOP EFFECT

Quality has always been a consideration in purchase decisions, but the concept is more top of mind with AI slop continually reminding consumers that not all brands care about delivering polished outputs; some just want their money. As one [Reddit user put it](#) “Slop’ is for either AI-created work or for extremely low-effort cash grab things.”

The proliferation of slop of all kinds is driving consumers — when possible — to value quality over low prices. They’re giving themselves time to evaluate products and the ultimate ROI they will deliver. We found **45% of consumers are taking longer to decide to buy** something than they did a year ago, showing they are less likely to react to low prices with an impulse purchase.

Business Impact: While consumers will remain price conscious, the quality and long-term value they will get from a purchase is going to play a growing role in decisions. Explore messaging that conveys quality, value, and durability to reassure buyers.



2 SELF (SERVICE) SATISFACTION

As companies continue to build out their AI capabilities and train LLMs for internal efficiency, they are advancing consumer self-service tools at the same time. Such internal initiatives include developing a complete and accurate knowledge bank and responsive AI engines for employees to leverage. These very same components are being released to consumers, and as self-service experiences improve, they are

becoming the **preferred way to handle standard service needs**. The same is true in B2B: [Gartner](#) found 61% of buyers prefer to self-serve over dealing with a rep.

Business Impact: As your company expands its AI capabilities, put customer-facing tools on the roadmap to get even more ROI from these efforts.



Need to know what trends **your customers** are leading?
Want to understand emerging **shifts in your market**?
Seeking help knowing where things are headed in **uncertain times**?

Our Cultural Strategy + Insights practice can help. Reach out to info@empatixconsulting.com.

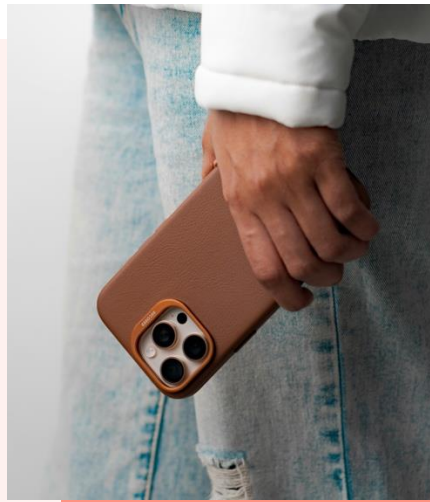


DIGITAL DRAW(BACKS)

Use of AI will continue to grow in 2026 as consumers embrace its productivity. However, they are reevaluating their dependence on digital, and we see an evolution in people's relationship with such tools. A recent study found that [50% of Americans](#) are taking breaks from phones, with Gen Z most likely to do so. Our own study noted that **78% are reconsidering their use of social media.**

Going forward, consumers will increasingly question whether the time they spend with digital is a benefit or a waste.

Business Impact: As consumers cut back on digital, and on social media in particular, brands will need to explore new paths to engagement, ensuring that their messages and activations are deemed worthy (and not a waste) of time.



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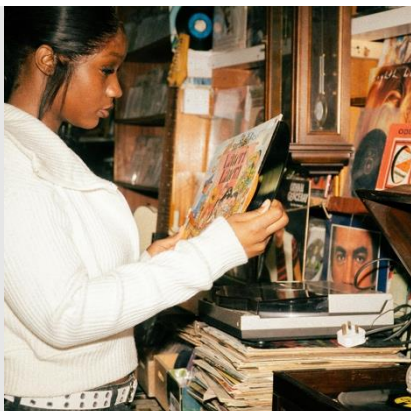
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ANALOG ALTERNATIVES

The desire for tactile, physical objects is on the rise. This trend is correlated to the one above — consumers who use their phones less need other ways to access music ([vinyl](#)), keep a calendar ([datebooks](#)), and communicate with friends ([stationerycore](#)). But while this shift might seem practical on the surface, it's driven by a need for humans

to **feel a sense of connection with the world around them**; a need that has been growing since the pandemic. Brands that account for this core human need will have an advantage in 2026 and beyond. Even [Netflix](#) has recognized the opportunity to translate its ephemeral entertainment to the physical world, complete with merch to solidify the moment.

Business Impact: If your business is primarily digital, consider how to bring tangible elements into the mix. Don't underestimate the impact of a card sent to a customer, a magnet or sticker that allows them to show brand loyalty, or in-person experiences.



GAME BREAK

Gamification isn't new, but the growing number of games on offer from business-oriented services is. From the popularity of [LinkedIn's games](#) to [Puzzmo's](#) partnership with The Skimm, the message is clear: workers in the modern business world are **seeking an outlet for relief from day-to-day pressure** they feel. As companies

navigate times of economic uncertainty and are under heavy pressure themselves, this trend isn't dissipating. Instead, it will provide an ongoing opportunity for companies to rethink client interactions and workers' needs.

Business Impact: Particularly in B2B settings, consider how to provide a momentary sense of joy and ease for your colleagues and peers, whether that be in your products and services, or simply in how you engage with them. This trend applies to consumer-facing brands as well, because, after all, workers are consumers too.



WHOLE HEALTH

The pushback against processed foods is mainstream, and consumers are focused on products and ingredients that **more closely resemble their natural state**. From whole milk to whole fruits and veggies, we expect this trend to have many more TikTok moments, like the recent craze for [cottage cheese](#). This trend finds its start in food, but **we expect the "naturalization" of more consumer categories**, including clothing, furniture, and home goods made from natural materials.

Business Impact: Consider how to connect your brand marketing to the concept of natural or an original state, which consumers interpret to be better for them (and worth a bit more).

WHY EMPATIX?

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Flexible technology, built for efficiency

ENGAGEMENT EXPERTISE

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