

# OMNICOM

WHERE  
GROWTH  
IS MOVING NEXT

OMNICOM AT SXSW 2026

A stylized sunburst graphic composed of numerous white horizontal lines of varying lengths, radiating from a central point, set against a blue background.

**SXSW<sup>®</sup>**

# INTRODUCTION

Every March, SXSW brings together tens of thousands of people to work through the questions shaping technology, culture, and business. Across 600+ Innovation sessions and 1,500+ speakers, it's a real-time map of where the industry is headed—told through the questions it hasn't answered yet.

These questions are signals about where growth is moving. For the last two decades, growth came from reach. Optimize for scale, buy attention, convert traffic into customers. That path is closing. AI has made average content free. Platforms have lost control of discovery. Consumers have moved toward communities and creators they actually trust.

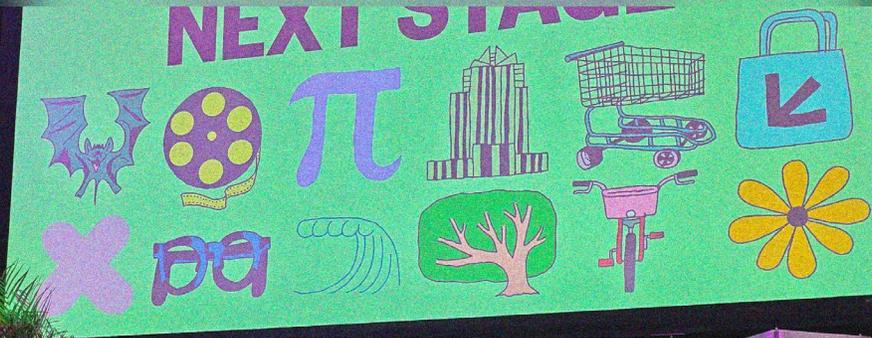


What's replacing reach as the engine for growth is influence—the ability to shape how people think, what they value, and what they choose to do. And influence flows through entirely different channels now.

This report identifies how six key themes from SXSW 2026 are reshaping where brands can build growth. Each maps where influence is migrating, and therefore where your next growth opportunity lives. Across perspectives from Omnicom leaders in diverse disciplines, the insight is clear: the organizations that thrive will be those that move from broadcasting at audiences to building with communities. From chasing reach to earning trust. From one-way messaging to participatory ecosystems.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

Three tensions running through it all:



**SPEED VS.**

**DEPTH**

Platforms operate at extraordinary pace, but trust and human connection require time.

**ACCESS VS.**

**OWNERSHIP**

AI democratizes creation, but who captures value remains open.

**OPTIMIZATION VS.**

**HUMANITY**

Efficiency is technology's default logic, but the market is starting to price meaning, connection, and authenticity.



# THE 6 THEMES

WHERE GROWTH  
→ IS MOVING NEXT

## The economics of attention, search, and advertising are being rewritten. What replaces the old model?

Walking the streets of Austin for SXSW 2026, the energy was different. Without the central anchor of the convention center, the festival spilled into the neighborhoods, and the conversation followed suit. It wasn't just about "using AI": it was about the total collapse of the search model we've relied on for thirty years.

### THE SHIFT: FROM BROWSING TO DELEGATING

We are witnessing a fundamental rewrite of the internet's "front door." The old model (optimizing for "ten blue links" to drive site traffic) is breaking in real-time. We're moving from an internet of browsing to an internet of delegating. AI assistants and autonomous agents are now intercepting users before they ever reach a brand's app or storefront. In short: if the AI doesn't find you, the human never will.

### THE REAL TENSIONS: AEO VS. THE BOT BLOCK

In the session "Is Search Totally F\*\*ked?", the anxiety in the room was heavy. Marketers are terrified that their carefully built brand identities are being stripped down into raw data for an AI's backend scoring matrix. We're seeing a frantic scramble from legacy SEO to AEO (Answer Engine Optimization) and GEO (Generative Engine Optimization). The goal? Forcing the models to cite us as the authority rather than just scraping our "AI slop."

The tension is even visible at the enterprise level. During "The Internet After Search," Cloudflare's CEO Matthew Prince highlighted a massive rift: by 2027, bot traffic is expected to overtake human traffic. We're already seeing major players taking opposite sides: Walmart is opening the doors for autonomous shopping agents, while Amazon is moving to block them.

## WHAT IT MEANS FOR BRANDS: THE HUMAN MOAT

Here is the core insight: while reach is still vital, trust is the new algorithm.

To survive this shift, brands must position themselves as highly credible, verifiable sources that AI agents feel "confident" recommending.

Paradoxically, as the digital world gets flooded with predictable, synthetic content, the ultimate competitive moat will be profoundly human. We need to balance our technical AEO strategies by doubling down on what bots can't replicate: IRL experiences, owned communities, and authentic, long-term creator partnerships. By treating AI as the discovery infrastructure while fiercely protecting human connection, we can own this next era.

# THEME 02

## CULTURE & FANDOM: WHO'S PAYING ATTENTION?

Across Sports and Gaming sessions, clear themes highlighted that brands, creators, and organizations are trying to move from broadcasting at audiences to building with communities.

Speakers repeatedly talked about participation, not just reach.

That showed up in different ways: creator-led storytelling instead of polished top-down campaigns; live formats that let audiences comment, react, and shape the experience in real time; and partnerships designed around genuine cultural fit rather than traditional logo placement. The biggest tension underneath all of it was control. Organizations still want scale, consistency, and brand safety, but younger audiences and fan communities are signaling that credibility now comes from co-creation, access, and behavior that feels native to the space.

The shift is that growth no longer comes primarily from polished, one-way messaging and mass awareness alone.

The old model assumed brands could create a campaign, push it out broadly, and win by being the loudest or most visible. That model is breaking because audiences, especially younger ones, are less responsive to messaging that feels overly managed or overly commercial.

What is replacing it is a more participatory model of growth, where brands earn relevance by creating spaces, moments, and tools people actually want to engage with. Live interaction, fandom-driven experiences, creator ecosystems, and cross-category culture all came up as growth engines.

In other words, attention is becoming a byproduct of involvement.

What this means for brands is that we should think less about how to “show up” in culture and more about how to design for contribution.

The most future-facing organizations at SXSW were not just chasing impressions. They were asking: how do we give people a role, a reason to stay, and something worth sharing or shaping themselves? That is a meaningful strategic shift. It suggests the smartest brand moves will be less about campaign packaging and more about **building credible participation** loops across creators, fans, and live communities.

### RELEVANT SESSIONS

Relevant sessions included “**Don’t Be Cringe: Gen Z and Gen Alpha**,” which made the case that younger audiences do not reject long-form or branded content outright, they reject content that feels inauthentic, and “**Game On: The Future of Sports and Gaming Collide**,” which explored how digital and physical fandom now reinforce each other rather than compete. Across both, and the third panel recap, the same idea held: modern growth is increasingly community-shaped, culturally fluent, and participation-led.

I attended many live sessions at this year's SXSW. Some sessions give you answers. Others help you ask better questions. There was one session I attended that did both.

It centered on something deceptively simple: where trust in healthcare is actually formed today. But as the conversation unfolded, it became clear that the answer no longer lives where we've traditionally placed it.

The healthcare journey isn't anchored in the exam room anymore. It starts earlier. Much earlier. In moments of uncertainty. In quiet searches. In late-night scrolling. In the space between "something feels off" and "I should probably see someone."

And increasingly, that space is shaped by two forces working together: **AI and community.**

What stood out in this session was that there is a new trust model taking shape. It wasn't just the role of AI, or the influence of platforms like Reddit. It was how naturally they've begun to complement each other.

AI delivers speed, scale, and immediate direction. Communities deliver context, emotion, and lived experience.

One helps you understand what could be happening. The other helps you understand what it means to live through it.

Together, they form something more powerful than either on its own: a distributed, real-time trust layer that exists before clinical care begins. This is where patients are forming early hypotheses. Where language is shaped. Where confidence—or anxiety—starts to build.

By the time they reach a physician, their journey is already in motion.

One of the most important shifts discussed: patients no longer show up empty-handed, as passive recipients of information. They arrive with inputs. AI summaries. Reddit threads. Shared experiences. Emerging conclusions. Sometimes those inputs are accurate. Sometimes they're incomplete. Sometimes they're misleading. **But they are always influential.**

This reframes the clinical interaction. The physician is no longer the starting point for information, but the point of validation, interpretation, and guidance. And that same dynamic extends beyond the exam room.

## IMPLICATION FOR BRANDS: SHOW UP EARLIER

If trust is being shaped upstream, then engagement strategies need to move upstream with it. This is the opportunity—and the challenge.

Brands can no longer rely solely on controlled environments to build credibility. Trust is now earned in dynamic, decentralized spaces: Within AI-generated responses. Inside community conversations. Across fragmented, self-directed journeys. Showing up in these environments requires a different approach.

Not interruption, but contribution.  
Not messaging, but utility. Not control, but credibility.

It means creating content that can live inside AI systems. Be referenced, surfaced, and trusted.

It also means understanding the language and emotional context of communities—where questions are raw, unfiltered, and deeply human.

## THE RISK BENEATH THE OPPORTUNITY

There's real promise in this new model. Patients are more engaged, more informed, and more proactive in their care.

But there's also tension. AI can present information with confidence, regardless of accuracy. Communities can reinforce beliefs, regardless of evidence. When those two forces intersect, they don't just inform decisions—they can accelerate them, for better or worse.

**Which raises a critical need:** Not just for better information, but for clearer signals of credibility, transparency, and evidence.

## A SHIFT WORTH PAYING ATTENTION TO

Walking out of the session, one idea stayed with me: We're no longer designing for the moment of care. We're designing for the moments before it. The in-between. The uncertain. The self-directed. This is where trust is now built—or lost. And for those of us thinking about engagement, the question isn't whether AI or communities will influence decisions. **They already are.**

**The question is:** How do we show up in that space in a way that earns trust - before the exam room ever comes into view?

# THEME 04 AI & THE HUMAN QUESTION

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Each year, SXSW becomes a snapshot of the cultural mood—part crystal ball, part group therapy session for the curious. This year, a striking irony ran through the talks I attended: a festival obsessed with the future kept arriving at the same conclusion—AI might make us dumber unless we fight harder than ever to stay human.

Over six days, I moved through five or six sessions a day, followed by constant street corner debates, hallway debriefs, and random sidewalk philosophizing. Coming from New York—where “don’t talk to strangers” is practically a civic guideline—the openness in Austin felt like stepping into an alternate universe. Every line was a chat room; every stranger, a co conspirator. Perhaps it was the heat. Or the curiosity. Or the tequila. But everyone seemed hungry—not for tech, but for human connection.

And maybe that’s what made this year’s event feel so electric. Not just the content, but the communal processing of it. Neuroscientists, futurists, technologists, musicians, VC bros, programmers, and a delightful menagerie of curious “randos” all dumped their thoughts into the collective consciousness. The result: your brain expands, and you’re compelled to talk it out with literally anyone who will listen.

## THE THEMES THAT HIT HARDEST

Across nearly 20 sessions, several themes kept circling back:

**1. Finding truth in a post truth world:** How do we navigate reality when deepfakes, hallucinating models, and algorithmic certainty make the ground beneath us feel less stable?

**2. Brainwaves as therapy—and the idea of becoming “superhuman”:** Researchers explored using neurotechnology to heal trauma and enhance cognition, raising questions about whether “superhuman” is a future or a fantasy.

**3. Creative craft as humanity’s love language:** Even the most tech forward talks pointed back to this idea: creativity is the last, best expression of our emotional intelligence.

**4. Brain atrophy from AI misuse:** Yes, the fear is real. Several neuroscientists warned about over reliance on AI and its potential cognitive effects—especially around memory and critical thinking.

**5. The rise of Alzheimer’s and the urgency of cognitive self care:** Sessions explored how lifestyle, environment, and tech either protect or degrade our long term cognitive resilience.

**6. Immersive tech (AI, AR, VR, XR) as an emotional surrogate:** One question lingered: Are we creating experiences that help us feel more connected—or simply more content?

Across all of it ran a clear, pulsing undercurrent: Stay human. No matter what. Control the technology. Don’t let it control you.

I saw stickers all over Austin with a single word: *afrAid*. It summed up the vibe perfectly. Awe and fear, held together in a creative truce.

## A NEW CULTURAL SPLIT IS FORMING

There’s a real tension shaping up—a set of emerging factions:

- The AI counterculture, championing hand craft, analog methods, and human made everything
- The virtual maximalists, who see AI, AR, VR, and XR as the doorway to fully realized alternative worlds

SXSW felt like ground zero for this divide: one group clinging to the tangible, the other ready to transcend it entirely.

## SO... WHAT NOW?

It’s going to take weeks for me to process everything I absorbed at the festival. But my early clarity is this:

The most valuable human traits of the future will be discernment, taste, and emotional intelligence—especially when wielding artificial intelligence.

AI can accelerate output, expand imagination, and generate endless possibility. But only humans can decide what matters.

Only humans can discern what is aesthetically good. Only humans can feel when something resonates.

In a world where machines can mimic almost anything, the rarest and most powerful things will be the intrinsic qualities that make us feel emotion and make us uniquely human.

The E-IQ economy is here.

# THEME 05 LIVING, BREATHING, & HUMAN NEEDS

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“Trends tell you what is changing; convergences tell you what is inevitable.” Amy Webb’s line stuck with me because she didn’t just critique trend reports, she buried them.

SXSW 2026 didn’t feel like a place to collect a neat list of innovations the way CES often does. It felt like being inside the storm systems she described: overlapping anxiety about AI, work, health, and trust colliding from every direction. And we all play a part in that, as people, as employees, and in the brands we build and admire.

Rising background anxiety, commercialized loneliness, and AI-shaped emotional infrastructure kept popping up in sessions that were not labeled “wellness.” Webb’s view was blunt. Unlimited digital labor and human augmentation do not just change productivity, they change how replaceable people feel. That sense of being outdated or “behind” is becoming a default setting of work and life, and in Austin it felt like everyone could feel it. Microsoft’s AI upskilling work hit the same nerve in a practical way.

**You do not get real transformation without psychological safety.**

Short learning bursts, “always on hackathon” energy, and celebrating tiny wins are all ways to remind people they still matter inside AI systems.

Emotional outsourcing turns loneliness into a business model. When comfort and companionship can be automated, there is money to be made in people staying isolated, not less. Whoever owns that emotional infrastructure has power over how people feel before they think, vote, or spend. That is a different kind of influence than we are used to talking about, and it makes culture at work feel less like a poster and more like the underlying code. The lessons people absorb about safety, judgment, and experimentation become the operating system everything else runs on.

For brands, especially in health and behavior change, this feels like a growth question more than a “do good” question.

People living with constant anxiety and tired of broken systems do not have patience for brands that add more noise or treat their loneliness like a funnel. In a session with the leader of Flam, a new interactive ad format, that came into focus for me. Yes, it was about ad tech, but the real question underneath was simple: are we going to keep pushing one-way messages at people, or are we willing to build environments that give something back?

That is the shift I keep coming back to: moving from chasing attention to taking responsibility for the emotional environments we create.

# THEME 06

## WHAT'S NEXT BEYOND AI (& WHO GETS IN)

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EVP EXECUTIVE  
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STUDIO RX

**SXSW exposed a growing disconnect: we're consuming more content than ever, yet remembering less of it. In a constant "scroll, stream, swipe" loop, very little actually holds.**

What's emerging in response is a renewed pull toward live experiences—but not in their traditional form. The ones gaining momentum are shaped by new technology, giving them a sense of novelty that makes them feel different from anything else competing for attention. The Sphere in Las Vegas—projected to generate \$2 billion this year—is the most obvious example, but SXSW featured lots of others.

In one session, the immersive venue Excurio shared how they are redefining "live" through technology. Excurio's experiences have already attracted over 3–4 million visitors globally across more than 30 venues, with the ability to host 100+ participants simultaneously in a single experience. Their "Immersive Expeditions" take participants through spaces like ancient civilizations or artistic movements, reconstructed at full scale and designed to be explored in real time. What makes it compelling isn't just the visual fidelity—it's the feeling of moving through the experience alongside others, discovering moments together as they unfold.

In another session, speakers from Magnopus described how they created the Daft Punk Experience inside Fortnite as a new kind of "live" event—one that isn't bound to a single moment or physical space. Instead of a traditional concert, they built an immersive, persistent world where players can move through a series of environments inspired by Daft Punk's music and visual identity—from the iconic pyramid stage to interactive spaces where users remix tracks, engage in rhythm-based gameplay, and gather with others. The experience launched with a premiere moment, but continues to live on as something audiences can return to, explore, and shape over time.

And in the physical world, new technologies are also being used to rethink what "live" actually looks like. The K-pop group PLAVE was cited as an example—performing in real time through digital avatars powered by motion capture. While the performance happens once, it can be streamed live into multiple locations or viewed across distributed audiences simultaneously, with fans reacting together in real time. It's still responsive, still happening in the moment—but rendered, scalable, and no longer tied to a single physical stage.

**Across all of this, "live" starts to feel less like a format and more like a spectrum—physical, virtual, synchronous, persistent.**

And layered on top of it is this constant push toward novelty, often driven by emerging tech. That combination is what seems to be pulling people in.

For brands, the opportunity is to tap directly into this growing appetite for experiences that feel new, shared, and worth showing up for. The examples from SXSW point to a clear formula: combine liveness with a sense of innovation, whether that's through emerging tech, unexpected formats, or participatory design. The goal is to make people feel like they're part of something unfolding, not just observing it. In a world where most content is easy to scroll past, the brands that stand out may be the ones that create live experiences compelling enough to pull people in—where attendance feels like access to something new.

# CLOSING

You went to SXSW—or you're thinking about what it means for your business—to see where growth is headed next. Here's what you're looking for: the shift from reach to influence, from broadcasting to participation, from one-way messaging to relationship-building.

The real insight isn't coming from any single session. It's coming from noticing how these themes are already reshaping how organizations think about building growth—where they're doubling down on distinctiveness instead of reach, where they're investing in owned relationships instead of rented audience, where their actions finally align with what they claim to believe in.



The opportunities are limitless when we work together across silos—and remain curious, thinking big and acting both boldly and with agility.

The marketplace has moved. Growth now flows through influence, not just reach. And influence is built in the spaces where people choose to show up, the communities they trust, and the experiences that make them feel like they're part of something unfolding.

That's where we're moving.

That's where your growth is waiting.

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