

SXSW 2026 Recap

8 Signals Shaping the Future of Health

Contributions by Mick Aulakh, Maya Avrasin, Max Bolotov, John Deely, and Susie Spallina Twaddell



OMNICOM HEALTH




Introduction

Each year SXSW offers a glimpse into what's next—and how technology, culture, and human behavior converge in new and often unexpected ways.

This year in Austin, one thing was clear: **the future of health is not being shaped in traditional healthcare spaces alone.** It's being influenced by AI ecosystems, creator dynamics, sensory experiences, and entirely new definitions of trust, cognition, and care.

A group of Omnicom Health leaders who were on the ground identified the signals they believe will meaningfully impact health behavior and health marketing in the months and years ahead. These signals are not trends in the traditional sense, but early indicators—grounded in real observations, emerging technologies, and shifting behaviors—that point to where the industry is heading.

What follows is a curated collection of 8 signals spanning near-term shifts already underway to longer-term transformations that will challenge how we design, communicate, and build brands in health.



AI Is Becoming the Interface



Max Bolotov

VP, Associate Director
Experience Planning

REMEDY EDGE

Signal 1: Health Discovery Is Moving to Agentic Interfaces

- ✦ **Signal:** Health discovery is shifting to “agentic discovery,” where AI becomes the default interface for information and decision-making.
- ✦ **Where it showed up:** SXSW sessions on OS-level AI integration, including Microsoft Copilot and Google Gemini.
- ✦ **Why it matters for health:**
 - **Behavior Change** is being reshaped as AI becomes the “front door” to the internet for all age groups.
 - **Ambient Sensing and Invisible UI** are transforming how people interact with health information.
- ✦ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:** Brands are no longer just competing for search rankings—but for inclusion in AI-generated answers that patients rely on.
- ✦ **Things to do in the next 90 days:** Run an AI search audit to track brand citations in LLM outputs and pilot an “Ad-as-Answer” model (eg, “98% efficacy. Available in [City].”) to deliver value propositions directly within the search interface.
- ✦ **Proof point:** Google’s default assistant is now Gemini, Microsoft added a physical Copilot key to keyboards, and organic click-through rate (CTR) for top pages has dropped 25%.
- ✦ **Confidence + horizon:** High / 12+ months
- ✦ **Watch-out:** AI-generated outputs introduce new regulatory risks, especially around hallucinations, missing fair balance, and lack of source transparency.



Maya Avrasin

SVP, Group Director
Engagement Strategy

AREA23

Signal 2: From Omnichannel to AI Ecosystems

- ✦ **Signal:** Omnichannel is giving way to fully integrated AI ecosystems powered by autonomous agents.
- ✦ **Where it showed up:** Multiple SXSW sessions and activations highlighting agent-based systems.
- ✦ **Why it matters for health:**
 - Behavior change through continuous engagement
 - Care ecosystems replacing isolated touchpoints
- ✦ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:** Marketing shifts from orchestrating messages to designing intelligent systems that guide behavior over time.
- ✦ **Things to do in the next 90 days:** Map a customer journey and identify where AI-driven automations can support behavior change. In the short term, pilot discrete agents at key moments (eg, symptom checker, nurse support, adherence reminders). Longer term, explore how these agents can be connected into a unified, always-on “brand agent” that follows and supports patients across their journey.
- ✦ **Proof point:** “We think the prompt is dead and, now, what we’re seeing is a lot of our clients actually have these autonomous agents.”
— Karl Redenbach, CEO of AgenticScale AI, during the session, “Scaling AI Infrastructure for the Next Big Thing.”
- ✦ **Confidence + horizon:** High | 12-18 months
- ✦ **Watch-out:** Regulatory frameworks are not yet built for adaptive, real-time systems, especially those that evolve based on user behavior. Without clear guardrails, brands risk compliance gaps as AI-driven experiences become more autonomous.



Mick Aulakh

SVP, Management Director

AREA23

Signal 3: AI Companions Become the Always-On Health Layer

- ✦ **Signal:** AI companions are emerging as a persistent layer of health support and influence.
- ✦ **Where it showed up:** “10 Breakthrough Technologies of 2026”
- ✦ **Why it matters for health:**
 - Behavior change
 - Care ecosystems
 - Trust and credibility
- ✦ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:** The most consistent touchpoint in a patient’s journey may no longer be a doctor or brand, but an always-on AI companion shaping questions, motivation, and adherence. This shifts the focus of brands from delivering one-time messages to designing ongoing, adaptive dialogue.
- ✦ **Things to do in the next 90 days:** Prototype a companion-style experience (eg, adherence coach or symptom navigator).
- ✦ **Proof point:** Emerging companion-driven health tools from companies like Verily.
- ✦ **Confidence + horizon:** High | 6–12 months
- ✦ **Watch-out:** Over-reliance on non-clinical AI guidance and blurred lines between support and medical advice.

The End of the “Average” Patient



John Deely

EVP, Chief Experience Officer

REMEDY EDGE



Mick Aulakh

SVP, Management Director

AREA23

Signal 4: The End of the “Average Patient” (and the Rise of Modeled Intelligence)

- ✦ **Signal:** Vurvey Labs session “Brand Worlds Are the Next Marketing Frontier” on synthetic audiences and Adweek sessions challenging traditional measurement systems.
- ✦ **Where it showed up:** “10 Breakthrough Technologies of 2026”
- ✦ **Why it matters for health:**
 - Access and equity: Traditional research flattens diverse populations
 - Behavior change: Edge audiences reveal hidden response patterns
 - Trust and credibility: Modeled data introduces new bias risks
- ✦ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:** Brands must rethink both who they study and how they study them, moving beyond averages toward dynamic, simulated, and segmented intelligence.
- ✦ **Things to do in the next 90 days:** Run a synthetic test audience alongside traditional segmentation and validate against real-world patient feedback.
- ✦ **Proof point:** Neurodivergent audiences ranked a top-performing Super Bowl ad near the bottom, while industry leaders called current measurement systems “sick.”
- ✦ **Confidence + horizon:** High | 6-12 months
- ✦ **Watch-out:** AI-modeled insights can scale hidden bias, especially if not validated against real-world patient experience and diverse populations.

Trust Is Being Rewritten



John Deely

EVP, Chief Experience Officer

REMEDY EDGE

Signal 5: Trust Is Becoming More Human, Not More Polished

- ◆ **Signal:** Proof of humanity is emerging as the primary trust signal in an AI-saturated content ecosystem.
- ◆ **Where it showed up:** Creator economy track (multiple sessions); Morra Aarons-Mele's session on AI anxiety; Jack Conte (Patreon CEO) keynote on creativity and risk.
- ◆ **Why it matters for health:**
 - Trust and credibility
 - Care ecosystems driven by real voices
- ◆ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:** Trust will increasingly come from lived experience and imperfection, not just scale and polish.
- ◆ **Things to do in the next 90 days:** Identify a patient advocate or condition-community creator whose content already performs on trust. Commission 1 unscripted, human-narrated asset alongside your next campaign and run them in parallel, comparing not just clicks, but sentiment and engagement quality.
- ◆ **Proof point:** Creators are intentionally introducing imperfections to signal authenticity.
- ◆ **Confidence + horizon:** High | 6-12 months
- ◆ **Watch-out:** Signals of "authenticity" can be manufactured, raising new concerns around disclosure, manipulation, and erosion of trust over time.



John Deely

EVP, Chief Experience Officer

REMEDY EDGE

Signal 6: Cognitive Health Is the Next Frontier

- ✦ **Signal:** AI dependency is reshaping how patients process information, creating a new category of cognitive health risk.
- ✦ **Where it showed up:** “Lose Your Mind to AI” debate featuring Dr. Sahar Yousef (neuroscientist, UC Berkeley) and Greg Shove (CEO, Section AI), with reinforcing themes across sessions on AI anxiety and youth + AI.
- ✦ **Why it matters for health:**
 - Behavior change
 - Trust and comprehension
- ✦ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:** Patient ability to engage with and retain health information is changing, impacting adherence and informed decision-making.
- ✦ **Things to do in the next 90 days:** Bring together medical, scientific, and brand leads to identify where cognitive load is most critical across your patient journey. Audit existing education materials for friction, but resist the urge to remove it entirely. In some cases, intentional friction supports comprehension, retention, and better decision-making.
- ✦ **Proof point:** Dr. Yousef highlighted that this may be the first generation experiencing measurable cognitive decline tied in part to digital dependence, prompting new research and coursework at UC Berkeley focused on “*Mind, Machine, and Meaning.*”
- ✦ **Confidence + horizon:** Medium | 18+ months
- ✦ **Watch-out:** Over-optimizing simplicity may reduce true understanding, creating risk in patient comprehension, consent, and long-term engagement.

The Next Ethical Frontier



Mick Aulakh

SVP, Management Director

AREA23

Signal 7: The Ethics of “Optimized” Health Are Emerging

- ◆ **Signal:** AI is accelerating a shift toward predicting and potentially pre-selecting health outcomes.
- ◆ **Where it showed up:** Breakthrough technology sessions on predictive biology.
- ◆ **Why it matters for health:**
 - Access and equity
 - Trust and credibility
- ◆ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:** Brands may be forced to take a stance on what defines “better” health.
- ◆ **Things to do in the next 90 days:** Establish internal guardrails for how your brand approaches AI and predictive biology. Partner with medical, legal, and ethics stakeholders to pressure-test messaging for bias, equity, and unintended consequences, especially as innovation begins to outpace societal and regulatory consensus.
- ◆ **Proof point:** SXSW discussions on breakthrough technologies highlighted rapid advances in predictive biology alongside persistent inequities in diagnosis and access, raising concerns that optimization technologies may not be equitably applied.
- ◆ **Confidence + horizon:** Medium | 18+ months
- ◆ **Watch-out:** Perceptions of “modern eugenics,” widening health inequities, and loss of trust if optimization outpaces ethical consensus.

Experience Beyond the Screen



Susie Spallina Twaddell
SVP, Client Services

OMNICOM HEALTH
MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS

Signal 8: Scent as a New Frontier in Health Experience Design

- ✦ **Signal:** Signature scent is emerging as a powerful tool to differentiate health experiences and improve memory.
- ✦ **Where it showed up:** “Smells Like Brand: The Future of Scent Branding.”
- ✦ **Why it matters for health:**
 - Patient experience
 - Memory and emotional association
- ✦ **Why this is important for pharma/health marketers:**
 - Memory and recognition: Scent is deeply tied to long-term memory, making brand experiences more “sticky” than visuals alone
 - Emotional-state management: In high-stress health environments, scent can help create feelings of calm, reassurance, or control
 - Experience differentiation: In-person HCP and patient experiences can feel interchangeable. Scent offers a unique way to stand out
- ✦ **Things to do in the next 90 days:**
 - Define the emotional outcome first (eg, calm and in control vs warm and cared for), not the scent itself
 - Map the patient or HCP journey to identify where scent adds value and where it shouldn't be used
 - Pilot in a controlled environment (eg, congress booth or patient support space)
 - Measure perception shifts and emotional response
- ✦ **Proof point:** Scent is strongly linked to long-term memory and emotional recall.
- ✦ **Confidence + horizon:** Medium | 18+ months
- ✦ **Watch-out:** Poorly executed sensory design can backfire, triggering sensitivities, overstimulation, or negative associations that undermine the experience.



Conclusion: What This Means for Health Marketing

Taken together, these signals point to a fundamental shift: health marketing is moving from communication to orchestration—from delivering messages to designing systems, environments, and experiences that shape behavior over time.

AI is not just a theme. It is the connective layer across discovery, trust, experience, and care. But as these signals make clear, the future of health will not be defined by technology alone.

It will be defined by the choices we make—how we design for trust, how we navigate complexity, and how we ensure innovation remains grounded in real human needs.

Because in the end, the most powerful brands in health won't just be the most advanced.

They'll be the most human.

Put these signals into action:

If you're interested in exploring how these signals could impact your brand or organization, we'd love to connect. Reach out to our team at omnicomhealthmarketing@omnicomhealthgroup.com