

Reimagining customer loyalty

Evolving customer behaviors call for
a new approach: **Brand Devotion.**



Is customer loyalty dead?

Too many choices in the aisle.

Too many promotions in the inbox.

Too many push notifications, celebrity endorsements, product placements, and social media influencers.

The noise is overwhelming. Today's consumers are exposed to thousands of marketing messages per day, compared to just a few hundred in the 1970s. As a consequence, trust in brands, institutions, media, and advertising is at a historic low. And relationships between brands and consumers have never been more fragile.

The result? Unbound consumers. Unbound by tradition. Unbound by rules or conventions. Unbound by the familiar norms of loyalty.

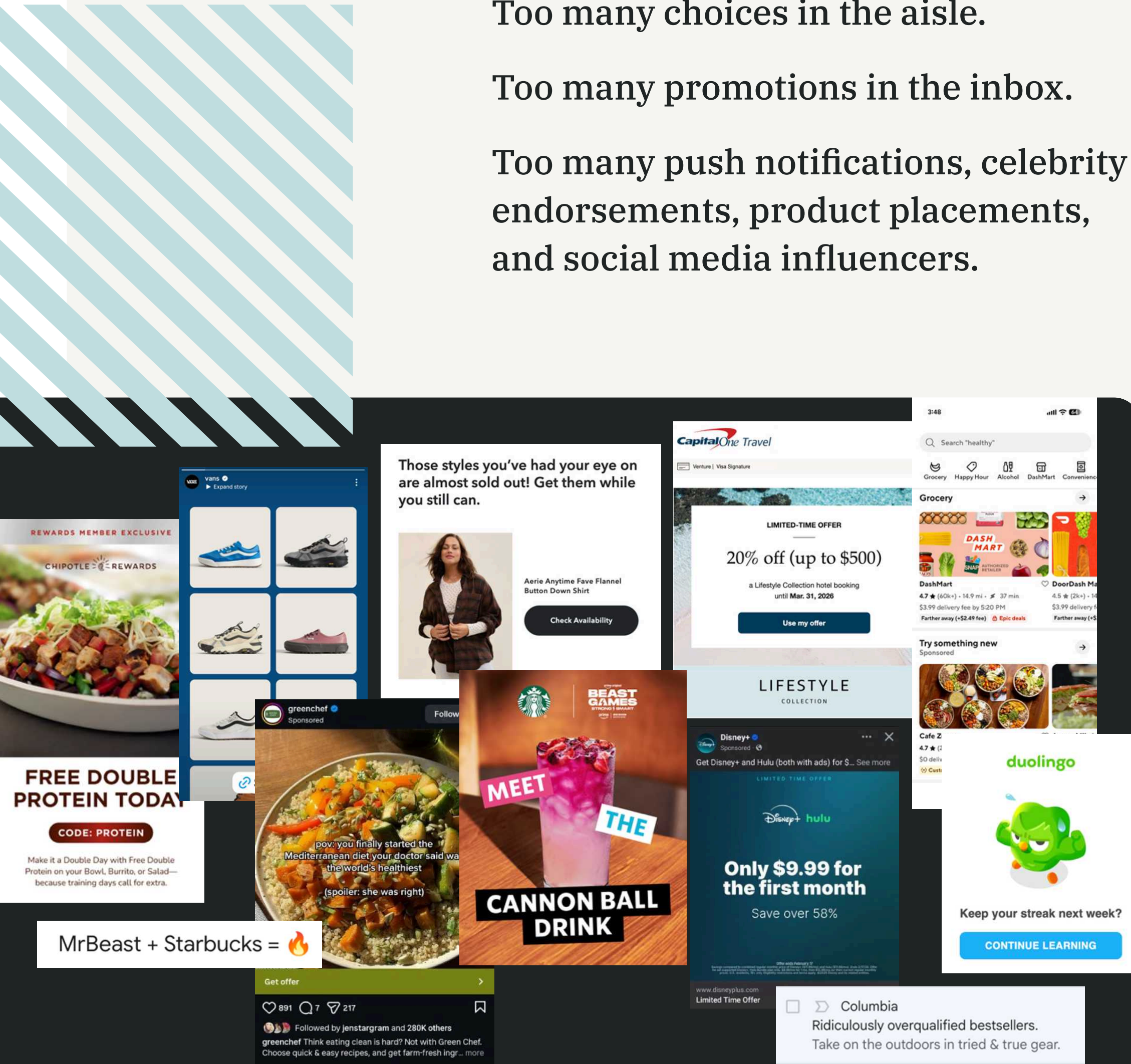
They're creating their own identities and values—and making purchase choices—that aren't dictated or molded by brands. Your brand is just one piece of their meticulously constructed world. And if you're not transparent and genuine, you're not in the game.

How does your brand meaningfully show up for consumers? How do you earn attention in an environment where consumers have become incredibly adept at tuning everything out?

The brands we actively choose, advocate for, and identify with—even when cheaper options exist—are building loyalty by going beyond transactions and rational incentives to tap into the deeper, often irrational, emotional connections that make a brand indispensable.

We call this Brand Devotion.

Note: AI was used to generate several images in this document.





Brand Devotion: a paradigm shift for loyalty marketers.

Customer loyalty has traditionally been driven by habit, value, or simply a lack of better alternatives. It’s been a transactional relationship based on amassing points, miles, visits, and purchases. That means it’s also a functional relationship, making it more likely you’ll leave a brand if a more practical option comes along.

Devotion, on the other hand, is built on deep emotional connections, shared values and identity, and a sense of belonging. When brands are integrated into your values in this way, you’re proud to champion them.

You share content about them. You’re willing to pay a premium or travel out of your way to purchase them. You’re inclined to overlook flaws or make sacrifices. And you’re more likely to defend them from criticism.

In many ways, this idea of devotion may defy logic, or even common sense, at times.

But study after study in the behavioral sciences tells us that we make spontaneous, irrational, utterly emotional decisions when we have every intention of applying logic and order.

This shift to Brand Devotion is built on the simple premise that the human brain is not a purely rational decision-making machine.

FROM

Traditional
loyalty



TO

Brand
Devotion

Consumers are passive recipients

Consumers are active and passionate brand advocates

Brands demand loyalty for transactional rewards

Brands amplify consumer identity with shared values and meaning

Brands strive to lock in consumers

Consumers choose to stay with brands



Loyalty is not won by discounts but by delight.

SHEP HYKEN
CX expert





Understanding the bonds and dimensions of loyalty.

Loyalty is a *relationship*, not a *mechanism*, and like all good relationships, it can't be manufactured. It must be earned.

For decades, loyalty conversations have centered on programs—how to design, optimize, scale, and measure them. But solving program design alone doesn't adequately respond to behavioral insights.

While the *bonds* create the initial opportunity for loyalty, the *dimensions* elevate the customer-brand relationship from functional to fundamental, from transactional to transformational.

Plus, consumers have evolved. Less bound to traditional points of view, they've been rethinking their relationships to brands. For today's customers, repetition doesn't necessarily mean commitment. Habits don't always indicate affinity. A customer who stays because leaving is inconvenient may not feel loyal; they might be feeling stuck. True loyalty is a choice freely made, renewed constantly, and ultimately rooted in something far more powerful than points or perks.

Behavioral science calls it person-brand congruence. When a brand reflects who someone is or who they aspire to be, the relationship transcends the transactional.

The brand stops being something they buy and becomes something they belong to. Genuine loyalty begins in the shift from customer to believer.

When developing loyalty programs and strategies, marketers start with a model that focuses on four distinct bonds: *emotional*, *social*, *structural*, and *financial*.

These bonds categorize the initial reasons consumers engage with a brand—practical factors, financial incentives, some sense of shared values. Crucially, bonds are largely in the brand's control. They reflect what a brand does for its customers in direct, often quantifiable ways.

But consumers remain committed to a brand for deeper, more intrinsic reasons that move beyond transactional benefits and tap into psychological needs, personal values, and identity. Ogilvy's global research, conducted across 3,500 adults in seven countries, confirmed a new framework to understand customers at a deeper level.

Those four dimensions of loyalty are *principal*, *potential*, *culture*, and *community*. Together with the four bonds, the four dimensions form a new model for understanding how loyalty works.

While the *bonds* create the initial opportunity for loyalty, the *dimensions* elevate the customer-brand relationship from functional to fundamental, from transactional to transformational.

When a brand excels across these dimensions, it fosters advocacy, emotional attachment, sustained long-term value—even forgiveness—which, in combination, create a brand connection that's far less susceptible to competitive pressure.

At present, most brands invest heavily in structural and financial bonds. While they're a necessary foundation, they're nowhere near sufficient for building and maintaining customer connections. The brands that inspire lasting devotion go further. They align with what their customers aspire to, stand for, belong to, and believe in. Brands that successfully build devotion don't just reward behavior, they reflect identity.

A closer look at the four dimensions of loyalty.

1 Principle | Does this brand align with my values?

As trust in institutions declines, consumers are more intent on supporting brands that reflect their values. Our research found that 85% of consumers care about brands acting in ways they respect. The takeaway? Brands should authentically live out their values—particularly focusing on the values that resonate with their audience.

2 Potential | Does this brand help me grow?

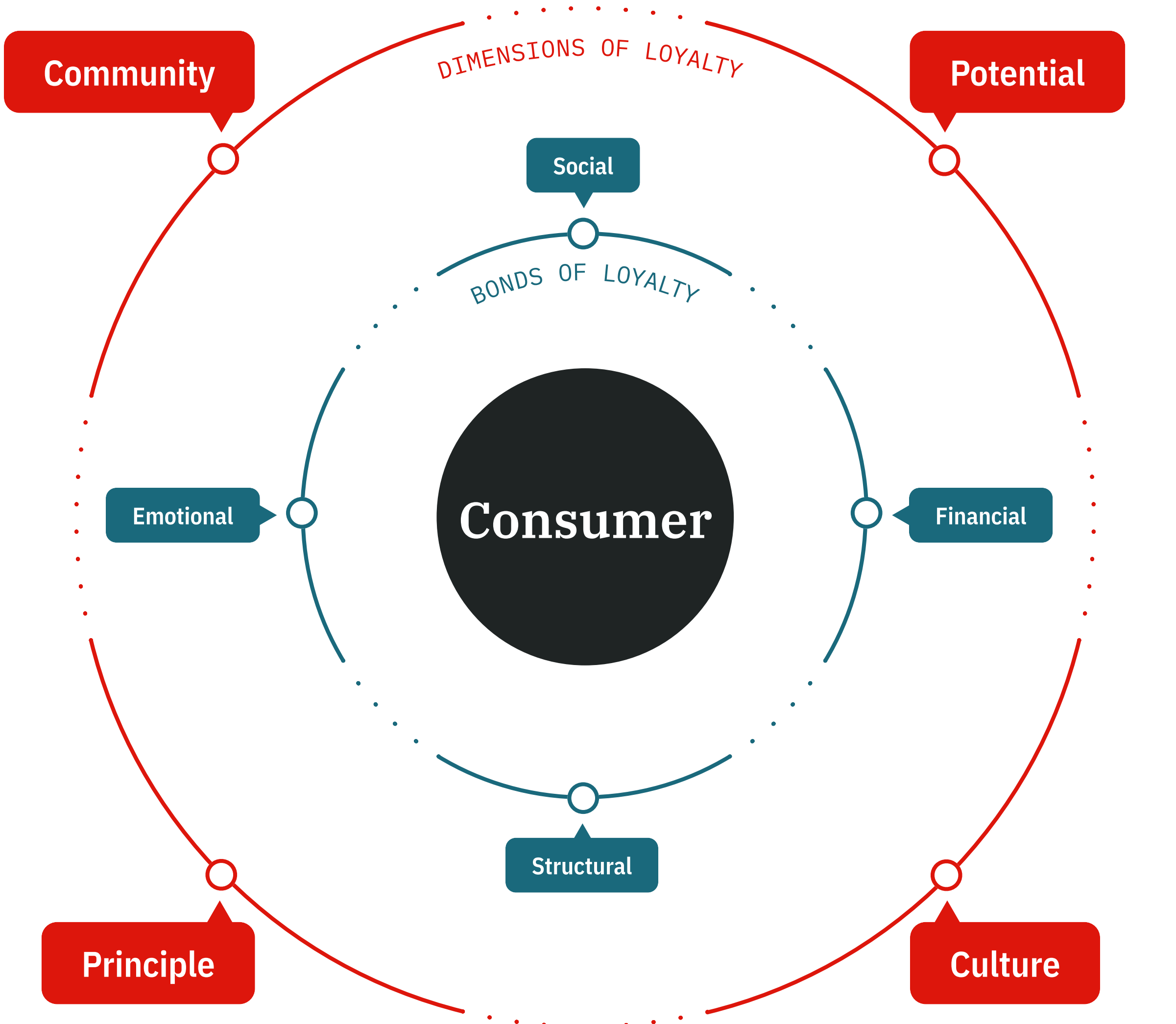
Consumers expect brands to enhance their lives emotionally and practically: 83% respect brands that entertain or uplift, while 81% appreciate help with real goals. As traditional expertise declines, brands offering guidance, education, and support build strong loyalty by delivering value beyond products. Consider Nike Training Club, Today at Apple interactive sessions at Apple Stores, and IKEA's online, AI-powered design tool.

3 Culture | Does this brand fit into my world?

Most consumers prefer brands that align with culture rather than try to lead or change it. Our study found that 79% favor brands that “chart their own path” while reflecting customers’ cultural realities rather than imposing outside values. The ideal approach combines global brand assets with authentic local expression.

4 Community | Does this brand make me feel like I belong?

Community plays an increasingly crucial role in brand loyalty, with 76% of respondents saying they value connections among their friends, family, and preferred brands. Brands that build authentic community foster advocacy, belonging, and repeat purchases. LEGO's multigenerational fan ecosystem and Hallmark's “Countdown to Christmas” movie lineup illustrate how shared identity can deepen loyalty.



Brand Devotion isn't rocket science. But it *is* brain science.

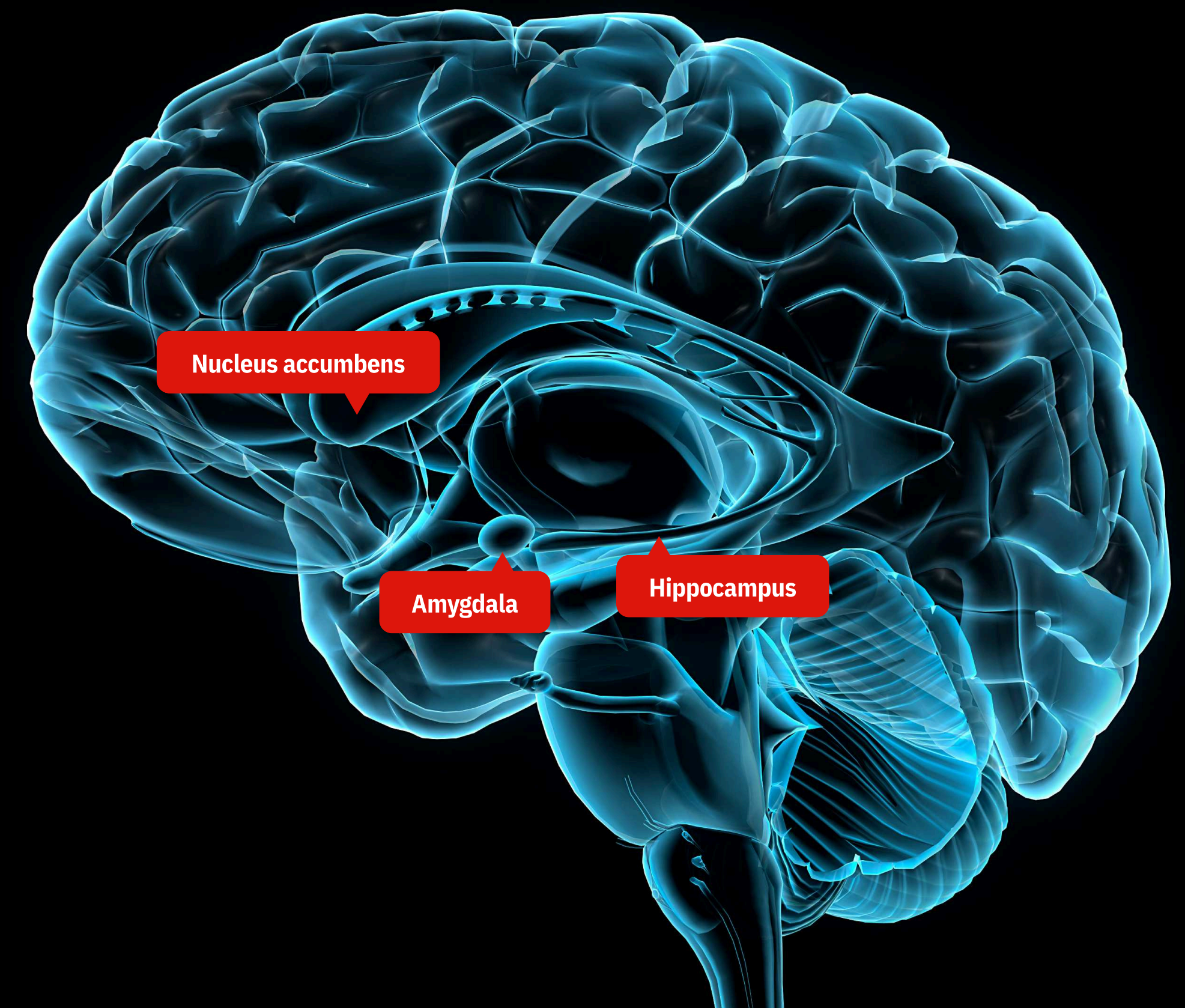
The three-pound mass of gray matter between our ears is hardwired to form strong, enduring attachments to people, places, things. And brands.

The process begins with the limbic system, which houses the amygdala, hippocampus, and nucleus accumbens and plays a key role in both anticipating and experiencing rewards. When a brand consistently expresses appreciation or makes people feel valued, the brain learns to expect positive experiences from future interactions. This anticipation releases dopamine and increases preference for that brand. Brands that cultivate belonging and recognition can create what's known as "limbic-level attachment."

To nerd out just a little bit more here, let's identify the distinct roles played by each structure. The amygdala processes emotions, particularly fear and pleasure, and helps encode powerful, positive feelings for future reference. The hippocampus forms episodic memories that store recollections of special experiences, such as extraordinary events your brand creates. Meanwhile, the nucleus accumbens is part of the brain's reward circuit, activated by pleasurable experiences and the anticipation of reward.

When we think about or use a favorite brand—the surge of pride when you pull on a team jersey or the comfort of your crafted drink arriving on the barista's counter—dopamine is released, creating a sense of pleasure that reinforces the behavior. That emotional loop is fundamental to habit formation.

And that anticipated reward of engaging with a product drives repeated engagement and, ultimately, devotion.



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**We are not thinking machines that feel.
We are feeling machines that think.**

ANTONIO DAMASIO

Neuroscientist



And it's supported by behavioral science too.

Behavioral science sits at the powerful intersection of human psychology and marketing, offering a deep understanding of how people make decisions. Several core human needs drive Brand Devotion:

- Our desire for belonging and social connection leads us to follow others (a concept known as social proof) and favor our own groups (referred to as in-group bias).
- We use brands to signal who we are and what we value.
- We place greater value on the brands we already own.
- Consistent delivery of quality earns our trust.
- We're more likely to embrace brands with a strong mission or ethical stance because we have a collective drive to improve the world around us.
- Because our brains are wired for efficiency, we prefer brands that are easy to use, easy to understand, and familiar.

Additional cognitive biases—anchoring, framing, scarcity, reciprocity, narrative bias, the peak-end rule, and others—further shape how we perceive and choose brands, with rich applications in both marketing and the building of emotional rituals.

When these principles are skillfully applied, the results can be significant: deeper brand connections, greater resistance to competition, stronger word of mouth, higher willingness to pay a premium, and a much greater likelihood to forgive the occasional misstep.

But building devotion isn't without pitfalls.



Building devotion is harder for some brands.

When a beloved brand disappoints, it can feel like a personal betrayal. Devoted graphic designers and art directors don't forget a buggy launch quickly. So when QuarkXPress, developed by Quark, Inc., frustrated design professionals with a series of poor upgrades and delayed support for Mac OS X in the early 2000s, the industry shifted almost overnight to Adobe's InDesign.

An emotional connection might be the last true differentiator in a crowded category.

Devotion doesn't always scale. Due to limited distribution in its region, Colorado-based Coors beer was something of a cult lager in the 1970s. Its mystique grew when East Coasters would bring it home on flights like it was a trophy. When distribution expanded east of the Mississippi River and the brand eventually went national, sales increased but devotion waned. Turns out when you can get it anywhere, it doesn't have the same cachet.

Devoted customers don't appreciate big changes, often making innovation and adaptation challenging for brands, even when they believe it's necessary. Coca-Cola didn't change its 99-year-old formula on a whim; it ran thousands of taste tests before "New Coke" was introduced in 1985.

To the company's great surprise, the launch was an epic fail.

Some brands struggle to build deep devotion—such as commodity products with no real differentiation, brands chasing short-term results, or brands that fail to clearly articulate why they exist. And there's no shortcut around quality: You can't inspire brand pride and ownership with an inferior product or inconsistent service.

But even commonplace or B2B categories—insurance, banking, or office furniture, for example—have built strong emotional connections by leaning into trust, community, or purpose.

An emotional connection might be the last true differentiator in a crowded category.

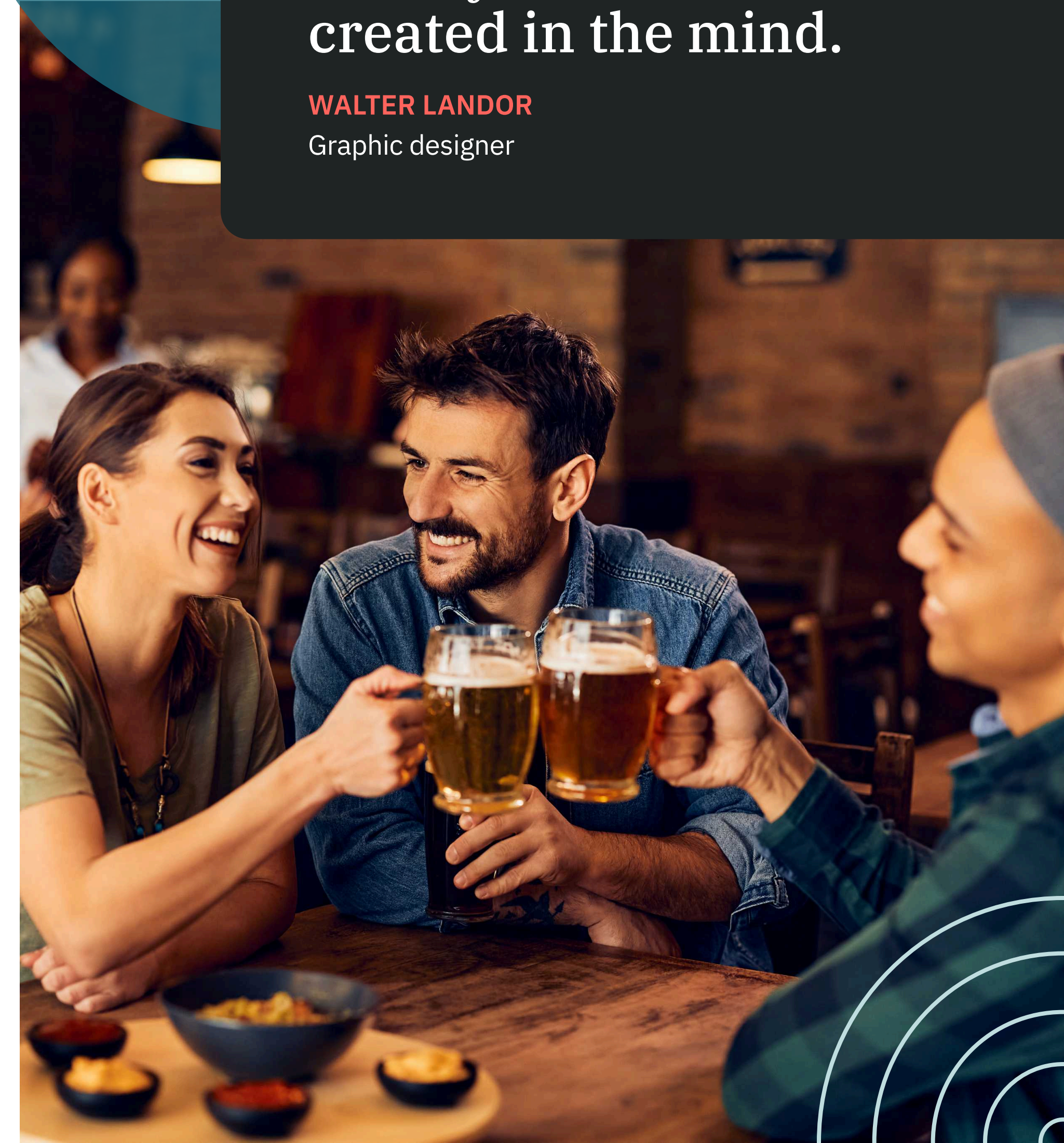
And here's the good news: With today's digital tools, social media, and data analytics, it's never been easier to personalize experiences, build communities, and tell compelling stories at scale.

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Products are made in the factory, but brands are created in the mind.

WALTER LANDOR

Graphic designer





So how should brands leverage this new way of thinking?

BEHAVE WITH PRINCIPLE

Brands must actively live their values, not just market them. That means making a meaningful impact, championing shared beliefs, and having the courage to take a stand, especially in a polarized world. The key is doing so in ways that unite rather than divide.

IMPROVE LIVES WITH POTENTIAL

Brands must go beyond product utility to offer experiences that entertain, inspire, and help customers define themselves. Devoted customers expect their relationships to deepen over time, and the best brands deliver on that expectation through emotional enrichment and genuine, personal relevance.

REFLECT CULTURE

Brands should aim to be a natural part of their customers' worlds, charting their own paths while understanding and honoring local cultural nuances. This requires an intimate knowledge of the customer, a commitment to authenticity over tokenism, and a genuine appreciation—even in this fragmented world—for the realities of a customer's life.

BUILD COMMUNITY

Brands should create real connections among customers so they feel a sense of belonging that goes beyond their transactions. Whether through authentic voices, shared rituals, or creative touch points, the strongest brands bring people together—friends, families, and wider communities alike.



Our top five tips for building Brand Devotion:



- 1 Be alert to the entire ecosystem—don't just listen to your brand channels. Use social intelligence to understand the full customer sentiment: their broader values, passions, challenges, and aspirations *everywhere* they are.
- 2 Move beyond feedback loops. Actively involve your consumers in shaping products, services, and even your mission. This taps into their desire for autonomy and competence—key behavioral science principles.
- 3 Provide tangible tools, resources, and platforms that directly enhance self-fulfillment. Think growth, not just gifts.
- 4 Help people connect for their benefit, even if there isn't a direct tie to the brand. This is the heart of social community management—enabling, not controlling.
- 5 Expand KPIs to reflect how well the brand helps consumers achieve their goals or amplify their potential. When a brand helps define who you are, loyalty isn't a program—it's personal.

QUICK VIEW: PATAGONIA

Living out core values for more than 50 years.

Patagonia's commitment to sustainability and activism is central to its identity. The brand takes responsibility for its impact on the planet by cutting absolute greenhouse gas emissions, by pledging 1% of sales to the preservation and restoration of the natural environment, and by advancing grassroots activism. Patagonia customers proudly approve and support the brand's activities in these areas.



Photo: Patrick Hendry

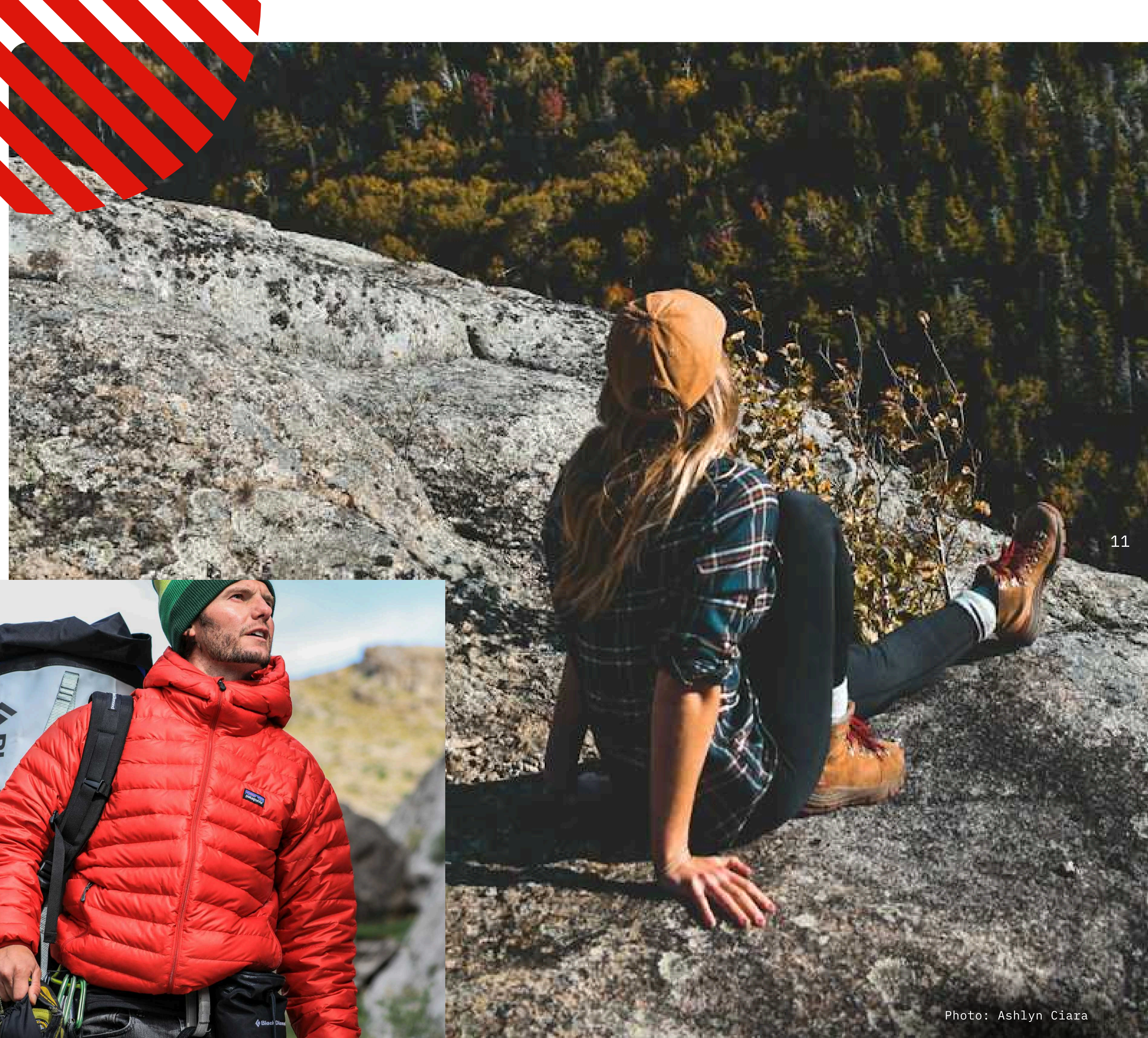


Photo: Ashlyn Ciara

QUICK VIEW: MARRIOTT BONVOY

Elevating personal recognition and pride.

Lifetime Elite members travel for business and leisure more than almost anyone else. So Marriott Bonvoy created an evolving digital experience that highlights each member's personal journeys and achievements through travel. This tailored recognition helps each member feel they're living their best travel life.



QUICK VIEW: FORD

Offering identity and a sense of belonging through a strong community.

Being a Ford owner isn't just about the vehicle you own. It's about the passions your Ford helps you pursue. Creating a space for members to meaningfully come together strengthens social bonds constructed around a brand they love. One way Ford of Canada brings that to life is an annual photo contest where Ford Rewards members share and inspire with epic moments and Canadian pride.



A photograph of a young couple sitting on a bed, smiling and interacting with a small brown dog. The woman is wearing glasses and a light-colored sweater, and the man is wearing a grey sweater. The dog is standing on the bed, looking up at the man. The background shows a window with a view of a house and trees.

How do you measure an intangible like devotion?

Quantifying devotion is the kind of strategic puzzle we love: innovative and challenging. Using a comprehensive, cross-functional approach, we developed a team of six specialized AI agents that assesses operational effectiveness, competitor brand perception, consumer sentiment, generational appeal, effectiveness of loyalty proposition, and social media engagement. Each agent evaluates specific facets, such as product delivery, competitive standing, online sentiment, generational affinity, loyalty program efficacy, and social media engagement.

Overseeing this process are human experts with years of experience and insights. They're assisted by an AI manager agent that can adjust the weighting of any score based on the availability and credibility of relevant data.

Our assessment uses a proprietary scoring methodology to evaluate Brand Devotion with a score ranging from zero to 100. It also provides targeted scores reflecting each agent, critical insights into future trends, industry-average scores, and rankings of notable competitors. This efficient, AI-powered evaluation accelerates and enhances the deep insights that inform our strategic recommendations to help boost Brand Devotion.



Introducing the Brand Devotion AI agent team.

Our proprietary, AI-assisted evaluation quantifies Brand Devotion to fuel deeper strategic thinking. Targeted assessments by each AI agent are combined with analyses of anticipated trends, industry-average scores, rankings of notable competitors, and human insights to score each dimension. It all coalesces into a comprehensive analysis of Brand Devotion.

BRAND OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AGENT

Evaluates how effectively the brand consistently meets or exceeds customer expectations, ensuring that the foundational elements of trust and satisfaction are firmly in place.

COMPETITOR BRAND PERCEPTION AGENT

Analyzes how the brand is perceived against its closest competitors—focusing on perceived value, differentiation, and the capacity to inspire loyalty compared with market alternatives.

CONSUMER SENTIMENT ANALYSIS AGENT

Scans online forums, social media commentary sites, and other digital platforms to gather and analyze sentiment, providing real-time insights into public perception and emotional responses to the brand.

GENERATIONAL APPEAL AGENT

Taps into a specially curated focus group of persona agents, each representing key generational demographics, to gauge the brand’s general affinity level and resonance across diverse age groups.

LOYALTY PROPOSITION EFFECTIVENESS AGENT

Evaluates the potential of the brand’s loyalty offerings against the actual, measured realized devotion, identifying any gaps between aspiration and outcome.

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT AGENT

Scans both owned and earned social media channels to assess engagement levels, identify trending topics, and understand the nature of interactions surrounding the brand.

MANAGER AGENT

Dynamically adjusts the weighting of individual agent scores based on the availability and credibility of information, ensuring the assessment remains tailored and relevant to the specific context of each brand.

SAMPLE RETAILER BRAND DEVOTION SCORE

Composite Score 87.5/100





Stop chasing loyalty. Start creating devotion.

Brand Devotion isn't a buzzword—it's a strategic imperative. It's how brands will win over unbound consumers.

How do we know? Thirty years of accrued expertise in relationship design, data analytics, and loyalty-focused collaborations that have paid big dividends for global consumer brands.

Leveraging the four dimensions of Brand Devotion—principle, potential, culture, and community—will help brands design customer relationships that are meaningful, resilient, and rooted in true belonging. In today's complex and often mistrustful world, the future of loyalty will be built on authentic human connection and belonging.

A future when brands stop selling and start mattering.





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About the authors



LEANNE CORDES

Leanne is senior vice president, Strategic Services, at The Lacek Group, where she leads loyalty program development and builds the foundational strategy behind high-impact customer engagement initiatives. A strategic marketing and loyalty leader with more than 20 years of experience, Leanne spent 15 years in leadership roles with brands such as Starwood Hotels & Resorts, Marriott International, JetBlue, Teladoc Health, and Humana. Leanne delivers a rare blend of commercial rigor and human insight to help brands turn engagement into enduring customer relationships.



JOHN JARVIS

John, The Lacek Group's chief creative officer since 2009, brings more than three decades of advertising and creative experience to the loyalty sphere. His broad experience and knowledge helped The Lacek Group double in size and attract a wide range of national clients looking to brand and rebrand their loyalty programs. Prior to joining Lacek, John was CEO and chief creative officer at Colle+McVoy. He's also taught advertising classes for many years at several universities and chaired the marketing committee for Super Bowl LII in Minneapolis.



◊ The Lacek Group

For more than 30 years, The Lacek Group has been perfecting the art and algorithms of Brand Devotion. We help world-class brands identify their highest-potential customers, engage them across channels throughout their lifecycles, personalize each relationship for optimal long-term results, and measure the true effectiveness of those efforts. The Lacek Group is a WPP Enterprise Solutions company.

We're always thinking.

Go to lacek.com/insights or sign up for the *Thinking Out Loud* newsletter to stay on top of emerging trends with analysis by our customer engagement, loyalty, and experience experts.

