



BOLDSPACE

# THE BOLD SPACES

Where brands can win in 2026

# FOREWORD

As brands look ahead to 2026, they are operating in a landscape shaped by rapid cultural change, technological acceleration and increasing pressure to prove relevance and value. For leadership teams, the challenge is no longer predicting what comes next, but understanding where to act, where to invest and where to lead.

This report was created in response to that challenge.

Rather than cataloguing what's next, we set out to identify where brands can truly win. The bold spaces are the moments, mindsets and market shifts that create an opportunity – the space where insight meets action, and where brands that move decisively can build relevance, trust and momentum.

Throughout this report, members of our Senior Leadership Team draw on their individual expertise to explore these opportunities in depth. Each chapter

uncovers a distinct bold space for brands to observe, understand and pursue in 2026, spanning sectors, channels and technologies. From evolving ideas of vanity as self-care, to the accelerating power of the creator economy, these aren't simply passing trends. They are signals of deeper cultural change, reshaping how those in the modern day think, feel and choose.

Our belief is simple: the brands that succeed in 2026 will be those willing to engage with these shifts early and with purpose. Those that recognise the cultural context they operate in and align themselves accordingly, will be the ones that stand out and reap the rewards as a result.

We hope you enjoy this first edition of The Bold Spaces. If you'd like to explore any of these areas in more detail, or learn more about our new brand-owned AI platform, **Boldstream**, we'd love to continue the conversation.

You can get in touch at [hello@boldspace.com](mailto:hello@boldspace.com) or visit [Boldspace.com](https://boldspace.com).



Bold Space 01

# COMMS NEEDS AI



Mike Robb  
Co-CEO

This will be the year communications stops experimenting with AI and starts running on it. The old big agency economics of people-heavy networks and slow processes are not merely under pressure, they are being redefined.

The market is polarising, where commoditised execution collapses toward automation and in-house delivery, while high-value strategy, judgement and category-defining creative become the premium currency. That means communications leaders face a hard and immediate choice: continue to accept steady erosion of control, or redesign how work is owned, measured and delivered so human talent is focused where it truly matters.

The most urgent gap is twofold, with capability and confidence both paramount. Communications leaders must rapidly build the skills and systems to use AI safely while also demonstrating a clear roadmap that cuts cost and risk, while freeing teams to focus human attention on high-impact strategic advice and creative judgement that they do best.

Trust will be the strategic battleground in all this. Synthetic media, GEO (generative engine optimisation) and AI-curated narratives are changing discoverability and what it means to own a story.

Measurement must evolve too - coverage and impressions will feel superficial unless tied directly to outcomes the business cares about, from stakeholder belief to behaviour change.

This is a story of redirection, not replacement. The future of great comms lies in hybrid models where powerful, brand-first platforms handle repeatable execution while human teams are freed to exercise judgement, cultural insight and persuasion. Platforms that combine governed intelligence with specialist workflows are the future, where they lower the cost of the base layer while amplifying the strategic value that only humans can deliver.

For communications leaders in 2026 the mandate is clear: reclaim time and enhance both speed with AI, insist on good governance so trust scales with speed and invest in the uniquely human skills - judgement, cultural understanding and narrative craft - that AI cannot replicate.

Do that and comms stops pleading for relevance and starts proving it.

**Bold Space 02**

# THE NEXT WAVE OF MUSIC NOSTALGIA

Over 2026 we're going to see a continued rise in brands tapping into a different set of memory banks.

For years, music nostalgia in advertising drew from a familiar canon. Classic pop, soft rock, piano intros designed to feel safe and broadly appealing. That shared reference point is ageing out. Not disappearing but losing its ability to surprise or signal relevance.

In its place, brands are increasingly tuning into the sounds that shaped everyday youth culture for a generation now firmly in the mainstream. UK garage, grime, jungle, house and early road rap. Music that lived in car parks, youth clubs, pirate radio sets and tinny headphones on the way to college. Passed hand-to-hand through burned CDs, Bluetooth transfers and shared links, long before algorithms took over.

These genres are becoming powerful emotional shortcuts. Not because they are obscure, but because they are deeply specific. They carry memories of independence, belonging and identity formation. When brands use them well, they don't feel like throwbacks. They feel like recognition.

Over the next few years, we'll see this evolve beyond headline tracks and obvious hooks. Brands will dig deeper into the catalogue. Instrumentals, intros, regional references and production textures will start to appear more often, with less explanation and more confidence. The sound won't be polished smooth. Character will be left in.

We'll also see a shift in how brands participate in the culture around these sounds. Collaboration will matter more than citation. Crediting, compensating and platforming original artists, DJs and collectives will become part of how brands demonstrate fluency, not just good intent. Audiences will expect brands to show they understand where this music came from, not just how it sounds.

This isn't nostalgia as comfort. It's nostalgia as connection. A way for brands to signal shared experience in a landscape where attention is fragmented and trust is hard-earned.

As more campaigns tap into these memory banks, the ones that land will be those that treat the music as lived culture, not mood-setting. Because when a brand gets it right, the response isn't "I remember that track." It's "that was my time."



**Arif Miah**  
Senior Director

Bold Space 03

# VANITY MEETS BODY POSITIVITY

Netflix's critically acclaimed *Adolescence* started 2025 with a bang. It reminded the world that issues of body and gender identity belong just as much to men as they do women, and set the precedent for a year that put masculinity under the microscope.

If the John Lewis Christmas ad and the *Celebrity Traitors* final were 2025's cultural compass, they pointed us firmly in the direction of positive masculinity.

So what can we expect of gender and body politics in 2026? At a time when beauty tech is accelerating, subtle surgery is booming, and weight loss drugs are flying off the shelves – the upcoming release of the *Devil Wears Prada 2* could hardly be more timely.

## Welcome to the year of vanity as self-care.

For nearly a decade, the likes of Dove and *This Girl Can* have made aesthetic self-improvement practically unthinkable. They've called out a society that once demanded we chase the perfect body, however unattainable. Instead, their message has been clear: love the body you're in.

But as technology and science are reaching new frontiers, the narrative is changing. Thanks to the availability and efficacy of a new hybrid category that combines beauty with healthcare, the 'perfect body' now might just be attainable. And with it, there is a growing acceptance that it is actually ok to seek cosmetic improvement.

**Chloe Beckett**  
Senior Director



If this sounds like terrible news, don't despair. We're not winding back the clock to a time when Size Zero was revered and goal weight was but a stomach flu away. No, what we're seeing now is an evolution, not a reversal, of the body positivity era; a recognition that taking care of one's appearance is an expression of self-care.

As new beauty brands and products come to market this year, this will be the message. Either love your body, or create a body you will love. And do it for no one else but you.

Perhaps surprisingly, the brands doing it well are in the men's category – a happy side effect of 2025's spotlight on masculinity. Take *Manscaped*, which invites men to 'upgrade their oysters', or the countless skincare brands discovering that men have skincare routines too. Their message is look after yourself. Their impact is permission to take pride in appearance.

As 2026 progresses, we will see more of this. Messages of empowerment and permission that validate those who seek improved bodies, but who have until recently felt guilty or unable to pursue them. The dangers are obvious, and not all brands will get the message right, but the opportunity is greater. This year, body positivity will be about body improvement, where vanity is hailed as the new kind of self-care.

Bold Space 04

# REAL FANDOM



Charlie Skillen  
Head of Sport

# 1-0

# LAME CAMPAIGNS

There's one event in sport that stands above all others in 2026 – the World Cup. And while fans will still be focused on domestic action as the New Year hits, brands will already be deep in planning mode on how to show up.

My hope is they learn from the mistakes of the past. The FIFA official partnerships were sewn up long ago, so the battle is on to claim a non-approved piece.

So many World Cups see a deluge of brand campaigns that awkwardly crowbar football where it doesn't naturally fit, speaking about the sport like they've just arrived from space and doing nothing to tap into real fan experience.

You've seen the type... grinning fans wearing safely off-brand shirts and scarves embracing in cringeworthy celebrations, a black-and-white ball resembling the 'soccer' emoji inexplicably at their feet.

Too many campaigns begin with "How do we use the World Cup?" The better question is: "What does football mean to people during a World Cup?"

So, instead of fake-looking celebrations, slow motion action montages and trophy lifts, tap into the humour, fan culture, the nerves. The brands that resonate during

World Cups aren't the ones that shout the loudest. They're the ones that understand football as culture.

Football fandom lives in specifics: the superstitions, the tension, the humour, the arguments, the emotional whiplash. Campaigns built on vague ideas of 'unity' or 'passion' rarely cut through because they ignore those lived details. Fans don't want football explained to them, they want it reflected back in a way that feels recognisable.

This World Cup isn't entirely celebratory - there's even a spiky edge with eye-wateringly high ticket prices and FIFA president Gianni Infantino's reverence of President Trump. A smart brand may be able to take advantage of that.

PR needs to lead the creative thinking here. Listen to football fans, and make your campaign with them, take note of how fans consume content from their favourite football creators or pundits – and stress-test work against the likelihood of fans sharing it among each other.

There will be a \*lot\* of noise. The way to cut through will be to hone in on authentic slices of fan culture... and leave the emoji balls at home.

# THE RISE OF THE CREATOR ECONOMY

Jack Storry  
Head of Corporate



The creator economy has exploded in recent years. In that time, we've seen creators move from being a niche to a force that often set the agenda. Today creators are opinion shapers. They enjoy influence and trust that many would dream of. Our view is their influence is only set to grow in 2026.

It's useful to first reflect on the diversity of the creator economy. In past years, it has been tempting for some organisations, particularly those in the B2B world, to dismiss creators as not relevant to them because they are consumer-facing influencers. That view was wrong in and of itself – but it's also increasingly wrong because it fails to understand that today creators are everywhere.

They are not just everywhere, they are increasingly sophisticated. Many are becoming brands themselves and building multi-channel audiences. In light of this, Goldman Sachs estimates that the creator economy will be worth half-a-trillion dollars by 2027.

In 2026, we will see the creator economy continue to evolve and grow in new ways as it moves towards that

milestone. The biggest area of growth though may well be influence.

We are already seeing signs. A founder we work with told us he was inundated with messages from investors and industry partners after a recent podcast appearance. By comparison, he has had interviews with high-profile media outlets that have received significantly less feedback. This is just one example of how influence dynamics are shifting.

We may well see a world in 2026 where we have LinkedIn newsletters driving the news agenda, YouTube channels scooping the biggest interviews and podcasts shaping opinion faster than traditional media ever could.

For organisations already working with creators, it's a case of thinking hyper-strategically about how you can deepen relationships and leverage influence across channels. For organisations who don't have a track record of working with creators – now is the time to change that.

The creator economy will become, and in many ways already is, the next communications and marketing battleground. If you don't have a strategy, then you are losing competitive advantage and leaving your reputation in the hands of others.

# “PICK ME. CHOOSE ME. LOVE ME.”



**Lou Kelly**  
Head of Consumer

Much like Meredith Grey’s iconic line, retail marketing in 2026 is going to be less about making the most noise and more about removing doubt at the exact moment a customer decides.

We’re operating in a world where discovery is messier, attention is fragmented and trust is harder to earn and easier to lose. That combination demands a certain standard of marketing: easy to understand, easy to verify, and consistent from first impression through to delivery.

In short, brands need to be more direct and honest. Less grand gesture, more emotional intelligence. More Meredith.

First, discovery is becoming AI-mediated and platform-native. People increasingly meet brands through AI summaries, marketplace search results or short-form video, often long before they ever see a homepage. The reality is simple: if your product information is vague, your brand will be summarised badly. The brands that win will make life easy for themselves. Clean product data. Clear FAQs. Sharper comparisons.

If AI is telling your story for you, you want to give it something good to work with.

Second, commerce and retail media are no longer side hustles, they’re core brand builders. As spend shifts closer to the moment of purchase, creativity has to work harder in smaller spaces. Distinctive assets, tight value articulation and evidence that reduces hesitation become non-negotiable. Measurement also has to mature - less fixation on clicks, more focus on incrementality, repeat purchase and the message that best moves real behaviour.

Third, creator-led shopping turns content into the shop floor. The content that performs best feels like a great in-store conversation. It shows the product, explains it clearly, tackles the obvious objections and makes the price feel fair. No smoke, no mirrors. For brands, that means better briefs, stricter discipline around claims and modular assets that can work harder across product pages, retail placements and social formats.

Fourth, operational reality becomes marketing. Returns policies, delivery promises, fees, customer service and sustainability claims are no longer background noise. They’re judged publicly, shared socially and remembered.

In 2026, the fastest-growing brands will be the ones that align promise with experience. Plain-language policies. Transparent trade-offs. Fewer, stronger claims, and the evidence to back them up. Say what you mean, mean what you say. The best retail marketing in 2026 will feel more credible, more connected and far closer to how people actually buy today. It’s no longer about who shouts the loudest.

It’s about showing up clearly, consistently and honestly. Give customers every reason to choose you.

# TURNING CURIOSITY INTO GROWTH

Over the last year, AI has been a sidekick in areas of my life I'd never have attempted otherwise. I've recorded and released an EP on Spotify, fixed a long-broken kitchen sink, and put together investment plans.

Not because I suddenly became an expert, but because AI let me get inside the workings: how the sink is put together, how tracks are layered and mixed, how a plan diversifies and adjusts to risk. It turns 'I can't do that' into 'I can learn this' - fast.

That's the real opportunity, and it's about to transform marketing.

In 2026, I believe the teams that win won't just be the ones using AI to produce more output or simply give them the answer. They'll be the ones using it to reshape workstreams - building new capability in strategy, creativity, insight and execution. The biggest gains will come from the organisations who treat AI less like a shortcut and more like a system for learning: a way to upskill teams, deepen thinking, and improve judgement.

Because the competitive advantage is shifting. When everyone has access to the same tools, the difference is no longer who can generate the most. It's who can apply the technology with the most understanding - who can make better calls, faster, and keep improving.



**Nick Ford-Young**  
Co-CEO

This is also changing what clients want. They'll expect partnerships that are more efficient, more transparent and more sustainable. They'll want more agency, and clearer ways of working. But they'll still value - even more - premium creative and strategy at the highest level, because the top layer will always be about taste, direction and experience.

The next wave of AI won't be owned by the organisations chasing answers. It will be owned by the ones building capability - and turning curiosity into growth, both personally and professionally.

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