



CANNES LIONS



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Recap Report

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Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity 2026

Creativity is the Lifeblood of Commerce

And Commerce has become the core of the media plan. Observations from Publicis Commerce



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Publicis Commerce executives reporting back from the media industry's premier annual event found creativity to be alive and well, despite all the recent debate over its AI-instigated demise.

It might be ironic at a festival founded to recognize creative excellence for its own sake, however, that a key reason creativity has become even more critical is the AI-enabled ways it can be scaled to unprecedented levels and have its impact tied directly to measurable commerce outcomes.

Also contributing to creative's health is the strong backlash to "AI slop" already coming from consumers and marketers alike, as both groups decry the clear lack of authenticity, relevance and, yes, humanity that's too-often evident from content generated solely by AI. A loss of those qualities could be devastating for brands and retailers at a time when trust is becoming an even more crucial aspect of consumer decision-making — which, in turn, is a key reason why authentic creators and influencers increasingly are being enlisted to help brands build authentic, relevant, and human creative content.

Here are some key themes from this year's event, as presented by Jill Cruz with commentary from the rest of the Publicis Commerce thought leadership team.

1. Great Creative Drives Commerce

Creativity remains the core of great media activation. Now, however, it's not only tied to commerce outcomes but will be judged by its measured performance. This marriage of creativity with conversion, brand building with basket building, demands culturally and contextually relevant creative that resonates immediately with consumers through specific rituals (caregiving, child rearing, home life) and moments (back-to-school, family management, vacation time).

Since we're in the AI age, the best work is balancing performance at scale with informed shopper meaning and connection, especially when creating content for conversational agents/LLMs. Brands that only optimize for the algorithms may drive dashboard results, but only breakthrough storytelling will win hearts and wallets. ▶

» **Amy Lanzi:** AI-generated creative will not be good enough for our industry. But AI-rich systems can accelerate everything great teams already do, freeing up creatives to focus on work that actually drives business outcomes.

» **Amy Andrews:** Every commerce experience is a brand opportunity, and every brand experience is a commerce opportunity. AI helps us scale those experiences to more shoppers, in more personalized ways, but the core idea behind the experience remains driven by human intelligence and creativity.

» **Casey Lissau:** Consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of marketing claims, and the best work at Cannes reflected that. Instead of saying something is faster, stronger, cleaner, or better, the work demonstrated those qualities in ways impossible for people to ignore. Product demos became entertainment. Experiments became campaigns. The proof isn't buried in the fine print — it becomes the creative idea.

The awards entry work we found ourselves saving and talking about wasn't defined by technology, AI or media innovation. Those tools certainly played a role, but they rarely were the idea. The strongest work was built on timeless creative principles: human insight, surprise, participation, simplicity, and emotional resonance.

2. The Hype is Over: AI is Working

AI has blown past the hype phase and now is making an impact in many areas, most especially:

- Creative versioning at scale (dynamic ads targeted by audience, retailer, context).
- Retail media optimization (bidding, assortment decisions).
- Content supply chain (automated updates of PDPs, imagery, copy).

But there are watchouts for implementation, perhaps the most critical being a potential “reversion to the mean” if everyone adopts the same AI tools, as Flowcode CEO Tim Armstrong put it.

The impact of measurement on the process is still TBD, as is the potential of identifying effective strategies for true, growth-driving differentiation if/when every brand uses the same underlying models, and if breakthrough marketing potentially dissipates into a dull, average baseline. Weaker marketers may definitely benefit from these trends, but top-tier creatives could have their talents diluted.

AI is a powerful resource for task completion and mass production, but it doesn't empathize. The human mandate hasn't gone away, especially as opportunities between brands and creators continues to emerge.

» **Amanda Rogers:** Last year, the industry focused on defending human creativity from AI. This year, the discussion centered on determining what humans should do vs. what machines should do. Consensus opinion finds AI most valuable when used to accelerate execution, improve productivity, increase content-creation efficiency, or enhance creative workflows. And the humans should stay in charge of strategic thinking, creative concepting, emotional understanding, and brand judgment.

Organizations need to intentionally define what humans will own vs. what AI will handle — with the highest value work remaining in human hands. Otherwise, AI will determine those roles by default.

» **Amy Lanzi:** Hackers wanted. The best outcomes right now are coming from talent who are rolling up their sleeves and embracing democratized AI. Magic happens when teams turn internal work challenges into breakthrough client solutions.

» **Amy Andrews:** AI helps us win every SKU across every shelf. Our teams across Publicis Commerce are creating new AI skills every day to help our clients win across physical, digital, social, and agentic shelves. While there was healthy debate at Cannes about AI vs. human intelligence, no one is arguing that we need to embrace AI with curiosity and creativity. ▶

3. Trust is the Real Currency

AI slop is flooding every feed with content, eroding trust among consumers already filled with plenty of skepticism about advertising and brand content.

Pinterest, Spotify, Google/YouTube, and Reddit all debuted experiences, moments, and new research that exemplify how trust springs from listening to consumers, developing relevant communication, and always responding honestly.

Reddit is presiding over a new validation economy where consumers go to verify what they've already seen elsewhere, to pressure-test their purchase intent through real opinions, not advertising. With 50% of its community traffic related to discussions about brands and products, Reddit has a new insights tool for brands in beta. The ability to pull Reddit comments dynamically into brand creative would give a boost to retail media activation, bringing real consumer voices closer to the point of purchase and directly into the ad experience. (FYI: search agents have already tapped into Reddit as a trustworthy source of brand content.)

Brands need to lean in and learn the sources people trust. That will require making an impact farther upstream and establishing a presence where validation is happening alongside discovery. In a world of AI-generated everything, human opinion can be a differentiator.

» **Amy Andrews:** Trust is built through relevance. In an increasingly AI-driven world, relevance and authenticity are even more critical for brands and retailers for building and maintaining trusted relationships with shoppers. We now can leverage AI to build relevance with specific audiences and measure the impact on commerce.

4. Retail Media Has Grown Up

Retail media's ongoing evolution into a full-funnel media ecosystem — complete with proof points — was evident in many ways:

- Kroger, Albertsons, and Walmart/Sam's Club all shared news about structural reorganizations that will align their networks with the rest of the enterprise.
- Offsite opportunities continue to grow, with a heavy focus on Connected TV integration. (Walmart even bought its own streaming ad software company, Vibe.co.)
- The store continues to become a larger piece of the media puzzle as a connected location for inspiration and discovery that also helps the network roadmap evolve and expand.

There even seems to be a heavy push toward standardization and interoperability/cross-channel visibility, with practitioners acknowledging that fragmentation remains a problem. So does measurement, although media mix models are evolving to help brands make sure their campaigns are driving new demand rather than paying to "capture" existing shoppers. The confusion over true incrementality vs. attribution persists, too. ▶



» **Amy Andrews:** Retail media is almost becoming as much about culture as conversion. Seeing Cannes attendees wearing “Rico’s Tacos” hats (from the new Albertsons Media Collective/P&G “micro-sitcom”) was a visual representation of how retail media has grown up. As it matures, we’ll need to move beyond connecting channels to create experiences in which people want to actively participate — whether they’re in a grocery aisle or on the Croisette.

5. The Creator Economy Has Arrived

Given the comingling of brands, agencies, and investors on the scene, Cannes has become a highly relevant venue for creators to attend.

Creators were evaluated in three ways simultaneously that illustrate their ability to drive both opinions and transactions:

As a **media channel** that delivers reach, attention, and cultural relevance — and with emotional connection, not disruption.

As a scalable **creative production model** that, as a complement to a brand’s traditional, agency-built assets, can develop content quickly, inexpensively, and aligned with platform behavior.

As a **commerce driver:** Retail media networks are establishing formal programs with access for brand partners that enlist creators for affiliate programs, storefronts, live/social shopping, other shoppable content, and even retail activation.

» **Amanda Rogers:** Reach is no longer difficult. Meaning is. Creators succeed because they bring trust, authenticity, community, and storytelling. Research is even finding that creator-led advertising outperforms traditional brand advertising in some contexts. Brands, however, need to remain central to the process, enlisting creators for amplification and not letting them take complete control.

6. Sports Are a Commerce Platform

Sports advertising has always been a crucial and lucrative area for the industry because it sits at the intersection of fandom, culture, community, live experiences, and brand/retailer partnerships.

Now, as the one remaining form of entertainment that still draws mass live viewing, sports are increasingly being viewed not just for brand-building purposes or sponsorship opportunities but also as a commerce environment. The combination of live audience scale and intense fan emotion makes sporting events an ideal venue for shoppable media, and retail media networks including Best Buy and Sam’s Club are enlisting brands for media activation around their existing sponsorships. And let’s not forget that athletes and relevant creators can add another layer of consideration drivers. ▶



7. Commerce Media Is the Plan

The discussion has shifted noticeably. No one questions if retail media should be part of the plan anymore. In fact, the tone has shifted to: Commerce media *is* the plan or, as Jacques Hagopian, P&G's SVP of North America Brand Operations, summarized, "Every point of reach is a point of sale."

In its many forms — retail media, vertical services (finance, travel, hospitality), marketplaces, aggregators, social platforms — commerce media is becoming central to the plan. Meanwhile, successful networks are becoming more consultative, focused on advertiser goals, and capable of building full-funnel plans across onsite, other owned channels, and offsite programmatic that can be measured at every touchpoint.

The convergence of media, data insights, and distribution channels is leading brands to strategically broaden their thinking:

- Instead of, "How much do we invest in retail media?" they're asking, "How can we connect all media to a commerce outcome?"
- Instead of, "How do we drive people to stores?" they're asking, "How do we win in any environment?"
- Instead of, "Product discovery only happens at the beginning of the journey," they're thinking, "Discovery can happen anywhere."

» **Amy Lanzi:** Brand building and the fundamentals are more essential than ever, amplified by systems and data. Modern CMOs are stepping up, driving growth engines while keeping the creative spark alive. The future favors the curious, the collaborative, and the systems builders. ♦



Getting More Strategic About Creative



Mike Bartlett
Chief Growth Officer
Publicis Commerce

Everyone came to Cannes talking about AI.

But they left talking about creativity.

Yes, AI, automation, AdTech, optimization, and personalization were impossible to ignore. Every conversation touched on how technology is reshaping the way brands work.

What surprised me was that none of it felt like a replacement for creativity. If anything, it reinforced its value.

The campaigns that stood out weren't the ones with the most sophisticated technology behind them. They were the ones with the strongest ideas. The ones that made people laugh, think, or feel something. The ones that earned attention instead of chasing it.

That shift showed up everywhere—from award-winning work to conversations inside the Palais to walks along the Croisette.

During his session, 'Robots don't build brands, people do.', Mark Pritchard captured it perfectly.

That wasn't a rejection of AI. It was a reminder that technology is only as valuable as the thinking behind it.

The real conversation at Cannes wasn't whether AI belongs in the creative process. It was how we use it without sacrificing originality, intuition, and the human perspective that great brands are built on.

If there was one lesson I took home, it's this: The future of creativity isn't human or AI. It's human creativity, amplified by technology — but always led by people with something meaningful to say. ♦



Creative Trends:

Finding the Moments That Inspire



Casey Lissau
EVP-Executive Creative Director
Saatchi X

Every year, the Cannes Lions Awards give us a glimpse into where creativity is heading. As we looked back through this year's work, a few patterns kept showing up. They're not meant to be definitive trends for commerce marketers, but instead signals pointing toward future creative success.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Proof > Promises: Consumers are becoming increasingly skeptical of marketing claims. Rather than asking people to simply believe a message, the best work found creative ways to prove it. Instead of saying something was faster, stronger, cleaner, or better, the work demonstrated it in ways impossible to ignore. Product demos became entertainment. Experiments became campaigns. The proof wasn't buried in the fine print, it became the creative idea, and the product itself became the story.

As AI makes it easier than ever to generate convincing advertising, authenticity and tangible proof may become one of the most valuable creative tools brands have.

Takeaway: Don't just communicate the benefit. Let people experience it.

2. The Idea in the Moment: Some of the strongest work didn't invent entirely new places for creativity but instead uncovered creative opportunities inside moments that already existed: Ordering food. Reading reviews. Watching sports. Scrolling social feeds. Packaging. Everyday rituals.

Rather than interrupting people, brands inserted themselves into behaviors that already had their attention. The result felt more natural, more relevant, and often more memorable. It's not simply reacting to culture but recognizing that almost every consumer interaction has creative potential.

Takeaway: Sometimes the best plan doesn't find a new channel but sees an existing moment differently.

3. Build for Fans First: One of the biggest surprises from this year's work was how often ideas started small. Instead of chasing mass appeal, brands leaned into passionate communities, niche interests, and specific cultural moments. They built ideas for people who genuinely cared, trusting that authenticity would travel further than an attempt at broader relevance ever could.

Cultural impact often starts by delighting a small audience before reaching a much larger one. Specificity isn't limiting; it's often what makes an idea feel universal.

Takeaway: The smartest path to scale doesn't always include everyone at the start. ▶📌

Creative Trends: Finding the Moments That Inspire

KEY TAKEAWAYS - Continued

4. Participation Beats Exposure: Many of the strongest campaigns asked consumers to do something instead of simply watch something: play, collect, vote, unlock, review, compete, customize. The audience didn't just receive the idea, they became part of it. Whether through gaming, promotions, or interactive brand experiences, participation created a level of engagement that traditional advertising simply can't replicate.

Consumers increasingly remember what they experience, not just what they see.

Takeaway: The next generation of great creative will capture attention by inviting participation.

5. Familiar Assets, Fresh Ideas: Some of the most compelling work wasn't built around entirely new products or technologies. Instead, brands found new ways to use assets they already owned. Packaging became media. Menus became experiences. Products became collectibles. Offers became entertainment. Brand codes became platforms for creativity. Rather than chasing the next innovation, brands found new value in things consumers already recognized.

Sometimes creativity doesn't require creating something new but looking at something familiar with fresh eyes.

Takeaway: Great ideas don't always demand new assets. Sometimes, they simply require new thinking.

FINAL THOUGHT

Technology, AI, or media innovation certainly played a role in the Cannes Lions work we found ourselves saving and talking about, but they rarely were the idea. The strongest work was built on timeless creative principles: human insight, surprise, participation, simplicity, and emotional resonance. That's an encouraging reminder.

As our industry continues to evolve, the fundamentals of great creativity haven't changed. They're simply showing up in new places, reaching people in new ways, and influencing decisions closer to the moment of action than ever before. ♦

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Settling Some Big Debates on the Croisette



Amanda Rogers
President
Saatchi X

One common debate throughout Cannes Lions 2026 involved efficiency vs. effectiveness, a pair of objectives that aren't mutually exclusive but often seem at odds when brands are setting strategy.

Speakers at the festival also debated the options of content quality over volume, long-term brand building over short-term optimization, simplicity over complexity, and creativity as a business growth driver rather than a cost center. (That last choice points to effectiveness winning out over efficiency, by the way.) None of these choices should be considered either/or options either.

All of those debates roll up into the most important debate of all: human insights over AI technology. And here, the consensus from marketers, creatives, and jury presidents was clear that future success will belong to the organizations using the two in tandem.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Here are some other key themes from this year's event:

1. AI has shifted from novelty to utility. Last year, the industry focused on defending human creativity from AI. This year, the discussion centered on determining what humans should do vs. what machines should do. Consensus opinion finds AI most valuable when used to accelerate execution, improve productivity, increase content-creation efficiency, or enhance creative workflows. And the humans should stay in charge of strategic thinking, creative conceiving, emotional understanding, and brand judgment.

Organizations need to intentionally define what humans will continue own vs. what AI will handle — with the highest value work remaining in human hands. Otherwise, AI will determine those roles by default.

2. Creativity remains a competitive advantage. One of the strongest messages throughout Cannes was that creativity remains the primary brand differentiator. Several jury presidents noted that the work winning Lions awards was often simple, human, emotionally resonant, culturally meaningful — even imperfect.

Rather than recognizing technical sophistication, juries rewarded ideas that made people feel something. One recurring theme: “Do you actually have something to say?” Because the best campaigns solved real human problems, not just marketing objectives. ▶



Settling Some Big Debates on the Croisette

KEY TAKEAWAYS - Continued

3. Brand building needs to come back. A major undercurrent throughout Cannes was concern that marketing has become too focused on efficiencies, short-term metrics, content volume, and platform optimization. Marketers are creating more content than ever, but most of it is quickly forgotten.

Having an “always on” activation strategy drives sales, but it doesn’t necessarily build a brand. That still requires the development of a strong identity that will inform strategic, intentional, and connected content — keeping you “always on brand” as well.

4. Community and creators matter more than reach. In fact, reach is far too easy to achieve these days (especially if you have a budget). Meaning, on the other hand, is hard to build.

Creators succeed as commerce marketing partners because they bring trust, authenticity, community, and storytelling. Research even finds that creator-led advertising outperforms traditional brand advertising in some contexts. Brands, however, need to remain central to the process, enlisting creators for amplification and not letting them take complete control of the message.

5. Friction can create better experiences. One of the more interesting concepts heard at Cannes was “friction-maxing.” Instead of removing every obstacle to purchase, successful brands are intentionally introducing friction because it can create engagement, encourage participation, strengthen memory, and make experiences feel earned.

Our industry may have become overly obsessed with convenience and optimization as we’ve worked to eliminate every possible friction point between consideration and purchase. But sometimes, intentionally slowing people down on their way to the cart can create a stronger emotional connection along the way.

6. Courage defines leaders. There was one other common characteristic behind many of the award-winning campaigns: Someone was willing to take a risk, whether to move beyond legacy, long-term brand platforms or to make creative choices that exceeded the brief requirements. AXA’s highly awarded “Three Words” campaign addressing domestic violence is just the clearest example of that characteristic.

For agencies, marketers, and brands alike, Cannes Lions 2026 ultimately confirmed that, while technology may be changing everything, the winner’s advantage is still deeply rooted in human capabilities. Brands can’t automate their way to meaning. That comes from creativity that will compound over time, build trust, and create emotional connections. ♦





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