

Rewinding Advertising Week 2025

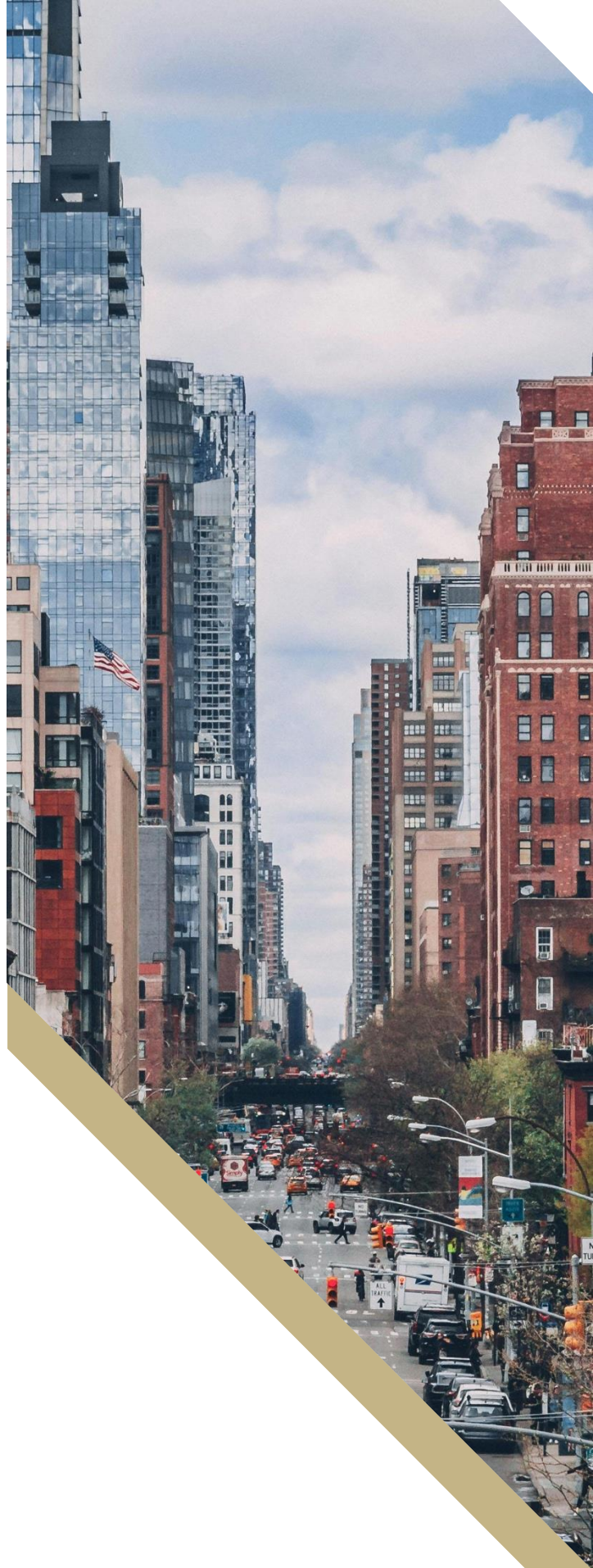
Commerce Edition

Four Smart Takes from Four Bright Minds
at Publicis Commerce



What's In Store?

- 01 Less Madcap, More Endcap**
Lee Dunbar, SVP, Director eCommerce
Starcom
- 02 AI and the Human Thread**
Amy Vollet, SVP, Commerce and Media
Saatchi X
- 03 TikTok, Search, and Discovery**
Jill Cruz, EVP, Commerce Strategy
Publicis Commerce
- 04 AI & Retail Media—Two Takes**
April Carlisle, EVP, Commerce
Spark Foundry



***In many ways,
Advertising
week traded
hype for
homework this
year—that’s
according to
four very
smart
Commerce
experts who
were on the
ground in NYC.***

Lee Dunbar (Starcom) sees retailers getting disciplined about in-store (less Times Square, more time well spent). Amy Vollet (Saatchi X) pulls the human thread through an AI-saturated week. Jill Cruz (Publicis Commerce) breaks down a panel about how “search” on TikTok is really “discovery” now. And April Carlisle (Spark Foundry) ties it together: AI is where the attention is, but wallet data is where the retail media money is. They’ve all kindly shared their input, insights, and takeaways—inspired points of view, from those who can spot the Commerce trends that matter.

Less Madcap, More Endcap: How Retailers Are Rethinking In-Store Advertising

In-store advertising opportunities continue to be a popular topic, but there was a measured and perhaps more mature tone to the discussion.

Marlow Nickell of Grocery TV highlighted the need for stakeholder management, particularly around merchants who are the ultimate arbiter of the shopper experience. After all, if merchants are on board, the advertising experience can be more unified with the shelf, particularly with endcap signage and other advertising surfaces close to the actual category being advertised. Otherwise, advertisers are stuck at the entrance or checkout. While still powerful, it doesn't fuel the potential contextual relevance and impulse that in-store can bring.

In a related way, Walmart projected powerful, visual experiences of their stores on the walls of their event space for Partner Connect. Even on 20-foot walls, Walmart's story centered on connections and not splashy surfaces. Perhaps it was the proximity, but retailers, brands, and agencies weren't eager to turn the aisles into Times Square. Smart move.

-Lee Dunbar, SVP, Director eCommerce

Starcom



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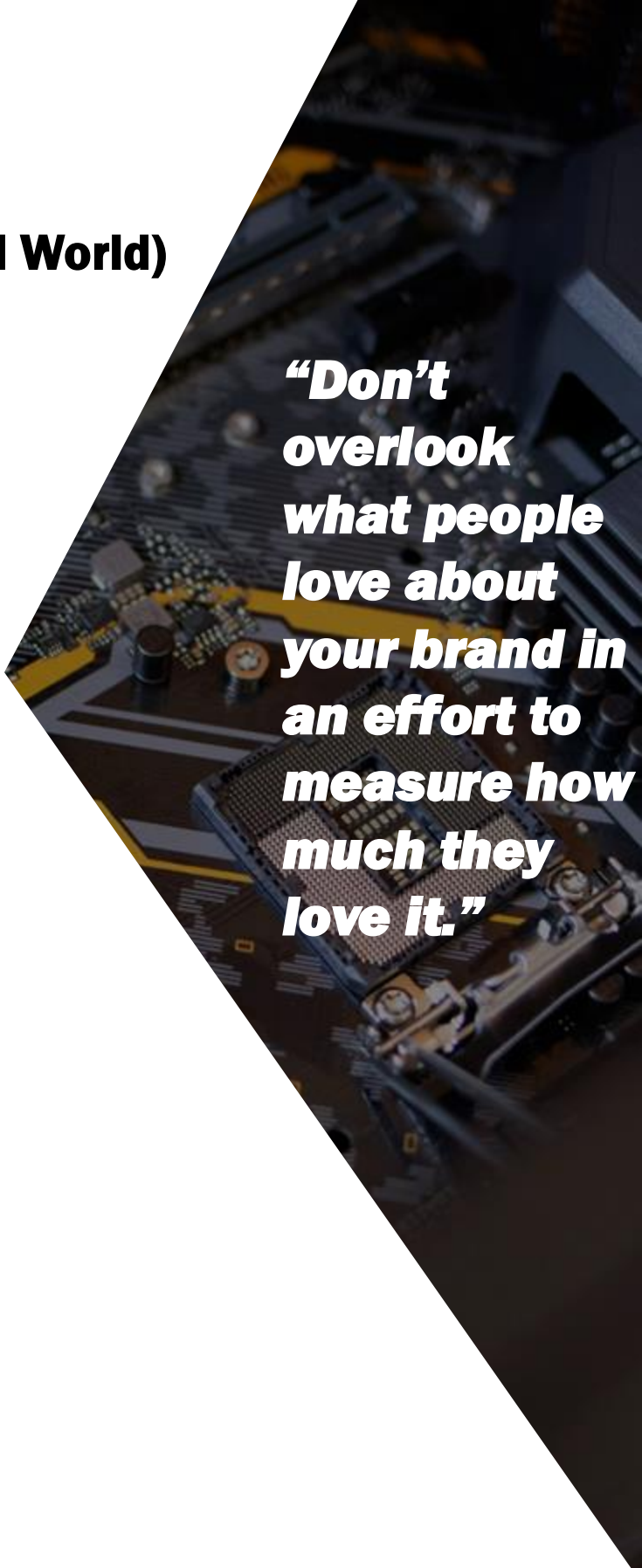
Pulling on the Human Thread (at the Heart of an AI-Powered World)

Advertising Week was, in no small part, a study in contrasts. On one hand, there was a continued push to integrate digital and physical commerce in pursuit of more personalized experiences.

On the other, the sharpest contrasts emerged in conversations about technology. Amid constant pronouncements about AI expansion, data proliferation, and audience fragmentation, an equally strong emphasis surfaced around simplicity, authenticity, and humanity.

Building trust through a genuine voice (while striking the right balance between AI and human creativity) was a recurring motif throughout the week. Both on stage and off, many (very smart) people insisted on reinvigorating content and brand development alongside the now-standard focus on performance metrics and partner expectations, particularly from Retail Media Networks. Put another way: don't overlook what people love about your brand in an effort to measure how much they love it.

-Amy Vollet, SVP, Commerce and Media
Saatchi X



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What Does it Mean When “Search” Becomes “Discovery”?

If Advertising Week underscored anything this year, it's that search has moved beyond the narrow task of answering questions. In the session “From Query to Cart: How Search Is Moving Audiences from Discovery to Action,” Rema Vasan (Head of North America Marketing at TikTok) described TikTok not as a search engine but as a discovery engine. One in four people search within seconds of opening the app, and increasingly those searches are driven by creators and cultural trends rather than static intent.

The implication for marketers: you need to listen to organic behaviors, test against what people are already exploring, and marry ads with content that feels native to the discovery journey. Keywords still matter, but not in the traditional “answer the question” sense. They function more as connective tissue between curiosity and conversion.

To illustrate, Cypress Villaflores (VP of Social at Publicis Groupe) shared the Hulu Paradise case. Five-minute TikTok clips seeded awareness, drove organic search, and ultimately converted viewers into fans. In this light, search is part of a loop that begins with inspiration and ends with action. It's the tip of a much larger iceberg: search has become discovery. And brands need to treat it as a bridge between exploration and purchase, rather than as a siloed endpoint.

-Jill Cruz, EVP, Commerce Strategy
Publicis Commerce



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AI Runs the Show, Retail Media Runs the Wallet

My biggest takeaway? Two, actually. First: AI was the star of nearly every session. Even when it wasn't on the agenda, it dominated the Q&A. The mood was urgent and clear-eyed. Just months ago, AI felt like a shiny object, but now it's a must-have shaping everything from workflows and creative development to personalization and the future of search. Whatever problem you're solving, you need to know how AI fits into the answer—because someone will probably ask.

Second: retail media is accelerating—especially from financial services. American Express introduced Amex Offers Digital Media (“advertising powered by membership”), and Financial Media Networks continue to expand across Chase, Mastercard, and Western Union. The signal is clear: real purchase behavior is increasingly becoming media currency. For advertisers, wallet data (not proxies) is where targeting, measurement, and growth will be won.

-April Carlisle, EVP, Commerce

Spark Foundry



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