Presented by RIVAL

RIVAL 50

2025 REPORT

THE CHALLENGER BRANDS BUILDING THE FUTURE

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the beginning of time, humanity has evolved by adapting. Once, we communicated news through newspapers, before transforming the written word into audio through radios. Then came the emergence of the internet followed by the obsession of smartphones, accompanied by the craze of social media. Each innovation replaced the last, and whether anyone realizes it or not, as long as there has been innovation, there have been marketers. Because marketing, at its core, is storytelling in motion. It is both the science and the art of helping society understand what's new, what's next, and why it matters.

And we're standing on the precipice of the most disruptive era of marketing as we know it. We are now competing in an age of overwhelming noise. Forbes reports that the average American is exposed to between 4,000 and 10,000 ads per day.* Yet most people can't even recall the brands they interact with daily. The frameworks marketers once relied on to understand consumers no longer apply. Traditional campaigns are losing their power. AI is rewriting the rules, and creativity is under siege.

In a landscape this loud, marketing that has an impact can feel like a pipe dream. With the same players dominating every ranking and the same strategies recycled year after year... where do you even start?

That's why we created the Rival 50. While traditional rankings fall short, overlooking the nuance of challenger behavior, the Rival 50 dives deeper. Each year, we spotlight 50 global brands rewriting the rules of modern marketing. Brands proving that progress isn't reserved for the biggest players, but for the boldest thinkers. These challengers understand that scale no longer guarantees impact. Instead, they dominate categories through cultural relevance, creative conviction, and strategic bravery.

At Rival, we define a challenger brand not by its size, but by its mindset. These are brands that question category norms, take creative risks, and deliver impact far beyond their resources. They don't just compete for share; they redefine how their industries grow. We measure them against three pillars: **Differentiation** (standing apart with intent), **Relevance** (connecting meaningfully with modern audiences), and **Talkability** (earning cultural attention money can't buy).

And this year's Rival 50 marks a new historic milestone. In collaboration with Imperial College Business School, London, Rival conducted one of the most comprehensive analysis of challenger behavior to date.

Through a global survey of over 300 CMOs and a scoring index built on data and creative insights, we developed the Challenger Index.

By analyzing a brand's performance between 2024 and 2025, conducting market research, and sifting through social, digital, search, and media channels, we created a framework for measuring how brands challenge convention to drive growth in this day and age.

* "Finding Brand Success in the Digital World," *Forbes*, August 25, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/

Across this year's Rival 50, **five clear patterns** emerged:

Belonging has become the new brand infrastructure.
The strongest performers treat community not as a channel, but as a system people live inside. Brands like Crocs, Buldak, and Nothing prove that participation now drives distribution.

Ideology has replaced positioning.
In an age of functional parity, belief systems are the most powerful differentiator. Whether through irreverence like Liquid Death or precision like On Running, conviction now outperforms scale.

Comfort has become its own kind of rebellion.
From Owala to Rhode, as financial strain and cultural burnout rise, brands that simplify, soothe, and stabilize are winning through empathy, and not noise.

Challenger thinking now transcends commerce.
From Doechii to The Boys, creators and cultural figures are adopting brand frameworks long before a product exists. Culture itself has become the newest category.

The future belongs to brands that think like media companies.
The most effective challengers are no longer running campaigns. Surreal, Represent, and Nothing are all running content engines. Building continuous stories that inform, entertain, and convert.

For CMOs, marketers, and founders, the Rival 50 isn't just a list. It's a lens. A way to understand what's working, what's changing, and what it really takes to build brands that people care about in 2025. In an era where attention is fragmented and effectiveness is in decline, every brand faces the same truth: relevance is no longer bought — it's earned. Challenger thinking isn't a niche strategy; it's the new foundation for modern growth.

This report helps marketers navigate a world where differentiation is fleeting and creativity remains the last unfair advantage. The Rival 50 unpacks the behaviors, strategies, and cultural cues shaping how brands grow today.

After all, the future won't be led by the biggest brands -
It will be built by the boldest ones.

Have we got your attention now?

METHOD-OLOGY

METHODOLOGY

The Rival 50 was built to do more than rank brands. It was designed to reveal the blueprint behind those redefining how marketing works today.

In a world where effectiveness is harder to measure and attention is more fragmented than ever, we created a ranking that goes beyond subjective commentary. The Rival 50 celebrates the brands and the brains breaking the mold—challenging the conventions of the traditional marketing playbook. At Rival, we define a challenger brand as one whose marketing strategy and tactics successfully challenge the convention of their category in a way that engineers outsized impact on their growth.

This index represents four years of ongoing research: more than 10,000 hours of podcast conversations, interviews, and collaborations with challenger brands around the world. That foundation allowed us to identify the key attributes that define a challenger mindset and build a data-backed way to measure it.

HOW WE BUILT THE LIST

The Rival 50 began with a global, open-nomination process, inviting CMOs, founders, and marketers to identify brands they believe exemplify challenger thinking. Brands that they believe challenge convention, move culture, and achieve outsized impact relative to their scale.

From hundreds of nominations, brands were organized into industry categories spanning CPG, Health, Tech, Finance, Fashion, Automotive, Food and Beverage, Entertainment, and more. A secondary research phase followed, analyzing publicly available data, reports, and media coverage to identify additional brands aligned with our criteria.

Each nominated brand was then evaluated through a rigorous multi-phase process, developed in partnership with Imperial College Business School, London. Thereafter, we enlisted the input from a panel of expert judges: **Fernando Machado** (Former CMO Burger King), **Dean Aragón** (Current CEO of Shell Brands), and **Kristen Cavallo** (Former CEO of MullenLowe Group). We invited them to share their expert opinions, weigh in on the shortlisted brands, and assist with tie-breakers. The final result? The Challenger Index. A data-led scoring model combining analytical rigor and with creative judgment to evaluate how brands challenge the norms of modern marketing.

4 YEARS

10K HOURS

3K+ CMOs

SELECTING THE PILLARS

After conducting more than 10,000 hours of interviews and working with challenger brands, we found that the challenger playbook is typically built a set of distinct pillars, with trackable attributes. The Rival 50 evaluates brands across these three core pillars:

DIFFERENTIATION

Understanding how clearly a brand stands apart within its category, and challenges conventional positioning. Asking the brand whether or not the brand has a distinctive presence within their category, understands what consumers want, and if the brand leverages design in a way that goes against the norms of their category.

RELEVANCE

Seeing how effectively a brand connects with modern audiences, values, and needs. Measuring brands against markers such as whether or not the brand is changing things for the better, if the brand is ahead of the times, and if the brand is addressing a real human need or current problem, to name a few.

TALKABILITY

Discerning how well a brand earns attention, conversation, and cultural resonance beyond paid reach. Looking at factors such as whether the brand activates on trends and culture, shows up in fresh and surprising ways, looking at the brand's momentum, as well as if consumers are talking about, engaging with, and sharing the brand with their social circles.

Each pillar was rigorously assessed using both quantitative and qualitative data, sourced from social, digital, and media channels, as well as from expert insights.

HOW THE SCORING WORKS

To ensure credibility and depth, our scoring system integrates multiple data sources and expert perspectives:

Quantitative Analysis included metrics such as brand visibility, engagement, share of voice, search trends, and sentiment.

Qualitative Evaluation draws from cultural analysis, social listening, review sentiment, and a global survey of over 300 CMOs and marketing leaders.

And finally, our **Panel of Expert Judges** reviewed the final shortlist to provide commentary, resolve tie-breakers, and validate contextual nuances behind each score.

Each pillar was scored on a five-point scale, weighted by its contribution to modern brand and marketing growth, and aggregated into a weighted composite score determining the final ranking.

The final result is a model that doesn't rely on subjective opinion or popularity, but on data, context, and insight.
A balance between storytelling and science.

WHY IT MATTERS

In a marketing landscape transforming at breakneck speed, traditional rankings still reward outdated tactics that only serve legacy brands with established followings. The Rival 50 exists as a roadmap for leaders who want marketing to deliver real, measurable commercial impact. In an era defined by AI, economic rebalancing, and declining marketing effectiveness, brands can no longer buy their way into relevance. They have to earn it.

This report gives CMOs, marketers, and founders a data-driven lens on what's really driving growth today, and why challenger thinking is becoming the new standard of success. It proves that in an industry saturated with sameness, the brands that win aren't the loudest or largest, but the ones brave enough to challenge the rules of modern marketing itself or even come up with rules of their own.

TRENDS & INSIGHTS

TRENDS & INSIGHTS

When building the Rival 50, it became clear that while we could never capture every challenger brand in the world, there were commonalities among the brands. Whether in fashion, fitness, food, or tech, challengers everywhere were navigating the same cultural shifts and finding growth through the same instincts. In an era shaped by AI, fragmented attention, and economic pressure, the most successful challengers weren't moving faster. They were moving with more intention.

These brands build systems of meaning and set out to solve real human pain points, not just bridge communications gaps. These brands stand out in their categories because they were able to recognize that some things cannot be bought. They have earned cultural presence through participation and conviction, which will take them much further in the broader marketing landscape compared to that of a larger media spend budget.

Where traditional brands optimize for reach, optimize for relevance - and understand that relevance now comes from community impact, ideological clarity, and cultural fluency. Design belonging, create emotional safety, and show up in ways that reflect how people actually live and express identity in a digital, decentralised world.

These trends are not predictions. They are behavioural patterns already visible in the market, repeated across industries, regions, and business models. They are backed by data and surfaced through both performance signals and cultural insight. Together, they reveal a new competitive logic: modern growth is earned through belief, behaviour, and participation. The brands leading today, and the ones shaping tomorrow, are those treating community as infrastructure, transparency as value, and creativity as leverage.

TREND 01: BELONGING AS A BRAND ECOSYSTEM

What was once a campaign line has become the new operating model. The most effective challenger brands are not interested in “building audiences” but in creating systems people live within, where identity is performed in public and reinforced through participation structures that keep people coming back.

As we reviewed hundreds of brands, it became clear that the ones winning in both **Relevance** and **Talkability** do not simply sell products; they engineer environments and rituals where consumers become contributors, storytellers, and validators.

We are operating in a climate of institutional distrust and algorithmic sameness. People no longer trust brand claims- they trust collective proof of behavior.

Already ~ 75% of consumers say they stay loyal to brands that create a sense of community (Deloitte, 2024). And brands with strong community infrastructure see engagement and retention up to 2.5 times higher than peers (WARC, 2024).

The most magnetic challengers create visible, repeatable, and consistent rituals that allow people to publicly show who they are. **Crocs** turned footwear into personal storytelling, where Jibbitz and subcultural references make identity literally wearable. Buldak turned noodles into a shared endurance ritual, generating more than 261 million social challenge posts and turning consumption into a public act of belonging.

At the same time, brands like **Nothing Phone** show the infrastructure behind belonging. Community functions as an operating layer, not an audience list. With more than 139,000 self-moderated subreddit members and community-designed SKUs selling out instantly. **Nothing** has figured out that the community lever is not a channel but a critical pillar enabling brand growth; they invite community members to sit in on quarterly board meetings and co-create iterations of products, both software and hardware. People do not just buy the brand. They inhabit it.

These brands succeed because people build, remix, and carry them forward. Marketing has shifted from communication to a structure of belonging, where participation drives distribution and community becomes the brand’s most defensible asset.

The lesson to be learned? If people do not feel seen by your brand, they will not share it. If they cannot find a place within it, they will not stay. Challenger brands that design both the rituals of participation and the infrastructure of community earn what traditional brands cannot: cultural gravity.

TREND 02: IDEOLOGICAL POLARITY AS DIFFERENTIATION

Challenger brands are proving something counterintuitive: there is no single formula for winning. Across the Rival 50, we saw brands reach nearly identical composite scores while operating with opposite belief systems. What separates them is not what they sell or how they function, but the worldview they commit to. In an age of functional parity and price transparency that flattens categories, ideology becomes the most powerful differentiator.

On Running and **New Balance** illustrate this perfectly. Both achieved a composite score of 4.066, yet their philosophies could not be more different. **On Running** pursues engineered futurism built on precision materials, minimalist performance, and partnerships with cultural accelerants like Zendaya and Loewe. **New Balance** leans in the opposite direction, centered around craftsmanship, intergenerational trust, and timeless design. This is reinforced through collaborations with heritage fashion houses and a steady resurgence across both Gen Z and older consumers. One wins through aesthetic velocity and innovation theatre. The other wins through emotional credibility and consistency.

The same duality appears across categories. **Liquid Death** scales through irreverence and anti-corporate satire. **Owala** grows through joy, colour, and playful optimism. Both succeed because they choose a belief system and hold it with conviction.

But this shift isn't just a brand strategy evolution. It mirrors how society itself has reorganised. The same forces that turned politics into identity performance and social media into ideological sorting have made every consumer decision an act of self-definition. People no longer buy running shoes because they fit well. They buy them because they signal who they are, or who they want to be seen as. Neutrality that once felt safe now reads as cowardice.

“The middle ground that once captured the majority now captures no one.” - Cecelia Parrish, Rival

What we're witnessing across challenger brands is a commercial reflection of a broader truth: in a hyperconnected, hyper-fragmented world, people don't want consensus. They want confirmation. And just as political movements win not by converting the centre but by mobilising the committed, brands win not by being palatable to everyone but by being essential to someone.

The market is saturated with products that converge on similar features, so values become the battleground. Challenger brands succeed by picking a lane, sharpening their stance, and executing without apology. The brands rising fastest today are not those with the most features, the biggest budgets, or the widest reach. They are the ones that stand for something clearly enough to make the rest of the market feel blurry by comparison.

TREND 03: MAKE ME SAFE

"Economic strain, rising wellness pressure, and decision fatigue have created a consumer mindset defined by overwhelm. More than half of consumers cite financial stress as their primary emotional burden" (Deloitte, 2025).

"Additionally, 68 percent of consumers now value simplicity and transparency over innovation claims" (Gartner, 2025).

Not all challengers rise by being loud. Some win by lowering the temperature in a world that feels relentlessly demanding. While the headline-grabbing brands in the Rival 50 build momentum through spectacle and participation, a powerful cohort in the middle of the index earns relevance through emotional relief. They remove anxiety, guilt, complexity, or financial pressure in categories where incumbents have failed to provide clarity or comfort.

These brands succeed not because they spark cultural fireworks, but because they allow people to exhale. **Graza's** growth comes from stripping intimidation out of premium olive oil and making quality feel everyday. **Too Good To Go** turns food waste and cost-of-living stress into a moment of empowerment, giving consumers a way to feel smart and socially responsible at the same time. The **Light Phone** removes the overstimulation of endless apps and notifications, creating calm through intentional disconnection. **Rhode** and **The Ordinary** simplify skincare with transparent routines and straightforward formulations, replacing confusion and overconsumption with calm confidence. In each case, the brand shifts power back to the consumer by removing friction and shame.

In this environment, brands that offer relief instead of aspiration can create trust faster than those chasing spectacle alone.

Importantly, these are not passive, utilitarian plays. They are strategic choices to challenge the category norm that complexity equals credibility. It's the brand equivalent of using complicated jargon to explain a concept to "prove" you know what you're talking about.

Rather than amplifying status or intensity, these brands democratise access and give consumers permission to feel competent and in control. And the Rival 50 data confirms the impact. Brands in this segment commonly score between 3.5 and 3.7, not because they lack creative ambition, but because they prioritise empathy and stability. Who knew reassurance could be a challenger act of its own?

Although brands like **Liquid Death** succeed through loud irreverence, sometimes challenging convention does not always mean aggression or provocation. It is important to remember the culture of anxiety that many consumers operate within. That's where comfort becomes rebellion. And the brands that master it create a form of defensibility that performance marketing cannot replicate. Sometimes the most progressive move is to calm the noise rather than contribute to it.

TREND 04: CHALLENGER THINKING BEYOND COMMERCIAL BRANDS

During our nomination process, while filtering through the different submissions we had received, we came across one that named performing artist Doechii as a challenger brand. With one submission, we were confronted by a new idea altogether: challenger thinking no longer belongs solely to consumer companies. A new class of cultural operators is behaving like brands long before a product ever enters the picture.

They build worlds people enter, narratives people extend, and communities people identify with. These new "brands" manifest in the form of TV series like The Boys, fictional characters such as K-pop Demon Hunters HUNTR/X, athletes, and performing artists.

This shift is being driven by two forces. First, audiences increasingly participate rather than passively consume. Second, cultural power has been decentralized. Identity is now fluid, platforms are porous, and attention moves through stories and fandoms faster than traditional marketing cycles can keep up. The result is a landscape where creators, fictional characters, and athletes are adopting the same challenger frameworks as high-growth companies, utilizing world-building, community scaffolding, and cultural provocation.

But don't take our word for it. We proved that the challenger mindset stretches beyond commercial brands by using our own scoring method on prime examples of these newly envisioned brands.

HUNTR/X, which scored 4.87, is the clearest proof. Originating as a fictional K-pop group in the animated Netflix film K-Pop Demon Hunters, the music group quickly began charting music, selling merchandise, and building a global fandom that did not care whether the group started as IP. Their hit song Golden has over 93 million streams worldwide, and the group has now gone Platinum. They have also proven that they're not losing momentum anytime soon, as the group was nominated for five Grammy Awards including the coveted Song of the Year. Should they win, this will be a first fictional group win at these awards. HUNTR/X created a category instead of entering one, using transmedia storytelling, toy partnerships, and fan-driven momentum to blur the boundary between fiction and commerce.

Amazon Prime's The Boys is not a new phenomenon, but as the series gears up for the release of its final season, the "brand" has managed to maintain its cultural momentum and scored 4.67 in the process. The series behaves like a brand insurgent rather than a TV show, challenging the superhero industrial complex by critiquing it from within. Its cultural power lives not only in viewership but in the discourse, memes, political commentary, and academic analysis it fuels. That is not entertainment distribution, it's ideological distribution.

Artists and athletes are operating the same way. Tyla reframed amapiano as global pop without translation or compromise, positioning herself as both cultural ambassador and innovator. Doechii builds her brand on creative defiance rather than format, treating performance and identity as acts of self-authorship that invite community rather than fandom. And let us not overlook Sir Lewis Hamilton. The first black Formula 1 driver who uses legacy influence to challenge systemic inequity in motorsport from within, turning his personal platform into a vehicle for institutional reform and broader representation.

Challenger thinking pushes so hard against convention that it was only a matter of time before it expanded beyond product categories altogether. Challenger thinking is defined by the capacity to build belief systems and invite audiences into living, evolving worlds. The next decade of brand power will belong not to those who market well, but to those who create cultures that people choose to live inside.

TREND 05: MEDIA-MINDED AMPLIFICATION

The best-performing brands in the Rival 50 don't operate like marketing teams. They operate like media companies. They understand that attention is the real economy, and that they are not competing against category players, but against everything else vying for a scroll, a click, or a share.

Surreal approaches every campaign like a tabloid headline. Each piece of communication is designed to feel like news: disruptive, shareable, and primed for cultural commentary. Represent follows the same logic, building a dedicated YouTube ecosystem that documents founder George Heaton's process, philosophy, and lifestyle. The product isn't the focal point; the story is. And **Nothing** has gone even further, creating an always-on content ecosystem that mirrors the rhythm of a 24-hour newsroom. Featuring everything from product teardowns to fan meetups, community updates, and design deep dives.

This shift marks a fundamental redefinition of what brand building looks like. Challenger brands have realized that the traditional marketing funnel of awareness, consideration, and conversion is being replaced by media logic: narrative, consistency, and audience retention. They're not chasing moments; they're programming them.

The result is a new type of organisational model. Instead of relying on agencies to generate sporadic bursts of attention, brands are building internal media studios designed for continuous output. They're producing podcasts, docu-style content, live streams, and newsletters that inform as much as they entertain. Rolling Stone described this as "the rise of brand-owned IP," where cultural relevance and media fluency have become the strongest predictors of brand equity.

Represent's "24/7" series, **Surreal's** fake-endorsement campaigns, and Nothing's YouTube storytelling each show the same mindset in motion. Treat your audience like subscribers, not shoppers. And the results prove the point. These media-first challengers outperform in Relevance and Talkability because they understand the algorithmic truth of modern culture: consistency builds familiarity, familiarity builds trust, and trust drives conversion.

The impact extends beyond brand growth. As more challengers internalize production, creative, and narrative strategy, the role of agencies will continue to evolve. The brands shaping the next decade will be those that own their story, control their distribution, and build content engines capable of sustaining culture, not just chasing it.

For challengers, thinking like a media company is no longer a metaphor, it's the new business model.

MEET THE TOP TEN

MEET THE TOP TEN

Every year, a select group of brands rises above the noise. Not just performing well on paper, but redefining what modern marketing looks like in practice. These are the brands setting new benchmarks across **Differentiation**, **Relevance**, and **Talkability**.

The following write-ups spotlight the top ten brands of the Rival 50 for 2025. Each one earned its place through a combination of data-backed performance and creative audacity. They are not simply case studies in success. They are living proof of what challenger thinking can achieve when it's executed with precision, empathy, and conviction.

From the brands turning nostalgia into community, to those building media ecosystems from scratch, these ten brands reveal the evolving blueprint of modern growth.

THE RIVAL 50

Rival 50

1.	BULDAK	4.53
2.	HYROX	4.33
3.	LIQUID DEATH	4.27
4.	REPRESENT	4.26
5.	OWALA	4.19
6.	CROCS	4.19
7.	CHATGPT	4.19
8.	NOTHING PHONE	4.13
9.	SURREAL CEREAL	4.06
10.	ON RUNNING	4.06
11.	LIGHT PHONE	4.06
12.	NEW BALANCE	4.06
13.	LADDER	4.00
14.	FROMSOFTWARE	4.00
15.	RAMP	4.00
16.	POPPI	3.93
17.	BLANK STREET	3.90
18.	SALOMON	3.87
19.	OURA	3.78
20.	ASICS	3.75
21.	MID-DAY SQUARES	3.74
22.	PLAYTOMIC	3.73
23.	DAVID'S PROTEIN	3.72
24.	FEASTIBLES (MR.BEAST)	3.71
25.	YETI	3.70
26.	SKIMS	3.68
27.	GRAZA	3.67
28.	TOO GOOD TO GO	3.66
29.	PIP & NUT	3.64
30.	FENTY	3.62
31.	RHODE SKIN	3.60
32.	BLOOM & WILD	3.59
33.	THE ORDINARY	3.57
34.	FISHWIFE	3.55
35.	WINGSTOP UK	3.55
36.	BANDIT RUNNING	3.54
37.	WHOOP	3.53
38.	SWORD HEALTH	3.50
39.	NOTION	3.48
40.	ALDI UK	3.46
41.	CELSIUS	3.46
42.	CHEWY	3.45
43.	TONIES	3.44
44.	RIVAN	3.44
45.	NANDOS	3.43
46.	BYD	3.41
47.	TONY'S CHOCOLONELY	3.40
48.	LOVEABLE AI	3.35
49.	PRENUVO	3.33
50.	SATISFY RUNNING	3.33

BRAND DEEP DIVES

★ Rival 50 ★

불닭볶음면 Buldak

Instant noodles have long been the food of comfort. A five-minute escape powered by nostalgia and convenience. For decades, the category spoke the language of familiarity — a bowl you slurp alone at 2 a.m. to feel safe. But Buldak doesn't want you to feel safe like the rest of the category; it wants to be survived.

Launched in 2012 by Samyang, Buldak Bokkeum Myun (literally "fire chicken noodles") didn't enter the ramen aisle as a better-tasting noodle. It arrived as a dare. Packaged in matte black, wrapped in flames, and fronted by a screaming chicken breathing fire, it rejects comfort culture and frames eating as endurance.

What began as a Korean mukbang novelty exploded into a global internet ritual through the "Spicy Noodle Challenge," where creators battled sweat, tears, and pride for views, status, and digital clout. Buldak isn't consumed. It's performed. In doing so, it transformed instant noodles from late-night comfort into social currency.

By 2024, this spectacle-driven strategy helped drive Samyang to 45% YoY revenue growth and push its market cap to $8.1B, overtaking heritage giant Nongshim for the first time in history (Bloomberg, 2025). Buldak didn't just enter the instant noodle category — it set it on fire and dared the world to keep up.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

Instant noodles have historically been framed as comfort: quick, warm, and nostalgic. Its reputation is for being a safety net to students, late-night workers, and anyone seeking a familiar flavor at a low cost. Buldak chose to incinerate that narrative. Rather than promising ease, Samyang's "fire chicken" ramen asked eaters to earn their meal, positioning spice not as seasoning but as storytelling. Legacy brands like Nongshim and Nissin built their equity around tradition, broth richness, and trust. Whereas Buldak built an adrenaline product designed for spectacle and digital participation.

It does not outperform others in nutrition, affordability, or convenience. In fact, it rejects all three. The brand charges roughly 4x the price of standard ramen and doubles down on intensity levels so extreme that Denmark temporarily recalled its 3X Spicy variant in 2024 for "acute poisoning risk." However, the brand has made a name for itself in using this extremity as a brand positioning tool.

Under CEO Kim Jung-soo's leadership, Samyang doubled down on this conviction-led marketing model. Since her appointment, the company's bold risk tolerance has been matched by rapid scale. Buldak's unapologetic stance redefined Samyang's reputation from a nostalgic noodle maker to a global provocateur. But this approach has also brought scrutiny. From health warnings to criticism that its virality overshadows product innovation. It's become a strategy that thrives on tension as much as taste.Buldak transforms a household commodity into a cultural dare, carving out a white space where consumption becomes proof of identity rather than an act of hunger. The result: while others feed cravings, Buldak feeds performance.

RELEVANCE

Buldak thrives because it capitalizes on the internet's appetite for endurance-based spectacle. Remember the cinnamon challenge or the ice bucket challenge? Across cultures, people crave the thrill of survival-as-content, and Buldak has made that its central marketing engine.

However, its rise is deeply tied to broader cultural shifts: the global explosion of Korean culture, the virality engine of challenge-based content, and the gamification of consumption. Originally emerging from user-generated mukbang content, the Fire Noodle Challenge became a global rite of passage, accumulating more than 261M TikTok challenge posts that spanned generations. The challenge became so popular that even Cardi B joined in, earning 4.6M likes in the process. The brand even has seven-year-olds requesting Buldak-themed birthday parties.

This was only the beginning. For Coachella 2025, Buldak became the first Korean food brand to partner as an official sauce and ramen collaborator. This embedded its presence not only within food culture but also within music, festivals, and lifestyle spaces. In this context, spice tolerance became a form of tribal identity. “Can you handle it?” became shorthand for “Do you belong here?”

The brand’s most impressive feat? It’s no longer prompting consumers to engage with the product. Consumers are prompting each other. From independent Reddit groups to ramen ranking videos to home recipe hacks and global mukbang series, it all exists entirely without Samyang’s intervention.

TALKABILITY

Buldak is not eaten in silence; it’s consumed on camera. Every slurp is an invitation for a reaction, every tear-streaked face a badge of pride, and every gasp is a moment made for replay. This is not a brand that hopes to be mentioned; it’s designed to be witnessed.

With over 1 billion units sold annually across more than 100 countries, Buldak noodles are less a meal and more a social performance piece with millions of co-stars. Between 2024 and 2025, the brand didn’t just go viral — it stayed viral. Denmark’s recall of its “3X Spicy” variant sent global search spikes soaring. Cardi B’s casual taste-test triggered a 30% stock price jump, and a seven-year-old requesting Buldak as a birthday gift instead of toys generated 60M views while reigniting challenge culture for Gen Alpha.

Mainstream coverage didn’t arrive through corporate announcements; it was pulled in by cultural pressure. TIME, CNN, and Fortune weren’t reporting a flavor release so much as they were documenting a phenomenon that refused to slow down.

And the numbers continue to prove it wasn’t a phase. While the instant noodle category grew at a modest 4% CAGR, Buldak surged 45% YoY, driving a 133% profit increase, and helped push Samyang’s market cap to $8.1B. For the first time, legacy leader Nongshim was overtaken. That growth wasn’t driven by taste alone, but by a loop where eating became content, content fueled desire, and desire reignited the challenge. Pain became participation, and participation became perpetual publicity.

Together, Buldak walks away with a composite score of 4.534. Not because it created a new food trend, but because it transformed eating into a global performance economy that competitors are still trying to mimic.

RIVAL'S TAKE

Buldak's strategy is simple but seismic: it challenges the rules of taste, tolerance, and tradition. In a world where food brands play it safe, Buldak plays with fire, both literally and figuratively. Rather than hiding behind health trends or premium wellness claims, it leans into excess, emotion, and entertainment. It's not a comfort brand. It's a competition brand, turning spice into status and eating into theater.

Still, the brand's challenger behavior comes with consequences. The same shock factor that fuels growth can easily spark backlash, and maintaining long-term brand equity amid short-term virality will test how durable this strategy truly is.

All in all, Samyang managed to build a stage for the world's most chaotic eating experience and let its consumers take over. They continue to earn the kind of attention that cannot be bought. From mukbangs to memes, the Buldak community drives its own content cycle, evolving the brand's meaning far beyond corporate control. The result? A self-sustaining ecosystem that thrives without paid amplification. A cultural snowball that keeps rolling.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. DON'T SHY AWAY FROM EXTREMES.

Buldak shows that polarization creates power. When you commit to a distinct, emotional experience, you don't need to appeal to everyone. Just deeply to someone.

2. BUILD FOR CHAOS, THEN GET OUT OF THE WAY.

The brand's viral success didn't come from control but from letting go. It built the arena, and the internet took over. Letting your community lead can be your most effective marketing strategy.

3. MAKE THE PRODUCT THE CONTENT.

Every bowl of Buldak is a story: a challenge, a meme, a reaction video. It's proof that when your product is the experience, your marketing becomes self-generating.

JUDGE COMMENTARY

When judge Dean Aragon reviewed the Rival 50, one brand stood out for its mastery of Talkability. “The clear winner for the Talkability criterion is Buldak,” he said. “While other brands are talked about, Buldak requires consumers to perform the talk.” Known for turning consumption into participation, the Fire Noodle Challenge transformed eating into a global ritual, filmed, shared, and repeated across cultures. As Aragon noted, “Buldak’s popularity is fueled by actionable user-generated content. It’s not just being talked about. It’s being lived.”

HYROX

In a fitness industry valued at nearly $97 billion, where new fitness trends flare and fade with the frequency of TikTok sound cycles, very few formats survive long enough to matter. Most promise transformation, sell aspiration, and disappear before the sweat dries. HYROX didn't.

Founded in 2017 by two veterans of elite performance and mass participation events, Moritz Fürste and Christian Toetzke, HYROX entered the market with a radical premise: fitness shouldn't end at the gym door. It should culminate somewhere. A place where everyday athletes could prove themselves, not to an algorithm or a mirror, but in front of a roaring crowd and an official timer.

Eight rounds of running. Eight functional stations. The same format, in every city, every continent, every season. Where marathons celebrate miles, CrossFit prizes skill complexity, and boutique fitness trades in aesthetics, HYROX anchored itself in something almost old-fashioned: measurable effort, shared suffering, and a scoreboard that doesn't care how you look. Only how you perform. It took the silent logic of the gym and gave it a finish line, a community, and a global identity.

HYROX revealed something the industry had missed: people didn't need another workout. They needed a place where their training meant something.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

HYROX didn’t enter fitness promising transformation through aesthetics, elite mastery, or digital gamification. It entered with structure. One fixed race format, one global standard, and one promise: measurable performance for everyday athletes. In a category defined by siloed disciplines, HYROX built a hybrid arena where endurance and strength coexist, and where confidence is earned through completion, not perfection.

With a 98% finish rate and the majority of competitors being over 30, the brand rejected the intimidation that underpins much of performance culture and replaced it with a format that rewards preparation over pedigree. Their marketing at launch wasn’t paid amplification, but physical evangelism. With founders driving city to city, delivering free HYROX classes in local gyms to seed a real-world community long before social buzz. Yet accessibility has limits: the $160+ entry fee, reliance on gym access, and a format that favors runners introduce structural barriers. Course-time discrepancies reported by hybrid fitness media also challenge the brand’s claim of absolute standardization. Still, HYROX’s differentiation doesn’t rest on perfection. It rests on building a sport where difficulty is inclusive and legitimacy is earned by showing up.

RELEVANCE

HYROX’s rise is a direct response to the fracture within modern fitness. The landscape faces many shifts, like the collapse of gym community, fatigue with aesthetics-driven marketing, and the shift toward longevity, hybrid training, and measurable results. And while legacy brands continue to sell promise, HYROX sells proof. Its strategy sits squarely inside current macro shifts: the dominance of functional training, the “gym-community crisis,” and a consumer pivot from aspiration to accountability.

With 38% female participation and one of the most balanced gender ratios in strength-endurance sport, HYROX signals inclusivity not through slogans but through visibility. Its partnerships emphasize credibility over spectacle: PUMA’s extension through 2030 signals confidence in HYROX as sport infrastructure, not a fitness fad. With over 8,000 affiliate gyms in 2024, a 260% YoY expansion in training clubs, and races now moving to lottery systems as demand exceeds capacity, data speaks for itself.

Their relevance has been further amplified by earned media. Figures like Ollie Marchon, Nick Bare, and Represent’s vlog channel document their race prep and post-race recovery. It generates consistent visibility and cultural crossover into lifestyle, fashion, and endurance content ecosystems. This participation-led storytelling keeps HYROX in constant conversation without needing to dominate paid channels.

TALKABILITY

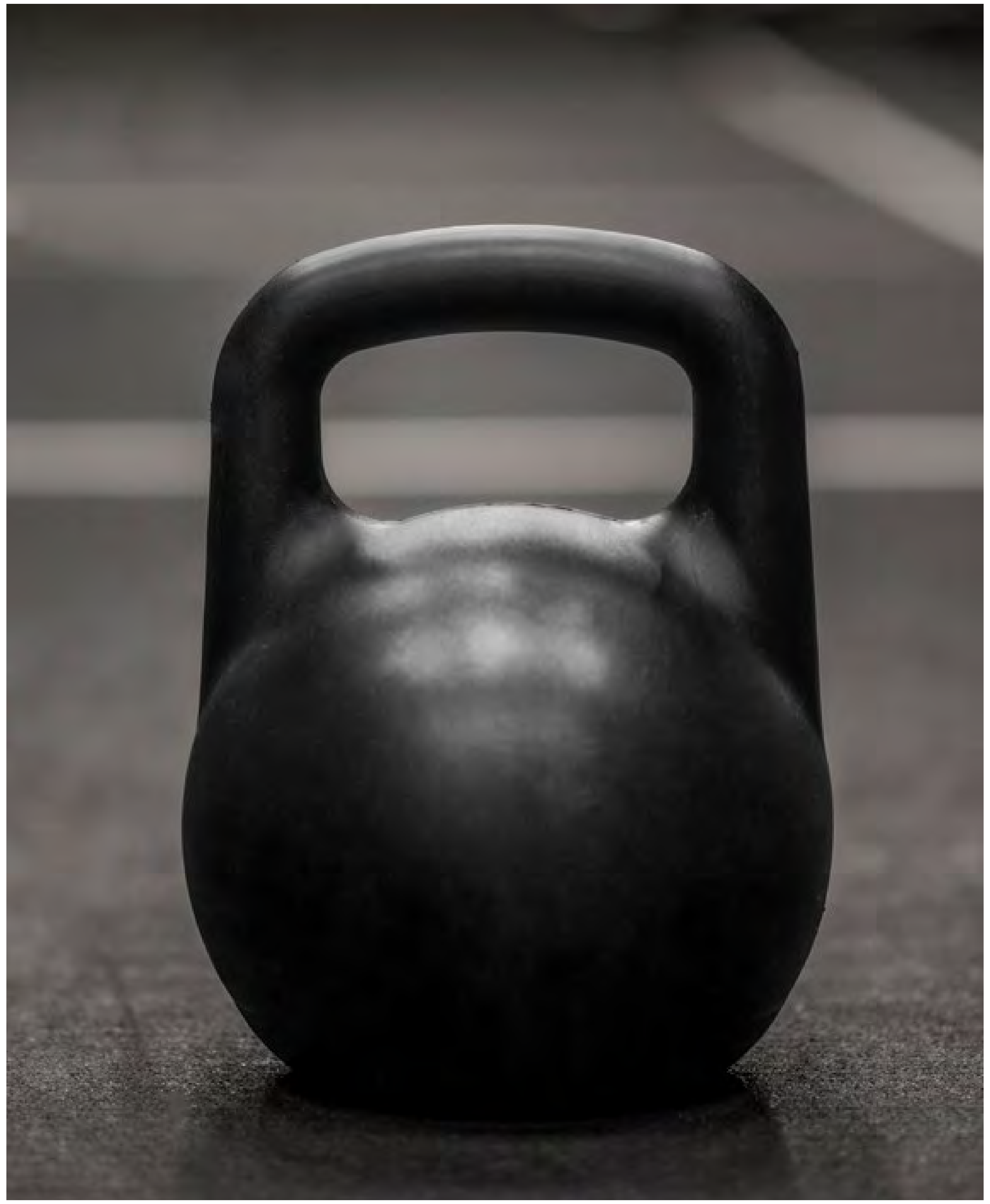
HYROX's content engine manifests in the form of participation-led storytelling. Every race is accumulated in thousands of finish-line videos, shared splits, team jerseys, and medal selfies. Content born from effort, not ads. The "shirtless race" trend, originating from athletes rather than brand directives, accelerated TikTok mentions by over 650% and drove a 233% increase in Google searches. This only reinforced HYROX's position as a culture-first sport, and not a digital campaign.

Press followed participation (not the reverse), with TIME naming HYROX one of the most influential movements of 2024, Business of Fashion spotlighting it as the future of fitness culture, and Men's Health framing it as the "ultimate test of hybrid performance." Unlike boutique fitness brands, HYROX does not chase creators; creators chase HYROX for legitimacy. Yet the brand has not broken fully into mass mainstream consciousness. Its talkability surges around race weekends and training cycles, but not continuously. That is less a weakness than a reflection of its core model: in HYROX, noise must be earned. As co-founder Moritz Fürste explained on an episode of our Scratch podcast: "It's like there are millions of people hitting golf balls on a driving range every day, but there were no golf courses. HYROX is the golf course." That mission of giving everyday athletes a stage remains its most powerful marketing engine.

Participation is their media plan. Results are the content. And belonging is the acquisition strategy.

This gives the fitness brand a composite score of **4.33**. A brand scaling not through hype, but through the oldest growth model in sport: build a stage, prove the format, and let competitors tell the story louder than any | campaign ever could.

RIVAL'S TAKE



HYROX didn't scale by shouting louder than the fitness industry. It scaled by organizing it. While competitors obsessed over apps, aesthetics, or boutique studios, HYROX made a contrarian bet: build a sport before building a brand. In doing so, it reintroduced something the category had accidentally abandoned. Stakes. Every class, every gym session, every run suddenly had a destination. The marketing wasn't messaging; it was infrastructure.

Instead of constructing community on social platforms and hoping it translated into real-world loyalty, HYROX inverted the model. It built physical communities first inclusive of race halls, training clubs, and affiliate gyms. This allowed content and conversation to form around lived experience. It understands that the future of fitness isn't digital escapism or algorithmic coaching; it's human energy systematized at scale.

This is a brand that markets like a federation, not a franchise. Leaderboards, standardized formats, referees, divisions, and qualification events transform casual exercisers into athletes with identity, language, and rituals. The playbook mirrors endurance sport, but modernized for a hybrid generation raised on data, culture, and competition as social currency

But success brings new tension along with it: can HYROX remain "for everybody" as it professionalizes? Price barriers, race-day logistics, and the risk of gatekeeping as elites accelerate could fracture its accessibility narrative. The brand sits at a pivotal moment. One where growth must balance ambition with humility, performance with participation, and global scale with local culture.

The clearest signal of its intent comes not from campaigns, but philosophy. As Fürste noted, HYROX didn't create a workout. It created a playing field. The more it protects that core, the harder it will be to displace.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. BUILD PLATFORMS, NOT PROGRAMS.

HYROX didn't create ads to sell classes.
It created a sport that makes classes necessary.

2. MAKE YOUR AUDIENCE THE MEDIA ENGINE.

Race halls became content studios. Finish lines become proof points. The internet isn't the funnel. It's the amplifier. When the product is the story, distribution becomes community-led and compounding.

3. DEMOCRATIZE AMBITION, BUT GUARD ACCESSIBILITY.

HYROX wins by making competition feel attainable, not elite. But as price and prestige rise, so does the risk of alienation. Brands scale best when they protect the entry point even as they expand the ceiling.

REPRESENT

For years, the streetwear category has revolved around hype, resale, and seasonal noise. When authenticity was claimed, it often came across as performative. That was until there was a new kid on the block named Represent.

Founded in Manchester by brothers George and Michael Heaton, Represent doesn't position itself as another fashion label. It has built an ecosystem where nostalgia meets aspiration, and where community has become its core product. Every campaign, from the Oasis 30th Anniversary collaboration to the 247 x Hyrox performance line, operates less like advertising and more like cultural calibration. Again and again, the brand has synced perfectly with moments that matter.

Few brands engineer relevance rather than chase it. Even fewer succeed. Represent manages to translate emotion into equity, by blending the intimacy of founder storytelling with the scale of data-driven precision. Its marketing machine is designed to feel human, characterized by personal narratives shared directly with fans, community-led design loops, and campaigns that move seamlessly between streetwear, sport, and legacy culture.

By 2025, that formula transformed a small British label into a £100M powerhouse with 33% year-over-year growth, outpacing the category's 5% baseline. Represent proves that in a market obsessed with performance metrics and hype cycles, emotional literacy is still the most powerful marketing strategy of all.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

Represent stands apart by rejecting the performative playbook that dominates luxury streetwear. Where many brands have survived on selling aspiration through exclusivity, it builds belonging through precision. The Oasis 30th Anniversary collaboration proved this approach in full force. Two Manchester icons, each rooted in rebellion and working-class authenticity, reunited after sixteen years in a campaign that blurred the lines between music, nostalgia, and design. Rather than exploiting sentiment, Represent orchestrated a cultural moment. One that sold out within hours and positioned the brand as a new custodian of British identity.

That ability to connect timing and meaning carried through to its 247 x Hyrox campaign. Where competitors rely on influencers to sell activewear, Represent embedded itself within the global functional fitness movement, partnering with athletes like Jake Dearden and William Goodge. Where many activewear campaigns are built on shouting at consumers, Represent spoke from within the fitness community. The result was performancewear validated by participation, and not celebrity endorsement.

Another thing that sets Represent apart from other brands is its founder-led transparency. George and Michael Heaton often turn their social platforms into extensions of the brand, revealing design processes, production challenges, and daily insights that give consumers a proximity to the creative core that other brands don't offer. When operating within a category often accused of elitism, that level of transparency and inclusivity honesty feels radical.

RELEVANCE

Represent's marketing is powered by cultural intuition. Just about any brand can react to trends. Represent responds to emotion. The Oasis collaboration tapped into a universal longing for connection, translating the nostalgia of a music reunion into a fashion experience that felt communal. That same instinct anchors the 247 line. As consumers blur the boundaries between sport, style, and identity, Represent redefined what performancewear could mean, treating strength as an extension of self-expression.

This emotional literacy extends to the brand's community infrastructure. The Prestige Club, with its early access and co-creation benefits, and the Rep Talks Facebook group, with over 15,000 members, serve as proof of the brand's structural relevance. These aren't marketing programs; they are mechanisms of participation. Like a number of other brands within the top ten, Represent turns consumers into collaborators who help shape everything from color palettes to campaign feedback. That's why Represent resonates across generations, speaking to both the Gen Z consumer chasing self-expression and the legacy customer whose purchasing habits are based on craftsmanship and continuity.

Still, Represent's growing proximity to luxury presents an interesting tension. As the brand refines its aesthetic and expands globally, it risks alienating the subcultures that built it. A potential hurdle many challenger brands face over time.

TALKABILITY

It's no secret that many brands remain a topic of conversation through controversies and engineered or accidental chaos. Represent's talkability, however, is built on credibility. There's never a need for the brand to manufacture virality because it earns it through cultural alignment. From NME and Hypebeast to Vogue Business — the Oasis collaboration generated coverage across music, fashion, and business media. This is not only a rare convergence of verticals under a single narrative, but also isn't the kind of attention that can't be bought.

The 247 x Hyrox activation only extended the brand's presence into new cultural arenas. Athlete partnerships, run clubs, and UGC-driven storytelling turned the campaign into a participatory loop. Represent's consumers weren't just sharing product, they were documenting experiences. This strategy created a self-sustaining rhythm of talkability, reinforced by the brand's owned content ecosystem. Through mini-documentaries, campaign breakdowns, and behind-the-scenes films, Represent sustains a constant hum of relevance without oversaturating or needing to fuel it.

With 77% YoY growth in the U.S. and consistent international expansion, Represent's visibility compounds naturally. Fans analyze drops on Reddit, creators translate the brand into styling content, and community members carry the narrative forward. Talkability here isn't about volume. It's about velocity. The kind of word-of-mouth momentum that comes from shared meaning, and not paid reach.

This unique approach earns Represent a composite score of 4.26. Proving that modern brands don't have to sell their souls in order to scale.

REPRESENT

RIVAL'S TAKE

Represent's strategy challenges one of fashion's most enduring assumptions — that aspiration must come at the cost of accessibility. Instead, the brand has built a model where the two feed each other. By grounding its storytelling in emotion rather than exclusivity, Represent has turned community into currency and managing to scale whilst staying authentic.

A marketing engine that doesn't rely on spectacle or controversy but on a sequence ofa constant cultural listening, emotional translation, and precise execution. Each collaboration, campaign, or collection launch follows the same quiet formula: identify a human truth, map it to a cultural moment, and express it through design. It's how the brand can move fluidly from Britpop nostalgia to functional performancewear without losing coherence. Represent doesn't borrow relevance from culture, but rather manufactures it through empathy.

Where legacy luxury brands depend on aspiration and streetwear brands depend on hype, Represent builds belonging through proof. The Oasis collaboration proved its grasp of timing and heritage. The Hyrox partnership proved its understanding of community and performance. The founders' transparency proved its humanity. Together, these choices form a blueprint for what marketing can look like when intuition is treated as data and brands are designed for participation.

Represent's marketing isn't loud because it doesn't need to be. It speaks in the kind of frequency that audiences choose to tune into. That's what makes Represent a modern challenger. It doesn't fight competitors. It outgrows categories.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. LEADING WITH EMOTION CAN BE EVEN BETTER THAN ASPIRATION.

Represent proves that the most effective marketing starts with emotional literacy. By grounding campaigns in genuine human feeling it creates connection that outlasts any hype cycle

2. TREAT AUDIENCES AS POTENTIAL COMMUNITIES.

The Prestige Club and Rep Talks group don't just engage consumers. They give them purpose. Represent shows that community isn't just a channel but also an operating model. When people help build the brand, they also help sustain it.

3. THERE'S NO "LUCKY TIMING" WHEN IT'S YOUR STRATEGY.

From the Oasis reunion to Hyrox integration, Represent shows that cultural timing can outperform any budget. It's time to stop treating relevance as reactive when it can be choreographed through attention to what people are already feeling and waiting for.

Liquid Death

MOUNTAIN WATER

Most water brands beg not to be noticed. With minimal labels and the frequent use of serene streams, they tend to be the marketing equivalent of a deep exhale. Hydration has always lived in the polite corner of consumer culture. Premium when it whispered and forgettable when it didn't. It's a necessity purchase you make, but never a brand you remember. Liquid Death looked at that landscape and chose violence, gleefully.

Founded in 2019 originally as a canned water that behaved like a punk rock band, the brand has never tried to elevate hydration. Their mission is to obliterate dullness. Nothing about the brand conveys water: the name sounds like a metal album, the can looks like a lager or energy drink, and the promise "Murder Your Thirst" makes the bottled water aisle feel like a mosh pit. Unlike most incumbents, Liquid Death didn't set out to win over the typical health-obsessed consumer. Instead, they targeted the kid who doodles skulls on notebooks with Black Sabbath blasting in their ears.

And it worked. Not because the product reinvented water, but because the brand reinvented belonging. In a category built on purity, Liquid Death built a tribe around irreverence. And even monetized it through their Murder Head Death Club, a digital membership granting fans exclusive merch drops, ad-appearance rights, and community privileges most brands would never dare to give away.

By 2024, the "joke" had become an empire: $333M in revenue, 133,000 retail doors, and a merchandising business rivaling streetwear brands. They pushed cultural ownership so far that Death Wish Coffee sued them over naming rights to "death" itself. Proof that their provocation had crossed from parody into genuine power.

Liquid Death turned canned water into one of the decade's most unlikely status symbols. All because when incumbents ask to be refreshing, it asks to be unforgettable.
And millions agree.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

Most water brands compete through purity claims, source stories, wellness aesthetics, or sustainability credentials. Liquid Death decided it wasn't interested in being purer, cleaner, or "smarter." They took a commodity product sold for 99 cents, put it in a $1.79 tallboy can wrapped in heavy-metal aesthetics, and built a personality that felt more like a touring punk band than a beverage company.

Its "Murder Your Thirst" proposition reframed water as rebellion. Sustainability became satire, sobriety became swagger, and hydration became an act of irony. Where Path Water preached, Liquid Death provoked, making water feel like being in on a joke against the entire wellness industry.

But its real differentiation lies in brand behavior. It didn't just sell water. It sold the idea of having the most entertaining hydration brand on earth. Their merch store functions like a fashion line, complete with limited-edition apparel drops that regularly sell out. The Murder Head Death Club built exclusivity through absurdity, offering NFT-style membership perks and licensing rights to fans. And their collaborations, from YETI's "Casket Cooler" that featured a limited run of 1,500 coffin-shaped coolers, to an Ozzy Osbourne campaign with the Prince of Darkness crushing ten cans of iced tea and leaving signed DNA samples, prove that Liquid Death doesn't borrow fame; It manufactures spectacle.

Still, this isn't performance without cracks. The brand doesn't outperform peers on taste, price accessibility, or ingredient transparency. Stevia-based flavors sparked backlash across Reddit and Thingtesting, prompting critiques with buzz words like "chemical aftertaste" and "tastes artificial". Some Product Hunt users even claimed stomach issues. Its value proposition only works for consumers who see attitude as a feature and not a tax.

Liquid Death's winning strategy? Behave like anything but water. The differentiation of the brand is the risk. If the joke stops landing and the cultural energy fades, the liquid inside the can must carry its weight. But right now, it's still working.

RELEVANCE

Liquid Death didn't invent the sober-curious movement, environmental urgency, or even anti-brand snark, but it did fuse them into a single point of view. The brand did their homework, understanding before others that millennials and Gen Z don't just buy products in line with their values; they buy the products that put on a performance of their values. Liquid Death packages virtue with satire, proving that you can care about the planet... and still laugh at earnest sustainability messaging while doing it.

The brand's relevance is rooted in reading the direction in which where culture was heading: ironic wellness, meme-driven branding, creator-economy-fuelled identity, and inserting itself not as a moral authority but as anti-corporate theater. Whether it's Tony Hawk's "blood skateboards," AI-generated spoof ads, or fake deodorant for your "death pits," Liquid Death doesn't just sell a drink. It sells relief from sincerity.

Liquid Death
MOUNTAIN WATER

But relevance also demands evolution. When Coca-Cola shelves aluminum Smartwater and PepsiCo accelerates recyclable-packaged hydration, the brand'sbrands novelty moat shrinks. Competitors are now sustainable, social-first, and irony-literate. And as the brand moves into iced tea and developing energy drinks, the question becomes: can the cultural engine carry products that aren't "just water but funny"?

Add rising critique around their "try-hard edge", compounded with price elasticity for a target audience that is increasingly concerned about cost-of-living, and the once-subversive brand risks drifting into mainstream parody. When you scale irreverence, you flirt with becoming the very corporate theater you mocked. Relevance earned through rebellion has to keep finding new enemies. So far, Liquid Death is still hunting, but it can't drink nostalgia forever.

TALKABILITY

Liquid Death did not accidentally go viral. Its marketing is its entire business model. It builds, scripts, and manufactures cultural shocks the way a Hollywood writer's room creates season arcs.

From selling out "Death Dust" mosh-pit diapers in 24 hours to producing a horror movie about water, every move is orchestrated for maximum conversation. The Ozzy Osbourne iced-tea campaign, the YETI "Casket Cooler," and the Tony Hawk blood boards all prove how far it's willing to blur lines between product, parody, and performance. A brand that once sold cans now sells moments. Each one discussed, debated, and reposted without the brand lifting more than a matchstick.

But Liquid Death didn't just scale through content, but also through community provocation. It constantly invites consumers to make spec ads, remix brand jokes, and co-author the absurdity. The 378M+ TikTok views from fan-generated campaigns aren't a coincidence. They're conversion. Their product became merely a prop, with the brand's personality starring as the main character, with the internet as their distribution engine.

With $333M revenue in 2024 (+26% YoY), distribution in 133,000 stores, social dominance comprising 7M TikTok followers and 7.3M followers on Instagram, not to mention consistent mainstream press cycles across WSJ, Bloomberg, NBC, and Rolling Stone. Liquid Death is not just talked about. They have made themselves unavoidable. And that, for challengers, is currency.

All in all, Liquid Death earns a composite score of 4.27. Conducting a masterclass in weaponizing culture, satire, and community to turn a commodity into entertainment.

RIVAL'S TAKE

Liquid Death didn't just sell water. It rewired what a commodity brand could behave like. It challenged the category not with moral superiority, functional innovation, or borrowed wellness calm, but with cultural velocity. It understood the emerging truth: brands don't win attention by trying to be liked; they win by refusing to be ignored.

Instead of competing in a purity arms race or with carbon-neutral sermons, Liquid Death weaponized absurdity and irony. Thereby turning hydration into spectacle and satire into a growth engine. That's their real innovation. The drink is water. The product is the provocation it's packaged in. The moat is the ability to continually create cultural theatre that people want to participate in.

But there's a tension challengers must confront as they scale: what happens when the anti-brand becomes big enough to be the establishment?

Liquid Death is no longer niche. Its irreverence now plays on Super Bowl stages and grocery shelves next to billion-dollar incumbents. It has entered the phase where challengers often stall, still swinging at "corporate sameness," while staring down the mirror of its own scale.

The next test isn't whether Liquid Death can shock. It's whether it can evolve without sanding down its teeth and whether it can find new edges instead of parodying its past ones. Brands die when they repeat themselves. Liquid Death will need to shift from cult rebellion to cultural relevance with endurance. Still funny, still subversive, but increasingly self-aware about its position in the ecosystem it once mocked from the outside.

For now, it remains one of the rare beverage brands whose brand equity is not hydration, but participation. Liquid Death didn't destroy the category; it made the category feel ridiculous for ever being boring.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. COMMODITY? THEN CULTURE IS YOUR PRODUCT.

Liquid Death proved that when your functional offer is undifferentiated, your brand must be unforgettable. Tone, theatre, and participation became their product, not the water.

2. BUILD MOVEMENTS PEOPLE PERFORM, NOT MESSAGES PEOPLE CONSUME.

Challenges, memes, stunts, fan-made ads: their audience didn't just watch Liquid Death. They acted it out. A challenger brand doesn't broadcast; it incites..

3. STAY DANGEROUS AS YOU SCALE AND EVOLVE THE EDGE BEFORE IT DULLS.

Rebellion wins attention. Repetition kills it. Liquid Death's next chapter isn't about being louder. It's about staying unpredictable with discipline, not nostalgia for its own chaos.

owala®

There was a time when water bottles were invisible. They were purely functional objects you filled, carried, and forgot about. Hydration was just a checkbox to tick between meetings or workouts. But no one ever saw it as a moment of joy. Although the category has giants like Stanley and Hydro Flask, no brand has ever made hydration feel deeply personal. Until Owala.

Launched in 2020, Owala didn't enter the category as a better container. Instead, it positioned itself as a companion. Where others ask consumers to choose between straw or spout, minimalism or personality, Owala asks a different question: What if a water bottle could feel like it belonged to you, not just with you?

With its patented FreeSip™ lid that solves the daily irritation of choosing how to drink and a design language rooted in expressive joy, Owala transformed hydration from routine into ritual. The brand managed to blur function and feeling, and embed itself in the emotional rhythms of daily life.

Its collaborations with Disney's Lilo & Stitch and Wicked the Musical brought nostalgic storytelling into hydration. This only extends the brand into fandoms that consumers already love. By the time biweekly Color Drops began selling out in seconds and limited editions were trading like sneaker releases, Owala had proven its thesis: it doesn't just improve the category. It makes people feel something inside of it.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

Where most bottle brands ask consumers to choose between sipping or chugging, Owala asks: Why choose at all? The patented FreeSip™ lid, a dual-function innovation wrapped in a covered straw system, solved one of the category's most overlooked pain points: hygiene. According to Mintel (2024), "protected mouthpieces" rank among the top three purchase drivers for reusable drinkware post-pandemic. But Owala didn't just meet that need; it owned it.

Visually, the brand rejected Hydro Flask's neutrality and Stanley's rugged nostalgia. Instead, it embraces playful dual-tone maximalism with colorways like Blue Oasis, Shy Marshmallow, and Neo Sage. Each bottle became a collectible, and not an accessory. For the first time, there was an object of emotional resonance just as much as utility. The result is a design system that radiates optimism in a market dominated by stoicism.

And then there's its Color Drop Strategy: the heartbeat of its differentiation. These limited, surprise launches created cultural anticipation around hydration, making water bottles a conversation piece. Each drop wasn't just inventory; it was an event that transformed a basic object into a self-expressive collectible.

RELEVANCE

Owala's success is rooted in its ability to translate macro shifts in consumer psychology into brand behavior. The "emotional support object" has become a generational coping mechanism for burnout and overstimulation. Everyday items ranging from Stanley cups to Squishmallows became grounding tools that offer control, comfort, and continuity. However, Owala sits at the heart of that evolution.

Its brand behavior mirrors what we identified in the Make Me Safe trend: brands winning not through intensity or aspiration, but through emotional reassurance. Owala's promise isn't "drink more water," it's "you're okay, you're doing enough." That's why its design palette feels calming rather than assertive, and why its messaging leans toward affirmation, instead of instruction.

At the same time, Owala plays directly into the "accessorization of everything," turning utility into identity. The brand's "Owala-fy It" UGC campaign encouraged users to match bottles to outfits, desk setups, or moods. It successfully transformed product ownership into self-expression. Their collaborations with Disney, Marvel, and NASA tap directly into cross-generational fandoms, only further proving that Owala can stretch from pop culture to wellness seamlessly.

owala®

TALKABILITY

Owala's virality wasn't manufactured; it was performed. Much like Buldak, Owala realized the product itself was the performance and leaned into it. TikTok became a stage for "emotional support bottle" confessions, "Why I switched from Stanley" debates, and color-ranking rituals. Students filmed haul videos, whilst nurses posted FreeSip demos, and bottle-swapping trends turned into friendship tokens.

The Color Drop launches routinely sells out in seconds, with Valentine's editions quickly appearing on resale markets for over $100. Each drop became a cultural flashpoint, amplified by FOMO and joy rather than influencer seeding. The brand's aesthetic and scarcity combined to make owning an Owala bottle a social signal.

The hype about the brand doesn't just live is social media feeds. TIME named the FreeSip "a breakthrough in hydration ergonomics," while BusinessQ called Owala "Marketer of the Year." Fortune asked the question that summed it all up: "How did this bottle become a cultural obsession?" In 2024 alone, sales grew 400% month-over-month, with revenue doubling year-on-year.

Instead of relying on big campaign budgets, Owala built emotional rituals that people wanted to share. Every bottle became a comfort object and a conversation starter, and every drop a small-scale cultural event.

Together, Owala walks away with a composite score of 4.19. Not for making hydration essential, but for making it irresistible.

Rival 50

RIVAL'S TAKE

Owala's power lies in its refusal to sell hydration as a function. Instead, it sells belonging disguised as a bottle. Its strategy isn't rooted in product superiority but in emotional alignment. The brand is built on ease without compromise, personality through color, excitement through scarcity, and comfort through possession.

Where legacy competitors built performance roots, Owala built personality gravity. It engineered a product that people want to use publicly and feel soothed by privately. It doesn't market a feature. It markets a feeling: this bottle says something about me.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. SOLVE THE FUNCTION, BUT BRAND EMOTION.

Owala fixed an overlooked problem. Then sold an identity, not a feature.

2. BUILD SCARCITY AS A NARRATIVE, NOT LOGISTICS.

Drops weren't stock releases; they were social moments designed for urgency and sharing.

3. DESIGN FOR BELONGING, NOT JUST BUYING.

When your product feels like a personality e xtension, the community builds itself.

crocs™

Most footwear brands enter the market trying to look good. Crocs entered fully prepared to be hated and built a $4B empire from it. Formed in 2002 as a practical boating shoe molded from proprietary Croslite foam, Crocs aimed to be comfortable, durable, and almost medically functional. Quick to clean, easy to slip on, and kind to tired feet. Crocs never asked to be fashionable, and that led to the brand being cast as a cultural villain. Mocked as “the ugliest shoes on Earth,” named one of TIME’s “50 Worst Inventions,” and ridiculed across pop culture, Crocs spent years as a punchline rather than a product of desire.

But instead of pivoting toward aspirational aesthetics or apologizing for its appearance, Crocs leaned into what made it polarizing. It doubled down on comfort as rebellion, turned its bulbous silhouette into an instantly recognizable asset, and introduced Jibbitz. A personalization system that lets wearers literally decorate their “ugly” with pride.

That’s when everything changed. Under CMO Terence Reilly, the same marketing architect behind Stanley’s viral comeback, Crocs began operating with a challenger discipline rarely seen in global brands. Reilly introduced what he called the “Airport Test,” the idea that if people are willing to carry your product through an airport, it has become truly irreplaceable. It wasn’t about being loud or flashy. It was about creating something people refuse to leave behind. From runways to playgrounds to airport gates, Crocs became impossible to ignore.

Now it’s one of the most talked-about brands in the world, and a frequent topic of conversation in the Rival Amp CMO network. Crocs has become a benchmark for how audacity, consistency, and community can rewrite cultural perception. What was once a shoe became a shapeshifting backdrop for identity itself, equally at home in hospital corridors, Balenciaga runways, Post Malone concerts, and kids’ playgrounds.

In a footwear category obsessed with performance, fashion, and aesthetic conformity, Crocs didn’t become beautiful. It made being unapologetically ugly feel iconic.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

Footwear brands typically differentiate through performance technology or design innovation. Crocs did neither. Its Croslite construction offers lightweight cushioning, water resistance, and day-long wearability. This makes it a quiet workhorse for healthcare workers, hospitality staff, gardeners, and home users alike. Functionally practical, visually polarizing: that was the point.

Jibbitz, the personalization system allowing wearers to decorate their clogs with charms, turned an unassuming shoe into a blank canvas for identity. The result: over $270 million in annual Jibbitz sales, adopted by three out of four Crocs buyers, and a new revenue stream that thrives entirely on creativity.

What most brands saw as an aesthetic liability, Crocs treated as strategic differentiation. The bright colors, bulbous form, and holes became not a weakness, but the uniform of confidence.

Crocs doesn't make you fall in love at first sight. It makes you take a side, and that's far more powerful for loyalty than aesthetic approval.

RELEVANCE

Crocs didn't invent new trends; it mastered them through cultural timing and tone. As "ugly chic" blurred irony with desirability, the brand became a symbol of self-acceptance. Comfort without apology, for those who wanted weirdness without shame.

This philosophy was far from theoretical; it showed up in how the brand moved. Collaborations with Balenciaga, Post Malone, and Bad Bunny stretched from couture runways to fandom culture. While partnerships with Gymshark and Minecraft proved that Crocs could fluidly traverse between fashion, fitness, and play. It also helped that the brand's humor matched the moment. From KFC's fried-chicken Crocs to Margaritaville's resort pairings, Crocs leaned into cultural absurdity while other brands were still trying to act cool.

Reilly's approach reframed comfort as rebellion. In a world of high-performance marketing, Crocs became a refuge and a badge for those tired of over-curation. It's why Gen Z adopted it as a comfort object, while healthcare workers saw it as validation of practicality over pretense. This multigenerational resonance makes Crocs one of the few brands consistently discussed by CMOs, not just consumers. It's both a meme and a masterclass. Equally likely to appear in a TikTok trend as it is in a boardroom case study.

TALKABILITY

Crocs' talkability is deliberate theater. Its moves are not constant, but when they land, they echo across industries. The $850 Balenciaga platform Crocs at Paris Fashion Week, Questlove's gold pair at the Oscars, KFC's fried-chicken clogs, and Post Malone's sold-out collaborations each triggered waves of admiration, irony, and chaos. What many consider the holy trinity of online conversation.

Its marketing isn't about frequency; it's about precision. Each collaboration is designed as a social flashpoint, an experiment in how far brand elasticity can stretch before it breaks. That elasticity, in Crocs' case, only seems to make it stronger. Every outrageous activation reinforces the same truth: Crocs can exist anywhere because it doesn't belong anywhere.

This orchestration consistently fuels earned media cycles. Mentions across Fast Company, Hypebeast, WWD, and mainstream outlets track quarterly with major drops, creating predictable spikes in cultural engagement. The numbers tell the story: $3.27B in 2024 revenue, up 8.8% year-over-year, outperforming a category averaging 3–4% growth.

With a composite score of 4.19, Crocs proves that in a world obsessed with perfection, there is massive power and profit in being proudly polarizing.

RIVAL'S TAKE

Crocs didn't fix what people mocked. It monetized it. In a category where performance and perfection dominate, it made imperfection a virtue. Its strategy hinges on amplification, and not adaptation: amplifying comfort, weirdness, and personal ownership into cultural capital.

Rather than seeking mass approval, Crocs built deep allegiance. Its marketing blurs the line between product and performance, letting consumers co-create meaning instead of passively consuming it. That's why Crocs isn't just surviving ridicule. It's scaling it.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. POLARIZATION CAN BE POSITIONING.

When a brand stops fearing division, it can build stronger emotional conviction with those who choose it.

2. IDENTITY IS A UTILITY.

Jibbitz proved that giving consumers tools to express themselves transforms a product into a personal platform.

3. SHOW UP WHERE YOU DON'T BELONG.

From fried chicken to couture runways, Crocs thrives because it enters worlds its competitors wouldn't dare touch.

ChatGPT

AI used to be a story about the future: distant, technical, and theatrical. For years, innovation in the space tried to win through spectacle. Bigger models, louder keynotes, and bolder predictions.

ChatGPT flipped the script by doing something radically un-dramatic: it made intelligence feel ordinary.

Launched quietly in late 2022, it didn't arrive with cinematic hype or Silicon Valley mythology. It arrived as a text box. A conversational interface that traded intimidation for instinct. No manuals. No gatekeepers. Just a tool people could use immediately, intuitively, and imperfectly.

And behavior followed. Within five days, one million people tried it. Not to marvel at technology, but to make life easier. Students used it for study sessions, parents for homework help, marketers for briefs, and professionals for structure. AI didn't disrupt daily life; it quietly embedded itself into it.

By 2025, more than 700 million people were using ChatGPT weekly, and 92% of the Fortune 500 had integrated it. It wasn't the most powerful model, but it was the most human. ChatGPT sold cognitive ease. It normalized asking for help and reframed productivity as a partnership between human and machine.

In 2025, OpenAI launched its first-ever brand campaign, Human Craft, a global effort to tell its own story after two years of user-led growth. Shot entirely on 35mm film, it rejected the trend of AI-generated visuals to remind the world that intelligence begins with people. It was a campaign about emotion, not engineering. Proof that even the world's most advanced tech brand could lead with warmth.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

ChatGPT's advantage has never been technical dominance. It was accessibility. In a field built for engineers, ChatGPT spoke in everyday language. It replaced command lines with conversation and dashboards with clarity. It made intelligence feel ambient rather than mechanical. That simplicity became its most powerful differentiator, and the reason adoption spread faster than any software in history.

Its 2025 Human Craft campaign reinforced that positioning. While competitors like Google's Gemini and Anthropic's Claude showcased technical benchmarks and multimodal capabilities, ChatGPT focused on empathy. The campaign used real footage, real people, and no generative visuals. It turned technology into a story about human connection. This was a deliberate contrast to an industry obsessed with showing off intelligence rather than understanding it.

But simplicity carries its own risks. Reliability gaps and hallucinations continue to test user confidence. Open-source rivals are closing technical gaps quickly. Differentiation now depends less on model performance and more on emotional equity and brand trust. ChatGPT's greatest win remains its human-first interface, and the feeling that this is not just AI, but assistance.

RELEVANCE

ChatGPT didn't enter culture through novelty. It entered through necessity. Drafting emails, structuring ideas, and summarizing meetings. It became part of the daily mental workflow. It normalized AI not by predicting the future, but by softening the present.

Its marketing strategy mirrors that philosophy. For two years, there was none. ChatGPT became one of history's greatest examples of product-as-marketing. It didn't need an ad to earn attention when the tool itself was the story. OpenAI's Head of International Marketing, Elke Karskens, formerly of Skype, Facebook, and Coinbase, was only brought in during 2025 to build the brand's first global marketing function. Her approach signaled a new phase: from viral adoption to intentional storytelling.

Human Craft was the first step in that evolution. It showed that OpenAI understands its position. A brand that built mass behavior before it built an identity. And that's what makes it relevant. Where competitors battle for technical credibility, ChatGPT has already achieved cultural presence.

The scale of earned media surrounding its growth is unprecedented. News cycles, policy debates, and academic studies all orbit the product. The launch of GPT-5, its Apple partnership embedding ChatGPT into over one billion devices,

ChatGPT

and OpenAI's growing ecosystem have made the brand synonymous with the AI era itself.

Still, relevance carries responsibility. Copyright lawsuits, creative-industry unease, and regulatory scrutiny create new pressure points. The product made AI feel safe. Now it must make it feel dependable.

TALKABILITY

ChatGPT's talkability doesn't rely on campaigns or controversy. Its ubiquity creates its own gravitational pull. Product updates, model launches, and policy discussions generate global attention without paid amplification. Every version release becomes a headline. Every regulatory mention becomes a debate. Without even realizing it, the brand has become the invisible architecture of modern productivity.

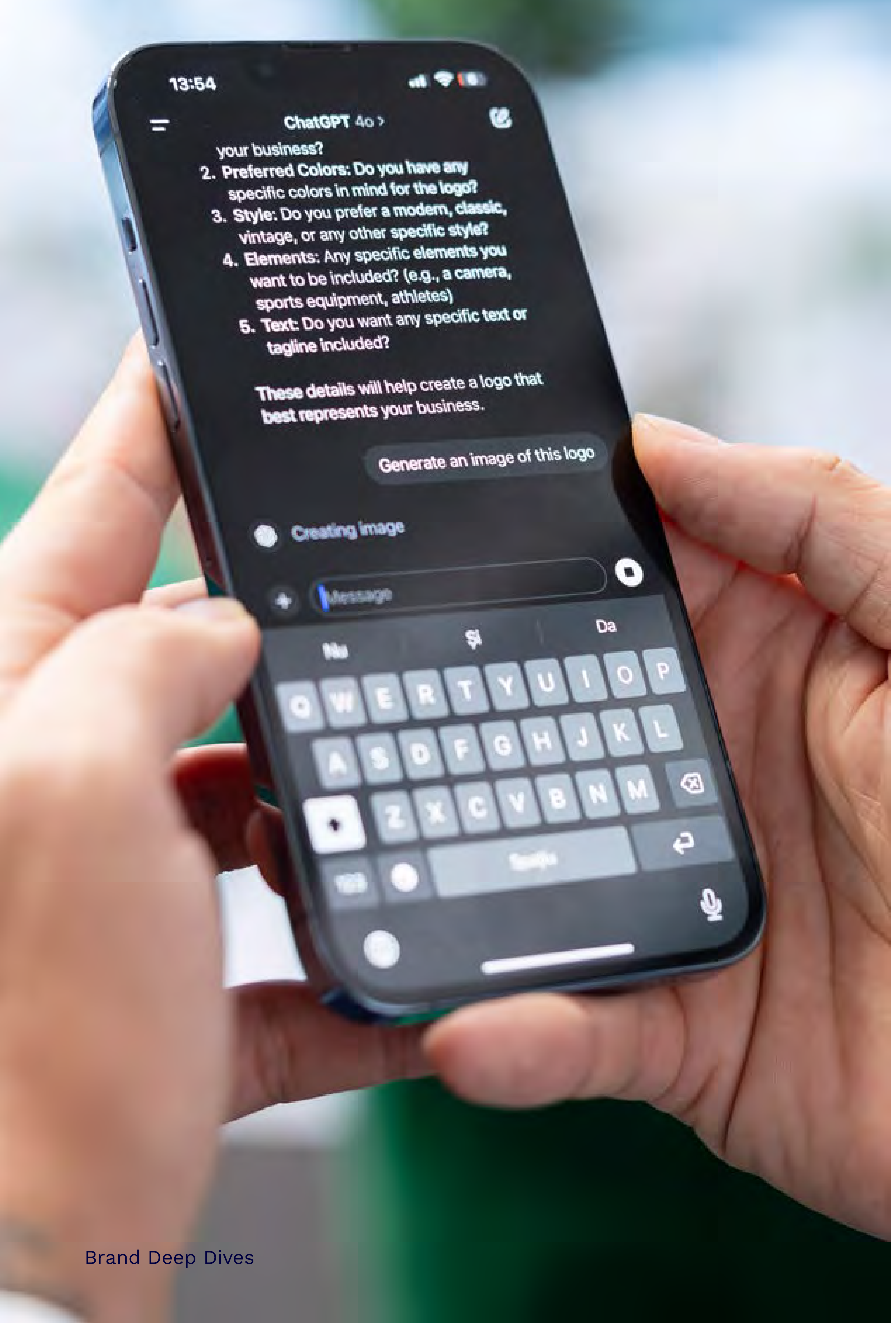
The Human Craft campaign expanded that visibility by reframing AI as empathy-driven design. Shot on film and narrated through human experience, it went against the grain of the AI-generated advertising that dominated 2025. It positioned OpenAI as a cultural leader rather than just a technical one.

Yet ubiquity brings fragility. Model changes provoke backlash, and pricing adjustments spark questions. Each move is amplified through the lens of a global audience. ChatGPT must now operate with institutional care rather than startup bravado. Its competitors are getting louder. Google's Gemini, Anthropic's Claude, and Meta's open models are vying for public imagination.

But ChatGPT's staying power lies in its quiet dominance. Its cultural saturation, endless earned media, and presence across education, business, and creativity mean it no longer needs to chase attention.

Altogether, ChatGPT earns a composite score of 4.19, built on behavioral change, emotional literacy, and the rare ability to make frontier technology feel human.

ChatGPT



RIVAL'S TAKE

ChatGPT didn't disrupt with spectacle, contrasting with the majority of frontier technologies that arrive with ego. It didn't need billboards to convince people. It simply worked, and in doing so, rewrote how innovation spreads.

For nearly two years, OpenAI followed no marketing playbook. The product was the promotion. The brand's challenger energy came from restraint and from proving that a truly great product can generate its own gravitational pull. Only in 2025 did OpenAI begin telling its own story through campaigns like Human Craft, reminding the world that the best technology serves humanity, not the other way around.

The challenge ahead is scale with soul. As regulation tightens and rivals multiply, OpenAI must protect what made ChatGPT magnetic: trust, transparency, and tone. The product made AI accessible, and now the brand must make it intentional.

ChatGPT changed the world by rearranging one daily routine at a time. Its next act will decide whether it can stay a challenger in an empire it built.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. DISRUPTION CAN WHISPER.

ChatGPT proved you don't always win by being the loudest. You win by becoming the default. Make your product feel inevitable, not intimidating.

2. BUILD BEHAVIOR BEFORE BRAND THEATRE.

Habit is harder to dislodge than hype. ChatGPT focused on embedding itself into daily workflows long before launching global campaigns.

3. TRUST IS THE NEW DIFFERENTIATION.

In an era where capability is commoditized, authority comes from reliability, restraint, and emotional reassurance. Not technical chest-thumping.

TIE BREAK

TIE BREAKER

Rival 50

When our judges were asked to break the tie between ChatGPT, Crocs, and Owala, their answers reflected different sides of what it means to challenge convention. “Owala isn’t trying to be the biggest; it’s trying to be the most loved,” said Kristen Cavallo. In a category dominated by Stanley and Hydro Flask, Owala’s community-led storytelling and emotional pull made it the truest challenger. Crocs earned recognition for a cultural surprise comeback from “ugly clog” to fashion icon, while ChatGPT was acknowledged as a category-defining force.

As Fernando Machado put it, “It’s impossible to ignore ChatGPT. Probably the one brand in the market today that is truly part of the day-to-day of everyone in the industry. From hiring a CMO to launching its first campaign, this is a brand that’s here to stay and will only grow in terms of utility for all of us.”

NOTHING

Most phones today feel engineered to disappear: glass, metal, silence. Perfect rectangles built to be forgotten the moment the screen goes dark. The category has become frictionless to the point of numbness. Categorized by benchmark charts instead of brand love, and keynote script instead of cultural pull. Smartphones are the most personal objects we own, yet the industry has stripped them of personality. Nothing chose to make the object visible again.

Founded by Carl Pei, the brand didn't promise more power; it promised more feeling. Where Apple sells prestige and Samsung sells scale, Nothing sells presence. It delivers high-design products at attainable price points in a world where top-tier flagships now exceed £1500. Its transparent hardware isn't nostalgia or novelty. It's a manifesto. A phone designed to be seen, understood, and interacted with, almost analog in an era obsessed with artificial everything.

With the launch of Phone (3), Nothing sharpened that stance. If competitors speak in AI superlatives, Nothing speaks in human signals. Its Glyph interface reframes light as communication, turning notifications into design language. And its Community Edition program turns users from critics into co-authors, letting them shape UI, materials, and even packaging that ships globally.

Carl Pei has become a masterclass in challenger marketing himself, trolling major YouTubers and tech critics, responding directly to reviews that called the phone “ugly” with unapologetic confidence. His blunt replies, “You're wrong, we're right,” created exactly what the brand needed: tension, talkability, and loyalty.

Nothing isn't selling hardware. It's reviving affection for a category that forgot how to inspire it. With 76% year-over-year revenue growth, a 577% surge in India, and one of tech's most self-organizing fan ecosystems, Nothing isn't competing on specs. It's competing on soul.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

Nothing entered a category where hardware had become invisible, both literally and emotionally. Where competitors optimize incremental power, Nothing optimizes emotion. Its transparent design language and Glyph interface aren't aesthetic stunts; they're strategy. The Phone (3) campaign When Light Becomes Language reframed utility as sensory communication.

The differentiation extends to how it markets itself. Nothing doesn't hide behind overproduced keynotes. It uses social-first storytelling, reactive marketing, and CEO-led confrontation to turn tech critique into conversation. While Apple avoids dialogue and Samsung overwhelms with comparison charts, Nothing embraces imperfection and invites participation.

Its YouTube channel, with over one million subscribers, is central to that strategy. It features everything from behind-the-scenes documentaries and community events to Pei reacting to tech reviewers in real time. This level of transparency and self-awareness makes Nothing feel alive. Something no other hardware brand has achieved.

Still, differentiation comes with risk. Transparent hardware can be easily parodied. Critics dismiss it as "aesthetic minimalism with maximalist marketing," and rising prices may test the "accessible rebellion" ethos. But at its core, Nothing's strength is clarity. It gives people technology they can see, understand, and shape. An antidote to the opacity of AI-led design.

RELEVANCE

Nothing's rise reflects a cultural shift in how people want to relate to technology. Consumers no longer seek complexity disguised as magic. They want clarity, control, and connection. While Big Tech leans on AI-driven abstraction, Nothing appeals to those uneasy with algorithmic dependence.

Its "Community Edition" wasn't a PR exercise. One thousand co-created units sold out in 15 minutes, turning fans into collaborators and cementing the brand's belief that participation builds stronger ecosystems than performance claims. The result is an active Reddit community of 139,000 members and thousands of fan-run teardown and modding accounts worldwide.

This strategy resonates especially in markets like India, where premium mid-tier fatigue runs deep. With 577% year-over-year growth there, Nothing has become the most culturally visible new entrant in the smartphone space. Its editorial halo reinforces that: The Verge praised its "anti-AI clarity," iF Design awarded Gold, and TIME listed Nothing among the year's "Best Inventions."

NOTHING

Nothing's narrative, however, walks a fine line. Anti-AI rhetoric can risk sounding romantic rather than functional, and its minimalist design language must continue to evolve to avoid aesthetic repetition. But for now, Nothing owns a unique position: the most human-feeling brand in a post-human tech landscape.

TALKABILITY

Nothing doesn't rely on launch-event spectacle; instead, it architects participation. The Phone (3) rollout combined cinematic restraint with cultural provocation, generating 1.2B TikTok views under #NothingPhone and coverage across CNET, The Verge, GQ, and Hypebeast. But its most distinctive talk engine is its community.

From self-organized meetups to teardown fan culture and co-created firmware content. Nothing has built a participatory ecosystem where users create content about experience, not just specs. The brand also drives attention through deliberate unpredictability. Its 2023 Nothing Uniform clothing collection became an unexpected cultural hit, bridging the gap between hardware and lifestyle identity.

Even controversy fuels conversation. When Nothing was caught using AI-generated stock images in campaigns promoting "human creativity," critics called it hypocrisy. The brand didn't retreat. Pei publicly owned it, clarified intent, and pivoted messaging. Only reinforcing the brand's signature transparency.

The result is a rare equilibrium: controversy without collapse and authenticity without polish. With 76% YoY growth, $200M+ in investment, and one of YouTube's most active tech fanbases, Nothing continues to turn participation into performance.

Together, these strengths give Nothing a composite score of 4.13. Proving that visibility, when humanized, can outperform innovation when abstracted.

RIVAL'S TAKE

Nothing doesn't challenge Big Tech by promising to be smarter. It challenges the belief that smarter is the only story worth telling. Where incumbents chase AI supremacy, Nothing builds human intimacy. It reframes smartphones from sealed systems to expressive, living objects. Tech that speaks, listens, and glows.

Its marketing doesn't depend on spectacle or secrecy. Instead, it's powered by honesty and interaction. From trolling reviewers to inviting fans into design decisions, Nothing's strategy blends engineering, emotion, and entertainment. It's what happens when tech branding learns from streetwear and community creators rather than corporate roadmaps.

But the real challenge is sustainability. As it scales, Nothing risks becoming the very establishment it once disrupted. Rising prices, repetition of design codes, and performative anti-AI stances could all threaten its edge. Its future success depends on keeping its rebellion functional, and not just philosophical.

Still, the core lesson stands: when technology feels human again, people don't just buy it. They believe in it.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. DESIGN IS NOT DECORATION – IT'S IDEOLOGY.

Nothing didn't build aesthetic differentiation; it built philosophical visibility. When design communicates belief (not just beauty), it becomes brand code and community magnet.

2. DON'T "BUILD COMMUNITY." GIVE IT CONTROL.

Fan pages, co-created drops, and user-led R&D aren't tactics. They're governance. When people help shape the product, advocacy stops being marketing. It becomes identity.

3. IN A WORLD RACING TOWARD AI OPACITY, EARN TRUST THROUGH LEGIBILITY.

While others chase invisible tech, Nothing made clarity its competitive moat. Transparency, literal and strategic, can be as disruptive as innovation, if you commit to it.

SURREAL

Most adults don't wake up excited about cereal. Breakfast, for many, is a trade-off between sugar crashes and sad protein bars. Forced to choose between adult obligation and childhood joy. It's undeniable, traditional cereals have stayed stuck in the past, clinging to cartoon mascots or "whole grain" virtue signals. All while ignoring the fact that today's consumers track macros, scan ingredients, and scroll memes before their first sip of coffee. Then Surreal arrived and asked a different question: what if breakfast didn't have to grow up quietly?

Launched in 2021, Surreal set out to rebuild breakfast from the ground up with zero sugar, 13g of protein, and a plant-based, keto-friendly recipe that feels like Saturday morning TV in a bowl. But its real breakthrough isn't nutritional. It's psychological. Surreal doesn't behave like a health brand preaching restraint or a cereal brand selling routine. It behaves like a cultural saboteur, hijacking timelines with BBM-era billboards, fake celebrity endorsements, and intentionally "lazy" January ads that mock New Year's pressure.

In a £2.5B UK cereal market declining by nearly 10% annually, Surreal grew 456% year on year and became the fastest-growing cereal brand in the country. It now sells one box every minute, with listings in Sainsbury's, Whole Foods, Co-op, and Amazon. Not to mention its more than 12,000 five-star reviews from macro-counting gym-goers and nostalgia-fueled millennials alike. In a category that had become predictable, Surreal made breakfast feel mischievous again.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

Where legacy cereals divide shelves between sugar-loaded childhood nostalgia and joyless adult health options, Surreal fuses both worlds into one proposition. Thirteen grams of plant-based protein, zero sugar, keto-friendly macros, and flavor names that sound like childhood cartoons. Its positioning isn't "better for you cereal." It's "the cereal your inner child wants and your adult macros can justify." That instantly separates it from traditional leaders whose protein content averages just two to three grams per serving.

But Surreal's biggest distinction lies not in formulation but in tone. It rejects the wellness industry's polished restraint and speaks like a gym bro who still loves old internet humor. While competitors lean on "natural energy" and "whole grain" claims, Surreal goes to market with lines like "Breakfast that f*cks" and "Guilt-free gains for your inner child." It's irreverent, funny, and refreshingly human. Whilst being emotionally louder and culturally stickier than any polite health brand could hope to be.

But that edge comes at a cost. UPF critics have dismissed it as a "chemical cocktail," and natural-food purists reject its sweeteners outright. But Surreal isn't trying to win over everyone. It's built for a growing audience of fitness-minded consumers who want their breakfast to feel like a dopamine hit, and not a moral obligation.

RELEVANCE

Surreal thrives because instead of following trends, it fuses several into one cultural identity. As protein culture became mainstream, fueled by Gymshark aesthetics and TikTok macro-tracking, Surreal positioned cereal as "macro-friendly joy." Its "Cardi-Os" collaboration with Gymshark wasn't a predictable co-branding exercise. But it did reframe cereal as pre-workout hype fuel.

At the same time, Surreal tapped into nostalgia economics. Its BBM-inspired billboards didn't sell cereal; they sold the memory of signing into your first group chat. Its Comic Sans New Year's ads, filled with misspelt misspelled resolutions, mocked performative wellness culture and won creative awards based on humor alone. The brand's ability to mirror Gen Z and millennial humor, burnout culture, and "fun wellness" sentiment made it a lightning rod for digital relevance.

Each move ties into a larger behavioral truth. Consumers want products that make them feel good and seen, not preached to. Surreal reads this perfectly. But as the hype builds, so does the question of sustainability. The brand has become a marketer's darling for its tone and virality, yet it remains to be seen if creative applause continues to translate into long-term consumer loyalty. Especially as bigger players like Magic Spoon compete for the same breakfast bowl.

TALKABILITY

Surreal behaves less like a cereal company and more like a disruptive creative agency that happens to sell breakfast. Every campaign is built for screenshots, social discourse, and creative press. Its fake celebrity endorsements featuring names like “Dwayne The Rock Bottom” and “Michael B. Jordan’s Cousin Steve” became instant LinkedIn case studies.

Its BBM campaign sparked a flood of nostalgic reactions, while its Instagram comment sections read like fan communities, and not customer service channels.

Surreal’s irreverent tone made it a creative darling across Marketing Week, Creative Review, and Famous Campaigns. Even Tracksuit used its work as a benchmark for how challenger brands drive awareness without traditional media spend.

With 456% year-on-year growth in a category shrinking by 10%, Surreal now sells one box every minute. But perhaps its biggest victory is perceptual, earning endorsement from Sir John Hegarty as proof that humor, irreverence, and low budgets can build brands bigger than legacy marketing logic allows.

Together, Surreal earns a composite score of 4.06. Not because it redefined cereal, but because it made it fun again, and that might be the boldest innovation of all.

RIVAL'S TAKE

Surreal didn't enter the cereal aisle to compete on health claims or nostalgia credentials. It came to turn breakfast into cultural entertainment. In low-interest categories, the loudest idea often matters more than the cleanest label. Surreal understood that adults don't want to abandon childhood comfort; they just want permission to enjoy it differently.

By blending emotional regression with adult discipline, Surreal built a new lane: cereal for people who lift with irony. It sells attitude as much as product. That's why Surreal's marketing feels more like pop culture than packaging. The humor is the hook; the macros are the permission slip.

Its real challenge lies ahead. Can the brand sustain its creative energy once the novelty fades and bigger players like Magic Spoon scale their cultural storytelling? Surreal's growth shows what's possible when creativity becomes currency, but long-term success will depend on turning that cultural attention into durable consumer advocacy.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. IN LOW-INTEREST CATEGORIES, YOU DON'T SELL THE PRODUCT. YOU SELL THE ENERGY.

Surreal isn't loved because of macros alone. It's loved because every box feels like an inside joke you're in on.

2. NOSTALGIA WORKS HARDER WHEN IT GROWS UP WITH YOUR AUDIENCE.

They didn't just revive childhood flavors. They reintroduced them with gym gains and adult self-awareness.

3. CAMPAIGNS SHOULDN'T JUST PROMOTE. THEY SHOULD PROVOKE.

Surreal didn't wait for category demand. It creates conversation through creative sabotage.

Performance footwear used to scream. Nike sold rebellion, Adidas sold acceleration, and Hoka sold oversized optimism. Louder soles, brighter colorways, faster claims. For years, the category rewarded adrenaline. Shoes weren't just worn; they were declarations of ego.

But as performance culture shifted from intensity to intentionality, and from marathon pace to longevity, a different desire emerged. Not for noise, but for precision.

That's where On Running stepped in. Not with a roar, but with engineered clarity. Founded in 2010 in the Swiss Alps, it introduced CloudTec, a cushioning system that looked like mechanical architecture and felt like propulsion softened by air. It wasn't a gimmick. It was physics in motion, built with industrial discipline rather than the theatrics of hype.

Over the next decade, On evolved from a niche distance-running brand into a global symbol of engineered elegance. It appeared on Olympic podiums, in Loewe collaborations, and on Zendaya in campaigns built around movement as emotion rather than speed. By the time it crossed CHF 2.32B in 2024 revenue and posted 43% year-on-year growth in early 2025, it was clear: On didn't challenge the category by being louder.

It redefined it by being sharper, quieter, and more deliberate.

SCORING

DIFFERENTATION

On Running stands apart by fusing performance innovation with aesthetic intention. Its CloudTec cushioning system delivers a distinct underfoot feel recognized by both athletes and everyday users. Unlike bulkier maximalist silhouettes or brands built on speed narratives, On reframes performance as refined comfort. It's built for transition, allowing wearers to move from long runs to city streets without compromise.

There are limitations. Premium pricing between $150 and $180 and narrow fits reduce accessibility. Some runners note durability issues, from heel wear to debris getting trapped in CloudTec pods. Yet On's strength has never depended on flawlessness. Its power lies in its hybrid identity, engineered for performance but styled for modern life. It's a brand that chooses discipline over spectacle and lets product substance speak before marketing does.

RELEVANCE

On's rise aligns with the broader evolution of wellness and fashion. Performance is no longer defined by exhaustion, but by balance, longevity, and flow. On's message reflects that shift, positioning itself at the intersection of precision engineering and luxury minimalism.

Collaborations with Loewe, ambassador partnerships with Zendaya, and Roger Federer's long-term alignment allow On to move seamlessly between sport, culture, and high fashion. Its minimalist, architectural aesthetic mirrors the growing appetite for quiet refinement. In a cultural climate where "quiet luxury" replaced logo maximalism, On became footwear's most precise interpretation of that ethos.

Its 2024 Loewe collaboration launched to critical acclaim and dominated social coverage, but sales were modest. The capsule's purpose was less about driving units and more about reinforcing brand positioning. The same formula fell flat when Alo attempted to enter luxury fashion with its bag launch in 2025, revealing what On already understood: without substance, style collapses. On's credibility stems from years of product-led proof, allowing it to enter cultural spaces others can only imitate.

This balance of engineering integrity and design restraint has made On the benchmark for performance-luxe brands. It's not the loudest in culture, but it's often the one others quietly follow.

TALKABILITY

On builds conversation through consistency, not chaos. Its moments are orchestrated, whereas competitors are more explosive. From Olympic podiums to Zendaya's "Zone Dreamers" campaign, Loewe capsule drops, and Federer's ongoing ambassador narrative. Each activation reinforces its brand values of precision, movement, and modern calm.

Unlike viral-first brands, On doesn't need shock value to drive coverage. It earns visibility through creative direction that blends the language of sport and luxury. Publications like Business of Fashion, GQ, and Vogue position it as a case study in how athletic credibility can coexist with cultural desirability.

Still, talkability has limits. While Loewe collaborations sparked major social buzz, they didn't convert at scale. The value lay in perception, not product turnover. On doesn't generate conversation for the sake of noise; it curates it as a halo effect. The result is long-term credibility built on rhythm, restraint, and reinforcement.

On holds a composite score of 4.06, earned not through spectacle, but through sustained precision, cultural elegance, and the discipline to play the long game.

RIVAL'S TAKE

On Running doesn't challenge the performance category by turning up the volume. It challenges it by refining the signal. In an industry defined by intensity and swagger, On's edge comes from calm. It wins by restraint — by betting on engineering-led design, purposeful partnerships, and clarity of identity.

Its most powerful move is reframing performance as a lifestyle, not a metric. On isn't competing for speed or spectacle; it's setting a new definition of success built on intention and refinement. It is one of the rare challengers that competes not by provoking, but by raising the standard and inviting the category to catch up.

MARKETER TAKEAWAYS

1. PRECISION CAN BE MORE DISRUPTIVE THAN VOLUME.

Clarity, restraint, and engineering-led design can out-perform louder narratives when backed by real product excellence.

2. PERFORMANCE AND LIFESTYLE DON'T NEED TO COLLIDE.

On proves that a performance brand can scale into fashion and culture without diluting credibility.

3. AUTHORITY DOESN'T ALWAYS SHOUT.

Some challengers win not by being louder, but by making themselves the quiet benchmark others must catch up to.

TIE BREAKER

TIE BREAK

In the face-off between Surreal and On Running, Cavallo drew a clear line between scale and spirit. On Running has “gone from niche start-up to Nike rival,” she noted, redefining performance with precision and restraint. But Surreal captured the essence of a challenger: “a small voice with big personality and zero fear of absurdity.” Its wit turned a low-interest grocery item into cultural commentary. For Cavallo, that’s what the Rival 50 celebrates: brands that don’t just grow fast, but make noise where none existed before.

BRANDS TO WATCH FOR 2026

BRANDS TO WATCH FOR 2026

While the Rival 50 celebrates the brands already defining today's landscape, a new wave is beginning to surface. We've rounded up three brands whose conviction, clarity, and creative discipline has already gotten them into the Rival 50, but we foresee them moving up in the ranks for 2026. In addition, we've also identified four brands we believe will be making a feature in the Rival 50 for 2026.

OUR LISTMAKERS ON THE UP-AND-UP

OURA

Oura has mastered the art of personal optimization through precision data and calm design. Its position at the intersection of health tech and lifestyle has made it a discreet status symbol. But its untapped potential lies not in product innovation, but in participation.

The brand's next leap will depend on how it transforms private insight into shared experience. A move toward small, private benchmarking groups or team-based sleep and recovery challenges could reshape Oura from a silent companion into a social ecosystem. Turning wellness into a collective, performable habit could be the shift that takes Oura from wearable to world-building.

GRAZA

Graza has already redefined what olive oil can feel like. It took a traditionally intimidating, premium product and gave it a joyful, everyday identity through its squeezable design and "drizzle & sizzle" simplicity. By stripping away the elitism of food culture, it turned sustainability and quality into something playful.

Its rise, however, is just beginning. Expansion into complementary categories could elevate Graza from cult DTC favourite to trusted pantry essential. A high-profile restaurant partnership or cookbook feature would further anchor it as both credible and cultural, moving it from viral novelty to household name.

RAMP

"Ramp is rewriting the rules of B2B branding. In a category dominated by incentives to spend more, Ramp built its identity around financial discipline and operational intelligence. It reframed corporate finance from a backend function to a cultural movement around efficiency, driven by campaigns like Office Camping, which turned cost-saving into a badge of pride.

What makes Ramp one to watch is how it could evolve from solving workflow pain to shaping workplace identity. Its recent campaign with Brian Baumgartner, known for playing Kevin in The Office, turned corporate finance into a clever, relatable cultural moment. By blending humor with insight, Ramp showed that even expense management can spark conversation. Looking ahead, shared performance markers could transform private financial data into collective proof of discipline and achievement."

OUR FUTURE LISTMAKERS IN MOTION

FRAMER

Framer has quietly become the creative industry's new power tool. Originally known as a no-code website builder, it's now redefining how design and storytelling coexist. Its latest $100 million funding round and $2 billion valuation mark more than growth. They signal Framer's arrival as a brand operating at the intersection of design, publishing, and participation.

By giving teams the ability to design, edit, and ship content collaboratively in real time, Framer is shaping the infrastructure for the "brands as media companies" era. As creative teams increasingly produce at the pace of culture, Framer is poised to become not just a design platform, but the operating system of modern expression.

AIRALO

AirAlo has turned connectivity into culture. What began as a travel tech solution is now the world's first eSIM marketplace, connecting more than 20 million users across 200 countries. Its $220 million raise and unicorn valuation solidify its position as the global default for digital freedom.

By making mobile access borderless, AirAlo has transformed what used to be a logistical headache into an identity marker for global citizens. With upcoming moves into enterprise and white-label platforms, the brand is not just selling data. It's selling belonging in a hyper-connected world where being online is synonymous with participation.

MANORS GOLF

Manors Golf is reimagining what golf looks and feels like. Founded in the UK, the brand has built a loyal following by rejecting the sport's exclusivity and bringing modern fashion sensibility to the fairway. Its expansion into the U.S. market and launch of the Foulweather collection show a brand ready to bridge performance, luxury, and culture.

By turning golf into a creative lifestyle, one that celebrates individuality rather than conformity, Manors is opening the clubhouse doors to a new generation. If golf is having a cultural renaissance, Manors is dressing it for the occasion.

HERE WE FLO

Here We Flo has made one of the most taboo product categories impossible to ignore. The UK-born personal care brand built its identity on bold humor, inclusive language, and fearless transparency. Completely disrupting the period and bladder-care aisle with unapologetic storytelling. Its recent partnership with Chelsea FC Women cements its evolution from challenger to cultural force.

What makes Here We Flo stand out isn't just product innovation, but ideology. It treats feminine wellness as a shared movement, and not a private issue. By infusing activism into commerce and chaos into packaging, it's proving that progress and playfulness can coexist.

A LETTER FROM OUR CEO AND CO-FOUNDER

The mission of Rival from Day 1 has been to document the playbook of successful challenger brands - to understand what allows the Davids taking on the Goliaths to punch above their weight, to seem bigger and grow faster than their competitors, and ultimately to do more with less (budget, resource, etc) in their approach to and investments in marketing. Over the last four years, our team has spent more than 10,000 hours researching, interviewing, and bringing together challenger CMOs and founders around the world. The brands we've discovered, the people we've met, and the things we've learned along the way is my favorite part of the job - and the most important to our mission.

The Rival 50 is an idea many years in the making. How can we take everything we've learned, every brand we've discovered, every conversation we've had, and identify the few things that really seem to matter most in driving growth? What are the red threads that apply across categories, markets, and audiences that are the true pillars of bringing a successful challenger brand? Can we distill those pillars down into a formula for what drives challenger growth in a way that anyone can take and apply to their own business?

Our hope, with the Rival 50 and with everything we do in our research, content, and events is that this can add value to CMOs and growth leaders. We've loved this journey with the team at Imperial College and our fantastic judges, and we've learned so much. We've tried as best we can to distill three months of intensive research (and 10,000 hours of work over the last four years), into a definitive, comprehensive list - and, more importantly, key insights and takeaways that any marketer can take and apply to their own business.

As we celebrate the culmination of this work, there are people who deserve our deepest thanks. To Imperial College Business School, thank you for your partnership and insight throughout this process. To our judges, Fernando Machado, Dean Aragon, and Kristen Cavallo — your expertise and perspective was truly appreciated. And to the entire Rival team, thank you. This report is proof of what happens when you work with exceptional people. Together, we've built something extraordinary.

Thank you for your time in reading this report, and your support in furthering our mission. We'd love to hear any feedback or suggestions you have for what can make the Rival 50 more valuable to you going forward. And if you're interested in joining our community, please join our community of 350+ challenger marketers sharing ideas, insights, learnings, and resources over on Rival Amp.

Eric Fulwiler

Co-Founder & CEO, Rival

THE RIVAL 50 BRAND

The Rival 50 is designed to celebrate the brands rewriting the rules of modern marketing — a list that feels as bold and unconventional as the challengers it recognises. Our aim was to create something both premium and provocative; prestigious enough to stand alongside major industry indexes, yet with the raw energy and edge that defines challenger thinking. The identity draws from Rival's own brand world, using our signature deep blue and vibrant pink to balance authority with creativity — the blue giving the work a sense of confidence and clarity, the pink injecting energy and modernity.

At the heart of the design is the use of bright pink tape as a recurring graphic device. It runs across the identity as both logo and motif, much like the way challenger brands make themselves seen in a crowded landscape. The tape becomes a symbol of stickiness: how really great brands don't just get attention, they stay with you. The repetition of the Rival 50 wordmark, punctuated by a star detail, gives the identity pace and focus, while the star itself serves as a subtle marker of achievement. The collage of cut-out brand visuals and layered textures creates a tactile, human feel — avoiding corporate polish, and reflecting the diversity and dynamism of the brands being recognised.

The photocopy-inspired textures and punky, hand-crafted overlays add a deliberate imperfection — a reminder that creativity often thrives in experimentation. The Rival 50 doesn't just recognise bold brands; it celebrates brands that stick — the ones that leave a lasting impression, challenge convention, and build a resonance that can't easily be ignored.

THANK YOU

A massive thank you to all the incredible brands featured in this report, for pushing boundaries and inspiring creativity across the industry. All imagery is used for illustrative and editorial purposes only.