

THE 

RELATIONSHIP

REPORT

How Brands Earn Attention, Build Connection, and Create Relationships That Last



BRANDS ARE EASY

TO FIND

BUT HARD

TO FEEL

There was a time when discovery was the challenge. Today, discovery is everywhere.

Scroll any feed, open any search bar, walk into any store, and you're met with a constant stream of new brands competing for attention. The barriers to entry are lower, the channels are more accessible, and the volume of content is overwhelming.

And yet, something isn't working. Although consumers are seeing more brands than ever, they're forming fewer meaningful connections with them.

Why?

Because reach doesn't offer value, and impressions aren't the same as experience. The modern consumer journey is efficient, optimized, and increasingly impersonal. Algorithms serve up recommendations, influencers introduce new products, and reviews validate decisions. It's a system designed to move people quickly from awareness to purchase.

BUT

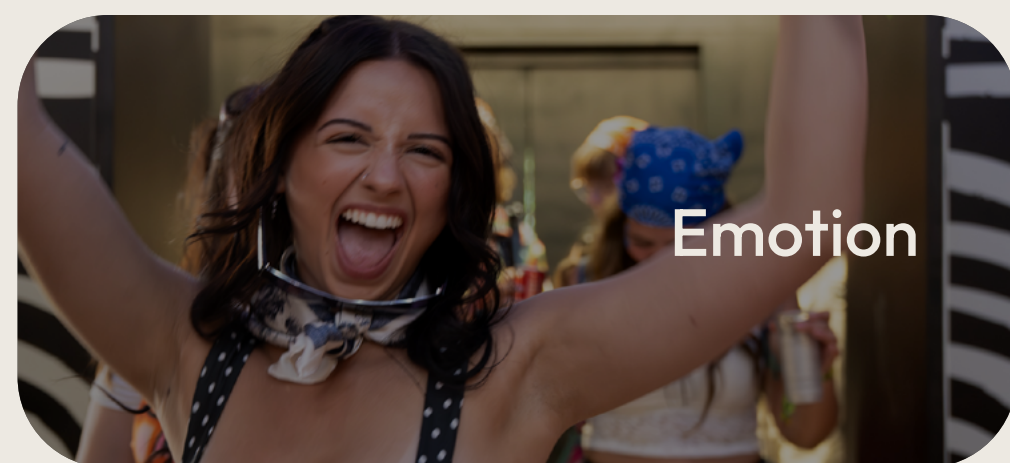
RELATIONSHIPS DON'T WORK

THAT WAY

RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRE:



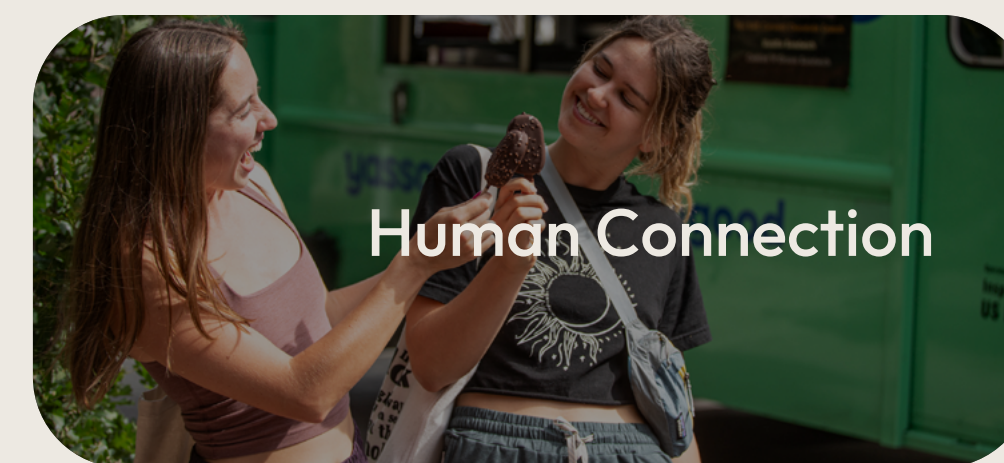
Trust



Emotion



Relevance



Human Connection

In a world where so much of brand interaction happens through screens, something essential is missing.

People don't just want to see brands, they want to feel connected to them.



OUR RESEARCH

We wanted to understand what builds a relationship between a brand and a consumer, not what brands think works, but what real people feel and find meaningful.

So, we asked them. The data that follows reveals a clear truth. The way people connect with brands is shifting and the brands that keep up are the ones that invest in building long-lasting, honest relationships.

125 people across the U.S.

Ages 25-45

Gender: 50% male, 50% female

HHI \$50K+

There's no question where the modern brand journey begins. Consumers are discovering brands primarily through:



Digital channels dominate the top of the funnel. They're fast, scalable, and effective at capturing attention.

They introduce brands, spark curiosity, and drive initial exploration. But what happens next is where things start to shift.

When consumers hear about a new brand, they don't immediately convert; they investigate by:

- Looking up reviews
- Checking social media
- Visiting websites
- Asking people they trust

This behavior reveals something important: although discovery may be instant, trust is not. Even more telling is how consumers evaluate what they see.

A growing number are actively questioning if the brand's or creator's content is authentic, whether it's paid, or if it's AI-generated.

DISCOVERY

IS DIGITAL.


BUT IT'S

NOT ENOUGH

In other words, the very channels that drive discovery are also introducing doubt. Consumers haven't stopped engaging with digital, but they've become increasingly cynical. And that creates a trust gap.

Today, a brand can be visible, well-reviewed, and frequently recommended and still not feel real.





THE TRUST SHIFT:
FROM
POLISHED
TO
PROVEN

For years, brands invested heavily in crafting the perfect image, think polished campaigns, high-profile influencer partnerships, and professionally produced content. And, for a time that worked. But, like all things on social, there's been a shift.

Today, what stands out isn't perfection, it's authenticity.

When asked what makes a brand feel "real," consumers consistently point to:

- User-generated content; stories and recommendations from real people
- Transparent behind-the-scenes content from brands
- Real-world in-person interactions with brands

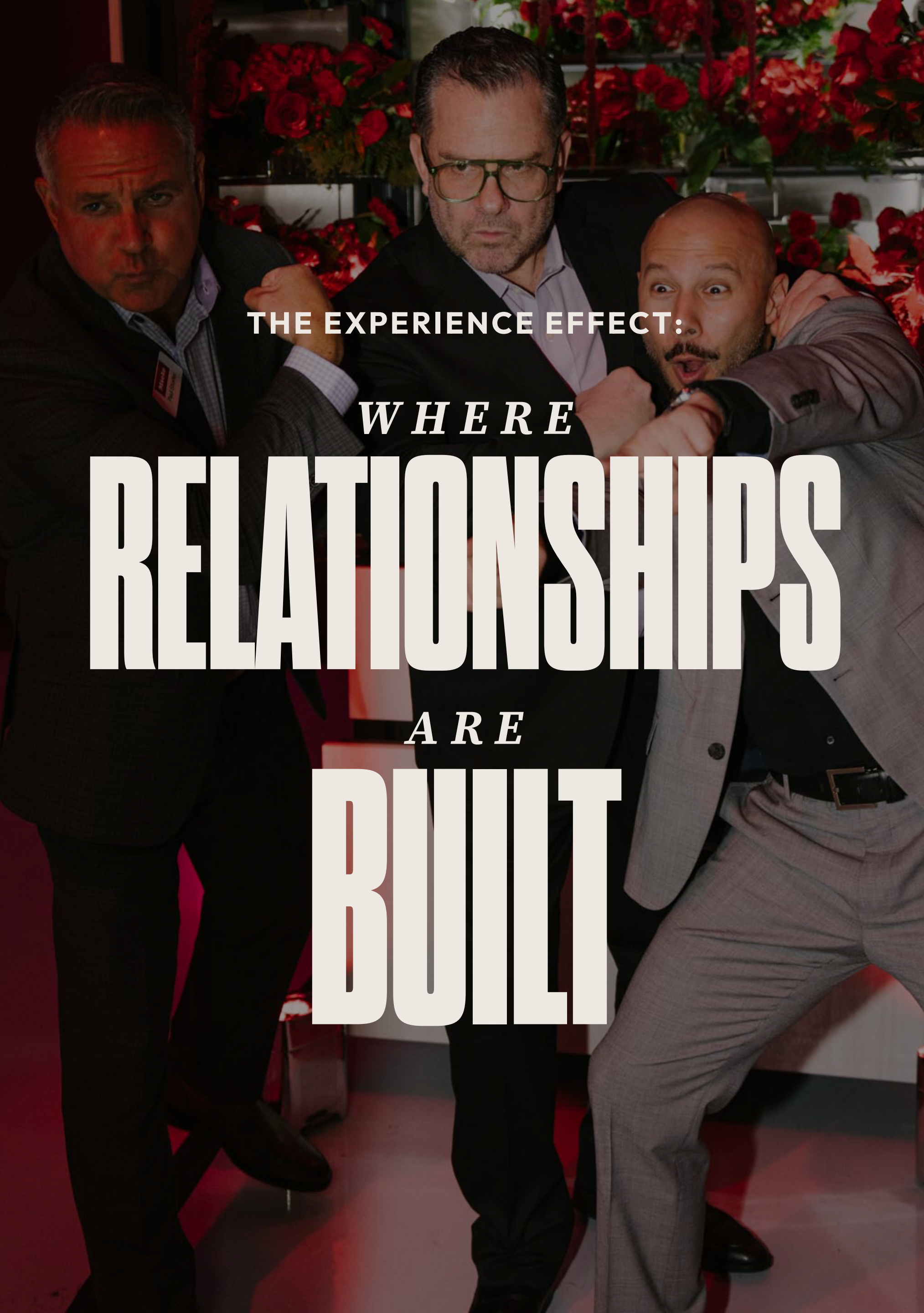
At the same time, they're quick to call out what feels inauthentic:

- Overly polished content
- Excessive and intrusive advertising
- Performative values
- Content that feels automated or artificially generated

This is where we're seeing the biggest change: trust is moving away from what brands say, and toward what consumers experience for themselves. In a digital-first world, proof has become more important than messaging, but delivering that proof is difficult, because no matter how compelling a piece of content is, it still lives behind a screen. It can be skipped, questioned, filtered out, and ignored.

But an experience? An experience is different. You can't scroll past it, you can't fake how it feels, and when it's done right, you don't forget it.





THE EXPERIENCE EFFECT:

WHERE

RELATIONSHIPS

ARE

BUILT

If discovery is digital and trust is shifting, the next question is simple:

What builds connection? The answer is clear and it's not what most brands are prioritizing.

When consumers were asked which type of interaction makes them feel most connected to a brand, in-person experiences outperformed digital interactions.

WHAT TYPE OF INTERACTION MAKES THEM FEEL MOST CONNECTED TO A BRAND?



This is a critical distinction. Digital interactions, likes, comments, and emails keep brands present, but presence isn't the same as connection.

Connection requires something more:

- Attention that isn't divided
- Interaction that isn't passive
- A moment that feels personal
- Authentic community

connection

And that's exactly what in-person experiences deliver.





HOW DO IN-PERSON BRAND ACTIVATIONS SHAPE YOUR PERSPECTIVE OF A BRAND?

We asked our panel to choose their top three.



That's not incremental impact. That's relationship acceleration.

These experiences...

- Awareness
- Consideration
- Trust
- Purchase
- Advocacy

...collapse the traditional funnel into a single moment.

And that's what makes them so powerful.



THE

PARTICIPATION GAP

There's another dynamic at play. Even though **68% of those surveyed attended an in-person brand experience in the past year, most brand interaction still happens digitally.** But when it comes to building real connections, digital doesn't lead.

This reveals a gap in modern marketing:

- Brands are investing heavily in scalable digital engagement
- But consumers feel most connected through human experiences

We don't view this as a weakness. This is where we see an opportunity for long-term relationship building.



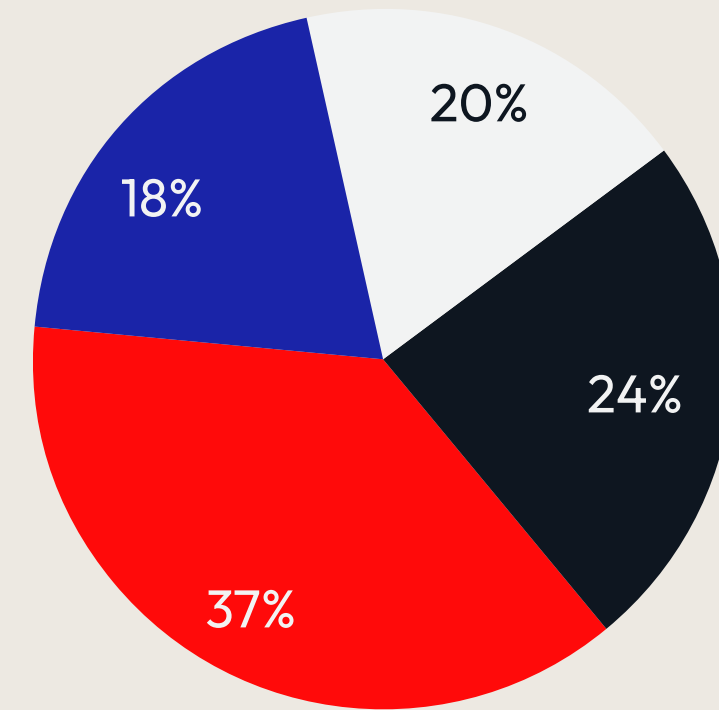
BELONGING ISN'T BUILT IN FEEDS

If connection is the goal, belonging is the outcome. It's what turns:

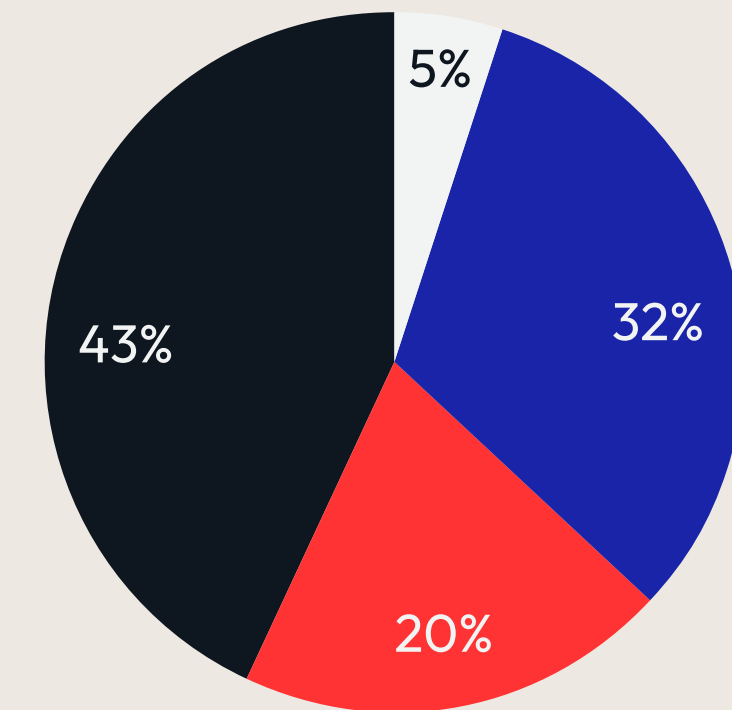
- A customer into a repeat buyer
- A buyer into an advocate
- An interaction into a relationship

And it's increasingly what consumers are looking for.

When asked where a sense of community and belonging is created, the answer isn't simply "online" or "in-person." It's both. How important is it for a brand to create a sense of belonging and develop a community?



- Extremely Important
- Very Important
- Somewhat Important
- Not Very Important



- Primarily Online
- Primarily In-Person
- Both Equally
- Neither

For years, brands have tried to build community exclusively through:

- Social platforms
- Comment sections
- Digital groups

And while those spaces matter, they often lack something essential, shared presence. Belonging isn't just about shared interests, it's about shared experiences.

Consumers don't see digital vs physical as separate.

They see them as connected.

- In-person = emotional ignition
- Digital = relational continuity





WHAT CREATES
BELONGING

WHEN IT COMES
TO BRANDS, WHAT
MAKES YOU FEEL
LIKE YOU BELONG?

63% Access to something
exclusive

41% Shared values

35% Participation in
experiences

31% Feeling
recognized

Notice what's missing? It's not content. It's not
messaging. It's not frequency. It's interaction.

Brands spend enormous energy refining what they say. But consumers remember more about what they experience.

When asked what created their strongest connection to a brand, consumers point to specific small moments, not ongoing exposure. When asked to describe a specific moment that made a brand unforgettable, this is what we heard:

“When purchasing a cream and soap for my daughter’s eczema problem, I saw an informative booth at a pop-up event that went and explained the problem, and they explained what product to use vs. what not to use. Went online, saw reviews were good, and we ordered the product.”

“Met the founders of a make-up brand at Sephoria and shared my love for the brand and the quality, and was able to interact with them and see their genuine reaction to the support they get from their customers. Love being able to engage to see who is really behind the brand.”

“I went to a pop-up event, and they approached me and made sure all my questions were understood, and I felt noticed.”



MOMENTS MATTER MORE THAN MESSAGING

This is a critical shift because it reframes how relationships are built. Not through repeated impressions, but through memorable interactions. And those moments don't have to be massive. In fact, the most powerful ones often aren't.

They're:

- A perfectly timed sample
- A thoughtful interaction
- A surprising, delightful experience





THE NEW
RULES
OF
TRUST

Trust has always been foundational. But how it's built and broken has changed. Today, consumers build trust through:

- Consistency
- Transparency
- Real customer feedback
- Real-world interaction

At the same time, trust is fragile. Consumers are quick to disengage when brands feel:

- Overly polished
- Overly automated
- Overly performative

69%

say that too much automation or use of AI makes a brand feel fake or inauthentic.

This is where digital starts to show its limitations. Because the more automated and optimized interactions become, the more consumers crave something that feels human.





DIGITAL'S REAL ROLE:

STAY

CLOSE

STAY

RELEVANT

None of this means digital doesn't matter. It absolutely does. But its role is different from what many brands assume.

When asked what keeps them engaged over time, consumers point to a mix of:

- Quality
- Rewards and Perks
- Personalization
- Innovation

Digital is essential for:

- Staying present
- Reinforcing value
- Maintaining relevance

70%

say that digital interactions help to maintain their relationship with a brand over time

But when it comes to building the relationship? That's where digital alone falls short. Brands today need a mix of in-person engagement and digital follow-up to truly build ongoing, long-term relationships with consumers.





IF YOU WANT A
RELATIONSHIP
SHOW UP

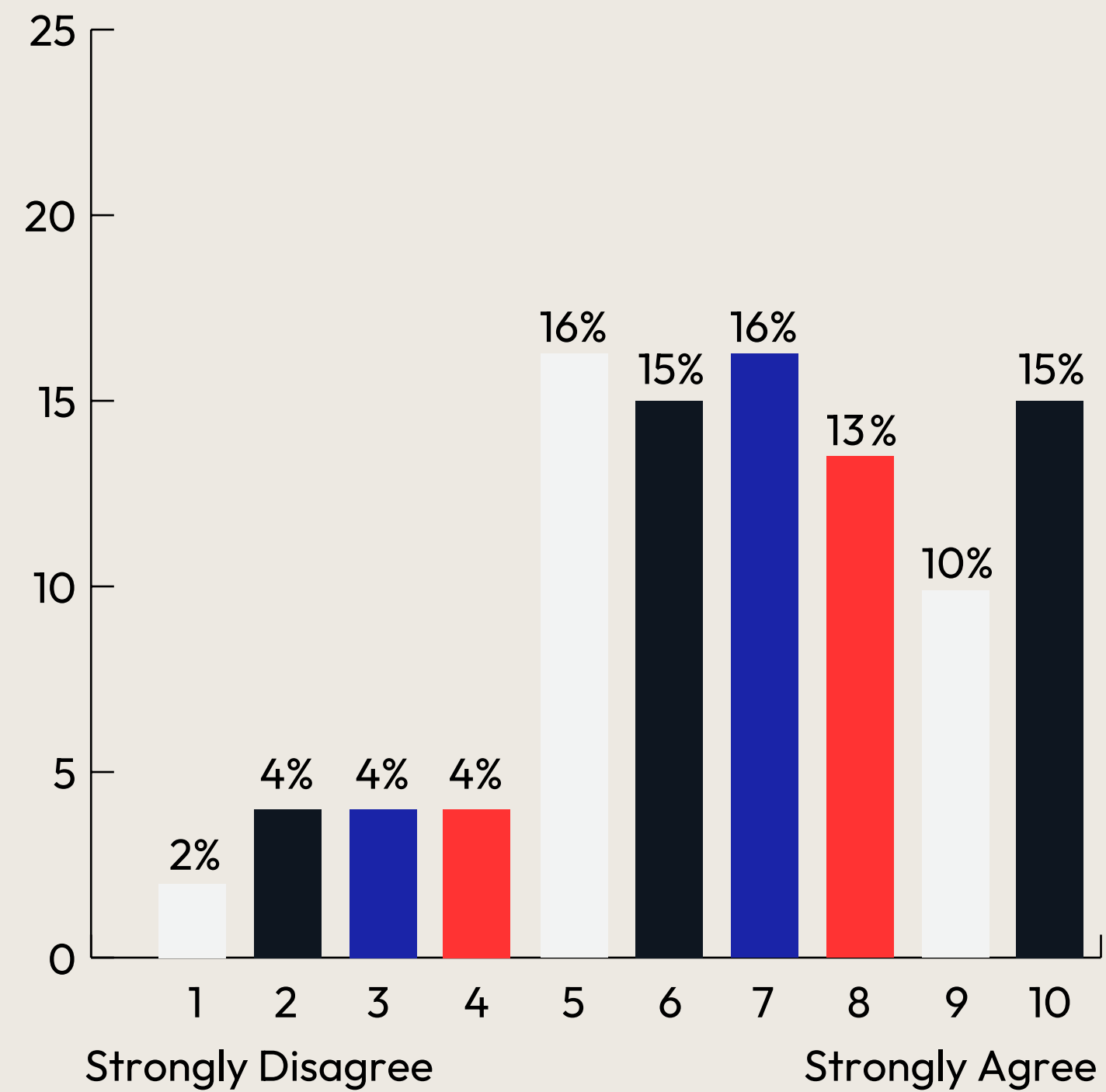
The takeaway from this year's report is clear. Discovery is easy, attention is abundant, but connection is rare. And in a world shaped by algorithms and automation, human interaction has become the ultimate differentiator.

Consumers are telling us:

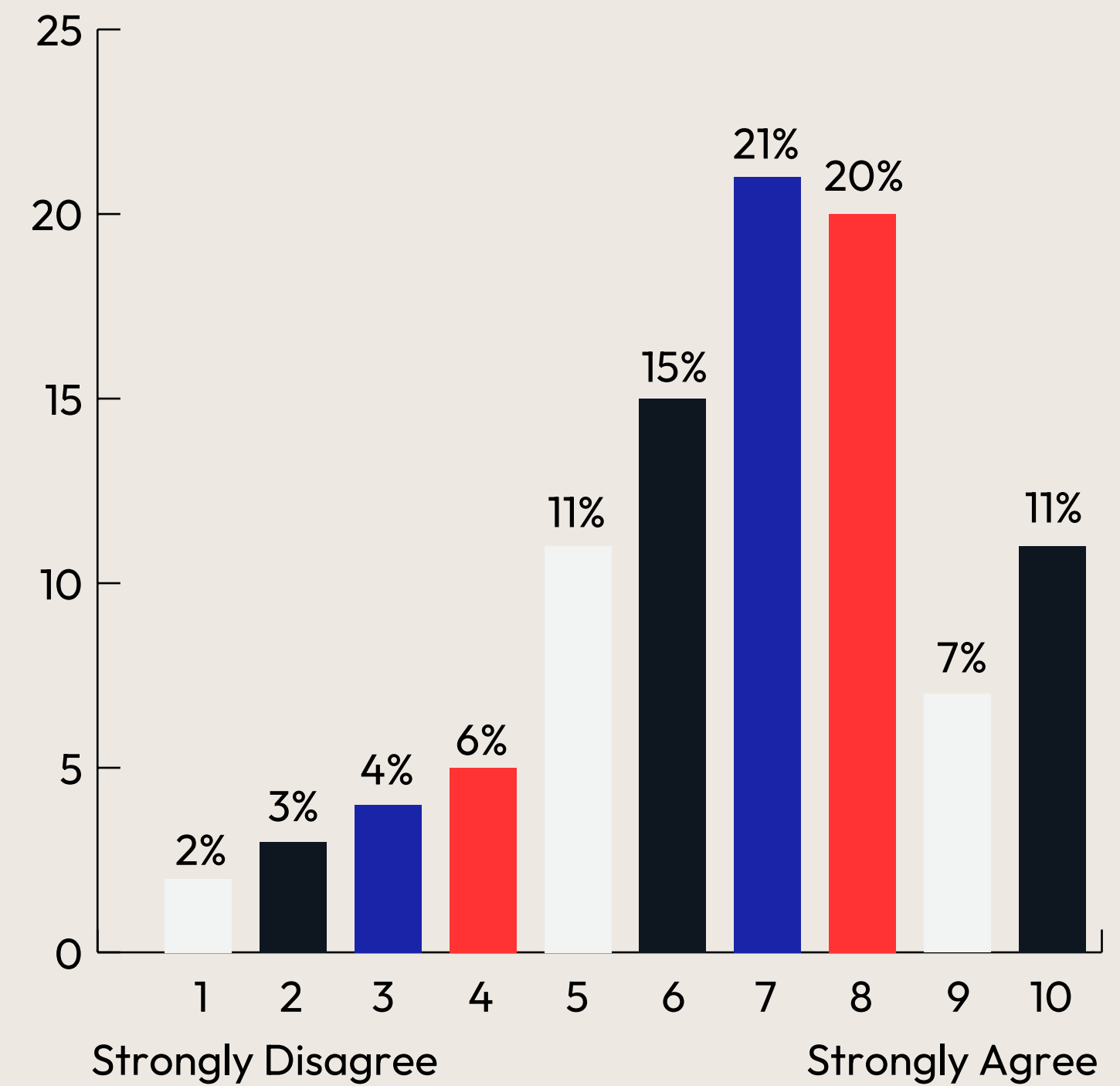
- They trust what they can experience
- They remember how brands make them feel
- They form relationships through moments, not messages

When we asked our panel, this is what they said:

IN PERSON EXPERIENCES MAKE YOU FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO A BRAND THAN DIGITAL INTERACTION.



IN-PERSON EXPERIENCES INCREASE YOUR TRUST IN A BRAND.





EXPERIENCES

DEEPEN THE RELATIONSHIP

DIGITAL

ENSURES CONTINUITY

The brands that understand this won't just capture attention. They'll create something much harder to earn and far more valuable. A relationship that lasts.



THE BRAND

RELATIONSHIP

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