

# What's Next

## 2023

**Leadership,  
transparency and  
purpose in the  
age of uncertainty**

A summary of the critical factors and forces that will shape marketing and communications over the year ahead



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## Introduction

**2022 has seen people live through war, rising inflation, climate change, and political turmoil, with the systems that govern our world – political, economic, legal, corporate and cultural – being called into question.**

As a result of this 'perma-crisis', there is growing distrust and disillusionment. Consumers are looking to take back control by rejecting established norms and seeking greater authenticity in all forms of life.

As we enter 2023, this sense of volatility is set to continue, but there is a belief that brands can lead the way in supporting consumers and employees by focusing on the issues impacting their daily lives.

Achieving this will not be easy. In 2023, brands must work hard to gain trust by showing they are genuinely on the side of the people they serve; they must engage with the increasingly powerful Gen Z audience; and they must ensure they behave as good corporate citizens. They must balance focusing on immediate consumer, customer and employee concerns like the cost of living crisis, with longer-term societal problems.

Transparency will be paramount – particularly when it comes to purpose. In 2023, people will expect brands to be open about their purpose progress, even if results fall short of their initial expectations.

**The 2023 – What's Next? report has been created to help companies understand the factors and forces influencing audience behaviours in the year ahead.** Drawing on our long-standing strategic relationship with Foresight Factory, we have distilled the key insights from their annual Trending report while also pulling out data from our own Brands in Motion research to create a list of the top trends for brand communications in 2023. We hope this approach will arm you with information and intelligence to ensure your brand thrives over the year ahead.



# Make it Real

In difficult times, people are looking to brands for solutions, but they are increasingly sceptical that they are not delivering on their values-led commitments. The 2022 Brands in Motion survey found that only half of companies that have made purpose commitments are seen as delivering on them.<sup>1</sup>

Phenomena such as “greenwashing” are known only too well. Brands recognise that purpose-driven commitments help them generate positive sentiment among consumers. But talk is cheap, and today people are noticing when brands don’t follow through on the goals they set.

Brands need to share their progress on their commitments with clear and unimpeachable data.

To conserve momentum in achieving these goals, employee buy-in is essential. Teams need to believe that their company’s goals are achievable and will result in positive change. By nurturing advocacy and co-operation, long-term goals can be accomplished from the ground up.

At the same time, employees expect brands to never lose sight of their welfare. Cost of living is the number one area where people want brands to accelerate their efforts. Brands need to address this issue or risk losing the confidence of their most important stakeholders. To make it real, brands need to put their employees first.

## Actions to take



**01**

Set **realistic goals** and issue frequent **progress reports** that take people on the journey with you to secure buy-in.

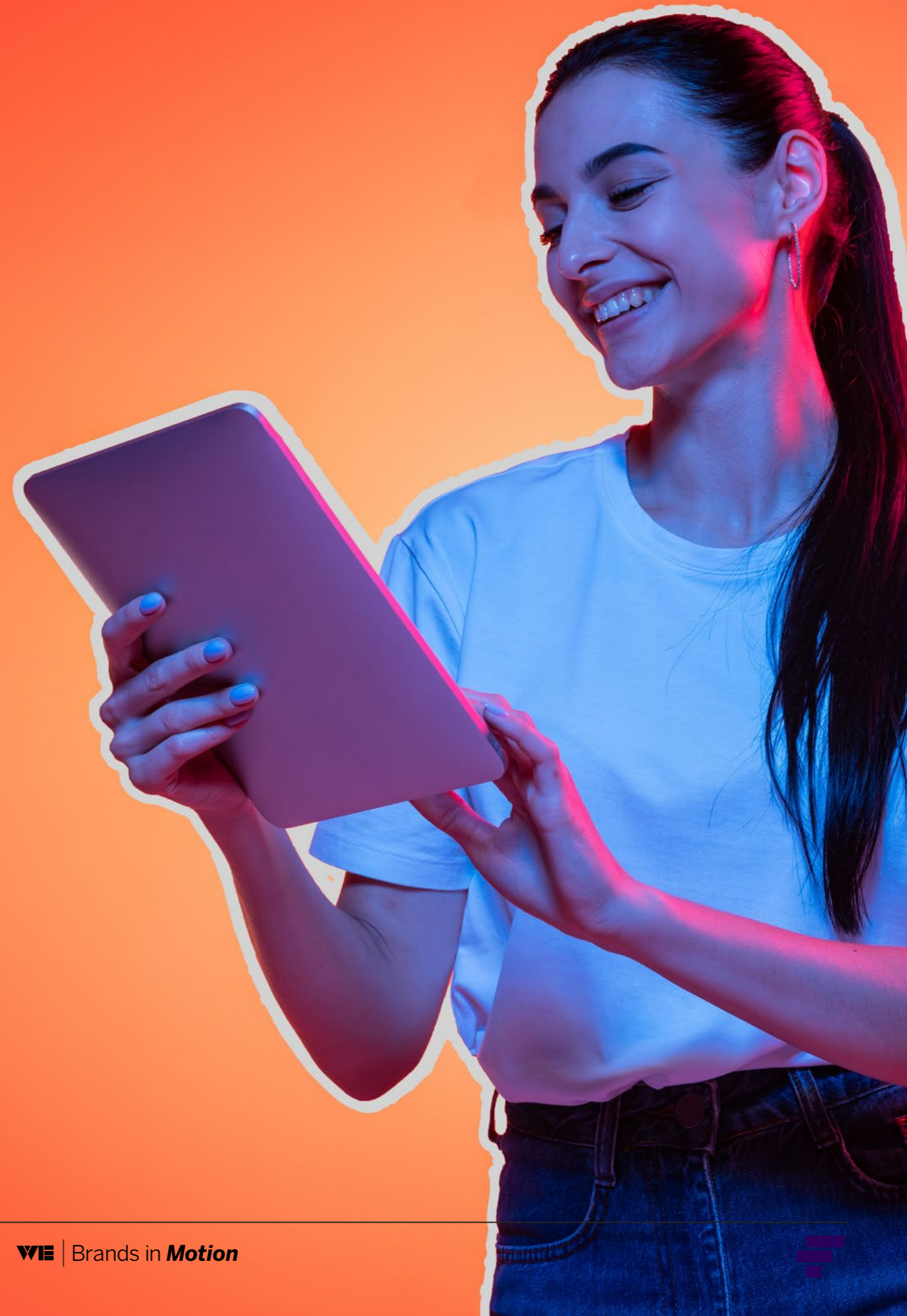
**02**

Generate **advocacy** among your employees by involving them in the process.



**03**

Purpose-driven commitments need to factor in the **welfare of employees** as a priority.



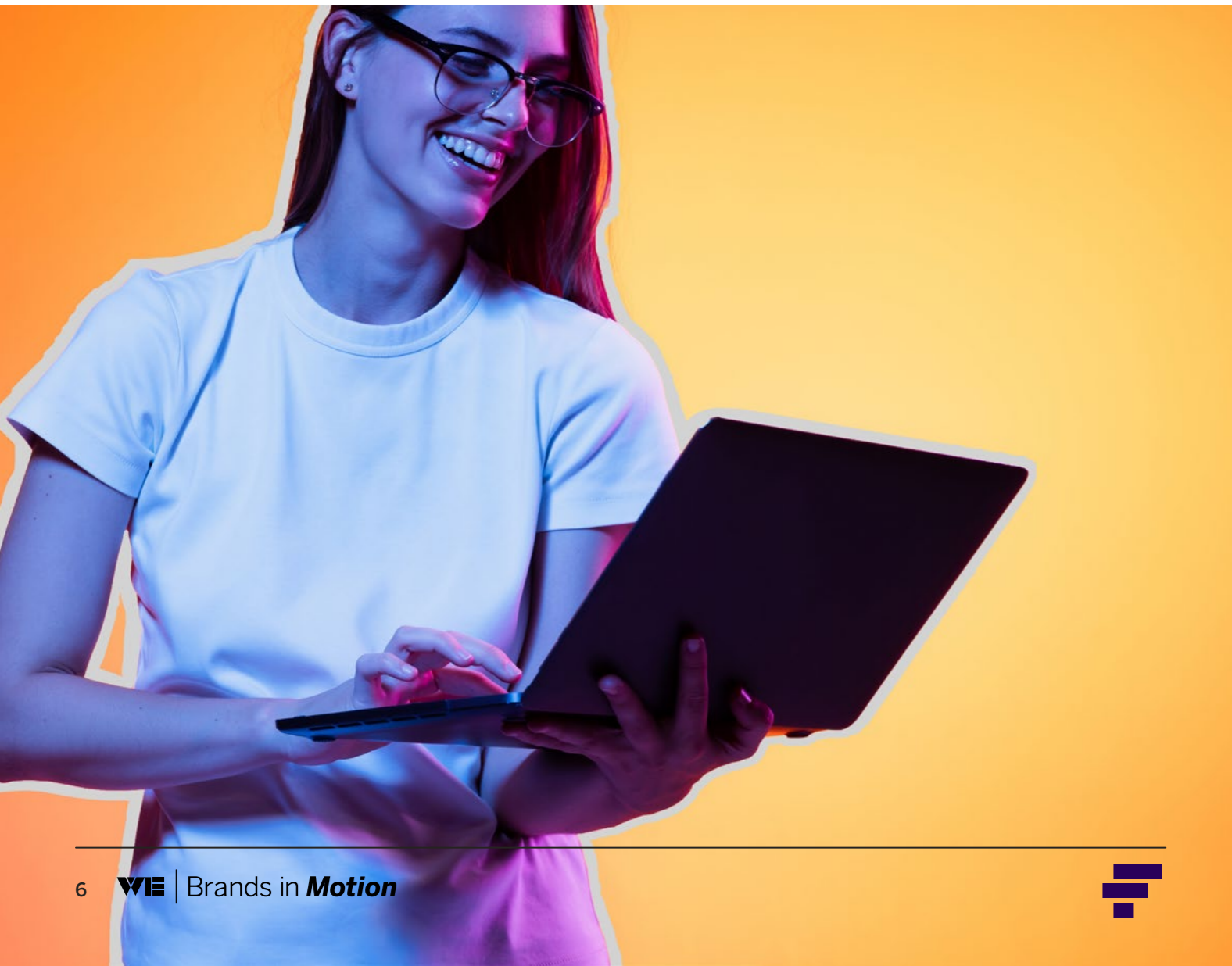
# Need for Transparency

Seventy-eight per cent of EMEA respondents want brands to be transparent in their communications with the public about how they are responding to current and emerging issues in society.<sup>1</sup> To win over their audience, brands need to honestly present their customers with facts about their product or service and spotlight their hard work, showing precisely what they are doing for a cause.

But transparency on the brand level is not enough. People are increasingly perceiving company messaging to be biased by self-promotion and advertising. They are instead turning to other sources of information. Fast Company recently

reported that crowd-powered sources of information such as Reddit are supplanting Google as a trusted source for searches.<sup>2</sup>

To maximise transparency, consumers need to see the values of a company reinforced by individuals working within it. WE's Brands in Motion findings show that CEOs and other C-suite executives have an opportunity to lead by example by keeping stakeholders in the loop. In fact, 80% of respondents say that the best way for CEOs to convince them that they will follow through their purpose goals is to provide transparency on progress.<sup>1</sup>



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## Actions to take

01

Present detailed **updates on progress** as frequently as possible. The gold standard would be a **dashboard** where development is tracked in real-time.



02

**Strengthen the voices of your C-suite executives** with clear content strategies that effectively engage consumers and align with company goals.

03

Use communications to **amplify the human element behind your company's activities**, telling the stories of individuals working behind the scenes.



# Where's the Proof?

These tumultuous times have fostered a generalised distrust in authority. In the UK, 36% of consumers say they reject the influence of the media, and 24% say the same of political leaders.<sup>3</sup> The culture of instantaneous reaction has resulted in a newsfeed full of contradicting views and a Governmental administration full of policy U-turns.

At the same time, public backlash from any issue deemed controversial has become so widespread that organisations are now avoiding it at all costs. A new study by climate consultancy South Pole has called out a new trend of “green hushing”, where companies are choosing not to publicise

details of their climate targets to avoid allegations of greenwashing. Twenty-five per cent of the 1,200 companies surveyed said they would not publicise their emissions targets.<sup>4</sup>

Sticking your head in the sand is not (and has never been) the answer. A lack of data and data-driven goals is the number one reason people become sceptical of brands achieving their value-led commitments.<sup>1</sup> Rather than hiding their goals, brands need to reinforce them at every stage with data that is relevant and compelling.

## Actions to take



**01** Verify any claim made in any form of communication with a **valid datapoint**.

**02** Setting **clear measurements of success** needs to become an integral part of any communications strategy.



**03** A reference list is not enough. **Effective visualisation of data** conveys the facts clearly and convincingly.



# Practicality Takes Precedence

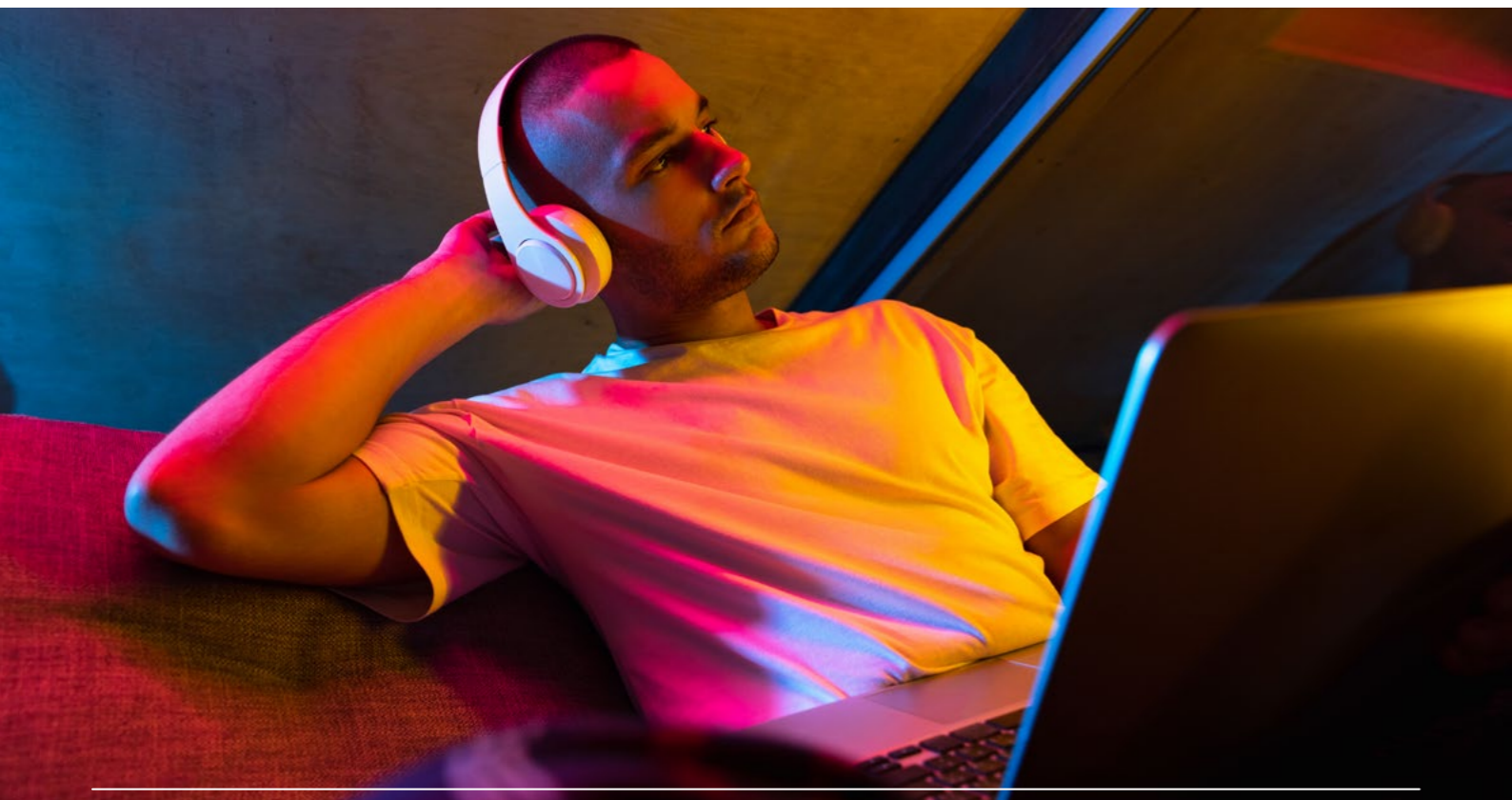
People continue to see companies as capable of bringing about real positive change on the world stage. Brands need to place greater emphasis on practical values-led goals over ambitious ones. EMEA respondents to the Brands in Motion survey say that brands should place 59% of their efforts on practical goals versus 41% on ambitious goals.<sup>1</sup>

This opinion was hammered home during COP27, where world leaders agreed that tackling climate change is about progress, not just pledges. They demanded that organisations have an ambitious, credible, and implementable plan to transition toward a greener, cleaner future.

A focused commitment to a single purpose also means brands can establish themselves as advocates and bring about meaningful change.

People in EMEA want brands to stay the course – no need to jump into every issue. In both WE’s 2021 and 2022 Brands in Motion studies, about 70% of EMEA respondents said they prefer that companies focus their multiyear investments on a single cause, rather than support a different issue every year.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, brands cannot lose sight of the future. A focus on practicality is not a call for brands to abandon their ambitious plans – nearly all consumers say they want companies to have high-reaching goals. The expectation for brands to speak and act on large-scale issues is here to stay, and all must strike a balance between big-sky and ground-level goals.



70% of EMEA respondents said they prefer... companies **focus...** on a **single cause**



## Actions to take

**01**

**Make your goals SMART** by defining them clearly, setting them on a fixed timescale, and establishing a system to measure your success.



**02**

Build upon your practical goals over time by setting out a **directed and specific plan** to achieve them incrementally.

**03**

If the topic is not one your organisation has influence over, or central to your brand’s mission, **it is OK to refrain from speaking out.**



# Generational Divide

The children of the internet are coming of age. As more Gen Zers enter the workplace and their buying power grows, companies need to adapt if they want to stay relevant.

A good place for brands to start is relaxing their image and tone to align with the playful and light-hearted voice of Gen Z. Forty-five per cent of consumers like brands that don't take themselves too seriously, and 48% of them don't mind them using GIFs, memes or emojis in their communications.<sup>3</sup>

There's also the question of social media. TikTok is a relatively new platform that has exploded in popularity over recent years. The app was used regularly by 39% of global consumers in 2022.<sup>3</sup> It has redefined the way content is consumed, with short-form, high-entertainment media that is almost entirely user-generated.

Any brand catering to a Gen Z audience must embrace platforms such as TikTok, and the influencers that generate the content, as a vitally important channel of communication. Effective use of the app has the potential to start a snowball effect leading to unprecedented levels of engagement

## Actions to take



01

Don't be afraid to take an **informal tone** in your messaging – this can be a difficult line to tread and by no means should it compromise your image, but **a sense of humor can't hurt.**

02

Work with **influencers** operating on platforms like **TikTok** to co-create **content that is palatable to Gen Zers** and aligns with your **brand goals.**



# Raw and Unfiltered

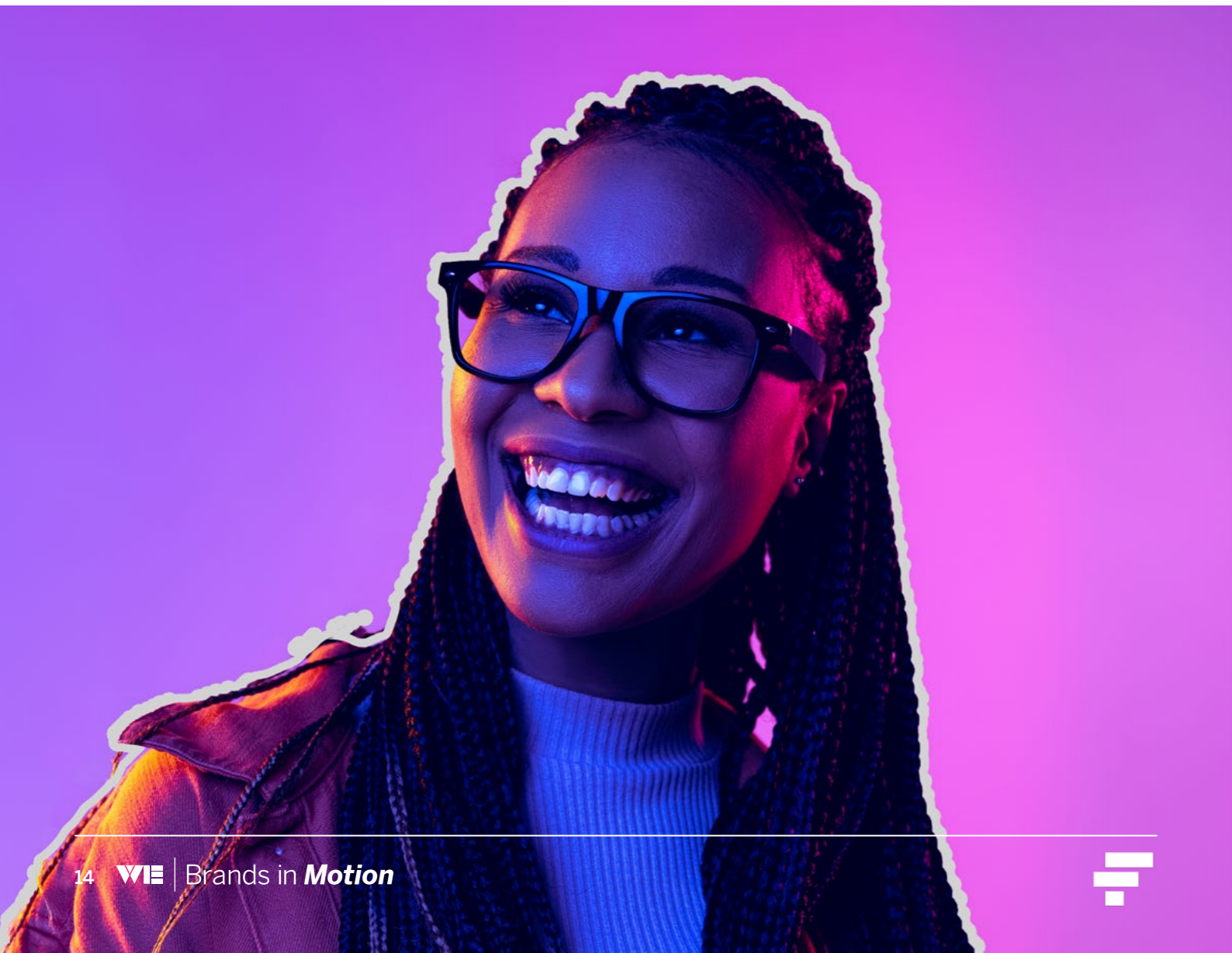
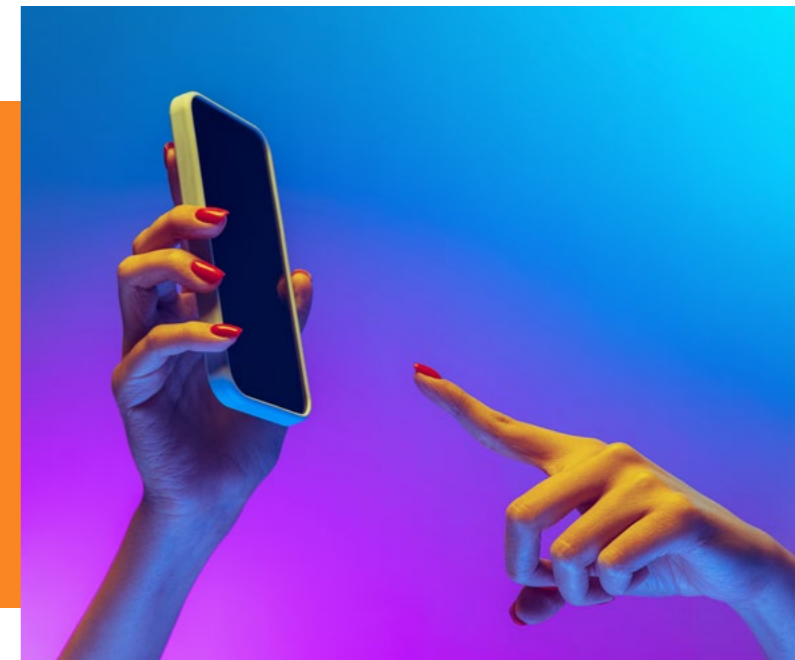
Consumers are tired of the flawless perfection that many brands aspire to, and the image no longer feels genuine. To communicate their purpose authentically, most brands should consider adopting a more unfiltered approach.

The evolution of the social media landscape reflects this shift in attitude. TikTok is an app that celebrates unedited content, and the new platforms like BeReal demand it by asking users to share filter-free photos at random times of the day.

By telling real stories and capturing everyday moments, brands can become more relatable and appear genuine. If companies can relate these stories to the achievement of their purpose, so much the better.

Brands can take this approach even further by taking a stand on difficult topics. Eighty percent of the Brands in Motion survey respondents agreed that during times of high social division, businesses and organisations have a moral obligation to help bridge differences.<sup>1</sup> By exhibiting honesty and integrity in their values, brands will appear dependable and trustworthy.

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## Actions to take

01

Promote and amplify an **open, consumer-led discussion** around your brand on social media, utilising new platforms and trends.



02

Tell **tangible, human stories** that show the small steps that help your company make a positive impact.

03

Don't be afraid to **speak out on the issues you feel strongly about**. The goal is not to be a better you, but the real you – whatever that looks like.





# Purposeful Pleasure

The stresses of modern life are taking their toll. Sixty-eight percent of people agree they are “less happy than they used to be”.<sup>3</sup> To remedy this discontent, many people are turning to guilty pleasures as a light relief. One in three consumers said they game as a self-care activity, while TV has become the number one activity consumers say they do to maintain their general wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

Brands need to help consumers experience unplanned moments of distraction in their everyday lives. They need to celebrate the positive impact that these moments can have on people’s wellbeing and encourage them to take advantage.

However, consumers often believe that fun comes at the expense of wider concerns – whether that be their finances, health, or environment. For pleasure to be truly guilt-free, brands need to unite a joyful present with a positive future. By helping consumers find an equilibrium, they will be left feeling more uplifted and satisfied.

## Actions to take



01

Tap into the **“moments economy”** and offer audiences light relief from the gloom of everyday life.

02

Keep the stakes low and avoid any discomfort by only asking for **passive participation**.



03

Seek out opportunities to make this relief **beneficial in the longer-term**. This will make people more willing to indulge.





# Preparing for 2023

**We live in unpredictable times. The crises of the past few years are likely to have long-term effects that reach far beyond 2023. But out of turmoil comes an opportunity to reset and build anew.**

Brands now have a **unique opportunity to become trusted partners of customers** dissatisfied with the established order and offer them timely support that helps them weather the storm. By leading with a **focused purpose and practical, data-driven goals, brands can be seen to authentically be on the side of the people they serve.**

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# Our Partners



**For over 20 years, Foresight Factory's consumer trends and data insights have helped their clients 'See Beyond'. Uncovering different, better answers so they can see further.**

Combining human and machine intelligence, they interpret shifting behaviours and signals to uncover what matters most to consumers today - and tomorrow. Empowering brands to know what do, when and why. Activating global trends which deliver across four strategic goals - eliminating uncertainty, strengthening brand relevance, powering long term growth, and optimising spend.



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**If you'd like more information on these trends, or a discussion on how they apply to your brand, we'd love to hear from you.**

For more information, please contact:

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