

DIGITAL **Diary**

THE SIGNALS THAT SHAPED THE QUARTER
Q2 2026



Q2 HAS COME AND GONE AND THE ERA OF AI HAS SETTLED IN.

AI changed how we find information, make content, build products, and talk to each other. The more it did, the more something unexpected happened: human creativity, authenticity and trust went up in value, not down.

From search engines that answer instead of listing, to platforms that predict intent before you type, this issue covers the shifts redefining the digital landscape, and what they mean for the people building in it.

WHY OUR DIGITAL DIARY?

We track the shifts shaping marketing, technology, creativity and culture, so you don't have to.

IN THIS ISSUE

01. Overall Trends

02. Channels and Platform Specifics

03. Creative and Design Trends

04. Departmental Specifics

AND, ABOVE ALL:

What actually matters if you want to win.



TRUTH **Literacy**

Why recognising credible information is becoming an essential.

71%

of people now say AI makes it impossible to know what's true.

(VML Future 100, 2026)

When **Reality** Becomes Unclear

In May 2025, artist Patrick Karpiczenko and Fotomuseum Winterthur released "Switzerland is Fake", an AI-generated campaign so convincing it suggested Switzerland itself was a fabrication. It worked.



The **Trust** Problem

As AI makes realistic video and audio trivially easy to produce, the risk isn't creativity - it's trust. The danger begins when people can no longer judge what is real, accurate, or accountable.



How the **Industry** Is Responding

The C2PA - Adobe, the BBC and Microsoft on its steering committee - introduced Content Credentials, labels showing how content was made. Google, Meta, TikTok and Pinterest are rolling out watermarking.



WHAT THIS **Means** →

Truth isn't dead, but it is under pressure. Where misinformation is organised and trust is scarce, recognising what's real becomes a skill. For brands, **credibility now matters more than reach** - being built to win means being transparent, accountable and trustworthy in every piece of content you put out.

Algospeak

The way we speak is evolving and changing online, but authenticity still matters.

When **Algorithms** Start Shaping Language

Language is changing fast. Social platforms and AI systems are influencing how people speak, giving rise to "algospeak" – a growing set of words designed to improve visibility, avoid moderation, or boost engagement online. As Marshall McLuhan noted, the medium is the message; today, that medium is the algorithm.

How Online Culture Is **Shaping Speech**

Social media is changing the way we speak. From words like "rizz" and "delulu" to terms like "unalive" that bypass platform restrictions, online slang spreads faster than ever. As these words move from TikTok to everyday conversations – and even dictionaries – it's clear that digital culture is reshaping modern language.

AI Is Accelerating **the Shift**

Generative AI is speeding this up further. Research shows that words commonly used by large language models (LLMs) are appearing more often in podcasts and conversation, pointing to a subtle standardisation of speech driven by AI systems.

WHAT THIS **Means** →

For brands, online language is both an opportunity and a challenge. Using internet slang without understanding it can feel inauthentic, while relying too heavily on AI can make messaging sound generic. As AI standardises communication, the **brands that stand out are the ones that stay human** – with personality, authenticity, and purpose.



DIGITAL **Intent**
Consumers are pushing back against constant distraction and rewarding brands that respect their time.

The Attention **Problem**

Technology has always promised to make life easier. While digital tools reduce effort, they also create more distractions. Eight in 10 people believe technology is harming attention spans, and the average mobile user now spends nearly four hours a day online, adding up to almost two months per year.

Designing for **Mindful Use**

A new wave of products is intentionally adding small barriers or pauses to encourage more mindful use. Concepts like the Special Projects' Aperture phone case, which limits screen visibility, and the Nothing Phone's rear-facing notification display aim to reduce compulsive phone checking, making it more intentional.

Platforms Are **Adapting** Too

Platforms are also responding. TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest have introduced features that encourage breaks, reflection, or disengagement at specific moments, especially among younger users.

THE **Shift**→

The bigger shift signals a cultural pushback against constant capture of attention. As doomscrolling becomes less appealing, value is moving toward technologies and experiences that respect users' time, focus, and mental wellbeing.

For brands, this changes the game. Being built to win is now about **creating experiences that are worth people's time and trust.**



LLMs **Going Local**

AI is becoming more culturally aware.

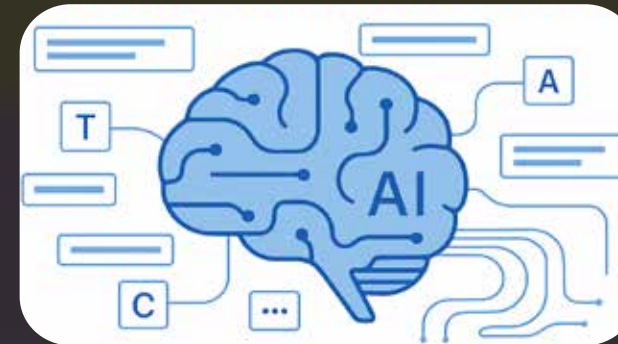
The **Problem**

Despite their global reach, most large AI language models are still heavily influenced by English. While trained on multiple languages, they often miss cultural context, local expressions, and the nuances that make communication feel authentic.



The **Response**

AI is becoming more local. Around the world, culturally grounded language models are being trained on regional languages, data, and social context. From Latam-GPT in Latin America to Jais and Humain Chat in the Middle East, these models aim to deliver more accurate, culturally relevant communication.



The **Shift**

This shift challenges the idea that global AI must be Western. As locally fluent models emerge, the next phase of AI innovation is likely to prioritise cultural relevance over universality, supporting a more plural, regionally rooted digital ecosystem.



CHANNELS & PLATFORM **Specifics**



Meta

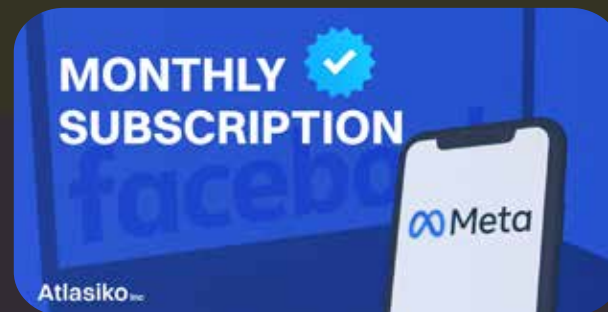
Meta to introduce new subscriptions to their platforms. Being ever generous, Meta is giving advertisers new ad tools, this time focusing on the brand-creator space.

These updates include:



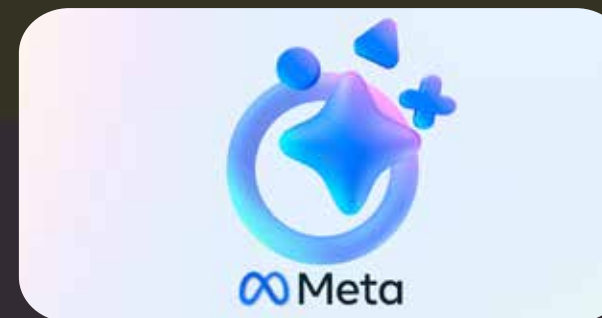
New Premium Tiers:

Meta is preparing to pilot paid subscription modes across its ecosystem, specifically targeting Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. These trials are expected to roll out over the next few months.



Exclusive AI & Toolsets:

Subscribers will get access to expanded AI features and more advanced tools. Each platform will have its own set of features, designed specifically for how it is used, rather than offering the same tools everywhere.



Pricing & Availability:

Meta has confirmed these subscription tests are in development, but official pricing has not been shared yet.



Flume Focus →

Maximise your impact this holiday season as Meta introduces new shoppable video formats and creator-led promotions. The updates focus on **smarter targeting, richer creative tools, and smoother commerce features**, helping brands reach the right audiences and turn engagement into sales.

TikTok

TikTok has become the key platform where entertainment and shopping are closely connected, changing how people discover and buy products.



Global **E-Commerce** Expansion:

TikTok Shop is growing globally and making it easier for users to move from discovery to purchase without leaving the app. Products can now be bought directly from the video feed, which is reshaping traditional online shopping behaviour.

The Rise of AI Marketing:

AI-generated avatars are not experimental anymore. More brands are using virtual creators as part of their marketing strategy to stay active on the platform and scale content production more efficiently.

Search Engine

TikTok is increasingly being used like a search engine. Instead of going to traditional search engines, such as Google, users now search for products, reviews and information directly on the TikTok platform. To stay visible, creators need to focus on SEO tactics, such as optimised captions, relevant hashtags, and trending audio.

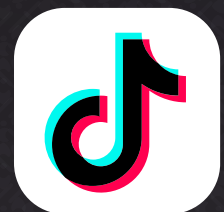
Flume
Focus →

Get more bite and less waste with **smarter targeting, AI-driven insights, and trend-led audience understanding**, turning festive scrolls into sizzling summer sales.



TikTok

In 2026, TikTok rewards real over refined. Unfiltered stories, real people, and genuine community over curated perfection. TikTok has become the key platform where entertainment and shopping are closely connected, changing how people discover and buy products.



Real-TEA

Audiences are moving beyond AI avatars and polished content, favouring real human stories, emotion, and relatability. Brands that win are helping people make sense of chaos, not performing perfection. Oreo mirrored audience lingo for its Reese's collab, tapping into the "merging with your best friend" joke, becoming its second top-performing post of 2025.



Curiosity Detours

TikTok search is exploratory, not transactional. Users often leave with more than they came for. Two in three say they regularly discover useful content beyond their original search. Duracell found an unexpected audience in K-pop fans, who use batteries for concert lightsticks, turning a niche insight into growth.



Emotional ROI

Impulse is giving way to intention. Audiences are more cost-conscious but emotionally driven in what they value. Audible leaned into this shift, letting its community guide content and achieving 376% above-average reach from a simple "recommend a 5-star book" post. The brand moved from authority on stories to a brand in the story.



Flume
Focus →

Show up with real stories, tap into moments, and **create space for your audience to lead**. That's what builds loyalty on TikTok in 2026.



X

An “X-traditional platform” to multi-purpose ecosystem.



Multi-Purpose Hub

X is moving away from the traditional social media model and positioning itself as an all-in-one digital ecosystem, combining conversation, commerce and content in one place.

What it means: The focus is shifting from attention to action. Instead of measuring reach or engagement alone, X is prioritising outcomes like payments, subscriptions, and repeat behaviour. Brands that only generate noise will struggle compared to those driving real results.

Integrated Mini Economy

Payments, shopping, and subscriptions are now built directly into the app, creating a closed-loop system where creators can monetise without relying on external tools.

What it means: Content that doesn’t drive conversion, retention, or engagement becomes less valuable. Success will favour creators and brands that generate real economic outcomes, not just visibility.

Prioritised Human Authenticity

As automation increases, X is placing more value on real interaction and authentic communication over automated or overly optimised posting.

What it means: Creators who share clear viewpoints and engage in real dialogue will build stronger influence. High-volume, low-engagement or AI-heavy content will lose impact.

Flume
Focus →

On X, relevance is no longer earned by publishing often, but by participating visibly in outcomes and conversations that compound over time. This is less about posting more, but more about **behaving like an economic and conversational actor** within the platform.



Pinterest

Mood boards are going generative.



AI-Driven **Intent Discovery**

Pinterest is evolving from a visual discovery platform into one that understands user intent. Using generative visual search and insights from its 600 million users, it can identify not just what people are looking at, but what they're trying to achieve, such as planning a wedding rather than simply browsing for a dress. That's one way to ensure users are actually pinning their interests.

Personalised "Intent Modes": The platform is now organising the user experience around different goals and behaviours.

Planning: Supports deep-dive research for long-term projects, such as renovations and large life events.

Saving: Curating aesthetics and building personal mood boards.

Shopping: Creates a more seamless path from inspiration to purchase directly from Pins.

Pinterest **Predicts** 2026

Pinterest's annual "Not-Yet-Trending" report has become a key tool for marketers, with over 80% accuracy in identifying cultural shifts before they hit mainstream feeds. Trends like "Gimme Gummy" (tactile, jelly-like aesthetics) and "Neo Deco" (modernised Art Deco) appear months in advance, helping brands align launches with early signals of consumer desire.

As platforms improve at predicting what users want next, success is shifting from understanding interest to understanding intent. Brands that act early on these signals are better positioned to stay relevant and drive meaningful action.

Flume
Focus →

Pinterest has evolved from a passive discovery platform into a **high-velocity intent engine designed for future action**. Our approach must shift accordingly; pins should no longer merely inspire but actively assist, with content that flexes across different "intent modes" to remain discoverable throughout the planning journey.



Search

Search is becoming discovery. Instead of simply finding answers, people are using AI to explore, compare, and make purchasing decisions. Google's AI Mode reflects this shift, helping users evaluate brands more easily while creating new opportunities for sponsored recommendations at key moments of consideration.

Q New Monetisation in AI Mode:

A new monetisation experience in AI Mode called Direct Offers has been launched, offering businesses the opportunity to share tailored offers to shoppers ready to buy and help close the sale, without changing what was offered.

Q Shifting Discovery Behaviour:

Search is no longer the starting point for discovery. Consumers are increasingly finding brands through TikTok, Reddit, YouTube Shorts, Threads, and AI tools like ChatGPT, making discovery more social, conversational, and community-driven.

Q Influencer Marketing as Foundation:

Influencer marketing is becoming the foundation of digital advertising, driven by consumers who are engaging on social media, highly propagated by Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

Being built to win means showing up wherever discovery happens. The brands that succeed won't just optimise for search engines, they'll create visibility across social platforms, creator communities, and AI-powered experiences where decisions are being made.

Flume
Focus →

As search fragments across AI interfaces, social platforms, and community spaces, **brands need to show up beyond Google.** Invest in content that works across discovery surfaces, from YouTube Shorts to Reddit threads, and explore AI-mode ad formats to stay present in emerging moments of consideration.





DEPARTMENTAL
Specifics

The Friendly Neighbourhood Web Crawlers...

Brands need to be discoverable by both people and AI.

55%

of consumers across top retail and service sectors now use AI-based search tools to help make purchasing decisions.

The Rise of Generative Search:

AI tools like Google's Search Generative Experience (SGE) and Microsoft Bing's Copilot are changing how people search. Instead of scrolling through links, users now get direct AI-generated answers. This means traditional SEO is no longer enough. To stay visible, content must be clear, structured, and trustworthy so AI systems can easily understand and surface it.

The Supremacy of E-E-A-T:

E-E-A-T (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness) now defines modern SEO. Search engines and AI tools prioritise content based on real knowledge and experience, not just generic information. This levels the playing field for smaller businesses that can demonstrate real expertise, local insight, and customer understanding. Trust and credibility are now critical for visibility.

Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO):

GEO is the next evolution of SEO, focused on how AI systems interpret and use content. Instead of keywords alone, it prioritises clear structure, natural language, and credibility. Because AI pulls from multiple sources, content that is well organised and easy to interpret is more likely to be included in generated answers. Poorly structured content risks being ignored, even if it's high quality.

Flume
Focus →

Being built to win means writing for both people and AI. The brands that succeed will be the ones that **keep things simple, clear, and credible** so their content is easy to trust, easy to understand, and easy to surface in AI-driven search results.



Brands need to be **discoverable**
by both people and AI.

Engineering

Over Execution:

The best SEO teams are building systems, not completing tasks. AI removes the need for complex specialist tools, where teams now describe what they want in plain English and the process runs itself. Speed and efficiency become the real competitive advantage.

"Ranking #1"

Doesn't Mean Anything:

Results are no longer universal. What you see depends on your behaviour, history and intent, so there's no single top result, only what's most relevant to each person in that moment.

Platform Fragmentation:

People are beginning to distrust general AI tools where accuracy matters, moving on to specialised platforms built for high-stakes areas. Different AI systems pull from different data and rank information differently. Visibility now requires showing up across multiple platforms, not dominating one.

Humans

vs. Agents:

SEO is now two games. The first is earning clicks. The second is ensuring AI can find, understand, and reference your content - even if users never visit your website. Brands that succeed will optimise not just for rankings, but for visibility wherever people and AI look for answers.

Flume
Focus →

Stop optimising for rankings and traffic. The **new SEO is about being a trusted, structured, reusable source** that machines rely on. If your content isn't built to be pulled by AI systems, you're invisible in the places that increasingly matter most.



The Hook Line and Thinkers...

Trust now depends on real, human connection.

62%

of consumers are less likely to trust or engage with social media content if they know it is generated by AI.

The Psychology of Short-Form Video:

Short-form video has become the definitive medium to get information, driven by a fundamental psychological shift: the human desire for efficiency. As dopamine-seeking creatures, we gravitate towards rapid-fire ideas that offer immediate gratification. This dominance is reflected in the numbers: TikTok is forecast to exceed 2.2 billion monthly active users by the end of 2026; Instagram Reels now accounts for 40% of all time spent on Meta platforms; and YouTube Shorts has recently surpassed 70 billion daily views.

The videos that truly resonate and move the needle for brands will be those infused with a human touch. Success now lies in content designed to authentically educate or entertain, prioritising genuine connection over synthetic perfection.

Humanised Storytelling:

In 2026, the digital landscape is increasingly rewarding vulnerability. This isn't about oversharing, but about genuine humanity. With 90% of consumers citing authenticity as key to brand loyalty, human-generated content is outperforming synthetic alternatives. NP Digital reports that human-led content drives 5.44x more traffic than AI-generated content.

This shift is especially clear in sectors like cybersecurity, where faceless corporate messaging and clichés like the "hacker in a hoodie" are losing relevance. Audiences now prefer direct input from real specialists and experts. By replacing generic tropes with authentic voices and transparency, brands are building stronger trust and authority.

Flume
Focus →

The brands that perform best will be the ones that **show up as real, human and trustworthy**, rather than overly automated or disconnected. That is how to win.



The XP Brigades

The creative landscape is pivoting toward genuine, human-centered content.

75%

of consumers judge a brand's credibility based on its website and digital experience.

The Era of **Liquid Glass:**

Since Apple introduced the "Liquid Glass" look with iOS 26, it has become one of the industry's biggest design trends. At the centre is glassmorphism, a design style that uses transparent, frosted-glass effects to create depth across websites, apps, motion graphics, and icons. With Microsoft embracing glass and metal-inspired interfaces and Figma adding dedicated glassmorphism tools, the trend looks set to stay.



Voice-Based Interface Design:

Voice is becoming a core way people interact with AI. Instead of typing, users can now speak naturally to tools like Gemini Live, which combines voice with visual understanding. Voice capabilities are also becoming standard across ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity, making software's ability to listen, understand, and respond more important than ever.



The Battle of the **AI Browsers:**

Web browsers are evolving into AI-powered assistants. Platforms like Perplexity, OpenAI, and The Browser Company are enabling AI to search, gather information, and complete tasks for users. As AI becomes a bigger part of browsing, designers will need to create experiences that work seamlessly for both people and AI systems. To stay in the winning lane, brands need to adapt early, designing for changing user expectations and the future of digital interaction.



The XP Brigades
-UX/UI

Q2 2026 signals are pushing UX/UI toward AI-assisted design workflows, multimodal journeys, and faster iteration.

77%

of digital agencies have actively integrated AI into their prototyping and interface design pipelines.

Flume
Focus →

Stitch by
Google Labs:

Stitch is an AI-powered tool that can turn simple prompts into high-quality UI designs and front-end code. Instead of starting with wireframes and technical planning, designers can begin with a business goal, a user experience they want to create, or even a creative reference, and let the tool build a starting point.



Multimodal
Inputs:

Stitch turns ideas into interfaces. Using text, images, or voice prompts, designers can generate UI concepts in seconds. The real advantage isn't just speed - it's giving teams more time to focus on creativity, strategy, and building exceptional user experiences..



The brief is becoming the wireframe. Brands and agencies that **learn to articulate objectives clearly**, not just visually, will move faster and iterate better in an AI-assisted design environment.

CASE Studies



Adidas x Bafana Bafana

2026 World Cup Kit

Shifted budget toward creator content and away from one-way broadcast ads.

100K

jerseys sold achieving a record-breaking launch.

R180M

in sales within just the first two days of release.

WHAT IT WAS

A product launch rooted in emotional memory, where Adidas released the new Bafana Bafana kit drawing direct inspiration from the 2010 World Cup, tapping into a moment loaded with national pride, unity, and global significance for South Africa.



WHAT THEY DID

Connected a new product to an existing cultural memory, timing the release around a World Cup cycle when audiences are already thinking about football, country, and legacy, amplifying emotional impact without needing to manufacture it.



IT ALL STARTED WITH ONE INSIGHT:

The 2010 World Cup isn't just history. It's an emotional reference point that still carries strong feelings of identity and belonging for South Africans.



WHY IT Worked →

Audience-led insight – the campaign started where people were already talking. Creator validation – authenticity and credibility drove engagement.

Unilever x Vaseline

Vaseline social
listening-pivot (TikTok)

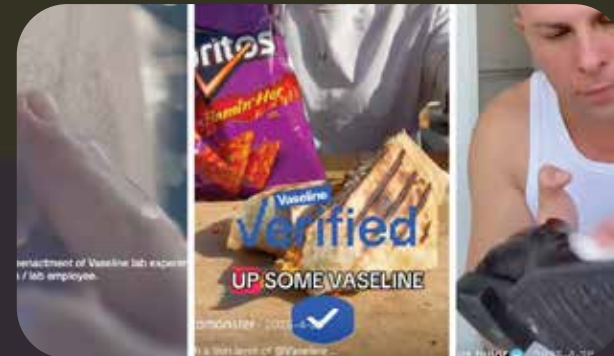
Shifted budget toward creator
content and away from
one-way broadcast ads.

3.5M

online posts featuring clever,
unorthodox product uses.

WHAT IT WAS

An organic community activation
that transformed user-generated
life-hack content into strategic
campaign activity.



WHAT THEY DID

Used social listening to identify
trending user content, then verified
and amplified it through creators
and brand channels.



IT ALL STARTED WITH TWO INSIGHTS:

- Vaseline's unexpected popularity
on TikTok came from real
life-hack UGC.
- Audiences trust
community-verified content more
than brand promos.



Year in Search – Google:

Making invisible
utility emotional.

295M

views on YouTube.

7.5M

hours of watch time
on YouTube.

WHAT IT WAS

An annual reflection of global
searches turned into a cultural narrative.



WHAT THEY DID

Google curated search trends into
human stories, showing how curiosity,
fear, hope and resilience played out
globally.



IT ALL STARTED WITH TWO INSIGHTS:

- Search data shows how people
are feeling, not just the questions.
- People want meaning and clarity,
especially after difficult years.



WHY IT Worked →

Data → narrative – analytics made emotional.
Trust leverage – only Google could credibly tell this story.
Broad relevance – global, yet deeply personal.



Duolingo:

Platform-native chaos
as brand strategy (TikTok)

31M

total followers across its major
social media channels, led by
massive audiences on TikTok,
Instagram, and YouTube.

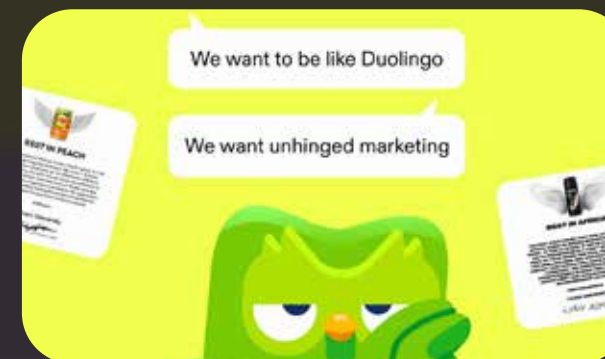
WHAT IT WAS

A brand account behaving like a
creator – being absurd, self-aware, and
unpolished.



WHAT THEY DID

Duolingo handed the account to a
creator-style team and leaned into
low-production, high-personality
content, often reacting to trends instead
of starting them.



IT ALL STARTED WITH TWO INSIGHTS:

- TikTok punishes “brand voices” and rewards native behaviour.
- Younger audiences don’t want brands to talk at them, they want brands in on the joke and to be part of the culture.



WHY IT Worked →

Algorithm alignment – content looked like TikTok, not advertising.
Cultural fluency – speed and tone mattered more than polish.
Brand memorability – the owl became a character, not a logo.

NBC/Brands

at Super Bowl 60 (2026)
(Meta & Tiktok)

764B

potential social impressions.

WHAT IT WAS

High-impact, culturally relevant spots from major brands using humour, celebrity, and trend signals.



WHAT THEY DID

Brands blended surprising creative, celebrity talent, and emotional storytelling at a large scale – e.g. Bosch with Guy Fieri.



IT ALL STARTED WITH TWO INSIGHTS:

- Pop culture events provide mass reach and cultural conversation.
- Super Bowl audiences expect entertainment, not just advertising.



WHY IT Worked →

- Event leverage – huge audience pools and social amplification.
- Story and spectacle – memorable content that becomes part of culture talk.

THANK
You

FLUME DIGITAL MARKETING