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**How brands
should talk,
not just listen**

In pursuit of personalisation, many brands have lost some of their power to shape consumer demand. And in trying to meet every individual need, they've often diluted their own identity. This short paper, developed in collaboration with Longitude (a Financial Times company) and drawing on interviews with industry experts, finds that many bold brands are now reasserting themselves, deepening consumer relationships across five key dimensions.

Consumers chart their own course

The singular customer journey—awareness to consideration to loyalty—has been upended. In its place? A mix of peer endorsements and never-ending feedback loops.

“The way that we consume media, and the media that we consume, has changed what was a linear relationship to what feels like a series of waves,” says

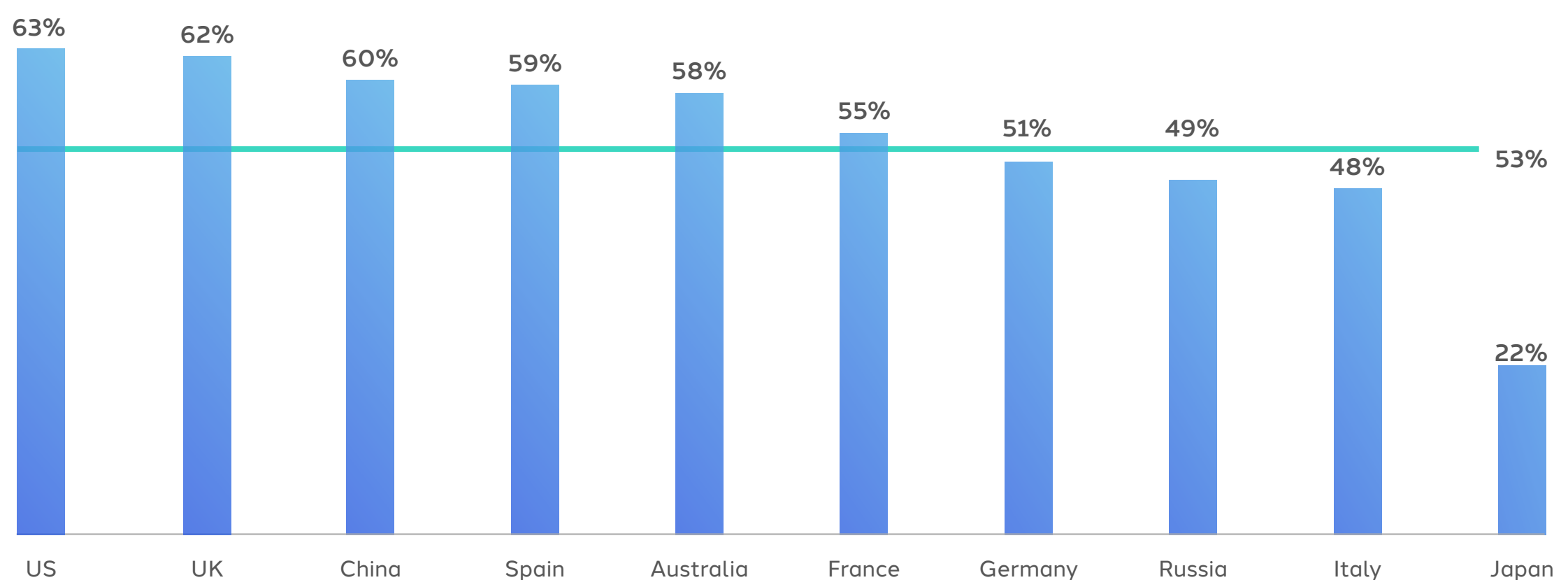
Kate McCutchen, Head of UK Marketing at payments company Square. “You have loops that circle back on themselves and it never really ends; you're constantly giving feedback to brands, searching for what's better.”

With this new relationship, marketing itself has fallen for a short-form approach. “Marketers are afraid that, if they don't sell everything about the product at one moment, they're going to miss out,” McCutchen says. “It becomes harder to trust long-form storytelling that builds campaigns and that will take time to pay off.”

Amid these short but ever-rolling waves, consumers are charting their own course to brands, enabled by the unparalleled access to information and multiple channels that digital technologies have helped generate. Indeed, [a great number of CMOs](#) now believe that the majority of interactions with a brand are initiated by consumers and not by their own marketing (see Figure 1). Consumers are calling the shots and choosing to engage with brands on their own terms.

Figure 1: Most CMOs believe consumers initiate the majority of interactions with their brands

The majority of interactions with our brand(s) are now initiated by consumers, not by our marketing (% agreeing)



Source: [Dentsu Aegis Network CMO survey 2019](#)

Personalised, but not personal?

In this ‘C2B’ world, empowered consumers have high expectations of brands, whose response has often been to personalise the way they interact. However, fuelled by more real-time data than ever before, brands risk pursuing strategies to make products and services more personalised in a superficial way—but leaving them no more personal than before. In offering hyper-personalisation they risk losing their consistency, and perversely, some of their power to connect people.

The recent Dentsu Aegis Network CMO survey also reveals that when it comes to trust, personalisation matters less to consumers than it does to CMOs (see Figure 2). Nearly half of CMOs believe personalisation is an important factor

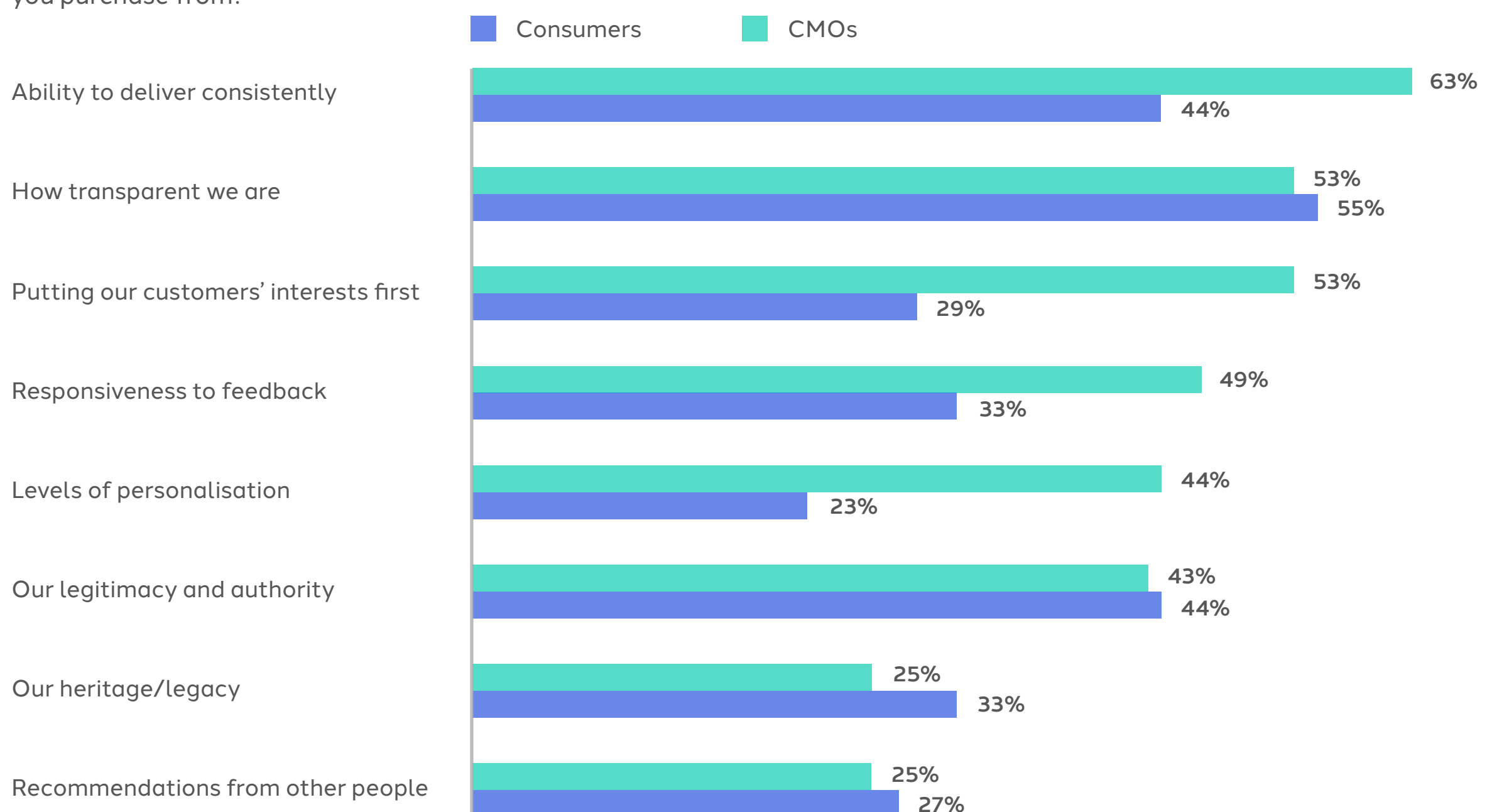
to increase consumer trust—but less than one quarter of consumers share the sentiment.

The message here is two-fold. Our expectations are that brands will respond to our feedback and adapt their products accordingly. However, we also expect brands to make us feel part of a like-minded community. This leaves brands with the contrary task of being both followers and leaders.

Striking the balance between a unified brand identity and the ability to deliver better personalisation is hard, but not insurmountable. Dig beneath the surface of dominant consumer trends, and there is still room for brand influence to take hold. How can they do this? Based on our research and interviews, five strategies emerge.

Figure 2: CMOs are more likely than consumers to believe personalisation is a key driver of trust

What do you believe are the most important factors that increase levels of consumer trust in your business/businesses you purchase from?



Source: [Dentsu Aegis Network CMO survey 2019](#)

1.

Create shared experiences

We live in an era where ‘Everyone’s an Expert’. [According to Euromonitor](#), “rather than be seduced by brands’ marketing, consumers look to each other for advice on what to buy and where, and how to get the best product for their money.”

From Instagram stories to apps that crowdsource price comparisons, consumers choose their influences and influencers. And they are choosing to listen to them over and above the messages that brands have selected, no matter how tailored.



With the rise of the influencer, it might seem that power has shifted, but many brands are still steering the purchasing process. Consumers follow an influencer because of the ability to share that experience with others who are guided in the same direction. There is a collective appeal, an affirmation in a shared experience.

That shared experience need not be shared at the same time. The digital economy has given consumers, as tribe members following the same influencer, the freedom to choose their moment or context in which to receive those messages. They can choose the time, the place and even which device. Anthropologists argue that we create shared stories to function as societies. Perhaps the biggest impact—and value—of social media is that that doesn’t mean having to sit around the same campfire at the same time to listen to those stories.

The queues for the launch of the iPhone 11 globally or Kanye West’s Yeezy sneakers show how brands can maximise both this sense of shared experience and the flexibility with which it can be shared. Those that have developed the ability to understand consumer motivations—sometimes rational, other times deeply buried—can retain a greater measure of control.

As Johnny Devitt, CMO of streaming service DAZN, says: “Customers buy things the way they want to for reasons that they don’t always know—or like.”



Make it easy

Do consumers actually want less, not more, choice? It is paradoxical but the more choice consumers have, the harder it is for them to decide, and the less likely they are to buy.

The rise of the subscription business model is testament to this paradox. In the subscription economy, consumers receive products or services without having to make multiple decisions. While brands look to create bundles of services or products, they have the advantage that the consumer feels less of a barrier to beginning the relationship. It is still possible to build a bond over time, but, if a brand can catch the customer's attention, they have much less to lose.

“The journey and the interaction depends on the commitment that the person has, and the complexities of the services they're buying. If someone's buying a subscription service, it's relatively straightforward: just try it,” says Johnny Devitt. “There's no complication with figuring out what they need to be cognisant of before the purchase.”

While people are willing to share their personal tastes and sign up to an ongoing relationship with a brand, companies are in the driving seat.

“It's a wonderful solution from a brand perspective because you build direct relationships with your consumers,” says the Chief Marketing Officer at a global electronics company.

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CMO at a global electronics company

3.

Solve human problems

Brands can also reassert their value to a consumer by showing a sharper anticipation of needs. “Great brands solve customer problems before they know that they have them,” says Devitt. “One of the things that's clear from our surveys is that people who like us acknowledge that we've solved a problem and it means that they tend to be relatively sticky,” he confirms.

Square adheres to the [Jobs to be Done theory](#), that consumers buy products or services to get a job done. By understanding in detail what that “job” is, [companies are far more likely to create and market solutions](#) that will win in the marketplace. This presents an opportunity to look at customer needs in terms of their lifestyle, alleviating their problems and getting the job done, rather than their needs around pricing or product.



“Great brands solve customer problems before they know that they have them.”

Johnny Devitt, DAZN

“We are always focused on understanding why our sellers hire us,” says Kate McCutchen. “They have lots of different problems that they’re trying to solve, and there are lots of different solutions. Often, it's very complex. If you understand why they're using you, it makes it much easier to evolve our understanding.”

The problem to be solved need not be complex. Often it can be as simple as offering hyper convenience, as [Nike's curb service and drive-through pick up shows](#). McDonald's has managed to work the problem-solving concept into its out-of-home advertising, literally directing hungry motorists to the nearest restaurant using adapted versions of [its ubiquitous brand logo](#).



4.

Choose words carefully

The first step to solving a problem is knowing what the problem is. That requires listening to what the market is saying.

“My goal is to talk to at least one seller a week,” says Kate McCutchen. “I can use that, even though it’s data points of one, to start to see patterns. Empathy and understanding are incredibly important.”

Presenting something new that solves problems and satisfies desires the customer was not aware of breeds a sense of authenticity—even authority—around a brand. However, there is a fine balance between granting consumers the autonomy to dictate their needs, and not ceding so much ground that a brand relinquishes control.

One possible solution to this conundrum is the personal supply chain—where consumers can, if they wish, personalise each stage of the purchase process to their tastes. Consumers are directed towards a product that has been designed for them, but also given the opportunity to modify it within certain parameters.



Consumers want to feel that they have a say in how the products they buy are produced, but they also want something new to be put in their hands by an intelligent brand—in the same way that they want choice, but not too much. Essentially, they want to be listened to, but they don’t want to do all the talking.

The democratisation of consumer communication through different channels has led to a new type of conversation. Brands must listen to the opinions of their customers, but that does not mean they need to be silent—provided they know how to communicate.

“Precision of language is important,” says Kate McCutchen. “When you use a generic term like ‘consumer’ or ‘user,’ you’re taking the agency out of the relationship. ‘Consumer’ is passive. We talk about our ‘sellers’ or our ‘merchants,’ because that is what they are.”

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Kate McCutchen, Square

5.

Open up

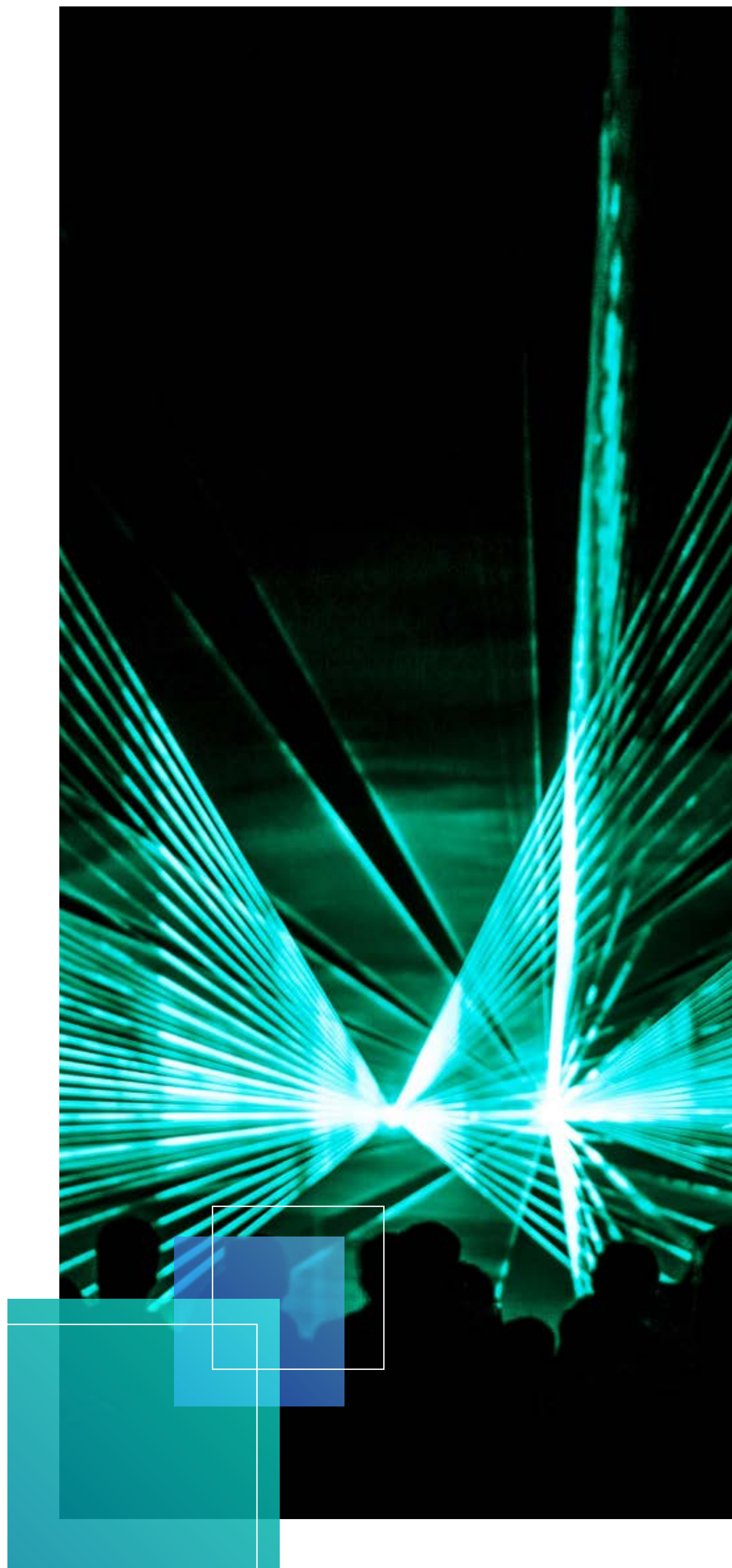
In a time of increasing scepticism, closer customer relationships can be forged through transparency.

Japanese beauty brand Shiseido, for instance, [has opened its new Tokyo research hub](#) to the public, giving reassurance about its R&D process.

Southwest Airlines in the US has followed the same path, introducing [its “Transparency” initiative](#), which ensures that customers know that the low fares that it advertises will be what they are asked to pay on checkout. As part of the programme, the airline launched a campaign ‘Behind Every Seat is a Story’ to reveal personal stories of why customers fly.

Panera Bread’s [“Food as it should be” campaign](#) has developed a “transparent menu” that lists calories, detailed ingredients and nutritional information for every item, and an animal welfare report and positive impact report to ensure that consumers know exactly what they are getting.

More recently, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky revealed that [the rental platform](#) will verify all of its seven million listings by the end of 2020, because ‘people need to feel like they can trust our community, and that they can trust Airbnb when something does go wrong.’



New decade, age-old wisdom

Having a more personal relationship with consumers does not mean trying to mimic their attitudes. In order to retain credibility as a source of problem-solving, brands must also retain the personality and human traits that distinguished them in the first place.

Brands that put social value and human value at the heart of their products and services will build trust. Brands that make life simple and show understanding of needs and motivations will be respected, even loved.

Paying attention to fast-changing opinion is critical, but there is still an opportunity to combine responsiveness with calm authority. As we look ahead to the dawn of a new decade, bold brands will hold steady, confident in the craft skills that have served them so well.





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