

## RISE OF THE INTENTIONAL INTERNET: WHAT IT MEANS FOR MARKETERS IN 2026

By Emma Falci

The beginning of a new year often sparks new habits, and in 2026, one key trend reshaping the marketing landscape isn't about doing more — it's about consuming less. After years of digital overload, there are indicators people are actively reassessing the role of technology in their lives and becoming more intentional about when, where and how they use it.

For marketing and communication professionals, this means many of the principles that have guided digital strategy — more touchpoints, greater automation and constant connectivity — may no longer resonate in the same way they did before.



Signs of this digital reset are emerging across multiple fronts. To better understand where this broader macro shift is coming from, here are five recent “micro” examples that reveal how people are reconsidering their digital habits:

1

### FRICION-MAXXING

An [article from The Cut](#) recently went viral, discussing the concept of reintroducing friction into people's lives. This involves intentionally choosing experiences that require more effort (like using a cookbook rather than ChatGPT for recipes) as a way to feel more grounded by building a higher tolerance for inconvenience.

2

### THE COZY WEB

A [new opinion piece from AdAge](#) identifies a rising Gen Z trend of retreating from loud public social platforms to “the cozy web” – smaller, more private digital spaces that prioritize comfort and community over performance, reach and visibility. These online niches aim to promote mindfulness by connecting with others over common interests.

3

### SOCIAL BECOMES LESS SOCIAL

2025 [polling from the BBC](#) shows that nearly a third of all social media users post less than they did a year ago. Platforms once built for personal sharing are now dominated by ads and brand content, making users more selective with what they post.

4

### AI'S ANTICIPATED EMOTIONAL COST

According to [Pew Research](#), 53% of people say AI will worsen people's ability to think creatively, and 50% say it'll worsen people's ability to form meaningful relationships, suggesting there's a large portion of people who believe the convenience of AI comes with a bigger sacrifice.

5

### THE AGE OF ANALOG

On Google Trends, the term “[analog hobbies](#)” has risen 160% over the past 30 days alone, showing a growing interest in offline activities. And while it feels a little ironic that this has gone viral on TikTok and Pinterest, analog activities push people to stop doomscrolling and start crafting, puzzling, reading, crocheting and more.

## Winning Engagement in the Age of Intention

All these trends communicate one common theme: a growing desire for intentionality when it comes to digital tools. Consumers aren't fully withdrawing from technology; they're just becoming more conscious of where, when and how they engage.

People want to spend their time in a way that makes them *feel* something and helps them meaningfully connect with others, intentionally avoiding outlets that make them feel like a passive, robotic consumer. Even if stepping back from tech feels more difficult or inconvenient.

So, what can brands do in response to this shift? Below are four strategies worth considering: two inspired by brands that were ahead of their time and two from brands actively putting these ideas into practice today.



### Lend a Hand

If consumers are intentionally disconnecting from social media and technology, how can your brand help people achieve that goal?

**Example:** Every year, Nickelodeon celebrates [Worldwide Day of Play](#) by pausing all their programming for a day to encourage kids to go play outside.



### Embrace IRL Experiences

People are craving meaningful, tangible, real-life connections. How can your brand use technology and online presence to enhance and elevate, rather than replace in-person experiences?

**Example:** [Netflix](#) is creating immersive, show-themed experiences like interactive sets, themed rooms and VR activations to engage and excite fans in real life.



### Approach AI Mindfully

With wariness around the deeper human impact of AI, consumers are approaching the tool with caution. How can your brand also approach AI and other evolving technologies in a way that is conscious of any potential shortcomings?

**Example:** Cosmetics brand [Lush](#) has a dedicated landing page about their ethical approach to digital technology and safety-first approach to social media, while also piloting AI tools like [the Lush Lens](#) to improve the customer experience.



### Cut the Clutter

Inboxes and internet browsers are filled with constant "breaking news," promotional push notifications and messages. How can your brand help people actively declutter their lives and minds, connecting with them more intentionally?

**Example:** Heineken's 2024 ["Boring Phone" campaign](#) featured a limited-edition "dumb phone" that strips smartphones down to calls and texts, designed to help people unplug and focus on real-life socializing.

## Meeting Audiences Where They Are

Cultural shifts surface in what people choose to engage with, and what they quietly tune out. As consumers enter 2026 with a more intentional approach to technology, they're raising the bar for which digital interactions feel worth their attention.

The brands best positioned for what's next are those willing to meet people where they are by understanding when technology adds value – and when stepping back creates space for more meaningful connection.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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