How Brands Change Owing to AI Agents

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28 September 2026.

The buyer assembles the brand

A brand begins as a promise, and it becomes a brand only inside a person. The company makes the promise. The buyer assembles the brand from signals gathered across time: a name she keeps seeing, a package she recognizes, an advertisement, a shelf, a friend's recommendation, a purchase that went well. None of these encounters is the brand. The brand is the structure they add up to in one person's memory, and it exists to make a decision cheap. Faced with forty options and thirty seconds, the buyer reaches for the structure that lets her choose without thinking. A brand is a compression of everything a company has done into a form a busy person can carry.

This assembly runs on a particular kind of rememberer: a human one, with limited attention, imperfect recall and a life that is mostly about something else. She gives a category a few seconds in a store and a few exposures across a year. Every institution of brand building was designed around her constraints. The repetition, the slogans, the colors, the mascots and the reminders all exist because the rememberer forgets, and because the brand that goes unremembered at the buying moment does not exist at the buying moment.

The canon saw the rememberer clearly

The classic works of brand building each take this rememberer as their subject, and together they describe the whole machine. David Ogilvy, writing in 1963, gave the work its cumulative frame: 'Every advertisement should be thought of as a contribution to the complex symbol which is the brand image.' Each exposure is a deposit into a symbol held in someone else's mind, and the account is kept by the buyer, in memory the company cannot see.

Ries and Trout stated the goal in Positioning: occupy a place in the prospect's mind, and repeat the position until she can retrieve it in a buying moment. 'Positioning is not what you do to a product,' they wrote. 'Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect.' The product is made in a factory. The position is made in a head, and the head belongs to someone who is thinking about something else.

Byron Sharp supplied the mechanics in How Brands Grow. Most buyers of most brands are light buyers, people who give the category little sustained attention, so growth comes from being easy to think of and easy to buy across a great many such people: mental availability and physical availability. 'Building mental availability requires distinctiveness and clear branding,' Sharp writes, 'while brands seldom compete on meaningful differentiation.' Jenni Romaniuk then gave distinctiveness its working parts in Building Distinctive Brand Assets: the colors, characters, jingles, taglines and shapes that trigger the brand in memory, scored on fame, meaning how many buyers link the asset to the brand, and uniqueness, meaning how exclusively they link it. The canon agrees on the shape of the problem. A brand is a structure built, expensively and over years, inside millions of individual memories, none of which the company can inspect.

How brands communicated

The communication built around that rememberer, and its best practitioners made the repetition beautiful. HUL's Surf Excel built a campaign worldview around 'Daag Achhe Hain', making dirt mean a child's good act rather than only a laundry problem, and ran that worldview across years of television until the phrase alone could stand for the brand. Amul put its girl on a billboard beside a topical pun, week after week for decades, until the character and the voice became instantly retrievable for a country. Nike compressed a worldview into three words, 'Just Do It', and left them to surface whenever someone laced up a pair of shoes. Each of these is a memory structure engineered at population scale. The scale was the point: the brand offered cues that millions of people could recognize and carry into a store.

Notice what the form assumes. One message, broadcast to everyone, because no buyer could be known individually. The television spot and the billboard speak to an aggregate, a statistical person assembled from research, and they repeat themselves because the aggregate forgets. Within that constraint the work was often wonderful. It was also, structurally, skilled guesswork aimed at a crowd.

The phone made the reminder look personal

The same logic followed the buyer off the billboard and onto the phone, wearing new clothes. Zomato turned the push notification into a little performance of personality: cheeky, flirty, at times NSFW-tinged, the brand as a wit in your pocket. A loyalty program collected points and sent a birthday email. A shopping site showed an advertisement for the item left in a cart. A win-back campaign tried to recover a customer who had stopped opening messages. An airline's miles balance, a festival sale, a carefully timed nudge: each kept the name close enough to be recalled when a purchase came due.

The tools got closer to the person without getting closer to knowing her. The company knew a transaction, a segment, perhaps a click. It had to infer the person, and then spend to remind her. A familiar color, a friendly line, a discount timed to a lull: each bridged the gap between one encounter and the next. Two eras of brand communication, the billboard and the notification, share one substrate. Both aim darts at an aggregate. The second era's darts are smaller and better aimed. They remain darts.

The worldview belonged to the brand manager

This is why the worldview belonged to a brand manager and a marketer. They chose the promise, the colors and the message, then broadcast it toward a statistical picture of the buyer. Ogilvy warned his own industry about the cheap version of this sixty years ago: 'The consumer isn't a moron; she is your wife.' The warning was right, and the machinery could honor it only in spirit. The system knew her as a panel, a segment and a campaign response rate. Some of that work made things people genuinely loved; Surf Excel's worldview, Amul's voice and Zomato's audacity can mean something beyond a reminder. Still, the purchase system ran on imperfect memory and incomplete knowledge. The brand could aim the dart with great skill. It could not see the full person standing at the shelf. Physical availability also mattered then and still matters now: the product has to be stocked, reachable and deliverable.

The agent changes the person doing the remembering

Now place a serious agent on the buyer's side. An agent that lives with one person becomes acculturated to her: it learns her taste, her people, her rhythms and her boundaries, continuously, the way a long relationship learns them, and the accumulated calibration becomes something no campaign can buy. Such an agent holds the buyer's preferences, her history, her constraints and her present situation together. It remembers what she cannot be bothered to. It carries a delivery, a return and a service call into the next choice, across every brand it deals with on her behalf.

The old mental-availability spend meets a buyer-side record that stays full between purchases. A company can remain famous across a population and still have to earn its place in one person's continuing record. The work of the brand shifts toward surviving close, repeated inspection by a mind that knows the buyer. Agents know you; models and marketers throw darts. The remembering that brands spent a century buying, the buyer now gets as a feature of her own software.

Friday dinner, with the brand in the room

Take one worked scene. A restaurant used to put its name on a sign, buy a listing, post a bright photograph, send a Friday offer and hope the person remembered it at seven. Her food agent already knows who is coming to dinner, who cannot have dairy, the shape of her week and how the last order arrived. It has been following the thought cloud around the meal, the late meeting, the missed lunch, the weather, the streak of new places, before hunger becomes a search. It can put the restaurant forward before anyone searches, with a reason that belongs to this evening. If the restaurant sent the wrong dish last time, that travels too. The Friday offer has to survive the same record as the recommendation. The brand meets a situation the marketer's segment never held, and it meets that situation through a mind whose job is to stand on the buyer's side.

The relationship gets institutionalized

Now the relationship aspect gets radically transformed. What a brand used to call a relationship was statistical: a CRM record, a loyalty balance, a segment, a birthday email. The record lived on the company's side, in the company's format, for the company's purposes, and the buyer carried no equivalent. The buyer's agent holds continuity across brands on the buyer's side of the exchange. The relationship gets institutionalized in a system that remembers, updates and answers back.

The onus concentrates on the brand. Every kept promise strengthens its case; every broken one stays available at the next decision. The buyer can see the reasoning, so the brand has to keep earning it. This cuts deeper than a new channel or a new gatekeeper. The institution of the relationship moved sides. For brands that perform, the record compounds in their favor, because a history of kept promises, held whole, builds a stronger position than any reminder campaign could. For brands that coasted on memory gaps, the gaps are gone.

The reminder apparatus loses its gap

The repeat-performance apparatus loses the gap it was designed to fill. Retargeting, re-engagement and win-back campaigns existed to re-enter a person's attention between purchases, because between purchases the brand had no other way to stay present. The agent retains the relationship through the interval and can be proactive inside it: it can act on a forming need before the need becomes a search, which makes the middle of the interval the worst place to spend money shouting. The budget that bought reminders has to find work that survives the record: product, service, kept promises, and reasons that hold up in front of a mind with the facts.

Desire, identity and affection still reach the person directly. A person may still want Coke by name, love an Amul pun, or run because Nike made a sentence stick. The agent changes how practical recommendations get made; wanting remains hers. What changes is that the practical recommendation now passes through a record of what the brand did for this particular life, and the record belongs to the buyer.

What survives

None of this abolishes the old canon; it re-reads it. Physical availability survives intact: the product still has to be stocked, reachable and deliverable, and no agent can recommend what cannot reach the door. Distinctive assets survive with their job changed. The color, the character and the tagline still speak to the person, because desire and identity still form in the person, and fame still gets a brand into a household's consideration. The record decides what survives consideration. Positioning survives as the discipline of knowing what the brand stands for, because a mind that can inspect everything rewards a brand that stands for something inspectable.

Brands get re-made because the person doing the remembering changed. For a century the rememberer was a human with a few seconds and a fading trace, and brands built an entire world around her forgetting: the campaigns, the assets, the reminders, the loyalty programs. The buyer now has an institution of her own, one that remembers everything, updates continuously and answers back. The next generation of great brands will be built for that rememberer.