APRIL 2026

THE NEW RULES OF BRAND MOMENTUM

What the Top-Scoring Brands Reveal About Growth in 2026

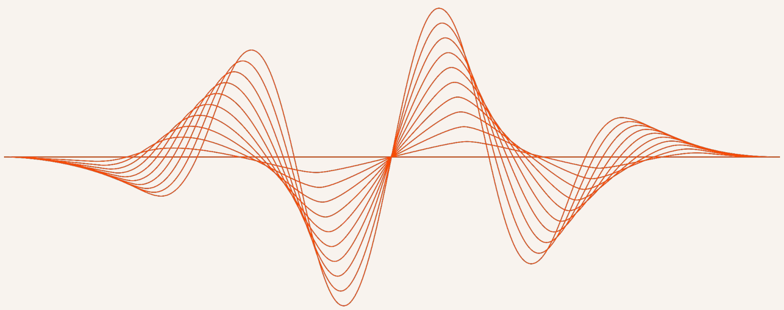
DOUBLE E ANALYTICS

BRAND MOMENTUM SCORE

ABOUT BRAND MOMENTUM

Brand Momentum is no longer a soft brand health metaphor. It is a rigorous measure of whether a brand is building the energy, attention, and cultural relevance required to grow.

Unlike traditional measures that capture whether a brand is known, Brand Momentum captures whether a brand feels active in the market—whether it is gaining force, shaping perception, and earning meaningful consumer energy. That performance is expressed through the Brand Momentum Score, a 1–100 metric in which higher scores indicate stronger momentum and greater brand growth potential.



The score is organized into three factors—Attention, Animation, and Amplification—and six underlying facets.

01

Attention reflects a brand's ability to attract notice and interest, through the facets of Interest and Intrigue.

02

Animation reflects the freshness and energy a brand creates, through Refreshing Energy and Rebel Energy.

03

Amplification reflects the extent to which a brand enters broader culture and community, through Cultural Change and Dispersion.

Together, these components provide both a single momentum score and a diagnostic view of what is driving it.

INTRODUCTION

In our previous Brand Momentum technical report, we showed that the measure is both valid and reliable. In our earlier white paper, we showed that it is not only statistically meaningful, but also practically meaningful for brand management. In this paper, we go a step further by showing why Brand Momentum is essential for the business environment of 2026. Only Brand Momentum can explain whether a brand merely exists in the market or is truly moving through it by earning attention, generating relevance, and building cultural energy with consumers.

For the study, we selected 15 brands that we either believe resonated culturally in 2025 or brands that we've included in our previous Brand Momentum benchmark studies.

Those brands are: **OpenAI, ALO Yoga, Netflix, Starbucks, Doordash, KPop Demon Hunters, Taco Bell, rhode skin, Anthropic, Southwest Airlines, WNBA, Jeep, Gap, POP MART, and Yahoo!**

In this paper, we set out to answer three questions that matter in 2026:

01 Among the 15 brands, which earned the highest Brand Momentum Score—and what drove it?

02 What does it take to build momentum in an environment shaped by AI-mediated discovery, fragmented attention, and growing pressure for authenticity?

03 What should brand strategists and marketers do differently to drive greater preference, advocacy, and growth relative to their competitors?

The central conclusion is straightforward.

The brands with the strongest momentum are not simply the ones with the highest familiarity. They are the ones that combine freshness, emotional relevance, and cultural resonance in ways that feel unmistakably current.

In 2026, that means brands must win not only attention, but also interpretation: by people, by platforms, and increasingly by AI systems that influence what gets surfaced, trusted, and chosen.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on one of our proprietary Brand Momentum studies. In December 2025, we surveyed 750 respondents across the United States using census-balanced quotas for key demographics, including age, income, race, ethnicity, education, and employment.

Because this paper is designed to identify which brands have the strongest overall momentum, a general-population sample provides the broadest and most comparable view across brands. A U.S. census-balanced sample lets us evaluate momentum at the market level, rather than through the lens of any one subgroup.

Respondents answered both general questions about the 2026 environment and in-depth questions about one of 15 brands. To assess brand momentum, we used computerized adaptive testing, which selects the 18 most informative items for each respondent from an item bank of more than 100 questions measuring specific factors, facets, and drivers of Brand Momentum. This allows us to ask fewer questions while capturing a more precise read on how consumers perceive each brand.

All scores are scaled within our historical database of more than 50 brands across 10 major industries.

For more on our method and analytical practices, see our technical paper hosted at: www.doubleeanalytics.com.

A Note on Results

In our study, fielded in December, OpenAI was our highest-scoring brand, while Anthropic was ninth. Since that time, public perception has shifted as OpenAI transitioned from a consumer-centric innovator to a perceived "military-industrial" partner, particularly after its rapid deal with the Pentagon following the outbreak of the 2026 Iran war.

In contrast, Anthropic's reputation has been bolstered by its refusal to compromise safety guardrails for defense contracts, leading to its controversial "supply chain risk" designation that many users now view as a badge of ethical honor. This divergence has created a significant shift in which OpenAI is increasingly seen as an opportunistic, profit-driven utility, while Anthropic is embraced as the principled, safety-first alternative. Were we to field a study again today, we would expect the Anthropic to score significantly higher than OpenAI.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Scores

Overall, our study shows that OpenAI leads the field on overall momentum with a score of 76, well ahead of ALO Yoga at 66, Netflix at 65, Starbucks at 63, and DoorDash at 63. At the other end of the ranking are Pop Mart at 50, Gap at 51, and Yahoo! at 15.

The Facets That Matter

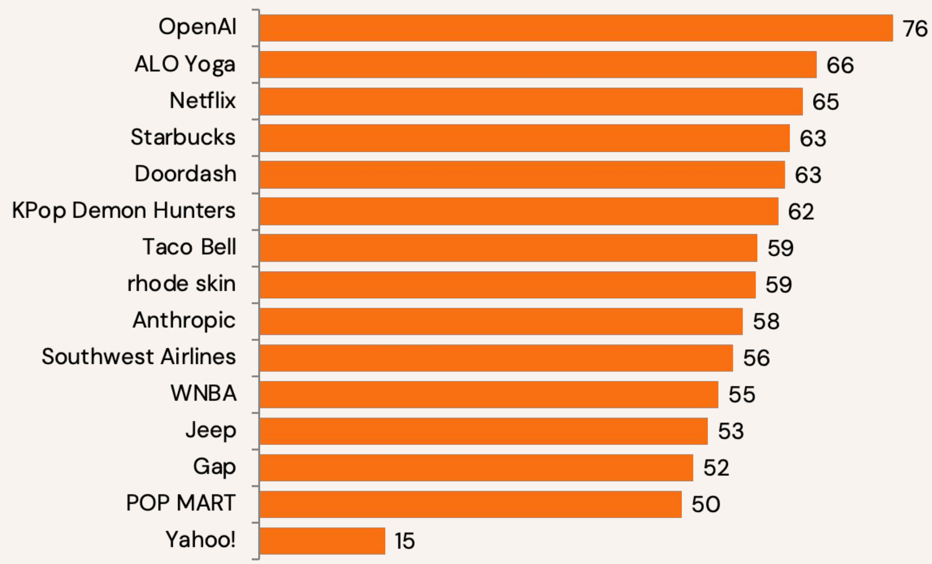
While each brand has its own profile, the broader pattern is consistent: leading brands outperform lagging brands on Interest, Refreshing Energy, and Dispersion.

The sharpest separation between the top five and bottom five brands appears on Interest, with a 17-point gap, followed by Refreshing Energy at 15 points and Rebel Energy at 12 points. This matters because it suggests that momentum is not built through novelty or cultural visibility alone. It is built when brands capture attention through a perspective that feels both fresh and bold. In turn, consumers experience the brand as active in the present rather than reliant on past recognition.

The Outcomes That Matter

Momentum also appears to be closely tied to advocacy. In our analysis, overall momentum and advocacy have a correlation of 0.76, indicating that higher momentum is associated with a greater willingness to support and recommend the brand. This reinforces a central finding from our earlier Brand Momentum reports: momentum is not just descriptive; it is commercially consequential.

Chart 01: Brand Momentum Scores By Brand



Headline Finding	What it Means
The highest-momentum brands span categories, led by OpenAI, followed by ALO Yoga, Netflix, Starbucks, and DoorDash.	Momentum is not confined to a single sector. It appears to be a cross-category brand dynamic, suggesting that brands in very different spaces can build momentum when they feel timely, relevant, and energized.
The largest gaps between top- and bottom-performing brands appear in Interest and energy-related dimensions.	Momentum depends on more than visibility alone. The strongest brands stand out because they generate attention and feel fresh, active, and resonant in the present.
Amplification matters, but it is not enough on its own.	A brand can spread widely and still underperform if its messaging does not create attention, emotional pull, or meaningful consumer connection.
Momentum is strongly associated with brand advocacy.	Momentum should be treated as a leading growth signal, not just an image metric, because stronger momentum is linked to greater willingness to support and recommend the brand.

THE BRAND MOMENTUM FRAMEWORK

The Brand Momentum framework treats momentum as a three-part system. Brand Attention measures how well a brand captures interest, creates buzz, and builds emotional connection. Brand Animation measures how a brand energizes consumers through newness, creativity, and emotional spark. Brand Amplification measures how a brand spreads, connects, and becomes part of broader cultural conversations. **Together, these dimensions help explain why some brands feel active, current, and culturally alive, while others feel visible but flat.**

Because each pillar is further broken into two facets—Attention breaks down into Interest and Intrigue, for example—the Brand Momentum framework useful diagnostically, because it shows not just whether a brand has momentum, but which underlying dimensions are helping build it—or holding it back.

Chart 02: Heatmap

Brand Momentum Pillar Scores By Brand

	Attention	Animation	Amplification
OpenAI	76	76	75
ALO Yoga	66	66	67
Netflix	64	65	65
Doordash	62	62	64
Starbucks	62	63	65
Taco Bell	61	60	57
rhode skin	59	58	60
KPop Demon Hunters	57	62	66
Southwest Airlines	57	55	57
Anthropic	56	58	59
WNBA	52	54	58
Gap	50	52	53
Jeep	50	54	56
POP MART	43	52	57
Yahoo!	17	13	13

Lower score — Higher score

The pillar heatmap reinforces an important pattern: the strongest brands tend to perform well across all three dimensions rather than relying on a single area of strength. In the heatmap, OpenAI stands out as both high and unusually balanced across Attention, Animation, and Amplification. By contrast, several mid-tier brands show more uneven profiles, with one dimension outpacing the others. KPop Demon Hunters, for example, appears meaningfully stronger on Amplification than on Attention, suggesting that cultural circulation alone is not enough to create full momentum if it is not matched by comparable widespread consumer interest and emotional connection.

The practical implication is that momentum should be managed as a system. A brand can be widely discussed, but if it does not also generate interest and emotional energy, that visibility is less likely to translate into stronger momentum. The brands with the most durable momentum are those whose story travels because people notice it, feel something from it, and carry it into broader culture.

Momentum Pillar	Interpretation for Brand Strategists
Brand Attention	The brand captures interest, creates buzz, and builds emotional connection in ways that make people care.
Brand Animation	The brand feels new, creatively energized, and emotionally alive in ways that make it feel current and distinctive.
Brand Amplification	The brand spreads, connects, and becomes part of broader cultural conversations through interaction, community, and advocacy.

WHY 2026 RAISES THE STAKES

If the Brand Momentum framework explains what momentum is, the 2026 environment explains why it is both harder to build and more important to sustain. The competitive landscape is shifting from a contest for reach to a contest for interpretation: not just whether brands are seen, but how they are understood by consumers, platforms, and increasingly AI-mediated discovery systems. At the same time, AI tools are becoming table stakes, while human authenticity is emerging as a stronger differentiator.

Other market signals point in the same direction. Circana identifies community, wellness, hyper-personalization, innovation, and value as key growth forces in 2026. McKinsey similarly finds that consumers are spending more time alone and online, expecting more convenience, and showing less tolerance for friction, even as digital channels continue to gain usage without automatically earning trust.

These signals converge on a single strategic point. In 2026, momentum is built at the intersection of distinctiveness, trust, and usability. Brands need enough originality to cut through algorithmic sameness, enough coherence to be understood across channels, and enough real-world value to remain worth choosing in a more convenience-driven and value-sensitive market.

That is exactly what Brand Momentum is designed to capture:

- Refreshing Energy reflects originality
- Interest reflects meaningful relevance
- Dispersion reflects a brand's ability to spread coherently through interaction and advocacy.

2026 Market Shift	Strategic Implication for Momentum
AI-mediated discovery is reshaping how brands are found and understood.	Brands need clearer signals, stronger authority, and richer content that travels well across machine-interpreted environments.
As AI-generated content floods channels, human authenticity becomes a stronger differentiator.	Brands need communications that feel recognizable, credible, and distinctly human.
Consumers remain convenience-and value-driven.	Momentum must be tied to lived usefulness, not just creative theater.

TOP-SCORING BRANDS AND KEY DRIVERS

The top-performing brands are worth examining closely not because they all win in the same way, but because they do not. That is what makes the dataset especially valuable for strategists: it shows that momentum is not tied to a single creative formula, but can be built through different brand models.

Rank	Brand	Momentum	Attention	Animation	Amplification	Strongest Facet	Weakest Facet
1	OpenAI	76	76	76	75	Refreshing Energy	Rebel Energy
2	ALO Yoga	66	66	66	67	Dispersion	Rebel Energy
3	Netflix	65	65	65	65	Dispersion	Rebel Energy
4	Starbucks	63	62	63	65	Refreshing Energy	Rebel Energy
5	DoorDash	63	62	62	64	Dispersion	Emotional Connection

Open AI is the clearest momentum leader because it performs at a high level across all three pillars and all major facets. Its strongest facet, Refreshing Energy, suggests that the brand feels active, current, and category-defining rather than static. Just as important, its weakest facet remains relatively strong, indicating that its leadership is driven as much by balance as by standout peaks.

ALO Yoga and Netflix illustrate a second model. Both are lifted by Dispersion, suggesting that their meaning travels well across audiences, channels, and contexts. These brands appear to benefit from being easy to recognize, easy to talk about, and culturally portable across environments. Their weaker Rebel Energy scores suggest that momentum does not always require provocation; broad spread and consistent freshness can be enough.

Starbucks and DoorDash illustrate a third model. Both are highly familiar, utility-rich brands, yet they still rank near the top because they feel active in everyday life rather than merely established. Starbucks benefits from Refreshing Energy, suggesting that familiarity has not prevented it from feeling current. DoorDash, meanwhile, appears to gain momentum less from boldness than from relevance and everyday embeddedness.

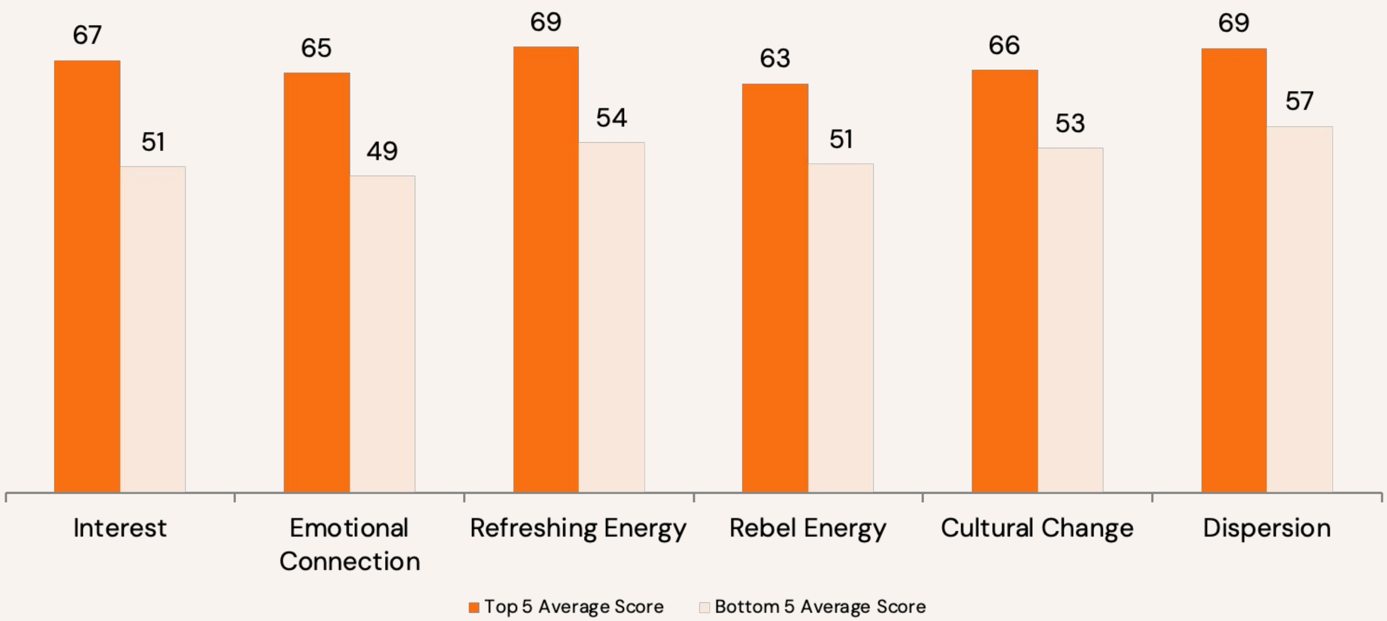
BOTTOM SCORES AND WHAT WE CAN LEARN

One of the most useful lessons for strategists is that top-scoring brands are diverse in category and tone. What they share is not sector, target, or media mix. What they share is that they are interpretable as active brands—brands that feel current, distinctive, and in motion. They give the impression that they are going somewhere.

The comparison between the facet scores of the top five and bottom five brands makes that point more clearly.

The largest average gap appears in Interest, where the top five outperform the bottom five by 16 points. The next largest gap is Refreshing Energy, at 15 points, followed by Cultural Change at 13 points. Rebel Energy and Dispersion each show a 12-point gap, suggesting that while rule-breaking and spread matter, they are not the only routes to momentum.

Chart 03:
Average Brand Momentum Facet Scores by Top 5 and Bottom 5 Brands



Facet	Top 5 Average	Bottom 5 Average	Gap
Interest	67	51	16
Intrigue	65	49	16
Refreshing Energy	69	54	15
Rebel Energy	63	51	12
Cultural Change	66	53	13
Dispersion	69	57	12

The broader implication is that momentum is built less by familiarity alone than by a brand's ability to feel emotionally relevant and newly alive in the present. Brands that underperform are not always invisible; more often, they feel static, predictable, or culturally inactive. That creates a clear opportunity: in crowded categories defined by polished sameness, fresh perspective and carefully deployed unconventionality can still create meaningful upside.

The glossary supports that logic by defining Interest as emotional impact and meaningful personal connection, Refreshing Energy as newness and forward-thinking stimulation, and Rebel Energy as a bold, unconventional edge.

WHERE MOMENTUM BREAKS DOWN

If the leaders show what momentum looks like at its strongest, the lower-ranked brands show where it starts to unravel. The most common weakness is not low awareness, but the inability to convert visibility into interest, emotional connection, and forward movement.

Pop Mart illustrates this clearly. Its Brand Amplification score of 57 is materially higher than its Brand Attention score of 43, suggesting that the brand may circulate culturally without holding comparable attention or emotional pull. Gap and Jeep are especially weak on emotional connection, while Yahoo! underperforms on Rebel Energy, reinforcing the idea that legacy brands often lose momentum when they stop feeling current and in motion.

For brand builders, the lesson is that momentum usually erodes in three ways: a brand becomes too predictable, too functional, or too easy to notice without being meaningful enough to carry forward. In those cases, it may remain known, but it no longer feels like it is going anywhere.

Low-momentum brands often still have isolated strengths, but not enough reinforcement across the full system. They may still appear in culture or in purchase occasions, yet fail to generate the combined effect of buzz, feeling, freshness, and spread that gives a brand forward motion.

Signals of Lower-Ranked Brands	**Interpretation**
Amplification exceeds Attention	The brand may circulate widely, but the story is not strong enough to hold interest.
Emotional connection is weak	Utility or familiarity is not translating into attachment or meaning.
Rebel energy is weak	The brand is clear and easy to recognize, but not surprising or energizing.
Scores are uneven across pillars	The brand lacks the coherence needed for sustained momentum.

WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD MOMENTUM IN 2026

The evidence from our study points to a new formula for building momentum. Brands must now operate as systems of signal, experience, and proof. Signal makes a brand recognizable and discoverable. Experience makes it usable, relevant, and felt in real moments. Proof makes it credible enough to be trusted by people and by the recommendation environments that increasingly shape discovery.

The first requirement is distinctive freshness. Our data show that high-momentum brands outperform most clearly on Refreshing Energy, Interest, and Intrigue. This does not require constant reinvention. It requires keeping the brand current through message evolution, product or service innovation, and expressive creative choices that push beyond category sameness.

The second requirement is human credibility in an AI-saturated environment. Hootsuite's analysis suggests that while AI tools are becoming standard, audiences still respond more strongly to content that feels human in texture and intent. The implication is clear: brands should use AI to improve speed, testing, and responsiveness, but not at the cost of voice, imperfection, or point of view.

The third requirement is spreadable meaning. ALO Yoga, Netflix, DoorDash, and others benefit from strong Dispersion, suggesting that their meaning travels well across audiences and contexts. In practice, that means the brand has a clear enough point of view to be talked about, recognized, and carried into culture. Strategists should ask not only whether a message is clear, but whether it can travel across creators, communities, search results, retail touchpoints, social snippets, and AI summaries.

The fourth requirement is practical value. Circana and McKinsey both show that convenience, value, and reduced friction remain central to consumer decision-making. Momentum will not be sustained by expressive branding alone. The brand must also feel worthwhile in a life that is increasingly digital, time-starved, and cost-conscious.

The fifth requirement is systemic coherence. The strongest brands do not rely on a single spike in performance. They align attention, animation, and amplification so that freshness, meaning, and spread reinforce one another. That balance is what allows momentum to build, travel, and last.

2026 Momentum Requirement	What Leaders Should Do
Distinctive Freshness	Refresh the brand's expression and product story before the market labels it stale.
Human Credibility	Use AI for speed and optimization, but preserve a recognizable human voice and point of view.
Spreadable Meaning	Build messages and assets that can travel across creators, communities, search, retail, and AI-mediated discovery.
Practical Value	Tie brand energy to convenience, usefulness, or value so momentum translates into action.
Systemic Coherence	Align attention, animation, and amplification rather than overinvesting in only one dimension.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BRAND STRATEGISTS AND MARKETING PROFESSIONALS

FOR STRATEGISTS the first implication is methodological. Brand planning should stop treating awareness, differentiation, and advocacy as separate trackers. Our research suggests that momentum is a bridging construct, linking expressive brand qualities to downstream recommendation behavior. In practice, that means teams should plan not only for what a brand wants to say, but for how much energy it is creating in the market—and where that energy is being lost.

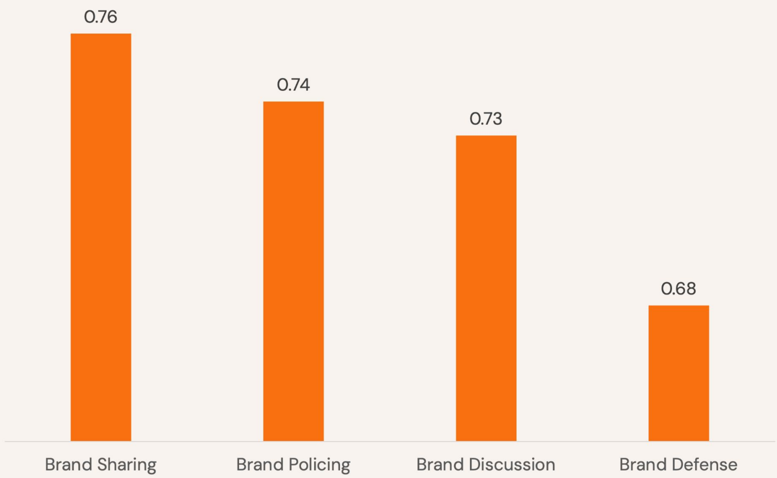
FOR MARKETERS the second implication is operational. Content planning needs to move beyond a calendar mindset and toward an energy-management mindset. The emerging environment suggests that speed, adaptation, and clearer AI-era discoverability are becoming baseline competitive requirements. Teams therefore need a portfolio approach that balances foundational brand assets, rapid-response cultural participation, proof-building authority content, and channel-native human storytelling.

FOR COMMUNICATION LEADERS the third implication is reputational. Digital channels increasingly shape behavior without automatically earning trust, which means every touchpoint contributes either to momentum or to drag. The task is no longer just to maintain consistency; it is to build a coherent system of trust signals, fresh expression, and useful relevance.

These implications matter even more because momentum is not merely descriptive. As the correlations on the next page show, stronger momentum is closely associated with advocacy behaviors such as sharing, discussion, policing, and defense.

That relationship should be especially meaningful for performance-minded teams. Momentum is often dismissed as a brand-side abstraction, yet in this dataset it is strongly associated with advocacy. That suggests it should be monitored as a leading indicator of commercial resilience. Brands seeking stronger recommendation, preference, and conversion should identify which momentum facets are underperforming and treat those weaknesses as growth problems, not just creative ones.

Chart 04: Correlation Between Brand Momentum and Brand Behaviors



Function	Key Implication
Brand Strategy	Treat momentum as a system and focus planning on the facet where energy is being lost.
Creative Development	Build work that feels current, emotionally resonant, and distinctly human.
Media and Channel Planning	Balance reach with discoverability, trust signals, and content that travels across channels.
CRM and Loyalty	Strengthen relevance and emotional connection so ongoing utility becomes deeper attachment.
Measurement	Monitor momentum as a leading indicator of advocacy and commercial resilience.

CONCLUSION AND ACTION AGENDA

The central lesson from this analysis is that momentum is no longer a soft indicator of brand health. It is a strategic operating requirement. In 2026, brands will not build forward motion simply by increasing exposure. They will build it by becoming more meaningful, more current, and more capable of traveling through culture at the same time. The highest-scoring brands in this dataset show that there is more than one path to that outcome, but none avoids the need for a brand to feel alive, relevant, and in motion in the present.

For the next planning cycle, strategists should begin with a momentum diagnosis, not just a message brief. They should identify whether the brand's greatest constraint lies in Attention, Animation, or Amplification; determine which specific facet is holding the system back; and then design interventions that combine expression, experience, and proof. For some brands, that will mean increasing Refreshing Energy. For others, it will mean rebuilding Interest or making the brand easier to carry into conversation, community, and culture. In every case, the objective is the same: to create a brand that moves people enough to keep moving through the market.

That is the practical challenge for brand teams now. Do not ask only, *Are we being seen?* Ask instead, *Are we generating enough momentum to be chosen, recommended, discussed, and carried forward?* The brands that can answer yes to that question will be the ones that do more than stay visible—they will be the ones that build sustained growth.

BRAND MOMENTUM SCORE **GLOSSARY**

The Brand Momentum Score

A forward-looking measure of how well a brand builds attention, energizes consumers, and amplifies cultural relevance to drive future growth.

Brand Attention

How well a brand captures interest, creates buzz, and builds emotional connection.

Interest

The brand creates emotional impact and meaningful personal connection.

Optimism: *Creates a sense of personal benefit or positivity.*

Attraction: *Builds a strong emotional bond with consumers.*

Motivating: *Drives emotional reactions that inspire engagement.*

Intrigue

The brand generates excitement, curiosity, and ongoing conversation.

Excitement: *Creates anticipation and enthusiasm around the brand.*

Curiosity: *Makes people want to learn more or pay attention.*

Exploration: *Gets people talking and following what the brand is doing.*

Brand Animation

How a brand energizes consumers through newness, creativity, and emotional spark.

Refreshing Energy

The brand feels new, forward-thinking, and creatively stimulating.

Fresh: *Feels new or newly discovered; sparks initial interest.*

Groundbreaking: *Clearly stands apart from competitors in a meaningful way.*

Innovative: *Introduces new ideas; products, or ways of thinking.*

Rebel Energy

The brand challenges norms and brings a bold, unconventional edge.

Unconventional: *Creates anticipation and enthusiasm around the brand.*

Bizarre: *Surprises with unusual or unconventional ideas.*

Outside the Norm: *Actively challenges established standards, and expectations.*

Brand Amplification

How a brand spreads, connects, and becomes part of broader cultural conversations.

Dispersion

The brand spreads through interaction, community, and advocacy.

Interaction: *Encourages active engagement across channels.*

Community: *Shows up frequently in relevant conversations and places.*

Advocacy: *Is recommended and embraced by more people over time.*

Cultural Change

The brand influences perspectives, behaviors, or trends.

Social Shift: *Drives meaningful change in communities or society.*

Creating Trends: *Shapes what's popular or influential in its category.*

Attitude Change: *Changes how people think or feel about key issues.*