

# UBA Trends Day 2026: Comprehensive Speaker Reports

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## 1. Jonah Berger - The Catalyst

### The Pitch

Change does not happen by **pushing harder** (more advertising, more arguments), but by identifying and removing the **“handbrakes”** (barriers) that naturally keep people from moving.

### The 5 Key takeaways

- **From “Pusher” to “Catalyst”**: Instead of asking, “How can I convince them?”, marketers should ask, “Why haven’t they changed yet?”
- **Fighting reactance**: People have a kind of **“anti-persuasion radar.”** To get around it, you need to restore their sense of autonomy by offering a menu of options rather than a single solution, or by asking questions that lead them to persuade themselves.
- **Highlighting the “gap”**: As shown in the Thai anti-smoking campaign example, pointing out an inconsistency between the advice people give (“don’t smoke”) and their own behavior (smoking) is more effective than any health warning.
- **Reducing uncertainty**: Change involves immediate costs for uncertain future benefits. The answer is **“trialability”** (freemium, samples, free trials) to lower the barrier to entry.
- **The REDUCE framework**: An acronym for the five barriers to change: **Reactance, Endowment, Distance, Uncertainty, and Corroborating Evidence.**

### Actionable Insight

**Stop adding more “fuel”**: The next time a campaign stalls, do not increase the media budget or promotional pressure. Identify the specific brake instead (often uncertainty or reactance) and focus your energy only on removing it.

### Conclusion

Berger provides the behavioral science of change. While the framework is a classic, its application is vital for sales-driven organizations to move from aggressive tactics to effective catalysis.

### My personal rating: 5/10

My mixed rating is probably due to the **sense of déjà vu**. Jonah Berger is a regular on the international conference circuit, and his *The Catalyst* framework has been around for a few years now. While the concepts are fundamental, the talk can feel a bit too theoretical or **overly formatted** for a trends-focused event in 2026. You can sense the well-oiled Wharton professor machinery, but perhaps it lacks the spark of radical novelty one might expect from that kind of event.

That sense of déjà vu was very much present throughout his presentation. Still, moving away from a “**push at all costs**” mindset can be effective for sales-driven organizations. A genuine internal reflection on “**why isn’t this working?**” can generate insights that lead to “**here is how it could work better.**”

## 2. Rahaf Harfoush - Digital Anthropology

### The Pitch

Technology does not merely automate tasks; it encodes invisible beliefs that shape our culture, alter our cognitive abilities, and redefine the boundaries of our intimacy.

### The 5 Key takeaways

- **The atrophy of human cognition:** By moving from a culture of “**search**” (exploration) to a culture of “**generation**” (immediate acceptance of the AI’s answer), we risk losing our command of critical thinking. AI helps experts, but weakens novices.
- **The tyranny of availability:** Our tools impose a culture of immediacy. Constant interruptions (every 6 to 11 minutes) prevent us from reaching the state of deep focus required for creativity, which paradoxically depends on moments of boredom.
- **The beliefs encoded in tools:** No software is neutral. Choosing a tool that optimizes every minute of your calendar rather than one that protects your thinking time means adopting a work ideology without even realizing it.
- **The collision between AI and intimacy:** AI gamifies our emotions and redefines human connection. Whether it is Alexa imitating the voice of a deceased parent or deep attachment to chatbots like Replika, technology is now interfering with grief and with our most private emotional needs.
- **Curiosity as survival:** In a volatile world, those who think they already know everything will remain stuck in the past. Survival belongs to the **learners**, those who use their curiosity to ask the right questions and navigate complexity.

### Actionable Insight

Write a “**Belief Manifesto**”: Before adopting a new tool within your team, define your human values (for example, “**focus matters more than reactivity**”). Then check whether the tool reinforces or contradicts those essential behaviors.

### Conclusion

Harfoush moves the AI debate from productivity to ethics and humanity. She warns that we must remain “learners” to navigate the cultural shifts technology is forcing upon us.

### My personal rating: 8/10

My enthusiasm reflects the strength of her anthropological approach. By using striking examples such as Alexa and the voices of the deceased, she takes the AI debate beyond simple productivity and places it on the ground of ethics and humanity. It is an essential perspective for a marketer in 2026: understanding that we are not merely handling data, but emotions and deep cultural structures.

### 3. Meredith Whittaker - Privacy & Ethics

#### The Pitch

Privacy is not a luxury; it is a fundamental human right and a pillar of democracy that must be protected via radical transparency against extractive Big Tech models.

#### The 5 Key takeaways

- **Transparency through verification (Open Source):** Whittaker rejects blind trust in favor of technical verification. Unlike opaque platforms, Signal allows any expert to inspect its code on GitHub and verify its privacy promises.
- **“Social conscription”:** Whittaker rejects the idea that users are lazy when it comes to privacy. They remain on intrusive platforms because they need social connection, but they switch to Signal when security becomes a matter of survival, as seen in Ukraine.
- **The atrophy of cognition in the age of AI:** Adopting AI without a clear strategy leads to a decline in critical thinking. Whittaker warns that relying on a machine’s automatic answers “atrophies” human capacities for reflection and problem-solving.
- **Warning against “vibe coding drifters”:** She cautions against AI vendors who exploit decision-makers’ fear of seeming outdated in order to sell poor-quality solutions (“garbage”) that add useless noise instead of creating real value.
- **Infrastructure sovereignty:** True digital independence cannot remain a talking point. It requires control over heavy infrastructure (servers and data centers) which are currently dominated by a handful of American giants.

#### Actionable Insight

Dare to ask **“the stupidest question”**: do not let yourself be intimidated by the complex jargon of AI vendors. Asking simple, direct questions helps expose groundless solutions, save massive resources, and restore human control over technology.

#### Conclusion

Whittaker offers a moral clarity that is rare in marketing. She reminds us that in 2026, authenticity and the protection of the private sphere are the ultimate brand assets.

#### My personal rating: 9/10

My rating reflects the impact of Whittaker’s moral clarity. Her background at Google gives her unique credibility in denouncing the erosion of digital rights. She turns the technical subject of data into a vivid societal issue, reminding us that in 2026, authenticity and respect for intimacy are among a brand’s most valuable assets.

## 4. Christopher Sanderson - The Transformation Economy

### The Pitch:

We have moved from the experience economy to the transformation economy: brands are no longer judged by what they do, but by how they help consumers become a better version of themselves.

### The 5 key takeaways

- **The “Consumer Reset”:** This is not just a trend, but a complete reset of values. Three out of four people worldwide say that what they value has changed. Consumers are no longer just asking, “What’s the price?” but also, “Why am I buying this?” and “What is the real value?”
- **From value to values:** The notion of **value** (price/promotion) is giving way to **values** (ethics/sustainability). The growth of second-hand and repair markets proves it: 60% of global consumers are now willing to buy second-hand products.
- **Digital fatigue and selectivity:** Faced with constant push messaging and doomscrolling, 69% of adults believe brands should leave platforms if they are unethical. Consumers now prioritize the quality of interactions over the quantity of touchpoints.
- **Well-being as a status symbol:** Well-being, mental and emotional, has become the new luxury. The brands that succeed are those that offer an **emotional return on investment**, helping individuals along their journey of self-discovery.
- **Co-curation:** Brands should no longer deliver finished stories, but rather **building blocks** that allow consumers to co-create their own experience. The flagship example is Spotify Wrapped, where data is used as a mirror to help users understand their own habits.

### Actionable Insight

Do not fight **dupes** or resale, integrate them. Sanderson cites Lululemon, which organized a “**Dupe Swap**” by inviting customers to trade in their copies for the original product in-store, turning a commercial threat into an opportunity to prove the superiority of its quality and recruit new ambassadors.

### Conclusion

Sanderson highlights the shift from the 'Experience' to the 'Transformation' economy. Success lies in assisting the customer’s personal evolution.

### My personal rating: 6/10

My reaction is perfectly consistent with the structure of the talk. Sanderson delivered very **future-agency-style** content, dense and built around figures and theoretical frameworks. After Whittaker’s natural charisma or Harfoush’s human-centered approach, a presentation that felt read aloud (even if packed with good examples such as Vinted, Nike Breath Lab, and Avestan) could come across as rigid and academic. The substance was strong, but the delivery lacked the emotional connection that he was in fact advocating for brands.

## 5. Katrien De Bauw - Apple & The Power of Craft

### The Pitch

In 2026, a brand's value will not rest on technological shortcuts, but on a radical commitment to creativity, craft, and the ability to tell deeply human stories.

### The 5 key takeaways

- **The primacy of brand building:** Brands like Pink Palm Puff (created by a teenager) or Taylor Swift succeed because they master scarcity, the drop model, and total community engagement. They prove that investing in brand identity can drive growth far beyond the market average.
- **The foundation of long-term partnership:** Apple's success is built on a relationship of more than 30 years with its agency, grounded in total transparency and shared ambition. That kind of stability is crucial for building a creative platform that remains consistent over time.
- **Extreme simplification:** True to the mantra "*Simplify, simplify, simplify*" displayed at Apple Park, the goal is to eliminate everything that is not essential. That is how stripped-back campaigns like the Mac campaign came to life, centered on the simple blinking cursor as a symbol of the idea's potential.
- **AI in service of humans, not the other way around:** Although AI is used for prototyping, Katrien De Bauw stresses that the **human touch** and crafted imperfection (such as using real puppets in their commercial rather than 3D) bring an irreplaceable nuance and personality.
- **Emotion as a driver of decision-making:** 70% of consumers make decisions based on emotional factors. Brands must aim for an **emotional return on investment** by becoming part of people's everyday lives, as illustrated by the hearing-assistance features of AirPods.

### Actionable Insight

Prioritize the **creative platform** over one-off content: do not produce ads one by one, but develop platforms that can last for decades, like "**Shot on iPhone.**" These structures allow the brand to remain flexible and adapt to new media while preserving a highly recognizable DNA.

### Conclusion

De Bauw proves that 'Craft' is a competitive advantage. In a world of fast AI content, the time and care put into the human details make a brand stand out.

### My personal rating: 7/10

My rating reflects a certain paradox: while the work presented (Apple's films) was visually beautiful and inspiring, the presentation method eventually became tiring. Katrien De Bauw relied heavily on demonstration through examples, but by showing long films illustrating similar ideas again and again (attention to detail, the human touch) the message lost some of its initial punch. It is a perfect example of "**too much craft can kill the message**" in a conference format.

## 6. Rozemarijn Koppenaal – Rituals

### The Pitch

A brand's true power does not lie in its massive resources or technological tools, but in its ability to cultivate small, meaningful human connections through meticulously precise execution.

### The 5 key takeaways

- **“Accessible luxury” as a growth driver:** Rituals has democratized well-being by turning everyday routines into precious moments. By combining high-quality fragrances and packaging with broad accessibility (through stores, online, hotels, and department stores) the brand reached revenues of €2.4 billion in 2026.
- **“Dream Big, Act Small”:** This concept is built on the balance between an ambitious global vision and an obsessive attention to executional detail. Koppenaal places far greater value on concrete in-store execution than on theoretical strategy laid out in PowerPoint.
- **The philosophy of “1% better”:** Rather than chasing brutal reinventions, Rituals focuses on improving by 1% every day, making the organization 30 times more effective after a few years. This is reflected in the constant training of its 10,000 employees to refine every customer gesture, from hand massages to the welcome tea.
- **The “10% Profit Pledge” (B Corp):** True to its societal commitment, the brand pledges to donate 10% of its net profit to causes that improve the well-being of people and the planet, from nature protection to supporting children in war zones.
- **Innovation through experience and sustainability:** The offering has expanded beyond products into services such as Mind Oasis (a 30-minute deep relaxation experience) and a strong push on refills to reduce environmental impact.

### Actionable Insight

Treat attention as a concrete action: do not see customer attention as an abstract concept. At Rituals, it becomes a deliberate act, forcing a pause with a cup of tea that is too hot to drink immediately, encouraging discovery, or asking head-office employees to work in stores at Christmas to stay grounded in the human reality of the business.

### Conclusion

Koppenaal shows that a multi-billion dollar company can remain 'human.' Rituals' success in 2026 is built on the consistency of its soul across every touchpoint.

### My personal rating: 8/10

My rating confirms that Rituals is a fascinating case study. While the slogan **“Think Big, Act Small”** may sound simplistic, you clearly picked up on the fact that it is the brand's deep societal grounding — through initiatives like the partnership with Tiny Miracles or the **10% pledge** — that makes this multinational feel both likable and credible. The **accessible luxury** positioning allows it to maintain a high level of desirability while being present in the lives of 140 million customers.

## 7. Steven Van Belleghem - The Wrap-Up

### The Pitch

In a world where AI makes customer journeys seamless and frictionless, technology becomes an invisible norm, and tomorrow's true differentiator will be a brand's ability to create deep emotional and human connections.

### The 5 key takeaways

- **The locksmith dilemma:** The more efficient and fast a service is, the less value the customer feels it has. With AI, frictionless experiences will become the norm and lose their impact; this is the paradox of technological perfection becoming boring.
- **The agentization of customer relationships:** Van Belleghem highlights the conflict between ad-based AI models (such as Amazon) and those designed to optimize customer value (such as Perplexity). In the future, AI agents may position themselves between brands and customers, making traditional transactional models obsolete.
- **The three levels of loyalty:**
  - **Transactional:** Buying because it is easy (the domain of AI).
  - **Transformational:** Buying because the brand helps us improve ourselves (the life partner).
  - **Deep relational:** Buying because we identify with the brand's values (the sense of belonging).
- **The fragility of the system:** People are not loyal to brands, but to efficient systems (for example, the current large-scale shift from ChatGPT to Claude.AI). To endure, brands need to move beyond dependence on short-term results dictated by Google or Meta's advertising algorithms.
- **The importance of "feeling":** In the end, it is not what you say or do that people remember, but how you made them feel. AI can handle the transaction, but humans handle emotion.

### Actionable Insight

Broaden your perspective and stay actively curious: do not judge new trends or cultures through your own local or personal lens, as illustrated by the example of work ethic at Samsung in Korea. To succeed in tomorrow's economy, you need to accept complexity and learn to navigate it with an open mind rather than looking for ready-made technological solutions.

### Conclusion

This wrap-up closes a day full of contrasts: from Jonah Berger's science of change to Meredith Whittaker's view of privacy as a fundamental right, via Apple's and Rituals' emotional craftsmanship. The common thread of 2026 seems to be this: **use technology for the structure, but humans for the signature.**

## 8. My conclusion of the day

If I had to sum up this 2026 edition of UBA Trends Day by connecting the different speakers' perspectives, I would say that a clear roadmap emerges for navigating a year in which artificial intelligence has become ubiquitous, yet where human depth remains the only true source of differentiation.

Here are the **three priority marketing strategies** for this year:

### 1. Move from “Pressure” to “Catalysis” (The Human Signature)

AI now makes it possible to create content and manage transactions at infinite speed. But as Steven Van Belleghem and Jonah Berger both pointed out, technological smoothness is becoming an invisible norm, and, ultimately, a boring one.

- **The objective:** We should stop trying to “push” (Berger) or “flood” our customers. Let technology handle the structure, but keep humans in charge of the signature.
- **The action:** Let us follow Apple’s “Simplify, simplify, simplify” principle (De Bauw). We should strip away the noise generated by AI and leave only the pure idea, the one that creates a real **feeling** (Van Belleghem). We should also give our teams back the mental space they need by protecting moments of **focus** (Harfoush), so they can create genuine emotional value.

### 2. Turn Ethics into a Competitive Advantage (Radical Trust)

In a world of vibe coding and opaque algorithms, transparency has become the ultimate luxury. Meredith Whittaker’s and Christopher Sanderson’s talks show that the 2026 consumer has become highly skilled at spotting inauthenticity.

- **The objective:** Move from being a brand that merely “communicates its values” to one that actually **encodes** them into its tools and processes.
- **The action:** Let us adopt the Rituals mindset (Koppenaar) with its **Profit Pledge**, or Signal’s approach through **open source**. We should stop asking for trust and start earning it. Let us audit our tools (Whittaker) to make sure they do not contradict our brand values (Sanderson). Privacy and ethics are no longer just legal constraints under GDPR : **they are now core brand promises**.

### 3. Deliver “Accessible Luxury” through Transformation (Sustainable Value)

Consumers no longer simply want to **own** something; they want to **become** something. That is the transformation economy described by Sanderson.

- **The objective:** Offer products of impeccable quality (the **craft** highlighted by De Bauw) while integrating them into everyday life in a way that is both useful and accessible, echoing Koppenaar’s idea of **accessible luxury**.
- **The action:** Turn products into rituals. Do not sell a cream; sell a moment of reconnection with oneself. Take inspiration from Lululemon’s strategy (Sanderson) or from Apple’s AirPods being repositioned as hearing devices: make high performance accessible. We should no longer fear the second-hand market or dupes, but instead integrate them into a circular and sustainable product lifecycle.

### My one-sentence summary:

“In 2026, our success will not depend on the power of our algorithms, but on our courage to simplify our messages, protect our customers’ privacy, and turn every commercial interaction into a meaningful human ritual.”

## 9. Duncan Wardle: A Practical Workshop in Creative Thinking

**The closing session** was led by Duncan Wardle, former Head of Innovation and Creativity at Disney, who turned the room into a living laboratory of ideas. Here is a synthesis of this end-of-day **workshop**:

### The Pitch

Creativity is not a gift reserved for a select few; it is a muscle that can be trained by rediscovering childlike curiosity, breaking established rules, and prioritizing empathy over data.

### The 5 key takeaways

- **The “What If” tool:** Used by Walt Disney and Reed Hastings of Netflix. This tool consists of listing the rules of your industry and then asking the most provocative question possible: “**What if I broke this rule?**” That is how Disneyland emerged from the idea of “**taking the movie out of the theater,**” and Netflix from the idea of **eliminating the physical store.**
- **The “Yes, And” method:** Wardle shows that the response “**No, because...**” kills innovation and shrinks ideas. By contrast, “**Yes, and...**” turns “**my idea**” into “**our idea,**” creating a culture of co-creation where ideas grow exponentially.
- **The naïve expert:** To innovate, you need to bring in people who know nothing about your industry. For example, a young Chinese chef helped Disney architects. Diversity of profiles drives innovation because it encourages simple questions and avoids the usual entrenched patterns of thinking.
- **Brain states (Beta vs. Alpha/Theta):** At work, we are often stuck in **busy beta mode**, which shuts the door to the subconscious, said to account for 87% of our brain’s capacity. Playfulness and laughter are deliberate tools to bring the brain back into a relaxed state, where the best ideas are born, like in the shower or just before falling asleep (Thomas Edison’s example).
- **Empathy in the age of AI:** Wardle argues that in a world dominated by AI, the most valuable skills will be those machines cannot replicate: curiosity, imagination, intuition, and above all, empathy. People do not buy a product; they buy the story and the emotion it carries.

### The actionable insight

**Institutionalize “thinking hours”:** Do not ask your teams to be creative in two-hour meetings under pressure. Give them one hour per month, with no PowerPoint, to share ideas they have seen elsewhere, and systematically use “**Yes, and...**” to explore every lead, even the most absurd one.

## Conclusion

Duncan Wardle ended by reminding the audience that “**the opposite of courage is not cowardice, it is conformity.**” In the economy of 2026, AI manages the structure, but humans must keep the courage to be brave, curious, and deeply empathetic if they want to stand out.