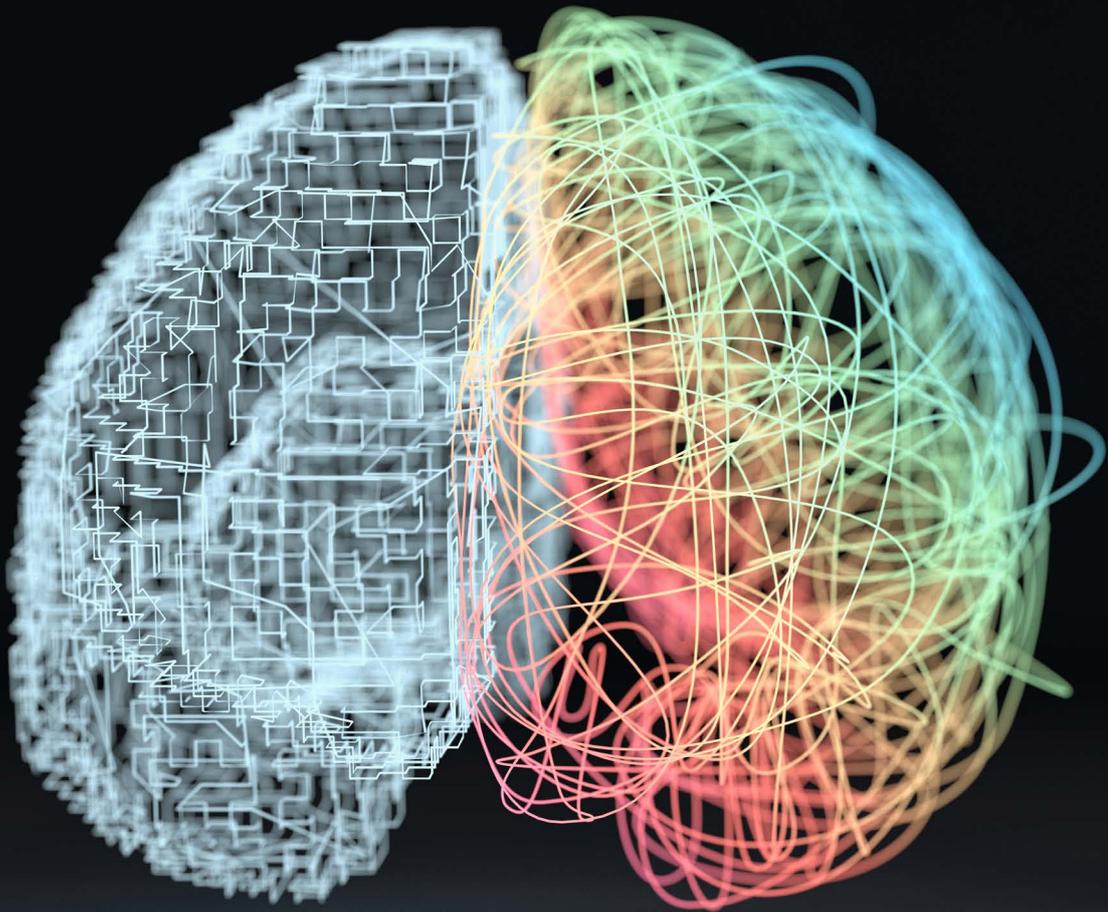


# Marrying stories with checkouts:

*Aligning brand experience  
with ecommerce ambitions*

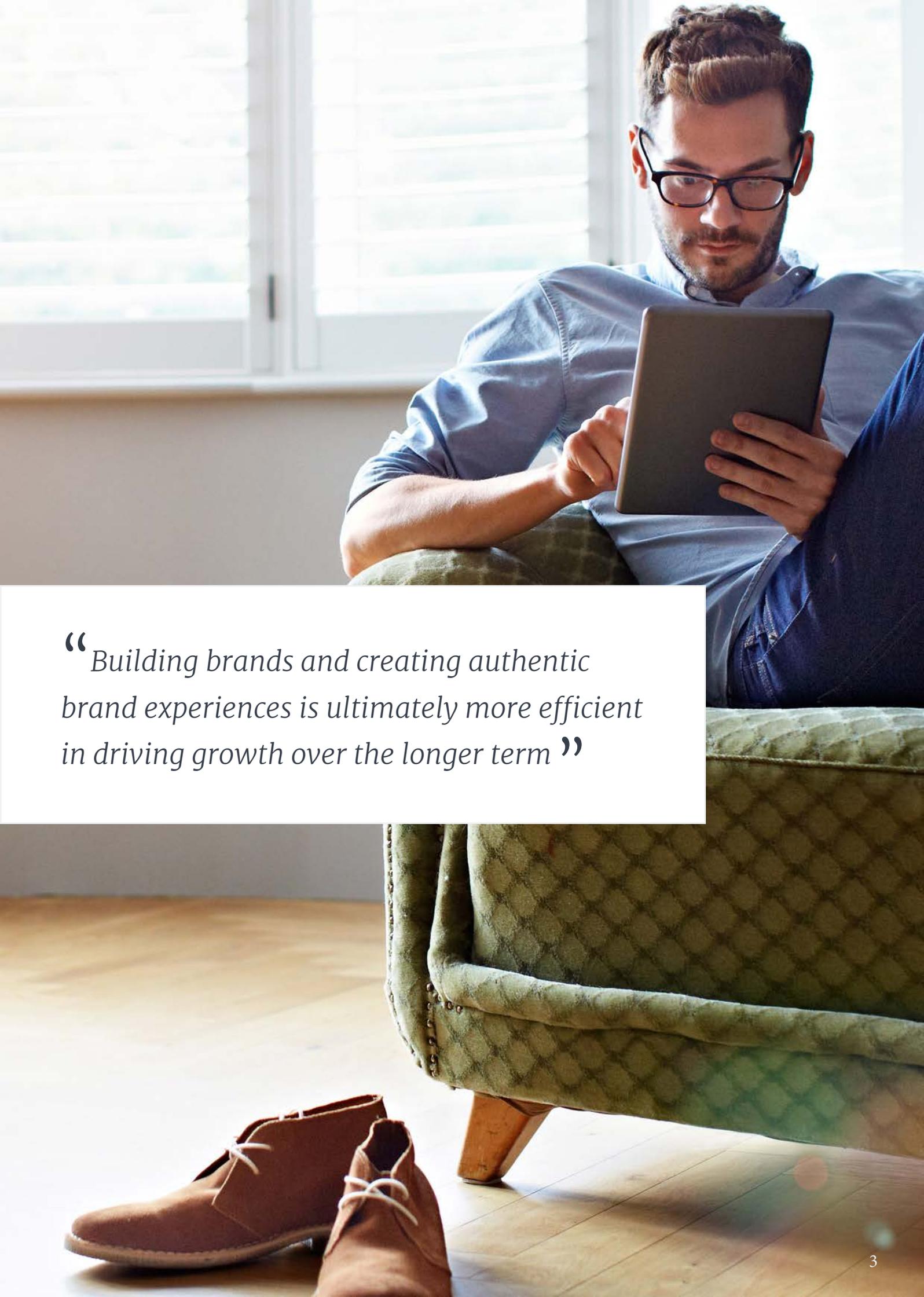


*Sell more stuff. That's all any business is ultimately looking to do. And the online space is a significant channel for sales for many brands. For some businesses, selling more stuff is the only thing that matters in the short term. We know that building brands and creating authentic brand experiences is ultimately more effective in driving growth over the longer term, accumulating effect and weathering challenging times and competitive markets. But that takes time. And tends to take significant longer-term investment. So how can we align these two ambitions without the detriment of the other – sell more product while nurturing the brand experience? For the purposes of this article, we'll focus on brand websites rather than third party retailers or selling via social channels.*

*While it would be careless not to acknowledge the chaos and crisis we find ourselves in, and recognise the strain it is putting on businesses over the globe, the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on online retail is not the focus.*

*What we want to explore is something that's certainly relevant to businesses now as they navigate this crisis, but not dictated entirely by the situation. Ecommerce was the fastest growing segment of retail market in Europe and North America, with combined sales in Western Europe growing from £152.20bn in 2015 to an expected total of £224.42bn in 2019<sup>1</sup>, according to figures by the Centre for Retail Research. That is a growth of +47.5% in 4 years. It will take some time to fully understand the impact of the crisis, but it's helpful to understand the scale of the ecommerce market and opportunity pre-crisis with the hope and expectation that it will recover and find greater strength in the future.*

*In this article we'll look at ways in which brands and businesses can approach marrying brand experience with ecommerce ambitions. It's always been a challenging balancing act. Just now, it seems to matter even more.*



*“ Building brands and creating authentic brand experiences is ultimately more efficient in driving growth over the longer term ”*

# Make sure your brand isn't an after-thought.

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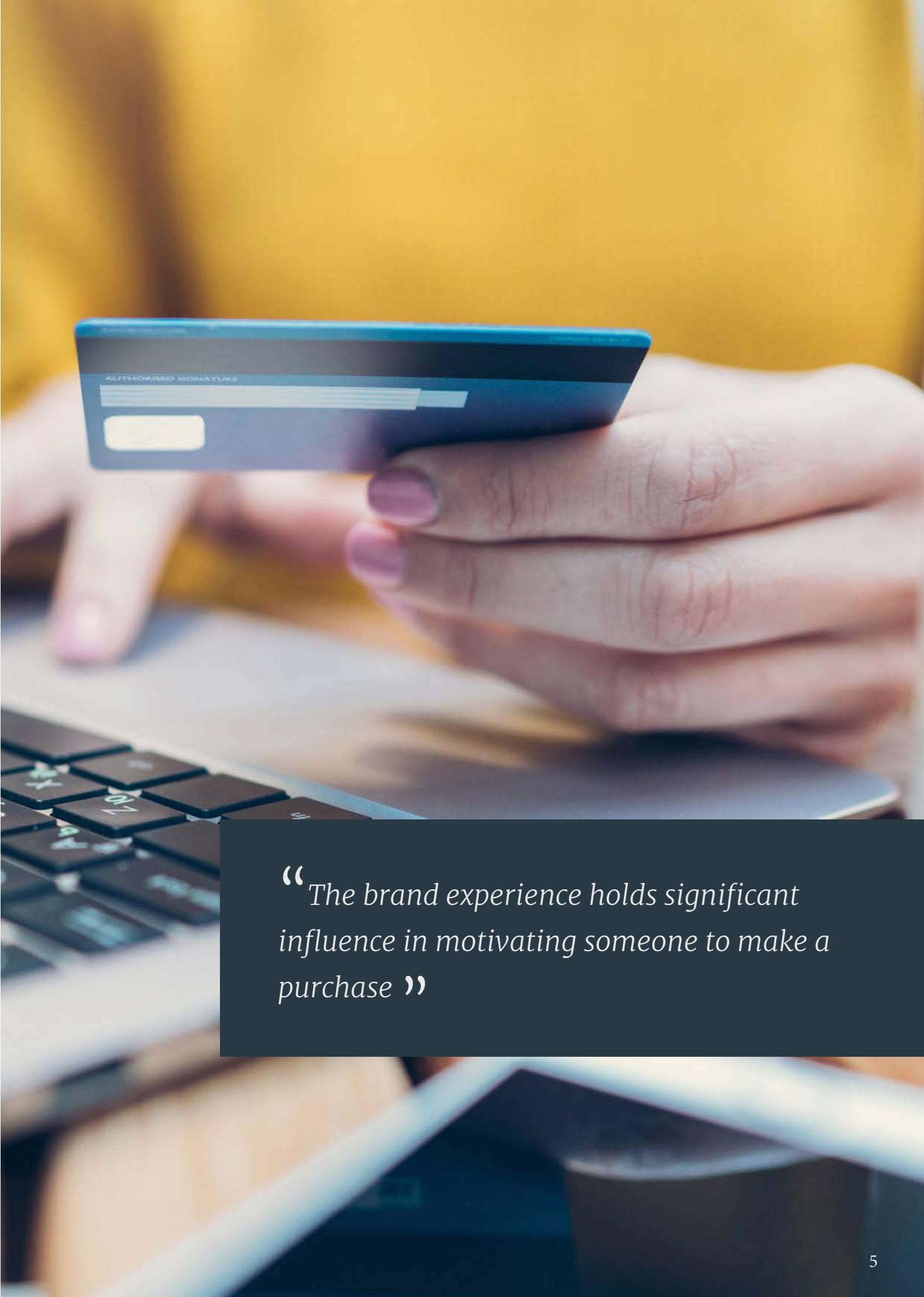
*When thinking about online sales, it's easy to ignore the brand experience and focus on the technical platform capabilities. To set the brand aside for another team to address, or when you have more budget, or more time to make beautiful films for example. But the brand is critical when it comes to the website experience and sales. Having a strong brand and clear story makes it much easier to create a compelling website experience from the outset. By setting a vision and value proposition for the experience based on the brand values and core narrative, we can articulate the brand story and interpret values and purpose for the website experience. We can make sure each little interaction is on brand and the transaction, a brand experience.*

*The brand matters in most purchasing decisions. We know that people buy the brand. And this is increasingly the case for any purchase that warrants a bit of thought. People buy the story behind the brand, what that brand represents and what that brand means for a person's identity by buying into it. The brand experience holds significant influence in motivating someone to make a purchase, and as such, should form a key part of the website strategy process.*

*At the very least alongside a selection of distinctive brand assets, having a clear brand proposition, set of values and tone of voice expressed through the website will ensure a level of consistency across the experience and lay the groundwork for sustained growth.*

## **Brand experience is not always brand OVER product**

*Certainly, in the case of online shopping through a brand website, the story of a product can be an effective brand experience. If told well that is. By weaving the product story into the shopping experience, brands can engage consumers with the brand story while shopping. Think of your hero products as brand ambassadors: Consumer-facing communicators with the responsibility for representing and sharing your brand's story, values and benefits.*



*“The brand experience holds significant influence in motivating someone to make a purchase ”*

## Focus on the intimacy of relationships

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By intimate, we don't mean creepy, or physical (of course!), we mean connected and deeply understanding. IAB's **The Rise of the 21st Century Brand Economy** sets out that future retail growth will come from direct consumer relationships. In a recent report, Senior Analyst at Econsultancy, Lynette Saunders, explores how we can learn from the recent wave of Direct to Consumer brands in exploring how growth can come from creating exceptional and intimate customer experiences.

The website is an enabling layer of the relationship, connecting consumer to product for D2C brands. One critical layer within a broad ecosystem with the consumer at the core. The brand experience is seamless and connected across each layer and touchpoint. D2C brands recognise that consumers come to their website to shop first, having been energised on other channels. Engaging with the brand is a secondary intention, so the shopping experience must be upfront, with the brand weaved in to encourage engagement.

Mutual understanding is key to an intimate relationship, one where both parties understand each other on a deep level. Brands like Glossier, Everlane and Warby Parker prioritise and nurture intimate relationships through authentic communication, transparency and community experience. Both consumers and brand recognise what each other stands for, who they are, what they want, and how they can be mutually beneficial to each other now and in the future. It's a two-way relationship. And one forged by data.

D2C brands are meticulous in their approach to data. Emily Weiss of Glossier reportedly invested \$8.4 million in funding in technology to measure the effectiveness of Glossier social posts and how well products were performing. D2C brands recognise the value of knowing their audiences intimately and use every piece of relevant information intelligently.

Going beyond monitoring performance, the website can offer huge opportunities here. Making sure brand engagement is being tracked enables us to re-engage consumers, those who have demonstrated an interest in the brand by, for example, watching a video, downloading a catalogue, or sharing something with friends. Not only is the data used to create shopping experiences they know their audiences will love, data informs strategies to extend the relationship, grow the audience and improve the experience in the future.



*“ Mutual understanding is key to an intimate relationship, one where both parties understand each other on a deep level. ”*

# Make the experience valuable. Functional AND Emotional.

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## **Make it easy.**

*In some cases, brands create beautiful experiences that fail to convert into sales because they make it almost impossible for shoppers to find what they're looking for and buy what they want easily.*

*In others, brands try to run before they can walk and attempt complicated personalised experiences that overwhelm and confuse shoppers. Embrace simplicity.*

*The Accenture Pulse Check 2018 survey found that nearly half (48 percent) of all consumers have left a business's website and made a purchase on another site or in-store simply because it was poorly curated. Consumers can become overwhelmed with having too many choices or options. And their expectations are higher than ever before in terms of personalised experiences and comms, outpacing brands' efforts. Simply try to provide shoppers with what they want, when they want it. Make the shopping experience easy.*

*“Simply try to provide shoppers with what they want, when they want it.”*

*According to a survey of almost 3000 consumers by BigCommerce, convenience, price and free shipping were the top 3 reasons UK consumers across generations (X, Z, Millennial and Baby Boomer) chose to buy an item at a branded online store. And for Millennials and Gen Z, speed on branded websites matters 2.5X more than for Gen X and Baby Boomers.*

*This being the case, it's a good idea to explore ways you can make an experience more convenient for consumers, easier for them to interact with your brand and buy your product. Look at Click and Collect options, reward purchases with access to promotions, and of course get the basics right – make sure your platform is capable, your website is responsive and quick to load on all devices. By making it easy, consumers will have a positive experience with your brand. And that will go a long way to helping build a meaningful relationship and help bring people back to your brand website time and again.*

## **It's not all about functionality.**

*We know that people make decisions on purchases based on their emotions. Of course, there is a layer of rational thought which checks through the logic of our decisions, but the primary driver for making decisions is emotional. People are motivated by emotional drivers. They want to feel good about their purchases and have wants and needs to be met.*

*Tap into the other reasons people buy things and create content and website experiences that deliver on that front. They may be looking for emotional connection, respite from the daily grind, or quite simply entertainment. Add value to the experience wherever you can to enrich the shopping experience. And never, ever, underestimate the power of good creative in developing compelling experiences.*

*“Tap into the other reasons people buy things and create content and website experiences that deliver on that front.”*

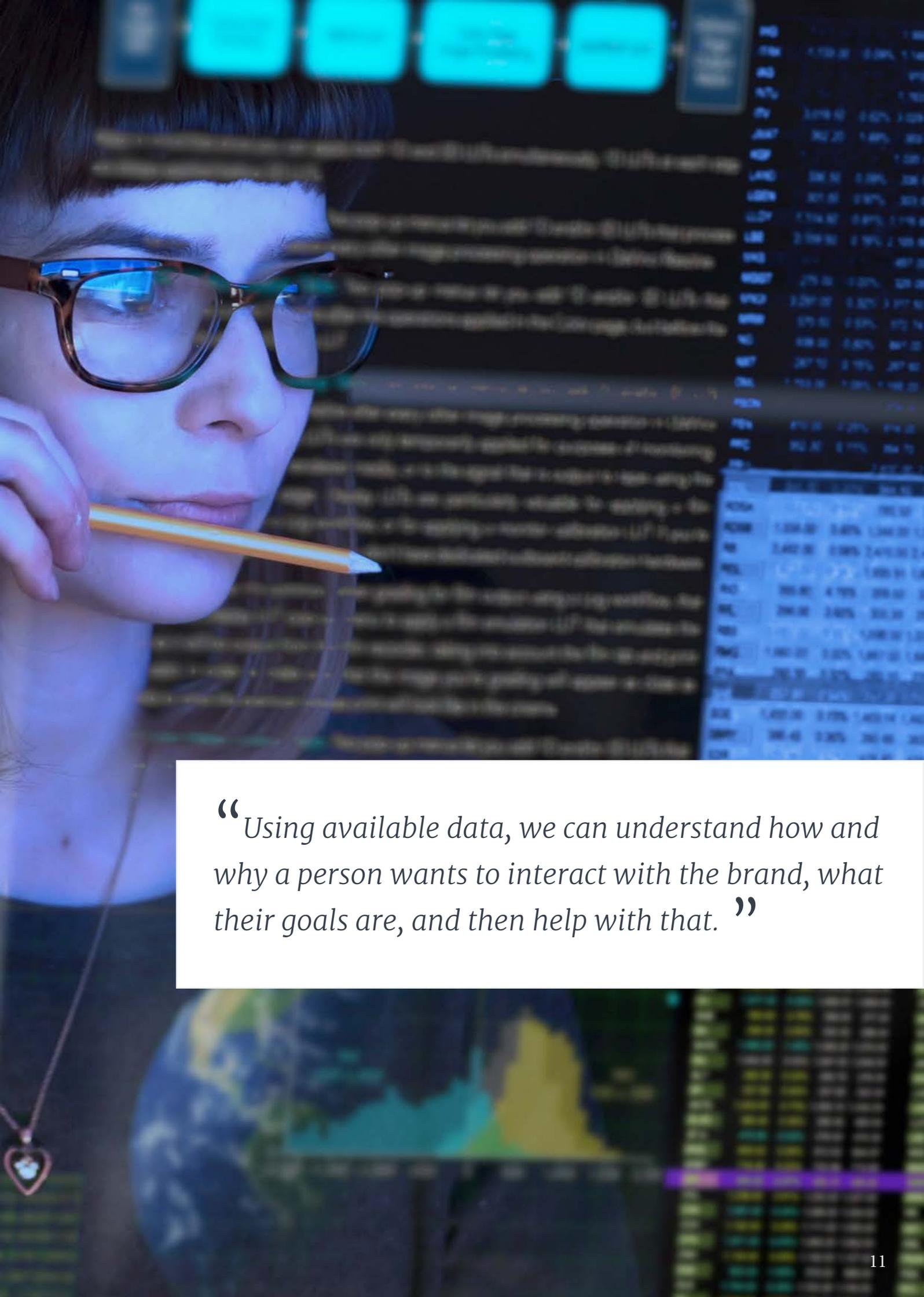
*For [Isle of Harris distillery](#), for example, the brand taps into that sense of belonging innate to island life that it encapsulates, and its customers seek out. Its Social Distillery and Journal sections focus on community and promotes a deep connection to the Isle of Harris. When developing the creative strategy for this website, it was a focus of ours to bring that element of the brand truth to life through the website experience. Similarly for IKEA, the brand recognises that its customers' driver is to create a home, somewhere they belong. And the website experience and communications reflect this. For fashion brands Finisterre and Sheep Inc, it's about building on their responsible fashion credentials and baking these into the website experience. From hero home page content through to search snippets, these brands present their sustainability and biodiversity stories and online stores in equal weight. Identify the context that surrounds your brand, the context that matters most to your target consumers, and focus on creating experiences that delve into the conversations you can*

## Put the customer first. *And put yourself in their shoes.*

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*We know that people want more personalised experiences that are useful and delightful. And we recognise that a brand's greatest competitive advantage is the opportunity to know their customers better than anyone else. It's tricky nowadays – people have multiple devices, social channel identities and even email addresses. However, an effective data strategy is key and worth its weight in gold. Using available data, we can understand how and why a person wants to interact with the brand, what their goals are, and then help with that. Going beyond web analytics, we gather data from social listening and keyword research to create a more holistic understanding of our customers as people: Their communities, conversations, personalities and intentions for example. Try to truly understand what it is that individuals want from your brand in a web experience. Put yourself in their shoes and consider what will nudge them towards purchasing your product.*

*Approaching the website content strategy in this way, putting the customer first, is also key. People need different communications and content from brands at different stages of the decision-making process and connection to the brand. So, consider that buying journey without being too formulaic. Content strategies that align the rational and emotional customer journey and craft content experiences for consumers at each stage of the buying journey are those that will help to meet ecommerce ambitions. Of course, making sure relevant content and messaging is delivered beyond the website is crucial in driving final sales, but ensuring your website has content that brings people closer to the brand, that covers off awareness and consideration through to purchase and loyalty, is a useful exercise. Think about the content that will engage consumers at each stage: What they want, what will resonate with them, and the information they need.*



*“Using available data, we can understand how and why a person wants to interact with the brand, what their goals are, and then help with that.”*

## Be human

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*We sometimes forget in this age of data that when it comes down to it, we're just a bunch of people trying to connect with other people who are or might be interested in what we have to sell them. And on the flipside, we're just people looking for stuff to make our lives better and more enjoyable.*

*In taking a human approach, we can embrace dialogue rather than marketing comms. And move towards a more relevant and tailored brand and ecommerce experience. By using data, we can begin to build profiles to recommend and curate a personalised experience, rather than a one-size-fits-all experience. Hello Fresh is a simple example of curating an experience based on data supplied by the consumer. With the right tools, all marketing and shopping experiences can be personalised to the wants and needs of the individual. Just remember to start small and simple. Making constant improvements to experience will help to get things started and maintain momentum. It's a very human reaction to feel overwhelmed by what may seem like a gargantuan task. So, take it step 7 by step.*

*“In taking a human approach, we can embrace dialogue rather than marketing comms ”*

*Great brand experiences happen when people feel treated as a human being by people who understand them. Whether that's in a bricks and mortar store, or a brand ecommerce site. It's that human element to customer service and experience that motivates people to buy products. Being human is critical to brand. And critical to sales.*

## Conclusion

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*Retail is an extremely competitive space and trying to motivate people to buy from a commerce-enabled website while creating a brand experience, is a complex task. Now more than ever, businesses have to align short term sales ambitions with longer term brand building for sustained growth. Both are equally as important in today's market. And must be aligned for success.*

*However, if you focus on creating a clear brand experience, champion your customer experience by putting them first, forging relationships that are intimate and based on mutual understanding and meeting wants and needs, making the experience valuable, both in terms of function and feeling, and above all approaching ecommerce with a human heart and mind, you'll be going in the right direction to reap rewards both on a brand and sales level.*

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<sup>1</sup>Figure unconfirmed in light of Coronavirus pandemic.



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