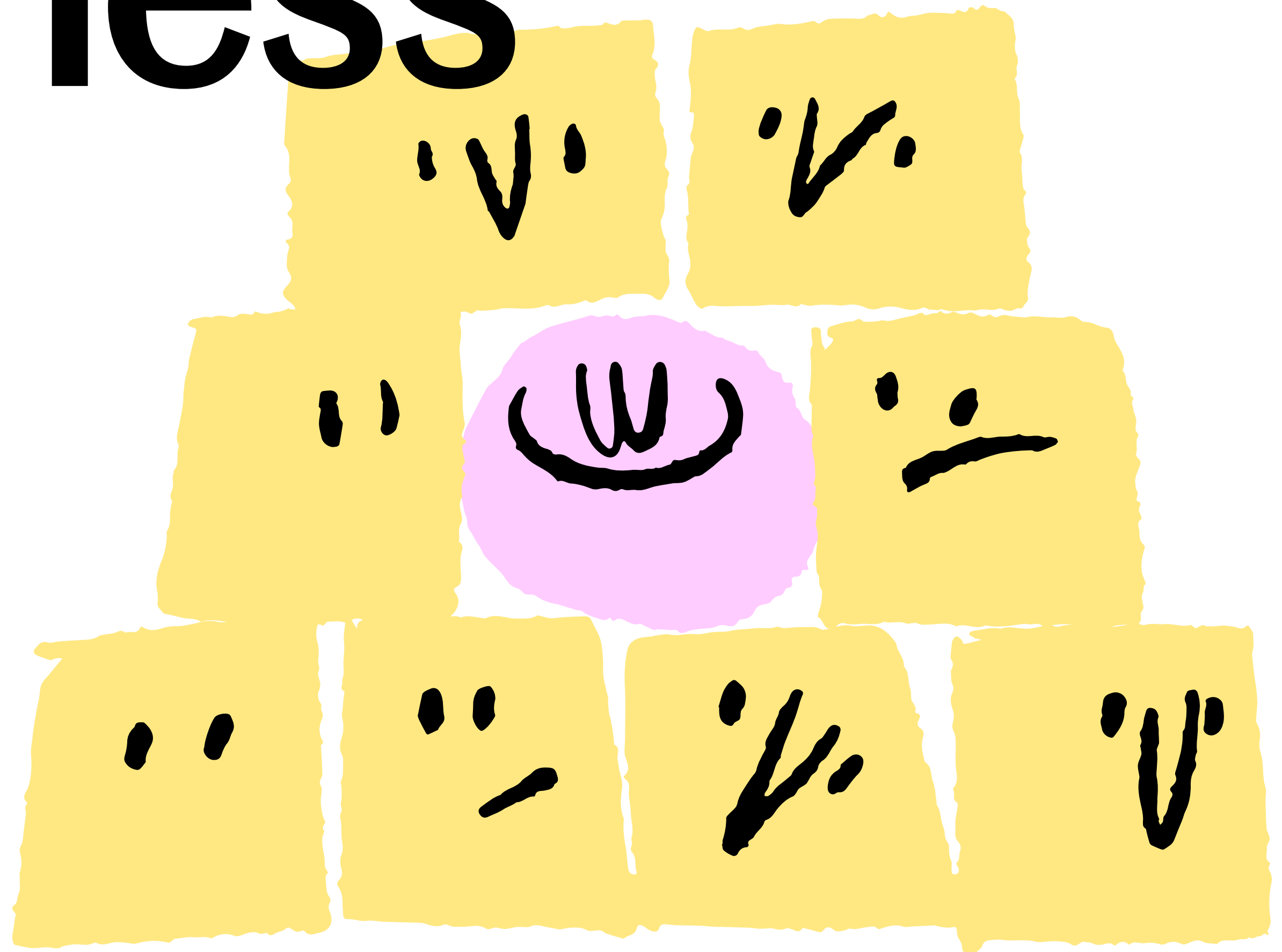


The distinctiveness deficit.

BORN UGLY*

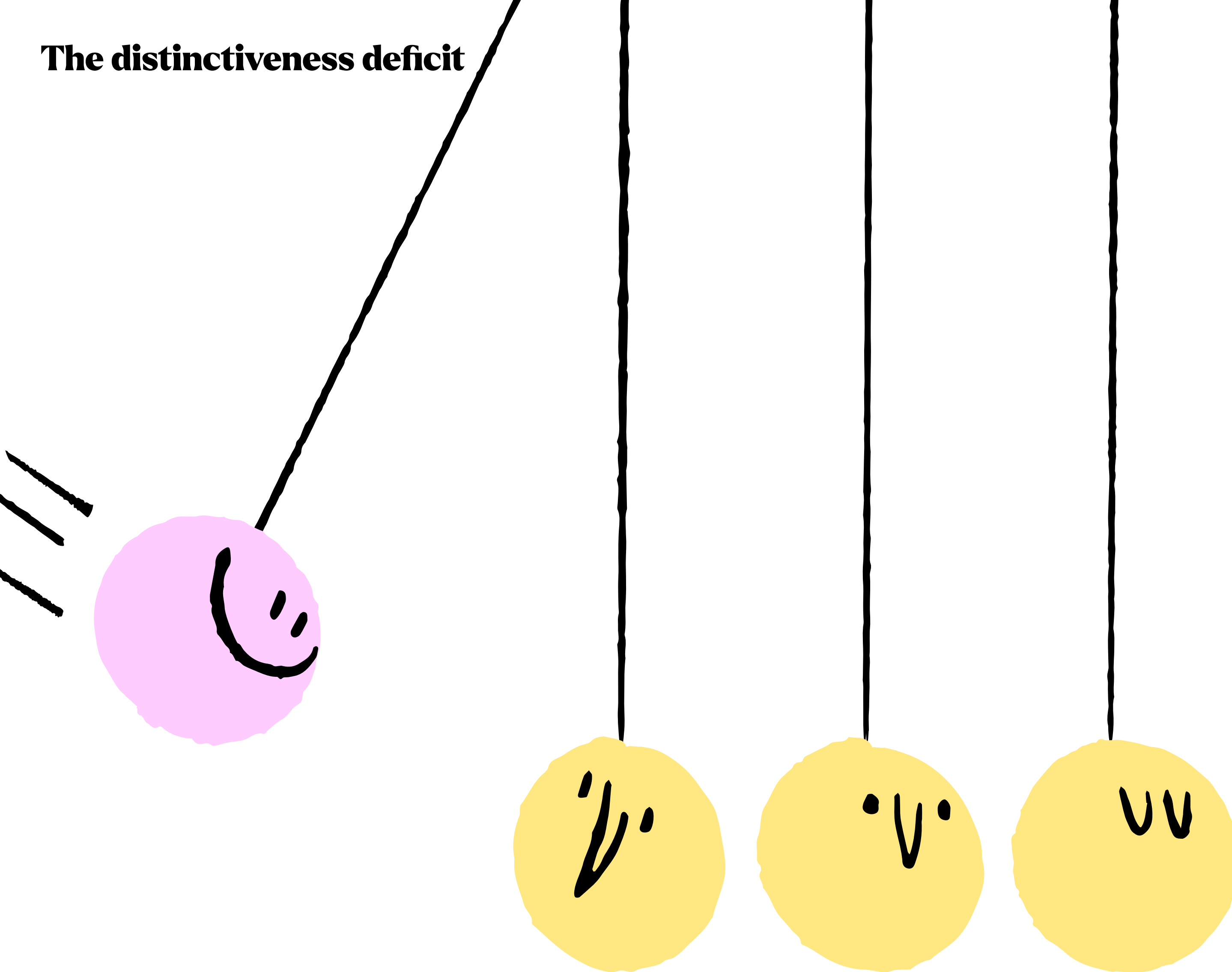
How AI is eroding distinctiveness and
how brand assets can save it

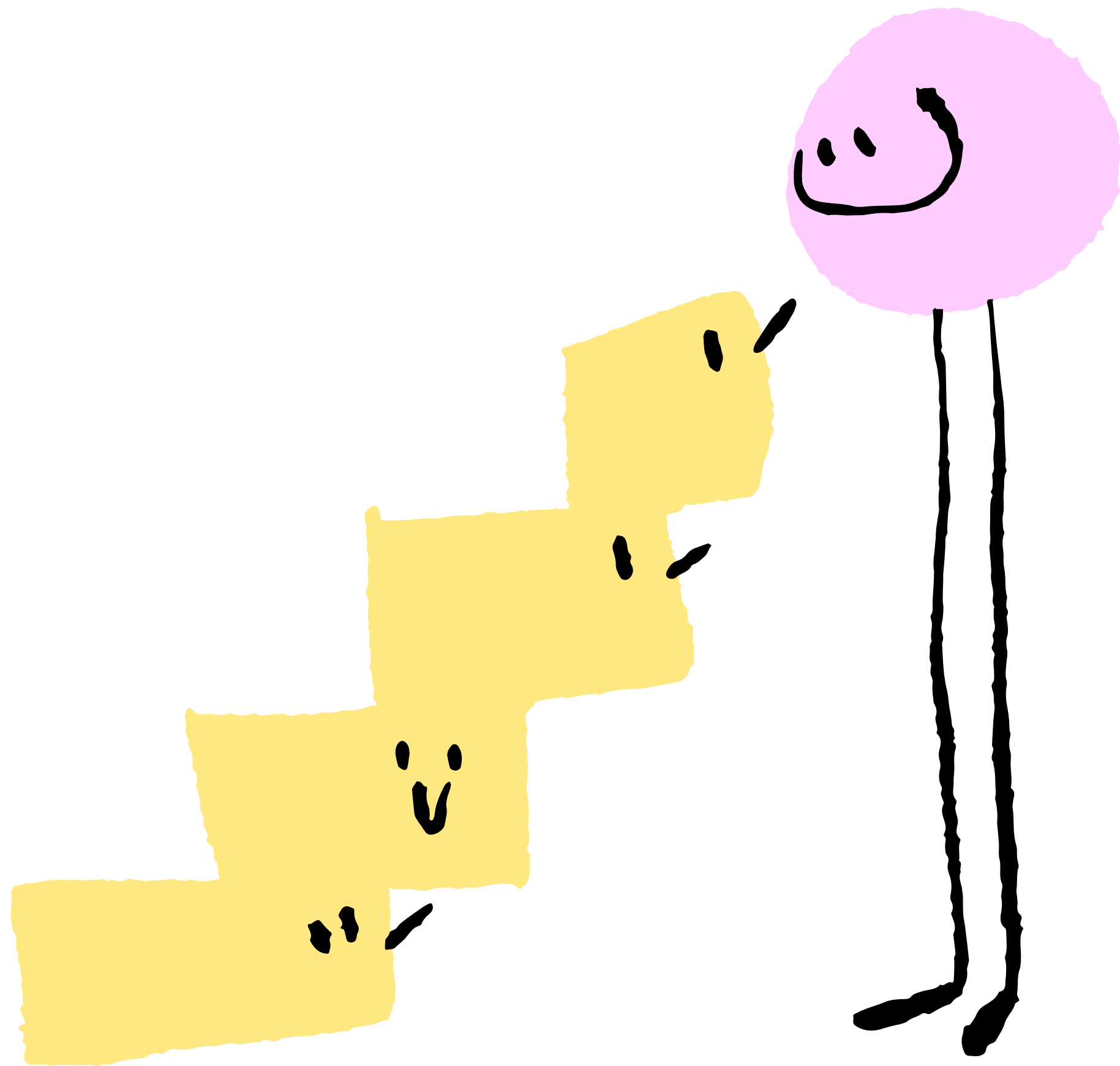


Brands live or die by their distinctiveness.

Many of us know this already, especially avid followers of Byron Sharp. Consumers don't make rational buying decisions; they grab what comes to mind first. And what anchors that mental availability? Distinctive brand assets. The brand marque, colours, format, shapes, sounds and cues that cut through the noise and make a brand instantly recognisable.

Distinctiveness is not a nice-to-have for a brand. It's a vital building block of growth. Without it, brands are interchangeable and unmemorable – and in the fast paced world of consumer brands, where consumers decide which products go in their basket within milliseconds, unrecognised means overlooked.





Distinctiveness is
not a nice-to-have
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It's a vital building
block of growth.

Nothing about this fundamental branding principle has changed. And yet, distinctiveness is under attack.

The proliferation of digital and social platforms has created relentless demand for content across every channel, every day. In the rush to entertain, perform and 'go at the speed of culture', brands are starting to lean on AI to deliver that volume. And in doing so, they're increasingly losing sight of what underpins successful brands.

We're not saying AI is the enemy.

Used well, it offers powerful solutions. The problem is that AI can't create difference or maintain consistency without human intervention. It feeds from prevalence and accelerates sameness, borrowing from what already exists to flood the world with content that looks and feels familiar.

This is marketing's new trap. Distinctiveness gets diluted, consistency slips and brands fall into a cycle of technology-enabled mimetic isomorphism, inadvertently copying each other into a bland, beige sea of sameness. It's happening online and may soon begin to happen on-shelf.

This paper is our rallying cry: for brands, but especially consumer brands – challengers and established leaders alike – to revive the fundamentals, double down on distinctiveness, and design with the consumer, not the algorithm, in mind.

In a marketing world that loves to talk about the 'death' of one thing or another, let's make sure truly distinctive brand assets live to stand the test of time.

The problem:

In the era of AI, brands face a rising tide of sameness. Distinctiveness is being diluted as the push for brands to churn out content at speed increases, sacrificing long-term recognition for short-term engagement.

The danger is that soon, brands will blur into one another and become forgettable.

The opportunity:

Brands that invest in consistent distinctiveness – by doubling down on both their unique story and the distinctive brand assets they use to tell it – will be the ones that stand out, build mental availability, and grow.

The question is, how do they do so successfully?

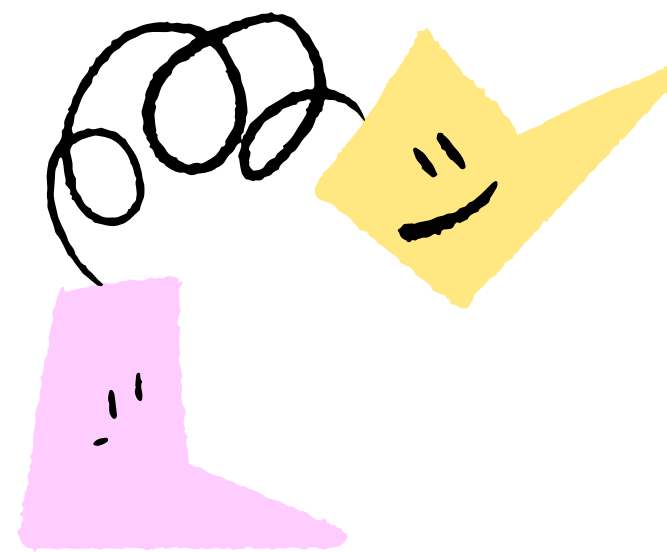


01 Escaping the imitation cycle

AI threatens brand uniqueness now and increasingly will in the future. It's already reshaping content creation and may soon extend to packaging.

Wherever it appears, AI raises the tide of sameness as it mimics and learns from what already exists.

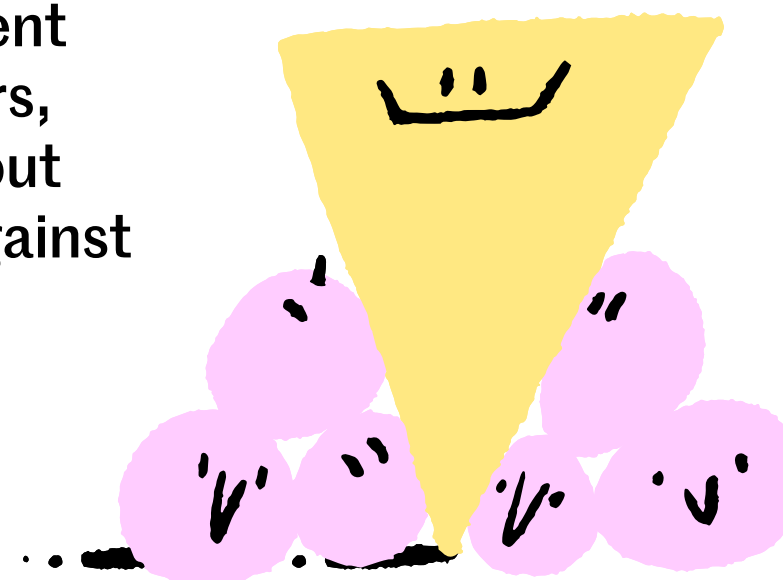
To stay ahead, brands must first differentiate themselves through a story only they can tell – a clear, unique brand positioning that guides all content and assets and ensures consumers understand simply what they're about.



02 Building your distinctive full brand thumbprint

Once that story is clear, brands need to build distinctiveness through a sufficient number of ownable brand assets that bring it to life across every channel and touchpoint. This means both primary assets (such as word-marques, logos, or colours) and storytelling assets (secondary visual, verbal, and sensory cues that extend the brand, reinforce consistency, and drive recognition everywhere). You need a fully-realised brand world.

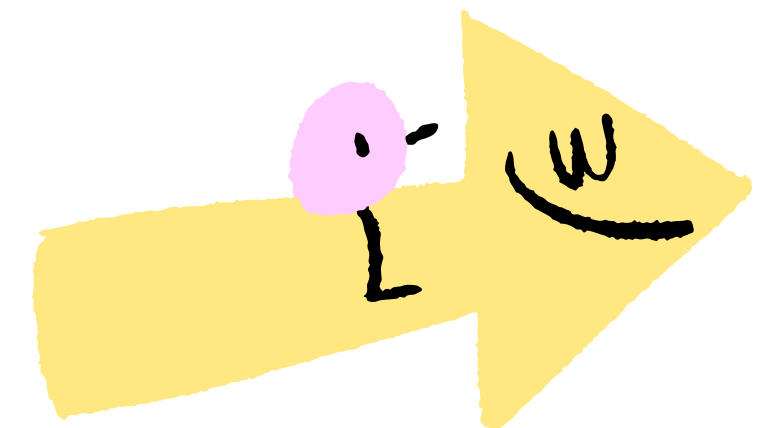
This depth helps content feel unmistakably yours, so your brand stands out and is remembered against an increasingly beige landscape.



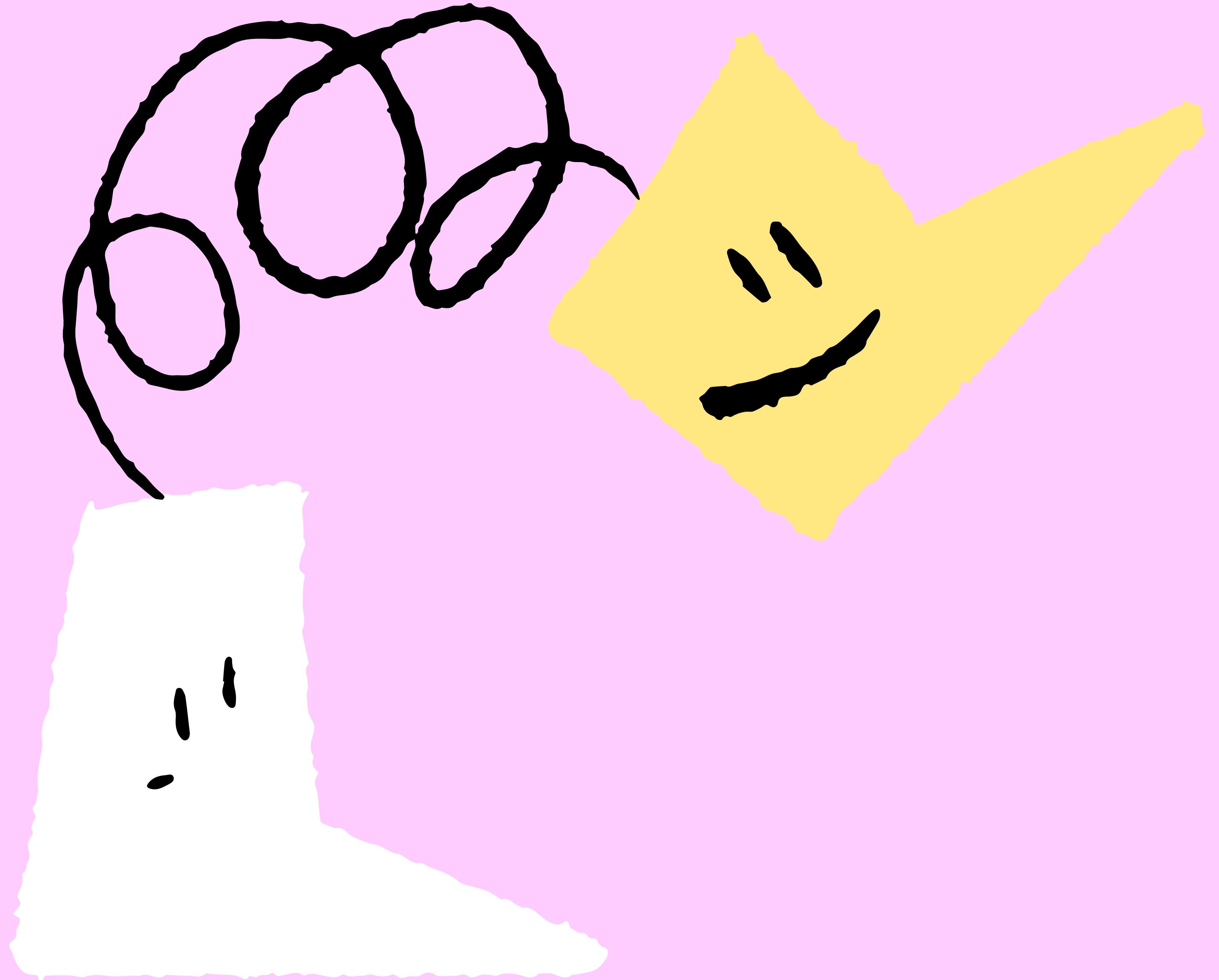
03 Designing distinctive brand assets that work

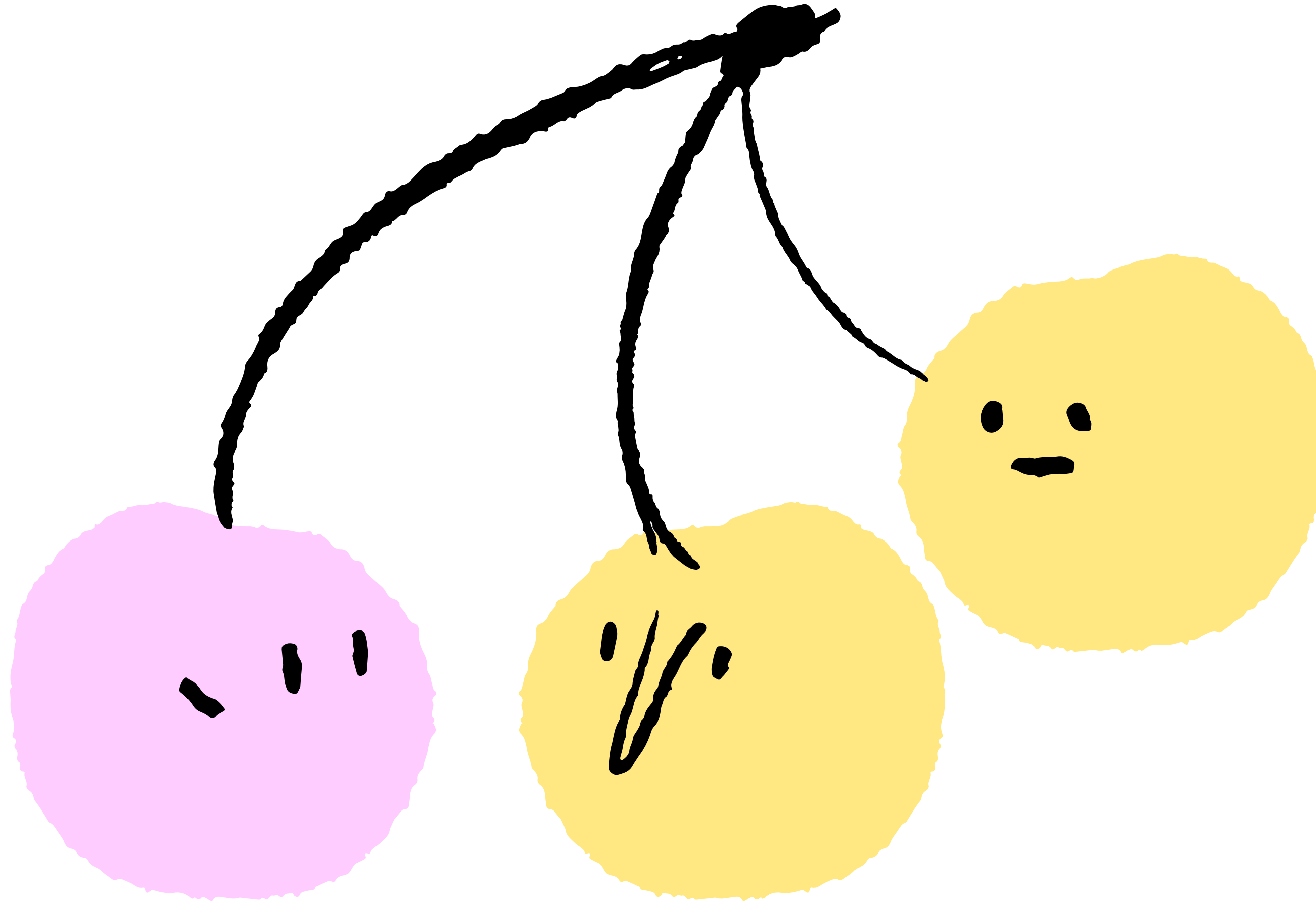
You now know why you need a complete brand world to rise above the sea of AI sameness. But how do you make sure you create distinctive brand assets that truly work? With most buying decisions made by our sub-conscious brains, brands need to trigger human instinct to win. AI-created content can't do this. It mimics patterns, but doesn't understand what truly moves people.

At Born Ugly, we use our proprietary Biomotive Triggers™ – rooted in neuroscience and behavioural psychology – to design distinctive assets that connect at a deeper, instinctive level, triggering emotion, inspiring trust, and building lasting brand equity.



01 Escaping the imitation cycle





AI is predictive algorithmic intelligence. By its very nature, it doesn't invent – it imitates. And while imitation has always existed in marketing, AI is now able to do it at a scale and speed that has never before been possible.

That means a long-standing tension in consumer marketing – the pressure to chase the new and next rather than build long-term distinctiveness – is amplified. Left unchecked, brands will fall into a dangerous cycle of mimicry, producing content that blends together and erodes the very recognition and memory that drives growth.

How this is playing out

This is already visible across digital and social content. Brands are under relentless pressure to stay culturally relevant and produce constantly. But what once required large budgets, specialist agencies, and creative craft can now be generated instantly and at minimal cost – by big brands, small brands, and private labels alike.

The result is a flood of work that looks and feels the same: recycled cues, short-term hacks, and entertaining moments that grab attention briefly but fail to build long-term memory. Even the advantages that once distinguished premium brands – polished design, execution quality, scale – are now accessible to anyone with basic AI tools.

In-housing creative production could accelerate the risk. When content production is placed in the hands of overstretched or inexperienced teams not free from internal pressures, there's a temptation to rely on AI shortcuts and neglect core brand principles. Objective measures of creativity, marketing fundamentals and distinctiveness get lost.

And if this sameness begins to extend onto packaging, brands risk competing on shelf solely based on price – a race that can only go in one direction.

Breaking the cycle

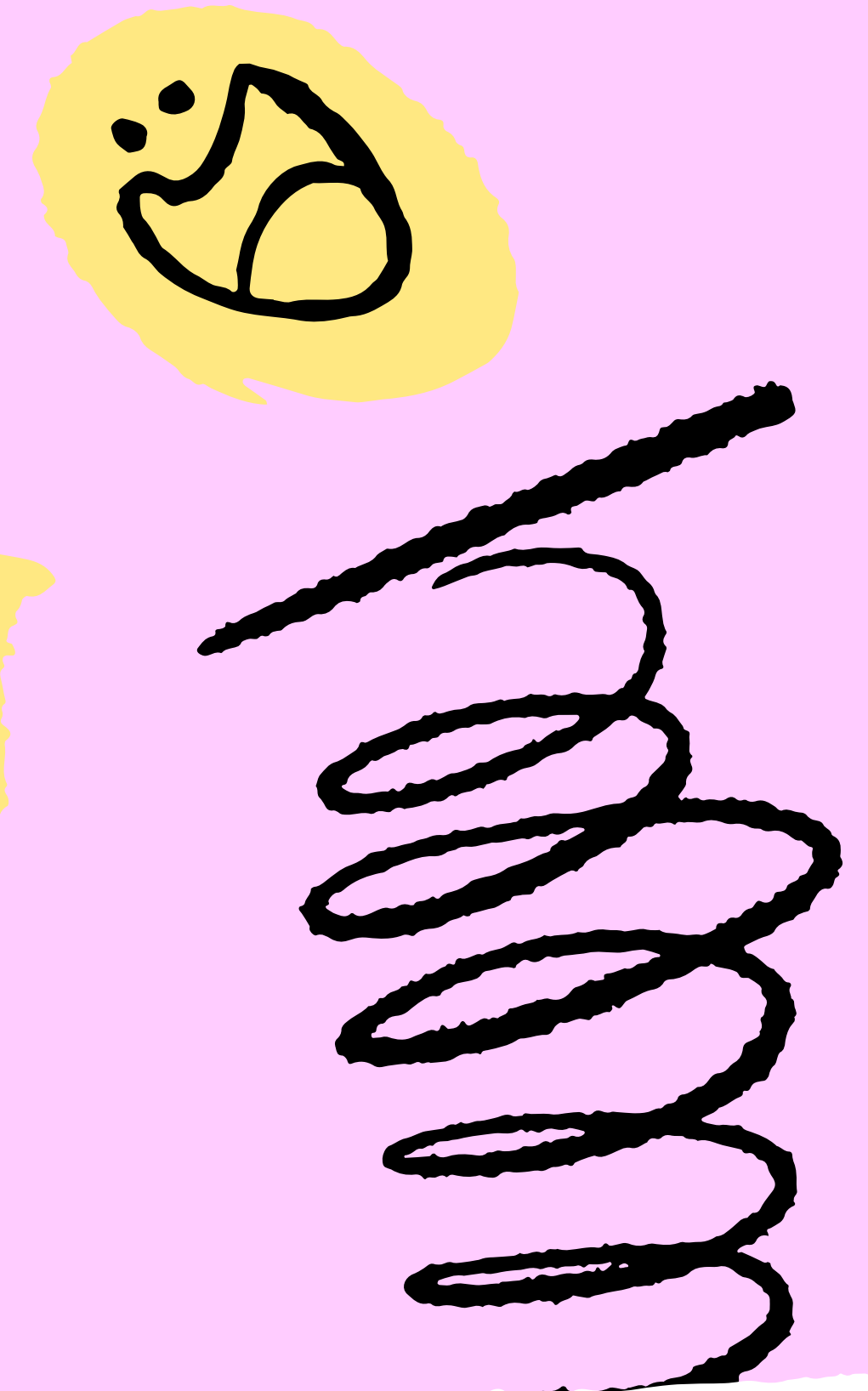
The good news is AI only erodes distinctiveness if the humans behind brands let it. The solution is to double down on what makes a brand memorable and recognisable.

The first line of defence is a differentiated positioning distinctively activated through brand assets across every touchpoint.

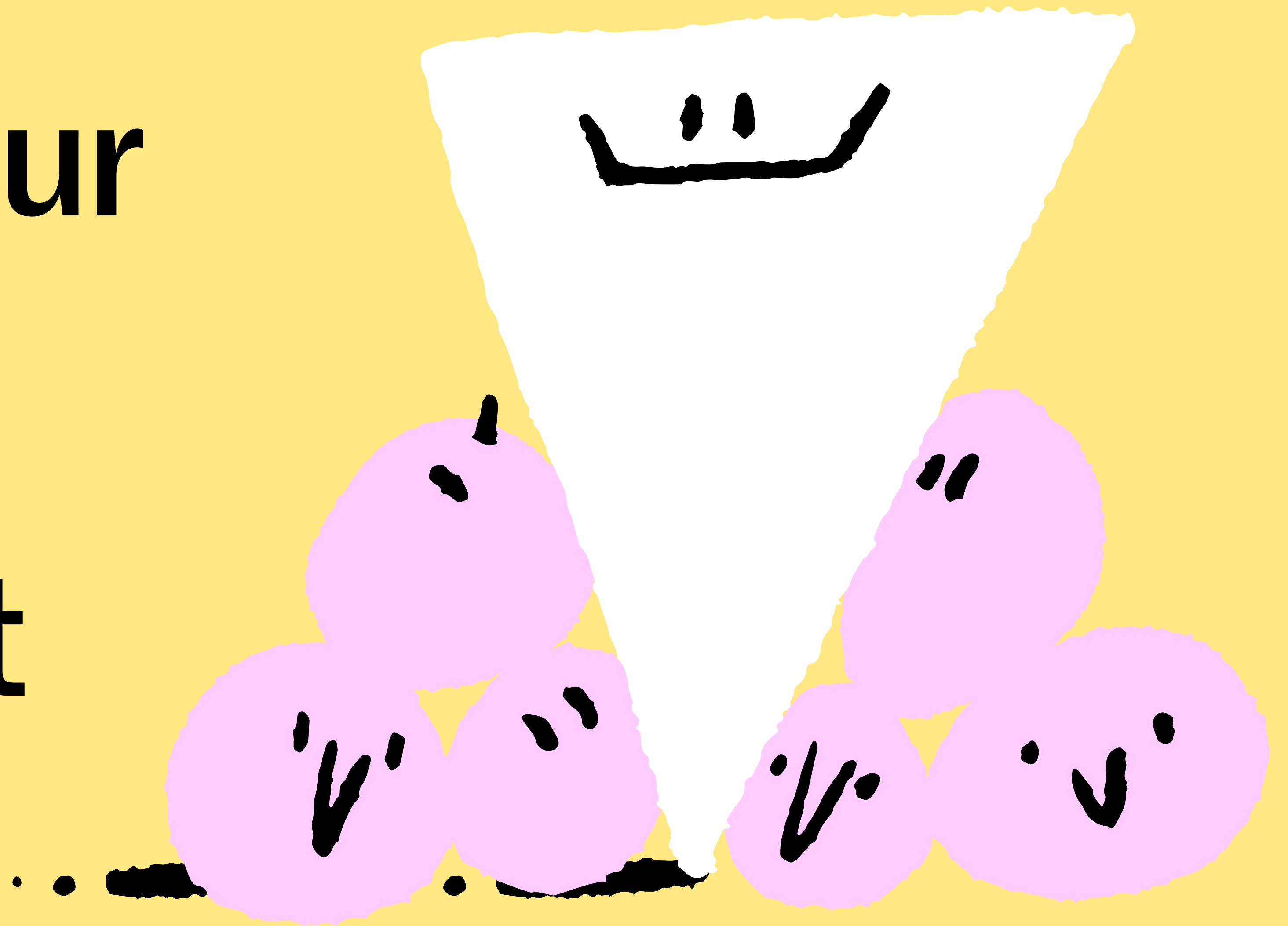
Defining a differentiated brand story means:

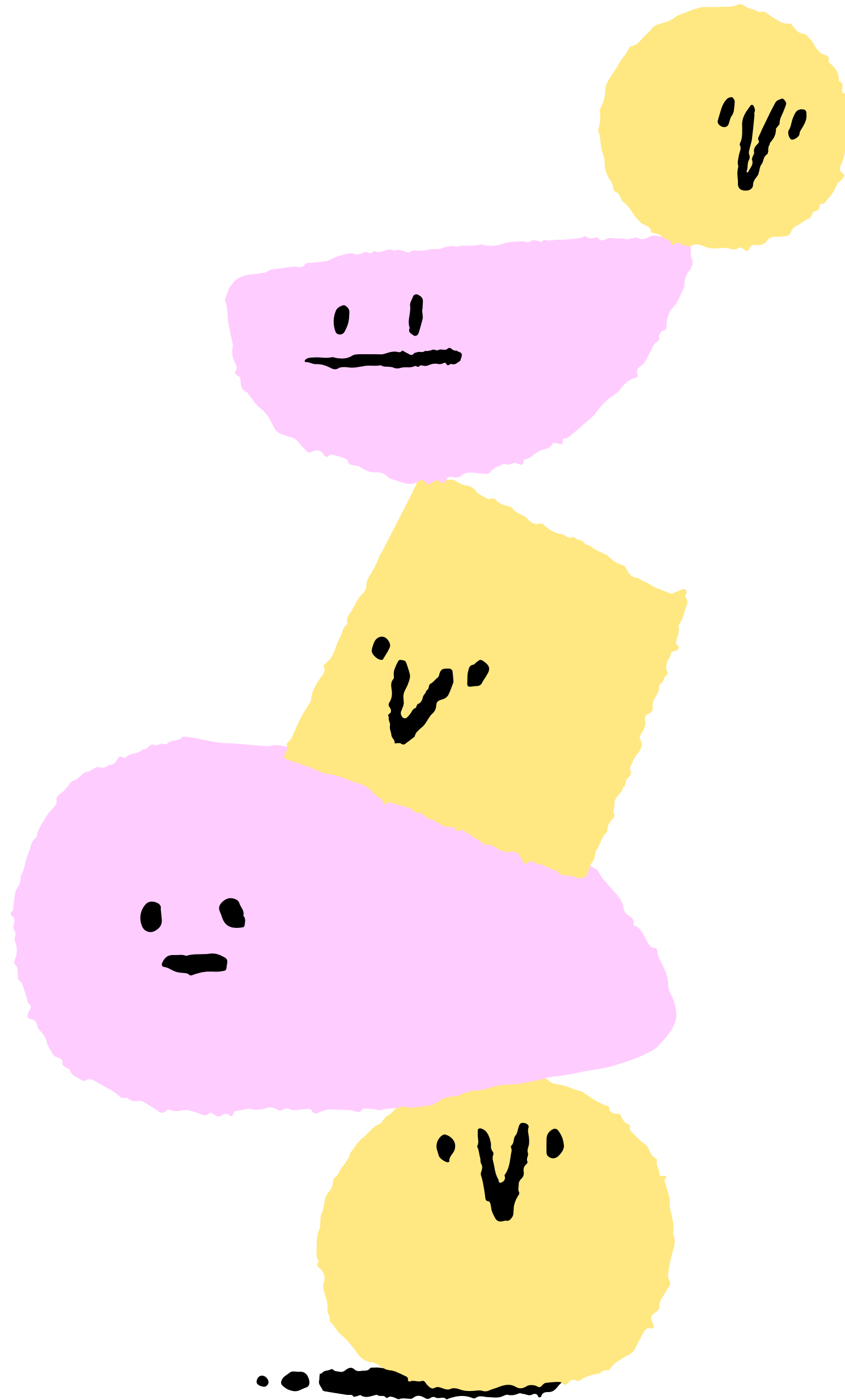
1. **Clarifying your role in people's lives – the problem you solve or the joy you bring that nobody else can.**
2. **Anchoring in your heritage or values – the truths that have always set you apart.**
3. **Articulating a clear promise – the benefit or feeling people should always associate with you.**

Once the story is defined, it becomes the foundation for everything that follows – including the distinctive assets that bring it to life, which we explore next.



02 Building your distinctive full brand thumbprint





Once you've defined a unique brand story, the next challenge is bringing it to life everywhere your brand shows up. In a world where AI-fuelled mimicry threatens to take the edges off points of difference, every piece of content and communication must activate distinctive brand assets, building mental availability so shoppers can spot, recall, and choose the brand instantly.

But the solution to sameness isn't only to consistently double down on a few distinctive brand assets – brands need depth. To be truly unique, their identity needs to work like a thumbprint: layered with multiple distinctive elements that work together to create instant recognition.

That layering starts with core assets that are the anchors of recognition and the most immediate signifiers of identity. They say: I am here. This is me. But too often, they, the only asset a brand has, are applied inconsistently or lost in the melee of competing content. Even the strongest asset can't do it all and loses its power if it isn't used with discipline, or supported more broadly.

The distinctiveness deficit

To thrive across today's platforms, brands need support from storytelling assets: the secondary visual and verbal (and other sensorial) cues that reinforce consistency and build meaning over time. These might be a photographic or illustration style, a tone of voice, a motion language, a packaging format, or even a sound or smell. What matters is that they're uniquely yours. Ownable cues ensure that, even as AI makes imitation more likely, your brand remains its own.

Some of the world's most recognisable brands show how simple this can be in practice: KitKat, Coca-Cola, McDonald's. A single mark, a colour or two, a shape – instantly recognisable – anchored by consistent storytelling and storytelling assets that reinforce the brand world across every touchpoint.

Brands that don't craft this broader thumbprint default to what everyone else is doing. They fall back on generic category cues that could belong to any competitor: stock fruit splashes, pouring shots, smiling families. Yes, stick a logo on top to claim ownership, but in reality it could be anyone's brand without that –

and AI is only amplifying this effect. It's not that these cues should be avoided. The difference lies in finding an ownable way to use them, so they feel unmistakably yours rather than just another category shorthand.

That's the power of building a distinctive full brand thumbprint. Each element layers onto the next to create a brand identity that is instantly recognisable, consistently applied, and deeply memorable against a world of lookalike AI content. Done well, these assets drive mental availability – the ability to come to mind quickly and easily at the moment of truth – and, with it, brand affinity.



Building your distinctive full brand thumbprint

“Ownable cues ensure that, even as AI makes imitation more likely, your brand remains its own.”

VFC: rebellion made distinctive

When VFC (Vegan Fried Chicken) set out to win over the fast-growing flexitarian market, the challenge was clear: build a plant-based brand that didn't look, feel or preach like the rest of the category.



The distinctiveness deficit

At a time when the vegan category was a wash of fifty shades of green, leaves and salads – we positioned VFC as a no-compromise foodie brand. A positive food rebellion. One that delivered all the greatness of junk food, with none of the guilt.

That idea came to life through a full suite of distinctive assets. Messy, indulgent photography with splatters of ketchup and toppling burgers. Spontaneous, spray-paint-inspired graphics. And a rebellious tongue-in-cheek tone of voice that re-framed the status quo, brought to life with a bespoke typeface and spontaneous spray paint graphics that celebrated freedom and flavour over worthy restraint. Together, these assets rejected generic category codes and created a bold, ownable world that felt fresh, distinctive, and emotionally engaging.

And it worked. In fact, post-launch demand was so overwhelming that the brand struggled to keep up with supply. All without a penny spent on advertising.

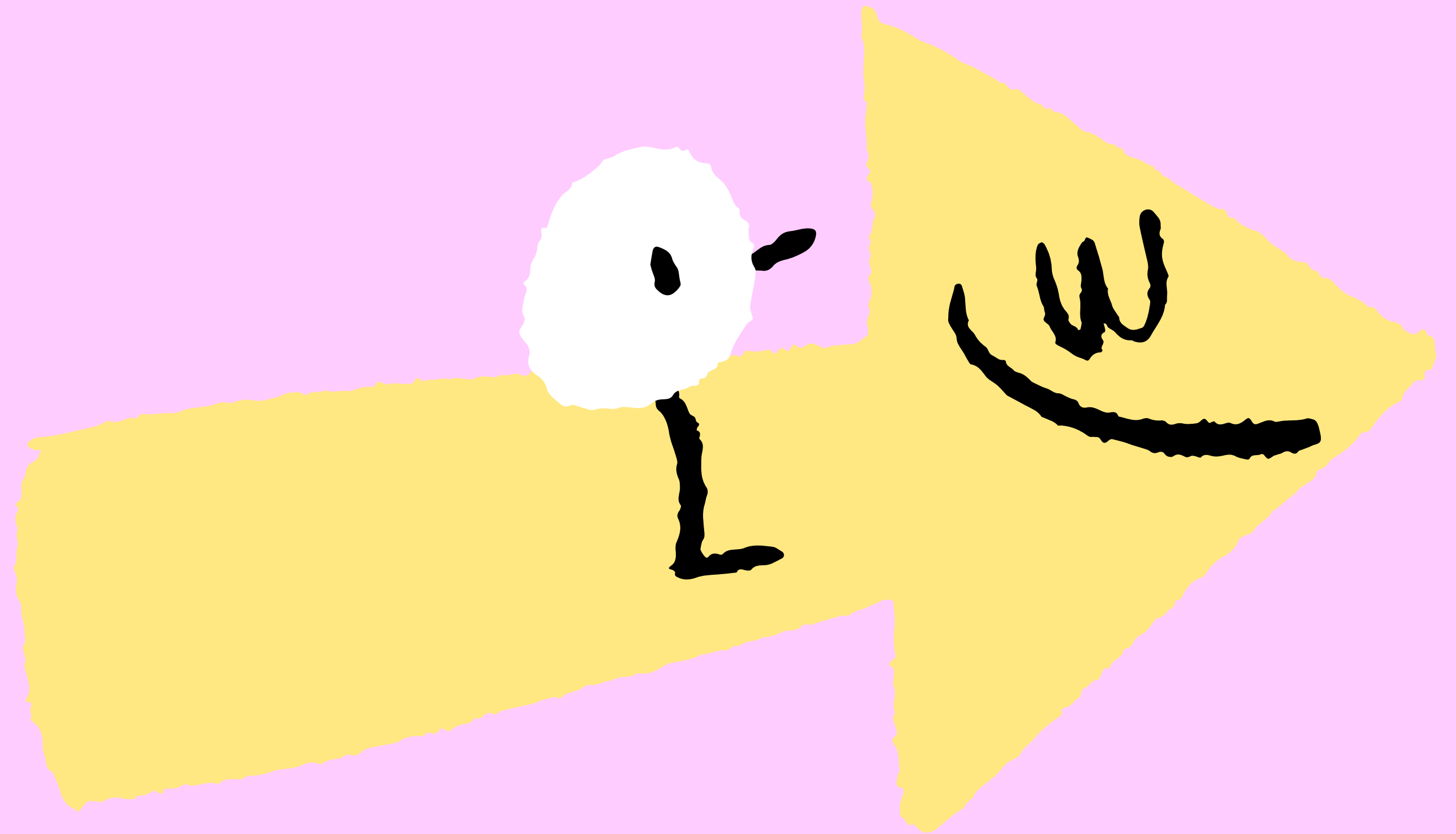
VFC proves the point: when brands build a complete thumbprint of assets, grounded in their story and amplified with creativity, they don't just stand out from the crowd. They stick.

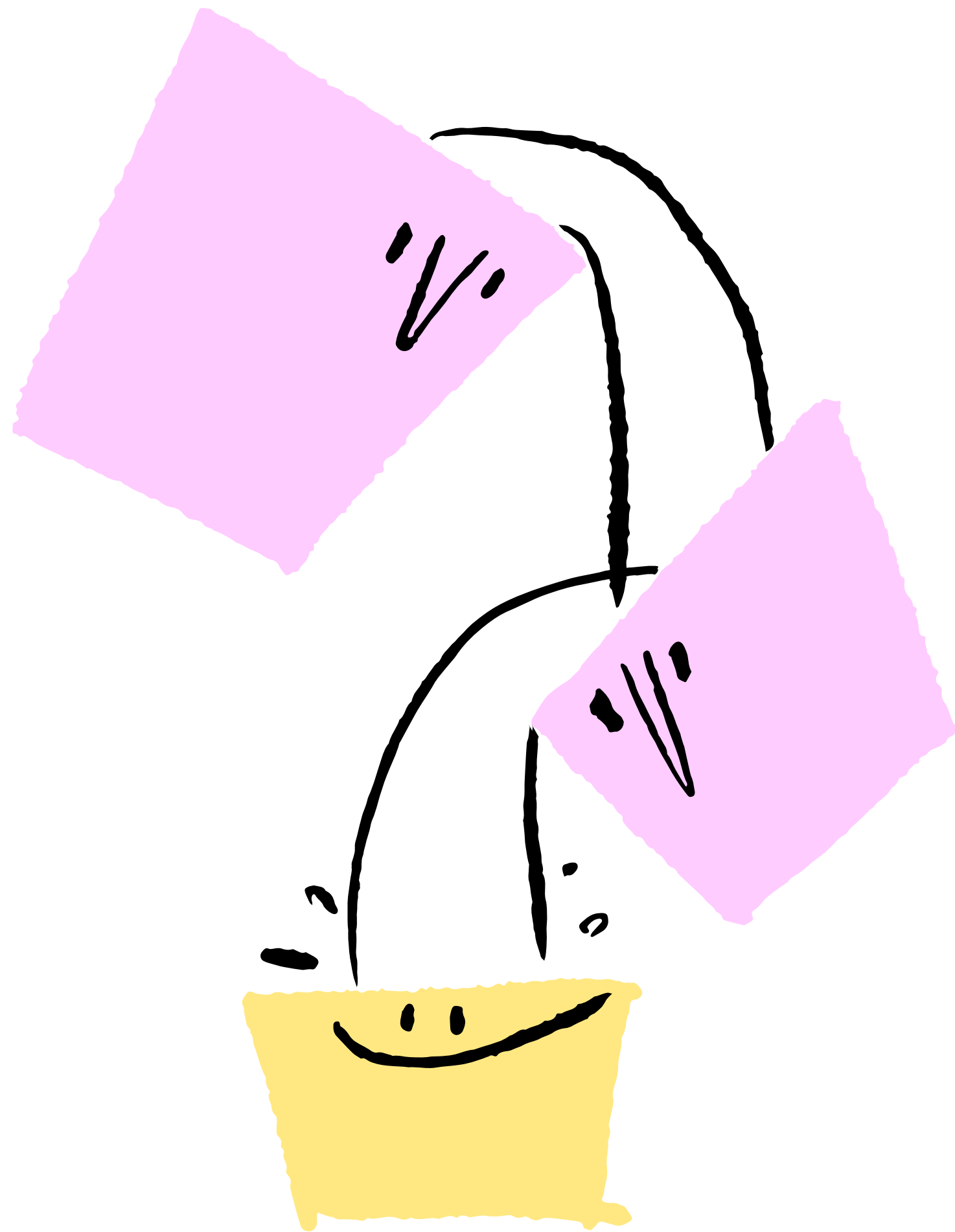


Building a full brand thumbprint



03 Designing distinctive brand assets that work



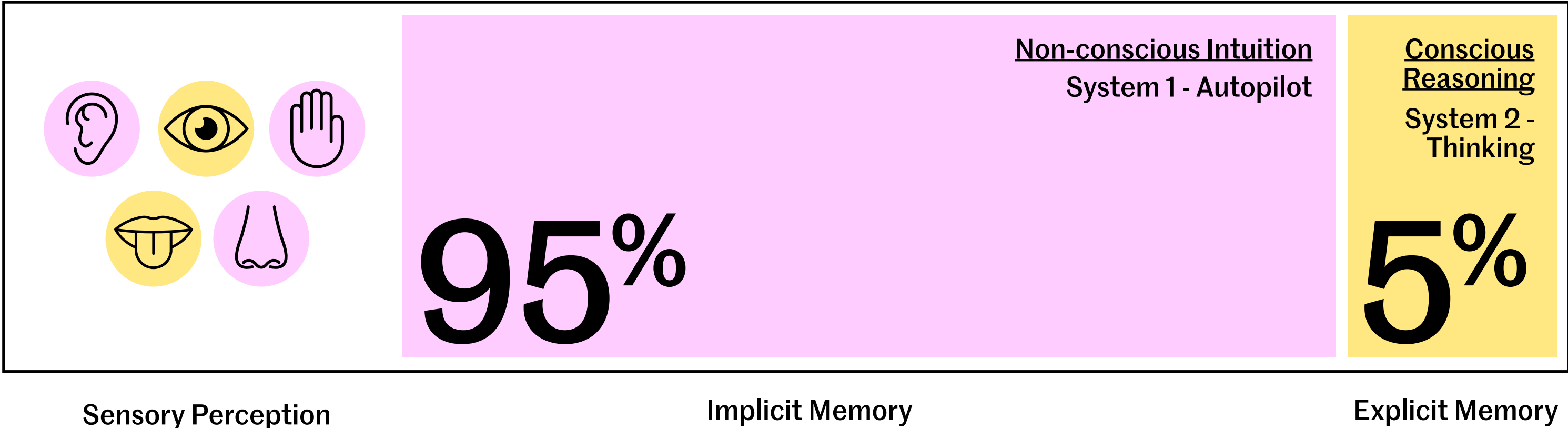


Most consumer buying decisions aren't conscious. They happen on autopilot. In fact, Harvard Business School professor Gerald Zaltman showed that around 95% of purchase decisions take place in the sub-conscious mind.

To ease cognitive load and survive, we are programmed to notice difference. We like to believe we're smart, logical shoppers, but in reality, we decide instinctively and lazily, and then post-rationalise those decisions.

That's how distinctive assets work: they operate at the level of instinct. They bypass rational

processing and lodge directly in memory. And this is where AI-created content falls short. AI risks mimicking patterns from the past, but it doesn't understand human instincts or emotions. It can flood the world with more of the same, but – without human intervention – it can't create the gut-level triggers that make brands memorable and loved.



A few years ago, we set out at Born Ugly to dig into the science of how our sub-conscious mind reacts to sensory stimulus. We'd been winning countless awards for effectiveness with nothing more than design intuition, but we wanted to know what we were doing and how to harness that knowledge more deliberately. Partnering with neuroscientists at Bradford University, we explored how the brain processes what it sees and feels.

‘Understanding these non-conscious triggers allows us to design with greater purpose and impact.’

and impact to create brand defining work. Out of this came our proprietary Biomotive Triggers™ – a series of paired tools that tap directly into instinctive responses.





A simple example is cusps and curves. Sharp edges demand attention because they might harm us, like a spear or a spiky cactus. At the other end of the scale, soft curves feel nurturing and familiar. That's why spiky shapes are often used for retail price flashes, while curves dominate in furniture and homeware. Both have their place – the skill is knowing how and when to use them either singly or together.

For us, Biomotive Triggers™ are the foundation of effective distinctive assets. They use triggers from the natural world and are part of our survival toolkit, we can employ these to create the feelings the brand wants to inspire. We apply them differently depending on the category and brand story, layering them onto the brand's narrative.



Done right, assets don't just look distinctive. They trigger emotional responses, embed meaning, and make a brand come to mind when it matters most. At its core, this is about designing for people (their instincts, emotions and memories) and for brands (their stories and touchpoints).

That's not something AI mimicry can achieve.

Eve: letting the moment unfold

Carlsberg's Eve, a lychee-flavoured shandy, risked fading into generic beer and soft drink codes. Once a premium choice for women in carefree moments, the brand was losing relevance with younger audiences and needed revitalising.



The distinctiveness deficit

We set out to rebuild Eve's distinctiveness by reconnecting it with its existing story: 'the pleasure that unfolds'. Using our Biomotive Triggers™ – we designed packaging and a visual identity that work emotionally as well as aesthetically.

At the heart of the redesign is the signature 'unfolding device': a flowing, ribbon-like motif symbolising openness, spontaneity and connection. Its dynamic curves cue joy and relaxation, tapping into the brain's welcoming response to fluid shapes.

Supporting this is the Eve Hummingbird, a new brand motif that embodies curiosity, energy and freedom – instantly recognisable and emotionally resonant. Reimagined fruit cameos, made juicier and more refreshing, further cue flavour and indulgence.

Together, these assets reject generic category shorthand, modernise Eve's image, and build instinctive cues that spark recognition and affinity across every touchpoint in an increasingly crowded market.

Designing distinctive brand assets that work



This is a call to
arms: for consumer
brands to double
down on story and
distinctiveness.



Saving distinctiveness in the age of AI

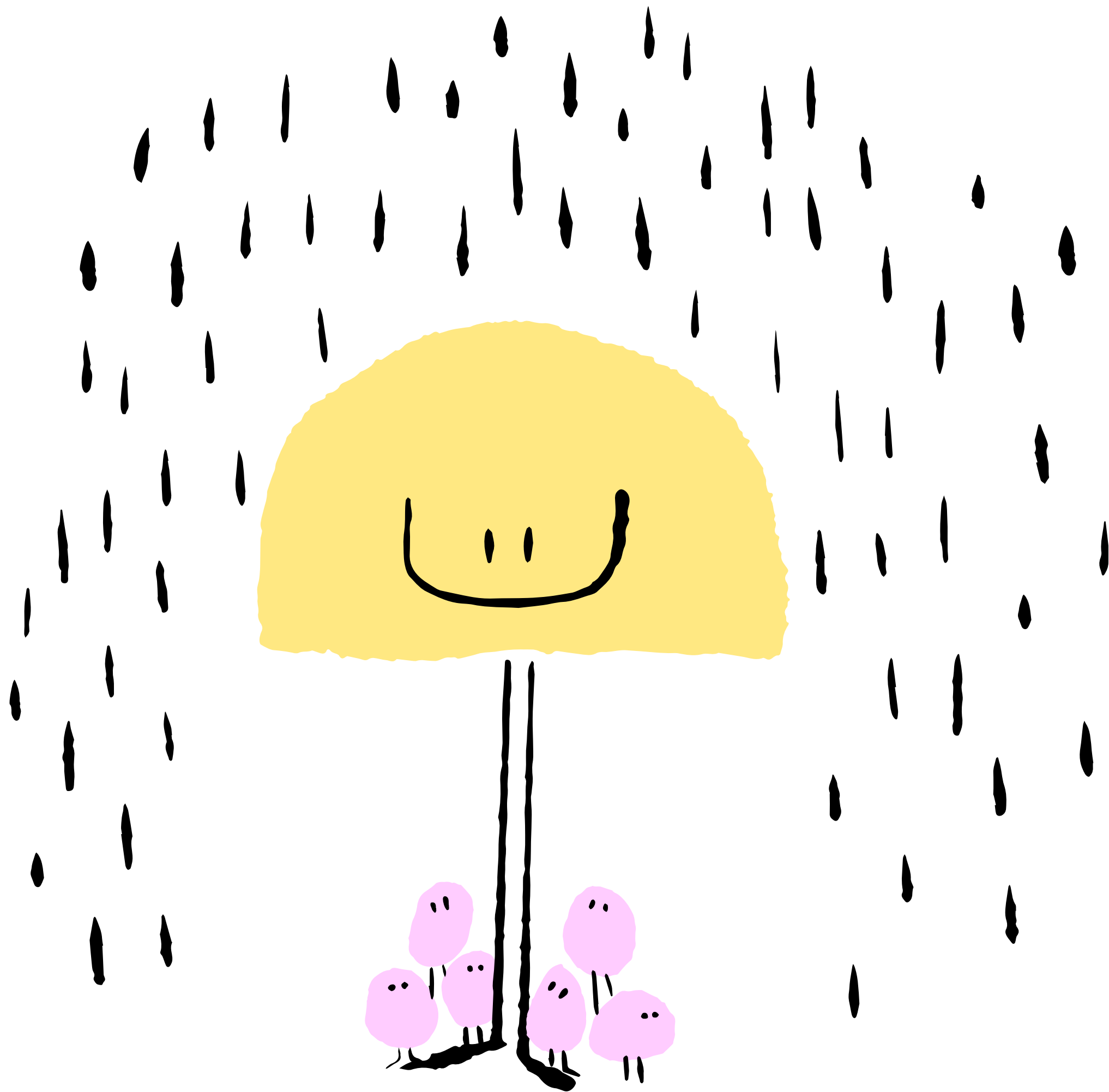
Distinctive brand assets aren't optional. They're the foundation for anchoring mental availability, the shortcut to recognition, the spark for affinity. But in an era where AI is accelerating sameness, they're under threat.

The brands that thrive will be those that resist the pull of homogeneity. Rather than purely chasing more volume or speed, they'll invest in the long term – by defining their unique story and doubling down on core assets applied with consistency, storytelling assets that deepen the brand, and instinctive cues that work on a subconscious level.

Get both story and distinctiveness right, and you create recognition, easy decision-making, and long-term brand equity.

‘This isn't about resisting change or rejecting new tools. It's about using AI for what it does best while protecting what matters most: your brand's unique identity.’

This is a call to arms: for consumer brands to double down on story and distinctiveness. Build a world that is uniquely yours – rooted in brand truth, applied with discipline, and built for lasting resonance.



In a world of sameness, distinctiveness is your greatest asset. Protect it.

We are Born Ugly:

In a world that tries to dazzle by forever blowing
bubbles, we poke through...

No swagger.

All grit.

And just brand-defining work.

If you'd like to explore how Born Ugly can help you
protect and grow your brand's distinctiveness,
we'd love to talk.

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