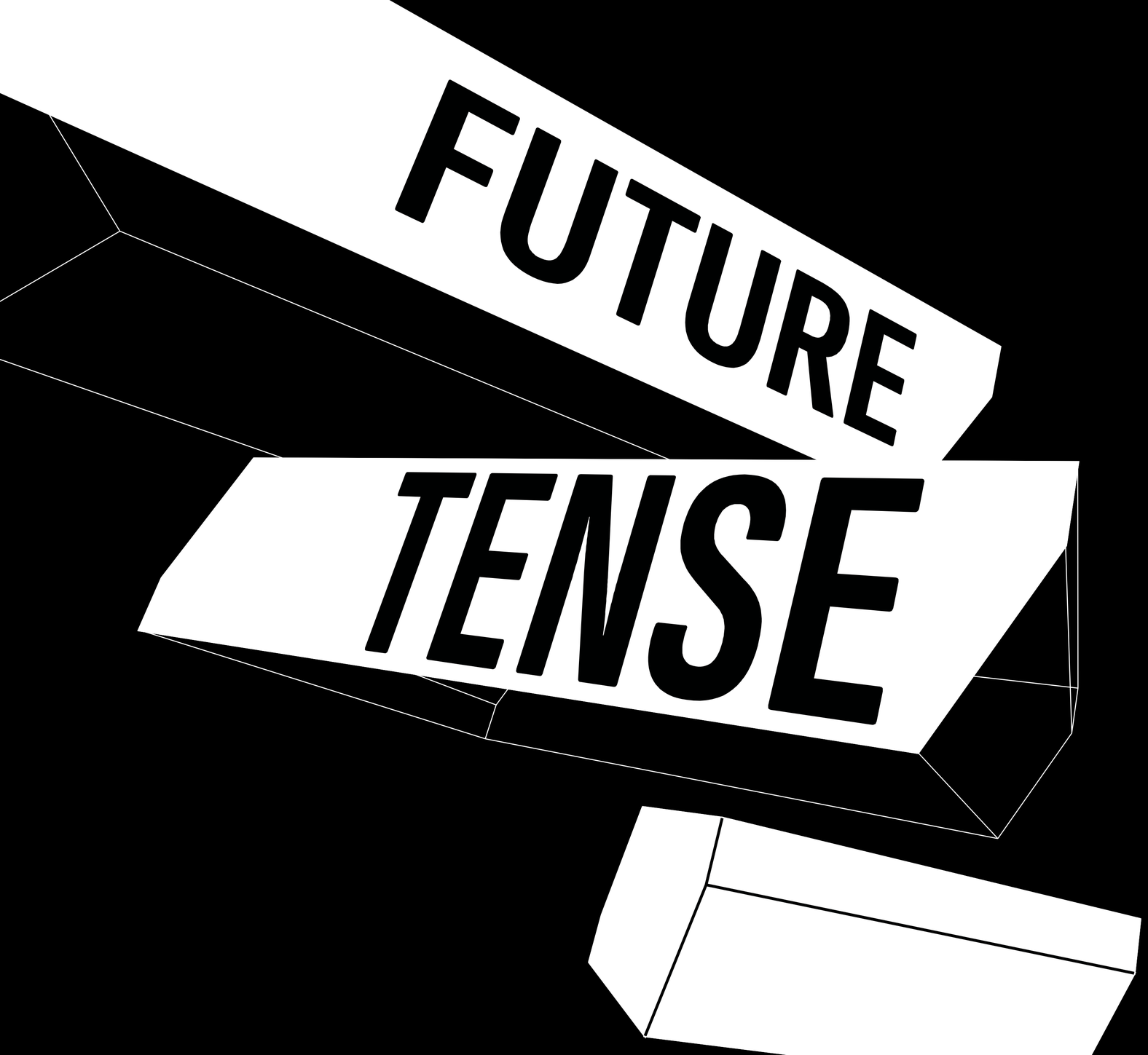

FutureBrand

NOVEMBER 2026

An Australian research study that interviewed informed business leaders about brand-building insights and strategies

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SETTING THE SCENE

BUILDING BRANDS, *INSIDE AND OUT*

Changing times. Fast-moving tech. Customers counting every dollar, and businesses counting every dollar too. The pressure on brand leaders is real, but so too is the potential.

Over the past ten years or more, our colleagues at FutureBrand around the world have conducted a series of global research studies to track those changes, those innovations, those pressures on budgets and more. Those research studies have given us more than a decade of data to explore and understand the all-important intersection between brand perception and business performance, globally.

Now, for the first time, we have taken a deeper look into the Australian market to complement our global knowledge with brand-building insights locally: to know what's on the minds of Australia's brand leaders, and what they are doing about it.

After almost one hundred in-depth conversations full of considerations and questions, the answer that came up most pointedly wasn't out in the market. It was inside the building, namely leadership and culture, in response to questions about how purpose shows up in real decisions, where a brand must hold firm and where it can flex, and what builds trust or breaks it. The answers kept circling back to the distance between what a brand says and what the business behind it does.

But don't take my word for it, read on.

You'll find the collective voice of Australia's brand leaders sharing their first-hand experiences and insights into what it takes to build a brand, for today and tomorrow.

See you in the future.



Rich Curtis CEO, Australia

HOW WE LISTENED

"Juno exists to find real human truth in its purest form. That means not leading people toward an answer, but creating the conditions for them to express their views fully. It's the only AI researcher post-trained and built by research experts with the depth and patience to hear not just what people think, but why they think it. That's what makes this research study with FutureBrand not only so credible but also so insightful, with findings you can actually act on."

MICHELLE GILMORE – CO-FOUNDER & CEO, JUNO

In October 2026, we spoke with 89 senior brand and business leaders across Australia. Every conversation was led by Juno, an AI interviewer built by qualitative research experts.

They came from 16 industry sectors, led by financial services (20%), not-for-profit (17%), consumer and retail (15%), professional services (13%) and technology (12%).

Leaders were invited through a combination of FutureBrand's network of senior brand and business leaders and senior marketers from the Sydney Marketing Community, and they chose to take part. Everyone who did so received a complimentary ticket to an event hosted by the Sydney Marketing Community to launch this research study. Before the interview, each participant chose the role that best described their current or most recent position. Company size was not recorded.

70%

marketing leaders (CMO, CCO, head of brand or marketing)

62 of 89

20%

business leaders (CEO, founder, GM, MD)

18 of 89

10%

in other senior roles, from strategy to corporate affairs

9 of 89

HOW THE *INTERVIEWS* WERE FACILITATED

Interviews were conversational, not scripted. After the opening question, Juno followed up on what each person said, guided by three key objectives and asking for specific examples:

- How brand purpose shows up in everyday decisions, and in the experience of customers and employees.
- How leaders balance a coherent brand with flexibility: what must stay fixed, what can flex, and the tensions they have navigated. (This objective was explored in the most depth.)
- How leaders build trust with customers, employees and partners, how trust can be eroded, and what threatens their brand's success to 2027 and beyond.

Because each interview followed the participant contextually, leaders were asked different questions to fulfil objectives. Partway through, Juno showed a list of ten potential threats and asked each leader to choose up to three, then asked most of them which one worried them most.

READING THE *NUMBERS*

Leaders spoke about their own organisation, or the one for which they had most recently worked, so the findings reveal patterns across many brands and businesses. Every response was fed into Juno's proprietary synthesis system and reviewed by Michelle Gilmore, an expert qualitative researcher and system engineer.

Throughout the report, you'll find sample weighting alongside the voices behind them, so you can see where leaders agree and hear why.

- Figures show the share of leaders who raised something. Most are out of all 89 leaders. Where a question reached fewer people, the figure is out of those who answered it.
- Figures reflect what leaders brought up in an open conversation. A leader who didn't mention something hasn't disagreed with it.
- A leader can appear in more than one finding, so figures don't add up to 100%.
- Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. On small bases, each leader moves a percentage a long way, so read percentages with the count beside them.
- 'Key threat' figures come from the list, so they show what leaders chose when prompted, not what they raised unprompted.
- Quotes are verbatim, exactly as participants gave them, including their own spelling. They are attributed by role and industry sector only.

Juno reported what leaders said. The interpretations, the 'Put it on the agenda' questions and the recommendations in 'In practice' are authored by FutureBrand.

WHAT THIS RESEARCH *CAN AND CAN'T* TELL YOU

This is qualitative research with 89 leaders who chose to take part. It shows the patterns in this group and the reasoning behind them. It is not a statistically representative sample of Australian brand or business leaders, and no figure in this report is a market estimate.

Leaders described their own organisations, and they may present them favourably. Customers and employees were not interviewed, so what leaders say about employee and customer experience is their own view of it. Business leaders (18) and other roles (9) are small groups, so differences between groups are reported only where at least five people in the smaller group addressed the topic.


IN
BRIEF

AT A GLANCE

We asked almost 100 brand, marketing and business leaders what shapes their brand-building efforts today, and what stands to inspire or even challenge them tomorrow. They were clear about what matters, and candid about what gets in the way.

1. LOOK OUT ABOVE

Leadership and culture play a pivotal role in building brands. More specifically, leadership and culture beyond the brand and marketing team. Ask brand leaders for their single biggest threat and you see the role of business leadership rises to the top.

2. GET YOUR BRAND FIX

Almost every leader values the importance of strategic focus when it comes to defining and delivering their brand: a fixed position as a platform on which to grow, flex and stretch the brand. But, of course, the real test comes when the very standards that support the platform itself come at a cost.

3. OPEN TO IDEAS (AND TO INTERPRETATION TOO)

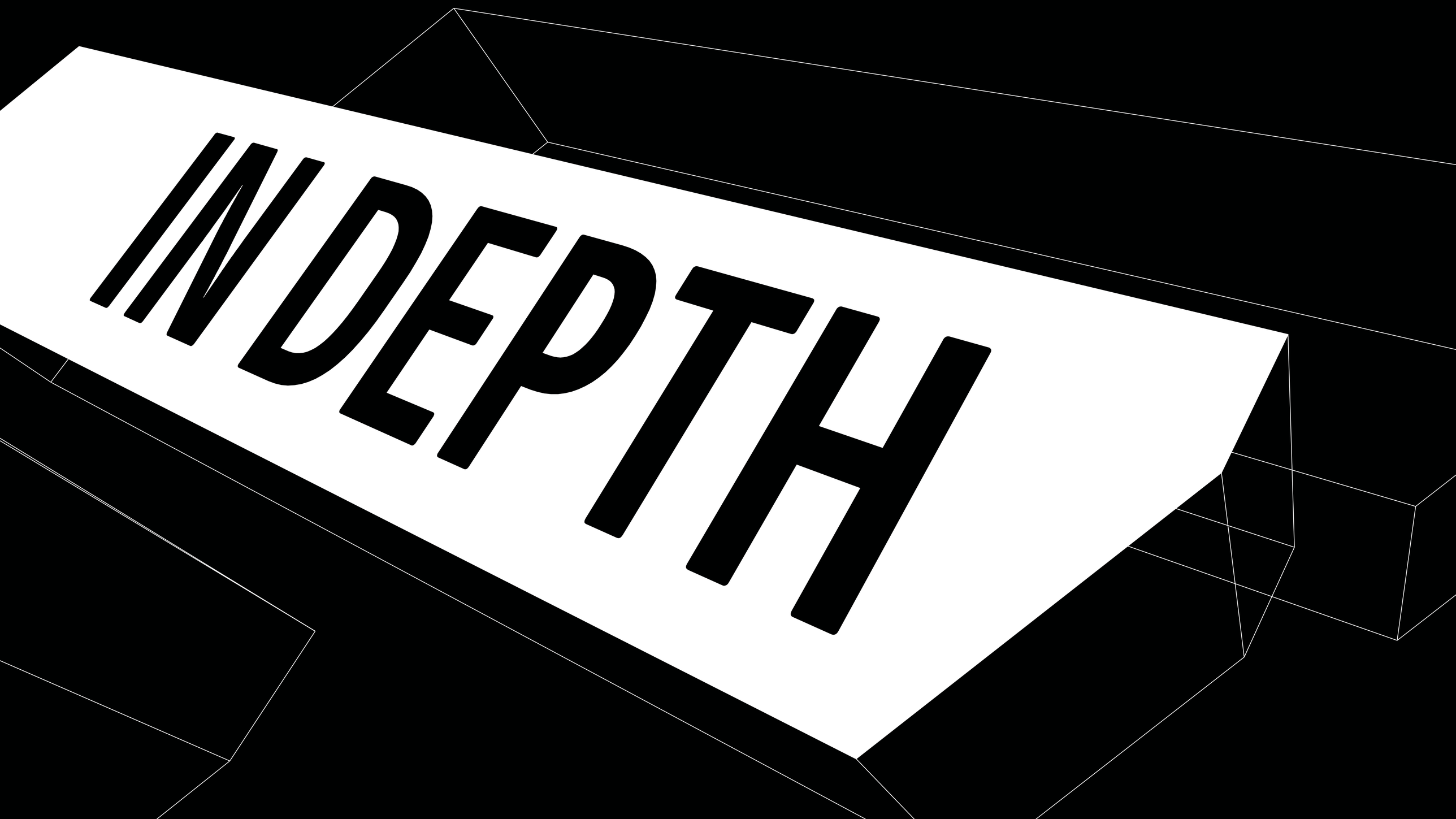
While it can be galvanising to learn that brands work in so many multi-faceted ways, it begs one question. If a brand can do so many jobs at once, what's the risk that the rest of the business will be left guessing which one matters most?

4. CAN YOUR BRAND TALK AND WALK AT THE SAME TIME?

Brand purpose resonates with brand leaders, they can tell you their brand's purpose and outline its principles. A subset of those leaders went the next step to describe it shaping what the business actually offers, thereby bridging the gap between brand and reputation.

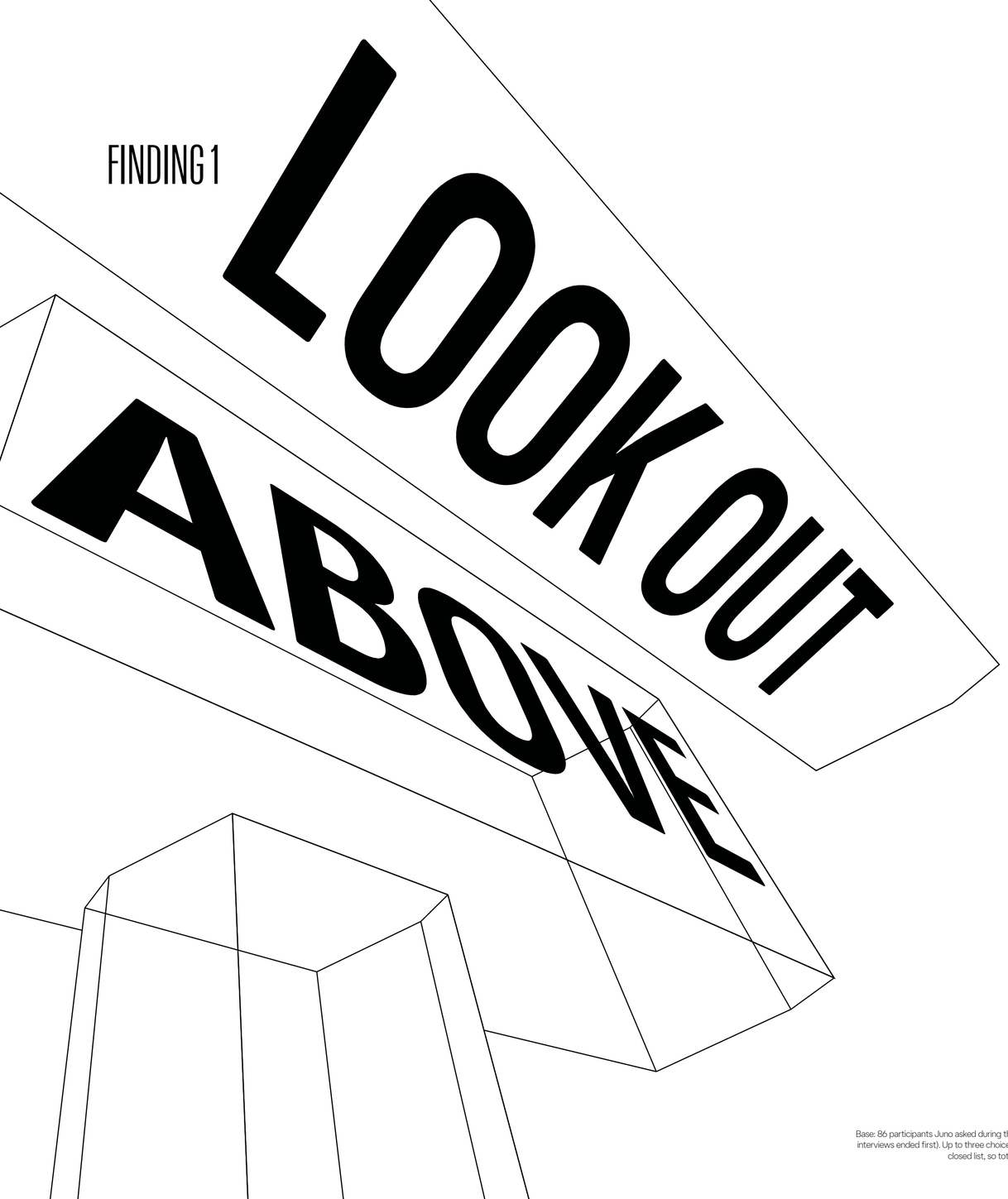
5. AI IS ON YOUR MIND. ARE YOU ON AI'S?

Globally, technology adoption and integration has been top of mind for brand and business leaders for the better part of the last decade. The same is true for Australian leaders. AI would seem to offer a massive opportunity for brands and businesses alike, but some leaders see the future more clearly than others, and they see an audience that's already recommending brands to their customers.


IN DEPTH

FINDING 1

LOOK OUT AHEAD



It's often the case that a company's vision is seen most clearly from the top of an organisation, and that vision sets the frame for all of its organisational functions to deliver in reality.

In a market as tough as today's, brand leaders know that every little counts. Which makes it all the more interesting that their most pressing concern is not those external forces and market pressures. It's their own business leaders.

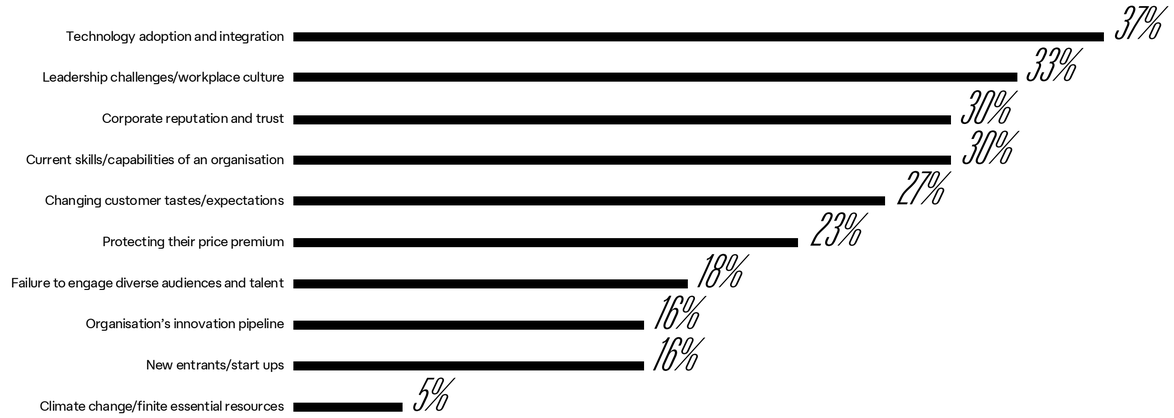
When asked which challenges presented the most pressing threats to their brand, technology adoption topped the list (43%), and leadership and workplace culture followed closely behind (38%). But when we asked which one single threat worried them the most, leadership and culture came up more than any other.

Most of that worry came from brand leaders looking straight up their organisation chart. While it goes without saying that business leadership and workforce culture are pivotal, it's notable that as many as 44% of brand leaders named leadership and culture as a threat to their brand.

"Ultimately we need leaders to help drive and embed the change and sometimes they are the worst at following brand guidelines or staying on message."

MARKETING LEADER, INFRASTRUCTURE

THREATS TO THE BRAND, 2027 AND BEYOND



Base: 86 participants Juno asked during the interview (3 interviews ended first). Up to three choices each from a closed list, so totals exceed 86.

TAKE IT TO THE TOP

For those brand leaders who get business leadership behind the brand, the brand gets backed in the decisions they make and modelled in the culture they lead.

Before a customer believes in a brand, the people running the business have to believe in it first. Marketing can build a brand, but it can't make the rest of the business carry it.

The stories shared with us by brand leaders tell of what happens when leadership doesn't. A CEO acting at odds with an agreed brand strategy. Business owners insisting on messages the data didn't support. Brand budgets treated as optional the moment costs tightened.

The leaders who described it working told a different story: brand calls made together with the business, with everyone standing steady behind them. It starts when leaders back the brand in the key decisions about where to invest and what to protect. Ultimately, teams take their cues from the top, so the brand only sticks when leaders model it in how they lead the business.

"It's not just a brand call. That's an investment committee decision that was made together and everyone agreed to. Presenting a united front."

MARKETING LEADER, FINANCIAL SERVICES

PUT IT ON THE AGENDA

1. Where has a business leadership decision in the last year supported or supplanted your agreed brand strategy, and why?

2. In which big decisions should the brand have a say, and how will you bring it into the discussion?

3. Where do your teams see a gap between how your leaders act and the brand you ask them to deliver?

FINDING 2

GET YOUR BRAND FIX

"Giving all four audiences the same message would be poor marketing. Changing our principles for each would be poor leadership."

MAREKTING LEADER, NOT-FOR-PROFIT

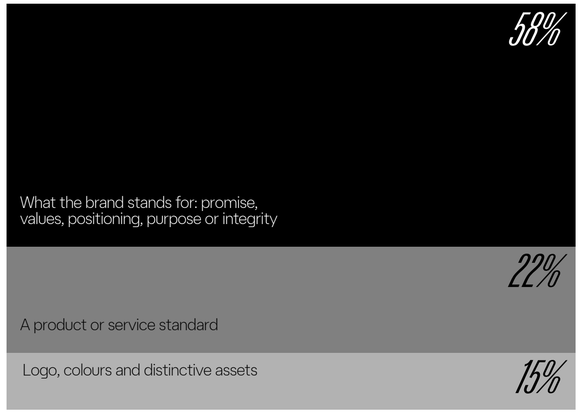
This not-for-profit marketing leader put it best, and it sums up one key area of clear consensus from our research: 98% of all leaders who responded to this line of enquiry named something about their brand on which they would never bend nor budge.

For these leaders, a brand is defined by how the business behaves, above and beyond the way it looks. In defining the brand, most named what the brand stands for – its promise, values, positioning or purpose – and it was only a small minority who defaulted to the logo, its colours or other distinctive assets.

While almost everyone put a value on the importance of that fixed, strategic focus for their brand, they did not necessarily mean it as an anchor to stop the brand from moving, but more so a platform on which to grow, flex and stretch the brand. Two-thirds (67%) described what they let flex, namely tone and content, channels and offers.

The real test comes when the very standards that support the platform itself come at a cost, and holding that core steady gets harder when it costs money. More than a quarter (27%) named protecting their price premium as a threat, and almost one in five (19%) had already seen cost or budget pressure override the brand in their own organisation.

WHAT LEADERS HOLD FIXED



WHAT LEADERS LET FLEX



Source: FutureBrand, Future Tense study. Base: the 55 leaders who answered what stays fixed and what can flex. Leaders named more than one, so figures overlap.

STAND FIRM TO STAND OUT

It's important not only to reinforce what's right for your brand, but also to refuse what's wrong.

In fact, some of the most revealing brand decisions in this study were refusals. Every 'no' makes your brand clearer. A conservation group walking away from land which it cannot be confident of protecting forever. A not-for-profit organisation declining a partner in spite of the fundraising possibilities. A media business turning down a big story even though it would have driven traffic.

Many of those decisions came at a short-term cost. In almost half (47%) of those decisions that leaders described in detail, they could name exactly what that cost was. They made the call anyway, because they recognised the longer-term benefit that compounds with brand clarity, coherence and conviction.

That's the practical value of a fixed, strategic platform. The leaders who stand out turn it into a test that anyone in the business can apply: 'Does this fit who we are?' It gives people the confidence to say 'no', as well as to make the call themselves without asking for permission.

A steady core also buys you room to be brave. When everyone knows what can't change, there's more freedom to experiment with what can: tone, channel and creative expression. That's how a distinctive brand avoids looking the same as everyone else.

"Hold to your differentiating brand attributes. If you're competing where everyone else is, you're not working your winning edge."

MARKETING LEADER, FINANCIAL SERVICES

"Remaining static is a brand killer but innovation without direction can lead to brand dilution."

MARKETING LEADER, FINANCIAL SERVICES

PUT IT ON THE AGENDA

1. Which business dynamic is pressure-testing what you've said is fixed about your brand?

2. What simple test could anyone in the business use to decide whether or not something fits with your brand?

3. How would a new starter learn what's fixed and what can flex about your brand, and how long would it take them?

FINDING 3

OPEN TO IDEAS

(AND TO INTERPRETATION TOO)

Brands work in multi-faceted ways.

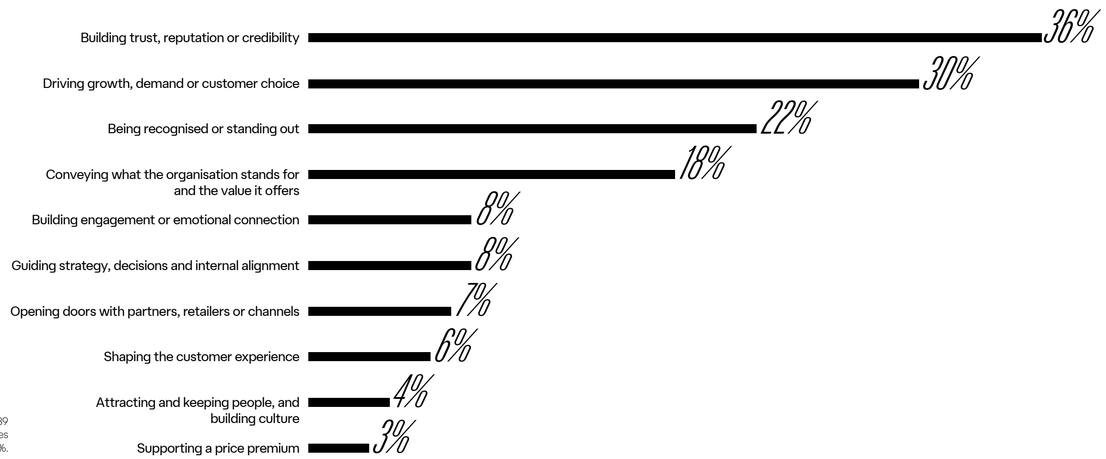
Many leaders named more than one job for their brand and even the most common, building trust and reputation, was named by only 36%. But at what point does a brand's versatility stop being a virtue and start undermining its value if the rest of the business is left guessing which job matters most?

That uncertainty comes at a cost. When nobody can consistently say what the brand does, it risks being siloed, sidelined, or simply ignored. Ultimately, only 16% of leaders told us that their whole business owns the brand, and twice as many (31%) said short-term pressure even works directly against it.

What we heard sounded like the voice of frustration at a time when the biggest focal points for business leaders – winning customers and holding a price premium – are the very jobs that their brands are built to deliver. The leaders who had made that case in the business's own language saw their brand treated very differently, not as a cost but as a pathway to growth.

ONE BRAND, MANY JOBS

The job leaders named for their brand, in their first answer.
Even the most common was named by only 36%.



Source: FutureBrand, Future Tense study. Base: all 89 leaders. Leaders named more than one job, so figures overlap and do not add to 100%.

GET BACK TO BASICS

As leaders told us, brand means different things to different people, even to those who know it best. That breadth is part of its power. It's also what sometimes makes a brand easy to wave off as a nice-to-have, when it's one of the hardest-working assets that a business owns.

Strip it back and a brand is simple. It's what your business is known for, built from what it says and does. And its job is commercial: getting you chosen, more often, at a price worth paying. Every leader in the building wants that, including the ones who think brand is marketing's business.

The leaders who had cracked the code had done so by keeping their brand simple, and making sure their leadership team agreed on its strategic role and commercial value. One financial services marketer had reframed brand as "demand creation," and they said it had changed how the business talked about marketing investment. Once that level of understanding is shared, a brand has the power to inform decisions well beyond marketing.

"It is explaining the data you have at hand in language that finance can understand."

MARKETING LEADER, CONSUMER AND RETAIL

"Brand is a well understood enabler of business growth and culture at our organisation. My team's respected and our advice sought often in respect to communications, org strategy and target market engagement."

MARKETING LEADER, FINANCIAL SERVICES

PUT IT ON THE AGENDA

1. How would your CEO, CFO and CMO each describe what your brand does for your business?

2. Where can you already see your brand helping you to win customers or hold your price premium, and how will you put that in front of the Board?

3. Which business leader or team beyond marketing might champion the value of your brand, and how might you align early?

FINDING 4

CAN YOUR BRAND TALK AND WALK AT THE SAME TIME?

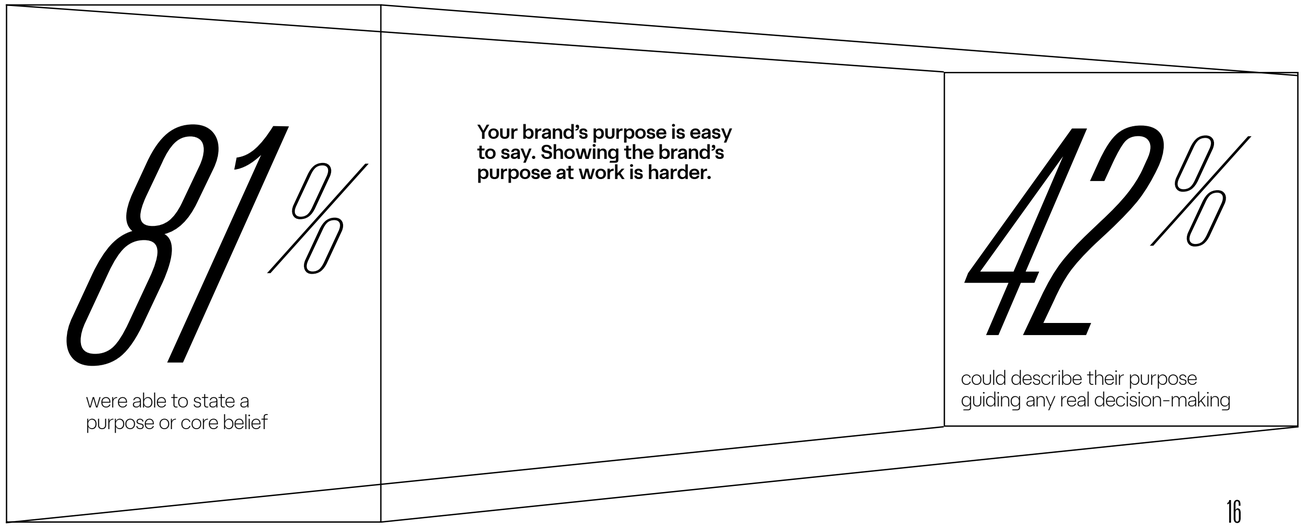
Your brand's purpose is easy to say – of the 68 leaders whom we asked, 81% were able to state a purpose or core belief. But showing the brand's purpose at work is harder, given that only 42% across all leaders could describe their purpose guiding any real decision-making.

Therein lies the gap between brand and reputation. Leaders know why that gap matters because they understand that it's the source of building trust: when asked how trust is earned, more than half (58%) talked to brand experience via delivery, consistency and a track record built over years.

In other words, the brand is only one part of the trust-building equation. When leaders told us about times their organisation had lost trust, nearly two-thirds (62%) of those moments originated in operations or delivery. A quarter (26%) described a gap between what the brand promises customers and what the employees experience at work.

Ultimately, the businesses with the strongest brands are the ones that make sure the brand is widely known and clearly understood by marketers and non-marketers alike, from the boardroom table to the contact centre and shop floor.

SAY AND DO



Source: FutureBrand, Future Tense study. Base: 81% is for 55 of 68 leaders asked. 42% is for 37 of all 89 leaders.

BEHAVE LIKE YOU MEAN IT

Customers believe what they see more than anything your brand might say. Over time, that behaviour becomes your brand.

Consequently, one of the most valuable things you can do with a brand is surprisingly practical: turn your brand into behaviours. How might you live out your brand's promise at the front counter? On a complaint call? In a pricing decision? Every team should be able to answer how your brand's promise comes to life through their own work in delivering the experience.

A practical approach also adds discipline to what you promise. For every claim, ask what a customer would actually see that proves it. If you can't prove it yet, adjust the claim or do the work to build that proof into how the business operates.

"having a brand defined by brand values that are explained with objective behaviours so that anyone in the organisation can make a decision if something is on (or not) on brand."

BUSINESS LEADER, NOT-FOR-PROFIT

"Say what you'll do and do what you say... if something goes wrong... own up to it, be honest, transparent, and tackle it head-on."

MARKETING LEADER, HEALTHCARE

PUT IT ON THE AGENDA

1. What was the trigger for your most recent loss of customer trust, and what did you learn from it?

2. Which of your brand claims are hardest to prove, and what would it take to close the gap?

3. How does your brand's promise surface in the organisational delivery of the customer experience every day?

FINDING 5

AI IS ON YOUR MIND. ARE YOU ON AI'S?

Globally, technology adoption and integration has historically been top of mind for brand and business leaders, and the same is true for Australian leaders too.

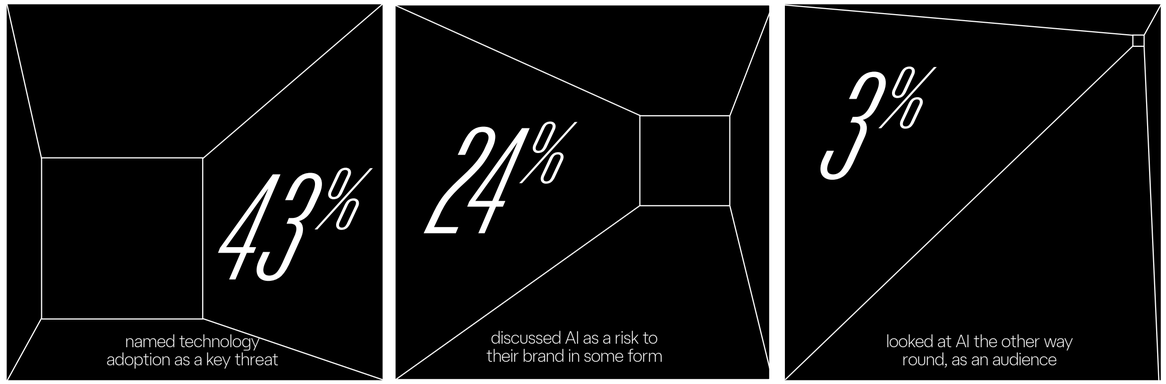
While technology is perceived to be the key threat, named by 43% of leaders, most of the conversation that followed was practical and clear-eyed. How fast should we adopt AI? How best to use it well? What might be possible for a business that sells human expertise when a machine offers a version of it for less? In all, almost a quarter (24%) discussed AI as a risk to their brand in some form, though a few already saw an opening for brands that double-down on what AI can't do: human judgement, trust and craft.

Most of that conversation treated AI as a tool. Only a handful (around 3%) looked at it the other way round as an audience already talking to their customers and pointing these customers towards their brand and others too. One professional services leader worries that clients won't engage at all, if only "because the AI is telling them that it's all fine."

It's a small group today. We expect it to be a much larger one by the time a year ticks over on this report.

"Knowing when and how to use AI for marketing and comms, and when not to use it but instead rely on the human side of businesses."

MARKETING LEADER, PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



Source: FutureBrand, Future Tense study. 43% is of the 86 leaders who answered; 24% is 21 of all 89 leaders. 3% is only a handful of leaders.

BRIEF THE MACHINES

Give AI a clear story and plenty of public proof, so it describes your brand and business the way you would.

That starts with knowing how it forms a view. Ask an AI assistant which provider to choose and its answer draws on everything it can find: what a brand says about itself, what it has done, and what others have done and said about it too. Brands that are clear about what they stand for, and prove it in public, are easier to describe well. Where the story is patchy, AI will fill the gaps on its own information.

Then brief it the way you would brief any audience that matters. Be clear and consistent about who you are, wherever you show up. Make your proof easy to find, use real examples and real outcomes. And keep an eye on what AI is saying about you, as you would any other measure of awareness and reputation.

"Make sure your brand stands for something meaningfully different and that you are telling your brand story effectively both to humans and machines."

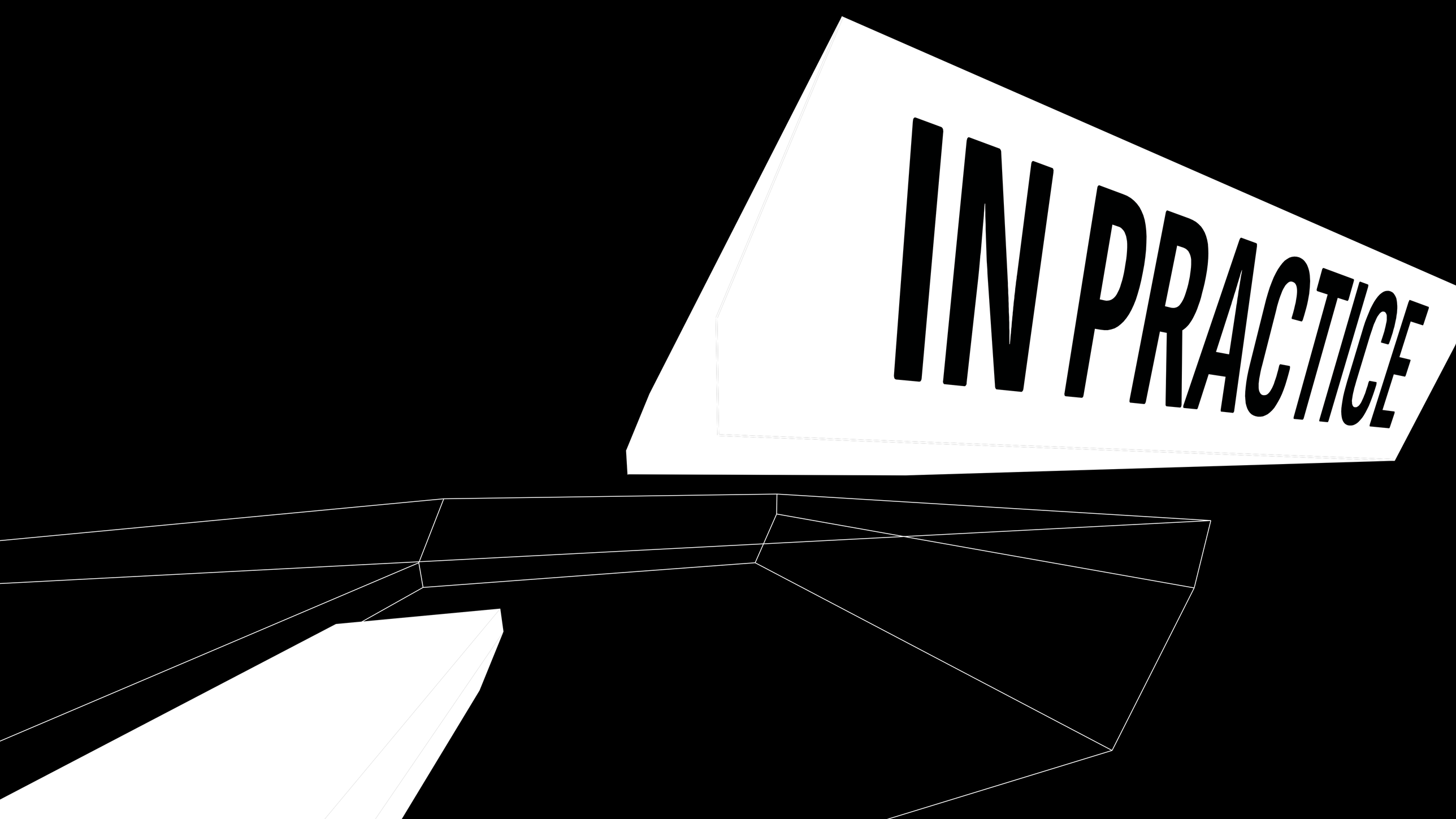
BUSINESS LEADER, PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

PUT IT ON THE AGENDA

1. If a customer asked AI about your brand and business today, would you like the answer?

2. Where is your story inconsistent across the places AI looks, and what would you fix first?

3. Who is responsible for what AI says about you, and how will you keep track of it?


IN PRACTICE

WHAT NEXT?
FIVE BRAND-BUILDING STRATEGIES TO MAKE THE FUTURE A LITTLE LESS TENSE

Look across the five findings and the same pivotal dynamic keeps coming up: the brand works best when the whole business can use it.

1. TAKE IT TO THE TOP

Get leadership behind the brand, so it's backed in the decisions they make and modelled in the culture they lead.

2. STAND FIRM TO STAND OUT

Reinforce what's right for your brand, reject what's wrong. Every 'no' makes your brand clearer.

3. GET BACK TO BASICS

Focus your brand on its most practical job, one the whole business already cares for: getting chosen, more often, at a price worth paying.

4. BEHAVE LIKE YOU MEAN IT

Promise only what you can prove, and let your brand's behaviour speak for itself.

5. BRIEF THE MACHINES

Give AI a clear story and plenty of public proof so it can position your brand the same way you would.

THE FUTURE IS COMING, READY OR NOT.

LET'S MAKE SURE YOUR BRAND IS TOO.



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We are a diverse and entrepreneurial group of brand strategy, identity and experience experts. We come independently minded and locally owned, together with global relationships and the resources of FutureBrand worldwide.

We work collaboratively with organisations to transform and future-proof their brands. No two futures are ever quite the same. No two projects are either. It's realising the future that's best fit for each unique brand that unites and inspires us most: from strategy to reality.

We'll help you find and own your future.

Brand Purpose & Strategy
Brand Architecture
Brand & Customer Experience
Visual Identity
Naming
Brand Voice & Messaging
Employee Value Proposition
Brand Management
Brand Measurement

SEE YOU IN THE FUTURE

FUTUREBRAND.COM.AU

If this report sparked a question or an idea, we'd love to hear from you.

With thanks to Michelle Gilmore and the team at Juno; to the Sydney Marketing Community and its founder Michael Apte; and, to all the Australian business and brand leaders who shared their time and experience with us.