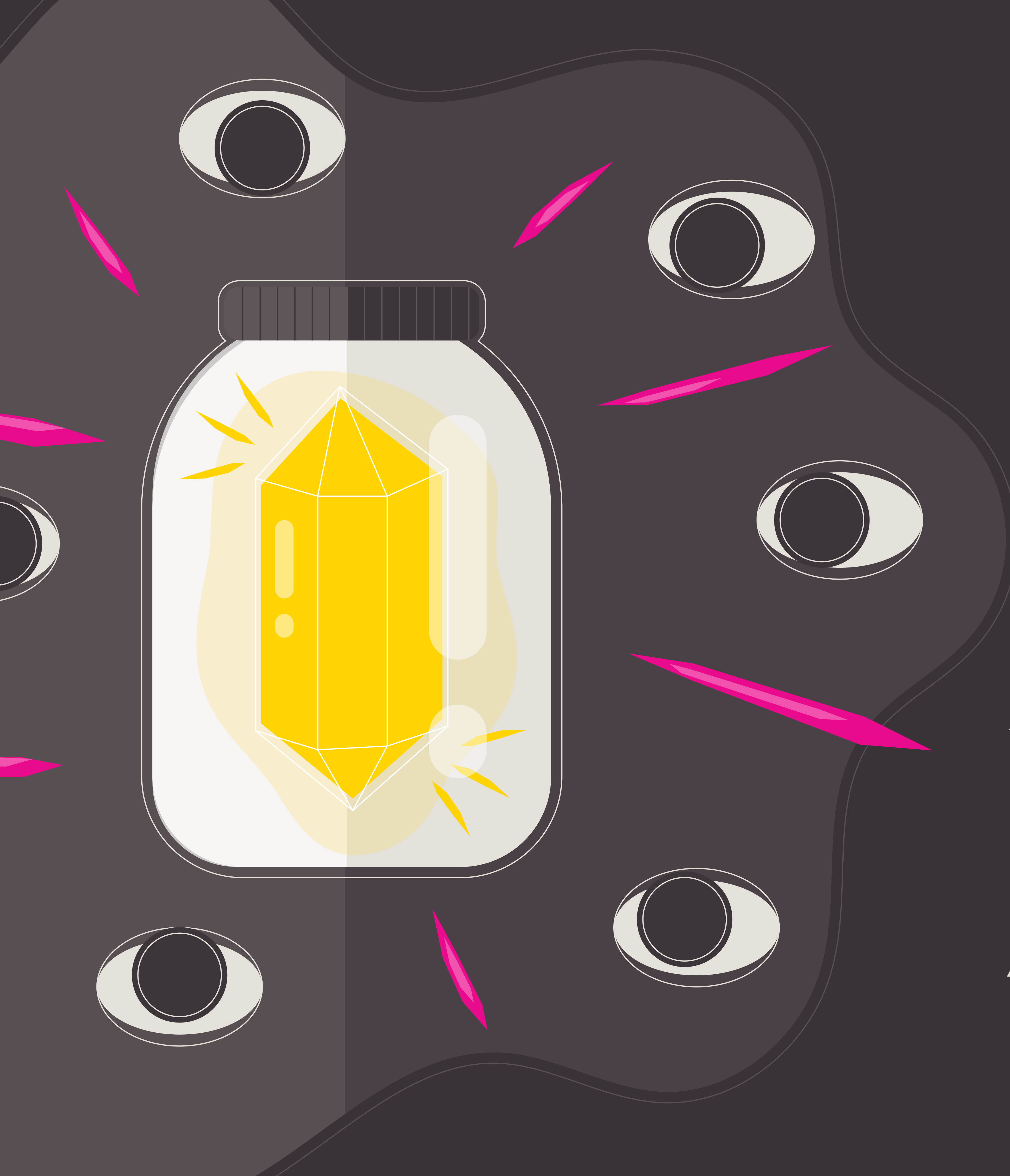

TRICOM**B2B** INSIGHTS

SAFE SUCKS

A B2B Marketer's Guide to Ideas That Refuse to Be Ignored

THE FORGETTABLE COMMUTE IN A STATE OF BOREDOM

The B2B sales cycle is often described as a "journey" for B2B buyers. It's not; it's a long, grueling commute. We've all experienced this: drive back and forth on the same route for years and one day you'll drive home from work, pull into the driveway, and realize you don't recall the drive at all. Nothing new occurred, so your brain just tuned out. Without unique input, no new neural pathways were formed, and your brain decided you didn't need to remember anything. It's called "highway hypnosis," and it can last for 100 miles.

B2B buyers commute through miles of marketing messages and materials every day. Nothing changes. So they don't really see or remember much of anything.

It gets worse. B2B buyers think your advertising is boring, and even if they do see it, they don't remember it — or take any action on it. According to a 2018 B2B advertising survey of 1,100 B2B buyers, nearly half of business buyers think *all* B2B advertising is boring. Most of these same buyers believe they'd make better decisions if B2B advertising engaged them. Worst of all, **only 22 percent will respond** to B2B communications they find boring: no clicks, no calls, no email opens.

Nothing.

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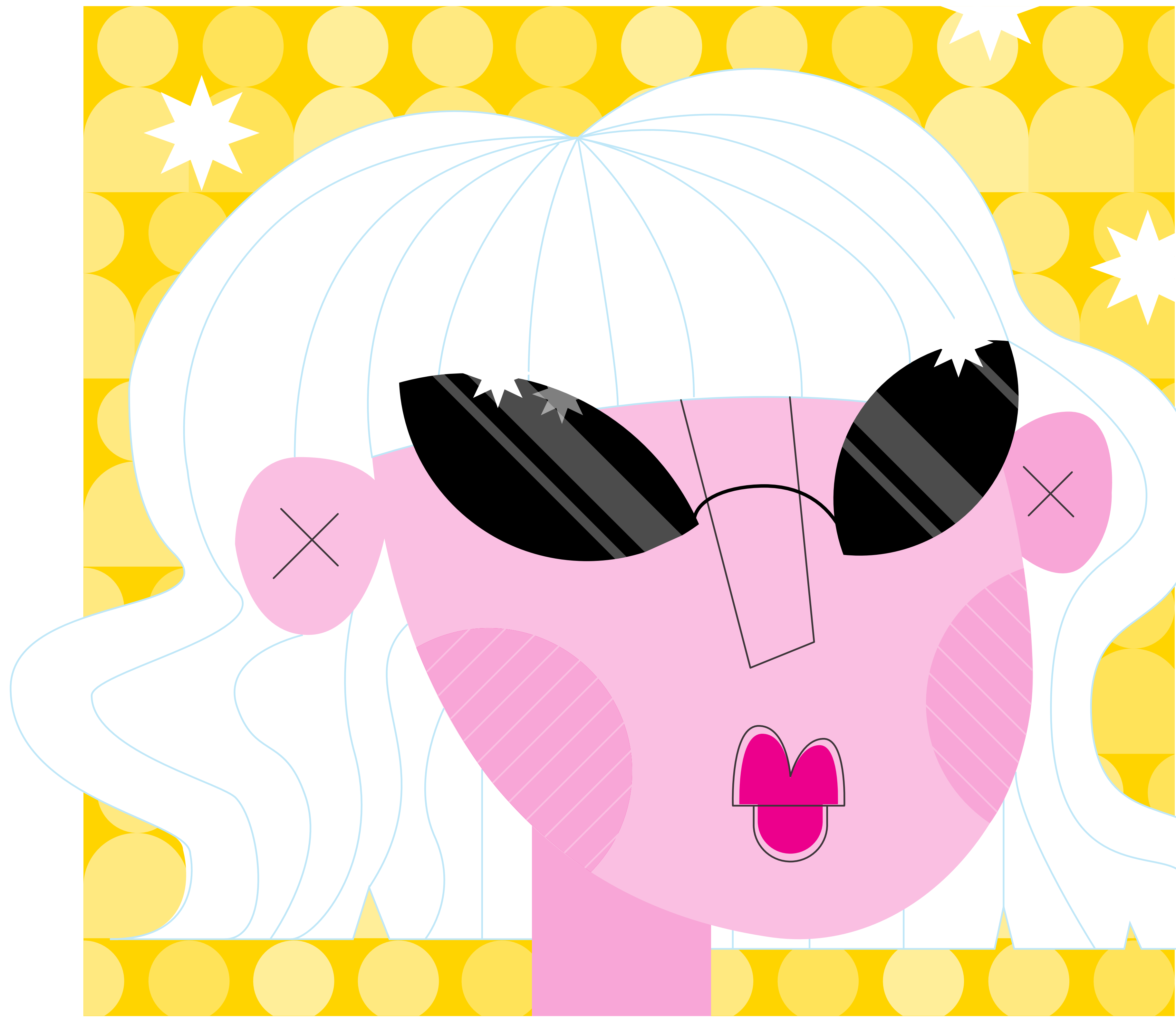
ARE YOU BORING?

For your next marketing piece, do some soul searching, ask yourself the following, and do your best to answer honestly:

- Why would anyone pay attention to this?
- Would anyone share or reference this?
- Is this new, insightful information that goes beyond the obvious?
- Is this distinct or memorable?

Even if your marketing is flush with jewels of wit and fresh thinking, please read on. This paper provides objective, science-based arguments for creative risk-taking. You'll also find some well-informed opinions about the state of boredom in B2B and why that works in your favor. Either way, understand this: there is no ROI on "safe" marketing. In B2B, safe sucks.



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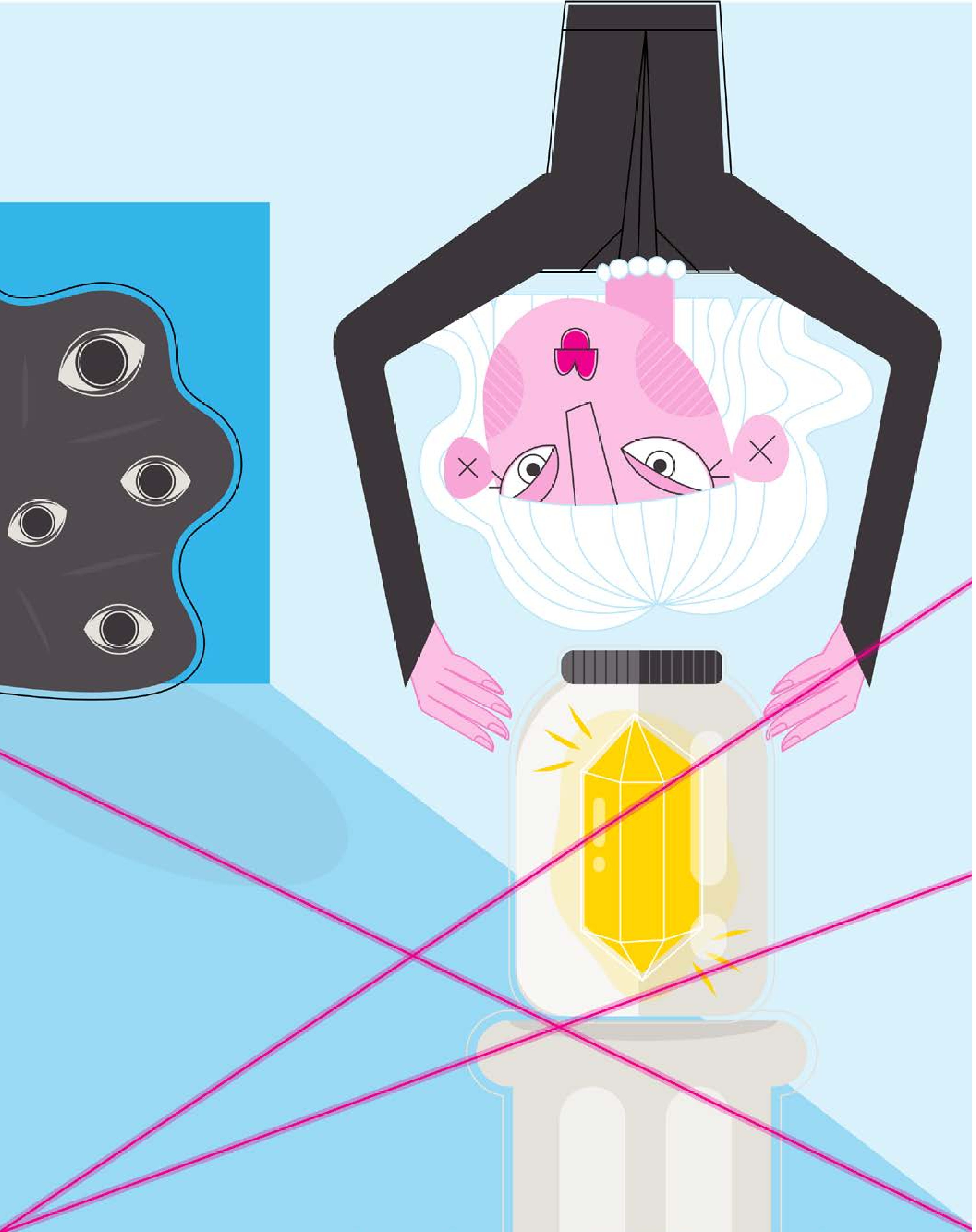


SELECTIVE ATTENTION AND THE PICKY BRAIN

Some B2B companies understand that the monotony of B2B marketing works to their advantage. They leverage one of the most studied phenomena in brain science: the theory of selective attention. Here's how it works. Bombarded with outside stimuli, the brain disregards anything ordinary or boring: highway hypnosis on an interstate of information overload. However, if the brain encounters something out of the ordinary, it zeroes in on that shiny object and locks onto it until it "solves" the disruption and ultimately remembers the "solution." Even better, the more boring marketing material it drives through, the more the brain gives its undivided attention to intriguing stimulus — to the exclusion of everything else.

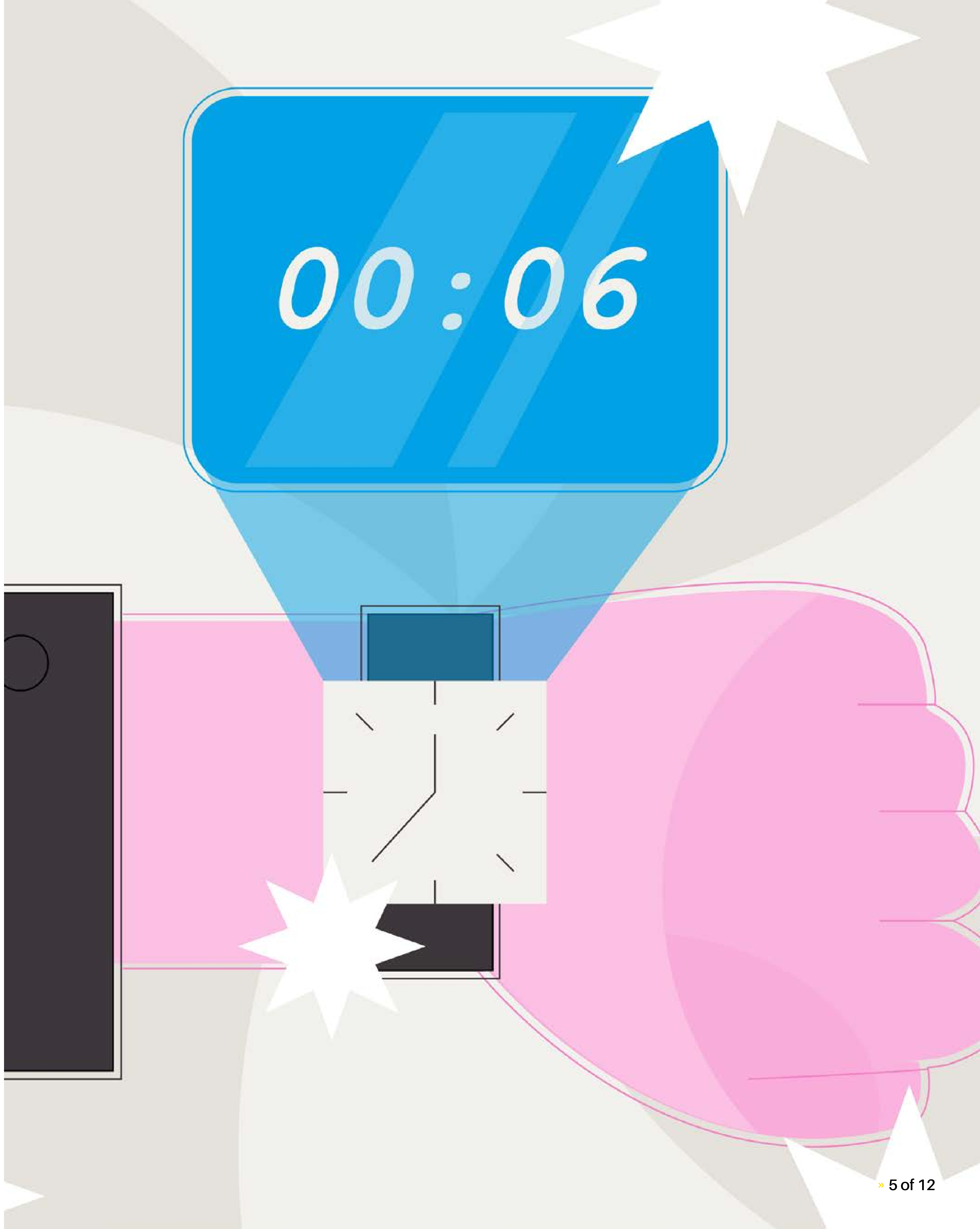
The Broadbent model of selective attention
Dr. Donald Broadbent (1926–1993) theorized that the brain filters through and almost immediately selects the input it wants to process. The filter sends everything else into a sensory buffer, where it rapidly decays. The brain processes the message the filter selected, and then stores it as memory. The brain doesn't bother with any of the unselected inputs. They don't exist anymore.

Look at me! When you apply the theory of selective attention to B2B marketing, the boring landscape becomes an incredible opportunity for risk-takers. The rare company that breaks out with something unexpected, conceptual, provocative, challenging, humorous or intriguing will have a monopoly on attention, because the brain rules that there is simply nothing else worth looking at.

ATTENTION LEADS TO EMOTIONS THAT MAKE CONNECTIONS

Your brain may want to pay attention to the following facts. You've got to get attention quickly, get into buyers' heads, and start making emotional connections — all at once — before you get down to business.

- You probably already know that a marketer has no more than 6 seconds to get a buyer's attention. Digital media exacerbates the challenge: studies show that when online, you only have 2 seconds. Remember: The brain's attention is ignited by seeing something NEW. And that filter doesn't waste time, so your ideas need to be really interesting, really fast.
- A Harvard study shows that **95 percent** of consumer decisions regarding brands are made unconsciously — they're not sure how they made them. B2B decision-makers will deny this happens and instead claim they make decisions on a strictly rational basis. If you believe this, we have some untargeted display network inventory to sell you (or an article for you to read). The buying decision is simply not rational. Unconsciously, buyers and specifiers have a positive vibe about a company or product. Hopefully, you put it there.
- Brands are built with *emotional* connections. Trust is built with *personal* connections. Decisions are made with both. And you can only make connections with something if you notice it in the first place. Play it safe with a milquetoast idea and you risk being invisible — and that means there's no possibility of making those connections.



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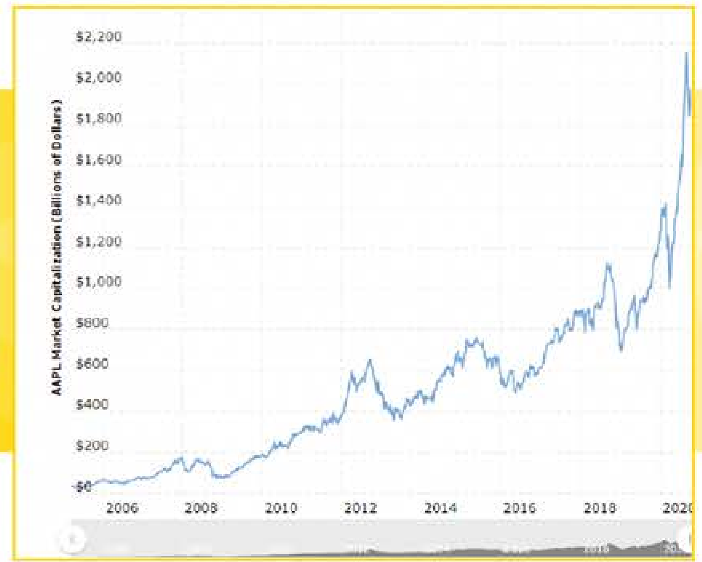
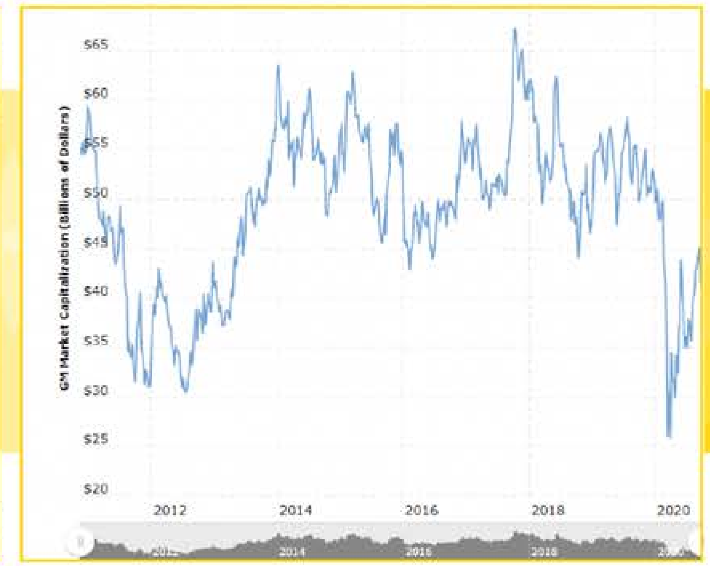
IBM

APPLE



GENERAL MOTORS



TESLA

GO BOLD OR GO HOME

Some companies command constant attention through daring advertising and positioning. The most famous example in B2B is now the biggest company in the world, which got there by boldly advertising itself as a cool underdog … for 40 years straight. In 1980, an early microcomputer guru named Wayne Green wrote, "The best ads I've seen have been those by Apple. They are attention-getting, and they must be prompting sales." They sure were: **Apple** was the world's largest manufacturer of small-business computers. Three years later, they were all but bankrupted after the faceless **IBM** introduced the PC. Apple survived by spending its last penny on a single, incredibly provocative and defiant ad that is still legendary 36 years later. Apple has never stopped cultivating their contrarian personality. IBM is still just "Big Blue" and its products sell themselves, right? Let's go to the charts.

CULTS OF CORPORATE PERSONALITY

If you listen to this short podcast about the role of emotion in B2B decision making, you'll see that buyers don't trust, value or give their loyalty to blank, faceless companies. It's personal: most successful companies have distinct "personalities" built on garnering constant attention over the years.

One superstar company relies entirely on one personality. While only part of their story is B2B, there is much to learn from **Tesla**. Some marketers claim Tesla does not advertise; they're wrong. Tesla advertises constantly through the use of a provocative, disruptive and obsessively attention-seeking brand personality: Elon Musk. The media can't get enough of him, so Tesla's advertising is free — and that's no accident. On the other hand, **General Motors** spends about $3 billion a year on advertising, yet really doesn't seem to have much of a brand personality. (Really, could you describe it?) Can you differentiate a GM ad from a Ford ad from a Toyota ad? To us, they just show cars skidding on dark, wet roads. So is there a tangible business effect of the force of personality? Let's look at the charts.

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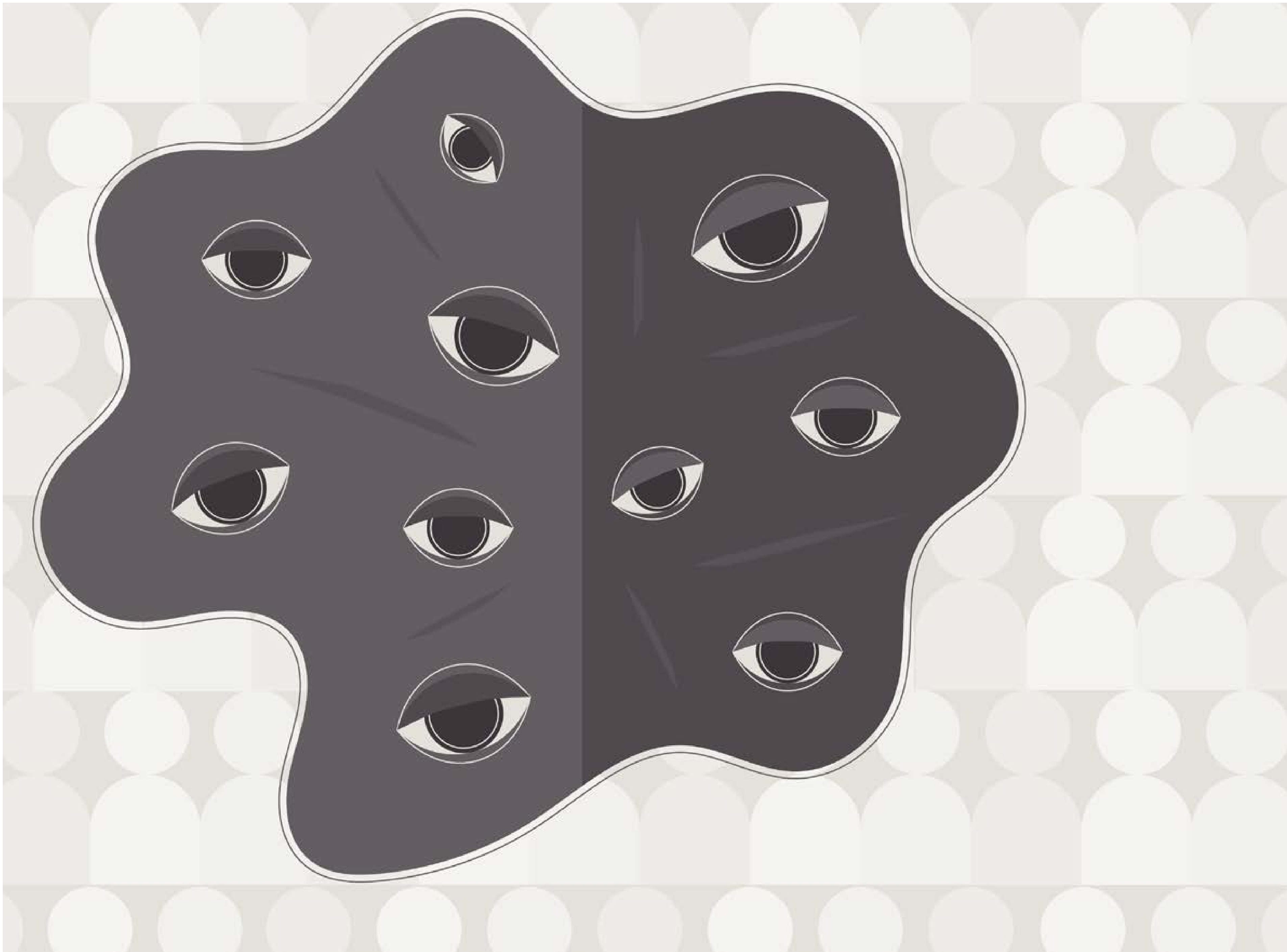

DO B2B COMPANIES CHOOSE TO BE DULL?

Some do inadvertently. Others, perhaps overtly. Yes, some B2B companies run great, attention-grabbing work, but as a rule, many that need the most attention are the least willing to seek it.

Some think buyers will act because they simply offer what they believe is a better product. Others are just unaware of the positive impact of "thinking differently." But whatever the underlying reason, they have put in place barriers that stand in the way of attention-grabbing creative. Let's look at some reasons why B2B companies seemingly work so hard to be so bland.

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FOUR TRAPS THAT GUARANTEE BORING MARKETING

Trap #1: "Rational" Marketing

Many B2B companies believe marketing is strictly providing the hard-core information about their products; that disruptive or creative messaging will distract from the detailed "nitty gritty" buyers are seeking. The reality is exactly the opposite. By taking risks in your marketing with ideas that provoke reactions and build emotional connections, you can create a gateway to that company/product/service information you're dying to share. Your audience won't notice your rational, bullet point-riddled ad or overstuffed webpage. Present your story in an interesting, inventive way, and the selective brain will zoom in on it — and retain it.

If you're not convinced that emotional, thought-provoking ideas work better than rational approaches, take a moment to read this fantastic piece by Bain & Company on the B2B Elements of Value.

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Trap #2: Copycat Marketing

"If it works for them, it'll work for us." Every B2B marketer has hit this wall a few times. You research your competitors' websites, advertising and collateral from top to bottom, and amazingly, all of them look *exactly* the same: The same product images, facility photos, smiling employees, stock photo cliches, web navigation and "About Us" copy. Dozens of bullet points in no particular order.

Upon review, conservative, authoritative voices in your business start saying things like, "We should consider a similar approach." (Sigh.) You then begin the thankless task of investing time and resources into work that is so safe and expected, it won't cause any issues.

Unfortunately, it won't cause any actions, either.

Author Michael Brenner stated, "In order to save marketing itself, marketers need to have the courage to push back on bad ideas. We need to fight to create value for customers through content, stories and better experiences."

This is your chance to stand out from the competition; to stake a brand position that dramatizes your strengths and advantages. Use challenging headlines and surprising visuals. Build webpages that speak to customers' real concerns — rather than detailing your OTC128-74X with all the industry jargon you can summon. Intrigue before you inform. Be meaningful and memorable.

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Trap #3: Obligatory Marketing

Maybe you've seen this before. The B2B marketing budget that's been running like clockwork for years. Everyone knows it by heart, and it's underpinned with a spend-it-or-lose-it budgeting culture. The detailed, tactical allocations consist of little chunks of activity designed to hit every possible customer at every possible touch point. Advertising is spread across the usual publications and regional trade associations. A healthy allocation is set aside for brochures, flyers and fact sheets to support selling efforts. You plan to attend the usual same trade shows with the same 10′ x 10′ and 10′ x 20′ trade show booths and requisite tchotchkes. Monthly email newsletters, etc. We check the boxes and the money is spent.

Rinse and repeat.

The emphasis is on fulfilling obligations, i.e., the "we always do that" tactics we wouldn't dare sacrifice. But what about a high-impact campaign for a high-potential vertical market? Or a thought leadership program that engages customers to discuss key industry issues? Or a world-class product launch for your company's biggest R&D investments? Without the money and resources for strategic thinking and creative, marketers are forced to recycle old ideas, making everything generic and vague, and thus jumping into Trap #4.

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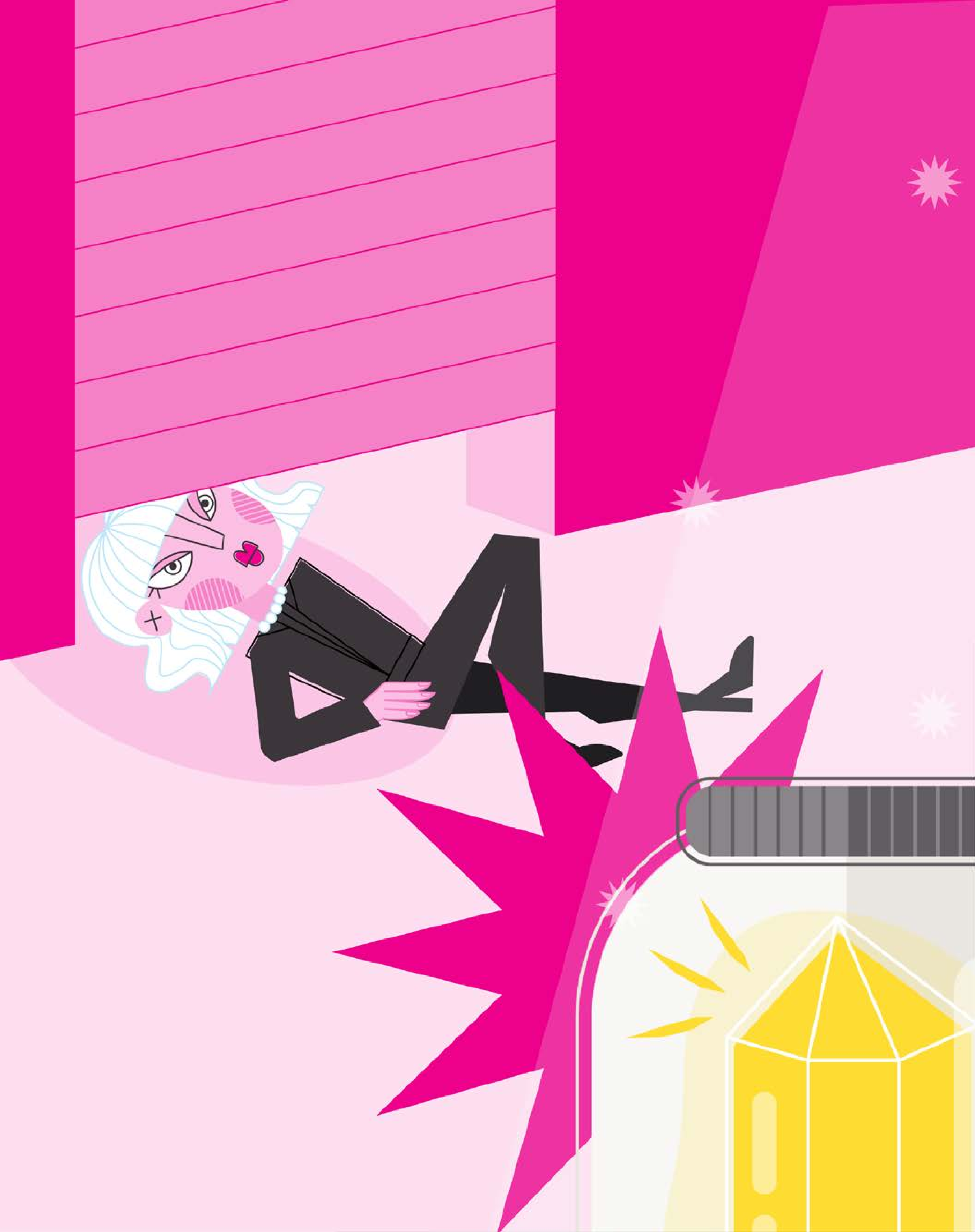

Trap #4: Make Everybody Happy

There's a belief that all marketing must make everyone happy, internally, externally, top to bottom. Many B2B companies use groupthink and round after round of input and revisions from numerous powerful stakeholders to get their marketing "just right." It doesn't take long for the safe, industry standard copy and visuals to surface as the "answer." Consensus kills creativity.

But in trying to please everyone, we reach no one.

In her book, Trust Me, B2B, Katie Martell points out that **making everybody happy puts a wall between B2B companies and the buyers they so desperately want to attract.** She advocates a healthy dose of transparency and authenticity for brands that want to avoid the "curse of the consideration set." She states: "Too many brands lack an opinion about the very space they operate in or fail to make it clear what they believe or what they stand for."

In B2B, 60 percent of executives say knowing what a company stands for is much more important than whether it is innovative (21 percent) or dominates its markets (20 percent). It makes sense that playing it safe and making everybody happy is a bigger risk than being bold and courageous. To quote Martell, "... if you stand for nothing, or believe in nothing, you mean nothing."

Don't water down your creative to pander to everyone. Focus your work on ideas that are interesting and authentic. That might mean you're not for everybody. And great businesses know that's okay.

NO GUTS, NO GLORY (AND NO GROSS REVENUES)

You can't afford to bore your customers. Blending in, mimicking competitors, and playing it safe to keep stakeholders happy ignores the brain science that begs for bigger, bolder ideas that garner attention.

And since so many companies are willing to settle for keeping it safe, the opportunity to stand out is there for the taking.

Think of companies or individuals who succeeded in big ways. Bold players who won big and grew quickly through stand-out marketing, innovation and leadership include Apple, Tesla and Salesforce (i.e., the big boys). Ironically, they see more risk in playing it safe than they do in taking risks. And that's a paradigm shift to which we should all take heed.

If you're not sure how to start this new journey, don't worry. Here are some great resources to help you and your marketing team get your creative juices flowing:

- » muz.li
- » adsoftheworld.com
- » branding.news
- » abduzeedo.com

So the next time your big idea is on the chopping block in favor of something safe, here's hoping you'll have the courage to say, "Safe sucks." The brain says so. And the big winners in business know so.

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