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# *The State of Marketing*

From Social-First to Distribution-First: A Briefing for 2027 Planning for Marketing Teams and Organizations

Prepared by:

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**Author Credibility:** This write-up serves as a published industry report from an individual perspective on the current state of marketing. This comes from practicing, executing marketing strategies for over the past 12+ years, from work including Riot Games, NFL (Dallas Cowboys), Optic Gaming, Discord, Evil Geniuses, Dallas Empire, Dallas Fuel, Complexity, agency and more.

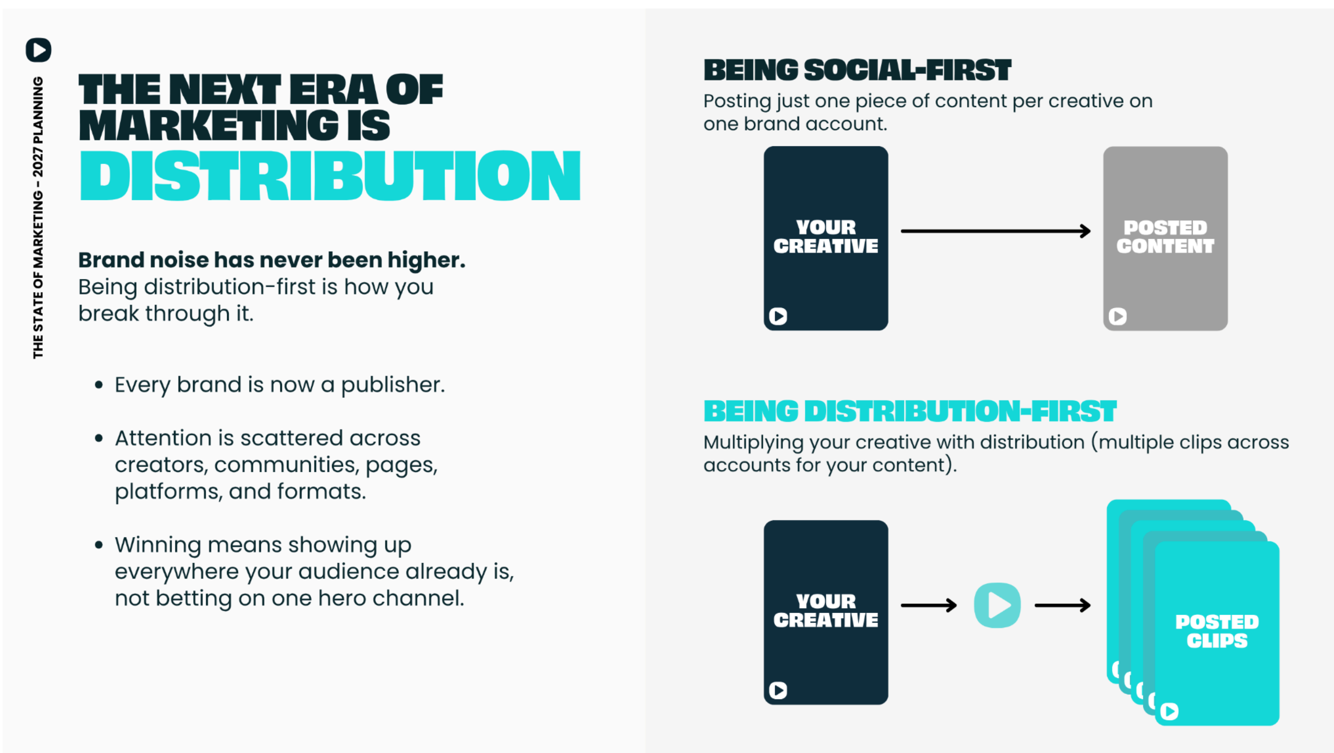
## 01 The Shift

The brands winning on social media right now aren't the best storytellers.
**They're the best distributors.**

For a decade, marketing orthodoxy said the same thing: make great content, post it natively, and let the algorithm reward quality. That model is fading fast. Feeds are saturated. Every brand now has a video team, an editor, and a content calendar. Good creative stopped being a differentiator. It's the floor.

What actually separates the brands winning right now isn't the quality of any single post. It's how many surfaces, creators, and formats that post reaches. Reach used to be earned. Now it's engineered.

That's the shift from social-first marketing to distribution-first marketing, and most 2026 marketing budgets were built for the model that's already ending.



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## 02 What Distribution Marketing Actually Is

If you haven't heard the term, that's fair. It's newer than the shift itself.

**Distribution Marketing** is the discipline of engineering how far and how often a piece of content travels, independent of how good that single piece is. It treats content as raw material, not a finished product. One video, one photo, one moment gets re-cut, re-captioned, and re-posted across hundreds of creators and platforms until the algorithm has no real choice but to notice it.

This isn't influencer marketing with a new name. Influencer marketing rents an audience: you pay one creator to post once, and you're borrowing their followers for a day. Distribution marketing manufactures surface area. You're not buying one creator's followers. You're buying thousands of shots on goal against the feed.

| Social-First | Distribution-First |
|---|---|
| One brand account posts native content.<br>*Est: 3-5 posts/week* | Multiple managed brand accounts and clip accounts are posting social-first clips with curated content strategies multiple times/day.<br>*Est. (3-5 posts/week) x (12x managed pages) = 36-60 posts/week across IG, TikTok, and YouTube.* |
| Success depends on one post catching the algorithm. | Success depends on volume, variation, and repetition. |
| Budget centers on a handful of hero productions. | Budget centers on distribution infrastructure. |
| Reach tracks follower count. | Reach is decided post by post, independent of followers. |
| Campaign bursts, then a drop-off. | Always-on programs that hold their numbers. |

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## 03 Why This Happened Now

Three shifts got us here.

1. **Feeds stopped following the follower graph.** TikTok proved that an account with 200 followers can outperform one with two million, and Instagram and YouTube followed with Reels and Shorts. Reach is decided post by post now, not account by account. A brand's follower count barely predicts what happens next.
2. **Content volume exploded. Every competitor has a video team now.** “Good” used to be rare. Now it's assumed. The differentiator moved from quality to quantity and repetition.
3. **Attention fragmented faster than any single internal team can keep up with.** There are more platforms, formats, and creators competing for the same six seconds of someone's thumb than any brand's in-house team can realistically produce for alone. The only way to keep pace is to distribute production across a network instead of centralizing it in one team.

The platforms have said as much themselves. TikTok's own documentation states that neither follower count nor a creator's past high-performing videos are direct factors in what the recommendation system shows next. Every video gets tested on its own. Instagram has moved its feed the same direction, ranking more of it by interest graph than social graph. The platforms did this math before most marketing departments caught up with it.

| $44B | 26% | 48% | 4x | 5.6B |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PROJECTED 2026 U.S. CREATOR AD SPEND | YoY GROWTH, ~4X THE MEDIA INDUSTRY | OF BUYERS CALL CREATORS A “MUST BUY” | ENGAGEMENT LIFT, MOLSON COORS' CREATOR OVERHAUL | VIEWS FROM ONE e.l.f. DISTRIBUTION PLAY |

*Sources: IAB 2025 Creator Economy Ad Spend & Strategy Report; Digiday; The One Club. Full citations on the last page.*

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## 04 What the Trade Press Is Already Saying

This isn't a theory we're pitching. It's already showing up in how the industry covers itself, and in the numbers brands are willing to put their names on.

### e.l.f. Cosmetics: one song, not one campaign

e.l.f. Cosmetics didn't produce a polished ad. It gave away raw material, in this case a 15-second original song, and let creators do the rest with its #eyeslipsface challenge. Case-study data submitted to The One Club puts the result at more than 3.5 million user-generated videos and 5.6 billion views, with unpaid, organic participation from celebrities nobody booked. TikTok has since turned the mechanic e.l.f. proved out into an actual ad product, Branded Buzz, which pays to amplify whichever creator posts are already working instead of picking a winner in advance.

*Source*: https://www.oneclub.org/awards/theoneshow/-award/36612/elf-eyeslipsface-tiktok-campaign/

### Duolingo: the brand that runs like a creator

Duolingo doesn't market the way a beverage brand runs a Super Bowl spot. It runs a character. Adweek has covered the team behind Duo the owl directly, and its global senior social media manager described the job in one line: “the comment section is our social brief.” There's no quarterly hero campaign. There's a daily presence that reacts to what the audience already responded to, in whatever format each platform rewards that week.

*Source*: https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/duolingo-duo-owl-marketing-strategy/

### Molson Coors: a 230-marketer conglomerate rebuilds for creator speed

Digiday reported in September 2026 that Molson Coors, whose 230 marketers run more than 100 brands from Miller High Life to Fever Tree, rebuilt its social workflow from scratch with its creative partner Movers+Shakers. The old approach treated organic social like a “high-stakes TV campaign,” one post at a time. The new one puts less weight on any single post and more on volume, speed, and a legal process built to keep pace with the ecosystem instead of slowing it down. Since the change, Molson Coors says engagement with its creator content has quadrupled.

*Source*:
https://digiday.com/media/molson-coors-ditches-its-tv-era-workflow-to-move-at-creator-speed-quadrupling-engagement/

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## Cluely: a 16-person startup that out-shouted companies ten times its size

Cluely didn't win 2025 attention with a better product demo. It won with distribution, at a volume most startups never attempt. Founder Roy Lee built the AI meeting assistant's early notoriety on a deliberately provocative launch, then backed it with a clipping operation built the same way Clouted builds one: find existing creator accounts, pay them directly, and get many people posting instead of one. Lee has said publicly that Cluely hired more than 700 clippers. Forbes reported the operation helped the company reach $7 million in annual recurring revenue on top of a $15 million Series A from Andreessen Horowitz. Lee told the crowd at TechCrunch Disrupt 2025 what most founders won't say out loud: unless you're in deep tech, you “need to low-key deep focus on distribution.” Whatever anyone thinks of the marketing, Cluely became one of the most talked-about startups in tech in 2025 running exactly the mechanic this white paper is describing.

*Source*:
https://www.forbes.com/sites/boazsobrado/2026/02/11/inside-the-clipping-farms-driving-fintechs-marketing-boom/

*Source*: https://techcrunch.com/2025/10/29/cluelys-roy-lee-on-the-ragebait-strategy-for-startup-marketing

## Prime Video’s “The Summer I Turned Pretty” Campaign

Digiday's own Content Marketing Awards tell the same story from the judging table. Amazon Prime Video's 2026 campaign for “The Summer I Turned Pretty” turned old episodes into scheduled YouTube “Watch Party” events instead of producing new hero content, and drove a 164 percent increase in organic watch time and 73,000 new subscribers, most of it from people who weren't subscribers to begin with. The industry isn't just talking about distribution mechanics. It's giving them awards.

*Source*:
https://digiday.com/media/ford-amazon-prime-video-and-pokemon-are-among-the-2026-digiday-content-marketing-awards-finalists/

## 05 How It Actually Runs

In practice, distribution marketing comes down to four things running together, not four separate line items.

**Creator-powered clipping at volume.** Dozens to hundreds of creators cutting the same source material into different hooks, captions, and formats, instead of one internal team producing one hero video.

**Paid amplification on what's already proven.** Money goes behind the cuts that are already working organically, instead of guessing which single ad will land.

**Systemized testing and repetition.** Hooks, captions, and sounds tested across dozens of variations, not one launch post and a hope.

**Always-on infrastructure, not campaign bursts.** A program that keeps running so the numbers don't fall off a cliff the week after a launch.

**WHAT THIS BUYS YOU**

Across our music and entertainment client base, effective CPMs are landing near $0.40, a fraction of standard paid social benchmarks. That's the return on distribution infrastructure: cost efficiency a single hero video can't touch.

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## 06 What This Means for 2027 Planning

If you're building next year's marketing budget right now, here's where that shift should show up.

Budget by program, not by campaign. Distribution infrastructure needs to run continuously. A campaign burst around a launch date, then silence, throws away the compounding effect that makes distribution marketing work.

Move dollars from a handful of hero productions toward volume and variation. Ten different cuts hitting the algorithm ten different ways will consistently outperform one perfect video the algorithm never picks up.

Ask your agency to own strategy and creative, not just distribution. Good creative in leads to great distribution out. Distribution without a strategic point of view just spikes and falls back down. That's the difference between a campaign and a moment.

Treat clipping, creator content, and paid amplification as one system. Split across three vendors and three line items, nobody owns the outcome.

Plan for measurement from day one, not after the campaign ends. IAB's own research found ROI tracking is the top operational hurdle for buyers putting real budget behind creators. Whatever program you build in 2027, decide upfront what you're measuring and how, or the budget conversation for 2028 starts from the same guesswork this one did.

**The next twelve months will split brands into two groups: the ones still thinking about content, and the ones thinking about distribution. Where your 2027 budget goes decides which group you're in.**

**Eric Aaberg**
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## Sources & Further Reading

Every figure and case study above is drawn from public reporting or primary industry research. Nothing here is a Clouted estimate unless labeled as one.


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*The $0.40 effective CPM benchmark cited earlier is Clouted's own delivery data across its music and entertainment client base, not a third-party figure.*

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## Where to Go Deeper with Clouted

Everything in this briefing runs through the services below. Each page has more detail on how we scope, price, and run it.

### Clipping

Raw footage, cut into short-form content and distributed through our trained creator network.
https://clouted.com/solutions/clipping

### UGC

Dedicated creator content built for a specific brand, product, or moment.
https://clouted.com/solutions/ugc

### Managed Pages & Accounts

Always-on community accounts that keep a brand or artist visible between campaigns.
https://clouted.com/solutions/fan-pages

### Paid Performance Ads

Paid amplification behind whatever is already proving out organically.
https://clouted.com/solutions/performance-ads

### Influencer Seeding

Genre- and audience-aligned creator placements built for discovery.
https://clouted.com/solutions/influencer-seeding

### Distribution Intelligence

Reporting and strategy that ties distribution activity back to real outcomes.
https://clouted.com/solutions/distribution-intelligence

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For brands, start here: clouted.com/brands