

# James Cloete - Marketing trends: Lessons from Bill Bernbach, Nelly the Elephant & others

By [James Cloete](#), issued by [RAPT Creative Agency](#)

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Thinking about 'marketing trends', my mind goes to the week I just had and the discussions we've been leading with our clients on where the industry has been, where we believe it's going and why we're reshaping our agency accordingly.



Image created through AI. James Cloete, chief creative officer, RAPT Group, talks marketing trends or what he has learnt from Bill Bernbach, ChatGPT and 25yrs in advertising. And Nelly the Elephant. And my mom!

I'll come back to that later. Let's talk a bit about what I've learned.

“ Not every new trend is worth following, regardless of how many people may be doing so at the time ”

## Lessons

### 1. Lesson

Let's start by clarifying what we mean by the term 'trend'. While searching for a definition, I can't help thinking about a particular point in time when I was dancing, well 'mashing', to a children's nursery rhyme called 'Nelly the Elephant' – which became inexplicably popular within the alternative music scene during the mid 90's – and I feel a twinge of

both new and remembered discomfort.

On that night, I broke my arm. “But? But! BUT – WHY – WERE – YOU – DOING – THIS – JAMES?” and “WHY – WERE – YOU – EVEN – AT – A – NIGHT – CLUB – IN – THE – FIRST – PLACE?” said my mother in an understanding voice, punctuating her words with short, sharp slaps to the back of my head.

To which James of the Past eruditely replied: “Because it’s cool – and you don’t know anything.”

From the vantage point afforded to me by time and perspective, I cringe with a newer, keener kind of pain as I look back on myself as a wide-eyed herd animal happily jumping around in that cesspool of embarrassing music, moves and fashion.



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**Learning:** Not every new trend is worth following, regardless of how many people may be doing so at the time. Sometimes trends lead to burst dotcom bubbles, banner ads that no human clicks on, or bad photos and broken arms. (Also, we should all probably listen more to our mothers and not makeup things about them beating us to make our writing more interesting.)

**Learning:** People are weird, and what they do and why they do it can be hard to understand and predict.

This is a nice offramp into the next bit about technology and why it can’t fully replace human beings, for now.

## 2. Lesson

You can’t really reflect on what’s happening in marketing right now without touching a bit on AI.



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So, I reached out and touched ChatGPT.Me: Please write a 200-word thought leadership article on current and predicted marketing trends.

ChatGPT: *In the dynamic realm of marketing, trends continuously evolve, shaping the way businesses connect with their audiences. As we navigate the current landscape, several key trends stand out. Personalisation remains paramount, with consumers expecting tailored experiences that resonate on an individual level. Advanced data analytics and AI-driven insights empower marketers to craft targeted messages, enhancing customer engagement. Additionally, the rise of video content... ..Looking ahead... the integration of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR)... Immersive... ..brand experiences. Moreover, ethical and sustainable practices... In conclusion, the future of marketing lies in a harmonious blend of personalisation, immersive experiences, and ethical considerations. Staying attuned to these trends positions businesses to not only meet current expectations but also anticipate and adapt to the evolving needs of their audience.*

“ Also, do you mind if I call you ‘Chatty G’ for short? ”

Me: Interesting. Also, errrmagerrrrd, I am so bored! Added to that I note the distinct absence of anything to do with humanity, using emotion as a lever, insight, ideas – or the rise of social commerce (which I think is set to make increasingly bigger waves, don’t you?). Also, do you mind if I call you ‘Chatty G’ for short?



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Bored with Chatty G, I decided to consult on the above with one of the old human oracles, Bill Bernbach. Bill: “However much we would like advertising to be a science – because life would be simpler that way – the fact is, that it is not. It is a subtle, ever-changing art, defying formularisation, flowering on freshness and withering on imitation; where what was effective one day, for that very reason, will not be effective the next, because it has lost the maximum impact of originality.”

Me: What else can you tell us, Bill? Bill: “At the heart of an effective creative philosophy is the belief that nothing is so powerful as an insight into human nature, what compulsions drive a man, what instincts dominate his action, even though his language so often camouflages what really motivates him. If you know these things about a person, you can touch him at the core of his being.”

“ Insight-led creative thinking remains the secret ”

**Learning:** AI tools are increasingly useful in the hands of skilled, strategically astute and empathetic creative souls. But don’t leave your marketing and advertising in the hands of an entity that does not understand the human condition and is not capable of original thought. Insight-led creative thinking remains the secret behind cracking the strategies, ideas and stories that allow brands to reach into hearts and minds - and therefore pockets.

### 3. Lesson

“I’d like an integrated campaign to drive a consistent message in the market. So obviously I’m going to hire four different competing companies with separate P&Ls to work alongside our in-house team.

“Simple. Ooh - and I have this great deal on squeeze backs for an obscure morning show, secured as part of a bulk media purchase deal before the comstrat for the current objective even existed, but hey,” said an imaginary amalgam of marketers to help me make my next point.

The reality, of course, is that many clients have gone back to agencies that have returned to offering an integrated model because the cost and time savings are theoretically obvious.



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Lara-Anne Derbyshire 25 Jan 2024



Genuinely integrated offerings are, however, hard to find. Mostly, different departments of specialists still operate in a baton-passing structure and some services, like media, are still procured from standalone companies.

“ *Integration is dead. Long live integration* ”

**Learning:** Integration is dead. Long live integration. The answer to all of today's increasing complexity and shrinking marketing budgets can be found by simply revisiting an idea from yesterday - genuine integration.

Before media agencies decoupled from ad agencies (shortly followed by all the specialists), marketers were able to enjoy the congruency of messaging and efficiency of spend afforded by getting all their shopping done at one advertising supermarket.

Communication strategy, channel strategy and creative were all done together in the same place, all in service of the same objective, with only one bill to pay. As intimated at the top of the article, at our shop we've decided to change our model and bring media planning and buying back into the fold, front and centre.



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We believe that this is what marketers and their brands want and need – and consequently, I think you'll see the same change in model from many agencies going forward.

“ *Properly practised creativity can make one ad do the work of 10* ”

## In conclusion

To be read in my mother's voice: “Just because everyone's using the same picture of a generic person smiling inanely at an electronic device beneath AI generated copy, or placing their 3D rendered product in the hands of the same ‘influencer’ set (who can't actually afford the product), all placed on media bought before there was a strategy or idea, doesn't mean that you should too”.

Or in Mr Bill Bernbach's words: “Properly practised creativity must result in greater sales more economically achieved. Properly practised creativity can lift your claims out of the swamp of sameness and make them accepted, believed, persuasive, and urgent. Properly practised creativity can make one ad do the work of 10”.

Here's to ensuring that your marketing matters. Here's to the future. And the past.

## ABOUT JAMES CLOETE

Group chief creative officer at RAPT Creative. He has 20 years of TTL agency experience and loves leading and growing people and building brands and big ideas.  
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