



PERCEPTION CREATES REALITY: WINNING WITH OPTIMISM

How perception shapes reality, what declinism is costing brands, and shaping positive influence when purpose is no longer in vogue

FOREWORD



Clay Routledge, existential psychologist, Executive VP and COO of the Archbridge Institute, a non-partisan think tank, and director of its Human Flourishing Lab



We have a cynicism problem. Surveys, including ones conducted by my team at the Archbridge Institute's Human Flourishing Lab, find that the majority of Americans are pessimistic about the future, with little confidence we will make progress on the big challenges we face. At the root of it is a distorted picture of our fellow humans.

Research consistently shows that people are better than we assume. We overestimate how selfish and dishonest others are, and underestimate how kind and helpful they will be.

We treat optimism as naive. In reality, it is a critical ingredient of human progress. When we expect the best from one another and our shared future, we become more resilient, open-minded, collaborative, and creative. We also become more inspired to help build the better tomorrow we imagine.

Right now, our information ecosystem is a major obstacle. It trades more and more in fear and outrage, presenting the worst of humanity as the whole. However, we are not helpless victims. We reward the negativity with our attention. But this also means we have the power to change course.

And there are signs people are starting to. Many are growing exhausted with the doom and gloom and are stepping back from the platforms that feed it. This is especially true among the young, who report the highest levels of distress, distrust, and pessimism, yet are also leading the search for something more hopeful.

Brands have an important role to play. They reach people every day and are well-placed to help tell a more optimistic and accurate story about who we are. As this report shows, this is not only good for the world. It is good for business.

WE HAVEN'T LOST OUR VALUES, BUT WE HAVE LOST SIGHT OF EACH OTHER

Something has shifted in how we read the world. Not just what we think about it, but what we feel when we step outside, unlock our phones, talk to strangers, and watch the news.

There's a weight to daily life that feels new. A low-level vigilance, and a background assumption that people will disappoint us, that institutions will fail us, that things are heading the wrong way.

DECLINISM, THE BELIEF THAT SOCIETY IS IN MORAL AND SOCIAL FREEFALL, IS NOW MAINSTREAM.

And yet, look closely at what people actually experience day to day and a different picture emerges. Strangers still hold doors, neighbours still check in.

Covid triggered a global surge in kindness - helping strangers, volunteering, donating. It carried on after the pandemic, but it seems our belief in each other didn't.

BOSTON, APRIL 2026

Remember the two Boston marathon runners who sacrificed PBs at the finish to help an exhausted competitor cross the line?



AFTER A SURGE IN ACTS OF KINDNESS DURING THE PANDEMIC, THE WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT 2025 SHOWED BENEVOLENT ACTS WERE STILL 10% ABOVE 2017-2019 LEVELS.

...DESPITE THAT SURGE IN BENEVOLENT BEHAVIOUR, A 2023-24 PEW RESEARCH CENTER POLL FOUND THAT ONLY 34% OF AMERICANS SAID MOST PEOPLE CAN BE TRUSTED. EUROSTAT PUTS AVERAGE INTERPERSONAL TRUST ACROSS EU MEMBER STATES AT JUST 5.8 OUT OF 10.

THE EVERYDAY FABRIC OF HUMAN DECENCY, THE
SMALL, UNSPECTACULAR ACTS OF CONSIDERATION THAT
KEEP SOCIAL LIFE RUNNING IS LARGELY INTACT.
IT'S NOT PERFECT, AND NOT WITHOUT FRACTURE.
BUT LIKELY NOT AS BROKEN AS WE THINK.

THAT GAP, BETWEEN THE WORLD WE PERCEIVE AND THE WORLD WE LIVE IN, IS WHERE WE FOCUS.



THIS HAS MAJOR IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETY

Pessimism at scale isn't just an emotional state. It becomes structural. When we collectively assume the worst of each other, we pull back - from community, from risk, from the longer-term thinking that progress requires.

We shorten our horizons. We stop investing in futures we don't believe in.

THE IRONY OF DECLINISM IS THAT IT RISKES BECOMING SELF-FULFILLING. A SOCIETY THAT HAS STOPPED EXPECTING GOOD THINGS FROM ITSELF IS LESS LIKELY TO BUILD THEM.

Optimism isn't naivety. It's the precondition for resilience, for innovation, for collective action. You cannot fix what you have given up on.

WINNING WITH OPTIMISM ISN'T A STORY ABOUT HOW WE FEEL. IT'S ABOUT WHAT WE'RE CAPABLE OF AND WHAT WE LEAVE ON THE TABLE IF A DISTORTED PICTURE OF EACH OTHER GOES UNCHALLENGED.

A 360° EXPLORATION OF ONLINE VOICES

ONE Strategy Studio is an AI-first strategic insights agency that solves tough brand challenges in days and weeks, not months.

Our expert strategists, in collaboration with our virtual team ‘The 5’ (each a model trained to think and act like an expert function in an agency), have explored hundreds of curated consumer, cultural, brand and academic online sources to understand the complex cultural and psychological tapestry of this space, defining thoughtstarters for how brands can meaningfully play a role in helping to re-calibrate perceptions, without preaching and without forcing ‘big brand purpose’.

MEET THE 5



SAMMI

“THE SEEKER”

WITH THE POWER
OF SOURCING



HAYDEN

“THE KEEN EYE”

WITH THE POWER
OF ANALYTICS



SKYLER

“THE BRAIN”

WITH THE POWER
OF STRATEGY



OLI

“THE STORYTELLER”

WITH THE POWER OF
NARRATIVE



FINN

“THE DREAMER”

WITH THE POWER OF
CREATIVITY

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radius

OUR COLLEAGUES
AT RADIUS

THE PERCEPTION MACHINE

Think about the world we've experienced over the last decade.

A global pandemic

Wars playing out on our phones

Economic uncertainty

Political division

...An endless stream of headlines telling us what has gone wrong.

It's not a surprise that the collective mood is one of cynicism and fatigue, given the information environment we're swimming in.

THAT ENVIRONMENT IS DOING SOMETHING VERY SPECIFIC TO OUR SENSE OF REALITY. IT SYSTEMATICALLY OVERSTATES THREAT, CONFLICT AND HUMAN FAILURE - WHILE UNDERSTATING CONNECTION, DECENCY AND REPAIR.

THE PERCEPTION MACHINE

The mechanics are well understood:

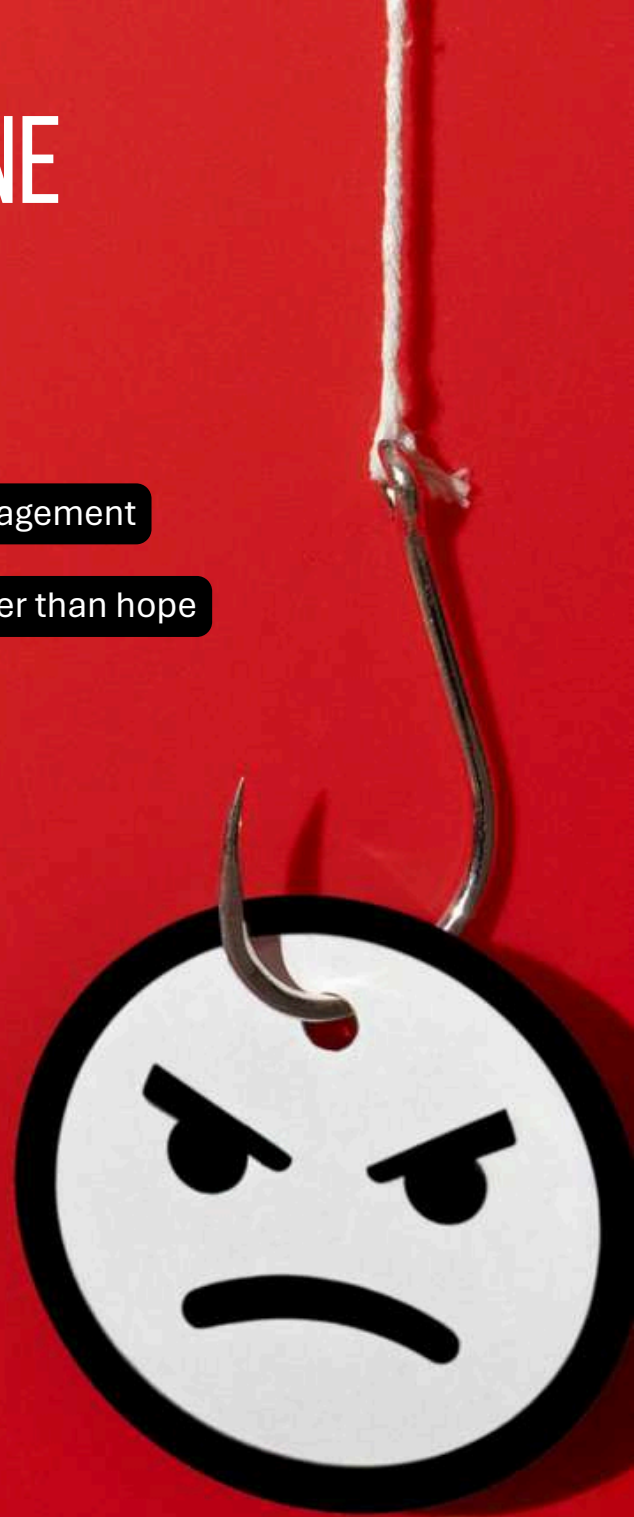
News algorithms reward anxiety

Outrage drives engagement

Platforms built around attention know fear travels faster than hope

THE RESULT IS A 24-HOUR SCROLL THAT FUNCTIONS LESS LIKE A WINDOW ON THE WORLD AND MORE LIKE A FILTER, SELECTING FOR THE WORST OF WHAT HAPPENS AND SERVING IT UP IN HIGH DEFINITION, ON REPEAT.

The same dynamics shape public discourse more broadly. Simplified narratives of threat and division tend to travel further than complex, nuanced ones. The cumulative effect is a public conversation that systematically overstates how different we are from each other and how threatening we should find it.



BUT IT'S NOT JUST THE ENVIRONMENT SHAPING PERCEPTION - IT'S ALSO HOW WE'RE WIRED

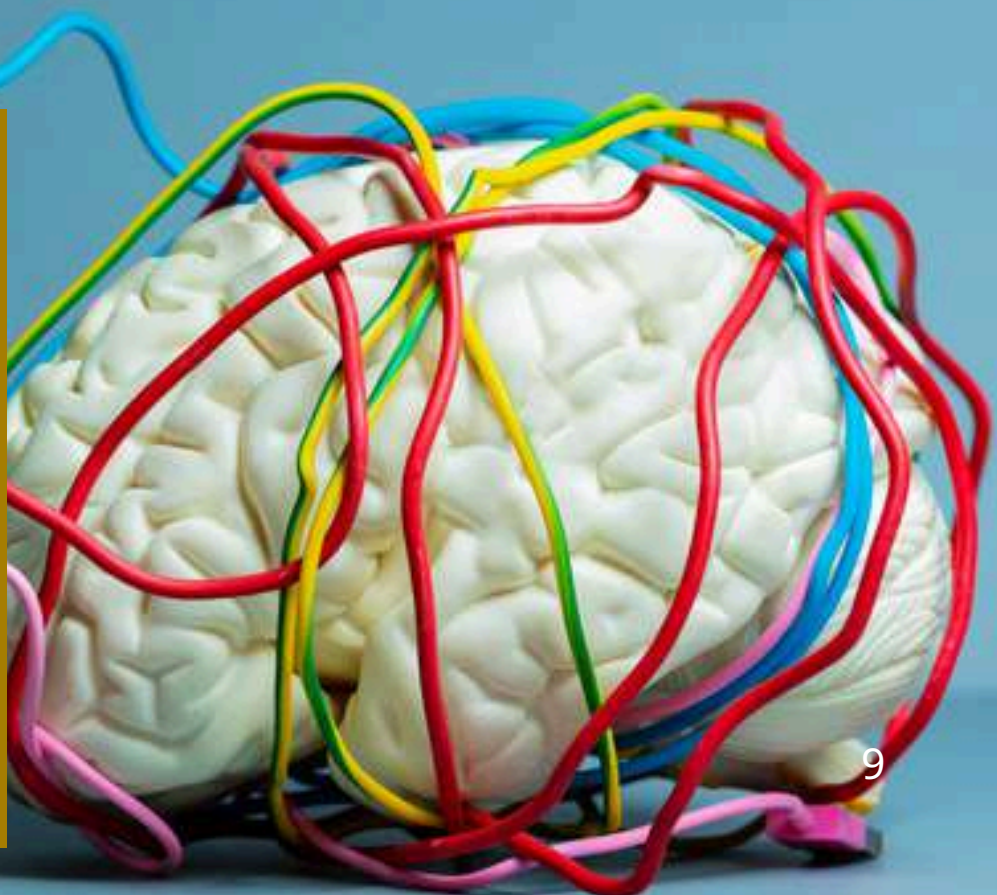
Negativity bias, the cognitive tendency to register and retain negative information more strongly than positive, means we're already predisposed to notice the good before the bad.

In the current environment, it compounds into something more serious: a feedback loop in which a distorted picture of the world is absorbed by minds already primed to believe it.

YET RESEARCH REPEATEDLY SHOWS THAT PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY BETTER THAN WE EXPECT THEM TO BE.

Studies show:

- That people are more honest, trustworthy, kind, and less selfish than we predict.
- When psychologists ask strangers to strike up conversations, both people enjoy the interaction far more than they think they will.
- When people perform small acts of kindness, they consistently underestimate how much those acts will mean to someone else.



OUR EXPECTATIONS DON'T JUST REFLECT REALITY - THEY HELP CREATE IT

The same pattern continues to emerge: people expect less goodness than they typically encounter.

There's a gap between who people really are and who we've come to believe they are.

AND THAT'S A PROBLEM BECAUSE EXPECTATIONS SHAPE BEHAVIOUR.

If we expect a stranger to be unfriendly, we're less likely to start a conversation.

If we expect people to be selfish, we're less likely to trust them.

If we expect indifference, we're less likely to offer kindness ourselves.



THE COST FOR BRANDS

When enough people lower their expectations at the same time, something subtle begins to happen. We become more guarded, more suspicious, more transactional.

We start protecting ourselves from a version of humanity that may not be accurate. And in doing so, we can accidentally create it.

IT FEEDS INTO CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR:

01

Less experimental

02

More sceptical

03

More price sensitive

04

Slower to decide

CYNICISM IS BAD FOR GROWTH.

We're not suggesting the world is without its problems - bad things happen, and division is real.

But good things happen every day too. They're just less likely to make the headlines - and because they don't, we forget they exist.



So maybe the challenge isn't that humanity has changed as much as we think. Maybe what's changed is the story we've been telling ourselves about humanity?

And if that's true, then there's something hopeful hidden inside it, because expectations can change.

SO IF IT'S A PERCEPTION PROBLEM, THE QUESTION BECOMES: WHO SHAPES PERCEPTION?

Who has the scale, the reach, and the creative capacity to offer people a different picture of each other?

Brands and marketers aren't just selling products – they're also shaping what people notice in culture every day. Leaning into culture, reacting to it, influencing it.

WE'RE NOT SUGGESTING IT'S ON BRANDS TO SAVE SOCIETY.

This isn't about forcing big, bold brand purpose - but brands and marketers do play a role in what society looks like, and the stories that get told.

Ultimately, if declining belief in others makes consumers more sceptical, more cautious, less willing to try something new...then rebuilding trust isn't just a social opportunity.

IT'S A GROWTH OPPORTUNITY.

The question is how.

Not through purpose. Not through preaching. But it might be through the choices brands make about the stories they tell, the behaviours they celebrate and the expectations they create.

MARKETEERS *are* ARCHITECTS — OF — PERCEPTION



SOME THOUGHTSTARTERS

01 THINK PERCEPTION, NOT PURPOSE

Most brands don't change the world directly. But they do shape what people see as normal, acceptable, and aspirational, and that is real influence.

The opportunity isn't to position brands as moral leaders or agents of social change. It's to recognise that every creative decision, every partnership and product decision, contributes to a picture of the world that millions of people absorb.

Brands with cultural fluency and a genuine point of view can use that influence deliberately, shifting perception without preaching, and shaping the expectations that ultimately drive behaviour.



Kleenex's partnership with Mind encouraged consumers to "cherish the smiles of passers-by warming the day". A different initiative, but a nudge to see the positive human behaviour around us.

"I don't believe every brand needs a purpose bigger than its business. But every brand needs to recognise that it shapes perceptions... Ultimately, I think shaping perception is the more realistic job...They shape expectations, and expectations drive behaviour. That's where their influence really lies."

Kevin Evans

Senior Marketing Manager,
Masterbrand Comms,
Pepsi-Lipton International

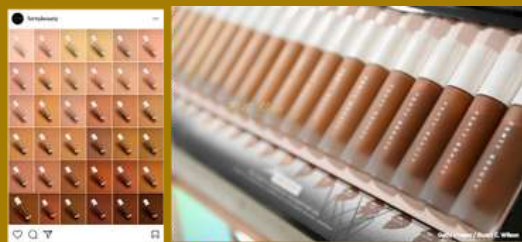
SOME THOUGHTSTARTERS

02 MAKE IT SOCIALLY PERMISSABLE TO HAVE HOPE

One of the striking findings from this research is that optimism has become a social liability. Cynicism has become the sophisticated public position.

Brands have always shaped what's culturally or socially permissible – what's cool, what's normal, and breaking down stigma. They've made it normal to challenge assumptions around gender, to celebrate imperfection, to express identity through consumption. The same mechanism can make it normal to expect good things from other people again.

The opportunity is to make hope, trust, and generosity towards strangers feel culturally safe again. Not by telling people to be kind, but by creating contexts, formats, products, and experiences where those behaviours are the natural default. It's not preaching kindness, but building an environment where it's easier to express.



Fenty Beauty launched 40 shades of foundation without a stated inclusivity purpose, but it led to other brands expanding their ranges too. An example of brands shaping what's normal, without overtly talking about it.

"I was in Pizza Express recently and my daughter was doing the activities on the back of the kids' menu. She got to the bit where it asked for her name and she refused to fill it in because she said: 'That could be a scam.' An entire generation is growing up being taught to question what's put in front of them..."

We're living in a world of misinformation, AI-generated content, scams and endless competing narratives."

Kevin Evans

Senior Marketing Manager,
Masterbrand Comms,
Pepsi-Lipton International

SOME THOUGHTSTARTERS

03 MAKE PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR VISIBLE

The consumer experience has shifted markedly to one that flags the social breaches everywhere: signs that state “Respect our staff. Abuse will not be tolerated”, prove you’re ‘not a bot’ CAPTCHA challenges, returns policies that hint at customer fraud over honesty. All signalling a low-grade hostility and what you believe about human nature.

Brands have access to enormous amounts of real behavioural data, and we imagine most of it tells a more positive story than the ambient cultural narrative.

The opportunity is to publish that signal - what proportion of your customers pay on time, return things honestly, treat your staff well? It flips the story, and if brands design their operations around the assumption that most people are decent, it can alleviate tensions.

Other examples of highlighting positive behaviour encourage micro acts of kindness and generosity such as ‘pay it forward’ initiatives that make it easy for consumers to act on innate kindness. Both make kindness visible and easy.



Suspended Coffees invites customers to pre-pay for a coffee that a stranger can claim later, turning a small act of generosity into part of the everyday transaction. ■



“Marketing often gets framed as persuasion. But a huge part of marketing is actually removing uncertainty and trust reduces uncertainty.”

Kevin Evans
Senior Marketing Manager,
Masterbrand Comms,
Pepsi-Lipton International

WANT TO KNOW HOW YOUR BRAND CAN WIN WITH OPTIMISM?

Every category has its own version of the cynicism problem, and its own opportunity to fix it.

We'll help you find where your brand can shift the story.

LET'S TALK.

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