

AI, BRANDING AND TRUST

Executive Session Summary

Round Table with Nina Christian | 12 June 2026 | Hosted by Michael Valos

On 12 June, a group of marketers, founders, academics and consultants gathered for an interactive round table on artificial intelligence, brand and trust. The session was led by Nina Christian (Marketing Futurist, co-founder of Virtually Myself), with contributions spanning marketing, psychology, recruitment, retail, research and corporate insights.

This summary captures the core ideas shared, the live demonstration of Nina's AI digital twin, and the themes that emerged through discussion.

Framing the Conversation: Where Are We on the Hype Cycle?

Nina opened by acknowledging that the AI landscape currently feels like “the wild west” — a mix of fear, obsession and blind enthusiasm that echoes earlier technology shifts such as the dot-com boom and the rise of digital and social marketing.

Rather than debating whether AI adoption is good or bad, she reframed the conversation around a more useful question: as AI capability becomes ubiquitous and commoditised, what will actually differentiate one brand, person or organisation from another?

Her answer: trust.

As tools become equally accessible to everyone, technology itself stops being the differentiator. What remains is the relationship people have with a brand — and increasingly, that relationship is shaped by how consistently and authentically a brand shows up across every channel, human and AI-assisted alike.

The Four Cogs of Congruence

A central model from Nina's talk was “congruence” — the idea that trust depends on consistency across four interlocking areas:

- **Digital expression** — How you present yourself online and across content
- **In-real-life presence** — How you show up in person, in meetings, on calls

- **Interactions and experiences** — The quality and tone of two-way engagement, whether handled by a human or AI
- **Client/customer experience** — What it's actually like to work with or buy from you

If any one of these is out of sync with the others, it undermines trust in all of them — people's "BS detectors" pick up on the inconsistency even if they can't articulate why something feels off.

The Klarna Example: A Cautionary Tale

Nina referenced the well-known case of a company that replaced a large portion of its workforce with AI agents while publicly maintaining a customer-first mission.

The efficiency gains were real, but the move contradicted the brand's stated values — customers strongly disliked being forced into AI interactions without a choice, and the backlash damaged trust significantly.

The lesson: AI decisions need to be assessed not just on productivity grounds, but against whether they reinforce or undermine what the brand claims to stand for.

Live Demonstration: Virtually Nina

A highlight of the session was a live demonstration of Nina's AI digital twin — Virtually Nina — built on her own books, frameworks and 20+ years of IP. Attendees emailed questions to a dedicated address, which Virtually Nina answered in real time on screen, while Nina answered the same questions live as a human.

Nina was careful to frame this as augmentation, not replacement: Virtually Nina has a more complete "memory" of her own work than she does in any given moment, but lacks the real-time context of being in the room — reading the audience, tailoring tone, and responding to what's actually being discussed. She drew a parallel to medicine, where AI tools free up professionals to operate "at the top of their scope."

Two audience questions addressed live:

How can brands use AI without becoming average?

Lead with a clearly defined point of view, lived experience and worldview. Content shaped by genuine perspective will always carry a flavour that generic AI output can't replicate. Small differences in whether AI is used to outsource thinking versus sharpen it will compound into a significant gap within 18–24 months.

How do you manage messaging when you wear multiple professional hats?

Identify one primary anchor — the core thing you want to be recognised for — and treat other areas as supporting “planets” that orbit it. Clarity comes from anchoring communication around one primary identity rather than trying to represent everything at once.

Discussion Highlights

Disclosure and trust

Research shows trust is higher when people are told upfront that they’re interacting with AI, but drops sharply if they discover it after the fact without being told. A real-world example was shared of a healthcare brand facing strong customer backlash after AI was used in creative content without disclosure.

Sense-making as a human skill

As AI takes on more analytical and drafting work, the next frontier for human development is “sense-making” — the intuitive, emotional and contextual judgment that AI cannot replicate.

“AI can analyse really well, it can draw connections, it processes at speed, but it doesn’t feel, and it doesn’t sense, and it doesn’t have imagination and pure creativity.”

— Round table attendee

Helping the next generation think for themselves

A significant part of the discussion focused on early-career professionals and students who are growing up with AI as a default tool. Suggestions included teaching people to treat AI as a critical reviewer and reinforcing the importance of retaining personal agency over one’s own IP, identity, data and decisions.

Authenticity over performance

Brands and individuals are better served by being honest about who they are rather than performing an idealised version of themselves. If there’s a gap between how you present yourself and reality, people will notice eventually.

“Your people are your brand online — collectively, employees’ LinkedIn profiles get more followers and views than the company page does.”

— Round table attendee, on employer branding

Key Takeaways

1	As AI tools become equally available to everyone, trust — not technology — becomes the primary differentiator between brands and individuals.
2	Consistency across digital presence, in-person presence, day-to-day interactions and the overall client experience (the “four cogs of congruence”) underpins trust.
3	Disclosing AI involvement upfront protects trust; discovering it after the fact erodes it.
4	Distinctiveness — a clear point of view shaped by real experience — is what prevents AI-assisted content from becoming generic.
5	Retaining agency over one’s own IP, identity, data and decision-making is increasingly important for individuals, brands and organisations alike.
6	For people or brands with multiple areas of focus, clarity comes from anchoring communication around one primary identity.

Looking Ahead

Nina offered to follow up with short video responses to the questions raised during the live demonstration. Catherine Toms will be running a related session on 17 July focused on AI training, building on themes from this discussion and a recent panel covering why AI adoption stalls within organisations.

Executive Summary prepared by Ivy Semple