How We Work With Culture

AKA creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's greatest brands...

Introduction

First up, an admission. Probably should've written this a long time ago. Not now, almost 15 years into the Crowd DNA story.

So why now? Well, better late than never. Also because, as we grow, as we become more global, communicating what we stand for becomes ever more important to get right. We can't just hope that this will all drift through the ether, like we perhaps could when Crowd DNA was a handful of people sitting around the same table. Now we're not even sitting in the same timezone.

Prior to creating How We Work With Culture, what's in here had never all been put down on paper in the one place. It had been talked about in instalments. Shared in various presentations, workshops and company get-togethers. It had existed in the heads of various people (much of it in mine). It often ended up hidden away in the mysterious depths of our Google Drive.

What do we hope to achieve with this? To give our team, particularly new arrivals, a stronger sense of what we're about. The confidence to dive into the wonderful messiness of working with culture. And if there are people outside of the business who are also interested in what we're about, that's great, too. We hope it will demonstrate that, despite all of the aforementioned messiness, Crowd DNA has craft to it - something we can call... *a way*. We want to be seen as a unique proposition, and to define and inspire a next generation of cultural strategists. We think How We Work With Culture has a big role to play here, too.

But then in some ways it's just nice to have the opportunity to tell our story. All of the things we chat about. The stuff we try to make sense of, and somewhat obsess over. The big strategic things, but then also all of the weird bits and pieces that make up our narrative. All of it, in its own way, is important.

With thanks to the entire Crowd DNA team, whose creativity and energy never fails to amaze. Special applause for Chloe Swayne for all of the fabulous design work (and perseverance) that went into creating How We Work With Culture. And to our group managing director, Dr Matilda Andersson, for her contributions here, but more so, for her commitment to Crowd DNA itself.

Andy Crysell, founder and CEO

Brands live within culture. This isn't something that they chose to either do or not to do. They have no say in it. They just *are* within culture. All that differs is how cognisant they are to this fact.

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What Are We Trying To Do Here?

It isn't easy to get down on paper exactly what we do at Crowd DNA. In lots of ways, that's exactly why we like doing what we do. It changes often. There is always a new dimension to consider. It's sometimes like (strategically) herding cats.

But this much is certain: ever since opening for business in 2008 - even if the articulation has changed - we have been exploring culture. More specifically, the intersection of culture and brands, of culture and innovation.

And this document? This counts as our best stab to date at codifying what it is that we do with culture. At narrating that we have 'a way'. Something as effective as it is inspirational. Something that's more developed and refined than sometimes we have even acknowledged ourselves. Something informed by lessons from countless success stories (ok, and from a few not so successful ones, too).

There is more detail to come, but if we want to keep it really brief, what we're pointing to is this:

→ Brands live within culture. This isn't something that they chose to either do or not to do. They have no say in it. They just *are* within culture. All that differs is how cognisant they are to this fact

→ Brands will always focus on their customers, their competitors and their category. Fine, makes sense. But they should also explore the wider cultural context. Often searching for opportunities or for threats. But always, always, always for change

→ Most of the time, people are not customers. They are too busy being people, caring about all of the things that people care about. Just like brands, they are also living within culture

→ Marketers, innovators and strategists, through to C-suite leaders, have a greater need than ever to connect with people emotionally and compassionately. There is nothing fluffy about this. It's not a feel-good exercise. It's all about the second part of our company ambition: *Culturally charged* **commercial advantage**

→ We believe brands achieve better things through greater awareness of their context in culture. It's a stand-out maker of brand health and of future potential

Image left: Photojournalism for Vans in NYC

A rejection of a 'top down' view of culture, as something defined by the upper classes, and instead a belief that culture is less hierarchical than that, coming at us from all angles. And that's a perspective - in many senses a celebration - that runs seriously deep in Crowd DNA's origin story.

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What Is Culture?

Talking about culture can be tricky - even for us, and we've been doing it for years. It is big and it is expansive. It can refer to the most underground corner of music. The most mainstream aspect of family life. It is religion and generational change, and it is walking the dog and making a sandwich. It can charge along at a crazy pace. Or move with glacial stealth. It can be utterly frivolous. Painfully important. It is everywhere, and in another sense, it is nowhere.

None of which helps much, so let's have another go…

When searching for the building blocks of what we do at Crowd DNA, you can turn to a number of sources. But cultural studies, which emerged in the UK (though strongly informed by the 'classless society' of the US) amid the growth of mass communication in the 1950s, offers the sturdiest blocks to build on.

With sociologists Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams among the earliest proponents, core to this form of study and analysis was a rejection of a 'top down' view of culture, as something defined by the upper classes, and instead a belief that culture is less hierarchical than that, coming at us from all angles. And that's a perspective - in many senses a celebration - that runs seriously deep in Crowd DNA's origin story.

Cultural studies found its strongest voice in Stuart Hall, the Jamaican-born theorist and activist. Director of the Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies (which Hoggart founded) at the University Of Birmingham, he spoke of culture as something expansive and unrefined; as "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined."

Hall argued that culture is about 'shared meaning' - giving meaning to people, objects and events. Meaning that can be interpreted by others, and that produces a sense of identity. That meaning, he argued, is conveyed in various forms:

1. **Group identity and group differences**

2. **Personal and social interaction**

3. **Media and advertising**

4. **Everyday rituals and practices of daily life**

5. **Narratives, stories and fantasies**

6. **Rules, norms and conventions**

Other (adjacent) ways to think about culture include as a fabric of ideas, customs, values and social behaviours. As a set of knowledge acquired over time. Or as how to construct a relationship between oneself and the world.

So, culture as shared meaning. How to think about that in the context of brands and marketing? To take this all the way through to a rather brutal commercial application: there's not much point spending eye-watering sums on a Lamborghini, say, unless you know that others hold the same shared meaning of what such a purchase is saying.

Axe	The Dating Game

Unilever brand Axe (aka Lynx) launched its Find Your Magic position to reflect more diverse and nuanced takes on the game of attraction. Blending methods and working across China, India, Indonesia, South Africa, Argentina, the US, UK and Netherlands, our job was to make that credible. What teen boys say is rarely the same as what teen boys do, but we got to the truth and shared it with strategic energy and conviction. Better still, we got to make a booklet.

Culture is 'shared meaning' given to people, objects and events. Meaning that can be interpreted by others, and that produces a sense of identity.

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Applying Culture To Our Work

Let's start here with the ambition we set ourselves as a business:

Creating culturally charged commercial advantage

These five words sit at the heart of how we work. How we communicate. How we train our team. How we design our projects. Time to unpack that ambition a bit...

Image left: Behind the scenes for adidas in Manchester

As we've explained already, culture is not exactly simple. Amen to that, we like it that way. But we do figure that fact might scare some clients off from working with Crowd DNA.

Ah well, you can't please all of the research and strategy people all of the time. But we can help reduce that scariness by bringing some shape and form to how we work with culture. While there is nothing cookie cutter about this, there are ways of thinking that inform how we respond to a client brief, and this section is dedicated to them.

Thanks to the strength of our brand position, coupled with the immense talent of our team and the advocacy that comes from all of the brilliant work we do, we benefit from a healthy level of 'mental availability' in the industry - buyers notice, recognise and/or think of us in the right buying situations. In short: meaning we get DAMN GOOD BRIEFS...

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The Client Challenges We Receive

We talk a lot at Crowd DNA about how absurdly lucky we are to get the projects that we get - genuinely future-facing stuff which taps in an abundance of exciting, challenging, emergent themes.

Thanks to the strength of our brand position, coupled with the immense talent of our team and the advocacy that comes from all of the brilliant work we do, we benefit from a healthy level of 'mental availability' in the industry - the probability that a buyer will notice, recognise and/or think of us in the right buying situations. In short: meaning we get damn good briefs...

So first up, let's talk about those briefs we get.

Briefs About Culture

Unsurprisingly, many of the briefs we get literally are about culture. We know it's one about culture. The client knows it's one about culture. It's probably even got culture in the title.

Generally we're blending our 'reporting on' and 'acting on' thinking modes (see overleaf) on this type of project, and a considerable body of previous experience - spanning topics and themes through to approaches and methods.

The cultural focus point we're interrogating can be narrow (say, new codes of partying in a particular city), or broad (global travel trends for the next decade). Either way, the cultural narrative is bold and centre stage.

Briefs That Can Be Answered Through Culture

Then there are the 'other briefs'. In these cases, the client might not be terming it a cultural brief, but they sense that Crowd DNA will be able to come at it from an interesting perspective, unlocking something different through a cultural lens.

For instance, let's take the topic of how loyalty works in a particular category. Other agencies may well work solely from the perspective of that category and those customers. That's ground we're likely to cover, too, but our ideal is to also look at loyalty more discursively: what does loyalty even mean to people; how is our understanding of it (and related needs from it) evolving; what new articulations of it are there, outside of category and across culture?

Our 'acting on' thinking mode often comes to the forefront with these type of commissions, using cultural insight to act as trusted strategic advisors.

A Simple Model For Thinking About Culture

Image left: Workshopping for Timberland

Making culture more fathomable

With culture so fantastically broad and sprawling, it's important when we're talking with our clients that we try to break things down. We need to help them to think about which cultural factors are important to meet a particular commercial objective and, for this, we often turn to talking about fast culture and slow culture.

If any of you have read the rather wonderful 2009 book Chief Culture Officer, you will know we're borrowing heavily from how Canadian anthropologist and author Grant McCraken likes to think about culture. He's a smart guy and it's a smart way to look at things.

Fast Culture

Fast culture refers to the factors that typically evolve at pace. Music, media, fashion, food, celebrity. Often when people think about trends, it's what's happening in these fields that come to mind.

There's often a belief that these factors are centred around younger audiences and opinion formers. While it's certainly true that many ideas do move at speed among these cohorts, fast culture is by no means limited to them, and reaches out far and wide across all people in all places.

Fast culture is generally explicit and observable. It's on the surface, and shows how our values and beliefs are manifesting. Generally speaking, it's more likely to influence tactical objectives; the next campaign or activation.

Slow Culture

Slow Culture, by comparison, is below the surface. It is found in traditions and history. It informs family and spirituality. It's how we relate to each other. It's what makes houses into homes and food into more than just nutrition. Slow culture ultimately determines the trajectory of the latest fast culture - what will stick and what will keep accelerating.

It is worth pointing out that, in our age, even much of what is considered slow culture is starting to evolve at pace. The old rules are sometimes tested and, no doubt, there'll be plenty more of that to come. Nonetheless, there is a lot about culture that is implicit and hidden - and it's often of relevance to our clients; particularly on briefs pertaining to longer term future planning.

Some of our work leans heavily on fast culture. Other projects, slow culture. Quite often, a combination of the two. Like any framework, it has limitations, but we still consider it an effective way to organise thinking and to inform project design.

Another Way We Think About Our Work With Culture

Thinking modes in how we operate

As we mentioned earlier, we often use the thinking modes of reporting on culture and acting on culture at Crowd DNA. It's another way through which we explain our approach to a client brief.

Reporting On Culture

Reporting on culture is mandatory to our work. Regardless of method used, it's a dedication to documenting and explaining the complexities of culture as credibly as we can. Authenticity is an overused term - but we use it here with purpose. This is about needs and tensions brought into sharp focus. Stories told so masterfully that our clients can connect with the lived realities of today and our projections of them in the future. It's empathy building to a level that informs strategic decision making. It takes cues from editorial principles. It's the antithesis of market research's sometimes tendency to strip the life and soul out of insights, reducing multidimensional truths into tame bullet points.

Acting On Culture

We're always reporting on culture for our clients, and we're often acting on it, too. This is a mode switch from researcher and storyteller to strategist. We're calling on workshopping skills. Frameworks and models, such as 'jobs to be done' and needs hierarchies, scenario planning and journey mapping.

In this mode, we're being judged on our capabilities for acting as trusted partners, turning highly textured cultural understanding - needs and aspirations, cultural artefacts, language and symbols - into inspiring and reputable strategic recommendation

Image left: Clean Air interviews for IKEA in Los Angeles

Culture And Our Workstreams

This is where we get to the practitioner end of creating culturally charged commercial advantage. Leveraging this understanding in different ways for different types of work, and drawing on our huge catalogue of experience (14 years, 75 markets, and counting...)

People And Context

Many of our client relationships start here, with briefs that have a primary ambition of trying to understand people and their cultural context. Creating opportunities for businesses to build empathy like this - both to inspire internal teams and for thought leadership - enables commercial advantage in myriad ways.

To get to this credible wider cultural context, we blend research methods with trends analysis techniques and the investigative intelligence of journalism. We arrive at stories that are rich in detail, providing a strong point of difference from just looking inwards on the category or at competitors.

Brand And Comms

Brand positioning. Readying for launches and new markets. Communication and campaign development. We get plenty of briefs across these areas, and we're pretty fanatical about the challenge of defining what brands stand for (or can stand for) in the minds of audiences, and how this then gets expressed.

Given we firmly believe that all brands are within culture (whether they like it or not), we come at these challenges with potent skills. We mix evidence with real world inspiration. The methodologies are diverse (rather than off-the-shelf) and the frameworks are bespoke. There is much that we can take from Douglas Holt's Cultural Strategy ethos here - seeking opportunities that upend the orthodoxy.

Product And Experience

We collaborate with our clients to develop convention-shifting new products and experiences. We also map the (increasingly messy) paths to purchase and the optimum places at which a brand can make a difference along those journeys.

What we're seriously good at is making sure that, at the heart of all of this wonderful innovation, is a credible understanding of the real needs that must be met. The cultural forces (from emergent to dominant) that either must be challenged or synched with. This is the very definition of creating solutions with humans in mind - rather than cooking things up in the lab and then working out what to do with them.

Channel 4	UK Tribes

This one takes us right back to our earliest days, with UK Tribes running for a very epic 11 years. Our mission was to make sense of youth culture (authentically, as told to us by young people). That was a BIG challenge to take on at exactly the point when so many of the old rules around identity and belonging were starting to break down, but it was an endlessly fun and fascinating one. We produced an ever-evolving account of the cultural forces around which young people were gravitating and the industry loved it. Our focus is way more global these days, but we'll never forget UK Tribes and the vital role it played in getting us established and a bit famous. Oh, and if anyone you know is doing media studies as an A Level, you'll see UK Tribes popping up in various course books.
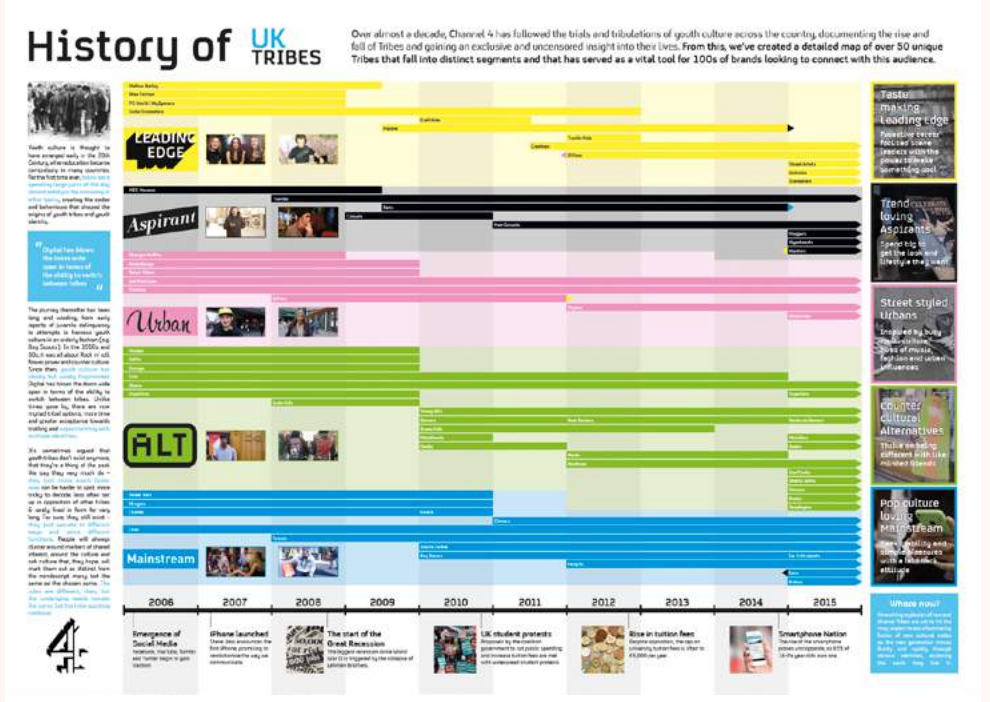
Our *Specialisms*

Our ambition to create culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's exciting brands is brought into focus by our four specialisms. We deeply value each of them, believing all have a vital role to play in making Crowd DNA the energised and unswervingly creative business that it is.

Image left: Photojournalism for Vans in NYC

Bringing together trends specialists, researchers, data analysts, strategists, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's most exciting brands

+ Crowd Insights

Authenticity, in-the-moment, seeking nuance, lived realities, relatibility

+ Crowd Signs

Exploring and forecasting future scenarios, identifying opportunities

+ Crowd Numbers

Segmentation studies, tracking trends and audiences

+ Socialise

Thought leadership, communicating trends, prototyping, amplifying impact
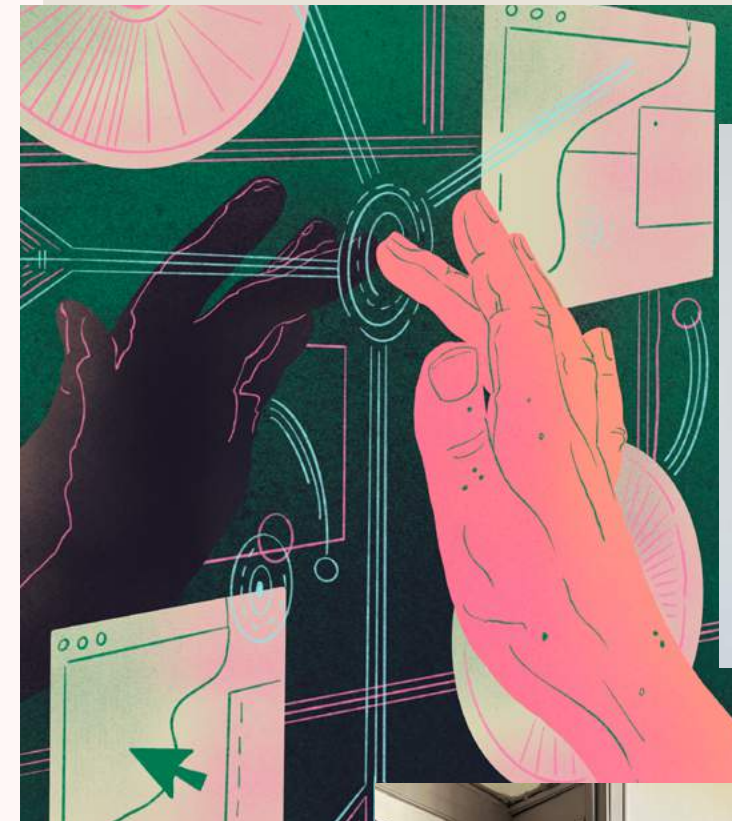
Image top left:
BBC Studios, Future
Youth illustration
Top right:
Interviewing in Shanghai
Bottom right:
Crowd DNA, Amsterdam

A couple of considerations:

i) While there's a simplicity in communicating these four areas as distinct specialisms, we encourage members of our team to have capabilities across as many of them as they wish. You don't have to be in Socialise to be good at writing or photography. It's not just our Crowd Signs team who can have a view on trends.

ii) No single specialism owns in full the strategic thinking that ultimately drives the output of our work; that can, and does, come from anywhere.

You will find us conducting ethnographic research, and remote ethnographic research using mobile platforms.
You won't find us spending time in focus group facilities, feeding participants snacks and cash in return for foggy recollections and outright mistruths. And please don't say quallie - not ever.

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Crowd Insights

Reporting on culture and building empathy through authentic, first hand experiences

Crowd Insights is the name we give to our qualitative team (please do not say quallie; not ever). You will find them conducting ethnographic research, and remote ethnographic research using mobile platforms. Observing things in-the-moment. The moment when people are interacting with a media platform. Or buying drinks with their friends. Cooking dinner for their family. Commuting to work. It's about lived realities and relatability.

What they are not so much doing, therefore, is spending time in focus group facilities, feeding participants snacks and cash in return for foggy recollections and outright mistruths. OK, we do conduct focus groups on some occasions, but we so much prefer to be out there in the real world.

Despite our aversion to focus groups, we do a lot of talking with people (you can call them participants, too; but don't call them respondents; not ever). Individual interviews, friendship groups, cross-generational interviews - we often weave these in and out of the more observational elements of our qualitative work. Our dedication to both deep listening and knowing when to ask questions is unwavering.

But our Crowd Insights team have never been limited to just a reductive take on qualitative methods. They lean into trends analysis; to working with our KIN network; to drawing on multiple sources of data and inspiration. To truly be the strategic partners to our clients, to be cultural strategists, not just the 'research vendor', it's essential they have all of this creative, intellectual and entrepreneurial space to operate in.

Image bottom left: Capturing music moments for Spotify
Centre: Gaming ethnography for Google Play in Korea
Top right: Crowd DNA's Hybrid States project

Crowd Insights

Getting into our craft and some of our techniques

Cross-Generational Interviews

When you're trying to understand generational change, interviewing multiple generations of a family at the same time is a powerful approach.

We've used this method across many projects, learning so much from how children, parents and grandparents talk to each other. Finding the commonalities and the differences in how they relate to topics as diverse as wealth and relationships, health and hedonism.

Cross-generational interviews are a fantastic method for producing film content from, too. It's an appealing format, one that people can relate to, feeling a sense of familiarity with.

Images from left – right:
Workshop facilitation
Hybrid States thought leadership work
adidas workshop, NYC
Understanding wealth in Asia for HSBC

Friendship Groups

Friendship groups, either conducted in-person or online, often combined with ethnographic work, are a mainstay of our Crowd Insights method set.

The obvious strength of the friendship group is speaking to people in an authentic context, with social dynamics in full effect. We get to hear how all things from attitudes to sex and relationships, to finance and food play out among people who would genuinely discuss all of this stuff together.

Friendship groups also create a good BS filter. You might say what you think you should say in a room-full of strangers, but your pals will likely call you out for that.

Deprivation & Exposure

In some cases, the best way to get people thinking and talking about something very familiar to them is to take it away from them. Take music, for example (but this works in lots of other spheres) - it's so embedded in the lives of many that the only way to get them to articulate the role it plays is to deprive them of it.

Similarly, there can be scenarios where doubters, cynics and indifferents can be exposed to something (perhaps a different media platform) in such a fashion to have them explaining why it's never interested them in the past (perhaps it still doesn't; perhaps exposure brings about a new-found appeal).

Deprivation and exposure exercises feature in quite a number of our projects. The design (participant numbers, diarising methods, length of task) vary but the purpose is consistent.

Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism is the name we give to the type of reporting back (generally via mobile) that shifts from participants simply responding to tasks to offering them a more empowered position to tell us about what is happening in their world.

Typically this involves them showing us what their friends, family or work colleagues are doing and thinking - thus it widens our sample. The guidance from us tends to be light - the scope for self-directed storytelling strong.

When we started out as an agency, the thinking was this method worked only with younger and more opinion forming audiences. The mainstreaming of content creation and the documenting of our lives, however, has increasingly opened up the applicability of this approach across different typologies.

Everything I Touch

We like reworking ideas and approaches that we come across elsewhere in culture. In a TV show, for instance. Or, as in this case, from an art exhibition.

Everything I Touch is a method in which we ask our participants to take a picture of, yes, everything they touch - generally in one day. It's a fabulous way in to more detailed and explorative conversation with them about the rituals and habits, needs and tensions in their life.

Everything I Touch creates powerful stimulus material to drive that conversation, taking us into what we like to call the story of the moment.

More so, Everything I Touch creates compelling outputs. There are so many exciting ways to visualise this type of work.

Ethnographic Moments

Ethnography is about hanging out with people in their own environment; understanding things from their point of view. For us, it mixes observation and conversation. And everything counts as data - from a poster on the wall to the type of milk in the fridge.

Timelines and budgets sadly mean we can't always hang out with people, as lovely as they often are, for as long as we'd like. As a fix for this, we often design approaches where we begin getting to know our contributors through remote ethnography, before then visiting them in real life. It builds rapport and identifies the moments where we should focus our in-person ethnographic endeavours.

We take field notes and arm our team with a framework for gathering observations on activities, behaviours, space, people, relationships, emotions and much more. But we also leave room for the unexpected. And though purist ethnography is more about being the fly on the wall, we also see times when it's best to get involved. Cooking in small kitchen, for example – it's awkward to just watch and you'll learn more by doing as well as observing.

Platform Pluralism

We do use research-specific platforms for online research and some of them are excellent. But we also see major benefits in using the platforms that people are using anyway. The ones they know and love - be it WhatsApp or Pinterest, Instagram or Discord.

You could say it's polite for us to go to them, rather than ask them to come to us. You save on the issues that can come from onboarding people to research platforms, with this often taking up headspace better filled by letting them share content and ideas. And let's face it, these platforms tend to have very strong UX experiences for the user; something research platforms don't always manage.

The trade off is that, while it's often easier for participants, it can be harder for the researcher, with no built in analysis tools to call on. It's not right for every brief, then, but it's perfect for some.

Crowd IRL

Some call it city safaris, but we call it Crowd IRL - and we could write a whole other book on this one. This is how we get out on-the-road with stakeholder teams, immersing them in the lives and culture of people.

When set up carefully, there's something incredibly powerful about this type of work. Rather than listening to, reading about, or watching what we have to say, or peering from behind the glass in a viewing facility, the client is truly alert to what they're seeing and hearing.

You've got to bring energy and purpose to these occasions - encouraging clients to lean in and to be truly receptive to what's around them. Based on countless experiences running Crowd IRLs every place from Portland to Shanghai, we've developed six principles for how to design these projects perfectly. There's not the space to cover them all here, but shout if you'd like to find out more about them.

Remote Adventures

We've been using digital methods extensively since launching in 2008. But, with the 2020-2021 pandemic requiring us to switch out even more of our face-to-face work for remote solutions, it was time for us to really focus on our digital repertoire, trialling new ideas.

This isn't a definitive list, but here are some of the mobile methods we call on:

Time-Lapse Tales: we've had great success asking participants to create time-lapse videos as they complete activities. There's an obvious advantage in these compressing down something big into something small. It's a method that provides perfect stimulus material for follow-up interviews.

Show Us: in this mobile method, we ask participants to walk and talk us through something (could be their fridge, could be a bike) in detail, spending the time to show us the specifics and to 'think aloud' over what they're sharing.

10 Second Glimpse: participants record 10 seconds on the hour every hour, providing a scene-setting view of their day, and fantastic stimulus for digging deeper into moments, occasions and rituals.

Mobile Memories: often we're using mobile to get us in-the-moment, but with this approach we're asking participants to take on a virtual trip down memory lane. This might be to show us images from vacations, perhaps, or big nights out.

Virtual Visits: using Google Maps Street View, participants show us a place of relevance to the project. It's a powerful method for unlocking memories and sentiment that's otherwise out of reach.

Bottom left: Skate stories in NYC
Top left: adidas, IRL in Shanghai
Top right: Documenting young sports fans in Paris
Bottom right: City Limits, Volume Three - Youth

Crowd Numbers

Crowd Numbers, our quantitative offering, hasn't been there quite since the start of Crowd DNA, but it only took us 18 months to bring it on board

At first, we battled against some industry cynicism about our quant credibility. We always believed it had a vital role to play, though; as much a part of getting to culturally charged commercial advantage as our other specialisms. And wow, in recent times the team have been proving it.

Our clients know they came come to us for quantitative work that has a freshness to it. An ability to deal with complex topics and explorative questions through well-crafted and very human questionnaires, not standard off the shelf approaches. We're very proud to have developed global quantitative capabilities with a focus on both storytelling and the analytical challenges. Our skill for visualising data and, more broadly, for socialising the insights we derive in Crowd Numbers is an essential part of what we do.

A lot of agencies say they merge their quantitive work with an array of other methods. But we're different: we really do this. It's a pursuit of blendedness that requires a lot of purposeful collaboration (see our values!) between individuals, between teams, between offices. Rather than awkwardly stitching our learnings together, whether quant comes first, last or someplace in between, we make sure it has a credible platform to influence the strategic recommendation we offer to our clients.

Our Crowd Numbers team deliver surveys within five main areas:

- Audience understanding and profiling - segmentations and mindset analysis
- Sizing and tracking trends - demonstrating the move from niche cohorts to the mainstream
- Consumer journeys - including path to purchase and jobs to be done
- Evaluation - concept testing for brand, comms and products
- Thought leadership - point of views and opinion pieces
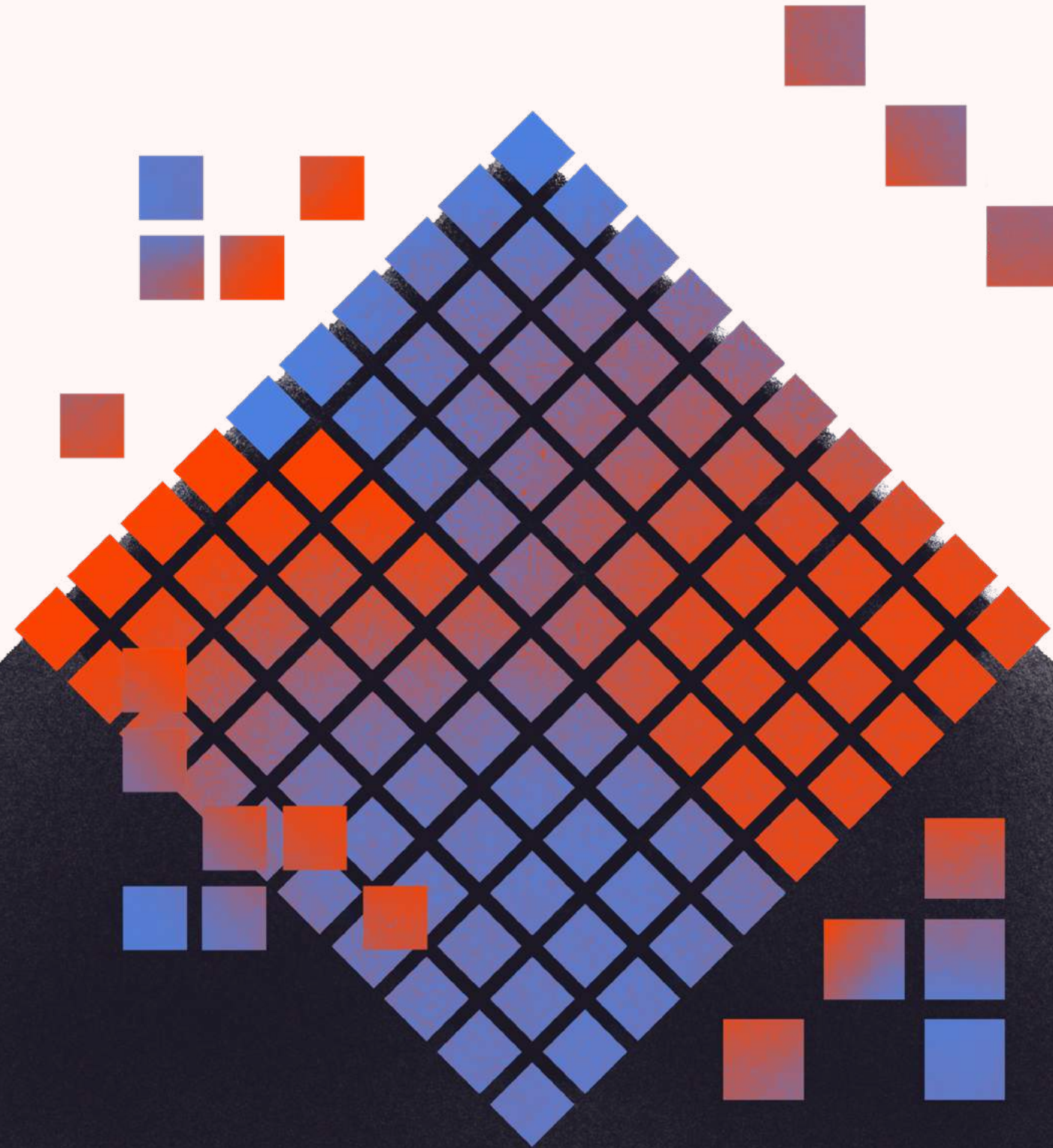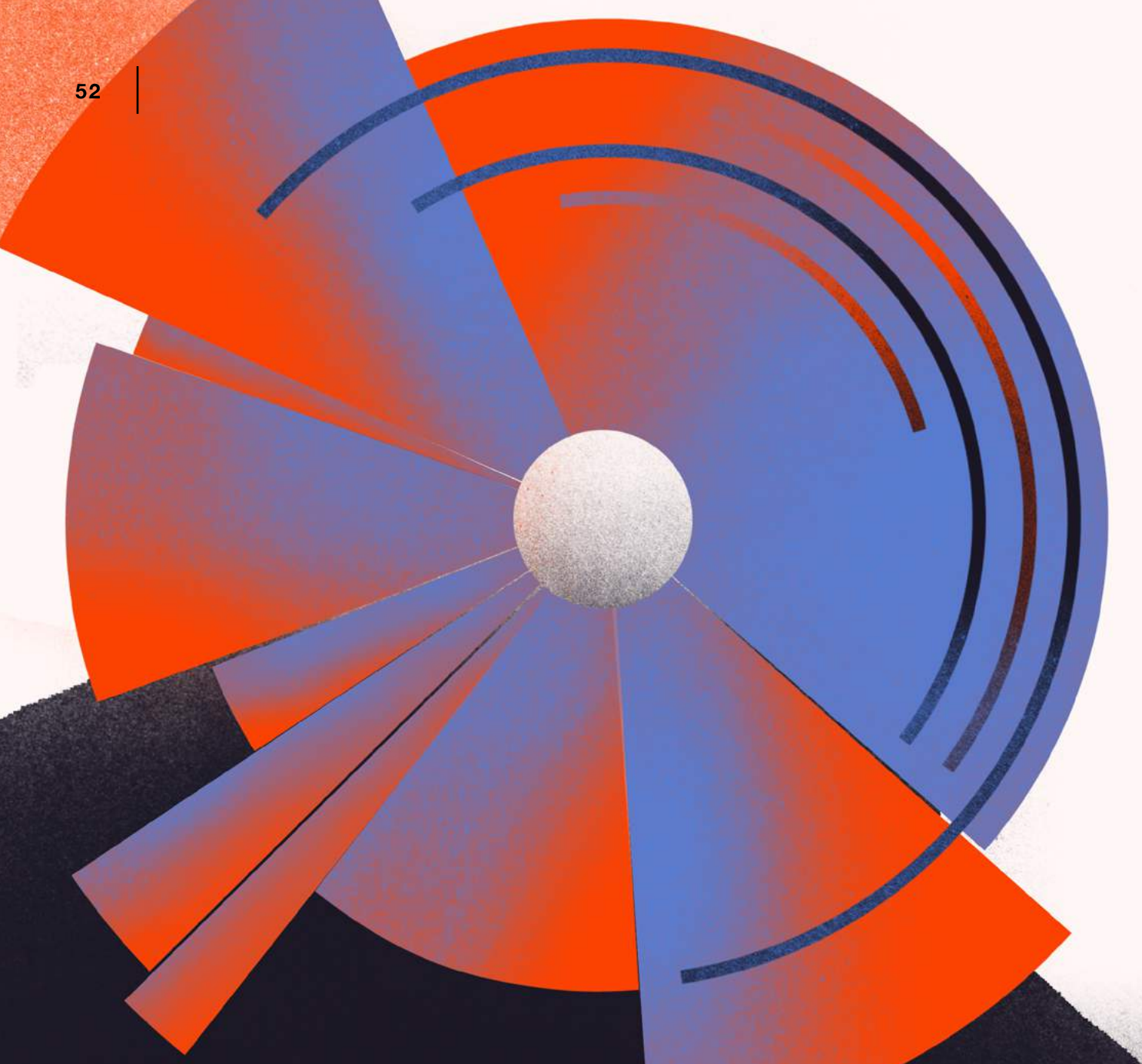
Segmentations

Yes, segmentations are about clever analytics and clustering lots of data points against each other to create distinct segments. But we believe that successful segmentations are just as much creativity as science, and segments mean nothing if they're not human-led and taking into account cultural factors. When writing a segmentation questionnaire we prefer to have immersed ourselves in the lives of the audience first, so that we can write an empathetic set of questions that capture their cultural reality.

Most segmentations aren't used due to meaningless data points and uninspiring typologies that no one identifies with. To prevent this, we spend just as much time socialising segments as we do on surveys and analytics. We try to ensure that everyone who works for a brand feels like they know their target. Who they are, their hopes, dreams, what gets them up in the morning; and therefore can translate that into culturally relevant comms, products and services. So much about making a segmentation stick is to do with storytelling - down to calling the segments something relatable and inspiring rather than giving them demographic labels or just plain daft names...
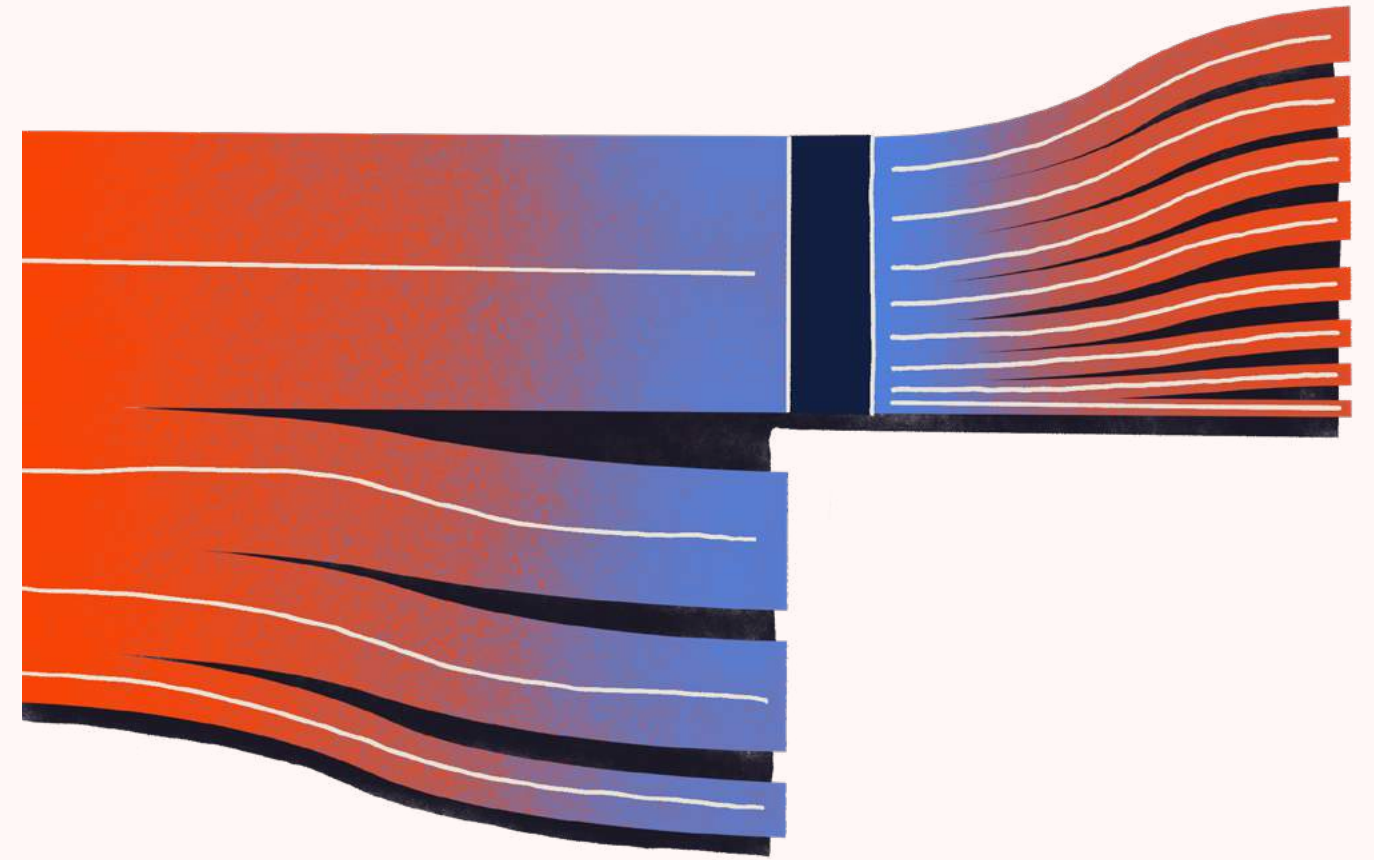
Sizing & Tracking Trends

We've developed a reliable way to size trends in the general population using online surveys. This enables us to demonstrate how they move from niche cohorts to the mainstream, helping us win over the trends cynics (tsk) that may lurk in some businesses.

But to be able to size a trend you first need to be able to articulate and visualise it to survey respondents. Good job, then, we've got designers and copywriters at Crowd. If the description is too broad, we may over size it. Too obscure, we under size. Accurately articulating a trend is just as important as discovering it.

To understand the current and future appeal of trends, we employ system one techniques - quick, intuitive decision-making when seeing a trend for the first time. Then system two - slow, rational decision-making, with more time to reflect.

We were a little nervous the first time we tried to track trends. What if the results came out completely at odds in wave two? But our trends trackers have shown credible results across bi-annual waves. We've got more work to do with this method, but so far, so good.

Crowd Paths To Purchase

Customer journey work perhaps isn't what we're most known for. But truth is, we're doing a great deal of it and have developed some exciting ways to help brands optimise these customer pathways, both on and offline.

Purchase journeys, and the way people move along them, are not linear. Therefore we believe in testing the boundaries of the traditional purchase journey model. You know the stuff: discovery, info gathering, moment of truth, post purchase. It's limiting and it's out of date. We dig into nuance, sketching new journey models even if they do look like bow ties or complex marble runs! And naturally, all of this takes in the cultural factors surrounding the journey, rather than assuming shopping happens in a vacuum.

Instead of starting with channels and touchpoints we take a 'needs perspective'. This uses our Jobs To Be Done framework - a technique that stays focused on the problems consumers are trying to solve. We then help figure out where on the journey our clients can best make a difference and which of the customer Jobs To Be Done they can solve in a way that their competitors cannot.

A vital element of this work is helping our clients to communicatethe journeys with their wider teams in an uncomplicated fashion. Our Socialise team add real life photos, imagery and screenshots to the stages; breakout copy to editorialise the important details. Creativity is vital, but so is readability - ensuring that the logic and key information in the model is not lost.

Crowd Signs

We've always explored trends at Crowd DNA, searching hard for other sources of information and inspiration from those offered by primary research

Over the years, we've got better and better at trends work, and this has matured into Crowd Signs, our futures specialism.

The premise here is that, when trying to figure out what's next, asking people isn't always going to give you the best answer (not everyone can exactly be expected to have a fully formed view on the future of, say, food innovation). Signs, on the other hand, does give you the best answers.

Signs is an excitingly fast evolving space; one that we've added new dimensions and super talented team members to over time. Here we investigate change through analysing the cultural context and emerging trends in media, content, advertising, fashion, new products and much more besides. We decode and map the signs and symbols. Rather than asking questions, we explore what people are saying online - on social media, blogs, forums. And we engage with those who are close to where things are happening. Not necessarily traditional 'experts', but those who are in close proximity to cultural change in all capacities - from DJs and fashion influencers to writers and next generation entrepreneurs.

By bringing all of these perspectives together we arrive at future scenarios and opportunities for brands. Blueprints for leading culture, not just following it. The importance of finding these culturally charged sources of inspiration is matched by the need to articulate the opportunities, contextualise the

shifts, in truly relatable ways. To blow our own trends trumpet a bit, we like to think we disrupt the norms of a trends industry that tends to prefer the abstract and rather aloof forms of delivery. We don't mind getting our hands dirty.

Let's unpack this some more. Within Crowd Signs we have multiple approaches to work with. Sometimes they're used on their own - at other times we blend them to get to more dimensions.

Lifting the lid on our Crowd Signs specialism

> Trends are used to spot emergent themes and how they're manifesting in culture and for brands. Our analysis combines desk research and forecasting techniques

> Semiotics lets us get even deeper into the visual and verbal cues that define culture, categories and brands – helping us to understand codes from the dominant to emergent

> Culture At Scale, powered by strat7.ai, is where unstructured data comes into play, tapping into sources like social, blogs, forums and behavioural data sets to identify and track new signals. Or to deep dive into a category, community or occasion

> KIN is our global network of experts, connectors and creators. Collaborating with KIN takes the form of interviews, roundtables, journalism and innovation sessions

Illustrations from our Scenario Planning webinar

Crowd Signs Salons
Democratising trends

In line with our belief in blended teams and T-shaped skills, there's no wall around who gets to talk about, or work with, trends at Crowd DNA. One facet of this is our monthly Salon sessions - a chance for all of us to gather together to figure out what's changing in topics such as sustainability, mobility, sex and relationships, Britishness and so on. We share articles, discuss emerging signals and come up with new ideas. All of the sourced raw materials from each Salon makes it onto a Miro board, where they are organised, analysed and made ready for client work.
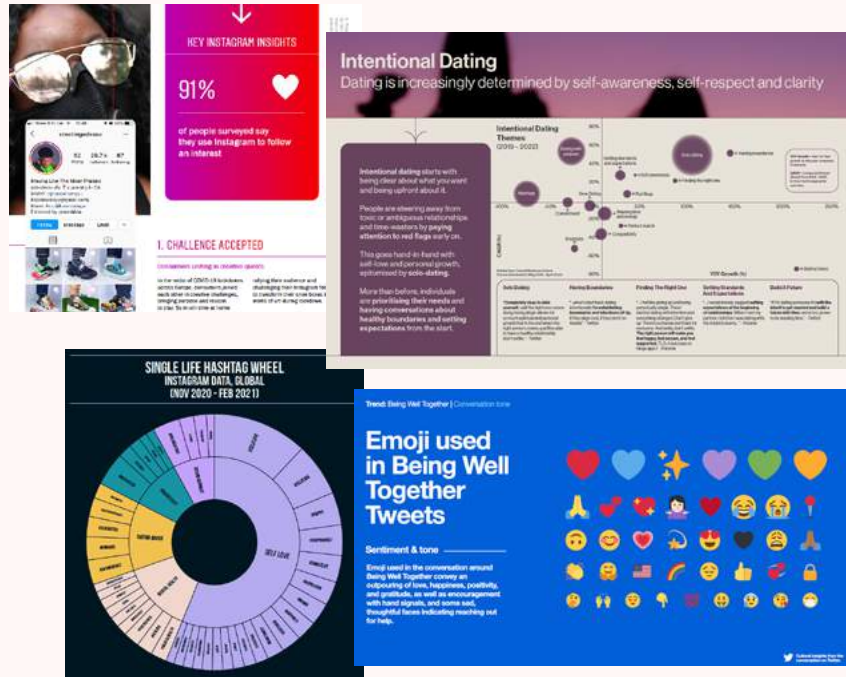
Culture At Scale
Finding cultural change and future opportunities from unstructured data

Getting deep into real culture, with real people, is a fantastic way to earn a living. In many senses, it will never be topped for getting close to the truth. But our lives are increasingly taking place online. This is not likely to change any time soon. In fact, if the metaverse has its way, quite the opposite. Our work therefore needs to benefit from the conversations, activities and lived realities found out there across the vast and intricate digital landscape.

In order to capture and make sense of all of this fabulous richness, at speed and in a more data driven way, we have developed Culture At Scale. It's an offer that's powered by the advanced natural language processing, AI and machine learning capabilities of strat7.ai, something we've developed in tandem with analytics specialists Bonamy Finch.

Image top left: Instagram, Trends In Culture
Top right: Crowd Signals, Remodelled Relationships
Bottom left: Crowd Tracks, Sex & Relationships
Bottom right: Twitter, Tracking Culture

If we wind back a bit, we settled on calling our early efforts at working with unstructured data 'social listening'. Now, we feel that the term 'listening' far downplays the value that working with online data sources brings to cultural insights and strategy.

We definitely don't think the machines are taking over but we're not scared of them either. One part of our Culture At Scale work we're particularly proud of is Crowd Signals - where all of that aforementioned AI is built into a platform that means we're able to perform data driven topic modelling and cluster analysis of words and themes, finding trends and signals that aren't in plain sight.

Having an always-on trends tool allows us to track cultural shifts over time. Interrogating, visualising and providing recommendation to our clients seamlessly and at pace.

OK, now bring on the humans. All of our work needs to end up as motivating outputs that encourage change. Which means we treat what we do with big data much the same as with our other methods - with smart and creative consultancy so vital to the success.

KIN
Getting to informed and unexpected global perspectives

We've always loved working with different types of expert and influencer (let's try to think influencer in the less mock-able definition of the term). They bring exciting perspectives and provocations to our work that you can't always expect to get from speaking to - for want of a less patronising term - 'regular' people. Some years ago we brought this together as KIN, our global network of creators and connectors. Leading edge collaborators ready to help brands stay at the forefront of culture.

KIN contains experts of varying kinds. Those with what could be considered more formal types of expertise: academics, economists, category specialists. And those whose expertise is less formal but equally valid in so many circumstances: food bloggers, streetwear collectors, music subculture aficionados.

And we've worked with more than 1,000 talented and inspirational creators and connectors from across this broad swathe of expertise, spanning cities such as Shanghai, Mumbai, Jakarta, Tokyo, Berlin, Barcelona, London, New York, Los Angeles, Sao Paolo and Buenos Aires.

Often the format in this space is: one expert, one interviewer, one hour. But it doesn't have to stop there. Bringing a range of experts together, designing for collaboration and/or for watching the sparks fly, can reveal so much more. We've had industrial designers chatting with beauticians; semi-professional basketball players working alongside mental health activists.

While it is fair to assume these types of collisions and collaborations land well in newer and more progressive businesses, we have also witnessed big successes among more traditional corporations – often as just one factor in a more far-reaching push to shake off legacy behaviours.

We're passionate about broadening out the potential for how we collaborate with KIN, particularly in terms of different platforms to leverage. Using mobile research tools allow us to get to experts in their own worlds – reporting back on what they see around them, sometimes interviewing other experts, creating content to support their perspectives.

Using pop-up communities lets us bring experts together, wherever they are globally – for debate, for critiquing each other's views, for deep and considered cooperative exploration of new ideas. These platforms also foster greater opportunities for involving client stakeholders in expert interaction, in turn building trust in what they have to say and share.

Just as expert collaboration does not need to be limited to interviews and roundtables, it also does not have to be fleeting in form. We often work with clients to create more ongoing approaches to accessing informed opinions and problem-solving capabilities. Assembling expert networks to work with across the year lets us track change in what they are seeing and thinking. It shifts us from the assumption that the expert view is fixed to, more realistically, something that is evolving, and influenced by the increasingly fast pace of cultural change.

Image top right: KIN member Hector
Far bottom left: KIN member Xandice
Bottom left: KIN member Olivia

Socialise

Editorialising insight and recommendation; thought leadership and the power of narratives

There's a frequently used expression: 'bringing research to life'. Sadly, it often doesn't mean much. It gets thrown around without a great deal of purpose. It tends to result in meh-level deliverables. It all feels a bit flat and forced.

Strong creative and editorial capabilities that run counter to this mediocrity have been integral to Crowd DNA since day one. We've bridged the divide between insight and content on countless projects and using endless different formats and techniques. Journalists, videographers and designers aren't nice-to-have adjuncts to our team, but as fundamental as it gets - deeply embedded in our project designs.

Core to our thinking here is that, for every person who likes research, there are lots more who like stories. When we create strong and empathetic stories, people walk away from our work, however we deliver it, better equipped to make good business decisions that chime with culture and with people.

So what does our Socialise team create, exactly? There are plenty of films, extending from broadcast quality documentaries to ones made of quickfire found-footage or user generated content. Editorialised reports and magazines. Postcards and colouring books. Websites and podcasts. Grand scale, immersive take-overs of the lobbies of major corporations. But also quick and nimble planning tools - such as to depict a user journey and contextualise where a difference can be made. And on our radar: how we use AR and the metaverse to land warmly human and cultural narratives.
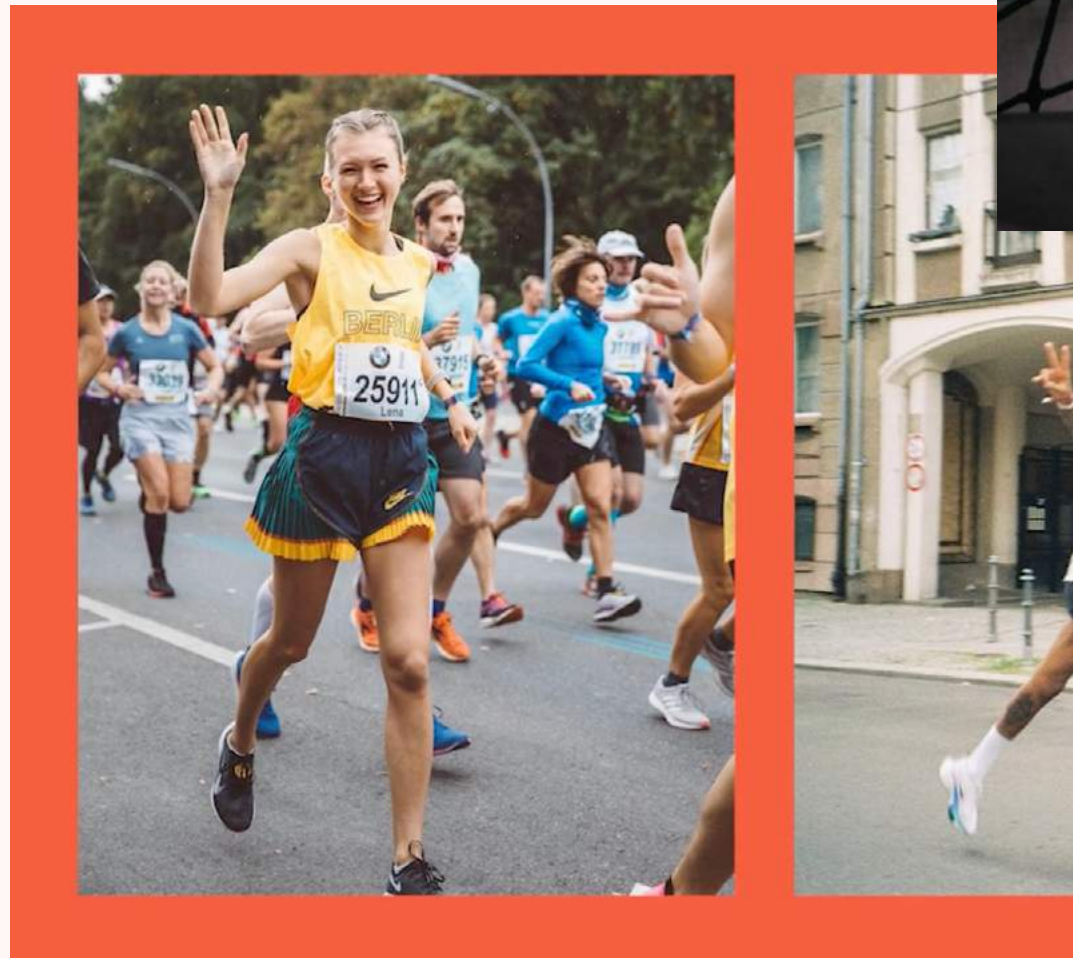
Image top left: Portraits Of Agility documentary Bottom left: Filming fitness stories for Nike Bottom right: Editorialising financial insecurity for bud
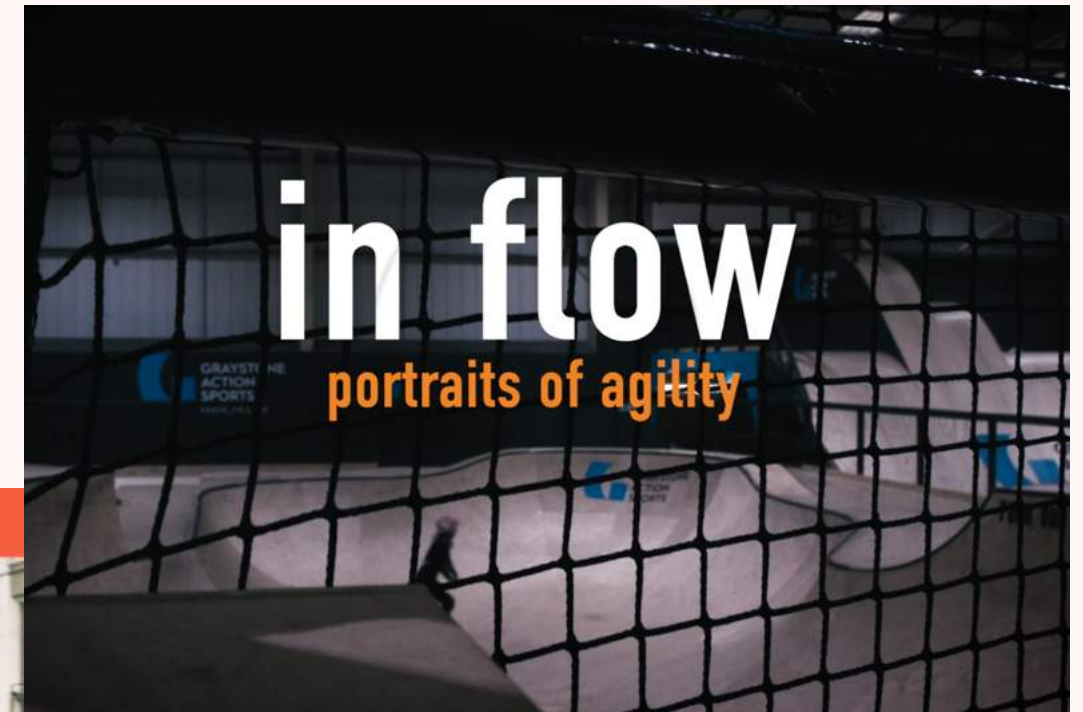
*Image top left: Illustration for New
Narratives On Masculinity webinar
Bottom left: City Limits, Volume
Three - Youth
Centre: Portraits Of Fluidity
photojournalism
Top centre: My Teen Life films
in Viacom's NYC lobby
Bottom centre: Our Hybrid
States project
Top right: Illustration for
Twitch, Gamer Parents
Bottom right: Wealthy Millennials
publication for UBS*

Building Confidence Through Connection
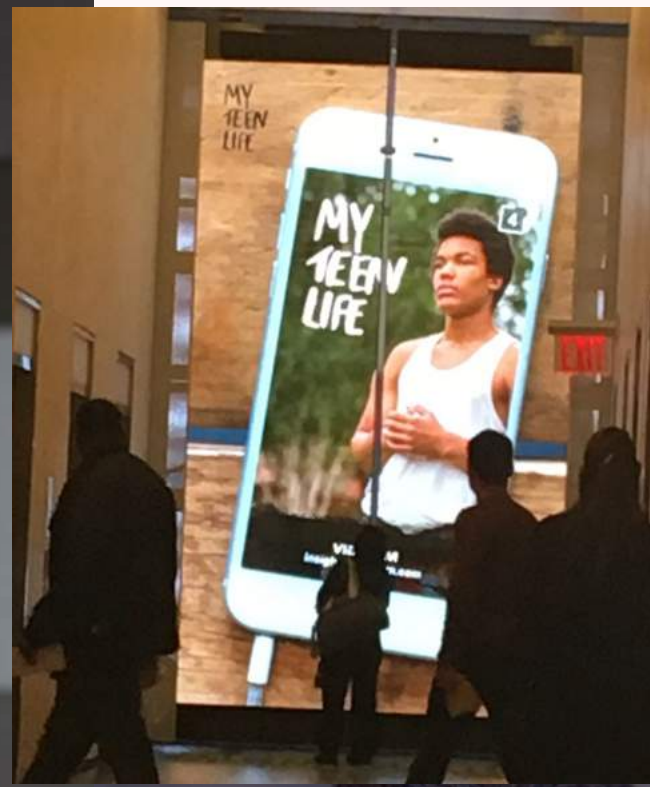
Google Play
CHANGE THE GAME

| IKEA | Clean Air |

IKEA came to Crowd DNA for a comprehensive understanding of clean air - from awareness levels and misconceptions, to how it changes behaviour in society around the world. We brought together ethnography, interviews, expert perspectives and trends analysis. We also provided our participants with air monitors to gauge personal air quality across their day-to-day lives, allowing us to then see how increased awareness potentially disrupted behaviour. We produced documentary films to shine a vivid light on the challenges, and landed strategic recommendation.

CLEAN AIR REPORT

IKEA

Better Storytelling, Better Thinking

Often in the desire to hear from lots of people, to take in all views and to represent every perspective, the more conventional end of the market research industry squeezes the life out of stories. What you get instead is vanilla-flavoured bullet points.

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As a team, it's important that we focus on all of the incredible craft that goes into our methods - how we avoid averageness and reach for something more energised. But we're also aware that no client in their right mind is spending money on methods alone.

They're not really buying depth interviews or surveys or semiotics. They're investing in outcomes, answers, evidence. And in the case of Crowd DNA, they're investing in inspiration and communication. No surprise, then, that we're dedicating a section here to how we go about acting as strategic partners.

Better Storytelling

Few terms have become more overused in marketing communications in the last decade than storytelling. Seems like everyone's a storyteller now. There are more than 300 TED Talks tagged with #storytelling. And even your washing up liquid appears desperate to have a 'narrative' to share.

But despite all of the reasons to cringe, we're unswerving believers that storytelling is what we must do - and that we have great stories to tell. Often in the desire to hear from lots of people, to take in all views and to represent every perspective, the more conventional end of the market research industry squeezes the life out of stories. What you get instead is vanilla-flavoured bullet points.

There's lots of high falutin stuff you can read about 'narrative arcs' (and actually, we advise you do, as there's much to learn) but, boiling it down, what we're simply, but beautifully aiming for here is empathy building. Some people like market research - but many, many more people like human and cultural stories.

Land those stories and people step away from working with Crowd DNA far more likely to get all of that empathy into their strategies and actions. This comes all the way back to our ambition as a business. That's right: creating culturally charged commercial advantage.

Some basic principles of storytelling.

Have a plan before you start: yeah, you'll probably stray from it, and switch things about, but you've got to get going with something in mind that you really want to say

Embrace conflict: you've got to get some tension in there; everyone likes a bit of drama, and there's plenty of it out there

Repetition: it's a good thing; you've got to keep circling back to some key themes otherwise no one is going to remember a word of what you're saying

Make it human (and cultural): as much as you might have big, macro topics to address, rooting them in something less sweeping, more nuanced, is essential

Better Thinking

Some agencies pin all of their hopes on a single framework or analysis technique - a blackbox answer to every brand's dreams. Good luck to them, but that's not going to work for us.

Instead, we take a more pluralistic approach. We encourage our team to consider ideas for frameworks, models and more as they come across them. In industry commentary, perhaps, or case studies or new books. We want them to be asking: could this work for us, for the next project I'm on? If they hit the mark, we then encourage others in the business to adopt the approach where relevant. We'll also modify and refine it as we go. The ones that don't bring so much to the goals, however, they naturally fade out of contention.

But just because we don't have a singular framework that we call on, that doesn't mean we don't understand the value of such things in getting to cogent findings and trustworthy recommendation. Culture is a messy thing, so applying a lens or filter or similar tends to be a very good idea. Here are some that we frequently call on:

Behavioural factors - drawing from an established list of behavioural biases to pinpoint those most likely to have relevance to the brief we're working on. Once we've isolated those biases we can design our methods and analysis techniques to make sure we can explore them and reach informed conclusions.

Cultural strategy - these draw from the Douglas Holt book of the same name (a big influence on Crowd DNA in many ways), and sees us looking for the more fundamental shifts in cultural orthodoxy that a brand can benefit from - new manifestations of what it means to be rebellious or luxury or trustworthy, say, and how to use these shifts to embed strong and purposeful new brand positions.

Need states models - there are various interesting formats of these that build on the basic Maslow model, presenting us with something that we use with our clients to understand which needs are being, or could be met; and often how to shift brands from the functional territories found at the base of the model, to more elevated places with greater dimensions of cultural relevance.

Brand DNAs - as in the numerous varieties of brand pyramids, onions etc which allow us to really drill down into fundamentals such as 'reasons to believe', tonality and who or what the brand is fighting against. From experience, we don't just stick to one of these frameworks, as different clients tend to bring different expectations with them and have brand DNA frameworks that they favour themselves.

Journey mapping - this is an important form of analysis and articulation, too. It can be around purchase journeys, but can also take in different forms of experience and interaction. What we're finding is that while mapping these journeys accurately is important, as they can be so unique per person these days, what's most important is boiling things down to probably the handful of places on a journey where a brand has the greatest license to create change and to disrupt established behaviour

Value proposition frameworks - simple, effective ways to work with brand teams to identify the jobs that people are trying to get done in life - from making a nice cup of tea to keeping on top of their finances to entertaining their children. Then exploring how well a brand is helping with those jobs through the products or services it offers - and, of course, how to improve.

Twitter	Tracking Culture

Twitter is 'what's happening in the world'. It's the home of the hashtag. The place where new movements are born and where the biggest cultural events play out in real time. If any media owner can claim authority over providing cultural insights, it's Twitter. Calling on machine learning, semiotics and trends analysis, we got to six core themes housing a total of 18 trends. With the work shared at Cannes Lions' Twitter Beach and through a main-stage panel discussion at Advertising Week New York City, this was a project that paved the way for our Culture At Scale adventures in unstructured data.

Being Well Together

Cultural insights from the conversation on Twitter.

Trend: Gender Redefined | Key driver

Masculinity
+616%

The subject of masculinity has become more flexible and open. People are discussing it in relation to toxic masculinity, as well as feminism and femininity.

Our Back Story

How we started
& how we've grown

We launched in June 2008, slap bang in the middle of the worst financial crisis in memory. But we weren't going to let that dent our positivity. We started with four clients - Sony PlayStation, Channel 4, Kiss FM, Topshop - and a loose yet fast-evolving ambition to do things just a bit differently in insight. In terms of method innovation, for sure, but as importantly in how we talk about insight. How we communicate. The people we look to bring into our team and, of course, our efforts to set everything in a broader cultural context.

We first set up as a team of four in a small space rented from the lovely folk at Poke, a couple of floors above Mother creative agency, in Shoreditch's Biscuit Building. Next stop: just across the road to the Tea Building. Then up the high street to Hoxton Square. Most recently, a short hop to City Road.

And along the way, we've achieved the hugely satisfying aim of launching in other markets. That's launching as in headfirst, having to learn extremely quickly as we go (we wouldn't have it any other way). You can now find us in Amsterdam, New York, Singapore, Sydney, Stockholm and, most recently, Los Angeles. And, you never know, maybe a few more places to come...

In all of those action-packed years, our work has got progressively more global, too - we gave up counting at circa 70 markets worked in. Our long-held belief in the power of content and editorial to socialise insight has flourished. And our strategic insights core has been augmented by the increasingly impactful additions of quantitative research, trends and semiotics, our KIN network and our growing interest in working with unstructured data. All of it powered by the creativity and first-rate thinking of the smartest, nicest team in the business.

In 2020, we took another important step, when we were acquired by the Strat7 group. This has enabled us to set bigger and bolder growth plans. To really capitalise on cultural insight's growing commercial significance.

We're dead proud, and hugely grateful, for everything we've achieved at Crowd DNA so far. But enough reminiscing, because we've got plenty more to do in the years ahead.

You'll Find Us In London, Amsterdam, New York City, Singapore, Sydney, Stockholm & Los Angeles*

It's not that we can't do global work just from London, where we started. That city arguably has the greatest reputation for that of any place in the world where you can run an agency from. But we think we can do it more credibly still with a team dispersed across different locations. We think we can get to work with a way more interesting mix of people. And ultimately create a much more progressive business.

Importantly for us, we concentrate on cities in our descriptions, not countries. It's all about the tone and sentiment we are trying to convey. These details matter.

Looking back, we wish we'd got started on launching Crowd DNA in other cities sooner than we did. But never mind, we got there in the end - and here's where we've got to so far.

* You'll actually find us in other places, too. We have members of our team in Houston, Leeds, Jakarta, Melbourne and a few others places. This is a good thing.

London (2008)

This is where our founder is from so, not suprisingly, this is where we launched. Despite the often aired negatives about the city, we still think it's a truly wonderful place. Innovative, stylish, effortlessly diverse and well worth the chaos that comes from living with nearly 10m other people.

Amsterdam (2014)

This was our first venture overseas. We were drawn by the creative energy of the place (including the many excellent creative agencies that call it home) and the slew of innovative brands in the area.

New York City (2017)

Well, if your going to make a mark, you might as well try to make it in New York City. It seems to get criticised about as much as London does, but it remains energy personified. We love emergent trends and this place has oozed with sub-culture for decades and decades.

Singapore (2018)

As the focus of our work increasingly grew to take in cultural change in Asia, we wanted a basecamp there - and Singapore is a lovely one. We're not so naive as to think this means we have Asia 'covered', but it's a start.
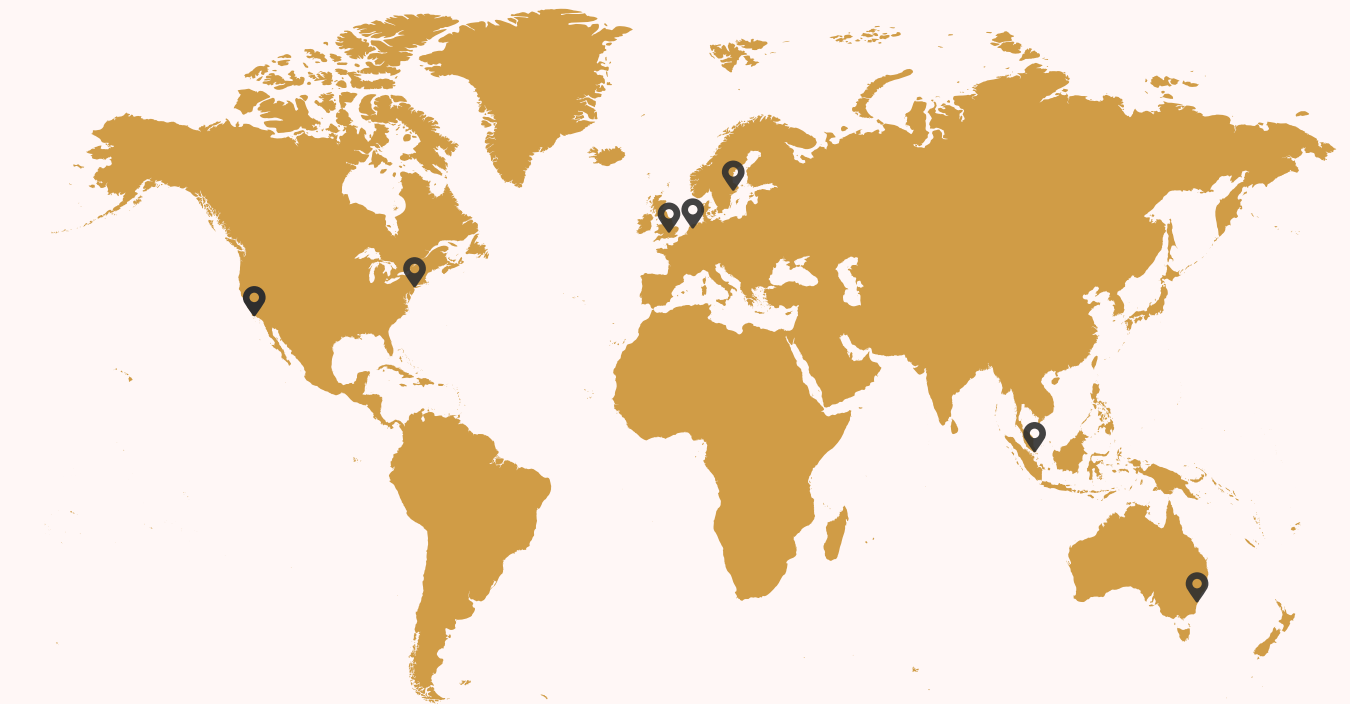
Sydney (2020)

Right, so this one was a bit of a curveball. One of our senior London team wanted to head home - we thought that, seeing as they were great, they should take Crowd DNA with them. It's been an awesome success, really propelling on our APAC endeavours.

Stockholm (2021)

One of our partner businesses in Strat7 is from Stockholm. We were finding interesting opportunities coming our way from them, justifying a presence in town. There are myriad progressive brands in the region. Better still, our group managing director comes from Stockholm, so we can find our way around.

Los Angeles (2022)

And most recently we've touched down in Los Angeles. There's much we're excited to be doing here. Increasing our US footprint. Getting to even more amazing talent. Creating thought leadership in this future of entertainment hotbed.

THE GREATEST HOUSE RECORDS OF ALL TIME
faith fanzine
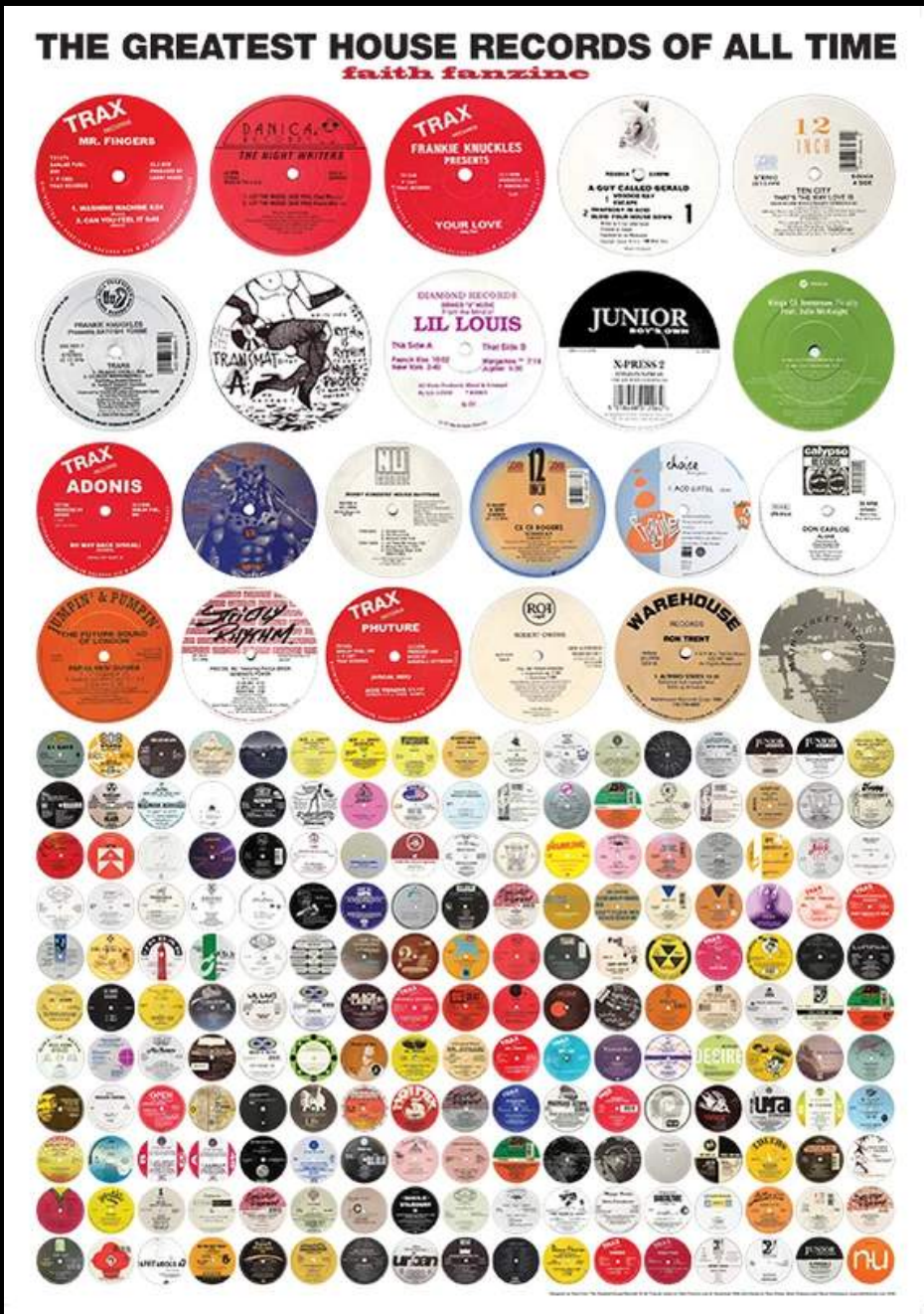
House Music
& Crowd DNA

Crowd DNA is a product of lots of things but it's particularly a product of house music. A sound that emanated from the marginalised Black and Hispanic gay community of Chicago, and consequently conquered the world, when house music (or acid house as it was then known) touched down in London, it ignited more than just great parties. It was a democratising force, creating a platform for creativity and entrepreneurialism among people who otherwise would not have found a way to such things. Quite a number of exciting businesses can trace their origin story, in some kind of winding way, back to that sub-cultural explosion and Crowd DNA is very happy to be among them.

Image left: Faith fanzine, The Greatest House Records Of All Time, pride of place in our London office
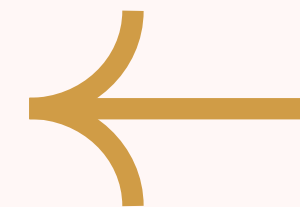
Kraftwerk & Crowd DNA

At some point, a very long time ago, it was decided that 'things' at Crowd DNA should often have names associated with German proto-techno pioneers Kraftwerk. No one remembers why this first happened, but, to this day, there are meeting rooms named Trans-Europa Express, Autobahn and Computerwelt. We've used Ralf and Florian as team titles. Our staff award goes by the name of Kling Klang, after Kraftwerk's Cologne studio. And our project management platform is called CrowdWerk. Little known fact: the other naming convention in consideration way back then - though outvoted by Kraftwerk - was to use 1980s digital reggae riddims. This might have meant a meeting room called Sleng Teng, or a team called Mud Up, or an award called Duck Dance. A missed opportunity, frankly.

Images from top – bottom:
Kraftwerk's Autobahn, Trans-Europa Express and Computerwelt
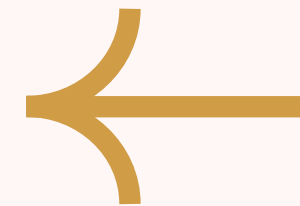
Ballantine's | Diversity On The Dancefloor

With calls for DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) reform rebounding across all areas of culture - from football to fashion to far beyond - it's little surprise that there would also be a spotlight on the dancefloor. We provided Ballantine's True Music platform with a thought leadership frame of reference forged from the views of both clubbers and music sub-culture insiders. Reflecting all of this amazing material in a report with strong editorial sensibilities, Resetting The Dancefloor presented a revealing, no-holds-barred account, but also flagged positive actions that could be taken by brands, fans and the music industry alike.

BALLANTINE'S: RESETTING THE DANCEFLOOR

(SEPT 2021)

Resetting
The Dancefloor

→ Fan and industry perspectives on a safer, fairer future for music

Ballantine's
TRUE MUSIC

USA

UK

SPAIN

BRAZIL

SOUTH AFRICA
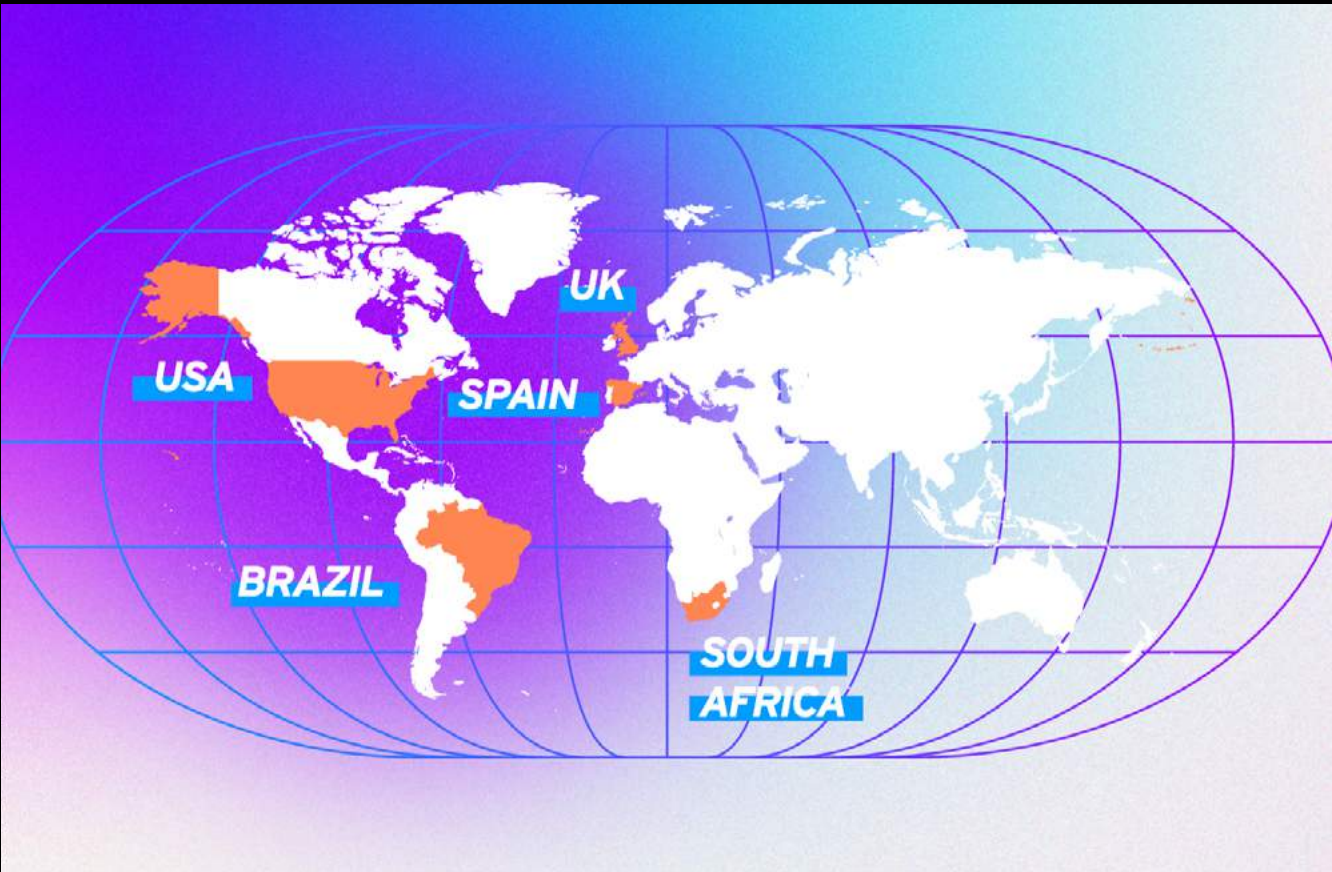
Team
&
Talent

Let's start off by stating the obvious: we are nothing without our team. We're not an insight factory. We're not big on 'products'. And, until recently, we did not offer any tech-enabled solutions. On the other hand, what we do have in abundance is smart, empathetic, culturally curious and commercially aware people.

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Whether 50+ people in our London office, or a team of four in one of our newer locations, the way we come together is powerful and empowering. We call ourselves cultural strategists because we believe that what we do will fuel our clients with the inspiration and direction to make a notable impact on how they grow and prosper. And that's all down to our team.

Emotional Health & Well Being

Mental health and wellbeing is as big topic for us as it is, or should be, in any business. We truly want everyone to thrive while they're at Crowd DNA. We've not always been set up in to help in all the ways we've wanted to. Now, we have a head of people function, mental health first aiders, duvet and mental health days - no questions asked.

And we pay a lot of attention to making sure all of our leaders are set up to support the team. We know we can get even better at this, but we are proud to have been able to create a more open conversation about mental health, with our team reaching out when they need help and support. We are committed to making sure it stays that way.

Another aspect of wellbeing at Crowd DNA has been about becoming more alert to different needs; including caring responsibilities, interests and passions, and individual health requirements. Multiple manifestations of flexible working have been key here, too. For instance, as well as hybrid working principles to blend work-from-office and work-from-home, there's our work-from-anywhere policy. It's an opportunity our team has for four weeks each year to, yes, work from anywhere - be that a beach on the other side of the world or round at their mum's house.

We have a lot of expertise in that team - qualitative, quantitative, data analysis, trends, semiotics, strategy, creative and production skills. Deep specialism is important but we also believe that there's great value in anyone being able to get involved, learn about and experiment with any method or skill at Crowd DNA.

Which means learning-as-you-go is an important principle. We think a lot about what good collaboration means. We're forever excited by bringing together blended teams.

With all that in mind, T-shaped skills is a term we place at the heart of our talent strategy. Excellent knowledge in specific areas, but also an ability and passion for collaborating with those who have different types of expertise, drawing from their knowledge and adding to your own knowledge.

When busy blending skills and specialisms, we've also realised that we need a strong sense of shared understanding of what we're about as a team. That's one of the reasons our Crowd DNA values keep increasing in relevance as we grow as a business.

We're sure that the much talked about 'future of work' is going to throw a whole bunch more challenges at us before long. But we'll keep on listening and learning, working with our team to create great solutions. Better wifi, however, we'll have to leave to someone else.

The idea of T-shaped skills was first popularised by design thinking agency IDEO as a way to build interdisciplinary teams. It doesn't stop there. You'll find articles about M-shaped, π-shaped and comb-shaped skills. For the sake of simplicity, we'll stick to talking about T-shaped.

Meritocracy & Mixing It Up

We don't always get it exactly right, but making sure we have an approach to creating opportunities for our team that suits the individual, not just the business (because ultimately that wouldn't suit the business), is a priority. We've devised brand new roles, different offers and specialisms, carefully designed secondments. We've even launched an entirely new office in a different country in our pursuit of making sure there are opportunities for our much valued team.

Crowd DNA was founded on the ethos of meritocracy, and the strong belief that your past or background does not determine your future. Your talent, effort and achievement do. Are we staying true to it? We think occasionally we've talked it more than walked it, but yes, as much as we possibly can, and it gives us a meaningful ambition to aspire towards.

Having lots of strong research skills in our team is, of course, important. But Crowd DNA was formed with a firm ambition to not just be about research skills. Diversity of perspective and bringing experiences from other fields has always been essential in setting us apart from more conventional agencies.

From introducing people who are looking for their first job in our industry, to those mid-career who want to make a transition - all points on the spectrum are important to us.

As we say in the Culture Club blurb: We're not asking for CVs and we absolutely do not require you to come to Culture Club armed with a degree, nor to be the loudest person in the room. Our ambition is for Culture Club to be the best internship programme in cultural insights and strategy. Actually, we think it might be already.

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Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity

There is a pressing need for greater diversity, equality and inclusivity (DEI) in our field. We're supposed to be understanding and representing culture, after all. But to do that fairly and in a way that can create brands, campaigns, products and experiences that speak to all, we need to be shaping far more space for different voices and perspectives.

In recent years, we've been trying to bring more impact to what we do here. In 2020 we signed the MRS Inclusion Pledge. When asked to explain why, here's what we said: *"Signing the MRS Inclusion Pledge has been an important milestone for us. It runs in parallel to other DEI work we are undertaking: team training, encouraging open and frank discussions, improving representation, protecting against bias in hiring, making certain we design our projects with sound principles in mind. The Inclusion Pledge signals our intent to our team, makes our aspirations more tangible and gives us targets to aim for. It demonstrates our commitment to playing a role in creating a fairer and more inclusive version of the industry that we love."* Andy Crysell (Founder & CEO), Dr Matilda Andersson (Group Managing Director)

A little while ago, looking in on Crowd DNA as honestly as we could, we've realised that committing to training and consultation was necessary to create a safe environment for our growing team. After speaking to our friends at Colours Of Research (CORe), who advocate for the inclusion of ethnic professionals in the market research industry, we had LILA recommended to us.

LILA is a self-learning platform that helps us explore and discuss topics like inclusive leadership and allyship. DEI can't just sit pristinely on a platform, though. Getting together to discuss the modules, to run workshops across our offices, is such an important part of this.

In doing this work, we've found that, as a team, we're all on slightly different journeys, or places on the journey. We're therefore allowing for individualised training to sit alongside the group sessions. And we're constantly reminding ourselves that diversity takes many forms - ethnicity and race, of course, but also disability, neurodiversity, age, gender, identity and class. Also that diversity within a business is nothing without equity and inclusivity, too. There is much to work at, but we're committed and we're optimistic.

Culture Club

We're proud of the progress we've made with Culture Club - our paid internship programme that runs across all of our offices and through which he hope to introduce the work we love doing to an ever more diverse range of people.

So far we've offered permanent roles to circa 25% of those who've come on board. Just as exciting for us, even when we're not able to offer a role, the vast majority of those who spend time at Crowd end up some other place that's very exciting, in fields such as insight, advertising, media and beyond.

We advancing it further by collaborating with people and organisations who can connect us with the diversity of talent and experience our industry lacks. Internship programmes and apprenticeship schemes, schools, colleges and campaigning organisations.

As we say in the Culture Club blurb: We're not asking for CVs and we absolutely do not require you to come to Culture Club armed with a degree, nor to be the loudest person in the room.

Our ambition is for Culture Club to be the best internship programme in cultural insights and strategy. Actually, we think it might be already.

Crowd Days

Our yearly Crowd Days are an opportunity to think and talk about what we do and how we work together. To keep on working at creating the best version of Crowd DNA that we can (we've actually started thinking we need more Crowd Days each year, but that's a different story).

During our Crowd Days we don't just focus on the good things - hell no, we work through pain points and friction, coming up with solutions for how we can operate even better as a global and blended team.

For instance: In 2018, we shaped our values; in 2019, we worked on our frameworks; in 2020, we talked about the impact of the pandemic; in 2021 we came out with five guiding principles for how to support each other through complexities, workload challenges and tricky clients (hey, we love you all the same).

Crowd Labs

With people coming at us from so many different entry points to the industry, training and up-skilling at relative speed is a challenge. Sometimes, at busy times, we've struggled to onboard and provide the best training. But we have learnt lessons and got better over the years.

Now we have an in-house training programme, Crowd Labs, providing sessions on core insights and strategy, as well as more general skills.

The format is varied and a large proportion of it is delivered by in-house experts. After all, there exists hundreds of years of experience across a dizzying array of skill sets. From researchers to strategists, PhD doctors to journalists, creative storytellers to project managers. And when we think we need to add an extra splash of inspiration, we invite external speakers to join us.

The better we've got at Crowd Labs, the more we've realised that no external training programmes are really fit to help our team to hone their craft at delivering culturally charged commercial advantage. It comes with leading the way and that nothing much of what we do is off the shelf.

Crowd Council

Making sure that those who lead Crowd DNA get to hear from a range of voices in the team, not just the more senior ones, is an important challenge to get right. When that team is spread all over the world, the importance of this is greater still.

Hence the introduction of Crowd Council, a chance for our leadership team to meet with and learn from a diverse mix of Crowd people. Their perspectives are vital, and make sure our efforts to create the best version of Crowd DNA are grounded in what they are experiencing - not just a bunch of nice-sounding concepts. Meeting once a month, it's one of those ideas that, when you introduce it, you wish you'd put it in place years ago.

In 2021, we added a page to every proposal that leaves Crowd DNA with words as follows:

A word about our team...

We're biased, obviously, but we think we have the most fantastic team at Crowd DNA. Smart, creative, empathetic, solutions-oriented, they will dedicate so much energy and passion to your work

But we hope our clients will respect that there must be boundaries, too. That our team should be treated fairly and that they deserve restorative personal time away from their work

This isn't just about us. We think of setting boundaries as a way to first build and then strengthen honest relationships. We believe this very much benefits everyone in the long run

If this doesn't make sense to you, we're probably not the agency you should be working with

Thanks for reading...

Work is messy and we know a page in a proposal isn't the answer to everything, but it has been heartening to hear back positively from so many clients. Kudos to all of the other agencies who've introduced something like this - we know we're not alone.

We're cultural strategists

In 2022, we changed the core job title at Crowd DNA to cultural strategist. It brings a new energy to how we talk about our jobs, and to our ambition of creating culturally charged commercial advantage.

We think the cultural strategist role is something we can make our own. Defining what it stands and shaping something motivating and empowering for a diverse next generation that's drawn to our brilliant field of work. That, we feel, is a very exciting goal to work toward.

The North Face | Modernizing Hike

Out on the trails, there are more young people, more people from diverse backgrounds. Yet the visual look and feel of hiking, the word itself, still evoke images of something stuck in the past. We wanted to change that, arming The North Face with the inspirational stimulus material, resonating narratives and strategic direction to enter into a bold new phase in its relationship with hike. We used semiotics. We spoke to experts and scene leaders. And, best of all, got to to do hike-alongs, hitting the great outdoors with lovely people in five countries.

HIKE ENABLES MENTAL EXPLORATION TOO

Our Values

We've always had strong and meaningful values at Crowd DNA. But in the early days, when we were small and scrappy, and you could fit the whole team around one table, they kind of floated in the ether, drifted in and out of the conversation. They permeated their way quite naturally through most things we did.

Zap forward some years and we realised this 'in the ether' approach wasn't enough in a fast growing business where the team were no longer even all in the same timezone, let alone seated around the same table. It was the moment, we surmised, to get something down on paper.

Company values don't necessarily have the best reputation. They tend to be trite and obvious. Or just a bit weird. We once visited a PR agency whose values were all quotes borrowed from Nelson Mandela – really appropriate when promoting snacks, sneakers and mobile networks. We knew what to avoid, then, and we got started on doing this by dedicating one of our Crowd Days to the task.

Crowd Days are a yearly chance for us to collectively re-think and re-tool our company. We worked through the potential themes. We crunched them down and we discarded any that either we felt weren't really for us, or that were too hygiene level to need calling out as a value ('don't be evil', as far as we're concerned, should not be a value).

How we articulated our values was important, too. You don't want to write an essay on each, as no one's going to read that. But if it's just a couple of words there won't be much to connect with – no soul of substance.

1. Everything Is Changing

We're here because we see the upside, rather than the downside, to new challenges – enjoy the adventure

We had to start with this one, because it's an unavoidable truth in what we do for work. From timeline shifts, to brand new clients, to taking on briefs about emergent topics that we've never been near before – so very much is in flux. And it's not for everyone – it's really not – so we wanted to lay this one on the line before we went any further.

2. Purposeful Collaboration

We believe everyone can contribute to a challenge and that diverse perspectives are vital. We also understand when collaboration must give way to ownership

Affixing purposeful in front of collaboration was very important. We think there's a lot of very wishy-washy collaboration that goes on in the workplace and that often amounts to a lack of accountability and conviction (see below). Rather than bland 'chipping in' we want collaboration at Crowd DNA to be a thing of wonder.

3. Ownership & Conviction

We're problem solvers, understanding the importance of absolute ownership and of working with conviction

All of that purposeful collaboration eventually needs to make room for ownership and conviction (authorship is another term we like to use). We're not quite asking our team to live and die by their work but, when they are leading something, we do expect them to have a plan, a vision and a true commitment to excellence.

4. Simple Is Probably Best

We relate simplicity to clarity of thinking. Keeping it simple is almost always best – in how we design things, present things and communicate with others

This one is all about deterring the predeliction to add layers and dimensions where brevity stands more chance of achieving engagement and facilitating action (you can probably see what we did there). In other words, ideas, insights, content, communication – they will all benefit from a good old edit.

5. Culture Rules

It's not fluffy – it's powerful. Cultural relevance is the stand-out marker of brand health and future potential, and we're committed to exploring it

We're back at our core purpose here. We might reword this one soon, as we're not sure there are so many people left now who do think culture is fluffy and lacking in commercial consequence.

6. Crowd Proud

We believe fully in the power of our work to fuel our clients with the evidence, inspiration and recommendation they need to grow and prosper

This one has kind of evolved into our meme. It is about being proud of our work and the impact it has, but it's also to do with the pride we have in each other, and in our collective efforts to do great stuff.

Spotify	Power Of Audio

This was a trailblazing study, investigating and celebrating the role of sound in our lives, and what the future holds in store. Our project design had a number of phases, but of particular note was the deprivation method - asking 50 participants in the US, UK, Brazil and Japan to go without music for two weeks. You see, if you really want to understand what music means to people, talking it away from them really does get them opening up. One particularly striking theme in the work was articulating the ever more sophisticated ways that many of us manage our mood through music. Play on.

Audio is with us throughout our day.

#AudioMoments

*Making
A Difference
Through
Our Work*

We have an incredible opportunity - and responsibility - to bring about DEI change through our work. Insight and strategy that can go towards creating meaningful developments in how brands communicate with, and shape products and services for, those who are marginalised or excluded.

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Making A Difference Through Our Work

As with all industries and professions, there is a pressing need in our field to bring diversity, equity and inclusivity improvement to the workplace (see our Team & Talent section).

But there is a further focus for us, one that's more unique to what we do: the opportunity we have to bring about change through our work. Insight and strategy that can go towards creating meaningful developments in how brands communicate with, and shape products and services for, those who are marginalised or excluded.

To be in a place to make a difference like this is quite a privilege; something for the industry to be proud of. But equally, it is quite a responsibility. There is much that needs considering in how we design projects and how we set expectations with clients.

In the last 12 months, we've been exploring DEI for clients in contexts as diverse as dance music, dating apps, gaming, sports apparel, mobility and representation in media. We're sure we're not alone in this sudden uptick of DEI work – nor in starting to comprehend just how much complexity there is to navigate.

We certainly haven't got everything right. And what's written here comes from the perspective of 'we're learning', not 'we're experts'. But these are some of our focal points when reviewing how we design and conduct research in DEI – and indeed, much of what's covered here is important in ensuring inclusivity in all of our work, not just that which has DEI in the title of the RFP.
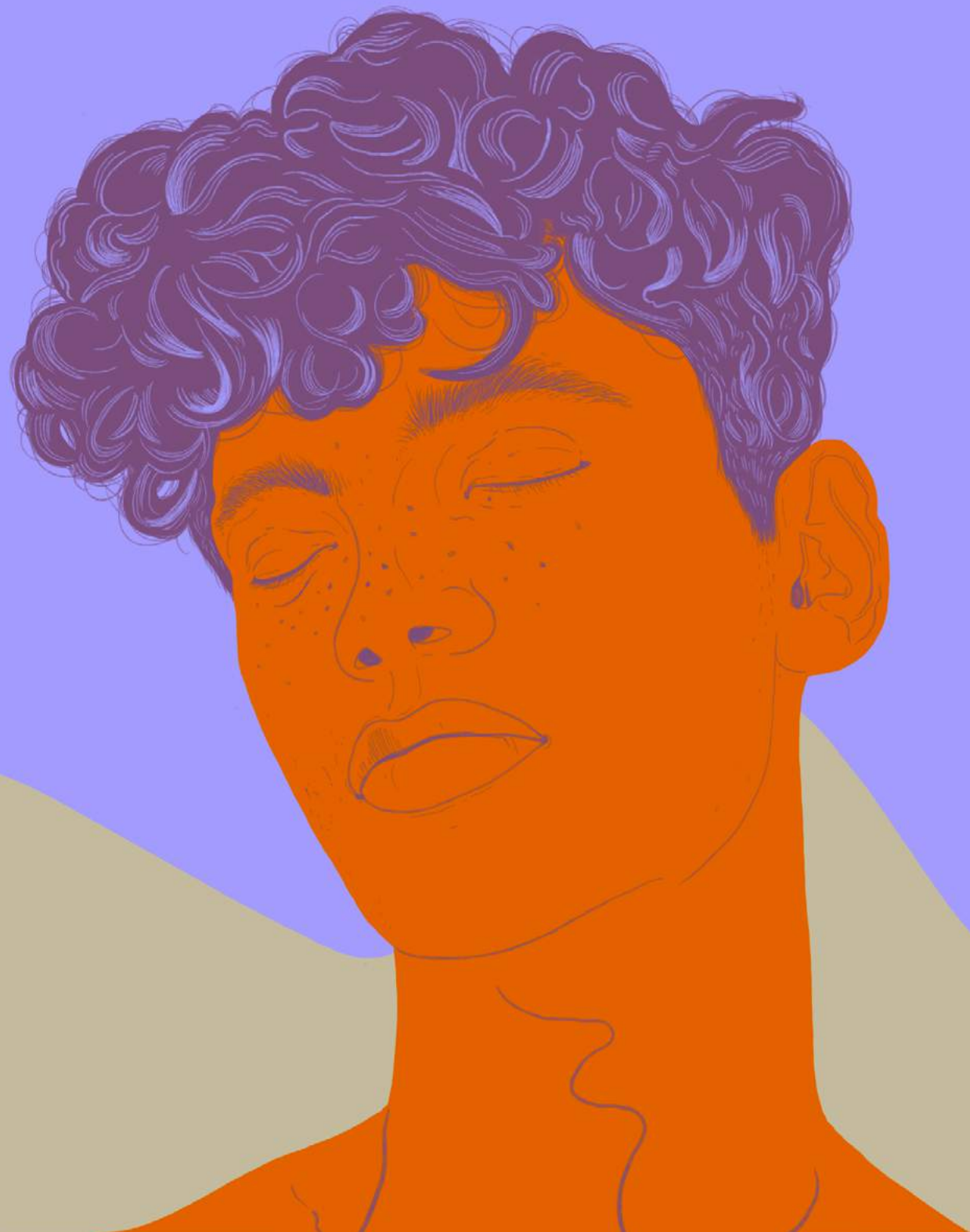
Embrace the complexity

Intersectionality is a term that gets bandied around quite loosely, but acknowledging that many experience overlapping and interdependent forms of discrimination is key to how brands can make changes – be that to products and experiences, or campaigns and communications – beyond the superficial.

Gender, race, identity, disability, economic status – whichever dimensions you choose to consider, there will always be others. We cannot use this complexity as an excuse to dodge the issues, to say it's too complicated. But it does have a profound impact on how we manage DEI projects, guide our clients and avoid box ticking exercises.

Who tells the stories

We must check our working practices to ensure that we are relaying narratives that are true and unvarnished. That, of course, means making sure we're hearing from the right people. But also that we're not filtering or distorting stories through only picking the aspects that make sense to us, or that correspond with our assumptions of what the challenges are.

We also need to be aware that we're often placing a great deal of weight on a small number of participants to speak on behalf of whole communities. You could say these points are true in all market research, but the responsibility becomes paramount with DEI work.

The other side to who's telling the stories is who's asking the questions. And therefore consideration to if we, as a team, are best placed to relate to the lived experiences of others, or if we should call on outside expertise from those who can better identify with the discriminatory factors we're exploring.

Method challenges

All research methods have flaws, but mitigating against them is a priority in DEI work. We've discussed story-gathering and interpretation above, but quantitative research throws up particular issues.

Quantitative research is intrinsically about putting people in boxes, which runs about as counter to acknowledging intersectionality as is possible. Tackling this means allowing people to give breadth of experience within their answers. For example, when understanding intersectional experiences, not asking participants to reflect on just one part of their identity, but on their lived experiences as a whole.

Another area where we have encountered issues is with recruitment screeners. Preparing these to adequately address factors ranging from identity to neurodiversity isn't yet the norm in our industry. Special measures are required in their creation for DEI projects.

All links in the chain

Particularly when conducting multi-market projects, we need to know the DEI stance of suppliers and partner agencies before we can credibly introduce them as a contributor to our work. To not expect differences when working with partners around the world is ill-judged.

Careful briefing of partners runs alongside this. Local context needs to be laid out and appreciated upfront – including where it might sit counter to finding the common global story that clients are often seeking. Moreover, translation – from descriptive terms used to interpretation of very personal stories – needs attention.

Safeguarding

In DEI work, the need to safeguard both participants and our project team is crucial. Projects should be set up with procedures in place for what to do if triggering language or actions are encountered. We need to avoid anyone being left uncertain what they can do, or who they should speak to, if the work is causing them concern.

Clients are as much part of this as anyone. We hope to have an equitable relationship with our clients on all projects, but here it is vital that we can have frank conversations – and raise it loudly and confidently if we feel the work is putting people at harm.

What success looks like

Research is generally expected to provide tidy 'answers'. Projects to reach agreed results. Clients make the call on if the work has been a success or not. But all of these basic principles of a buyer-seller relationship are put under pressure in the case of DEI work.

Here, is success defined by the client or by those who are marginalised? Clients need to give away more power and license than they would normally expect to. Reciprocity between brand and those disempowered is essential. All of this makes for a steep learning curve for our industry – and not to overlook, all of the refinement of project design won't count for much unless we can bring greater diversity and inclusivity into our industry, too. But there's also an incredible opportunity here, for us all to contribute to meaningful change. Let's embrace it.

HSBC	Enrich List

This is one of many projects we've conducted for HSBC where the focus has been on high net worth. In this case, the brief was directing their wealth management offer, Jade, on how to inspire and motivate those who have already achieved a great deal in life with challenging, horizon-broadening new experiences. We clustered our work around four primary pillars - ultimate wellbeing, professional game changers, curated adventures and purposeful living - beneath which then sat further trend filters. It was important that our focus here was truly global, including taking into account factors such as East/West differences. The work has driven a multitude of activations and innovations.

We've Got Things To Say

Sharing our views and reporting on what we see around us. We produce a lot of our own content at Crowd DNA. Always have done, always will. We call it being editorially minded

Sometimes other agencies quiz us for tips on how they can also create great content. They ask us for recommendations for writers and videographers who can do this for them. Not meaning to be rude, but this is missing the point somewhat. Start by having something to say. Something you believe in and that represents your business, your brand, your people.

With a company position of culturally charged commercial advantage, we know we are lucky. There is no limit (actually, that can be a problem) to the themes we can explore. If it's loosely at the intersection of brands and culture, that's our remit.

We've made films about the changing dynamics for women in sport and neighborhood pride in New York City. We've used social data to track the Black Lives Matter conversation. We've produced editorial on everything from generational change and identity to parenthood and the death positive movement.

Then there are our tried and trusted regulars, such as our Last Month At Crowd and Crowd Signals trends vids. Our Crowd Source newsletter. City Limits - our ongoing exploration of the ever-changing urban experience, which has embraced themes such as mobility, small cities, youth and the after dark economy.

Bring all of this together and you have a huge and ever growing body of work that positions us as thought leaders, as a business with interesting things to say. It builds our knowledge and gives us perspectives. And much of this finds its way into our client work, too, providing foundational understanding and initial jump-off points. We'd be a much less interesting business without all of this brilliant editorial and creativity. Look out for so much more to come.
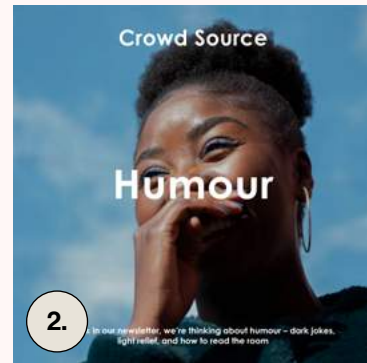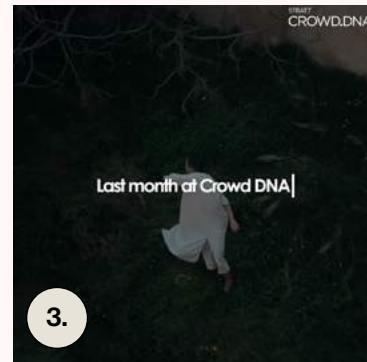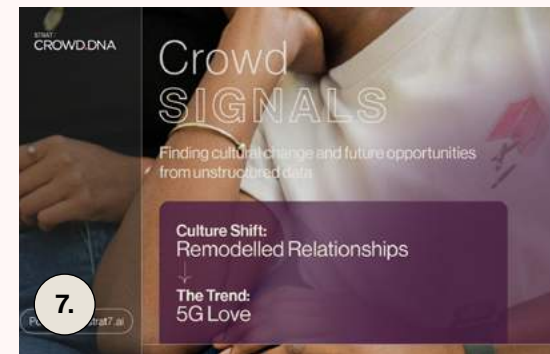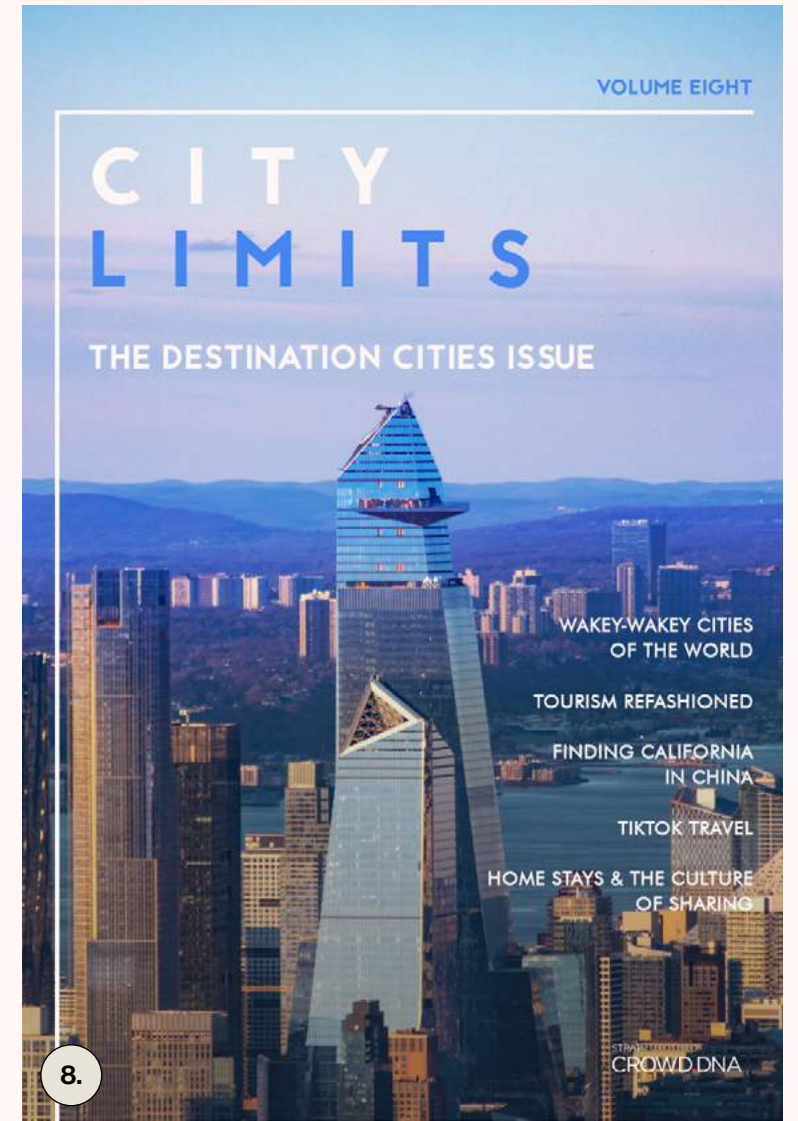
1. Crowd Signals trends video
2. Crowd Source on Instagram
3. Our Last Month At Crowd DNA video series
4. Crowd Tracks, Sex & Relationships
5. Crowd DNA New York's Neighborhoods project
6. Inside China report
7. Crowd Signals, Remodelled Relationships
8. City Limits, Volume Eight - Destination Cities

Crowd Source

Digital Avatars

In our newsletter, we're examining our relationships with our digital counterparts

CLICK STATE.

Localising The American Identity

Whiplash Living is here

More Than A Number

Quantitative research's checkered history and Crowd Numbers' role in revamping the space.

THE SMALL CITIES ISSUE   CITY LIMITS

A CHALLENGER SPIRIT

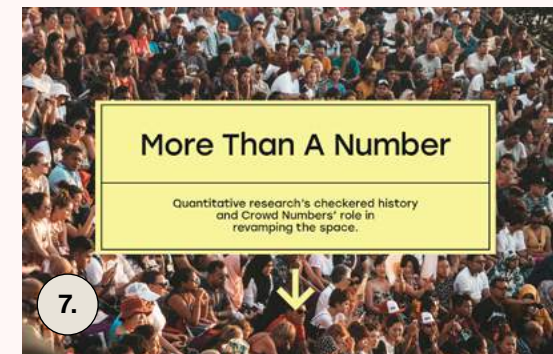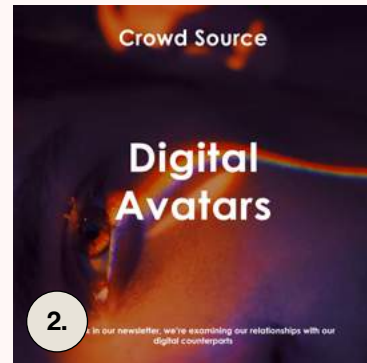Music In Second Tier Cities

Music is the cultural life blood of cities. A city's music scene can sometimes define its identity. Think of Liverpool's inescapable Beatles heritage, techno emerging from Detroit basements, or New Orleans as the birthplace of jazz. It is so often second tier cities, not the capitals, that are the petri dishes for new sounds, venues and genres. Word travels fast among smaller communities and a new sound can embed itself quickly. Music can also help to express a local, challenger spirit as second tier cities sometimes feel forgotten, or disconnected from the centres of political power. The youth of smaller cities might seek to invigorate their social lives, getting a taste for the big city pie.

Across the world, music fans and party goers are hungry for the new. Here, we explore some of the latest and most exciting iterations of music culture in global second tier cities –in turn tuning in to the sonic values that brands can harness when speaking to audiences outside of the capital.

1. Editorialising change in China
2. Crowd Source on Instagram
3. Click State on Instagram
4. Crowd DNA New York's Neighborhoods project
5. Illustration for our Storytelling webinar
6. Crowd Signals trends video
7. More Than A Number report
8. City Limits, Volume Seven - Small Cities

Snap	Gen Z Voter Power

The 2020 US election was one charged with more tension and drama than any in living memory. And amid the drama, this was the first opportunity that Gen Z would get to vote. We told a story of a young generation who looked set to turn out to vote like no other in recent times. They understood the connection between their activism and the ballot, and the pandemic had made them acutely aware of the effect politicians have on everyday lives. Snap shared the work across multiple channels in the build up to November 3, 2020. The most heartening news: that Gen Z did turnout, with the highest youth numbers ever recorded in the modern era of politics; and a difference made in particular in key swing states.

DON'T SCROLL PAST GEN-Z

HOW TO HARNESS THIS GENERATION'S POLITICAL IMPACT
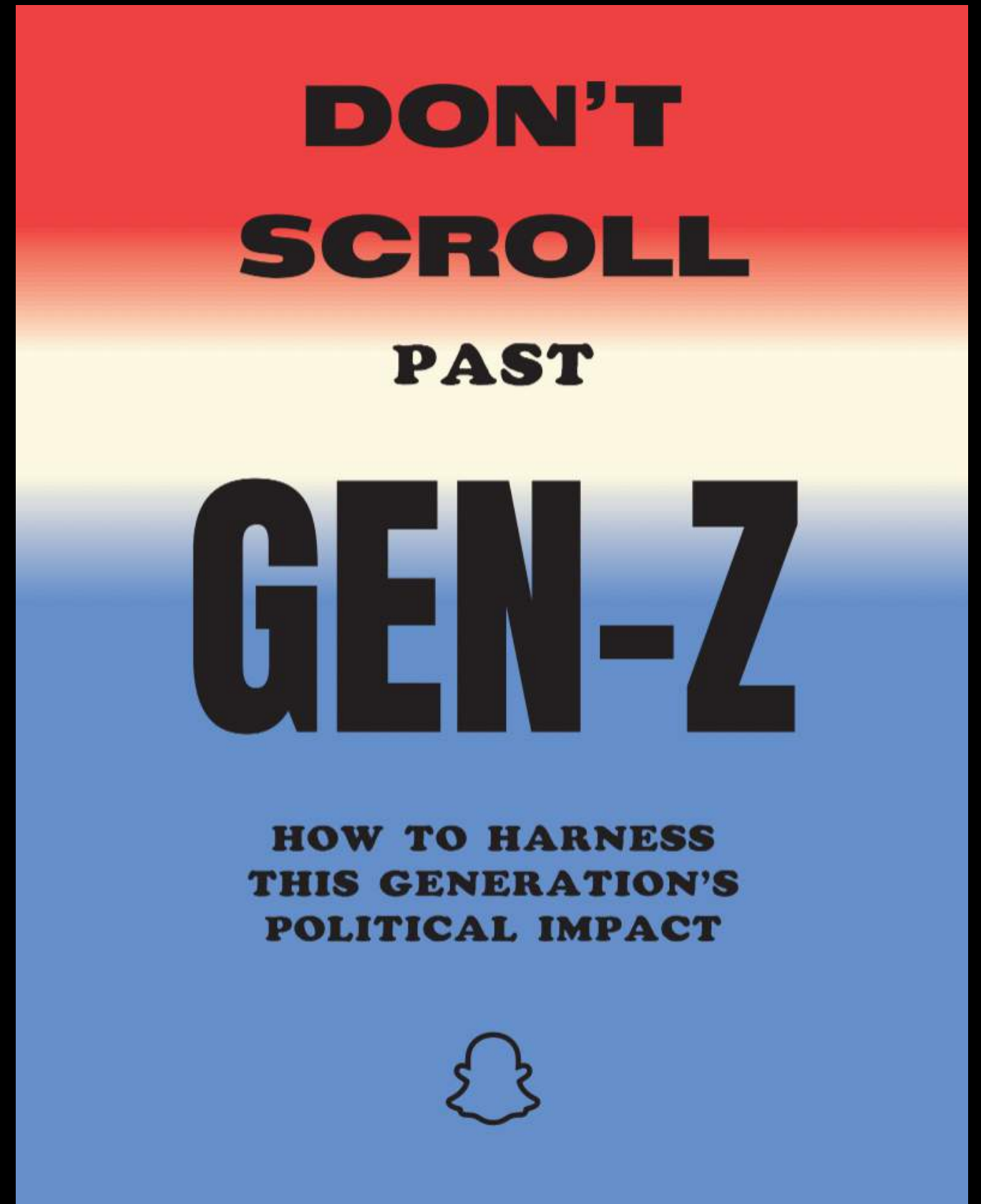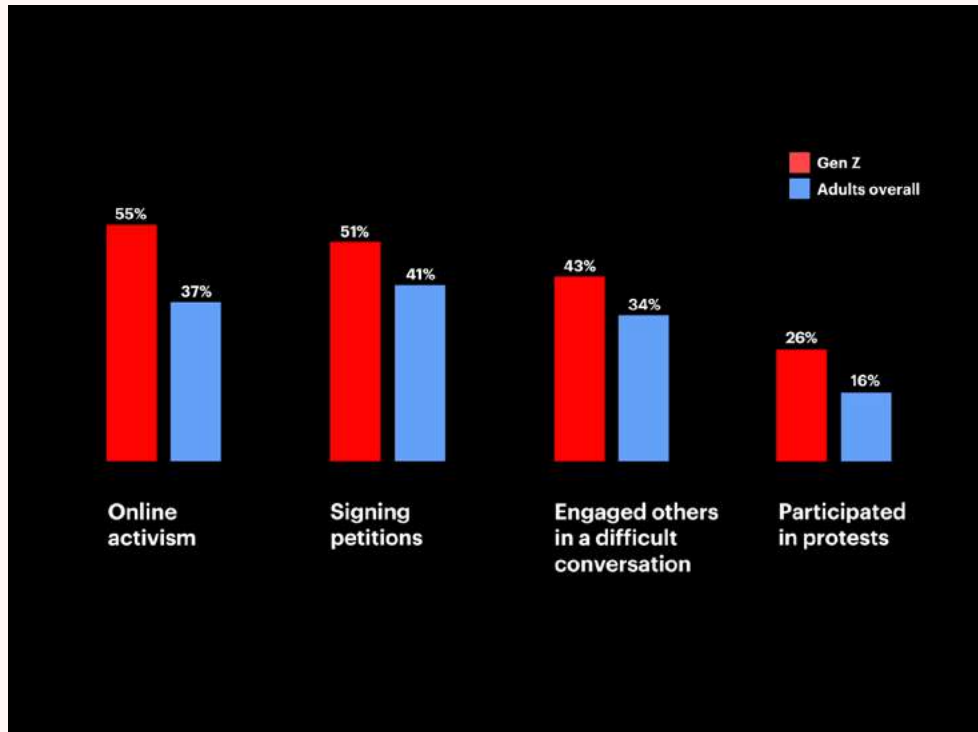
Whether you're a member of our team or looking in on Crowd DNA, new to cultural insight and strategy or as experienced as they come, we hope you've found this read useful and inspiring.

If it's helped you to do your work differently, to think about the role of culture more deeply, we'd love to hear about that.

Thanks for reading!

Culturally charged commercial advantage

Cultural Insights & Strategy | London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore,
Sydney, Stockholm, Los Angeles
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