



Loyalty 2030

Earn the Conversation

Building Customer Gravity in an Agent-Mediated World

The real challenge in modern commerce is not losing the sale.

It is winning the sale while somebody else owns the reason it happened.

Written by Mark Sage, Founder, Kesetian.

Alibaba has just raised US\$10.2 billion through a record-breaking share placement in Hong Kong. [1] Every dollar earmarked for AI infrastructure, and they're wiring their Qwen AI assistant directly into Taobao, Tmall, Alipay, travel, logistics and entertainment.

This is not an AI company doing AI. This is the world's largest commerce engine putting a conversational interface above every merchant on its platform — and demonstrating what happens when the same entity that hears the intent also executes the transaction.

In Western markets, the architecture is fragmented but the direction is identical. Retailers are already seeing 'exponential' increases in agent-mediated traffic. So, whilst the agent is not yet the primary interface everywhere, it is becoming the primary interface for more customers, more of the time.

For most businesses, the danger is not whether this happens. It is whether they end up owning the customer understanding, or merely the warehouse that fulfils it.

And the answer is not to build another Alibaba. It is to earn the conversation.

September 2026

The \$10 Billion Question

In August 2026, Alibaba completed an equity raise of approximately US\$10.2 billion — roughly HK\$80 billion — with every dollar earmarked for AI infrastructure. Global compute. Hyperscale data centres. And something Alibaba describes as an "Agentic Cloud architecture." [2]

This is serious capital at serious scale, and we should be upfront about why this matters.

Alibaba is not spending US\$10 billion so consumers can generate prettier pictures or have more entertaining conversations with Qwen. It is a commercial enterprise, and that investment needs to return economic value.

Fortunately for Alibaba, it already owns one of the world's most powerful mechanisms for turning customer attention into money. Across Taobao, Tmall, Fliggy, Damai, Alipay and Amap, Alibaba represents roughly 40 per cent of Chinese e-commerce, which itself accounts for around 86 per cent of the group's total revenue. [3]

In their own May 2026 shareholder communication, Alibaba's leadership was explicit: "*Agents will increasingly serve as the primary interface between humans and the digital world.*" They went on to describe Qwen — their all-in-one personal AI assistant — as having moved "*beyond the initial investment phase and entered full-scale commercialization,*" recognising "*the strategically vital role*" of AI in driving user acquisition and engagement. [4]

When a company that controls two-fifths of a nation's online commerce says the agent is becoming the primary interface to the digital

world, the rest of the industry should listen carefully.

And this is where Qwen fits in.

Alibaba's own product literature describes the shift as moving "*from models that understand to systems that act — deeply connected to real-world services.*" Those real-world services are used by hundreds of millions of people every day. [5]

Already, Qwen can place real-time food and beverage orders through Taobao's instant commerce solution, leveraging available promotions and integrated payments. The capability is expanding into travel through Fliggy, and into general shopping through Taobao and Tmall.

The significance is not that Alibaba has built a chatbot for its marketplace. It is almost the reverse.

Alibaba has spent more than two decades building an ecosystem around transactions. Qwen turns that ecosystem into a platform around intentions.

The customer no longer needs to know which Alibaba service solves their problem. They simply explain the problem. The agent understands the context, assembles the solution, executes the transaction, and arranges fulfilment — often without the customer ever seeing a product page, a search result, or a checkout screen.

In the process, Alibaba is retraining consumers on how to buy. Discovery and purchase collapse into a single conversation. The future customer platform does not merely remember

what the customer did. It understands what they are trying to do and helps them do it.

For the consumer, the benefits are genuine.

No longer needing to read dozens of reviews, verify merchant trust, or perform side-by-side product comparisons. No longer pausing over the "buy now" button wondering if they have made the right decision. AI empowers discovery, inspires confidence, and increasingly streamlines the entire act of purchase.

But for the brand, the question is more troubling.

Alibaba may be one of the first companies with enough pieces of the puzzle already under common ownership to demonstrate what a customer platform managing intent means at mass-market scale.

It has the category breadth, the payment infrastructure, the fulfilment network, and the customer relationship layer. Most businesses do not.

So as consumers learn these new ways to buy — as conversational interfaces become the preferred route to satisfying need — where is your brand in that conversation?

You can either end up owning the conversation, the intent, and the relationship. Or you can be the warehouse endpoint on someone else's API.

From a business perspective —

**The opportunity is potentially exponential.
And potentially existential.**



Implications for Leaders

Agentic commerce changes more than how customers discover and buy. It changes who gets smarter every time they open their wallet.

For leaders, four implications emerge.

Recognise What the Platforms Are Building

The infrastructure for agentic commerce is being assembled now.

Companies like Alibaba are investing at extraordinary scale. Google is building protocols that connect conversational interfaces to retailer catalogues, inventory and checkout. Payment networks are creating the authorisation layers agents need to transact.

These platforms may make commerce easier, but that is not their primary objective. They are building new ways to acquire customers and strengthen their position between demand and supply.

Businesses should participate with their eyes open. **The platform that controls the conversation gains influence over where demand flows and which providers capture the value.**

The Intent Is the Asset

The commercial risk is not simply higher acquisition costs or another platform taking margin.

It is the loss of customer intent.

Transactions show what somebody bought. Conversations reveal the occasion, constraints and motivations that explain why.

That understanding is more valuable than the order alone. It allows a business to distinguish lasting preference from situational decision, and to learn what the customer is actually trying to achieve.

If the conversation happens elsewhere, the business may still receive the sale. But it sees only the outcome, while somebody else learns from the reasoning that produced it.

Earn the Right to Host the Conversation

The question is not whether you can add an agent to your website. It is why a customer would speak to it rather than Gemini, ChatGPT or Qwen.

Customers will begin with the environment most capable of solving their need with the least effort.

To host that conversation, a business must create sufficient customer gravity: enough relevance, usefulness and trust that customers choose to bring their intentions there first.

Build Gravity You Can Credibly Own

Different businesses will create gravity in different ways.

Some will manufacture breadth — satisfying enough connected needs that customers have a reason to start with them. Others will own a domain so deeply that a general-purpose platform cannot compete. Strong communities create belonging and reasons to participate when there is nothing to buy. High-frequency businesses build habit and become part of everyday behaviour.

These advantages reinforce one another.

Greater engagement creates more opportunities to learn. Deeper understanding makes the interaction more valuable. Broader capabilities allow more needs to be satisfied.

Leaders must determine which advantages they already possess, which they can credibly build, and where partners could add capabilities they cannot provide alone.

The objective is not to recreate Alibaba. It is to create enough gravity that the customer chooses to start with you.

The alternative is a business that continues receiving orders while looking through the keyhole at the customer understanding that created them.

Every Layer is Mobilising

This isn't something unique to China.

The same vision is in play across Western markets. The difference is architecture.

China has vertically integrated customer platforms. The West has a fragmented landscape — separate apps for discovery, separate platforms for purchase, separate providers for payment, separate networks for fulfilment.

To enable agentic and conversational commerce at scale, trust and intent need to flow through each layer.

And this is happening fast.

It feels like each week there is a new update. Google Search has already collapsed discovery into AI Overviews, with reported reductions of 20 to 60 per cent in organic clicks for some categories. [6]

The open web — where businesses could be found on relevance alone — is being replaced by an orchestrated interface where the agent summarises, recommends, and directs the transaction without the user ever leaving the Google surface.

The traffic numbers tell the same story. AI services led traffic to US retailer sites rose almost 400 per cent year on year in the first three months of 2026. [7] UK retailer John Lewis has reported an eightfold rise of AI driven traffic over the year, growth their Managing Director, Peter Ruis, described as 'exponential'. [8]

And the queries themselves are changing. Searches containing eleven words or more

have jumped from 3.27 per cent to 5.37 per cent. Conversational queries have grown from 5 per cent to 20 per cent. People aren't just searching now. They are prompting.

However, this is only really discovery. More is needed to actually buy, and the vendors in these layers aren't waiting either.

Through its Universal Commerce Protocol, Google is building the rails to enable conversational commerce to consume a retailer's ecommerce solutions — product catalogue, inventory, pricing, even loyalty offers — turning search into transaction without the retailer necessarily owning the interaction. [9]

Stripe demonstrated at its annual conference how wallets can allow agents to securely spend from them, and how businesses can sell directly inside AI search and chat environments.

Visa and Mastercard are both developing solutions to enable merchants to trust that a transaction from an AI agent is legitimate — solving the authorisation problem that sits at the heart of autonomous agentic purchase. [10]

Meta is building too. Through its Business Agent Platform, it is enabling agentic solutions for businesses of all sizes — product recommendations, appointments, integrations through Instagram and into ecommerce platforms like Shopify and Shopee.

So every layer of the consumer experience is being re-engineered to support this new model.

From search and discovery, through product selection, checkout and payment. The

machine is learning to carry the customer from intent to transaction without human friction.

Crucially though, every platform and provider that touches that transaction is also extracting value from it.

Anywhere there is control over the purchase, there is control over the economics.

For retailers and merchants, the process may be smooth, but at the expense of their marginal value. Participating within these ecosystems is not going to be free. Sales costs will likely increase as each layer extracts marginal value proportional to its influence over the consumer conversation.

But that's not the real loss here. Merchants are already used to paying a platform tax for the demand these platforms bring.

No, the real loss here is the customer themselves.

In a vertical system, the same entity that hears the intent also executes the transaction and learns from the outcome.

In the Western model, intent is captured by one layer, discovery by another, transaction by another, payment by another, and fulfilment by another. The customer passes through like a baton in a relay race, with each runner seeing only the hand-off, never the whole race.

The merchant may still process the sale. But they no longer see the reasoning that created it.

They own the transaction.

Somebody else owns the understanding.

And even the transaction itself is becoming harder to recognise.

In traditional commerce, a merchant might see the same payment token from the same customer repeatedly, allowing behaviour to be connected over time.

Some agentic transactions can break that continuity. Where an agent uses a single-use payment token without passing a persistent customer or loyalty identifier, each purchase may arrive as a standalone event. [11]

This protects credentials and limits unnecessary data exposure, but it can also leave the merchant unable to connect the transaction to a known customer or their history.

The sale still happens. The money still arrives. But the merchant's ability to connect this purchase to that customer, this moment to their history, is quietly removed.

This means the customer is being peeled away from the transaction, across every layer.

And that is a much harder problem than a higher cost of sale.



The Bottle of Wine

There is a reason Google search is seeing longer queries. In agentic commerce, the customer increasingly tells the system why, not just what.

And that ‘why’ is extraordinary customer data, something we term ‘privileged data’. [12]

Consider a bottle of wine.

Wine is not merely a product. It is a signal. A bottle taken to dinner says something about the bearer — their sophistication, their discernment, their effort. The choice carries social weight that no SKU can capture.

In a conversational interface, that decision is now assisted rather than searched. The customer says:

"I need a bottle of wine for dinner tonight. I don't want it to look cheap — the host knows a bit about wine. I usually drink Bordeaux but I want something less obvious. I want to spend around \$30 to \$50."

Before any transaction occurs, the agent understands the wider context, and ultimately recommends a Barolo, which the customer accepts.

The retailer simply receives:

1 × Barolo — \$42.

The retailer owns the transaction. The agent owns the reason it happened.

And here is where it gets interesting. The retailer's CRM, looking backwards at that purchase,

may infer that this customer likes Italian wine. Perhaps they would enjoy a Brunello next time.

But that inference is not merely incomplete. It is most likely wrong.



Figure 1: Barolo “King of the wines” [19]

The customer still likes Bordeaux. They simply did not want to look predictable. They are aspirational in social settings, but habitual and value-conscious in private. They feel exposed about their wine knowledge and are trying to make a good impression.

None of that is visible in the transaction record.

The purchase history says "Barolo buyer." The conversation says someone who enjoys wine, knows what they like, but is not a connoisseur — and likes to make a good impression.

This is not limited to wine. A request for a hotel that "feels special but not pretentious; somewhere lively but where I'll still sleep; convenient for what I'm doing rather than simply near the city centre" is an entirely different level of preference.

No filter on a booking site captures that.

The agent's relevance depends not on catalogue size, but on conversation depth — and on the memory that informs it.

For decades, customer analytics has tried to infer intent from behaviour. But agentic commerce captures intent before behaviour occurs.

That is bigger than conversational shopping. The prize is not a new interface. It is a new level of data for understanding consumers.

Alibaba gets this. Google gets this. Every major platform understands what is at stake.

In traditional ecommerce, the real consumer 'cost' was search.

Millions of products, limited time, limited patience. Customers browsed, compared, and often settled for what was findable rather than what was right; or simply gave up before they found anything of interest.

Agentic commerce changes scarcity entirely.

A recent paper on the economics of agentic commerce argues that the constraint shifts from "product inspection to preference articulation", as the agent can scan an enormous catalogue at marginal cost. [13]

The question is no longer whether the right product exists, but whether the customer can express why it is right for them.

And that expression is where the value accumulates.

It is not just about what the customer asks today. It is about the accumulation of what they have asked over time. And the platforms know this.

Tencent recently open-sourced its Agent Memory solution, describing it as "accumulating experience over time." Longer context windows, persistent memory, and conversational history mean that every interaction compounds. [14]

The platform learns. Value-conscious, low-carb, prefers city walks to beach holidays, chooses real food over ultra-processed. Each query lands with more relevance. Each recommendation feels more personal. The customer returns more often because the platform understands them better.

With every conversation, the switching cost of leaving rises.

The retailer fulfilling the demand? They know a bottle of Barolo was purchased, but that is just a fleeting fragment of the customer understanding and intent held by the agentic platform.

It is the retail equivalent of looking through the keyhole at a great party and thinking you were actually there.

The Russian Doll

The bottle of wine leaves us with a question. If the agent owns the understanding, and the retailer owns only the transaction, how does any business get back into the conversation?

The party analogy is useful here because a party requires breadth.

It needs people, but a mix of people — those with something interesting to say, those who bring a laugh, those who connect the group. It needs food and drink to create reasons to interact. Music to set the mood. A destination that balances ease with something memorable. A party in your home office with a glass of squash is not a party. It is a meeting.

Agentic commerce works the same way. To host the customer conversation — to see more of the customer, more of the time — a platform needs two things. It needs to capture more of the customer's life: their needs, intents, desires, and the occasions that drive them. And it needs to provide more reach: the product assortment, the service breadth, and the category coverage that makes the conversation worth having.

Alibaba can do this because it spans commerce, travel, entertainment, payments, and logistics. Amazon can do this because it sells enough of everything to be a regular destination. Even within grocery, there is likely enough frequency and depth to build meaningful customer understanding over time.

But the specialist brand? The single-category player? They face a structural problem.

McDonald's provides a clear example of how hard this is becoming, and how aware the company is of the risk.

The business is pushing aggressively to move customers onto its owned digital platform — currently around 25 per cent of customers utilise it. On their Q2/2025 earnings call, they contrasted this to the 90 per cent levels seen in China which is *'when you would see some really significant benefits'* [15].

It has also set a target to shift home delivery orders from aggregators like Uber Eats and foodpanda into its own app, aiming to capture up to 30 per cent of global delivery sales through its own customer platform by the end of 2027 [16].

This is not simply a loyalty play.

It is a recognition that if McDonald's does not own the customer relationship, somebody else will.

And in an agentic world, that somebody else may not even be the delivery platform. It may be the AI assistant that sits above it.

Yet McDonald's remains a single brand with a single menu. It can capture frequency. It can capture engagement. But it cannot capture the breadth of customer life that makes an agent truly useful. The customer may order through the McDonald's app, but they are not asking it to plan a dinner party, book a flight, or find a birthday gift. The conversation stays narrow. And narrow conversations create narrow understanding.

Now consider Uber Eats. As a platform, it already has a two-pronged approach to agentic commerce. [17]

First, through its Cart Assistant, it enables users to build orders through conversation, handwritten notes, or even recipe screenshots. It has the customer's broad order history across multiple merchants and categories. As a platform player, it is likely to be more relevant to a customer's overall needs than any single brand.

But the second prong is more revealing. Uber Eats is integrating directly into ChatGPT and Claude. And here the layering becomes visible. [18]

Think of it as a Russian doll.

The general-purpose agent is the outer layer — ChatGPT or Claude — capturing the intent and the customer understanding.

Open that layer and you find Uber Eats, providing the consolidated product reach.

Open that layer and you find the payment providers and networks.

And at the very centre, the smallest doll of all, is the individual merchant — simply responding to the demand and finding that what started out as a decent-sized economic opportunity has become that little bit smaller by the time it reaches them.

Look at where value sits in that stack.

The customer understanding is at the top, with Google, OpenAI, and Anthropic. The margin leaks through the middle — Uber Eats, payment providers, payment networks.

The retailer at the centre receives the order, often at a discount, and learns almost nothing about why it was placed.

Even if you have customer frequency today, even if you have engagement, there is no guarantee that agentic commerce will not disintermediate you.

If you are a grocer listing products on a delivery platform or an LLM like Gemini, there is a real chance that those platforms will start to "get" the customer more than you do. They will capture the conversation. They will capture the understanding. And they will capture the relationship.

This means the battle is not simply to be relevant. It is to stay relevant. To give customers reasons to come, and reasons to stay.

Because in a world where the agent can source from anywhere, the merchant who owns only the transaction is always one conversation away from being replaced.



The Nike Paradox

Nike has spent years building something most retailers can only dream of. **Genuine customer gravity.**

Through Nike Run Club, Nike Training Club, SNKRS, and the Nike App, the brand has created distinct community experiences — coaching, challenges, collecting, content — all tied to a single member identity.

Nike describes them as "*gateways for people to get closer to the brand in ways that resonate with them*". The strategy is not merely to sell products, but to understand customers as a whole person: their progress, their goals, their relationship with sport. [21]

Layering a conversational interface across these environments would seem like a natural next step. One persistent memory, one accumulating understanding, connecting a customer's running history with their training habits with their collecting behaviour. Nike would know not just what they bought, but who they are becoming.

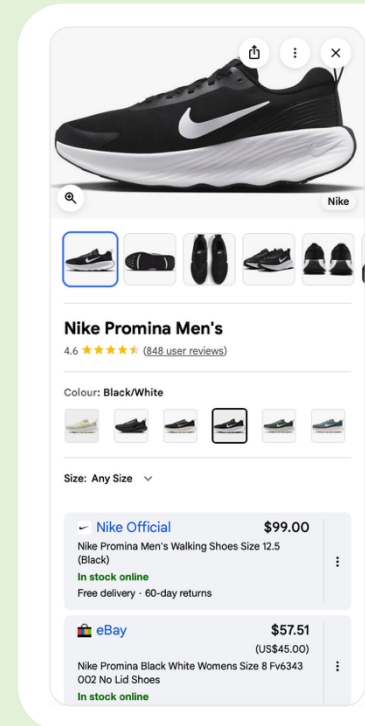
And yet.

In May 2026, Nike announced that consumers could discover and purchase Nike products directly from within the Gemini app and AI Mode in Google Search, via Google's Universal Commerce Protocol. The stated aim was to "reduce steps between inspiration and action". [20]

They may have succeeded. But they have also, perhaps inadvertently, separated intent from purchase. When a customer tells Gemini — not Nike — that they need trainers for a Tokyo trip, that they want something comfortable for all-day walking, that they prefer a certain aesthetic, Nike receives none of that understanding. What reaches Nike is an order. The conversation, the context, the mission, the memory: all of it belongs to Google.

Nike risks trading the richness of its community relationship for the convenience of a mediated transaction. And it is a trade. In the short term, it drives discovery and simplifies check-out. But in the long run, Nike may find that the platform which owns the conversation increasingly owns the customer — while Nike owns the fulfilment.

Even the strongest community is not a defence if the brand chooses to hand the conversation to somebody else.



Earn the Right to Host the Party

The strategic response to agentic commerce cannot simply be to make products available to agents. That will increasingly become table stakes.

Product catalogues will become machine-readable. Inventory will become accessible. Payments will become agent-ready. APIs and emerging commerce protocols will make it progressively easier for an external agent to discover a product, place an order, and initiate fulfilment.

But there is a profound difference between participating in agentic commerce and owning the customer relationship within it.

This is not necessarily an argument for every business to build its own general-purpose AI assistant.

It is an argument for thinking much harder about why a customer would choose to start a conversation with your platform rather than Gemini, ChatGPT, Qwen, or whatever general-purpose agent ultimately occupies that position.

If the customer begins elsewhere, the business may still win the transaction. A retailer can expose its inventory. An airline can expose flights. A restaurant can expose its menu.

But each risks moving downstream from customer understanding towards fulfilment.

As we discussed, McDonald's has spent years trying to shift delivery demand towards its own digital environment. The logic is not that a McDonald's-employed driver needs to deliver

the burger. It is that originating the order gives McDonald's greater access to the customer relationship. The opportunity lives with the data, and the ability to understand preferences and cravings.

Agentic commerce potentially recreates that opportunity one layer further upstream.

The external agent doesn't merely know that the customer ordered McDonald's. It may know why they wanted McDonald's in the first place.

The objective, therefore, isn't simply to capture transactions. It is to create enough customer gravity that people continue to bring their needs, questions, decisions, and intentions to you.

But let's be honest. You are probably not Alibaba or Amazon. You do not own the payments, the travel, the entertainment, and the marketplace under a single roof.

So, the question becomes, how do you compete? How do you build gravity when you don't already have the ecosystem?

Well, there are at least four ways to do it.

1. Breadth: solve enough of the customer's needs. Alibaba represents the most complete version of this strategy. Its advantage is not simply that Taobao and Tmall contain an enormous assortment. Around them sit payments, local services, travel, maps, instant commerce, entertainment, and fulfilment.

Qwen then gives the customer a conversational layer through which those capabilities can be orchestrated.

But ownership is not the only way to manufacture breadth. Marketplaces have already demonstrated another. Decathlon's marketplace is a good example of this.

The physical retailer has traditionally been heavily weighted towards its own brands. Online, a marketplace can offer a dramatically wider assortment from third-party merchants. That endless aisle allows Decathlon to capture demand its own product range could never completely satisfy. Marketplace demand then becomes a signal: where third-party products or categories perform strongly online, they can potentially inform what deserves physical distribution.

The important lesson isn't really about marketplaces though, it is that **a business does not necessarily need to own the supply in order to own the demand.**

Agentic commerce extends that principle beyond products. A customer platform can combine capabilities from multiple businesses to

satisfy needs that no single participant could address independently.

This then changes how we should think about partnerships.

Don't start by asking which partners you want. Start by asking which customer needs your existing network cannot fulfil. Every unmet need is potentially another reason for the customer to take the conversation somewhere else.

2. Depth: own a sufficiently important domain. This doesn't mean solving every aspect of the customer's life.

A great travel platform doesn't need to sell groceries. But it might need to understand enough about travel to support inspiration, flights, accommodation, ground transport, restaurants, experiences, insurance, itinerary management, and disruption.

The important boundary isn't an industry category. It is the customer's mission.

Uber: Going deeper into the need

Uber's Cart Assistant shows commerce moving from search towards intent. Rather than searching for individual grocery items, customers can describe what they need and have Uber construct the basket, with early users creating baskets around twice the size of a typical Grocery & Retail order. [23]

Today, that reasoning is largely confined to groceries. But Uber already spans restaurants, prepared food, grocery and retail. The interesting next step is therefore deceptively simple: **"I need dinner tonight"**

That doesn't necessarily mean groceries. It might mean restaurant delivery, prepared food or ingredients to cook. An agent that understands the need can reason across all three.

And that deeper engagement has helped create an advertising business exceeding a \$2.5 billion annualised revenue run-rate for Uber. More customer attention means more merchants paying to influence it.

That's depth. Not more products within a category, but more ways to solve the underlying customer need.



A customer doesn't necessarily have an airline need followed by a hotel need followed by a restaurant need. They have: *"We're taking the children to Japan for a week in February"* need.

A platform with sufficient depth around that mission can earn the right to own the conversation without becoming Alibaba.

The strategic threshold is reached when the customer no longer thinks *"I'll need to check four or five different places to understand my options. I'll just ask Gemini"*.

So you don't need to solve every customer need; you simply need sufficient breadth and depth around a meaningful set of needs that customers choose to start the conversation with you.

3. Community: become somewhere the customer belongs. There is another source of gravity that has little to do with assortment, and Nike demonstrates it particularly well.

Nike has spent years building customer environments beyond commerce. Nike Run Club isn't primarily somewhere to buy shoes. It is somewhere to run, track progress, train, participate in challenges, and connect with a running community. Nike Training Club extends into training and wellbeing, while SNKRS builds around a very different form of cultural participation.

Historically these have been relatively specialised environments connected through a common Nike identity. Agentic AI and accumulated memory create the possibility of connecting them at a deeper level.

And this progression is significant:

Nike knows what I bought.

becomes: Nike knows that I run.

becomes: Nike understands the runner I am becoming.

That last step is fundamentally different.

A generic agent may be able to search every running shoe on the internet and recommend the technically optimal product.

But a Nike environment could potentially understand the customer's history, progress, goals, achievements, training behaviour, and relationship with the sport.

And community adds something else: reasons to engage when there is nothing to buy. Customers return to record progress, share achievements, participate, compete, and celebrate. Those interactions simultaneously deepen the relationship and create richer understanding.

A sufficiently strong brand therefore doesn't necessarily need a vast coalition of partners around it. If it can satisfy enough customer needs within its domain while creating a community people genuinely value, the brand itself can become the destination.

4. Engagement: become part of everyday behaviour. Finally, some businesses possess another advantage: extraordinary frequency.

Luckin Coffee doesn't need to solve travel.

McDonald's doesn't need to build a fitness community. Their opportunity comes from the combination of penetration and usage depth.

A coffee customer might interact several times a week. A QSR customer might interact several

times a month. At sufficient scale, those repeated interactions create an outsized share of the customer's digital behaviour.

Luckin's digitally mediated model is particularly interesting in this respect. The app isn't an occasional loyalty layer sitting alongside the core business. Digital interaction is embedded into how customers discover, order, pay, collect, and reorder.

Frequency creates opportunities to learn. More importantly, it creates habit. And habit reduces one of the greatest advantages a general-purpose agent possesses: being the default place the customer starts.

A customer who already opens an app three times a week doesn't need to be persuaded to establish another digital relationship. The strategic opportunity is to progressively increase the value of the relationship they already have.

Anthropic Takes a Different Path

There is another response to the general-purpose agent: bring the intelligence to the retailer.

Anthropic's commerce-agent blueprint puts the shopping agent inside the merchant's existing website or app. The merchant keeps its catalogue, cart, payments, and identity. [22]

The principle is simple: own the memory, rent the intelligence. And it matters because it shows that agentic commerce doesn't require surrendering the customer relationship to the model provider.

But Anthropic cannot solve the distribution problem; the customer still has to turn up. A retailer can build a world-class conversational agent and still find customers start with Gemini, ChatGPT, or Qwen instead.

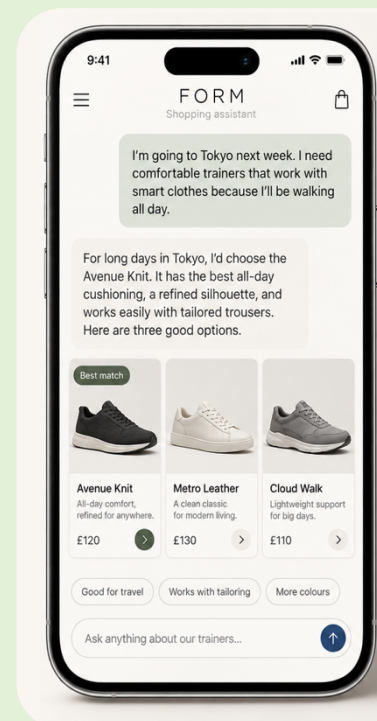
General-purpose agents remove the friction of deciding who to contact before explaining what you need, creating a powerful path-of-least-resistance effect. Imagine a customer says: *"I'm going to Tokyo next week. I need comfortable trainers that work with smart clothes because I'll be walking all day"*.

Inside Nike's environment, Nike captures the trip, the occasion, the constraints, and the accumulated memory. Claude could help turn that into a recommendation, and Nike keeps what it learns.

But if the customer asks Gemini, one conversation may consider Nike, Adidas, On, New Balance, the weather, and the itinerary. Gemini may recommend Nike and Nike may get the sale, but what reaches Nike is: *Nike Pegasus. Size 10. Black. Deliver tomorrow.*

The transaction survives. The understanding does not.

So Anthropic may solve the architecture, but it does not solve the gravity. The retailer still needs breadth, depth, community, or engagement to give customers a reason to start with them.



Conclusion

These four routes are not mutually exclusive. Nor are they fixed models.

Breadth, depth, community and engagement are different ways of creating the same thing; which is enough relevance that customers **choose to begin with you.**

Breadth may come from owning many capabilities, as Alibaba does. But it can also be assembled—through a marketplace that extends what a business can offer, or through partners that allow it to address needs no participant could satisfy alone.

Depth works similarly. It does not have to mean remaining narrow. A business can build services, expertise and support around its core product, allowing it to own more of the customer's need and therefore more of the conversation.

Community and engagement create other reasons to return. They build belonging, frequency and accumulated understanding, including at moments when there is nothing immediate to buy.

The strongest customer platforms will combine these characteristics in ways appropriate to the needs they are trying to solve.

For some, that may involve a coalition. For others, a marketplace, deeper services, specialist expertise, community or habit. There is no universal formula.

The strategic question though is simpler.

Which customer needs can we credibly solve well enough that people choose to start with us?

This is where relevance becomes customer gravity.

General-purpose agents have an enormous structural advantage. They can appear infinitely broad. A customer confronted with a fragmented set of specialist apps and websites can simply say, *"I'll ask Gemini"*.

Once that happens, the customer has not necessarily disappeared from the businesses underneath. Gemini may still send the order to the retailer, book the hotel, buy the trainers or call the restaurant.

But the originating conversation has moved. And with it goes the rationale, context, preference articulation and potentially the accumulated memory that explains why the customer ultimately chose what they did; and why they may come back.

The business may still receive the transaction. What it risks losing is the understanding that would make the next interaction more relevant.

And that leaves a fairly stark strategic choice.

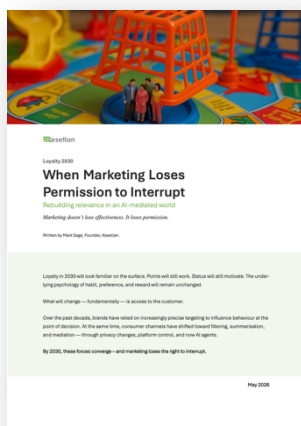
Build enough gravity to host the conversation, or risk becoming a capability invoked by somebody who does—and peering through the keyhole at the customer understanding that creates it.

Further Reading

Earn the Conversation is the third paper in Kesetian's Loyalty 2030 series, exploring how AI is changing the relationship between brands, platforms and customers.

The Series So Far

1. **When Marketing Loses Permission to Interrupt** asks how brands remain visible when AI increasingly controls access to attention.
2. **The Age of Privileged Data** asks what becomes possible when customers explain not only what they want, but why.
3. **Earn the Conversation** asks who will own that understanding—and what businesses must do to earn the right to create it.

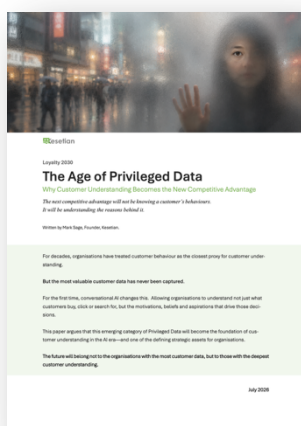


When Marketing Loses Permission to Interrupt

As AI increasingly filters, summarises and decides what customers see, brands can no longer assume that attention is available to buy.

This paper examines why traditional marketing and loyalty models are losing influence—and why businesses must shift from campaigns and offers towards owned customer platforms, conversation and sustained relevance.

[Read the paper](#)



The Age of Privileged Data

Conversational AI captures something traditional customer data rarely contains: the motivations, aspirations, constraints and compromises that explain why customers behave as they do.

This paper explores the emergence of machine-readable customer understanding, the value it creates, and the responsibility that comes with becoming its steward.

[Read the paper](#)

Works Cited

- [1] Bloomberg, "Alibaba raises US\$10 billion in record Hong Kong share sale," Taipei Times, 25 Aug 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/biz/archives/2026/08/25/2003863065>.
- [2] X. Shen and A. Cao, "Alibaba to issue US\$10 billion in new shares for huge AI push amid strong investor demand," 23 August 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3364957/alibaba-issue-hk80-billion-new-shares-global-ai-push>.
- [3] DBS, "Alibaba Group," 21 08 2026. [Online]. Available: https://www.dbs.com.hk/treasures/aics/stock-coverage/templatedata/article/equity/data/en/DBSV/012014/9988_HK.xml.
- [4] Alibaba, "Letter from our Chairman and our CEO," 20 May 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.alibabagroup.com/en-US/document-1993785120221298688>.
- [5] Alibaba, "Alibaba's Qwen App Advances Agentic AI Strategy by Turning Core Ecosystem Services into Executable AI Capabilities," 15 Jan 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.alibabagroup.com/en-US/document-1948497434959151104>.
- [6] L. Chavez-Mattos, "How Google AI Search Mode Changes Content Strategy for Businesses," MindStudio, 26 May 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.mindstudio.ai/blog/google-ai-search-mode-content-strategy-businesses>.
- [7] L. Eadicicco, "AI is changing the internet forever. Here's how," CNN, 23 May 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/05/23/tech/ai-internet-search>.
- [8] M. Lodha, "'John Lewis Is Marketing to Machines Now'," 9 Sept 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://takumitech.ai/blogs/john-lewis-is-marketing-to-machines-now>.
- [9] A. Handa and A. Gupta, "Under the Hood: Universal Commerce Protocol (UCP)," Google, 11 Jan 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://developers.googleblog.com/under-the-hood-universal-commerce-protocol-ucp/>.
- [10] D. Hoerig, "The real fight in agentic commerce isn't autonomy. It's authorization," Techradar Pro, 31 July 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.techradar.com/pro/the-real-fight-in-agentic-commerce-isnt-autonomy-its-authorization>.
- [11] D. Sharda, "Paid with a Mastercard. The merchant saw a Visa.," LinkedIn, 15 September 2026. [Online]. Available: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/dhiraj24_paid-with-a-mastercard-the-merchant-saw-activity-7505245269983191040-Bh66?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAAOOF84B9AXfN5yGKiaN8inRw3Po0iU8OII.
- [12] M. Sage, "The Age of Privileged Data," Kesetian, July 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.kesetian.com/white-paper-privileged-data>.
- [13] L. Dong, K. Luo and F. Xu, "From Product Search to Preference Articulation: The Economics of Agentic Commerce," 9 August 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2608.08395>.
- [14] M. Sutter, "Tencent Open-Sources TencentDB Agent Memory: A 4-Tier Local Memory Pipeline for AI Agents," 23 May 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.marktechpost.com/2026/05/23/tencent-open-sources-tencentdb-agent-memory-a-4-tier-local-memory-pipeline-for-ai-agents/>.
- [15] "MCDONALD'S CORPORATION," roic.ai, 6 August 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.roic.ai/quote/MCD.TO/transcripts/2025-year/2-quarter>.
- [16] "McDonald's Announces New Targets For Development, Loyalty Membership, And Cloud Technology," McDonald's, 6 Dec 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://corporate.mcdonalds.com/corpmcd/our-stories/article/mcd-announces-targets-development-loyalty-membership-cloud-tech.htmlMcDonald.html>.
- [17] R. B. Sousa, A. Biyani and D. K. Sahoo, "Cart Assistant: Agentic Grocery Shopping on Uber Eats," Uber, 16 June 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.uber.com/us/en/blog/uber-cart-assistant/>.
- [18] "ChatGPT Integration for Eaters," Uber, [Online]. Available: <https://help.uber.com/en-GB/ubereats/restaurants/article/chatgpt-integration-for-eaters?nodeId=7e56650b-9482-4a55-a560-1902ba2dd70e>. [Accessed 17 Sep 2026].
- [19] "Iacave-eclairée.fr," La Cave Eclairée, [Online]. Available: https://iacave-eclairée.fr/en/blogs/info/all-about-barolo-fascinating-italian-wine?srsltid=AU7gw4UaXuRbHzoaL_MmQZsAnNm-AoafC08qz8KkcOGyknSMfHRnO94h.
- [20] "Nike Is Serving Athletes Faster Through AI-Powered Shopping on Google," Nike, 19 May 2026. [Online]. Available: https://about.nike.com/en/newsroom/releases/nike-is-serving-athletes-faster-through-ai-powered-shopping-on-google?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- [21] "How Nike Creates Its Digitally Connected Marketplace," Nike, 10 Nov 2021. [Online]. Available: https://about.nike.com/en/newsroom/releases/nike-membership-digital-benefits?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- [22] "Anthropic Debuts Commerce Agent Blueprint With Visa and Mastercard," PYMNTS, 3 Sept 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.pymnts.com/news/artificial-intelligence/2026/anthropic-built-the-shopping-brain-and-skipped-the-wallet/>.
- [23] Uber Technologies, Inc. (UBER), "Q2 2026 Prepared Remarks," Uber Technologies, Inc. (UBER), 5 Aug 2026. [Online]. Available: https://s23.q4cdn.com/407969754/files/doc_earnings/2026/q2/transcript/Uber-Q2-26-Prepared-Remarks.pdf.



Kesetian was built on the belief that customer relationships are not optimised — they are understood. That in a world of increasing automation, precision, and intermediation, the advantage does not come from reaching customers more efficiently, but from being more relevant to them.

The ideas in this paper are not theoretical. They are grounded in experience — building loyalty programmes, customer platforms, and data capabilities at scale, and seeing first-hand where traditional approaches begin to break.

Kesetian exists to explore what comes next.

To develop a point of view on how brands connect with customers in an agent-mediated world. To test ideas, challenge assumptions, and share what works — and what doesn't.

For some, that is enough.

For others, it becomes the start of a conversation.

www.kesetian.com