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2026 Digital Health Trends & Insights

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LETTER FROM PHM CEO ANDREA PALMER

This year's CES was distinctly concrete compared to previous years – and not just because Caterpillar came to keynote the "world's most powerful tech event." CES is often a showcase for the aspirational, the near impossible, the almost philosophical limits of what humans might achieve. However, in 2026, things got literal.

Infrastructure and Physical AI got their moment to shine, with innovators showing much more of HOW they might achieve a future state, rather than just WHAT that future state might be. As nearly all sectors looked to the practical, health remained top of mind for many across industries. Keynotes from leaders of AMD, Lenovo and Siemens all touched on how their technologies could further accelerate advancements in life sciences and pharma, fields they consider primed for AI-driven growth. Inside our industry, innovations moved us closer to "ambient infrastructure" with interoperable stacks quietly knitting together how we live, how we buy and how we are treated; it is no surprise then that Digital Health and Smart Home were physically adjacent at this year's event.

In media, we explored expression at scale, both in the way content is produced and consumed, but also the complex consumer journeys on which individuals discover potentially life-changing products and solutions. With adoption of conversational and agentic platforms, consumers are forming decisions with new insights which demands a marketing approach that wins hearts, minds and machines.

Thank you for reading along as we spotlight some of the key trends and insights that bear on digital health and media this year and beyond.

Best,

Andrea
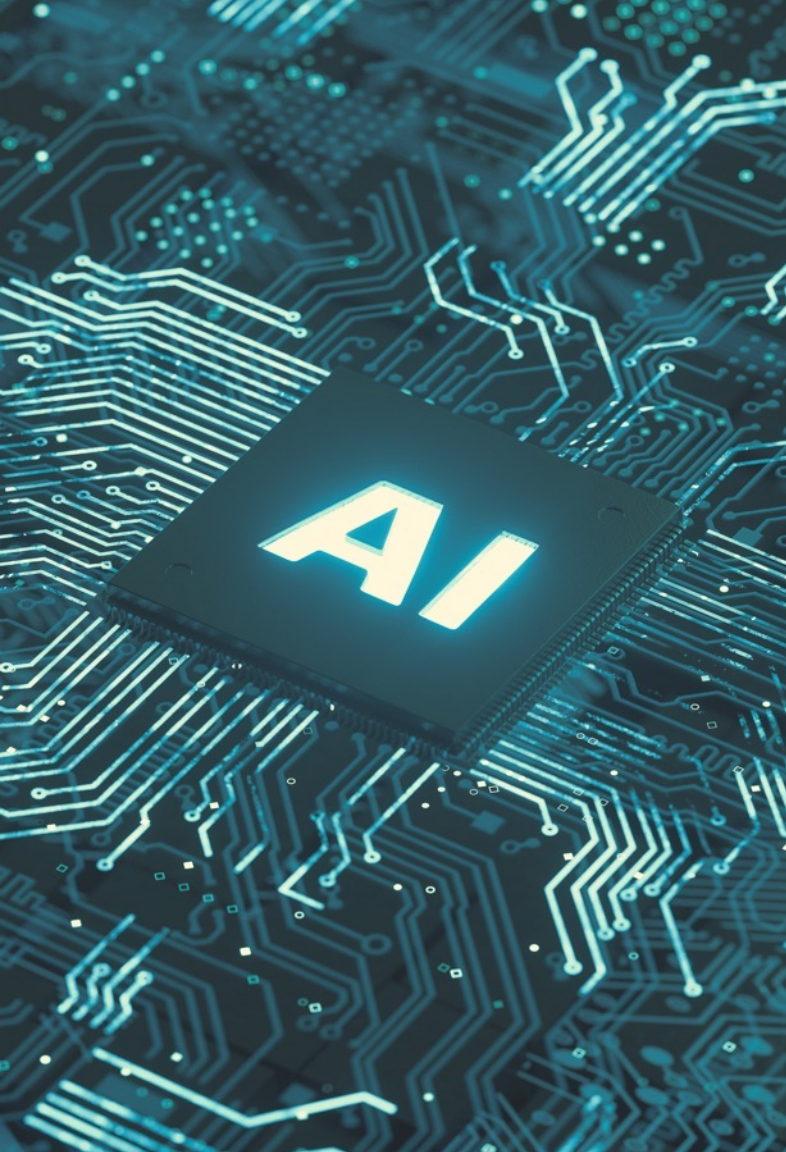
Practical AI, From Horizon to Expectation

CES 2026 heralded a transition from aspirational to practical AI, with marketers pursuing application, rather than discourse on what 'could be' in a decade's time. As such, conversations focused on infrastructure needed to implement enterprise-wide agentic AI. While adoption of AI tools for workplace utility is the highest in the US (63% vs 56% in the UK according to the CTA), custom-built agents to achieve industry-specific goals remain more rare, with several new marketing agents introduced at this year's show, trailing industry leaders. Marketers stressed the need for humans to manage agents – no matter how advanced – to move innovation forward. Bob Sternfels, Global Managing Partner, McKinsey & Company, distinguished the human value in the exchange saying, "what can the models not do? Aspire. Set aspirations."

11% of organizations have agents in production, despite 38% piloting them.

Source: Deloitte Tech Trends 2026 Report

"True innovation has clarity of purpose."

Bill Briggs
CTO, Deloitte

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH AND MEDIA:
As agents take center stage, autonomous media buying is being heralded as a means to reduce overall implementation time, from trafficking to optimization; however, many remain cautious of agents handling actual buying. Major media players announced new agentic-powered tools, but competing visions could determine if the digital ecosystem becomes more unified or more fragmented as a result.

→ KEY TAKEAWAYS:

For media, agentic AI can help resolve content waste; TikTok estimated near 50% of marketing content goes unseen. AI can help resolve this issue, dramatically improving distribution and impact for brands; for consumers, these more personalized experiences will yield advertising that increasingly feels like helpful discoveries, not interruptions.

Health Tech Takes the Long Road

Longevity was the buzzword du jour, with CTA Futurist Brian Comiskey introducing it as one of two key themes for this year's show (the other being Intelligent Transformation, see page 3). The show floor foreshadowed a world where health is ambient, personalized and deeply integrated into daily life (see page 9). Broadly, longevity medicine represents a paradigm shift from traditional disease-focused healthcare to preventive, data-driven approaches, with the field moving toward democratized, AI-powered personal health management where consumers become "CEOs of their own health."

For clinicians and health systems, the proliferation of wearables and emotion-tracking devices, no matter how sophisticated they may be, creates both opportunity and friction. While 70% of physicians want to be involved in AI and digital health design, the core barrier remains: wearable data is not yet trusted or integrated into clinical workflows.

Tom Hale, CEO, OURA, admitted challenges incorporating wearable data in a clinical setting adding, "we hear this from doctors a lot: we don't want more data. I think it is the responsibility for companies like ours to not waste physicians' time."

"Perhaps you are no longer satisfied with AI outcomes generated from generic information or public sources. You want something that is distinctly yours.''

Yaunqing Yang
Chairman and CEO, Lenovo

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH AND MEDIA:
Device manufacturers stressed the value of continuous monitoring to deliver insights about a patient's baseline 'normal,' outside of single moments with a clinician. Clinician Ami Bhatt, Chief Innovation Officer, American College of Cardiology, agreed there are limitations of information gathering at a single office visit or physical saying, "that's not healthcare; that's episodic check-ins".

However, with little connectivity to clinical settings, wearables-collected data is often left to patients to evaluate. As wearables and LLM see parallel rapid adoption, it is possible consumers will turn to tools like ChatGPT Health to evaluate biometric data, introducing yet another path into healthcare decisioning.

➜ **KEY TAKEAWAYS:**

As we see the exponential advancement of consumerization of healthcare, marketers need to be looking at new ways to be a part of the shift toward utility and consumer enablement. The partnership between the patient and care team is critical, but it's time to rethink what the care team looks like and how brands can be a part of that relationship in meaningful ways.

Blurred Lines in Video

At C-Space, marketers explored the enduring strength of video in the modern media mix, but also what 4As CEO Justin Thomas-Copeland called "creative-creator convergence" and what CTA called "expression at scale," wherein content creators and traditional creative merge in short-form video environments. The result: a rich entertainment economy experiencing deep engagement. The catch: engagement with a side of skepticism. As Shelly Palmer, CEO, The Palmer Group, explained to marketers, "you will be trading in trust because everyone in the world is going to figure out how to default to distrust very, very soon."

As a result, brands are exploring ways to tap into authenticity of creator-led content reflective of their multidimensional consumers.

90% **of consumers believe it's important to know the media they consume is created by a real person**

Source: iHeartMedia "Human" Consumer Study 2025

"We have to throw the old brand standards out the window to make content that is going to break through."

Kelly Mahoney
CMO, Ulta Beauty

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH AND MEDIA:
Brand safety is top of mind for health marketers – after all "risk is inherent in every conversation we have about healthcare," said Kerri Haresign, Sr. Director - Technology & Standards, CTA – but several panels warned of the risks of leveraging AI-generated content in video contexts. As consumers put digital content through a more rigorous 'sniff test' as AI adoption increases, forgoing human-created videos for more controlled AI-created assets may do more harm than good for many brands.

➜ KEY TAKEAWAYS:

The future of content belongs to premium, differentiated storytelling that meets audiences where they are, across platforms, formats and business models, while preserving human creativity at the core. AI can do the heavy lifting on many administrative tasks which allows creativity and ideas to once again take center stage for creator and marketers.

Retail Tech Reshapes the Purchase Funnel

The customer journey is no longer linear; people move fluidly between discovery, engagement and transaction. The lines between discovery and conversation are blurred even further with the introduction and subsequent adoption of conversational and agentic surfaces, often a black box for marketers searching for consumer insights.

As such, marketing funnels have collapsed, leaving in their wake an imperative to develop a deep knowledge of consumer intent to fuel marketing efforts. Several sessions proposed this impetus for the rise of commerce media, with retail marketing data serving as an augmentation tool for comprehension of consumer behavior for a seamless journey. After all, according to Snap CMO Grace Kao, it is time we move from funnel to ecosystem.

"[Many] journeys that end with shopping don't start inside a Walmart store or inside the Walmart app … you're going to start seeing graceful handoffs between the discovery phase and the commerce phase."

Daniel Danker
EVP, AI Acceleration, Product and Design, Walmart

Organizations must shift from siloed excellence to **end-to-end ownership of the customer experience**, with faster decision-making and shared accountability.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH AND MEDIA:**
Modern marketing performance is no longer about optimizing for the final click, but about understanding how every touchpoint contributes to outcomes; performance is not synonymous with immediate conversation but rather can be defined by behavioral change and consideration.

Part of this equation is moving beyond old performance metrics, such as last click, and into those that better tell the consumer story, like incrementality. AI, automation, and closed-loop data systems are accelerating this shift, meaning marketers must evolve into technologist-leaders who are fluent in data, AI, and systems, while still mastering storytelling and emotion.

➜ KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Growth today is driven by collapsing the traditional funnel and rebuilding marketing around customer mindset, seamless experiences, and AI-enabled personalization, grounded in trust, privacy and cross-functional collaboration.
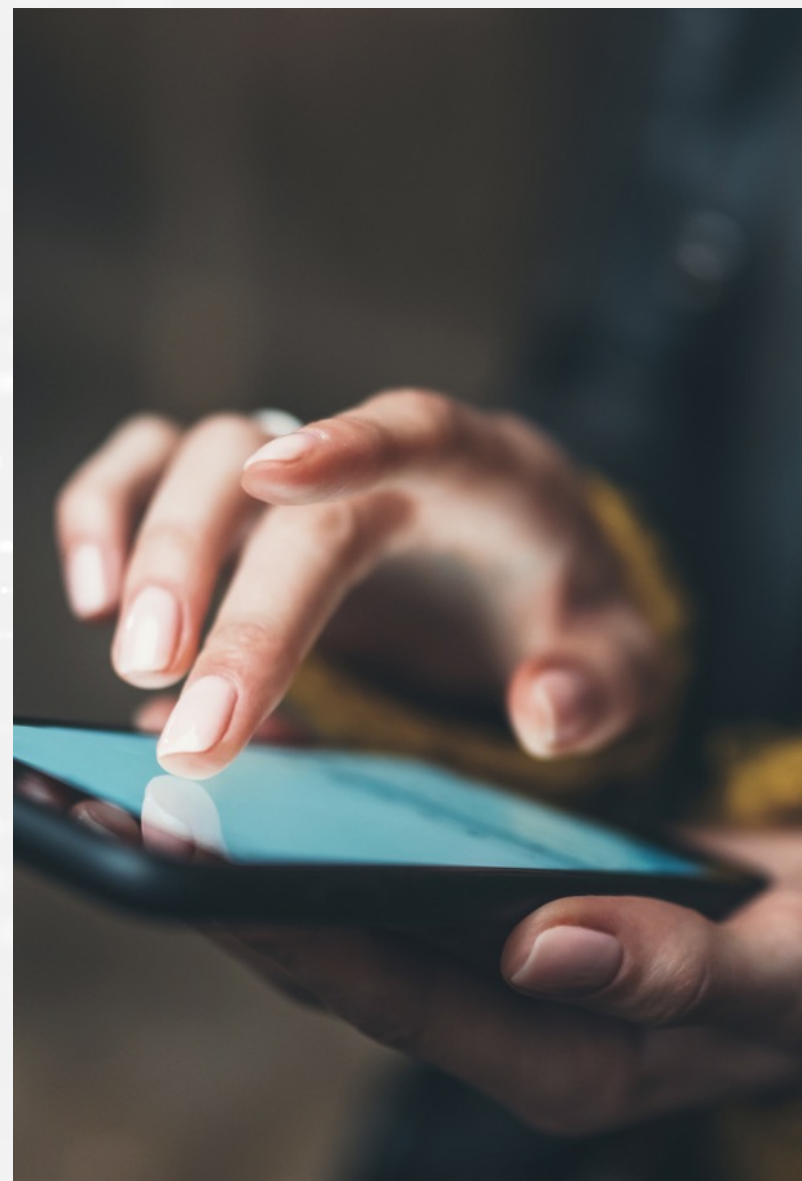
Where Tech and Health Policy Meet

While Big Tech has pursued notable advancements for health, implementation is curbed without meaningful policies or standards shepherding advancements through a complex system of payers, providers and regulators. As health regulation has been top of mind for the current administration, multiple panels explored how stakeholders can drive meaningful adoption. While many encouraged tech giants to unlearn the "move fast and break things" mentality, Nichole Young-Lin, Clinical Lead, Google, "challenge[d] the notion of how slow[ly] healthcare is adopting AI and technology."

Addressing the existing gap head-on, CTA issued "The Role of Standards in Digital Health" in partnership with UL Standards & Engagement.

80% consumers can't name a certification or industry standard for digital health, yet most assume that if a product is on the market, someone has ensured it is safe and reliable.

Source: CTA, "The Role of Standards in Digital Health"

"When a policy analyst goes to heaven, he goes up and asks God "Is there ever going to be a single payer system in America? And God says "Yes, but not in my lifetime."

Julie Barnes
CEO, Maverick Health Policy

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH AND MEDIA:
While partnerships between government and private companies, like that between US Department of Defense and Abbott, can achieve breakthroughs, other spaces remain less regulated – especially those powered by AI. For example, the ongoing mental health crisis (with 60M people in America estimated to be impacted) has exacerbated demand for psychologists and other mental health HCPs. As new tools enter the marketplace to fill the gap, regulation remains fragmented, leaving organizations like the American Psychological Association to provide piecemeal guidance on AI for professional practice.

➜ KEY TAKEAWAYS:

As digital health tools and marketing efforts continue to evolve, there remains opportunity for third-party industry standards to perpetuate conformance as a competitive strategy. This strategic asset can be achieved by championing data stewardship, prioritizing AI governance and directly engaging in standards development leadership.

Radical Partnership Builds Fandom

As the advertising industry pursues incrementality, many marketers are seeking differentiation through unexpected partnerships. As panel "Inside the Commerce Media Gold Rush" posited, "we all share the same audiences" so it is crucial to get your brand "in the group chat" by whatever means necessary. These radical partnerships attempt to break through the noise to tap into existing or create new fandoms. Said one panel: to remain iconic, brands need to stay in motion.

One such partnership between Mars and WhatsApp delivered the Twix Harmonizer, allowing users to turn voice notes into 'sweet' harmonies, demonstrating the value of a two-way engagement in building a fandom (That value? Double digit growth).

Tapping into existing fandom, brands are placing bets on multi-platform campaigns in sports, augmenting sponsorship with emotional storytelling and engaging 'shoulder content' celebrating favored athletes and notable announcers.

"One of the big opportunities for marketers moving forward is collaboration"

Gordon Young
Editor In Chief, The Drum

IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH AND MEDIA:
As sessions at C-Space explored ways for brands to engage beyond the algorithm, for all beneficiaries of partnership – be it legacy media organizations or nascent fandoms – the oft repeated refrain was respect. Matt Sandler, GM, Creator Services, Amazon warned of putting partners in too small a box, indicating certain "traditional companies tend to look at creators through a certain lens." Instead, by creating mutual trust through shared priorities and clearly articulated goals, true differentiation can be achieved.

➔ **KEY TAKEAWAYS:**

As consumer journeys evolve, authenticity and personalization reign supreme; we're experiencing the death of mass market as previously defined. While reach can be attained through unique experiences, the concept of "one size fits all" has fewer advantages in 2026.

View From The Show Floor

From brainwave-driven performance tools to homes that quietly monitor your wellbeing, the convention floor revealed a seismic shift: technology is no longer a sidekick to healthcare; it's becoming the operating system of human experience.

1. The brain is the next biometric frontier

At CES 2026, neurotech crossed a threshold: devices are now capturing sleep onset patterns, real-time attention and cognitive load, emotional state and early markers of cognitive decline, using that data to optimize performance, prevent disease and secure identity.

2. East–West medicine meets in shared devices

A new wave of devices is targeting the vagus nerve and related autonomic pathways with electrical, acoustic and pressure-based stimulation, often wrapped in AI-guided protocols, introducing a practical bridge between Eastern mind-body concepts and Western biomarker-driven care.

3. Home care (literally)

Embedded passive systems enable home tech to quietly intervene in all manner of potential health risks such as air-quality, or adjustments to lighting or water minerality for an improved, personalized experience. As devices fade into the background and spaces themselves become active participants in care, health shifts from an app you open to an environment you inhabit.

4. Co-pilots, without the cloud

Across sectors, AI is moving from the cloud to device-based processing, delivering faster and more reliable results. In health, if longitudinal, real-time, multimodal health data can be processed on a personal device instead of shipped to distant servers, people may feel safer sharing sensitive information with care teams, and systems may gain access to richer signals with fewer privacy, security and compliance concerns.

5. Assistive Tech: two steps forward, one step back

Assistive tech advanced leaps and bounds, evidenced at CES 2026 with innovations in haptics, robotics, AI, and sensors enabling a new generation of tools for people with disabilities, deafness, blindness, low vision and mobility challenges. However, equity and affordability remain central tensions; advanced assistive devices remain expensive and hard to access with funding pathways lagging behind the pace of innovation.

6. Paging Dr. AI

AI health coaches are rapidly evolving into AI "doctors" and care companions —at least in how they're marketed. Booths were filled with virtual doctors, AI twins, and clinical-sounding agents, risking over-signaling authority to consumers in ways regulators (and clinicians) will likely challenge.

Images at left: *1. SomaReality, 2. Pulsetto, 3. Ceragem's AI Wellness Home, 4. Buddyo Healthy Management Robot, 5. MaaS-Bridge Accessible MaaS Connectivity, 6. ViiRaa Body Intelligence*
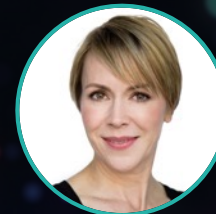
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