CURRENT

The Four Shelves

Where brands compete now

Published by
Modern Current
Volume 1 | Issue 002
October 2026

An Observation

We spend a lot of time talking about how much consumers have changed. And of course they have.

Technology has changed how we live, how we communicate and how we shop. We have more choice, information and ways to discover brands than ever before.

But people still have needs and wants. We still look for products and brands that solve a problem, make life easier, bring us joy or simply give us something we want.

What has changed dramatically is how many places we can now discover, evaluate, choose and buy those brands.

The traditional retail shelf still matters. A lot.

But it's no longer the only shelf that matters.

The consumer has evolved.
And the shelf has evolved with them.

THAT'S THE IDEA BEHIND THIS ISSUE OF CURRENT.

Stephen Chriss
Founder, Modern Current

BELIEF.

People still have needs
and wants

How they satisfy them
continues to evolve

More brands have a way in

PRESENCE CAN
CREATE SCALE

The Shelf Changed

Today, a consumer might discover a brand through a creator, learn more about it online, ask AI for a recommendation and buy it at a retailer.

Or they might do none of that in that order.

That's the point.

There are more places where consumers discover brands, learn about them, decide what they want and ultimately buy.

And there are more ways for brands to show up in those places.

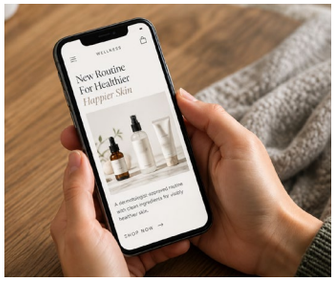
The physical shelf still matters. A lot.

There isn't one shelf anymore.

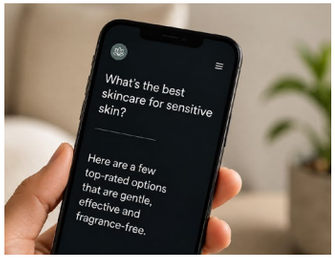
There are four.



Discover through culture



Learn online



Get a recommendation



Buy at a retailer

More Brands Have a Way In

It used to take significant scale to build significant presence.

You needed distribution, retailer relationships, media investment and the infrastructure to support it.

Those advantages still matter. But they are no longer the only way to build a brand.

Today, a new brand can launch online, find an audience, build a community and create demand long before it earns meaningful physical distribution.

That doesn't make building a brand easy.

It does mean more brands get to play.





78% of shoppers say new brands make it easier to find products that fit their needs [1]

1 in 3 shoppers have purchased a new brand in the past 6 months [2]

>50% of U.S CPG growth is coming from brands under $100M in sales [3]

1 Accenture, "Why Digital-First brands Win," 2023
2 Numerator, "New Brand Shoppers Study," 2023
3 Circana, "Emerging Brands Fueling CPG Growth," 2024

More Opportunity. *More* Competition.

More brands having a way in also means more brands competing for the same consumer.

Established brands still have enormous advantages. Scale, awareness, distribution and resources matter.

But smaller brands now have ways to build an audience, create demand and earn relevance that simply didn't exist before.

A brand that's been around for 100 years can find itself competing for the same consumer with one that's been around for 100 days.

Being big doesn't guarantee presence. And being small doesn't prevent it.



The Four Shelves





Four shelves.
One consumer.
One brand.





Four Shelves. *One Consumer.*

The four shelves aren't separate worlds. They work together.

Consumers move between them constantly, often in a different order than brands expect.

Someone might discover a brand through a creator, ask AI for a recommendation, read reviews and buy it in a store. Or start in a store and end up buying online.

Different shelves. One Consumer.

Presence Can Create Scale

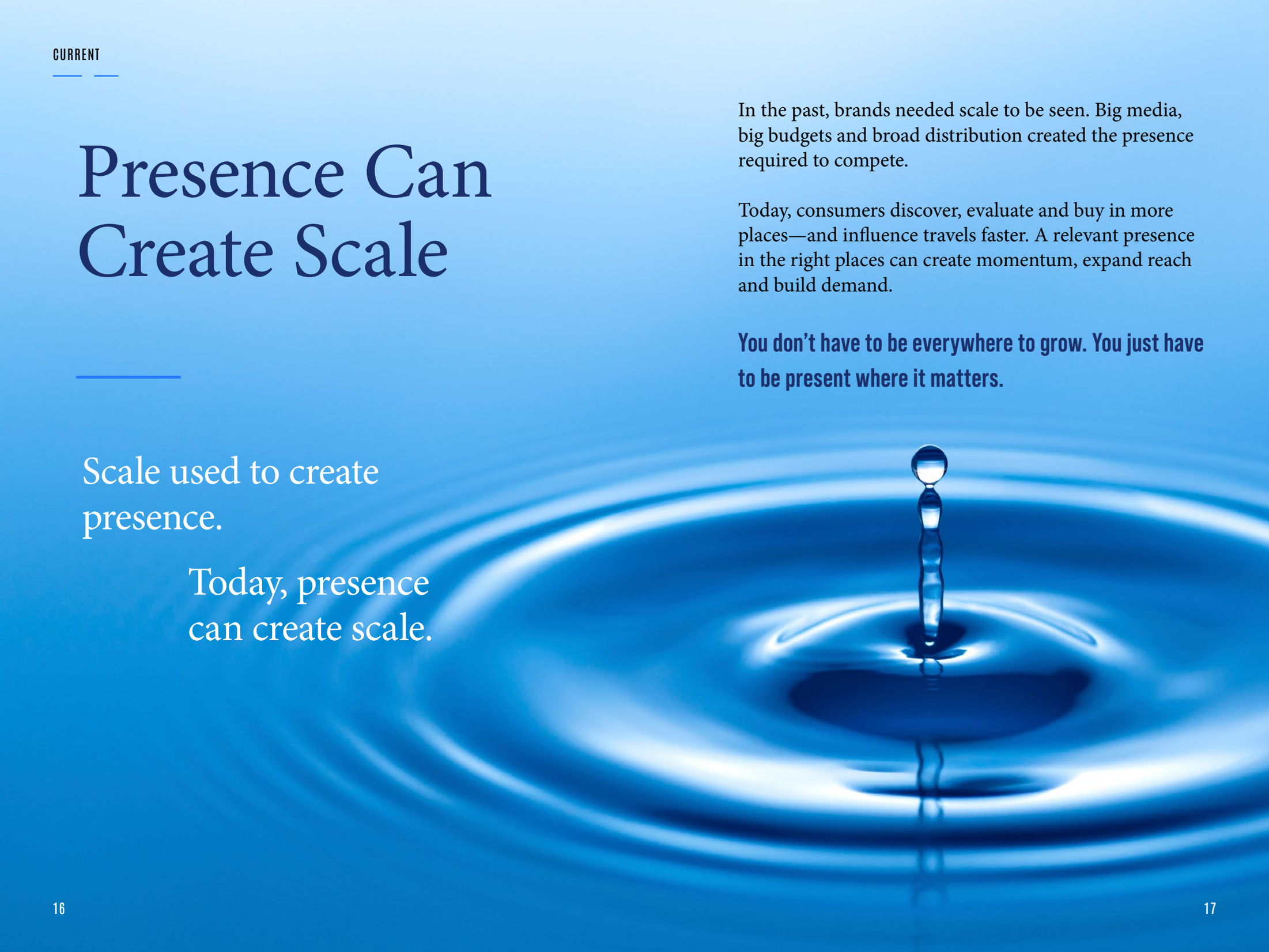
In the past, brands needed scale to be seen. Big media, big budgets and broad distribution created the presence required to compete.

Today, consumers discover, evaluate and buy in more places—and influence travels faster. A relevant presence in the right places can create momentum, expand reach and build demand.

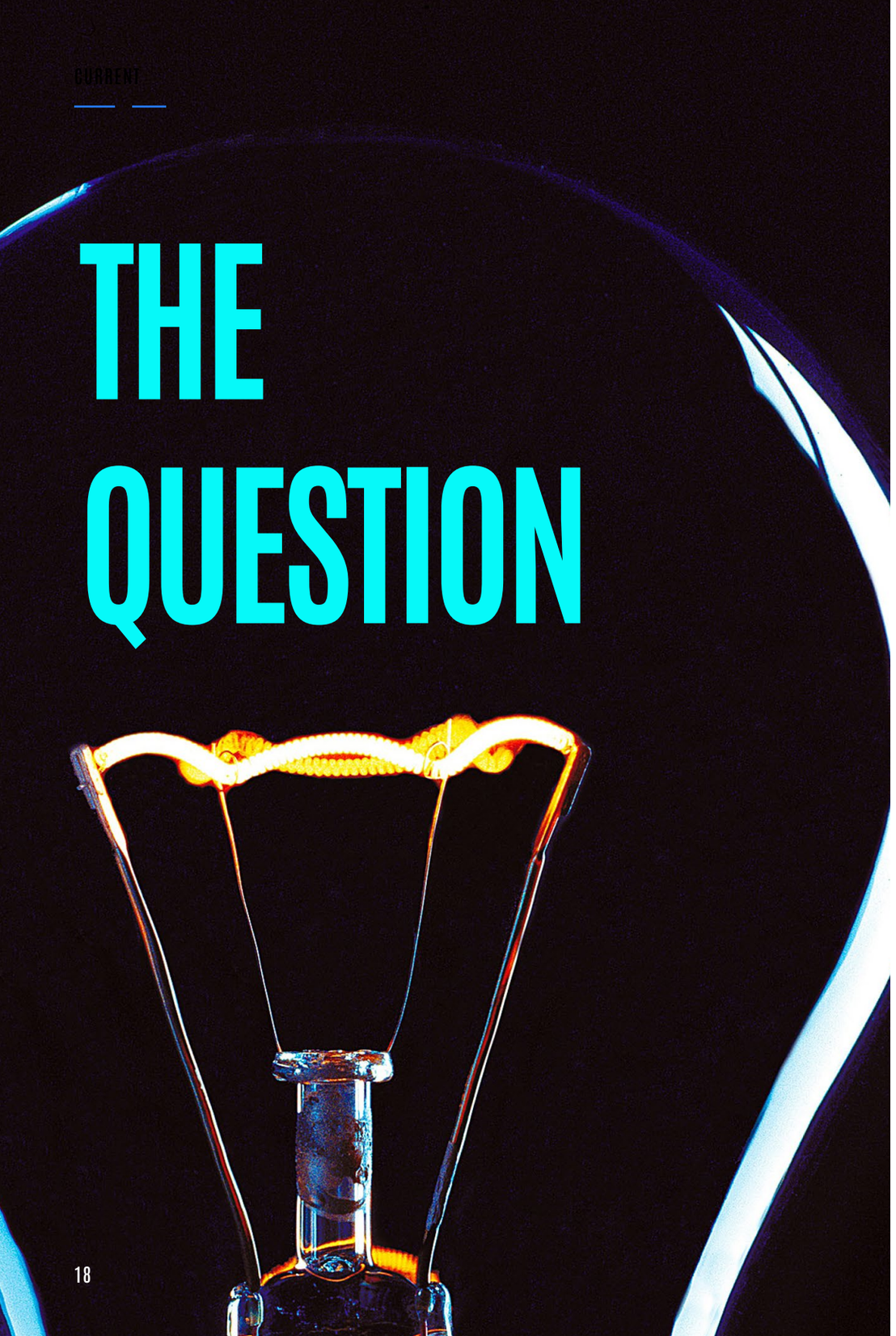
You don't have to be everywhere to grow. You just have to be present where it matters.

Scale used to create presence.

Today, presence can create scale.



THE QUESTION



Where is your consumer?

Today, consumers move across more places, platforms and influences than ever before.

Can they find you?

Are you relevant to them?

Will you be recommended?

Can they easily buy you?

Will your brand be there?

CURRENT
Volume 1 | Issue 002

Modern Current Studio
©2026 Modern Current
moderncurrent.com