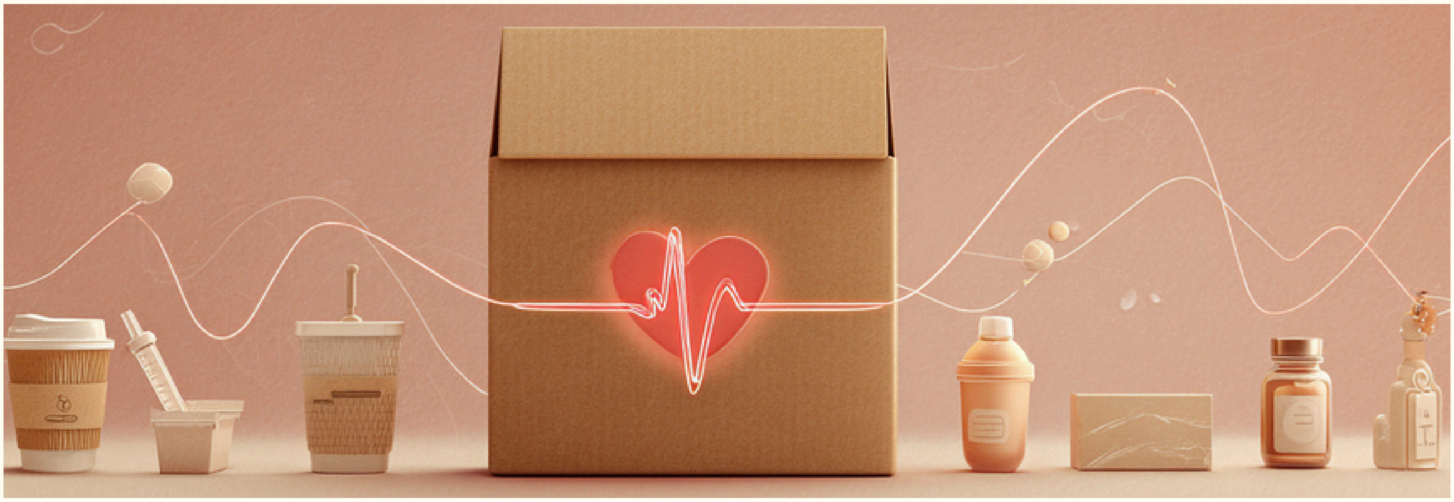
The Popcorn Report:
Creating The Heartbeat Brand
Your Last Competitive Advantage



D'Liver D'Letter and a Whole Lot More

I was sitting across from Patrick Donahoe, Postmaster General of the United States Postal Service, and Nagisa Manabe, his visionary CMO, who had hired us many times because of the way we think. Even so, the room went quiet before I finished the first sentence.

"*You are not a logistics company that happens to know people. You are a relationship company that happens to deliver mail.* The carrier is not an infrastructure asset. The carrier is America's most trusted recurring human contact."

Your carriers know which mailbox hasn't been checked in three days. Which porch light hasn't come on. Which elderly resident used to wave from her window, and one day isn't there.

You have a presence inside the daily life of every household in America, and you're using it to deliver catalogues.

Re-envision the carrier, not as a social worker or a nurse, but as a human being who already stops at that door, trained to notice. To say hello. To ask: How are you feeling today? To know the difference between a slow morning and a cry for help. Add one simple piece of tech: a scanner in the mailbox, for a small fee, that alerts next of kin when Mom's mail goes uncollected.

Do this and the most consistent human touchpoint in America has begun to evolve into a safety net with a heartbeat.

I think about that room a lot lately. Maybe it's time to pay a visit to the new Postmaster General, David Steiner.

M'm M'm Goodness

Campbell's Soup had something any brand would envy: Goodness in its bloodstream. M'm! M'm! Good! since the '40s. But with the economy so unsteady with people leaving corporations in droves, goodness had become a faint, historical memory. And here was Campbell's carrying it in its heart, still.

We recommended that they leverage that opportunity; suppose they uncanned themselves, went fresher, sent soup kitchens on wheels across America to feed the hungry. Suppose the ethos inside their walls had become the Brand itself. What made this possible is that ethos had a name: Doug Conant, one of the most ethical, empathetic CEOs I'd ever encountered. A man who handwrote daily notes to employees who needed praise, or something more. We expanded this habit to have him write some of those notes to consumers going through something hard, or simply people who deserved to be seen. In this way and more, he would continue to put a heartbeat into the Brand.

It never happened. He was about to launch The Goodness Mission when a near-fatal accident intervened. We discuss the "what-if" to this day.

Both stories share the same lesson: Bravery. The guts to act on what your brand actually is, rather than what the institution is allowing it to become.

Early on, when Conant talked enthusiastically about making Campbell's goodness real in the market, the room didn't exactly lean in. After the accident, it lawyered up. "What if something goes wrong? What if we do something good and then do something bad and the contrast kills us?" So, with Doug out of the everyday picture, they did nothing. And nothing is always the safer catastrophe. No one to blame.

Owning Pain Where It Hurts: From Comfort to Ouch!

Bill McComb, President of McNeil Consumer Healthcare, faced a different kind of resistance with Tylenol, not fear of goodness, but fear of irrelevance dressed up as prudence. Mature brand. Core consumer. Safer to milk this moneymaker. He ignored all of it.

Different brands. Different problems. Same enemy: The institutional instinct to protect the asset by never really using it.

McComb didn't reposition brands. He resuscitated them. He didn't believe in mature brands. What he saw was tired marketers.

Tylenol had built its empire on comfort. But comfort had become code for old. The Brand didn't age with its consumers; it got buried with them.

Gamers whose hands seized up at 3am. Skateboarders eating concrete daily with nowhere warm to fall. Kids sitting in tattoo chairs and piercing parlors –- the most consensual pain environments on earth. They were choosing their pain, owning it, wearing it. Relishing it.

Tylenol made cultural history as the very first Brand to sponsor a professional gaming team. Then it built an indoor skatepark on the East Coast, not as a stunt, but as infrastructure for a community it was now serving.

We sub-branded all of it as "Ouch!" and shed twenty years off the Brand, overnight.

Tylenol stopped talking about comfort and started showing up at the injury site. It didn't chase youth; it followed them to where it hurt.

A Heartbeat Brand always goes exactly where the cold category has decided is off-limits. It's there that it lives.

Costo Loves and Needs Future-Babies

That's why it launched an IVF program. Members can now access fertility treatments and medications at up to 80% off, through a partnership with a fertility clinic network and a telehealth platform. A warehouse retailer famous for its $1.50 hot dog has decided that helping its members have babies is also its business.

The U.S. fertility rate just hit a record low, 1.6 births per woman. One in six people globally struggles with infertility. A single IVF cycle can cost $30,000 or more, almost entirely out-of-pocket. Costco looked at that reality and decided the struggle was their business too. Most brands looked at the same reality and looked away. Not their business. Too exposed. The cookie makers were busy making cookies, not thinking about growing the children who would one day be eating those cookies.

Costco's U.S. membership renewal rate sits at 92%. That number is not an accident. It is the compound return on forty years of decisions that treated members as human beings rather than transactions.

That's a full-on loud Heartbeat Brand move.

It measures its relationship with consumers in life outcomes, not transactions. It doesn't ask how do we sell more? It asks what does this person need? Want? Desire? Struggling to achieve? The answer is almost never another SKU. It thrives on whether an elderly parent is safe. Whether someone going through a hard year feels like at least one company in their life is paying attention. A worker whose industry just evaporated notices that the Brand that served him for twenty years, when he was doing better, is still talking to him when he's doing worse.

This is not philanthropy. It's not cause marketing. It's a strategic decision to treat the consumer as a whole person, building brand equity in the places that matter most to her life, even when what's in her shopping cart has shrunk. The distinction matters because it creates loyalty that behaves like an asset. One that compounds for decades.

The Original Lie Detector Test: Does Your Strategy Have a Heartbeat?

Women control 80% of global consumer spending and make two-thirds of household financial decisions. They are scheduled to be worth $140T by 2030. They also outlive men by five to seven years, which means their brand loyalty compounds and extends in ways the C-suite never thinks to measure. Win her at the Heartbeat moment and you've made more than a sale. You've created a long relationship that will outlast most of the executive suite's time in the job.

The Heartbeat Brand closes that gap because it earns trust at the level where trust is formed: Inside the tender, vulnerable moments of a consumer's day, month, and life.

The packaged goods industry has spent decades trying to crack the code of female loyalty. The answer was never the packaging. Never the influencer. Never the cause-marketing campaign that ran for six weeks in October, and then vanished. The answer is here: A diaper brand that detects a health issue and offers pediatric telehealth access. A formula company that funds lactation hubs inside your grocery store and delivers child-rearing guidance at the exact moment of stress. A tampon that screens for early uterine cancer.

This number should be printed on the wall of every marketing department in America: Consumers who trust your brand will spend 51% more than those who don't. Trust is not a soft metric. It is a revenue line. And right now, only 50% of U.S. consumers say they have confidence in the brands they do business with. Among Gen Z, that number drops to 28%.

Women have always been able to tell the difference between a brand that genuinely cares and one that's performing care. She doesn't announce that distinction. She just acts on it permanently, at every subsequent purchase decision for the rest of her life. And then she tells everyone she knows. And they do too.

The Brand Blood Pressure Test Every Executive Should Take

Does your consumer love your brand as much as you do? Spoiler alert: No.

Ninety percent of executives believe their companies are highly trusted. Thirty percent of customers agree. That gap, sixty points wide, is not a perception problem. It is a strategic blind spot of historic proportions, sitting directly between most brands and the loyalty they think they already have. Many Fortune 500 marketing departments are still optimizing for awareness and trial, A/B testing subject lines, burning budget on focus groups and interviews, and debating whether the logo is award winning, while their consumers are trying to figure out how to afford a family, care for an aging parent, and get through a week without feeling invisible to every institution they foolishly trusted. More than 700 U.S. companies filed for bankruptcy in 2025, a 14% jump from the year before. Rite Aid. Forever 21. 23andMe.

Joann Fabrics. Party City. These were not obscure brands. They were household names that lost the thread of their own existence. Their customers noticed long before the filings did.

The gap between what brands are doing and what people need has never been wider. That gap belongs to whoever decides to jump across it first.

Consider what's already possible without a single new product. A telecom carrier already knows when an elderly customer's usage drops sharply and without explanation. A Heartbeat Brand builds an opt-in program that alerts family members when something seems wrong. An insurer that detects a life change — a new baby, a sudden income drop, an aging parent added to a policy - and calls proactively to offer support and advice. And sources child-care. A pharma company that measures success not by prescription volume but by whether patients are getting well. And if not, inquire, why not? And finally, a bank that notices a customer's cash shifting downwards, signaling financial distress or something worse and offers an investigation and a conversation before implementing the overdraft fee.

I've lived this. A devastating sum was hacked out of my Bank of America account. What followed was weeks of calls to people who couldn't help, none of whom apologized, none of whom could tell me when the money would be back, none of whom would give me so much as a name to call, or their cell phone number. Not one person uttering the simple "sorry." If I were Brian Moynihan, CEO, I would have called me, personally, then assigned one empathetic human being to own the case from start to finish. That single decision would have cost almost

nothing. Instead of switching banks, I would have told everyone I knew. A heart-stopping incident turned into a Heartbeat Brand moment. They had the chance. They didn't take it. What's worse, I'm sure no one gave it one moment's consideration. Bye bye BofA.

None of this is complicated. It requires a different question asked honestly inside the organization and the willingness to sit with an answer that might be inconvenient. Or take time. Or cost something. But far less than a bankruptcy filing.

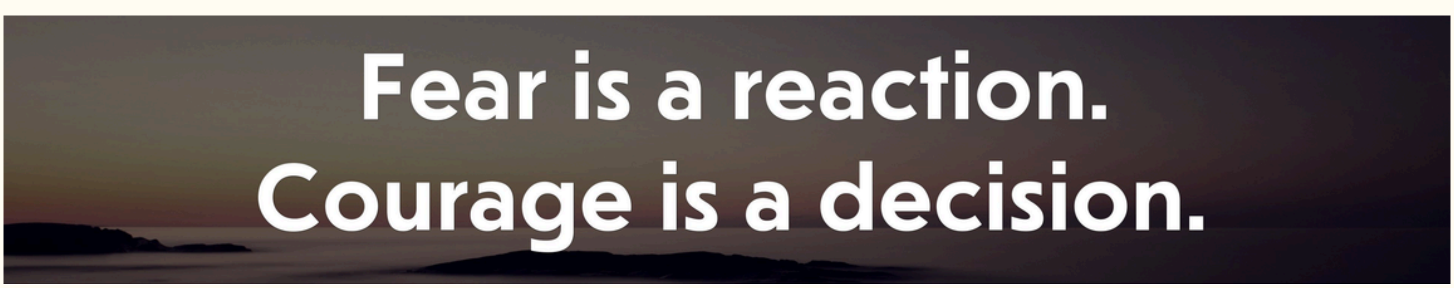
Three Life-and-Death Decisions

Heartbeat Brand behavior doesn’t require a new product line or a repositioning exercise. It requires three decisions about whether your brand lives or slowly becomes irrelevant.

First, audit your existing touchpoints for human value. Every brand already touches consumers at moments that matter. The question is whether those moments are being treated as data points or recognized as opportunities. The postal carrier who knows the ages and stages of everyone on their route and who becomes the first signal when something goes wrong. The pharmacist who fills the same prescription every month and notices the month it doesn't come in. The app that can see when usage patterns quietly shift for the worse. Your brand is already alive inside the lives of the people it serves. The only question is what you're allowing it to do with that knowledge.

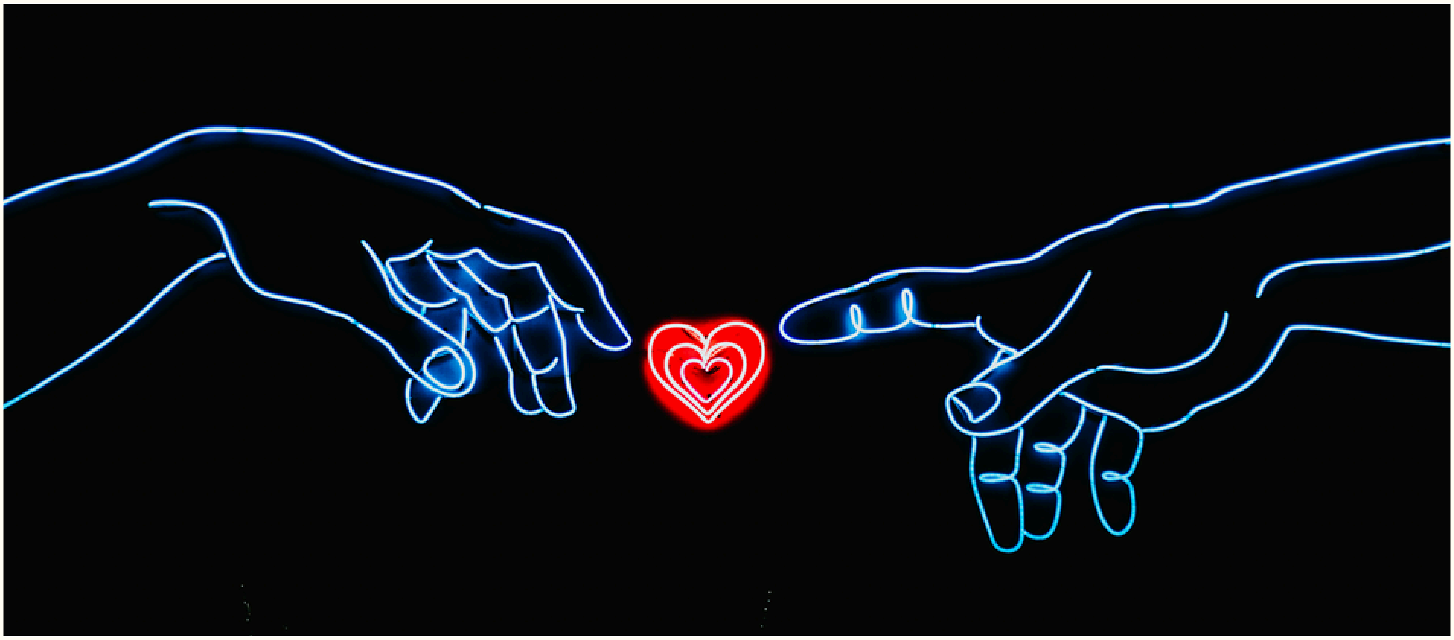
Second, measure the pulse, not just the metrics. NPS scores and quarterly penetration data tell you how a consumer rated a recent transaction. They tell you nothing about whether your brand would be missed or how it may be quietly misbehaving. Start asking those questions internally, seriously, and honestly, before your market answers them for you on the way out.

Third, pick a life outcome and own it. Costco chose fertility. The USPS could have chosen safety. The brand that connects most authentically to what is already alive at its core, and goes deep with the people it's genuinely reaching for, will build something that earns loyalty in ways a loyalty program never can.



A few questions worth sitting with a good bourbon in hand:

- Can you name or build the Heartbeat Brand that could disrupt your market now, in five or ten years?
- If your brand disappeared tomorrow, would it be missed after a day, a week, a year?
- Have you ever had a real one-on-one conversation with your customer? With your competitor’s customer?
- Are you personally listening to your helpline? Have you ever called a customer back yourself?



When caring flows, cash flows too.

If your heart is racing a little faster after reading this,

perhaps it's time we meet.

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