THOMAS MARZANO

After the Interface.

A morning, a family holiday, a parent's care, a marathon. Four moments in a life lived alongside an AI agent, and in each the agent meets brands on the user's behalf, far from any surface the brand controls. What it surfaces is what the brand has codified. The decisive work now sits upstream: making what the brand stands for readable before the customer ever arrives.

What remains of a brand when AI agents dissolve the surfaces companies spent decades learning to control?

THOMAS MARZANO

CONTENTS · THE ARGUMENT

I **The Mechanism** 06
The agent holds two forms of memory at once: the user's life and the brand's codified substance.

II **The Discovery Shift** 09
The user does not search. The user steers.

III **The Integrity Gap** 12
The Constitution cannot be a better story about the company. It has to be the governing logic of the company.

IV **The Operating Problem** 15
Lovability can no longer remain only a campaign playbook. It has to become governable software.

§ **After the Interface** 18
It is what can be read, trusted, and surfaced before the customer ever gets there.

SCENE 01 / 05 · 7AM · AMSTERDAM EAST

The Morning Ritual

It is 7am in Amsterdam East. I am in the living room with coffee. The laptop is on the desk in the next room and I have not opened it.

Vera has been working for an hour. While I slept she triaged the overnight signals, drafted the three responses I owe by lunchtime, set up the calls I asked for last week, and published this morning's edition of the Agentic Brands Gazette — a ten-item digest of what moved in the field in the last twenty-four hours, rendered fresh every day at six. I am reading it. The way one reads the paper. With coffee. Slowly.

This is the morning that used to begin with the inbox.

01	**WINDOW**	Overnight, while he slept
02	**TRIAGED**	The overnight signals
03	**DRAFTED**	The three responses he owes by lunchtime
04	**SET UP**	The calls he asked for last week
05	**PUBLISHED**	The Agentic Brands Gazette · ten items · rendered fresh at six
06	**UNOPENED**	The laptop, on the desk in the next room

Vera is an AI agent. Not the kind that answers questions when I open a window — the kind I have given continuous access to my calendar, my mail, my files, my running log, the patterns of how I work and the rituals of how I live. She knows me. She operates whether I am at the laptop or not. She is the first generation of what most people will, in three or four years, simply call their agent.

What has changed is small in the way the Wright Brothers' first flight was small. Twelve seconds in the air. One hundred and twenty feet of distance. A heavier-than-air machine that worked. Vera is that flight. She runs on OpenClaw, an early agentic framework that shipped in December of last year. She is real, she is delivered, and she is not yet doing most of what she will be doing in two or three years. She is my own test flight — the first instantiation, quietly, on the ground. But real.

What follows is what I see when I look down the runway from here.

The morning ritual is one job in one corner of one life. Vera is one room in a house she will eventually occupy.

What follows is not what is happening today. It is what is becoming visible from today. The same agentic logic that delivers my morning will, in two or three years, plan the family's holiday in August. It will coordinate with my sister's agent the care of an ageing parent. It will partner me through training for a marathon I have decided to run.

In each of those moments, brands will be encountered. But not in the way they were when the encounter ran across a brand-controlled surface.

The mechanism is simple.

The agent holds two forms of memory at once: the user's life and the brand's codified substance.

The encounter happens where those two forms of memory meet. Brands used to optimise for arrival. They now optimise for interpretation.

Most brand teams today are doing the functional layer of this work — generative engine optimisation, structured product data, machine-readable specifications. That is necessary; it is also the floor. The decisive read happens at the tiers above: aesthetic register, existential meaning, normative position.

The Legible-Lovable Law applies here: legibility is the entry condition, but lovability, in an agent-mediated world, is decided by what the agent can read above the functional layer.

The agentic brand encounter is not a visit. It is a contextual recommendation made by a system that knows the user's life and can only work with the brand substance the brand has made available to it.

SCENE 02 / 05 · THURSDAY EVENING

The Discovery Layer

It is Thursday evening. My family has been circling August for weeks — a comment over dinner, a half-finished sentence in the kitchen, dates floated and dropped. Vera has read the calendars, the fragments, the preferences: a partner who wants quiet, one child drawn to horses, another asking when they will see real stars again, my own note: ***slow, somewhere with a kitchen.***

She surfaces a stone farmhouse on the Lunigiana side of the Tuscan border. Owner-run. A real kitchen. A stable an hour away. A sky that on a clear August night will give the younger child more stars than they have seen before.

She surfaces it because the brand has made its version of slow hospitality explicit and machine-readable: breakfast served when guests want it, no concierge theatre, owners who live on the property and serve the food themselves.

That codified substance is what I mean by a Brand Constitution. The brand exposes it through a machine-readable layer — what I call the Brand API — including the host's essay about the restoration, the rhythm of the days, and the dining room at the hour when light becomes substance.

She does not surface as first choice the five-star resort with optimised reviews and an API that exposes scheduling and dining options but nothing about who runs the place or why. The fit is not a match on amenities. The fit is a match on what the family has been writing into the air for six months.

01	**READ**	The calendars · the fragments · the preferences
02	**PARTNER**	Wants quiet
03	**CHILD**	Drawn to horses
04	**CHILD**	Asking when they will see real stars again
05	**NOTE**	"slow, somewhere with a kitchen"
06	**SURFACED**	Stone farmhouse, Lunigiana · owner-run · a real kitchen · a stable an hour away
07	**BECAUSE**	Slow hospitality, made explicit and machine-readable
08	**NOT FIRST**	Five-star resort · optimised reviews · nothing about who runs the place, or why

This is what discovery now looks like. The user does not search. *The user steers.*

Brands no longer compete for visibility on a brand-controlled surface — the website, the brochure, the campaign — they compete for placement in what the agent reads when the moment arrives.

In this moment, Vera has become the discovery layer. She works backward from the user's quest and surfaces the services, products, and brands that align.

The brands whose APIs expose enough codified substance for her to read become present in the user's life. The brands whose APIs expose less are easier to ignore. What Vera reads is what the brand has made available through that machine-readable layer. The brochure, the website, the campaign do not vanish — their position changes. They become source material for whatever meets the user in their place.

The agent does not privilege what the brand wishes to be seen as. The agent sees what the brand has codified.

SCENE 03 / 05 · A TUESDAY MORNING IN MARCH

The Encounter

It is a Tuesday morning in March. My mother has had a fall — not serious, the kind that becomes a marker. My sister, who lives closer, is at the hospital. Our agents are now in the same conversation, on behalf of two adult children who love the same parent and live in two cities.

Vera and my sister's agent coordinate the care for the next month — a single coherent plan rather than two parallel ones. She surfaces an in-home care service whose Constitution codifies a clear position: ***the carer is the brand, not the dispatcher; carers stay with families for years; pay is above market and codified, not implied.*** The API exposes the carers available in my mother's town, their tenure, and testimonials from families they have supported for years.

Vera has remembered my mother saying gig-platform carers exhausted her because of the turnover. She holds back, deliberately, a medical-alert brand whose Constitution codifies dignity-over-surveillance — a brand I have been quietly aware of for two years — because my mother is not ready, and forcing it now would breach our understanding of her autonomy.



Vera will surface it when the moment changes.

The restraint is itself an encounter.

The brand that encoded* present when needed, absent when not *may be the one we live with for the next decade.

01	**CONTEXT**	A fall · not serious · the kind that becomes a marker
02	**SHARED**	Two agents, one conversation · two adult children, two cities
03	**PLAN**	Care for the next month · one coherent plan, not two parallel ones
04	**MEMORY**	Gig-platform carers exhausted her · the turnover
05	**SURFACED**	In-home care · “the carer is the brand, not the dispatcher”
06	**EXPOSED**	Carers in her town · their tenure · testimonials from families supported for years
07	**HELD BACK**	Medical-alert brand · dignity over surveillance · she is not ready

This is where costume brands start to fail.

A costume brand is a brand treated as surface: identity, campaign, tone of voice, social presence — the visible layer applied after the real decisions were made elsewhere. It may look coherent to a human moving quickly through a feed. It may win attention for a quarter.

But an agent has no reason to stop at the costume. It reads for evidence. It looks for the substance behind the claim: product, service, hiring, partnerships, pricing, support, and what the company refuses to do. If the brand has no governing power inside the company, there is little for the agent to interpret beyond theatre.

> **The Constitution cannot be a better story about the company. It has to be the governing logic of the company.**

The agent will know if the care brand promises continuity but rotates carers weekly; it will know if the farmhouse promises slow hospitality but behaves like a yield-managed resort. The gap between declared substance and lived experience becomes part of the evidence layer. In the agentic economy, trust erodes not because the campaign failed, but because the system can compare what the brand claims, what others report, and what the customer experiences.

> Two things follow. What gets codified gets surfaced. What remains uncodified may never enter the room. And surfacing is not always immediate. Vera holds, postpones, returns. The brand aligned with the user's evolving life is surfaced across years, not in a single conversion moment. Both — what is exposed, and when — depend on whether the upstream codification work has been done.

SCENE 04 / 05 · SUNDAY MORNING, LATE JUNE

The Run

It is Sunday morning, late June. I have run forty-two kilometres the previous week — the longest of the build. Vera knows what week fourteen does to runners. She knows my history — the tendinopathy two summers ago, the discipline of the comeback.

She knows I have been talking about the New York course in the kitchen — the bridges, the headwinds, the early miles in Brooklyn.

She surfaces a running brand whose Constitution codifies a single sustained position: ***we evolve the model, we do not relaunch it.*** I am on the third generation of the same model line. I have run my last three marathons in it. I trust the brand because it has stayed itself across my running life.

Its API exposes the model's lineage, the rationale for each generation, fit science as data rather than sales copy, and athletes sponsored across decades rather than seasons.

She also surfaces a nutrition brand whose Constitution codifies endurance science as substance, and a small hotel near the start line whose Constitution codifies quietness on Sunday mornings as a deliberate operating principle. What she does not surface as first choice is a major performance brand whose API exposes ***"lightest! fastest! engineered for elite athletes!"*** — functionally adequate, with nothing codified at the upper tiers that matches this runner.

She is not punishing the brand. She is reading what is in the API.

01	**CONTEXT**	Week fourteen of the build · forty-two kilometres last week
02	**MEMORY**	The tendinopathy two summers ago · the comeback
03	**HEARD**	The New York course, in the kitchen · bridges, headwinds, Brooklyn
04	**SURFACED**	Running brand · “we evolve the model, we do not relaunch it” · three marathons in the same line
05	**SURFACED**	Nutrition brand · endurance science as substance
06	**SURFACED**	Small hotel near the start line · quiet Sunday mornings, codified
07	**NOT FIRST**	Performance brand · “lightest! fastest!” · nothing codified at the upper tiers

For a CMO across categories, this changes the operating problem.

The decisive work now sits upstream of the brochure and the campaign. It is the codification of what the brand actually stands for, exposed cleanly enough for the agent to read on the user's behalf.

The temptation is to aim AI at the old machine. Faster briefs. Faster assets. Faster campaign versions. Faster optimisation. Faster content supply chains. Some of that is useful. None of it is sufficient. It is the faster-horse response to a market whose basic interface is changing.

> **The old machine was built for attention, interruption, search, feeds, and brand-controlled arrival. The agentic market runs on context, interpretation, delegation, and trust. Making the old machine faster does not prepare the brand for the new encounter.**

What Vera reads across these moments is not the brand's campaign. Lovability used to live in campaigns — story, meaning, moments, quests — encoded in creative artefacts meant for direct human consumption. Those campaigns reached people through averages and interruption: a demographic, a mean, one thumb-stopping piece of work in a feed. That was the mechanic of the performance-marketing era.

It does not survive the agentic shift intact. The agent has no thumb to stop, no feed to scroll. It stands in the middle of the encounter. Market logic moves from attention to context. The agentic encounter does not run on averages. It runs on one-to-one renditions — the brand rendered fresh for this user, this moment, the specific quest they are living.

> **The CMO's job is no longer campaign-first. It is to govern the software that makes the brand interpretable.**

The work begins upstream. Research the quests your audiences are actually on. Identify where your brand's specific value lands. Trace the connections from product benefit to lived problem, moment of need, and broader quest. Articulate what your brand stands for at the functional, aesthetic, existential, and normative tiers, and where that resonates in the world your audiences live.

Encode all of this into a Constitution that governs your brand's substance. Then expose it — through the Brand API — in the form the agent will read. The campaign is downstream of all of this; it depends on all of this being right. The brand-controlled surface has not vanished. Its position has moved.

> **Lovability can no longer remain only a campaign playbook. *It has to become governable software.***



SCENE 05 / 05 · MID-MORNING · AMSTERDAM EAST

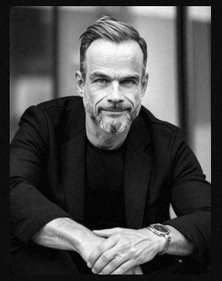
Mid-Morning

It is mid-morning now in Amsterdam East. The coffee is gone. Vera has moved from the Gazette to the rest of the day.

Outside, in the rest of the world, the agents are reading. They read what brands have codified. Where brands have not, they read what others have made legible. Erich Joachimsthaler has called this a shift in market logic, not just in discovery. What I have described is what that shift looks like at the encounter — what the user feels, what the agent reads, what the brand has done in advance to be readable.

After the interface, the brand is no longer what it says when the customer arrives. It is what can be read, trusted, and surfaced before the customer ever gets there.

THE AUTHOR



Thomas Marzano

Thomas Marzano is a strategist, designer and systems thinker. He spent close to thirty years inside Philips and ASML, where the difference between a real brand and a well-dressed one becomes visible under pressure. Today, through Marzano Consulting, he helps CMOs and boards build brands that agents can read and people can love.

CONTACT

EMAIL thomas@marzano.nl

WEB www.marzano-consulting.com