

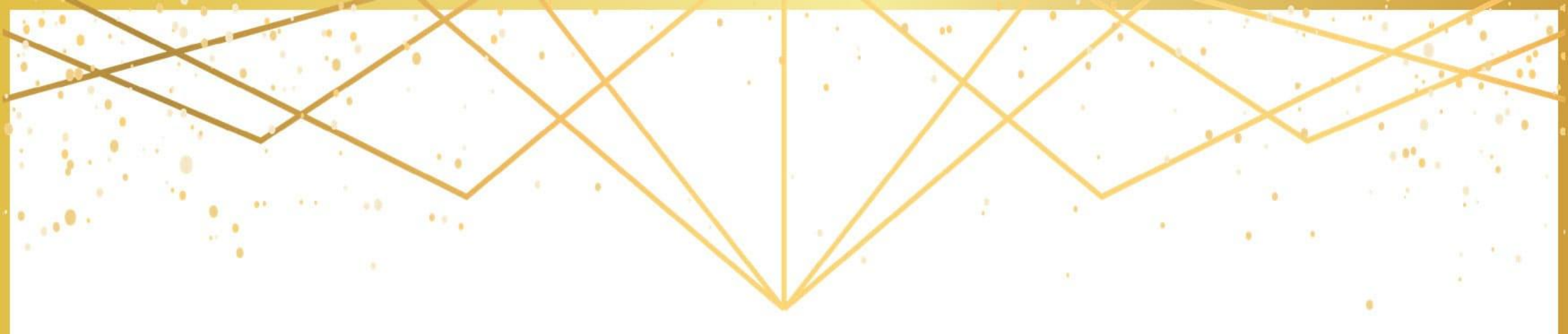
The CMOcircle

A Global Room of Distinct Voices



Trust as a New KPI

*From First Signals to Quiet Cracks to
Post-Purchase Truth*



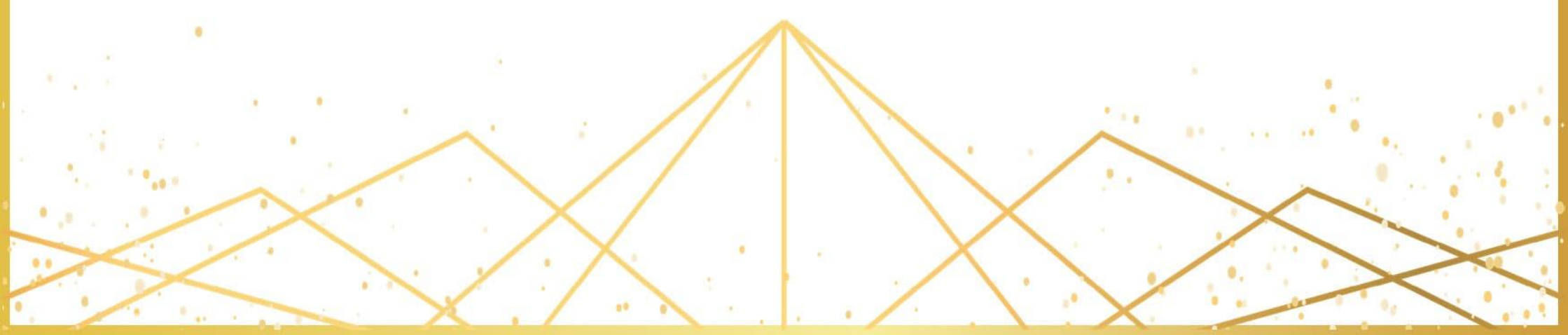
About TheCMOcircle

TheCMOcircle began with a simple realization: CMOs are among the most connected leaders and yet, when it comes to honest, no-posturing conversations, they're often the most alone.

Today's marketing heads are asked to do it all: drive growth, navigate AI-led disruption, protect brand credibility, and influence across functions, sometimes all before lunch. Most forums reward visibility over vulnerability and performance over perspective. TheCMOcircle was designed to flip that script.

This is a deliberately small, invitation-only gathering built for trust-rich conversations. No panels. No pitches. No performative storytelling. Just peers in a room, comparing notes from the trenches, challenging assumptions, and learning from one another, without the pressure to impress.

The Bengaluru edition was our first Circle. The leaders who showed up didn't just attend an event; they set the tone, depth, and intent for what this community will become. What follows is the playbook we distilled from that room.



Key Takeaways



Trust is a business KPI, not a soft brand sentiment.



Trust is built by **behavior and delivery**, not by campaigns alone.



AI-mediated discovery is reshaping **where** and **how** trust is formed.



Founder credibility and **third-party validation** carry outsized weight.



Authenticity beats polish.
Every time.

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Chapter 1:

The Prompts That Lowered the Armor

We didn't start with bios or slides. We started with prompt cards.

Each leader got a question about trust; no context, no debate. The goal wasn't to land answers; it was to surface the signals leaders notice long before trust shows up on a dashboard.

1.1 The Question That Shifted the Room

The first prompt was simple:

“What is one thing brands do that quietly erodes trust?”

The answers didn't point to spectacular public failures. They pointed to small, everyday decisions made in service of quarterly goals, growth targets, or convenience.

“I've often seen brands choose short-term metrics over slow, fragile trust because trust is a lag metric.” — **Ankit Talaria**

The idea of trust as a lagging metric resonated. It's easy to rationalize borderline choices when the consequences won't show up on dashboards for weeks (or months).

“Trust is built slowly and destroyed instantly. And most of the time, it's not one big event, it's a series of small misses.” — **Nakul Gupta**

“Brands don't earn trust through perfect narratives anymore, they earn it by showing up consistently in the messy, everyday moments. That consistency is the new brand promise.”
— **Shruthi Sharma**



“Authenticity is the one word I associate with trust today. Glossy profiles can’t replace what people sense in a real interaction.” — **Archana Venkat**

Soon the focus widened beyond campaigns and landing pages.

“Crazy internal deadlines and not listening to people quietly break trust inside organizations.”
— **Reena Mary**

What happens inside eventually shows up outside; in tone, in response quality, and in how brands behave under pressure.

By the end of the first round, trust had shifted from a communication problem to a systemic outcome of leadership behavior, operating choices, and cultural signals.



1.2 Where Trust Breaks First

If trust breaks quietly, where do the first cracks appear?

Leaders spoke candidly about how internal environments shape external outcomes, often invisibly.

“Inside organizations, when people stop listening to each other, trust erosion has already started.” — **Reena Mary**

Unrealistic timelines, performative reporting, and “make it work somehow” pressure were called out as early warnings for customer facing breakdowns facing breakdowns.

“Overconfidence is dangerous. It takes years to build trust and just one small move to break it.”
— **Shubhii Agarwal**

The room challenged the idea that employee trust is a soft issue.

“Leadership behavior beats any campaign. I’ve seen teams sit with customers all night to fix issues, that’s what builds trust.” — **Mukund Setlur**

“Resilience is what trust feels like today, not perfection, but consistency in how a brand shows up.” — **Shruthi Sharma**

The consensus: **internal trust is upstream of external trust**. When teams don't trust systems, decisions, or intent, customers feel it, even if they can't quite name it.

1.3 Where Trust Is Actually Won (Hint: After the Sale)

Attention isn't trust. **Reliance** is. The group agreed that prepurchase signals; ads, content, reviews, founder presence earn a chance. The test comes after the sale, in delivery, support, and recovery.

“I realized this personally when I made similar high value purchases from two premium brands. One brand went completely silent after the sale. The other stayed engaged, clear communication, follow-ups, support. My decision to never go back to the first brand had nothing to do with the product. It was entirely about what happened after I paid.” — **Mukund Setlur**

“Positive sentiment is not trust. Neutral confidence is. For example, we never track our order, we knew it would arrive.” — **Shagufta D'sa**

“The response matters more than the mistake. Apology with clear action rebuilds trust. Apology without a fix makes it worse.” — **Jermina Menon**

“In food industry, every single session is a chance to lose or earn trust.” — **Nakul Gupta**

“A clear signal that customers trust us is when they engage on their own, use the product deeply, and then ask for more. That shift from curiosity to conviction, is real trust.”
— **Vishwanath**

The implication is structural: marketing cannot stop at acquisition. Ownership must extend into onboarding, issue communication, and renewal, because that's where belief is formed.



1.4 Media Choices: Habit vs. Reality

When we moved to media, there was no dogma. The real question wasn't which channel is best, but **are we showing up where trust is formed?**

"Customers have outgrown gimmicks. They expect transparency and proof." — **David James Karambekar**

Legacy channels weren't dismissed, but habit driven spend was.

"Print still signals stature in some luxury contexts, but digital carries the journey and conversion."

"In one large retail environment, we reduced print and radio spends after customer research showed very few shoppers actually consumed those channels. Footfall didn't drop. What changed was alignment, our spend finally reflected where customers were forming trust and consideration." — **Jermina Menon**

The group aligned on a sequence, not a binary choice: **signal credibility where it matters; prove it through experience.** Media shouldn't just drive reach; it should reinforce reliability.

1.5 Who Speaks for You in an AI-led World

As discovery becomes AI-mediated, what others can credibly say about you matters more than what you say about yourself mediated.

"Customers don't just Google anymore. They read AI summaries, scan reviews, and reach out directly. Trust is no longer formed on brand websites; it's formed across the ecosystem." — **Shagufta D'sa**

"In this environment, what others can credibly say about you matters more than what you claim yourself. Founder visibility amplifies trust, but it also exposes truth very quickly." — **Vishal Agarwal**

"Customers research founders now. They DM them. Authenticity expectations are brutal."

New intermediaries: AI Overviews, LLM summaries, platform recommendations, shape first impressions. The caution from the room was clear:

“Don’t wall customers behind bots in high-stake moments. That’s how annoyance turns into betrayal.” — **Suman Howlader**

Net-net: In an AI-shaped discovery world, focus less on what you say and more on the facts, proof points, and policies the ecosystem will use to describe you.

1.6 If This is How Trust actually works, what Should we do Differently?

By the end, the room had largely aligned on how trust behaves. The tougher question was: So what changes?

At a **strategy** level, the shift is from short-term optimization to long-term credibility. Growth can’t be treated as neutral if it trades off fairness, transparency, or customer confidence.

Brand and performance aren’t rivals; they’re a sequence. **Brand builds trust, performance converts it with restraint.**

At an **operating** level, experience needs clear ownership.

Trust is not won through perfection, but through response.

“Customer expectations have collapsed in timeline, from days to hours to minutes. The real trust barrier now is speed and human quality together.” — **Vinay Kumar**

Marketing can’t be limited to acquisition or messaging. It must actively shape onboarding, incident communication, recovery, and renewal; where belief is either reinforced or undone.

At a **governance** level, trust needs explicit ownership. Early signals must be captured and acted on before they escalate. Annoyance and betrayal require different responses. And in an AI-mediated world, make sure the facts others rely on to summarize you are accurate, current, and defensible.

Trust doesn’t need a new philosophy; it needs different leadership defaults.

Chapter 2: *The Beliefs We Left the Room With*

As perspectives were exchanged and debated, a few shared beliefs took shape. These aren't universal truths; they're convictions this group is willing to stand behind, shaped by experience more than theory:

- Trust is a business metric, but it behaves differently from revenue or reach. It compounds slowly, erodes quietly, and rarely announces its decline until it's well underway.
- Post-purchase is not adjacent to marketing; it is **central** to it.
- When trust breaks, surface messaging can't repair it. **Structural fixes** do.
- Silence after the sale often hurts more than visible mistakes.
- Trust is protected by everyday behavior more than heroic interventions.
- Small operational failures, delayed responses, and unresolved friction corrode trust faster than imperfect execution.
- Trust is sustained through **consistency**, not theatrics.

The goal wasn't closure, it was clarity.

One thing the group agreed on quickly: trust is not something organizations ever “finish.” It's reinforced daily through leadership behavior and response or quietly traded away through neglect.



Chapter 3: Inside the First CMOcircle (Bengaluru)

A deliberately small and diverse group of senior marketing leaders shaped the first CMOcircle. Each brought a distinct industry lens, leadership context, and lived experience, fuel for an honest conversation.

Attendees — Bengaluru, Edition 01



Ankit Taparia
Head of Marketing, Yulu



Archana Venkat
Growth Strategy Advisor to
Founders and CXOs



David James Karambekar
Head of Marketing and
Communications, Stanley Lifestyles



Jermína Menon MRICS
Brand Strategist, Bhartiya Urban



Mukund Setlur
Head of Marketing,
Paramount Assure



Nakul Gupta
CMO, Barbeque Nation



Reena Mary
Global Brand Marketing Strategist



Shagufta D'sa
Head of Marketing and
Partnerships, OptimizeGEO



Shruthi Sharma
Marketing Manager,
Novo Nordisk



Vishwanath Sridhar Harpanahalli
Chief Business Officer,
Wozku



Facilitation & Partners



Shubhii Agarwal
Co-founder & COO, Locobuzz



Vinay Kumar Jagadeesh
Co-founder & CEO, Verbinden



Vishal Agarwal
Business leader and community partner, actively supporting CMOcircle initiatives



Suman Howlader
Founder & CEO, Foiwe Info Global Solutions; technology and IT services leader driving scalable digital solutions



Kavitha Garla
Curator, independent marketing leader and facilitator



Chapter 4:

Where the Circle Goes From Here

TheCMOcircle worked because it resisted scale. It was curated, not crowded. Agenda-light, not slide-heavy. Structured enough to guide the conversation, flexible enough to let it flow. Without performance pressure, leaders spoke freely, challenged one another respectfully, and stayed engaged well past the clock.

We intend to protect that balance.

The next edition of TheCMOcircle is scheduled for Mumbai, guided by the same principles: a closed-door setting, a carefully selected cohort, and a topic that reflects the most pressing leadership questions of the moment.

As the Circle evolves across cities, the intent remains the same. Each gathering will be shaped by the people in the room and distilled into playbooks that inform and endure beyond the evening itself.

If you're a senior marketing leader interested in participating, collaborating, or learning more about TheCMOcircle, reach out at: **TheCMOcircle@verbinden.ai**

This is not a series of events.

It's a growing community built on trust, perspective, and shared responsibility for the future of marketing leadership



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