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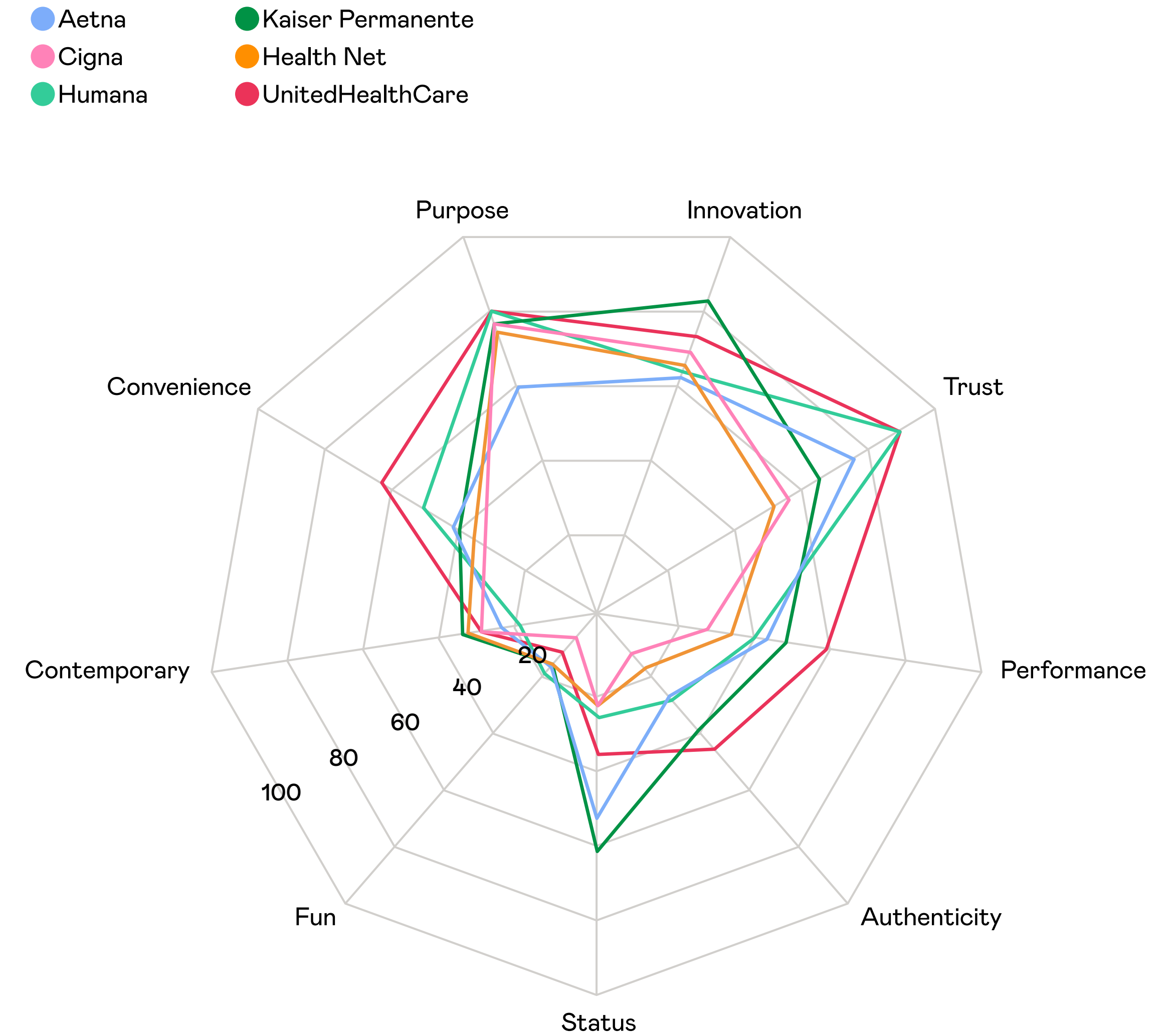
It's hard to think of another field of human endeavor that has advanced – and continues to advance – as much as healthcare.

In recent years, the pace of medical advances has been nothing short of astonishing. RNA vaccines, AI protein folding, and personal DNA profiling, have the potential to transform all our lives.

But apparently, not our brands. The healthcare category suffers from the terrible branding affliction of *Genericus Maximus*, which roughly translates as *they're all the same*.

Given the enormous changes in healthcare, you might think that brands in this category would be innovative, exciting and inspiring, reflecting and expressing these breakthroughs with distinctive positionings, roles and personalities.

Instead, we see BrandAsset® Valuator* (BAV) studies** of healthcare brands like this snapshot of US health insurance providers:



The brands are clustered together, with very similar attributes and perceptions. In any sector, this is an indicator that its brands are reflecting the norms of the category, rather than pursuing their own distinctive positioning and expression. Clustered around the muddled middle, brands move in herds, anxiously benchmarking each other until all potential differences are erased.

This blunts consumer choice, and ultimately leads to commoditization. If all brands are the same, then the only thing left to drive choice is the cheapest price. And nobody is really looking to have their operation at Bob's Bargain brain surgeons. Brands need to do better.

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To avoid this commodization trap, brands need to understand four forces. Firstly, they need to grasp and express the future opportunities of the category. Secondly, they need to emphasize with the nature and motivations of their audience. Third, brands need to appreciate their role within the overall healthcare ecosystem, to position themselves correctly. And finally, they need a deep understanding of themselves. With these elements in place, they can develop their own unique commodization buster – an Unordinary Idea.

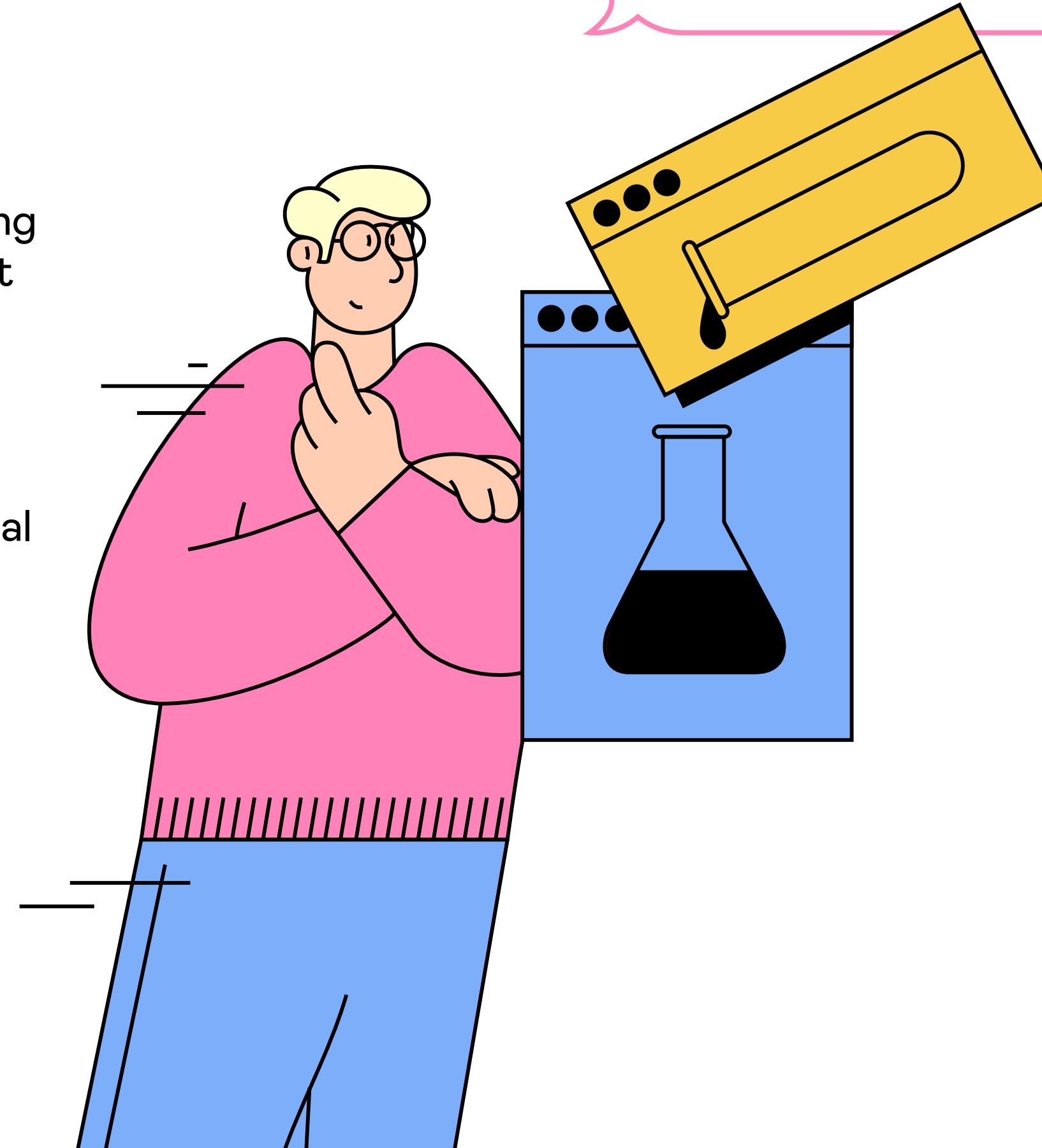


The future of healthcare, and people

Thanks to the mutually reinforcing drivers of technology and human ingenuity, the future is bright. We can look forward to gene editing, reversing aging, and cures for hitherto impenetrable hereditary illnesses. We should experience personalized healthcare, wrapped around our lifestyles, history, and risk profile like a double helix.

Imagine, in the future when you're out rambling in the bush, you're bitten by a snake. No need to panic, because your botdoc would know something was amiss, thanks to your attractive earring that doubles as a monitoring device. Your elevated heart rate would have triggered an alarm that your botdoc sent to your medical cloud profile. This would have been passed on to your human doctor, who sent an authorization to your personal drug manufacturer to create your anti-venom. This prescription would be rustled up at the

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hospital that geotags had identified as closest to your location. And your insurer would already be authorizing the fees in the background to ensure things moved along smoothly. Take that, snake.

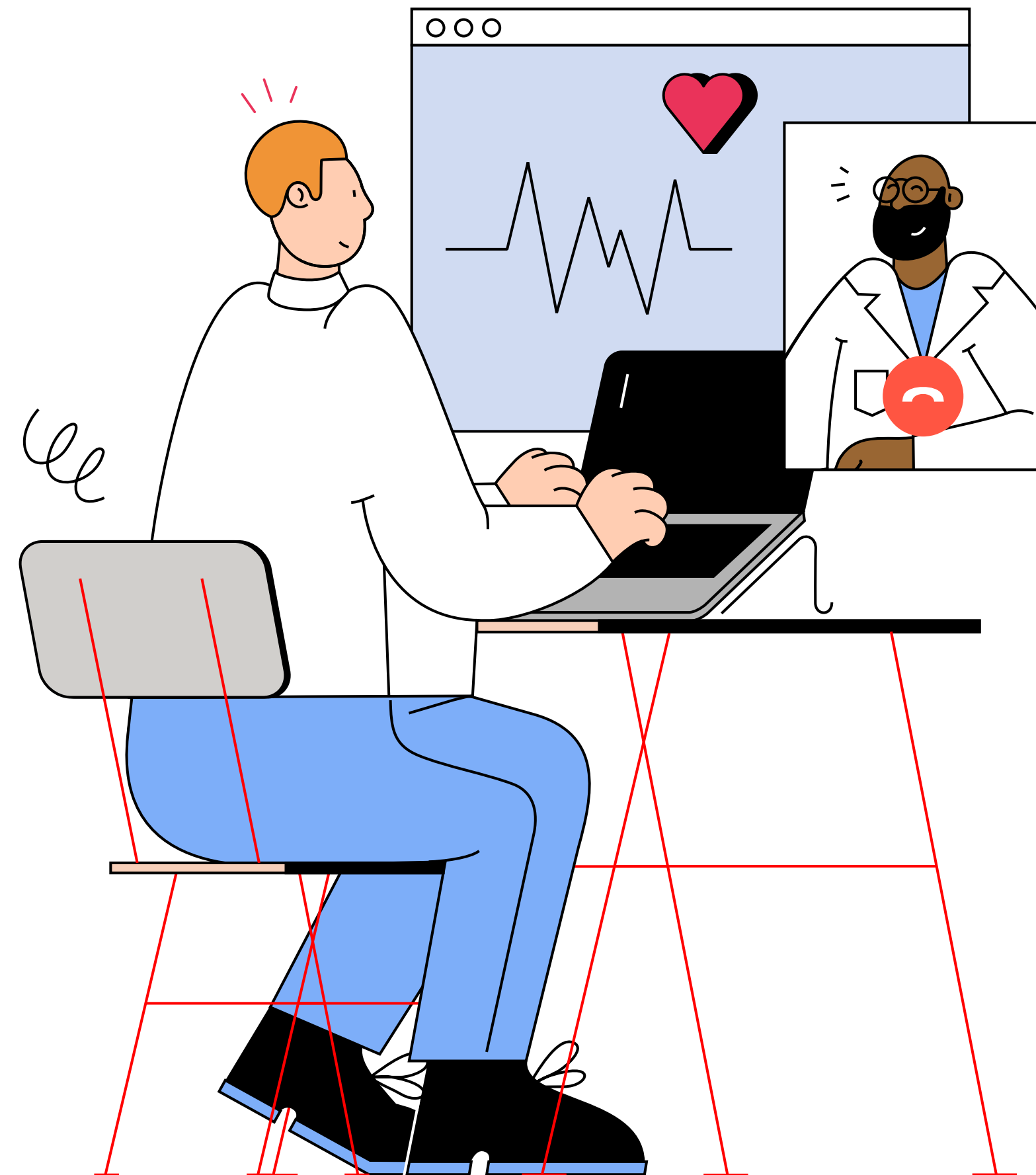
So the medico-techno wizardry of the future could save us from bitey things, but can it save us from ourselves? For having so viciously maligned the snake community, the real problem is cheese. That's right, the biggest medical problem the world faces is the implacable rise of extra mature cheddar.

Or rather, it's our all too human tendency to eat it by the tonne. Slathering it over burgers and pizzas, stabbing it with pineapple for an amusingly retro Hors D'oeuvre, guzzling it in smoothies. OK maybe not the last one, but you get the point. No matter how advanced the technology gets, healthcare still has to deal with its ultimate nemesis – the human.

Did you brush your teeth for 2.22 minutes this morning? Did you slack off at 9,900 steps yesterday, or did you go for a run around the garden in the dark? Did you make time in your busy schedule for your mental health, or did you prioritize scoffing an entire tub of ice cream?

If you answered 'no' to any of the above, congratulations, you're a human. Irrational, messy bundles of needs and wants, subject to a constant slosh of impossibly contradictory impulses, still looking to the fire to chase away the dark.

And this is your brand's target audience. The all too fallible humans who know what we should do, but very often don't actually do it. Mammals who need brands to coax, prod, order, persuade and love bomb them into looking after themselves better.



It's important to understand your brand's space in the category ecosystem.

Of course, not all healthcare brands have to deal directly with Joe Patient. Many brands are spared the agonies of grappling with consumers as they're purely B2B or have a mixed consumer and professional audience. Others need to think about different audiences like governments, funding bodies, and even entire societies.

This wide variety of audiences is why it's important to understand your brand's space in the category ecosystem. This space exposes the audience need – and therefore the role – each brand is expected to fulfil. This in turn informs the brand's positioning and indicates broad guardrails for its personality.

The Healthcare Brand Ecosystem

The direct practitioner brands that we all experience and immediately think of – doctors, hospitals etc. – are part of a much larger healthcare brand ecosystem which also includes researchers, manufacturers, carers, financiers, and lifestyle advisors.

At the research end of the ecosystem, there is a legion of august heritage brands. As befits one of the most venerable professions, some of these brands have been around for quite a bit. The oldest medical establishment in the US is the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, which was founded in 1765. With a shield logo featuring not one but two open books, its original desire to establish its academic bona fides is writ large.

The Pen Med brand looks like iPhone-esque minimalism compared to the Royal College of Physicians, founded in 1518 by King Henry VIII. It's the ultimate medical heritage brand, another shield logo, sporting a surprised leech crossed with a stick of willow. OK not quite, but with four Fleur-de-lis, and hand-drawn hands taking a pulse, it's very much a brand of ye time.

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A stylized illustration of a person with dark skin and curly hair, wearing glasses, a red long-sleeved shirt, and pink pants. They are sitting on a large, black, Y-shaped stethoscope. The stethoscope has two grey tubes with black tips that curve upwards and outwards. The person is wearing white sneakers with red laces and red soles. There are several decorative elements: a blue starburst near the person's feet, a black starburst near the top of the stethoscope's Y-shape, and a red starburst near the top of the right tube. A pink speech bubble is on the left side of the stethoscope.

Forging a new world
at the intersection of
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These sorts of category origin brands, alongside medicine-adjacent brands like scientific societies, underpin all modern healthcare brands by providing the entire sector with a rational, objective, scientific aura, building trust in the whole enterprise that others can draw from. They also set a positioning template that any institutional healthcare brand would be expected to follow.

At the cutting edge of this part of the ecosystem are the researchers, forging a new world at the intersection of computing and biology. Brands in the research area can be charitable foundations like Wellcome, modern inheritors of the category-founding brands. Pharma brands can also be found here, carefully balancing their positioning between reliability and discovery.

This is where healthcare's mavericks can be found, like J Craig Venter, inventor of the revolutionary EST strategy for rapid gene discovery. Brands in this area are pioneers, positioning as ambitious and inspiring to appeal to an audience of smart and motivated potential employees.

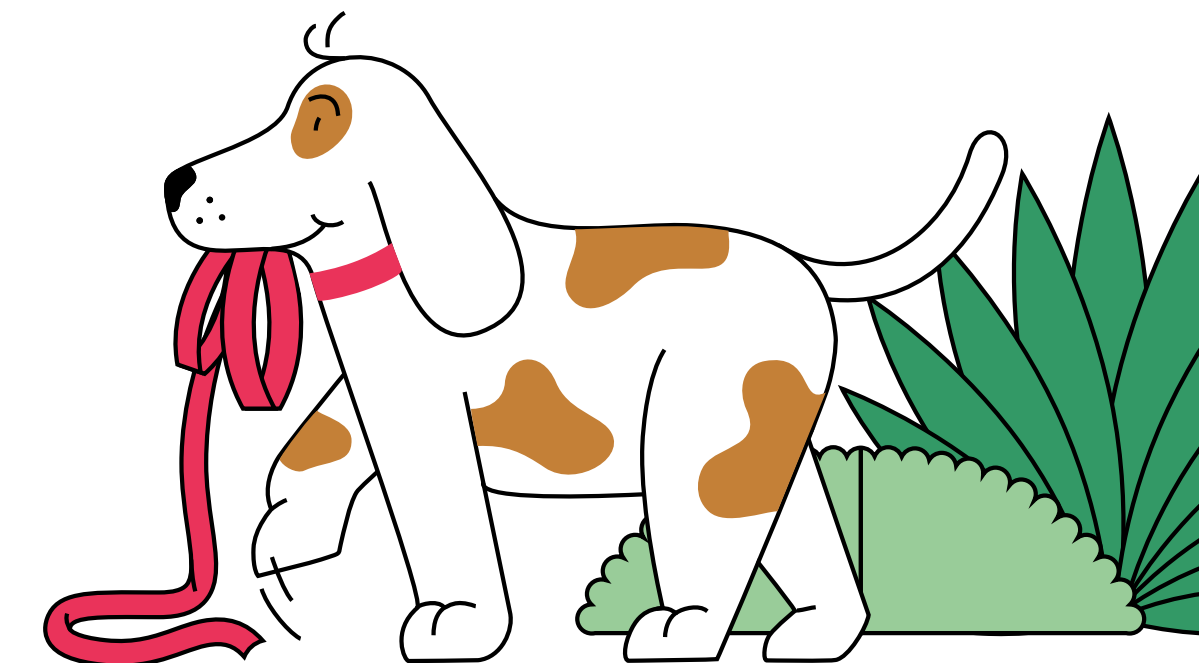
Less visible healthcare brands make vital equipment – everything from CT scanners to wooden tongue depressors – that augment the skills of the physicians. It might not occur to you when the doc instructs you to open wider, but there are 12 leading wooden tongue depressor brands, all of whom are striving to persuade the physician that their depressor is the smoothest on the market. These quiet brands follow the same rules as any other, striving to be the most innovative in their niche.

The area that has the most direct contact with Irregular Joes are the practitioners. Doctors, nurses, and the institutes around them like hospitals and clinics. But the most intimate and personal brands in the ecosystem can be found in the broader worlds of nutrition, mental health, and lifestyle. Your trainer will exhort you to do one more set, your nutritionist implore you to put down the cheese, and your dog silently pleads with you to go for a walk. These brands need to be highly engaging, with fine emotional tuning and high levels of empathy.

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So the category ecosystem contains a wide range of positioning options, related to the function, role and audience of the brands in that area. As you'd expect, there are the caregivers, but also pioneers, rule setters, mavericks, persuasive friends, and wag-tailed mental health supporters.

Understanding their role in the ecosystem clarifies how brands should position across the category. But this isn't enough, as it doesn't determine how brands should differentiate *within* their specific areas. If all research brands are white-coated explorers, or all practitioners caring nurturers, no individual brands in that area will be distinctive. They will all reflect the category, rather than expressing their own view of it. Consequently, there is a 10,000th step for healthcare brands – their Unordinary Idea.



Unordinary answers

With insight into the audience, the future, and positioning options, healthcare brands have all the ingredients needed to develop their unique idea.

Unordinary Ideas tell the story of a brand in miniature. They're sticky, truthful, insightful brand nuggets. They drive businesses, inspire creativity, and frame choices. They're the key to creating a distinctive brand. And they're rare, difficult and precious.

One of the best examples from outside healthcare is IBM's "Smarter Planet". The idea is a succinct expression of IBM's technical and intellectual capabilities, applied to global issues. The idea shocks the eyes because we expect the planet to have things done to it, resources are extracted, the planet is denuded. A smarter planet reverses that expectation, upgrading and empowering the earth.

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Airbnb's "Belong Anywhere" encapsulates the promise of experiencing life as a local when you travel. The unexpected juxtaposition of "belonging", a closed and exclusive concept, with "anywhere", which is the opposite, gives the idea a memorable freshness. Note that they didn't say "travel all over the world staying in people's houses". Which is an equally accurate description of the offer, but sluggish rather than stimulating.



There are strong ideas to be found in the healthcare category. The Francis Crick Institute's mission is "Discovery without Boundaries".

A succinct expression of the brand's distinctively open research philosophy, the mission also clearly linked to its principals and objectives, cascading clarity through the organization.

Another good expression is "healthier happens together" from Aetna. The idea contains an insight – that good health takes partnership and teamwork. This gives the brand a clear role in the purchaser's life. It's another three word expression and uses linguistic rhythm to be easily memorable. Aetna's used this idea to inspire their brand

expression. The insurance area of the ecosystem's saturated in blue and green, but Aetna's found some distinctiveness with a rich "imperial cloak" purple.

Some exceptions aside, the category generally suffers from a surfeit of nothing. There's a multitude of hollow words floating around like ghouls, sucking the meaning out of well-intentioned Purposes. Bought to you by the renowned branding agency Platitude & Generality, these are the kind of vaguely positive sounding sentiments that can infest corporate speeches. Some common offenders in the healthcare category are "improving", "transforming", "leading" and "you".

The biggest problem with these words is that their meaning has been denuded by overuse. This is a natural social process that happens over time, words emerge then drop out of popular usage as over-familiarity gradually blunts their impact potential. It's not cool to say it's cool. The branding world is no different, it's a constant race for verbal originality. But rather than evolve, brands can easily get stuck in linguistic conventions. Often engraved into the very stone of corporate headquarters, words lose their fluid mutability and slowly drain of resonance. It's telling that of the top ten pharma companies, half use "improving" in their purpose or mission.

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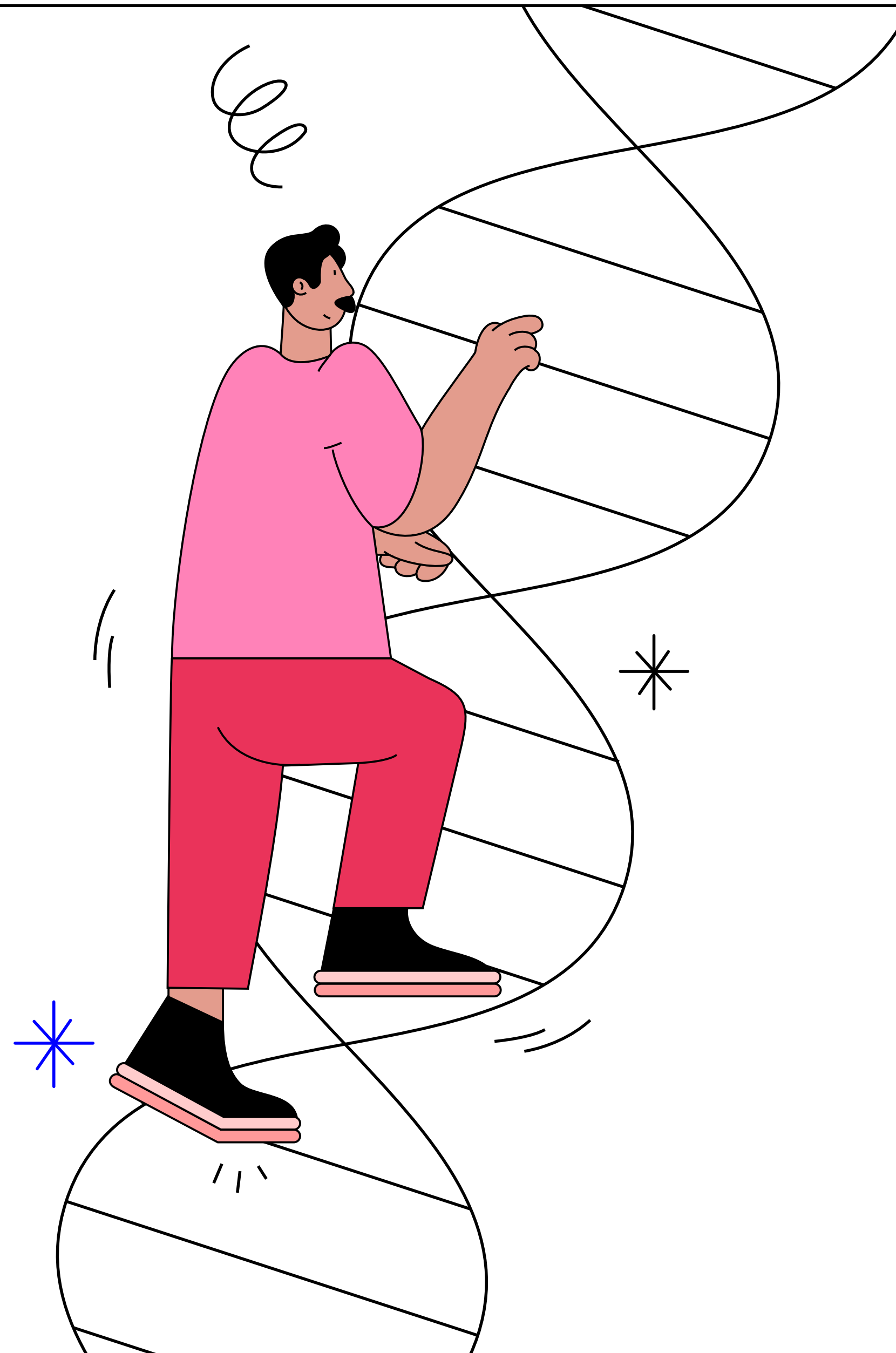
The repetition of the same words across a category is often a symptom of a brand developed in not-so-splendid isolation. Brands look into themselves, soul searching about their meaning and purpose, but don't consider the wider context and competition enough. Seconded to a secret bunker under the garage for six months, subsisting on nothing but club sandwiches and murky coffee, the brand working team finally draw a 2-by-2 grid.

After carefully positioning their logo in the top right, they don their best black turtlenecks, line up in front of an unnecessarily large screen, and proudly reveal to the whole company that their shiny new Purpose is... virtually identical to everyone else's. And if your idea is generic, then your brand expression will be the prototypical color for the unimaginative brand, *all blue*.

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While brand ideas need an element of ambition to be compelling and inspiring, "transform" provides a salutary warning of what can happen when vision becomes disconnected from reality. "Transformation" is a very big promise, defined in the Cambridge dictionary as "a complete change". Great if that's what the brand is going to do, but more often the promised "transformation" is rarely backed by the requisite level of...transformation. A slightly smoother patient experience does not justify reaching for the thesaurus. Over-promise is rapidly followed by disappointment, sending consumers into a slough of detached and cynical despondency, unreachable by further brand messages.

Commonly witnessed lurking around the consumer parts of the ecosystem, the category has heavy utilization of the word “you”. It’s used to indicate an absolutely personalized, laser-like focus on the healthcare recipient. But it rather invites the question - what else would the brand be thinking about? Themselves? The impact on your neighbor? The cost of splints?



If you're a healthcare brand, but still feel there is a need to say you really honestly totally absolutely completely solely think about nothing but the patient day-and-night 24/7 365, then you're more likely to worry than reassure. It is, quite literally, the job. Why would this need to be highlighted? Of course that's what the brand will be doing. It often helps to test the reverse meaning when developing these ideas. If the opposite sounds obvious or even ridiculous, you're not saying anything meaningful. If you're a professional services firm boasting that you're professional, or you're a B2B brand that aspires to be a trusted partner, then you need to try a little harder.



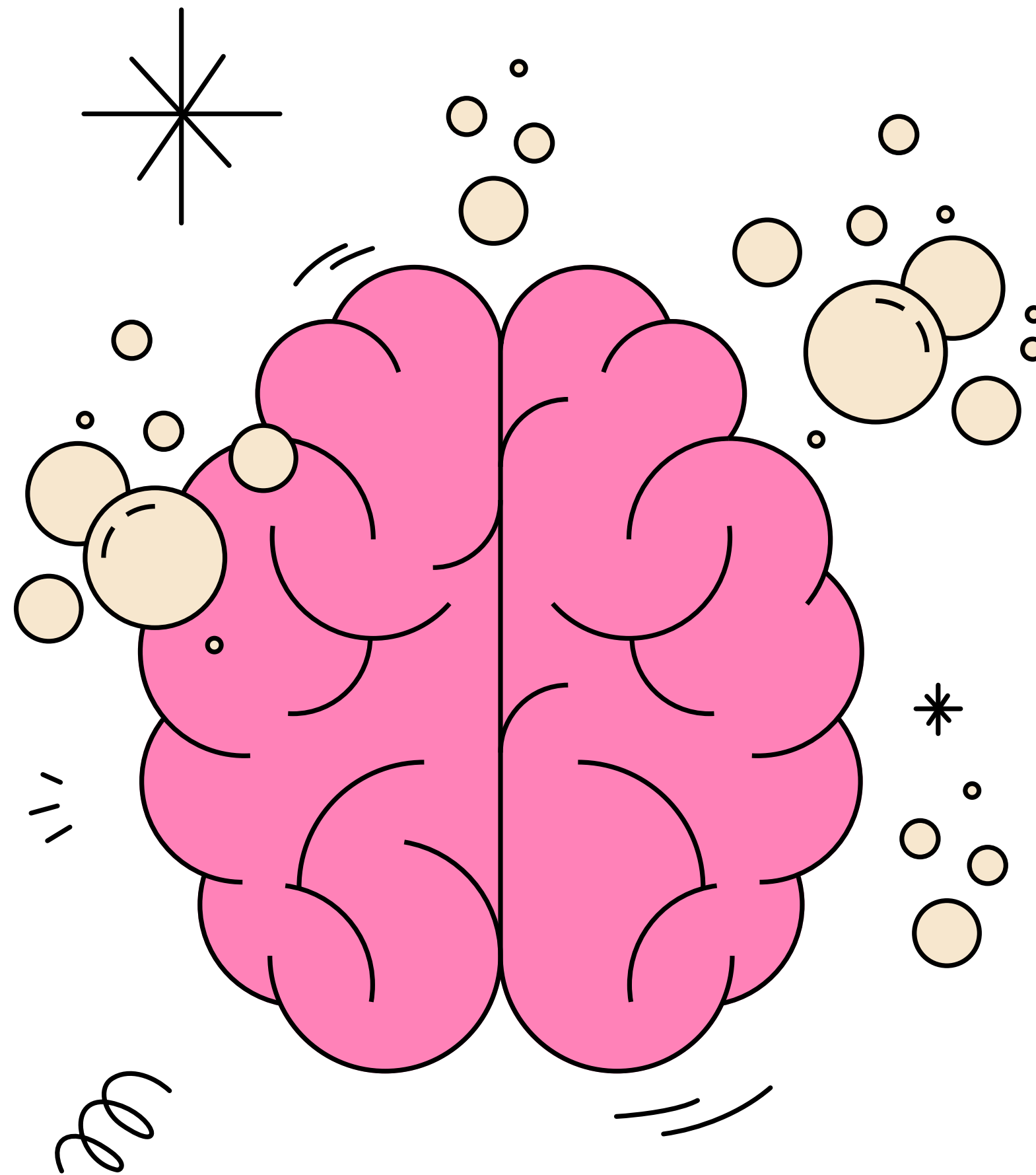
Words like “improve” are best avoided completely but can work when firmly married with a very specific counterpart. What exactly are you “improving”, and why exactly (again) does it matter to the audience? This combined solution is helpful for brands that are highly ambitious, needing to couple soaring ambition with prosaic delivery.

Precision can be the remedy to this common branding malady, and is a key component of a good brand idea. Categories are general, but brands must be specific. That specificity must be derived from what the brand does or is. What is it about what you do that is different – and better - than everybody else? There will be something, because if there wasn't then commoditization would already have swept all before it, leaving only one brand supplier left in the market. No need or desire for choices, just a monopoly.

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With your truth held before you like a torch of righteousness, you can seek out the final component of an Unordinary Idea. It's a surprise. Really, it's a surprise. Our brains are very efficient categorization machines. We see, we log, we cease to see. When did you last really look at that painting on the wall of the lounge? We're wired for novelty. So, as well as being vague, words like "leading" suffer from being exactly what you'd already expect a brand to be doing. Your eyes

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glaze past, brain shrugging into a soup of neuronal indifference. Strong ideas are embedded with a newness that makes the brain fizz.

Despite the fearsomely forensic analysis above, some of you may still be unconvinced. You may be thinking - what does all matter, they're just words, it's the benefit of the care/research/vaccine that matters. And you'd be absolutely right. But the brand idea sets the direction for the whole organization to stretch for that benefit. They constantly remind us of what we're doing, why we're doing it, and why it matters. These tiny words amplify into huge organizational and cultural forces by galvanizing everyone they touch.

Great ideas live in the heart. Bad ideas die pinned to the canteen bulletin boards.

The Category Prognosis

The opportunity for healthcare brands is clear. This is a category full of invention and discovery but populated by many brands that are generic and lack distinctiveness. They position as the category, not themselves. The desire to reassure has overwhelmed the opportunity for originality.

Great brands are compelling ideas. They're truth and insight, wrapped in creativity. Remember, no-one has ever been inspired by the word inspiring.

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Thank you.

* BAV (BrandAsset® Valuator), is a WPP proprietary brand management tool and global database of consumer perceptions surrounding brands. BAV informs strategic and creative solutions that drive brand and business results. Over 27 years, BAV has captured data and consumer insights on more than 60,000 brands in 50 + countries around the world, evaluating 75 brand image and equity dimensions that matter.

** BAV USA 2023 Healthcare Insurance Brand Personality Type