HENCE

ASPECTS

V2. ISSUE 4
May 2, 2025

// Get a Handle on AI—Or Else

Photo Courtesy Paul Crandell

Sam Altman has long predicted that AI will transform nearly every aspect of human life. His outlook has been rosy. But *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, well, not so much. He calls the AI Revolution an age of extinction: "And for anything that you care about," wrote Douthat in a recent column, "from your nation to your worldview to your favorite art form to your family—the key challenge of the 21st century is making sure that it's still there on the other side."

Count Hence with the those hoping the creative industry survives the extinction. But don't categorize us as luddites. To preserve quality storytelling, we all need to be honest about where the technology is going so we can adapt.

To that order, we talked with two creative industry professionals from our world, and one marketing specialist from the AI side to help ensure this isn't the last of us.

John Bradley is a former *Outside* magazine editor who has spent the past 20 years as a B2B marketer, most recently with an AI firm. Donny O'Neill is a Roster member and the Content Director of Protect Our Winters—the strongest voice for climate in winter sports. And Tavis Coburn is a Hence Expert and a renowned commercial artist.

John Bradley: If AI Can Replace Your Skill, it Will.
John opened a recent LinkedIn column with a gut punch: "Don't comfort yourself with the truth that AI-generated content isn't as good as the best human work. It just doesn't matter to the market." John's take: As with Hollywood and social media, most people are happy to consume low quality media. AI is just the latest technology dumbing us down. And that's true with marketing, too. What we think of as traditional copywriting, illustration, and photography can now be crudely aped with AI. Again, the argument that AI "content" isn't particularly good doesn't hold water, says John, "because, for the vast majority of marketers, AI produces far better content than *they* could ever do on their own."

The key for creatives in this environment, says John, will be access and authenticity. But even that is fraught. "Skateboarding had, and still has, a unique aesthetic," says John. "But it was copied by mainstream advertisers. AI makes copying easier. The key will be to stay focused on the moving target that is authenticity. That, plus a return to branding as opposed to ROI, will be the differentiators in the future. At least that's my hope."

Donny O'Neill: AI is a Tool. Use it Like One.
POW is in the business of telling real-world stories that convince Washington, D.C. lawmakers—often disconnected from the natural world—that climate change is happening and there's something we can do about it. But while he sees the efficacy of employing AI to help with pitching and other backend tasks like billing, he does not see it making large inroads into the outdoor media, which is already heavily invested in the real.

"There will be a lot of marketers that will plug 150 words into ChatGPT to spit out bad messaging," says Donny, "but at least in the outdoor space, consumers can see right through that stuff. They know if a landscape is contrived, or if an image is doctored. POW's audience needs narratives to latch on to, whether that's written-word, a podcast, or a film. That's the magic of POW. We tell stories about athletes, creatives, and scientists. If anything, the truth is going to be even more valuable."

Tavis Coburn: They Stole Our IP. Now We Must Use AI to Save Our Careers.
When he first saw the potential of AI to disrupt the world of commercial art and design, Tavis was dejected. "The first AI learning was trained on art," he says. "You spend years learning to draw and stay current by adopting technology, and with a few lines of text that work can now be recreated. It's like the high school quarterback stole your girl and your artwork and won the art show.

"It sucks that they pirated copyrighted work. But there's nothing we can do about it now. So if this is the next technology, I'm all in. As an artist, I will take their hard work and I will use it as a lever that the average person can't."

To Tavis, that means near constant experimentation with a range of ever-evolving AI models to see which one can help him turn original art and design into completed projects for clients—faster. If he can let a model he helped train fill in a background in minutes rather than days, or quickly replicate variations of his design, he can take on more work.

That's not a new idea for Tavis, who has been an early tech adopter throughout his career, but this time it feels more existential. "This is something else," says Tavis. "Today, 98 percent of the motion and animation industry is using AI. We either have to learn how to take advantage of it or let it ruin our careers." —Marc Peruzzi

// Meet an Entrepreneur

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After helping introduce Red Bull to North America and GoPro to the world, Paul Crandell has some ideas about what it takes for a company to succeed. To excel, says Paul, you better get your priorities right.

Photo Courtesy Paul Crandell

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// Meet a Creative

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Long before he was an acclaimed designer, creative director, and brand advisor, Kelly Dee Williams was just another kid with a skateboard. His life in boardsports culture informed his aesthetic and pursuit of originality.

Photo Courtesy Kelly Dee Williams

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Trade Secrets: Creative Work Is Good Therapy.

"My work lets me escape the day-to-day by creating worlds that I can dive into and disappear," says the illustrator and **Hence Expert** Tavis Coburn. "When your work is your escape, it makes it easier when you hit those downturns that everyone experiences. As long as I stay true to what I love to do, it works itself out." Read on.

Trade Secrets: Hunger Creates Momentum.

"If you identify a specific character or a mission-driven adventure," says the award-winning documentary filmmaker Peter Goetz, "and if you believe in it, and are motivated and hungry, it can come to life. Partners feed off that energetic exchange. Before you know it, you have a tangible film that shows your voice." Read on.

// From a Hence Creative

When Yesterday's Powder Becomes Tomorrow's Whitewater, Hence Roster Member Lee Cohen Follows the Runoff.

If you want to see Alta Lift Company ski patrollers in summer, book a raft trip. For as along as Alta has been a ski area, its patrollers, instructors, and mountain managers have been guiding and outfitting western rivers. "It would take me a couple of days to think of all the people I know from Alta who have worked on rivers," says Lee. "And after that, more would still be popping into my head." Check out a gallery of Lee's river shots on the Hence Instagram.

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