



MARKETING TRENDS 2015

the futurist's field guide

vol.
6

Welcome to TRENDS 2015



Howdy! Once again, the creators, architects, engineers and artists who make up thunder::tech have been following the interesting trends that have developed in the marketing and advertising industry over the past 6–12 months. Some of these are just getting off the ground, while others have been simmering for months—or even years—and only recently have gained serious momentum.

For this year's edition of TRENDS: the futurist's field guide, we've paid special attention to the trends that are helping make and maintain connections. In this increasingly connected world, we believe the products, people and procedures that help create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships are the ones we'll still be talking about for years to come.

For some of you, everything inside these pages might be brand new. For others, many of these may be old news. There's no right or wrong, just an awareness of how each can affect your business—because one thing is guaranteed: You will hear more about all of these trends in 2015.

If you have questions or want to learn more about any of the topics covered in the field guide, give us a [call](#), [shoot us an email](#) or reach out on social media.

:: Jason Therrien, president

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THE WIND-UP SALESMAN: MARKETING AUTOMATION

Imagine how impactful it would be to your bottom line if you had enough 24/7/365 customer service specialists to instantly respond to every email request, direct prospects to landing pages rich with content tailored to their wants and needs, monitor and respond to every social media request or question, and collect relevant information and seamlessly integrate it into your CRM platform.

Sound like wishful thinking? It doesn't have to be when you implement marketing automation.

What is Marketing Automation?

At its heart, marketing automation is a process in which you connect an audience with content and tools that are highly relevant to them. This isn't a new idea, of course—it's the same concept that made local newspapers and magazines the dominant information source for hundreds of years.

More recently, online video and blogs have exploited this desire for hyper-customized content to attract and maintain extremely loyal audiences.



What is new is the introduction of sophisticated platforms that gather and store information from the desired audience, then cultivate and mine that information to build strong, lasting relationships with them. These efforts result in a loyal, proprietary audience who you have just reached without having to spend a dime of your advertising budget.

The Tools You'll Use

So, how do you get started with marketing automation in 2015? First, you select an automation platform with capabilities that fit your needs. There are dozens of choices, each with a range of features and varying pricing combinations. Most are priced on a per-active-contact or subscriber-tiered model, meaning these systems charge you based on the total number of active contacts you have at any one time.

Where these automation platforms really pay off is with the gathering and targeting of current and potential customers. Using simple tracking code, systems can monitor the pages a user visits, forms submitted, referral sources, length of stay and other factors. All users remain anonymous until they have

been activated with a specific event like an email open, form submission or other connection.

Most platforms allow you to set point values to tracked activities. This means that the more desirable actions (like downloading a white paper or submitting information through an online form) score higher points than low-value activities (such as simply reading a web page). You can use this lead-scoring system to identify the hottest leads (i.e., the highest-scoring members of the audience) and then target them with additional promotions or touch points, allowing you to streamline the efforts of your sales force.

Where Custom Content Comes In

Once the different audience segments are identified, you can create touch points with custom content specific to the segment. Newsletters, savings programs, white papers and special offers are some of the tools often used to deepen the relationship.

Many brands are already embracing trigger-based marketing to augment—and in some cases, even replace—more traditional

methods of audience engagement. This allows smart brands to predict a customer's journey and create touch points based on actions, such as an email reminding a customer that she has left items in her shopping cart without checking out.

Tracking these efforts becomes a vital part of the sales cycle. By measuring the actions of groups and individuals, you will be able to figure out the right approach for different audiences to convert them into customers. Call tracking, open rates, download rates, redemption numbers, site tracking, call logs and other metrics can be combined to give you insight into the customer experience. These tools allow you to determine not only if you're offering the right information, but if your system (and your customer service team) is helping close the sale. 🚦

Marketing automation processes and platforms will help streamline your customer engagement and sales process in 2015 without additional staffing. If you're not already using or researching marketing automation, we recommend investigating it soon.



VIDEO:

YOUR FIRST LINE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

The phrase “self-serve customer support” might evoke negative experiences, such as flipping through endless indecipherable pages of a product manual or wading through the frustrating menus of an automated 800-number “help” line.

But there’s another automated customer service option that is embraced and even preferred by many customers—the DIY video.

More and more, the trend is for consumers to first seek out answers to common problems they encounter with a product or service on the Internet. This is easier and less time consuming than calling a customer service line or waiting for a representative to return an email. Providing simple and

fast solutions to your customers via your website is no longer considered a value-add service; in 2015, it is an expectation.

Give ‘Em What They Want

Providing FAQs, PDFs and blog entries is a good way to get useful information into the hands of your customers. But for complicated topics or step-by-step installation, a video is by far the simplest and most engaging way to reach your customer (see [“Making the Complex Simple”](#)). A helpful video not only gives you the opportunity to assist your customer during a difficult moment—it is another touch point in which you can show your authority in the industry and help boost loyalty to your brand.

For 2015, you need to understand that if you're not creating videos to help your customers resolve issues, someone else is.

As an example, let's say your company manufactures and installs residential water heaters. If a customer's water heater springs a leak, they are likely to try to fix it themselves before paying for an expensive house call from a plumber. They'll search Google or YouTube for answers. If you don't have branded content that they can find, the best case scenario is that they find someone who has had a similar problem and posted a video on how they fixed it. The worst case scenario is they find content uploaded from your competitor. This instantly puts your competition in a position of authority, and your customer is more likely to remember how the competition helped them out of a tight spot. If it was your branded content they found, you could retain your position of authority and strengthen the customer's existing brand loyalty.

For 2015, you need to understand that if you're not creating videos to help your customers resolve issues, someone else is.

An Added Bonus

These videos can also help increase your search ranking, as Google and others rank pages with dynamic, engaging content higher than those without. It's also helpful to strategically name and describe videos using keywords customers might search for to find your how-to video. Uploading a transcript is advised because search engines (including YouTube/Google) are now starting to crawl them to find search results.

When you have branded video content freely available to your customers, you are, in effect, automating the customer service process. In 2015, make sure you're providing this value to your customers. Besides the initial creation, it will cost you no additional resources. Your customers will be forever grateful. ::

When your customers have a question about a topic you're an expert on (like your products), be the first source they turn to for answers. How-to videos are the perfect vehicle for this.



THE DIGITIZATION OF BUSINESS IS HAPPENING IN THE CLOUD

Most marketers are familiar with the fact there is this “cloud” that makes information easier to access via our phones, laptops and iPads. Really cool, right? Well, as with most newsworthy concepts and stories, the cloud label itself is tending to be a bit overhyped or misunderstood. It is really, at its core, the digitization of business.

Marketing in the Cloud

The cloud as it relates to the marketer is the ecosystem of servers and services that all of those cool programs and products you subscribe to and budget for live on. The products living in the cloud vary in uniqueness and range. The big software players out there today—IBM, Oracle,

Salesforce and Adobe—are scratching and clawing for your marketing dollars by combining various marketing tools into single-serve, niche applications and multi-serve behemoth offerings that allow users to automate, email, report, calendar and track your customer’s every move. The digitization of business is the mass migration of handshakes to mouse clicks.

It’s not that customers are becoming tired of face-to-face customer service and relationships; it’s that there is a growing expectation that the customer can get anything he or she wants done online and within moments. The cloud and the online applications built within the cloud create those interfaces, experiences and touch points.

Light and Fluffy Customer Satisfaction

The businesses that focus on breaking down barriers and offering frictionless, self-serve access to their products and services are the ones that are going to attract the most customers. This goes beyond industry. It is a universal truth. Both B2C and now, almost even more so, B2B marketers need to understand the almost immediate impact digitized experiences can have on customer relationship building.

If you have a bad e-commerce site or horrible account login experience for your customer, it's like forcing a grumpy salesman onto their doorstep. Businesses need to invest in efforts to collaborate with their customers more within the cloud. These self-service portals aren't just for the customer; marketers can also benefit.

The digitization of business is the mass migration of handshakes to mouse clicks.

The metrics harvested from customer interactions with various digital experiences help launch new products and services that focus not on guesswork or hunches, but rather on hard facts and input provided by your customers. What FAQ pages are our customers visiting most on our website? What instructional videos resonate the most? When are they purchasing? What online feedback are they giving us? What content is working and attracting the most leads?

If you invest in making your customers' digital experience with your business more delightful and pleasant, you will reap the rewards. In short, "To the cloud!" Your customers are waiting for you there. ::

Get over the hype of the cloud; it's really about connecting and serving your customers better through digital means.



DON'T FORGET TO LOCK THE DOOR: THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA SECURITY

Marketers have so many goals and objectives in front of them, due in very tight timeframes, that anything that would hinder the speed at which they perform is perceived as undesirable.

Data security can be one of those undesirable topics that doesn't seem to add value, but rather, can put the brakes on efforts in the marketer's eyes.

We can tell you that it's not the cost to manage security that should worry you, but rather the cost of ignoring it.

The Risk is Not Worth Any Reward

We have all seen the data breaches in the past year. The Target, Home Depot and Radio Shack episodes sent shockwaves through the banking, consumer and credit worlds and should be a very real warning for businesses to escalate the importance of this topic.

All of that goodwill and relationship building you do over a long period of time with your messaging and customer service can be completely wiped out in a heartbeat with a singular instance of real or even perceived mismanaged data security.

How to Prevent a Breach, Online and Off

For 2015, we recommend you develop protocols, policies and governance guidelines for every digital project you attempt, be it a campaign-driven microsite or a very robust customer portal or extranet. We have been educating more and more clients on the various vulnerabilities and risks involved, but more importantly, how we can safeguard against them.

It's not the cost to manage security that should worry you, but rather the cost of ignoring it.

Typically, these security measures often take the form of vulnerability scans, hotfixes to platforms, assessment of software chosen, and partnerships with folks who have expertise in the latest malware and distributed denial of service (DDoS) preventions. Scanning a site for vulnerabilities and providing privacy policies and terms of use will not break a budget, but it will help you and your customers sleep at night.

And while we may be focusing a lot on digital forms of security, the offline security measures are just as important, as offline activities are cited as the most common threat to an organization's ability to ward off instances of theft. Create a role hierarchy and document who has what permissions and in what capacity. Don't give the keys to a proprietary database of consumer addresses to an intern who is taking that database to and from his or her shared apartment via a flash drive every day.

The simple task of remembering to initiate the conversation is the equivalent to remembering to lock your house before you leave. It's those conversations that will save us from crisis. ::

Digital security is now a non-negotiable part of running a business and a cost that is better borne up front.



VISUAL DESIGN GETS PERSONAL

If there's one thing that visual designers love, it's rebelling against the current hot trend in the design world. For example, photorealistic, real-world, object-inspired design ("skeuomorphism," as discussed in last year's Trends book) used to be in, championed by Apple designers. But that has been surpassed in recent years by the simple shapes, icons and angles of "flat" design.

Now that flat design has proliferated across apps, operating systems and websites, we're seeing the next rebellion: design that embraces the imperfections and unique character of letterpress, screen printing and other labor-intensive executions. Call it "artisan design."

Back to the Basics

Artisan design has paralleled a much broader trend, the "artisan economy." This desire to return to a simpler time has



created a new business model that generally focuses on local, genuine, sustainable goods and services. This has spawned a mini-revolution of small businesses that sell everything from fair-trade coffee to locally sourced cheeses to community-based bicycle repair to organic clothing. By necessity, this kind of business demands visual design that helps articulate a “back to the basics” philosophy.

Perhaps even more importantly, artisan design needs to tell a personal story. It must convey the fact that these are products handcrafted by real people—maybe the same people across the counter from you or on the other end of the telephone.

For this reason, artisan design eschews overly produced and polished designs that feel “corporate.” Symmetrical grid alignments and pixel-perfect kerning are cast aside in favor of the offhand elegance of slightly imperfect design. This sort of organic design often features hand lettering, illustration, collage, photography and other techniques that are either crafted by hand or digitally created to mimic the handcrafted look. The tiny faults and flaws inherent to this style of design give it a very humanistic feeling—perfectly capturing the homemade, small-batch experience of shopping at your local gourmet pâtisserie, for example.

Should You Hop on the Bandwagon?

Artisan design has been the hallmark of certain subcultures for years, like rock music, graphic T-shirts and underground comics, to name a few. Most recently, the craft beer explosion has fully embraced artisan design in labeling and marketing.

In 2015, artisan design no longer will solely be in the domain of niche audiences or products wishing to champion their hand-crafted nature. This style of design has gone mainstream—you can expect to see everything from car dealers to dollar stores trying to create “small-batch,” personalized experiences for their customers.

Is Artisan Design Right for Your Brand?

Ask Yourself Two Questions:

1. Does my brand have a simple, handmade, authentic story to tell?
2. Is there something about my brand that ties it to the local community?

If you answered yes to these questions, using artisan design as a storytelling element for your brand might be a good fit. If not, there are plenty of other techniques and styles for connecting customers with your brand—artisan design may be one bandwagon that you can stand to watch pass by. ::

It's not for everyone or every project, but a hand-crafted design aesthetic may be a good fit for your brand in 2015 if you have a genuine, handmade story to tell.

PAID DIGITAL MEDIA GETS BETTER AND MORE COMPLEX IN 2015



It's getting noisier by the day out there, and marketers know it more than anyone. We're competing with cute cats, the viral trend of the month and even ourselves to get our well-thought-out content off the ground.

What should 2015's marketing strategy contain to get us out of the abyss and into our audience's realm of awareness? Let's explore a few options to enhance next year's integrated marketing campaigns.

Getting Enhanced Digital Display Off the Ground

When we look back at 2014 and the trends associated with paid digital media, we see great technology strides from location-based ad services to real-time digital ad purchasing. But what we think is missing and will be a huge trend for 2015 is actually customer buy-in and engagement in the mid-market when it comes to enhanced or rich media advertising.

Sorry about the buzzwords there. What does that really mean?

We see richer display media options as trending with customers in 2015. This could be video pre-roll or expandable mobile ads that draw customers into an experience. Based on this research, paid enhanced digital advertising is doubling year over year, and slated to rise another 6% in 2015, with better content and storytelling than ever before.*

A trend becomes the norm in the mid-market when small-to-mid-size businesses make it standard in marketing plans. With some purchase cycles getting longer and longer, clients have to start embracing all points of customer contact whether it's paid digital media or traditional offline advertising.

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Paid digital media, including display, will vastly improve in effectiveness and targeting in 2015 and is now forever intertwined with offline media efforts.*

Improvements and Enhancements to AdWords

2014 was an exciting year for app developers looking to promote their apps. Why? Google's AdWords began to allow advertisers to target ads to users based on the apps they use, how often they use them and what types of in-app purchases they make. Creepy? A little, but as marketers, we probably love it a little more than we should and we know it's going to open up even more opportunities in 2015. Here's how:

* <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/How-Will-2013rsquo-Digital-Display-Trends-Converge-2014/1010613>

Ever download an app and forget about it? You're not alone. Over 80% of downloaded apps are used only once and then deleted.** To combat this, AdWords got creative and gave us an app re-engagement campaign tool that helps remind users "there's an app for that" when they search on Google.

For example, if you have a travel app already installed on your phone and search for something like "hotels in New York," this new campaign type allows app advertisers to target you with an ad that will launch the app already installed on your phone. This means keeping your app content up to date in 2015 will be more important than ever. It also means if you're just now considering creating a mobile app, you need to be 100% sure it's the right fit for your brand. Although this tool helps draw users back into apps they ignored, we can't forget the original problem of users generally not using most apps. Depending on your goals, a responsive website may be a stronger investment.

Enough about apps. What about measurement? Google is continuing to help advertisers understand the full value of their AdWords campaigns with the Website Click to Call conversion type. This conversion option allows advertisers to insert a code on their site that will swap out any phone numbers with a Google forwarding number. This is great news for lead generation advertisers who need to track the number of phone

calls being generated through their AdWords campaigns in 2015.

In addition to the Website Click to Call conversion type, Google plans to introduce an additional conversion type that will use anonymized purchase data from retail partners to help advertisers measure the effectiveness of search ads at driving in-store sales. The technology behind this futuristic conversion type is pretty hush-hush right now, but Google plans to release more details soon. Similar to the Website Click to Call conversion type, this new and improved conversion tracking means that all advertisers in all types of industries can test PPC campaigns and understand the exact ROI they are generating. With this introduction of better conversion tracking, lead-generation advertisers now have even fewer reasons not to test PPC for their businesses in 2015.

** <http://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/16-percent-of-mobile-users-try-out-a-buggy-app-more-than-twice/#!Evdol>

Stop Waiting for Social Organic Reach to Return. It's Gone.

Social media marketers, maybe we should start group therapy sessions because it's getting rough out there. In case you missed 2014, two things have kept us awake at night recently: the decline of Organic Reach on Facebook, and Twitter moving to an algorithm-based feed. It was a year of updates and setting the new norm for social media marketing.

How does a marketer adapt for 2015? Social media advertising is on the rise, not because we love to spend money, but because channels are providing creative and effective ways for us to reach highly targeted audiences and convert them into customers. Advertising revenue is definitely top of mind for the publicly traded Facebook and Twitter teams, and this means it should be for marketers too as these platforms continue to build tools to make it an easier and more effective option.

Based on what social media platforms rolled out for their advertising programs in 2014, we expect to see Facebook and Twitter's tools upgrade even more in 2015 to help marketers hit their goals and engage their targeted audiences better than before. We'd also bet that analytics and tracking options for social media ads will continue to improve, which is even more of a reason to experiment with ad campaigns in 2015. Who wouldn't want to be able to show off successful campaign results broken up into all kinds of stats and fancy graphs?

On top of this, social media ad spending is projected to surpass \$8 billion in 2015, and with marketers getting creative with remarketing* to website users, producing ads that are more of an experience (see page 15) than actual ads and constructing insanely targeted ad campaigns for key audiences; no marketer can afford not to be using or at least exploring this space. The social media ad options we have today seem like more than a marketer could have dreamed of a few years ago, but we're all anxiously awaiting what they give us to work with in 2015. ::

Digital advertising (display, social and search) will continue to get increasingly complex with more options for marketers, but will still rely on creative thinking to break through and not add to the noise.

* [http://www.biakelsey.com/Company/Press-Releases/130410-U.S.-Social-Ad-Revenues-to-Reach-\\$11B-in-2017.asp](http://www.biakelsey.com/Company/Press-Releases/130410-U.S.-Social-Ad-Revenues-to-Reach-$11B-in-2017.asp)



VIDEO:

MAKING THE COMPLEX SIMPLE

As marketers scramble to publish more content to the web, video is becoming a preferred method to communicate complex messages quickly and more memorably. As the noise continues to get louder, we see video becoming a distinct competitive advantage in brand communications.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then how many words is a video worth? According to Dr. James McQuivey of Forrester Research, “a minute of video is worth 1.8 million words.”

Imagine what you could accomplish if your audience actually read more than 1 million words about your product or service. They won't, of course. But they will watch a one-minute video.

When you think of it in those terms, it's easy to understand the real power of video. It quickly and effectively conveys a wealth of information in a very short amount of time. Consider that each frame engages multiple senses through visuals, motion, text and sound. Because of this, video is a great way to make

complex topics easy to understand. Considering that the general public's attention span is continually decreasing, creating engaging video content will be even more key as we move through 2015 and beyond.

Do It Right

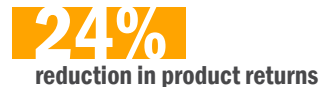
Successful videos will walk their audiences through a complicated concept or process by breaking the idea down into its most basic and essential parts. In the planning phase, a two-column script format can be used with visuals on the left and audio/narration on the right. Beat by beat the concept is explained, using whatever technique or combination of techniques (voiceover, animation, live action, text on screen, etc.) best conveys the meaning. By doing this, each part is explained until the audience understands the entire concept.

In 2014, we've seen some pretty engaging marketing and advertising videos being put out by brands large and small. Creativity is critical. Increasingly, few people will sit through a boring sales presentation from a "talking head." But when the concept is creative, interesting and engaging, the audience will consume the entire sales pitch—and be happy they did.

Worth the Cost

A common objection to video is the time and cost associated. Compared to uploading static text to a web page, video is more expensive up front. However, it might cost you far more in missed opportunities if your audience doesn't bother to read the paragraphs of information you spent so much time and effort in creating.

Consider the following numbers for online video:



source: *Brightcove*

Video is already the method preferred by many when seeking information about products and services. In fact, YouTube is the second-largest search engine (based on total query volume). This trend will only continue to grow. By 2018, video traffic is projected to make up 84% of all Internet traffic.* ❖

Better than any other communication method, video is the ultimate choice for capturing audience attention. It's also a medium that is very easily adopted and preferred by users looking for brand insights.

* source: *Cisco Systems*



A RECIPE FOR STRUCTURED CONTENT AND TACOS

The rise of using more owned content in your marketing is nothing new. This trend has been reported on for the past few years, but now that we've got all this content at our disposal, how do we deal with it in an intelligent manner? The growing answer, especially around managing web content is to treat it as structured content.

What is Structured Content?

Let's take a look at the average thunder::tech team member's dinner. It's Tuesday, so we're making tacos. In a few bowls

we've got the ingredients: fresh guacamole, spicy black beans with cumin, shredded manchego cheese and some kind of salsa we found in the back of the fridge. Each type of ingredient is in a separate bowl, making it easy for us to put the fillings in our tacos quickly and neatly. What we've got here is structure, just like content on the web can be structured. On the other hand, if you dumped all the ingredients on the floor into a big pile and just left it there, like Chris did, well, that would be a blob. Nice going, Chris.

Let's not be like that guy. Let's structure our content.

It's not about the presentation, it's about manageability and saturating content with meaning. Describing and organizing information is crucial to its continued relevance. We, as content creators, need to think about not only addressing our immediate requirements, but also considering the future of our content as we release it into the wild. Sure, it's just tacos tonight, but we're prepared for burritos on Thursday and enchiladas on Saturday. The content may be the same, but with structure, we can always change the packaging.

How Do We Use Structured Content?

A content management system (CMS) might be set up, for example, to store a product's name, the SKU number, current price and availability all as separate chunks. A template is created for the CMS to place the content into, including all the unique styling and layout that makes it easy for a user to read and experience.

For an e-commerce example like this, maybe a user wants to search the site for a particular type of product, or sort through all the products with an attribute such as price. The server is able to look at the data by type and return just what the user is looking for. Without structure, a lot of manually organized and duplicate content would have to be created to achieve this functionality.

It's not about the presentation, it's about manageability and saturating content with meaning.

COPE

"Create Once, Publish Everywhere," or COPE, is the philosophy of publishing content to multiple channels to maximize reach with any particular piece of content. A content management system may simply publish a web page, but it can do so much more. Automated publishing to RSS, Facebook or Twitter feeds, a mobile app API or other content distribution channel can be implemented only when content is structured. Besides unique presentation, different channels may require a different hierarchy of information to meet users' needs.

Cards

Cards are a fast-developing digital design pattern that rely on structured content. You might have seen some examples on Twitter, where a shared link includes the author of the article, the author's Twitter handle, a short summary of the page, and a featured image or even an embedded video player. Twitter looks for the structure of the content of the page being shared and formats it into a card template best suited for the job. The result of this is greater user engagement with content, as users are now more likely to watch an embedded video, click to an article relevant to their interests or begin to follow a content creator.

Google has been using cards for a while in the web services it calls Google Now. This first appeared on Android-powered mobile devices. The card format is excellent when screen sizes vary as much as they do on Android, as the small chunks of content can be laid out in the way that they best fit. Generated actions such as links to purchase tickets or reserve a table at a restaurant are not only extremely helpful to the user, but potentially lucrative for both Google and content creators.

What About the Future?

While web services like Twitter and Facebook often require some proprietary metadata, simply having all your content in a structured format from the get-go allows you to update and adapt to new schema, without having to manually make changes to each piece of content, each page or even each website. Nothing is future-proof, but structuring content can help you prepare for inevitable change.

If you haven't done so yet, focus in 2015 on a plan to structure your website's content. This most likely will mean building custom templates in your CMS to house your data. Though this might not be a quick process, it will be worth it and will help your content stay relevant and engaging in the years to come. So go ahead; start making tacos the right way. ::

By structuring your website's content strategically through a CMS, you will be able to better engage your audience and improve their experience with your brand.

Keep Tracking the Trends

As 2015 unfolds, we'll continue monitoring new technologies, tools and trends. As always, you can stay in the loop as we explore the latest marketing topics on our blog at chatter.thundertech.com and subscribe to one or all of our emails at thundertech.com/subscribe.

Can't wait until next year for another TRENDS Book? We can't either. We received so much positive feedback from our end-of-year installment, we just can't stop. Keep an eye out for a mid-year edition from us in spring/summer 2015.



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