

CHINA RISING

How Chinese OEMs are rewriting the rules of car-changing in the UK during the Year of the Fire Horse.

In this one-off report, bringing you all the best insights from Carwow Group:

Market Pulse: awareness & consideration | Performance & Sales: editorial curiosity to checkout |
The Ownership Experience: insurance & running costs | On the Ground: Beijing to Goodwood |
The Road Ahead: what's next, and the verdict



2026: The Year of the Fire Horse



John Veichmanis
Chief Executive Officer, Carwow

Every sixty years, the Chinese zodiac brings the Year of the Fire Horse, a period often associated with ambition, pace and significant volatility and if you want to understand the feel of this year in the automotive market - that sums it up well.

The speed of change on our platform has been incredible. Two years ago, Chinese brands were outliers or curiosities. Today, they are rapidly climbing our enquiry charts and dominate the conversations many of our partners are having every day. The rise of new Chinese entrants is a symptom of a broader market-wide shift. Loyalty as we knew it is changing and Chinese OEMs seem to be benefiting most from a 'brand-agnostic' era where consumers are more likely to prioritise value and tech-fit over historical badge equity.

It hasn't been a straight line, though. We're tracking a massive acceleration in UK consumer consideration, now a record 49% of consumers on Carwow say they are open to buying a Chinese car. But this isn't just about challengers; legacy brands are proving their resilience, with names like Mercedes-Benz still topping the 2026 Driver Power satisfaction survey.

The broader context for everyone is shifting quickly - from a new Prime Minister and revised policies on home EV charging, the ZEV Mandate consultation, and a cost-of-living squeeze impacting many people's buying decisions.

We're tracking the actual car buyer's journey: from first awareness, to the total cost of ownership. We've been on the ground from Beijing to Goodwood, and this report gives a candid look at what's working and what remains unproven.

The market may be moving in real-time, but the buyer's need for simplicity remains constant. At Carwow, our focus remains on providing the data-backed clarity our partners need to turn that volatility into their next opportunity.



MARKET PULSE

Awareness, consideration and the quality paradox

BRAND RECOGNITION IS MOVING FROM NICHE TO MAINSTREAM, FAST

Polling on Carwow shows that brand recognition among Chinese OEMs continues to gain significant traction, moving from niche awareness to mainstream visibility. While BYD maintains its status as the market leader, the most striking growth has come from newer entrants like Chery (+14pp) and Jaecoo (+8pp) — recognition is converting swiftly into consideration.



H2 2026 BRAND AWARENESS

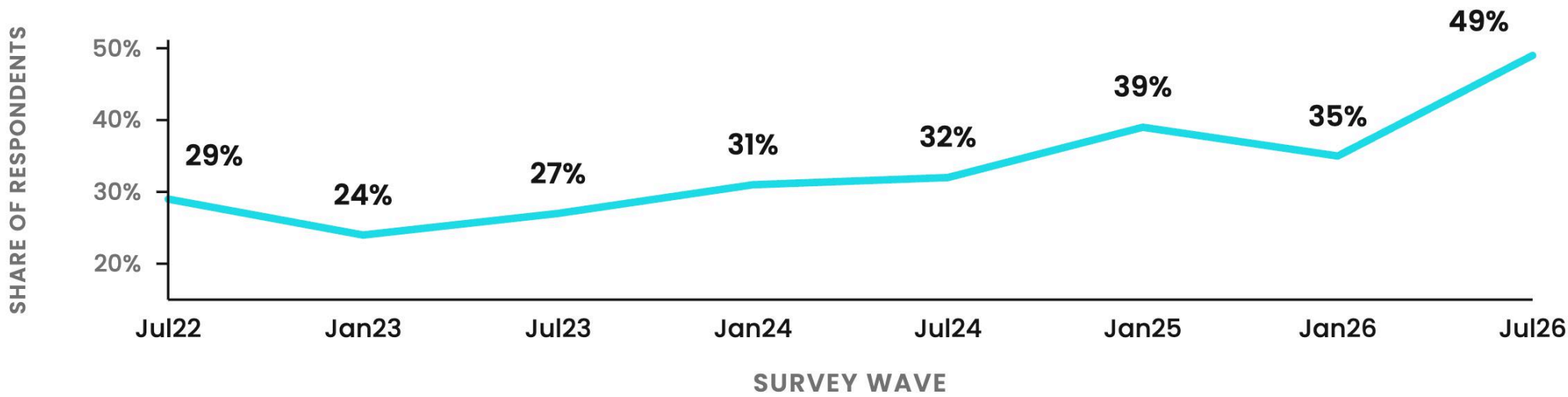
1	BYD		71%	— Flat (vs 72%)
2	Jaecoo		69%	▲ Up (vs 61%)
3	OMODA		57%	▲ Up (vs 50%)
4	Chery		50%	▲ Up (vs 36%)
5	Geely		41%	▲ Up (vs 33%)

* 1,270 Carwow users polled on 22 July 2026

UK CONSIDERATION FOR CHINESE BRANDS SURGES TO 49% — THE LARGEST JUMP WE'VE EVER TRACKED

49%

of UK drivers would now consider a Chinese brand for their next car — up from 35% in January 2026, and just 29% in July 2022.



THE UK'S COST-OF-LIVING BITES

42% of drivers cite value for money and 28% competitive discounts as reasons to consider a Chinese brand. Rising costs are also pushing more than one in five motorists (21%) toward leasing.

Based on an on-site survey of 1,270 Carwow consumers on 22.07.26

TOP OBJECTIONS (BLOCKERS)

Aftersales / servicing	33%
Perceived build quality	32%
Unfamiliarity	25%
Political reasons	21%
Had no concerns	32%

WHAT'S DRAWING PEOPLE IN

Value for money	42%
More competitive offers	28%
More choice of EV models	19%
Longer range EVs	12%
Higher safety ratings	4%

*Percentages rounded



“Chinese brands have spent the last few years winning over early adopters. Now, with consideration surging to 49%, these buyers are logical and risk-averse — they care whether the car works, whether the tech is intuitive, and whether they'll be left holding the bag on depreciation.”

— Richard Ingram, Deputy Editor, Auto Express, part of the Carwow Group

"We're seeing leasing play a vital role here - it acts as a release valve, helping people make the switch to cheaper fuel in the form of EVs and PHEVs while avoiding significant upfront costs and residual value risks. Our data shows that those considering an EV are nearly twice as likely to be leasing customers. We see a healthy mix of new and legacy brands in our top four leasing enquiry share: Tesla (10%), Volkswagen (9%), Jaecoo (7%), and Vauxhall (6%)."

— Alex Powel, Director of Leasing, Carwow Group

LEGACY BRANDS ARE WINNING SATISFACTION BUT LOSING CONSIDERATION



Toyota

75% of owners say their next car will be another Toyota



Mercedes-Benz

#1 overall, 2026 Driver Power survey

New entrants' share of considerers: 24.5% this year



This is the paradox: satisfaction and loyalty remain high for legacy giants who still dominate Driver Power's Top 10 Most Considered list. The Auto Express Awards added to this reality check, naming the Nissan Leaf Car of the Year, while Skoda, Kia and Audi each secured three category wins apiece.

DRIVER POWER

Our 2026 Driver Power survey shows overall satisfaction across the market has fallen to 84% from 89% in 2024 — with infotainment and tech usability the primary frustration points. Drivers aren't against tech; they're against bad tech.

Driver Power is part of the Carwow Group

LEGACY ADAPTS: THE CHINA-FOR-GLOBAL STRATEGY

We're used to seeing new Chinese car brands entering the UK market. But Volkswagen is now evaluating whether to bring its China-exclusive models to Europe, potentially even building them here — leveraging its Chinese R&D to defend its home market.

"From Stellantis' direct investment in Leapmotor to BMW's co-development with Great Wall, the 'China-for-Global' blueprint is rapidly becoming the industry standard for staying price-competitive in the electric age."

— Tom Jervis, Consumer Reporter, Auto Express, part of the Carwow Group

PERFORMANCE & SALES

From editorial curiosity to checkout

SEVEN OF CARWOW'S 10 MOST-READ CAR REVIEWS THIS YEAR ARE CHINESE MODELS — UP FROM FOUR IN 2024

When 70% of our most-read reviews are for Chinese models — up from 40% two years ago — we know consumers are doing their due diligence at scale.



THE HYBRID BRIDGE

Hybrid enquiries were up 26% in H1 2026 vs H2 2025 — officially outpacing BEVs (+15%). Buyers see hybrids as a low-risk bridge to get the tech and economy they want without charging anxiety. Enquiries on Jaecoo 7 are up 17%, while Chery Tiggo 8 is up 149%

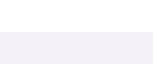
10 MOST-READ CAR REVIEWS

1	BMW iX3		
2	Jaecoo 7		
3	Chery Tiggo 8		
4	BYD Seal		
5	Jaecoo 8		
6	Omoda 5		
7	BYD Seal U		
8	Chery Tiggo 7		
9	Tesla Model Y		
10	Kia EV5		

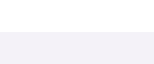
ARE CONSUMERS PUTTING THEIR MONEY WHERE THEIR CLICKS ARE? YES

Despite the shift in sentiment, the data confirms that conversion from curiosity to checkout remains strong for the brands that have built trust.

TOP 10 MOST CONSIDERED EVS YOY

1	Renault 5-E-Tech		+149%
2	Tesla Model 3		+102%
3	Dacia Spring		+38.4%
4	Vauxhall Frontera - Electric		+2514.6%
5	BYD Seal		+177.8%
6	BYD Dolphin - Surf		+1225.9%
7	Tesla Model Y		+255.5%
8	Jaecoo E5		No YoY Data
9	BYD Sealion 7		+107.8%
10	Kia EV3		-11.2%

TOP 10 MOST CONSIDERED ICE AND HYBRIDS YOY

1	Jaecoo 7		+29.2%
2	Jaecoo 5		No YoY Data
3	Kia Sportage		+35.5%
4	Hyundai Tucson		+40.7%
5	Omoda 5		+147.6%
6	Chery Tiggo 8		No YoY Data
7	Chery Tiggo 7		No YoY Data
8	Nissan Qashqai		+29.5%
9	Hyundai Santa-Fe		+13%
10	Jaecoo 8		No YoY Data

TOP 3 BRANDS BY TOTAL SALES

1	BYD	 
2	Renault	 
3	Toyota	 

TOP 3 MODELS BY TOTAL SALES

1	Jaecoo 7	 
2	BYD Seal U	 
3	Renault 5 E-Tech	 

(Total sales, H1 2026, excl. stock used.)



THE OWNERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Insurance & running costs

CHEAPER TO BUY DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN CHEAPER TO RUN

Carwow's editorial investigation found that some of the newest Chinese models are still being treated by insurers as unknown risks — a 'new to market' problem that fades as brands prove themselves, much like Japanese imports faced in the 1960s.

“New brands, models and technologies are arriving at speed, and insurers need to adapt far faster than they are. It’s simply not fair for drivers to be penalised because insurance pricing and data can’t keep up.”

— Iain Reid, Global Content Director, Carwow



► DEVELOPING — importer ceased trading Jul 2026

SKYWELL BE11

~£2,200/YR

9 of 10 insurers wouldn't quote
vs ~£840/yr for a Peugeot E-3008

JAECOO 7

~£860/YR

average premium
~£170 more than a VW Tiguan

XPENG G6

~£1,100/YR

average premium
~£270 more than a Kia EV3

BYD SEAL U

~ £645/YR

the exception
~£545 cheaper than a Toyota RAV4

ARE CHINESE CARS REALLY CHEAPER? TRUE BUYING AND RUNNING COSTS UNCOVERED BY AUTO EXPRESS

Auto Express tested top-selling models from five popular Chinese brands against rivals, tracking costs over three years and 30,000 miles — the average lease or ownership period.

MG HS VS QASHQAI VS SPORTAGE

WINNER (BUY) **MG HS**

WINNER (LEASE) **KIA SPORTAGE**

Low price undercut by Kia’s lease deal

BYD SEAL VS MODEL 3 VS ID.7

WINNER (BUY) **TESLA MODEL 3**

WINNER (LEASE) **TESLA MODEL 3**

Rare loss for a Chinese model - £3k more over three years

JAECOO 7 VS TUCSON VS TIGUAN

WINNER (BUY) **JAECOO 7**

WINNER (LEASE) **JAECOO 7**

Wins outright, both ways

OMODA 5 VS PUMA VS JUKE

WINNER (BUY) **OMODA 5**

WINNER (LEASE) **FORD PUMA**

Cheapest to buy, gap narrows on running costs

LEAPMOTOR B10 VS ELROQ VS COUNTRYMAN

WINNER (BUY) **MINI COUNTRYMAN E**

WINNER (LEASE) **LEAPMOTOR B10**

Priciest to buy, cheapest to lease

LESSON: LOOK PAST THE STICKER PRICE

As Auto Express consumer reporter Tom Jervis notes: "Once depreciation, insurance, servicing and fuel costs are factored in, the savings are not always as significant as they first appear."

ON THE GROUND, BEIJING TO GOODWOOD

The speed, the scale, and the spectacle of the Chinese automotive evolution.

"FLASH CHARGING" — 10% TO 97% IN JUST NINE MINUTES, SOLVING THE FINAL BARRIER TO MASS EV ADOPTION

Earlier this year, Carwow's Head of Commercial, Will Jackson, took a group of partner dealers to the front lines of automotive innovation: Auto China 2026 in Beijing.



SOFTWARE AS A PRODUCT

From vehicles navigating complex parking autonomously to hearing how technology giants like Huawei co-design the total in-car experience, it's clear software is now fundamental to the car as a product.

DISRUPTIVE PRICING COMPARISONS

The pricing comparisons were equally disruptive. Premium Chinese brands like AITO and Li Auto retail luxury seven-seat SUVs for around £50,000, versus roughly £129,000 for a Mercedes EQS SUV in the UK.

TAKEAWAY

The biggest takeaway was the franchise strategy: while the agency model dominates in mainland China, Chinese OEMs are actively seeking to partner with established dealer groups in Europe for the reassurance and expertise consumers need.

HEAR THE FULL STORY; SHIFT HAPPENS



Carwow's industry podcast

VP Stella Li on BYD's Flash Charging, plus a Beijing bonus episode with analyst Felipe Munoz. On Spotify, Apple Podcasts and YouTube.

AT THE GOODWOOD FESTIVAL OF SPEED, THE AMBITION GOT A LOT MORE EXPENSIVE

For the first time, Chinese brands brought genuine halo cars to a major UK event — not just value SUVs.



NEW ENTRANTS

DENZA Z



From £143,000–£173,000, rivals the Lamborghini Revuelto

DENZA BAO 5



Luxury PHEV off-roader, from £69,500, rivals the Land Rover Defender

YANGWANG U9 XTREME



3,000hp, 308mph, fastest production car in the world, from £200,000+, only 30 built

MG CYBER CONCEPT



Compared by critics to a Ferrari Purosangue

LEGACY RESPONDS

BMW M CONCEPT NEUE KLASSE

All-electric next M3, ~800hp

AUDI NUVOLARI

1,000hp Lamborghini-based V8 hybrid, £500,000, only 499 built

MERCEDES-AMG CLA 45

High-performance all-electric - 0-62mph in 2.7 secs

"Everyday cars parked next to hypercars — that's Goodwood in one sentence, and still capable of surprising you."
— **Ryan Birch, Content Editor, Auto Express, part of Carwow Group**

"The challenge Chinese brands face entering premium and luxury sectors is that as much as performance and design matter, so too does brand image. Those shopping this market would rather spend £2m on a 15-year-old Bugatti Veyron than £200k on a Yangwang, despite the latter being more powerful, faster and a tenth of the price."
— **Stuart Gallagher, Editor in Chief, evo, part of Carwow Group**

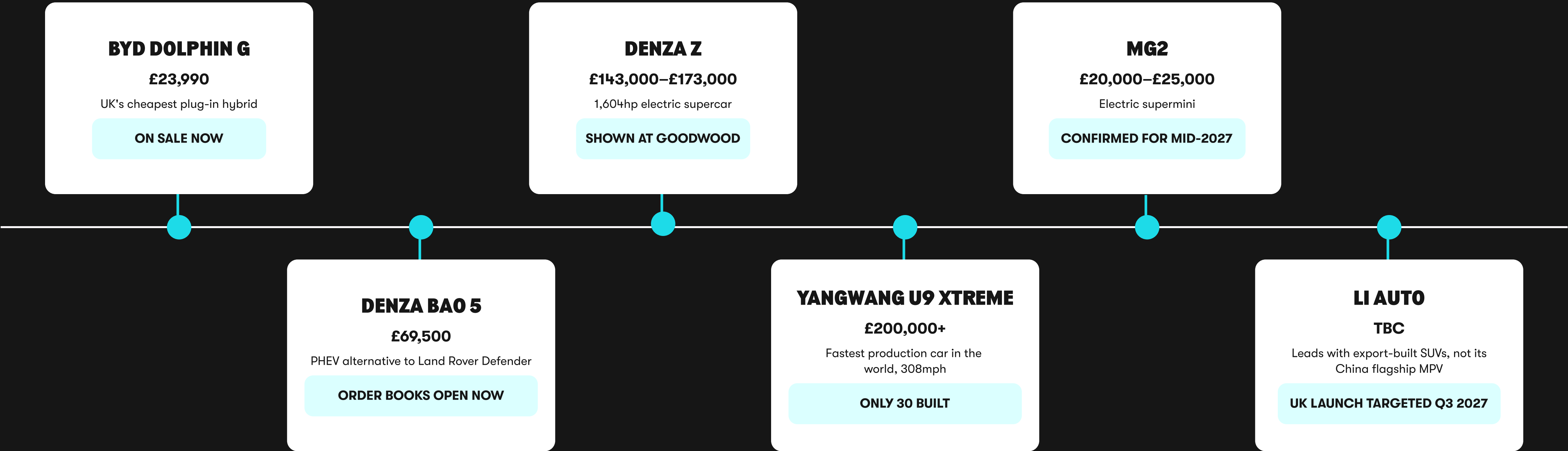
THE ROAD AHEAD

What's next, and the verdict

THE NEXT WAVE IS ALREADY IN THE PIPELINE — AND IT SPANS EVERY PRICE POINT

Keeping up with the arrival of new Chinese cars can be tricky — from small, affordable hatchbacks to bonkers supercars. Every brand named here is deliberately building for Europe, not just exporting what sells well at home.

Sources: Auto Express (Richard Ingram, 15 Jul 2026); BYD Dolphin G launch (10 Jul 2026); carwow.co.uk/news/11093/new-chinese-cars-coming-soon



THIS IS AN EXPANSION OF THE ECOSYSTEM.

If the "Year of the Fire Horse" has taught us anything, it's that the automotive market is moving faster than at any point in the last decade — but the direction is a maturation of the ecosystem, rather than a changing of the guard.



THE SUMMARY

We're beginning to come out of the new-Chinese-brand hype phase. We've seen how new entrants including BYD, Jaecoo, Omoda and Chery have mastered the art of the first sale, but their real test will be securing the second. Lasting success will belong to the brands that turn initial interest into long-term loyalty. The next wave of growth will come from the brands that can prove their reliability and back it up with a dealer network that knows how to sell the whole experience of ownership.

LEGACY BRANDS ARE LEVERAGING NOSTALGIA

Reviving iconic back-catalog models as EVs, highlighted by the soaring popularity of the Renault 5 and 4, Citroën's confirmed return of the 2CV as an affordable electric car, and Ford's planned comeback of the Fiesta in EV form.

THERE'S MATURATION OF DEMAND

Buyers are becoming more discerning, testing new entrants against the high bar of established reliability.

THE VALUE OF RELIABILITY & TRUST

Winning brands in H2 2026 will be those that provide peace of mind through reliability and intuitive ownership.

"Our prediction is that the winners in 2026 won't be the brands with the loudest launch or the cheapest price — they'll be the ones that position themselves consistently across the entire journey, from first search to final purchase."



Ben Carter
Chief Customer, Marketing & Media Officer, Carwow

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