

Forget Newton. It's time for

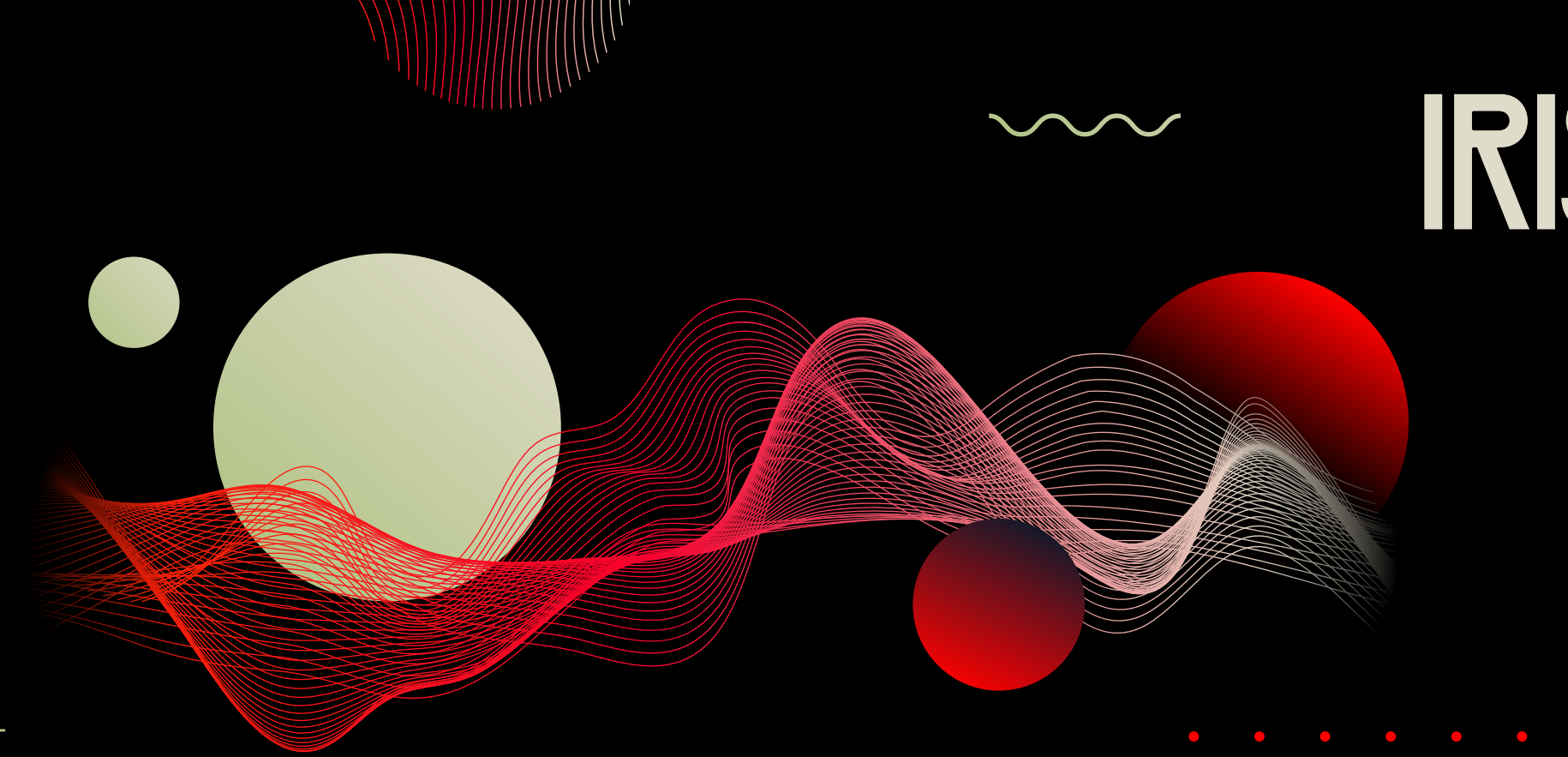
QUANTUM MARKETING

A VIEW FROM BEN ESSEN, GLOBAL CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER AT IRIS

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Marketers are stuck in a Newtonian mindset
 – obsessed with precision, linearity and control.
 But today's consumers behave more like quantum particles: unpredictable, entangled and shaped by context. It's time to shift the model.

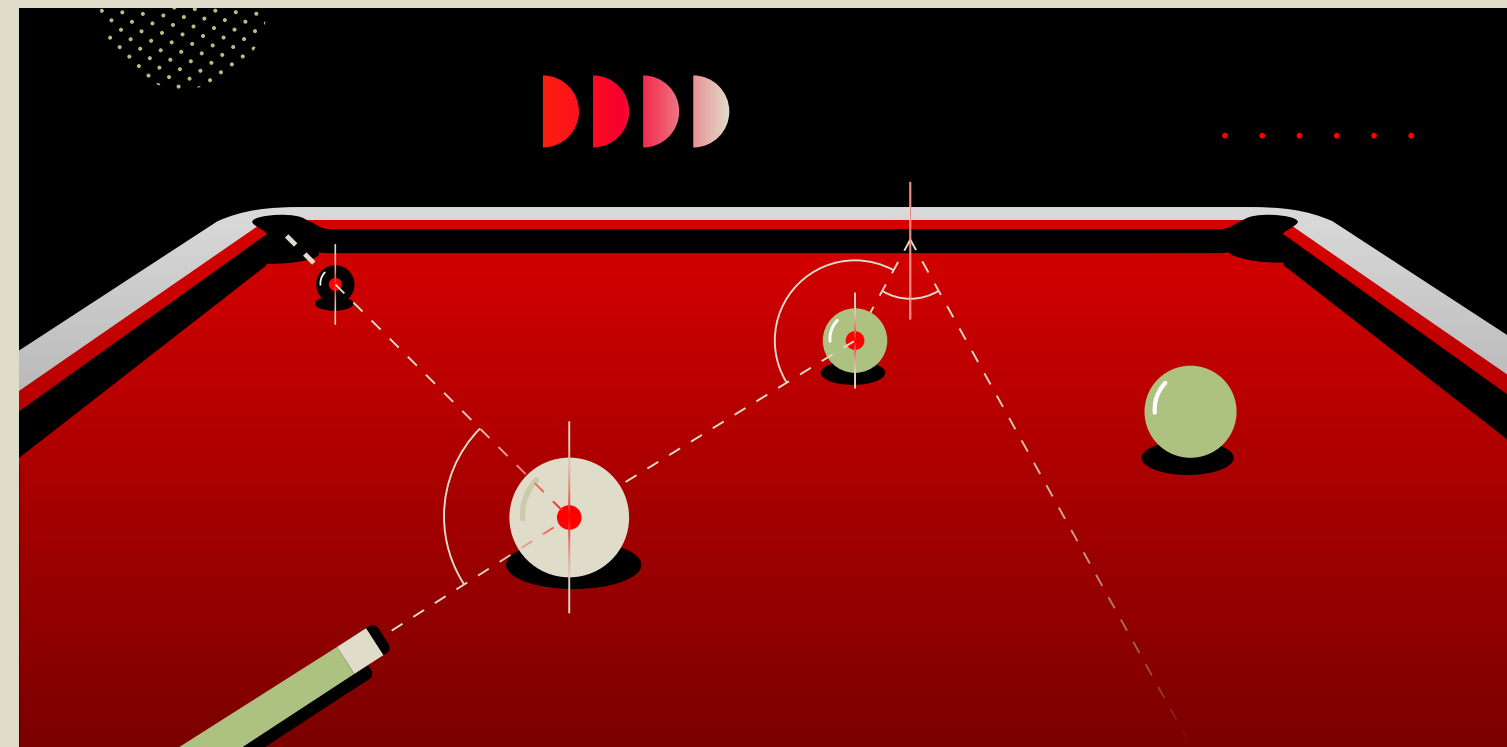


Quantum theory has been around since Einstein, but only now is it shaping how we think – through quantum computing, quantum economics and beyond. So what would a quantum theory of marketing look like? Truth be told, most marketing science is stuck in Newton's world.



Quantum physics is the science of how really tiny things, like atoms and particles, behave in surprising ways that don't follow the usual rules. Instead of moving in straight lines or having fixed answers, they can be in many places or states at once until we look at them.

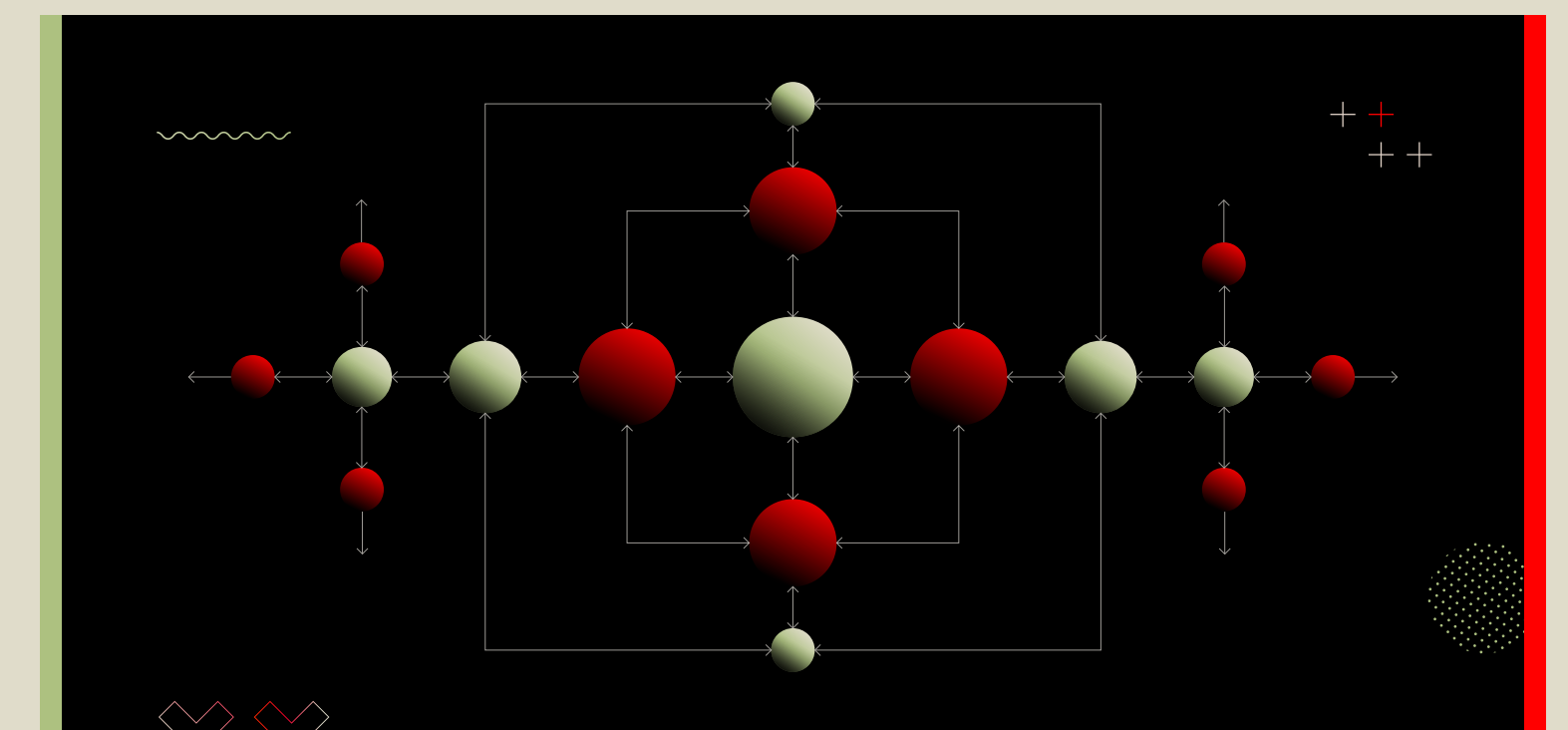
We treat consumers like billiard balls on a snooker table – predictable, inert, waiting to be knocked into place by the right cue. **That's Newtonian thinking:** for every action, an equal and opposite reaction. Fire an ad, measure the impact, optimise, repeat. Linear. Deterministic.



For every action, an equal and opposite reaction.

But reality doesn't work like that. Physics moved on a century ago, when quantum theory showed that the world is built not on clockwork certainty but on messy probability. Particles exist in superposition – multiple states at once – until observed. They're entangled across space, influencing each other even when apart. And the very act of measurement changes the outcome. If you think that doesn't sound suspiciously like consumer behaviour in 2025, you should probably spend more time in the feed.

Marketers cling to rigid models: neat segmentation, linear funnels, the fantasy that consumers march rationally from awareness to consideration to purchase. We put them in boxes – “price sensitive”, “eco-conscious”, “brand loyal” – when in reality they're all of those things at once, depending on context. This obsession with Newtonian certainly is killing brand culture. It reduces marketing to optimisation – A/B testing, micro-targeted performance ads, dashboards of false precision – while the true power of brands, to shape meaning and embed themselves in culture, is left untapped.



Newtonian thinking uses segmentation and rigid models.

Newtonian Marketing = Linear Thinking

Fire ad → measure impact → optimise → repeat

A quantum mindset accepts that consumers exist in superposition. They don't have fixed preferences until they're confronted with a choice. The "sustainability-conscious" shopper still buys fast fashion. The "bargain hunter" splurges on a luxury brand if the cultural moment feels right.

Decisions are entangled. A teenager in London buys trainers not because of product features, but because her favourite artist wore them on TikTok. A parent in Manchester chooses an SUV because of what neighbours will think, not what the spec sheet says. Choices ripple through families, fandoms, communities, algorithms. Brands that fail to understand these networks are flying blind.

Outcomes too are inherently uncertain. No dashboard, however fancy, can predict with Newtonian precision what will land. Quantum marketing deals in probabilities, not guarantees. It's less about drawing a straight line from ad to purchase, more about creating the conditions where your brand is most likely to matter.



Consumers are messy, entangled, context-dependent, always shifting.

Think of brands as both particles and waves. They're tangible products with features and benefits, but also a set of cultural meanings – status, identity, nostalgia, aspiration. Which of those meanings "collapses" in the consumer's mind depends entirely on context. Nike is both a sweatshop scandal and social justice champion. McDonald's is both junk food and a family treat. That's wave-particle duality at work.

Traditional marketing says: pick one position and hammer it home. **Quantum marketing says:** embrace multiplicity.

Participate in culture across contradictory meanings. The task isn't to reduce a brand to a singular truth, but to manage a field of associations.

Newtonian marketing is finished. Consumers are not billiard balls; they are quantum states – messy, entangled, context-dependent, always shifting. Measurement is not neutral; every survey, retarget or nudge changes the very behaviour you're trying to observe.

The marketers who thrive in the coming decade will be those who think probabilistically, who see brands not as blunt instruments of persuasion but as cultural entities. They'll design campaigns as adaptive experiments, not rigid roll-outs. They'll measure influence through networks and cultural ripples, not linear funnels.

Physics moved on a century ago. It's about time marketing caught up.

Experiment Time! Try this thought experiment:

1. Imagine a product you like.
2. Write down three different reasons someone might choose it.
3. Now imagine someone else picks the same product for completely different reasons.
4. You just witnessed quantum consumer behavior!