Shapes of Things

For years, the world in which we lived and operated was turned on its head. Existence was insular, reality was inverted, and all the regular rhythms of life lost the beat.

Now the world is ours again—but it isn't quite the same, now is it? While the memory of how things were pervades, new desires, demands and values forged from our time between worlds are transforming our reboot of 'real life'.

One undeniable human truth of this strange new normal? A universal hunger to *fully* **experience everything** again.

In turn, events and experiences are changing too. A deluge of new pressures and shifting expectations are giving rise to all sorts of new shapes and forms.

In the following pages, we'll feel our way through five emerging *experience futures*. For each, we'll unpack the drivers behind them, what they mean for experiences (implications), and what you can do (actions) to better fit the shapes of things to come.

Audience values are changing, fueling amped-up expectations:

AGENCY: Users and guests are demanding the ability to exert control over their experiences

INVOLVEMENT: Audiences are eager to move from passive to more active participation

INFLUENCE: Opportunities to support and activate change, from big to small, are being sought out

IMMERSION: There's a profound desire to be fully present and more deeply engaged

NOVELTY: People want to experience something new and exciting, just for the sake of it

Market pressures are driving a need for experiences to evolve:

SOCIAL: A priority on ethics and values are driving CSR, equity and inclusion demands

TECH: Digital offers the potential to ease and enhance, while moving at the speed of light

ECONOMIC: Rising costs, financial tightening and general uncertainty loom over business and society

ENVIRONMENTAL: Planetary concern and sustainability requirements are now impossible to ignore

TIME: Urgency is increasing, global processes are slowing down, and the value of time is inflating

EXPERIENCE FUTURES

As new values and enhanced expectations collide with increased pressures, new shapes of experience are emerging. Here are **five futures** that exemplify where the world of experiential is headed in 2023—and beyond.

1 **Full-Contact Experience**

2 **Peak Immersion**

3 **Content+**

4 **Native Sponsorship**

5 **Artificial Renaissance**

FULL-CONTACT EXPERIENCE

Reemergence from an existence of facsimiles and faux-realities has driven many to seek out the fullness of real **experience** again.

Audience values

AGENCY:
INVOLVEMENT:
INFLUENCE:
IMMERSION:
NOVELTY:

Market pressures

SOCIAL:
TECH:
ECONOMIC:
ENVIRONMENTAL:
TIME:

After years of separation, touch starvation, and an alarming epidemic of loneliness, people are craving the embrace of closeness and contact.

This built-up inertia has created a new world of 'experience seekers' who are keen on rediscovering the essence of what it means to be human.

Now, with a reopened world to get back into, many are ditching remote meetings and virtual happy hours in favor of more intimate and intentional in-person connections.

Whether we're touching grass, living life away from home, or testing the limits of our taste buds, it's clear that people are looking for more tangible, visceral ways to engage with reality all over again.

This desire for 'full-contact experience' is also transforming the world around us—from the resurgence of knobs in cars, to the explosion of new, intensified and enchanting experiences inundating the sensory landscape for max-aliveness.

For meeting planners, event organizers and experience designers, now's the time to fully embrace your attendees' most essential, human needs for closeness, contact, and connection.

George P. John

DRIVERS: WHY IS IT HAPPENING

People are suffering from a legitimate epidemic of loneliness. Positive, active and frequent social connection with others is directly equated to personal wellbeing. As a society, we're craving up close and personal engagement like never before.

Interestingly, and perhaps because of this, values like honesty, authenticity and positivity are being prioritized as well—and it's showing in the way people are engaging, and the brands, products and services they support.

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS

On one hand, audiences are eager to experience more, and push the limits of sensation to new ends. On the other hand, audiences are intent to slow down, focus in and eliminate outside noise.

Both extremes represent a similar need—the desire to make deeper connections with people, places and things. For brands, substance, relevance and authenticity are paramount to positive and meaningful engagement.

"Humans are wired for social connection, but we've become more isolated over time."

The Healing Effects of Social Connection

ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

**1. Get rooted in audience understanding**
Experiences must be in service of those who are investing their time, energy and resources to attend. Understanding what your audience needs, what problems they're trying to solve, and how you can help is the first step in designing something meaningful.

From there, identify ideal entry and exit states to build your experience around. What are your guests' intentions going in, what are their desired outcomes, and how can you program your event to get them where they want to be?

Want to get going? Audience listening, persona development and empathy mapping are great places to start.

Contact your GPJ Account Director or reach out to learn more.
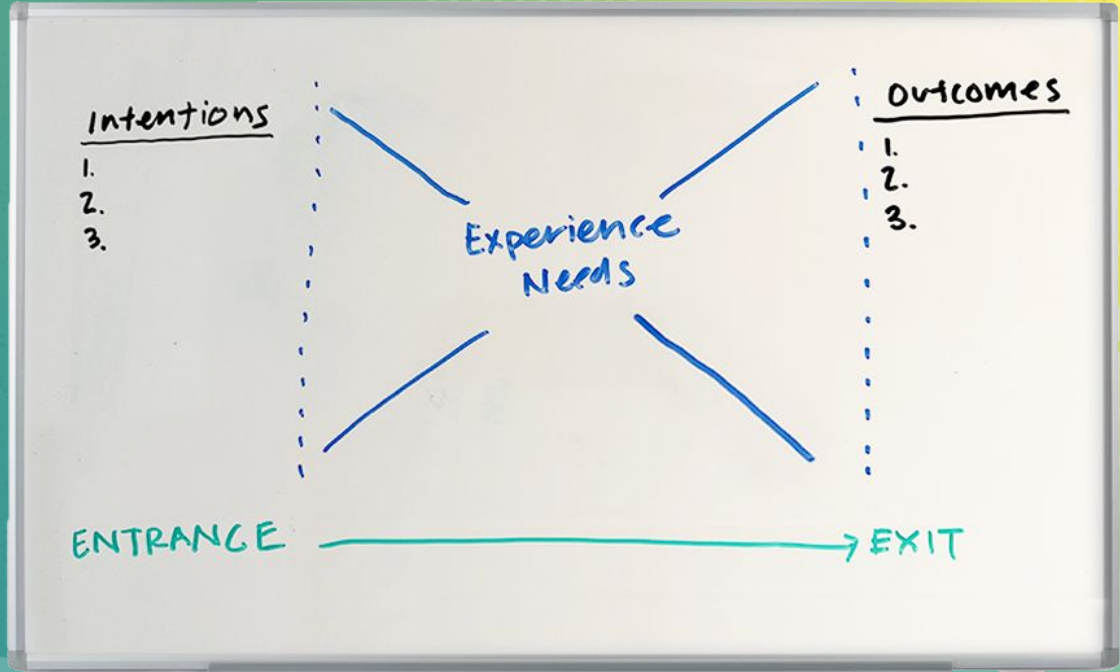
ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

2. Move in closer
Audiences are seeking out experiences that put them in closer contact with what's really real. How might you close the distance by peeling away unnecessary layers of mediation or abstraction?

Could your speakers and audiences be more closely connected? Could a real park take the place of a room designed to look like one? Could a key message not only be seen and heard, but felt?

3. Structured design for unstructured interaction
Full-contact experiences embrace less rote, formulaic formats, allowing more room for spontaneity and serendipity to arise.

This doesn't mean that experience designers can just sit back and watch the sparks fly. Designing ideal environments and contexts for enabling genuine connection is a craft.

Lastly, consider the role of tech, and how it might augment or enhance connections—without turning it into a gimmick.

Image art directed by Carra Buttress created with MidJourney

PEAK IMMERSION

Immersive experiences are growing out of our screens and into the world around us.

Audience values

AGENCY:

INVOLVEMENT:

INFLUENCE:

IMMERSION:

NOVELTY:

Market pressures

SOCIAL:

TECH:

ECONOMIC:

ENVIRONMENTAL:

TIME:

When the 'real world' shut down in 2020, virtual worlds opened up to take the place of what got left behind. Concerts found stages in Fortnite, we travelled the world through Zoom, and events without physical footprints gave birth to digital twins. All of a sudden, planet earth was virtually immersed.

For years leading up to the pandemic, a growing number of people had been turning to video games and VR for immersive escapes from the everyday.

But when the everyday moved its way into virtual space, it was virtual reality that needed escape.

As restrictions loosened and lifted, social scenes roared back to life, the virtual exodus returned us to the real world—and the desire for immersive world-building came with us. Fast forward through immersive Van Gogh, the Vegas Sphere, and Apple's Vision Pro to arrive at the present moment of '*peak immersion*'.

With people hungrier than ever for otherworldly experiences, and with spatial computing and physical spaces now wide open, everything from art and theatre to fine dining and fitness is getting an immersive expansion.

DRIVERS: WHY IS IT HAPPENING?

While the desire for novelty, transcendence, and serious play are primary motivations, the conditions for *'Peak Immersion'* have come as a result of coinciding social and technological disruptions.

IRL, commercial vacancies have provided a fresh pipeline of venues, while advances in XR tech, spatial computing, and access to 3D design tools are accelerating creative potentials that blend online and off. In parallel, nascent disciplines like, immersive design are synthesizing technologies and techniques to produce increasingly higher intensity forms of experiential immersion.

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS

For experience designers, the growing appetite for 'real' immersion is far more than a change in venue, it's a qualitative shift in experience. While immersion is a feeling that can be reproduced in virtual space, to be truly, fully immersed is a physical phenomenon.
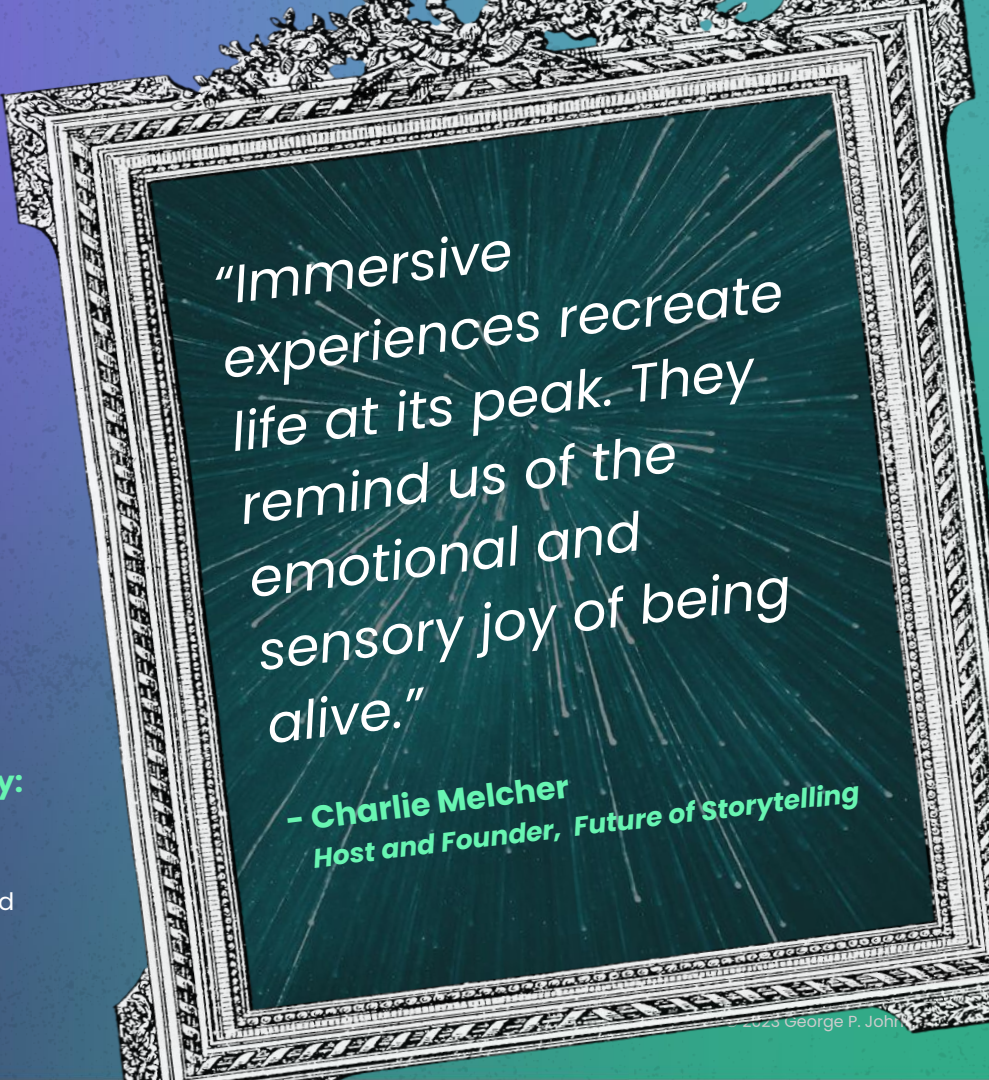
In folding the material environment into the experiencescape, the body and all its wonderful senses are included in the production. Done properly, such experiences can have profound effects.

For brands, it's essential to recognize that immersive experiences are more than party tricks. In fact, immersion is known to enhance learning, social connection, and human wellbeing.

The demand for immersion isn't a fad, it's written in our source code. However, expectations for immersion are ever-evolving alongside tech and culture.

The following shifts illustrate the change in trajectory:

- from solo to social
- from in-home to out-of-home
- from passive to active
- from virtual-first to physical-first

- from screens to surrounds
- from AV to multi-sensory
- from projected to embodied

"Immersive experiences recreate life at its peak. They remind us of the emotional and sensory joy of being alive."

– Charlie Melcher
Host and Founder, *Future of Storytelling*

ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

1. Immerse yourself

Some things are better done than said. The best way to get it is to try an immersive experience out for yourself. Here are a few good places to plunge in:

1. Bassins des Lumières, Bordeaux
2. 180 The Strand, London
3. Moco Museum - Digital Immersive Art, Barcelona
4. Bubble Planet Experience, Brussels
5. Frameless, London
6. Wake the Tiger, Bristol

2. Get your story straight

According to immersion expert and researcher, Paul Zak, *"A narrative arc is the most effective way to sustain immersion."*

Before rushing in, take the time to get your story sorted. Once you've got the beats, consider the role your audience might play as active participants in the making of it.

CTA: *Book a Narrative Workshop with GPJ Strategy to break and build your story*

3. Design your way to new depths

Looking to design for immersion? Use the *'4S Immersive Design Framework'* to investigate new depths:

SENSORY	SOCIAL
What senses could you expand into?	How might you amp up the being with others?
SPATIAL	STORY
How could you engage the environment as collaborator?	What's the story and how do participants play a part?
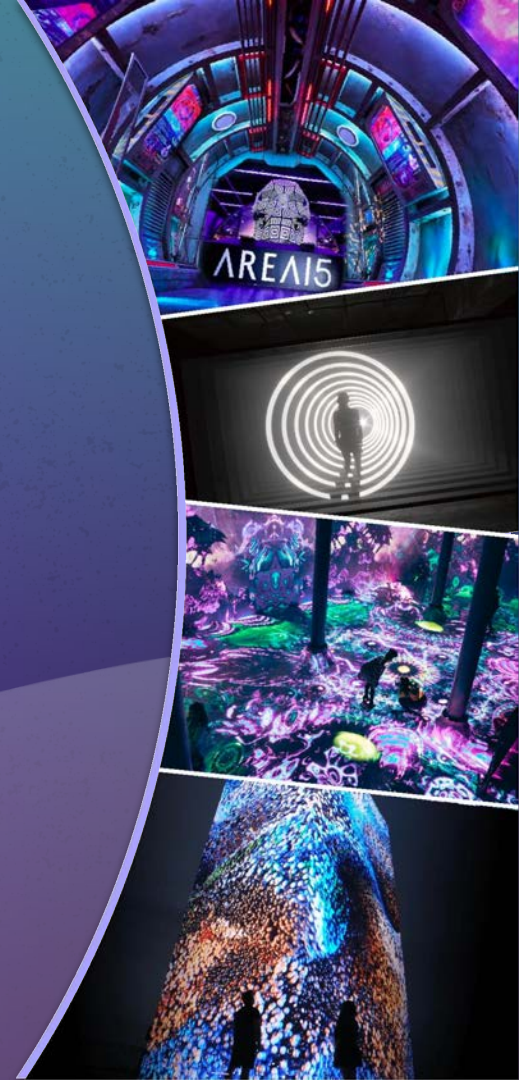
CONTENT +

The amalgamation of events and content is creating a new marketing paradigm driven by experience-led campaigns.

Years of virtual-first engagement have risen the water mark for compelling, high-quality content. Now, for most audiences, it's the expectation.

In the world of events and experiences, the shift is significant.

Sure, it's easier than ever to capture high quality, in-the-moment moments. But in a world where consumers are clamoring for more agency, immersion and active participation in their experiences, it's now vital for events and content to work together in lockstep.

This has driven brands to think more **strategically** about the relationship between events and content than ever before. And as these two entities continue to amalgamate, exciting new possibilities for plussed-up **experience-led campaigns** await brands and organizers who jump on board.

Here are four big ways that content is plussing up events and experiences:

+ Purpose

Sessions at live events are becoming more scripted and story-driven to yield highly-consumable content.

+ Everyone

Programming at proprietary events is increasingly being regionalized, translated and made more accessible to all audiences.

+ Anywhere

Events are being outfitted with advanced production setups, turning them into fully-functional broadcast studios. Meanwhile, attendees are endlessly capturing and sharing their own experiences.

+ Everywhere

Event content is being thoughtfully delivered and distributed via proprietary platforms, VOD, social channels, and in-person watch parties to more effectively reach audiences.

Image art directed by Carra Buttress created with MidJourney

DRIVERS: WHY IS IT HAPPENING

The pandemic served as a forcing function for brands and marketers to uplevel their content capabilities. Thinking strategically about content and how it can more intentionally support broader sales and marketing strategies should now be table stakes.

Audience expectations for relevant, worthwhile content have also risen significantly. Poor, ineffective and low-effort content will be easily sniffed out—and quickly ignored.

Lastly, people are increasingly taking on the role of creator. One's ability to exert their own subjective influence over brands, products and culture is stronger than ever. Attendees as influencers, and potentially co-collaborators, is something that brands and event organizers should be keenly tuned into.

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS

Post-pandemic, with the world as our stage once again, brands are making their content more engaging, effective and expansive.

For experience planners and designers, leveraging events as content—generators isn't a new concept by any means—but brands are now approaching this notion with more sophistication and rigor.

Unleashing the power of content as a connector, driver and enhancer across the entire experience life cycle has become more viable and achievable. For brands aspiring to this ideal, bringing creative, production, marketing and technology teams together in greater synchronization is the first—and most crucial—step.

Image art directed by Carra Buttress created with MidJourney

ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

1. Look forward

How can content help you get where you're going?

Take a look at your most important marketing goals and objectives, and consider how content can help you get there.

TIP: a workshop is a great way to bring sales and marketing colleagues into the fold and give them a sense of ownership.

2. Look inward

Content is everywhere, and providing something of value is necessary to cut through the clutter.

Ask yourself—why does your audience turn to your brand, and how can you create content to satisfy those desires?

3. Look outward

Events are unique melting pots of diverse perspectives and expertise. Consider how others—guests, partners and sponsors—can contribute.

Is there an opportunity for the kind of co-created content that could only happen at an in-person experience?

4. Look backward

Treat your event content like you would any marketing vehicle, and continually assess performance.

Constant evaluation, iteration and optimization will drive growth and progress.

TIP: incorporate content performance into your broader event measurement plans.

5. Do it live

Live brings content to life.

Consider how you can best structure your experience for dynamic content capture, and develop a strategic plan to leverage and distribute it long after the event is over.

ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

Build stronger synergy between events and content with a 360-degree approach.

Live events are where content comes to life. But beyond that, how can you look inward, outward, forward and backward to plus up your experience?

Internal: Determine what your audience needs, why they turn to you, and how you can create content to satisfy those desires.

External: Explore opportunities to activate attendees, partners and sponsors to amplify your experience with co-created content.

Future: Take a look at your most important marketing goals and objectives, and consider how content can help you where you want to go.

Past: Continually assess performance, and adjust accordingly. Constant evaluation, iteration and optimization will drive growth and effectiveness.

A 360-degree approach to experience content planning:

External Contributors

Past Performance

Live Event

Future Goals

Brand Value
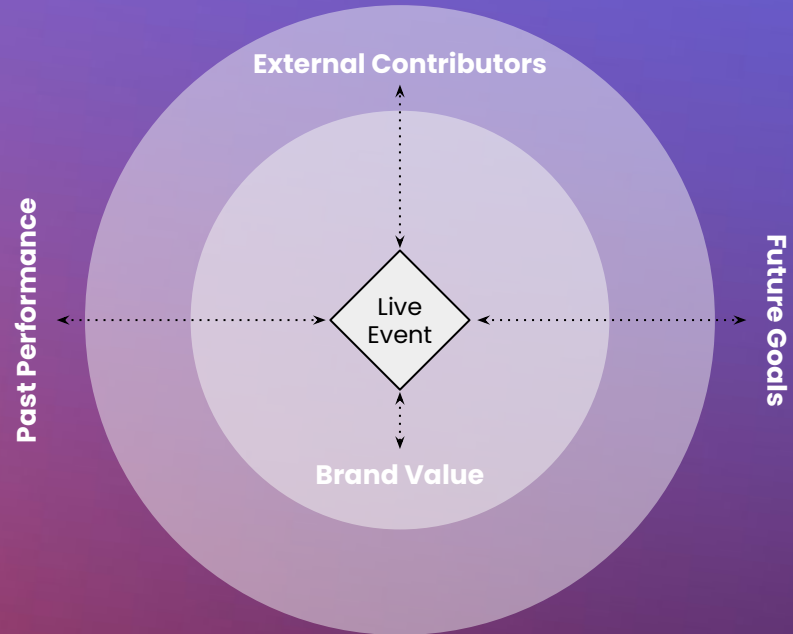
X-axis: time considerations; y-axis: content sources

NATIVE SPONSORSHIP

Sponsorships are co-evolving with events to stand out in less typical, more meaningful ways.

The last few years of disruption have done a number on the economics of events. Costs got crazy, budgets got cut, and revenue streams went dry. For sponsorships, it's been a rollercoaster.

It didn't take long for event folks to realize the old approach to sponsorships wasn't working in the new world. A booth for a banner ad wasn't a fair exchange. Experimentation ensued, and as event organizers and sponsors co-created their future together, native sponsorships emerged.

This evolution towards native integration has happened in other mediums before. Television ads gave way to soap operas and product placements. Digital ads have learned to blend in, too. Native ad spend in the UK is expected to increase from approximately $6 billion currently, to around $27 billion by 2025.

When it comes to events, what stands out about this new breed of sponsorship is the sponsors stand out in becoming an integral part of the show.

DRIVERS: WHY IS IT HAPPENING

As delivery models and methods of distribution evolve, the value equation between events, attendees, and sponsors changes.
Now, with sponsors demanding more impactful and resilient investments, more integrated sponsorships are growing in appeal.
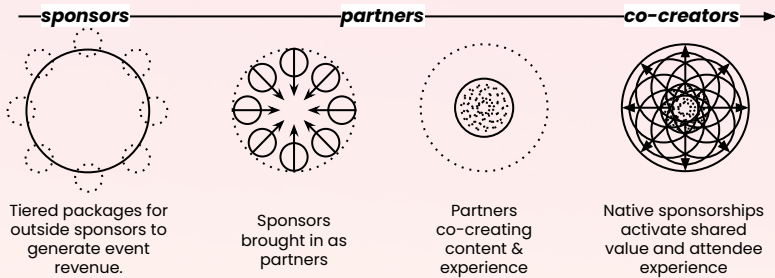
Looking ahead, continuing budgetary and social pressures on organizers and sponsors will play a significant role in the compression of sponsorship packages into more collaborative, cohesive, higher-value forms.

Image art directed by Carla Buttress

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS

As ecosystems transform industries, events that bring ecosystems together will need changing, too. Those able to coordinate the most partners together in service of greater needs and higher purposes will take the lead in business and events.

For the events industry, the emergence of native sponsorships is rooted in a fundamental shift in the relationship between organizers and sponsors, as reflected in the model below:

sponsors —————— *partners* —————— *co-creators* →

| Tiered packages for outside sponsors to generate event revenue. | Sponsors brought in as partners | Partners co-creating content & experience | Native sponsorships activate shared value and attendee experience |

Essential in realizing this shift is a change in perspective. From a native POV, sponsors aren't just sources of revenue, they are co-creative partners in the making of experience.

To realize this shift requires a change in behavior, too. For starts, organizers should plan to bring outside sponsors into the mix earlier, and more often.

Image art directed by Carra Buttress created with MidJourney

NATIVE SPONSORS @ OMR

OMR (Online Marketing Rockstars) in Hamburg, Germany, is Europe's leading platform for the global digital economy, spanning content, events and technology.
The OMR Festival with 70.000 attendees in 2023 is the event of the year for marketing pros and aficionados. Part expo, conference, Masterclass, side events and party, the Festival is the centerpiece of OMR.

More than a festival it is an extraordinary experience, and sponsors play an integral role in making it so. This reciprocal relationship is a win-win-win (partners, organizer, attendees).

For B2B event pros, cultural happenings like OMR are a case study in successful native sponsorship activation.
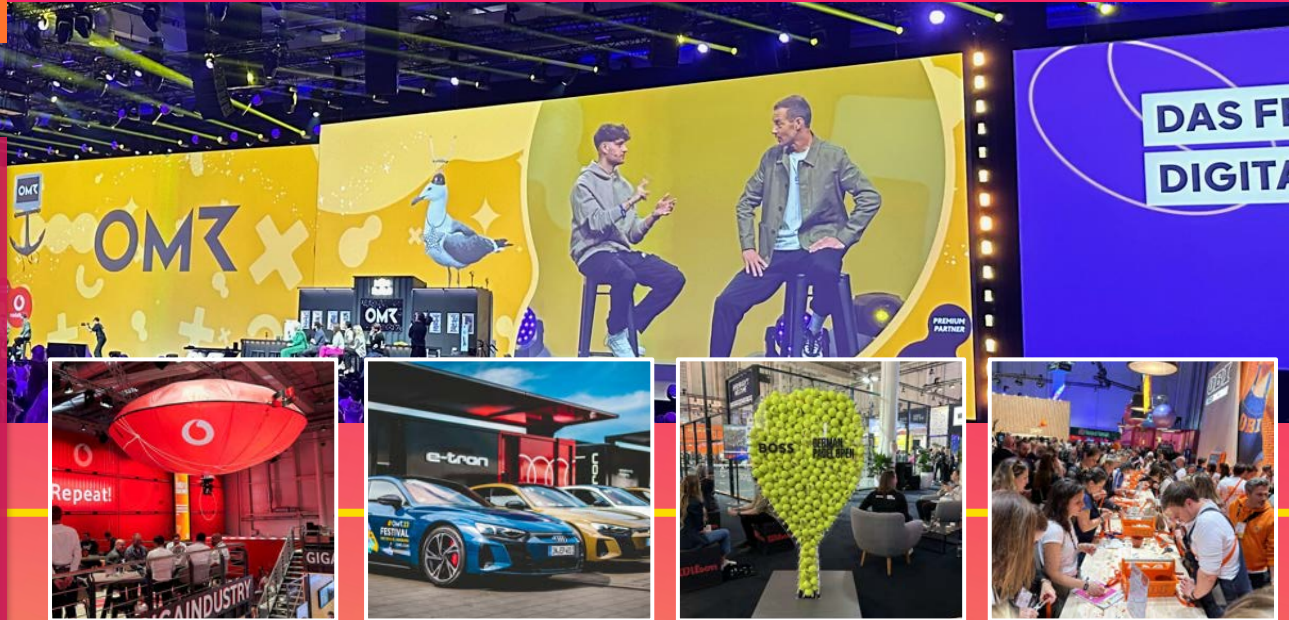
1. Vodafone
An established content partnership since 2019. The expertise of Vodafone's experts is incorporated into jointly produced industry reports, OMR Daily articles, seminars or the OMR podcast

2. Audi
An official shuttle and transportation partner with e-fleet co-branded cars that created hype at the beginning of the attendee journey

3. Boss
With a huge exhibition area Boss and OMR highlighted 'Padel', in Europe a rather unknown sport, which could push this sport to a trend sport which such two strong sponsors

4. OBI
The German hardware store offered an area in which the participants could engage in handicraft activities (mobile lanyard)

ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

1. Organizers, bring partners in from the get-go

Developing native sponsorships is more like building a partnership than selling ad space. Bring your partners into the process from the very beginning.

Don't forget, the same thing that attracts attendees to events is what attracts brands to sponsorships; to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

Answering the following question is as good a place as any to start. *What's something only you and your partners could make together?*

2. Sponsors, invest in ideal contexts

Native sponsorship is all about context. Not all sponsorships need to go so deep. However, for your innermost circle of strategic alliances, native approaches are fertile ground for generating new value together.

Now's the time to reassess your portfolio and zero in on your ideal contexts. Once you've identified the right places and situations, invest in story and experience to complement presence and placement.
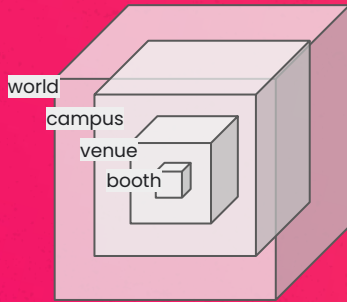
Value inversion: from standing out to fitting in
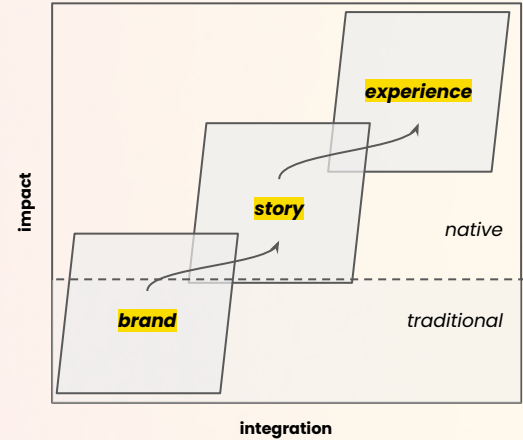
ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

3. Think outside the booth

Native sponsorship means imagining opportunities beyond the normal confines of the booth and event. As a thought experiment, consider ways of redistributing your sponsorship differently in and over space and time.


world
campus
venue
booth

EXPANDING IN SPACE:
What new possibilities open up as you move out of the booth and into the venue?

Think outside the venue into the surround environment. How might you enhance the experience while uplifting the local community?

Lastly, think way outside the box. Are there opportunities to bring the outside world into the on-site experience, and vice versa?

*Did you know that **_96% of global tourists_** say it's important that their spending has a positive impact on their destinations?*

anytime
pre-event
post-event
real-time
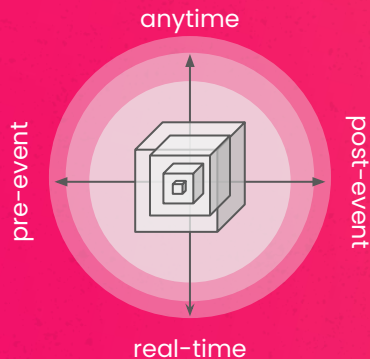
EXPANDING IN TIME:
X axis: Pre-event to post-event
How might you orchestrate marketing efforts to lead into and out of the event? From a narrative perspective, how might your stories converge or play off each other over time?

Y axis: Real-time to anytime
What on-demand content could you make and capture on-site? How might you blend into the real time engagement or enhance downtimes in between and after hours?

ARTIFICIAL RENAISSANCE

As the world gets rewired in the image of A.I., it's the *'only human'* stuff we'll long for most.

artificial: *made or produced by human beings, rather than occurring*

naturally **renaissance:** *rebirth, revival*

If you believe Bill Gates, or your newsfeed, the age of AI has officially begun. As the generative era unfolds, industries are reorienting, new ecosystems are emerging, and age-old hopes and fears are resurfacing.

There's no escaping the AI conversation. It's not just monopolizing online forums and feeds (or reports like these), it's in line at the grocery store, it's over coffee with a friend, it's riding the train on the way into work. One reason for this collective obsession is a shared sense that the world is now different. However, just how different and in what ways has proven hard to pin down. So, we talk it out.

A technological revolution is a social revolution in waiting. Whatever the tech may be, fire or the printing press, cars or the internet, what makes it revolutionary is the level to which it disrupts the status quo.

As AI makes its way deeper into our organizations and everyday lives, new questions, problems, and potentials erupt onto the scene. These ruptures are giving rise to new reasons for people to gather together--to share stories, connect dots, to do what humans do. The tech is novel but the dance isn't new.

In transitional times like these, the critical role of events can't be overstated. The more disruptive the tech, the more we humans need to connect.

The *'Artificial Renaissance'* is both a reimagining of our relationship to the things we make, and a deepening understanding of what makes us, us. For events and experiences, the potential of generative AI is hard to fathom, and yet, it's the 'only human' stuff that attendees will be looking for most.

DRIVERS: WHY IS IT HAPPENING

According to McKinsey, organizations that have adopted AI are realizing decreases in costs and increases in revenue. With purse strings tightening and productivity in a slump, it's no wonder why AI is attracting so much attention. References to AI during calls with investors are up 77% YoY.
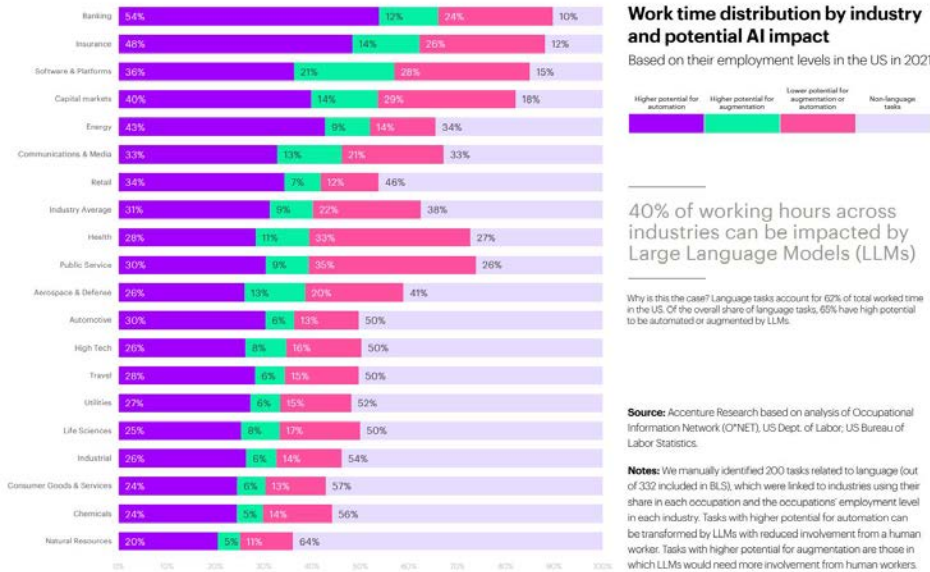
With AI adopters pulling ahead of their peers, and many tasks 'exposed', the pressure for individuals and organizations to partner with AI is mounting. Who wants to get lapped or left behind?

While the AI craze may feel sudden, the staggering acceleration we feel today has been decades in the making. Only now, a step change in our relationship with AI has occurred, with the democratization of access to new models.

In the grand scheme of things, it's a story as old as we are, rooted in the deeply human drive to survive and transcend our own limitations.

Now, for event pros and experience people, the question is not if AI will change our industry, but how.

Figure 3: Generative AI will transform work across industries

Work time distribution by industry and potential AI impact
Based on their employment levels in the US in 2021

40% of working hours across industries can be impacted by Large Language Models (LLMs)

ARTIFICIAL RENAISSANCE

IMPLICATIONS: WHAT IT MEANS

Big picture, the value proposition of physical events will be enhanced in the age of AI. With online trust eroding, the certainty and truth of in-person experiences will only grow in value.

We also expect to see continued growth in AI themed events and communities addressing the collective threats and opportunities posed by AI. For existing players, now is when the next generation of industry-leading flagships and gatherings will be made.

For experiences, AI will be an accelerant to existing trends. For attendees, AI-powered engagements and environments are already bringing the unimaginable to life--upping the ante for personalization, convenience, and wow. The new expectations of the *'Artificial Renaissance'* will be set by a few, but apply to all.

While the 'front-end' experience has gotten lots of attention, the 'back-end' is just as ripe for intelligent innovation--optimizing supply chains, workstreams and inventories, or modeling complex systems like the behavior of crowds.

For all of the concerns AI raises, it also has the potential to unlock some of our most pressing problems. If AI systems like AlphaFold can predict the 3D shape of a protein from a strip of amino acids, then no doubt AI could help expedite DEIB, accessibility, and sustainability initiatives.

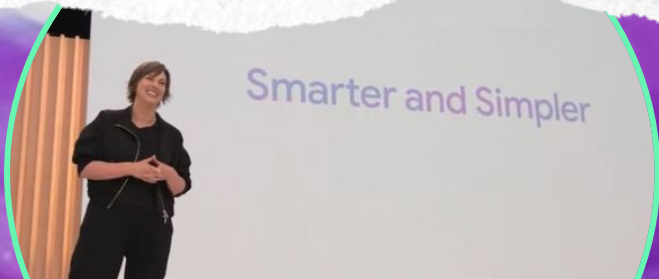***What's the gnarliest problem you could solve with superhuman intelligence?***

Image art directed by Carra Buttress created with MidJourney

Smarter and Simpler

'AI could be more profound than fire or electricity.'
- Sundar Pichai, *Google CEO*

2023 FUTURE OF EXPERIENCE

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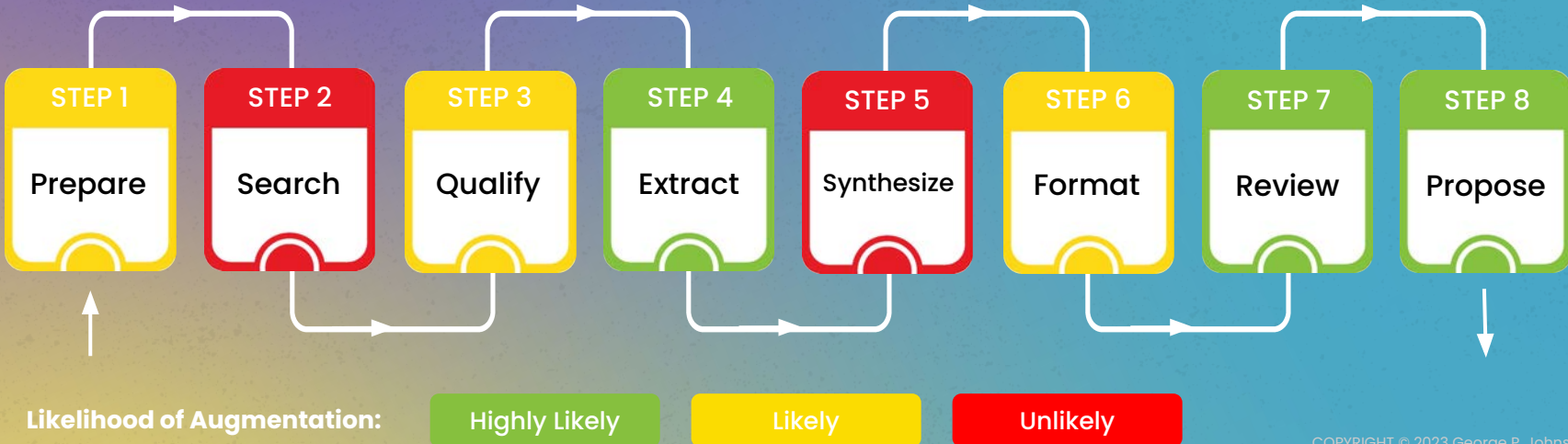
ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

1. Assess for opportunities to assist, amplify, or augment
Whether you're assessing your event, a portfolio, or your organization as a whole, you can use a similar approach to assessing opportunities for innovation with AI.

Create a workflow chart to map the steps of a process or task. Consider the likelihood of AI assistance, amplification or augmentation for each step.

Next review each step and consider the role of human creativity, experience, and discernment in optimizing for success along the way.

Design an experiment to test out different ways of partnering to find the right balance between human and machine. Approach each instance with a 'pilot'

STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3	STEP 4	STEP 5	STEP 6	STEP 7	STEP 8
Prepare	Search	Qualify	Extract	Synthesize	Format	Review	Propose

Likelihood of Augmentation: Highly Likely   Likely   Unlikely

ACTION: WHAT TO DO?

2. Get unsexy

Some of the most meaningful opportunities for AI to enhance experiential aren't sexy, they're invisible. Considers a systems-mapping exercise to help document the processes and flows of planning and production.

- Ticketing
- Inventory mgmt (F&B, swag)
- Space and scenario planning
- Price / package modeling
- Supply chain and material assessments
- Sustainability mgmt
- Crowd mgmt, traffic flows

3. Take AI for a human spin using the 'Four Forces' framework

The Four Forces is a map of basic human desires and motivations developed by Trish Blain. Use these primary forces to root, inspire, and focus your ideation around human needs.

PURPOSE	CONNECTION
Everybody wants to be part of something bigger	Everybody wants to belong, be loved and in love
GROWTH	EXPRESSION
Everybody wants tomorrow to be better than today	Everybody wants to be seen and heard