

THE

21

# NEW RULES OF POST-PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE DESIGN

CO-PRODUCED WITH



## The fundamental changes that will forever disrupt the industry's event design practices—and why they're good for business

To say that the event industry has taken a good long look in the mirror in the wake of the pandemic is an understatement. Most event marketers have used the challenges of the past two and half years as an opportunity to reevaluate. Some even used the pandemic as a chance to rethink their entire event design portfolio and practice.

But as event marketers begin the work of building back, they have to resist the temptation to go back to their pre-pandemic playbooks. Or even their *during* pandemic playbooks because, let's be honest, those are already outdated, too.

"There's no rule book," says Victor Torregroza, Events and Experiences Program Manager at Intel. "We're all in the business of storytelling and for the last two and a half years, it was through a bright screen. [Then] we wrote rule books for virtual and those are burned up, too, because now it's, 'How do you engage your audiences wherever they are at, in their time zone, when they want, and keep it short and concise.' So our rule book? Burned, gone, recycled. It's absolutely exciting."

This April, Event Marketer and leading event structure partner Highmark Techsystems sat down with Torregroza and a panel of industry peers at the Experiential Marketing Summit Design Lab to discuss the unique nuances and challenges of experience design in a post-pandemic world and what the playbook of tomorrow might include. What emerged was a set of *new* rules that take into account the many changes impacting the way events are experienced—and the upside for businesses and event marketers who are game for real change.

### THE PANELISTS



**Joe Conover**  
Strategic Manager-  
Live Events Group  
Panasonic  
Connect



**Lucille Essey**  
SVP, Executive  
Creative Director  
Jack Morton  
Worldwide



**Victor Torregroza**  
Events and  
Experiences  
Program Manager  
Intel



**Harley Ward**  
Creative Director-  
Retail Innovation and  
Store Environment  
AT&T

To learn more about Highmark TechSystems or to see the range of modular structures they can provide for your next event or activation, email Matt Andrews at [mandrews@highmarktech.com](mailto:mandrews@highmarktech.com) | 260.483.0012 x2104

RULE

#1

RULE

#2

RULE

#3

RULE

#4

RULE

#5

RULE

#6

## LIVE EVENTS MUST BE RECIPROCAL

Many attendees are ready to get back to live events, but they're more judicious about which events they attend and which experiences are worth the inherent health risks that come with attending them. "What we've found is those that are willing to engage and *want* to engage—they're giving you something, right?" says Harley Ward, Creative Director-Retail Innovation and Store Environment, AT&T. "They're giving you their time. Their energy. They're showing up. They're willing to participate. We have to give back. It's no longer this moment of activating for the sake of activation. It's about activating to create that connection with the consumer in a way that is meaningful for *them*."

## COMFORT LEVELS REQUIRE FRESH APPROACHES

Event designers will need to push creative boundaries and explore cutting-edge technologies to develop experiences that speak to a wide array of comfort levels. "What could have been a highly touched, highly interactive meet-and-greet moment, or an interactive digital opportunity, has become more of a place in which we have to stretch our abilities to figure out what type of technology can create that engagement for those that don't want to interact in that way," says Ward.

## THE 365 COMMUNITY IS KEY

Smart events have always had engaging pre- and post-event touchpoints designed to create an event community that buzzes all year round, but in the post-pandemic era, those touchpoints will become even more critical for sustaining event portfolios. "If you buy a ticket, your experience is starting digitally first," says Joe Conover, Strategic Manager-Live Events Group at Panasonic Connect. "And then the expectation is once you approach your live event, there's a community and that we're all going through the same thing together. There's this pool of people that you commune with and expect to see."

## 'SITTING IS THE NEW SMOKING'

Hybrid and virtual event producers will be faced with even shorter attention spans than before the pandemic and will need to condense online experiences into even tighter experiences more suitable to Zoom fatigued audiences. "We don't want to be online for three days or even three hours," says Victor Torregroza, Events and Experiences Program Manager at Intel. "But [we're] making sure that the experiences they have with us are short, concise. And then you *move on*. Sitting is the new smoking—it's just not going to work."

## EMBRACE THE TOTAL TEAR DOWN

As painful as it is to let go, most of the ways brands strategized and activated events pre-pandemic are, well, outdated. Brands today are looking for design partners that can do a deeper level of thinking, says Ward. "It's not using the formula that we were using for 10 years prior. It's breaking apart everything that we know and what we as a brand expect and pushing us in a way that makes us think a little differently as well."

## IT'S MORE ABOUT THE 'WHY'

A successful total tear down should lead you to some hard questions—chief among them: why are we doing this event? And, should this event even *be* an event? Asking the hard questions may lead you to smarter strategies that resonate better with today's customers. "Top of mind for me, whenever I'm having those conversations in those planning sessions, it's less about event production and planning and much more about event *strategy* and *why* we're showing up and how frequently we're showing up and thinking through that plotted course, as opposed to those two or three big moments a year that you put all your energy into," says Ward.

To learn more about Highmark TechSystems or to see the range of modular structures they can provide for your next event or activation, email Matt Andrews at [mandrews@highmarktech.com](mailto:mandrews@highmarktech.com) | 260.483.0012 x2104

RULE

#7

RULE

#8

RULE

#9

RULE

#10

RULE

#11

## WINNING CAMPAIGNS WILL ENGAGE EVERYWHERE

Event designers who can develop an omnichannel approach to their experiences that engage attendees across every channel and device will have a leg up in the future. “It’s all about being able to reach your audiences again, whether they’re in-person or at home,” says Torregroza. “And what we did in the past, that had its purpose. But now we get to write everything brand new again. What we’re looking for is new ideas, better ways to engage online or in-person anywhere in the world, on any device, because we’ve proven we can do that—we don’t have to go into the office.”

## YOU CAN STILL EXPERIMENT

The pandemic gave most event designers the latitude to try new things with relatively low risk. But just because live events are coming back doesn’t mean the crazy ideas have to stop. “You could come up with ideas and they may work, or they may not, but because you were still providing an opportunity or content or connection or a moment, people were willing to engage and try it out,” says Ward. “It’s always been my philosophy to continue to rewrite [the playbook] and never do the same thing twice, if you can help it or afford it. The acceleration the last few years has given us has been great.”

**“There’s no rule book that you can fall back on and say, ‘OK, this is going to show my success.’ There’s a little bit of anxious energy in the industry. Especially for creators. It’s not just the timelines that are challenging, but the way we are working is challenging.”** –Lucille Essey, Jack Morton Worldwide

## YOUR ‘MAVERICKS’ ARE PRICELESS ALLIES

Those people who *do* show up to your events? Those are your “mavericks” and they have critical information you need to know, like, why they came and what you can do to make your events better. “We are making an effort to keep the surveys short, but really getting their input *because* they decided to come,” says Torregroza. “They’re willing to give you that feedback now because they know you’re trying to figure out what the future looks like. And it’s priceless.”

## THE METAVERSE WILL BE YOUR NEXT ‘VENUE’

The metaverse may be an opportunity for event designers to finally bridge the physical with the digital to create more meaningful online experiences where digital audiences are not just passive viewers but active participants. “The things that we’re talking about are: How do you create virtual engagement points or platforms where *everybody* can be in the physical world?” says Ward. “You have a main stage moment in a virtual world, but then you can also step over to the side as a virtual attendee and have a conversation while the main stage is happening.”

## THE BEST CAMPAIGNS WILL STRIKE A BALANCE

We’re all one click away from a distraction, right? The most memorable events will need to strike the right balance, asking just the right amount of time and engagement from physical and digital audiences. “You don’t always want to be online, but you want to have some moments of learning, some moments of engagement, some moments of delight,” says Torregroza. “It’s a balancing act of informing and connecting through those screens and with sensitivity.”

To learn more about Highmark TechSystems or to see the range of modular structures they can provide for your next event or activation, email Matt Andrews at [mandrews@highmarktech.com](mailto:mandrews@highmarktech.com) | 260.483.0012 x2104

RULE

#12

RULE

#13

RULE

#14

## INSPIRATION WILL COME FROM EVERYWHERE

While event designers were busy navigating and innovating their way through the pandemic, so was everyone else. Smart event pros will look outside their verticals and industries for inspiration. “What I prefer not to do is look to direct obvious competitors,” says Ward. “Getting inspiration from how art museums are showing up in interesting and innovative ways through engaging and digital moments. And there has been interesting work done with various performances in a virtual space. It’s not losing sight of what makes you as a person want to attend something.”

## SPECIALISTS WILL BECOME GENERALISTS

Creative roles and expectations are changing so quickly in the wake of the pandemic that many roles once defined by function (think: copywriter, art director) may morph into a more amorphous “creative” title that better reflects the vast knowledge creatives need to have today. “Because the way we are communicating is changing so rapidly, roles are changing as well, and how you engage with the work, and your contribution, has to change,” says Lucille Essey, SVP, Executive Creative Director, Jack Morton Worldwide. “For young creators, it’s even harder than it was previously because your skills need to be a lot broader and you need to feel comfortable across myriad platforms.”

## NEW HIRES WILL REJECT TRADITIONAL SILOS

As creative teams look to hire the next generation, they may find that the org charts and hierarchies of the past don’t fit with post-pandemic expectations. “They don’t want to be stuck in a silo just doing one thing,” says Essey. “They want to have the opportunity to touch everything. They’re coming at it with such a different perspective and such a different mindset. And I think that’s what makes our industry so exciting at the moment is that the definitions, the boundaries, the guardrails—they’re not really there anymore.”

**“...[we’re] making sure that the experiences they have with us are short, concise. And then you move on. Sitting is the new smoking—it’s just not going to work.”** –Victor Torregroza, Intel

RULE

#15

RULE

#16

## UNCERTAINTY WILL CONTINUE TO BE THE NEW NORMAL

Even with events making a comeback, work environments across the industry are still volatile. Timelines are compressed. Best practices don’t work anymore. “Everyone’s so uncertain,” says Essey. “There’s no rule book that you can fall back on and say, ‘OK, this is going to show my success.’ There’s a little bit of anxious energy in the industry. Especially for creators. It’s not just the timelines that are challenging, but the way we are working is challenging.”

## IT’S OK TO KEEP IT SIMPLE

Your comeback events don’t have to be the biggest “wow” to be effective and in fact may turn off audiences slowly making their way back into the world. An event with a clear, authentic purpose that’s time efficient and focused will strike the right tone. “Yes, we have all this technology, but it’s a simpler approach to connect, to be amazing, to be immersive and have that moment,” says Torregroza. “So [it’s about] simplicity, back to basics, with a little bit of sincerity, purpose and comfort.”

To learn more about Highmark TechSystems or to see the range of modular structures they can provide for your next event or activation, email Matt Andrews at [mandrews@highmarktech.com](mailto:mandrews@highmarktech.com) | 260.483.0012 x2104

**“It’s always been my philosophy to continue to rewrite [the playbook] and never do the same thing twice, if you can help it or afford it. The acceleration the last few years has given us has been great.”** –Harley Ward, AT&T

RULE

#17

## SMALL IS THE NEW BIG

During the pandemic, many event designers went big to reach as many people as possible. Now, many are finding more value in smaller, but more frequent moments. “I think that is a trend that will continue to grow,” says Ward. “It’s less about filling the room and more about keeping that conversation going.”

RULE

#18

## SOME AUDIENCES MAY NEVER COME BACK

As events come back, many event marketers are realizing that some of the virtual audiences they reached during the pandemic may stay remote even if the industry gets back to normal. “Don’t forget everything we’ve learned over the last two and a half years,” warns Torregroza. “I know there’s an energy and excitement to come back in-person, but many of our audiences, many of our customers, and we experienced this at CES, are going stay home because they can, and it’s convenient.”

**“Attendance might be a little less but certainly the touchpoints are getting a lot more responsive and a lot more people asking the question: How do I curate an experience for myself and my family?”** –Joe Conover, Panasonic Connect

RULE

#19

## NEW ROI MODELS WILL REPLACE OLD ONES

As post-pandemic events become fewer and more targeted, many marketers will see a shift in value perception. Where attendance numbers, cost and ROI were important metrics before, there may be more value placed on the value of the “warm, meaningful moments,” says Ward. “Someone standing in that space, immersing themselves in your experience for 20 minutes is worth more than five other people that come in for two seconds. There is a change that we’re trying to make happen in that thinking.”

RULE

#20

## CONSUMERS WILL DEMAND MORE CUSTOMIZED EXPERIENCES

Along with rising expectations among event attendees is also the desire to have more tailored experiences. If they’re going to leave the safety of their home, after all, shouldn’t the experience be designed just for them? “I think that’s the challenge everybody sees right now,” says Conover. “Attendance might be a little less but certainly the touchpoints are getting a lot more responsive and a lot more people asking the question: How do I curate an experience for myself and my family?”

RULE

#21

## CONSUMERS WILL CRAVE FULLY INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCES

A lot of event experiences may be immersive but are ultimately static. The next phase of event engagement is going to involve actually participating in the experience, predicts Conover. “Can I manipulate that storyline? Can I participate in what you see on the wall? How can I use crowdsourcing? How can we leverage gesture feedback,” he says.

To learn more about Highmark TechSystems or to see the range of modular structures they can provide for your next event or activation, email Matt Andrews at [mandrews@highmarktech.com](mailto:mandrews@highmarktech.com) | 260.483.0012 x2104