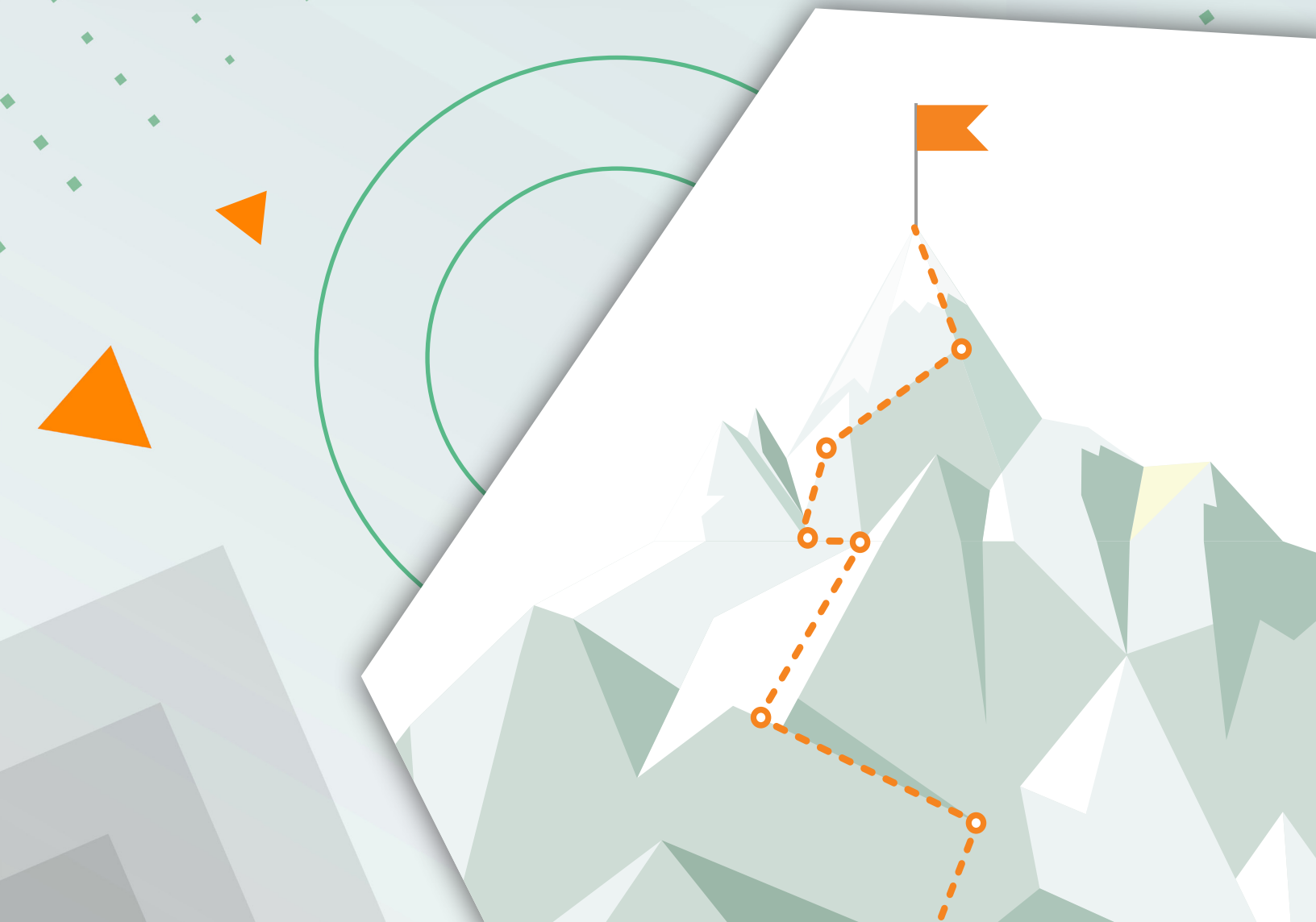


THE EVENT STRATEGIST'S GUIDE TO 2023 EXPERIENCE PLANNING

The industry has experienced a seismic shift. Mastering the new event landscape requires recalibrating the role of content, aligning attendee expectations, leveraging design as an engagement tool and embracing an audience-specific mindset.





INTRODUCTION

The stakes are high for 2023 event experience planning. Brands expect their budgets to nearly match 2019 spend levels, according to recent research*, yet it's as much a sigh of relief for event strategists as a breathtaking challenge. The way events are produced, consumed, measured and entrenched in broader organizational goals have all changed. Audiences are everywhere. Personalized engagement is non-negotiable. Timelines are tight. But much of the solution lies in embracing the modern attendee's perspective: Content isn't part of the experience; content *is* the experience. Ready to crack open a new event playbook? Roll up your sleeves, prepare your Trello boards, and let's dig in.



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THE NEW ROLE OF EVENT CONTENT

Long hailed as “king” or “queen,” content has become *currency*. Attendees will offer their valuable time and attention in exchange for quality content that not only resonates, but can be consumed in their preferred method. Their shifting behaviors makes it imperative for marketers to embrace a content-first methodology that ensures the messaging being broadcast at events not only maps back to the purpose for hosting the experience, but the company’s overarching business goals. In other words, the way event content is crafted, collected and shared should be part of a year-round customer engagement strategy, and perhaps a year-round event portfolio, that supports the greater organizational good.

“It’s critical not to overlook the strategy behind delivering content,” says Angel Micarelli, SVP-Strategy & Content at Cramer. “You can create experiences that, yes, are interactive and fun and look great. But do they tie back to the purpose of the event? And do they tie back to the company’s goals? So you need that strategic lens at the beginning, and everything needs to ladder up.”

Event content shouldn’t be viewed as an add-on, but as a *priority*. Taking a content-first approach, like building an event agenda that amplifies key brand messaging, is fundamental to connecting the dots between experiences and overarching business objectives. In other words, content is the conduit to extending events beyond the confines of time and place.

This mindset, of course, inherently requires organizations to leave their “silos” behind. To deliver a holistic message, communications across every department must be in sync.



“We start every external project by asking our clients what the goal is for their event, but we’re taking it a step further by asking how the event aligns with their organizational goals as a whole,” says Erin Martin, Marketing Director at Cramer. “We’re planning on a corporate level to understand what the touchpoints are that move the needle for both the sales and marketing teams, and then determining if the event is one of them.”

“You have to look at your customer journey and the touchpoints that are going to have the most impact along the way. It’s the flywheel—how do you get people excited and re-engaging and coming back? What are the ways that you can get your brand out there that are authentic to what you do and make people understand that they’re valuable to you, wherever they are in that journey?”

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The greatest miss in experience planning is to think it ends with the event. Keep the conversation going and reiterate core messaging from the live experience, brands need to be intentional about leveraging content outside the walls of the event. (Aligning the right content delivery method with the right audience persona is also important. More on that later.) Finding different channels to parse out core messaging and provide more value across the customer lifecycle is vital to connecting with audiences that have become accustomed to consuming content anywhere, anytime.

“If you want your audience to continue engaging after the event—and why wouldn’t you after putting all the time, effort and budget into creating it—then you need to continue to give them something of value,” says Micarelli. “And it’s not a regurgitation of what was on-site. It’s a curation of that content, it’s augmenting that content, it’s repackaging it in ways that might appeal to different types of learning. So it’s really making the most of your content throughout the year, and it should carry you all the way to the next event.”

The strategy leaves plenty of room for creativity. Maybe it’s turning the most impactful elements of a mainstage keynote into an editorial article, a recap email and a curated video shared on social. Maybe a headline performance is transformed into a TikTok video series. The content already exists; it’s a matter of disseminating key communications in a way that engages attendees the way they *want* to be engaged, and at touchpoints all along the customer journey in order for the message to resonate.

It might sound like a no-brainer, but it’s also critical to build awareness around the availability of the content. The audience can’t benefit from the material if they don’t know it’s out there and where to access it.



“Putting content up after the event has become a standard. But if you put it up on a website, for example, and you don’t tell anybody about it, it’s for naught,” says Tripp Underwood, Vice President of Strategy & Content at Cramer. “So it’s a matter of not only having a multichannel approach for delivering the content, but also creating awareness that the content exists.”

AUDIENCES ARE EVERYWHERE

Whether in person or virtual, attendees want to be immersed in experiences on their own terms and in a way that makes them feel like part of something bigger than themselves. That makes delivering meaningful event content that resonates across platforms—and time zones—challenging, and requires something of a paradigm shift in the way brands present their material (and their comfortability doing so).

“We’re doing live broadcasts for one event from five locations to 25 different viewing parties for one of our clients, and these are remote audiences, so they’re not necessarily online, but there’s a huge broadcast component to it,” says Macey Ley, Event Creative Director at Cramer. “So we’re thinking about the environment that we’re broadcasting from, and the fact that there’s a studio audience there. We have to think about what the experience is like for every audience member. And then for the presenters who don’t have physical people on stage with them, where everybody else is being broadcast in, what does that feel like for them and how do we engage them? It’s important to note that audiences are everywhere and speakers are everywhere.”

ALIGNING AUDIENCES & EXPECTATIONS

As the lines between our digital and physical lives continue to blur, we've all become accustomed to absorbing content that is tailored to our personal wants and needs. It was a movement already brewing, then amplified exponentially during the pandemic amid a mass adoption of digital technologies and experiences.

For event marketers, there's no looking back—the one-size-fits-all methodology is rapidly becoming a relic of the past. Not only do audiences have high expectations for content that is curated and customized, the wealth of behavioral data that event organizers procure by delivering on them is priceless.

"There's a need for us to be more aware of audience-specific content, because that's going to create those data breadcrumbs that have become very valuable to clients to see how things are going and that their messaging is being properly received," Underwood says.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF EXPERIENCE-SEEKERS

A one-to-many content distribution system has been implemented across the event industry for many years because, historically, it's worked. That approach is still a viable solution in certain instances, but all signs point to a future where the most effective programs provide the right content to the right audience at the right time in the right format—all while delivering the bigger business message.

Few people are willing to sit in a ballroom for hours on end. They want options, and that means brands need to laser-focus on exactly what information they want the audience to

know, then offer a handful of ways for them to learn it. Understanding attendees' preferences and deploying content delivery methods that align with their specific needs puts organizations in a position to drive more engagement and amplification of their message.

"It's thinking about how content from the keynote on the main stage can show up in other places at the event. Maybe it's in smaller, bite-sized videos that are available outside the ballroom, or it's leave-behinds on dining tables," Underwood says. "So it's articulating your message very clearly, then delivering it in multiple ways to appeal to different learning types. And that ties into individualization and thinking about the audience as different types of learners and different types of experience-seekers."



RECOGNIZING ATTENDEE TYPES

It's beneficial to categorize attendee types based more on how they prefer to consume content and what they hope to achieve through the event than their job titles these days. Some attendees may be big-picture thinkers that want to get the most up-to-date pulse-check on everything that's happening in their industry right now. Others may be more focused on social interactions and networking. Identifying these preferences requires some strategic pre-event planning.

An example: ahead of a thought leadership conference, instead of asking attendees what they're interested in learning about, ask them how they like to learn. Getting that kind of empirical data is critical to formulating accurate attendee persona types, then building engagements that cater to them.

It's also helpful to look for overlaps in content consumption preferences and craft a way to meet various groups in the middle. And, in a similar vein, if an attendee straddles multiple persona types, it's effective to implement a strategy that satisfies the needs of different aspects of their personality.

If the classification approach sounds a bit overwhelming, hang tight. Identifying attendee types isn't about tracking every last one of their behaviors and creating a multitude of subgroups. Keep it simple and offer a handful of ways to deliver the main message with maximum impact based on what you know about them.

"The best way to start thinking about audiences is, what do they want to experience and how do they want to experience it?" says Mark Wilson, Executive Creative Director at Cramer. "But it's also thinking about what's going on in the big wide world, and the general zeitgeist. That little ball of personal psyche is something we need to really dive into because it's still about the experience. At the end of the day, is this an experience that's going to enrich my life or not?"



INTERNAL EVENTS

The key difference between internal and external events, of course, is that external audiences elect to attend an event; internal ones are more or less obligated to be there. But there are still different personas to consider when developing an internal engagement strategy if you want employees to walk away from the event informed and energized. One way to do it? Make it a mission to ensure different personality types mingle, and that employees who wouldn't typically interact with one another on a day-to-day basis have a chance to converse and offer their interpretation of the company messaging.

"Anything you can do to thoughtfully pair up or group employees that might not normally interact with each other is going to A, keep things more engaging and interesting, and B, allow the message that you're putting forth take shape and get different perspectives on it. That's ultimately going to make it more impactful for the organization across the board," says Underwood.

EXPERIENCE DESIGN AS AN ENGAGEMENT TOOL

When it comes to determining an event format, developing the event environment and crafting those dazzling design moments, it can be tempting to loosen the reins on the content piece in favor of some spectacle. Don't fall for it. There are ways to wow in-person and online audiences and deliver on their expectations for the event without straying from the broader business objectives.

Consider the average post-pandemic person's attention span—barely perceptible. Which means 45-minute conference sessions or virtual events focused on talking heads in boxes aren't effective anymore. Zoom fatigue continues to be a very real factor in the digital event realm, and adding to the challenges of both in-person and virtual events is the fact that attendees don't just

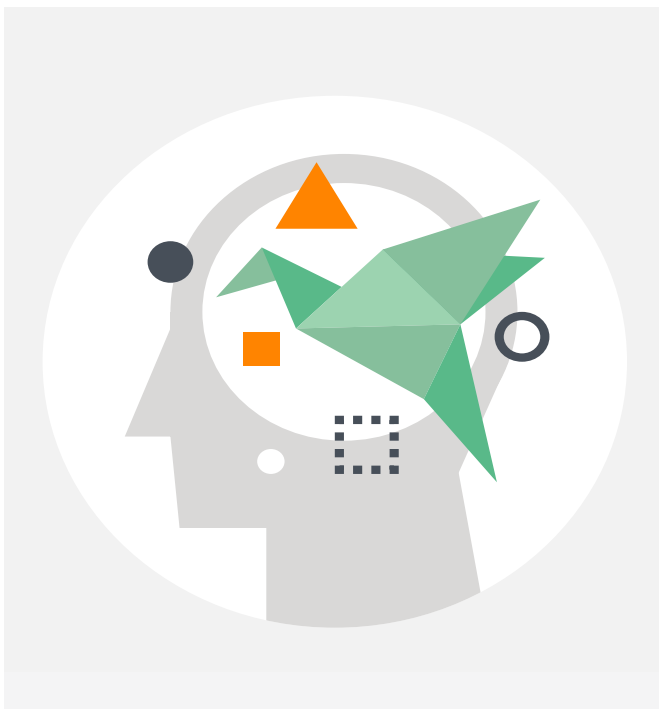
want to be informed anymore; they want to be entertained. Not in a frivolous manner, per se, but most attendees expect organizers to both capture their hearts and minds, and make good on their event promises.

"We've all been through the smoke and mirrors of, 'This is going to be an awesome experience' and then you get in and maybe the opening experience is awesome, but then everything else is boring or not conducive to learning or meeting," Ley says. "I've been to big conferences where I get in and I feel tricked by the descriptions of the breakout sessions and I feel like I'm not learning what they said I'd learn. So you really have to pay attention to what your audience wants and then deliver on it. You can't not deliver anymore."

STIMULATE THE SENSES

There are few tactics as powerful as stimulating multiple senses (or engaging one of them in a novel way) to turn a brand message into an enduring memory. Multisensory engagement aligns well with the modern attendee's expectations to be entertained as they're educated.

While planning a recent event for a data company operating in the life sciences industry, Cramer's challenge was determining what the show's signature "wow" moment should be. The solution: Bringing to life the sound of data—including a tunnel entry moment where attendees were immersed in rainbows of color and the hum of biophilic sounds related to the human body designed to energize and intrigue. The audience already knew what data looked like, but weaving data sonification through the event helped "connect attendees to something that was meaningful to them, or that was in



their line of business, or that gave them a light-bulb moment where they felt excited or smart,” says Ley.

WHITE SPACE

In the year ahead, designing events and environments that are conducive to modern attendees’ behaviors will be critical. An example: audiences across the board are craving more down time at events. And organizers are quickly discovering that overflowing event schedules and laundry lists of formal activities don’t jive with today’s attendees’ desire to simply catch up.

“At least for the next couple of years, the idea of having white space in a meeting is going to be so important,” says Rich Sturchio, President at Cramer. “It might seem like a waste of time, but it’s what we hear over and over again: ‘I just want to talk to people.’”

Internal communications became siloed for many organizations during the pandemic, with information often being disseminated in a top-down fashion to ensure everyone was equipped to do their job and help keep the ship afloat. But leaders are now finding that what employees—and event audiences—really want is a chance to engage in peer-to-peer interactions. “That’s where we start to see white space coming into play and having the time to just share what you’ve been doing,” Sturchio says. “You have to let the minds roam, which doesn’t happen when you say, ‘Can you meet me at 9:30 for an hour.’”

Adds Ley, “They want white space, whether it’s to talk with each other or just to digest the information. I think as people are coming back from having no physical conferences and events to having them in person, there’s a tendency for meeting planners to jam-pack the schedule. But we’ve had two years

to realize that they don’t want that. They can’t learn that way.”

EDGE OF THEIR SEATS

Behavioral shifts at in-person events should inform tactical changes to the layout of the event footprint in the year ahead, and beyond. There’s a current tendency, for instance, for attendees to seek out hive-like environments at events where they feel cozy and connected to their peers.

“People love to sit in pods right now, they want to sit with their people,” Ley says. “And theater-style seating isn’t conducive to that. So it’s thinking about how we can make clusters of seating for people so they can sit with the people they want to, or meet new people just by sitting together in front of a plenary stage.”

Here’s another experience design idea that, among advantages, addresses miniscule attention spans: seating that (almost) literally makes the audience stand at attention. Cramer is experimenting with chair designs that require the occupant to sit at the edge of their seat, with no option to sink back and, presumably, be more inclined to let their mind wander.



GETTING TO THE 'WHY' OF EVENTS

Event marketing departments have historically been viewed as addendums—entities tied to the larger organization, but not always strategically embedded in its goals. Now, that model is shifting as the benefits of eliminating silos and getting teams from every corner of the business on the same page can no longer be ignored. With tighter timelines, tighter workforces and tighter budgets creating widespread marketing challenges, companies can't afford to waste resources on tactics that don't ladder back to the organization's broader business objectives. This is where the "why" of events comes into play.

The why is a roadmap to every decision made about the event, from the format to content to design to measurement, and everything in between. If you can extract the why from the very start and stick to a strategy that supports it throughout the planning process, it's a recipe for success. And it's the philosophy Cramer relies on to guide event strategy for every client. Here, four executives weigh in.



RICH STURCHIO
President



ERIN MARTIN
Marketing Director



MACEY LEY
*Creative Director,
Events*



MARK WILSON
*Executive Creative
Director*

How do you help clients identify the 'why' of their events? What kinds of questions should marketers be asking themselves?

ERIN MARTIN: First of all, all of the stakeholders that need to be in the room should be in the room when you're strategizing. Think about: who's the influencer that you are reporting to? Who's the influencer that is determining your budget? Who is your audience, and did you do a survey last year? What did they say they want to get out of your event? So, think about where you can pull insight from the different people that are being impacted by the event you're hosting.

If it's an internal event, it's asking, what are the objectives your leadership team needs to get across? What are the key messages that the team needs to learn, and how do you limit the noise within your agenda so that those messages are understood, but without eating into the fun time that your employees are looking forward to?

What makes establishing the why of an event critical in the current climate?

RICH STURCHIO: We've found that communicating information from one person to many can be done fairly easily, digitally. And coming out of the pandemic, we've continued hearing people

say, 'Hey, we have two and a half days together at this live event—do we really want to spend that time doing our one-to-many communications that we can do just as easily electronically? Or do we want to spend that time building our one-to-few or one-to-one relationships and communication?' That has become the focus of events for the near-term, and probably well into the future.

MACEY LEY: We've had this giant pause to reflect on what was meaningful, what was purposeful and what we didn't need at events. And I think the coolest part of having to go through that process is being able to strip everything down to: what do people really want? What will make them excited to be together? What kind of experiences are meaningful to them? Even today, people are not going to hop on a plane and potentially risk their lives unless the event provides something that matters to them.

MARK WILSON: And for internal, it gives you the opportunity to show powerful, authentic, transparent leadership. When things are difficult or we're in a recession, they're going to get worse before they get better. But it's amazing what you feel in an audience when people are honest. It's like, 'OK corporate, you're great, but we've had these supply chain issues for the last 18 months and I'm making promises to customers that I can't deliver on. What are we doing about that?' For somebody to be able to answer those things honestly is really powerful.

Where should event teams begin in the process of identifying the why?

RS: Everyone putting on the event, not just the organizers, but the executives, needs to understand what the why is. So at our first meeting, I have everyone write down three reasons we're putting on the event. And every meeting we start with those reasons because eventually they devolve into something else, like, 'Well, we need Johnny from finance to talk.' So we keep referencing back because the hardest thing is not falling into what we've always done or who has always spoken at an event.

EM: We have a client that we originally started working with on both their global campaign and their event campaign, but with separate teams

and as separate projects. And we started asking enough questions that they merged the two. So that's a great example of: how do your company's overall goals and messages ladder into your event? What are your attendees showing up for, and how are you guaranteeing that they get it?

MW: I think you have to look at everything in the context of a moment in time. We've all been trained in brand vision and values and persona. And those are things that are anchored, and they cross over. But your why for an event has to be that moment in time. You have to be hyper-sensitive and hyper-aware of what just happened yesterday, what's happening right now and what's probably going to happen tomorrow.

How should event marketers approach the why when it comes to the event format?

EM: Getting to the why should help you answer those format questions. So if attendees are at a user conference to learn new skills, but can't attend all of the breakout sessions, let's make sure that there are breakout sessions available online that they can watch after the event or on their own time so that they're not missing some of the hype around the event and they're not getting this frustrating experience of, 'I want to learn that, but this is happening at the same time.'

Between in-person and digital, we're looking at the content and what do you need to get out of it? If it's a big keynote, you want that to be live and in person. That's part of the, 'Wow! Oh my God, they've got Obama on stage.' That would be a bit less impactful watching through a computer screen. But, if you're learning something new or having a tips and tricks type of conversation, you can absorb that anytime; it doesn't need to be in real time. If it's meaningful enough to you and your work, you're going to go back and watch that.

ML: I think we got complacent in the format of events, even before COVID. And then everyone had to scramble and reconfigure how to reach a mass audience and make them feel like it's a true experience, but at their desk or at their kitchen table. There were a lot of missteps, but that's how you learn, right? That's how innovation works. For two years, and it's still ongoing, people started to crave human interaction because they were denied it.

RS: And now we take every meeting for in-person projects and look at how we can create either formal or casual 'collisions' that allow people to have meaningful networking—not just, 'Let's have a party and throw everyone in a room and call it networking.' It's how can we solve problems together, share personal experiences together, spend time in smaller groups so that we can start to really meet and appreciate each other, and start to rebuild our company culture from the ground up.

TOP FIVE TAKEAWAYS

You've just consumed a whole lot of information. Consider the following core takeaways as a quick reference guide to experience planning in 2023.

TAKE A CONTENT-FIRST APPROACH

Event content shouldn't be viewed as an add-on, but as a priority. Taking a content-first approach, like building an event agenda that amplifies key brand messaging, is fundamental to connecting the dots between experiences and overarching business objectives. In other words, content is the conduit to extending events beyond the confines of time and place.

EXTEND ROI BEYOND THE EVENT

The greatest miss in experience planning is to think it ends with the event. To keep the conversation going and reiterate core messaging, brands need to be intentional about leveraging content with a post-event communication campaign.

IDENTIFY THE WHY

The "why" is a roadmap to every decision made about an event, from the format to content to design to measurement. Extract the why from the start and stick to a strategy that supports it throughout the event planning process.

TAILOR THE EXPERIENCE TO THE USER

Brands need to laser-focus on exactly what information they want the audience to know, then offer different ways for them to learn it. Understanding attendees' preferences and deploying content delivery methods that align with their specific needs puts organizations in a position to drive more engagement and amplification of their message.

USE DESIGN AS AN ENGAGEMENT TACTIC

Designing experiences and environments that are conducive to post-pandemic attendees' behaviors is critical to keeping them engaged and entertained—the new table stakes.