

2015 Trend Tracker

The fourth annual list of the top 50 trends impacting trade shows and events this year



WHITE PAPER SUMMARY

Marketers across Corporate America continue to harness the incredible power of face-to-face marketing—using “brand experiences” as a critical part of the modern era marketing mix. Event and trade show programs have become fully high-tech engagements that connect and engage—before, during and after an actual event or trade show. The result? Stronger marketing programs powered by stronger experiences. Welcome to the future of marketing... and welcome to the fourth-annual Trend Tracker, produced by Global Experience Specialists (GES). As always, Trend Tracker provides a rapid-release checklist of trends. Go through the list and check-off the ones you’re activating now. Circle others you know you should. And make a list of the ones you’ll need to learn more about in 2015... and beyond



2015: The Bold Year

Brands are staying in step with the hyper pace of experiential

Consumers are checking emails and texts from smartwatches. Event attendees are connecting with more of each other via social media. Trade show booth visitors are being immersed in brand experiences via gamification. And drones have taken flight atop trade shows and events, capturing and streaming content.

Welcome to 2015, the Year of Bold. Strategy, Design and Technology are touching every aspect of the live event in their boldest applications yet, from planning, audience targeting and tuning to the on-site and online engagement that starts early... and never ends.

CMOs agree that this is the year marketers will go “all in” on experiential with bolder budgets, bolder strategies and bolder experiences that tie together creative, execution and data analysis. “And marketers are using big strategies and big data in a meaningful way, to use events to generate meaningful intelligence,” says George Hines, CIO and Head of Innovation at Global Experience Specialists (GES).

Presenting the world’s only annual checklist of event and trade show trends—the fourth-annual Trend Tracker. Here, the future forecast: the 50 top trends across budgeting and planning, marketing, technology and design. Go through the list and check-off the ones you’re activating now. Circle others you know you should. And make a list of the ones you’ll need to learn more about in 2015... and beyond.

BUDGETING AND PLANNING

Marketers are finding that the years of cost cutting got in the way of delivering the best experiences for attendees—that includes everything from housing to content to food and entertainment. Companies are making bold investments they can leverage across multiple programs.

“Everybody is sharpening their swords, getting better and better with the help of technology, whether it’s their pull-through strategy or booth rep engagement; it’s rare now to see anyone displaying a stagnant design year over year,” says Errol Ahearn, VP of Global Design at GES.

01 VIRTUAL REALITY FOR PLANNING

Expect to see marketers leveraging virtual reality, not just for event experiences but also in event planning. Perhaps 3D models will be replaced by virtual walkthroughs of an exhibit mockup using technologies like Oculus Rift. In addition to the client, and to offering virtual attendees a face-to-face-style interaction, these walkthroughs could be useful tools to keep on record for the following year of planning processes.

02 STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS

Clients continue to strive toward lighter, smaller spaces and materials (drayage is still a bad word) but they are willing to make investments in pieces such as LED screens (which have come down in price) and other tech to form magnificent anchor structures.

03 TECH-FOCUSED DESIGN

Designers have a two-fold challenge this year—to design technology into exhibits creatively, and consider what parts of the experience can be re-repurposed. “Clients want to see product display elements able to be pushed out to the sales team as a multi-use platform,” says Doug Shockley, VP Client Relations and Global Corporate Events at GES. “They’re developing tools for the corporate event and then realizing that with a little tweaking it becomes a sales platform to take on the road, whether it’s a digital catalogue or an augmented reality experience.”

04 HOLISTIC PLANNING

It used to be that exhibits were planned in one process, and events in the other. Now, companies are tying all live experiences into one strategy, one process. They continue to look for agency partners that can provide them that one-stop shop to tie events, shows and their digital presence together, and strategically.

05 DESIGN THINKING

Companies are embracing a concept invented by David Kelley of IDEO that is taught at top design schools including Stanford and Cornell. The process involves solving challenges by empathizing with the end-user, creating low-res prototypes, and performing the solution in order to collect feedback. GES has held design-thinking workshops with numerous clients and prospects to find innovative solutions to improve their event programs. Successful? Different? One client even built their own design-thinking lab in their corporate offices afterward.

06 DATA SECURITY

Customers are more aware than ever of data security and identity theft thanks to high-profile security breaches at major retailers in the past year. And so marketers are not only requesting that data be collected in real-time, they want it stored in real-time, too, via cloud software and using methods of encryption. They are developing strategic plans surrounding what kind of data to collect and how, who has access to it, and how it will be secured and stored.

07 APP SPENDING

Apps are still as important as ever, and clients are placing much emphasis on developing a solid app that can take on new features and upgrades for the next year’s show. Look to the sporting space for the future forecast: powerful stadium apps are emerging on the scene, and sports fans are embracing the tech that takes them closer to the game. Did you know Levi’s app for the new 49ers Stadium in San Francisco allows fans to reserve parking, order food to the seat, follow and vote on play-by-plays, and even shop?

08 EVENT EXTENSIONS

Companies are increasing the number of times a successful event is offered, launching smaller versions of their most successful projects to capture additional share of mind. Exhibit booth getting exceptional traffic on the show floor? Why not take it on the road. Event receives buzz-worthy press coverage? Why not extend its life and keep it open longer. “You’re getting the upfront dollars and carrying those assets the client has invested in over multiple shows, or multiple years,” Shockley says.

09 ENLISTING EMPLOYEES

Influencers are often outsiders, but some clients are focusing on amplifying from within, turning to employees to influence and spread messages internally. USG Corp. leveraged this strategy before announcing its Olympic sponsorship of Team USA. The brand secretly handpicked employees from each department and sent them on a training mission at Olympic training grounds in Colorado. These internal brand ambassadors then went back to their offices to promote social sharing, hashtags and lead discussions on the company’s internal site.

10 FOODIE STRAT

Event planners know all too well that if the food isn’t good, they are going to hear about it. But today, health needs vary so widely from what were meat-free or dairy-free folks. There are peanut allergies and gluten-free diets and, in general, more foodie-ism. Marketers are prepared to spend on the edible experience, whether it’s tapping the farm to table trend or serving a culturally relevant cuisine.

11 TALENT THRIFTINESS

In the quest to drive emotional and deeper connections, conference planners aren’t always gunning for that seven-figure entertainment deal. They are looking at alternative platforms like YouTube, pulling talent off reality shows and tapping the local music scene to discover artists. Often, attendees will recognize names from these pools as much as they would a famous rock star, and they come at a cheaper price.

12 LOW-RES PROTOTYPING

Going outside your comfort zone can get you on the map, but it may also break the bank. Enter: low-res prototyping. It allows decision makers to visualize the concept, and for changes to be made quickly without impacting the budget. GES developed a new wall system by 3D-printing all of the pieces to scale to see if the idea was feasible. “It allowed us to fail early and often in an extremely productive way,” says Heidi Katherine, Product Development Manager at GES. “After a week of testing and revising, we had a clear direction for the rest of the project and it saved us quite a bit of time and money.”

MARKETING

Marketers are growing their knowledge about attendees before they even step foot on the show floor. And all that early data collection and research is impacting the design of the event to make it as relevant as possible—from breaking attendees into groups by segment or session needs to deliver personalized content and even personalized giveaways.

“Building a truly personalized customer experience is becoming easier with tools like Salesforce.com’s Journey Builder. You can link what a customer says on social media with what pages they visited on your site, and what content you serve them over email, which gives sales a better understanding of who the customer is and what they want,” says Gina McDuffie, EVP of Global Marketing at GES. “This helps us create more customized experiences at an event, and facilitate better conversations with our sales team—you connect with the customer as a person much quicker, which is really exciting.”

01 ATTENDEE RESEARCH

Companies know that amplification in conferences can be widely achieved through their top influencer-attendees, those with the most robust and quality networks. Marketers are leveraging solutions to identify who these folks are, segment them and engage them. Sprinklr is one of them. The platform allows brands to create 360-degree profiles of customers via social, view their engagement history with the brand and interactions; and allows brands to target those specific groups strategically.

02 EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

Why should shows be the only time of year brands deliver content—and sales pitches? Mini-shows and boot camps held throughout the year are adding another layer to campaigns. Cole Haan held a two-day workshop to inspire storytelling and entrepreneurship. American Express OPEN supported its small business campaigns with boot camps catering to woman business owners with a panel of experts and presentations on its products and services. Stay connected through content.

03 HIGH-TECH RIDES

GPS-driven car services have become that next best add-on to keep attendees engaged while they’re heading to and leaving the event through the simple luxury of a free ride. Uber and its ramped-up marketing efforts has captured headlines and capitalized on partnership strategies that are both a win for its brand, and the brands that partner with it.

04 EMPHASIS: HOUSING

As shows grow, organizers are placing even stronger emphasis on accommodations—actual booked properties, and the booking process—realizing that the event experience doesn’t end, or even begin, at the actual event. In late 2014, GES recognized this opportunity and added the leading two event-housing companies onPeak and Travel Planners to their network. “Where you stay is a critical part of the live event experience, and should be as awesome as the event itself. Hotels are the emotional and social headquarters of events,” says Colin Bunn, VP Product Development and Marketing, onPeak | GES.

05 OFF-SITE ACTIVITIES

Networking opportunities are going beyond the show floor or local bar and getting more active and adventurous, whether it be food or architecture tours or exercise opportunities like yoga and running clubs. Hot activities are offering marketers yet another touchpoint to engage attendees in the brand. “At Exhibitor each year, we do a walking tour of the Vegas strip to immerse participants in the design experience. It provides meaningful context—it isn’t just the aesthetics of design, but the rationale and meaning of why it was created,” says John Woo, GES VP Design and Creative.

06 GUARANTEED AMPLIFICATION

The good footprints today are primed for more than just real-time data collect—they’re designed for amplification. Clients are looking for solutions to streamline the registration process, the sharing process and the reporting process. Oprah’s The Life You Want Weekend tour and its 0 Town LED-RFID wristbands tied all the sponsors together with one drive to register and share on Facebook. Amplification isn’t a result of the experience anymore—it is an expected deliverable.

07 ELECTRONIC BROCHURES

It is estimated some 75 percent of show brochures end up in the trash. Not a good statement for our environment, but it also means attendees are not being delivered the content they actually want. Here is where electronic literature comes in. Event planners are deploying kiosks, as a stand-alone or within an exhibit, stocked with brochures on a brand’s products and offerings. From there, consumers flip through, select the information they want, and have a link for download delivered immediately.

08 PERSONALIZATION

Marketers are getting smarter about personalizing attendee experiences. What was once a practice in place at events for VIPs or executive-level attendees is trickling down in the form of customized education, content and specialized sessions for general attendees. “Participants don’t want to be talked at, they want to be actively engaged in the conversation, and the conversation starts before the event through event hashtags,” says Gina McDuffie, EVP Global Marketing at GES. “This continues at the event through smaller, more active sessions with real-time surveys and polling.”

09 VIRTUAL REALITY TO DRIVE SALES

Virtual reality is making the expected shift from a hot entertainment tool to an educational tool that drives sales. Take Lowe’s Home Improvement, which in Canada has been testing a service called Holloroom. It allows shoppers to enter in the dimension of a room to renovate, select all the products and materials, and then strap on a pair of Oculus Rift goggles to virtually tour their room and finishes. Bosch Automotive Parts this year took an Oculus Rift educational room on the road, designing virtual software that allowed mechanics to go inside its engine parts.

10 SOCIAL REGISTRATION

Social media pre-show marketing strategies continue to catch on and gain speed; solutions like InGo are driving attendance through a little friendly peer pressure. Attendees register with a social media profile and the solution looks at who that attendee is linked to and reaches out to those people, too. Expect to see competitors emerge in this space as marketers seek to zero-in on target audiences.

11 POST-SHOW CONTENT

Show-focused communications with attendees have officially gone year-round in in-app social features, blog content and quarterly updates. Marketers have an even stronger interest in taking an on-site experience digital and letting it live online long after the event has wrapped, a strategy that won’t detract from the live event but gives those who couldn’t attend a piece of the action—and those who could the opportunity to relive it, further reinforcing their experience with the brand or company.

12 CEO ACCESSIBILITY

The CEOs of major companies are like celebrities to most conference attendees. And while these leadership figures are often housed in executive suites during the duration of the show, saved for the keynotes, marketers are leveraging that celebrity to drive social amplification. Microsoft at its World Partner Conference held a reception for top sellers and partners where they were invited to “snap a selfie” with new CEO Satya Nadella.

TECHNOLOGY

The convergence of technology experienced last year has resulted in even deeper engagement opportunities—experiences that are driving emotional connections between people, brands and properties. Show and event planners just might find the best examples of this today among music and sports fans embracing wearables and apps to get closer to what they love.

“There are so many different technologies that have come together over time to make some of what we see at events possible,” says George Hines, CIO and Head of Innovation at GES. “How wearables, social media technology and indoor positioning technologies mature, and how we put them together to generate meaningful insights, is more important than ever.”

01 WEARABLES

Sparked by fitness bands and ignited with the release of Apple Watch, wearables have officially hit the main stream. But consider how wearable strategies will go beyond the footprint and deliver longer-term insights. Look no further for a future forecast than Coca-Cola, wearable brand Misfits Shine and “The Coca-Cola Red Shine.” Coke’s Global Director of Marketing Ventures Bachir Zerual says in a company blog the brand wants to leverage wearables “to build an ‘ecosystem’ of consumer experiences integrating multiple partners, versus launching one-off programs. This includes linking activity tracking to a reward component.”

02 EMBEDDED TECH

What comes after wearables? Embedded tech. In truth, we’re not that far off. Consider the story of Dutch entrepreneur Martijn Wismeijer, founder of MR Bitcoin, who embedded NFC (near-field communication) chips under the skin of his hands allowing him to, among uses, unlock the front door, the computer, as well as program the alarm clock to force him to use both hands to shut it off. How well, and quickly, consumers adopt to wearable tech could be an indicator of what’s to come in this space.

03 BIOMETRICS

iPhone users everywhere rejoiced when Apple added the passcode fingerprint scan, one example of seamless technology integration. Expect more in biometrics, as marketers embrace this potential. Verizon at the Super Bowl XLVIII Boulevard fan fest in New York City ditched RFID bracelets for a thumb-print scan—a print translated into a binary identifier and deleted—that turned each fan’s thumb into a code that traveled with them, emailing them custom content in real-time as they explored the experience with their thumbs up.

04 BETTER BANDWIDTH

The biggest problem in large shows like the International CES (sports stadiums, too) has always been bandwidth as networks are overloaded and can’t handle all the push and pull on their systems. Marketers are looking for smarter strategies surrounding connectivity, and new technologies like closed-networked Wi-Fi are poised to deliver. Better bandwidth will translate into richer multi-media experiences for show attendees—and fans.

05 3D PRINTING—BEYOND TCHOTCHKES

More than a simple event attraction (but indeed, a good attraction since attendees still want to see them in action), 3D printing is rapidly moving from a “wow factor” entertainment source, to a true solution that could change the way we think about engagement, especially for brands that don’t have a physical product to touch. From printing organs (see this [TedTalk](#)), to printing food, crowns in dentistry to cars, marketers are watching closely for developments in this rapidly evolving space.

06 EYE GAZE TECHNOLOGY

Hands-free and eye-tracking technology, bolstered by Google Glass, is getting more sophisticated, and poised to change the lives of people with conditions such as ALS (look up the start up Ability Eye Gaze and hands-free tweeting) or paralysis. But could eye tracking also help brands read consumers’ minds? Pizza Hut teamed up with Tobii in the U.K. to test an eye-gaze-based “subconscious menu” of toppings automatically selected based on eye movements. Before you laugh it off: the brand says 98 percent of folks that tried the menu were “satisfied with the experience.”

07 ‘ROBOTICS’

Virtual has transformed event attendance for the good, but there’s always that underlying concern it will detract from the live show. Here is where

robotics (and software) comes into play, supporting the foundation of the live event—face-to-face interactions. This technology has been put to use at IMEX with the first robotic attendee created by EventMobi. Attendees could login to “Mobi,” drive him around, attend sessions, and mix and mingle. Mobi even kept a journal of all his activities.

08 ENERGY GENERATION

Thanks to solar, kinetic and gesture recognition, brands are turning energy generation into an event in and of itself. Take kinetic-powered charging stations: step to it while charging your device. There are more service-related strategies to explore. Duracell transformed covered bus stop stations in Montreal into heating shelters. Two conductive pads were installed on each end of the shelter, and to get a blast of heat, at least two people needed to “complete the circuit” by holding hands.

09 DRONES

Drones are here, and they are being put to use. Amazon made headlines with its testing of a drone-based delivery service. In events, drones are providing new touchpoints for consumers as Pepto-Bismol did at Six Flags Theme Parks where consumers could “Tweet for Relief” and have Pepto delivered via a drone drop. Expect drones to impact the event planning space as well. Think show floor fly-overs; exhibit planning, and foot traffic analysis.

10 VINE

Vine is transforming how we look at the “story arch.” Marketers are embracing the six-second video platform, and adding it to their social strategy toolboxes. Ford for its College Ambassador Challenge last fall had students create Vine videos that showcased a day in the life on campus and tested their social skills. Expect more Vine applications on the show floor as brand representatives introduce themselves via a Vine post, show quick videos of the exhibit or highlight top solutions.

11 BLUETOOTH LOW ENERGY (BLE)

This proximity-sensing technology is helping marketers deliver customized experiences that are changing how consumers experience an event—and giving marketers even more precise data on what consumers are interacting with. This tech works with beacons to facilitate two-way communication between beacons and a smartphone app (an event app). Bonnaroo music festival organizers leveraged iBeacons to create a heat map that tracked attendee movements, including stages that were most popular, and how many notifications devices received.

12 3D AND HOLOGRAMS

Holograms have been around for a few years in a static capacity, but they are starting to become more interactive and advanced. American Express at the US Open activated an augmented reality Pro Com, where fans could pose with a hologram of professional tennis player Sloane Stephens. Beyond photo activations (yes, they are getting more high-tech and animated), imagine delivering a ceo keynote to satellite streaming events using hologram technology.

13 MORE TABLETS, NEW USES

Siemens at HIMSS demonstrated a new IT software solution with a 25-foot display of 188 iPad tablets linked to each other to create synchronized media showcases. Other health care companies are using tablets and software-enabled accessories to demonstrate, among things, how to administer medicine with a syringe the correct way. On top of that, in-line entertainment magic tricks and trivia games powered with tablet kiosk stations are just tipping the iceberg on how tablets and software will continue to inform but, more importantly, engage and entertain.

DESIGN

Companies are more aware than ever of not only how their brand looks, but also how it feels, smells and even tastes. Bolder strategies surrounding the senses are translating into concepts designed to leave lasting impressions on audiences.

“People are making decisions based on interaction and emotions, more than just attributes and features,” says Doug Shockley, VP of Global Events and Client Relations at GES. “There is sight, sound, smell, touch and taste—a true bombardment of the senses to consider, and leverage, in the experiences you build.”

01 EDUCATIONAL LOUNGES

Seating areas on the show floor have evolved from rest stops to charging stations. But not willing to miss out on an engagement opportunity, marketers are looking at lounges to deliver content. Look out for couches with digital tablets attached or that swing out, offering product information or data. Transform that coffee station into an interactive experience with a touch-screen, and turn downtime into an opportunity.

02 EVOKING THE SENSES

Events have always catered to sight and touch, but event planners are turning to smell and taste to drive meaningful and emotional engagement. On taste, they are hosting after-hours craft-cocktail workshops and tapping the local food culture to drive networking opportunities. Inspiration: Scent took a technological turn this year as a Harvard professor and former student launched the oPhone, and successfully sent the smell of a New York City breakfast across the Atlantic Ocean.

03 ART INFUSION

Art Basel Miami transformed into the year’s hottest event for celebrities and many brands looking to activate among culture-rich consumers. As marketers look to foster more emotional connections, they are turning to art partnerships and strategies that get attendees and fans feeling creative. LG this year launched an entire campaign surrounding new-media art to support the launch of a new TV; and TD Bank commissioned artists to turn its storefronts into mini art galleries.

04 DEEPER IDENTITIES

Call it the Apple effect, that recognizable crisp, white feel of its stores, that is influencing companies to focus more attention on the feel of the brand. That doesn’t mean more signage. Take for instance TaylorMade Golf, which incorporated its 13-degree logo angle (a golf reference) all throughout a pop-up studio design in everything from the window angles to the furniture seams. YouTube and “Angry Birds” publisher Rovio Entertainment teamed up for a pop-up that brought out the colors and shapes of both brands without heavy graphics: acrylic red play buttons, and color-coordinated candy jars and fresh flowers. It’s all in the subtleties.

05 LEANER BUT BOLDER

Exhibit structures are becoming much more open and inviting in the wake of heavier use of interactive and attractive technologies, from LED displays to touchscreens and tablets. Exhibitors are balancing LED signage with traditional backlit fabric signage—meaning, bold overhead identification but leaner ground elements supported by the use of digital media. Think bigger and bolder social walls and multi-user touch interfaces that combine several product areas.

06 OUTSIDE INSPIRATION

Designers are looking closely at markets and host cities for inspiration and elements that can be brought onto the show floor, whether it is architecture or concept areas with locally inspired themes. Think neighborhoods, parks and signature buildings and tie the outside in to pull an entire conference experience together. It is not about the conference hall; it is about the journey and that includes the host city.

07 COUNTERTOPS NO MORE

Brands are looking to spend less on structures and more on technologies like tablets and interactive screens to display their products and product information. The result: Fewer countertops, and even more open floor plans. “Passive displays are out and interactivity is in: all the conversations happening within an exhibit, sales conversations included, are being supported by technology,” says Darren Pasdernick, Executive Creative Director at GES.

08 LOW-TECH ENGAGEMENT

Why do we still see live presentations on the show floor? Because they work. That human voice and presence is an engagement-driver. Errol Ahearn, VP Global Design at GES, describes this as “The essence of now.” But the key message behind this ongoing trend is people. “You still often see a touchscreen with no one near it, and it’s just wasting away for three days at the show because there’s no strategy to get people to explore it,” Ahearn says. “You can’t let technology self-support.”

09 BETTER BRAND AMBASSADORS

Look for the booth babe trend to fade to grey, as marketers augment their brand experiences with technology and capable support staff trained in the art of conversation. In a recent tour, U.S. Cellular brought in sales associates that worked at the local markets in which it activated to support brand ambassadors, handing out cards with a handshake and driving personal connections.

10 COMMUNAL EXPERIENCES

Creating experiences that attendees and consumers can do together, communal experiences, are going bold, both in meaning and in style. Take GES’ Earth Harp at Exhibitor—a giant harp with strings that went 40-feet to the rafters. It resonated throughout the show floor and fostered shared emotions. Expect more crowd-driven experiences in areas such as social media installations that allow attendees to work together to enact an activity on-site: an encore performance at a show concert, or an unlocked lightshow.

11 SINGULAR EXPERIENCES

On the flip side, marketers are embracing the singular experience trend, most notably driven by technologies like Oculus Rift that allow attendees to strap on a headset and go on their own journeys. Walt Disney World is doing this through event apps that allow kids to go on their own treasure hunts with their mobile devices. Sennheiser for several years has hosted silent discos at The Governors Ball festival in New York City, highlighting the quality of its wireless headphones.

12 STORYTELLING

Storytelling is key to driving emotional connections with jaded and detached attendees. The second screen, LED, 360-degree theaters, multi-touch surfaces and virtual reality are all helping brands tell immersive stories about their companies and products. Warner Bros. at San Diego Comic-Con drove awareness for the new film “Into the Storm,” which lacked a built-in fan base, with a 90-second Oculus Rift tornado experience complete with high-powered fans and vibrating seats. Computer data storage brand EMC at a launch event built an LED tunnel leading in that, in addition to striking visuals, delivered content about the brand’s “hybrid cloud.”

13 DESIGNING AROUND SURPRISE

The success of stunts like WestJet’s “Christmas Miracle,” show that surprises can often provide stronger returns—viral returns, in particular. The thing about surprises is, they always have to be bigger and better. Bud Light set the bar this year with a total takeover of Crested Butte, CO, for #UpForWhatever, a campaign that sent 1,300 consumers on the ultimate weekend and leveraged Facebook for social amplification.



ABOUT GES

GES is a global full-service provider for live events. Clients depend on our 3,000 passionate employees throughout the world for unparalleled service and consistent execution of breakthrough experiences that excite and engage. We generate a competitive edge and measurable return for clients by partnering with them to blend the art of high-impact creativity and innovation with the science of easy-to-use technology, strategy, and worldwide logistics. For more information, visit our site and join the conversation on our blog at www.ges.com.

