2018: BUILDING A BETTER BLUEPRINT

Our year-end Executive Roundtable breaks down their biggest challenges, their most imaginative solutions and what trends they'll be banking on in the new year

A few weeks ago, we invited six of the industry's top marketers to grab a drink, grab a seat and share what's working, what isn't and what has them excited about the year ahead. Talk about an informative and inspiring couple of hours.

It was one of our most diverse roundtables yet—this year coproduced with leading global event agency Sparks—with brand marketers from the worlds of banking, technology, entertainment, spirits and lifestyle in attendance. And it was one of our most candid conversations to date, covering everything from the pain of flat budgets and the pressure to prove ROI, to the ways each brand is using technology and analog touchpoints to stay connected to today's modern audiences.

We didn't leave one morsel of wisdom on the cutting room floor with this one, so lean in and take note of this exclusive industry intel as we head into the new year.

PRESENTED BY: sparks

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS:

Karla Dover
Senior Manager-National Event Marketing
Pernod Ricard

Benjamin Ezrick
Head of Marketing, Content & Community
Google

Sean McBrien
SVP/Head of Operations-Global Event Marketing
Citigroup

Ben Nazario
Chief Sales Officer
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Laura Petro
Assistant Brand Manager
Peloton

Dana Viltz
Events Producer
TED

EM: *Let's start by talking about some of the challenges you've faced in the past year. What stood out?*

KARLA DOVER: It's universal, and not necessarily unique to 2017, but it's challenging to continually have to prove the value of events to the larger business, even if a certain brand supports and understands event marketing as a way to reach consumers. But the challenge is continually merchandising it to get the most out of the investment, and showing that you are getting more and more reach and scale for budgets that can be flat, year over year.

A conversation that I've noticed I've had with clients a lot in the past year is, "This was your budget for 45 events. Now, for the same brand, with the same budget, next year let's make it 50 events." So you have to find efficiencies, while the hard costs to throw an event are rising. That was one of my biggest challenges.

SEAN MCBRIEN: One of the biggest things from my perspective on the technology side is the budget doesn't change, and we're all after the holy grail of tying event expense to revenue. And one of the only ways to do that is to leverage technology. So where do you find the money to invest in the additional technologies that are going to get you to the next level, where you have data that proves the value of what you're doing?

BEN NAZARIO: You're right, it's very difficult to try to find things that can be cut, because you probably worked as efficiently as you could last year. The big challenge we often face is working with the same budget yet increasing the level of interactive engagement.

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National Event Marketing
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LAURA PETRO: For Peloton, our biggest challenge is the fact that experiential is completely uncharted territory for us. So explaining the value—not even compared against anything else, but just that we should even be doing this—is what we've been working on the past year. It's sort of the most exciting challenge you can have, saying that these events matter, and there is ROI, and doing real, live things where people can go see, touch, play with this product, is an investment worth making.

DOVER: I think the way we talk about the reach that events have for our brands has taken a different tone over the past couple of years. Now, it's figuring out your social channels, and measuring and showing the trickle-down effects in your recap.

NAZARIO: Has social become a challenge for anyone? Is it part of that equation right now?

MCBRIEN: For us, the biggest thing is, where does its value fit in the b-to-b space? I can definitely see the value in b-to-c; that's pretty straightforward. In b-to-b, where you have specific people you're after, social media has been a very tough thing for us to prove the value of.

BENJAMIN EZRICK: I see social media not as a challenge, but as a great opportunity. It's really about how the event generates social conversation. There's always going to be a limited number of people in the room, no matter how big a space you get. And it's about what those people in the room can experience, and how they can share with others on social.

We're able to reach that many more people by having the attendees in the room share on social. We just had an event in California for the top contributors in our Local Guides community and one thing we tracked on Twitter was if people were saying that they wanted to be at the event, or they felt like they wanted to participate in the fun. And we had handwritten postcards we were writing, taking photos of, and then tweeting back at them. We saw really high engagement there, and we were getting the type of brand love we expected back. People were saying, "You know, I'm going to keep contributing to Google Maps. Thank you so much, this really motivates me."

DOVER: It's interesting how the human touch goes so far, especially when you're trying to engage people socially. So to do handwritten cards, that's so interesting.

PETRO: We have people on our team who we call member concierges, and their entire jobs are those surprise-and-delight gestures.

If we are having an event in one of our showrooms, and we know there are 10 super-users in that area, we send them something special, a little piece of swag, that's signed by a human being at Peloton. It goes so far. And then they share it on Facebook, and everyone goes wild, and people think about how they can engage more with the brand—it's like, "I want my special note, too"—so it's this cool concentric circle.

MCBRIEN: I've had executives who, after they've looked at what we're spending on events, ask me, "Can't we digitize some of this? Can't we have this be virtual?" Our response is that in an increasingly virtual and digital world, the face-to-face event is getting more important, not less, because you don't get many opportunities to put people physically together in a room, in one location, at one time.

So that's a very valuable space to occupy. And we're seeing the numbers prove that out, in terms of event budgets, and what portion of the event marketing mix is being spent on physical events.

DANA VILTZ: Our biggest mission right now for the new TEDNYC Theater in Soho is to reach a greater global audience, and bring people in remotely from outside NYC to attend TED events. We want to create the experience of them actually attending the show and having a virtual presence in the theater. Right now we're exploring ways for attendees to videoconference into the theater and have their images projected on the walls during our shows, so that it's immersive for everybody—both the speaker and the audience. We can't teleport people yet, but to be able to at least get them to see one another is a good first step.

DOVER: User-generated content is something we are talking about a lot now, and it's so important, especially with direct-to-consumer products and lifestyle brands like an alcoholic beverage, people have seen it all. The consumers you're going after are very savvy and wary of "brand-voice."

So we're challenged to create an environment with touchpoints where consumers are sharing socially. And the trick there is finding every touchpoint we can to create an experience for the consumer to push out for you—while having it not feel forced or super-branded.

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EM: *So many events, especially in b-to-b, were influenced by TED—from the format to the short-and-sweet talks. So I'm curious about how you keep the momentum going and still keep it fresh.*

VILTZ: There are lots of conversations taking place about ways we can branch out and different formats. There's a new team at TED dedicated to exploring different avenues. Within the theater, we have this great space that's very technologically advanced. It's a fully functioning video studio where we hold speaker salons, we can do live broadcasts, we can do pretty much whatever we need from a technological standpoint.

We definitely rely on new technology and are trying to stay up to date on the best new way to allow people to share big ideas about relevant topics, whether it's in person, or virtually. For example, we're currently exploring ways that we can have interviews with folks who are not necessarily in NYC, so we can stay on top of current topics and themes in real time. So we rely heavily on vendors for learning about new technology and we've got a great curation team that works with us to find the perfect speakers for the specific themes and topics we are looking to cover. But that's been the biggest challenge for us: just finding the technology to enable us to stay on top of things in real time

EM: *So, for everyone else, when you see a technology that can make a difference in terms of ROI and proving value, how do you move forward? Is that part of your budget, or can you call on the technology department?*

MCBRIEN: We think about blended events, where the different marketing channels are kind of getting integrated. Technology's very responsible for that. So does that mean the cost and the investment start in the marketing budget? Or with the cfo, and then have it trickle down that way, with some things that benefit each of the different channels?

You can use a marketing cloud—Marketo, Unica, Eloqua, stuff like that—where all of your touchpoints feed into a central location, and it becomes almost a big data engine. And when you make that argument that RFID is going to feed the marketing cloud, that's a different argument than, "You've got to go with buffet instead of seated meals, because we're doing RFID."

NAZARIO: Incorporating a technology can give you the opportunity to spread the costs out, and to think about efficiencies. You may want to integrate a technology for one particular launch or a keynote, but can it be utilized across multiple events over the next 12 months.

If you can reuse it, and spread the cost across multiple event budgets, it's easier to justify it as part of the marketing budget. If you really want to use tech effectively, the long-term view is the way to approach it.

EM: *How much is your audience changing, and is that driving changes in how you approach your marketing strategies?*

MCBRIEN: From a business perspective, a millennial banker is pretty much the same as any other banker. But when they show up for a conference, that's a little different. They're far more likely to be engaged with mobile devices, and they want things that are mobile-enabled.

During a Q&A session, millennials would be much more willing to present their feedback if they're doing it from a digital device using Slido, or some kind of audience response system from their own device. When it comes to check-in, they're not as used to queueing up and checking in with a smiling face on the other side of the registration desk. They much would prefer to go to a kiosk, type in their name and have the badge print out.

I don't see much difference in the content, but I see a lot of difference in the way that they engage with the content.

NAZARIO: The change in audience engagement preferences has definitely become a challenge for us, from the agency side. We need to go to where the customers are now, and serve individual preference from attendee to attendee, more often than not. No longer will they just come to you and accept what they are given. It's created more opportunity from a creative perspective, and it's pushed us to get out of the old, traditional approach of how we produce events, and convey brand messages.

EZRICK: The millennial generation cares about experiences. So that's an opportunity for us. And their expectations within events or experiences are changing. They want it to be much more social. They care about it from beginning to end, and how they're capturing that journey within social media.

One thing that's been really exciting this year is social stories really taking off, and I think it has kind of changed the experiential marketing practice this year.

Consumers are taking pictures, and they're tying them together with stickers and other visual elements. And that's allowing us to have a deeper, richer conversation with consumers at the experience, and allowing the attendees to share a deeper story about the brand, and about their connection with it, with the rest of their generation and everyone else on social media.

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Benjamin Ezrick
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EM: *What are the big experiential trends you're paying close attention to as 2017 ends and 2018 begins?*

MCBRIEN: One of them is face-to-face interactions around networking, I think it's important to make sure there's enough time for people to engage with each other at our events—and that it's part of the layout and design of the space.

There are things like learning labs and genius bars, where people can go and just engage. I think product demo areas can be stacked with salespeople, but not people with their sales hats on. You want customers to engage with the product, feel it, like it, get those personal connections. Then, later, you can close the sale.

The challenges related to that are, how do I capture information about who talked to whom about what, and how do I capitalize on that? So you're not only making those engagements, and making those connections but you're also able to report out on them.

PETRO: I think this trend toward the personal, in-person interaction is exactly what we're trying to tap into with live events for Peloton. We want to bring bikes to places, and we want to get people in those seats with awesome headphones on and let the experience happen for them. We're really trying to make it so that the event almost dissipates into the background, and the magic of the experience shines through.

We just did a mobile tour where we drove a pop-up to seven different cities. The environment we created was like a little living room, because that's where a lot of people have their [exercise bikes]. But the environment was meant to just be a little quieter, be in the background. We had staff there if they had questions, but they weren't super-intrusive, so people could just really be set up to experience it themselves.

NAZARIO: The visitor wants to be involved—they don't want to just stand there and be told something. They want to touch something, they want to push a button, they want to put on a headset, they want to be engaged. And that's the norm now. So what we're talking about is, how do you get them interested, get them engaged and then get them excited, because we want them to leave, and say something positive about their experience to their friends or on Twitter.

VILTZ: We've had quite a bit of success with Facebook Live interviews within the theater. Usually we'll do a 30-minute interview with a speaker, and then we take questions from the Facebook audience, and push them to our prompter so that the host can read them live. And it's been really cool, and we've been lucky with our audience. There's always a risk associated with having the open comments section and asking for questions, but I've been very impressed with how little antagonizing behavior we've encountered—the vast majority of the audience has been really great and thoughtful. And we've gotten some fantastic questions that have steered the conversation in ways that we didn't necessarily even expect.

EZRICK: Livestreaming has been very big, and we love it. We've been doing it for a year and a half or two years, and we've recently been experimenting with 360-degree livestreams.

DOVER: As Ben was saying earlier, every touchpoint has to have some kind of interactivity, because that's what people are looking for today. For direct-to-consumer, that means that you have to provide utility while asking them to engage.

So if you're using RFID, you have to think about "What's the value of the guest checking in at all these different stations?" Obviously I want it, because it gets you to opt in to my CRM program, and I get to see where you went, and which of my 15 different installations was the most sticky, but you have to give something back to the consumer. People don't do something unless they get a very tangible benefit from it. And the branded photo doesn't cut it anymore. So what can we give them?

EM: *That raises the question of how you keep pace with all of these changes. How do you stay flexible and nimble, so you can react in real time to new opportunities?*

VILTZ: One thing that surprised me when I came over to the client side of production from the agency side was just how much you rely on agency partners and vendors to help keep abreast of what new technology and products are available, and how much we appreciate it when a vendor has an idea specifically for TED. And especially at a nonprofit, where we don't necessarily have giant internal teams that can go out and research all the new technology on our behalf.

DOVER: It's crucial to have a diverse team of people who are really passionate about experiential; people who are going out and doing things, going out to events frequently, even those outside our industry. You know, people in our finance department will sometimes attend a cool event, and they'll tell me something I hadn't heard about yet. So it's also being willing to listen to everybody.

PETRO: One of our core values is being member-first. So we are not doing things just for the sake of doing them. It's always through the lens of what value we're adding for our current members—even if it's to acquire new members.

So when we think about events, we're always keeping in mind, how can we engage our members? Because they're such amazing evangelists, and they come, they bring their friends and it all becomes very cyclical.

DOVER: Everyone on my team, when they attend an event, has to send a recap afterwards—which can be just a one-paragraph email and a couple of photos they took on their phone. Even if it's a play or a show, and not a spirits event. We've been doing it for years and now our agency partners do it as well. It's really valuable as a way to keep up with the current event landscape.

MCBRIEN: When we look at how we're trying to adapt to these trends, one of our biggest challenges is allowing ourselves to try something different, even something that might not work so well or something that requires a little bit of investment.

You might learn that bankers aren't going to engage in a social wall, but at least you tried. Check that off the list, go to the next thing, and don't be afraid to get in there and try something. That's hard to convince people to do.

EM: *Sean, a lot of b-to-b brands have consolidated their event portfolios recently. Maybe they've found that out of 2,000 events, only 500 are really hitting the mark. How are you adjusting your event mix?*

MCBRIEN: We've seen that a lot of the attendees who come to our events are pretty much globally mobile anyway, and they're going to competitors' conferences in various locations. So we may not need the same vertical in an EMEA conference and a North America conference. We can do it all in New York because chances are, most of the people who are going to the London conference will be in New York at some point during the year anyway. They all go to basically the same cities, so we don't necessarily need to have as robust a geographic footprint as we might have in the past.

EM: *Karla, spirits has gotten so sophisticated. It used to be big sampling events with thousands of people. Now we're seeing smaller, targeted events—maybe a distiller teaching five people about the drink. Is that where things are headed?*

DOVER: It depends on the brand. There were definitely a couple of years when every brand was moving away from the massive, 2,000-person party, where you didn't even know what brand you were drinking, to those more intimate events,.

Across our portfolio of brands, whiskey events tend to be more intimate—the consumer wants something that's much more hands-on, they want to meet a distiller, and they're savvy enough that a sales rep or bartender is not going to cut it. But with some of our other brands, we play more in the lifestyle space, where we can throw a big party that has lots of different touchpoints, and is a little bit flashy, but people are still interested in finding out what the product is and why they're there. So I think it runs the gamut for us.

EM: *Time for some fearless predictions. If we were to meet again this time next year, what trends do we think we would be talking about?*

EZRICK: I would say augmented reality is going to become increasingly important. We've talked about the merging of the digital and physical world, as it relates to events and engaging consumers. Augmented reality provides a richer opportunity for people at the event itself, and for them to share. I think that's going to be a big trend. Also, livestreaming with drones—something we're doing now. It gives you an unbelievable vantage point of the event, and the participants within it.

MCBRIEN: Just following up on that: Obviously technology's going to be the thing that we're going to keep talking about, but it's going to be in a much different way. Whereas now we might be talking about things like a marketing cloud or data, the things that Ben mentioned will eventually work their way into our space—even for me, at a bank.

I think what we want technology to do for us is to somehow extend the engagement. And particularly at a financial services event, where everybody flies in, everybody has a really good time and everybody flies out. But what happens from there? How do we keep that engagement going past everybody leaving for the airport?

PETRO: I think the emphasis on curation is going to continue to rise. Maybe because we sort of straddle the technology, health and wellness industries. I think you really see it in health and wellness, with brands like Goop, and Well+Good–they are continuing to just scale back their events in terms of the noise and clutter there.

So it's not like 1,000 people giving you samples; it's one. It's the apothecary wall, where there are the five things that they have selected, and that's it. And if you want to buy it, it gets sent to you in a very organized manner; it's not a bunch of people shouting in a room.

I think that a personal, curated experience just feels a lot more special.