

OPERATION COMEBACK

TOP AGENCY VETERANS WEIGH IN ON WHERE THE INDUSTRY IS GOING—AND WHAT IT'S GOING TO TAKE TO GET THERE

THERE ARE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES COMING TO THE EVENT INDUSTRY. UNDERSTATEMENT OF THE YEAR, RIGHT?

But how this industry gets there is going to be very nuanced depending on a lot of factors ranging from how quickly the virus can be controlled (or at least, contained), to how comfortable attendees will ever be gathering in large groups again (except for you, Lake of the Ozarks—you seem verrrrrry comfortable.)

We thought it would be the ideal time to pick the brains of some of the agency leaders who, from the earliest days to the glory days to the darkest days, have weathered several decades of experiential marketing—and survived. From laying the strategic groundwork in your organizations for the eventual comeback to predictions for the years ahead to the exploding phenomenon that is virtual events, our panelists cover it all. So stick a fresh pod in the Keurig and take note of some of the most seasoned perspectives in the biz.

THE COMEBACK
IS ALWAYS
STRONGER
THAN THE
SETBACK

THE PANELISTS:



DEREK GENTILE

President and CEO, EEI
Global



ZEV NOROTSKY

CEO & Founder, ENTER



CHAD TONS

CEO & Founder, Infinity
Marketing Team



MARK SHEARON

Founder, Managing
Director, Proscenium

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EVENT MARKETER: HOW WILL THE CORONAVIRUS FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGE HOW THE INDUSTRY FUNCTIONS AND HOW CAN EVENT TEAMS PREPARE FOR THESE CHANGES?

DEREK GENTILE: At EEI Global, we believe safety and security must be top priorities for the entire industry so that audiences can return with confidence to the face-to-face events they value and enjoy. Event teams also need to: Offer deeper benefits to clients like consumer/customer research, strategic planning and solutions integration; forge new levels of collaboration between show organizers, venues, clients, digital providers and show producers/production companies; and for virtual events, rise to the new challenges of audience acquisition

ZEV NOROTSKY: With respect to global changes in the industry we are seeing a total shift in both the how and why of event marketing. Special events will respond with a purpose driven approach by ensuring that the “why” is answered before embarking on the creative and production journey of the “how.” Once we answer that fundamental question will need to address the psychology of mass gatherings, the safety and precautions we need to enact and ultimately what is driving the ROI for this type of brand investment.

MARK SHEARON: Everything has changed! And not only has the world changed, but it will continue to change. We are nowhere near done, and as I sit here in early May 2020 in New York, we know so little about antibody testing and when a vaccine will be widely available. Right now, the live event industry is at a complete standstill, and until we have a vaccine, we will not be able to meet up in large numbers, safely. Our clients, and we, have pivoted to Virtual Event platforms, and at Proscenium, we were fortunate that before COVID, we had already operated several virtual events for some of our clients. Every industry has been affected; however, I think we are at an advantage in live events as we are used to change, being

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ZEV NOROTSKY
CEO & Founder, ENTER

able to pivot, we are incredibly flexible and used to coming up with creative solutions to complex issues.

EM: WHAT STRATEGIC QUESTIONS CAN EVENT TEAMS BE ASKING THEMSELVES AND THEIR BRANDS RIGHT NOW TO LAY THE GROUNDWORK FOR AN INDUSTRY COMEBACK?

MS: At Proscenium, we are spending a lot of time modeling what the new normal will be for live events in 2021 and beyond. How do we keep our attendees and team safe and healthy? What are the new logistical constraints in terms of square footage per attendee? What will a 2021 attendee experience look like? How do we build a virtual solution into every live event in case we have to pivot at the last moment? How will the long-term effects of the pandemic affect budgets?

ZN: I really believe that the new blueprint for experiential is going to require a very cohesive understanding of how streaming can, and whether it should, potentially be leveraged from an event perspective. I think the biggest takeaway from our time under quarantine is really going to be a newfound appreciation of the intersection between live and digital and leveraging available technology to amplify and extend the reach of existing platforms.

DG: Clients should revisit their core strategic goals and ask themselves, “How has our value proposition changed? What are our customers’ current unmet needs?” Then, look at re-optimizing the entire media mix (events, advertising, social, digital marketing, PR, etc.). We wouldn’t be surprised if this leads to new, hybrid models that revolutionize the industry. For some marketers, this can be a time to make big strides even while others retreat.

EM: WHAT NEW WAYS OF THINKING AND DOING SHOULD BE EXPLORED?

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MS: Here at Proscenium, we see this as a huge opportunity. When in life do you ever get to push the pause button, take time to think, and really plan? What is clear is that we won't, and that we shouldn't, go back to what we were doing before. We have teams working on new exciting hybrid solutions with enhanced levels of creativity, interactivity, and data capture. We are excited about the future of live events.

EM: LET'S TALK ABOUT SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM STRATEGIES TEAMS CAN BE WORKING ON NOW: CAN YOU SHARE SOME OF THE NEAR-TERM ITEMS ON YOUR CHECKLISTS (THE IMMEDIATE STOP-GAPS, QUICK COST-CUTTING SOLUTIONS), AND THEN SOME OF THE STRATEGIES YOU'RE EXPLORING FOR LATER THIS YEAR AND YEARS TO COME (NEW EVENT AND REVENUE MODELS, OUT OF THE BOX IDEAS)?

CHAD TONS: IMT's short-term and long-term strategies are morphing into a marriage of both live and virtual elements. For our U.S. team, short term strategies are based on the live executions our global IMT-Pico partners have been conducting in the virtual space with clients like Huawei and Alibaba. Our team is reviewing data driven analytics and exploring the re-emergence of previously stand-alone digital messaging enhancements, like gamification, to determine how we create exciting, emotion-driven interactions for guests. We are seeing that the virtual event solutions that are currently out there are a bit ordinary—so with our Virtuosity platform, our team is implementing interactivity points that “wow” to keep virtual attendees excited and engaged in a completely fresh experience.

When thinking long-term, we have to be conscious of the fact that live events are changing as we speak. By incorporating emerging, cutting-edge technologies that allow us to focus on content and brand

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EEI Global

narratives, we are at the forefront of creating the new normal when it comes to live events. IMT's event producers, creative minds and development teams are coming together to test and execute scenarios that blend live and virtual elements. Whether it is a physical stage build with AR elements to tell the brand story or a virtual showroom with live demo experts walking guests through exploded product views, now is the time to push limits and that is exactly what Infinity Marketing Team is doing.

ZN: Overall, I think we have seen a lot of brands take event marketing roles in-house over the last few years as the growth of our economy and the need for diverse, integrated team has made this possible. Today, with the downsizing happening across all industries a lot of those roles have evaporated thereby making agencies more valuable than ever before as companies need to fill the internal void left by our economic downturn. In order to lean into that, ENTER has stayed fully operational through the entire downturn by staying connected to not only our clients but also the creators. We have made it our impetus to remain grounded in the cultural class that will ultimately drive the larger conversation of a rebound by being accessible and humanizing the agency in as many ways as possible.

We have explored strategic partnerships and investments ranging from a cloud kitchen to execute virtual restaurant pop-ups to a streaming & content studio to support our integrated multimedia initiatives across the board. At the moment we are in the process of planning a Drive-In Theater concept in L.A., a fully produced music video & live stream at a remote location, a fully integrated digital campaign for an apparel brand and a wide range of livestream content opportunities for clients. Additionally, we have remained close with all of our strategic partners on media, festival and promotional side to ensure that we stay informed and able to share that intel back to our community.

DG: Relationships are so crucial. At EEI Global, we're fortunate to have strong bonds with many long-term clients. A few weeks into the crisis, we began holding virtual

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roundtables with them. One thing we heard over and over as a silver lining of the crisis was that it's given us more time to think. It's become an unexpectedly ideal time for strategy. So we've begun remapping the landscape by creating briefs, time/horizon scenarios and various other tools for clients to work through on their own or in collaboration with EEI. We're looking at virtual events, a variety of integrated digital tools, digital media planning, mobile tours and lobby displays among other tactics. But the key is to start with a dynamic strategy, which itself has to grow from the relationship.

EM: THERE HAS BEEN A HUGE SURGE INTO VIRTUAL EVENTS. IS THIS A BAND AID OR WILL WE SEE A RESURGENCE OF DIGITAL AND HYBRID EVENTS IN THE FUTURE?

CT: Some of the virtual event solutions we are seeing can certainly be considered "Band Aids," or short-term solutions to a long term problem. Virtuosity is creating a platform that allows a seamless blending of virtual and live events to provide a level of engagement that event audiences have not experienced before. The events industry will see a wave of change into 2021 that will allow us to more intuitively use all of the emerging technologies that are at our finger tips.

DG: We believe virtual events are worthwhile to consider, as is the vast landscape of digital tools. In strategy sessions, we counsel clients to get back to the fundamentals of their marketing goals, then think through a variety of options. This process has led to some surprising conclusions. We're excited about the learning we'll get from alternative tactics, and anticipate that the post-COVID 19 world will usher in superior ways to achieve goals.

ZN: It's more like a band-aid on a gunshot wound if you ask me, I believe we are seeing unparalleled levels of digital fatigue and while impressions and standard metrics may be increasing in terms of time spent online I personally believe the actual engagement is down. The rush to "streamification" has

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MARK SHEARON

Founder, Managing Director, Proscenium

created a massive glut in online events without real connectivity. I do think the major paradigm shift will occur once events are allowed to commence when you see streaming built in as a much more vital part of the event content strategy ecosystem than ever before. The amplification you can generate from live experiences is what's going to fundamentally propel experiential growth into the next decade.

MS: It's both a band aid and something that will play a role in the future. In times of crisis, communication is more difficult, but it is more important than ever, so we have been forced to turn to virtual. This is not a choice; it is out of necessity. And with the internet and the availability of online meeting software, it is all technically possible. The brands that will win in this space will be the ones who use their virtual platforms in engaging, innovative, and creative ways. One interesting side effect is that it will be possible to really measure engagement for these online events. Proscenium understands how to do all of this, and we will be giving our clients an edge over their competitors. It's a real and immediate opportunity.

EM: GIVE US YOUR PREDICTIONS: WHAT WILL THE LIVE EVENT LANDSCAPE LOOK LIKE AT THE END OF 2020, AND IN THE YEARS TO COME?

MS: At Proscenium, we feel like the halt on live events will last longer than most people hope and think it will. We are anticipating that for at least early 2021, hybrid events will play a significant role in our industry. So smaller, more focused, more custom, more immersive events for select audience members that will then be broadcast to a broader online audience. To be successful, these events will need to be thought of as TV spectaculars rather than just live events. A subtle but different mindset will be required. We are excited about the future, and ultimately, we think that good things will come from what has been a challenging time for our amazing industry.

ZN: I am predicting a soft recovery for Q4 that

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sees a few smaller events and activations that pave the way for larger comeback in early 2021. Based on a myriad of both economic and social factors that have created widespread collateral damage across brands, platforms and promoters we will be forced to redefine the playbook as experiential marketers, but this will ultimately allow us to continue prospering into 2021 and beyond. There will be new standards, expectations and challenges but as an industry we will adapt and move forward.

DG: Full recovery will not happen until there is a vaccine, which is likely 12-18 months away. There will be very few, if any, major shows or events in 2020. We expect that in 2021, the entire landscape will remain fluid. Markets that adopt safe practices across all travel-related services will gain consumer confidence and we'll see a return of some shows. This is likely to happen in major convention cities like Las Vegas, Orlando, Chicago, Atlanta and New York in early 2021 and grow through the end of the year. We expect that full recovery will happen by the beginning of 2022.

EM: WHAT AREAS OF THE EVENT INDUSTRY WILL BE MOST CHANGED BY THE PANDEMIC?

ZN: I don't view this as really an isolated issue that affects micro aspects of the industry rather a macro issue that will largely impact the entire discipline including sponsorships, festivals, conferences, etc. The challenges to our industry start with a new set of best practices to guide what mass gatherings look like moving forward. Experiential agencies are going to need a solid road map that first protects everyone involved in the planning and production. We're looking at things like staff isolation, thermal screening, built in distance tactics etc. Secondly, we have to address the psyche of consumers and attendees. In some regards there is massive pent up demand for experiences and to resume a sense of normalcy. On the other hand, there is a responsibility of brands and guests to ensure it's safe to do so. I believe as long as we can find a middle ground where safety meets psyche, we can begin to march towards resuming all aspects of the business in good conscience.

“What will be interesting for those in our industry will be the different demographics who are attending these events in person versus opting for virtual attendance. Millennial and Gen Z Coachella festival goers won't be nearly as fazed attending in person, whereas middle-aged, traditional b-to-b conference goers may require extensive assurances for personal health and safety before committing to attend in person”



CHAD TONS
CEO & Founder, Infinity
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DG: The higher the dependence on physical throughput, the greater the impact.

EM: ATTENDEES MAY BE WARY OF LARGE GROUP GATHERINGS FOR SOME TIME. HOW WILL EVENTS NEED TO CHANGE TO ADDRESS CONSUMER FEARS?

ZN: Let's start small, I don't think the first events need to be a 4,000-person conference or a 40,000-person festival. I do believe it's going to be more about the 40-person dinner party that leads into the 400-person reception that are going to be far more impactful for the state of the industry than anything else. The smaller events will lead us back to execution and provide a blueprint for the larger events to ultimately resume in 2021.

DG: To even attract audiences, it's incumbent on state and local governments, venue owners, and show organizers as well as exhibitors to demonstrate that safety measures are in place. Those who get it right soonest will benefit from pent-up demand for participation.

CT: Our primary concern is, and always will be, the health and safety of attendees and our clients. IMT is already implementing the idea of safety and spatial distancing in designs and logistics for a slew of early Fall events.

From entrance points with immediate symptoms testing and sanitary, on-site badge pickup solutions, to changes in food displays, ground transfers, and spacing mechanisms built into displays and exhibits, the opportunities for creating safe environments in creative, intuitive and aesthetically pleasing ways are endless.

We are rethinking everything from comfortable, spacious guest seating in keynote presentations as well as how hands-on product experiences—the crux of experiential marketing—can evolve to deliver key messaging in new ways.

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versus opting for virtual attendance. Millennial and Gen Z Coachella festival goers won't be nearly as fazed attending in person, whereas mid-aged, traditional b-to-b conference goers may require extensive assurances for personal health and safety before committing to attend in person.

In the end, event professionals need to create open forums to listen to concerns from clients and their targeted audiences and be prepared to make swift, structural adjustments as needed. We will ultimately need to approach these next few months of new territory with open minds and compassion—we are all in this together.

