



EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE: PLANNING FOR THE COMEBACK

**IN THIS MID-YEAR FORECAST, EVENT LEADERS
SHARE THEIR PREDICTIONS ON WHAT THE INDUSTRY
HAS LEARNED, AND HOW IT WILL INFORM ITS FUTURE**

Most event marketers have reported that the industry's impending comeback still feels like a moving target. But now that cities are beginning to phase into complete reopenings, it's given many hope that the second half of 2021 might just be the start of the "official" comeback they have been waiting for.

This summer, Event Marketer convened a virtual roundtable of industry experts to discuss the topics keeping most event professionals up at night. From contending with the realities of hybrid events (nope, you're not crazy—they're way more work), to building resilient event organizations, to the one thing every event will need to be successful in the future, this panel left no stone unturned. Read on for some fresh perspectives and insights that can help you prepare for the second half, and your return to live.

THE PANELISTS:



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EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE: PLANNING FOR THE COMEBACK

A LOT OF EVENT MARKETERS HAVE REPORTED THAT THEY LEARNED SOME PAINFUL, BUT IN SOME WAYS INSIGHTFUL, LESSONS IN 2020 AND EARLY 2021 THAT WILL SHAPE HOW THEY DO EVENTS IN THE FUTURE. WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

PD: “Fluid and flexible.” We are advising our clients to approach 2021-22 event planning with an adaptable mindset. As event professionals, we understand that event planning and activation have always required a high degree of fluidity and flexibility, but the pandemic has made long-term planning more difficult and has placed a premium on agencies with strong logistics and operations experience capable of reacting, adjusting, and overcoming challenges while taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves.

PK: Scaling experiences through digital, virtual and content will be the norm moving forward, which will make aligning expectations to budgets tighter than ever. We believe this will slowly shift, and experience makers will be the ones to benefit.

JC: We’ve learned that events can be put on hiatus, but they can’t be replaced by virtual. Even during the darkest times of the pandemic, consumers were eager to engage with our staff at the limited brand activations we did execute for our agency clients—obviously these most recent interactions were different than they were pre-COVID, but the appeal was the same. If we didn’t know it before we cannot deny it now: People crave face-to-face connection. As restrictions continue to lift, consumers are eager to get away from their screens and extremely willing to connect with brands at live experiences.

MG: Experiential marketers have always needed to be resourceful, creative,



With finite time and budgets, we must be prepared with a criteria or scorecard upon which we evaluate simultaneously occurring events to determine which are most likely to provide the greatest impact and value.



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groundbreaking and quick to embrace new technologies. The pandemic challenged live event producers to adapt or die, and those that did adapt have created a new kind of event marketing, one that allows brands to reach and engage consumers and build audiences on a global scale. These new tactics, platforms, and strategies have reshaped the marketing landscape and will continue to evolve and mature. It’s exciting to be working in this industry at a time when people are looking forward to reconnecting and are open to creative ways of doing it.

WHAT SHOULD A “HYBRID” EVENT LOOK LIKE IN 2021, AND HOW DO YOU THINK THE INDUSTRY SHOULD BEST UTILIZE LIVE AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS TOGETHER IN THE FUTURE?

PK: Hybrid events should ensure that the extended audiences still have an engaging experience by using the same thoughtfulness we put into physical experiences. Strive to engage emotions wherever you meet your target audience.

Pre-planning and story mapping how the experience and content scales will be critical to ensure the extended reach of hybrid and virtual experiences are seamlessly and efficiently intertwined.

Not every live event will need the same degree of hybrid and digital experience, so knowing the audiences’ needs and expectations will be key. It will also ensure budgets are utilized where they can have the maximum impact.

Brands that are looking to scale a live experience now have audiences that are eager to consume those experiences. Every experience should be considered a “media” opportunity. Brands that maximize their reach by considering their live experiences as a “physical set for content” will win in the long run.

EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE: PLANNING FOR THE COMEBACK

Coming out of the past 15 months, consumer expectations have changed and as a result, we believe brands will begin to rethink their budget allocations, aligning more budget to experiences they create to ensure it scales through content and digital virtual spaces.

JC: For some companies, live events will now have digital layers that allow brands to connect with audiences that may not be comfortable attending the event. Others will produce virtual events and live events separately—a hybrid “portfolio” of experiences. Honestly, I see consumers ready to bust out of their homes and attend live events. Digital layers provide incredible reach at incredibly low cost—and many of our clients’ programs will be tethered to those types of amplification channels. But many won’t be.

MG: Setting up a physical event and giving “remote” consumers the opportunity to engage and participate from the comfort of their own homes is something that I think is going to continue to grow in the future. In addition to amplifying and sharing live events, the best hybrid programs will provide additional experiences to an online audience, such as opportunities to do Q&A’s with talent, get a peek behind the scenes, enjoy additional packaged content and respond to special product offers. The look and feel of hybrid events will continue to expand as new technologies become available.

HOW SHOULD EVENT ORGANIZATIONS PREPARE AND EVOLVE TO KEEP PACE WITH WHAT IS SURE TO BE A BUSY FALL AND 2022?

PD: As live events return at a rapid pace, event marketers are going to have more choices than normal in terms of viable and/or historical events to attend. With finite time and budgets, we must be prepared with a criteria or scorecard upon which we evaluate simultaneously occurring events to determine which are most likely to provide



Brands and agencies need to consider the physical and emotional needs of every type of consumer and find ways to engage both active and passive audiences.



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the greatest impact and value relative to our individual objectives and overall scheduling parameters.

PK: FG|PG has taken the last year to make key strategic hires and enhance our digital and virtual capabilities, down to building our own virtual IP bespoke platform so we can better help scale any client’s digital and hybrid needs.

JC: Reconnect with your clients, peers, industry friends and partners. Ask them what has changed—processes, pricing, personnel—so you can adjust your own. Keep your partners in the loop of what is in the pipeline so we can plan accordingly. Communication will be key to ensure all parties are ready to ramp up as the industry gets back to full swing.

MG: A lot has changed over the past year. As event marketers have embraced online integrations, new technologies and vendors have emerged. Knowing about new resources, digital platforms, capabilities and pricing will put agencies in a better place when hybrid events are in full swing.

While there is a great interest in returning to live events, consumers have accepted virtual events, and brands will continue to want to connect with online audiences. For the immediate future (through 2021) there will be a rush back to in-person activations but with an emphasis on safety (proof of vaccination, social distancing, protocols for hands-on demos).

The challenge will be finding the balance between events that are safe but not restrictive or overly intrusive. Event marketers will need to be sensitive to the wide range of consumer comfort levels at this time. Understanding your audience demographic and your location and adapting approaches based on these factors will be the key to successful events. What works for one market may not work for another.

EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE: PLANNING FOR THE COMEBACK

WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL BE THE BIGGEST PAIN POINTS FOR EVENT MARKETERS THIS FALL AND EARLY 2022 AND WHAT ARE SOME WAYS TO APPROACH OR ADDRESS THEM HEAD-ON?

PD: Supply chain delays, raw material costs and scarcity, as well as labor shortages, have the potential to significantly and negatively impact the events industry. Historical timelines and budgets for events and mobile tours are likely going to be lengthier and more expensive well into 2022. Marketers who are already looking toward 2022 and working with their partners and procurement departments are going to have a critical advantage over those marketers who are waiting until the next fiscal or calendar year to approve marketing plans and/or budgets.

Additionally, as the industry moves forward dealing with the above issues, missed deadlines can mean your program is dead. Vendors are not going to have the patience, bandwidth, or flexibility to simply charge rush fees to keep you in queue. Missing production or commitment deadlines will move you to the back of the line or cancel your production window.

PK: The most difficult aspect for marketers will be feeling confident enough to get back to live engagement, balancing the always present fear that COVID could spike again or someone might get sick at one of their activations. We believe this can be easily managed through strategic planning that recognizes the needs of the many types of attendees – both physically and mentally. We understand that clients will also be budget-challenged, wanting to do robust hybrid events, but often without the budgets associated to do it all the way they dream. For us, the trick is to manage the needs against the wants, always putting the “experience first.” This is another reason we designed and built our own virtual hybrid IP platform. It gives FG|PG the ability to offer a unique, tailored hybrid/virtual solution that can be value engineered to support the wide

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range of budgets we’re sure to see during the next 12 months.

JC: Event marketers have always operated best when they had total control over an experience. I think the biggest pain point, as we try and make a return to some degree of normalcy, is understanding that total control just isn’t doable right now. Rules are different across states, cities, venues, even zip codes. Being flexible and pivoting when you need to will be critical. Also, we all need to understand that events will start small and eventually scale up. The first batch of live events will be small—marketers need to embrace a quality-over-quantity mentality.

HOW HAVE CONSUMERS CHANGED THIS PAST YEAR AND HOW WILL YOU SHAPE LIVE ENGAGEMENTS TO TAKE THOSE CHANGES INTO CONSIDERATION?

PD: During our live event activations in 2020 and into 2021, we are seeing an expectation from attendees that the event promoters, as well as the activating sponsors, are taking steps to make attendees feel safe. Signage encouraging social distancing, less surfaces to touch, more cleaning of the surfaces people are touching, availability of sanitizer and masks are simple steps necessary to provide attendees with the confidence to engage and interact at pre-pandemic levels.

PK: In the short term, the void of interesting experiences means consumers are simply craving the basics. They want to get back to the type of experiences they used to love. The music and food festivals, sporting events, and other entertainment moments. So, brands can win by helping bring these back, and amplifying the joy of being together and connected around passion points.

That said, the consumer mindset has shifted in different ways across the country. Some people will be less cautious when it comes to safety protocols, and others more careful.

EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE: PLANNING FOR THE COMEBACK

This means brands and their agencies need to consider the physical and emotional needs of every type of consumer and find ways to engage both active and passive audiences – ensuring both have equally rewarding experiences and every type of audience feels safe joining in on live experiences and events.

Finally, there's no doubt that consumers are digitally fatigued from the past year. So, as we explore hybrid engagement and scaling events digitally or virtually, we need to ensure that the experience we are crafting is rewarding. Livestreams without some form of two-way engagement will be too easy for consumers to turn off. Brands should ask themselves how they can provide value when scaling any event. We know consumers will be expecting it, but their expectations will also be higher than a year ago.

JC: The rules of interaction have changed. Behaviors that were once common—handshakes, hugs, being invited into someone's house and sharing space with strangers—are only now being reintroduced. There is confusion as to what is/isn't appropriate. We work with our agency and brand partners to ensure our brand ambassadors know what the “rules of engagement” are—meaning, how they should engage consumers, when they should be more proactive or more conservative... when a little more space might be a good thing, and so on. It's really about making sure they are sensitive to all situations and audiences.

WHAT'S ONE THING EVERY LIVE EVENT WILL NEED TO BE SUCCESSFUL THIS YEAR?

PD: Attendees willing and able to engage and interact.

JC: I'll say it again: It's all about flexibility. We've always needed backup plans for weather, variability in attendance, delayed shipments and other scenarios. But we now need to be prepared for the unpredictable—rules that can change at any time. Kick off your planning with the understanding that



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things might need to shift as the program launch approaches to help all parties deal with unexpected changes—including new opportunities that arise as restrictions continue to change. We have all worked closely together this past year to navigate challenges; now we can work closely to embrace and respond to possibilities.

ARE THERE ANY GROWTH AREAS YOU PREDICT WILL TAKE HOLD THIS AND NEXT YEAR? MORE MOBILE TOURS? MORE TARGETED OR LOCAL EVENTS? FUNDAMENTAL SHIFTS IN THE WAY CONFERENCES ARE PRODUCED?

PK: We believe brands will start to put experience first in the brief, it's what we call “experience first” marketing. Through this approach, a live event or experience will now also have the potential to grab media dollars and be considered a live set from which content can be planned and scaled more than ever.

JC: It's going to feel like 2007 again—as brands get back to the basics of experiential with grassroots-style, super-local campaigns that reach consumers through street teams and Main Street experiences. Low cost, flexible, mobile—this is where live experiences started and we're seeing so many companies getting back to the basics in 2021 and 2022. It's perfect for us, because our local field staff can use their expertise to recommend ways to engage with the target demographic. Nobody knows their zip codes better.

MG: We have noticed that brands are beginning to test the waters with small-scale events, but are cautious about driving large crowds to their events, opting instead to go where their audiences are already feeling comfortable.

Another trend that will continue is creating experiences for small, targeted groups of

EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE: PLANNING FOR THE COMEBACK

people, producing content there and pushing it out afterwards to a wide audience. Finding appropriate outlets and driving traffic to these online events will be key to success.

As the year progresses and brands (and the public) get more comfortable, marketers will start to create their own larger events.

I'm hopeful that come 2022, consumers will be able to get back to pre-COVID activities and events and there will be an increased interest in experiential marketing and the industry's expanded offerings and reach.

DO YOU THINK THE INDUSTRY IS STAFFED AND READY FOR ITS COMEBACK OR WILL THERE BE PAIN POINTS WHEN IT COMES TO RESOURCES LIKE STAFF, VENUES, SUPPLIERS?

PD: There are certainly going to be pain points as the industry attempts to quickly ramp back up from 0 to 100. Those pain points will obviously be higher for anyone who stays on the sidelines much longer relative to working with their partners

and vendors on planning and procurement. For brands who are planning to launch or relaunch live or experiential campaigns in early 2022, the time for selecting partners and vendors, scheduling resources, placing production orders, and procuring capital assets is now.

JC: It doesn't matter the brand or the event or the location: Our staffers are the frontline of this industry. So we're working as hard as our clients to ramp up right now—making sure our staff database is up to date and recruiting more brand ambassadors in all key markets. I'd say to all of the EM readers that the sooner you lock down staff for an event, the better. Last-minute staffing orders and bookings—much like venue bookings—won't be as easy this fall as they were pre-pandemic. The earlier you get us involved the earlier we can help you ensure it will all go as planned.

MG: The rush to market is creating a backlog of talent, materials, and supplies. Much of the world is still on lockdown, causing a delay in production. Vendors and venues are understaffed or have gone out of business, making it difficult to execute quick timelines. Brands will need to allow for longer timelines and marketers will need to get creative and resourceful as the world reopens.