

MEET THE TRAILBLAZERS

In our 20th anniversary roundtable, we talk to the agencies that have been on the It List the longest

In 2002, Event Marketer published the first-ever list of the top 100 experiential agencies in the industry, ultimately shining a spotlight on the people who were instrumental in transforming an up-and-coming marketing discipline from “party department” to “strategic marketing powerhouse.” Flash forward to today and many of those same agencies still hold a coveted spot on the It List—still the event industry’s only comprehensive roster of the best experiential shops in the biz.

Staying on top in a volatile industry takes a certain amount of moxie, so we reached out to a short list of long-time It List executives to find out what the journey so far has taught them, and what it might teach other event marketers as they embark on the next twenty years.

Introducing, the 2022 It List Trailblazers.

PARTICIPANTS:



Chad Tons
CEO & Founder,
Infinity Marketing Team



Rod Mickels
Co-Founder and CEO,
InVision Communications



Josh McCall
Chairman & CEO,
Jack Morton



Jeff Boedges
Managing Partner,
Soho Experiential



Adam Charles
EVP, Agency & Professional
Services, Freeman

EM: *As one of the industry's trailblazers you've been witness to the event industry's evolution from what, for many, was the "party" department to what is today, for many organizations, a business-generating center of the marketing mix. What do you think drove that change in function and perception, and for those still struggling to legitimize their event practice, any advice on how to prove their business value?*

Chad Tons: No question about it... the quantifiable results and ROI mechanisms have been the game changers. The industry has evolved from the early days of simply having 'brand visibility' to today's strategic focus on touchpoints, registration, tie-ins to martech stacks, consumer surveys, and pinpoint accuracy on defined target markets.

Moreover, it's a big acknowledgement of the industry's progression when agencies like Infinity Marketing Team are asked to have the proverbial 'seat at the table' when strategizing on client budgets, partnerships, and 360 campaigns that emanate with the experiential concept and expand into social, influencers, OOH and PR tactics.

For those still struggling to legitimize their event practices, their company offerings need to match the clientele they are focusing on. If—for example—they are shooting for retail clients, platforms offering tracking mechanisms on sales, spikes and consumer interactions are essential. If the focus is on brands simply trying to gain traction in their marketplace, then company offerings should adjust accordingly.

Rod Mickels: Several elements drove the changed perception in the industry. One, our knowledge as an agency grew, and we became more aware of the needs of our



The industry has evolved from the early days of simply having 'brand visibility' to today's strategic focus on touchpoints, registration, tie-ins to martech stacks, consumer surveys, and pinpoint accuracy on defined target markets.

— CHAD TONS

clients. Initially, we were mainly providers of staging solutions, but we noted that our clients needed more over time. We saw the need for strategic and content support (keynotes, speakers, creative). Second, clients began to view us less as a 'vendor' and more as a partner and an extension of their staff. With the added collaboration, our scope of work expanded beyond 'AV equipment provider' to that of a trusted partner who can also provide services in design, creative, communications, digital, and more. Third, being in business for 31 years, the industry naturally matured over time to take a more strategic approach. For those still struggling to justify their event practice, I'd recommend reviewing the myriad of research on the value of face-to-face experiences as irreplaceable in building relationships and credibility. Moreover, responding to client opportunities (e.g., RFPs) with a proactive approach that leverages events as part of a broader, overall communication and campaign strategy, with built-in holistic measurement, positions events deeper into the marketing mix.

Jeff Boedges: Owing to convenience but more recently COVID and the social shut

down, our lives have become more virtual than ever. But as my business partner and I tell our clients, the more digitally reliant we become, the greater the value people will find in face-to-face interaction. While the metaverse will continue to blur the line between digital and IRL, there will always be a need for real life experience—gathering and sharing common interests has been a part of human existence since the beginning of civilization. The need to engage all five senses, while it can be simulated in the metaverse, still pales in comparison to the real thing.

Josh McCall: Jack Morton founded this agency 83 years ago, producing music and entertainment events. At that time, much of what he did was for industry and trade association "parties," but from day one, he was always laser focused on helping his clients achieve their business objectives. He was also intensely aware of how the audience responded, their reaction and emotion were central to how he recommended the talent and planned the events.

As technology evolved, so did our offerings, and we migrated into business

theatre and ultimately experiential. We have never lost sight of what engages an audience which is at the core of changing behaviors and increasing loyalty. The focus has always remained on our clients and working with them to achieve their business success. For those who may still be struggling to legitimize your event practice, you need to reposition your value proposition and ensure that your focus is not only on what the client wants but also on what moves their audience to act.

EM: Were there any key moments (or pivotal campaigns) that marked when you knew experiential was coming into its own as a strategic marketing discipline?

Chad Tons: Two moments immediately come to mind, both ironically from our HP client...

It was 2006 (and yes, I'm going to hide my grey hairs) and we had launched the YOU+HP Experience. It was the most aggressive experiential mobile tour ever created and it housed over 40 HP products, had on-site sales that outsold HP partner stores, and was attended by over two million consumers during its run. As these results began to roll in during the campaign, it was the first time that strategies for national brand campaigns and public relations efforts all shifted to accompany an experiential platform.

Another fond memory came back in 2012 at CES. IMT made the bold decision with our HP and Intel clients to create their entire CES product experience OFF of the traditional show floor. It was the first tech art-meets-EDM interactive environment ever developed. In addition to the record attendance achieved (from partners, media and customers), multiple HP and Intel products still won 'Best In Show' at CES despite not having an 'official' presence! This is when the power of our industry truly flexed its muscle.

Our pyramid of priorities is 'client, people, profit,' and we have always run the company that way. It's important to take care of our employees, providing them ample opportunities for flexible work environments and prioritizing retention and tenure. The importance of building a unique culture is also key to engagement. The industry now gets it, too.

—ROD MICKELS



Rod Mickels: I can look back on several pivotal moments in time—one when we started competing more with communications agencies versus staging/AV companies. Second, when we began working in earnest on content that was vital to our clients and their customers. Third, the industry began labeling less about “an event” and more about the experience, understanding the audience mindset and honing the customer journey. Learning from research about face-to-face experiences surfaced over the years to support how experiential has transformed into a strategic marketing discipline—namely, measuring data how face-to-face impacts customer behavior and shortens the buying cycle. At the same time, mainstream publications and economists started talking about the “experience economy.” Also, having a deeper understanding of audience segments and personas—and using this research to guide our programs—has further ingrained experiential as a strategic marketing discipline.

Jeff Boedges: When I started in this industry, there was a well-known but seldom discussed ROI disconnect. Most

if not all our clients had “gut feelings” that experiential moved the needle, but they could not, nor could the agencies, help explain how or how much. When we started Soho, we knew our work had value and we set out to create ROI models that would prove it. While we were confident we could prove it, when we eventually did create a functional ROI model, we were pleasantly surprised at just how effective it is. We have since that time, worked with our clients to educate them on how and why ROI evaluation can be done to fuel their efforts moving forward. The more we can add rigor and transparency to our evaluation processes, the more seriously we will be taken as a strategic marketing discipline.

Adam Charles: It was around a decade ago that I was working with one of the top luxury car brands overseas. At the time, the market was less mature than it is today. Because of the market we were in, we always had a seat at the table with agencies from different parts of the marketing ecosystem.

And in those days, people were more focused on building up-stream market-

ing campaigns like TV advertising. But what we were doing was different for that era by focusing on building a holistic campaign around event experiences.

It really set the stage for the marketing around that brand, and we were helping to integrate all disciplines of marketing within events.

The point and goal was to put the brand and experience at the center of everything we did, which was really different and impactful back then. Experiences allow the brand to develop a deeper and more meaningful relationship with a brand.

Josh McCall: In 1998, 24 years ago, The Interpublic Group (IPG), one of the world's largest advertising holding companies, purchased Jack Morton for over \$100 million. That transaction validated that experiential was a strategic marketing discipline that held significant value to IPG's client roster of leading global brands.

EM: *This industry has weathered many setbacks, including a recession and a pandemic. What do you think the industry does better now than it did before these challenges?*

Rod Mickels: As an industry, we now fully understand the value of digital to make programs more accessible—and we've seen attendance increase as a result. Living in each other's "living rooms" for three years on Zoom calls and other video chats gave us a better understanding of how our clients work and the pressures they face in their organizations, enabling us to collaborate and support them in critical new ways. Having lived through the pandemic and related hardships, we have more empathy for audiences and our employees, resulting in increased accessibility.

We have also evolved radically our concept of "office life." Our team is now more decentralized than ever and how we define office hours, time-off and a normal work week has changed forever and quite possibly, for the better. Giving employees the power to work from remote locations, temporarily or just as a break from NYC, has helped us help our people to find a better work life balance and, consequently, provide a better work product for the team.

— JEFF BOEDGES



As an agency of 31 years, we've been through several major market condition changes: the recession of 2000, 2008, 2020, and now the pandemic. Our sales went down 54% overnight. That would make many in our industry panic. Having experienced the ups and downs in past economic downturns—and always emerging stronger—we had the choice to weather the storm. Rather than shrinking our teams, services, etc., we maintained a sound approach to ride out the roller coaster. No matter the market's ups/downs, we've always valued our staff above everything, and now we see that the industry is learning this too. Our pyramid of priorities is 'client, people, profit,' and we have always run the company that way. It's important to take care of our employees, providing them ample opportunities for flexible work environments and prioritizing retention and tenure. The importance of building a unique culture is also key to engagement. The industry now gets it, too.

Jeff Boedges: I can't really speak for the industry, but I can speak for my experience and a limited number of business

associates that I collaborated with during COVID. But there are many things that changed during the Pandemic and many of those things have helped make the experiential industry better. Those include the blending of IRL and Digital/Meta—in the past, Experiential was primarily in the domain of IRL, but if there was ever any doubt, it is now certain that Experiential can and will thrive in the digital world as well.

We have also evolved radically our concept of "office life." Our team is now more decentralized than ever and how we define office hours, time-off and a normal work week has changed forever and quite possibly, for the better. Giving employees the power to work from remote locations, temporarily or just as a break from NYC, has helped us help our people to find a better work life balance and, consequently, provide a better work product for the team.

I think the last thing that changed for us was the idea and implementation of collaboration. During the shut-down, we found ourselves often with strange bedfellows. Former competitors were now advisors, collaborators and cheerleaders.

There is no more powerful driver of cooperation than a common enemy.

Adam Charles: Everything during the pandemic was accelerated, and moving to digital was always on the roadmap, but it forced not only events, but brands to think and act in different ways. Our ability to change mediums and still be able to communicate and provide a great experience for our audiences has been crucial. We're now able to seamlessly shift between live and virtual and still be able to make an impact.

And because of this, brand marketing is no longer just about B2B or B2C, it's about H2H (human to human). As we return to live, there's a pent up demand for more meaningful human connections. Creating these connections for brands is nothing new, but they're usually developed and ideated for a singular conference or tradeshow and executed as one off programs.

With brands ramping up their live campaign strategies and spending again, they need to start thinking more holistically—developing a comprehensive plan that delivers what your audience wants most: human connection. Thinking long term, it's important to create experiences and themes that tell a cohesive story across multiple channels and mediums to targeted audiences that will leave a lasting impression.

Josh McCall: We have weathered many economic downturns and, of course, Covid which was unprecedented in its impact on live events, none of which have been easy. But when times were challenging, delivering pro-active, creative solutions to help our clients continue to reach and inspire their most important audiences along with responsible fiscal management got us through those challenging twists and turns. Agencies who do it well recover stronger. The ability to pivot and offer a breadth of services to various industries is also crucial during a crisis. It allows

Passion. That's the secret sauce. A passion for what we do and understanding a client's objectives and audiences. A passion for solving complex problems, developing strategic solutions, and award-winning creative ideas. A passion for the craft—the ability to flawlessly execute an idea you never thought was possible, and a passion for delivering results that move the dial for a business and provide a real return on investment. With passion, you can get through good and challenging times.

—JOSH MCCALL



you to ride through the rough times and shift the business as needed. The agility that we, and many agencies, exercised during the pandemic to shift to virtual programs was impressive, and it's something we continue to offer and provide.

EM: What's the secret to a long career in events? How has your team and agency been able to weather the storms?

Chad Tons: First and foremost, your agency has to have a specialty. Why could a client steer your way vs others? For IMT, it's usually clients that have seen our renowned creative experiences (Coachella, TwitchCon, Uber Elevate, etc.) and want to bring their brands into that similar 'industry changing' mindset.

Obviously, client trust in knowing your firm will always deliver—high quality productions, staying on budget, knowledgeable staff to guide the process—is essential.

'Weathering storms' can come in all shapes and sizes, as we've seen most recently through the pandemic. That

said, the one underlying thread tying all 'storms' together is an agency's ability to stay agile and adapt. I realize that is easier said than done, but an internal escalation plan for the numerous situations that can arise in our industry (both on the event production and client sides) is a first step in the right direction.

Rod Mickels: Longevity in events predicates allowing people to set their destiny and grow within—and develop alongside—the agency. It means allowing people the flexibility to move around within the organization and to learn and try new things. It also means harnessing people's curiosity and providing a place for them to share ideas and communications. We need to provide the necessary training and resources to upskill and reskill staff to keep us nimble and help our clients with their evolving needs. We also need to ensure that our teams have a balanced approach to their professional and personal lives. I believe the pandemic reinforced the need for balance between work and personal life and demonstrated the benefit of juggling both more effectively with remote work.

Jeff Boedges: I believe that the secret to success in any field of endeavor is perseverance. It is difficult to lose a game if you never give up the fight. Even if you are a slow learner, eventually you know the right choices to make. If you can consistently get better, by showing up every day, eventually you will have the right team, the right clients, and the right culture to succeed.

Josh McCall: Passion. That's the secret sauce. A passion for what we do and understanding a client's objectives and audiences. A passion for solving complex problems, developing strategic solutions, and award-winning creative ideas. A passion for the craft—the ability to flawlessly execute an idea you never thought was possible, and a passion for delivering results that move the dial for a business and provide a real return on investment. With passion, you can get through good and challenging times.

EM: How will events change—or need to change—to stay relevant in the years ahead?

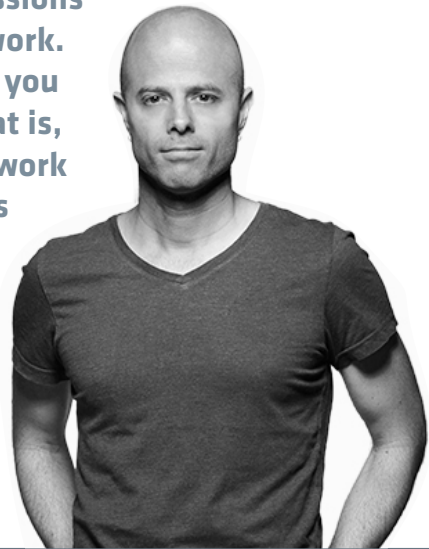
Chad Tons: I hope experiences like our recent REGEN at Coachella serve as inspiration to both clients and teammates to allow themselves to try new, experimental, and exciting things.

Our audiences and markets change with time, and our storytelling approach needs to evolve with it. Whether it is a physical, virtual, or hybrid experience, audiences want to connect with meaningful content. As creators, we have the opportunity (and obligation) to try new ways to tell that story.

Rod Mickels: The impact of technology, particularly over the pandemic, has allowed audiences to benefit from immediate, short-term satisfaction—whatever content they want, when they want, how they want it. We, as an agency, need to adjust to this new audience

It's important to remain focused and maintain your passions both in life and at work. And early in your career you might not know what that is, so I encourage people to work on a variety of projects and clients. Having a diverse perspective on our industry will let you focus on what truly matters to you.

—ADAM CHARLES



mindset and new expectations and help our clients do so, too. We'll need to deeply understand audience personas—how they learn and consume information. Applying a campaign approach to events as part of the overall marketing mix will help our clients better reach and engage audiences over time to impact hearts and minds – and ultimately, change behaviors. It's more about a multi-year approach to the customer journey. We'll also need to continue to consider both in-person and digital channels in the future and how we reach audiences uniquely (in each channel) and as one.

Jeff Boedges: Change is the only constant. The things that I can see we'll need to do in the near term are three. First, we'll need to integrate more seamlessly with the Metaverse. Right now, the two exist but in largely different spheres and to lesser but still significant degree, with different audiences. This is the single most exciting challenge we have at present.

Second will be the ability to co-create with other agencies within our client's universe. Gone are the days when

agencies worked hard to protect their turf. This traditional workflow started with one positioning, usually created above the line, which was passed off to the other various agencies who provided creative activation within their lane. But the agencies that succeed in the future will be those that play well in the sandbox in the upfront. Moving forward, the best programming will be developed with the overriding strategy co-created and developed in a way that will both reinforce common messaging and be practically activated no matter the channel.

Health safety will continue to be another significant area where we, as an industry, we will need to apply more rigor and consistency. Clearly our audiences will want improved health safety, but at what cost? We also know it is in our best interest to help stop or at least control the spread of communicable disease, but how can we do this in a cost effective, relatively painless way that also doesn't ruin the value of the overall experience.

The last thing we will also need to get better at is security. We have so far been fortunate that the number of IRL

events that have been the target of mass violence have been somewhat limited in this country. Unfortunately, I do not believe that luck will hold. It only takes one incident to devastate agency and client alike, not to mention our obligation to keep our guests and employees safe.

Josh McCall: Technology will continue to drive change. New immersive technologies that will create environments that transcend and transform physical spaces will provide a new engine for brand experiences to engage audiences in new, different, and more impactful and measurable ways.

EM: What will the trailblazing agency of the future look like?

Rod Mickels: The trailblazing agency of the future will focus on driving innovation, a decentralized agency workforce, and providing a nurturing culture. The focus will be more on the audience journey and experience and less on a piece of content or a particular program. Understanding the audience mindset will be crucial, knowing how to deliver the right content to the right person at the right time.

Jeff Boedges: The trailblazing agencies of the future will be the ones that realize the full potential of experiential. They will be capable of creating experiences at every level, and in every medium. Experiential will be threaded completely through the line and experiential will lead the development of the overall strategy and communication plan.

Josh McCall: The “Trailblazing agency of the future” will look like Jack Morton has for the last 83 years—always focused on the client’s needs, embracing new technologies, leading with bold and brave ideas, recruiting passionate talent, embracing, and welcoming diversity and diverse thinking, promoting from

within, and creating opportunities for hand raisers. In a nutshell, you’re always striving to lead, evolve and be better.

EM: How will agency offerings or services be different than they are today?

Rod Mickels: The agency of the future will be multi-solutions based, allowing clients to work more holistically with fewer agency partners across various services for programs and experiences. The agency of the future will have a growing cadre of in-house subject matter experts (SMEs) by vertical and by client, allowing deeper category-based knowledge that will benefit clients. Learning and training expertise is an area of growth that will be increasingly woven into services to help brands’ audiences’ learning and information retention. The ability to create personalized content and experiences will also be core to the agency of the future’s work.

Adam Charles: You need to do more than just create experiences. We help our clients achieve their goals throughout the entire process. Through deep customer insights and trends, we get to the heart of audiences. Whether it’s an intimate VIP event, product launch, or a half-time performance we deliver moments that build connections, drive business, and surprise and delight.

These moments in time are what keep bringing customers back—as partners, colleagues, and friends—to build a community that reaches goals together.

EM: If you could go back to the start of your career and/or agency’s early days, would you do anything differently?

Rod Mickels: I feel what we did worked well! Perhaps I would have tried a few more things earlier on, such as partnering with other organizations and clients. On

balance, however, I feel very good about how things have evolved for InVision, and I couldn’t be prouder of the team and the work we do.

Jeff Boedges: I might drink less and sleep more. But no, I wouldn’t change much. When I started in this industry in the mid ‘90s it was the wild west as we learned and honed our craft. We had many more mistakes than successes, but it was fun, exciting and necessary for our industry to grow up.

Josh McCall: I would have loved to have spent some time living and working for Jack Morton in London. As far back as I can remember, some of our industry’s most incredible creative work originated in the UK. I am enormously grateful for the 22 years we have had a London operation. Over that time, I have worked closely with our senior leadership and incredibly talented team, met many of our clients and experienced our great work. It has always been great fun visiting the UK and I always return totally inspired.

EM: If you could offer advice to the next generation of trailblazers, what would that be?

Adam Charles: It’s important to remain focused and maintain your passions both in life and at work. And early in your career you might not know what that is, so I encourage people to work on a variety of projects and clients. Having a diverse perspective on our industry will let you focus on what truly matters to you.

Develop a roadmap for your career journey to sustain longevity. And don’t be afraid to go a different direction if your passions change.

Personally, I’ve worked all over our industry, in different roles and sectors, and in four different countries. It molded me into the person I am today.

Finally, take breaks. Everyone needs to recharge and come back refreshed and refocused.