

EXECUTIVE THINK TANK

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GLOBALIZATION IN COMPLEX TIMES

17 candid insights on scaling events internationally in an era of economic uncertainty

If you're looking for a pop song to sum up the state of the event industry when it comes to globalization, there are a few solid choices. "It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)," by R.E.M. sums up the perpetual state of change event leaders operate in. "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by Tears for Fears nicely captures the ambition of brands looking to create relevance for their products and services in global markets. But perhaps the Cat Stevens song "Wild World" and its refrain, "Oh, baby, baby it's a wild world" best captures the vibe right now.

Indeed, event marketers are once again at the forefront of a new era of "wild" economic volatility where they are the among the first to feel the impact of, well, everything.

"It feels like it's the next pandemic, but it is different," says Elizabeth Gilstrap, VP-Strategic Events, Salesforce. "That was a global pandemic, whereas, unfortunately, there's discord across economies and that's a totally different unknown that we didn't have before. I think that's why global events are so important to think about."

Last month, Event Marketer, together with leading event marketing agency Opus Agency, gathered a group of seven event executives from some of the most prolific experiential b-to-b brands in the world to find out how they are managing this new reality—and complexity—across their event portfolios and teams. And how global expansion may simultaneously be one of the biggest challenges and opportunities right now.

Among the most common themes: events have gotten significantly more difficult to execute than they were just a few months ago, both domestically and internationally. And they will only get more expensive to produce in the months to come. And yet, the group unanimously agreed that there is still reason for optimism as interesting new markets begin to emerge and the challenges of the day force event marketers to do what they do best and innovate in the face of adversity.

"Innovation comes with risk, but if you don't take risks, you're not going to grow," says Dan Preiss, VP-Experiential Marketing, Dell Technologies. "That's the thing that I keep trying to remind myself through all this macroeconomic environment we are in right now: what that might look like. And that's where I get excited because where we live in the world of events is innovation. We don't do boring events."

Here are 17 predictions and top takeaways from the conversation.

THE PARTICIPANTS:



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Global Conditions & Constraints

1 | The 'T-Word' Will Impact Global Expansion

Yep, we're talking about tariffs, which have shocked the industry into a new era of unpredictability not experienced since the "P-word" (pandemic). Entire supply chains required to produce an event in a foreign country may or may not be available. Or if they are available, they may be too cost-prohibitive to purchase. And this will impact the ability to produce events in some countries. "The availability of the items that you would hope to have in [a particular] country isn't the case anymore, especially in some of the emerging markets," says Kelsey Schneider, Director Global Events & Experiences, GE HealthCare. "So it's making it more difficult to be able to pull off those events."

2 | Regional Suppliers Will Become a Lifeline

Smaller, regional or local suppliers that can help event producers get the resources they need are poised to become critical partners for the industry in their respective countries. Event marketers would be wise to identify those relationships now. "It's an opportunity for hungry, smaller companies that can quickly figure out how to give you the resources that you can no longer get," says Gilstrap.

3 | There Will Be Speaker Roster Shake-Ups

The fluidity with which top event speakers, SMEs and international employees move around the world, especially into and out of the U.S., has changed and that will require a more thoughtful approach by event and content teams that take things like border crossing and green cards into account, and may ultimately limit who can speak at events. "We don't want to send [our key opinion leaders] out of the country and then have to make them come back in again," says Michelle Martin, Sr. Director-Marketing, 4DMedical.

Localization Over Standardization

4 | Cultural Relevance Is More Important Than Ever

It may seem intuitive to most marketers to customize local market events and storytelling to the local market, but many still don't take the language and cultural nuances into account. "Consider the relevancy of your customer stories and how they will connect with your target audiences in different parts of the world," says Preiss. "Maybe there's a better story we could tell that's more regionally accepted and hyper-personalized to the region that you're trying to operate in."

5 | Understanding Buying Behavior Differences Is Imperative

Adding to Preiss's advice, global market expansion also requires an intricate understanding of the differences in buying behaviors and how they change from country to country. A general practitioner may make the radiology purchase decisions in one country, but a pulmonologist may make it in another. "Know your audience and don't assume that it's the same everywhere," says Martin. "Don't waste time and money selling to the wrong person."

6 | Just Say 'No' to the Traditional 'Event in a Box'

Many b-to-b event marketers have tried to "templatize" their events into a repeatable, plug-and-play model that can be executed in any country, by anyone. But most are finding that this strategy not only misses the localization required to be successful, it also requires an outsized amount of prep work and training from already lean internal teams. Michelle Hughes, Sr. Manager, Conference Attendee Experience at NVIDIA suggests leaning into the regional teams as much as possible to translate the brand and event goals into something that resonates on a local level. "Nobody knows their region better than they do," she says. "So it's having that dialogue of, 'Here's our best practices. How does it fit in with your culture? How would you tweak it a little bit versus the template?'"

7 | Just Say 'Yes' to the Event in a Box Concierge

Keri Ibbitson, Director of Scientific Engagements & Events at Danaher Corp. also tried the event in a box and discovered another downside: asking people who aren't "event people" to be "event people." The solution: an event "concierge" that lives in each region who guides and supports the regional team member activating the Tier Three and Tier Four events to make sure they have all of their bases covered. "She has a customer service focus and she looks at them as clients," Ibbitson says of the concierge. "She's not there to tell them what to do. She's there to help them do it better so that we are getting what we want. So that when you see pictures of an event in a random location on LinkedIn, you're like, 'Oh, wow!'" Hot tip: Ibbitson started with just one concierge and then leveraged the data from the impact she made to hire more for her team.

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— Dan Preiss, Dell Technologies

WHERE TO NEXT?

Think Tank panelists predict these international markets and cities as “growth” markets in the year ahead:

- Latin America, specifically Mexico and Brazil
- Canada, specifically Toronto and Montreal
- Asia Pacific, specifically Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Singapore

New Event Formats + Field Strategies

8 | Embrace the New Roadshow Strategy

One of the big pandemic-era pivots is making a comeback as b-to-b teams lean into smaller, local and regional events that bring the experience to attendees. “It’s always been about meeting them where they are and right now where they are is *where they are*,” says Ibbitson. Unlike the post-pandemic era, event teams are dealing with a new combination of travel budget cutbacks, travel challenges, and lean teams with less time for multi-day events. “If you’re like, ‘Hey, I’m where you are and I’m gonna be there for a day or an afternoon,’ that’s a lot easier to carve out,” Ibbitson says.

9 | Global Regions Often Offer More Decision-Makers

Many senior leaders will come to Tier One shows from Europe, APAC, and other key global markets but the high ticket and travel costs often prohibit the next tier in the org chart from coming, and those are often key decision-makers. Regional events put b-to-b brands in closer proximity to more of the “doers” who also make buying decisions. “When we go to the regions, the companies are more willing to send five of their employees, and now you’re penetrating deeper into these customers and developers and researchers versus just the top layer,” says Jasmin Dave, Senior Director, Corporate Events, NVIDIA. “It’s easier for them to get to and it’s lower cost.”

10 | Collaborations and Co-Locations May Be a Way Forward

One way event marketers might ameliorate the pain of an unpredictable international economy is by exploring never-before-done collaborations that share some of hard costs—and risks—of producing an event. “We’re all fighting for venues, so maybe we just start having co-hosted events,” says Gilstrap. “We need to think differently. And as leaders in the industry, we have to start figuring that out.”

Internal Strategy + Organizational Models

11 | Internal Collaborations Will Also Be Key

In unpredictable times, it’s helpful to reach outside the internal silos to look for efficiencies that can make the most out of an in-market, global event. “We work with the local field marketing team to say, ‘What other ancillaries are you thinking of doing in the next few months that might make sense to combine? Maybe there’s some synergies,’” suggests Preiss. “It’s a beneficial relationship where all boats rise when you have a shared goal and shared awareness.”

12 | Anticipate Tough Conversations with Stakeholders

Event leaders live the challenges of the current economic environment every day, but other stakeholders, from sales to the c-suite—not so much. This will likely create more pressure on event teams as they try to deliver against sometimes impossible odds. “You don’t want to over promise—you want to be really realistic with them,” Ibbitson says. “But at the same time, as much as I’d love to believe I can do the impossible, there are just things we can’t do. And so how do you take the ask and redefine it into something that is deliverable, that’s getting them what they want?”

13 | An Event May Not Be the Answer

Many b-to-b event marketers get approached by their internal teams with requests for events that are unsubstantiated strategically. They, in effect, want to “throw an event at it.” All of the panelists try, as much as they can, to consult their teams towards the right solution—and sometimes it’s not an event. “I’ll say, ‘In this instance an event isn’t the right tool for this market at this point for what you’re trying to achieve,’” says Preiss. “An event doesn’t solve for everything and I think you have to have that thoughtful consultative conversation with all or parts of the organization, your peers, upper, lower, everywhere.” Schneider requires her internal teams to prepare a brief they have to pitch to be considered for event support.

Budget, Risk & Future Outlook

14 | There Are More Pivots Ahead

The industry thought it retired the other “P-word” (pivot—remember that one?) post-pandemic, but surprise! It’s back again, and this time in reference to the need for event marketers to weather a new flavor of unpredictability and find a new way forward. “Day to day, we don’t know what materials are going to be available, what we need to be planning for, and then how do we pivot as an organization to maybe lean into new materials or new ways of fabricating, new ways of doing our job,” says Preiss. “We have to modernize to be able to stay ahead of it.”

15 | Proactive Budget Increases Will Help You

All of the panelists agreed that price increases will be unavoidable in the near-term and long-term and it’s up to event leaders to fortify their budgets to cover the hard costs and the additional resources needed to execute in the current economy. Schneider recommends building in a 20 percent buffer into event budgets to cover the unknowns and the additional resources.

16 | The ‘Global South’ Will be a Future Engine

As population growth and innovation shifts southward, global event strategies must shift with them. The question is no longer whether to engage these rising regions—it’s how to do it meaningfully. “The fastest-growing audiences, industries, and economies are no longer clustered in the legacy power centers of the Global North. The Global South is where growth is happening—and where relevance is being redefined,” says Brent Turner, EVP, Strategy and Solutions, Opus Agency. “Our global event strategies have to evolve accordingly. That means rebalancing portfolios, empowering regional teams, and showing up not just to be seen, but to belong. The future isn’t waiting in the usual places.”

17 | You Should ‘Never Waste a Crisis’

According to Preiss, 2025 is presenting the industry an opportunity to modernize its event practices and organizations. “I think we have to be prepared to innovate,” he says. “I think this is an inflection point where we’re going to have to rethink how things have been done and use our creativity and [consider that] the old model may not serve us anymore. It’s time to think about that as we explore all different types of markets that will emerge in the next few years.”

To explore more insights from this conversation,
connect with Brent Turner at brent@opusagency.com