

EVENT OPS

SUMMER REPORT

INSIGHTS, IDEAS & TIPS FROM THE EVENT FRONTLINES

SIX OPERATIONS PROS SHARE CANDID
INSIGHTS ON TARIFFS, EXTREME WEATHER,
SUSTAINABILITY AND MORE

POWERED BY:



Have you hugged your operations team lately?

If not, you might want to consider the mental load event operations professionals are carrying these days. From the looming impact of tariffs to living in economic uncertainty to navigating unprecedented weather events to creating experiences despite ever shorter timelines—ops teams are on high alert all day, every day, and probably twice on Sundays.

This spring, leading event structure partner Highmark Techsystems convened a panel of operations leaders to get the low-down on how some of the most prolific event agencies in the business are weathering the many storms impacting the industry right now. Part think tank and part master class in how to zig and zag to keep pace with market conditions, the conversation tackled it all, ultimately generating some playbook-worthy insights for both brand and agency-side event teams. And lucky you—we're about to share the wealth.

Here is a human-generated recap from the conversation's biggest "aha!" moments.

THE PANELISTS



Brad Fogle
Executive Producer
Produce XM



Alexa Foli
*Senior Event Producer &
Head of Staff Development*
AKJohnston



Scott Knueppel
SVP-Production
GMR Marketing



Josh Mele
Executive VP
Hatch.im



Jonathan O'Connor
VP-Production
160/90



Sarah Shulman
VP-Executive Producer
Jack Morton

MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF TARIFFS

SARAH SHULMAN: Costs have gone up approximately 20 to 30 percent and we've started quoting things that are going to have long lead times or things that we're going to ship from other countries or continents with that in mind. We have ended up placing orders and putting more inventory in stock. We've started fabricating things earlier or with longer lead times, just so our clients and their programs don't lose the opportunity to actually activate this summer or this fall.

ALEXA FOLI: We are obviously forewarning people. We've also been suggesting a lot of semi-custom programs, so things that we have in our inventory that have the ability to be customized to you and what you need but they're not entirely brand new starting from scratch.

SCOTT KNUEPPEL: If it's a big purchase of AV or a future project, we're putting it into the contract so that we can get out of those contracts if the price substantially goes up. There's a clause to get us out of those. I think AV coming from China is where we're going to see and get hit the worst.

JOSH MELE: It's actually reminiscent of coming out of COVID when prices skyrocketed and we all were having the same conversations about how we were going to break the news to our clients. And that tap dance that we all had to learn in real time is going to play out, not exactly, but to an extent right now. It changes the mindset of how you will build things and how you will rent things and it will shift that focus and that conversation with everything from the creative down to where we're sourcing, when we're sourcing, how we're sourcing.

BRAD FOGLE: Six months from now, we're going to pass on those costs. What's hurting us right now isn't the tariffs, it's the instability of what's going to happen. We're coming to the summer where everyone spends their money and people are just stutter stepping. Are we going to actually spend the money, do the tour, do the thing? So that's what we're getting hit with right now.

SARAH SHULMAN: Silver lining seems maybe a little too optimistic, but there is a bit of a bright side in that it's getting some of the clients to pull the trigger. If they're uncertain right now and they know they want to do this thing and they're running it up flag poles through different teams, they're able to make decisions faster because the quotes are now limited—they're only going to be valid for five days instead of 30. And so people have to make decisions. So you're able to leverage that to get to a yes faster.

THE IMPACT OF EXTREME WEATHER

SCOTT KNUEPPEL: I have a client that goes around the Gulf every year, at the end of August, beginning of September. We've had hurricanes hit multiple times. So for us, we're thinking about materials, wind ratings and getting things engineer stamped up front. What's changing is that it's required now. Many folks are requiring us to show up with those stamps. Live Nation, for example, is taking over all the different festivals. Any time you want to go to one of those, you better come with all your paperwork or you're not going to get on site. Since the pandemic, I feel like it has really, really changed.

JOSH MELE: I would say it's just another step in the planning process, right? If a client says, Hey, we want to make this thing out of leaves and feathers. We have to say, well, no, we're going to Miami where it's going to be a torrential downpour, we can't do that. We're not going to suggest that. It's got to meet standard X, Y, and Z because we know that from being there for years and years outside we need to be thinking about an activation that does X, Y, and Z for you to be successful. They're paying us to say, hold on, in this environment, these are the challenges we will run into. We should pivot that concept and build it out of this, because this has a 90 mile an hour wind rating. We're doing a disservice at that point by not bringing the knowledge and the experience.

SARAH SHULMAN: We have a fairly rigorous practice around risk mitigation, weather contingencies, security, what have you. With weather specifically, it changes things at the up front, particularly if you have any way to steer venue research or venue recommendations. A brilliant colleague of mine said, now more than ever, it's important to have an indoor plan. It might be an outdoor activation, but what is the indoor plan? Where are you going? How are you going to do it? Maybe you have two different budgets at the front. Maybe you have two different venue recommendations. And you just sort of take that to the extreme. Sometimes it does mean a little bit more upfront work for us. We do find that the clients are much more amenable to it than they used to be.



OPS ADVICE FOR BRAND TEAMS

ALEXA FOLI: I think a lot of clients come to us with a venue already in mind or already selected and contracted and I think that conversation needs to happen with the production team and operations team before you get the venue. If you tell us your goals and what you want to accomplish, then we can make suggestions based off of that and we're not backing ourselves into a corner and feeling forced to make that space work when it may not be the ideal space.

SCOTT KNUEPPEL: Operations should be brought in right away. As you're planning something, there are so many paths you could go down that are totally the wrong way if you don't have that producer in the room. We can guide those conversations and not burn a bunch of money and time trying to figure something out that can't even happen.

SARAH SHULMAN: I think it's always helpful for us to hear the clients' hopes and dreams, but more so than that, it's what do they need to achieve? What are their goals that they have to achieve with this budget? And within what amount of time? And as long as those things have gelled, I think that we're able to be more productive and more constructive in the conversations from there.

BRAD FOGLE: Just check in. If you're the brand, check in when you're getting creative, check in when you're doing the site visit, check in when you're doing the budget obviously, and any other pre-planning. I want to be a trusted partner, and I don't want my clients to think that when they pick up the phone, the clock starts like a lawyer. So every single time that we've had a successful event where we come out of adversity, it's because of the communication. Between midnight and 6 a.m. is when the real conversations start.

THE STATE OF SUSTAINABILITY

SARAH SHULMAN: We're starting those conversations before the project even starts just to make sure that we can allocate the appropriate amount of funds to do it properly and we're very transparent about that. So saying up front, this is going to cost you a little bit more to be sustainable in this aspect and would you like to move forward? If you don't have the conversation ahead of time it really does just come as a large bill at the end that no one wants to deal with.

ALEXA FOLI: One sustainable item that costs a little more but we see consistently used is cardboard signage versus foam core signage. We've been able to build or fabricate some pieces like signage bases that are bespoke to the client or on brand and we just save the bases. They're small. They're easy to pack. They're easy to get from place to place and then you buy the recycled signs. There are changes like that that I do see clients approving more and more often. I think you just have to consider that, collectively, small changes are meaningful when taken in aggregate.

JONATHAN O'CONNOR: For some clients it's a huge priority and it has been for years and they have a lot of benchmarks and standards and third party agencies that we have to work with to make sure we're adhering to all those standards. And for others, it's a priority to a certain point, based on budget implications. Reusing existing assets is a huge advantage. We're building once and modifying each year. So I think starting to think in those ways of, how can we, not only for sustainability reasons, but for cost saving measures, make an impact. It really depends on the client in terms of how far we go.



IDEAL TIMELINES AND TURNAROUND TIMES

JONATHAN O'CONNOR: We can build pretty much anything in four to six weeks. But ideally, the minimum amount of time ops and production needs for a modern-day, tier one, best-in-class experience is eight to 12 weeks. Two and a half months for a large event. We did Super Bowl activations, they were four or five million dollars, that we got two and a half months out and they were successful. It's still a lot to pull off in a short amount of time, but, things can be done in less time. It depends on the nature of the event and what needs to be built.

BRAD FOGLE: What I'd say about timelines is it's like a 90s rom-com. You look at your client in the eyes and you say, 'We're going to do this together. I'm not sure how we're going to do it but it's going to get done, and I'm going to be with you the whole time.' If you don't have their signoff for that tight timeline, it doesn't matter if you have 12 weeks or 12 days. It's going to be a problem. If you don't have that kind of client, don't accept the project.

TOP OPS TRENDS FOR MID-2025

BRAD FOGLE: This is going to be the summer of AI. This is an opportunity to learn, to teach if you will, AI—AI everything. This is the opportunity to tell your clients to not only involve AI in what they're doing, but how you tell your consumers that this is how you use it, don't be afraid of it.

JONATHAN O'CONNOR: I'd say social and content continues to influence everything we do. It continues to skyrocket. When you're designing events like Super Bowl, it's, how are we getting credit for that beyond the footprint, right? And so just constantly weaving those moments in with creators so the event can live on.

JOSH MELE: I think a lot of it is a combination of both of them. You've got clients that are going to say, all right, the AI thing is here. How do we use it? Or we are trying to use it in this specific way or that way combined with how are we going to maximize all the social impression stuff and watch all the technologies converge together? It's also new that everybody is racing to 'Will this connect with that?' Or, a client who already is deep in one way or the other, who's saying, this is the direction, now let's figure it out in the live experience. It's exciting because it's so new for everybody. And just watching it all happen in real time and converge together is a really exciting time in all of our live businesses.