



HAVAS Red
Part of the Havas PR Network

A NEW LENS ON BRAND EXPERIENCE 2026

SIX PREDICTIONS SHAPING THE
FUTURE OF EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION



What does brand experience look like when the rule book no longer applies?

In 2026, the answer is clear: it's bolder, braver, and more human than ever.

The tides have well and truly turned since the global pandemic forced a reset across the industry. What began as experimentation out of necessity has blossomed into a full-scale creative renaissance, one that's reshaping how brands connect, express and earn attention.

In this new era, experimentation isn't the exception, it's the expectation. Brands have been given permission to try new things, to test, to learn, to push boundaries and to redefine what connection means in increasingly personal, unexpected, and innovative ways. That spirit of experimentation hasn't faded. In fact, it has accelerated and diversified.

Today's brand experience landscape is more fragmented than ever, but that fragmentation has become its superpower. We're witnessing a rich, multi-threaded ecosystem emerge: one where data and human emotion are equally weighted, where fandoms are embraced as powerful engines of loyalty and where bold ideas win over familiar experiential formulas.

This global white paper provides a fresh perspective on the future of brand experience. Through six emerging trends, we explore how brands are cutting through the noise of a crowded landscape, transforming the moments that capture attention into those that create lasting connection.

1

FUELED BY FANDOM



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In a world where attention is fleeting and brand loyalty is harder than ever to earn, fandoms are completely rewriting the rules of engagement.

These aren't just hobbyists or casual followers, they are passionate, highly engaged communities built on shared meaning, emotion and ritual. And for brands, they've become one of the most powerful engines for connection.

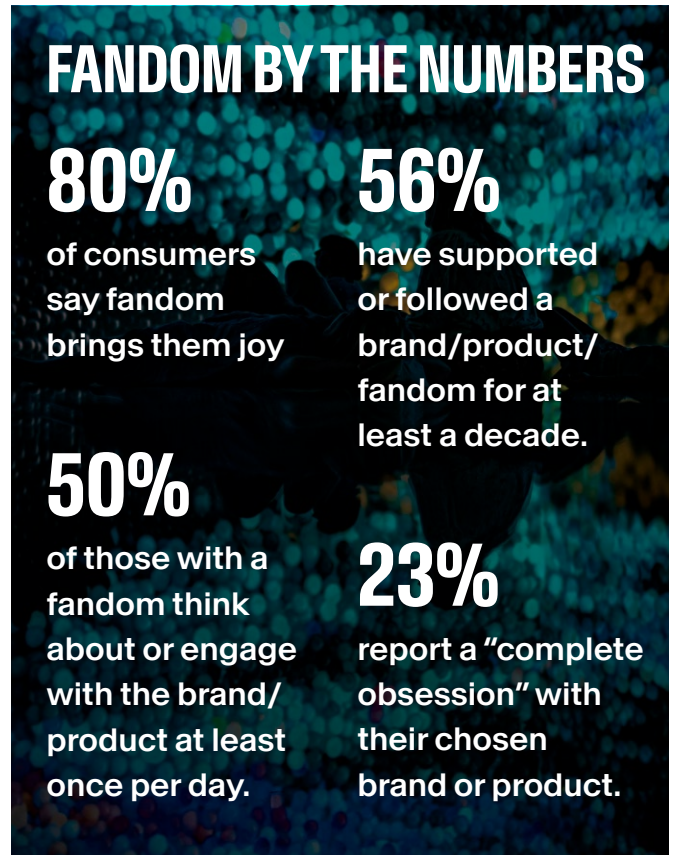
According to the Kearney Consumer Institute's 2024 global study, nearly one in four consumers report "complete obsession" with their fandoms. More than half engage daily and have also stayed loyal for more than a decade. For marketers, that's not just an audience, but a vibrant cultural ecosystem. One with its own language, rituals, and rhythm.

Fandoms stretch across music, entertainment, lifestyle subcultures, sports and tech, and beyond. What they all have in common is emotional intensity and a deep sense of belonging. When brands enter these spaces as authentic participants, not as outsiders looking to sell, they earn trust and long-term relevance. But tread carefully, fans are fiercely protective and quick to call out inauthentic attempts to commercialize their passion.

Experiential marketing geared around fandoms works best when it's immersive and participatory. Think themed pop-ups, interactive installations, and exclusive drops that let fans live and breathe the world they love.

Take the Barbie Café launch in Australia, the first of its kind outside the U.S. Timed with the release of the Barbie movie, the two-story venue featured retro interiors, themed cocktails at the "Ken Kabana," a skating rink, exclusive merch and curated photo moments. It offered fans the ultimate wish fulfillment: a chance to step inside Barbie's universe and share the experience online.

Similarly, HAVAS Red client Perrigo's Opill®, the first FDA-approved over-the-counter daily birth control pill in the U.S., partnered with the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) to celebrate empowerment and promote equity in sports and health. The partnership kicked off with the "Ready, Set, O!" event, bringing together Opill® and WNBA stakeholders, journalists,



content creators and athletes to generate buzz and highlight the game-changing collaboration, transforming a pivotal product launch into a shared cultural moment.

When done right, fandom-based activations don't just make noise – they build movements. They turn participation into pride, spark organic amplification, and position brands as cultural allies. These are experiences that live well beyond the event, creating meaningful, emotional bonds that endure.

Fandoms reward authenticity and participation. Brands that join conversations, rather than commandeer them, gain trust and emotional equity that can't be bought.

In 2026 and beyond, the brands that win are those that move with fandoms, not just market to them.



2

BOLDNESS IS THE NEW
BENCHMARK

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Audiences are tuning out brand experiences that feel overly familiar or formulaic.

From pop-ups to PR stunts to social feed-friendly activations, too many executions blur together, feeding a growing sense of content fatigue. The once bold have become background noise.

This isn't just an aesthetic issue, it's a strategic one. Uninspired, templated ideas no longer cut through. The brands that matter now are the ones that take creative risks, those willing to go off-script and make people stop, think and feel.

One of the year's most talked-about examples came from Duolingo, which "killed off" its beloved mascot, Duo the Owl. After a total blackout of its social channels and the launch of a fake memorial site, Duolingo stirred a frenzy online. Fans mourned, speculated, and created a storm of memes. The twist? Users could bring Duo back by completing lessons in the app. The result: a global frenzy that boosted engagement, app downloads and affection for the brand. Wildly unexpected, yet perfectly on-brand, it was a masterclass in earned attention.

But bold doesn't always mean viral. Sometimes it's about clever cultural play. Take Vita Coco's Valentine's Day activation. Recognizing growing fatigue with influencer-led gifting campaigns and glossy, overproduced Valentine promotions, the brand launched a cheeky vending machine in New York that dispensed coconuts and lo-fi, playful "anti-gifts." By mocking over-the-top consumerism with humor and authenticity, Vita Coco successfully tapped into a cultural undercurrent, winning attention not by scale but by relevance.

Meanwhile, HAVAS Red client Wise took a similarly inventive approach with its "Fleece Free FX" activation at Bondi Beach. Using physical theatre to dramatize its anti-bank-fee message ("fleece" being slang for being ripped off), the brand staged a surreal but smart, memorable and shareable stunt: live sheep roaming a branded pop-up, fleece-themed prizes and witty signage.

WHEN BOLD MEANS BUSINESS

DUOLINGO

"Killed" its mascot to drive 3x engagement and a surge in app downloads.

WISE

Turned a financial message into theatre with live sheep at Bondi Beach.

VITA COCO

Won Valentine's Day with a coconut vending machine and zero clichés.

Bold ideas don't just break the mold – they build momentum.

Beyond a spectacle, it was a brand truth made tangible, entertaining passersby while embedding its point of difference into culture. The simplicity and wit behind the execution ensured it spread socially and sparked conversations beyond the beach.

The lesson? Playing it safe is no longer a strategy. Consumers reward originality, courage, and moments that feel fresh and alive. Success today isn't measured in footfall or impressions. It's about impact, conversations sparked, perceptions shifted, and cultural moments created. Marketers must rethink the goal: not just to be seen, but to be felt.

In a world full of copy-paste, boldness isn't optional. It's the new benchmark.



3

WHERE DATA MEETS HUMAN
EMOTION

WHERE DATA MEETS HUMAN EMOTION

The most powerful brand activations go beyond eye-catching stunts; they forge connections that feel personal and emotional.

And at the heart of this connection is the fusion of human emotion and data.

Data tells us what people do and where they show up. Emotion tells us why it matters. Together, they transform insight into impact.

Data and insights reveal the deeper motivations behind behaviors – our hopes, fears, quirks, and contradictions. They are rooted in real-life experiences and cultural truths that shape how individuals perceive and interact with the world. They spark ideas that feel real and relatable.

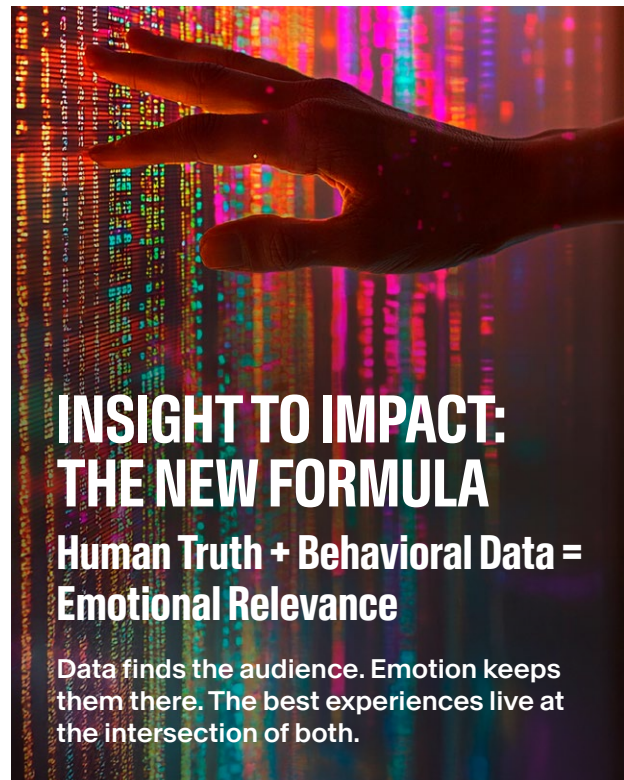
Think Dove's insight that "women are their own harshest critics" or Nike's recognition that "people seek unity in times of crisis." These aren't just campaigns; they are emotional mirrors that invite people to see themselves in the story.

Data adds precision. It helps brands understand who to reach, where they are, and what they care about. When human insight and data align, creativity becomes not just inspired, but intentional.

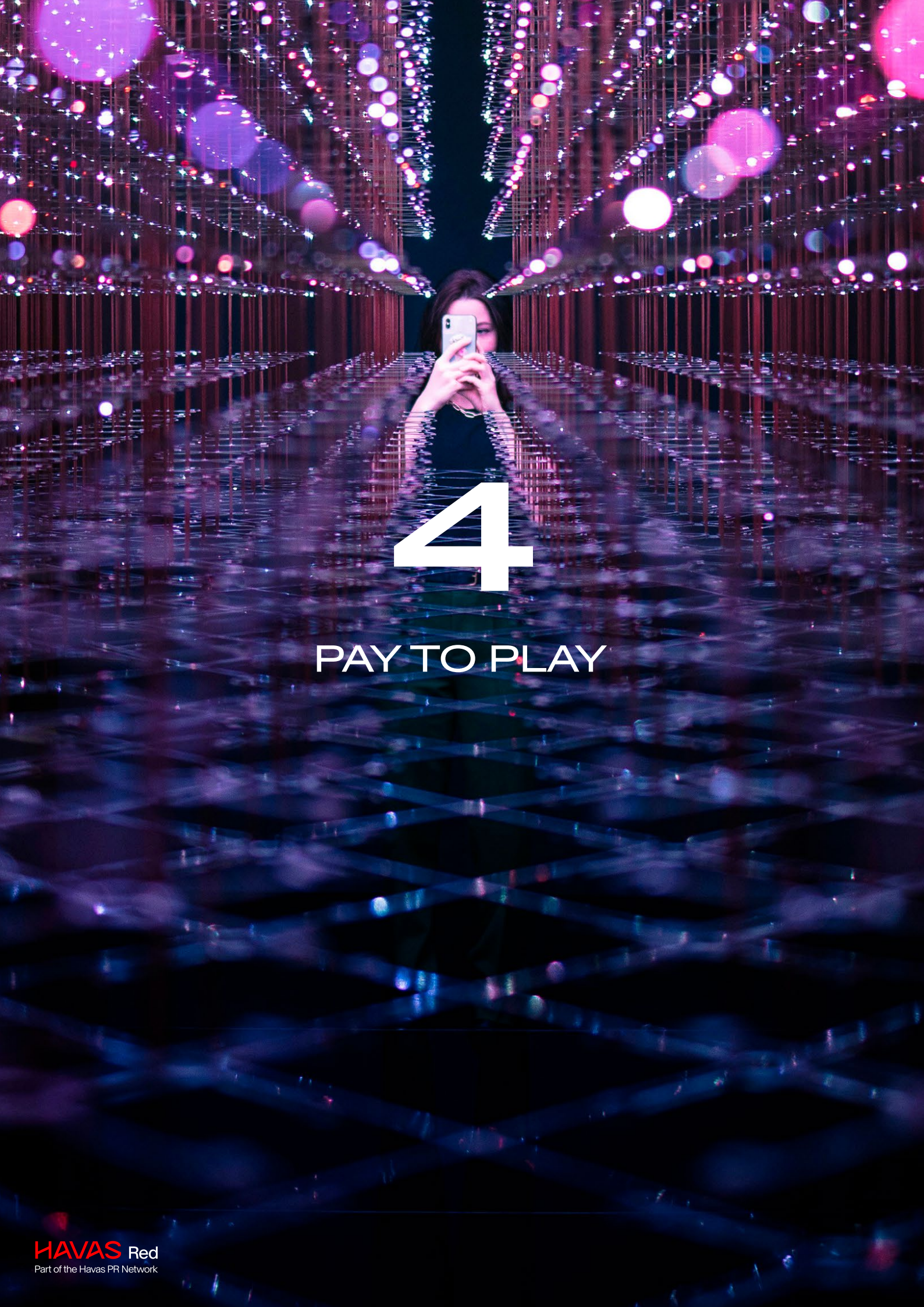
That alignment powered the Asuniwa Association's "Sato2531" campaign in Japan. When a law requiring married couples to share the same surname sparked debate over identity and equality, it was data that ignited mass conversation. A population expert's simulation revealed that if the law remained unchanged, everyone in Japan could share the surname "Sato" by the year 2531. The finding shocked many and struck a deeply emotional chord, fueling widespread public dialogue. In an age of misinformation, the campaign proved how data-driven truths can cut through the noise, build empathy and inspire cultural change.

HAVAS Red client Smirnoff took a similar approach with its "Crush Corner Store" activation. YouGov data showed that 70% of Gen Z would rather meet a potential partner in "real life" than on dating apps, with corner stores emerging

as an everyday meeting point. Smirnoff turned that insight into experience, transforming a convenience store into an immersive "meet-cute" playground complete with interactive aisles, branded story moments, and opportunities for spontaneous connections. By blending data with cultural insight, the brand tapped into a truth about connection in the digital age, creating an experience that was playful, relevant, and designed to travel on social.



When data meets emotion, the result is more than engagement, it's empathy at scale. Brand owners and marketers have an opportunity to create meaningful brand experiences from converged, well-thought-out data backed by human insights that cut through. By balancing analytics with authenticity, these types of activations and events create experiences that resonate, attract significant media buzz and live longer in memory, usually because human insights are relatable, connectable and rooted in real life.

A woman is standing in the center of a room with mirrored walls and floor, creating a complex, multi-layered reflection of her and the surrounding environment. She is holding a smartphone up to take a selfie. The room is illuminated with vibrant, out-of-focus lights in shades of pink, purple, and blue, which create a bokeh effect. The floor reflects the lights and the woman, creating a sense of depth and repetition.

4

PAY TO PLAY



The age of free-for-all brand experiences is evolving. From the immersive brand playgrounds at Coachella to ticketed runway shows in fashion and tech's large-scale installations, brands are moving beyond simply competing for attention.

They are increasingly curating experiences so unique, intentional and exclusive that people are willing to pay for the privilege of entry.

When executed well, the ticket becomes more than a transaction. It signals belonging, an invitation to something rare, high-quality and culturally resonant. For attendees, paying for entry isn't about access alone; it's about participation in a story that feels meaningful to be part of.

For brands, this shift carries real benefits. Ticketed experiences unlock higher production value, allowing for more ambitious design, storytelling, and talent partnerships. They also encourage deeper participation, as consumers who pay to attend arrive with stronger intent, deepening engagement, and generating more authentic advocacy. They can also offset costs, making creative ambition both sustainable and scalable. Collaborations with artists, creators and influencers extend this value further, adding credibility and emotional depth that money can't buy but attendance can.

A prime example: Vans' House of Vans Johannesburg 2024. Once a free festival, it was reimagined as a ticketed, three-day celebration of skateboarding culture featuring headline acts such as Little Simz, skate clinics and curated art exhibitions. Charging admission elevated the experience's exclusivity and sustained revenue, while reinforcing Vans' deep connection to the skating community. Attendees walked away as brand advocates, while curious newcomers didn't just watch the culture, they became part of it.

WHY PEOPLE ARE WILLING TO PAY

EXCLUSIVITY

Access feels earned, not given.

QUALITY

Production value signals respect for the audience.

COMMUNITY

Shared participation creates belonging.

CULTURAL CURRENCY

Being there becomes part of identity.

For brands, "paid" doesn't mean exclusion, it means intention.

Across industries, the rise of curated, paid-for brand experiences signals a powerful shift in consumer behaviour. People are no longer paying for products or perks, they're willing to exchange money, time and attention for moments that feel rare, high-quality and unforgettable. For brands, this marks a powerful evolution: from event hosts to cultural curators.

5

NOSTALGIA MEETS
NEXT GEN



NOSTALGIA MEETS NEXT GEN

For marketers, nostalgia isn't just a look back, it's a bridge forward. The most successful cross-generational campaigns today don't just expand reach; they unite diverse audiences around shared values like nostalgia, sustainability, and community.

By creating experiences that resonate with both the digital-first (Gen Z and Millennial) and the decades-loyal (Gen X and Baby Boomer) generations, brands can boost engagement, deepen loyalty and foster meaningful connections.

Cross-generational storytelling taps into the unique strengths of both ends of the age spectrum. Older generations bring deep cultural knowledge and spending power, while younger audiences fuel trends, virality, and cultural momentum. The art lies in designing experiences that speak to both, without alienating either, creating moments that feel fresh to Gen Z yet familiar to Gen X.

Nespresso's new campaign offers a masterclass in this balance. Partnering with pop icon The Weeknd, the brand launched the Samra Origins collection, including the Togetherness Blend coffee. Moving beyond its traditional sophisticated image, Nespresso embraced playful aesthetics, influencer-led storytelling and in-store activations across North America, creating experiences that felt modern, engaging and culturally relevant to younger audiences without losing connection to long-standing fans.

Meanwhile Lipton Hard Iced Tea's National Iced Tea Day 2026 activation perfectly captures the "Nostalgia Meets Next Gen" trend. The brand invited Baby Boomers and Millennials to join forces for an all-inclusive Palm Springs getaway sweepstakes, encouraging participants to tag a friend from another generation using #dontretiretheparty. Featuring creators from the popular TikTok series Retirement House and comedian Cruz Corral, the campaign flipped aging stereotypes and turned shared humor over hard iced tea into shared experiences.

The takeaway: cross-generational marketing works when it feels inclusive, not instructive. By identifying shared passions that resonate across age groups and fostering inclusive experiences that can be enjoyed both individually and collectively, brands create emotional resonance that transcends age. And by tailoring tone and channels for each audience, they ensure every generation feels seen, not sold to.

This approach not only broadens reach but also positions brands for lasting cultural relevance in increasingly diverse and aging markets.

THE GENERATIONAL EQUATION

Boomers + Gen X + Millennials + Gen Z + Gen Alpha = Shared Experience

- Boomers bring heritage, loyalty and perspective.
- Gen X bridges legacy and innovation.
- Millennials drive purpose and participation.
- Gen Z fuels creativity and cultural momentum.
- Gen Alpha is redefining influence before they can even vote.

Together, they create a conversation that spans decades.



A large-scale digital art installation featuring a dense, colorful stream of particles in shades of pink, yellow, and blue, resembling a digital rain or a data visualization. The particles are set against a dark background, creating a high-contrast, ethereal effect. In the foreground, several people are silhouetted against the bright light of the installation, looking up and interacting with the environment. The overall atmosphere is one of wonder and technological immersion.

6

CONTROL. ALT. ENGAGE.

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In today's hybrid world, brands are increasingly recognizing a vital truth: your most important audience might already be on the inside. Internal brand experiences are emerging as a strategic lever to nurture culture, strengthen alignment, and retain top talent.

When done right, they do more than inform and engage. They create belonging, turning employees into the brand's most authentic and influential advocates.

Culture, after all, needs a stage. As work environments become more virtual and decentralized, it's easy for culture to feel diffuse or distant. Thoughtfully designed internal events offer something increasingly rare: a shared, tangible, emotionally resonant expression of what a brand stands for. These moments allow people to see, hear and feel the brand in motion, bringing its purpose and personality to life.

Internal experiences also play a crucial role in storytelling. Whether a company is launching a new strategy, navigating change or redefining its purpose, internal activations can help teams understand not only what's happening, but why it matters. When done well, they build belief, not just buy-in.

Equally important, they build connection. In a world of remote work and digital overload, the need for genuine human connection, where colleagues laugh, collaborate or simply share space, has never been greater. Internal events can act as cultural glue, building trust, creating shared memories, and bridging gaps across teams and time zones. They also provide a valuable platform for leadership to show up visibly and vulnerably, strengthening trust and galvanizing teams around a shared vision.

And when employees feel that connection, advocacy follows. From social posts to casual conversations, they share their pride and belief in the brand, amplifying its story far beyond internal channels, and influencing how others perceive it. This kind of authentic, peer-to-peer advocacy often carries more weight than paid media, helping attract new customers and talent through genuine, trusted voices.

THE INTERNAL ADVANTAGE

STRONGER ALIGNMENT

Shared understanding of mission and values.

DEEPER CONNECTION

Culture that travels across time zones.

AUTHENTIC ADVOCACY

Employees who live and amplify the brand.

When people feel it inside, the world sees it outside.

Two standout examples illustrate this shift. At Spotify, new hires participate in "Band Camp," a two-to-three-day immersive onboarding experience that blends storytelling, music, team collaboration and executive engagement. It's more than an orientation; it's a cultural immersion. Meanwhile, LEGO's annual "Play Day" invites every global office to close for a full day of play, creativity and connection, a living embodiment of the brand's purpose. Both examples highlight what happens when internal experiences are built with the same creativity and care as external ones: they engage, inspire and emotionally resonate.

For marketers, embracing internal brand experience as part of their remit offers a clear opportunity: to drive alignment, loyalty and advocacy from within. In 2026 and beyond, internal experience design isn't just good for culture, it's a competitive edge.

THE B2B BRAND EXPERIENCE EVOLUTION

Consumer activations may dominate the spotlight in experiential marketing, but B2B companies are fast catching up, embracing bold, emotionally resonant and culturally relevant brand experiences. The same six trends shaping consumer activations are now redefining how B2B brands connect with clients, partners and employees.

FUELED BY FANDOM

Semrush has tapped into creator communities with invite-only events for B2B creators, treating professionals as loyal fan bases that influence decisions.

BOLDNESS IS THE NEW CURRENCY

Spotify's "Wrapped for Advertisers" adaptation of its popular consumer campaign and Duolingo's playful campaigns show how B2Bs can break the mold with unexpected, creative formats that spark conversation and engagement.

DATA MEETS HUMAN EMOTION

B2B brands like Salesforce and IBM are using behavioral insights to craft experiences that speak to professional aspirations and pain points, turning data into empathy-driven storytelling.

NOSTALGIA MEETS NEXT GEN

Cross-generational programs help bridge legacy and innovation, appealing to both seasoned professionals and emerging talent.

PAY TO PLAY

Premium, invite-only summits like Adobe Express Creator Week reflect a shift toward curated, high-value B2B experiences that drive deeper engagement and advocacy.

CONTROL. ALT. ENGAGE

Internal brand experiences, from Spotify's "Band Camp" onboarding to LEGO's global "Play Day", are becoming strategic tools for culture-building, alignment and employee-led brand storytelling.

IN 2026 AND BEYOND, B2B BRAND EXPERIENCES ARE NO LONGER JUST ABOUT TRADE SHOW BOOTHS OR BROCHURES. THEY ARE ABOUT CREATING MOMENTS THAT MATTER: BOLD, HUMAN, AND BUILT FOR CONNECTION.

CLOSING THOUGHTS



DON'T
JUST EXIST!

The most impactful brand experiences don't follow the old rules, they rewrite them.

Whether through data-fueled empathy, fearless creativity, fan-first storytelling, generational bridge-building, premium experiences or culture-led engagement, brands are abandoning the "one-size-fits-all" approach in favor of strategies that are more agile, authentic, and audience-driven.

The fragmented nature of the industry is no longer a flaw; it's the new operating system. And within it lies the opportunity to reach the right people in the right moment, to spark conversations that move culture forward and to design brand environments for genuine connection.

The challenge for marketers isn't just to keep pace, but to stay curious, stay culturally sharp, and, above all, stay brave. Because in 2026 and beyond, the brands that stand out won't simply be seen, they'll be felt.



UNBLINKERED THINKING. UNEXPECTED IDEAS.

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