WIRED FOR ENGAGEMENT

From personalization to customization to data inundation to innovation, this year's event technology roundtable gets candid about what's shaping their events today—and in the year ahead

Tech-savvy companies may have a leg up when it comes to event technology, but making the right strategic decisions about which technologies to deploy when at events is another challenge altogether. This was just one of the topics discussed at this year's Event Technology Roundtable, coproduced with leading technology partner Helios Interactive, a Freeman Company.

Last month, we sat down with a panel of five event marketers to talk about the role events and technology are playing in their organizations. With tech giants IBM and Dell at the table, along with red-hot automaker KIA and pharmaceutical bigwig Pfizer, it was a lively discussion among intrinsically innovative brands—all on a mission to make their products more meaningful, more personal and more memorable.

Listen in and learn how these brands are utilizing technology to change perceptions, surprise and delight, entertain, tell a story and intrigue attendees and customers in new and unconventional ways.

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS:

Dan Preiss
Director-Experiential Marketing
Dell

Daniel Louie
Experiential & Process Integration Marketing Manager
KIA Motors

Erin McElroy
Program Director, Event & Digital Innovation
IBM

Laine Mann
Director, Global Congress Lead
Pfizer

Mike Schaiman
Managing Director
Helios Interactive

EM: *How has experiential marketing's role changed at your organization in the past five years? Has it become more important? More strategic? Is it more likely to have a seat at the table when strategy is being discussed?*

DAN PREISS: We had a marketing road show recently and they put up the six priorities for the year, and one of them is to knock big events out of the park. So that's where we spend a lot of our time from an experiential point of view. And how we tie back to the marketing goals. When the cmo is talking about experiential as one of the six things, it's a pretty good place to be.

DANIEL LOUIE: Experiential is so important because once the consumer goes through the experience, they get it. They get the message we're trying to convey, and we know we have their attention. So, that's the big push right now.

And a lot of the consumers who come out of the events say, "We had no idea KIA has come so far in such a short time." They're actually telling their friends about our brand and they are becoming our advocates. And that's great for us to be able to see that enthusiasm.

ERIN MCELROY: For us at IBM, experiential is a greater focus than five years ago. And I think if we look at the proliferation of devices, social platforms and access to media, everything's about entertainment. Usually people who don't want to have to bother with doing entertainment-type stuff say to me, "Well, now it's not *just* about entertainment." But I think everything's about entertaining. And our brand focus is to delight customers. And that is the consummate challenge for all marketers now, because it's the consummate challenge for anyone who wants any attention from any consumer or buyer—to delight them and to entertain them. And I would say it absolutely has changed in the last five years.

I'll give you one example. About four years ago we launched this "engagement wall" where people could engage with social media. We did this at about 65 different events. But we had to change the name after a year or two because it was no longer "engagement" to post a tweet or a selfie and see it up on a media wall. Engagement's now, "I want to touch it. I want to hear it. I want to experience it!" It has to be more dimensions. It has to be a memorable, delightful experience.

MIKE SCHAIMAN: We're seeing experiential grow across all of the organizations we work with. It used to be a little bit more trade show–oriented or at least kind of regimented, as in, "Here

are the three events we have to be at per year." Now, they're getting smaller. They're getting more personal. And that trend of personalization is one we're seeing across the industry.

LAINE MANN: For us, it's been a huge paradigm shift. Five years ago, it was all about that "push"—we're going to push out all of our information and you're going to accept it and you're going to like it. There was no "pull." Now, we're doing a lot more storytelling. We're making sure we know how they want to receive information, whether it's a trade show or a commercial, and then truly telling the story of what the company is. And not just telling them what they need to hear, but what they want to hear.

MCELROY: The storytelling has to be very varied across the different types of individuals you're trying to reach—the person who's going to tear up at the commercial about the mom and the daughter, or the person who's going to be really jazzed by something exciting or ambitious or challenging. So I love that you mention the storytelling, because it's so key.

MANN: I would echo that "smaller" experiences have become the focus. We're very lucky: Events always have been one of the top initiatives. It's the "experience" part that's taken longer. But we have a person who's the head of experience who's got people with experience in their title, which I think helps.

MCELROY: You know, what's a great experience to one person isn't necessarily a great experience to another. So, we're sometimes shooting the shotgun to try to capture most of the people. So I think that's made it a lot more interesting but a lot more complicated to be successful.

MANN: I like that we're the conduit to get that change in mindset, to lead these types of conversations.

Going back to storytelling, it's our job as event strategists or experiential marketers to get everybody else to see. I like when I sit down at the table and we're talking about a trade show, and everybody's saying, "OK, we're going to have a 50-by-50, and we're going to have carpet and we're going to do this." And I'm like, "Hold on. If your booth could talk, what would it say?" And that's how they start to think about the technology. You have to brand yourself without being able to say a lot. There's a lot of noise on the floor. So, if I'm walking by these booths, what do they say to me?

MCELROY: Another thing is that there's so much information.

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Program Director, Event
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IBM

We talk a lot at IBM about data and the proliferation of data. The amount of data happening this year is greater than the amount of data from last year and all the years before it — that's how much data is out there. So, if people are getting hit with all this information, just putting the information out there isn't enough. I think that's why it has to resonate on a whole other level of our other senses to really make an impact.

SCHAIMAN: For me, the difference is that an event is a little bit more of, "We have information we're imparting on someone." An experience evokes an emotion. And that's what I think everybody's goal is. To get people to walk out of there with a sense of wonder or awe or excitement or fear or terror or whatever it is. If you can get somebody to feel that, that's the gold standard. If you can hit that, if you can tug that heartstring, that's experiential.

EM: *What are your brands doing to get consumers and buyers more engaged?*

LOUIE: Last year, we launched our KIA Niro, an all-new vehicle. Pre-launch, we wanted to get consumers' reactions and get engagement, so we had mall displays around the country and we had product specialists there on weekends and at busy times. But we also had a holiday-themed vending machine that was interactive, with a quick quiz about Santa's reindeer or how the Niro can help you get there. And at the very end, you got a gift from the machine. It was so successful. People were so engaged, and they got big smiles on their faces. It was a vending machine, but if you do that kind of thing right, you can think about how you have a dialogue with a consumer and they get something back in return.

MANN: We had a large gerontological conference, and we asked, "Why are we going to go in and talk about our brand, specifically?" Instead, we decided, "Why don't we talk about how our company has been there across the life course?"

So we ended up doing a journey of healthy aging. It had nothing to do with the brands. We used a mirror technology so when you walked up, the mirror would appear and it was as if you were

the baby who was just being born and you're looking up at your parents. So, there are people in the mirror who are playing with toys. And then, onto adulthood, where they're focusing on going to your prom, all the way to older age.

I wanted to test our theory that we did the right thing and had changed the mindset. One of the attendees shared that they expected Pfizer to be pushing sales, but instead were pleasantly surprised to see through the journey of healthy aging, that we are their partner throughout their life course. Once we realized through this feedback that we had changed the perception, I knew it was a success. We did that. It was about using technology to tell the story and have them feel that they were a part of it.

MCELROY: I think the key message is that the experience doesn't have to be a linear line between "I'm trying to sell this cell phone" and "I'm trying to sell this product so I'm going to make the experience about that product." It's about the brand.

PREISS: We have a pot of funds that we allocate for innovation, and we have a belief within our marketing department, "Fail fast and recover." We don't always get it right, but we learn from it each time.

We did drone racing in a geodesic dome at Dell EMC World, and it was one of these engagements where we could draw out and hyper-personalize the experience and create one of those surprise-and-delight moments.

It was a little bit wacky and fun to try out. And we found that it wasn't just the people with the goggles on doing the first-person racing. It's everybody around them saying, "I've never driven or piloted a drone before. How do I do that?" And there are sometimes very introverted technologists, so it was just a fun way to draw them out and have that conversation. We like to try that type of stuff and see. Sometimes it hits, sometimes it doesn't.

MCELROY: I love that thought that there's risk involved and you have to be willing to try things that haven't been done. And be OK if it fails.

LOUIE: You know, because we own our projects, when we are

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challenged by executive management, finance or other areas, we'll fight for them. It's having the logical reasons we need to do them. Saying that, yes, there's risk involved but here are all of the potential problems that could happen and here's how I've dealt with them ahead of time.

So, when you are at the event you can let the event blossom and do well as opposed to fire-fighting. It's really cool that we're so engaged that we kind of live and breathe it. And it's just so wonderful when consumers leave with a smile on their faces, and you know you've done something right.

PREISS: For me, the two key words are "innovation" and "personalization." That's the magic recipe because they lead to shareability, which leads to success, which leads to better consumer engagements.

There are lots of ways to innovate. And innovation is that attraction, right? That's going to draw somebody to your space to join in with the experience. Then that personalization is what really gets them engaged and what holds them and also what provides that memorable experience that hopefully is going to resonate with them long after they've gone away, something that just sticks with them for a while. So, for me, it's those two simple words.

MANN: Pfizer is a company that has always wanted to be the most innovative. So you have to have the culture and the support that makes it OK to fail, because out of failure is where innovation comes.

EM: *There are so many ways you can utilize technology and social media to improve the value of an event in ways you couldn't before. So what is the role of technology, and is it helping you with measurement?*

PREISS: It's a fun, evolving thing, and we're figuring out what success looks like in this new world order. With us, it's looking at global comms, the big partner, looking at some of the social metrics that come out of their organization and also a lot of the p.r. metrics.

I think we all have probably seen the overuse of NPS (Net Promoter Scores). I would wager we're all a little tired of it. So, look at the costs, the benefits, the leads and everything else. But it depends on the event type.

MANN: ROI hasn't gone away for us. I think technology has helped us measure. We look at, how long they have been there. What did they focus on? That tells me the interest in the message.

So I would focus on that and then design something around that.

But we throw out the buzzword, ROO, return on objective. That is, did we change the perception of Pfizer as an organization, and have that direct testimonial? If so, then, boom: return on objective.

But it depends on what your objectives are—maybe to build brand awareness or that you're likely to prescribe a product. So, it's soft. It's not numbers.

LOUIE: With measurements, it's a constant education to our management and to finance. I show them a survey we do, pre- and post-test drive experiences. And we can see the huge lift in brand sentiment. So, I know from the half-hour experience, that KIA's experiential programs had a huge impact. Finance still wants to see the relationship to actually buying a car, but then we have the discussion about all these factors we have no control of.

MCELROY: Metrics is a matter of art and science. There are hard metrics we can measure, like badge scans. But we try to qualify those in a different way than we used to by supplementing with social listening and social media information about those leads.

We also try to build in experience maps and metrics into our activations. For example, we've created what we call our CIO command center. It's a touch-interactive experience, and we're also giving the user the chance to star and favorite things that they like, provide their email address and send information. So, we've got not only a badge scan but also what they explored, what information they requested, and we've put that together and that actually further qualifies the lead because we know what they were interested in.

We also have a personalized microsite for each of our conference attendees, called myIBM.com. So, we've given our customers a personalized way to see how we've engaged with them, either digitally or at an event, and we track all of that information for them. And they can go there and see, "Here are all of my engagements with IBM."

SCHAIMAN: We work across a lot of different brands, and one of the biggest issues we see is lack of context—when you're collecting all this data and you have nothing to compare it to. Oftentimes, because we work with a lot of new technologies and innovative experiences, it's really challenging to compare it against anything because nothing else like it has existed.

But data without context is not actionable. When you have data with context, you can say, "OK, we understand that A causes

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B and this is why." And then the next year, you build, measure, learn, and then re-apply it. That's when you're going to get really valuable, actionable data.

LOUIE: One thing I do when I have the metrics is ask, "What does it mean? What is it telling me? And how can we use it to improve?" That's a value I think we can add, because executive management might not be there to see the activation. And I find it's my job to give them the high level view of what it means. Sometimes it's one or two sentences, but it's the most powerful thing after analyzing all the data we have collected. And it's nice when they say, "Thank you, Dan. That's an insight we have not thought about before."

EM: *Knowing that the bar for engagement is much higher than it used to be, what trends are you expecting to see in the next year?*

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MCELROY: Another thing that comes to mind for me is customization. It's part of some of the activations we've had, such as our Art With Watson: Hidden Portraits activation, Urban Art Cloud, or Cognitive Food Advisor—all of these allowed the attendee to be part of the the creation. And I think it's really customization and making it individualized. We talk about personalizing the experience, but I think it can also about letting people actually participate in creating something.

PREISS: One of things we try to think about with our user conferences is that we want them to walk away and say, "That was done just for me." We might think, "Well, it was done for you and 1,000 of your other friends, but I'm glad you thought that." But that's cool.

SCHAIMAN: Erin, your definition of customization was really interesting because I've always thought of customization and personalization as really, really similar—almost the same thing. But that was an epiphany. Because personalization seems like crafting a message very specific to an individual based on their interests. Customization is actually that individual impacting their own experience. I'm fully on board with customization because when an individual has an impact on their own experience and guides themselves through it…

MCELROY: They remember it.

SCHAIMAN: And they have power. We saw with a lot of the early VR projects that somebody puts on a headset and they go on a ride for three minutes, and they're done and they take it off. And for a while we rode the wave when people were going to be blown away by VR just because of the medium itself. And now, we're past that curve where we've got to do something else, and fast, because that's not good enough. People are going to get bored.

It's only been two years. But such is the world of tech.