



Creating the Ultimate Experience

True experiences make gatherings more engaging for participants. They make better learning environments and create a higher return on investment, resulting in direct profits or future sales and greater mindshare. In this white paper we will present the foundations of an experience—Creative Group's model, as well as examples of great experiences.

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Background:

In order to understand where we are in the experience economy today, let's recap where we've been.

Industrial Economy – Following a largely agricultural economy, the Industrial Economy arose from the invention of new tools, which created efficiencies in manufacturing.

Service Economy – The development of highly specialized skills led to high productivity in distinct areas, which led to the delivery of intangible benefits in the Service Economy.

Experience Economy – Coined by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore in 1998, the term Experience Economy refers to creating and staging memorable and personalized experiences for consumers. Since 1987, consumer spending in the U.S. has increased 70% on live experiences and events.¹

The Experience Economy

More than ever, people are seeking out experiences over material things. In the millennial population, 78% say they would rather spend money on an experience or event over buying material goods.ⁱⁱ Numerous studies, such as the workings of Cornell psychology professor Thomas Gilovich, point out that experiences provide greater happiness than material things; whether in anticipation of the experience, while partaking in it or when reminiscing about it.ⁱⁱⁱ Experiences are connected to one's identity and social behavior, and may even provide a new or unique perspective on life. Experiences make people happier. Groupon, the online e-commerce marketplace, has a new commercial campaign that is all about the "Haves" vs. the "Have-Dones." It's a fun play on what it's like to enjoy experiences over material items.



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We will explain why this shift in mindset is driving companies to create more and more experiences, and we will discuss how to understand the components of a true experience.

Have you ever seen HGTV's Tiny House, Big Living? The tiny home movement has recently gained popularity with people who seek to reduce their living spaces to secure more time and financial freedom for themselves. The cost of a tiny home (described as a residential building under 500 square feet) typically ranges from \$20,000 - \$50,000. One millennial couple from the show says, "We'd rather spend our money on experiences and doing things instead of putting money into a home."

“Once-in-a-lifetime has become another Saturday afternoon. The Experience Economy turned amazing into expected.”

According to the newsletter TrendWatching, “Once-in-a-lifetime has become another Saturday afternoon. The Experience Economy turned amazing into expected.”^{iv} At RenttheRunway.com, women can rent a designer dress for any occasion and return it after the event. They are creating their own experience—becoming important, luxurious and fashion-forward—by putting on a dress that they couldn’t otherwise afford. Now there’s no need to invest in a ho-hum dress from a department store, when it’s so easy to rent a Valentino and feel like a celebrity for a night.

Instant access to information has heightened expectations—we see this every day, as news stories, advertisements and social media unite to feed the FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). More value is now placed on the uniqueness and authenticity of experiences. Audiences need to have their attention captured. Cutting through the clutter to deliver a clear message is more important than ever. Staging experiences has now become practically essential, regardless of industry or position—consider a marketer in the consumer world or executive trying to influence change in business.

Which Industry Does “Experiences” Best?

We might be inclined to say that the beverages and spirits industry has all the fun—after all, its business is to release inhibitions. So, it’s truly a loaded question. (Pun intended?) But many organizations, from automotive to life sciences, are increasing mindshare and creating emotional bonds that grow their businesses by staging experiences. From small retailers to tech giants; television channels to social media companies; the smartest brands are taking advantage of the amplification and attention that experiences afford them.

For the fifth consecutive year, the Content Marketing Institute’s 2015 Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends Report states that “in-person events” were rated as the most effective B2B marketing tactic.^v We can use the knowledge we’ve garnered about experiences to more effectively reach our goals and inspire people.

But what makes the most effective experiences? What elements do they entail?

The Best Experiences Change Behavior

An experience is defined as “a particular instance of personally encountering or undergoing something.” or “A memorable event that engages a guest in an inherently personal way.”^{vii}

See figure 1: An ideal experience exists at the intersection of six key components, which can be seen in Creative Group’s model. Keep in mind throughout this paper, that the ultimate goal of any experience is to cause a change in participants’ behavior and spur them to take some sort of action. You’ll arrive at that goal once you are able to inspire the audience to shape the event themselves by being actively involved; facilitate their absorption of knowledge; and immerse them in a multi-sensory and extraordinary environment.

Figure 1: Creative Group's i|xperience Model



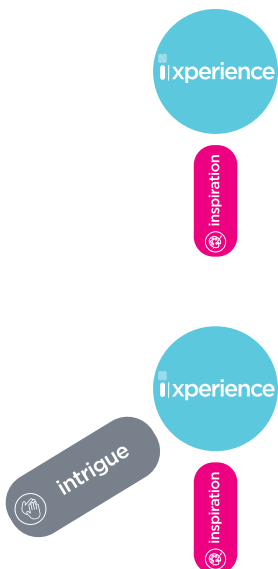
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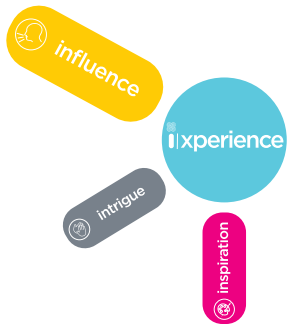
The Six I's

1. Inspiration – Every great experience starts with inspiration. You should be creating an experience not because you want to, but because you *need* to. The brand or thematic must tell a story and it should be integrated throughout the experience.

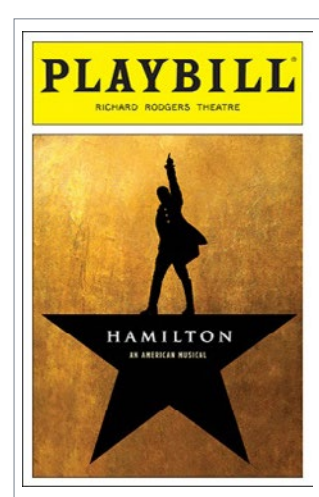
Creative Group helped plan a conference for Futures Without Violence, which focused on domestic violence prevention and intervention strategies, while providing a safe environment for attendees to share their stories. The meeting thematic and purpose were so inspiring that some residents in abusive situations near the event were compelled to seek shelter and counsel and Vice President Joe Biden travelled to use the conference as a platform to raise awareness.

2. Intrigue – The audience's attention is occupied and they are provided with amusement or enjoyment. Topics and activities should be interesting and captivating for the audience, so understanding what intrigues them is a key element. The intrigue of an experience is really drawn from all of the other aspects. Figure out what inspires your audience, what they want to learn, and involve them in the storyline as much as possible. Topics that one may never have previously found "interesting" can be brought to life with the right experience. Brian Jochum, senior director-marketing for KCD Brand Kenmore, said, "I'll be honest with you—laundry machines aren't the sexiest things in the world [and] laundry isn't the biggest passion point for people. So, finding a property like [the Dirty Girl Mud Run] makes the topic surprisingly interesting and fun and not a chore..."^{viii}





3. Influence – The audience learns skills, knowledge and tactics—verbally, aurally or kinesthetically—which can change behavior and motivate people to take action. A popular example of an influential experience is the partnership between Hamilton, a Broadway musical about the life of political mastermind Alexander Hamilton and The Rockefeller Foundation. They offered 20,000 NYC public school students \$10 tickets to see the hit musical and partake in the experience that will enhance their American history classroom material in a memorable and engaging way. Yeliz Sezgin, a 15-year-old junior at Fort Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, spoke to the New York Times, saying “I hope I can be inspired and motivated.”^{ix}



4. Impression – Lasting impressions are formulated by engaging the five senses. Our sense of smell quickly connects subliminally to our brain’s memory center. Remember that fond scent from your childhood that takes you back? Usually, the scents associated with a botanical garden are wondrously aromatic, but not always. A recent event showcased a “Corpse Flower” blossom at the Chicago Botanic Gardens. True to its name, the Corpse Flower is known for releasing a rotting stench during its quick (24- to 48-hour) bloom. A live video stream of the bloom was posted for those who couldn’t brave the smell, but for the bold and the curious who attended in person, gas mask or not, the rare experience was undeniably more memorable.



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5. Interruption – Escaping reality, if only for a short period of time, helps turn an ordinary day into a unique and memorable one. Exotic destinations, exclusive venues and virtual reality environments interrupt the status quo. A marketing initiative for the movie Mission Impossible set up a virtual environment to take people through the movie as the main character would experience it. Virtually, participants in harnesses dangled from an airplane, and their reactions to what they saw in the virtual reality simulator changed the course of the event.^{xii}



6. Immersion – Full immersion into an experience involves not just a state of mind, but also physical participation. The Art Institute of Chicago recently hosted an exhibit showcasing Van Gogh's famous "bedroom" paintings. The exhibition was accompanied by a full-size re-creation of the bedroom, which was also made available to rent through Airbnb. It allowed people to go beyond simply viewing the paintings in the museum by actually staying in the replica room for a night. Guests could feel what it was like to sleep in Van Gogh's world, smell the paint and perhaps imagine the thoughts that clouded his mind.



Van Gogh's bedroom painting



Bedroom re-creation by Airbnb ^{xiii}

The best experiences contain an element of each of the six I's. The participant is actively involved, shaping the event, absorbing knowledge and being immersed in a sensory environment. Experiences are memorable, unfold over time and are inherently personal. No one else will have the same experience as their neighbor.

How to Do It

Let's look at the process that comes into play when designing the ultimate experience. We will discuss strategy, planning, execution and evaluation. Keeping the six I's in mind during each phase will ensure a successful experience. It is also important to note that an [ilxperience](#) focuses on the personalized aspect of experiences. Considering that millennials have already surpassed Gen X as the largest generation in the U.S. labor force, embracing the "I" movement is key to creating impact through experiences. Google introduced the concept of micro-moments, which "occur when people reflexively turn to a device—increasingly a smartphone—to act on a need to learn something, do something, discover something, watch something or buy something. They are intent-rich moments when decisions are made..." ^{xiv} Reflexivity is the crucial point here, because if this is happening in people's daily lives, then it's happening during every experience, event and meeting. What are you doing to enable and enhance those "I-need-to-learn, I-need-to-do, I-need-to-buy" moments?

Strategy

The strategy phase of an experience offers the opportunity to set the framework, or outline, to guide each step throughout the planning, execution and evaluation phases. At the onset of any brainstorming process, it is first important to determine SMART goals that will serve as the theoretical "finish line" and identify the behavior(s) you would like to achieve.

Once your goals are established, create an overarching thematic for the experience. This shouldn't be confused with a "theme." While the two can go hand-in-hand, it's important to mesh the design and the key messaging into a cohesive story, rather than arbitrarily deciding on, say, a Hawaiian theme that bears no connection to the message.

In creating a thematic, the most important information to keep in mind is your audience. Who are they? You can create a mini-persona, identifying the audience's desires, preferences and personalities. This could even be an opportunity to incorporate a sampling of your actual audience. Are you on the same page? Is your understanding of their needs and wants accurate? If you have the opportunity, great information can be gleaned by polling your audience with pre-event surveys.

A great way to connect your audience to your message is with storytelling. Make a connection between the audience and your goals by telling a story throughout the experience. The best stories are emotional; they make you laugh, cry, wonder. Brands use storytelling in their commercials and social campaigns because it works. We take action when we are inspired, and stories inspire us. Think back to your goals and what you want your audience to be inspired to do or the behavior you want to change. Be concise and compelling in your messaging and look to it to drive all design elements.

Planning

You've explored ideas and brainstormed a creative story to inspire your audience to learn, network, celebrate and collaborate. Now you can create a blueprint for the logistics that will make the gears of your experience turn. While remembering the thematic and keeping your audience and goals in mind, here are some things to consider:

TIP: People love central gathering places. Think of a hotel lobby or the neighborhood Starbucks. People are drawn to areas that enable spontaneous encounters, opportunity for networking or a place to unwind for a while. How can you design your central meeting space to allow for collaboration?

TIP: Lighting is an important mood setter. It can be energizing or relaxing. Make sure you optimize room lighting to set the proper mood and tone for the experience.

TIP: Create environments that induce emotions. Small cozy rooms with lounge furniture can feel homey and comfortable, while industrial buildings with oddly shaped furniture might evoke creativity.

TIP: Supply gifts that reinforce your messaging. A veterinary care client of Creative Group donated plush toys and dog houses to children receiving care at a local hospital.

TIP: Optimize your agenda or show flow to allow for information absorption as well as brain recovery time. This is key for improved learning and audience engagement.

Creating a journey map will help identify and enhance each touchpoint with your audience. Are there opportunities before guests arrive, while they are en route or after they leave, to excite them about attending, to reinforce your message or make them curious to learn more? This could also be a chance to make your experience that much more memorable. Enhancing a dine-around transfer with a “fun bus” complete with playful costumes and instruments, or sending a gift to the attendees’ homes after they return from an incentive trip, can be unexpected ways to surprise and delight your audience. Use the touch points on the journey map to elicit ways to make each individual experience a personal one.

There’s a reason Rolling Stones concert T-shirts are more expensive than a regular cotton tee, and why people spend large amounts of money on memorabilia. Those items represent their personal memories of the experiences they once had and treasure. Find ways to work memory merchandise into your experience. Create photo opportunities or interactive stations for guests to make their own takeaways. Here is an excerpt from Event Marketer magazine on a pop-up experience in Brooklyn that whiskey brand Jack Daniel’s activated:



“The moment attendees checked in at the “office,” they entered the world of Motel No. 7, with its uniformed bellhops and leather-clad housekeepers and more than 25 photo shareable engagements. Jake the Janitor, closeted in his supply room, had guests pull up a cot and join in games with luggage from the Lost and Found. Swimsuit-clad Pool Sweethearts beckoned guests to take a dip or lounge poolside with a cocktail. Guests could spin the style wheel in the Rock Salon for a makeover, while the Royal Suite offered a glitzy take on the photo op, with participants reclining on white shag carpeting against a backdrop of gold records. There was a game room and a Motel Chapel, where a few guests tied the knot Vegas-style with rocker Andrew W.K. officiating as “Elvis” looked on.”

– Sandra O’Loughlin, Event Marketer ^{xv}

A proper communication plan is important for creating an experiential community among attendees. Create conversation before, during and after the experience. Not only will this make guests excited about the event, but it will keep the buzz alive long after. There’s no better way to keep people talking about your experience and furthering your objectives than to facilitate discussion and social sharing. Social media—either public or private—is a great way to create communities and foster conversation.

Execution

You’ve explored and planned the nitty-gritty details to make your experience work—now it’s time to finesse and execute. The environment through which you present the experience will set the baseline for how people will generalize your experience (well done or poorly presented). This is the unconscious vibe; the culmination of positive and negative cues. A sensory-rich environment will go a long way in building the emotional bond that connects your audience to your message and will influence how well people are able to participate in the experience. In the words of Maya Angelou, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

“Our brains are so adapted to make associations with the environment that whether we want to or not, we link our experiences and their settings, and those two things together produce our behavior.”

- Winifred Gallagher

Figure 2



Click to watch a video of the experience.

Train your speakers and staff to speak and present themselves in a way that supports the theme and messaging. Keywords or even slight changes to greetings can make a big difference. Be aware to remove any disturbances or detractors from the experience such as overflowing garbage cans or annoying background noises. The image of an organization like the Walt Disney company, known for its always-on cast members, would be diminished if Cinderella were caught smoking in costume.

Use the right colors and visuals to intensify the desired atmosphere. Muted colors ease conversation, and bright colors are best for high energy interaction, while natural settings and outdoor imagery has proven to reduce stress.

We've touched on the importance of immersing people in a sensory-rich environment, but what does that entail exactly? The five senses take in about 11 million bits of information per second, while we can consciously process only around 40 bits.^{xvi} That being said, a targeted strategy should be created to properly integrate the five senses—ultimately enhancing engagement, learning and memory. Be mindful of ambient noises and plan for how you will use intentional sounds. Same goes for aroma. The right scents elicit a strong emotional connection to behavior.

Visual aspects of an experience are the most obvious components when appealing to the senses, but be aware of inflicting sensory overload. Use thoughtful visuals to emphasize and enhance a venue instead of cluttering the space. Another more recent take on the importance of visual stimulation is the previously mentioned virtual or augmented reality. It's not always possible to bring fantasy-like worlds to life or teleport someone to far-off destinations, but virtual reality can make them feel part of the action. Many travel and hospitality brands, as well as real estate companies, are using a 3-D video tour of their properties to give potential guests or buyers a feeling of actually being there. According to Apartments.com, site users spend three times longer engaging with properties that offer 3-D tours than those without.

Finally, taste—a combination of all the senses—can be greatly impacted based on environment. Nutritional and cultural distinctions in taste, visual variations in presentation and even room setup can alter the perception of the tasting experience. An experiment by an Oxford University professor validated that participants reported a whiskey as having more “grassy” flavors when they were in a green, natural looking room as opposed to “sweeter” hints when in a red multi-sensory themed room.

Evaluation

OK, now you have designed an event thematic that was inspiring, intriguing, immersive, influential, impressive and it interrupted your audience from their daily routine; after which you delivered an unforgettable, one-of-a-kind experience. Now what? Now it's time to pick it apart. Gather all the feedback you received from mobile app surveys, word-of-mouth or on social media. Compare the feedback to your initial goals and see what lines up and what doesn't. Understanding this alignment will help you determine if you had a positive return on your investment.

Are your employees working more collaboratively together? Are healthcare professionals recommending more patients for your study? Do your salespeople feel appreciated and motivated to sell more? Think back to the original reason for needing to have this event. Was that need met? If the answer is no, this is the time to analyze every aspect of the event and what can be done better—while it's fresh in your mind. If the answer is yes, this is still the time to identify what worked in an effort to continually raise the bar and find ways to continue the conversation surrounding your message. The evaluation phase is the time to take your learnings and apply them to future experiences.

Results in Action

An IKEA store in the UK needed to increase awareness about their bedroom products and portray themselves as a guide for designing and furnishing the perfect sleep space. The experience they created was “IKEA’s Big Sleepover.” Winners were invited for a sleepover in a local store and their experience included the following elements:



intrigue

Intrigue – Local celebrities reading bedtime stories and ultimately, the press and social mentions surrounding the event inspired others to buy more IKEA bedroom products. That UK store sold more bedroom furniture than any other IKEA store, and “bedroom products” became the most popular products sold on IKEA’s online store (source: IKEA.com)^{xvii}.



influence

Influence – A sleep expert provided mattress selection tips.



interruption

Interruption – Sleeping away from home, outside of normal routines.



impression

Impression – Soft pillows, sounds of sleeping in a big room with many others, massages, drinking hot cocoa.

IKEA had a need to be met, and staging the right experience helped them reach their goal.



Put It All Together

Let's evaluate three experiences to understand what made them so influential by examining the six I's.

Company: Bud Light

Background: For two consecutive years, as part of its experiential marketing campaign #UpForWhatever, Bud Light hosted party goers in a completely branded experience of a total town takeover. Sweepstakes winners were whisked off to a surprise destination to enjoy concerts, games and just a fun party.

A spokesperson for one of the events said, "Most events provide the exact same experience to attendees...our goal was to get a thousand people to tell a million stories. Giving (the participants) options and choices let them create their own experience. They were on a constant voyage and never knew what was next." ^{xviii}

Experience Details

- **Inspiration and Intrigue** – Participants had to audition for a spot to attend. Whether it was answering questions such as, "based on your skills, what kind of world record do you think you could set?" or submitting a video demonstrating how they were "Up For Whatever," the imaginative attendees shaped the event.
- **Immersion and Influence** – 1,000 attendees at Whatever, USA – in the first year alone – posted 37,000 pieces of content that were directly accessed by more than 15 million people on Facebook and Twitter, with social impression doubling the second year.
- **Impression and Interruption** – Every aspect of the event was branded. From airline tickets and the planes themselves, to the chocolate shop and hair salon in town. The concerts and day-to-night activities transported the participants to an epic party world.



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Company: Restoration Hardware^{xx}

Background: Upscale American hardware and home furnishings retail store opened a "café" that aims to blur the lines between residential and retail, home and hospitality.

Experience Details:

- **Inspiration and Intrigue** – RH chose a location for this store/café that most would consider a long shot. The 3 Arts building was low on the list of prime spots for a luxury home furnishing store or a café. It was a dilapidated 100-year-old building that had been sitting vacant in a largely residential area for 20 years. Riding on the coattails of the building's art history, Restoration Hardware decided to play up the vintage feel, paying homage to the arts. Developing a story to lay the guiding principles allowed for strategic direction to script and stage the experience. The goals of the experience designers were for people to imagine their life as it would be at home and to find new ways to express their lifestyle.
- **Immersion and Influence** – When planning over 70,000 square feet of space, special consideration was taken to provide a stage for musical performances, a contemporary art gallery, a design atelier (studio) and a café to present the culinary arts.



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- **Impression and Interruption** – No hosts, no reservations. Eat anywhere you sit and buy anything you see. The space is meant to look and feel just like home. The creative director for the restaurant group summed it up by saying, “If you could have amazing food at your house every day, that’s what this would be like.” A much different feel than your average retail big box store, the surrounding atmosphere helped enhance the RH experience.



Company: Automotive Company

Background: A forward movement for an automotive company to a high-growth segment with high-quality vehicles required education on key brand priorities from leadership to the sales teams. Top sales managers were invited to a one-night incentive event that would both educate and challenge them to raise their game to the next level.

Experience Details:

- **Inspiration and Intrigue** – During the qualification period, consistent and strategic communication encouraged sales managers to be Game Changers by striving for higher levels of personal and team commitment for a chance to experience a completely over-the-top event at Dallas Cowboys’ AT&T Stadium.
- **Immersion and Influence** – Mimicking tests from the NFL Scouting Combine, players participated in passing, running and jumping competitions to earn points redeemable for rewards. The gaming stations integrated intuitive, rather than overt, messages about customer service, leadership, discipline, and commitment to excellence, to drive home the brand priorities.
- **Impression and Interruption** – To create game-day excitement, participants entered the stadium through the underground tunnel just as the players do. As they took the field, they watched their live entrance on the world’s largest LED screen and were greeted by the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. The smells of game-day themed food wafted through the air all night, and following a half-time performance, photos with the cheerleaders were available. Head coach “Vince Lombardi” even opened the evening with an inspirational pep talk.

Summary

While many of the best examples of experiences lie within the field of marketing, there's no reason why the experiential mindset couldn't or shouldn't become part of every meeting and event. Every gathering is an experience, but how impactful it is depends so much on its strategy, design and execution. Activate your audience with motivation and inspiration by creating the ultimate experience.

Let Creative Group help you create programs and experiences that help your audience thrive.

How we can help

We create lasting experiences that help you connect with your audience to effectively deliver your message and build your brand.

Our approach is focused on creating the most engaging and personalized participant experience. With end-to-end meeting support, we provide all the elements necessary to create a world-class meeting or event that will drive behavior to meet your goals. Our global programs and experiences reward excellence and inspire people to reach their full potential – we call it Thrivability – the art and science of reaching for the stars and nurturing individual greatness. For more information, contact Creative Group, Inc.

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Let's Thrive.