

Future-proofing events

Insights from
ibtm[®] WORLD

Barcelona 2023



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Introduction

An event for event people, every year IBTM World Barcelona gathers 15,000 experts from the conference, meetings and events industry. They're the people who make Coachella happen, create programs for the Royal Albert Hall, bring Pokémon GO to life, and strategise for the Financial Times.

Corporate events leaders share common challenges and opportunities, but rarely have the chance to gather in a meaningful way to sense-check, calibrate and co-create solutions.

The Visionary Leaders Workshop at IBTM World Barcelona 2023 aimed to generate a new approach to some of the tough challenges facing us all,

in an environment where we can quickly get down to the crux of the issues, as we all share a common language.

This report details the common themes identified by global events leaders onsite at IBTM World Barcelona 2023 and in the workshop

– namely the biggest challenges, as well as potential solutions to future-proof events as a strategic and results-driven marketing channel. Based on researching with the Visionary Leaders Workshop group, these five themes came out as the most common areas of both opportunity and challenges:

1

Community

People are craving human connection in the face of over-digitization. So how can we build engaged event communities that meet this need – at a time when everyone is striving to create one?

2

ESG / Sustainability

Climate change is one of the biggest issues impacting companies and people right now. How can we deliver on sustainability in the (notoriously unsustainable) events industry?

3

Measurement – Ro(X?)

So much data, so little time. With so many new tools to track data, how can we focus on what's actually meaningful and use it to make an impact?

4

Resources

Stretched budgets are the norm and people's attitudes to work are changing, so how can we evolve our approach to resources?

5

Tech

Emerging technologies like AI are already reshaping how we make events happen. How can we seamlessly integrate the physical and digital to elevate event experiences?

“My hot take for 2024? We’ve got to

ditch the word “event”.

This dowdy catch-all category word hints at airport meeting rooms with warm white-wine. This is not what we do.

We create experiences. Experiences that **educate, entertain,** and **inspire.** Experiences that **transform.** Experiences that **drive growth** and **deepen relationships.** Experiences that make your job, and life, **worth living.** If you do one thing different in 2024; **do yourself justice.**

You create experiences!”

Ella Kiernan, SVP Marketing & Director of Stream, WPP

These five themes converge in a
broader landscape of global instability:

climate crises, economic and political uncertainty, war and humanitarian disaster

impact the resources we have, the ways we behave, and how we connect. Rising costs and inflation naturally impact events. In tandem, the attention economy makes it difficult to capture and maintain people's interest. Companies now have to constantly innovate new ways to spark that "wow" moment – and this is especially true for events, where there's an extra pressure to delight.

People may be more difficult to impress, and resources may be tighter, but there is also a huge and growing appetite for in-person interactions. In fact,

71% of Gen Z consumers say their trust increased following their interaction with a brand at a live event,

according to Freeman. There's a clear correlation between in-person interaction at live events, brand trust, and the positive effects they have on Gen Z.

At IBTM World Barcelona 2023, American Express shared that events are right behind online ads as the second most significant item in the budget for B2B marketers. And for good reason: business events are now proven to generate \$1 trillion in direct spend alone worldwide every year, according to a study by the Events Industry Council. This ranks the business events sector alongside consumer electronics in size and scope.

Julian Grigo, Managing Director at Solaris, predicts that 2024 will be the year that events become the marketing channel of choice for companies. He said:
“With the combination of hybrid, virtual, and in-person, plus the repurposed content generated during the sessions, events are a marketing goldmine. They are our go-to way to seek clarity over misinformation and polarization.”



My prediction:

2024

will be the year events become
the marketing channel of preference.

TREND: **Community**

In the Visionary Leaders Workshop, building event communities was identified as an outsized challenge, at a time when everyone is striving to create an engaged, flourishing and self-perpetuating community.

True community, in its purest form, is organic

a space where individuals self-select and opt into a collective based on shared values and genuine connections. It often echoes through brand marketing strategies, yet proves elusive and challenging to establish. When companies get it right, a powerful symbiotic relationship emerges. Event and community form a virtuous circle where individuals rally around a "moment-in-time" event, all the while benefiting from the continuous, "always-on" nature of the community.



What are the challenges of building event communities?

Increasing polarization is one roadblock to community-building: as society splits off into vehemently opposing groups based on political views, identities and values, trust is difficult to establish. Alongside this, there is an over-saturation of brands and voices competing for people's attention online. On average, we're exposed to between 6,000 and 10,000 ads per day, according to Lumen. This presents a clear opportunity for events, as over-exposure to online ads pushes people back towards human interaction. In fact, Freeman also found that 64% of Gen Z consumers retained their trust in a brand for at least one month after interacting with them at a live event. The result is a halo effect of long-term recognition. The question is how to build enough initial trust to keep people returning to your event and engaging outside of it, so that you maintain a loyal and self-perpetuating community.

“Your decision is not whether a community is right for your brand. It’s whether you’re willing to do what’s needed to get a brand community right”

write Susan Fournier and Lara Lee in Harvard Business Review. Ultimately, Visionary Leaders Workshop attendees agreed that the opportunities for community-building seriously outweighed the challenges.

What should you do to create stronger communities?

Five takeaways:

1

The need for communities to be **ORGANIC**.

The true essence of community is one that grows and enlarges even in the absence of a dedicated moderator. As Fournier and Lee explain,

"Companies build effective communities through a design philosophy that replaces control with a balance of structure and flexibility."

2

A sense of **BELONGING**.

People self-identify to communities where they feel like they belong – where they can show up authentically without judgment. This happens when brands build loyalty by understanding the intricacies of people's lives, and helping them to meet their needs. Leverage ambassadors and influencers who create sub-communities with the brand at its core. Recognise and reward loyal community members with shout-outs, discounts and freebies.

3

PERSONALISATION is important and is enabled by good **technology**.

Like the best dating matchmakers, communities can be enhanced when people are able to share interests and passions. Use online tools selectively to support community needs (think Instagram broadcast channels, Discord, and community management tools like Hivebrite). Use AI and chatbots to personalise online interactions.

4

SOCIAL GATHERINGS – ideally face-to-face, are key to community.

Virtual meet-ups are a poor substitute but of course, are more practical geographically. If you are able to find a good ambassador for each region to host IRL events, even better.

5

OWNERSHIP.

Community often falls down in businesses where it is someone's side-gig or in a laundry list for a junior marketer. Someone integral to the product **MUST** own the community and drive it every day.

XPLand's Erica Boeke and Amazon's Lesly Simmons explored Community as part of their "Rules for Experiential Rulebreakers" session at IBTM with a clear guide that

"the end
is just the
beginning"

The idea around community is that you always want to leave the audience at an event wanting more - and guess what? Post-event is the perfect time to get started on a community: a community that is excited and wanting more.

Niantic's Philip Marz attributes the community to the success of **Pokémon GO**, the **world's biggest AR game of all time**. If managed properly

“community can become an
extension of your
marketing team” he says.

Strong communities need a **real world touchpoint** and empowerment is absolutely key:

“Empower your players, and
they will build their **own community”**

he says. Other key factors are **enablement**, **lifestyle** (people need to feel that community is a lifestyle) and **investment into the community** for the **future**. This requires active brand commitment and investment.

TREND: **Measurement**

Most measurements are meaningless – except the meaningful ones.

It sounds counterintuitive, but this was a talking point for a reason in the Visionary Leaders Workshop.

Measuring the success of an event is a robust way to explain why it happened, why it needs to keep happening, and to secure future buy-in and investment. In turn, choosing the right metrics and using the data to tell the right story enables you to meet another challenge: securing the resources to keep elevating your event (more on that later).



What are the challenges of effectively measuring an event?

Almost 90 percent of event experts are struggling to get what they want from their event data, according to a recent study by Eventsforce. Its CEO, George Sirius, said:

“As the significance of events continues to grow for associations, so does the importance of managing all the data they collect from events. It tells them a lot about their members and how they’re engaging with their events, and it also gives them the kind of business insight they need to expand their reach to much wider audiences.”

The emergence of new ways to track data – like AI-enabled sentiment analysis and face recognition – make it difficult to know what measurement tools are worth using. And even when the tools are established, there’s a deluge of data available and a non-universal glossary of terminology to describe it. Then there’s the question of how to present the data in a way that’s actually meaningful. Overcoming these challenges to convey the true value of an event requires delving deeper, refining measurement strategies, and sharing nuanced insights that go beyond the quantitative.

What should you do to more effectively measure your events?

Five takeaways:

1

DEFINE GOALS.

Establish a clear framework with predefined goals and key performance indicators. Ask: what does success look like? It could be lead generation, increased attendee satisfaction, greater brand awareness on socials – the list goes on.

Data shouldn't just be used for reporting, it should inform decisions made across the organisation.

2

Develop a SHARED GLOSSARY.

A common understanding of terms can help to make sure that people consistently interpret the data. Consider the word 'engagement' – it's thrown around all the time, but has different meanings for different teams and organisations. What does it mean for yours?

Establishing shared meanings = more accurate analysis.

3

Use DATA STORYTELLING.

Lots of data is great, but it's only useful when it tells a story.

Key to this is extracting a breadth of data – descriptive, diagnostic, predictive and prescriptive – and developing a narrative storyline that communicates insights, context and actions that inspire. Then, visualise it using graphs, images, videos. It's about using what works for your organisation.

4

Build a data-focused TEAM.

Successful data storytelling demands a team of data-driven people and a continuous reporting culture, even when no-one is asking. Breaking down organisational silos encourages teams to share and integrate insights, and the result is a holistic view of the event's impact. Then, a commitment to honest and transparent reporting nurtures a culture where genuinely useful insights can flourish.

5

Integrate NEW TECH.

Emerging technology like facial recognition or sentiment analysis (Google is currently piloting this) can add greater depth to your data pot. **The key is to choose the tools that align with your overall strategy.** Start small, stay focused, and be mindful of ethical considerations, like making sure that people agree to having their facial expressions and sentiment measured.

“Stop being satisfied with top level agreement, **seek deep level alignment**”

Shared **Leigh Gilmore**, Former GM Live Journalism Events, Dow Jones and now strategic consultant for **Bloomberg** and **Yahoo Finance**.

“Everyone thinks that they get the brief. There has to be **one identified owner** of the project who seeks the **deep level alignment**”

When discussing reporting metrics and ensuring C-Suite buy-in.

TREND: **Resources**

In the Visionary Leaders Workshop, taking a holistic approach to building resources – both financial and workforce – in a time of economic uncertainty, culture change and digital transformation came out as another key challenge for the future of events.

Transformation is what makes organisations successful, and the ones that come out on top usually take a human-centric approach to change.

Research by EY shows that considering human factors as a critical element of strategic leadership and planning can increase the probability of success to more than 70%. In short, putting people at the centre is how businesses can (and should) stay ahead.



What are the resource challenges for events?

Growing numbers of Generation Z are entering the workforce, bringing with them different expectations of culture and working life. They want better work-life balance and they want to work in a way that prioritises diversity, equity and inclusion.

If companies don't focus on their training and development, this generation is more likely to tune out and focus on their side hustles. As a result, bigger companies need to undergo huge cultural shifts to keep up.

Stretched budgets mean that teams of 80 are now stripped back to one or two people who have to manage the workload. Burnout is a real risk. Then, there's the need to make sure you pick the right people to build the skilled team that you need. While the experts suggest that event budgets aren't going to face cuts like they did during the 2008-9 economic crisis, competing KPIs add another layer of complexity to financial resourcing. But the future looks promising, if companies can adapt quickly to meet the needs of the next generation.

So, how can you keep evolving your approach to financial and workforce resources? Five takeaways:

1

Combat BURNOUT.

Spend time with entry-level to mid-level employees – coaching and supporting them with prioritisation. Make honest, open conversations the norm, where teams talk about workplace boundaries and the expectations of their role. Measure retention rates to see real-time data on what's working and why.

2

Prioritise EDUCATION.

Define times for people to take courses and attend events that are tailored to their focus. To avoid overwhelm, experts from the workshop recommended setting at least one year for each person to reach specific benchmarks in their chosen area. Alongside a culture of reward and recognition, this gives people a real reason to be loyal.

3

BUILD OUT the hiring process.

Think building a bank of freelancers and global agencies so you can choose who you need, when you need them. Or integrating HR tech – like AI to streamline the recruitment process– without losing essential human qualities. As people reconsider how, when and where they work, companies will need to think more about talent management than talent acquisition. That means looking to mobilise people's skills internally to avoid losing talent, before looking elsewhere.

4

Open up COMMUNICATION.

"Tell me, and I'll try to fix it" is something that most people would like to hear from their manager. This kind of openness and honesty is built on a trusting relationship between manager and employee – so, take the time to build it. **Transparency can bridge the generational gap and help to balance expectations** – for example around keeping people happy vs. 'productivity' and getting things done.

5

KPIs THAT MATTER to people.

How can you showcase what benefits the event brings to the brand? It's all about choosing metrics that matter to people, and that demonstrate its return on investment and lifetime value to help claim the necessary budget. **Make sure that stakeholders are deeply aligned with these metrics, not just in high-level agreement.**

Anne Wheat, Event Operations General Manager, Google enlightened
us all on the impact of designing events for neuroinclusion,

“It’s amazing how
one person
who chooses to
be an advocate can **really make**
a change.”

TREND:
Sustainability

Our planet is under threat. Speaking to the Guardian, Prof Sir David King, the chair of the Climate Crisis Advisory Group and a former UK chief scientific adviser, said: "It is undeniable that to limit global warming to 1.5C we must all rapidly reduce carbon emissions... the alternative is an unmanageable future for humanity." From catastrophic weather systems to rising sea levels, environmental crises are prompting people to rethink their consumption habits.

More than half of consumers (57%)

are now willing to change their purchasing behaviour to be more responsible,

according to an IBM Institute for Business Value survey.

Alongside this, McKinsey recently identified the increasing importance of climate change and the net zero transition as the sixth-most-important trend impacting CEOs' leadership. Brands are now competing to cut carbon emissions and show consumers they care about the world – but making events sustainable is still notoriously difficult.



What are the challenges to delivering sustainability in events?

Visionary Leaders Workshop attendees shared the reality that while some businesses are still doing the bare minimum, others are making strong decisions behind the scenes – like choosing sustainable vendors. The issue is that they're just not communicating it. Others found that driving sustainability often demands its alignment with another benefit, for example cost-saving.

At the same time, the initial investment cost of integrating sustainable technologies and services is often much higher than the budget allows. A lack of clarity around who is responsible for driving the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) of an event presented another clear challenge.

How do we find ways to deliver on sustainability in events?

Five takeaways:

1

REFRAME the challenge as creative.

ESG frameworks have traditionally presented sustainability as a risk or compliance issue – making it seem complex and overwhelming. **Understanding the new strategic opportunities that are emerging, and transforming them into a creative brief, shifts people's mindsets and the focus of their efforts.**

2

Make it OWNABLE.

Give someone the responsibility of being the sustainability strategist for the event, with the creative brief to make it happen. This is the status quo disruptor: the person who asks questions, streamlines different teams' challenges and capabilities, and lays out how they can coexist to make a (more) sustainable event.

3

BREAK IT DOWN into small components.

Unbundling the different aspects of sustainability makes it easier to strategise, get things done, and measure the results. That could look like: the sustainability of suppliers and vendors, venue, event design and technology, transport management, and in-event resources (like plastic).

4

COMMUNICATE with integrity.

Intentional and transparent communication with attendees, employees, budget-holders and stakeholders is key. **Sharing your vision and values, and the steps you're taking to get there, holds you accountable and maintains transparency.** There will be aspects of the event that, right now, can't be sustainable. Communicate that, too. Inviting feedback and suggestions is another way to build integrity and, in turn, loyalty.

5

MEASURE to improve.

Setting clear, realistic targets is great. But how do you collect and analyse the relevant data to back it up? Look to tools like the ISO 20121, the Event Sustainability Management System, or the Global Reporting Initiative. Emerging technologies are progressing at meteoric speed.

TREND: **Tech**

Live events are already a breeding ground for innovation, and Bloomberg Intelligence predicts the metaverse could generate up to **\$200 billion** through live concerts and sporting events by 2024.

According to McKinsey's 'State of AI' report, strategic organisations are leveraging AI for sales and marketing, resulting in increased revenue and reduced costs.

Writing in Forbes, Stefan Deeran, co-founder of the AI platform Vendelux, predicts that AI will facilitate more immersive, personalised events: "For one, organizers are preparing for a future that involves more gamification and VR activations. On the flip side, it's inevitable that pandemic-era standards for measuring ROI will persist." While finance departments will continue to watch large-scale investments like in-person events, Deeran believes that it's no longer a wise business decision to opt out. The future looks like a frictionless experience between physical and digital realities – but first, the challenges.



What are the challenges of using technology to build events where physical and digital realities coexist?

A major talking point at the Visionary Leaders Workshop was the sheer breadth of technology solutions that purport to augment and enhance the event experience at all stages of the journey (but often don't). From practical tools like mobile event apps, live translation and contactless registration software, to 'experiential' virtual reality experiences, the consensus was that it's hard to know what's actually worth investing in.

Fear and overwhelm about how to use and integrate emerging technologies presented another challenge. Building confidence across teams requires investment – not only in the tech, but also in taking people on a learning journey.

Despite these challenges, the event experts were clear that taking small steps to use emerging tech – particularly AI – would be a key growth opportunity for events in 2024 and beyond.

How can we integrate emerging technologies into live experiences?

Five takeaways:

1

Shift your PERSPECTIVE.

Strip things back and see technology for what it is: a tool that helps humans to do things differently. The Royal Albert Hall has spent 152 years evolving alongside technology: first using a sail cloth to combat amplification issues, then suspending mushrooms from the ceiling, and finally introducing a 400-speaker sound system. Each intervention is an example of technology in action.

2

Make SMALL BETS.

Avoid overwhelm by testing the smallest possible thing you can think of when deploying new technologies. That could look like automating the event registration process or making look like Dave Gamble, head of programming at the Royal Albert Hall, and using a ChatGPT bot that gives tips on who to book next.

3

UPSKILL your team.

It's natural for people to feel fear of newness – the solution is to educate, upskill and build confidence across teams. If you can, build mini programs for teams and launch project-based sprints.

4

Consider PERSONALIZATION.

AI-driven features can help to personalise people's experiences before, during and after the event. Think using AI to generate headshots, facilitate real-time interaction at workshops and live Q&A sessions, or to act as a personal assistant for marketers as they create and segment their content. AI can even help to make events accessible and inclusive, for example by analysing registration forms to identify people with disabilities or extra requirements.

5

GAMIFY your events.

It's another example of tech as technique. Gamification has been around for years, but now we're starting to use newer iterations (like AI) to facilitate it. Trick attendees into being characters in a story, based on the marketing personas you identify, and use game-like elements including points, badges, levels and rewards that motivate them to achieve certain goals.

How can emerging technology - especially AI - be used to augment the end-to-end experience of live events? Thankfully **Howard Gray, CEO, Wavetable** gave a number of practical ways we could utilise the power of AI. He reminded us

“It doesn't have to be **scary.**”

“The Royal Albert Hall has been around for 152 years, and they've used technology since the start. But when the hall first opened, amplification wasn't even available. 'Technology' meant coming up with techniques **to do things differently. Same goes today.**”

“Avoid the overwhelm
by testing the
smallest thing
you can think of.
Make the tiniest bet.”

“Many trade bodies and associations can utilize these tools without breaking the bank, and arguably have much more flex to test out ideas with their audiences than B2C companies. **There's tons of opportunity to explore.**”
We also got into **facial recognition, weird robots, and AI ethics...**
but that's another story.

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year's roadmap**

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