



What AI Can and Can't Disrupt in Event Marketing



Jacob Brooks-Harris

Marketing and Experiential // Strategic Brand Partnerships //
Organizational Strategy and Leadership



March 7, 2024

The hype is cacophonous and omnipresent: Artificial intelligence is going to disrupt every business from Wall Street to Hollywood. I personally believe experiential marketing is the last industry that could be turned upside down by AI. There's an irreplaceable human-centered ethos that imbues the work we do, and of course AI has limited utility in producing the tangible IRL elements that consumers need to touch and feel in order to have the experience feel textured and memorable. Nonetheless, AI is certainly making ripples in our space, [some bigger than others](#). Hype aside, I think there are some aspects of experience building where AI could bring outsize value.

What AI can improve

Cost management

Experiential is incredibly valuable to brand marketers, but it ain't cheap, and budgets are always a focus in this industry. [Industry experts foretell a period of rising costs](#) in the near future, and we're also seeing more clients tightening their budgets and encouraging their agency partners to do more with less. We love this challenge, and AI might be able to help: Using data analysis, this technology could help marketers better analyze and forecast event budgets and find areas of potential efficiency, especially for large and complex activations. And AI algorithms that can predict trends in consumer behavior could help event marketers make better decisions about how and where to spend their budgets from the start.

Design mock-ups and pitch decks

One of the more time-intensive elements of event production is mocking up creative concepts and designing decks to present those concepts to clients. Experience design requires both specialized training and a logistics-forward approach, so outsourcing design to the robots comes with a degree of risk. It's questionable whether AI can bring an implicit understanding of materiality, install/deinstall logistics, or the variety of execution and cost considerations that an experienced designer has learned through years of practical training.

But that's not to say there's no potential upside. With AI support in creating concept visualizations or mock-ups (with thoughtful oversight), experiential designers can spend more time finessing the creative ideas to wow guests, potentially cutting out some of the intense legwork required to painstakingly render every element.

Augmented Photo and Video Moments

We all love a photo moment, but if we're honest, this mainstay of event marketing could use an injection of innovation and evolution. I'm excited to see how agencies and our vendors will use generative AI to create richer photo and video moments that incorporate the event source material in ways that would be impossible—or at least cost prohibitive—to pull off without digital intervention. There's a relatively spectacular potential for AI to help put guests INSIDE their favorite shows, situations, or passion areas, letting you traipse through the Upside Down or get on the court to volley against Serena and share out on your social channels.

What AI can't replace

Sensory experiences and personal connection

The best VR technology still struggles even to mimic the sensory experience of visiting a space in person. Layering AI generated content into real life has the potential to further remove guests from the primal immediacy of an immersive experience or the connection that comes with a shared community experiencing something unique and special in real time. If we race to create AI enhanced virtual experiences, we risk watering down the intangible but incredibly powerful emotional immediacy that make IRL events special.

A big reason we gather at events is to connect with others—with fellow attendees, with performers and characters we admire, and with event staff that bring a brand's ethos to life for us. The connections we make at events don't just make for a stronger affinity with a brand, but contribute to our wellbeing as people. It remains to be seen whether AI can enhance this connectivity, but there's reason to believe it might have the opposite effect.

Collaboration and investment

Any experienced event producer will tell you: It takes a village. And to an important degree, the contributions of each party rely on trust, connection, and shared history. A computer might be able to tell you the most efficient way to load-in a stage, but in reality, the best way is discovered through collaborative conversations that draw on the hard-earned expertise of the players involved, and are relentlessly tweaked and improved on as new information and inputs come in throughout the course of the pre-production process.

Real-time observation and feedback

Engaging with guests in real time also gives marketers the opportunity to observe how their target audience interacts with different brand elements, products, and intellectual property, providing valuable insight about what customers and fans love about their work. Some of this you only get by being in the room. This feedback helps us improve future events for better guest experience and brand impact.

Creativity

At the heart of experiential marketing is the creative vision required to translate a brand ethos, a product's unique selling proposition, or even a TV show into an impactful in-person experience. Understanding the client's needs and aspirations, the opportunities and restrictions of an event space, and the spirit of the brand itself requires human insight. Managing the professional relationships required to realize audacious designs also requires the human ability to communicate a creative vision and collaborate on its development. Despite its name, generative AI isn't actually capable of generating original ideas. According to the [World Economic Forum](#), artificial intelligence "lacks the ability to understand and synthesize concepts in the same way that humans

do." To create unforgettable experiences, we need more than a hodge-podge of things that have already been done many times before. We need human creativity.

While [AI has been making impressive strides](#) in just a short time, I'm convinced it will never take the place of experiential marketing. Our very human desire to gather in groups and participate in communal experiences will continue to drive us to engage with the things we love in real life, including movies and tv shows we enjoy, products we buy, and brands we trust. AI *can* make experiences better for everyone involved, but like many technologies, it must be used carefully and thoughtfully. We shouldn't hand over the keys to our industry to the robots anytime soon, and folks who rush to outsource the special sauce of events and experiences to AI will ultimately realize they're going to lose more than they gain.