THE NEXT WAVE OF SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCE

BY GPJ

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Sustainability is quietly entering its second act, leaving the green checkboxes and refillable water bottles behind for operationalised inclusion, circular design strategies, and measurable return. The brands that are leading the charge aren't talking louder or more explicitly about sustainability, they're designing smarter systems around it.

Designing for belonging is the new sustainability standard

Shifting gears from green gestures to circular craft

The ROI of responsibility is getting real

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01

Designing for belonging is the new sustainability standard

Inclusion and wellbeing are emerging as the invisible architecture of meaningful, sustainable experiences.

Today's brands aren't settling for baseline carbon messaging and performative DEI statements, opting instead for intentional, human-centered design that makes belonging intuitive. These changes are showing up in tangible choices—from local vendor procurement and regional caterers to supply food and beverage, reducing transport emissions while reinvesting in nearby farms and artisans, to implementing spaces like quiet rooms, sensory maps to indicate high and low-stimulus areas, tactile wayfinding and adaptive lighting to support neurodiverse attendee participation in events.

Last year, Global Citizen Festival adopted a 100% vegetarian menu, compostable concessions, refill stations, and donated surplus food to local organisations, turning sustainability into a shared value experienced by all. At IMEX America, Tokyo's booth demonstrated culturally rooted sustainability practices through modular booth components, paper accordion furniture, and a no-trash policy—proving that belonging can be expressed through familiar cultural norms as much as environmental principles. Together these practices signal a new maturity in sustainability: inclusion is no longer something to talk about, but something to operationalise. When attendees have access, agency and a role in creating shared values, sustainability becomes something real.

Key Takeaway | For experiential teams, belonging is a sustainability imperative. By prioritising vendor diversity, neuro-friendly environments, inclusive spatial planning, and community-focused hospitality, brands can create events that feel equitable, model shared responsibility, and deepen trust long after the experience ends.

Shifting gears from **green gestures to circular craft**

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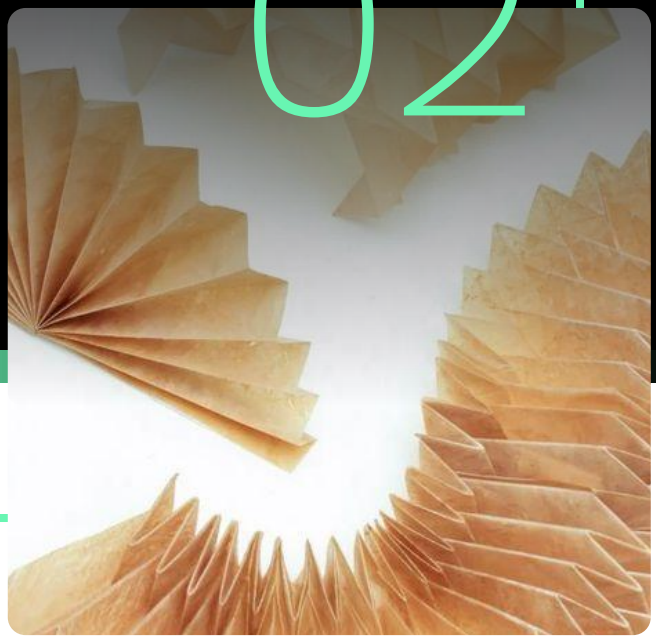


Material choices, modular thinking, and purposeful reuse define what it means to build responsible experiences.

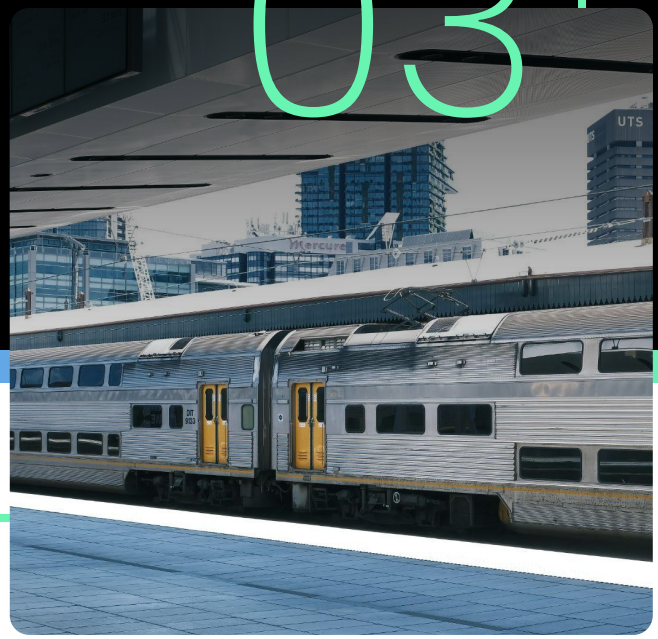
As consumers become more knowledgeable in circularity and material impact, brands are applying craft through modular and reconfigurable production methods, enabling installations to be reused or recycled post-event. At CES 2024, multiple brands dedicated physical space to showcase their material impact stories, feature sustainable products, and spotlight partnerships. HERE Technologies built a LEGO-style exhibit designed for rebuilding each year, Samsung demonstrated how upcycled packaging and by-products of their household goods became the structure of their booth walls in a Sustainability Zone, while Panasonic introduced kinari, a plant-based cellulose resin shaping the drapery, and invited attendees to shape the brand's future material applications using kinari coins. At Cisco Live Amsterdam, a kinetic walkway powered the venue lighting through attendees' movements—turning a structural sustainability story into something immediately visible, participatory, and memorable.

Attendees now expect proof, not props—systems that turn sustainability into something they can see, feel and co-create. By inviting them to physically step inside the sustainability story, brands are helping bridge audiences' understanding for how design choices reduce overall footprint in a tangible way.

Key Takeaway | Brands are designing with an afterlife in mind, and treating every structure, surface and system as part of a longer material journey. When circularity becomes an integral piece of the creative process, sustainability shifts from a constraint to the language of design itself.

03

The ROI of responsibility is getting real



Brands are shifting from carbon claims to measurable frameworks, making impact credible and participatory.

With pressure on executive leadership to show that sustainability drives business value and ROI, brands are moving from optics to sustainable frameworks. Rather than relying on whitepapers and annual reporting, events are implementing tools and activations that measure emissions and visualise impact in real time. With travel and transport being the highest expenditure of event emissions globally, organisations are offering tools and intelligent technologies to capture impact.

At Dreamforce, Salesforce linked sustainability to participation, inviting attendees to plant native seedlings and offering a "bike valet" as a low-carbon alternative transportation option. SXSW London committed to measurable targets using the TRACE emissions tool, while at IBC 2025 in Amsterdam, event organisers integrated the city's public transportation system directly into badges, enabling attendees to catch the metro or a bus and reducing reliance on rideshare. Venues like the Colorado Convention Center now offer an Event Attendee GHG Emissions Calculator for attending trade shows, as well as educational resources for vendors to offset attendance with carbon credits. Measurement tools are expanding, rather than limiting, what's possible creatively and transforming events into a living ecosystem where audiences can see their actions ladder up to something bigger.

Key Takeaway | With ESG metrics holding greater weight, the new benchmark is designing experiences that invite participants to see, measure and contribute to the impact they create. When sustainability tracking becomes participatory, it evolves from brand claim to shared, lasting achievement.

OUT-THERE EXPERIENCES

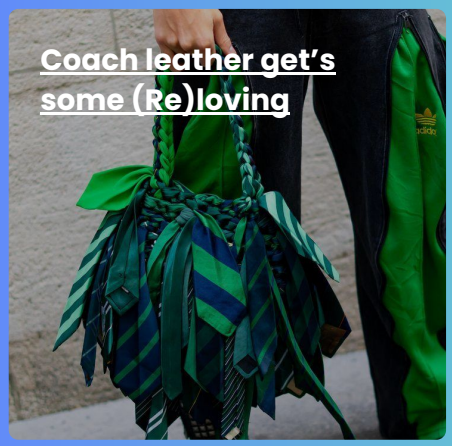
People, brands and marketers continue to push the boundaries of physical and digital experiences, with new and creative executions popping up across the globe.

Nourishing self and nurturing surroundings

From digital detox retreats to forest-breathing kids' clubs and mindful stargazing, Six Senses venues are taking sustainable wellness to the next level.

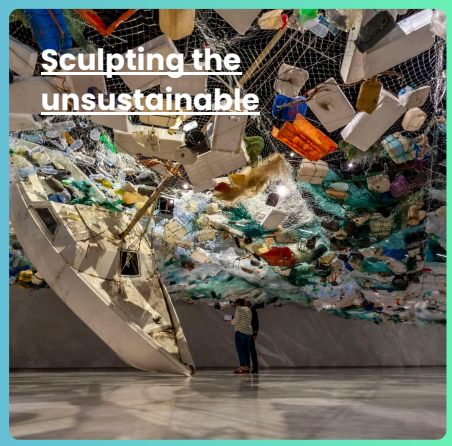
Running the (ocean) tide back

Turning coastal cleanup events into city run clubs, Adidas x Parley rallied runners to collect marine-bound plastics and laced it back into limited-edition gear.



Coach leather get's some (Re)loving

As part of the brand's circular programming, the *Tomorrow's Vintage* pop-up invites attendees to restore and reimagine old bags with custom embossing, revived icons, and upcycling stations.



Sculpting the unsustainable

Kiehl's transforms two tons of plastic waste into public art on the NYC High Line, making single-use practice the headline, not the footnote.