

EXPERIENCE INTELLIGENCE

BY GPJ

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In 2026, real voices, cultural depth, participatory glory, and tangible demonstrations of value break through the noise of an era defined by automation and commodification.



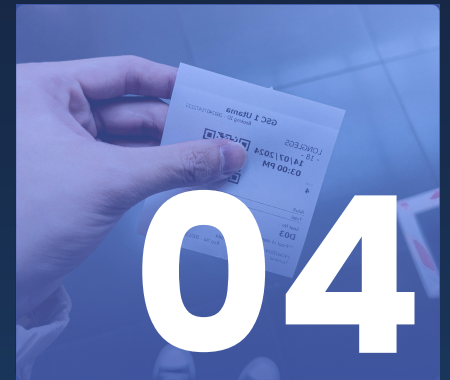
The competitive edge of being real



Audiences want culture with credibility, not costume



Super Bowl LX is minting more stars than ever



Retail wants receipts, not rhetoric



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experience marketing

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The competitive edge of **being real**

Trend spotted by **Catherine Wallin**

As AI floods the feeds, authentic human voice gains value

With generative AI, storytelling is now being produced instantly and endlessly. But while AI may now generate competent narratives, it still **falls short of the most imaginative storytellers**, especially in richer narrative work. As the wave of generated content spreads, companies are investing even more into storytelling, **paying extraordinary salaries** to communications specialists who can translate complex technology into narratives that feel credible and human. At the same time, audiences are gravitating towards **spaces where lived experience still feels intact**, and where nuance, disagreement, and imperfection signal authenticity.

01

What it means

The easier it becomes to generate a story, the more valuable authentic human voices become. Emotional nuance, lived perspective, and imperfect delivery are now the competitive advantage.

Key Takeaway | For experiential marketers, this is the moment to double down on real people. Live environments are one of the last spaces where presence cannot be automated, and where real humans serve as credible proof points. Save AI for enhancing production, not replacing voice. Put customers, employees, and creators at the center of the narrative. Live testimonials, unscripted dialogue, and visible imperfection build trust in ways automated storytelling cannot.



Audiences want culture with credibility, not costume

Trend spotted by **Andrew Lacanienta**

02



Audiences demand culturally hosted, craft-led escapism.

In a year of geopolitical whiplash and cultural polarization, audiences aren't just consuming culture, they're seeking refuge in it. As Gen Z, the most [diverse generation to date](#) reclaims roots and resists assimilation, global stories are becoming comfort, identity, and even counterculture.

[Ne Zha 2's record-breaking global run](#) and viral [cross-border](#) memes reflect how fast culturally specific worlds now travel. [AI-powered translation tools](#) are collapsing distance, making multicultural access feel instant and irreversible. But with that access comes accountability: brands are being watched closely, and missteps like the [Logan Moffitt controversy](#) prove authenticity isn't optional anymore.

What it means

Design experiences as cultural portals, not theme parks. Skip red-and-gold shortcuts and embed credible collaboration, as [leading Lunar New Year campaigns have done](#). Build multilingual entry points, then hand the mic to practitioners, chefs, artists, musicians, elders so we lean into appreciation instead of appropriation. Pay for craft, source locally, and let guests participate through guided rituals, not borrowed aesthetics.

Key Takeaway | The new luxury is belonging. If you want to borrow a culture, don't. Instead, hold space for it through credible collaboration that fits your brand's DNA. Specificity wins when it is hosted by the people who live it, then translated for everyone else.



Super Bowl LX is minting more stars than ever

Trend spotted by **Brandon Dolan**

As [The Superbowl Experience](#) becomes more commercialized, brands across every category offer cultural proximity.

San Francisco's Super Bowl week welcomed a much [broader](#) audience, and in turn, a greater swath of brands than ever before. Attendees gathered exclusive [collectibles](#), strutted down a mock draft [stage](#), and restlessly queued for influencer [meet and greets](#). Simultaneously, they spent time [shopping](#) the look of [vintage brands](#), planning their [dream homes](#), becoming [financially literate](#) with fintech companies, and trading [smiles](#) for [photo opps](#) with healthcare and automotive brands. The underlying draw? A taste of glory, in all its forms. With every experience for sale, the volume of barriers like paywalls, cheap product, and tech prerequisites was [disheartening](#) for many fans. Winning brands didn't overpromise the spotlight, they handed it to fans in easy, meaningful ways.

03



What it means

Bad Bunny's message of unity—and the [42 million](#) that engaged with this message—said it all. Brands that create moments for inclusion in an otherwise inaccessible space have the best chance to turn impressions into long-term equity. This year's [extensive list](#) of global sporting events is ushering in an abundance of opportunities to share the stage.

Key Takeaway | From the Winter Olympics to the World Cup, 2026 is ushering in a long list of global sports events. Brands aiming to activate and build equity around these cultural moments should focus their message, make it easy to participate, and most importantly—make the fans the stars.



Retail wants receipts, not rhetoric

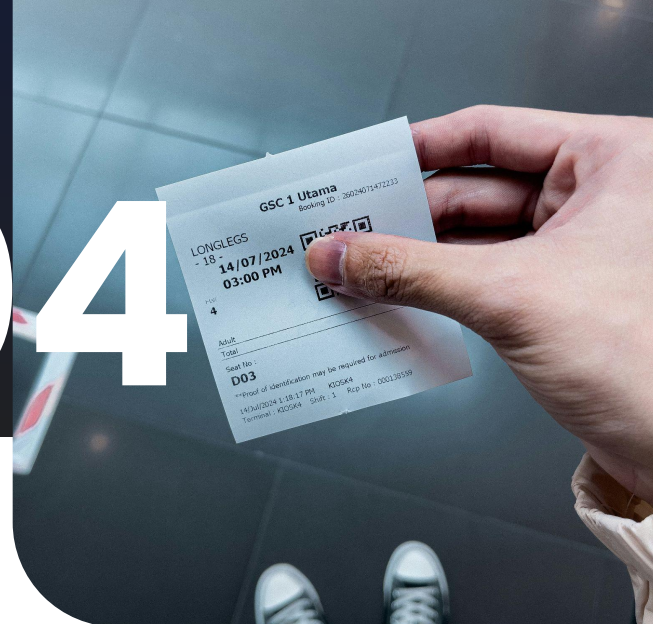
Trend spotted by **Meghan Michalski**

At NRF 2026, AI only cut through when it proved tangible value for attendees.

This year, [agentic AI dominated](#) nearly every booth, [keynote](#), and breakout session. But when everyone leads with the same headline, differentiation shifts from messaging to manifestation. The brands that stood out simplified their story and anchored it in credible client stories, live demos, and believable retail scenarios. [Robots](#), [holograms](#), and [biometric activations](#) drew crowds, but clear storytelling and [proof of partnership](#) sustained them. Executive roundtables, [new content tracks](#) and [gated AI stages](#) signaled that high-value engagement is shifting toward intimacy, while multilingual sessions reflected retail's expanding global lens.

Key Takeaway | Rather than surrounding attendees with product language, anchor them in a moment where they can see a process improve, feel personalization happen in real-time, or understand the operational lift. Lead with a clear retail story, then prove it through tangible use cases and credible partnerships. Design attendee journeys that move from intrigue to evidence to organic conversation.

04



What it means

In a sea of AI sameness, the most resonant experiences made intelligence tangible and emotional. Human-centered stories, confident simplicity, and environments designed for real conversations made the difference. When technology helps guests see themselves in the product—faster, smarter, more effective—the story sticks. When proof is built into the experience, your message doesn't have to be the loudest.



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.

Trailblazers on Rails

Nike turned a standard train into a mountain playground, where guests could trek gear, sip espresso, and lounge in technical labs.

Love-Love, Lacoste Style

Lacoste made waves at the Australian Open with a floating tennis court for fans to watch matches, enjoy French-inspired bites, and soak in the riverside setting.

Love at First Bite

Couples said “I do” at Denny’s Fremont Street chapel—serving up music, quirky officiants, and over-easy kits.

A Meal Before the Miles

Adidas turned carb-loading into a city-wide ritual—creating an Adizero Pasta that kept Dubai Marathon runners fed and fueled before race day.

