



# Guiding Principles in Experience Design

## *Six Truths for Innovative Event Strategies*

### ABOUT THIS REPORT

Our first phase of research resulted in more than 60 one-on-one interviews, generating approximately 2,000 unique comments. We asked our experts to use change as a lens to sense areas of focus and progress, and to forecast the drivers and frameworks that will guide experience design in the coming years.

We brought experts together, in person and remotely, for focused discussion. These global roundtables examined the tenets that emerged from the interviews and assessed how these trends are being integrated and planned for in practice.

Our content partner, Google Xi (Google Experience Institute), shared case studies from its Xi Days event, which featured new event formats and experimentation in content delivery, for this report.

To diversify our data, we are now calling for your help to bring this grand experiment to a wider audience, by seeking organizations to test a truth over the course of 2023 and share their findings. Which truth will you test in 2023, and beyond? The results of testing and case studies will be included in a final white paper, to be released in January 2024.

This research brought to you by



Research conducted by





## Truth 1: Exploring Identities

Connecting the intersections  
that make us unique.

This truth reflects an increased awareness of the intersectionality of our audiences. As audiences seek to “find their people” and make meaningful connections, the event designer and strategist’s role will include reimagining networking and facilitating connections.

## The question for experience designers: How to design experiences that allow attendees to make meaningful connections?

### What We Heard

“You have to be okay with being uncomfortable and putting yourself out there – create conversations and camaraderie with people, hear other people’s points of view. We need to be more intentional about creating safe spaces to facilitate this and create a sense of community to enable it.”



Jessica Charles  
Vice President,  
Programming + Events  
Forbes

### What This Means for Experience Design

“At their core, audiences want to gather to consume content, they want to connect and network. Nothing replaces connection amongst our attendees; the real value in events comes from this aspect. One of the key reasons we invest in events is because of the value they deliver through the face-to-face experience.”



Stuart Frank  
Senior Director  
Strategic Experiences APAC  
Salesforce

### Emerging Themes:



#### Networked Communities

As people venture on journeys of self-discovery, they consider the multi-faceted aspects of their identity. This increases the many unique groups they can identify or find commonality with.



#### The Places That Make Us

The pandemic gave us a new appreciation for local connections, supply chains, resources, and insights. Organizations have found they can learn from local identities as opposed to imposing a central identity.



#### Discomfort + Delight

Exposure to different viewpoints and ideas are both the risk and reward when we explore beyond the confines of our comfort zones. Showing audiences how being open to new experiences benefits them in terms of innovation, cross applications, and new relationships, may get them excited to get out of their comfort zones.



#### Co-created Networks

Design ways for people to define and build their own communities and provide space for local, regional, or other identity groups to gather. Meaningful connections happen throughout an event, not just in dedicated networking spaces and activities, so consider how to use interstitial spaces to foster those connections.



#### Scales of Intimacy

This could mean smaller gatherings, messaging that incorporates local dialects and customs, or simply a more considered approach to how you present your content via technology.



#### Inclusive Invitations

Planners could incorporate psychological safety into their risk-management plans, offer social equity training so that staff can engage with all social identities in the case of conflict, and communicate clear boundaries for participants engaging in discussion.



## Truth 2: Architecting Choice

Engaging audiences as agents of experience.

This truth reflects audience desire to have agency over their experiences. At the same time, audiences are looking for support to make clear and informed choices. For experience creators, this represents a shift away from controlling defined outcomes toward a new role as curators of choice, and agents in shaping experience.

## The question for experience designers: What's the right amount of choice at this moment?

### What We Heard

"There's a really fine balance between assumptions and curiosity when you're designing events because there's challenge and risk in giving all the authority to the audience. It's important to find the middle ground between your own assumptions, which are beyond the data bias, and keeping the curiosity alive in your audience."



Sarah Adeel  
Senior Manager  
Inclusion, Diversity + Equity  
Amazon

### What This Means for Experience Design

"People are becoming more accepting of having diverse choices. People appreciate having the optionality to choose. Especially with in-person event experiences, people are looking for more elevated aspects that make it worth their time."



Amanda Ma  
Founder + CEO  
Innovate Marketing Group

### Emerging Themes:



#### Choice

Bring your audience into the design process in a way that they can help you identify those key points and those key places where choice is necessary and really meaningful to them. It's important to bring your audience into the mix because the appetite and need for choice varies regionally around the world.



#### Charting Pathways

As designers, we often design around solving our own problems rather than the problems of the audience. Integrate your audience into the process of charting pathways, scouting ideas, and verifying journeys.



#### Accommodating Change

People's opinions and needs shift and change, so we need to offer flexibility. It's about designing a journey in which people can try one option, try another option, and come back and re-experience a flow depending on a new perspective or need.

### Tools and Takeaways:



#### The Role of Architect

Architecting journeys that are diverse and provide flexibility without overwhelm requires that we consider wayfinding and communication to guide the process of exploration and discovery.



#### The Role of Audience

Think about how the audience plays into the process of design and the valuable feedback that they can offer you at the right points along that path. Tools such as audience personas can create distinct, personalized pathways to design around.



#### Setting the Space for Success

For neurodivergent audiences, The Neu Project ([theneuproject.com](http://theneuproject.com)) suggests allocating recovery spaces like quiet rooms, creating zones where socializing or interacting is not expected, or setting up more intimate options for networking.



## Truth 3: Designing Belonging

A new strategic goal and driver of intentional design.

Belonging has emerged as such a pervasive truth that it underpins the majority of the new principles in design shared in this report. Belonging has turned up as a mission and as a measurement, and it is central to the meaning and even magic of the experiences we create.

The question for experience designers:

## How might we design journeys that facilitate belonging for everyone?

### What We Heard

“Creating a welcoming, belonging, inclusive place is difficult, but at the end of the day, we’re still human. Attendees want to know you care about them. They want to know you’re going to help them get their needs met and guide them in a way that helps them find value.”



Janet Sperstad  
Faculty Director  
Madison Area Technical College

### What This Means for Experience Design

“Realizing that everyone is human creates a larger sense of empathy in people. The experience of trauma from the pandemic almost mandated that we all find our communities and get in touch with empathy; it is increasingly important to seek intersectionality and connect with others to break patterns of exclusion.”



Karen Robinovitz  
Co-founder  
Sloomoo

### Emerging Themes:



#### Defining Belonging

Belonging stops us from reducing DEI to simple metrics by requiring that we examine the extent to which these practices produce meaningful results.



#### Authentic Dialogue

People want to know that you care and that they matter and their needs are considered. But it needs to go one step further than that. The audience needs to be willing to share what belonging means to them, and we must be willing to listen and hear the opinions of others without judgment.



#### Reflection + Awareness

There is a mindful awareness of Belonging as a noble pursuit at both an organizational and individual level. Recognizing that belonging means something different for everyone, practices and frameworks are emerging to support the process of inquiry and understanding.

### Tools and Takeaways:



#### Begin With Dialogue

Engage your audience in dialogue at the beginning of the design process, using quizzes, focus groups, or interview conversations to understand varied preferences and needs.



#### Make Space for Authenticity

In the shorter term organizations will continue to utilize spaces for authentic presence and unfiltered conversations that are peer supported and led. We’ll see these content-free spaces as cultural connectors.



#### Be Curious + Proactive

Be deeply curious when considering people with disabilities and non-typical conditions and test what it could mean to accommodate these needs.



## Truth 4: The Value of Values

The ROI criteria to produce audience participation.

Audiences are looking for experiences that provide value beyond the dollar, and design choices like sustainability, venue selection, diversity, hybrid channels, communities, time, and uniqueness are all elements that make up the value of an investment for our audiences.

## The question for experience designers: How might we adjust our communication to convey all the values an experience provides?

### What We Heard

“People are much more disciplined and focused on how they will spend their time, and they’re invested in getting the best experience for themselves. We want to maximize that investment for our attendees, clients, and partners as much as possible.”



David Peckinpugh  
President + CEO  
Maritz Holdings

### What This Means for Experience Design

“The awareness of how valuable people are, from companies to events and audiences, that’s what matters. Knowledge can be transferred in lots of different ways, but relationships are forged in person.”



Anna Abdelnoor  
Co-founder + CEO  
Isla

### Emerging Themes:



#### Needs + Values

There is an empowerment and even a sense of urgency about how experiences represent values-based advocacy. Audiences are asking how experiences are designed to meet their needs and the needs of society.



#### Actions + Activism

People like to know they are ethically aligned to the brands they consume and interact with. The activist consumer uses their buying power and their social networks to influence issues – aka impact – at a grassroots level.



#### Time + Community

The ways in which individuals assess the value of experiences has changed. Time and community connection are top of mind when our audiences make choices about investment of their energy and personal resources.

### Tools and Takeaways:



#### Knowing What Matters

Having a system in place that can identify what is important to your audience can help you get the right stories to the right people quickly to capture their attention.



#### Showing You Care

Ensure that you are pointing to real-life examples of how your organization and your event lives your values by highlighting partnerships or employee volunteerism.



#### New Value Propositions

Distinct offerings continue to be needed to meet audience values. For the time-conscious, the virtual-hybrid experience will remain essential in order to be connected to their communities wherever they are. Articulate value propositions that address time, community access, and demonstrate the ROI for the audience in terms of advocacy.



## Truth 5: Emotional Data

Assessing the feelings that generate behavior and action.

This truth reflects the considerable shift in how business regards emotion. Once something that was seen to limit sound logic, emotions are now seen as a key to driving loyalty and important decision making. For experience designers and strategists, there is much to be discovered about how we make use of this data, measure it consistently, when, where, and how it is collected, and what we can glean from its analysis.

The question for experience designers:

## How can we best assess the emotional state of our participants?

### What We Heard

"Most surveys do not measure how people feel. Rather, they measure how people feel about the choices you gave them, resulting in inherent confirmation bias."



Chris Laping  
Author of *People Before Things*

### What This Means for Experience Design

"It doesn't stop at measurement: We must use the data we collect to inform our practice. How are we creating and delivering events that use emotional data to improve our audience experience?"



Jessica Charles  
Vice President,  
Programming + Events  
Forbes

### Emerging Themes:



#### Emotions Mean Business

It's not emotion or business, it's emotion and business. Ultimately, emotional data is a new and emerging form of data that can help us better gauge and predict what returns might be.



#### Measurement Systems

Experience creators are leaning in to measuring sentiment, often one step removed from quantitative assessment, through use of keywords and emojis.



#### Time + Community

Finding new, more strategic ways to return data to the audience, clarifying how and what it is used for, and making people comfortable with sharing emotional states are the way to move forward.



#### It's Still ROI

At the Google Xi Days event, the ROE (Return on Emotion) survey was conducted on the final day and measured via numeric scale how the attendees felt about five key emotions: hopeful, adventurous, accepted, active, and motivated. This approach provides an alternate metric to NPS (Net Promoter Score — i.e., how likely would you be to recommend this event?).



#### No More Post Event Surveys

At Xi Days, Meeting Pulse used sentiment polling at every activation, which employed a quick and simple system of emojis and keywords to collect responses.



#### Curiosity, Comfort and Confidence

Audience segmentation tools use personalization to create dialogue. Using these tools pre-event as a vehicle for experience design demonstrates how the emotional data collected has been used to create better experiences for the audience.





## Truth 6: The Power of Play

Infusing cultures of  
collaboration and innovation.

This truth is a compelling design mindset that benefits wellness, creativity, and productivity. Play connects function and experience, helps to catalyze content, build teams, define cultures, introduce new ideas, synthesize learnings, and spark joy. Audiences want to get hands-on and be free to tinker as they make sense of new concepts. Designers will create play-first spaces that celebrate testing and experimentation.

## The question for experience designers: How can we design spaces where play and joy can thrive?

### What We Heard

“Storytelling and narrative is the way we make sense of the world, and that’s one key way that we can help people make sense of all these multiple tools. Breaking something apart and putting it back together — that’s a shortcut for understanding and making sense of it. Play is interesting, because it solves many of its own problems — we put the parts together, blow them up, and put them back together in new ways.”



Ryan Howard  
Technical Program Manager  
Experience Design  
Google

### What This Means for Experience Design

“Play is a lifestyle, it doesn’t have to be necessarily chess or sports, it’s a mindset. Infusing play into events, whatever that looks like, has to be fundamental. It can’t be a luxury or something that we do occasionally, it has to be infused into the fabric of the experience.”



Zach Fisher  
Founder  
Kinflow

### Emerging Themes:



#### Play and Productivity

We can drive experience and technology forward by creating a new playscape process — one that supports creativity through play, mindfulness, and imagination.



#### Unprogrammed Play

When playing, people leave their ego at the door, which allows them to get radical and creative. Play should not be confused with games, however. Competition changes the nature of play and produces the opposite of innovation, experimentation, and collaboration.



#### New Tools for Collaboration

One of the major tools that has emerged for us to experiment with in terms of play is AI. Developments in AI are opening new avenues for experimenting and playing with new tech tools that can facilitate communication and connection.

### Tools and Takeaways:



#### Play Place-Making

Creating dedicated spaces that are flexible and without too many rules will encourage play. Create unstructured play, instead of competition, so people can lean into the moment and feel free to experiment.



#### Positive Resonance

Those who have seen the effect of having shelter dogs available for petting and adoption at a space at an event see that the act of play can benefit everyone, including observers, not just the individual at play.



#### AI, a Creative Co-Pilot

Carve out a role for AI on your team, or find a space for AI to play with your meeting participants, and for them to play with it — celebrate the messy and the authentic product as a co-created art piece.