

Not another trends report!

creating the
unskippable



An
Experiential
Playbook
for 2026

by **verve**

THE ERA OF SKIP *has arrived*

People are allergic to interruption.

We live in a world where almost *a billion people* use ad blockers and *as many as 40%+ of internet users* filter out ads by default. (B2.ai).

Younger audiences are even more ruthless: over half of Gen Z say social content from creators is more relevant than TV shows and movies, and they spend 54% more time on social platforms than the average consumer (Deloitte).

In other words: attention isn't guaranteed. It's negotiable. And it's increasingly being rationed, or worse, withheld.

You can skip a pre-roll.

You can scroll past a post.

You can mute a brand.

But you can't skip a moment you've chosen to step into. That's why experiential is no longer the garnish of a marketing campaign. It's the last unskippable frontier, the only channel where attention is a conscious, physical decision.

The Problem?

Most "brand experiences" still feel like set-decorated sales promotions: generic, passive, and obsessed with the brand, not the human being standing in front of it.

2026 is the year experiential has to grow up.

From stunts to systems.

From entertainment to fulfilment.

From impressions to impact.

This shift needs a Playbook, a practical, opinionated guide that shows teams how to design experiences that earn attention, serve real human need-states, drive measurable business outcomes, and scale beyond one-off moments into repeatable brand advantage.





“

**You can
skip an
ad. You
can't skip
a feeling.**

”

verve

EVERY

THING

is changing

EVERY

WHERE

for EVERY

ONE

As AI accelerates content and synthetic interaction,
human presence becomes scarcer and more valuable.
Experiential isn't competing with AI, it's the antidote.

Across markets, the fracture line is clear. People are done being spoken at. Brands that still broadcast instead of invite are fading into noise.

This isn't a trend. It's a reset. What's really changing beneath the surface.

1° 

Heightened Reality

Audiences now expect experiences to feel cinematic, not static.

The consequence:

If it still looks like a booth, stage, or showroom, it will feel dated and skippable. Spectacle is no longer impressive; it's the minimum.

2° 

Creator-Led Discovery

Gen Z and millennials increasingly trust creators, not studios, to shape culture.

The consequence:

Experiences without creator POV feel controlled and tone-deaf. Brands that don't co-create will always feel like outsiders.

3° 

Fandom as a Commercial Engine

Fandom now drives conversion, not just awareness.

The consequence:

Brands that treat fandom as media rather than an economic force leave serious value on the table. Passion beats paid reach.

4° 

Participation Beats Exposure

The most effective experiences are useful, not performative.

The consequence:

If people can't actively shape what happens, they won't remember it or advocate for it. Passive audiences don't convert.

5° 

Blended Realities

Physical and digital are no longer channels. They are one system.

The consequence:

Siloed IRL and digital experiences create friction where audiences expect flow. Trust erodes fast.

6° 

Purpose with Proof

Values must show up live and be tested in public.

The consequence:

Purpose without participation reads as performance. Underneath it all, people only give time to what feels real.

Underneath all this is one simple human truth; **People will only give time to experiences that fulfil something real for them.**

experiences *as fulfilmment*

The “experience economy” isn’t a buzzword; it’s where the money is going. [McKinsey finds](#) over half of Gen Z travellers now splurge on experiences rather than possessions, and even middle-income consumers prioritise travel, dining and events when they have something to spare.



The bar has moved.

It's no longer enough to entertain people for an afternoon.

Experiences have to do something for them.

Here at Verve, we see three universal need-states:

Emotional Needs

Belonging,
identity,
joy, escapism,
pride, calm.

Functional Needs

Learning, clarity,
problem-solving,
ease.

Social Needs

Status,
connection,
recognition,
cultural relevance.



If an experience doesn't meet at least one of these needs, it's background noise

“Don't meet the need, prepare to be skipped.”

CODIFYING THE

unskipp -able

Most agencies still treat experiential as a craft you “*feel out*”. In 2026, that approach is indefensible.

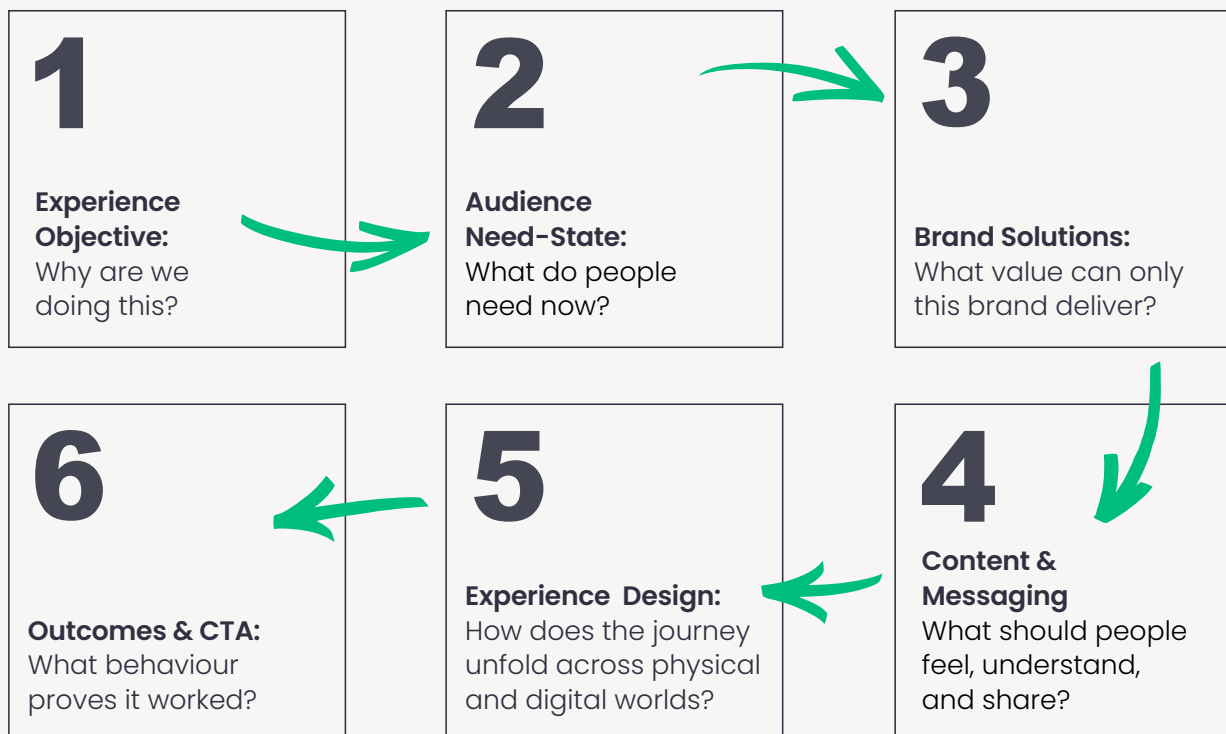
That’s why we developed *The Feels Formula*.

It codifies what makes an experience unskippable: the mechanics of emotion, immersion and meaning that turn moments into memory and memory into action. It replaces guesswork with repeatable logic grounded in human behaviour and commercial truth, giving teams a shared standard to design against, evaluate ideas, and defend decisions with confidence.

The Formula starts where most experiences fail, not with ideas, but with intent. It decodes how people want to feel and what they need in that moment, then aligns that truth with brand value and behavioural design.

The result is experiential as a system, not a stunt: work that creates connection, drives value, and delivers experiences people willingly step into, and businesses can justify.

The Feels Formula connects six non-negotiable elements:



= Think of it as an experiential operating system: not a constraint on creativity, but its focus, *discipline*, and *consequence*.

Start with the Business Outcome

Too many experiences begin with "Wouldn't it be cool if...?" The result is viral-looking content with little commercial impact.

Verve starts elsewhere: what must this experience deliver for the business? Fame, trial, sign-ups, retention? Clear objectives don't limit creativity. They sharpen it, simplify decisions and enable measurement.

Build for Humans, Not Brands

Ask most brands who an experience is for and you'll hear demographics, not people.

The real question is: what emotional, functional or social need does the audience arrive with?

At Smirnoff's Collective Stage, the need wasn't another party, it was to feel seen and included. Accessibility wasn't messaging; it was design. When you define the need-state, creativity becomes focused empathy, not guesswork

Create Value, Not Just Features

Your product may drive the P&L. It's not the hero of someone's weekend.

Brand solutions answer one question: what can this brand help people do, feel or become? Think solutions, not features, and experiences become useful, not just entertaining.



Design for emotion and participation, and behaviour will follow.



Script the Feeling, Not the Slogan

Every experience communicates, planned or not. The Feels Formula asks three things upfront:

What should people feel?

What should they understand?

What story will they share?

Design the story people want to tell, and sharing takes care of itself.

Crafting the Unskippable

This is where strategy becomes sensory. Experience design isn't about size or spend; it's about choreographing an inevitable, unforgettable journey. Think, meaningful theatre, full immersion, creator & influencer led, gamification, the merging of realities.

Behaviour is the New Vanity Metric

By 2026, "great vibes" won't be enough. Outcomes must be defined from day one:

What do people do during the experience?

What do they do after?

What does success look like at 30, 90, 180 days?

Experiential isn't a party. It's a performance channel.

If it doesn't move behaviour, it's just décor.

from **ideas** to *decisions*

We created this Playbook, not as inspiration, but as a filter, something to use to decide whether an idea deserves to exist at all. It is most useful at the moments where things usually go wrong: when ambition outpaces clarity, when spectacle replaces purpose, when “interesting” is mistaken for “effective”.

**The Feels Formula changes three things fundamentally:
how you brief, how you decide, and how you define success.**

1

It Changes the Brief

From “What should we build?” to “What must this experience do?” If you can’t articulate the experience objective in business terms, don’t brief it. If you can’t name the human need-state the audience arrives with, don’t design for them. **If the brand’s role could be played by anyone else, it isn’t a brand experience, it’s decoration.**

The brief is no longer a shopping list of deliverables. It becomes a set of constraints that protect the work from irrelevance.

2

It Changes Decision-Making

From taste and instinct to cause and effect. If the idea doesn’t create a feeling that maps to a behaviour, it’s just entertainment. **If participation is optional rather than intrinsic, the experience will be ignored.** If the journey doesn’t work without staff explaining it, the design has failed.

This framework exists to make decisions harder to argue with, because they’re rooted in human logic, not personal preference.

3

It Changes Success Criteria

From outputs to outcomes. If you can’t define the behavioural shift, don’t fund it. **If success is measured only in content, impressions, or footfall, it’s not experiential.** If the experience ends when the moment ends, the value was never designed in.

Success is not what people saw. It’s what they did *differently* afterwards.

The Rule That Sits Under Everything

“ If it doesn’t fulfil something real for the person inside it, it will never deliver anything meaningful for the brand behind it. ”

Experiential marketing isn't about bigger builds, louder moments or more technology. That arms race is already lost.

What separates experiences people enter from those they ignore is intent, design and discipline. The strongest brand experiences behave less like events and more like worlds: purposeful journeys that reward curiosity, invite participation and leave a lasting imprint

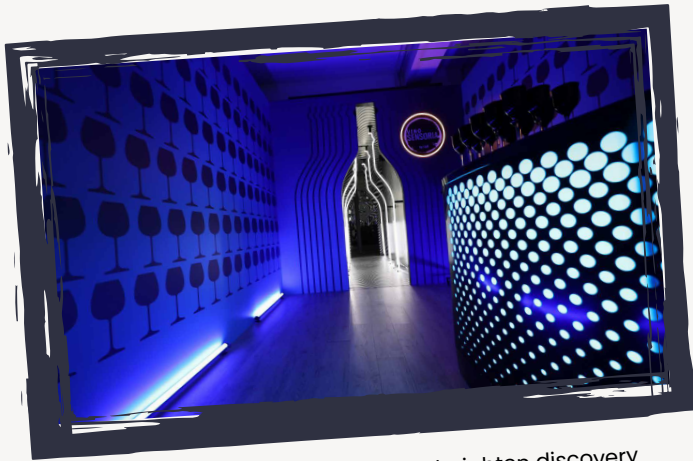
These principles aren't trends. They're foundations for earning attention, building memory and turning presence into meaning. Apply them properly and you create culture.

Sensory Storytelling

Screens trained brands to think in 2D. Real life is 5D. Sensory design pulls people into presence: scent to signal mood and transition, tactile moments that trigger memory, soundscapes that follow narrative arcs, taste as reward. Design for the senses and you design for memory.



Range Rover House, a guided whiskey tasting shaped by aroma, texture, and time



Lidl Vino Sensorio, removing sight to heighten discovery

Create Theatres of Discovery

Humans are wired for story, tension and release, yet most brand experiences are flat from entry to exit. Meaningful showmanship uses dramaturgy: a clear transition into the brand world, rising discovery through zones and reveals, a sensory or emotional peak, then a reflective space where the CTA lives. Design it like a film, not a showroom.



Discover TikTok Shop, creators co-authoring the future of social commerce

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Glenveagh North Portal, a Santa experience designed around play and participation

Gamification with Purpose

Most gamification is shallow. Points and prizes are the surface layer. Real impact comes from behaviour design: progression systems, co-operative quests, real-world actions as gameplay inputs, and digital passports to track progress. Done properly, gamification guides people towards what matters.

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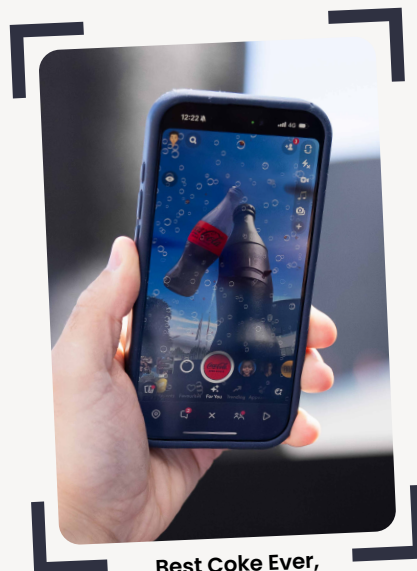
Rhinestone Ranch, where theme becomes identity

Fandom Activation

Fandoms aren't demographics; they're cultures with rituals and status. Winning brands don't target fans, they host them. Strong fandom activation creates shared rituals, encourages self-expression, and rewards superfans with recognition and access. You're not engaging a segment. You're building a culture.

Blended Realities

For younger audiences, digital and physical are one environment. Blended realities use digital before arrival, technology in-space to add depth, and digital layers after to extend the relationship. One rule: don't duplicate. Extend.



Best Coke Ever, where physical moments extend into augmented reality

Purpose with Teeth

Every brand talks about purpose. Few prove it. Purpose with teeth means action: repair bars over slogans, workshops over exhibitions, confronting issues instead of avoiding them. The test is simple, if it doesn't change what people can do, it doesn't count.



Smirnoff Stage, haptic suits enabling deaf and hard of hearing audiences to feel the music

CMOs *keep score*, so should we.

Engagement:

Footfall and reach, Dwell time
by zone, Interaction rates,
Repeat visitation.



Conversion and Commerce:

Sample-to-sale ratios, On-site sales
& upsell, Lead capture & qualification,
Pipeline and revenue attribution.



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It's part

Experiential is no longer the wild west.

Reports like AnyRoad's *State of Experiential Marketing 2024* show that 90% of marketers now see experiential as critical for brand growth, with the majority using it to build loyalty not just awareness. (anyroad.com)

But to unlock serious budgets, you need to talk about metrics CMOs actually care about. And to do that you need a scorecard where the metrics really count.

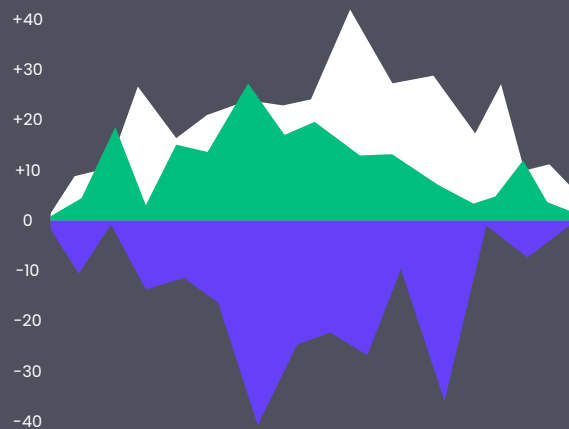
Brand Impact:

NPS and satisfaction scores, Favourability & trust shifts, Message recall & "brand meaning" metrics.



Amplification:

Volume and quality of UGC, Creator content reach, Shares, saves, comments, Community growth after the event.



Measurement
postmortem.
of the design.”



the **experie** OS

1

Start with
needs, not
novelty.

No tech for
tech's sake.
No builds
for awards
alone.

2

Solve
something
real.

Emotional,
functional,
or social
ideally
two out of
three.

3

Make
creators
and fans
co-authors.

Don't rent
their reach.
Share the
pen.

4

Orchestrate
sensory
arcs, not
random
wow-
moments.

Think
journey, not
Instagram
wall.

essential

Print it. Pin it.
**Build
against**

5

Use digital to deepen and extend

Before, during and after, one story, many touchpoints.

6

Embed conversion invisibly.

Make the easiest path also the most valuable one.

7

Measure everything that matters.

Design for the data you want, don't beg for it later.

The last **unskippable** *frontier*

We started with a simple truth: people are allergic to interruption. They scroll, mute and filter anything that doesn't earn its place. But they'll always step into something that feels worth their time. That's the power, and responsibility, of experiential.

The rules have been rewritten. Consumers aren't waiting to be spoken to; they move towards what moves them. In a world built for skipping, the brands that win are the ones bold enough to create moments people choose to enter.

And in that shift lies our opportunity. Experiential is the last corner of culture where brands can still earn genuine attention, and that's why we have set ourselves a mandate for 2026 (& beyond) to make the work that people lean into, not look past.

verve
unskippable
by design
