



# EXPERIENTIAL

I N T H E A G E O F C O V I D A N D B E Y O N D

**FALL, 2020**

# What's This?

It's Relevent's **thinking about the pandemic**, and what it means for **experiential marketing** right now and into the future.

There's a lot going on, to say the least, but we'll keep it brief: **three key insights and three tactical applications** to help marketers think about the future of our craft.

Our goal is to **better orient ourselves and our clients** in this disorienting time, so that we can successfully navigate this storm and the new landscapes that will follow it.

If anything within sparks questions or ideas, **please reach out at [info@relevent.com](mailto:info@relevent.com)**.

# Superpower Turned Kryptonite



Traditionally, experiential marketing has had the extraordinary capability to deliver deep and lasting connections between consumers and brands.

We built those connections by bringing people together around physical spaces and journeys that communicated brand values.

But now, that very act of gathering people has become a recipe for public health disaster.

It would be easy to say that “experiential is dead.”

The truth, however, is that COVID has not killed experiential. Instead, as with many other facets of our society, COVID has accelerated already-shifting consumer behaviors and trends.

The immediate challenge before us is how to rapidly adapt experiential marketing to this moment, recapturing the unique power of the medium for our clients.

But the bigger challenge is to understand how the pandemic will alter our society in the longer term - beyond the arrival of a vaccine - and to match the acceleration of that change so that our clients' brands can stay relevant to consumers as they continue participating in the historic cultural shifts we're all apart of now.

# INSIGHTS

# COVID is Fracking Society

Masks, distancing, hand washing - the pandemic has created some immediate, tangible and unprecedented changes in how we live.

But these are by-and-large short-term inconveniences. They can be overcome currently with products, policy and logistics - and in the near future (hopefully) by a vaccine.

The changes with longer-term ramifications are different. These are not new changes, caused by the pandemic.

Instead, they are seams in our culture that were already there and slowly emerging - but the pandemic has served as a kind of cultural fracking, injecting them with pressure and splitting them wide open almost overnight.

The following are three COVID-fracked cultural trends we believe are critical to the future of experiential marketing.



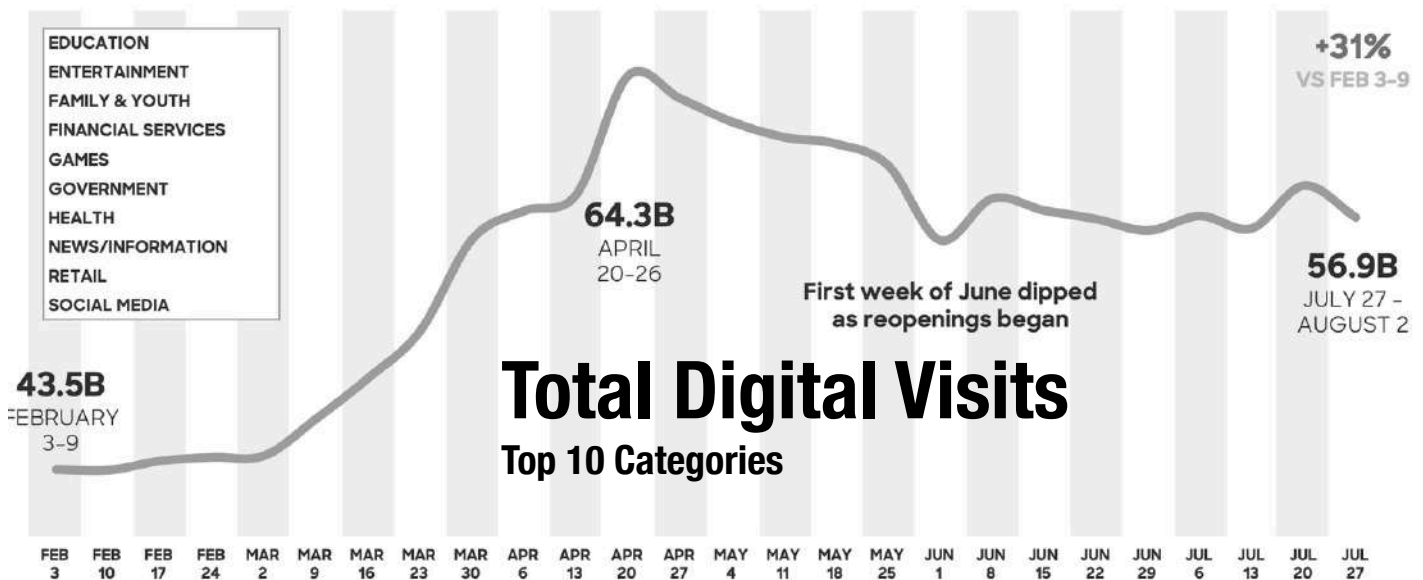
# Insight #1 // Digital Deluge

## WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Along with baking bread, Americans have spent the pandemic consuming a ludicrous amount of streams, feeds, emails, video calls and video games.

Since February, Internet consumption is up a whopping 31% in the United States. E-commerce as a share of overall retail is up 50%. Twitch traffic has doubled. Zoom has gone from unknown to ubiquitous in less than a year.

**While the pandemic will eventually end, many of our new digital behaviors will remain.**

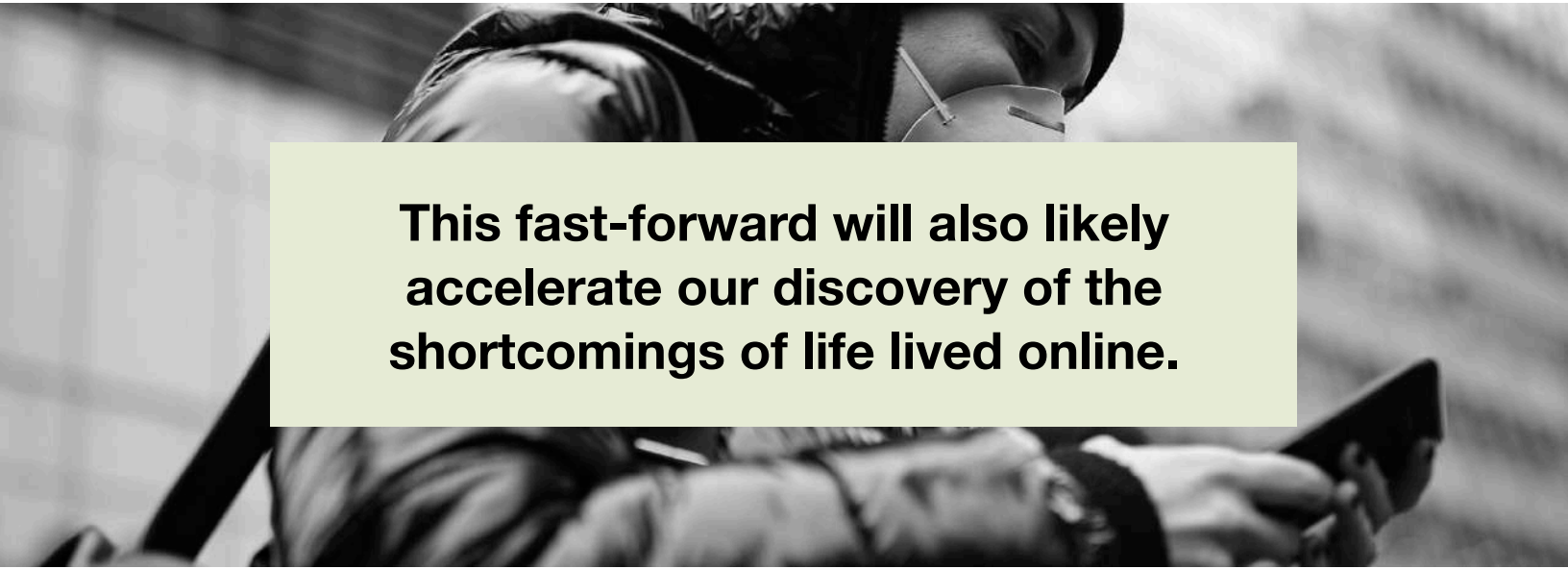


With limited places to go and fewer things to do, we are glued to our screens, conducting more and more of our lives through digital channels.

But while the pandemic will eventually end, many of these behaviors will remain. And we will find ourselves on the other side of a massive fast-forwarding of the transition to more-things digital. What was once expected to take decades will have happened in months.

# Insight #1 // Digital Deluge

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?



**This fast-forward will also likely accelerate our discovery of the shortcomings of life lived online.**

The impact of this digital fast-forward will be enormous for almost every sector of society and business.

From accelerating the “retail apocalypse,” to changing the way we think about business travel, to setting new expectations of online presence for every institution we interact with – the post-pandemic world will be vastly more digital.

But, crucially, this fast-forward will also likely accelerate our discovery of the shortcomings in life lived online. We already know:

- When everyone buys everything online, local mom-and-pops suffer - and the community loses its anchors.
- When everyone has meetings via video, much is lost in the communication of body language, cross talk and side conversation.
- When friends only see each other on social media, they receive sanitized versions of one another’s lives.

As we have known since its inception, the Internet is an incredible machine for delivering convenience. But that convenience is not without cost to the richness of life.

That will be as true after the pandemic as it was before.

# Insight #1 // Digital Deluge

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EXPERIENTIAL?

**While everyone is scrambling to up their digital game, remember that the real-world can be your secret weapon.**

A digital connection is not the same as a real-world connection. How could it be? There is no eye-to-eye contact on the Internet.

A digital experience is not the same as real-world experience. How could it be? It engages only two of the five senses.

A digital place is not the same as a real-world place. How could it be? It exists in only two dimensions.

In a world awash in shallow digital interactions, a touch of the real and its inherent depth can be extremely powerful. Combining the emotional power of real with the broad reach of digital is the magic formula to unlock.



# Insight #2 // WFH 4EVER

## WHAT'S HAPPENING?



An estimated

**two-thirds**

of Americans have been working from home during the pandemic -*concentrated around knowledge-based sectors.*

The trend isn't new - prior to the pandemic,

**~30%**

of college-educated employees reported working from home at least some of the time.

And some will certainly return to the office in whole or part at some point.

**But many will not.**

Yes, employees like the flexibility of work from home. But, more importantly, many businesses will have realized they can produce the same output without the high cost of the office.

That big bottom-line savings will drive WFH to permanent status for a lot of workers. Expect this to start in the tech sector and filter to everywhere (like "casual wear in the office" did 20 years ago).

# Insight #2 // WFH 4EVER

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

### ***Big City Flight***

There have been a number of news stories speculating that the pandemic will mean an “end of big cities” - claiming that people are fleeing for more space and safety elsewhere. For the most part, that’s not true. New York and San Francisco have seen a spike in departures. But overall, most people have stayed put thus far.

While COVID may not have altered cities dramatically, work-from-home lifestyles could. More WFH workplaces will mean more choice for employees who no longer need to worry about proximity to the office. Work for a company based in NYC or LA, but live in Nashville or the Hudson Valley or Sedona. Heck, live in your van and travel the country. All you need is an Internet connection.

WFH may drive a shift away from concentrations of taste-making knowledge workers in a few urban cores - and could drive a boom for both suburban areas and second-tier cities.

**While COVID may not have altered cities dramatically, WFH lifestyles could.**



### ***Local Focus***

The pandemic has triggered a lot of local love. About 55% of consumers say the pandemic has led them to feel more unity with their community, and almost three-quarters want to support local businesses more.

With many employees continuing to work from home - no longer commuting into the city for the bulk of the day - their focus and energy may gravitate to where they live.

And with that newfound focus - and the flexible schedules WFH allows - expect more people to get more involved in activities in and around their homes: from local businesses, to hobbies, to volunteer work and local government.

# Insight #2 // WFH 4EVER

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EXPERIENTIAL?

### **The future of experiential is distributed.**

We need a wholesale rethink of experiential campaigns, where they happen and the value they provide to consumers.

Big cities will always have a role to play in experiential because of the large physical audiences they aggregate, but we need to start thinking about expanding the lens to a variety of customized experiences that happen in many places - both large and small.

Those more-distributed experiences should also aim to become authentically involved in the communities that customers increasingly care about. As they shift their attention to their new hometowns, we should, too.

*See our focus on Distributed Experiences on page 20.*

# Insight #3 // Hope Wanted

## WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Not gonna sugar coat it ... things aren't great out there. A quick catch-up on current events:

A global pandemic has triggered a global recession. In the US, hundreds of thousands are dead and millions are unemployed as entire industries have been put on hold to stem the spread.

The nation's cities and towns are frequently the scene of large-scale protests demanding an end to systemic racial injustice and calling for structural change to policing and government.

Most of the west coast is on fire and there are so many hurricanes devastating the Gulf Coast and eastern seaboard that meteorologists have cycled through the entire alphabet naming storms.

Disinformation campaigns flood social media, creating distrust in institutions, while algorithmic recommendation engines serve increasingly inflammatory content to viewers, pushing our national political discourse to previously unimaginable extremes.

Meanwhile, government at all levels appears too paralyzed by partisanship to do anything about any of it.

**About 70% of Americans believe the country is on the wrong track.**

**2020 has not been an easy year.**



# Insight #3 // Hope Wanted

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

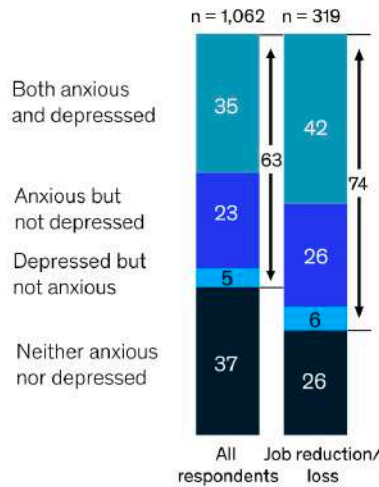
For most Americans, this historically chaotic time has meant uncertainty and fear.

A McKinsey report finds that **63% have reported recently feeling anxious or depressed.**

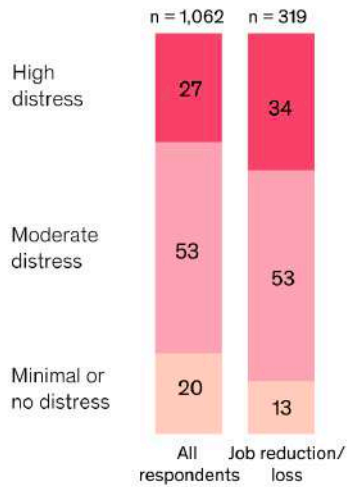
**80% have reported feeling high or moderate levels of distress.**

Among people who have lost jobs during the pandemic, the numbers are even higher.

Respondents reporting feeling anxious or depressed in past week  
% of respondents



Respondents' reported level of distress related to COVID-19  
% of respondents



**“Doomscrolling” has entered the lexicon** - binge-watching a constant stream of updates about the world’s descent into crises (often, unhelpfully, just before bed).

Many seek out glimmers of normalcy, safety and reassurance - trying to find new narratives that provide hope for the future.

# Insight #3 // Hope Wanted

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EXPERIENTIAL?

### **First, do no harm. Read the room.**

There's a recession and large-scale unemployment – so the time may not be right to play up excess.

Similarly, people are stressed and scared – so it's also probably not the right moment for a stunt designed to frighten. Instead, we should be focused on offering experiences that provide comfort and bring people together (figuratively - or literally, if done with proper safety precautions).

Second, return to experiential's roots as a marketing medium for prototyping the future.

People are crying out for hope and signs that human ingenuity can guide us through this difficult time.

### **So, let's give it to them!**

Let's create visions of a better world and invite consumers to step into those visions with us. Every experiential activation is an opportunity to show people the ways - large and small - that life can and will be better.

# ACTIVATION FRAMEWORKS

***“Whosoever is delighted in solitude is  
either a wild beast or a god.”***

**ARISTOTLE**

Through this pandemic-induced experiment in varying degrees of forced solitude, most of us are learning that we are neither beasts nor gods.

**We are people.**

And people need people. We are social creatures.

Experiential marketing is based around bringing people together, immersing their senses in new ways, and giving them new stories to tell.

But how do we do that safely right now? And how do we build robust programs and platforms that are going to be relevant in a post-pandemic future that seems so uncertain?

In the following pages, we've shared our POV on two tactical approaches and a creative lens for approaching these unique challenges:

**APPROACH: DISTANCED EXPERIENCES**

What brands can do right now to safely create experiences that bring people together in the real world. We've done it and we have lessons to share.

**APPROACH: DISTRIBUTED EXPERIENCES**

How brands can activate in new ways to leverage the power of “the real” in an increasingly digital world. This approach is designed to work during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic world to come.

**CREATIVE LENS: STRATEGIC DISRUPTIVE EMPATHY**

Strategic disruption has always been core to who we are - and what great experiential marketing is about. But in a world discomfited by enormous amounts of change, it is critical to understand consumers evolving mindset and meet them where they are. While we must still fight and win the battle for attention, we should do so not through provocation and flash, but with steadiness, optimism and a spirit of reinvigorating assurance.



# Distanced Experiences

Until the pandemic is over, social distancing will be part of life. That doesn't mean we can't create great brand experiences that bring people together. For those experiences to be successful, they need to be developed with two things in mind:

## SAFETY

Safety is first, last and always. There is a moral imperative on the part of any brand or group bringing people together right now to ensure that activation does not lead to illness and contribute to the public health crisis. But there is also a business imperative: If it's not safe, many consumers aren't going to want to attend or stick around.

Creating a safe environment starts with understanding the regulations and guidance from public health officials about how people can gather - and then working with those constraints to make them an organic part of the experience (not an endless series of hurdles for consumers to overcome). Every touchpoint - from ticketing to signage to restrooms to contactless food delivery to spatial design and programming - must be rethought and optimized to create an environment that is effortlessly safe. When consumers feel safe, they will be all the more ready to engage with your brand.

**If it's not safe, many consumers aren't going to want to attend or stick around.**



# Distanced Experiences

**What, specifically, did consumers love about that experience? How did it make them feel? What utility did it provide? What stories did it create for them?**

## INSPIRATION NOT ITERATION

When faced with new challenges, it's human nature to fall back on what we've done before. But that approach may not be the right one in the pandemic.

Instead of trying to recreate the things we knew and loved before the pandemic - but with distancing! - we should start with a clean slate and ask: What, specifically, did consumers love about that experience? How did it make them feel? What utility did it provide? What stories did it create for them?

Once we've identified the answers to those questions, we can set about developing an experience that delivers those feelings, utility and stories - but perhaps in a vastly different way than usual.

For example: A brand interested in creating a pop-up store might sidestep creating a traditional store that's optimized for the pandemic with timed slots for participants. Instead, they might create a walkable outdoor branded environment where consumers peruse the goods while strolling booths, but then buy online and have product delivered to their home.

*A high school in New Hampshire reimaged graduation for the pandemic by partnering with a local ski mountain to conduct the ceremony via chairlift. This delivered on the traditional feelings of the day - specialness, community and student recognition - while keeping families spaced apart.*



# Distanced Experiences

## RELEVENT CASE STUDY: THE GREENS

### CHALLENGE

Howard Hughes Corporation owns and operates Pier 17 in Manhattan's storied South Street Seaport. Three years ago, the company created the Seaport Summer Concert Series – bringing big name acts to the newly created Pier 17 Rooftop. The concert series attracted upwards of 4,000 guests every weekend in the summers. But like all concerts and music festivals in the city, the pandemic forced it into hiatus for 2020.

Howard Hughes' challenge to us was: What do we do instead? And specifically, how can we create an experience that gives the Seaport and larger NYC communities a place to come together in the summer and feel revitalized after a very difficult spring?

### RESPONSE

We helped Howard Hughes develop and build The Greens – a unique gathering place at the Rooftop of Pier 17, custom-designed to offer New Yorkers a place to socialize and have fun, see and be seen, while still taking all necessary social-distancing precautions. The Greens features 28 “Mini Lawns” - private, designated, rentable spaces with grass, shade, chairs, coolers and solar-powered recharge stations. For guests that want a little more activity, there are grass courts to play a variety of lawn games - from bocci to ladderball. Food and drink are available through an app - with contactless delivery to your Mini Lawn. A full slate of summer programming - from music to movies to workouts - provide additional experiences for guests.



The Greens was designed to deliver the open and causal feeling of a park, blended with the premium service and amenities of a hotel pool cabana.

### RESULT

The Greens has been fully booked since opening this summer. It's drawn rave reviews on social media and widespread local and national news coverage for the Seaport and Pier 17, including mentions in the New York Times, Interior Design Magazine and ABC News. The New York Post called it “The New Hotspot of the Summer.”

# Distanced Experiences

**Distributed Experiences describes a world in which we start thinking more broadly about where and how brands activate; that we start pushing for brand experiences that happen outside the expected locations of major metros (NYC, LA, CHI, MIA, etc.) and large-scale events (Super Bowl, Coachella, SXSW, etc.).**

Activations in those places will always be a core of experiential because of their ability to aggregate audiences - but we believe the future can be broader, for three reasons:

## 1) GIVING DIGITAL CAMPAIGNS MORE SOUL

As described on page 7, digital marketing has incredible reach, but limited depth.

As the pandemic accelerates the proliferation of all things digital, including digital marketing, we anticipate brands will need to find new ways to differentiate from a tsunami of branded content and online experiences.

For example: Imagine Oscars or Superbowl or Holiday digital campaigns with experiential components that add depth - e.g. an Oscars campaign that mails thousands of “mystery boxes” to consumers who unpack a series of items as the event unfolds each of which tie into the telecast and the brand’s social presence - things that allow them to create their own sensory experience at home, like costumes, scents, food, etc.



**Experiential layers  
can help brands  
differentiate from a  
tsunami of branded  
content and online  
experiences.**



# Distanced Experiences



## 2) ADAPTATION TO NEW HOUSING PATTERNS

The pandemic is also accelerating adoption of the option to work-from-home. It won't be everyone and it won't happen immediately, but one result of more WFH will likely be more people spread out across more locations in the coming years.

Brands and agencies can respond by being more strategic in determining activation locations. In recent years, the focus has been on major metros and tentpole events - and that may still make sense for brands seeking to engage certain audiences. But widening the lens to suburbs, and secondary and tertiary cities will also pay dividends by connecting with consumers where they are. A side benefit to brands is that these locations traditionally don't host a lot of brand experiences and audiences may be more receptive and ready to engage than their urban neighbors.

## 3) CREATIVE OPPORTUNITY

The past decade has been one of significant growth for the experiential industry. But with that growth has come some creative stagnation. As more brands created pop-ups and mobile tours and festival activations in the same places, the disruptive value of those experiences decreased. They became expected, losing some of the unique quality that had been the calling card of great experiential marketing. By shifting our focus to new places, we create opportunities for new and creative ways to engage.



# Strategic Disruptive Empathy

**Strategic Disruptive Empathy is the lens we're applying to creative challenges going forward.**

We've always been about rooting creative in strategy, and we've built our reputation on disruptive experiences - zombies in the subway, flying-car fashion shows, and many more.

But the world has changed - and we're changing as well.

When two-thirds of Americans are reporting being anxious and depressed (see page 13), empathy needs to be a priority for every brand.

This starts by asking a simple question about any brand activation: "Will this activation make my consumer's life better?"

Going deeper, "better" can fall into two categories: Assist or Inspire.

An activation that Assists consumers makes their lives tangibly better in that moment. It solves a problem, makes them smile, provides respite from a troubled world.

An activation that Inspires consumers is one that gives them hope for the future. These activations could range from a stand-alone stunt that makes a statement about what's possible (think: RedBull Stratos), to a long-running platform that seeks to make broad societal change (think: Opt Outside) - or anything in between.

Whether assisting or inspiring, we're doing it with creative rigor, designing empathetic experiences that begin in the real world, but go on to drive content, conversation and coverage across all channels.

**This starts by asking a simple question about any brand activation:  
"Will it make my consumer's life better?"**





# THANK YOU

Relevant is an experiential partner that can help you meet this moment and build the future.

We'd love to talk about your next campaign.  
Reach out at [info@relevant.com](mailto:info@relevant.com).