

Practical guide: Plan an event or activation that pays back

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What makes an activation pay back

An activation is a live experience the audience takes part in: a stand, a pop-up, a launch, a customer gathering, a flagship installation. It pays back when what a visitor does changes what happens next, when you know who came, and when there is a plan for what they hear from you afterwards.

The money is moving this way. The IPA Bellwether report for the second quarter of 2026, published on 16 July, put events ahead of every other category of UK marketing spend. That was the second quarter running. More companies increased their events budget than cut it, by a margin of 11 percentage points. Confidence in their own prospects fell over the same period.

What it is not

It is not spectacle. Joseph Nunes and Wendy Heimann, writing in Harvard Business Review in July 2026, describe immersion as a state of mind that fails when designers put spectacle in its place. Production value is the easiest thing to buy and the first thing visitors forget.

It is not a footfall number. Reach and attention are different things. McKinsey found 83% of Gen Z and 79% of millennials using more than one medium at the same time while streaming. The same gap applies to anyone walking past your stand.



What live attention is now worth

McKinsey surveyed 997 UK consumers for Mind the attention gap, published on 12 December 2025. Live viewing, meaning sport, live music, amusement parks and cinema, earns 21% of UK media revenue from under 1% of the 274 billion hours people consume each year. Audio streaming takes 28% of the hours and returns 5% of the revenue. Four reasons that matters to a business planning one event this year.

Attention people chose is worth more

An hour someone booked, paid for and turned up to behaves differently from an hour of background scrolling. That gap is what a live event buys, and it is the reason the money per hour is so much higher.

Spending is moving with it

The global experiences market grew 2.6% a year from 2023 to 2025, against 0.8% for non-essential goods. Travel experiences grew 4.4%. Asked what they would do with an extra USD 200, about AED 735 at the pegged rate, 27% of consumers across five countries chose a holiday, the top answer in every age group.

Dubai takes a direct share of that

Some of the travel spending that consumers in London and Paris now prefer over goods is spent here. That is extra demand for anyone in hospitality, retail, destination marketing or events, and a reason to be disciplined about what gets built.

It keeps you in contact between purchases

Among established luxury customers, interest in brand-hosted gatherings reaches 40% in the US and 36% in China, and half of established US customers want cultural events from the brands they buy from. An event is one of the few reasons to contact a customer when there is nothing to sell.



The six questions every visitor asks

Nunes and Heimann set these out in Harvard Business Review in July 2026. Every visitor asks them in order, mostly without knowing it, and the experience fails at the first one that goes unanswered.

1. Where am I	Does the space explain itself in the first few seconds
2. Who am I with	Are the other people part of it, or in the way
3. What can I do	Does anything the visitor does change anything
4. What is happening	Is there a sequence they can follow
5. Am I making progress	Do they know they are getting somewhere
6. Why does this matter	Is there a reason to care after they leave

Question three is where the money goes

A screen you can touch that changes nothing. A choice with one outcome. An installation that runs the same whether or not anybody is standing in front of it. All three look like participation in the design drawings and produce none once built.

Question six is the one most teams cannot answer. If nobody can say in a sentence why a visitor should care the following week, more production will not supply it.



The decision check, and what it costs

The check, one hour, before design

List every decision a visitor can make. Not everything they can see or touch. Every point where they choose, and the choice has more than one outcome.

☐ Does the decision change anything?

☐ Can the visitor see that it changed something?

☐ Does it build on the decision before it?

Anything failing all three is decoration. Decoration is allowed, and it should be budgeted as decoration rather than as engagement. Then count what is left. A short list means the money is going into spectacle.

Cost per hour of attention

People ask what an activation should cost. That depends on venue, length, production standard and audience, and anyone quoting a figure without those is guessing. The better question is what an hour of real attention costs.

Estimate the visitors who will spend meaningful time in the experience, and how long. Multiply for hours of attention. Divide the full cost, including production, venue, staffing, content and promotion, by that figure. Then set it beside the same calculation for the rest of your media plan.

In most plans I see, the live event looks expensive per visitor and cheap per hour of attention, while paid social looks the opposite. That comparison on one page usually settles a budget conversation with a finance director.

What visitors remember has almost nothing to do with what the experience cost to build.



Actions before anything is built

01

Write the objective before the design

One sentence, agreed and written down, before an agency draws anything. Awareness, leads, existing customers, trade relationships, recruitment. Each produces a different event.

An objective agreed after the design is approved only describes what was already built.

02

List every decision the visitor makes

Ask the agency for this list rather than the visual. Every point where the visitor chooses and the choice has more than one outcome.

A long visual deck with a short decision list tells you where the budget is going.

03

Score each decision on the three tests

Changes something. Visible to them. Builds on the last one. Use the worksheet on page 9 and mark anything failing all three as decoration.

Do this before the design is finalised, when changes still cost nothing.

04

Budget decoration as decoration

Split the budget into two lines, participation and decoration, and let the split be visible to whoever signs it off.

Most briefs I review are 80% decoration presented as engagement. Naming it changes the conversation.

Actions before anything is built

05

Answer question six in one sentence

Why should a visitor care a week later. Write it, test it on somebody outside the project, and put it at the front of the brief.

If the sentence needs the sponsor's logo in it, it is not an answer.

06

Work out the cost per hour of attention

Visitors who will engage, multiplied by minutes each, gives hours. Full cost divided by hours gives the number. Put it next to the same figure for your paid media.

One page, two numbers, and the budget conversation changes shape.

07

Record who came, with consent

A named list with permission to contact them is the asset the event produces. Without it the whole cost lands in one day.

Decide before the build how the capture happens, and make it part of something the visitor wanted to do anyway.

08

Plan what they hear next

Three contacts over the following quarter, written before the event runs. Something useful, not a sales sequence.

An experience with no follow-up is a one-off cost. With a list attached it is the start of the retention work.

A worked example

A made-up business services firm with a stand at a Dubai trade exhibition. Three days, a budget of AED 320,000 all in. The figures are invented. The method is the one on page 5.

What the first brief contained

A double-height LED wall, a coffee bar, a prize draw for a headset, and a touchscreen showing the product range. The agency deck ran to 40 pages.

What the decision check found

Touch the screen to browse	Decoration
Enter the prize draw	Decoration
Take a coffee	Decoration
Answer three questions, get a costed comparison for your own business	Real

One real decision out of four, and it was the only one nobody had budgeted properly.

What changed

Budget moved: AED 120,000 out of the LED wall and into building the comparison tool and staffing it with two people who could talk through the result.

Question six answered: visitors left with a costed comparison for their own business, which is a reason to care the following week.

Capture: the comparison was emailed rather than printed, so consent came with something the visitor wanted.

The numbers

410 visitors spent an average of 9 minutes at the stand, giving about 62 hours of attention. AED 320,000 over 62 hours is roughly AED 5,160 an hour. The same quarter's paid social delivered attention at an estimated AED 11,400 an hour once multitasking was allowed for.

The asset: 287 named contacts with consent, and three planned contacts over the following quarter.



The one-page decision check

List every point where a visitor chooses and the choice has more than one outcome. Mark each test yes or no.
Anything failing all three is decoration.

DECISION THE VISITOR MAKES	CHANGES SOMETHING	THEY CAN SEE IT	BUILDS ON THE LAST	REAL OR DECORATION

WHY A VISITOR SHOULD CARE A WEEK LATER, IN ONE SENTENCE

BUDGET SPLIT: PARTICIPATION AND DECORATION

COST PER HOUR OF ATTENTION, OURS AND OUR PAID MEDIA

HOW WE CAPTURE THE AUDIENCE, AND THE THREE FOLLOW-UPS

9 · PLAN AN EVENT THAT PAYS BACK

Mistakes to avoid and sources to read

Six mistakes I see most often

- ☐ Approving a design before the objective is written down.
- ☐ Buying a screen the visitor can touch that changes nothing.
- ☐ Reporting footfall, which counts people walking past.
- ☐ No way of recording who came, so the cost lands in one day.
- ☐ No follow-up planned before the event runs, so none happens.
- ☐ Comparing the event with paid media on cost per visitor rather than cost per hour of attention.

What I learned at Expo 2020

As Director of Events and Entertainment I was responsible for 229 international events across 182 days and more than 3,000 venue bookings, on a site that received 24 million visits. Visitor memory had very little to do with budget. Some of the most expensive productions were forgotten by the exit. What stayed with people was doing something rather than watching something, seeing that it changed what happened next, and a reason to care that had nothing to do with a sponsor's logo.

Sources

McKinsey, Mind the attention gap: winning the battle for UK consumer attention, 12 December 2025, UK Consumer Attention Survey 2024, 997 respondents. McKinsey, State of the Consumer 2026, 22 June 2026. The Business of Fashion and McKinsey, The State of Fashion: Face to Face With Luxury Clients, June 2026. Joseph Nunes and Wendy Heimann, Why the Best Immersive Experiences Succeed, Harvard Business Review, July to August 2026. IPA Bellwether Report Q2 2026, 16 July 2026.

A note on the evidence

The attention survey was carried out in 2024 and covers the UK only. The revenue comparison mixes ticket income with advertising income, so it should not be pushed too far. The consumer survey covers Brazil, France, Germany, the UK and the US, with no UAE figure, and the Gulf reading is my own. Every case in the Harvard Business Review article is a commercial success, and its largest figure probably owes more to the brand involved than to the design method.

Related reading

On ataylorcmo.com, under Insights: experiential marketing that pays back. Case studies: Expo 2020, Dubai New Year's Eve, The Dubai Mall. Related guides: Keep your customers, and Measure your marketing, at ataylorcmo.com/guides.



Conclusion

One written objective, a list of every decision the visitor gets to make, three tests against each, decoration budgeted as decoration, and one sentence explaining why anybody should care a week later. An hour of work, before the design is finalised.

Then measure the cost of an hour of attention, record who came, and plan what they hear next. Those three turn a day into an asset.

Next step

I offer a 30 minute discovery call at no charge. Send the brief and I will run the decision check on it beforehand.

Book at ataylorcmo.com, or write to adam@ataylorcmo.com.



Adam Taylor

MSc, FCIM, CDMP. A marketing leader with more than 20 years of international experience driving growth, market expansion and competitive positioning across luxury retail, real estate, free zones, automotive and mega-events.

I work as a fractional chief marketing officer for owners, executives and boards in the UAE, the UK and internationally. My career includes Group Head of Marketing at Emaar, Director of Events and Entertainment at Expo 2020 Dubai, and marketing leadership of a UAE free zone, with more than 5,000 events and activations delivered for premium brands.

Credentials

MSc Marketing. Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Certified Digital Marketing Professional.

Experience

More than 20 years across the UAE, the wider Middle East, the UK and global markets.

Specialisms

Marketing strategy, brand positioning, UAE market entry, growth and marketing return on investment, events and experiential, and board governance.

Brands and organisations

Emaar · Expo 2020 Dubai · The Dubai Mall · IFZA · Al Tayer Motors · Ferrari · Gucci · Harvey Nichols · Bloomingdale's · Dolce and Gabbana

Contact

If you have a question about this guide, or want a second opinion on an activation brief before you sign it off, write or call. I reply within one working day.



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