



GMR

2025

**GMR BRAND
EXPERIENCE
INDEX.®**

2025

GMR BRAND EXPERIENCE INDEX®

At GMR, we've built our reputation on understanding how brand experiences become memories—and why those memories matter. Our String of Lights Effect established how a single powerful interaction can embed itself in a consumer's story, resurfacing at moments of choice and influence.

Since the launch of SOLE Science™, GMR's proprietary experience design analysis capability, we've analyzed thousands of brand activations across categories, contexts, and cultures. The 2025 GMR Brand Experience Index builds on that foundation to reveal which experiences are most memorable. The best brands aren't just creating attention—they're creating moments people feel, revisit, and carry with them long after the event has ended.

This report highlights making memories and why it matters. Read on to see which branded activations earned the top scores, what GMR leaders think set some of these activations apart from the rest, and learn from our guest contributor, R. Gerald Monkman, currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of Oregon where he makes interesting connections between memorable experiences and neuroscience.



This report features the most memorable brands of the past year, based upon their live experiences, as measured by GMR's proprietary experience design analysis & approach called SOLE Science™.

THE TOP 25 BRANDS ACCORDING TO OUR EXPERTS



01
DUNKIN' DONUTS
QSR/Casual Dining/Restaurants



02
AMERICAN MUSICAL SUPPLY
Retail & Wholesale



03
XFINITY
Telecommunications



04
U.S. AIR FORCE
Government



05
US OPEN EQUITY EXPERIENCE
Education



06
JACK DANIEL'S
Beer, Wine, & Spirits



07
GRILLO'S PICKLES
Food & Beverage (Non-Alcohol)



08
AMERICAN EXPRESS
Financial Services



09
STRAIGHT TALK WIRELESS
Telecom/Wireless



10
FUJI FILM INSTAX
Retail & Wholesale



11
NISSAN
Transportation Products



12
WWE
Entertainment



13
STARZ
Entertainment



14
BACARDI
Beer, Wine, & Spirits



15
VERIZON
Telecommunications



16
COCA-COLA
Food & Beverage (Non-Alcohol)



17
OMEGA
Retail & Wholesale



18
BULLEIT BOURBON
Beer, Wine, & Spirits



19
CHUBB
Insurance (Non-Healthcare)



20
NIKE
Retail & Wholesale



21
ON!
Altria Group
Distribution Company



22
NBA
Sports



23
TARGET
Retail & Wholesale



24
CHEVROLET
Transportation Products



25
SOUTHERN COMPANY
Service

OUR METHODOLOGY

OUR METHODOLOGY

GMR has developed research instruments to measure live brand experiences and created a data collection infrastructure to conduct ongoing measurements across the experience marketing landscape. This methodology was developed by a team of data scientists in partnership with strategists, behavioral psychologists, and external consultancy.

THE QUALITATIVE

Qualitative data was mined and aggregated through facilitated debrief sessions held immediately following event attendance. During these sessions, GMR researchers explored concepts around events and brands in greater detail—validating and driving exploration around trends. Then analysis was performed to identify insights, patterns, and map live experiences to Experience Quotient (EQ) need states.

THE QUANTITATIVE

In 2018, GMR began a series of laboratory experiments informed by behavioral psychology and cognitive neuroscience frameworks where memory functions, as they relate to recall, were tested under various conditions. As a result of these experiments, a set of factors was identified that reliably predict the formation of brand-embedded memories: the GMR Three Factor Model.

SENSORY IMMERSION

The number and intensity of senses engaged within the experience.

LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

The number of touchpoints a person is invited to interact with.

RELEVANCE TO CONTEXT

The degree to which the brand and the experience align with the event and/or deliver against the audience's passions and interests.

As these factors increase, experience participants are more likely to form the kind of brand-embedded autobiographical memories that impact downstream consumer behavior. Related in-market research conducted as part of our GMR Experience EQ work revealed that experiences can be interpreted or felt in systematically different ways based on individual or contextual differences. Our extensive research included investigations into how the effectiveness of tactics aimed at influencing memory are conditioned by environmental and human factors.

CREATING THE INDEX

GMR actively measures brands everywhere they offer experiences in the marketplace. Measurements allow us to construct estimates of how memorable each experience is likely to be. At the same time, measurements of consumer reactions are collected. This experience/event/consumer data is blended, yielding our GMR Brand Experience Index®.

EXPERT INSIGHTS ON THE BEST BRAND EXPERIENCE

TYSON
WEBBER

PRESIDENT
& CEO



“The Comcast Xfinity WrestleMania activation succeeded by deploying a comprehensive experiential strategy that hit multiple engagement touchpoints (multisensorial)—from interactive digital experiences and QR codes to celebrity athlete appearances, premium distribution, and immersive lounges that provided fans with relaxation and rejuvenation. The activation perfectly balanced entertainment and thrill elements (games, contests, music) with practical brand demonstrations, while strategic data collection and sampling stations converted fan excitement into measurable business outcomes. Xfinity’s multi-sensory approach featuring graphic backdrops, comfortable seating areas, and self-expression opportunities created an authentic brand ecosystem that enhanced rather than competed with the WrestleMania experience. The combination of consumable offerings, premium giveaways, and passive digital elements generated organic social amplification while demonstrating product value to WWE’s highly engaged, tech-savvy audience.”



ELKE
JONES

CHIEF STRATEGY
OFFICER



“Coke Crushed It. Coca-Cola knows to make a moment unforgettable. This past year, the brand didn’t just show up, it owned the experience across multiple events with Austin City limits standing out as a highlight.

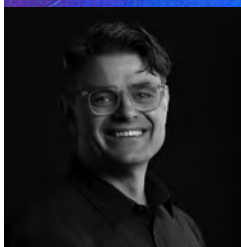
Picture this: a vibrant, high-energy space loaded with music, interactive elements, personalization; where a joyful, inclusive experience became a destination. Think high levels of sensory immersion, social-friendly moments and the perfect, ice-cold can of Coke delivered by a brand ambassador that felt more like a friend than a staff member.

The result? A flood of positive mentions and share-worthy content. Coke nailed the balance between cultural relevance and emotional connection, proving once again that they understand the audience, the context and how to turn a simple sip into a lasting memory.”



MAX
LENDERMAN

CHIEF EXPERIENCE
OFFICER



“One would not typically equate pickles with southern California vibes, but Grillo’s Pickles actually pulled off a highly engaging and, dare I say, relevant activation at the Beach Life Festival. Maybe it was because the brand’s footprint featured a free tongue-in-cheek oversized pickle ride – the kind usually reserved for ponies, hippos and fire trucks outside of a grocery store. Plenty of IG fodder there. Or maybe it was because of the cool, retro swag that features a grinning pickle that the brand handed out to willing fans. But probably because Grillo’s sponsorship of the Speakeasy stage placed them squarely in the conversation of new music and potential main-stagers in future Beach Life Festivals, and bringing a cool-cred partner like Punk Rock & Paintbrushes to create on-site art and merch was a killer touch.”



Beyond the Event: How Brands Can Facilitate Memorable Experiences



BY: R. GERALD MONKMAN

MORE SENSES = MORE MEMORY

Layer sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell to create memories that stick.

One clear pattern among the top 25 performing brands this year: they didn't just show up, they engaged *every sense in the room*. Immersive experiences that go beyond sight and sound create more powerful memory hooks. Many neuroscientists agree: activating multiple senses strengthens the connections between memory and sensory systems (Murray & Shams, 2023).

Think of it this way: the more sensory channels you give the brain to process an experience, the more likely it is to “stick.” American Musical Supply nailed this by letting people hear, touch, and see music come to life through games and hands-on instrument play. The Air Force and Straight Talk Wireless turned to VR, pulling participants into immersive and high sensory flight and racing simulations. Dunkin’ Donuts and Grillo’s Pickles worked a different angle: taste and smell, by surprising fans with new flavors. Novelty plus sensory richness? A quality recipe for strong memories.

When brands orchestrate these sensory layers, they create memories that can last long after the event wraps.

REFERENCES

Morales-Calva, F., Leal, S.L. (2025). Tell me why: the missing w in episodic memory's what, where, and when. *Cogn.Affect Behav Neurosci* 25, 6–24. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13415-024-01234-4>
Murray, C. A., & Shams, L. (2023). Crossmodal interactions in human learning and memory. *Frontiers in human neuroscience*, 17, 1181760. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2023.1181760>
Weinstein A. M. (2023). Reward, motivation and brain imaging in human healthy participants - A narrative review. *Frontiers in behavioral neuroscience*, 17, 1123733. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2023.1123733>

THE THRILL BECOMES THE RECALL

Competition and prizes turn excitement into unforgettable brand moments.

Another thread across top performers: the thrill of the chase. Games, competitions, and prize moments weren't just fun, they tapped into one of memory science's most reliable boosters: reward. Decades of research show that reward-driven moments (in both humans and animals) spark heightened arousal that imprints more deeply in memory (Weinstein, 2023).

Importantly, it's not just the winner who benefits. The pursuit itself causes a rush of neurotransmitters; the "what if I win?" moments enhance the experience. Nike and the NBA leaned into this by offering coveted, high-stakes prizes like unreleased sneakers. Even simple mechanics like prize wheels, lever pulls, or high-score competitions light up this reward-to-memory pathway.

For brands, the takeaway is clear: structure activations that don't just entertain, but *reward*. Those high-energy, high-arousal moments don't just feel good, they make those moments memorable.

DESIGN FOR THE WHY

Experiences built around identity, enrichment, belonging, and release tap into the motivations that make memories meaningful.

Beyond the what, where, and when of events lies the *why*: the personal motivations that give memories power (Morales-Calva & Leal, 2025). GMR describes these deeper drivers as *need states*, and they map directly to the contexts that make experiences meaningful.

IDENTITY

People remember experiences that help them express or explore who they are.

ENRICHMENT

Novelty sparks curiosity, growth, and learning—fertile ground for lasting memory.

BELONGING

Social connection and collaboration add emotional weight, which enhances recall.

RELEASE

Positive stress relief, fun, and catharsis create the perfect conditions for memory formation.

When brands design around these deeper "whys," they aren't just crafting activations. They're creating experiences that resonate, stick, and matter long after the tent comes down. |

KEEPSAKES KEEP BRANDS ALIVE

Personalized takeaways reactivate the event long after it ends.

Finally, some of the smartest brands gave participants something tangible to take away: personalized memory cues. These keepsakes are more than swag; they're psychological triggers that reignite the event every time they're seen.

Xfinity and WWE sent fans personalized videos of themselves making wrestler entrances. Dunkin' Donuts set up photo booths, while Chevrolet let attendees leave as the star of their own custom video game cover. These moments extended the brand far beyond the activation. A photo on a cork board, a shared video on Instagram, or a video game cover all serve as powerful retrieval cues, pulling the memory back into focus.

The impact? A single moment at an event becomes many each time the memory gets reactivated from the keepsake.

BRIGHT BRAND MOMENTS

In addition to the 2025 GBEI High-Scorers, our experience auditors have noted some other exceptional branded activations that are worth an honorable mention.

BUBBL'R KNEW THE LINGO

At Summerfest, the brands that get it don't just show up—they show they belong. Bubbl'r did exactly that.

If you're from Wisconsin, you know a “bubbler” isn't just a drink—it's what locals call a water fountain. This nod to local slang in the brand name instantly made Bubbl'r feel right at home at the Wisconsin-based festival.



But Bubbl'r went beyond clever naming. Their space was vibrant, buzzing with energy, and filled with things people actually wanted: samples that sparked curiosity for new flavors, giveaways like paddle boards, branded coolers, and even a Bubbl'r Bronco. The iconic name itself — “Bubbl'r” — displayed in a photo op, encouraged attendees to snap pics to share online with their Wisconsin-loving followers.

Bubbl'r didn't try to steal the spotlight—they joined the vibe. They showed **relevance to the context** of Summerfest and Wisconsin through GMR's Experience EQ need state: **belonging**. They understood Summerfest wasn't just about music or drinks—it was about connection, local pride, and belonging.

Bubbl'r's iconic ode to Wisconsin—through both its name and its activation—turned a simple drink stop into a shared experience that celebrated community.

The result? A brand that didn't just fit in—it stood out by fitting in perfectly.



THE METHOD BEHIND REPLENISHMENT

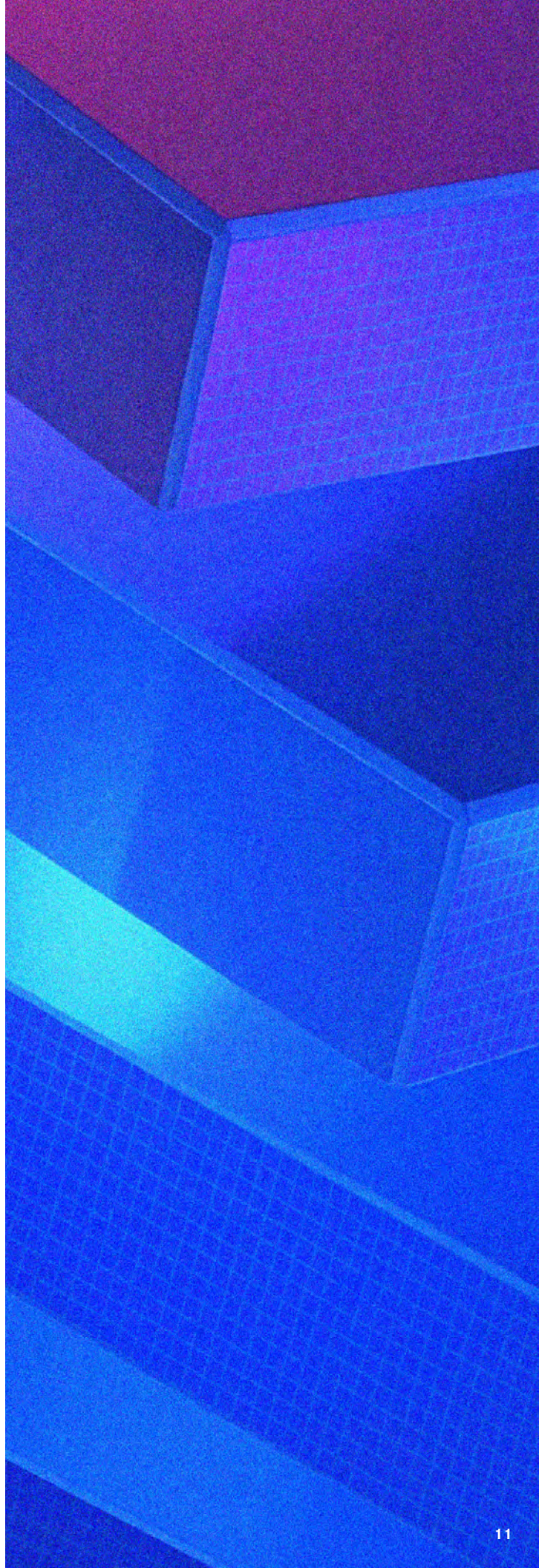
Coachella is a stage for identity. People come to be seen, express themselves and stand out.

Most brands try to jump into that spotlight. Method didn't. They played a smarter game—supporting **self-expression** by giving people what they actually needed: **replenishment**.

Their space was simple but smart. Air conditioning. Sparkle touch-ups. Pearl face stickers. Flower clips. A seat to catch your breath. In the middle of the noise, Method created a pause—helping people reset so they could keep showing up as their best, most expressive selves.

This wasn't about making noise. It was about knowing their role. Method understood that looking good starts with feeling good. Their core promise—bringing refreshing order to chaos—fit perfectly in the heat and intensity of the festival.

Method understood that the EQ need states of **replenishment** and **identity** are connected—because no one shines when they're burnt out. Sometimes, the best way to support identity is to fuel it.





FROM SPECTATOR TO SPECTACLE: GARNIER'S GLAMBOT MOMENT

The red carpet. The flashes of light. The GlamBOT. That slow-motion moment when time freezes and a celebrity's image becomes immortal.

We've all watched it. We've all wanted it. Most of us? We'll never get it.

At Rolling Loud California. Garnier understood a fundamental human truth: We all want to be seen. To shine. To matter. Despite being known as an accessible brand for the every-day person (you can buy Garnier products at the grocery store), Garnier gave attendees a real, iconic, VIP celeb experience at Rolling Loud California by creating a playground for **Self-Expression** with their GlamBOT experience, making people feel extraordinary.

Garnier didn't just sell products - they sold validation. They sold that 15 minutes of fame we all secretly want. And the crowd ate it up.

Because in a world where celebrity is currency, Garnier just made everyone a little rich.

**SXSWERS WANT TO SEE BEYOND THEIR PEAK.
SHOW THEM & THEY'LL KEEP CLIMBING WITH YOU.**

That rush of accomplishment? It's real—the feeling of pushing yourself, delivering, and knowing you gave it everything. But hitting a wall, realizing your best still isn't enough? That's a tough pill to swallow and a dead end to progress. SXSW is full of high achievers—leaders in media, design, tech, and culture—who know these highs and lows all too well. If we map the **Experience EQ** of SXSW, one thing is clear: people come to **level up through Discovery**. They're here to know more, be better, and get recognized for it.

IBM's AI Sports Club tapped into this anxious need to succeed, challenging attendees' definition of “best” and inspiring them with proof that what feels like the peak is really just the next stepping stone.

Picture this: You step up to a foosball table, but instead of just a casual game, you're met with next-level AI tech that analyzes your moves, hypes up your progress, and lays out exactly how to get better. This wasn't just about playing—it was about evolving.

In a world that treats milestones like finish lines, IBM said, “plot twist - your ‘best’ is just the warm-up”. They didn't just capture attention—they rewired how people see achievement itself. For a crowd of achievers, IBM got it right.



An abstract background image featuring a series of overlapping, angular planes in shades of blue and purple, creating a sense of depth and perspective. The planes are illuminated from different angles, casting soft shadows and highlights.

PEPSI SERVED IT UP AT THE NATIONAL RESTAURANT ASSOCIATION

The stereotype of B2B gatherings tends to evoke images of endless panels, tech that fails, a sea of dark suits, and arctic breakout rooms in hotels. This may be true in some environments, but we're beginning to see change.

One of our SOLE Science™ Experience Auditors recently went to the **National Restaurant Association** show. She recognized numerous household brands showcasing their latest innovations as well as a host of industry-specific suppliers. She noted that there was minimal swag, lots of meetings and the odd sample being handed out. She also called out Pepsi for how differently it showed up.

Pepsi's tagline, "That's what I like" is 'intended to appeal to people who are comfortable in their own skin and enjoy life without worrying about others' opinions'. Showing up at a trade show and infusing their mantra/promise is nothing short of refreshing.

The brand stood out by leaning into some basic fun normally found within a B2C environment and positioning this part of their activation on par with their operational B2B must-haves.

On one side of their footprint, restaurateurs interacted with Pepsi's latest vending machine innovations (B2B focus) while the other side showcased a vibrant mocktail making experience (B2C focus). The duality of their space provided essential information for restaurateurs who were in research mode, while helping them imagine their customers delighting in the joy of options.



Further, where other brands' BAs weren't wearing name tags, Pepsi's were. This small but important addition made the experience more personable, removing the seller/buyer aspect and giving off more of a Meet-Up vibe.

As the only brand to use B2C tactics, Pepsi leaned into the **human need state of enrichment through discovery** (new flavors) making their presence **memorable, relevant** and given the context, **ingenious**. They did what others didn't and it worked.

More B2B brands should take a page out of Pepsi's simple but effective playbook, remembering that a person precedes a title or a company.

Way more impactful than a branded pen, right?

CLOSING MESSAGE FROM TYSON



After reading through this year's Brand Experience Index, one thing is clear to me: the brands that rise to the top aren't just creating activations, they're creating memories. These are the moments people will talk about at dinner tables, post about online, and revisit years later—proof that the power of experience is still unmatched in shaping how we feel, connect, and choose.

I'm proud of what our teams have uncovered here, and grateful to the many brands whose work we've had the chance to study. Each activation we analyze adds to a growing body

of knowledge about what really resonates, and together it pushes our industry forward.

My hope is that as you close this report, you leave with both inspiration and a spark of curiosity: what might this look like for your brand? How could your next experience not only capture attention but also live on in memory? If those questions feel exciting, we'd love to explore the answers with you.

Thanks, as always, for taking this journey with us."

**TYSON
WEBBER**

**PRESIDENT & CEO
GMR MARKETING**



Chat with our SOLE Science™ Leaders

We'd love to show you how SOLE Science™ can help make your experience unforgettable and embed your brand into the hearts and minds of your audience forever.

Click below to schedule an introductory call about SOLE Science™ and the GMR Brand Experience Index or for more information on the rankings, our methodology, or our expertise.

ELKE JONES, CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER



CONNECT ON GMR AND
SOLE SCIENCE™

CHRIS HOYLER, VICE PRESIDENT OF
MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS



GET IN TOUCH ABOUT
MEDIA INQUIRIES

